

I shake my head, regret coming tonight just paying for parking, but I'm here. Like I'm playing out a deleted scene of "Yes Man," I'm dressed way too clean to be here, and feel a bit too old. My buddy Wells has a friend in the band so he talked me into going to this clunky little venue tonight, a gathering in an open amphitheatre that seems better equipped for a school play than a punk rock concert. There's maybe seats for fifty with not even twenty filled.

"It's Halloween, man. Just come hang out, I'll get you in for free." That was all Wells had to say to get me somewhere I knew I wouldn't want to be. He wouldn't want to come either if he had better plans, but one of his good friends is the bassist.

He texts me right as I arrive to find there's no cover charge anyway. "Runnin late gimme a while," it reads, meaning he's probably chasing a possible hook-up with one of his exes, all of whom are terrible and none of whom he's managed to get rid of.

Which means I'm probably riding this event out alone or taking my sorry ass home. I wish I had literally any other plans.

Eh. I'm here: I'll be a yes man for a while longer. Maybe I'll meet some people with a party to head to even if the band is terrible. I could really use a change of pace tonight from kicking my breakup around my head all night.

What's it been, six weeks since I finally told her we're done? Long enough to get over four months of great chemistry, bitter fights, constant misunderstandings and jealousy, and just plain bad phone etiquette. That last one just happens to get under my skin. A lot about her and me I thought could have worked, but didn't--time after time. And I know better than Wells than to keep her attached for those nights when I'm extra lonely and stupid.

So I take the high road that takes me no further than the lamest Halloween concert in the city. I walk toward the center aisle where it leads up, stepping past the only security guard in sight tonight; he doesn't bother looking up from his phone to check my ID.

I start heading toward the back until I see a pair of pretty faces on the left with legs up over the seats in front of them. The aisle seat by the short-haired one is open. She has fade-to-blue hair brushing along her chin line from blond roots, wearing blue eyeshadow (that actually works for her), an *In Flames* tee, and jean shorts with fishnets. Her heeled boots hover partially over the open seat beside her.

Her friend stretches languidly as I climb near. "God, these fuckers never start on time," she sighs, running both hands through long black hair. She wears a denim jacket over a white v-neck that shows off several necklaces that either came from *Hot Topic* or a science museum gift shop. She's got ripped jeans to match the jacket that reveal more leg than they cover.

Neither of them looks at me as I approach. But I'll see if they're worth my time; why not? I'll be bold tonight, flip a coin to either meet people or get rejected and have an excuse to bug out.

I ask, "This seat open?"

The short-haired girl nods lazily without moving her legs to make room. I sit, my right knee brushing the bottom of her crossed legs. She eyes me appraisingly, doesn't pull back from

the contact. She gives a vibe that strays from devil-may-care to bitchy, but somehow not standoffish. Comfortable, calmly curious. Her eyes kind of remind me of a girl I used to like.

“Your girl stand you up?” she asks. Her legs are warm.

“Something like that.” I smile wryly. “Halloween’s a night for tricks.” Wells’s ex is sure one.

The girl in the jacket flips her hair and smiles at me. “Well we’re sweet at least. I’m Tara, this is Danielle. Don’t try to call her Danny. And this band fucking sucks but the after-party should be good.”

“Edgar. I go by Eddie.”

“Edgar,” Danielle tastes the name. She folds her arms beneath her breasts and turns her shoulders towards me. “There’s an old name. No wonder you look like a Norman Rockwell painting.”

Okay, I just might like this girl. “I’ve got an honest face. Helps me meet pretty strangers.”

Tara gives a flirty smile but Danielle isn’t impressed; I’ll need to give her something witty, something new.

Tara says, “I like your tattoo,” prompting me to lift my sleeve and reveal the rest.

“A Chimaera,” Danielle points out, then meets my eyes. “The power of all beasts. But a true bastard for all its strength: no real parents, no chance for offspring. Sounds lonely.”

