

Miscommunication

By C. Jade Wyton

Jerome is invited out to see a movie by the girl of his dreams. But it's not a date. It can't be! There is no way she'd like him back, right? They're just friends... right?

Contains some suggestive content.

~~~~~

It had been a long, exhausting day at work. But Jerome didn't mind.

Of all the labouring he'd done since his first job as a young teen just shy of ten years ago, the work in this factory had been some of the most pleasant he had ever done.

Perhaps not the *easiest* work he had ever done. But the most pleasant— He felt like a *person*, here, rather than a number.

And he could be his truest self; unlike his old home, nobody here ever questioned why he looked so much like his twin sister. Here, they simply assumed they were fraternal, and not once-identical.... No, they never questioned it. Never looked twice, or asked a single question about it. And even though he wasn't out he knew from watching that young boy who worked in the cafe —Tee—that the people of this town would accept him if they ever *did* find out what he was.

'Stonescale!' the voice of Jerome's boss, one most distinguished Alistair Highstone, called out from the factory door.

'Me, sir?' called a reply from the back of the factory. It was Boris, Jerome's brother; he leapt on top of a table to peer over the crowd at his boss. 'Or Jerome?'

'Jerome,' Alistair replied.

'Eyup!' Jerome acknowledged, placing down the heavy crate he had been carrying and, petting the splinters from his talons onto his thick denim overalls, made his way over to the well-dressed enthrar. He addressed the older man warmly, with a genuine smile and a respectful nod. 'Mr Highstone. To what do I owe the pleasure?'

'You have a visitor,' Alistair chuckled; stepping aside to reveal... *his daughter*.

Jerome felt himself blush as he saw Theodosia Highstone —beautiful, wonderful Theodosia, wearing that dress she loved so much and with her feathery crest tied back a pink-and-orange ponytail— standing in the factory's entrance way.

She saw Jerome and her hands found their way behind her back as her ears perked up and she shifted from foot-to-foot in a way that made her dress bounce and spin at her ankles. 'Hello, Jerome,' she greeted; her voice low and coy as she grinned at him.

Jerome felt like there were a thousand rocks in his throat, choking him. 'Th-Theo! Hi. Uh, what are you... doing here?'

Theodosia's crest gave a twitch in its scrunchie as she giggled, seemingly at Jerome's stuttering, and she began to rock on her heels, making an exaggerated motion with her head as she spoke. '*Peaaarl* has gotten some vouchers for the cinema in the city,' she told him. 'Four of them, half price tickets. She invited me and Olive, and *Oliiiiive*... suggested I invite you.'

'*Me?*' Jerome's mouth felt dry— And for once, it wasn't from the warm factory air. 'Y-You want *me* to go with you?'

Theodosia giggled, lifting a finger to tap against the tip of Jerome's snout. 'Of course! Why wouldn't I want you to come? Silly thing.'

Jerome knew he was blushing; though he hoped Theodosia (and her father— Oh, gods, don't let her *father* see!) wouldn't notice.

He didn't think he could bear it if she realised how much he liked her. Because if she didn't return those feelings —and there was such a real chance she wouldn't, with her stunning beauty and his awkward plainness— he might lose her friendship. And that would devastate him beyond anything he could imagine.

'We'd have to leave now to make it,' Theodosia commented, her hands suddenly behind her back again as she grinned at him and rocked back and forth. 'Well. Now, if you wanted to get changed into something nice. Though I don't mind if you don't. I think your uniform is *endearing!*'

Jerome thought he might faint at the compliment. Especially so when Alistair laughed.

'Uh, I don't know,' Jerome glanced to Alistair. 'Sir? May I leave early?'

'You have my blessing,' Alistair confirmed, lifting a hand to motion to the door. 'You've done good work today, and deserve a night to relax.'

A cough to clear his throat so his voice didn't break, and Jerome gave a small nod. 'Thank you, sir. I appreciate it. I'll be in early tomorrow.'

'No, lad, that's not necessary!' comforted Alistair as his hand moved from its motion to pet Jerome's back. 'Your usual start is fine. You go have a good time. *Keep my girl in good company, hm?*'

A blush spread over Jerome's cheeks as Alistair leant in and dropped his voice, sounding almost as if he was aware of Jerome's feelings.... But Jerome knew that couldn't *possibly* be true! He was sure if the esteemed Alistair Highstone knew that a plain and common wage-earner was interested in his precious daughter, he would not *encourage* them to go out together.... Would he?

No. There was no way.

He was protective enough when the upper class boys attempted to court her; there was no way in any of the three heavens that Alistair would allow such a dull-scaled man with calloused and rough hands from blue-collar work to pursue Theodosia.

So when Alistair gave Jerome a friendly *thumping* on the back, all Jerome could do was return to him a nervous-but-genuine smile and allow himself to be turned towards the door.

He was barely out it before Theodosia had wrapped herself around his arm, her soft feathered cheek resting on the top of his head.

'*Theo!*' he chuckled, sheepishly, at the affection. Though he didn't shake her off. He had seen her with her friends many times and knew this was how she always was— It would be more likely to alert her to his feelings if he was to push

her away. So instead, he allowed himself to lean into her touch, just ever-so-slightly, and savoured the feeling of her warm feathers against his scales as respectfully as he could. 'You're not planning on following me home, surely?'

'Why wouldn't I want to follow you home?' she cooed, sounding almost hurt. 'It isn't far! And after you've changed, we can walk to Pearl's house together. You can tell me about your day. How work was? I'd love some time to talk with you, just us, before we meet with the girls.'

