

THE QUEEN OF TEETH

ISAIA MASANIAI

Gabe leaned with his back against the club's brick shell, muffled dwarf-step pulsing from within. The night air was pleasantly cool on his skin, relieving him from the heat of sweating crowds inside. He swiped through potential hookups on his phone, as his friend, Jessie, smoked next to him. The joint was hand rolled and organic, filled with herbs that Jessie himself had grown in his garden. The smoke, which smelled oddly of peaches and plums, created apparitions of pixies that twirled and danced as the breeze carried them away.

Gabe looked up from his screen, a small smile coming to his lips. "You're getting better at that. Maybe you should try your hand at one of those competitive vaping tournaments."

"Thank you for being so supportive of my dreams." Jessie shook his head, but grinned, revealing a set of dazzling white teeth. Most of the time, Jessie's smile would be enough to brighten up even Gabe's darkest day. On nights like this, however, it just reminded him of how lonely he was.

Jessie checked his watch and threw the cigarette in the side of his mouth. "I wonder when she's going to get here."

Gabe rolled his eyes so hard, he could almost feel one of his contacts trying to pop out. "You're still waiting on Daisy?"

"Daisy?" Jessie raised an eyebrow, surprised but still amused. "Do you mean Diana? My girlfriend?" He giggled, releasing another puff of smoke that twisted into a writhing serpent. Its long gray form slithered into the air before turning its head towards Gabe. It gave a silent hiss, baring nonexistent fangs, and dissipated as the wind blew by.

"Diana, Daisy, Debra, it's all the same to me." He shrugged as he looked down and continued swiping, finding a handsome, although rather green, young man on his screen. He sped through the pictures and found himself drawn to a beach photo where his wetsuit clung tightly to his body, leaving very little to Gabe's imagination. Also, there was something endearing about the two small tusks poking out from his bottom lip. Gabe scrolled down to the bio. Mord, 22, 10 Miles Away. Wizardry Major at SDSU. Half-Ogre and Proud! LTR Oriented and Vegan (Sorry if that's annoying). Just looking for a nice guy who'll pay off my student loans or buy me ramen. Gabe chewed on his bottom lip. He seemed nice and like he had a sense of humor. But then again, most of the Wiz Majors he knew were pretentious

assholes. He took a breath and swiped right, but felt a drop in his stomach when no match popped up.

"I'm not sure if she likes me still." Jessie tapped his foot nervously as he looked at his phone in anticipation. "I mean- I feel like she's been distant. Like, emotionally, y'know?" He leaned against the wall, looking like a freshly kicked puppy.

"I'm sure she's head over heels for you, bud." Gabe grabbed his friend's shoulder and smiled weakly. "Who wouldn't be?"

Jessie shrugged, taking another drag. When he exhaled, the smoke went limp, vanishing into the air.

Gabe plucked the cigarette from his lips and placed it between his own. As he inhaled, it tasted like lemonade and creamsicles flooding his mouth. He put his hand in front of his lips, making several quick gestures. As his fingers moved, he could feel the magic dancing between them like static electricity. He exhaled. From the cloud, a crudely shaped unicorn galloped on short, uneven legs.

Jessie laughed, shaking his head. "If either of us should take up professional vaping, it's you."

Gabe smiled as he slipped the joint behind his ear. They chuckled together, but a silence soon passed over them. Gabe studied the brick wall before him, careful not to look too much in Jessie's direction. He ran his eyes along a spray painted mural of a young girl holding a bouquet of roses. Over her mouth floated a white banner that read "GET BENT" in messy red letters.

"Well," Jessie got off the wall. "I'm going to get a drink, are you coming?"

"Nah." Gabe shook his head. "I'm going to cool off for a little longer." His eyes went to Jessie's shoes before he dragged them up towards his face. He smiled sheepishly. "But if you grabbed me a Nymph Nip while you were at the bar, I wouldn't be upset."

"Consider your nips nymphed." With a wink and another bright smile, Jessie opened the rose-colored door and moon walked back into the club.

