

It had been three weeks since Nidrah had guided Lyselle and Lori out of the desert. The trio had claimed one of the slavers' forsaken wagons for their journey out of the sweltering sands, though this time the vehicle's occupants were in much better spirits than they'd been on their arrival. The Abyssal had aided Lyselle in scavenging several sets of clothes from the ravaged vendor space outside of the slavers' hall, guiding the Terran to a fair selection of both Karnan garments and more familiar fare from her home world. This had only been part of Nidrah's efforts to prepare the cowl's new tagalongs for an inevitable journey through the distant mountains; the demoness had also carefully picked out her choice of rations and other such supplies for the trip, to the point that half of the wagon's space was taken up by her multitudinous precautions.

It had been something of a grisly affair, Lyselle had to admit. The escaped prisoners had not been kind to the outlaws operating beyond the walls of the auction hall and its warehouse, and the aftermath of countless bloody altercations had been left evident throughout the former vendor space. Amid the witch's tour of available supplies, she'd stopped to settle several lingering disputes, tending to the wounded and giving direction where she felt it was needed. Not once was her authority questioned by anyone involved, and Lyselle had watched in awe as the towering demon calmly dispelled the chaos that had erupted in her own wake.

By the end of Nidrah's interventions, several of the vendors had taken to aiding the escaped prisoners' own preparations to depart, with some of the more traveled among the lot coming to agreements to serve as guides in helping the lost find their ways home. Both sides scavenged the wreckage for anything that could be used, and in the process they'd moved the bodies of their fallen onto a pile of tatters and debris at the encampment's edge.

Nidrah stood before the hill of corpses and began to recite something in her tongue. Lyselle, wrapped in a blanket and standing

among the crowd of solemn survivors, came to a sudden realization as the sky lit with the coming dawn:

This was a funeral pyre.

The sun's light reached across the sands in a breaking wave. No sooner had its rays touched the base of the debris than the shattered wood scattered amidst the rubble took to flame, fire bursting up from the ground and through the mountain of departed.

The demoness's voice rose with the flames, the final rites of the lost cast to the heavens alongside their ashes, as the fire burned with an intensity that seemed to challenge the rising star for supremacy. Outside of the sound of the crackling pyre, nothing dared to interrupt Nidrah's words; nobody spoke, and nothing moved. Even the air itself seemed still as respects were paid to the lost.

Eventually, the chant ended. The silence held as Nidrah turned to face the crowd that had gathered behind her. The demoness's gaze slowly scanned across them all, her saddened eyes seeming to take in every single face among them before, finally, she bowed her head and gave a slow nod.

With that simple gesture, everyone knew that it was time to go their separate ways. The crowd dissipated quickly, fanning out to their various means of evacuation. Lyselle and Lori stood side by side as the sea of people parted and flowed away from them, until at last they were left alone, watching the Abyssal as she stood, quiet and still, her eyes still cast to the sand at her feet.

By the time the demoness moved, most of the other survivors had taken to their own respective journeys. Nidrah's shoulders heaved with a deep sigh, preceding her slow strides towards the pair that waited for her. At last, as she came within an arm's length of them, her eyes rose; her expression was heavy with concern, but an aching smile crossed her face as she spoke to the two girls.

"Come, then," the woman spoke in a tone softer than her towering frame implied possible. "I think it's time we were on our way."

The trip across the desert took two days, at the pace of the strange beasts pulling the wagon. As the first night set upon them, the demoness brought the scaled, tusked creatures to a trudging halt at an isolated oasis. She'd been largely quiet until then, and remained so until

morning, meditating beside the waters in the cool evening air while Lyselle and Lori shared a tent next to a small campfire. Come morning, however, the pair was awoken by a cheerful song that the cowl had begun belting out in the middle of preparing their breakfast.

Though she did not speak much of why she'd been so solemn in the interim – and neither companion felt it in good taste to pry into the matter – Nidrah had proven perfectly pleasant company throughout the rest of the desert trek, and remained so as the group made their way up into the mountains beyond.

Said mountains were where Lyselle found herself now, sitting on a stone by the light of a campfire as Lori busied herself nearby. The furry companion had quickly turned a game the pair had shared into a habit, and she was presently seeking new things to show Lyselle so that they could exchange words in each others' tongues.

Lori cheerfully held up a nut she'd found nestled in the fresh snow around the base of a nearby tree. "*Uut*," she declared, before placing the object firmly into her friend's mittened hand.

