

Witches' Thralls

**~ Book 1 ~
Student From Another World**

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~Content Warning~

This book contains sexually explicit material intended for an adult audience, as well as potentially triggering content involving emotional & sexual abuse and religious cults. Reader discretion is advised.

This release represents a work in progress.

~1~

Rooted in the devils' plane, The Karnan Academy of Magical Arts was an old and elaborate campus. The collective of ornate, spired buildings pierced the skyline in the heart of the Erduin Valley, its vine-laced towers of beige cobblestone rising over the surrounding forest's canopy with swirling golden accents that glistened in the sun. The school's reputation was as well-known as its visage, serving as Karna's primary place of magical education and governance, and as such its sprawling dormitories housed students of all kinds, attracted by the promise of wielding arcane powers as their own. It of course had no shortage of the land's native demons looking to hone and expand upon their innate spellcraft, but among them also walked, crawled and flew all manner of fae and animal kin, elves and orcs, and, in recent decades, the humans of Terra.

Serving as a connective plane, Karnans were no strangers to welcoming new kinds to their lands, though they certainly found Terrans to be of mixed quality. Being a species clearly used to holding a dominant position in their own world, they frequently struggled to navigate the complexities of their neighboring realm's more interdependent society. Over the years, more than a few had entered with naked ambitions of claiming the realm as their own, be it by economic persuasion or raw use of force, but their successes had been – put graciously – minimal. Still, Terrans held the nasty reputation of being manipulative towards others and far too convinced of the “inarguable” power of money, and many a bad actor helped reinforce that impression while visiting the realm.

The Academy was no exception to these patterns, but the administration was quite used to such things. Ambition and lust for power were not lacking even among the higher echelons of Karnan witches, never mind within the ranks of the numerous candidates walking the Academy's halls. The High Council was composed of little if not the exact sort of status-seeking kind that the stereotypical Terran would feel right at home with. It was other shortcomings that made the Terrans of Earth so rare among the student body.

The entrance qualifications for the school were clearly defined and strictly enforced by the Council, and the majority of Terran applicants would find themselves swiftly rejected. It was believed that their homeworld was lacking in the kind of magical energy that infused itself into the beings of other worlds, leaving its human residents at a distinct disadvantage. For a Terran to make the cut at all, they needed to demonstrate an incredible sort of adaptability and aptitude, as most were declared too lacking in magical compatibility to be worth refining. Only the most exceptional and determined Terrans were permitted to walk the school's halls.

All the more confusing, then, was Lyselle Alwin.

The bookish and full-bodied redhead had never felt entirely comfortable even among her own kind, but here in the Academy's halls she felt especially out of place. After a full year of study, Lyselle still regularly struggled with even the simplest of spells and conjurations, her wand rarely emitting so much as a spark. When she did manage to manifest something, it was never under her control; just quick flashes of unrestrained power that fizzled quickly and mostly served only as a source of embarrassment. Her mentors and peers seemed impatient with her lack of casting ability at the best of times, and outright dismissive of her at worst.

"Surely," they'd murmur, "there must have been some mistake."

"What potential could she even have?"

"Even for a Terran, Lyselle is a dud."

The teaching staff rarely cared if Lyselle could hear their insults or not, and the other students treated her with a mixture of avoidance and direct ridicule. Her list of friends was a non-starter, but that wasn't all too different from how things had been back home. While other would-be witches formed cliques and covens, Lys toiled away on her own, holed up in her dorm any time she wasn't in class, wholly dedicated to her studies and hoping to find the solution to her readily apparent shortcomings.

It was through such effort that she'd found the one area of study in which she excelled: alchemy. Through her work with alien roots and mystical stones she had caught the eye of one Magus Greye Evenclire, an eccentric demon whose reputation as an instructor was well-known throughout the school.

There was much debate over whether being taken under Evenclire's wing was a blessing or a curse. He was as likely to offer his tutelage to a student who excelled in all areas as he was to one as apparently talentless as Lyselle Alwin, and equally as likely to see his students succeed as he was to be the reason they quit their studies entirely. An outwardly soft-spoken demon, he was famous for his gentle mannerisms, but a stubborn resolve burned within him, masked behind his kind words and nurturing guidance. Rare was the creature that would claim to know what the Magus was thinking in any circumstance, and his selection process was especially esoteric. While many witch candidates sought his guidance, it was rarely – if ever – granted to those who asked for it.

It seemed like pure chance that Lyselle found herself under Evenclire's instruction for introductory alchemy, but throughout her studies and efforts she had clearly left a mark on the man. While she routinely struggled with spellcasting, the more tactile experience of blending materials and provoking reactions seemed to suit her incredibly well. Her work consistently pushed ahead of the rest of her peers, and her notes and formulas were daunting even to much of the faculty. The normally reserved young woman would present the results of her efforts almost giddily, and this day's demonstration was no exception, being set off with a quite literal bang.

"As you can see, the initial reaction is rather volatile," she shouted from behind a thick plume of smoke, speaking in fluent Demonic, "but rest assured this is all part of the distilling process!"

Had any other student uttered such reassurances from behind a table which had actively caught fire, the words would have likely rung hollow. But this was Lyselle Alwin, and she carried on with confidence as she stepped away from the billowing cloud before her, unswayed by the fog that had overtaken the thick lenses of her spectacles.

"Now," she continued, pulling a pouch from her waistband, "the timing of this next part is pretty important." From the pouch, she presented a handful of pale-colored dust that she held out in her palm. "Right now, the flames around the catalyst are green, but in a moment they'll start shifting towards blue, and at that point—"

She paused.

“Erm, those of you with sensitive hearing may want to cover your ears for a moment.”

A few of the onlooking students heeded her warning at their desks, an elven boy in the second row going so far as to cower behind his books. Sure enough, the flames' hue began to cool, and Lyselle scattered the dust over the fire. A loud bang shook the room, the pillar of smoke blown outward in an instant with a vibrant flash of color that quickly gave way to a murky haze.

The young candidate could be made out in the swirling dust and soot appraising her own efforts, pacing back and forth while gathering her thoughts as she waited for her peers to cease coughing. On the table before her rested a glistening orb of rough and twisting blue crystal, its form held aloft by tendrils of stone which had risen and coiled outward from the ring of ash upon the table before spiraling together at the sphere's base. At its center shone a brilliant light, shifting gently in hue as it cast a rippled glow onto the walls through the crystal's rough texture.

Lyselle brushed her hair back and cleared her throat. “As you can see, the end result is a hybrid formation of the Leshwitt and Coratine Methods, and the catalyst has been ensnared in the process, which *should* render it responsive to magical input, allowing for a fair amount of control over the light's intensity and color.”

An ivory-white demoness chortled at the front of the class, crossing her arms over her scantily-covered chest as she leaned back into her chair. “So it's a desk lamp?”

Lys stifled a grimace, smiling through clenched teeth as she fought her immediate response back: *You? Again?* The demoness had been a consistent heckler for as long as the pair had shared a class, a snobby elitist from a well-respected lineage of powerful spellcasters. This *particular* member of that lineage also just happened to be built like a supermodel, and dressed to make sure everyone knew it. Lyselle envied the demoness's confidence, though not her brash personality.

She took a deep breath and carried on. “Yes, Auna, I suppose that is... *one* possible application. Though, again, it should be responsive to spellcasting in ways that a typical lamp wouldn't be-”

Auna leaned back in her chair and threw a mocking grin at the half-elf sat beside her. “Geek made a desk lamp.”

Her neighbor smiled back, violet hair cascading over her shoulders as she cocked her head to the side as she replied, “Auna... Have you tried being less boring?”

“Boring!?” The demoness bolted upright at her desk. “Talia, we *have* light spells!” She rolled her golden eyes, limply raising a jewel-adorned hand to produce a small glowing orb. “See? Wow! Look at that.”

The half-blood rose from her seat and made for the front of the room. “I would like to *try* the...” – she turned towards Auna, walking backwards as she made over-emphasized air quotes at her – “‘desk lamp.’”

“O-Oh,” Lyselle stammered, blushing as the lithe woman confidently sauntered towards the front of the room. “Um, by all means!”

She stepped aside to let her classmate get in close to the formation. Lyselle was well aware of Talia Rosenblum, as was most of the school, in equal part for her prodigious magical ability as for her complete recklessness in employing it.

Talia had been chosen as another of Magus Evenclire’s students of interest upon the advent of her dorm room releasing a ball of fire so intense that it blew out every one of its four quite sturdy walls, an incident she had excused at the time as a “teensy dare gone awry.” She had accrued a reputation for being a notorious trouble-maker, often cited by both teachers and peers as a hot-headed meddler with minimal restraint. Despite this, she was a contagiously cheerful and energetic woman, and among the scant few who seemed genuinely interested in Lyselle’s presentations.

Watching the half-elf’s amaranthine eyes flicker over her work was enough to make Lyselle’s heart skip a beat, uncertain what to expect from someone so skilled and infamously volatile. Talia leaned over the orb with a keen interest as the light from the structure danced through her long violet hair. Paired with how it shone against her fair elven skin, it was enough to overpower Lys’s instinct to breathe. She watched Talia’s every motion and reaction as the woman appraised the object in front of her, deeply nervous of her classmate’s opinion, yet thrilled that *any* of her peers had taken such an interest in her efforts.

Talia chuckled to herself, and Lyselle braced for the worst.

“That’s neat stuff, honestly.” The half-blood snapped upwards with a bounce and turned to Lyselle, startling the poor girl back half a step. “You said the catalyst is what’s producing the light?”

“Er, y-yes!” She adjusted her glasses, gesturing towards her creation to direct the girl’s attention back to her work. “The subcosta of a shed fae wing still reacts to magical energy, thus it glowing in response to the alchemical reaction! Magic coursing through their veins is what gives fae creatures their distinctive glow, similar to what happens with mages and their, um...”

Lyselle found herself suddenly very conscious of eye contact as Talia watched her ramble on.

“... their eyes.” She turned away, certain she felt a blush running over her freckled face. Talia’s pupils shone from the fire within, which from a witch was about as genuine a sign of excitement as one could name.

“So then, by channeling magic *through* the fae wing...?” Talia urged her on.

Lys cleared her throat. “You can... control the light, yes. Um, i-in theory.”

“Desk lamp,” the ivory demoness heckled in sing-song.

“Like I said, Auna, you’re dreadfully boring.” Talia had once again moved in close to the crystalline structure, looking it over from all angles as her eyes betrayed the mischievous thoughts running through her head. “You can do a lot with a fae wing that’s not quite possible with your standard light bulb or radiant stone. For example – and you’d know this if you’d been paying attention -- storing basic spell instructions!”

Auna sneered. “Oh boy! You can make it, what, *blink* or something? Consider my mind, like, blo-”

Before the heckling could finish, Talia produced a small wand from her waistband and tapped it on Lyselle’s creation. After a quick flash of brilliant emerald, the light focused towards the font of the classroom and spelled out a phrase in shimmering letters upon the wall.

“AUNA IS BORING”

Talia smiled smugly at the demoness that was now slumping into her seat with a scowl.

“Fascinating,” Lyselle remarked as she examined her classmate’s handiwork. “I hadn’t even considered the possibility of such a highly-focused projection.”

“Eh,” Talia shrugged, “a little creativity goes a long way.” She winked back at Auna.

“Indeed it does,” the Magus chimed as he rose from his desk. “But perhaps one can instill a lesson in Miss Leltwick without the need for base insults.”

Evenclire cast an imposing figure. A tall and slender form of demon commonly known as a Firebrand, his pupils shone out from his otherwise dark eyes with an intense glow that radiated over his red skin, and when he spoke one could see a heated luminescence in the back of his throat. What he lacked in muscle he made up for with his magical aptitude, though even without the visage of raw physical strength his long horns and dragon-like tail made him an intimidating specimen. This impression was balanced out by the details; his long golden hair flowed down over his dark robes in straight locks, and whether the hair or the robes were kept in better condition would be a difficult assessment to make. His eyes were framed by a pair of slim golden-rimmed glasses, an elegant accent to his slender, long face. The man kept himself near-spotless, and could often be seen fussily tidying his teaching space between classes.

He approached the table and placed a single well-manicured hand on Lyselle’s construct, quietly muttering a complex and intricate spell. The lights on the wall shifted and bent away from Talia’s message, swirling back into place to form a brilliantly detailed shimmering rose, spinning slowly around as it peeled from the wall and into the air like a hologram. As it settled slowly above the construct, the petals blossomed further outward, animated with lifelike accuracy, drops of fluorescent dew rising from them and sparkling as they danced around the flower in the air.

The class looked on at the Magus’s spellwork in awe.

“‘Boring’ is a subjective evaluation,” the teacher stated as he cocked his head towards Talia. His voice was deep but gentle, and his

words were spoken in the way that only carefully measured words can be. “As is ‘creative.’ There is always room to expand one’s mind.”

Talia’s gaze was fixed on the illusion twirling before her. She let out a defeated sigh and smiled. “Understood, Magus.”

“Most excellent,” said Evenclire. “As for you, Miss Alwin, impressive alchemy as always. It’s only a shame you can’t explore your work’s full potential for yourself.”

Lyselle’s shoulders sank. “I will... continue my efforts, Magus.”

“I’d expect nothing less. Now, then...” Evenclire turned his attention back to the front of the class. “Since you seem so confident that your own work is of superior interest, Miss Leltwick, why don’t you demonstrate *your* efforts next?”

Auna groaned as she turned to gather things from an expensive-looking embroidered satchel she kept by her desk. As Lyselle moved to return to her own seat along the wall, she was startled by a firm pat on the shoulder from Talia, who flashed her a quick smile as she passed by.

Lyselle felt herself turn red, and the rest of the student demonstrations were something of a blur. Oh, certainly, Auna Leltwick lived up to the family name and her reputation as a High Adorned, fusing magic and minerals to form an excellently-crafted mimicry of her father’s dignified visage, but at the end of the day the alchemy involved was nothing fantastical or of much note. Lyselle had found “showy but underwhelming” to be something of a running theme with the white demoness, and thus rarely paid her particular insults too much mind. Lys had been growing a thick skin towards the insults of her peers as a whole, in truth. It was practically necessary.

Now, *praise*, on the other hand...

The Terran turned to look out the window, covering her flushed face with her hand as she took comfort in what had once felt like an alien landscape to her. Days were marked by a perpetually orange sky, as if sunset was all they knew, the sun often resting low on the horizon even at mid-day. The trees were flush with red and violet leaves swaying in the wind, their dark bark breaking into the similarly warm-hued grasses and shrubs at their roots where a pair of ethereal squirrel-like creatures were frolicking in their shade. Even after two years of living on this plane, it was hard to dwell too much on one’s own

thoughts when they saw a griffin soaring in the distance or the tell-tale signs of a living tree marching its way towards its next sunbathing spot. Karna was thriving with the stuff of mere legends back home, and reminding herself of that gave Lyselle a sense of gratitude. It was a far cry from the suburbs, if nothing else.

She was brought back from her thoughts by a sudden bang and woeful wail. At the front of the class shook Melissa Angua, a bespectacled lamia girl presently wilting to the floor in front of the scant remains of what had been the presentation table. The orange, snake-like tail that made up her lower half coiled around her body as tears filled her eyes. Another failed attempt.

Evenclire tutted as he walked towards the wreckage. “Are you alright, Miss Angua?”

She struggled to look her teacher in the eye, hiding in her own mussed-up auburn hair. She spoke in a voice Lyselle could barely hear, her spirit clearly defeated by her latest mistakes. “I’m sorry, Magus.”

“Now, now,” Evenclire spoke in a soothing tone, kneeling down to pat her on the head. “You’re making progress, believe it or not.”

Hope swelled in the girl’s eyes. “I.. I am!?”

“Of course!” The Magus smiled at her warmly, adding, “That was your biggest explosion yet!”

The girl went beet red, sinking even further into her tail with a saddened whimper as a portion of the class chuckled.

Evenclire was unphased, reaching his hand to the floor and, with another silent spell, quickly cleaning the mess. The remaining parts of the table swirled together with ash and rubble, their form beginning to refine and resemble what had been present before. Dust compressed into matter as wood reached across the gaps to grip itself and be made whole. As the reconstructed table came to rest on the floor, one could scarcely discern a difference between the former furnishing and its present replacement.

“I am being sincere, Miss Angua,” he resumed. “Though I understand that it *is* disheartening that your reactions keep backfiring, their aftermath is a testament to your growing magical output. It is simply outpacing your material ambition.”

He brushed her back and helped her back up off the floor, as much as someone with half a snake body could be. Melissa sniffled,

wiping the tears from her eyes while giving her best attempt at a determined nod.

“Try scaling back on the alchemical complexity next time,” her teacher advised. “Focus on what your magic can do within your studies’ means, and I think you’ll be surprised.”

“Yes, Magus,” the lamia muttered. “Thank you.”

What your magic can do... Lyselle’s thoughts drifted back to her own shortcomings, the Magus’s words echoing in her mind. *That’s right. You’re capable of more than you think, Mel.*

She sighed, opening her notebook to review her studies, as she often did when she was troubled. She started scribbling thoughts and observations about the work of her teacher and peers, trying to distract herself from her own self-doubt with elaborate formulas and equations.

Then again, someone said that about me, too.

The rest of the class proved largely uneventful. Students presented their various constructs – most rather middling – and then filed out to get on with their day. Lyselle, meanwhile, had gotten lost in her notes, attempting to deconstruct spells she’d observed and messing up her own hair as her intent focus left her leaning her head further and further down into her own hand.

“Wow, *someone’s* working up a proper brainstorm.”

The voice startled her so thoroughly that Lyselle almost fell backwards in her chair, a frenzied yelp echoing through the now mostly empty classroom as the Terran slammed the book shut on her desk.

Talia looked down at her, head tilted but clearly amused. “Quite the reaction. What, are you writing love poems or something?”

Lyselle attempted to regain her composure, straightening her back and doing her best to look neutral, brushing her hair back into place with her hands. “N-Nothing of the sort!”

Talia smirked. “If you say so.”

The Terran gave her an annoyed glance. “It’s my study notes, if you must know.”

“You study without any research materials?”

“She is *surrounded* by research material, Miss Rosenblum.”

Both girls looked over to see Evenclire approaching from the front of the class, a knowing grin on his normally stoic face.

“Lyselle is actually quite observant,” he continued, “or, at least, she is when it comes to others. Attempting to decompile your fellow students’ spells again, Miss Alwin?”

Lyselle’s gaze returned to the window. “Not that I’m sure why I bother,” she grumbled.

“You bother because you’re inquisitive. You have a sharp mind,” her teacher praised. “What you lack is instinct.” His gaze turned to Talia. “Quite the opposite of this one, actually.”

The half-elf simply shrugged. “Eh, I was never one for book learnin’.”

Evenclire’s eyebrows raised. “Yes, quite.”

He returned his attention to Lyselle. “Miss Rosenblum’s natural aptitude for spellcasting is actually quite remarkable, which helps offset how thoroughly one must work to slowly etch new knowledge into that impulsive skull of hers.”

Talia sulked. “Okay, well, that’s just rude.”

Lyselle looked at her teacher, puzzled. “Why are you telling *me* this?”

Evenclire thought for a moment, considering his words, as he often did. “Every witch has their strengths and weaknesses, Lyselle.”

“I’m *hardly* a witch.”

“In practice, perhaps not. However, it seems you forget who reads your essays and reports. Stellar work time and again, and yet,” - he tapped at her closed notebook, looking her in the eyes - “you seem to feel it’s shamefully inadequate.”

Lyselle could feel her teeth grinding together. “If it were *adequate*, I would be able to *use* it.”

“Is that so...?” Evenclire looked down at her, his assessing glare intensified by the warm light of Karna’s setting sun blazing through the window.

Things were quiet for a moment, Talia glancing back and forth from her teacher to her peer, unsure how to break the tension until she recalled a conversation she’d had earlier in the day. “Uh, Magus? You wanted to see us *both* for something, right?”

“Ah, right.” The firebrand shook his head. “Apologies, my mind wandered.”

He leaned against a desk across from Lyselle, looking off into the woods outside. “I have a job for you two. It’s rather important, so I’d usually handle it myself, but…” He stopped to look over both of his students a moment before committing to their assignment. “Yes… I think it’s best that you go together.”

“Together…?” Lyselle couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Together *where*, exactly?”

“I need you to undertake an excursion into the woods,” Evenclire stated matter-of-factly. “We’re in need of some vital materials for an upcoming lesson, and they’re of the sort best sourced naturally.”

“I-I see,” stammered Lyselle.

“Now wait a minute!” Talia crossed her arms and stared into Evenclire’s eyes with an assessing squint. “There’s rumors going around. A *lot* of them, actually.”

“I am aware,” came Evenclire’s blunt reply.

“Folks are saying the woods are *dangerous*.”

“That is correct.”

Talia moved a hand to her hips, gesturing at the woods outside with the other. “Like, *deadly* dangerous.”

“Indeed.” Zero hesitation.

Talia’s lips seemed to dance around her face as her gesturing hand came up to her chin. “And you want *us* to go, what, flower picking?”

“There’s a number of things, a flower or two among them,” Evenclire explained, completely unphased by Talia’s concerns. “I’ll give you a list, if that helps.”

“I *am* a fan of lists,” Lyselle said. “I would prefer not to die, though.”

Talia tapped her fingers against her own face. “Would you like a *list* of things people are saying are out for blood?”

The Terran grimaced. “Is it… extensive?”

Talia started pacing, her boots clacking on the stone floor. “Oh, it’s just a few things, you know. Cannibalistic spiderkin, aggressive mandragoras, a few carnivorous plants in full bloom-”

“Ah, yes, thank you for reminding me,” their teacher interjected, pulling out a quill and paper to scrawl something down.

“Oh, sure,” Talia shouted as she threw her hands in the air. “No problem! Happy to help!!”

Lyselle looked concerned. “That *does* sound like a lot. I know it’s just rumors, but if they’re true then how are we supposed to deal with all of that?”

“I’ve accounted for that quite well, I think,” their teacher stated proudly, rolling the paper up into a scroll and using it to point at each of them respectively as he spoke. “Talia’s instincts will keep you two alive, and *your* intellect will make sure you gather the right ingredients, rather than something that could poison and kill the entire class.”

“Oh,” squeaked Lyselle. “No pressure, then.”

“You’re more than capable, I’m certain. That is, provided you’re both up to the task?”

Talia pondered for a moment, her eyes widening as a prospect crossed her mind. “Do I get out of writing that essay you wanted next week?”

“Deal.” Again, zero hesitation.

“A’ight, I’m sold!” Talia’s worries seemed to melt away instantly into an eager enthusiasm, the half-elf doing a little twirl in place and stopping to face her prospective companion. “How about you, Lys?”

“I don’t know...”

“It would be a fantastic opportunity, Miss Alwin,” Evenclire assured. “The task suits your abilities to a T, and I’ll make sure you are both handsomely rewarded for the efforts.”

The Terran gave it thought. *It would be nice to be useful*, she considered. *I’ve never been assigned a task before. And also...*

She looked up at Talia, who gave her an encouraging nudge. Lyselle couldn’t place it, but something in her desperately wanted to spend more time with this girl. Was it simply that the half-elf had been encouraging towards her and her work?

That must be it, she thought, shaking off her doubts and rising to her feet.

“Alright,” she declared, “I’ll do it.”

~2~

A straightforward difference between the cultures of Karna and Terra was that the former was a much less conservative place. Lyselle had gotten *somewhat* used to the behavior of the beings that surrounded her in her new home - the excess skin, the open advances, the public displays and blatant sexuality - but only due to how much of her time she spent with her head down in a book. It was easy enough to seem accustomed to something when you were so focused on ignoring it, even the cultural shock of regularly passing by naked bodies pressed against walls when you yourself were used to being scolded if your skirt was shorter than your knees. As long as she kept to her studies, Lys could block out most of the jiggling and moaning with relative ease.

Today was different, however. Today, Lyselle was in a shockingly casual conversation with Talia Rosenblum - the first friendly conversation with a fellow candidate that she'd had in quite some time. Instead of being fixated on a page, her attention was on the cheerful prattling of her half-elf peer. Her ears were as engaged as any other sense as Talia recounted her favorite moments from the day's presentations.

Consequently, it was the noise that caught Lyselle's attention first, the jingling of jewelry clattering amidst a horrendous sort of wet, gagging choke that rhythmically rose over the pair's pleasant chatter. Second came the widening of Talia's eyes as she looked past Lyselle, a wry grin sliding across her face.

Third was Lyselle's poor decision of following Talia's lead, turning and facing the famed open sexuality of Karnan demons head-on. She froze in her steps, entirely unprepared for the scene unfolding mere inches from her.

Auna sat kneeled against the wall outside the class door, head bobbing against the groin of a very pleased and scruffy satyr boy that was hunched over her. The demoness's already scant clothing had been pulled down to reveal her breasts, her partner gleefully leering down at the exposed porcelain skin while gripping at the long, decorated horns that grew from the back of her head. Lyselle couldn't help but stare at

the display as saliva trailed down the Adorned's face and dripped onto her chest, the spit glistening in the light alongside the patterns of gold that embellished her kind's flesh. Her bust was accentuated by trails of hair swaying over her shoulders like a golden road inviting Lys's eyes to follow it down the demoness's voluptuous body.

The Terran's breath caught in her throat, a strong blush taking over her face, until her trance was broken by a loud snort from Talia.

"Damn, Auna," the half-elf heckled. "Couldn't even make it five feet, huh?"

The Adorned's head tilted back, the dark, meaty shaft she'd been pleasuring springing up out of her mouth with an audible pop. She stroked it with her hand and seemed to appraise it, her amber eyes fixed on their pleasurable prize. "Can you blame me, half-blood? Look at this *meal*."

Auna ran her finger up the boy's cock, parting the drool that clung to it as she bit her lip. She turned at the pair standing over her, eyes lazily trailing from Talia over to Lyselle before giving a mocking chuckle. "What's wrong, Alwin? You look like you've never seen goat dick before."

Lyselle grew even more flustered at the acknowledgement of her staring. "A-ah, w-well, I, uh," she stammered, eyes darting between meeting Auna's gaze and the twitching member in front of her.

The demoness rolled her eyes. "You must not look around much. These boys don't put much effort into hiding their 'toys.'" She leaned over to one side, peering across the hall from behind her partner with a wry grin. "Case in point."

On the other side of the hall another satyr leaned against the wall, clearly attempting to make advances on Melissa as she wrestled with a handful of textbooks she was trying to coerce into a locker. Auna was right; the boy made little effort to hide anything about his intentions. His erection throbbed between his legs, fully exposed and pointed directly towards the lamia, his body language showing confidence that the twitching member spoke for itself.

Though the prominently displayed boner certainly drew Lyselle's initial attention, she found it hard to ignore the lamia's response to it. Mel was doing her best to avoid so much as eye contact as she struggled with books at her locker. She looked distinctly uncomfortable as she

shrunk away from the boy, her tail twitching like a rattle as the satyr stubbornly insisted on striking up conversation.

Someone get her out of there, Lyselle thought. She grabbed at her own blouse, grimacing in frustration.

Someone...? Why not me?

Her legs wouldn't move. She was adept at avoiding confrontation, at ignoring attempts to rile her directly, but found herself frozen in place when the time came to engage with it.

Dammit, Lyselle! Stop being so useless!!

A light wind blew past Lyselle, carrying a scent like lilacs. Talia had begun crossing the hallway towards Melissa, her stride quick but casual, like a friend who was eager to start a conversation, which is exactly what the half-elf did.

"Hey, Mel!"

The lamia jumped, nearly dropping her books in surprise as she looked over her shoulder towards her peer. "U-um, yes??"

Talia gracefully reached out, rebalancing the texts in Mellissa's arms and offering her a cheerful smile. "Are we still on for study buddies tonight?"

The lamia blinked, obviously confused. "Study... buddies...?"

Talia playfully cocked her head to the side, masking an indicative sideways glance towards the satyr as she started helping Mel move her books into the locker.

"O-Oh!" Mellissa perked right up. "That's right!! I almost forgot!"

The half-blood chortled. "That's alright, I know how it is. It's easy to lose track of things after botching it in front of Evenclire. He has a way of crawling right into your head, huh?"

The satyr coughed, legs spread as he leaned into his own arm against the wall. "I think perhaps the lovely lady had something *else* occupying her thoughts...?"

Talia turned to glance down at the still *quite* erect penis protruding in front of her. She frowned. "You mean *that* little thing? I'm pretty sure her mind can handle a lot more at once than that. Mel's a smart girl."

The boy scoffed, dick shriveling like it'd just received a blast of cold air as he turned and stormed away. Talia watched until he rounded

a corner before turning back to Mel and giving a little wink. The lamia smiled at her and silently mouthed her thanks, closing her locker and waving as she went on her own way.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Talia remarked as she returned to the group.

“Speak for yourself,” bemoaned the object of Auna’s attention. “We’re roomies. Bro’s gonna be fuming about that exchange all week.”

“Stop bitching,” Auna barked. “You’re gonna go fucking soft!”
The satyr grinned. “For you? Never.”

These were the last words he said before being reduced to a series of lustful moans by the Adorned’s renewed efforts, the demoness clearly venting her frustrations over being interrupted upon the satyr’s lower head. He was hardly complaining, the boy’s legs trembling underneath him as her lips slipped down to the base of his shaft. Auna’s eyes looked up into his as she slowly slid back up his length, a satisfied smile growing as she let her tongue trail up to his tip before the envigored bobbing resumed.

Lyselle couldn’t tear her gaze away, and would have thought herself rude if not for the demoness glancing at her and tilting her head to an angle that put on a better show. Auna put her neck into it, shoulders and spine swaying as her lips twisted around the satyr’s cock. As rude to Lyselle as she often was, it seemed the demoness no less enjoyed her attention.

Lys’s chest felt tight, her mouth turning dry and her breath heavy. “I can’t believe you’re comfortable just... doing that right here,” she thought out loud.

A deep voice came from the doorway behind them, snapping her back to attention. “I concur, Miss Alwin.”

The Magus had stepped into the hallway, glaring down at Auna. The demoness looked back up at him through the messed-up hair laying across her face, head still bobbing as she slurped away at her shaking afternoon snack, until her teacher’s stare finally persuaded her to pause and release the cock from her mouth.

“F-Fuck,” the boy groaned. “I was so fucking close-!”

Auna pulled her hair away from her eyes, visibly annoyed. “Can I help you, Magus?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Evenclire quipped. “Primarily, you can take these activities elsewhere.”

Auna scoffed. “There’s no rule saying I can’t do it here.”

Evenclire raised an eyebrow as he glared down at her. “Perhaps, but I must *insist*, Miss Leltwick. I’m trying to enjoy my lunch and, to be perfectly blunt, your pleasure toy’s incessant sputtering is making me question the use of mayonnaise on my sandwich today.”

