

Belle Femme

By C. Jade Wyton

Barbra finds herself constantly crossing paths with the strange elven man, Kenneth Bloom. He's intriguing, one of the more interesting people she passes by. Something about him just draws her in.... So, one day, she decides to take a chance and approaches him; changing both their lives forever.

Contains depictions of mental illness, and some sexual content.

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*There he was again.*

That skinny elven man with the unkempt hair and unusually long ears.

Ever since the studio had started its weekly public displays to market their outfits he had been a quiet presence in Barbra's life.

Though it was strange to see him in a café, and not his usual corner of the run-down studio away from the rest of the crowd. He was never hard to spot; he sat like a pretzel. And he always seemed to wear the same beige vest and striped blue pants. And so, when he had bumped his head on the low frame of the café door, and the waitress had giggled to the cook about how he had *done it again*, Barbra's attention was doubly piqued.

She hadn't expected to see him today. She was just having lunch out (an excuse, really, to not have to go home to her mother and sisters) when he'd come in and taken a table in the corner.

It had been rather entertaining watching him fumble his words to the waitress. He hadn't noticed her the first six times she'd approached him; which she seemed used to, as she quietly placed coffee and biscuits by him. It had only been the seventh time she was at his side, as she was gathering up his dirty dishes, that he'd noticed her— And jumped so hard in surprise he'd slipped out of his seat.

Barbra thought it was the same sort of energy he had when he would visit the studio.

He would mill around the products for about ten minutes before sitting on the floor and watching the models —watching *her*— for hours on end.

Even though the other models had muttered their concerns about Barbra having another stalker, she wasn't overly concerned. She didn't think he was acting dangerous. A bit strange, perhaps, but the way he looked at her didn't give her the uncomfortable feeling that some of the other regulars did.

Even now, after he had shown up as she ate lunch, she wasn't too concerned. She didn't think he'd come in because of her. This was her first time ever eating here, and the staff were talking about him as if he came in every single day.

*He was in his usual spot, they'd said. Doing his usual thing.*

Which was apparently staring directly at the wall, mindlessly ingesting a week's worth of coffee, and not noticing his phone going off— And also calling the waitress "ma choupette" when she helped him open the packet of sugar he was

struggling with (which Barbra was fairly certain, from the bit of French she spoke, meant he was calling the girl a *cabbage*)....

This man didn't seem capable of doing anything, let alone anything *malicious*.

Of course that wasn't to say she didn't understand her co-workers' worries about him.

Being the studio's only plus-size model left her open to a lot of... uncomfortable comments from unsavoury people. She'd had people removed from the building several times before for inappropriate behaviour or attempts to touch her—

But this elven man had never done anything of the sort. When he was in he simply sat and drew in his oversized sketchbook, ignoring everything around him except for whichever model he locked onto— Which, whenever Barbra was working, seemed to be her.

She knew he went to more displays than just the ones she modelled in. That was why she wasn't too worried. She'd seen him do the same thing at other venues while she herself was milling about in the crowd... though, perhaps, not with the same intensity that he watched her.

The only other thing she'd ever seen him stare at with the same intensity that he watched her with was a dead moth which, when she'd quietly passed behind him in order to look over his shoulder at his work, she saw he'd been using as inspiration for a shawl design.

That was the moment she'd decided he wasn't a chubby-chaser or a stalker; he was just the strange sort of creative. The sort that spent so long creating they forgot how to do anything else. Including talk to people or care for themselves.

Though it all made her very curious— She'd thought the shawl he was designing had been beautiful, even with just the quick glance she'd gotten of it... if he could be inspired to make such beauty at the sight of a dead bug, what had been drawing while looking at *her*?

Barbra let out a sigh and looked up at him again.

William, her boss, had warned her against talking to him when he was in the studio, but.... Well. She was technically off work, now, wasn't she? And she didn't have to do what William said— Not until 9am on Saturday....

And so slowly, ignoring the whispers and gossip that arose from the surrounding café workers, Barbra got to her feet and approached the man.

'Hi?' she tried as she reached his side; though he obviously didn't hear her as he stared at the wall.

When he didn't reply, she looked down at his table.

His sketchbook was open on a half-finished drawing that looked like one of her coworkers; though the dress they were wearing was patterned suspiciously like the brick he was currently staring into.

'Hello?' she tried again, gently reaching out a hand to tap him on the shoulder.

He let out a shriek and jumped forward; slamming his face directly into the wall before collapsing backward out of his seat and knocking his plate of biscuits halfway across the room.

'Oh— Oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!' Barbra gasped, ignoring the laughter from behind the counter as she helped the man to his feet. 'I didn't mean to surprise you like that!'

‘Oh i-i-it’s fine, mon chéri, it’s—’ he looked to her and paled, talking a step back. ‘It’s you! Oh mon Dieu! C’est toi! C’est elle— Ah, you don’t come here!’

‘Not usually, no,’ Barbra said, trying to make her chuckle sound warm and friendly, and not like she was laughing at his fall. ‘I was trying somewhere new, and I saw you here and recognised you.’

‘You recognised me?’ he seemed taken aback. ‘Y-You know me?’

‘Yes, of course I do,’ Barbra gave another chuckle, and pet the man on the arm. ‘You come into my work every week.... You think I don’t notice you watching me?’

The man’s face went bright pink and he slowly sunk back into his seat. ‘Oh non, Kenneth, elle a vu que tu étais bizarre. Vous êtes trop étrange! Oh non. Oh non.’

‘Ah, your name is Kenneth?’ Barbra noted. ‘It’s nice to finally have a name for your face... may I call you Ken?’

‘Ou— Oui!’ the breath caught in Ken’s throat as he nodded; and Barbra hoped she wasn’t making a mistake by speaking with him. ‘You are a uh, oh, what is the word? Um.... Non. Uh.... Oh. Hello.’

‘Hello,’ Barbra replied. ‘May I sit with you?’

‘With me?’ he sounded like he couldn’t believe his ears.

‘Yes,’ Barbra confirmed, placing her hand on the back of the chair opposite his. ‘With you.’

‘Ou-Ou-Oui,’ he managed, stammering and swallowing as Barbra sat down.

‘Uh. Um. Your name? It is.... What?’

‘I’m Barbra,’ Barbra chuckled, holding out her hand for Ken— Who stared at it with a mix of fear and confusion before very slowly taking it.

He glanced up to Barbra as he nervously shook her hand, and she couldn’t help but think his eyes were a very beautiful blue.

She’d never been close enough to see them before— Or to see the freckles that dotted the skin underneath them. He was quite handsome, really, his unkept hair aside.

*He could clean up quite nicely, she thought. If he wanted to....*

‘I’m Kenneth,’ he introduced himself. ‘Uh— Non, attendre. You knew that already. Je suis désolé.’

