

# ***CRAZY EYES***

## ***CHRONICLES OF VAJRA*** ***BOOK TWO***

***T E WHITAKER***

PREVIEW

## Sugar on the Rim

“Wherefore the fuck art thou?”

“Terminal five.”

“I flew from Mexico,” I said. “I’m outside the international terminal.”

“TequilAir stops in San Diego,” Euclid said. “The connection makes it domestic.”

“I flew their Guacamole Express. It’s nonstop from Cabo.”

Euclid asked, “What’s that run these days?”

“It’s only money.”

“Especially when it’s not yours,” Euclid said.

We’re either not as screwed as we think we are, or lowballing our screwed magnitude. Rare is the being who sees all that is *as* it is, pronounces, “I am screwed to this degree,” and goes forth clear-eyed to dry hump reality’s leg.

After gaining access to Sydney’s pay pig’s villa via the unlocked beachside door with the taped-on note reading *Enter Me*, I’d finished the Key lime pie, emailed myself everything I’d ever written in case I had to sell my laptop for the flight to Los Angeles, and searched the home for spare change.

I was a teenager the last time I’d rifled my parents’ room for change, and in those days of yore finding ten bucks in a drawer would have been the equivalent of stumbling upon Paititi, the lost Incan City of Gold.

In the villa’s master bedroom closet I discovered five blocks of cash wrapped in cellophane beneath a straw sombrero, each block the size of a carry-on suitcase. I suffered the ethical implications of taking a few dollars from the tech billionaire’s smuggled, tax-avoiding stash while strolling to the kitchen for plastic gloves and a knife, and decided *enough to hire a car to the Cabo airport and fly back to Los Angeles* was morally defensible. I’d pay it back when I had it. So—technically—it was a no-interest loan. I checked online for available flights, and weighed the extra fifteen hundred dollars necessary for the luxury and expediency of TequilAir’s Guacamole Express (departing an hour earlier from Cabo and arriving at LAX three hours earlier) against

my debt burden tolerance. The reply was hazy, forcing me to factor in the emotional toll the sensory deprivation hood had extracted from the moment I'd regained consciousness to my escape from the hood, account for unknowns such as developing nyctophobia or sedatephobia or eremikophobia, or all three, and estimate the opportunity cost of avoiding margaritas in Los Angeles given the city's many excellent Mexican restaurants. I arrived at *Yes*.

Euclid stopped his car at the curb. He ran around to open the door.

"Namaste, and thanks for choosing URide," he said, and closed the door behind me.

Once Euclid was behind the wheel, I said, "Namaste?"

He made a little half-assed shrug. "I'm exploring a new spirituality called Tantrarma. It flows through the mistress Shiva-Lu Shiva."

"What flows through her?"

"The bright word."

"In what way?"

Euclid hesitated. "I don't understand the question."

"How'd you meet her? Is she a yoga instructor?"

"Yes, and other things. But I've never met her. Her temple is in Bangkok."

I considered. "So it's a hybrid? Tantra and karma?"

"Tantrarma is a philosophical and spiritual blend," Euclid said. "It's apart from the earth. Karma is a prime element of Shiva-Lu Shiva's philosophy."

"Great. Now I have to pay back the billionaire."

"You might want to," he said, "so you don't reincarnate as a cockroach."

He tapped at his phone, on the URide app.

"You're charging me for this?"

"Cash, grass, or ass," he said.

"To quote my good friend Euclid," I said, "Ha fucking ha."

He grinned and handed me his phone, "Void the ride, please."

We exited LAX and, predictably, Euclid took La Cienega north toward Hollywood.

When we continued past Beverly, I said, "Where are we going?"

"To pick up the equipment."

"What?"

“We shoot tomorrow.”

“Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck.” I’d forgotten it all. “I shot yesterday.”

Euclid said nothing.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “We were on the beach, and the ocean, and the moon—”

“And she was just so pretty?” he whined. “And it felt so right? Holy crap, Brät.”

It’s often necessary to analyze Euclid’s reactions, and determine whether he’s feigning anger because it’s the expected reaction given the circumstances, or legitimately angry. I categorized this one as *legitimate*.

“The situation was complex, Uke. I saw an escape route and made an executive decision.”

“Yeah, that worked out well. Naked on a beach in a mask. Did you ever consider that if she’d put the locks on you’d be dead?”

“Of course I did. That’s how I know she loves me.”

The rotational speed of Euclid’s head snap to eyeball me threatened to toss his nose onto the dashboard like a small child on a merry-go-round’s perimeter, given the tangential force applied to his nose because of its distance from his head’s axis of rotation.

“Please tell me you’re kidding,” he said.

I smiled. “I’m kidding.”

He took a good look at me. “Are you wearing the guy’s clothes?”

Rustic khaki slacks. A DB-brand polo shirt with distressed collar. Numbered, limited edition black deck shoes with a skull and crossbones on one blood red sole and a pitchfork and flames on the other, to leave unique footprints. This pair was branded 2/666. I was keeping them.