The satyr boy grinned. “Mayonnaise, huh? I could stand to whisk some eggs.”

Auna looked up with a glint in her eye, a mischievous smile growing as her intentions took shape in her mind. “Could you, now? Well, lucky for you, I know just the *loveliest* place for egg whisking!”

The boy chuckled. “Oh, do you? And what will you use for seasoning?”

“I’ve an idea or two...” The demoness rose to kiss her plaything on the lips and took him by the hand. She bit her lip as she said, “Why don’t I show you?”

He didn’t need to be told twice, a spurt of precum shamelessly announcing his excitement at her prospect. Auna pulled at his arm as the two ran down the hallway, giggling and still exposed, with more than one of their peers pausing to ogle the bouncing goods.

“Absolutely foolhardy girl,” Evenclire lamented as he shifted to return to his desk. “Her father would have a fit if he knew.”

Talia chuckled. “That might be just why she does it, boss.”

The Magus sighed. “Perhaps. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve a sandwich to get back to, and you two have your own matters to consider as well.”

Lyselle drew her arms close to her chest. “R-Right.”

The door to Evenclire’s classroom shut, cutting the hallway off from the other room’s windows and the radiant sunlight pouring through them. Lyselle stood nervously in shadow, trying to quell her own uncomfortably lustful thoughts, and still unsure what to make of her assigned mission.

Am I really up for this...?

Talia gave her a smile and a gentle slap on the back. “What do you think, partner? Ready to get going?”

Lyselle shook her head. She *must* have misheard. “W-What?! Already?!”

Talia laughed. “Well, not *immediately*, but we need to get ready, right?”

“It would be beneficial to prepare a few things, yes...” Lyselle recalled the rumors Talia had mentioned in their meeting with the Magus and frowned. “Like a partner for you that won’t just be carnivorous plant bait.”

“Oh, please,” the half-elf mocked. “If anyone’s over-eagerly throwing themselves at dangerous forest creatures, it’ll be me!” She leaned in close and gave Lyselle a little wink. “I like the way they grab at me.”

Lyselle pulled back. “What, like-!?” She choked on her own words, unable to speak the implications out loud. “I-Is that even *ethical*?”

Talia just giggled, urging Lyselle down the hall alongside her with a hand on her shoulder. “If someone’s into it, then why not? It’s all about minding the vibes, Lys!”

“Plants are ‘someone’?” Lyselle was incredulous. “Plants have *vibes*?”

“Well, most don’t,” the elf admitted, “and I wouldn’t recommend trying to seduce those. Some plants are just plants, technically alive but not very strongly opinionated, at least in my experience. They kinda just wanna blow pollen and call it a day.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind.”

“Oh, but I hear giving them a little chat now and then helps them grow! I guess they like that?” She pondered for a moment, her face scrunching up in deep thought, before adding, “Tsk... I’m not a gardener.”

Lyselle rose an eyebrow. “Okay. So let’s say a plant has... ‘vibes,’ as you put it. How do you ‘mind’ them?”

“The same way you would anyone else. Like, uhhh...” Talia scanned the area for a moment, before crying “A-ha!” and pointing to a felkin down the hall. “That one! The cat guy!”

“Okay, I see him. What about him?”

“Take a good look at him,” the elf said as she aimed Lyselle’s head with her hands.

Lyselle tried to humor Talia, soaking in all the detail she could. Felkin were creatures that resembled humanoid cats, and this one in particular was a Greater Felkin – closer resembling a human in proportion and appearance than their Lesser kin – with dark gray fur dotted with small patches of white. He was digging through one of the lockers in the hall, seemingly muttering to himself, though Lyselle couldn't hear anything at this distance.

“Looks like a cat at his locker,” she concluded.

Talia slouched. “Wow, you're gonna need to get better at *that*. Look...”

She started pointing out different features as she named them. “Furrowed brow, talking to himself, has looked under the same book three times now.”

“So... he's lost something?”

Talia gave a quick nod. “Something important, probably. He's a catfolk, so he talks with his tail. If he were just irritated, it'd be twitching, right? But look at it. Just draped on the ground like a sad little worm. Whatever he's looking for, he doesn't think he'll find it.”

Lyselle felt bad for not noticing the felkin's distress on her own. It seemed obvious now that it had been pointed out to her. “Should we... Should we help?”

“No need. You see her?” Talia didn't point this time, instead just gesturing with her eyes.

Lyselle scanned the room, at a loss. “I'm not sure who you're—”

Talia gestured again. “Right there, the nymph girl walking towards him.”

“O-oh,” Lyselle stuttered as she noticed a shimmering green fae approaching the felkin. “She's... very pretty.”

“She's on a beeline. And look at her face!”

Lyselle blushed. “She looks delighted.”

“Right? And she's holding something in her hands. How much you wanna bet it's what catboy there is looking for, hmm?”

True to Talia's estimations, the nymph approached the felkin, getting his attention and holding out her arms. The boy visibly leapt with joy as she handed the object in her hands over – a small and unremarkable pouch to any passive observer – and he embraced her, the forest spirit blushing and grinning from ear to ear in his arms.

“She seems... very happy about this,” Lyselle remarked.

“They’re cute together,” the half-elf stated. “I hope they kiss.”

“Is that a normal thing to hope about strangers...?”

“Gods, I hope so,” Talia said as the pair finally passed the subjects of their discussion on their trek down the hall. “Gray! Thyx! I wanna trap you in a closet together!”

The felkin and nymph both blushed heavily as Talia waved at them, the pair waving back in turn and returning to their own conversation as they walked away.

“Yeah,” Talia added, “they’re totally gonna be a thing.”

Lyselle grabbed Talia by the arm. “Oh my God, you *know* them?!”

The elf shrugged. “We’re acquaintances.”

Lyselle was dumb-struck.

“Anyway,” Talia added, “that’s vibes!”

“Okay.” Lyselle rubbed at her temples, skeptical. “So you can get a good read on people you know. That’s fine, I guess.”

Talia raised her hands behind her head, squinting at her classmate. “You seem less than impressed.”

The Terran shrugged. “It just seems like you may have known some things beforehand, is all.”

“Is that what you think?” Talia stopped walking. “Alright. If that’s how you want to be about it.”

She cracked her neck and proceeded to scan the hallway for a moment, cocking her head with a couple thoughtful hums as she took mental notes. She took a deep breath and smiled back at Lyselle. “Okay, got it.”

Talia took her classmate by the shoulder and started directing her attention to various candidates, speaking quickly and directly as she went. “The guy walking out of class over there looks miserable. Dude’s the last one out – clearly – and he’s not exactly hustling. Just failed a benchmark, I’d wager, so he’s in for a long night of studying, and probably not eager for company given how much he’s avoiding eye contact with anything that’s not the ground. The demon across the hall looking concerned wants to help but doesn’t know what to do. The felkin next to the demon *hates* that he’s paying attention to his sad friend instead of her, and judging by her outfit that’s because she’s

really trying to sell her goods and it just ain't working on her intended target today."

"Wow," Lyselle mustered, just trying to keep up.

Talia continued. "The firebrand with the serious face over by the lockers down there probably got challenged to a duel. Nobody just stares at a wand like that, or at the very least nobody who's confident they've got a fight in the bag."

"Understandable," Lyselle remarked. Duels were typically serious affairs, fights of varying stakes and intention that witches and candidates could call for if they felt their honor - or even just their pride - had been sufficiently challenged by another. Serious injuries were common, and outright death was not unheard of.

Talia carried on. "The imp dancing in the middle of the hallway is clearly just trying to get attention, that's not rocket science, but if you look just past him you can see it's absolutely working on that little honey hiding behind that annoyed Terran's leg. Judging by how confused the human girl looks, I don't think they even know each other; I'd be pretty annoyed too if some half-meter ball of pining started using me as a prop."

"Alright, alright," Lyselle interrupted. "I get it! You're an accomplished people watcher!"

"No," Talia retorted, looking outright offended, "not just *watching*. You wanna pick up on the *vibes*, you need to understand and interpret what you're seeing, to pick up on little clues and nuances. You need to actually make an effort to *understand* people. It's something you get a lot better at when your eyes aren't always glued to a book or the ground."

Lyselle was looking directly upward, face red as a sunset sky. "As opposed to the ceiling?"

"Alright, well, I was trying *not* to bring your attention to the fairies fucking like rabbits up there, but yes, I suppose."

Overhead, a group of small fae had gathered together into a gravity-defying orgy, crawling across the ceiling and each others' bodies with little care or thought for anyone below. Limbs of all colors wrapped around each other, translucent wings fluttering and sparkling shimmering dust that gently lilted over the hall below. The creatures

pleasured each other and moaned as if in song as they bred in prominent display.

Lyselle couldn't stop looking. "Boy, they are... really going at it."

"Yeah," said Talia. "We should probably get out of the splash zone."

Lyselle suddenly found it quite *easy* to stop looking. "The *what!?*"

Talia took Lys by the wrist and led her down a side hall. "Come on, focus! We've gotta get our supplies in order."

"You still haven't explained how to tell if a *plant* has vibes or whatever," Lyselle protested.

"You'll know it when you see it," the half-blood answered, "but what we're looking for *now* is right down here!"

Talia led Lyselle to a nearby dark green door that stood in a dimly lit nook. An old sign with "Excursion Stock" etched into it hung from the mullion. Lyselle looked on as the half-elf opened the door and immediately took to digging through what seemed like little more than an overstuffed closet.

"We're gonna need outdoor gear," Talia said, half-buried in a dusty old crate. "We don't know how long we'll be out there, but I imagine at least a day or two."

"Th-that long?" Lyselle gulped. "Just the two of us?"

Talia sprang out of the box with a musty green satchel in hand. "Did I not say 'at least?' But yeah, just us! Is that bad?"

"N-no, no! It's—" Lyselle could feel herself blushing again, and hoped that Talia's attention would stay fixed on the closet. "S-So what all do we need, then?"

Talia glanced over her shoulder, dashing those hopes immediately. "The usual, mostly. What, you never been camping?"

Lyselle glanced away, too bashful to look the elf in the eyes. "Not since my Dad was around, no."

"Ah, flaky parents?" She was rummaging through items up on a shelf now. "I feel ya, girl. Mine aren't really around anymore either."

"It's not that dad doesn't want to be," Lys barked. "It's just—!"

She paused, having realized that her defensive response had resulted in her reflexively meeting Talia's concerned gaze. She turned away again, ashamed.

"It's complicated," Talia finished for her. "I get it."

Lyselle brushed her own arms with her hands, trying to calm herself down. “I’m sorry. Usually when that comes up, it’s a... less favorable audience.”

“Say no more,” Talia chimed. “Tell you what. You leave the outdoorsy shit to me. Ain’t my first rodeo. I basically grew up in the woods!”

Lyselle peeked back at her. “Are you sure?”

The elf waved her off with a cheery grin. “Oh, totes! Besides, Evenclire’s got us hunting down some rare plants or something, right? That sounds like nerdy book crap, and that is *not* my strong suit.” She wrestled with a box that was attempting to tip off of the shelf and onto her. “So while I do this, the book-smart one – that’s you – can hit up the library or whatever else geeky thing might help to make sure I don’t eat some poisonous murder-berry or something.”

Lyselle chuckled. “The one who grew up in the woods is going to be the one eating a ‘murder-berry,’ huh? What about the plant’s *vibes*?”

Talia managed to get the box down without incident, setting it on the floor with a huff. “Their only vibes were about looking delicious! That’s why keeping my insides intact always wound up being my sister’s job.”

Lys smiled a soft smile, her anxieties over the conversation dissipating. *Alone in the woods? With her...?* She watched the half-elf as she pried open her crate, Lyselle stifling a laugh as a cloud of dust billowed out and into Talia’s face. *Maybe that’ll be okay. She seems easy enough to get along with, if nothing else.*

“Alright,” the Terran agreed, “I’ll handle the book stuff. You focus on making sure we don’t die of exposure.” She started to walk away, paused, turned, and added, “or murder plant.”

Talia gave her a thumbs up. “You stop me from eatin’ them, I stop them from eatin’ you! We’re the perfect team!”

“You bet!”

Lyselle made down the hallway, her step lighter than it had been in a very long time. She wondered if she was finally making a friend at this bizarre school. Talia seemed so cheerful and kind, if a little lacking with regards to her conversational filter. That kind of open honesty had its charm though, and Lys found herself taking quite a liking to it already.

“Oh, and Lyssie,” Talia called down the hall. “One more thing!”
The Terran turned around. “What?”

“You might wanna catch a warm bath before we go. Helrehm knows when our next chance might be.”

Lyselle stopped in her tracks. “A bath, huh?” She closed her eyes and took a breath. “Yeah. You’re probably right. I’ll... do that. After the research.”

“Good plan,” Talia chirped, already disappearing back into the closet with audible rummaging.

“Yeah,” the Terran mumbled. “After...”

And with that, the stubbornly persistent anxieties of Lyselle Alwin returned.

~3~

Lyselle stepped into the brisk night air, warm steam dancing around her heels. The Karnan sky shimmered above her, a meandering cosmic stream of violets and blues flowing past constellations no Terran could recognize. She stared into it, steeling herself under the comforting starlight.

Her assigned task from Talia had gone well enough. The head librarian, an arachnid woman, had been eagerly helpful in guiding Lyselle towards the most beneficial resources, most notably a field guide for identifying the forest's flora and fauna that could be referenced mid-excursion. Said guide paired well with an alchemical reference of her own, a copy she'd been granted by the school at Evenclire's insistence. She'd done some preliminary reading and taken some notes down in a third tome, an initially empty journal that she'd more than half filled with lesson anecdotes, ideas and observations. Amidst her scholarly whiling away of the hours, she'd managed to eat a light meal in her room while waiting for the sun to hide under the horizon. It had been comfortable. Safe.

But now she was *here*.

She sighed nervously, lowering her gaze to scan the surrounding hot springs. The academy had long since employed the steaming pools as its exclusive bathhouse. The school's walls surrounded the springs on all sides, stretching a couple stories overhead with mostly-darkened windows overlooking the bath. A few lit rooms served as a reminder that some of the dorms had a direct view into the space and all of its happenings, but thankfully nobody seemed to be taking advantage of that at the moment. The handful of glowing spaces appeared unoccupied by any prying eyes.

The dark pools that made up most of the springs reflected the night sky beautifully. Other patches gently shone with pastel hues, the earth under their surface laced with gemstones that cast a cool glow up through the rippling waters. Thermal vents bubbled and spat out of rugged rocks scattered around the pools, creating naturally-formed fountains that cooled the liquid to something more tolerable as it ran down them. These were arranged alongside carefully maintained

shrubbery to partition the space into smaller pools, as well as offering a faint sense of privacy to any students that might wish for it.

Lyselle was one such student, feeling utterly exposed wrapped in a towel at the edge of the space. The baths were, like everything else in the school, wholly co-ed, which didn't help her feel any less vulnerable while present. She tried to slink in late at night to avoid having too many eyes on her, but even then there were almost always other candidates who equally favored the evening hours, be it to bathe or simply fool around with less company.

She did a head count; a pair of students were exploring each others' bodies in the corner while a third watched, obviously fondling herself under the surface and being quite vocal about how that was making her feel. The naiad that maintained the springs was laid bare over a large stone, a cerulean-skinned beauty with shimmering white hair. Their feet danced in the air as they smiled mischievously at the open affections happening nearby, clearly enjoying the show themselves before glancing over and seeing Lyselle. The spirit gave a sly wink and cocked its head, quietly motioning towards the back of the baths before gleefully returning their attention to the events happening across from their perch.

Lys clutched tightly to the towel she'd wrapped around her body, her own eyes lingering thirstily on the public display. With a jolt, she shook off her mounting feelings, and quickly crept off in the direction indicated by the water spirit.

What's wrong with me, she wondered to herself. Don't look. Don't listen. Right? Same as always.

Her favored bathing place was a secluded pool in the corner, out of the way and at least *relatively* quiet. The surrounding shrubs and an overhanging tree offered refuge for the bashful, provided the space wasn't being taken advantage of for a midnight rendezvous. The naiad, being an observant sort, was well aware of Lyselle's particular hesitations and preferences, and often signaled to their guest if the space was available on any given arrival to prevent her stumbling into any evening lovers.

Once sufficiently convinced no one was looking, Lyselle dipped her toes into the water, the contrast of the springs' heat against the cool air sending a shiver up her spine. She took in an anxious breath as she

glanced one last time over her shoulder, then, having concluded noone was looking, finally let the towel slip off of her body and down onto the stone floor. A wave of anxiety washed over her, the girl clinging to herself, hiding whatever she could of her own bared skin as she hurriedly dropped into the warm bath to obscure herself under its reflective surface.

I still hate this, she thought as she sat. Lys wrapped her arms around her knees, pulling her legs in to further minimize her visibility. *It's bad enough to be exposed like this when you're not—*

Lyselle tried to expunge the thought before she could finish it. Even ignoring the way that she'd been brought up, how she'd been taught to keep her skin covered and curves hidden, she struggled to accept her own appearance. When her body was out like this, she couldn't help but dwell on all the ways it wasn't what Terran society had called beautiful, and even in Karna she couldn't escape the idea that she was undesirable. She'd left her glasses behind in the dressing room, which made ignoring her own surface-level flaws a bit easier, but she could still feel her own flesh bending and folding around her in places she hated.

She wasn't thin, and the curves she had formed as a result had been scolded as a whorish curse by those who raised her, her hips and chest cited as foul temptations which existed only to get her in trouble with men. She lacked elegance, physically and mentally, wavering between awkward shyness and insatiable interest-driven enthusiasm seemingly regardless of her own wishes, and she knew that caused others to judge her.

And then there's my skin, she bemoaned as she sulked into her freckled knees, trying not to dwell on her freckled shoulders, her freckled face, her freckled hips.

And yet I was chosen to be—

She shook *that* thought off aggressively. That was the last thing she wanted on her mind, *ever*. Those problems were gone and behind her now. She wanted anything else on her mind, *anything*, as long as it wasn't *that*. She stilled herself in the pool, taking a deep breath as she rubbed the water's warmth into her arms to try and silence her thoughts.

It became harder not to focus on the sounds coming from across the space, three moaning voices breaking over the sounds of the bubbling fountains and adding some splashing of their own. The presence of such a gleeful sexual encounter pulled Lyselle's mind back to what she saw when leaving Evenclire's classroom; the bobbing head of the Adorned, the throbbing red meat of that satyr's spit-shone shaft, and the way Auna looked at her, *presented* herself and her prize, like she was putting on a show just for the Terran to see...

Lys balked at her own thoughts. *Why would she want you to see? She hates you, and you're hideous compared to her. She was probably just showing off, gloating.*

The moans grew louder still. The Terran's internal scolding was interrupted by one of the girls crying out her partner's name in orgasmic bliss, and that alone was enough to make Lyselle blush. She'd never known anything like that feeling firsthand. She envied the pleasure, the freedom, the *choice*. She'd spent her adult life fighting to feel those things, and even now, surrounded by them, facing it all as head-on as she could bear in a world she chose to be in, she couldn't bring herself to embrace it. She'd been taught all too well to chase such thoughts and feelings away, and could barely escape her own shame any time thoughts of lust and want crossed her mind.

But "barely" wasn't the same as "never." As rampant and engrained as her shame was, a stronger feeling was overpowering the Terran. Today had simply been too much, and now, hearing the sounds she was hearing, thinking the thoughts she was thinking, she found herself slipping into a breaking point.

Almost subconsciously, Lyselle exhaled and sunk further down onto her back, her face barely breaching the surface, as her hand trailed down from her arm towards the space between her spreading legs.

A part of her panicked, synapses springing to life as her fingers brushed across her groin. *What am I doing? What am I doing!?*

She'd never been so bold before. Lyselle Alwin wasn't one to pleasure herself in her most private of moments, never mind out in the open like this. Her mind always raced to her upbringing, how ashamed she should be to even have these thoughts, how she'd been taught and treated back home.

How I've been treated...

Lyselle's eyes lilted shut as she recalled how Talia had talked to her, how she'd made her *feel* all day. The half-elf's sparkling eyes as she smiled, her confident sway as she walked, the bounce of her perfect—
What!? The Terran's eyes shot open at the realization of what she was thinking about. *I'm not like that! I've never...!*

But her flower ached. It *throbbed*. Whatever her struggles with herself, Lyselle's body certainly had no problems letting her know what it wanted. She pressed into her folds, softly gasping as her fingers rubbed along her tender flesh, touching herself where no one else had.

She couldn't fight off her thoughts, her *urges*. Shame clawed stubbornly at the back of her mind, but its voice was fading into the silent dark, drowned by the sheer depth of Lyselle's needs. *You can't*, she argued in futility. *You shouldn't!*

Her mind wandered towards the image of Auna sucking the satyr's cock, and the shimmering trickle of spit dripping down her chin and into her gold-traced breasts. The flow of saliva begged for Lyselle's gaze to follow the rivulets flowing between those teats, to watch their swaying movements as the demoness's head bobbed over that throbbing, *appetizing* piece of meat.

Lyselle's breath grew hot as she rubbed her own clit, letting instinct take over her mental journey as she fought to keep herself silent.

That cock...!

It was a far raunchier thought than she was accustomed to having, but she found herself envious. She was *craving*. She couldn't help but imagine herself in Auna's position, feeling that shaft slide in and out over her tongue. She started to drool hungrily, her imagination rampaging out of control as the water's heat was barely noticeable compared to what was already running through her body.

Her memories faded deeper into fantasy, a delicate pair of hands wrapping around her exposed body as she tasted the flesh of a man for the first time. Her lips started moving on their own as she imagined it, wordlessly mouthing the name of the latest subject of her lust. The Terran's body started twisting under the water, her legs trembling as a pressure built within her.

Her mind's eye guided her with ease; gentle hands on her bosom, squeezing, caressing, caring. A kiss on her neck as she felt a body press

into her back, skin brushing against skin as the newcomer urged her on. A whisper in her ear goading her to keep going, to finish the boy, to taste his thick, succulent cum and let it run down over her body.

The smell of lilacs and the tickle of violet hair brushing her shoulder.

“Talia...!”

Lyselle didn't have time to process the name leaving her lips as her body tensed, seizing as she buckled, her head dipping below the water as her back arched in spasmodic rhythm. The fight against inhaling the hot bathwater somehow made her experience even more intense, air catching in her throat as she forcefully came into the springwater, her hips nearly breaching the surface as they bucked longingly against the unrelenting pressure of her own touch.

Her eyes clenched shut against her will as waves of pleasure washed over her, a series of aftershocks running up her spine and sending trails of air bubbling to the surface as she uncontrollably moaned. Then, finally, as a new warmth washed over her, she went limp, resting a moment there under the water, swimming both in body and mind.

Then, after a moment of piece, a singular conscious thought:
What did I say...?

The shame came roaring back, louder than ever. Lyselle bolted upright, breaching the surface with a gasp. Her wet hair draped over her face as she leaned forward, catching her breath as she processed what she'd done.

She lifted her head to look around. Still alone. If anyone had heard her, they hadn't come to investigate. At least she had that.

The Terran pressed her head into her hands as she shrank back down into the water, once again curling into a ball, though a much more red and shame-addled one than before.

“What was that,” she muttered into her own palms.

Lyselle wasn't sure what to think. Lusting after men would've been enough to get her beaten back home, so that was bad enough. But women? She'd have been lucky if that's all they'd done! And both at once! The thought had never even crossed her mind!

She couldn't help but wonder, was Karna changing her? Or had this been within her all along, buried, suppressed by her family and

fellowship? A part of her simply believed that she was pathetic enough to fall for someone, *anyone*, who even feigned treating her with respect, regardless of her inclinations. That would certainly prove some people back home right.

Her arms embraced her legs tightly as she sought some comfort, rationally knowing that her shames were taught, that none of this was needed. *I'm not there anymore*, she reminded herself, trying to chase away the encroaching fear and memories. *They can't hurt me here. I'm allowed to—!*

Tears ran down her face. She felt absurd. She was *angry*.

This is Karna, she thought. *This isn't like home!*

She tried to still herself once more, but only managed to settle into quietly rocking in place as she fought to ground herself in the world around her, to come back to where she was. The bubbling water, the sounds of the forest outside the school, the gentle breeze...

The ongoing fucking loudly happening a few meters away.

Lyselle sighed. *Right. It's okay. You're allowed to want here. You're allowed to feel these things. It's okay.*

She shakily eased herself back, laying against the rocky edge of the pool once more, deriving a strange comfort from the whorish sounds she could hear from across the space. As odd as she felt admitting it, the moans and slaps sounded to her like a reassuring chorus: *You are here. You don't have to hide yourself. Nobody does.*

There was a sort of peace in that, even if it kept feeling like an uphill battle in the guise of solace. She looked down at her body again, grimacing once more at her own shape and speckled skin. She was so imperfect, so *broken*, inside and out.

And yet you dare to want her attention?

She scolded herself; she didn't want to, yet she did. She was frustrated, confused. She'd spent two years in this world, two years away from home, and yet she still couldn't shake off that place's influence over her. She still struggled to *know* herself. Were these feelings real? Was she really lusting after a woman?

Hell, two women! And they're classmates! All while thinking about doing that, no less! Doing that while Talia...!

She ran her hands back through her hair with a quiet, overwhelmed groan. *It doesn't matter*, she thought. *It was just a fantasy. It*

wasn't real! And I don't deserve that, anyway! She's gorgeous. She's perfect! I look like a mangy dog next to her! Why would someone like that ever want someone like me...?

Her arms fell back into the water as she looked up at the sky, watching the dancing current of midnight hues overhead. It had always struck her as brilliant, a calming and consistent evening presence that she could never have even dreamed of back on Earth. The glittering shimmer of magic and starlight swirled overhead, a cosmic parade of celestial jewels that both helped calm the Terran and left her pining.

I wish I could be as beautiful as the stars, she yearned.

There were all sorts of creatures in Karna, and even a spectacular range just within the different races of demon. From the Adorneds' golden trails to the Firebrands' ember-lit cores, Lyselle found something to envy about them all. She couldn't say with any certainty if it would make her any more confident in herself, but if she could choose to wake up one day as any one thing, she knew exactly what she'd want.

There was one breed of demon that reminded her of the shimmering heavens above, and the one she'd met was an elegant creature in ways she herself could only dream of even poorly impersonating. Lyselle had met her right after seeing the glistening Karnan sky for the first time, and the creature's beauty was hardly the only thing the Terran had come to admire.

Stepping through the portal into Base 16 was a surreal experience. At a glance, not much had changed; you stood in a queue, stepped through the outwardly unimpressive gate, and stood in a queue some more. The gate itself looked like little more than an unusually large steel door that was set into a wall that partitioned its housing hangar in two. That gate, however, had been built to stabilize a pathway between two worlds: the one Lyselle had called home, and the demon realm she was now supposedly standing in.

The base around the gateway had been constructed deliberately to provide a seamless transition; there were no windows facing outside, and the rooms on either end felt like a part of one whole. It would be easy to believe you were still standing on American soil, that you'd

simply walked through a doorway like any other. The act of crossing realities physically impacted participants about as much as walking through a typical door frame.

Lyselle filled out her paperwork and waited for the various official stamps and seals needed for her passport, which she'd applied for the night she turned eighteen. She'd acted on her own, hiding her intentions from her family and striking out in the dead of night, boarding a train with a ticket paid for in cash and riding out the last leg of her journey by bus. She felt a pang of guilt while standing in line, but never a shred of doubt; she *had* to run. There wasn't any other option left.

As the last stamp of approval secured her escape from American territory, Lyselle was hit with a wave of relief. She had no direction, no plan except to get away, but she had *done* it. She strode down the wide steel hall towards the base's exit with excitement, worried she would wake up from this dream at any moment. She broke into a light jog, passing by other travelers as she ran; businessmen, politicians, tourists. Families. A hint of sadness crossed her mind as that thought hit her, but it didn't matter. It couldn't.

Dust kicked up under her feet as she practically sprinted through the base's gates. She skid to a stop and looked up at the evening sky – the shimmering violets and blues she would soon come to love – and twirled in place, laughing with relief as her green jacket fluttered around her.

She looked back over her shoulder, unable to believe she'd really done it. The base loomed over her like an iron-clad monument to a life she desperately aimed to leave behind, like a nightmare casting shade over her dream. She was a refugee who'd fled to a foreign world with nothing but the clothes on her back and a small bag, without so much as a plan beyond self-preservation, to the one place she knew anyone who would pursue her wouldn't *dare* go. She'd acted on hearsay out of desperation. She'd barely been able to plan ahead more than it took to get here. She knew she was a fool.

And she was *free*.

She smiled as her breath steamed in the cold night air. She giggled as her shoes left marks in the red dust under her feet, and gasped when she saw a fairy and an imp bickering on the side of the

road. The tongue was foreign to her, but Lyselle couldn't help but stare a moment as the creatures carried on with their heated argument. Every little detail around her made things feel more real.

The military base clearly wasn't new; a small trading town had formed around its gates. The road was lined by merchant stalls with signs written in a multitude of tongues. Many had English scrawled on them somewhere in an attempt to accommodate Terran travelers, often with broken grammar or misused words, but signs reading things like "MEAL" or "GIFT BUY" did their job well enough.

The hour was late, and the road dark. The light of the night sky danced over the roofs of the market, with most of the businesses shuttered for the day. A lone food cart stood lit alongside the quiet stalls, the warm light of a strange lantern illuminating a cheerful humanoid hydra as he served up plates of meat and grain to hungry late-night travelers. His three heads barked orders at each other and coordinated the preparation of their meals with shocking fluidity and charisma in spite of only working with two hands.

Lyselle's mouth watered as the food's smell wafted over the trading hub. She had little to her name, her earthly tender traded for a small pouch of the jewels Karnans used as currency. She stowed the pouch into her travel bag, which she'd slung over her shoulder; she couldn't afford to take chances on her budget until she found somewhere to stay. She was left to repress her stomach's growling demands and push onwards toward the outskirts of the town.

The roads were empty. Most other travelers had taken to an inn for the night, which Lyselle considered herself until she saw the prices, often scrawled in numerals she had to look up in a pocket guide she'd picked up on the run. She'd hoped to find something more accommodating to her limited budget off of the main path, wandering the settlement's fringes until she came to a rustic wooden building that shot firelight across the street like a welcoming beacon of warmth in the increasingly cold night. A small gathering could be heard talking the evening away within.

Lyselle rubbed at her chilled arms and made her way to the door, hoping to get out of the cold, even if she found she could afford nothing else. She stepped onto the small porch protruding from the establishment and reached for its shoddy wooden door, which barely

clung to its hinges but still served its duty as a barrier against the elements. The closer she got, the less reputable the establishment seemed, but she was running out of options.

You're on your own now, Lyselle, she thought to herself. You're going to have to learn to be brave in times like this.

And that's when she got struck from behind.

