

Outside AceHigh

AceHigh sounds bubbly today.

Buddleia stands a little way outside the gates. Looking, listening, wondering, and contemplating. It's the most variable town. The most dangerous, though often the most interesting. You never know what you'll get, here.

Foaming suds ooze between the planks of the walls, and rainbow-gleaming bubbles float upwards, spiralling in the wind. It feels more like champagne than laundry, though; tinkling laughter and the fizzing scent of expensive parties.

"Coming to visit?"

A Joker is standing a few yards away, watching her. Smooth dark hair, smooth dark face, stylish hat and tailored suit. Eyes glowing green, tigerish grin.

Will you walk into my parlour, said the spider to the fly.

Her eyes skim across him for a moment, not meeting his, just a quick *I see you*. "No thank you," calm and quiet, polite but uninvolved. "I don't play Games."

Buddleia has years of practice at this. The impersonal sidestep, weaving through the crowd untouched; the inoffensive refusal allowed in civilized society to allow different people to interact and get along - or just coexist and ignore each other - without stirring up trouble.

The soft answer which turneth away wrath.

Usually.

His smile grows a little. "Dear me. Whoever said anything about Games?" he asks, stepping nearer. "I don't seem to recall showing you any Cards, not even so much as inviting you to pick a number."

A slightly longer look. More alert now, verging on wary, expression flattening. Still level, "Not playing *your* Games."

He circles in towards her, ostentatiously looking her up and down. "Ah. How interesting. Why are you here, then? Perhaps you came to meet somebody, hm? Or is there something you're looking for? Something you want?" Coming in closer, close enough to touch.

She isn't just standing there listening, no; but she isn't frozen with fear or preparing to fight or turning to run away, either, nothing so entertaining. If anything, Buddleia seems rather *boring* somehow; being so quiet, so detached, so uninvolved. She is just standing there, being simply a face in the crowd, not worth noticing, not worth the trouble to pay attention to.

She isn't even turning to look at him when he goes around behind her.

He sighs, reproachful. "You're no fun."

No response beyond a tiny curl of smile, not quite sufficiently suppressed; it shows in her eyes too. But she knows better than to say out loud, *that's the idea*.

It shows in his eyes, too. That predatory gleam of smile takes on a new angle, reassessing. Regrouping. "Nevertheless I am delighted to make your acquaintance," he purrs. "Meeting a charming young lady will always brighten the day."

He reaches for her hand, bows to plant a courtly kiss upon her fingers. "Perhaps you might honour me with your name?"

She frowns slightly, hand sliding free before he can take any further liberties.

"Or might you be interested in spending some time here? There are so many diverting sights to see, so many amusing people to meet. I do wonder why you came."

Brown eyes flick across the Joker's face again, still not meeting green. Thoughtful. She's met far worse, but he is rather persistent. Maybe yielding him a token victory would help - or maybe the first slip will be seized upon.

A feint, then, testing the waters. "I could tell you," she bids. "But why?"

The tiger is pretending to be a kitten. Altogether too many teeth in his smile, in his voice. "Ooh, how exciting. Offering to trade now, are we?"

Come out and play, little mousy...

"I could tell you, and then you could stop trying to ..." her head tilts and her fingers ripple as she tries to find the best word for it, "... *engage me like this*." It's not a very exciting proposal, is it. But it's the most she's said, the best she's offered yet.

"*Engagement?* Goodness me. We have only just *met*, my dear, I wasn't thinking that far ahead." But he's - not losing, just - not yet winning. And also losing interest. And now she's tendered a contract; all he can do is accept or refuse.

And although nobody likes to lose, few Jokers would refuse.

They eye each other.

He nods slightly, conceding. He *could* raise the stakes ... but it hardly seems worth it.

Not enough fun.

She nods too, stepping away with a perfunctory twitch of smile, the disconnection-signal of a surface social transaction. "*Ninety-nine percent chance of Cake*," over her shoulder, blandly, as she walks past him and on into AceHigh.

A minute after her footsteps crunch-tinkle-pop-fizz and fade into the mixture of all the interesting background noises of the town of the Jokers, one of the wallguards tosses a Coin. Another rolls his eyes and hands over his stake. That wasn't much of a game, was it. Hardly entertaining at all.

"Told you," the nearer one calls down.

The Joker shoots him a dirty look. "Yes," he allows.

"She won't play."

"No."

A pause, the two of them turning back to look out to the jungles, from above and from below.

"Not yet," muttered.

Silent grins from both, eyes gleaming.

(Buddleia storylogs: goo.gl/2mZieS)

(Template link: goo.gl/rbiug7)

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