

A Boring Afternoon

July 2022

God, this job is boring!

I mean, it pays well enough. And I suppose there are worse jobs in this world than changing the filters in the goldfish tanks or unboxing the latest shipment of organic puppy chow or checking stock on cat toys. This pet shop's pretty quiet, which is also nice – or at least, it usually is on days when the groomer isn't in.

Quiet... which means I hear every single time the door chime dings and a prospective customer enters.

I glance up from the brick breaker game on my phone just in time to see the duo step in, then disappear out of sight toward the aquarium supplies. Another young couple – and holding hands too, from the looks of it. *Ugh, how sickeningly sweet. Thanks for the reminder of my breakup two months ago, okay?*

And frick it all, thanks for making me lose my game, too!

As the minutes tick by and I hear the murmur of their voices rise and fall from somewhere within the aisles, I sigh inwardly and prepare to rise from my comfy spot behind the counter. The manager's been abundantly clear on this. If a customer comes in and doesn't immediately get something, it's on me to go up to them and ask if I can help. All part of the fucking job. Gotta go be nice and helpful... as if they couldn't figure things out on their own like rational human beings...

I find them in 4B: the dog supplies aisle. The girl is short: shorter even than my own five-foot three, and rather plain-looking with her mousey hair and make-up-less face. The guy beside her, on the other hand... well, he's a tall glass of water, and handsome to boot. That reddish hair? Mmmm. Those grey eyes? Hot. His tall, muscled frame, toned and fit as an athlete's? Triple hot.

No, dammit – I'm not jealous! I'm just describing the scene, okay?

"Hi, guys. Anything I can help you find?" Their hands slip apart at the sound of my voice, and the guy looks at his companion with something akin to awkwardness. "Ummm..." he begins uncertainly, and she brightly fills in the rest. "Actually, I think we're good, thanks! Just looking at all the lovely leashes and collar you have here."

They don't want me, I'm almost positive. I get it. But I also know I'm on the CCTV, and that my manager will ding me yet again if I don't force myself upon them. "Oh, okay, that's great! So, is this for a new puppy?" Of course it must be. A stupidly cute couple, doing stupidly cute things together. Like buying a fucking puppy and deluding themselves into thinking it'll stay small and cute and adorable for the rest of its life-

"No, well... actually, he's not a puppy at all." She's glancing up at her partner, almost as if she expects to read the answer in his face. "And he's definitely not new." She giggles softly. "It's just... well, you see, it's my baby's birthday this weekend, and I want to get him a nice new collar and leash. He's been such a good boy, and I know he deserves it. Don't you think so, Brian?"

The guy seems uncomfortable for some reason – or maybe he was just tuning her out, I dunno. "Um, uh... yeah. Yeah, I guess." I could spend more time analyzing what the heck's going on, but frankly that's beyond my pay grade. They've told me what they want, and I know exactly what to do – beginning with the usual polite gushing.

"Oh, that's so sweet! If it's collars and leashes, then you're in the right aisle. You'll just need to find the right size, of course." I gesture at the rack before me, filled with leather and steel and nylon in a dizzying array of colors and styles. I have my gripes with the manager, but I do gotta hand it to him. When it comes to sheer selection, our shop can't be beat. "So, how old will your doggo be, then?"

"How old?" She seems momentarily confused, almost as if she didn't know – which is itself weird. Most folks who know their pet's fucking birthday should damn well know how many years old they are. "Let's see... I guess in doggie years he'd be... um, twenty-eight, I guess?" *Oh, for heaven's sake, we're doing the whole dog-year nonsense? I didn't get hired to do multiplication and division in my head! Let's see, twenty-eight divided by seven – or it is eight?*

"So that's, um, four people years, then?" I venture a guess, trying to sound bright and confident – and I'm relieved to see her nodding enthusiastically. "Yeah, I think that's right!" Whew. "And what sort of breed is he? Is he a big boy or a little guy?" I'm almost there. Just gotta keep this helpful shit up a bit longer...

