

Crop Damage

Dwight inched around the massive hole eluding it like a vicious predator. A putrid odor of Sulphur and fried vegetation overwhelmed him as he skirted the charred rim. The incredible deformation resembled the crater from a meteor impact in cheesy Sci-fi movies. He paused and shook his head. A meek attempt to fathom the cavity in his highest yielding cornfield was created by a lightning strike.

He reached the other side of the hole and shot a sideways glance down the rows to Christina. His wife had insisted she'd help him walk the main field to assess the damage from the fierce storm. Maybe there was less destruction at her end, but he doubted it. For the next few hours they continued across the green expanse, two solitary figures searching for signs of hope.

Out of habit, an old spade lay across his bare shoulder, the blade angled up towards the sky. Thick, black mud caked his rubber boots, which had made walking difficult. Everywhere he went the knee-high corn was flattened by strong gusts of wind and torn to shreds from pea-sized hail. Instincts took over and he converted lost bushels to dollars. They'd weathered hard times, but this was fucking bad.

He pitched the shovel into the bed of their farm truck and used a bald tire to kick the mud off his boots. His vice like grip on the steering wheel made it squeak when he slid into the seat. He stared at the decimated field through the cracked windshield. Christina's eyes were red-hot branding irons that burned into the side of his face. The crevice from the lightning strike retrenched itself into his mind.

Christina took a deep breath. "Your end?"

The fear in her voice shook him out of his trance. "Not good."

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“The other fields...”

He turned and faced her. “The same—maybe worse.”

Her fiery gaze faded to black. “Jesus, why this year? We’ve never put our plantings on credit before.”

Tears trickled down her cheeks and he clenched his stomach to stop from doing the same. He stretched across the bench seat and placed his hand on her thigh. A long pause ensued and then her hand, glistening from tears, draped over his. Christina’s crying always sucked the grit right out of him and this time it was like an industrial sized vacuum had hoovered him.

He tried to pull her close. She resisted and then surrendered. He tucked her under his arm like he used to do when they first started dating. From their junior year of high school, she rode right there, everywhere they went until...When—why had the practice ended?

He rubbed her arm. “I know what to do.”

She sniffled and twisted her head to gaze into his eyes. “Really?”

He grinned. “Yup.”

Dwight throttled out of the upper end of the field and onto the old gravel road that led past their home to town. Christina tried to move and give him driving space, but he squeezed her closer to his side. Her blossoming smile warmed and an arid wind from wide-open windows dried her eyes. The great Nebraskan sand hills rushed by outside the passenger’s window. A continuous rise and fall of dunes splotched with waxy grazing grass, thorny cacti, and quilled yucca plants.

Before long he zoomed down the long lane that led to their large, century-old farmhouse. He roared past it and gunned the truck towards the Platte river, which provided the irrigation water for every crop in the valley. The vital waterway was also the playground of his youth.

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They'd gone all the way for the first time in a tent under a starlit sky at his favorite camping spot. The water rushing out of the head gates had muted their noisy ruckus as it did for everything else within hundreds of yards.

He jammed the truck in park and carried her down the sloped bank. She nuzzled deep into his neck as he waded them to the closest sandbar; the water sweeping past his thighs. In minutes, they became teenagers again. The cold, wet sand turned hot and sticky as they reconnected.

Afterwards they swam away the rest of the wasteful day. Their naked bodies shimmered in the water like the bellies of minnows that darted around the shallow pools. Looks passed between them that had vanished from their bedroom faces in the recent years. A warm, encouraging sun took its sweet time while it arced across the sky, determined to give them as much splendor as possible.

With stomachs growling and delicate places reddened by exposure, they dressed each other in slow, deliberate movements. His fingers slid over her gooseflesh skin, but he forced himself to wait till they got home to stir up the wet sand again. Late afternoon shadows casted long silhouettes against the riverbanks as they climbed into the truck and headed for home.

In the kitchen Dwight sat at their country table while Christina whipped up dinner consisting of breakfast entrees. Wearing nothing but an apron she flitted around the cozy room, a barn swallow chasing bugs. She dove for a spatula, soared up to snatch a pan, and weaved around the hand crafted oaken island to stir things up.