The Terran envied the girl's comfort in the cold. Even as bundled as she was within the embrace of a thick fur coat, Lyselle still felt the bite of the mountain air. "*Uut*," she responded. "*Nut. Pai ajretil lie' ibanja.*"

"*That grows into a tree*," she'd said. Lyselle had been paying attention; Lori's chipper attitude routinely proved to be a highlight in the Terran's day, and she couldn't help but return the girl's enthused smile any time Lyselle surprised her with a word or phrase in her own tongue.

Lori smiled wide, giggling as she responded, "*Hi'! Yes!*"

Even through the bitter cold, Lys couldn't help but feel a little warmer when she saw her friend beaming. Nidrah had informed her that Lori was one of a species called the tunnadora, a cave-dwelling race that rarely took comfortably to surface life. This was obvious during the day, when Lori hid from the sun under the cover of the trio's hijacked wagon, but even more apparent at night. She'd already begun looking for another object she could use to expand Lyselle's vocabulary, and in a blink had vanished into the trees surrounding the camp, as comfortable navigating the terrain under the shimmering night sky as Lyselle would be on a clear day at noon.

As Lori tore through the bushes, Lys turned and leaned towards the fire, trying to warm herself despite the mountains' best efforts to chill her to the bone. Aside from her, leaned back against a small pile of fallen logs, Nidrah tended to a pot she'd set over the flames.

"You learn quickly." The Abyssal spoke without turning, only her eyes glancing towards her Terran company. "The old tongue is not widely used, though. Would it not be better to focus on Demonic?"

Lyselle hummed in acknowledgement, thinking for a second. "*Ke vit ju*," she finally said, throwing Nidrah a sly smile.

The demoness's body did turn for that. "*Ku roset*? When did this start?"

Lyselle shrugged. "Between the desert situation and your dealings with other folks trudging along these old trails, I've tried to pick up what I can." She wasn't about to admit that she had no idea what "*ku roset*" meant. "Besides, I've heard you use the 'old tongue' plenty of times."

Nidrah turned back to the fire and smiled. "*Ju*, I have. It is the spirits' tongue." She lifted a stick from her far side, using it to prod the embers. "We need more wood."

"Lori," Lyselle called over her shoulder, "*olmet' zu' ipantia*?"

"Go' ogre," the girl chimed from the dark. More rustling followed, proceeded by a brief pause. Then, the sound of wood cracking pierced through the quiet, accompanied shortly by a tree falling just into the fringe of the fire's waning light, kicking a soft cloud of snowy powder up into the air.

Lori scrambled across the fallen log on all fours, looking quite proud of herself as she tapped her claws along its bark. Finding a point she deemed suitable by a measure entirely inscrutable to her companions, she lifted her hand into the air, pulling her claws into a honed point, and drove them like an axe down into the wood.

With that single blow, a ring of breakage cracked through the bark. Seconds later, a second blow created another break a bit further along the tree's length, cleanly separating a section of wood from the main body. Eager to please, Lori rolled the severed wood through the snow closer to Lyselle, turning away from the fire as she set it upright and brought her claw down into the log a final time, splitting her prize cleanly into five chunks before turning to the Terran for approval.

“*Iveme*,” Lyselle thanked, tussling the creature’s fur with one hand as she lifted a piece of wood with the other. “Are you cold?”

The girl thought for a moment, squinting as she parsed the meaning of the question. “Ah,” she said, her eyes sparkling as she realized she understood. “No! I am fine!”

“*Hible*.” She brushed Lori’s hair back into place with the same hand that had sent it into disarray. “Be safe.”

“*Hi’*, *hi’*,” the girl assured, rushing back into the shadows before even finishing her reply.

Nidrah watched Lori depart, sighing as the girl left line of sight. “Honestly, I am not sure her enthusiasm to learn your tongue over one Karnans typically speak is of aid, either.”

Lys stood, taking up another piece of wood before moving to stack both carefully around the cooking pot. “It’s good to be curious,” she said bluntly.

“It is, yes. But not everyone is as quick a study as you are, *keski*.”

“Oh?” The Terran turned her head from tending the flames, meeting the Abyssal’s azure gaze. “And what would you call a quick study in Demonic?”

“*Ze’ setku*. It means ‘fast learner.’” The demon laughed, then pondered for a moment before adding, “Perhaps we should get you some books?”

Lyselle gave a light-hearted huff. “You say that like these mountains will ever end. We’ve been in the thick of them for a week now.”

The Abyssal waved her hand dismissively. “*Ju, ju*. The mountains do end, eventually.” She brought her hand back, resting her head against her wrists as she threw a coy look towards Lyselle. “Though, not before we reach our next stop. A nice little town near the edge of all this cold.”

The Terran turned. “A town? Out here?”