Lyselle woke bleary-eyed to the world rumbling around her. She shook her head, trying to remember what had happened. The dull ache on the back of her head served as a ready reminder, and her arms weren't faring much better; with a weak tug, she'd quickly found that her wrists had been tightly bound behind her. Her bag and jacket were missing, the Terran reduced to her t-shirt and worn down jeans, both covered in the orange dust of Karna's earth like she'd been drug across the ground.

Her eyes adjusted to the dim light available to her as she tried to take in her surroundings. Lyselle's aching body was less than eased by the rattling and shaking of her enclosure, but amidst the jostling of the small space she managed to pull herself together enough to identify a handful of different creatures. Some had been lined up on benches along either wall, Lyselle included, while a small number had been left sitting across the space's rumbling floor, provided they were upright at all. Several looked injured, and among those who were conscious there was a resounding sense of fear and sorrow.

A strange, fuzzy-looking young girl sat across from Lyselle, bound tightly in rope and audibly sobbing. A pair of whiskers hung over each of her large, tear-soaked eyes, and a set of almost cat-like ears drooped miserably over her shoulders. Tufts of pale fur draped out of the ears, framing her face as she sulked. Extra attention had clearly been paid to tying the girl's arms compared to the other occupants, her forelimbs strong enough in appearance to be imposing well before one noticed the long set of claws jutting out from their furry ends. The rope around them was tied in layers, as if her captors couldn't settle on how much was enough. In the thing's present pitiful state, however, Lyselle couldn't conceive of the poor creature being much of a threat.

A Terran man, roughly Lys's own age, was sitting next to the weeping girl with visible contempt. He wore a plain leather jacket over a faded and stained graphic tee, and looked generally scruffy and ill-kempt all around; the sort of boy Lys would typically find deeply uninteresting in any normal situation, but had now caught her attention by merit of being the only person present whose limbs

appeared to be free. Hewas doing his best to ignore his neighbor's emotional display while staring out the back of the tent-like space through an opening in the wall beside them.

Lyselle followed his gaze through the thin slit in the fabric, and quickly realized why everything seemed to be shaking around them. Whatever company she'd found herself in, they were on the move. A trail of dust kicked up behind the rickety vehicle transporting them, with little of interest to see beyond the odd wilted shrub shrinking over the horizon.

"Ku ju?"

She turned, startled. A cloaked figure sat next to her, as bound as the rest of the seeming trailer's occupants. She hadn't understood what it said to her.

"Pardon...?"

"Ah," the figure answered. Its voice was breathy, calming. It paused for a moment, thinking. "...Terran. English, yes?"

"Y-yes, that's right," Lyselle sputtered, leaning to look up into the stranger's hood.

The gaze of three luminous blue eyes looked back at her, alien but gentle in their expression. The figure looked her up and down, then sighed. "And a visitor, no less?"

Lys looked down at her feet, tied as much as her arms were, though she noticed at least they'd left her shoes on her feet. "I was... *hoping* for something a little more permanent, but..." She looked around the space again, her eyes now fully adjusted to the light, and found herself unable to deny how devoid of hope her company appeared. "I don't think that's going to work out quite how I'd hoped."

"Hmm," the figure hummed, surveying the enclosure themselves. It sat hunched forward, making its exact size difficult to gauge, but even still the hood of its cloak nearly scraped against the cloth ceiling overhead. "I cannot imagine that this is what most would desire."

The Terran sitting across from them sneered, raising his hands behind his head in a cocky display of freedom. "Speak for yourselves. I'm getting *exactly* what I want out of this deal."

Lyselle was baffled by his declaration. "W-What do you mean?"

“Seriously?” The young man rolled his eyes, waving his hands at her as he spoke. “There’s only one reason to come to this weird-ass Halloween land. I came here to get *laid*, red!”

“Well, *I* most certainly didn’t,” Lys protested. “And why aren’t you tied down?”

The robed figure seemed to sneer under its shroud. “Because he *sold* himself,” it huffed dryly.

“Damn right I did,” the boy boasted with a prideful grin, puffing out his chest in a display of more confidence than sense. “It was a no-brainer! They trot me up on stage, show me off, and some demoness likes what she sees so much that she drops *money* on having me as a plaything!? What’s not to love?”

“Quite presumptuous,” the cloaked figure mocked. “There’s plenty of folk who would pay a high price for the tender meat on your bones. ”

The boy’s bravado melted away in an instant. “What, like... Like *eating* meat?”

“Or something else entirely.” One of the eyes glowing from under the cloak winked at him. “Or did you think all that would be interested in you were the lithe little soul-layers modeling for your photographers? I’ve met more than one oni *guga* that would gleefully bend you over their beds.”

“*Ew!*” The boy sulked into his dusty jacket. “W-Whatever! It’s not like some *guy* would want anything to do with me anyway!”

The figure sighed again. “What’s done is done, even by a fool. You’ll be bought, for some purpose or other, and for far less than any life is worth.”

Lyselle had begun to understand, to her despair. “Are we... Are we *all* to be bought?”

The cloaked figure nodded solemnly. “It would seem so,” they answered.

The state of the fellow captives under the whitetop was more than understandable to Lyselle now. It was dire enough that they’d been abducted by some unseen aggressor, but to be *sold*...

They can’t! Lys fought back tears as memories of the home she’d fled raced through her mind. *Why!? Why can’t I just be free!?*

The girl across from her sputtered and choked on her own sobs, her head sunken into her own thick-clawed hands. They barely reached her face thanks to the ropes binding her.

The figure was solemn, turning its attention to the crying creature and offering words of comfort in a language Lyselle didn't understand. The furry girl nodded back, trying to rein in her sobs as she looked over to Lyselle, who was still stifling tears of her own.

The robed creature leaned back, giving a greater sense of its true height as it looked up at the ceiling and took a breath. They towered over the rest of the cabin, even sitting down, their head pressing up against the fabric overhead as the being sat with their own thoughts for a long moment.

Finally, it looked back down to Lyselle, addressing her once more in English. "Something horrid has taken root in the Southlands: a trade of life and will. I believe your kind calls this a 'black market?'"

"Of life and will?" Lyselle thought for a moment. "Some sort of slave trade?"

The shrouded being looked up in thought once again, absorbing the words. "'Slave'... Yes, that seems right."

Lys frowned. "I thought Karnan law put autonomy above all else. Isn't slavery about as far from that as it gets?"

"Karnan law puts *Ke'* above all, if this is what you mean," the figure answered, "and yet here we are."

A low, frustrated growl could be heard creeping into their tone. They lowered their head and took a deep breath, shoulders heaving under its cloak. "This should not stand. Something must be done."

The boy looked at her incredulously. "Like what? Do you even know where they're taking us, weirdo?"

"I do not." Their gaze rose to look at the boy. "Do you?"

He shifted in his seat, his eyes nervously avoiding contact with the three boring back into him. "I mean, I have... *some* idea. They said some things while I signed some papers."

The figure leaned in, squinting at the increasingly restless Terran across from it. Its voice deepened into a gravelly rumble as it spoke. "Perhaps *share*."

The formerly proud lad seemed to age ten years under the being's scrutiny. Sweat beaded across his brow as his eyes darted around the

wagon, the creature's fierce glare easily triggering his fight or flight instincts.

It took hardly a second for him to cave. "W-We're just headed to some merc city in the wastes! Real outta-th'-way-type place! Guess they have a nice auction house or somethin'."

The figure's head tilted, its vocal tone barely relenting. "What is a 'merc city?'"

"Wha-?" He clearly hadn't expected such an intimidating figure to so quickly need clarification. "You know, like... *hired guns!* Strongarms! Tough guys! Real violent sorts!" He pantomimed firing a rifle into the air. "*Mercenaries!*"

"Ah. *Bik bilara.*" It nodded, voice easing back to normal as it leaned back into its seat. "I understand now."

"Ya do?" The boy settled back against the wall, trying to look cool in spite of himself. He was not succeeding, his posture having shrunk down into a still-shaky ball as he scooted himself as far as possible onto the edge of the weathered bench he'd been sat on. "Well then you know how hosed anyone trying to get in uninvited would be! It'd take a whole *army* to deal with this lot!"

"Question." Something was eating at Lyselle, and she couldn't hold her tongue any more. "What did you do when you saw the others in here?"

"Eh?" The young man sat up and squinted at her, trying to figure out the girl's angle. "They weren't here yet, really. I was pretty much the first."

Lyselle tensed against her binds. "And when they arrived? Did you just sit there and *watch* as they brought in unconscious victims? Did you just *ignore* what was happening? The people left bleeding on the floor!? The ones waking up in despair!? A *crying little girl!*?"

"Well, what was I s'posed to do!?"

"*Something,*" Lyselle barked, body shaking as she strained against her bonds. "She's a *child!*"

Said child winced at Lyselle's outburst alongside half the other occupants, looking from Lyselle to the boy and back again before turning to the cloaked figure across from her. The being simply observed, head only turning from the scene when a banging came from

behind the front wall alongside a voice angrily shouting in a Karnan tongue at the cargo.

The boy grinned cockily. "You'd best keep it down, ugly. Pretty sure they cut the tongues off of mouthy brats like you."

Lyselle's glare at her fellow Terran could have boiled water. Binds be damned, she was about to lunge at a fool.

"Be calm," came the voice next to her, the cloaked figure finally intervening. "Help will come."

"Well, *someone* ain't listening," protested the man. "Did you not hear the bit about all the mercenaries?"

"I heard."

The boy laughed. "So who's gonna save ya? Santa Claus?"

The figure's head cocked again. "What is a 'Santa Claus?'"

The Terran's face danced through a number of frustrated contortions. "Just forget it," he huffed, turning back to resume watching the terrain laze by under them.

The wagon continued on in relative silence, the rumbling of the dirt under its wheels interrupted only by intermittent sobs and sniffles from its distraught occupants. Lyselle sat, still fuming, her eyes burning into the boy as he made every effort to ignore her.

People like you are why I've always been trapped, she seethed. *Just ignore it, right? It's none of your business?*

"Asshole," she spit out under her breath.

The figure next to her sat still. There was a calming air around its presence, though Lyselle couldn't quite place why that was.

"*Help will come*," she remembered. But the boy seemed so confident that wasn't possible. Did the figure know something they didn't?

As that thought crossed Lyselle's mind, the sounds of some alien sort of animal screeched in a pair as the wagon rattled to a stop. The angry voices from the front started shouting in earnest now, and within seconds a clawed hand tore the back flaps of the enclosure open, flooding the space with harsh sunlight and blinding most of the people within.

The passengers were roughly coerced out and ushered into single-file by two tall, rough-looking demons. The Karnan sky overhead was cast in a radiant yellow that beat down across the orange

sand underfoot. The heat was equally merciless, and it quickly became apparent that the victims had been carried out into a desert.

One of their captors leered down at them, a towering lizardman, his body coated in rugged scales and scars. All Lyselle could clearly make out of the creature's face against the backdrop of the relentless sun was the glare of his judgemental amber eyes. His was the voice that had shouted from the front of the wagon, and he was no more kind here. The reptile held tightly to the handle of a whip, cracking it overhead as he barked orders in what Lyselle believed to be the Demonic tongue.

Standing nearby, shaded under a tarp draped over a set of shoddily-assembled poles, was another man. He was a stout, gap-toothed Terran, a thoroughly shady character whose smile seemed to be as much metal as bone, glints of gold shimmering in the sun as he smiled a wide, toothy grin. He wore a wide-brimmed hat, though it did little to distract from the sunken eyes with which he watched the group get lined up before him.

The captives stood in front of the wagon, and in broad daylight Lyselle could see just how poorly some of her involuntary companions were faring. The vehicle's shady interior had provided a flattering service, masking the bruises and dirt that decorated most of her peers' skin, many of the marks looking too fresh to not have been inflicted by the men lording over them now. She winced, grimly reminded of the sore patch on the back of her own head from the night before.

The Terran did her best to follow orders, despite the language barrier. The boy from the wagon laughed at her as she staggered behind the rest of the group, struggling to keep her captors' ire at bay through the fine art of imitation.

The lizard-man would shout something, the group would act upon it, and if she was lucky Lyselle would pick up on the instruction before he'd take to barking at her directly. Lyselle hadn't had much chance to study her Demonic beyond glancing at a phrasebook in her now-confiscated travel bag. The language selection she'd covered wasn't going to be of much help to her anyway, though it did allow her to pretty confidently assess that her captors weren't asking where the nearest restroom was.

Her present circumstances, despite what they were, proved to be an excellent learning opportunity. Certain instructions were hollered

more often than others, and she'd gleaned quick enough that they were under some manner of assessment.

"*Iltko*," the reptilian barked. Lys had figured out that one meant something akin to "turn."

"*Vejit*," came another order. He'd shouted it at several of his captives as they came off of the wagon, Lyselle included. She was fairly certain it was a command to march.

The man in the hat watched them intently, muttering to a demon next to him that would in turn take notes in a leather-bound notebook. As Lyselle proved her adaptability, his attention had turned to her directly, the facade of his sinister grin melting away into curiosity as she proved herself a quick study. Lys tried not to pay him too much mind, which was easy enough when any deviation from the lizardman's orders would gain her his more hostile attentions.

The fuzzy girl who'd sat across from her on the wagon was also doing her best to keep pace, though she struggled far more, stumbling disorientedly through the loose sand underfoot. The desert's harsh glare seemed far too much for the poor thing's eyes, which were squinted down to thin lines any time they weren't shut outright. Each crack of the reptile's whip had her recoiling in fear, regardless of who it was meant for. Two thick strands of hair on the top of her head seemed to be moving and scanning the environment around her like a pair of thinly-disguised antennae, though Lys wasn't sure what the appendages were accomplishing.

The cloaked figure that had sat beside Lyselle now stood in the center of the forced formation, the ropes around its arms doing little to diminish its proud stature. It stood tall enough over the others that it could look the towering reptoid in the eye. The three azure beacons looking out from under its robe glowered with contempt at any of the working men who crossed into its line of sight, but the being followed their orders with perfect obedience all the same.

The stout man's eyebrows raised as he looked the figure over. He finally spoke as he stepped out from the shade, addressing her with a thick drawl that made Lyselle think of a shady used car salesman.

"Well, now, that one's interesting," he remarked with a whistle. "What's *your* story, big girl?"

The creature didn't say a word in response, its eyes only narrowing as it stared down the Terran.

The man motioned to have the creature's hood removed. The lizardman nodded at his coworker's command and, with little more than a grunt of distaste, tore the fabric mantle back from its owner's unresisting head.

Curled white locks fell over the creature's shoulders like alabaster fire. Its eyes shone even under the desert sun, though that same star did little to illuminate its intensely dark violet-hued skin, nor the pair of thorned horns weaving through its hair from above its pointed ears to around the back of her head.

"Well, I'll be!" The man's eyes went wide as his attention turned to the reptilian. "An Abyssal, Carl? How in the hell'd you pull *that* off?"

The lizard – "Carl," though Lyselle somehow doubted that was his given name – huffed. He spoke slowly through a thick accent, clearly less than adept with his partner's tongue. "Sssame as always."

"The ol' 'howdy-do,' then." The Terran chuckled as he began sauntering towards the group with a considerable limp. He hummed and cooed delightedly as he scanned down the lineup before him up close, going so far as to grab the faces of some of the girls within reach to look them over at eye level.

"And two Terrans, to boot!" His grin was wide as his attention trailed from the college boy over to Lyselle.

Her skin crawled as their eyes met. She did not grin back.

"Y'know," he continued undaunted as he hobbled up beside her, "a fella like me, out here in no man's land... sometimes we need us a taste a' home. And you..." He ran a hand over Lyselle's side as he bit his lip. "Well, you look like a mighty fine treat. You get me, honey?"

It took every fiber of Lys's self-control to not kick the scoundrel square between the legs. This left very little resolve left to fight her secondary urge to step back, an act which promptly saw the lizard knocking her to her knees on the ground.

The man leered down at her, the sun throwing his shadow over Lyselle's body like an eclipse of hope. His toothy expression had barely changed as he chuckled down at her. "Careful, darlin'. Carl don't take well to disrespect."

He snapped his fingers. The lizardman grabbed Lyselle by the back of her neck and lifted the girl to her feet. His grip clawed at her nape, forcefully holding her to attention before the Terran.

The man's gaze did not rise at quite the same speed as she had, instead traveling hungrily up her body before looking her in the eye. "Now, girlie, I'd recommend you play nice. You wouldn't want to be left behind after the biddin'." His eyes traveled back down, lingering on her bust and hips. "Not that I'd *mind* being left to break in such a delightful feast for the eyes as y'self until you're properly ready for sale. I *love* trainin' you *feisty* little things."

Lyselle struggled not to cry. The compliments of men always seemed to come with violating implications; she'd gotten more than enough of this kind of attention back home. She made every effort to remain stone-faced, a decision that was thoroughly tested despite her experienced resolve, as the man pulled a large knife out of a holster he kept on his belt.

Lys inhaled sharply as he brought the knife up to her chest, pressing it into the fabric of her shirt between her breasts.

"On the *note* of the biddin', you won't sell for *shit* like this." He looked up past her at the beast grabbing her neck. "Keep her still, Carl."

The lizard huffed, its already firm grip tightening even further down into her shoulders. Lyselle tensed, teeth gritting with pain as his claws dug into her skin, which worked out perfectly for the Terran man. With the fabric over Lyselle's bust as taught as it would ever get, he pressed the knife's tip up into her shirt, catching under the base of her bra, and swiftly cut the fabric open up to her neck with an ease that suggested extensive practice.

Lyselle fought back her emotions as her breasts burst out from her severed brassiere. The torn front of her shirt barely kept her decent as her fruit strained against its fabric. Her eyes clenched shut as she tried to hold herself together, holding back tears as the shady man whistled in approval. The other Terran from the wagon hooted and clapped in approval.

"Now, y'see?" The stout man's hand brushed up her stomach, wrapping up under one of the swaying teats to give it a lecherous squeeze. "That's *much* better. Freckled, too! Them big ol' things'll fetch

a fair bit a' coin, I reckon!" He chuckled. "Maybe I *shoulda* kept you under wraps fer m'self!"

His eyes trailed back over her body one more time as he turned to walk away. "Ah, well, I've got time to consider that decision." He waved his hand to the side, motioning to his underling. "You know what t'do, Car! Oh, and *do* get that underthing off of her, yeah? Not like it's accomplishing anything now besides obstructin' the goods."

The lizard simply grunted in affirmation, unceremoniously reaching its and down the back of Lyselle's shirt and tearing the remains of her bra off of her body. The straps over her shoulders snapped like they were nothing, a faint sting lingering against the Terran's skin where their short-lived resistance had dug into her.

She broke. Despite Lyselle's efforts to maintain her stoic expression, tears had begun flowing down the poor girl's cheeks. She was mortified. She was scared. She was *furious*.

Carl's grip had abated, the creature moving to stand at the front of the line. He cracked his whip over the group once more and shouted his order. "*Vejit!*"

The captives began moving forward, whether Lyselle was ready or not. Her hands still bound behind her, Lys shook her head in an attempt to jostle the tears out from her eyes so she could at least see the road ahead.

They were led through a disorganized encampment, marching towards a relatively large structure at its center. Everything present seemed temporary by design; tents lined roads that seemed largely defined by happenstance, and tarps had been draped between the structures to shade the travelers underneath from the merciless sun.

Lyselle felt exposed, sensing the eyes of countless demons and creatures leering at her half-revealed assets as they hung freely from her chest. The loose fabric of her torn shirt did little more than tease any wanting eyes with hints of the bouncing curvature underneath. She felt like a piece of meat hung out for starved hounds.

As the group filed past a food vendor working a line of sizzling woks, her fretting was amended by her growling stomach. The smells and sounds teased her as the captives were paraded deeper into the settlement's maze-like arrangement of ramshackle shanties. Her last meal had been more than a day ago, and the aroma of fresh food had

triggered her stomach to make its feelings on the lack of nourishment abundantly clear.

She whimpered hungrily as an ogre stomped by eating a chunk of grilled meat that could've sated her own stomach several times over. AS the beast's teeth dug into the tender flesh, its juices dripped down into the sand underfoot, and Lyselle found herself envying the earth as her guts growled in need.

"Ibeni orazi?"

The furry girl had turned to whisper over her shoulder. The tarps overhead seemed to have allowed her to open her eyes a bit further, though they still looked agitated by the daylight.

Lys couldn't understand the girl's statement, but she didn't have to. The creature twisted her wrists in the ropes that bound her, turning her long, powerful claws outwards. The pair of antennae on her head were scanning their trail as they moved, like an ant sniffing around for a picnic.

A red demon came out from another stall, drunkenly walking across the trail in front of the group with a cluster of freshly acquired kabobs hanging loosely in his inebriated grip. He stopped and turned to heckle one of the girls in the front of the line, leering at several of the captives before turning his attention back to the road and hobbling past them.

He walked by the girl in front of Lyselle and, in one surprisingly dexterous motion, her rough claw caught under a sizeable piece of fresh meat dangling from the swinging kabob and lifted the steaming snack off of its perch undetected.

Through it all, she kept facing forward. Lyselle could barely believe this was the same girl who'd been bawling her eyes out on the ride in, though the stained streaks running down her spotted face reassured the Terran that she hadn't been imagining things. Despite it all, her peer was doing their best to stay strong.

Is she trying to be reassuring for me? Lys sniffled, trying to recompose herself. *Surely, if this one can put on a brave face, then I can too.*

The girl wiggled her long claw up as best she could, though it still barely reached Lys's waist. *"Ferro. Kibisho'."*

The Terran could guess at the meaning of that well enough. She did her best to think quickly, feigning a stumble over a rock in the

loosely-defined “road” as her cover to lean down and get the girl’s offering into her mouth. It was the first thing to go in Lyselle’s favor since she’d left the American base, and she was thankful she got away with it as the tender flesh practically melted in her mouth without catching the unwanted attention of their captors.

She let out a quick exhalation of relief as she returned her posture to normal. “Thanks.”

“Go’ ogre,” the girl responded with a soft smile. She looked as tired as Lyselle felt, but quickly returned to orderly posture and held her pace with the rest of the group. Lyselle would’ve been utterly convinced by the girl’s brave face, if only her body language had matched up to any of it; the moment of confidence and skill had passed in favor of ears drooping over drawn-in shoulders, and the hands that had so skillfully fetched something for the Terran to eat just moments before were now anxiously fidgeting in their binds.

Ahead of them, Lyselle could see the Abyssal’s figure towering over her peers, back straight and eyes forward. The demoness hadn’t flinched once at the cracking of Carl’s whip, nor when her cloak was pulled back against her will. She stood tall through all of it, a beacon of strength, heads turning to observe her as they passed on their trek.

The structure at the grounds’ center soon stood before them. A large pair of stone doors served as its gate, guarded on either side by a pair of muscular figures whose statures made even the Abyssal look small. At a glance, Lyselle estimated them to be easily twice her own size – giants by any right. They were a pair of hairy men, beige-skinned, with only one pair of eyes between them. With a nod from Carl, they moved to open the heavy doors as the prisoners were ushered in.

No sooner had the last member of the involuntary march crossed over the threshold than the doors sealed shut behind them. The room was large and dark. Dim torches hung from haphazardly placed posts that seemed to hold up the rickety ceiling only through the experience of trial and error, but their light did not reach far. Even still, it was clear that this place had been constructed as flimsily as the rest of the encampment.

Lyselle had barely begun to grasp her surroundings when the lizard shouted a new order.

She didn't even have time to try and parse what he'd said; in an instant, captives began to cry out, a slew of streaking shadows rushing into the line and dragging prisoners away, one by one, out of the light. The wailing of prisoners was nearly the only sound; the dark forms kicking through the sand glode through the room silently, eerily, and without relent.

The furry girl in front of Lyselle backed up into her, whimpering and shaking, her eyes darting around the dim room in terror. Lys realized that the girl could *see*. Whatever was assailing them, the creature's eyes followed it, her feet stepping to this side and that, and she was using her weight to try and push Lyselle out of the thing's line of fire as well.

Her efforts wouldn't hold. As the captives dwindled in number, more and more of the dark forms focused on Lyselle and her companion, kicking up dust as they skid across the sand around them. Further, Carl had noticed their resistance, and marched towards them with a glare made all the more menacing by the torchlight dancing in his amber eyes.

His whip cracked. The girls' footing faltered, sending both to the ground. Before the impact had even knocked the breath from Lyselle's lungs, the dark forms had grabbed at them both, cold and slick, and pulled them away into the dark with terrifying speed.

They shrieked as dust kicked up from under their dragging bodies, the noiseless captor hauling them across the chamber towards a line of crates. Before either girl could resist, they were flung into a cage, backs slamming against its bars as a metal door slammed shut behind them.

Lyselle pushed herself up from the ground, grimacing in pain. From the cage, the shadows could be made out to be long tendrils writhing through the dark, grabbing and lifting the other captives and forcing them into crates and cages. Whatever they belonged to seemed to be the warden of what she assessed to be their perfunctory jail.

Or a shoddy kennel for livestock, Lys thought.

The crates were arranged loosely into rows with makeshift halls left between them for guards and clients to roam. The floor was as much loose sand as the roads outside, the footfalls and trails of previous

guests and captors left imprinted upon it as a grim reminder that the captives were never alone.

The other girl shook on the floor, crying again. A light trickle of dark blood dripped from her shoulder, the rough metal bars having cut into her during impact. Lyselle couldn't imagine she wasn't at least bruised herself, though with her arms bound in the dark all she could really ascertain was that her glasses were crooked on her face. She was thankful that was all that had befallen them, or she wouldn't have much need to complain about the lack of light regardless.

From around the corner, Carl personally ushered the Abyssal into a cage nearby. The demoness offered little resistance, even if her expression, glowing intensely in the shadows, was one of seething disdain. The lizard pushed her down onto her knees to fit her into his prison of choice. She repaid his care with a particularly judgemental glare over her shoulder, which the reptilian simply laughed at as he dusted off his hands and strode away.

Lyselle watched the Abyssal's defiant gaze hold until her captor had crept well out of sight, at which point the being's eyes turned over to the wall before her. The demon's shoulders heaved with a heavy breath as she lulled herself into a meditative calm.

The room had stilled. Distant sobs and wails could be heard echoing through its space, but whatever creature had pulled the group apart had once again vanished into the dark. In her own space, Lyselle had only the sound of her fellow prisoner's soft weeping. The girl lay curled up on the floor, beaten and afraid.

Frustrated, the Terran assessed her situation and surroundings as her eyes took to the flickering torchlight. The cage's condition was dire, though you'd need to be brave to test its durability; the bars were old, and its thin strips of rough metal had been bent and arranged to discourage anyone contained within from getting any ideas about touching anything they didn't have to. A spot of fresh blood could be seen where her cellmate's shoulder had impacted against a particularly merciless edge. Lyselle winced thinking about the kind of cut that might've been sliced into the girl's flesh.

Then, her eyes lit up with an idea.

Working as quietly as she could, the Terran straightened herself upright, groping blindly but cautiously behind her until she found a

suitable edge for her purpose. She pressed her binds against the metal strip behind her and started moving her arms to grind them against its sharp rim.

It was slow, tedious work, and Lyselle struggled to hide her exertion. She was thankful for how dimly lit her corner of the room was, as any guards walking by would have a harder time discerning her condition.

Her fretting over such matters is what led to her being keenly aware of just how little patrol there even *was*. The room was dark enough that when someone did move through it, you could get a sense of their distance from the torchlight breaking over the crates and cages around them. Guards or otherwise, few ever strayed far from the central path through the chamber.

They must be pretty confident in their warden, Lyselle thought. It worked in her favor, though; she worked away at the edge behind her unimpeded, and she wouldn't need to test the weak excuses she was concocting to excuse her sweat in the event someone asked.

At last, after what felt like entirely too long a time, she felt a snap between her wrists. The tension around them abated as her ropes gave way. Lyselle's arms were free.

She wasted no time, working quickly and quietly to examine her cellmate's injury, and hushing the girl as she whimpered under Lyselle's touch. This was hardly her first time sneaking around behind a captor's back, and the feeling of trying to soothe a fellow victim was painfully familiar. Lys felt closer to home than she ever would have liked, but like it or not this had become her element.

Blood had stained the fur around the back of the girl's shoulder. She'd held relatively still since laying down, which at least meant not much dirt had gotten into the wound, but it was still bleeding slightly even after Lyselle's prolonged efforts with the cage's steel.

The Terran huffed, looking down at her shirt. Grabbing at the already tattered garment, she tore off a strip of fabric from the frayed edge left by her captor's knife, wincing at the noise it made.

No sense worrying about that now, she conceded as she sat the girl up and took to wrapping her injury with the makeshift bandage. There was no hiding what she was doing at this point, and she couldn't bring

herself to care. *They're already stealing my life from me. What worse can they do if I misbehave?*

She worked quickly, stowing her thoughts away like she had all the times before. She'd come to Karna to escape, but also to find her strength. After a lifetime of feeling powerless, of being *surrounded* by others who felt the same, she wanted the power to help others. Here and now, in this grim place, she would use what power she had to do that for her cellmate.

"There," she whispered, tightening a knot over the creature's shoulder to stay the bleeding. "That should help."

"Iveme," the girl wearily responded.

Lyselle took a moment. Nobody had come to check on the sounds. If anything, the room was darker than ever. The most noticeable light was the trio of glowing eyes watching her from across the hall.

Lys's cellmate had also noticed the Abyssal's gaze. *"Tiemoku..."*

The demon spoke warmly, just loud enough to hear. "I am glad to see you aiding each other. I am grateful for your light in such a vile place."

"Just doing what I can." Lyselle worked to undo the girl's binds, struggling in their limited space. She huffed in frustration. "Not that it feels like much. We're all just waiting to be sold, right?"

The woman frowned. "Such is the intent, yes."

"Then all I'm doing is making misery more comfortable."

The ropes around the other girl's wrists finally loosened as Lyselle at long last defeated the last knot holding them together. The creature held up her freed hands and smiled weakly. She turned her attention to the rope around her own feet, and began grinding away at it with her claws.

"There is great value to strength in a hopeless situation," the woman remarked as she watched the creature work, "as well as charity in times of need."

Lyselle drew her legs in and held herself tight. "Maybe."

"Imener," the girl chirped excitedly as the cut bindings fell from her ankles. She immediately turned to do the same for Lyselle. *"Vrino jeheb!"*

The demoness turned back to Lyselle. "You see? Your kindness already returns to you, and you are both stronger because of it." She

shifted in her cell, showing the first sign of discomfort Lyselle could perceive.

“Sorry we can’t do much about *your* binds,” Lys offered meekly.

“As am I.” The Abyssal sighed. “I am not so fortunate as to be bound with rope. I seem to be bound with Hazurite.”

“Hazurite?”

