

Mick sipped his IPA, swirled it around in his mouth, then swallowed it with a grimace of disgust.

“*Ugh*,” he grumbled, setting his pint glass down on the coaster in front of him. “Too hoppy.”

“Mine’s alright,” said Douglas, the otter sitting across the table. He gestured with his glass of far darker beer before taking a sip and getting brown foam on his mustache.

“Course it’s alright, all dark beer tastes the same,” Mick said as he rolled his eyes and sat back in his creaking chair. “Like coffee grounds and oatmeal.”

“And IPAs taste like bleached asshole,” Douglas said, pointing to the yellow lab. “And *you’re* the one that keeps going back to it, so what does that shit say about you?”

“Only the *bad ones* taste like bleached asshole. It’s why you gotta try all different kinds, bro.” Mick picked up his glass and stared into the pale, bubbling liquid before setting it back on the coaster and pushing it aside. “I haven’t had a good beer in this whole fucking state, so far.”

“Maybe it’s something with the air,” Douglas said, waving his hand vaguely above his drink. “All the salt from the ocean and shit. When’ve you ever heard of a good beer coming out of *Florida*, anyway?”

“Mine tastes okay,” said Michelle, Mick’s collie girlfriend who sat on his right and sipped a pink cocktail out of a tall glass. It came with a paper umbrella that she’d tucked just above her ear.

“That’s liquor, though,” Mick explained. “Atmosphere wouldn’t bother it.” He paused, then picked up her glass and sniffed her drink before taking a slight sip and smacking his lips. “Is there even alcohol in that? It’s like pure grenadine.”

“It’s tropical!” Michelle said defensively, taking her drink back and sipping it again through the stirrer. “I’ve never been south of D.C. before, I wanted something beachy.”

“Beer is beachy!” Mick said, throwing his hands up. “Corona on the beach is better than *sex!*” He smirked to himself and glanced at Douglas, who nodded in amusement and raised his glass to agree.

“I don’t like Corona,” Michelle said, frowning.

“You’re crazy,” Mick snorted. “I’ll get you one tomorrow with the lime and the salt and everything. you’ll love it.”

“I think you guys are full of shit,” piped in Lydia, the Douglas’ girlfriend. The lynx narrowed her eyes and Mick and sipped from her glass of amber liquid. “My cider tastes fine. Tasted fine last night, too.”

“That’s because it’s cider, babe,” Douglas said, smoothly. “It’s got more preservatives.”

“Plus, cider is like ‘baby beer,’” Mick smirked. “I’d give my *niece* cider.”

“Why the fuck are you being snobs about it?” Lydia frowned. “Just shut up and get drunk, alright? Jesus.”

“What crawled up your ass and died?” Mick said, raising an eyebrow.

“Chill out, Micky,” Douglas said calmly as he mediated between the two of them. “Lydia’s still wiped out from the drive. I am, too.”

“Yeah, fucking hell,” Mick sighed as he leaned back in his seat. “We should’ve just flown, yknow?”

“I liked the drive, actually,” Michelle said, wagging her tail slightly. “It was neat seeing all the marshes and driving by the ocean.”

“And the shitty gas stations and road-side tourist traps,” Mick rolled his eyes.

“Some of that shit is fun, though,” Douglas said. He turned to Lydia with a smirk and said, “Remember that big-ass fiberglass cowboy we saw? Right when we crossed over through Georgia?”

“Near all the porn and liquor stores?” Lydia chuckled. “When the fuck has there *ever* been a cowboy in *Florida*?”

“Need a feller ta round up all them gaters,” Douglas said in an exaggerated accent.

“Shut up,” Lydia giggled again and shoved him playfully before drinking more of her cider.

“Oh, Micky? That reminds me,” Michelle said as she turned to her boyfriend. “Do you wanna go to Disney World while we’re down here?”

“What about cowboys reminded you of *Disney World*?” Mick asked, perplexed.

“N-no, not the cowboys. When Douglas called you ‘Micky.’” She hesitated, then shook her head and got back on topic. “But what do you think? I’ve never been and I’ve *always* wanted to go.”

Mick scratched behind his ears and grimaced as he thought.

“Eeeehhhhh, I don’t know,” he said with a shrug. “I don’t know about all that little kid shit.”

“It’s not *just* kid stuff,” Lydia said. “Besides, even if it is, it’s fucking Disney World. Be a kid for a day.” She glanced at Douglas for support, but he shrugged hesitantly and drank his beer in silence.

“I’m over that stuff,” Mick said, waving his hand dismissively. “The Army beats that outta you. That’s the first thing they do.” He clenched his fists and flexed his considerable biceps, revealing the edge of a tattoo just beneath his fur. “Makes a *man* outta you,” he growled to Douglas, who smiled back and nodded.

“Hell yeah they do,” Douglas agreed, lifting his glass. Lydia rolled her eyes.

“What about Cape Canaveral?” Lydia asked. “Kennedy Space Center? That’s only like a two hour drive away, and that’s not ‘little kid shit.’”

“I’d be into that,” Douglas nodded. Mick hesitantly bobbed his head side-to-side.

“It’d be *cool*, but isn’t it like 30 bucks to get in? Plus we drove all the way here, I don’t wanna just get *back* in the car to go somewhere else.”

“Military discount?” Lydia said, raising an eyebrow. “Hell, they might let you guys in for free.”

“I just wanna get on the beach, alright?” Mick sighed, sitting forward in his chair. “I get antsy if I’m away from the water for too long.”

“We can swim tonight, if you want,” Michelle offered. “We’re in walking distance and it’s not like it closes after dark.” Mick glanced slyly at his girlfriend and reached around her shoulders to pull her closer.

“That’s not the only thing I wanna do with you in the dark,” Mick muttered. Michelle squirmed in her seat and giggled quietly.

“We can ask Artie what there is to do around here,” Douglas offered, quietly annoyed by the sudden and awkward PDA.

“*Oh!* Right! You have that friend that lives down here,” Lydia said, snapping her fingers. “Is he coming by tonight?”

