



Shark Bite Brew

by Jaycie “chimerror” Mitchell

“Look, I know you spent hours on a train out here, but you *really* should have asked before showing up. I had just gotten to figuring that that whole ‘shark-woman’ thing was a weird dream, and then you send me a message out of the blue that you’re in town for the week. I want to find out what the deal is, too, but I can’t get out of my job...” Earlie typed into the chat window. She was at least glad that FloodedHeart... Dammit, she didn’t even know his real name... had been prudent enough to get a hotel, the last thing she needed was some unknown *man* stumbling around here in the detritus of her year-long moody lesbian funk.

And after her encounter with one last year, there really was nothing more that she wanted to do other than scope out the beach in search of these supposed shark-women. For whatever *reason*, it seemed that this gathering of shark-women for Shark Week happened every year at the beach. It apparently had even been given an official blessing by the city based on the official-looking permits that Earlie had noticed on barricades blocking off traffic... but something was off with that, Earlie discovered. She had combed through every relevant page of the city’s website to look for this Shark Week and found... absolutely nothing.

She could remember what she saw. But according to the documents, what she saw never happened. Which, of course not. The only types of people are just the normal human ones. And despite that urge to go and look herself this year tickling at the back of her head, she would have to refuse.

“Look, it’s a nice sunny day in July, and I would love to go to the beach and enjoy it with you, shark-women or not, but I don’t have the choice. I

have to leave *right now* to catch the first of three buses to make it to my phonebanking job for a city council candidate,” she typed.

“Venus? Venus Taiwo?” FloodedHeart replied, referring to the upstart leftist candidate that was going into the primary election with a very close lead on the establishment choice. Either candidate should go on to destroy whatever wet sack the other party put up.

“How do you know who she is? You’re not even from this state!” Earlie typed.

“Oh, you just talk about it all the time when we game. I just picked up a thing or two. You’re better news than... well, the actual news.”

“Thanks. Sadly, no. I would love to be working with Venus, but my company got the Evans contract.”

“Wow, that sucks.”

“It pays fine, I guess. But it takes me so many buses and I’m heads-down from 3pm to 11pm, right when things cool down enough to hang outside. But we have to do it now, the election is on August 1st.”

“Oh, hey...” FloodedHeart typed, changing the subject “I think I see a sharkgirl.”

“Don’t infantilize them; they’re ‘shark-women’.”

“Well, don’t you really want to see them? They’re really cute... Oh, that sign says ‘no photos’...”

“Like I said, I wish, but Evans would bite my head off in front of the others to make an example of me.”

“That doesn’t make sense; she’s not a shark.” FloodedHeart replied, leaving Earlie staggering before he continued, “Anyway, I found that studio that is filming that ad for Shark Bite Brew... I hope I get the job.”

One of the few other things Earlie knew about FloodedHeart is that he was an aspiring actor, and that he had been trying to work his way deeper into show business by acting in ads. It had been pretty unsuccessful, and it was taking a toll on his confidence. He seemed especially broken up by the last rejection where he was told to his face that he just wasn’t “manly” enough.

Earlie hadn’t been great at soothing his feelings with her blunt response of “well, fine, why would you want to be a *man* anyway?” God, she hated how much of a stereotypical dyke she let herself be sometimes. Would it hurt to be a little bit more nurturing now and then? She could just— no, nice people get hurt. She wasn’t going to get hurt again.

“You know I think that whole thing is fishy, and I just don’t mean the shark thing. I’ve never even heard of Shark Bite Brew! And some small micro-soda company not only has their own in-house studio, but are offering you *that* much money?”

“Yeah. Gotta go!”

Earlie cursed as she tossed the phone on her table and stretched her arms back, trying to limber up a bit from the deathgrip she had had on her phone. It was good to have a chance to pull her face away from it. She wasn’t really mad at *him*, she was mad at *her*. (Interim) City Councilwoman Laura Evans, her boss. She was the *worst*. She was such a *liberal*. Earlie hated how much she had compromised since 2020. How she had folded like a house of cards. Fuck, she had even stopped wearing a mask...

But that didn't stop the need to pay rent on her nice beach-front apartment despite the fact that she would really not get to enjoy it this summer. And, so off to work she went.

The doors of the bus snapped shut behind Earlie as she made her way to the bus stop bench to wait for her transfer, which was expected to show up in five minutes. She was glad at least that this first bus stop of her trip still had a *real* bench. Way too many of them had those terrible anti-homeless benches that felt like a bike seat put up against the wall rather than a real seat.

Her phone buzzed in her bag, and she pulled it out to check what notification had come up. It was another message from FloodedHeart.

“Hey, good news, I got the part! And you're not going to believe it! There *are* sharkgirls working at the studio!” he had typed. Before she could respond, she noticed him editing the message to say her preferred term ‘shark-women’ instead of ‘sharkgirls’. Thanks, FloodedHeart. Thanks.

“So wait, next you're going to tell me this Shark Bite Brew is turning people into shark-people,” she typed, before adding ‘lol’ and pressing send.

“Well... I'm not allowed to talk about that... I guess... I'm under NDA, Ms. Darcy told me.”

“Look, who's ‘Ms. Darcy’?”

“Oh, she's the director! She's really... purple. But she's got a soft side, she's in their current ad and wanted to take things in a different direction for the rest of the campaign,” she saw before he edited ‘purple’ into ‘forceful’. Auto-correct gets us all, Earlie thought. But what he typed didn't really make sense, did it?

“What? They let the spokesperson become the director? Who *does* that?”

“Gotta go! My first shoot is about to start! Let me know if you see it!”

“Ha, ha, yeah,” Earlie typed, “As if it’ll come out so fast that I’d just see it.”

Earlie looked up, slightly miffed that she couldn’t get more answers from him when she noticed a large purple something next to her on the ad posted on the side of the bus stop. She saw, in the stunning undersea photo, not just one shark-woman but three, next to the words “Shark Bite Brew. Just drink it already.”

