

5) a fresh disappointment

Florbet tapped her claws anxiously on the surface of her dressing room vanity. Waiting on hold was something she barely tolerated at best of times, and this was far from the best of times. *Pick up*, she commanded silently. *Pick up*.

Finally, a voice came through her compact, and she nervously responded, "Yes, I'm calling about a package... the site says guaranteed delivery by 6pm, and it's already—" she glanced at the clock on the wall. *Shit*. "...7:14, so I was wondering when it was going to arrive. It's kind of urgent, so..."

The tone on the other end of the call was apologetic, sinking a lead weight into Florbet's stomach. "No... no, no..." she said, "...the order can't be *canceled*, I had a guaranteed delivery by 6pm, I need it for *tonight*."

There was an explanation of a failed cooling element, a blocked road, and the effects of Dewclaw's sun on a shipment of dyes made from organic elements like berries and fruit juices that she couldn't bear to listen to. "There must be... you must have some in storage? Or or or, if there's another shipping company... you don't understand, I need it by *tonight*—"

The steady tone of the customer service minion was really starting to grate on Florbet's nerves. She almost caught a look of herself in her vanity's mirror, turning away just in time to not see the anger hardening her face. "I don't care—" The droning voice continued. "I don't *care*," she shrieked, forcing their spiel to a halt. "—what your terms and agreements say about unforeseen natural impediments to shipment!! I *want* my dye, and I want it *now*."

The voice stayed reasonable and level, the absolute last thing Florbet had patience for right now. "There must be *something* you can do." A pause, a few words from the other side. "*No! Not tomorrow! Tonight!*" A few more words. "Well then why am I even talking to you??" the alligator demanded, before slamming her compact shut on the corner of her vanity.

She buried her face in her hands. Why why why why why why *why* had she waited until the last minute to order?? Why had she thought it would work out? When did anything ever work out? She pressed her face into her hands ever harder. "Guaranteed delivery," her rent-paying ass. Why had she trusted that?? When had she ever been able to trust *anyone*??

She clutched the edge of the vanity. She became aware of the rattle of glass, and realized it was her own trembling arm shaking the furniture on which her makeup supplies rested. She took a deep breath. *Calm. Focus. Release the panic. Release.*

She looked up. Okay. There was still a little time before the show. Maybe she could make this work. Improvise.

The mirror beckoned. Florbet glanced at it out of the corner of her eye, immensely suspicious.

She breathed in, and out. It wasn't going to be as bad as she thought it was, she told herself. It was going to be fine. It couldn't be as bad as she thought it was.

She gripped the vanity with her other hand now too, as if preparing to catch herself in case she tried to bolt. It would be fine, she repeated. It would be fine. She could do this. It wasn't going to be as bad as she thought. *Calm. Focus. Breathe in. Breathe out.* It couldn't be as bad as she thought.

She almost turned, and didn't.

She almost turned, and didn't.

She almost turned, and didn't.
She squinted her eyes shut tight. *Coward*, she told herself.
She turned to face the mirror.
She opened her eyes.
She looked at what she saw there, in the reflection.
It wasn't as bad as she thought it was going to be.
It was so, so much worse.

She was a mess, she told herself. I'm a mess, I'm a mess. It's wrong, it's all wrong. She had been unable to look before, but now she felt unable to turn away. She had heard the comparison of being forced to look at something like one would with a car crash, and that's how she felt locked now.

Her colors were *wrong*. They were all wrong, every tint and hue, and shade and blend. She felt sick, truly sick. It would be bad enough seeing these colors anywhere, she told herself. To see them on herself was a nightmare.

Unable to break eye contact with the wretch in the mirror, she reached a trembling hand for a nearby foundation, desperately trying to imagine how she was going to salvage this.

The tip of her claw met the lip of the bottle, knocking it over. The cap, not properly sealed, rolled off, described a gentle curve that took it off the edge of the vanity, where it immediately bounced out of sight. The expensive, silvery product leaked out on the table, where the thirsty wood immediately began to drink it down.

"No!" she screamed, slamming both fists on the table in frustration. This, in turn, upended several more bottles onto their side, one managing to topple its way over the edge to shatter on the floor below, out of sight.

"No, no, no, no..." The lizard reached out, her hands shakier than ever, to try to set as many back on their bases as she could. She tried to steady herself, but it was no use — every missed grab or shaky attempt to set a bottle upright just made the quavering worse.

It was too much. It was too much right now. She turned away from the mess, burying her face in her hands again. Tears were forming in the corners of her eyes, and more than anything, all she wanted to do was to force herself to cry.

She looked up at the clock. 7:41pm. There was barely any time left now.

She looked back to the mirror. Impossibly, she looked worse than before, even more catastrophically disheveled. And that's when she saw the grey creeping in, spreading from her eyes, the corners of her mouth, the base of her neck...

She might have managed the tears, had a knock on the door sent her cringing away from the door, her entire spine tensing at the simple, intrusive noise. "Not fucking yet, Amboise!" she shrieked at it. "I still have twenty *fucking* minutes, so leave me the *fuck* al—"

"Hey," came a gentle, deep voice from the other side. "It's me, Bastin. I just wanted to check in, see if I could do anything to help."

That was it. That was the final straw. She took a look at the lizard in the mirror, who had just screamed at... not even the person she meant to scream at, as if that made anything better.

She let herself slump forward, letting her head come to rest against the mirror. She breathed in, and breathed out. Focus, she thought. Release. Let it go.

And she did.

She let her color go, inch by inch. She felt it drain from each of her scales in turn, every drop of pigment, receding into the darkness.

Release. Let it go.

She leaned back, and opened her eyes.

There she is, she thought, as she looked in the mirror. *There's the lizard I hate*.

"You okay, hon? Can you say something?" Bastin's voice was so concerned. She felt an immense guilt at this — it hurt so much, to see that sort of kindness wasted on someone who didn't deserve it.

"I can't do this tonight," she said, still staring into the mirror. "I can't perform. I just, I can't."

There was a pause, before Bastin said, "That's fine, I'll take your slot tonight. Don't you worry about that at all." Another pause. "Do you need anything? Do you want me to come in? Can I leave anything by your door? If there's anything—"

"There's nothing," the dancer assured him. "There's nothing you can do. It's fine." And then came the words that felt so natural, and so bad. "Just leave me alone."

A longer pause this time. "Okay, hon. If you need anything, you know you can text Amboise anytime, they'll come running."

"Yeah, I know," Florbet said, pushing herself slowly and weakly off her stool. She made her way over to the bundle of pillows, blankets and pads that dominated the center of her private dressing room and started to crawl inside. That was fine. This was fine. It had to be fine, she told herself. She had to get used to this.

She figured she *would* be used to this by now, she realized. She wasn't sure how every time something like this happened, it managed to be a fresh disappointment. She assumed she would know how her life worked after all this time.

Just as she got properly ensconced, she realized she had failed to turn on the heating element on the way over. She didn't need much heat to sleep... but the HEAT dance club didn't retain warmth well (which might seem ironic, until you realize that a building that traps heat is poor choice of venue for a pack of fire-commanding performers), and she knew from experience that a chilly night spend without anything (or anyone) to provide some external warmth would leave her achy and miserable in the morning.

Oh well, she thought. If that's what my body wants, maybe I should just listen to it.

And so she curled up, squeezing herself into a tight curl, separate from the world by one thick blanket layered on top of another. Shrouded from everything. All by herself.

At least one thing went right, she thought a minute later. *At least I managed to make myself cry*.

12) kindness refused

Beyond her door, Florbet could hear the quiet sounds of the club being cleaned up and put away for the night. It'd be after-hours now, she knew, leaving only employees, close friends, and perhaps a VIP client or two. She listened, overhearing the sounds of casual conversation and easy laughter; it was the calm time now, the intensity of the night's performances behind them, a period of rest before having to prepare for tomorrow.

Beyond the confines of her bed, Florbet could hear her fellow dancers cracking jokes and sharing stories. She could hear the march of heavy footsteps, unmistakably Ques's — tired, yes, but not ready for rest, not while there was any work left to be done. She could hear the sweep of a broom, as the janitor made their way up and down the hallway, cleaning up what detritus has accumulated in this backstage thoroughfare.

Beyond the shroud of her blankets, Florbet could hear the sounds of those around her living their lives, freely and easily. Not giving a care in the world to how many trips they took up and down that hallway, past her door — never knowing just how lucky they were, that a single night in bed would lift the weight from their bones and soothe the ache in their muscles. Never knowing just what a miracle it was, to wake up the next day and feel *good*.

Florbet curled herself into a tighter ball, in the darkness.

Time passed. The voices grew less frequent, and quieter.

Time passed. The chill of her mattress got no better.

Time passed. The darkness got no brighter.

Time passed.

Time passed.

Time passed... ..and then...

...and then came a knock at the door.

Florbet stirred. She would have liked to pretend she was upset that the knock woke her, but the aches and nausea had been making that impossible anyway. Still, she ignored it, shifting some of the bedding over her head to block out the sound.

There was another knock. Florbet clenched the bedding tighter. *Go away*, she commanded the knocker. *Not now*.

The knock came again.

And then Quill's voice: "Florbet, it's me. Can I come in?"

Florbet set her mouth into a hard line. What was *he* doing here anyway?

Quill tried again, "I know you're in there, Florbet. Can I come in, please?"

What did he want, anyway? Probably to try to cheer her up or some shit. Why couldn't he go spend his concern on someone who deserved it?

"Florbet..." Quill said, his voice trailing off. What a joke. Not like *she* had done a good job being there for *him*. And now he was here, trying to support *her*? The guilt didn't make the nausea one bit better. *Good going, Quill*, she thought bitterly. *Just go take care of yourself, idiot*.

She listened. She could hear the sound of a hand landing on the handle of her door... and then the sound of hooves, heading away.

...well. Good, she thought. Yes. Correct. She released the bedding from the sides of her head, and curled up tighter. *Just what I wanted. Perfect*.

Florbet lay in the darkness, and the cold, in her own perfect isolation.

And then came another knock at the door.

"Okay," said Quill's voice again. "I got a VIP pass. So are you going to let me in, or do I have to go through the refund process? Because you know how much paperwork that generates, and I can't imagine—"

Oh for fuck's sake, Florbet thought. "Uggghhhh, come in," she groaned.

She heard the door open, and felt the vibrations come up through the floor of Quill walking over to her vanity chair, awkwardly cramming himself into it to sit down. There was a *shff* as a plastic bag hit the floor, and the smell of something salty and savory pierced the veil of her bedding to taunt her nostrils.

"I brought takeout," Quill explained. "For whenever you're hungry. I figured nuggets wouldn't be too messy to eat in bed."

