



# Snowed In With My Orc Ex-Lover (Monster Men of Pigeonpond #1)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Back in my hometown, trapped in a blizzard with the orc who broke my heart.

Vanessa: I knew returning to my magical hometown of Pigeonbrook would bring back memories, but Torwood is one I'd truly like to forget. Unfortunately my grandma's taken a shine to him, and now Torwood is renting a room in the former inn she calls home.

I thought I would be back for just a few days, but when a blizzard brings record-breaking cold and a prolonged power outage, I have to find a way to exist under the same roof as the chiseled orc who I once loved. Oh god, is he taking off his shirt again?

Torwood: When Vanessa Greywick appears outside my door after ten years, I panic and slam it in her face. My first and only love is even more beautiful than I remember, and there's no use pushing down the feelings I tried for so long to forget.

**Total Pages (Source):** 12

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:46 am*

Vanessa

My life changed one snowy night in January.

I was returning home from a long day, my body feeling like a well-wrung rag, wanting nothing more than a shower and a mug of hot tea.

I was gunning for a promotion, but it felt like the management had me running in thankless circles.

I clicked the door to my apartment closed, and mused for the millionth time that I should have followed my heart and become a ballet teacher.

I set my keys down on the hall table, and realized that I had placed these same keys in that exact spot every day for the last five years.

There was even a light spot on the table, physical evidence of my miserable routine.

My phone began to buzz in my pocket.

My brow knit as I saw the name on the screen.

My brother hated calling, and never did it unless it was an emergency.

“Hey Ness,”

Tom said, as I brought the phone to my ear. “Sorry if it’s a bad time. I wish I was

calling under better circumstances.”

“Oh god, did Grandma die?”

I asked immediately. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, thoughts of this exact call pierced my brain like a spike of ice. Our mom’s mom, Shirley, was my last connection to my hometown of Pigeonpond, and the only family I still felt any real love for. My mother hadn’t been in our lives since she ran off with her minotaur coworker when I was eight, and Tom and my dad lived on the opposite coast.

Tom’s silence made my heart drop to my toes. “No,”

he said after a too-long moment. “But she’s not doing well. Apparently she fell pretty badly last month, but she’s refusing to stay off her feet. She was out walking with a neighbor today, and fell again. He caught her, but when he took her home he got dad’s number off the fridge, and called him, and he called me.”

“Fuck,”

I said, absorbing the information. “What did dad have to say?”

Tom laughed mirthlessly. “What do you expect? He said it’s long overdue that she goes to a home. That if she sold the house it would be enough for her to live on until she dies. I think he’s right, Ness. We need to go back, so we can arrange some care for her.”

I scoffed. “And I’m guessing he won’t do it because-”

“Because she’s our blood, not his. It’s not worth fighting him on this one.”

I wasn’t surprised our father had gone straight to Tom when he got the call.

Tom was always his little deputy, especially since he'd been taken on as a junior partner at our father's firm.

That, and he knew I wouldn't have taken his candy ass excuses.

I sighed, and looked around my apartment.

My assembled life here, all the clutter, the keepsakes, photos of friends, the world I'd built in the last ten years, had taken on a strange and unreal quality.

I felt like a kid again, sitting on the train out of Pigeonpond, looking back at the slate rooftops and shining lake for what I thought would be the last time.

A kid, now standing in the home of a stranger.

"I guess something like this was bound to happen eventually,"

I replied at last. "I just hope grandma is okay."

Tom didn't reply. After a moment of uncomfortable silence, I continued. "When do you get in?"

"I absolutely can't miss work tomorrow, but I've booked a flight for Saturday. Would you be able to fly tomorrow? I'll buy the ticket for you."

This is how Tom was. When his emotions failed, he filled the gaps with money.

"I can tell the company I have an emergency. They can do without me for a little while. That's what understudies are for."

We got off the phone, and Tom texted me the flight details.

I showered, made a quick dinner, and sent an explanatory email to my team lead and department head.

Then I began to pack.

What was Pigeonpond like in January? I tried to remember.

Like a dam breaking, images flooded my vision.

Pigeonpond in January was digging tunnels in snow banks with Tom and my dad, it was snowball fights with my mom, shaking ice out of our boots and drinking hot cocoa while our socks and gloves dried over the floor vent.

I shook my head. There was no use reminiscing like that. I hoped this would be a short visit.

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The following afternoon I was on the train for real.

I leaned my head against the cold window, watching the airport recede in the distance.

It was a couple hours on this line to the Pigeonpond Station stop.

I thought back to my youthful misadventures, I took a sweatshirt from my bag, balled it up, and placed it between my cheek and the glass, closing my eyes.

I had slept like shit the previous night, beset by memories of the town, of old friends, of old boyfriends.

After I'd left for college my brother and dad had moved out of Pigeonpond, and as far as I knew, hadn't been back.

I'd always been closer to Grandma Shirley, but my visits to her had dwindled, and then stopped entirely.

When she asked about it, I blamed the increasing demands of my job, but I knew better.

Pigeonpond was the last place my whole family had been together and happy.

As I got older I realized that the town was better as a rosy memory than a real place.

I just wanted to plow forward with my adult life in peace.

Lost in thought, my eyelids began to droop.

Maybe a quick twenty-minute nap would do me good.

Of course I didn't want Grandma Shirley to think I was anything less than thrilled to see her, even if it had been five or so years since I'd been back.

I wondered if she'd look the same.

How old was she now? Seventy...one? Seventy two? She had my mom when she was twenty five, and my mom had me when...

I fell deeply asleep.

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“Miss? Miss? I believe this is your stop.”

A gentle looking lizardfolk woman in a conductor’s uniform stood over me, shaking my shoulder gently. She pointed at the punched ticket on the seat beside me, as I got my bearings and looked around groggily. “Pigeonpond is your destination, yes? We’re here.”

“Uh, thank you. Sorry, yes. Thanks so much.”

I must have been more tired than I thought. The woman smiled and continued down the aisle as I retrieved my luggage from the overhead rack. Pigeonpond had one small train station on the west end of town, and looking out the window, it looked like very little had changed since I was last there.

In fact, as I slung my bag over my shoulder and rolled my luggage through the station and out to the street, I realized that I had changed much more than this town had in my absence.

Pigeonpond was never a bustling metropolis, but it was definitely an oddity for the region.

With a major university, a thriving arts scene, and a reputation as a great town for families of all races and backgrounds, it certainly punched above its weight.

While the adjacent hills and valleys were quilted with picturesque farmland, Pigeonpond was well-positioned at the edge of a long, deep lake which made it a destination for fishing and sailing, as well as a hub for freshwater merfolk culture and cuisine.

Every time I spoke about where I grew up, someone in the room would pipe up with a fond connection to the town: a bachelorette party wine tour around the lake,

childhood family vacations to a cottage on the water, or a family member who got their degree and settled down there.

For me, it was a place I left behind.

I thought about getting a taxi, but decided to walk to my grandmother's house.

It was only fifteen minutes away, and the sun was lovely.

My rolling suitcase rattled down the sidewalk, and the friendly faces of Pigeonpond smiled as I passed.

I found myself smiling back, heavy waves of nostalgia rolling through me.

There was the apartment building where my family used to live, across from the bridge where Tom and I used to drop rocks onto the frozen river and listen to the crack of the ice.

The small park, the scene of secret late-night meetings with my high school love.

That was so many years ago.

I wondered what he was up to now, that boy?

As sure as I was that he'd be long gone, I found myself furtively scanning the faces of people passing by, wondering if, by some galactically remote coincidence, he would be walking by this park and reminiscing about the same moment.

The thought filled me with warmth, then anxiety.

The boy had been nice, incredibly nice, but sneaking around and hiding ourselves

from my brother...the experience had made teenage Vanessa a nervous wreck.

I disregarded the thought, carrying on with my walk.

Wherever he was, I wished him well.

I took the scenic route towards my grandma's house, a paved path that ran next to the river.

Ice flows raced along with the current, and the sunlight sparkled like a disco ball on the water.

I wondered if kids still smoked pot by this river in the summer?

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Grandma Shirley's home had always been too big for her. My dad used to teasingly call it Chateau Shirley, much to my grandmother's amusement. Although not quite a mansion, it was a grand old Victorian home, with three generous floors full of large windows and winding hallways, and a dining room fit for a family of ten. That family had been Grandma's, but as her parents died and her siblings drifted away, she was left alone in the big house. Eventually, she made good on a childhood dream of turning that home into an inn, and the moment the ink dried on the liquor license she mounted a beautiful hand painted "Chateau Shirley"

sign over the wraparound porch. There were so many happy memories of sucking down lemonade on that porch, or chasing Tom around the legs of annoyed guests while Grandma told us to "slow down before we killed someone". I could almost hear her voice in my head.

The Chateau Shirley sign was gone, its metal hooks hanging empty from the roof

beam. I was pleased to see that the front walkway was well shoveled, and the exterior paint appeared fresh. Even the long icicles which hung over the porch had been knocked away for safety. One of the neighbors must have been helping her out. I clomped up the front steps as I had thousands of times before, inhaled, and swung the old metal door-knocker against the wood. After a few seconds I heard shuffling inside, then a clacking noise as the door unlatched and swung open.

“Why if it isn’t sweet Vanessa! Oh, it’s so good to see you,”

“Hi Grandma,”

I said, and bent to give her a hug. The skin on her cheeks hung lower and the roots of her auburn hair had gone a starker white in the years since I’d last seen her, but otherwise she was the same crotchety old woman I had always known and loved. I noticed a black medical boot on her left leg, but said nothing of it. Picking up my bags, I stepped over the threshold. The smell of the old house plucked a string deep inside me, filling me with thick nostalgia. The interior looked well-kempt, and I could hear music playing from a distant room. The former front desk, a gorgeous old mahogany thing that must have cost a fortune, sat where it always had to the left of the stairs.

As always, my grandmother’s runecraft skills were hard at work in making the house as cozy as possible. Candles, which I knew had ever-burning and levitation runes inscribed on their bases, floated lazily around the house, illuminating the soft corners and shining off the brass doorknobs and radiators. I could see back into the kitchen, where mugs and dishes were washing themselves, inscribed with gold filigree runes in Grandma’s loose handwriting. I knew there were less-obvious runes in place as well: wards against bad smells, sweetening on the tap water, cleaning and softening runes needlepointed into the linens. She had honed these skills during her years as an innkeeper, and they hadn’t faded with age.

“You look great, sweetheart,”

said Grandma Shirley. “I can hardly tell you just travelled for nine hours. You barely look like you’ve been traveling for eight,”

she teased, making me smile.

“Hey, I slept on the train. I nearly missed the stop, too. Do you have anything to eat?”

Being here was putting me straight back into “entitled grandchild”

mode. I headed for the kitchen, and was happy to see a bowl of pasta salad on the counter. I had a complicated relationship with pasta, but that didn’t stop me from shoveling some onto a plate and into my mouth.

“Wow. This is fantastic,”

I said. It was salty, tender, and loaded with fresh vegetables.

“Isn’t it?”

said Grandma Shirley. “My boarder makes it even better than John did.”

John, my late grandfather, had also been the inn’s cook in its heyday. “If only he had been around during those days, he would have turned the inn into an international destination!”

“Oh, I didn’t know you had a boarder. I was wondering who was clearing the snow and taking care of the house.”

Grandma Shirley began to respond, but was suddenly cut off.

An unbelievable, raucous noise clattered down through the ceiling from upstairs, like somebody stomping cans or maybe jumping on a pogo stick. No, not a pogo stick, because that up-and-down motion would have rhythm. This was more like something over our heads was going through death convulsions.

“Shit! What is that?”

I asked. I felt briefly self-conscious, but remembered that my grandmother had a dirtier mouth than even I did.

“That’s him, the one who’s been shoveling snow and doing maintenance,”

she replied. “Although yes, he sometimes makes noise like a fucking bulldozer.”

“Who is he?” I asked.

“Do you remember your brother’s friend Torwood? He’s been staying here for a month or so. Oh, he’s been so helpful, he shops, and he cleans, and...”

Whatever words came out of her mouth next were lost to me like bullets bouncing off an armored tank. Torwood couldn’t be here. He should have been off in some forest chopping down trees, or fighting fires in a distant city, or being scouted as the first orc male model in history. Instead, he was one floor above my head, making an unholy racket. The same Torwood, whose face I had been searching for by the park. That boy who was my brother’s best friend, the lanky teenager with whom I’d shared a forbidden kiss, and now the man who would be sleeping under the same roof as me for as long as I had to be here.

Was it too late to catch the next flight out?

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:46 am*

Vanessa

Stunned as I was, I was able to swallow my surprise and maneuver Grandma Shirley into the living room where we continued to catch up. I tried my best to focus on the conversation, but the damned bowling game going on upstairs kept wrenching my attention away from her, and back to him. What in the hell was he doing up there?

At long last, my grandmother seemed to tire of chatting and showed me to where I'd be staying on the first floor, a room overlooking the back garden which had always been a guest favorite. I dumped my stuff, noting the expansive closet and wardrobe, but chose to not unpack. What was the point, when I'd only be here for a short while? Sure, it was nice seeing my Grandma, and maybe the town itself was pleasant to return to, but I had a life. Soon, Grandma Shirley would have the help she needed, and I would get back to the city, leaving all this behind again. Leaving Torwood behind. God, I had to go talk to him, didn't I. It would be rude not to.

"Dear, I think I'm going to have a nap,"

Grandma Shirley said, once I had finished placing my things in the room.

"Sounds good, grandma. I'm gonna rest a bit too."

I leaned down and she kissed me on the forehead, then began to waddle towards her room. I noticed that she had carved what looked like a clever little anti-gravity rune on the boot she wore. I guess that was one way to keep the weight off while disobeying your doctor's "don't walk" orders.

I genuinely tried to rest, the tiredness catching up to me once again. But like clockwork, each time as my eyes closed and my consciousness began to drift towards sleep, the clatter from upstairs began anew. If anything, it sounded like it was getting louder. Wearily, I swung my socked feet out of the bed and trod towards the main stairs. There was no putting off the inevitable.

I followed the noise through the upstairs hallways until I found a closed door with an edge of light spilling out from below. I steeled myself, and knocked.

Nothing. I knocked again.

“One minute, Shirley,”

came a voice from within.

The door opened, and I was face to face with a wall of green.

Torwood had always been tall, but he hadn't always been wide. The man standing before me filled my vision completely, his shoulders disappearing beside the sides of the door frame. I moved my vision up from his muscle-bound chest, and was greeted by a bearded, chiseled face, tall horns, and pearl white tusks. What had not changed one bit was his eyes. Torwood always had the most beautiful golden eyes, which now met mine, and at once I was eighteen again. I was in the park. I was-

“Vanessa?” he said.

I came back to reality. His face was a picture of shock.

“What are you doing here?”

he continued.

“Uh, I just got in. I’m back in town for a bit. I’m helping out Shirley.”

Why did I suddenly feel self-conscious calling her Grandma? Surely the seven foot tall half-nude Adonis in green looking down at me had nothing to do with it.

