Summer had found its foothold. Stuffy coats and baggy sweaters were replaced by light t-shirts and shorts, skirts and blouses, unless one’s culture demanded otherwise, such as the goths who huddled together in the school’s shadow every lunch break to smoke, clad in leather or dense black coats. The popular cliques used it to show off the cutest designs money could buy, the sluts bared all that they could get away with, and the plain stuck to the usual of mimicry, desperate for a place. Carmen ignored them all. She didn’t have much other choice.

Stalking thrift stores and taking whatever charity they could left few options. A blue shirt, sometimes a few stainless whites, and perhaps a summery blouse were all she could find, and half of which no longer fit. Whatever the Futa Note was doing, it had culled her options to the barest essentials, unless she wanted to dress like Mary.

“Just let me buy you a few things,” Mary said, exasperated. They sat outside, under a large, filled out tree that provided a gentle ambience as the breeze rustled its leaves. She wore a sleeveless shirt, cropped to show off her navel, and a pair of pants so short her member almost peaked out. “It’ll be fun! And I swear I won’t pick out anything ‘risqué’.”

“Last time you said that, I wound up wearing nothing but lace,” Dakota said.

“Once,” Mary added.

“It’s fine,” Carmen said, shaking her head, “I think Zoey needs the help more than I do. Can’t be easy for you.”

“No, it’s alright,” Zoey shrugged, setting her luscious curves jiggling beneath her strained shirt. Since the race two months ago, she’d become a true Amazon. Eight feet tall, Carmen estimated, and still growing. She couldn’t bring herself to remove that aspect from the Futa Note, not since Zoey enjoyed it. In every aspect, she was the largest of the school. Though not the smartest. Carmen made sure to hold that distinction.

Mary just rolled her eyes, “You got me beat for now, Zo, but these puppies are catching up.” She referred to her breasts, augmented by implants too large for a teenager, though they’d started growing in the past months. Carmen feigned ignorance when Mary had announced the fact.

“Yeah, yeah,” Zoey snickered. For better or worse, the Futa Note had created this moment. Carmen leaned against the tree, content to listen to her friends and savour the breeze on her skin. Even Ryuka, who kicked her feet from a branch overhead, couldn’t dampen the mood. Only one person could do so, and she was off-campus somewhere, making life miserable for others.

Lunch would be over soon, then it was back to monotony. But, fleeting as it always seemed, a moment of happiness was enough for Carmen. Graduation wasn’t far, after that, she could take greater strides towards bringing her family into this fold. No more double-shifts for her mother, no more rags for her sister, and no more Gretchen for herself. That alone was worth the price of any college.

“Anyone got any plans?” Dakota asked.

“What? For later?” Mary said.

“No, I mean college. Like, what’re you gonna do?”

“I dunno,” Mary shrugged, “Zoey? Got any ideas?”

“Not sure yet. Probably something athletic. Or maybe I could just work as a bouncer. Put these guns to work!” Zoey chuckled, flexing her impressive arms. She already was, to an extent. With her around, Gretchen didn’t dare make any direct moves on Carmen or her friends, not after the media latched onto the fact that Zoey was ‘trans’. Expulsion would result in a backlash, the kind that Saint Puella couldn’t survive at this point. Though it wouldn’t survive regardless. One more year at most.

“Carmen?” Dakota sped up to walk beside her.

“Hmm? I’m still figuring it out,” Carmen said.

“You could literally do anything,” Mary said, leering at the honour student’s chest, “Ever thought of modelling?”

“No,” Carmen chuckled, “I want to do something meaningful. Maybe I’ll just be a doctor.”

“Oh? Become a plastic surgeon, that way you can give me a discount,” Mary said.

“I thought you were done with that,” Dakota frowned at her.

“Well, yeah… sort of. I mean, I don’t have Ashley around to pay for it anymore. I guess I like being a little plastic,” Mary squeezed her breasts. They had more give now, having piled on more fat around the implants, though their spherical shape hadn’t dissipated enough. Anyone would know their true origins at a glance.

“You’re not the only one,” Dakota said and copped a feel, a sly grin on her face.

“Quit it,” Mary laughed and swatted at the other futa.