Jerome felt his cheeks burn at the suggestion. 'I would have thought you'd find conversation with me to be rather dull?' he commented. 'Compared to Pearl and Olive, I mean. They're much more interesting than I could ever dream of being.'

Theodosia's lips drew tight and she gave an upwards flick of her ears as her brow furrowed and her wings pulled close to her body. 'I think you're plenty of fun,' she said, her voice laced with a sad sort of concern.

Jerome's blush darkened and he found he couldn't meet Theodosia's eye as he walked. Even when he felt her ears brush his cheek as she twitched them again.

'Mm...' he hummed.

And Theodosia gave a sigh. 'I wish you wouldn't speak of yourself that way,' she said. 'I truly wish you wouldn't. It breaks my heart.'

The comment very nearly broke *his* heart, and Jerome mumbled an apology; his free hand rising from his side to place on top of Theodosia's own as he did. 'I'll be kinder to myself,' he promised.

'Thank you,' she replied, softly, her voice edged with a sweet and caring note that made Jerome's scales prickle.

Everything about her was so beautiful. So perfect. He wished, truly, that they could have been together. But he was a labourer, a rough-cut worker, and she was so... soft and precious. Like silk. There was no way she was interested in him in that way; he was lucky enough she considered him a friend.

So he wouldn't push it, and would do all he could to keep himself respectful in her presence. And he would bask in the love of her friendship —a wonderful thing, truly, even if they could never be together— and not take the blessing of her company for granted.

'So... have you girls decided on the movie you want to see?' he asked. 'Or were you going to choose once we got there?'

'Oh, Olive really wants to see *Between Heavens*!' Theodosia chirped, her ears flicking back up in excitement.

'*Between Heavens*?' Jerome echoed, feeling his palms starting to sweat in nerves. 'That's that... new romance, isn't it?'

Giving a happy nod, Theodosia leant firmer against Jerome and giggled. 'It is! How much do you know about it?'

'Uh...' Jerome felt himself blush as he turned the street's corner. He could see his house, now. But he barely registered how close to home he was as Theodosia pressed against him and hugged his arm tight. 'N-Not a lot? I know it's about a woman who falls in love with someone in the afterlife?'

Theodosia nodded, her feathers tickling Jerome's cheek as she did. 'Yes! A man from a different heaven to her own! She's an artist in Alivia's heaven whose lost her inspiration and drive to create, when a man from Adrenos' heaven

accidentally finds his way to her and tells her his stories of adventure. He becomes her muse, inspiring her to create again, and then when he leaves she has to decide if she wants to stay under Alivia's wing, or follow her new love back to Adrenos' realm!

A sweet premise; though Jerome thought it sounded a little predictable. It was clear that she *would* choose to follow her lover, and use their adventures together as her inspiration. Though, he didn't say anything on it as the thought that, if *he* was given a similar choice with Theodosia, there would be no hesitation in his decision. He would choose whichever heaven she preferred.

He shook the thought from his mind and chuckled. 'So, I should dress nice, then?'

'Yes!' Theodosia confirmed. 'It doesn't have to be your *best* clothes, but Olive and Pearl wanted to go to dinner afterwards, and if we're making the trip to the city we want to eat somewhere nice.'

'Understood,' Jerome said with a light laugh. 'I'll make a point not to forget my wallet, then!'

A giggle escaped the woman on Jerome's arm as they reached his front gate, and she finally released his arm so that he could open it.

He held it for her, motioning for her to go through first, and she stepped through with a joyful energy; her dress bouncing with each step and her tail lashing back and forth playfully.

Once she was through she turned to watch Jerome as he followed her. Again, her hands found their way behind her back and she rocked on her heels.

Her energy made Jerome blush, and he paused a moment to just watch her. She noticed him watching and giggled about it, making Jerome's entire body warm with sheepish embarrassment, before she turned away and skipped to Jerome's front door.

'Come on!' she urged, happily. 'I'd hate to be late!'

Jerome thought he wouldn't mind it, if it meant he could look at her a little longer, though he wasn't going to do that to her (or to Pearl and Olive!) and quickly hurried after her.

Just like he had at the gate, he opened the door for her and let her through first.

He tried his absolute best not to blush at her giggle. Though, when he heard his sister call out from the lounge, he felt his cheeks darken deeply.

'Brought a girl over, huh!'

'Hazel! *Hello!* Oh-em-gee, it's been so long!' Theodosia gave a sing-song greeting, clearly very excited to see the woman as her wings lifted up and her feathers puffed out. She glanced to Jerome, smiling so wide it creased her eyes. 'Do you mind if I talk to her while you get changed?'

'Sure,' he said with a nervous chuckle. Then, before he realised what he was saying, he'd made a joke. 'It's not like you were going to follow me upstairs and watch me change, is it?'

Theodosia gave him a brief look, one he was *sure* he misread, before Hazel called to her and she giggled and, with a wave, hurried away.

He could have sworn she had looked almost disappointed at his comment. Though he couldn't imagine it to be true, and he cringed at himself. Clearly, his

joke had overstepped a boundary, and her disappointment was an expression of discomfort.

Shaking his head at himself and making a point to avoid uncomfortable comments like that in future, he made his way upstairs to his room to change out of his work clothes and into something nicer.

He undid his shirt and paused, sniffing at it.

*Ugh.*

Quick as he could be, he stepped from his room and into the bathroom so he could rinse himself off in the shower— It was no more than a minute that he spent, but he felt (and smelt) a whole lot better for it.

