

“Feliz aniversário, Thiago.” Leandro Oliveira clinked his glass of expensive tequila against his oldest friend’s, watching as the mellow lighting from the Champagne Pearl’s interior caught the golden liquid.

Thiago flashed him a smile then drained his drink, his gaze drifting to a beautiful Asian woman wearing nothing but a red lace bra and matching G-string. Leandro took a sip of his drink, savoring the warming tingle it cut down the center of his chest.

“You like her?” he asked, gesturing toward the stripper who’d sighted their group and was making her way over, her hips swinging slowly from side to side.

Thiago raised his eyebrows and nodded slowly. “Very much.”

Leandro grinned. They’d always had similar taste, and under normal circumstances he might’ve bought a dance for himself, but it was Thiago’s night, and Leandro had managed to get him, as well as a few other friends visiting from back home in São Paulo, onto the Pearl’s exclusive guest list. He slipped a hand into his pocket and fished out a bill. He squinted at it, making sure it was a one-hundred-dollar bill. Damn American money, it all looked the same, not like the colorful Brazilian reals he was used to.

Not that it mattered. He wasn’t worried about giving the stripper too much money, only too little. The women at the Pearl didn’t dance for twenties, or even fifties. But despite the dim light, he could make out Benjamin Franklin’s dour expression. Clasp it between two fingers, he caught the stripper’s attention and smiled. Her gaze zeroed in on the money—as usual, it was always about the money—and she came to a stop directly in front of him, hands on her slender hips. Maybe a little too slender for his taste, but if she was what Thiago wanted, who was he to argue with the birthday boy?

“Would you like a dance?” she asked sweetly, pushing her hair over one shoulder. Her words were barely audible over the R&B playing through the club’s speakers.

“Not for me. My friend,” he said, handing her the money and pointing at Thiago. “It’s his birthday.”

She tucked the bill into the strap of her G-string and turned her attention to Thiago, egged on by the cheers and whistles of the rest of their group. As Thiago enjoyed his dance, Leandro sat back, savoring his tequila buzz as he surveyed the club. Red and gold lights bathed the intimate, upscale space in a warm glow, leaving the booths in the corners in shadow. A stage sat in the center of the room, a gleaming pole in the middle. Two smaller stages with gorgeous half-naked women dancing on each one flanked either side of the bar. Tables surrounded by deep leather armchairs dotted the floor, most of them occupied with moneyed men in suits. Beautiful women wearing expensive scraps of lace and leather wove their way through the space, smiling and chatting with the customers, occasionally leading one off toward the curtained area to the right of the bar. The VIP lounge. Leandro knew it well, as he’d come to the Pearl a couple of times since moving to Vegas several months ago to fight in the World Fighting Championship.

From her position straddling Thiago’s lap, the stripper flipped her hair over her shoulder and made eye contact with Leandro, a sultry fuck me gaze. He winked and finished the rest of his drink, a little surprised at how uninterested he was in watching the lap dance. He wasn’t even sure why. Maybe it was simply that the novelty of Vegas was already wearing thin.

“Hey, aren’t you Leandro Oliveira?” He looked to his left to see three men looking at him, eager grins on their faces. He tipped his head in acknowledgment and rose from

his seat, moving toward their table. They all shook his hand and got him to sign napkins—no photography allowed in the club for obvious reasons.

“Man, I couldn’t believe the way Maddox did you in that last fight. What a fucking pussy,” said one of them, his words a bit slurred.

“I know, right?” chimed in one of the others. “If I were you, I’d be so pissed. Not much of a championship fight.”

Leandro schooled his face into a neutral expression and clapped the guy on the shoulder, harder than was necessary. “Next time will be different,” he said, and although it was a casual statement, it was also a promise to himself. He signaled to the waitress to bring them another round and put it on his tab. “Enjoy your evening,” he said, telling himself as he sat back down that they were drunk and hadn’t meant anything by it. They thought they’d been commiserating, not rubbing salt into a wound that wouldn’t quite heal.

