

The bathroom mirror had begun to fog around the edges.

Not enough to obscure the man standing in front of it.

That would have required considerably more steam.

Orphius Marius dragged a razor carefully along his jaw, tilted his head toward the mirror and continued speaking as though the conversation had begun several minutes ago.

Orphius: “The type of men that we are?”

Water ran.

The razor disappeared beneath it.

Orphius: “Bold claim.”

He examined his reflection.

Orphius: “I’ve heard that before.”

Bare feet appeared in the doorway behind him.

Orphius noticed them in the mirror.

He didn’t turn.

Sera stood there wearing one of his shirts.

Her hair had apparently spent the night attempting to escape in several directions simultaneously.

One eye was open.

The other remained unconvinced.

Orphius returned the razor to his face.

Orphius: “Good morning.”

Sera made a noise.

It contained no recognizable language.

Orphius: “Eloquent.”

Another noise.

Orphius nodded.

Orphius: “Compelling counterargument.”

Sera shuffled past him.

Opened a cupboard.

Stared inside.

Closed it.

Opened the next one.

Sera: "Where's my toothbrush?"

Orphius: "Where you left it."

Sera slowly looked at him.

Sera: "Fascinating."

Orphius rinsed the razor.

Sera: "Where did I leave it?"

Orphius: "Second drawer."

Sera opened the second drawer.

There it was.

She stared at it.

Then at him.

Sera: "I knew that."

Orphius: "Naturally."

Sera picked it up.

Orphius finished the final section of his jaw and ran his fingers across the skin.

Satisfied.

Sera caught him doing it.

Sera: "Are you checking yourself out?"

Orphius: "Quality control."

She stared.

Sera: "It's seven in the morning."

Orphius: “Standards don't observe business hours.”

Sera squeezed toothpaste onto the brush.

She looked toward the mirror.

Orphius looked back at her through it.

Then toward the camera sitting unobtrusively beyond the bathroom doorway.

Of course.

Sera finally noticed it.

Her toothbrush stopped halfway toward her mouth.

She looked at Orphius.

Then the camera.

Then herself.

Then Orphius again.

Sera: “You have a camera in here.”

Orphius: “Technically, the camera is out there.”

Sera: “I'm going back to bed.”

Orphius: “You just got here.”

Sera started brushing her teeth.

Apparently this constituted staying.

Orphius smiled.

Then his attention returned to the camera.

Orphius: “Ethan Murphy has apparently been thinking about me.”

Sera's eyes moved sideways.

Orphius caught it.

Orphius: “Professionally.”

Sera continued brushing.

Orphius: “Don't.”

She hadn't done anything.

That somehow made it worse.

Orphius: "He believes we aren't terribly different."

Sera leaned against the counter.

Orphius: "We're solitary. We prefer responsibility for our own victories and our own failures. We dislike losing."

He considered the summary.

Orphius: "And from these extraordinary revelations, Ethan has concluded that he understands the type of men that we are."

Sera spat into the sink.

Rinsed.

Sera: "Maybe he does."

Orphius looked at her.

Sera wiped her mouth.

Sera: "You do hate losing."

Orphius: "Most competent people do."

Sera: "You prefer singles matches."

Orphius: "I prefer not having somebody else's mistakes attached to my name."

Sera: "You both think you're very good."

Orphius: "He is very good."

That came without hesitation.

Sera noticed.

Orphius reached for a towel.

Orphius: "I've never suggested otherwise."

Sera: "And you?"

Orphius stopped.

Slowly, he turned toward her.

Sera was already smiling.

He looked toward the camera.

Winked.

Then casually brushed a loose strand of hair away from his face.

Orphius: “You'll have to excuse me if I'm not dreadfully concerned with your opinion, Ethan.”

A beat.

Orphius: “I'm too busy being magnificent.”

Sera snorted.

Orphius looked wounded.

Orphius: “Something amusing?”

Sera: “No.”

Orphius: “You laughed.”

Sera: “I did not.”

Orphius: “Sera.”