“She took all of mine,” I said.

“He has better taste than you.”

I frowned. “That’s a little over the line.”

He barked a laugh. “One of my many jobs is assuring your erection stays in frame. So our friendship has no lines.”

Euclid parked near the rental company’s door and switched off the engine.

“We can’t change our shooting days again,” he said. “I just negotiated a weekend rate for Tuesday and Wednesdays. We pay whether or not we shoot.”

“I understand,” I said. “It’s on me. Did I mention you’re an excellent producer?”

We picked up the equipment and headed for Euclid's apartment.

"Is the stunt dick available tomorrow?" I asked.

We sat at a red light. "Don't know. Why?"

"Maybe we could get him over tomorrow. We could shoot day two the first day, and vice versa. It would give me an extra day to build my reserves."

"But then our star will be tired for the big scene."

"No I wouldn't," I said.

"The girl, dumbass."

"Right. How about dialogue in the morning, stunt dick non-penetration shots in the afternoon, the climactic scenes morning of day two, and finish with the stunt dick in the afternoon?"

Euclid punched it when the light turned green. "You'll pay for the stand-in's extra day?"

"It seems like a production expense."

"It is, but it's coming out of your monthly take," Euclid said. "You can't screw up, as understandable as it is with the beach and all"—he winked at me—"and expect the rest of us to pay for it. We're all working toward something bigger."

"All right."

"Why are you grinning?" Euclid asked.

"It's just good to be back."

He laughed. "We'll see how you feel after you talk to Troika. She's dying to monologue about professionalism."

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"We're there," Stu said, dipping a tortilla chip in Ocho's *salsa raro*, made from Mazahua heirloom tomatoes flown in from Mexico twice daily, and jalapeño peppers raised behind the restaurant in three-inch clay pots for perfect marbling. Ocho had managed to sell the Hollywood elite on its stratospherically priced authenticity by arranging rusted, weather-abused tables and chairs reclaimed from a dust-riddled town sixty miles south of TJ around a polished concrete floor sprinkled with sawdust. Other *Authentic Ambience Elementals* included artistically cracked

glass (with a pristine inner pane to pass L.A. health inspections), primary color painted window lettering, a mule petting zoo next to the jalapeño nursery, and *Authentic Itinerant Graffiti* in the side alley, erased and revised nightly by an *Authentic Undocumented Immigrant*, whose oils on canvas had recently shown at LACMA. A tin plate screwed into every table apologized for the restaurant's failure to pipe in authentic tap water from south of the border.

"So what's the next step?" I asked, lifting my blended strawberry margarita, hesitating, and setting it down for the fifth time.

"I'll run through it, fix some errors of grammar and clarity I noticed, then Nikki'll give it a light proof and we'll send it out Tuesday."

"Who's Nikki?"

"My daughter. It's my weekend."

"Is she qualified?"

"She's majoring in journalism," he said. "I mean, she will. They can't declare until sophomore year."

"Okay," I said, thinking *Nine Lives* warranted a keener eye. "What's 'a light proof?'"

"Whatever she catches over the weekend. It doesn't have to be perfect from a grammatical or punctuation perspective. Just not distracting. If you wrote the greatest script of all time on toilet paper with a gray crayon, it would eventually sell." He killed off another few chips. "Hell, it would probably sell faster because it was on toilet paper, and its unreadability would contribute to its mystery."

My expression betrayed my doubt.

"Brät, all the formatting to airframe tolerances, and Dante's nine levels of copyediting, and the brass fucking brads 'of an inch but not an inch and a quarter in the outside holes but never the center hole' are *guidelines*. Nothing more. That shit sells screenwriting books, not screenplays. The only ironclad rule of screenwriting is you've gotta be here in L.A. And even that isn't ironclad."

I smiled. "So is it ironclad or not?"

Stu laughed, murdered a chip, swigged margarita. "What do you care? You're already here. You've optioned a script. You're living the dream, with your bat out of hell at the curb."

The sun ignited off the twisted exhaust pipe and exploded in my heart.

“I really love it.”

Stu studied me. “You say that like your best friend rode it while you were out of town.”

Our waitress, who’d earlier informed us she’d portrayed a murdered exotic dancer’s dead body in a recent episode of *Beat Cop*, stopped by the table. “Excusa me, amigos. *Life with the Lobahtums* is shooting here in five minutes. I guess Lily’s mom is confronting her about the whole Linen thing. I thought I’d give you a head’s up in case you wanted to leave before they arrive.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Stu said.

“No problemo.” She laid our check on the table, and next to it a pair of model release forms. “If you want to stay for the fireworks.”

When she’d left, Stu paid the check with cash. “You ever watch that shit?” he asked.

