


Spider Dance

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He felt nervous and silly and he really shouldn't have. It was recursive. He ought to feel like an ordinary person doing an ordinary thing. It was weird as hell but it was, in fact, ordinary. They had a lot of really powerful magical people helping them fight this war, and gods too, so there were a lot of extremely weird, extremely ordinary things going on. But he *couldn't* feel ordinary about it, and that was super weird.

Well, he was tired. He didn't have to make sense. He just wandered through the subterranean maze of halls until he saw someone he wasn't embarrassed of. That took five minutes, tops, and only because they had way more space than people.

"Hey, hey, Kurt? Is Diane around? I mean, in?"

The boy gave him a big smile, though it was cracking and exhausted around the edges. "Love and a nap, huh?"

Mordecai ducked his head aside and shrugged. "Yeah, I guess. I've only got a couple hours and I'll never get to sleep otherwise... Well, you know how it is."

"Pssht. Lucky. I'm jealous."

Mordecai hesitated. Kurt always put up a brave front and hid instead of asking for help when he needed it. It was a real problem, one he sympathized with. Men, even very young men, learned to put up walls and had no idea when or how to let them down again. "Hey, listen, if you'd rather grab a bite to eat..."

Kurt snickered and gave him a gentle shove. "Nah, you've got the time and I don't. Hurry up and take it. I think I saw her by the kitchen, just don't wear out our spider-girl."

Mordecai scolded with a finger, "Now, that's our first coloured Prime Minister you're talking about."

"War changes people," Kurt replied, with mock gravity that Mordecai didn't think was really mock. It was like a parfait of sarcasm with that boy. Sometimes Mordecai wanted to adopt him.

Eh, but he thought that about all of them. He'd sort of adopted them already. "Hey, Kurt, when you have a minute, eat something, okay?"

The boy laughed and saluted him. "Yeah, all right, 'Dad.'"

Mordecai turned quickly to hide the wince. He never should have told her about that, but it wasn't like he could help it. She hadn't meant to tell either, he was sure of that; she knew how he felt about his failed revolution and all things associated, and she tried very hard to keep *everyone's* secrets and be kind. It was just... It was weird. It was weird, and she was a very sweet and helpful person, but she couldn't help passing information between them like a plague vector. And he meant that in the nicest possible way!

If this siege went on much longer they were going to form a hive mind like a goddamned horror movie, but that was not her fault. ...Well, okay, it would be *totally* her fault, and she would be their demon queen, but she didn't mean it that way.

He sighed and made his way towards the kitchen to tell her the gods alone knew what other humiliatingly private thing.

But love and a nap was worth it.

Their first coloured Prime Minister turned around with a peanut butter sandwich crammed in her mouth, like a dog with a squeaky toy. "Hnuh?"

He folded his arms and leaned casually against the stainless-steel counter with an ironic expression. "Oh. Uh-huh. You made that one yourself?"

"You seemed busy," she replied, mouth full. "I checked."

"Well, now I'm unbusy, but I only have a couple hours. You have a minute to knock me out, or do you only have eyes for sandwich?" He opened his arms, not quite for a hug, more like offering a virgin to a volcano. "I promise I won't resist."

She licked her fingers. "What? Love and a nap?"

"You have something else in mind?"

She regarded him for a moment. She just loved to tease him like that. At last, she casually shrugged. "Honestly, no. But I have some time and I'd like to sleep too. Can I ride your elevator down?"

He bowed. "My tasty brain chemicals are at your service, Jungle Vampire."

She regarded him again. He shrivelled just slightly, embarrassed, but he tried to hide it.

"You've got a real fetish for women who could squash you like a fly," she said curiously.

“Yeah, well, you’ve got crunchy peanut butter on your chin.”

She wiped her chin with the back of her hand and checked it for edible peanut pieces. There was one and she licked it up.

“You,” he said, “I mean, you were, like, a civilized human being when this whole mess started, weren’t you? Shrimp forks and cloth napkins and all that? What the hell happened?”

He touched a hand to his mouth. He didn’t mean to swear at her. She wouldn’t be offended, there was that, but on the other hand it was rude. He didn’t want her to think that... that he thought she was the sort of person he ought to be rude to. Or that he was a rude person. Honestly, much of the time he was still very polite! Especially to ladies!

Now, now, not necessarily in a *sexual* way, but on the other hand, not with a *total absence* of... of...

Oh, gods, he was being weird again.

“People aren’t pointing cameras in my face all the time anymore,” she replied with a shrug. “Unobserved by the conservative coalition, I’m going feral. And jumping in and out of animals all the time sure doesn’t help. They have no shame. Want to take advantage of it?”

“Hell yeah,” he said. They liked to say that. The kids. They all said that. But he’d once again managed to make a normal thing weird by feeling nervous and silly about it. He turned his head aside.

She ignored it, or she didn’t care, and dragged him by the hand.

The semi-modern warren of doors and corridors that lie beneath the faux-medieval wall had a repeating pattern like a cheap cartoon background. There were cells separated by fire doors that could be quickly sealed, and a lot of redundancy. If one section became unusable — gas, fire or a cave-in — you could seal it off and use another. For instance, they had one “kitchen” and ten decentralized storerooms that could be *turned into* kitchens, if you moved things around. That meant a lot of empty space for their skeleton crew of Southies. It wasn’t too hard to find a private bunk with room enough for two if they squeezed. They drew the curtain around it in case anyone else came in.

