

-Date 1-

“I hope you weren’t waiting too long.” A deep voice spoke from behind. I turned my head to see a lavishly dressed tiger stepping out of an equally stylish car. His suit was a soft black 3 piece with some darker embroidery along his hips that wrapped along torso and to one of his shoulders, mimicking a type of vine. Based on how it fit him, I’d say it was custom tailored as well. His glare was piercing and reminded me that I was the person he was talking to.

“O-oh! No not at all! I was actually just about to get on my phone and message you, uhm, Ryko, right?” I asked, not feeling confident to admit that I felt stood up a few minutes ago. Although he’s attractive as hell, fashionable lateness doesn’t mean 30 minutes! We had been chatting online for a while, trying my hand at online dating and we actually hit it off. He’s a bit showy and has the charm of an apex predator, which doesn’t fit a human very well. Ryko nodded as he walked up to me, taking my hand swiftly and escorting me inside.

“You could have at least gotten our table, cutie. You didn’t have to wait for lil old me.” He slyly made his way past the room of people and stepped to his table. In all honesty it was crowded inside and I felt underdressed. It didn’t help that the reservation was in his name and I was still in the mindset of being left.

“Well I just didn’t wanna be sitting here. What took you so long anyway?” I asked, watching as he basically beat the waitress to his table. Did... Did he pay for a specific one? It was in the center of the room and directly beneath the shimmering chandelier and just a few steps from the bar with a lot of space between the other tables. Once again, a creeping feeling of inadequacy makes me shutter. I could feel Ryko’s gaze not let up for a second as he welcomed me to sit down, pulling out my chair. As I sat, his nose lowered to my curly black hair, sniffing it lightly. I looked up at him and saw a smirk across his face.

“I was just dealing with an ex of mine, he found out that I had moved on from him and decided to cause problems.” He said, walking to his chair without offering

an explanation. I was tempted to ask him about why he just smelt my hair but hearing about an ex on a date is never a good thing.

“Oh that sucks. What happened?” He seemed to smile at my reaction, amused by my curiosity as he shrugged. His paw then rose to point to his fangs as he smiled.

“Well I ate him. He was a rabbit after all.” He smiled as though what he was saying wasn’t a terrifyingly viable thing that could happen. His smile didn’t fade as I very visibly reacted. He then laughed as though a joke was told between the two of us. Was he joking? I couldn’t ask the question before a waitress walked up to us. I hadn’t even looked at the menu yet!

“Hello I am Yvonne and I will be serving you two today. What can I get you guys to drink to get us started?” She asked the question to the both of us though my eyes traced the menu urgently. I could have sworn I was ready for this date but as soon as one thing went against my mental script, it snowballed out of my control!

“We’ll have a Bloody Mary and a Sangria. Thank you.” Ryko smiled at her. Although I’ve yet to hear a tiger purr, his ability to roll his Rs made me second guess the notion entirely. She quickly jotted it down with a shared smile and bowed her head slightly.

“Ok the bar will make your drinks shortly and would you like some time to decide on what to eat?” She asked, now only looking at Ryko, who didn’t spare me a glance before nodding his head. She ended up walking off before Ryko shifted his gaze to me, not saying a thing as I still looked at him in confusion and glanced at the menu in indecision.

“You seemed like you were having some trouble. I hope you don’t mind.” He smiled at me, his head now held by his paw as he glared at me from across the table.

“Why did you order those?” I asked. Admittedly I was stalling as I came to terms with the menu. He insisted that he would pay for the food on the date but even the cheapest option was practically a loan for me. I can’t expect him to pay for this just to show off.

“I’ll take whichever you won’t drink. Now what will you be having? I heavily recommend the wagyu, if not that then the japanese bluefish tuna is also quite the catch from what I’ve been told. Admittedly I’m not much of a seafood person so I cannot speak to its flavor.” He smiled, only giving the menu a cursory glance before sharing eye contact once more. There’s no way he just *conveniently* offers the most expensive menu items on the planet is there?