Several cans of the beverage floated through the white sunbeams piercing the blue sea, the clawed pink hand of a shark-woman reaching up towards them. But that was *not* the large purple something that had caught her attention. In the center, a bright purple shark-woman held an open can of Shark Bite Brew. From the waist up, her body was mostly humanoid except for the obvious purple skin, clawed hands, and shark’s head, though curiously, and as Earlie remembered from last year, two fins stuck out emulating ears, not a feature found on most normal sharks. However, from the waist below, the body was formed by the large body of a shark, much like a mermaid.

Earlie had never seen such a thing in her life, except maybe in some video game. The shark-woman she remembered last year had legs and was walking around on land...

Nonetheless, she surmised this must be the “Ms. Darcy” FloodedHeart mentioned. Part of Earlie wanted to scope out Darcy’s large bikini-top-clad breasts, but she was most focused on Darcy’s face. Darcy’s hair floated in the sea in a mess, and she looked upward at the purple cola-like beverage floating away before her. Not exactly easy to drink from a can of

soda under the ocean, even if you are a shark-woman.

Because of this, Darcy's face had a hint of despair that had kept Earlie riveted to it. As she began to notice other details of the ad besides Darcy's face, breasts, and massive tail, she noticed a blurry green shark-mermaid much like Darcy. A shark-mermaid that looked very familiar... as Earlie might have remembered as she stood on the city street last year and saw the sad, apologetic shark-woman in front of her. This green shark-woman was smarter than Darcy. She drank her Shark Bite Brew happily from something that looked like a soda can combined with a scuba diving tank. Earlie admired her cleverness, but the mask made it much harder to successfully identify her...

Just as Earlie was about to be certain this was *her* shark-woman she heard the sound of her bus rumbling to a stop beside her. Phone in hand, she snapped a quick photo of the ad with Darcy on it, figuring that she could take a look at the green shark-woman closer on the bus. Happy with her photography, she stepped on the bus, tapping her card, causing the reader to make a chirpy beep.

Earlie slumped down in one of the rear-most seats of the bus. There was this electricity she felt. More than just confirming the green shark-woman, the photo of the ad was hard evidence of *all* of these shark-women. Earlie never used whatever weird social media site the MMO guild leader Ruth had gotten her on, but something like this seemed like a time to start... didn't it?

It both seemed so obvious that she should post the photo up and yet... What *was* weird about it? Wasn't there *nothing* weird about it? And didn't she feel so *calm*? Why did she need to do anything but *wait* for her stop?

Her second bus was the longest of the three, and instead of posting that boring old photo, there was a *much* more interesting book she could be

reading. Earlie unlocked her phone and once again came face-to-face with Darcy and, with a bolt, that electricity returned. Holy shit, this is a photo of an ad of a real-life shark-woman. The very idea of which Ruth and Zelda both had teased Earlie about when she talked about it last year. She had to *prove* that she wasn't crazy...

But then the *calm* came back. Why would *they* care? Just the same ads they saw go up *every* year, right? What was *she* worried about? She could *just sit there* and watch the city go by out the window... Earlie was just about to do that when she noticed the reflected phone in the window and looked back to once again remember, no, this was definitely something wrong.

Earlie just locked her phone and shoved it back in her bag. The flipping back and forth of her emotions, of her memory, was getting to her. Forget that phone, forget that ad, forget the shark-women, she thought; It's easier that way. Doing nothing was easier than thinking about what was on that phone. And as she looked around the bus, she could see nothing out of the ordinary. No ads of shark-women on this bus at least.

Earlie closed her eyes and took a slow breath in, and a slow breath out. And when she opened them, she was only a few stops away. That felt much too short, but much too short was easier. Earlie liked easier, didn't she?

One stop, two stop, three stops, and then Earlie stepped off the bus at her second stop. One more bus. Without even thinking or looking, Earlie pulled her phone back out of her bag and swiped back over to her chat with FloodedHeart.

While she had been riding the bus, he had sent a photo of himself with the caption "about to go to make-up!" and another message reminding her to keep an eye out for his ads. She still wondered why he felt he needed to tell her this *now*, but she figured she might as well try to remember his

face. Which, to be honest, did not make it easy.

FloodedHeart was one of the more average looking men she had seen, wearing a pair of cargo shorts and a gray t-shirt that had “Property of Kennedy High Athletic Department” written on it. She seemed to remember him once mentioning he helped out his old basketball coach...

FloodedHeart had tried to distinguish himself from the rest of the gaggle of boring men with a bushy beard. The beard had filled in well, Earlie thought, but she found his eyes worked against what he wanted his beard to say. His eyes were dark brown and hard to see; there was a hint of tears in the glee he showed at being in a make-up chair at long last.

Finding FloodedHeart boring like she found all men, Earlie looked up from the phone and noticed an ad for Shark Bite Brew on the side of the bus stop. An ad with the same man she had just been looking at on her phone, dressed up in a flannel shirt and carrying an axe over his shoulder like a lumberjack, his other hand holding up a can of Shark Bite Brew. “A hard drink for hard work. Shark Bite Brew,” was the copy of the ad.

While this was a much more “normal” ad than the one she saw before, something felt incredibly wrong about this ad being *here* in front of her at this bus stop. Looking back at her phone, she noticed that FloodedHeart had sent his photo in the make-up chair about 30 minutes ago. Based on what she saw before her, Earlie knew that not only would they have had to finish the photo shoot, they would have had to print the poster, bring it out here across town, and post it up into the bus stop billboard in just that short amount of time. Absolutely impossible.

Earlie boggled at this before she heard the familiar rumble of her bus. Flipping back to her phone app, she snapped a picture of the impossibly fast ad and turned to get on to her last bus.

Earlie felt herself flash forward, already sitting in her chair, one of the far front side chairs. There were no other riders, disabled, elderly, or not, so she felt it was OK to use them for now. She was feeling her head spin, or at least *try* to spin, but some force gripped it back, kept fast in place, wavering up and down around a feeling of “calm”.

But she wasn't calm. The fact was continually there in her face on her phone. Her encounter a year ago was no dream. There *were* shark-women. Not in a dream. Not in a fantasy. Not in some book. Not on some TV show, but here, right in front of her, on the mundane common sight of her phone resting on her leg as she rode the bus to work.