If they were going to sleep they had to get undressed. Partially. Nobody was going to zip themselves into a pair of feetie jammies in the middle of a siege, but a person needed to be somewhat more comfortable to go unconscious. That was... That was like science!

Boots and coats had to go, obviously. Mordecai froze up sitting on the edge of the bunk and staring at his wool socks. He felt there was something deeply unsexy about going to bed in a pair of wool socks and he wasn't sure if he ought to take them off or not.

"Leave the socks on, it's cold," she said.

When he glanced back at her, he saw she had removed her skirt and was folding it over the back of a chair. "Oh, gods, Diane, your *legs!*"

She didn't even look back at him. "What? Don't I still have two of them?"

She certainly did. They were clad only in a set of grey ribbed tights and he could see every last curve, including the total lack of a panty line. Ladies' underwear was at a premium these days, the starcatchers were more concerned with finding food and medical supplies.

"I just wanted to sleep!" he cried.

"So do I," she said, "and I'm not going to bed in that split skirt *de merde*. They don't make you wear anything that stupid, you don't know how it is. Is the fact that I have two legs going to stop you from sleeping somehow?"

"Listen, listen, I can't read your mind, okay?" he said. "Remember? Your interface is magical, but I'm analog. I have to look at what you're doing and guess. People... Normal people... *Other* people do things to signal their intentions without having to say what they want, and when you do things like tell me to keep my socks on and take your skirt off, I get very confused. Okay? That's what this is. You are freaking me out, Diane."

She snickered. "Yes. I see."

"This... This is... I am a man, you are a woman, and I have eyes. You are not being fair, you have to warn a person!"

She folded her arms with a sigh. "Look, whatever you need, but I just wanted to sleep and you said that was what *you* wanted. Have you changed your mind or not? Call it."

He was often at war with himself and she could see it. She treated him like a coin flip. He had to land and inform her with certainty which side was up.

But he couldn't do that yet.

"Do... Do you ever think of me like that?" he said weakly.

"I have noticed you have two legs on more than one occasion, yes."

He shook his head. "Please, Diane. This isn't funny to me. Not... Not right now. I'm tired."

She knelt on the bed. "I don't think like you think and you don't think like I think. We've been over it, Morph. Do you *need* me to think like you think?"

He sat on the edge, looking away. "I feel differently about you. It's not casual. I get it into my head that you don't love me and then I don't want to anymore. I know you don't understand. I only sort of understand it myself, and I'm the one feeling it."

"I do love you," she said, but with exasperation like she didn't want to. "But we only have a little time and I'm tired too. I need to know what you need to feel happy and get to sleep, because *I* want to feel happy and get to sleep. I asked if you'd let me use you that way. Is that not okay anymore?"

He was starting to feel like less of a man and more of a bedtime snack. In another life, he would've said, *no, it's not okay anymore. I'm going to the movies, don't wait up.*

But that wasn't fair, and that wasn't the person he wanted to be.

"I am trying very hard, Diane. Could you just hold me for a little? Like... Like you care?"

She put her arm around his shoulders and took his hand. "I care."

He could feel her around the edges, being gentle, even though she could knock him over whenever she wanted. She had a hand inside and she was brushing against the controls they both knew were there. She was trying to work out what was okay without asking, but it made him feel like a weird new kind of car that needs to be seduced before you start it up.

I'm sorry, he thought. He knew she could see it. *My mind's in a bad place — because of you, no NOT because of you! I'm not trying to hurt you, I'm just hurt. If you want any fun out of me, you've got to mop up this goddamn puddle of stress, and it's not fair.*

(Hey, stop. You don't have to say it for me. It doesn't have to be words. I see.)

I know that, and you knew you were getting involved with an uptight control freak who needs to state things exactly or else even he doesn't know what the hell he thinks. Okay? He winced. Gods, I'm sorry.

"Shh," she said. She kissed his cheek and rested her head on his shoulder. "I can't mop it up if you keep trying to hide it so it won't hurt me, Morph. Do you need to hash this out talking, or can I fake it?"

He shook his head, eyes stubbornly closed. "Don't listen to the other side of me, if you don't fake it, I won't get any rest at all. For gods' sakes, crush my will and shut up my brain."

She snickered and tipped up his chin so he'd look at her. "I know your two sides fight each other and get mad, but I like both of you and I don't want to hurt either. Please remember our racist stoplight, but you don't have to make it racist if you don't want." She showed him an imaginary stoplight in plaid, polka dot and stripes.

He smiled at her and took both her hands. "I do love you, but I've spent my whole life in the city, you sweet, privileged creature. If you get me beyond verbal, I will not be able to give you a plaid stoplight. You know how I am, anyway." He took back one red hand and showed her both sides. "I'm not going to pretend red doesn't mean stop."

She pointed to her blue face with both index fingers. "But I'm not sad!"

He grinned. "But if you wear red, *I'll* be blue."

She pounced and hugged him around the waist.