“A stone that dispels magic.” Cuffs around the woman’s wrists clinked behind her as she tugged at them in demonstration, a quick glint of blue shimmering off of their rim in the torchlight. “For creatures like me, Hazurite is like a poison that disrupts our mana flow. Most magical creatures would not have the strength to break these bonds.”

The ropes under Lyselle snapped, and the girl’s head popped up from behind Lys’s legs with a triumphant smile. “*Apge!*”

“Oh! Thanks, uh...” The Terran was at a loss on how to ask the girl’s name, awkwardly settling on just kind of pointing at her.

The creature looked from Lys’s face to hand to face again, confused for a moment, before stifling a quick laugh and shaking her head. “*Lori.*”

“*Lori...?*” It was so normal that it had caught Lyselle off-guard. She sat up and put a hand to her chest, momentarily flustered at how bare it had become. “Ah! I’m, uh...” She shook it off, patting her chest to emphasize what she was trying to get across. “Lyselle.”

“Lyselle,” the girl chirped, “*Lorijeb iblei.*”

“Oh, uh-?”

The Abyssal chuckled from her cell. “*Iblei.* She’s called you her friend.”

“Her friend...?”

Lyselle had come to Karna with nothing but the clothes on her back in part because there was little to fret over leaving behind. The church had alienated her, singling her out in an attempt to break her. Her family had worked to sacrifice her for their own standing, for approval in the eyes of some supposed god who had seen countless girls offered up by their own families in the same way. Everyone around her seemed to work with the express purpose of making her feel like she could only belong in one place, against her will, and for their benefit at her expense.

Friends had not been part of the equation. She'd nearly forgotten what it meant to have them at all. Lyselle looked at this girl, this strange creature who had been crying off and on throughout the day, who had shown strength in service of helping a fellow victim, and who now smiled warmly up at her in this cramped and uncomfortable corner of a frightening room in an alien world. She looked into the eyes of someone else who was scared, who felt powerless and abandoned, yet tried to help others despite how little she could do.

“There is great value to strength in a hopeless situation.”

The Abyssal's words rang through Lyselle's mind again. Even though Lori had been able to do so little, it had meant the world to her in those moments. As best the Terran could tell, the feeling seemed to be mutual.

“Alright, then.” She put one hand on Lori's head and playfully scruffed at the girl's hair. “Iblei.”

~5~

The room had gone dark some time ago, the torches on the walls having been left to fizzle out as the cold desert night overtook the criminal outpost

Lori fidgeted with the lock on their cage for some time, but to no avail. Her antennae twitched in irritation as she mumbled her frustrations to herself, teaching Lyselle a bevy of new curse words each time the cage's sharp iron dug at her hands.

Across the hall, the Abyssal sat in meditation, its dark figure only discernible thanks to thin strips of moonlight breaking through the space's haphazardly constructed walls. She'd watched Lori work for a time, but had long since recommended the pair get some rest before withdrawing into herself.

Lyselle wasn't about to argue. The Terran had given up on public decency by then, and bundled what was left of her half-scrapped top into a makeshift pillow. The bunched fabric at least served as a buffer between Lyselle's head and the bars she'd pushed it up against, but it did little to protect her from the desert's chill as it permeated the drafty room. The chill on her skin made it hard to stop thinking about how bare she was, but she tried to subdue such concerns; it wasn't as if there were many eyes on her at the moment, anyway.

Eventually and with one final swear, Lori gave up on lockpicking. The extended effort had proven tiring, and Lyselle's shivering had started to take up more of the creature's attention. She crept up next to the Terran, prodding her slightly.

Lys rolled over, bleary-eyed and embarrassed, to see the creature lay down next to her and nuzzle its way into her arms. The Terran turned red as Lori's head came to rest against her chest, but the girl's warmth was beyond welcome, and her intentions sincere. Lyselle held Lori tight in the darkness, and her companion quickly fell asleep.

She'd been effectively left alone with her thoughts. Soaking in the reality of her situation, despair washed over her. This was not the escape from her old life that she'd had in mind. Her goal had been *freedom*, had been escaping from a cycle of abuse and control that had

dominated her entire life. To go from that to *this*, having barely tasting her fought-for freedom for even a moment, felt unspeakably cruel to the point that she questioned if her life wasn't just some sick manner of cosmic jest. She questioned the point of even fighting it any longer.

From one prison to the next, she thought, burrowing her face into the remains of her shirt to hide her tears. The dark hugged her like a malevolent presence, and there, in that dreary corner of a chamber dedicated to shattering wills and hope, Lyselle Alwin drifted off to sleep.

A loud crash rang through the storage room, waking Lys with a start. An azure light tore through the chamber from above like a comet, a streak of blue that left a trail of sapphire embers tilting down over the hall. The chamber was quickly filled by the sounds of panic and the barked orders of the storehouse's wardens as a rain of debris erupted from the far end of the space.

Lori rose, squinting against the unexpected yet manageable light, and let out a simple "Ah!"

The girl pointed at the cage door, her eyes glimmering with hope. It now sat slightly ajar, the lock holding it shut now smashed upon the ground by some unknown force. The two girls looked at each other, sharing a momentary pause to weigh their next action. With a mutual nod, they quickly turned and crawled out into the cleared path between crates.

The ceiling overhead was burning with a crackling blue fire unlike anything Lyselle had ever seen before. The warmer hues of flickering torches danced through the center of the chamber as mercenaries rushed into position to defend against an unseen foe.

Another crash. Pained screams. A patch of the torchlight faded, accompanied only by the clattering of armored bodies hitting the floor. The dark tendrils of the mysterious creature that had drug the captives off to their cells were now roaming throughout the room, the fire overhead casting light on the immense form of its writing appendages, though their host body still evaded sight.

Lyselle looked up the hall. The other prisoners had noticed them; arms stretched out of cages and crates as the voices within pled for help in a myriad of tongues.

“*Ajre jo’ia*,” Lori shouted as she rushed to the nearest cage. Free to move unrestrained in the open air, her strength was much more easily demonstrated. With a quick swing of her mighty arm, the padlock on the cage was smashed by her thick claws, and its occupant freed. A pair of young demonesses crawled out of the opened crate, hugging the girl for a brief moment before she urged them off of her so that she could work towards opening more of the confines their fellow captives were held in.

Lyselle scanned the room for some tool that might let her be of help, and quickly noticed the single other open cage in the hall.

The Abyssal was missing.

Another crash. A tremendous roar. Whatever sort of creature had thrown the group into their cells, it was now facing down the camp’s invader. A massive, dark and freshly severed tendril flew across the room, crashing into the wall and crumpling to the ground in a smear of tar-like blood. Sparks of blue flame crackled to life in the air overhead, each shooting off towards the far side of the room and impacting a dark mass, the creature roaring in pain with each hit. A tentacle cut through the air towards a shimmering light, attempting to swat its aggressor out of the air like an annoying gnat. A flash of lightning later, that tentacle was torn to pieces that trailed off in flaming chunks towards the prison’s outer walls.

Lori was working quickly, smashing locks and tearing crates’ doors off their hinges. The dainty creature’s small stature greatly underrepresented her abilities. The chaos overhead barely seemed to distract her from the task at hand. If anything, the chaos was simply an opportunity to take out her anger towards their captors in a productive manner, and the tiny ball of fur that seemed so kind and sweet just minutes before was aptly demonstrating that she had been bottling up an ample supply of frustration.

Among the battered parts of former prisons, Lyselle found the remains of a sturdy wooden board that she could lift, and thus took to assailing a few locks of her own. She’d never been the strongest, but neither were the padlocks on the cages; the slavers had clearly banked

on the power of hired muscle to keep their stock in line, and that muscle was presently more than occupied with other problems.

Another roar. A blinding flash of light. Though Lyselle still couldn't make out the beast's form, it was clear that it was losing. Another batch of torches were snuffed out in the scuffle. Whatever was giving the escaping prisoners cover, it was damn good at the job.

The hall the girls started in was cleared out within minutes. Moonlight had begun breaking through the dissolving ceiling, illuminating a parade of prisoners that quickly took to helping their peers. Some took up debris or utilized their natural strengths to contribute to freeing those who remained captive. Others started gathering groups and organizing movement and action.

To the Terran, it was a ray of hope, an indication that she hadn't been lied to. The Karnans acted together with a singular goal, herding and protecting the weak while the others tore through the room to liberate their peers. As bleak as this place was, seeing it crumble around her gave Lyselle an undeniable swell of joy.

Lori wrestled the door off of a particularly large crate and was presented with a towering oni lumbering out of the box, bound in rope and chain. The girl's claws made quick work of the former, which was enough for the beast of a man to brute force his way out of the latter, the hulking demon's flexing muscles bending the chains to their breaking point.

This was enough to catch the attention of some unfortunate guards, who quickly learned how dangerous some of the captives could be when they weren't snuck up on and clubbed from behind. With one powerful swing, the massive demon knocked the entire group into a pile of the freshly-emptied cells, shattering wood scattering through the air as metal bent around the poor souls' battered bodies.

The group of escapees became an unstoppable force as they pushed across the relatively strongly-guarded central walkway. Mercenaries fell, outnumbered and overpowered, the unseen assailant just one problem among now-countless others as escaped prisoners worked to increase their numbers in a vengeful fury. Swords for hire began fleeing en masse as spilled torches began to catch the emptied crates aflame. Smoke billowed over the desert as the traders' men scattered over the far-reaching sands like panicked ants.

In the light of the rising flames, Lyselle could see the creature – or what was left of it – flailing its remaining limbs in failing defense. Its dark form stretched from floor to ceiling like an inky kraken, its oily skin parted by an array of even darker eyes, several of which had been gouged out in the battle. Bolts of light struck at it from all angles, sparks flying against its increasingly battered flesh. The monster cried out, roaring in desperation, and was clearly too preoccupied with its assailant to do its job.

As the cells left to empty dwindled in number, the prisoners' rampage spread quickly. Numbers began fanning out of the hall and into the shoddy outpost they'd doubtless been paraded through, just as Lyselle's group had before. The shouts of straggling vendors and their shady customers rose quickly as Lys and Lori continued to work, releasing the last of the jailed victims.

It was as the last lock fell, with Lyselle ushering a cat-like child to run to the other escapees, that she heard the click behind her.

"You," hissed the familiar voice of the operation's stout ringleader. "Turn. Now."

The Terran tensed, turning slowly. She found herself staring down the barrel of a pistol, the man's furious eyes boring into her from behind the weapon. Behind him, the lizardman, Carl, had Lori in a chokehold, a large knife held up to her head as she shook in fear, though anger still flickered in her eyes.

The man chuckled through clenched teeth as he shook his head. "I *knew* that damned haul was too good to be true! The *fuck* kinda terror y'all workin' with, girlie?"

Lyselle's chest felt tight. She'd been through so much, had hope teased and dangled in front of her, taken away, and teased again. Now, staring down the barrel of a gun, she found herself shaking, though not in fear. Her grip on the board tightened enough to make the wood creak in her hands. She stood up straight and stared the stout man in the eye, nostrils flaring as she uttered one single command:

"Let the girl go."

He laughed outright. "Really!? *That's* your priority right now!?" His arm tensed, a ringed finger resting on the gun's trigger. "Worry about yourself, bitch! Lettin' all my stock out!? Guess God gave you more tits than brains!"

“Would you expect me to leave them all to rot? To have their freedom stolen by some gaudy little asshole!?” Lyselle couldn’t believe what was coming out of her mouth. A fire burned within her, an anger held back for years now clawing its way up and out of her throat.

The man’s eye twitched as his gun lowered to Lyselle’s heart. “Y’know, girlie, *most* folks have an instinct regardin’ *self-preservation*. It’ll be a real waste if you make me blow a hole through them tits.”

Lyselle glanced down towards the gun, but caught something of interest beyond it. She glared up at her captor, still furious. “Is that all you see when you look at me?”

He chuckled up at her. “They’re strong assets, darlin’, and they’ll help you sell for a *real* pretty penny when I’m done collectin’ my debt off-a you. And rest assured...” The man grinned, prodding Lyselle’s naked breast with the barrel of his weapon. “I *do* intend to collect.”

She didn’t flinch. “You’re going to ‘collect’? How?”

The man rolled his eyes. “With my *pecker*, you stupid slut!”

She glanced down. “*What* pecker?”

“The *fuck* are you-!?”

As he looked down incredulously, the next thing the man saw was a steel pole being vaulted up directly between his legs. Lyselle had stomped down on a piece of bent metal left lying on the ground, which quickly found its mark as it shot up into the man’s crotch. He cried out in pain, and the resulting opening is all Lyselle needed to hit him across the head with her wooden board, cracking it into splinters across his skull.

“Boss!” was all Carl could get out before his lapse in attention gave Lori an opening of her own, biting his hand to break the lizard’s grip on its knife. He reared back in rage, tightening his hold around the girl’s neck and winding up to show her how easily he could crush her skull.

A gunshot.

Lys crouched over the stout man, one foot digging into his wrist with her shoes, her other knee pressed against his neck as he struggled under her. She’d acted quickly and with certainty, the anger within urging her to action. Carl stumbled backwards, a freshly-made hole in his chest shooting blood, as he stared at the smoking gun in the Terran girl’s hands.

Lori fell to the ground, hand to her neck, coughing from the lingering ache of the man's grip on her. The reptilian, blinded by rage and howling in pain, barrelled towards Lyselle.

His effort was short-lived. Lori swung her leg out, causing Carl to stumble directly toward his employer. Lyselle pushed off of the man, diving out of the way of the collapsing lizard and breaking the Terran's wrist under her foot in the process. The leader's pained howl was cut short as the large creature's weight landed forcefully on his tender human stomach, knocking the wind out of him for one blissful moment before he managed to find his voice again..

"Bitch!" The slaver was sputtering, coughing. "Whore!!" A trail of blood ran down his face from where the board had hit him, a scattering of splinters still clinging to his swelling cheek. "I'll fucking kill you!!"

The lizardman moved to rise off of his boss, but was quickly halted by Lori climbing to his back and striking his shoulder with a piercing blow, her thick claws breaking through his scales as easily as a stone piercing through the surface of a pond. The creature's hands writhed in pain as his arms gave out from under him, the Terran man groaning as the beast's full weight fell down onto him again and covered his shoddy suit in blood.

Lyselle and Lori breathed heavily in exertion. Their gazes met, both hesitant to believe that they'd emerged victorious. Lori came to accept it first, a wide grin and proud holler punctuating her joyfully jumping on the lizardman's back, unbothered by his blood still dripping from her claws. The man trapped under the body was none too pleased with this behavior, though his loud complaints only managed to encourage the girl to stomp with extra vigor before she'd had her fill and scurried to Lyselle's side.

Behind them, the cries of the shadowy kraken grew weak and sparse. Any prisoners who hadn't already fanned out to overtake the camp had fled at the sound of gunfire.

The man struggled under his subordinate. "M-My baby! What is happening to my-!?"

He was cut off by another severed tentacle flying over him, smashing into the wall with a loud *splort*. It slumped to the ground, multiple eyes attached to the oozing sinue that twitched in futility on

the ground. The man looked upon the remains of his now-silent pet in terror as footsteps approached where he'd been pinned down.

"My, my," came a familiar voice. "It seems my new friends fared even better than I'd hoped."

The man's eyes grew wide. "*You-!*"

Lyselle turned to see the Abyssal coming down the walkway behind her, fallen debris withering to ash in her wake. Her hair waved like a white bonfire trailing behind her as she strode towards them, hands still cuffed behind her back. Her robes were tattered, revealing a glowing trail of cerulean tattoos twisting across her body. A shining azure gemstone radiated from her chest like a beacon.

"I don't understand," the man growled. "We had you restrained!!"

The Abyssal smiled. "Ah, yes. The Hazurite. Most magical creatures would not have the strength to break these bonds." Her eyes narrowed as the smile left her face, her final word breaking through her lips with an angry growl. "*Most.*"

Her arms tensed, her lean figure flexing, revealing a surprising amount of muscle concealed within the demon's thin frame. In one swift, easy motion, the link of the cuffs was broken. She brought her arms before her, looking to ensure that she was holding the slaver's attention before balling her elegant hands into fists. The cufflinks cracked, streaks of white light piercing through them, and then shattered into shards so delicate that they drifted into the air like dust.

"What in the hell!?" The Terran was pale. "Th... That's impossible!! Who *are* you!?"

The woman strode past Lyselle, elegant and smooth, never breaking eye contact with the frantic man as he struggled and pushed at the weight on top of him, desperately trying to break free.

"Who am I?" Her voice was cold. "I am one who protects Karna and her people. I am a guide to the lost and defender to the powerless. And to men like *you*..." She kneeled down and stared into the man's eyes so closely that he could feel the demon's breath coming down upon him. "I am a *hunter*."

"No...!" The slaver trembled on the ground, panic overtaking him as he wrothe under his underling's weight. "No!! Carl! *Dammit*, Carl!!"

The lizard didn't respond to the man's cries, nor to the fist frantically slugging into its injured shoulder.

"You brought in a god damned *witch*!! You fuckin' iguana!!"

The demoness stood upright, towering over the man as she cocked her head down at him. "You think me a simple *witch*? As if the gods would ever show a man like *you* such a pity."

Said man could only manage to whimper a pitiful "Eh!?"

The woman swung her arm in an arc to her side, evoking a powerful gust of wind. Her tattered clothes seemed to molt away into a brilliant black gown as a green cape flew back from her shoulders. A wide-brimmed, pointed cap appeared on her head, matching the cape in hue, and under its shadow the demoness's shining eyes seemed to peer out from an absolute void down at her prey as she leaned down over him. She rested her weight against a long, gnarled staff that seemed to grow out from her palm like the roots of a tree, now sitting in her grasp like it had been present all along.

"A cowl," the Terran hissed. "A fucking *cowl*!? Dammit Carl, wake the fuck up!!"

He punctuated his words with more pummeling, but the lizardman remained unresponsive.

"Everett Hector," the Abyssal roared, "you have been witnessed by countless numbers as the undeniable head of an operation of supreme sin, a willful and persistent violation of the Sacred Law."

"Jesus Christ," protested the stout man. "No need to be pretentious about it!"

The demoness drove the base of her staff into Everett's shoulder. The man hollered in pain as he struggled to move something, *anything* away from her.

"Do not *hasten* me, *jeju*." The witch's voice dripped with contempt. "To violate the *Kegi* of another..." She paused for a moment and looked to Lyselle. "The, ah... 'autonomy,' is how you said it?"

Lyselle was still struggling to process that she'd shot a man, never mind what was happening in front of her since. Nonetheless, she managed to give a baffled blink and a shaky nod.

"Right, yes." The woman turned back to Everett, her face still glowering down over his. "To violate the *autonomy* of another is an

incomparable crime. And yet, you felt comfortable stealing the will of *many*, did you not?”

Everett writhed in pain, glaring up at her with grit teeth and loathing in his eyes.

The Abyssal continued, speaking slowly, and clearly seething in her own right. “By law, such a crime as selling a single Karnan’s *kegi* is punishable by death. And here you are, a worthless man who thought he should sell lives beyond count. How many do you think it’s been, hm? Hundreds? Thousands?”

The Terran responded by spitting in the Abyssal’s face.

The witch did not flinch. “A simple death is not befitting of what you have done. So long as others continue to suffer due to your actions, it is only fair in my eyes – which you have so kindly blessed with your *filth* – that you suffer as well. Their agony is your burden.”

The woman stood tall, staff still driven into the man’s shoulder, and looked over at Lyselle as she spoke to him. “This seems as good a start as any. As I recall, you and your man violated this poor girl while she was powerless against you. Quite wicked...” She turned back to Everett and cocked her head. “Don’t you agree?”

“Bitch got me back plenty,” the Terran growled. “Look at my damned face! Or my fuckin’ hand!”

“Yes, I see your face, unfortunately. It hardly seems damned enough for such a man, if my opinion bears any weight.”

“Fuck you! Be lucky if this damn eye still works!”

“Is that so?” There was mischief in the witch’s voice.

“Interesting choice of words from a man whose luck has so clearly run out. Personally, I think it’s *incredibly* lucky for you that you continue to draw breath.”

“Not with this fucker on top of me,” Everett grumbled.

The woman shook her head. “You clearly still have enough air in you to complain. I admit, you go numb far more quickly than I’d like. Does this not bother you already?”

She twisted her staff into his shoulder. Everett screamed in agony as blood began to spill where it pierced into his flesh.

“Excellent,” the witch cooed. “Now, hold onto the pain this time, so you have something to compare to what’s coming.”

The man's spit frothed at the edges of his mouth. "The... The fuck are you-!?"

The Abyssal leaned back over him. "As I said, your face is *far* from damned *enough*. Leering over girls, tearing their clothes... Those eyes of yours get you into a lot of trouble. Maybe you could see the error of your ways more clearly if you weren't so busy focusing on *bokara*."

"I don't know your ding-dang demon wor—"

He was cut off by the Abyssal snapping her fingers.

In an instant, his undamaged eye burst into a plume of blue flame. Everett hollered in pain, struggling in vain to put the fire out. He attempted to close his eyes, but that simply caused the lid to burn away in a cloud of ash. Trying to smother the flames with his functioning hand left his palms burned and melting, his dripping blood and skin doing little to douse the rampaging fire dancing within his skull. The air around them flooded with the stench of burning flesh, yet still, through the screams and agony, he could not stop. Instinct drove him to fight the fire, no matter the cost, and he clawed at his own face in desperation until trails of blood poured from tears ripped by his own fingernails.

The flames died down, but his screams didn't. Everett, face scarred and deformed by the fire on one side and swollen and splintered on the other, writhed in agony under his bleeding subordinate, twisting and contorting in desperation, bashing his head against the ground to try and deflect some of the pain as his screams choked through his throat.

"That's better," the witch remarked. She pulled her staff out of the man's shoulder and his screaming peaked anew, blood pouring from the wound and onto the ground.

"Bitch," shrieked Everett, the word slurring through his gnashing teeth. "Bitch! Bitch, bitch, bitch, *BITCH!!*"

"It was but an introduction to what you are owed, Mister Hector." The Abyssal produced a cloth from within her cowl, finally wiping the man's spit from her face before flinging it onto his bleeding wound. "As I said, you will suffer as long as those you've sold have. You can appreciate death only after I've found and freed every last soul you've enslaved."

The witch's demeanor changed drastically as she turned and approached Lyselle, a gentle smile settling onto her face. "Here, my dear. Until we find you some proper coverings."

Lyselle looked up, slowly pulling her gaze away from Everett's smoldering eye towards the Abyssal's unexpectedly kind face as the witch removed her cowl and placed it over the girl's shoulders. The Terran pulled the flowing garment tight over herself, the adrenaline of the moment abating and giving way to the recollection of her own nakedness. A blush rushed over her face as she muttered an ashamed "thank you" and turned her eyes to the ground.

"Apologies for allowing you to go through all of this," said the woman. "I would have intervened back on the wagon, but to be quite honest there was information here that I needed."

"Information!?" Everett growled like an animal as he seethed in agony. "Fuck you! You won't find shit, you fucking bitch!"

"Indeed," the witch admitted. "I noticed you keep no records. A rare bit of wisdom on your part, from one perspective. But I learned something quite valuable when I was sneaking about and saw you selling off your little volunteer."

The other Terran, Lys recalled.

"You're crafty," the Abyssal continued, "but also quite cheap. Every slave you sell has their will suppressed with a cursed band, yes?"

From a small satchel at her waist, the witch produced a simple, silver and red necklace. "Mass produced and nearly identical, each and every one," she remarked. "It will still be a long search, but at least I know what I'm looking for."

Everett hissed through his adorned teeth in frustration and pain.

The woman returned her attention to the girls. "You both did quite well," she chimed. "Even better than I'd hoped."

The image of their cage's broken door crossed Lyselle's memory. "You're the one who freed us?"

The Abyssal smiled. "Indeed. The way you were taking care of each other told me all that I needed to know."

Lyselle didn't understand. "Which was what?"

"That you were the types to help others in need."

Lys's breath caught in her throat. *Helping others...*

In the heat of the moment, she hadn't even considered what she was doing to be anything more than what needed done. Yet now, looking around the room, she couldn't deny the evidence of emptied crates any more than the distant shouts of the vengeful captives she'd helped free.

The witch continued speaking. "I believed that you two would not flee without aiding the other prisoners. It seems that belief was well-placed; we are the only ones left in the hall, and you even managed to bring down these two—"

Metal flashed. Everett's knife came flying out from behind the witch, nearly piercing into her skull before she turned and repelled it with her staff.

On the ground before them, Carl had awoken from his shock-induced blackout, and had grabbed the knife from his boss's belt and lobbed it in one final, desperate attack. Seeing it fail, he tore open Everett's shirt, ripping out a patch of cloth.

The Abyssal's eyes went wide. "*Bik!!*"

She readied her staff, but it was too late. The lizardman slammed the torn fabric onto the ground with surprising speed. In a flash of light, a cloud of dust kicked off of the floor, spreading over the hall like a shroud.

When it finally settled enough to see, the pair of criminals had vanished. A ring of ash lay in their place, blurred sigils within it rubbed away by the outburst of wind and settling of dirt.

For a time, the witch stood over the ring, her grip tightening around her staff. The flames in the hall ebbed, naught left to burn but smoldering embers, as moonlight overtook the ruins of the building. Finally, the woman slumped down onto her knees, removing her cap and covering her face with her hand.

Lyselle and Lori came up behind her, the Terran still gripping the green cowl tightly around her shoulders as the heat of the dying fires gave way to the cold evening wind.

Lori rushed ahead to the witch's side. "*Tiemoku?*"

The Abyssal turned her head slowly, facing the creature from even height for the first time. She spoke words Lyselle still couldn't understand, but did now recognize to be Lori's language, as she ran a finger through the girl's hair. Lori responded with a reassuring smile

and a hug more delicate than one would assume her clawed arms to be capable of.

The witch rose to her feet. Her shoulders heaved with a heavy sigh as she gave one last, long look to the evidence of her targets' escape.

She turned her head to speak to Lyselle behind her, the demon's voice quiet and tired. "Do you have anywhere to go, Terran?"

Lyselle nervously clutched at the cloak. "I don't."

The witch nodded, solemnly. "As I thought," she said, turning to leave the crumbling ruin around them. "Come then. Surely we will find something among the abandoned stalls that will fit you."

The Terran smiled bashfully. "That would be appreciated."

The witch began to walk out into the camp, but stopped suddenly, turning back to the girls. "Something occurs to me. I never introduced myself."

The Abyssal bowed with incredible elegance, especially considering her stature. Lyselle couldn't help but look at the witch's figure against the night sky and think that they were anything less than sisters; the violets and blues of the demoness's skin shimmered under the similar hues above, and her white hair shone like a great star looking down on them from above.

"I am called Nidrah, Witch of the Green Cowl," she stated, "and for the time being you can consider yourselves under my care."

~6~

Lyselle awoke in her dorm to the sound of birds chirping in the trees outside her window. She sat up, bleary-eyed and disoriented by her sudden return to the present. Here, in this quiet room, that desert outpost seemed like it was an entire world away.

Flecks of dust shimmered in the light streaking through the window's wooden blinds, their nature-lit dance serving as the only motion in the space that wasn't the Terran's own. On her nightstand, an alchemical clock measured the time via drifting motes of light, swirling colors dancing within a gemstone cage of Lyselle's own making. The stone reflected the sunlight up onto the ceiling in a brilliant prismatic pattern, a painting of nature's own making signaling each morning's arrival and easing Lyselle into the day.

It was early still.

The half-awake Terran looked back to the ceiling, navigating the thoughts in her mind as her eyes navigated the patterns of reflected light overhead. Her introduction to Karna had been so harrowing, but here now, in this quiet room, she felt at peace.

Now if only I could adjust to the culture...

Memories of the day before quickly rushed back to the front of Lyselle's mind. She'd never felt so overcome by her own restless urges as to think about another woman while doing *that*, never mind in such a public place as the baths. It was hard enough to overcome the shame to pleasure herself in the first place, and the number of times she'd done so to completion could be counted on one hand. She'd normally been too afraid of the consequences to get there.

But that hadn't stopped her this time, had it? The recollection of her own behavior instigated a fresh flushing of Lyselle's face. She felt as if she'd entirely lost control of herself, but all the same she couldn't chase away the acknowledgement that, while writhing there under the surface within the spell of her own pleasure, she'd felt... *wonderful*.

Lys had tried to quiet her racing thoughts with study and preparation, to mixed success. Learning about the flora and wildlife of the forest had done little except help the poor girl lay awake half the

night wrestling with imagined scenarios involving her to-be companion and different aspects of the wood; what to say about this plant, how to impress her talking about that creature, where best to camp with her, the routes they should walk...

Even now, sitting up in bed in the morning light, Lyselle struggled to shake off such thoughts. The prospect of spending so much time alone with a powerful and promising sorceress was in itself intimidating, but Lys found herself infatuated with other things about the half-elf. She still had no idea how to process such feelings, even if she had made due and come to terms well enough with them in the bath.

Lyselle cursed under her breath as she wiped the sleep from her eyes. Even just recalling it, her groin ached with need, panties dampening between the girl's legs in shameful excitement.

Christ, Lyselle! She scolded herself, trying desperately to ignore that her breath was already growing heavy. *What's gotten into you!? We just did this—!*

But the thoughts persisted, easily drowning out her shame no matter how much she tried to refute herself. Lyselle's heart pounded in her chest in an arrhythmic dance of excitement and anxiety, the urge to grant her body its desired encore swelling with each conflicted pulse. The act she'd hoped had gotten these urges out of her system seemed to have instead left her trembling in need for another round, like a roused beast starving after a long hibernation.

It's so hot! She hissed through her teeth, her body's needs putting every nerve on edge so intensely that even the bedsheets against her body felt like the knowing touch of an old lover. *I can't take it! I want it again! I need it!!*

Nature and desire had won out. Lyselle's hand shook as it slowly reached down across her body, a hanging finger sending her senses even further into touch-starved lust as it traced down her middle in a motion that only started as an accident. Her shoulders rolled under the influence of her own hand's graze, her eyes liting and a sharp gasp escaping her lips as she felt her own wet mound. The deep-rooted shame she felt wrestled for control inside of her, but the lustful Terran couldn't bring herself to stop, waves of heat coursing through her body from her core.

The memory of the night before was exciting to her on its own, the thrill of her sin urging her fingers to part the lips under them and rub at her point of pleasure. Everything that had made her hesitant in the baths in hindsight seemed like an exciting adventure into the taboo. The fear of getting caught, succumbing to her urges, feeling her body meld with the hot water around her; all of the swirling emotions of that moment pressed her forward again now.

And then she recalled what had made her so amorous in the first place. The image of Talia flashed into Lyselle's mind like a bolt of lightning; her warm smile, her cheerful voice, her amaranthine eyes. Lys's own eyes drifted shut, seeing the subject of her desire clearly in her recollections; how she walked, how she spoke, how her body moved underneath her clothes.

