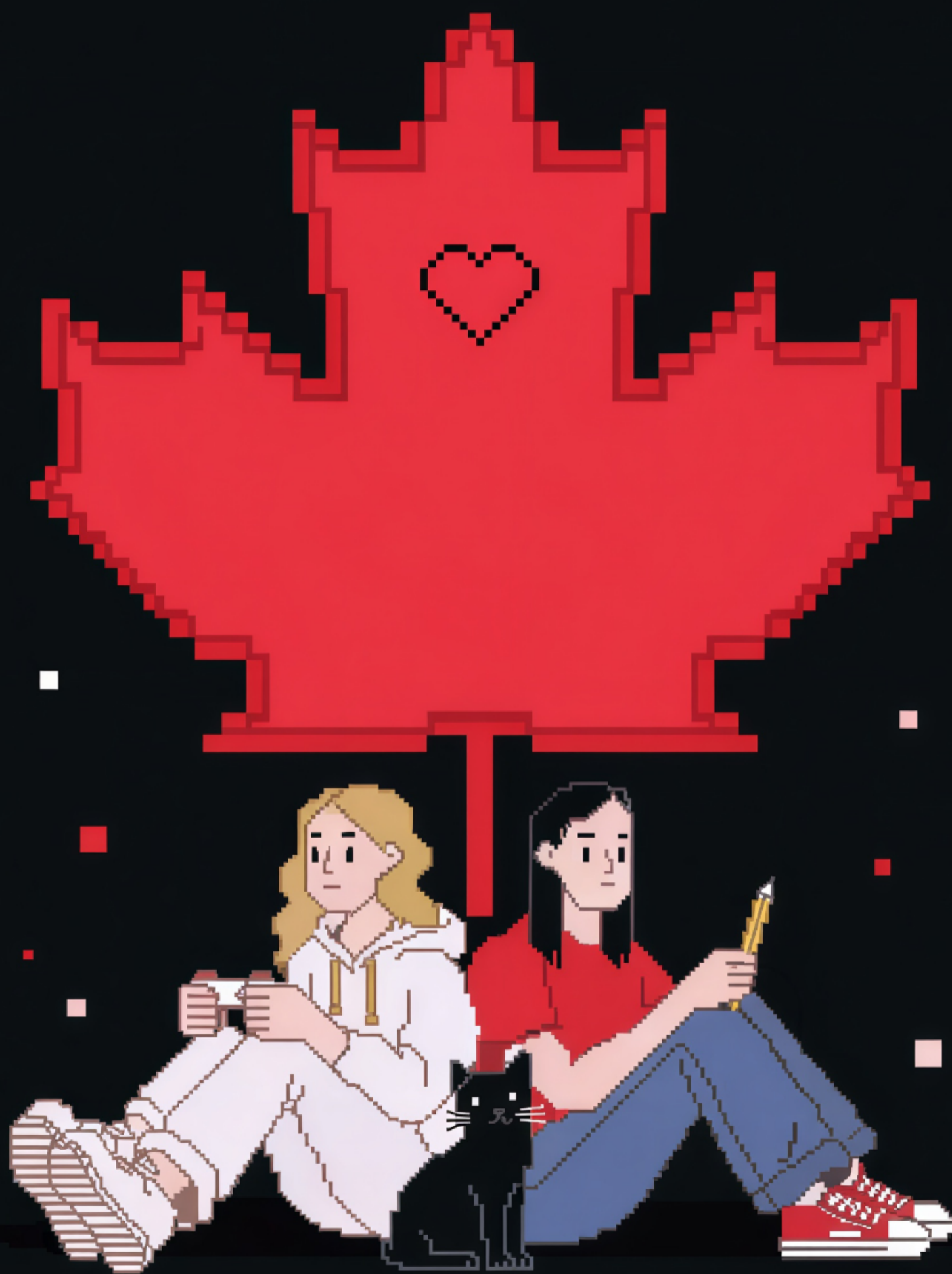


My Canadian Girlfriend



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My Canadian Girlfriend Part 2

The Uber smells like gasoline and the driver's Axe body spray, and Sasha's eyes are watering before they're even out of the parking lot. She rolls the window down, but the wind just brings in clouds of cigarette smoke from the car up ahead. Figures.

She's sitting behind the driver, knees pressed together, and trying very hard not to look at Ethan. This is difficult, because he's sitting two feet away in the honey-colored wrap dress, and he looks—

No. Stop. Do not finish that thought.

She finishes the thought.

He looks like a girl she'd swipe right on so fast she'd crack her screen. The dress sits on his collarbones like it was *specifically* cut for them, the neckline framing the sharp ridge of bone and the hollow beneath, and Sasha wants to put her mouth there, which is a new and terrible development. The amber eyeshadow makes his eyes look like they belong in a painting, or a wanted poster, or a religion. The beauty mark is exactly where she placed it yesterday and she keeps staring at it like it's a target and she's a heat-seeking missile.



Stop. Staring. At. His. Face.

She stares at his face.

“You’re being weird,” Ethan says, not looking up from his phone.

“No, I’m not. Am I?”

“Yes. You keep looking at me like—I don’t know, like I’m a raid boss and you’re trying to figure out my mechanics.”

“I’m not!” She was. “I’m just... reviewing your look. Professionally. As your—”

“Stylist? Manager? Handler?” He glances at her, one eyebrow raised. The eyebrow she shaped with tweezers yesterday. God, even his skepticism is pretty. “You have to relax, please. Everything will be okay.”

He sounds so calm. Why is he calm? She’s the one who’s done this before—the voice, the clothes, the constant calibration of how to sit and stand and laugh so that nobody clocks you—and she’s sweating through her bra. Ethan looks like he’s just going to dinner. Elise looks like she’s going to dinner.

Sasha wipes her palms on her jeans. “Okay, last-minute stuff. Jen is going to be quiet. Think of her like your cat, Jupiter. You know, always watching, never talking, probably judging. Anya is the talker. Rosa will

try to take a selfie, but you can say you hate photos, it's fine."

Ethan makes a face. "I do hate photos."

"See? It's already working." Sasha tries to smile, but she can taste her own panic. It's metallic, like the inside of an old battery. "Um, we'll need to do couple stuff. Nothing crazy. Just, like, touch my hand, lean into me, that kind of thing. Make it look easy."

"Easy," Ethan repeats. "Right."

"Oh. Anya will probably ask about our sex life."

Ethan turns his whole body. "She's going to what?"

"That girl has no boundaries. She once asked our VP of Engineering about his vasectomy. Just be mysterious."

"Mysterious." Ethan looks out the window. "Cool. I'll just be mysterious about the sex life I have with my best friend. Who I'm not sleeping with. While wearing a dress. In front of strangers. At a restaurant." He pauses. "This is fine."