He sighed. It was like sinking into a hot bath. Or *being* sunk, because he didn't have any control over how fast, or how hot. She knew him well enough by now that she hardly ever made him shriek "ow!" and jump out anymore. And he trusted her — to be fair, it was hard not to trust her. If she still liked him after all she knew, she had to be a beautiful person.

He was inclined to think something less-than-flattering about himself by way of a compliment to her (...or a masochist...?), and she guided his hand away like he'd almost knocked a hairdryer in the tub. He laughed a little — *Okay, okay* — and sank into it passively, drifting. It was safe and secure and utterly nonjudgmental. Pure, mutual affection. Love.

Chemicals. Fake.

(Shh.)

She had learned every curve and quirk and kink in him and she wouldn't be able to give him this perfect experience if she didn't love him.

Like she knew he needed a logical excuse to latch onto so he felt safe to let go. True?

Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah. Yes it is.

He curled up, holding her, and he felt her, distantly, drawing the blanket over them both. She could send him to sleep in an instant, with sweet dreams, but she knew he wanted more. Craved the sensation of drowning. There was nothing so relaxing as being utterly incapable of being the responsible guy in charge.

(Ha. I'm so heavy.)

Do you just not want to rule the world? Is that why you don't already?

(I can't love the world. I'd rather rule you.)

Ahh...

He pictured himself served up with a side of drawn butter, a baked potato and a sprig of parsley.

(You and your cooking metaphors. Can't we have a song?)

Cut me deeper, I bleed music.

(Tortured poet.)

Pleased poet. He tensed and hissed, trying not to moan.

(Oh, I see.) She undid the buttons of his shirt — he let her — brushed the locket aside, and rested her head and a hand on his chest.

Oh, gods, you always know. I'm... I'm...

He couldn't even *picture* an apology. She'd hidden it. He barely even had the *concept*. Just enough memory to know she could idly scramble him however she wanted.

Mmmm. Um. You know. Thing. Oh, gods, please don't make me forget the number four again, I really need that and I...

He didn't know what he'd been saying and he didn't care. It was as if she'd closed his mouth with a kiss, but so much more fundamental. Oh, well, nevermind the other thing, let's do this forever. Yay.

(You couldn't get away if you wanted. I could make you not want to get away. You're really stuck. If I want to put you on like a suit and walk you into the dining hall right now with no clothes on, I can. And I'd make you like it.)

Ahh, ah, Oh, crap. Yellow. Yellow, please don't ever do that for real, I'll dieee...

...but can we just pretend you will for a couple seconds? Oh, make me believe it...

Ah! No! Red! Green! Crap!

She snickered aloud and sat up again. "Okay, I like the cute little pathetic one. He's like a hamster, I'd feed him peanuts all night long. But they're both you, so you have to reconcile."

He groaned and hauled himself upright, leaning hard on one elbow. He had to catch his breath. “Okay. Okay. Let me think for real. No more shell games with my intellect. Just for a sec.”

She nodded.

He rubbed his eyes with a hand and blew out a long sigh. “Okay. That’s sexy to me because it feels dangerous, but it’s too scary. You could really do it and I don’t like that. I *do*, but it’s more scary than fun. Did I kill the mood?”

She shooed a hand as if she were holding open a door for him. “I don’t have the same moods. Sort yourself out and I’ll devour you however you like. I’m in it for the sheer joy. You’re the amusement park, what rides are open?”

He paused, looking aside, embarrassed, for only a moment. “The naughty ones.”

She smiled. “Okay. Inside or out?”

He looked pained. “You really don’t care if...?” He lifted a hand and didn’t quite dare to touch her. He knew she didn’t mind him *touching* her, but she didn’t need it the same way. He put his hand under the blanket and looked away again. “I love you very much and I never want to make you do anything you don’t want, but you must understand, this goes against everything I know about being a good lover and a gentleman.”

She brayed laughter and covered her mouth with both hands. “It’s not funny! I mean, it’s not funny like I don’t take you seriously or care about your feelings, I swear.” She was still laughing, with tears welling in her eyes. “It’s not you. It’s not! It’s the whole *concept*. This... This is... I *told* you, it’s like I’m an astronaut on an alien planet where the natives express their love by going into a dark room and sneezing together. It’s just so... It’s so *silly*! I know how you mean it — it’s really sweet — I can sneeze with the best of ‘em, but I’m only trying to speak your language so you understand. Oh, *mes dieux*, I’d just as soon go to the movies with you — but all the theatres are smoking craters in the ground! Woo-hoo, 3-D effects!”

Cackling helplessly, she waved her hand in his face to stave off any objection, and hopefully any offence. “No, I know it’s... I know this is really rude of me, I know it’s important, *love* is important, but it’s like being at a funeral...” She stifled a shriek, clapping a hand to her mouth and shaking her head. “No, no. I don’t want to, ha, ha, I don’t want to *bury your sexuality alive*. Oh, oh, talk about a mood-killer! Your poor widdle feewings! No! Like *needing to laugh* at a funeral. Ah! It’s worse because I’m not supposed to and I can’t hold it. I really can’t.” She wiped her eyes with her sleeve. “I’m really sorry. Honestly.”