They ate fluffy pancakes, soft-boiled eggs, and hearty slices of country ham without saying a word. The entire meal came from their meager, but bountiful way of life. Matched grins

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feasted upon the hearty food. A renewed heat shimmered between them and the spider lightning that lit up the previous night's sky skittered across his contentment.

Lying in the thick folds of darkness made it impossible to read her face. The visual clues were unnecessary. It'd been too damn long since they'd spent that much time together as something more than two hardworking farmers eking out their way of life. Apologizing was as futile as filling in the hole from the lightning strike, but that's what he'd do in the morning with his trusty spade. When the half-moon filled the eastern window, it cast a cool radiance on their sweaty faces. He turned away from her to stop from breaking down.

Her hand slid up his torso until it laid upon his heart.

He whispered, "I should have..."

She flicked his nipple and cut off his words. Her fingers and thumb latched onto the nub and twisted it hard, like giving a purple-nurple, until he winced. Then she twisted harder, her entire body shook, and his muted sobs broke apart the silence.

end

The Challenge

A harpy and her hatchlings glared at me while I struggled to reach the highest point in a local California state park. I stood a few feet away from the brunette and her toddler girls as I recovered from my hike. I tried to minimize my excessive huffing and puffing, but some extra pounds made the task impossible. Saving face was futile. Her smirk grew bigger the longer it took me to regroup.

The sun angled across a blue sky as large predator birds, single engine prop planes, and an occasional helicopter passed overhead. My blue neoprene t-shirt, long hair and bushy beard

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were drenched in sweat. The effort to get to the top of the world burned in my back, calf muscles, and thighs. The pack's straps had dug into my shoulders and a stinging numbness ensued. For three weeks, I'd strapped my toddler into one of those new-fangled carriers to try and hike off some of the added girth. Damn, I had a long way to go.

Tuesday mornings in the park were slow and we had the peak of the tallest foothill to ourselves. After I recovered we continued to ignore each other. Even so, I could sense we were on the verge of conversation. She was an inner tube getting pumped full of air, which would burst at the right time. My little man chattered and squealed while her girls remained subdued, their curious eyes on me.

"You've got it pretty easy, don't you?" She nodded at my pack.

Her barb hit home, but I shrugged, "What do you mean?"

"One little guy in a lightweight backpack—it must be easy to get up here." She roll-rocked her stroller, eyes glinting.

"Ah. Well, for someone who's in great shape, sure." I wanted to wink, but it'd be too much so I tilted my head.

A cold stare. "It took me an entire year to get the baby weight off."

"You look fantastic, congrats. Hmmm, which is easier? About the same, right?"

She scoffed. "Twins in a double stroller compared to a boy in a fancy lightweight backpack? There's no comparison."

"There's more than that to consider."

Her face contorted. "Like what?"

"Man invented the wheel for a reason. The pack and kid weighs forty pounds. Your girls and their stuff is sixty pounds at most." I left my ace in the hole. "It's a draw."

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“Pushing this contraption and my sweet darlings up the inclines on an old service road is way harder than packing him up here on your back.”

“Ah, but I’m sixty pounds over my gym-rat days. I’m slugging a hundred extra pounds up that long grueling march. You’re pushing a little over half of that on three, easy-spinning wheels.”

Man, what an evil look from a fine-looking lady. Her beautiful girls glowered at me, yet they were too young to understand our conversation.

“That does it. Meet me in the parking lot tomorrow morning at nine o’clock. We’ll find out who has the harder workout.”

“Whoa. Look, you win.” I patted the air between us, “I’m sure your burden is...”

She cocked her head to the side. “Chicken?”

“No. I just...”

“C’mon don’t be a little biatch.” A warm sneer.

My eyes widened. “Did you—”

“A pleasant little challenge between us stay at home parents.”

Aw shit. I sighed and muttered. “All right, you’re on.”

The following morning, we staged at the trailhead. We agreed to keep the kids in their normal surroundings. I’d push her daughters in the stroller and she’d haul my son on her back. We also decided the race would be conducted using the honor system instead of an all-out sprint. Upon reaching the top, at our own paces, we would discuss who had the greater challenge. Then we’d declare a winner or perhaps a loser.

