

1

Her rust-red loose top for *Heavenward*, to go with her skinny jeans and black arm warmers. Pimpalicious, Adin says. Like the wee fox you are, says Ronaldo. Artful, Jonathan says, artful suits you. Her long sharp nails are painted black for *Heavenward*, but the nail polish needs to be gone by Monday. Don't draw attention to your claws.

They're sat at the bar tonight, her, Adin and Jonathan, with Peter behind the counter. Ronaldo's up on stage in his glitzy jacket, lip-synching a song Sylvia's never heard before. He's shimmying, holding his arms out wide, his face turned towards the spotlights. The dance floor between him and the bar is empty, now the drag show has begun. It'll fill up again later. People at the tables either side schmooze and booze while onstage Ronaldo raises a hand.

"He's not even trying," Adin says. Presumably he means Ronaldo's stubble, and the fact that he's not wearing a corset under his gown. The outline of his belly is clearly visible. Peter nods, drawing another

pint. Sylvia can't tell if he agrees or if he's just nodding for the sake of it, if he's even paying attention. Peter's lost in thought, mixing cocktails as if he's half asleep and getting them mixed up every now and then. Sylvia couldn't say why Ronaldo should try harder. The main thing is to be surrounded by tall women, as far as she's concerned. They're even taller in high heels.

Then there's Jonathan with his perfect little ears. It always takes him a moment to arrive, sitting on his barstool, gauging the atmosphere. Gauging Adin. He wants something from Adin. She can tell because his hand lying on the bar is on its way to Adin, like it's reaching out. The song's over, the drag show's over.

Adin grins and disappears between all the men and tall women heading back to the dance-floor or over to the bar. Maybe he's off to the dressing room to strap on his wings. They look so good on him.

"Dance, dance, dance!" Sylvia shouts, jumping up and down.

Jonathan watches her and smiles.

"Don't you get out enough during the week?"

"Hey," says Ronaldo, who's finally managed to work his way through the crowd to reach them, and gives Jonathan a hug. He's wearing those stick-on false eyelashes this evening. Sylvia loves them. So long, so very long. Ronaldo is interested in Jonathan. She can tell by the way he hugs him. Hears it in his voice. It's warmer. "You need to eat more, kid."

Ronaldo hugs her too, and she leans against his chest, fingers his hips. He's softer there, meatier. If she could, she'd pinch the folds of flesh with her fingertips, she loves touching them. But she can't because he's too embarrassed.

"I'll do your makeup, kid, if you'll do mine."

Jonathan laughs: »Not everyone's got what it takes to be a Queen."

»But nearly everyone looks gorgeous in makeup«, Ronaldo replies.

Sylvia thinks he's right. She likes Antonio best, he never does drag but he's a Queen all the same, everyone thinks so. He's a baldy man in jeans and a T-shirt who just paints his eyes, but he really goes to town on them. And he has a streak of colour right across his face like a blaze of fur or feather markings, which glistens dangerously. Sylvia

wants to rough him up, but that's all. Just rough him up. Sylvia wants to bite off Jonathan's ear. And more.

From the first time she met him, he smelled like prey. She'd followed him and prowled around him on the street outside *Heavenward*, while he smoked a cigarette with Ronaldo and talked about work. Jonathan had spun round and cocked his head as he looked at her, unsure what she was after. He'd offered her a cigarette.

"A cigarette? What do I have to do for it?"

A gift of tobacco. You're offering me a deal, Sylvia had thought at the time.

"What do you mean, what do you have to do for it? You don't have to do anything. Why are you traipsing around me?"

"You can keep it then."

Even if Jonathan wasn't familiar with the rules – it was never good to be under any kind of obligation, no matter how vague.

"It's because you're a great dancer."

"When did you ever see me dance?"

She hadn't, of course, but he never chased her away after that and Ronaldo had been a fan from the start. He called her his wee Mephistopheles until he saw her trying on one of Adin's costumes in the dressing room. As she'd pulled the tight, blue, sparkling top over her head, she'd snagged her arm warmers which slid up her arms. He'd understood pretty quickly what she really was.

"Don't worry," Ronaldo had said. "No one in this place will ever notice," and he'd pulled out his phone to show her some arm warmers she could buy, which would be a tighter fit to hide the bare bits better, and how to make them stay put.

"Just ask - I can tell you everything you need to know," he said.

"When I'm in drag there's always something slipping somewhere that needs to be fixed."

Now Jonathan starts tapping his foot on the floor. He always takes his time to get going. The time it takes to drink a cocktail, and then he's fine. All these juicy birds. She's in the middle of a hen house. Peter sees the way she's looking and passes the peanuts.

