

STING OF THE TAIL

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“We’ve already got The Eurythmics; music doesn’t need another male-female synthpop duo.” The response was always the same whenever Riot and Minx tried to book a gig at even the smallest clubs throughout West Germany. It didn’t seem to matter that Riot and Minx had an entirely different sound and image; all anyone saw was a guy and a girl with a guitar and keyboards, and instantly likened them to the pop duo that had been all the rage through the early 1980s.

It had been nearly a year since the two of them walked out on their former band Nirvana, leaving their egotistical bandleader Jerry screaming curses at them and voicing his hopes that they would fail. So far it seemed that his wish was coming true. It was no small comfort to either of them that they’d heard over the past few months that Nirvana had run into some troubles of their own: first, they were forced to change their name because there was already another band from America with that same name. They performed under another name for maybe a month or two before Jerry finally walked off stage one night at a show in Munich and declared he was finished with music forever.

“These foolish club owners!” Minx muttered under her breath as she and Riot returned to the hostel where they were staying. After a long day of walking up and down the streets of Berlin to find a place to play, her feet were aching and she slumped onto her little cot, taking off her high-heeled boots with a relieved sigh. “Why can they not hear that we sound nothing like these groups they keep comparing us to? How are they able to keep their clubs going when they are clearly deaf and can’t hear the music?”

“I hate to admit it,” Riot said; a sentence he seldom ever spoke aloud to anyone except to her, “but it looks like we need to find a new angle. We need to figure out something to make people notice us and to give us a chance. All we have is our image. People are going to see us before they hear us, and we need a look that’s going to grab their attention.”

“Like what?” Minx sniffed. “We barely have enough money to stay in the hostel another day or two; how are we going to create an image that makes people take notice?”

Riot noticed a long loose thread dangling from the cuff of his coat sleeve, and yanked at it angrily. It was a coat he had saved for months to buy, and he thought it was rather smart-looking. It was another thing he hated to admit, but the coat was slowly but surely getting to the point where it could no longer be wearable. Minx thought he cut quite a nice figure in the stylish coat, and the girls who fawned over him on the street corners where they played seemed to agree.

“When we make it,” said Riot confidently, “one day I’m going to have closet racks full of the newest, best clothes. So many that I will only have to wear them once, and if they show so much as the slightest snag or stain, I will toss them out like yesterday’s garbage.”

“It’s no less than a perfect specimen as yourself deserves,” Minx said as she rubbed her tired feet, “but we still have to figure out how to even get into a club. We can’t ever hope to make it by being discovered playing on the streets for loose change.”

“No, but it’s playing on the streets for loose change that will allow us enough money to get by so we can keep looking. We can’t give up. Tomorrow morning we start bright and early pounding the pavement to find a gig, so get some sleep and don’t worry. I’ll think of something.”

It was a bitter cold German winter morning, and Minx’s fingers were frozen so stiff that she could barely play her keyboards. She felt awkward wearing her gloves while she was playing, but it was the only thing that kept her from frostbite, so she managed.

Poor Riot, she thought, looking over at him in the coat that was wearing thin in the back; he was probably even colder than she was. Shabby as her coat might have been, at least it wasn’t full of holes...not yet, anyway. She wondered if her own coat would last her to next winter, and shook her head as if to negate her thoughts; instead, focusing on her music, she played with even more passion when she thought of having to struggle another day.

Today’s crowd on the corner was especially attentive for the first few song or two, but then Minx started to notice that slowly, the people were walking away and following the sounds of an acoustic guitar playing across the street. After their crowd had diminished to about two or three people left, Riot and Minx called for a break and promised to be back in 15 minutes. It was then that they decided to find out what was luring the people over to the other side of the road.

“You’d think that these people would learn to find their own street corners,” Minx said haughtily as she walked a step behind Riot, who walked determinedly towards the crowd gathered around the source of where the music was coming from. They could hear no music at that point, but there was still a large crowd milling about. What was going on?

Standing unobtrusively behind the mass of people, they could not get a glimpse of who was at the center of all this attention, but they decided to hang back and listen to the reactions from the crowd. After about a moment, two young teenage girls came rushing towards them, talking excitedly in German.

“She’s here! She’s here!” Minx translated, after Riot asked what they were saying.

“Ask them who they’re here to see.” Riot urged Minx, nodding towards the girls.

After a minute or so of conversation in German, Minx turned back to Riot and told him what had been said. “They’re here to see some fortune-teller, they say. Apparently she not only tells fortunes, but she also sings music and makes up songs based on the fortune she gives you. She’s become real popular in

the smaller villages around here; she's like a regular troubadour that travels from town to town, and the people await her arrival."