Gabe laughed as he disappeared into the building, but as the door slammed shut, he realized that he was alone again. He looked around, observing the alley in all its Law and Order SVU greatness. Although he had to admit it was fairly clean for an alley in LA, the lighting provided by a few old lamps outside the club seemed pretty serial killer friendly. Gabe pulled out his phone again, proceeding to absent-mindedly swipe through potential suitors. After four headless torsos, two slender elves wearing offensive amounts of highlighter, and a red-faced gnome that seemed funny, but not very attractive, he decided it would be best to give it a rest for the night. He checked the time on his phone and was very disappointed in how early it was. He wondered if Jessie would get too drunk to walk home by himself. It wasn't like Gabe lived far, so that wasn't a problem. Drunk Jessie was just a little too affectionate for Gabe. The last time

they went out, Jessie had his arm around him the whole night and kissed him on the cheek when he walked him to his apartment. It was nice and cute or whatever, but it made him feel uncomfortable. Or, more accurately, it made him feel hopeful.

Gabe pressed himself into the wall and closed his eyes, a part of him hoping that it would swallow him up. He could have stayed home and watched some reality TV. Then again, he really needed to start his intercultural communications essay. He had known about it for months, but so far all he had researched about fairy culture was that they lived in groups called courts and used some kind of weird barter system.

He sighed. He shouldn't have come out. But, it had always been hard to say no to Jessie. Even as kids, all it took was one crooked smile from him to convince Gabe of anything. He couldn't count all the nights he had been roped in to being Jessie's wingman. Of course, Gabe was well versed in Jessie's alluring qualities so he took naturally to the role. It was always fun until last call with Gabe alone holding an empty martini glass and Jessie sucking face with a bottle blonde siren at the other end of the bar.

Maybe Gabe would give the hook up app one more chance. He opened it up again, his stomach fluttering unexpectedly as a spinning red wheel appeared on the screen and the app accessed his location. Maybe this would be the time he matched with someone and they'd talk for a week without Gabe blocking them for the crime of excessive emoji use.

He wrinkled his nose at the disembodied crotch that appeared on his screen. He swiped left. The groin was, thankfully, replaced by the face of a handsome man with oak colored skin and white hair. He had a slight build and pointed ears, though his features seemed rather delicate for an elf. Maybe he was mixed with something? Gabe scrolled down to his bio. Zephyrus, 23, Less Than A Mile Away. Dental Assistant. Let me whisk you away! I love coffee, music, and making people happy! Swipe right to have your wishes granted! A small smile came to Gabe's lips. Some wish granting certainly sounded appealing. In his picture he was feeding a pegasus a carrot with a goofy grin, giving a thumbs up to the camera with his free hand. It was adorable. It reminded him a bit of Jessie.

Gabe swiped right and the words "YOU'VE MATCHED WITH ZEPHYRUS!" popped up in bright red letters. A small sort of pride swelled up in his chest, as if he had been deemed the fairest bachelor in the land. He pulled up Zephyrus' profile and began the process of carefully crafting a message. Should he open with a compliment? Or maybe a question about one of his interests? Was asking about his favorite musician too cliché? A light breeze ran over his knuckles as he began typing.

"Hey, are you Gabriel?"

Gabe looked up from his phone with a furrowed brow.

There he was with the same dolllike features and white hair Gabe had just acquainted himself with. He held a phone in his hand and gave a large grin,

wearing a white button down and sky blue dress pants. Gabe thought of his own ripped dark jeans and "Bad Witches Only" t-shirt, suddenly feeling very underdressed. As Zephyrus stepped towards Gabe, several lapis butterflies fluttered around his head like a whimsical halo. Where the hell did he come from?

"Uh, hello." Gabe felt a strange mixture of surprise, embarrassment, and concern rise as a blush on his cheeks.

