

Shelly and the Contessa

Rex Jameson

Shelly sits on a bench at the metro station. Her head bobs to the beat of a local rapper waxing poetic in her black headphones about fighting off mana wyrms in the fields of Rhyr. She doesn't care for the artist's lyrics; only that when she cranks up the volume, the result is loud and noisy. People on the trains avoid her when her music is loud, as if acknowledging the music would endorse it. The less they look at her, the better. She's not like other people here.

She pulls the string-ends of her hoodie and slides them back up, partly to play the part of a hyperactive teen but also to keep her face in shadow. Dark strands of hair frame and jostle against her white face. She still looks youthful because she has just eaten the day before. Another meal today is just about maintenance. The plushness of her skin. The color in her hair. Without another meal, her features would not be as supple. Mana is how she keeps her youth.

She fidgets against her jeans and makes drumming sounds against the wooden boards beneath her. With a practiced eye, she watches for the tell-tale signs of mana users. There is a certain way their clothes billow and buff that sets them apart, like an unnatural wind flowing from within. Subtle but there, if you know what to look for.

Through a crowd of dozens bustling onto the stopped train, her mark's energy shines through the darkness like a beacon. The woman is blonde and beautiful. Red and black dress. Long heels. Scarlet lips. Hair pulled up. An onyx choker, high red collar, and form-fitting dark dress with a white sash. To anyone else, the woman probably looks like a rich professional going to a costume party. But Shelly knows differently. This woman is undoubtedly flaunting her body, but more importantly, she wears the tight dress to hide the mana emanating from inside her.

What gives the woman away is her collar. It sways unnaturally away from her body. Very small movements. A centimeter or two to the left and right in an enclosed terminal with almost no ventilation.

Her hair is tightly bound to her head, and it isn't moving at all. But the collar... that is the sign. This is Shelly's meal.

Shelly pretends not to notice the blonde as she bustles past her and onto the underground. There is no rush. There is plenty of time. The train doesn't leave for another five minutes. The blonde is undoubtedly aware of the fact that others like Shelly exist. The mark may not take kindly to a feeder being so close. She turns down her music enough to hear what is going on around her. Her senses elevate. She catches the woman's sharp, floral scent. The rapping of heels against the metal grating and the concrete between the ramp and the train. More importantly, she feels the waves of mana emanating off this woman like heat from a desert road.

The woman disappears into the portal and to the left. Shelley glimpses through the windows quickly and tracks the woman as she walks with composure and poise to an empty seat. Shelley jumps to her feet and strides confidently to the door and along the path to her target. She is careful not to look directly at the woman, who is facing away from her. She tries not to squeal when she realizes the seat behind the mark is vacant. Within seconds, she plops down in the chair behind the woman and drops her boots noisily into the seats across from her.

There is a laugh behind her. A small titter. Shelly turns her head toward the window, using the reflection from the glass to view the blonde. The woman is reading a newspaper, possibly the comics. Shelly maliciously stares down a man who paused beside her, as if he had thought to ask her to move her feet so he might sit there.

The mana waves roll over her now, since Shelly is so close. She fights them off, keeping her guard up and her senses sharp. Absorbing mana so close is intoxicating. She had taken a mana wielder to bed once, many years ago. All she could remember was ripping the man's clothes off and then waking up in a hospital with a headache and a phone number in her pocket. For a mana vampire, mana is the most potent drug in the world. Unregulated. Unknown to most of the masses. The best high you'll ever have.

She pulls the central armrest down and braces herself against it. She can feel the tug of her body against the seat as she lets one internal guard down after another. Her breathing becomes shallow but quick. She closes her eyes as the woman's scent fills her nostrils and comes alive.

Shelly is suddenly barefoot in a meadow. Her toes dig into the pliant earth, and she jumps and stomps in circles. She realizes she is not just barefoot but naked. She covers herself with her hands briefly and reaches for a hoodie that isn't there. The dream presses on, engulfing her in warmth. The grass is thigh high, and it tickles her exposed skin as she runs through the fields. A single tree amongst miles of soft green blades beckons her to it, and she happily obliges. She caresses the rough bark, rolling along the six foot wide tree and into something plush and warm but unyielding. Shelly falls to the ground where twigs from the tree prod her ribs. She looks up, half-knowing and frightened.

It's the woman.

Shelly jerks awake from her dream, still gripping the armrest. The blonde woman is beside her on the train, leaning so close that a long necklace with a red gem inset in gold and diamonds is dangling against Shelly's arm. The mana is so strong that Shelly is lethargic and almost sedated.

"It's impolite to drink from someone so close," the woman says.

"I didn't," Shelly stammers. "I was—"

It is all Shelly is able to say. Her eyelids flutter as if she is having a small seizure. Pain receptors fire. Pleasure receptors double and then triple their intensity. Her hands begin shaking.

"Yes, you were," the woman says, looking at Shelly like a wolf might look at a sheep that had been cornered. "Do you mind if I?"