Riot laughed. "A fortune-teller? The things that the small-minded are entertained by. We have genuine musical talent and have had every door slammed in our face, yet this joker with an acoustic guitar steals our crowd by strumming a couple of notes and giving them some false hope for the future?"

Minx shrugged. "Fortune-tellers have always been popular. Even if you don't believe in them, it's always kind of amusing to hear people try to figure out what's in store for you. I think it's a waste of time, but even I have had my fortune told just for the fun of it."

Riot nodded as his brows knit together; as if he were giving this further consideration. "Fortune-telling and that whole wandering minstrel nonsense may not be my thing, but maybe it's the kind of thing we need. Let's try to move in closer and see if we can watch her work."

Patiently they moved through the crowd and inched in closer to where the fortune-teller was; she didn't look like the typical "fortune-telling gypsy". Where most of those types dressed in flowing robes with a colorful scarf on their heads, this woman looked completely different. Maybe that's why people were drawn to her, because she didn't look as one would expect. Her platinum-blond hair was cut short in the current style of the day, the sides swept up like wings on the side of her head; reminiscent of Brigitte Nielsen in the latest *Rocky* movie. Instead of the paisley-printed dresses that psychics and card-readers normally wore, she had on a long yellow jacket with black stripes; peeking out beneath the long coat were high black leather boots. Both Riot and Minx could tell the jacket was expensive, the boots were stylish, and both were made of good material. For a "wandering troubadour", she seemed to have quite the fashionable wardrobe.

Riot pointed at her and whispered excitedly in Minx's ear. "Now *that's* the kind of look we need! Something like what she's wearing; something that is bold and eye-catching. Something that makes you want to pay attention to the person wearing it!"

Minx made a face. "I don't know if I like those colors, or if I'd want to go around looking like a bumblebee!"

The mysterious woman was back to playing on her guitar and they could hear her singing a merry tune in English. The lyrics were quirky and gave a run-down of the fortune she had just told. "The love you seek is far from home, to a new land you must roam...dare to seek the far unknown, and you will never again be alone."

Riot and Minx looked at each other, their own thoughts unspoken. Riot was thinking of how good she was on the acoustic guitar, and what a talent she had for making up lyrics on the fly like that, even if they were somewhat hokey. Minx was thinking to herself that the woman's voice had a husky, throaty quality that would complement her own high, sweet voice very nicely. She was suddenly curious to know how they'd sound singing together.

“Come one, come all!” the woman called out to the faces in the crowd. “Who will be the next to have their future foretold by Rapture? Just place your money in my basket, and the crystal ball will reveal the knowledge you seek!”

There were several people in the crowd waving money in the air and shouting, in the hopes Rapture would tell their fortune next. Her eyes caught Riot and Minx standing off to the side, and she was intrigued by them. They made a handsome pair; both of them tall, blonde, and imposing. Something about them appealed to Rapture, and she waved in their direction.

“Ah, here I see a lovely young couple! Why don’t you step forward and allow me to look into your future?” Rapture said to Minx and Riot.

Riot gave a sly smile and stepped forward. “Sure, why not?”

“Bring your lady friend forward,” Rapture said, “I would like to tell your fortunes together!”

Riot smirked, thinking to himself that if she was such a psychic, she would have already realized that he and Minx were not a couple; at least not in the way she was suggesting. He turned to Minx. “Come on, Minx. Let’s hear our future!”

Rapture waved her hands over the crystal ball on her lap, closing her eyes as if channeling some unknown spirit. “I see that both of you are determined souls,” she said, and took each of their hands into hers, “your auras are strong, and tell me that you are both driven towards a great destiny. Neither of you will stop at nothing to get what you want. Your fate is tied together; both of you need each other in order to reach your ultimate goal.”

“Humph.” Minx scoffed. “Anyone can notice that about us within two seconds of meeting us!”

Rapture ignored her, and reached for her acoustic guitar. Now it was time for her to make up a song about the fortune she had told. “Two souls driven by a powerful force...now it is time for them to choose their course...But if those things are meant to be...the answer lies not in two, but three!”

“Bravo!” Riot clapped, and tossed her a coin before beginning to turn away.

“Riot!” Minx grabbed his arm, willing him not to go. “Didn’t you hear what she said?”

“Big deal,” Riot said, “she probably tells everyone that they’re ‘destined for great success’.”

“No, it isn’t that...” Minx looked thoughtful for a moment. “When she sang her song, something in her lyrics made me realize what it is we’re missing. We need another person in our band. We need another instrument to fill out our sound. You’re going to think I’m crazy, but Riot...we need *her*!”

“She’s a good con artist, if she can have you convinced that her generalized predictions somehow apply to you, or to us.” Riot snickered.