“Oh, yes! And one I think you will enjoy a great deal, my little *setku*. I’ve a friend there who manages quite a fine library!”

“A library...?” Lyselle returned to her stone seat, looking into the fire as she considered the offer. “I appreciate the thought, but I couldn’t. You’ve already done so much.”

“Bah,” Nidrah scoffed, brushing at the air as if physically pushing Lyselle’s concerns aside. “*Gikak tegra!* This does not bother me!”

Lyselle didn’t know that one, either. All the same, she couldn’t help but laugh at the demoness’s reaction. “Well... whatever you think is best, then. You *are* the great and powerful witch here, after all.”

“This is right,” Nidrah quipped, grinning smugly to herself as she rose a shoulder towards Lyselle. “And the ‘great and powerful’ witch says that the smart, *smart* girl could do with some books.”

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Night was falling over the forest. Talia had led the group to a small clearing alongside a riverbank, and had no sooner finished setting up her tent for the evening than she’d stripped down and jumped into the water. Lyselle and Auna had taken a fair bit longer to wrestle the group’s other shelter into an upright state, again proving inferior to the self-proclaimed wood elf’s affinity for outdoor affairs. With a bit of fuss and relatively minimal huff from Auna – by her personal standards, at least – the pair eventually succeeded, and the demoness dismissed herself for her own self-care, elegantly disrobing as she walked towards the water. She dipped into the stream with significantly more grace than their elven companion, barely disturbing the water as she strode into its embrace.

For her part, Lyselle had immediately busied herself preparing a fire pit out of nearby stones, trying to occupy her thoughts with anything besides the rampant female nudity in her vicinity.

“‘Helrehm knows when our next chance might be,’” she barked quietly to herself, parroting Talia’s reasoning for Lys’s visit to the school’s springs the night before. “Seems you knew pretty quick once you found yourself covered in plant–”

She paused, scrunching her nose as she fought for a description that she wasn’t ashamed to mutter aloud.

“... *stuff.*”

She fidgeted with the rocks she’d gathered, meticulously positioning them with far more attention than was necessary. Lyselle’s travels with Nidrah had equipped her well with a tried-and-true mental

checklist for any outdoor camping situation, and she'd taken to working through it dutifully, even if her skills seemed to come up short amongst present company.

*Right, she mused to herself. Next, kindling.*

The Terran kept her nose down, scanning the ground around her for anything that would do the job.

*I certainly miss having Lori's help gathering wood.*

Lys quickly managed to find some hefty branches, and even broke a pair of them down into workable chunks by snapping them over her knee. Said display of strength had elicited a round of cheers and catcalls from the magicians in the water, yet again driving the Terran to blush.

*If this keeps up I might just turn red for good,* she worried.

She struggled to focus on the task at hand, but still managed, stacking the gathered wood this way and that until she felt the job was done. Satisfied with her arrangement, Lyselle reached into her bag and pulled out a red gemstone. Holding the object between her thumb and forefinger, she pinched it in her hand above the fire pit and steadied herself. With a quick snap of her fingers, the gem shattered into a burst of orange flame that leapt into the pit and set the kindling ablaze with an ease that would have been the envy of any camper back home.

The Terran stood up, proudly observing her handiwork with her hands on her hips. *I may not have magic,* she thought, *but I'm not half bad as an alchemist!*

"Lyssie!"

Lyselle's guard had fallen in her moment of pride, and she'd reflexively turned to the sound of Talia calling her name. By the time she'd processed her own actions, it was far too late to escape the consequences.

Talia Rosenblum laid bare against the riverbank. The vibrant light of the setting sun danced through and resonated with the autumnal hues of the Karnan forest around them, surrounding the woman in a fiery halo that radiated across her pale, wet skin. The river flowed beneath her, catching the waning daylight and bouncing it across the woman's body and face in a shimmering pattern of moving ripples and waves and, as if placed deliberately as the centerpiece of it

all, over her shining eyes. The orange glimmers danced through the magentas over her irises and merged with the fiery spark at their core.

Lyselle was immediately captivated.

The elf cocked her head curiously at the gawking Terran. “Aren’t you gonna wash up?”

Lyselle couldn’t find her words, her thoughts fully captured by the half-elf’s beauty. It was all she could do to simply remind herself to breathe.

Talia’s eyes – those gorgeous, shining eyes – looked over Lyselle with mild concern. “You got pretty scuffed up, you know. You need to take care of that.”

Lys felt like she was standing in a dream, the signals from her mind barely translating to her body. Slowly, awkwardly, she looked down at her own limbs and the scratches that had decorated her over the day’s journey.