He left his work clothes in the hamper and, towel wrapped around himself, slipped back into his room to dress properly.

Choosing out a nice-but-casual outfit, he dried off and dressed himself with speed. And when he made his way back downstairs to his sister and friend, he thought he saw Theodosia's gaze look him up and down before she jumped back up, clapping happily, and held out her hands for him to take.

'You look *amazing!*' she chirped. 'So perfectly *handsome!*'

Jerome tried not to look embarrassed. But it was hard, especially when his sister cackled from her place on the couch and slapped her knee. He bit his tongue, holding back the brotherly urge to tell her where to go and sit on her, and instead just gave her a warning look that made her laugh harder.

A sigh of defeat, and Jerome offered his arm to Theodosia to take again. 'Shall we go?'

'Yes!' Theodosia chirped, clinging to him once more. She gave him a little sniff as they made their way back outside, and commented; 'You smell nice.'

'Um... thanks,' he replied, sheepishly. Unsure how else to respond to such a compliment (but, still glad he had clearly made the correct choice in quickly bathing) he lifted a wing to pet her on the back with. 'I thought that, uh, if you wanted to go somewhere nice... you probably didn't want me smelling terrible.'

'Oh, I didn't think you smelt bad, before!' promised Theodosia. 'There's nothing wrong with being a little sweaty. Girls *like* that.'

The laugh that escaped Jerome was stiff and loud, and he suddenly became *very* aware that he was at risk of becoming *a little sweaty* again. He didn't dare to look at Theodosia as he replied to her. 'I'm sure whatever restaurant the others want to go to won't like it, though.'

'True,' she agreed, simply.

Her grip on his arm squeezed tighter, almost like she was trying to reassure him; though he didn't look at her to confirm it and instead kept his gaze on the street ahead.

It wasn't far to Pearl's house. A ten minute walk, at most.

But ten minutes had the habit of feeling like hours, when one was nervous, and Jerome wasn't sure how to fill the quiet that followed his lack of response to Theodosia laying her head against his while they walked.

She seemed content, at least. And when they were only two streets from Pearl's house, he dared a glance sideways and could see her smiling at him.

The blush that found his cheeks had her giggle, and she finally spoke again.

'Hazel and Boris are always so sweet to me,' she commented. 'What's it like to

have siblings?’

Taken by surprise, Jerome gave a cough to clear his throat. ‘Oh, uh... it’s nice,’ he answered, honestly. ‘Sometimes it can be a little frustrating, but it’s never too bad.’

‘Is it anything like having cousins?’ she asked. ‘How you and Hazel talk... it *seems* quite a bit like how Olive and I are.’

‘I think it’s comparable, yeah,’ Jerome confirmed, a smile finding him. ‘Though, I think you’re lucky; you and her share a lot of the same interests. Me and my sibs don’t really have all that much in common. It makes it harder.’

‘But you still make a point to spend time with them,’ Theodosia pointed out.

‘Well... yeah, of course,’ Jerome cleared his throat again. ‘They’re my family.’

‘That’s *so* sweet.’

‘Well, it’s—’

‘Theo! Jerome!’

The conversation was cut short as Olive’s voice called down the street, and Theodosia lit up bright and excited; releasing Jerome’s arm to flap her wings and wave both hands at her cousin in greeting. Jerome didn’t mind as she rushed ahead to Pearl’s yard to meet the pair, though he followed at a more relaxed pace. By the time he caught up the girls were chatting, jokingly accusing Theodosia of being late and motioning to the taxi that sat patiently in the street.

‘Theo’s not the late one,’ Jerome defended, playfully. ‘I came from work, needed to change and shower. If you have to blame anyone, blame me.’

‘Alright,’ leaning on her gate, Pearl’s snout crinkled in a humoured mock-sowl that made the pale iridescent scales along it shimmer. ‘You’re officially blamed, Jerome.’

‘No!’ Theodosia gasped between giggles. ‘*No!*’

‘Blamed!’ a gem-like claw pointed at Jerome, accompanied by a snort of a laugh before Pearl unlatched the gate and motioned to the taxi. ‘Come on, then. We don’t want to miss the movie. Let’s get hustling.’

Jerome stepped ahead of the three girls, reaching the taxi first so he could open the door for them; an action met with both coos and a jeer.

‘I can close the door on you if you like, Pearl,’ he teased over his shoulder as he helped Theodosia into the vehicle. The softness of Theodosia’s hand in his was a little distracting as he helped her down into the low car... but not distracting enough to stop him offering the same help to Olive after Theodosia scooted into the middle seat.

‘Aw, what a *gentleman!*’ Olive teased, taking his hand and settling down next to Theodosia. ‘See, Theo? I *told* you it was a good idea to invite him!’

Theodosia laughed, muffled as Jerome shut the taxi door, though he could still hear how boisterous and hearty it was.

He turned to Pearl and, with a smile, offered her his hand so he could guide her to the other side of the taxi.

She playfully glared at it, arms crossed, before giving a happy scoff and accepting it. ‘Oh, sure, why not? Let me feel like a member of my class, for once.’

‘Lady Shimmerwing,’ Jerome teased as he got her seated in the car. ‘Are you comfortable, m’lady?’

‘Oh, very much so, peasant, very much so,’ she replied, taking on a

fake-snobbish tone. She made to say something else, but whatever it was made her laugh so hard she couldn't get it out, and she instead doubled over with her snout in a hand to giggle as Jerome shut the door and made to the front passenger seat to take his own place in the car.

The cinema address was confirmed with the driver, and then the girls in the back began chattering away with excitement. It was a wonderful sound, truly, and though Jerome didn't say much he listened with a smile on his lips and a lightness in his heart; just content to see his friends happy.