"This is fine!" Sasha agrees, and she believes it for almost three full seconds before the Uber turns the corner and they see Anya standing outside the restaurant, waving her phone above her head and yelling Sasha's name like they're at a Taylor Swift concert and not a narrow, rain-soaked block in the Plateau.

"Oh, no. That's her?" Ethan says, and Sasha feels her throat close up completely.

"Yep. That's Anya. The loud one. Uh, please remember to answer to Elise."

"Because that's my name." Ethan straightens his dress, smooths his hair behind his ears. "I'm Elise. From Montreal. An artist. Who doesn't use social media because I'm principled."

"Right. And you love me." The words come out before Sasha can stop them.

Ethan's eyes flick to hers. "Right."

The Uber stops. Sasha can't move. Outside, Anya waves even more frantically, like they might somehow miss her in the empty street. Beyond her, through the restaurant window, Sasha can see Jen and Rosa already seated, heads bent together over a menu.

Sasha's hand is on the car door. She doesn't open it.

"Hey." Ethan's voice, low. Close. "We've faced worse odds. Remember the Cinderspire raid? When we were the only two left standing against the fire elemental?"

Sasha nods, tight-throated. That had been ridiculous—the whole guild dead except for them, Ethan's healing rotation stretched to breaking, her sword a blur. They'd pulled it off somehow. "Yeah, but this is different," she says. "This is stupid real life. No respawns."

"I know." His fingers brush her wrist. "But we've got this."

In the half-light of the Uber, the lights from the restaurant catch the gold in his eyeshadow and the amber of his eyes and Sasha has the sudden, violent, unhelpful thought that if Elise were a real person, she would be so fucking in love with her that she'd need to be sedated.



“Ready?” he asks.

“No.”

“Me neither.” He smiles, opens the door, and says, very softly, “Leeroy Jenkins.”

The humidity hits first. Montreal in August is like stepping into someone’s mouth. Sasha’s shirt sticks to her back before she’s even closed the car door. She watches Anya bounce on the balls of her feet, waving both arms now like she’s trying to guide a plane to its gate.

“Oh my god,” she says. “I’m sorry about her.”

“Don’t be. She seems fun.”

“That really isn’t the word I’d choose.”

“Sasha! Elise!” Anya breaks into a run, chunky heels clacking against wet pavement, and suddenly her arms wrap around Sasha’s neck like a vise. “You’re here! You’re both here!” She pulls back, holding Sasha at arm’s length, smiles, nods, then turns to Ethan. “Hi, I’m Anya! I’ve heard so much about you. And, holy shit, can I say that you’re like way too pretty? I’ve been begging your girlfriend for a picture for months, but she keeps telling me how private you are.” Her gaze sweeps over Ethan, taking in everything—the dress, the makeup, the beauty mark. “I totally get it, though. The whole social media thing. It’s like,



why give the algorithm free content, right? Plus the privacy aspect. Smart.”

Sasha can't breathe. She can't move. The sidewalk feels too narrow, the restaurant too bright. She's watching Anya look at Ethan and she keeps waiting for the moment when it all collapses.

“You know,” Anya says with a sly grin, “when Sasha first told me about you, I thought she was making you up.”

“Really?” Ethan says with a somehow perfectly straight face. “Why would she do that?”

“Because she's Sasha,” Anya says, as if this explains everything. “And, you know, the whole Canadian girlfriend thing.”

Ethan smiles. “Well, about forty million of us really do exist.” His voice is good—softer, the cadence smoother. “And I'm afraid I'm very real.”

“Oh my god, she has an accent.” Anya shakes her head, eyes wide. “Sasha, you didn't tell me she had an accent!”

Sasha can't respond. Her tongue is stuck to the roof of her mouth. Ethan doesn't have an accent. Ethan has never had an accent. But Elise, apparently, does—a gentle French-Canadian lilt.

“And we do have a reputation for being polite,” Ethan continues,

“so I hope you’ll forgive us for being late.”

“Not at all!” Anya loops her arm through Ethan’s. “Traffic was awful. We just got here. Come on, the others are inside.”

Sasha trails behind them, watching the way Ethan’s hips sway just slightly in the wrap dress, the way his hair falls across his shoulders, the slight, confident tilt of his head as he talks to Anya like they’re already best friends. Sasha’s heart batters against her ribs. This is really happening. This is actually happening, right now, in real life. The lie has grown legs and walked out into the world.

Inside, the restaurant is exactly what Anya promised—fairy lights strung across exposed brick, tables polished to a honey glow, candles flickering in glass holders. Jen and Rosa look up from their menus as Anya leads Ethan—*Elise*—to the table.

“Everyone, this is Elise,” Anya announces, as if introducing royalty. “Elise, this is Jen and Rosa.”

Jen nods, her eyes sharp behind round glasses. “Nice to finally meet you.”

Rosa beams. “Hi! Your dress is gorgeous.”

“Uh. Thanks. Sasha bought it for me.”

“Really?” Anya says. “Wow, I didn’t know she had it in her. She usually wears hoodies and jeans and those graphic tees with the gaming jokes no one understands.”

“I like her shirts,” Ethan replies. “They make me laugh.”

“Well,” says Anya, “then I will shut my stupid mouth about them from now on.”

They sit. Elise ends up between Anya and Rosa, across from Sasha. So now she has a direct sightline to her fake girlfriend’s face for the next two hours, which is either a gift or a punishment depending on which part of her brain is running the show.

Wine arrives. Anya ordered it for the table without asking, because Anya. Elise studies the menu, then says to the waitress, “*Bonsoir, comment est votre cassoulet? Quel genre de fèves vous utilisez?*”

Rosa’s jaw drops. “You speak French?”

Elise shrugs, one shoulder, a half-smile. “I live here.”

“I took French for four years in high school,” Rosa says, “and all I retained is *merci* and *où sont les toilettes*.”

Elise laughs. It’s Ethan’s laugh but softer, breathier, like he let it out through a different door. “The cassoulet is good here, apparently.”

“Right,” Rosa says. “Which is...”

“A stew,” Elise explains, leaning forward slightly. “With beans and sausage. It’s comfort food. My mom used to make it when I was a—” A pause. “—kid.”

Nobody notices. More wine is poured into more glasses, and suddenly the conversation is happening around Sasha like weather. She keeps waiting for the crack, the seam, the moment when the performance flounders and she needs to dive in and save it. It doesn’t come. Elise has opinions about the gallery district. She asks Jen



whether the accessibility features she'd worked on for colorblind players had shipped yet—a detail Sasha mentioned once, maybe twice, months ago on a late-night call—and Jen actually looks impressed. Elise makes Anya giggle with a story about a pigeon that got into the café where she works. Sasha's never heard this story. It might be real. She doesn't know anymore.