‘No need to apologise,’ Barbra said warmly. ‘It’s very nice to meet you.’

‘It is?’ he asked, his shoulders relaxing slightly. ‘You do not think I am... uh... inhabituel?’

‘I think you’re *very* strange,’ Barbra answered, honestly. ‘If you weren’t I wouldn’t have noticed you.’

‘Oh— Uh— Mm....’ Ken quickly picked up his coffee and sipped at it.

‘Excusez-moi. Je suis désolé. Pardon— Je n’avais pas l’intention!’

‘No— No, I didn’t mean it in a bad way,’ Barbra clarified. ‘You’re... interesting. That’s what I meant.’

‘Interesting?’ slowly, he lowered his cup. ‘Moi?’

‘Yes,’ Barbra said, simply. Then, she motioned to his sketchbook and tried to lead the conversation into something he might be more comfortable with. ‘I see you draw a lot. What do you draw?’

‘D-Designs,’ he answered, putting down his cup and shyly fingering the side of

his sketchbook. 'Uh. Shirts. Shawls. Et dresses. M... mostly.'

'That's nice,' Barbra offered him a smile. 'May I see?'

He looked like he might faint, his eyes went so wide and his body went so stiff. 'Y-You want to s-s-see mon travail? M-My art?'

'If you'd show me, yes.'

'Uh... oui— Oui!' his face lit up, and he slid his sketchbook into the centre of the table, flicking through it with excitement and mumbling to himself. 'Oui! Oui! La belle femme veut voir mon travail! Oh— Oui, you may look!'

'Thank you,' Barbra chuckled; she wasn't sure that Ken had realised that she could speak French, too. 'Ah. These are so beautiful. I could really see William being interested in them.... Have you ever considered applying to be a designer?'

'A-Apply? Oh, non, I am not skilled enough,' he dismissed. 'I-I would never be— Never be accepted. Non. They are not good enough.'

'Aw, no, honey! I think they are,' Barbra comforted, putting her hand on Ken's— And he stammered and went pink. 'Don't put yourself down like that. I think you have a real chance.'

'*La belle femme me touche*,' Ken whispered with awe. Then, he coughed and pulled away, continuing to flick through his work. 'I-I-I— You think I do?'

'Yes, I do,' Barbra replied. 'You should consider—'

She cut off as Ken turned the page and then, in a panic, quickly turned it back.

'Oh?' she queried. 'Are you alright?'

'Uh— Oui—' Ken managed. 'I-It is just— On the next page— I have... uh. Oh, non. Non. Elle verra que c'est elle-même. Elle verra comment tu l'as dessinée. *Oooh....*'

Barbra gently put her hand back on Ken's own. 'It's me on the next page?' she asked, gently.

Slowly, Ken nodded. 'Oui. I... I, uh.... I *was* happy with it, before. But now I, uh....'

'You're not happy with it anymore?'

'N-Non. Not anymore.'

'Why?'

'I-I-I've seen you u-up close,' he blurted, turning a deep crimson. 'And I c-can s-see now that I-I didn't get your f-face right. You're much... you're even plus beau up... up close....'

'Thank you,' Barbra said, feeling her own cheeks growing warm. It was such a genuine compliment— Something she wasn't used to, in her back-handed career.... 'May I see it?'

'Uh... oui?' Ken said unsurely, slowly turning the page. 'Oui.... Uh. Oui.'

*She looked beautiful.*

She could barely believe how beautiful he had made her look.

Something about it, about these drawings, had captured something she'd never seen in photos of herself.

She felt herself tracing a finger over the page as she considered his artwork.

There was something in her here, on the page, that the photographers always seemed to try to hide with airbrush and photoshop.... He'd captured something very real in her form. Her weight. How she moved.

*How had he made her natural self look so beautiful?*

‘Y-You’re my favourite,’ Ken mumbled. ‘To draw, I mean.... You’re really very pretty. I-I hope that’s not uh, rude to say.’

‘No, it’s sweet,’ she replied, feeling her cheeks burning hot. ‘I uh... I appreciate it.’

‘I uh...’ slowly, he turned to the next page, and Barbra saw it was another drawing of herself, this one in a dress she couldn’t recall wearing. ‘You are... inspiring.’

‘Did you design this?’ Barbra asked.

‘Oui,’ Ken mumbled.

‘Wow,’ she breathed. ‘It’s beautiful.... I’d love to wear something like this, one day.’

‘Oh... uh... I... have it,’ Ken mumbled. ‘I uh. I made this dress.... You— You may have it, if you like. Though I think I may have made it the wrong size, for you— Uh— It is very hard to make clothing without real girls to wear them, oui? I only have mannequins. So I cannot see how they move.’

Barbra let out a chuckle, and pushed back a lock of hair from her face. ‘I mean. If you need a model, I freelance....’

Ken looked like he might have been about to drop dead on the spot— And the noise he made didn’t help.

‘Are you okay?’ Barbra asked, sitting up straighter. ‘Can you breathe— Are you— Are you asthmatic?’

‘*Non!*’ Ken managed, pulling his knees up to bury his face in them. ‘Oh, Kenneth, tu ne peux pas refuser ça. Ne le gaspillez pas. Elle est jolie et elle veut t’aider. Dis oui. Dis oui.’

‘Je suis libre vendredi,’ Barbra offered, grinning as Ken’s eyes went wide and he looked at her with surprise. ‘Je dois donner à William l’adresse à laquelle vous voulez vous rencontrer, juste pour m’assurer que je suis en sécurité. Mais puis-je vous rencontrer vers midi?’

‘*Tu parles français?!*’ Ken squeaked, hiding behind his own legs. ‘As-tu compris ce que j’ai dit?’

‘Oui,’ Barbra giggled. ‘So... what do you say? Friday?’

‘Uh— Um—’ Ken let out a laboured breath. ‘Oui! I would— Please! It would be very helpful if you would do it!’

‘Perfect! Give me your number, and I’ll text you to get the address later,’ Barbra said, pulling out her phone and passing it to the fumbling man. ‘Do you work at a studio, or from home?’

‘H-Home,’ Ken stammered, typing into Barbra’s phone. ‘But if y-you are not comfortable I-I can—’

‘Your house is fine,’ Barbra replied, taking her phone back and texting the number she had been given to test it.

She smiled warmly when Ken’s phone went off, and then stood up.

‘I look forward to working with you,’ she said before returning to her own table to gather her things and pay her bill. ‘See you on Friday, Ken!’

‘*Oui,*’ Ken squeaked after her. ‘À vendredi.’

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Barbra was surprised to learn that Ken lived in Shadow Oaks, considering how often she saw him in the city. Did he make the drive every day?