Something that seemed so impossible just a few hours ago was as real and imminent as work looming ahead. Why, the next person to get on this bus could be a shark-woman, as natural as that would obviously be.

No, there was *nothing* natural going on here. Earlie *had* to help FloodedHeart. She could feel the urgency coming from deep within. Some primal fear that she, and perhaps all of us, have forgotten in these modern times. A fear of a cunning alien magic. Something that could only remain on the tip of the tongue.

Well, she could at least *warn* him, she thought. She opened up his chat, to see that he had posted a new message: “First ad already done! I gotta get to the next one! They got really excited when I mentioned that I played basketball!”

Earlie began to piece together the timeline in her head. Someone was tugging at it, but if she kept on with the thread she might be able to follow it. He must have sent this message shortly after the lumberjack ad. That was now exactly 17 minutes ago. Seventeen. She needed to keep that number in mind.

Earlie began typing back when, to her surprise, a new message came in.

“Wow, I’m really surprised how good the soda is... I’ve had like 3 cans already... I didn’t need to, they said, but I wanted to get the realism across... You’re definitely going to have to try some... if you want...”

Earlie was pretty sure she was *not* going to do that. Even flirting with the thought made that primal memory flare up. No doing.

She looked up with a start to realize that the bus was coming to a stop at her destination. The phonebanking company she worked for was located on the far edge of the city, where it was no longer technically the city, but some non-incorporated hole in the patchwork.

Having been a very good and patient girl, she felt her head begin to spin, but focused on getting herself and voice together into her work mode. Getting to the correct level of business casual: casual enough to be considered friendly, but professional enough to cause no waves. For waves would attract her client, (Interim) City Councilwoman Laura Evans. Evans had been appointed to the City Council to replace a council-member who had had died during the tail end of society giving a shit... uh, society under quarantine protocols.

She had been a perennial contender, but had generally failed to gain enough votes against the more leftist candidate she had been attempting to dislodge from her district. But the council-member who died was an at-large member, so Evans could rely on being put before the entire city and not those Marxist Jackals... uh, activists in District 3.

Earlie grumbled as she thought about how she had ended up here, unexpectedly working for the *very* candidate that she had joined the phonebanking company to fight *against* in that previous election. But the company’s loyalty was always swayable, and with the larger donation

bank Evans had picked up, the company could be pulled away.

That's politics.

Evans felt that the phonebanking was so important to her obviously impending victory over Taiwo that she had decided to come down to the company to oversee the efforts herself. And "oversee" was a very appropriate word, Earlie thought. She shook her head before her eyes fell on the side of the bus stop next to her.

She checked her phone. Only a few minutes had passed, moving her 17 minutes to 19 minutes. And yet, here was a new ad of FloodedHeart again, drinking a can of Shark Bite Brew after seemingly playing a game of basketball, judging by the ball he held in his hand. His eyes were closed as he serenely drank, the camera able to make out a few beads of sweat running past his patchy beard. At the bottom, the slogan: "Take your body to the limit. Shark Bite Brew."

Beyond just trying to think of *how* this ad could be here in front of her after not even 20 minutes, beyond the sudden patchiness of FloodedHeart's beard, and beyond his softening features and protruding chest, there was something Earlie felt like she was realizing but couldn't quite get there.

And as a sharp yell from the door interrupted her thoughts, she'd not get there. Evans had noticed her arrival and called out. Evans considered Earlie "her favorite person here." Earlie disagreed, but the job paid well. Having the sense to snap a quick picture of the new basketball ad, she thought that maybe she'd get to what she was realizing after work.

Stumbling out the door in a daze, looking up towards the night stars, and letting herself swirl back into the Earlie that she actually *was*, and not the Earlie as she must appear, Earlie kept coming back to try to complete the

persistent “realization” that she kept having. Something about the ad on the side of the bus stop.

She looked and there was already a new ad there. Earlie pulled out her phone to see the basketball ad again, to confirm something. And yes, what had been small points on his ears in the basketball ad were beginning to stretch further out in this one, where he was dressed as a doctor.

Earlie, in her tired state, tried to read the copy, which seemed to be a rather mocking take on how these changes were natural and surely not enough to get one out of an advertising contract. And then complaining about it just leading to being forced to wear a doctor’s uniform and take it all out on stage. Earlie thought such irony in advertising had died in the 90s, but it was a joke, right?

She turned her gaze back to FloodedHeart. No, those changes were *not* natural. His face pushed forward, as if the point of his nose had been smoothed down flat to then be tugged forward a bit, kneading the clay of flesh into a blunted snout. His beard barely held on, seeming like the bare peach fuzz of a high school freshman. But beyond the snout and the ears... and some hmm... Earlie felt a bit of a blood rush as she noticed FloodedHeart’s soft... rounded... and feminine form.

After all, there hadn’t been any shark-*men*. Shark Bite Brew has no side effects, my ass, thought Earlie.

She released a breath that she hadn’t even realized that she had been holding in before falling in the familiar pattern of taking a picture of the new ad. There was a bit more until her bus would arrive so she decided to check out the chat with FloodedHeart.

There had been a few sent messages from FloodedHeart that were now

deleted, their exact contents lost to the ephemerality of Internet services. And then, “Yeah, I guess I can’t talk about that. Sorry, NDA. I seriously can’t believe the contract even specified that clause. At least they say they’re going to make it up to me by doing a shoot on the beach before the sun sets... Though...”

Earlie looked back at the FloodedHeart in the ad, imagining him saying his line, fretting with his doctor’s lab coat, trying to calm himself out of his anger. She could sense several loud sensations in her head but in the haze of sleepiness, none of them could really do more but fade into a dull roar that made thinking impossible.

“Oh, here is my bus,” Earlie said a bit robotically as she noticed the bus pull up, “I should get on and ride the bus home and go to sleep, and hope FloodedHeart enjoys her time at the beach...” Wait, what did she just say about “her”? No, careful, Earlie... that’s something FloodedHeart would have to tell you. Just sit on the bus and think about it more when you’re not so tired. You’ve been such a good girl dealing with work today.

And so Earlie slumped down onto a nearby chair as her bus, the only one she would need on the ride back, rode off with her.