He smiled weakly, shaking his head. It really wasn’t her fault. Hysteria of all kinds came so much easier when you were just so damn tired all the time. He was sort of glad it was laughter, that hurt a little less. He scooted closer and put an arm around her to help hold her up. “I can’t help

but keep asking. I really can't. Are you sure it's not just that nobody's ever figured out how to make you sneeze in a way you'd like? Even me. I wouldn't be offended."

She smiled, sniffled and kissed his cheek. "You know what I like."

"Would you rather do that instead?"

"Too," she replied. "I like making you happy like you like making me happy, I won't take that away from you. So in or out?"

"Oh," he said, with a blush. "Oh, well, not that I don't love a hard bunk and an itchy military blanket and knowing we might have to stop at any moment because they're shelling us again, but if it's all the same to you, let's do in."

She lay down again, beside him, and patted the pillow, inviting. "Sure."

It wasn't full dark, just the yellowish black and faint visual noise of closed eyes. He could still feel himself holding them closed for her, her arms around him and the bed beneath.

(Slow, or you want me to snap you like a twig?)

Ha, ha, ha. Oh, man. A snippet of old, crackling film, but with the actors swapped out. He was swooning in a greyscale jungle treehouse. The silent dialog popped up on a decorative black background: *You Tarzan, me Jane.*

(Nah.) A different movie. She scaled a skyscraper and swatted at the airplanes while holding him securely in the palm of her hand. Caption: *Rawr.*

Now you're speaking my language, baby. He swapped that out with the Creature from the Black Lagoon, wading into the water with a fainted frail man in its arms. Caption: *The beast will drown him by inches. A hideous death. Poor man.*

Oh, he shouldn't have said it that way. It was like cold water, trickling in. He was trapped below decks and the boat was sinking. He couldn't move. He was going numb and losing even the *memory* of where he really was, one inch at a time.

Ah, oh, no. Yes. It's okay. Green.

(Count me down.)

'Kay. He shut his eyes, or they were already shut. It seemed darker. He went slow. *Ten... nine... Eek...* He could lose himself in this sensation, it was like standing in the tide at the beach. Deep water. Being drawn out. Caution: Severe Undertow.

He had to speed up because he couldn't stand it.

And he wanted it.

Eight, seven, six... He had to strain and hold his head up to breathe at all. *Ahh. Ahh... Five...* So cold. *Um... Thing?* He didn't know. He was supposed to be saying something. He was right in the middle of... *Something? Um. Um. I don't know. Can't remember, mmm, feels nice...*

There was an air pocket here and she let him up just enough to remember that this was just a little joke they had.

Oh, goddammit, Di...

He tried to draw a breath and his mind filled with dark water.

(Bonne nuit, Morph.)

He was exposed. More naked than a human being could be. She saw every inch of him like he was under a microscope, glued to a slide. Not just what she was doing to him physically, but every thought, every emotion, every sensation. Every memory stretching back into childhood, the building blocks of desire from times before he had any idea sex itself might be something he wanted. All the fumbling and searching done in solitude with fantasy women from movies and magazines. Every perversion he'd collected and held close and secret. She filed through them like a pack of cards, and it made him feel so damn small and dirty.

Thoughts swam like a fever. He didn't have enough mind left to remember before or after. This sweaty moment stretched out like taffy. She'd given him just enough autonomy to remember his hellish petri dish had an escape hatch and he could pull the release whenever he wanted...

But he knew she knew he didn't want it. Couldn't. He knew she knew why. She saw him.

She was taking notes on him. Detached and clinical. Like a scientist. He could almost smell the disinfectant and rubber gloves. He was an experiment and she could run him however she liked. She had a wire in his brain, a glowing hot wire, and she turned up the electricity. She made him feel...

Oh, gods, so sexual. Like not even a human being. A dumb animal that only knew how to do what was next. A raw red nerve, twitching. A gun with her finger on the trigger, pulling slowly.

And so ashamed. He saw himself as if from a distance and couldn't do anything to stop or hide what he was doing, how he felt, what he wanted. He knew she saw and he wanted to shrivel to nothing and die.

Hmm. So what happens if we turn up the need to procreate and the inhibition as far as they go? Like switching on the central heat and the air conditioner and letting them fight it out. Would one of them win before they popped all the fuses and voided the lease?

He wanted to masturbate and couldn't. He *could*, she'd let him and watch him the whole time, with her damn notepad and rubber gloves. But he was mortified, *petrified* by being so out of control and driven like this. He was too embarrassed of wanting it — of her *making* him want it — to *do* it. It *ached*...

Oh, gods, let me, let me, make me, no don't make me, please don't make me, let me, let me, I need to, don't let me, make me, you have to make me...

(*Green?*) It was like she couldn't believe it.

Oh, gods, yes, green all over, polka dots. Stripes. Whatever you want — sexy, sexy scientist. Monster. Goddess! Bitch-Astronaut, how can you not want this? Why don't you come down to earth and roll around in the slime with the worms like me? I'm dying, I'm gonna die...

(*You like feeling like you're gonna die?*)

YES! Oh, gods, touch me. Touch me. You don't have to want me just touch me, I can't stand it. Drop the damn microscope and touch me. I need you. Please, please, please...