“The Lobahtums? No. My life’s drama enough.” I touched my tongue to the margarita glass. Sugar on the rim. Thank the gods. I sipped some, swished it around. Waited. Steeled myself and swallowed.

“Something wrong, Brät?”

“Margaritas make me nervous these days,” I said.

“That’s not what I mean.”

A crew-type with a network logo t-shirt stopped at our table.

“What’s up guys? I’m Scott, PA for *Life with the Lobahtums*. Lily’s two minutes out. If you’re going to stay, I need you to sign your release.”

“We’re not done here yet,” Stu said. “You can blur us.”

“Yeah,” Scott said, super apologetic, “that’s not really L-square canon.”

“But it’s reality.”

A stare down ensued. Stu won. Scott swore under his breath and stalked off.

“So what’s going on?” Stu asked.

“Just the usual,” I said. “Cash flow.”

“That’s pretty much par. You’re still driving, I assume.”

“Against my will.”

Stu leaned back in his chair, holding his margarita glass by the stem. In his white pants and open-collared palm frond print shirt, he looked like a Bogotá brothel owner fresh out of coca-laced cheroots.

“We all do shit we don’t want to do,” he said. “Wait tables, drive taxis, give handjobs at the Marmont.” He grimaced. “Practice law. The dream doesn’t come cheap. So you do what you have to. You bet on you. If you win—and believe me, you’re winning right now, Brät—your life’s above and beyond. If you lose... well, you gave it a shot. More than most.”

Outside the restaurant, three big black SUVs and a platoon of paparazzi cars and motor scooters screeched to stops, too close to my bike for me to relax. Three network cameramen burst from the first SUV and took position in front of Ocho, mere steps ahead of the paparazzi. The first two cameras focused on the second and third SUVs, while camera three rehearsed his rack focus in the restaurant’s glass.

I turned from the outside frenzy to maintain my sanity. “It doesn’t feel like I’m winning.”

“It never does. That’s lifestyle escalation. You optioned your script, got a little money, and the first thing you did was buy the motorcycle. Which was about two or three grand more than you had. So right at the gun you’re over your head—”

“I financed it.”

“You still have to pay for it.”

I glanced at my bike to assure myself no one was touching it.

“Sometimes,” Stu said, “on rare occasions, one’s problems aren’t one’s fault. But yours are. When *Uberman* is financed and you get a check for a couple hundred grand—”

“Did they get the financing?” I blurted.

Stu’s stare was hard. “This is a desperate place,” he said. “But you can’t show it.”

“I’m new in town.”

“Not anymore, Brät.”

The doors of the second and third SUVs opened in unison and out stepped Lily Lobahtum and her entourage. Cameras flashed, paparazzi shouted, traffic halted. Lily stood, sculpted from marble, her chin and gaze imperious, above it all. She was shorter and heavier than I’d expected, and more beautiful. Responding to market demands, an L.A. plastic surgeon had developed a package of tucks, injections, and implants for women who wanted to go full Lobahtum.

“You want to sign the release, Brät, or do you want to listen?”

“Sorry,” I said. “I’m nervous about my motorcycle.”

“Then I’ll make it quick.” Stu breathed yoga-like, calming. “Horde your money. Don’t be the asshole who won’t learn from his mistakes. Precede the eight ball.”

I maintained eye contact and gritted my teeth against the certainty my bike would soon crash to the pavement.

“For most of us,” Stu said, “there’s two ways to win here. Hit the jackpot and walk, or be the house.” He pointed at me with a meaningful tortilla chip. “You’ll never be the house, Brät.”

The restaurant doors flew open. Lily and the cameras and the throng invaded, spoiling the authenticity, but Stu’s stare was intense, straight at me, waiting for an acknowledgment I’d tattooed his words on my virgin soul and they would become thematic elements in everything I wrote for all my remaining days.

I matched his earnestness and raised him a solemn nod, but a paparazzi brushed past my motorcycle’s back tire in his haste to take a primo Lily Lobahtum ass shot. I jerked my attention to the bike, willing it to stay upright, dying a string of unending moments as it wavered on its kickstand. Three lives later the bike went still.

I collapsed in my chair, shaken.

“Brät, the motorcycle will be okay,” Stu said from a far off, echoing place. “Do you get what I’m saying?”

“You’re telling me to walk away?”

“Not yet, obviously. Write like hell for now. Strike hard, before they do. If you get the golden ticket, which I think you will because I’m a starry-eyed dreamer with a pet unicorn, enjoy the meteoric rise, and the instant, the fucking *instant*, the phone doesn’t ring quite as much as it used to, get out, go like you’ve never gone, ride into the sunset with your piles of money and a nice girl who’ll embrace your sins.”