“*She*,” Douglas and Mick both corrected her simultaneously. Michelle and Lydia both blinked in surprise.

“Wait, *she*?” Lydia asked first. “I thought you guys didn’t have any female friends.”

“I mean, does she really count?” Mick asked Douglas.

“Barely.”

“She was in the Army with you, right?” Michelle asked.

“*Mm-hmm*,” Mick nodded while trying to choke down his beer. He paused, then glanced at Michelle and asked, “Wait, you thought Artie was a guy?”

“You barely talked about her before this trip,” Lydia said. “And her name’s *Artie*.”

“Short for Articia,” Douglas added.

“Don’t call her that, though,” Mick added with an amused grin. “She’ll break your finger off.”

Douglas and Mick laughed while Lydia and Michelle glanced hesitantly at one another.

“I like that name,” Michelle said, quietly.

“Why haven’t we met her yet, then?” Lydia asked, quietly suspecting that Artie was some kind of secret between Douglas and Mick.

“She kinda dropped off the radar once our contracts were up,” said Douglas. “We only reconnected on Facebook through a group our squadron put together.”

“Oh yeah, speaking of that,” Mick said, leaning across the table toward Douglas. “Did you know that Harvey lives in *Japan* now? Works as a translator for some kinda banking firm.”

“Damn,” Douglas whistled. “Sounds like good money.”

“So what’s Artie like?” Lydia asked, steering the conversation back on track. “All you said was that she was coming by tonight.” Instead of an answer, Mick laughed and shook his head as he leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head.

“Shit...fucking Artie, man,” he chuckled.

“Artie’s awesome,” Douglas said. “Kind of a badass, though.”

“*Kind of?*” Mick snorted. “Artie is the hardest bitch I’ve ever met. Takes absolutely *zero* bullshit. Tough as fucking nails.”

“Wow,” Michelle said, swallowing. “She sounds pretty...cool...”

“She could’ve gone in for Ranger training,” Douglas said. “She was good enough, but we weren’t able to convince her.”

“Saved my ass more than once,” Mick nodded, solemnly. He raised his arm and pointed a finger straight ahead while pinching one eye closed. “*Crack* shot, too. She can put a hole in fish as it jumped out of the water. Straight up *apex predator*, man.”

“Sounds like...something,” Lydia nodded skeptically as she drank.

“Hell yeah she is,” Mick nodded. “Totally disappeared for a few years, though. I figured she was living in a shack somewhere off the grid or something like that. Artie would totally do that.”

“Here, I think I have a picture,” Douglas said as he pulled out his phone and began thumbing through his photos.

“Where’s she from?” Lydia asked.

“Alaska, I think,” Mick said, sipping more of his beer. Despite his earlier protests, his glass was half-empty. “Only ‘cause she’d mention Anchorage a few times. She didn’t talk a lot about herself. Didn’t talk all that much *period*, actually. Silent badass, yknow?”

“Here,” Douglas said as he turned his phone on its side and passed it to Lydia. She cupped a hand over the phone to block the glare from the overhead light and squinted at the picture of five people standing on the deck of an aircraft carrier, each wearing identical fatigues and carrying similar guns.

She recognized a younger Douglas without his mustache standing at the end with a slightly uncomfortable, tight-lipped smile on his brown face. Mick stood on the opposite end of the group, half his face hidden by a pair of mirrored sunglasses, and with a wide, open-mouthed grin that seemed oddly charming. Between them were two other soldiers she’d seen in some of Douglas’ other photos, but couldn’t recall their names. In the middle, towering a foot and a half taller than even the lanky otter, was a bulky, muscular leopard seal that even barely looked female.

“That’s her?” Lydia asked she pointed to the seal. She was the only one in the picture not smiling and had a hard look in her eyes. She held her rifle in both hands, customized with tactical attachments Lydia had only seen in movies. Her face was sharp with high cheekbones and the tips of her pointed teeth visible just below her top lip. Her thick, gray skin, built for cold weather, was dotted with dark spots that ran down the length of her thick tail, which looked powerful enough to crush cars underneath it.

“Wow,” Lydia said as she passed the phone across the table to the curious Michelle. “She *does* kinda look like a badass...”

“Let’s see...uh...” Mick said to himself as he scratched his chin while his girlfriend stared with a frown at the cell phone in her hands. “She was a *huge* gym rat. Artie could bench like a linebacker and could break somebody’s arm in five places if she wanted to. One time, in Kuwait, she *did*.”

“Motherfucker had it coming,” Douglas nodded.

“She seems... kind of scary,” Michelle said quietly as she handed the phone back to Douglas.

“Yeah, that’s ‘cause she *is*,” Mick chuckled.

“Only when she was on duty,” Douglas said. “Once she kinda ‘turned off’ and relaxed, Artie was a lot of fun. Especially when she drank.” He paused, then turned his attention to Mick. “Hey, should we open a tab? Artie might drink our asses under the table.”

“Ooohhhh, maybe,” Mick nodded. “Let’s wait ‘til she gets here, though. Just in case she offers to buy a round.” The yellow lab smirked and wagged his tail excitedly. Lydia glanced between the two men and sighed quietly before finishing off her drink. She was willing to extend the benefit of the doubt toward Artie, at least until they met, but was quietly dreading the rest of the night. Michelle, meanwhile, was sipping her cocktail through the straw and rubbing her legs together under the table anxiously. Nothing about Mick or Douglas’ descriptions of Articia had done much to endear confidence in the nervous collie.

Once the clock hit eight, the bar began to fill with locals and tourists (though far more of the latter than the former), forcing the group around the table to gradually draw closer as room began to shrink. Each time the door swung open, either Mick, Douglas, or both craned their heads anxiously over the crowd to see who had come in.

“When was she supposed to be here?” Lydia asked, checking her cell phone.

“She didn’t give an exact time,” Mick said. “I told her we were gonna be here a while so to just come by whenever.”

Michelle and Lydia flashed one another a weary look, both of them unsure what ‘a while’ was going to actually mean.

