

Saida & Autumn

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A MENSURA COLLEGE NOVEL

ARILIN THORFERRA



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Preface

So, this started as roleplaying. Sort of. But not really.

Let me back up.

Many years ago, when dinosaurs roamed the earth and internet forums were still popular, a forum called BigFurs started a shared world setting: “BigFurs Community College.” Contributors brought their ideas and characters to a loosely defined scenario of a mixed-size college, and wrote a shared ongoing story in that setting. My character Arilin Thorferra became a professor there, despite her first story appearance, “Cheating at Solitaire,” casting her as a sociopathic villain. I folded in what she’d done on FurryMUCK as canonical for BFCC, as she’d become decidedly less villainous over time. (She also obviously became a pen name—and, yes, to a degree her author’s fursona. Is Arilin-the-character supposed to be the author of the stories under her name, including this one? I don’t think so, but never say never.)

BFCC was nominally contemporary, but had magic and mad science and aliens and God knows what else. It was glorious fun—and conceptually, a steaming hot mess, with no regard for world-building consistency and power balance. While it faded into furry history, I took inspiration from it as part of Arilin’s background as she moved away from being a villain. The ever more byzantine back-

story drew from it as well as ideas—and even other characters—from the nebulously defined “world” of FurryMUCK.

Eventually, I decided I wanted to make Arilin’s life story make *some* kind of sense as a story. Her journey remains dubiously fantastical—as you may glean from *Saida & Autumn*, Arilin is the unwilling heroine of a redemption-arc portal fantasy that’s never been written—but her new setting has its own identity and own world with its own rules.

The story “Teacher’s Pet” introduced the new Mensura College and provided glimpses of the college’s uneasy relationship with the (normal-sized) town it’s adjacent to, as well as hints of the larger world’s history. When I started my Patreon, I decided I’d do a larger Mensura College story. Originally, I planned on a longer sequel to “Teacher’s Pet,” but a tossed-off joke ended up leading me somewhere else entirely. The joke? That Saida, Arilin’s cousin, should have a goth bunny girlfriend. And, well, here we are.

At the time I finished, this was the longest macrophile story I’d written. It’s also the first story, macro or otherwise, I’ve written that’s a romance front and center. It was written in 2018 and 2019, and re-edited in 2021. Publishing this in 2022 gets it out later than I’d planned, but [gestures wildly at 2020].

I won’t lie: Mensura College is *still* a bit of a hodgepodge, and there’s something awkward about creating “canon” versions of role-playing characters—especially the one I share a pen name with. On the other hand, it’s fun to actually *have* canon, story-appropriate versions, and to bring out bits and bobs in my head that haven’t been shared before. Writing this, I fell in love not just with Autumn but with Saida, too, who may surprise folks who know her only from non-canon jokes/vignettes. I hope you love them as much as I do.

– Arilin

CHAPTER 1

The Beanstalk

TWO MONTHS PAST HER TWENTY-NINTH BIRTHDAY, SAIDA Talirend could still usually pass for a college student, but she'd begun to feel self-conscious about it, as if her monthly stays at Mensura College perpetuated a kind of fraud. As a relative of a tenured professor here, though, she had the right to rent a little studio in the staff housing area—and there weren't any places *off* the campus a cat woman whose ears broke the eighty-foot mark could fit.

Mensura's Student Union building was a marvel of crazy engineering. Set into the side of a hill, giants entered at the ground level and littles entered from the hillside at about her waist level. They had more effective space available, getting in several floors where the giants had only one. She'd overheard giant students grumble about that, but it never bothered her. Giants weren't normal-sized here, after all—they were, well, giant. That had become the appeal for her, what drew her back regularly: being in a world where nearly everyone and everything felt toy-sized was magical.

Areas where the sizes mixed freely, though, were even *more* magical.

She'd been coming to the college two years, after improbably reconnecting with her cousin Arilin—now even more improbably a professor here—and it still seemed like a storybook every visit. The college's clever design subtly kept students of different sizes apart as

much as possible, but some spaces deliberately mixed things up. Her favorite of those places, by far: the Beanstalk.

Most of the cafés at the Union tacitly segregated patrons by size. The Beanstalk, though, had floor-to-ceiling posts made to look like huge, thick vines, with “leaves” holding groups of tables at various levels—very often right over tables sized for giants. Littles could also sit “on” the bar at a separate raised bar. Catwalks criss-crossed the space everywhere, artfully arranged to be out of any giant walking paths. On her second visit, Saida realized at least two servers handled each table, one little and one giant. Food orders would always be brought out by someone at the scale of the diner, but they might well be taken by someone on the opposite end of the spectrum.

Originally Saida doubted the genius of the design outweighed the sheer madness of mixing giants and littles with alcohol and food. But her cousin assured her no one had ever been accidentally, let alone intentionally, killed, and the serving staff maintained a legendarily zero-tolerance policy for bullying. That didn’t stop them from displaying a deadpan sign behind the giant bar reading 0 PATRONS EATEN TODAY.

The pizza pub was maybe half full as she stepped inside, lively but not so crowded that she had trouble finding a seat at the counter. As usual, she caught people turning to stare across or up at her, depending on their size. She suspected at least half were doing a double-take to confirm that, no, Professor Thorferra *hadn’t* just walked into the Beanstalk in denim shorts and a fashionable T-shirt. They didn’t look that similar—Saida had creamy fur rather than snow white, strawberry blonde hair, green eyes rather than blue—but she got mistaken for Arilin regularly.

It only took about ten seconds before the little tabby cat bartender, rather than the dog her size, looked up toward her and waved. “Hey!” He smiled, not in the least fazed by a customer who could swallow him whole. “What can we get you?”

“The black lager and a slice of pepperoni and mushroom.”

He nodded, punching a few buttons on his touch screen. “It’ll be right out.”

“Thanks.”

She spun around on her stool slowly, looking around the room again. Maybe it wasn't as busy as she'd first thought; there were just a few groups—two ones her size and an especially rowdy, all-fox-guy one at the little bar—and a handful of loners like herself, noses in textbooks and half-forgotten glasses of beer or soda to the side.

No: *nearly* all the loners were like that. The exception sat alone at a dark table in a corner, a rabbit with fur so white it looked almost unnatural. She'd accented that with black eyeliner, brow highlights, and even lipstick, then kept her wardrobe just as black, too. Jeans with so many lateral rips across the legs it was a wonder they still held together held fur-tight to her, and an oversized, plain black tee-shirt slipped off of one shoulder. Her hair offered the only break from the stark monochrome style. Most of the long strands falling down past her chest maintained a deep black, but streaks of red, orange, and green ran throughout. It wasn't a look Saida usually found attractive, but she felt her heart speed up just a beat or two.

Suddenly the bunny girl looked straight at Saida. Her eyes narrowed. Probably thinking *Shit, that's not Professor Thorferra, is it?*

But it could also be because Saida had been looking at her so intently. The cat flashed her a small, hopefully disarming smile. After a moment the rabbit's posture relaxed into a slouch and she gave a small smile back, picking up her drink.

The giant bartender set her beer down, along with shakers of red pepper and grated cheese.

She leaned toward him. "Who's that?" she said softly.

"Who?"

She nodded toward the corner.

The dog, a handsome retriever type, tilted his head, one ear flopping over. "Don't know her name, sorry. I've seen her around campus, and here occasionally. Think she's a MAP student."

"Huh." Saida nodded. "Thanks."

"MAP" was the Magical Arts Program. So Goth Bunny was a sorceress in training? That gave her some pause. Her past experience with magic was mostly as a target.

She glanced toward the rabbit again. Now she'd leaned forward, elbows propped up on her table, arms crossed, giving Saida a one-

raised-brow look. The cat flashed another smile, slightly sheepish. This time, the rabbit didn't smile back; she nodded at an angle, eyes flicking down and up again. Toward the seat opposite her? Was she inviting Saida to come over?

The laughter from the group of littles on the bar grew more raucous, coincidental to her smile. Or maybe not. Her ear swiveled to focus on their conversation.

“—lesbo giants—”

“—really be a dyke if you're not really a—”

She glanced down with a sharp frown. A couple fell quiet, ears lowering, but one of the ones who'd been speaking yelled up, “No offense, big girl. We're just saying.”

“You're 'just saying' what?” Saida kept her voice low and deliberately foreboding. The dog behind the counter flashed the littles a disapproving glance, too.

“Bunny's...you know...was...” He trailed off, as if finally realizing he'd headed onto dangerous ground.

“Never mind,” another one muttered, voice low enough she had to strain to hear it.

Out of the corner of her eye, Saida caught the rabbit girl's expression freezing. She turned to look back down, keeping her tone deadly flat. “Leave before I use you as pizza toppings.”

It wasn't just that group that went stone silent. The pub's background babble dropped to near nothing.

Just Saying Guy was the first to find his voice. “Y-you can't make jokes like that here.” He looked up at the dog giant behind the bar beseechingly. “If students get caught—”

“Shame I'm not a student.” Saida flicked her gaze to the frowning dog, giving him a wink. Hopefully he'd cut her some slack.