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My profile—recent photos portraying me as fun and sexy and mysterious but not shady, confident yet humble self-descriptions, specific-sounding ideal mate essays eliminating exactly

zero women who categorized themselves as slim or athletic, likes, dislikes, love and sex quiz responses, star ratings, favorite movies, most-loved books, and checked boxes pegging me as tall and athletic—resides on twelve dating sites and three hot-or-not meet-up apps, including *Zamba*. I’ve A/B tested photos, quiz responses, self-descriptions, and what-I’m-looking-for. Each profile has a different primary photo—similar but not so similar as to inspire “oh, him again” by women who share my shotgun method of finding “an intimate relationship with someone special.” I may be more analytical than most, but I’m simply employing a *work smarter, not harder* methodology to a numbers game.

I turned onto Sweetzer, parked at the curb to wait for my passenger, and opened *Zamba*.

Shooting our films mid-week had freed my weekends, which enabled me to drive during URide’s most lucrative weekend time periods and resume my online dating regimen—to retain my fifth-in-the-world ranking. Truly the salad days. I was two scripts ahead on *Crimes Against Passion*, and “between scripts” in my mainstream career, which is writer-ese for sitting on my ass and hoping what I’d already written would instigate a bidding war.

“Thanks for choosing URide,” I said when my passenger climbed in. “Still heading for Santa Monica?”

“Always stick to the plan, bra,” the man said. Mid-forties, HGH over-musculature, age-inappropriate blonde fraternity hair, jeans, flip flops, and an *I am DB* graphic t-shirt. It was a DB world—adapt or die.

We continued along Sweetzer to Melrose.

I had conflicting feelings for URide. With the exceptions of funding my life via my writing or—*very* theoretically—conforming my lifestyle to whatever means writing provided, the driving gig delivered weekly cash infusions without impinging upon my writing time, porn shoots, or online dating habit. During the Friday and Saturday night dead zones between the fine dining and dance club rushes, I scheduled at least one online meet-up at Ground Zero, where I could write or pretend to write while waiting for the night’s blind date to arrive, stop uncertainly by my table, and ask—

“Brät?”

“Fauna?”

We shook hands and exchanged greetings. She was slender, pretty, and Asian, with long black hair swept to one side to reveal she was shaved and tattooed above her ear with a colorful cherry blossom, one of her many tattoos. Fauna modeled for Gothica Girls, a site featuring inked and pierced alternative girls photographed in varying stages of undress. So yes, I'd already seen Fauna naked. No, I hadn't subscribed to the GG site to do so. She'd sent me her most recent photoset "so you know what you're getting into," a delightful phrasing. I put away my laptop and motioned for her to take a seat.

"Is this where you write?" Fauna asked.

"Sometimes," I said. Troika and Euclid had tag-teamed me weeks ago to explain Queens Street was our de facto office and therefore verboten to love interests, lust objects, like likes, and undecideds. "I like to mix it up."

She grinned. "It's best to keep moving. Confuse the crazies."

I laughed, knowing what she meant, but said, "The what?"

"The girls you meet but don't like."

I rose like Godzilla from the Sea of Japan and said, my crotch at her eye level, "Let's get something."

Fauna's smile was lovely. "So I passed?"

"You passed."

"Goody goody."

We ordered, waited, small-talked, and returned to the table with matching chocolate cappuccinos. I'd expanded my caffeine repertoire. I sat at twelve o'clock, she at three.

"So you do this a lot," Fauna said. Not a question, a statement.

"I like online dating. What about you?"

"I suppose," she said. "It's fun. Even more fun when someone looks like their photo. But it reverses the normal order of meeting someone."

She sipped her drink, so I did too, synchronizing our movements. Conversational synchronicity—which may or may not be the correct term for it—happens naturally over time, but not immediately. On coffee shop dates, if I like a girl, I mimic her body language. If I don't, I do the opposite. This isn't manipulative, it's smart. It communicates subconsciously, *I get you. You get me. My penis will fit nicely in your vagina.*

“For forever,” Fauna said, “you’d see someone across a crowded bar—”

“Or a water hole.”

“Which became the bar.”

“And just like that,” I said, snapping my fingers, “we’ve summarized evolution.”

She laughed. “Exactly. And you’d get to know each other. Now you meet without meeting, talk a little, and *then* see if there’s chemistry.”

“It’s the way of the world,” I said.

“Which do you think is better?” she asked, taking another sip.

I sipped my cappuccino, too. “If you keep the messaging back and forth to a minimum, just enough to establish neither party is insane—”

“Or a serial killer,” she said.

“Or that. And you move it quickly to the real world, like we did, then I prefer this. It expands the water hole. You make the first meet quick—”

She chuckled, a bit mocking. “Right, your thirty-minute rule. How long do we have left?”

I checked my phone. “About ten minutes.”

She sipped her drink, and I sipped mine.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Thirty minutes is great if there’s no chemistry, or the other person’s photos were fifty pounds ago, but what if you like each other?”

“Then you’re both anticipating the next date.”

“Hmmm...”

“I tell you, it’s the unified theory of online dating.”