~~~~~

Jerome was struggling to focus on the movie. He was really, *really* struggling. It wasn't that the movie wasn't interesting —oh, no, it seemed like a great movie!— but for some reason, Theodosia had lifted the arm of the chair that had sat between them so she could shift closer and lay her head on his shoulder; practically cuddling him as they watched the film projected in front of them.

Jerome was trying very, *very* hard to be appropriate. He knew she was cuddly, and that he should have seen this coming before it happened. She always sat practically on top of her friends when she got the opportunity to share a seat with them, and while Pearl and Olive were whispering soft words to each other it left her with nobody else to press against but him. So it shouldn't have been a surprise....

But, still. It made it a *lot* harder to focus on the movie than he had expected. Especially considering that, every time he thought he might be able to ignore that she was clung tight to him, she shifted and her feathers tickled him.

He glanced down as she lay against him, and saw the neck of her dress had shifted with her position; revealing some of her feathered chest. Not a lot, but *just* enough that he could see the crease of her cleavage. He felt himself blush as she gave a contented sigh that made her chest rise and fall. Her feathers fluffing up and laying flat again with the deep breath.

He wondered how far that yellow marking went down her chest.... If it was the same one that ran on the underside of her tail, or if there was a break in the colours somewhere on her body. Did it perhaps mark her thighs?

The idea of what may lay between her legs made him blush, and Jerome swallowed as he imagined Theodosia bare of clothes. Her stomach, her thighs, her hips, her—

He looked back to the movie, heat creeping through his body as he imagined the things hidden within her undergarments, and tried to focus his thoughts onto something more appropriate.

But, seemingly, the movement he'd made had drawn Theodosia's attention, and she glanced to him as the couple on the screen ahead kissed.

'Have you ever kissed a girl, before?' she whispered to him.

And he silently shook his head in response, willing himself not to look like he was a deer about to be run down by a truck.

She giggled, muffling it with her hand as to not disturb the other cinema-goers around them. *'I've never kissed anyone, either.... Though, I think*

I'd like to....'

Jerome swallowed as he felt Theodosia's hand move from her mouth to rest lightly on his thigh; her fingers trailing along a pale line of wear in his pant leg. Finally, he glanced at her, and saw her gentle smile as her half-lidded eyes watched ahead at the on-screen kiss.

Then her gaze flicked back to his, and Jerome quickly looked away; blush creeping from his shoulders to his cheeks as he tried to keep his fins laid flat. He was sure he'd imagined that grin. She couldn't have had any idea how he felt, could she?

'I've heard it's fun,' she whispered. 'Is it something you want to try? I really want to.'

Again, Jerome swallowed, unable to look at her. His heart was beating so hard in his chest he could hear it in his ears, and he was sure that was the reason that he'd misheard Theodosia's tone to be hopeful.

'O... One day, maybe,' he managed. Though, he didn't think it was appropriate to add the thought that he would have very much liked to have tried kissing *her*.

'Well... I hope we get to, soon,' replied Theodosia, causing Jerome to swallow again.

He wished she hadn't said it like that; it made it sound like she wanted....

Theodosia's hand continued to fondle the fabric covering Jerome's leg, and the arousing sensation was so much that he had to place his hand on hers and hold it still so she couldn't continue to unknowingly work him up.

She gave a quiet little hum as he squeezed it softly, and she spread her fingers out so his slipped between them and they clumsily interlocked together.

He saw from the corner of his eye as she looked back at the movie with an almost longing expression and felt a pang in his chest.

Not sure what else to do, or how else to comfort her from that lonely-looking gaze, he put a wing around her and whispered encouragingly; *'I'm... I'm sure it will be soon.'*

Her face softened as she turned it back to him, a small smile returning to her lips. Though, their conversation didn't continue as the credits began to roll ahead of them, and the people around them began to rise to their feet as the lights brightened.