After a moment he turned away from the scene, studiously wiping down an already-clean prep area. “Let me know if I gotta change the number,” he said, jerking a thumb at the PATRONS EATEN sign.

The foxes all turned to look at up Saida, each set of ears back. Keeping a steely gaze fixed on them, she slowly raised the cheese shaker.

They bolted, knocking over chairs as they scrambled to the elevator.

The rabbit was looking off to the side, away from the bar. Saida chewed on her lip, watching. Had she lost the moment? Damn little pocket frat bros—

But, no, maybe not. After a second she glanced back at Saida expectantly, long ears up.

“Here’s your pizza.” The dog set down a plate behind her on the counter.

“What? Oh. Thanks.” She turned around. “Wait, I didn’t order two slices.”

“You didn’t? Sorry.” The dog continued to look studiously disinterested. “Maybe you can find someone to share it with.”

“I...thanks.” Picking up her beer and the plate of pizza, Saida headed across the room to the table, setting both down and taking the opposite seat. Across from the younger woman, the cat finally realized how much taller the rabbit was: at least a hundred feet high, not counting the ears. It was *extremely* uncommon for her people to be that big. In this world, at least this part of it, there seemed to be little limit on potential sizes—and, for that matter, powers. She liked to think she’d made her peace with it, but she might never be completely used to it.

“You’re not related to Professor Thorferra, are you?” The bunny’s voice had a lovely smokiness to it. Deep violet eyes locked onto Saida’s.

“I’m her cousin Saida.”

“Really. So you’re another Rha.” She folded her hands in front of her on the table, the dim light catching glittering black claw polish. “Are you a student?”

“No.”

“Staff?”

She shook her head. “I live back in Stravell. But I take long weekends here at least once a month.”

The rabbit lifted one brow and smiled curiously. “I hear second- and third-hand stories about Thorferra having got here through some kind of mad science accident.”

“That’s not wrong. Teleportation is less mad science than niche business back home now, though.”

“How can you sound blasé about traveling between worlds?”

“I don’t mean it that way.” She shrugged self-consciously. “We can only teleport between beacon stations, so the one here is probably the only one that ever *will* be on another world. It’s a strange fluke, a silver lining to what happened to my cousin. Otherwise, where I’m from is...no magic, no crazy tech. No giants, since everything is my scale. It’s nice, but boring.”

“So’s most of this world if you get about a hundred miles from Mensura.” She shook her head. “So is that why you come here? Because it’s not boring?”

“That’s a fair way to put it. I like being a real giantess, having the world literally at my paws. When I first got here I used to take long walks around places where people might never have seen giants.” She laughed. “Although I appreciate the campus and the area around it more now, since it’s nice to be a real giantess without worrying someone’s going to send an army after you.”

That earned her a laugh. The rabbit held out her hand across the table. “I’m Autumn.”

Saida closed her hand around the rabbit’s for a moment, smiling back. Autumn’s palm felt fuzzy against her own velvet pads. “So you’re a student here?”

Autumn nodded. “Magical Arts.” She spread her hands. “I look the part, right?”

“No, then you’d have a robe and a pointed hat. But I guess you fit with the dark and mysterious stereotype.”

The rabbit lifted a brow and crossed her arms. “Do I, now.”

“You do. You didn’t explicitly invite me over as much as signal I had permission to approach.”

That brought more of a teasing smile. “And I don’t give it to just anyone.”

She smiled, taking a sip of beer. “I also know...let me see. By Rha standards you’re extremely tall. At home, I’m five foot seven, so you’d be...how tall are you?”

Autumn picked up her own drink. It looked like a soda, most of the ice melted by now. “A hundred and one feet.”

“That’d be...” She closed her eyes, working out the math. “Six foot nine.”

“You can do that math in your head?”

“I’m good with numbers.”

“I see that.” She grinned, showing off her sharp front teeth. “I like the idea of being six foot nine. I like the idea of being a hundred feet tall better, but if I’m standing next to someone on my scale, I want to be the taller one.”

Saida laughed, although she felt her tail twitch. She thought she’d seen something glint farther back in the rabbit’s mouth, and couldn’t help but be curious. She sighed inwardly. Had she always had an oral fixation, or could she write that off as more quirks from her curse? Shoving it to the back of her mind, she picked up a pizza slice. “It looks good on you.”

Autumn’s ears went up, then lowered into a more relaxed position. Even so, self-consciousness shadowed her eyes as she looked down at the table. “Thanks.” She took a deep breath. “I’m glad those ankle-high jerks didn’t put you off. It seemed—I mean, it looked like we had...”

The Rha smiled. “So it wasn’t just me.”

“No.” Autumn relaxed again. “It definitely wasn’t.”

Saida took another bite of the pizza. “Want any? Although it’s not vegetarian.”

“The pepperoni gave that away. Just because I’m a rabbit doesn’t mean I’m an obligate herbivore, though.” She picked up the other slice. “You didn’t put any of the jerks on here, did you?” Without waiting for an answer, she opened her mouth wide and took an exaggeratedly big bite.

“No, sorry.”

Autumn chewed and swallowed, then smirked. “Just as well. They’d probably be bitter.”

Saida laughed, then lowered her voice. “I hope I’m not going to be banned from here for making the joke. It’s kind of frowned on around campus, right?”

“Did the server say anything?”

“No, he heard it all and played along with me.”

The rabbit glanced toward the counter with an expression of relieved surprise. “Cool. I think you’re safe, then.”

They ate their pizza in silence for a few moments. Companionable silence? Maybe. Saida felt...not at ease, not even comfortable, but happy. She’d had lust-at-first-sight crushes before, some of which hadn’t at all been good for her—some of which she couldn’t help blame on that damn curse. But this, whatever it was, it didn’t feel like that.

She realized Autumn had paused chewing, head tilted to the side, expression quizzical.

The Rha flushed. “What?”

“You were looking at me with, with...like...” The rabbit trailed off, looking to the side with another sheepish smile, then back down at the cat.

“Sorry. I got kind of lost in thought in a moment.”

“Ah.” The rabbit looked just a little disappointed.

Saida bit the inside of her lip. She needed to get the conversation going. “What kind of magic are you studying?”

“Hmm? Oh.” She took another bite of pizza. “I started with transformation magic. That’s what I came to the school to do. The instant I learned about the school, getting here and learning that became my life’s mission.”

“That’s a very specific focus.”

Autumn fixed her gaze on the cat. “I had big things to change.”

Saida nodded slowly. The word choice wasn’t accidental, was it? “You weren’t a giant when you came to the school.”

Autumn took a deep breath. “Like I said.” She spread out her hands, pressing them against the table. “There’s what I realized I always had been, and what I realized I should be. I knew I needed to change to be both. So it’s what I did.” Her expression grew more intent, and she bit her lip.

The cat reached across the table, putting her hand over one of the rabbit’s. After a long moment, Autumn flipped her own hand

over, entwining her fingers with Saida's and beaming. The Rha felt herself melt into a happy puddle.

"You need to tell me a secret now," Autumn said after a few moments, smile growing impish once more.

"I do?" Saida gave her a lopsided smile in return.

She leaned forward, lowering her voice. "Maybe my transitions aren't *secret*, but I don't share them casually with strangers. So we shouldn't be strangers, little cat."

"Little?" Saida drew herself up with a smirk.

"Little," Autumn repeated. "Want me to stand close enough to you to touch and compare heights?"

Saida felt her ears blush. "That's not as effective a threat as you might think coming from you."

"Oh, now I'm even more intrigued."

Saida sighed. The blush wasn't going away. Well, she had an obvious choice or two, but *obvious* wasn't necessarily *wise*. "It's just hard for me to come up with something. My choices are either boring or overly personal."

"Go with personal."

Right. Given what Autumn had shared, that was a lousy attempt at deflection. "They're...I mean...kind of...intimate for a first..." She caught herself and cleared her throat.

Too late, though. Autumn leaned forward, thin brows lifting. "Date?"

"Are we on one?"

Autumn tilted her head to one side again, then the other, then straightened up, looking intently into Saida's eyes again. "That depends on whether you let me lead you out of here holding your hand. If you do, then I'm going to take you to a great coffee place, buy you coffee, and we're going to call this our first date."

Saida laughed. "All right."

"All right." Autumn stood up slowly, still holding Saida's hand.

The Rha stood up too, not letting go.

Autumn walked around the table, eyes on Saida's, then slowly walked past her, fingers still entwined with the Rha's. Saida tightened her grip on the rabbit's hand and followed.

CHAPTER 2

Higher Grounds

WHEN AUTUMN HAD LED HER OUT OF THE BEANSTALK, Saida hadn't expected the rabbit to head right for the main campus road. More precisely, for the sidewalk that ran along it, set a good two meters lower than the road's surface to make it harder for small cars and big paws to accidentally meet. "You ever been to Higher Grounds in Parkcrest?"