Fauna’s gears turned. “What if on minute twenty-nine a girl says to you, ‘Let’s go have sex in the parking lot.’ Don’t lie and say it’s never happened. What then?”

“There are exceptions, obviously.”

She grinned. “Obviously.”

We finished our cappuccinos.

“But you know if you’re open to sex with a man within seconds of meeting him,” I said. “So the problem isn’t my thirty-minute rule, but your theoretical woman’s self-defeating compliance with society’s expectations of her behavior.”

“That’s a mouthful,” she said. “I think you’ve practiced it.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Either way it’s true.”

She played at being serious. “So you’re saying this woman should have told the man she wanted him right away.”

I matched her mock intellectual expression. “She knew the pre-existing time limit—”

“The artificial and self-imposed limit,” she interrupted.

“So be it,” I said. “She knew and understood and tacitly agreed.”

“I guess. Maybe.”

“Maybe? If sex was what she wanted, she should have acknowledged her desires, defied society, and made her desires known.”

“That sort of assumes your participation, doesn’t it?”

“All men are sluts, right?” I asked, the first real question I’d thrown at her.

She turned her empty cup on its saucer. “You don’t mean that, Brät. You’re testing me.”

“And you passed. Yet again.”

She checked her phone. “We only have a minute left.”

“Damn,” I said. “I was going to suggest sex in the parking lot.”

“Ouch. Defeated by your own rule. Maybe a blowjob?”

“Noooooo. There’s not enough time, even with my premature ejaculation issues.”

She laughed. We stood. I grabbed my backpack.

“This went well,” Fauna said, and winked. “I’m anticipating our next date.”

“Me, too. We should try for an hour next time.”

“That’s a great idea,” she said.

“And we should start with sex.”

She hugged me, her hips against mine. “That sounds even better.”

## Code White

“Are you guys looking at the most recent site stats?” Jordan asked via teleconference.

“We are,” Euclid said, louder than necessary, unaware the fiber optics between Los Angeles and Miami were happy to handle the amplification for him. The *Crimes Against Passion* brain trust sat around our Beverly Boulevard-view “conference table” at Queens Street. Troika and I wore earbuds, while Euclid and Chad did it the old-fashioned way, phone to ear.

“You went over five thousand yesterday,” Jordan said. “This early, that’s hallowed earth.”

“It’s a goddamn phenomenon,” Chad said.

Troika motioned to Euclid, who asked, “Why isn’t our cut rising at the same rate?”

“In general, it is,” Jordan said. “But it’ll never be lockstep. We have our standard content contract, the one you signed, that all our clients are under for the first year. We offer the higher-yield sites, such as yours, better deals at the end of your rookie contract.”

“On the affiliate end, too?” Troika asked.

“Yes. And for their own content. So you’ll make less when you refer to them, and they make more when they refer to you. But for sites such as yours, that’ll even out if you go long-term on the next contract. They take more of their original content, you take more of referrals, and we take less. But it’s higher volume, so we all make moolah like mofos.”

Troika made a face.

“But you make most of your money during the first year,” I said.

“To be honest, guys, most sites don’t do shit,” Jordan said. “We’re taking the risk, we provide necessary additional content and whatever expertise the client doesn’t have, and for that Whirling Pervish takes a significant share in year one. One in a hundred sites do what you’re doing. So on our end, the failures fund the Ferraris. Like banks. Same model.”

“You drive a Ferrari?” I asked.

“Lambo. Lime green metallic. Baaaaad asssss. And an M5 when I’m meeting clients.”

“Keepin’ it classy, huh?” Euclid said.

“The ride makes the man,” Jordan said.

“I goddamn love Lamborghinis,” Chad said.

“Don’t we all,” Troika said, and laughed.

“All right guys, I gotta go,” Jordan said. “Any other questions?”

Shaking heads around the table.

“I’ll take that as a ‘no.’ Cool. Keep on fuckin’.”

All involved hung up.

“Keep on fuckin’,” Chad repeated slowly. “That’s some stone-cold survival shit.”

We laughed, and Euclid asked me, “How are the scripts?”

I began to answer, but the table went quiet. Too quiet. “What?”

Euclid and Troika stared at each other. Troika lost.

“This week’s felt a little flat,” she said. “Like we’d done it before.”

That hurt. “Every series has consistencies.”

“Absolutely,” Troika said. “We all understand that. But please hear what I’m saying. The back-and-forth sounded familiar. The sex was great.” She glanced at Euclid. “Right?”

“Definitely,” Euclid said, and nothing else, content to let Troika handle me—a smart move.

“So the most important part of what we’re making is really good,” she said. A little smile.

“Both our final product and my first-hand experience of it.”

I tried, but it was impossible not to return her smile. Would a day come she didn’t own me?

“But there’s already gonzo porn with good sex,” she said. “A lot of guys do the POV stuff because they like sex, and think they’re amazing at it, and a few of them are right.”