“Oh Oh *Oh Oh!*” Mick suddenly gasped as he stood up slightly from his chair and waved one arm high in the air. “*Yo! Artie!*”

The other three around the table followed his gaze and spotted the gray, hairless head of a seal standing tall above the rest of the crowd. She scanned the crowd with sharp eyes before spotting Mick’s raised hand and pointing to it before grinning and slowly maneuvering toward the table while gently nudging people out of the way.

“*Micky!*” Artie shouted in an excited and high-pitched voice that didn’t quite match her appearance. “Hang on! I’ll get my fat ass over there eventually!”

Artie gradually pushed her way through the crowd and stumbled into the clearing near the table. Mick’s eyes widened in surprise at the sight of her just as Douglas’ expression changed as well. Lydia and Michelle glanced at each other before turning back to Artie, who scarcely looked anything like the picture they’d seen.

She was at least thirty pounds heavier, for one thing, with a layer of plush fat all over her body. Her cheeks were plumper and gave her a more friendly, almost jolly demeanor when she smiled. Her arms and thighs were still clearly muscular and thick, but they were far chubbier than they were in the old photo. Her motherly figure was complemented with what was clearly a vastly pregnant belly that tented out her purple top almost a foot in front of her as her weight settled back into wide, feminine hips. Beneath it, Artie wore loose, black pants made of thin, stretchy fabric that tightly hugged her thick thighs. She didn’t have any makeup on, but wore a gold chain around her neck, a metal band around her tail, and a glittering wedding ring on one hand.

“A-Artie?” Mick breathed, staring her up and down with his jaw hanging slightly open.

“Yes, it *is* me,” Artie smirked as she rested her hands atop her belly and bobbed her long tail to the side. “It’s been a...*busy* few years.”

“N-No, I mean I wasn’t gonna...” Mick swallowed and flashed a nervous glance at Douglas, as if asking for help. Artie burst into laughter, a loud and deep-throated honking followed by a few snorts through her nose.

“Don’t worry, Micky,” she said through her chuckles. “I’m not gonna sprain your wrist for callin’ me fat. Not again, anyway.” Artie put her hands on her hips and shrugged. “I *did* put on some weight. It happens with a baby on the way.” She picked up a nearby chair and moved it to the free end of the table, carrying the thick wood effortlessly like it was made of cardboard. With a low grunt, she

held her belly in her hand and carefully lowered herself into the chair as it creaked beneath her weight. “Oh, and *also*,” Artie said as she raised a finger in the air, “yes, I *am* pregnant. So, you know, you don’t have to pretend you didn’t notice.”

“Thanks for clearing that up,” Lydia said, smiling nervously.

“It was a little hard to tell for a while, but then I sorta *blew up* around 20 weeks,” Artie explained as she leaned back and patted her pregnant belly with a smug grin on her face. Artie then shuffled in her seat before turning to the other side of the table and beaming at Douglas.

“*Dougie!* Oh my God, it’s so good to see you again!” She reached over and pinched his mustache before gently tugging on it. “Look at *this!* It’s *cute!*”

“Y-You think so?” Douglas said, bashfully as he smoothed it down with his fingers. “I’m uh... still not sure about it.”

“I like it!” Artie chirped, happily. “It goes with your *whiskers*.” She raised a thick hand and fiddled with his whiskers while glancing around the table. Artie caught eyes with Michelle and gasped while loudly slapping a palm to her forehead.

“Holy shit, I’m so fucking *rude!*” She shifted forward and stretched an arm across the table toward Michelle. “*Hey!* I’m Articia, but everybody calls me Artie.”

“H-Hi,” Michelle responded, smiling bashfully as she took the seal’s hand and shook it. Her palm was unexpectedly soft and warm. “I’m Michelle, Micky’s girlfriend.”

“*Micky!*” Artie shouted at the yellow lab. “*What!?* You didn’t tell me you had a *girlfriend!*”

“I didn’t?” Mick said, flatly. “I thought...shit, I thought I mentioned she was coming.”

“You said you were bringing a *friend*, you asshole!” Artie huffed through her nose, blowing enough hot air to ripple Mick’s beer underneath her face. She shook her head before turning back to Michelle. “Well, you’re adorable and it’s *great* to meet you.” Artie glanced up to the flower Michelle had clipped above her ear and gasped as she touched it, “Ohhhh, this is so cute! Did you get this here?”

“At a gas station on the way here,” Michelle said as she unclipped the flower and handed it to Artie. “I picked it on the side of the road. I didn’t know if that was okay.”

“Michelle, we’ve got so many of these flowers around here. *Please* take one if you can do something cute with it.” Artie chuckled as she held the bud in her hands, noticing how the green stem had been wrapped around a normal hair clip. “Makes me wish I had a little bit of fur,” she smirked as she ran a palm over her flat head.

“N-No! You look great!” Michelle stammered, quickly.

“Oh no, sweetie, it’s fine. I’m not bothered by it,” Artie smiled before leaning back with a sigh as she smoothed her top down over her round belly. “Sorry, I’m gonna be huffing-and-puffing all night. He’s finally big enough to start mashing my lungs into pancakes. Thank God I can just sit around and be lazy now that I’m out of the service.” She looked up and beamed warmly at Douglas and Mick with a smile that, coming from Artie, seemed completely alien to them. “So how’s civilian life been to you guys?”

“Oh, y’know,” Douglas shrugged as he gestured vaguely with his beer. “Calmer. More stable. Less exciting, though.”

“I think I had enough excitement for one lifetime,” Artie breathed, shaking her head. She rested a hand on her stomach and tapped the ground with her wide tail. “I’m ready to stay put for a while.”

“I never thought you’d want that,” Mick said. “Figured you’d be bored out of your mind.”

“*Ha! Please,*” Artie snorted. “I’ll take boredom for the rest of my life over getting shot again, that’s for sure.”

“You were *shot?*” Lydia asked, raising her eyebrows. In response, Artie grunted as she sat up in her chair and rolled up her left sleeve. Just below her shoulder was a white scar between her dark spots that she pointed with her pinky finger.

