

Stephanie, Kelly, and Brian stepped out along the poolside patio, blinking in the sunlight as they left their room behind them. Unlike some of the towering complexes nearby, the hotel Brian booked was relatively small, reaching only four stories tall. The tightly-clustered rows of rooms each opened out onto railed verandas, which circled an open-air pool and jacuzzi area. Other scattered groups were leaving their lodgings on all of the levels, many already in costumes or clearly dressed for the convention, and the boisterous sounds of more parties still getting ready echoed out from open doors as they passed. Once again, an eager energy seemed to tremble in the air.

<i>Wow...</i> Kelly thought to herself, watching as a masked killer-corps ninja from Shinobi Souls gave them a silent nod and then snuffed out a cigarette with his split-toed shoe. *<i>I haven't even had a single smoke all weekend. Shouldn't I be craving nicotine somethin' serious by now?</i>*

"I'm—I'm so excited!" Stephanie exclaimed. "Is that weird!?"

"Kinda? Hey, 'fore we get too much further into everything... how 'bout we take a picture?" Kelly asked innocuously. "Of us three, together. A li'l group shot?"

"That's a good idea!" Stephanie agreed, her eyes lighting up.

"Sure," Brian gestured towards one of the decorative arrangements of flowered plants near the pool and withdrew both his and Kelly's phones from the utility-belt pouches at his waist.

"How 'bout over here?"

"Um, but uh—but who can we ask to take the picture for us?" Stephanie wondered, glancing around.

"No need," Kelly laughed, gently pushing her into Brian. "We don't need nothin' fancy. I just want a l'il group selfie."

"Uwah!" Stephanie apologized, bumping away from Brian only to be shoved right back as Kelly maneuvered in close beside her. "Um, s-sorry."

<i>No escape for you, my pet.</i> Accepting her cell phone from Brian, Kelly held it up and thumbed into her camera menu, studying the display. *<i>You need to be pressin' all up against him, all day long.</i>*

"Guys, smoosh in closer," she insisted, seemingly unwilling to sacrifice even a pixel of her own beguiling smile to tilt the phone further and give the other two more space in the shot.

"Alright, say *<i>'shoes!</i>* Ready? One, two—"

"Wait, 'shoes?" Brian interrupted with a jerk of his helmet. "What happened to saying *<i>'cheese?</i>*"

"No one says 'cheese' for photos anymore," Kelly rebuked. "Smiling with your teeth, like creepy hillbillies? Gross. Saying 'shoes' gives you a way better smile."

"What, one of those duck-face, pouty looks? I'm not saying 'shoes.' I don't want to look weird."

"Y-you can say whatever you... *<i>hey!</i>* Wait, you're still wearing your helmet!" Stephanie realized with a laugh, playfully patting a gloved hand against his chest.

<i>That's more like it. Don't be afraid to touch him.</i> Kelly quirked her lip, steadying her camera. "Whatever! One, two—three!"

"Shoooes!"

"Cheeeese!"

"Cheese!"

Reaching around behind them, Kelly grabbed Stephanie's gloved hand and used it to cup a firm handful of Brian's butt the very instant she snapped their photo. The Darkmask helmet swiveled to solemnly regard Stephanie, and she blushed furiously and hid her face. "It! That was Kelly! It-it wasn't, I didn't, I w-would never mean to—"

"Hey, don't sell me out. I mean—whoops? What an accident!" Kelly teased. "One more shot, for real this time?" The sound effect for a camera shutter played on her phone as she captured a cute selfie of their trio.

"One more, just one more," Kelly insisted. "Take your stupid helmet off."

"Sure," Brian said, slipping the plastic Darkmask helm off to reveal his face. "Hey, take one with my phone, too."

"Okay," Kelly took his device as well. "One sec, lemme get this first."

Allowing herself a long moment to just look at him in the guise of setting up the shot, Kelly couldn't help but ogle those charming features of his. There was that *<i>intensity</i>* within those mottled green eyes of his, the clean line of his jaw, that slight, unsure smile of his as he glanced towards Stephanie, still squashed in between them.

<i>Okay, so... yeah, he's a little handsome.</i> Kelly considered herself a specimen of the highest quality, and had never been daunted in the slightest by good-looking guys... but this situation was different, somehow. *<i>Brian</i>* was different. She was feeling something more here than sheer physical attraction—something substantial. There was actual weight and mass exerting a terrifying gravity over her mindscape, a draw that just continued to pull her in deeper into his sphere of influence. There was an alien feeling, deep in her gut, that she was struggling to understand. A grounded and stable feeling, that told her she could *<i>rely</i>* on Brian.

<i>But, that's impossible, right?</i>

Although reluctant to admit it, she was starting to... trust him. Brian had helped her out more than she'd have hoped of even the thirstiest of guys: a three-day convention pass, a place to stay, breakfast, the very expensive outfit she wore today—yet, he genuinely appeared to have no ulterior motives. He wasn't trying to impress her, get into her pants, or take advantage of these situations. While he clearly wasn't free of his earthly desires, he did seem to be in rather firm control of them.

<i>He's not another asshole who thinks with his dick,</i> Kelly summed up, frowning.
<i>Almost kinda wish he was. Least then, I'd know how to deal with him.</i>

"Here," Kelly snapped the picture and then switched to his phone, pulling away to give Brian and Stephanie some space. "Let's get this one with just the two of you."

"Alright."

“O-okay.”

“Closer, then. *Closer,*” Kelly instructed, waving them towards each other. “Now, put your arms the rest of the way around her. Yeah, like that. Steph, kinda lean in, rest your head on him a bit, there. *Perfect.*”

Kelly’s fear of becoming the superfluous third wheel for this cute couple had been jettisoned out into deep space after the events earlier this morning. She had a vested interest now, in both of these two geeks. They were both so... *different,* in a way she couldn’t sum up simply by thinking of them as typical convention nerds anymore. *Complex?*

She took the picture, and was just admiring her handiwork in the displayed photo when the device throbbed with vibration in her hands, and a message appeared.

<blockquote>

♥ iXi Cerulean iXi ♥: hey brian

♥ iXi Cerulean iXi ♥: u up n runnin?

</blockquote>

“You just got a text message,” Kelly frowned, handing his phone back to him. “Your ex?”

“Uh-oh,” Brian sighed heavily and leaned forward to take a look. “Ah, no. Thank God. It’s Emily.”

“That” Emily?” Stephanie inquired with a smile, jerking her elbow out in a dramatic thumbs-up.

“Yeah, *that* Emily,” Brian nodded, trying to tap a response into his phone before realizing the touch screen refused to recognize the material of his costume. Biting a gauntleted fingertip and yanking his hand out, he spat the glove down into the open helmet he was holding with a *ptui*. “Excited for you guys to meet her later, though. She’s a handful.”

“Are you gonna show us off?” Kelly asked with a slight smirk.

“I...” he paused and looked up from his phone, embarrassed. “I don’t think I really can, right? It’s not like either of you belong to me, or anything.”

“Isn’t it *kinda* like that, though? A little bit?” Kelly prodded, intent on spurring him on. She looked to Stephanie for support. “There’s *somethin’* goin’ on ‘tween all of us, right? Stephanie?”

“Um. I’m. Maybe a little,” Stephanie stammered, looking from Kelly to Brian. “Would, uh, would you *want* to show us off, Brian?”

“Well.... that’s...”

“Yeah, we want to show off,” Kelly grinned. “Can we?”

“If that’s what you really want,” Brian chuckled, fidgeting with his phone. “But, s’not gonna work. Me and you two girls? Emily won’t buy it—she knows me too well.”

“Well, Steph and me—we can be *real convincing,*” Kelly said.

Besides. What does she ‘know too well’ about you, huh? That you’re just a geek who can’t pick up chicks!? Kelly thought, eyeing him up and down as he distractedly thumbed responses into his phone.

That black bodysuit he had on was distractingly skintight, and her gaze kept wandering south of the cartoonish skeleton bone motif, where ever-so-slight delineations in that form-fitting fabric betrayed perfect musculature beneath. Below his utility belt, Kelly admired the pronounced, provocative outline of the cup he wore, and the powerful shapes of his thighs was enough to send brilliant flecks of red searing through her mind. Brian's every form and outline seemed drawn in primal, rugged contours, a masculine constellation that burned itself into her brain the longer she looked. Kelly was starting to find it difficult to even glance in his direction without seeing stars, bright little red flashes of lust.

*<i>Yeah, right. No way,</i> Kelly thought to herself, biting her lip. *<i>More like a wolf in geek's clothing. Once you're able to look past the goofy costume—the 'GEEK' part—you realize he's basically this total diamond in the rough. He's cute, he's cool, he's got those pensive, brooding green eyes that make it hard for me to concentrate, and... yeah, a body that's like it's just built to fuck. Those abdominal lines ALONE are fuckin' hardwired into the primitive parts of the female brain—they're like, the primeval instruction manual for immediate and intense copulation. Fuuuck!</i>**

"Uh-*<i>huh,</i>*" Brian sighed, and Kelly thought she saw a bitter look crossing his face before his expression was hidden beneath his Darkmask helmet again. He tucked both phones back into his utility belt pouch, checked to make sure it was secure, and then pulled his glove back on with a tug and a splay of his fingers. "C'mon... let's head over."

<i>The hell?</i> Kelly frowned, feeling uncomfortable. That glimpse she'd caught from Brian bothered her, a lot. *<i>What's he thinking?</i>*

"Whaddya mean, anyways, *<i>she knows you too well?</i>*" Kelly finally griped. They passed through a small gate that divided the hotel courtyard area from the outside, and stepped out onto the city sidewalk. "The Brian *<i>/</i>* know was eatin' pussy last night. He—"

<i>"Kelly,"</i> Stephanie admonished, jumping over to quickly cover Kelly's mouth with both gloved hands. There were scattered groups of other pedestrians along the sidewalk, and Stephanie bashfully glanced around them to see if anyone had overheard.

<i>Good, she's getting more comfortable bein' physical with me, too.</i>

"Kelly..." Stephanie exhaled slowly, lowering her hands in exasperated embarrassment. "Y-you can't just say things like that out lou—"

"What, that Brian went pink clam pearl-diving?" Kelly teased. "That he was lappin' at your sap trap?"

"I—*<i>I don't know what that means,</i>*" Stephanie insisted, face going red.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure that you do," Kelly smiled wickedly, arching an eyebrow. "And if *<i>not,</i>* Brian and I, we'll be happy to run you through another lesson."

<i>"Kelly!"</i>

There was a lingering morning chill as they walked over to wait for the crosswalk opposite the convention center. Brian didn't seem bothered by the temperature, and Kelly was wearing several layers of gothic lolita outfit, but Stephanie's short and sleeveless Flamituff cosplay exposed a fair amount of skin to the cool morning air. *<i>Opportunity for Steph?</i>*

“BrrRRrr,” Kelly trilled in exaggerated discomfort, pretending to suddenly notice Stephanie’s gijinka sundress. “Steph, aren’t you *freezing?*”

“No, I’m, um. W-we’re almost inside again, it’s fine,” the pink-haired girl said with a weak smile, tugging her long red costume gloves up a little higher on her arms. Finally noticing, Brian shifted, settling into place behind her. He let his prop shopping bag dangle from one wrist, bringing his Darkmask gauntlets up to cover Stephanie’s bare shoulders.

“O-oh, ah, thank you,” Stephanie said with a small jolt of surprise. Slowly, she relaxed and pressed her slim frame back into him, positively glowing with happiness. As the young couple stood watching the heavy morning traffic rushing by, Kelly took a moment to just watch the pair: a Darkmask minion, protectively shielding the cute Flamituff gijinka from the cold.

Then, the crossing signal flashed, spurring the gathered crowd together across the lanes of pavement to the convention center. Enormous masses of people were arriving at AnimeCon in droves from all directions, filling the sidewalks and joining into the enormous horde of enthusiasts and cosplayers converging at the convention center’s entrance plaza. It was clear that for Saturday, many of the cosplayers were pulling out all the stops, as more and more elaborate cosplays seemed to have all crawled out of the woodwork.

A seductive pair of teenage girls wearing matching demon horns, full red body paint, white bikinis, and little else were walked along the sidewalk arm-in-arm. Across the plaza, a dozen young men in historical kimonos and woven straw samurai hats were posing with drawn katanas in a face-off photoshoot. An entire walking steampunk castle was even shuffling and shuddering along the opposite crosswalk through all of the people, prompting Kelly to wonder how many were inside operating the enormous thing—and how the hell they would get the hulking thing in through any of the sets of double-doors.

“Wow. S’like AnimeCon’s bleeding out of the convention center, and into real life,” Kelly commented. The sight of all the bizarre costumes everywhere she looked lent a dreamlike quality to the scene.

“Should’ve seen the diner where I picked us up breakfast,” Brian chuckled. “All the restaurants and bars on this side of the city are gonna have some *very* strange customers turning heads today.”

What will everyone think when they see me? Kelly was already no stranger to attention—interest from guys and jealous glares from women—but, the Calamity Queen set she now wore made her into something else entirely. She was haunting, so stark and out of place that some would be sure to stare, while at the same time, such an ethereal beauty that they might doubt their eyes. After several long years, she remembered the *thrill* of cosplaying once again. She was eagerly anticipating being seen by even more people, excited to make a huge impression on everyone, so she could bask in their appreciation for her perfect gothic beauty. As luck would have it, however, Stephanie was the one who was noticed first.

“Hey! By any chance, is that a *Flamituff* dress? From Monster Battlers?” As their little trio entered the plaza, a pale, dark-haired girl with a nose ring and eyebrows drawn up in bold arches approached Stephanie. “Could I please get a few pictures?”

“Y-yes! Of course,” Stephanie breathed, hopping out of the flow of traffic and tensing up in nervous excitement for the photo. Unsure of what to do with her hands, she awkwardly held them at her sides, as if never having posed for a cosplay picture by herself before.

She’s so cute.

“Hey, Brian,” Kelly said, leaning in close to him as they stepped off to the side to wait. “I was bein’ serious, about what I said earlier.”

“What?” Brian’s muffled voice called, and he pulled his helmet off again. “Sorry, what?”

“I was being serious earlier,” Kelly repeated. “I want you to finish that massage you started last night.”

“What, right now?” Brian paused, looking around the area teeming with people.

“Not like, *right this second*, no.” Kelly grinned. “Just, soon, okay? And, I want a massage like you gave Stephanie—you know, the kind with a happy ending.”

“I... didn’t give Stephanie a massage,” Brian said carefully.

“Uh, yeah, I’m pretty sure that ya did,” Kelly said. “Look how... *relaxed* she is. Look at her smile! She can barely keep her feet on the ground, after that tongue-lashing she got. *I* want that.”

“She’s just... excited for the convention,” Brian laughed, looking out across the overflowing crowds of anime fans trooping in towards the convention center’s entrances.