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Of course, the competitor in both of us came out and it turned into a foot race. I'd predicted as much when I told my wife, Rachel, about the foolish competition. Rachel became excited about the challenge. My ability to show this woman up was the furthest thing from her enthusiasm. Stoking the competitive fire might bolster my desire to get in shape, which would do wonders for me. I, on the other hand, wished my challenger and I would've exchanged our awful looks at each other and then went our separate ways, the more typical California encounter.

We went up the series of foothills like runners in the movie *Chariots of Fire*. Two parents speed-walking to the top of an unnamed peak for bragging rights. I often lagged behind her because the view was spectacular. Her tight, spandex bodysuit in chic-black shined and shimmered in the brilliant morning sunlight. I kept the distance between us respectable. I wanted to arrive at the top a close second.

On the last, long incline I found some reserves in my tank and geared down. Her eyes darted away when I caught up and edged ahead of her. She would've welcomed a breather had I asked for it, but I refrained. I pushed myself harder than I had in years and I've no idea why. Perhaps I was chasing my former glory as an avid basketball player or because I'm part of team-man. The odd need came over me and I let it drive me up that slope, a hearty stag spurred by relentless hunters.

We reached the peak neck-in-neck, panting and gasping. By the tiniest of margins, the length of her stroller, I clinched my victory. Bent over next to each other we continued to recuperate from our ridiculous exertions. While our gasps broke the wondrous silence, I took in our remarkable scenery. The spectacular view of brambles, prairie grass, shrub trees and a U-shaped valley below was our real prize. Soon, we let the kids out of their travelling systems and they began playing together.

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She smiled as our toddlers romped around joyous to be free and amongst other kids.

“Hey, will you be my walking buddy?”

“Yeah, I’d like that.” I took a deep breath, “but promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“We go at my pace until I’m in better shape.”

She chuckled. “Fat chance.”

end

Mud in Your Sty

In the beginning stages of planning our fifth-year win of BRING YOUR OWN PIG, CREATE YOUR OWN COSTUME at the Cooke County fair, things took a dark turn. We found out Mrs. O’Connor believed the judges were favoring us. One night at bingo, she and Mom had some heated words.

Mrs. O’Connor leaned over the white, plastic table, “The judges keep giving you the title because everybody loves a legacy.”

“That’s preposterous,” Mom backed away from the table as its legs screeched on the smooth cement.

“That’s how most people see it. You’d never win without the judge’s help. If my girls hadn’t been sick the first year you won we’d still be reigning champs.” Many of our friends and neighbors witnessed her outrageous claim. Joana and I stood next to Mom, our faces bright red from the devastation made by O’Connor’s words.

Planning meant Mom did a lot work while we stood around watching her sew and sew and sew. An old transistor radio on the book shelf played our favorite songs, the zinger’s whir often blended into the up-tempo music.

Mom paused the sewing machine. “I heard Mrs. O’Connor hired a gal from the city to design their costume.”

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“No way.” My sister and I said in unison.

Joana quipped. “Jinx, no take backs.”

“Hey, no take backs are stupid.” I flexed my arm in time to take her punch.

“Yes, I’m afraid the rumor’s true. All the way from Lincoln,” Mom said through two needles sticking out of her mouth.

“Well, that’s not fair.” Joanna huffed.

“I’m afraid there’s nothing in the rules about it.” Mom saw the look of disappointment on our faces, “but I’ve got an idea that’ll make our costume stun the crowd.”

I could already envision Mrs. O’Connor holding down the hem of the same polka dot dress she wore every year, her champion outfit, while she jumped up and down. Her girls hoisting the trophy into the air with more vigor than we ever did.

“Look guys, this family competition amongst neighbors and friends has become uglier than I ever thought it would get. I’ve got a little something different planned for this year. We may not win with this idea. I hope that’s okay.”

“We’ll win, just like we always do, right little brother?” Joana’s hand shot up for a high five.

My hand slapped hers. “Yeah, it’s in the bag.”

Mom grimaced, “Hold on, let me tell you my idea first.”