Torwood was silent for a long moment. “I wasn’t told you would be coming,”

he said finally.

“Well, sorry. It was kind of an emergency. Tom just called me yesterday and told me that she fell. So I took the next flight out here. Tom’s getting here tomorrow. He didn’t call you?”

Torwood shook his head no.

“Sorry,”

I repeated. “Uh, anyways, how have you been? It’s been a long time,” I said.

Torwood just stared at me.

Then, like I wasn’t even there, he closed the door in my face. I stood at the threshold in stunned silence. Okay, I knew things were gonna be awkward, but what was this? I gathered myself, then turned back towards the stairs, shaking my head in disbelief.

Behind the door, the racket resumed. What was going on in there? My confusion started to burn away, replaced by a righteous anger. Anyways, who the hell did this guy think he was? He was shacking up in my grandmother’s house, answering doors shirtless, and making noise like he was trying to wake the dead. I spun on my heel and marched back to his door, pounding on it with a force I was sure would get through even his thick skull. He wrenched it back open.

“Yes?”

“I just wanted to ask if you’d also be able to keep your noise level down a bit. I’d really appreciate it.”

I spoke carefully, keeping my voice calm and level.

“I apologize. I did not mean to upset you,” he said.

“I’m not upset. I’m just letting you know that it’s affecting the rest of the house.”

“It’s clear that I’ve angered you. I will stop,”

he continued. My temper flared twice as hot, and my facade began to slip. Was he trying to provoke me?

“I’m not angry. It’s just— for your information dude, both my grandmother and I are trying to rest right now. Whatever you’ve got going on up here, you’re keeping the whole neighborhood awake.”

“Once again, I apologize. I won’t keep you any longer,”

he said, and moved to close the door once more. I stuck my foot against it, refusing to let it be shut in my face again.

I felt an old, familiar feeling well up in me: I was about to say something I was gonna regret.

“What are you even doing here Torwood? I thought you never wanted to see me again. I don’t get it. Are you trying to get your name on my grandma’s will or something?”

He looked taken aback. I pressed further. “What’s your angle here, Torwood?”

“Your grandmother needs care, and neither you nor Tom were present. I do not have an angle,”

he snarled the last word.

“And you’re the one caring for her? Where were you when she fell, huh?”

He finished closing the door, pushing me back with it. I stumbled, then stalked back downstairs, fuming. What was I expecting after all these years, a happy reunion? I thought time would have healed some wounds, but I guess I was wrong.

His reappearance in my life, acting like a grump and living under my grandmother’s roof, was a disruption I wasn’t going to tolerate. This guy would not fuck with me any more. Teenage Vanessa was gone. Adult Vanessa was mature, she was self-assured, she was no longer under the spell of his golden eyes and big hands and soft lips. The ten years I spent not thinking about the orc who broke my heart were not about to disappear.

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That night, snow began to fall. As soon as the sun set, a thick blanket of clouds moved in from the south, bringing with them what Pigeonponders called “pigeon shit”, snow so wet and dense that it clumped together in heavy balls and quickly carpeted every surface. My sunlit stroll that afternoon was a distant memory, as the world outside the windows became a curtain of white.

The snow kept falling as I went to sleep, it was still falling when I got up for a glass of water in the middle of the night, and it had barely slowed down when I woke up. God, I had forgotten how Pigeonpond could dump historic amounts of snow like it

was nothing.

I got dressed and poked my head out of the room. It was quite cold in here, I thought, wishing I had brought my slippers. Floating candles bobbed around the hallways, leading me to the front of the house, where I heard commotion. I felt my mouth twist into an expression of distaste when I walked in on Torwood feeding logs to the old hearth that dominated the front sitting room. Blessedly, he was wearing a shirt this time.

If he heard me enter the room, he said nothing. I stood behind him and prepared to clear my throat, thinking of a way to ask him why he was making a fire while fully communicating my discomfort with his presence, when he spoke: “The power has gone out for most of the town. The front door is packed with snow and will not open. If you had any plans for today, they are cancelled. Your grandmother is in the kitchen.”

My stomach twisted. Did he mean we were trapped here? Did he mean that, until the snow was clear, I had to stay here with him? Certainly it wasn't true.

“Did you push the door hard?”

I asked, immediately regretting how stupid the question sounded.

He stood and turned towards me. It was the first time I had seen his full figure without the obstruction of a half-closed door, and it confirmed that the man was truly huge. His shoulders strained against his button-down shirt, framing a vast expanse of chest and a neck like a tree trunk. I wondered how wide I would have to hold my arms to wrap around his neck to hug him, or maybe to strangle him.

“Yes,”

he replied. “I pushed hard.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:46 am*

Torwood

“Surprise surprise, Tom just texted me that his flight was cancelled. Probably a good thing, I bet the roads are murder,”

said Vanessa. She was sitting at the kitchen table with Shirley, nursing a cup of tea and trying to get a news story about the weather to load on her cell phone. I stood at the counter, preparing ingredients for a hearth-cooked lunch. She had not looked at me since stalking out of the living room, not that I much blamed her. I had never known how to act around Vanessa. Even when we were teenagers I always seemed to provoke her terribly.

Perhaps closing the door in her face yesterday wasn't the best idea, but what was I supposed to do when it felt like my heart would beat out of my chest if I had to look at her for one more moment? Her further accusations of manipulation and malintent had cut deep, but there was solace in the pain. I clung tightly to my anger over her comments, hoping that it would provide me the strength to keep away from her during her stay.

Oh gods, I didn't want to keep away. I wanted to wrap her tiny form within my arms. I wanted to kiss her all over, touch the curves of her body, smell her scent which I had dreamt of for ten long years. But no. For now, I would quell the burning in my chest and keep my distance.

“I'll be moving to the hearth to prepare lunch,”

I announced. I had assembled the ingredients for a simple meal of acorn squash,

broccoli, and beans. The squash was one I had nurtured for months in Shirley's greenhouse, and was excited to finally taste. I retrieved a large cast iron hearth skillet from the back of the pantry and hooked it to the metal arm which hung inside the hearth. The fire had burned down a little, and was the perfect height for cooking.

I carefully arranged the foil-wrapped squash halves, well-basted with butter, salt, and herbs, among the coals, then retrieved the broccoli and placed it in a mesh basket over the wide pot which we had used for tea. The broccoli steamed for several minutes, softening the woody stalks. I employed my mother's favorite test for doneness, of pinching a piece between my fingers and comparing the color of the vegetable to that of my skin. Seeing that it was sufficiently emerald, I placed the broccoli on the skillet and began spooning the melted garlic butter over the florets and stoked the fire with a hickory log, hoping to achieve a nice char.

Next, I poured the baked beans into a sturdy low pot, and reheated them over the coals. On a whim I retrieved a tub of molasses, and spooned a few dollops into the beans, mixing well. Feeling good about my improvisation, I returned to the kitchen and mixed a glaze of maple syrup, miso, and rice vinegar for the broccoli.

I was keenly aware of Vanessa's presence as I beat the ingredients together in a small jar. Although she remained chatting with Shirley, who was informing her about all the nefarious activities of her elderly friends, I felt the unmistakable prickly feeling of her gaze against my back as I prepared the meal. My heart began to thump again, and I made a hasty retreat back to the fire.

After glazing the broccoli, I moved it to a cooler corner of the hearth and unwrapped an acorn squash. It was deep yellow and orange, and had a beautifully sweet, earthy smell which mixed delightfully with the hickory wood and molasses aroma of the beans. I found three earthenware plates, and portioned a section of each dish onto them, salting everything generously. My return to the kitchen was greeted with sounds of delight from Shirley, and, I was deeply happy to see, a faint smile on

Vanessa's lips.

"Oh Torwood, you've outdone yourself,"

said Shirley.

"It's no trouble. I am always pleased at a chance to cook on your wonderful hearth,"

I replied, pulling a seat out for myself.

"No meat?"

asked Vanessa.

I paused. "Are you no longer a vegetarian?"

Vanessa snorted. "I haven't been one for years. What, are you?"

How could I tell her that I had been a vegetarian since she introduced me to the concept ten years ago. That I was ecstatic to share my vegetarian recipes with her, that whenever I prepared a new dish it was her mouth I would imagine eating it.

"I will find some meat to cook for our next meal,"

I replied, unable to answer her question.

I watched carefully as she cut a piece of the acorn squash, speared it on her fork, and placed it into her mouth. A wisp of steam escaped her lips as they closed around the food. Her eyes shot open. Before she could finish chewing the first bite, she was tearing again into the squash's flesh with her knife, clearly eager for more, before becoming aware of herself again and slowing, attempting to appear indifferent to the

food. I lowered my head so she would not see the blush that swept across my face.

Like a bull in a china shop, Shirley piped up and obliterated the delicate mood in the room. “Torwood, you cook like a fucking miracle!”

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An hour later, when we had finished the meal and I was wrapping up the dishes, my fingers numb from the frigid sink water, Vanessa stalked back into the kitchen and announced, “I’m making my famous banana bread!”

followed by some grumblings under her breath about “not the only cook in the house,”

and “anyone can make something good on a fire.”

I finished the dishes quickly, careful to ensure that she wouldn’t see me chuckle at her adorable display.

No, not adorable! She was insulting me. She hadn’t even thanked me for the meal, and now she was trying to upstage my cooking. That had to make me upset, right? I dredged up her words from our fight the previous night, the memory of the disgust in her voice fanning the small coal of anger in my chest. I embraced the fire, allowing it to drive me away from her.

I left the room quickly and I found an empty spot on the living room couch near Shirley while Vanessa rummaged around in the kitchen, hunting for the necessary bowls and ingredients.

“Thank you for doing the dishes dear, but you know they will take care of themselves, yes?”

said Shirley.

She asked me the same question most days, and I responded the same way: “Yes of course Shirley. It’s a task I don’t mind when I have the time. If you had your way, runecraft would handle all the tasks of this house, and you’d have no need for me anymore,” I teased.

Shirley swatted at me. “Oh you drama queen, don’t act like I’m putting you out of work. If I figure out runes that can cook as well as you can, or lose at card games, or be a lousy waltz partner, well then you should be worried.”

I chuckled, and we settled into a comfortable silence. After some minutes, Vanessa entered the room with a small foil-covered tin of what I could only assume was the beginnings of her famous banana bread. She shoved the package roughly into the coals, and sparks flared. She yelped, then withdrew her hand sharply, grasping at her palm.

Without thinking, I was on my feet and by her side. “Are you hurt?”

I asked, kneeling down to look at her hand. A quarter-sized circle of shiny red skin was forming on the side of her palm, where a coal had jumped from the fire and hit her.

“Oh, dear, was it a burn?”

asked Shirley.

“Yeah, but it’s...it’s not bad,”

said Vanessa, clearly wincing. She stood, ignoring me and still holding her palm in her other hand, and walked to the bathroom. I heard the tap open, and was happy in

the knowledge that the water was ice cold. I stood by the bathroom door, out of her eye line, unsure if I should offer help. She shut off the water, and I heard the mirror cabinet open, followed by a loud clattering.

“Fuck, fuck, fucker,”

she growled.

I moved into the doorway and saw that she had been attempting to wrap her palm, one end of the bandage held in her teeth and the other in her opposite hand, and in doing so had knocked the contents of the sink counter to the floor. I never came into this bathroom, as it would have been small for someone half my size, but I attempted to kneel and gather some of the items from the ground.

“I got it, it’s fine,”

said Vanessa. She attempted to keep wrapping her palm, but her other hand did not have a proper angle to manipulate the bandage. I stood, leaning back out of the doorway, then gently grabbed her forearm and pulled her in my direction. She looked up at me in surprise.

“You will not be able to wrap your burn properly like that. If it progressed to an infection, it would be extremely difficult for any emergency services to reach us. I will do it for you,”

I said. In that moment, seeing her hurt and struggling, the anger I had tried so hard to listen to was silent. All I felt was a deep need to protect this woman, to help her heal.

I retrieved an antibiotic cream from the cabinet and rubbed a measure of it into her burn. She winced despite my attempts at gentleness, but did not protest. I couldn’t help but notice how small her hands were in mine, my forefinger like a thick branch

supporting the fragile leaf of her palm.

By Gruumsh above, I was becoming overwhelmed. I tried to focus on the task with a clinical remove, but was caught up completely in her closeness. I was unable to stop looking up from her hand to her lips, imagining closing the distance and tasting her lips. My heart began to pound, and a familiar heat crept into my cheeks.

With every ounce of willpower I possessed, I refocused. I took the bandage from her, and passed it around her hand several times, before finally tying it off and severing it with one long claw. My voice caught in my throat as I spoke again.

“Please, uhm, be more careful. Cooking on the hearth can be quite dangerous.”

She had a strange look in her eyes. I expected her ire at that boneheadedly obvious comment, but it did not come. Instead she nodded at me, and returned to the living room. I cleaned up the remaining mess on the floor without complaint, hoping that neither the flush in my cheeks nor the scent of my pheromones were too noticeable. These were the exact kind of situations I needed to avoid.

“I think I need to lie down for a little,”

said Vanessa to her grandmother.

“Yes, of course dear. Take a rest, we’ll be here,”

Shirley replied.

Vanessa padded off to her room, while I returned to my seat on the couch, fit my reading glasses against my face, and opened my book, desperately seeking distraction.

“That was a very kind thing you did, Torwood.”

Shirley spoke only once Vanessa was out of earshot, oblivious to my reading. “My granddaughter has always had a temper, but she’s a wonderful person. I hope you’re not taking her coldness too much to heart.”

I put the book down. “I understand she is in a difficult situation. I’m sure she will be glad to leave here once the storm has passed. I can tell that my presence is causing her distress.”

“She’s been gone for ten years, and her last memories of this place were not very pleasant. Everything is causing her great distress,”

Shirley chuckled.

I considered this. “Well, I will give her the space that she requires. I do not have any need for her to like me, but I hope we can at least be neutral within this house.”

“Hah. Good luck with that,”

Shirley replied, wearing the mysteriously knowing expression that only elders can accomplish.

Thoughts of Vanessa swirled in my mind, and I found myself reading and rereading the same passages. After a while the fire burned low, and as I went to add more logs, I noticed that the banana bread was still nestled amongst the coals. I retrieved it, barely feeling the scorch of the metal through my thick skin. Unwrapping the foil, I was pleased to see that it was not burned, and in fact looked perfectly baked. I cut a slice with a generous coating of butter for Shirley, who ate it greedily.

“Not bad at all for a first effort,”

she said. “Why don’t you bring some to Vanessa? I’m sure she’d appreciate tasting the fruits of all her hard work.”

I had a mental image of Vanessa throwing a lamp at my head for having dared to wake her from her nap.

I plated another slice and headed to the back of the house, pausing outside her door.

After a moment’s consideration, I bent to leave the plate on the ground.

A noise, from inside.

A rustling of sheets.

A faint electrical buzz, perhaps? And then a sound that froze me in place.

It was a miracle I did not drop the plate in that moment.

Vanessa let out an unmistakable moan of pleasure, a long mew that she failed to stifle.