I just told him straight-up that I want him eating me out. Nothin’? No reaction at all?

“Yeah, okay,” Kelly sighed in exasperation. “Well, she’s certainly excited to have more... *fun*. How ‘bout you?”

“Aren’t we all having fun right now?” Brian countered with the hint of a smile, before abruptly changing the subject. “How do you like wearing the outfit?”

“Yeah... s’pretty neat,” Kelly mused after a long moment, nodding and presenting him a patient smile. *So, he’s not actually that dumb for real. Just... I dunno, being purposefully dense? Deflecting things? But, why? He can’t seriously have no fucking interest in me at all, right?* “Was a real bitch to get into, though. Think you’ll be able to help me take it all off, later?”

“That... doesn’t sound appropriate,” he said, looking over towards Stephanie. She was excitedly chatting with the girl who’d taken her picture.

“No, guess it doesn’t, does it?” Kelly smirked, edging a little closer to him. “You know, there’s a meaning to when a guy gives a girl a dress to wear.”

“Hah,” Brian shook his head. “Bet the meaning gets a little convoluted when it’s a dress he bought for someone else, though.”

“That can be fun too, though,” Kelly smiled, her voice dropping to a velvety, rolling purr. “I’m wearing your girl’s clothes, huh? Does that mean I should act like I’m your girlfriend for today?”

To her surprise, he didn't look flattered, or even amused by her words. He looked—uncomfortable, uneasy, and not in the good way. He didn't meet her gaze, and his eyes seemed to tighten into a distant, cagey look, instantly bringing to mind that bitter look from before.

<i>He's... thinking about his ex!</i>

"...Christ, I hope not," Brian muttered under his breath, and he put his helmet back on, cutting off further conversation.

His sudden flash of antipathy seemed directed at that ex-girlfriend, so Kelly didn't feel quite as slighted as she should have. Flirting had never misfired in such a spectacular way, though, and the dark-haired beauty found herself once again in an awkward position.

*<i>Is he a wolf in geek's clothing, or isn't he? I'm USED to hunting wolves. Alphas of the pack, even,</i> Kelly groused. *<i>Put out a bit of meat, and they'll move right in for a good kill. Not used to poaching this... skittish game that you can't even lure out. So, is he like another one of those geeky herbivores after all?</i>**

They watched as Stephanie finally thanked the photographer and pranced back over towards them, her rabbit ears bobbing and skirt bouncing. Of course, Kelly couldn't help but remember this same shy little weeb with her legs spread, involuntarily shuddering back against her with pleasure as she was tongued out of her goddamn mind. The sight of Brian poised over the girl like a predator, feasting on his prey...

<i>Okay... no, so maybe he's not a COMPLETE herbivore. And, there is his rockin' body, too. Guess it was just the way I said things? Pushed the wrong button? He really wasn't kidding about still having weird baggage and open wounds from his ex, sheesh.</i>

"Skullfie!"

"Where?"

"Holy shit, hey, Skullfie! *<i>Darkmask!</i>*"

The moment between them had become awkward, but relief came in the form of three of college-aged guys, each wearing headbands with crude Japanese slogans drawn on them. The hooligans all clambered around Brian, apparently drawn over by his cosplay.

"That's so badass! Can we get your picture?" One of the guys asked.

"Skullfie? What?" Another of the friends joked. "Where, behind this perfectly normal shopper? He's even carrying a Komari-mart bag! Pffft!"

"Steph!" Kelly whispered loudly, sidling over beside the girl as Brian started chatting with the guys. "Once those guys're done with Brian, go lean in, and like, fix the collar of his costume."

"Okay," Stephanie agreed, before taking a second baffled glance. "But, uh, what's wrong with—does, does his collar even need to be fixed?"

"That's the gimmick," Kelly replied, rolling her eyes. *<i>He</i>* can't tell whether there's anything wrong or not. Not without a mirror. It gets you close, it's an intimate gesture—shows both that you're paying attention to his appearance, and that you're looking out for him. I'm

not gonna have time to explain every little thing each time a chance pops up, though, ya know? When I tell ya to do something, just do it.”

“Okay,” Stephanie nodded, biting her lip. “I-I can do that.”

“Today, I want you to be all over Brian. You stick *close.* Whenever you’re not holding his hand, have your arm around him or somethin’. It’ll be crowded, so when you can’t walk by his side... at least have a hand on him, somewhere. *Always.*”

“B-but, then, what about you?”

“Don’t worry about me, I’m working some... other angles. You focus on constant body contact. Keep touchin’ him, all day. Flirt with him, smile, play with that pretty pink hair of yours. Keep making eye contact and smiling. Make yourself seem as open, inviting, and available to him as you can. Can’t be afraid to be a little forward to get what you want.”

“Is-is this wrong? I mean, us doing this, when he doesn’t uh, doesn’t want to—”

“He *does* want to, he’s just holding himself back,” Kelly countered. “His ex has his head in a weird place, that’s all. Didn’t you two kiss, yesterday? How *hesitant* was he last night when he was burying his face in your muff? He was at it for like, *a while,* you know? Longer than most guys. Seemed pretty eager, once he got his first taste.”

“I...I get it! I get it. Okay,” Stephanie said, embarrassed. “I’ll... try.”

“And, there’s not only that,” Kelly tugged a lock of Stephanie’s vivid pink hair. “What about all of this? This... whatever it is he’s done to you. He’s gotta take responsibility. C’mon, Steph... isn’t this what you want?”

“I want...” Stephanie frowned, seemingly wrestling with how to put her desires into words. “Well, I, um, I know I want to *do* something. For him, after everything he’s done for me.”

“Sounds like you feel guilty, then,” Kelly teased. “Like, you just wanna pay him back for him goin’ down on you. So, you wanna blow him today—give him your messy li’l first blowjob?”

“N-no, no, that’s not what I mean. I don’t think I even could—” Stephanie blushed, cutely furrowing her brow. “N-no, I just don’t think that I could pay him back, wi-with me trying to do that. He was, um, *amazing,* and I don’t—I don’t know the first thing about...”

“S’not exactly rocket surgery, Steph,” Kelly explained with a laugh. “I can show you a thing or two, sure, but if you’re worried ‘bout *technique,* then how ‘bout we skip all these... formalities, and just have him fuck you? It’s not complicated, and you don’t need to know anything, or even really do much of anything, to send him off to heaven.”

“...Rocket *surgery?*” Steph regarded Kelly with a dubious expression. “Y-you don’t think that that’s... a little extreme? I mean, uh, since I am still a, um. Since I’ve never had, uh... had real sex.”

“I dunno guys...” One of the slogan headband-wearing college guys over with Brian joked, narrowing his eyes in feigned suspicion. “I think he might actually be one of those evil minion guys “But, in disguise. You know, one of those Darkmask guys?”

“Darkmask? *Me?*” Brian intoned in a raspy voice from within his Darkmask helm, hefting his stenciled shopping bag. “Kid, you sure know how to joke around.”

<i>Guess that's what a Darkmask, or a Skullfie or whatever is supposed to say?</i> Kelly wondered, a little charmed by the situation. *<i>Cute.</i>*

"You're freakin' awesome, man. Hey, can I try on your helmet for a picture real quick?"

"Where'd you get the bag, do they sell them somewhere?"

"Did you make the helmet yourself?"

"Makin' a big deal outta being a virgin is like being that one friend who always brings up that they don't know how to swim," Kelly muttered in a low voice, turning back to Stephanie. "I say, throw 'em in the fucking water, then. Get it over with."

"Haha, ha," Stephanie chuckled weakly, shoulders sagging. She dropped her forehead into her gloved hands. "Of course you would say that. The thing is, well, I don't think that, um, I could ever be that... *<i>forward</i>* with anyone. Even, uh, even him. Maybe especially him? And, that's not, well, *<i>exactly</i>* what I want—"

"Well, Stephanie, what do you really want, then?" Kelly asked, rolling her eyes.

"More of... of all of this. I want this weekend to never end," Stephanie replied wistfully. "To learn ev-everything about Brian, just... everything there is. To get to know you better, too, Kelly. For you to open up to us, for the three of us to all be best friends, and... more of this."

"Let's not ruin the moment by gettin' to know each other *<i>too</i>* much, okay?" Kelly sighed. "That'll only ever get ugly—you don't wanna get to know me."

"I do, though," Stephanie insisted, a persistent, serious look in her eyes. "I... I do want to know you."

"No, Steph, you don't."

"Yes, I do!"

"Aren't you supposed to be all shy and shit?" Kelly narrowed her eyes in suspicion at the shy-looking girl. "When did *<i>you</i>* grow a backbone?"

"I didn't!" Stephanie said, a little too proudly. "I-I don't need one. I have you. And Brian. And, we're friends, wh-whether or not you'll admit it. Last night, you both pushed me to be brave, to be honest, to open up—to trust in you guys. And, it was worth it! It was... it was more than anything I ever hoped for."

"Well, glad that it worked out for *<i>you,</i>* then," Kelly snorted, shaking her head. "Bravo."

"So... will you try?" Stephanie asked again, giving her a pleading look. "To open up, a little? To us? Y-your feelings, I mean, not just your, um. Your..."

"Legs?" Kelly smirked. *<i>Did she almost go for a dirty joke? We really DO have a whole new Stephanie, today.</i>*

"Yes... those."

"Well, we can get into all *<i>that</i>* stuff later on, or... tonight, alright?" Kelly proposed. "We'll all have drinks and talk. Talkin' about my issues right *<i>now</i>* would ruin the mood, spoil our good fun."

"Okay," Stephanie agreed nervously. "You promise?"

“What,” Kelly joked, “don’t you trust me?” *<i>Share my whole stupid sob story with these guys? The more I’m around them, the less I want them to know. Maybe it really will be time to split before too long. Right after I take care of...</i>*

“I...” Steph began, looking at her with that serious expression again, “I really want to. You might be the best friend I’ve ever had.”

“Geez, I hope you’re kidding,” Kelly’s laugh trailed off as she remembered discovering the address book in Stephanie’s phone—there hadn’t even been enough listings to generate a scrollbar.

<i>Does she really have no fucking friends?</i> Seeing Stephanie in that perspective made her feel strangely uneasy. She’d taken it for granted that Stephanie was just another hopelessly naïvé geek, lacking *<i>real</i>* experience with the bitter truths of the world—but, maybe that was doing this girl a disservice.

<i>For whatever reason—probably that social anxiety thing—Steph’s practically been all alone,</i> Kelly thought, frowning slightly. *<i>Of course she’d hide away, get more and more introverted. Vulnerable, and all that. How’s she s’posed to know any better? S’not really her fault, then, that she’s... the way she is. A shy, dorky loser. But, if she’s making this big effort now to try and reach out, now—and I DON’T help her—isn’t some of that actually on me, then?*

Thing is, I’m NOT her friend, though. Not for real.*</i>*

“Hey, sorry ‘bout that,” Brian interrupted Kelly’s pensive look as he hurried back over towards them. “They all wanted pictures. You guys okay? Everything cool?”

“We—uh, we’re...” Steph hesitated, looking nervously to Kelly.

“We’re cool,” Kelly decided, wetting her luscious lips with her tongue and mustering a smile for them.

Hundreds of anime fans were surging into the convention beneath the enormous AnimeCon banner hung proudly above the plaza. Finally passing through one of the dozen pairs of double-doors and inside the wide convention center’s lobby, Stephanie and Kelly squeezed in even closer to Brian for safety. The dissonant jumble of dozens of different nearby conversations filled the air, and the three companions were momentarily at a loss as to which overcrowded direction to try to push through.

Despite the lavish size of the enclosed area—and it was *<i>enormous</i>*—it was already filled to the brim with people. Everyone was packed in like pocki, and there was simply nowhere for the trio to go, no gaps opening up throughout the diverse swath of cosplay enthusiasts and anime fanatics.

“This place... is *<i>fucking crazy,</i>*” Kelly almost had to shout to be heard, and Brian’s skull helmet bobbed in a nod of agreement.

<center> * *</center>*

“Upper level?” Brian called over the noise of the nearby crowds in the main lobby. Stephanie nodded, and Kelly took initiative to lead the way, the raven-haired gothic beauty’s self-assured presence of confidence seeming to help open a path among everyone.

To Brian’s surprise, he also noticed her reach back to take Stephanie by the hand, ensuring the shy, diminutive girl wouldn’t bump into anyone. The pair of escalators was overloaded and even had lines forming, so Kelly chose the staircase leading up between them, which was almost empty. Together, their small group climbed up towards the terrace that overlooked the convention hall.

Brian wasn’t sure how to feel about Kelly, anymore. At first, seeing her in the Calamity Queen set had been a painful reminder of Chloe. After all, he’d been picturing Chloe wearing the outfit for months leading up to the convention—ever since ordering it for her, in fact.

Kelly was likewise endlessly confident, a little imperious, and even fairly manipulative like Chloe... but there was plenty of nuance to the girl’s demeanor that was in stark contrast to his ex-girlfriend, as well. Despite that intimidating bravado Kelly affected, some subtle change in her mannerisms, this morning in particular, made her feel warmer, friendlier. Closer, to both him and Stephanie. Maybe in ways even Kelly herself had yet to realize.

<i>No matter what happens today...</i> Brian mused, looking thoughtfully back up at the raven-haired beauty ascending the stairs, *<i>I think I’ll let her keep the outfit.</i>*

The thing had been atrociously expensive, but that particular dent in his wallet was already in the past, practically forgotten. He’d only brought the Calamity Queen set to the convention so that he could try getting rid of it without feeling like it was a waste—not necessarily to recoup the whole loss.

<i>Looks like it was practically made for her, anyways.</i>

Upon reaching the top, both girls turned to Brian for direction, and he led them to a free spot along the railing where they could take in the entirety of the convention hall. While there were a lot of people on this upper level as well, it was a breath of fresh air compared to the oppressive crush of bodies in the lobby below. Though they were two stories up now, the ceiling skylights were much, much higher overhead, giving their area a mezzanine view of the entire convention lobby.

“It’s... it’s *<i>amazing,</i>*” Stephanie breathed, still almost hopping with excitement. “Look! There’s a Key Catcher Sakuro! And, and over there’s a Solar Bear cosplayer! I-I hope I can get a picture of them, later.”

“There’s probably a whole Monster Battlers meetup going on at some point today,” Brian said. “Let’s ask the next Battlers cosplayer we see, maybe somebody’ll know something.”

“Okay!” Stephanie agreed, flashing him a smile and turning back to try and spot more familiar cosplays.

“Excuse me, Miss in the lovely black dress,” an older voice chimed in from behind Kelly. “Could I take your photo?”

All three of them turned in unison to see a man in his early forties wearing a pocketed vest. He was wielding an oversized camera rig, the bulky cylinder of a specialized lens protruding forward from the thing and an external flash mounted above.