"Better get me a toasted ham and cheese sandwich," she says. So she doesn't bite off someone's ear, oops. Later on she jumps with Jonathan. A bit of rough and tumble. On days like this she gets restless if she sits still for too long. Jonathan is looking across at Adin who's dancing in his blue wings; the straps Adin uses to fasten them to his shoulders are sparkling with rhinestones.

2

Jonathan hasn't answered the phone and he doesn't open the door when she rings the bell either, but she wants to go for a walk, she's feeling itchy, feeling driven. She wants to run, run, run, get out of this squeeze, but he still doesn't open the door. So she opens it with the flat-share's spare key she stole from him once. He probably knows, but he's never mentioned it. He seldom says anything when she steals things. Sometimes he just fetches them back again. He's let her keep the flat-share's spare key. Maybe because it doesn't belong to just him, maybe it belongs to them all or to none of them.

She bounds up the stairs, and unlocks the door of the flat as well.

The others either aren't there yet, or not any more.

"Jonathan, let's go!"

He's asleep on the sofa in the living room, fully dressed, lying on his stomach with one arm under his head and the other one limp by his side.

"Jonathan!"

She lies down on top of him. He flinches, and then relaxes again.

"Uh huh," he says.

His back is so warm. A new scent. She crouches down close and rests her chin on his neck, breathing in through her nose. Yes, she's certain; Jonathan has started to smell different. In fact he smells a bit like chicken at times.

As if she doesn't want to gobble him up as it is. She strokes him and his back feels hot between his shoulder blades, and bumpy. She runs her hand over his skin. It's as if something is seething and stirring beneath. He flinches as she presses it.

"Come on, wake up!"

She pulls down his T-shirt, licks the back of his neck and he flinches again, tries to free his arm, turns over onto his back. She shifts her weight, propping herself up on the sofa so as not to slip off as he turns under her. Then she drops back down on top of him- "Oomph," he says. "What are you doing here?"

His eyes are small and swollen. He hardly looks at her.

"Picking you up – we're going for a walk."

"You're going. I'm too tired."

"Rubbish," she says. "It's not even dark yet. Humans are day creatures."

She props herself up on his shoulder with one hand while she scratches his arm with the other. She can tell which touches he likes, which ones are allowed. But she does things that aren't allowed too – lowering her head and taking his nose between her teeth.

"Stop it," he snorts.

She doesn't. He tries to push her off, and in doing so he heaves himself up. She shies away. Then he's sitting at last, his head still heavy.

"Stay where you are."

She fetches his shoes, kneels in front of him, lifts his feet and puts them on, ties his laces, stands up again, takes his hand. He lets her pull him up after all.

She drags him to the door and out, pulls him down the stairs.

Downstairs he blinks in the setting sun and walks beside her without needing to be dragged anymore. Just a bit slower than normal.

"Why are you so tired?" she asks.

He shrugs.

"Work. Why do you want to go for a walk so much?"

Sylvia thinks about what her colleagues tell her, all the gossip. What the cuts are going to mean for her. She likes her job. Watching pedestrians, picking easy prey, catching them, cajoling them. There's always a trick that works. Or door to door. Some people are vulnerable when you meet them in their den. Still in their dressing gowns or with their trousers undone. They hang up their prickles on their coat stands and feel uncomfortable putting them back on in front of you. Some of them fight tooth and nail even. The best doors

to knock on are the ones with that blessing from the Three Kings chalked above the door, as far as Sylvia is concerned.

She still misses the Prater funfair at times. Shouting to pull people in, taking their money, tearing off the tickets. Would they take her back? She should ask. All the workers there liked her. Especially if she flashed her teeth when she grinned. They used to put her on the ghost train. Perhaps they would have appreciated what was hidden beneath her arm warmers, like Jonathan and Ronaldo.

She shrugs again.

»Work«, she says.

Run, run, run. She feels driven on days like this.

They walk down Berggasse, across the junction and into the avenue, then past the Faculty of Mathematics and down the stone steps to the Donaukanal. This is where they all live: the mice, squirrels, beavers and weasels. Forget your hunting instincts.

"Things keep getting worse all the time at work." Jonathan says.

"Every day when I've finished my shift, all I want to do is sleep. They came and took some more of them away today. They're being

transferred to a larger refugee centre. We, well, the others, I mean, have stopped fighting for everybody except for a few of them with big medical issues and even then ... one guy with a psychosis was deported, I think ... I don't know where he's ended up. No idea. It's not my realm, anymore. I'm not even working for the centre properly, am I? All I've basically been doing for months is collecting clothing donations and sorting them. No, that's not totally true. But that's how it feels sometimes."

