

11. A Ritual Taken to Excess

Sandy leaned against Rocky's back where he fidgeted on a long bench in the boys' locker room, massaging his neck and shoulders. She tried not to breathe smelly gymsuit odor but it couldn't be avoided.

"Is it time yet?" asked Rocky.

"No again, handsome."

Her man sat hunched over, hands clasped, as though he'd been benched for a foul.

He glanced at her and smiled. "We got those two dancers over a barrel, I can feel it."

"No contest, hon. Flann and Brandy, they're a couple of clothesracks. You and me, though, we *do* stuff. Kids cheer your tackles and your field goals. I give them a rise with my pompons and the occasional flash of my butt."

Rocky had worn a clean white jockstrap to bed once. Now she pictured him, his killer teammates too, arrayed down the dim empty bench, big swells of dick held in before them like whips of spackle, their buttock muscles tight, the playful *thwap* of towels against bare bottoms.

"We'll do that throne shit, huh?"

"That's right," she said. "They'll spotlight us. They'll give us a big brassy fanfare, robes, crowns, the whole shootin' match."

"And then the newspaper!"

"Uh huh." She nodded vigorously, relieved that the lesson had finally begun to sink into Rocky's thick skull. "Tonight, big grins to the peons, flashbulb pops, royal waves and armloads of roses. Monday morning, our picture will grace the front page of the *Gazette*—"

"Dead corporate grunts'll've stepped aside at their Sunday afternoon picnics."

"—yes, and there you'll be, ready to take your pick of the jobs opened up by their deaths."

Rocky chuckled.

He rubbed his palms together, like she did when she smoothed hand cream on, but more briskly. "And then," he said, "we'll find a third to round us out."

"Yes. A nice man. Maybe some old guy with a good job and yummy lobes."



Sandy would stay home with the pup. *Which* pup she wasn't sure. But it had frizzy caramel-and-cream fur and a cute wet black nose. She could see the little yapper now. She would hire a landscaper to put in a perfect flower garden, then sit back and spend the money her husbands brought in.

"Nobody from school though," said Rocky, parroting her.

"No one."

Her sights had been raised considerably since their nomination as prom royalty. It had put them safely beyond slaughter. That release from terror had given Sandy a far wider vision of the future, up from the confined sandbox of high school to the unending stretch of beach frontage that lay before them.

"They're all such children here," she said.

"They sure are."

Bending to him, Sandy pressed her breasts against his back and kissed his thick coconut-aroma'd hair.

Gaunt gray lockers aisled off parallel into the gloom, ending at yet another wall of them. Murmurs of other couples arrayed elsewhere back near the showers floated in dim stifles of air. Ghost-voices. Soon to be memories only.

"Is it time yet?"

"Not yet. Soon."

"I swear, I'm gonna cut you a big bleeding hunk of corpse."

"I'd like that, Rocky."

Bobbing knee. "You sure it's not time yet?"

The shrill bell had startled Pill. Gigi, her stuffed goat, huddled close then.

The bell was much louder than when she walked down the halls in the daytime to visit her biology teacher mommy, holding Daddy's hand.

Outside in the hallway, Pill heard heels and giggles. She had just enough time to rush into the coat closet, a nice non-squeaky door that let her leave half an inch and didn't swing open when she took her hand away. It smelled woody, but it was warm enough that cool air blew on her from the thin bright crack.

Two girls came in, noisy and excited. They were very happy to be here.

Pesky, the high-pitched chatterbox of the pair, kept squealing and jumping up and down, to judge from her leathery taps on the tile floor.

And Pill heard laughter in the calmer, lower voice of Flense. It sounded like her daddy when he was agreeing to something Mommy had said but was really patting himself on the back about how much brighter than her he was.

The squealer, the one named Pesky, skipped and danced around the room, hand-kissing stuff on the long counter and peeking into the mini-fridge. Pill caught glimpses of her: a shiny pink ribbon in shiny black hair, her creamy neck and lobe-flesh going by, the gleam of a pleased eye.

Pill was afraid one of them would fling open her closet door and she would get yelled at.

Flense called Pesky a teacher's pet. "*I'm* just along for the ride. Pesky's date," she said. "But they stuck *you* here cuz you kiss their big fat behinds all the time."

"Yep. No blood's gonna be spilled here. What the hey, they're not gonna you-know-what where they eat," said the other girl. "Well I guess, for form's sake and so they don't kill us 'n' shit for disobeying the rules, we ought to sit on the couch, under our number."