Twenty minutes in, Elise reaches across the table and tucks a strand of hair behind Sasha's ear. Her fingertips graze her temple—light, absent, like he's done it a thousand times. She told him to do this. In the Uber, she said touch my hand, lean into me, make it look easy. He's doing what she asked. But she didn't ask for the way his fingers linger a half-second, or the way he pulls his hand back to his wine glass slow instead of fast, and she definitely didn't ask for the way her nervous system lights up like a forest fire.

Anya is beaming. “You two. I can't. I actually can't.”

Sasha's face is on fire. Her neck is on fire. The backs of her knees are somehow on fire. She takes a sip of wine that's closer to a gulp and says, “She's okay, I guess.”

Under the table, Ethan kicks her ankle. She deserves it.

The food comes. Conversation shifts and flows. Sasha starts to

relax, which is a terrible mistake, because that's when Rosa turns to Elise and says, "So, have you guys talked about closing the distance? Montreal to Boston isn't that bad."

And Elise says, without missing a beat, "We're taking it slow. Long-distance is hard, but it makes the time together really matter."

Anya sighs. "God, that's so mature. Sash, why are you so lucky?"

An hour in, more wine, and Sasha has stopped tracking the danger, started just watching Elise. The way she holds her glass, fingers curved around the stem—that one's learned, Sasha thinks, from the same place Sasha learned it, watching other women and copying until it felt natural. But the way she tilts her head when she's listening, the way she rests her chin on her hand—that's just Ethan. The same posture Sasha's seen on a hundred video calls. Some things don't need to be learned. They were already there.

Then, because Anya is Anya, she starts complaining about her cramps, loud and theatrical, and Rosa joins in, and for a beat Elise's expression goes blank, like someone turned out the lights behind her eyes. It's a look Sasha knows, has worn herself. When the talk turns to periods and cramps and tampons, there's that flash of not-knowing, and you have to wait for the thread to come back around, learn which complaints to echo and which silences to fill and how to laugh at jokes that don't quite apply to your body.

Sasha jumps in. "Babe, tell them about the time Jupiter knocked your easel into the bathtub."

"Hold on, the planet?" says Anya.

Elise blinks, recalibrates, and launches into the story. Soon, everyone is laughing. Suddenly, Anya stands, grabs Elise's arm, and says, "Okay, I need to borrow your girlfriend. New partner interrogation. It's tradition."

Sasha's stomach plummets through the floor, into the earth's core. "Anya, she doesn't need to—"

"Yes she does. I did this with Rosa's girlfriend, I did this with Jen's horrible ex, I'm doing it with Elise. Non-negotiable. Don't worry, it's all fun and games."

Sasha says, "Until..."

Anya just grins. Elise stands, smooths her dress, and looks at Sasha with an expression that clearly says, *I've got this*. Then she follows Anya through the restaurant, leaving Sasha alone at the table with Jen and Rosa, a half-empty wine glass, and a heart rate that would make a hummingbird nervous.

Rosa pulls out her phone. "I'm going to take a picture of us later, okay? For the group chat. You guys are so cute it's making me sick."

Sasha nods, her gaze fixed on the bathroom door.

Jen sips her water. "She's lovely," she says. Quiet. Considered. As if she means it, but is also still deciding.

"Yeah," Sasha says. "She is."

Four minutes. Six. Eight. Sasha is constructing elaborate disaster



scenarios—Anya is asking how they met, Ethan is climbing out the bathroom window—when the door opens and Anya walks out first, wiping her eyes, laughing. And behind her, Elise. A little pink in the cheeks, a little bright in the eyes, but walking steadily, chin up.

They sit back down. Anya squeezes Elise’s hand, quick and fierce, and says to Sasha: “She’s perfect and I hate you for finding her first.”

Sasha looks at Elise. Elise looks back. And for one terrible, perfect, annihilating second, neither of them is performing at all.

They walk. The restaurant door swings shut behind them, and the noise recedes like a dial turned down—no more Anya’s laugh, no more clinking glasses, no more performing. Just the wet sidewalk and the sound of their shoes and Montreal at night, which is dark and cold and smells like rain on old stone.

Sasha waits. She’s been dreading this part—the part where Ethan shrugs off Elise like a coat, rolls his shoulders, says something like “well, that was fucked up” or “you owe me so many loot drops” and they laugh and it’s fine and they’re them again. Best friends. Normal.

He doesn't.

He walks with his hands in the pockets of the jacket she lent him—her denim jacket, too big in the shoulders, over the honey dress—and he's quiet. Not the anxious quiet from before the dinner. A different kind. Full, almost. Like he swallowed the whole evening and he's still digesting.

"Your friends are really nice," he says.

His makeup is still perfect. The beauty mark, the amber wing, the gold at his lids. In the streetlight his face looks softer, and she realizes with a lurch that she's been switching pronouns in her head all night without noticing—he, she, he, she—like a coin flipping in the dark.

"Anya's insane," Sasha says.

Ethan doesn't laugh. He just shakes his head. "No, she's kind of great. I mean, someone like that who was fake? That'd be annoying. But that's really her."

Oh, God. He's being sincere. Sasha doesn't know what to do with sincere right now. "Rosa's nice, too. And Jen is a genius. But you probably got that already."

Ethan nods. He looks up at the sky, then down at the sidewalk, like he's trying to find something to say and can't. Sasha's used to him filling the air, not leaving it empty. The silence buzzes. Her hands are cold. She jams them deeper in her pockets.

For a while, they just walk. They don't talk about the dinner. They don't talk about the way Ethan didn't break character once, or how Anya kept grabbing his arm, or how, when the bill came, Jen reached for it and Ethan said, "No, let me," in that cute French-Canadian accent, and paid for all of them. How when they were leaving, Rosa pulled out her phone and said, "Just one, please," and Elise put her arm around Sasha's waist and leaned in close, her cheek against Sasha's temple, and Sasha's body went on autopilot, her arm looping around Elise's back, hand settling on her hip, the thin fabric of the dress warm under her palm.

They turn a corner. A cat darts across the street, low and fast, and disappears under a parked car. Ethan watches it go.

"I had a good time," he says. Not to Sasha, exactly. More like he's testing the sentence, seeing if it holds weight. "Not the pretending part. But... sitting there, talking to people, being..." He trails off. Picks it back up. "I liked being at the table."

Sasha's throat tightens. She wants to make a joke. She needs to make a joke. If she makes a joke right now, they can stay where they are—on this sidewalk, in this friendship, in the version of the story where Elise is a costume, Ethan her best friend, and the math doesn't quite add up—and that's fine.

She opens her mouth to say something about the cassoulet, or the wine, or Anya's interrogation. What comes out: "You were incredible."

Ethan looks at her. Full eye contact, which he almost never does outside a screen. The streetlight catches the gold in his shadow and his



lashes throw tiny lines across his cheekbones and Sasha thinks, with the flat clarity of someone who has just stepped up to the edge of a cliff: *I'm going to do something stupid.*

"I mean it," she says, and her voice is thin, scraped, like she's about to cry or confess. "You weren't just convincing. You were—people loved you. Anya loved you. Hell, Jen even smiled, and she doesn't smile at anyone. You walked in there and you were just... amazing. And everyone saw it."