“The sex is what I get paid *with*, not *for*,” I said.

“Exactly,” she said. “So we need you to focus on what you’re writing. Don’t mail it in—”

“I’m not mailing it in.”

“You’re not putting yourself into it anymore,” Chad said. “I’m right there, man. Three feet away. I can smell it.” Troika grinned and I opened my mouth to speak, but Chad’s expression stopped any attempts at interruption. “The first ten or so episodes were goddamn hot. I wanted to jump into the middle of them. But it’s been a little stale lately. You gotta listen to what we’re sayin’, man, if you want it to be great. Do you?”

A convertible flashed past, the wind blowing the driver’s comb-over all to hell. Did I want it to be great? Yes, but—but what? Were I to subject myself to soul-scouring honesty, I would have

concluded sex had been my life's work since the day Vajra first reared his all-knowing head. I might have interpreted a few of my habits as self-destructive. I would have admitted my recent porn scripts were half-assed efforts.

But I was a few years from self-reflection that didn't self-serve.

"Of course I do," I said.

"Then what's up?" Chad asked. "You're livin' the dream."

"I'm not sure it's my dream."

"Sorry man, I'm not gettin' you," Chad said, leaning forward. "My best friends since I was a little kid aren't talkin' to me because we blood oathed we'd make it together no matter what, that I'd sing and they'd play, and that fell apart within a month of signin' our first record contract, because we didn't read the fine print and, you know, grasp the record company's intentions to ditch everyone but me. So I'm goin' through some real 'piece of shit' feelings here, and you're writin' and directin' films and bitchin' it's the wrong genre?"

"I—"

"No," he said, pointing at me. "You listen. Art's a constant balance between feedin' your ego and killin' it. Your ego's feastin' on pussy, but you're droppin' the goddamn pen. We all have problems, and we all think we have the biggest problems because we're obsessive animals whose brains got too big, but man, get some perspective. Your life is incredible. Porn girls? Are you nuts? I'm losin' my friends, dudes I rode skateboards with and got my ass kicked with because we were in drama, over something I knew was comin' and could have said 'no' to but didn't because I wanted it so goddamn much. And I'm gutted, man. Gutted." Chad's eyes welled, and so did mine. "So grow up."

Troika took Chad's hand. He sniffed hard and blinked back tears. He stood abruptly, walked out of Queens Street, bolted down the sidewalk. His primal scream carried through the windows.

\* \* \*

"Cash only," the albino counter dude said when I walked into Sekkusu, Los Angeles' most popular Japanese sex shop. I was on a pre-date mission for the night's accoutrements, items Fauna deemed necessary for what she termed an "initial experience."

“I’m looking for”—I checked the message again—“Sukahashi condoms?”

Albino disengaged from his tentacle porn comic long enough to say, “Third aisle. In the condom section. Obviously.” He had the heaviest, blackest septum piercing I’d ever seen.

“Right,” I said, and headed for the back.

“Hey,” he yelled. “Sukahashi comes in three sizes. Heikin, American, and Koku. Heikin’s ‘average’ and koku is ‘black’ in Japanese. So, unless you’re hung like a mouse or you strap it to your leg to run, get the one with the American flag. Red box, white lettering, Japanese script. Looks like this”—he pointed to his porn comic’s title—“and the flag’s in the bottom right corner.”

I found the box and returned to the counter.

“Is this the right one?”

“Yeah.”

“How do you know they call it American if it’s in Japanese?”

He tapped his comic. “I can read Japanese.”

“Of course,” I said, and smiled. I checked the list on my phone. “Do you have nuru gel?”

“You opening a massage place?”

“No.”

“Gigolo?”

“No.”

“Submissive? Dominant?”

“No, and not professionally.”

“Then what’s with all the Japanese stuff?”

“This is a Japanese sex shop,” I said. “So if I’m here, I must want Japanese things.”

He peered at me. “I think what you mean is if you’re here and want Japanese sex toys, then it follows that this shop carries Japanese sex toys.”

“You’re familiar with the anthropic principle.”

“Obviously. Do I look like an idiot?”

“No, but the nose ring doesn’t scream *academia*.”

He laughed. “All right. Fuck off, but I’ll give you that. Still, you’re not Japanese, and here you are.”

“Neither are you, and so are you.”

“I lived in Tokyo for a year, and Kyoto for two,” he said. “I’m a student of the culture. You don’t strike me as one.”

“A girlfriend sent me the list. She’s allergic to latex.”

“Your girlfriend is Japanese?”

“It’s a second date, but yes, she’s Japanese.”

“Hmmm.”

“Why ‘hmmm?’”

“Sending you condom specs before your second date. Is she an escort?”

I frowned. “No.”

“She must be Americanized,” he said to himself. “That makes more sense.”

“Wh—?”

“First generations are more traditional, demure.” He tapped the condom box. “You ever worn these before?”

“No.”