My brain told me to walk away immediately, that this was a violation of the worst kind, but my feet remained glued to the spot.

“...ohwood!”

her cry shaped into a word.

There was no way. Had Vanessa just moaned my name? I must have been hearing it wrong, surely it was something else, “so good”

perhaps.

My heart was racing.

The buzzing from beyond the door ceased, and I heard another rustling of fabric.

Quickly I placed the plate at the foot of her door and turned to leave.

As my brain began to resume its normal processing, I was aware that I was fully, painfully hard within my pants.

As if her mere proximity weren't enough, now I had this thought, those sounds in my head.

I retreated to the kitchen, thoughts swimming, hoping for a safe few minutes to allow my cock to calm.

I would have to take care of it tonight, and I knew what my fantasies would contain.

It would be far from the first time that I would cover myself in cum thinking of Vanessa, and it would certainly not be the last.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:46 am*

Vanessa

My hand hurt.

It had shifted from the sharp pain of the burn to a deep throbbing, which made it difficult to sleep.

I wanted to go find some ibuprofen, but the prospect of walking back through the house just felt impossible.

I replayed the last few hours in my head, and was surprised to notice that my mind kept returning to Torwood.

His huge form moving around the house, hunching through doorways to avoid knocking his horns, his hands moving quickly and precisely to prepare our lunch, his tiny reading glasses perched on his nose.

The smell of him, as he leaned in to bandage my hand, like wildflowers and summer sun and sweat, and something else.

A deeper scent.

I wanted in that moment to lean my face into his chest and inhale.

His hand on mine had been rough and huge, and I knew it could have crushed my own with a small slip, but he was almost impossibly gentle with me.

Did I want to fuck him? The thought thunderstruck me with how plainly obvious it was.

He was an asshole who had closed a door in my face, who could barely bother himself to speak to me in full sentences, but why did his closeness cause me to become so hot and dripping wet?

Was it our forbidden past love, or was it just because he was an orc twice my size who could snap me in half if he wished?

While bandaging me he began to put off a certain scent.

It was musky, earthen, and tugged at a deep part of me.

I remembered the same smell on him when we were teenagers, and he'd explained that orcs' natural pheromones were heightened during periods of stress, anger, or arousal.

That I'd sensed it while he was near me could have meant he was worried or angry, but it could also indicate desire.

The thought almost scared me.

Sex with Torwood would be like trying to fuck a mountain.

I would be so helpless against his hands, he would fill me so completely with that cock, that all I could do was lay back and try to take whatever he wanted to give me.

Dammit, I was drenched now.

I rolled over and reached down to my suitcase, digging through the clothes until my

hand closed over a hard piece of purple plastic.

I pulled out my toy, stuffed it under as many blankets as I could, and held it tightly to my aching pussy.

Why shouldn't I fuck him? Maybe it would resolve the tension between us, which had not been released in ten years.

I plunged the toy deep into myself, and in my mind the plastic was not purple, but green.

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A piece of banana bread sat on the floor outside my door.

I tried a bite, and was pleased to discover that it wasn't half bad.

Maybe I did have an actual knack for hearth cooking, if I could just keep myself unsinged next time.

I would have to find a way to rub that in Torwood's face - maybe after I finished letting him fuck me senseless.

A couple excellent orgasms had slightly eased the burning tension between my legs, but I knew that the pot would boil over again in time.

I grabbed the banana bread and returned to the kitchen, where Torwood and my grandmother were listening to an old battery-powered radio that I recognized from childhood camping trips.

“-emergency measures being taken, with record lows expected overnight as power

outages continue throughout the Pigeonpond area.

Residents are advised to stay indoors and bundle up.

The cold represents a significant risk to the elderly, and we urge our listeners to take extra steps to ensure the comfort and safety of our older neighbors.

Remember that the use of fire magic in unventilated areas can be dangerous, and should only be attempted by professionals.”

“Well isn’t that fun,”

said Grandma Shirley.

I made eye contact with Torwood, thoughts of seduction driven from my head by the mental image of a popsicle shaped like my grandmother.

“I suppose we just have to make it through tonight, I’m sure things will improve tomorrow,” he said.

Despite no evidence in that direction, I couldn’t help but feel comforted by his optimism.

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That night, Torwood and I went around the house and took an inventory of all the sheets and blankets in each room and closet.

After the inn closed, grandma had sold many of the old supplies, apparently including most of the beddings.

I grabbed the large down comforter from my bed, and Torwood took two soft old quilts from his.

With no apparent effort, he moved the massive couch away from the fireplace, and hauled Grandma Shirley's bed from her room to take its place.

With our blankets combined with hers, we were able to build quite the nest for the old woman, who looked funny and childlike in her cocoon of wool and linen.

Torwood promised to get up during the night to feed the fire, and we insisted to her that we wouldn't be cold even with the thin sheets we were left with.

In bed, I wrapped the covers around myself and curled my knees into my chest, trying to fend off the severe chill.

I glanced over at the big clock on the wall, and was dismayed to see it was barely after ten.

The weather woman on the radio had said the deepest cold would begin around two in the morning.

Thump, thump...thump thump thumpa tha-thump.

The startling, raucous noise carried down from upstairs, almost directly over my head.

Sounded like Torwood was back at it, whatever it was. As if the cold wasn't enough to keep me from sleeping.

Shivering, I slipped out of bed and climbed the stairs, stern words for Torwood bouncing in my brain. It was strange, wanting to fuck someone and also being very

annoyed by them. I was surprised to see him standing in the hallway.

“Vanessa. I’m sorry about the noise. I am moving around to keep warm,” he said.

While that story made some sense, I was baffled to see that he was shirtless again, with only loose pants hanging low around his waist. Even in the low light, my vision was magnetized to the V shape of his abdomen and the strip of dark hair below his belly button. It looked almost like an arrow, guiding my eyes down even further. I shook myself, and forced my gaze back up his face.

“Where are your clothes?” I asked.

“It is...I am not used to sleeping with clothing. I find it incredibly irritating, and so I never wear them at night. Despite the cold I decided that I would rather not sleep than wear clothing to bed.”

An image of naked Torwood, tangled in his sheets. Down, girl.

“Well...I have to ask you to keep it down again, okay? It’s only gonna get colder, and...I for one would like to get at least an hour or two of sleep tonight,”

I said, and started back down the stairs, then stopped. “Thank you for taking care of the fire tonight. I appreciate it. I know my grandma appreciates it. Okay. Goodnight.”

“It is no problem. Vanessa, if...”

Torwood began to speak, then quieted. I gave him a quizzical look, but he shook his head. “I apologize. Yes, I will be quieter.”

I nodded, and returned to my room. I felt a little bad, but if the man insisted on being half naked on the coldest night of the year, that was on him. I slid back in bed,

screwed my eyes shut, and willed myself not to think of the numbness in my fingers and toes.

Midnight. I could see my breath in front of my face, illuminated by a slice of moonlight through the curtains. An idea sparked in my head, and I pivoted out of the bed, my lone sheet wrapped tightly around my shoulders. I walked to the front entrance and grabbed a big armful of coats, mine and Grandma's and a massive leather coat lined with sheep's wool which must have been Torwood's. I began to return to my room, then considered. If Torwood had the same idea, he would come looking for his coat. I wanted to offer it to him, knowing he would probably turn me down.

I began to stride up the stairs with Torwood's coat in my arms. The upstairs hallway was dark, as was Torwood's room. Had he warmed himself up enough to finally sleep? I approached his door, and was surprised to find it ajar.

"Vanessa?"

his voice echoed from inside. I pushed the door open, and saw the orc on his bed, his giant nude back forest green in the pale light of the room, a white sheet shoved down around his midsection. He looked back over his shoulder at me. "Are you too cold to sleep?"

Framed as he was against the opposite window, strange formations of moonlight appeared to curl around his form. I squinted, and realized what the curls were: steam, rising from his body, congealing in the cold air. Whatever he'd done to warm himself up had clearly worked. I moved inside and closed the door behind me, realizing that the whole room was slightly warmer.

"I brought you a coat, but it seems like you don't need it," I said.

Torwood turned onto his back and pushed himself up on the bed, his forearms flexing.

The moon shadows on his chest and abdomen made him look almost godlike, Hercules with ivory tusks.

The sheet fell low, barely concealing his crotch.

I remembered, suddenly, what I had been thinking earlier in the day, before the dangerous cold had descended.

“Thank you, Vanessa. That’s very kind,” he said.

I held out the massive leather jacket, then dropped it on the ground. Torwood stared at me, confused. Maintaining eye contact I padded over to the bed, then crawled onto it.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:46 am*

Torwood

I could do nothing as this woman, this silver creature with irresistible curving hips and glimmering dark hair, approached me and mounted the bed beside me.

“I’m worried that it’s dangerously cold down in my room,”

she said. “I don’t want to impose, but would you just help me get warm? Then I can go back to my own room.”

Her soft hand grazed my own, and an almost animal instinct overtook me, a deep desire to envelop her completely and never let her go.

I wrapped my arm around her, shifting onto my side, and she sighed and slipped into my embrace.

The curve of her back fit like a puzzle piece against my chest, and as she wiggled and shifted, her rear made contact with the iron rod of my cock.

She looked back at me, gave a small smile, and removed the sheet from between us, nestling further back against me.

My entire length was nestled in the crook of her ass, and further up onto her lower back.

Though her extremities were cold, she was radiating a heat that paralleled mine, even through the thick fabric of her clothing.

My hand came to rest on her stomach, in the gap between her waistband and the bottom of her sweatshirt.

The feeling of her bare skin set me aflame, and I was certain she could feel my heart pounding against her back.

I was still as a boulder, not wanting any wrong move to send her away, or gods forbid, make her think that I held ill intentions.

Her hand over mine, her fingers interlacing with my own.

Then, she began to push my hand downward, under her waistband, until the edge of my hand contacted the rough hair of her sex.

I was in disbelief.

She kept directing my hand deeper into her clothing, until I felt unbelievable warmth below the tips of my fingers.

Vanessa gasped.

All pretense was gone, and she began to rock against me, precum erupting from my tip as she ground her ass against my throbbing cock.

The sensation of my hardness against her was driving me almost mad, and I could not stop myself from bucking against her.

She removed her hand from mine and reached back and up to my face, brushing her fingers through my rough beard.

Then she pulled my form over hers, turning her face up so it could meet mine.

For the first time in a decade, we kissed.

Ten years ago, on a sweaty summer night, I was under a tree by the river.

Vanessa sat on my lap, her lips half parted, eyes glittering in the moonlight.

She had pulled my face to hers, just like she did now.

I remembered the brush of my sensitive tusks against her cheeks, and how she had climbed up my body, straddling my leg to hold herself taller and kiss me as an equal.

And then the clatter of a bicycle, and a sharp pain on my back.

Vanessa's older brother and my best friend, Thomas, face red like a winter cabbage, reaching down to find another rock to hurl at me. His expression had not been rage, it had been worse. Disgust. Betrayal.

I pushed Vanessa back, and withdrew my hand from the warmth of her.

"I cannot. I promised your brother I would not."

The words echoed from my throat, but hit my ears as though spoken by someone else. Vanessa stiffened, and her breath caught. I needed her out of here immediately, for I knew I would not be able to resist her, to uphold my promise much longer.

"My brother isn't here," she said.

"I am sorry Vanessa," I said.

Speaking like this felt like tearing out my own eyes, like my heart would burst from my ribs. I released her and turned on to my back, staring at the ceiling.

With a sharp inhale, Vanessa stood up and quietly readjusted her clothing.

“It’s fine, dude. This was just supposed to be a fling, it doesn’t have to be a whole ordeal.”

She was doing a fine job acting, playing off the evening as a simple night of passion. I wasn’t fooled. Buried in her voice was an old, familiar pain. I knew Vanessa far too well, and I had known this pain before.

“I understand if you hate me. I deserve at least that much,” I said.

She stared at me. Her face twisted, and her eyes filled with anger.

With a sudden snatch, she wrenched the bedsheet from me, leaving me naked. Then she walked away, and the precious thing that I had lost once and could not bear to lose again exited my room and slammed the door.

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The morning arrived as a rude horn.

At first I thought it was a fragment of a dream, but soon realized that the sound was quite real, and was coming from outside my window.

I rubbed my eyes, and saw that I was still as bare as my bed.

I had no idea when I had fallen asleep.

My last memories were of pacing the room in the nude, doing pushups, trying and failing to let my anger warm me and keep me away from thoughts of Vanessa.

The horn sounded again, and I plodded blearily over to the window facing the street, stepping over my crumpled jacket which still lay on the floor where Vanessa had dropped it.

It appeared that the previous night had truly been the worst of the storm, and things were rapidly improving.

A plow trundled down the road, the driver impatiently waiting for a family of chupacabras to finish crossing from their burrow in a neighbor's bushes to the alley across the street.

The sun was shining, and like magic, the vast drifts of snow and ice were receding.

Shirley would be thrilled, and would probably try to convince me to take her out on a walk today.

I would have to discourage her, citing her doctor's orders for the millionth time.

Ice struck my heart.

Shirley.

I had meant to check on her and feed the fire shortly after midnight, but Vanessa's arrival and the turmoil she'd left had erased my mind completely.

Panicking, I threw on some clothing and pounded down the stairs.

"Tsk tsk, Torwood. I didn't take you as the type to let an old woman freeze, but I suppose I've been wrong about you before."

Shirley was seated in her usual breakfast spot at the kitchen table, looking the

absolute picture of smug. Vanessa stood at the counter, whisking eggs and clearly trying to ignore me.

“Shirley, I am so sorry. I fell asleep and I-”

“Now, Torwood, that’s in the past. What matters now is that you make up for it, and I know exactly how you can do that. Vanessa?”

“There’s a shovel on the porch, and the snow has melted enough that the door opens now. Draw your own conclusions,”

she said, without looking at me.

“The power’s still out, and they say it might not be back until tomorrow. I would like to go on a walk later today. I’ve been cooped up in this house for too long. Oh, and I’m sure the Whistlewind family next door would not mind having their walk-up shoveled one bit either...”

continued Shirley. I was doing my best to keep up with her jovial mood, and not agonize myself with the memory of the previous night. If only Vanessa would look at me, give me some kind of sign.

None came.

I retrieved my coat from my room, then returned to the foyer. Wrapping myself tight in a scarf and a cap with warm woolen flaps for my ears, I tried the doorknob and found that I only had to push aside a small mound of snow to ease the door open.

“Oh, and Torwood?”

said Vanessa from behind me. I hadn’t heard her approach, the fuzzy socks on her

feet muffling her steps. I turned, and Vanessa's eyes met mine. Her hazel irises were speckled with green which glinted in the morning light. My throat went suddenly dry.

A flash between us. A moment where I thought she might name what had happened the previous night, or curse me out, or tell me she never wanted to see me again. She was clearly considering certain words.