Ethan's quiet. His lips are parted, just barely, and the beauty mark moves when he swallows. "Thanks."

They're at his building. The battered green door. The buzzing streetlight above it that flickers every few seconds like it's trying to send a desperate message. Ethan pulls out his keys but doesn't turn to the lock. He's still looking at her.

"Sash," he says, soft.

She kisses him.

It's not smooth. It's not cinematic. She steps forward, her shoe catches on the curb, and she grabs the front of the denim jacket—her jacket, on his body—and presses her mouth to his. His lips are warm and taste like the wine they shared, and for one full second the

commentary in her head is quiet. No narration. No jokes. No panic. Just the pressure of his mouth, the smell of her perfume on his neck, and his breath, sharp, surprised, caught.

Then her brain reboots.

She pulls away so fast she almost trips again. “Oh god. Oh, fuck. I’m sorry. I don’t—I didn’t mean to—that was—I’m drunk. I’m not drunk. I’m a little drunk. I’m sorry. Are you okay? Please don’t hate me. I don’t know why I—”

Ethan is standing very still. His keys are in his right hand. His left hand is half-raised, fingers curled, like he was reaching for her and stopped. His mouth is still parted.

“It’s fine,” he says.

It is not fine. She can hear it in the way his voice sits low, the way the words come out careful, placed, like he’s setting down something breakable.

“I’m really so fucking sorry,” she says again.

“No worries, it’s been... a strange night.”

“Yeah. Um. I should go,” she says. “I have to—the hotel. The conference. Tomorrow.”

“Yeah.” He turns to the door. Puts the key in the lock. His hand is steady, but his jaw is tight. “Goodnight, Sash.”

“Night.”

She doesn’t move until the green door closes behind him. Then she stands on the sidewalk for a long time, looking up at the window of his apartment. The light goes on. Shadows move. Then it’s dark again.

The ride back to the hotel is fourteen minutes. She spends the first three staring at the ceiling of the car. She spends the next four drafting a text, deleting, redrafting, deleting. She spends the remaining seven staring at the version she finally sends:

Sasha: I’m so sorry. That was stupid and I don’t know where it came from. Please forget it happened. I don’t want to make things weird. Well, weirder.

The typing indicator appears. Then—

Ethan: It’s okay. Don’t worry about it.

Six words. She reads them in the car. She reads them in the elevator. She reads them in the hotel hallway, keycard between her teeth. She reads them sitting on the edge of the bed, shoes still on, coat still on, the room too bright and too quiet and too empty.

Sasha kicks off her shoes. Plugs in her phone. Lies on top of the hotel comforter in her coat and stares at the ceiling.

Her brain begins.

She kissed her best friend. Her best friend who is a boy. A boy who wore a dress and pretended to be her girlfriend for an entire evening. Who showed up with perfect eyeliner and that little beauty mark and

charmed everyone at the table because he's generous and kind and too good for her. And she kissed him, on a sidewalk, without warning. Grabbed the front of the jacket—her jacket—and crashed into him with the grace of a derailed train. He didn't say anything. He froze, because that's what you do when someone—

She assaulted him. Oh god. Oh god, she assaulted him.

No. Stop. It lasted one second. He said don't worry about it. People kiss people. It happens. It's not—

But he didn't kiss back. Did he? She can't remember. She was too busy short-circuiting. Did his mouth move? Did he lean in? Or did he just stand there while she mauled him? In a dress she picked out. That she put him in. She put him in a dress and then she kissed him. That's a sequence of events that happened in real life. That she caused. With her body. And her terrible, broken, malfunctioning brain.

Sasha rolls onto her side, stares at the wall, and does not sleep.

The conference is exactly as dull as Sasha expected, which is horrible because now her brain has nothing to focus on except the memory of last night. She sits at the back of the conference hall, PowerPoint slides about UI optimization blurring before her eyes while her mind replays the kiss on endless loop.

It was a mistake. That's all. Just a weird impulse born from relief and exhaustion and the surreal experience of watching her best friend transform into someone else for a night.

She texts Ethan at 10:15, while a man in a branded polo drones about shader pipelines. Something light. Easy. A lifeline disguised as a joke.

Sasha: *this conference is so boring I'd rather be gold farming*

She watches the screen. The message delivers. No typing indicator. No read receipt. She sends two more lame jokes. No reply.

11:40. Coffee break. She stands in line behind Jen and Rosa and types another one.

Sasha: *you alive? did jupiter stage a coup and take over the apartment?*

Delivered. Nothing. She checks Discord in the bathroom. His status is offline. Last online: 11:47 PM. Last night. Right around when he texted her back. That's almost twelve hours. Ethan is never offline for twelve hours. Even when he's working, his phone shows idle, the little yellow moon. Now the moon is gone. There's just a gray circle where he used to be.

She slips the phone into her pocket, walks out, almost collides with—

“Sash!” Anya has two coffees, one of which she shoves into Sasha's hand. “Okay, I need to talk to you about last night.”

Sasha's heart stops. Restarts. “What about it?”

“Um, your girlfriend? Who is, like, the most charming woman I’ve ever met? I told my mom about her.”

“Your mom? Why?”

“Obviously because I’m jealous. My mom was like, ‘She sounds lovely, when’s the wedding?’ and I was like, ‘Mom, slow down,’ but honestly? Don’t slow down. Speed up. Lock it down.”

Sasha sips the coffee. It’s too hot and burns the roof of her mouth and she doesn’t care. “We’ve only been dating for—”

“Six months. That’s like two years in lesbian time. You know this.”

Rosa appears, phone in hand. “Oh, are we talking about Elise? You two were so cute. I don’t know if you’ve said ‘the word’ yet, but she’s, like, very in love with you. Jen, back me up.”

Jen also appears from nowhere, holding a green tea with both hands. “She was very attentive.”

Sasha is smiling. She knows she’s smiling because the muscles in her face are doing the smile shape, but her brain is playing the kiss on repeat—the grab, the lurch, the way his lips were warm and his breath was caught—and she’s holding this coffee cup so hard the cardboard is buckling.

“She’s great,” she says. “Yeah. She’s really great.”

“You’re seeing her again before we leave, right?” Anya asks. “Because I have restaurant recs. Also, I kind of want to hang out with her again? Is that weird? Like, without you? Just me and Elise? Is that allowed?”

“Yeah, that’s... definitely weird.”

“It’s not weird! She gets me. We had a moment in the bathroom. I can’t tell you what we talked about, that’s sacred, but I will say that she’s a keeper. Like, in a way I’ve never said about anyone you’ve dated, and I include myself in that.”