Jerome didn't rush Theodosia, though he found his attention drawn from her to her cousin and friend as they pulled apart and he saw Pearl's hand slip out from where it had been hidden in Olive's overcoat.

No wonder Theodosia had been so intent to put her focus his way for the movie; if someone had slipped their hand into his sister's clothes while out in public, he *also* would have done everything in his power to avoid acknowledging it.

He couldn't help but make a face at the girls as they got up and looked to him, silently asking them *"really?"*

And Pearl made a face back, looking very happy with herself as she returned his look with a wordless *"yep, really."*

He gave her an eye-roll, which earnt a laugh and caught Theodosia's attention. It made Jerome sad that Theodosia pulled herself off his side and rose to give

each of the girls a hug in turn, but he tempered his disappointment and collected the empty popcorn container from her armrest. He said nothing as the girls began discussing where to go for dinner; though he took Olive and Pearl's rubbish from them and stepped ahead to put it all in the bin.

He waited for them at the door, holding it open for them (and the group of girls that preceded them, because it seemed the polite thing to do), and then followed them quietly along as they decided where it was that they wanted to go.

Pearl took out her phone as they walked, opening her GPS app, and took the lead. Olive hurried to keep in pace with her, laughing and teasing as she did... and Theodosia slowed her pace to walk beside Jerome, rather than in front.

Arms finding their way behind her back, she looked to him with a warm smile that practically beamed out of her like a light in the brightly-lit city streets that they stepped into.

'Isn't it funny,' she said, taking on the most matter-of-factly tone she could. 'Just how quickly it gets dark? There was not a sign of sunset before we went in to see our movie, and now street-lights and stars!'

Chuckling, Jerome nodded and let his hands find his pockets. 'You know what's funnier?' he asked, pausing a moment for effect. 'When you watch a movie during the day, and come out, and it's *still light*.'

'Oh I *hate* that feeling!' Pearl called over her shoulder. 'It's *surreal*!'

'Too surreal,' Olive agreed, running a hand through her fluffy cheek. 'It feels like stepping out into the wrong universe!'

'Ooh, imagine if we *did* end up in another universe!' Theodosia chirped, stepping ahead to catch up with her cousin. 'Wouldn't that be fun!'

'I like it here,' Pearl said, simply. 'There's cute girls, here.'

'I'm sure there's *cute girls* in other universes,' snorted Theodosia.

Jerome couldn't help but chuckle, and when Theodosia turned at him to scrunch up her snout in an expression of playful conflict, he spoke up: 'I like the girls we have here, too. I'm sure there's nothing wrong with the ones in other universes, but... the ones here are *particularly* pretty.'

He didn't mean to meet Theodosia's eye as he said it; though he thought he saw a flash of joy in them before Olive shouldered her, nearly knocking her over, and the pair started shoving each other and chattering in a joking, over-exaggerated kind of argument.

The playful fight continued all the way to the restaurant, where they straightened up and took on a much more regal and polite air as they were seated. Jerome followed the girls' leads, as this kind of fancy establishment was quite new to him, and mirrored their address to the staff.

He caught a glance as they were walked past a booth of a photo on the wall, containing both Pearl and Theodosia's father, and knew immediately that the girls had been here often; it was to be assumed with that picture he saw, that their fathers had some sort of investment in this place.

'Alright, it's my turn to shout,' Pearl commented as they took their menus. 'Go nuts.'

'Are you sure?' Jerome asked. 'I can pay for myself.'

Pearl gave a humoured little snort, like she almost doubted it, and shook her head. 'It would *not* be fair for me to pick this place without your input, then

expect you to pay these prices.'

'I'm sure they're not that...' Jerome trailed off as he looked at the prices on the menu, before sucking a hiss of air through his teeth and giving a nod.

The girls all giggled, Theodosia giving him a soft pat on the back.

'Alright,' Pearl flicked through the menu, then pointed at each of her friends in turn. 'Wine for the table? Wine for the table?'

The girls seemed excited, though Jerome gave a little shake of his head. 'You girls can, but I have work in the morning, so no more than a cup for me.'

There was teasing, though no pressure, and as their server returned to take their orders, the girls all settled down.

