



WORLDS OF
PROTHEIKA



MONSTER'S
LITTLE PRINCESS

A DARK FANTASY MONSTER ROMANCE

ANNE HALE
CELESTE KING

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PROTHEKA PUBLISHING

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Kaylee, Emily, Taylor, Jordon, Melanie, Jamie, Jennifer, Hannah, Donna and the whole “Project Protheka” family. Thanks for believing in the world.

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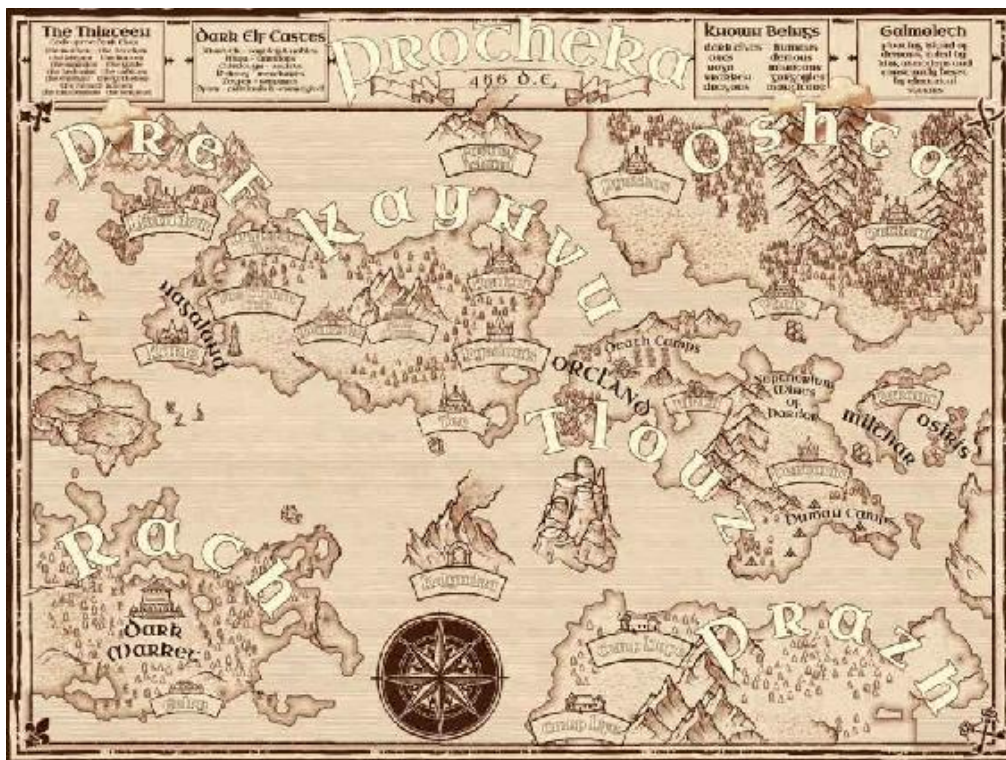
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THE WORLD OF PROTHEKA



LUCY

“I know they have my name. That I’m on their list.”

The orange glow of lanterns permeates the town square. Happy couples, children, and elders all galavant, laughing and chatting around abandoned houses and decrepit storefronts that haven’t found new owners.

Their smiles taunt me. I want what they have so badly, but I know in this life, I might never find it.

I can’t remember the last time I was truly happy. It might have been before my sister was born, though I’m surprised I can even remember that far back. During the very brief period when I was an only child, at least I was the focus of *somebody’s* attention.

In the middle of the town square, I sit alone, observing passersby, just trying to make something of my last few days on Protheke. The atmosphere is quaint. All around me, I can hear the cries of insects take form, calling from the forests and the trees.

“Who do you think will be the sacrifice?”

My ears are immediately pulled to the source.

An elderly gentleman who I recognize as Alder Ellis has taken up a seat nearby along with several of his peers. They wear prim attire, and I recognize them from the positions of power they used to occupy within the town before retiring.

Alder Ellis, the former mayor. Lunk Greeley, a retired priest. Hillard Batlazshire, local hunter for hire and the talk of

the town. And Mullen Retch, a man who single-handedly put together the local schools, with possibly a bit of corruption involved.

They don't see me watching.

They don't know what I'm thinking.

"Younger population just keeps getting smaller and smaller," Hillard says. "There are only a couple of viable options."

Funny how they can talk about me as though I don't exist. But that's my skill. I can be anywhere, and nobody notices I'm there because my entire life I've been invisible.

I'm like an insect to these townsfolk. And they will readily stomp on me, if given the chance.

Their chance is coming up.

"My money's on that girl... Her name starts with an 'L.'"

Alder is deep in thought, trying to formulate my name from out of nothing. What's frustrating is he used to be a friend of my father's.

"Luella?" Mullen offers a name that isn't mine. He used to be my teacher. He guided me in learning some of the far languages of Protheka.

"No, she's too old to be offered. And she's too valuable, anyway," Alder says.

He pauses to think.

"The one with the hot sister. The oldest daughter of the Alton family."

My blood boils. To think that this man used to hold a position of power over me, and *that's* how he sees us.

"Ah. Leslie?"

It's again not my name.

"I think that's it!"

I want to stomp over to them and tell them off. I'd like to take the scorching candles that cover the town square and

cover them with the burning wax.

Maybe that's a bit extreme.

Still, they need to pay.

"It really is a pity though," Lunk pipes up.

The three look at him in confusion.

"It's how we've always done things, Lunk," Alder spits. "What, would you rather the whole town face the consequences instead?"

I sigh and take in the cool autumn air.

I normally enjoy the season. The sound of crisp leaves stomped underfoot is so refreshing to my ears. And it's nice that there's a happy medium between the torment of summer and the freeze of winter.

But it's been hard lately.

I suppose I can't blame them, as I discreetly stand.

I think one of them actually notices me, and I hope he feels bad.

They don't want to die. I don't want to die, either.

I haven't been given my death sentence, but I'm just waiting for it to drop.

I breathe deep, trying to calm myself. How do I want to spend my final days?

Walking forward, I find the aroma of the soap shop too intoxicating to resist and step inside.

I've always loved the decoration here. It can be challenging to integrate light sources into these wooden shops without it seeming out of place, but the candles are nestled well into the displays in such a way that they don't feel disjointed. Adding to that, the whole store is made up of the pink tones of cerasus wood, giving it a calming vibe.

I always come here when my mind is spinning out of control and I can't find my center. Today, though, I'm not sure it will help.

Would anything?

I rub my hands over the herbs, taking in their smell and texture. Soap has always been such a joy to me.

If I felt like it would get used, and if I had any money, I might buy something here. But I don't know how much longer I've got, and my parents have already seized my money.

I notice a swarm of small, fluttering insects on my way out of the shop, filling the sky and covering the moon. It's strange and ominous.

Even a small bit of powder removed from their wings will render them flightless forever. But they don't know how vulnerable they are. They don't even think about it.

"It's pretty late for a walk, isn't it?"

I turn. Standing there is my sister, Edie.

The eyes of the elderly men are already bearing down upon her lasciviously. I hate them.

And I kind of hate her, too.

For as meager and frail as I am, she's always gotten the better genetics. Prettier face. Curvier body. Happier disposition.

"You're out here, too," I reply. "So don't even give me that."

"Relax," she says. "I'm just here because Mom and Dad are wondering where you are."

"Afraid I'll run off, are they?"

She laughs. "That's ridiculous. *You're* ridiculous."

"You can laugh about it all you want, because you know it isn't gonna be you."

I can tell by how she carries herself. I know by the cheerful tone she's still carrying.

She's not worried. And why should she be?

"It could be me though! Why couldn't it be?"

I gesture widely to the open space.

“Look around you. Every man in this town wants to be with you!”

She puts on a face of mock outrage. I think if she ever genuinely felt a negative emotion she might shrivel up like the leaves.

I smile at the thought.

Another leaf for me to step on.

“I don’t like what you’re implying.”

“Meanwhile, I’m barely noticed. ‘Poor little Lucy can’t do anything right.’ Or is it Luella? Or Leslie?”

I say it loud enough for the elderly men to notice. They get up and leave.

It doesn’t even bother me that I’m making a scene. Anything to get noticed might help my chances.

“Have you completely lost your mind?” Edie asks. “We can talk about this at home if you want. But you’re my sister. I love you. I don’t want to fight.”

I shake my head, still processing her audacity.

She always has to be the bigger person. Always willing to extend a branch my way, offering forgiveness, and hope, and blah blah blah. She always has to be the perfect one. Always doing and saying the right thing. Always the focus of everybody’s attention.

I’m tired of her. And the only reprieve if I get sent away is that at least I won’t have to look at her anymore.

And she won’t be the last thing I see before I die.

“I’m sorry,” I lie. “You’re right. I shouldn’t have said those things. Let’s not fight.”

She holds out her arms, and I very reluctantly fall into them. She embraces me tightly.

It’s vaguely comforting. I just wish it was genuine. Deep down, I know that the only thing Edie really cares about is

herself.

At least she smells bad, I think. The consolation does satisfy me somewhat.

“Let’s go home.”

She offers it as a suggestion, but I know, deep down, that she’s been ordered to bring me back.

Edie takes my hand in hers and starts to walk back up the mountain path.

I pull away.

She looks like she might want to scream at me by instinct, but of course, Edie denies that natural urge in order to be patronizing instead.

“What’s wrong?”

“You go ahead, Edie,” I suggest. “I thought I might hang around here for a bit. Take in my last days.”

She shakes her head.

“You know that’s not –”

“I do know, Edie. In fact, I’m pretty sure it’s going to be me.”

She turns her back toward me. “We’re not discussing this again.”

I silence the urge to continue arguing with her about it. There’s no point.

“Tell Mom and Dad I’m sorry and that I’m not going to run off. I just need to get my head in order.”

She turns back toward me, pleading this time. She’s got a single tear in her eye.

Edie has always been great at faking emotions that don’t belong to her.

“You know they’re not going to listen,” she insists. “You know how Dad gets.”

“Then try for me, please,” I insist. “Maybe you’ve convinced yourself I’m safe, but I need to sort myself out.”

She shakes her head.

“Fine,” she says. “I’ll take the heat for you. Just be safe.”

I chuckle at the thought.

There’s nothing in this town more threatening than what’s coming for me. As she heads out, I actually shadow her, watching her from a distance until she reaches the fork in the main road.

That girl hasn’t got a single worry.

Thing is, I’m not actually sure what I’m going to do out here. I might be happier at home.

I look out over the vast ocean from where I stand on the cliffside. The rushing tides give me a sense of peace.

And the chittering insects become louder still, drowning out the calm.

NASERIN

“Soon. She’ll be coming soon.”

I rock back and forth to curb the urges. I know that soon, I won’t be able to fight them anymore. Soon, I will be a mere passenger within my own body, forced to watch actions I can’t be held accountable for.

My shadow dances on the cavern wall. It unnerves me slightly to watch it mimicking my movements. My body quakes in the leaves, and they crinkle underneath me as I shift.

Soon, the creature within me – the creature they all fear – comes out and makes them pay.

I replay the last time in my mind, and it bothers me that it doesn’t bother me... That I’ve become so accustomed to this.

I still hear their screams. Their flesh is soft and malleable to my claws. Their faces all look the same to me.

Their blood is *delicious*.

But I’ve been able to stave off those cravings for some time. It’s been many cycles since I attacked them.

Since then, they’ve been consistent with their offering. In exchange for sparing their lives, they offer me a new girl to taste.

I reach over and massage my wing. It’s still tender to the touch, even after all this time.

I was flightless for days following the attack.

The expression their elder gave me before he drove his spear into my wing still penetrates my mind.

Something jostles the leaves nearby me.

I stand.

A worg curls up against the wall, rubbing its shoulder against the rock. Its fur is covered with thorns, and its blood drips gently. It is meek in my presence, as though it doesn't realize I'm the thing that will devour it.

"Hello beast," I growl. "Did you lose your way?"

My movements unsettle it as I edge forward, my abdomen rattling and bending in time, producing a steady, rhythmic clicking.

It creeps away from me, looking around. But I can see that it is injured.

I could spare this creature. Killing it now wouldn't be a fair fight.

Surely, there are more capable creatures who could appetite me more, without the need to pick around the sharp foliage engrained in this one's fur.

"In nature, you take what you're given."

Perhaps somebody said that and I overheard it before I devoured them. Perhaps I'm misremembering. It was a very long time ago. I was a different beast back then.

It's wise advice. The words feel sweet to my mind.

In one connected step, I lower myself, meeting the worg's reluctance and fear with vigor and intimidation.

Its whimper below me doesn't dissuade me.

My antennae perk up, sensing the release of fear chemicals.

My proboscis uncoils slowly, lowering itself and enlarging, finding the most vulnerable spot in the worg's exterior by following my antennae's guidance.

And I suck the worg dry.

At first, it becomes feeble and tries to escape, but no such luck. In its already weakened state, I'm easily able to grapple it using my pincers.

I watch as the beast, without its vital juices, becomes paler and paler. Its eyes give way to panic, and it fights my grasp once it realizes it's gone and has no chance for survival. Then, one by one, its organs fail, and as its consciousness fades, I am free to enjoy my meal.

The feast satisfies my hunger, but it is tainted by neglect. It doesn't fill me with the nectar of humans. In fact, it doesn't taste like any healthy animal I've encountered.

Something was wrong with this beast.

I shake it off. I'm not here to ask questions. Only to exist.

But as I move forward out of my cave dwelling, my appetite returns with a frenzy, and I'm natively drawn to continue hunting.

Leaving the pallid husk behind – I'll figure out what to do with it later – I take to the skies in search of prey.

The cool autumn air is far too gusty for my liking. Were I a more timid creature, I might seek out somewhere more tropical, in light of the coming winter. But my cave is deep, and in its recesses, I can find warmth and frigidity alike.

The first drops of rain hit my wings.

A pavo, mid-migration, crosses my vision. It looks appetizing but far too small to satisfy me.

I chuckle at the irony.

The people of this realm have often likened me to the insects of Protheka before I sucked them dry. Yet on repeated occasions, I have seen the small birds of this continent devouring insects. The yillese make for fine morning treats. And the papillions, who have spent lifetimes incubating to be winged creatures like me, are all too quickly snuffed out.

But I am not like them. Some of my anatomy resembles theirs, and I have more in common with them than the ursain that roam these woods. An ursain would make a lovely meal.

Still, I can't help finding kinship with them. Though they are easy prey, I feel no satisfaction in consuming them, and I have all but refrained from the activity the more mellow I've become.

That's when another pavo enters my eyesight, and I realize that I've spotted an entire flock of them.

I believe this sensation is what the humans call 'excitement.'

In perfect harmony, I beat my wings, carrying my legs forward. My proboscis is prepared, already alerted to the sensation by my dampened but functioning antennae.

The rain falling down upon me is frigid.

The pavos have not spotted me, and I'm far too quick for them to evade me even in the event that they did.

Finally gaining on the first pavo, my proboscis pierces through flesh and feathers alike with force, penetrating its avian body. The blood content is so small by comparison, I can drain it in an instant.

Its pavo friends panic.

Once my proboscis leaves its form, it falls limp to the ground.

Seeing through the harsh black clouds, I see more and more of these birds.

My wings carry me from one target to the other, leaving a mess of bird corpses on the beaches below.

I've heard the humans talk about my victims as they passed by my cave.

They treat me as a creature to fear through lifetimes. But when it comes to the animals I simply leave dead, en masse, they lie to their children.

There are always convenient explanations. Plagues infesting the wildlife. The cruel acts of unforgiving gods. Vindictive parents tell their children it's punishment for something the children did, manifesting in the real world.

I do not understand why humans lie. There are many things about them that intrigue me, but I could never imagine conversing with one to understand more.

Dropping to the ground below, I look over my work. There's a really beautiful pattern to the way the corpses of drained birds have fallen. None of them feel out of place.

“Still not satisfied, though.”

I reach down, patting my thorax.

The benefit of targeting meek, defenseless creatures is that there's no risk of harm. The detriment is that even staving off my hunger is fruitless, and I will need to succumb or receive my prize eventually. These creatures are just not satisfying.

I sigh, pondering which god engineered me, if indeed there are gods at all, before taking to the skies.

Immediately, I spot an ursain among the dotted trees, standing on its hindlegs and looking up at me.

It thinks I'm its prey. It's about to be in for a rude awakening.

I flutter down in front of it, dropping down slowly due to the pelting rain.

And before I can even get my bearings, it charges at me, full-speed. My eyes barely have room to process it.

It's faster than any ursain I've ever seen.

Unfortunately, it still lacks the one thing it needs to fight me on even ground, and before it has a chance to collide with me, I take to the skies, penetrating the space above it.

“You'll need to be faster than that,” I growl.

I taunt it, hovering too high out of reach, and it ponders what to do before its eyes land upon a nearby tree.

As it climbs, I simply bring myself higher out of its reach.

It escalates itself to the very top of the tree, and I am still beyond it.

I ponder over my options.

This ursain is particularly tenacious. To subdue it, I will either need to overpower it, or I'll need to breach its space without it breaching mine.

I am not immune to the injuries of battle, but simply engaging it in confrontation might be my only real answer.

My wings bring me back down to the soil.

The ursain cannot register confusion, I don't think, but it still seems to puzzle over me as my feet touch the ground.

You don't wish to escape me?

I can almost hear it speaking to me. At times, I like to imagine that the creatures of the wilds have a voice like mine and that I can engage them in conversation.

But humoring myself does not allay the beast's hunger. We are two beings of primal motivations, driven by nature to fight each other.

It charges at me, and I swoop to the side.

The opportunity to pierce it is not good.

I try to find my composure, and it charges me again. My proboscis narrowly misses as I sidestep out of the way.

On one final charge, I manage to pierce its flesh with my feeding tube but immediately realize that it's still too strong.

This is why I don't like fighting ursain.

I pull my proboscis back before the ursain can damage me and realize that this will be a game of patience.

With every dodged attack, I drive my claws into its fur, slicing into it bit by bit.

Eventually, I tire it out. Its hubris spelled its own death.

With one final, slow dodge, I get my proboscis inside one of its dozens of gaping wounds.

I am thoroughly satisfied for today. And I am again left with a corpse I have no interest in using.

“Soon. She'll be coming soon.”

Soon I'll receive a nectar that fills me far more than any wild animal and my hunger will abate for the year.

I am counting down the hours.

LUCY

Today is the day.

Our parents send us out the door without looking at us, shoving the morning meal into our faces. I can see the dread in their eyes.

But I know that, deep down, they're more afraid of losing their golden girl than of losing me.

Losing me would be the desirable outcome for them.

We shuffle out the door, and the morning insects are especially lively, buzzing and chirping as if it were a regular morning and not the deciding moment of our lives.

She'll be fine, though.

They'll never pick her.

On the way to the town square, I look out over the scenery, trying to remember the happier memories.

I remember when my sister and I fought with sticks in the forest, pretending to be warriors for a noble cause, on an adventure.

We played for hours, frolicking among the trees while coming up with contrived storylines and motivations for ourselves.

Then Jerese, one of the idiot kids, showed up in the woods, and he interrupted our playtime and started fondling me.

My sister did nothing, too afraid for her own safety.

“Gonna die today, Lucy?”

I turn my head to find him standing tall, just as arrogant as ever. He smirks.

“Don’t give him the satisfaction,” Edie says. “Just ignore him.”

She knows me too well.

“Feeling lucky because you were born with a penis, Jerese?” I ask him.

Before us is a wood platform, lined with decorations and garbed with a ceremonial banner.

They try to spin this as a positive thing. As if losing your life to some stupid monster in the woods is an honor. As if the girls who go into that forest give up their lives voluntarily.

“What would you know about my penis, poor girl? I’d slit my wrists before I’d let you see it.”

I shake my head, laughing.

Then a thought occurs to me suddenly.

If I cause a scene, would they stop the ceremony?

The mayor, Greeley Harovich, retrieves an ornate hat, taking several folded slips of parchment and placing them inside.

But I know that it’s rigged and that my sister’s name probably isn’t in that hat.

For all I know, only my name is in there and the other slips of parchment are blank.

“What’s so funny, Lucy? Mad that you want to whore yourself out and there aren’t any takers?”

I snap.

I rush up to him, my fist drawn. I’m screaming.

He’s completely caught off guard, unable to process what’s happening.

I might finally be able to vent some of the pain I feel in this awful town and maybe save myself in the process.

My knuckles are inches away from his face.

And my sister pulls me back from him.

“I told you to stop! They’re going to send you away if you can’t –”

Her grasp on my arms is tight.

She’s going to ruin everything.

Luckily, she’s younger than me. She doesn’t have my strength.

I break free and charge forward at him.

But something’s changed. His expression has changed. He’s not terrified like he was.

Instead, he’s wearing the same shit-eating grin from moments ago.

My fist collides with his cheek, barely making an impact.

I know that I haven’t hurt him at all. For as strong as I am, he’s so much stronger. And he was ready for me.

And at first, I face disappointment.

But as he falls to the ground screaming, I start to panic.

“Oh, come on, Jerese! I barely hit you!”

I had intended a lot more of an impact, but I’m a bad fighter. And now my fist hurts.

“Ms. Lumière!”

Harovich is stepping off the platform, approaching us slowly.

Edie steps forward and starts to walk toward him.

But as she reaches him mid-way, he stops her.

“No, not you, Edie,” he says matter-of-factly.

He’s got graying hair parted to disguise a balding crown and bags under his eyes that never seem to go away.

And I think I hate him, too.

“Come with me,” he says, unable to hide his anger and taking me by the hand.

I try to fight him, but Edie shakes her head. He’s still too strong for me, anyway.

My worst fears are confirmed when I’m led up to the platform alongside him.

I look down at the crowd. They’re all adults and elders who don’t have children up for consideration, and the few other girls like me, who might have been sacrificed.

And then there are sadistic fucks like Jerese, who are just here to watch everything unfold.

“This year, there’s no need for a drawing,” Harovich exclaims to the crowd.

I get one last look at the town square and take it in, because my gut is telling me I might never see it again after today.

“Lucy Lumière has kindly volunteered herself for the honor of the moth feast!”

The crowd cheers.

My mind spins. I can see the crowd vibrating and bouncing before my eyes.

Oh gods.

It’s really happening.

He gives his speech, and in my head, I interpret the things he’s saying as he actually means them.

“Every year, we ensure our continued prosperity by offering one of our lucky women to the forest!”

‘I’m a murderer and this is how I get away with it.’

“These lucky women have the honor of ensuring the survival of generations following them!”

‘Better them than me.’

“The beast that dwells within the forest, in return, promises not to take his swift vengeance upon us, killing us all in a brutal display.”

‘We get along famously.’

“While we mourn Miss Lumière, we honor her sacrifice and appreciate what she’s done for the betterment of society.”

‘Maybe now I’ll actually learn her name.’

What’s most appalling to me is that through all of this, Edie says nothing. She just watches from the distance, as though unconcerned that her own sister is literally standing on the gallows.

Please, do something, Edie.

My entire life, I could always count on Edie to fail me. But not today.

Today she’s going to come forward for me and stop this nonsense.

The crowd stops cheering as Mayor Harovich wraps his speech.

“It was always going to be you, you know.”

I look up to see him standing over me, watching my emotional state.

I didn’t even realize when tears filled my eyes.

I couldn’t hear the sobbing that overtook me. Couldn’t feel the forced breathing as I choked through my tears.

He speaks in a hushed voice.

I don’t know if he’s speaking more to comfort me, letting me know there’s nothing I could have done. Or if he’s rubbing it in my face.

His next comment confirms his intentions.

“You stupid girl,” he says. “Did you think you could just start a fight and delay the sacrifice? You would have killed us all.”

I wipe a tear from my eyes.

“What’s with the change of tone? I thought I was your ‘honored sacrifice.’”

He chuckles. But it’s a hollow, adversarial chuckle. Then he looks out toward the distant ocean, deep in contemplation.

If I run down to the ocean and drown myself, then there would be no sacrifice. This entire town could die, for all I care. At least then, my life would have had actual meaning.

“Maybe under Alder, you could have gotten away with that. Alder had a bleeding heart.”

But then I see Edie in the crowd.

Would she be offered in my stead if I did that?

Or would she die in the ensuing attack?

Why do you care? She abandoned you. Just like she always has.

“But not me,” he continues. “Things have a system in this town. It’s up to me to protect these townsfolk, not the life of *one. Little. Girl.*”

I could be mistaking it, but I think I suddenly see the pangs of guilt in his eyes.

And then I think about the very few people in this town who mean anything to me and how sad I would be if they had to die too.

He walks off. I uncurl my clenched fists and try to wipe away the tears.

The crowd has all cleared out. They either didn’t see Harovich’s display, or they didn’t care.

Probably the latter.

Well, everybody except for one person has cleared out.

I look out into the far distance to see Edie, having not budged at all.

Walking forward, my legs feel wobbly, as though the act of walking brings some sort of alien sensation and my legs aren’t even mine.

I descend the wood steps of the platform and walk across the hard cobblestone market square.

I don't know what to say. But as I get close enough to her, I think I see tears in her eyes.

She wipes her cheek as soon as she sees me approach.

Just like her to make a scene. Probably playing up the pity for special treatment. She doesn't care about me. Not really.

I walk up to her, and without thinking, I throw my arms around her.

It feels awkward and uncomfortable, but I know it's what's expected of me.

Maybe she's genuinely sad?

I have to doubt it, but anything's possible.

When I return home, I devote the remainder of my time to giving my possessions to the people in my life who mean anything to me.

My neighbor Tyrin gets my foreign currency collection. It was given to me by my father after one of his diplomatic trips, but it won't mean anything to me when I'm dead.

I give May, my childhood friend, my dresses. We have the same dress size, and she's usually pretty kind to me, for the most part.

And the smaller things, Edie can have. She doesn't want them, because Mom and Dad have already bought her better versions, but as I realize, I don't have many in my life who care about me.

At night, long after everybody has gone to bed, I hear a rap on the door. Unable to sleep and relieved for an excuse to stop trying, I open the door.

There are four men in brown hoods standing there at the door, their faces obscured.

Run!

It's all I can think, in a moment of panic, but even as I turn away toward the only opening I have, I feel something sharp pierce my neck, and I drop to the floor.

The last sensation I feel is my head bashing down on the hardwood.

The world goes black.

NASERIN

“Ugh, disgusting,” I hiss as I forcibly suck the last bit of blood from the deer I caught.

It falls limp on the ground, devoid of its insides as it becomes a part of the soil that’s infested by worms. I can’t stomach the taste of this animal anymore. Just the smell of its rotting carcass makes me want to vomit it back out.

This is just one of many nights that I have to deal with before my sacrifice comes along. A human girl satiates my hunger longer than any forest animal. However, the hunger I get from it after is worse than before. My cravings take over control before my instinct.

“That troublesome town better have sent the sacrifice already. I’m sick of sucking out the organs of furry things.”

Furry things, small things, any things that aren’t humans. They’re not as fun as they used to be when I went out hunting. They don’t make as much noise as humans do. They at least put up some fight before I kill them. Now it’s just the same as chasing a falling rock.

I grab a couple of rabbits nearby. They’re probably the worst, right after the squirrels. They’re too small for my caliber. They don’t even count as a snack.

“I wonder if the girl will be fuller this time. Even the size of this deer wasn’t enough.”

Just then, my antennas whirr slightly. I perch up from the carcass, concentrating on the source of their movement. I walk

up along the ditch for a closer look. Slowly but surely, they start picking up an invigorating scent.

The closer I walk toward the direction of the town, the more my antennas vivaciously move.

“Pheromones,” I conclude, showing my teeth in utter delight. “Finally, she’s here.”

I waste no time walking back. I take flight and speed across the perimeter letting my antennas guide me towards the long awaited sacrifice. The after taste of the deer quickly falls down to the pit of my stomach. All I can savor is the soft and supple taste of a human girl.

A shrill noise escapes from my thorax, already wanting to get on with my feast. This time I’ll savor it, slowly breaking her down to the smallest bit of flesh after relishing in her virginity. I should be there any second now, and my prize awaits.

I pick up her scent finally. Quickly, I dash down to the tree, landing perfectly on the ground. My landing creates an echo throughout the forest, dust and leaves flying around me.

A small gasp comes from my right, and I whip my head towards the sound. It’s soft and frightened. I stalk towards my new prey, building up the tension of what’s to come. I can feel her shaking against the trunk.

“My, my, what do we have –”

I stop moving at the sight of her. It’s the same reaction I have when there’s a bright light nearby. I’m hypnotized by it, but I’m not sure why. All I know is that I want to get drawn in closer and see more of it.

I don’t know if it’s the way she looks, the fear in her teary eyes, or the way she’s screaming at the sight of me. Her existence is on par with my beastly nature, a moth drawn to a flame. Something about her speaks to my soul in a way the other girls’ did not.

It does not hurt that she is by far the most pleasant to look at of all of the women they’ve offered me. Everything about her reminds me of the earth, of comfort. Long, bark-brown

hair frames her face, tousled from her struggles and moving like ripples through water with each jerk of her frenzied head. Her wide eyes are the color of mossy soil, ambers, browns, and deep greens all blended together.

I do not think I've ever found anything so pleasant to look at.

But those ear-piercing screams are soon going through my head like needles. She tries to wriggle off the ropes they tied her in. Stupidly and pointlessly, she tries to back away from me, only by turning her head away.

"Be quiet," I hiss, whirring my antennas.

Her eyes widen, no doubt surprised by my ability to speak. I stopped taking offense to such minor details. All the females have the same reaction when they're brought to me. At first, it ignited my anger and their night turned more brutal than planned.

I stare down at her, waiting for her to quit her blubbering. She hiccups a few times while she composes herself, trying not to shed more tears each time she glances at me. She swallows hard at the end, showing her face fully to me.

"Why are you doing this?" she asks in a trembling voice.

My left antenna moves a certain way it has never done before, resulting in me seizing for a moment, trying to get it back to normal. When she's not screaming bloody murder, her voice sounds smooth, even pleasant.

She repeats the question again. "Why do you do this? I don't understand."