<i>Professional photographer?</i>

“As you wish,” Kelly sighed theatrically, twisting back against the rail in a sensuously graceful way. The distant, morose expression she wore combined with the Calamity Queen set was effortlessly captivating, and the photographer took several shots at different angles. Stephanie and Brian even had to edge back further out of the way as the gentleman stepped back to take a wider picture.

“Excellent, thank you. Very beautiful.” The man nodded with satisfaction at each still he replayed, and turned next to Brian. “Could I get a few of you as well?”

Brian posed once casually, leaning back against the rail as if relaxing, produce sticking out of his shopping bag, and then did a more serious one. He left the bag on the ground for the ‘serious’ pose, adopting a proper combat stance, fists raised at a ready to the camera and stylized skull helm glaring with menace.

“Ooh, I like that one,” Kelly whispered loudly to Stephanie.

“You may’ve just made the papers,” the middle-aged man shook Kelly and Stephanie’s hands, then turned and offered Brian a hand as well. “Dan Andrews, Sunday Morning Gazette.”

“Brian,” Brian chuckled, returning the photographer’s firm handshake and then respectfully taking off his helmet. “And, me? No way. With all the other costumes here, I’m nothin’ special.”

“Well, you’re right, and you’re wrong,” the man said with a hearty laugh, turning to take in the entirety of the convention hall with a look of appreciation. “Couple years ago, I woulda singled out a couple of cosplayering twerps from some big, well-known series and been able to call it a day. Woulda made for a cute little interest piece... buried sixteen pages back in the paper.”

<i>Cosplayering?</i> Brian gave the older man a lopsided smile.

“But <i>now,</i> you know, this anime stuff’s <i>big.</i> If there’s no other big news before tomorrow, this event’s got a good shot at making front page. People attending anime conventions aren’t these, y’know, these social pariahs anymore—they’re, potentially, the sons and daughters of parents who read our Gazette. Everyone knows somebody who’s crazy into this stuff nowadays, so now, you’ve gotta give stories like this a very... <i>special</i> treatment.”

“So it’s changed the... criteria you look for, in taking photos?” Brian asked, a little interested. Kelly and Stephanie seemed to be huddled into their own whispered conversation again.

“Well, yeah, sure,” the photographer nodded. “Going right for the ones that look the most <i>nerdy</i> just doesn’t fit the narrative anymore. Can’t just stroll around taking shots at tits and ass, either, though—er, if you’ll pardon my language. My editor’s this shrewish old harpy,

know what I mean? Heaven forbid, nothing improper, hell, nothing *suggestive* can be put in our paper, not in this day and age. I've gotta avoid taking any shots that show too much skin, and that's—hell, that's most of 'em, these days."

"Sounds like that doesn't leave a lot for you to take pictures of," Brian laughed.

"Hah, no, it really doesn't," Dan Andrews chuckled, shaking his head as a young brunette woman wearing a *virgin-killer*-style sweater passed by. The knit sweater's backless opening extended down far enough that the first few inches of the cleft of her butt was on open display, visible to all. "Well, when you're young, everything's all *sex, sex, sex.*"

Brian's eyes absent-mindedly wandered up Stephanie's profile instead. Up her tall red boots, to where they slightly pinched the plush, pale skin of those lovely thighs. The fluttering, breezy hem of her pink-and-red dress, and that alluring hipline that angled into the shy girl's slender waist. She turned, as if feeling his eyes upon her, and her cute face bloomed into a warm smile.

"*Hell, you* fit the bill for the Gazette, though," Mr. Andrews said. "Interesting, but not inappropriate. You are a...?"

"A... Darkmask minion, from Hero Hero Haruki," Brian explained guiltily. With some difficulty, he tore his eyes away as Stephanie turned back to Kelly. As usual, no matter how tempting her figure was, that brilliant smile of hers was a thousand times more dangerous.

"*A dark mask,* okay," Dan pulled a tiny notepad out of his vest pocket and scribbled *skeleton guy = a dark mask.*

"I web search 'em all when I'm back at the office," he explained with a sheepish smile. "Fill in the character and series details, and all that. Otherwise I'd never keep track, you know?"

"No worries," Brian shrugged.

"Now that, there," the photographer sighed, pointed out a nearby young mother ushering along a screaming costumed child away from the railing, "Would've been my safe bet, woulda been perfect for the Gazette—if only she wasn't bawlin' her eyes out."

The frail-looking mother in front of them stopped in place, still attempting to coax the young girl, who looked no older than four, to calm down. The child was cute, and probably would have looked sweet and adorable... if not for the fact that her little face was contorted into a screaming wail. With a pink-and-red dress, tutu-like skirt, and what looked like a familiar headband with ears attached, Brian realized that she was actually dressed up *gijinka*-style, as a monster from *Monster Battlers*. *Either Embrin, or its evolution—Flamituff!*

"Cassie—*please,*" the frazzled young mom begged in a tired voice. "We can fix it. Mommy can fix it when we get back to the car. Cassie? *Cassie?*" The girl was clutching at a small animal-eared headband in her tiny hands, not unlike the one Stephanie had made for her own costume. The ears were slightly rounded triangular shapes of red craft foam, but one of them had separated from the headband, exposing dried beads of hot glue.

"Maybe I'll wait and see if she calms down. Cute kid, recognizable costume," Dan Andrews nodded to himself. "Makes the event seem like a family thing, *broadens appeal across demographics* and all that targeted thinking mumbo jumbo—"

<i>“Oh my goodness!”</i> Stephanie exclaimed suddenly, crossing over to the crying girl right away. “Are you an <i>Embrin?</i>”</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="55 91 949 134" data-label="Text">
<p>With teary eyes, Cassie looked up at Stephanie’s approach with so much surprise that she nearly dropped her broken headband, and the little girl shrunk back against her mother’s legs.</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="55 136 935 225" data-label="Text">
<p>“You look <i>so pretty!</i>” Stephanie praised, slowly crouching down beside the girl so that she wouldn’t appear threatening. “I’m a <i>Flamituff!</i> Do you know <i>Flamituff?</i>”</p>
<p>The little girl stood in awe for a moment, completely enthralled by Stephanie, before slowly nodding and reaching out a hand in wonderment.</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="55 227 945 315" data-label="Text">
<p>Sucking in air between his teeth with a hiss, the journalist disregarded conversation with Brian and stepped in, bringing his expensive-looking camera rig to bear on the unfolding scene. The photographer hurriedly snapped photo after photo after photo in quick succession of this unexpectedly perfect scene between Stephanie and the little girl.</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="55 317 942 404" data-label="Text">
<p>“Yes, she’s an Embrin!” the mother spoke up, gently nudging her daughter forward. “Say hello to the pretty girl, Cassie!” Naturally, Cassie didn’t speak, still entranced by this beautiful girl suddenly crouched down in front of her. She stepped forward and grabbed at Stephanie’s outfit as if to ascertain she was real.</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="78 407 415 428" data-label="Text">
<p>“She’s shy,” the mother apologized.</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="55 431 944 496" data-label="Text">
<p>“I am, too,” Stephanie confided to Cassie with a knowing smile. “But, since you’re the most bravest little Embrin… here!” She withdrew the rabbit-eared headband adorning her own pink tresses and then carefully placed them upon the little girl’s head.</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="55 500 930 564" data-label="Text">
<p>So astonished that her mouth was hanging open, Cassie immediately pulled them off and held them in front of her, working her pudgy fingers across the soft felt of the ears and then looking back up at Stephanie, an adorable smile blossoming across her features.</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="55 566 910 609" data-label="Text">
<p>“Those are for you, little one,” Stephanie insisted, helping her put them back on again. “Look, you’ve already outgrown your old Embrin ears! You’re ready for big Flamituff ones!”</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="55 611 886 677" data-label="Text">
<p>“Oh! Thank you so much! Thank the pretty girl, Cassie!” the girl’s mother said quickly, covering her mouth with a hand, taken aback. “Your costume looks great, and I just <i>love</i> your hair! Are you sure you’re okay with…?”</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="55 680 952 723" data-label="Text">
<p>“Yes, of course,” Stephanie beamed, rising up from her crouch and giving Cassie a last little wave. “I hope she has a really great time.”</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="55 726 948 791" data-label="Text">
<p>“Doesn’t matter <i>what</i> other news is happening, now,” the old photographer mumbled to himself. “We just clinched cover page, for sure. Dan Andrews, Sunday Morning Gazette, sorry to interrupt. Would you be alright with this being published in tomorrow’s paper?”</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="55 793 942 858" data-label="Text">
<p>“Yes—oh my god, yes,” the mother hurriedly agreed. “Cassie, <i>do you want to be in the newspaper?</i> You got a picture of—?” He leaned in, tilting his camera for them and clicked through several of the photos he’d taken.</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="55 860 945 949" data-label="Text">
<p>Shot from an angle just behind and slightly over the shoulder of Stephanie’s Flamituff gijinka dress, the pictures were extremely well-composed, capturing the vibrant colors of their costumes with vivid clarity. In the foreground, the pink-haired young woman was proudly crowning her own rabbit-eared headband onto the little girl’s head in the focus of the shot,</p>
</div>

giving the still photo a sense of depth and movement. Wearing the matching colors in her little Embrin outfit, Cassie's cheeks were still wet with obvious tears, but her expression captured in that moment was dawning surprise and happiness.

"Wow," Kelly mouthed, impressed.

"That came out perfect," Brian congratulated, and he took Steph's hand. "That was cool, what you did."

"N-no," Stephanie blushed. Giddy with excitement, she kept stealing glances back at Cassie wearing the oversized Flamituff ears, rather than the photographer showing off the shot. "She was just—she's too cute! And, and it broke my heart, seeing her with her little broken ears!"

"But now *you* don't have ears," Kelly pointed out.

"That's okay," Stephanie smiled, adjusting her glasses and running a hand through her fluffy pink hair. "I'm, um, I'm already satisfied, with how my cosplay turned out this year. It made her so happy. Did you see?!"

The smile she turned towards him was dazzling, and she was so perfect, so overwhelmingly cute in that moment that Brian lost control for a moment, unconsciously leaning in to kiss her. The fire in her eyes seemed to flare brighter, and she happily allowed herself to be pulled closer, tilting her head up to kiss him—

But he stopped himself, pulling back in alarm and giving her an embarrassed look.

"I—uh, yeah, sorry," Brian said with a nervous chuckle. She seemed to understand, to *know* that he'd almost lost control—lost himself because of her, seriously struggled to hold himself back—and she looked extraordinarily pleased with the notion. She gave him a shy grin, turning away to hide the fact that she was going completely red, the rosy tinge spreading across her entire face and all the way down her neck.

What was I doing!? Brian wondered, turning away and exhaling slowly. Staying within the lines was so much simpler and easier to understand with Chloe setting ironclad boundaries. A stern frown here, a disapproving look there, immediate and intentional guidance for his every subtle behavior.

But, with Stephanie, that whole rulebook was thrown out the window. She radiated raw attraction, and her every appreciative glance, her every beaming smile seemed like she was eagerly inviting more. He was a little afraid to discover how little restraint he actually had when it came to her.

"Hey, you two! The fu—" Kelly began to gripe, before looking to see that the mother-daughter pair was still several feet away from them. *What the fuss* was that supposed to be?!"

"What do you mean?"

"You're like this stubborn little kid who doesn't wanna take his medicine." Kelly shook her head in exasperation. "You just don't get it, do you?"

"Get what, exactly?"

"C'mere. *Come over here,*" Shooting him a wry smile, she took Brian by the hand and tugged him along after her in search of a more private place for them to talk. He couldn't help but notice the entrancing way the layers of Kelly's petticoat and dress slowly twisted back and forth about her as she walked, as though ever-so-slightly pivoting with each step them. She remained conspicuously silent as she pushed through the flow of passerby with Brian in tow, meandering through another group of anime fans over towards a secluded area of the overlook. Stephanie followed close behind them.

"Okay. You don't get that you *need* this. It's like, all the stars are aligning, everything's falling into place for you to have some amazing fucking times this weekend. Hookin' up with Steph is exactly the kind of intimacy you need to get past all of this bullshit with your ex."

"I... don't think we're—well, I don't think *I'm* ready for that," Brian shook his head. "Getting myself into all that right after a breakup like this, *that* would be dumb."

"You tell yourself that all you want," Kelly laughed. "S'not gonna help you sleep any better tonight, *trust me.*"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means, us girls—Stephanie and I—well, we've both got *the itch.*" She eyed him in apparent amusement, leaning to rest her elbows on the upper level railing. "That itch that only you can scratch, Brian. What're you gonna do about it?"

This whole conversation feels... surreal, Brian thought as he met Kelly's brandy-brown eyes.

"Okay. Stephanie, I could see," Brian said, glancing at the speechless pink-haired girl beside them.

"S-see what?" Stephanie blinked.

"Maybe," Brian continued, chuckling and shaking his head. "But you? You don't even like me, Kelly."

"Oh?" Kelly arched an eyebrow.

"You know what I mean," Brian said. "You don't have feelings for me, Kelly, not really."

"...I'll have you know I have very strong feelings for you," Kelly teased, looking out across the plethora of attendees below. "So what if they happen to be... a very specific sort of feeling?"

"What—strictly physical?"

"Is that a crime?" Kelly pouted her lips at him. "I don't catch feelings, Brian. Not in that other way. They fuck people up, no thanks."

"Kelly, I don't think you and I would ever work out." He decided to be blunt with her.

"Oh?" She quirked an eyebrow, seeming unfazed. "Why's that? Our parts match up, right?"

"...I don't think that they do," he said. "Our personalities wouldn't fit well together for an actual relationship."

"Oh," Kelly laughed, rolling her eyes. "Those weren't the parts I was talking about. God Damn, Brian. Your idea of *what a relationship is*—it's way too fuckin' static. Let me

guess, you're just in for the long haul? The <i>serious relationship</i> monogamous dating, with the intention of maybe eventually getting engaged? <i>Married?</i>

He didn't fail to notice she said that last bit with undisguised disgust.

"Yeah," he agreed, keeping a straight face. "That's how I see it."

"Well, that's <i>dumb.</i> Your little <i>romance</i> ain't gonna play by your one li'l set of rules, and you shouldn't try to force it to. Take it from the bisexual girl—'relationship' can mean, like, a bazillion different things, and each and every one is gonna be completely different. They <i>can</i> be a long and boring like you want, or they can be short and sweet... you know, <i>punctual.</i> They could be with just one undeserving broad, or with as many as you can stick your dick in."

"Yeah, <i>real</i> romantic. When I <i>do</i> find the person I want to spend the rest of my life with," Brian explained, shaking his head in dismay at her choice of words, "I don't want to have to tell her that I'd been just having meaningless flings, all casually. I feel like that would... demean the private moments I have with her."

