

The convention's rave was in full swing, and Janet let it carry her along.

“*Whoa-oh-whoa-oh-oh, it's always a good time!*” she sang, feeling tipsy despite having drunk nothing. She bounced in rhythm to the pounding, bass-heavy mix of *Good Time*, and the suspenders of her Misty cosplay bounced with her. “Woo!”

Then she glanced at Rich, a model of sobriety in his Brock cosplay. He was only tapping his foot: a statue in an ocean of energy. Occasionally he'd eye his orange shirt and green vest, then wince as his gaze continued onto the surrounding masses.

Janet, hopping like there was no tomorrow, couldn't help but follow his line of sight: there was so much to see. All around her, hands pointed at the roof, but also paws and claws. A trio of birds hopped off to their right, frenzied wings threatening to smack anyone within their radius. A Renamon fursuiter bumped into her back, and pantomimed an apology as they backed off.

Things got stranger the more she looked. A purple-maned white unicorn costume, with the right size to be one person on all fours; a pair of satyrs bounding around with seemingly inhuman agility; a trio of ladies who all looked *exactly* like Marilyn Monroe, or at least Janet assumed they were ladies until one laughed in a deep, masculine voice.

She shivered, and returned her attention to the stage, where the DJ wore flashing cat ears and a neon costume. Something *reasonable*.

“Come on!” she yelled, waving to her immovable boyfriend. “Dance, baby! *Woke up on the right side of the bed—*”

He rolled his eyes and said something she couldn't hear.

“What?” she yelled, hopping closer. *What's up with this Prince song inside my head?*

“I feel naked!” he yelled. “Why'd you make me wear this thing?”

“Oh come on, like you need a fursuit to enjoy a party—”

“*Skinsuit,*” he called back. *Hands up if you're down to get down tonight—*

“Who cares? These costumes are way lighter! And not so... *weird!*” She wasn't hopping anymore, and it took her a moment to realize. *'cause it's always a good time*, the song said, not that she agreed.

“Weird? Look at all these people!” He gestured, almost slapping a giant-eyed doll girl straight out of an anime. “They're not weird here, they're awesome and fun, and you'd get it if you just gave it a *try!* And they're fun in *other* places too....”

She vividly recalled him opening his extra suitcase, letting two fleshy suits spill into their hotel room. They'd been cartoonish, but anatomically correct; Janet knew what *other* places he meant.

She grimaced like she'd done then. Rich threw his arms up, then dropped them as quickly. “No, I get it. I know you can be scared about trying new things, it's *fine*.”

Was this reconciliation, or biting sarcasm? Janet assumed the latter. “*Scared?* Are you kidding me? You don't need to be *scared* of something,” she yelled, louder than she needed to, “to think it's a *stupid* idea!”

“Oh, I *totally* see where you're coming from there—for instance, I'm not scared of this *costume!*” he retorted, tugging his vest. “Look at this, it's ugly as hell! And the wig itches! I look stupid!”

She gasped, then glared. “I made these cosplays for us! I thought you'd *like* it!”

“I bought *those* skinsuits for us, and I thought you'd like *that!*” Rich scratched his wig, and it shifted to reveal a shock of ginger hair. “Ugh, forget it. I'll be back later, *maybe*. You might not recognize me!”

“See you later, jerk!” she called at his back as he disappeared into the crowd, stepping behind a bikini-clad supermodel—with a silver zipper up her back. Janet went bug-eyed.

She was gritting her teeth, she noticed, and she wasn't dancing. Forcing a spring back into her step as the song changed tempo, she re-synched to the rhythm. Who needed Rich?

“*Good morning and good night,*” she sang, then muttered: “It was *not* an ugly vest. And I am *not* scared.”

We don't even have to try, it's always a good time!

She hated to admit it, but the crowd seemed more intimidating without Rich—more judgey. She checked that her wig hadn't slipped, then that her suspenders hadn't fallen off, then that her top hadn't bounced off her boobs. A lizard scale-suiter glanced at her, and she instinctively looked away. She *knew* no one cared, but... she *did* feel underdressed.

What was she doing? She ground to a halt, glancing at the empty space that Rich had left; somehow it hadn't been filled by the press of surrounding bodies. She'd been hyped to come here with him, had been so glad he'd talked her into it, but... those suits! Those floppy *things* he'd shown her in his suitcase—asking her to *wear* one? She got claustrophobic just *thinking* about it.

Why did she keep thinking about it?

—

He surveyed the rave from its edge, a king contemplating his domain, and saw a disturbance.

What is it, part of him wondered. *I don't know if I'm up for more dancing yet.*

There's a girl in the middle, all alone, he answered, his lips remaining still. *Dressed like Misty, from Pokemon.* He squinted. *Longish nose, Cleopatra-esque. She's out there, hugging her arms, not dancing.*

Cleopatra nose, Misty cosplay... Does she have four piercings on her right ear? Naively, one

might think Ragnos's thoughts sounded like whispers under his skin, too quiet to hear over the pounding beat outside.

“Excuse me,” he said, letting a little *Ragnos* into his voice. A Lucio and a D.Va in front of him turned and noticed him for the first time: they jumped apart in shock. He could forgive them for not noticing him sooner: Ragnos was resting right now, not fully *on*. That, however, seemed poised to change.

“Thank you,” he rumbled, nimbly entering the opening they'd left in the crowd. The Misty girl was far ahead, but as he got closer—yes, *four piercings*.

I saw her before, he realized in response. *Earlier yesterday, but I couldn't be sure I recognized her. Her name is Janet. A part of me knew her for a while in college. She always looked so shy... and that boyfriend of hers, Rich, he wasn't mean or anything, but he always looked at other, bigger guys, always like he was contrasting himself with them....*

He stopped for a moment. *Shall I go to her?*

His answer didn't hesitate: one confident pull in the right direction.

Ragnos surged forth, his careful steps transformed into confident strides that fit him better. Someone out there, maybe two someones, needed help. How best, he wondered, to approach her?

—

“Excuse me, human miss?”

