

SHADOW'S LURE BOOK TWO



Short Story

CASTING
LIGHT

ALICE WINTERS

Casting Light Short Story

Alice Winters

Sssssso gentle proof- Courtney Bassett

Oliver

“Hey, Ollie, Ollie, can I use your phone? I forgot mine in my room,” Andras says as he flashes me a smile. The smile immediately makes me suspect something’s going on.

“What do you want it for?” I ask.

“To use your Amazon account to buy myself something,” he says.

“What’s wrong with your Amazon account?”

“It... doesn’t have your credit card attached,” he says, like this might be a hard thing to understand. “I’m joking. I literally just need to call Bastian... or do I? How about this, I will trade you your phone for my Soren.”

He holds the weird snake out like that is a fair trade in any way. The snake perks his head up and watches me as his little tongue flickers about.

“I don’t want the snake,” I say, and Soren’s head droops down like I’ve offended him in some way. It almost makes me *feel* bad. So there I am, swapping out my phone for a snake.

The snake, who I’ve somehow grown closer to over the past year, wraps around my neck. Andras promises it’s not to choke me, but I’m not so naïve. “Roman needs help moving some equipment in the basement of the training center, so I’m going to help him. I’ll grab my phone back when I’m done. If you’re bored, you could help.”

“I don’t ever foresee a moment when I’m bored enough to willingly put myself in a room with Roman, but you do you, big bro,” he says before

patting me on the back, like he's sending me some kind of encouragement. Encouragement for what? I'll never know.

Then he gets a thoughtful look on his face.

"What do you think about marriage?" Andras asks.

"Uhh... it's a thing people do," I say.

"You're so unromantic."

"Are you asking about a certain someone?"

"Maybe..."

"You want my advice?" I ask. Andras and Bastian have been together for around a year now and are ridiculously in love with each other. I'm not sure I ever saw my little brother as someone who'd settle down and get married. Not because he was someone who jumped between partners; it was more that he never seemed to have an interest in *having* a partner. But now that he's with Bastian, I'm pretty sure I couldn't see him happy any other way.

It's been good for him to finally have some stability in his life. Someone he can rely on and a man special enough to find his jokes funny.

"Let's just say that you better capture that man before he realizes your jokes just aren't as funny as you think they are," I say.

Andras gasps as he gives me a look like my advice wasn't solid. "Hahahaha, you're hilarious, Ollie. So funny. I'm going to walk away before I cry..." He dramatically wipes away a fake tear.

"You want my honest opinion?" I ask.

"Of course."

"I think there's no reason to hesitate. Bastian's an amazing and lovely man. He's sweet, funny, and makes you ridiculously happy."

"He does..."

"Then?"

“Then I need to find a worm!”

The shit he says. “What the hell do you need a worm for? You’re ridiculous,” I decide.

Andras just cackles as he pats me on the back. “Thank you. And why don’t you try opening up your heart,” he says as he nods. I try to look at who he’s nodding toward but the only person over there is Roman who’s having a battle with a piece of equipment that won’t fit through the door. “Anyway, thanks for the talk. And maybe you could talk to Roman.”

“I thought you didn’t like him?”

“I tolerate him just fine!”

“That’s... not necessarily *liking* someone,” I say.

“Roman and I haven’t fought in like...” he checks the time on the watch he stole from Roman, “six hours. And that was just over the fact that he didn’t want me to steal his sword. But I bet he wouldn’t mind *your* sword.” He waggles his eyebrows and I sigh, planning to ignore him.

“Have fun and don’t buy sketchy shit on my phone,” I order as I decide that I really should help Roman before he busts a hole in the doorway. So I rush over to the center just as he tugs the equipment through the doorway.

“Sorry, Andras stopped me,” I say.

“Hmm...” Roman mutters, and that’s that.

I follow him down into the basement where he points at the stuff in the corner.

“I want that desk and then that equipment upstairs,” he says.

“What are you doing with this stuff?” I ask. “Are you hiring a new teacher?”

He’s quiet for a moment as he tries to shuffle things around. “I was considering it.”

“Not sure now?” I ask.

“Hmm...”

“What’s all the hmms for?”

“Because I’m constantly second-guessing everything,” he says.

“Just... it’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

He’s always so difficult to talk to because he doesn’t ever want to *talk*. He just wants to run headfirst into every problem without consulting others so he can just “take care of it” himself and not have to rely on anyone.