"Then, don't have meaningless flings, Brian," Kelly rebutted. "Have <i>intensely meaningful</i> flings, with someone you've just met. Or, several someones... if you're up to it."

"Okay—and what would the meaning be, then?"

"Well, you know," she teased, flashing her bewitching smile. "There's only one way to ever find that out. You look real deep inside of yourself to find your answers. Or sometimes, deep inside someone else?"

"Very funny."

"I'm being serious, though," Kelly insisted, grabbing his arm. "Like, Brian—I'm <i>for real</i> serious."

"I'm <i>for real</i> serious, too," Brian countered. "Last night was... I don't know. Things went that way, and it happened, and no, I don't regret it. But, that doesn't mean I'm gonna play along with your act like this, whatever it is. I'm not into casual hook-up stuff like that. That's not me. Okay?"

<center>• • •</center> RoyalRoad

"You're... a fuckin' idiot," Kelly rolled her eyes and turned away from him with a heavy sigh. "And, you're gonna regret all of this later. Such a big fuckin' mistake. A waste. But, whatever. Not <i>my</i> problem... right?"

<i>We're all friends,</i> Stephanie thought in dismay. She understood each of their particular perspectives—in a detached way—but her heart ached watching their difference of mind grow into such a point of contention.

After the argument between Brian and Kelly, a strained atmosphere seemed to fall over them. Kelly was annoyed, seeming to have grown stiff with discontentment, while Brian fell

silent, making Stephanie's sense of social helplessness start to gnaw at her. She didn't want this sense of apprehension to dampen the excitement and energy she had for this day.

Remembering the instructions she'd received earlier, Stephanie timidly offered Brian her hand, and felt a wave of relief when he accepted it. The three headed across the gallery of the upper level together at a leisurely pace, taking in the sight of the vibrant swarm of fans gathered in the lobby below.

"Let's take a look around up here first," Brian gave Stephanie an apologetic look before turning towards Kelly. "Kelly?"

"Yeah," Kelly stated in a neutral tone. "Sure."

The first panel room of the upper level they arrived at had its program underway already, with a speaker addressing a nearly full room of attendees.

"What is 'moé?'" A large, bearded man with a shaved head who looked very much like the member of a biker gang fresh out of prison was roaring into his microphone in a hoarse voice. "Cute?! Moé is more than just *cute*."

"Hear, hear!"

"Exactly!!

"Yosh!"

"Preach!"

"Moé is when yer heart gets a boner! It's that budding feelin' of infatuation, it's tha pangs of adolescence invoked all over again when you see somethin' *so damned adorable*, that it touches you, deep inside and melts yer bitter and cynical heart that's been walled off by thirty-seven years of desperate, *painful* loneliness!"

Lingering near the door, Brian looked to his companions for a consensus. Kelly winced at the idea of entering the panel room, looking decidedly disinterested. Stephanie shrugged, curious but ready to agree to whatever Brian decided.

"Yeah. Guess I don't really want to sit down right away, either," Brian nodded, looking restless. They passed the room by and continued on. "We can check out the atrium?"

"Let's!" Stephanie agreed eagerly, giving him a smile.

The atrium, to Stephanie's surprise, was an entire amphitheater room built into the upper level, featuring several stages set up beneath an enormous dodecahedron of glass and steel far above their heads. Here, padded swordfighters in tunics, tabards, and gambesons were having practice matches upon stage. The theater's seats had been cleared out, creating a broad open space populated with different tables, lines, and clusters of medieval-clad warriors chatting with each other.

"This is where my friend Rebecca does her thing," Brian explained, gesturing across the bustling activity throughout the giant room. "Live-action battle gaming, I think."

"Have you ever played this... game?" Stephanie asked with interest, watching a fighter with a two-handed sword crash his weapon down upon his opponent's shield. It was exciting—and a little alarming—watching the pair on stage trade aggressive blows back and forth, and she couldn't help but wonder what Brian would be like up there.

“Emily and I had a little practice fight with the weapons they let you try out,” Brian remembered. “But, it wasn’t anything big like this back then. Last year, it was just a little room off of the lobby downstairs. Seems like this stuff’s really taking off.”

While it was interesting, it felt rude to simply stand off to the side gawking at the battle-gamers, so the trio moved on from the impromptu arena and across to the other side of the upper level. As they did, Stephanie couldn’t help but walk next to the railing overlooking the lobby so that she could see down across the entire convention hall.

There were friends huddled together for security amid the press of bodies, smiling and enthusiastically pointing out costumes. Going around the convention with Brian and Kelly, she felt so much more like she belonged, like she was one of them, like she was a part of the whole experience rather than an interloping outsider. Adjusting her glasses with her free hand, Stephanie found her lovely blue eyes drawn to several of the stand-out cosplayers from series she recognized.

There was a Faye Heartlock strutting in yellow hotpants that offered about as much coverage as wearing a belt, the deep line of her cleavage barely constrained by the single button of her yellow vest. A platinum-blond girl wearing the null suit from Metrazoid might as well have been painted into the outfit she was boldly posing in, light-blue latex hugging intimately to every curve. Some of the outfits worn down there would have seemed positively scandalous to the Stephanie of yesterday—Now, she felt so much more confident and comfortable in her own body that she could almost imagine wearing some of them herself. Stephanie looked at them all with interest, musing on new perspectives and wondering where her own boundaries would be; what she might decide to wear next year.

She felt uniquely off-balance, like she was standing with one foot in the world of yesterday she was used to, and one foot in a future she couldn’t have ever imagined. When she’d arrived at the con yesterday with Megan, she’d been interested but... *withdrawn,* her feelings for the convention experience subdued and reluctant. Last night, she’d been initiated into a whole new world. A world filled with intimacy, attraction, and uncertain companionship that was dangerously addictive. Now, she was excited, exuberant, she felt alive in ways she’d almost forgotten.

But, at the same time, she was terrified of overstepping herself, of testing the unknown boundaries. After years of detaching herself from things and becoming conservative with her feelings, keeping the world at a healthy distance... she was now riding the thrilling edge of high risk, high return emotional investments.

Her eyes wandered up Brian’s chest and across his broad shoulders. *And, it feels like I just keep winning big.* She wanted to latch onto Brian and Kelly both and never let them go.

Taking a closer look at her two companions, however, Stephanie felt the beaming smile on her face begin to fall. Kelly was openly broadcasting impatience and annoyance with her crossed arms and disinterested scowl, while Brian had donned his Darkmask helmet once again, rendering him somehow distant and impersonal. *You guys...!*

“Sh-shall we head back downstairs?” Stephanie proposed in a meek voice, feeling desperate for them to move on from this thorny situation and leave it behind them. “Or... ah, d-did we want to look at the other things, um, the rooms, on this level?”

“Lead on,” Brian shrugged.

Shooting Kelly a nervous glance when the dark-haired gothic beauty didn’t respond, Stephanie gingerly took each of them by the hand. She wasn’t sure she quite understood their adamant refusal to see things on each other’s terms, and didn’t know how it had come to such a stubborn standoff. Holding Brian’s hand on one side and Kelly’s on the other, she felt like she was the bridge to help them reconnect, to set aside their differences somehow. And, she had no inkling on how to accomplish that.

Together, the three forged on through the crowds on the landing and stepped onto the escalator that would take them back down to the ground floor of the convention hall.

“...Were we just gonna fuckin’ wander around aimlessly?” Kelly asked, looking from Brian to Stephanie. “We’d be having more fun back at the hotel. What about *the plan,* Steph?”

“Uh-uhmm,” Stephanie sputtered, freezing up in fright. She mostly felt like she was on Brian’s side of the argument... it was just that certain aspects of Kelly’s position were also tantalizing and persuasive in their own way. “I-I just—”

“Plan?” Brian looked from girl to girl.

“Yeah—your plan,” Kelly said, slyly turning back to face Brian again. “You said we’re on ‘plan B,’ today. Plan B was for all of us to have a blast today. Right?”

“Plan B was us all having fun here at the convention, yeah.”

“Okay. We can be here at the con and have fun. Fun like *last night*.”

“I... didn’t mean that kind of fun.”

“Well, I do.”

“Sounds like we’re at an impasse,” Brian held up his hands, not about to keep arguing pointlessly. By now, he looked wholly indifferent to Kelly, which seemed at odds with expectations of what a guy would want, but... somehow natural and real for Brian.

Stephanie watched the proceedings with interest.

“C’mon, Steph,” Kelly switched to a new tact, turning instead to Stephanie. “Help me talk some sense into this loser!”

“Sense? Steph’s having fun here,” Brian said. “Aren’t you?”

Alarmed, Stephanie backed up a step with a weak smile, holding up her hands and shaking her head to indicate she was staying out of this.

“No?” Kelly cocked an eyebrow at her. “You’re saying ‘no’ to which one of us?”

“I-I’m not... saying anything at all!” Stephanie answered with a meek laugh. “I’m, um, impartial, th-the impartial third party, hah ha...”

“...Excuse me, while I confer with my associate for a moment,” Kelly growled, pulling Stephanie aside to the edge of the lobby, away from Brian.

“Steph? You’ll help me, right? Please?” Kelly begged, her fine features revealing a distraught, defenseless look. “Fuck. I’m tryin’ hard to keep my cool, but I really can’t take any more of this, I’m—I’m going *crazy*—help me?”

“O-okay, I’ll help,” Stephanie agreed with a concerned look. “What’s wrong?”

“Seriously, of all things, *that* was gonna work?” Kelly smirked, her distraught expression immediately reverting back to the teasing, impassive mask she normally wore.

“You guys are both so damned naive...”

“Y-you... are you being serious?” Stephanie stammered. “Or is this a, is this all just an act?”

“Well, *yeah*, the helpless trick’s an act,” Kelly admitted. “But, so is the whole *I’m all in control all the time* thing. Look, it’s *all* an act. Guys’re more sensitive to these kinds of moods than you’d think. I really can use your help with Brian right now, though.”

“H-how...” Stephanie began, regarding Kelly with a cautious smile and feeling a little perplexed. “How can I trust you, then?”

“I don’t want your trust,” Kelly replied, wearing an mysterious, unreadable face in return. “I want your help.”

“I’ll help you,” Stephanie decided with a nod. “Just, um. Well, what’s wrong?”

<i>“Brian,” that’s what’s wrong,” Kelly scoffed, fluffing the ruffles of her petticoat in aggravation. “Things aren’t working like they should. It’s like he has his guard up, he’s all on the defensive. He warms up to *you* no problem, but all *I’m* gettin’ is cold shoulder. I don’t get it. You think maybe I’m just not his type? Too intimidating, or something?”

“Well, um...” Stephanie looked baffled. <i>Does she really not understand his point of view?</i> “What do you really want out of this?”

“Have you even listened to me at all today?!” Kelly exclaimed in exasperation. “I’m helping you two out, yeah. But, *I’m* trying to get fuckin’ laid, too, you know? Clock’s ticking on that if his friends are showing up. Can’t you like, ask him what his deal is with me?”

“So... all you want is sex?”

“Fuckin’ *duh!*”

“I don’t buy that either—it doesn’t add up,” Stephanie insisted, shaking her head. “I don’t think it’s just, um. *That.* I’m sure you could... do that, have... *sex* with almost anyone else you wanted, anywhere, just by being you.”

“Obviously not...” Kelly made a face, pursing her lips in annoyance, but she let Stephanie continue.

“Why him, then? Why me, wh-why stick around with us? Kelly... what’s going on? Why are you really here, at the convention? What was the big thing that happened with you, th-that you didn’t want to talk about last night? Brian just—”

<i>“Look,” Stephanie,” Kelly growled. Something in her carefully composed mask flickered, revealing something in the beautiful girl that was neither calm nor in control. Just as quickly, Kelly took a deep breath and the moment was gone, the cool girl facade returned in its place. “Knowing what my whole deal is? It won’t help us out any, here.”

<i>Kelly...</i> Stephanie regarded her for an uncomfortable moment in silence, unable to interject—still too timid to do so. She wished she could be someone Kelly could confide in, but the right words to reach out seemed to just be out of her grasp.

“Hell—you’d probably trust me even less. It’s... long, and <i>full</i> of bullshit, and I don’t need anyone else getting involved.” Kelly made a frustrated noise of aggravation. “Okay? I don’t need you prying all up into my business, and I don’t need your <i>pity.</i>”</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="54 182 937 225" data-label="Text">
<p>“I’m not... I wasn’t offering you my pity,” Stephanie countered in a quiet voice. “I’m offering you my help. Kelly, do you... do you trust Brian and I? Really trust us?”</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="54 227 948 360" data-label="Text">
<p><i>“Trust you guys? No,”</i> Kelly snorted, inexplicably looking vulnerable again before she scoffed again. “Yes? I don’t know, dumb question. Doesn’t matter. Why would I trust you guys? Steph—you don’t go and spill your life story to people when you’re just tryin’ to get laid. It’s counter-intuitive, <i>retarded,</i> it’s like, immediate red flags and alarm bells. You don’t have perspective, Steph. You’re doing all your thinking with that <i>widdle wovely heart</i> of yours, that has this big dopey first crush on him.”</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="54 362 909 405" data-label="Text">
<p>“Okay,” Stephanie replied seriously, appraising Kelly again for a long moment. “Maybe I am. Is that any worse than, um... what you’re trying to think with, instead?”</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="77 407 390 428" data-label="Text">
<p>Kelly’s eyes widened in surprise.</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="54 430 934 519" data-label="Text">
<p>“Well, <i>sorry</i> for having sex on my mind,” Kelly finally gave her a mocking look. “Sheesh! I only sat there, neglected, while he tongue-punched your twat-box to this amazing fuckin’ orgasm? Yeah, of course <i>you’re</i> all satisfied—he already slurped your spunk sleeve all fuckin’ sloppy.”</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="54 520 932 607" data-label="Text">
<p><i>“What?! No,”</i> Stephanie said quickly, flushing with embarrassment and glancing around to make sure no one had overheard. “Yes? I-I don’t know, maybe? Could you please not refer, um, could you <i>never, ever</i> call it that? H-how do you keep coming up with those?!”</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="77 610 397 632" data-label="Text">
<p>“They just come to me. It’s a gift.”</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="54 634 940 699" data-label="Text">
<p>“Wh-what if,” Stephanie blustered, “maybe it did—uh, that, d-doing that <i>did</i> feel that amazing, but it was <i>because</i> I have a crush, um, because I <i>do</i> trust him. It, ah, made the difference. It was... cathartic.”</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="77 702 253 721" data-label="Text">
<p>“Ca-<i>what?</i>”</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="77 725 216 743" data-label="Text">
<p>“...Cathartic?”</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="77 747 311 766" data-label="Text">
<p>“What does that mean?”</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="54 770 942 858" data-label="Text">
<p>“I’m... not sure how to, um, it’s this emotional, um. I-I don’t know how to describe it,” Stephanie sighed, helpless to explain herself. “Cathartic. Catharsis? M-maybe it is a crush, is what I’m saying. But, maybe <i>that’s</i> what you actually need? N-not a crush, but, maybe... a deeper connection?”</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="54 860 925 904" data-label="Text">
<p>“Yeah, uh, sure,” Kelly replied with a noncommittal shrug. “But, what if <i>instead,</i> we all just fuck, and leave it at that? No complications, loose ends or feelings or anything?”</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox="54 905 918 949" data-label="Text">
<p>“But, he may not, um... no, he won’t do that,” Stephanie pointed out. “I don’t think. If you can’t open up to each other, that is, and really... um, connect.”</p>
</div>

"Which sounds dumb to me," Kelly sighed in aggravation. "People don't havta get personal to have great sex, Stephanie."