The Terran's body cheered her on as imagination took hold. Talia was cheerful, energetic... *bouncy*. She didn't seem too interested in proper support for her chest, either, and the motions one could glimpse happening under the loose fabric over her unrestrained tits were, to Lyselle's private admission, mouthwatering.

She had to admit to herself, for now at least, that she loved and resented that fabric in equal measure. It left just enough to the imagination to encourage creative thought, and create the lustful woman did, undressing the half-elf in her mind, slowly, purposefully,. In this fantasy, Talia's cheerful smile never waned, her gemstone eyes locked onto Lys's mundane gaze as if hers were just as beautiful a treasure. That smile, that look, maintained unflinchingly as cloth gave way to skin.

Lys's body trembled in want. Her shame had been silenced entirely now as the image in the girl's mind moved to Talia's approach, her gentle touch, a delicate kiss. The thought of feeling another's skin against her own sent another shiver through the Terran, and she couldn't stop herself from imagining that lithe elven hand trailing down her body just as she'd done to herself, tracing her form, touching her where she'd never been touched by another. The imagined half-elf's hand joined Lys's own, fingers interlocking as they churned against her in lascivious unison.

Lys grunted in frustration, grabbing at her panties. *Get out of my fucking way!!* She hissed again, forcefully pulling the undergarment

down to gain easier access to her dripping sex. The action felt animalistic, and she once again began to scold herself out of trained instinct, though she'd barely thought a single reprimanding word before her fingers had resumed thrusting hungrily into her core, her range of motion as unrestrained as her dominant thoughts.

She moaned as her back arched into the mattress beneath her, her hips rising and bucking against her own hand under the bedsheets. She'd barely woken up, and already she'd caved to forbidden urges that she'd thought long since trained out of her. Worse, she *liked* it; as inexperienced as she was, she couldn't lie to herself enough to deny that whatever she was doing felt *amazing*. In reluctant submission it had been exciting, but now, lost in self-indulgent thought, free of any concern over who might see, engaging with it willfully, Lyselle realized just how much she was *enjoying* herself.

But she was still holding back, however little. That voice of shame and doubt kept shouting from the back of her mind.

Fuck it, she thought, aiming to silence the hindrance within her. *If we're doing this, we're not half-assing it.*

She pressed her digits as deep into herself as she could, letting out a staggered wail as her fingers pushed up into her own walls, and Lyselle's imagination ran wild. Set free by her decision to succumb to her desire, the Terran's sporadic thoughts flickered between the excitement of her public display in the baths and thoughts of being pleased by her fellow candidate. Those trains of thought ping-ponged and swirled together, mixing into a new scenario of Talia joining her in the bath, the water trailing in tantalizing rivulets over the woman's pale skin. Every stroke of Lyselle's own hand down her channel evoked a fresh coo or mewl that further buried her senses of shame and doubt under a rising swell of need.

The night before, she'd foolishly thought nobody had noticed, that she'd gotten away with her masturbatory act without consequence. She'd forgotten a key aspect of naiads. The spring's keeper was one with the very water the girl had pleased herself in and, as Lyselle attempted to creep out undetected, the being had given her a knowing smile.

In the moment, that had been devastating, but now, here in private, the thought of someone knowing what she'd done, of knowing

they'd let her keep on with it after discovering her in the act, that they *liked* it even...

The Terran's breath trembled She rolled over, pushing her panties down over her knees and kicking them off entirely into the bed sheets as she burrowed her face against a pillow. Her hips rose as she worked at her dripping slit, the soft down pillow in her arm barely containing her building moans of excitement.

She'd been caught! What if Talia had been there? What would she think!?

What if she did what I'm imagining...?

Then, a fresh flavor of intrusion broke into her thoughts: And *what if the naiad joined?*

Lyselle bit her lip. A naiad was an elemental spirit, its form decided upon consciously, and the one minding the springs had certainly not settled for a sub-par visage. Their womanly figure was decorated by the light dancing through their body as it would any mass of water, ripples within them making patterns dance across their skin like shimmers at the bottom of a clear pool. They always appeared to be underwater, in that sense, and were constantly framed by a glistening white mane of beautiful hair.

In the Terran's mind, the naiad looked upon Lyselle and her subject of adoration with its shimmering eyes. They leaned against their favorite rock, watching the girls frolic in their waters, spreading their own legs and joining in on the pair's masturbatory pleasure in a provocative display. The Talia in Lys's imagination simply looked over her shoulder and laughed it off, turning to Lyselle with a coy grin that gave way to a subtle bite of the lip.

"Let's give them a *real* show," the figment beckoned.

"Talia...!" The name escaped Lys's lips in the quiet dorm, flowing out of her like honey. She didn't want to fight it this time. She was alone in her room, an animal in heat left to its own devices and desires, and her desire was clear.

"Talia," she mewled again, a little louder than before, the imagined scene of intimacy in her mind pushing her virginal lust to the brink, the half-elf's head descending as she pushed Lyselle's legs apart.

"Talia!" She wasn't even trying to suppress her volume anymore. Lyselle's pulse crescendoed as her feet dug down against the mattress,

her legs kicking and squirming in jolts as the pressure built within her.
“*T-Tal-!*”

With one last seizing breath, the Terran’s body tensed and throbbed as her thighs clamped around her wrist. Lyselle’s essence shot out from her as she cried out in heat, body shaking as waves of ecstasy rippled in rhythm up her spine. Her pussy clenched around her fingers, which were still gripping at her walls and rubbing, pressing, urging out more of the orgasm, more bucks and wails and ejaculatory mess, until finally, mercifully, her quivering body abated, releasing its hold of her hand and leaving the girl to catch her breath.

She’d been loud. Maybe too loud. She wondered what her neighbors would think, or if they’d heard clearly the name she’d been calling. As she rolled onto her back, looking back at the labyrinth of light on the ceiling, she wondered if that even bothered her anymore.

She glanced over to the blinds on her window, the sun’s amber light streaking through them, and began trying to distract her mind with the last of her preparations.

“Alright, let’s see...” Alwin began to take stock aloud of what she’d packed for the trip. “Field guides, alchemy text, notebook...”

There wasn’t much point in doing this a third time. She’d been thorough, and she knew it. No matter how many times she checked her utensils, her notes, or whatever else, it was all just a distraction, a procrastination of her one final act of preparation.

Lyselle took a deep breath. There was no putting it off any longer, lest she keep Talia waiting.

Talia...

The name echoed through her mind, lingering and sweet. Lys bit her lip, glancing up at her headboard. She couldn’t escape her thoughts, clearly. A different approach was due.

She closed her eyes, still catching her breath from her spontaneous act of exertion. Post-climax, everything felt more sensitive, more alert. The air she breathed coursed through her with weight and power, and her heart quieted its thunderous pounding as her blood returned to its regular pressure. The bedsheets and night shirt slid against her body with every movement, every breath, and she sensed every minute millimeter of displacement.

It was in that movement that she found her inspiration. Her chest heaved with every breath, its form teasing at the fabric of her shirt as it rose and fell. She thought back to her own fantasies, as well as what had instigated them. It reminded her of a lesson she'd learned long ago, though bittersweetly.

Lyselle rolled out of bed, suddenly remembering she was bottomless as her legs broke out of the sheets and stretched to the wooden floor. She sat there for a moment, collecting herself and her resolve, and fighting as best she could to chase away the shame she felt in seeing her own naked skin in the slatted sunbeams.

She had to. It was time to figure out how to best present her body.

This was not a department with which the Terran often concerned herself. Her wardrobe was largely simple and practically decided upon, and while her would-be attire for an excursion into the woods would still hinge on that practicality, she'd concluded there was something else to consider.

Taking her glasses from the nightstand and looking towards the mirror against the far wall, Lyselle took in a deep breath and, after bracing her mind, swiftly pulled her shirt off over her head and threw it to the floor. She stood up from the bed, looking her naked reflection in the eye as she moved, and stared herself down, convinced it would somehow yield a modicum of confidence if she could just convince the thing in the mirror that they weren't as gruesome as they believed themselves to be.

To her own surprise, she actually was less bothered by her own visage than usual. She wore a slight flush behind her skin and a glisten between her legs, the blatant evidence of her pleasure decorating her body in a way that made her feel less trapped, less restricted by old thoughts and feelings. Her anxiety left her breath still heavier than usual, but the resulting movement of her breasts and shoulders made her feel, in light of how she found herself thinking about the bodies of other women, a strange and foreign sort of confidence.

As she stepped towards the mirror, Lyselle's eyes fell to the sway of her hips. Her mother had called it the devil's curse, but in this moment, posing cheekily with a hand on her hip before the mirror, the Terran found herself acknowledging - perhaps for the first time in her

life - the potential appeal of her natural assets. Even her eyes seemed to sparkle with an unusual optimism and joy.

She giggled, to her own surprise, and struck a couple more poses in front of the mirror, standing tall and with confidence. She almost felt like a completely different person.

“Yeah,” she assured herself. “Yeah! We can do this!”

Lyselle wasn't sure if she entirely believed her own affirmations, but it didn't feel like a complete lie. She strode back across the room, looking over her shoulder to watch herself in the mirror and nearly running into the nightstand by the window. She turned to face the shut blinds, pausing for a moment in hesitant consideration against a sudden, impulsive inclination. With a sharp inhale, she flung the blinds open, allowing sunlight to flood the room and cascade over her naked figure.

The fresh air blew in across the girl's face, the morning's breeze dancing with its light through the room as she soaked in their touch upon her body. It was a warm morning, and quiet, the only sound outside being the rustling of the forest beyond the dorm's walls.

It was unusual for there to be such a lack of other candidates taking advantage of such weather, but Lys didn't mind one bit; the solitude gave her a moment more to assure herself that her confidence wasn't unfounded without embarrassment being a factor and, again, she found herself feeling glorious. The sun's heat against her bare chest felt proper, natural. She closed her eyes and stilled herself with a deep inhale, finally calming her breath as she listened to the rustling of the trees in the morning wind.

Finally, Lyselle turned, striding back over to the small closet beside the mirror to begin looking through her clothes. She pulled out a selection of tops and laid them over her bed, testing each one at a time in front of the mirror. Her motivations were unusual and new, but the weather was the perfect cover for it. Surely, she thought, she could present herself flatteringly without betraying her signature practicality. Nobody would ever have to know.

It was in this process, while alternating between a t-shirt and a button-up in front of the glass, that her self-doubt clawed its way back to the forefront.

“Why are you even bothering, Lys?” She heckled her reflection as she defied her own words, testing different angles and loosening the odd button like a dare to herself. “You’re not exactly working with a beach bod here, are you?”

Mister Everett Hector seemed to disagree, was the thought that intruded in that moment. Lyselle huffed, pulling her clothing options up against her body defensively at the recollection of the slaver’s lecherous appraisal of her figure.

For a time, she stood there in frustration and shame. Thinking back to her time in the desert, the sun’s flooding of her living space felt suddenly less emboldening, the motes of dust fluttering through it less whimsical. She felt cornered by her own thoughts, overpowered by memories and fear.

Then, her eyes trailed back to the mirror. The shine in them was gone, the creature looking back at her instead resembling a frightened, cowering animal. It was as if the woman she’d found in the reflection just moments ago had abandoned her.

That hurt.

Lyselle felt tears welling in her eyes, and a single thought screamed through her being.

This isn’t what she’d want.

She straightened her back again, still holding the clothes close, shaking a bit as she fought against her instincts.

This isn’t what she fought for!

Lys tried to imagine what Nidrah would say if she saw her like this. Deep down, she knew; the Abyssal would be stern, not mincing words in the slightest, yet patient, sympathetic. She’d traveled with the demoness for most of a year, and seen her treat countless strangers with the same care and resolve that she’d displayed with her closest friends.

“He is not your king, *keski*.” Lys did her best to impersonate Nidrah’s energy as she spoke. “You owe that man nothing, least of all your fear.”

She wasn’t sure if the words had done much, but recalling the witch’s comforting presence did wonders in itself. Lyselle turned back to the bed, placing both options in her hands down in exchange for the next.

She turned back to the mirror, her new choice held in place against her, and gave her reflection a defiant glare.

“This isn’t for him!” She broke the morning’s silence with a rebellious shout, trying to drown her doubt out by force. “And I don’t need *your* damn approval!”

She’d shut her eyes while yelling, nearly forgetting what she was even doing. Reopening them, she looked at the garment against her body with renewed determination. She cocked her head, turning to the side with an inquisitive hum. Lyselle’s eyes widened as she turned the other way, and the Terran suddenly couldn’t help excitedly biting her lip as a blushing smile crept across her freckled face.

“I will *take* that approval though.”

The halls of the Karnan Academy were abnormally vacant. As Lyselle walked her way towards the facility's front gate with a hiking pack slung over her shoulders, she couldn't help but notice that the usual bustling crowd of candidates were entirely absent. A few individuals rummaged through lockers, quietly minding their own business as they hurriedly went from A to B, a mentality Lyselle understood well enough from experience, while others were gathered into small groups, whispering to each other anxiously for reasons the Terran couldn't glean.

It's as quiet in here as it was outside, the Terran thought to herself. *Where is everyone?*

As she approached an intersection of halls, Lyselle finally heard a swelling of voices. Coming around the corner, their origin was immediately clear; a small swarm of candidates had gathered around the entrance to a singular classroom, the mage at its entrance doing her best to address their concerns over the frenzied voices shouting at her.

"We are looking into it, students, I assure you!"

A collection of balks and jeers cried back at her.

"Don't give us that crap!"

"Why isn't she answering!? She always answers!"

"I tried three different contracts!!"

Lyselle's pace slowed as she listened in, and she realized quickly what field her peers were suddenly struggling with.

"We don't know why your contracts aren't answering their summons," the mage bemoaned, "but I've been assured by Magus Haji that the matter is being investigated as we speak!"

"Investigated?" The responding felkin practically spit his reply.

"Those old dustbags are just going to argue about what to do for weeks," protested a young firebrand. "What are we supposed to do while they get their shit together!?"

The mage at the door looked increasingly flustered and overwhelmed, but there was little to be done. Lyselle kept moving

forward, quickly lost in thought as she made her way to the cafeteria for a quick breakfast.

She found little competition or wait for her meal; the space was as vacant as the rest of the academy had been. The lone cook tending to the counter seemed to have their own thoughts elsewhere, muttering to themselves with the air of someone who'd lost a bet as they quickly served Lyselle her order; one funnel-shaped powdered pastry filled with mixed berries and a sweet syrup.

Everyone is either missing or distracted, the Terran thought to herself as she moved, savoring her breakfast on the go. *The summoners are certainly having their own problems, but where's everyone else?*

It was as she approached the school's entrance that Lyselle noticed the rising murmur of the missing student body. The entry's large iron doors stood ajar, daylight pouring in over a mass of students huddled at its sides, the lot of them peering cautiously around the framework to see what was happening outside. Beyond the doors, less anxious candidates had gathered in swarms, shouting and cheering at some event that couldn't be made out without moving ahead.

Ahead happened to be the direction Lyselle was heading, whether she cared for the idea or not. She pressed forward, walking unnoticed past the students by the door, the collective too preoccupied with the mystery event in the yard to even perceive much else.

As she crossed the threshold into daylight, a rumble suddenly tore through the earth. Before her, from within a ring of shouting students, shot up a great spire of stone, and from its tip a screeching figure came hurtling into the building just above the doorway. The Terran jumped back as the body hit the ground at her feet; a young incubus lay there battered and burned, groaning in agony as he rolled onto his back.

A duel had just concluded.

A female voice boomed from within the ring. "Who else?"

Several students murmured, shifting anxiously in place, some looking to a handful of their teachers for intervention. Said teachers had lined up against the building's outer walls in an inadequate show of authority, standing side by side as they looked on in an equally powerless discomfort from their position as other parts of the student body heckled and jeered for more carnage.

“Nobody?” The voice rose louder. “I find that hard to believe!”

A group of healers came out from behind Lyselle, taking the demon at her feet back indoors to tend to his wounds. The students behind the doorway muttered amongst themselves as they nervously shuffled out of the way.

The voice continued to demand another victim. “Where are they!? Where is *she*!?”

“Oh, she is *pissed*,” remarked a familiar voice to the Terran’s side.

Lyselle jumped again, startled by the sudden impact of someone else’s words piercing her own swirling thoughts. Talia had crept up beside her amidst the movement and murmurs. “When did you—!?”

Talia grinned. “Saw you as soon as you walked out. Little extra skin today, eh?” The half-elf threw in a wink after letting her eyes visibly give Lyselle a once-over.

“A-ah, well...!” Lyselle blushed. She’d opted to be as daring as she could muster, which in her case meant forgoing an undershirt with a top she’d usually pair with one. Even the couple of inches of cleavage now on display was far more than she was accustomed to and, now that it had fetched the attention she’d sought, she found herself unsure how to actually handle it, opting to pull her gray open-fronted hoodie over the dark tanktop to shield her sudden embarrassment.

Talia, meanwhile, was dressed in a bright red tunic, held in place by a leather belt buckled around her waist. The resulting neckline fetched Lyselle’s attention as easily as anything she’d imagined earlier in the morning, as the half-elf’s shoulders peeked out from under the wide and low collar the fabric formed, a tapered window of pale skin coming together to a pair buttons that were tied together with string. Those buttons had been tasked with the job of keeping Talia’s tits contained, though the girl’s constant energy made the movement underneath as tantalizingly noticeable as ever, even before Lyselle’s eyes were pulled into the hint of bare breast peeking out above them. The only other notable clothing on the elf was a sturdy pair of thigh-high leather boots, laced up tight, and dense enough to deny any potential briars access to the delicate skin underneath, though only barely. Hints of thigh peered out between the base of the tunic and top of the boots, teasing Lyselle’s awakening passions with the promise of more skin with every light movement of the half-blood’s athletic body.

The whole of Talia's packing appeared to be condensed down to a singular handbag, small enough to pass as a purse, making the Terran feel a bit over-prepared by comparison.

"You look great, Lyssie." Talia encouraged her with a gentle nudge of her elbow.

"Oh?" Lys glanced off to her other side, brushing a lock of red hair back behind her ear.

"Showing some leg was a nice touch." Talia threw a flirtatious look down at Lyselle's choice of pants, a pair of khaki shorts that came to rest around the middle of the girl's thighs, and raised her eyebrows as her cheeky grin widened.

"A-ah, well, I figured it would be, uh..." Lys looked back to meet Talia's gaze, but couldn't even hold her eyes there for a full second before feeling overwhelmed by her own emotions. "... hot," she squeaked out, meekly.

Talia's light chuckle was interrupted by the woman in the center of the crowd calling out again.

"You!"

"Uh-oh." Talia winced, taking Lyselle by the hand and leading her up over to the side of the gathered crowd. They stopped behind a short hedge, which stood to decorate the edge of a hill overlooking the walkway.

From there, Lyselle could see the events unfolding much more clearly. A lone Adorned, radiating in a dark aura of dominant power, stood within the circle of candidates, pointing across it towards one unfortunate soul while gripping a long, dark and ornate staff with her other hand. The demoness wore a dress consisting of straps of rich purple cloth held together by golden clasps and jewelry, which accentuated the being's voluptuous figure whether it covered a place or laid it bare. The woman's golden hair flowed down to her ankles, violet at the tips and waving in the air around her under the influence of her uncontained power. She cast a beautiful and intimidating figure, tall enough to look down on most of the gathered students even without the dark heels on her feet lifting her up to a full head above most of her peers.

The student body had collectively stepped away from the lone target of the woman's ire, leaving him cowering under the demoness's

gaze. Lyselle recognized him as the satyr boy that Auna had been with the day before.

“You,” the demoness repeated, approaching the boy with slow steps and visible contempt, her hand locked in its accusing gesture. Her pale, ornate legs broke out from under the violet fabric of her dress with every step, heels pressing into the ground with force far exceeding any evident weight. Her aura seemed to consume the light around her, yet her eyes pierced the dark veil like golden daggers as she glared at her new target. “I sense her energy all over you. Care to explain why?”

The boy simply stood in place, his furry legs violently shaking underneath him. Lyselle spotted his roommate, the boy who had been hitting on Mellissa the day before, hiding amidst the crowd, shaking his head and signing Karnan blessings as if he were standing beside the satyr’s deathbed.

The Adorned reached out her hand. An aura of amethyst and shadow surrounded the terrified satyr and, with a simple clutch and pull of her arm, she drug his body effortlessly towards her through the air.

“You’ve *soiled* her, haven’t you?” The woman’s voice was dripping with hatred as she held the clenched fist to her side, trapping the boy in her shadow as she stared down into his soul. “Sullied my sister with your obscene *filth*.”

The satyr’s body tensed. He mustered up all the courage he could, before finally throwing his head back and shouting a defiant, ill-advised justification. “She is *very* hot, ma’am!”

The crowd offered a mixed response; some laughed, some hooted in bloodthirsty anticipation. More than a handful visibly winced and backed away from the circle’s center.

“‘Hot,’ you say?” The Adorned cocked her head. “This means nothing to me. All Adorned are physical perfection. We demand it.”

The satyr glanced around nervously, his gaze dancing from the crowd and its reactions to his captor and back in short, nervous bursts. “I s-suppose you’re right.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed. “That does not give you permission to indulge your heretical little *creature* eyes, never mind your hideous, bestial *cock*. But I suppose worthless animals like yourself cannot help themselves, can they?”

“T-there wasn’t much to help,” the boy admitted, his voice growing defiant under the bevy of insults. “*She* came on to *me*. I ain’t one to turn down a pretty thing’s proposition, what with all your ‘physical perfection’ and what not. Who would?”

The crowd was more unanimous in its anxiety this time as a wave of muttering pulsed through their numbers. Varying candidates threw glances to each other, acknowledging the odds that they were about to see a fresh corpse.

“A smarter being,” rebuked the Abyssal, her anger billowing out of her in waves of dark energy that billowed across the ground like streams of rolling fog. “Our kind do not exist for such wretched animals as your sort to...” She paused, hissing through her teeth and growling her final word down at the satyr. “...*deflower*.”

The boy immediately went on the full defensive. “Hey, hey! Don’t blame me! There weren’t no deflowerin’ to be *done*! I’m hardly Auna’s first plaything around here!”

The demoness’s face twitched in a subtle display of irritation, a violet glow overtaking the golden light her eyelids. “So I am learning.”

She threw her fist forward, releasing her clutch. The boy was sent hurtling back away from her, landing harshly against the cobblestone path underfoot and tumbling backwards onto his rump.

“Far be it from me to not be sporting about this, however,” the Adorned stated, slowly pacing a circle around the boy in a powerful display of barely-restrained anger. “Ready yourself, and count your blessings. I shall educate you on the superiority of my race first-hand, so that next time my sister makes unwise advances on something she shouldn’t, you all can recall this moment and prevent such... *shortcomings*.”

Lyselle looked on, concerned. “Wait, is she really gonna-?”

Talia nodded. “It’s a duel, whether he likes it or not. Her eighth this morning. Someone is *very* unhappy.”

“Wait, whether he likes it or not? Doesn’t he have right of refusal?”

A muffled growl could be heard deep in the half-elf’s throat. “He would if anyone was willing to intervene on the rampage of Magus Leltwick’s eldest. Stepping in the way of that family exercising their

so-called 'divine right' is a great way to end up standing before the council.”

“That’s...” Lyselle trailed off, visibly distressed.

The satyr fumbled to his feet, his expression clearly panicked as he held out one shaking hand. A beam of light emerged from his palm, and in an instant it became a staff in his grasp, simple and wooden with a roughly-cut shard of quartz at its end. “This is such *bullshit*,” he grumbled, his hooves shifting into position as he braced for combat.

“Oh, I’ll be gracious,” the demon assured. “By all measure, I may even be *merciful*, provided your opening spells impress me enough that I see some measure of worth in you. I suspect not, though.” She put a hand on her hip as she gestured for her opponent to act. “My sister has *shit* taste in playthings.”

“Is that so?” The satyr’s fear and defiance seemed locked in combat with each other. “And what if this plaything beats your ass?”

The Adorned snorted, and then laughed out loud at the proposition. “Oh, you wretched thing! If *you* manage to best *me*? Then I shall celebrate the freezing of Helrehm by allowing you to demonstrate what about that worm between your legs appeals to my sister so much, right here in front of everyone!”

The satyr smirked. “Guess that kink runs in the family, huh?”

Instantly, two stones flew at the satyr, passing within an inch of him to either side and breaking into the earth at the edge of the crowd behind him.

The woman’s staff was raised, pointed directly at her opponent. “If your first move is anything besides seeing how angry you can make me before you die, I would advise you to get to it.”

The boy huffed, mumbling his thoughts under his breath as he fought to settle on a plan. Finally, with one deeply drawn breath, he leaned back, stomping one hoof on the ground behind him as his staff shot forward. “*Apje!* Come forth, Aerides!”

The wind kicked up, catching the dust around the satyr’s hooves and swirling it underfoot in a circular dance. Light built at the end of his staff, and for a brief moment a glimmer of confidence and pride crossed the boy’s face.

But just that brief moment.

The winds stopped, and the light sputtered with a pitiful noise. The satyr's eyes widened in a mixture of disbelief and panic as he was left standing before an already-agitated Adorned in the melodramatic pose he'd taken. He'd just misfired his one chance to ease her inevitable onslaught.

Whispers ran through the crowd again, this time without the usual cheering, hoots and hollers.

"Just like the rest, then." The demoness's words spat from her lips like venom as her own staff was lifted over her head.

"I-I'm sorry," the boy whimpered as the sky above began to darken. "I... I don't know what happened! She's always answered before!"

The Adorned's eyes gleamed amethyst under the building darkness as a black miasma pulsated into existence above her staff, swirling into a dark orb that seemed to consume the light from the air around it. "The day I meet a man who doesn't reek of excuses and incompetence will be a blessed day indeed."

The look in the woman's eyes told the satyr all he needed to know.

"Shit! Shit!!" He stumbled back, tumbling onto his ass again as he frantically thrust his staff into the air in front of him, over and over, calling out his spell in a panic. "*Apje! Apje!!*"

It was no use. Quick as a whip, the demoness's staff swung down, pointing directly towards her target, and with that streak of motion the darkness above was sent flying towards the boy below with incredible speed. With a tremendous and near-instantaneous impact, the mass of energy crashed into the ground like a cannonball, a shockwave of dark mist bursting from its point of contact and sending several unfortunate onlookers stumbling back into the screaming crowd as hunks of cobblestone and earth were scattered like shrapnel.

Lyselle was too transfixed to move, equal parts enraptured by the demon's display of power and horrified by the damage it could so easily inflict. Her attention was pulled too late to the softball-sized stone that was soaring towards her face. Time seemed to slow as the debris closed in on her, the hurtling mass encroaching far too quickly to avoid now even if she'd tried.

A hand shot out in a flash. The rock impacted Talia Rosenblum's palm with a meaty *thwack*, the girl's arm barely budging under the impact. It was only then that Lyselle's body finally responded, jumping back with a yelp as the immediacy of the danger finally reached her brain.

Talia tilted her head towards Lyselle, barely taking her eyes from the arena in front of them. "You good?"

Lyselle clutched at her chest, trying to find her breath. After a few panicked intakes of air, she finally managed a simple, quiet response in her native tongue: "Holy *shit*."

As quickly as it had rolled in, the darkness overhead began to dissipate, burning away like ebbing fog. As the dust settled, the unfortunate satyr could be seen laid out and unmoving in a small crater, his body partially embedded into the crushed cobblestone.

The Adorned sighed, and turned to address the crowd. "One of you fetch the nurses again. He can't warn the rest of the garbage if he's dead, even if that *is* what the wretched thing deserves."

The students looked on, uniformly terrified, some staring at the witch while others watched their classmate for any sign that a nurse was even worth fetching. Even the mages standing along the wall simply stared, paralyzed by their own fear of the witch's evident power.

"Hurry now," she urged. "As weak as he was, I suspect there's more than a bit of skeleton that's been reduced to powder." The demoness looked down at the crater. "Or don't. Maybe he's so wretched that even you loathsome things don't think he's worth the salvage. I wouldn't blame you, so long as you spread the word."

A pair of students, one of them the satyr's roommate, scurried out of the crowd and pulled the battered body out of the dirt, a trail of blood left in their wake as they drug him off towards the main building. The Adorned's eyes tracked her victim into the muttering throng, a villainous smile adding to her merciless air once he'd left her sight.

"Honestly," the woman sighed, "nobody properly respects this place." With a lazy wave of her hand, the ground around the crater shifted and rose, turning in and mending itself until the evidence of the conflict was swallowed by the earth, blood and all. "Not like I do, at least, or rabble like that wouldn't even be allowed on these grounds. Who fails at a basic summons?"

Lyselle felt Talia's energy shift beside her. The half-elf's eyes narrowed, her muscles tensing ever so slightly, as the demoness spoke. Something the Adorned said had clearly gotten under the girl's skin.

She turned to Lyselle, the energy in her voice less enthused than normal as she offered the fallen Terran a hand. "We should get moving before she decides to take her frustrations out on someone else who can't do shit about it."

"O-oh...!" Lyselle took the offer, rising back onto her feet with the elf's aid. "Thank you."

Talia's eyes were already drifting back towards the demoness. Lyselle followed her classmate's gaze, and a chill ran down her spine.

The Adorned was looking directly at them.

"Rabble like *this*," the woman hissed. "A filthy half-blood and a talentless invader. I would think such refuse would be ashamed to show themselves in the light of day at all, yet here they are, hand in disgusting hand."

Lyselle saw something in Talia snap, the slightest twitch of true irritation crossing the girl's face as she drew in a resigned breath. She placed her hand on her hip, taking up a convincing air of her usual grinning bravado as she addressed the antagonizing combatant.

"I see you're as charming as ever, Camilla."

The demoness's head cocked. "Mind your manners, impurity. I am *Lady* Camilla, to you."

"Funny," the half-elf quipped. "I didn't know 'Ladies' went around smashing little boys into the dirt."

"It is my divine right to do as I please, and I *protect* that right by defending the purity of my lineage." Camilla's finger tapped agitatedly against her staff. "Something my sister would do well to remember. The last thing we need is her dragging our bloodline closer to mud like your whore mother did hers."

Talia's grin stiffened as she cracked her own neck. Despite the facade, Lyselle could see the anger raging in the half-elf's eyes. "I don't recall your bloodline making much of a difference last time you picked a fight with me, 'Lady' Camilla. Or have you forgotten?"

Whispers shot through the crowd as candidates began to step away from the space between Talia and the Adorned with a nervous haste.

“I do not forget my shames,” Camilla growled, her fingernails carving a fresh groove into her staff. “I long for nothing more than to cleanse this plane of your sickening presence.”