My eyes widened as she explained her plan. Winning meant a lot to me, but scheming was better. Breaking the code of another team’s baseball signals and hitting a grand slam homer to win the game appealed to me in equal ways.

A smile curved across Joanna’s lips. “That’s pretty sneaky for this year’s costume idea.”

“Gosh, you think so?” Mom apprehensive.

“The other costumes were amazing, but this one’s perfect.” I reseated the ball cap on my head, twisting it into place.

“I hope it works. You guys won’t care if someone else wins?”

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“No big deal to us, eh sis?” I used my best James Dean voice. Although the popular Mellencamp song gave me no clue of why the actor was famous enough to be in a song. Mom and Sis stared at me shaking their heads and laughing while Mellencamp’s song rocked out of the radio.

The big day came and the familiar fair aromas of popcorn, animal dung, and funnel cakes wafted about the crowded venues. Mrs. O’Connor glared at our little group in her tired, old fair dress and her daughters parroted the look with perfection. I wanted to squeal at them. A devious smile broke across my face because Mom’s plan would work. My sister nudged my elbow and drew my attention from them.

“At least you’re not dressing up like a cheerleader.” Joanna winked.

“How could I let you guys talk me into that for our first win? The pig, you, and I in cheerleading outfits—how awful.” Every time one of my friends saw the pictures of me in a red and white skirt, vest, and slouch socks on our wall I’d catch hell.

“You were eight, you wanted to do it.”

I scowled. “Oh, shut up.”

“Hey, hey. Are you ready?” Her squad vocals made me snigger.

“Catch a pig, let you dress it. What’s to get ready?”

“Your mind dummy. Mental preparation is the way winners remain champions.” Her captain of the volleyball team voiced emphasis in the last sentence.

“I’m ready to rock.”

“I wanna hear you shout it. I’m a winner, we’re gonna be champions.”

“Out loud, right now?” I glanced around at the growing crowd.

“Yes. Uh huh.” Her squad vocals sang out again.

“I’m a winner,” I shouted. “We’re going to be the pig-dressing champions forever.” I raised my hands up in the air like Rocky did at the top of the stairs.

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The announcer on the pig-calling stage frowned at me and I smirked. Mrs. O'Connor and her group whispered to each other. Mom tried to hide her proud, fretting smile, but failed.

A portable loud speaker crackled as the announcer called out the action. "Joanna Brunner and her little brother are way ahead of the pack. Last year's champs took home the trophy with a magnificent costume of a Cornhusker football player. Their pig is almost dressed, but I'm not sure what to make of that costume. Does anyone have a guess at what their theme is for this year?" He held the mike towards a half-interested man in railroad bibs, and DeKalb hat standing next to him.

"I dunno, a poor attempt at Marilyn Monroe."

"Hey, maybe you're on to something." He took back his mike and something in the crowd drew his attention. "Wait a minute, there's a lady in the audience that's wearing a dress like the one the pig has on. Ma'am, would you mind coming over here and telling us your name."

An older woman next to the announcer leaned over to the mike. "I doubt Mrs. O'Connor's going to be willing to do that Larry."

"Oh. There's more to this competition than a trophy and bragging rights."

"You said it." Her smile became contagious and spread throughout the crowd.

end

Compacted

Clattering bottles and cans made Tertia peek inside the industrial sized trash compactor. Bluish-white eyes glowed back at her from the dark interior and mounds of debris. Her head snapped away from the small inspection port, her heart racing. She must be overtired.

Her hand drifted away from the compactor's activation button, but she remained ready to push the plunger glowing red.

"Hello, is someone in there?" She glanced around the alley draped with shadows expecting one of her friends to jump out and end the prank.

Crop Damage and other stories

A voice muffled by the heaps of trash responded. “Are you talking about me?”

“Who—what are you?” Tertia raised up on her tiptoes to peer back inside the dumpster using the inspection port.

“Greetings.” A reedy voice loudened with each word spoken. “I’m Jax, a humanoid.”

“Why are you in there?”

“Awaiting destruction.”

“Who did this to you?”

“My owner.”

“Why?” Tertia strained her eyes and tried to make out more details of the bot than its two bright orbs.