She didn't think she'd be able to cope with that— It was the entire reason she had moved out of Warm Waters with her sisters and mother; to be closer to the studio....

Though, she supposed, it cost a *lot* more to live in the city than one of the surrounding towns.

And, judging by the neighbourhood the address led her to, Ken didn't seem like he could afford that.

Barbra bit her lip and hesitated at the gate.

It was rusty. With peeling paint and a thin layer of... some sort of off-looking residue coating it.

Opening it seemed like such a... heavy prospect. Especially considering there was no discernible footpath— Just an unkept lawn that reached all the way to her knees.

It was as messy as his hair, Barbra sighed at the thought. *Hm....*

There seemed to be a trail from the gate to the door. Grass that was just *slightly* shorter than the rest....

'Hey there!' a cheerful voice called out, and Barbra jumped and turned to the yard next to Ken's, where a young man was grinning at her from his own front door. 'If you're soliciting, don't bother with that house. He never answers the door. You'll be standing there for hours, hah!'

'Really?' Barbra asked, stepping away from Ken's yard and making her way to the neighbour's fence to talk to him. 'He's expecting me, actually. Should I call him instead?'

'He's expecting you?' he echoed in surprise, reaching Barbra and looking her up and down. 'Are you from the bank?'

'No.'

'The church?'

'Why would I be from the church— I— No,' Barbra waved a hand. 'No, he's hired me to model for him.'

'Ooh,' the man grinned. 'Cos of the clothes, right?'

'Yes, because of the clothes,' Barbra replied. Then, she offered the man her hand. 'I'm Barbra.'

'Jason,' Jason replied. 'Ah. He's a strange one, isn't he? Great guy, though.'

'Yeah?' Barbra asked. 'What's he... uh. What's he like?'

'Aww, funny dude. Nice enough, even if he's terrible at eye contact!' Jason laughed. 'One time I caught him at the mailbox and he started speaking in tongues! Absolutely crazy! He was like, she-doll-a-leaf!'

'Je dois y aller?' Barbra guessed.

'Awah! That was it!' Jason chuckled. 'Crazy, isn't he?'

'No, just... French.'

'What? French?' Jason looked confused. 'Like the fry?'

'Uh... something like that...' Barbra took in a sharp breath. Then she heard Ken's door creaking open and turned; her heart leaping with excitement. 'Ah! Ken! Hi!'

'Ooh,' Jason gave a wicked grin. 'That was extra cheerful.... Are you sure

you're *just* here to model?'

'Huh?' Barbra glanced back to Jason. 'What do you mean by—'

'Ah! Awesome! You have the jacket!' Jason was immediately distracted by the carefully-folded bundle of leather in Ken's arms. 'You are a life saver, my friend! How much do I owe you?'

'Uh...' Ken's cheeks went red as he stared at Barbra. Then he jumped and quickly made his way to the fence he shared with Jason, thrusting the jacket he had into the man's arms. 'Non cost! It was easy to fix! Barbra— Bonsoir! Come inside, oui? Oui— Okay!'

Barbra didn't have time to reply as Ken hurried back into his house.

'You bagged yourself a baddie, my dude!' Jason shouted after Ken— And Barbra felt herself blushing as he turned back to her and winked. 'Hah! I can't wait to tell Polly about this! You go get on in there and have your little *modelling* session, huh?'

'It— It is modelling,' Barbra managed, though she wasn't sure Jason heard her as he made back for his own house. 'Uh... alright... alright then....'

She gave a cough, and turned to Ken's front gate.

It wasn't as sticky as it looked, thank goodness, but it did leave orange dust on her hands from all the rust— Which she wiped off on the grass as she made her way to the house.

Ken had left the door half-open. Whether he'd left it for her, or if it was just because he'd been too flustered to shut it, she wasn't sure.

So she went inside and closed it after herself, and then let out a long breath as she turned to the room.

It was a mess.

Fabric and paper cluttered the house in messy heaps; broken by the occasional pile of discarded food wrappers and disposable cutlery.

She wasn't sure what she was expecting, given the obvious state of Ken's hygiene, but....

Barbra winced at the smell.

When was the last time Ken had taken out the garbage?

And where had he vanished to?

She heard a thump at the top of the stairs, and let out a sigh.

'Ken?' she called out, making her way to the steps.

'Hello! Je suis désolé! Just one— One second!' Ken called. 'Aie! Aie! S'il te plaît, s'il te plaît. Ne mords pas.'

Barbra frowned, and started up the stairs.

Biting?

'Take it! Prends-le!' Ken exclaimed— And then let out a fearful cry.

Barbra reached the top of the stairs just in time to see Ken retreat out of a room, seed and several bird feathers scattering behind him as he whirled around and slammed the door.

'S'il te plaît! Je ne veux pas me battre!' Ken cried— Then he turned, and saw Barbra, and went bright pink. 'Uh. Uh— I was just— Uh....'

'You have pet birds?' Barbra asked.

'N.... Non,' Ken answered. 'They are... not mine.'

'Not yours?' Barbra's hands found her hips and she gave him a quizzical look.

‘Are you... caring for a friend’s birds?’

‘Oh, non! Non!’ Ken gave a nervous laugh. ‘I don’t have friends! Uh— Non, they are feral. Pigeons. Doves? Pigeons. I uh. Made the erreur of leaving ma bedroom window open et— When I came in. There was a nest, and eggs. I— I could not kick them out, oui? Not with eggs. So... they live there now. And I sleep on the canapé.’

Barbra had to take a moment to take in the weight of that confession.

No friends.

Chased out of his own bedroom by feral pigeons.

Sleeping on his own couch....

At least he seemed compassionate; feeding the birds when he could have otherwise just shut the door and ignored them.

Or chased them away, like a sane person....

It was sweet.

Weird.

But sweet.

Barbra felt herself give a smile.

What a strange, strange man this was.

He was obviously kind.

With the pigeons. And mending his neighbour’s jacket for free....

Hm. His neighbour had said....

Barbra couldn’t help but think about Jason’s comment....

Why *had* her heart leapt like it had, when she’d seen Ken at the door?

Ken gave a cough, and brushed himself down, and Barbra pursed her lips.

She hadn’t felt like this since.... Highschool?

Oh, no.

No!

What the— A *crush*?

On this guy?!

Ugh.

Barbra let out a heavy sigh.

Nice going, hormones, she thought to herself, watching as Ken struggled to pull a feather from his hair. *Thanks a lot for this one.*

Hmp. At least she was aware of what the feeling was this time.

Unlike with *Sasha Anderson*.

And at least Ken was actually being nice to her.

Unlike with *Sasha Anderson*.

‘Ugh, j’ai besoin d’une coupe de cheveux,’ Ken groaned.

‘I can cut your hair,’ Barbra blurted without thinking.