“You’re so much fun, Mikeal. I hardly have to ask to know what you’re feeling.” His unyielding smile now caught me off guard. Not only was this guy late to a restaurant to bankrupt me, but now he’s a psychic? He seemed to catch my irritation, much to my surprise and continued talking. “I don’t mean to be insulting. Your face is simply much more expressive than you seem to be aware of. If you’re worried about the prices then I assure you it’s of no issue. I told you I’m paying for us today. Unless you wish to buy 5 of everything on the menu, I have no intention of stifling your hunger.” He smiled through the words as though it were normal behavior.

“Well just because you’re willing doesn’t mean you should. And you do know I was fine with the park date idea, right? You didn’t have to spend this much on me. For a first date too, no less.” I told him. I’ve mentioned several times that I’d rather just spend quality time with a person rather than being super performative and showboaty. The very same tiger before me insisted that he should show me what he’s truly like, rather than some hopeless romantic who falls for anyone. Though now that I see how he's treating me, I’m debating which I’d like more from him. He hasn’t looked away from me at all during this and I feel like I’m going to shrink in on myself.

“You’re better than a park walk, Mikeal. You can expect these types of meals often if you decide on me as your mate... No, humans don’t *do* mates, do they? Silly me, I forgot!” Ryko smiled slyly, though his eye contact remained unbroken. This alone assures me that he in fact, did not forget. Was he doing all of this try and... Huh??

“W-wait did you actually want to like... Be mates? I thought you only do that with others in a species?” I asked the question, though with the gaze of the tiger those social rules seemed to fade. His smile confirmed this idea further.

“Nonsense! It was only a slip of the tongue, think nothing more of it, my little fawn.” He smiled at the nickname, of which I’d yet to hear from him. Didn’t that mean female deer? Before I could ask him once more about this, the waitress came back with two red drinks and handed the Sangria to me while he got the Bloody Mary. Why did she assume I’m a sangria person?

“Are you two ready to order your food?” The waitress asked, looking at him expectantly while he simply shifted his gaze to me. As he did so, she did as well, suddenly putting me on the spot as I realized I still hadn’t decided on my order.

“Oh right! Uhh, I’ll uh...”

“He’ll have an order of your medium rare wagyu ribeye with a side of mushroom bordelaise and if we could get your cauliflower cheese bread to share then that would be great. That will be all.” He smiled through it all, once more shifting the waitress’ attention from me as she seemed to jot down his every word. After bowing her head slightly, she briskly walked off. Ryko seemed to remember my existence after she had left, chuckling at what I could only assume to be my expression. “You don’t *normally* spend so much time on the menu, do you?” He mocked, his chin returning to the striped paws as he tilted his head at me. I shook my head slightly, trying to remind myself that I have my own autonomy despite what this night is convincing me of.

“Well usually whenever I order something it’s within my price range. Why’d you not order yourself anything?” I asked, realizing he did all that while leaving his own food out of the question. He smiled again at the question as if it was done in attempts to amuse him.

“I told you before, I ate before I got here! Now I have no problem watching you eat in fact. It’s the main reason I brought you here.” He explained, though once again not acknowledging the unsettling horror that it carried. I don’t want to ask about an ex on a date, but wait what did he mean watch me eat? Was he trying to

deflect? Based on the twists of my face, I'm assuming he caught onto my realization. Laughing once more, he took a sip of his bloody mary before speaking.

"I'd rather not speak ill of someone who isn't here to defend himself. Now drink, I want to make sure you're happy with it." He said, still not responding to the part that I wanted him to respond to. Though before I noticed it, I had already lifted the drink to my lips, not even realizing that I just obeyed him. Though I continued to drink it nonetheless, I was surprised by the taste of wine after not having it for a while.

"I figured a sangria was best for someone who doesn't drink wine often. Was I correct in my assumption?" He watched my face carefully, now leading me to focus on my expression much more than before, contemplating if I told him how long ago I'd had wine. I don't think I ever told him that. Maybe he just assumed by my face, most adults don't do that with alcohol and I'm already easy to read. Let's not jump to any conclusions.

"Are you being serious?" I finally asked him, trying to keep my face as solid as possible, though I was met with the same smiling face of the tiger nonetheless.

