

Every crisp flower petal, ornate arch, tittering bird, and trickling fountain of the pleasure garden irked the businesswoman. First of all, she knew why Terthweit had sent her here: to feel inadequate. Her gothic suit was an out-of-place splotch of black and gray against the garden's beauty. A passive-aggressive show of power. Even the comfortable seat and generous layout of fruit bothered the businesswoman as she snacked on berries. But what truly boiled the businesswoman's blood was the *tackiness* of it all.

From behind, a chain clinked over the stone. The businesswoman turned in her seat to see something sleeping on the floor. It was a tiger. A little too long. A little too slim. But curled up on the floor with its back turned, it was clearly a tiger. It swished its tail lazily. A leather collar around its neck connected to a chain affixed to a nearby wall.

"Of *course*," the businesswoman rolled her eyes. Internally, her bingo chart of clichés, upon which she had already counted three straight lines, nearly filled completely. "I expect when this 'Terthweit' character finally shows up, they will throw a piece of meat to the beast as though it were intimidating."

"Sometimes," said a voice from behind. It rumbled, a little deeper than one would expect, and was distinctly masculine.

Startled, the businesswoman turned back. The tiger had rolled to face her. This time, it was not a tiger. At least not in the way the business man expected. From this side, it looked more like a man. A tall man, unusually muscular, still covered lightly in fur, still with a tiger's pointed ears, still with a tail curled beside it, but with a distressingly human face. And a beautiful face at that, if one disregarded its cat's eyes and lack of human hair.

"Oh, it's one of *you*," the businesswoman's eyes narrowed. "And I thought I had scraped the bottom of this garishly-colored barrel." The tiger's expression darkened a little. "So are you kept here as a pet, or as a decoration?"

"Neither," the tiger yawned. "Why are *you* kept here?"

"I am not!" the businesswoman snapped.

"You want to leave. Yet you do not," the tiger observed.

"I will have you know that I am here to meet your master, this enigmatic 'Terthweit,' to discuss an important business proposition," the businesswoman proudly declared. "Once she *finally* arrives, that is."

"He," the tiger corrected.

"Really?" the businesswoman asked.

"No," the cat replied. "Maybe. You do not need to know. You will not meet them."

"So that's it," the businesswoman snapped her fingers, "You are kept as a jester."

"Better the jester than the joke," the tiger replied.

Annoyed, the businesswoman flung her tray of fruit in the tiger's direction. It missed. Or the tiger dodged. The motion was too fast to tell. "Feel free to eat the scraps while I wait!" the businesswoman yelled, flush in the cheeks. "I am done with them as I am done with this place."

The tiger stood up. He was even bigger than he looked. Statuesque in height and build. "I do not eat *fruit*," he growled. To the businesswoman's immediate shock, he unclasped his collar. It fell to the ground along with its chain with an echoing *clink*. The tiger took a step forward. "And you are not done with this place."

Scrambling in place, the businesswoman tried to stand. "Sit down!" the tiger roared. She sat. "Look at my claws," the cat flashed his claws. "Look at my fangs," he bared his fangs. "Do you know what it is to fight me? You will sit. You will wait."

The businesswoman sat, and she waited. The tiger passed uncomfortably behind her, brushing against her with his tail as he passed. On the back of her neck, her hairs prickled, and a shiver ran down her side. The tiger took a seat on a cushioned stool across from the table. Earlier, the businesswoman had thought that the stool looked a little too large for a person. It fit the tiger perfectly.

"This garden exists for my pleasure," the tiger stated calmly. "While you are here, you, too, exist for my pleasure. You are *not* a guest."

Though the businesswoman tried to respond, the words came out as a string of blubbling. Her heart beat noisily in her ears. Sweat began to stain the collar of her suit. They say that seeing is believing. In the long run, maybe. For now, however, the businesswoman could not believe what she saw.

"Stand," the tiger commanded. The businesswoman stood so quickly that she knocked her chair to the ground. "Your clothes displease me. Remove them."

Hurriedly, the businesswoman began to unbutton her suit. "Faster!" the tiger interjected, snarling. Jumping, the businesswoman practically tore away her suit, ruining the cloth in several places. She continued until the look of displeasure left the tiger's face. By the time she finished, she was naked.

Standing straight up from years of training, the businesswoman's formal posture failed to fit her physique. Though far from fat, years of high class living and a lack of hard labor had left her soft and frail.

"Better," the tiger concluded. "Now. How can you please me?"

"W-well, I can-" the human began to stammer.

"I did not mean to ask you!" the tiger growled. Licking his wrist and staring silently, he regarded the human.

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With a sweep of his arm, the tiger cleared the remaining fruit from the stone table. "Lay here," he pointed.

"W-what?" the human asked.

"I do not repeat myself when heard," the tiger said, then, raising his voice, "And I am *always* heard."

Timidly, the human sat on the edge of the table and laid back. From the side, the table had looked like an ornate decoration. From here, however, it looked more like a slab.

"If you flinch, I will bite," the tiger explained no more than this.

When the tiger lifted her arm and licked it wrist to shoulder, the businesswoman *wanted* to flinch. Suppressing the urge felt like emerging from water and forcing yourself to not take a breath. Nevertheless, she managed. After the fourth lick, she even partly acclimated to the tiger's rough tongue running across her skin.

"If I were to eat you, where should I start?" the tiger asked. The human knew better than to answer. "Here?" he licked her face. "Here?" he licked her thigh. "Hmm, here?" he fit her entire groin in his mouth.

"Don't" the human blurted. "I mean," she coughed, composing himself, "I command substantial resources. This garden is drab compared to what I could construct. And I have a fleet of ships besides. Why confine yourself here? You could see the world."

"Confine?" the tiger laughed mirthlessly. "I go where I please." He leaned closer to the human's face. "I do what I please." Their eyes nearly touched. "And now, what I please is *this*."

With inhuman speed, the tiger opened his jaws and clamped them around the human's neck. A normal tiger striking with such speed and force would have snapped the human's spine. Unfortunately, the tiger's human-shaped mouth could only reach so deep. Blood sprayed, and the tiger kicked his head back to swallow a large chunk of flesh.

Below, the human flailed aimlessly, but the tiger held her down with a single paw. Her attempts to breathe bubbled in her sundered throat. *Chomp*. Another bite, and the human's struggles receded to twitching. *Chomp*. The human fell still.

The tiger tore into his meal ravenously. Skin ripped and ligaments snapped as he tore away strips at a time. He never chewed. Lumps of meat bulged down his throat, disappearing at his collar bones. Red splashes stained his face and all the way down to his chest. Occasionally, some bone snapped loose, but the tiger spat them aside.

Eventually, the human cooled, and the tiger's belly swelled to a comfortable curve. Much of the human remained, but the tiger was done for now. Leisurely, he walked away from the dripping table and washed himself in a pool. Threads of red diluted away into water which constantly poured into a nearby drain while a fountain fed the pool from above.

Over the rest of the day, the tiger periodically returned to snack on the human's body. In between, he lounged in the sun, swatted insects by the garden, climbed overlooks, and enjoyed the rest of the garden's pleasures. Servants eyed him warily as they tended to the garden's plants and restocked its supplies. They avoided mopping the table and floor until the tiger had fully finished his meal.

By the time the tiger discarded the human, much remained. He had only eaten the choice bits: all of the muscle and several of the major organs. Strips of skin and a tangle of entrails clung to the human's skeleton as it was tossed into a nearby patch of ivy. Broad leaves hid the corpse entirely.

Alongside sat many other bones in varying states of decomposition.