"No. I'm guessing the name's a size pun? I didn't think the town had anything built for us once you got off campus." Saida looked up at the college entrance archway as they walked underneath it. To her, it felt like a small garden gate on an old money estate, but had to be staggeringly imposing to someone used to the rest of the world's scale.

"It's a pun on coffee." She pointed ahead into the city. "It's just few blocks that way."

As the ground shifted from poured concrete to broken asphalt, the sound their sandals made shifted from hard slaps to softer crunches. The neighborhood right past the college gate had become unofficially known as the DMZ. It had been run down for years, in the way light industrial areas often were; the college's construction brought added fear of what might happen with giants and magic just past the huge walls. The DMZ had been left as a mix of increasingly squalid slums and outright abandoned buildings. The desolation all

but invited giants to come out and “play monster”; what was the harm in kicking over an already-condemned building? Arilin had told her this had been one of several ongoing tensions with the city. “Wait, it’s little?”

“That doesn’t mean it’s not built for us, does it? Everything’s built for us.” She laughed. “Sorry, that sounds like it should be followed by deep maniacal laughter. I just mean we live here, too, and we can go where we want as long as we’re careful about it.”

The next block was in better shape; the block after that, not too many giantess-steps ahead, looked like Tiny Hipsterville. Tiny LGBT Hipsterville, to boot: rainbow flag banners hung from storefronts and lamp posts. If she were the same scale as the town, she’d love to explore it. But now, at normal size, her sandals took up more than half the width of a road lane. In the DMZ almost nobody had parked on the side of the road, so she could walk normally without fear of causing damage. Tiny Hipsterville had wide medians full of grass and flowers and even trees and benches, and parked cars lined the roadside.

Autumn seemed to notice her hesitation and grinned. “Hey, I have way bigger feet than you and I walk here all the time. We’re specifically allowed to be on these roads.”

“‘They can’t stop us’ isn’t the same as ‘allowed.’”

“If we weren’t allowed, we wouldn’t have the traffic signals, would we? For someone who says she loves being giant, you’re awfully nervous about...being giant.”

Saida furrowed her brow. “What do you mean, traffic signals?”

“You haven’t seen them? Stop at the intersection here for a moment.”

Saida stopped and glanced behind her. The closest car was more than a block back, going *very* slow to avoid being too close to the four giant paws ahead. She bit her lip and looked down at the fragile buildings and cars and pedestrians. She’d expected the two of them to be attracting more stares, but everyone just kept going about their little business below.

Abruptly, the tops of the lamp posts lining the avenue ahead lit up red.

“Wait for green.” The rabbit had pulled a phone out of her pocket and was tapping on it with both thumbs.

“Those are for us?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Are you...turning them on with your phone?”

Autumn glanced down at her with a laugh. “No, goof, I’m texting our coffee order ahead. What do you want?”

“I...” Arilin had never mentioned giant-safe roads, but Saida had foolishly preferred walking around—and through—town many miles away, where giants were less common and she *had* been putting both the littles and herself at risk. She’d caused more than one traffic accident, sent more than one crowd of pedestrians screaming away in panic, and angrily kicked one set of traffic lights into a strip mall when she nearly tripped over it. She might not have been a monster, but she’d been callous. If she’d learned earlier to be a *good* giant like Autumn, she might not have been cursed—

Autumn tapped her on the shoulder. “Green.”

“Oh.” Saida steeled herself, then took a big step forward, over the entire cross-street. Her sandal came down hard enough to set off two car alarms. Oh, *there* were the scrambling panicked pedestrians. Her ears flattened.

Autumn laughed. “Walk normally. Just watch where you’re placing your feet and keep them in the lane.”

“There are cars!” she protested. “Moving! In the same direction!”

“Yes. Don’t step on them.” Autumn walked ahead.

Saida gritted her teeth, but did her best to follow the rabbit’s lead. How did the *drivers* know where she was putting her feet?

But—somehow—it worked. As she moved forward, the traffic moved forward, too. The car behind her got uncomfortably close, but it didn’t try to go under her. She could see the red “landing lights” on the block ahead changing to green, then the next block; the cars on cross-streets got red lights. So giants had right of way. Lights set at ground level also flashed, perhaps alerting drivers they now shared the road with giants.

By the second block she’d gotten comfortable enough to increase her speed—and the car behind her had gotten comfortable enough

to pass. It startled her, but she barely had to change her stride. She just had to be aware of where the car was. And where the pedestrians and the parked cars and the trees and the little yappy dogs were. But it wasn't hard. And all the littles around her paws stayed aware of where she was.

"You've never walked through a city?" Autumn kept her eyes on the road and her own paws, even as she made intermingling with the auto traffic look barely more difficult than breathing.

"I have. But it wasn't like this. They didn't plan for giants. Here they're trusting me not to be a monster."

"And?"

Saida laughed as she realized the answer. "The trust is way more of a rush."

Autumn grinned back over her shoulder, then looked forward again. "Okay." She pointed. "The shop's right there."

The Rha looked down. From her angle, she couldn't see the storefront; it was just another little dollhouse. "What do we do?"

"Lower your hand to signal people behind you that you're stopping, like this, but right over the street." The rabbit raised her hand, palm up. "Then move as close to the sidewalk as you can without blocking it."

Saida followed suit as well as she could. One parking space nearby was empty, so that made it—ah, there was another one, around the corner. It wasn't too awkward a stance. She hoped.

Crouching, Autumn leaned over the building's roof. People on the sidewalk backed away warily, but she smiled and pointed at one with a black claw. "Go inside and let them know Autumn Caligo is here to pick up her white mochas?" The rabbit's tone and manner made it sound like a polite question, but her phrasing—and size—made it more of a command. The fox nodded and ducked in hurriedly.

"Hey, *your* paw is blocking the sidewalk."

Autumn glanced down. "Not completely. Besides, if somebody touches my foot, it's good luck."

She laughed in spite of herself. "A white mocha, huh? You didn't wait for my order."

“You were slow. But you’ll like it.”

Shortly a goat walked out, paper cup in each hand. From above, the most noticeable thing was her shocking blue mohawk. If Autumn had a perky-goth vibe, this woman looked like she’d just leapt off the stage at a punk club. “Hey, Autumn,” she called up. “Who’s your friend with her paw in the loading zone?” She set both cups down on the sidewalk, about six feet apart, then leaned against Autumn’s lucky foot to look up.

“This is Saida. Saida, this is Kim.”

Saida crouched. Her balance felt steady, but if she fell she’d take out at least one store even if she put her hand out to catch herself. Great. “Hi.”

Kim’s eyes swept up and down Saida. “Hey. Nice to meet you.” She looked back toward Autumn’s face and gave her a thumbs up, with an expression that clearly read *good catch!*

Autumn grinned down, then looked to Saida. “So, you’re probably wondering how we drink those.”

“That’s a leading line, isn’t it?”

“It is. Everyone clear?”

Kim stepped back. “Clear.”

Autumn lifted a hand and traced a symbol in the air, murmuring under her breath. Her claw-tip flared and sparked like a just-struck match. Then she carefully tapped it to each tiny paper cup. The cups sparked, too, then abruptly expanded in size, each one now standing taller than the goat woman.

Saida’s eyes widened.

Scattered clapping came from watchers on the sidewalk, including a couple big claps from Kim. “That’s always so cool.”

Autumn picked up both cups, then straightened and handed one to Saida. She took a sip from her own. “Great as always, Kim.”

The goat gave her a thumbs-up, grinning, and headed inside again.

The rabbit motioned with her free hand. “There’s a park a couple blocks away with enough space for us to sit down in.”

“All right.” Saida smiled. “Let’s go.”

This time the walk seemed almost normal, even with a couple

drivers tapping their horns. (Autumn explained they were just letting her know they were underneath her.) A forest Saida had seen in the distance turned out to be in a huge municipal park, three blocks wide and eight blocks long. The trick was finding enough *empty* space for them.

“There?” Saida pointed at an open meadow between one of the gardens and a soccer field.

“Sure.”

As they walked through the grass, over paths and benches and by thankfully-sparse crowds of littles, Saida found herself grinning. Autumn didn’t comment on it until they’d both sat down, the Rha with her legs stretched out, the bunny cross-legged in a lotus position. “What?”

“I went out for pizza, and suddenly I’m on a sunset date with a younger woman who’s showing me how to be out on a little town without accidentally trampling it.” She laughed, shaking her head.

“What’s the unexpected part? The not trampling, that I’m younger, or that I’m a woman?”

“Yes.” She grinned. “Although I’ve always known I was bi.”

Autumn nodded. “I am, too, although my experience with boys hasn’t been great. But have you been out in little towns and accidentally trampled them? Or not-so-accidentally done it?”

“Yes and no.” She sipped her mocha. “This *is* really good.”

“They’re always good there, but Kim makes the best. So tell me about the yes and the no.”

“When I first started visiting here, Arilin drilled into me that the campus is the only safe place for giants, and that we’re all trying to make a good impression on the town here. But I started going for... long walks. Through other towns, farther away.”

“To be a monster?” Autumn’s beautiful violet eyes focused on her with uncomfortable intensity.

