

S H A D O W ' S L U R E B O O K O N E



Short Story

CAST IN

SHADOWS

A L I C E W I N T E R S

*To be read after Cast in Shadows

Alice Winters

Proofed by: Courtney Bassett

Andras

“Bastian! Let’s go!”

For some reason Bastian seems wary as he looks at me, like something I said could possibly have been strange or maybe he’s just confused. Often, he does seem easily confused when he’s around me, but I feel like that’s due to Roman sapping away the good parts of his brain.

“I’m... I might be busy right now,” Bastian says.

“Oh...”

“Training! I’m training.”

I still as this hits me. This... this lovely man is dismissing me? He’d rather... what? Frolic around beating other sweaty men with fake swords? Run around a circle doing the disgusting deed of “exercising”?

“You... you don’t want to be near me?” I ask.

“Yes, that’s one hundred percent what I said,” he says sarcastically.

“B-Bastian... what happened to my sweet Bastian?”

Bastian looks a bit horrified like he really thinks I’m mad at him. It’s ridiculously cute, though, so I don’t give in *just yet*. “No! I’m not... we’ll meet up later, okay? I’m just busy today.”

“Fine,” I whisper as I see Soren on the table. “Soren and I will find someone else to hang around with.”

I grab for the snake, and I feel like if he had arms he’d be struggling to grab onto the table in an attempt to not go with me. When he immediately turns into a limp noodle in my hand, I gasp. “You don’t want

to be around me either? FINE! You two are meant for each other!” I cry as I hand off the snake and hurry on my way.

I suppose I could just spend the day alone but that sounds absolutely dreadful. I’ve been alone for a huge chunk of my life and now that I have multiple humans to annoy, I have no interest in suffering, so I hurry down the hallway to Oliver’s room.

I throw the door open without bothering to knock and look over to where Oliver is face down on the floor completely clothed and covered in filth.

“Did I just waltz into a crime scene?” I ask.

“Yes,” he mutters into the floor. “I’m so tired. I had to work through the night, and they wouldn’t even let me eat. I *just* got home.”

“That’s okay. We can hang out together now. You can feast off my love for you,” I decide as I grab his ankle and start to pull him toward the door. If he can’t walk, I’m more than capable of dragging him around for our adventure.

“Andras, stop! I’m so tired. Let me melt into the floor.”

“Then... what am I supposed to do? Like... be alone?” I ask. “Be unloved?”

“Go pester someone else. I need to take a shower and then sleep the rest of the day away.”

“I don’t even care if you smell. That’s how bored I am.”

Oliver doesn’t seem to care about my concerns as I sigh and step out into the hallway where I look for my next vic... friend.

A particularly perky junior starts walking by until they see me before crying, “I don’t have any money!” and scurrying off.

It... weirdly makes me feel like a bully, which I think is unjustified and uncalled for.

That's fine. I will find someone else to enjoy the day with since everyone else has "better" things to do.

After wandering around and deciding that I don't know where else to go, I head over to the library.

"Hello," I say as I saunter up to the librarian's desk.

The man who I've talked to, oh... once in my life while plotting his murderer for *much* longer than our conversation, stares at me.

"Hi?"

"Don't be concerned. I promise I didn't consider stuffing your body in the closet. It was much too tall anyway. Haha!"

The man has gone from curious to confused to minorly horrified. It's all quite fascinating how fast his emotions change!

"Chase, people used to make fun of me when I was a teen... I thought aliens could possibly be real... where they'd invade your body, take over, and wear your flesh. They'd laugh at me, tell me that aliens aren't real. I forgot about it... until you came back," he says.

"What the fuck, man? Does it look like I'm out here phoning home and probing people? Fine, I'll find someone else to speak to."

I see a group of juniors sitting at a table and hurry over to them. There are four young women around twenty or so and one guy that's about the same age. He's clearly enjoying the undivided attention as they giggle about something he says a moment before I slide into the only empty chair.

"Hello," I purr then toss them the "I'm so fucking hot" look that Chase had to have perfected being the proud owner of this face.

"Hey, Chase," one says with a huge smile.

"It's so great having you back," another says, while the guy glowers at me now that I have all of the attention.

“Aren’t you seeing Bastian?” he asks, like he wants to prove that I am already spoken for.

“I am! Isn’t he adorable? You guys never bullied him, right? If you did...” I run a finger over my neck, and they all laugh like I’m joking.

“I’ve never really talked to him,” the guy says.

“He’s delightful to talk to. Now what are you guys doing?” I ask.

“Studying. Can you help us?”

“Of course!” I say a moment before she slides a paper over to me that I have absolutely no interest in reading. “It’s C.”

“C isn’t an option.”