Florbet gave a mild grumble, what passed for a noise of approval right now.

There was a pause, no sound in the room except for the shifting of the cheap paper containers settling inside the plastic bag.

"...you want to talk about it?" her unicorn friend offered.

"No," Florbet huffed. Then, more softly, "It's not like there's anything new to talk about. It's the same thing. It's just the same thing it always is. There's nothing else to say about it."

There was silence from beyond her blankets. And then, "That doesn't mean you can't talk about it."

Florbet huffed again, but said nothing.

Quill sat, and thought. "Do you want to go home?" he ventured.

Florbet just growled, not at him. She just growled.

"I could carry you," the unicorn offered. "Do you want a piggy-back ride?"

"No," Florbet shot back. She stopped, and considered. "Maybe. Kinda." She sighed. "Yes," she conceded, "...but not tonight."

"Alright, we'll call that a rain check." There was silence. "You want me to feed you some nuggets? If you just give me a sense where your head is under there, I could slip them under—"

"Oough," Florbet complained. "No, I can't, I can't even think about food right now." She touched a claw to her tender gut. "Throw 'em in the mini-fridge, I can have them tomorrow morning."

"Nuggets for breakfast," Quill commented as he placed the bag inside the fridge. "A feast fit for a queen."

"Shut up," Florbet pretended to complain. Likewise, she gave a grumble of no complaint when Quill took a seat on the edge of her bedding rather than return to the chair.

"Your heater's not on," Quill noticed. He made to rise, "Here, let me get that for y—"

"No." She had said it as a reflex. She shifted, embarrassed by her own train of thought. She could just tell him to go do it, it wasn't too late...

But Quill got there ahead of her. "...do you want me to join you instead?" he offered.

Of course, the frustrated dancer thought, *the one time Quill actually got the hint...* "You don't have to," she countered.

"*May* I join you?" Quill asked instead, refusing to let her squirm away that easily.

"I'll be fine," she tried, "Just turn on the heater before you I—"

"Florbet," Quill said, using his Tone. It was rare to hear his "running out of patience" voice come out so quickly. The insistence caught her off-guard, cutting her sentence short. "I would like to join you. May I?"

Florbet let out a long sigh. "Yeah. Sure. Okay." But as Quill started to lift one corner of the bedding, the first dim rays of light from the room sneaking into her sanctuary, she was overtaken by a stab of panic. "W-wait!" she cried. The corner of the bedding fell. Florbet took a moment to try to steady her breathing, suddenly rapid and fearful.

It was fine, she told herself. *It was, it was, it was scary, and, fine, but, if he saw, and...*

"Florbet?" Quill asked quietly.

The shivering lizard shut her eyes tight. *It was fine, but it wasn't, and it would be okay but it felt like it would be the end, and that made no sense but it was everything right now, she just needed to trust, but it would go wrong, it always went wrong, right? So it would go wrong, but it couldn't, but—*

"C-could—" she finally managed. She hated this, but it was her only way out.

"...c-closet," she instructed. "Side cubbies. S-second from the top."

She could feel Quill rise, make his way over to the closet, and open it. She could hear him shifting the canvas box from its cubby, in order to peer inside.

Pathetic, she scolded herself.

It was all she managed to think before Quill returned to the edge of the bed. "Okay, it's on." She could hear the reluctance in his voice. "You know it doesn't bother me, if—"

"I know," Florbet assured him. "I know, I know." She hugged herself with both arms. "I just... I don't want to deal with it right now. I just, don't, want to think about anyone seeing me."

"That's fine," Quill assured her. "That's perfectly fine."

That's right, Florbet thought. *She could trust him either way.*

She raised one arm, lifting the bedding with it. She peered out, and saw Quill right where she expected him, the blindfold she had him retrieve securely attached to his face... as well as his horn cozy, the thick foam wrapped around his point.

"You came *prepared*," Florbet accused. "You *knew* I might..."

"Just in case," Quill retorted. "And I wasn't wrong, was I?"

Florbet had nothing to say to this. She grabbed Quill by his wrist and gave him a sharp tug, throwing him off-balance but failing to wipe the smug smile from his face. She continued to yank as he scrambled to keep up, guiding him behind her to spoon her from behind.

She waited until he properly wrapped himself around her. It took a little effort — the bedding wasn't quite long enough for him, and adjusting the covers with the arm that wasn't pinned underneath her and without being able to see took more than a few attempts. He had to adjust her a few times — a little this way so his head could stay on the bed, a little that way so her mohawk wasn't directly in his face, a bit to the side to improve the blood flow to his other arm. It didn't matter that she was exhausted, ready to sleep at the first opportunity; the time he spent firmly but gently gripping her body and guiding her into place was far more soothing than she would ever dare to admit to him.

It wasn't until both were perfectly settled in that she spoke again. "Hey," she said, softly. She had managed to find her sweet tone again. The one she preferred to use for her friends, in quiet moments like these. "Thanks for this. Thanks for..." She struggled to find her words: "...putting up with this, I guess."

She could feel Quill shrug from behind her. "It's no trouble at all. It's not like I'm all that eager to sleep at my h—" He paused, faltering on the word. "...at my place." Florbet felt the pang in her heart. That feeling of wanting, so, so, badly, to help share a friend's burden...

"Besides," he went on before she could say anything, "Oh no, I spent a night cuddling with an exotic dancer, how *awful*."

"Shut up," she snorted. "More like you spent a night cuddling the rude bitch who wouldn't even eat your nuggets."

"I don't know how I'll forgive you," Quill sobbed, mired in anguish. "To have my kindness refused..."

"Seriously," she warned him, "don't expect to get any of those nuggets in the morning. I'm gonna wake up with an *appetite*." She threw herself back to push her neck against the curve of his. "I'll let you watch me eat them if you're *lucky*."

"It's a hard life," Quill sighed. "A hard, hard life."

Florbet hesitated. "Yeah," she said, not able to hold back her sadness. "It is." She heard Quill go quiet, a sudden divide opening up between the jokes a moment earlier and the two friends now huddled together under the blanket, hiding from the world. "Does it ever get better?" she asked, voicing the words that so often rattled around in her mind.

Quill took his time to respond. "Well," he ventured carefully. "...I met you. So, that's how my life got better."

Florbet smiled, and felt something crack. She found herself shut shuddering out a sob, tears coming to her eyes, happy and sad all at once. Letting herself smile properly had cracked open a reservoir of feelings, grateful and miserable and joyful and wretched, all at once. She didn't try to name them, or even understand them. She just cried, letting herself cry, letting herself cry as her friend held her from behind, squeezing her tightly.

It didn't last long, but the effect was cleansing. "Mine too, pal," she squeaked, her voice cracking. "Mine too."

There were no more words that night. Just quiet, and still, and the sense like neither of them were alone.

21) put on your best mask

The color was wrong.

This was nothing new right? The color was always wrong.

It was always, always, wrong.

Florbet buried her face in her hands, claws gripping the back of her head like she was trying to physically hold herself together as well.

Just one night. She just wanted one night.

It had been too many, recently. Too many canceled performances, too many times having to beg her coworkers to cover for her. Too many nights out with friends, skipped; too many afternoons lost to inescapable naps. Too many conversations cut short, too many accidentally snappy remarks, too much time spent trying to push through the pain, or the fog, or the ever-present exhaustion. Too many doctor's visits, too many doctors who would just shrug their shoulders. Too many specialists being able to do nothing but tell her to "avoid over-exerting herself".

What was she supposed to do, when living at all was apparently "over-exerting" her??

When was she supposed to *live*??

It was just... she slammed her fist against her vanity.

too... she slammed her fist again.

much!! she slammed it one last time.

An unmistakable series of wet *squelches* came from the neighboring corner of the room.

Florbet opened one eye, staring down at the grain of the vanity. Slowly, she turned to confirm what she had just heard.

Skinky, her pet gum shooter, sat on a large leaf near the center of his vivarium. Staring at her.

His tail shooter was pointed straight up.

Florbet stared at him, hoping against hope that he hadn't just...

A moment later, a drop of cerulean paint, freshly fired against the ceiling of his enclosure, landed on Skinky's nose. The lizard's face curled up in annoyance, and he let out a tiny warning hiss at nothing in particular.

"Oh... oh no, baby, not now..." Florbet whispered. The guilt in her stomach churned. She had startled the poor dear, of course he'd ink, she should have been able to control herself...

A second drop, this one a lush, dark green, followed the first, hitting Skinky smack on the snout again. Once again, he scrunched up his face and hissed a warning, even if he didn't know who he was warning or what he was supposed to be warning them about.

"Baby, please, I go on in..." Florbet glanced at the clock, "...in 17 minutes, and I don't have time for..."

A third drop, more of a copper palette this time, caught Skinky's snout as well, and this time his expression managed to be especially pissy.

"Well then *move* if it bothers you!!" Florbet shouted at him. She slapped a hand over her face. Great. She was yelling at her pet now. How much worse could it get? How much worse could *she* get?

She let out a low groan. The lighting and heating elements were up there. If she let the paint dry as it was... if she let it drip all over the plants... if she didn't clean it *now*, the damage might be irreversible...

The vivarium was one of the few things she had *made* that she felt really proud of, and it was about to be ruined because she had lost her temper, *again*...

"Okay," she said to herself. "Whatever." She got up and made her way over to Skinky's enclosure, resigned to giving up the last of her prep time. She knelt before the cage, and made to open the door.

It was at this point that the shock finished making its way up Skinky's spinal column to his brain. He panicked, darting frantically around his cage until he finally came to rest on the glass, one half on each side of where the door opened.

Florbet paused. She nudged the door, moving the half of the clinging lizard that was in front of it. His grip was tight, though, and so the door was pulled shut again. Florbet tried again, and again, but each time Skinky forced the door closed just as soon as she started to open it.

"Baby, please... baby, I just need..." she tried pushing a little bit harder, only to earn a look of pure displeasure crossing her lizard child's face.

"It's the *one* place I need you *not* to stand right now!!" she yelled at him. "Just *move*, just move a *little*..." She rattled the door a few more times, hoping it would somehow get through to his tiny peabrain, but he held fast.

Florbet squeezed both of her hands into fists, hard. She grit her teeth, gnashing them at this, the stupidest of all possible situations. It wasn't bad enough that *everything* had to go wrong *all the time*, even *cleaning up* after this latest shitty turn of events had to be a pain in the ass, because *of course it did*...

"Would you *please* just *move* and *let me clean your cage!*" she snarled at the obstinate little lizard. "Just *move* you little *dumbass!*"

Skinky just stared at her.

Florbet threw her head back and shouted at the ceiling, a bark of pure frustrating and impotent rage.