The half-elf rested her head against her palm. “I can’t help but feel like it’s my fault, you know.”

Lyselle blinked, finally starting to come back to her senses now that her gaze had been torn away from her interest’s visage. “Your... fault?”

Talia hummed her confirmation. “I know most of that’s from when you tried to jump into the fray behind Auna.”

Sitting just downstream of Talia, Auna huffed. “Maybe you should have communicated your intentions before you bolted off to offer your slit to a fucking plant.”

Talia rolled her eyes. “Yes, yes, point taken. In my defense, I didn’t think I’d up and yelp when I found it.”

“You *screamed*.”

Auna’s bluntness visibly shook Talia’s smug demeanor. “It just... startled me with its eagerness. That’s all.”

“Uh-huh.” The demoness had already started checking back out of the conversation, and took to cleaning her hair.

Talia took Auna excusing herself as an excellent opportunity to shift the conversation back to her original intentions. “Anyway, Lyssie! You need to tend to all of that.”

Lyselle’s eyes glanced to the side as she grasped for an out. “I-It’s nothing serious! They’re just a few simple scratch-”



“I won’t hear it.” Talia’s hand came out, palm up, fingers pointed like a gun before they curled inward in a beckoning motion. “*Dom, tuimegil.*”

Lyselle had no further chance to protest before the earth beneath her feet began to shift, pushing her forward towards the water. She yelped as her body was pulled ahead, barely keeping her balance against the sudden shift in momentum. As quickly as it began, the dirt beneath her feet came to a full stop, sending the Terran falling face-first towards the ground.

Lyselle shut her eyes and braced for impact, but instead felt herself being caught in Talia’s arms.

“There, now,” the half-elf soothed, running a delicate hand through her classmate’s red hair. “I’ve got you.”

Lyselle opened her eyes and found herself inches from the woman’s gentle face.

Talia smirked, quirking an eyebrow at Lyselle’s still-panicked expression. “Did you really think I’d let you fall? I’m trying to tend to your wounds, not add to them.”

Lys snapped back to reality, finding the ground beneath her and skittering backwards on all fours. She only made it about half a pace before tumbling onto her rump through her own hectic flailing. “I-I am not disrobing and jumping into the river!!”

“Is that what you’re worried about?” The half-blood laughed, and then settled into a warm smile. “Relax, nobody’s asking you to.”

“I am,” Auna retorted from downstream. “I’d like to not deal with either of your pit stinks more than I have to, if it can be at all helped.”

“Don’t get distracted, Auna,” Talia mocked, “or you’ll never find that last twig in your pretty little locks.”

“Twig!?” Auna began frantically combing through her hair with her fingers in search of the rouge object. She would be looking for some time, on account of the fact that it did not exist.

“Now, off with those,” Talia ordered, gesturing at Lyselle’s shoes. “You *will* need to remove that much, at least for a bit.”

Lyselle hesitated, looking from her well-worn sneakers back to the half-elf that was waiting on her.

Talia's eyebrows rose. "No fuss, Lys. Or are you a fan of wet socks?"

Nobody is a fan of wet socks. Realizing she had no real way out of this situation, Lyselle begrudgingly began untying her shoelaces, and had soon enough freed her admittedly tired feet from their cramped confines.

"Good girl. Now, over here." Talia slid back into the river, motioning for Lyselle to approach. "You're at least getting your feet wet. We can do the rest with you sitting on the bank here."

The Terran complied, though she remained on guard. She was not convinced the other women hadn't concocted some scheme to get her wholly in the water, and did her best to brace against the large stone she'd perched on as she dipped her feet into the river.

"There, see?" Talia leaned her arm against the stone, looking up at Lys with a playful grin. "Lyssie's hanging with the girls now! No fuss or bother."

"I can see *your* hanging girls," Lyselle absent-mindedly muttered aloud.

"And I'm sure that breaks your heart," Talia teased as she took hold of the redhead's foot and circled around to her front. "Now let's take care of this."

Lyselle barely had time to register that she'd thought about Talia's breasts out loud before she could feel the rousing things pressed against her bare leg. The Terran's voice tried to emit a yelp in response, but the sound couldn't worm its way out before Talia's hand began brushing against the battered limb, washing away the dirt and dried blood with the cool river water. Lys's familiarity with having any part of her bare skin touched was essentially non-existent, and so her would-be yelp evolved into an awkward, jolting groan.