“Oh?” Talia’s eyes burned like fire as she stared down at the demon below. “Are we trying *again* today??”

“You speak with some confidence for someone who simply stood and watched as much as the other dregs.”

“And you antagonize a lot for someone who goes crying to daddy every time they lose.”

The energy in the air was tense as the pair glared into each other. Lyselle swore she could feel heat radiating from the half-elf. Talia’s hair seemed to rise and spread as if exposed to an electric current. Camilla was no less intimidating, the sunlight once again dimming as she stared back at the elf in disgust. The air seemed electric just from the intensity of the pair’s mutual stare, each daring the other to make the first move.

Then, in an instant, the tension snapped as the Adorned turned away with a huff. “Your time will come, you... *misfortune*, but luckily for you I have more important matters to attend to.” She began marching towards the school, the crowd parting before her to clear her path. “Such as finding my shameless whore of a sister.”

Talia’s eyes tracked Camilla as the demoness walked off towards the front gate, her grin fading into a more honest look of distaste now that the demoness wasn’t looking. “Whatever you say, Cammy.”

The gathered students began to scatter in the Adorned’s wake, each scurrying away from the agitated demon with understandable haste as her attention turned to searching the school’s halls. Murmurs of gossip and speculation rose quickly as the giant doors of the academy’s front gate slammed shut behind the imposing woman.

Talia exhaled, her demeanor immediately softening once the demon was out of sight. “Hell’s stone, that girl’s a pain.”

“That’s Auna’s sister?” Lyselle shivered, thinking about the power the woman had so easily displayed. “What do you think will happen if she finds her?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that.” Talia grinned at her classmate before turning her attention to the hedge beside them. “Right, Auna?”

A light yelp came from the bush. A moment later, the leaves slowly parted as the younger Adorned's face cautiously peered out from within. "How long have you known?"

Talia shrugged. "The whole time."

Auna balked. "How!?"

"Auna, she may be your sister, but I'm in class with you every day." Talia leaned down towards the face in the bushes. "I am keenly aware of your fussy bitch aura."

Lyselle blinked as realization hit her. "You stood here on purpose!"

"Of course." Talia stood back upright, her expression showing that she was clearly pleased with herself. "Even if she sensed Auna's presence, she'd just look up and see me."

"And once you had her attention..." Lyselle let out a light laugh as the half-elf's intentions clicked.

"Make a little fuss, do a bit of magical peacocking, and Camilla can't even notice her own little sister hiding right underfoot." She glanced back down to Auna. "You're welcome, by the way. I don't really enjoy watching your boyfriends get cremated alive, but I figured they had a better chance of walking away than you."

Auna's face sunk back into the leaves. "I doubt you're wrong."

Lyselle thought for a moment. "You know she's just going to go right for the dorms, right? If Auna goes back in there..."

"Auna's a bush now," protested Auna the bush.

Talia shrugged. "Hey, if that's your play. I can't play gardener all day, though. Got work to do."

Lyselle sighed. She had an idea brewing. She hated it. "I don't think the bush will suffice for very long."

Auna's porcelain face shot back out of the shrubbery, glaring up at the Terran. "What, have you got some *better* idea, Alwin?"

Lyselle's eyebrow raised. "Than hiding in a bush?"

The Adorned's face flushed as it sank lower against the leaves that framed it. "Okay. Fair point. I saw her coming this morning and worked with what I had. I didn't think she'd start busting dicks in the dooryard!"

"Camilla's stubborn, too," lamented Talia. "I give it at least a week before she gets bored and wanders off again."

Auna let out a long-winded groan of frustration. “Man, I just wanted to ride Gavin under a tree!”

Lyselle frowned. “In front of everybody?”

“That’s the point,” Auna and Talia responded in unison, the former with a notably higher degree of indignation.

“Ah.”

The demoness growled in frustration, though to an outside observer it looked like Talia and Lyselle were listening to the qualms of a vibrating garden hedge. “Honestly! I don’t know why this damned family gets so mad about our bloodline or whatever! It’s not like I’m gonna have these dudes’ babies! I don’t want *anyone’s* babies!! Why does she have to police what I do!?”

“I think it’s because she’s a raging cunt,” Talia remarked nonchalantly.

Lyselle looked back over her shoulder towards the closed double doors that Camilla had disappeared into. The idea forming in her mind grew louder, more assertive.

Someone, help her...

These words had crossed her mind before. Her thoughts drifted to the previous day, to her hesitance when Melissa had needed help.

Someone...?

Anxiety gripped her. She was powerless, hardly in a position to make such a fearsome foe as an Adorned who primarily spoke through violent spellcraft and insults. She hadn’t even stood up to a horny satyr in a hallway full of witnesses. Her and Auna hardly even got along, regardless, so what was to say the girl would accept or even want the Terran’s help?

Why not me?

She’d made a dreadful enemy of someone she feared before. She’d escaped her former home and abusers. She’d stood up, even if by a fit of desperate adrenaline, to Everett Hector.

Those were necessary! I had no choice!

The image of Lori in the lizardman’s arms flashed across her mind, memories of the other captives, of their horror and sorrow in that wretched wagon.

And then, the image of *her*.

“Let’s set Camilla’s interesting motivations aside for the time being,” Lyselle remarked, pulling her pack from her shoulders and stripping the hoodie off of her body. “Auna, put this on.”

The demoness scoffed. “Not my style.”

“That’s the point.” Lys pushed the garment into the hedge insistently.

There was a resigned huff from the bush before the sweater was pulled into its depths. A brief rustling of shrubbery later, Auna emerged from the flora with a displeased pout, slouching inside of Lyselle’s Terran garment as if it weighed half a ton.

“Hood up,” Lys ordered, reaching out to pull at the fabric rather than waiting for Auna to do it herself.

“But it hides my pretty horns,” the demoness whinged.

“Yeah, that’s the idea.”

Talia put a hand up to her chin, observing the process with eager curiosity. “What you thinking, Lys?”

“Low profile,” stated the Terran. “She can’t go back into the school, obviously, but she can look as little like Auna as possible while we help her sneak off campus.”

Lyselle turned back to Auna. “Now, where’s the last place anyone would ever think to look for you?”

“This plan *suuuucks*.”

Auna, still clad in Lyselle’s hoodie, swatted clumsily at a low-hanging branch after having nearly walked into it. The warm-hued forest thickened quickly beyond the bounds of the school’s campus, though a number of trails, both natural and deliberately-crafted, wove through the undergrowth.

“I’m sorry,” Lyselle quipped, carefully pushing aside the outstretched arms of some particularly ambitious shrub, “but *your* idea of hiding in the gym’s changing room was infinitely worse.”

Auna whimpered as she brushed a loose twig off her sleeve. “It’s got that good *boy* stink, though!”

Talia laughed. “Yeah, and that’s why it’s probably the first place Camilla went looking for you.” The half-elf was weaving through the trees in front of her companions deftly, demonstrably unbothered by nature’s crowding embrace.

The demoness scoffed. “So? What, you think athletes aren’t ‘genetically superior’ enough for the family lineage?”

“I don’t know,” the half-elf replied. “Is the athlete your cousin?”

“We don’t conceive with our *cousins*,” Auna sneered, visibly offended for just a moment before quietly finishing her thought with a much less enthused “They’re *second* cousins, at least.”

Talia snorted. “Amazing.”

“I can see why you’d want to branch out.” Lyselle took a moment to pluck a pair of orange leaves out from her hair, twirling the stem that they clung to between her fingers. “Your sister doesn’t seem very pleased, though.”

“My sister is *never* pleased.” Auna slapped a branch aside so hard that it snapped off of its host tree and loudly crashed into the bushes beside the trail. “Camilla can fuck right off. She’s bought so much of daddy’s bullshit that even half of our own gross-ass family isn’t good enough for her anymore.”

Lyselle frowned, flicking the leaves aside. “I can relate to that.”

“Can you?” Auna reached out, pulling another stray leaf from the back of the girl’s head and smugly holding it out like a prize. “You missed one, by the way.”

“O-oh. Thanks.”

It was uncanny, receiving any display of kindness from Auna Leltwick, even if the experience was being cushioned by the demoness’s typical displays of attitude. Camilla’s venomous words in the dooryard had provided a rare bit of insight into what made the younger sister tick, though Lyselle still wasn’t sure how she felt about it.

In fairness, Auna seemed uneasy as well, her brief show of pride ebbing quickly to embarrassment, as if comprehending the whiplash of her own previous behavior compared to now.

Lyselle sighed. “I *can* relate, yes. My brother has fully bought into our own family’s... *doctrine*.”

Talia looked up, having leaned against a tree while waiting for the other two to catch up. “Oh, shit! Are you a cousin-fucker too?”

Lys recoiled. “Ew, no!”

“Thanks for that,” Auna muttered.

“I’ve never slept with a cousin,” the Terran protested. She held another branch aside in her hand, trying to mask an uneasy hiccup in her stride with the motion as she glanced away and muttered, “or anybody else.”

Auna bolted forward in front of Lys, eyes wide as she shouted in surprise. “You’re a *virgin!*?”

Lyselle stared back at the Adorned, expression unenthused. She let go of the branch and let it swat Auna in the face.

Talia laughed again, lifting herself from the tree and placing her hands on her hips. “You know that’s easy to fix, right?”

Lys brushed past the pair, trudging deeper into the wood. “I just... want my first to be special, alright? Is that a problem?”

“Lucky.” Auna lifted the branch from her eyes, pushing it aside and holding it in place as she spoke. “Wish I’d had that option.”

Lyselle stopped in place, turning her head to listen. “What do you mean?”

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence, followed by a resigned sigh. “I *mean* that daddy dearest tried to arrange *everything* for

us.” The demoness looked at Talia and squinted with a bitter grin. “The ‘cousin-fucking’ wasn’t optional.”

Talia’s bravado dropped quickly. “You don’t mean...?”

Auna waved her free hand, dismissing the concern. “We were told that arranging pairs would help preserve the ‘purity’ of the Adorned. Me and the guy were both just doing what we were taught was right, even though neither of us liked it.”

The half-elf frowned. “I’m not sure that’s any *better* than what I was thinking...”

“I guess not.” The demoness thought for a moment, idly bouncing the branch against her hand as she chose her words. “It wasn’t all bad. He and I both agreed in the end that the family’s way of doing things wasn’t for us. We both hated it. It’s no fun fucking out of duty, honestly, and neither of us wanted kids, never mind with each other.”

Lyselle’s eyes were fixed on the ground, still facing away from her companions. “Auna...”

“So no,” the Adorned interrupted, releasing the branch and walking towards Lys while rolling her eyes. “My first wasn’t special. But~!” She clasped a hand around Lyselle’s shoulder, giving the girl a wink as she walked past. “I make damn sure that the rest are!”

Lyselle huffed out a soft chuckle, smiling weakly at the demon. “Even if it means your sister hunts you for sport?”

Auna laughed as she continued ahead. “Pissing off Camilla is a bonus. It’s what she *does* with that frustration that I’d like to avoid.” She waved back as she strode past Talia. “Hurry up, slowpokes!”

The half-elf rolled her shoulders and began hopping in place. “Oh, like hell I’m letting a pretty little *teacup* out-woodsman *me*.”

“W-wait!” Lyselle protested as the half-blood bolted forward.

It was no use. Talia had already pulled herself up into the tree she’d leaned against and scampered down its hefty bough. The pair could only watch as the woman vaulted through the branches overhead and vanished into the woods, the sound of rustling bushes and shaking trees rapidly quieting into the distance ahead of them.

“Okay, cool, you do that.” Auna tilted her head towards Lyselle as the Terran stepped up beside her. “She’s... *heard* about all the monsters and shit out here, right?”

“She has,” Lys answered. “There was a whole lecture about ‘vibes.’”

“Ah.”

The pair stood for a moment, listening as Talia’s movements faded even further into the distance.

Suddenly, something clicked with Auna, the demoness’s head whipping towards Lyselle as she barked, “Did you say ‘vibes?’”

Her thoughts were interrupted by a loud snap and the sound of Talia screaming in the distance.

“Oh, she is so fucked.” Auna held out her hand, manifesting a sparkling crystal wand. “Stay behind me.”

Light quickly built within the wand, streaming from its origin at the demoness’s palm and up to the crystal’s tip.

“*Ajuegil!*”

The command came alongside a quick flick of her wrist, and the energy in the wand was shot forward into the ground. The earth rumbled beneath them, the barely-maintained foot trail of orange and yellow grass parting with an earthen roar to reveal the root-woven soil below. As the gap widened, the bushes ahead pulled apart, branches and roots snapping and falling into the freshly-torn rift as the undergrowth was spread aside. Within seconds, a path forward was cleared.

In the distance Talia yelped, shouting something at her assailant.

“Come on,” Auna barked, rushing down the newly-carved trail with her wand still lit in her grasp.

“R-right,” Lys stammered, taking a moment longer than she’d have liked to convince her own legs to carry her forward. *Not that I’m going to be able to do much to help by comparison...*

The path opened by the demoness was long enough to match most of the distance the half-elf had so eagerly covered, and the Terran couldn’t help but feel intimidated by the seemingly effortless show of power. Auna didn’t seem interested in gloating or showing off, though; Lyselle had never seen the typically-haughty classmate display such immediate and serious focus and action before.

At the end of the tear, the path tapered into a veil of crimson bushes, and Talia’s cries could be heard from just beyond. Auna lept through the shrubbery ahead of Lyselle with unhesitant, wordless determination.

Lys winced in preparation to follow suit. “Damn it all...”

The Terran did her best to break through the undergrowth as confidently as her peer, though she wound up feeling much less graceful about her own attempt. The branches scraped at her bare shoulders and arms, her legs faring little better as she came stumbling out on the other side with substantially less confidence and momentum than she assumed Auna demonstrated in her effort.

As she found her footing, the Terran righted her glasses on her face and took stock of the situation. The Adorned stood less than a meter from her, feet planted and wand pointed at something overhead. Talia’s handbag was on the ground in front of her.

Lyselle’s gaze followed Auna’s outstretched arm to see the thing before them. An array of thick crimson vines wrothe through the air, and for a moment Lys was violently reminded of the great beast her former captors had employed in their desert prison. She felt in that instant as if the thing’s tendrils were grabbing for her again, moving to steal her away into another dimly-lit cage. This creature was shrouded in less darkness and mystery, though what the light revealed was of little comfort; the undulating vines met at a great maw like a venus fly trap’s, opening and closing in steady rhythm over a ring of red and yellow flowers at the plant-like creature’s root. The mouth was massive, several meters across and lined with spiked extrusions as long as Lys was tall, spaced in such a way that when the great maw snapped shut its prey would be sealed inside the digestive prison at their center.

Within the nightmarish thing’s twisting tendrils, hung aloft several feet overhead, was Talia Rosenblum.

“Oh, hey guys!” Her demeanor was oddly calm for someone wrapped in a monster’s grip. The vines holding her overhead pulled and prodded at her clothing like they were trying to get to the soft meat under a creature’s outer shell.

“T-Talia!” Lyselle didn’t know what to do, but knew she had to do *something*. “Hold on!” Her voice cracked as she spoke, her fluency in Demonic wavering under the pressure. The Terran started frantically scanning the landscape for some tool she could use, some means of freeing the elf from its grasp as her mind raced. “We... I... I’ll get you down! Somehow!”

Talia cocked her head. “What, and ruin the fun?”

“This is hardly the time for—!” Lyselle paused, shaken out of her emotional response by the juxtaposition of the half-elf’s words. “Wha... What!?”

Upon further examination, Talia wasn’t just calm; she was downright *cheery*. The candidate’s body squirmed and leaned against every touch the vines offered her as they moved against her, and she seemed to offer the furthest possible thing from resistance one could fathom to its efforts to peel away her clothes.

A heavy blush of realization flooded Lyselle’s face as a smiling Talia let the creature’s appendages pull down her panties, the tentacles hiking up the skirt of her tunic enough to fully expose her groin as they began to rub against her inner thighs.

Lyselle’s eyes shot away to the first tree trunk that could hold her attention, and her linguistic ability finally withered into flustered English exclamations as her knees slowly gave out under her. “O-oh! Oh my God!”

Auna was less than pleased, dismissing her wand back into the aether from which it came with an audible huff. “Dammit, Rosenblum! I thought you were fucked!”

“Oh!” A vine around Talia’s arm let go, leaving her to drape down by her legs as the floral beast started pawing at the corset holding her tunic in place. “Naw, not just yet. Hopefully, though, if things keep going according to plan!”

“Plan!?” Auna balked. “What fucking plan!? Did you drag a virgin out into the woods to get railed by a fucking writheweed!?”

“I mean, I don’t think the writheweed would mind.” Talia spun slowly overhead as her corset was flung to the ground. “Oh,” she cooed up at the vines, “that was fast! You’re a dextrous one, aren’t you?”

“But no,” she resumed as the vine undressing her wound its way into her cleavage and pulled against the final meager ties holding the fabric loosely in place, “the plan was to find one of these. Where did you think I was leading you?”

“Leading!?” The demoness’s white skin had gone violet with frustration as her shouting grew increasingly agitated. “How the fiery fuck were we supposed to know you were ‘leading’ us anywhere? You just hopped off through the trees like some kind of damned lemur!!”

“Excuse you,” the captive girl balked as her breasts spilled out from her increasingly ineffective top, “I hopped through the trees like a damned wood elf, thank you very much! On my mother’s side, for the record.”

“Who *gives* a shit!?”

Auna’s frustrations were met with the removed tunic being flung directly over her face.

“Oh! Nice shot!” Talia stroked the end of one of the undressing vines as if it were the chin of a cat.

A thought occurred to Lyselle as she looked over the beast. “Wait, that’s—!” She quickly took off her backpack and, after a quick rummage through its front pouch, pulled out the folded list of items Evenclire had prepared for them. She pried it open, her eyes scanning down the list quickly. “You said writheweed?”

“I said *fucking* writheweed!” Auna punctuated her response by flinging Talia’s top to the ground and making a dramatic gesture towards the monstrous plant.

Talia spun overhead, seemingly without a care in the world. “That’s what we’ve got here, yeah. It’s on the list, right?”

Auna hunched down with a loud groan of resignation before glancing over to Lyselle and speaking in a defeated – but still entirely perturbed – tone. “What list?”

“Scavenger hunt for Evenclire,” Lys answered. “And she’s right. The Magus asked for writheweed pollen and extract.”

“Bingo,” the half-elf chimed from above, petting the top of a vine in each hand. “You get the pollen, and I’ll get the extract!”

“And how do you get the extract from up—” The words caught in Lyselle’s throat as she looked up.

Talia had run out of clothing to cast aside. Stripped down to nothing but her boots, the woman’s lithe figure now hung half-cradled by the fondling plant. The elf bit her lip and hummed in delight as the weed massaged her pale skin with a singular attentive length that wrapped and slid around her. Her breasts hung nakedly over the fibrous appendage, jiggling and molding against its form as its length slithered across her naked body.

Lyselle couldn’t help but stare as the tendril slid over the other candidate. Talia’s body was turned into position in the air by the vines

as she dangled willingly at their mercy. The Terran's breath seized in her throat as she watched the tip of one vine contort and surge into shape, the end of the otherwise innocuous length of plant engorging into a bulbous phallus that began probing the tender space between its catch's legs. Talia let out a soft, rapturous gasp as the vine teased at her glistening entrance, and Lyselle caught herself quietly uttering the same breathless sound.

Auna looked from Lyselle to Talia, from Talia to Lyselle. "Uh... Do you wanna join her?"

Lys snapped out of her trance with a sharp, stuttering breath, her speech bouncing between English and broken Demonic as she tried to refocus. "*N-nope!* Job to do! Have a job to do! Gotta..." She turned shakily towards the opened pack, remembering the alchemic supplies she'd gathered the day before. "*Right!* The pollen! I'll gather the pollen!"

"Pollen's around the blossom," Talia instructed through a soft moan.

"*Oh, Jesus,*" Lys muttered. The half-blood's pleased voice seemed to wash through Lyselle's entire body, and the fantasies she'd so gleefully embraced that morning came roaring back into her mind. Her head was flooded with unwelcome wants and wishes as she pulled a vial and long metal prong from her pack's depths.

"It's easier to gather when it's—" A louder groan, long and lustful, interrupted the half-elf's speech this time as the creature's tendril finally pressed into her, slowly sliding up into her wet and wanting core. As it settled into her, Talia finally finished her sentence through noticeably heavier breaths. "... excited."

"Being excited isn't making it easier for *me,*" Lys grumbled quietly, hands shaking as she gripped her tools and attempted to mentally steele herself.

"How *ah!!*-bout you, Auna?" Talia mewled, her vocal responses to the creature's work becoming harder to contain as it began to rhythmically thrust into her. "It's— *ah!!* — It's pretty fu-*ah-uuuhn!*"

"Pass," the demoness stated bluntly. "Not my thing."

Talia just shrugged, letting the plant continue its exploration of her body. The creature slid in and out of Talia's elven canal steadily, taking its time as its girth pressed against the girl's slick walls. The

half-blood let herself melt into its touch, no longer concerned with conversing with her peers as her hips twisted eagerly against the vine's writhing motions in the air. Its length wrapped around the girl and cradled her neck, supporting her in the air as its motions left its form brushing back and forth across her body, gripping and loosening in rhythm with its thrusts.

Lyselle tried not to dwell on the show happening above her as she hastily made her way towards the ring of vibrant red blossoms circling the creature's base, but it was difficult not to give in to temptation. One glance upwards, and the sway of Talia's tits dangling overhead could entrance the girl long enough for the elf to notice. She *had* to glance though; once, twice, here and there, each time serving as a test of her will to look away as the sunlight breaking through the trees cast speckling patterns against the slender silhouette twisting amidst its rays. Each mote told volumes about the curvature and movement of Talia's muscle and skin, while also shrouding her in just enough glare to leave Lyselle wanting. On one glance, the glint of dew dripping from between the half-elf's legs caught in the sun, nearly overwhelming the poor Terran on its own. Even when Lys wasn't looking, the increasing sounds of the girl's pleased cries sent surges of heat through the poor girl's shaking body.

She sat on her knees and tried to focus on her work, brushing the metal utensil around the center of the writheweed's blooms to gather a dusting of its pollen before depositing the results into the vial in her other hand. A quick dusting, a quick deposit, another dusting, another deposit; direct, simple, and effective. To Lyselle's relief, the writheweed seemed happy to cooperate, doubtless because its own wants were being more than placated. To her decidedly more mixed feelings, the weed also seemed to be enjoying Lyselle's specific attentions as well. The flowers' petals spread open, their amber stamens stretching out towards the Terran, eagerly presenting themselves for her gathering tool.

Lys was hesitant, but there was a job that needed doing, and her partner was clearly too occupied to handle it for her. Besides that, there was a sense of obligation to prove Evenclire's decision to send the Terran along to be a wise one; the last thing she wanted was to demonstrate another assignment's optimal means of failure.

Gripping the bristled utensil tightly, she resumed gathering from the weed's blooms, trying to focus on the scientific necessity of the action through the shudders quaking of the flowers under her touch. For a brief time, her mind managed to free itself from the hold of Talia's evocations, focused on the work at hand.

... But only for that brief time.

As she collected the pollen, the attentive Terran couldn't help but observe a demonstrable pattern. With each brush of the tool against the plant's numerous stamina, the vines around it would tense, with the contraction then rolling up their length in waves...

And directly into Talia Rosenblum, who bucked and cried out lustfully with each swell of the creature's tension, as confirmed when Lys watched very attentively during one particularly experimental prodding at the bush's blossoms.

Her eyes darted away, that persistent tattletale blush returning even stronger than it had been before. Lyselle paused for a moment, absent-mindedly brushing the tool's bristles off into the glass vial as her gaze fixated on the twitching stamens before her. Her throat went dry as she considered what was happening.

Every time I brush...

Without turning her head, Lyselle's eyes shifted towards Talia. The sounds overhead had calmed, the half-elf's yelps and cries now reduced to contended moaning as the creature worked at her body.

She's clearly having a good time, the Terran conceded. Then, biting her lip as she pulled the brush out from within the vial, a devious thought crossed her mind.

But I can make it better.

Her hand shook as she lowered the tool back over the flowers, hesitation holding her back again as she questioned what she was doing. Her breath seized and her heart beat like a drum in her ears as she paused to reconsider.

Don't be absurd! You just have a job to do, that's all.

Then Talia's voice groaned out like an animal in heat. "More. Gods, that was so good. Why did you stop? Keep going, please!"

She's talking to the plant, Lyselle assured herself. *She has no way of knowing I was—!*

"Please," the half-blood whimpered. "Please, I was so close!"

Lyselle found her breath again, sharply inhaling as the whorish plea rang through her mind. A chill shot up her spine, sending a shudder through her body in breaking desire as her limbs tensed. Within that fit of reflex, her arm thrust the brush harshly into one of the plant's buds.

The great maw let out a guttural groan of its own as tension shot up its vines like a bolt. Almost instantly, Talia's voice rang through the forest again, a long, lustful cry bursting out of her as the plant's vine surged deep into her core. The tendril wrapped around her seizing body gripped tight against her, heightening the sensation as her restrained hips fought to buck and spasm over the girth penetrating her.

Lyselle paused, shakily exhaling a single breath as her actions sunk in. The heat washing over her was borderline unbearable, and again she felt herself internally divided over her own wants and actions. There was no real out, though; the utensil was still pinned into a trembling bud, its petals shivering in apparent pleasure against the girl's knuckle. Though it seemed incapable of speech, there was no question left in Lyselle's mind what exactly the writheweed wanted.

Oh my God, the Terran realized. *This is what she meant by vibes.*

Lys started to pull the tool back out of the flower, slowly, gently. The plant responded with a sound somewhere between a growl and a purr, the petals of its buds flitting in delight as its vines vibrated up and through its captive's body. Talia's voice yelped and then, after a brief pause, sounded as if she were melting in the thing's grip in response.

The apparatus shook in the Terran's hand, but the writheweed hardly seemed to protest the ticklish attention. Lyselle watched as a single, large bud extended out from the other flowers and opened wide before her.

An invitation.

She glanced over her shoulder; Auna was ignoring the entire situation, seemingly preoccupied plucking more loose foliage from her hair and borrowed sweater. She'd been covered in the stuff after her daring would-be rescue efforts, and visibly could not care less about what was happening overhead, never mind Lyselle's markedly less thrilling collection endeavors.

Lys looked back at the wanting flower and gulped down her nerves. In a slow, deliberate motion, she placed the bristled tool against the eager red petals before her. They responded quickly but gently, the

flower closing tightly around the tool and sucking its length down into the pistil at its center. The tips of the flower grazed against Lyselle's hand as if holding it, guiding her towards its desires.

The Terran's face softened as any remaining pretense of scientific necessity grew shakier by the second. She let the flower guide her movements, pushing the utensil down into the petals calmly, steadily, and then pulling it back just as gently as they pushed back. The same tension rolled up the vines as before, but its pace, its *swell*, followed hers.

In and out.

In and out.

In and out, all while overhead Talia was left responding with eager approval.

It was improper. It was sinful.

It was *intoxicating*.

Lyselle closed her eyes, too embarrassed to look at her classmate, to risk being figured out, but eagerly listening to every vocalization, every cry and moan and wanting hum of the girl twisting in the vines, the girl begging for more, the girl who was deriving such pleasure from the actions of her companion here below.

The Terran's motions grew more confident and eager by the second, and the flower responded by taking her entire hand into its surprisingly firm grip. Images formed in Lyselle's mind, lustful fantasies of Talia making these sounds for her knowingly, wantingly, her pale skin bared in the moonlight as it poured through the dorm window next to Lyselle's bed. She thought about how her own body had felt under her hand, and wondered if a half-elf's slit and folds would feel the same. She wondered if she would even know how to pleasure another person regardless when she had barely even learned her way around herself.

Talia's vocalizations built even more, louder, faster. "Yes! Yes! Right there! Just like that!"

Lys, I think it's safe to say you're figuring that out pretty well, she consoled herself.

She could learn. She *wanted* to learn. Here in this moment, she felt herself giving in to a sick sort of pleasure, admitting that she *was*

learning, eagerly and happily, and not just with regards to giving the *elf* a good time.

In and out, in and out, in and out...

A lustful instinct guided her in response to Talia's building desperation. She could hear it; that same feeling she'd had in the springs, what she'd felt in her bed that very morning, what she had to fight the urge to let herself feel *now*: the swelling, fitful tension and heat of being on the cusp of a desperately-sought orgasm.

At that realization, a single thought shot through the Terran's mind like a bullet. *I want to do that for her! I want to make her feel what I've felt!*

Talia!

She leaned forward, intently focused on her task. As the apparatus plunged down into the flower below, Lys started experimenting, twisting the long device around as she thrust it within the plant's fertile tube, and gently brushing the flower's exterior with her other hand, the receiving vial long since set aside in favor of her deviant affair. The weed responded blissfully to Lyselle's efforts, its smaller flowers squirming at its base and begging for a similar touch, and in her heat the Terran gladly obliged, brushing her fingers over and under petals, across stymens and pistils, cradling individual buds in her palm as she grazed by them.

Something was happening. The writheweed bent and bucked at its root, the maw at its core clamping shut as it shook out another guttural purr. The flowers at its base trembled, the large bud pulling Lyselle's entire forearm into its grip as it throbbed. She grabbed at the stems beneath her in a fight to keep her balance, and her grasping sent a final wave of tension up the creature's vines. Talia cried out in a long, stuttering wail as the rippling tremors pounded into her, shaking against her inside and out.

Lyselle turned quickly, worried that she'd caused the plant to hurt her partner. Instead, what she saw was Talia Rosenblum, eyelids lilted in orgasmic bliss as her body shook in the plant's tense grip. Her pale legs twitched in the air as a thick, amber-hued sap poured out from between them, a clear stream of her own ejaculate shooting out of her as she and the plant came together.

Slowly, the writheweed relaxed, the tension in its vines abating into a careful slack as it gently returned Talia to the ground. As the half-elf came to rest against the red grass underfoot, the intruding vine moved to exit her body, only to be met with the tight grip of the girl's thighs holding it in place.

"Not yet," the elf cooed, her voice soft and warm. "Give us just a moment."

There was a quiet moment as Talia caught her breath, and Lyselle took that moment to regain her own composure, picking the vial up off of the ground and gently pulling the brushing tool out from the bud loosening around her hand. Feeling rude simply walking away, she gave the flower a gentle brush across its underside with her palm, scratching the petals lightly as she rose to her feet. The plant leaned itself into her touch until she'd slid away, and then the buds at the weed's base all closed slowly upon themselves as if going to sleep. The Terran felt herself blushing again, but not out of shame, even if she didn't want to think too hard about what she'd just done.

"Lys." Talia beckoned from the ground, still not having moved from where she'd been set. She wove towards the hiking bag that had been left on the ground at the clearing's edge as she spoke. Her words came out slowly, like someone who'd just woken up from a pleasant dream. "You brought a bowl or something, right? Could you bring that over here?"