He rubs his eyes.

"I think they'll probably close it down soon. Then I'll take the clothes someplace else. I suppose."

They carry on walking, along the concrete with dusk on their tail. Listen. She can hardly smell the Donaukanal in this skin. But this isn't the kind of territory that gets any safer if you patrol it. It's just an old habit. Jonathan grows silent. They climb the steps at the Urania Observatory, follow the Ring and then make their way through the small winding alleys towards Karlsplatz.

"This isn't the way home."

"We could go straight to *Heavenward* if you like."

"It's far too early."

But they can circle *Heavenward* until it gets dark. And so they wander through the narrow streets off the Wienzeile road until the doors open and they are allowed inside. *Heavenward* feels vast and naked this empty. But Peter is already there, tidying up behind the bar. He opens the till and counts the money, his lips moving as he does so. It takes him a while to remember to offer them a drink.

"No red top today, Sylvia?" he asks because he's only starting to notice her properly now; she shrugs. It's not as if it's a rule. Just a familiar covering she enjoys slipping into, which she otherwise rarely dares to wear.

Next to arrive, are the drag show performers. They climb up onto the stage still in their ordinary clothes. They check sound and lighting, confer. Ronaldo who soon joins them, gives Jonathan and Sylvia a quick wave and then stares up at the one spot that hasn't come on. His hair is short without his wig; he's got his hands in his pockets.

"Test 1, 2, 3. Test 1, 2, 3." They aren't happy with the sound yet.

"There's too much reverb!" Peter shouts from the bar.

The Queens disappear into the dressing room to get changed and Sylvia follows them. When the dressing room is full and buzzing, it's probably one of her favourite places.

Later on: dance, dance, dance. Jonathan suddenly turns away and walks back to the bar, his shoulders drooping forward. Heavy. It looks as if he wants to cry. But Antonio grabs Sylvia and lifts her up onto his and Adin's shoulders. Sylvia is so light; people here love to carry her.

Sylvia mistakes him for a woman at first because of his face and his slim hands, but Ronaldo introduces Feo as a male friend. And people get mixed up here all the time. He sits on one of the bar stools, leaning back, his elbows resting on the bar behind him. Jonathan has talked to him before. Baggy trousers and a sleeveless shirt, so he's not one of the Queens then. Or he's in his day clothes. Sylvia's been watching the two of them. Jonathan's body leaning forward while he follows Feo's gestures with his eyes.

"And this is Sylvia," Ronaldo says next, "who has managed to grab the most amoral job any NGO has to offer."

Feo tilts his head, strokes his mouth. His eyes are only half open but he's watching her almost too closely, she thinks.

"Why, are you a tin rattler?"

"Err... yes," says Sylvia.

"Really?" Feo asks. "I was only joking."

"Really." Says Sylvia.

He nods. "I'm sorry. I'm sure you get enough stick at work already."

He turns to Ronald. "It's not like she's collecting protection money."

"Uh huh, although she'd probably be great." Ronaldo answers. "We should remember that - the way things are going, we'll be ranked as a terrorist organisation before we know it."

"Uh huh? How come?" Feo asks.

"Not really. But we are worrying about the court case on our plate because of Sea Guard. Don't you hear about any of this stuff over there?"

Feo pauses before he answers, and frowns.

"Europa seems very far away when I'm not here," he says.

Then they change the subject. But it's back to Brazil again, because Ronaldo was born there, Feo works there and Feo's mother comes from there. And Jonathan listens, nods, asks question then nods again. He's still leaning forwards gently, as if he wants to tumble into Feo. And Feo talks slowly, calmly, using his hands, his elbows resting on the bar behind him. The others fall silent as he speaks. About trans people being murdered in Belém or a dam in the forest and the damage it's causing. "They should never have been allowed to build it, by rights, but you know how things are."

Even Peter is tuned into Feo, listening when he's not busy pouring drinks or putting glasses into the dishwasher. He touches Feo's arm then, almost tentatively. Asks if he'd like another drink. Feo turns to Peter and gives him a wide open laugh, revealing all his teeth. He orders a beer and Peter smiles and straightens up. As if he's been waiting for that laugh. As if it means something.

Jonathan stays standing beside Feo until Sylvia returns to the dance floor, until she finds Antonio because he's such a great dancer. The

Himmelwärts – Elisabeth Klar
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next morning she looks up Brazil on the world map. She doesn't understand why Jonathan would want be there.

A few months later, Jonathan is gone. Just an internship at GlobalCare in Rio at first, but then he writes to say he's going to stay.