Lys didn't protest beyond that. She couldn't. Forget skipping a beat; her heart felt like it had gone on holiday. Talia gently tended to Lyselle's leg, washing it, subtly massaging it, as if she could sense where the Terran was sore from the day's trek rather than just the immediate tension present from her body freezing like that of a deer in headlights. A barrage of strange emotions and feelings hit Lyselle all at once, her mind feeling as if she'd lept into an intersection at rush hour

and told the oncoming traffic to bring its worst right after taking out the signal lights.

Talia paid little mind to her peer's barely-contained panic. Wordlessly, the half-elf moved away from the first leg to gently coax the other away from its withdrawn position against Lyselle's chest. The act of submitting to Talia's beckoning brought Lys back down to earth, and as her classmate began tending to the scrapes and bruises on the second limb, Lyselle Alwin experienced the utterly alien sensation of feeling increasingly at ease in the presence of another person's naked body.

Talia smiled warmly, seeming to sense the shift in the human's demeanor. "There. That's better, isn't it? Just breathe, *keski*."

There was something in the elf's word choice that further disarmed Lyselle. *Keski*. The Karnan word for a young lady, and one that the Terran knew extremely well; Nidrah had employed that term countless times as a form of endearment. Talia's choice to employ it in such a vulnerable situation was almost certainly coincidental, but it finally let the half-blood's gentle sincerity pierce through the last of Lyselle's guard.

"Now," Talia leaned in, her body language as casual as if the two were conversing at the campus cafeteria. "Arms, please."

"S-sure," Lyselle stammered as she leaned forward slightly to offer another fresh limb. *This is nothing*, she thought. *No big deal. Look at her. She's so casual! This is just a convenient time and place to handle this kind of thing, for a Karnan. That's all. See?*

Talia pulled herself up from the water to better observe the new appendage's condition, her upper body rising up in front of Lyselle and leaning towards her to do her work. The half-elf's naked teats hung from her body, rivulets of river water running over the woman's delicate skin and dripping from her nipples onto the stone below. The Terran could not help but observe the entire display, lined up as it was with her gaze, but she probably could have done something about how slack her jaw immediately went. Probably. But not this time.

*Casual*, Lyselle tried to remind herself. *It's casual boob! Non-flirtatious boobies! Free-hanging just-hanging boob!! Shining! Glistening! Right there!! Oh my God!!*

Talia finished with the Terran's first arm quickly, gaze never rising from her task as she reached for the other. "You're staring, Lyssie."

"God!" Lys defaulted to English as her eyes shot up towards the sky. "Damn it!!"

Talia simply laughed as she continued her work. "Gods, you don't know what to do with yourself at all, do you?"

Lyselle glanced down in quick bursts in a futile attempt to make polite eye contact without staring down a pert, dripping wet nipple. "W-What's that supposed to mean?"

Tal's brows rose as she spoke. "It's a bit late in life to just be figuring out you're into girls, isn't it?"

That damned blush was back. "I-! *You-!*"

"It's not like I dislike the attention." The half-elf grinned to herself before pausing with a quick but noticeable thought. As her expression dropped, she finally looked up to meet Lyselle's gaze. "There's no shame in it. Or has someone convinced you otherwise?"

Lyselle's eyes darted from point to point, searching the dimming scenery in a wishful bid to find some way to escape this conversation. Failing to find a sufficient distraction to deviate the conversation, her head slowly sulked down into her shoulders as she answered in a quiet mumble. "It doesn't matter."

Talia stopped cleaning. She glanced slowly to the side to check that Auna was still preoccupied, then shook her head and pulled herself up onto the rock beside Lyselle.

The Terran barely had time to protest the naked presence directly beside her, nor the puddle of river water now rushing into the fabric at the seat of her shorts, before being silenced by Talia's serious expression. The elf's eyes looked straight ahead as she considered her words.

Finally, quietly, Talia spoke.

"Lis'en to me, Alwyn." Her voice cracked in a slow but fluid English, a strange accent dancing through her words. "Ya won't find your light so long as ya keep lyin' to ya'self."

Lys was caught aback, taking a moment to adjust to hearing her native tongue spoken after so much time spent without. She briefly

struggled to find her own voice, finally deciding to answer in kind.

“You... you speak English?”

Talia looked up and smiled a weak, aching grin. “Da’ was Terran. Don’t miss me point.”

Lyselle shifted her weight, looking to the river flowing below.

“You think I’m lying?”

“Aye, when it comes to the self, ya are. What, ye can’t tell?”

Lys huffed, biting her lip as her arms withdrew to her waist. “Is this about the staring?”

“Hardly just that, lass.” Talia’s head rolled to face the Terran, placing a single finger under Lys’s chin to guide the redhead’s gaze back towards her own. “Ye’re denying ya’self your own truth. ‘Bout who you are, what ye want. Not just of a sexual nature, though gods know *definitely* that as well.”