Sera: “Sorry.”

She wasn't.

Sera: “Please continue being magnificent.”

Orphius: “Thank you.”

Sera walked toward the doorway.

Sera: “Your hair's sticking up at the back.”

Orphius froze.

Sera disappeared.

Silence.

His eyes moved immediately toward the second mirror.

Sera: “Magnificent!”

Her laughter drifted down the hallway.

Orphius stared after her.

Orphius: “Cruel woman.”

Sera: “Love you too!”

Something changed in his face.

Small.

Instinctive.

The smile wasn't the one he'd given the camera.

Orphius: “Love you.”

Quiet enough that perhaps it wasn't meant for anybody else.

Then he looked at his hair.

The smile disappeared.

Orphius: “There's nothing wrong with it.”

From somewhere down the hallway—

Sera: “I know!”

Orphius closed his eyes.

Of course she did.

When they were alone, Sera didn't need to defeat The Endgame.

She merely needed to convince him that his hair looked funny.

Apparently that was considerably easier.

Breakfast had improved Orphius's mood.

This was unfortunate for everyone else.

Sera sat across from him at the small dining table, one leg tucked underneath herself, coffee held between both hands.

Orphius had somehow acquired eggs.

Toast.

Fruit.

Coffee.

And the expression of a man who had recently confirmed that his hair was, in fact, magnificent.

Sera had declined to apologize.

His phone rested against the sugar bowl.

TJ Alexander's AWS biography filled the screen.

Orphius stared at it.

Scrolled.

Continued scrolling.

Stopped.

Scrolled again.

Orphius: "Good God."

Sera looked over her coffee.

Sera: "What?"

Orphius: "The British are invading."

Sera blinked.

Sera: "New Zealand?"

Orphius: "Apparently."

He picked up his coffee.

Orphius: "Again."

Sera: "I don't think that's—"

Orphius: "This time they've sent TJ Alexander."

Sera lowered the mug.

Sera: "Just TJ?"

Orphius: "One assumes the navy was unavailable."

She stared at him.

Sera: "Are you going to cause an international incident before breakfast?"

Orphius looked at his plate.

Orphius: "I've already started breakfast."

Sera: "That wasn't the important part of that sentence."

Orphius: "Then you structured it poorly."

Sera took a very long drink.

Orphius returned his attention to the phone.

Orphius: "The Game Changer."

Scroll.

Orphius: "The Aerial Assassin."

Scroll.

Orphius: "Kidd Krazy."

His eyebrow lifted.

Orphius: "With two Ds."

Sera: "Important?"

Orphius: "Apparently."

Scroll.

Orphius: "The Kid Without Fear."

Scroll.

He stopped.

Silence.

Sera watched his expression.

Orphius: "The Best Brit in the Business."

Another silence.

Sera: "You don't like that one."

Orphius: "On the contrary."

Orphius placed his phone carefully beside his plate.

Orphius: "I adore it."

Sera knew that tone.

Sera: “Oh no.”

Orphius: “Five nicknames.”

Sera: “Orphius.”

Orphius: “Five.”

He held up a hand.

Five fingers.

Orphius: “That's not branding. That's indecision.”

Sera laughed into her coffee.

Orphius: “Pick one.”

Sera: “Says The Endgame.”

Orphius slowly lowered his hand.

Sera: “Or Orphius Marius.”

Orphius: “That's my name.”

Sera: “The Endgame is not.”

Orphius: “One nickname.”

Sera: “Still a nickname.”

Orphius: “One.”

Sera: “You're very defensive about this.”

Orphius: “I'm defending restraint.”

Sera glanced toward the phone.

Sera: “Maybe he likes options.”

Orphius: “It's a wrestling introduction, darling, not a fucking tapas menu.”

Sera choked.

Coffee nearly returned through her nose.

Orphius watched her.

Orphius: “Careful.”

Sera coughed.

Sera: “You—”

Another cough.

Sera: “You can’t say shit like that while I’m drinking.”

