The next day was quiet. Anna spent the day in the living room anxiously wondering what was happening across the hall. After all the chaos of the previous evening it seemed very anticlimactic. Ryan had headed out earlier in the day and hadn’t returned leaving Anna to do nothing but worry. She had a strong urge to go across the hallway and knock on the door. It would’ve been a stupid thing to do.

When Ryan finally came home he was looking harried and nervous. He ignored Anna as he walked straight through to the kitchen. Anna wondered if he was mad at her or if he was just distracted. She wasn’t sure what to say.

“Everyone knows.” Ryan finally said as he opened a beer. He had a wide-eyed look as if he had just seen some natural disaster first hand.

“Know what?” Anna asked.

“That I’m a loser!” Ryan shouted angrily. He put his beer down, “Words already spreading that I’m some pathetic beta that can’t keep my woman in line. Paul has told everyone.”

“Oh.” Anna looked down, “What do we do?”

“Why’d you have to do it?” Ryan asked as he looked at Anna bitterly, “Why’d you have to provoke Paul like that?”

Anna kept her eyes on the floor like a chastened schoolgirl. She knew it was her fault really, she had let her emotions get the better of her and she had created an awful situation for everyone. Thanks to her rash actions she had managed to get everyone in trouble. Paul’s reputation was in tatters and Jane was being threatened with being sent away, everyone she cared about was suffering because of her.

“He was treating Jane badly.” Anna replied quietly, “I got angry.”

“You can’t save the world.” Ryan sighed.

“So I’m just supposed to let that bastard do what he wants to Jane!?” Anna argued back. The flames of her anger were being kindled.

“Yes!” Ryan shook his head, “We’re in Sallas! What Paul does with Jane is his own business. It’s only because you’re with me that you aren’t in the same boat. If I was anyone else you’d be off to the Finishing School as well!”

“Finishing School?” Anna repeated slowly. She’d heard him say it but she had thought it was just to scare her, “Paul’s sending Jane to… We have to stop him!”

“Anna… Anna! No!” Ryan shouted.

Anna had reacted to the news Jane was being sent away in a predictably emotional way. Without a second of thought she turned to the door to go and intervene. Ryan hurried around the kitchen island and grabbed hold of Anna before she could reach the door.

“What is wrong with you!?” Ryan exclaimed.

“We have to help Jane!” Anna replied.

“Have you not been paying attention?” Ryan asked with exasperation, “You can’t save Jane.”

Anna could feel the anger descending on her. She pushed off of Ryan and stood back in the living room with her husband warily standing between her and the door. The old feelings of hopelessness and frustration boiled inside her. She looked at Ryan and didn’t see the man that had treated her so well but another male in a system designed to keep women down. Her fists were clenched and shaking by her side.

“It’s easy for you!” Anna finally screamed. She waved her arms in front of her and continued sarcastically, “Oh I’m SO sorry that you’re damn career might be hurt. It must be SO hard for you!”

“I’m not your enemy!” Ryan replied, “God, maybe Paul and my father are right…”

The colour seemed to drain from Anna’s face immediately. She shook her head slowly as she tried to process what Ryan had just said. She could see he was immediately regretting his last sentence but it was too late, the damage was done. Anna turned on her heels and ran to the bedroom.

“Anna!” Ryan called after her, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean-”

Anna slammed the bedroom door and threw herself on to the bed. She immediately burst into tears. She hit the pillows above her head in anger. A large part of her thought about running away, becoming one of the “strays” who wandered the streets until they were picked up and either returned to their men or to a Finishing School. She half-expected Ryan to come in but he didn’t, she was grateful. She needed space.

Anna fell into a fitful sleep after a while. She had no idea how long she had been on the bed before unconsciousness took her and she had no idea how long she had been asleep when she woke up again. The anger had largely dissipated to be replaced by an empty feeling of hopelessness. Outside the window the sun was starting to set.

With some distance from the argument earlier Anna felt a little bad. Ryan had done so much for her and she had been so ready to throw it back in his face. At the same time she still felt a lot of hurt from his comments. She didn’t know what to do, the side of her wanting to avoid confrontation begged her to stay in the room, the rest of her wanted to go out and see Ryan. Eventually she decided she couldn’t avoid him forever.

Anna opened the door and stepped out into the hallway. She was being as quiet as possible as she went through to the living area. She was somewhat surprised to see that Ryan wasn’t there. She frowned as she looked around and felt a little vulnerable. She wanted to clear the air but apparently that wasn’t going to be possible.

“I know…” Anna muttered to herself as she went through to the kitchen.

Since Anna had started being treated as an equal she hadn’t really done much cooking. It wasn’t that she hated doing it but Ryan seemed to want to go out of his way to make sure she knew he was willing to shoulder his share of the responsibility around the apartment. Preparing a nice meal would put them both in a good place to talk like adults.

Opening the fridge Anna was immediately disappointed. There wasn’t a lot in there. She was going to have to do something she never liked doing even in the best of circumstances. Anna was going to have to go to the store.

Back in the bedroom Anna got dressed. It was always strongly encouraged that women wore diapers or pull-ups when outside even if they were potty trained. If a woman was alone it was basically an unwritten rule. It was a rule Anna had no intention of following. She got dressed in panties with a knee-length skirt over the top and a pale pink top, something that could be considered adult or childish depending on who looked at it. Once ready she headed towards the front door and stopped in front of the harness.

The harness was a bigger deal. If women were going outside unaccompanied by their man they were supposed to have a note saying they had permission, they were still supposed to have their harness on. Anna didn’t want to put the harness on, she wasn’t even sure she could since the buckles that fastened it were out of reach on the back. She slipped the harness over her shoulders loosely, indeed she couldn’t tighten it up so she would have to be careful. She picked up a jacket and slipped it on over the harness.

Anna felt nervous about going outside but she had grown so tired of hiding around the home. It was going to be an easy trip, there was a small supermarket on campus just a couple of minutes away and all she had to do was get some ingredients and go home again.

Anna left the apartment and for a few seconds and stared at the door across the hall. She wondered if Jane was still in there and if there was anything she could do to help her. Ryan had been right though, she couldn’t save everyone, she couldn’t even save herself. It was a depressing but devastatingly realistic fact. Before she was too tempted to knock on the door and make matters worse she turned and walked down the hallway. She felt very alone as she went out into the sun.

Reaching into her pocket Anna pulled out a pacifier and slipped it between her lips. She felt like she was undercover, she was dressed like a Sallasian woman but she felt like anything but. As she started towards the store she tried to look as confident as possible, it was only halfway through the walk that she thought she was attracting even more attention that way. Being a woman walking alone she already stuck out like a sore thumb. Fortunately she found a man who wasn’t watching her and followed him a couple of steps behind, it seemed to fool most people that they were together.

The store soon loomed large and Anna stepped away from the random man she had been trying to discreetly follow. There was a notice in the window that attracted her attention. She stood to the side as myriad people walked in and out of the building in front of her.

“Seriously?” Anna muttered.

“New rules coming in to effect immediately.” The sign proclaimed in big bold black letters, “All girls are to be accompanied by their men. No exceptions.”

Underneath that first line was a dozen bullet points listing the other rules of the supermarket. What really caught Anna’s eye was that it wasn’t signed by the manager of the store but the Dean of the college. It felt ominous.

Anna was at a bit of a loss. She wanted to go in the supermarket and being told that she couldn’t only made her want it more. She really didn’t want to return home and have to come back with Ryan. She stood out in the open for a couple of minutes trying to work out what to do. She noticed she was attracting more attention, she had to decide what she was doing soon.