"I-I know," Stephanie tried, struggling to find the words to express her feelings. "But isn't doing that, uh, doing *just sex*, isn't that only treating the symptoms, without addressing the cause?"

"...The *cause*?" Kelly's eyebrows rose, and that tenuous thread of gravity between the two girls seemed to pull taut again as she bristled with unseen anger. "Stephanie—you don't *know me*. And, even if we *were* friends—and we're not, not really—it wouldn't be okay for you to be all up in my personal business."

"Sorry," Stephanie said quietly. "I'm sorry. I thought—well, um, I think of us as... friends. What... are we, really?"

"We're friend*ly*," Kelly reminded her, aggressively palming a handful of Stephanie's butt for emphasis. "Not friends."

"Awah!! Ahh, ahh, st-stop that!" Stephanie protested, twisting and squirming her way out of Kelly's grasp. "Well, *I* think of you as my friend. Even if—even if you're mean, sometimes."

Unmoved by her claim, Kelly just shook her head in exasperation and stepped back over to Brian, ending their little talk. Stephanie followed uneasily—she didn't feel like she'd gotten through to the girl at all. Standing together once again, the three companions exchanged uncomfortable glances with each other, and Stephanie felt a bitter sense of loss that she was unable to put into words.

"Ah... well, *fuck*."

Both Brian and Stephanie turned in surprise towards Kelly, who'd frozen on the spot, staring off ahead of them. Stephanie tracked her gaze through the crowd in confusion, but didn't see anything—or anyone—that seemed out of place. Different anime fans and cosplayers were walking ahead of them, but none of them spared a glance back at Kelly.

"Is... everything alright?" Brian asked.

"I've—gotta go," Kelly said distractedly. The expression on her face was difficult to read, but it still looked like her eyes were following someone up ahead. *"Shit."* Uh, yeah. Well, bye, guys."

"Everything okay?" Brian asked again, while Stephanie looked at her with mounting concern.

"No. But, I've just gotta get it over with," Kelly's gaze snapped back to them and she gave them a dry smile. "Personal business. I'm gonna go see this old friend, take care of some things. I'll catch you two lovebirds later sometime, though."

"Uh... okay. You need your stuff?" Brian asked, passing Stephanie his Darkmask helmet so that he could pop open the pouches on his belt.

"I..." Kelly seemed to pause, stepping up to him as he pulled everything out of his pouches and passed her both her cell phone and the crumpled twenty-dollar bill. She seemed hesitant and uncertain for once, in a way that Stephanie found unsettling.

<i>Is she really leaving us? Just like that?</i>

“You have two of these?” Kelly asked, drawing the hotel room keycard from his hand.

“Yeah,” Brian said, surprised. “This is the spare. Always keep mine in my boot, just in case—I was gonna give that one to Emily and Rebecca later on. Take it if you need it, though.”

“Cool. Thanks,” Kelly said, awkwardly unclasping and unbuttoning the top of her gothic lolita dress until cleavage was revealed. Brian and Stephanie tried not to stare as she slipped the key between her breasts and hurriedly began fastening her top up again, already striding away.

“W-wait!” Stephanie called out in an anxious whisper, quickly advancing forward and latching onto Kelly’s arm before she could get away. “Do you have to, um, are you really—what will, what do—<i>what do I do?</i>”

“Uh,” Kelly stopped to look back at them, actually giving Stephanie a guilty look. “I’ll see you guys later? Probably.”

“There’s the <i>Hero Hero Haruki</i> thing at noon,” Brian said. “Don’t know where we’re doing our actual photoshoot, but we’re meeting up in the main lobby first. Look for a buncha guys dressed up like me.”

“Kay,” Kelly nodded, before looking to Stephanie. “Steph... just, you know. Stick to the plan, okay? You’ll be fine.”

Kelly turned away from them with a whirl of her skirts and left them, hurrying away down the convention corridor. The pair watched on in surprise as Kelly disappeared into the crowds, and Stephanie moved closer, taking the initiative to clutch onto Brian’s arm.

“Well... alright?” Brian shook his head, trying to figure out what could have happened to spur Kelly into such a sudden flight. “What <i>is</i> the plan, then?”

“It-it’s not a plan,” Stephanie said firmly. “It’s a promise. She’ll be back.”

While they’d only met the day before, Stephanie already felt incredibly attached to Kelly. The dark-haired girl with the alluring smile always bolstered her confidence, encouraged her, <i>provoked her,</i> even—gently urged her on towards these things she wouldn’t have been able to imagine a few short days ago. In her very most vulnerable intimate moment with Brian, Kelly had been right there with her, holding her steady with comfort and support. Kelly had been there for her, been there for both of them, and her presence with them <i>meant something</i> to Stephanie.

<i>And, now she has to go? Just like that?</i> Stephanie worried her lip, feeling terribly unresigned at her friend’s abrupt departure.

“So...” Brian began, shifting awkwardly.

“Yeah, um,” Stephanie began, not knowing what to say, either.

“Hah,” Brian chuckled, shaking his head. “I was afraid this would happen—that things’d get... you know, weird between us, soon as Kelly wasn’t here.”

“No, it’s, just... well,” Stephanie blustered.

“Here—let’s go this way,” Brian suggested, steering Stephanie in a different direction than the one Kelly had gone. “We’ll give Kelly her space to go do her own thing. You wanted a pic of that Solar Bear cosplayer, right?”

“Um... yes!” Stephanie gave him a sheepish smile. She’d honestly already forgotten about it, and she instead sent a last glance in Kelly’s direction before they were worming their way through the throng of attendees again.

The Solar Bear was huge, a cosplayer wearing a hulking white fursuit nearly seven feet tall, patiently picking his way along the convention hall. With as often as he was stopped by others for photos, especially people with children, it wasn’t hard at all for them to catch up to him, and when they were standing in front of the big fluffy bear Stephanie couldn’t suppress a giddy smile.

“H-he’s so *cute!*” She exclaimed under her breath, shyly wringing her phone in her hands. Rather than a mascot-style costume that resembled human form, this one really had the figure of a bear—it had a realistic shaped head defined by the shape of its snout rather than an anthropomorphized face, and the girth of its neck seemed to form a natural slope all the way down to where its foreclaws began rather than forming angular humanoid shoulders. A pair of teenage girls had been posing for a photo with the Solar Bear and just trotted away, but Stephanie found herself hesitating, too timid to ask to do the same.

“Scuse me, can she get her picture with you?” Brian spoke up, gently pushing Stephanie forward by her shoulders.

The giant bear from Monster Battlers turned towards her in a lumbering motion and then spread his giant white paws, inviting a hug. Excitedly stumbling forward, Stephanie couldn’t help but giggle as she was enveloped by the cuddly creature’s arms.

“One more, please—Steph, look this way for a picture!” Brian chuckled, and Stephanie turned to see him holding up his phone for them.

I should have given him my phone! Stephanie flushed with embarrassment all over again as she realized she was still clutching her own phone in her gloved hands. Though she wanted to hide her face, she turned her smile towards Brian.

“Got it! Thanks, Solar Bear,” Brian gave the cosplayer a thumbs-up. “You look incredible.”

“Thanks you,” Stephanie blurted out, feeling her face go beet-red. *Thanks you?* “I mean, uh, th-thank you!” She was released from the fluffy white embrace, and she hurriedly skipped back over to Brian.

“Second one came out good. Take a look,” Brian offered, turning his phone towards her.

She blinked at the screen for a moment, almost failing to recognize herself with the unfamiliar bright pink hair.

“Thank you! It’s—it’s a good picture.”

Getting her picture taken with the Solar Bear hadn’t been an ordeal at all. Her anxiety usually meant interaction with a stranger required mustering up a certain amount of nerve, a level of *tension*. It was something she was used to having to work herself up for, while

she mentally prepared the words she planned to say. All so that she hopefully wouldn't make a fool of herself.

Instead, Brian had read her hesitation and acted on it right away, facilitating everything so that the situation played out smoothly, *naturally.* While it may have been a simple small gesture on his part, the relief and assurance she felt from it had those crackling pink flames warming her inside.

It's different, Stephanie bit her lip, trying to keep from latching onto him in a random hug. *Everything's different.*

"What is it?" He asked.

"L-let me fix your collar," Stephanie stuttered out, averting her eyes to the task of re-straightening the neck of his Darkmask bodysuit. She wasn't able to stifle her slight smile as she pretended to focus on righting the already neat lines of his cosplay.

"Was it messed up?" Brian chuckled.

"...No," Stephanie answered honestly, her smile breaking into a grin before she could help herself. "I just, I... just wanted to."

The honest admission probably wasn't what Kelly intended, but Stephanie continued fidgeting with his collar for a moment anyways, feeling her cheeks glow. Standing right in his personal space, almost *too* close to him, should have been awkward and discomforting. Instead, it was somehow everywhere she ever wanted to be.

"Well, thanks." Although he was holding his helmet and had his Komari-mart bag hanging from his wrist next to it, Brian still managed to put an arm around her, and the flames burning within her leapt up higher and brighter. "What do you wanna do now?"

"Um," Finally daring to look up at his face again, Stephanie's mouth opened as if to answer, but she really had no idea what they should do next—it felt like she was barely keeping up with everything. *I don't know what to do—this feeling, it just keeps growing!*

"Can I be completely honest?" Brian asked.

"Please," Stephanie nodded quickly, turning her full attention to him and preparing to hang on his every word.

"There's this part of me that feels like I'm wasting your time with us just wandering around like this. Like, I should be showing you around the panels, or taking you to events you want to see, or something. But, at the same time..."

"At the same time?" Stephanie prompted.

"...At the same time, it's also like I just want to spend time with you, without any those distractions." There was an individual intensity in the way he was looking at her, an undivided focus that made her feel like she was standing with him alone in an empty lobby, rather than boxed in by hundreds of AnimeCon attendees.

"Y-yeah?" The innocent honesty in Stephanie's sweet expression became heated at the attention, her face flushing with raw, almost palpable *desire.* The self-control she was so certain of after all of these years nearly gave way beneath the heady weight of his gaze, and for a few brief moments all she could think in response was how badly she wanted him.

Although the words shocked her speechless, those searching green eyes of his seemed to see it all, *<i>to know,</i>* and so her hesitant, yearning look slowly blossomed into a smile as bright as a sunrise. *<i>I keep thinking about last night. I'm thinking of you. Of us. Us taking this, whatever this is between us, and going further and further... </i>*

Blushing furiously, she was unable to say any of that out loud. Instead, she simply nodded.

The two walked on together below the atrium, where the smacking noises of boffer weapons and occasional yells were still sounding out, and then slowly picked their way through the crowds across one of lower promenades. This concourse was lined on both sides with long planters of tiled brick, filled with large decorative plants. Here and there along its length, attendees were using the planter edge as a bench.

"This morning, you said..." Stephanie began, embarrassed, "that I—um, this, th-the, *<i>us meeting,</i>* was like, um. That, that I was like... an anime dream girl?"

"Yes?" Brian nodded, still waiting for her question.

"What did you mean?!" Stephanie asked with an exasperated smile.

"Hmm... in anime, it's the *<i>genre cliché,</i>* that a beautiful girl will fall out of the sky—sometimes literally—and into the protagonist's lap, into his life. She's really, like, *<i>magic.</i>* Mysterious and fascinating things happen around her, you know, draw the ordinary, average guy into some big adventure that changes everything."

"W-well yes, I know all of that," Stephanie flustered. "I watch anime! But, but, what does any of that have to do with *<i>me?</i>*"

"Stephanie—" Brian quirked an eyebrow at her, "how did we meet?"

"Th-that, uh, was..."

"And, there's also how beautiful you are, how cool you are, and this... whatever's happening with your hair. Turning a different color when you get kissed? That's like, right out of an anime story," Brian decided, grinning at her.

"I'm—I'm not, though, I'm just... *<i>me.</i>* Th-there's nothing cool about me, at all."

"That's not true."

"Yeah?" She asked shyly. "Then, wh-what's so cool about me, huh?"

"I think what makes you so cool is how brave you are."

"N-no, no," Stephanie stammered out quickly, and her face fell. "No. I'm not brave though, at—*<i>at all.</i>* I'm, like, I'm *<i>terrified,</i>* al-almost all of the time."

"Well, yeah," he nodded. "Wouldn't think you were brave, if you weren't. Take Kelly, for example. She really doesn't care what anyone thinks—so she's *<i>bold,</i>* but not really *<i>brave.</i>* When I see you fighting with your fear all the time... it really makes me proud of you when you win out."

"I'm—I'm definitely not *<i>beautiful,</i>* though!" Stephanie argued, blushing fiercely. "And, uh, y-you're not average or ordinary, like you were saying, at all! You don't get to say that, then."

"How about we compromise, have ourselves a truce," Brian offered, letting go of her hand and turning to face her, letting his fingers fall to her side. Her eyes went wide. "How about..."

you don't doubt me when I tell you you're beautiful, and in return, I'll never call myself average or ordinary. Deal?"

"...Deal," Stephanie agreed, unable to look away from him.

"Stephanie," Brian wet his lips and leaned in to whisper in her ear. "You're *beautiful*."

"Ohh?" she quietly breathed, her eyes dazed and her pink lips parting. Before she could even dream of denying his words, he'd pulled her into a hug.

Blinking with surprise and smiling despite herself, she hugged him back. She'd never felt quite so safe and satisfied as right here in his arms—but there was also a pink flash of adrenal excitement that spiked through her. She'd lived for years with social anxiety, but she was realizing that the suffocating, directionless, and uncomfortable pressure she was so accustomed to was now building up instead into a very *different* kind of tension.

It was a subtle, supple tension, an intimate and sometimes sexual tension. It was attraction and anticipation, a thrumming readiness, an eager urge for physicality; to touch him, to put her hands on him and never let go. That habitual stiff, anxious rise of her shoulders was already beginning to melt beneath the blazing pink heat she felt rolling through her.

Can't stop getting all... turned on around him! Stephanie blushed furiously, unable to deny it to herself. She was warm and wet with arousal simply by being in his proximity, and whenever he flirted with her—*th-this is flirting, right?*—little pink explosions were set off in her brain, making it impossible for her to think straight.