She knew what he wanted and she was mystified. All the wires were crossed and the fuses were blowing but he liked that. She'd sharpened him to a single point and there was no disagreement at all. She gave a mental shrug, wiped the steam off the lens of the microscope and said, (*No.*)

It was like he had a dial in there that went to eleven, but it was secret. You had to rack it to ten and keep going, even though it resisted and made noises like it was breaking. Then it clicked into place, everything lit up in hearts and rainbows and the whole system crashed.

Happily.

You are so beautiful. Please blow my fucking brains out.

Well, she knew how. Everything outside had cut out when she followed him to sleep, but she had direct access. Unseen — while he writhed in the boiling bath she'd thrown him into — she opened an access panel, pulled down a welder's mask and twisted some wires.

He felt his hand go down without asking, felt every instant of it with zero control. She had all the control, the wire in his brain, and she moved him.

She saw him and if he said stop and meant it she would... but she didn't have to and he wallowed in knowing that. The safest, most horrifying unsafe sensation possible. No control, out of control, but *controlled*. Held safe. A horror flick with involuntary suspension of disbelief, and a girlfriend in the seat beside him, feeding him sexy popcorn.

She watched him, curious, and he watched her watching him like some kind of sick freak, but she didn't mind. Utterly nonjudgmental.

Love.

It was almost an anticlimax. A sliver of cheesecake after the best meal of his life.

But if anyone had tried to get between him and it, he would've stabbed them to death with the fork and eaten without even taking a second to wipe the blood off his hands.

So good.

She let him up just enough to feel like a human being with a will of his own — he didn't know where they were or what they were hiding from but he knew they were safe — and she held him. After a little while, he tried moving and found he could hold her too. He snuggled close, but he didn't bother to open his eyes. He was tired in a good way now. Thinking was hard and this was rest.

Still, he couldn't help clawing his way back slowly, to be with her. She let him try, she wanted him to learn how to fight her — honestly! — but it was like watching a fly tread soup. Eventually she just reached in with a spoon and got him.

He seemed grateful and a little disappointed to be deposited on a napkin and allowed to dry out.

Oh, gods. That's like bitter dark chocolate. You're the best fake scientist ever.

She snickered. A fly drowning in *chocolate* instead of split pea. No wonder he liked it!

"Do you really take notes?"

"Not on paper. But I'm curious about you."

"You're studying me."

"All the time. I love you."

He squeezed her. "Do you do that for anyone else?"

Now she laughed. She gave him the image of a fancy aristocrat plucking a hair off her salad fork. "Hey, what's this jealousy doing in my sheer joy?"

He sat up and looked at her. It was dark all around, but he could see her. "That's not all it is. I'm curious about you too."

"Another person wouldn't want what you want," she hedged.

"I get bitter dark chocolate and Kurt gets a strawberry sundae and Janice gets a candy apple or some damn thing?"

She pushed back from him to look at him. "You can't possibly want me to be faithful. You have sex with other people too."

"But you don't *want* sex with me." He shook his head. "I mean, not like you're not willing to do it. I need to do sex with someone who needs me to do sex back to her. It's supposed to go both ways. I'm used to it."

"And I'm fine with letting you, so why can't you let me?"

"Because I want it to mean something!" He put a hand over his mouth to shut it. He drew a slow breath and tried again, "I shouldn't have said bitter dark chocolate, it's not like a candy bar. If you do that to people, they're going to want to spend the rest of their lives with you just so you'll *keep* doing it. But that's not where *I'm* coming from... I... I..." He grabbed her, harder than he meant to, then took back his hands and folded them away. "You aren't just contributing to the war effort, you are toying with emotions you don't seem to understand. You see what people are thinking all the time, how do you not get this?"

"Seeing it isn't the same as feeling it," she said. "I'm not you. I can splash around in your chemicals, but your feelings aren't my feelings. I have my own."

"Do you feel *anything* when you do that to me?"

"Of course I do! It's like..."

He was standing in the kitchen, surrounded by heaped dishes, with flour dusting his clothes and a chunk of butter clinging to his hair. He'd knocked himself out making a total mess of everything to produce her favourite cake in the whole wide world, in the middle of a siege. Frosted and decorated and everything. He cut her a slice and served it with a flourish. She ate a single bite, slowed chewing and groaned with pleasure. She devoured the slice, licked the plate and cut another.

“Hey...”

She snarled and threatened him with the knife. “You get between me and this cake and I will end you.”

He laughed, backed away with his hands up, and watched her eating with a smile.

He nodded and sighed. “I’m glad I made you so happy and I’m proud of myself and it’s really sweet, but this is not unsexy to me, Diane. It’s probably the sexiest thing you’ve ever wanted me to do to you, so maybe it’s like a substitution. I wouldn’t feel like that if I made a cake for a friend, even a friend I have sex with, but there is another dimension I feel with you. It’s more. I-I am head-over-heels, butterflies and puppy dogs for you, and that changes everything.”

She shook her head and laid her hand on his chest, over his heart. “I feel the same.”