“Then here’s free advice. Don’t fuck her too hard.”

“Why not?”

“Thinnest condoms ever made. Point zero-one microns. It’s like you’re wearing nothing, and you won’t know if it breaks. So check a lot. And I’d pull out if I were you. You know, unless you’re an asshole.”

We shared a long stare.

“You own this place?” I asked him.

“Obviously,” he said. “You think I’d hire someone who talks like I do to customers?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. You’ve transformed a simple purchase into a rite of passage.”

He laughed and produced a container from beneath the counter. It read *Nuru Gel*.

“Again, fuck off,” he said, and put the condoms and gel into a brown paper grocery bag.

“Thirty-eight dollars. Cash only.”

“Wercomm to Fauna massage,” Fauna said, speaking with an Asian-ish accent—over-the-top, offensively stereotypical, and sexy as hell. A thin silk kimono failed to conceal her slender magnificence, and she’d secured her long black hair in a bun with dark green chopsticks. She wore her makeup lighter than when we’d first met—geisha-adjacent. “You come for sixty minute?” she asked.

Behind Fauna candles burned, reaching for me with fingers of lavender and pumpkin.

“You avairabre for sixty minute?” she said.

I blinked, understanding my role. “Yes. Is there somewhere I can put my bag?”

She smiled, bowed. “I take. Prease sir, come in.”

I handed Fauna the Sekkusu shopping bag and followed her into the apartment. She walked with tiny steps, conforming to every preconception I had regarding Asian women, mocking me a bit by nailing my expectations, but I didn’t care.

A large plastic sheet covered her living room floor, secured to the baseboards with painter’s tape. An expensive-looking black PVC mattress waited in the room’s center, its surface shining like an ink reflecting pool. I waited next to the mattress. She poured the nuru gel into a glass bowl inside a larger water-filled glass bowl next to the mattress, unboxed the condoms, tore open three of them, and placed them behind the glass bowl.

She pivoted on the balls of her feet. The plastic crackled, candlelight flashed off the chopsticks. “Prease now,” she said. “I now undress you.”

Fauna began with my shirt. She knelt to untie my shoes, slip them off, set them aside. She undid my pants, off they went. She sank to her knees and discarded my socks, before straightening to bring her head to underwear-level. She tugged down my underwear, her fingertips gliding along my thighs. I stood naked. She paused, eyes on Vajra, said nothing, and rose. She undid the kimono’s belt, shrugged one shoulder and the other, and it slid to her ankles.

Depending on the man, seeing a woman naked after you’ve already perused a collection of her nude photos can be underwhelming. Photo angles are chosen to flatter. Lighting is controlled. A photo’s moment is made eternal, the pose held indefinitely, capturing her joy or anger or smolder in the light between irises, making it infinite, creating in the appreciator’s mind an impression the moment *is* her. He senses something between himself and the photographed “her”—desire, understanding, the stuff of delusion—and wants that. But a woman is a

continuum, so a man's disappointment in her reality is a reflection of the man. When her reality doesn't conform to his delusion, he glimpses himself for what he is, and experiences disappointment, but misinterprets it as *her* shortfall. So it's best to see a woman naked for the first time in the flesh, ha ha. Same goes for dick pics. Don't send them. Your unit will never actualize your painstakingly angled comic book foreshortening technique.

Fortunately, I'd spent no time staring into Fauna's soulful, inviting gaze or studying her every curve in the photos she'd sent me. I'd appreciated her slim, exquisite body, spent next to no time following from one photograph to the next the dragons and flames wrapping around her torso and legs, and deleted the files from my phone, wary of my phone's security and confident Fauna and I would soon spend some naked time together.

Fauna stepped to the side, head lowered, and raised her eyes to meet mine.

"You rike?"

I swallowed, concluded there was nothing dashing I could say, and nodded.

"Prease rie on stomach," she said, gesturing to the shiny black mattress.

I did as I was told, resting my head on the cylindrical embroidered pillow. I adjusted myself, trying to find a comfortable position for my erection. The plastic sheeting crinkled beneath her feet as she circuited the mattress. She moved the glass bowl a few inches and knelt beside me.

She dipped her hand into the bowl and said, "This might be a ritter cord," her feigned accent adding to the authenticity.

Fauna poured the nuru gel along my spine, deliciously warm. She straddled me and stroked my back, my hips, my thighs and calves. The warm gel oozed around my torso, between my legs, over my balls. Slippery, warm, wet, amazing. She shifted her hips until her thighs pressed on my calves and her feet bracketed mine. She glided her hands up my thighs, over my ass, and along my back, spreading her body along my length. The sensation was intense, the smoothness of her thighs and torso contrasting with the tickle of her nipples on my middle back, and the soft scratch of her mons against my ass.

Candles flickered, shadows watched, lavender and pumpkin wafted through the room.