“Got a chunk taken out of me in Colombia about eight years ago,” Artie said, running a finger over her marred skin. “I took a couple to the back a few years after that, but this was the worst one.”

“Oh my God,” Lydia breathed with a hand over her mouth. Michelle leaned over the table to get a look for herself. “Did it...I mean, I’m sure it hurt, but what was it like?”

“Unimaginable,” Artie said with a sigh. “The worst pain I’ve ever felt in my whole life.” She paused, thinking for a moment, then added to herself, “Though I’ll have to think about that again once I give *childbirth* a shot...”

“I was there for that,” Mick said with a smirk as he sat up and pointed to Artie’s scar. He was in familiar territory again once combat stories were on the table. “Artie got dragged off screaming every four-letter-word in the English language. I heard she nearly broke the jaw of the first medic who tried to patch her up.”

“That was an *accident*,” Artie said, jabbing a finger toward Mick as she pulled her sleeve back down. “Don’t make me sound like such a badass, either. You weren’t there when I was crying my eyes out every night for three weeks every time the painkillers wore off. I never want to go through that again.”

“That sounds horrible,” Michelle whimpered. Mick, meanwhile, chuckled again and gestured to Artie with his beer.

“But if anybody could take a gunshot, it’s Artie,” he said. Artie folded her arms and rolled her eyes.

“I *guess*, but pain like that stays with you, y’know? It was a big thing I had to work through in therapy.” Artie made a face like she smelled something unpleasant and flicked her tail again. “This sucks, I don’t wanna talk about how much bullets hurt.” She sat up and glanced at Lydia and smiled at her toothily. “You’re Lydia, right? I’ve see you on Dougie’s Facebook. It’s nice to finally meet you!”

“Likewise,” Lydia smiled as she leaned across the table to shake Artie’s huge hand. “Seems like you left a big impression on the guys.”

“I kinda leave a big impression on *everything* these days,” Artie said, grinning. Her eyes flicked to Lydia’s earrings, a collection of amethyst stones hanging from gold chains. “*Ohhhh*, these are gorgeous.”

“You think so?” Lydia asked, flicking her ears to make the earrings shake. “I wasn’t sure about them.”

“They go with your eyes,” Artie said, fiddling with the dangling stones with her finger. She sat back and gestured to her own ear holes on the sides of her head. “I don’t think I’ve got enough ear to pull them off.”

“That’s okay, I’ve got a little *too much*,” Lydia smiled as she pinched her long feline ears atop her head.

“That’s why I have so many necklaces,” Artie said as she jingled the gold chain around her neck. “I don’t really have anything that I *can* get pierced, so bracelets and rings and necklaces will have to-*HYCK!*”

Artie suddenly and violently hiccuped, making everyone sitting at the table and even some at nearby tables jump. She coughed into her hand and blushed slightly as she rubbed the top of her belly.

“Hehehe...Uh, sorry. Baby likes to do backflips off my diaphragm now that he’s head-down.”

“Is he moving a lot?” Michelle asked, her eyes wide and curious.

“He hardly ever *stops*. He used to do loops in there when there was more room, but he’s *little* too big now.” She poked her belly with a finger and scolded, “Not like that it stops him from *trying*.”

“I’m gonna go grab another drink,” Mick quickly said as he stood up from the table.

“You’re not even done with this one!” Artie said as she picked up his glass. “Don’t be a quitter.”

“I’ll finish it,” Douglas said as he plucked the glass from Artie’s hand and downed the rest of Mick’s beer in a few gulps.

“Anybody want anything?” Mick asked the table. “Artie, you want a drink?”

“No drinks for me,” the seal said as she sat back and patted her belly. “Is the kitchen still open?”

“Should be,” Mick said, glancing toward the bar. “I know you like to keep it lean, so I don’t know-”

“Oh *fuck* that,” Artie snorted, waving her hand in the air. “*Wings*. See if they got *hot wings* and blue cheese sauce. Oh, or some *raw fries* with vinegar.” She licked her lips. “The heartburn is worth it.”

“I’ll see what they have,” Mick said. He glanced at Douglas and nodded toward the bar.

“Gimme a hand?” The otter shrugged and tossed back the rest of his beer before standing and side-stepping behind Lydia’s chair to follow Mick.

The two were separated by the crowd and it took longer for Douglas to push his way through to the bar. He stumbled up next to Mick as the canine was reading through the list of craft beers.

“Let me try this milk stout,” he said to the bartender, pointing to a drink on the laminated page. “And uhh...shit, what was Michelle drinking?” He glanced to Douglas, who just shrugged. Mick turned back to the bartender and said, “And a cocktail. Something, like, fruity and beachy, I guess.”

“I’ll have another Yuengling and another Strongbow,” Douglas said to the bartender. The short, stoic opossum nodded to them wordlessly before shuffling off for their drinks. After a moment of silence, Mick stepped closer to Douglas and spoke under his breath.

“This is...weird,” he said, gesturing to the table, where Artie was talking cheerfully out of earshot with Michelle and Lydia.

“What’s weird about it?” Douglas asked.

“I mean, it’s not like *weird* weird, but it’s...like...I don’t know...” Mick frowned and scratched the back of his head. “I didn’t expect Artie to be like...so *different*.”

“Is she all that different?” Douglas asked, raising an eyebrow.

“*Yeah*, bro. I mean, like, *look* at her.”

“Well yeah, she’s pregnant,” Douglas said. “So?”

“It’s not...that’s not the thing...” Mick growled to himself as he frustratedly struggled over what he was trying to say. “She’s just, like, a totally different person now.”

“You think so?” Douglas asked. He turned to look at her through the crowd, frowning beneath his mustache. “I think she’s different than she *was*, but not like a different *person*.”

“Then what is it?” Mick asked. “It’s not just that she’s pregnant. What’s up with her?”

“I think she’s just *happy*, dude.”

Mick struggled to respond before the bartender returned with their drinks. As the two of them carefully gathered them up, Mick turned to him again.

“Oh, and can we get an order of wings? If you have them?”