Though, it only lasted about as long as the bottle of wine did, and by the time they were done with their meal, Jerome found himself with quite the job of herding his friends into their taxi home.

~~~~~

Somehow, even harder than herding his friends into the taxi, was getting Pearl into her own house. She had drunk the most and, being the whimsical person she was, was decently determined to make her way down the street following her neighbour's cat. Jerome just counted himself lucky that Olive and Theodosia had sobered a little on the ride home and waited, flopped into the swinging seat on the front porch, for him to lead Pearl in back from three doors down to the front door where her mother stood shaking her head, ready to take her off his hands.

'Thank you, Jerome,' she commented, opening a wing to brush it over Olive and Theodosia on their seat. 'Come now, girls. All of you in.'

Olive didn't hesitate to follow Pearl into the house; though Theodosia took a moment longer. When Mrs Shimmerwing raised her wing again, Theodosia looked to Jerome, the corners of her lips lifting up and her ears flicking down in a cheeky look. Then, she stepped close enough that Jerome could feel the feathers of her wings brush the scales of his own, and he blushed so deep he heard Mrs Shimmerwing snicker at him.

'Walk me home?' Theodosia asked.

He swallowed as she looked down at him; her arms behind her back as she rocked back and forth on her heels in that same way she always did.

*Her eyes were so beautiful....*

Then she giggled, breaking his nervous trance, and turned to give her friend's mother a wave. 'Goodbye, Mrs Shimmerwing! Jerome's going to walk me home!'

'I see,' she replied, a cheeky grin on her lips; the same that her daughter often gave. 'Well. You two have a good night, then.'

'Uh... we will,' Jerome said, quickly wrapping an arm around Theodosia before she could walk the wrong way off the side of the porch. 'Good night, ma'am.'

The door shut softly, and Jerome's attention was immediately taken by Theodosia as she clung to his side and giggled. 'Come on,' she urged, her voice high and honeyed as she pulled Jerome down the porch steps and through the yard. 'Before Pearl realises we didn't go in with her!'

Humoured, Jerome allowed himself to be lead through the streets without complaint. He didn't even complain when he knew she was taking him the long way back (whether on purpose, or because it was the only path she remembered in the moment, he couldn't be sure). Even though he knew he had to get home so he could be rested for work in the morning, he couldn't help but smile and let Theodosia keep his time, just a little longer, as they talked about nothing in particular.

It was almost disappointing to finally arrive at her house. And his heart felt heavy as he walked her to her door. Though, he chuckled when she didn't let his arm go.

'*Shh!*' she shushed. '*Don't wake them!*'

He knew that "them" meant her parents, and realised she was right; it was well past midnight and they'd both be asleep, by now. Waking them would be impolite.

'*Sorry,*' he whispered, humoured, as he couldn't free his arm from Theodosia's grip. He realised, then, as she failed to get her key into the lock, that she was *just* unsteady enough she might not make it to bed on her own; so he took the key from her and helped her inside.

As he led her through the door, her lashing tail knocked over one of the shoes placed nearby, making it thump quietly onto its side, and he had to hold back a chuckle as she mistakenly shushed *him* again about it. And then she shushed him again, even though the *click* of the front door as he carefully shut it was completely unavoidable.

She continued shushing him all the way to her room, where he finally let her go and was pleasantly surprised that she was still sober enough to stay upright.

'Alright,' he said, softly, taking a polite step backwards towards the door. 'How you feeling? Will you be alright from here?'

'W... Wait!' Theodosia moved with surprising speed, taking Jerome by the arm. 'Wait... just.... Just wait one more moment?'

The pleading look she gave him made his heart squeeze, and though he was getting tired, he answered her with a smile and a nod that made her light up in joy.

She released him and stepped across the room, removing the scrunchie that held her feathered crest back, as well as her shoes, which she gently kicked under her bed.

Jerome waited, patient but confused, as she made herself more comfortable. He wasn't sure why she had asked him to wait with her.... Perhaps she was worried she would need help with something? It wasn't clear. But he couldn't bring himself to step out. So, patient he remained.

Then Theodosia took off her necklace, placing it down on her bedside table, and put her hands behind her back again— In a different way to usual, though Jerome wasn't sure exactly what it was about the motion that seemed off.

'Jerome,' she said, that deep, coy tone returning to her voice. 'I want to do something... *improper* with you.'

'Improper? What do you mean—'

There was a *click* of a clasp and Theodosia's dress came loose from her shoulders and wings; falling forward as it slid away from her chest and crumpled

down to her ankles with a quiet *whooshing* of air and fabric. Almost her entire body was revealed; save for what was hidden by her bra and underwear, and Jerome was so taken off guard by her sudden nudity that he screamed; his breath escaping him as a loud, surprised sound that echoed through the silent halls of the large house.

The sound of heavy footsteps —quick and concerned— followed his shout, and Theodosia hurriedly wrapped herself in the blanket from her bed as her father burst into the room.

‘What’s going on?!’ Alistair exclaimed, stepping between Jerome and his daughter.

‘I-I-I don’t know!’ Jerome stuttered in his panic. ‘I-I just— We were just— We just got back and— She asked me— Wait— And then her clothes were on the floor?! Theo, why did you take your clothes off?!’