Wow. Danielle. I know she sees the fire in my eyes now.

I play cool, look toward the stage and drop my knee to stretch out my right leg, breaking contact with her folded legs. A bassist strums and adjusts his amp cord, presumably Wells’s buddy, but only the drummer and a sound tech are with him on stage.

I tell her, “It’s Greek; its parents were actually Typhon and Echidna, but yeah, that was kind of the idea behind the tattoo. People tend to expect a lot of me, but mostly I just feel different.”

“Oh my God,” says Tara. “I have like ten tattoos I want to get. You should give me the name of your artist.” She’s friendly, gives a lot of openings. Wells would like her.

Danielle lifts her shirt, and I hope she doesn’t catch my eyes widen momentarily. Along her ribs a brown hawk covers her entire side, wings swept back toward her spine and talons grasping towards her pale abdomen.

“Beautiful work,” I say. “The coloring is really well done.” The gold eyes are striking.

“Haast’s eagle,” she explains, holding her shirt up as my eyes wander.

I take a risk, putting a hand on her hip to lean in and inspect a detail of the wings. She smirks and lets her shirt drop. Our fingers brush maybe on accident as I sit back.

She continues, “It’s been extinct for six hundred years. The largest eagle that’s ever lived. I guess it’s sort of like my war cry, but no one seems to hear it in this day and age.”

Danielle looks at me expecting, knowing, I’m interested. I say it clearly, “That’s fuckin’ cool. I love that idea.”

Tara giggles and bites her lip. "I can't really show mine."

I smile. "Show me."

Looking around quickly, she leans toward me and peels down the front of her jeans, revealing a pair of roses and stems reaching down along her lower lips.

"Wo-ow." I fall back in my seat as Tara laughs and gives my shoulder a little shove.

I'm turning a little red, enjoying this a lot more than I expected. "No," I say, "you're too sweet for thorns. You two.... This'll be the best concert I've ever been to unless the band ruins it by starting to play."

They both laugh. "Eddie. No--Edgar," says Danielle, taking my right hand and playing with the fingers one at a time. "I know a party. You should come with us."

This vibe, from Danielle especially: what do they see in me? "Yeah, we should go." It feels electric, but girls like these, I know they're used to getting what they want. Maybe tonight I'm just it. I let Danielle play with my hand as I look into her amber eyes beneath the faux lights of the amphitheatre. They match the eagle eyes of her tattoo.

Tara says we're taking her car. She slides past me as I stand, brushing against with just the right amount of invitation. Danielle is more subtle, still making the faintest contact with my hand and sleeve as we exit, as if to stay close in a crowd; but enough to make me so aware, like a plasma ball in glass where the lightning always tracks your fingertips.

I slide into the back of Tara's BMW with Danielle, a newer model that I wonder how she affords. Danielle is studying me. She's stopped playing with my hand so I wonder if she wants me to reach out next, continue the dance. Maybe she wonders if I'll be a white knight to wrap my arm around her, or someone hungry for whatever she'll give: go in for a kiss; or will I play a teasing game of my own, her eyes seem to ask. Somehow, I understand she'll take a lot from my next move.

I enjoy what she's given me. I want it still to be her game. Mostly, I love watching her mind move through the silent game of flirtation: so I'll embrace its subtlety.

I rest my hand on the center seat, in easy reach of her fingers. Our eyes meet. I see her wondering if it's cowardice or cleverness, and my easy look answers her. Danielle grabs my hand, interweaving her fingers with mine like a new bond of trust.

"David's is going to be crazy tonight," says Tara, sliding the car into gear.

"Oh shit," Danielle sighs, "That guy is always an ass. He is not going to want me at his party."

"That's because he's fucking in love with you. Just tell him off like you usually do, he's not going to kick us out." Tara drives fast, a comfortable mix of carefree and competent. Her movements, her friendship with Danielle make me think there's more to Tara than the party girl persona she embraces.

