

## The Deject-tice

This story, like so many others, begins outside a dingy, washed-up bar with too much history to delve into and two too many people inside. However, they will be receiving a third inhabitant shortly, who shares a story quite similar to the once-glorious establishment, although neither of them know it. Or, for that matter, particularly care. Right now, Vanessa “Luna” Evans is just looking for shelter from the beating rain and a car from Hell, which refuses to work properly despite her set of very concentrated prayers. The fact that they mainly contained loud swearing isn’t necessarily helping her case, but she trudges herself into the bar all the same.

Clearly having seen better days, chairs are stacked up on tables like the place has already been closed, while the walls still exist in a past age. Somewhat decrepit, peeling paint, and a visible layer of dust or dirt has managed to coat everything. Low-hanging, low-voltage lights don’t illuminate much else, a man putting his coat on and finishing the last swig of his drink. Either the bartender wasn’t around to take care of his bar anymore or there wasn’t a real need to.

She sighed and decided that there wasn’t anything inherently wrong with residing in this place for the next few hours, maybe it would make getting drunk alone finally fun. Luna walked forward, taking careful note of the other patron’s clothing and demeanor while doing so. A large overcoat, with well-maintained garments that look, admittedly cheap. A clear color clash, (who chooses to wear maroon tops in 2024?), but an otherwise fairly reasonable outfit. He carries himself...slowly. As if he had the weight of the world on his back and he wasn’t struggling to hold it, but to move inches at a time without dropping it. Rather soothing to watch, actually.

By now, she’s dripped water to the bar top, and begun to take the damp clothing off, while avoiding eye contact with the other patron, or the bartender she’s now noticed in the far left corner, tending to his glasses.

“Rough day, hm? You look like a wet cat,” said the other patron.

“Hush now, you’ll scare off all my customers,” came the bartender, “and your wit really isn’t up-to-par today. Can you not think of anything better than ‘wet cat’?”

A small sigh escaped his lips as he returned, “Yeah, sorry. That it wasn’t funny. I was supposed to go back to the store around this time but I wouldn’t mind keeping someone company for a bit. Especially if it meant getting to bother Frank.”

If there was a time to let off some steam, she supposed it would be now. A dingy bar with nothing but two strangers and cheap brew, who could think of anything better? Add in the fact that she was cripplingly lonely in her new life and it sounded like a pretty sweet deal.

She turned to her right and started, “The name’s Vannessa but all my friends called me Luna,” she spoke with some pride but the words rang hollow, as if she pushed from the chest and not the heart, “no, it’s not because of my gloominess or that I was born on a full moon or whatever.” She extended her left hand for a handshake and to show the man what she meant, a scar that’s since settled into her skin in a crescent shape.

“We were stupid back then. I guess everyone was when they were kids but especially my brothers and I. We really wanted to bake some cookies but father informed us there weren’t any ingredients left so we would need to get ‘all hands on deck’ to acquire some. I got it in my head—”

“Ahhhh, I see where this is going. I’ll hand it to you, I wasn’t much better in my early days,” he said with a slight chuckle, more to himself than to anyone else.

“Right, you get it. I put my actual hand on the ‘deck’ and had my brother slam the cookie cutter straight in. It didn’t penetrate the skin at first but I was really desperate to help, so I told them to do it again, and again, and...yeah. That was the last time my dad ever lied to us again.

So after a decade or so, when he told me he was cutting me out of the family and dropped me off at the side of the road with nothing more than the shirt on my back, I didn't blink twice. Being too 'helpful' with the family fortune wasn't exactly my best idea either," she finished with a grimace.

"...Wow. That sounds like a call for drinks if I've ever heard one," he said with a turn and a gesture, "The usual, Frank."

Frank's response was a non-committal grunt. Despite the forlorn look, he seemed less moved by the story itself and more by the experience of sharing grievances and old lore underneath the fluorescents again.

The man started again, "Do you usually lead off with that or was it my radiating charm and vulnerability this time around? I hate to say it like this but are you okay? I don't interact much with people outside of Frank here and he's more of a statue anyway but I fear I should lend an ear to any other of your, clearly abundant, troubles."