I narrow my eyes, gaining tunnel vision on her face.

"It's simple. Your town provides me sacrifices for my benefit. All in exchange for me not to attack during my hunger frenzies."

She looks down at her feet. "So you're going to eat me," she whispers, nearly choking in her tears.

"That's not the only part of the deal, sacrifice. My hunger includes *other* aspects."

The door drains from her face, realization dawning on her. Usually, there's not much talking between the offerings and I. Just my demands for them to obey if they know what's good for them. The rest of the time is full of crying, screaming, and pained grunts.

The tears return. The sight of them makes every part of me tingle. Soon I'll get to taste the saltiness of them mixed with her sweat.

She sobs when she notices the grin I couldn't help hiding. It seems that she's gotten the hint of what I'm getting at.

"There's no use crying. The townspeople should've made you aware of what's coming. Be upset with them, for I'm just doing this out of necessity."

Unable to contain myself, I reach out to her face, grazing my claw over her soft skin. I take hold of a single teardrop, licking it off. The enticing taste sends shivers through my body. The fur near my waist prickles, and my antennas stand straight.

My prey is agape, nearly faint with what I just did. I reach my claw to have another taste, but swiftly she moves her head away.

"How can I not cry? I'm here as a broodmare!"

I nearly grab her by the throat, daring her to move from my grasp. Somehow, I stop myself from doing it, further confusing me as to why. I lower my hands as she opens her eyes, expecting to be struck.

She's nothing more than a sacrifice to me, yet she's quite the back-talker for one. She can make noise all she wants, but it won't matter in the end. Her life's in my claws, ready to be toyed with and slurped up – vessel by vessel, muscle by muscle, down to the very last drop of blood.

My groin is getting rather impatient, wanting to defile her already and get a taste of her orgasmic juice before starting my meal. I've never wasted time so much in my life, yet I'm not in a hurry, either, save for my lust.

A laugh escapes my mouth. To her, it'll sound like the shrill noise of cicadas during the scorching season. She trembles at the sound, surely knowing that it's a mockery of her useless willpower that's quickly dying out.

“A broodmare, you say? Breeding is even a bit more noble than what I'm about to do with you.”

She gasps, breaking out in a cold sweat.

“Please,” she whispers. “Please, don't do this. I don't want to die like this.”

I snicker. “As I said, sacrifice, there's no use crying. It'll only excite me more.”

I start to untie the rope around her delicate frame. She clenches her fists so hard they shake. Her knuckles are a ghostly white, and her knees turn weak.

She doesn't know whether to cry or scream, but she's doing both beautifully. I'm not even using the same force I do with the other girls. I try not to cut her perfect skin with my claws as I want to pierce her flesh anew with my pincers.

She's not fuller, as I wished for her to be, but I have a feeling she'll satiate me far more than the rest of the females I've preyed on. In fact, she's considerably smaller than the rest of them, making her my weakest prize of all. Usually, the weaker they are, the easier the hunt, meaning the more boring it is. However, she makes up for it by many things.

“Stop. Please. Don't,” she begs between sobs and screams. “Please, please, please.”

They're the only three words she can utter to me. The scent of her fear grows stronger, enticing my cravings further. Her pheromones stick to my body like a second layer of skin. Another shrill erupts from the thorax after I've undone all the rope.

It falls around her feet. I can feel her temperature drop as the time for her being here comes closer. She tries to create space between us by putting up her arms. I laugh at her attempt at defense and simply grab her.

“No, wait, stop! Please!”

“Be quiet. The more you scream, the worse it’ll be for you,” I warn.

“No, no. No, no, no, no, no! Stop!”

From then on, her pleadings don’t cease until we get closer to my cave. The anticipation of letting my sacrifice live longer grows on me. I have every intention of going through the whole mating ritual, but it makes me wonder why I’m going through all these useless hurdles.

I wonder why I’m not doing the nicety of not just taking her now. I could argue about wanting to savor everything until the end. But for what reason, really? Why didn’t I have these types of thought with the other offerings?

I look down at her, seeing she’s slowly accepting her fate by the emptiness in her eyes. I didn’t even notice when she stopped screaming and crying. I graze her cheek again. This time, she doesn’t move away.

Wonderful. She’s turned completely docile. I look forward to our long night.

It’s something different but nothing that isn’t unwelcome. She makes me feel almost soft.

LUCY

“**N**o, no! Put me down! Let me go!”

I scream insistently against the wind.

His strong wings grapple me, claws digging into me from somewhere on the edges of the wingtips. I’m terrified for my life, but I can’t help but feel impressed by the dexterousness with which such an usual creature carries me.

My heart beats faster. My body longs to live. I can see my inevitable death, and I can feel the chemicals rushing through me, urging me to survive at any cost.

I fear I might pass out from fear as I see the vague outlines of trees streaking by my vision.

Against my will, I am carried through the night into a hollow opening somewhere in the mountain. It’s so dark out, I swear I’m being carried into solid rock until I feel the wind rush by me, the damp, leaf-covered cavern dripping with welcome.

This is where you die.

I try to think of something to do. I couldn’t possibly hope to subdue such a formidable creature.

And then I catch a whiff of something. A bright cloud of dust falls down from an indiscernible source, and my mind is thrown into discord.

Is this what death feels like?

It lights up the room around me, illuminating jagged spires and a rugged ceiling. Faintly glowing flora cover the floor, masked by leaves that have been dragged inward.

My senses are pulled in thousands of directions, and everything I see feels exciting to me. The air smells delicious even as I take in the mustiness that surrounds me. The cool air brushes against the parts of my skin that are exposed, and it arouses me.

No.

He's doing something to your body.

I panic as he sets me down on the cold floor and resist the urge to rub against the hard stone, still enamored by everything around me.

I miss the feeling of his claws against me, even as I can see where they pierced my skin. I feel the cool blood trickling down my shoulder.

I command my body to move, even as my mind is overwhelmed.

This is my only chance.

He's released me. I can run now.

But he blocks my exit out of the cavern with his large and huddled form. Such a large obstruction is not passable.

For an instant, he observes my body and how I move.

I settle in the truth that I might die here and that these cold, gray walls, lit up by blue falling pollen, might be the last thing I see.

"P-please don't," I insist, staring up into his cold, red, insectoid eyes.

I know begging for my life won't do the trick, but I also know that running deeper into the cavern isn't an option.

This is where all the other girls die. They've never found the bodies.

“Oh, but I must. You wouldn’t want me to kill the entire town, would you?”

I shake my head. I can see Edie’s face in my mind, and a seething resentment boils somewhere in my soul.

Though I want to speak, I can feel my nipples poking against the fabric of my shirt. It’s distracting. Though they chafe, the mere sensation stimulates my senses in a pleasurable way.

I want to push them down.

The way his eyes settle on my body, lingering on my every curve, looking down at my pouty lips...

I want him to stop.

“You know what comes next, don’t you?”

My eyes enlarge. I nod my head slowly.

He breaches the distance between us, and the curled tube on his face lowers and extends.

I’ve never seen a penis before, but as I look at this tube, which resembles a snout, I can only be reminded of how I’ve heard them described.

Its movements are strange and autonomous. As it straightens out, it twitches. Its alien qualities are almost hypnotic to me. I watch it move with fascination.

I want to reach up and touch it.

My hand moves on its own, and the tube is hairy in my grip. Its flesh is soft and malleable in my hands.

Stop that.

I want to step back out of my own body and separate from this entire scenario, because I’m no longer in control.

There’s a growing heat that’s building in my core.

What is he doing to me?

The dust disperses a little more, and I connect the light powder to his wings as they shake, filling the air with more blue light.

There's something hypnotic about this material as it spreads and covers my skin.

He doesn't have a mouth, but I can imagine an arrogant smile forming.

"Enough playtime," he says.

He moves my hand off of his tube.

I want to protest, but immediately, he pushes up to me, and the tube plunges into my mouth. Its size is overwhelming to me, and I strain myself just to contain it, my jaw aching from strain.

It has such a strange, unpleasant taste. And yet, as it dips forward, I'm intoxicated by its unfamiliarity.

With his tube, he reaches down and explores my mouth. I feel it prodding against the walls of my mouth and throat, coating my teeth, tongue, and throat with a viscous fluid.

I want to ask him if this is his reproductive organ, but with every passing minute, he pushes his throbbing organ more forcefully inside me.

My breathing struggles the further into my mouth he goes.

To appease him, I try to swirl my tongue about the tube in my mouth.

He pushes my shoulders down against the hard stone, becoming more vigorous in his approach.

My eyes go blank. My head goes empty.

The only thing that matters is this sensation. I can never stop. I twist and contort my mouth around him, stretching against his invasive appendage.

I know that by now, I am completely covered in his powder. The urge to tear from him and strip off my clothes is almost overwhelming.

In one fell movement, he removes his tube from my mouth, pushing me down harder.

I become aware that one of my hands has moved down to my core, and the other is pulling frantically against my shirt.

“We’ll get there, little one,” he says.

“S-sorry,” I reply.

What are you doing? Why are you allowing this to happen to you?

He pushes himself back into my mouth.

I can feel myself humping the air, desperate for a sensation I barely understand. The urge to be filled by something is incomprehensible to me, yet biologically, I know what I want, though I might not be the one in control anymore.

Then I realize that this thing in my mouth *isn't* his organ but better equated to his tongue.

Something very hard and very large prods against my core. I try to move against it, but immediately realize that my movement is restricted and that I can't move my waist.

I need to understand, but with every attempt to look up and fight him, he pushes me down harder into the rock.

I try to return to the feeling of ecstasy, enraptured by the movement of his tube into my mouth. I want to become lost in my senses, so that I don't have to think about what's going to happen to me.

But then I feel two sharp points digging into my waist.

Their movement against me is elaborate and mechanical. Like the tube that currently explores my mouth, I feel the hairs on them tickle me.

Then I hear them chittering and realize that while I was distracted with the invasive appendage in my mouth, they were methodically tearing away at my clothing! My bare entrance is now exposed to the cool cavern air, a gaping hole torn into my pants large enough for him to penetrate me.

My eyes shift from the large, monstrous creature whose tube invades my mouth, down to my loins. This time, he allows me to look.

My waist is gripped by two sharp and hairy pincers, and his tremendous, hairy member is inches away from my entrance.

“Don’t think about it,” he tells me.

I close my eyes, feeling his tongue-like tube entering my mouth one more time.

Tremendous pain overtakes me suddenly, as something very forcefully and abruptly enters me.

I whimper as I feel my body nearly tear in two in an effort to accommodate him. For a moment, I want to tell him to take it out, but I don’t have the words. I couldn’t make them if I wanted to.

But almost instantaneously, the painful sensation is replaced with a joy for everything happening to me. All of the sensations currently stimulating me bring me to a point of ecstasy.

I love everything about this place.

And my core is rocked by pleasure, almost as though my mind is tricking me, and it’s converted that pain into positive sensations. There’s a small glimmer of resistance within me that still wants to live, but I quash it.

There’s nothing more to live for. Nothing except for this.

His organ presses against every wall within me while his tube dances around in my mouth. His cock presses forward even further, then his hip and pincers both undulate.

I am helpless to his advances, unable to move even if I wanted to. I try to shake my hips, with the illusion of better embracing the sensations coursing through me, but even my nerves are gripped by the tendrils at his waist. They have me in a complete hold.

The hair stimulates the sensitive point at the apex of my thighs as I stretch to accommodate him. Every little fiber presses up against me at the same time, all standing erect.

This shouldn’t feel so good to me.

I know what's about to happen, and it's my death... the end of all sensations, whether pleasurable or painful.

But he dips further into me and begins thrusting against me.

I hear my moans and accept that they are mine.

The grunts that fill the cavern are punctuated only by the dripping water around me.

He cries out, his method of speaking still immersed in my mouth, my jaw now stiff and awkward.

And my screams join his as he erupts inside of me.

The thought of what comes next, for one brief, blissful moment, never occurs to me.

NASERIN

“**C**lean yourself up if you wish,” I tell her as I sit up to lean against a boulder.

I leave her on the pile of furs on the ground. She’s still quite wet from the multiple orgasms I gave her. At first, she tried so hard to not show any kind of pleasure, until it was all too much for her.

My antennas whirr, still overpowered by her pheromones. They’re not as strong as they were before mating. Still, they can give more need to continue mating.

Slowly, she sits up, closing her shaking legs. She looks around the cave for her clothes, only to find out they’re nothing more than shreds. Defeatedly, she looks at the remaining pieces, wondering what she’s going to cover herself with. She uses one of the furs beneath her to cover her body.

I stare at her back, taking in the sight of her that keeps confusing me. Why is she still alive? I should be delighting in the taste of her thighs or even her liver.

I’ve had my fun now. Normally I’d be sated now for an entire year, at most, until next mating season. I’ve always killed the girls once I’m done with them. I’ve seen no reason to keep them around for a year.

She turns back, feeling my intense stare. She averts her eyes down to the floor, her cheeks reddening. I’m also wondering what to do now, since this is a first.

I don't want to kill her, at least not yet. There's still many things I'd like to know about. The reason I'm instantly drawn to her. Why I'm not as brusque with her as I was to the rest.

Her bare back displays red lines, both from laying on rock hard ground and my pincers. With her thin frame, I can see the limp muscles and her spinal cord. Even though I didn't use my full force on her, she already has marks from it. She can easily break if I'm not careful.

"I'm keeping you," I announce to her. "Don't mistake it for your freedom, though."

She flinches at the sudden sound of my voice. She turns her head back to me, and again, there's a still and hypnotic moment for me. As soon as we lock eyes, I lose control of my senses. But it's nothing like what I experience during my frenzies.

"You... won't kill me?" she asks, full of distrust.

"I haven't decided yet."

She grimaces and coils within herself. Her eyebrows furrow, pensive with whatever doubts she may have. Her dark hair drapes over her shoulders with any sudden movement, highlighting her small and weak body.

"Why won't you kill me yet?"

That's something I'd like to know myself, but I can't let her know that. She might mistake it for mercy. The last thing I need is for her to run away and do as she pleases. I can't have her thinking she has free will now

"Is it because... you need someone for your urges?" she asks again.

I take a moment to think about it. The sex was indeed good. I felt a different kind of pleasure using her body. However, no, that's not completely it. I don't usually need more right away.

I shake my head. "That's not the entirety of why I'm keeping you alive."

“I see,” she says, lowering her head. “Then I suppose I’ll be a broodmare after all.”

“You have more uses than that, sacrifice.”

She scoffs at me audaciously. “If it’s not *that*, then what exactly is it for? Do you want a friend? Company? I don’t understand my role.”

“A friend?” I repeat back.

“Yes, a friend. If you wanted one so badly, there were other ways to do it. You didn’t have to treat me or the rest like this.”

That’s the first time I heard that word before. Given her tone when she says it, I could suppose it has a different meaning than a broodmare. However, she’s not far from assuming her position here. I just need to figure out the rest.

Ah, she mentioned company right after the mention of “friend.” Perhaps it has the same connotation as that? But it could be the same as a broodmare.

She stares at me, waiting for an answer. This is the first time she has looked directly in my eyes without quivering in fear or on the brink of tears. She looks the part of being a damsel in distress quite well, although there are glimpses of a concealed defiance.

“You seem to be still unaware of why you are here. Your people offer me human girls as sacrifices so I won’t attack their home. I mate then be done with them. I’m keeping you for the same reason.”

She stares at me beforehand. “You don’t know what the word friend means, do you?” she asks, rather condescendingly.

“It’s the same as a broodmare, sacrifice. There’s no need for you to describe it to me.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Um, no, it’s not the same. It’s far from what you seem to think it is.”

She shifts in her seat, careful not to let the coverings fall from her chest. She tries to find a comfortable position, but the

fur's too big for her. She reaches for her clothes, forgetting momentarily that they're no more.

"You can tie it from the back if you'd like some clothes for now. I can get plenty of those later," I say.

She hesitates but finds a way to make it hold onto her body without much of a fuss. I know the lining's are prickly and uncomfortable as I only use them as bedding. Maybe she's good with her hands and can fix her original clothes, not that I care.

"A friend is a, well, it's a person with whom you have a close relationship with," she explains.

"Once again, that's no different from a broodmare."

"No, it's not. There's nothing sexual with a friend," she insists, her tone completely changing to sound almost frustrated. "With a broodmare, you just care about what she does... for breeding. With a friend, you have someone you feel comfortable with and talk to freely. You know, enjoy their company?"

"You keep talking, but I have yet to understand what all those words mean. You are talking quite freely towards me, yet you are still a sacrifice."

I hear her swallow hard, then she bites her lower lip. I don't understand her reasoning as to why she has to explain to me what that is. It has no benefit nor of importance to me. As for now, she's only going to be used for when I need release.

"You asked me if I want a friend. You can be that if you wish, but don't forget your initial purpose here."

She tilts her head. "So... you understand what I was trying to explain?"

"I do." I nod.

I lie. I still don't have even the slightest idea of what it could be. This is the start of whatever relationship this will ultimately be. If she would rather be referred to as a "friend" for her to be more obedient, then so be it.

"Do you mean it?"

“If I said it then I do.”

She presses her lips together, quieting down. The tension from her limbs slowly disappears as I see her muscles relax around me. Still, I can feel her shields up, not completely being comfortable around me. Such matters aren't important to me as long as I get what I want.

I stand up from my seat to head towards the entrance of the cave. During my mating season, other predators tend to lurk near my territory, trying to steal my prizes. So far, I haven't detected anything since I went out hunting. But with the explosion of pheromones stagnating in the air, others will be able to smell it from miles away.

I hear her rustling over the furs, standing up. Meekly, she approaches me, making her presence smaller than she already is.

“What is it, prey?” I ask, returning back inside as she follows behind.

She stumbles on her words. “Then, since I'm your ‘friend,’ you won't eat me anymore? Friends don't do that. They protect each other.”

I narrow my eyes, trying to see what she's getting at. I inch my face closer to hers, trying to detect any malicious thoughts coming from her small head. I stop myself when I can feel her soft breath, deciding how ridiculous that'd be.

I fold my arms, staring at her intently. She's no longer shaking and her tears have dried up. I can still smell the fear but it's leaning towards... relief. Of what, I'm not sure.

“As of now, you will just be that, ‘friend.’ If you keep questioning me about it, you will live to regret it.”

She gulps and quickly nods, and the fear I find so enticing spikes up. Then she takes a seat back on the furs, making herself more or less comfortable. I continue with what I usually do during my nights here – being alert to enemies and just digesting the lust that's been quelled.

I glance at her, wondering what she's doing, staring at me with those wide eyes of hers. She reminds me of the dae that I

kill often – innocent, bright, and naïve. They think they’ll always be protected but that confidence is destroyed when I get my hands on them.

She fiddles with the material of her dress.

“What are you doing with that?”

“I’m trying to see if it can get sewed back together.”

“Mm.”

“M-May I ask what you’re doing?”

“Looking out for predators. In the past, they’d often take my hunts. Before you ask, no, I won’t let them take you.”

“I see... Thank you.”

What reason would she thank me for? It’s only natural that I would protect what is mine. But again, there’s the relief building up in her. It only makes me wonder more about her and what these emotions are a result of.

Whether she’s happy I won’t kill her or whatnot doesn’t matter. We’ve come to a sort of agreement that somehow has an implicit exchange in it. Her protection for my needs.

LUCY

“**M**ay I use this?” I ask, holding up what looks to be a needle.

“If you wish to do so,” he answers without looking back at me.

Every now and then, his antennas twitch to whatever sounds they hear. They still put me in unease. They make me feel like they can smell me.

I glance up at him as he still watches outside of this dry and cold cave. I don’t know what to refer to him as, either. I can’t keep calling him “you” for the remainder of my time here. That is, if I ever do get to leave.

He turns back directly to me, probably sensing that I’m staring too much. It still makes me jump when those bright red eyes look into my soul.

“You can cut yourself,” he suddenly says.

“I’m sorry?”

He points at the needle. “That’s my fur. It’s very sharp for a weak thing like you to use.”

Taking a closer look, I realize that he’s right. The “needle” has jagged ends and is white just like the fur around his waist. I don’t mind getting cut, I just don’t want to use animal furs!

“It’s fine. These are just... my favorite clothes. I’d like to fix them,” I say.

“Why?”

“So I can wear them to cover myself?”

“You’re already covered with the furs.”

Yes, but I want my clothes. Not a poor critter’s flesh!

“It’s just that my clothes are already fitted for my body.”

“Your body is rather small.”

“It sure is.”

I don’t know how to take his words. I’m sure he’s had other girls with a fuller figure, like Edie. But I don’t even know if a creature like him is bound to the same societal beauty standards as I am.

I try to piece together my clothes as best as I can, all while he watches me do it. I try to keep my hands firm so he doesn’t notice they’re shaking. At any moment, he can decide to eat me or use that tongue of his to suck me dry. Shivers run through my body just remembering it.

But not in a bad way.

Before I know it, he stands right above me. The beads of sweat run on the left side of my head. My breathing’s uneven, and the whirring of his antennas make my brain itch.

“Uh, if... if you want, I can make a set for you. I’m really good at sewing,” I say, trying to calm myself.

“Why?”

“Because... that’s what friends do?”

“Why?”

“Because that’s just how it is.”

There’s a pregnant pause as he mulls over my words... I think. He keeps calling me sacrifice so I suppose it’s possible he thinks of me as an idiot.

“Your definition of the word is quite vague. There’s an exchange of some sorts. Once again, that’s no different from a broodmare,” he says.

“But it is different. It’s nothing like a broodmare.”

“Then explain it.”

I put down my nearly mended clothes. I really wanted to put this behind us already, but it looks like he won't let this go.

“As I said, there's nothing sexual with a friend. You enjoy their company and confide in them,” I repeat.

“There's not a reason you stated as to why.”

“Well, there's no need for a reason. It just happens, and you just do it. You talk to them about anything. You don't feel lonely.”

He stares at me for a moment. “What makes them a different form of companionship?”

“Well, for starters...” I begin to say before my words trail off.

It's not a complicated question but looking closely, I actually don't know exactly what makes them so different. Even though I'm human and familiar with the concept, I haven't had many friends, either. I watched Edie have those experiences, not me.

“You're quiet,” he says.

I clear my throat and pick up the clothes again. “Yes, sorry, I was just thinking about your question.”

“You don't know how to answer,” he says bluntly.

It stings like the needle in my thumb, but he's right. It's just embarrassing and pathetic that *he* of all people and creatures will call me out like this.

“No, I don't. I don't really have any friends back home. Well, it wasn't much of a home, anyway,” I say.

I came to a realization long ago that that's just how my life will be, one as an outcast. It's useless to cry about it when nearly the whole damn town knows how pathetic I am.

Suddenly, I find myself pouring out to him. Not that he asked or even cares.

“I used to think of my sister as my friend, but as we got older, things changed quickly. People would often point out our differences, and I guess she started to see them as well. I tried to make friends of my own, but it never really worked out,” I explain, remembering all the name calling and pranks played on me.

“Elaborate,” he says as he takes a seat on the boulder next to me.

I sigh. “One time I was forced to walk around nude because my sister’s friends stole all my clothes and burned them.”

“What else have they done?”

“They offered me to you because my life is worthless to them.”

This time I’m holding back tears.

“There were many things, honestly. Lots of name-calling, humiliation, and forcing me to isolate myself from the rest of the town. I couldn’t go anywhere without feeling unsafe there if I’m being honest.”

“I see,” is all he says, nodding as if he understands what I went through.

For a moment, I feel stupid for opening up to him. I mean, what did I expect? He goes through life simply on instinct. He wouldn’t understand what it’s like to be forced in a place that treats me badly.

Then he gets down from the boulder, crouching next to me.

“What do you need for you to feel safe?”

“Huh?”

“Answer me,” he demands.

“Um, I-I guess for you not to call me sacrifice or offering. Or broodmare?” I answer without thinking.

“What shall I refer to you as?”

“My name is Lucy.”

“Lucy. What else?”

“Wh-Why are you suddenly asking me?”

“There’s no benefit for me if you are miserable here. Your fear is enticing to me, but I can’t have you running away, either. It’s better if you’re cooperative.”

I sputter nonsense, not knowing what to say to that. It all comes down to that after all. I guess this is somewhat of a start. It’s quite harsh how he goes about things, but this is as good as it can get.

“Bear in mind that it’s only us up here. No one else is allowed to trespass. You’ll be safe.”

“Th-thank you.”

“There’s no need to thank me. It’s natural to not want to be in a place that causes misery. As I said, it’s better for me if you’re at least comfortable.”

“Yes... I understand.”

Suddenly, he gets up from beside me. He goes to a deeper side of the cave and all I hear is rustling. His twitching antennas make quite a lot of noise with an echo. It sounds like a horde of wasps.

He emerges from the dark ends with something in his arms. As he comes closer, I realize it’s fruit. He lets them fall on my lap, mostly a variety of berries and apples.

“Human females eat fruit, do they not?”

“Yes but –”

“What else do they need to survive?”

“Uh...”

“Answer.”

“Well, water. Water is very important to –”

He suddenly dashes off out of the cave. Within seconds, he brings me a bowl, which seems to be an animal skull filled with water. He hands it over to me, and I quickly take it in fear of insulting his attempt at hospitality.

“Is there anything else needed?”

I shake my head. “No, no, this is all fine. Thank you, I was hungry.”

“If you need anything, tell me. I’ll get it for you.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

He looks over at the cave’s entrance, looking at the sky.

“Dawn approaches. It’s time to sleep,” he says as he disappears back in the dark parts.

Then, without further warning, he grabs me and takes me deeper into the cave. My blood turns cold, already thinking the worst is about to happen. Until he plops me down on what feels to be a bed. It’s softer than the furs and much bigger. He made this for me.

It’s pretty basic, but considering I’m being held against my will here, let’s be honest. Not dying is the ideal scenario.

We lay down as the sun comes up. Even though I’m exhausted, it’s not easy to sleep during the day. Luckily, the cave is pretty dark, at least, so that helps. But my mind races for a while, even when he’s already asleep.

This can be the perfect opportunity to run away, but he’ll catch me in a heartbeat. Besides, where will I go? I have nowhere to be.

I can’t go home because they’d be furious that I put the town in danger. If he comes after me, it really could put the town in danger. He seems almost placated this way, and he’s not hurting me, either. It’s a game between the pros and cons of me risking being here or leaving.

He seems intent on providing for me – giving me food, drinks, a safe place from being ostracized. All my needs will be fulfilled. I’m not uncomfortable, and I’m not abused. The town also doesn’t want me back. If they don’t kill me for running out, he probably would.

I sigh quietly. *It’s an out-of-the-frying-pan, into-the-fire situation.*

I'm definitely not happy to be here yet, but I'm also not homesick. Returning there would be a death sentence. The decision's already made for me, unfortunately.

I look over at his sleeping form, still looking threatening as ever. For now, I'm just hoping that I'll meet his expectations, whatever they are, and he'll willingly let me go soon. I still don't know why he's keeping me here.

Hopefully, I'll find that out soon too.

I'll just play a good captive, and he'll get bored. Right?

NASERIN

My body already knows when it's time to wake up for the night. Once the sun starts to set, my eyes open, and I stretch out my wings. As the moth-man creature that I am, I sleep during the day and roam at nights.

Lucy sits up on the bed I made for her, wide awake and with her old clothes on. She startles when she notices that I'm up.

"You're awake," I say, half surprised.

She nods. "I've been awake for a while already."

Her voice sounds tired and worn out. Her eyes also appear to be puffy. It doesn't take away from their appearance.

The sunlight doesn't reach very far back into the cave, but it barely touches where we sleep. Under the golden hues of the afternoon sun, I can see more sides of her that I didn't notice last night.

Although my vision's slightly impaired by light, her features stand out more than in the dark. I notice she has different colors in her eye, streaming from golden rings, green strokes, hints of blue, and a brown base.

She yawns and pulls her legs over the bed, taking in the fact that it's also made of animal furs I've gathered through the years. After noticing, she gets up and dusts off her legs for whatever reason.

"Why are you awake so early? It's not near nighttime yet," I say, remembering why I stared at her in the first place.

She rubs her eyes and looks up at me quizzically. “Humans sleep during the night. I’m sure you know about that, right?”

“I assumed you were also nighttime creatures since the offerings were during my hunts. If you sleep during the night, you must still be tired, are you not?”

Another yawn. “A little bit, but I did get some sleep. I don’t usually sleep well back home, so I guess I’m used to it.”

“For what reason? Surely lack of sleep must affect you in some way. I’m unable to hunt at night the few times I don’t sleep the whole day.”

“Well, you know, the usual things. Stress, nerves, and the fact that it’s not my normal schedule to sleep in the day.”

“Stress and nerves? Why would that be a reason for lack of sleep?”

“Do you know those words?” she asks.

“I’m not sure. I’ve heard humans use them before but never really understood what their use is.”

“Stress is when something or someone causes you mental and emotional turmoil. That’s the best way to describe it.”

“What about nerves?”

“Oh, well, that’s like nervousness. Like how I was... last night.”

“There’s only certain things I can sense from humans. Fear and happiness, really. They are the most prevalent among your kind.”

She furrows her eyebrows. “I don’t think that’s entirely true. Sadness can also be a strong emotion among us.”

“Sadness, you say.”

My antennas twitch as they try to detect that emotion from her. There’s still underlying fear in her, but not as much as there was. Happiness is mixed in with fear, which I take as relief from her. As I concentrate deeper, I start to notice a shift of temperature in her body, going throughout her whole mass unlike fear that lies in her torso.

“I see. There’s still sadness in you,” I say to her, still not having an accurate image of it.

She turns away. “So you can detect sadness, after all.”

“I didn’t realize that’s what it was called. So this is the same as nervousness?”

“You can say that, it’s part of it, I guess. Human emotions aren’t quite black and white, you know.”

“Another complexity of your kind.”

“Don’t you ever feel those things? You were quite happy and excited to bring me back here,” she retorts.

“I work more on instinct. When I find food, it’s for my survival. Of course it’s something to be excited and happy about.”