No!

Why?!

Why would you say that?!

‘Oh— Uh... thank you?’ Ken mumbled. ‘But uh. You are already doing me such a favour by modelling. Please do not worry about this.’

‘That’s fair,’ Barbra agreed, taking a deep breath.

That’s right.

She was here for work.

Work....

‘So... speaking of, we should probably get a move on with this modelling you need done!’

‘Oh— Oui! Pardon, I did not mean to hold you up!’ Ken exclaimed, hurrying down the hall and vanishing into another room. ‘Come, come! In here, belle femme!’

Barbra bit her lip to hold back her giggle.

She didn’t think he realised he’d even called her that.... Belle femme....

Oh, she could feel herself blushing.

Deep breath. Let it out....

What a strange and sudden crush to have gotten.

Was it sudden?

She wasn’t sure.

It didn’t feel sudden— Barbra had been fascinated by him for a while, she supposed. He was interesting, and had easily caught her eye. She guessed finding out he was a kind-hearted dork was what tipped the scales into a mild attraction.

Her mother could never know.

If her mother found out about Barbra liking someone she’d pitch a fit! And that was without it being an elf like Ken—

Oh, *wow!*

Barbra froze as she entered Ken’s studio and saw the dress he was holding.

It was the one from his drawings. And it was even more stunning in person.

‘Um, this,’ Ken said awkwardly. ‘You liked this?’

‘Yeah,’ Barbra breathed, stepping over to take it from him. ‘Wow. This is gorgeous! Is this what you want me to try on first?’

‘Uh, oui?’ he replied nervously.

‘Okay, where should I get changed?’

‘Oh, uh. You can get changed in the bathroom— AH! NON!’ Ken let out a cry, physically jumping in place as a thought seemed to cross his mind. ‘Not the bathroom! You... do not want to... go into there....’

Barbra could only guess why, given the state of the rest of his house....

‘I’m not judging you for your house,’ she said, simply.

Ken’s shoulders relaxed, though his face was still tense in a grimace. ‘You... may. If you see the bathroom.’

Barbra licked her lips before heaving a sigh.

The honestly....

Seeing a man panic over the state of his bathroom should have been the world’s biggest turn-off... but somehow, in this case, it wasn’t. It was somehow *endearing*.

Her first crush in over three years, and it sure was a doozy....

Barbra kicked at a pile of fabric on the floor, nudging it aside with her foot so she could stand more comfortably. ‘So, where should I get changed?’ she asked again.

‘Uh...’ Ken hesitated, before stumbling past Barbra and making for the door. ‘Ah! I will exit here, et you can bring me back in when you have changed, oui!’

‘Alright,’ Barbra agreed as the door was half-closed behind Ken.

She waited a moment, watching as Ken mindlessly looked down at his feet

and spun around twice— Before he looked up, noticed the door was still open, and let out a surprised ‘Oh! Pardon!’ before shutting it fully.

Barbra couldn’t help but chuckle.

What a strange man, she thought again.

Then, she quietly slipped out of her clothes and into the dress she had been given.

It fit better than she thought it would have; though some parts were too tight, and others too loose.

‘Ken?’ she called. ‘You can come back in!’

Slowly, the door opened, and Ken crept back into the room. He looked nervous, at first. Like he was scared he’d misheard Barbra calling him in. But then he saw her in his dress, and his face lit up.

‘Oh! Tu es belle!’ he exclaimed. ‘It suits you better than I thought it would! Ah— But the shoulder is loose, and the hips are too tight! Hold still and I will fix it!’

Barbra was only halfway through opening her mouth before Ken had crouched by her side and started unpicking several of the seams around her hips.

She decided not to say anything as he worked, and just turned in place to help him reach around her.

The entire time he worked, she couldn’t help think how respectful he was trying to be; she’d had seamsters work on her like this before, but often it was accompanied by comments on her body or “*accidental*” brushes against bare skin.

But Ken did neither. He simply focused on adjusting the width of the dress, and then stood up and asked Barbra to turn so he could check his work.

‘Hm...’ he hummed, checking Barbra up and down before smiling widely. ‘Oui. That is good!’

‘Yeah,’ Barbra agreed, watching herself in Ken’s nearby mirror. ‘That’s much better.... Wow, though. This just... looks so nice. I love it!’

She couldn’t believe how beautiful she was in this dress.

Something designed for *her* body. Not designed for someone else’s and then scaled up to fit her— But something designed for *her*.

It gave her goosebumps.

She’d been a model since she was a child— But in an industry that catered to the thin, she’d always been tokenised....

This... this was the first time that she’d ever looked at herself and thought she was beautiful.

Actually, really, genuinely beautiful.

Beautiful.

‘Est ce que ça va, chéri?’ Ken asked, his hand finding it’s way to Barbra’s cheek to wipe away a tear. ‘What is wrong? You are smiling, but crying. I am afraid I do not understand....’

‘Oh. Oh, sorry. I didn’t— Oh my gosh,’ Barbra gave a sniff, and quickly wiped her eyes. ‘Oh.... Sorry. I just— Wow. You know? Wow. I look *amazing*.’

‘Oui,’ Ken agreed. ‘You always do.’

A giggle escaped Barbra. She covered her mouth to try and hide it— But in doing so, only brought more attention to it.

And as she went bright pink, so did Ken.

‘Uh... so... you like the dress?’ he asked sheepishly.

Barbra nodded.

‘Oh! Very good!’ Ken exclaimed, lightly clapping his hands together. Then, he let out a light gasp. ‘Oh! That’s right. Right, oui— How much will I owe you for today?’

‘Owe me?’ Barbra echoed. Then she remembered this was supposed to be a *job*.... She’d actually forgotten. ‘Oh, no. Don’t worry about it!’

‘Oh? But I uh. I owe you. You are working for me, oui? So I owe you?’

‘No, don’t worry about it,’ Barbra repeated.

She couldn’t charge him; he’d been so sweet, and courteous, and he’d made her feel so absolutely *beautiful*.... She couldn’t charge him.

‘Uh...’ Ken’s blush grew deeper. ‘But you are doing a job. It is not fair to not pay you.’

‘You didn’t charge your neighbour for fixing the jacket,’ Barbra shot back with a wink. ‘I’m not going to charge you for this. I’m happy to help. You’re... you’re my friend.’

‘Friend?’ Ken repeated, his breath catching in his throat with amazement. ‘I— You are my friend?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I—I’ve never really had a f-friend before!’ he stammered, his face lighting up with excitement— And then immediately falling again. ‘Unless... you count Eloise.’

‘Eloise?’

‘M.... She was a cat,’ Ken answered, rubbing his hands together anxiously. ‘That I knew when I was a child. She was very sweet. But my... my father— H-He did not like her. He... took her away. And I never saw her again.’

