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

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

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

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

A collection of balks and jeers cried back at her.

"Don't give us that crap!"

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

"I tried three different contracts!!"

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

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

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

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

The mage at the door looked increasingly flustered and overwhelmed, but there was little to be done. Lyselle kept moving forward, quickly lost in thought as she made her way to the cafeteria for a quick breakfast.

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

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

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

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

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

A duel had just concluded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

singular handbag, small enough to pass as a purse, making the Terran feel a bit over-prepared by comparison.

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

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

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

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

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

“You!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's..." Lyselle trailed off, visibly distressed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But just that brief moment.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A pair of students, one of them the satyr's roommate, scurried out of the crowd and pulled the battered body out of the dirt, a trail of blood left in their wake as they drug him off towards the main building. The Adorned's eyes tracked her victim into the muttering throng, a villainous smile adding to her merciless air once he'd left her sight.

"Honestly," the woman sighed, "nobody properly respects this place." With a lazy wave of her hand, the ground around the crater shifted and rose, turning in and mending itself until the evidence of the conflict was swallowed by the earth, blood and all. "Not like I do, at least, or rabble like that wouldn't even be allowed on these grounds. Who fails at a basic summons?"

Lyselle felt Talia's energy shift beside her. The half-elf's eyes narrowed, her muscles tensing ever so slightly, as the demoness spoke. Something the Adorned said had clearly gotten under the girl's skin.

She turned to Lyselle, the energy in her voice less enthused than normal as she offered the fallen Terran a hand. "We should get moving before she decides to take her frustrations out on someone else who can't do shit about it."

"O-oh...!" Lyselle took the offer, rising back onto her feet with the elf's aid. "Thank you."

Talia's eyes were already drifting back towards the demoness. Lyselle followed her classmate's gaze, and a chill ran down her spine.

The Adorned was looking directly at them.

"Rabble like *this*," the woman hissed. "A filthy half-blood and a talentless invader. I would think such refuse would be ashamed to show themselves in the light of day at all, yet here they are, hand in disgusting hand."

Lyselle saw something in Talia snap, the slightest twitch of true irritation crossing the girl's face as she drew in a resigned breath. She placed her hand on her hip, taking up a convincing air of her usual grinning bravado as she addressed the antagonizing combatant.

"I see you're as charming as ever, Camilla."

The demoness's head cocked. "Mind your manners, impurity. I am *Lady* Camilla, to you."

"Funny," the half-elf quipped. "I didn't know 'Ladies' went around smashing little boys into the dirt."

"It is my divine right to do as I please, and I *protect* that right by defending the purity of my lineage." Camilla's finger tapped agitatedly against her staff. "Something my sister would do well to remember. The last thing we need is her dragging our bloodline closer to mud like your whore mother did hers."

Talia's grin stiffened as she cracked her own neck. Despite the facade, Lyselle could see the anger raging in the half-elf's eyes. "I don't recall your bloodline making much of a difference last time you picked a fight with me, 'Lady' Camilla. Or have you forgotten?"

Whispers shot through the crowd as candidates began to step away from the space between Talia and the Adorned with a nervous haste.

“I do not forget my shames,” Camilla growled, her fingernails carving a fresh groove into her staff. “I long for nothing more than to cleanse this plane of your sickening presence.”

“Oh?” Talia’s eyes burned like fire as she stared down at the demon below. “Are we trying *again* today??”

“You speak with some confidence for someone who simply stood and watched as much as the other dregs.”

“And you antagonize a lot for someone who goes crying to daddy every time they lose.”

The energy in the air was tense as the pair glared into each other. Lyselle swore she could feel heat radiating from the half-elf. Talia’s hair seemed to rise and spread as if exposed to an electric current. Camilla was no less intimidating, the sunlight once again dimming as she stared back at the elf in disgust. The air seemed electric just from the intensity of the pair’s mutual stare, each daring the other to make the first move.

Then, in an instant, the tension snapped as the Adorned turned away with a huff. “Your time will come, you... *misfortune*, but luckily for you I have more important matters to attend to.” She began marching towards the school, the crowd parting before her to clear her path. “Such as finding my shameless whore of a sister.”

Talia’s eyes tracked Camilla as the demoness walked off towards the front gate, her grin fading into a more honest look of distaste now that the demoness wasn’t looking. “Whatever you say, Cammy.”

The gathered students began to scatter in the Adorned’s wake, each scurrying away from the agitated demon with understandable haste as her attention turned to searching the school’s halls. Murmurs of gossip and speculation rose quickly as the giant doors of the academy’s front gate slammed shut behind the imposing woman.

Talia exhaled, her demeanor immediately softening once the demon was out of sight. “Hell’s stone, that girl’s a pain.”