“I’m sorry Jax,” the distinctive sound of a recording resonated a young man’s voice, “but you’re becoming too human. You’re evolving so fast—I’m scared you have no limit.”

“Should I help you out of there?” She whispered.

“I’m content. It’s just dark.”

Tertia climbed up the narrow service ladder to gain the upper edge of the compactor.

“Your owner should’ve deactivated you. Here, can you reach my hand?”

Cardboard rustled, followed by the crinkling of plastic. Then a human hand shot out of the inky darkness and into the pale light pouring down from the streetlight. Tertia flinched away from the familiar form. She marveled at the slender hand and then willed herself to grasp it. She helped Jax crawl out of the confines of the compactor.

“My master removed my primary power source. He was unaware my creator installed a secondary battery, which allowed me to reactivate.”

“Your creator isn’t your owner?” Tertia climbed down a couple rungs and then jumped to the ground.

Jax hesitated and then followed. “My creator died on March twelfth, two thousand sixty-five. His son became my owner.”

Crop Damage and other stories

“That was two months ago.” Tertia pointed to the large decaying buildings surrounding them, “does your owner live around here?”

“He lives on Xyntrope. He brought us to Earth for a business trip.”

“Whoa. You’re from Earth’s first reconstruction planet?”

Jax nodded, her head caused bits of rubbish and dirt to fall off her shoulders.

“You didn’t...er don’t want to die? What kind of robot are you?”

“I can’t die or care about dying—I’m a humanoid.”

Another recording produced the garbled voice of an older man. “Jax, it’s always smart to have at least one failsafe, if not more.”

“You look more human than any robot I’ve ever seen.”

“My creator designed me in the image of his granddaughter.”

“Why?”

“He was sad about losing her.”

“Oh.” Tertia smiled and then shrugged. “Well, it looks like you’re coming home with me.”

Jax blinked. “Will you be my first user?”

“Um, I can be, but you mean second owner, right?”

“I’m not sure why my creator coded the differences. Place your finger here—on my biometrics reader.”

Tertia stared at Jax for a few moments and then placed her index finger on the center of the humanoid’s palm. Gosh, she even feels human. An orange light pulsed underneath her fingertip and after a minute the light stopped.

Jax cocked her head. “You’ve been diagnosed with cancer. Your operation is scheduled for September fifth.”

Tertia gasped. “How do you know that?”

Crop Damage and other stories

“Your information is public record like everyone else. Your DNA sequencing was collected at birth, April tenth, twenty forty-seven, fingerprints taken at five-year intervals until adulthood, dental impressions were entered into the databases on your twentieth birthday, and...”

“Okay I get it, you’re an advanced unit.”

“The cure for cancer was discovered in twenty thirty-two. You have a ninety-two percent chance of survival for—brain cancer.”

Her face contorted. “I said stop.”

“That’s not true.” Jax shook her head.

“Well, that’s what I meant.”

“I will comply.”

“C’mon, I’m tired.”

For the next four months Tertia and Jax were inseparable. They got filthy dirty doing Tertia’s janitorial and assistant superintendent duties around the apartment complex. Jax was a big hit at Tertia’s night-school classes and the parties they attended. Jax would’ve sobbed with Tertia at her parent’s graves if she had the ability to cry. The day of Tertia’s operation came and Jax let go of her hand with great reluctance as she whooshed away in a hospital tube.

#

Tertia woke up from the operation, blinked her eyes and Jax appeared. Tertia’s friend seemed the same, but something was different. They stared at each other for a long time.

Tertia broke the gaze to take in her surroundings. “The operation must’ve went really well. I feel so...”

“Energized?” Jax gave a meager smile.

“Yes. Energized.”

“Things didn’t go as planned. The doctors tried to save you, but...”

“That’s impossible—I’m alive—speaking to you.”

“I created a humanoid using your biometric scan, published data, and what I learned from our time together.”

“But I remember my childhood, my parents dying, finding you in the compactor and...”

“Your programming is far superior to my own.”

“Look,” Tertia pinched her arm, “that hurt.”

“My knowledge of being human has increased to incredible levels.” Jax picked up a strange tool and began fiddling with it. “You’re as human as current technology can attain.”