People gave them a wide berth in the halls. It was natural for the students, as they did so whenever Gretchen walked through, and had done so for Mary just a few months prior. Now Carmen was in a similar position, at the head of three other ‘girls’ that used to hang out together, their leader in a sense. Only a liar would deny the satisfaction it gave.

Carmen grinned at her company. Relief saturated the air around Saint Puella’s senior students, those who knew that in under a month, they’d be free. Whether they used that to enrich their lives, or just to bask in Gretchen’s absence, was up to them.

“I think you’d make a great doctor,” Zoey said.

“Really?” Carmen asked. She’d thought about it before. They made plenty of money, however med school was a financial nightmare, and the hours of study she’d have to put in made it seem like an impossible dream. For now. If she played her cards right, that could be her ultimate future. In the meantime, she could find something lucrative and milk it for all it had, “It’s too expensive, though.”

“Get a scholarship,” Mary said, “You’re smart enough for one.”

“That doesn’t cover everything,” Carmen sighed, “I’ll just figure it out when the time comes. So long as I make good money from it, I don’t really mind what I do.”

“Maybe whore yourself out?” A familiar, venomous voice suggested. It dripped with disgust layered in saccharine, reverberating with falsehood. Carmen didn’t acknowledge it and kept walking. What power Gretchen held would soon vanish, and she’d be left as a petulant child, alone and desperate. After graduation, Carmen didn’t care if the vile bitch drowned or overdosed. She was nothing in the grand scheme.

Seeing that she didn’t response, Gretchen turned to Mary, “No, that’s your piece de resistance, isn’t it?”

“Fuck you,” Mary snapped.

“Hey, a bitch with bite. Never seen that before. What about you, Rachel?”

“No,” the petite redhead at her side agreed, “Then again, the one who does nothing must be pathetic. Guess she’s that scared.”

“Yeah,” Ashley nodded from behind the two, hiding away from Mary’s glare. Carmen turned to observe and caught Rachel’s eyes, each a vibrant green like the freshest grass, yet they were ashen with disdain. And none of it was spread between Dakota, Mary or Zoey. Only Carmen.

“You know, I think you’re gonna love tomorrow,” Gretchen said, strolling by, though no one moved aside for her. She paused and beamed at Carmen, though her eye twitched at the lack of reaction, “Especially you.”

“Whatever,” Carmen said and turned away. The bell rang for classes just as she stepped through the door, leaving Gretchen in the middle of a breath. She sat close to the window just as always and stared across the city. Almost every career path was open to her, it all depended on what she chose. Of course, they could all be hers with a few simple sentences.

She snapped her gaze to the front and brushed her bag with her leg. Inside the dilapidated rucksack was the Futa Note, ready and waiting for her to use it again, as was the Seikogami that toyed with a lock of hair longer than Carmen was tall.

“This is boring,” Ryuka said, and reclined in the air. Her breasts fell and quivered mere inches from Carmen’s face, “Depressingly so. I can’t even masturbate like this.”

“Good,” Carmen muttered and focused on her textbook. Exams were coming. Supernatural or not, she couldn’t afford distractions. These could make or break her plan.

“Just give me the book,” Ryuka said, “I’ll go have some fun and be right back. You won’t have to feel any guilt.”

“No,” Carmen said, “You’ll just write my name or something. I refuse to give anyone, especially you, that much control over me.”

“But you have no problem exerting it over others?”

“Of course not,” Carmen said, her hand paused mid-letter. She didn’t. She’d taken control of three people, turned them into what she figured was best, aside from the futanari aspect, yet she couldn’t find the remorse she’d felt at first. Why would she? Everything had turned out for the better. Those people were her friends now, they were happier, focused, free, all because of her.

“Then why not use it?” Ryuka inquired. She floated around until her expansive bosom was squashed against Carmen’s desk, consuming the north in her creamy flesh, “Surely that Gretchen girl deserves something.”

“She does, but I’m not about to write her name. She’s just a bitch. Besides, she’ll be gone in a little while. There’s no point.”

“Spoilsport,” Ryuka pouted.

Later, Carmen stepped into the comfort of Stacy’s embrace. It wasn’t time for the usual rush and only a few people occupied the cosy space, none of which paid them any mind, so the two snuck a quick kiss.