“I don’t think so,” she said slowly. “But I guess I just didn’t want to worry much about whether people thought I was. I don’t think I did much damage, but I got into enough trouble that I stopped.” She knew leaving things hanging there made it sound like she’d had people try to kill her, but she wasn’t up for explaining she actually

had been killed—and set up by a twisted curse to have it happen again.

“I hope it wasn’t too much trouble. What did you do? Dance across a city kicking over buildings? Swallow annoying policemen whole?”

Saida’s eyes widened, and she looked up, fluffy tail lashing once.

The rabbit tilted her head, the sunset glinting off her earrings. “I just want to know who I’m on a first date with.”

“I’ve done a little damage here and there, mostly by accident, not always. I’ve...what-ified about eating people, if I’m honest.”

“Really. Huh.” Autumn sipped from her own mocha, looking out over the city with an unreadable expression.

As the silence stretched on, Saida fidgeted. Maybe honesty wasn’t always the best policy.

Autumn looked down at her. “I don’t want to hang out with someone who’s enthusiastic about being a monster, but that doesn’t mean I expect everyone to be giant nuns or something.”

“Do I pass, then?”

The rabbit nodded. “I’m pretty good at reading people.” She lowered her voice again. “Besides, I won’t pretend I *haven’t* thought about being a monster once in a while.”

“I thought it might be different for someone who...” How had Autumn put it? “Didn’t grow up the size she should have been.”

The rabbit’s smile grew warmer. “Maybe.” She took a sip of her own mocha, looking thoughtful again. “I love knowing I have the power I do, but just taking it because I can is...” She shook her head. “I can do anything I want with someone who fits under my paw. But if they *want* to be there, if I get them to say, ‘Oh, Autumn, *please* do anything you want with me...’” She smiled, letting that hang in the air as she took another sip of her drink.

Saida glanced down at Autumn’s shapely sandaled paws and found herself gripping her own drink tightly enough that the cup started to crease. “I hadn’t thought of it that way before.”

“Like you said, the trust is a hell of a rush.” She focused that intense gaze back on the cat. “Now I’m trying to think how I’d react

if some cute little thing I was holding in my hand gasped out, ‘Please, Autumn, swallow me!’”

“And how would you?”

“I’d probably be freaked out.” Autumn looked down at the Rha again. “But if they had resurrection magic, and I’d be able to see them again and ask how it was...” She grinned slightly. “Yeah, they’d be going down my throat.” She tilted her cup and her head all the way back, exposing her long neck and visibly swallowing as she finished the drink.

“Oh.” Saida felt a blush rise to her ears. Before she could think of anything to say, her phone started buzzing. Frowning—but a little relieved at the distraction—she pulled it out of her purse. A text message, relayed from the office through the off-world beacon. She sighed. “Hang on.”

It was Jonry, of course: her patronizing problem child, following up on a sales contract he’d been having trouble working out yesterday. Reading between the lines, he’d made the problem worse, and was sending her new document revisions and by the way it would be *so helpful* if she could get on a phone call and smooth things over in person. It was a miracle that the hack she and her brother had put together for cross-dimensional data worked at all; she’d have to go back to Stravell to actually make the call. She tapped out a few curt lines of advice and a promise to follow up in the morning. “Goddess Arvya, what an idiot,” she muttered as she put her phone away.

“Problem?”

“Work. I’m going to have to get back to my suite and review some documents before I get to bed.”

“Did—did you just get a text from another world?” Autumn looked incredulous.

“Yeah.” She grunted, sipping from her own drink. Unlike Autumn, she still had a third left. “Just being on another world doesn’t get me off of being on call.”

“What do you do?”

“I mentioned how teleportation beacons are a niche business now. I’m the sales director for the company that makes them.”

“You’re—” Autumn looked taken aback. “Wow. You don’t seem much older than I am, and you’re a corporate executive?”

Saida sighed; this wasn’t the time to go into this. “I wouldn’t have the job if I wasn’t family, and I’m sure it’s only because I’m family that I get enough slack to keep a home here and take long weekends. Not that anyone but my brother knows where I go.”

“Keep a home here,” Autumn echoed.

Saida started to feel more self-conscious. “I mean, it’s a studio here I rent with Arilin’s staff discount, and I have a flat back home. Still renting there, too.”

“Mmm. You being a bigwig over there makes me more surprised you’d want to come here.”

“I like the place. I like feeling giant. And I like the people I meet.”

“Like me?”

“Like you. When I first saw you earlier tonight you seemed so dark and mysterious. Then as we talked, you seemed gentle. But still with an edge.”

“Everyone’s a bundle of contradictions.” The rabbit put her hand on Saida’s shoulder; it looked slim and elegant, even though it was larger than the Rha’s in every dimension. “I’d like to think I’m gentle *and* dark and mysterious.” She grinned.

“So will you dance across the city with me?”

“Only if we place our paws very carefully. But,” Autumn rose to her feet and leaned down to offer her hand to Saida, “you wouldn’t do that.”

“You’re sure?” She took the rabbit’s hand and stood up.

“Yes.” They started walking back toward the street. “Like I said, I’m good at reading people.”

As they approached the main street, the landing lights switched back on for them. The walk back toward the college was easy, despite higher traffic. “So other than mostly gentle, how do you read me?”

“Dark and mysterious.”

Saida laughed. “I don’t feel like I’m either, but I’m going to take it as a compliment.”

“You should.”

When they reached the college's gate, Autumn stopped, looking down at the cat. "So now what?"

"Are you asking how far I go on a first date?"

"I know you have to leave to do work." She put her hands on the Rha's shoulders, looking down into her eyes. "So I'm asking if there's going to be a second."

"If you want it, yes."

Autumn kept her eyes locked on Saida's for long seconds. "When will you be back in town?"

"A couple weeks."

"I'm going to give you my number, and I expect you to call."

"I will."

Autumn touched her lips to Saida's lightly, holding there. The Rha leaned up, tightening her hands on the rabbit's shoulders, purring.

When the kiss ended, Autumn brushed her muzzle against Saida's ear. "You still haven't told me a secret, little cat. Don't think I've forgotten."

Saida shivered, eyelids fluttering. "Next time."

CHAPTER 3

Volunteer Work

“ARE YOU HUMMING UNDER YOUR BREATH?”

Autumn frowned down at the hyena who’d asked the question, a broad-chested, thirty-something guy in tight blue jeans and an equally tight purple tee. Tom stared right back up, unfazed, grin even wider than usual.

“Yeah.” She resumed her work—watching little volunteers at a dozen tables within her reach repacking bulk dry goods and produce, from rice and beans to fresh fruit, into family-sized bags for distribution. The tables sat to one side of a warehouse floor, the work area partitioned off into a “room” with no ceiling; she sat just outside that area on the main warehouse floor. The rabbit’s job was to see when they’d either emptied one of the bulk boxes and move a new box over to them, or filled up one of the distribution boxes and move the finished product to the receiving area. As one of the food bank’s few paid staff members, Tom’s job was handling all the actual shipping and distribution coordination. And, apparently, giving the giantess shit. “So?”

His grin grew. “Are you...*happy*?”

“Look, we’ve been over how my fashion sense isn’t a subtle statement of existential despair. I’m a happy person.”

“You’re not a *humming* happy person.”

Rolling her eyes, she hurried to move a few more boxes into place. “Look, I just happened to be humming.”

A grey fox vixen glanced up from the rice she was weighing out. “So I guess you had a good date last night?”

Autumn nearly dropped the box she was holding between thumb and forefinger, staring down at her.

The vixen’s ears lowered. Autumn wasn’t sure of her name, maybe Carolyn or Karen or something, but she recognized her. Always immaculately professional-looking, someone you wouldn’t guess would volunteer monthly at a food bank. “I...didn’t mean to assume, but...”

“Autumn went on a *date*?” Tom’s grin grew even more. “Oh, come on, who’s the lucky guy?”

The vixen opened her mouth, closed it, then cleared her throat and went back to her rice.

Autumn reached down and tapped a black claw on the concrete floor by the woman. “Out with it.”

The vixen jumped, barking, sending a scoop of rice flying into the air, then looked back up at the rabbit giantess, tail between her legs now. “I saw you and your friend last night because you’re both, well, hard to miss. I shouldn’t have assumed it was a date, but...”

“It was. And sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Tom put his hands on his hips. “Oh, you don’t date normal-sized people? I thought I had a chance! Have you been leading me on?”

Autumn sighed again, returning to her box-moving task. “Sometimes you’re lucky I like your boyfriend.”

“I like him, too,” he replied in a sing-song voice. “All right, everyone, five more minutes.”

Five minutes later on the dot, Tom led the volunteer group—everyone but Autumn—off the warehouse floor into a no-doubt charming lobby area she couldn’t even see into, much less enter. Other than the vixen, she hadn’t recognized anyone from past shifts. That wasn’t uncommon. A lot of white-collar managers took their work groups to the food bank for a shift as a team-building exercise. There’d always be people who’d enthusiastically talk about coming back on their own, but almost no one ever did.