‘Oh,’ Barbra let out a sympathetic sigh, and put a hand on Ken’s shoulder. ‘I’m so sorry to hear that.... I know how you feel, though. When I was young I had a dog.... My dad accidentally hit her with his car, and then lied about her running away. I didn’t find out about that until my parents were getting divorced and my mum threw it in his face to get custody....’

‘Ah,’ Ken gave a knowing nod. ‘Oui. I am glad you understand.... Well, not *glad*. I am not happy that you lost your dog, I uh— What I mean is— Uh—’

‘I know what you meant,’ Barbra gave Ken a reassuring pat on the shoulder.... And then looked around at all of the clothes he had made. ‘So, um... is there anything else you wanted me to wear? Now that this one’s been adjusted.’

‘Oh, uh, oui,’ Ken gave a cough and fumbled for a nearby pile of clothes. ‘I had another! Uh... ah! Here! C’est ici!’

Barbra accepted the dress that was handed to her, and then giggled as Ken hurried out of the room and forgot to close the door again. It didn’t bother her (strangely enough; usually when her coworkers did the same it frustrated her to no end!) and she simply pushed it shut and then got changed.

The second dress lacked the problems of the first; it fit almost perfectly. And when Barbra looked to herself in the mirror she felt herself welling up with tears again and had to look away.

‘Ken?’ she called. ‘You can come in!’

Ken slowly obeyed, creaking the door open and peeking in— And letting out a happy exclamation when he saw Barbra.

‘Oh! Oui! Oui!’ he cried, clapping his hands together. ‘How does it move? Can you lift your arms? Ah— Oui! Parfaite! Perfect!’

Barbra couldn’t stop smiling as she lifted her arms and spun for Ken. His excitement was so genuine and pure; it made her heart flutter.

‘Beautiful!’ Ken cheered. ‘Oh, wait! Wait! I must draw you! Wait! Do not change, I will be right back!’

Barbra felt herself let out another giggle as Ken bolted out of the room; tripping several times in his hurry and muttering excitedly about getting his sketchbook.

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‘What do you think, William?’ Barbra asked, twirling to show off the dress that Ken had let her take home. ‘He’s a *brilliant* designer, isn’t he?’

‘He certainly has potential,’ William tentatively agreed, watching Barbra with a thoughtful look. ‘I thought you were *joking* when you said you were doing a job for him. You really did that? Went to Mr Vest-and-Sketchbook’s house? Alone?’

‘His name is Ken,’ Barbra explained. ‘And yes. I met him in a coffee shop and we talked a little. I offered him my services, he accepted, and I spent a few hours yesterday at his house modelling. It was a pretty standard job.’

‘I told you not to speak to him,’ William grunted. ‘Honestly, I can’t believe you would take a risk like that. You’re supposed to be the sensible one!’

‘I *was* sensible,’ Barbra defended. ‘If I wasn’t, I wouldn’t have given you the address, would I? I would have just gone. And then probably been hacked to pieces with an axe.’

‘That’s Isabel behaviour,’ William joked, slowly beginning to circle Barbra. ‘Hmm.... That *is* a beautiful dress. He designed it himself?’

‘And sewed it, too.’

‘Impressive,’ William admitted. ‘We *have* been wanting to expand our plus-size section.... I could talk to Levi and Perry. See what they think— *If* you think that Ken will accept the job.’

‘I think he might. I’m pretty sure the only reason he hasn’t applied yet is that it involves talking to people— He’s not very social.’

‘Ah... I just don’t want to make an endorsement that leads nowhere— Not again, Barbra,’ said William. ‘Not after the incident with your sister.’

Barbra shrugged, and rolled her eyes. ‘Isabel couldn’t tell a plagiarist if he copied the watermark with the rest of the work!’ she scoffed. ‘I’m not gullible like she is. I’ve seen Ken’s design process. It’s all his own work. And all very unique.’

‘Hm,’ William gave a tentative hum and took the hem of Barbra’s dress in his hand. ‘Well, you’ve never let me down before.... Okay. I’ll see what I can arrange with Levi— Maybe leave Perry out of it, until we have Levi’s opinion.... Why don’t you speak with Ken and see if he’s got anything he’s willing to present? He should be coming in today.... He’s never missed a week before.’

‘He seems to be a creature of habit,’ Barbra confirmed, thinking back to the comments she’d overheard about Ken at the café. ‘He should be here within the

hour... should I get changed, until then?’

‘No, keep that on,’ William ordered. ‘If he’s interested in the job, it’ll do him good for Levi to see you in it.... Okay. I’ll go see if I can arrange a meeting, you wait here. Take him into the staff lounge when he gets in, right? Until then, talk to the customers. Try and get them to buy things.’

‘Will do,’ Barbra gave a nod as William headed for the back room and then, adjusting the straps of her dress, headed out onto the floor.

She was right, of course; Ken was there within the hour. And he immediately made for his usual corner before looking up and seeing Barbra. He blushed when he saw her and made a questioning motion up and down— Clearly surprised that she was wearing the dress he made.

Barbra motioned back to him with a nod and a beckoning wave of her hand; calling him over to her.

Slowly, Ken obliged her. He slunk over to her like a nervous animal; she was sure if he had a tail it would have been between his legs....

‘Ken, how are you?’ she asked.

‘Je vais bien merci,’ Ken replied. ‘And yourself?’

‘I’m well,’ Barbra told him, gently opening an arm to put around him so she could lead him towards the back rooms. ‘I showed my boss the dress you made.’

‘Oh? You did?’ Ken’s blush grew deeper. ‘Why?’

‘Because I think you really have a shot at getting a position here,’ Barbra said, carefully herding the nervous man through the staff room door. ‘And William agreed; he wants to show your work to *his* bosses.’

‘Oh, non, my work is not good enough for this place!’ Ken stammered as he was sat down on the leather couch. ‘You are all so skilled, here! I am pas beaucoup in comparison.’

‘Your work is *beautiful*!’ Barbra reassured. ‘Trust me, if you show it to Levi, you *will* get the job— If you *want* the job.... You *do* want the job, right? I’m not just... jumping the gun?’

‘What gun?’ Ken’s brow furrowed for a moment, before he gave his head a shake as if to clear it. ‘Non, though. Non. I do want this job. This job— It is— It is— C’est mon rêve!’ Ken let out a disbelieving laugh, and rubbed the back of his neck. ‘But I thought it was just that, oui? Un rêve que je n’atteindrais jamais....’

‘You’re here, though,’ Barbra told him. ‘All you have to do is show your work to Levi and he’ll love it. I know he will.’

‘I cannot believe it,’ Ken said, seemingly to himself. ‘This is.... Too much. I am grateful. Overwhelmed? Merci, chérie. Merci.’