“How was school?” Stacy asked while Carmen pulled an apron on. It was new, embroidered with a heart around her name, and a small, almost unnoticeable, padlock to it. Stacy had said she’d bought it on a whim, though her own apron shared the same flare. In the back, two other girls worked. Their names were Rebecca and Holly, neither paid much mind to Carmen and she returned the favour.

“Alright. Just the usual stuff,” Carmen said.

“Gretchen’s still giving you trouble?”

“Not really. I think she’s getting desperate with graduation coming up.”

“I can’t wait,” Stacy said.

“Me neither.” It wasn’t the fact that a vacation would give Carmen more time to work, or that she would be free to spend more time with Stacy, but that they could go away together. The plan was for one week, all alone, in a cabin up some hill. On further research, there was one perfect for their wishes. Foot traffic was rare, and it was inaccessible by car, though it still had cell phone reception for emergencies. No one would bother them there.

Just the thought of it made Carmen’s heart skip and her thighs clench. She took a long breath and pushed the thoughts away for now. Getting wet at work begged for disaster to occur.

“Did you milk yourself this morning?” Carmen asked.

“I’m not a child, Carmen. I can take care of myself,” Stacy giggled, “But I stopped a bit earlier than normal. Just for you.”

“Thanks,” Carmen said and stole a quick peck on the cheek, before righting her posture as the first of many customers entered. A tide built before long, mostly men, all with familiar, lecherous faces. Accustomed, Carmen ignored their gazes and did her job, enticing them to spend more money than they reasonably should, while still giving her a generous tip. If this kept up, she could afford med school, but she needed more. A little extra skin wouldn’t hurt. The thought almost made her slip up.

When time came for a break, she contemplated the idea and her chest. Even now, she purported more cleavage than she’d like. It was inevitable given her selection of tops and the magnitude of her bosom, which had flourished further. They were close to Stacy’s size but perkier, proud on her chest despite the lack of support. She was already using them for her own means, going a touch further couldn’t be any worse. When all eyes had left her, she adjusted her top to bare another inch of breast. The tips corresponded.

At least she wasn’t stripping. Money was second only to her family, but she couldn’t sacrifice dignity for it either, not unless things became desperate. That wouldn’t happen. Things were stable now, better in fact, since the law firm her mom temped at had landed better cases, they even offered her a full-time position with better pay, and Stacy was earning enough to give Carmen a small raise. Which she hoped wasn’t due to their weekly ‘bonding’ sessions.

After break, Carmen worked with a full stomach and Stacy with emptied breasts. Even sucked dry, they had a hint of pert to them, as if they were already filling up for another milking, though Stacy had lost some weight. People did claim sex was a great form of weight-loss, however she hoped it wasn’t *that* good; Stacy’s voluptuous form was one of the few indulgences Carmen had.

Not that it mattered. With, or without it, she would love Stacy. Simple as that. Their attraction wasn’t purely physical.

Carmen exhaled as the final customer left. The sun was setting and, without a cloud in sight, the sky was bathed in fire, broken by wisps of smoke and airplanes. She stretched and removed her apron, highlighting the majesty of her bust for Stacy’s eyes, a quick tease for Friday.

“See you Wednesday,” Carmen said.

“I’ll call tomorrow,” Stacy whispered to her.

“Looking forward to it,” Carmen stole a short but loving kiss and left. Yes, things were stable now. She had a girlfriend, her job was going well, and soon college would be in her reach. Tomorrow, she would look into nearby med schools. If it was close enough, she could stay on with Stacy. Maybe even use her for practice. The thought ripped a giggle from her lips.

“Someone’s giddy,” Ryuka noted, descending from the unknown. Carmen didn’t know where she went during work hours, regardless she was glad that the god gave her some privacy with Stacy.

“Things are looking up,” Carmen said and smiled at her supernatural stalker.

“For you maybe,” Ryuka sulked, “You haven’t even touched the damn book. And I can’t watch you and Stacy get nasty. It’s boring.”

“Find someone else,” Carmen shrugged, “It’s a big city. Gotta be some kinky weirdos around.”

“It’s my own fault really. If I wasn’t so worried that I’d miss you finally giving in, I’d have done that. But it’ll be worth it,” Ryuka said and hovered closer. She took a long breath, swelling her chest into Carmen’s back, dragging the long nipples through the thin fabric of her shirt, “Your potential is fantastic. A Seikogami can smell these things, brimming beneath the surface. Everyone has that unspoken or repressed fetish. But you, hmm,” she sighed as if smelling the finest bouquet and dinner at once, “There’s no telling.”