"Breed?" Again she's glancing up at her silent partner, a curious expression on her face. "Um, I actually don't know. Kinda a mutt, I guess... though I think he's probably got some Irish in him?" "Umm... Irish? Oh, like, an Irish setter? Or an Irish wolfhound?" I'm trying my best here. "Sounds

like a pretty big boy, then..." She's grinning and nodding, even as it seems her boyfriend is suddenly intently interested in the faded sign about custom tag engraving.

"He's definitely a big boy," she admits with an inexplicable giggle. "That's why I was thinking of something nice and strong and wide. Maybe something like this..." She reaches for the leather collars and picks one of the wide black ones from the rack. "Don't you think this would look fantastic, Brian? Such a nice color, and so sturdy, too..."

"It's genuine leather," I offer helpfully, though of course the tag says exactly that. "And it's adjustable from 14 to 20 inches. That should handle most medium- to large-size dogs – though if you really want to be sure, you probably ought to measure beforehand..." She's scrutinizing it, flipping it over, evaluating and pondering... and I know this is when I'm supposed to press the sale. "Oh, and they also make a matching leash, too!" I chirp, tugging the thick leather coil from the shelf. "Of course, it's not quite as fancy as a retractable lash. But it does match, and it's super strong..."

Maybe I was too pushy. The girl's looking up once more at her boyfriend, who almost seems to be... embarrassed? Or maybe it's just a suntan on that sexy face of his? But he's shifting around and looking decidedly uncomfortable, and she's trying to get his attention... "Um, well, I'll let you two decide," I offer, stepping back lamely. *Don't need to be involved in couple dynamics.* "Just holler if you need anything else, okay?"

And so I flee back to my safe place behind the counter. The voices murmur on in the aisle: her lighter tones rising and falling, punctuated by the occasional rumble from him. I can only imagine what's going on in there. "It's your dog! Why the hell should I care?" "But it's *our* dog, baby! Why are you so out of it? Don't you even care? Why are you always like this, anyway?!"

Or I dunno. Maybe I'm just projecting based my own past relationships.

In the end, they emerge: and in her hands I see the very collar and leash I pointed out to them. *Yes – thank the lord! One more sale I can get that commission on!* "So you found everything you were looking for?" Yes, yes, they did, thanks. She's whipping out her card, and into the reader it goes as I bag it for them, and we're almost there...

Except the card reader errs out.

"Um, can we try that again?" "Okay, yeah, let's try this-" "So, let's see... now we need to wait..."

And wait we do, as the freaking POS (piece of shit, I've always termed it internally) takes its fucking sweet time doing its job. While in the meantime, the silence descends over my little checkout counter, and I have to do or say something – anything – to keep it from being awkward as hell.

"So, umm, that's a really great choice. I bet that..." I cut off, suddenly realizing that she never told me their dog's name. "I bet he'll really love it. What did you say your pupper's name was, again?"

Ding. Praise be, it's finally going through! "Umm, oh. My baby?" She's tucking her card back into her wallet, but I could almost swear I catch a tiny smirk and a giggle in her companion's direction. "Oh! Um, he's, um– his name is Brian."

And out they trot, before I can even collect my wits for a reply.

Wait, but that- that's the guy's name- Don't tell me she named the dog after... No, surely not. Maybe it was just a happy coincidence? Brian isn't exactly the rarest name... Or hang on. Wait just a minute...

Oh my god. Did I just witness a girl buying a collar and leash for... for her boyfriend?

I settle awkwardly back into my seat now, but there's nothing for it. No longer am I seeing the now-quiet pet shop, or the glowing screen of my phone. I'm seeing that couple, hand in hand: her leading him to their cutesy little bedroom. Ordering him to strip naked... to kneel for her on the carpet like a good boy. Her hands are reaching down and slipping that strong black leather around his muscly neck... She's watching him squirm and shiver as she tightens it around his neck, claiming him for her own...

Yeah. Maybe my job isn't quite so boring after all!