‘Ah, I can’t wait!’ Barbra let out a laugh, and joined Ken on the couch. ‘The idea of working with you more— It’s thrilling!’

‘Working with...’ for a moment, Ken seemed to lag. Then, he went bright pink and began to stammer and panic. ‘Oh m-mon Dieu! We *would* be working together! Oh! OH!’

‘Wouldn’t that just be wonderful?’ Barbra couldn’t help letting out another laugh, and edged closer to Ken so she could put an arm around him. ‘Working... *close*?’

Ken’s breath caught in his throat, and he looked to Barbra with wide eyes. ‘*Oui*,’ he breathed. ‘*Oui*....’

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It had been a little over two months since Barbra had approached Ken in the café, and every day she was more and more glad she had.

It had been a no-brainer on Levi hiring Ken to work in the design department. Designers of plus-sized clothing were so uncommon— And designers of plus-sized clothing who were actually *good* at their jobs were even rarer.

Levi had looked like he had been won over the moment he saw Barbra in the dress Ken had made.... And then, when Ken had shown him some of his ideas for modifying existing clothes so that they fit larger models better than when they were simply designed thin and scaled up, Levi had all but fallen over himself in his rush to get Ken onto the team.

And *then*, once he was on the team, most of Ken's time working had been spent with Barbra.

She never thought there would be a *positive* to being the company's only plus-sized model. But being able to spend half of her week with Ken seemed a pretty good one.

Barbra wasn't sure if Ken was picking up on the hints she kept dropping. She knew from a bit of quick-reading that elves usually flirted using innuendos and comments that *suggested* attraction, rather than outright *stating* it— But Ken seemed a little too dense for all of that.

She thought back to the time she'd made a comment about being warm, and slowly taken her jumper off.... She'd been trying to get his attention; deliberately lifting her shirt with the jumper to reveal her midsection— But when she'd finished pulling her jumper off she'd found Ken at the air-conditioner, turning the temperature down for her.

It had been both frustrating and overwhelmingly endearing; he had been too polite and considerate to realise what she was *actually* trying to communicate to him....

Her sisters, however, had realised almost immediately what she had been doing, and gone blabbing to their mother.... Which had led to a fight. Which had led to Barbra looking for more excuses to spend time outside of the apartment— Which led to her seeking Ken out, outside of work.... Which, of course, had just led to another fight with her family.

Barbra let out a heavy sigh as she parked her car outside of Ken's house.

Today was an especially momentous occasion for him; the second nest of baby pigeons had finally moved out, and Ken had actually managed to shut his window before the parents came back in to lay their third lot of eggs.

It had been such an exciting thing for him that he had called Barbra to tell her all about it in detail. The chicks were fledging (something Ken had found out as he was standing underneath his bedroom window, when one of the creatures had landed on his head and he had frozen in fear until it had taken off again) and now occupied his backyard instead of his house.

He had then invited her over to share a cake and see his bedroom— Something that, if it had come from anyone else, she would not have taken so literally. But with Ken, she was learning to take him as literally as possible.

Barbra hoped that he wouldn't mind her bringing a bottle of wine. She had intended to find a motel to spend the night while she drank herself into forgetting the argument with her mother and sisters, even before Ken had called her.... So what was the difference if the motel was in Shadow Oaks instead of the city? She could leave her car here.... It wasn't like she had work in the morning, or anything!

God, Barb, keep it together! Barbra let out another heavy breath, gently slapping the sides of her face to clear her thoughts. *You've only been talking to him for two months! Don't rush into things!*

Knock knock!

Barbra jumped as someone rapped on her passenger's side window, and she looked over to see Ken's neighbour waving at her.

'Hey there!' he called, his voice muffled by the glass.

'Oh no,' Barbra mumbled before opening her door and stepping out of the car. She took a sharp breath as she did, and then spoke with a high, cheerful voice that she hoped didn't sound *too* disingenuous. 'Hey, Jason, how are you? It's good to see you again! How's Polly doing?'

'Aw, about out to here,' Jason made a motion to his stomach that couldn't possibly have been accurate. 'Reckon the little tyke's gonna take after me, I do!'

'One can hope,' Barbra fought back her grimace as Jason cut her off from the sidewalk, instead turning it into a grin as she awkwardly circled around him.

'Because the world needs more men who enjoy talking.'

'Yeah, exactly!' Jason gave a proud nod. 'You get it!'

'Yep. Okay, so, I gotta, uh.... I have to... go,' Barbra managed as she felt herself back into Ken's rusted gate. 'Ken's expecting me. It's a... *work* thing. You know how it is.'

'Man, I wish I could drink at my job,' Jason chuckled, motioning to the bottle of wine in Barbra's hand. 'Did something good happen?'

'Yep,' Barbra replied; not elaborating as she turned and pushed past the gate and through the grass to Ken's house.

'Alright, then! Well, you have a good time, yeah?' Jason called after Barbra. 'Let me know how it goes!'

'Yeeeeee-uuuup!' Barbra called back, hurrying into Ken's house without knocking.

She all but slammed the door as she leant against it, and let out a deep, heavy sigh of relief.

It wasn't that she *didn't like* Jason.... It was just that she... *really* didn't like him. Even if he technically hadn't done anything wrong, he was too much.

He talked.

Constantly.

And Barbra thought that her sisters were chatterboxes.... They were *nothing* compared to this man.

'Barbra?' Ken's voice floated from the direction of the back door, and Barbra felt herself smiling —genuinely— as Ken came into the hall and greeted her with a kiss to the cheek. 'Ah! Bonsoir, Barbra! Tu vas bien?'

'I'm fine,' she replied. 'How are you doing?'

'Wonderful!' Ken beamed. 'I have just been outside, scattering the last of the

seed for the birds.... They are pas si mal, when they are not voler mon lit.'

'Les oiseaux peuvent être très mignons,' Barbra giggled, letting Ken take her by the hand and guide her to the back door. 'N'oubliez pas de garder cette fenêtre fermée.'

'Oui, oui!' Ken chuckled back, pulling Barbra outside. 'Ah! There they are. That one is the mother, yes? The solid grey with the uh— Oh, the word. Uh. Irisation? Iridescence! I watched her sit on la nest when there was only une egg. Et when she stood, there were two eggs! And the father is there, he's the one with the pieces of white all over him.'

'Aw, you know so much about them,' Barbra chuckled, watching the birds peck at the seed Ken had thrown across the backyard. 'Are you going to miss them?'

'Non,' Ken replied simply, much to Barbra's amusement. 'Pas du tout.'

'Not even a little bit?'

'They are evicted, and they shall stay that way,' he said. 'If they wish to remain in the backyard I will not complain— But they are not allowed à l'intérieur.'