Earlie was suddenly startled awake as her brain recognized the automatic announcer call her stop, and by instinct pulled the cord to signal her desire to get off. She got up and got to the door, eager to hurry home and into a warm bed.

The bus came to a stop, the doors opened, and Earlie rushed out into the bus stop a few blocks from her apartment. “Oh, this must be the beach ad FloodedHeart was talking about,” Earlie said to no one in particular, just as a sing-song mindless chatter pulled from her throat.

This must have been the ad, it seemed unlikely that there were multiple

beach ads for Shark Bite Brew, though Earlie accepted that the beach was likely a common location for such ads given the whole “shark” thing. However, the spokesperson in the ad didn’t strike Earlie as FloodedHeart. She was rather inappropriately dressed for the beach, wearing a heavy flannel shirt and a warm woolen hat that bulged in a odd way that seemed unexpected for hair. The spokesperson also had her face covered with a bandanna, which jutted out in an inhuman way, more like she had a snout than...

A flash of recognition came to Earlie and she pulled out her phone and looked at FloodedHeart’s first lumberjack ad. Yes, she realized. It was the same flannel shirt! This *was* FloodedHeart! The changes from the soda must have progressed even further. Her... his body was even more soft and feminine in some parts, but there were several very prominent *sharp* parts: a hint of a point on his kneecaps as well as what Earlie now recognized as his pointed ear-fins under the hat. His hands and feet seemed to be partially merged into something more like fins, but that didn’t stop him from being able to hold up a can of Shark Bite Brew in his left hand. And from his lower back, there was something protruding, being held back by his shorts and heavy flannel shirt. Above his head was this ad’s tagline, “Take a load off with Shark Bite Brew... for when you have nothing to hide.”

It certainly seemed that FloodedHeart had plenty to hide judging from the mask and flannel shirt. But if the ad said there was nothing to hide... perhaps there wasn’t? The ad, much like the ads before it were so out-of-place that Earlie began to think that maybe her fatigue and frustration at work had been making her see things... But they were all on the phone... She swiped over to the chat with FloodedHeart, he had posted a message.

“Wow, four whole shoots in one day! They say I’m a natural! I feel like a whole new... person... Anyway, let me know if you see my ads anywhere!

I'm beat... Nighty Night," he had typed. Earlie was a bit disappointed to see his status had changed to offline, though perhaps he could be reached in the morning. That same bit of primal fear in Earlie didn't want to wait, but all the various trials of the day were getting to her. She snapped a quick photo of the beach ad and walked past the bus stop to her apartment where she collapsed into her bed. Her last waking thought was that maybe she should send the photos of the ads to FloodedHeart, but that seemed like a problem for tomorrow Earlie. After all, good girls needed their sleep...

Though, it didn't seem that Earlie was good enough of a girl that she *got* good sleep. She hadn't had *nightmares*. Not really. It felt like she would find herself stuck on a small island near a pristine beach by the ocean, but unlike the nearby beach in the city, nothing was around for miles except beach, ocean, and clear blue skies. The island was about 100 yards from shore, and besides a nice rock for sitting, the palm tree above her, and Earlie, there was nothing.

As she looked across the dream beach, she would see an orange blob cowering before a much larger purple blob before... darkness, and a deep, dreamless sleep. It had happened a few times. As if a dream *meant* to begin, and then was just suddenly *ripped away* before anything could occur. So not quite a *nightmare* since there wasn't even anything concrete to go off of... but... the fear of that cunning alien magic... the aborted dreams *reeked* of it.

Perhaps cereal would clear it.

Scouring the box of cereal, half suspecting a shark-woman to come in from off the side of the box and have her way with the cereal's regular lapine mascot, Earlie decided against all odds that her phone would be better reading material. After all, FloodedHeart had gotten back online, and posted a few messages.

“So yeah, the studio is right near the beach, let me give you the address if you want to visit! Or maybe have some Shark Bite Brew yourself...” Visit? Maybe. But Earlie was sure as hell not drinking a god damn thing.

“We’ll see,” Earlie curtly responded, “OK, I don’t know how it happened, but I did see all four of your ads yesterday! I’ll upload them for you...”

“Oh, cool! Hmmm, that first one isn’t me! That’s Darcy or as she told me to call her: ‘Deadly Darcy’. She’s... she said something to me after that beach one... That’s my favorite one... Oh, noes, gotta go! Darcy wants to talk to me...” Shoot. Earlie had hoped to find out more about Darcy.

A series of sharp raps came from Earlie’s front door dragging her attention away. She swallowed the spoonful of cereal in her mouth as she got up to see who it was, putting her eye up to the pinhole. Nobody.

She slid the chain off and opened the latch to quickly stick her head out and scan the hallway in hopes of seeing the person who had knocked. Her intuition had awarded her with the sight of a green blur, that nonetheless, she could recognize as a green shark-woman... after all, her mind had been already primed towards that... but... hmmm...

The blur had ducked in the elevator and closed the doors, and Earlie could not afford to give chase, so she took another look around her front door and noticed an envelope on the ground with her screen name written on it in delicate cursive: “QueenieTheEarlie”. She crouched down to investigate the suspicious missive. It just seemed like a normal envelope.

Earlie felt a sense of disappointment before hearing a vibration from the phone on her table in the apartment. She picked the envelope up off the floor and placed it on the table near the door. She *really* felt like she should probably read the letter, but there was no time. The vibration from the phone was her alarm letting her know that she had reached the last

minute before she needed to hop in the shower to be ready for the three long busses to work. She'd have to read it on the bus.

Between the food, shower, coffee, first bus ride, and fear any sleepiness in Earlie had been suppressed by the time she opened up the light matcha-colored envelope at her first stop, which was her first private moment with the envelope since leaving the apartment. The letter was handwritten, matching the penmanship on the envelope.

“Dear QueenieTheEarlie,

Yes, it's me, selachisapphic. I'm so sorry for standing you up last year right before our date. There were several changes that I had to deal with suddenly and it didn't feel right to lay that all on you. Let's just say that I drank some soda that didn't quite agree with how I saw myself and leave it at that.