“We're out of eggs,”

she said at last, then turned on her heel and stalked back to the kitchen.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:46 am*

Vanessa

I took great pride in my ability to mask my feelings. My dad, who had developed the same ability in the military and used it to great effect while starting his law firm, always repeated a mantra to Tom and I: “never let them see you bleed”. Whether it was a mean comment by a classmate or the final look from my mom as she drove away with her new husband, I refused to give any satisfaction to the people who hurt me. Ballet had taken this skill and honed it to an art, allowing me to receive brutal corrections in class, and take the bad news of a lost role or the pain of a torn meniscus with grace. These days I mostly used my ability to smile in the face of my manager when she told me I was passed over for another promotion.

As I sat playing cards with my grandmother, I was sure that my face was a mask of total nonchalance.

“Okay dear, what’s up your ass?”

asked Grandma Shirley.

I slapped down a pair of sevens on the table in front of me, and grimaced. It had been almost an hour since Torwood had gone out to shovel and then departed for the store, tasked with replenishing the eggs and fetching ingredients for dinner. After much coaxing, my grandmother had persuaded me into a game of high stakes poker, with unshelled walnuts and almonds as the chips. I’d just wanted to pout in peace, but she was having none of it.

“Noth-”

I began, but Grandma Shirley cut me off with a sharp flick of her hand.

“I know you better than almost anyone else alive, and I will not have you lying to me, telling me nothing is going on.”

“I’m just tired,”

I said, exasperated.

“And I’m the queen of fairies,”

she retorted. Then she leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. “I know this is about Torwood. Out with it.”

Damn this fiendishly perceptive woman and her runes and her tricks and her stupid, stupid words of wisdom.

“Okay, yes grandma, I am having a difficult time with your houseguest. We have...some history.”

“Ah yes. History. Would this history in any way be related to a series of late nights and long phone calls during the summer after your senior year of high school?”

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. You just could not get one past her.

“Why didn’t you tell me beforehand that Torwood was staying here, if you knew about all that? When I called to tell you I was coming, maybe you could have mentioned, ‘oh, and by the way your first love who broke your heart and destroyed your relationship with your brother is going to be staying in the spare room’?”

I had just called Torwood my first love. I’d never said it so plainly before, but it was

undeniably the truth.

“To be frank, dear, how would you have reacted had I said that? You’re both adults now, and for all I knew you’d either patched things up a long time ago or forgotten about it completely. But now you’re here, and you’re walking around like a thunderstorm upsetting the delicate balance of energies in this home, and I think it’s time we just spoke plainly about it.”

To say I felt like a teenager would be an understatement. I couldn’t believe I was sitting here, a grown woman, being lectured by my grandmother about boy troubles.

“He’s an asshole,”

I said. “He looks at me like I’m causing him problems just by being here. This is our family’s house, not his.”

Grandma Shirley sighed. “Well, Vanessa, I think you’re right about one thing: you being here is causing him a lot of trouble. Do you know what his life looked like before he moved into this old house with me?”

I shook my head. Truthfully, I hadn’t thought too much about it.

“He was living alone, in an apartment a few blocks from here. He’s been a handyman around town for a few years now, and a damn good one too. Very reliable. And of course, all the old ladies he worked for kept trying to set him up with their young daughters. Unfortunately for them, those girls just bounced off him like arrows off dragonscale. It got to the point that there were awful rumours, like he wasn’t giving those young women the time of day because he was too busy with their mothers and grandmothers,”

she said, giving me a pointed look. I grimaced, not wanting to admit that I’d been

having the same thought.

“Of course, nothing could be further from the truth,”

she continued. “He was never anything but the picture of a gentleman. He was fixing a leak in the garden shed last month when I slipped on a loose patio stone, and, well,”

she said, gesturing to her braced leg. “His rent was going up, and I suggested he move in just to keep an eye on me as I recovered. Truthfully I just thought the boy was lonely. It turned out to be not such a bad idea, as he was with me when I took another spill the other day. If he hadn’t caught me, well, who knows what would have happened,” she said.

I realized idly that this was one of the longest monologues I’d heard my grandmother go on without uttering a single dirty word.

“The only break in his facade that I’ve seen is when I told him you were coming to visit. He nearly had a stroke in the living room,”

she laughed. “There’s not a lot that can faze him, you know. His mother died last year, and I only found out when I read it in the newspaper. But you seemed to have taken a really good crack at his shell,”

she said, and broke a walnut open with her silver nutcracker.

I was quiet, absorbing this information. The Torwood I had known ten years ago was like a big, clumsy puppy, unself-conscious and unaware of the effect his golden eyes and strong hands had on people. Had on me. I had thought it strange that in the last decade he hadn’t become attached to any of the eager local women. The image of him leaving his small apartment in the morning, doing jobs for old ladies all day, and going home alone again made me strangely sad. I recalled my words from the night

I'd arrived.

What's your angle here, Torwood?

It seemed simple now. He wanted to stay here because he was lonely, having just lost his mom. Because Grandma Shirley was great company, and he could take care of her. And, perhaps...did he know I would eventually come back? Despite my hurt from the previous night, something fluttered in my chest.

My emotions must have played like a movie on my face. Grandma Shirley chuckled, and placed her own poker hand down across from mine. Full house.

\*\*\*

Satisfied with our little talk, Grandma Shirley allowed me to recuse myself from the game, sacrificing the pot of hard-shelled nuts to her, which she began to crack with glee.

I decided it was time to get out of the house for the first time since arriving here. I tugged my boots on, bundled up, and headed out into the bright winter day. I began to stroll down the street, looking fondly at the neighbors shoveling their driveways, kids of all shapes and sizes bundled up in bright little snowsuits, building forts and rolling down the plowed mounds of snow by the side of the road.

My mind drifted back to Torwood. Okay, I had to admit that he had a lot to offer, and we had history, and a big part of me still wanted to jump his bones six ways to Sunday. But I just couldn't forgive his behavior from last night. What kind of fucked up promise had he made to my brother that would keep us, two consenting adults, from sleeping together? It made me wonder if-

And in the space of a breath I was on my ass on the ground, pain sprouting from my

left shoulder. I had collided head first with a lamp post, lost so totally in my thoughts that I hadn't noticed the tall brass thing until it was too late.

"Are you okay, ma'am?"

someone asked, and a hand extended down to me. I looked up. It was a middle aged human woman with pale skin and a crooked nose, wearing a funny yellow cap.

"Yes, oh my gosh, I just lost my balance there for a second,"

I said, my face flushing crimson. I brushed myself off and stood, waving away her hand, needing to prove that I was still capable of standing on my own, even if I wasn't capable of avoiding stationary objects. "Thank you for asking. I'm fine, really."

She laughed very strangely. "I think our meeting here was providence, don't you? Our Mother acts in funny ways like that. Tell me, have you yet taken her pollen?"

I paused brushing the snow from myself, and took another look at the woman. Her funny hat was in fact knit to look like a daffodil sprouting from her head, and her eyes were strange and glassy. Oh god, she was one of those weirdos that followed the Herbaceous Mother. They lived in a big compound in the hills west of town, but usually kept to themselves. This one seemed to have gotten loose.

"No, no, and I'm not interested, sorry!"

I said, and began walking away.

"Don't ignore me, you bitch! This was not a coincidence,"

she called from behind me. Her voice was getting louder and reedier. "Her vines

connected us. You're so young and beautiful, I can see the Mother's sap leaking from you! What do you think you'll gain by denying her?"

I shoved my hands in my pockets and began to speed walk. I heard the rapid crunching of snow behind me. Her hand grasped my shoulder, surprisingly firm, and she spun me around.

"You can be the seed bearer for our ceremony tonight! You'll come, won't you?"

Her eyes were wild, and her long nails dug into my flesh. I cried out. "I was a ripe young fruit like you once, I was a seed bearer once. Look how it transformed me!"

I tried to push her off, but her grip was too tight. My heels slipped on the icy sidewalk, and my cheek struck the ground with a smack. As I tumbled, the woman came down with me. Her words were inaudible now, just a high pitched squealing from her mouth, so close to my face that I could smell the awful too-sweet scent of her breath. I screwed my eyes shut, fearful that she would attempt to claw at my face.

And then she was gone, wrenched off me. A statue stood over me, lit from behind by the brilliant morning sun, a silhouette holding the screaming woman aloft with one hand by the back of her jacket. The figure wrapped its other hand around the woman's ankles, drew her back, and tossed her headfirst into a nearby snowbank. I blinked away tears, my vision blurry. My savior knelt down, and the sharp angles of his face came into focus, the gloss of his tusks, his golden eyes burning with feeling. Torwood.

"Vanessa! Did she hurt you?" he asked.

"I'm okay, I'm okay,"

I said automatically. I wasn't okay. The smell of her breath was still in my nostrils. I

knotted the front of Torwood's shirt in my fists and pulled him to me, leaning my head into the crook of his chest. He placed a hand on the back of my head and began to stroke my hair, making quiet shushing noises.

We stayed like that for a long moment. I heard shouting, and cracked my eyes. A small crowd had gathered, and was shouting after the Herbaceous Mother cultist, who had worked her way out of the snowdrift and was now beating a hasty retreat. Torwood glanced back at her, but made no move in pursuit. The whole world of his attention was focused on me.

"Come now, let's get you home,"

he said. I hesitantly untangled from him, and he helped me to my feet. I noticed a discarded paper bag of groceries on the sidewalk, split down the side. An egg had escaped, and its yellow yolk was leaking out onto the snow.

"The groceries," I said.

"I can get those,"

came another voice. It was an older elf man I recognized as a neighbor. He knelt and collected the scattered groceries as best as he could in the torn bag.

"Are you sure you're alright? My clinic is right down the road, I can take a look if you're hurt,"

said another woman.

"Those people are a menace, I don't know why they haven't been run out of town. Torwood, you did a good job with her. I doubt she'll be harassing anyone else anytime soon. You should probably make a statement to the police, though,"

said a lizardfolk girl who I dimly recognized as the conductor from the train. Others in the immediate area murmured their agreement with her sentiment.

“Thank you, but right now my only concern is to get Vanessa home,”

Torwood replied. He took the groceries from the elf in one arm, waved off the crowd of onlookers, and began to guide me home. As we walked away, I realized that his arm had remained wrapped around me, both supporting me and giving me protection from the prying eyes of the neighbors. In that moment, despite the terror of the last few minutes, I felt a deep and reliable safety that I had not felt in, well, I didn’t know how long. Ten years? Yes, it had been at least ten years.

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“Those Herbaceous Mother...fuckers! They just keep getting bolder and bolder. They give a bad name to plants, I say. No, don’t go to the police, Torwood. They’ll just traumatize my poor granddaughter further, and of course they won’t do jack shit about the cult. The chief of police goes to their meetings, for god’s sake. Here, take this,”

said my grandmother, ladling a large quantity of some kind of tincture into my mouth. It was gritty and bitter, but spread a fuzzy warmth through my body, calming my rattled nerves and dulling the pain in my bruised cheek.

“I’m really okay, Grandma,”

I said, swallowing. “What did you just give me?”

“Dandelioness paste. I grow a patch every summer and keep a jar for the whole year. Effective, isn’t it?” she said.

“What does it do, exactly?” I asked.

“Relaxes that which needs relaxing. Some say it’s best as a topical, but I like to mix it with whisky and take it orally.”

The nice feeling in my body seemed much more in line with the effect of liquor than that of ground up flower paste, but I wasn’t about to tell that to Grandma Shirley.

“Thank you, I feel better already. Torwood looks like he might need this stuff more than me, though,” I said.

The big green man was leaning with his butt against the kitchen counter, arms crossed, wound tight as a bowstring. His brow was knit, a sexy muscle twitching at the corner of his jawline.

“I am just happy that you are not hurt,”

he said. “I wish I had tossed that damned woman further.”

I laughed. This was the first time I’d heard Torwood express ill will towards any creature. “Get your mind off it, big guy. Hey, you got dinner stuff, right? What are we having tonight?”

I asked. I realized that it came out quite a bit flirtier than it had sounded in my head. I felt the flitting of a side eye from my grandmother. Damn plant paste. Wasn’t I mad at him?

Slowly, Torwood’s shoulders relaxed, and he refocused on the preparation of the meal.

He’d bought venison steaks just for me, from a local hunter who sold to the butcher.

I was skeptical that the improbable vegetarian would know how to prepare the excellent looking cuts of meat, but his marination process put my mind at ease.

Another surprise awaited when Torwood retrieved from the icebox a banneton full of dough, and set it on the counter to proof.

I had no idea when he'd had the time, but it looked like sourdough.

We passed the afternoon easily as the meat marinated and the bread rose.

I snuck a few more spoons of dandelioness paste between card games and book chapters, finding the taste more agreeable and the effects even more pleasant as the day wore on.

In the late afternoon, after so much reassurance that I was okay and could be left alone, Torwood took his promised walk with Shirley.

I sat on the couch in the living room holding a mug of tea, a low fire burning in the hearth.

The sun had gone gold, and was illuminating small specks of dust that hung in the air.

The copper pipes that ran through the house rattled, replenishing some hidden basin, the sound like the comforting voice of an old friend.

How many afternoons had I passed as a child in this exact spot, watching guests come and go, trying to evade the chores that my grandmother doled out to idle children?

I leaned my head back, and gazed out the room's big south facing window.

The familiar branches of the oak tree in the yard greeted me.

A neighbor was taking advantage of the sun to string laundry on the line between his building and the next.

A bird flew overhead.

Without realizing I had begun to cry, I tasted a tear at the corner of my mouth.

I didn't want to leave.

I wanted to be with my grandmother, in this house.

I wanted to be in the Pigeonpond that I knew and loved, the one that I had thought was no longer available to me.

I wanted to feel what I had felt when Torwood held me, all of the time.

My heart did a small flip, the same flip it had done when he bandaged my hand.

At the time I had thought, not entirely incorrectly, that what I had felt was lust.

Now that I scratched against it a little harder, the feeling's true nature began to shine through.

Torwood, as infuriating as it was, knew the real me.

His patient eyes saw through all the defenses I put up between myself and the world, and cared for me despite them.

I felt the care in his arms around me, in the food he cooked and the way he said my name.

He was a good man, better than I deserved.

Oh god, I was falling for my brother's best friend. Again.

The door opened, and they were back. I wiped the tears from my eyes and greeted them. I shouldn't be so emotional, it had just been an intense day— an intense few days. Once I was back in the city, would this all seem like a hazy memory?

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:46 am*

Torwood

Shirley had decided that dinner would be a lavish affair, a demand that I was happy to accommodate.

She claimed it was to help get Vanessa's mind off the day's events, which I believed, but I also knew Shirley needed but a threadbare excuse for festivities.

She instructed us to dress well and meet in the dining room at seven sharp, leaving me to hurry to both finish the meal and scamper down to the basement to dig up a casual grey blazer, shoes, and an old Oxford cloth shirt from my stashed possessions.

I changed into a pair of jeans that were free from paint stains, wishing I had access to a working iron.

I caught my reflection in the mirror as I was leaving.

I hadn't worn this outfit since a particularly uncomfortable date two years ago, with the daughter of a gorgon woman I had met at the supermarket.

The girl had seemed to like me, but the snakes on her head hissed and spat at my every move, keeping me even from hugging her goodnight.