“Does your heart race when you find your prey? Do you hurry up to get to your sacrifices because you can’t wait to get your fill?”

“Of course.”

“That’s adrenaline, but it’s not only when you feel happy. Many emotions can make your heart race. For me, I had adrenaline when you were bringing me here because I was nervous.”

It seems that emotions branch out from other emotions. Such things don’t matter to me as I see no use for them. However, I know what adrenaline feels like.

I never thought to find her so interesting based on her answering my questions without hesitation. Perhaps isolation from the others did her some favors.

“Your sadness comes from the treatment you received by the other humans, correct?”

“I guess you could say that. Why?”

“For what reason were you tormented by them? I’m assuming they got adrenaline or happiness from doing it. But why? Humans don’t work on instinct as beasts do.”

She stays quiet and looks down to her lap. I have a sudden urge to touch her out of nowhere. This isn't based on curiosity but just the simple need to hold her against me. I work throughout my thoughts to find out why this is.

I refrain from doing so to hear what she has to say, wondering what she's going to say. If it's going to cause the sadness to erupt.

"I mean, I don't have a specific answer as to why they liked bullying me. It all always came down to being compared to Edie. Because she's beautiful, and I'm not. I guess they couldn't accept that."

I nod, feeling the surge of sadness spreading to every limb of her body. Her chest, I notice, is heavier with it than the rest. This sudden change is something new and different. How odd that human emotions can quickly switch up.

I take a seat next to her, wanting to see if I can feel it other than with my antenna. She flinches when my pincers touch her thigh. That's when I detect a sudden spike of another emotion I don't recognize.

"Humans can be cruel as well. What do they usually do when they aren't tormenting you? Were all the humans like that towards you?"

She leans away from me, her eyes darting to the sides. Her confusion pleases me, by the way her expression changes as much as her emotions.

"Um, I'm not sure. Each family or each person has their own interests and daily activities," she says rather quickly. "To answer your second question, not all of them were, but they just watched as I was bullied."

"I see, I see. So humans have routines just as I do. Who are the hunters in the town?"

A million questions arise, and I don't know why I want to know about humans. All I ever saw them as was another resource and annoyance. That's when a better question comes to mind, and I interrupt the previous one she's answering.

“What about you, Lucy? They isolated you for being different. What sets you apart from being different from your sister?”

There’s a spark of happiness coming from her chest. She gathers her words and fixes her posture on the bed, getting more comfortable.

“I guess I was more into astrology than Edie. I always loved studying the stars and how our ancestors created life and future events around their positions.”

“Of course, the position of the stars indicate the seasons. That’s how I know when to hibernate.”

“You hibernate?”

“If the temperature is far too cold, then yes.”

“So, then if winter –”

“Tell me stories about your life. I’m sure it wasn’t all misery for you. Tell me of the times when you weren’t being mistreated by the others.”

There’s another spike in her chest. Her eyes no longer look as tired and the weariness on her face smooths out. Her energy fills me somehow. I want to see what more she can do, what more she can change based on whatever she’s talking about.

“I really don’t have a lot of funny or great stories, but there was one time when I fell in a pond trying to impress a boy,” she starts saying before she bursts out laughing. The spike turns into a wave that overpowers the sadness.

I peer closer to her, still not feeling that emotion rub off on me.

“Tell me another story, a better one,” I say.

“Well, like I said, I don’t have much to share.”

“There must be something.”

Then that wave slowly lowers and dissipates with her. I notice her biting the inside of her cheek. There’s a different change within her, coming from her torso and her head. The

way her eyes brows furrow downward makes me believe she's somewhat upset.

She must be hungry and cranky. She didn't eat the fruit I gave her last night. If she's fed, she'll be in a better mood to talk.

"I'll be right back," I say as I fly out of the cave.

Within minutes, I bring back some meat for her. I hold up the deer leg for her to take, but she stares at it with disgust.

"What is it?"

"I can't eat it like that. It still has its fur and the hoof! It needs to be cooked first!"

After a thorough explanation, I make a fire by the cave entrance. With her instruction, I rotate the leg over the fire so it cooks evenly. This is such a hassle, but I realize the warmth of the fire is not so bad.

I look over my shoulder to check on her, only to see that she's falling asleep sitting up. I suppose it'll take time for her to get used to my all-night schedule. All that crankiness, and she won't be awake to eat it.

Perhaps I shouldn't let her sleep yet. I want to see her enjoy the food I brought her. Besides, the absence of her is almost annoying. I want to hear her talk some more. I want her to entertain me.

I decide against it, remembering she has trouble sleeping already. I leave the meat cooking and carry her to the bed instead. It's a different feeling having her in my arms and sleeping peacefully.

LUCY

The next morning, I lie between the furs, feeling the cool morning air on my exposed face. My eyes are still heavy, having tossed and turned the whole night. Obviously, I'm not used to sleeping on stone, and my body is certainly protesting.

I sit up, watching the creature sleep with his wings curled around his body. He looks quite peaceful wrapped up in his leathery wings. I stand up and gather one of the fur pelts around my shoulders. I take careful steps around the cave, sure to not make any noise. My legs are still sore from where he kept his grip on me, and I wince when I walk.

The stone walls are slick with morning dew. My captor snorts in his sleep on the other side of the cave. My head whips around, nervous at the thought of him waking up. He simply rustles his wings instead.

I look up and around at the cave, counting the stalactites hanging precariously above my head. A handful point down at the rumpled pile of furs that still hold my shape. Deep, long scratches permeate the wall right above my sleeping spot. I shudder at the thought of what creature left those. My captor or his prey?

I take deep breaths, trying to calm my buzzing mind. *What am I going to do here?* I think to myself. Just from looking around, I can tell this is no proper place for a human to live. It is simply a dark cave, more suitable for bats or salamanders, or giant moth creatures, apparently.

A cool breeze runs through the cave and sets into my bones. I shiver and pull the fur closer around my neck. I have no clothes, nowhere to keep or cook any food, nowhere to bathe. Hell, I don't even have a hairbrush!

I pout for a moment, feeling sorry for myself over the last few days. I run my fingers through the rat's nest that's formed on the back of my head, stepping towards the entrance of the cave. From its mouth, I can see that we are up on a high hill, looking out over miles of forest.

The trail of soft crushed grass leading to the mouth of the cave calls to me. I walk a few feet down the path, just past the treeline. The sun warms my skin, and I loosen my grip on the fur. I can't help but appreciate the beauty of the forest as I desperately try to conjure any survival skills I could've learned over the years.

Just when I'm starting to think I won't find anything useful, a familiar scent catches my attention. A patch of mint covers a few feet of the ground in front of me. I grab a few handfuls, holding some to my face and inhaling the sweet, sharp smell. Once my hands are full of mint leaves, I struggle to find a place to carry anything in my makeshift furry bathrobe.

I head back to the cave, picking up loose sticks and branches from the ground as I climb back up the hill. He's still sleeping by the time I get back. I curl back up on my piles of furs and get to work.

I mash up some of the mint leaves as best as I can with my bare hands. I strip some bark off one stick and spread the mint mush. I chew on the end with the very backs of my teeth, wincing at the texture. The bark eventually softens, and the mint taste coats my mouth, almost like toothpaste. I chew until I feel clean, and I spit the rest just outside of the cave.

My attention turns to the knots forming in my hair. I'm able to yank my fingers through the large, looser knots, and then do my best to work out some extra tight tangles. I look around the cave for anything I can use on my hair, settling on

ripping off a strip of my former shirt to tie my hair into a braid.

Later in the evening, the creature finally begins to stir. His red eyes are open, squinting in the light. I watch nervously as he stretches out his wings and body, still fearing he might change his mind and gut me without hesitation.

He catches me staring. He grunts, which I assume means 'Hello.'

I watch as he opens his wings, stretching the muscles that lie beneath his dark skin. He catches me watching and shakes out his wings.

"I never asked your name," I whisper.

He stares at me for a moment, as if no one had ever asked before.

"Naserin. My people are so solitary, that we don't often use each other's names. There's not that many of us, either. I don't ever have a reason to use my name."

"Naserin is quite an interesting name. Does it mean anything?"

"Yes, it means 'wildflower' in my people's ancient language," he says, straightening up and seeming proud of his heritage.

"What's that there?" he says, looking at my pile of sticks and herbs.

"Oh, I really needed to brush my teeth this morning, and this was the best I could do," I say, picking up another pinch of mint leaves. "See?" I demonstrate, sticking the bark between my molars. "And the mint makes it fresh."

Naserin cocks his head.

"I've never heard of that," he says. "Can I try it?"

I nod and hold out the bark. He leans forward, taking it into his mouth. I get a good look at his face, seeing my reflection in his eyes. The bark quickly disappears into his mouth, his teeth gnashing efficiently on the bark.

“I like it,” he says, swallowing. My eyebrows raise over how easily he was able to eat quite a large chunk of wood.

“It’s not ideal, but it’ll work, I guess.”

“What else do humans need?”

I blink, surprised at his curiosity.

“A lot of things. Clothes, to start. Food, water, a ton of hygiene products.”

“There’s a creek not far from here. I can take you there now. You can drink as much as you want.”

I giggle. “That’s sweet, but that won’t work. Humans can’t always drink creek water. There could be diseases in the water, but I could buy a big jug of drinkable water.” I hold out my arms in a circle to demonstrate the size of those big ten-gallon water jugs.

He leans forward, seemingly shocked at this discovery. “You buy water?”

“Sometimes. I buy food, too. I’ve never been hunting. I have to cook and store food safely. I can’t eat raw meat.”

His furry face scrunches in confusion.

“Humans need warmth, fire. We could build a fire to cook with right outside. I need to bathe, too,” I continue, “And the water has to be different than the drinking water.”

“We could go to the creek for that?”

“Right, we could go to the creek to bathe.”

“What else?” he asks excitedly, eager to understand this strange way of living.

I search my brain for something interesting to tell him.

“Humans need enrichment. We have to have things to do or we’ll literally go insane.”

“What kind of enrichment do you like?”

“Reading books, mostly. Some people take walks, or they draw, or play games. We call those things ‘hobbies.’”

“Hobbies,” Naserin repeats, nodding like he understands. I doubt that he does. How could this monstrous moth creature understand what it’s like to be human?

“I can get you anything you need. Anything a human needs to survive is in the forest.”

“Not always. I need things like soap and clothes, things that you can’t just find in the woods. If I could just run into town—”

“No!” Naserin snaps, anger clouding his eyes. “You will not go back to that place. You live here now, with me, and you will stay *here*.”

My eyes fall to the ground, fear rising in my chest. Despite his earlier softness, Naserin is still an intimidating creature, and I need to stay on his good side. I nod, feeling small, like a puppy scolded by its owner.

“You have clothes,” he says with a much more gentle tone. “The fur is more than enough warmth in the cold nights. I’ll hunt for you, and you can teach me about cooking.”

He motions towards my sticks and herbs with the end of his wing.

“You’re already working with the land to satisfy your... human needs. You’ll be fine out here.” He sounds very sure of himself.

I drop the matter. I walk to the edge of the cave, throwing the pelt on the dirt and sitting down. My legs curl under my body, not even caring that I am naked. I feel Naserin’s eyes on my back. Hoping he’ll leave me alone, I pick a few flowering weeds growing next to the cave, picking off the leaves one by one.

I pick apart a few more plants until I hear him shuffle away. I look out to the forest, wondering if there is any way I’d be able to make it back to town. The forest stretches for miles, but I can still see a few glittering city lights way off in the distance. I think about taking my chances and running off into the forest, escaping back to my painful, normal life.

I doubt I'd be able to make it through the forest, naked and barefoot, even without Naserin looking for me. I think back to all the loneliness I felt before I was chosen. Despite our circumstances, Naserin somehow makes me feel much safer than I ever did there. I take one last sigh and resign myself back into Naserin's cave.

NASERIN

The fire crackles within the cavern, bringing a calm.

“I told you that I could cook if you’d just guide me through it again.”

My eyes are wide, observing the scene before me with puzzlement and rage.

She’s taking herbs from within the cavern and mixing them in, overcomplicating the process.

“If you keep adding stuff, you’re just going to ruin it! What are you doing?”

I don’t even enjoy burnt food. When you cook the juices out, you’re hardly eating the same creature, and I get nothing from it anyway. I barely enjoy using the teeth that line the inside of my proboscis.

I already had enough issues bringing the creature here to her. Food is meant to be drained at the site of the kill. It has the purest flavor, and the satisfaction is so much better at the moment than later on.

“I didn’t want to say anything,” she says. “But last time, the dae was barely edible. I know you tried your best, but I thought maybe this time, I’d try?”

She continues spinning the spit-roasted dae while regularly throwing herbs, with names I’ve never heard until now, onto it.

I can appreciate the nectar of the plants around us. What I can’t appreciate is her tarnishing something perfectly good

with the fruits of the dirt.

“I’m sorry, are you scowling right now? Because it’s hard to tell sometimes.” She addresses my hardened stance.

“You mocked my cooking,” I hiss. “And now you’re ruining my food!”

I stand tall over her, intimidating her. I don’t aim to make her uncomfortable, but it would be nice if she’d drop the meat so that I might have a chance to savor it while it still means anything to me.

My thorax is begging me to consume something. Nature’s pangs have taken hold.

She heaves a sigh.

“You just learned how to cook. It’s natural you’re not going to be great at it at first.”

I have to be patient with her.

Hours pass, and she produces the meat, retrieving it cautiously from the fire with sharp sticks.

I don’t have a well-defined sense of smell, but though I enjoy the calling of a nice fire, it ruins most things it touches, and the idea of consuming this now, with so much added to it, is revolting to me.

“Try it,” she says, handing me the chunk of dae.

I look down, puzzled.

“You’re giving me all of this to eat?”

My stomach turns at the thought.

“Not all of it, silly. It’s not as though we have knives or plates or anything.”

I shake my head.

“I’m sorry. I cannot.”

She puts her hands on her hips.

“After the hours I spent cooking that, you’re not going to eat any of it?”

I say nothing.

“You ate the dae fine last time,” she objects.

“I didn’t want to say anything,” I reply. “But I’m not the biggest fan of solid food.”

She pauses.

“That’s ridiculous. Just eat some.”

I sigh. “Very well.”

Taking my proboscis, I do my best to restrain from sucking the entire dae through it. I could easily crush it, bones and all, if I’m not careful, leaving her nothing to eat.

I could have just flown out and gotten something for myself, I think.

But as it crosses through my proboscis and I very cautiously and methodically suck in some of the dae, I’m greeted with a medley of flavors I didn’t realize existed.

She notices my consumption is slowing down.

“Not so bad after all, is it?”

I shake my head, trying to speak in spite of the food in my mouth, which at every moment wants to go hurtling down my gullet.

“It’s unnatural, is what it is.”

“But also delicious?”

I struggle to keep the food in my proboscis to process its flavor. She holds a chunk of dae which is half drained and limp, covered in my saliva.

“Fine.”

I swallow it, regretting that I have to end the sensation that now graces the taste buds of my proboscis.

“Fine?”

She probes, trying to get me to admit something I’d rather not.

I barely noticed the charred embrace of the fire on my meat.

“It isn’t terrible,” I remorsefully declare. “But it’s not like devouring it fresh from the source, either.”

“Oh no?”

I shake my head. “That’s something you’ll never capture.”

I find it kind of amusing how she avoids touching the saliva-covered portion of the dae as she holds it awkwardly, even though she has ingested that saliva herself.

She holds the dae up to her mouth, and though it’s still heavy in her grasp, she begins eating it.

“I’ll take that challenge,” she says, as she ponders over the dae in her mouth, moving it around in her cheeks and between her teeth.

It looks unnatural and uncomfortable to her, holding it like that.

“What are ‘plates?’”

She looks up at me, perplexed.

“You know, I’m sometimes amazed by the things you don’t know,” she says.

I can feel anger rising up within me. “You’re not answering my question.”

In her head, she ponders over how to answer me. I can see her mind working exhaustively. It tires me out a little, always seeing one who acts on manners of thought, rather than pure instinct.

“So you have claws,” she says.

“I do.”

“And you have that... what is it?”

“A proboscis, I believe they call it.”

“Right.”

She scratches her chin.

“Okay,” she says. “So we just have these.”

She holds up her hands.

“I know what a hand is, Lucy. What’s your point?”

“When you want to eat something, you can just suck it up through that tube thing. We have to grip it with our hands.”

“Okay.”

“And with our hands, we feel *everything* we touch. So we don’t really like making a mess as much when we eat.”

“Fascinating.”

The way she describes everything is, admittedly, cute. I’m struck not only by her thoughtfulness but also by her insane fragility and standard of living.

She nods, as though she’s finished the thought.

“And what’s a plate, Lucy?”

“Oh! Right!”

I wait for her to elaborate. It takes her several moments.

“When we want to eat something, we put them on these silver discs we call plates.”

“Silver?”

“Well, not always silver. Usually wooden.”

“And how do I make them for you?”

She pauses, looking up at me to process what I’ve said.

“Oh, don’t worry about it.”

She walks forward, leaning up against the cavern wall. She nearly stumbles into the fire as she crosses the threshold.

“You aren’t comfortable,” I tell her. “How can I make you a ‘plate?’”

“We don’t make them,” she tells me finally. “We just buy them in town.”

“In town?”

There's that insistent, pestering thought again.

She wants to leave me here and head up to the town again. She knows I can't go with her.

"Yeah. So if you'd just –"

"Out of the question," I interrupt her.

We're not humoring this again.

She sighs, holding her head down.

"I figured as much," she says.

The amount of disappointment in her features, as she drags her feet back to the fireplace and slumps down, is visible.

Does she really want to escape me that badly?

Over the next few days, I continue to probe more into her lifestyle, learning things about her and the human world I didn't know that I wanted to know.

The fear that one day she'll wake up and head out into the town is always on my mind. But I press it downward, ignoring it.

It's not integral to my survival, so why would I ruminate on it anyway?

She keeps telling me that plates, and all of these things she wants, can only be found in the town.

"But surely, somebody makes it," I prod. "It doesn't come from nature."

The thought of these plates growing on nearby trees horrifies me for some reason.

"No, it doesn't," she admits.

"So?"

"So you're right. They don't just come from nowhere. There are people who devote their livelihoods to creating these things."

"Makes sense."

She nods.

“And how do they make plates?”

“I don’t know,” she says in frustration. “I guess they just arrange some wood or metal into a circular shape somehow.”

“Metal?”

She drops the discussion. I can tell that I’ve upset her.

But I try it for myself. Stumbling outside while she’s asleep, I find a nearby tree.

I pick a soft-looking tree and drag my claws into it, intending to surprise her when she wakes up.

To the best of my ability, I cut out a flat piece of round wood and carry it with me, bringing a suru who was sleeping nearby with me as well.

When she sees the plate I’ve made, she grows confused.

“What is that?” she asks, waking up.

“It’s a plate.”

She pauses, giving me a genuine smile. Or at least one that I think is genuine.

“Good job,” she says.

We eat the suru together after putting it over an open flame, but I notice that she’s still having difficulty with it. The piece of wood I’ve given her is unwieldy, and I’m starting to think I didn’t quite capture the likeness of a plate.

Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if you let her go. She could bring things back that would make living here more comfortable.

Over the course of the meal, we are left with our own thoughts.

I want to dominate her and take her against the wall.

And she seems lost in some other world.

“The plate I made you isn’t very good, is it?”

She opens her mouth to speak, and I stop her.

“Don’t lie to me.”

She shakes her head solemnly.

My gaze lingers over her, fixating on the strange ways her skeleton curves in and out and creates bulges in her skin. Her form is still so strange to me, and the thought of having a human here with me is still such a new feeling.

I walk over to her, and before she can finish her meal, I pin her to the cavern floor, gripping her hard with my claws.

LUCY

How can I feel so comforted in his presence, yet so terrified at the same time?

“What are you doing?”

My hands are gripped and bound, his claws and body pinning me to the hard stone floor.

It’s a strangely familiar position for me, yet it feels so new.

“Don’t fight it,” he growls. “I know you want it.”

I look back at my half-eaten meat, my stomach growling.

But there’s a deeper yearning within me. As he grapples me, and I pretend to fight him, I see the awkwardly constructed plate jiggling, threatening to send my meal to the dirt and leaves covering the cavern floor.

And I don’t care.

But I know that the more I pretend to resist him, the more invigorated he becomes.

“I do not,” I lie.

I’m a terrible liar, but Naserin is not great at reading people.

A smile creeps up my face, indiscernible to him.

Even through his proboscis, which fails to portray emotion, I can sense his glee. It might be through the intonations of his voice. It might be through the way he carries himself.

He's eager to defile me again.

"This entire time I've kept my hands off of you, you've wanted me to ruin you again, haven't you?"

His claws are abrasively fondling my bosom, and I can feel him rising.

"That's not true."

His gigantic form huddles closer to mine, pressing me further into the rock.

His grip on my breasts suffocates and bruises them. Just when I think I can't get more excited, he frees them from my shirt.

The texture of his claws against my bare skin as they fall out is almost enough to send me over the edge. While his moist and cold claws clutch and manipulate my breasts, the fur from his wing overstimulates them, dust rubbing off with every vibration and heightening the sensations.

In the light of the dark cavern, they're pink and swollen enough that they stand out from the gray. Remembering that the dust from his wings only converts my pain into pleasure, I try to stifle my screams as I reach my climax.

He doesn't relent.

"I knew you were lying," he growls.

His manipulations shift from my breasts to my nipples. He claws and rips into them. I'm reminded when my pleasure is supposed to be pain by the sheer numbness he inflicts upon my body, the only remnant of the illusory effect of the chemical released by his wings.

The pleasure is so much that my brain might become overloaded from stimulation. I grow concerned that I'll pass out.

I stammer out a reply, though nobody would be convinced by my denial.

"No, I'm n-not!"

His proboscis lowers and hardens, falling onto my right areola.

“Oh, then you won’t mind this,” he says.

“W-what are you doing?”

I feel intense suction.

I know that if he wanted to, he could kill me here and now, sucking everything out of my body.

But as he pulls back, my heavy, heaving, swollen breast comes with him, almost pulled from my flesh by the force of the suction.

It’s a red ball in his mouth.

I’m not sure if I want to beg him to stop or to continue. Words fail to enter my thoughts.

However, as he stops sucking, letting my overexerted orb fall back to my small chest, I know that I am furious.

“Would you like me to continue?”

I don’t speak. I don’t have to.

I’ve already outed myself from the look of frustration that autonomously crossed my features.

“N-no.”

It’s thoroughly unconvincing, and I know he’s not persuaded.

“Very well.”

He stands up.

“Then continue eating.”

My nethers are on fire, and my body is squirming. With every passing moment, my hands urge themselves to reach downward and satisfy my core, but I resist them.

I imagine going back to my plate unsatisfied, and the disappointment I’d feel.

My mind wants to be free, but my body wants to be used.

Fighting with myself, I finally have the courage to speak. His body is turned to me, but his form is still within range.

“Please don’t stop.”

His body rotates, his large red opalescent eyes in my vision.

“What was that?”

I close my eyes, as though it will hide the embarrassment of having to ask again.

“I said ‘Please don’t stop.’”

He approaches me precariously, but I know it’s all an act.

“If you wanted me to continue, why did you tell me to stop?”

He’s really going to drag this out.

I don’t want to have a conversation.

I just want his cock inside my body.

“Come here.”

He takes two steps closer, barely clearing the gap between us.

His eyes analyze me, still expecting an answer he already has.

He wants me to degrade myself for him.

“What do you want me to say,” I ask. “Do you want me to beg?”

He stands perfectly still.

“You know what I want.”

I can feel the moisture pooling under my skirt and my back starting to hurt from being pressed against the ground.

It means the aphrodisiac is starting to wear off.

If he’s going to fuck me, he needs to do it now.

“Tell me what you want!”

I'm nearly screaming at this point. Any deniability I had is gone, and I find myself more okay with that than I am with the thought of not being filled.

He takes two more steps toward me, and I feel myself overwhelmed with rage again when he stops.

"Tell me who owns you," he growls.

I am confused by the request.

"W-why?"

The light hits his body in such a way that I get a clear view of his immense, throbbing cock, and I feel my waning arousal peak once again.

I'd never gotten such a clear view of it before, but I still have absolutely no idea how I took it inside of me.

"Do it or we stop."

There is no question in my mind now what to do, a clear indicator of the depravity to which I've fallen.

"You own my body," I reply.

This answer is apparently unsatisfactory to him.

"Just your body?"

I think of what I'm giving up by admitting what I already know to be true.

"No," I say. "You own me."

He finally clears the distance between us, pressing me back into the rocks. For a moment, it hurts again. But then the dust settles on my numb and raw breasts, and I'm brought back to the sheer orgasmic level of pleasure I know him for, my senses again overloaded.

I expect his cock but am surprised when he instead lowers his head to my entrance.

His hardening, phallus-like proboscis swells up and curves inside of me, and immediately, I inhale sharply, trying to adjust to the intrusion.

It's nowhere near the size of his member, but I am still unused to the sensation of being penetrated, and the hairs on it even work to stimulate my walls as they push inward and pull out of me.

His head dipping and nodding as his tube fills my tunnels, I can feel the claws, which have moved themselves back to my breasts, moving with his every thrust. As I move into him, my back chafes against the rock floor harder, only adding to my pleasure. I can feel cuts and burns forming from the friction, yet I don't care.

His tube pulls out of me abruptly. I want to object to him, but he stands up, his member looming overhead.

"Tell me again who owns you," he growls. "Then I'll fuck you."

"You do!"

He seems immediately satisfied.

"Good, pet," he says, lowering his waist back to my entrance.

I get a good view of the object about to enter me. Beyond the layer of fur that covers the groin and the base, a long, black and pink shaft curves upward. It looks more like it belongs to a creature than a human, and as it prods into my entrance, I find myself wondering why it turns me on so much.

Then he thrusts forward, softly at first.

It's still forceful, cramming such a large organ into such a small space. But this time, there's a tenderness that wasn't there before.

His wings wrap around me, and I find all of the fibers rubbing into my body almost overstimulating. But I am comforted by how he swaddles my torso, covering my breasts from the cool cavern air.

Then I realize his true intentions.

The claws at the end of his wings dig into my flesh, and the hook-like tendrils at his waist grip onto me.

I am being picked up.

He doesn't want to be gentle. He wants to prime me to be used harder.

My view shifts as I am lifted into the air I am lifted, never knowing if I'll be dropped to the ground or flown higher into the air.

But immediately, I feel another shift taking place, as his member pushes harder inside me by the sheer force of gravity. I can no longer guide him into easing into me. I am completely at his mercy.

I remember, however, that all of my pain is only converted, as I embrace the inevitable and start to bounce on his cock, risking passing out from the pleasure.

He grips me tighter, and I realize that I'm no longer bouncing.

With his claws and his tendrils, he's driving me forward and back, using me like a sleeve.

I imagine how I must look to anybody watching... to anybody I know... seeing me reduced to a monster's plaything, a mere vessel to fill with his organs and fluid. It pushes me toward another summit.

I scream. His cock is buried so deep inside me, I don't know where my body begins and his ends anymore.

"Come inside me!"

I feel his organ swell up, my tunnel completely unable to widen beyond its current capacity as I am flooded with his seed.

I feel like I'm almost unable to breathe, I'm so worn out.

Slowly, his hips lower his waist to the cool cavern ground, and I move with his cock, a mere extension of him at this point.

I fall asleep swaddled under his wings.

NASERIN

“**Y**ou’re awake now?” I hear Lucy ask as I barely open my eyes.

She watches over me, elbows over my chest. I can feel her light weight pressing on my abdomen. The sweet scent of her pheromones waft in the air, making my antennae twitch,

“I am. Did you manage to sleep well this time?” I ask as I sit up on the bed.

I realize that I’ve woken up earlier than usual. It’s rare that I’m awake before noon. After having rough sex all night, I suppose we went to sleep earlier than usual. However, I don’t recall the moment we actually fell asleep.

“Mm, I slept through the whole night. Well, morning, actually,” she says.

She gets up from the bed, and I notice she hasn’t dressed herself yet. I was careful not to rip her clothes apart like the first time. She pricked herself many times using my fur as a needle.

I follow right after her, expanding my wingspan as I always do. Lucy puts her clothes on and gently brushes her hair with her slender fingers. I gesture for her to let me do it since it’s more convenient with my pincers.

“They won’t cut my hair, will they?” she asks hesitantly.

“The tips are the sharp parts. I’ll be careful not to cut anything.”

“Oh, okay then. Thank you... Naserin,” she says meekly.

It’s still odd to me to hear her say my name. All I’ve ever been called by humans is monster, beast, or “thing from hell.” Hearing Lucy say it directly at me, and without fear or disgust, stirs something in me.

With her head down, she turns her back towards me, waiting for me to brush her hair. She tried making a hairbrush out of twigs, but it kept breaking. She still doesn’t know that I decided last night that I’m allowing her to go to one of the nearby towns. I figured this can be a moment where I can touch her some more.

My wings, however, get in the way. They graze her back and startle her at times, making this anything but gentle.

“Perhaps you should brush your own hair. Something more suitable for your small size,” I say as I step away.

She giggles as she runs her fingers through her hair again. I start to notice the marks I left her from last night – bruises, cuts, and bite marks. There’s a swelling sensation coming from my lower abdomen, but I know it’s not disgust or that I’m about to wretch.

I press my hand over it, wondering if I ate a rotting carcass these past few weeks. There’s no pain or discomfort, so I don’t know what this could be.

I look towards the cave entrance, sensing movement nearby. Animals. Since it’s early, I can go for a quick hunt to come back faster. Meanwhile, it gives a chance for Lucy to do her... shopping, or whatever this is she’s doing.

Lucy sits on the rock she found to use as a chair. She took a liking to sit at the very entrance and watch the forest. I don’t know why she finds this appealing. She’s not searching for food. Why would she just sit and watch?

She fiddles with the ends of her hair, wrapping the strands between her fingers over and over again. She bites her lower lip and her left foot shakes violently. I use my antennae to sense her emotions but nothing seems abnormal.