Barbra let out another laugh, and pet Ken on the arm. 'You're a goof,' she told him, before holding up the bottle of wine. 'Hey! I brought this. Thought we could have some with that cake.'

'Oh?' carefully, Ken accepted the bottle from Barbra. He looked it over with a hint of confusion, before giving an unsure nod.

'I know it's a weird choice for pairing with a dessert,' Barbra admitted, starting back into the house. 'Full disclosure, I bought it before you called— And I was going more for the alcohol content.'

'Ah,' Ken gave another nod, this one in understanding, as he followed Barbra into his lounge room. He cleared a spot on his coffee table and set the wine down. 'I will go get some cups, and the cake!'

'Do you want help?' Barbra asked; not waiting for an answer as she trailed Ken to the kitchen. 'I'll help carry things. Don't want to drop a cup and have it shatter!'

'Oh, non, they will not break,' Ken reassured, opening his cupboard to reveal....

'Disposable cups?' Barbra asked. 'For wine?'

'I don't like dishwasher,' Ken admitted. 'I cannot stand it. And I can't afford a dishwasher. So I only use dishes that I can throw away.'

'Yeah?'

'Oui— Though,' Ken looked thoughtful. 'Maybe now, that I have more work than just mending clothes for my neighbours, I could afford to have one installed.... Oh, do you mind if I put on my lunch? It is getting rather late.'

'No, please, do!' Barbra stepped to the side so that Ken could move more freely around the cramped kitchen. 'What are you thinking of making?'

Ken removed a microwave dinner from his freezer and held it up shyly. 'Would you... uh... like to share it?'

'Share it?' Barbra chuckled.

'Oui,' Ken confirmed. 'I uh, I only have the one left. I need to go shopping.'

'Ah, well— I don't want to take your last... lamb chop,' Barbra read off the container. 'I'll have something else. What is there?'

‘Uh...’ Ken opened his cupboard —his very, very empty cupboard— and looked it up and down. ‘Mayonnaise,’ he listed, pulling out a half-empty jar. ‘Et... a popped-tart.’

‘Ah, okay,’ Barbra pursed her lips, feeling her face scrunching up. ‘So you have a microwave lamb chop. Half a jar of... *expired* mayo, and an unwrapped pop-tart.’

‘Oui.’

‘Oh, Ken,’ Barbra let out a long, heavy sigh. ‘Is that really all you have?’

‘Uh...’ Ken looked deep in thought. ‘Non, I have the cake. Et some bottles of wine. And milk.’

‘Oh, *Ken*...’ Barbra couldn’t help but shake her head. ‘I’ll just fill up on the cake. You put your lunch in, yeah?’

‘Oui, oui,’ Ken mumbled, slowly unwrapping his microwave meal and piercing the top as Barbra watched on curiously.

He seemed *scared* of the meal, as he poked holes into it. The loud *POP* it made caused him to jump every time. And then, when he put it in the microwave, he pressed the buttons like he thought the entire thing was going to explode.

Barbra wondered, for a moment, if she should offer to help him, but... as he backed away and gave her a nervous grin, she decided against it.

‘We can go have some cake, oui?’ Ken offered, holding a hand out for Barbra. ‘And the wine you brought. I am looking forward to trying it.’

‘Alright,’ Barbra felt her cheeks grow warm as she took Ken’s hand and let herself be led back to the lounge.

The pair sat together on the couch— And then Ken immediately leapt back up with an exclamation, realising he had forgotten both the cake and the cups for the wine.

He rushed in and out of the kitchen very quickly, and rejoined Barbra on the couch. With shaking hands and cheeks pink in blush, he offered her one of the two disposable cups he had brought in.

She accepted it and poured them both drinks as Ken cut the cake.

Ken downed his in seconds, seemingly trying to stave off his nerves— And Barbra found herself doing the same.

I should say something to him, she thought to herself. He’s obviously interested in me.... Just... ask him. Ask him.... After this next drink.

Okay... no. After *this* drink—

Okay. No. One more.

One more....

One... more....

‘Ah, we’re out of wine already?’ Barbra asked, giving the bottle a shake.

‘Oui...’ Ken said, looking impressed. ‘It has only been a few minutes. And you... drunk... almost all of it— Are you alright—’

The microwave cut Ken off, and he folded back his ears as he looked to the kitchen.

‘I should go get that, oui?’ he mumbled. ‘You are okay here? You have drunk a lot.’

‘Yeah, I’m fine,’ Barbra gave a cough and put the empty bottle down. ‘Takes more than that to get me drunk.... One of the pluses of being, well... *plus*.’

‘Heh,’ Ken gave a nervous laugh as he stood and made his way to the kitchen. ‘Okay, I will be right back.’

‘*Okay!*’ Barbra sung after him, her voice sweet and high. Then, as she waited, she finally took the slice of cake Ken had cut for her and tasted it.

It was delicious.

Definitely home-made, though she doubted he was the one to cook it. He had probably gotten it as payment for mending a shirt or a jacket— Maybe from that young kobold couple that had moved in a couple of houses down....

‘*Non!*’ Ken gave a loud, dismayed cry from the kitchen. ‘Oh, non! Je suis inutile! Inutile! Stupide!’

Barbra pushed herself to her feet, dropping her plate of cake back onto the coffee table, before she hurried into the kitchen.

She found Ken on the floor, his face pressed into his knees and his hands tugging on his hair and ears in distress.

‘Ken? Are you alright?’

‘Oh, I am useless!’ Ken cried, his voice breaking in a sob. ‘Inutile! Father was right!’

‘Ken— Hey, shh,’ slowly, Barbra lowered herself to Ken’s side. ‘What’s wrong? What happened?’

‘It— It said five minutes,’ Ken stammered, his lip quivering. ‘But it is still cold. Oh, I cannot do anything right! My father was right! I am useless garbage!’

‘Oh... *okay*,’ Barbra let out a deep breath. *This was about his food?*

An entire, sudden, complete and utter breakdown.... because his dinner was still cold?

‘Okay, uh... you’re not... useless,’ Barbra comforted, putting her hand on Ken’s arm. ‘Sometimes this happens. Just... put it in for another couple of minutes.’

‘B-But the— The instructions said—’

‘Instructions can be wrong,’ Barbra interrupted, sliding her hand from Ken’s arm to circle around his back. ‘It’s not your fault. Your microwave is just a lower wattage than they recommend for this meal, okay? You just need to put it in a little bit longer.... Take a deep breath. Okay? Deep breath.... You’re alright. There we go.’

Ken followed Barbra’s instructions; sitting up properly so he could take deep breaths and calm himself down....

‘Je suis désolé,’ he apologised. ‘I don’t know what got into me.’