Her own entrance and exit was less dignified, crawling on her hands and knees—carefully—to a set of giant rolling doors barely big enough to accommodate her when she crawled through on her stomach. It took slow, careful wiggling to make her way out, and once a frantic “No! No! To your left!” yell from the staff.

By the time she made it outside and dusted off, Tom had walked out, too, setting down a can of Diet Dr. Pepper. She traced the power-drawing rune in the air—sloppily, Professor Snep would tell her, but she’d done it so often it had become automatic—and muttered a focus word under her breath, then tapped the can carefully. It shimmered, expanding to her scale. “Thanks.”

Tom waved a hand dismissively. None of the other volunteers were given free snacks from the staff break room, but shifts Autumn worked on ran close to three times more productive than the average. Then the hyena grinned. “Four today.”

“Four, huh? Is that a record?”

Tom frequently reported on how many volunteers—or staff—were, quote, “ogling that cute giant puff tail.” She’d grimaced and rolled her eyes and half-heartedly told him to stop it, but he’d correctly guessed she was less offended than conflicted. She didn’t want to be objectified, but it could still be annoyingly gratifying to hear people thought she was sexy.

“Maybe.” He laughed. “I think the coyote in the blue floral print shirt was all but drooling.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me. He was looking up at my chest when he thought I wasn’t noticing.” She shook her head.

“But I shouldn’t be bothering you with this anymore, should I?” He punched one of her toes. “Tell me about your date!”

“It wasn’t...I mean, it was a date, yeah, but we just went out for coffee.”

The hyena crossed his arms, looking up expectantly.

She sighed theatrically, rolling her eyes. “She’s a cat I met at the Student Union.”

“Oh. *Oh.*” The gears turning in Tom’s head might as well have been clacking like a switchyard. “Another student?”

“No. She’s a professor’s cousin.”

“How old is she?”

“I don’t know.” She took a long drink of the soda.

“Older than you?”

“Yeah.”

He wagged his tail. “What’s she do?”

“She’s a sales... VP? Director? Some kind of corporate executive.”

He tilted his head, looking up with raised brows.

Autumn sighed. “What?”

“I would *not* have bet money on ‘high-power capitalist’ being your type.”

“She’s not like that. I mean, she must be doing well, since she lives and works...wherever Rhass live, and rents a studio here. But she’s sweet.”

“Rha?”

She waved her free hand. “Giant cat. I guess. Professor Thorferra and Saida are the only cats I know who use the word, and I think they’re both from another world or something.”

“Another world? Like, another planet or dimension?”

She nodded.

“Come on.”

“Yeah, explain to the giant sorceress-in-training you’re sitting here talking to how that’s completely crazy.”

“Point.” He shook his head, looking back at the warehouse. “Speaking of that, any luck on coming up with a spell that multiplies food instead of just making it bigger?”

The question of why the spells that enlarged food to her scale didn’t let wizards breezily solve world hunger hadn’t led to heated arguments when she and Tom first met, but only because he was still too terrified of a real live giantess to dare contradict her. By the time he was comfortable enough to tease and argue with her, he’d come to understand she wasn’t bullshitting him when she said it didn’t work. Giants could eat little food without a problem, and littles could eat “naturally made” giant food if they dared. But magically size-shifted food played by fiddlier, arcane rules. Shifting food at Tom’s scale up to hers would be fine for her, but it’d render it about as nutritious as packing peanuts for Tom.

So the next obvious question: why can't you take a bag of rice and cast a spell on it that makes it ten bags of rice? "No. The only textbooks I can find on it don't go into detail about why it doesn't work, though. Half of them try to make it sound like a moral question and the other half make it sound like an impossible physics problem, which is probably closer to the truth."

"*You're* an impossible physics problem, but you're still here."

She grinned wryly, taking another sip of the soda. "I know. But enlarging objects is easier than multiplying them. It's transmutation versus creation. I've researched turning inedible material into food, too, but it's not promising. Turn a brick into a pear and you get something that looks, smells, and tastes like a pear, but still has the nutrition value of a brick."

"Great. And transmutation isn't easy, even though you're an expert at it."

"Not an expert, just...some kind of savant. There are common first-year spells I'm terrible at."

"You're selling yourself short. Ha!" Tom waved a hand. "But back to your mystery date. When do you see her again?"

"That's up to her. She's supposed to give me a call when she's back in town."

"You didn't get her number?"

"I gave her mine. I don't know if she even keeps the same number between visits."

"Oh, honey. You go out of your way to make your life difficult sometimes, don't you?" He sighed and patted her toe again. "I need to get ready for the afternoon volunteer group. You staying?"

"I can't. Too much school work to do."

"Got it." He snapped his fingers and pointed up at her. "Speaking of work. Did you ever write that letter?"

"No."

"It's been a month."

"That depends on how you measure it." Her parents had sent a birthday card two years ago; it took her nearly six months to work up the nerve to write back and correct them on her name. Next year she got two birthday cards: one from her sister, addressed correctly; the

other from her parents, addressed to her dead name. She hadn't written them since. Or heard from them, until the email from her sister.

"You can't avoid it forever, dear."

"I can do whatever I want. I'm a giantess." She downed the rest of her soda, then pushed herself up to her feet. "See you next week."

Maybe Tom was right, and she *should* have gotten Saida's number. In the moment, making Saida promise to call had seemed romantic, but maybe she should have opted for practicality.

She's not like that. But Autumn had no idea what Saida was like, did she? No matter how much she deflected about her wealth and position, the cat was a rich executive. An older rich executive. Being looked at in the adoring way Saida had looked at her—seemed to have looked at her?—was thrilling, but people like that didn't get seriously involved with moody broke college students.

Did she want to just be a fling?

She made her way through the parking lot carefully, then picked up speed on the empty street. The food bank's warehouse sat close to the DMZ, just a few minutes from the campus; she'd seen other students volunteer occasionally, although never any other giants.

When she reached the gate where she and Saida had shared their first—and so far, only—kiss, she stopped, looking across the campus in the direction of the staff housing, then back out across the city.

"I should have asked for her number," she muttered.

CHAPTER 4

Buckle Down

“THEY WEREN’T GOING TO TAKE THEM AT THAT PRICE.” Jonry spread his hands apart, fixing Saida with his patented, patronizing *let me ’splain to you* expression as they walked. He must have thought he looked authoritative, but he just looked constipated. “I know how much we’re eatin’ on the installation costs, but trust me, it’ll work out.”

She suppressed a sigh. As much as she liked the theory of these “walking one-on-ones,” it was an unconscionably hot day, approaching 94 degrees, with what the weather claimed was 50% relative humidity but felt more like 500%. Wanting to stop and wring out her tail made this intolerable conversation somehow even less tolerable. “And how much are we ‘eating’ on installation?”

“Just under five million.” He managed to say that not only without sounding sheepish, but with an edge of disdain, as if she should have already known the answer.

Unfortunately for the swaggering gray tabby, she *did*, in fact, already know the answer. “If that’s correct, we won’t break even for fourteen months.”

“Right, but—”

“But that’s *not* correct, because you assumed all of the client’s eighteen remote offices match our standard cost structure.”

“It all evens out!”

“No, it doesn’t. The four cross-country ones are in metro areas with taxes and regulations that run their cost up about thirty percent. The six in other countries range from two to four times as much when you add import duties, infrastructure improvements, and security updates. And your contract doesn’t pass on the costs of the extra security we’ll have to hire in Lantalvo, since it’s a war zone. Our breakeven point is *three years*.”

Jonry’s ears had steadily lowered as she spoke. “But I wouldn’t have gotten the contract.”

They turned a corner, heading back toward their office past the new war memorial. This city had come through the lightning-bombing of the previous decade with little more than scratches, but these austere, cheerless “memory parks” had become perversely fashionable displays of patriotism. “Jonry, you’re a good salesman, but you need to stop treating teleportation beacons like HVACs. We aren’t trying to undercut the competition.”

His tail lashed. “Do you know how much cheaper the competition is? I do my research, little lady, and let me—”

Her voice rose into what she’d heard the staff call the “Saida Screech,” but she couldn’t help it. “We have no fucking competition!”

He stopped mid-stride, eyes widening.

“Every other company on the market selling teleporter beacons is just rebranding Melovi units, and they’re cheap because *they’re cheap*. The bigger the payload, the shorter their range. None of their units can send something heavier than a paperweight cross-country and they have to recharge for ten minutes after each transfer.”

“I know—”

“Only *one* of their models is certified to send people, a max of a hundred miles. This company wants to send staff between international offices. If they don’t use us, they’re using airlines. We don’t compete on price because we don’t *have* to.”

“So you would have just walked away?” He sounded genuinely affronted by the idea.

“I’d have given them a final offer that was within the discount guidelines I’ve already given you, and if they said no? Yes, I’d have

walked away. If they needed us, they'd be back." They'd reached the warehouse-like office building, walking past the understated but expensive marble sign with the Talirend Dynamics logotype carved into it. She'd had to push Mradhi hard to replace the sheet metal one, to make *some* attempt at giving the offices an upscale look. It had improved the sales by about twelve percent within a year. She'd tried to get him to move the sales and executive offices downtown, too, but he'd balked at the cost, no matter how much data showed that sales to status-conscious millionaires would cover it in under a year. Convincing him wasn't her job now, anyway. She tried not to grit her teeth.