I approach her. “What’s wrong?”

“Huh? Nothing’s wrong, why?”

I point to her leg. “You’re shaking. Is this the nerves you’ve been referring to?”

She stops moving it. “Oh, no, it’s just something my leg does without me noticing. I can’t just sit still sometimes. People do it for other reasons, like anxiety, boredom, or too much energy.”

“Which one is it for you?”

“Uh...” she stops herself short before answering.

I already know the answer to it, though. I realized that her chair faces the direction of the other towns. The lights from it can be seen from up here.

“Lucy.”

“Yes?”

“I’ve decided to allow you to go to the town. It’ll be easier for you to adapt yourself here if you have the necessary human materials.”

Her eyes widen and her mouth’s agape. “Really? You’ll let me go? Are you sure, Naserin?”

I nod. “Yes. Just be aware that this doesn’t mean I’m granting you freedom. You’re still returning here.”

She jumps up from the rock and bounces in place. She claps her hands as a fit of giggles start. The happiness in her chest resembles thousands of bubbles popping.

“Thank you, thank you! I’ll definitely come back, I swear!”

“You’re –”

I’m suddenly caught off guard when Lucy grabs my face and plants her lips on it. She kisses me tenderly before I can process what’s happening. Once breaking the kiss, I stare at her while my antennas twitch, trying to snap me back into consciousness.

“It won’t take long, I promise!”

“Fair warning, I will hunt you down if you don’t come back.”

Another giggle. “I know!”

She runs off inside, leaving me standing there, dazed. She did not show one spark of fear after I threatened her. But a surge in happiness instead. I follow after her, wondering what she is up to with all the sudden ruckus.

She picks a couple of furs lying around, placing them over her shoulders or across her chest. She makes a certain twist of her mouth and shakes her head while changing furs.

“Now what are you doing?”

“It’s been so long since I could go somewhere. I think not even in my town did I leave my house,” she says in a pout.

“I meant what are you doing with the furs? It looks like you’re measuring them on yourself.”

“Oh! Well, I’ve been wearing my same old clothes. I thought I could look nicer for my little outing.”

I tilt my head. “But you don’t need any of those things.”

“Of course, I do. Besides, I’d like some sort of cover for these,” she says as she gestures down to the marks I left her.

There’s the swelling again, and it’s starting to concern me. I have to look further into why I get this feeling when I see my marks on Lucy. I know it makes me happy to see them, but I can’t pinpoint this other emotion.

“I think I’ll just use this as a cardigan,” Lucy mentions while holding up a doe’s fur.

“What’s a cardigan?”

“It’s a different kind of covering for women,” she explains.

She puts it on and tries to fix it as best as she can. At first, she had qualms about the animal hides, but now she has no problem wearing them. Slowly, she’s finally getting used to life here with me.

Then, she goes on to her hair, messing around with it. She picks it up and flips over, doing all sorts of odd things to it. I'm not sure if she's trying to give it shape or something.

She sighs. "Hopefully I can find hair products. I'm getting sick of my hair being loose and messy."

"There's nothing wrong with your hair, Lucy."

"Maybe not, but it gets in the way. I want to change it a little bit. It'll be easier to move around, too."

While she has somewhat adapted to my way of life, I have yet to understand her way of living before coming here. There are still many things I don't understand or the reason behind them. Although, there's a different kind of brightness on her face tonight. As if she's never tasted freedom before.

She tugs on my right wings. "Um, Naserin?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Is it okay to go now? I think I'm ready."

"Just to be clear, you are not going to your previous town, correct?"

She nods quickly. "No, no, I know that's impossible. I can get what I need somewhere else."

"Good. Then, hold on tight to me," I order as I pick her up.

After making sure she won't fall mid-flight, I take off toward the edge of the forest where the nearby town is. During the ride, I glance at Lucy to make sure she's not afraid. Instead, she stares at our surroundings and gasps every now and then with anything she finds interesting.

I land at a certain distance from the land, careful not to make too much noise with my strength. I place Lucy on the ground, careful not to drop her so suddenly.

"It's here?" she asks in a near whisper.

"Mm, the town is about a mile away. You'll need to walk quite a bit."

"You can't accompany me to the edge of town?"

“No, I attract too much attention. They’ll try to hunt me down, and I’m sure you don’t want hundreds of humans to die tonight.”

“Well... No.”

“Then you understand. Go on, don’t waste any more time.”

“Okay, then. Before I go, thank you again for letting me come here.”

“There’s no need to thank me. You were in need of necessities. I’ll meet you here at dusk, not a moment later.”

“Okay, I’ll be here. Anyway, I’ll get going then.”

She pauses for a moment before leaning up to me for another kiss. She doesn’t do it as boldly as earlier, but I take it into account. She starts walking towards the town, looking back at me here and there.

I really wish I could go with her. But as I said, my presence will cause an uproar, and it’ll bring me problems. I’m not inclined to hunt down humans tonight. I’d rather spend that time back in my cave listening to Lucy’s stories.

Once she’s out of sight, I sigh and return home. I don’t go in yet, feeling an empty depth in the pit of my stomach, different from the swelling. It extends to my chest, and this time, I can feel a twinge of pain.

It arose when I realized that the cave feels larger and emptier without her presence. I wonder how that’s even possible. The echoes made in here are louder. The temperature isn’t as warm either.

I’ve never felt this emotion before, and I don’t like it.

LUCY

“I didn’t think this through,” I curse under my breath while I wait behind a trash can.

I don’t know what I expected to happen once Naserin dropped me off. Did I really think I could just go on a shopping spree? Without any money or nothing to my name?

When my town decided to stand me in the forest, I was just wearing these same old clothes and nothing else. I didn’t think to pack a suitcase because I was supposed to be dead.

I watch the people walk and chatter amongst themselves, not even noticing me lurking in the shadows. I don’t know anyone from here, yet I’m the only one hiding. I look even more suspicious doing this than just walking idly through the streets.

“I wonder if Naserin left already,” I mutter, taking notice of a little dress kiosk by the fountain.

I’d rather wear pants, but at this point, I can’t be picky at all. My body has gotten worse ever since I started living with Naserin, of course, against my will. Scraped knees. Dry and dull skin, which is getting paler as the nights go by. I don’t know how much longer I have to endure before I completely adapt to these new circumstances.

I made a list of all the things I need, but I don’t think that’s going to happen. Despite wanting these modern conveniences I can’t find in the woods, they aren’t easy for me to get. I didn’t know how expensive a bar of soap could be.

I'm sick of scrubbing myself with tiny mint leaves.

Who would've known that mint can irritate the skin? How could I never appreciate the little things in life like a warm bath or even underwear? Those were beyond repair, and I've had to go commando moving forward.

What do I do now? I have to wait until dusk and the shops are starting to close.

I look around the main street, coming up with ideas to get money in less than five minutes. I don't think even prostitutes make money that fast either. Also, I do *not* want to do that.

In a kiosk selling artisanal bread, one of the morsels falls on the ground. A guy passing by picks it up and shoves it in his pants! No one notices, either. They keep their focus on their food, conversations, or whatever's on their mind.

There's a tingle in the back of my head, coming up with a morally wrong idea. I've never stolen in my life but desperate times call for desperate measures. It shouldn't be that hard, right? If that guy did it without blinking, so can I.

I gather up confidence by smacking my cheeks, ready to be a fiend. I look over at the store still open to take my pick. I think I'll try for the hygiene part of my list. I'm desperate to smell fresh and like a field of flowers.

First, I wait until there are a few customers in line, to distract the sales lady. I fix my hair before aimlessly walking towards it. I try not to call attention to myself and just pretend I'm looking at the selection from the storefront. Really, any soap is fine as long as it smells good and can lather.

The old woman in charge of the store is attending to a customer. She explains the benefits of her soap, and I get caught up in it for a moment. Quickly, I set my eyes on a soap by the very edge of the table. I grab it and nearly make a fast-paced walk for it.

Then she calls to me. "Oh, there's a buy one get one free special, my dear."

I look up and force a smile. "Re-really? That's so great. All of these smell wonderful."

“Thank you, you’re so kind. The soap you’re holding is actually a new invention of my daughter-in-law. Minty lavender.”

I slightly grimace. “Mint? Oh, no, I’m allergic to mint, unfortunately. I guess another time I’ll buy something,” I say before putting the damn thing down and walking off.

“Oh, but miss, we still have –”

I try not to look back, but I’m already guilt-ridden.

Don’t start, don’t start. This is for your survival, Lucy. Grow a pair and steal something.

My first attempt at thievery is futile. I have to be casual but not too obvious at this game. Should I wait for something to fall on the ground? But if I do that, I’ll end up empty-handed by the time it’s dusk.

I bite my thumb, thinking about my new strategy. Maybe I can try the art of misdirection? Of course, I’ve never learned or even tried such a thing in my whole life. But the title itself is quite self-explanatory.

I set my eyes on the dress kiosk, liking a red dress with long sleeves. It hangs on the lower section, which is easier to swipe.

But how am I going to hide that thing?

I shake my head, taking that option off the table. However, just a few steps behind that kiosk, there’s a beauty stall. Maybe there I can get my hairbrush and toothbrush. My gums still hurt from scrubbing with the stick.

Once again, I make my way towards it, pretending to be an interested customer. I nod at the woman in charge as she organizes a set of face washes.

I could use some of that, too.

The shop owner gives her attention to the brushes in front of me.

Okay, here it goes. Art of misdirection.

“Excuse me, miss? How much are those up there?” I ask, pointing at a random object behind her.

She turns around looking for it. “Which ones, darling?”

“Those, to the far left,” I explain while I fumble with my free hand to get a hairbrush out of its damn stand. “I can’t see very well from far away, I’m not sure what they are.”

I almost have it at hand when I accidentally take the whole hairbrush stand. I knock them on the ground. I thought I found my chance until I see her come over to me and help me organize the things.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t watch my hand,” I lie.

“It’s okay! It happens a lot, don’t worry about it.”

Damn it, I’m already calling too much attention to myself!

As quickly as can be, I help her organize the stupid hairbrushes and try with another stall, kiosks, whatever, anything I can get my hands on. However, like the first two tries, I fail miserably. It’s a little disappointing.

I should give up already, I think as I walk aimlessly through the stores.

The bright signs and extravagant items that I could never afford in my lifetime. A few things are not necessary, but it wouldn’t hurt to have a nice purse or something. In some stores they have display tables outside, showing items on sale.

I can’t remember the last time I went shopping, let alone by myself. Sure, I would’ve liked to do it more, but I wanted to hide my face as much as I could. Now I can see all the things I wish I could have – nice dresses, a variety of shoes, a collection of makeup palettes. Anything to satisfy my materialistic urges.

As I walk through, I manage to actually swipe a few things – a travel-size soap, some perfume testers, and hair accessories. It’s not much but something at least.

It’s a start, I guess... Now what will I do?

The idea of panhandling for money comes to mind, but no one really pays attention to me unless I speak directly to them. Story of my life, not existing to anyone unless I make noise.

If it were Edie in my position, which would be never, she wouldn't struggle as I am. In fact, she wouldn't even need to steal crap. Men would line up to buy her anything and everything. All the while, I can't get absolutely anyone to look my way.

It must be really nice to be the gods' favorite. Never having to struggle or suffer a day in your damn life.

Sometimes I wonder why I was even born. What's my purpose on this planet? To just be my sister's shadow?

Having had enough, I curl up in a ball on the sidewalk and put my head down on my legs. I'll wait for night to fall and save myself from further disappointment. To think I was so excited to come here.

"I want to go home, Naserin's there," I mumble.

I perk up when I realize what I'm thinking, not expecting that from myself. It feels weird to say it, but I can't deny that I feel more comfortable with him than anywhere else. Despite his shortcomings, he's been trying his best to keep me around and happy. It's way more than what anyone back "home" did for me, including my parents.

As I mull over my thoughts on Naserin being safer than my hometown, I feel someone toss coins at me. I guess I cause some sort of sympathy for them to toss some coins at me. But they didn't even look at me.

I lift my head to see who it was, but the person's already walking away. So, basically, they could care less about me beyond throwing me some spare money.

"Edie?" I utter, very much noticing the blonde hair and blessed curvaceous body.

It's my goddamn sister. I swear it is! What the hell is she doing here?

Why is she in this town? If she recognized me, she would have the time of her life making fun of me. Worse, she'll probably go back to our home town, tell the rest of them that I'm alive, and make sure I'm killed.

I look at the coins she threw at me, filled with a disbelieving rage. How does she have enough money to just be dropping it to an assumed 'street urchin' like that?

We used to be the ones without a coin to spare! What the fuck!

I start slowly following behind her, not wanting to be seen but needing answers, *now*.

NASERIN

Dusk finally arrives after waiting for what seems like an eternity. I never once felt so eager for that time to come so fast. Sometimes, I wish the nights would last longer so I could hunt and roam some more. Other times, I simply don't care and just follow my routine.

I couldn't even sleep during the time she was gone. I've been keeping track of the sky, making sure I wouldn't be late in picking her up. But why? Why am I this eager to see her again?

It's the same eagerness as when I have a sacrifice waiting for me. I already want to put my hands on them and never think about it again until the next mating season. Now, all I can think about is the feeling I get when Lucy's at the cave, by my side.

Deep down, I expect for her to not be at our meeting place. I'm already preparing to terrorize the town to search for her. However, she's already there, waiting for me.

She paces around between two trees, arms folded and muttering incoherencies. I knew she wouldn't be too happy to return to isolation, but this reaction is a bit exaggerated given that we had a deal.

I land right in front of her. She doesn't gasp as she used to and just looks up at me, still with the same upset expression.

“Finally, you're here! I've been waiting for like an hour!”

My antennas twitch at her sudden outburst. “I arrived at the exact time I told you.”

“I know, I just wanted to see you as soon as possible. Especially with what just happened not too long ago,” she says.

“What do you mean? Did they do something to you?” I ask in a hiss.

She shakes her head. “No, nothing happened.” She stops walking back and forth, holding her chin. “Well, I don’t know if it counts directly to me, but it happened! What I just discovered, you know?”

“I’d know if you’d explain it to me already. What happened in town?”

She goes on a tirade without a moment to take a breath. The sound of her fast-talking is the same as when I fly at high speeds and there’s a squeak in the air. What I understand is that she didn’t have the currency to purchase her human items. Thus, she needed to steal some things.

“I really didn’t want to do it,” she utters, showing me the objects stashed in her pockets. “But I couldn’t get anything from the big stores. So I took the display items.”

“Are they what you need?”

She nods. “I got a hairbrush and things to do my hair with. I got other things, too.”

“That’s good. Is that why you’re so upset?”

Her smoothed face distorts again, remembering that she was angry a few seconds ago. Her small hands turn into balls of fists, and she stomps on the ground. I guess with adrenaline, the hardness doesn’t hurt her feet like it does in the cave. Humans have odd capabilities regarding their bodies.

Lucy goes back to pacing around the trees, not noticing the dirt building on her feet and legs. She’s going to have to wash off, and I know that’s still something she struggles with. Perhaps I can take her to the river and help her clean up.

“Naserin!”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Are you listening to me?”

I blink several times. “Of course.”

She rolls her eyes. “No, you’re not, you were spacing out. Did you hear a word I said?”

“The first part I did. Repeat the last things you said,” I ask, not knowing how to take this sudden back talk. I wonder where this sudden yapping came from.

Then she makes a new guttural noise. “Ugh, can you please pay attention? I’ve never felt so angry before. I’m pissed!”

“Well, if you’d tell me instead of making circles, I’d understand.”

She stops walking abruptly to look at me.

“I saw my *sister*, Edie. She threw money at me when I was sitting by the street,” she says.

I narrow my eyes. “Did she see you?”

“No, she didn’t see me, thank the gods or whoever’s up there. She just threw her fucking change at me then left. I followed after her –”

“You *followed* her? Why would you do that? Were you trying to follow her back to your other town?”

“I wanted to know what she was doing there when she’s *not* supposed to be there! I was sure that she was making sure that I was dead when I saw her, but what I discovered was worse!”

“And what is it that you discovered?”

“That *bitch* married a dark elf! I asked around town to see if there were any rumors from my town, and boy, was her wedding a grand fucking spectacular! Who else but Edie would marry such an ‘elite’ race? None of the men at our home were even *remotely* good enough for her so she had to branch out.”

“I fail to see where that’s your problem, Lucy. Dark elves are haughty and aggressive. Your sister must’ve been chosen the same way as you. As a sacrifice.”

There’s the guttural sound, along with the look of disgust. Her hands shake, and she turns red in the face.

“You’re not listening! She *married* the dark elf! I was and still am a *sacrifice*! There’s a huge difference! And I already explained the differences of companionship to you!”

I narrow my eyes. “Keep your voice down, someone will hear you shouting. I suggest you tone it down and remember who you’re speaking to.”

She steps back, swallowing her words and collecting her thoughts. Her fists still shake, but at least the redness from her face fades to her original color. She still frowns, her glare now directed toward the ground.

How odd. If a female or anything else was this loud towards me, I would’ve normally instantly ended them. I even gave Lucy a warning, because I want to hear the end of her problems. Perhaps I could do something to help her, but with the surge of all these different emotions, it’s difficult for now.

She clears her throat. “I-I’m sorry. I’m just feeling overwhelmed and hurt.”

“Finish what you were saying.”

“Well,” she mutters. “Like always, Edie got chosen. As soon as I ‘die,’ she gets married to a rich, powerful elf. It’s like she was waiting for me to die so she can celebrate without me being a bother.”

“Go on.”

She presses her lips tightly together. Her glare’s straight as if she’s trying to concentrate. Then, tears stream down her face. My first instinct is to hold her for some reason, but I let her compose herself first. Something about the growing mania behind her face settles into my bones like an illness. I do not wish to see her unhappy. The very thought of her pain makes me murderous.

“I’ve been gone for how many days now? Weeks? A month maybe? And now she’s doing well for herself, unsurprisingly,” she explains through gritted teeth. Then she roughly wipes away her tears. “I mean, what did I expect for her to do? Cry for my death? No, she has to live the high life with a dark elf who without a doubt is also rich. All the best for my *sister*.”

“Your words don’t match your tone,” I note.

She glances at me. “Of course not. I’m not happy for her in the *least*. It’s not fair that she’s living such a great life while I’m not. I have to steal crap when she’s given everything.”

She slings over a large pouch I didn’t notice at first. It looks like the other things she mentioned.

“At least I got what I needed with the money she threw at me. No wonder she had so much to spare for someone she didn’t even recognize.”

She frowns as she looks inside the pouch, rummaging through the items she actually purchased. It seems she’s still unhappy about it. I can’t sense that emotion at all right now, but at least she’s calmed down even for a bit.

“Let’s get back,” I say, picking her up.

Without a fuss, she obliges and remains silent the whole flight back to the cave. Once I release her by the entrance, she scurries inside with her head lowered. I follow after her and see that she tossed the pouch on the floor. She starts taking out the objects.

I watch her for a moment, analyzing her actions and expressions. She’s mentioned before that it’s important to know about human facial expressions. I find it more difficult to know what they’re feeling or thinking by their face than to just sense them with my antennas.

Roughly, she shakes the pouch and lets the items fall on her lap. There are many human contraptions I don’t recognize, but I’ve seen the toothbrush before since she fashioned one out of a stick.

“What were you able to purchase?” I ask, sitting on another chair fashioned out of a rock.

She holds up a large pebble that smells sweet.

“This is the soap I mentioned I really needed. The lady told me I can use it to wash my hair, too.”

“What scent is that? I don’t recognize it.”

“It’s peach-scented. I told her I didn’t want anything mint,” she says as she takes out other things. “This is lotion to moisturize my skin. This is a needle and thread kit. This is a nail cutter...”

As she explains what each random thing is, I take a closer look at her face and sense her emotions. They all seem neutral, but there’s still some bubbly anger brewing inside.

“Are you still upset?” I ask.

She doesn’t look up and shrugs. “It’s unfair how well she’s got it while I have to struggle,” she mumbles.

“I see,” is all I can say.

After emptying her pouch, she explains what each item does. This time, I actively don’t pay attention to a word she says, focusing more on the last thing she’s said. About how bitter she is about the whole situation.

My way of life isn’t typical for humans, but I thought she’d already accepted it. I’ve tried to accommodate her as best I can, but she calls it a struggle. This outburst about her sister being married to a dark elf is irritating me. Am I not good enough for her?

LUCY

“I’ve brought you some fruit,” Naserin says as he places the morsels on my lap.

“Thank you,” I mumble, picking them up without much enthusiasm.

Another night in the cave, same as always. The monotony is starting to get to me, and I don’t see it changing in the future. Naserin offered to take me roaming with him a few times, but I can’t bring myself to go.

I don’t think I’ll be able to stomach seeing his eating habits, at least not yet. Not to mention that I’d be as bored as I am here. Here, I can at least watch the town from afar, hoping that I can one day reach greater things. Alas, it’s only wishful thinking.

“What will you be doing while I’m gone?” he asks from the cave entrance.

I don’t bother to look up at him, knowing he can already see my expression. Tired, bothered, bored, and I just don’t want anything right now. Not even this measly piece of fruit that’s started to rot.

“I’ll go take a bath down by the river,” I say.

His eyes narrow. “It’s dangerous for you to be by yourself there.”

I sigh. “I’ll be fine. I haven’t washed properly and feel disgusting.”

“There’s still could be animals wandering –”

“Fine, I’ll just stay up here as always. It’s not like the other forest animals aren’t already aware of your presence, you know.”

I wait for him to threaten me, but he just stares at me with those large, red eyes of his. They glow brighter the longer he looks at me, probably wondering if he should kill me now or wait until later. I’d rather he just get it over with since I still don’t see the point of my staying here.

His antennas twitch first before he turns around.

“Clean yourself quickly and come back. I’ll be close by,” he says as he flies off.

Since he granted me permission, I start to gather all the cleaning products I bought. They aren’t many, but they’re a thousand times better than rubbing myself with mint leaves.

Carefully, I go down the mountain, remembering the path Naserin would take. I’ll apologize for snapping at him when I get back. I just wanted to go out on my own again without being intently watched.

I get to the river that’s a few meters from the mountain hill. This stream deviates from the main one that’s used by the surrounding towns. It’s cleaner which I’m at least grateful for.

I take out the soap and smell it, missing the taste of a fresh peach. I have my sister to thank for giving me such a wonderful blessing. If it weren’t for her, I’d smell like mint and dirt.

“She’s so generous to give me enough to buy all this crap,” I mumble as I lather the soap on my body.

I look at my reflection, wondering if my complexion has gotten worse. The ripples I create make it hard to really tell. I just know that my face will never come close to Edie’s beauty. I’m just a little forest ogre bathing in the forest. If it were her, she’d be a goddess taking a dip with critters surrounding her.

I still can’t get over my resentment. It flared up once I saw her again. I used to cower next to her, but now, all I can feel is

disgust and hatred.

I set down the soap in my new bag. I have to make sure to make it last for months. Who knows when someone will throw money at me again?

It's not just the material things I do without, though there is that. I just can't help myself to think how Edie must be living it up in her new husband's grand palace. Taking bubble baths with the finest soaps and oils. The water, I'm sure, is warm no matter how long she decides to take.

I stare down at my naked body. Dressing up is also a hassle since nothing looks as good on me as it does on her. Here, I'm wearing the same rags while she no doubt has a variety of clothes with matching purses and shoes.

I slap the water, wanting to distort my reflection.

"It's not fair. Why does she get to have everything?"

Hot tears form in my eyes as I keep making comparisons of my pathetic life to my perfect sister's. I shouldn't get this emotional anymore. I'm sure she doesn't even spare a thought towards me, while she fills my head with all these insecurities.

I slip my clothes on, finishing my pathetic bath. I look around the trees to see if Naserin's around. Maybe I could catch a ride up the mountain. But I decide not to even bother since it'd be awkward to ask for favors after how I spoke to him. I know I wasn't kind, but I'm too angry to feel as guilty as I should.

Suddenly, there's a fluttering above, and he lands right in front of me. My heart nearly jumps out of my chest.

"You're done?"

I nod quickly. "I am, I was just heading back."

"Why didn't you call for me? I told you I'd be nearby."

"I didn't want to bother –"

He doesn't let me finish speaking and swiftly picks me up. I feel my cheeks reddening out of pure shame. He's treating

me as he usually does, but all I feel is this twisting feeling in my stomach.

We get to the cave, and there's a pile of food perfectly piled by the entrance.

"What's all this?" I ask.

"I managed to hunt down a boar. It was lurking by where you were bathing," he explains as he picks up one of its limbs.

I was too absorbed in my resentment to even notice the noise around me. At least he got it before it got to me. I can't even enjoy a nice bath without danger lurking around.

Naserin starts preparing the leg to eat it, just as I taught him to. He gathers the extra firewood lying around the cave while I wait on my chair. I look at how he takes off its skin and just throws it over the edge.

He sets it up over the brewing fire to make it like a rotisserie chicken. However, the smells are nothing alike. My mind can't help but flicker back to what my sister must be doing right now.

What would you be eating right now, you bitch? Roast beef with wine? Golden potatoes garnished with the finest sauce as your husband praises you?

She'd have a heart attack if she'd have to eat the way I am, like a wild animal. The material differences between us bother me greatly. But more importantly, there's a deep-seated rejection there I don't want to acknowledge.

I'm a loser who got sent to the woods. My perfect sister managed to completely turn her life around as soon as I was out of the picture. I was someone who held her back from greater things even though she already had so much. I was jealous of how well her life was going even when I was there to see it, and it only got better when I left.

We were both struggling with our family, but why is my experience harsher than hers? Why did I feel poorer than her? Why did everyone spit at my existence but revere hers?

I was a burden to everyone else. They're probably celebrating that I disappeared from their lives. They were right to pick me to get rid of.

"It's done," Naserin announces as he hands me the leg

I take it reluctantly. "Thanks."

There's a pregnant pause between us. I don't know whether to apologize or just let it be. I still feel some type of way towards him, when I shouldn't. He's the only one who has been kind to me, and I'm stomping all over him in my little tantrum.

While I think over it, he speaks up first.

"Your demeanor has changed," he says.

"What do you mean?"

He points directly at my face. "Your expression contorts more. You raise your voice at me. You are not the same docile female."

I scoff. "So you want me to be submissive then?" I snap back at him.

"No. I want you to stop being this rude creature. Boldly barking at me as if you were upset with me."

"What makes you think I'm upset with you?"

"Since you saw your sister, you've changed dramatically. I haven't sensed anything good from you."

"How do you expect me to think positively after finding out how good she's got it? I've always been treated like dirt, and she gets it all. You'd be upset, too!"

He stands up. "Enough," he hisses with a twitch of his antenna. "Blaming your sister for all your shortcomings will change nothing here. You were adapting well. Why does it matter how her life is going?"

The tears I've been holding fall. "Because it does! I want the things she has. Is that such a bad thing for me to want? Aren't there things you want?"

He narrows his eyes. “I want you to stop screaming at me. I give you what I’m capable of. Although I am me and am bound to my nature, I still try to understand your way of living.”

I swallow hard. I know. I know he’s doing all these things out of his instincts for me. I hate that I’ve become bitter towards him.

That’s what this is. I’m bitter towards him because he can’t give me the life that she has.

I can’t believe I’m being a jerk to the one person or creature that’s looking out for me. My anger is misdirected and completely unfair. Naserin’s just trying his best to make me happy even though he can’t understand most things.

I bit my lower lip, regretful for feeling this way even for a short while. I just can’t help this anger inside of me.

“I’m sorry, Naserin. You’re right,” I start to say. Meekly, I approach him with my head lowered. “It’s not fair for me to react to you like this. I’m sorry, it won’t happen again.”

He looks over at me. “You still have anger inside of you.”

“I know, but it’s not towards you. I’m sorry,” I repeat over and over again.

Until he lets me get close to him. He’s wary of my sudden approach, but he has a curious look in his eye. At arm’s reach, I envelop my arm around his neck, planting a tearful kiss.

NASERIN

She plants a tearful kiss on my cheek, wrapping her arms around my neck.

I stand firm, maintaining my composure.

“I’m sorry.”

The words leave her mouth often, and I have to stop myself, remembering that I’m not the one she’s irritated by.

So with every incessant apology, I try to ease her mind despite my increasing annoyance. It takes a lot of patience to not simply reply that I know or point out that she’s already said that, but my time with her has taught me much about how not to offend humans.

Her kiss moves slightly, and she brings her lips from my cheek to the end of my proboscis.

The sensation tickles slightly, but mostly, it just stiffens me.

I’m not sure how I feel about her taking charge.

I manage to pull away from her slightly, far enough to speak.

“You don’t need to if you don’t want to,” I remark.

She has a surprised expression. “Oh, really? That’s not what you said before.”

She’s wearing a mischievous smile on her face now.

I meet her gaze. Her eyes are still filled with pain, and I can tell that even though she gives me access to her body voluntarily this time, there is something she'd rather be doing... somewhere else she'd rather be.

"If you don't want to, it's okay," I add. "We can stop if you like."

Her body is emitting pheromones, but it's not like before. There are still so many emotions she seeks to bury and hide from me. I can sense them on her. Every negative thought is another antenna twitch, every buried resentment an ache in my thorax.

But I don't want her to feel like she has to hide.

I just want her not to be cruel to me. It's disrespectful to my power, tempting me when she knows what I can do. She spoke against me earlier as though I were powerless to hurt her for offending me... powerless to help her from her problems.

"Right now, you're the *only* thing I want, Naserin," she corrects.

She pushes my proboscis back to her mouth and wraps her lips around it, kissing me.

I try not to think about the deeper implications.

Am I enabling her destructive behavior?

I heard her say that once. For how angry she can be, she's also very doubtful of that anger's validity.

And anger, when not put to use, has no point. It only upsets the thorax and causes an early death.

But these thoughts are better saved for a more trivial creature. One as powerful as me doesn't need to think about this stuff.

Who am I to deny nature's strength? She has grown tired of her spinning and ruminating thoughts, and so she has returned to something more primal.