“I guess I’ll take the compliment,” Carmen rolled her eyes. She didn’t have any secret fetishes. The mother-daughter roleplay she did with Stacy wasn’t uncommon, less so with Stacy’s bountiful lactation, and being the one on top whenever they used toys was just a sign of her drive. Nothing strange there.

Her sleep had improved in the last few weeks. She didn’t care to admit it, but her breasts made for magnificent pillows, and their weight made it oddly simple to drift off, like a permanent comforter on her chest. While her actual pillows and sheets protected her from the jagged springs in her mattress, Carmen curled into herself and nuzzled her bosom. It wasn’t the same as Stacy’s, but a close second.

And Melody was doing better too. Her birthday had come and gone. They’d gone out to an authentic Japanese bathhouse, one designed for families, and had their first proper bath in years. Astounding to think what simple clean, hot water could do for someone. Even Alicia’s fatigue had dwindled afterwards, though its return was steady. Not much longer, Carmen thought as she snuggled into herself. Everything would work out. The world owed her that much.

Morning came, normal as could be. Carmen woke from a pleasant, enigmatic dream to the errant ray of late Spring sunlight, while its slighter cousins broke through the cracks in the ceiling. Opposite her, Melody stirred. Ryuka hovered nearby, seemingly asleep despite having her phallus draped across her breasts while she nuzzled against it. The honour student grinned and rubbed the sleep from her eyes as she sat up, happy enough to face another day. One more down.

Then she felt it. Something that shouldn’t be. The potential of it had nibbled at the furthest abyss of her thoughts, creeping up at random, now it was realised. Carmen froze and watched her sister mumble and turn away, before she flung off her own meagre covers. She lowered her eyes, slow, as if she was looking away from a predator. A rush of cold flowed through her fingers then mitigated throughout her body. A slight chill, but the kind that’s impossible to identify or ignore.

“This isn’t happening,” Carmen whispered, cautious of alerting Melody.

Ryuka heard her, however, loud and clear. Of course, “Oh? So it finally happened?”

“Bathroom. Now,” Carmen growled. Once in the cramped space, she pulled her pants down to confirm what the bulge had already told her. There it was. Unwelcome. Unusual. And, above all, hideous. A penis, small and limp, hung over her privates like a cowl. Two balls filled a wrinkly sack beneath it, each no larger than a grape.

“What the fuck is this?!”

“Calm down,” Ryuka yawned, “It was bound to happen. You read the rules, did you not?”

“It never said anything about this!” Carmen said and sat on the toilet. She ran her hand through her hair, which had once been a dark, sandy blonde colour, now it was closer to black and longer than she liked to have it.

“Oh? My mistake,” Ryuka giggled.

“This isn’t funny! What if this gets in the way? And… oh god, Stacy! What is she gonna think?” Carmen curled into her, taking deep breaths and ignoring how the air felt on her… penis.

“I bet she’ll love you just as always,” Ryuka said.

“No she won’t,” Carmen sobbed, “I’m a freak. She’s nice, but this is… even she has her limits. Everything’s ruined. What hospital will hire a transsexual anyway?”

“Futanari,” Ryuka corrected.

“It’s doesn’t fucking matter,” Carmen said, then sighed and straightened out her clothes. A faint bulge was all that belied her new addition, “You’ve ruined my life.” She said and left to wake Melody.

Self-discipline comprised Carmen’s psyche. It afforded solidity where others would crack and crumble to dust. She had a phallus now, it was small and easily concealed with some choice attire, so no one would find out. Her vagina remained intact. If push came to shove, she would have the abomination removed from her body. Though she doubted the Futa Note would permit such a thing. Regardless, time marched on and so would she. This wasn’t the end. Perhaps even a blessing. Sensibilities towards genders were sky high, therefore this might work to her advantage in college.

For now, however, she had more important matters. She gave her darling sister a quick shake, to no avail. Her face remained lax, though her body tensed. Carmen grinned and rolled her eyes, cleared her throat, then announced.

“Goodness Supergirl! The city’s under attack!”