The voice wasn't loud, but Janet heard it easily; its masculine confidence pierced the hubbub like a ship's prow carving the sea. She looked around, and couldn't find the speaker—but then something tapped her shoulder. “Over here.”

Janet whipped around and stared at the cyan dragon-centaur that had appeared in Rich's empty space.

She knew who this had to be. All day, the convention had buzzed about the costume that had won the dance contest, and which had earned yet more admirers today. Rumor flew about the way they moved—the way *he* moved. He looked like a two-person costume, but no one had ever caught the two halves out of sync: no testing touch to the rear had gone unnoticed by the front, and few gestures of the front hadn't carried naturally through to the rear. He'd shown no handler, no zipper, no breaks from the heat of the costume.

Assuming he *was* a costume—but no one could be sure *what* he was. Two Cirque du Soleil performers, advertising an upcoming show? One person operating a hyper-advanced puppet? A robot, controlled or autonomous? Hell, maybe an actual fantasy creature?

The convention only agreed on two things: Ragnos was his name, and wherever he strode the spotlight came with him.

“Uh?” Janet stammered, staring him up and down. His scales iridesced in the flashing light.

Like Rich, he wasn't dancing, but he hadn't a hint of unease about him: his tail undulated lazily, and he leaned slightly forward with lips upturned. Janet drew back, like he was a bonfire she couldn't approach for fear of getting burned.

He flashed her a smile filled with pointed teeth. "I was wondering," he said in his easily booming voice, "if I might ask your help. You see...." He affected a pained expression and sauntered closer, just inside her bubble. With one sculpted arm he pointed back toward his rear, as his rear-left leg pawed expectantly at the floor. "I've got this *itch* I can't scratch, and then I saw you—pardon me, I didn't catch your name?"

"Um—Janet," she mumbled, and he cupped his ear. She tried again, louder: "Janet!"

"Excellent volume, Janet—as I was saying, I saw you, and I thought you would be *just* the human to scratch my *itch*." He beckoned with that arm, still perilously close to his rear. "Come close, human girl," he said reassuringly, "it's okay to touch."

She tiptoed forward, ready to bolt if things got weird. "You want me to do.... what exactly?"

"Just there, on my lower thigh—I can't quite *reach*," he groaned, stretching back to no avail, pointing at a spot his claw couldn't touch.

A *literal* itch. Janet relaxed, and extended her hand. The rear leg straightened into her fingers, and as soon as she started scratching, Ragnos moaned, "Oh, that's *fantastic*, Janet, don't hold back," and closed his eyes in ecstasy. His tail flicked to and fro.

Her scratching increased in vigor, and his leg relaxed into her touch, muscles rippling beneath the skin as if muscles were the only things under there. Janet narrowed her eyes. Making sure Ragnos's eyes were closed, she pulled away.

Immediately, he rounded on her in one well-coordinated spin. "Why did you stop?" he demanded. He was only a little taller than she was, but his horns cast shadows over her, and her tongue caught in her throat.

Immediate!

After a few seconds, he smiled. "Oh, I understand," he rumbled: the bonfire's heat returned. "You're not the first, after all, to wonder if I'm real." He winked. "Go on, then...."

Janet gulped, looking into his eyes. "Are you... real?"

Grinning, he raised a claw to brush through her wig; she stiffened at the touch. "Dear Misty... are *you*?"

She blinked, and realized she was breathing heavily—and as she looked around, people really *were* staring at her. Gaping, even. She saw one of the Marilyn Monroes pulling out a smartphone.

"No photos—not *yet*!" Ragnos declared, and the Marilyn fumbled her phone in surprise. "It's all right," he murmured to Janet, still brushing her hair soothingly, and she realized she was clutching her sides. "*No one* is looking at Janet right now, poor human girl. A few are looking at Misty... but all of

them are looking at *Ragnos!*”

He strode in front of her and posed like a strongman. “*Now*, photos are *appreciated*,” he boomed, and as Janet hid behind the shield of his body, she heard shutters clicking. She took deep breaths.

“And a few with the lovely girl, perhaps?” she heard. *What?* Her head whipped up, but Ragnos smiled down to her, radiating warmth. “Don't worry, Janet, it's only Misty they're after. They won't bite *you*.”

He held her shoulder, and she felt herself calm at the touch. She heaved a few more breaths, then walked around Ragnos and posed to the cameras.

The pose was generic: a sideways peace sign in front of her eyes, cocked hips, and a cheerful smile to tie it together. The cameras ate it up nonetheless, and Janet felt like a model on a runway. For some reason, the thought didn't make her want to shrivel and die.

Ragnos, not to be outdone, reared up on his hind legs and held the pose for several seconds. The crowd *oohed* and took yet more pictures.

At last, with another wave of Ragnos's hand, the photographers dispersed. A nervous laugh escaped Janet as she put her pose away. Then she sighed, as someone else came to mind.

“My dear?” Ragnos stepped in front of her, and his equine body wound sinuously around her torso, enveloping her. His tail curved in, completing the loop. Her breath caught at this squeezing contact. “If I might be presumptuous... you did not come here alone.”

His emerald eyes pierced her as easily as his voice cut through the rave. It was intimidating, but with Ragnos surrounding her, Janet couldn't help but feel... safe. She nodded. “You were thinking of him, just now,” Ragnos continued, leaning closer to her, concern filling his features. “Where is he?”

“Rich said he might not be coming back,” she said, glowering at the floor. “After our fight...”

His claw scooped gently under her chin, raising her head. “Would you like to talk about it?”

She sighed, and rested her elbows on his back as if he were a bar—and the bartender, whom she'd tell her woes. “He talked me into coming to the con in the first place, and that was cool, I was gonna push my boundaries a bit! But then he brought these two... weird costumes—he called them skinsuits—and wanted us to wear them out? I mean, it's weird enough that they were full-body, but then they were both female—and anatomically correct! Now, *that's* not appropriate!”

Ragnos growled in a cadence like a wolf-whistle, and his tail twitched.