"Uh... S-sure," the Terran stammered, brushing herself off in an unconvincing show of nonchalance before power-walking her way over to the pack, eyes fixed firmly on the ground the entire time. After a moment of rummaging, she found what Talia had requested, or at least something that would serve the purpose the Terran was realizing she needed it for: an alchemical mortar, one of a set, and the largest Lyselle felt comfortable cramming into a bag she intended to haul through a forest.

"Thank you, Lyssie," Talia sang at her classmate as she handed her the bowl.

Lyselle was already mentally elsewhere, eyes fixated on the curvature of half-blood's naked body; the movement of her chest with every recovering breath, the flush of her cheeks, the surprising strength

of her delicate-looking legs. She felt jealous of the writheweed gripped between them.

She wouldn't have to hold onto that jealousy for long. Talia lifted her rear, sliding the bowl under her as she parted her legs. The newly-freed vine pulled out of her sex, and with a soft sputter spilled more of its amber sap into the bowl on top of what was already pouring out from between the half-elf's curtains.

"Gross." Auna stood leaning against a tree, nonchalantly inspecting her golden fingernails. "You coulda just stroked it off, you know."

"And you could've fucked a satyr somewhere with fewer witnesses," Talia retorted. "Let a girl have her fun."

Lyselle stared at the mortar as it flooded over with the thick substance gifted to them by the writheweed, only somewhat distracted by the glistening vagina hovering above it that was covered in something so similar in appearance to sweet honey. She found herself equal parts agreeing with Auna and fascinated by the prospect of being in Talia's position. She quickly shook those thoughts out of her mind.. "That's... the extract?"

"You got it!" The half-elf smiled as she sat upright in the grass, giving Lyselle an accomplished smile. "Good teamwork, partner" she added with a wink.

"O-oh," Lys sputtered, eyes shooting back up from the bowl between Talia's legs to the half-elf's face. "I-it was nothing! I just got the pollen!"

"That you did," Talia cooed, "and our friend here *loved* it." She wriggled her shoulders, looking off to the side with a coy grin before adding, "As did I."

Lyselle stiffened. She felt as if her entire body was turning red. "Okay, er, *well*, uh—" She desperately looked around for something to distract them both with. "Clothes! Your clothes! I will get your clothes."

Talia laughed. "That would be sweet, thank you!"

The half-elf rested her arm against her knees, placing her palm against her face as she cheerfully watched the Terran scurry off to gather up the discarded wardrobe. She got a particular chuckle out of the sudden yelp Lyselle uttered upon realizing she was holding her classmate's underwear.

“Oh, you are gonna *break* that poor girl,” Auna said as she approached, also watching Lyselle’s flustered scramble across the clearing.

Talia rolled her eyes. “I would never.”

She slid the bowl of extract aside and began brushing her disheveled hair back into place with her fingers. Her expression softened as she watched Lys stop and look off into the trees, shoulders rising and falling with a single, intentional deep breath.

“If anything, I’m hoping for the opposite.”

It had been three weeks since Nidrah had guided Lyselle and Lori out of the desert. The trio had claimed one of the slavers' forsaken wagons for their journey out of the sweltering sands, though this time the vehicle's occupants were in much better spirits than they'd been on their arrival. The Abyssal had aided Lyselle in scavenging several sets of clothes from the ravaged vendor space outside of the slavers' hall, guiding the Terran to a fair selection of both Karnan garments and more familiar fare from her home world. This had only been part of Nidrah's efforts to prepare the cowl's new tagalongs for an inevitable journey through the distant mountains; the demoness had also carefully picked out her choice of rations and other such supplies for the trip, to the point that half of the wagon's space was taken up by her multitudinous precautions.

It had been something of a grisly affair, Lyselle had to admit. The escaped prisoners had not been kind to the outlaws operating beyond the walls of the auction hall and its warehouse, and the aftermath of countless bloody altercations had been left evident throughout the former vendor space. Amid the witch's tour of available supplies, she'd stopped to settle several lingering disputes, tending to the wounded and giving direction where she felt it was needed. Not once was her authority questioned by anyone involved, and Lyselle had watched in awe as the towering demon calmly dispelled the chaos that had erupted in her own wake.

By the end of Nidrah's interventions, several of the vendors had taken to aiding the escaped prisoners' own preparations to depart, with some of the more traveled among the lot coming to agreements to serve as guides in helping the lost find their ways home. Both sides scavenged the wreckage for anything that could be used, and in the process they'd moved the bodies of their fallen onto a pile of tatters and debris at the encampment's edge.

Nidrah stood before the hill of corpses and began to recite something in her tongue. Lyselle, wrapped in a blanket and standing

among the crowd of solemn survivors, came to a sudden realization as the sky lit with the coming dawn:

This was a funeral pyre.

The sun's light reached across the sands in a breaking wave. No sooner had its rays touched the base of the debris than the shattered wood scattered amidst the rubble took to flame, fire bursting up from the ground and through the mountain of departed.

The demoness's voice rose with the flames, the final rites of the lost cast to the heavens alongside their ashes, as the fire burned with an intensity that seemed to challenge the rising star for supremacy. Outside of the sound of the crackling pyre, nothing dared to interrupt Nidrah's words; nobody spoke, and nothing moved. Even the air itself seemed still as respects were paid to the lost.

Eventually, the chant ended. The silence held as Nidrah turned to face the crowd that had gathered behind her. The demoness's gaze slowly scanned across them all, her saddened eyes seeming to take in every single face among them before, finally, she bowed her head and gave a slow nod.

With that simple gesture, everyone knew that it was time to go their separate ways. The crowd dissipated quickly, fanning out to their various means of evacuation. Lyselle and Lori stood side by side as the sea of people parted and flowed away from them, until at last they were left alone, watching the Abyssal as she stood, quiet and still, her eyes still cast to the sand at her feet.

By the time the demoness moved, most of the other survivors had taken to their own respective journeys. Nidrah's shoulders heaved with a deep sigh, preceding her slow strides towards the pair that waited for her. At last, as she came within an arm's length of them, her eyes rose; her expression was heavy with concern, but an aching smile crossed her face as she spoke to the two girls.

"Come, then," the woman spoke in a tone softer than her towering frame implied possible. "I think it's time we were on our way."

The trip across the desert took two days, at the pace of the strange beasts pulling the wagon. As the first night set upon them, the demoness brought the scaled, tusked creatures to a trudging halt at an isolated oasis. She'd been largely quiet until then, and remained so until

morning, meditating beside the waters in the cool evening air while Lyselle and Lori shared a tent next to a small campfire. Come morning, however, the pair was awoken by a cheerful song that the cowl had begun belting out in the middle of preparing their breakfast.

Though she did not speak much of why she'd been so solemn in the interim – and neither companion felt it in good taste to pry into the matter – Nidrah had proven perfectly pleasant company throughout the rest of the desert trek, and remained so as the group made their way up into the mountains beyond.

Said mountains were where Lyselle found herself now, sitting on a stone by the light of a campfire as Lori busied herself nearby. The furry companion had quickly turned a game the pair had shared into a habit, and she was presently seeking new things to show Lyselle so that they could exchange words in each others' tongues.

Lori cheerfully held up a nut she'd found nestled in the fresh snow around the base of a nearby tree. "*Uut*," she declared, before placing the object firmly into her friend's mittened hand.

The Terran envied the girl's comfort in the cold. Even as bundled as she was within the embrace of a thick fur coat, Lyselle still felt the bite of the mountain air. "*Uut*," she responded. "*Nut. Pai ajretil lie' ibanja.*"

"*That grows into a tree*," she'd said. Lyselle had been paying attention; Lori's chipper attitude routinely proved to be a highlight in the Terran's day, and she couldn't help but return the girl's enthused smile any time Lyselle surprised her with a word or phrase in her own tongue.

Lori smiled wide, giggling as she responded, "*Hi'! Yes!*"

Even through the bitter cold, Lys couldn't help but feel a little warmer when she saw her friend beaming. Nidrah had informed her that Lori was one of a species called the tunnadora, a cave-dwelling race that rarely took comfortably to surface life. This was obvious during the day, when Lori hid from the sun under the cover of the trio's hijacked wagon, but even more apparent at night. She'd already begun looking for another object she could use to expand Lyselle's vocabulary, and in a blink had vanished into the trees surrounding the camp, as comfortable navigating the terrain under the shimmering night sky as Lyselle would be on a clear day at noon.

As Lori tore through the bushes, Lys turned and leaned towards the fire, trying to warm herself despite the mountains' best efforts to chill her to the bone. Aside from her, leaned back against a small pile of fallen logs, Nidrah tended to a pot she'd set over the flames.

"You learn quickly." The Abyssal spoke without turning, only her eyes glancing towards her Terran company. "The old tongue is not widely used, though. Would it not be better to focus on Demonic?"

Lyselle hummed in acknowledgement, thinking for a second. "*Ke vit ju*," she finally said, throwing Nidrah a sly smile.

The demoness's body did turn for that. "*Ku roset*? When did this start?"

Lyselle shrugged. "Between the desert situation and your dealings with other folks trudging along these old trails, I've tried to pick up what I can." She wasn't about to admit that she had no idea what "*ku roset*" meant. "Besides, I've heard you use the 'old tongue' plenty of times."

Nidrah turned back to the fire and smiled. "*Ju*, I have. It is the spirits' tongue." She lifted a stick from her far side, using it to prod the embers. "We need more wood."

"Lori," Lyselle called over her shoulder, "*olmet' zu' ipantia*?"

"Go' ogre," the girl chimed from the dark. More rustling followed, proceeded by a brief pause. Then, the sound of wood cracking pierced through the quiet, accompanied shortly by a tree falling just into the fringe of the fire's waning light, kicking a soft cloud of snowy powder up into the air.

Lori scrambled across the fallen log on all fours, looking quite proud of herself as she tapped her claws along its bark. Finding a point she deemed suitable by a measure entirely inscrutable to her companions, she lifted her hand into the air, pulling her claws into a honed point, and drove them like an axe down into the wood.

With that single blow, a ring of breakage cracked through the bark. Seconds later, a second blow created another break a bit further along the tree's length, cleanly separating a section of wood from the main body. Eager to please, Lori rolled the severed wood through the snow closer to Lyselle, turning away from the fire as she set it upright and brought her claw down into the log a final time, splitting her prize cleanly into five chunks before turning to the Terran for approval.

“*Iveme*,” Lyselle thanked, tussling the creature’s fur with one hand as she lifted a piece of wood with the other. “Are you cold?”

The girl thought for a moment, squinting as she parsed the meaning of the question. “Ah,” she said, her eyes sparkling as she realized she understood. “No! I am fine!”

“*Hible*.” She brushed Lori’s hair back into place with the same hand that had sent it into disarray. “Be safe.”

“*Hi’*, *hi’*,” the girl assured, rushing back into the shadows before even finishing her reply.

Nidrah watched Lori depart, sighing as the girl left line of sight. “Honestly, I am not sure her enthusiasm to learn your tongue over one Karnans typically speak is of aid, either.”

Lys stood, taking up another piece of wood before moving to stack both carefully around the cooking pot. “It’s good to be curious,” she said bluntly.

“It is, yes. But not everyone is as quick a study as you are, *keski*.”

“Oh?” The Terran turned her head from tending the flames, meeting the Abyssal’s azure gaze. “And what would you call a quick study in Demonic?”

“*Ze’ setku*. It means ‘fast learner.’” The demon laughed, then pondered for a moment before adding, “Perhaps we should get you some books?”

Lyselle gave a light-hearted huff. “You say that like these mountains will ever end. We’ve been in the thick of them for a week now.”

The Abyssal waved her hand dismissively. “*Ju, ju*. The mountains do end, eventually.” She brought her hand back, resting her head against her wrists as she threw a coy look towards Lyselle. “Though, not before we reach our next stop. A nice little town near the edge of all this cold.”

The Terran turned. “A town? Out here?”

“Oh, yes! And one I think you will enjoy a great deal, my little *setku*. I’ve a friend there who manages quite a fine library!”

“A library...?” Lyselle returned to her stone seat, looking into the fire as she considered the offer. “I appreciate the thought, but I couldn’t. You’ve already done so much.”

“Bah,” Nidrah scoffed, brushing at the air as if physically pushing Lyselle’s concerns aside. “*Gikak tegra!* This does not bother me!”

Lyselle didn’t know that one, either. All the same, she couldn’t help but laugh at the demoness’s reaction. “Well... whatever you think is best, then. You *are* the great and powerful witch here, after all.”

“This is right,” Nidrah quipped, grinning smugly to herself as she rose a shoulder towards Lyselle. “And the ‘great and powerful’ witch says that the smart, *smart* girl could do with some books.”

Night was falling over the forest. Talia had led the group to a small clearing alongside a riverbank, and had no sooner finished setting up her tent for the evening than she’d stripped down and jumped into the water. Lyselle and Auna had taken a fair bit longer to wrestle the group’s other shelter into an upright state, again proving inferior to the self-proclaimed wood elf’s affinity for outdoor affairs. With a bit of fuss and relatively minimal huff from Auna – by her personal standards, at least – the pair eventually succeeded, and the demoness dismissed herself for her own self-care, elegantly disrobing as she walked towards the water. She dipped into the stream with significantly more grace than their elven companion, barely disturbing the water as she strode into its embrace.

For her part, Lyselle had immediately busied herself preparing a fire pit out of nearby stones, trying to occupy her thoughts with anything besides the rampant female nudity in her vicinity.

“‘Helrehm knows when our next chance might be,’” she barked quietly to herself, parroting Talia’s reasoning for Lys’s visit to the school’s springs the night before. “Seems you knew pretty quick once you found yourself covered in plant–”

She paused, scrunching her nose as she fought for a description that she wasn’t ashamed to mutter aloud.

“... *stuff.*”

She fidgeted with the rocks she’d gathered, meticulously positioning them with far more attention than was necessary. Lyselle’s travels with Nidrah had equipped her well with a tried-and-true mental

checklist for any outdoor camping situation, and she'd taken to working through it dutifully, even if her skills seemed to come up short amongst present company.

Right, she mused to herself. Next, kindling.

The Terran kept her nose down, scanning the ground around her for anything that would do the job.

I certainly miss having Lori's help gathering wood.

Lys quickly managed to find some hefty branches, and even broke a pair of them down into workable chunks by snapping them over her knee. Said display of strength had elicited a round of cheers and catcalls from the magicians in the water, yet again driving the Terran to blush.

If this keeps up I might just turn red for good, she worried.

She struggled to focus on the task at hand, but still managed, stacking the gathered wood this way and that until she felt the job was done. Satisfied with her arrangement, Lyselle reached into her bag and pulled out a red gemstone. Holding the object between her thumb and forefinger, she pinched it in her hand above the fire pit and steadied herself. With a quick snap of her fingers, the gem shattered into a burst of orange flame that leapt into the pit and set the kindling ablaze with an ease that would have been the envy of any camper back home.

The Terran stood up, proudly observing her handiwork with her hands on her hips. *I may not have magic,* she thought, *but I'm not half bad as an alchemist!*

"Lyssie!"

Lyselle's guard had fallen in her moment of pride, and she'd reflexively turned to the sound of Talia calling her name. By the time she'd processed her own actions, it was far too late to escape the consequences.

Talia Rosenblum laid bare against the riverbank. The vibrant light of the setting sun danced through and resonated with the autumnal hues of the Karnan forest around them, surrounding the woman in a fiery halo that radiated across her pale, wet skin. The river flowed beneath her, catching the waning daylight and bouncing it across the woman's body and face in a shimmering pattern of moving ripples and waves and, as if placed deliberately as the centerpiece of it

all, over her shining eyes. The orange glimmers danced through the magentas over her irises and merged with the fiery spark at their core.

Lyselle was immediately captivated.

The elf cocked her head curiously at the gawking Terran. “Aren’t you gonna wash up?”

Lys couldn’t find her words, her thoughts fully captured by the half-elf’s beauty. It was all she could do to simply remind herself to breathe.

Talia’s eyes – those gorgeous, shining eyes – looked over Lyselle with mild concern. “You got pretty scuffed up, you know. You need to take care of that.”

Lys felt like she was standing in a dream, the signals from her mind barely translating to her body. Slowly, awkwardly, she looked down at her own limbs and the scratches that had decorated her over the day’s journey.

The half-elf rested her head against her palm. “I can’t help but feel like it’s my fault, you know.”

Lyselle blinked, finally starting to come back to her senses now that her gaze had been torn away from her interest’s visage. “Your... fault?”

Talia hummed her confirmation. “I know most of that’s from when you tried to jump into the fray behind Auna.”

Sitting just downstream of Talia, Auna huffed. “Maybe you should have communicated your intentions before you bolted off to offer your slit to a fucking plant.”

Talia rolled her eyes. “Yes, yes, point taken. In my defense, I didn’t think I’d up and yelp when I found it.”

“You *screamed*.”

Auna’s bluntness visibly shook Talia’s smug demeanor. “It just... startled me with its eagerness. That’s all.”

“Uh-huh.” The demoness had already started checking back out of the conversation, and took to cleaning her hair.

Talia took Auna excusing herself as an excellent opportunity to shift the conversation back to her original intentions. “Anyway, Lyssie! You need to tend to all of that.”

Lyselle’s eyes glanced to the side as she grasped for an out. “I-It’s nothing serious! They’re just a few simple scratch-”

“I won’t hear it.” Talia’s hand came out, palm up, fingers pointed like a gun before they curled inward in a beckoning motion. “*Dom, tuimegil.*”

Lyselle had no further chance to protest before the earth beneath her feet began to shift, pushing her forward towards the water. She yelped as her body was pulled ahead, barely keeping her balance against the sudden shift in momentum. As quickly as it began, the dirt beneath her feet came to a full stop, sending the Terran falling face-first towards the ground.

Lyselle shut her eyes and braced for impact, but instead felt herself being caught in Talia’s arms.

“There, now,” the half-elf soothed, running a delicate hand through her classmate’s red hair. “I’ve got you.”

Lyselle opened her eyes and found herself inches from the woman’s gentle face.

Talia smirked, quirking an eyebrow at Lyselle’s still-panicked expression. “Did you really think I’d let you fall? I’m trying to tend to your wounds, not add to them.”

Lys snapped back to reality, finding the ground beneath her and skittering backwards on all fours. She only made it about half a pace before tumbling onto her rump through her own hectic flailing. “I-I am not disrobing and jumping into the river!!”

“Is that what you’re worried about?” The half-blood laughed, and then settled into a warm smile. “Relax, nobody’s asking you to.”

“I am,” Auna retorted from downstream. “I’d like to not deal with either of your pit stinks more than I have to, if it can be at all helped.”

“Don’t get distracted, Auna,” Talia mocked, “or you’ll never find that last twig in your pretty little locks.”

“Twig!?” Auna began frantically combing through her hair with her fingers in search of the rouge object. She would be looking for some time, on account of the fact that it did not exist.

“Now, off with those,” Talia ordered, gesturing at Lyselle’s shoes. “You *will* need to remove that much, at least for a bit.”

Lyselle hesitated, looking from her well-worn sneakers back to the half-elf that was waiting on her.

Talia's eyebrows rose. "No fuss, Lys. Or are you a fan of wet socks?"

Nobody is a fan of wet socks. Realizing she had no real way out of this situation, Lyselle begrudgingly began untying her shoelaces, and had soon enough freed her admittedly tired feet from their cramped confines.

"Good girl. Now, over here." Talia slid back into the river, motioning for Lyselle to approach. "You're at least getting your feet wet. We can do the rest with you sitting on the bank here."

The Terran complied, though she remained on guard. She was not convinced the other women hadn't concocted some scheme to get her wholly in the water, and did her best to brace against the large stone she'd perched on as she dipped her feet into the river.

"There, see?" Talia leaned her arm against the stone, looking up at Lys with a playful grin. "Lyssie's hanging with the girls now! No fuss or bother."

"I can see *your* hanging girls," Lyselle absent-mindedly muttered aloud.

"And I'm sure that breaks your heart," Talia teased as she took hold of the redhead's foot and circled around to her front. "Now let's take care of this."

Lyselle barely had time to register that she'd thought about Talia's breasts out loud before she could feel the rousing things pressed against her bare leg. The Terran's voice tried to emit a yelp in response, but the sound couldn't worm its way out before Talia's hand began brushing against the battered limb, washing away the dirt and dried blood with the cool river water. Lys's familiarity with having any part of her bare skin touched was essentially non-existent, and so her would-be yelp evolved into an awkward, jolting groan.

Lys didn't protest beyond that. She couldn't. Forget skipping a beat; her heart felt like it had gone on holiday. Talia gently tended to Lyselle's leg, washing it, subtly massaging it, as if she could sense where the Terran was sore from the day's trek rather than just the immediate tension present from her body freezing like that of a deer in headlights. A barrage of strange emotions and feelings hit Lyselle all at once, her mind feeling as if she'd lept into an intersection at rush hour

and told the oncoming traffic to bring its worst right after taking out the signal lights.

Talia paid little mind to her peer's barely-contained panic. Wordlessly, the half-elf moved away from the first leg to gently coax the other away from its withdrawn position against Lyselle's chest. The act of submitting to Talia's beckoning brought Lys back down to earth, and as her classmate began tending to the scrapes and bruises on the second limb, Lyselle Alwin experienced the utterly alien sensation of feeling increasingly at ease in the presence of another person's naked body.

Talia smiled warmly, seeming to sense the shift in the human's demeanor. "There. That's better, isn't it? Just breathe, *keski*."

There was something in the elf's word choice that further disarmed Lyselle. *Keski*. The Karnan word for a young lady, and one that the Terran knew extremely well; Nidrah had employed that term countless times as a form of endearment. Talia's choice to employ it in such a vulnerable situation was almost certainly coincidental, but it finally let the half-blood's gentle sincerity pierce through the last of Lyselle's guard.

"Now," Talia leaned in, her body language as casual as if the two were conversing at the campus cafeteria. "Arms, please."

"S-sure," Lyselle stammered as she leaned forward slightly to offer another fresh limb. *This is nothing*, she thought. *No big deal. Look at her. She's so casual! This is just a convenient time and place to handle this kind of thing, for a Karnan. That's all. See?*

Talia pulled herself up from the water to better observe the new appendage's condition, her upper body rising up in front of Lyselle and leaning towards her to do her work. The half-elf's naked teats hung from her body, rivulets of river water running over the woman's delicate skin and dripping from her nipples onto the stone below. The Terran could not help but observe the entire display, lined up as it was with her gaze, but she probably could have done something about how slack her jaw immediately went. Probably. But not this time.

Casual, Lyselle tried to remind herself. *It's casual boob! Non-flirtatious boobies! Free-hanging just-hanging boob!! Shining! Glistening! Right there!! Oh my God!!*

Talia finished with the Terran's first arm quickly, gaze never rising from her task as she reached for the other. "You're staring, Lyssie."

"God!" Lys defaulted to English as her eyes shot up towards the sky. "Damn it!!"

Talia simply laughed as she continued her work. "Gods, you don't know what to do with yourself at all, do you?"

Lyselle glanced down in quick bursts in a futile attempt to make polite eye contact without staring down a pert, dripping wet nipple. "W-What's that supposed to mean?"

Tal's brows rose as she spoke. "It's a bit late in life to just be figuring out you're into girls, isn't it?"

That damned blush was back. "I-! *You-!*"

"It's not like I dislike the attention." The half-elf grinned to herself before pausing with a quick but noticeable thought. As her expression dropped, she finally looked up to meet Lyselle's gaze. "There's no shame in it. Or has someone convinced you otherwise?"

Lyselle's eyes darted from point to point, searching the dimming scenery in a wishful bid to find some way to escape this conversation. Failing to find a sufficient distraction to deviate the conversation, her head slowly sulked down into her shoulders as she answered in a quiet mumble. "It doesn't matter."

Talia stopped cleaning. She glanced slowly to the side to check that Auna was still preoccupied, then shook her head and pulled herself up onto the rock beside Lyselle.

The Terran barely had time to protest the naked presence directly beside her, nor the puddle of river water now rushing into the fabric at the seat of her shorts, before being silenced by Talia's serious expression. The elf's eyes looked straight ahead as she considered her words.

Finally, quietly, Talia spoke.

"Lis'en to me, Alwyn." Her voice cracked in a slow but fluid English, a strange accent dancing through her words. "Ya won't find your light so long as ya keep lyin' to ya'self."

Lys was caught aback, taking a moment to adjust to hearing her native tongue spoken after so much time spent without. She briefly

struggled to find her own voice, finally deciding to answer in kind.

“You... you speak English?”

Talia looked up and smiled a weak, aching grin. “Da’ was Terran. Don’t miss me point.”

Lyselle shifted her weight, looking to the river flowing below.

“You think I’m lying?”

“Aye, when it comes to the self, ya are. What, ye can’t tell?”

Lys huffed, biting her lip as her arms withdrew to her waist. “Is this about the staring?”

“Hardly just that, lass.” Talia’s head rolled to face the Terran, placing a single finger under Lys’s chin to guide the redhead’s gaze back towards her own. “Ye’re denying ya’self your own truth. ‘Bout who you are, what ye want. Not just of a sexual nature, though gods know *definitely* that as well.”

Lyselle’s eyes shot back to the side, desperately trying to avoid Talia’s piercing gaze despite her face being gently kept in place. “N-No! That’s wrong! I can’t think about that sort of thing!”

“And why not?” Talia cocked her head. “Why do ye think burying your own thoughts is th’ right thing to do? What, do you intend to keep your naughty little desires at bay with raw will and shame?”

“I–!” Lyselle moved to shout her reply before being silenced by the single, slender finger rising from her chin to press against her lips. She took a deep breath and tried to steady her voice as she answered, “I have to.”

“Oh?” Talia’s eyes seemed to be looking through the girl and seeing her very soul for how intently they watched Lyselle’s every move. “And why’s that?”

Lyselle felt tears welling up in her eyes. “It’s not right,” came the choked-out answer.

“Buryin’ yourself ain’t, no. But that’s not what ye mean, is it?” Talia’s eyes narrowed. She spoke slowly, patiently. “What exactly ain’t ‘right,’ Lyselle?”

The Terran’s breaths were deep and quick, her emotions broiling just under her skin as thoughts of home came flooding back. “Being like this. Thinking this way. I... What was I thinking!? God, I’m so ashamed!”

“Of what, exactly?”

“I was bad,” she whimpered. “Should’ve covered up more. Wanted...” Without thinking, Lyselle had physically retreated into herself, her arms wrapped around her own legs as she pulled them back against her chest again. The shadows of the forest seemed to stretch out and claw at her as the doubt she’d buried that morning came screaming back into her soul. “Doesn’t matter what I wanted. Shouldn’t have wanted it.”

Talia hummed in thought, lips pursing across her face as she glanced over the shrunken form of her curled-up peer. “Lyssie... You think I ain’t noticed, do you? That ye dress the same way basically every day ‘til the one we’re meant t’be alone together?”

Lyselle meeped, her face buried into her arms.

Talia smiled softly, suppressing a chuckle at the girl’s innocent shame. “Are ye *really* losing your shit just ‘cause you showed some leg and a few millimeters of tit? Honestly. Ya look nice. Bit o’ confidence suits you!”

Lys squeaked as her hands migrated up to cover her head. “God, don’t say that! I... I can’t hear it! You have no idea!”

The half-elf couldn’t contain her humor anymore, a light laugh escaping her throat before she could catch it. “I think I have *some* idea. A lady flatters ya and you don’t know how to feel about it, eh?”

“I know how I feel,” Lys barked, throwing her hands down a moment and glaring up at the elf before being startled back into submission by her own outburst of boldness. “But...”

Talia waited a moment before urging her on. “*But?*”

“But it’s *wrong*.”

“Wrong?” Talia scoffed, her nose wrinkling in distaste. “Says who? What dimwit be puttin’ these things in your mind?”

There was another pause. For a time, the only sound was the river splashing against the stone’s edge as it flowed past. The world and its noise seemed a million miles away as the Terran tried to find her response, until finally, quietly, Lyselle spoke her reply.

“It’s how I was taught.”

Talia took a slow, deep breath, eyes closed in thought until she spoke again. Her speech was slower now, more deliberate, her accent less fluid and present as she probed towards the heart of her classmate’s distress. “You were taught to hate yourself?”

“No! Yes? It’s...” The tears Lyselle had been fighting back now flowed out as quickly as the thoughts trying to pour out of her mouth. “It’s a lot! It’s a lot, and I stick out like a sore thumb here, and I feel like no matter what I’m trapped in my own damn head and world and past, and I just—!!”

The Terran’s face sunk into her own arms once again as she tried to calm herself down. Talia watched and waited patiently as Lys’s shoulders shook with each wrestled-against sob.

Quietly, muffled by her own arms and knees, Lyselle continued. “I don’t understand,” she admitted.

Talia instinctively rose a hand, wanting to reach out, but debating to herself whether or not placing it on the Terran’s shoulder would be appreciated or make matters worse. She pulled it back, looking back to the water as she dug deeper. “Understand what?”

Lyselle’s head rose enough to look out at the elf. “How you do it. How you’re so comfortable with...” She glanced over her classmate’s body, wholly exposed and dripping wet beside her. “With all of it. Your body, what you do with it. Who sees.”

“Who sees?” Talia laughed as her head turned back towards the Terran. “Folks only see what I want ‘em to, Lyssie. Ain’t any more complicated than that.”

Lyselle looked incredulously at her. “You don’t seem all that discerning.”

The half-elf finally decided where to place her hand, rubbing it over Lyselle’s head and ruffling her hair. “Whether I am or I ain’t, it’s still my choice, innit? Who I show it to, I mean, an’ whatever I choose to do with ‘em. Oh, and who attracts my lovely eyes is my own business, while we’re on the subject an’ all.”

Lyselle thought for a moment. “Even if they’re another girl?”

“Aye,” Talia remarked, leaning her body against Lyselle’s. “Even if. After all, what good would it do anyone if I was ‘shamed of thinkin’ ye’re cute as a button?” She accented her point by tapping Lyselle on the nose with one finger.

The Terran went red again. “M-Me? Cute!?”

“Aye.” A direct answer partnered with an unapologetic shrug.

“I—!” Lyselle’s head did its best to retract into her shoulders. “I’m flattered, but you’re wrong.”

“Wrong, is it? My own opinion an’ taste?” Talia’s eyes glimmered as her mouth turned up into a teasing grin. “Don’t be sellin’ me the poison you were fed, lass.”

“I’m not cute,” Lys protested. “I’m overweight.”

“Sounds cute t’me,” Talia sang back. “Me mum was stocky too, and a right lot more than you. No less gorgeous for it, I promise you. How d’ye think she nabbed me da’? Lady knew what to do with ‘er curves, when it suited her. An’ so should you!”

