

# **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.

## ~1~

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, vine-laced towers of beige cobblestone rising over the surrounding forest's canopy with swirling golden accents which glistened in the light of 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, "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.*

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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, Alwyn? 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 enervated 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 Alwyn.”

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, uh...” 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.

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. She'd done some preliminary reading and eaten a light meal in her room while waiting for the sun to hide under the horizon. It was 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 offer a semblance of separation to the pools, as well as a faint sense of privacy to any students that might wish for it.

Lyselle was one such student. The baths were, like everything else in the school, wholly co-ed. 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 present, be it to bathe or simply fool around.

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, her feet dancing in the air as she smiled at the open affections happening nearby before glancing over and seeing Lyselle. She gave a sly wink and cocked her head, quietly motioning towards the back of the baths before gleefully returning her attention to the event happening beside her.

Lys clutched tightly to the towel she'd wrapped around her body, eyes lingering thirstily on the public display, before quickly creeping 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 often signaled to her guest if the space was available on any given night so she wouldn't stumble 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 finally let the towel slip off of her body and down onto the stone poolside 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. She 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, 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. Lyselle was pulled back to what she saw when leaving Evenclire's classroom; the bobbing Adorned, the throbbing red meat of the 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...

The moans grew louder still, one of the girls crying out her partner's name in orgasmic bliss. Lyselle had never known anything like it firsthand. She envied the pleasure, the freedom, the *choice*. She'd never felt it, and even now, surrounded by it, facing it head-on, she could barely suppress her own shame.

"Barely" was the key word. 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 that satyr's cock, and the shimmering trickle of spit dripping down her chin and into her gold-traced breasts, begging for Lyselle's gaze to follow the rivulets flowing between them, 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 cum and let it run over her, *into* her.

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 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 dropped to embrace herself, seeking 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 herself 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 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 pools. 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 comfort 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 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?"

"It is," 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 jejeb!"*

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-scraped 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.

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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, girly, *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. "*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.”

The 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 wills 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 plume of ash. Trying to smother the flames with his functioning hand left his palms burned and skin melting, blood and melted 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 his ripped skin.

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.”

“There ain’t no information here for you,” Everett growled. “We don’t keep no records! Customer confidentiality in case of uppity bitches like you!”

“Indeed,” the witch admitted. “A fleeting and 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."