All of the sudden, she wanted to attack him. There was *something* going on between them, and she wanted to explore what it was. Kelly's notions about what to do with Brian didn't seem as absurd anymore—she really *did* want to be all over him, in an immediate and bodily way that she'd never dared to consider with the opposite sex. The boundaries that had boxed her in were gone, around Brian at least. She wanted to play around, to grab him by his shoulders and grapple him, wrestle with him. To strain her muscles with exertion, test the sexy *solid*-ness of his masculine frame.

Oh, no. I really DO want to attack him. Oh, whoa. Stephanie wanted to fight Brian... and she wasn't even sure if she wanted to win. Frantic pink flames fluttered dangerously through her mind as she explored this strange new compulsion she felt.

Maybe she would let out a giggle as he grabbed her by the wrists, but she would fail to twist out of his grasp. First she imagined she'd try to pull away from him—a futile exercise, against his strength. She would valiantly push against him a few times, struggling against him as he pinned her down, before laughing and kissing him in a sloppy way. With him holding her in place, there was no desire or reason to imagine escaping.

A smile would blossom across her face, her lips parting with lust, and she would start kissing him and never stop, spreading her slender legs to wrap around him. Then, they would fight it out all over again, pressing their bodies against one another in fervent abandon as they each vied for a superior position. It wouldn't matter who won, so long as they drew each other into the soft tangle bodies, flushed with heat and skin sliding slick down there as he—

W-wait wait wait! Stephanie blithely realized, turning away from Brian as blood rushed to her face. *Isn't that basically just... sex? Am I actually just wanting to... go the whole way, to do that with him?!* It was as if an instinctive *need* had been woken up from deep within her, and her body, very obviously lubricating with excitement, was able to tell her exactly what she wanted.

"You—you know," Stephanie swallowed nervously. "You never *showed* me, what you thought of m-my... my butt..."

"I didn't," Brian warned, exhaling slowly in an uneasy breath. "Yet. You should, uh. Be careful what you ask for?"

"...I will," she promised, and she gave him a serious nod that shook her fluffy pink tufts of hair. "Is it—would it be, um, *bothersome?* For me to ask things...?"

"No, no," he said quickly. "Ask me anything you want."

"Okay," she smiled, and her mind was already racing through what felt like a billion topics all at once. "Let me, um, think how to phrase... what I want to ask."

Behind one of these big groupings of people, in some secluded alcove, he could *show her* what he thought of her butt. Her heart pounding with excitement at the thought. How *would* he show her? Direct her to stand, gloved hands splayed out against the wall, like he was frisking her? Maybe he would just crouch down to 'fix' her costume for her, make sure those tall red boots were tugged up properly to pinch the soft, plush shapes of her pale thighs. His brushing lips could follow the gentle curve of her hamstring up to the round globes of her bottom, so that she could tremble when he nibbled, or even wriggle, as his thumbs drew up on either side—just beneath the crescents of her cheeks—and slightly spread them?

He could take me somewhere private and just... bend me over, Stephanie thought, an intimate longing trapped deep within her eyes. *Spank me. Play with me. Whatever he wants, I want. Want to forget all of these pointless little worries, disregard everything else and just...*

In her imagination, Brian took a mouthful of luscious thigh, gently pinching her pale skin between his teeth. He'd *squeeze* her trembling ass and watch the ample flesh bulge between his fingers. Pull her panties all the way down to around her ankles and then *kiss* her, tongue and lick her from behind until her knees were knocking together and she was soaked sloppy with his saliva. *Longing for his every touch, reacting to his tiniest movement. I want him to just take me however he wants and never ever stop. If Kelly hadn't—*

Stephanie's expression fell, and her pace faltered a step.

"I'm... worried about Kelly," she admitted. "A little."

"About Kelly?" Brian arched an eyebrow.

"Yeah. What do you think about her?" Stephanie asked, curious.

"Kelly? I didn't like her at all, at first," he answered candidly. "She seemed—I don't know. Full of herself? Like, she was a little too quick to just... kinda dismiss us as geeks. I didn't like her."

“Really?” Stephanie didn’t necessarily *<i>disagree</i>* with his perspective, but still found herself surprised. “Wh-why did, um, then, but—you invited her to stay with you anyway?”

“Because of you,” he said. “I thought, you know, you’d feel safer if she was there, too. Since it’s like, you barely know me—I didn’t want you thinking you were going to be alone in a situation, or in a position where I was gonna take advantage of you, or anything. She seemed like she was looking out for you, so I figured you’d be more comfortable with me offering you a room if she was there too, to keep me honest.

“Hah. Instead, things went, like, the opposite way?” He winced. “I guess?”

“No, no,” Stephanie patted her gloved hands on his chest. “I’m glad she was there with us. I really am. I feel like... maybe she did keep you honest? She um, she kept both of us honest, i-is what I mean to say.”

“Oh?” Brian laughed.

“Yeah, it’s—um, the things that happened, the last night, it, um, I don’t think things would have gone so perfectly, if she hadn’t—if she hadn’t been there too,” Stephanie mumbled, tracing a small circle on her own arm with her opposite fingertip. “If that makes sense?”

“You really think so?”

“I—I do,” Stephanie confirmed. “Do you still not like her?”

“She’s grown on me,” Brian said. “Wouldn’t have kissed her last night—not even on a dare—if I didn’t like her.”

“...Good,” Stephanie decided with a nod.

“Of course, I was still pretty surprised walking in on you two kissing this morning,” Brian said.

“Y-yeah,” Stephanie giggled, looking away in embarrassment. “Me too.”

<i>The thing between Kelly and I—it isn’t attraction. Well, not exactly. Instead, I simply feel... curiosity? Some kind of interest?</i> Stephanie wondered, a little conflicted on the nature of her strange relationship with Kelly.

She’d never entertained thoughts about kissing another girl before, yet... when confronted with *<i>things</i>* earlier this morning, the same-sex aversion Stephanie expected wasn’t really there, either. Not with Kelly. She’d become unexpectedly, maybe even inexplicably *<i>comfortable</i>* with her. *<i>I don’t think I desire her—not necessarily—but appreciating her, admiring her with kisses or even... exploring touches doesn’t sound so bad. Is that... weird? I think I might be turning weird?</i>*

“Am I just...” Brian began, giving her a half-grin, “you know, gettin’ in the way between you two?”

“Y-you’re, um, you can’t say that, th-that’s not fair!” She squeaked out. When he smiled at her with those mottled green eyes of his, his very presence seemed to demand her full attention, light her body up, igniting errant wildfires for miles across the jumbled terrain of her thoughts.

“What?” He asked with a grin. “What’s not fair about that?”

“Because... um...” She felt her face frozen in a stupid smile as she gazed at him, speechless, her heartbeat coursing through her. *<i>Because I...</i>*

“Well, not gonna press you, if you don’t want to talk about it,” Brian assured her with an amused smile. “Honestly, maybe it’s better if instead of telling me, you could show me, instead?”

<i>Show you... ?</i> While she wasn’t sure if that made much sense, it seemed incredibly appealing all the same, and as they strode along hand-in-hand among the crowds of AnimeCon attendees, Stephanie couldn’t help but giddily think about how they must seem like a couple to everyone.

<i>Which is silly... isn’t it? We’re not a couple. Are we? We HAVE kissed a few times, though... and then, um. Last night was... that was something. Does that kind of make us like a couple? Even if we’re not officially dating? Right? Does this count as a date? Something like a date? What am I, to him? Am I... his girl, kinda? A little bit?</i>

“Y-you’re teasing me,” She finally accused, realizing she’d been in a bit of a daze. She was almost too embarrassed to meet his eyes. “How would I... how would I show you?”

<center>• • •</center>

“Sarah, that goth bitch over there is totally casing you,” Qin Wanwan muttered in a catty voice, leaning in close.

“Ew, and it’s another *<i>Ita</i>* in a knockoff from Taobaba,” Mega Miruku sighed, shaking her head. “You can totally tell she’s tried to copy your makeup.”

“Oh, God, you’re right! I didn’t even notice at first,” Qin snorted. “It’s like she just finished walking herself through Sarah’s *<i>horror fantastique</i>* tutorial for the first time, and she wants to, like, come here and compete with the real deal.”

Qin was Asian, and wore a skimpy tribal outfit of ragged leathers and a necklace of bones and animal teeth along with a shaggy white wig that featured large wolf ears. Mikuru, on her other side, was dressed in bloomers and an athletic shirt, like a girl who’d walked out of the track and field segment of a high school anime. She had large breasts that looked fake, and her shirt advertised her own cosplay alias, *<i>Mega Mikuru,</i>* in large letters.

Sarah herself was wearing her Gestalt-version Sabel Princess cosplay, which incorporated ornate foam armor pieces—cut to shape, sealed with a coat of rubber spray, and carefully painted to look like tarnished silver—atop what looked to be the Victorian dress of a ruling monarch. The cloth portions were perfectly sized to her body and hemmed with lace, while the armor was ornamented with white trimmings and decorated with vine-leaf patterns. The Gestalt-version costume had taken her over four months of work to complete last year, and it was now simply *<i>one</i>* of the nine costumes she had prepared to wear on her rotation this weekend at AnimeCon.

Curious, Sarah Star turned with a slight smirk and looked over her shoulder to see just who was out to get her this time. As a well-known local cosplay idol, she was the undisputed

star of their area—maybe even their whole coast. Her Nibbler followers numbered in the millions, her cosplay makeup video tutorials were touted as prescribed curriculum for new cosplayers, and more than a dozen different conventions had offered to sign her as a guest rather than an ordinary attendee.

So, it was a bit startling to her friends Qin and Mikuru when Sarah stopped walking and went pale at the sight of the girl they'd pointed out.

<i>No. No way,</i> Sarah stared in open disbelief. *<i>How can SHE possibly be here? How can she be here like this?!</i>*

"Uh... Sarah?" Qin whispered uneasily. "Are you okay? Is that copycat girl a stalker, or something?"

"I'm not afraid to go tell off some Ita cunt for you," Mega Miruku boasted, shooting a dirty look at the girl in the distance.

<i>Ita</i> was derogatory slang in Gothic Lolita fashion, taken from a similar-sounding word in Japanese that meant *<i>'ouch.'</i>* Few subcultures were as elitist as Lolita fashion, and newbie Lolitas with mismatched co-ords, Lolitas wearing too much tacky lace, or those wearing knock-off brand counterfeits from Chinese sites like Taobaba were all sneeringly referred to as Itas.

Sarah's lip twitched. There was nothing *<i>Ita</i>* about the dress of the beautiful young woman looking in their direction—if she didn't know any better, she'd say it was an authentic *<i>Noblesse Oblique,</i>* somehow. And, the idea that *<i>that</i>* girl, of all people, copied *<i>her</i>* makeup was even more preposterous.

"You don't recognize her?" Sarah sighed. "You guys... you better go on ahead without me. She's, uh. She's an old friend from a couple years ago."

"Yeah, sure. If you say so," Qin said, giving the girl one last dubious look before leading Mega Mikuru away.

As soon as they had gone on ahead, Sarah took a deep breath and slowly approached the girl with trepidation.

"What are you doing here, Kelly?" Sarah asked bluntly.

"Nice to see you, too," Kelly said in a quiet voice, putting on a weak smile. "It's been—"

"What do you want?" Sarah cut her off with a scowl. "How did you even get here? What are you wearing? Why are you *<i>here?!</i>*"

"I came to say goodbye to you."

"Okay, then. Goodbye," Sarah snorted, crossing her arms. "It's a little late for *<i>that,</i>* don't you think?"

"This time... this time it's *<i>for real</i>* goodbye," Kelly said. "Forever goodbye."

<i>"Don't fucking—"</i> Sarah realized how agitated she was getting and looked around, lowering her voice, "Don't you fucking dare tell me that now. Do you have any idea how Mom's been since you left? Where have you been?!"

"Royally fucking up my life," Kelly answered honestly.

“Of course you have,” Sarah spat, trying not to lose her cool and mostly failing. “You’re so fucking goddamn stubborn. Fuck, both of you are. *Fuck.*”

“Sarah...”

“Shut up.” What do you need, money? A place to stay? If you’d just *apologize—*

“Sarah. I’m not apologizing to her. And, I’m not going back,” Kelly said with finality. “I didn’t come here for money, or as a cry for help, or anything like that. I came here to say goodbye to my little sister.”

“You—*stupid fucking fuck,*” Sarah cried, eyes watering. “Well, don’t. I don’t want to hear it, so just fucking don’t. Don’t fucking bother.”

“Sarah.”

“What is it? *Drugs?* Are you—what, out of cash to shoot up, or snort, or whatever the fuck drugs you’re on, now?!”

“Sarah.”

“Shut up! What happened to Dale? Did you know Mom actually tried visiting him? To find out where you were—”

“Sarah,” Kelly interrupted with a pointed glare. “You’re making a scene.” The surrounding crowd in the lobby had gone silent as everyone turned to look and see what was going on, and her two cosplay friends had hurried back over, looking like they wanted to interject, but unsure of what to say.

“Uh... Sarah?” Qin finally asked. “Are you okay? What’s going on?”

“I...” Sarah looked around in embarrassment and collected herself. “Sorry. Is *Cosplay Makeup* empty right now?”

“Yeah, it should be,” Qin nodded, looking uneasily from Sarah to Kelly and back again. “Everything we need for the panel is all set up, and we still have another half-hour before it’s time.”

“Come with me,” Sarah demanded, taking her sister by the wrist and leading her down one of the hallways branching off the main lobby. Bewildered, Qin Wanwan and Mega Mikuru followed after them.

“Your makeup looks great,” Kelly said, obediently letting herself be pulled along.

“Don’t start,” Sarah warned.

“Of course her makeup looks great,” Mikuru snorted. “She’s *Sarah Star,* she’s like the queen of makeup. Every single freaking one of her tutorial videos has more than five hundred thousand views?”

“You do videos, now?” Kelly asked, interested.

“Yes,” Sarah hissed through gritted teeth. “I made a few videos, so what?”

“Makeup videos?”

“Yeah, she does makeup videos,” Mikuru said in exasperation. “She’s fucking famous for it. Aren’t you wearing her exact *horror fantastique* look? Who the hell do you think *you* are?”

“Horror fantastique?” Kelly blinked in surprise. “That sounds retarded, I never called it that.”

“This is... my older sister Kelly,” Sarah grudgingly admitted to her two friends, not turning to look back at either of them. “She... taught me how to do makeup. Forever ago.”

“She... what?” Mikuru asked in disbelief, slowing down and dropping back a bit as they headed down the hall towards their panel room. “I thought she said her sister was dead?”

Arriving in the empty panel room for Cosplay Makeup, Sarah yanked her sister inside, and after Qin and Mikuru had followed, closed and locked the door.