“We got wings,” the bartender said. “Sauce?”

“Blue cheese, I guess.”

“Gotcha.”

Mick and Douglas returned to the table together, holding the drinks high above their heads to keep from bumping them into other people. Mick collapsed into his seat and passed Michelle the strange greenish cocktail whose name he hadn’t quite caught from the bartender.

“What’s this?” the collie asked.

“I have no idea,” Mick said as he brought the beer to his mouth.

“So before we found out the gender, I was just gonna go with ‘Max,’” Artie was saying to Lydia while proudly stroking her belly. “‘Cause I was lazy and couldn’t think of two names. But once we found out it was a boy, I was like ‘holy shit, that’s my son.’ Now I’m trying to think of something better.” She threw her hands up and shook her head. “I mean, I’ve still got *nothing*, but at least I’m *trying*, y’know?”

“What about your parents’ names?” Lydia suggested. “That might be a place to start.” Douglas and Mick glanced at one another in alarm, both of them remembering how Artie used to react to the topic of her family being brought up (and, more vividly, the bruises that followed).

Artie balled her hands into fists and sighed through her nose while staring at the table with a scowl. It was a remarkable show of patience from the seal and the clearest sign to her old friends that she'd changed.

"Nah," Artie said, shaking her head. "They're not in my life anymore. They probably don't even know I'm married."

"...Oh," Lydia said, glancing aside and feeling awkward.

"That's sad," Michelle said, her ears drooping as she sipped her green cocktail. Artie hesitated for a moment, then looked up with a smirk and shrugged while patting her baby bump.

"Not really. Not to me. I've got my own family, now," the seal said, cheerfully. Mick shot a glance to Douglas across the table, who only shrugged in mutual surprise and quietly sipped his beer.

"So who's the father?" Lydia asked, clinging to a change of subject to something more pleasant. "You haven't even talked about him yet."

"Oh, I've been tryin' not to," Artie snickered. "Because once I start talking about Julian, I can't really stop."

"Julian," Mick said, flatly.

"Julian?" Douglas asked, more inquisitively. "Do we know him?"

"No no no, I met him after the Army," Artie explained as she waved a hand. She wiggled in her seat, the wood creaking beneath her weight, as she reached for her pocket. However, she wasn't able to push her chair back far enough to reach it and was forced to stand to reach it. Her belly protruded far over the table and was big enough to cast a shadow of its own. With a satisfied huff, Artie finally retrieved her phone from her pocket and set it on the table.

"Here, I got pictures," Artie said as she swiped through her massive smartphone that was still dwarfed in her hands. With a satisfied giggle, she passed the phone across the table to Lydia, who cupped it in her hands as Douglas leaned over her shoulder to see the screen. It was a photo of Artie, pre-pregnancy, grinning toothily on the beach, while a slender, male sea lion stood at her side with a shy smile. He wore a pair of thin glasses and was a full foot shorter than Artie, who's hand he was holding just above the bottom of the frame.

"And his name is Julian?" Lydia asked, cocking her head slightly at the photo. Even she had expected something more like a bodybuilder or a football player to be Artie's husband. He looked small enough for her to pick up and throw.

"Julian Renoir," Artie said, sighing wistfully as she said it. "He's Canadian and can speak French. He hates his picture being taken, but I made him sit still for that one." She paused thoughtfully and touched her belly. "I wonder if I was actually pregnant by then..."

"He's pretty cute," Lydia said, and she meant it. Julian was thin and could almost be described as elegant, but wasn't really to her taste. He was a little too effeminate for her. She glanced up to Douglas, with his mustache and broad shoulders, but also his dexterous fingers and wiry swimmers body and thought to herself how much more she preferred the otter's looks.

"He *is*," Artie breathed, patting her round middle happily as she fanned her tail across the floor.

Lydia passed the phone over to Michelle, who held it in front of Mick so she could see. The collie seemed more taken with Julian, as she wagged her tail and smiled warmly at the photo and exchanged glances with Artie across the table. Mick, however snorted in laughter at the sight of her husband and chuckled into his beer.

"He looks like a librarian," Mick snickered. "Or like a fucking ballerina. No no no, he looks like one of those guys we saw in Singapore with all the jewelry. Remember that?"

Instead of more laughter, Mick encountered silence around the table, even from Douglas. Artie stared at Mick without blinking for a long time, her lips pursed around her sharp teeth. She then calmly sat up in her chair, smoothed her top over her belly, and shifted forward a few inches before swiftly and powerfully punching Mick in the shoulder hard enough to knock him to the floor on the other side of his chair.



“*Quit being a DICK!*” Artie barked after Mick had thudded to the wooden floor beside Michelle’s chair. His entire left arm had gone numb with a throbbing pain and his head was swimming from the sudden fall to the ground. As he tried to climb back in his chair with one arm, Artie grabbed him by the bicep and dragged him into his chair before leaning over the table and glaring directly into his eyes.

“You and me? We served together. We fought together. So I don’t mind when you wanna bust my chops sometimes,” Artie said to a dazed and confounded Mick. “But you don’t say *shit* about my *husband*. About the *father* of my *son*. You don’t have that right.” She sighed and settled back, shaking her head as she rubbed her hand in a circle over her stomach. “God damn it, Micky...Made me wake up the fucking baby...”

A thick and awkward silence fell over the table as Mick guiltily stared down and flexed his trembling arm to work feeling back into his hand. Artie took deep, relaxing breaths and monitored her pulse through her wrist. She glanced around the table at the stunned looks on Lydia and Michelle’s faces before turning away in her own embarrassment.

“*Oh-kay*,” said the voice of the opossum bartender as he pushed through to their table with a huge bowl in his hands. “You guys have wings?”

“*Yeah!*” Artie answered happily, perking up at the smell of bar food. She took the bowl in one hand and settled it down on the table. “Did you guys have any-” The bartender answered her question by setting down a smaller bowl full of off-white sauce, making Artie gasp. “*Blue cheese sauce*,” the seal sighed happily as she touched her pinkie finger to the sauce and licked it clean to sample it.

