

→ Julie and the Warlord

“Okay,” she laughed after three complicated cocktails. “Now, you, sir . . .”

“Yes.”

“You, sir . . . Now . . . I am . . . Okay. I feel like we’ve only talked about me. But I don’t know anything about you. Other than that you’re very, um, charming and, well, very cute, of course. Ha, don’t let that go to your head! Shouldn’t have said that.”

“Thank you.”

“But I feel—okay, if this is my—well. Okay: what do you do?”

“What do I do? You mean what is my job?”

“Sorry, I hate that question, too. It’s like, is this a date or an interview, right?”

He finished his bite of sauce-soaked broccolini and answered, but she didn’t hear him clearly.

“HMMMMMMMMMMMM? All I heard was ‘lord.’”

“Yes.”

“Ooh! Okay, this is fun. Are you a . . . landlord? Because I do not have the best history getting along with landlords. My first apartment—”

“I’m not a landlord.”

“Are you . . . a . . . drug lord?” Julie said, stroke-poking the side of his face with her finger. “’Cause that could be a problem.”

“No.”

“You’re not . . . *the* Lord, are you? Because I haven’t gone to temple since my Bat Mitzvah. Ha, don’t tell my grandma!”

He laughed politely. She could tell he was laughing just to be nice—and she liked that more than if he had laughed from finding her funny. A nice guy: now that would be a real change of pace for her.

“Then what kind of lord *are* you, anyways, eh?” she asked with an old-timey “what’s the big idea” accent. God, she was a bit tipsy, wasn’t she?

“I’m a warlord.”

“In-ter-est-ing! Now, I don’t know exactly what this is. But I want to learn. So: what exactly . . . is . . . a warlord?” Julie asked, her chin now resting playfully on a V of two upturned palms. “Educate meeeee.”

“Okay. Can you picture where the Congo is on a map?”

“Kinda,” she exaggerated.

“This is Africa,” he said, pointing to an imaginary map in the air between them. “*This* is the Indian Ocean. *This* is the Democratic Republic of the Congo. *This* is just regular Congo.”

“What? Hold up—”

“I know—that’s just how it is. I didn’t name them,” the warlord laughed. “Anyway. *This*? All *this*, here? This is what I control.”

“So you’re like . . . the governor of it?”

“No. There are areas of the world where it will show up on your map as a certain country. But in reality, no government is in control of that region, in any real way. They cannot collect taxes. They cannot enforce laws. Do you follow?”

Yes, nodded Julie.

"The people that *are* in charge are the warlords. They—*we*—bribe, kidnap, indoctrinate, torture, and . . . what am I forgetting? What's the fifth one? Oh, kill—ha, that's weird that I forgot that one—the population of any region that falls above a certain threshold of natural resources but below a certain threshold of government protection. It's not *exactly* that simple, Julie, but, basically, that determines where I'm based. Once those conditions reach that level, me and my team, we show up and terrorize that area until the entire population is either dead, subdued, or, ideally, one of our soldiers. *Ideally* ideally, dream scenario? A child soldier."

"That does *not* sound legal," said Julie, trying to stall for time so that she could object properly and intelligently, which was going to take a second, because she had had a couple of drinks already and had not anticipated having to debate a hot-button topic like this at the top of her intelligence—especially not with someone who did it for a living.

"No, it isn't legal at all—have you been listening?" Julie blushed and rotated her fork on her napkin in a four-point turn so she would have something to focus on besides her embarrassment. "This is a show of force *outside* the ability of any government to enforce its laws."

He went on and on. The words "rape" and "limbs" came up more than on any other date she could remember.

"What about, like, the international community?" asked Julie, hoping this was a smart question. Usually this was something she was good at on dates, but tonight she was having more trouble. "Don't they ever pressure you to stop? Or," she added, thinking there might be something else there, "or something?"

"Yes," said the warlord. "Sure! For example, there was this thing about me on Twitter a while ago—are you on Twitter?"

She said she was but didn't check it often. "Same here!" he laughed. "I have an account, but I can never figure out if it's a thing I do or not. Anyway. I was 'trending.' You know what that is?" She did. "I'll be honest, it weirded me out. I got into this pattern where I was checking my name every two seconds, and there were like forty-five new mentions of me. All negative!"

"You can't let yourself fall into that," said Julie.

"Exactly. Anyway, it passed," said the warlord. "You know Twitter—before long everyone's on to the next thing."

"What about," asked Julie, downing the last sip of her cocktail as she felt a premature ripple of seriousness returning, "the ethics of it? How do you feel about that? Doesn't that trouble you?"

The warlord gestured to Julie with his fork. "That top you're wearing. Anthropologie?"

"H&M," said Julie, "but thank you."

"Even better," said the warlord. "Do you know the conditions in the factories that made that top that you're wearing? Do you ever think about that?"

"Yeah, okay, no. That's not—nice try. Just because . . . No. And *yes*, I know, this *phone*, right here, that I use every day—but, no. No! You can't . . . It doesn't help anything to equate . . . Look," said Julie. "There's no excuse. But that also does *not* mean—"

"Just in case you're thinking about dessert," whispered the waitress, dropping off two stiff sheets of artisan paper in front of Julie and the warlord.

"Remember when they used to ask first if you wanted to see a dessert menu?" asked the warlord. "Now everyone just ambushes you with a dessert menu without asking. When did that start?"

"I know!" said Julie. "Everyone started doing that at the same

time, too! How does stuff like that happen? Everywhere, just"—she snapped—"changing their policy at the exact same time?"

"Get Malcolm Gladwell on that," said the warlord.

"I know, right?"

They both scanned the menus, each pair of eyes starting in the unhelpful middle of the dessert menu for some no-reason, then tipsily circling around and around until most of the important words had been absorbed.

"I have never understood 'flourless chocolate cake,'" stated the warlord, finally. "Is flour such a bad thing? I mean, compared to the other things in chocolate cake?"

"You want to split that?" said Julie.

"Flour is probably the *least* unhealthy thing I can think of in chocolate cake," the warlord continued. "Is that supposed to be the point? That the whole cake is just all eggs and sugar and butter? And anyway, who cares? It's chocolate cake. We know it's not a health food. Use whatever ingredients you want. All it has to do is taste good. We don't need to know how you did it—just make it."

"You want to maybe split that?" said Julie again.

"We will split the flourless chocolate cake," declared the warlord.

"Great!" said the waitress, disappearing again.

"So, do you get to travel a lot?" asked Julie.

"Not as much as I'd like. Now and then we'll reach some cease-fire, after some especially big massacre, and things get quiet for a bit. That's what allowed me to take some time off, travel, meet you, stuff like that. Oh, I meant to say: you look even better in person than in your profile picture."

"Oh . . . Thank you."

"Yeah, I've been meaning to tell you that. Nice surprise. Rare it goes in that direction."

"Ha. Well, thanks. Um, same. Don't let that go to your head."

"Thanks. So . . . Lost my train of thought."

"Cease-fires?"

"Right! So, you know cease-fires—they never stick."

"Yes, I think I saw something about that on Jon Stewart. That must be frustrating."

"It is! Thank you, Julie. That's *exactly* the right word," said the warlord. "It's very frustrating!"

"Flourless chocolate cake," said the waitress.

"Thank you," said Julie and the warlord at the same time.

"Can I get you anything else? Another drink?"

"I really shouldn't," said Julie. "Are you okay to drive, by the way?"

"I have a driver," said the warlord.

Julie ordered a fourth and final cocktail.

Discussion question:

Do you think Julie should fuck the warlord? Why or why not?