I embrace her in earnest, gripping her shoulders with all my strength. She falters under my power slightly, but I feel her

hand reach down in my grasp, clearly telegraphing her needs. It places itself on my ever-hardening rod and begins to push the flesh of my staff up and down.

I want to slap her hand away and push her down to the rocks like I always do, but there's something enticing about letting her find her power.

This time, I think I'll let her explore me.

She runs her hands gingerly over my phallus, caressing its every bump and feeling its every irregularity. I'm not used to this level of tenderness.

"I'm going to put you in my mouth, okay?" She looks up at me, her eyes a bright fire.

I simply nod my approval but stand firm with my wings square.

She really doesn't know what to do with me, but I trust her to learn.

I'm far too big to get her hands around me and too heavy to hold.

"Could you lie back?"

I let myself yield, lying gently on the rock floor, beside the roaring fire.

My phallus standing erect, she begins to stroke me the best she can. I watch as the veins throb and pulse in her grasp.

She looks intimidated by it, but I resist the urge to coach her as she slowly takes her tongue and moves it to my erect head, licking around my glans.

She's never tasted me before, mostly because I had never seen this as an option, but I feel a hunger welling up in me as she licks my tip.

Her lips will not fit easily around me, but she stretches her jaw, attempting to fit me inside. She is able to get a bit beyond the head before relenting, bobbing only on the small amount that she can handle.

And my senses are thrown into turmoil. I've never experienced this kind of bliss.

Against my own will, my tendrils detach, gripping her hair and pushing her downward.

She is caught off-guard and can't help but gasp as a little more of me than she was prepared for enters her.

I want to apologize to her, but such a notion is preposterous. I don't apologize for what my body needs.

My claw-like tendrils grip her head tightly, and I know that a neurotoxin is coursing through me, making resistance impossible for her.

But she doesn't fight me. She refuses to.

No matter how many times my body pulls her deeper into me, she accepts what it does to her completely, yielding entirely to my whims.

In her eyes, I think I see a remorse not characterized by her endless apologies. It leaks from her eyes as she's brought further and further down, losing her breath more with each successive pull.

"Thank you for your obedience," I growl. "It makes this a lot easier."

I decide to stop fighting my body and let it return its control, seizing hold of my primal needs and satisfying them.

The edge of her throat repeatedly hits my glans, her mouth widened beyond her comprehension to fit me, and every time my head hits the barrier, I feel myself growing more orgasmic.

She is unable to speak and can barely maintain respiration. I see her going bluer and try to urge my tendrils to stop, but they refuse to comply.

For a moment, I worry what my body might do to her. But as my pleasure builds, and the tendrils on my hips slow their assault, I can feel fluid emitting from me, filling her mouth.

I feel temporary relief, but my body forces her down onto my lap, pushing upward and deeper into her.

I can only look at her beautiful eyes, now full of tears, not from sorrow but from intense strain. They shine like amber, with water pooling in them.

My grip on her lessens, my pincers no longer injecting her with neurotoxins, and she's now able to escape my grasp without difficulty.

She does not run.

Instead, she cuddles by my side, gripping my muscles and hair with her fingers.

"Thank you," I say simply, without understanding what I'm thanking her for.

She nods in response. And we lay together for some time, as she refuses to humor me with another detail or complaint about her sister.

I know what she wants. I can feel her rubbing against my waist, urging me on.

"If you want this," I say while gesturing downward. "Then you'll have to take it for yourself."

"I intend to," she growls, pretending to command more confidence than she actually exudes.

She brings herself to her feet, gripping what she can of my appendage tightly and trying to guide it inward. But I can tell that she's still terrified of my pincers, and thus hesitates about a foot above me, stopping just short of my reach.

Though I know how badly I want this, every inch of my body is just waiting to watch her take charge, seeing what she's truly capable of.

She manages to slip my tip inside of her, and for some time, she rests on top of me, barely dipping lower. My head is not even fully immersed in her sex for minutes. Gently and with great fear, she dips herself onto me, centimeter by centimeter.

I want her to take the plunge herself. My pincers attempt to grapple her, but she's still too far above me to reach.

“Can you go any lower?” My voice growls, breaking the tense silence.

She hesitates. “I don’t know if I can take any more than this,” she says.

“You have before.”

She shakes her head. “That was with you covering me with your –”

She looks down at my wings, and I know what she means.

I beat up my wings, extending them to within her reach. “I know you’re capable of it. Just grab on.”

She bites her lower lip, still looking down at how much more of me she has to take. “Okay,” she says, mostly to herself. “I can do this.”

“Of course you can.”

She grabs onto my wings tightly and begins to slowly but more forcefully lower herself.

I can feel the sensations registering as without instigating it, her sex engulfs me. I feel warm and oddly comforted within her.

She rests on top of me for a moment, just adjusting to me.

“There you go. Told you,” I say.

I’ve never been an encouraging force in anybody’s life. Until recently, I didn’t know what that meant. But as she raises herself up, then lowers herself back down in sequence, I’m a little proud of how much I’ve changed her.

Her lithe legs move with vigor and speed, bringing her body agilely down on top of me.

I can feel her moisture pooling at my waist. The entire time, my tendrils sit still, ready to grab her but never pulling her in. I imagine that, like me, they take pride in watching her corruption.

She came to me a virgin, afraid of this glorious feeling that courses through us both.

Now, she is learning. Her body has changed to accommodate me, and I've found a new home inside of her, far better even than my cavern.

I burst inside of her, just witnessing her spectacle. And when she has stopped, my tendrils grab her, pulling her back down toward me until we both fall asleep together in the cavern.

LUCY

The gnawing of my stomach hasn't subsided. Days have passed since I saw Edie in the town. Naserin and I made up, and everything's supposed to go how it was before, but it's not.

There are whispers in my head each time I do a simple task. It tells me that Edie has this or she has a better whatever. It's always there, forcing me to compare my life to Edie's.

I'm reverting back to my old sleeping schedule but still up all night with Naserin. My face has become gaunt. I look ghoulish, worse than before. I ask Naserin if I look any different, but of course, he says no.

Today's another sleepless day. Naserin still sleeps soundly next to me, unaware that my sister's taunting laughter rings through my head. I want to scream out and punch everything in sight, but I promised Naserin that I'd keep my anger under wraps.

I'm still trying to keep my anger at bay, but it wants to spill out at any possible second of the day. In fact, I think this resentment of mine is only growing and getting worse. I chewed off my nails already, but I need something to nibble on.

"Lucy?"

I jump at the sound of my name. Naserin peeks up at me from underneath his wing.

"Yes, hi, what's wrong?"

He sits up. “You’re awake again? It’s not the afternoon yet. Why are you up at this hour?”

“Sorry, am I being too loud?”

He tilts his head quizzically. “You were whispering, I thought you were talking to someone.”

“I was?”

“Yes.”

I try to laugh it off, but he seems to be even more suspicious of me.

“Sorry, sorry, I got caught up in my own thoughts. I was struggling to fall asleep but didn’t want to get up yet.”

“You’re having trouble sleeping again? Don’t tell me this is about your sister.”

“What? No, no. I’m just trying to talk myself back to sleep, that’s all.”

“Are you telling the truth?”

I press my mouth in a tight line. He’ll know if I’m lying or not by sensing my emotions. I don’t want to start another argument about it, even though that might happen.

I try to press carefully. “Yes, but,” I start saying and quickly get the words out after seeing the look on his face. “But! It’s because I had a nightmare about her. I’m trying to calm myself down.”

He stares at me for longer than a moment. He does it so often that it feels scrutinizing, but I know he doesn’t do it on purpose. Once his antennas twitch, I know his analysis is over.

“So it was just a nightmare,” he finally says.

“Yes. Please go back to sleep.”

Hesitating, he lowers his body back on the bed. I kiss his cheek to quell his worries. It seems to be enough as he closes his eyes. Then the soft shrill coming from him starts as he breathes.

I get up from the bed, not wanting to wake him up again. If I walk around, that'll distract my thoughts from Edie. The routine is just getting to me, or it already has. I latched onto the first thought outside of the cave.

Yes, that's it. This is my boredom taking over my thoughts. But is it really boredom? Or am I just now free to express all the repressed feelings I have towards Edie?

All these years of being quiet and accepting my family and my town's rejection. She certainly didn't do anything to stop it.

How arrogant of her to think so highly of herself that she agrees with the verbal abuse thrown at me. At times, she'd try to laugh it off. She'd jump into the teasing with a light scolding. "*Oh, you're so mean! Don't tease Lucy like that!*" In the end, it was all to gain favor with whoever happened to be tormenting me at the time.

I dig my nails into the palms of my hand, feeling rage course through my veins. I lied to Naserin just now. I didn't have a nightmare but a pleasant dream. I dream that I cut off her beautiful old blonde hair and left her bald.

I can't help it. I *wish* for an opportunity like that.

"That bitch," I hiss, almost the same as Naserin does. "She deserves t—"

I shake my head, trying to erase my dark thoughts. I don't know why they're suddenly resurfacing when I don't think I had them before. I know I resented her, but not to this level. I didn't even realize it was jealousy I felt towards her.

I sit down on my rock to gather these flailing thoughts of mine. Naserin's right. This isn't like me. He's also right about me having no control over how our lives unfolded.

With a click of my teeth, I stand up, ready to go back to bed.

"What the hell am I supposed to do, anyway?"

What if I'm the one imagining things? What if it wasn't really her and I just want someone to blame and hate?

I know I like it here. Naserin allows me to be myself, whoever that may be. I don't have to cower in a corner anymore. He tries to make me happy.

I definitely don't want to go back to that awful town, despite there being some obvious conveniences. Everything sucked and would still suck if I hadn't been offered up to Naserin.

So why am I so mad all the time?

I pace around the entrance, trying to come up with an answer, but none presents itself. The only thing I can think of is, why not? Why shouldn't I be mad when I've been treated poorly my whole life?

Each time I open my eyes, I feel her presence in a far corner of the cave. I see her hiding her giggles.

"Lucy."

I whip my head around, slapping the air. My heart races as I look for her around my new home. When I realize it's nothing, I laugh scornfully.

"As if she'd ever step inside a place like this."

"Lucy?"

I nearly jump over the edge when I hear my name loud and clear. After realizing who it is, I sigh in relief, holding my unsettled heart.

"Naserin? Did I wake you again?"

"No, it's time to get up," he says, pointing at the sun lower in the sky.

I join him back inside. *"You're up earlier than usual."*

"I can sense turmoil inside you. What are you doing by yourself?"

"Nothing, I was just talking to myself again."

"I see. Then what do you want to do tonight?"

"Anything's fine. As long as it's a distraction."

"Do you want to visit the lower caves?"

“The what?”

The lower caves are at the ground of the forest. They were hidden by a brush of trees and that’s why I never noticed them. They are much tidier than where we’re staying. There’s more humidity and soil, perfect for a garden that I’ve been hinting I’d like to Naserin.

He takes my hand and actually shows me useful materials to create garden beds. Tree bark, random wild herbs, and tools that I don’t question the origin of.

“I remember all the things you said needed for the garden. The forest has many different edible plants for you to grow,” he explains.

“Naserin... this is so sweet. Thank you.”

“A garden in the forest? I just have to send my husband’s servant to the market.”

I turn around behind me. Nothing again.

“Lucy?”

I shake my head. “Nothing, sorry, I thought I heard something. Where shall we start?” I say, quickly changing the subject.

“Oh, Lucy, look at how tame your monster is.”

We start on our first home project and finish it the same night. As grateful as I am toward Naserin, seeing the raised garden bed doesn’t feel as good as I thought it would. I stare at all the seedlings we planted with such... disappointment.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Lucy. I feel bad that I have to enjoy fresh produce while your plants will likely wither.”

I punch myself on the head to get her voice out, all without Naserin noticing. I’m ridden with guilt when he asks for another project to do. But I suggest building a couch just to humor him.

The next night, when we finish the new project, we sit on the new piece of furniture. We used the extra hides for cushioning. It looks really nice despite some shortcomings.

“Nice? Ha! My husband just purchased a satin couch stuffed with goose feathers. Yours still reeks of a rotting animal.”

“What do you think, Lucy?”

I force a smile. “It’s great. Thank you again.”

He tilts his head. “Why do you smile that way?”

“What do you mean? I’m happy about the couch.”

No, I’m not even the slightest bit happy about our new creation. Why can’t it be made of gold instead of dead wood? This doesn’t even make the place look nicer, just more sad and pathetic.

“My palace can house twice as much as your sad little hole. Have you ever seen marble floors?”

I’m the one that suffered.

“My husband loves to spoil me. He loves me so much!”

I deserve nice things in life.

“I’d want to die if I was you.”

Not her, not her, not her.

“My sweet sister.”

“Lucy!” Naserin snaps at me.

“What?” I glare in response.

“You’re whispering to yourself with that look again. You said you’d stop.”

“I wasn’t doing anything. I was just –”

“Don’t try to lie to me again. Why are you being like this? Why are you so consumed with your sister’s life?”

“I-I’m not. I –”

He grabs me by the arms. “I know what’s going through you. I want this to end already. Tell me how to fix it.”

Tears fall without warning, and I just hold on to him. This is all because of *her*. I don’t want my life to change, really. I

want Naserin and the life we're building together. I want to be with him the way we were before Edie came along and ruined everything.

Before I began to ruin everything. I know deep down that I've been cruel to Naserin, that I've made him unhappy with my thinly veiled taunts and jabs, and I hate myself for it. I just can't stand the thought of Edie looking down on me like everyone else.

I would rather see her dead.

NASERIN

Lucy says nothing for the longest time, but the silence in the space is very, *very* loud.

I pull away from her just enough so I can see the furrow in her brow and how she clenches her teeth hard enough that it must hurt. Her hands are balled up into fists and were it not for the stubby, ineffective nails that humans have, I would worry that she would break the skin. I smell no blood, though. Thankfully, only the acrid scent of stress emanates from her.

I would have to be both deaf and blind to not see her struggle against the sickness deep in her own mind. She's unraveling and has been for quite a while now, and I would like to fix it.

I'll do anything to fix it.

"Lucy," I say, because I can see herself getting lost in her head once more in the bone-chilling silence that has filled our home. "Tell me what I need to do."

"I want her dead," she says suddenly. The words shoot out like deadly arrows, like feral animals, like they pushed past her throat and her teeth to be heard. They're sharp, cruel, angry, and desperate in a way that I have not heard from her before. "I wish she was dead and not a part of my life anymore."

The admission is not as much of a surprise as I'm sure she thinks it is. In the same way that I feel nothing but vague apathy when removing a sore or chipped claw for a new one to regrow, killing something that brings me annoyance is just

natural. I don't feel anger or shame removing dark elves or humans from this plane of existence when needed and neither should she.

Except, this clearly isn't the case for Lucy, who looks both repulsed and excited by her own confession. Her eyes are wide, and her mouth opens and closes like she's gasping for air. Even her hair, usually soft and straight, has changed with her sickness and mania, knotting itself around her and flying around her face in wisps.

I'm momentarily struck by a mix of emotions that I cannot name, but at the forefront of them all is determination. I've finally found something that will help Lucy get better, and I want to push forward with it.

Perhaps she only needs encouragement?

"So, kill her," I say, the solution presented to me and lifting up the pressure on my chest. "Let us be rid of the problem."

Lucy bites her bottom lip and fidgets. "Yes. Maybe..." she says, but her heart is not in it.

I wonder if it is because she doesn't want to kill Edie herself.

Humans have such strange views on death, murder, and the deceased. None of it makes a difference to me, and whether Edie dies by Lucy's hand or my own is a detail that's completely irrelevant, but some humans truly don't want to kill others. If Lucy cannot commit herself to committing the act, then I will do it for her.

My soul will not be crushed like hers could be. In reality, it would be no different than any other hunt I participate in.

"Then I'll kill her," I respond after she says nothing. The act of it would be laughably easy, simpler than most other things Lucy could ask of me. There would be no fight in it, and once Lucy tells me where she is, I would be able to make the trip there.

Really, I'm almost lucky that it's so simple.

“W-wait!” Lucy bites her bottom lip. “Just, wait.”

“Wait for what?” I ask. “Is she not the one who has been causing you grief this entire time?”

“Yes, but –”

“Has she not been the source of all your problems?” My voice grows louder because whether or not Edie dies isn’t something I care about, but Lucy’s well-being *is*. If this would fix it, why not commit?

“Yes, she has –”

“Isn’t she the one that’s made you this way? Made you into a sick, manic shell of a person?”

“Yes!” Lucy yells. She furiously rubs her eyes now that they have started welling up with tears again. The sight makes me frown and something in my chest aches. Neither of us says anything for a moment while she tries to regain control of her breath. I don’t dare interrupt her during these precious seconds, not until she can take an unshaken breath on her own.

“I don’t understand,” I murmur. I keep my voice soft and gentle, nothing like how it was before at the height of my frustration. I want to fix what is going on with her, not cause her more issues. “Won’t removing her from your life help you?”

“... Maybe. Yes? It’s just...” Lucy wraps her arms around her chest like she’s giving herself a hug. “It’s complicated... I hate her. I do. I hate that she’s lied and that she has such a good life where she’s never had to worry about her happiness or well-being. It’s unfair, and she doesn’t deserve it.”

She doesn’t explicitly mention the jealousy she harbors toward her sister but she doesn’t need to. I can taste it in the air as she speaks, bitter and sad all at once. Human emotions can be so very complicated when they don’t have to be. Their morality, too, is something that I will never understand.

I’ll try, though. For her.

“I don’t want you to go and kill her,” she says finally, but I can tell that that isn’t the end of this conversation. It can’t be,

not with the way she's holding herself like she's ready to collapse.

"Alright." I tuck a stray hair behind her, waiting. I can be patient with this. "That's okay."

Lucy hums, but the sound is flat and sad. I want to be able to fix this for her. I would raze cities if she asked.

"Could you bring her back here?" she finally asks quietly, like the question would insult me. Her voice cracks, as fragile as the bone of a bird, and it reminds me of how delicate her mind is, too. "So I can see her?"

"I could," I respond, making sure to keep my voice low. I let my hand linger on her cheek, and she leans against it. "But I would not understand why."

Lucy hums for a moment, searching for the words in her head. I watch as she glances at me and then to the side, finally just sighing with a shrug. "I don't know how to explain it. It would just make me feel better to see her."

"Consider it done, then."

"Really?" she asks, her eyes widening a bit in shock.

"Of course. I told you I would do anything to help you fix this problem."

Lucy smiles, though it's a hesitant thing. "Thank you. I think... I think I would just like to speak with her one last time."

"What is there to say?"

"I want her to know the grief she caused me," Lucy answers immediately. "I want to have that satisfaction of her knowing that this is her fault and that it could've been different if she were a better person. And... Just to show her that I'm here. I'm alive, no thanks to her."

There is a pause that is heavy before she continues to speak. "I want her to see me before she dies, alone and scared just like I have been my entire life."

She looks away from me and rests her gaze on her chipped nails, a nervous habit, and picks at one of them. I cover her hands before she can do any further damage to herself.

“I don’t pretend to understand why you need to speak to her,” I say when her hands are still under mine. “But if it would bring you peace of mind, I’ll bring her here before I kill her.”

“Okay,” she says, voice as soft as a breath.

“And this will help?” I ask one last time.

She hesitates only for a moment but nods. “Yes. Yes, it will.”

“Good.”

I pull Lucy closer to me, cradling the back of her head as I hold her. I feel her pulse rise rapidly for a moment before slowing down to a steady, determined rhythm, but I don’t dare move until she squirms in my grasp.

“I will leave now if you tell me where she is.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “In the morning. I have to explain where she lives to you, and I’d like a moment to plan my words for her out carefully.”

“At dawn then,” I surmise, and she nods.

Lucy doesn’t look healed. There’s still something wild in her eyes that has barely been contained throughout the entirety of this conversation. It’s a ferocity that both worries and intrigues me, but I am relieved to finally have an answer and cure for the mania that she has endured.

“At dawn,” she repeats. “Tomorrow my sister will die.”

LUCY

Naserin wakes me up early the following morning from a deep sleep.

I dreamed of Edie, her face plaguing my thoughts even while I'm unconscious. Though I can't remember what I said or what I did, I remember my feelings of anger and despair. I remember being so consumed with rage that I lost myself, and afterward, I did not feel any better. The feeling of emptiness that follows is the one that I wake up with.

"There you are," Naserin says. His voice is deep and rumbly, and I feel it all the way down to my bones. "It's time to wake up."

"I know," I murmur back. I take his stretched-out hand and allow him to pull me up and out of bed. He lets me fall against him for a moment, and I press my face against his chest. I can already feel my hands shaking from what's to come.

Naserin and I step into the entryway, his silence being both a comfort and a curse at this point in time. He only speaks up when we get close to the exit, asking me where to find Edie with a low voice. I tell him about the surrounding area and her big manor that she doesn't deserve.

"She lives in the fanciest house you'll see there," I say, the bitterness deeply obvious to anyone who can hear me. Naserin doesn't comment on it, probably already tired enough of my ranting about Edie, but I can't stop myself. "There's flowers and carvings everywhere. It's like a work of art or a picture from a painting. All beautiful and scenic and everything."

Naserin responds with a hum from deep within his chest but he doesn't say anything, merely nodding afterward.

I ignore how that makes my chest spark with agonizing pain, and I feel like I'm slowly losing my mind. Naserin has been quiet through most of my explanations of where Edie lives and what her home looks like, only once asking a question about the direction of the town.

He must be sick of me.

I can't stop, though.

"Edie doesn't look like me at all," I say, picturing my sister in all her beautiful glory. "She's curvy, full figure. Everyone always said she had the body built to be a good mother or a man's dream. She's an idol, or so others would say."

I run a hand down my side absentmindedly, thinking of our differences. Naserin's hand stops me from pinching the fat around my side and holds my hand tightly. The touch burns.

"She's blonde and pretty. Her hair is like... like gold. Bright and bouncy, unlike my dark strands. I—"

I used to be so jealous when other people would compliment her about it, I almost say, but that's inaccurate. I'm still jealous of it.

Golden child Edie with her pretty, pretty hair and her pretty, pretty eyes.

Ugly Lucy with my bland hair, my dull eyes, and my plain face.

Not that anyone paid enough attention to me to actually taunt me in such a way.

"People said her eyes were like... like sapphires or something." I smile wryly. "I always thought that was pushing it just a bit. Like sapphires are such gorgeous gems and Edie's eyes were just blue. Just plain old blue like the sky we see everyday. It's nothing special, it's nothing —"

My voice catches in my throat when Naserin squeezes my hand. He must want me to shut up and get to the point, since I'm the one making him go get her in the first place.

My eyes burn with embarrassment, but I clear my throat anyway, dislodging the emotions that are stuck in there. “Right. Well, pretty house, pretty girl. Blond with blue eyes.”

“Nothing like you,” he says. Even though the words should hurt and they do, just a little bit, he says them with a warmth that tampers down my agony just for a moment.

“Nothing like me,” I respond. The words sound hollow.

Naserin nods and lets go of my hand which now just feels cold. “I’ll return soon with her,” he rumbles, stepping toward the entrance of our home. I follow him outside to watch him fly up and away from me until I can no longer see him.

It doesn’t hit me until a soft breeze blows past that I’m completely alone with my thoughts, and my skin starts to itch like bugs are writhing underneath it.

“She’ll be here soon,” I whisper. “She’ll be here.”

The thought makes my entire body burn. I get down on my knees, desperate to ground myself. When she gets here, Edie will die, and I’ll be free of her once and for all. I’ll be able to take back control over the life that I have built through blood and tears, no thanks to her or the rest of them.

I won’t miss her. I won’t miss her at all when she’s gone.

You can’t even stomach the thought of killing her yourself, my mind taunts me. You’re making Naserin do it because you’re so afraid.

But Naserin doesn’t care, he said he doesn’t! So, it’s okay that I don’t have to kill her on my own. That doesn’t mean anything, and it’s just easier this way.

I look at my hands and picture them filled with blood anyway, and I feel sick. I rub them into the dirt, leaves, and stones until it hurts.

The sound of rustling leaves interrupts my mania, and I look up to find a small creature in between the dry leaves and branches of a bush.

It blinks big, warm eyes at me, and I feel seen. Too seen.

“You don’t know anything about me,” I yell. The small rodent runs off from where it came from. “I could do it if I wanted to!”

Nothing responds, and I wrap my arms around myself and squeeze hard enough that I cannot breathe. The ache in my chest makes me feel as if I’ve been shot.

I stay there for a while, unaware of the time passing by.

I hear screaming in the distance that gets louder by the second and realize my time is up. Naserin approaches with Edie clutched in his grasp, yelling and crying for help. He drops her onto the dirt away from me and continues to fly until he lands next to me.

Edie’s still crying.

It’s... strange to see her like this. Completely unraveled and... ugly. Her face is still turned away from me, sobbing as tears fall towards the ground. Her face, from the little I can see, is morphed into a hideous expression of grief that stays there until she finally looks up.

When she looks at me, I feel like I’ve been pinned down. I can only watch as she gasps and her eyes widen.

“Lucy?”

My name feels like poison from her lips.

“Lucy, is that you?”

She sounds so shocked, so worried.

“You’re alive!”

My breath gets punched out of my body suddenly and my whole body tenses up. She’s hugging me before I know it, She launches herself at me, wraps her arms around me, and is sobbing into my shoulder.

“You’re alive,” she keeps saying. I can barely understand her through her sad sobs. “You’re still alive, thank goodness.”

Did she... miss me?

Surely not.

Edie holds onto me tightly, like she's afraid I'll vanish the moment she lets go. For a moment, I feel warm, so, so warm. The comforting pressure of her hug is enough to make my eyes sting like some sort of touch-starved child. She moves one hand to hold the back of my head and runs fingers down my knotted hair.

"You must have gone through so much... I can't imagine what happened to you, I only could think that... that you were dead."

I was, or I should have been.

"It brings me such relief that you're okay. I-I prayed for you. I didn't really know how, but I hoped that you would be at peace, at least."

She prayed for me?

At peace?

My hands shake at my sides. I hadn't wrapped them around Edie's body like she had done to me. She's mocking me because of course, she is. To have the audacity to feel bad, to feel worry?

Who does she think she is?

Everything that happened to me was her fault, and once I think the thought, it repeats like a loud, angry mantra in my head and I see nothing but raging crimson.

"How could you say that to me?" I whisper. Edie stills and pulls away just enough to look me in the eyes, worry and confusion on her perfect features.

"What do you mean, Lucy?"

"You thought I could be at peace? When I was told to lie down and die? Alone?" I yell, pushing her off me. The rush of emotions is sudden, but I feel enraged. Worse than that, I feel like I'm on fire. The warmth that Edie gave to me with her hug has turned into an uncomfortable blazing fury.

"If you wanted to give me any sense of peace," I hiss, taking one threatening step forward. "You should have been the one that died instead of me."

Edie's eyes are wide and scared when I lunge at her, her mouth wide open. She says something to me, but I don't hear it with the pounding roar in my ears as I reach out for her neck.

This is your fault, the roaring in my head screams. *This is your fault.*

NASERIN

“I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!”

I stand by as I watch Lucy’s plan unfold. The yelling, the deranged expressions, the barbaric strength she turns out to have. It’s something completely out of character. The woman I see now is nothing like the one I met that night of the offering.

She slaps her sister a few times – on her face, her body, and even around her head. Lucy doesn’t have a clear aim of where to hit her.

“You still have the audacity to keep your mouth shut? Why, Edie? Why don’t you have anything to say now?” Lucy belittles her as she smacks her at the beat of every word.

I try to sense her emotions to get a better grasp of things. But like the chaos happening outside her physical self, it’s the same inside of her. Lucy bares her teeth as her shrill shrieks get higher and longer.

“Why? What did you ever do to get treated better than me? What made you such a gift to the whole damn world?”

Edie tries to answer, but with Lucy’s grip on her throat, she can’t. The latter shakes her vigorously, making her sister hit the ground with the back of her head.

“Do you have any idea what it was like for me? To be hated so much just for being born like this? Do you think I wanted any of it? I just wanted the same love as you did! And yet –!”

Another slap to the face. Now Lucy's the one crying.

"I always hated my life. Every waking moment, I wished I died in my sleep. Do you know what that feels like? Of course, you don't. You never will! Even our parents loved you instead of me! I never asked to be born, Edie!"

She spills out everything that I haven't heard from her. I'm appalled at what she's saying. Not wanting to be born? That goes against the flow of nature.

"I also wanted to be pretty. I wanted to have a good body. To be charming and funny. To be loved by everyone. I wanted to not have to work for all the damn things I need just to survive!"

I promised Lucy I wouldn't step in unless Edie hurt her. However, I'm not sure if I can just watch and do nothing. It feels like this is just letting Lucy lose her sanity completely until her heart gives out. This has helped nothing.

There's a wrenching feeling inside of my chest down to my abdomen. Like if I'm being pierced by a spear. I want her to stop screaming, for her own sake and mine.

This mental breakdown is something I've seen before. When deer are diseased, they go insane and will do anything to kill themselves, to free them of the excruciating pain. I want to save Lucy from whatever sickness she's going through.

I thought this would be the answer to all her troubles. I thought by killing her sister, she would stop having hallucinations of her taunting. That maybe her obsession would stop, and we could go on to build our life together.

Now, I'm not so sure. This has made her even worse. Perhaps it's this new nervousness of mine, but I think I can sense Lucy being near death. But if I interfere now, I don't know if it'll be even worse for us both.

Lucy straddles her sister, weakly hitting her face, not even seeing where she's hitting. Her eyes are wide and bloodshot. Her whole body trembles as she tries to create coherent words.

"What's the point of telling you all this? You don't even care, do you? Why would you, since you always thought of me

as a burden... Just like the rest of them!” She punches the dirt right by Edie’s face.

“L-Lucy,” Edie croaks.

“Shut up!” Lucy shrieks as she grabs her own head, punching herself. “Just admit it! You always thought I was holding you back, didn’t you? That you wouldn’t struggle as much if I wasn’t there. But we were both poor! Why is your life better than mine, even so?”

