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Rooted in the devils' plane, The Karnan Academy of Magical Arts was an old and elaborate campus. Its collective of ornate spired buildings pierced the skyline in the heart of the Erduin Valley, the vine-laced towers of beige cobblestone rising over the forest canopy with swirling golden accents that glistened in the sunlight. The school's reputation was well-known, serving as Karna's primary place of magical education, and as such its sprawling dormitories housed students of all kinds. It of course had no shortage of the land's native demons looking to hone their 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. More than a few had entered over the years 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 sort that the stereotypical Terran would feel right at home with. It was other shortcomings that made Terrans 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. Terra 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 deemed 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 chubby 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, and fizzled out quickly to boot. 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 candidates 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, 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 was likely 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 pushing ahead of the rest of her peers, and her notes and formulas being daunting even to much of the faculty. The normally reserved young lady 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, "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. Lyselle 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' color 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 at their base 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 as she leaned back into her chair. "So it's a desk lamp?"

Lys stifled a grimace, smiling through clenched teeth. "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 beside her. "Geek made a desk lamp."

Her neighbor smiled back, cocking her head to the side as she replied, "Auna... Have you tried being less boring?"

The demoness bolted upright. "Boring!? Talia, we *have* light spells!" She rolled her golden eyes, limply raising a 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 and made over-emphasized air quotes at her - "'desk lamp.'"

"O-Oh," Lyselle stammered, "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." While the most notable incident, it was far from her only folly, and as such she had accrued a reputation for being a notorious trouble-maker by account of most of her teachers and peers, though never, the Terran had noticed, malicious towards Lyselle.

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 was leaned over her work with a keen interest, the light from the structure dancing 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 she appraised the object in front of her, deeply nervous of her classmate's opinion, yet thrilled that *any* of her peers had taken 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 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.

“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 demoness heckled in sing-song from her seat.

“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 back of the class 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.”

“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 eyes held 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 the front of 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, muttering something in an alien tongue that neither student could understand. The lights on the wall shifted and bent away from Talia's message, swirling 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 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, sir."

"Most excellent," said Evenclire. "As for you, Miss Alwin, impressive alchemy as always. It's a shame you can't explore the potential of your work 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 gave her a little wink 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 own 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 a silent spell, quickly cleaning the mess. The remaining parts of the table swirled together with ash and rubble to reassemble into something functional before their form began to refine and resemble what had been present before, dust compressing into matter and wood reaching across the gaps to grip itself and be made whole. As it came to rest on the floor, one could scarcely discern a difference between the unscathed old table 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 she leaned her head further and further down into the pages against her own hand.

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

The voice startled her so thoroughly that Lyselle almost fell backwards in her own chair, a frenzied yelp echoing through the now mostly empty classroom as she 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. “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, you see,” 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.”

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

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

Evenclire thought for a moment, considering his words. “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?”

The firebrand shook his head. “Ah, right. 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.”

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,” 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 offered, “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.

Talia threw her hands in the air. “Oh, sure!! No problem!!”

Lysells 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 that?”

“I’ve accounted for that quite well, I think,” their teacher stated proudly, rolling the paper up into a scroll. “Talia’s instincts will keep you two alive, and *your* intellect will make sure you gather the right ingredients and not 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.” Evenclire didn’t even hesitate.

“A’ight, I’m sold!” Her 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 tee, 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, *and 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 to her work?

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

"Alright," she declared, "I'll do it."