The bartender set down a glass of water next to Artie before walking away. She scarcely glanced up from her plate of wings as she sipped from the straw. After multiple attempts to lean over the table, Artie discovered she was too far along to reach over her pregnant belly and was forced to sit back in the chair and hold the plate above her stomach as she hungrily gnawed at the chicken wings. Mick quietly rubbed his sore arm and drank with an embarrassed scowl on his face. Lydia and Michelle sipped their drinks quietly and weren’t entirely sure what to say. Only Douglas seemed oblivious of the awkward atmosphere.

“Can I grab some of these?” the otter asked as he reached for Artie’s plate of wings, but hesitated as he waited for her approval.

“Knock yourself out,” Artie said, sauce around her mouth. She swallowed and grinned while tapping a knuckle to her belly. “Don’t expect ‘em to be there for long. I’m eating for two, remember?”

“How can I forget?” Douglas said, chuckling. “You bring it up after every other sentence.”

“I...Well, I...” Artie hesitated, then did the unthinkable and blushed as she glanced aside. “I’m just happy about it, okay? Gimme a break.”

As she shifted closer to the table, a chair leg caught against an uneven board in the floor and made Artie lose her balance enough to spill the plate of hot wings against her purple blouse, the sticky glaze staining the surface.

“*Oh shit*,” she swore, dropping the plate to the table and frantically reaching for napkins. “*Shit shit shit shit*.” Dabbing against the fabric over her belly only made the stain darken and spread, elevating the seal’s panic. “I just *bought this!*” Artie pushed herself away from the table and awkwardly stood while pinching the front of her shirt to keep it from staining any more. “I-I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll come with you,” Lydia said quickly as she pushed her drink away and stood up to follow the huge mother seal as she waddled toward the bathroom. Michelle didn’t say anything, but she quickly stood and followed the pair of them inside.

“Why did I get fucking *wings*?” Artie moaned to herself as she and Lydia shuffled into the bathroom with Michelle slipping inside a moment later. “I’m so *stupid*.”

“You’re not stupid,” Lydia said soothingly as she walked Artie toward the sink and turned on the water. At her side, the lynx only stood tall enough to reach Artie’s shoulder, but she followed Lydia’s lead carefully, her long tail bobbing from side-to-side over the ground. Though she moved

carefully and deliberately, as if she was well-used to her size, Artie seemed to have to have trouble navigating around her rounded belly and walked with a bow-legged shuffle.

"I forgot I was wearing this," she groaned, peering at the stain in her reflection in the mirror. "Should've gotten a sandwich or something, I'm an idiot." Artie took the handful of paper towels Lydia handed her and tried to reach for the running water in the sink, but found she was too tall to reach the water without bending and couldn't even see the sink around her baby belly obscuring her view.

"Damn it," Artie swore quietly in frustration as she threw the paper towels down. There was an unexpected quiver in her deep voice. She took a deep breath and swallowed the lump in her throat as she turned to the side and tried to squat to reach the sink.

"Hang on, let me help," Lydia said, mercifully grabbing the paper towels and wetting them under the sink. She even squirted a little hand soap on them for good measure before turning Artie to face her and carefully dabbing the wet towels against her blouse. "It'll come out, don't worry. You'll need to wash it, but I think we got to the stain in time."

"It was so expensive," Artie whimpered. "A-And it's one of the only shirts that *fits me* now... I'm such a stupid idiot." Lydia glanced up and found Artie crying softly while clenching her fists on either side of her hips. The seal blinked in surprise, then touched a finger to her face before quickly wiping away her tears. "Ugh, sorry...Sorry...I don't...it's stupid, it's just a shirt."

"Don't be sorry," Lydia said, turning away to focus on wiping away the stain on Artie's blouse. As she did, she inadvertently braced her hand against the seal's belly. It was unexpectedly warm and firm beneath her fingers, but Artie was chubby enough that there was still some give around her late-term baby bump.

"I shouldn't- I shouldn't be crying over this," Artie sniffed, trying to wipe away tears that were still coming, whether she liked it or not. "It's just clothes..."

"It's okay, really," Michelle said, standing beside Lydia and looking up at Artie. She was barely taller than the seal's elbow. "You're pregnant, it's okay if you cry sometimes. That's just the hormones."

"I guess," Artie said, her voice cracking. She cleared her throat and pulled away to look at her blouse in the mirror, smoothing it out against her belly. "You sure this'll come out?"

"Oh yeah," Lydia nodded confidently. "They've got stuff now that'll take stains out of *anything*."

"Okay," Artie said dejectedly. "Um...I don't really know anything about detergents and things like that. What should I buy?"

"I'll send you a list of what I use," Lydia said, cheerfully. "You're on Facebook, right?"

"Y-yeah," Artie nodded. Even with her intimidating appearance, she seemed remarkably timid and vulnerable at that moment. She looked at her reflection in the mirror and pinched the fabric of her blouse between her fingers. After a long silence, she sighed and shook her head. "I...I shouldn't have hit Micky like that. I'm sorry."

"I mean, he kind of deserved it," Lydia said, folding her arms. "He was acting like a huge asshole." She paused, then glanced at Michelle. "Oh, no offense."

"You're right, he was being a jerk," Michelle nodded, idly fiddling with the curly hair of her ear.

"I still shouldn't have hit him," Artie mumbled. "That's not...it isn't the kind of thing I should do."

"I wish I could've," Lydia said, flicking her ears as she folded her arms. "I'm jealous you can meet him with his macho bullshit."

"But that...I don't *want to*," Artie sighed. She turned and leaned against the counter, using a paper towel to dry the wet spot on her belly. "When I went into the Army, that was basically my whole life for a while. And punching somebody like that when they talk shit is something you can do in the military, but not something you can do in the real world." She hesitated before folding her arms and blushing slightly. "And it isn't something a *woman* should do, either."

“Who told you that?” Lydia asked, raising her eyebrow. “I’d hit guys all the time if I could get away with it.”