He shouldn’t have said that and she shouldn’t have either. But he still couldn’t sort out if she’d said it because she was so much in love she was as stupid as him or because she just didn’t get it. He didn’t even know if she really understood how *he* meant it. It ached, and not the fun kind of ache that promised satisfaction. This had been hurting ever since he said “I love you,” and she laughed and reciprocated like it was so fun they both liked hot dogs with mustard. It was awesome that it didn’t matter — he couldn’t put up walls against the danger when she *saw no danger* — but it was also... awful.

“You feel it but you don’t differentiate,” he said. “You love everyone. You don’t even prefer boys over girls.”

“I prefer you.”

“You prefer Seth, too, would you do to him what you did to me?”

“Oh.” She shook her head. “Never. He likes his privacy, he’d hate that, but that’s not what you mean.”

“No. If he *wouldn’t* hate it? What do *you* feel?”

She put her head in her hands, pressing the heels of her palms over her eyes. “I can’t help knowing he likes sneezing in dark rooms like the rest of you aliens, but I wouldn’t want to see it happen, let alone do it with him. I can differentiate, there are some people I wouldn’t have sex with. I know it can be casual or romantic or off limits. With you, it’s romantic. Head-over-heels, puppy flies and butter dogs. I’m not just saying what you want to hear because I know on some level you *don’t* want to hear this, but I’m as stupid as you are. Now I can’t even tell myself you still want it to be over when the war is.”

She picked up her head and glared at him. "You wanna talk walls? You have slipped through every barrier I tried to put between us like this is a heist movie and I've got the diamonds. I wouldn't have set all those damn traps in the first place if I didn't think you were special, but you never believed me. Do you believe me now? Did I pass your test? Do you feel special?"

He winced. "I feel like a dumb son of a bitch with all the wrong priorities. You're in love with this idiot?"

She laughed weakly.

He put both arms around her and held her close. "I'm so sorry, but I'm not sorry, and I want to hold you and keep you safe like it really is a movie and I'm the hero. I wish I could. But more than anything, I wish I hadn't kept prying. I don't have that right. You just wanted to sleep. Now we're stuck..." He regarded the featureless darkness around them. "Oh, darn, I've just gone lucid."

He pushed back from her and noted the gold ball gown, her favourite dress. A dead giveaway. "Please tell me I haven't been having this extremely important conversation stark naked, or as a sex worm on a wire."

She smiled. "You always put your suit on, like I have my dress. I was picturing you as a fly in soup for a little bit, but it wasn't on purpose and I quit it when you wanted to talk. I don't want to be mean."

"Oh, of course," he said, with the same half-laughing embarrassment that slipped through when he was blushing in real life. "Well, thank you very much. Mind if I take a minute and fix the creepy black void?" He could do that. She could do anything, but he couldn't get out of his own head. She was, by necessity, sleeping over at his place. He put the stars in the sky. Their stars.

She cooed and applauded.

"Want to be in a heist movie?" He changed his default grey suit for a black tuxedo and drew her near. He posed with her like a poster, and a dramatic spotlight hit them. "Go to a casino and spend those diamonds?" He hung a sign in the near distance, it said CASINO in blinking lights. Beneath it was a door with a small handwritten note: *I've never been in a real casino (sorry!), you're going to have to help me imagine it.*

She laughed. "No, no. I prefer the simple things in life."

"Yes. I can tell by the dress."

She brushed at the gleaming fabric and adjusted her tiara. "Listen, this has sentimental value. It's the closest thing I'll ever have to a wedding dress, and I quite enjoy being married to Estelle."

“Okay, for real this time,” he said. “I’m not being jealous, I’m being curious. Does she have any idea that’s how you feel?”

“Oh.” She shrugged. “I don’t need much and I don’t want to make it weird. We read all the same books and write lovely letters and when I go visit Jake, we get our hair done together!”

“You and your brother do?”

She swatted him. “Silly. And when we’re both really excited,” she beamed, “like when Sprite got into college, we grab each other’s hands and go ‘eeee!’ You can even do that over the phone! It’s so fun! You know?”

“I know the thing,” he said, “I have seen it, but it is not a thing men do.”

She regarded him, frowning.

“Prime Minister, are you standing there with infinite possible fantasies available to you and wishing I’d grab your hands and go,” one could almost hear the quote marks, “‘eee’?”

“Do you need to be a woman?” she said. “I can make you a woman.”

He sighed and smiled bravely. “If it’s really what you want, but you’ll have to make me forget I’m a man.”

She seemed to consider it for a moment, but she shook her head. She buried her face in his shoulder, eyes closed. “No, I don’t want to make you forget anything. Not even, like, long division, so you have to come yell at me to put it back when you notice. I want to be with you. Just not in the middle of this stupid war.”

He made his best guess and put a park background behind them, with birds and sun. It came off a bit like a matte painted theatre backdrop. He supposed he was ready to yank it back into the flies if she wanted a change of scene. “Do you want to play or is holding you enough?”

“It would be more than enough if it were real, but I can’t forget what’s going on out there. Will you help me trick my brain into giving me the good stuff?”

He stroked her hand, or what seemed to be a hand. “However you like.”

She smiled at him. “Ow, I hurt my hand.”