Jonry's tail was between his legs now, but he sounded more resentful than chastened. "Point taken. Ma'am."

"What other prospects are you working on?"

He walked through the door ahead of her, letting go just in time to make sure she had to catch it to walk through herself. Terrific. The only thing worse than false, patronizing chivalry was a macho sulk. At least the blast of blessed air conditioning lessened her irritation.

"Got a few. Harrison Media Group is looking at an interoffice system, and there's a couple movie moguls who want to set up JetNets."

She nodded. "Those sound promising." JetNet was their trademark for a personal system, what the excessively rich would set up between their offices and their various homes. They weren't much cheaper than the commercial systems, but people making that much didn't care. Technically, she had a JetNet, although it was a prototype unit that predated the company. Back from when it was just her brother trying to make their late uncle's mad science project into something real.

"Thanks. So." He shuffled back and forth on his paws, keeping his eyes on her but turning the rest of his body back toward his cubicle. "Anything else, ma'am?"

"No. Is there anything you need from me?"

He'd already started to head away. "Nah, we're good," he called, without looking back.

Saida headed back toward her own cubicle, forcing herself not

to look at Raiben's office as she passed by. She had the biggest, nicest cubicle of anyone in the company, not just the newly combined sales and marketing division. It was barely a step down from an office.

But it *was* a step down from an office. Specifically, *that* office. The one she'd been in six weeks ago.

Dropping into her chair, she slumped back, staring dolefully at the computer. As futuristic as their business had sounded to Autumn, the consumer tech around Mensura was at least a decade ahead of Stravell's. Her PC wasn't as powerful as the *phone* she carried on her weekend visits to the campus. She wasn't sure Mradhi had ever completely given up on the idea of finding a way to commercialize a smuggling operation between the worlds, despite his reluctant agreement to both her and Arilin's objections.

She skimmed her email, ignoring most of it until she hit a missive from Raiben. She scanned over it, eyes narrowing.

Tail lashing, she pushed back from the desk and headed toward the CEO's office, doing her best not to make it an angry march.

Her brother was six years older than she was, but didn't look it. If he put effort into it, he'd pass for a fashion model—something he stubbornly remained disinterested in. His new wife, though, surely didn't. Since the marriage he'd been dressing more sharply, button-down shirts rather than polos, slacks rather than jeans, colors that complimented his light tan fur—although Saida was still pretty sure he bought off the rack. But his disinterest in “the good life” was also a saving grace, an inoculation against the excesses one might expect from a multi-millionaire in his early thirties. He'd spent a bit lavishly on his home theater setup, but the house he and his wife had recently moved into was, well, a house. Not a mansion estate, just a pleasant house in a nice suburb, not even that big for its neighborhood. Big for only two, but she expected they'd have a child within the next couple of years.

He saw her and held up a finger, swiveling around in his chair as he continued talking on the phone. Saida crossed her arms.

It only took him a few seconds to disengage with a typically curt, “Call back later.” Then he spun around again to face her. “You're

here to complain about Raiben's plan to move our sales team to commissions."

She sighed, tail lashing, then turned to close the door behind her. "I'm here to complain about him not even running it by me."

Mradhi frowned. "He said he'd clear it with you. I'll speak to him."

"So he cleared it with you."

"I'm the CEO."

"And I'm the Director of Sales."

"Again, yes, he should have run it past you. But as the VP of Sales and Marketing, he can make this call."

"Commissions? We're not selling air conditioners, Mradhi. Or cars."

"Earlier this morning you were moaning about Jonry all but giving away beacons to get the service contract. Do you think he'd have done that if he were working on a commission basis?"

"Bluntly, yes." Saida's tail lashed. "And for Arvya's sake, Raiben wants to put me back in the field."

"He just said he wants you more hands-on with the biggest contracts."

"That means in the field. Instead of getting a promotion, I'm getting a demotion."

Mradhi leaned forward. "Saida, you've grown into an excellent manager, but when we talked before I brought Raiben in, *you* said you didn't think you were ready to be a VP. Are you reconsidering that?"

Her ears lowered. "No." She sighed. "Maybe."

"I still think your self-assessment was right. As good a manager as you are, you're distracted. I don't expect you to live for your job, but I expect you to focus more on the company than on your weekends playing giantess." Mradhi turned back to his computer.

Her ears went completely flat, and she hurried out of her brother's office. She didn't stop at her desk, instead heading out of the building, back into the broiling sun.

She'd risen high and fast—higher and faster than she likely deserved. She had a knack for planning, a head for numbers, but

she'd never been that good a salesman. *Was* she a good manager? Did she get the pushback she did—never from Mradhi, to his credit, but nearly everyone else—because she was a woman, or because she just wasn't as competent as she tried to convince herself she was? Her trips to Mensura helped her put all those doubts aside.

At least, they *had*. Since the curse she'd been too spooked to keep exploring off-campus, and after a mortifying encounter a few months ago—another temporary death from being swallowed alive, all the more horrifying from the way the curse made her own body betray her, reacting to the act like it was the best sex ever—her enthusiasm for the campus had cooled.

Until meeting Autumn.

She covered her face. Did it even make sense to call her again? It'd been a magical evening—literally—but talk about a long-distance relationship. And she'd all but promised to tell the rabbit about her curse. Letting more people know about it was the last thing she should do. She'd gotten the uneasy feeling there were rumors about her among the more predatorily inclined campus giants. Hell, Autumn might *be* one of those giants.

And she knew just which big contracts Raiben would want her to be “hands-on” with. She hated to admit it, but he wasn't wrong. Dammit, maybe she had to buckle down, behave like the high-power executive she was rather than the college dropout she felt like.

But maybe she should do that tomorrow. Right now, she needed a good happy hour.

CHAPTER 5

*Maybe Not That
Interested*

BY THE THIRD TIME THE LITTLE HUSKY HAD STOPPED JUST on the balcony just behind her to stare, Autumn had had enough. She turned around abruptly enough to make him jump. “Can I help you?”

He looked around wildly, as if she might be speaking to someone else in the library standing right behind him, then gripped the railing. “Um. Y-you’re in Snep’s advanced alchemy class, right?” His voice shook in time with his whole body shaking.

If she was in a better mood, she’d try to sound reassuring, but this wasn’t shaping up as a good mood day. Besides, if he was in that class, he had to be at least a second year student, so he should be way over the whole giants-are-so-terrifying thing by now. “Yes.”

He nodded quickly. “There’s, um, nobody else who looks like you. Um. You’re one of his favorite students.”

“That’s a stretch.” She sighed. “Did you just want to say hi, are you looking for homework help, or were you just hoping to keep staring at me without me noticing?”

His ears folded down, although not before she caught them turning bright red. “I...um. I dunno. I was just looking. You’re... you’re very pretty.”

Autumn barely managed to stifle her sigh. Before her transformation, she hadn’t realized being a giantess would attract littles

constantly fantasizing about what creative things girls they were ankle-high to could do with them. “Thanks.”

He nodded, shuffling on his paws. “I just. Uh. What...do you think about littles?”

“They’re fine.” She kept her voice flat.

The husky nodded again, looking down, then up, then down again. “I, uh. Maybe see you later.”

“See you in class.”

She waited until he’d turned around and headed out of sight before sitting down and staring at the ceiling with a groan. At least he’d picked up on the go-away-now-please vibe before asking if she’d ever thought about dating a little.

No, she’d thought about dating more often than that, ha ha. She’d been on six dates total since she transitioned, and maybe ten in her whole life. Granted, it was validating that she’d had more not only after she’d become a giantess, but after she’d consciously adopted what her sister Kelly called a “dare you, bitch” look. And, yes, that had included a few kinky things with people ankle-high to her, but she was pretty sure they’d been more fulfilling for the littles. Being giant didn’t stop you from being objectified—if anything, it made it worse.

And then there was Saida.

She’d spent the first couple of weeks after their meeting almost floating. *God*, she was cute—and there was something else she couldn’t put her finger on. An almost kitten-like sense of wonder, maybe. The way she got flustered when Autumn did something that reminded the cat she was the small one. The way she clearly enjoyed being flustered.

Playing it over in her head made Saida sound dismayingly like the little husky she’d just dismissed. But crap, if the Rha was just out for some kind of kick, that should have been *more* reason for her to call. But she hadn’t called in two weeks. Or two more weeks. This upcoming weekend would make it two months.

How had Tom put it? High-power capitalist. Maybe Saida had realized she wasn’t interested in dallying with a freaky-looking college student after all.

She pushed back from the desk, sweeping up the books and dropping them off on the nearest book cart. “Maybe I’m not that interested in dallying with her, either,” she muttered aloud.