"What do you mean?" He said it in almost a sing-songy voice, still smiling.

"Eating him."

The tiger didn't falter in his smile, though I did see a fast flick of one of his ears. I should have done research into tiger behaviors before I went on this date!

"Would you be uncomfortable if I was telling the truth?" He asked me. I felt a sudden shift within me. The undying eye contact and smiling face had gone unlabeled in my mind though as he posed the question with an extraordinarily dry tone, I recognized the position I felt myself in. I felt like I was being hunted. But he said he was trying to be mates with me, would he try and eat someone he was trying to mate? Then again, I am human and he also said he ate his ex. How much of this tiger should I just ignore? This glare is undeniable but I could easily just be misreading a predator. For all I know, this could just be how he is, and I'm just being cruel. Am I making excuses? He seems like a good guy, should I really be treating him like a predator? Maybe he just has an off sense of humor? The sudan

movement on the opposite end of the table shook me out of my thoughts. Ryko suddenly straightened his body, raising his paws next to his head and smiled widely with closed eyes.

“Rest assured, Mikeal, I was indeed joking. I was only late by 26 minutes and some change, that’s hardly enough to properly dispose of an entire body, even if it was the body of a rabbit. You can calm down now.” He laughed about it and as soon as he closed his eyes, I felt my body loosen considerably. Yeah this is much more preferable. Even though he’s clearly doing this in an attempt to soothe my worries, I’ll still keep an eye on him for this. As with most tigers, he’s extremely large. I likely couldn’t take him in a fight if push comes to shove... What am I even thinking about? I’m sure he’s fine.

“Yeah it’s just a bit of a weird thing to joke about, don’t you think?” He swiftly returned to his previous gaze, though now it felt softer. He wasn’t as set on glaring, now sparing me to look around every so often as he spoke.

“No. Being a tiger, I’m aware of the effect I have on some species. It used to be an inside joke with him, though I can see how it can be misinterpreted from someone else. Oh looks like your food is here.” Ryko smiled, gesturing with his chin to the waitress who was slowly making her way over with a tray of food. She was a good distance away, though I suppose a tiger would be able to see her from however far she may be. Actually, why shift focus from our discussion? We still have time to talk before she gets here, was he deflecting again?

“Stop looking at me so accusingly, Mikeal. I mean well.” He laughed as I looked at him with some slight irritation which he clearly was privy to. I seriously need to relax.

The rest of the meal wasn’t as awkward as I thought. True to his word, he insisted on watching me eat the exquisite food. He was still a lot more lenient on eye contact, so that’s a relief but he only took a single stick of bread, even then only taking a few bites out of it. Despite him saying that eating his ex was a joke, that just meant he still hasn’t told me why he wasn’t eating. It could be the case of him

not wanting to dump his bank account on the first date. I remember talking to him online but meeting him in person was a much different experience than I thought. The Ryko I spoke to online was a less talkative person, every now and then sparing a day or two to talk but insisting that I message him whenever I want so that he can have something to read when he's available. He also wasn't very eager to share his own life, insisting on knowing everything about me that he could. It came to a point where I realized I knew nothing about his family so I asked and he offered a physical date. I made sure I didn't spill *all* my info to him, he is still a new person in my life but I found myself spilling it simply to fill in space. He wasn't the most timely responder and I found myself trying to almost appeal to him in a way. He humored it, though it still built up to the same realization that this is one sided. I tried to ask him about his family as I ate but he seemed to disengage with it afterwards, flicking his ear and laughing about how his parents aren't going to make the food taste any better. I asked about siblings and he shared that he was an only child. I tried to get him to talk about any hobbies of his and looking back on it, I feel really stupid.

"So do you have any hobbies you do?" I asked, taking another bite of the steak as I finished the question, planning on chewing my way through his response. He looked away as he thought about it, suddenly landing on an idea as his face lit up.

"...Oh yeah, you said you watched horror movies a lot, right? Recently I was able to watch that 1980s horror movie you recommended."

"Oh really? What'd you think of it? Did you like the ending?"