And then she slumped forward, her head suddenly too heavy to lift.

What was she doing?

What was she supposed to be doing?

...

Why did it always have to be like this?

"...I'm sorry I called you a dumbass," she whispered. She opened her eyes, just enough to see Skinky staring at her. To anyone else, it would have been the same blank stare, but she found herself reading the concern that was in it.

She sighed, and tried to smile, almost successfully. "...I mean, you are a dumbass," she told him. "...but..." It was an odd sensation — the disappointment and relief, blended together, that comes with giving up — "...but us dumbasses have to stick together, right?"

The little gum shooter blinked. Then, suddenly inspired, he scuttled around on the glass, leapt for a nearby leaf, managed to miss it entirely and hit the floor of the vivarium with a thud, where he scampered into one of his favorite hiding spots.

"Thank you," Florbet said with a roll of her eyes. She opened the door and craned her head, trying to get a good view of the ceiling.

Shit. It was pretty bad. A thick layer of paint coated several of the lights. The heating coils seemed mercifully untouched, but there was no way she could let the rest set where it was.

Showtime was looming.

Florbet's mind raced. She'd need gloves, rags, an apron, wipes something to keep any of the ink from splattering onto her face. She'd probably need a basin to catch the runoff and place any soaked rags. A bucket for water... she couldn't think of anyone available to help, anyone who wasn't currently on stage or manning the door or managing the AV. She was completely unequipped here. *Most* of the things she needed — only most, and only if she was lucky — could be found in the janitor's storage, on the other side of the building. If she ran... if she ran... if she... ran...

She imagined herself running, awkwardly sprinting there and back just before her performance. She imagined scrubbing, and scrubbing increasingly sweaty and disgusting, seconds ticking down before she was set to go on stage, tick tick tick...

She closed her eyes again, and ran a frustrated claw through her hair, grabbing a handful as if to hold herself upright.

"I'm so tired..." she said, letting herself slump a little.

There was a quiet moment, when all she could hear was the finale of the previous set, the cheers and applause growing to a roar. All she wanted to do was...

She took a deep breath.

"I'm so tired..."

Her claw twitched. An impulse stabbed her in the heart.

"I'm so tired," she said one more time, "...of letting this body *beat me.*"

In a frenzy, she jammed her unprotected claw towards the ceiling of the vivarium, scooping a thick glob of Skinky's paint off the lighting in one go.

She looked down at the paint-covered hand, a chaotic mash of pigments swirling against each other. There was no way she was going to be able to clean it off before her set.

Fine!

She took the claw and streaked it across her face, painting wild stripes that stretched from snout around the back of her neck. She reached into the cage to snag another glob of paint, and smeared this one from her opposite shoulder down to the crook of the other hip.

If this body wanted to fight her, she'd *fight back*.

Grinning maniacally, she reached in with both hands, collecting as much paint as she could with each pass and wiping it off on her body wherever instinct guided her. She imagined desperate, greedy hands, yearning to grab her wherever they could, to seize her and hold her and stroke her — while her own claws traveled her body, leaving rainbow streaks across every scale they touched. Her chest, her thighs, the base of her tail, her neck, her face, no inch of her was safe.

If this body wanted to defy her, she'd *reclaim it!*

When at last there was little ink left for her to scrape off, she indulged in one final act of debasement, running her hands through her hair to stain them in coarse, jagged streaks.

She stood up, the tip of her tail swinging the cage door shut without having to spare a thought.

She was trembling, head to toe to tail; and yet she felt unstoppable.

She swung around, shooting a look at the lizard in the mirror.

The look of fear and sadness she saw on the reflection only lasted an instant, before her defiant snarl cut through that cowardly image. "Nothing's gonna stop me!" she snapped at it, before storming out into the hallway.

Bastin was there, apparently on his way to her room. "Uh," the jade alligator said, giving her a wild look up and down. "Do you need me to, uh, swap in for you, because—"

"Not tonight!" Florbet barked at him, shouldering past him without a second glance. She was on a death march for the stage. With each footstep, she left behind a slick patch of flame, which burned a brilliant blue before extinguishing itself.

As she approached the far corner, she ran into Amboise, nearly bowling them over. The short-eared scapegoat/rabbat gave a startle, shrinking back from her.

It was by reflex that she grabbed their collar, tugging upward to bring them to their toes.

"New first song. *Set the Night on Fire*, by Ice Cream," she ordered.

"Th-that's..." Amboise stuttered. "All last-minute set changes are supposed to b-be approved b-by..."

Florbet leaned in towards Amboise's array of ears, and hissed.

She didn't need to say anything. The hiss carried the full weight of her convictions.

Amboise swallowed. "Y-yeah, o-okay, b-but... that's a l-loud song, so—"

"Play it loud," Florbet whispered directly into their left-center ear, the one Florbet knew from experience to be the most sensitive. Then she pulled back. "If my adoring fans want me to hear their desperate pleas for attention..." she gave them a Look, the one she used whenever she felt like dragging someone's hidden desire out into the open. "...they better be ready to work for it."

With that, she released the hapless rabbit with a shove, continuing on towards the stage.

Ques was waiting just off-stage, her Vanguard physique perfectly suited to her multi-role job at the club as bouncer, maintenance worker and general heavy-lifter. Her eyes went wide as Florbet approached, but Florbet cut off whatever she was about to say with a single lifted claw.

“Move the front row back, darling,” she informed Ques. “I’m going in *hot* tonight.”

The vanguard’s uncertainty only lingered for a moment, before that doubt decided it would do well to find somewhere else to be right now. As soon as it was gone, Ques gave her a stern nod, and headed out on stage.

Ques wasn’t the kind to take orders, but when she recognized work to be done, she didn’t hesitate. Protective and loyal, the vanguard was a blessing to the club. At the moment, that blessing took the form of a loud voice and a huge body ordering everyone to step back, or she’d step them back herself.

Ques returned, shooting Florbet an affirmative thumbs-up. Florbet gave her a nod, satisfied.

All that was left was the curtains, and beyond that, the stage, and beyond that, the world.

...

The lights dimmed. The room went quiet.

...

The performer marched out, head held high.

Her footprints blazed behind her, a tantalizing trail of will o’ the wisps left in her wake.

Halfway down the catwalk, she leapt.

She caught the pole with a hand and a leg, completing one revolution around it before slamming the ground, hard. A shockwave of flame rocketed out, knocking more than a few of the closer audience members halfway out of their chairs. Her nostrils flared at the sting of singed fur, and she smirked. Those scorched patches would serve as a reminder, for those who hadn’t properly heeded her warning to back up. The owners of those scorched patches wouldn’t soon forget as to just who they were dealing with.

She rose, pulling herself up to her full height. Commanding. Imperial. Invincible.

The crowd gasped, collectively.

And then the bass kicked in.

Florbet threw her entire self into her performance that night.

From high above the crowd, she threw herself into her dance, loving every flourish, extending herself as far as she might go. Every curve, every arc, every sweep — this is where she found her radiance.

Tomorrow, she knew full well, she would pay for this. Oh, how she would pay.

For now, though, she was alive, and just barely able to hear the screams of desire over the roar of her own flame.

30) it all comes together

The knock at the door wasn’t at all unexpected. “Yeah?” Florbet called, from within her heap of blankets.

"It's Quill," came the response. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah," the aching lizard called back. "I mean I'm a pile of garbage right now, but if you don't mind that..."

The door was already opening. "Hey," she could hear him say, along with the *swish* of a plastic bag. "I thought you might need the company after tonight." He shook the bag in his hand, the contents inside jostling temptingly. "I got twice as many nuggets this time, since I didn't get any last time."

Yeah, of course. No surprise news of her performance had gotten around. Quill's arrival had been like clockwork. There were ways in which he wasn't always dependable; but this wasn't one of them. "Oh, sweet," Florbet announced. "Twice as many nuggets for me!"

"Ha." Quill said. "Do you want me to put 'em away, or...?"

"Aaa, hang on, I should go slow, but..." She wormed her way to the edge of the bedding, and stuck her paint-covered snout out from under the covers. "Go ahead and pop one in my mouth, I wanna see if I can get my tummy to hold down a few." With that, she opened wide, waiting to be fed.

"Alright," said Quill. "And I can help you to the bathroom if your stomach rejects them. Or just let me know if I need to grab the bucket." The dancer who had this room before her had been kind enough to swap when she first arrived, giving her one that was as close as possible to both the stage and the bathroom.

Florbet waited. When she felt the warm morsel of meat land on her tongue, she snapped her jaw shut, relishing the way the heat trapped inside the breaching filled her mouth. She chewed eagerly. Her gut was complaining, but she could probably risk a few nuggets without incident...

"I forgot how feral you are for these," her friend snorted, retrieving the next one from the bag.

"Watch your sass there, pal, that's a good way to lose a finger." Florbet opened her mouth again, and again Quill slipped the nugget inside, pulling his hand away just in time to avoid her teeth snapping shut. Florbet brought her snout back under the bedding, retreating to the dark and the quiet. Oh, her body hurt, and tomorrow was going to be a trial to get through. But for now, she was forcing herself to enjoy the moment, and was delighted to find she was managing to succeed.

"...you doing okay?" Quill asked.

Florbet swallowed her bite of food. "I'm doing okay for me," she responded. "This body's gonna come to collect tomorrow, but for now I'm just stiff and achy."

Quill was silent for a second. She was used to this; she got it a lot. There was no good way to talk to her about her issues — there was nothing that could be done about it, nothing that wasn't just her managing it as best she could, trying to sneak as much life past her disease as she could manage. "Well..." he said eventually. "I have work, but. If it's a crisis, you can always text me, you know? I checked with Papaya, she's completely cool with it."

Florbet sighed wistfully. It was nice, knowing people who didn't try to sugarcoat it. They just... saw it, and responded to it. They didn't ignore it or make it out to be even worse than it was (which admittedly was impressive, when anyone actually pulled it off).

"Thanks, pal," she said gratefully. "I got plenty of folks I can whine to here if I need someone to drag my ass around." She groaned. "Ah, geez, I'll probably need someone to help

give me a bath tomorrow. As much fun as looking like the disaster I feel like is, I gotta scrub this paint off at some point.”

Quill fell conspicuously silent. Florbet snorted to herself. When he wasn't being oblivious, he was being obvious; a trait that made him endless fun to toy with. “Would you be willing to— oh yeah, you have work tomorrow, never mind. Don't worry about it, buddy, I'm sure I can find *someone* around here who I can talk into helping me out...”

She felt a heavy hand land on her upper arm through the bedding, giving her an affectionate jostle. “Dumbass,” he snorted.