Lyselle’s eyes shot back to the side, desperately trying to avoid Talia’s piercing gaze despite her face being gently kept in place. “N-No! That’s wrong! I can’t think about that sort of thing!”

“And why not?” Talia cocked her head. “What do ye think burying your own thoughts is th’ right thing to do? What, do you intend to keep your naughty little desires at bay with raw will and shame?”

“I—!” Lyselle moved to shout her reply before being silenced by the single, slender finger rising from her chin to press against her lips. She took a deep breath and tried to steady her voice as she answered, “I have to.”

“Oh?” Talia’s eyes seemed to be looking through the girl and seeing her very soul for how intently they watched Lyselle’s every move. “And why’s that?”

Lyselle felt tears welling up in her eyes. “It’s not right,” came the choked-out answer.

“Buryin’ yourself ain’t, no. But that’s not what ye mean, is it?” Talia’s eyes narrowed. She spoke slowly, patiently. “What exactly ain’t ‘right,’ Lyselle?”

The Terran’s breaths were deep and quick, her emotions broiling just under her skin as thoughts of home came flooding back. “Being like this. Thinking this way. I... What was I thinking!? God, I’m so ashamed!”

“Of what, exactly?”

“I was bad,” she whimpered. “Should’ve covered up more. Wanted...” Without thinking, Lyselle had physically retreated into herself, her arms wrapped around her own legs as she pulled them back against her chest again. The shadows of the forest seemed to stretch out and claw at her as the doubt she’d buried that morning came screaming back into her soul. “Doesn’t matter what I wanted. Shouldn’t have wanted it.”

Talia hummed in thought, lips pursing across her face as she glanced over the shrunken form of her curled-up peer. “Lyssie... You think I ain’t noticed, do you? That ye dress the same way basically every day ‘til the one we’re meant t’be alone together?”

Lyselle meeped, her face buried into her arms.

Talia smiled softly, suppressing a chuckle at the girl’s innocent shame. “Are ye *really* losing your shit just ‘cause you showed some leg and a few millimeters of tit? Honestly. Ya look nice. Bit o’ confidence suits you!”

Lys squeaked as her hands migrated up to cover her head. “God, don’t say that! I... I can’t hear it! You have no idea!”

The half-elf couldn’t contain her humor anymore, a light laugh escaping her throat before she catch it. “I think I have *some* idea. A lady flatters ya and you don’t know how t’ feel about it, eh?”

“I know how I feel,” Lys barked, throwing her hands down a moment and glaring up at the elf before being startled back into submission by her own outburst of boldness. “But...”

Talia waited a moment before urging her on. “*But?*”

“But it’s *wrong*.”

“Wrong?” Talia scoffed, her nose wrinkling in distaste. “Says who? What dimwit be puttin’ these things in ye mind?”

There was another pause. For a time, the only sound was the river splashing against the stone’s edge as it flowed past. The world and its noise seemed a million miles away as the Terran tried to find her response, until finally, quietly, Lyselle spoke her reply.

“It’s how I was taught.”

Talia took a slow, deep breath, eyes closed in thought until she spoke again. Her speech was slower now, more deliberate, her accent less fluid and present as she probed towards the heart of her classmate’s distress. “You were taught to hate yourself?”

“No! Yes? It’s...” The tears Lyselle had been fighting back now flowed out as quickly as the thoughts trying to pour out of her mouth. “It’s a lot! It’s a lot, and I stick out like a sore thumb here, and I feel like no matter what I’m trapped in my own damn head and world and past, and I just—!!”

The Terran’s face sunk into her own arms once again as she tried to calm herself down. Talia watched and waited patiently as Lys’s shoulders shook with each wrestled-against sob.

Quietly, muffled by her own arms and knees, Lyselle continued. “I don’t understand,” she admitted.

Talia instinctively rose a hand, wanting to reach out, but debating to herself whether or not placing it on the Terran’s shoulder would be appreciated or make matters worse. She pulled it back, looking back to the water as she dug deeper. “Understand what?”

Lyselle’s head rose enough to look out at the elf. “How you do it. How you’re so comfortable with...” She glanced over her classmate’s body, wholly exposed and dripping wet beside her. “With all of it. Your body, what you do with it. Who sees.”

“Who sees?” Talia laughed as her head turned back towards the Terran. “Folks only see what ah want ‘em to, Lyssie. Ain’t any more complicated than that.”

Lyselle looked incredulously at her. “You don’t seem all that discerning.”