"Eddie," she continues, "you're there with both of us. You don't seem to be the type to get all alpha if someone's in your face about what you're doing with us, but I'll just tell you anyway: relax and we'll look out for you. We like you." She giggles.

I love that that's all they've defined, the only territory they've set. I like being with these girls. I already don't like David. Tara's right, I don't get alpha or controlling about guys being assholes to me, but I've got hot buttons about how guys treat women. I'm not the sort to threaten, push, any of that, but I've been known to calmly break a few fingers or teeth when boundaries get crossed. Grabbing a woman's arm, not respecting personal space or the word 'no,' that type of thing. I hear Tara's advice though, and trust that these two can typically handle themselves.

Danielle puts my hand on her leg, surprising me.

"I like your thinking face," she says simply. "You're not just staring out the window or wondering where the hell we're headed, who you'll sleep with tonight. I like how your mind works."

I squeeze her thigh, moving up toward her knee, then stroke lightly back where she placed my hand. I take in the sensation before I sigh and answer, "It's like you see me. Like the three of us are old friends when we've barely spoken. Lovers from a former life if you believe in shit like that. You two seem confident, but it's surreal where I'm sitting."

Even as Danielle responds with the most genuine smile she's shown me, I feel like I've just said too much. Let the silent song say what it says, let it just be what it is, don't define anything before it needs to be.

"Oh Danielle is eating that shit up," Tara laughs, "Hey Eddie, give me a chance to have a little fun tonight." She blows me a kiss in the rear-view mirror.

I try not to blush and look over to Danielle who's looking out her window.

A few moments pass in silence. Then she says, "You'll know."

"What?" My fingertips are barely still on her leg as she's turned away from me, and her hand rests lightly on mine.

She turns to me. Her bearing and expression haven't changed but she suddenly feels more vulnerable than a moment before. "You'll know. When you kiss me. You'll know if it's from a former life." Then she smirks, and her strength returns. "If you believe in shit like that."

I don't know when my jaw dropped. Or when the last time I've ever been at such a loss for words. I don't know how much time passed in the silence that followed, a silence so pregnant even Tara didn't dare disturb it. I think if Danielle hadn't turned away again after saying those words I could never have stopped my lips meeting hers.

But the car stops and we've arrived somewhere. I wish it didn't.

Tara opens her door and a beat pulses from the enormous house before us. "Party music! Finally, let's have a good time."

Danielle opens her door, tosses me a sly glance and she stands.

I feel a little wooden as we walk up the stairs to big white double doors, even as my companions take each of my arms in one of theirs. They're warm against me. It only intensifies the strange overwhelmed feeling that seems to fill my whole mind.

Relax, I have to tell myself. Relax, relax, relax. Don't stop, don't think, don't ask yourself if you just fell in love with a stranger. Or two, fuck! Be in this moment, and look back

when the moment stops. Be here. I take a deep, quiet breath, and I begin to feel the comfortable, good feeling of the night returning.

Tara rings the doorbell. Danielle's eyes meet mine. I lift the hand she holds and trace the side of her lips, but I don't need to kiss her, not yet. She sees me, knows I'm back with her and flashes another of those rare, incredible smiles from her heart.

The door opens and the dark-haired man on the other side only has eyes for Danielle. He wears the most tailored-looking toga I've ever seen, and I take a moment to remember we've come to a Halloween party. Not a whit of his style matches the dyed hair and dark punk-chiq of Danielle, and his eyes seem to hate her with adoration.

"Got your invitation," says Tara, pulling his gaze away. I think we wouldn't have gotten far tonight without her around. She steps past the toga-clad man without further ado, pulling Danielle and I with her.

"Make yourselves at home. Bartender by the pool," he says to our backs. Almost too late he adds, "Danny, we should talk later tonight."

I glance over my shoulder to see him returning to a group of his friends nearby, four of them with equally groomed hair and fitted costumes. I might want to invite Wells in case I get a bad vibe from these guys, even if he'll almost certainly try way too hard to hit on Tara.