“Okay, you need to explain *everything*,” Sarah insisted, crossing her arms and standing to block off the door. “Start talking.”

“Everything? That’s a lot of explaining,” Kelly smiled, glancing at Qin and Mikuru. “You must be my little sister’s friends.”

“We’re professional cosplayers,” Mikuru huffed, crossing her arms as well. “They invite us to cons as *headline guests*, they *pay* us to be here.”

“Of course they do,” Kelly gave her an unimpressed look. “Isn’t that cute.”

“Everything,” Kelly,” Sarah demanded.

“If that’s what you want,” Kelly rolled her eyes and turned to face all three girls. “Alright, I’ll start from the very beginning. Before either of us were born, my mother—well, our mother was a cosmetologist—”

“That’s not what I fucking mean!” Sarah hissed. *“They”* don’t need to know any of that. Where have you been? How did you get here? Why are *you* wearing brand? What the fuck happened between you and Dale?!”

“Wait, wait,” Qin interrupted, motioning Sarah back. “Sarah—you never mentioned that your mother’s a cosmetologist? That’s kind of a big deal. I thought you said she was a nurse?”

“It is a big deal,” Kelly agreed. “Our story doesn’t make any sense if you don’t know that part.”

“And, Sarah—you said your sister was dead?” Mikuru chimed in.

“She’s been dead to me for a long time,” Sarah elaborated through gritted teeth.

“Yeah, fuck you too,” Kelly snorted.

“So, your mom’s actually a cosmetologist?” Qin pressed the issue. “Was she the one who—”

“Mom is *not* a cosmetologist,” Sarah insisted. “She’s a registered nurse now. Kelly, can you just for once—”

“Let her talk, I want to hear this,” Mikuru said.

“Of course she’s not a cosmetologist,” Kelly shook her head and sighed. “Not anymore. But our mother *was* a cosmetologist, and she was good. A little... *too* good, in fact. As you might guess from looking at Sarah and I... our mother was, once upon a time, very, very beautiful.

“And, being a makeup expert, she was of course very, very, very beautiful,” Kelly continued. “More so than us sisters are now, still. Which drew the eye of a certain man, and... well,

suffice to say that's how *she* was born. Sarah, too. *Physical products of her narcissism, manifestations of her vanity.*"

"Don't even start with that, again," Sarah scoffed.

"Anyways, popping out first one brat, and then two of them, she doesn't have as much time to invest in her appearance—our mother puts on weight, stops wearing makeup, lets herself go a bit. Big mistake, I guess, and daddy exits the story, stage left.

"Well, our mother takes it hard. Ends up swearing off cosmetics, wants to make sure her little girls never wind up like her. No learning makeup, no fancy haircuts, we're supposed to study and be smart like good little pawns, so we don't make her mistakes. All the while, she's dating her way through guy after guy, trying to find a *father figure* for us, I guess.

"I get a little mouthy one day with one of them, because I have a mouth. John, this big creepy guy who was probably going to molest us one day—"

"He was not," Sarah argued. "There was nothing wrong with John. He just wasn't going to put up with your shit."

"Okay then, as she says, one day John doesn't put up with my shit, and I earn myself my first black eye. Real beauty of a shiner, on ten-year old little me. Eleven-year old little me? Sometime around then. I fight back. Mom comes home and freaks out on both of us, sends him packing. Sarah runs and hides in our room like she does.

"So, my Mom breaks out this big kit that I guess she'd kept hidden behind shit under the bathroom sink, and sits there with me showing how to cover it up with makeup so I can go to school the next day. All the while explaining why, when I'm at a certain age, I shouldn't ever make myself *too* good looking, because of what can happen if I'm not careful.

"When I finally look in the mirror, it's like *fucking magic*," Kelly whispered. "Gone like it'd never been there. Couldn't even see there was fucking makeup there. It was fucking magic. Naturally, all I want to do then is learn how to do that, and of course, every day she catches me with makeup on, she goes into a fit and makes me wash it off. I wake up and practice putting on makeup, she makes me fuckin' scrub it off, then I go to school and apply it all over again."

"She let you buy makeup?" Qin asked.

"No, of course not. It was contraband. But I had friends. Our mother was just so fucking determined that neither of us made her same goddamned mistakes—"

"Yeah, and guess how the story ends?" Sarah taunted, shooting Kelly a glare. "You making those same goddamn mistakes."

"I guess so, fine," Kelly gave them a helpless shrug. "But, it's my fucking life. Not hers. You're not shying away from a little makeup now, either, I see."

"That's different," Sarah growled. "You still haven't told me what happened. Where you've been, what's fucking going on. Why you're wearing fucking brand lolita—where'd you get the money for that?"

"Do you like it?" Kelly did a slow pirouette for them. "It's the *Calamity Queen* set, by *Noblesse Oblique*. I'm modelling it for a friend, it's for sale."

“Friend, what friend?” Sarah huffed. “You don’t have any friends who’d buy brand. You don’t have any friends.”

“...How much?” Mikuru asked, looking at the dress with interest, now. Qin was already tapping the name into her phone.

“Make me a good offer,” Kelly shrugged.

“You said *Calamity Queen*?” Qin Wanwan asked, looking up from her phone in shock. “The whole set? What size is it, exactly?”

“How much is it?” Sarah asked.

“The full set goes for a hundred and thirty thousand yen,” Qin said. “That’s like... what, a grand?”

“A little over a grand,” Mikuru said. “Like, uh... eleven hundred some dollars?”

“...What?” Kelly blinked.

“Kelly—don’t lie to me, is that stolen?” Sarah asked, bewildered. “Where did you find ‘a friend’ that trusts *you* to run around in over a thousand dollars worth of brand?”

“Just... some people I met,” Kelly deflected with a laugh and a shrug. “It doesn’t concern you.”

“Cut the shit,” Sarah snapped. “Where did you get it?”

“Listen kiddo—I don’t fuckin’ answer to you,” Kelly gave her little sister a mocking smile.

“Jesus Christ,” Sarah’s shoulders rose in frustration and she forcibly turned away, letting out a bitter laugh. “And to think, I used to wonder why Mom and you always fought.

“Because she’s a hypocrite and a liar?” Kelly guessed.

“There you go again— do you even listen to yourself?”

“Have you ever listened to our mother? Really listened?” Kelly challenged. “How many times did she warn us not to wind up like she did, not to make her mistakes?”

“Millions of times?” Sarah snorted. “Uh, ‘cause she cares about us? You know, actually gives a fuck? Unlike—”

“Hello?” Kelly waved a hand in front of her sister’s face to get her attention. “So, you were never *actually* paying attention? When she says not to make her mistakes, do you even know what she’s fucking talking about? *Us.* Me and you. *We’re the mistakes.*”

Sarah’s mouth fell open at the shock and realization. She closed it, opened it again, as though unsure of what to say before she managed to find the right words again.

“So, that’s it,” Sarah chuckled, shaking her head. “All this time, you thought she was really—what, denying your existence, or something? Is that what it’s all always been about? All this time?! You’ve just got something to prove?!”

“...You can’t begin to guess my thoughts,” Kelly said slowly, in such a menacing tone that Sarah found herself shrinking back.

Years of hate showed painfully in Kelly’s eyes, and for the first time in her life Sarah felt like she’d begun to understand the reason her sister’s path had diverged so significantly from hers. That endlessly confident, rebellious sister that for years she’d secretly looked up to like

the sky appeared so dark and distant to her now that it was like a veil of dread had fallen over the room.

<i>She just couldn't stand being thought of as a mistake that needed correcting?</i> Sarah clenched her jaw, horrified that this sentiment she'd never thought of might have defined Kelly's every action for so many years. <i>How long has Kelly been thinking this?</i>

"But. Whatever," Kelly shook her head. "I've got my own life, and you've got yours. It's whatever. I'll be here at the con the rest of the day. Message me if you want to get together for dinner one last time, or something. I guess. Bye."

<center>• • •</center>

"Excuse me, could I get your picture?" A fan approached, gesturing with his phone.

<i>"No."</i> Chloe refused, continuing on without breaking stride. "I have the right to refuse any requests for photos, so, please—don't harass me." She smiling sweetly, leaving the dumbfounded man behind.

Her Magical Doll Himari cosplay seemed to be incredibly popular with the crowds, so far. She'd enjoyed preening and posing for the professional photographers—the ones carrying around nice, expensive cameras—and delighted in refusing the creeps who approached her with just their shitty cell phones. It was <i>empowering.</i>

In the sprawling convention center complex, filled with thousands of attendees, the chances of stumbling across Brian by accident were pretty low, so she was currently prowling along the hallway all of the gaming rooms branched off of. At some point today, Brian was sure to stop by the Mana: the Mastery room to visit his old friend Mark. Failing that, he would be at the Hero Hero Haruki meetup at noon that she'd seen advertised on the AnimeCon forum.

Chloe was ready to make her triumphant return to <i>her apartment,</i> the one she shared with Brian. After all, she'd already spent a whole week sleeping on the couches of different friends. While at first, that had been a great method of canvassing for sympathy and attention, all too quickly she ran the danger of overstaying her welcome, which would ruin her image.

Also, if her father discovered that she'd broken up with Brian, there would be disastrous complications. Because <i>he</i> was under the impression that she and Brian had been struggling financially—that her lazy boyfriend just wasn't able to hold down a job. So, he'd been transferring her enough money to support both of them, enough to cover all of their expenses each month. If he knew they were broken up, he'd insist she move back home, or find a smaller apartment, and then some of that easy income would disappear.

Or <i>worse,</i> if he started asking questions and found that Brian actually worked full time, and paid virtually all of their bills... Then her father would—irrationally—demand to know what happened to all of the money he'd sent them. As if he'd bought her. As if he <i>owned her.</i> Chloe's placid smile almost quirked into a sneer at the very thought of it.

<i>Would Daddy be able to appreciate my shrewd resourcefulness, and recognize the situation as the victory for feminism that it really is? Of course not. Because, no matter how doting, generous, and supportive Daddy may be, his understanding of gender culture's complexities will ALWAYS be constrained by certain limitations. He's a man; short-sighted, narrow-minded, and never able to look past himself to see the bigger picture.

After all, she snorted to herself, *<i>there's a CULTURE WAR going on, all around us. Hidden in every shed tear and nuance of interaction between women and THEIR OPPRESSORS.* Time would prove that Chloe was on the right side of history, but until then, she was determined to fight on no matter what the cost, or how much she had to sacrifice.

And she was absolutely prepared to sacrifice. It wouldn't be *<i>her*

making a sacrifice, of course—that would be foolish. Wasteful. She had a small but growing collection of willing tools; her father, the ignorant old man stuck in the past, and Brian, who she'd spent so long bending to her will. Soon, she'd break him like one does a thoroughbred horse, have him fully conditioned and ready to be what a real man should be. Luckily, his abusive parents had laid plenty of groundwork for Chloe.

<i>Yes, Brian was abused... if you can even still consider violence against men as real abuse, that is. What Brian failed to understand was how his abusive experiences with his parents, when put in proper perspective, actually TEMPERED him, made him into a better person. It served to reign in that neurotypical male aggressiveness—no matter how hard I pushed him, he never raised a hand against me. Naturally, when she'd brought that idea up with him, his fragile little male ego wasn't strong enough to look at it with detachment, and regard the positive concepts objectively.

Without a convention pass, the areas she could search for him were actually pretty limited, as badge checks were stationed at the entrances of all the events and panel rooms. She'd been making a long, careful circuit through the hallways, making a loop from the main lobby to the gaming hall and back again. She wore a bright, bubbly smile, but her eyes scanned back and forth in a cold way, *<i>searching.*

Finally—she saw him.

Saw that black bodysuit, those ridiculous cartoon skeleton bones he'd stenciled out, and the familiar stylized Darkmask helmet he'd spent a month oh-so-carefully assembling. A predatory smile had just begun to stretch across Chloe's face when the scattered attendees walking between them parted further, revealing the young woman with pink hair walking close beside Brian.

<i>Who the fuck is that? A half-smile still frozen in place, Chloe's eyes danced venomously and her brow twitched, violent emotions trembling just beneath the skin. *<i>Brian, you're supposed to be alone, and miserable. The entire reason you're even HERE like this is to serve out your penance. Yet, here you are, walking with another girl.* The leather of her cute purse with the Magical Doll logo squeaked in protest as Chloe's clutching hand squeezed down in a crushing grip.

<i>Brian... you're being a very naughty boy.</i> All at once, the myriad distractions of the convention happening all around her seemed to fall away, and the target of her focus sharpened to cruel clarity. *<i>You're supposed to be sitting in time out, and instead, I catch you with your hand in the cookie jar? Oh, Brian.</i>*

She'd always known that, as a man, he'd never be able to fully appreciate the things she did for him. But, to see *<i>this?</i>* To see him take everything she did for him, and then just flagrantly disregard her hard work? To just piss their bright future away, and for what? *<i>Her?</i>*

Chloe understood the pink-haired girl next to Brian completely at a single glance. *<i>Dyes her hair to show off how UNIQUE and ARTISTIC she is. Wears—what, half a cosplay?—that her ass is practically hanging out of, because she's that desperate for attention. Probably has quirky tattoos, boasts being POLYAMOROUS, and undoubtedly has taken miles of dick from anyone and everyone who will fuck her.</i>* Chloe hadn't seen the girl's face yet, but, then again, she didn't have to. She *<i>knew.</i>*

<i>All that hard work, grooming Brian into the perfect boyfriend he's meant to be, almost ruined. I can't stress enough how IRRITATING it is that males are such biological simpletons. A single week goes by without my careful cultivation, and already he's starting to go fallow. Reverting to his crude, baser instincts, so that he can stumble, drooling, after the first art hipster THOT to clap her flabby asscheeks in his direction.</i>

Brian, you must have thought that we're really broken up for good,</i> Chloe smirked, eyes flashing. *<i>That this means you can cheat on me, without consequence or repercussions; that you're in the clear. You're so cute and naive. I was the one who initiated our break—because I knew it would be good for you—and I decide when our break's over. You're MY boyfriend. You belong to me.</i>*

Then, a brilliant opportunity presented itself, and Chloe's moment to act came. Brian pulled away from the pink-haired girl, pushing into the overcrowded Mana: the Mastery room, while the pink-haired girl waited patiently for him outside.

<i>Hah. Brainless fucking bimbo isn't paying attention at all,</i> Chloe smiled with glee. *<i>All I have to do is make it seem like I came walking out from the direction of the gaming room, and...</i>*

<center>• • •</center>

"Uh, *<i>hi!</i>*" A bright, chipper-sounding voice sounded out, yanking Stephanie from her daydreams. A tall, slender figure in a Magical Doll Himari was standing before her. The stylized white Japanese school-uniform with its blue sailor fuku and micro-skirt was dazzling, and the way the girl was flanked on either side by her own mega twintails, each curled into enormous regal ringlets, was somewhat intimidating. "Are you here with a guy named *<i>Brian?</i>*"

"Um, ah—yes!" Stephanie nodded, standing up straighter.