‘It’s been a big day,’ Barbra offered. ‘A lot has happened.... You’re alright.’

‘Thank you,’ Ken mumbled, wiping his eyes. ‘I’m sorry. I’m ruining your day now, too.’

‘No you’re not.’

‘I don’t know why you are so interested in knowing me,’ Ken continued, his lip quivering as he looked around. ‘I am such a useless man. And you— Tu es la plus belle femme qui ait jamais existé.... You deserve more than being surrounded by me and my garbage... but.... C’est juste trop pour moi.’

‘Ken...’ Barbra hesitated, then let out a sigh. ‘Ken... do you need help? Because I’ll help you. You just need to ask me, okay? No judgement. No shame.... I’ll help you. Just tell me you need help.’

Ken gave a sniff, and wiped his eyes again. But he said nothing.

‘Do you need help?’ Barbra asked again. ‘Ken. Say it, okay? Say: “Barbra. I need help.”’

‘B... Barbra...?’ Ken started, his voice breaking as he let out a shaking breath. ‘I-I need help....’

‘Okay. I’ll help you,’ Barbra said, softly.

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It had taken almost five hours of solid work, but they’d managed to bag up every piece of garbage in Ken’s house and pile it all in the hall. They’d filled his bins as much as they could, and now it was just a game of catch-up; he would have to slowly get more and more of it out each week as the bins were emptied.

Ken had surprised himself, Barbra thought, with how capable he actually was. As soon as he had some sense of what he needed to do he was able to follow through with it— But then, when he finished each task he was given he would be paralysed again, not sure what to do next or how to start.

But Barbra didn’t mind directing him. And she didn’t mind doing the things that Ken was uncomfortable doing.

She’d cleaned the few dishes he owned, and changed his pigeon-covered bed sheets, and then bagged up a mouldy slice of bread that Ken had seemed absolutely terrified of.

By the time the sun was setting and Barbra ordered them dinner to be delivered from a local take-out, the pair were exhausted.

The house still wasn’t done. Not really. But it was at least *liveable*.

So they finally sat down to finish the cake and eat their dinner; Ken offering to get another bottle of wine to share, and Barbra promising to *actually* share it, this time.

‘Are you sure you’ll be alright driving home, chère?’ Ken asked, handing Barbra the wine. ‘You’ve had a *lot* to drink, today..’

‘Oh, I wasn’t thinking of driving home,’ Barbra shrugged, opening the bottle and taking a sip before passing it back to Ken. ‘Just getting a room in a motel for the night, you know?’

‘The closest motel is along the road from here to Warm Waters,’ Ken told her. ‘Much too far to walk, especially if you are not sober.... Les bois ne sont pas sûrs la nuit, you don’t want to be out walking once it gets dark.’

‘Mm,’ Barbra let out a thoughtful hum. She hadn’t realised that there was nowhere to stay in town....

Well. Technically there wasn’t *nowhere* to stay, was there?

Barbra eyed Ken.

He had his bedroom back, so maybe she could....

No, she *couldn’t*....

Should she suggest it?

Ah, screw it! It was worth a shot!

‘Well...’ Barbra started, slowly. ‘Maybe I could stay the night, here? If that’s alright with you?’

Ken’s cheeks went bright pink, his breath catching in his throat, and he almost dropped the wine as he stumbled. ‘The night? Here? Dans ma maison? Avec moi?’

Où je vis?’

‘Yeah,’ Barbra grinned, causing Ken’s pink cheeks to turn dark crimson as he collapsed onto the couch next to her.

‘*La jolie dame veut rester avec toi, Kenneth,*’ Ken mumbled to himself, barely loud enough for Barbra to hear. ‘*Dis oui. Oui. Dis à la jolie dame que oui.*’

Barbra gave a giggle, at that, and edged closer to Ken; shifting until her knee lightly bumped into his. ‘It’s up to you.’

‘O... Oui?’ he managed. ‘Oui. I could, uh... I could sleep on the couch another night et you could use my bed—’

Barbra cut Ken off by gently placing a finger to his lips. ‘I was thinking, that... maybe... we could *share* your bed....’

For a long, long moment, Ken stared at Barbra.

Then, his eyes widened as what Barbra had suggested sank in, and he let out a noise that sounded half like a chicken being strangled, and half like a violin in a blender.

‘Is that a no?’ Barbra asked, shifting away to give Ken some space. ‘You don’t sound like you—’

‘Belle femme!’ Ken blurted. ‘Dans mon lit? Partager? Avec moi? Partager mon lit avec une belle femme?!’

Barbra felt her cheeks burning, and could only imagine that her blush matched Ken’s own.

‘Yeah,’ she said, shifting closer again so that she was gently pressing into Ken. ‘Pretty woman, in your bed with you.... What do you... think about that?’

Ken made a blubbering noise, before abruptly standing up— And then sitting down again— And then standing up.

And then sitting down.

‘Ken? You alright—’

‘You like me?!’ Ken managed. ‘Is that— Oooh. That is why you have been— All month!’

Barbra felt herself give a grin. ‘Yes.’

‘But— But why?’

‘Why... what?’

‘Why do you like me?’ Ken asked, looking panicked. ‘I am a— A burden! I am a burden, and useless! Bon à rien—’

‘You’re not a burden, or useless,’ Barbra interrupted, taking Ken by the hand. ‘You’re sweet. And kind. And you make me feel special.’

‘But, mon chère! You *are* special, you don’t need me to— To tell you—’ Ken cut off as Barbra leant in close and pecked a kiss on his cheek. He tensed, for a moment, squeezing his eyes shut before letting out a long breath and relaxing. ‘You... you really like me?’

‘Yes,’ Barbra replied, pressing herself into Ken’s side. ‘I do.’

Ken let out a sound that Barbra could only assume was a laugh, before very, very slowly taking Barbra by the hands.

‘So...’ Barbra leant close and whispered to him. ‘*What do you want to do?*’

Ken’s bit his lip, and looked from her to his sketchbook.

Barbra felt herself giggling. ‘Don’t say *draw me*....’

‘Uh,’ Ken’s blush grew even deeper, and he looked back to Barbra. ‘C.... May

I... k-kiss you?’

‘You may....’

Ken’s lips met Barbra’s neck, and she took in a gasp; feeling her entire body burst with heat as she melted into Ken’s arms.

‘*Vous êtes si belle,*’ Ken breathed into her. ‘*Si belle....*’

‘Viens ici,’ Barbra shifted, climbing into Ken’s lap so that she could press her hips against his, and cupped his face in her hands. ‘Tu es un homme merveilleux, merveilleux.’

Ken let out a whimper, which Barbra silenced with a kiss.

‘We should go upstairs, oui?’ she asked with a grin.

‘Oui.... Oui. A l’étage nous irons.’

—END—

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