The waitress had brought him a fresh drink while he’d been over at the other table, and he took a large sip.

Fucking Maddox.

Three weeks ago, Leandro had won the light heavyweight championship belt, stealing it from Maddox, but the victory was tainted. The bastard had barely fought him, ducking and dodging the entire time, refusing to engage. In the end, the fight had gone to a decision, and while Leandro had won, it felt hollow. He had the belt, but only because Maddox had decided it was time to retire.

Leandro hadn’t earned it, and for the first time in his life, his failure to earn something . . . fuck, it bothered him. It made him restless and hungry, and maybe a little angry. He didn’t want people to think he wasn’t worthy of the title of champion.

Granted, he'd spent most of his life simply being handed things, like an \$800 million trust fund, and an expensive European education that he never used. He had multiple homes, including a mansion on the outskirts of Vegas, with a garage full of fancy cars, and a closet full of Armani, Dior, Burberry, and Tom Ford. All of it was his, by right, as an Oliveira.

The fact that he hadn't earned any of those things didn't bother him. They were simply his. But the belt? Yeah. Feeling as though he'd been handed the first thing he'd ever really worked for burned his ass. He felt . . . unsatisfied.

"Well, well. If it isn't my favorite MMA champion," a female voice rasped against his ear, and he turned to look over his shoulder. Red stood just behind him, her fire-engine-red hair tumbling over her shoulders in thick waves. She smiled at him, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

He returned her smile. "You dance for other champions?"

She sent him a coy look and mimed zipping her lips shut. Red was one of his favorite dancers at the Pearl, sweet and smart, and so damn flexible. They'd fucked a couple of times in recent history, and a flicker of heat surged through him at the memory of her spread out beneath him.

"Like what you see, champ?" she asked, doing a slow turn for him. She wore nothing but a skimpy white leather halter and G-string that barely covered her fun bits.

He winked at her. "You know I do."

She leaned down, draping her arm over the back of his chair. "Maybe I need a refresher." Without waiting for an invitation, she planted a knee beside his hip, half straddling him. "You want a dance?" She brought her other knee up, settling herself on his lap. Leaning into him, she draped her arms over his shoulders.

He glanced toward the rest of his group, reminding himself that it was Thiago's night, not his. "Maybe another time."

She laughed and rose from his lap. "Sure thing, champ." She let her gaze dip down his body, and then with a wink and a saucy hair flip, she walked away.

Thiago's stripper, done simultaneously entertaining and tormenting him, picked her bra up from the floor and sauntered away, glancing back at their group as she left.

"I think she likes you," said Leandro, chuckling at Thiago's red cheeks and labored breathing.

Thiago let out a long breath and took a sip of his drink. "And I think I'm in love," he said, his words getting lost in the laughter of their group.

Leandro's pocket buzzed, and he pulled his phone out intending to dismiss the call, but when he saw "Vovô" pop up on the screen, he knew he had to answer it. He'd catch so much shit if he ignored a call from his grandfather.

Excusing himself from the group, he quickly wove his way through the club and out onto the smoking terrace, where it was much quieter. The last thing he needed was for his grandfather to know he was at a strip club right now. He was already on thin ice with his family after a string of recent . . . events. He swiped his finger across the screen and raised the phone to his ear.

"Alô?"

A world-weary sigh greeted him, and he braced himself against whatever might be coming. "What's wrong with you?"

Now, there was a short question with a long answer. "Vovô?" He didn't need to say anything more. João Oliveira wasn't a man who pulled his punches.

"Did you think I wouldn't find out?"

Leandro bit his tongue, not entirely sure what his grandfather had found out about. That he'd accidentally lost the family yacht for three weeks last year? The illegal racing?

"I saw your little video, with the models."

Ah. The sex tape. Fantastic.

"To be fair, I didn't know anyone was recording us. That was supposed to be a private, uh, party."

"It doesn't matter, Leandro. The damage is done. When are you going to grow up and start behaving like an Oliveira? Like a man? You're twenty-eight years old, for Christ's sake."