“I just... I made *these* cosplays for us to wear, and he didn't tell me he was bringing *those* weird costumes and it's like he—he doesn't even *care!*” She grabbed her head with both hands. “And they're *really, really weird*, and I guess... I guess I *am* scared,” she admitted. *Admitted to this total stranger.* Her hands gripped tighter. *What was she—*

Ragnos's chuckle broke through her burgeoning self-recrimination. “*Weird*,” he said, squinting

and pondering as if the word were wine to taste-test. “Am I *weird*, Janet? Am I... scary?”

Janet grunted, looking up. “You are *incredibly* weird. And, um....” She blushed. “A little scary?”

“Very true. But weird can be *incredibly* good, can't it?” His hand idly stretched out to brush through her hair again, and she hardly noticed the intrusion—or, rather, didn't think of it as an intrusion anymore. “And scary can be a little....”

His claw idled down to rest on her neck—*around* her neck. Leaning down close to her ear, he sucked in a breath through his grin. She glanced at his teeth, noticing how *sharp* they were. “*Fun*,” he whispered, and his breath was hot on her face. *Malice* twinkled in his eyes, and she stiffened—and blushed even warmer.

Abruptly he straightened, giving her back some of her personal space—but his claw remained. Janet shivered, feeling the tips of his claws on her neck, and—if she was being honest—*liking* it. “Yeah, I guess so.”

Feeling she ought to reciprocate, Janet rubbed her hand down Ragnos's bony spine a few times. He relaxed beneath her touch, stretching into it like a cat and groaning in pleasure, and she glowed.

“Up a bit, up a bit,” he said, tapping a spot in the middle of his back, and she obeyed. “Now, one more question for you,” he purred, wiggling at her touch. “You're frustrated that he never told you what he was doing beforehand.” He frowned. “Did you ever tell *him*?”

She froze mid-rub. “Uh... I mean,” she mumbled, trying to look away.

But he still had her neck. “*Janet*,” he warned. His grip grew ever so slightly *firmer*, and his body curled tighter around her.

“*Oh, fuck*,” she whimpered, and sucked in a shaky breath, squirming. “You're right. You're right, it's the same. He probably feels just the way I do—god, I'm so stupid....”

Both his grips loosened, and he returned to brushing her hair. “No, Janet, you're not.”

She blinked at him, and he continued, “You're right, though: he *did* feel the same as you. You both wanted to surprise each other. To make each other *happy*.” He chuckled. “Dear Richard suggested something outside your boundaries, to be sure... but he didn't mean harm by it. The important thing is that you communicate: that's always important—I should know!”

He laughed. “And about those boundaries... I think you've enjoyed *pushing* them this lovely evening, haven't you?”

The hubbub of the crowd returned abruptly to full focus. Janet was surrounded by hundreds or thousands of people, dancing to some other jam by Owl City, and *all* of them had seen her at the mercy of this otherworldly creature, whimpering with pleasure, and people must have taken *pictures*—

She felt a phantom clawtips at her neck, and Janet realized how much the crowd mattered. “You're right,” she said, awed by her words.

"I know." Ragnos leaned in again, smiling gently. "It's just us. Ragnos, and the human girl who dared to steal a piece of his heart."

If he hadn't delivered the line with untouchable conviction, it would have sounded unbearably corny. But he *had*, and Janet was weak at the knees.

"I, um—" She took a breath to steel herself. "Can I ask you for something?"

His eyebrow rose a fraction, and she took it as a 'yes'. "Can I ride you?"

"Oh-ho-ho!" he chortled, his rear twitching with mirth. "How *forward*, Janet. And here I'd heard you had a *boyfriend*...."

"I don't mean like that!" she stammered. "I mean, ride you like a horse. It looks like it would be fun!"

His eyes went wide. "Dear me, you think *that's* not forward? Not that I disapprove," he added slyly. "But it's been a long day. I wonder.... am I," he boomed with sudden volume, "up to the task of carrying this fair maiden?"

Janet wondered who he was booming for, but—of course—the crowd was around her, waiting as anxiously as she was. Had no one dared to ask Ragnos this before?

After a pregnant pause, Ragnos shivered, and let out a sigh of pleasure. "The answer is a *definitive* 'yes', my dear. Up you go!"

Janet beamed, and lifted a leg over Ragnos's back. He reached behind his chest, grabbed her tank top, and hoisted her like a toy. The crowd cheered as she settled onto him.

"Yeah, woo!" she exclaimed, holding tight on Ragnos's horns as he finally started dancing—just as the music switched back to a triumphant reprise of *Good Time*.

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Rich sighed and adjusted his ever-scratchy wig as he stared at the elevator. Through that door, up to room 607, and he could change out of Janet's low-cost cosplay and into what he'd brought. He could *really* cut loose and enjoy himself, in a body he chose *himself*!

He'd been there for twenty minutes, and the more he thought these things, the less he believed them. Who was he kidding?

Of *course* Janet wasn't into it. He knew she wasn't up for weird stuff, and he'd been stupid to ask, and now she'd hate him, and break up with him for some *pretty* boy—

Gritting his teeth against what he *knew* were delusions, Rich turned away from the elevator and bent over the water fountain to quench his thirst. It was, unfortunately, reflective: he saw his face, including the leftover acne blemishes which his ginger bangs usually hid, when they weren't held hostage by Brock's wig. He grimaced, then sputtered as some water went down the wrong way.

Tacitly admitting defeat, Rich stood up straight, took a water bottle from his vest, and filled it for later. Admittedly, the skinsuit didn't have pockets: the vest, however tacky, was proving its worth.

Rich wandered back to the floor, trying to think of whatever apology could make things right this time. "Janet?" he yelled from the edge of the crowd. A hulking giant dressed as Kratos, with a rare example of the physique necessary to really *rock* the cosplay, glanced back at the sound. Rich winced and rolled down his sleeves.

"Janet!" he repeated, staying at the edge. "Hey, Janet?" No doubt she'd have let herself get pushed out of the tumult. If she hated anything, it was being the—

"All right! Woo!"

Center of attention?

In the *middle* of the crowd, he saw a Misty cosplayer, riding on a... blue horse thing. A Misty cosplayer who *sounded* like Janet, bouncing to the tune of *Fireflies*, because apparently the DJ had a hard-on for Adam Young.