They quieted down and hugged a bunch. Among the rustle of dresses and the slaps and slurps and moans they gave out with, the deep-voiced one sometimes shushed the other and asked if she heard any screaming yet.

Pill hugged Gigi and pretend-whispered that these two were silly and a bother, and she hoped they would go back to the dance soon so she could curl up again in the stuffed chair and count the dots in the ceiling tiles.

Then a loud crack startled her. It sounded like a huge toaster popping bread.

The high-pitched one said, though not in reply to anything, "Mjust askin'!" followed by "But you can't—!" which was cut off by a thud.

Pill hunched up tight and held her breath.

A weak no from Flense gave way to sounds of running and the rattle of a locked door. Then a louder series of no's pierced the air as she was struggled back across the room.

The hunching made Pill's shoulders hurt. She felt light and funny in her head.

She had to keep breathing. Had to trap her whimpers inside.

Through the thrashing, Pill moved her right hand to the closet knob, grasped it, afraid it would creak. Then she froze her arm there. She had been ready to shut the door. But the noise gurgled away, and Gigi warned her not to.

Putting an eye to the crack, Pill saw a glove gripping a tiny pellet. The pellet was all swirly with mist. The gloved hand thrust it between the Flense girl's lips, fingers jammed in, abruptly, in an ungentle way like her old daddy shoving a pill into their cat Puff's pried-open jaws and forcing him to swallow.

Then the glove smacked Flense's face and was gone, and Flense fell out of sight, oddly quiet as the struggle stopped. "Wait!" she said. "What did you—? Leave Pesky alone! Oh jeez, oh shit. Make it stop. Please make it stop." She sounded like she had bad tummy-ache pain, like she wanted to throw up but couldn't.

Someone fell like a sack of potatoes.

Dragging sounds outside.

Grunts of effort.

Pill was suddenly sure that the knocked-out Pesky was going to be shoved into the closet, and that the hurty man with the dark blue arms and the bloody workgloves was going to see her then and do really bad things to her.

Should she scream?

Could she get away if she darted out right now, clonked him with a chair or something, and broke down the door?

Then the shuffling sounds stopped.

The girl who'd been forced to swallow the misty pellet cried and moaned like wind in a lonely cave.

Pill could see the other one through the crack. Her skull knocked hard on the counter top. Then a *shoof* sounded, like some weird heavy car door closing in the distance, and the girl's face bunched up and opened wide into a scream like Pill had never heard before.

Pill started to shiver. She no longer trusted her hand on the knob, but she didn't dare move it.

"My fingers!" came the high scream.

Pill remembered her mother working at that same counter, squaring paper on a green grid and clumpling a curved blade sharply down.

Pesky's face smeared out of the crack as she tried to tear away, but again she was grabbed, to judge from the violent waver in her voice, and the noise grew really loud and close. Pill's fingers flared with pain as the crack shut and the closet door slammed and darkness struck her like a heavy fist.

Pill heard whimpering. When she realized it was her own, she made it go away. Outside, dulled to cotton by the closed door, the fierce fighting went on.

She backed up against warm wood, touching it with one hand and hugging Gigi to her chest with the other.

An angled corner, pillows, her little nest. She inched downward, the walls sliding up around her, soft comfort beneath her as beyond the black muffle the killing continued.

Go away, she prayed.

Go away, go away.

At the Shite House, one side of the split-screen showed the scrubbed teens sitting beneath the number 57, the other the Home Ec teacher poised to spring open the metal panel above them.

She's closing in for the kill," murmured the announcer.

Secretary Wanker suppressed a laugh.

Prom night always fired up the President and his cabinet. The slaughter of the young fueled a year of decisions and proved far more effective a teambuilding effort than any touchy-feely retreat with teams of fake-empathetic facilitators.

To be sure, the cabinet secretaries' juices flowed free, and the naughtiness of their exposed lobes gave everyone that extra jolt.

But the real thrill lay in eavesdropping on two frightened kids thinking someone else had been chosen. And on a teacher who, for one evening of planned mayhem, dropped all pretense of caring for her snot-nosed charges.

It revived memories of their *own* proms even as it firmed up governmental resolve.

But tonight, thought Wanker, something new would be added to the mix.

As if that thought were a signal, the trap was sprung onscreen.

"There she goes!" screamed the announcer.

The blade flashed.