Orphius: “I refuse responsibility for your inability to consume liquids safely.”

Sera wiped her mouth.

Sera: “Asshole.”

Orphius: “Frequently.”

He picked up the phone again.

Orphius: “Now.”

Scroll.

Orphius: “Six-foot-one.”

Scroll.

Orphius: “One hundred and eighty-eight pounds.”

Scroll.

Orphius: “London.”

Scroll.

Orphius: “Technician. High flyer.”

His amusement faded slightly.

Orphius: “Agility. Striking. Speed. British catch wrestling. Endurance. Stamina.”

Sera watched him.

Different now.

Still relaxed.

But reading.

Orphius: “Hybrid.”

Sera: “Problem?”

Orphius: “Potentially.”

That answer came easily.

No joke.

Orphius took another bite.

Orphius: “Speed complicates timing. Technical ability complicates control. Combining the two means I can’t simply wait for him to commit to one range.”

Sera: “And the flying?”

Orphius: “People eventually come down.”

Sera: “That's your analysis?”

Orphius: “Gravity has an exceptional record.”

Sera smiled.

There he was.

Orphius continued scrolling.

And scrolling.

And scrolling.

His fork slowly stopped halfway toward his mouth.

Orphius: “How many fucking moves does this man have?”

Sera: “A lot?”

Orphius: “I’m beginning to suspect all of them.”

He scrolled.

Orphius: “Suplexes.”

Scroll.

Orphius: “DDTs.”

Scroll.

Orphius: “Hurricanranas.”

Scroll.

Orphius: “Kicks.”

Scroll.

Orphius: “Shooting star press.”

Scroll.

Orphius: “Four-fifty.”

Scroll.

Orphius: “Phoenix splash.”

Scroll.

Orphius: “Sky twister.”

Scroll.

Orphius: “Sharpshooter. Crossface. Figure four. Fujiwara armbar. Heel hook.”

He looked across the table.

Orphius: “Has anyone informed TJ that he's only allowed to wrestle one match at a time?”

Sera grinned.

Sera: “Maybe that's why he's The Game Changer.”

Orphius: “Which game?”

Sera: “Wrestling?”

Orphius: “That seems terribly broad.”

He scrolled once more.

Then stopped.

Something caught his attention.

Orphius: “Oh.”

Sera: “What?”

A smile slowly appeared.

Not pleasant.

Orphius: “Weaknesses.”

Sera leaned forward.

Orphius: “Impatience.”

One finger.

Orphius: “Doesn't know when to quit.”

Second.

Then Orphius's smile widened.

Orphius: “Tag-teaming.”

Sera looked at him.

Orphius looked at her.

Sera: “No.”

Orphius: “It's right there.”

Sera: “Don't.”

Orphius: “His documented weakness—”

Sera: “Orphius.”

Orphius: “—is the match.”

Sera covered her face.

Orphius: “That's extraordinary.”

Sera: “You're enjoying this too much.”

Orphius: “Ethan spent an entire promo explaining that TJ and Hector may struggle to function as a team.”

He turned the phone toward her.

Orphius: “And TJ's own biography has apparently submitted supporting evidence.”

Sera peeked between her fingers.

Sera: “Maybe he's improved.”

Orphius paused.

The amusement didn't disappear.

But something shifted behind it.

Orphius: “Maybe.”

He turned the phone back.

Orphius: “That would be inconvenient.”

Sera: “For you?”

Orphius: “For Ethan’s argument.”

Sera: “Right.”

Orphius: “I, naturally, will be fine.”

Sera: “Naturally.”

Orphius took another bite.

Then—

Sera: “You know Ethan called TJ arrogant.”

The fork stopped.

Slowly.

Orphius looked up.

Orphius: “Yes.”

Sera: “Just TJ.”

Silence.

Sera: “Not you.”

Orphius stared at her.

Sera smiled sweetly.

Orphius: “Perhaps Ethan isn’t as perceptive as I’d hoped.”

Sera burst out laughing.

Orphius ignored her.