“Takes one to know one, pal!” she called back.

There was a pause — and then she felt Quill lower himself on top of her. He draped himself over her, like a blanket, gathering the bedding together to gently cocoon her further. She wriggled, enjoying the sensation of being squeezed by the plush material from all sides, and sighed.

The second knock at the door, that was a little unexpected. “Come in?” she said, too surprised to think about it.

She heard the door open, and then a tiny voice, “Oh! Am I interrupting? I can just leave this here...”

“Vess!” she called out, wriggling free of Quill's weight. She stuck her snout out again, not caring what this particular friend saw. Her paranoia about image, normally able to conjure the nastiest, vile thoughts coming from anyone and everyone, simply couldn't get a foothold when it came to Vess. It would try, of course -- she could feel it working to find the kind of nasty, mean little thought it tried to attach to anyone she cared about. But when it tried to craft “the sort of unkind thing Vess might say,” it would always come up blank, and simply slink away, defeated. “Don't be silly, you aren't interrupting anything! Stay, stay!”

“Oh, well, I just thought...” She heard a rustle, “I just thought you might need a little care after tonight, so, I thought I'd bring by some takeout... I figured, starches to replenish your energy reserves, and I know you love tater tots, so...”

“Great dorks think alike!” Florbet exclaimed, hearing Quill lift his own bag. She paused. “You know I'm a mess right now, right? Like. Literally. More so than usual, if you can believe it.”

“Oh, that's not a problem!” Vess replied. “Here, look!” Florbet craned her head forward slightly, lifting up the bedding just enough to let her get a look at the rabbit visitor. They had taken two of their ears and wrapped each one diagonally across their face, covering the upper half of their head completely. “See?” asked Vess. “Built-in blindfold!”

“Pfft, you goof,” the lizard snorted, retreating back into her soft, cozy lair. “C'mon, c'mon already, sit,” she instructed.

She could hear the shy rabbit tarrying in the doorway. It was rare to see them in the club at all — the bright lights, dense heat and pounding music of the performance were a poor fit for the quiet, long-eared creature — and she wasn't about to let them get away when they had come this far. “Sit!” she commanded, and this time she could hear Vess close the door behind them and start to approach.

But it was then that a chime came from her compact, a pleasant *ding* ringing through the air. The compact was sitting out on the vanity; a few feet and a million miles away. “Ah, I can bring that to you,” Vess offered, “I'll make sure not to look!”

"Oh whatever," Florbet sighed, "I am so not in the mood to care about that." She paused. "Oh, if it's Toyle, tell him no."

"What are you expecting him to ask you...?" Quill asked curiously.

"Oh, I'm not expecting anything," Florbet explained. "Just, whatever he says, tell him no. It's the best approach, when it comes to Toyle."

"Oh, it's Lexy!" Vess exclaimed delightedly. "She says, 'hey flor. me and pap got too much takeout for just the two of us. if you'd like us to drop some off with you, the club isn't too far out of our way. want us to come by?'"

"Aww," Florbet cooed. "What a sweetheart. Tell her—"

She was cut short by another chime, and Vess continued to read. "Oh, uh, this one's from Papaya. She says, 'we're right outside. lex is being a dumbass. just let us know if we can come in.'"

"Oh my god," said Quill.

"Oh my god," agreed Florbet.

Another ding. "Oh, another from Lexy... 'fine. yes. okay. we're right outside. i didn't want to pressure you but i guess *someone* had to go and blow my cover. anyway. please tell papaya to stop reading my screen, because it's very rude.'"

Florbet could feel Quill positively vibrating, trying to stifle his laughter, and the way it shook the entire bed made her start to lose it too. It only got worse when the next *ding* came in, and Vess continued to read: "'tell lex that she wouldn't know i was looking at *her* screen if she wasn't looking at *my* screen, and that this just confirms her dumbass status.'"

Now the laughter came. The moment Florbet started to break, Quill began to guffaw, which cost Florbet what little resistance she had been managing to hold onto. When the fifth *ding* rang out, it was all they could do to shush each other while Vess read, "'wow. calling me a dumbass just because i caught her surreptitiously *spying* on my screen thanks to my entirely-justified surveillance of her screen? what a hypocrite. tell papaya—'"

"Oh my god," Florbet said again, choking on her laughter. "Just tell those two nerds to get in here already, I'm going to *die* if they keep this up."

It wasn't long before she heard Lexy's voice from just beyond the door, already announcing something as she entered. "Technically," she was explaining, "'the club isn't too far out of the way' is true for the case where we're right outside. It very clearly isn't 'too far,' under those circumstances. And while she might have read my text as *implying* that it was *accidental* that we got extra takeout, I'd like you to note that I never said as much, and *therefore--*"

"Hey, hot stuff," Papaya interrupted in a very meaningful way, cutting Lexy's explanation mercifully short. "Heard you're going through a rough patch." Florbet could hear the shuffling of cards as they passed back-and-forth between the flowercat's hands. "I brought my tarot deck, in case you wanted a reading. Seems like this could be a decisive moment."

"Oh *hell* yes." She gave a tiny fist pump under the bedding, not caring if no one else could see it. "I am so ready, hit me with that spread, baby!"

"If she tells you there are burgers in your future," Lexy cut in, "she's cheating. Because that's what we got you." Lexy's face descended into the bag. "I honestly don't know what's on most of these," came her paper-muffled voice, "we just grabbed the least healthy-sounding names off the menu."

Florbet's snout emerged once more, this time pushing out farther and twisting to one side to let Florbet see into the room with one eye. Papaya took a seat next to her head, dealing out cards onto the floor right beyond the edge of the bed. "Let's see... Sculptor of Cups... Beacon of Wands... Planter of Swords? Huh. All court cards."

Florbet couldn't help but wriggle excitedly, craning her head to get a glimpse of the not-a-witch-stop-calling-me-that's face. "That's interesting..." Papaya went on. "...might need to draw a few extras to figure out how these are connected... hm... The Emperor, over the Beacon of Wands? Geez, this is a regal spread--"

"Oh! This reminds me of the dream I had last night!" Florbet acclaimed.

"Oh my god, seriously? That's incredible," she could hear the excitement in Papaya's voice -- and when Papaya got excited, it was impossible not to get uplifted by her energy. There was the sound of rifling through pages, and then the *click* of a ballpoint pen. "Tell me everything, don't leave out any details. I want to hear it all."

The retelling was interrupted by the door opening yet again. "Hey hey!" came Wel's boisterous voice. "Hope I'm not late for the party!"

Quill was the first to respond. "It's not technically a party--"

"It's a party now!" the ink-stained tiger shot back. "Now that I'm here!"

"Can't argue with that!" Florbet confirmed.

"Whatcha got there?" asked Lexy. "More takeout?"

"This?" Wel responded. "Nah, I brought drinks! Figured the rest of you would supply the grub!"

"But we didn't— how did you know—" Quill tried, but gave up just as quickly. "Whatever. Just tell me you've got lemonade in there."

There was *clink* of bottles bumping into each other. "One li-mo-nade for monsieur Quill, coming right up!" Florbet was sent bouncing as Wel flopped down on the bed, mere inches away from sitting on her. "Don't worry hun, my ink won't make a mess of these lovely, *premium* sheets of yours."

An item from Florbet's mental to-do list floated to mind. "Ooh ooh, speaking of stains..." She turned her attention back to Papaya. "I got a nasty gum shooter paint situation going on in Skinky's vivarium, and the sooner I can get that scraped off, the better. Can I borrow your maid for the morning?"

"Maid??" the hapless unicorn protested. "I'm her *assistant*, and I'll thank you--"

"Oh sure," Papaya agreed. "He can just stay late to make up for the lost time."

"Sweet," Florbet said, making her fist pump more obvious this time.

"Can I just quickly point out, " Vess interjected, "That everyone knew who Florbet was talking about as soon as she said 'maid'?"

"Pfft, a-duh," the cozy lizard giggled. "Who else would I mean?"

"Excuse me, but don't I get a say in this?" Quill protested.

"Relax, dude," Papaya cut in. "Bunch of us are gonna be stuck working late, we got an evening shipment coming in. It'll be nice having you around anyway."

"Well—" Quill tried to fuss, but the wind had been taken out of his sails. "...yeah. Yeah, okay, that sounds good, I'm in."

"Hell yeah. Owe you one, pal!" Florbet cooed, daring to extend a claw outside the confines of her bedding to give Quill a grateful pat on the leg.

"You owe me a higher number than you can count to, Scales," he replied, placing a large, gentle hand to envelop hers.

"Good thing I got into dance instead of math then, huh!" Florbet withdrew her claw... but only briefly, as she hunted down her next prey. Lexy had taken a seat next to Papaya, leaning her head on the larger cat's shoulder. That left her tail unguarded — it was the work of a moment for Florbet to snag it, dragging the fluffy appendage into her lair and laying her head on it. Lexy gave her tail an experimental tug, but Florbet kept it properly pinned, making sure it couldn't budge even an inch.

"Hey!" Lexy protested. "That's mine!"

"Not any more!" Florbet snickered.

"You've got that smug shithead look on your face, don't you?" Lexy demanded, shifting to try to make herself more comfortable while her tail remained trapped under Florbet's head. "I can tell through three layers of comforter, don't even deny it."

"Wouldn't dream of denying it, buddy," she responded, fighting a yawn. It was just so *fluffy*, and the way it fit beneath her exhausted noggin was just so *right*...

"Oh dear," she could hear Vess say, their voice delightfully playful. "Have you been added to the dragon's hoard, dear friend?"

"Seems that way," Lexy confirmed. "I guess this is just my life now. Goodbye, freedom."

"Such is the fate of all fair princesses who venture too close to that draconic tyrant's lair." Vess getting into it, building up the riff as they went. "Fair thee well, noble lady; you shall be dearly missed."

"Sucks," Papaya said without a trace of even mock sympathy. "My condolences. I'll make sure to sell all her junk for a good price; I know that's what she would have wanted."

"Don't you dare," the trapped fox warned her.

"Hey hey," Wel joined in, "she's got that ink bottle that changes any ink inside it to the last color you wrote with, yeah? So you only ever get colors you already have on-hand? Gimme me a good deal on that, Paps, that little beauty would be perfect for my collection."

"Don't you *dare*," Lexy warned again, "I *love* that thing. I've been trying out sticking to one color for each of my projects, so it can remind me what I was working on yesterday."

"You got enough colors of ink for that, my fluffy friend?" said Wel, with a grin so glowing Florbet could feel it with her eyes closed. "If not, you know I can give you the hookup any day of the week, huh?"