Theodosia gave him a confused, furrowed-brow look. ‘*Well,*’ she said, dropping her voice as if to hide their conversation from her father; though, he could clearly hear her as she spoke over his shoulder. ‘I was *hoping* to seduce you, you silly thing!’

Jerome realised how stupid a question it had been to ask as Alistair covered his mouth and looked away; a small chuckle breaking his authoritative composure.

‘You wanted to...’ Jerome swallowed to moisten his throat. ‘You wanted to *seduce* me?’

‘Yes?’ exasperated, Theodosia gave an over-exaggerated shrug with her free hand; audibly landing it against her side before heaving a sigh. ‘What do you think I’ve been trying to do *all night*?’

‘Uh...’ Jerome wasn’t sure. He’d honestly just assumed all she had done, had been done in friendship. Or by accident. The idea that someone so kind, and funny, and beautiful would ever want to seduce *him* seemed like a completely ludicrous suggestion.

And yet, apparently, here she was.

‘Jerome,’ Alistair said, slowly; his voice humoured but firm as he examined the young man’s stunned look. ‘*Boy....* Tell me: what *exactly* did you think you were doing tonight?’

‘Seeing a movie with a friend?’ Jerome answered.

Theodosia looked hurt, and Jerome felt himself blushing as she mumbled, miserably; ‘A *friend*?’

‘Are we... *not* friends?’

‘Well, I thought we were a little *more* than friends,’ her voice took on a sooky tone to it as she took a step around her father and, head lowered in a show of her exaggerated sorrow, took Jerome’s hand. ‘Don’t you like me?’

Jerome didn’t know how to respond and simply stood in wide-eyed silence.

A moment passed before Theodosia gave a disheartened sigh and released Jerome— And Jerome realised he needed to say something, and quickly grabbed Theodosia’s hand in both of his own to stop her stepping away.

‘O-Of course I like you!’ he blurted. ‘I mean, *look* at yourself! I’d have to be gay not to like you!’

Alistair covered his mouth to hide another chuckle, and shook his head.

‘I’m just.... I’m just surprised that you like me back!’ Jerome continued. ‘You’re so beautiful, and smart, and kind— And I’m.... I’m just....’

‘Handsome?’ Theodosia offered. ‘Charming? Sweet? Funny? I can’t think of a single reason *not* to like you.’

Jerome blushed at the compliments. ‘Really? You think I’m all that?’

Theodosia nodded, that wonderful warm smile finding her lips.

‘Theo said you’ve been dating for months,’ Alistair commented, running a hand through his feathery crest.

‘I... well. I-I’m not complaining!’ Jerome cast a look between Theodosia and her father, his cheeks growing even warmer as he turned back to Theodosia’s yellow-green eyes. ‘But I.... I just wish she’d told *me*!’

‘A miscommunication?’ Theodosia’s smile seemed nervous, now, as she adjusted the blanket around herself and rocked lightly on her heels. ‘I thought *you’d* asked *me*. And I thought you understood my yes!’

Alistair pet Jerome on the back, before heaving a sigh and collecting his daughter’s dress from the floor to place in the hamper in her ensuite.

‘When... did you think I asked?’ Jerome asked, the lump in his throat finally settling enough for him to breathe.

Theodosia just shrugged. ‘I dunno,’ she answered, sheepishly. ‘It was always so clear you were interested in me. And then you sat down with me in the cafe.... You paid for my food. And walked me the long way home so I could see the ducks at the lake. Was that not a date?’

‘I thought I was just being a friend,’ Jerome admitted. ‘I didn’t realise it meant that much to you.’

‘No boy’s ever offered to pay for me, before,’ she commented. ‘They always try and leave me with the bill, because of Daddy’s money.... But then you wanted to do something so nice for me, and it made me feel special.’

‘Well... you *are* special,’ Jerome told her, feeling himself blush. ‘But I... I don’t want to lie to you, Theodosia; it was just something I did because we were friends. Not because of my feelings for you....’

Theodosia looked like she couldn’t decide if that fact made the action sweeter, or more hurtful. In the end she just sighed. ‘You’re such a sweetheart.’

It was then that Alistair stepped back to his daughter and used a wing to guide her to her bed.

‘Put on your nightdress, Theo,’ he said. ‘And get some sleep. I’ll see Jerome home.’

‘Or he could stay the night,’ Theodosia sat on her bed, gently thumbing at the silken mattress cover as if begging for Jerome to join her on it.

‘That is a *very* bold suggestion, Theodosia,’ Alistair commented, his arms crossing and his brow raising high. ‘And one that I will have to deny.’

‘But Daddy—’

‘Have you been drinking, Theodosia?’

Theodosia gave a huff; not answering her father but instead flopping over in bed childishly and curling up.

Alistair turned his gaze to Jerome, then, who gave a cough to clear his throat.

‘Uh. Yes, sir,’ he answered. ‘Not a lot, but we all had something to drink at dinner.’

‘Thank you, Jerome,’ Alistair gave him a warm look, and Jerome was able to relax a little, knowing that he wasn’t being judged for this very sudden and strange situation he had found himself in. ‘Come on, now. It’s late, and I don’t want you tired at work tomorrow.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Jerome acknowledged, politely. ‘Um.... If I may... just have one moment alone with Theo, sir? Before I leave.’

‘Of course,’ said Alistair. He didn’t ask further questions, seemingly trusting Jerome (something the man was very, very grateful for), and made his way into the hall. After a moment his voice floated in again, soft and kind and reassuring, but somewhat distant, and Jerome realised he must have been talking to his wife.

He didn’t listen in, and instead turned back to Theodosia with a heavy breath as she looked up at him with a sad and longing expression.... He wasn’t sure what to say, really. So, instead of using his words, he sat beside her in the bed, giving her a soft smile as she pushed herself up to rest her chin on his shoulder.