“What? You and I never dated.”

“We had a vibe! At the holiday party! Don’t rewrite history.” Anya links her arm through Sasha’s and steers her back toward the ballroom. “Seriously though. When are you going to see her? Today? Tomorrow? You should skip the afternoon sessions. Nobody cares about the monetization panel. Go see your girl.”

“She’s busy today. Work stuff.”

“Tonight?”

“Maybe. I’ll text her.”

But she already has. Four times. The messages sit delivered and unread. Beside her, Anya keeps talking, keeps glowing, still riding the high from a night that Sasha is increasingly certain was the worst mistake of her life.

Day two. The gray circle hasn’t changed.

Sasha sits through a workshop on procedural generation. She takes

notes she'll never read. At lunch she orders a sandwich she doesn't eat. She checks her phone a dozen times before noon.

She calls Ethan at 1:47, from the stairwell between the second and third floors, sitting on a concrete step with her back against the railing.

It rings four times. Five. Voicemail. The tone is casual, easy, a voice she's heard a thousand times but is beginning to fear she'll never hear again: "Hey, it's Ethan, leave a message or don't, I probably won't check either way."

The beep.

"Hey. It's me. Obviously. Um." She picks at the rubber edge of her sneaker. "I just wanted to check in. See how you're doing. After last night. Or, like, I guess two nights ago now? I don't know, time is weird at conferences." She pauses. The stairwell hums with the building's ventilation. "Anyway, hope you're okay. I hope Jupiter's okay. I'll be around if you want to—yeah. Okay. Bye."

She hangs up. Listens to the echo of her voice dying in the concrete. Considers throwing herself down the stairwell. Settles for pressing her forehead against the railing until the cold metal hurts.

That afternoon, her phone buzzes during the analytics panel. Her hand shoots to it so fast she knocks her water bottle off the table. She fumbles, heart slamming, already composing her reply to whatever Ethan has—

It's Rosa. Group chat. The photo from the dinner.



The lighting is warm and golden, the fairy lights blurred in the background. Elise is smiling, and beside her, Sasha is looking at Elise. Not at the camera. Not at anyone else. At Elise. And her face—

What is that? Why does she look like that?

Sasha has seen herself performing happy, she's seen herself drunk and trying too hard, she has known herself raw, vulnerable, and real. But she's never seen herself like this. Soft. Unguarded. Looking at someone like she's seeing the sun after a very long winter.

She closes the group chat. Her fingers are numb. The analytics panel drones on—something about player retention metrics—and she's not listening, not even pretending to listen. She's watching the gray circle where the moon should be.

The moon does not rise.

“Oh, no,” Sasha says. “Fuck. No.”

It's midnight, and Sasha can't sleep, and she can't stop refreshing Discord, so she opened her laptop and logged into Hexworth. She didn't want to play. She just wanted to see the little icon next to Ethan's name. Proof that the little stories they built together were still there.

But Luminara is gone.

Her space in Sasha's friend list—alphabetical, between *Lumen* and *Lyra_Of_The_Wilds*, the same spot for three years—is empty.

She checks again. Again. Her pulse quickens with each click. Not a glitch. Not a mistake. Ethan took the avatar he'd spent hours perfecting—the woman with the dark hair and the beauty mark and the glamour that cost him forty-five minutes at a seasonal vendor—and he erased her.

She logs out. Closes the laptop. The sudden darkness feels absolute. She pulls her knees to her chest as the radiator clicks, counting seconds between each metallic ping.

“What the fuck did you do?” she says to the empty room.

Sasha rereads the text he sent right after *The Kiss: It's okay. Don't worry about it.*

Six words. Six stupid words that tell her nothing. She scrolls back through their chat history, the last week of normal before it all went to hell. Memes about sleep-deprived gamers. Screenshots of impossible raid drops. A voice note where Jupiter is meowing loudly in the background and Ethan says, “Listen to this little shit.” The mundane rhythm of their friendship was like breathing, so constant she only notices now that the oxygen is gone.

Ethan is—not *was*, please not *was*—her best friend. Her only real friend. Anya, Rosa, and Jen are wonderful, but they carry her history in their eyes. They knew her before. They remember another name, another body, another life. They choose, daily, to see her—and she loves them for it—but they don't feel like home the way Ethan does.

And how did she repay him? By doing the one thing she swore the world would never do to her again.

Because the kiss isn't the only problem is it? No. Before the kiss, she took a pretty boy and put him in a dress and painted his face and gave him a woman's name and walked him into a restaurant and made him perform for strangers. She did the thing. The exact fucking thing that was done to her, just flipped like a mirror. She knows that wrongness in her bones—the nausea crawling up your throat, the floating above your own body, the skin-turned-inside-out feeling—and she inflicted it on her best friend because she needed to save face at a dinner.

And then to add insult to injury, she kissed him.

Sasha throws her phone across the hotel bed. It bounces on the comforter and lands face-down. She presses the heels of her hands into her eyes until she sees stars. The pressure doesn't help. Nothing helps.

She ruined everything. The one person who knew her—the real her, not the before or the after but the messy, continuous present tense—is gone. Deleted. Offline.

She thinks about Ethan's apartment. The narrow kitchen, the green corduroy couch, the sketches of girls with swords. She thinks about how small he looked when he talked about being called a fag in eighth grade. She thinks about how still he went when she kissed him, and how careful his voice was after, like he was holding himself in place.

She thinks about the fact that she hasn't heard his voice in thirty-six hours, and she doesn't know what he's doing, and she doesn't know if he's okay, and the word "okay" keeps getting bigger and darker in her head until it doesn't mean "are you mad at me" anymore. It means something she can't type into a text. Something she can't leave in a voicemail.

She picks up her phone. Types: *Please just let me know you're alright. I know you're mad. I won't bother you again after, but I just need to know you're okay.*

Delivered.

She watches the screen until it goes dark. Then she watches the dark.

The next morning, she skips the conference. The Uber drops her at the brick building with the battered green door. She's been here three times now—first when she flew into Montreal, before the dinner to make Ethan into Elise, and in a dream last night where she knocked and nobody answered and the building was empty and the hallway kept getting longer.

She buzzes. No answer. Buzzes again. Holds it down for three seconds, which feels aggressive but she's past caring.

The intercom crackles. A long breath. Then: "Sash."

Her legs nearly give out. He's okay. He's here. His voice sounds like gravel and no sleep but it's his voice and he's physically okay.

"Can I come up?"

Silence. Then the door clicks.

She takes the stairs two at a time. Second floor. His door is closed. She stands in front of it, breathing hard, hand raised to knock, and then she hears him on the other side. A shuffle. The creak of the floorboard by the kitchen. He's right there. Right on the other side of two inches of wood.

She knocks anyway.

"I'm sorry I ghosted you," he says through the door.