Rich blinked. Then he pressed forward, pushing revelers to the side, trying to keep his hands off any errant breasts. "Excuse me," he said, squeezing between some handsy Zootopians, "coming through—"

He reached her, and his jaw dropped. This put him in good company with the circle of people surrounding Janet and the 'blue horse thing'. (At least, the ones who weren't chanting, "Go Misty, Go Misty!")

First of all—not a horse thing, but a hybrid dragon-centaur. A dracotaur? It glimmered in the strobelight, and cavorted in circles like a mechanical bull, while somehow staying on-beat. Its reptilian lips curled with fiery glee, and its laughs boomed through the crowd. Rich leaned forward to look for seams, then jumped back as the tail whipped out.

More stunning than the mythological creature was Janet, who rode it with equal passion: bouncing as it bounced, laughing as it laughed. As Rich stared, she gripped its horns tightly, then stood up straight on it back: the dracotaur glanced up at her, then reared up on its hind legs until her orange wig brushed the ceiling. The crowd erupted in cheers and photography.

"What the *hell*," Rich yelled, his eyes slits of anger, "are you two doing with my girlfriend?"

Janet glanced at the noise and finally noticed him. She jumped off the dracotaur's back, stumbling on the dismount (the crowd still applauded). "Rich!" she said, embracing him, but he pushed her away. And to think *he'd* been coming to *apologize*!

"Who is—who are they?" he demanded, gesticulating at the two-person costume in front of him. "And what were you doing? You'd *never* do that!"

"Oh! Well, um...." She giggled, blushing. "Baby, this is Ragnos. Ragnos, this is—"

"Richard," Ragnos interrupted, ambling their way. "Shortened to *Rich* for purposes of

affection.” He—it—smiled. “Hello, Rich.”

Richard glared back. “It’s right along your back, isn’t it?” Ragnos cocked his head in puzzlement. “The *zipper*, duh. Come on, open up, so I can see who’s trying to—” Rich spluttered for a moment before settling on, “*Seduce* my girlfriend!”

Janet gasped, blushing deeper. “Rich, it’s not—I mean—”

Ragnos chuckled, and she fell silent. “*Open up*, you say? I’d love nothing more. But first....” He moved closer to Richard, not showing an ounce of the shame which Richard *desperately* wanted him to feel. “I think I’ll have to compliment your girlfriend, Richard dear,” he remarked, glancing back at her.

“Oh yeah, talk her up some more. You think you’re so *hot* with those fake muscles and—”

“*On her excellent taste in men.*”

Richard’s comeback lodged in his throat. Ragnos stared down at him, showing a hint of teeth in a devilish grin, and his warm breaths brushed Richard’s cheek.

“Yes,” Ragnos continued, before Richard could respond. “So unlike me, of course—then again, who isn’t?” He smiled, kicking out idly with his rear leg. “Yet, in place of horns and tail and sturdy musculature....”

And then Ragnos knelt before him.

The back half followed, and Ragnos’s rump rested entirely on the floor, his tail curling docilely on its side. Where Ragnos had loomed over him before, now he gazed tenderly up into Richard’s face—and then at his arm.

Rich felt his anger bleeding away to some hole in the ground, and he didn’t know how to get it back. He stared down Ragnos’s back and couldn’t see a zipper—and then Ragnos’s arm reached out and gripped his tricep. “Hey, wait—” he began, as the claw pulled up to the shoulder, bringing the sleeve with it and exposing the skin beneath.

“In place of all that, we have tender skin and boyish charm,” Ragnos murmured. “Such a slender build, lithe and... mmm, adaptable. But with just enough strength at the core for some fun....”

Richard leaned in despite himself. All those muscles had looked so untouchably hard before, and yet now... Ragnos, this costume, was so soft. Demure, like a centaur maiden from Fantasia’s Pastoral Symphony. “Rich,” he asked, “would you flex for me?” He squeezed Richard’s bicep, gazing up with tender eyes.

Meeting Ragnos’s gaze, Richard complied without thinking. The bicep strained against Ragnos’s scaly claw, and improbably, Richard won: Ragnos’s grip was forced to slacken. “Perfect,” Ragnos breathed, “it’s perfect. You should keep these rolled up.”

He wanted to protest—obviously the dragon-thing was just humoring him, even if he didn’t get why—but he didn’t have the words. Murmuring from the crowd penetrated Rich’s skull: he felt like he was awakening from trance. “Wait a minute,” he said, pulling his arm out from Ragnos’s grasp, and

Ragnos made no attempt to hold on. Somewhere a camera shutter clicked—

“Delete that photograph.”

Ragnos's eyes were slits, and he pointed directly at a Yoko Littner holding a phone, who jumped back in surprise. A moment later, Ragnos turned to affix her with his glare. “Delete it,” he repeated, not with anger but with intense *certainty* billowing off him. His musculature rippled, suggesting a strength that could shatter boulders in one fist. “No pictures of any kind, not until the young man feels comfortable.” Yoko hurried to comply.

Rich was frozen in mid-step. “You see it now,” Ragnos said, returning his eyes to Richard's: the intensity melted away, or at least rested behind a layer of tenderness, and his body was soft once more.

He reached for Richard's fingers, took them, pulled them in to rest on his own bicep—thicker, even when relaxed, than Rich could hope to equal. Yet under his hesitant touch, it was pliant and yielding. “You don't think these muscles are all that give me strength, do you? These things inside me, they're not what make me *me*—and they'd be beautiful no matter what size they were.”

Richard gulped, sensing the analogy. “I'd understand,” Ragnos said, “if you said no, but....” His teeth tugged at his lower lip. “May I keep on admiring you? Please?”

“Um... what?” Rich shivered; Ragnos lifted his hand with a claw and laid it to rest, delicately, on Ragnos's own cheek. He held Ragnos—held this powerful creature in his own hand, and Ragnos was asking for *Richard's* permission to *admire* him.

Rich shook himself mentally. It was a costume, idiot. “What do you—what do you want?”