A moment of hesitation, and then he pecked a kiss on her cheek.

Her disappointed sigh made him realise, then, *exactly* what she had been trying to imply to him in the cinema. So with a nervous chuckle at his own thick-headed nature he kissed her again; meeting her lips softly with his own.

She perked up *immediately*, and her arms were around him in less than a second, pulling him tight into her so that he wouldn’t break the kiss too soon. He laughed into her as she pushed firmer against him, and savoured the wonderful-but-clumsy moment.

But he knew he had to pull away, eventually. Even if it made her whine at him and flop limply against him in protest.

‘Come on, Theo,’ he said with a light chuckle. He removed her from his side and lay her down comfortably. ‘If you’re not too tired tomorrow, I’ll take you out again when I’m off work. *Properly*. Just you and me.’

‘To the lake?’ she suggested, a hopeful look coming to her eye.

‘We can have a picnic,’ he promised. ‘And feed the ducks. But you need some sleep before we do, or you won’t enjoy it.’

She beamed at him and snuggled down. ‘Alright, you make a good point,’ she conceded, her happy smile now seemingly permanent on her lips. ‘Goodnight, Jerome.’

‘Goodnight, Theo.’

Jerome dared another kiss, this one much shorter than the last, and then rose from where he sat and made for the door. He turned the light off as he left, and quietly closed the door behind him; his attention moving from Theodosia as she called another goodnight, to Alistair and his wife.

Poor Beatrice was pacing back and forth in front of her own bedroom door, her hands trembling as her husband comforted her and retrieved her smokes.

Guilt prickled in Jerome’s chest and he made his way over to the couple, head lowered in apology. ‘I’m sorry, ma’am. I didn’t mean to wake you.’

Beatrice’s hands shook as she *cl-cl-clicked* her lighter on and lit her cigarette. She took a short puff as she stepped to a nearby window, and she let the smoke out into the night with a nod. ‘I’m-I’m-I’m gl-glad it’s j-just you, J-Jerome.’

Alistair took a moment to wrap an arm around her and give her a gentle squeeze. Comforting words were whispered, which Jerome politely made a point

not to hear. And finally, as she took in a deeper drag of her smoke and received a kiss on the side of her snout, Mrs Highstone managed to stop the worst of her shaking.

Her hands were still unsteady as she stayed by the window to continue smoking, but it was a much more familiar kind of movement; something that Jerome knew was normal for the nerve-shot woman.

‘Will you be alright if I drive Jerome home?’ Alistair asked, softly.

‘I can see myself home, if need-be,’ Jerome offered.

Though, Beatrice shook her head at him as she took another drag. ‘N-No. No. You’re such a-a gentleman, J-Jerome. But you shouldn’t be out walking this late. E-Especially not alone. I’ll be fine. I-I will.’

‘Are you sure?’ asked Alistair, his wing hovering lightly at her side.

She nodded, and put out her cigarette. ‘Y-Yes, I’m sure. I’m going to, um.... Head back to b-bed.’

‘Alright, my dear, you sleep well,’ Alistair instructed, walking with her to their room. ‘I’ll take my phone. Call if you need.’

‘Y-Yes, of course,’ Beatrice promised. Then, she cleared her throat and cast a glance to Jerome. It was a warm smile, despite her tired and anxious eyes, filled with genuine affection. ‘I’m... I’m glad Th-Theo’s found someone so... so kind,’ she said. ‘I al-always worried she’d have tr-trouble finding someone who could keep up with her but.... But you’re such a sweet boy. It’s such a relief to know sh-she has you to look out for her.’

Unsure how to respond, Jerome simply returned her smile with his own and gave a quiet nod as she retreated into her room. Alistair followed her, though only briefly before he emerged once more (in clothes suitable for driving) and motioned for Jerome to walk with him to the garage.

‘I’m sorry again for waking you both,’ Jerome commented as they walked together. ‘My reaction was, perhaps... a little over the top.’

‘At least you will have a funny story for it,’ Alistair comforted. Then he gave Jerome a pat on the back, and raised his brow. ‘And, as her father, I can say: I am *quite* pleased to know you’ve not been rushing her into anything. And seeing how you handled her tonight was a great reassurance of your intentions. You’re the best suitor she’s ever had. And the only I’ve *ever* approved of.’

Jerome felt himself blush, his wings pulling in tight as he gave a shy chuckle. ‘You... approve of me,’ he said aloud, processing what he had heard. ‘I’m... I’m glad. I was worried you wouldn’t.’

‘I’m not unreasonable,’ chuckled Alistair, unlocking and opening the door into the garage and leading Jerome to his car. ‘I just want her to be safe and happy. You make her happy, and I know you’re a moral man who won’t take advantage of her. Thus, I approve.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ Jerome said, climbing into the passenger seat. ‘I appreciate that you trust me.’

‘You’ve never given me a reason not to,’ Alistair responded. ‘Now, get your seat-belt on. And, perhaps, lend me a quick reminder of which street it is that you live on.’

Jerome laughed. ‘Of course, sir. Of course.’

—END—

If you enjoyed reading, please consider supporting me and my work at  
**[cjadewyton.com](http://cjadewyton.com)**

~~~~

This publication is provided for free and may be redistributed as long as credit to the author is provided and no money is made from its distribution.

Permission to change this document to other ebook formats is given for the sole purpose of ereader compatibility.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

No generative artificial intelligence was used in the writing of this work. Any use of this publication to train generative artificial intelligence technologies is expressly prohibited.