As Lexy started to recount all the projects she was presently working on -- plus the ones she had backburned for now -- and the ones that she was still going to come back to at some point -- and the ones she had gotten started, but hadn't really gotten *into* yet -- plus her latest ideas... ..Florbet could feel herself losing focus.

Florbet's mind was drifting. She could feel the grip of sleep reaching for her, ready to drag her into that peaceful oblivion. There was so much happiness in her private little room — the smell of salted meat and spicy sauces teased at her nostrils. There was a ring of laughter, some joke Vess made having landed perfectly. She could feel the others shift their weight around her, a ring of friends to surround her on all sides.

I wanna stay up, came the quiet thought. I wanna enjoy this. I don't always want to be the first one to conk out, the one who never has enough energy.

It wasn't a thought that was going to go anywhere. The exhaustion was truly bearing down on her now, absolute and inevitable. Staying awake wasn't an option, not even remotely so. The food, the laughs, those precious moments of friendship... she'd... she'd just have to hear about them in the morning.

Her head sagged hard into Lexy's tail, every bone in her body suddenly heavy.

It was hard.

It was so hard.

It was so, so, pointlessly hard.

It wasn't a mistake she had made. It wasn't a consequence of anything. It wasn't even a... wasn't even a proper thing, that could be pointed to. It was just... her. Her, and her body. And no amount of hating her body could change that.

It was so hard.

...but...

She listened for each of their laughs. There was Quill's deep and pleasant, emblematic of his good-natured ways. There was Vess's, gentle and giggly, like a cache of hidden bells. There was Lexy's, earnest and inviting; and then Papaya's, as passionate and energizing as everything else about her. And then there was Wel's, eager and open, the kind that made you want to never stop telling jokes.

It was hard.

There were days when she just wanted to give up.

There were moments when, at her lowest, she felt like she would give up anything just to escape this life, this curse, this prison of flesh and bone that robbed her of anything it could get its greedy little hooks into.

But that never lasted.

Because this? she thought as she drifted into a deep slumber. *This, right here?*

She wouldn't trade this for *anything*.

If this illness was part of the story of how she met these friends, then it was worth absolutely every second.

She slept. And she dreamt.

19) refusing the call

It was a glorious day in Dewclaw. Florbet leaned against the wall of the outdoor cafe gratefully, letting it help prop her up. She had taken the whole day off to be friends, and for once, her body didn't seem to have any complaints about that. It was still nice to avoid taxing it, though, and so she openly lounged against the inviting surface, using it to help her stay balanced on the high stool.

This cafe was a favorite of hers, but a little outside her normal range. Ten blocks from the club, in the direction of nothing else in particular, trips here had to be limited. She had to be careful about indulging in that kind of extravagance—at least, she did when she didn't have Quill to piggy-back on.

Quill sat across from her, ever so slightly awkwardly, his own height plus the height of the stool leaving him looking a bit precarious. Meanwhile, Vess sat catty-corner to both. They

suffered from the opposite problem — their face only just cleared the height of the table — but they smiled joyfully, looking perfectly comfy even if they had to reach up to take their drink from the table.

Florbet sighed, wistfully. She felt lucky. That was a rare feeling, and so she let herself luxuriate in it, the emotional equivalent of a warm, soothing bath.

"What were you thinking for dinner tonight?" Vess asked her, their paws up on the table.

Florbet shook her head. "I don't care, seriously." She snorted. "Well, not takeaway, but besides that."

(It had been a week since her "Painted Lady" "afterparty," and she had only just managed to polish off the copious leftovers that resulted. She was sure she had managed to put on a little weight as a result; if there was one thing that her life made easy, though, it was that the intersection between "exotic dancer" and "fire user" gave her an amazing metabolism. She never had a problem burning off calories, quite literally.)

"That new Althar place that just opened?" Vess suggested, drumming their fingers on the table eagerly.

"I seriously don't care," Florbet repeated. "All I care about is having dinner with my best friends." She pounded her fist on the table. "And I'm gonna DO it!" she declared, raising her fist in the air defiantly. "Come hell or high water!"

Quill and Vess joined her in her cheer, hoisting their drinks to the sky.

As the unicorn set his lemonade back down, he asked, "...you are going to be okay, right? I know an all-day outing can be—"

Florbet cut him off by slapping the table. "I set aside my whole day for this. Just one day with friends, with nothing else to do and nothing to ruin it." She took an eager sip from the sweet, rainbow concoction in front of her (having requested "the fruitiest goddamn drink you've got" from the waiter). "Anyway, you should be asking yourself if *you're* gonna be okay hauling me around on your back."

Quill snorted. "I'll be fine. Just mind your claws, would you?"

The lizard smirked. "No promises."

The rabbit sitting between them cleared their throat. "Oh, would this be a good time to tell you about this game I wanted to show you two?"

"Lay it on us, pal! I can't wait to kick both your asses at—"

She was cut short by a ring from her compact. She retrieved her from her purse, glanced at the number, and wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Oh, not *again*..." With her friends giving her concerned looks, she explained, "I must have gotten on some shitty database because this spam caller has been bothering me several times a day for like a week. What a pain."

"What do they want?" Vess asked.

Florbet shrugged. "I don't know, I just have no idea who it is and it's an unlisted number."

"Just tell them to put you on their Do Not Call list." Quill reached across the table, offering an open hand. "I'll do it for you, if you want."

The peeved lizard shoo'd him off. "I'll do it, I wanna yell at little first. It was *fine* when it was just me, but they're intruding on friendtime now!" She tapped the screen and brought the phone to her head. "Alright, listen up buddy—"

"She picked up!" came an unfamiliar voice on the other end of the line. There were shuffling sounds, as the caller passed their compact off to someone else. Florbet paused,

awkwardly, her righteous anger blunted by the forced delay. She waited until it sounded like the compact had been passed off before she tried again, "Now you listen to me, I—"

"Oh, thank *goodness* I got a hold of you," came the surreal response, carried by a rich, husky voice. "I am so *allieved*."

With a terrified squawk, Florbet fumbled her compact into the air. It bounced and landed in the center of the table. With "Speaker Mode On" displayed as a bright blue bar across the top of the screen, the luxuriant voice continued: "...I do have the right indivisible, do I not? Florbet?"

Vess jumped onto their stool, hands planted on the table, staring down at the compact, eyes wide. Florbet just held both hands near her face, still processing the shock. "J-j-" Florbet stuttered. "J... ..maby?!" was all she could manage.

"Maybe...?" Jasmaby asked, confusion in his voice.

"No! I mean, yes!" Florbet shouted. Her mind raced, trying to get back to reality. *Give me something to say*, she ordered it. "Hi!" she shouted, angry at her mouth for betraying her lameness.

"Wonderous. It has been such an ordeal, being unable to converse."

Further horror dawned on Florbet. The three friends made eye contact. "I've been hanging up on *Jasmaby*," she squeaked quietly. "*Jasmaaaby*," she added by way of clarification.

The diva's voice took on a more serious tone. "Allow me to be as concise and compendious as possible." The three friends looked back down, not one daring to breathe. "I attentivated your show last week, you see, and I've been trying to get in touch with you hence."

Florbet blinked. "Last week?" she whispered to her friends. "But I've barely been doing public shows, I've mo— oh no, oh no no no no no no..."

Quill swallowed. "He must mean..."

Florbet grabbed her face with both hands, her voice barely managing a pained squeak. "He, the, the 'Painted Lady' incident, he— oh my god, no no no no..."

Jasmaby cleared his throat, loudly and distinctly. "I daresay an apology is in order."

"I'm sorry!" Florbet forced out, her throat tight.

"I'm sorry too!" Vess added. Florbet gave them a dumbfounded stare, to which the flustered rabbat could only offer a panicked shrug.

Jasmaby voice was like gravel. "I had to walk out, just as your perforation was coming to its conclusion."

This was a nightmare, Florbet thought. This had to be a nightmare. This is exactly how her nightmares went. "My stunt was so bad he *walked out*." Her mind flooded with the disappointed face of every dancer after her that night. Her stupid, impulsive *nonsense* had driven *Jasmaby out of the club*.

"Oh, I'm so fired," she mouthed to the empty air. "I," she addressed to Jasmaby, "I, I, I, that was, it, it wasn't my— it was, I, I can explain—"

"Yes," Jasmaby said, cutting her off. "I am so *very* looking forward to your explification."

Florbet looked up at her friends again, a wild smile on her face, the corners of her eyes wrinkling with stress. "Ha ha, cool," she told them. "Lemme just carve my explanation on a tombstone real quick and hop in my grave!!"

But Jasmaby was still speaking: "I so wanted to hear it that night, everything you must have thought and felt to invent such a spectacular!" There was an urgency to his voice now: "You *must* believe me that I was called away by an *absolute* crisis. To have seen me walk out

like that must have been..." He sounded almost sorrowful, as he said, "Oh my dear, it must have been so *awful* for you."

"Wha—" It was less of a word, and more of stupefied grunt.

Jasmaby was on a roll, far more powerful than any mere grunt. "Your fervency, ah! Your animalosity, ah! I must confess, I have scarcely been able to turn my mind to other matters, when I would rather be contemplating the meaning of your work. Promoting the primal as an absolution for imperious mores, oh, my heart! What I saw on the stage that night was positively... positively..."

Florbet had never heard any word spoken as decadently as what came next: "...*iconoclastic*."

She blinked. She was aware of the two other beings sitting at the table with her were giving her thumbs up, but she couldn't for the life of her figure out why.

Slipping into a mournful tone, Jasmaby concluded his speech: "Your art deserved my commendations. 'tis the highest form of unpropitious happenstance that it received my egress instead."

Florbet slapped at Quill's hand. "You. Tallboy. What did that mean?"

"Uh," the writer rubbed his hand tenderly. "Which words did you not understand?"

Florbet slapped her forehead. "Are you stupid? All of them!" she hissed.

The unicorn gave her a hard stare. But he relented, and translated: "He liked your performance, and was sorry he had to leave before he could tell you so and ask about it. He liked how you went wild, like you were breaking a bunch of abstract stuff."

"Okay," Florbet said, fanning herself as she tried to calm her pounding heart. "Okay. Okay." She took a deep breath, eyes closed, finding her focus. "Okay." She turned to Vess. "You. Bunnyface. What did any of Tallboy's words mean?"

Before Vess could answer, Jasmaby's voice rang out: "Allow me to make my aspirations perspicuous: I want you to partner with me for my upcoming fashion gala." Almost growling now, he added, "I *need* that energy, that *life*."

"P-p-", Florbet stammered out. "P-p-" She tried to remember where in the body words were made, so you could say some. "P-p-"

"Are you interested?" Jasmaby asked.