Out popped the Home Ec teacher. The wide-eyed boy sustained a lethal slash to the throat. His date, offering a feeble whine and a feint at struggle, joined him in death.

The beautiful brutality of it brought most of the cabinet over the top, though they were careful that their moans did not top in intensity those of President Windfucker.

Holding back his own release, Willy Wanker spoke softly into his lapel mike: "Now."

The doors burst open.

Everybody turned in mid-spurt at the heavy tromping of boots, taking in a sudden rush of soldiers in camouflage, men and women not much more than high school age themselves, brandishing knives and grimacing with resolve.

The stern-faced suits who tried to protect the President lost fingers to the downslash and were shoved out of the way by the sheer force of numbers.

Cholly Bork took a stab to the neck. The crossbarred airplane control that animated Gilly Windfucker flew out of his hands, and the puppet leader collapsed. Beneath the pummeling, Bork went down, his arms flopping ineffectually this way as he tried to ward off the attack.

A crack crew lofted the inert president into the air. Snips at his strings. Snips where his limbs articulated. His arms and legs were passed on to two solders assigned to snap them over their

knees. Others stomped on his head and torso, then tossed the bashed and broken parts into a waiting trash can for the bonfire Wanker had scheduled at midnight on the Shite House lawn.

All of this a trio of filmers filmed, cameras perched like parrots on their shoulders, eyepieces to their eyes, close enough but not too close to be caught up in the melee.

So as not to detract from the slaughters being carried out across the nation, the footage would be aired on late-night news. This would be a capper, not a distraction.

So the Committee to Assassinate the President had planned it, and so it would be.

Wanker was pleased with himself.

He was able then, at last, to relax into the ride of his orgasm, his huddled privacy set aside for a brief instant as he moved into the flow and gave all he had for his country.

"I think we've made it," said Tweed, barely whispering. The darkened chem lab, with its odd stifle of odors and its solid workbenches, would suffer nothing louder.

Dex confided, "I think you're right."

"Did you hear screaming?"

"I might have." He gestured in the same direction she had fancied muffled sounds coming from moments ago. "Off that way."

"Yes, just ringings in my ear," she said. "I thought I was only spooking myself."

It might be, thought Tweed, nothing but a shared deception. Right this moment, the square grate above Dex might be kicked spangling across the classroom and the killing begin.

Or now. Or now.

But she felt a lifting in the lab, as if it and its ghostly pairs of seniors arrayed against the wall were being raised heavenward. Intuition, sure. But that was something she and her sister Jenna excelled in.

"I wonder who bit it," Dex said.

"I love you, Dex."

He looked into her eyes and smiled through a sadness, a good wish toward somebody now defunct. "Love ya, Tweed."

"No, I mean more than ever."

Relief flooded her body. Dex looked so good, so indescribably good, that she thought she might burst.

"I mean," a laugh escaped, his eyes steady on hers, "I mean," she said, putting her hands to the sides of his head, his earlobes warm between thumb and forefinger, "I mean I really sincerely truly *love* you, Dexter Poindexter."

Then her lips pressed against his.

His hand touched her back.

A lip tingle, like spot-on trombone playing but a kajillion times more gratifying, softened her. She grew moist as if Dex were fondling her, her earlobes beating hot with passion.

Her fingertips found something smooth at his lapel. With a laugh, she broke the kiss.

"What?" he asked.

"You still have your sax strap on," she replied.

"Makes me feel sexy."

"Old joke." Bubbles of joy effervesced in Tweed's head.

"Besides," said Dex, "I knew, one way or the other, that we were going to survive this. I just knew it."

A bell shattered the silence, so loud and so sustained that gasps and shouts and a flurry of startled obscenities erupted in the classroom.

Tweed hugged Dex anew, taking his friendship lobe between thumb and forefinger as though it were a fat velvet button.

"Let's go," said Dex, helping her up. "Time to hunt for the victims."

Whichever couple found the dead folks first won some silly prize. But Tweed didn't care about that. She only cared that she and Dex were out of the woods—a murkier and more wicked place than she had imagined—and she told him so.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," he said. "But let's get into the spirit of the thing anyway. We did it. We're survivors!"

"I've got to call Dad first."

Dex took her hand.

Futterware and cleavers swaying in tandem, they headed for the hall, which was already choked with kids on the move. This was the beginning of an unencumbered life together for her-and-Dex-and-whomever.

And it felt wonderful!



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