The woman motioned toward the seat beside Shelly, but every nerve in Shelly's body is overloaded. Her skin tingles everywhere. The necklace feels like sandpaper and then a hot knife and then a soft hand.

Shelly opens her eyes and the woman is mounting her legs, which still extend to the other seat.

“Oh my,” the woman says. She runs her hand up Shelly’s leg. “You are quite the attuned one, aren’t you?”

A massive wave of mana overpowers Shelly. Her back arches and her body temperature fluctuates between scorching hot and icy cold. The cotton fabric of her black punk rock shirt feels more like silk now. And the waves of mana push and pull the shirt along the fine hairs of her stomach and chest.

“Release me,” Shelly whispers. “I’m sorry.”

“Are you?”

The woman is beside her in the window seat now. Her hand is on Shelly’s shoulder. The floral scent beckons Shelly like the tree did in her dream. Shelly’s head begins to lean toward the woman involuntarily.

“No,” Shelly whispers.

“You want me to stop?” the woman asks.

Shelly nods as another wave of mana rocks her senses into oblivion.

A blonde woman is on the walls of a castle. She is looking down at the ground far below. A man is down there. She can’t seem him, but she knows he’s there. Dead. Not now but before. Sometime in the past. A wraith. A dark creature now. Angry and alone. Reaching toward her from the crypts of hell.

“You don’t want to come home with me?” the woman asks, wrenching Shelly from the vision.

“No,” Shelly says. She almost means it. This woman is dangerous. Shelly knows it, but the meal is so delicious. The mana is so strong.

“You don’t like my mana?” the woman almost purrs.

Shelly tries to reply but all that comes out is something feral. Not quite a snarl. Possibly a whelp. She can’t tell. She’s not in control of her faculties. Her mind is mush and her nerves are overwhelmed. She feels like she’s floating above her seat.

The woman runs a fingernail down Shelly’s arm, and Shelly whimpers in ecstasy.

“Please stop,” Shelly begs.

“You really want me to stop?” the woman asks.

Shelly looks at the woman. Her lips quiver as a line of drool begins its slow descent down the crease of her mouth. Her eyes water. She knows this woman feels the billions of neurons begging the torture to continue, but Shelly grips the armrest and musters every ounce of power and control she can.

“Please,” she says. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” the woman asks, a slight Italian accent lingering in her final syllables and into her next statement. “I’m not.”

The woman kisses Shelly on the lips, right where the line of drool had formed, and Shelly’s head hits the headrest like the jolt of a short dive into a deep pool.

She swims in a cool pond, naked again. Her feet do not touch the bottom, and she is unafraid of what might be lurking there. She hears the rush of a waterfall nearby, muffled by the liquid above her. She reaches upward, pulling herself toward the surface. The water gets warmer. Another sound joins the rush of water. A metallic clang. Something hard hits the ground nearby. Another clang. A muffled cry. She panics, but her arms flail frantically, pulling her to the surface even though she doesn’t want to go there anymore. She needs to breathe though. She doesn’t want to see the bodies, but she must gasp for air.

The light gets brighter and brighter above her. Only a few feet more. She can see figures through the water, along a nearby shore. The men are swinging swords. There’s a fire. Triumphant yells. Her lungs are burning now. She must breathe. Five feet. Two feet. Her hands break the surface. With one final stroke, she bursts from the water.

Her lungs fill with air, and she flails about to tread against the water. But something is wrong. Beneath her arms is fabric. Soft but firm. She’s in a chair. She opens her eyes, and finds herself back in the train. The woman is gone, and the engines have stopped. It’s barely dawn now, and the car is empty.

“Last stop,” an attendant announces from the hallway. “Please locate your bags and exit the car to the left.”

Shelly looks around for her belongings, but then she remembers she entered with none. She stands and stretches and then attempts to pass the attendant toward the exit.

“Ma’am,” the man calls for her. “Ma’am! Your things!”

She turns and sees him pointing toward her seat. She walks back to him and follows the line from his finger. In the seat beside her is a gold necklace with a red gem, inset in diamonds.

“You don’t want to be leaving that behind,” the man says.

“No,” she says, picking it up. “I don’t.”

An unnatural warmth presses into her palm and fingers. The necklace must have been in the mana wielder’s presence for a long time, perhaps even years. It emanates mana faintly, like an enclosed kettle’s heat an hour after being removed from the stove. Shelly holds the red gem of the necklace against her lips and the floral scent returns for a moment. She breathes deeply, thinking of the woman’s green eyes and red lips.

She remembers the lake by the waterfall. Then the castle with the man below. The scents of the meadow and the feel of the blades of grass against her naked legs and thighs. The feel of the bark of the tree as she rolled along it, and the chance encounter with her mark that was not chance. The woman had drawn Shelly into that meadow and to that tree. She had known Shelly would roll along the bark. Their soft bodies, possibly their souls, had mingled there naked in that dream world. Soft form against soft form, and Shelly had fallen to the hard ground alone, wanting to look up at the blonde woman. Longing for that warm touch once more.