Florbet panicked. She turned to Vess. "You. Bunnyface. Help. I need the, the, the..."

Vess leaned towards her, eager to help. "What do you need?"

The stuttering lizard tried to make progress down the sentence: "I need the, the, the, the word, the word, the, the..."

"Which word?" Vess leaned forward as far as they could, as if proximity could translate to comprehension.

"The, the, the..." Florbet nodded her head up-and-down rapidly. "The, that word!"

"...yes'?" Vess offered.

Florbet snapped her fingers and pointed at them. *That was the one*. "Yes!" she shouted into her compact.

"Splendid!" Jasmaby cheered, and Florbet found herself rising off her seat in excitement. "Now, I'm afraid my itinerary is a cataclysm right now, just an absolute *disaster*, so: dinner tonight, at 7pm."

"T- tonight?" Florbet asked, lowering herself back down. She glanced up at her friends, a sudden fear in her heart.

"It is the *only* time I can get away," Jasmaby insisted. "Oh, if only I had managed to get in touch sooner... I *do* apologize for the short notice. I simply don't know *when* I'll be free next, galas are *such* a whorlwind."

Florbet looked up at her friends again, mouth open, words caught in her throat. "What... what do I do?" she whispered.

"*Ditch us*," Vess hissed.

"There'll be other nights," Quill insisted. "This is important, go for it!"

Florbet sat, and looked into their eyes, and thought.

They were right. It was important. It was an opportunity -- not merely one she had been waiting for, but one she could scarcely dream of.

So why did it feel so wrong?

What had gone from a nightmare to a dream had turned back into a nightmare, right out from under her.

She looked down at her claws, and remembered that night, when they were stained with paint.

She remembered the quiet moment, when she had stopped being mad at Skinky.

She remembered giving up.

It was like thinking through a fog — like the answer was in front of her, but she just couldn't make any headway on approaching it. She just... couldn't see it.

Or, maybe she simply didn't want to.

She sighed, and spoke into her compact: "Could you give me just a minute?"

"Of course, darling, I'll be here."

"Thanks." She hit the mute button, and looked up at her friends. "I'm gonna turn him down," she told them. "I'm gonna have dinner with you two."

Quill looked shocked. "What?"

"Look," Florbet told them, looking away. "It's a nice thought. It'd be cool to have dinner with him or whatever." She thought about what it was like, high on her pole, looking down on her adoring fans, on top of the world. "But that night was dumb luck. I went out there expecting to bomb. I figured the club was going to let me go." She rested her head on one hand, doing her best to hold it up. "It wasn't art; it was just me being an idiot."

"It was *defiant*," Vess tried, but Florbet wasn't hearing it.

"I don't know what Jasmaby was talking about. I don't know how being an absolute feral makes me more imperial, or whatever he said."

"He actually said—" Quill offered, but Florbet cut him off.

"It doesn't matter. I'd be faking it if I accepted." She sighed. "Besides, it's not like I could keep up. You heard him; what kind of schedule he keeps. I'd love to be able to do that, to be able to do..." She sought for the right word.

The word she found made her heart sink, but she said it anyway: "...anything. To be able to do, anything. But that's just not me. I just have to... accept that. Might as well be now."

"You don't know..." Vess began, before trailing off into silence. Florbet shook her head.

"You heard him. He needs energy, he needs life." She chuckled. It was almost funny, honestly. "I mean, come on, those are my defining traits? I spend two days off my feet for every night I spend dancing. Is that the 'energy' you think he's looking for?"

Quill leaned forward, taking one of her hands in both of his. "If you—" ...but she pulled away before he could continue.

"I took a nap yesterday, in-between the time I spent in the morning doing nothing, and the time I spent in the afternoon doing nothing." She looked at them, soft smile, wet eyes. "Is that the 'life' you think he's looking for?"

Her friends were silent. Florbet looked down.

She was tired.

Tired of being a source of sadness in everyone's life; for everyone who got close to her.

She was just... sad. It was just sad. It didn't have to be big and complicated: it could just be sad.

It felt inescapable.

It felt inescapable.

It felt inescapable... but... it wasn't.

It wasn't, was it. She had escaped before. That night. It felt just as hopeless now as it did a week ago: but she remembered the road out this time. That night — the Painted Lady performance — it had lit something inside of her, and when she needed it, she knew where to look for that flame.

She looked up.

"You two. I'm choosing you two over him. That's what I want."

"But—" Quill tried, but Florbet was having none of it. She thrust an accusatory finger in his face.

"You want to tell me, 'this is important'? Fuck that." She slammed both of her pointer fingers into the table, before gesturing at the three of them sitting in the circle: "*This* is important, pal." She pointed the finger back in the startled unicorn's face. "*You're* important. Don't tell *me* what's important. *You're* important." She gave him her most defiant look. "You got that?"

"Are you sure—" Vess began, but Florbet was on them in an instant.

"You want to tell me there'll be other nights? So what?" she hissed. Slamming both of her fingers into the table again, she declared, "Damn right there'll be other nights. But I want *this* night." She leaned, hissing a wave of hot air that caught Vess in the face. "How long have you been waiting to teach me this game you want to play? How long have you waited for me to feel well enough to have a day like this?"

"It's, only been a few... months?" Vess confessed.

Florbet leaned back, her interrogation having reached a satisfactory conclusion. "I'm gonna make the most of my life. I'm gonna do what's right for me." She pounded her fist into her chest, rearing up to loom over those who would defy her imposingly. "And if that means blowing off Jasmaby to play board games and watch DewTube and doodle with each other, then so be it!!" She slammed her fist into her open palm.

"*Fuck* Jasmaby," she declared. There was a beat. "Figuratively!" she added.

Before Quill or Vess could raise any more objections, before she could have second thoughts, before she lost her grip on her truth, she made her move: her hand darted out to hit

the mute button on the phone. "I'm having dinner with my friends tonight," she told him, bluntly. "I'm not canceling on them."

There was a long pause.

"I... see," Jasmaby's voice was low, and quiet.

Florbet nodded. And then her claws sunk into the wooden tabletop, gouging a series of thin, deep lines.

I just did that, she realized. I just said 'no' to Jasmaby. She gently touched the side of her head, feeling it might float away at any moment. *I'm proud of myself, and also I'm a fucking idiot.*

She breathed out, hard and slow, releasing a deep tension in her gut she didn't realize she was carrying. Her friends were staring at her — it didn't matter at the moment whether it was admiration, or pity, or concern, or whatever. They were here with her. They were here.

There was a long pause before Jasmaby spoke again: "I do believe an apology is in order."

Yeah, Florbet thought, running a knuckle along the corner of her eye. *Yeah*, blowing him off like that was pretty rude. He had reached out her, given her this incredible chance, presented this opportunity that others would kill for and she had just... blown it off, to play games and whatever. *Sure*. She could apologize.

She could apologize.

She could have apologized...

But she wasn't quite fast enough.

"I am ever so sorry for assimilating you wouldn't have dinner plans tonight, you *must* understand," Jasmaby entreated her. "I have just been in *such* a tizzy, it has *completely* robbed me of my social graciousses." Even over the phone, Florbet could hear the sound of Jasmaby slapping a paw to his cheek. "How incontrovertibly foolish for me to surmise that a marvelous *danseuse de arte* would be able to bend her schedule on a whim — after all those missed calls, even!"

Florbet bit back her tongue, not wanting to bring up that the last time she had skipped one of his calls, she was lying upside-down in bed, flipping cold nuggets into her mouth while watching makeup videos on her compact, hanging off the edge of her chair above her.

"Well," Jasmaby concluded. "If you can find it in your heart to forgive me, I *do* have a proposal: Why don't they come along? My treat, naturally."

Florbet was dimly aware of a loud *thud* coming from nearby. She would only later realize that this was Vess, tumbling sideways off their stool in a briefly catatonic state. She opened her mouth, but she was having trouble with the thing again. *Words*. She was having trouble with her words.

"I *just* checked with my assistant, and they were able to book the private room. How many were you planning on bringing?"

"Friends!" Florbet shouted. *Shit*, okay, she could do this. "Two friends! They're—" her mind raced. *Names, names, names. Give me their names.*

Tallboy. Bunnyface, her mind offered.

No, she hissed at it.

Longboy. Flophed.

No! she hissed again.

Longtall. Earsface.

Florbet tensed every muscle in her body, which succeeded in getting her brain to shut up. "...they're great," she concluded. *Okay, anything besides "great", come on.* "They're really, really, really... um, great," she repeated. *"Really great." Nailed it.*

"Well," Jasmaby went on graciously, "I would be *delighted* to host your friends as well. Surely they won't mind if I take up some of your time, though? Us *fashionistas* will need *some* time to conspire on our collaboration."

Florbet couldn't even bring herself to look up. "Is that okay...? Do you, want to go?" she asked the table in front of her.

"*PLEASE*," came Vess's voice from below. "*PLEASE*."

Florbet looked to Quill. She realized he had been sitting stock-still since Jasmaby's offer, eyes as wide as they could be. That... was probably a "yes" from him too, then.

"Th- we're in," Florbet announced.

"Oh, I am so happy," Jasmaby cheered. "Our reversations are for Hakari — do you know it? The Aurorian place near the North End?"

Florbet knew it, if only by reputation. "Th-that's... that's the f-fancy..."

"Well," Jasmaby interrupted, "they certainly are on the pricey side, yes. But really, once you get to know her, the head chef is just an absolute *delight* to converse with. Now, *personally*, I find the cuisine something of an... acquistionable taste, *but*," Jasmaby interjected with such force that it felt like he was interrupting himself, "...the service is really first-class, they are *so* practiced in finding *just* the perfect dish, the whole staff is *so perfectly* attentive. It is one of my *favorite* spots for planning meetings, it *never* fails to go smoothly."

Florbet wasn't quite caught up in the conversation. "That's the f-fancy... w-with the s-suits and—" she ventured.

Jasmaby scoffed, but it was a scoff that made Florbet feel like he was ready to dismiss anything that might stand in her way. "Oh, do *not* worry about formulality," he assured her. "I *insist* on comfort when it comes to planning. You and your friends, wear *whatever* you like, this will be *our* time. I had an artist show up wearing *pajamas* once, if you can believe it!"

Florbet's gaze turned briefly to Quill. "I can believe it," she stated flatly.

Jasmaby snorted, the whole thing dreadfully amusing to him. "I daresay, it is our *private* room. We should have the right to wear burlap sacks, if we so choose."

"Burlap sack! I— I think I have one of those in storage!" squeaked Vess from below. Mechanically, Quill reached down, snagged Vess by the back of their neck, and placed them back on their stool, Vess chattering away the entire time. "I'm sure I do! I, could cut some holes, I'm sure— what color should the sack b—"

The chattering rabbat stopped there, Florbet having pinched their mouth shut with one claw. "Casual dress code, got it."