How did I not notice yet *another* deflection? God he's so consistent at this but why? I've been trying to keep myself open but it's completely unreciprocated and somehow I keep falling for it. It came to a point where I realized I finished my food, suddenly dissatisfied with the portion I was given. Once again, my face seemed to display my thoughts on a screen as Ryko responded.

"You're welcome to the dessert menu if that would satisfy you." He offered it with a smile across his face. I was still set on making this date work. In all other attempts to get close to someone, it ended horribly. In the worst way possible, I was at the end of the line and Rtko was one of the first and only people who actually

talked to me and engaged in conversation outside of some booty call or one night stand. I wouldn't feel right ending this date here.

"Hey, Ryko?" I asked his name as if we weren't sitting across one another for the past few hours. With a curious smile on his face, he tilted his head at me.

"Mikeal?" He responded in almost a mockingly similar tone.

"It's only 7. Do you still have time to do something else after this?" I asked, looking at my phone and quickly pulling up an app. Ryko seemed surprised by the question, his smile fading as his head tilted further, his eyebrows lowering in confusion.

"Something else? What did you have in mind...?" He asked, sounding much different now that he wasn't in control and even leaning forwards as if I would give up this feeling. I smiled and tried not to let the feeling go to my head.

"Well once we're done here, I'll show you. It's a short walk." I tried to reassure him while not giving too much away. He seemed taken aback, inspecting me closer as if he could read the address in my eyes and his face set in an expression of confusion and wonder. Soon enough, he nodded. I celebrated internally as I tried to set this up on my phone. I could feel Ryko watch me intently as if he could read the screen from where he was sitting. He didn't ask anymore questions, leaving me to smile at what could potentially be a date much more my speed.

Leaving the most expensive building I've ever not spent money on, we were able to take a walk down the road. A lot of lights were still out, being winter time and close to the holidays. I held Ryko's wrist which was much larger than what my hand could grab but he followed nonetheless as we made it to a soft library I frequented in a lot full of much more convenient restaurants. Many of which were closed aside from the bars and such, but the library was open just as I thought. Stepping inside, there was a sudden silence. I continued to lead Ryko to one of the corners of the library and greeted the librarian, who I've come to know pretty well. All the while, Ryko looked around curiously as if the walls of the library would fall to reveal a much more extravagant building, but the decades old books remain. After a

short exchange, I offered Ryko the medium sized coffee cup. Even though it was medium to me, it was dwarfed as he cautiously grabbed it.

“They give free hot chocolates to visitors on holidays. Come this way, see that little corner with the wizard poster above it?” I asked quietly, leading him once more to the corner which had a large assortment of bean bag chairs, benches, cushions and much more. It was meant to be for shows or stuff the library held though when not in use, it made for a pretty cozy hang out spot. I set down the coffee cup and welcomed him to sit down next to me. He continued to look around in such odd bewilderment, holding the disposable cup with both paws as though one weren’t encompassing enough. His expression was practically unreadable, but I decided to take away some of the wonder and simply explain my attempt.

“You don’t really talk about yourself a lot, so I wanted to make sure we were still able to get to know one another by the end of the date. This place doesn’t close until 10:30 so we have all the time in the world. The workers are also the only people here and I promise you they don’t care.” I laughed under my breath. Even though we were still the only customers in here, it still felt like proper etiquette to be quiet. Ryko looked at me, then his coffee mug and back at me, still looking like he was expecting something, while not saying anything. “...Ryko..?” I asked, inching my hand to lightly tap his wrist, wondering if he was even ok. This wasn’t the normal reaction to have, right? Responding to my touch, he looked down and quickly held my hand with one large paw, suddenly smiling and speaking quietly as well.

“I’m sorry I was just wondering how I never heard of this place. You come here often, right? I always wondered what it was.” He smiled.

“What do you mean?” I laughed in return, genuinely unsure of what he meant by that. He shrugged it off, exchanging looks once more to the cup, then me, then to the hand that he was holding. Suddenly, he let go.