I ran my fingers through my own thick brown hair, moving it away from my face.

One of these days I had to buy an orc-made comb, I couldn't keep breaking the flimsy combs made for human hair.

I took a deep breath, and noticed a fluttering anxiety in the pit of my stomach.

Vainly, I found myself hoping that Vanessa would approve of my outfit.

I arrived in the dining room, wreathed in the light from dozens of floating candles, and began to help Shirley set the table with fine linens and delicate silverware.

The wine bottles were inscribed with sensitive runes that monitored temperature and humidity within the bottle, and kept the wine perfectly aerated as it was poured.

For an added bonus, the bottles would also float around the table and keep everyone's glasses perfectly filled.

For the hundredth time, I wondered why Shirley hadn't gone into runecraft professionally.

As we worked, I heard a small cough behind me.

Shirley saw her first, and clapped her hands over her mouth.

"Oh darling, I knew it would fit.

You have just my figure from when I was your age," she said.

Vanessa was wearing a gauzy off-white dress embroidered with small blue flowers.

It hung perfectly from her, stopping just above her knees, with a low neckline that almost risked being inappropriate for the setting.

Her hair was curled around her shoulders, with face framing front pieces that accentuated the dark wings she'd applied to her eyes.

A glittering silver necklace, matching the silver and blue of her earrings, tied a bow on the entire outfit.

I stared at her for several seconds, before remembering to breathe.

“I don’t know Grandma, it’s more of a summer dress,”

Vanessa said. Her cheeks were slightly red, and it felt as though she were pointedly avoiding eye contact with me.

“Well, wasn’t it a beautiful summery day?”

Shirley retorted. “We need a break from all the ice and darkness. Oh, I have a delightful idea. Let’s treat this as a garden dinner, remember the kind we used to have with the whole family?”

“I remember,”

said Vanessa.

“Torwood, would you go get the vases?”

she asked.

I agreed, and returned from the basement with an armful of blown glass which I laid in front of Shirley.

Each vase had a rune on the bottom which, as she filled it with water from the kitchen, activated and sprouted a magnificent bouquet that burst out of the vase.

Following Shirley’s instructions, I helped to set the flowers on cabinets and window

ledges and open spaces of floor, tulips and calla lilies, dahlias and sunflowers now surrounding us and brightening every corner of the room.

I noticed that the flowers even emitted a faint, incredibly realistic scent.

“I used to love bringing these out for weddings, baby showers, bar mitzvahs...it’s a shame they’ve gone unused for so long. Aren’t they lovely?”

Shirley asked.

Vanessa and I agreed. Shirley sat back down, smoothing out her silvery pantsuit. “Now that we have moved to the garden, shall we eat?” she said.

I had agreed to act as the waiter for the evening, and as I stood I felt Vanessa’s eyes on me.

Perhaps my pants were too tight, or I should have done up one more button on the top of my shirt.

I discarded the thoughts, and retrieved the first course, a creamy spinach and dill soup served with ramps and hazelnuts, perfect for the coming spring.

I thought it would be a nice opener to the heavier main course, and Vanessa and Shirley’s delighted faces as they slurped it confirmed that I hadn’t made the wrong choice.

Next I brought out the sourdough, which had been baked and cooled to perfection.

I had taken the extra step of carving a small wheat stalk into the crust and dusting it with leftover flour, giving it a rustic appeal.

We ate it with cultured butter, soaking up the remainders of the soup and filling the toothsome brown crumb with an excellent mix of flavors.

Then, the coup-de-grace.

I plated and served three portions of venison steak alongside Café de Paris sauce, with a side of cauliflower mash topped with buttery shallots, asparagus roasted in mustard, and pickled garlic scapes.

The asparagus had been troublesome to roast on the hearth, but clever placement and close attention had made them perfectly crisped and tender.

Shirley and Vanessa emitted audible gasps as I placed the meal in front of them.

“Torwood, I thought you were a vegetarian!”

Vanessa cried.

“I do not mind. This is good meat, and I’m happy to make something that will fill you.”

“Well, you didn’t have to. But thank you. I feel bad, but thank you,”

Vanessa said, and placed a corner of the steak into her mouth. This time I did not hide my blush as her face melted with pleasure.

I noticed that, though Shirley had placed her hand over her glass to signal the enchanted bottles to cease pouring, Vanessa was keeping up with me, despite our drastic size difference.

Our eye contact had steadily increased during the night, and as I sat to enjoy the main

course with them, I felt a foot sweep up my shin.

I jumped, nearly knocking my silverware to the floor.

Across from me, Vanessa stifled a giggle, then refocused on her food, smiling to herself.

Shirley was regaling us with tales of the inn's glory days, including a time when a troll guest had clogged a toilet so badly that the plumber had to call a disintegration magic specialist.

We laughed along, and I felt Vanessa's leg trace up my own once again, more slowly this time, more deliberate.

Her eyes met mine, and she cocked her head slightly, as if to ask my permission to proceed.

It must have been the wine, but I nodded subtly at her.

For that moment I let thoughts of Tom and my promise fall away, leaving only the heat in my belly and the electricity of her foot against me.

It seemed she had forgiven me from the previous night, or at least, in the moment her desire was stronger than her hurt.

My desire roared up to match her.

Vanessa continued to torment me throughout the night, as we finished the first two bottles of wine and moved to a third.

At this point I was moderately drunk, so I couldn't imagine what Vanessa must have

been experiencing.

Despite this she remained the perfect party guest, laughing at her grandmother's jokes, interjecting her own anecdotes, showing her gratitude for the food.

Throughout all this, her foot kept returning to my leg, each time creeping higher and higher.

During one moment of particular hilarity, the balls of her feet made contact with the head of my cock, sending an electric shock through my body.

I jumped suddenly, and stood out of my seat, turning quickly so the obvious impression of my incredibly hard shaft wouldn't be visible to poor Shirley.

"I believe it is time for coffee.

And cake.

I made cake, and I can make coffee,"

I said, beating a hasty retreat to the kitchen. There was a limit to how much torture I could take.

"Decaf for me, dear!"

called Shirley after me.

Vanessa cleared the table as I brewed coffee and retrieved slices of a rum cake I had made a couple weeks prior from the icebox.

I felt Vanessa's every movement around me, her scent as she swished past me in that

damned dress, clearly finding excuses to brush her arm against me as she moved to retrieve a plate, or leaning low to pick up a napkin and offering an incredibly tempting view of her chest under the dress.

I wish I could say I resisted looking.

When we sat back down at the table, I was in no better state than I had been when I stood up.

Shirley, blessedly, seemed distracted examining her wine bottle runes, musing on possible improvements.

We tucked into the coffee and the cake, which was as rich as when I had baked it fresh.

“Well, Torwood, that was an excellent, excellent meal,”

said Vanessa once we had finished our cake slices. Her tone wasn’t teasing, full instead of genuine appreciation. “Where did you learn to make a steak like that? I didn’t think you’d know how.”

I was embarrassed; I had hoped that question wouldn’t come up. “I, uh, adopted it from a rutabaga recipe. The marinade is the same, and you can achieve a similar crust in the skillet. The sauce was the same as well.”

I expected mocking, but Vanessa just looked impressed.

“Well you’ll have to make that for me sometime,”

she said, locking eyes with me. Her foot returned to my lower shin, tracing a wide circle on me.

A door opened and closed, and the sound of bags dropped hard against the floor echoed from the front room. Before any of us could react, Tom stepped around the corner, a dusting of snow on his long jacket.

“Hello, everyone! Did I miss dinner?”

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“Tom! Your flight finally got rescheduled?”

Vanessa asked incredulously, standing up from the table.

“It did. I tried to call, but nobody was answering their phones.”

“The power is out. Nobody’s got charge,”

she replied.

His eyes settled on me, and his brow furrowed. “Torwood?”

“Yes. How are you, Tom?”

I replied.

Tom and I had spoken only a few times over the phone in the last ten years.

“It’s been a while, buddy. Were you just joining for dinner?” he asked.

There was an awkward pause, before Shirley spoke. “Torwood is staying here. He’s helping to take care of me while I recover,” she said.

“He is? Why didn’t you mention that?”

Tom asked.

“Well dear, if you had called me recently I’m sure I would have brought it up,”

she replied, an edge in her voice.

Grimacing, Tom shrugged his coat off and tossed it over the bannister. Shirley stood, and walked over to retrieve the coat and hang it on a hook.

“What are you doing?”

asked Tom in surprise. “You should not be walking around like that! Go, sit back down!”

Grandma Shirley barely acknowledged him, hanging the coat before returning to the table. “I’m fine, dear. Surely you must be hungry and tired. Torwood, would you mind fixing Tom a plate since I’m in no shape to be on my feet? In fact, I think this old lady is rather tired. Tom, would you help me to my room?”

Tom took Shirley by the arm and led her away. I retreated to the kitchen, sharing a quick glance with Vanessa as I left. Stay out of this was the message, splayed plainly across her face.

I arrived with food as Tom returned, taking it with a small “thanks”. Vanessa had begun clearing the plates and emptying the vases, restoring the room to its pre-party state.

“So,”

said Tom, sitting in an armchair and picking distractedly at the meal, “what’s going on here, Ness?”

“What do you mean, dude,”

replied Vanessa. Her posture and tone were guarded.

“The fancy clothes, the flowers, the secret houseguest,”

he said, gesturing to me with his fork. “We’re here to get Grandma moved into a home. Have you even made any calls?”

“The power’s been out. And, well frankly, I’m not sure she needs to go anywhere. Torwood has been taking good care of her, in fact he’s the one who caught her when she fell again last week.”

Tom didn’t look at me, he just shook his head. “Dad was very clear. We’re gonna get her out of here, and he’ll come in a couple weeks for the final assessment on the house and to help arrange the sale. There’s a whole plan, and it doesn’t involve you hanging out and playing house with your high school boyfriend,” he said.

And there it was. Tom had walked in at perhaps the worst moment, treated to an intimate scene between Vanessa and myself. Had he seen her leg against mine?

“What are you implying, Thomas?”

I said, my voice a low growl.

“I’m not implying anything,”

he said, finally looking in my direction. “I’m telling you that you aren’t qualified to

take care of my grandmother, and that if you have any other motives in being here, you'd better forget them right away."

Nobody said anything. I did not want to scare Vanessa by expressing the true feelings his words had inflamed.

Tom sighed deeply, and set the plate down. From his shirt pocket he retrieved a vape pen and began to puff on it, the fog swirling around his fingers. "You made the right decision calling my father last week. Thank you for your commitment to my grandmother's safety, but you don't need to be involved with my family any longer. I'm sure you've got many things you need to get back to, so I'd appreciate it if you were out of here by tomorrow."

"You're an asshole, Tom. I know you're just following dad's orders, but you're just wrong. Torwood has been nothing but wonderful, and Grandma loves him. I...look, we are gonna talk about this more in the morning, okay? It's been a nice evening and I don't want to ruin it with this conversation. I'm going to bed."

"Fine by me,"

Tom replied. "I'm going to stay on the couch. No point in messing a room up, since I won't be here long."

The siblings glared at each other for a breath longer, then bid an icy goodbye.

A part of me wanted to tear into Tom, to make him feel all the pain he'd caused. Still another part wished to say, despite everything, that it was good to see him. How could it be, after all these years, that I still felt loyalty to this man? I had been a lost child, and he had shown me friendship, but there was no friendship between us now.

There were many things I wished to say to him at that moment. What I said was

“goodnight”.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:46 am*

Vanessa

It took me forever to fall asleep, and when it finally came it was a hazy dreamstate, not the deep and restful slumber that my body craved. I dreamt I was eleven years old, in the exam chair at Pigeonpond Orthodontic getting my braces applied. The orthodontist, a hulking half-yeti woman, couldn't get the braces applied on account of my teeth falling out one after another like tiny hard candies. She shone a bright light in my eyes, moving it closer and closer, trying to get a better view of my gaping mouth. The light was bright, impossibly bright.

My eyes snapped open. The overhead light in my room was on, glaring uncomfortably in my face. I heard the rumble of the forced air begin to move through the house. The power was back!

I glanced at my watch, and saw that it was just after one in the morning. I stood to shut off the light in my room, and realized that I was still feeling the effects of the wine. Well, it was better than the inevitable hangover, I thought. I stumbled to the switch and shut the light off, then saw a bright sliver of light spilling under the door. I pulled a robe over my t-shirt and underwear and tread into the hall. I worked my way towards the front of the house, turning off lights as I went.

Tom was still asleep in the living room, curled up on the couch with a loose knit blanket pulled over him. He looked cold, and I smiled before flicking out the living room lights. I thought about nudging the thermostat down, but decided that would be too cruel.

The stairs creaked behind me. Torwood was standing above me, again naked but for

those loose linen pants.

“Torwood. The power is back on,”

I said stupidly.

“Yes. I am concerned that the stove was left on,”

he replied.

Oh. Good thought, Torwood. I followed him to the kitchen where the stove was in fact not on.

“Well. Better to be safe,” he said.

We stood in the kitchen just looking at each other.

“I think we should talk,”

I said to him, my voice hushed. I wasn't sure we would have a chance tomorrow, with the whirlwind my brother was sure to spin up as soon as he awoke.

“Yes. I agree,”

he replied.

“Uhm,”

I stumbled. I toyed with the strings on my hoodie, not sure how to begin this. “Well I want to say I'm sorry about Tom. He's not...I mean you know him. He's not a bad person, but he hates this town, and he's following orders from my dad, who wants

nothing to do with this place. Tom wants things dealt with as quickly and painlessly as possible, so he can get gone.”

Torwood took a deep breath. “Is that what you want, Vanessa? To be gone?”

Shit. I turned away from him and pressed my palms against the cold tile of the counter. A few days ago I could have easily said yes. But things had changed so fast. My life in the city felt like the dream now, here in Pigeonpond it felt like my heart had started beating again.

“No,”

I said finally. The alcohol in my system made it a bit easier to admit this truth.

“What do you want?”

he asked. I heard him move behind me, stepping forward. I turned again and he was right there. His scent filled my nose, and I wanted to press my face into him again, to feel his wide forearms around me.

But something held me at bay. I kept my gaze turned down.

“What happened the other night?”

I asked. “When I came to your room. What was the promise you made Tom? I want you, Torwood. Don’t you want me too?”

I knew I would cringe at my words in the morning, but they felt essential now.

His body stiffened, and he took a small step back and away. He was lost in thought for what felt like an eon.

Then he began to speak, with a careful cadence that sounded like he had rehearsed the words in his head many times before.

“Thomas was once my closest friend. I never had an easy time with others, especially with humans, and it was only thanks to his friendship that I was able to make it through our school years. Before I go on, I must express that my friendship with your brother was real, and I owe him greatly for it.”

I knew it was true. Torwood and Tom were thick as thieves in middle and high school. Tom was always very popular, and I saw firsthand how he used that popularity to shield the gangly, quiet Torwood.