Orphius: “Besides, TJ and I practice entirely different forms of arrogance.”

Sera: “Oh, this should be good.”

Orphius: “TJ tells people he’s The Best Brit in the Business.”

Sera: “And you?”

Orphius gestured vaguely toward himself.

Orphius: “I have eyes.”

Sera's head dropped onto the table.

Sera: “Jesus Christ.”

Orphius: “He had nothing to do with it.”

That made it worse.

Sera's shoulders shook.

Orphius calmly buttered another piece of toast.

Eventually she recovered.

Sera: “So he's not dangerous?”

Orphius looked at her.

And just like that, the joke ended.

Orphius: “I didn't say that.”

Sera straightened.

Orphius: “He's fast.”

A beat.

Orphius: “Technically versatile.”

Another.

Orphius: “Experienced.”

His eyes returned to the accomplishments listed beneath TJ's name.

Orphius: “He's won almost everywhere he's gone.”

Orphius tapped the screen.

Orphius: “And people like this are irritating.”

Sera: “Because they're arrogant?”

Orphius: “Because occasionally the arrogance is earned.”

That surprised her.

Orphius noticed.

Orphius: “What?”

Sera: “Nothing.”

Orphius: “You expected me to dismiss him.”

Sera: “A little.”

Orphius shook his head.

Orphius: “That would be stupid.”

He leaned back.

Orphius: “TJ's problem isn't that he can't wrestle.”

Orphius: “TJ's problem is that he knows he can.”

Sera's smile faded.

Now she was listening.

Orphius: “Impatience.”

Tap.

Orphius: “Doesn't know when to quit.”

Tap.

Orphius: “Speed. Agility. Endurance.”

Tap.

Orphius: “Give someone enough weapons and eventually they begin believing every problem requires one of them.”

Sera looked toward the phone.

Orphius: “Thirty-one favourite moves.”

His mouth twitched.

Orphius: “I only need him to choose the wrong one once.”

There.

The Endgame.

Not replacing the obnoxious man who'd spent breakfast conducting an audit of TJ Alexander's nicknames.

Living underneath him.

Sera reached across the table.

Stole a piece of fruit from Orphius's plate.

His eyes immediately dropped toward her hand.

Orphius: "Excuse me."

Sera: "You were busy being magnificent."

Orphius: "That doesn't make my strawberries communal property."

Sera ate it.

Orphius stared.

Sera: "Maybe you should've been faster."

Silence.

Orphius slowly looked toward TJ's biography.

Speed.

Then back toward Sera.

Orphius: "You've been waiting to do that."

Sera: "Since the bathroom."

Orphius considered this.

Orphius: "I'm dating a deeply unpleasant woman."

Sera reached for another strawberry.

Orphius moved the plate.

Sera: "And yet."

Orphius looked at her.

That private smile returned.

Orphius: "And yet."

Orphius scrolled once more.

TJ Alexander disappeared.

Another name replaced him.

HECTOR VENEGAS.

Orphius waited.

Nothing.

His thumb moved.

Nothing.

Again.

Still nothing.

Sera watched him from across the table.

Sera: "Problem?"

Orphius: "No biography."

Sera: "Nothing?"

Orphius: "Nothing I can verify."

He placed the phone on the table.

Sera: "So what do you know about Hector?"

Orphius: "Not enough."

Simple.

No joke.

No clever reconstruction from scraps.

Orphius: "And I'm not going to invent a man simply because AWS neglected to provide me with one."

Sera nodded.

Orphius: "Perhaps he's extraordinary."

A shrug.

Orphius: "Perhaps he's terrible."

Another.

Orphius: “Perhaps he'll walk into Wellington and introduce me to something I've never encountered before.”

Orphius picked up his coffee.

Orphius: “Good.”

Sera raised an eyebrow.

Orphius: “Uncertainty isn't frightening.”

He took a drink.

Orphius: “It's merely information I haven't acquired yet.”

Sera: “That sounded suspiciously like something The Endgame would say.”