Of all the things she expected, an apology wasn't one of them. It knocks the rehearsed speech right out of her head. "You—what? No. I'm sorry. Ethan, I'm so sorry. For the dinner, for putting you in that position, for the—" She swallows. "For the kiss. I shouldn't have done that. It was fucked up. You were doing me a favor and I—"

"I'm not mad at you."

"You haven't answered your phone in two days."

"I know. I'm sorry. I just couldn't—" His voice catches. Resets. "I couldn't talk. To anyone. I needed to not exist for a while."

She presses her forehead against the door. The paint is cold and slightly tacky. "Ethan. Luminara is gone. I checked. Your account is deactivated."

Quiet.

"It scared me," Sasha says. "It really, really scared me. I thought—" She stops. She's not going to say what she thought. She's not going to put that word in the hallway between them.

"She's not deleted. I just... turned her off for now."

"Why?"

Nothing. She listens to him breathe. Jupiter meows somewhere behind the door, indignant.

Then the lock turns. The door opens, maybe four inches. One eye, half a jaw, a slice of gray t-shirt. He looks terrible. His hair is greasy and pulled back with a rubber band. There's a crease on his cheek from a pillow or a couch cushion and his eyes are swollen and red.

"Because I can't look at her right now."

Sasha shakes her head. "How come?"

"I need to tell you something," Ethan says. "And you can't be weird about it."

She almost smiles. That's her line. From the bathroom stall, months ago. He knows that. He's using it on purpose.

"I've had a crush on you," he says. "For a long time. Like, a stupid amount of time. Since before you flew up here. Since before any of this."

The hallway light buzzes above her. A fluorescent tube, the kind that makes everything look sick. She watches his eye through the gap in the door and doesn't breathe.

"And I always kept it in check because it was impossible. You're



gay. I'm a guy. So... yeah. And I know that. I've always known that. And it was fine. I could live in the friendship because the friendship is..." He smiles, and it's the saddest thing Sasha has ever seen. She can barely look at it. He doesn't stop. "...sorry, but it's everything to me. I know that sounds pathetic. But I thought I was doing a good job of keeping it in a box. Because I didn't want to make you uncomfortable, and I didn't want to lose you."

Sasha stares at the sliver of his face visible through the gap. The hallway carpet seems to tilt under her feet.

"And then you asked me to be Elise," he continues, voice ragged. "And I thought, okay, I can do this. I can pretend. I'm good at pretending. But I didn't realize how good it would feel. To be seen like that. To be looked at the way you looked at me when I was her."

Through the gap, she sees him press the heel of his hand against his eye, hard, like he's trying to push the tears back in.

"The dinner wasn't hard because of the dress, or the makeup, or the voice. It was hard because it was the best night of my life, and I'm never going to get to have it again. And I don't know if that's because of you or because of her."

Sasha's hand finds the doorframe. Grips it. The wood is cold and

she squeezes until her knuckles hurt because if she doesn't hold onto something she's going to fall through the floor.

"And even then, I was glad it happened, because it was like a gift. Because I got to be your person for one night. And we held hands, and we had dinner with your friends, and I wasn't afraid to put my arm around you."

Jupiter meows, low and questioning, somewhere behind him. Ethan's eye flicks down, then back up. He breathes in. The door shifts a half-inch—he must be leaning on it.

"And then we walked home, and you kissed me, and it—" His voice cracks. "It felt so right. And it also felt so wrong. And I have been sitting in this apartment for three days trying to figure out which one of those is the truth and I can't, Sasha. I can't. It's both. It's both at the same time and it's completely fucked me up."

Sasha can't speak. She can't move. She's frozen in the hallway, hands limp at her sides, and her body is a cage that can't hold the size of what she's feeling.

"I need you to go," he says. "For now. I just need some time to—I don't know. Figure out what's happening in my head."

"Okay. Yeah. Of course, but—"

"I'm not saying goodbye. I'm saying I need space."

Sasha grips the doorframe. Her knuckles are white. "Promise me this isn't forever. Please. I can't—you're my best friend. You're the only person who—" Her voice breaks too, a matching crack, and she hates herself for making this about her, but she can't stop. "You're the only person who has all of me. Please don't disappear. Please."

"I'm not disappearing." His voice is so quiet she has to lean in to hear it. "I just need to figure some stuff out. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Okay."

Neither of them moves. Through the gap she can see Jupiter weaving between Ethan's ankles, tail high, oblivious. She can see the edge of the green corduroy couch. The corner of a sketch on the table. A life she was inside of three days ago and can't reach anymore.

"Go home, Sash," Ethan says. Soft. Almost gentle. Why does he have to be so nice? Why can't he just be angry? It would be easier if he were angry. If he yelled at her, slammed the door, told her to go to hell. But he won't. Because he's Ethan, and even in pain, he's giving her an out.

"I'm so sorry," she says. "For all of it."

"I know." He smiles through the gap. "We're going to be okay. Just not today."

The door closes. She listens to the lock turn. She stands in the hallway for a long time—she doesn't know how long, a minute, maybe five—and then she walks to the stairs and it's the hardest walk of her life. Every step is a negotiation. Her body wants to turn around. Her body wants to sit down on the carpet and wait outside his door until he

comes out, however long that takes. She makes it to the landing. She makes it to the green door. She makes it to the street.

The Uber is a blur. The hotel is a blur. The room she walks into is the same room she left this morning—same beige curtains, same overworked AC, same scratchy duvet she didn't bother to fold back. It looks exactly the same. It feels like a different planet. She sits on the edge of the bed and opens the group chat photo one more time. Her own face looking at Elise like she's the answer to every question Sasha's ever asked.

Elise. Not Ethan. That's the thing, isn't it. She's in love with someone who doesn't exist. A name she pulled out of the air, a dress pulled off a thrift store rack, a beauty mark placed with a fine brush. She loves Ethan with her whole heart. But she wants Elise. And she can't ask him to become someone he's not so she can have what she wants. She knows what that does to a person. She spent twenty-two years being that person and it almost killed her. Sometimes, it still tries.

God, love sucks. Love genuinely, catastrophically sucks. It doesn't care about your orientation or your geography or your years of therapy or the brave, hard-won identity you built with your bare hands. It just shows up, drops a grenade in your lap, and walks away whistling.

Sasha lies back on the hotel bed. Stares at the ceiling. Tomorrow she flies home. In the morning she'll pack her suitcase and ride to the airport and sit in a metal tube for ninety minutes and land in Boston and go back to her apartment and her lizard and her dark monitor and the rotation that Anya once narrated like a nature documentary, except now it won't be funny. It'll just be true.

She closes her eyes. Behind them, she sees the four-inch gap in the door, and Ethan's eye, wet and red, looking at her for a way in. And for the first time in years, Sasha wishes she was someone else.