"Excellent," Jasmaby concluded. "Oh, this should be a *delight*! If there's nothing else—"

"Wait, I, uh—" Florbet interrupted. There was still a pit in her stomach. She swallowed, and felt the lump travel all the way down her long throat to join the weight that was already there. Oh gods, she was going to have to do this twice. "I don't want to waste your time, so..." She grabbed her hair, squeezing it in frustration. "I, I can't... I can't work long hours, I have this condition—"

"Oh yes, that," Jasmaby said. "What about it?"

"I— you, you know about it?" Somehow, her footing in this conversation never seemed to last more than a single sentence, before she found herself deep in the woods again.

"My goodness, you were intervated for that article, weren't you, dear?" The fashion model snorted, as if it was ridiculous that he might *not* be an avid reader of *Medicinal Monthly*. "That's part of what inspired my visit to HEAT last week, didn't you know?"

How could I possibly know that— Florbet shot that question down. "And... isn't that a problem?" she asked instead.

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Oh," Jasmaby said, flatly. "Oh, my dear, my dear— yes, of course." He let out a long, pained sigh. "Yes, how clumsy of me, of course — you've only ever worked asidelong artists, you've never had to magnate them."

"Uh..." Nope, still lost.

Jasmaby let out a groan so melodramatic, Florbet felt the urge to rush him a fainting couch, in case he just *had* to collapse. "I had an artist cancel on me yesterday because he felt the 'moon's spirit' was 'giving him sass' that night," Jasmaby explained. "I have a choreographer who I have to schedule around because they spend six days a week underwater." Jasmaby paused here. "Underwater," he repeated, helpfully assuring Florbet that she had indeed heard that word correctly. "I can *scarcely* even *call* them. Do you have *any* idea how hard it is to get proper reception *underwater*?"

Florbet tuned out Jasmaby briefly to glance at Quill. She had developed a sense for when his bad jokes would emerge. It did nothing to make them more bearable, but at least it put her in a state of readiness, so she could more rapidly respond with the appropriate punishment. At the moment, though, he remained frozen; so she turned her attention back to Jasmaby, still building steam.

"...and then there was the painter who took three times as long to finish her project as expected because it had taken, and I quote, 'an unexpectedly long time to soulmerge with the blank canvas.'" Jasmaby's voice was harsher now, his trademark ferocity emerging. "I had a designer once tell me they had to *start over*, because I had been 'sloppy with vowels' in the presence of their notes and '*tainted*' them with my '*lackadaisical* attitude towards *prosody*.'"

He was growling now, as Florbet simply sat and listened, willing to wait to figure out where he was going. "My *girlfriend*," he announced with immense gravity, having painstakingly built up to this conclusion, "...has written me *sonnets* — sonnets, *plural*, mind you," He paused to grumble, annoyed by how he was forced to end this sentence, "...chronicling the *exact* magnifitude with which she has, quote, 'whooped my ass' at her latest enfavorite video game. Each sonnet, a catalog of the plethora of ways in which she has, another quote, once again 'owned' me. I have a *library* dedicatered to my virtual *trouncings*."

The sound of Jasmaby slapping a table came through the compact, followed by the *whoosh* of flame and some panicked chatter in the background. "And — and! —" Jasmaby went on, regardless of the rising clamor around him. "And she has requested that I reply *in kind*."

He let out a long, low sigh, releasing the tension. There was a deep inhale — and then out again. After a few deep breaths (and after the clamor in the background had died down), he spoke again, having once again regained his regal, diplomatic tones. "Honestly," he confessed to Florbet, "I don't think 'whooped' is even a real word. But I do prefer to humor her."

"That's..." Florbet offered. Her brow furrowed as she tried to figure out what kind of response would be appropriate. "Uh... a lot. But what does any of that have to do with me?"

"My point is thus:" Jasmaby assured her. "...if your greatest idiosyncrasy is that you 'sleep in' and 'take naps' and 'need days off', that is a foible I *do* believe I will be able to indurate, and indurate gladly. No, I shall elucidate further: it will be a *welcome* escapade from what I habitually address."

His voice lowered to a conspiratorial whisper. "Perhaps this is indecorous, but — I have been *questing* for an excuse to buy one of those nap pods, one of those sound-and-light-proof ones? If you join me at the studio, it would be the *perfect* excuse to *finally* splurge."

Florbet had seen the pods in questions, and the price tags attached to them. She had them filed away under "accessories for rich toffs" and not anything she might actually encounter at any point in her life. "That's, uh, yeah! Cool," she blurted out.

There was still the matter of the meaning he was reading into about her performance; what he had imagined he had seen there; the backstory he had invented. "Uh, I also..." She scratched at the corner of her mouth with a nervous claw, resisting the urge to bite down on it. "...I don't want to waste your time... so... you should know, the whole thing about the dance you saw was—"

"Oh, *don't* tell me," Jasmaby insisted. "I so *disparately* want to know, but *don't* tell me. I am *luxuriating* in the *mystery*. Just, oh, let's *do* let us save the explication of its meaning for tonight, I *beg* you."

Florbet was stunned enough by the utterance of "I beg you" from Jasmaby's lips that she nearly didn't respond in time. She couldn't bear to let the lie stand, though; she had to make sure the affluent diva knew it wasn't an act of creative genius, but merely the reckless outburst of someone who had given up. Her hesitation cost her, though, so she still only managed a brief, "That's the thing, there *is* no m—" before Jasmaby interrupted.

"The *moment* you walked on stage," Jasmaby said, his voice recalling the awe he had felt in that moment, "I thought: 'here is someone who has given up.'"

Florbet choked on her words. "Wh-what?"

"It was so evident to me, so clear: here is someone who has given up." Jasmaby sighed a rich indulgent sigh: "Someone who has grown weary of the burdensome exhortations constantly placed on her by society — no, by herself! Someone who is so tired of living for an uncertain future, that she has chosen this moment—" Jasmaby paused here, positively giddy, "—a moment she has chosen to share with us! — to burn as brightly as she pleases. To be in *this* moment, sense and structure be damned — consequences be damned!"

It was Florbet's turn to nearly fall sideways out of her chair in a stupor. She barely managed to hang on, the tips of her nails driven deep into the wooden surface. "Yuh," she heard herself say, having to assume it was her mouth trying to agree with Jasmaby without the usual support from her brain.

"I've never seen such a vibrant display of pain and rapture, I've—" Jasmaby paused, as a voice from his end spoke in a hurried whisper. "Oh stars, is that the time?" The diva's voice was flustered. "Darling, I *must* run. See you at the restaurant tonight! It will be a *treat* to converse with you, to hear *everything*." Florbet barely caught herself, again.

"Oh— and your friends, too!" Jasmaby went on. "What kind of company do you keep... goodness, goodness. Ah, opportunity to converse with them as well! What good fortune! I *shall* have to interrogate them *most* thoroughly." Jasmaby gave a closed-mouth laugh at this, beyond pleased with the idea.

Vess barely did not catch herself, and hit the ground with a second *thud*.

"Anyway, ta!" Jasmaby concluded.

"Okay!" Florbet shouted, her voice more of a panicked laugh than anything else. "Great! I love you!" she scrunched up her face and pounded both fists on the table. "Your work! I love your work. Okay bye!" With that, she slapped her hand onto her compact, ending the call, before backhanding it off the table. (Even she wasn't sure what she had been hoping to accomplish with that one.) There was a tiny "oof!" from below, as it managed to land square in the middle of Vess's tummy.

Again, mechanically, Quill reached down to retrieve Vess. This time, they were clutching Florbet's compact reverentially between their paws. After they were safely planted on their stool, they held the device out to Florbet, as if surrendering a sacred relic to its caretaker. Florbet hesitated, then gingerly collected her compact, only after assuring herself that there was no possible way for her to accidentally hit the "redial" button.

She placed the compact back in her satchel, then folded her hands in front of her on the table. "Okay," she said. "I think that went well." She looked at her companions for confirmation -- even a nod would do. But Vess was gazing in wonder at her like a worshipper at their high priestess, while Quill remained catatonically staring at the center of the table where the compact had been. Making do with what little she had, she chose to nod to herself. *Thank you, Florbet, knew I could count on you for support, she thought. Happy to help, Florbet, you know I'm always here for you.*

Plan. She needed a plan. She turned to Vess. "Bunnyface." Vess perked up, ready and waiting. "You're good with emotions stuff, right?" Vess nodded in accord. "Alright. Exactly how *much* panic do you think we should be experiencing right now?"

"Ah," Vess said, thankful for the easy question. "I'm personally going to go with outward calm, while inwardly being too out of my mind with confusion to complete a sentence. You're welcome to join me, of course."

She could always count on Vess to come up with a reasonable plan. "Right," she said, happy to have that settled. "But no, seriously, is this really happening??"

"Well, assuming it's not a dream, it seems— ow!" Vess complained, as Florbet gave their cheek a firm pinch-and-tug. "Okay, not a dream, and I really should have seen that coming. As I was saying, it seems it's really happening, and that Jasmaby is taking us all out to dinner tonight."

Florbet spat out a nervous laugh. "I'm sorry," she apologized, "it just sounds so ridiculous when you say it." She turned now to the motionless unicorn across from her. "C'mon Tallboy, do your level-headed thing, I could do with some grounding right now."

It took a second, but Quill reacted. He sat up, and cleared his throat nervously. Then he leaned over, and — speaking directly into the table, where the compact had been — he said, "Excuse me, but just out of curiosity, will Charthur be there?"

Florbet stared at him, mouth open for a second. "Quill," she said uncertainly, "We... we already hung up." She shook her head, and turned back to Vess, who was vibrating quietly in their seat. "Looks like hornhead's out of commission. What do you got for me, flopears?"

"Oh, I'm just—" Vess bounced anxiously on their stool. "I was wondering if this would be a good opportunity to wear my nice poncho, I don't know if that's appropriate since I'm not from Auroria, maybe it's not my place to—"

"Oh my god, yes," Florbet interrupted. "*Please*. We were told to dress comfortable, right?"

"Yes, but—" Vess began bouncing more rapidly. "—maybe it'll look, forced? Or maybe that's not in their tradition, I really should have asked Lexy a bit more about the customs, I guess I was just so caught up in the moment—"

Florbet leaned down, to look the bouncing rabbat in the eyes. "Do you *want* to wear the poncho?" she asked.

Vess didn't answer, but their bounces became even more rapid.