“C ya later, fuckers,” I say as I get up to find someone more entertaining to talk to. I mean... I may be bored but I’m not *that* bored.

I head back to the main house and wander through the common area when I chance upon Soren looking at the board games. After I pick him up, he wraps around my neck as I try to figure out who I could possibly pester now when I realize that there is only one option left.

Throwing the bedroom door open, I burst into the room and face my archnemesis.

“Roman.”

“Can you ever just knock?”

“I have searched this place high and low looking for someone, *anyone* to speak with, and you are my final victim.”

“Lucky me,” he mutters as he remains seated on his bed where he’s shining his new sword. He weirdly keeps eyeing my sword while he does so like there’s some part of him that might be drawn to the sword that is one hundred percent mine.

“Roman, I would like you to entertain me,” I say.

“I would prefer I didn’t.”

“Tell me your deepest darkest secret.”

He slowly lowers his sword and looks over at me. “Sometimes I think about the fact that if I’d gone to meet Bastian that day, you’d still be stuck in a bottle somewhere and I wouldn’t have to look you in the face like I am right now.”

“That sounds like a nightmare! Who wouldn’t want to peruse my lovely new face?” I ask, clearly aghast. “But look at it this way, I brought a game for us to play!”

I hold up the box for *Pretty, Pretty Princess* that was busy collecting dust on the lowest shelf in the common area. It’s obviously made for little children, but right at this moment, forcing Roman to play it with me is the only thing I can think of doing.

I whip out the board and place it on the ground before pulling Soren off. I set him on one side and motion toward Roman to sit on the other. He refuses to move, which is rather ridiculous when I’m offering to waste a part of my life playing a game with him.

The game comes with multiple pieces of jewelry from clip-on earrings, bracelets, rings, and necklaces that each player is supposed to acquire as the game goes on. So while Roman’s busy being hot and cold, I grab one of the pairs of clip-on earrings and clip them onto Soren who wears them with pride. Then I drape a pink bracelet around his neck and stick the ring on the tip of his tail.

“Roman, how can you see this and not want to play with us?” I ask. “Look how pretty, pretty Soren looks right now.”

“There is absolutely *nothing* that could get me to play this game with you right now.”

“Nothing?” I ask.

“Absolutely nothing.”

“What about a date with Oliver?”

He scoffs so loud and so forcefully that Soren *jumps*. I think he’d fallen asleep with his new bling on. “No.”

“I can turn Bastian against you in a heartbeat. All the shit you put him through? All I need to do is open his eyes to how awful of a person you are as I question if you could *actually* be redeemed and sometimes... I think not.”

He’s gritting his teeth, telling me that I’m slowly winning this battle.

“Sit down,” I order. “If you win, I’ll give you your sword back.”

“Fuck,” he hisses as he sits down across from me.

“Now spin and become pretty, Roman.”

“I’m going to make you regret this so fucking hard.”

“The goal of the game is to get all the pretty jewelry and then the crown,” I say. “We need to pretty that face of yours up so maybe *someone* would overlook your personality.”

Roman spins it with pure hatred urging it along. It goes around so many times that I start to think that it’ll never stop, which is likely his plan, but when he lands on the clip-on earrings, I pass them over. He tosses them on the ground like he honestly thinks he’s going to get away without wearing them.

“Put them on,” I say.

“Fuck you.”

“Put them on.”

“You never said I had to put them on!”

“CLEARLY you must wear them,” I growl as I grab him. He tries to push against me, but I get him in a headlock and clip an earring to his right ear and then his left as he spews a fun variety of cusswords at me a moment before the door opens and Bastian looks in at us.

“I heard a struggle and no one answered when I knocked...”

He seems oddly confused as Soren looks over at him while decked out in his princess gear while Roman and I roll around. Honestly, he should get one look at Roman’s new earrings and understand what’s happening.

“What is happening?” he whispers, somehow not getting it.

“Roman’s on his way to being a pretty, pretty princess,” I explain.

“Uh... huh. I had... I’d come to get you, Andras, but now I’m not so sure.”

Roman yanks the earrings off and throws them at me with force as they pelt me between the eyes. “Get out of here.”

“Bastian, do you care about me again?”

He blushes, which makes me feel so much better after being locked in a room with Roman.

“I never stopped caring about you. I just said I was busy.”

“Fine, fine, I’ll keep playing with Roman,” I say. “We’re having a wonderful time, in case you’re curious.”

“It sure looks like he’s enjoying it. Now come on.”

“Me?” I ask. “Little ol’ me who you threw to the side so quickly?”

For some reason he’s blushing even harder now. “Yes, you. Come on.”