Her black mood propelled her out of the library and back toward the Union, although she didn’t have a destination in mind. Another Friday afternoon with no weekend plans in sight. So, one of her typical weekends. Good thing she usually believed herself when she insisted she liked being solitary.

Once inside, she scanned the atrium. She still remembered how awe-inspiringly huge this building seemed when she’d arrived as a little—there had to be *acres* of floorspace between the multiple levels. As a giantess, her relationship to the space changed substantially. It wasn’t as if it were cramped, but the options became far more limited: the open space she stood in right now with a few food kiosks, the Beanstalk, and the Union Café and Lounge, a small sit-down restaurant with a positively tiny bar. There were only three other giants in this central sitting area, but there were never that many giants, period. She doubted there were more than six or seven dozen total at the school; it was a wonder as many “non-essential” services existed for them as they did.

If she went back to the Beanstalk, she’d start thinking about Saida and be pissed at her again. But she didn’t want to spend the money at the sit-down place. Finally, she just dropped onto the nearest sofa. Sometimes deciding was too damn much work.

She let herself space out for a few minutes, then realized the little husky was back. Sort of. He was walking along the edge of one of the two overlooking balcony levels. The upper one ran over a hundred feet off the floor, past her ear tips; the lower one ran a bit above her waist level. That’s the one he was walking along. It didn’t look like he was trying to spy on her this time, at least not until he caught sight of her. He didn’t look at her, but the hitch in his step was almost a stumble.

Man, how had he made it this far staying all googly-eyed over giants? Sure, she’d had some of that, but she’d also been looking up at people Saida’s size and thinking *I’m taller than you are, you just*

don't see it yet. Well, maybe having a little fun would pull her out of her mope. "Hey," she called.

He stopped, looking down with a wary expression.

She stood up, walking slowly toward the balcony. "I was a little tough on you back in the library."

"That's...I mean, I think I was kind of a jackass. I'm not great at talking to girls my size, and...um..." He trailed off as she got closer, head tilting back and eyes getting wide.

One of the more unusual mandatory classes at the school, and one of the very few with segregated sizes, was a seminar on little-giant etiquette. Autumn was one of the only students who'd attended the versions for both scales. One of the lessons was that the perception of appropriate personal space didn't scale linearly, but grew with the size difference. Someone her height should stay back at least twenty feet from a little they didn't know, and let them choose to close the gap if they wanted. She slowed even more as she reached that distance, but didn't stop. "And you've got even less practice talking to giant ones."

"R...right. I say hi to giants in class sometimes, and Professor Thorferra likes to pair up mixed-size students in composition class, but..." His words ran dry again as she stopped barely a foot from the railing. He had to look almost straight up to see her face, which he did, ears visibly reddening. His tail clearly couldn't decide whether to wag or to curl between his legs.

"All right, then." She rested her hands on the railing, one to either side of him. "Practice." If this had been one of the catwalks common to campus interiors, he'd be trapped, although that would get a giant student reprimanded by staff if they saw it.

He whined. "I...I'm Charlie." His voice cracked like he'd just regressed to the edge of puberty.

"I'm Autumn." She kept her voice level, neither threatening nor welcoming, eyes remaining locked on him.

"Nice. Um, nice to meet you, I mean." The husky swallowed loudly. "So...um. How's it going up there?"

"Exactly the same as it is for you down there. Being a hundred feet tall doesn't give me my own weather system." She sighed, relent-

ing. “Look, Charlie, if you’re going to try to flirt with giant women, think about the *woman* part first. You’re signaling that you think the most interesting thing about me is that I’m big enough to swallow you whole.”

Charlie’s mouth opened, but no noise came out.

Autumn’s pocket started buzzing. She pursed her lips, then backed away a step, pulling out her phone. “Hang on.” The number wasn’t one she recognized, but it was local to campus. “Hello?”

“Hi. Autumn?” The voice on the other end of the connection sounded hesitant. “This is Saida.”

She lifted the hand that was still on the railing off it, so when she made a fist it didn’t break anything. She heard Charlie back away fast with another whimper, but didn’t look down.

She didn’t realize how long she’d stood there silently until Saida continued, now sounding more worried. “You...remember me, right?”

“Yes,” she said curtly. What kind of stupid question was that?

“I’m sorry I haven’t called before now. But this is the first time I’ve been able to get back to Mensura since our date.”

Autumn closed her eyes. She didn’t know if that made her more or less angry. “You said you came here every two or three weeks.”

“I know.” Saida’s tone had edged into forlorn misery. “It’s...work’s gotten not just busy but...complicated. I just...I couldn’t take a long weekend and work remotely like I had been.”

Oh, your job is more important than seeing me? Yes, dumb bunny, the executive is probably gonna put her job ahead of the goth girl she shared a light kiss with. Autumn rubbed her forehead. “Fine.” She didn’t mean it to sound as sarcastic and bitter as it did, but fuck it. She *was* bitter.

“No, it isn’t, and I’m sorry. I’d still like to meet again.”

The pleading in Saida’s voice was plain, but dammit, she could have popped in any other weekend, couldn’t she? “I don’t know.”

“Just a lunch on campus, then. A quick coffee, even. Please.”

She closed her eyes. “I can do dinner tonight.”

“You can?” Saida sounded almost comically relieved. “That’s great. Where? I’ll pick up the tab.”

Damn right you will. “I...” She opened her eyes again and glanced around. “The Beanstalk again, I guess, unless you want the sit-down place. The Banyan Tree, I think it’s called.”

“We can definitely do sit-down. Have you ever been to Chimayo? They have a few giant tables.”

Her eyes widened. “Chimayo,” she repeated. It was on the edge of campus, one of a handful of private businesses that leased space from the school with the condition they provide service to multiple scales. The upscale restaurant, owned by a celebrity chef she’d seen on television a few times, had only been open a few months—to rave reviews and solid bookings. “You think you can just get a table at the hottest restaurant in the city for a Friday night on a couple hours’ notice.”

“For giants, maybe. And I kind of have an ‘in.’”

“I...” She shook her head. “Sure. All right.”

“Great.” Saida sounded excited now. “I’ll call you back in a few minutes with the time if I can get it. Okay?”

“Okay.”

She put the phone back in her pocket, and looked down at Charlie. “Sorry. I have to go.”

He nodded. “Okay. Um. Thanks for...not eating me?”

Autumn paused, then crouched down. “You’re cute, Charlie. You just need to relax. Get more comfortable around people *you* think are cute, regardless of their size. Remember girls are people, not objects. Then remember giants are people, too.”

He nodded again, smiling uncertainly.

She straightened up. “Now, I have to go find something to wear.” Shaking her head, she hurried back toward her dorm.

CHAPTER 6

Chimayo

THE “BUSINESS DISTRICT” SAT NEAR THE SOUTHEAST corner of campus, close to the staff housing—which must be where Saida’s suite was. Technically, the district sat both on campus and in the off-campus DMZ, but at the edge of a low artificial cliff designed to put little street level at average giant chest height. Autumn had only been to this part of the campus maybe four times since she’d been a student. Five? There were no student services here, and she’d never had much interest in the Giants’ Club, a bar that Professor Thorferra apparently co-owned. Some people said it was kind of cliquish, the name seemed silly, and the Beanstalk was closer anyway.

She slowed down as she approached the restaurant. Smooth tan stone formed the exterior walls, lines curved rather than hard, softly lit from below by lanterns—spotlights, she supposed, to littles—hidden in the foliage. Logs from either magically enlarged or unimaginably intimidating trees supported the roof. It looked like something from a high desert city, taking cues from ancient architecture but remaining modern.

No other giants stood outside, although a handful of littles milled around at street level. The sheer drop-off of dirt and rock that she remembered from a few months ago had been finished into a four-story wall of dark brown stone blocks, water trickling down in rivulets to a pool at the base. Some littles saw her and waved up

cheerfully; others gawked gracelessly. All of them were dressed better than she was.

No, she admonished herself. *They're dressed more expensively. You're dressed great.* On her way out of her dorm, she'd been waylaid by Judy. The plushly curved raccoon had the eye of a fashion critic, and she'd immediately noticed the unusual lack of rips in Autumn's pair of black jeans. When the rabbit confessed she had a date, Judy briskly ushered her back to her own closet and commanded her to switch to that dark purple, design-free tee (tucked in), bring that black jacket, borrow this silver necklace. She'd bristled, but had to admit it not only all worked, but still fit her own style.

"Autumn!"

She turned to see Saida hurrying toward her. The Rha had traded her own jeans and tee look for a dark green sheath dress, a tight sleeveless wrap ending just above her knees, the V-cut neckline bordering on risqué given the cat's buxom build. She'd also added jewelry, by way of a matching bracelet and anklet, both simple gold hoops—albeit possibly real gold, or at least real gold plating. She started to feel underdressed again.

Before she could say anything, Saida stopped in front of her, looking her up and down. "You look stunning."

"Thanks. So do you."

Saida smiled self-consciously, fluffy tail flicking. "And thanks for giving me another chance." She hesitated, then motioned toward the restaurant. "Have you had...I guess they call it 'Southwestern' food? We don't have anything quite like it in Stravell."