Lucy scratches her arms, digging her nails into her skin. She draws blood and that’s when I step in. That is, until Lucy snaps at me with just one furious scowl.

“Don’t do that,” is all I manage to tell her before stepping back.

“It’s all her fault, Naserin! This *bitch* has everything! Everything that will never be mine! I was sacrificed just because I wasn’t Edie! And now she gets to live a life of luxury after my supposed death! That’s the only thing that stopped her from having the best life possible, me contaminating her space!”

After scratching at her sister, Lucy turns the attacks back to herself. She grabs her face, scratching her cheeks like she wants everything around her to disappear. This pain inside of me gets worse with each word she says and each abuse she directs toward herself.

To see her behave this way... It is worse than any physical pain I have ever experienced. She is strong, beautiful, and maddeningly confusing, but she is mine. This does not feel like my Lucy. I want nothing more than to intervene, and I step forward to do so, but Edie is faster.

Lucy’s shrieks and shrills turn into wails and sobbing. She rocks her body back and forth, muttering against her palms.

“I’m just garbage. I shouldn’t have been born. Why didn’t my mother get rid of me when I was removed from her body? Why am I still here? Why do I have to keep suffering because of you?”

“Lucy, please,” Edie begs, reaching out to touch Lucy.

The latter, in turn, slaps her hand away and grabs her throat again. The murderous intent returns to her dazed face.

“You wish the same things I do, don’t you? You also wish I was never here!”

“That’s not true!” Edie finally cries out. “That’s not true at all, Lucy!”

She puts her forearms in front of her to use as a shield. Lucy scratches at them while screaming that she’s a liar. I’m at a loss as to what to do now.

“Lucy, please! Listen to me! Everything you accuse me of isn’t true! Believe me!”

“Why should I *ever* trust a *word* you say?” Lucy hisses.

“You’ve got it all wrong. Not once have I thought of you as a burden.”

Lucy breathes hard, her frown growing deeper than before.

“Yes, you have. Once the rest of the town saw me that way, so did you,” she snaps almost in a snarl.

Edie blinks away tears. “No, I haven’t, I swear. I’ve always loved you so much. You have no idea how devastated I was when you were picked.”

“You were celebrating.”

“I wasn’t!”

Lucy shakes her head. “You can’t deny that you treated me like the others did, Edie!”

“Because you turned cold toward me first! You didn’t want anything to do with me, and I was hurt by that.”

“*You* were hurt? What about all the bullying done to me to gain *your* favor? You never had to suffer the same way I have! You’re married to a rich dark elf!”

Edie shakes her head and her lips tremble. She uses one of her arms to cover her face.

“That’s not true either, Lucy. None of it is. If you wanted me to suffer as badly as you, then your wish has come true.”

“What are you talking about? Breaking a nail isn’t suffering, you jerk.”

“Lucy, please, just listen,” Edie whimpers. “That dark elf I married isn’t anything like you think he is. He’s the absolute worst man to ever exist.”

“Why?”

“He just wanted a trophy wife. That’s why I got married right after you left. I wasn’t ready yet but since he was wealthy, our parents didn’t put a stop to it, again. They failed us both in their own way. I was raped as soon as he took me to his manor.”

Lucy jerks her head back. “He what?”

“You heard me. He wanted to imprint me so I could get pregnant right away. When I tried to fight him off, he started beating me and took me. I think he still did it when I was unconscious for a few days.”

Lucy glances at me, and there’s a silent understanding between us.

“I thought things would get better as time went by, but it only got worse. He branded me with fire magic and would lock me up in my room. He’d only come in to try to impregnate me or hit me when he had a bad day. Sometimes, he humiliates me in front of his friends or even the servants. One time, he hit me so bad that I accidentally peed myself and he dragged my face on the puddle I made.”

“If he had you locked up, why were you in town shopping? You threw money at me.”

Edie’s eyes widen in realization. “That was you? I-I didn’t _”

“Answer me.”

“He only let me go after I slept with him and tried his disgusting fetishes. He made me swallow a maid’s blood after he killed her in front of me. But once I gave in enough, he didn’t keep me locked up all the time,” she wails soon after.

Lucy's contorted expression slowly softens. She's calmed down even just a bit after hearing such atrocious things. There's perhaps even a hint of sympathy on her face.

She gets off her, letting Edie stand up finally. Her sister, noticing Lucy's change, keeps explaining.

"I even lost my molars because he made me chew rocks when I couldn't finish a meal from stress. There's no telling what he'll do to the children he makes me give him."

"You're preg –"

Edie shakes her head. "No, but I don't know when it'll happen. If he sees that I'm gone and I go back tonight, I'll die by his hand for sure."

Lucy looks down at the ground, pensive. She bites the inside of her cheeks, and I don't know what her next reaction will be. Then, she looks back up at her, with a scowl and deranged expression.

"You're lying. You're lying! You're lying again! You don't have any injuries, you fucking liar! Just shut up!"

Edie tries to calm her down, to no avail. That's when Lucy turns to me and points at her.

"Naserin, kill her! Kill her now!"

Like a switch, I prepare myself to abide by Lucy's wishes.

LUCY

Naserin grabs Edie and starts sucking out her blood by the neck, along with her life. She screams and cries but doesn't fight back. I can't hear her begging over the ringing in my ears.

Everything I've always wanted is happening at this very moment. I have control now, not her. I can finally stop living in her shadow and move into the sun.

I look away from the scene for a moment, unable to deal with the regurgitating sounds coming from her. This is what would've happened to me if Naserin hadn't decided to keep me. This is the exchange I wanted all this time.

But will it really make everything better? the little voice in my head whispers from the farthest corner of my consciousness.

Even with her dead, you're still not going to be her.

I know I won't. But at least I won't have to keep comparing myself to her. The town will surely mourn her death, but I won't be around to hear their laments and best wishes to my parents. All the things they surely didn't do when I was sacrificed.

I turn back to Edie. The color from her face drains and her body is so ghastly white.

She'll be dead soon. All your problems will be gone. Right?

“Naserin, stop!” I cry out as I collapse on the ground. “I can’t. I can’t do this.”

He lets her go, letting her fall on the ground. She stumbles on her arms, trying to gain balance, but the sudden loss of blood gets in the way. She lets herself go limp, her dirty, golden hair falling over a face now as gaunt as mine.

Her shoulders shake, and she starts crying. “Just kill me, Lucy,” she begs. “It’d be better if I was dead. My life is unbearable.”

Eddie crawls over to my legs. Out of instinct, I take a step back, but she still reaches for me. I look at Naserin for reassurance but Eddie pulls me.

“Please, Lucy. I don’t want to go back to that man,” she says, looking up.

My slapping, scratching, and punching did a number on her beautiful face. I’ve dreamed of this moment before, to deform that face of hers until it was no longer recognizable. Seeing it now, I just feel a pang of guilt and... regret.

When I went at her, she didn’t fight back once. She let me hit her, insult her, accuse her of everything, and yet she allowed me to. She didn’t even insult me once the entire time I yelled at her.

Maybe Eddie wasn’t lying at all.

“Everything that you said about your husband... How do I know you’re not lying?”

She scrambles on her feet. Desperately, she rubs at her forearms, neck, chest, and legs. I don’t know what she’s doing at first until I notice the paint coming off her skin.

Slowly, the bruises I accused her of not having begin to appear. Black welts stain her perfect, smooth skin like a disease. She shakes as she shows me the wounds her husband has inflicted on her.

I swallow hard as I stare at each one, wondering if I’ve ever been hit this hard.

“What else... has he done to you?” I ask softly, thinking how not even Naserin was this barbaric to me.

Tears flow again, a never-ending feat for the both of us. She hangs her head in defeat and shame before recalling all the awful encounters with that dark elf. What she’s told me so far sounds like a nightmare, but how much worse can it get?

“He treats me the same way in front of his friends as in the bedroom. They laugh at me while I cry for help and throw money at me when he finishes. They always ask for another show, and he does it without hesitation.”

“Does anyone else know about this?”

She snuffles. “Of course not. I mean, who would believe a human over a powerful dark elf?”

“If he treated you like that the very first night, he must’ve shown signs of him being like that. Our parents should’ve noticed them.”

“They were blinded by his wealth. Of course, they didn’t. Everyone else congratulated me for ‘snatching’ a good man, and I didn’t have another choice but to accept. Sure, during the wedding preparations and the ceremony he acted like a prince, but once the door closed in our bedroom...”

Edie starts to sob again, remembering that awful night. I feel for her since something similar happened to me. But I guess I was lucky that Naserin and I found some sort of connection that night.

“What does he say to you in all of this? Does he just abuse you all the time?”

She shakes her head and wipes her nose. “No, not all the time, it just feels like that. There are times when I feel like he could change. He spoils me and is actually sweet with me at times. He says he cares for me and even apologizes after he does all that. It confuses me.”

I slowly nod, understanding somewhat. Not with Naserin, but with my own parents. They blatantly favored Edie but would twist their words when I tried to call them out on it. Most of the time, I felt like it was my fault.

“So you spend all your time inside of that place? You don’t have any friends at all?”

“He won’t let me. He says that I enjoyed too much freedom in our town and that I should be a proper wife. I can’t do this, I can’t wear that, every word of his is law, and I have to obey unless I want things to get worse for me.”

“I didn’t realize he had you in a chokehold, Edie,” I meekly admit.

She shrugs. “One of the servants told me I should consider myself lucky to still be alive. I mean, what can I do? I’m a lamb in a lion’s den.”

I laugh bitterly. “I guess we were both thrown in the lion’s den, huh?” I ask ironically.

“It looks that way. But here we are, surviving what we can in such a hostile environment.”

“Yeah,” is all I can say.

We both appear to have our own problems. The only difference is the times we had to suffer. It truly is her turn now, but I’m not feeling as happy as I thought I would.

I look back over at Naserin, a new appreciation forming inside of me. I got to escape my suffering here with him, and it’s actually better for me. In ways I never thought of before.

I like it here. I’m happy. Everyone else leaves me alone, giving me a new sense of peace.

Maybe the reason why I’m somewhat thriving here is because I died the night I got sent here. But I was strong enough to come back from it as a new, better person. All thanks to Naserin and my own willpower.

When I look over at Edie’s defeated self, I can’t help to think that she doesn’t have it in her. That she’ll always be a victim of her circumstances. She’s given up on the life she has now, finding no way out. No way to try and make it better for herself.

I didn’t realize my perfect sister was as weak and pathetic as I am... or was.

I grab her hand, forcing myself to do so since I don't remember the last time I touched her. She looks up, taken aback, and then she squeezes my hand.

"I'm sorry, Edie, for... you know. I didn't know what you were going through and took out my insecurities on you."

She shakes her head. "No, no. I should've done more for you when I could. I'm just so happy you're still alive."

There's a pregnant pause that goes on a little too long.

"Do you... want to see where I live now?" I ask, not knowing how to steer the conversation now.

Her face lights up, and she eagerly agrees. I nod towards Naserin, who already picks us up to take flight up the mountain. Edie shrieks at first, clutching me tightly, but she relaxes when we quickly land at the cave's entrance.

I gesture inside to the "living room" area, where we made the new couch just a few days ago. She stares in awe at all the furniture we built and gawks at all the furs Naserin's collected. We go down to the garden beds by the lower caves, showing her the budding seeds.

She asks how I do basic things like take a bath or brush my teeth. I point down to the river where all my hygiene is taken care of. Her mouth hangs open as she asks how I did this or that, curious as to how I live my day-to-day life out here in the forest.

"Wow, Lucy! How amazing! You really adapted so well out here! I could never do something like that!"

"You never know, Edie. Survival makes you change a lot, and I ended up liking it here more than our town."

"I can see why! Everything you've done is amazing. Bathing out in the open? I'd rather stink!"

We both laugh, and I feel a weight off my chest. I thought I'd be offended by her last statement, but I finally feel good about myself.

I realize I managed to do all these things without the help of anyone. It's something Edie – no one – can take from me.

It's something she certainly couldn't do. Sure, it was kind of a no-choice situation, but I beat the obstacle that was supposed to lead to my death.

Eddie explores my new home with enthusiasm, praising me but still wary of Naserin. Seeing her like this makes me think that she wouldn't mind living like this either if it meant escaping her husband. I want her to gain some sort of freedom and autonomy.

Maybe she should pretend to die like I did and stay here.

I stand around with a blank stare, quickly realizing that's not a good idea. Eddie's too soft in the end for my life. She'll struggle to adapt way more than me. We could even end up fighting all the time.

Then another solution springs to mind. *What if it isn't Eddie that dies?*

NASERIN

The atmosphere is pleasant enough in our little cavern nook, with Lucy's sister seemingly enjoying our amenities. She seems fascinated by all of Lucy's additions, but not so much with the differently mined sections of the cavern and all of the flora and creatures contained here.

My head is still spinning from how quickly the mood changed. First, I was ready to kill the woman before me, and now I'm welcoming her into my cavern, and she and Lucy are smiling and laughing together as if nothing ever happened.

Humans really are a confusing bunch.

"What if *you* don't have to die to be happy?" Lucy speaks from across the room, hunched over in deep contemplation.

And I don't understand any of this.

"What are you talking about?" Edie's perplexed look is also half frightened. She's afraid of the leaps Lucy might have come to.

But me? I'm intrigued.

"It's okay, really," Edie says. "You apologized. We're good."

Lucy approaches Edie, who looked ready to leave but now looks ready to defend herself at a moment's notice.

"No," Lucy says. "We're not."

Edie's back stiffens up, her shoulders firm and eyebrows level.

“I don’t want to do this again,” Edie says. “So if we’re having this conversation, then I’ll see myself out.”

“No, Edie,” Lucy says. “You’re not listening! I mean *you* don’t have to die to be happy.”

“This is giving me a headache,” I say aloud.

The girls look at me, as though surprised I’m still here. But I’m a rather difficult being to miss, at least by human standards. I’m not some insect on the wall.

“Can you just say what you mean? I don’t know if I can take more yelling and crying today.” I can tell I’ve been heard, but I’m not sure I’ve impacted the conversation.

“Okay,” Edie says calmly. “Back up.” She gestures with an open palm held upward, trying to quiet the beasts raging in Lucy’s frenetic mind.

“You’re miserable because of your husband, right?” Lucy insists.

She nods.

I think I’m starting to understand human behavior a little more.

She looks like she doesn’t get Lucy’s point, but I think she does.

I think she’s afraid of an implication she’s not ready to face.

“I’m not following,” Edie says.

“Why not? It’s pretty simple.”

Edie shakes her head at Lucy’s words. “Just say it simply.”

“We made a mistake in trying to kill you, and I’m so sorry about that.”

“It’s okay,” Edie says.

“But Naserin is very good at making people *disappear* if you get my drift.”

Edie looks bewildered.

“I think your *drift* is that you’re playing fast and loose with the euphemisms, and there’s no way you’re taking anybody’s life.”

“I’ll do it.”

I interject into the tension, cutting through it as cleanly as I can.

“I don’t know what we’re talking about exactly, but I’ll do it.”

Lucy gives me a questioning glance. “Naserin. Should we maybe talk this over some more?”

I lower my head to meet her eyes. “If it makes you happy, I’ll do it.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Edie interrupts. “Considering this is *my husband* we’re talking about, I think I should have some say.”

“Edie,” Lucy says. “The bruises were the last straw.”

“But you’re covered in bruises, too!” Edie grips Lucy’s arm and looks at her neck.

“That’s different,” Lucy says.

“How is it any different?”

“The difference is Naserin loves me, and your husband makes you miserable!”

Edie puts her hand up to her chin and thinks for a minute. “Okay,” she says after a while.

“Okay, you’ll do it?”

“Okay, I’ll think about it,” Edie replies.

She heads for the cave exit once more. It would be quite a long walk.

“No!” Lucy rushes to Edie, taking her hands.

Edie’s eyebrows raise. “I said I’d think about it. What’s the matter with you?”

“If we’re going to do this, we need to do it *now*.” Lucy grips Edie’s hand tightly.

“Well... I’m sorry, Lucy. I don’t know if I can do that for you. It’s a big decision.”

Lucy bites her lip.

“By the way, Edie. How do you feel about killing your husband today?” Edie lets out a fake laugh that unsettles me a bit.

I can see that, though the tears have stopped, new tears are forming in Lucy’s eyes.

“I can’t let you spend another minute in that house, Edie,” Lucy says. “At least not while he’s there.” Her voice is hoarse from crying. Something about that rasp is a little sexy to me.

Edie sighs. “You’re really not going to give me a choice in the matter, are you?”

“Not until you let me convince you why it’s a great idea.”

“So not until I stop saying ‘no?’”

Lucy laughs, sniffing. “You’re catching on.”

Edie thinks for a minute. “No, that wouldn’t work anyway.”

“And why not?”

“Because the first chance I get back to Mom and Dad, they’ll just set me up with another rich asshole.”

“And why would you want to go back to Mom and Dad?”

The back and forth between them is fascinating, though my head is getting a bit dizzy.

“Luce,” Edie says. “If my husband dies, I’ll have nothing.”

Realization of *something* crosses Edie’s eyes, but I’m not sure what.

“Edie, you’re missing the whole point,” Lucy says. “If your husband dies, nobody’s going to stop you from swooping in and taking everything.”

A wicked grin starts to form on Edie's face.

"What's going on?"

They turn back to me, unprepared in the moment to offer a summary.

"If you kill the husband, Edie can just come in and take everything."

I crack a laugh. They're not sure what about the situation is amusing.

"That's the whole point of killing a creature." I snort. "It's so that you get every part of the body."

Their shocked expressions tell me I've missed something vital.

"No," Lucy says. She briefly considers how to explain this to me.

"So we made furniture for our home," she says. "Do you remember that?" Now she's questioning my intelligence.

"Of course, I remember that. It was just a short while ago."

"Right. But if you died, somebody would need to take that furniture. And if we were married, that person would be me."

"Are you saying you want to be married?"

She shakes her head. "Stay focused," Lucy says.

"So what I'm hearing then is that this guy has really nice furniture."

A blank expression crosses Edie's face. Lucy just sighs.

"Furniture, yes," Edie says. "Among other things, like a nice house and a lot of money."

"Money?"

I think I've heard Lucy use this word before on several occasions, but I still have no idea what it means.

"Money is how you get stuff," Lucy says.

"Oh."

I'm trying to understand. "So, with this money you're talking about, I could have gotten you?"

I can see them exchange a sideways glance at each other.

"Sort of, but not quite," Lucy says. "It's more like... rather than building the couch, we could have used money to get somebody else to do it, or we could have bought one somebody else has already made."

I try to think of the deeper implications. At first, it seems remarkably limited, but the more I consider it, the more I can see why this 'money' might have some value to humans.

By the time I understand it, though, they've seemingly moved on to something else.

"But if I just suddenly have all that money, won't they start to suspect something? That I was behind it?"

"Not if you hide all of it and you only use what you need."

"Where would I simply stash all that money without somebody else taking it?"

"You could leave it in this cave," Lucy proposes. "We'd keep an eye on it. And I don't think anything could get past Naserin."

"And here's the other thing," Edie says. "You're doing all this for me, but what are you getting in return?"

"We don't need anything," Lucy says. "We're perfectly fine the way we are."

I could think of a few things we could use. Though, I realize, none of them had occurred to me before Lucy moved in.

Edie paces around the room, clearly lost in thought.

"What if, in exchange for killing my husband..." She looks utterly shocked at saying the words out loud now.

"What if I offered you some of my fortune, to get some of the things you 'don't need,'" she says.

Lucy objects. "But that's your money."

“There’s no way I’d need all of it. And besides, it would probably be more trouble than it’s worth, like you said.”

I can already feel myself starting to tire. Not only has the back and forth created an aggravating headache, I’m having to compel my body not to fall asleep.

The sun outside is already high in the sky. By all accounts, I should have been asleep hours ago. I woke up at dawn to fetch Edie, and the events since then have been exhausting.

“We’ll do it,” I say simply.

“But hang on,” Lucy says.

“No. No more hanging on.”

They both look incredulously at me. I realize that I might have to use some of the ‘human manners’ that Lucy taught me.

I sigh. “Thank you for stopping by, Edie,” I say. “But if Lucy wants me to kill this guy, I’m going to need to sleep first.”

Realization dawns on Lucy.

“Sorry, Naserin,” she says. “I’m sorry. I completely lost track of the time.”

“You are fine.”

On any other occasion, I might punish her for her lack of awareness. But I’m having trouble even seeing straight.

I can feel my body going cold and limp. In a fight, as I am now, I would be a liability.

They briefly settle on the remainder of their plans, finishing out any important details.

When everything has been sorted out, I meet Edie at the door.

“So we’ll come by tonight to take care of him,” I say. “Is that the gist of it?”

She nods.

“All I’d need you to do is lure him away from his slumber. I need you to bring him to me.”

“And how might I go about that?” Edie asks.

“I don’t know. Try to think of something creative. It’s up to you.” I shrug.

LUCY

“Are you ready for this?” I ask Naserin as we fly towards Edie’s manor.

“I’m fine, don’t worry. The sooner we finish this, the better.”

I chuckle. “Are you that in a hurry to get back to the cave?”

“That, too, but another reason is that maybe you’d be better after all of this.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your mood has changed since you reconciled with your sister, but there’s still something lingering in you.”

“I see. Maybe, hopefully. I just want to move on with our lives completely. This could be a start for both Edie and me.”

“I should hope so.”

I blink a couple of times, never having heard Naserin say the phrase ‘hope so.’ That was a difficult term to explain to him, and he eventually decided not to use it. I guess he picked up some things by being around me so much, just as I have from him.

Except roaming and hunting for animals.

Either way, it warms my heart that we’ve gotten so used to each other by now. I’m even starting to forget what it was like when he wasn’t part of my life. To think that my dreaded sacrifice would have me end up like this – happy and secure.

We get to the outside of the manor, and I still can't get over how luxurious it is. Who would've thought that something so ugly would happen behind these beautiful and intricate gates? When I think back on my jealousy of all of this, I feel stupid and embarrassed.

We hide behind some bushes, watching the front of the manor. A few lights are still on that I can see from outside. I'm assuming they aren't sleeping yet. I don't think I remember Edie saying what her husband's job is exactly.

"Naserin, can you sense movement from here?"

He squints his eyes while his antennas twitch, trying to concentrate on whoever's inside.

He shakes his head. "There are too many bodies inside. I can't pinpoint which one is your sister, either."

"Dang it. I hope he's not giving her a rough time right now."

I bite my thumb as I impatiently stare at all the windows, wondering where they're at right now. I keep trying to guess which is the room that horrid elf locks her up in. Despite being surrounded by riches, she's unable to enjoy them. He makes her pay too high of a price.

Naserin's left antenna twitches vigorously. We whip our heads towards the source of the sound. As the noise gets louder, we crouch behind the bushes, watching inside the courtyard.

Edie runs behind her husband, a towering man with slicked black hair and dark skin. Just from a distance, I can tell he's awful by the mere expression on his sharp face. The way he walks, as well, like he's ready to threaten someone with their life with sweet and refined words.

"Wait, please, h-husband!" my sister calls out for him.

She reaches for his arm, only to be shoved. Edie stumbles to the floor, and I nearly scream. He doesn't even say anything to her and keeps walking straight. I wonder what she told him after all.

“Get up. Didn’t you say he waits out here, you whore?” he barks at her.

I gawk at the scene in front of us, having no idea what excuse she said. Maybe that there’s a monster?

“H-he does but like I said... he stalked me in the town, and I didn’t know what to –”

He grabs a tuft of hair and pulls her towards the entrance. I’m fuming and ready to just lunge at him, despite my very small size. But then, Naserin tries to push me towards the forest.

“Wait, no, I’m staying,” I whisper.

“This is going to get messy, Lucy.”

“I don’t care, I want to be part of it.”

Relenting, he nods and just puts me behind him. We wait until the guy’s at the gate, and for a second, I’m nervous he is going to drag her into this. When he opens it, he just pushes her like he did the first time and comes outside the property.

He looks around with a stank face. “Whoever you are, you will regret being near something that’s not yours. Show yourself before I –”

Naserin doesn’t even let him finish his threat and grabs him by the throat. In a whirlwind, he has the dark elf in his grasp. He tries to free himself while trying not to panic at the sight of Naserin.

“What the fuck are you? Are you the one after my fucking wife?” he yells at Naserin, who tightens his grip on his neck.

I jump out from behind Naserin, feeling quite full of myself, but I don’t care. I slap the dark elf as hard as I can. Of course, my strength is nothing to him, but damn, does it feel good to hold power over him.

“Who the fuck are you?” he asks in a raspy voice.

“I’m Edie’s sister, you asshole. She told me everything you’ve done to her, you sick bastard,” I say as I slap him again.

He growls at me, but Naserin quickly shuts him up.

“What do you want?” he croaks.

“I want you to feel the fear you’ve given my sister,” I hiss. “To feel humiliated and worthless like you’ve done to her. How dare you use your position of power to abuse someone weaker than you.”

All he can do is roll his eyes as if what he’s done to her is nothing. I can’t wait to get that smug smile off his face.

I smirk. “But it’s fine now. Since you messed with my sister, you’ll be paying for it. I hope you enjoy the other side.”

He gives me an incredulous look before he’s pinned to the ground. Naserin uses his proboscis tongue to pierce his chest and start sucking the life out of him. The dark elf tries to use his powers which makes Naserin even more vicious. He pounds his head into the ground and grabs onto his rib cage and all I hear is cracking.

I notice Naserin taking his time with it, though, dragging out his death so he can suffer more. The dark elf bellows out obscenities and insults while trying to pry him off. I can tell that Naserin’s also taking hold of his internal organs, and the shrieking gets worse.

Instead of being horrified, I feel myself smiling and my eyes widening. A giggle even escapes me as Edie’s husband slowly turns into a corpse. I knew he was strong, but not to this extent. I heard dark elves are powerful creatures as well. For him to take one like this is... admirable to say the least.

My heart races the whole time, my entire body heats up, and my vagina pulsates. I want him. I want him now and to use that strength of his to dominate me over and over again.

With him by my side, nothing and no one can ever touch me I think as I marvel at the newly rotting corpse on the ground.

“Lucy?”

I jump out of my thoughts and turn towards Naserin.

“Yeah?”

“Are you alright?”

I chuckle softly. He wouldn't have cared about those things before. I hold his cheek and kiss where I can reach him.

“You did great,” I say.

A purr-like sound comes from him. Then he gestures for me to go inside the courtyard to look for Edie. Only, she's not where this fool left her. I was so distracted looking at Naserin that I didn't notice her slipping away.

“Edie? Edie!” I call out for her, worried that some servants will hear.

Then I see her come out from the front entrance carrying a whole bunch of stuff. The top half of her body is covered, and she carefully walks over to me.

I run towards my sister. “Are you okay? I wanted to gouge out his eyes when I saw him pushing you around.”

She laughs softly. “It's fine. Everything's better thanks to both of you!”

“What's all this in your hands?”

She pushes the bundle on me. “Half of his wealth is here along with some expensive heirlooms. I need to go back in and get the rest of it.”

“The rest of it?” I say, but she runs back inside before quickly coming out with an even bigger bundle.

“There's clothes in here, blankets, shoes, all the bathroom essentials to last a lifetime, my favorite jewelry, some books I think you'd like, and I forget what else, but everything is yours.”

“E-Edie, are you sure? All of this? It's... a lot,” I admit, my arms already getting tired from the weight.

She nods with teary eyes. “After everything, you deserve even more. Thank you for saving me from him,” she whimpers before hugging me tight.

I hug her back, crying, too. “This won't be the last time I see you, will it?”

“Of course not. I’ll be checking in on you and keeping in touch. Don’t forget to do the same.”

“I won’t.”

We hug and cry until we’ve had enough. We say our goodbyes for now, and I wait until Edie’s inside the manor before calling for Naserin. He picks up the gifts before taking me in his arms.

He takes flight, and we finally get to return home. For the first time in my life, I actually look forward to seeing Edie again. I hope her life can turn out as good as mine has.

For now, I have *other* things in mind.

“You know, Naserin, I didn’t know you could use your tongue that fiercely,” I say.

“Is that so?”

“Mm-hmm. I wonder if *other* parts of you work the same way.” I reach down to his pelvis, poking around and teasing him to grab it.

He growls. “Lucy... I’m flying right now. I thought you were sad.”

“Not if you’re with me,” I tease as I find the tip and grab it softly.

He grunts and flies faster than he ever has before. Killing bad guys pushes my buttons, it turns out.

NASERIN

She grips me in the wind, tugging on me even in the midst of my flight.

I've never done anything like this in the air before. Concerned for the safety of my passenger, I voice my protest.

“Lucy... I'm flying right now!”

But the ferocity in her eyes is unmistakable. She wants me, and I don't know if she's willing to wait.

She teases my glans, gently caressing me. She rubs over the contours of my shaft, gripping me tighter.

And my wings beat faster. I know that if I'm going to get her home safe, we're going to need to land before we do this.

“What's gotten into you?”

I speak over passing trees and houses, the civilians below still well within view.

I don't want them to see her like this. She's mine to treasure, not theirs. These dark elves had better watch their eyes.

Her fingers play with my foreskin, and I almost collide facefirst with a tree, something that would kill her at this speed.

Though I want to express my gratitude, I am torn, wanting both her safety and my pleasure. But clearly, in this instance, I can't have both.

“Why can’t you just *fuck* me like this,” she whines. “I’ve always wanted to have sex in the air.”

“‘Always’ is a strong word for somebody who was a virgin mere weeks ago,” I correct her. “And I’d rather not kill you here, so you might keep your hands to yourself for a minute until we land.”

Her hand doesn’t stop moving my skin up and down, still just as fascinated by my cock as the day we met. She is seemingly fixated on it, and as I fly with her in my grasp, she makes it difficult to steer myself, moving so erotically in my arms.

“You mean you’ve never fucked a woman in mid-air before?” she asks.

I give her a double take. “When have I ever flown anywhere with any other human girl? How would I ever have that chance?”

She coos.

“You mean I’d be your first? That’s so sweet!”

“Absolutely not.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not happening.”