"That's a yes," Florbet declared, and Vess confirmed it with rapid nods, in time to their vertical oscillation. "Okay, that's settled. Now we just need—"

Quill suddenly snapped his fingers. "Damn, we already hung up," he announced.

Both of his friends turned to look at him. "Quill, are you okay?" Vess asked.

"Vess!" Quill shouted. He leaned down, staring at the spot at the foot of Vess's stool where they had landed twice before. "Vess, did you hurt yourself?"

Florbet touched two fingers to her forehead, pressing inward to keep her brain from escaping. "Tallboy's lost it. Bunnyface, smack him out of it."

Vess nodded to Florbet, before turning to Quill. His face was conveniently in reach. And so Vess leaned back, then swung their open palm forward, gently papping Quill on the cheek with all the force one might use to compress a marshmallow. "Sorry," they declared.

Florbet's other hand joined her first on her forehead. "Oh fer the luvva... I'll do it," she grumbled. Leaning across the table, she snapped her fingers in front of Quill's face, a sudden burst of flame startling him upright. "Yo, Tallboy, get back here."

Quill blinked rapidly. "What? Huh?" he asked.

"How is having dinner with Jasmaby getting to *you* more than *us*?" Vess demanded. "You've said you don't consider yourself a fan. Why are *you* nervous?"

"Huh?" Quill asked again. "I'm not nervous about having dinner with Jasmaby. Why would anyone be nervous about that?"

"Jas-ma-by!!" Florbet explained, pounding her fists on the table with each syllable.

"Jas. Ma. By," Vess clarified, pounding their fists much more softly.

"Yeah, I know," Quill said, perking up. "He's really nice."

"He's *nice*???" Florbet demanded. She rolled up an imaginary sleeve. "Alright, Vess, he clearly needs a bigger blast to snap out of it. You might want to cover your face for this one, I'm going for 'eyebrow incinerating' this time."

"No, really, we talked just a few days ago," Quill responded, holding a hand up to block Florbet's incoming firesnap. "Charthur needed a little time to put her class stuff away, so we chatted in the lobby while he waited."

"You *chatted*," Vess stated in disbelief.

"Sure. We used to hang out backstage sometimes, when he did that show at Papaya's theater, *Try, Try Again*. I told you I helped the crew out with that one, right?"

Florbet planted both her hands flat on the table, and leaned towards Quill. "You. Hung out."

"Yeah, he's great!" Quill smiled fondly at the memory. "I mean, he keeps calling me Quell, but I don't think he means anything by it. He laughs at my jokes and everything!"

Vess clutched their head with both hands. "I don't know if I'm ready to accept this," they moaned. "I don't know if I can handle the idea of someone laughing at Quill's jokes."

Quill ignored this. "He's really insightful, and he asks really good questions—" He turned to Vess. "He reminds me of you, in that way."

This time, Quill was alert enough to snag Vess before they could topple off their seat, righting their balance with a firm tug on their upper arm. "You never told us..." Vess moaned, as Quill helped them regain their balance.

Florbet slapped the table with both hands. "You kept this from us!" The lizard pointed at Vess. "Bunnyface, smack him again. Harder this time."

The rabbat nodded their agreement, then turned to Quill, hand raised. Then they paused, realizing that Quill's height was going to make this difficult if they weren't ready to climb their way up to the target. Florbet gestured at Quill to lower his head instead, and with a sigh, the unicorn complied, bringing his head into range of Vess's smack. Vess reared back once more, and again delivered a gentle pap, exactly as soft as before. "*Sorry!*" they declared more aggressively.

Florbet shook her head. Whatever, good enough. "The *least* you could have done is ask him to sign an autograph for your two best pals in the world."

Quill blinked at her. "Ah geez, it never seemed appropriate. We were just hanging out, you know? I didn't want to bring his celebrity thing into it." Florbet rolled her eyes, annoyed that he had a point. "You could ask for one tonight, though?"

Florbet snorted derisively. "You can't just ask someone for their autograph, horseface, get serious."

As the unicorn rolled his eyes in return, Vess chimed in, "So why'd you blank out on us, then?"

"Ah, um," Quill said, touching the tips of his pointer fingers together anxiously. "He didn't say if, um, Charthur is going to be there."

Florbet and Vess just stared at him. Vess cleared their throat. "Don't you... don't you see her at least once a week, when you're picking up your kids from her class?"

"Well, yeah, sure," Quill said, rolling his hand dismissively in the air. "But that's not getting *dinner*."

Florbet rubbed her eyes with her palms, trying to get a grip on her friend's unique brand of dumbassery. "Didn't you mention getting coffee with her a few times?"

"Well, it's actually tea," Quill explained. Florbet shot him a look that told him immediately this wasn't a sufficient answer. "And it's not like that." He brought one arm across his broad chest to clutch at his other arm, as if wounded. "She... she had a rough childhood. It's different, what she went through, but... but she offered to talk to me about my... situation. You know. To help my kids."

Florbet and Vess were quiet. For a moment, Quill was too. And then he planted his finger in the table. "This," he explained. "...is dinner. At a fancy restaurant. And it's going to be just me and her, talking?? What are we even going to talk about, just the two of us??"

Vess raised their hand. "Objection. I'll be there too, don't forget."

Quill turned to them. "Yes, but you'll be completely enraptured with whatever Jasmaby and Florbet are talking about."

Vess lowered their hand. "Fair. Objection withdrawn."

"Well, here's a topic," Florbet offered brightly, "How about you talk to her about how she's apparently totally into hot guys with long necks?"

Quill spluttered out three-and-a-half non-comebacks before settling on, "Thanks, yes, big help." He was quick to regain his hoofing, though: "We can talk about that, while Jasmaby *begs* you to share all the..." Quill gave Florbet his best salacious look. "...*imitate* details of your performance. *Begs* you."

Florbet hopped down off her stool. "Right!" she declared happily. "You're a dead man!"

Quill raised a finger. "I vote in favor of not killing me."

Florbet snapped her head towards Vess. "Bunnyface! Tiebreaker!"

Vess tilted their head to the side, effecting deep thought. After carefully stroking their chin a few times, they declared, "I vote against killing him. If you kill him now, you won't have any chance to embarrass him at dinner tonight."

Florbet crossed her arms with a smoky huff. "Ugh. You know me too well."

Quill planted a large hand on Vess's head and gave their hair a grateful tussle. "I knew I could count on you to pull my butt out of the fire."

"I've got plenty of time to roast your rump later," Florbet decreed. "But if we're going to get some games in before dinner, we better get a move on!"

"Ah! Yay!" Vess squeaked. "I just figured, we wouldn't get a chance today—"

The colorful lizard snagged the rabbat's head with their arm, adding her own playful tossle of their hair. "You kidding, pal? This Jasmaby thing's gonna be fun, but I could never forget what's important." They gave Vess an affectionate noogie before raising their arm into the air. "Let's go, I'm paying for the drinks!"

"Ha, oh yeah," Quill said, finishing his lemonade with a quick tip of the glass. "I guess you are on the cusp of wealth, aren't you?"

Florbet cocked her head at him. "Huh?" she asked.

Vess made a brief effort to free themselves from their headlock, to no avail. "I assume he means — well, that's an important question, actually, what are you planning to ask for tonight?"

"Huh?" Florbet asked again. "I don't know... whatever looks good on the menu, I guess."

Quill squinted at her, trying to figure out if she was joking or not. "No..." he said slowly. "We mean, money-wise."

Florbet looked startled. "Jasmaby said he was treating, didn't he?? I didn't make that up, did I??"

"Your payment," Quill explained.

"Compensation for your work," Vess clarified.

Now Florbet looked even more startled, squeezing an "oof" from Vess as she hugged their head tighter by accident. "Oh, but — no no, hang on — he couldn't, I mean — it would be an *honor* just to..." She released Vess to gently touch her own face in shock, and once again Quill was just barely fast enough to save the rabbat from an untimely plummet. "Seriously, there's no way I could ask for anything. There's no way. I can't even imagine it."

"You're going to be working for him," Vess insisted, and now the blush on Florbet's face truly started to emerge.

"Partnering with him," Quill corrected, causing her whole face to turn an especially warm shade of red.

"Ha ha, ff—" The painted gator twisted in place, her whole body not knowing what to do with itself. "—yeah, okay, but there's still no way I could ask him to pay me..."

Quill and Vess shared a look. Then they turned back to Florbet, and said simultaneously, "Skinky."

Florbet whipped in the direction of the club, ten blocks away, and shouted as loud as she could, "You hear that, baby?! Mama's gonna swing you the swankiest vivarium in all of Dewclaw!! Got a richboy who's gonna treat you to a lifestyle upgrade!! Ka-CHING!!"

Quill brushed his hands off, as the trio ignored the stares of the other patrons of the cafe. "Well, glad that's settled. We can help her figure out a mewble amount over games."

Florbet whipped back around and — after an awkward moment in which she gestured for Quill to lean down, and had to wait for him to do so — grabbed both of her companions by their necks, squeezing them tight.

"Thanks," she whispered. "Thanks for being here."

Quill and Vess whispered their happiness back, as the three shared a long, important hug.

"I'm glad we'll get to be with you tonight," Vess said happily, as Quill helped them down off their stool. "At this important milestone in your journey!"

"Same," Quill said. And then he thought for a moment. "Underwater... six days a week..."

Vess cocked an eyebrow at him. "Seriously?"

Quill shook his head. "Sorry, I'm still catching up to everything." He shrugged. "I guess that finally..."

Florbet's whole body tensed. "Don't you d—"

"...*sank* in," Quill finished, with the stupidest possible grin on his face.

Florbet smiled, but it was the kind of smile that had nothing to do with expressing happiness and everything to do with letting your prey count how many teeth you have, and admire how sharp they are. "Awful bold of you there, pal," she warned, "to assume you're going to survive until dinner tonight."

"...'*catching*' up, too," Quill pointed out, undeterred. "I guess you could say I'm really *hooked* on these puns."

Vess raised a weary finger. "Yeah, I'm changing my vote. It's fine, the two player variant of this game really isn't all that bad."

Quill folded his arms across his chest. "Come on," he argued, "Where else are you going to find a taxi service you can lose to at board games after your ride?"

Florbet grinned, this time an honest, eager grin, and scrambled up to cling to Quill's back. "In your dreams, pal," she scoffed directly into his ear. "I'm totally kicking BOTH your butts at this game I've never played before."

"Race you!" Vess cheered, sprinting off in the direction of their place. Florbet had just enough time to huck some money onto the table before Quill sprinted off in hot pursuit, his long strides working hard to gain ground against the nimble rabbat.

It was a glorious day. Not one of three friends could ever get over how lucky they were to have found each other.