“Well, I was thinking of praising your calves,” Ragnos purred, brushing a claw-tip against the back of his right leg: the touch just barely *kissed* his skin through Brock's long jeans. Richard shivered anew, but so did the dracotaur, all the way down his body length. “Just... the subtle contrast they provide with your arms. Both relatively slender with hidden strength, but here the strength is more obvious—thicker. Do you jog, dear Rich?”

“Bike. I bike, on weekends,” he stammered, legs shaking. This thing had seen *that* through his *pants*? There was no way they showed through the khakis, it had to be a lucky guess, or a lie—

“It shows.” Ragnos's eyes twinkled. “If I could ride, I'd love to go with you.”

Now, slowly, Ragnos rose and advanced on Rich. His claw traced up the front of Richard's pants, then his shirt, before stopping upon his sternum. “A nice chest, continuing the theme,” he whispered, half-crouched and letting his palm press against Rich's slight pectorals. “Slender but strong. The vest does a nice job embellishing—”

“Stop it,” Rich muttered, looking away.

The palm lifted from his chest, hovering inches away. Ragnos looked up with concern, but his gaze was gradually leveling as he rose.

“You're not that slick. You think no one's ever played this game with me before?” The anger was

flowing back up, but from a poisoned well. Rich felt his words choking him as his volume rose. “Someone who wasn't two guys in a Halloween costume, trying to make me look like an idiot? You think I don't know what you're doing?”

Ragnos's tail twitched. “Do not accuse me of playing games, little human,” he said mildly, back at his full height.

Richard gulped: the anger had flowed on, but the poisonous pain it had brought left its residue. But Ragnos wasn't scornful, or even pitying. All Rich saw was....

“Richard,” Ragnos began, stepping closer, “as I complimented Janet before, so I must praise you on your excellent choice of a girlfriend. She's beautiful, vivacious, and has more boldness than you ever guessed.”

Richard blinked several times, and Ragnos frowned. “Do you think a girl as wonderful as that would choose someone who was less than perfectly handsome, dear Rich? Do you think *I* would, as I have?”

All Richard saw was affection—affection he could even believe. Ragnos leaned in and kissed him, gently, on the cheek, then leaned further in for an embrace that Rich had to return, melting into Ragnos like he was hugging a pillow. He closed his eyes tight and sniffed, squeezing hard. He heard 'aww's from the crowd, albeit confused 'aww's.

“There's that lovely strength,” Ragnos murmured. “Look at all them,” he continued, turning Richard in a slow circle. “All those people in the crowd, what do you think they're saying to themselves? I'll tell you—they're asking, *How did I never see what Ragnos saw? Those prominent cheekbones, that button nose, those warm brown eyes—how did I miss them?*”

Ragnos pulled away with apparent effort, holding Richard's arms. “And I'm afraid,” he said, pouting, “that I may not be able to keep them from their photographs for much longer. So, dear Rich, are you ready to give the people what they want?”

His claw reached slowly for Rich's sleeve, but Rich patted it away. He took a breath, then rolled up his own sleeves, turned to the crowd, and flexed both arms..

“That's *exactly* the spirit!” Ragnos laughed, and spread his arms wide for the crowd, his grin shining. “He's *comfortable* at last, creatures of the dance! Bring out the cameras!”

A cheer arose, but mostly what rose up were smartphones, flashing in the semi-darkness of the rave to catch every square inch of Rich's muscles. There weren't that many square inches, but who cared? Behind him, Ragnos copied his pose, eliciting more passionate cheers.

Rich did a few more powerful poses, and Ragnos kept following his lead—and, Rich noticed, giving him the mother of all cheerleader effects. Finally Rich waved his hand, and Ragnos copied this too but at scale: the crowd obediently re-pocketed their phones and focused on the music. Ragnos took Rich by the shoulder and led him toward Janet, who was cheering at him, and bouncing to a beat which Richard had forgotten was there.

He'd been so angry at her before. Why?

Rich noticed that Ragnos's grip on his shoulder had grown infinitesimally firmer. He leaned in close to Rich's ear and spoke: "You weren't wrong to buy the skinsuits for her, Rich, and she wasn't wrong to make your costume for you. She didn't make it to embarrass you—she made it because she loves you and wants to be with you, just as you care for her. I hope I'm not telling you something you don't already know."

Rich nodded dumbly, and Ragnos's hand patted him on the shoulder as they rejoined with Janet. "And rest assured," he said to them both. "I have no intention of getting between the two of you...."

Then, Ragnos sniffed.

"No," he said, "that's not exactly right."

The gentle touch to Rich's shoulder became a harsh vise-grip, paired with a harsh whisper. "I have *every* intention of getting between you," Ragnos hissed, and Rich felt the dragon's hot breaths on him—or were those his own, quick breaths?

Ragnos's other arm had grabbed something—Janet. Now Ragnos had her by the neck, and she squirmed in his grasp. "And that's exactly the point—I need you *both* to be there *against* me," he said, pulling them together to hold them with their ears at his lips. "Both you *delectable* humans *surrounding* me, *touching* me, touching *Ragnos*. Knowing no lover but me, knowing no pleasure but *mine*. *You're mine*."

The intense aura that Rich had glimpsed before was back, but not as an aura—as a white-hot jet focused through Rich's ear and into primal lobes of his brain. His knees buckled, and only the grip around his shoulder kept him standing. Janet, on his right, kept mouthing, "Oh fuck, oh, *fuck*—"

"You see, little humans," Ragnos hissed, then took a quick breath, tasting their desire, "I'm not here to steal *Janet* from *Rich*, or *Rich* from *Janet*. I'm here to steal Rich *and* Janet, *together*, and I've already done it. So the only question, the only *choice* now is—my place, or *yours*?"

Richard panted. So did Janet. Ragnos's gaze seared into them.

But the dragon's eyes widened. He released them, standing upright once more. Richard stumbled into Janet, and the couple regained their balance like participants in a three legged race.

"Pardon me," Ragnos said, with a hurried smile. "I'm afraid I need to use the little dragon's room." Without another word he strode off, and the crowd parted like the Red Sea.