“It was known that you were off-limits to any of Tom’s friends, and I always swallowed my feelings when I was around you. That is, until that night on the train tracks. You ran away with my heart on that night, Vanessa. And then, later that summer when Tom discovered us in the park, it was the greatest shame I had ever experienced. Tom made me swear never to touch you again, and he, well...he made my life quite difficult afterwards. When your family moved away, it hurts me greatly to say but I was relieved. I have been trying to be a better man, Vanessa. A man who doesn’t betray his best friend.”

I exhaled slowly. Torwood turned, unable to face me, seating himself at the kitchen table and boring a hole into the table with his gaze.

“When I moved in with Shirley, I wanted only for you to come back. I knew that I should have stayed away, should have refused her offer, but I could not. When you showed up at my door several days ago, I was...overcome. I was in no way prepared to see your face, or hear your voice again. I wanted to apologize for everything, for not seeing you again before you left, and for not trying to contact you. But all I could hear was the pounding of my own heart, drowning out all words.”

“I am a dishonorable man, Vanessa. I could not honor my promise to my friend, and I could not make up for the pain I caused you.”

Torwood took a shuddering breath. “You asked if I want you? No man has ever wanted anything more. But now you see that I am no creature who is worthy of you. I should not disrupt your life any further.”

I reached out a hand to touch Torwood’s shoulder, but he stood suddenly. Without another word, he strode out of the kitchen. I was left standing there, feeling like he had slammed a door in my face once again.

This was ridiculous. Torwood was the kindest, most respectful man I had ever met. He had been beating himself up for ten years over what, a broken teenage promise?

Oh god, but I wasn’t much better. I had known for ten years that I still felt love for Torwood despite the hurt he’d caused me, but I had never reached out either. My mask had fooled even me, and if it wasn’t for Torwood and this trip I may have never known the truth. The lunacy of it all struck me. I knew exactly what I wanted, and I knew exactly how to get it.

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I ran down the hall after Torwood. He had begun to ascend the stairs, and I reached through the balusters to grab the hem of his pants. He looked down at me, and I up at him.

“I don’t care that you broke a promise, Torwood. You don’t owe Tom anything. He was wrong then, and he’s wrong now. I want you, Torwood.”

He hesitated, looking down at me.

“Vanessa, I...I don’t know if we should do this.”

“Why?”

His eyes were on fire. “Because once we start, I won’t be able to hold back.”

My breath caught. I was going to fuck this man until it killed one or both of us.

I moved quickly around the railing and approached him from below. He was impossibly tall above me, a single candle casting shadows on his well-defined muscles. I placed a hand on his abdomen, and felt his breath quicken. The shadow of his cock against his pants grew longer, and I pushed harder against him. He leaned back, hands contacting the stairs, until his back contacted the stairs. I was almost on all fours, and began to crawl up him, past his stomach, his chest, until finally my face was above his.

I saw his gaze dart over to my brother, whose sleeping form I could almost see on the living room couch, not fifteen feet away. My brother who had caused this gentle giant so much pain, just so that he could play the protective older sibling.

“He’s not here,”

I said. “It’s only me.”

I kissed Torwood deeply. His body was stiff, almost thrumming with tension. As I held my lips to his I felt him soften, yield to me, begin to touch me, slowly at first. And then, all of a sudden, not slowly at all. His hands were all over me, tugging up the hem of my hoodie, working their way under the waistline of my sweatpants, kneading my ass, caressing my back. He kissed me all over, moving from my face to my neck, causing me to whimper in pleasure. He moaned in appreciation as I pushed my leg back, my lower thigh contacting his manhood. I pulled back and reached

down his body, wrenching down his pants, hungry for my first real look at his cock.

It was, like the rest of him, a thing of beauty and power, with proud ridges bracing over its width and a green tip that turned almost pink around the rim. To my surprise he was well-groomed, the base of his cock to his heavy balls trim and tidy. His cockhead was already wet, with beads of cum pearlescent in the candlelight.

I slid down him, stripping my pants as I went. I wanted him to feel how wet I was as I moved down his left side, lower and lower until my hand finally enclosed around him. His penis jumped in my fingers, and I was amazed at how heavy and full it felt. I withdrew my hand briefly and pressed two fingers to myself. They came away soaking wet, and I returned my hand to his length. I began to stroke him up and down, circling a thumb around his head and mixing the moisture of my pussy with his precum.

Torwood groaned and shuddered, then grabbed me firmly. One of his hands removed my grip from his cock, while the other clutched my thigh.

“Vanessa. I am going to die if I don’t taste you,”

he said. The pressure on my thigh became greater, and he dragged me back up him, straining towards my pussy like a man possessed.

Well, I wasn’t about to protest that. I positioned myself over his face, braced my knees against the stairs, and felt his mouth make contact with my dripping wet pussy.

Oh, god. His lips were huge and impossibly soft, engulfing my entire pussy with ease. He began to press forward with his tongue, sliding it deeper into my folds until finally it grazed lightly against my clit. I had to grip the bannister and clamp my palm over my mouth to keep from crying out. This only seemed to encourage him, as his hands tightened on my thighs and he pulled me even deeper against his mouth. He began

mixing his lapping strokes against my clit with deeper probing movements that split me open on his tongue.

“Yesss,”

I hissed, and he seemed to get the hint. His tongue plunged into me, further than I believed possible, then further still. I gasped, and ground myself down onto his mouth, rubbing my clit furiously against his lips while his tongue found the throbbing swell of my G-spot. If he were a human man I would have been concerned that I was crushing him under me, but Torwood’s massive head and thick neck made me feel like I was the one trying to stay upright on a bucking bull.

“Oh fuck, Torwood. Keep...that. That,”

was all I could say. In the shape of his lips beneath my pussy, I thought I felt him smile. I could feel that I was going to cum very soon, and that it would be a big one. He held me tightly as I shuddered and moaned in ecstasy. Orgasmic waves rolled over me, shooting stars through my vision. I collapsed forward, and he withdrew his tongue, running it along my clit as it returned to his mouth, sending a cascade of clenching shivers through my body.

Limply, I slid back down until I was level with his face again. The bastard was grinning, just like he had when we were teenagers. Collecting myself, I kissed him again, loving the taste of my own sweetness on his lips. His hands moved up to my ass, and I knew that this was nowhere near over.

“My turn,”

I said, and made sure that his golden eyes were locked with mine. I sat up and skinned my sweatshirt and tee in one go, throwing them up the stairs and out of the way. I was naked now, grinding my pussy against his body as he reached up and

brushed my nipples with his long fingers. Part of me wanted him to suck them, as I was almost certain I could reach another orgasm from the combination of his lips on me and the movement of my clit against his skin. Despite how nice that sounded, I could read on his face that he wanted more. And fuck, I needed more too.

Like our bodies knew precisely where to move, I pressed myself downwards and felt the tip of his cock enter me.

I gasped. He was, it went without saying, far bigger than any man I had been with before. His palms moved to my hips, but he didn't press me further onto him, instead waiting while I adjusted to him. I curled my head into his chest and closed my eyes, just feeling the warmth of him inside me. Then, slowly, I slid further down his length. Each inch was excruciatingly pleasurable, like a need that had been unknown even to me was finally being filled.

Then, the first ridge. It came almost as a surprise, and I thought for a moment that I had reached my limit. Of course I had not. I was barely halfway down his cock, already as deep as I had ever felt. I looked back up at him, a whimper escaping my throat. His face was gentle, and he stroked my back as I lay on him.

"It is okay if this is as far as you can go,"

he said reassuringly.

As far as I could go? That sounded like a challenge to me. I grabbed his big hand and brought it to my face, placing the flesh below his thumb between my teeth. Then, biting down just hard enough, I pushed myself further, feeling my lips part to let the ridge pass. With a sudden slip it entered me, and I bit down with more force than I had meant. Torwood's hand jerked slightly, but did not move. I looked up, wanting to know if I had hurt him.

“Are you alright?”

he asked me. His eyes were heavy with lust, not pain.

Of course. I almost bit his hand off, but it was me he was worried about. I took his hand playfully back in my mouth, and pushed myself down further. I was able to manage two more ridges before I truly bottomed out, my mind going white with the pleasure and pain of taking him in that way. Torwood moaned, and his claws dug into my thighs. At last I began a subtle up and down rhythm, and his cock throbbed inside me with every movement. It was almost too much, almost sent me spiraling into a second orgasm, but I was able to hold on.

Seemingly unable to resist and longer, Torwood braced his elbows against the stair step beneath him, and with the renewed leverage began pumping into me. I stifled a cry, and my head dropped down again to his chest, letting him simply hold my lips and fuck me like a ragdoll. His grunts became throatier, and I felt like I would lose my mind as the big orc moaned my name.

“Vanessa, oh gods, Vanessa, I’m going to cum,”

he growled into my ear.

“Cum in me,”

was all I could manage. His orgasm was a volcano, his entire body tensing, his back arching, all the energy contained in his form coursing down and through his cock. My movements ceased, as all I could do was grab him and hold on while his hips bucked like a wild horse, driving him impossibly deep into me. I felt one more ridge pass inside me and I gasped, unaware that there had even been more of his cock to take. Torwood’s hot seed quickly filled me to the point of overflowing, coating his stomach and my inner thighs were in his cum. At last his body went slack beneath

me, and he was left glowing in the aftershock of the most unbelievable orgasm I had ever witnessed.

“Holy...oh my fuck,”

I said. His eyes were closed, head resting back on the edge of a step, but a lazy smile crept across his face. I realized to my astonishment that he was still hard inside me, and had begun to shift his hips slowly up and down once again.

Needing no further encouragement, I placed my hands squarely on his chest, and decided that two orgasms was the bare minimum I would accept tonight. With the ridges of his cock pressed firmly against my front walls, I started riding him once again. I was pleasantly surprised to find that his cum had mixed with my own wetness, creating such an abundance of lubrication that I was now able to slip over his cock ridges with more ease. I began to bounce on him, crying out with the exhilaration of taking such a massive length over and over. Fully recovered now, Torwood worked his hands beneath my ass, squeezing it and using his considerable strength to help push me up and down.

A truly monumental orgasm began to build in me, originating deep inside my abdomen. I knew it would be a kind of orgasm I'd only had a few times before, a whole-body shaking, G-spot pulsing screamer. I clamped a hand over my mouth preemptively, and was delighted when Torwood freed one of his own hands and replaced mine with it. I leaned into him, and prepared for the avalanche that was bearing down on me.

Then, Torwood craned his neck up, and his lips brushed against my ear.

“I love you very fucking much, Vanessa Greywick.”

Oh my god, that did it. A wave of heat rolled out from the pit of my stomach and

traveled to every end of my body, filling me with tingles. My vision became spotty, and I devoted all of my energy to muffling the scream that I projected into Torwood's hands. My shaking legs gave out and I dropped down onto him, impaled on his cock, the motion only pushing me further into the depths of my ecstasy. The world went black. Everything was warmth, and wetness, and ragged breath. And Torwood. Beneath the smell of sex was the scent that was so impossibly him, the smell of his sweat, the smell of his hair, the permeating pheromones of his arousal.

I lay on top of him for an endless moment, and did not even question the realization that I was completely in love with him. That I had been for a long time, and would be for as long as I lived. Torwood was my safety. Torwood was my home.

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Feeling like a wrung out dish towel, I finally pushed myself off of my orc. He had been stroking my hair and placing soft kisses on my forehead, and I knew unquestionably that if I didn't act I would be fast asleep in seconds.

He gazed at me as I tried to find my pants and underwear, and regain some semblance of dignity and control after that world shattering orgasm.

"You are a thing of pure magic,"

he whispered, and I was smiling even before I fully registered his words.

"You cornball,"

I teased, grinning now. "You think just because you gave me two of the best orgasms I ever had, you can say things like that to me?"

He smiled back, and we quietly collected ourselves. I nervously peered once again at

the dark shape of my brother, and he appeared to still be sleeping. If he'd indeed caught us, it seemed like he was planning to hold onto it until a later date.

“Well...goodnight,”

I said to Torwood as he began to move up the stairs.

“Wait. Vanessa,”

he said, and I looked back up again. He moved quickly, and pulled me in for a deep kiss. A real kiss, not one borne of naked lust, but a kiss that communicated a deeper kind of need. No, not a need. A promise. He held me in the promise for a long moment, then broke the kiss and moved away.

“I cannot wait to see you tomorrow,” he said.

I walked lazily back to my room, beaming like a teenager the whole time.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:46 am*

Torwood

In the morning, the house was abuzz with activity. It seemed as though Tom, or possibly Tom and Vanessa's father, had arranged a plethora of appointments as soon as the snow had melted. An assessor walked around the property taking notes in a legal pad, while a structural engineer perused the basement, knocking on walls and snapping photos of cracks in the foundation. Walzer, a pixie who owned a local vintage furniture store, was poking and prodding at the armchairs and bedframes, clearly hungry at the opportunity to flip some of Shirley's gorgeous antiques.

Shirley herself was doing her best to protest, but was being quieted by Tom, who assured her that the visitors were only getting a first look, and that nothing would be finalized until new arrangements had been made for her.

"Where is Vanessa?"

I asked, as I arrived in the foyer.

"Why?" said Tom.

"In the sunroom, with Kathen,"

she said. I grimaced. Kathen was a family friend and a fellow orc, but her occupation ensured that I had no love for her. I beat a quick retreat to the sunroom, cold but well-lit, with a wonderful view of the backyard.

Vanessa and Kathen were seated on opposite sides of a coffee table, a document

spread on the table between them. Kathen was pointing at a printed paragraph, while Vanessa seemed disengaged, leaning back in her cushioned chair. Her face lit up as she saw me enter.

“You’re up! Just in time for the circus,”

she said, a joke without mirth.

“Hello, Torwood. How have you been? I’m excited to get to work with you again,”

she said. I glowered at that. Kathen worked for a company that placed memory spells on the elderly, allowing them to live out their final days immersed in lifelike recollection of their happiest years. In turn they were rendered almost completely unaware of reality, able only to perform the basic functions of survival. The spell was a favorite of certain unscrupulous care homes, as it rendered their residents docile and friendly, with almost no material needs.

“Vanessa, is this what is being considered?”

I asked. I moved over to stand by her, and put a hand on the top corner of her chair.

“By Tom and my father, yes. By me, absolutely not,”

she replied, and gave Kathen a pointed look.

“Our Golden Years tier is just the first level,”

Kathen said, without acknowledging Vanessa or myself. “The Diamond Years tier includes an additional set of minor arcana which allows the client to receive the scent and touch inputs of memories, and introduces a feature we call the “eject button”, where a short trigger incantation can be recited to return them to a safe memory in

case their minds wander to anything uncomfortable. Torwood, this of course is the tier that your mother received, and as I recall she was quite happy with it, up until the very end,”

said Kathen.

My jaw clenched, and I felt a boiling begin in my stomach. I inhaled to respond, before Vanessa’s cool hand reached up and rested on mine. She met my eyes, and subtly shook her head no. She was right. Fighting Kathen here would do no good. Shirley would never let herself be put through this treatment anyways, and if-

“You grand bastard! You ratshit motherfucker! Put that back immediately!”