I hope that all can be forgiven because I do still like you, and I really hope that we can make up that date soon. It feels wrong to have treated such a lovely woman as you the way that I did. I didn't expect that we'd end up back in your town, but I'm glad that I have the chance to at least let you know what happened.

I am probably a bit too busy over the next few days, but expect to hear from me soon. I understand if you say no. The choice is yours.”

Earlie's mind felt like a perfectly silent riot had broken out. Everyone was going around in complete panic but there were no thoughts... no sound... just the feeling of confusion and franticness. And then, the phrase “drank some soda that didn't quite agree” cut through the maelstrom. Earlie's joke was right. Shark Bite Brew turns regular humans into shark-women.

She felt bemused bafflement at this epiphany. Hadn't she realized this

before? But what even was *this*? This wasn't supposed to be a world of magic drinks that turned you into a shark. But here, in the ads with FloodedHeart, that was exactly what seemed to be happening. He had come all the way here to get some ad work, and now he was a shark-woman too.

“But that’s what she wants, perhaps...” meekly came out of Earlie’s throat, muttered to no one. She looked up to see her second bus coming to a stop, nodded, and got on.

Earlie rather politely sat in her chair on the bus. Traffic was light today for some reason, so the bus could actually get some speed, and she found herself examining the feeling of the motion of the bus. Or more, this feeling that her mind should be moving just as fast as this bus... but it had been held... fast.

FloodedHeart was turning into a shark-woman, directly visible in ads all across the city. She hadn’t really paid attention, but she had seen them on bus stops, phone poles, and bare walls *everywhere*. Something impossible had happened. Something impossible *was* happening. And no one acted like *anything* was happening, as if it was just another day.

The smug face of Laura Evans on a billboard outside surely didn’t seem to care that Earlie’s friend was turning into a shark-woman, as if to say “So what? Your friend is turning into a shark-woman? I have an election to win! I need votes from everyone in the GLBT community! It’s not the 90s! It’s OK that your friend is turning into a shark-woman!”

It *was* probably OK, wasn’t it? Earlie wasn’t so certain she would say that she had... trans-dar... but there was this distance and sadness she felt in FloodedHeart’s voice during games. In Earlie’s experience most men who *didn’t* have that braggadocious certainty in every word they said... well, they hadn’t stayed men for long. At least not *straight* men.

So being— the words felt so odd to say despite the repetition —turned into a shark-woman would be like winning the lottery for a closeted trans woman. Which would explain why she— no, not yet —he would go through all this trouble to go on the wild goose chase of some moody lesbian with made-up stories of shark-women.

With a pained smile, Earlie looked away from the window and outside world and turned back to the inside bus. And there, right behind the driver was the sign that this was *not* OK. It was a new ad for Shark Bite Brew. And while she could recognize FloodedHeart, she could also recognize Darcy. Deadly Darcy.

Darcy was massive, towering above FloodedHeart, who she held up in the air by his hand with ease, both grasping a can of Shark Bite Brew. FloodedHeart seemed in shock, his bandanna mask having had slipped, a baseball cap falling off his head and revealing... His now luxuriously long brown hair? And his new snout, but it was the hair that caught Earlie's attention. Earlie turned back to look at Darcy. A completely different direction of woman, but Earlie tried to keep her focus on Darcy's smug little smile over her other features, but then noticed the tag line at the top reading "Show who's boss with Shark Bite Brew", sticking the product name drop and leading to "and brand new Shark Bite Brew Top Pop: It's Pop for Tops!"

Earlie scanned back up to notice the *other* can of soda Darcy was holding, with a slightly different label. Earlie tried to focus on the can and not the many *other* things that had crossed her vision up from the bottom tag line. *Especially* not her long thick tail that must be the size of Earlie herself... Or those breasts... Or that *bulge*.

She suspected that the FCC might have some notes for the company on this, but it wasn't like Earlie necessarily *agreed* with the FCC on that. It felt like the last wall of resistance to the bizarre advertisements magically

sprouting across town featuring her friend FloodedHeart becoming some mewling bottom sharkgirl... *shark-woman*... had broken. No, not just broken, but had been directly smashed through. Earlie took a picture of her conqueror and was happy to slip off the bus, recognizing her stop as the next one.

Oh, look, the same ad is here on the bus stop. Great. Earlie felt lucky a vibration from her phone gave her something else to think about. Instead of thinking about FloodedHeart, here, have a new message from a few minutes ago actually *from* him! And a voice message at that! You missed it because of your impure thoughts, Earlie!

“Uh, um... well, OK, first off... I’m OK and it’s fine! But uh... I... hmmm.. Noticed something about Darcy and I have like a question... and it’s a weird question and maybe not polite, but I need to ask it, and— oh man, I totally shouldn’t have left a voice message like this... But yeah, don’t worry, I’ll be OK and uh... I guess I can’t promise that. But I’ll be maybe OK? Thanks bye, maybe come visit or not...” he had rambled in a rushed breath. His voice sounded... higher... If it wasn’t for some sense of his personal resonances, Earlie would have thought this was just some... girl... a cis girl... Earlie huffed with the recognition that whatever Darcy was doing to FloodedHeart could even fix that common complaint of trans femmes as Zelda had gone on at length about.

“Well, that seems to be all OK, isn’t it?” Earlie found herself muttering, again the words just being ripped from her throat... No. It wasn’t OK. But she needed to think about how she was going to handle it. Either she would need to skip work and get her head bitten off by Evans to instead confront Darcy and get her head bitten off by *Darcy*. Or she could cower in her job she hated...

At least, either way, she could board her bus that had just arrived.

This was the last bus before work. If Earlie was going to figure out what to do, it had to be now. Yet, part of her was replaying traumatic stories she had heard from friends but with Darcy and FloodedHeart. Another part was coming up with all the fawning that it would just be better to give to Darcy than her anger. And another merely stood petrified before (Interim) City Councilwoman Laura Evans, who was letting her eternally fixed Duchenne smile fall to let the beast inside out.