I swerve past another set of spiky green trees, again nearly killing us.

“Where’s your sense of adventure?”

She squeezes my tip, and I start to lose control.

The world spins around me, and I’m almost dizzy from the movement. The ground is getting closer to my vision. And I pull back on my wings, bringing us back up before we collide with the jagged cliff face below us.

She cheers as we ascend.

I can’t hide my stern gaze. “You know, that could have killed you,” I snap.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You wouldn’t have let me die.”

There's almost no reasoning with her. She's drunk on her own playful, sadistic sense of lust.

Almost too quickly, I realize that we're not getting back to our cavern at this rate. I decide to find a clearing near a river and lower us downward. The entire time, she's unconcerned, only protesting that she'd rather fuck me airborne.

"I will agree to light hovering," I agree. "But that is it."

She nods in return, and before I even have a chance to act, she's down on her knees in front of me, licking my head.

There is nothing I'd rather be doing and no place I'd rather be than in the warm confines of her mouth. Her tongue's caress is smooth like silk or velvet, trying to melt all of my senses at once.

She looks up at me with that gaze, only it's not the innocent gaze I love. It's developed into something uncontrollable, craven and wanting.

"Having a good time?"

She flicks me with the tip of her tongue, bringing its wet surface repeatedly to my underside. The wet plop of my cock against her tongue competes with the rush of the raging river nearby.

I simply nod, my vocalizations reduced from protests to grunts. If this is how she's going to be, she can have her way with me whenever she wants.

I can feel myself soaring as I grip her head, fighting through sheer force of will to keep my pincers from engulfing her and bringing me down. I don't want to take control right now... She's gotten so good at it.

Still, as she takes me into her mouth, the sensations overwhelm me, and I can resist no longer.

My pincers grapple her hair, forcing her downward. But oddly, even though I know that she can barely fight me, she actually seems to revel in being dominated and used like an animal.

In fact, around her stretched and well-used jaw, I think I see a smile forming and a glint in her eye.

“You’re actually enjoying this, aren’t you?”

I know she can’t reply with my cock in her mouth, so I push her down even harder.

But I still encounter no resistance. She goes down just as smoothly around my great appendage.

In her overbearing arousal, has my lover simply abandoned her gag reflex?

I feel prideful as I stuff her mouth. No longer do I concern myself with whether dark elves or creatures of the woods can see her in a state of depravity. I *want* them to see that she’s mine... To understand that she holds no greater commitment to anything or anybody.

In my throes of realization, I bring her down one final time and begin to swell up. What she can’t contain within her cheeks simply spills out around the corners of her mouth, and I pet her with gratitude.

“You’re not done already, are you?”

Her question is inane. I pick her up like a plaything and lift her up, licking deep inside of her with my proboscis.

She groans. “I can’t get over... it’s just... like a cock,” she moans.

I turn her sideways and swirl inside of her, hitting the underside of her bulb as I push in, out, and upward.

The smell of her excitement is intoxicating, the electrical signals coursing through my antennae. I get off on the sensations of her spasming around me every time I collide with a nerve in her walls, and I try to alternate, finding every area I can to tease her with.

But she knows what I’m priming her for. I can feel it in her legs when she tenses up to avoid having another orgasm. She thinks she can save herself for when I fuck her and that she’ll run out of climaxes.

I need to teach her a lesson.

Rather than a targeted attack on every nerve inside of her, my proboscis begins a wild, relentless attack on her core, swaying inside of her like a savage beast, moving forward and backward with incredible speed.

All pretense of her fighting me is gone, as I ruin her with an ambush.

She screams. It's one of the most beautiful things I've ever heard in my life. The sound of her orgasm.

Her juices pulse over me, dripping downward onto the moist, riverside grass.

I set her down onto the dirt and let her think we might be done.

I want to hear her beg for me.

Standing over her, my member twitching with the spray of water, her helpless gaze meets mine.

"Please don't stop," she moans.

And already, her fingers swoop downward, readying herself for me or else just trying fruitlessly to burn off the sexual energy that courses through her.

I let her have her way but drag her back forward, across rocks, dirt, and weeds.

She takes the burn, no doubt startled when she finds nothing to rest her head on.

She tilts her head back to see the river mere feet below her, too lost in her own world to hear the rushing water around her ears.

"What are you doing?"

I laugh, chuckling as she gains awareness of the world around her.

"Here I thought there was no limit to your libido."

Her entrance thoroughly warmed and begging for me in spite of her reluctance, I kneel down on the ground before her

and wedge myself inside of her.

She cries out as I plunge into her smooth depths, bringing my waist forward with reckless abandon.

I don't care that I'm dragging her spine through the coarse texture of the ground beneath her with every forward nudge, or that if I'm not careful, her head could be pushed under the water, prey to the whims of the river creatures that terrorize the area.

And, I can feel in her growing compliance with every passing moment that she doesn't, either.

Before I grip her legs and pull them upward around my shoulders, my pincers push into her thighs, gripping them tightly as they bend to my will. I savor the look of pain she adopts, having not succumbed to the pleasure of my wing dust, as they pierce her flesh, clipping into her as a small trickle of blood forms around me.

She looks so pretty with my cock in her mouth, but nothing compares to the look she gives me when she knows I could easily end her life but choose not to... When she knows that I'm the only being capable of filling her.

I push her forward a little, pushing her head under the water, my hips driving forward and backward in a frenzy.

Even without breathing or speaking, I can hear her as, head submerged underwater, she begs me, her toes clenching together in both pleasure and dread.

Then my wings flap, and I begin to cover.

Without my wings wrapped around her back, she drapes downward the higher I lift, her body only bending around the intrusion deep within her.

She can't hide her glee, even through constant moans.

“Are we... flying?”

I don't bother to answer her. I feel myself building toward an eruption, ready to claim her once more with my seed.

I lose all sight of the ground below as, wings flapping wildly, my hips move on their own, doing whatever they can to propagate my species.

I bring her hips closer to my cock, careful not to break her tiny bones, and I spasm wildly, fluid pulsing out and building around her entrance.

We fall to the ground slowly, my cock still spearing her as my fluid pours gently outward.

LUCY

“**Y**ou are vibrating.” I give Naserin a sidelong glance, hoping he won’t pursue it, but I know he will. It’s unfair to expect him to pick up on human signals, but sometimes I wish he could take a hint.

“What’s wrong? You shake.” He takes my wrist and holds my arm up to look at it. “Your limbs are like dead leaves on trees.”

Gently extricating my wrist from his pincer-like talons, I nod in the direction of the town. “I haven’t heard anything from Edie.”

Naserin thinks for a moment. “Did you think to hear from Edie?”

I shake my head. “Not exactly.”

“So what does it mean, ‘haven’t heard from Edie?’” He cocks his head to one side and his antennae twitch.

“Nothing, it’s just that the silence worries me.” How does one explain intuition to a solitary being who has never felt it necessary to pick up on the mood of his surroundings?

Since being separated from other humans, I have learned how completely I relied on the signals from people around me. They were almost always negative, but I feel lost without them.

This afternoon, when I woke up, Edie wasn’t there. I hadn’t expected her to be there, but I felt her absence like a blanket that had been removed during a deep sleep. I was cold.

The stark afternoon light filtered into the cave and brought with it a chill winter wind.

Now, the bereft feeling has only grown. The longer I don't hear good news, the more I feel that bad news is a certainty. But I can't fathom how to explain my reasoning to Naserin. "How is silence a worry?" he asks, solidifying my predicament.

"It just is." He looks this way and that, probably contemplating how much of a comfort silence is because it means nothing attacks. "I haven't heard from Edie that things are good, so how do I know she's okay?"

Naserin lifts his shoulders in something resembling a shrug. I think he picked it up from me, and the thought makes me hide a smile. "She's rich and her husband is dead. What could be wrong?"

I hesitate. "What if the townspeople notice her husband is gone? What if they blame her and kill her? How would I know?"

"You wouldn't know," he answers, though he adjusts his wings as if dissatisfied. "What do you need to do?" he finally asks.

"I want to go to town. I need to see that Edie is okay."

Naserin shakes his head. "No. There's too much risk. If they see us at the wrong time, you could both be in danger."

Much as I hate to admit it, he's right. I can't go waltzing into town like nothing happened every time I'm worried about Edie. What if I see someone I know? I land on an idea. "What if I take some of the money she gave me and buy a few things?"

"What would that do?"

"Well, there are a few things I need, and people go to stores and shops to gossip. If I go to the shop and don't hear anything, they haven't found him yet. But if I go in and they're talking about it like Edie killed him, we'll know we have to get her out of there."

Naserin hesitates. I know he doesn't like the idea of letting me go into town so often, but there's no other way I'll be satisfied, and I think he's aware of that. "Alright. Try to make it fast."

I climb onto his back as before but with far more relish. I've begun to crave the wind on my face and in my hair, the strength of his muscles under my arms and legs, and the impossible softness of his wingbeats.

We get there before I've had my fill of flying, but I'm eager to find out any news I can about Edie. "I'll wait here for you on the edge of the forest," Naserin surprises me by saying. "Cry out if something happens."

I hope to the gods that nothing happens, imagining the carnage if something does. "I'll be back as soon as I can," I promise.

The comparative warmth and light of the town cheers me and sets me on edge somehow. No angry mob fills the streets, and I don't hear shouting in the direction of the manor, so I take those as good signs.

Still, I feel very much like an outsider here, and I wonder at the odd mix of nostalgia and derealization. Will there ever be a time when I feel truly at home somewhere? The image of Naserin and our cave comes to mind. Yes, I think there will be.

Flitting from shop to shop, I pick up a few necessities here and there. I don't want to draw too much attention to my sister's money, but there have been things I've craved since leaving the town, a couple of which I've never had.

I buy more soap and some new clothes, splurging on a pair of good shoes and a dripir-hair brush. Stopping at a fruit stand, I buy a hothouse peach. When I bite through the tender skin and the juice runs down my throat, I wonder what it would taste like smeared on Naserin's skin.

As I savor the fleshy fruit, I overhear some of the elf-wives talking by the butcher shop. All I can hear at first is, "Did you hear," and, "Devoid of blood," but I know they're talking

about Edie. I pretend to be interested in a set of cutlets in the window and approach, clucking over the price.

“No one knows why he was out in the woods at that time, but the magistrate is looking into it.” My heart skips a beat.

“Does he think it was murder?” asks her conversation partner, sounding more titillated than afraid.

“Of course not.” I take a deep breath. “I heard that nothing about the body suggested the involvement of an intelligent being, elfkind or... otherwise.” She looks down her nose at me, and it’s all I can do to keep from laughing in her face.

Little do they know that the *otherwise* standing before them is the mastermind behind the whole plot to divest their proudest elf mage of his lifeblood. I shudder in excitement at the thought of Naserin’s proboscis dipping into his arteries again and again.

The conversationalists must mistake the shudder for horror because they giggle like schoolgirls as they move away from me. I relax as I pick out the rest of the things I need. My next stop is at the tannery for a fur blanket. The autumn has already turned cold.

“Where did they find him?” the customer at the counter is asking as I enter. Walking straight for the racks of pelts, I rifle through the *dae*, *suru*, *iypin*, and *worg* skins. Wild pelts are warmer and nearer the counter at this time of year.

“Out in the forest. Word has it that a creature sent by the Holy Maws themselves is plaguing us out of discontent.”

“Oh, gods! What have we done?” I smirk into the furs, feeling heat radiate across my back and down my thighs. *Those hands touch me*, I long to tell them. “That poor Edie. What a beautiful human to be so unfortunate.”

My ears perk. She sounds almost sympathetic! I listen for the tanner’s reply. He shakes his head. “Wouldn’t go around that lady in a hurry. Everyone she loves gets eaten. Huh!”

He’s less sympathetic, but as the customer nods, pays him, and leaves, I consider that it might be to Edie’s advantage to be viewed as the town’s bad luck charm. This way, no one will

want to touch her or anything she has for fear they'll be attacked.

Selecting my worg skins, I pay at the counter and leave before he can chat me up. I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to contain my glee. *The plan worked!* I gather all my purchases and tie them in the pelts, rushing to the edge of the forest.

"Naserin!" I call. "Naserin!"

"Shh! Someone will hear you."

"Let them hear. You're fierce and terrifying and *mine!*" I shout. He pulls me behind a tree, looking out to make sure that no one hears me. "No one followed me," I assure him.

"How can you be sure? We should leave."

I can't imagine that he would care what a mess of townspeople thought if I weren't here. His protectiveness warms me, and I pull him toward me, savoring the feel of his body against mine.

"They won't come after us. They're all terrified that the gods sent a creature to decimate them for their iniquities." I laugh, giddy with the knowledge that such a ferocious rumor has taken root about my Naserin.

"And this makes you happy?" He seems unmoved. Surely he's accustomed to people living in fear of his power.

I nod, planting kisses up and down his chest and running my hands along his sides. Naserin wraps his wings around me, drawing me into him. I feel the pressure of him lengthening against me through his fur and almost lose myself.

"I'm glad you're happy," he breathes into my hair, and the warmth of his skin against mine ignites a fire in my belly.

"I am. For the first time in my life, I'm free. It doesn't matter who stands against us. The wrath of Naserin will stand against them all." I laugh, feeling grandiose and a little silly.

"I will waste a thousand worlds for you," he whispers against my neck, and sparks run down my spine. He's telling the truth, and he can deliver on his promises. Arching my back

to bring my breasts against him, I massage his lower back and bring him against me.

He pushes me roughly against a tree, and I gasp in pleasure. No one can imagine the pleasure of exciting the passion of a beast like this. If I have anything to say about it, no one else ever will.

NASERIN

We light upon the ground outside the cave gently and silently. Lucy's hands and knees always tighten against my shoulders and sides as we come in for a landing as if she experiences the same drop in her stomach as I do with sudden decreases in altitude.

It takes a much greater fall to produce the same effect in me since adulthood. I enjoy feeling her thrill against me, to see the new experience through her tiny eyes.

Bending to let her down, I help her untie her purchases from where she has secured them on my abdomen and legs. It's always a challenge to pack extra objects with the proper distribution to ensure a smooth flight. Lucy has taken the time to learn how to weigh things in her hands and tie them down – not too tight – with thongs she made from skins I hunted.

“Are you well?” I ask. I've made a habit of checking every time we land. I don't know what I expect to do if she answers in the negative, but I have a niggling suspicion that humans were not made for frequent flights.

“Yes,” she answers, a smile tugging the corners of her mouth. I used to find the human smile garish and unpleasant, a ghastly baring of the bone teeth they use to crush their unappealing food. I have grown accustomed to it, however, and find it almost comforting. I have noticed that Lucy doesn't smile unless she feels safe and whole.

“What did you obtain? It all felt heavier than last time.” Lucy recites the things she bought as I help her carry them all

into the cave. Most of it sounds foreign and unnecessary to me.

“Furs, dresses, shoes, a hairbrush...” She removes them from the fur bundles and lays them out for me to see. I stop her occasionally to ask questions.

“Why do you need more clothing?”

Lucy giggles. “I have to stay warm in the winter!”

“Why can’t you stay warm in the winter by yourself?” This question seems to mystify her, so I elaborate. “Your hair doesn’t get thicker?”

At this, she narrows her eyes before bursting out laughing. “No! Does yours?”

“Of course. Why is that funny?”

“I never thought of it before. How funny a human would look with a fur coat!” I fail to see the humor in it, but Lucy laughs so hard her face changes colors, and I have to check to make sure she’s still breathing.

Other things, though, I comprehend. I pick up the hairbrush made from dripirs’ hair and run my pincers along the bristles. It makes a satisfying *tss, tss, tss*, like shuffling through dead leaves. “Show me how to brush your hair.” Lucy looks startled. “Is that bad?”

“No,” she answers, coming to sit next to me. Placing the brush at the correct angle in my claws, she loosens her hair from the network of thongs holding it in place. It ripples down around her shoulders and sides in nutty cascades. It’s getting longer.

Gently, Lucy shows me how to work the tangles out from her strands starting at the bottom. Then she guides the brush in long strokes from top to bottom. When she finishes the section, she removes her hand from mine. “See? Like this. Now you try.”

I let her long tresses fall softly through my pincers, wrapping a lock around one claw and pulling tight. She gasps,

and I let go. “That hurts,” she says, her back to me. “Try not to pull.”

“Your hair is getting stronger,” I remark as I sink the bristles into the sea of brown.

“Hmm? What do you mean?” She picks up a lock of hair the way I had and twists it around her fingers, frowning.

“You are not satisfied?”

Lucy shrugs. “You’re doing fine. I’ve just never liked my hair.”

“Why?” I ask. “Your hair is beautiful.”

“No, it’s not,” she insists. “It’s dull and mucky and thin.” She tosses the section she was holding over her shoulder and stiffens her back. I feel her pulling away from me, and I don’t know how to bring her back. “Besides, it’s brown. I wish it were blonde, or black, or even red, but brown is boring. You should see my sister Edie’s hair. It’s gorgeous.”

I scoot closer to her on the cave floor, bending next to her ear to murmur the way she likes. “I have seen your sister’s hair, Lucy. I like yours better.” Little bumps appear on the skin behind her ear as a shiver travels down her neck and across her shoulders.

Lucy turns her head toward me until her nose brushes my face, her eyes wide. “Really?” I nod, and she smiles. She turns her back to me again, but this time, she melts into me. I feel my senses coming to full attention as I smell her skin.

Remembering my task, I continue working the tangles out of the earthy river before me. It’s tedious at first. Flying seems to breed knots and dust. But the more I work, the more I lose myself in the lustrous color, the way the light shifts across each strand, and the way they move, now separating, now coming together.

I talk while I work. “Your hair is the brown of the river in the autumn when it absorbs the life from the leaves that fall into it. It feels the way I wish the water felt, soft and warm.” She smiles to herself, but I don’t ask why.

“It shimmers and glints like the pools along the banks. I sit and watch for hours when the afternoon light is just right, sparkling just for me.” Lucy leans her head back against my shoulder and places a hand on my knee, running her fingers back toward my groin. She is impeding my work, but I don’t care.

“I like it when you brush my hair,” Lucy whispers, stroking my thigh with her fingertips. I harden against her, and she moans. I tickle the back of her neck, and she giggles.

“You seem to be feeling better.”

She stops stroking me and stills, her hand coming to rest chastely on my knee. “I am.” Her brows knit as a thought passes across her face and she sits up. “Why do you do these things for me?”

“What things?”

Turning to face me, she moves away and I feel the cold distance. “Why do you hunt food for me and take me places and brush my hair and...”

I suddenly know why she hesitates, and I fill in the words for her. “Kill the elf-mage?” She nods. “Does it upset you that I do these things?”

Scowling, she looks at the wall. “I guess what I’m asking is, ‘Why me?’ Everyone in town said you were a monster.” The words don’t hurt me. To them, I understand that I would seem like a monster.

Lucy looks me in the eye. “We used to give you a girl every year. You killed them. Why not me?”

“You’re different.” She should know this, but it seems to come as a surprise to her.

“How?” I don’t know how to answer her, but she is staring at me, and I don’t think she will be happy if I don’t answer her.

“You feel different than they did.”

She rolls her eyes. I have learned that is not a good sign. “Okay, but *how*?”

I don't know what she wants me to say. My frustration mounts. "I don't understand what you want. Why are you asking me this?"

Lucy takes a deep breath and holds it as she rubs her hands on either side of her face. Finally, she lets her breath out in a long sigh. "Okay. Let's start with this. Why didn't you kill me?"

My muscles relax a little. I remember this with perfect clarity. "You smelled different. More satisfying. I wanted to make it last."

"That's it? But why didn't you kill me later?" She seems angry and confused.

"I don't *know!* You were different! Maybe it was a weakness that I wanted somebody else in my cave, but I don't remember ever wanting that before you." Lucy's face opens up. Maybe this is what she meant.

"I was going to kill you. If it were anyone else, I would have. But you satisfy me in a way that no other beast or human ever could. The longer you stayed, the more I knew I could never let you leave. I want you to be happy, and I want to protect you from harm. I would do anything for you."

She stares at me silently for a moment before a single tear tracks its way down her face. "Did I say something wrong? Why are you unhappy?" Humans are so complicated.

"No, no," she insists, wiping the tears from her face. "Nobody has ever wanted me before." Her face flushes, and she smiles. "That's stupid, isn't it?"

Shaking my head, I look at her steadily. "No. No one has ever wanted me before, either. But I want you. I never want you to leave. When you're around, I have a reason to be more than I was. More than a monster."

Tears are falling from her eyes in greater numbers now. "Are you sad?" I ask.

Lucy dries them on her tunic and smiles. "No. People cry from more than just sadness. I'm very happy. Happy here with you." Warmth fills my chest and abdomen. *She's happy.*

Her demeanor changes. On her hands and knees, she crawls toward me on the cave floor, weaving back and forth like a likar. I've never seen her move this way, but I enjoy it. It displays her lithe, supple muscles and draws my attention to her tenderest flesh.

By the time she reaches me, I can sense her readiness through the heat radiating from her skin. She rights herself onto her knees with her hands on my shoulders, then surprises me by ripping her tunic at the collar, exposing her delicate breasts.

Enfolding her in my wings, I let her arch against me. She can do whatever she wants.

LUCY

On my knees, I gaze up into his gorgeous red eyes, once so alien to me but now so familiar. I can feel the strain against my fingers as I rip open my tunic, the moisture of the air coating my chest.

I don't care that I've ripped through my new favorite shirt. The moment is so worth it, my heart still pulsing hurriedly with love.

He says nothing as I reach for his groin, tears still welling down my cheek.

“You're sure you're not upset?”

My behavior is still so strange to him. It's hard to believe that in his eyes, I've been just as unfamiliar to him as he's been in mine.

I shake my head, gripping what I can of him and stroking the skin in unison.

I grip the smallest portion of the base, and it falls in my hand, dangling downward from my wrist. I run my arm along its length, and I can feel the moisture already beginning to collect at its tip.

“I just want to taste you,” I moan. His gaze is distant and yielding, fixated not on the cavern wall but on the deep collection of sensations and emotions that run through him.

Slowly, I lower my head, taking him in my mouth.

He tastes sweet to my senses this time, strangely. My curiosity piqued, I wonder what changed to give him such a delicious quality. Last time, he was far more bitter to my taste.

I want to savor him on my tongue.

My eyes open with dread toward the sharp pincers often used to hold me in place. They sit menacingly, pinched between folds of skin and hair on his waist, twitching as though ready to strike.

I'm relieved when they don't grapple me, and I'm allowed to slowly lower, then dip, then bob myself. His length has become easier and easier to fit. I still remember when the sight of it used to send terror through my soul. I can still see myself, so new to this world, taking him inside my body for the first time, afraid of dying.

My own arousal gives me pause. I can feel heat radiating through me, rushing across my cheeks and down to my core. From head to toe, he has claimed me. I am nobody's but his.

And I try to remind him of that.

He moans with satisfaction.

But still, as I look up at his wing, I note the small trickle of dust that falls upon me and realize that my urges have only been heightened from it.

That's when a wicked idea forms in me.

My lips wrapped tightly around him, I know exactly how to distract him.

I clutch his shaft, running my other hand toward his pendulous balls. Their leathery texture is still fascinating to me, I bring my finger over their every vein and wrinkle, taking in the ridges and details as though trying to form a memory but grabbing and kneading them just as eagerly.

I can tell from how his hips have started to move against me that I'm doing something right. I stare up at him, looking for an opportunity as I move back and devour him again, swirling my tongue around his edges and bumps.

I love his dust, and the feeling it gives me. I just want to become enveloped in it... to lose all concern as it overrides my fears and doubts, bringing me to the apex.

Just a little won't do it. I want it all.

I gorge on his hood, then remove him from my mouth briefly, nibbling and kissing all along his length.

And then I reach under him, feeling the tuft of skin under his orbs but rubbing it.

I bring my finger upward, and I dig at his center.

He is overwhelmed, taken by surprise. From his peak, he spews forth, erupting beautifully.

I take advantage of the moment, and with his eyes still closed, I stand up.

On my feet, I reach up and run my fingers over his wings, collecting as much powder as I can in a brief moment and pouring it over me. It falls slowly to the ground, but as it drifts downward, I attempt to inhale it.

The rush is immediate.

He looks up at me in confusion.

“What are you –?”

“Shut up and fuck me!”

I lay my entrance at his cock, kneeling on my knees, and I bring myself backward.

My nerves are screaming at me. It's so much better than before.

I split myself open on his cock, and I think I can see the colors of my penetration. I ride back on him, and I feel connected to his thoughts.

He is briefly concerned, but the more vigorously I bring myself back on him, the less he's able to think.

My screams are penetrating the cavern walls, shaking the rocks around me. They're probably reverberating into the forest.

I can feel every ridge, every detail of his cock. It all clutches around me as I grip it with my core, feeling myself convulse and spasm against it.

My tender breasts are swaying.

At first, it's just me fucking him, spearing myself on him with all of my energy. I've never wanted anything more in my life than to be fucked by him.

The caverns are crying out and playing my screams back for me, and they sound unrecognizable to me. My voice isn't so needy, or so shameless.

But I've gotten greedy. I want to devour him with everything in me.

I want to worship him with my body, show him every corner and crevice of myself, and even let him explore and find things I never knew.

The sweat pours down my face, intermingled with dried tears that activate on my skin. I feel myself shake, and I don't feel self-conscious. I only feel a deep yearning I've never known I felt, or at least not this much.

I feel like I've found my purpose. His tool reshapes and opens me beyond my capabilities, stretching me in ways I never knew I needed to be stretched.

His grunts are the background noise of my constant bucking. They've gotten more erratic and loud with time, but his are not nearly as loud as mine.

I can feel him reaching the summit, and we climb together, bouncing in harmony against everything that would challenge us and our union.

He grips my hands, and I feel him finally clamp down, piercing me with his jagged waist as he fills me with his seed.

I ponder if he's able to breed me, right here. I don't think anything in Protheke would make me happier.

The shadows are crawling away from me, and I need more of him. He envelopes me with his wings, ready to sleep for the

night, but I take the leathery feel and rub it together in my hands, coating my face and body with it as I breathe it in.

“What are you doing?”

He looks at me, perplexed, as I cover myself with his dust.

“Oh, no, sir,” I tell him. “You’re not done yet.”

He shakes his head in disbelief, but I can imagine that under his cold exterior, he must be smiling.

Thankfully, his waist claws don’t pose a challenge. I pull backward off of him, sitting once more at his waist.

I look up at his magnificent, pulsing cock. I can feel its shadow upon me as I rub the powder from my cheek and bring it back up to my nostrils.

“Really make it hurt,” I say, looking up at him with wild determination.

I think I hear him chuckle.

I stick out my tongue, and he beats me with his member. At first, I feel him trying to treat me delicately, but I urge him on, reminding him that I can take everything he has for me.

He slaps me more aggressively.

I bring my hand to his groin, and sitting under him, I let myself guide his tissue as it falls downward over my cheek, doubtlessly leaving bruises.

But every ounce of pain is more pleasure than I’ve ever experienced. I could never get enough of him as long as I lived.

It suddenly occurs to me, and I haven’t asked.

I wonder if any of his prior girls have ever fucked themselves to death on him.

And if they did, I wonder if he felt bad about it.

Violently and in one swift motion, I bring my lips around him, going deeper than I’ve ever gone. Not expecting the surprise, his pincers grip me immediately.

My jaw contorts around him as the pincers bring me up and down on him.

It doesn't ache. Every stretched muscle is another burst of dopamine for me to savor.

This could be dangerous, you know.

That boring part of my brain that's always guiding me to be mediocre speaks up. I want to cram it deep down inside me.

My own spit coats my cheeks, and suddenly, I'm a mess of saliva, tears, and sweat.

My heart is beating faster than I can ever recall.

He offers me his wing, and I grip it tightly while his body pushes me forward and backward on its own. What's manipulating me is the primal call for his body to breed.

It doesn't see that I'm engulfing him with my mouth.

All that it sees is that I've offered a warm hole to fuck. It wants to exploit that for as long as it can, because it knows that no other call in nature is more vital.

He fills my mouth with spunk, pushing me down, and I can only swallow. The sensation as his cock stuffs my throat well beyond its capacity is orgasmic.

Several times that night, he tries to stop me. But I've become possessed by him.

So, in every conceivable position, I stuff myself with him, ingratiated by the raw, animalistic feelings that course through me.

Through his own admissions, he's earned me forever. Deep down, I know he always did. If I ever thought any differently, I was in denial.

The moon rises, and I am full of his seed. My mind reels still with a desire, but that small, boring part of my mind has gotten louder.

It urges me to eat, drink, and sleep. And as much as it pains me to admit, I can no longer refute it.

There can always be more for tomorrow.

NASERIN

“Do you want to go see the cottage today?” I catch Lucy as she comes into the cave with a garland of flowers she made.

Her head snaps up. I’ve snagged her attention from her flowers. The way she stands now, with the pale light of a spring evening illuminating her figure and the light blues and pinks of the flowers against the creamy skin of her hands, I wish I could hold this moment forever.

I take in every detail of her. She wears a jade green tunic that brushes her feet, and her hair is coiled up on her head in a wreath, soft tendrils escaping to brush her face. Her eyes glow with a deep green hue today.

“Yes, please,” she answers, shattering the picture. No matter. I will take a living, breathing Lucy over a cold mosaic any day. “We’ve been cooped up in this musty cave all winter.”

She returns her attention to the flowers, and I smirk, moving in to tease her. “Are you complaining?” Most of the time we’ve spent indoors has involved her naked body writhing underneath me in pleasure.

A mischievous grin lights up Lucy’s mouth, and I picture her firm, perfect breasts dipping in and out of the fur blanket as I take her from behind. The thought makes me ache. I give her bottom a playful smack, and she giggles.

“Finish what you’re doing, and we’ll go.” I have learned that Lucy does not like to be interrupted in the middle of a

task. The bitter winter has broken before the insistent warmth of spring, and Lucy has been twirling around the cave singing and throwing flowers everywhere for days.