"Edgar," Danielle tells me, drawing my attention back. "Have a good time. Remember what Tara said."

I nod and she responds by playing with my fingertips like before. I'm beginning to love when she does that.

We walk straight ahead to a huge columned patio horseshoed around an infinity pool, all white marble and matching decor of wicker and bleached leather chairs. Abstract art splashes color on too-clean walls. A black-vested waitress offers us champagne from a silver tray.

"Thanks," I mutter. She nods without meeting my eyes before moving unobtrusively to the next crowd of guests. I don't like this party and I definitely don't belong. Perfect extravagance, not an unpampered ass in the house.

Tara points to a dance-floor set up at the far end of the patio, a DJ absorbed in his music while most of the crowd dances from inside the pool or hot tub, laughing and drinking. "There," she says. "We've got the floor all to ourselves." She giggles. "And I'm taking you all for myself." She presses against me playfully, then pulls my arms, walking me toward the dancefloor, peeling me away from Danielle.

"Tara, I'm not much of a dancer. This isn't really my scene."

"That's because you've never danced with me." Does her secretive little smile get sexier every time? "I'll show you how a real lady leads."

I still pull back a bit. "Danielle--"

"Can take care of herself. Don't make me beg." Even her pout is coquettish.

I let her pull me, and just have to smile. Dancing, God, this'll be embarrassing. I take the whole flute of champagne in a single swallow, then glance back to Danielle. She's already joined a group of girls by the pool, meets my eyes briefly, unreadable.

Tara and I step onto the dancefloor and her body moves into it immediately, dipping down and up, a sine wave, already more music in her motion than any sound.

Then she leads; guiding my arms up her back, her hands swaying my hips, legs guiding my steps. Suddenly, seamlessly, impossibly we move together. Close, hearing her breath, her playful sounds of pleasure when my body begins to respond on its own, knowing the moment to dip, to spin, to step out with the music. Then close again, closer, closer, my mind a blank and our bodies in motion.

When my hands find her hips, her body seems to invite them lower. My fingers brush her neck, her hair and always seems to draw our lips so near. I trace her back, memorize it with every nerve when my pounding chest presses near. Our legs entangle to the rhythm, playing, promising, giving, taking.

Tara, dance, both so completely redefined. The art of her body is so powerful. She knows it, exults in it, controls me with it.

The songs blend into new beats, new paces, and each one feels like a new lesson in Tara, or dance, or sex, or whatever the hell world of her beauty she's drawn me into. All a lesson, but different than learning through mind. More like she makes my soul remember how to play.

Perfect, glorious as the moment is, she makes my every muscle fiber want more. There shouldn't be clothes between us. The music should be the rhythm of our bodies. Her power, her art has focused all my desire, stolen it straight from my conscious mind, made me this body, this soul, this single need. And how she knows it. How her lips begin to brush my neck, my ear, my stomach. How she moves her body so my hands find and hold every part I want most desperately.

Her power! My God, Tara. This is more than toying, more than flirting with lines. She's claiming me. She's claimed me.

The music changes again, reaches a lull, and I pull away, breathless, shaking. My mind, usually organized and self-possessed, spilled like a deck of cards.

I can't even remember where I am for a split second. "I'm going to grab another drink," I explain lamely, and begin to turn. I've got to get my head back.

But before I can take a step, she pulls my face back to hers, eye to eye as her dark hair veils us in intimacy. She gives me a moment to pull away, to tell her 'no,' but I can't. I can't do a thing but wait and be held. Then she pulls my lips to hers, tenderly lasting, mouth closed, no whisper of sex, urgency, or heat. Just pressed contact of our lips--but making me hers as surely as a king's signet pressed into wax.

Tara smiles, looks down like she's found herself shy for the first time tonight, and steps away, clasping her hands behind her back.