“Oh. Don’t worry, ma’am.” He changed into a white coat, with a prop stethoscope hanging out of the pocket. “I’m a doctor. Let me see...”

“A mean lady bit me,” she added, pouting.

He examined her hand, walking careful fingers along the palm. “These look like the teeth marks of a lovely, intelligent woman. But I’m sure it was an accident.”

“No, totally my fault.” She grinned.

“Well, let’s see what I can do to make it... My dear, it’s hard to get near you without stepping on the sentimental dress. Can you change?”

She was instantly in a simple housedress with a flowered apron. She frowned at it. “No. What’s a random doctor doing in my house? That’s...”

He approved of the setting. There would be ice and bandages and chicken soup and a soft bed. Whatever she wanted. He’d make her one of those silly aspic salads with fruit. He drew a kitchen with cute plaid curtains in the window around them. “Maybe you’re married to him,” he said with a smile.

She laughed. “My husband, the doctor, comes into the kitchen and says ‘don’t worry, ma’am, I’m a doctor’? Does he have a head injury?”

He brushed her cheek and tipped his forehead against hers. “Maybe he’s teasing you because he just loves to see you smile.”

She did smile. Painfully. It became an open sob, and her eyes spilled over tears. “Red.”

The scene was dyed in the colour like someone had snapped on all the warning lights, and then it was gone.

It wasn’t so bad being a sideshow freak, really. She had this great tank, with a three-hundred-sixty degree view, and she could see all the people. They didn’t notice her looking, they didn’t think she could do that. She could watch them pick their noses, or adjust their underwear, or look at dirty magazines. She could watch them play music, or paint pictures, or make wishes. She could watch them hold hands and kiss and fall in love. Or out of love. Big sweeping dramas and little bitty absurdities. Situation comedies, horror shows, romances, political thrillers. New genres she’d never even thought about, or every kind of story all at once.

Sometimes, very rarely, she even saw another freak. She let them pass in silent acknowledgement, she didn’t like to make them feel weird. Even so, she never met a freak as freaky as her! She’d been afraid of that for a long time, but now she’d decided to help out around the circus, and the people didn’t mind. She put a great big sign over her tank in blinking lights: SEE THE LIVING OCTOPUS WOMAN! IT’S ALMOST HUMAN! And they came to visit!

She was proud of that.

It was a pretty sweet gig. She'd developed a little show for the people, they liked to see a little show. A smile, a wave, a pat on the head for the kids. She'd do some sleight of hand and pick their pockets, but she always gave everything back. She was a friendly monster! Some of the people didn't like her, or they were scared. They'd just leave. The nice ones would smile and applaud and put money in her tip jar.

Then they'd leave too.

It was weird, sure, but she didn't know any other way to be. Only by proxy, watching the people. That wasn't for her; she wasn't like them. She couldn't be sad about it. She didn't know *how* to be sad about it. She liked who she was and she wouldn't want to be anyone else. It was sadder when she saw the people being sad, like sitting in a theatre with a box of popcorn on one side and a box of tissues on the other. She'd try to cheer them up, she liked happy endings. It usually worked!

At least for a little while. Until they left.

This red guy in a blue soldier's coat came up to have a look at her. She liked the contrast, she thought he was cute. She did her show for him and ended with an extra loop-de-loop in the tank. Ta-da!

He tapped on the glass and said something. He had to repeat it a couple times before she made it out. *Do you like me?*

She laughed. Sure! She liked all the people! She did her act for him again.

He was frowning at her. *I don't understand.*

She stared at him through the glass. Huh? What was there to understand? She was weird and cute. The end. Did he need to see something else? She tried a few variations on the theme. A little song, a little dance. She didn't know where she found the top hat and cane. Well, what about that?

He shook his head at her, but he didn't leave.

She was starting to think that... Maybe she didn't *want* him to leave? He was too weird. This wasn't how people were supposed to act.

She threw herself into it. She did stuff she didn't even know how to do. Wagnerian opera. Stand-up comedy. Water-skiing. Art criticism. Juggling flaming batons. Celebrity impressions. Yoga. Puppet shows with the tentacles. Panting, exhausted, she stared at him. Well?!

He tapped on the glass again. She squinted to make out what he was saying. *Do you love me?*

She surfaced and screamed it at him, "YES!"

He was frowning again. "I don't understand you and I'm not even going to try. The important thing is, you've hurt my feelings."

He dumped her entire tip jar into his coat pocket and walked away.

(No, no, no, no. Please. I'm sorry. Please come back. Please. I'm sorry...)

She had both hands clamped over her face and she couldn't take them down. Sobbing. "Don't go, don't go, don't go. Who do you want me to be? Who do you want...?"

(Oh, please, Morph. I'm here. I'm sorry. Shh...)

Huh?

She took down her hands, shaking, and saw...

Me?

She reached out to touch what had to be a reflection. The mirror image clasped her hand, warm.

Why... Why are my hands red?

He broke down in tears again and clutched his hands against his head. "Oh, gods, I'm the bastard who stole all your tips!"

She held him, rocked with him. "No, no, no. You didn't. I just... It's just how I feel..."