But at that moment, Shelly had been afraid. Afraid of being caught. Afraid of being vulnerable. Mana wielders are dangerous. Shelly could have been killed, had the woman taken offense. But the woman hadn’t. No, she had pushed even more mana into Shelly, overwhelming her. Shelly had lost control, and she had panicked. Her senses were not her own, and she felt the mana overdose acutely.

If only the woman had stayed and let Shelly come down. If only the woman had comforted her. But the woman was not a friend, and Shelly did not just have a bit too much alcohol to drink. She had siphoned something far sweeter and far more intoxicating.

Shelly looks around the car and out the windows, hoping against hope that the woman might be there. But her green eyes are nowhere to be found. Shelly is alone.

A cold chill travels down her spine as she presses the necklace back against her face. The warmth spreads along her cheeks.

“Last stop,” the attendant reminds her.

She nods and clutches the necklace back to her chest. The warmth spreads through her punk t-shirt and into her skin.

“Did you see a blonde woman sitting with me?” she asks hopefully.

The attendant chuckles.

“Green eyes,” she adds. She motions a height that is maybe two inches taller than Shelly is.

“Red lips,” the man says. “Black and red dress. White sash. Right?”

She nods enthusiastically.

“Wait,” the man says, his eyes widening and a panic entering his voice. He points at her chest. “Ma’am, is that hers? Ma’am, that necklace. Is that hers?”

“No,” she says honestly. “She gave it to me.”

“She gave it to you?” he asks incredulously. “You’re telling me that *that* woman gave you a necklace like *that*?”

Shelly nods vigorously. “She wanted me to have it. Last night, we...”

The attendant folds his arms across his dark blue uniform. “You what?”

“Talked. She and I... she told me about her childhood. She lived in a castle.”

“A castle?” he asks. He grabs her by the arm and leads her to a nearby window.

“Let go of me, sir!” she demands. “Let go of me!”

“That castle?” he points out the window to a hill that overlooks the area. A ruin stands there. Covered in ivy but still inhabited. Lights shine through the windows into the growing dawn.

The vision of her atop the castle returns. She looks down over the side. A man is there, on the ground near the base of the wall. He must have fallen. He writhes against the stone path in the blood and gore. She calls down to him. She feels a hunger growing inside her, even though she just fed only hours ago on the most potent mana font she has ever known.

“Yes,” Shelly says. “That castle.”

“Lady,” he says, pulling at her black t-shirt and holey jeans. “People like that don’t just give expensive jewelry to people like us!”

“People like us?” Shelly asks, confused.

“Yeah,” the man says, “I mean, if you’re a Contessa, then please call me Count Arthur!”

“Contessa?” Shelly asks. “You mean she’s nobility?”

The man chuckles as he pulls her toward the exit.

“I can walk on my own,” she protests.

“Then go,” he says, pushing her toward the doorway.

He waves to her mockingly as she descends the stairs.

“Contessa?” she asks again, still dumbfounded. She points toward the castle.

“Yes,” he says. “You should go there and return that necklace to her. Or hide it where no one will ever find it. People like her don’t forgive a thief.”

“I’m not a thief!” she retorts hotly, but she knows it’s a lie before it even leaves her lips.

She stole from the woman, this countess. She stole something far more valuable than a necklace. She stole the woman’s mana. She glimpsed into the woman’s memories.

Shelly is not a young woman. She is over fifty, though her body would never show it. She may feel old sometimes, but the woman she met on the train is ancient. The vines on that castle did not just grow overnight. The walls had not just crumbled a few weeks ago. Shelly knows she has glimpsed back

into a time long ago. Back when armor was bulkier and magic was different and more hidden. Back when a war had waged near a lake and men had died along its shores. Back when the Contessa had been young.

“Do you know her name?” Shelly calls to him.

“Of course, I do!” Arthur says back. “Everyone knows the Contessa!”

“Then what do you call her?”

“The same name everyone calls her,” he says playfully. She shakes her head as he seems to soak up her frustration.

“Ok,” he says. “Ok. They call her Giovanna Belmonte!”

“Giovanna,” she whispers.

“You have a place to go, yes?” he asks her from the steps of the train. “If you overslept, the train returns back to Florence in a few hours.”

“No,” Shelly replies, walking toward the castle. “I know where I’m going.”

“There’s a restaurant nearby,” he says. “Best shrimp and linguini in all of Tuscany! Perhaps you might join me for a light breakfast.”

“I’m hungry for something else,” she says to herself, still clutching the warm necklace to her chest.

She unfastens the ancient clasp on the chain and slides it over her head and down to her neck. She slips the red gem under her shirt, and then repositions the jewelry so it is mostly hidden underneath her headphones. As she ascends the stone pathway, her eyes are drawn to a nearby meadow with a single tree in the center of it. Her tree. The one she had rolled across and into a naked Contessa. Back when she trembled powerless next to a font of raw mana in a train from Florence.

She pinches herself as she approaches the open gate and the gas-lit sconces that glow through the morning rays of the sun.

“This cannot be a dream,” she says. “I don’t want this to be a dream.”