"Oh, sorry." Zephyrus' smile seemed to wither as he ran his fingers through his hair, disrupting the paths of the butterflies. They scattered for a moment, but quickly reconvened and began to orbit Zephyrus once more. "I think we just matched on LuvSpell, but I could be wrong." He laughed nervously, slowly taking a step back. "I was just inside and got the notification and came outside to cool off and saw you and thought that maybe you were the guy but now I'm thinking you're not the guy and-"

As Gabe watched the other man ramble, he couldn't help but think that there was something off about him. His eyes were larger and darker than in his pictures and, although his voice was smooth and soothing, it felt strangely hallow. But, he seemed nervous and watching him talk in circles was almost painful to witness.

"No, no, I'm sorry. I am the guy." Gabe shook his head, stretching a polite smile across his face. He walked towards the other man and shook his hand. "You just surprised me."

Zephyrus gave a small laugh and winked. "Hopefully in a good way."

Although their conversation began as Gabe taking pity on the other man, Zephyrus proved to be quite charming. It seemed like they were leaning against that wall for hours, talking about frivolous things like their favorite restaurants and movies. However superficial the topics, a feeling of ease washed over Gabe as the butterflies fluttered around them like a child's mobile. Although he wondered what they were and why they were flying around Zephyrus, Gabe didn't feel compelled to ask. As he watched one land on his shoulder, he had trouble remembering the last time he felt such joy.

"You have a beautiful smile." Zephyrus reached out slowly to caress Gabe's cheek, a bracelet of silver coins jingling around his wrist. His touch was extremely gentle, to the point which Gabe was uncertain if their skin had actually made contact.

"Thanks." Gabe looked down, blushing. A part of him was surprised that he didn't jerk back from the stranger's touch, but as much as he knew he should have been uneasy, he wasn't. Looking into Zephyrus' dark eyes felt warm and familiar, as if they didn't belong to someone he had just met. The more he looked into them, the more they felt like they were someone's that he had known forever.

Oh, shit. Where was Jessie? Gabe pulled out his phone, which earned a look of annoyance from Zephyrus, and checked his messages. How did he not notice

any of these?

From: Jessie

Hey! Diana's here! I'm going to meet her at the front but we'll be back there in a few!

From: Jessie

We're on our way back there! And we have the nips!

From: Jessie

Where'd you go? You better not have bailed without letting me know

From: Jessie

Helloooooo??? Where are you?

From: Jessie

Why aren't you answering me? Diana and I are going to leave if you don't respond soon.

From: Jessie

DUDE. REALLY??? ANSWER SO I KNOW YOU'RE OKAY, ASSHOLE.

Gabe raised in his eyebrows in confusion. He looked at Zephyrus, whose large eyes flicked back and forth between Gabe's phone and the look of puzzlement on his face.

"Hey," Zephyrus plucked the phone from Gabe's hand, sliding it into his shirt pocket. He pulled back his lips into a smile, baring bleach white teeth. "Let's get out of here. I know a place." He hooked his arm through Gabe's and began walking.

Gabe tried to pull away. He tried to dig his heels into the ground and speak in protest. He tried to turn around, march back into the club, and find his worried friend. But his legs kept the pace that Zephyrus set and his mouth contorted into a painful smile that felt as if invisible hands were stretching the corners of his lips. The muscles in his face shrieked as they rebelled against the spell that held them. It did nothing.

Zephyrus hummed a cheerful tune as they came up to the spray painted little girl opposite of them. As he knocked on the wall, her face sunk in, the bricks beginning to fall backwards. The wall continued to crumble until she had completely disappeared, replaced by the entrance to dark hallway. "Watch your step." They skipped over the mound of bricks and walked down the hall which turned into another and another hall after that.

As he was led through the maze, Gabe felt as if he was screaming inside himself, begging for freedom in his own body. With each corner turned and empty hallway walked down, it felt more surreal and delirious to be prisoner in his flesh. The butterflies flew close to his face and seemed to taunt him, as did the coin bracelet that jingled happily with every captive step he took. His cheeks throbbled from the forced grin and he felt some drool dribble onto his bottom lip. His face quivered as it resisted another attempt to scream and rage against his captor.