Earlie couldn't think like this, but perhaps she could focus on something simple, like the logistics of getting back. It would take another 3 busses or one very long one to get back. But that would be the same hour and half it had taken her so far, if not longer due to the beginnings of rush hour. Yeah, that's right, rush hour was back to life after a short stay during the pandemic... during the time when people gave a shit about the pandemic. It would make more sense to get a ride share... use one of those exploitative apps to summon a driver from amongst the common folks desperately trying to hustle enough to afford dinner. Yeah, she could swing that, fiscally and morally.

All that was left for the rest of the short ride to the office was to order the rideshare and to begin to psych herself up to face her imminent foes. The psych up wasn't going well, none of the bickering parts of her had calmed down even with the plan already in motion. Earlie focused on her breathing, and had gotten the parts of herself to be at least quiet long enough so that she could say her piece. She just would need a second after she stepped off the bus and— Earlie felt the new ad's sudden appearance as a warning shot. The ads *had* been popping up with uncanny quickness regardless, but this was the first time that one of them felt *purposeful*.

Starting at the top of the ad with the tagline, Earlie read “Lead me to that... Shark Bite Brew”. Both Darcy and FloodedHeart were on this one. With his new big and long brown hair all around his blushing snout, ear-

fins back in submission, FloodedHeart was being led by a bright pink collar with a bright pink leash held off-shot by Darcy, whose tail poked in from the right. FloodedHeart had just slipped over the center of the spectrum between “human man” and “shark-woman”. His black shirt with a very low neckline showed off his new cleavage, which was supported further by his fishnet-clad arms which lead down to his submissively clasped fists. He wore a pair of pink, blue, and white full-height stockings on his legs, his sharp knee-fins protruding through a hole they had pierced in them. His tail hadn’t gained full thickness like Darcy yet, but *had* reached its full length, pulled a bit forward to come down and back up to his knees.

Well, at least it didn’t seem the FCC had gotten to them in time to stop them for *this* ad. Earlie had never heard Darcy’s voice in her life. But she could clearly hear Darcy say “come get her if you want her” in whatever imagined voice she was currently working with. Earlie snapped a picture of the ad, turned to notice her ride share pull up, and made the decision to get in. She would have to just ignore the few seconds of Evans noticing her and shouting “Reagan... I mean Earlie! Where are you going? Hey!” as she got into the car. She had picked *who* was going to bite her head off.

Evans could yell at “Reagan Earlie Kent” all she wanted, but thanks to decades of hating the name her white adoptive conservative parents had given her to erase her Korean origins, Earlie would respond to nothing besides “Earlie”. Evans had thought it funny because she had worked the Ronald Reagan campaign before she became a Democrat, so there was just something she liked about the name. Earlie could only think about how AIDS had been handled by his administration.

None of that was important, right now. Well, it was *important*, but there were a lot more imminent important things. Earlie stepped out of the rideshare car, giving the driver the *de riguer* 5 stars, and looking around.

The studio itself was very unassuming, being just another long warehouse a few blocks in from the beach, and in the opposite direction from the view out of Earlie's apartment only one block away. She tried not to think about how she had just spent 3 hours and \$74.25 in combined bus and rideshare fare just to travel such a short distance.

Nothing really stood out about the studio, which struck Earlie as a bit odd, because she *had* walked around here just a few weeks ago when some questions from FloodedHeart made her want to figure out just what she had seen last year. And the studio, was... not there? The mere assertion that it hadn't been there felt like a delusion in the face of the actual building in front of her, but the memory of seeing the sun rise over the beach through a vacant lot as she looked in this direction was strong. Heck, scrolling through the photos on her phone, she found the exact photo she had taken of a visible sunrise from a nearby spot after she had been struck by its beauty.

That primal fear began to claw at Earlie's brain. It was wavering between fight and flight and edging ever closer to flight. Earlie began looking around for her escape path, when her eyes caught the newest Shark Bite Brew ad on the side of some dive catty-corner from the studio. Maybe the FCC had finally turned its eye towards the studio, because at least compared to the last couple of ads, this one was tame.

FloodedHeart was just your good ol' fashioned American sharkgirl waitress... shark-woman server... holding up a tray of Shark Bite Brew cans next to an enticing glass of the deep purple liquid. FloodedHeart's transformation had seemingly reached its conclusion, with his long brown hair now past his shoulders to the small of his back, splayed out around his smiling blushing face. His skin had become a light orangish tan all over including down his ample cleavage, and his tail had thickened behind him. The waitress skirt, while of traditional design was shorter

than Earlie suspected they could have gotten away with in the 50s, showing his long legs.

The top tagline simply said “Order Up!” with the Shark Bite Brew logotype at the bottom. It was a shockingly conservative and wholesome ad... except for Darcy looming in the back with a self-satisfied smile as she leered at FloodedHeart. Earlie was at least happy that Darcy was finally wearing more clothes than a bikini. If it wasn't for her nose ring and pierced ear-fins, it'd be exactly the type of thing Earlie's parents would hang on their wall. Well, that and the shark-women. But even then, Earlie felt like she could hear her parents somehow saying “I don't understand, Reagan. Your friend seems a most upstanding sharkgirl, a real sweetheart not ruined by feminism...”

No. There was nothing actually wholesome about this ad, Earlie decided. This was a distraction. A moment to lull the normies into false security before... Earlie wasn't sure what exactly Darcy had planned, but based on her look, it was *not* anything that would be approved by The Heritage Foundation.

Earlie focused on FloodedHeart playing waitress. He... no... it was probably fine at this point... She looked absolutely stunning. Her eyes were full of life in a way they hadn't been in her human photos in the makeup chair. And that is what Earlie remembered most about when she saw selachisapphic walk away a year ago. The brightness in her eyes fighting the sadness of the missed opportunity. And that very same brightness was in FloodedHeart's eyes.

Earlie wanted to help her. Earlie wanted to hold her. Earlie wanted to console her. And *not* do whatever Darcy was going to do to her. At least, not unless FloodedHeart asked...

And with that, Earlie had tempered her fear into a calm, simmering rage.

She was ready to go in.