I’m quiet as I help him pick up the desk and start up the stairs. The desk is heavy and I’m starting to wonder if I should have asked Andras to help when Roman stumbles. It pushes the desk into me which shoves me back into the door. The door swings shut, closing behind me.

“Shit,” he grumbles. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” I say as I reach back and go to turn the door handle while also juggling the desk. When the door handle won’t turn, I give it a few good jerks only to find that we have somehow successfully gotten locked in the basement.

“You don’t happen to have a key, do you?” I ask.

“Why the hell does this lock from the outside? Although... knowing my dad, I probably don’t want know,” he mutters. “And no. I don’t have the key.”

“Okay. Let’s put the table down,” I instruct as we carry it back down the stairs. “Andras isn’t too far away, can you call him? He has my phone, so if I could borrow yours?”

Roman’s quiet as he stands there with both hands flat on the table. “So about that... I... didn’t want to break my phone when I was moving that other shit... so I set it to the side.”

“Out there?” I point beyond the door.

“Out there,” he mutters. “Like way out there.”

“Well... Andras has my phone and said he’d return when he’s done, so I’m sure he’ll bring it back in a few,” I say as I sit down on the top of the desk.

“Oh. That’s good.”

And then we fall into an awkward silence. I know Andras thinks there’s something brewing between us, but I don’t even know how to talk to Roman sometimes. I mean... he’s handsome and he’s nice when he’s around me and...

I look up and find him staring at me. Quickly, he looks away and clears his throat.

“Soooo um... who were you wanting to hire to be a new teacher? I’m assuming a weapons instructor?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he says.

“Ah... yes, that person. I know them quite well,” I tease.

He sighs as he crosses his arms over his chest. “Andras.”

Now *that* surprises me. “Ohhhh.”

“I know, right? The moment I even think about giving him that power, I know I’m going to regret it. I can envision the irritation now.”

I can’t help but laugh at this idea. “I don’t know. I mean... besides me, who’s your closest friend here? And don’t say Bastian, he’s your brother. It has to be Andras, right?”

Roman sighs and jabs a finger at me. “I’d rather be friends with that snake.”

That makes me laugh harder that Roman would even pick a shade over my brother.

He's staring at Soren who is looking between us, like he's not sure what he did to end up in this situation.

"I mean... why does he even have that snake?" Roman mutters, still staring at it. I *have* noticed that he stares at it quite a bit, but I always assumed it was a sign of how much he disliked the snake.

Does he actually want to hold it?

"Do you want to hold him?"

"Why would I want to hold him?" He scoffs as he looks away, like I've asked the most heinous of questions.

I pull Soren off my neck and hold it out to him. "Because I'm tired of holding him."

Roman gives me an "only because you *need* me to" look and takes the snake.

Soren, on the other hand, looks horrified. He doesn't overly love me, probably because I've mentioned getting rid of him in the past, but I've never seen him look so petrified before.

"He doesn't like me," Roman says as the snake plays dead in his hands. He's like a limp, dangling noodle.

"I'm not quite sure he likes anyone but Andras and Bastian," I say. "Probably because they're the only two who haven't threatened to kill him... well, Andras hasn't, I guess."

Soren slowly, *sooooo* slowly, turns his head to look at Roman. It's almost like he thinks if he goes slow enough Roman won't *notice*.

Roman stares at the snake for a long moment before petting him with one finger, like he's just testing it out or afraid he'll hurt him.

"He's softer than he looks, isn't he?" I ask.

"Yeah..."

Why is this kind of cute? And why the hell is that what popped into my mind? “You like snakes?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you have pets growing up?” I ask.

“I had a dog once... we weren’t allowed pets... so I snuck him into the complex. I... hid him in the shed until my dad found him,” he says.

I’m a little afraid to ask what happened.

“He didn’t hurt him or anything,” Roman says, like he was reading my mind.

“He didn’t hurt him... but what about you?”

Roman just stares at the snake. Soren seems a little less rigid now and actually winds his tail around his wrist.

“Why don’t you get a pet now?” I ask.

“It won’t like me.”

“Wow, it’ll just take one look at you and hate you?” I tease.

“Probably. Everything else does.”

“No, they don’t! I like you.”

His eyes snap up to mine, and suddenly, I feel very awkward. Like I’d just confessed some undying love or something and wasn’t just... I don’t know! Making him feel better? Trying to understand my own feelings? It’s like he just doesn’t quite know how to interact with people. He’s so afraid of being hurt by them that he just makes himself seem like a dick in the hopes that no one will get close enough to hurt him.

“You have to work with me, so it’s convenient,” Roman decides.

