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PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR TEXT.

It's a night for orange lightening out here in the desert. The storm has been going for hours, and we have been lashing through the rain in a leaking car at insane speeds. The only comfort has been the unwaveringly straight road and the knowledge that, on a night like this, any cop who sees a speeding nutter is going to leave them well enough alone. As they sit flicking peanuts and pretzels onto the dash, watching the salt get stuck on electrical tape hoarded from a discovered sex crime victim, they might see the streak of us fly past. Then, the most attention they'd give us is to wait for the distant sound of an impact and seek us out to masturbate over our torn remains. Or maybe not. The odds of us hitting anything are pretty slim. I'm pretty sure that aside from where we're going, there's little else to really smash into out here.

The shack isn't in a much better state than the car when we finally reach it: an island of warped wood amidst slanting dead grasses with a disused gas station a few miles away. Hugh is our little contact in this area, a man seriously underweight because he still cuts his cocaine with laxatives. He got into it when his dealer started doing it on the quiet, and when he found out and decided that he liked it, he just kept it up. Hugh lives with his slave Nora, though not in the Black or Gorean way. In their contract, there's no infallible knowledge of the books of Gor, nor strict adherence to the slave positions. It's just good, clean Domination slavery. She cooks, cleans and performs oral sex on command, and in return Hugh has never laid eyes in a desirous manner on another woman and showers her with praise and adoration.

I'm greatly envious of their commitment to one another. If I had a girl so hopelessly in love with me that she'd offer her mind as well as her body and heart like Nora does, I wouldn't know what to do with it. Nora has worn her high leather collar for five years now, exactly the same amount of time as her wedding ring. I can't make a commitment like that to one brand of whiskey, let alone a human being. They're a right honourable couple, and the fetish scene is friendly to them as such. Thus, they're in and privy to all the talk and gossip.

Tilley and I took ourselves on this mad venture into the empty land of their haven to be detectives, or at least to have something to do on an otherwise empty and wasted week. We didn't exactly fill the car with alcohol, but the dashboard is rammed and has to be taped shut. I never much saw the point of stashing bottles in the boot. No way to get to them in an emergency. The tape isn't exactly convenient for that, but I've got Tilley and her craft knife to attend to that when I need a drink quick. I'm way too paranoid to keep the bottles out in the open. I can just picture coming back to the car and seeing one of those birds that drops tortoises from hundreds and hundreds of feet down onto rocks to smash their shells making off with a bottle of pure pot still whiskey, imported and worth more than I'd price Tilley. I'd have chased that bird across the Earth for destroying a bottle of Redbreast and then roasted its body over its own nest, its own fluffy chicks as kindling.

The engine's off and Tilley doesn't say anything as I sit in the car and finish running this monologue to myself, uttering the odd word around an unlit cigarette. After a few minutes she takes an emery board from the car-mat and starts blunting off her nails until they're all square-ended. I end up just watching her do that and when she's done, I open the door and start letting the rain in. Shoving the door shut and ducking into my collar, I jog to the house.

Tilley follows at a far more leisurely pace, lifting her ankles high about the deepest wells in the mud.

I knock hard and let us both in when I hear a rumbled response, not knowing if it's an invitation or not and not much caring. Nora comes out of the kitchen in a fake snake-skin top with corners that pull down into suspenders and hold up wrecked fishnet stockings. Her boots are polished mirrors and have lines of studded, corset lacing up the fronts and backs. A metal yoke is across her shoulders, her fine wrists held out by supple leather cuffs with a red velvet trim. I admire the craftsmanship from inside the doorway.

"Sir is in the living area," Nora tells us, her softly smiling face perfect and glowing. Hugh buys her enough moisturiser to submerge herself in every year, and rubs it with long, loving strokes into her skin. I've seen him do it.

"Thanks Nora," Tilley says from behind me, sliding off her leather duster and hanging it on the hat rack.

Nora smiles again, looking younger than she is and trots delicately back into the kitchen. I take hold of Tilley's wrist and lead her through the hallway and into the living room, wincing at the seventies style wallpaper and the sickly carpet, swirled with flat and faded patterns. Hugh has always been firm on his priorities when it comes to spending money earned from doing... whatever. First comes the drugs, food, then the toys and accessories. The shack can keep sinking into the mud until the occasional downpours start to damage those first items.

In the living room, there isn't a sofa pointed at the television. Instead, Hugh is reclining half-drunk in his bed-nest of sex dolls, all under-inflated and shining from their orifices. They squeak against each other when he fidgets around and when, after squintingly identifying us, he climbs to his feet.

I shake his hand and clap his shoulder with the usual grunted greeting, still staring at the dolls. To my knowledge, he doesn't actually penetrate them. He's got an adored slave for that. Mostly he knocks them around, sometimes two at a time, and cleans them up in the bath afterwards, making them warm. Any man who takes such copious amounts of drugs invariably has a dark side lurking far too close to the surface. When it comes up, Nora shuts herself off in the kitchen to bake cookies and lets him beat on the dolls, swearing indiscriminately. Later he'll beat on her, but she'll enjoy that and have the assurance of him actually listening to her safe word.