As soon as the doors swung shut behind Earlie, several shark-women milling about the lobby, including a pair wrapped in a close embrace as they sat behind the receptionist's desk looked up. But rather than a feeding frenzy, the shark-women mostly watched in awe as Earlie fearlessly strode across the lobby. As she passed by the desk, the lavender receptionist said "Uh, excuse me, this is a closed set... ma'am..." Her cornflower snuggling partner nodding her head up and down in an attempt to add emphasis.

Earlie didn't respond, simply looked at the receptionists and began moving towards the door. A dark maroon shark-woman on a nearby couch found an ounce of nerve and got up, running next to Earlie, shouting "Hey, didn't you hear her? You can't go in there!"

"Then stop me."

Earlie was not stopped. Instead the maroon shark-woman froze, the bravery dropping from her face as Earlie simply nodded and moved on to open the door labeled "Studio" below a bright blinking red sign that said "CLOSED".

The studio was dark, and after closing the door behind her, Earlie needed to take a bit for her eyes to adjust. The center of the studio had been lit, but with the sudden move into darkness, Earlie couldn't see what was there. She watched the door in case any of the sharks outside interfered but happy with her ability to see, Earlie looked to the center stage.

There, lit from above by a single spotlight, was FloodedHeart. She had seemingly been knocked out or something, lying face-first on the floor, her tail and ass raised in the air, in a stupor. She still wore the waitress costume, or what was left of it after it had been ripped and torn apart,

skirt pulled up, and underwear pulled down. It seemed unlikely that she had had time to change her costume, yet, somehow, her hair had been dyed perfect bright pink from the earlier brown, cascading all around her head so that with the exception of her snout poking out the front, Earlie could not see FloodedHeart's face.

The state of FloodedHeart had sapped Earlie of her resolve, and she could only move slowly towards her in a state of shock. A deep, gruff, but feminine voice, not too dissimilar to what Earlie had imagined came from behind.

“Hey, lady, who the fuck are you? What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Darcy said, jumping up from the director’s chair she had been sitting in. The fuzzy white robe she wore did nothing to make her seem less intimidating. But having finally encountered her prey of Deadly Darcy, Earlie swung to stare her down and begin her tirade about FloodedHeart’s mistreatment. And then FloodedHeart herself spoke...

“Oh wow, wow, wow, wow... that was so good Ms. Darcy... is that what you call a ‘scene’?” she mumbled.

“Yes, doll, that is a ‘scene’,” Darcy replied with the softest honey in her voice before returning her glare to Earlie, “But what I’m about to do to this bitch...”

Earlie suddenly felt her carefully laid worldview crumble around her...

“Wait... ‘Scene’? Is this just some...”

FloodedHeart had finally pulled herself around to face the two, though still didn’t seem to have the energy to get up. “Oh, Earlie! You made it! And... uh... yeah... that was my first... kink scene...? Is that what you called it, Ms. Darcy?”

“Yes, doll. Don’t rush, take some time to enjoy subspace while I find out if Earlie is going to walk out here alive.”

“I would prefer she would, ma’am...”

“Fine, doll,” Darcy grumbled before turning to Earlie, “Listen, you have 10 seconds to explain yourself.”

“I am... well, I’m a friend of his...”

“(‘His’?)”

“Her... look, I just have seen all the ads, and she sent me this message and I... didn’t realize... I thought you were just abusing her for the ads... not just...”

“Not just...?”

“Sex,” Earlie blurted, “Fun stuff, but not exactly a reason to rush in here looking to fight...”

“You would have lost. Anyway, yeah, it’s that, but it’s *also* for an ad. We’re not here *just* to fuck around... Show her, Megs.”

Earlie saw Megs sitting in a corner of the studio in front of a computer with a graphics tablet. She had been putting the finishing touches on the ad. Much like Earlie had found her, FloodedHeart was splayed out with her ass in the air, a satisfied smile on her face, a can of Shark Bite Brew on the ground near her feet. “Shark Bite Brew: Take your body to the limit” said the taglines, Earlie recognizing the callback to the basketball ad. Earlie couldn’t help but find it clever, but out of some sense of pride she didn’t want to directly admit it.

“Hey, that’s great work Megs! And you got the shot perfectly Specs!”

“My name is Brittney, Ms. Darcy...” said the pastel teal glasses-wearing camera-shark standing over by Megs’s desk.

“Yeah, whatever, Specs. Hey, doll, this is great work. I think you’re ready for that name I promised.”

FloodedHeart perked up with excitement.

Giving a wide pointed grin as she shot a glance towards Earlie before facing FloodedHeart, Darcy simply said “How about ‘Cordelia’? It sounds pretty, doesn’t it?”

“It does, Ms. Darcy. Thank you,” Cordelia said, Earlie finally learning FloodedHeart’s true name.

“I’m glad this worked out... but... Cordelia?” Earlie asked.

The shark-woman nodded happily, making an inquisitive mewl.

“Darcy? Can you two at least *explain* some things?”

Darcy waited for Cordelia to respond. Cordelia finally got up on her feet and said, “Yes, anything for such a good friend.”

Hours before, he had taken his finger off the voice call button and shoved the phone into his pocket. He tried to readjust his now-baggy pants, which were having extra trouble staying up due to his lengthening tail. He was sure *something* had been happening to him, and not at all to his surprise, he found that he liked it... But this wasn’t right. He wasn’t a shark, he wasn’t a girl, he was... A nobody.

But in just five ad shoots, Ms. Darcy had made him feel like *somebody*. She constantly expressed her praise of his physical acting even when he had mustered up his courage to complain about how the somebody he was

becoming wasn't who he had been just a day ago.

He wasn't exactly trying to complain this time, but when Darcy had held him aloft with just one hand, his eyes had caught something as they looked down her body. And several off hand boasts about feeling like a "new woman" by Darcy had taken on a different light. He just needed to know... Not because there was something wrong... Just if it was... possible...

He knocked on Darcy's dressing room door. Darcy shouted "if you're going to bother me, have the guts to just come in" from behind, which he took as his cue to open the door and quickly shut it behind him after entering.

Darcy, unashamedly naked, looked over and simply growled "Ah, the fresh fish. What do you want?"