“Whatever! I’m a redhead! Covered in freckles!”

“Ye sure are, dove.” The half-elf danced a finger across the specks on Lyselle’s arm. “Like a fiery sun ‘rounded by its own constellations.” Her hand stopped on a cluster of freckles near Lys’s elbow. “We should name ‘em. That’d be cute! Somethin’ to use when ye need ammunition come time ta flirt.”

“Flirt!?” Lyselle glared over at the half-blood, still blushing furiously. “Nobody wants me to flirt with them. I think you might have low standards.”

Talia shrugged. “An’ I think that *you* sell ye’self short, an’ we ain’t even to the things folks’d notice a mile away. I’ll note ye ain’t bemoanin’ the tits them gods gave ya.”

“And what about them?” Lyselle scoffed, her voice rising as she spoke. “Mom spent the bulk of my teenage years telling me God gave me a whore’s body. Boys all treated me different the second I started to change. Even older men, like my teachers and the priest! Anyone who wasn’t telling me to cover up and hide these things was actively undressing me with their eyes, and some of the bastards did both at once! All these fucking fat-sacks do is attract unwanted attention and make me have to think too hard about how to go down a flight of stairs without smacking my glasses off my face! There’s nothing to be proud of!”

Lyselle had unfurled as she spoke, leaning towards Talia with increasing anger as memories of home rampaged through her mind. Her chest and shoulders heaved with each enraged breath as her words burst out into the evening air. Throughout it all, Talia stayed, looking directly at her, letting her speak. Watching.

In the resulting silence, Lyselle started to shake, tears staining her face as they streaked down her cheeks. “Is that enough *bemoaning* for you?”

No sooner had the Terran finished speaking than Talia’s arms lunged to wrap around her body. A gasp caught in Lyselle’s throat as her classmate’s head came to rest over her shoulder, the elf’s lithe arms gripping her in a tight embrace.

For a moment, all was still. Lys sat there, frozen, her trembling stilled in the comforting grip of the other girl’s hold. The memories of home, the frustrations and fears of her past life that had all come rushing back to her, seemed to drift away in the stream beneath them, and a breeze blew through the trees as if the wind itself wanted to hush away the last remnants of unpleasant thought. As the gentle wind settled, finally, quietly, Talia spoke.

“Ye poor thing.” She didn’t move, continuing to hold Lyselle as she whispered into Lyselle’s ear. “They’ve treated you wretched, haven’t they?”

Lyselle couldn’t bring herself to answer, instead fighting to keep her face from contorting into a loud, ugly cry.

“You ain’t there now, yeah? But a number was done, all the same.”

Finally, Talia pulled back, holding Lys’s shoulders in her hands as the Terran’s teary eyes rose to meet her gaze. “Here,” she soothed, raising a hand to wipe the tears from Lyselle’s eyes, “can I show ye somethin’?”

Lys offered no protest as the half-blood slipped back down from the rock and into the stream. Talia’s body pierced into the water without so much as a splash, her movements as at home descending into the river as they’d seemed anywhere else in the woods.

Talia turned, smiling up at Lyselle softly. Her hands rose to touch the Terran’s left calf, lightly tracing the ridge of one of the more prominent scrapes on the girl’s legs with her finger.

“Wounds are such divided little things,” she said as she looked intently at the broken skin. “Often, they heal on their own, an’ anyone lookin’ for proof of them would be none the wiser. But others...”

She paused, seeming to gather her thoughts and self as both hands rose to either side of Lyselle’s leg, casting a shadow over the

freshly-cleaned damage. “Others, they leave a mark, plain as day, an’ for a long damned time. There’s plenty of reasons why they could; sometimes it’s infection, sometimes they’re just particularly nasty little things, and sometimes... they just didn’t heal right. Maybe they never quite healed at all, really.”

Lyselle wasn’t sure where Talia was going with this. “Are you talking about my leg still, or...?”

Talia laughed. “Ah, make of it what you will. Just some thoughts, is all. There’s another thing about wounds, though.”

Lys huffed. “Alright, I’ll bite. And what’s that?”

“It’s that sometimes...”

The half-elf’s hands gently closed around the calf, sending a shiver up Lyselle’s spine. In a smooth, elegant motion, Talia brushed down the Terran’s skin, passing over the unpleasant scrape in the process. There was a faint, high-pitched sound as her hand hands moved, a shimmering whirr so subtle and faint that one could reasonably think that they’d imagined it. As her touch passed from the mark, the sound stopped, and nothing was left behind on the redhead’s freckled skin besides a handful of tiny, sparkling motes of light that quickly flickered away into nothing. It was as if the wound had never existed in the first place.

“Sometimes, healing just requires a bit of help.”

Lys stared down at her leg in amazement. “Wait, how did...!?” She cocked her head side to side, looking back and forth between Talia’s hands and where the injury had been just a moment before. “No aura. No incantation. No alchemical components of note. I don’t...?”

Talia laughed again, her telltale grin returning in full force. “Aye, ye won’t find any of that. Like I said, me mum was wood elf. They ‘ave a few tricks, is all.”

“Healing magic?”

“*Hm.* Among other things.”

“But with barely any magical traces or...”

The half-elf put her hands on her hips, managing a clearly sassy poise even though she was submerged from the waist down. “Ah, don’t fret the details, Lyssie! You let me worry about how it works, aye? Ain’t any difference to you, unless ya have some secrets ‘bout your own *bloodline.*”

It was Lyselle's turn to laugh. "None that I'm aware of. It's just curiosity. I guess I really can't help it."

A sudden shout of Demonic broke into the conversation from upstream. "*Ti'e!*"

The pair looked over to see Auna standing impatiently in the shallows a few yards away. "If you two are done talking in your little secret code or whatever, someone needs to figure out dinner. I don't know about you dorks, but I'm starving."

"Uh, s-sure," Lyselle stammered, shifting back into Demonic while fidgeting nervously with her glasses. "You catch it, I'll cook it."

"Deal," the demoness replied, immediately turning her attention to the water around her with her hands held out like a pair of grasping claws.

Lyselle watched for a moment before leaning towards Talia. "She... She can't be serious, right?"

The half-elf rolled her eyes. "Oh, she is. I'll let her struggle for a bit and then give her a hand."

Lys giggled. "What, with more wood elf tricks?"

"Actually, I was thinking I'd just use common sense."

Ignoring the both of them, Auna's eyes caught something moving in the stream and lunged at it like a desperate child. Her body hit the water with a thunderous splash, scaring off any potential prey she'd beyond what she'd managed to completely miss with her flailing. She rose back out from the water with a frustrated scream.

Lyselle nodded. "Yeah, I guess that would give you the upper hand." She sat for a moment, fidgeting with her own hands as she thought.

Talia glanced over from the senseless demoness show, a mocking smile fading away back to sincerity as she observed the Terran's shifting and pondering. "You good, Lys?"

Lyselle looked back to Talia, then closed her eyes and took a slow, deep breath. "I'm trying to be. One step at a time."

The half-elf nodded. "Just try to be honest with yourself for now, yeah? I know that's easier said than done sometimes, especially if you've made a habit out of avoiding it, but..."

Lyselle sighed, looking to the trees with a defeated smile. "No, I'm gonna have to. I don't think I've got much choice now."

“Oh?” Talia quirked an eyebrow. “And why’s that?”

Lys laughed. “Because somebody here is too observant and willing to call me out on my shit.”

Talia bit her lip as she returned to watching Auna struggle. Though it could have been a trick of the setting sun’s light, Lyselle was almost certain she’d spotted a blush setting into the half-elf’s face as she’d turned away. “Sorry. I can mind my own business, if you want.”

Lyselle pulled herself up to her feet, crossing her arms with a coy smile. “Don’t you dare.”

As the sun set and evening crept over the forest, Lyselle found herself sat alone beside the fire, tending to its flames as her companions continued their leisurely business in the nearby stream. Auna remained noisily fruitless in her hunt for dinner, while Talia had taken to lazing in some gently swirling current on the opposite bank while barking insincere encouragements.

“You were so close that time!” “Oh, almost.” “Fifteenth time’s the charm!”

Auna growled at the girl’s mockery. “I am working by firelight here! You’re welcome to step in any time, elf eyes!”

“Nope,” Talia rejected bluntly. “Can’t. Stuck in a current.”

“I’ll stick you somewhere,” Auna mumbled, before fruitlessly lunging at another target she’d perceived in the ripples below.

By the flickering flames, Lyselle had taken to checking the group’s findings against Evenclire’s list of sought items. Though gathering the writheweed’s materials had certainly stood out as the most memorable collection, they’d also quickly located a handful of mushrooms growing along Talia’s insisted-upon trail and a few small stones that Lys herself had declared were of alchemical value. With the materials spread out in front of her, the Terran couldn’t help but grin proudly at her decent little haul.

Not bad for a day’s work, she thought. Maybe Evenclire does know what he’s doing. Talia didn’t notice most of these at all.

She looked back to the list, skimming over it once again, trying to keep as much of it in her mind as possible. As she scanned from name to name, one item in particular seized her attention. Lys’s eyes widened with realization, and she turned to rummage through her bag with excited haste.

Less than a minute later, the Terran jogged up to the riverside with atypical excitement and a pair of towels in her arms. “Hey, Talia!”

The half-elf’s head cocked towards Lyselle as her body drifted in circles. “What’s up, Lys? You finally decide to join us?”

“Not exactly.” Lyselle’s mind was preoccupied enough that she was barely even distracted by the naked body rotating across from her. “I brought you two some towels.”

Auna emerged from under the water in front of Lyselle, brushing locks of soaked blonde hair away from her eyes. “How forward-thinking and considerate. And here I thought I’d need to drip-dry!” She leaned her shoulder up on the bank under the Terran, grinning up at her with a coy smirk. “At this point, I’m probably wetter than the damned fish, assuming there actually are any. I’ve certainly come up empty-handed.”

The second, closer nude woman was enough to knock Lyselle out of her focus. She blushed, glancing away from the dripping-wet demoness. “Happy to help.”

“Oh, *honestly...*” Auna rolled her eyes along with her body, turning over and leaning back on her arms, her wet bust on full display. “Why are you so uncomfortable here? You always act like you can’t handle seeing someone else’s tits.”

Lys huffed. “You mean like how I ‘acted’ like I’d never seen a satyr’s... *thing* before?”

The demoness glanced back over her shoulder with a look resembling concern. “... You’re kidding.”

“I’m not.” Lyselle shifted her weight, looking over at Talia as the half-blood spun lazily in the stream.

Just try to be honest with yourself, for now.

She sighed. “The kind of things that run through my mind in these situations wouldn’t have gone over well back home, is all.”

Auna cocked her head. “Like what? Don’t tell me you grew up with some ‘we are meant to breed’ shit too.”

Right, Lys realized. Auna had her own kind of upbringing.

“That’s not far off,” the Terran strainfully admitted. The words at the tip of her tongue were fighting to remain unsaid. After all, if she heard herself admitting how she felt, it would become real.

What, do you intend to keep your naughty little desires at bay with raw will and shame?

Talia’s words kept ringing through Lys’s mind, pushing her forward. “Lust of any kind was frowned upon, but pining after girls was

the sort of thing that would get you a summer locked away with the priests.”

Auna’s eyes went wide as she turned away. “Shit. That’s fucked.”

“I’m trying to accept that.” The words shook slowly out of Lyselle’s mouth. “Things are very different here. Freer. I’ve always admired that, but being comfortable around it has proven...”

“Harder,” Auna finished. “I get that.”

The demoness took a deep breath, watching the firelight flicker in the running water before her as she gathered her thoughts. “I still haven’t thanked you, by the way. Sorry about that.”

Lyselle blinked. “Pardon?”

“For helping me out earlier. Getting me away from Camilla, despite my bitching and moaning.” She paused, her lips twisting for a moment. “I know I give you a lot of shit, so it’s only fair I give credit when it’s due. Acting against any Leltwick is a bold move, never mind that one.”

Lys couldn’t help but laugh. “I’ve noticed I’m getting a lot less shit in the woods.”

Auna hummed in acknowledgement. “What am I going to do, mock you for not knowing how many leaves a given tree has? Kinda at your mercy out here, never mind miss monkey over there.”

“Not a monkey,” Talia sang out.

“Had me fooled,” Auna sang back. She settled back into her lean again, pondering her words a moment more before continuing. “I won’t pretend it makes things fair, Lyssie, but I wasn’t exactly raised to think much of Terrans. Made you an easy target, I guess.”

Lyselle grimaced. “I think your sister gave me a pretty good sense of your family’s values, yeah.”

“I guess that shit’s hard to shake, huh? What they taught us, I mean.”

Both girls stared into the dark for a time. There was certainly truth to the observation, Lyselle couldn’t argue against that. No matter how much her reservations raged through her mind and argued against her desires, the words she repeated to herself weren’t ever hers. The voice she heard them in certainly was, but the words...?

“It doesn’t matter.” Auna broke the silence with a decisive statement. “When I needed help, you gave it. We’re at this school to

learn how to be witches, and that's more what I'd want to see out of any witch than the shit I was raised to be. And while I'm at it, I would've shared the satyr dick too."

Lys turned beet red. "Jesus, Auna!"

The demoness let out a mischievous laugh. "Oh, don't act like you weren't curious. I could see it in your innocent little eyes, Alwyn. You looked just like I did the first time I laid eyes on someone I wasn't 'supposed' to touch." She accented her point with air quotes and all.

Lyselle covered her face with the towels in her arms. "Y-you can stop anytime!"

"Just imagine it. Me guiding sweet little Lyssie, helping her know what to do now that she was on her knees in front of a boy for the first time. Both of us there, drowning out the voices of our wretched forebears with the sound of throats sliding up and down a slick, throbbing—"

"I get it!" Lyselle shouted suddenly, unable to withstand any more of the Adorned's mental imagery. "Good God, I get it!!"

Auna laughed. "Gods, I fucked up being such an outright bitch to you all the time. This kind of teasing is way more fun!"

Teasing, she calls it. Lyselle bit her lip, trying to calm her breath and body as moisture built between her thighs. *I can't exactly let off this kind of steam out here with you two around, can I?*

"Really though," the demoness proceeded, "you do you. Maybe it's just all those years of being told exactly what to do with my body, but I've found playing fast and loose with my little rotation of partners to be extremely liberating."

Lyselle thought back to the aftermath of Camilla's rampage. "Less liberating for *them*, apparently."

"That's its own problem," Auna scoffed. "I don't get why Camilla thinks its her place to punish other people for my fucking decisions. Then again, Camilla thinks and does a lot of shit. Pretty sure she'll make up any reason to throw down with someone once she's decided she wants to."

She paused, fuming, before leaning forward and curling into herself. "I know it's not fair to my lovers. I also know what it's like to be on the receiving end of what she does to them as a price. I wish I could

stop her, but I know I can't. So, every time this happens, I try to restrain myself, to calm down and keep my legs closed, but..."

It was Lyselle's turn to finish the other's sentence. "But it's like you're lying to yourself?"

Auna looked up with a weak smile. "Yeah. I am who I am, I like what I like. And honestly it just... helps me not think about all this shit. *Their* shit. Sleeping alone just means there's nobody there to comfort me when the nightmares start digging up the shit I want to forget. Quiet places, too. Just you and the memories, then."

Lys nodded. "The woods don't seem like the best place to be if you want to escape your own thoughts, I'm learning. Sorry."

"You sure?" Auna nodded towards Talia, still turning in the water across the stream. "Look at her. No thoughts, head empty. Maybe we just need whatever she's having."

Lyselle laughed. "I'm not sure that's possible. I've never met anyone like..."

She paused, suddenly recalling what had prompted her approach in the first place.

"Talia!" she spouted as her mind pivoted wildly. "Evenclire wants avity moss!"

The half-elf finally turned upright, looking at Lys with curiosity. "What, like that dry blue stuff?"

Interpersonal growth and honesty with oneself were both lovely, but now Lys was comfortably back in her element. "It's not going to be dry. Hell, there's a chance you're standing in some right now."

Talia squinted and looked down, checking her feet under the water, before looking back at the Terran with a blank stare.

"Holy shit," Auna mumbled.

Lys sighed. "It's aquatic."

"Oh," the half-blood acknowledged, taking one more moment before more excitedly exclaiming "Ooo-oh! Say no more!"

With that, Talia Rosenblum dipped under the water, her rear end briefly breaching the surface as her body turned and dove below.

"Alright," Auna probed, "so, just between us, what's running through your mind right now?"

Lyselle's lip twitched. "Nice ass."

"Gotcha." Auna nodded knowingly. "My lips are sealed."

A few moments passed – enough for the Terran to look down at the water and wonder if something had gone wrong – before a trail of bubbles approached the bank in front of her and Auna.

Talia burst from the water, splashing the demoness in the process, with a bright blue clump of damp moss in her hand. “Yo, I got it!”

The alchemist part of Lyselle loudly and immediately overpowered her typical reservations, and in a blink she’d rushed over to the naked elf, setting the dry towels aside to examine a piece of the material up close with her freed hands.

“I, uh... I *think* I got it.” Talia’s lips danced as Lyselle checked over her haul. She waited a moment with visibly limited patience before meekly asking, “Did I get it?”

Lys held up a clump of the moss towards the light of the fire, examining its translucency for a moment, before turning back and giving her partner a reassuring smile and nod. “You got it!”

“Hell yeah!” Talia pumped her fist into the air, managing to splash Auna again before handing the rest of the moss off to Lyselle. “Here you go! Do we need more?”

Lyselle bounced the moss in her hand, feeling out its weight. “I doubt another clump or two would hurt any, if you’re up for it.”

“Leave it to mine elven eyes,” the girl proclaimed, framing her eyes with her fingers for additional flair before turning and diving back under the water, splashing Auna yet a third time.

“And try to catch us some damned dinner, too!!” The Adorned shouted after the ripples where Talia used to be. She then huffed, pulling a mess of her own damp hair back away from her eyes. “Like I’m not even here.”

Lyselle chuckled, passing Auna one of the towels from beside her. “She certainly gives her all to any given task, huh?”

“Moderation has never been Talia’s strong suit,” the demoness admitted as she took the cloth in hand. “Maybe that’s why Evenclire sent her out here with someone more reserved.”

“Maybe. Just... make sure she comes back up, yeah?”

Auna rolled her head back to look up at the Terran. “Yeah, sure. Ain’t like I’m able to get any *more* wet.”

Lyselle paused, humming to herself in thought, then slowly rose to her feet and turned away from the demoness. “You probably could if there were a satyr around,” she finally quipped as she shifted to make her way to the fire.

“What!?” Auna’s eyebrows shot up as her head spun back towards Lyselle. “Making dirty jokes? *Our* innocent little Terran?”

Lys smirked back over her shoulder. “Well, of *course* I’m dirty! I haven’t taken a bath yet!”

Auna grinned and flicked out her wrist, summoning her crystal wand with a golden flash. “We can fix that quick enough.”

With a twirl of the demoness’s wrist, a ball of water pooled at the river’s surface, following the gestures of Auna’s hand as she lifted her wand upwards. Lyselle’s pace towards the campfire picked up as she realized what was coming; with a quick flick, the wet orb was lobbed haphazardly towards her, causing Lys to yelp as the water splashed by her feet.

The Terran laughed, welcoming the somewhat forgotten feeling of playful joy, as she sprinted back towards the fire before taking up a pen and cracking open her notes. It had been months since she’d last found herself cheerfully working by the fire, and the Terran would readily admit that she’d missed that comfort. Soon enough she was scribbling away, pen against paper, with a pile of texts taken one by one out of her bag forming around her as she sat on a fallen log in front of the campfire. Lyselle Alwin was absorbed in her work, dutifully flipping through pages and jotting down notes and ideas, diagrams and directives. She was in her element, and perhaps beyond that the most comfortable she’d been since parting ways with Nidrah.

Maybe too comfortable.

“What’s all that?”

Lys jolted in place. She’d been so preoccupied that she hadn’t noticed Talia’s soft-stepped approach until the girl had already sat down next to her. The half-elf tossed a fresh pile of blue moss down to dry by the fire next to a surprisingly large fish that looked somewhat seared already. She didn’t seem to pay much heed to the Terran’s tongue being tied, instead leaning in close to look over her classmate’s shoulder. Lyselle was immediately made acutely aware of the fact that her partner was still naked and drip-drying by the sensation of the

woman's soft breast pressed gently against her arm. This did not help her find her words.

Talia cocked her head. "Oh? Well, look at that."

"What?" Auna's voice came from behind them, also much closer than Lyselle had expected. Suddenly, she felt the demoness leaning over her shoulders, the Adorned's own body barely any more robed than Talia's. The towel she'd been using to dry herself hung loosely around the back of her shoulders, effectively covering nothing and leaving her own sizeable fruit free to swing into the Terran's back.

Lyselle sat frozen on the log, gripping her notebook as if it were a lifesaver keeping her afloat in the sudden tide of naked tits. Both of the streaking maidens were intently looking over the complex diagram that she'd been working on, a swirling figure surrounded by a scattered collection of markings and symbols.

"Wait." Auna squinted down at Lyselle's notes, coming to a quick realization. "Is that the water spell I threw at you?"

The question snapped the Terran back into form enough that she at least remembered to breathe, sucking a sharp intake of air before managing to squeak out a strained "Uh-huh."

"Damn." The demoness leaned in closer, reaching an arm around Lys's opposite shoulder to trace the diagram's curvature as she analyzed the work. "You did all this in like fifteen minutes? This shit's spot on!"

That seized Lyselle's attention away from the onslaught of nude woman flesh. "Y-You think?"

"It's super detailed," Talia remarked.

"I can't read all this, though," Auna grumbled, tapping her finger against a block of text scrawled down in English. "What's that all for?"

"O-oh!" Lyselle blushed, not used to showing her work like this, never mind under such distracting conditions. "Th-those are my notes on the breakdown and flow of the..." Her words trailed off as she caught herself. "Well, the *theoretical* breakdown of the spell's components and execution."

The Terran sat quietly for a moment as uncertainty flooded into her. "I... I know I can't actually *cast* anything reliably, but I figure I can

at least study what everyone else does so that I can hopefully catch up once I... you know, figure it out.”

“Who would’ve thought? I guess you’ve been paying attention in class after all.” Auna furrowed her brow. “I’ve never seen someone who can’t cast spells while having so much knowledge about the damn things, though.”

“I understand the lectures fine enough,” Lyselle protested, “except for the parts where it comes down to ‘feel.’ Channeling, moving the energy around. I don’t really have a sense for any of that. I don’t feel anything of the sort, honestly.”

Talia glanced up at the Terran. “You don’t feel it at all?”

Lyselle gave her companion a long look before passing the notebook aside and rising to her feet. She placed her hands on her hips as she stared into the night sky away from the inquisitive pair. After taking a deep breath, her shoulders slumped as her gaze drifted down to the campfire before her.

“Someone told me once,” she started, “that they knew I could become an incredible witch. I never understood why. I... I still don’t. They must have believed it though, because they spent so much time teaching me about this world, its history and languages, its magic...”

Lys’s hand rose to her chest, her fist clenching over it as she habitually clutched for fabric that wasn’t there. It seemed silly to her how bold she’d felt that morning compared to the present evident dress code, but it still caught her off guard to have nothing there to channel her anxiety into.

“I only applied to the academy because that person told me to. She saw how well I picked up on things, how much I enjoyed studying, and she insisted I had what it took. I’ve never been able to get it, though. To *feel* it. Even if I manage to get something to come out of my staff, it’s never under my control, and I don’t really get what I did differently. A burst of fire here, a little jolt of energy there, it doesn’t matter. It all peters out right away, and I couldn’t tell you how I managed to *do* it.”

Lyselle swallowed her pride, turning to face her peers with shame in her eyes. Auna’s gaze had drifted away into thought, but Talia looked back at the forlorn Terran with an unwavering stare. The fire in the half-elf’s eyes flickered as she looked up at the human, their light

entirely separate in origin than the flames dancing at the center of the camp.

Lys felt broken as she saw that shimmer. “I can see it, you know. The light in your eyes, that spark in the other students. She told me it was the spark of a person’s spirit, the power of their deepest selves.” She couldn’t take it. Her increasingly tearful gaze trailed down to the open notebook that she’d left in Talia’s naked lap. “Is that what’s wrong? Is my light... broken?”

Talia scowled, taking in a slow, deep breath before snapping the book shut, startling both of her companions into full attention. She closed her eyes for a moment, weighing her thoughts, before her typical smirk broke back over her face. “Your light works fine, Lyssie.”

The half-elf’s eyes opened, meeting Lyselle’s with a fiery glint. “I’ve *seen* it.”

Lyselle was taken aback. Nobody had ever claimed to actually see a spark in her before.

Nobody except Nidrah, she realized.

Talia interrupted that thought by thrusting the notebook back up into Lyselle’s face. “It’s not just spells, right?” Her eyes glanced down at the gathered ingredients Lyselle had laid out to examine. “You’ve been scribbling away for a while over here.”

“I don’t see what that has to do with—”

“Humor me,” Talia insisted, waving the book under the Terran’s nose.

Flustered, Lyselle stood silently for a moment. She looked towards Auna, who simply responded with a small, confounded shrug. Sighing and reclaiming the book and her seat alongside their gatherings, she opened her notes to a different page, revealing a pair of detailed ink renderings depicting the mushrooms and moss. A smattering of notes in both English and Demonic lined the area around the drawings.

Auna gawked. “*Hel*, Lyselle! It was fifteen fucking minutes! Fifteen!”

Lys carried on, finding nothing particularly exceptional about her demonstrated pace. “Some of this is just lifted from the books I brought along, but I find their alchemical details to be troublingly under any kind of useful par. Obviously, I haven’t really gotten to test very many

reactions yet, though I *have* been able to see how each element responds when exposed to varying levels of heat thanks to our fire here, and I can make some assumptions regarding the moss's response to water."

Auna leaned over, tapping at a few lines of text that stood out from the others, written in its own script. "Is that the old tongue? What do you need that for?"

"Well, you saw my spellcast analysis. This is the reverse side of that same coin."

Talia had gotten in close again, leaning over Lys's arm to get a better look. "Alchemy ain't really my strong suit, sorry. Explain it like I don't know a fairy's fart from a glistening gemstone."

Lys cocked her head. "Okay...? It's simple, honestly." She began directing the other girls around the page with her hand as she spoke. "Alchemic ingredients are objects that have either become infused with or respond uniquely to magical properties. By analyzing these properties and studying how different pieces interact, one can learn to emulate certain spell effects through the utilization of physical materia—"

Lyselle was cut off as she looked up to see Talia's smug grin.

"W... What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I saw it again," the elf sang.

Auna leaned over to glare at her. "You're staring at *her*? I can barely keep up with what she's pointing at on the page!"

Talia shrugged. "Don't matter what you were looking at. I saw it. It's there."

Lyselle was skeptical. "Are you toying with me?"

"Not at all," Talia assured. "Now, tell me about the writheweed stuff. Let me know what I fucked a plant for."

"I assumed you did it for fun," Auna retorted.

The half-elf laughed. "Not wrong! But it also got the job done."

Lys's eyebrow rose. "Did you at any point stop to think of a way to get the job done without getting dangled and molested in the air?"

"Yeah," Talia assured, "but nothing came to mind that was as enjoyable without invoking casualties and collateral damage."

Auna snorted. "So, if you couldn't fuck it you were gonna kick its ass?"

“I didn’t say that!” The girl’s head sank into her shoulders as she crossed her arms. “I’m just saying, the most *enjoyable* solutions to most problems are sex and violence.”

“You should get a job in Hollywood,” Lyselle quipped.

Talia gave her a blank stare. “I don’t understand that reference.”

“Don’t worry about it,” the Terran sighed. “Still, you should probably show at least a *little* more hesitance before doing...” Lys’s hands grasped for a gesture, but failed to find an adequate one. “...*that* with a plant, though.”

The half-blood huffed. “Lyssie, it had the *vibes*. The vibes! We talked about this!”

Lyselle was unimpressed “Uh-huh.”

“I wouldn’t be so quick to judge, Lyly.” Auna startled Lyselle by running a finger through the Terran’s hair as she spoke, rising from her seat to circle around her with a haughty saunter. “If I recall, *one* of us was pretty engaged in something I would perhaps describe as ‘rubbing the plant’s balls’ while our travel buddy was getting railed.” The demoness’s finger traced around Lys’s head and came to a rest under her chin as she continued. “Now, who was doing *that*, again?”

Lyselle bolted to her feet, face as red as her hair as she quickly started marching towards the nearest tent. “Well, damn! Look at the time! I think I should be getting to bed, don’t you?”

Talia rose an eyebrow. “Before dinner? Besides, we never figured out who was sharing a tent.”

Lyselle froze in place, turning slowly to meet Talia’s gaze. Her voice managed to squeak out a shaky and barely audible “What?”

Talia leaned to one side, the fire highlighting her features in a way that only served to heighten Lyselle’s panic as the glistening half-blood laid out the situation. “We expected two gals. I brought two tents.” She gestured towards Auna. “We now have a third gal.”

Oh my God. Lyselle’s voice was officially trapped in her throat again.

“Not it,” Auna declared, grabbing a stick off the ground and skewering the fish with it. “I’m keeping my distance from both the plant-fucker *and* the girl who spent all day in the woods and was too shy to wash her stank off.”

Oh. My God!?

“Aw, I don’t mind a bit of Terran stink! I much prefer it to smelling like fish anyway, *Chef Auna.*”

Auna blinked. “Wait, huh?”

Talia grinned mischievously. “Grill that thing up, cook! We’re hungry over here! Right, Lyssie?”

Lyselle didn’t speak. She was still processing the idea of Talia being close enough to her to pick up her scent. *Sharing a tent? All night, in a tent!? Just us. In tent. Tent in. Us? Us in tent!!*

Oh, God!

“Wow,” Talia mused. “See? She’s so hungry she can’t even think straight.”

Auna rolled her eyes, leaning forward to hold the fish over the fire. “Yeah, I’m sure that’s what it is.” The towel slipped down, revealing what little had been obscured of the Adorned’s gold-streaked breasts, lines of metallic skin glittering in the dancing light of the open flames.

Lyselle absolutely noticed, even if her mind was barely keeping up with the conversation. “Te... Tuh... Tent...?”

Talia’s grin softened into a more sympathetic smile. “Yes, Lyssie. Tent. Don’t worry, I don’t bite.” She thought for a moment, then shrugged. “Not without invitation, anyway.”

Lys felt like she was being cooked as directly as the fish in Auna’s grasp. “B... bite?”

Talia laughed, her tongue switching to English for an irresistible bit of teasing. “Aye! Are ye askin’?”

That proved to be the last straw. Lyselle’s head spun, and before she knew it she found herself falling over onto the ground. The last thing she heard was the other girls reacting.

“Talia, you broke the Terran!”