"Hah, I don't know which part you'd rather me get into. Should it be the time that's now passed, the time spent trying to shape the horrid practices of a broken family that created the very forsaken spaces we now share, no offense Frank, or the time that's passing much too fast, the time I'm wasting of everyone around me, skipping birthdays, cutting off friends, missing interviews to miss more interviews and so on. It felt like once I was on top of the world, with nothing to show for it, restricted by my closest compatriots from offering anything at all, as if my skin were crusting over into untouchable metal. Now, I'm on the opposite side, completely porous and screaming into the void while they stay climbing and the rest of us...come here. No offen--"

“None taken.” Frank slammed down two mugs of “the usual” before turning around to mournfully clean glasses. It seemed as if Frank did nothing but clean spotless glass.

“It doesn’t even feel like a betrayal. I saw it coming with my own two hands passing out cash like they were Rosencrantz and Guildenstern passing out my execution letters. It was my own fault and my privilege blinded me to...how much I sucked, I guess.” Luna sat glumly with her hands covering her eyes as she mimed out the story for her royal audience. A loud sigh and a few drips of silence but somehow the silence didn’t feel awkward. It was a lived-in space, one used for decades past, and one promised to generations far from now. The bar embraced them, filling the tensest parts of conversation with stale air and poor lighting, but filled it all the same.

The other man took a deep breath. “Yeah.”

And outside the rain poured and the world moved and the money did too. But here, time stood for a little while longer. “I think my greatest fear has always been stagnating in a deadbeat city. I would’ve given anything to be in your position ten years ago but...maybe I should think better of all my cats now.” A light ripple of laughter washes through the place, easy, comfortable, rejuvenating. “You were saying something about interviews?” he finished.

“Hm? Oh, yeah. Some spot called ‘Heaven’s Gate’. No clue what it is but it advertised itself with cat pictures so I couldn’t pass it up. That and it was walking distance but that didn’t seem to work out.”

“Neither did driving if the expletives we heard before you walked in meant anything.” Frank and the man across from her shared a knowing smile while she tried to look guilty.

“You got me, you got me.” A pause. “I don’t know. It sounds cute but I don’t know if I deserve such a cushy job at this point. Maybe I’d be better working the bar in this joint...if there

was any need for that.” She took another look around and decided the words she was serving Frank weren’t really insulting at this point, just demeaningly true. Which might be worse.

She continued, “But if the rain lets up at some point I think I’ll still go for it. ‘You meow-iss a hundred paw-cent of the shots you don’t take’ or whatever it was the poster said. It’s only been around 30 minutes right?” As the man who bought her the drink started to open his mouth, she cut him off, “And before you try to convince me I’m drunk, don’t think I didn’t notice this non-alcoholic garbage. Is ‘the usual’ seriously watered down fruit juice for you?”

Frank and his patron shared another knowing look, the bartender offering a terse grunt in response while the other man tilted his head at her, giving her a slow look-over.

She started again, “Look, I didn’t mean it about this being garbage, I just said it for eff--”

“I’ll do you one better.” As the man got up from his seat and extended his right hand, he explained “My name’s Cielo but all my friends call me Axe-1,” he spoke with some sort of regained confidence, as he turned his right hand over to display a gnarly, straight scar, “an ‘accident’ caused by my sister while playing ‘Cookie Clicker’. Yeah, I don’t understand either. But I’ll give you a ride to my shop and while I’m at it, I’ll hire you because your superbly incompetent supervisor failed to arrive on time for the interview as well. How about it?”

As Luna sat, a little shocked but much more interested now, she began with the two questions she wished she could ask all of her interviewers: “Are there actually cats and will you buy me a real drink afterwards?”

A warm smile and a hearty chuckle erupted from Axel and Frank, respectively, as she stood to shake her new boss’s hand.

“Yes and of course.”

And so, if one looked a bit harder at that bar on one particularly rainy day, they would notice the soft embers of life flow back into a room filled with good company, mirth, and cheap beer.