Autumn followed. "Like tacos and burritos? Fajitas?"

"I don't think so. We don't have those in Stravell, either, although our breadpockets are close." She reached the door first, holding it open for the rabbit.

Inside, the restaurant looked like—well, like places her parents would never have taken her to. Soft, warm indirect light, walls that matched the waterfall stones, solid dark wood furnishings from each table to the host stand. Tasteful, restrained, expensive without being overtly excessive. She liked the look, but admitting that even to herself made her vaguely uncomfortable.

A tigress in a formal black suit—a tuxedo? Autumn wasn't sure, but it even had the bowtie—stood behind the host stand, smiling as they approached. “Good evening. Welcome back, Miss Talirend.”

Autumn's brows lifted.

Saida smiled. “Thank you.”

The tigress checked a display in front of her, then tapped the screen a few times. “Right this way.” She gathered two menus and headed into the dining room.

Past the entranceway, the reality of giant and little reasserted itself. The room for them held only five tables, although it didn't feel cramped. One wall, though, had a break just a bit over halfway up: the little dining room, separated from the giants by a railing. That space had dozens of tables, and she caught a glimpse of the separate entrance and host stand. The wall for the giants continued about twenty feet over the floor for the littles.

When she took her seat, the tigress handed her one of the menus, then handed Saida the other one after the Rha sat down. Autumn opened the menu, saw a column of prices, and immediately choked.

Saida blinked across the table, looking alarmed.

“They're just higher prices than I..wait, these are just the *appetizers*?”

“They're not—I mean—look. Don't worry. Order what you want.”

“You were going to say they're not that high?”

Saida's ears flicked back. “I've seen lower, and I've seen higher.”

Autumn shook her head, looking down at the menu. She didn't want to pick a fight. “Sorry,” she murmured. “I just feel out of place.”

Saida tilted her head and flashed a wry smile. “I don't know what to say that won't sound like ‘when I was your age.’ But I remember being a broke college student. Then a broke college dropout.”

When the waiter, a smartly dressed coyote, approached the table to take their drink orders, Autumn decided not to argue when Saida ordered a bottle of wine to split. The Rha seemed comfortable navigating a fancy wine list, but she'd seemed just as comfortable sharing pizza and coffee in a paper cup.

“So, you’ve eaten here before.”

“Twice. I’d always wanted to go to one of Chipotle’s restaurants.” She waved a hand at the room. “This is the first one I could fit in.”

“Chipotle...Layotl? The owner? Don’t tell me you’re on a first-name basis with her.”

“Well, actually, yes. She’s Arilin’s silent partner in the Giants’ Club.”

Her eyes widened. Before she could say anything, the waiter came back with the wine. “Are you ready to order?”

“I...um.” Autumn hurriedly scanned the menu. In fact, there were no tacos, burritos, or fajitas in sight. Everything sounded alarmingly fancy and she didn’t recognize half the ingredients. “Are the stuffed chiles vegetarian?”

He nodded. “They’re roasted poblano peppers stuffed with huitlacoche and sweet corn, topped with a walnut cream sauce. They’re delicious.”

“Okay. I’ll have that.” She had no idea what *huitlacoche* was, but evidently it wasn’t, like, chicken entrails or something.

Saida offered her closed menu to him with a smile. “I’ll have the honey-chile glazed salmon.”

“Excellent choice.” He took both menus, lifting Autumn’s out of her hands unbidden, and disappeared.

“So.” Saida took a big sip of her wine, looking across the table but not quite meeting Autumn’s eyes. “I don’t want to throw a lot of my office politics at you because they wouldn’t mean much and I know they’re not an excuse. But a few weeks before I met you, my company hired a new director of sales and marketing. Up until then, I’d reported directly to the CEO. My brother. Now I report to this new director.”

So she was second from the top, now she was third. “Is that a demotion?”

“Officially, no. But whether it is or isn’t, I’ve got much less slack now.” She let out a long sigh. “It hasn’t been said in so many words that I need to stop taking long weekends ‘out of town’ so often, but...it’s been made clear.”

Autumn picked up her own wine glass, mimicking Saida's swirling motions, giving it a careful sniff and an even more careful sip. It tasted like red grape skins rubbed on an oak leaf. Gah. Didn't wine have at least some sugar? "This feels like the start of a 'it's not you, it's me' speech."

"No, no. I mean..." Saida trailed off, looking into her own wine glass.

"It's okay." Autumn spread her hands. "Look, all we've had is pizza, coffee, and one kiss. First dates don't always work out. I guess I get a dinner I could never afford on my own out of it, right?"

Saida's voice tensed. "Could we maybe *start* dating before we break up?"

"Look, if it's either your job or your weekend world-hopping, it's better if we *don't* go any farther, isn't it?" She shook her head. "You're at a family business. You *must* be paid a lot. You've got a boss, but you're still management."

"Autumn." Saida leaned forward, meeting the rabbit's gaze now. "I didn't come back to tell you I had to make a hard choice between seeing you and keeping my job. I came back because I realized that choice is bullshit."

She felt her ears flush, and she looked away. "So now what?"

"Now we have a nice dinner. If anything else happens after that, it's up to you."

Autumn took another sip of the wine, this time trying to roll it around in her mouth like she'd heard you were supposed to. All right, now she could pick up other fruit flavors. Strawberry and cherry, maybe. "So were you really a broke college dropout?"

"I was. I'm not from a rich family. There weren't many rich families left after the war unless they were military contractors or something, but we weren't rich before it."

Autumn tilted her head. "War?"

"Arlin doesn't talk about it in class?" Saida let out her breath. "I guess she wouldn't. The accident that sent her here happened during the first big attack. Well, Mradhi thinks the attack's probably what caused it. The lightning weapons—"

The rabbit felt her eyes growing wider as the Rha spoke. Clearly,

Saida noticed it, catching herself and smiling a little sadly. “Just say a lot of people in Stravell lost a lot. Arilin was never interested in coming back. She’d built a whole life here, one she never had there.” She waved a hand around. “She was...antisocial. I don’t think she had any friends, and Mradhi and I were too young to know her before the accident happened. We’re it for her family now.”

“You’re—her parents were killed in the war?”

Saida nodded. “We thought she was, too.”

Her own crazy life started to seem blessedly mundane. “Uh—and your parents?”

“Physically, they came through the war fine. Dad never got another steady job, as far as I know, though, and they divorced... twelve years ago? I don’t know where he is now. Mom’s doing okay, thanks to a pension Mradhi set up for her.”

“Oh.” She bit her lip, looking down.

“How about your family?”

“Less dramatic than your story, but complicated. They’re not thrilled at having a giant for a daughter, and I can’t tell if it’s the ‘giant’ part or the ‘daughter’ part that bothers them the most. And my father has some kind of cancer now, I think, but I only hear this second-hand when my sister bothers to get in touch with me.” And when I let myself read her emails. “I’m going to have to deal with them again sometime, but I’m putting it off as long as I can.”

Saida grimaced in sympathy.

The waiter reappeared, setting down their plates. Autumn’s stuffed pepper looked like a work of modern art, split down the middle and overstuffed with a filling of not just corn and huit...whatever, but finely diced onions and what looked like some strange cross between squash and apple, drizzled with the cream sauce, sprinkled with pomegranate seeds and surrounded by multicolored wild rice. The cat’s salmon looked no less carefully plated, set on a bed of what looked like spinach and polenta. “Oh, wow.” She just studied her plate. “I’m pretty sure this is the fanciest food I’ve ever seen in real life.”

Saida cleared her throat. Autumn looked up to find a cheetah woman standing by the waiter, holding out a silver tray. On the tray

stood a short ringtailed woman—not a raccoon, a, what was it, cacomistle—wearing a chef's outfit. “I hope you like it.” She folded her hands behind her back and smiled. “I’m Luyu, the sous chef. Since you’re friends of Chef Layotl’s, I wanted to introduce myself. Is this a special occasion?”

Before Autumn could shake her head, Saida said, “It’s our first dinner date.”

“That’s lovely!” The cacomistle clasped her hands together. “We’ll make a special dessert you can share. In the meantime, let Ferran know if you need anything,” She indicated the coyote, who nodded.

“We will. Thank you so much.”

Autumn stared at Saida after they left. The cat smiled self-consciously. “I didn’t plan that, I promise.”

“That’s more worrying, somehow.” She carefully cut off a bite with her fork, put it in her mouth, then melted into her seat. “Oh my God.”

Saida grinned. “I’d say ‘wait until you see the dessert,’ but I don’t want it to sound like innuendo.”

Autumn waved her fork at the cat. “You don’t get to make innuendo yet. You still owe me a secret.”

Saida swallowed her own bite of salmon, looking down at her plate. Then she look back up and took a deep breath. “I’m cursed.”

Autumn swallowed her own second bite, and looked into the Rha’s eyes. “You’re serious.”

Saida nodded, ears lowered. They were both silent for a few seconds, until she straightened up and cut off another bit of the salmon. “Want a bite of fish?”

Saida & Autumn

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