“Sorry, I was caught off guard. You wanted to get to know me, right? Admittedly I was curious how much I could evade your questions while still keeping you. Seems I’ve been found out, my little fawn!” He laughed about it, leaning back in his bean bag chair while slowly sipping from the hot cup.

“What is that? I don’t think I fit the bill of a female deer, do you?” My question seemed to catch him off guard once more, looking at me in utter curiosity.

“Female deer? A fawn is... A *doe* is a female deer. A fawn is separate from that.” He smiled, seemingly enjoying my misunderstanding. Not taking the bait, I keep my silence, watching him carefully as I take a sip. He sighed as he continued to speak. “Ok fine, I’ll explain. A fawn is a young deer. It’s also a response to try and quell conflict by pleasing a person. I thought it was a fitting name for you.” He smiled, not bothering to evade the question anymore as he finally answered a question. Ha! I’m advancing my mental tactics!

“What? How is that like me?” I asked for both definitions of the word. From what I know, he shouldn’t have seen me in any conflict to label that as my fear response. Also why a baby deer? I’m an adult man.

“You may not remember this as vividly as I do, but when we were first talking, I was having a relatively bad day. You seemed to somehow understand that through the texts and rush to compliment me instead. It was at that moment that I wanted to pursue you.” He smiled, much more relaxed, not even looking at me. Now that we were next to one another rather than across, he only gave me a passing glance as he spoke, mostly just looking at his cup. I wasn’t sure if I explained to him that I was having a bad day too. Unlike the fear response, I just wanted someone to tell me something I needed to hear myself. Though we seemed to take different things from that story.

“Yeah I remember something like that. What about the young deer thing?” I asked, He gained a familiar smirk across his lips as he took an especially long sip of his hot chocolate.

“You look as tasty as a young deer. I could just eat you right up!” he laughed, suddenly laying an arm over my shoulder and leaning me over to him, causing me to lay between both of our bean bags and my head against his chest. I was careful not to drop my cup on him, seeing his suit that most definitely cost more than my house. Resting against him, I could feel myself freeze, though he kept moving as normal, his large arm wrapping around my shoulders and grabbing the cup from me and setting

it down. It was oddly reassuring to know that we shared a similar fear. As his paw now stroked my body, he spoke softly.

“I take it you also want to know about the previous questions I avoided, right? My parents, my hobbies, my ex?” He asked, leaning down to me as he spoke. I could feel his nose brush against my hair, his warm breath just above me. I was tempted to move but he was holding me securely, clearly he wanted me here... I wasn't against it either. I already told him that I'm a physical touch guy, was this just him initiating that? Why not humor him? I left the thought at that, leaning into him and allowing my weight to sink into his chest, partially surprised by the soft material of the suit, wondering how his fur would compare.

“I'll go ahead and talk about my hobbies.” He continued on his own, reminding me that this was a living breathing creature and not just a stuffed animal I can sleep on. “You already know I'm pretty athletic, but I'm actually just a computer guy. I deal with national security so often that I tend to over-correct and go to the gym far more than necessary. I'd say it was rather worth it though if I can catch prey like this.” I could practically hear his smirk as he flexed his arm around me, lightly tightening against me while also making the sleeves of the suit audibly scream as the tension rode through. I was far too flustered to properly react, though he very clearly sensed this. He leaned down once more and continued to smell my hair. I could hear him set the cup down as another paw held my shoulders, slowly lowering me so that I'd have my head on his lap. It was surprising how much I let him do. Though with his expression, I'm sure he was significantly less surprised, one paw under my head as his other arm which previously held me, now weighted down my chest.

“This how you expected this date to go?” I asked him, admittedly I myself just wanted to hear him talk about himself but this was an added bonus, feeling how soft he could be with me. A problem with several predators like tigers, bears, or even some others like elephants have to date within their own weight as to not accidentally wound their partner.

“I could ask you the same thing, Mikeal. I'll have you know I've also never dated a human before. What about you?” This actually caused me to think. I've

clearly dated humans before but I've only recently started dating outside of my species.

"You're by far the most dangerous date I've ever been with. Outside of that one dealer I dated in college." I rolled my eyes at the reminder, which Ryko took a lot of enjoyment in.