“Thank goodness,” the Himari seemed to sigh in relief. “He’s helping someone unload stuff for the panel, and he wanted *me* to ask *you* to go meet him, at the loading docks behind the convention center.”

“Uh... loading docks?” Stephanie repeated, momentarily bewildered.

“Yep! You just go outside the convention center, and then all the way ‘round the building to the back, and there’s the loading docks,” Himari smiled sweetly, giving her a friendly wave as she turned away. “Better hurry though, you don’t want to miss him! B~ye!”

Brian wants me to meet him... at the loading docks? Suddenly anxious, Stephanie wanted to really confirm that with the Magical Doll Himari who’d relayed the message, but the girl was already walking away at a brisk pace, like she had somewhere else to be. *I’d... better hurry!*

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When Brian stepped out of the Mana: the Mastery room, that long tiled brick of the planter just outside was empty. Shucking his helmet off, he looked right and then left, scanning through the crowds to spot Stephanie, but she was gone.

Probably just had to visit the restroom, Brian thought, chiding himself for feeling so unsettled by her absence. He stepped over to the planter to wait for her, slipping off his gauntlets and retrieving his phone from his belt pouches. There were no new messages, but the Hero Hero Haruki meetup over in the main lobby was going to begin fairly soon.

Nervously glancing over towards the restrooms, he fidgeted with his phone. For some silly reason, it felt like something was wrong, *off* somehow. The minutes seemed to stretch on, and the different cosplays making their way through the hall seemed less distracting as time went by. A pair of Tamashi ninjas from Shinobi Souls, loudly arguing with each other while wearing smiling faces. An annoyed-looking wasteland raider from Fist of the Seventh Scar. A Magical Doll Himari, face turned away from him as she passed by. No Stephanie.

He was beginning to seriously worry.

Maybe she ran into her friend Megan? Or, Kelly needed her for... something? Glancing at his phone was frustrating, but at the same time, messaging her to check on her seemed kind of awkward. *Not like she has to answer to me, or anything. I’m just...*

“Hey, could I get a picture with you here real quick?” A passing group of three friends asked, one of them approaching him with a cell-phone raised.

“Yeah, sure,” Brian answered, carefully setting his phone on the planter and hurriedly pulling his gloves back on.

“Awesome Skulfie,” one of the guys praised as he accepted his friend’s phone to take a shot of them.

Donning his helmet again, Brian posed—an action shot, made to seem like he was in the midst of punching the guy, who obligingly twisted his body and contorted his mouth in open surprise, hands flailing out.

“Bad. *Ass.*” The friend nodded as he took the shot. “Check it out, bro.” He turned the phone for them to see. It looked pretty spectacular, aside from a bright blonde pigtail from one of the nearby Magical Doll cosplayers, visible in the edge of the shot.

“Hey, thanks for the picture man, you look great,” the grinning guy clapped Brian on the shoulder.

“Yeah, no problem,” Brian replied. As the trio of friends headed off on their way down the hall, he looked back and forth for the familiar pink and red of Stephanie in each direction before trudging back over to his spot along the planter. He looked down, confused, and then took off his helmet, searching the floor, and then the decorative mulch in the planter itself.

His phone was gone.

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Hurrying along through the crowds as fast as she could without knocking into anyone, Stephanie made her way through one of the pairs of double-doors on one end of the lobby and out of the convention center. It was a little scary to be doing this all on her own. But, Brian was waiting for her, and so she was walking with purpose, red vinyl boots tapping forward with determination and the skirt of her sundress swaying with every step.

It was bright outside, and she found herself constantly surprised by how *busy* the convention was. Everywhere she went there seemed to be something new going on, cosplay photoshoots and meet-ups occurring around every corner. It was all so much fun, more fun than she’d had in years because she felt like she belonged—especially when she was walking with Brian. It’d been so long since she felt like she had a place with somebody that she didn’t think she’d ever be able to give it up.

When she left the small plaza in front of AnimeCon’s concourse and the groups of people began to thin out, however, a sense of discomfort began to grow. The convention center ended the next concourse over, which advertised a *trade show, conference and networking event for business owners and entrepreneurs,* which hadn’t begun yet, and then, past it, was... a sports bar and a restaurant at the corner of the intersection. *I’m supposed to go... out, and around the building?*

Wait. There it is. Between the convention center and the bar, there was a small paved access point—not quite large enough to be a street, but also not really narrow enough for her to consider an alleyway. She hesitated in the entrance. *Am I... allowed in here?*

There were no sidewalk or landscaping to speak of, no signs or fliers hung up, and nothing like the storefront display windows that were prominent along this area of the city. Just a single lane of pavement, cinder-block walls reaching up several stories on one side, brick rising up on the other. Although it looked like a long stretch, she couldn’t see very far in, as one side was marked by evenly spaced dumpsters, piles of pallets, and small loading bays for the various adjacent establishments opposite the convention.

<i>Brian must be waiting for me,</i> she thought, urging herself forward. She felt uneasy hearing the echo of her nervous footfalls travel down the narrow drive, and then a little ashamed. *<i>He said he was proud of me, for how brave I am. If anyone, um, says that I'm not supposed to be here... I'll just explain, and then turn around. There's nothing to be afraid of, and I'm not going to get in trou—</i>*

"Damn girl, wassup?" An abrupt voice called out from a doorway alcove of one the back entrances to those businesses along the row.

Jumping, Stephanie whirled to discover a guy in a white undershirt and jeans giving her a little wave. He had short, unkempt hair buzzed to a fade along the sides, cheeks stubbled with five o'clock shadow, and held a cigarette between his fingers.

"Uh... hi," Stephanie squeaked out in a quiet voice, returning his small wave and starting to walk faster.

"Hey, you gotta minute?" The voice called after her. "Hey, girl!"

She turned and waved again, too frightened to speak, but she didn't stop walking, briskly making her way further on down the access lane.

<i>It's scary,</i> Stephanie thought wistfully as she marched on down the alleyway in search of the loading docks. *<i>All of this is scary. Adventure. Going out here by myself. Thinking about sex. Falling in love. It's all so frightening, but at the same time... I think I want it so bad that it doesn't matter. Even if I'm in over my head. Except, that also makes it matter even MORE, at the same time.</i>*

There was a pink flame inside her mind that burned hotter and brighter the more she thought about Brian, a scorching blaze that cast light on the darkest recesses of her mind. A certain repressed memory had been slowly revealed once again, and Stephanie was having trouble turning her thoughts away from it now.

<i>I never thought I'd feel this way,</i> she smiled to herself. *<i>I never even imagined. I think this is it; I think he's the one. Anything can work out, because it's him. He's... he's the stone beneath the water.</i>*

Years and years ago, a younger, bolder Stephanie had bravely parted the sun-soaked grass of the meadow they called the Sea of Cats, which, without her glasses, was a blur of long, dried grass blown indistinct by a steady, noiseless wind. Alongside the rear of that empty field was a wide creek of muddy brown water, shaded by the canopies of trees that grew up along its steep opposite bank.

The creek was in many places deeper than she was tall, but she'd always donned her bathing suit to join Ben and Jess playing in the shallows every summer. Only, now everything had fallen apart, and Ben and Jess wouldn't be going swimming with her anymore. Determined to have more fun than ever just to spite them—to splash as much as she pleased, and not have anyone competing with her for the good jumping spot—this was the young blonde-haired Stephanie's first time venturing to the creek completely alone.

Leaving the meadow a vague glow of sunshine behind her, Stephanie's bare feet *<i>schlugged</i>* through the mud of the creek bank and into the cool water. Beneath the tall

old trees now, it seemed darker than she'd remembered. Scarier. She stubbornly splashed the surface of the water back and forth with her hands as she entered to make some noise and movement, anything to distract herself from the eerie silence of this little curve of creek.

Submersing herself completely with a quick dip of her entire body, Stephanie then swam in earnest to the opposite side, where the bend of the creek took on more depth. This deep side of the creek had a steep, messy embankment of clay muck and exposed roots from the nearest giant sycamore. Grabbing the familiar roots jutting out, Stephanie clambered up them, planted her feet against the thick one, and kicked off, jumping down into the water.

It wasn't a game, really—just something fun they'd done as children. Climbing up out of the water, and then launching themselves back in for the biggest splash they could make. Or rather, it should have been fun, but now she was on her own. Whenever the splash subsided, that creepy stillness to everything returned, reminding her that she was alone.

<i>Their loss!</i> She persisted on, spending half an hour trying to convince herself of just how much she was enjoying herself. She'd practically tired herself out in her bobbing movements swimming through the water back towards the jumping spot... when she mistimed a gulp for air, and began to drown.

Stephanie would always remember choking on the water, her eyes squeezed shut and legs kicking blindly beneath her through the murky water in growing terror. She remembered sinking down, remembered feeling her strength ebb away as she flailed, fighting to put her face back above the surface, struggling for a breath with burning lungs—and remembered being sure that she would die.

Then, by pure accident, she found it. Her foot encountered an edge of submerged rock that jutted up, unseen, from the bottom of the creekbed. With the last of her waning energy, she finally managed to balance herself standing upon it and rest herself, her lips now just barely above the water. That frantic hysteria gripping her had seemed to slowly disappear into the leisurely flow of the creek around her, replaced with an unforgettably surreal sense of calm after all of that wild thrashing.

She survived only by luck, by the grace of that hidden stone within the brown water of the creek bottom. The children all knew about it— it was that same exact outcropping everyone avoided swimming near, for fear of accidentally kicking their delicate feet into it and smashing their toes bloody.

<i>As apt an analogy as any for my personal situation,</i> Stephanie decided with a subdued smile. <i>Shying away from interaction, when it's what I needed to really save me. To make me... ME, again. Drowning in fear and anxiety for years, afraid to do anything on my own, afraid to reach out... well, it's not EXACTLY like that experience of panic back then... but in so many ways, it's worse, isn't it?</i>

For several long minutes, the wall of the enormous convention center seemed to simply stretch on and on and on. Feeling her shoulders fill with tension, and afraid to turn back around to see if that guy had followed her, she finally made her way out, to—

Another city street. Stephanie blinked in confusion. *<i>Where are the loading docks on the convention center's side? Did I go the wrong way?</i>* She turned and looked back, feeling a little lost and out of place. Her hotel hadn't been in this direction, so she'd never been anywhere over this way before. She was also a little hesitant to go back through and past that creepy guy, again.

<i>I'll just... message Brian.</i> Taking a deep breath, she withdrew her phone and flicked over to her address book, selecting Brian's name. With several long pauses, timidly biting her lip, she managed to tap her message in.

<blockquote>

Stephanie_Brandt: I got a little lost, trying to find the loading docks. Where do I go to get there?

</blockquote>

Standing there for a few moments, feeling silly and a little stupid, she glanced back the way she came again. *<i>Well... no matter what, I know that THIS isn't the right way. If he gives me directions, it'll be starting from where I was, or the lobby, or the plaza in front.</i>*

She walked quickly back into the access road, vowing not to slow down or stop. Surely that man had been an employee of one of those shops, just stepping out for a short break. She probably wasn't going to walk past him again, anyways. Stephanie was just nearing the area where that particular alcove would come into view when her phone sounded off. Stopping dead in her tracks, she scrambled to quickly unlock her phone again to see what Brian had said in reply.

<blockquote>

Don't ever fucking talk to me

Blocking you now

</blockquote>

<i>What?</i> She reread his words again in disbelief, eyes jittering over the tiny letters as if she hadn't assembled them into the correct syllables, the correct words in her head. The brave little pink flame that'd been dancing inside of her all weekend snuffed out, and the inside of her mind went black with anxiety and self-doubt. She read it again. *<i>He couldn't have—</i>*

<blockquote>

Don't ever fucking talk to me

Blocking you now

</blockquote>

<i>What? Did I...? Was there...?</i> Stephanie felt her eyes begin to sting, and her throat seemed to start closing up. An entire perfect world of hope and wonder was breaking, crumbling and crashing down all around her, and she stood frozen, helpless to stop it. Unable to understand. *<i>There has to be—this has to be a mistake. This can't... Why would...?</i>*

Her mind raced in a blur, attempting to play back those last moments she'd spent with Brian for any hint, any clue, but her thoughts careened and collided incomprehensibly and

then mired in raw terror, getting her nowhere. She choked out a small sob *<i>I can't go back, now. I can't. I can't I can't I can't— </i>*

Just when she was about to lose everything to a panic attack, right when that black maw was about to swallow her up—the tiny distant speck of a distant star became visible in the now dark depths of her mind, twinkling red.

<i>Kelly!</i> Stephanie remembered, steadying her feet. She'd been so close to giving up on everything that she'd almost fallen to her knees. *<i>Kelly will know what's going on. What to do. She'll know how to fix this. Kelly. Kelly.</i>*

Lurching forward again, Stephanie had never felt so terrified and on edge before. It *<i>hurt,</i>* it was a crushing force was clamping down on her breath, and her thoughts were skittering in errant, useless circles as her entire mind was thrown into disarray. It felt like parts of her were breaking. *<i>Kelly. Kelly can—</i>*

"See, Kenny? I fucken told you," That man from before interrupted her thoughts.

There were two of them now, that first one with the short hair and buzzed sides, and then an enormous lunk of a man wearing an enormous jersey and a hat. He was overweight even for a big guy, and had heavy, hooded eyes that made his glance towards her seem indifferent.

"Hey girl, c'mon in and sit with us for a bit," the first one invited. "Here for that anime convention in town? I *<i>/love</i>* anime."

"I-I have to go," Stephanie managed, feeling frazzled but continuing forward.

"Yeah, but you don't have to go *<i>right this minute,</i>*" he argued, taking a step towards the direction she was walking to cut her off. "I ain't *<i>stoppin' you</i>* from goin' anywhere, just come chill with us for a second, first."

"N-no, I..." She jerked to a halt, alarm bells going off throughout her head. *<i>No. No, no. No no no.</i>*

"Just for a l'il bit," the man promised, taking a step forward. "You tryin' to smoke? Come smoke with us, girl. Kenny, show her inside."

"No, th-thank you, no, I-I was jus—"

"You look *<i>good,</i>* girl," the guy said. He wasn't leering, or seeming to even appraise her. Despite the cheer in his voice, his eyes seemed... *<i>angry.</i>* Apathetic. Annoyed, and the dissonance made the dread clawing up inside her surge out. "Come inside, come chill with us for a l'il while."

<i>This can't be happening. This can't be happening. This can't be happening.</i>

Stephanie stumbled backwards from the man in panic, and someone grabbed her arms.

"We'll treat you right. Relax, girl," the bigger man said from behind her. "Don't say nothin', and you won't get hurt."