I would have thought that the greenery inside my cave would be nothing but a bother, but if it makes her happy, she can “decorate,” as she calls it. She hangs her current garland on one of the last bare spots on the wall. “I’m done! Can we go now?”

Chuckling to myself, I leave the cave with her and help her onto my back. Once in the air, I angle myself toward Edie’s property nearer to the town.

Lucy’s sister sent us word some weeks ago that she was building a cottage for our use on the edge of her property. I was confused as to the meaning of the news until I saw Lucy’s face light up. She wanted to travel there immediately and see the progress, but we had to wait until work stopped for the night.

Today, however, marks a human festival, and the workers won’t be near the cottage so we can go a little early. We could walk the few miles to the heavily forested area at the back of Edie’s property, but Lucy prefers to fly.

Landing next to the cottage, I’m surprised to see the progress since only yesterday. The walls are taller than even me. Lucy has noticed, too. “Look! She’s making it tall for you!” she breathes.

I feel an odd sense of kinship with Lucy’s sister. It isn’t anything like what Lucy does to me, but I see similarities between them in the way they think about details. I’m glad I didn’t suck the life out of her when Lucy wanted me to, but it’s still mostly for Lucy’s sake.

“Why are there holes in the walls?” I ask. I have seen gaps in human architecture from a distance, but I’ve never understood why they would want to weaken their structures like that.

“They’re windows,” Lucy corrects. “They let light and air in.” I find the idea distasteful, and it must show in my

demeanor. “Don’t worry. We’ll cover them with curtains during the day. But I think you’ll like being able to see outside without walking out.”

I’m dubious, but I’ll give it a try. I walk around the angles of the cottage asking similar questions. It seems humans require their homes to meet many of their needs. Nothing about it looks natural except the colors of the brick.

On the other hand, the cave can get damp, dirty, and drafty. Lucy says a house like this is built to ward off such evils. It may look strange, but she points out many useful qualities. “What is this back entrance that goes under the house but not inside it?”

“That’s a cellar,” Lucy says. “It’s a lot like the cave, but we store extra food there.” She explains how humans preserve food for use during the winter. “That way, you won’t have to hunt for me all the time.”

She talks about shelves, hooks, basins, and tables, all things I didn’t know we needed. But then, she adds that there will be space for me to hang from the rafters and a special door in the roof for me to fly straight out of the house into the night.

Lucy leads me inside the space that she says will be the inside. “See how roomy it’ll be? And it doesn’t curve down on the edges, so you can walk right up to the walls. And we can even add bookshelves.”

I’ve heard her talk about books before, but they sound odd to me. She has promised to teach me to read when she gets her first book to see if I like it.

Lucy turns in a circle, leaning her head back and closing her eyes with a big smile on her face. “We’re going to be so happy here!”

I push her against the wall gently and flatten her body against it with mine. “Is this what you meant by walking right up to the walls?”

She nods and nips at my neck, sending sparks of electricity down my belly. I nuzzle her ears and caress her sides, loving

the feeling of her against me as she slides one foot up the back of my leg and settles me between her hips.

Rocking back and forth, she teases me out and slips her hand between us, brushing her fingers down my full length. I groan, and she bites her lip.

“Anybody in there?” We separate as Edie comes around the wall. I stand behind Lucy so her sister can’t see what she has interrupted. When she sees us, a smile breaks out on her face and she holds up a bottle.

“I thought you might be here. Is now a good time? The workers say they only have a couple of weeks left, and I thought you might want to celebrate the good news!”

By now, I’ve contained myself and moved away from Lucy. “What is that?” I point to the basket Edie has on her arm.

“I’m glad you asked!” She removes two goblets from the basket, passing them to Lucy before digging out a covered plate. “I have something I’d like you to try.”

Uncovering the dish, I see three orb-like confections. “Pastries?” Lucy asks. Edie nods with a wink in my direction.

Lucy and I share a confused glance. I don’t remember informing Edie of my dietary needs, but I admit that I didn’t think I would have to. Lucy’s look says the same. She thought her sister would gather that I don’t eat normal food just by looking at me.

“Edie,” Lucy begins politely. “Thank you so much, but Naserin can’t eat those.”

Instead of looking disappointed or flustered, Edie giggles. I try to catch Lucy’s eye again, but her face is turning red. Is Edie being obtuse intentionally to embarrass her sister? Surely she wouldn’t go to all this trouble only to overlook something so obvious.

“These aren’t your average pastries, Lucy. These two,” she says, quickly sniffing two of the confections, “Are ours, and this one...” She sniffs the last with a slight grimace as she picks it up gently and hands it to me. “... is Naserin’s!”

Taking the confection in my pincers, I pierce it with a claw. Instantly, my senses are on high alert. My proboscis unfurls of its own volition, sampling the deep red fluid welling up from the center of the ball of dough.

I've never tasted anything like this. A pleasant ache fills my mandibles, followed by a burst of a foreign flavor so strong that I can only take small sips. *What is this?*

Edie notices my wide-eyed amazement and laughs. "What do you think?"

"It's delicious! What is this?"

Edie pours wine into the goblets and hands one to Lucy. "Oh, just a little something I whipped up using one of my late husband's awful exotic basement pets." A wicked grin overtakes her face.

"Edie! I've never known you to kill an animal before!" Lucy is surprised with her sister, but I'm still absorbed in whatever this is.

"Oh, hush, it was a huge, horrid whatever-he-called-it and it would have killed me quite happily if I hadn't taken care of it before it got any ideas. Anyway, there's more where that came from." My attention snaps to her as I suck the juice from my orb.

"A toast to the two of you!" Edie declares, holding up her goblet. Lucy clinks her goblet against Edie's and, for lack of a goblet, I hold up my dough ball and touch their glasses. This elicits mirthful looks from the women.

After taking sips and bites from our respective treats, Edie and Lucy discuss what the cottage is missing and what they might do with different areas of it once it's finished. They make a merry pair, and it's good to see that Lucy has someone she can become close to.

When the merriment is over, Edie packs her basket and leaves with the promise that she'll bring more of my special treat occasionally. "I like her," I tell Lucy when she's gone.

Lucy chuckles. "Increasingly, I do, too." She smiles without a trace of jealousy, then gets a naughty glint in her

eye. “What do you say we go home and finish what we started?”

I’m ready for takeoff before she finishes her sentence.

LUCY

When the cottage is finished, I relish the task of showing Naserin around. All of the things I've been telling him about the place we'll live are coming to life before his eyes.

He asks such good questions about the way humans do things, and coming up with answers helps me decide what I need to keep about human culture and what I can let go of for him.

“Why do you need so many tools in the kitchen?” he asked me one night. This led to a discussion in which I realized that the hours it took to prepare meals each day – meals that only I would be able to eat – would be better spent doing activities we enjoyed together.

Instead, we set up a barter system in which Edie would cook meals for me and we would supply her with butchered meat. Naserin surprised me with his deep interest in the butchering process.

Other problems were not so easily solved. “I can't move around if we put your bed here,” he insists.

“I want to sleep near your perch.” On this, I won't give an inch. His wings get in the way terribly in the soft give of a human bed, but that doesn't mean I can't sleep near him. “My bed is so small! Why can't it go here?”

After much fussing and rearranging, we finally get it set in a way he'll be happy with. It's surprising how many details we

come across that have to be hashed out. We end each day exhausted.

Something I establish early on, though, is that no matter the weather or our moods, we build a fire behind the house toward dawn and sit with each other. Domestic and boring as it sounds, it helps us to remember each other.

“Edie dropped off another delivery,” he says one evening as he brings a heavy box through the door like it’s nothing. He sets it down before he leaves to hunt. Taking off through the door built into the roof, he disappears into the night.

I love it when he does that. I was concerned that trying to fit Naserin in a human home would be like fitting a square peg into a round hole. But this house is such a melding of the two of us that there is no more fear of not fitting together.

Edie comes over most evenings when our schedules cross so that we can talk or she can drop something off. She set it up so that our deliveries come to her house. If it’s too heavy or unwieldy for her, she leaves a message, and Naserin goes to get it when no one is around.

She keeps only a few house staff these days, as well as a groundskeeper or two who never venture out of the gardens. She calls it keeping up appearances, but I think she’s lonely. I’m concerned for her that she doesn’t get enough contact with the outside world.

Pulling books out of the box, I smile to myself. It’s strange, being concerned for my sister. There was a time when I wouldn’t have given her a second thought, but I suppose we’ve both learned what it means to know family is all you have.

There’s a knock at the door with Edie’s special touch. When I answer, she has her basket on her arm. “May I come in?” she asks.

I cheerfully accept the company. Naserin’s hunts often take several hours because he waits for the right animal to come by. She looks at the open door in the roof, smiles, and shakes her head. “You found quite the guy, didn’t you?”

“I did!” I agree, though the wistfulness in her tone isn’t lost on me. “Have you thought about making another match yourself?”

She moves to the bookshelf, helping me unpack and stack books. “No. My dream in life was to be independent. I thought I would get that being married to a wealthy elf, but he kept me more dependent than ever. I’m not going to try that again.”

“There might be someone out there who wouldn’t be as controlling as him, though. We could look for someone,” I offer.

Edie shakes her head emphatically. “No.” Looking through the roof again, she sighs. “I’m not jealous of anything you have, Lucy. I never have been. I only wish I had your ability to enjoy it.”

And we let the matter drop. From then on, we seek only to understand each other, coexisting in a way we didn’t have the opportunity to do when we were children. Naserin returns shortly after she leaves.

That dawn around the fire, I reflect on all the things in my life that have come out for the best and how it couldn’t possibly get better. “What are you thinking about so seriously?” Naserin asks.

I smile. “I’m thinking about how strange it is to be grateful that my own townspeople tied me up as a human sacrifice for a monstrous beast.”

He laughs. One of the best parts of being around each other so much is that he has picked up on my sense of humor. Tracing his claws across the skin of my back in a way that he knows drives me crazy, I try to ignore the electricity coursing through my veins. Delaying the gratification is sweet torture.

“Are you grateful?” he asks.

“I am!” I lean into his wings. “Edie left a present when she was here earlier,” I say, and his wings flutter slightly.

Naserin doesn’t show emotion the way humans do, but just as he’s been able to pick up on my humor, I’ve been able to

pick up on his signals. He doesn't ever contort his face to make expressions, but his body language is very eloquent.

His trembling wings are a sign of his excitement. I've learned that if anyone enjoys gifts more than I do, it's Naserin. I grin. "I haven't opened it yet. Do you want to go see it?"

He's up and in the main room before I can even get the words out. When he sees the box, he looks between me and it repeatedly. "Go ahead and open it!" I know that he wants to. He rips open the wrapping paper and tears the top off of the box with his pincers.

"Yes!" he shouts as he pulls out jellied confections made of the blood of his favorite animal. Edie has told him the animal was a sort of cross between a dripir and a yillese, but neither of us can envision such a creature.

"I thought there might be some of that in there." I don't know how she stomachs it, but it warms me to see how hard she's trying to make Naserin feel that he's part of our family. Maybe she's trying to be a part of *my* family, and that thought is even more touching.

"And look!" Naserin pulls her gift to me out of the box in his excitement.

"What is it?" I'm not usually the one confused by human behavior and customs, so Naserin is taken aback.

"You don't know, either?" he asks in dismay. It looks like a tangle of string and broken glass. I reach to take it from him, and he hands it over hesitantly. "Don't cut yourself."

I take it gingerly, then see a hook at the top of the ball. Putting my finger through it and letting the ball go, it unfurls into a beautiful array of colored glass that catches the light. I shake it, and it tinkles beautifully. "It's a windchime!"

"What's that?"

"You hang it outside, and the wind catches it and makes it sing."

Naserin cocks his head to the side. "How does glass sing?" I laugh and shake it for him. "But what does it *do*?"

He doesn't understand, but I don't care. The gift is for me, and it's beautiful. That usually satisfies him.

The next night, we walk around the grounds of the cottage planning a garden. I want to plant some summer vegetables to give to Edie along with the meat, and there are some herbs that I can put on our fire for Naserin to enjoy.

We spend the night setting up the beds with some of the logs Naserin has split for our fire. I explain to him that the logs make good barriers for the soil and that, as they decompose, they can be mulched into the bed and replaced.

"Whatever makes you happy," he says, but I can tell that he enjoys the simplicity and exercise of the labor. I try to explain how it makes a difference to put herbs on fire, but that is something he will just have to experience for himself.

Night by night, we make our home a place to envy. There is more laughter and love in our little cottage in the forest than in every village within fifty miles all rolled into one. I come up behind Naserin one evening and jump on his back, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and hugging him tight.

"I love you," I whisper into his ear.

"What does that mean?" he asks.

I think for a moment. "Do you remember the night you said that you would do anything for me, that you wanted me to be happy and protect me, and that you never wanted me to leave?"

"I do."

"Did you have a warm feeling spread through your chest and abdomen when you said it?" I asked.

"Yes," he says, his antennae twitching.

"That's love."

"The words, or the feeling?"

"Both, and more. The actions that led to the words and feeling were love, telling me about them was loving, it's all love."

I expect him to be very confused, but he doesn't seem to be. Instead, he looks at me steadily. "Then I love you, too."

"I've never been happier in my life."

I swear I see a smile on his face when he answers. "Neither have I."

NASERIN

“**Y**ou’ve gotten so good at cooking, Edie.”

Lucy takes another bite of her meal, chasing the golden-crusted dripir with bread.

This house has always felt empty to me. There are few places where a creature like me feels small, but as I glimpse back at the tall ceilings, suits of armor, and large wooden banisters that decorate this home, I can only feel insignificant by comparison. To think that this was built for a human is quite unbelievable.

I know how much Edie hated her husband. So it’s still somewhat odd to me that the decorations have not been changed out completely. There are still photos of him with his family in the main entryway, though Edie is conspicuously absent from all of them.

I take a bite of my meal. The flavors are overwhelming to me.

I would give anything for a bit more simplicity right now.

“Oh, nonsense,” Edie says, cutting somanas in quick succession for the stew. “All I did was throw a few things into the pot. Recipe’s not difficult at all.”

Lucy laughs.

“You’re far too humble, Edie.”

“Well...”

Edie takes the somanas off the cutting board and gently pushes them into another pot.

“From everything you’ve said and what happened, it was about time.”

The room becomes a little more tense. I worry about the potential for an argument.

“One of these days when I come over, you should let me cook for you,” Lucy says.

Edie chuckles.

“I’m serious, Edie! You already do so much for us, cooking for us at home. It’s silly you think you have to cook for us here, too.”

Edie stirs the pot, mixing up the ingredients before stoking the fire under the oven and placing the pot down upon it.

“I cook for you because I enjoy it,” Edie says. “If you’re worried about inconveniencing me, you don’t need to. I volunteered to do this. We made a system where I cook for you. It’s all fine.”

Lucy cuts into her dripir and takes another bite, moving it around in her mouth and savoring it.

The smell of the pot over the flame is actually quite enticing, and I can feel my appetite growing.

“Regardless, Edie,” she says. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome!”

I sigh in relief.

I’m still used to these two bickering, but it seems they’ve learned to resolve their differences.

The stew is delicious, and by the end of the meal, I’m only craving one thing.

We say our goodbyes. I get the sense that Lucy lingers a bit, as though reluctant to leave, but the night is still young.

“Do you think she’s lonely?”

I turn to Lucy. The sound of crisp grass permeates the evening air as we trample through it.

“Who, Edie?”

“Yeah.”

“Why would she be lonely? We see her everyday.”

“Maybe you’re right. I just can’t help thinking she was sad to see us go.”

I say nothing.

It’s been quite a transition, bringing Edie into both of our lives. But I know that Lucy is all the happier for it. She’s much easier to get along with and is patient with me.

So I suppose it was worth it anyway.

“All I know,” I say, “is that you’d better start running if you want to live.”

She looks up at me, wide-eyed.

She giggles, and she starts to dash through the trees.

I give her a little head start. But after a few moments, I take to the skies, and begin to give chase.

There’s no point in her running, but I like to let her think she has a chance. My antennae have already pinpointed her exact hiding location, but I want her anticipation to build.

I remember my time as an apex predator well and still feel nostalgic for it. Before I met Lucy, this was all I had – flying through the trees, looking for my next prey. I survived off the skin of my back, the question of life or death weighed by the quality of my hunts.

And every year, I had to fight to stave off the hunger, waiting for a new offering from the village.

But no more.

I swoop down from out of the trees where she’s nestled, hiding just beneath a large boulder angled upward and sticking out of the ground.

I am unbearably rigid.

She squeals with delight as I tackle her to the ground, then firmly plant myself in her mouth.

“You’ve grown careless,” I growl as I stuff myself forward. “You’ve already hidden here before.”

She pulls herself off from me before my pincers can restrain her in place.

“Who says I didn’t want you to find me?”

I push myself back and thrust wildly, securing her with my extra tendons.

“That mistake will cost you your life.”

Immediately, my antennae detect the moisture releasing from her and the surge of chemicals that betray any roleplay.

Her warm throat serves as just one small reminder of what I’ve gained.

She is a comfort to me, embracing me with warmth. She makes the long night flights not so hard. Even if I have another small mouth to care for, every day of hunting feels worth it to me.

It’s not like before, where my existence was despised by those who feared me, and the only thing keeping me alive over the centuries was sheer tenacity.

She beats my leg, and I know to pull out. Even with the neurotoxins coursing through her, she’s learned to fight it somewhat so that she can let me know when she’s had enough.

A trail of juices follows my engorged cock as it falls out of her mouth.

“If that’s all you got,” I growl. “You’re losing your touch.”

She smiles wickedly. “Actually,” she says. “I was going to tell you to fuck my face harder.”

I push her down to the hard ground, the loose pebbles serving as a much less comforting floor than the solid rock of my cavern.

“Well, if you insist.”

Gripping her hair this time and willing my pincers to dig into her shoulders, I angle myself to go down her throat, and I shove forward.

I feel a little resistance. There's always resistance at first.

But the longer I thrust inside of her, the more I start to recognize her, through the fear that courses through her eyes.

She knows that my life is in her hands, and that my ability to go rough but not transcend her limitations is the key to our enduring bond.

She's placed her trust in my ability to know the difference between friend and food.

I feel myself twitching, my pace slowing as my relentless thrusts give way to gentleness, and I am made to cum.

She knows it isn't over.

I unbury myself from her, giving her my wing to support herself.

She stands up among the rocks and begins to undress, her bare flesh shining perfectly in the light of the moon. She's told me about how dark elves keep paintings in their homes, to gaze at whenever the mood strikes them or they want to seek inspiration.

At first, I thought that was a strange cultural difference. But looking at her, covered in my moisture, her bare chest heaving with her exhausted breath, I think I get it.

I want a picture of this moment to hang in our cavern.

And with my cock standing firmly at attention, I bend her over, gently pushing into her core. That one final gasp, when she knows that I've finally entered her, is all that I live for.

I push and thrust into her until she's become fit for me, feeling myself stiffen even more over the sounds of her constant moaning.

In the midst of our vigorous fucking, she cries out, so loud that the rest of the forest can hear.

"I fucking love you!"

With her finally speared upon me, my hips latch onto her, securing her in place.

My wings beat frantically, sounding off against the rushing wind.

And I turn my body, carrying her skyward as with every ascent, she's pushed further down onto me.

I revel in the feeling of her spreading and convulsing over me. I can feel every inch of her walls, and with every thrust, I pulse into her, filling her completely and stimulating all of her at once.

My feet leave the ground, my wings flapping wildly now.

A rush of adrenaline fills her, elevating her arousal. She's not sure whether I'll drop her or not. I'm not sure whether I'll drop her or not.

“We're flying!”

She manages to speak with difficulty, the trees growing distant below us.

I'm trusting my tendrils to hold her. I seemingly have no control over them, with them reacting to my body. At any point, if I lose control of myself, I could drop her through the sky.

But I trust that, if I lose my grip on her, I'll have the speed and reflexes to catch her.

It's worth it just to see her smile, even if I can only imagine it from my vantage point.

We soar through the sky, with her on top of me. I'm immensely satisfied just to see her fulfilled, but every climax as her walls convulse and squeeze me almost sends me over the edge.

I don't trust myself to come. Not until we're on the ground.

We come upon a beautiful meadow filled with flowers of every color, in a clearing in the forest. I swear I don't recognize it and that it must have come out of nothing.

We descend, and as my downward flight pushes into her even harder, she cries out.

I cry out in response.

We land among the soft grass and flowers, and with myself buried in her, I can finally see her face.

“I love you so much,” she reiterates.

“I love you, too.”

I smile and grip her tightly.

The night is ours. The creatures of the day might fear us, but when the moon rises and the sun falls, we can go wherever we want without fear.

“So.”

She smiles back at me, glowing with sweat and spit, her bare body wildly contrasting with the greens beneath us.

“Where do you want to go next?”

THE END.

To read more about Lucy and Naserin in my newsletter here:

<https://www.subscribepage.com/celesteking>

PREVIEW OF MONTER'S MATE

The Worlds of Protheka is a vast and growing world. Check out one of the books, Monster's Mate

Monster's Mate

By Anne Hale & Celeste King

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TANEM

The night is almost as dark as I am.
Almost.

Maybe nothing is darker than I am. I don't know. I have lived a very long time.

Somewhere in my memory, maybe I can find something as dark as I am.

But I have no interest in searching through my memories for something that doesn't matter.

What matters is that I am darker than night, and I shift and ripple with the shadows of Eelry.

I am not trying to hide. Not really. I am hunting, and maybe I should hide. Be stealthy.

Maybe.

But I have no patience for playing hide and seek with my prey. They will see me coming. They will see their deaths.

They will certainly feel their deaths.

Next time, I will try to be stealthy. The taste of surprise in the blood and flesh of whatever I am eating is quite exquisite.

That, I have to admit to myself.

My favorite meals are dark elves. They taste like nothing else I have ever consumed.

And in my centuries of living...

Centuries Tanem? Have you truly lived that long?

In my centuries of living, I have never tasted anything like a dark elf. Their flesh is soft, supple, tender.

Their dark sorcery flows through their veins, providing me with strength and keeping me sated days after the meal.

My fangs are extending from my gums, just think about them.

The muscles in the tentacles that are sealed into my back flex and twist. They are hungry.

“Shh. Be still.” The words slip from between my fangs. My low, guttural voice a growl more than anything else.

I catch the scent of humans when I lift my head to the air. My nose wrinkles involuntarily.

I am not the biggest fan of eating humans. But perhaps tonight I will find something sweet to calm my tentacles.

Maybe tonight, I should do the easy thing and give up on hunting the dark elves who have probably sensed my presence in the city.

The humans are in a hurry, that much I gather from the way their energy sparks and whips in the air.

Their voices are low, their footsteps hurried. I follow them, my footsteps soft and swift against the cobblestoned ground.

My body has remained muscular, strong, and lean, despite my years of living.

I find it fascinating that humans age to become decrepit creatures, unable to help themselves.

The group of humans turn a dark corner, and my tentacles lift from where they were hanging down my back. I loom over them, and the fools still do not see me.

You are so hungry. My voice speaks silently in my head, coaxing me on.

I am about to attack, to grab one or two, when the scent reaches me. The fragrance is like nothing I have ever smelled

before.

It is fresh and bright and so sweet. It smells even better than the magical blood of the dark elves.

Whatever it is, it is coming from the humans. I retract my tentacles, against their protests.

I can't eat yet. Not until I have found the source of the scent.

I am aware that my heart is racing and my stomach is twisting. My skin prickles as I follow the humans around corner after corner.

Soon, we come up to a one-story building with a low roof. I can't go in just as I am, so I wait for the humans to enter.

What is this place? I can hear dozens of footsteps crossing the dirt floor inside. A thousand different scents mingle and exude from the building.

I allow the darkness to cover me, slipping inside before the elf guarding the door can see me.

All he notices is a whisper of wind caressing his cheek as I pass.

I remain close to the walls of the building, until a guard catches my scent. The giant creature looks up at me, signaling the guards behind me.

I duck into an alcove to my left, and they follow.

The tentacles stretch from my back and break their necks in seconds. I do not even have to move.

I heft their bodies into the alcove, piling them on top of one another. There are bales of hay close by.

I remain pressed into the darkness as I pile the hale on top of them.

Finding my prey will be impossible now. I can't hunt or else I will be hunted. Hunted to my end.

When I turn, I realize exactly what is happening inside the building. It is an auction. Whoever is running it is auctioning

off precious jewels, animals and the like.

And humans, I quickly discover.

I can still smell the scent that has drawn me here. I can almost smell the fragrance in the air, shimmering like a bright light reflecting off glass.

I inch away from the wall, straining to see the front of the room. Several humans are auctioned off. They are beautiful; young, sweet things.

But right now? They are not enough to sate my hunger.

Not while the owner of the fragrance lingers close by.

The sixth auction item is a necklace containing several jewels of precious origin. I could not care less.

The seventh auction item is slightly more interesting.

“Get your hands off me, filth!” She screeches. Several of the humans and elves gasp at her words.

She is being brought, kicking and screaming onto the stage.

Strange. Usually humans like being auctioned off. They’ll be taken care of instead of remaining in their slums.

An elf close by chuckles with amusement.

The human girl is still struggling on the stage. “Don’t buy me!” She shrieks the words.

“I’ll stay on the streets! I’ll just run away from you!”

The scent is back and stronger than ever. I need to leave and find it. I need it. Desperately.

As I leave, it wafts towards me, and I turn unconsciously.

It is her.

The human girl throwing a tantrum on the auction stage.

Who is she? And why does her scent set me on fire?

I cannot answer the questions that flit through my head.

MOIRA

I have bitten three elves in the arm, and have chewed off an ear.

Dear gods, they taste awful.

The pain does not seem to register with them. They do not seem to even feel pain.

That doesn't matter to me.

I won't stop kicking and screaming until I get away from this place. From the auction house where I am as good as a side of taura.

I am sure I will be prodded and poked like a side of taura too. When I look down from the stage at the room, I see several elves and dark elves nodding at my appearance.

My heart almost freezes with fear, but I swallow through it, because if I do not, I will collapse.

I have been close to collapsing for several days now. I am not sure why. Maybe I am exhausted from worry. Maybe I am exhausted from grief.

I don't think it matters why any longer. I don't think it matters that I am exhausted any longer.

All I can do is keep kicking till they let go of me for one second. Then I can escape.

Both elf servants that hold onto each of my arms twist and I howl with pain. Tears sting my eyes, but I refuse to cry.

Not until I have given up all hope.

Betrayal lingers, burning in the back of my mind as I fight for my life.

I was working well before my master, such as he was, decided to sell me off. I was a good worker, attentive, and kind.

I took care of him, his house, and his family well.

I almost cared for the dark elf. But I think that maybe this was all part of his plan.

To use me up and toss me out. Until the only thing left for me was to lay back with my legs spread for whoever bought me.

The elf servant twists my arms again.

This time, tears fall. I am sobbing now, openly and loudly.

Maybe, just maybe, this will deter whoever thought I looked good enough to buy.

I thought at first that my elf master was joking when he said I was to be sold off.

But quickly enough I realized it was the worst joke that I would ever hear. And the other human servants did not help.

I had always known they didn't like me, though I am not sure why.

But they had blamed everything that went wrong on me. So I was forced out.

“This feisty one will be sold to the highest bidder!” A dark elf on the stage grins at me, his sharp teeth glittering in the dim fires that sparkle from torches on the walls.

“NO!” I scream the word until I can feel my vocal chords start to crack.

“Buy me and I will curse you all to your deaths. Don't fucking buy me or you'll regret it.”

Tears, real tears, are falling down my face. Tears of shock and exhaustion and grief.

And there is nothing I can do to stop crying.

My curses deter no one, and neither does my crying, I realize angrily. More hands with paddles on them have shot up.

The dark elf laughs loudly.

I recognize the elf closest to the stage who has now bid the most on me. He is known for his cruelty, and his ugly smile terrifies me.

I blink my eyes that sting with tears, and the room glitters around me. It smells rank, like sweat and drying shit.

Bile rises to my throat, but I know I cannot give up. Maybe I can escape.

This time, my struggles are more violent, and the elves must have lost their patience. They restrain me more forcefully.

And their claws draw blood. I fall to my knees as blood wells up from deep scrapes on both my arms.

My tears, this time, are silent.

The auction room goes quiet.

Are they shocked? Did these superior creatures think that humans didn't bleed?

The dark elf has ordered the servants to take me to the back. I will probably be punished there.

But just then, a loud, growling snarl comes from the back of the room.

Monster.

Because that is what it is.

It has thrown itself at the stage, a big, dark, hulking figure. It has clawed hands, and red eyes glitter from its face.

The elf servants jump into action, trying to restrain it.

Why is the monster coming for the stage?

The thought comes to me distractedly. Because I have seen my chance.

GO! NOW!

I slip away from the elves, who are too focused on subduing the beast. I don't care any longer that I am barefoot and bleeding.

But I am not fast enough. Because a dark elf shifts out of the darkness as I run past. He grabs me. He must have been waiting for me.

"You're all mine," he grins down at me. "And I don't even have to pay for you. You will be a nice treat that I keep chained to my bed."

My blood is cold, and I am shivering in his grip.

It is over. I know it is. Dark elves have magic. He will probably disappear with me now.

But someone disagrees.

The growl is low and rumbling and darker than the nighttime.

It is unnatural and the elf hisses.

"Beast." The word slips from his lips in a whistle and he shoves me behind him.

The monster faces us, and slowly, four long, thick tendrils stretch from his back.

The elf doesn't wait but summons a staff and throws magic at it. The beast avoids the magic effortlessly.

He growls again, leaping forward. The elf creates a dark forcefield around us. The beast bounces off it, but doesn't fall.

Our eyes meet. Both his red eyes close and open slowly. As though he is trying to communicate with me.

The elf throws spell after spell at him, swiftly, brutally. The beast is hurt several times but continues forward.

He is relentless, using his arms, legs, claws, and tentacles to fight.

I realize, when he avoids clawing at me when the elf shoves me in front of him, that the beast is trying to help me.

But why?

To be continued. To read more click [here!](#)