“You think I’m that lazy?” I ask. “That I just go for convenient? Man, Roman, you think too little of me.”

He looks flustered now before quickly hiding it. “I didn’t mean it like that. I’m just saying...”

He doesn't seem interested in finishing that sentence, so I push him a little with a "Saying?"

Roman sighs. "So do you think I should offer your brother this job or not? Is he going to annoy me?"

"No, no, no, I'm *waaaaaaaaay* more interested in this topic we were talking about," I say as I hop off the desk and walk over to him. He weirdly becomes much more fixated on Soren as I stop in front of him. Soren tips his head back and looks at me upside down, like he's also wondering what I'm doing over here.

I have no idea.

That's what.

"Do you like me?" I ask.

"You're tolerable."

"How much more tolerable am I than the others?"

"A significant amount," he says as his eyes flick to mine.

"You're the most stubborn man I've ever met."

Roman nods, not even denying it. "Yeah."

"Yeah?" I ask. "That's all you're going to say?"

"Yeah."

"I mean, you practically just confessed your undying love to me."

"That's definitely not what happened. I think you've been hanging around your brother far too much."

"That's possible. But who else am I going to hang around? You?"

He just grunts and watches Soren slide up his arm.

He's so difficult.

And what do I even say or do in response to that? Like Andras definitely isn't Cupid, yet he seems to think Roman likes me. Does he? I

mean... if he did, wouldn't he *try* for something? Instead, he's extremely fixated on this snake.

Roman can't be *shy*, can he? Although... I've known him my entire life and have I actually ever seen him on a date with someone?

Has he ever dated someone?

"You ever gone a date?" I ask.

His eyes *snap* up to mine with lightning speed. "What the fuck's that mean? Of course I have."

"Have you?"

"I just said I did! What's with all of these weird questions? You really have been around Andras too much."

"When's the last time?"

His eyes are challenging. "I don't keep track. Does it look like I keep track?"

I'll ask him out. It's as simple as that. I'll just tell him that however long it's been, it's been too long, we'll go somewhere ourselves, and then I won't give him the opportunity to back out.

"Alright then, let's—"

The door swings open and Roman moves away from me as Andras pokes his head down here.

"Was the door locked for a reason? Ohhhh noooo, did I interrupt something? Hahahaha."

"Help us carry this damn desk and take your snake!" Roman says as he shoves Soren toward Andras like he wasn't just enjoying the snake.

"Oh. My. God. You love Soren, don't you? He's sssssso cute, isn't he? Soren says he likesssss you too. You can hold him."

"I don't want to."

“Clearly you do! Let’s get a picture for Bastian!” Andras says as he uses my phone to snap some pictures of Roman before he hands the phone off to me. “Send this to Bassy.”

“Sure, sure,” I say as the three of us carry the desk upstairs.

We take it into a spare office space that hadn’t been used in a while before setting it down.

Roman glowers at Andras before setting the snake on the desk. “This is your new office. You’re going to start teaching the senior class next week, got it?”

Andras freezes. “Me or Soren?”

Roman’s eyes narrow.

“Like... I know it sounds stupid but it’s a legit question. You’re actually going to let me TEACH? I will teach them so well.”

“You’re sadly our best fighter,” he says.

“Sadly? I feel like you’re complimenting me and harassing me in the same breath, and I’m digging it! Yes, sir! I will teach them so well!”

Roman just grunts and leaves the vicinity as Andras beams at me.

“Did you do this?” he asks.

“Nope.”

“You’re serious?”

“Serious about what?” Bastian asks as he peeks into the room.

“Roman gave me a job teaching swordsmanship! Did *you* do this?”

“Nope,” Bastian says before giving him a wide smile. “That’s amazing!”

“It is! You and me, date tomorrow,” Andras says, and I can’t help but wonder if that’s when he’s going to pop the question.

“Okay, sure,” Bastian says. “Quick turn of events but I’m all for it.”

I hesitate before turning to the door and hurrying out. Roman's nearly back to the main building before I catch up with him. "Hey."

He glances at me. "Hmm?"

"I didn't get to finish what I was saying in the basement."

"Are you sure?" he asks.

"Yes... I want to go out somewhere tonight. With you. You better show up. Six o'clock. Got it?" I ask.

He stares at me for a long moment as I realize that maybe I let Andras get in my head. Andras is a fool after all.

"You better not be late," Roman says before hurrying off.

And there I stand with a grin on my face, feeling absolutely ridiculous as I watch the man storm off to tackle whatever else he has to tackle.