The half-elf finally decided where to place her hand, rubbing it over Lyselle’s head and ruffling her hair. “Whether I am or I ain’t, it’s still my choice, innit? Who I show it to, ah mean, an’ whatever I choose to do with ‘em. Oh, an’ who attracts my lovely eyes is my own business, while we’re on th’ subject an’ all.”

Lyselle thought for a moment. “Even if they’re another girl?”

“Aye,” Talia remarked, leaning her body against Lyselle’s. “Even if. After all, what good would it do anyone if I was ‘shamed of thinkin’ ye’re cute as a button?” She accented her point by tapping Lyselle on the nose with one finger.

The Terran went red again. “M-Me? Cute!?”

“Aye.” A direct answer partnered with an unapologetic shrug.

“I—!” Lyselle’s head did its best to retract into her shoulders. “I’m flattered, but you’re wrong.”

“Wrong, is it? My own opinion an’ taste?” Talia’s eyes glimmered as her mouth turned up into a teasing grin. “Don’t be sellin’ me the poison you were fed, lass.”

“I’m not cute,” Lys protested. “I’m overweight.”

“Sounds cute t’me,” Talia sang back. “Me mum was stocky too, and a right lot more than you. No less gorgeous for it, I promise you. How d’ye think she nabbed me da’? Lady knew what to do with ‘er curves, when it suited her. An’ so should you!”

“Whatever! I’m a redhead! Covered in freckles!”

“Ye sure are, dove.” The half-elf danced a finger across the specks on Lyselle’s arm. “Like a fiery sun ‘rounded by its own constellations.” Her hand stopped on a cluster of freckles near Lys’s elbow. “We should name ‘em. That’d be cute! Somethin’ to use when ye need ammunition come time ta flirt.”

“Flirt!?” Lyselle glared over at the half-blood, still blushing furiously. “Nobody wants me to flirt with them. I think you might have low standards.”

Talia shrugged. “An’ I think tha’ you sell ye’self short, an’ we ain’t even to the things folks’d notice a mile away. I’ll note ye ain’t bemoanin’ the tits them gods gave ya.”

“And what about them?” Lyselle scoffed, her voice rising as she spoke. “Mom spent the bulk of my teenage years telling me God gave me a whore’s body. Boys all treated me different the second I started to change. Even older men, like my teachers and the priest! Anyone who wasn’t telling me to cover up and hide these things was actively undressing me with their eyes, and some of the bastards did both at once! All these fucking fat-sacks do is attract unwanted attention and make me have to think too hard about how to go down a flight of stairs without smacking my glasses off my face! There’s nothing to be proud of!”

Lyselle had unfurled as she spoke, leaning towards Talia with increasing anger as memories of home rampaged through her mind. Her chest and shoulders heaved with each enraged breath as her words burst out into the evening air. Throughout it all, Talia stayed, looking directly at her, letting her speak. Watching.



In the resulting silence, Lyselle started to shake, tears staining her face as they streaked down her cheeks. “Is that enough *bemoaning* for you?”

No sooner had the Terran finished speaking than Talia’s arms lunged to wrap around her body. A gasp caught in Lyselle’s throat as her classmate’s head came to rest over her shoulder, the elf’s lithe arms gripping her in a tight embrace.

For a moment, all was still. Lys sat there, frozen, her trembling stilled in the comforting grip of the other girl’s hold. The memories of home, the frustrations and fears of her past life that had all come rushing back to her, seemed to drift away in the stream beneath them, and a breeze blew through the trees as if the wind itself wanted to hush away the last remnants of unpleasant thought. As the gentle wind settled, finally, quietly, Talia spoke.

“Ye poor thing.” She didn’t move, continuing to hold Lyselle as she whispered into Lyselle’s ear. “They’ve treated you wretched, haven’t they?”

Lyselle couldn’t bring herself to answer, instead fighting to keep her face from contorting into a loud, ugly cry.

“You ain’t there now, yeah? But a number was done, all the same.”

Finally, Talia pulled back, holding Lys’s shoulders in her hands as the Terran’s teary eyes rose to meet her gaze. “Here,” she offered, raising a hand to wipe the tears from Lyselle’s eyes, “can I show ye somethin’?”

Lys offered no protest as the half-blood slipped back down from the rock and into the stream. Talia’s body pierced into the water without so much as a splash, her movements as at home descending into the river as they’d seemed anywhere else in the woods.

Talia turned, smiling up at Lyselle softly. Her hands rose to touch the Terran’s left calf, lightly tracing the ridge of one of the more prominent scrapes on the girl’s legs with her finger.