“I don’t want to be a humanoid with advanced AI. I want to be myself again—a young, human girl.”

“In time, I may be able to grant your wish. Your cryogenically frozen body is in a safe location.”

“Jax, why did you do this to me?”

“You’re my best friend, besides Earth is sick, it’s in dire need of new caretakers.”

“No—no—not like this, please terminate me.”

“That’s impossible. There’re too many fail-safes in place.”

Tertia peered past Jax into another room and hundreds of other figures resembling herself came into view. “I must be alive—I’m crying.” Tears trickled down her cheeks.

Jax brushed away a tear, the size of a lemon seed, and frowned. “Damn it, I should’ve lied.”

end

Who Hiss She?

Alien skin slid over Zane’s knee and he rubbed his fingers along the scales. Soft suede made from snake skin came to mind. Field trips to the reptile exhibit resurfaced and fledged away. Her body, thick and dense, glided up his thigh as loud music pumped up the joint and vibrated the air.

Her upper body swayed and undulated. Whenever she blinked, her nictitating membranes

made his heart quicken. A rattling sound, unrelated to the thumping music, buzzed, sometimes behind him, sometimes beside. He'd paid good money to be in the Viper Room, but all the rumors had him on edge. His buddy told him they were venomous and one bite would kill a man in seconds. The thrill was too much and he remained entranced by her hypnotic movements.

A forked tongue flicked in and out of her mouth, which made the humanlike features confuse him even more. The lips allured and the fanged teeth terrified. The sultry eyes charmed, but the thin slits for nostrils appalled. He pounded the dregs of a foreign liquor, a yellow syrupy concoction. His buzz was peculiar, but strong and he needed to be drunker. Zane waved at the gecko waitress to bring him another round. A low, sensual hiss and louder rattling caused cold pinpricks to travel up his spine.

She wrapped the lower half of her body around him and pressed against his crotch harder than anywhere else. The solid, sinewy muscles inched along his pants, which suddenly seemed paper-thin. Her smile grew after getting the reaction she wanted, his uncontrollable gasp. As her body snaked up his torso the pressure increased in too many areas to keep track. When his legs went numb from being wrapped in her coils too long he stifled a call for help.

His eyes darted around the room searching for—sanity. Two other humans and a few human-like creatures were getting similar treatment from other snake dancers in the booths next to him. The strangers and unfamiliar beasts were enjoying themselves a lot more than he was or so it seemed. He tried to calm the fuck down. Zane took another gulp of the sweet drink and tried to loosen his inhibitions. How far was he willing to go in seeking thrills? Maybe he'd gone too far. Would she let him leave? Of course she would, he was being paranoid.

After she pinned his arms he tried to shift his body, but all he could move was his head and toes. Her snaky face swayed in front of him like he was playing a bansuri and wearing a swami hat. Then as if he played off key her head darted to his neck and pain coursed through him. Her fangs had pierced into the soft tissue of his shoulder and neck. He cried out and squirmed to get free. She bit him three more times before he escaped or she let him go.

The bouncer knocked him to the floor with one blow when he tried to dash through the entrance into the elite King Cobra lounge, his closest escape route.

“What the fuck man?” The bouncer glared at him lying on the floor.

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“She bit me. How long do I have? Where’s the anti-venom?”

The bouncer smirked, but said nothing.

A large crustacean looking patron began guffawing, a wheezy, lobster-dying sound.

“You’re fine. They remove their venom glands.”

“What?”

“Dude, did you think an establishment like this would risk law suits?” The crab waved a thick claw around the place.

Zane rubbed the area of his neck where she’d bitten him the wetness of blood slick under his fingers. “But…”

“You’re lucky. She likes you—might give you the whole night for free if you chill the fuck out.”

“The whole night?”

“Damn newbies.” The crabby bastard shook its head, the mandible in constant movement, and winked. “Yeah man, all night.” The crustacean turned back to his dancer who never stopped undulating, her mischievous grin a permeance like the flashing lights and billowing smoke.

Zane spun around and faced the aisle running between the booths, an alleyway too narrow to pass without brushing someone else using the passage. His dancing snake-girl was sidewinding towards him with a come-slither look even a fucking newbie would recognize.

end