Janet and Richard stared at him, at his swishing tail that warded off any followers. "Holy shit," Richard breathed. "Holy shit holy shit holy shit." Even the music had stopped.

"Yo," someone in the crowd yelled, "what the *fuck* was that?"

—

Ragnos paused just outside the men's bathroom, and grabbed a nearby Madoka by the arm. "Hey, what—" she began, anger burning in her eyes, but then those eyes followed the arm up to the

face.

“Do you know who I am?” Ragnos demanded.

She nodded.

“Make sure no one comes in here,” he said, tapping the bathroom door. “Tell them to find somewhere else, I don't care where. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” she breathed, as her face turned the color of her wig.

Ragnos winked. “There's an autograph in it for you.”

Assured of Madoka's loyalty, Ragnos shoved the door open to an empty bathroom. Good: he hadn't been looking forward to ordering people out. He hurried into the handicapped stall and locked it, feeling ready to burst: his two internal organs were getting restless, and there was only so much Ragnos could do about it.

“Can I just say, before I let you two out—” Two angry tugs cut him off. He winced. “All right, all right, just remember—you do love each other.”

Ragnos reached behind his head, pulled, and dispersed onto the floor. Dustin and Ashley took his place. “Oh my god,” Ashley moaned, nude and covered in sweat, “my back. Shouldn't have let the girl ride us.”

“I *asked*,” Dustin said, also nude, pulling his arms out of Ragnos's. “You *agreed*. Are you okay?”

“No, I was talking to myself—give me a second.” She yanked her legs from the costume, then stretched down to touch her toes. She leaned back, then side to side, then twisted left and right. Dustin copied a few stretches, feeling an ache that Ragnos hadn't.

“Okay,” she said, “now that that's out of the way—what the *hell* are you doing?”

He stared at her, his jaw loose. “What am *I* doing?”

“Look, it was fine when you were just messing with the girl, but then, *oh my god, seducing the guy too?* And then—” She realized her volume was getting high: Madoka outside might hear. “And then describing how you're going to *fuck* them both?” she hissed. “I just became your girlfriend, like, twenty four hours ago!”

“I didn't do any of that—Ragnos did!”

She glared at him. “If I hadn't been in this costume with you all day, I'd be calling BS. As it stands... still kinda calling BS!” She threw her hands up in the air.

“It's not BS—it's like, it's like—” Dustin waved his hands, like magic gestures to conjure up the right words. “Like mob mentality. Disassociation. I'm part of something but I don't have control over it, you know? He's *bigger* than me!”

Thirty six hours ago, before he'd become Ragnos, he'd have been calling the same BS she was. But as he remembered everything: the dance contest, the poses, the *seduction*—it was like watching a movie on an old, blurry camera, but with all senses. Vaguely watching what someone else had done; vaguely saying what someone had said; vaguely feeling what someone had felt.

“When we have that costume on,” Dustin said, “he's here and we aren't. Those crazy rear-up poses, that coordination, knowing exactly how to chat up that girl and that guy—I could *never* do it alone. I need you, and we need *him*. He's the only one who could have done all that incredible stuff!”

She stared back at him, but eventually her expression softened. “Are you even gay?” she asked. “Or bi, I guess?”

“Kind of a non-question at this point.” Dustin scratched the back of his neck. “I know I like girls, at least, because I like you... but, like, are you a dude? Same deal.”

“I getcha,” she sighed.

“So what are we gonna do?” he asked, hands resting loosely at his sides.

Ashley bit her lip. She'd suggested that Ragnos bite his lip in front of Rich, whispering through the surprisingly useful drinking tube—before she'd lost her nerve. Seeing it from the outside, Dustin immediately understood the appeal: he wanted to rush in and kiss her worries away right here. But he waited.

“Dustin,” she said, “I'm pretty sure I love you. Pretty damn sure, even if it's only been a day. But I don't know if I'm ready to do this... even if I'm... *him*.”

“Hey, it's okay.” Stepping out of the legs, he walked forward and embraced her. “Would I, or he, or whoever—would we have spent all that time talking about boundaries and communication and stuff, and then not listen to you?”

He smiled. “After all, I'm pretty damn sure I love you too.”

Now came the kiss: tongue met tongue, locking in a slow dance that could win a contest all its own.

After ages, seconds, they finally drew apart. “That's probably the biggest downside to being in Ragnos,” she muttered.

“What?”

“Duh, not getting to mack with you.”

They laughed. Privately, Dustin felt it was getting to look at her boobs, her curves, her stomach, her inviting slit—every inch of the beautiful genius who'd chosen him, whom he'd chosen. He leaned in to kiss her again and she didn't hesitate; then he pressed his palm against her outer folds, and she moaned into his mouth and ground against it, warming herself up.

“Look,” he said, once he'd pulled back. “How does this sound: we'll play it by ear. We'll make it clear that they don't *have* to come with us, and we don't have to go with them.” He stepped back into Ragnos's legs. “And if you want out, we'll get out. Ragnos can do anything, right? He can even say *no*, if that's what you really want.”

She sighed, a smile on her face. “I can do that. Let's play it by ear,” she said, slipping back into her end. “I trust you.” Leaning forward, she gently kissed Dustin's naked buttocks.

He giggled at the ticklish touch. “Kiss-ass.”

“You've been waiting *all day* to use that, haven't you—”

“Haven't had a chance, have I?” With both of them already inside, he grabbed Ragnos's zipper. “Love you, Ash.”

“Love you, Dusty,” she answered, as she disappeared.

Dustin pulled the zipper all the way up, and then “Dustin” was a muscle in a far grander design. “And I love you both,” Ragnos whispered, hugging himself, and then letting a claw scratch down both his backs. He felt the bloom of pleasure from all parts of himself, as the trail continued toward his tail. “I knew you'd be able to talk things through. And whatever you feel about this, dear rear end....” He patted his rump. “I'll feel it too. No one has to be unhappy tonight, all right?”

A single pleasurable tug rewarded him. “Ohhh,” he growled, “I won't tire of that.”

Thankfully, his initial judgment had been right: as he walked out the door, Madoka was too busy corralling angry congoers to spend time eavesdropping.