“That’s Auna’s sister?” Lyselle shivered, thinking about the power the woman had so easily displayed. “What do you think will happen if she finds her?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that.” Talia grinned at her classmate before turning her attention to the hedge beside them. “Right, Auna?”

A light yelp came from the bush. A moment later, the leaves slowly parted as the younger Adorned's face cautiously peered out from within. "How long have you known?"

Talia shrugged. "The whole time."

Auna balked. "How!?"

"Auna, she may be your sister, but I'm in class with you every day." Talia leaned down towards the face in the bushes. "I am keenly aware of your fussy bitch aura."

Lyselle blinked as realization hit her. "You stood here on purpose!"

"Of course." Talia stood back upright, her expression showing that she was clearly pleased with herself. "Even if she sensed Auna's presence, she'd just look up and see me."

"And once you had her attention..." Lyselle let out a light laugh as the half-elf's intentions clicked.

"Make a little fuss, do a bit of magical peacocking, and Camilla can't even notice her own little sister hiding right underfoot." She glanced back down to Auna. "You're welcome, by the way. I don't really enjoy watching your boyfriends get cremated alive, but I figured they had a better chance of walking away than you."

Auna's face sunk back into the leaves. "I doubt you're wrong."

Lyselle thought for a moment. "You know she's just going to go right for the dorms, right? If Auna goes back in there..."

"Auna's a bush now," protested Auna the bush.

Talia shrugged. "Hey, if that's your play. I can't play gardener all day, though. Got work to do."

Lyselle sighed. She had an idea brewing. She hated it. "I don't think the bush will suffice for very long."

Auna's porcelain face shot back out of the shrubbery, glaring up at the Terran. "What, have you got some *better* idea, Alwin?"

Lyselle's eyebrow raised. "Than hiding in a bush?"

The Adorned's face flushed as it sank lower against the leaves that framed it. "Okay. Fair point. I saw her coming this morning and worked with what I had. I didn't think she'd start busting dicks in the dooryard!"

"Camilla's stubborn, too," lamented Talia. "I give it at least a week before she gets bored and wanders off again."

Auna let out a long-winded groan of frustration. “Man, I just wanted to ride Gavin under a tree!”

Lyselle frowned. “In front of everybody?”

“That’s the point,” Auna and Talia responded in unison, the former with a notably higher degree of indignation.

“Ah.”

The demoness growled in frustration, though to an outside observer it looked like Talia and Lyselle were listening to the qualms of a vibrating garden hedge. “Honestly! I don’t know why this damned family gets so mad about our bloodline or whatever! It’s not like I’m gonna have these dudes’ babies! I don’t want *anyone’s* babies!! Why does she have to police what I do!?”

“I think it’s because she’s a raging cunt,” Talia remarked nonchalantly.

Lyselle looked back over her shoulder towards the closed double doors that Camilla had disappeared into. The idea forming in her mind grew louder, more assertive.

*Someone, help her...*

These words had crossed her mind before. Her thoughts drifted to the previous day, to her hesitance when Melissa had needed help.

*Someone...?*

Anxiety gripped her. She was powerless, hardly in a position to make such a fearsome foe as an Adorned who primarily spoke through violent spellcraft and insults. She hadn’t even stood up to a horny satyr in a hallway full of witnesses. Her and Auna hardly even got along, regardless, so what was to say the girl would accept or even want the Terran’s help?

*Why not me?*

She’d made a dreadful enemy of someone she feared before. She’d escaped her former home and abusers. She’d stood up, even if by a fit of desperate adrenaline, to Everett Hector.

*Those were necessary! I had no choice!*

The image of Lori in the lizardman’s arms flashed across her mind, memories of the other captives, of their horror and sorrow in that wretched wagon.

And then, the image of *her*.

“Let’s set Camilla’s interesting motivations aside for the time being,” Lyselle remarked, pulling her pack from her shoulders and stripping the hoodie off of her body. “Auna, put this on.”

The demoness scoffed. “Not my style.”

“That’s the point.” Lys pushed the garment into the hedge insistently.

There was a resigned huff from the bush before the sweater was pulled into its depths. A brief rustling of shrubbery later, Auna emerged from the flora with a displeased pout, slouching inside of Lyselle’s Terran garment as if it weighed half a ton.

“Hood up,” Lys ordered, reaching out to pull at the fabric rather than waiting for Auna to do it herself.

“But it hides my pretty horns,” the demoness whinged.

“Yeah, that’s the idea.”

Talia put a hand up to her chin, observing the process with eager curiosity. “What you thinking, Lys?”

“Low profile,” stated the Terran. “She can’t go back into the school, obviously, but she can look as little like Auna as possible while we help her sneak off campus.”

Lyselle turned back to Auna. “Now, where’s the last place anyone would ever think to look for you?”