He stammered a bit and asked his question. "Uh, well, you see Ms. Darcy... I uh... I don't mean to... Did you used to be a man?"

In one blink of his eye after finishing the question, Darcy was upon him, having cornered him back into the door. She stood above him with ferocity in her eyes, glowering.

"Keep talking," she said as she dragged her clawed fingers down the door, leaving deep gouges mere inches from his head. He couldn't do much but stammer and begin hyperventilating as he felt his legs buckle under him, the world closing in around his vision.

In the next blink of his eyes, he saw her face soften in surprise as she realized his intent...

"Oh... You're asking for help doing the same, aren't you...?"

The world around him opened back up, but he was no less able to stand on his own feet before responding “yeah... I guess... can like someone just do that?”

“What? Transition gender? You must be from one of those bad states, kid. C’mon. I’ve got some dresses for you to try on if you want.”

“What!? Dresses? No, I can’t do that... I’m a man... I’m supposed to be a man...”

“Are you, though?”

He thought... he reached inside... and she, not he, answered “No. I am not. I don’t want to be.”

“Great. Then let’s get you dressed up, doll.”

The girl who had just accepted herself liked the sound of that.

And from then on the two love-sharks had been pushing the boundaries of advertising, seeing how far they could go. The ad shoot had become less of an ad shoot and more of a porn shoot. Darcy had hoped that she could tick off the boss-lady enough to get her down to the studio where Darcy had a few choice words for her, but the boss-lady must have not cared.

That was two weeks ago, and the entire stressful event was now over, replaced by today’s stressful event: the election results. There would still be a few more days of counting all the mail-in ballots, but Earlie was happy her own ex-boss-lady seemed to be losing to Taiwo, though Evans hadn’t yet accepted the inevitable by conceding the race. So even that wasn’t that stressful.

Evans had left a long voice mail tirade on Earlie’s phone, but Earlie

guessed she knew the gist: you're fired, and deleted it without listening. Maybe Taiwo was looking for staffers, Earlie thought. But with the money from the Evans job, she did have enough to get some enjoyment out of the rest of the summer.

Darcy and Cordelia had offered to have Earlie join them, as well as sample some of the merchandise, but Earlie was glad to stay a human. At least for now. She chuckled at remembering how Cordelia had taken it so much better than Darcy, who grunted before mumbling, "damn, you would have been a great shark..."

Earlie chuckled to herself. She didn't need to become a shark, she thought. This whole thing had brought enough of her fighting spirit back out. So much so that if Earlie *had* become a shark-woman, that *Darcy* might need to end up practicing *her* mewling. Maybe that's exactly what Darcy had wanted...

A series of familiar raps came from the door, shocking Earlie out of her musings. There was once again no one through the pinhole, and the supposed delivery-shark had managed to pass her stealth roll this time as Earlie scanned the hallway. Looking down at her feet, she noticed a cardboard tube about 1 yard long, and picked it up before heading back inside.

Earlie knew this must have been the last ad of the campaign, which Darcy had promised to deliver to her. Opening the tube, she found big print outs of all the other ads in addition, though she was unsure where, if at all, she was going to hang them. Putting the ones aside she had seen, she rolled out the new one.

The new ad was a return to wholesomeness, with Darcy and Cordelia sitting together, Cordelia on Darcy's lap. Darcy seemed to be happily expounding on one thing or another as Cordelia listened intently with

a pleased smile. While Darcy wasn't dressed too out of her ordinary, Cordelia had been decked out in a beautiful yellow gingham dress. Her ear-fins had similar yellow ribbons tied on them, sporting several new piercings. Her pink voluminous hair surrounded Cordelia's blushing face, her snout resting closely next to Darcy's. She wore a lace choker of the same yellow around her neck, above a plaid yellow bow hiding her cleavage. The yellow dress was outlined in white lace, which matched the delicate white gloves on her clawed hands. Besides the cute pair of shoes and those long, bare legs, Earlie noticed another yellow bow tied around her thick tail as it trailed off over Darcy's leg. "See ya next year, Shark Bite Brew" the tagline read.

Earlie smiled at the ad, and the real joy that shined through. She really did hope to see them again next year. But for now, she had to break the news to her gaming group.

Earlie had been beaten to breaking the news by Cordelia, who had posted that she had started some changes and needed some time to see where it went. "I think you'll all like where FloodedHeart finds herself," she ended with. Zelda had noticed the use of "herself" and responded "ah, dang you finally came over to the cute side! Well have fun!" which Cordelia had responded to with an orange heart emoji.

"Oh yeah," Cordelia then added, "I felt bad about leaving the game, but one of my co-workers was interested in joining and I think she would be a great replacement for me. I already gave her the voice chat link; she should be able to join y'all for tonight's session."

"Ha," Ruth responded, "A new girl from the new girl! Better keep Earlie away before she scares her off with her lesbian thirst!" Earlie had responded to this with an angry face emoji. She would have to give her full thoughts over video. And luckily it was time for game.

She idly shifted as she waited for the voice chat to connect, looking at the poster of this year's final Shark Bite Brew ad now hanging on her wall. The others were nice, but there was something she liked about this one. Plus, it would be easier to explain to any guests...

With a chirp, the video chat connected and Earlie noticed that three other people had already joined. Ruth, Zelda, and... selachisapphic. Neither Ruth or Zelda seemed bothered that there was a green shark-woman in the chat, and selachisapphic looked sharp with her striped pointed ear-fins poking out above her short orange hair.

“Aw, look, she’s stunned... Damn, Earlie, pick your mouth up off the floor and be a polite lady and not the normal beast you are,” Zelda said.

“Oh, sorry, I think she’s surprised because we’ve met before,” selachisapphic said, “Yes, I’m Kristie, or you might know me better as selachisapphic... I uh... hope it won’t be weird to join your game... I just wanted to make up for last year...”

Earlie smiled. This shark-woman had been running in her head for the entire year, a ghost. But the thought of at least seeing her this year made it all just float away. “I’m QueenieTheEarlie... But you can call me Earlie. I’d be glad to play with you, Kristie.”

Kristie grinned, showing off her pointed teeth before responding, “Great... Let’s get started.”