“Your watch is ended, dear Madoka,” he rumbled, and chuckled as all eyes present returned to their natural position—fixed upon him. After a moment, the gaggle of male cosplayers brushed past him to fill the bathroom.

“Thank you, you magical girl,” he said, nuzzling his jawline against her pink wig, and eliciting a giggle. “Now, about that autograph I owe you....”

—

“Holy shit,” Rich repeated, as Janet supported his arm. “Holy shit, holy *shit*.”

The two of them had staggered to the edge of the room, all eyes of the crowd following along with them, and now they rested against the wall. Janet couldn't help but feel *pressed* against it, as if being *kabedoned* by a recognizable, muscular arm. “Are you okay?” she asked, hearing the shivers in her voice.

“I'm *bi*,” Rich muttered. “I never knew—holy shit, I'm so bi.”

She patted his shoulder. “Yeah, you're bi. Are you *okay*?”

“Huh? Oh, I'm fine, I think.” He tried to stand up straighter. “I just... the way he was *kneeling* in

front of me, and he called me beautiful, and then he—oh my god,” he added, touching his cheek, “he kissed me, and—”

“And he wrapped around me like some sort of snake,” Janet continued, breathily, “and I *rode* him, and he had me by the *neck*—”

“By the *chest*—”

They looked at each other and couldn't help but laugh: half nervousness, half genuine mirth. “Well,” Rich said, fixing his wig, “I don't think I can be mad at you for riding him.”

“No kidding.” She laughed, adjusting her straps: it felt like getting dressed after sex, and indeed she wasn't sure she hadn't climaxed in his grip back there. “It was different for me, he was way more in control, but—he did a number on you, huh.”

“I've never been called beautiful before.”

Janet stared. “What? I must have—are you sure?” He looked back at her, blushing, and she saw the vulnerability in his brown eyes: if *she'd* been the first to call him beautiful, she realized, he would have remembered.

She took a deep breath, trying not to self-recriminate, and searched for the right words—but then decided not to start with words, and leaned in to kiss him on the mouth. His eyes widened, then closed as hers did, and they wrapped their arms around each other, becoming one for a brief second.

She pulled away, but not far. “Rich,” she said, “you're beautiful. You're the most beautiful man here.”

He chuckled, his gaze downcast—at her breasts. “The most beautiful man here—what about... y'know....”

“I don't know what Ragnos is,” Janet said, “but he is not a man.”

They were quiet for a few seconds. The music was starting up, finally playing something other than Owl City.

“What do you think he is?” she asked.

“I'd say two-person-costume, but....”

“The way he acts, it *can't* be two people in there, they'd never be coordinated enough—”

“I've seen skinsuits like that, except that there's always a seam if you look hard enough, a zipper somewhere—”

“How would they even talk to each other in there? They'd never hear themselves think!”

“But I looked all over and his skin's completely smooth, I can't find any seams anywhere—”

“It's like he's one person!”

“It's like it's not a costume!”

They stared at each other. Janet felt the press of Ragnos's claws on her neck: a sudden, tactile memory. Judging by Rich's shiver, he felt a similar sensation on around his shoulder.

“He said he was going to fuck us.”

Janet's words hung in the air, collecting silence around them to give themselves greater impact. It was like she could read the words before her: *fuck us, fuck us, FUCK US.*

“Fuck. How, uh...” Rich drew a deep breath. “I mean, I didn't see a dick, or anything?”

“No idea,” she admitted, sliding down the wall.

“And, er... do we *want* to do this?”

She laughed, with less mirth and more nervousness. “Do we have a choice?”

“Well, I mean, by all rights we should—”

Knuckles gently rapped on the wall above her. “I hope I'm not intruding.”

At once, the two of them looked up to see Ragnos again—yet this time, he didn't look domineering. Confident, sure, but she'd been expecting Ragnos to corner both of them again, and yet here he was at their side, offering an easy way out: she saw hesitation in his stance.

“You're not here to...” Janet gulped. “*Claim* us, are you?”

He shook his head, a rueful smile stretching his lips.

“Then what?” Rich asked.

“Janet, Rich—or perhaps Misty and Brock?” He chuckled. “I said something in the fire of the moment, out on the floor—something about you having no choices. It was... *gauche*, and I apologize. Of course you have a choice.” Bending forward, he picked up Rich's hand and then Janet's, gently kissing their fingers. “I hope you weren't offended by my impropriety.”

“Offended?” Rich let out a strangled laugh. “Fuck, man, I don't know if I've ever been turned on like that in my whole life.”

Ragnos's eyebrows raised, and he looked into Janet's face: she felt a blush on her face that was all the agreement anyone could ask for. “So am I to understand,” he said, smiling more easily, “that you feel... the same affection as me? Enough to push a boundary to its breaking point—to really show off what one's body can do?” He stared into each of them in turn.

“Yeah,” Janet said, acting before Rich could: she leaned in and hugged Ragnos quickly. “You make me feel really good, whatever you are. So why not?”

His eyes narrowed, and his expression grew grave. “Don't be flippant about this, Janet—nor you, Richard. Are we all,” he asked, raising his voice, “willing to take this to the next level? Because once we start, it will be hard to go back.”

Janet looked at Rich: he looked back at her, then at Ragnos, then nodded. Janet nodded too. A moment later, Ragnos did as well, a smile melting onto his features like warm caramel. “I so hoped you'd feel that way. And if I might ask... may we use *your* room, not mine?”

Just as she nodded, Ragnos leaned in and scooped them up in a crushing hug. “You two are so wonderful!” he said, as Janet's toes left the ground: she hugged him back, and felt Richard's hand over hers. “I'm so glad I found such incredible specimens of humanity.”

He let go, sending Janet careening back a few steps as she got her footing; then he smiled in a way to make Janet's heart, and knees, melt. “Before we go upstairs,” he said, “I can't help but notice... it's a lovely tune they're playing.”

Janet listened. The DJ had finally started the song back up, and it was a slower tune: one made for rocking back and forth, holding your significant other. Maybe significant *others*.