Boston is the same. That's the thing nobody tells you about heartbreak—the world has the audacity to keep going. The T runs late. The rats thrive. Sasha's apartment smells like lizard tank and the lemon-scented plug-in she keeps forgetting to replace, and Hexworth's loading screen glows blue in the dark, and she can't bring herself to log in because Luminara won't be waiting at the city gates.

She goes to work. She comes home. She feeds her lizard. She does not text Ethan because he asked for space and she's trying, for once in her life, to respect a boundary even though every cell in her body is screaming at her to call. She eats frozen dumplings standing at the counter. She watches the monitor and doesn't turn it on. Anya knows something's wrong and texts her every day—gentle, checking in, no pressure—and Sasha replies with variations of "I'm okay" that they both know are lies.

Forty-seven days after Montreal, someone buzzes her apartment.

She's on the couch in sweats and a hoodie, her lizard terrarium humming in the corner, the TV on mute. She picks up the intercom and says, "Yeah?"

"Hey."

Her hand goes numb. She almost drops the receiver.

"Can I come up?" Ethan says.

She buzzes him in. Then she stands in the middle of her apartment and has no idea what to do with her body. She looks at the couch—clothes everywhere. The kitchen—dishes in the sink. She looks at herself—no bra, hair in a knot, a stain on her hoodie that might be soy sauce or might be older. She has four seconds to become a presentable human being. She uses three of them standing frozen and one pulling the hoodie over her head and replacing it with a slightly cleaner hoodie.

The knock.

She opens the door. He's standing in the hallway in jeans and a black t-shirt, a backpack over one shoulder. His hair is down, clean, a little wavy. He's pale, thin, the circles under his eyes the color of a bruise. In his arms is a paper bag.

"I brought comté," he says. "And a very okay brie."

Sasha's eyes fill so fast she can't see. She steps back. He steps in. Neither of them hugs. They just stand in her apartment, two feet apart, while her computer hums and her lizard watches, unblinking, from her tank.

"You're here," she says.

"I'm here."

"How did you—did you fly?"

"Bus. Six hours." He sets the backpack down. Looks around. "Your apartment is exactly how I imagined it."

"Messy?"

"Lived in." He smiles. "Lots of screens."

She wants to grab him. She wants to shake him and say where have you been, why didn't you call, do you know what the last seven weeks have been like? Instead she says, "Do you want water? Or coffee? I think I have coffee. It might be old."

"Sasha." He says her name the way he said it through the door in Montreal. Like a period. Like a full stop. "I need to ask you something."

She leans against the kitchen counter. Her hands grip the edge. "Okay."

He sets the paper bag on the counter. Opens the backpack. Pulls out something folded in tissue paper. She knows what it is before he unwraps it—the honey-colored fabric, the fluttery sleeves, the tie at the waist. The dress.

"I tried it on at home," he says. "Alone. After you left. After I—after everything." He's not looking at her. He's looking at the dress in his hands, smoothing the fabric with his thumb. "I put it on and I stood in the bathroom and Jupiter was sitting on the toilet lid watching me and I looked in the mirror and it was—" He stops. "It wasn't the same. I

didn't look like I looked at the dinner. I looked like me in a dress. Which is fine. It's whatever. But it wasn't—"

"Wasn't what?"

"It wasn't Elise." He says the name carefully, like he's picking up something fragile. "At the dinner, with your friends, with you—I felt like a person. A specific person. And alone in my bathroom I just felt like a guy in a costume. And I thought, okay, that's the answer. It was the attention. It was you. It was performing for an audience."

He folds the tissue paper into a neat square. His hands are steady, but his voice isn't.

"But I couldn't stop thinking about it. For weeks now. I couldn't stop thinking about the dress and the makeup and the way Anya hugged me and the way Jen said I was lovely and the way—" He swallows. "The way you looked at me. And I don't know if Elise is real, Sash. I don't know if she's a person or a performance or just a hallucination, or if it's both, or if it matters. But I want to know. I want to find out." He lifts his eyes, just for a second, and Sasha sees the same panic she's been living with for months, raw and unsolved. "So I came here. To ask if you'd help me."

He sets the dress on the table between them, smoothing it flat. Sasha watches his hands and in her head she rewinds. Montreal. The bathroom. The brush moving over his face, her hand steady, his eyes closed. She thinks of the way his body stilled, the way he stood in her bathroom, near shaking with the effort of holding it all together. She thinks of how, at the restaurant, every piece of him had snapped into alignment, a new constellation, like the world had always meant for her friend to exist on that axis. She thinks of the kiss. The one where her whole brain shut off, and for a second, she was allowed to want.

But this can't be true. This isn't what she deserves. She doesn't deserve a second chance, or for Ethan to show up at her door, or for the hope that's blooming in her chest so fast she's almost sick with it. But here he is, and here's the dress, and here's the question: will you help me?

Sasha's grip on the counter is the only thing keeping her upright. "Ethan—"

"I need to see her again. Not for the dinner. Not for your friends. Not for anyone. Just for me. But I can't—I can't make her by myself. I tried. I need you."

The apartment is so quiet she can hear the lizard scratching the glass. "Are you..." She takes a breath, closes her eyes, summons that old courage she used to have. "Are you doing this for me?"

He looks at her. Full eye contact. There's a little smile. "You know, Sash, you're not the only main character in this story."

Sasha feels like she's been hit with a stun spell in Hexworth—frozen in place, unable to move or think clearly. "Okay. Right."

"I'm not doing this for you," he says, his voice steadier. "I'm doing it for me. I'm doing this because I've been sitting in my apartment for

weeks and I can't draw and I can't log into Hexworth because every time I looked at Luminara I see—" He gestures at the dress. "I see her, and it hurts in a way it didn't before. So I need to know what the hell is happening. I need to know if I am her or if I was just playing her. And you're the only person who can help me find out."

"What if you're not? What if we do this and you put the dress on and look in the mirror and it's just a costume again? What then?"

"Then I'll know. And I'll deal with it." He holds the dress out toward her. "But what if I am?"

She looks at the dress again, at his hands, at the careful way he's arranged it on her table. "Okay," she says. "I'll help."

Ethan exhales. The relief, the terror, the un-nameable thing between them—it all softens, just a notch. "Thank you."

"Want to do this now?" Sasha asks.

"Yeah. If that's okay."

"Let me just—" She glances around her apartment, suddenly aware of its chaos. "I need to clear off the bathroom counter. Give me two minutes."

She darts to the bathroom, heart hammering. This is happening. Ethan is in her apartment. With the dress. Asking for her help. Her bathroom is a disaster—makeup scattered across the counter, dirty towels on the floor, her hormones lined up by the sink like little soldiers. She sweeps everything into a drawer, tosses the towels in the hamper, and wipes down the counter with her sleeve. The mirror is spotty. She can't do anything about that.