“Well...uh...I don’t know...” Artie said as she swished her tail below the sink. “I don’t really know what it feels like to...I mean, I just don’t...” She clenched her teeth and pinched the bridge of her nose. “I don’t really know *how* to be a girl. I never really learned, growing up, but I *want to*.”

“You seem to be doing pretty well so far,” Lydia smiled as she reached out and patted Artie’s belly, deliberately that time. It was a surprise when the huge seal let out a giddy, high-pitched laugh as she smiled and proudly touched her middle.

“Maybe that’s why I’ve kind of liked being pregnant,” Artie mused to herself. “It makes me feel feminine without even trying. Plus, I wanted to be a mom for a long time now...”

“Even in the Army?” Michelle asked. She hesitated for a moment, then took Lydia’s lead and touched her small hand to Artie’s baby belly.

“*Before* the Army,” Artie nodded, moving her hands out of the way and watching the two smaller women curiously touch her stomach. “I just didn’t think it was ever gonna happen. And I never told anybody in the service, either.” She sighed and shook her head. “I felt like I had an image to keep up.”

“That’s sad,” Michelle said, quietly. Suddenly, Artie’s belly trembled slightly before a lurching movement pushed out beneath the collie’s palm. She gasped and withdrew her hand in surprise, but quickly wagged her tail and glanced up excitedly at Artie. “Was that the baby!?”

“Oh yeah, that’s him alright,” the mother seal grinned. She glanced around the bathroom curiously, then pointed to the door and said to Lydia, “Hey, can you lock that?”

Once Lydia bolted the door, Artie turned and lifted the loose, ruffled fabric of her blouse before pulling down a spandex maternity band to fully expose the bare, spotted shape of her pregnant belly. She slid a hand over her stomach and proudly looked in her reflection as her baby visibly shifted and wiggled inside her.

“Geeze,” Lydia whistled. “You look ready to drop.”

“I *know*,” Artie grinned excitedly as Michelle curiously watched the movements of the baby seal. “My OB says I might go overdue.”

“Let’s hope not,” Lydia said, raising her eyebrows.

“I don’t mind,” Artie said, pulling her blouse farther up her torso. “As long as he’s healthy, he can cook as long as he needs to.”

“I agree,” Michelle nodded.

“I...I just...I’m...” Artie looked at herself in the mirror and rubbed a palm on the underside of her belly as she pondered what she was trying to say. “I’m just really happy that I get to do this...that I get to have a baby. I didn’t think I ever would, but it’s really happening. And with someone like Julian, who’s just the most...I never thought I’d meet someone like him and that he’d...” Artie suddenly snorted as more tears began welling up in her eyes and she quickly wiped them away. “Shit. Damn it. Not again.”

“That’s really, really sweet,” Lydia said, folding her arms as she smiled up at Artie with an appreciation of her sincerity.

“Sorry, I keep...I just *cry* all the time,” Artie sniffed, wiping her face with a paper towel. “I barely cried as a kid and almost never in the Army, but now it’s like *bwoosh* all the time.”

“It’s happy crying, though,” Michelle said.

“It is,” Artie sighed as she touched her bare belly one last time before pulling the spandex back over it and letting go of her blouse. “I guess I’m doing pretty good right now.”

The three of them left the bathroom together, with Artie taking the lead. The bar had only gotten more crowded, but the seal was thankfully tall enough that most people saw her coming and parted ways for her. Lydia and Michelle took back their seats, but Artie found another chair and sat on their side of the table while Michelle happily felt the baby moving in her new friend’s belly.

“*Dougie*,” Artie groaned as she picked up the bowl of wings and found it half-empty. “You son of a bitch!”

“I like wings,” the otter shrugged, a toothpick in his mouth. “I left you half of ‘em.”

“It’s almost *literally* like taking candy from a baby,” Artie said, reaching over to pinch Douglas’ mustache playfully.

“I left you the sauce!” he protested while swatting away her hand. She glanced down at the bowl of blue cheese dipping sauce and picked it up to make sure enough was left.

“Fine,” Artie said before jabbing a finger into the otter’s shoulder. “But you’re on thin ice.” She was careful to drape the stack of napkins over her belly to keep extra stains from dipping on her blouse. Before she could continue eating, Artie glanced at Mick, who was turned slightly away from her and scowling into a new glass of beer.

“Micky,” she said, more softly than she normally would have. “I’m sorry I hit you. I shouldn’t have done that. You were being a dick about my husband and I’m *not* sorry for responding, but I still probably shouldn’t have hit you like that.”

“Whatever,” Mick said as he picked up his drink. “It’s fine.”

“*Don’t worry about him*,” Lydia whispered to Artie. “*The only thing you hurt was his ego.*”

“*Obviously*,” Artie muttered back. “*I know Micky pretty well, remember?*”

“So what have you been doing after the military?” Michelle asked while she was feeling Artie’s baby move.

“*Dougie* thought you were living in a shack in the middle of the woods somewhere,” Lydia said.

“*So you’re calling me ‘Dougie’ now?*” Douglas said, raising an eyebrow at his girlfriend.

“*Maybe*,” she said as she scratched behind his ear. “*Maybe I like it.*”

“I kinda bounced around for a bit until I met Julian,” Artie said as she sipped her water and tossed aside a bone she’d finished with. “He was from around here, Florida, but we met at one of his art shows and-”

“Art shows?” Lydia repeated.

“Oh yeah, he’s a painter,” Artie said, smiling proudly. “He’s *really* good, too. He does graphic design stuff, too, but the painting is what he’s actually passionate about.” She rocked awkwardly in her seat and reached for her cell phone, then scrolled through her gallery until she found the photo she was looking for. “Here’s a recent one he did.”

“Oh *wow*,” Lydia sighed, her eyes widening. “This *is* good.”

“Isn’t it!?” Artie said, grinning as if it was one of her own before showing the painting off to the rest of the table. “He wants to paint something for the baby once he’s born. To put in the nursery. But he says he needs to get a *look* at him before he’d know what to paint.”

“But that’s Julian,” Douglas said. “What about you?”