Soon her hands were between my legs, beneath me, searching for me, finding my balls, my cock, kneading me, stroking me while she glided her body along mine. I groaned. If more people

knew about this, nothing would get done. We wouldn't have television or airplanes or kale salads. Wait, what the fuck is quinoa? How do you find time to shop for anything but nuru gel?

“Prease tun ovah.”

I did so. Vajra bobbed in respectful greeting. Fauna glistened. Her eyes burned, taking in my body. I liked the way she looked at me. She knelt between my legs, ran her fingers along Vajra's length.

“Angry boy,” she said, and played at a pout.

“Not at all,” I said. “That's his happy face.”

“You rike way feer?” She stroked me, softly, knowing me.

“It feer”—we exchanged grins—“feels great. Incredible. I don't have the words.”

“I thought you writuh.”

“Apparently I'm not a very good one.”

“Maybe you ah, maybe you not.” She scratched my balls with her nails. It felt incredible. “You write in Engrish? Or Japanese?”

“English. I don't speak Japanese.”

She pouted. “You want rearn? I teach you.” She stroked me and lowered her head.

“I should probably stick to what I know.”

“Too bad. But okay Engrish. There more to rife than write.”

“Let's hope so.”

“I show you.” She gripped my balls with one hand, pulled Vajra's head back to her, and took me in her mouth. Her lips glided along my shaft while she sucked me. I was marble hard. She slid her pussy across my knee, back and forth, moaning while she sucked, massaging my balls, pinching my sac, everything feeling exotic and new because of the gel. Fauna let me slip from her mouth and eased her way up my body, whispering all sorts of things which sounded Japanese but I didn't know the language and didn't care what she said so long as she continued softly scrubbing her pussy over my cock and balls. Vajra's head swelled, relaxed, swelled, relaxed. She slid down my body until her small breasts enveloped my cock, smiled just a bit because she knew how enslaved to her I was, and fucked me a bit with her breasts. My lips parted and something animal escaped. Definitely not Engrish.

“Mmmmm,” she teased, “you rike.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You want me fuck you?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You haf terr.”

“What?”

“You haf terr.”

*You haf terr?* Translate. *You have tell.* I have to tell her. Did I speak Japanese now?

“I want you to fuck me,” I said.

“Mmmm...” She winked at me. “You mas *rike* me. You rike me?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” Fauna said, stopping abruptly. “I get.”

She grabbed a condom from the bowl, slipped it from the pre-torn pack, and put it in her mouth. She rolled it over my cock with her lips and tongue, swung her legs over mine, found my balls with one hand, and worked herself onto my cock. Her cunt was feverish, so tight.

“You hord stirr,” she said, her eyes glazed with lust.

I didn’t move, and soon she contracted around my cock, gripping, releasing, milking me. Was I supposed to reciprocate? Did I need to? I lifted my hips, she pressed on my chest to stop me.

“I do,” she said within a moan.

She squeezed, relaxed, again and again in a rhythm as old as our species, more ancient than instant ramen and karaoke. When the first stirrings of impending orgasm rose, Fauna squeezed less, relaxed longer, until the sensations passed, and in my few and far between lucid moments I guessed she was gauging my orgasmic state with a function equation such as:

$$O = f(\rho_B, \Delta E, \text{gpm})$$

Wherein O is my time to orgasm, which is a function of (depends upon), the relative density of my balls, the change in my erection, and my groans per minute.

This went on forever. I was delirious, owned, wanting to cum, not wanting it to end. She slipped her hand between her legs, bringing herself to the brink but not quite, through the fall of

western civilization and humanity's colonization of Mars. Sometime during the commercialization of organic teleportation, Fauna decided it was time for us both to spontaneously explode, and when I reached code white she kept the rhythm. Her climax began before mine, a series of vise-like contractions that—what was going on?—*stopped* my orgasm. She came and came, before relaxing, smiling, exhausted, devilish.

“Baby wanna cum?”

I moaned.

“Thought so.”

She lifted her hips until Vajra flopped onto my lower abdomen like a felled tree. She slid along my body, slippery, every bit of her sliding over Vajra. In one stroke she flipped off the condom. One hand went to my balls, the other worked me with a slow, twisting motion. She leaned forward, slid my dick against her face, rubbing herself on my shaft, her mouth open, wanting. My orgasm surged. Had Vesuvius felt like this before it obliterated Pompeii, not giving a damn about the impending disaster because loosing so much lava was going to feel so good? She squeezed my balls so hard it should have been painful, kept her maddening rhythm, laughed when I shot two feet into the air, falling like burning salty rain, into her hair, onto her back and legs, over my stomach and chest, into my eye. Again, not so high, flowing over my cockhead onto her hand. She lapped at it, licking me all over, rubbing me on her face, her body sliding along mine, over the gel and cum, moaning, giggling, purring.

Whispering, “You rike?”

“Yeah.”

“Goood.” She straightened abruptly. “Sixty minute up. You reave now.”