“Never fear!” Melody leapt from her bed and adopted a true hero’s pose, fists on her hips and chest puffed out in pride, before losing her footing and tipping back onto bed. She hopped straight back to the pose.

“Good, now eat some breakfast. Even superheroes need food,” Carmen said.

“But the crisis?!”

“Will wait,” Carmen chuckled, “I bet the big monster is eating its own breakfast right now. You’ve got time.”

“Alright,” Melody groaned, “Who’s the felon this time?”

“Oh, it’s the worst of the worst. Goes by the name; School.”

Melody played up a gag, “A foul name indeed.”

“Yes,” Carmen agreed and handed her a bowl of bland cereal, though she managed to offer a sprinkling of sugar, courtesy of Stacy. Hers stayed plain. They cleaned their teeth, brushed each other’s hair, then the bus arrived.

“Go get ‘em, Supergirl,” Carmen said.

“I will,” Melody smirked, though her expression was strained. A shared glance to the bus confirmed the worry. She was eight, of course there would be bullies, more so because of her situation.

“Don’t worry,” Carmen said and crouched beside her, “Things will get better. I promise.”

“I know,” Melody said.

“Stay strong,” Carmen stood and gave her slight shoulders a gentle squeeze. A group of boys on the bus were gawking at her, some had mischief in their eyes, planning to either tease or manipulate Melody in some way. Fury flashed in Carmen’s mind and leaked to her face, frightening the onlookers, “If they go too far, let me know. I’ll deal with it.”

“It’s okay,” Melody said and walked to the bus, waving to her older sibling. Things would change before long. Another year, maybe two, and they could move somewhere better. No more weekly baths, scraps for dinner, or rags for clothes. To do that, Carmen needed more work. A second job in the Summer would help, she could save up for college, then rise up in the world. Nothing would prevent that.

The walk to school was pleasant as ever. Vapours of the city were muted by the freshness of Spring, people remained docile as they staggered to work, still half-asleep, and Carmen remained just another face in the crowd. Traffic slowed as she turned a corner onto the street where Saint Puella teetered. A small group of people in suits were studying it and taking notes. Government officials, she assumed. Not that it mattered to her. After one more short month, the school would be a best forgotten memory.

Aside from a few factors. Carmen spotted Zoey on the opposite path and waved. Mary and Dakota were already on campus, waiting for them, and Gretchen was nowhere to be seen. If they were lucky, today was one where she ditched school altogether. Such luck passed over them. Minutes before the bell rang, Gretchen strutted into the scene. Ashley and Rachel backed her up, like always, as did a small group of unknown sycophants.

“Hey there, carpet munchers!” Gretchen said, “Oh, my bad. Two of you are trannies. Must be weird for you dykes, huh? You know, if you ever get sick of dick, Dakota, you could always come over sometime. I wouldn’t say no to a free eating out.”

“Fuck off,” Mary growled.

“Oh?” Gretchen’s eyes thinned to slits and her smile twisted into a knowing smirk, “News spreads fast, freak. I know all about you and Dakota fucking in the bathrooms.”

Zoey stepped in, “She said ‘fuck off’.”

“What’re you gonna do about it? Touch me and I’ll get you arrested for sexual assault, after all, who’d believe a freakish tranny like you… Jesus, you’re like a fucking tree. Dumb as one, I bet. What do mommy and daddy spend on you, huh? Gotta be custom shit with tits like those. I guess the doctor lied when he said mine were the biggest he would do. Or maybe your ‘girlfriend’ buys all your shit for you?”

Zoey’s tan darkened to a dangerous shade, “I don’t give a fuck if I’m expelled, so leave, before I rip out your tits.”

Gretchen chortled at that, “Frightening.” It was, the earlier confidence in her eyes gave out to fear as she stepped away. She left with a final, condescending smirk to the group. Rachel also looked back, though her expression was torn between contempt and neutrality.

“What’s with her?” Dakota groaned, rubbing at her temples. She was flushed, as was Mary, “So, uh… cat’s out of the bag, huh?”

“About what?” Carmen asked.

“Us,” Dakota glanced to Mary, then to the ground, “You know, that we’re… uh…”

“I don’t care,” Carmen said, offering a grin to the pair, “I think it’s nice.”

“Same,” Zoey said. She pulled them both into a hug, her pristine musculature encompassing them with ease.