"Relax, we're almost there." Zephyrus turned one last corner. It was a dead end. The bricks were bone white and jagged, with patches of moss and fungi

sprouting randomly along the walls. The concrete floor was worn and possessed large cracks from which bright blue flowers and red toadstools sprouted. Zephyrus unlooped his arm from Gabe's and turned his body towards him. He wiped the drool and ruffled his hair affectionately.

"Y'know, this is nothing personal. A fairy has to do what a fairy has to do." He took him by the hand and guided him further down the hall, careful not to tread on any foliage. "You'll thank me one day, though. My Queen is the best in the city." When they came close to the end, Zephyrus knocked on the wall. Similar to before, the bricks fell back, but instead of another hallway, only darkness was revealed. A moment passed before a small shiny object was tossed from the hole. Zephyrus caught it, eagerly, giggling as he took off his bracelet and began adding the new silver coin to his collection. He looked towards Gabe and winked. "See you around!" He knocked on the wall behind him and quickly vanished into the portal that formed.

Gabe gasped violently as his body returned to him. He fell to the floor, his heart suddenly racing and his throat feeling as if he had swallowed a handful of tacks. He looked into the hole in wall before him. The darkness within it seemed to reach into him, pulling out every lonely moment he had ever suffered. He needed to get out.

A white stiletto heel emerged from the darkness.

Suddenly, there was a woman before him, dark skinned and beautifully terrifying. She towered over him in high waisted white slacks. Her eyes were impossibly large and iridescent, like fish bowls filled with cosmic swirls and flickering constellations. She was topless, her breasts covered by countless necklaces of strange white beads.

She smiled at Gabe, a look of amusement on her face as she watched him struggle to his feet. As he stood, he saw that the mountains of necklaces she wore weren't ropes of beads, but of an unimaginable number of teeth hanging in deranged smiles over her chest. Her long elegant fingers, decked in rings set with molars, reached out towards his face. He couldn't bring himself to breathe. She gently grasped the cigarette behind his ear and placed it between her plump lips. She did not close her eyes as she inhaled, rather, she seemed to look deeper into Gabe. She exhaled, a cluster of ghostly spiders hatching from the smoke. Perfumed with the scent of lavender and rotting meat, they scurried through the air and into Gabe's nose. He shook his head furiously and his eyes watered as he felt them crawling inside his skull.

She grabbed his chin and turned his face towards her. "What a handsome young man." Her voice was like hot honey dripping on Gabe's skin. She smiled again, the corners of her mouth extending just a little too far. She tilted her head. "Would you like a wish?" On her head she wore a crown of brambles, wilting roses, and spider webs, in which small birds and insects struggled to free themselves. There was a particular sparrow that caught Gabe's eye. It flapped ferociously, shaking the web in a vain attempt to break its silken binds.

"No." He gulped. "No, thank you." He looked at her pointed ears, the

dread within him twisting his stomach into knots.

“Zephyrus brought you for a reason.” She giggled, the stars within her eyes shifting slightly as she put her hands on her knees and bent down to his level. Her eyes dug into him, their constellations buzzing in his mind like angry hornets. “He smelled the desire on you.”

Gabe shook his head. “No, thank you. I just need to get home.” He looked around her massive form, but saw no escape from her long limbs. “I just want to get back to my friend.”

Her eyes somehow widened and brightened. “Your friend?” She tossed her head back and laughed, suddenly pleased. She smiled again, resembling a cat with a mouse between her paws. “Your wish is granted.”

She seized him, spinning and pushing him against the wall. She pried his mouth open with spindly fingers. He struggled against her, his legs flailing and his hands beating against her arms. She took no notice. She lifted him off the ground, the weight of his body straining his neck until it felt like his head was going to pop off. The fairy ran her fingertips across the teeth in Gabe’s mouth, visions flashing in his mind as she brushed against each tooth. He saw his middle school teacher handing him an alchemy test, he smelled popcorn from the countless movies he and Jessie had seen together, and he tasted his sloppy first kiss, a skinny satyr named Calvin. She sorted through his teeth and memories like files in a cabinet until she came upon one of his back molars. Gabe felt Jessie’s lips pressed against his cheek and his arms wrapped around his shoulder. He had never felt so warm in his life.