I quickly get to my feet and hurry after him. “Sorry, Roman, I know you were having a ton of fun, so maybe Soren will keep playing with you.”

Soren looks horrified by this idea and rushes after me where he wraps around my ankle. I take Bastian’s hand, having no idea what we’re off to do, but I know that as long as I’m with him, it doesn’t really matter.

“I had a dreadful time without you,” I say as he slips his fingers between mine.

“You did? What could have happened that would be so awful in the... what? Three hours I left you alone?”

“Well, first I tried conning Oliver into spending time with me, but he was too busy festering on his bedroom floor. It was really weird, don’t ask. THEN I tried getting the librarian to talk to me, but he was weirdly hung up on the idea that I thought about stuffing him in the closet. And then this group wanted me to do their work for them, which... I’m definitely not paid enough for. So thankfully, Roman saw me wandering around and was like ‘Yo, bro. This is my favorite game.’ Of course I couldn’t turn him down!”

“Of course not! I mean, when would you ever have a chance to roll around with my brother and put earrings on him again?” he asks.

“Right? So I couldn’t deny him such a fun bonding time,” I say as I notice Dr. Ness walking toward us. He looks down at our hands and Bastian’s face is horribly on fire. It’s adorable. And when Dr. Ness says hi, Bastian can’t seem to remember an adequate response to it.

“If you’re bored, Roman’s having a board game night in his room,” I inform him before Bastian drags me off outside. I assume he’s taking me as far away from the public as he can get as he takes me out the back gate. Beyond the parking lot is a large grassy area that he leads me over to. Since it’s around six, the sun is low in the sky.

There’s no one out here but us and what looks like a blanket lying in the grass.

“What is this?” I ask.

“S-Sit down,” he says as he lets go of my hand.

“Are we having a picnic?” I ask in surprise.

“Well... you’ve taken me to the movies and stuff, and... I never got to thank you for how special you made me feel,” he says. “So, I wanted to do something special... and I know it’s not much—”

“This is the best thing I’ve ever seen,” I whisper as I drop down on the blanket right there.

Bastian looks embarrassed as he kneels across from me. “It’s... not really. It’s not that big of a deal. I wanted to do more but I just felt like there was a lot going on, so I thought... I’d just do this. It’s silly, I know.”

“I love it,” I say.

Bastian glances up at me. “Really?”

“Really, really,” I say. “So is it like a picnic?”

“Yeah, I guess... I don’t know! I just...” He opens the backpack and hands me a small container that I open. Inside are five tiny pieces of popcorn.

“Oh wow, these look delic—” I freeze as I glance up to find him looking me in the eyes as he pours steaming hot chili out of a soup thermos into a bowl. He continues to watch me as he screws the lid back on and holds his chili up to blow on.

“What do you have there?” I ask eagerly.

“Popcorn,” he says as he takes a bite before “Mmm”ing.

“That’s awfully funny-looking popcorn. Maybe you should let me have a bite to make sure it’s safe for you to eat,” I say.

“What, you think someone might have poisoned me?” he asks. “I just made it so I’m sure that’s not the case.”

“But what if?”

He dips his spoon in and takes another bite. “I... nope, tastes *delicious*. Mmm. I got you your favorite. Just like you got me. Five pieces of popcorn.”

“The torture you put me through...” I whisper. “You stuffed me into a tiny bott—”

“STOP! No! I brought you a bowl,” he says.

“Wow, that was a fast and efficient way to get fed.” I take the bowl he offers me like it’s a precious and breakable item. He looks so pleased that I can’t help giving him a wink before taking the spoon and putting a spoonful in my mouth.

The flavors absolutely burst in my mouth. “This is phenomenal,” I enthuse.

“I’m glad you like it... was it worth being stuck alone for *hours*?”

“I would suffer with Princess Roman again for this.”

Bastian grins. “I’m astounded you got earrings on him.”

“Right? I think he knew how fashionable he looked with them on,” I tease.

“I bet. The real question is how did you get earrings to stay on a snake?”

“I’m just that good.”

The look he gives me tells me that he’s not quite sure about that.

We talk as we eat and when we’re finished, I push the bag and containers to the side. Sinking down on the blanket, I pull Bastian down beside me. He rolls into me, throwing a leg over one of mine as I wrap my arms around his waist and draw him close.

“We even get to watch the sunset,” I say.

“Maybe if your sketchy snake wasn’t in the way I could see it better,” he says as Soren freezes in the middle of scooting across Bastian’s chest.

“You hurt his feelings.”

“Not surprising,” he says as he sets his head on my chest.

I hold him tightly, wondering how I could have ended up with such a special person by my side. And all the rest of this? The blanket, the chili, the sunset? What did I ever do to end up this lucky?