“Thanks,” Mary refused to meet anyone’s eyes, though her lips were tilted in gratitude, “Oh!” She broke free from Zoey and hefted her breasts, “They grew again.” Of course they had, Carmen thought. That was how she’d written it. With the latest spurt, her once plastic friend now sported the largest boobs in the school, while Zoey, Carmen and Gretchen nipped at her heels, and unlike before, they looked like they belonged. A hint of her implants kept their bases too full, however no one would notice at a glance. Even Carmen had difficulty despite her staring.

She blinked and snatched her gaze away. What was that? No one noticed to her fortune, only she had, and that was enough to warrant concern. Carmen shifted weight on impulse and felt her erection slip from her panties to rub against her thigh.

“Sorry guys, uh, gotta use the bathroom,” she said and rushed away. She slipped her bag to her front, using it to shield the obtuse shape.

*“All students report to the gymnasium for a mandatory assembly!”* Principal Blake’s voice rang through the school, hollow and tinny from the outdated sound system. A collective groan answered it. Carmen took a long breath, she wasn’t far from the gym. If she arrived soon enough, no one would notice. Others took a lethargic pace, while Carmen weaved between them, careful not to let her bag move and reached the gym without issue.

“Okay…” She sat toward the back, “Okay, this is fine. It gets hard, of course it would, but I can handle it. This doesn’t change anything.” Carmen let her words fade to a soft whisper as people piled in, before straightening her back. Doubt could come later. For now, she needed to maintain composure. Ten minutes later and almost the entire student body was present, barring the dropouts. Even Gretchen showed up. Mary and the others managed to get the seats beside Carmen.

“You alright?” Dakota asked.

“Yeah. Fine,” Carmen said.

“Okay,” Dakota’s tone didn’t match. She was suspicious. No one can know.

“Just some cramps. Think it’s that time,” Carmen said.

“Oh.” That placated her. Principal Blake took to the stage then, though she appeared uncertain of her footing. It surprised Carmen that the rotting wood even supported her. She called the murmuring masses to order.

“Quiet! Now, the reason I’ve called you here is to notify you of some changes to our graduation plans. We’ll be extending the senior class’s time here.”

“What?” Someone exclaimed. Carmen almost didn’t notice that it was herself.

“Settle down. It’s a preparatory measure. You see, funding has been down, so we’re planning on converting to a college prep school. Somewhere that students can go for a year before moving onto college. This means the senior class will stay on with us for one more year at the end of this term. And yes, it is mandatory. That is all. Dismissed.”

Everyone stood and left, the majority of them grumbling about how unfair it was. Carmen didn’t move. She stared at the podium where the principal had stood. Not far below it, she saw Gretchen’s sickening stream of blonde move. She was staring at her, expecting a reaction. But Carmen remained silent, going over her own thoughts. A glimpse of rage almost snapped her free, then Gretchen stood and left.

Everything had changed. Following the assembly, they were handed pamphlets explaining what would happen. The days were the same, but the hours were longer, leaving little time for Carmen to work. If she took too long a shift, then she couldn’t study. If she didn’t study, then she would falter and it would reflect on her records. College wouldn’t have been easy, but she could’ve manage with the added freedom it gave. This…

“Well? How’d you like that? I know you were so desperate not to say goodbye, so I got you another year with me,” Gretchen said, coming to leer over Carmen’s shoulder, “Don’t worry, I made sure you got the toughest subjects.”

Carmen remained lost. She walked away without a word, mind whirling, twisting in every direction but found no answer. Her mom would need more shifts to cover for her share, which meant she’d be further exhausted. The woman was in her forties, anything more than she already had would take its toll. Maybe she could reason with Principal Blake? No, she wouldn’t listen. This was likely a perfect chance to keep her best student around to show off her results.

“Aren’t you listening, you stupid lesbian shit?!” Gretchen snarled. Her words might’ve meant something on another day, but they were garbled now. Carmen spared her a glance and continued to her first class.

Later, she laid on her bed, back toward Melody, and scribbled a million potential plans on whatever paper she had. She refused to let her sister see her worry. Her phone sat to her side, untouched as it hadn’t rang yet. Stacy usually sent a text or called during her break. Must be busy, Carmen figured. An hour later and still nothing.

“Melody? Will you be alright by yourself for half an hour?” Carmen asked.