“There we go.” She ripped the tooth from his mouth and let him fall to the floor. She looked down at him, putting the cigarette in her mouth. She plucked the sparrow from the webs in her crown and tossed it into the air. It fluttered around Gabe’s head. “Follow her. She will lead you home.” She snickered, slipping his tooth into her pocket. As the Queen ducked to enter the void from which she came, she turned back to Gabe with one last wicked smile. “Thank you for the trinket.”

Gabe didn’t remember the walk back through the maze, although he remembered the sound of the sparrow’s wings flapping. It all seemed like a bad dream. The white haired man surrounded by butterflies, the labyrinth hidden behind a graffiti little girl, and the queen with stars in her eyes and teeth around her throat. He could feel them fading from his memory, their features becoming hazy and blurred.

Was this Jessie’s apartment? He looked back, seeing a flight a stairs he couldn’t recall climbing. His hand, seemingly of its own volition, reached out and knocked on the door. For some reason, he half expected the door to break into pieces and fall backwards. His tongue explored the back of his mouth, discovering a gap he had realized was there.

The door opened at a startling speed. “Gabe?” Jessie, red eyed and still in his club clothes, pulled him into an embrace and squeezed him tightly. “You

asshole! Why the hell didn’t you respond to me? I thought you got mugged or abducted or something.” His arms constricted around Gabe’s torso. Jessie’s chin dug into his shoulder. “I kept imagining someone pulling you into a white van and selling you to a prostitution ring or stealing your kidneys. I called the cops, but they said you hadn’t been gone long enough to be considered a missing person.” His embrace felt uncomfortably warm. “I was so worried.”

“Sorry.” Gabe wrapped his arms around Jessie, locking his hands together behind his back. He pressed his face into the crook of Jessie’s neck, taking in his scent. His cologne intermingled with the smell of tequila and dried sweat. “I’m so sorry.” Jessie’s neck was suddenly damp. It took a moment for Gabe to realize that he was crying, although he didn’t really know why. The skin on his back felt as if it was creeping away from him.

“Are you okay?” Jessie pulled away, his eyes wide with concern. He pulled him into the apartment and sat him on a cream-colored couch. “Did anything happen?”

Gabe opened his mouth to speak, but couldn’t conjure any words. He just stared at Jessie, running his eyes over the face he had fallen in love with. He wasn’t sure if he had ever seen Jessie look so serious before. His brows were knitted with concern, his lips pressed tightly together, sealing dazzling white teeth behind them. It felt as if Gabe had come home to find the walls painted a different color and the furniture moved around. “Nothing happened, I’m fine.”

Jessie put his hand on Gabe’s cheek. The touch made Gabe feel nauseous. “I was so worried.” He shook his head and looked down. His hand snaked over to Gabe’s. “I don’t know what I would do if I lost you.”

“Where’s Diana?”

Jessie looked up, surprised. “We, uh-” He scratched his head. “We got in a fight. She wanted me to calm down and I. . . I guess I just couldn’t.” His fingers weaved into Gabe’s. He looked into his friend’s eyes. “But that doesn’t matter now.” He leaned in, closer than Gabe wanted him to. His breath smelled like lavender. “Gabe, I never want to lose you.” His eyes watered. “All these years and I never realized how I felt about you.”

Gabe’s core shook, screaming that something was wrong. He looked down at Jessie’s hand over his own. He had wanted this for so long. A lump formed in his throat, whether it was from nerves or guilt, he quickly swallowed it. “I love you, Jessie. I’ve loved you for a long time.”

“I’m sorry it took me so long.” Jessie smiled. It was small and dim, but all that Gabe needed. Gabe wiped a tear away from his eye and chuckled. “Me too.”

As they kissed, Gabe’s heartbeat drowned out the sound of horror welling within him.