

I walked slowly back to my apartment from work. Thunder split the black sky and I shivered. I felt raindrops in my hair. I drew my coat tighter around me and adjusted my scarf. The whole world seemed frigid. I wanted to do something, but I didn't know what. It was too cold to go to the bar. None of the guys there were nice, anyway. There really wasn't any point doing anything social. I guessed I could just go home and tomorrow maybe I'd go out. Not that I really needed to.

A deep bell rang out from somewhere. I was passing by an alley when I heard a soft voice.

"Hello," it said. I turned. A man stood in the alleyway, a man with piercing black eyes and a pleasant smile. "How are you today?"

"I'm awful. I've had a terrible day, and I want to get back to my apartment before it really starts raining," I said bluntly. I made as if to continue walking.

"Do people not appreciate you? Do you wish you could be a little more important in other peoples' lives?"

"Don't we all?" Another clap of thunder roared in the sky.

"Well, if you just want a little more power," he said, "if you just want to have your colleagues respect you, if you want more people noticing you, I know of something that might help."

I rolled my eyes. "Sure. What is it?"

He reached into his pocket and revealed two armbands. "Put these on."

I wouldn't refuse something given to me for free, so I slipped them on my arms. They seemed to shrink so they fit snugly around my wrists.

"Those bands will fulfill your every wish," he said. "Now see what they can do for you."

I had looked at the bands, and they appeared to be gold, so I left quickly, hoping that he wouldn't change his mind. I was freezing cold, and I wondered if what he said about the bands fulfilling my every wish was true.

"Make me warm," I said softly to the gold gripping my wrists.

Instantly I felt warmth rush through my body, and I couldn't feel the rain anymore.

I walked another few steps. "Take me to my apartment."

Instantly I was inside my apartment. Astounded, I walked in a haze to the mirror.

“Make me beautiful.”

I felt my body change, becoming curvier and slimmer. I looked in the mirror and saw a face that didn't look like mine. It was a beautiful face, a younger face, a confident face, with subtle makeup and a seductive smile. I found myself wearing a blood red dress with matching lipstick. The gold armbands somehow made the whole outfit very classy.

I took the elevator downstairs. I wanted to walk to the bar. I wanted to feel beautiful. As I walked into the cold I noticed mens' heads turning towards me. I smiled smugly and kept walking. I was headed to *The Moose*, a local bar. Its decrepit sign swung from ropes, tossed around like a marionette in the wind.

When I entered the bar, I didn't even look at the occupants. I simply sat down. I smiled to myself as a young man sat down across from me. “I haven't seen you around here before.”

He had, but I hadn't been myself before I got the bands.

“Can I buy you a drink?” he asked.

“Of course.” He left to order.

A very old, very drunk man stumbled towards me. “All right, m'gorgeous?” he asked. He almost collapsed at my table but someone pulled him away. A bit of his drool fell onto my shoe.

A few moments later the young man had returned with drinks. He offered me a bottle and I opened it, and I took a small sip. Three drinks later I wasn't feeling too stable on my feet, and I blindly took his hand as he turned to leave the bar. I was vaguely aware of walking, and suddenly I felt my back thrown against a wall. The young man had reached for my wrists and I felt him grasping at the bands. “What are you- get away from me!” I screamed. But his fingers clasped the bands and I screeched the only thing I thought of.

“Shoot him!”

Instantly bullets rent through him, and his flesh was torn to bits as bullets found their mark until his shredded organs littered the ground and his blood splattered on the concrete with the falling rain.

An uncontrollable shaking filled me and I whispered “Take me to my apartment” but even though I was in my apartment the sight of the young man's remains were branded into my eyelids and I saw them whenever I closed my eyes.

I collapsed into my bed and woke shivering the next morning.

But over the next few months, I learned how to use the bands properly. I got people to like me, and everyone respected me at last. Sometimes people tried to take the bands from me, but they were *my* bands, and I learned how to deal with the thieves. I had been on cruises and extravagant trips around the world. I was just returning from a trip to the Grand Canyon, and as I walked down the streets near my mansion, some boy bumped into me.

I stopped and turned towards him.

"Sorry," he said.

"That's not going to cut it," I said. "I'm practically your queen."

"I just-"

"You didn't 'just' anything. You are pathetic to me. I have complete dominion over you. Would you 'sorry' a goddess?"

He began to walk away, but I yelled after him. "Beg! Worship me! You are my puppet, boy!"

He turned and faced me. "No mortal deserves my worship."

My anger overflowed and I began to speak the words that would destroy him when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Excuse me," a girl said, "but I believe that's my boyfriend you're talking to."

"So? Why should I care about your puny little doings?"

Her eyes blazed with anger. "I don't like it when people disrespect my boyfriend."

I laughed. "Why should I care? What does it matter to a queen, to a goddess, if you don't like something?"

"Take off your manacles."

"They're armbands, silly girl, and-"

"They're manacles. Take them off."

"No."

"Why not?" she said. "Why won't you take them off? I thought you wanted to be free."

"I am free," I said angrily.

"If you're free, then why won't you take off your manacles?"

"They're armbands," I said, "and I don't take them off because I don't want to."

“Fool!” she shouted. “You dance pathetically for your manacles, and if you were really free you’d leap for joy at their absence.”

“Oh, I’m the fool? What about you? I can’t figure out if you or your boyfriend is more depressing. You’re stupid and belligerent, and he’s stupid and weak.”

She punched me furiously, and for the first time in months I felt pain. “My boyfriend is the strongest person I’ve ever met, and if you knew his power you’d tremble just by looking at him.”

I laughed, derisively and coldly, the adrenaline erasing the pain from my body. “Really? If he’s so strong, then he won’t feel anything from what I’m about to do,” I said. “Whip-”

The girl kicked me in the gut and knocked all the wind out of me. I stumbled backwards and fell onto my back, struggling for breath on the concrete.

The girl grabbed my wrists and pulled at my armbands. “No,” I gasped. “Get her away from me!” I screamed.

Nothing happened.

“Manacles don’t have dominion over me anymore,” she said.

“Kill her!” I screamed hysterically.

“Don’t bother,” she said. “You aren’t a queen, or a goddess. Just a depressing woman who was given something that she can’t control.”

I wrenched my arms away from her, and started to stand up. “Of course I can control it. I was given these armbands, and I control them well.”

“No, you don’t. You don’t control them at all. Those manacles tie you up and control you. You have let yourself be tied and gagged. For some people armbands are armbands, but you have let them become manacles, and you’ve tricked yourself into enjoying every second of it.”

“They’re armbands!” I screamed, and I stood up. But the girl shoved me back down, and once again grabbed one of my bands.

“It’s for your own good, you know,” she said. Her boyfriend came over and grabbed the other band.

For a second they exchanged a smile, and then they both pulled, and the bands snapped.

I was cold. I was no longer beautiful. When I looked at the place where the manacles had pinched my wrists, I saw blackened, charred flesh. I stared in horror at the ring of destroyed skin.

My pudgy stomach had returned but somehow I felt comfortable with it. Slowly I became aware of pain where I'd been punched and kicked. My blood dripped and splattered on the concrete.

"Thanks," I said.

The girl smiled and put her arm around her boyfriend. "I guess I'm easily provoked. Besides, I felt sorry for you," she said. She tossed her sleeve back and revealed a ring of charred skin on her own wrist. Only her boyfriend's wrists were clean.

I stood up, and hugged both of them, a tear rolling down my cheek. "Keep in touch."

They smiled, and I turned and headed back to the messy apartment that I called home.