I want to stand and stare, like watching clouds and trying to grasp the greatness of the sky. I want to play those dances, those undefined movements, that seal of a kiss again and again until I can make sense of it. But I'll look even more a fool and never quite grasp those clouds. So I turn and walk woodenly away, off to the cabana bar to get something hard enough to still my quavering heart.

I lean up to the bar and a friendly-looking hispanic man lifts his chin to request my order. I spot a bottle of tequila and just point. That should do it.

The man sets a shot glass for me, fills it, and stops halfway in reaching for a lime since I've already downed the glass. He chuckles, sets the lime on a napkin for me anyway and refills my drink.

Then, to my surprise he sets a second shot glass to my left and fills it as well.

Danielle. Her back to the bar, her eyes smile at me, sharp and contoured by blue eyeshadow. "You've been gone a while."

I exhale sharply, still trying to pull myself back together. "Have I? It was a little more than I bargained for."

"Yeah. She can... do that." She smiles, turns and takes her shot, biting the lime to chase it. "To be honest, I've never seen her go all out like that. She sees something in you."

I don't know how to answer. I probably shouldn't. Guilt writhes in my belly. My second shot goes down a little harder, needs the lime chase.

"I do too, Edgar." She sounds a little sad. "See something in you I mean. More than something."

She's speaking from her heart. Giving me vulnerability after seeing how Tara and I danced. How is this already so complicated? "You know it's the same for me. Danielle, you--I don't know. I need to know you more. Maybe something's lost or different. I don't know. I just don't want to stop knowing you more."

I look down, drop the napkin over my glass before the bartender can refill it. I can't look at Danielle right now, but I know she's studying me, reading me as she always can so easily.

She lifts my hand from the countertop. And she plays with my fingertips. Just that.

Oh fuck, that like really made me choke up. Danielle, Jesus. I'm not going to get teary-eyed. What the fuck is going on with me tonight? She could have held me tight and told me everything is okay, and it wouldn't have been this powerful. God, how do you just see me? How do you just reach into my soul like that? Danielle, you're going to make me fuckin' lose it. One night. One night, from a dead concert and it's already so much more than I can handle.

"I've never... danced like that." I tell her. "Did you know she'd...?"

Danielle shakes her head. "Well, she'll tease. You've known girls like her though, can get any guy." She smiles. "But she just always has the most fun just being herself wherever she is. So we're practically inseparable. And I never really make close friends, but Tara's... completeness in herself just makes it really easy."

Her fingers pause as she speaks. I get the feeling she may have never said before why they're so close; maybe no one's ever really asked. She completes the thought, then she looks at me and smiles.

I can't be sure it's now--the time I kiss her. I know I want to, I know she won't pull away, but... I don't know. The distance between us, Tara's kiss, I still feel those. I just pause, letting her amber eyes search through me, feeling so known, so comfortable. Yeah. I may regret missing this chance, but it's not quite there. She sees it, I think, but I can't tell how she feels.

Danielle smirks, "Hey, you were really moving out there, too. I'm impressed Edgar. Dancing can say a lot about someone."

A voice disrupts before I can respond, imperious, slurred. "Danny. Danny, we should talk." He approaches her side too closely, turns it into a stumbling approach to the bar. He's well into both our personal space.

I rotate my glass on the bar, my arm close to the toga-clad man I recognize from the doorway. The motion makes him seem to notice me for the first time, glance surprised into my face.

Too loudly he says, "What's up man, I'm David. Uh, I might've met you." He turns back to Danielle without me answering.

"Danny, why are you so cold with me. I always just try to be nice. Come to my party, drink whatever, but like then you avoid me? Why's it always gotta be mixed signals?"

Over his shoulder I see her scanning him like a frog she's preparing to dissect. Hope I'm never on the other end of that look.

"Yeah, David. I'm really into you. The thing is, I'm also really into cutting, needles, and I was just afraid how you'd react. I really just want you to accept me though."