“Oh, I work at a daycare. I think I wanna teach kindergarten,” Artie shrugged. Lydia and Michelle smiled and nodded while Douglas and Mick glanced at one another incredulously.

“*You?*” Mick asked, raising his eyebrows. “*Teaching kindergarten?*”

“It’s a hell of a lot easier than dealing with dickheaded soldiers,” Artie snorted. “At least little kids wanna do more than fight each other all the time.”

“I don’t mean to be an asshole, Artie,” Douglas said, slowly, “but you’re probably the last person I’d expect to be teaching little kids. Sounds like ‘Lord of the Flies’ waiting to happen.”

“Yeah, well, I have to learn sooner than later,” Artie shrugged, stroking her belly. The seal suddenly quieted as she stared into the center of the table and had a far-away look on her face. “Look... we’ve...we’ve seen a lot of shit. We’ve done a lot of shit. I spent a lot of my life hurting people and being good at it. I just...I feel...I...” Artie swallowed and held her hands to her belly, as if for support. “I like kids. They’re small and they’re innocent and they’re...they’re *good*. Kids are born good, I think. I want to live my life like that. And telling them things and watching them grow and learn and become people... it makes me happy.”

The group around the table was quiet for a while. Mick, in particular, seemed the most affected by Artie's words, as he was staring off into space and gripping his glass tightly in both hands, his thoughts far away.

"Ah fuck it," Artie said, waving her hands. "Who wants to get into that kinda stuff now, huh?"

"Do the kids like you? Are you a good teacher?" Lydia asked, changing the subject.

"I hope so!" Artie laughed, inadvertently flashing her rows of sharp teeth. "I think I'm doing alright. They're getting a kick out of the pregnancy, at least. Every single day one of them wants to feel the baby move. If I didn't have such thick skin, I'd probably be going home with little hand prints all over my belly."

"That's *really* cute," Michelle cooed, her own hands still gently resting on Artie's bump.

"They love it. But it means I need to come up with a thousand different ways to say where babies come from without getting into too much detail, y'know?" Artie snickered to herself and said in a gentle voice, "When a Mommy and a Daddy want to make a baby, the Daddy will plant a seed inside the Mommy that grows in her tummy."

"I mean, you're not *wrong*," Lydia shrugged.

"I try not to lie to them," Artie nodded, seriously. "But it's harder than you think."

"What's their favorite subject?" Michelle asked.

"I try to make science the most fun thing for them, plus I *love* space stuff." She looked down at her belly and smoothed her blouse down around her stomach. "I wanna do a diorama of the solar system with my bump as the sun. Plus, I take every class out to Kennedy Space Center once a year, so I hope that wins them over for me."

"Oh! We wanted to go to that!" Lydia said, excitedly. "What's it like?"

"Oh my god, it's *amazing*," Artie gasped. "How long are you guys here? I could take you if you wanted. I could go there *every day*."

"We were trying to work out a plan because the *guys* didn't feel like going to *Disney World*," Lydia said, rolling her eyes. Artie gasped, and exchanged a glance between Douglas and Mick.

"You guys too macho for the Happiest Place on Earth?" she snorted. As Artie glanced at Mick, staring glumly down at the table, she could tell something was wrong beyond just a bruised ego. With a new job, a happy husband, and a baby on the way, Artie had found her place in the world outside the Army, but Mick hadn't been so lucky. Too much had changed for him too quickly, something she knew all too well from the first few months outside. He wanted too see Artie as she was before and to live in the past that felt familiar. A painful past for her were some of the best years of Mick's life.

"Hey, Micky," Artie said, leaning across the table. "Y'know what I was thinking about lately? Remember that time in Rio? It was that op where we had to swim like a mile down the coast?"

Mick paused, then a smile crept onto his face and he glanced up. Artie could see his tail wagging beneath his chair.

"Yeah, I remember that."

"You ever tell them about the trafficking ring we helped bust up with the Brazilian coast guard that night?" Artie said. "The *people* trafficking ring?"

"Whoa, holy shit," Lydia said, glancing at Mick. "No, you didn't tell us about that."

"Mick was closer to it than I was," Artie said, leaning back in her chair and gesturing. "Tell 'em about that, I think I forgot most of the details."

Mick paused, then sat up in his chair and glanced at Artie with a grateful, sincere smile.

"So, it was just after two in the morning when we got offloaded up the coast, a mile away from the harbor..."

Artie came home hours later, sore and tired as usual from her late pregnancy, but happy all the same that she'd actually gotten out of the house for a change. It was hard enough for her to be quiet without carrying an extra fifteen pounds of baby in her belly, but she did her best to tip-toe through the

bedroom while Julian was sleeping, pulling off her blouse and tossing it near the hamper while thinking through the list of detergents Lydia told her to buy.

She took a long, cold shower, feeling her tense body relax under the chilly water that felt so much more relaxing than a warm one. Once she was done, Artie only partially dried off and put on a pair of loose pajama pants while leaving her upper body bare as she climbed into bed. Her weight displaced the mattress enough to roll Julian over, but he was already half-awake anyway.

The sea lion wiggled closer to his wife and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, the water on her back forming a seal between them as they cuddled together. Artie smiled in the darkness and sighed contentedly. As the baby began to shift inside her, she reached up and moved Julian's hand from her upper arm to the side of her belly.

"Did you have fun?" Julian asked, his voice sleepy and muffled.

"*Mm-hmm*," Artie responded, guiding Julian's hand over her belly to where their baby was kicking.

"Did you see your friends?"

"Yeah," Artie said. "I think I made some new ones, too."

"That's good," Julian sighed, resting his head against her neck. She could feel his whiskers tickling her chin.

Artie shifted in the bed, feeling her husband nestled closely up behind her and her baby nestled inside her.

"Have I ever told you how happy you made me?" Artie said, softly. Julian snuffled, but didn't answer. He'd already fallen back asleep. The mother seal snickered and tickled his nose with her finger before she sighed and closed her eyes, gently drifting off to sleep alongside him.