Shirley’s voice shot through the din in the house, and all three of our heads snapped in the direction of the front room. There was a clatter, a crash, and more shouting.

Vanessa raced out of the room first, and I was hot behind her, not caring if Kathen would be left alone. In the living room was a chaotic scene.

Shirley was on the floor, leaning against a wall and clutching an object in her arms. One of her philodendrons had fallen from a windowsill, and the potting soil was scattered around like there had been a struggle. Walzer flitted around the room shouting profanities, clutching at his arm as though it was hurt. Tom was trying frantically to calm the situation, and being roundly ignored.

“What the fuck is going on in here?”

shouted Vanessa.

I rushed over to Shirley and knelt beside her. “Are you alright? Have you fallen?” I asked.

“I’m fine, dear. I’m fine. But that man-”

she pointed furiously at Walzer, buzzing like a bee around the room, “needs to get the hell out of my home!”

I saw now what she was holding. It was a small box, which I knew contained Shirley’s engagement ring. It had been passed down from her own mother, and through countless generations beforehand. Not only was the ring beyond precious, but the box it was contained in was a work of art, crafted by merfolk silversmiths. The ring and box were hundreds of years old, and must have been worth a small fortune, not that you would know it by the nondescript placement on a bookshelf in the living room.

Against the burnished silver I saw the unmistakable lavender shimmer of pixie dust, and Shirley, small and huddled on the ground, with the vultures circling ever tighter around her.

I stood, and as I stood, I roared. The sound that emerged surprised even myself. It shook the window panes in their frames, flickered the fire in the mantle, and sent Walzer tumbling ass over teakettle into a nearby wall.

“OUT!”

The silence was complete, and unbroken for several seconds.

Then, in a burst of activity, the gathered plunderers began to stream out of the house.

The assessor, head held low, hurried up from the basement and made a quick exit without exchanging a word.

Kathen was not far behind, darting a nervous glance at me and silently placing a

business card on the hallway table as she left.

Walzer was last, blathering a pathetic stream of excuse and apology while he quickly packed his tiny measuring tapes and inventory lists and fluttered out the door.

I stalked over and shut it hard behind him.

“What the hell was that?”

said Tom, after the last unwanted guest was gone. His face was red, and a vein on his forehead looked dangerously close to popping. Brushing past him, I returned to Shirley’s side. She was being helped to the couch by Vanessa, who placed a hand on my forearm and mouthed “thank you”

as I approached. I was worried that I would see fear in her eyes, that my outburst had upset her, but all I saw was a mixture of deep gentleness for her grandmother, and steely fury directed at her own brother.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?”

shouted Tom from across the room. “You are not in this family! You don’t get to send my people away!”

I turned towards him. I could feel the ugly twisting of my face, and what Tom saw in it caused him to flinch and shrink. Then the anger returned, and he continued shouting. “Now it’s your turn to get the hell out of here, Tory,”

he said. I hadn’t heard that nickname since we were kids. “Don’t come back. If I can make a few calls, apologize, maybe I can save this-”

“He’s not going anywhere,”

said Vanessa. She was standing at my side, her arms crossed. I thought I could feel heat radiating from her, her rage even fiercer than my own. “Torwood has done more for grandma in the last few months than you or dad did in ten years. He has more of a right to be here than you do. Tommy.”

Tom’s eyes were wild. He looked at Shirley, but she merely shook her head and averted her gaze. His brow knit, and I thought I could see steam begin to escape his ears.

“I know...I know what’s happening,”

he began. “This is...oh, you thought I wouldn’t figure it out but I did. I saw what was going on last night. You two were pretty much on top of each other, all dressed up, playing footsie under the table. The flowers and the candles and the long looks. This was your plan all along, right Tory? That’s why you called my dad when my grandmother fell, because you wanted another shot at Vanessa. God, you’re probably the reason she fell in the first place, huh? You pushed her, didn’t you? But who cares, whether it was at a hospital or a funeral, at least you’d get to see my sister again. I knew I had to keep you away from her, I knew you’d just hurt her, you piece of shit. It looks like I was already too late.”

Tom looked meaningfully at Vanessa’s bandaged hand and the shining bruise on her face.

“That is not what happened!”

Vanessa protested, but she was ignored. Tom was in my face now, his expression a mask of rage, spittle flying from his flapping mouth.

“You betrayed me once, but you didn’t get your fill. Well, I didn’t get my fill either!”

And with that, he picked up the fallen houseplant and hurled it at me. The ceramic shattered against my chest, spraying dirt across the room. It did not hurt.

I remembered that all those years ago, Tom's rocks had not hurt me either. I had hurt me. My shame, my self-hatred, my rejection of Vanessa, had done more damage than any missile. If it wasn't for Vanessa's hard-headed refusal to let me mope my days away, then Tom's words would have struck deeply once again.

Instead, I walked over to Tom, grabbed the back of his belt in one hand and the collar of his shirt in another, and hoisted him like a poorly-behaving cat. Without waiting for his shocked response, I strode to the front door and kicked it open, wood splintering across the porch.

"I've wanted to do this for a long time,"

I said. I gathered my strength, swung my arms back, and tossed Tom clean over the porch and front steps, sending him sailing like a kite into the deep snowbank on our front yard. With a poof, he landed in the vast white expanse, creating a boy-shaped imprint in the snow.

I looked over my shoulder at Vanessa and Shirley, eyes shot open with surprise.

"I will fix the door," I said.

Vanessa

The rest of the day was difficult, but at the end of it, peace had finally returned to the house. Torwood and I tossed all of Tom's bags out after him, and we didn't hear another word from him as he gathered them and stormed towards a taxi. I spent the whole day dreading a furious call from my father, but it didn't come. Instead, Torwood and I focused on putting everything back that had been disturbed, and making sure that Grandma Shirley was alright. We danced around the events of the morning, not wanting to upset her further, but a dark cloud hung over her head.

The mood was melancholy as we finished up our dinner. Torwood had insisted on cooking, but I put my foot down and told him that he needed a night off. I couldn't stop him from sauteing vegetables and breaking out a chili and herb-infused oil to dress up the pizzas that I ordered, but it was nonetheless a quiet affair. Grandma Shirley nibbled at her crust, then straightened up and cleared her throat.

"Well, I'm sorry about this sour day spoiling our delicious meal. Torwood, I think there's something we show Vanessa to cheer us all up, no?" she said.

Torwood arched an eyebrow in confusion, before realization dawned on his face.

"Oh. Well, I don't quite...I am not ready,"

he replied.

"Nonsense, you big oaf. We've been practicing for weeks, and I think Vanessa will forgive you for a few missteps."

Torwood sighed, then pushed back his chair and stood. The mood was already getting lighter. He looked at me, deadly serious.

“You are not permitted to laugh.”

Grandma Shirley clapped her hands, then hopped to her feet. “Doctor Carol recommended a moderate amount of movement to keep my blood circulating while my leg got better. I told poor Torwood here that if he didn’t help me out then it was basically elder abuse. Hit it, T!”

With that, Torwood pressed play on the radio, and a CD began to spin. The tinny sound of a jazz tune began to drift out. It was an old one, Miles Davis or maybe that famous birdfolk saxophonist, what was his name? Charlie Parker?

Torwood leaned down, took Grandma Shirley’s tiny hand in his massive one, and began to step in time with her to the music. The height difference was so great that he had to bend almost ninety degrees at the waist so my grandmother’s hand could reach his shoulder. I could tell that he was helping her stay upright, and giving even more assistance to the float runes on her leg brace.

Grandma Shirley was a lifelong dancer. She was involved in a very modern company for most of her early life, and continued to find a community in dance even after she’d had my mom and moved to Pigeonpond. Her passion had ignited my own, and she was the first person I’d called when I was accepted to my first professional company. Dance had kept her nimble, and though she’d slowed down some, her movements were no less fluid and precise than I imagined they’d been fifty years prior.

Torwood, on the other hand, was a tank. His muscles could chop a young tree down in three axe swings or throw a shitty brother fifteen feet onto the lawn, but the coordination and poise needed for partner dance was simply not there. Despite

Grandma Shirley's best efforts, whispering instructions and gentle reminders to him, she couldn't stop his feet from crossing and his arms from flailing wildly. His chaotic steps were amusing and strangely familiar, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. At last it clicked: these were the exact clattering, arrhythmic thuds I'd heard from his room my very first night here.

My eyes welled up. I pictured Torwood in his room, probably shirtless, trying to learn the steps my grandmother had shown him so that he could support her while they danced. And then I had burst in and accused him of taking advantage of her. That night seemed like forever ago.

Torwood and Grandma Shirley swayed together for several more minutes. The clumsiness of the dance did nothing to diminish the impact it had on me, and by the end I was wiping away falling tears. The song concluded, and they clasped hands and executed an awkward bow. I whooped, and started clapping, hoping they wouldn't notice my wet face.

"That was amazing!"

I said, and I meant it.

"You wouldn't believe how much he's improved,"

said my grandmother, and a flare of pink rose in Torwood's cheeks.

"I...thank you for watching our dance, Vanessa,"

he said. Unable to restrain myself further, I rushed Torwood and pulled him into a deep hug. I shed a few more tears into his shirt before pulling away, and gave Grandma Shirley another, much more delicate, hug.

“Really amazing, you guys. You could sell tickets to that,” I said.

Grandma Shirley laughed, I laughed, and even Torwood started to chuckle under his breath. We laughed until our bellies hurt, sinking back into our chairs. The morning’s events had been weighing heavily on all of us, and it felt so good to forget it all for even a moment.

“Well,”

said Grandma Shirley once we’d settled back down. “I’m going to sleep soon. It’s been a long and difficult day, and I think we all need some rest. But, before I do, there’s one last thing I need to speak to you both about.”

I shared a look with Torwood. He placed a hand on my knee under the table and squeezed.

“Although he was being a right asshole about it, unfortunately I have to admit that Thomas had a point. I can’t stay here forever, and I can’t ask Torwood to give up his life to take care of me. I won’t always be the spry young woman you see before you; eventually I will need a change. This house is simply too big for me to keep on my own. Of course it’ll be hard to see it go, but at least we can do it on our own terms, no?”

“We’ll move in,”

I blurted out. “Well, not we since Torwood already lives here, but me. I’ll move in, and Torwood will stay. Right?”

His eyebrows sprung up in surprise. “You will stay? Then I will stay too.”

“I don’t want to leave you here alone again,”

I said. I was looking at my grandmother, whose eyes were beginning to brim with tears, but as I spoke I reached for Torwood's hand. I couldn't leave him either. "I'm sure I can find a job teaching dance here in town, and I have enough savings to make it work. We'll take care of you, and we won't let anything happen to you or to this house."

"I swear it,"

said Torwood. He was at my side, tall as a giant, one massive hand in mine and the other on my grandmother's shoulder.

"I...I don't know what to say,"

said Grandma Shirley after a long pause. "I thought this part of my life was over. I thought my family was over. Thank you. Thank you both."

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"Vanessa?"

a knock sounded on my door. I was halfway changed, wearing only my sleep shirt. My pants and underwear lay in a heap on the floor.

"Torwood?"

I responded. "What is it?"

The door creaked open, and the huge orc stepped inside, ducking to keep his horns away from the doorframe. He was, of course, without shirt.

"Oh! A thousand apologies,"

he said, instantly noticing my half-nakedness. He covered his eyes, and turned away.  
“I should have waited before entering,”

I reflexively pulled my shirt down over my crotch. Then, realizing the ridiculousness of that, I released my hands and let it spring back up. “It’s fine. You can look.”

He dropped his hands slowly, and I could feel his hungry gaze fixed on me. I felt a rush within my pussy, and I became very aware of the closeness of his muscled body.  
“I told you I was going to come up to your room after I got changed,”

I continued.

“Yes, but...”

he began, and paused.

“But what?”

His expression was strange, fixed restraint pulled tight over a raging fire. He was breathing heavily, and one fist was clenched tightly at his side. His cock, almost impossibly large and tantalizing, strained against the thin linen of his pants.

“But I could not wait.”

Torwood

Without a word Vanessa moved into my arms, and twisted around so her back pressed against me. She took hold of my wrist, and pulled my right hand across her stomach, bringing my hand to her wetness, just as she had our first night together. She was already soaking, and as I stroked circles on her clit she ground back against me, moving herself up and down on my engorged cock.

“Oh, fuck,”

Vanessa whimpered. My other hand traveled up beneath her shirt and found her nipple, hard and waiting. She quivered as I touched her, and I wanted nothing but to have her completely, to take her as my mate and never let her go.

“Wait,”

she said. “Let me...I’ve wanted to do this.”

She crawled onto the bed, teasing me with an unbelievable view of her pussy from behind, before turning around to face me and dropping onto her stomach, her chin propped up in her palm. She curled her finger, beckoning me to come close.

I moved towards her, and as soon as I was within reach, she grabbed my thick cock and pulled it to her mouth. The heat from her lips was unbelievable, like a hot bath had suddenly been poured over my tip. Working the base of my shaft with one hand, she opened wide and took me as far as she could in her mouth. She was able to reach the first ridge of my cock before without gagging, but stayed focused on her efforts

with her tongue, which lapped loving circles around my hardness.

“Your mouth is fucking hot,”

I growled at her. She looked up at me with her big brown eyes from below her messy bangs, her lips distended around me, and I nearly came right there. She reached a hand around my waist and grabbed my ass, pulling me deeper into her mouth. I began to thrust into her throat, and to her credit she was able to hold on even as the second ridge disappeared behind her lips. It was, perhaps, the sexiest thing I had seen in my entire life.

After a minute of this I could not contain myself any longer. “Gods. Vanessa. I am going to cum, I’m going to-”

She reached around to my flank with her other hand and pulled me, somehow, even deeper into her mouth. My orgasm came hot and fast, flooding her mouth before I could finish my warning. She swallowed the first few loads, but within a few seconds she had to release the seal of her lips and allow my seed to pour out of her open mouth.

I withdrew with a jerk, and the final few shots of my hot cum landed on her flushed and gorgeous face. I stumbled back, surprised by the speed and force of my orgasm.

“Gruumsh’s eye! I apologize. I was not aiming for your face,” I said.

Not seeming upset in the slightest, Vanessa merely gave a sly smile and used a finger to collect some of my seed from her cheek, before sucking it clean.

“You taste like cinnamon,”

she said, swinging her feet to sit on the edge of the bed. I watched my cum drip from

her mouth down to her perfect breasts, like a waterfall of pearls. Slowly, she spread her legs and revealed her impossibly wet cunt to me.

“I want all of you,” she said.

I felt unbridled, like a beast finally let loose on the hunt. Thoughts of our coupling on the stairs had not left me alone for the last day, and I could wait to be sated no longer. Any steel that had left my cock returned twofold, and I felt, distantly, disbelief and amazement that this human could have such a powerful effect on me.

I rushed her, scooping under her legs and hoisting her body up to mine. With the backs of her knees nestled in the crook of my elbows I brought her face to mine. I kissed her roughly and she kissed me back, tangling her fingers in my hair. I did not mind at all the taste of my own cum in her mouth, and could tell that Vanessa found this fact deeply arousing.