Minx shook her head. “It’s more than that,” she said, “she has an incredible singing voice; far too talented to be wasting it out here trying to make these villagers feel better about their miserable lives.

You already said yourself that you like her look, and that we could use something like that ourselves. I can tell by the way you were watching her that you think she's talented too; admit it!"

Riot sighed. "I do think she has talent; but what are we going to do, ask every average slob who has a spark of promise to join our group? Besides, who in their right mind would follow us up and down the streets, playing on the corners in the hopes someone will watch us?"

"She would." Minx said. "She's already doing that by herself. Let's go talk to her."

"I admit, I've been watching you two from afar for a while now." Rapture confessed when she met with Minx and Riot later on that evening at the local pub. They'd all done well enough today to actually afford dinner at this cheap hole-in-the-wall, which was an accomplishment for them. Usually they went to bed hungry, or with little more than scraps of food like pieces of bread and cheese, or fruit picked off a random tree, which was not easy to find in Germany in the dead of winter.

Riot furrowed his brow in consternation. "No wonder we've been having trouble lately," he said, "you've been following us so you can steal our crowds!"

Minx gasped in surprise; she hadn't thought that, but if Riot said so, then it must be true. She had followed him this far and he had not led her astray, so he must be right about this too. Such a shame; this girl seemed like such a good fit for them. But he was right all along; she was just a con artist.

"No, you've got me all wrong!" Rapture insisted. "It isn't like that!"

"What is it like, then?" Minx asked, her eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"Look, I'll be straight with you," Rapture said, "I love your music and think it's great, but...well, I also think I can add something to your dynamic. I feel if you took a chance on me, I could bring something to the table that would make your music better than it already is. I've been bumming around Germany for the last couple of years, trying to make a go at music on my own. I've seen the two of you trying to make it on your own. Maybe if we did something together, we could all make it!"

Minx looked over at Riot; waiting for his approval. She still liked Rapture, and agreed with her that she could contribute something worthwhile to their sound. But if Riot disapproved, then that would be the end of the discussion. It was his call.

"I admit, you have an interesting look, and a charismatic personality." Riot said. "Your musical skills are above average, which they would need to be in order to keep up with me. But if you've been following us around the way you say you have, then certainly you know our life hasn't been easy. There's no

guarantee we'll be any more successful as a trio as we have been as a duo. Do you still want to take a chance and join us?"

Rapture looked thoughtful for a moment before answering. "I'll tell you something," she said, "I've been on the move all my life. I was born in Toronto and lived in seven different cities throughout the U.S. and Canada by the time I was ten. I ended up in San Francisco when I was a teenager, but after I left high school I decided to backpack across Europe and have been here ever since. I've never really had a home or a family. I look at the two of you and I can tell you have a bond that's stronger than the music. You're really there for each other, and I like that. I guess what I'm trying to say is...I'd like to know I belong somewhere, and I feel like I belong with you. Can you understand?"

Riot and Minx looked at each other; they understood only too well. They were both outcasts, and had formed a bond together from that alienation. Minx had always been the subject of ridicule for being the only girl in a band; always being questioned as to whether she could really play her instrument. Riot had always had something to prove; to his disapproving father in childhood, and then to the band that took him in and ultimately cast him out for his strong personality. For so long, they had been the only support group the other had. Maybe it was possible to let someone into their tightly-woven union. Rapture seemed like she also knew what it was like to be alone, to be shunned, and to struggle. She seemed like the perfect fit for their musical family.

Riot nodded his head in approval, and Minx smiled. "Welcome home, Rapture." she said.

It had been three months since Rapture joined them, and she'd been right: she fit in perfectly with their sound, and even added new elements to their music. In honor of the long yellow-and-black jacket she wore, they christened themselves The Stingers and wore their own outfits in the same yellow-and-black striped pattern. They had an image, which was what Riot wanted. They had a bigger sound, which was what Minx wanted. They had a strong chemistry and a deep loyalty to each other, which was what Rapture wanted. Even though they went hungry most of the time and still played on street corners, they were the happiest they'd ever been. It was only a matter of time before fame knocked on their door. They knew it.

This morning they were on their way to audition for the same club where Riot and Minx had tried to book a gig the day before they met Rapture. Maybe now that they were a three-piece, the club owner would give them another chance. They'd been practicing hard on the new songs they'd written, and felt confident that the songs were good. It was always hard to tell whenever they played in front of these stone-faced club owners who had seen and heard everything.

At the end of their audition, Riot and Minx looked at each other, and the phrase "here we go again" could almost be read on the other's minds as they heard the club owner give his verdict.

“Kids, we’ve already got The Human League; music doesn’t need another ‘two girls and a guy’ combo playing new wave...”

THE END