His grip tightened around his phone as something hot and prickly clawed at his chest. "Pretty sure I was behaving just like a man in the video." Fuck, if he ever got his hands on the cretin who'd taken it, he'd flay him alive. The poor women in the video had taken so much shit, and they'd all only been out for a little company—okay, fine, a lot of company—and a good time.

"I'm sick of this behavior. You need to grow up, Leo," he said, softening his words with the use of Leandro's family nickname. "I know you're enjoying your life. I know you train hard for your fights. But there's such a thing as too much of a good thing. You spend so much time chasing these fleeting things, these undignified things . . ." He sighed again, as though he were weighing his words. "Even though you're wealthy, you'll have nothing, not even your good name." His tone turned sharp again. "Smarten the hell up. Enough of this shit. I don't want to hear more stories about you, you understand me?"

“Yes, *Vouô*,” he said, scuffing his toe against the ground. A wave of irritation, shame, and frustration crashed into him. Without another word, his grandfather ended the call. Leandro suddenly understood the English expression chewed out, because after that short conversation, he felt ripped up and spit out.

As he made his way back to his friends, he couldn't help but feel that there was no such thing as too much of a good thing. The concept was completely foreign to him, and not just because it was another annoying English phrase he sometimes struggled to wrap his brain around. No, it was simply that the idea of having too much of something good didn't make any sense. How could someone have too much of something that made them happy? That they enjoyed? It was like saying there was too much air or too much sunshine.

A completely louco idea if he'd ever heard one.

He downed the rest of his tequila, trying to push away his grandfather's words and the way they'd sliced into him, leaving him raw. The alcohol warmed him, and as beautiful women danced around them and Thiago told a favorite story from when he and Leandro were teenagers, Leandro felt the tension ebb from his shoulders, the corner of his mouth kicking up.

Too much of a good thing? Impossible. This was life at its finest, right here, right now.

“Hey!” A female shout came suddenly from behind the curtained area. “I said no!”

Frowning, Leandro pushed to his feet and ate up the distance between his chair and the VIP area in several long strides. He could hear the sounds of a struggle before he saw it, and then heard a familiar voice.

“Get your fucking hands off me, creep!”

Red’s voice. Where the fuck were the bouncers? Anger tensed every muscle in his body, and he ripped the curtain back. A ruddy-faced man in his fifties was holding a struggling Red against him, her arms pinned behind her at an awkward angle. Several strands of her hair hung from the links of his watch, as though he’d grabbed her head and she’d jerked away from him. The straps of her leather halter hung limply at her sides, and Leandro could see fingertip bruises already emerging on the pale skin of her breast.

His anger turned to protective fury, white hot and barely controlled.

“Let her go,” he shouted, and when the ass took more than half a second to comply, Leandro pushed between them, moving Red behind him and shoving the other man hard in the chest.

“You stupid bitch,” the man hissed at Red, and the remaining shreds of Leandro’s control evaporated. He shot his fist out and connected with the man’s nose, hard. Several flashes went off and Leandro realized they had an audience, but he was too angry to care.

“You don’t come to this club again,” he said, bunching his fists in the man’s shirt and shaking him. “I see you here, I do more than punch.” He had to concentrate on getting the words out, his accent thickening and his grasp of English evaporating along with his self-control.

The man struggled free and took a sloppy swing at Leandro, who leaned back and then jabbed his fist into the man’s jaw. Finally, the bouncers came rushing over, parting the crowd that had gathered. They hauled the asshole up by his elbows and escorted him out.

Leandro turned to Red, who'd managed to pull her halter back into place. "Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

She nodded. "I'm fine. No thanks to the fucking invisible bouncers!" she shouted in their direction. "Thanks."

He shook his head, smiling at her. "I like punching people. You don't need to thank me."

Something in her eyes shifted, and they softened and melted. "Maybe I want to."

He grinned. He knew that look. He was definitely in for a night of too much of a good thing. Exactly what he needed to chase away what his grandfather had stirred up.

Besides. Moderation was overrated.



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