Tilley shakes his hand next and then goes to perch on the edge of the grey armchair in the corner of the room. I sit on the arm of it, running a hand down through her tangerine hair before propping my elbow on my knee. Hugh offers us drinks, which we gladly accept, and arranges the dolls again, slotting heads between dimpled thighs to make a sturdier platform on which to sit. Like some weird futon.

I speak before Tilley can. "I heard that Carl's boyfriend died last week. Suffocated in a gimp suit."

No one laughs, though it is so tragically funny that we all want to. Hugh's bottom lip comes out bitten grey. "Yeah, I heard. Nasty thing. Zip got jammed or something. Not too sure. Carl's really torn up about it. Dominique is setting up a charity thing for the funeral."

Dominique is a female name meaning 'of the lord'. Dominique is a post-op transsexual who custom makes rubber-wear and will likely hold an auction of some of her clothing for this 'charity thing'. It wasn't one of her hoods that Ben turned blue in, I don't think.

I take the cigarette that's still sitting lonesome and cool from between my lips, thinking about sticking it behind my ear but deciding against it when I feel how wet my hair is. I give it to Tilley instead. She doesn't light it, just plays it in her hands, flipping it up and down along her fingers.

Nora comes in with a tray expertly held in her left hand, she drinks a meter from her head. She kneels so we can take them – fresh lemonade with a shot of vodka in each – and does the same for her husband, smiling demurely in her yoke. She offers us coke and cookies, but we all decline, and Hugh pats her arse lovingly when she makes her way back out.

"So, you came all the way out here for just the lemonade, or is there something else?" Hugh asks us after we all take long, refreshing sips from the tall glasses.

I sit back on the wide, bony arm. "It just all sounds really..."

"Suspicious," Tilley finishes, her lower lip against the rim of her glass.

Hugh looks interested, running a finger idly around the deep mouth of one of the dolls. I continue: "No one's saying if it was actually Carl Ben was sceneing with. I don't know if Carl liked to share his gimp with other Doms."

"You think that maybe one of the Doms plugged Ben's air-hole and murdered him?"

"Well, it's not outside the realms of possibility now, is it? I mean, the cops weren't gonna perform an inquiry into the fetish scene, were they? So some freaky guy with a neo-Nazi boyfriend who had an extensive collection of ball, bit and ring gags died performing some 'obscene' sex act. Who in vanilla society gives a shit?"

"I take your point," Hugh mutters eventually, finishing his lemonade and roughly shoving the base of the glass into a doll's mouth so it doesn't tip and spill its grainy dregs onto the appalling carpet. "So what do you want to do? Start asking questions in the scene about where Ben was in the last few days? Interrogate someone for real under the guise of a session?"

"Tilley can break a cane across a guy," I offer, seeing that as a helpful bit of information right then.

Hugh doesn't find that funny and pulls a face. "Oh yeah, all that is really going to inspire trust, isn't it? Seriously, mate, you sound like a fucking lunatic sometimes."

“Full moon,” I reply with a grin. “I’m not saying we should pin anyone down and lick their eyes until they talk. You could just send out some feelers; keep your ear to the ground whilst Tilley and I do some more direct sniffing around.”

The glass comes out of the sex doll’s mouth with a flat ‘pop’ and Hugh tips it upside down to let the dregs slide down, licking them off the rim when they reach the bottom. He wipes his mouth and nods to us. “Alright, I’ll call you with anything I find out.”

“We’ll do the same.” I stand up and neck the last of the lemonade, handing the glass down to Tilley. “Cheers mate. It’s all I wanted.”

Tilley utters a ‘thank you’ as well and carries our glasses out to Nora, taking Hugh’s from him on the way out. When Hugh gets up, the sex dolls groan out a restrained farting sound like a mysteriously sentient rubber duck trying not to have diarrhoea all over itself. He and I hang about in comfortable silence until Tilley gets back and we both make our way to the door.

Nora tips one suspended arm and her head around the kitchen door whilst Tilley puts her heavy coat back on. “Safe ride back,” she chirps. “It’s gotten heavier out there.”

I give her a little wave of thanks and take my cigarette back off Tilley, opening the door for us both and making a dash for the car, the cigarette hidden up my sleeve to stay dry. The ground is still in shock from the rain, which is hammering down in wide sheets. The top soil is floating like iron filings on the shuddering puddles, and I see it’s left rings of dirt around Tilley’s boots when she gets into the car.

Finally, I light the cigarette with a cheap blue lighter that had been pushed into a broken air vent, filling the car with smoke within a few, hard puffing minutes. When I’m assured that the nicotine is safely in my blood, I start the engine and we drive off. Tilley peels open a crumpled map and starts drawing a line with her finger to a motel, murmuring instructions just loud enough to be heard over the engine to go north. I’m trying to deal with a potential murder here. I don’t need her voice rattling my nerves.