“Wounds are such divided little things,” she said as she looked intently at the broken skin. “Often, they heal on their own, an’ anyone lookin’ for proof of them would be none the wiser. But others...”

She paused, seeming to gather her thoughts and self as both hands rose to either side of Lyselle’s leg, casting a shadow over the

freshly-cleaned damage. “Others, they leave a mark, plain as day, an’ for a long damned time. There’s plenty of reasons why they could; sometimes it’s infection, sometimes they’re just particularly nasty little things, and sometimes... they just didn’t heal right. Maybe they never quite healed at all, really.”

Lyselle wasn’t sure where Talia was going with this. “Are you talking about my leg still, or...?”

Talia laughed. “Ah, make of it what you will. Just some thoughts, is all. There’s another thing about wounds, though.”

Lys huffed. “Alright, I’ll bite. And what’s that?”

“It’s that sometimes...”

The half-elf’s hands gently closed around the calf, sending a shiver up Lyselle’s spine. In a smooth, elegant motion, Talia brushed down the Terran’s skin, passing over the unpleasant scrape in the process. There was a faint, high-pitched sound as her hand hands moved, a shimmering whirr so subtle and faint that one could reasonably think that they’d imagined it. As her touch passed from the mark, the sound stopped, and nothing was left behind on the redhead’s freckled skin besides a handful of tiny, sparkling motes of light that quickly flickered away into nothing. It was as if the wound had never existed in the first place.

“Sometimes, healing just requires a bit of help.”

Lys stared down at her leg in amazement. “Wait, how did...!?” She cocked her head side to side, looking back and forth between Talia’s hands and where the injury had been just a moment before. “No aura. No incantation. No alchemical components of note. I don’t...?”

Talia laughed again, her telltale grin returning in full force. “Aye, ya won’t find any of that. Like I said, me mum was wood elf. They ‘ave a few tricks, is all.”

“Healing magic?”

“*Hm.* Among other things.”

“But with barely any magical traces or...”

The half-elf put her hands on her hips, managing a clearly sassy poise even though she was submerged from the waist down. “Ah, don’t fret the details, Lyssie! You let me worry about how it works, aye? Ain’t any difference to you, unless ya have some secrets about yer own *bloodline.*”

It was Lyselle's turn to laugh. "None that I'm aware of. It's just curiosity. I guess I really can't help it."

A sudden shout of Demonic broke into the conversation from upstream. "*Ti'e!*"

The pair looked over to see Auna standing impatiently in the shallows a few yards away. "If you two are done talking in your little secret code or whatever, someone needs to figure out dinner. I don't know about you dorks, but I'm starving."

"Uh, s-sure," Lyselle stammered, shifting back into Demonic while fidgeting nervously with her glasses. "You catch it, I'll cook it."

"Deal," the demoness replied, immediately turning her attention to the water around her with her hands held out like a pair of grasping claws.

Lyselle watched for a moment before leaning towards Talia. "She... She can't be serious, right?"

The half-elf rolled her eyes. "Oh, she is. I'll let her struggle for a bit and then give her a hand."

Lys giggled. "What, with more wood elf tricks?"

"Actually, I was thinking I'd just use common sense."

Ignoring the both of them, Auna's eyes caught something moving in the stream and lunged at it like a desperate child. Her body hit the water with a thunderous splash, scaring off any potential prey she'd beyond what she'd managed to completely miss with her flailing. She rose back out from the water with a frustrated scream.

Lyselle nodded. "Yeah, I guess that would give you the upper hand." She sat for a moment, fidgeting with her own hands as she thought.

Talia glanced over from the senseless demoness show, a mocking smile fading away back to sincerity as she observed the Terran's shifting and pondering. "You good, Lys?"

Lyselle looked back to Talia, then closed her eyes and took a slow, deep breath. "I'm trying to be. One step at a time."

The half-elf nodded. "Just try to be honest with yourself for now, yeah? I know that's easier said than done sometimes, especially if you've made a habit out of avoiding it, but..."

Lyselle sighed, looking to the trees with a defeated smile. "No, I'm gonna have to. I don't think I've got much choice now."

“Oh?” Talia quirked an eyebrow. “And why’s that?”

Lys laughed. “Because somebody here is too observant and willing to call me out on my shit.”

Talia bit her lip as she returned to watching Auna struggle. Though it could have been a trick of the setting sun’s light, Lyselle was almost certain she’d spotted a blush setting into the half-elf’s face as she’d turned away. “Sorry. I can mind my own business, if you want.”

Lyselle pulled herself up to her feet, crossing her arms with a coy smile. “Don’t you dare.”