We kissed long and deep, until she was pleading and moaning, grinding her wetness against my upper abdomen, begging me to impale her with my cock, which stood proudly beneath her as if keening for her pussy.

I obeyed her, and slipped her legs down my forearms until the firmness of her ass rested in my palms. She was like clay in my hands, and could do nothing but mewl and bury her face in my chest as I began to graze the tip of my penis against her wet slit.

“Oh god, take me, take me, give it to me...”

she whimpered, her hands scraping up and down my back, trying to find purchase.

Not wanting to prolong her torment any further, I released some of the strength in my arm, causing her to fall and envelop the tip of my cock. She let out a long wordless

sound that morphed into cries for more. I let her down further, and the first ridge slipped into her. She gasped just as she had on the stairs, and her hands balled into fists behind my back. The second ridge went easily, and then the third. Vanessa was a mess in my arms, all the control she'd kept the previous night melted like spring snow.

I started to fuck her, easily bouncing her up and down on my cock, the ridges coming and going easier with each stroke. I thanked the gods that I had cum once already, as her tightness was already feeling almost too great to bear. Her nails dug deep furrows into my back and her heels bore into the top curve of my ass, hunting for purchase. Even her teeth were in the muscle of my chest now, and she hung to me for dear life as I pounded her. We continued for what felt like a small eternity, the rhythm of our bodies in total sync, my arms lifting and dropping her over and over, deeper and deeper on to my unimaginable hardness.

With a swift certainty, I felt my fourth and final cock ridge pass through into the smoldering velvet of her interior. This was not an experience I had ever imagined possible, not in my wildest fantasies. Vanessa raised her head from my chest and let out a throaty cry of pure pleasure. I moved quickly, releasing one hand from her ass and clamping it to her mouth so her scream would not wake her grandmother, or, perhaps, all the neighbors on the block. With the support of one of my hands gone, she slipped a few almost imperceptible millimeters deeper onto my cock, and with that, she was truly over the edge.

Vanessa's body shook, her inner walls contracting in waves that uprooted my own orgasm from within me. I began to fill her, still pressing a hand over her mouth, still holding her body up against mine, needing to focus intensely just to stay upright. We came together like neither of us had ever cum before, each height of pleasure only lifting the other's in what felt for a moment like it might be an endless cycle. I thought that I would dissolve into her, that we would join in that moment, and I would never want to separate.

At last, I collapsed forward onto the bed, careful to roll to my side to avoid crushing her tiny body beneath mine. Gingerly, I pulled out of her, and she let out a low moan as I did. She was flat on her back, her upper body flushed a deep crimson, legs still shaking from the force of her orgasm.

We lay together for a while, uncaring about the minor flood of our mixed cum staining the sheets. I ran my fingers through her hair as her breathing recovered and the twitchy aftershocks subsided, until she finally whined something that I couldn't hear.

“What was that, my love?”

I asked, then froze. I had not meant to say such a thing.

She half-cracked an eye, and gave me a smirk.

“I said, my love,”

she emphasised the words with a pause, “that was the greatest orgasm anyone has ever had, and I'm gonna fall asleep if you keep stroking my hair like that.”

I chuckled, and continued to caress her.

She groaned, and pushed herself up off the bed. “And I need to pee. For sexual health. It kills me, but I'll be right back.”

The motion was simple, a woman easing away from her lover with a promise to return, but the way it stirred my heart caught me off guard. I had known her, loved her for half my life, and now to be with her at last, I felt like I had recovered something long forgotten.

This would be my wife. I was certain of it; I had been certain of it for ten years. I would give her children, if she would have them. I would rip the heavens themselves to keep her safe, and I knew that she would do the same for me. She kissed me on the forehead, and pulled her clothes on. My wife. My Vanessa.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:46 am*

Vanessa

I never should have come back to Pigeonpond. I would get on the next train, get off at the airport, and fly...wherever. Who knows. Torwood could come with me, and Grandma Shirley, if I didn't kill her first. Maybe we'd go somewhere tropical, somewhere with coconut trees and beaches and no leprechauns in sight. I would open a dance studio and teach all the local kids ballet, and you know what, I'd take up surfing too. My deathly fear of the ocean and being allergic to coconut were minor obstacles. Maybe Torwood could be a fisherman, or a-

"Ma'am? Ma'am?"

a voice interrupted my fantasy, and snapped me back to my unpleasant reality: knelt on the floor, hair up in a scarf, cleaning leprechaun vomit out from the cracks between the hardwood. Those tiny fuckers could really party, and whatever they drank made their green puke thick and pungent. I turned my head to look at the speaker.

It was an older man with an English accent, who I knew as staying in Room 6. He was nice, and a very important customer. I shouldn't be mean to him, even if I was nauseated from the smell of bleach and vomit.

"Yes, Dr. Vanderclamp, how can I help you?"

"Terribly sorry to bother you, I can see this is a bad time,"

he began. I stood, peeling off my yellow gloves and wiping my hands on my apron.

Dr. Vanderclump was well put-together, with round spectacles and a smart suit jacket that made me feel quite underdressed.

“I just, well,”

he began. “How do I say this. I have been wanting to speak to you away from your grandmother, because, you see...I suppose what I’m trying to say is I’ve become rather taken with her, and would like to inquire if she is otherwise spoken for? I saw no wedding band on her finger, but of course didn’t want to presume.”

Oh. Oh. My bad mood alchemized quickly to a mischievous glee.

“Well, you are in luck. She’s a single gal, has been since my grandpa died.”

“Oh. I’m terribly sorry,”

he said, looking genuinely sad.

I waved him off. “It was a long time ago. Honestly, I think this is long overdue for her. She’s a real catch, you know.”

He smiled. “I can tell. I’d like to take her to dinner. Does she enjoy dwarven cuisine?”

I thought about it. I’d definitely seen her eat mushrooms before. Damn, I had really been craving mushrooms the last few days. “I think so. You know what? How about I talk with her, get her temperature on this before you go making any big moves. If she seems open to a date, I’ll let you know.”

“That sounds wonderful, thank you, ah...I didn’t catch your name?”

“Vanessa,”

I said, and stuck out a hand.

“Georges,”

he replied, shaking mine.

“Well, I’ll leave you to your task. Again, thank you very much, Vanessa.”

He returned to his room, and as soon as he was out of sight I cast off my apron and bolted down the stairs.

I rounded into the foyer like a slingshot, and made a beeline for the kitchen.

I passed the front desk, where Torwood’s young cousin Brul was checking someone in, and nearly toppled over the Welcome to Chateau Shirley, please ring bell for service sign.

I could see in the kitchen, beyond the saloon-style doors we’d installed, the large green back that could only belong to one man: my fiancée.

He was kneading dough on the counter while an incredible-smelling pot of soup simmered on the stove. I snuck up behind him and slipped my hands under his apron and around to his washboard abs. My favorite.

“I thought I told you that you have to wear a shirt in the kitchen, baby. It’s dangerous, and we don’t want any more guests complaining in their reviews,” I said.

“This apron is thick and protective,”

Torwood replied, his hands continuing to work the dough. If he was surprised by me, he didn’t show it in the slightest. “And, if I recall, what Ms. Dumitru wrote was not a complaint. I rather enjoyed being described as ‘sizzling like a vegan steak’.”

I rolled my eyes. “Well, Ms. Dumitru did book for another week in September, so I guess you didn’t scare her that badly.”

He chuckled, and the low noise reverberated through his body and into mine. I pressed my cheek against his bare back and closed my eyes contentedly. Sometimes I still couldn’t believe that this man was real, and that he was mine.

Wait, what was I doing here again?

“Oh! I have something to tell you!”

Torwood turned his head and gave an inquisitive look.

“Guess who just came up to me and asked for permission to take my grandma on a date?”

Torwood looked confused. “I do not know.”

“Fucking Vanderclamp! The professor? He’s in Room 6.”

Torwood’s eyes lit up with recognition. Georges Vanderclamp was a renowned lecturer on astronomy, who was currently being courted for a full-time position by Pigeonpond University. Each time he came to town he stayed with us, and I was realizing that the reason wasn’t just the soft beds and excellent room service.

“That is...exciting. He seems to be a kind man,”

said Torwood.

“I think he really is. I told him that I’d talk with her and figure out if she’s looking to get back in the dating scene. Wanna come with me? We’ll have to be subtle.”

“Hm. Subtlety has never been my strongest quality, and unfortunately there are guests waiting on me. But, you absolutely must tell me how this develops. This is very exciting news,”

he said, and placed a kiss on my forehead.

I meandered out of the kitchen and towards the back garden, where I knew my grandma was working.

I swung it open, and my eyes adjusted quickly to the sudden brightness.

The garden was flourishing, the trees heavy with fruits and trellises thick with vines. I spotted Julie watering the tomatoes, and waved to her.

A few weeks after she attacked me, Torwood and I found Julie wandering alone near the river.

She had escaped the Herbaceous Mother compound, but with no place to go was considering sleeping in the park that night.

She seemed significantly more lucid than when she had accosted me, and was unbelievably apologetic.

We offered to let her stay with us for the night, which turned into a few weeks, and when the inn reopened, became a job offer and a permanent room on the third floor.

Julie was, once rid of the cult fanaticism, a lovely woman, and her time under the Herbaceous Mother had left her with a mean green thumb.

Although it took a while to feel totally at ease with her, it became quickly clear that with her system free from the so-called “Mother’s pollen”, she was harmless.

“Hey Julie, is my grandma out here?” I asked.

“She’s over there harvesting the zucchini,”

she replied with a grin. “Well, more like trying not to get squished by the zucchini. Some of them are already bigger than she is!”

I squinted, and made out the shape of my grandmother huddled behind the massive leaves of a zucchini plant. I walked over her, carefully treading between the rows of vegetables. Our inn wouldn’t be able to keep its renown for delicious, fresh vegetarian meals if I stomped all over everything.

“Hey grandma! How’s the gardening?”

Shirley looked up at me, from her hunched position, shaded by the broad flat zucchini leaves. In the year since we’d opened the inn, it seemed like she had been aging in reverse. Her leg was completely healed, her skin was tan and rosy, and she sprung around greeting guests and tending the grounds like a woman half her age.

“Endless. How’s the clean-up in Room 5?”

“Similar. I needed a break before I added my own puke to the floor.”

She cocked an eyebrow at me. “You’re usually pretty good with the gross shit,”

“Yeah, well, these leprechauns were gross gross. Anyway, what are you gonna use these guys for?”

I hefted a zucchini, and made an effort not to blush. My relationship to large, green objects had...changed.

“Dinner tonight. Pasta with basil and zucchini pesto and a side of fried pink oyster

mushrooms. We're gonna roast some of those cherry tomatoes too,"

she said, pointing at a nearby bush heavy with golden and red fruit.

This was perfect. "Mushrooms, huh? Bit of a dwarvish twist. I've really been craving dwarvish food recently, I didn't know you liked it too."

"Well sure. There used to be a great dwarvish diner by the waterfront many years ago. Your great-aunt Sarah worked there for a few summers, when we were kids. All us siblings would go visit her after school and sit on the pier and eat leftover bits of their famous serviceberry pie."

She looked wistful, her hand resting loosely on her basket, lost in memories.

"I wish I'd met more of your siblings. It must have been tough being here without any family since grandpa died. Do you, uh, ever wish your family would grow more?"

Nice. About as subtle as a plane crash. Shirley looked at me, slightly bewildered.

"Well, of course having you and Torwood here has been wonderful, dear. Is this about Tom?"

"No, not about Tom,"

I replied.

Tom hadn't reached out directly since the event we now referred to as "the tossing", but each month since an envelope arrived in the mail with no return address, stocked full of cash. He didn't even try and deny it when I finally called him. Tom didn't ask to visit, or ask about Torwood, but did let me know that he had quit our dad's company and was finally trying to make it on his own. I guess it was his strange,

stunted way of apologizing, and it had helped the inn out tremendously in the first few unsteady months.

I saw Shirley glance back at the house, towards the sunroom where Torwood was pouring tea for a guest. A slow grin spread on her face. “Say no more, dear. Yes, I would be very open to adding someone to our little family unit. Thrilled, in fact.”

Wait. No. That’s not what I-

“Grandma, I’m not pregnant. The guy in Room 6 wants you to go on a date with him, and I was supposed to find out if you were interested. Georges Vanderclump, he’s a professor. He’s gonna ask you to go to a dwarvish restaurant, and you’d better act surprised when he does.”

Damn it all to hell. Torwood would laugh in my face when I told him how this had gone down.

“Oh! Well,”

she said, and let out a decidedly girlish giggle. “I can’t pretend I haven’t caught him looking my way more than once. He’s very handsome, no?”

To me Georges looked like any other grandpa. “Super hot, yeah. Anyways, you should probably start thinking about a nice outfit. Do you own makeup? I’ll buy you some, I need to go to the store for some stronger cleaning supplies anyway.”

We chatted about the date for a little longer, feeling funnily like I was a teenager helping my friend get ready to meet a boy she liked. I think my grandma felt the same way, and when I finally bid her goodbye and hopped on my bicycle to head downtown, she was positively glowing.

A drugstore was located a pleasant ten minute bike ride from the inn. I hunted down a

nice blush and mascara which I thought would compliment Grandma Shirley, then found the cleaning supplies I needed.

An annoying thought nagged in the back of my head, despite my best efforts to ignore it. At the checkout counter, as though taunting me, a display of pregnancy tests stood on the counter by the candies and travel-size lotions.

Fuck, fine. I grabbed one, scanned it, paid, and walked out. The nausea, which hadn't really gone away since this morning, the strange mushroom cravings...it was probably just a coincidence, right?

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That night, Georges and Grandma Shirley went out on their date, leaving Torwood and I to mind the inn. We served dinner and coffee, cleaned up, then found ourselves blessed with an evening free from clogged toilets or late check-ins.

“Would you like to practice our dance?”

Torwood asked me. I had taken his dance education into my own hands, and we were now pursuing the fine craft of the two-step. It turned out neither of us were very good at it, but that only made it more fun.

“Sure!”

I said. “Just don't step on my feet this time, okay?”

He laughed. We were alone in our room. The lamps were off, the only light shining from the floating candles that dotted the room. We liked it that way, just as it had been during our first few days together. I put on a record, a slow old country song, and Torwood placed a hand on my back. I grabbed his bicep, unable to reach his tall shoulder.

We swayed together, and I leaned my head against him.

“Would you like to try some steps?” he asked.

I was silent. He didn’t ask again, just began to stroke my hair while we danced slowly. Things would change soon. Maybe Grandma Shirley would move away with Georges, or her health would decline. Maybe the wedding would be a complete disaster. Maybe Tom or my dad would show up and wreak havoc. Maybe Torwood and I would have less of this precious time alone. Maybe, maybe, maybe. Torwood’s chest was warm, and his heartbeat was steady.

I sighed, then smiled.

“I have something I need to tell you.”

Want to see how Torwood and Vanessa first fell for each other ten years ago?