Orphius: “He's very intelligent.”

Sera: “And modest.”

Orphius: “Painfully.”

Sera smiled.

Breakfast was mostly gone.

The coffee wasn't.

Orphius looked toward the camera.

Orphius: “So, Hector, I have nothing for you.”

A pause.

Orphius: “Not disrespect.”

Orphius: “Nothing.”

Orphius: “There's a difference.”

His fingers curled around the mug.

Orphius: “Give me something.”

Orphius: “Show me who you are.”

Orphius: “Then I'll respond to the man who actually exists instead of constructing one that's convenient for me to defeat.”

Sera's eyes remained on him.

Orphius: “TJ?”

That smile returned.

Orphius: “I’ve got plenty.”

Orphius: “Five nicknames' worth, apparently.”

Sera groaned.

Sera: “You couldn't leave it alone.”

Orphius: “I could.”

Sera: “But?”

Orphius: “I chose happiness.”

Sera laughed.

Orphius leaned back.

Orphius: “And Ethan...”

Different.

Not quite serious.

Not quite joking.

Orphius: “You told me to lock in.”

He nodded.

Orphius: “Done.”

Orphius: “You believe we're already on the same page.”

Orphius: “Perhaps we are.”

A beat.

Orphius: “For one night.”

His eyes remained on the camera.

Orphius: “You hate losing.”

Orphius: “I hate losing.”

Orphius: “TJ and Hector happen to be standing between us and winning.”

The faintest shrug.

Orphius: “Civilization has been built on less compelling alliances.”

Sera stood.

She collected her coffee.

Sera: “Finished?”

Orphius: “Almost.”

Sera walked behind him.

Her fingers briefly brushed across his shoulders.

Orphius glanced upward.

Sera: “Good.”

She leaned closer.

Quietly—

Sera: “Because somebody made me a promise about going back to bed.”

Silence.

Orphius looked at her.

Then toward the camera.

Sera followed his eyes.

Oh.

Her smile widened.

Sera: “Well?”

Orphius stared directly into the lens.

Orphius: “Interesting.”

Sera: “What?”

He stood.

Slowly.

Orphius: “You're all still watching.”

Sera laughed.

Orphius: "I've insulted TJ's branding."

He began counting on his fingers.

Orphius: "Analyzed his wrestling."

Second.

Orphius: "Refused to manufacture an opinion about Hector."

Third.

Orphius: "Questioned Ethan's understanding of my personality."

Fourth.

Orphius: "Discussed our strategy."

Fifth.

He looked at his hand.

Orphius: "And apparently none of that was sufficient to make you leave."

Sera folded her arms.

Orphius's eyes narrowed slightly.

Orphius: "But she mentions bed..."

He gestured toward Sera.

Orphius: "...and suddenly I've never had a more attentive audience."

Sera bit her lip, trying not to laugh.

Orphius: "Remarkable."

Sera: "Maybe they really like you."

Orphius: "Naturally."

Sera: "Or me."

Orphius considered her.

Orphius: "Also reasonable."

Sera held out her hand.

Orphius looked down at it.

Then back toward the camera.

Orphius: “Ethan.”

One last pause.

Orphius: “You said you've been studying me.”

His expression changed.

Not much.

Enough.

Orphius: “Excellent.”

Orphius: “Study everything.”

Orphius: “My timing.”

Orphius: “My decisions.”

Orphius: “The things I show you.”

A faint smile.

Orphius: “The things you think I didn't mean to.”

Orphius: “Watch as closely as you like.”

He took Sera's hand.

Orphius: “Just don't make the rather embarrassing mistake of believing attention and understanding are the same thing.”

Orphius stepped away from the table.

Sera tugged gently on his hand.

He followed.

Two steps.

Then stopped.

Looked back.

The camera remained.

Of course it did.

Orphius: “Good God.”

He walked back.

His face filled the frame.

Orphius: “Some things aren’t research, Ethan.”

Orphius reached toward the lens.

Orphius: “Fuck off.”

Black.