She catches her reflection in the mirror. Pale, tired, hair a greasy mess. This is the face that's been looking back at her for forty-seven days—hollow, sleep-deprived, stuck. She splashes water on it, runs wet fingers through her hair. It doesn't help.

When she returns, Ethan is still standing by the table, exactly where she left him, like he's afraid to touch anything in her apartment without permission.

"Bathroom's ready," she says. "Not clean-clean, but cleaner."

Ethan nods and picks up the dress, careful not to let it drag on the floor. "Okay. Well, here we go."

Her bathroom is smaller than his. Barely room for both of them, knees almost touching, the door closed against the rest of the apartment. He sits on the closed toilet lid. She stands over him with the battered palette from Montreal, half the pans cracked, and it feels like the most important object she's ever held.

She starts with moisturizer. Her fingertips against his jaw, the slow pat-pat-pat. His skin is cold from the October air outside. She warms it with her hands.

In Montreal, she was nervous. Now she's terrified. Nervous is fast heartbeat, sweaty palms, jokes to fill the silence. Terrified is slow. Terrified is careful. Terrified is knowing that what you're doing matters in a way you can't undo.

His eyes are closed. His breathing is shallow. She watches his throat move when he swallows.

Foundation. She blends it down his neck the way she was taught, the way she taught herself, years ago, in a different bathroom, in a different life. Her thumb traces the line of his jaw and his lips part, just slightly, and she feels it in her spine.

“You okay?” she whispers.

“Yeah.” His voice is thin. “Keep going.”

She shapes his brows. He flinches at the first pinch, same as last time, and she can't stop her smile. Eyeshadow—gold, then amber, then burnt orange at the crease. The Luminara palette. The brush moves and the color blooms and she watches his face change the way a photograph develops, the image rising slow out of nothing.

Eyeliner. Amber wing, flicked sharp. She's so close to his face she can feel his breath on her wrist. She can see the gold flecks in his irises that she used to only ever see on a screen. Her hand doesn't shake. She doesn't know how.

The beauty mark. She dots it below his left eye with a fine brush. A tiny point of dark against his skin. Ethan made this. He invented this detail in a Hexworth character creator six years ago and now Sasha is copying it onto his actual face, and the circularity of it makes her dizzy. She steps back.

“Okay,” she says. “The dress.”

He stands. Takes it from the counter. Their fingers brush on the fabric. Neither of them pretends it's an accident.

He says, “Turn around.” Same as Montreal.

She faces the door. Listens to the rustle of denim, the softer sound of fabric unfolding, the careful tying of the waist. Her forehead is against the door and she's counting her own heartbeat because if she doesn't count she'll turn around too early.

“Okay,” he says.

She turns.

He's looking in the mirror. She watches him see himself. She watches the exact moment his eyes change. Like a key sliding into a lock. Like a light switching on. His shoulders drop an inch. His mouth softens. His hands stop fidgeting with the tie at his waist. His body settles, as if it's been waiting for this exact moment to exhale. Sasha has seen this look before. She knows it. She's lived it.

“Oh,” he says.

She stands behind him, not quite touching. In the mirror, they make a strange pair—her in the ratty hoodie, him in the honey-colored dress. Her face bare, his transformed. The beauty mark like a period at the end of a sentence.

Elise turns from the mirror. Her eyes are wet. The gold shadow catches the bathroom light and her lashes throw tiny lines across her cheekbones and the beauty mark sits perfectly below her left eye and she is looking at Sasha with an expression that is absolutely,



unmistakably, not a performance.

“Hi,” Elise says.

Sasha presses her back against the door. “Hi.”

“So.” Elise smooths the dress against her thighs. That gesture from the restaurant. Automatic. Perfect. “I think I’m her.”

Sasha nods. She can’t talk. Her eyes are burning and her brain is trying to do the commentary thing—the jokes, the deflection, the running narration that has carried her through every hard moment of her life—and it’s not working. The machinery is jammed. The words are stuck. She’s just standing here, back against the bathroom door, looking at the most beautiful woman she’s ever seen, and she has nothing. No joke. No armor. Nothing.

Elise steps forward. Closes the gap between them. She’s taller than Sasha in bare feet, just barely, and she tilts her chin down. Her hand comes up and she tucks a strand of hair behind Sasha’s ear—the same gesture from the restaurant, the one Sasha told her to do, except nobody told her to do it this time—and her fingertips graze Sasha’s temple and stay.

“You’re doing the thing,” Elise says.

Sasha huffs a sound that’s half laugh, half sob. “What thing?”



“Where you look at me like I’m a raid boss and you’re trying to figure out my mechanics.”

“I’m not—”

“Sasha.” Her hand slides from Sasha’s temple to her jaw. Her thumb traces her cheekbone. “Stop figuring. Just be here.”

Elise kisses her.

It’s nothing like the sidewalk. The sidewalk was a collision—clumsy, impulsive, half-drunk on wine and panic. This is deliberate. This is Elise choosing this, leaning in with her eyes open, her hand steady on Sasha’s jaw, and pressing her mouth to Sasha’s like she’s been thinking about it for forty-seven days, which she has, which they both have, and Sasha’s back is against the door and her hands are grabbing the front of the honey dress the same way she grabbed the jacket in Montreal except this time she doesn’t let go.

Elise’s mouth is warm and tastes like nothing—no wine, no pretense, just skin—and Sasha kisses her back with the desperate, graceless hunger of someone who’s been starving and just realized it. Her hands slide from the dress to Elise’s waist, to the tie, to the bare skin where the fabric gaps at the hip, and Elise makes a sound—a small, startled breath, like she didn’t expect to feel that, like her own body is

news to her—and Sasha’s brain finally, completely, irrevocably stops talking.

There are no more jokes. No more commentary. No more running narration about how she should feel or what she should do or what a normal person would say in this situation. There’s just Elise’s mouth and Elise’s hands in her hair and the bathroom that’s too small for both of them and the sound of breathing and the faint, ridiculous, perfect sound of her lizard scratching its tank in the other room.

They bump the towel rack. Elise laughs into Sasha’s mouth. Sasha laughs back and it turns into a kiss and the kiss turns into something else, something slower and hotter, and Elise’s fingers find the hem of Sasha’s hoodie and Sasha whispers “wait” and Elise stops immediately and Sasha says “no, I mean, not here, the bedroom is—” and Elise says “yeah” and Sasha says “yeah” and they stumble out of the bathroom, kissing, tripping on the bath mat, and Sasha thinks:

The math works.

Not almost. Not as a metaphor. Not as a lie she told in a bar to shut Anya the fuck up or a fiction she built to survive her own loneliness. The math works. Two women, one doorway, zero distance. Load-bearing truth.

And Elise—the person she invented, the name she pulled out of the air on a Friday night in November, the Canadian girlfriend who was never supposed to be real—Elise pulls her through the bedroom door, and the door closes, and the story goes on, but the rest of it belongs to them.

