“I must ask,” Ragnos said. With a deep bow, and a little twirl of his wrist, he extended his arm out to her. “May I have this dance?” Then his other arm, out toward Rich. “Both these dances?”

In unison, Janet and Rich took his hands, and followed as he led them onto the floor.

—

Ragnos trotted into his hotel room, kicked the door shut, and opened himself up.

“All right,” Ashley said. “All right, *how* are we gonna do this?”

Dustin, pulling his arms free, squinted at her. “Er... passionately?” He looked around, but thankfully didn't see any evidence of Jamie and Enrique. They knew about Ragnos, but this was a whole new level of strange.

“No, I mean—” She groaned, diving to the floor by the bed. “Ragnos! Smooth front! No dick! Nothing in back, either! Sex! How?”

As she yanked the costume repair kit out from beneath the bed, the implications—the *explications*—hit Dustin like a speeding subway. This had to be why they called them 'trains of thought'.

After their slow dance and some parting kisses, Ragnos had asked Rich and Janet for their room number—607, as it transpired—and sent them up to get ready in there, while he got ready for *them*. He'd promised that they wouldn't wait long.... “Oh my god,” Dustin breathed, “we're going to have sex with them.”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up or I'm gonna lose my nerve again.”

He made to step out of the legs, but Ashley waved him back in. “Open up,” she said, pointing to the frontal zipper’s location with one hand as she grabbed some of that wonderful clay-like substance from the suitcase with her other hand. “Dick out, Dusty.”

He complied. It was flaccid, but not for long: Ashley gripped it, and with a few powerful pumps she brought it to full mast. “Whoa,” he said.

“That’s not *whoa*,” she muttered, grabbing a second handful of clay. “*This* is whoa.”

She brought her hands together around his shaft.

Of *course* this was her solution, he realized, but it was one thing to think about and another to—oh, *Christ*, that was good. He moaned in ecstasy as the thick clay-latex covered his dick and balls: then she formed a block at the base, where the penis went through Ragnos’s hole. Reaching behind herself again, she grabbed two short zippers and pressed them into the block, matching their position carefully with the zippers already on the hole.

After a little detail work with her fingernails (fingernails which Dustin felt as if they were touching his bare skin), the prosthetic had texture. “This might get uncomfortable,” she said, and pulled out the heat gun. Dustin’s eyes widened. “Ready?” she asked, and he nodded quickly, wanting to get it over with.

It was... curiously *comfortable*. He’d never imagined a searing sensation on such a sensitive part of his body could feel good—but it didn’t exactly *hurt*, and he was moaning with something that wasn’t pain. “All right,” she said, finally lifting the gun, “take a look.”

He looked down and grinned. He’d said Ragnos was bigger than he was, and he kept being proved right: the penis had ended up being longer and thicker than his own, and he’d never felt insecure about his own assets either. Ashley reached in and grabbed the zippers on either side of the base, zipping them up and hiding them—and he was fully socked into Ragnos’s torso now, and he could see no discontinuity between the new member and the old skin.

“There’s a little hole at the tip,” she said, tapping it, “but it doesn’t connect to anything, so this should be safer than wearing a condom. Whatever comes out will just flow down into the suit—so it might get a little sticky in there.”

Dustin chuckled. “Oh no, what a nightmare.”

“And—” She grabbed the zippers once more, unzipped them, and pushed hard: Dustin’s dick inside Ragnos’s was forced back into the costume, and when she zipped the outer zipper back up, Ragnos’s front was as smooth as it had been before. “That’s important,” she said, “for the walk over there. Now come on out of there, you’re gonna have to help me.”

“Help you?” he asked, pulling himself free of Ragnos.

She was already stepping forward, putting her feet in Ragnos’s hind claws. Her hands were filled with putty, she had two more zippers in her mouth, and she sidled backward into the bathroom. “Bring the heatgun!” she called out, her voice muffled by the zippers.

He did so, and plugged it into the wall. “Pull it up and unzip me,” she mumbled, looking at Ragnos's rear on the floor.

With a little difficulty, he did so. “Hold it open.” Dustin obeyed, exposing the inner edges of her buttocks—and more pertinently, what lay between them. Without hesitation, Ashley smeared the putty into her own holes, groaning and biting down hard on the zippers. “Fffck, that's *good*.”

Once she had used up the putty, she smoothed out the makeshift skin until she was satisfied. Then she pulled her zippers out of her mouth and placed them in the appropriate spots on either side. “Heat gun,” she said, her hands replacing Dustin's on her buttocks, “*quickly*.”

“You sure?”

“Of course not, but *do it!*”

He turned the gun on and pointed it at her vagina. “Oh, fuck,” she grunted, holding herself open and keeping still. “that burns—keep going, keep going!”

He quested, poking the heat gun within her—first one hole, then the other. She hissed with pain or pleasure throughout, until he was done. “All right,” she said, “moment of truth. Zip them together.”

He grabbed the zippers as she had done, zipped them, and hid them. Now, Ragnos's rear was whole and uninterrupted—except for the two new openings. Ashley relaxed. “These should be safe too,” she said. “We'll have to get out of the suit to pee and stuff, but that's a worry for another time. Go now if you gotta.”

Sensing it would be a *long* night before they were out of the suit, Dustin pushed his way around Ashley and the half-deflated Ragnos, and squatted over the toilet. Next to him, Ashley was hiding her own organs as she'd done for him, presenting a smooth behind. “Good,” she said. “I'm just gonna get the drinking tube hidden a bit more and then I'll be using that too.”

“The drinking tube?” Dustin asked, straining.

“You know, in case someone doesn't want to feel a pokey plastic tube when they decide to stick something in Ragnos's mouth. Something like a dick, maybe?”

Dustin blinked. “I don't think I'd—”

“You don't, huh? Wanna bet?”

She fixed eyes with him. “I thought you got it better than me—maybe *you're* not planning on it, and maybe *I'm* not planning on it. But when we're inside him, we don't have control. At best we have... safe words.”

He stared back. “We're gonna have sex with them.”

“We're gonna have sex with them.” She winked. “Be ready. Five minutes to showtime.”