He recoiled from her, shuddering. It was too close, but it didn't make any difference. You couldn't unscramble an egg. Someone had thrown two different flavours of ice cream into his blender and hit "purée."

"Don't you tell me how I feel!" he accused. "I know *exactly* how I feel! I am a permanent strawberry banana milkshake, and if you think that means I like myself, you are sadly mistaken! I hope you like being married to me, because I am *never* going to get you out of my head! Ever!"

She began to cry.

He cringed. He clasped his shaking hands together, so they wouldn't hurt anyone. *I hit you?*

He remembered the sting of the slap. It had knocked all his preconceived notions of a relationship right out of him. He suddenly realized he had no idea what he was doing.

You hit me?

Then why are you crying?

Oh. Right. It's because I'm a bad person.

Self-loathing was the magic word. He couldn't hate her that way. Instead of a scrambled egg or a milkshake, he had two sorted decks of cards in his head. He'd shuffled them backwards, apart instead of together, like reversing the film. Oh. See? Those ones have red backs and those ones have blue backs. Simple. Now let's put them back in their boxes and never do that card trick ever again.

He shook his head, scolding himself with a sigh. No. That wasn't the problem.

It wasn't a trick that they couldn't pull off, it was a stress-induced failure that might happen at any time during the show. She'd had an anxiety attack right in the middle of asking, "Is this your card?" and sprayed both decks all the hell over the place so *nobody* knew whose card was whose. Maybe if there wasn't a war, if they both weren't so tired and near to hysteria all the time, maybe she'd be a better artist and he a better assistant.

Or maybe not, but he didn't care. After a few moments of mutual panic, he'd always been able to sort through the pile and pull himself together again. Their act was absolutely spectacular, totally worth it. He didn't mind an occasional, mild, inconvenient total loss of identity. Honestly. He was already ready to try again, but only if she wanted to.

He wondered if that ever happened with the others, if he upset her because he was special, but he knew not to ask. It hurt her that he always had to ask. He wished she'd felt secure enough to tell him that in regular human words, but he knew why she didn't.

He reached out carefully. She only cried harder when he touched her, but he didn't pull away. "I didn't mean that. I know I hurt you, but I barely even remember what I said. I wasn't myself."

She moaned.

"No, no," he said, too cheerfully. "I've got it sorted now. I know who I am. I'm the guy who tried to say 'I'm in love with you' and fell flat on his face so hard he knocked you over too."

He took her hand and walked his fingers along the palm like before, offering to soothe a pain she could no longer pretend was physical. It still helped to touch, it made her brain let her have some of the good stuff. But it wasn't fake or a trick or even a shortcut. She was magical, he was analog. No better or worse, just different.

"You don't have to perform for me," he said, "and if I ever have to leave you, it'll be because I get shot or *you* tell me to go. Not because you lost me by not being good enough. This is not about my feelings right now. I'm listening. I understand."

"You *can't*," she said.

He held her tighter. "I'm really sorry. I know you didn't mean to give me what I have, but I can't help but understand. I thought you couldn't possibly be serious about me because I tried to overthrow the government and you *are* the government. Okay? That's how dumb I am. The brain thing didn't even enter into it. The sex thing did, a little bit, but not anywhere near as much as class and politics. You were never a sideshow freak to me, you were a wealthy, sophisticated *politician* freak. I thought that had to be how you felt too.

"I was not listening. You are not wrong about that. I couldn't hear you over the noise of how different we are, and how hard it would be to stay with you.

"I should never have tried to play being married. You said your favourite dress was the closest thing to a wedding dress you'd ever have, and I wasn't listening then either. I don't know what to do about us. I don't even know if we're going to live through this. But I do know you deserve better than pretending you're married to your brother's wife. If I could make promises right now, I would promise to give you more than that myself."

"Ow," she said softly. "I hurt my heart."

He nodded. "Can I do anything to make it better?"

"Hold me like you care."

"I care."

He cradled her head, held her hand and nestled his cheek in her hair. She smelled like talcum powder, the ladies used that for dry shampoo — anything to feel a little more normal and human while the world was falling to pieces. He regarded the faded grey curtains around them and tried as hard as he could to work it out for himself, without asking. But he just couldn't do it.

He leaned closed and whispered it in her ear, "I'm so sorry, dear. Are you getting that rest you need already, or do you need to go back to sleep? My waking life has gotten very weird these days and I honestly can't tell."

“It’s real,” she said, muffled by his shirt.

He squeezed her. “It’s all real. Just close your eyes. If you want me to stay out here and hold you, I will, or you can knock me out whenever you like. All right?”

She snuggled closer with a sigh.

Later, he didn’t know how much later, Alba drew the curtain aside and peeked in. She saw him with his shirt undone and wrinkled trousers that probably needed changing if he wanted to be decent, and their first coloured Prime Minister glommed onto his chest. She snickered and smiled. “There you are. We need sugar. Can you pull yourself together?”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, Alba. I’ve got wounded here. Can we have a little more time?”

She signed him a thumbs up, then patted her belly under the oversized coat. “Me and Erik’ll cover for you.”

“Thank you.”

Diane reached up and covered his eyes with her hand. “Sleep with me.”

“Sure,” he said.

It all went black.

The story continues at soldier-on.com!