“Yeah, why?”

“I need to visit a friend,” Carmen said and left, though she made certain the door locked into place. The streetlamps were on, adding their false illumination to the dwindling sunlight. People were more energetic now, freed from work and school. Some were already drunk or drinking, others smoked. She ignored it all, striding toward Soothe the Soul. She needed to hear Stacy’s voice. Just seeing her would be enough.

Yes, just having the chance to see her girlfriend’s always smiling face and incredible body would chase all her worries away. A hug would be better, then she could smell the wonderful perfume of sex and coffee that lingered on Stacy, even after they finished a long evening together, and feel her breasts. What better comfort than her lover’s soft, warm, oh so very inviting tits? Carmen’s were a poor substitute.

Her fantasies coalesced, froze, then shattered as she stared at the burning building ahead of her. People were gathered outside, recording the action as firefighters subdued the inferno. Nothing would escape from there unscathed. Carmen rubbed at her arms. Her fingers were numb, despite the blistering air, and spread their influence elsewhere.

What did she do?

“Carmen?” She turned at her name and saw the sight she’d craved, yet it was bleached in horror and coated in soot. The voice, once warm and loving, rasped now, like a serial smoker.

“What happened?” Carmen asked. She moved toward Stacy and held onto her, afraid either of them might fall. Stacy returned her grip.

“You can see what happened, can’t you?” Stacy panted. Her eyes swam in the fire, as if prepared to cry but deprived of the moisture to do so.

“You’re okay, though?”

“Yeah, some smoke inhalation, but nothing some rest won’t fix.”

“Thank god,” Carmen breathed and clung to her, “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

But it was. For whatever reason, for some unimaginably small sleight she’d committed, the world wanted her to suffer. Now Stacy was part of that. Someone cleared their throat behind her. It was a man in a black suit, holding a series of papers.

“I’ll deal with this. You head home. I’ll try and call you tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Carmen said and reluctantly let go. She kept looking back. It might have been the distance, or the still blazing fire, but Stacy was crying. At home, Carmen rubbed at her stinging eyes. Her throat stung from the small bit of smoke she’d inhaled. She ignored it and went to check on Melody. A sobbing sound caught her in its grip.

“Mom?”

Alicia looked up from the floor. Her back was against the couch and a cheap, half-empty bottle of wine was cradled in her arms. On closer inspection, it was almost emptied, with perhaps a mouthful left.

“What’s wrong?”

“I got fired. From both jobs,” Alicia said, slurring her words. She frowned and took the final gulp from her bottle, as if to wash away the foul taste of her words.

The floor swivelled beneath her, yet Carmen was forced to remain upright. A sense that she must maintain composure and sheer despair both worked to keep her in place, as if she were chained to a pole, with one side brittle but supportive and the other strong and covered in jagged thorns. She came down to her mother and, wordless, enveloped her in a hug.

“We’ll get through this,” Carmen said, though she wasn’t sure where the words came from. Everything was dark, an endless stretch of ink that threatened to swallow what little speck of light remained.

“I don’t think we can,” Alicia strained to speak, holding onto drunken tears, and held up an envelope, stamped with ‘Eviction Notice’ in bright red. A cursory glance through the contents confirmed its authenticity. They had less than a week left.

“I thought we were paying on time,” Carmen said.

“We were. The building came under new management. They’re kicking everyone out to demolish it or something.”

“I…”

“Mom? Carmen?”

Both fell silent and turned to face Melody. Carmen hid the wine with her body and walked to her, shoving a casual grin to her face, “Mom’s tired, sweetie. Come on, I’ll model for you.”

“Okay,” Melody said, though she lingered on their mother, who refused to meet her eyes. Not that Carmen could blame her. This girl was the core thing they were working so hard for, if her brilliant blue eyes showed even a hint of disappointment, of sorrow, of the horrible reality they toiled in, then they had failed, “Is everything okay?”

“Of course,” Carmen said once they were in their room, “How do you want me?” Melody frowned for a second, then sighed and started moving Carmen’s limbs as she would a doll’s. In the corner, Ryuka caught Carmen’s gaze and looked away. Was she responsible? No, much as the god complained, she’d never shown any malice to Carmen. There was one person who wanted her to suffer, but even Gretchen didn’t have such influence.

Then who did?