He's undeterred; can't hear her sarcasm at all. He leans toward her, putting an arm around her waist. "Hey, you know, we could probably work something out." He giggles. The man giggles.

Danielle literally has to palm his face away. I can't watch this anymore. I tap David's shoulder. "Hey man, great party."

He spares me a backward glance, once again surprised I'm there. Ignores me. Danielle is disentangling from his grasp.

He asks, "Hey, what the fuck? I thought we were cool."

She steps past David without a word, abs clenched where his hands were. She takes my hand and we head toward the door. Tara spots us, notices her urgency and heads toward us.

That's when I hear a rush behind me. Fucking David brushes past me to grab Danielle by the arm.

He opens his mouth to say something. But no. You're done touching her. You're done.

My forehead collides with David's nose, blood spraying, cartilage and person crumpling. His ass hits the poolside marble, red spreading down the front of his toga as he tries to rise, shocked.



Things happen quick, then. A blonde, clean-shaven gladiator charges at me and throws his fist out wildly. He's drunk; I grab his hand right out of the air and twist it behind his back, bend him right over the pool so he doesn't try to squirm. Another youth in bowler hat and pinstripe is rushing to his aid when Tara boots him into the pool right over a *No Running* sign. Damn that was hot. People in the pool are mostly staring or scrambling for dry ground like they're in some natural disaster.

Two more gather near David, helping him up and looking murder at me. One of them has his own toga, and might actually be David's little brother.

I shake my head at him, making it clear with a look, 'You don't want to do that.'

He steps toward me anyway, and Danielle stops him with a finger on his chest. "Et tu, Brute?" she asks. He seems thoroughly confused. Little David goes back to nursing actual David.

Tara saunters up. "Mmm, what a party!" She inspects David. "You might want to get that reset."

"Fuck you, bitch," he slurs.

Danielle stops me bodily. Eye contact. I won't push her, but please let me finish this. She denies me, pulls me toward the door.

I'm forced to release the gladiator then, so I break his pinky backward to dissuade him or his friends following us. He cries out, and I hear the whole group scrambling behind us.

No one follows, and soon we're back on the road.

It's quiet in the car. We're all kind of caught up in our own heads I guess. Great night, kind of ruined, kind of confused, new people, a near-sexual assault, the dance, the brawl, the concert maybe we legitimately should have just stayed at. Yeah, I have to give Tara a bad call on taking us to David's party; I'm sure she knows some other events tonight. Hell, maybe she just wanted me to knock his ass down like I did. Let's see, did I miss anything? Oh I may have met the most amazing woman of my life.

But my phone buzzes, and there's one more thing I forgot.

"Here. Wat row r u in," Wells. That concert is still going? I smile, but leave it be. He'll be alright.

As I tuck my phone away I hear Danielle laugh suddenly.

I look up; she tells me, "You headbutted the shit out of him."

I grin, mostly just relieved that she's okay and happy now. I laugh, she and Tara laugh with me.

"You get it, you know?" she continues. "You know how guys like that think they are just gentlemen getting led on, like every woman should want them. I could see you know what bullshit that is, that you fucking hate it."

I shrug. "Yeah. I don't know. Some kind of white knight complex." I look down at my hands a moment. "I think I might have hurt him pretty bad... if you hadn't stopped me. You know that."

I look up; she's smiling again. "I met a really special guy tonight."

She unbuckles. She climbs across almost into my lap. She takes my face in her hands and presses her lips to mine. My heart is bursting. Her mouth explores mine. Her hands run through my hair and pull me deeper and deeper in. My arms hold her tight, run from her hips to her shoulders to her hair, then back around, just wanting to pull her closer.

Danielle.

Tara turns up some music like a limo driver rolling up the privacy window.

The rest of the ride Danielle and I only disconnect to see the helpless love in each others' eyes. She's right there with me. She wants me as fully, openly, completely as I want her, and every other moment and place in the world is a thousand miles away.

I think I loved her before. I know I love her tonight.