

## ~5~

The room had gone dark some time ago, the torches on the walls having been left to fizzle out as the cold desert night overtook the criminal outpost

Lori fidgeted with the lock on their cage for some time, but to no avail. Her antennae twitched in irritation as she mumbled her frustrations to herself, teaching Lyselle a bevy of new curse words each time the cage's sharp iron dug at her hands.

Across the hall, the Abyssal sat in meditation, its dark figure only discernible thanks to thin strips of moonlight breaking through the space's haphazardly constructed walls. She'd watched Lori work for a time, but had long since recommended the pair get some rest before withdrawing into herself.

Lyselle wasn't about to argue. The Terran had given up on public decency by then, and bundled what was left of her half-scraped top into a makeshift pillow. The bunched fabric at least served as a buffer between Lyselle's head and the bars she'd pushed it up against, but it did little to protect her from the desert's chill as it permeated the drafty room. The chill on her skin made it hard to stop thinking about how bare she was, but she tried to subdue such concerns; it wasn't as if there were many eyes on her at the moment, anyway.

Eventually and with one final swear, Lori gave up on lockpicking. The extended effort had proven tiring, and Lyselle's shivering had started to take up more of the creature's attention. She crept up next to the Terran, prodding her slightly.

Lys rolled over, bleary-eyed and embarrassed, to see the creature lay down next to her and nuzzle its way into her arms. The Terran turned red as Lori's head came to rest against her chest, but the girl's warmth was beyond welcome, and her intentions sincere. Lyselle held Lori tight in the darkness, and her companion quickly fell asleep.

She'd been effectively left alone with her thoughts. Soaking in the reality of her situation, despair washed over her. This was not the escape from her old life that she'd had in mind. Her goal had been *freedom*, had been escaping from a cycle of abuse and control that had dominated her entire life. To go from that to *this*, having barely tasting

her fought-for freedom for even a moment, felt unspeakably cruel to the point that she questioned if her life wasn't just some sick manner of cosmic jest. She questioned the point of even fighting it any longer.

*From one prison to the next*, she thought, burrowing her face into the remains of her shirt to hide her tears. The dark hugged her like a malevolent presence, and there, in that dreary corner of a chamber dedicated to shattering wills and hope, Lyselle Alwin drifted off to sleep.

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A loud crash rang through the storage room, waking Lys with a start. An azure light tore through the chamber from above like a comet, a streak of blue that left a trail of sapphire embers tilting down over the hall. The chamber was quickly filled by the sounds of panic and the barked orders of the storehouse's wardens as a rain of debris erupted from the far end of the space.

Lori rose, squinting against the unexpected yet manageable light, and let out a simple "Ah!"

The girl pointed at the cage door, her eyes glimmering with hope. It now sat slightly ajar, the lock holding it shut now smashed upon the ground by some unknown force. The two girls looked at each other, sharing a momentary pause to weigh their next action. With a mutual nod, they quickly turned and crawled out into the cleared path between crates.

The ceiling overhead was burning with a crackling blue fire unlike anything Lyselle had ever seen before. The warmer hues of flickering torches danced through the center of the chamber as mercenaries rushed into position to defend against an unseen foe.

Another crash. Pained screams. A patch of the torchlight faded, accompanied only by the clattering of armored bodies hitting the floor. The dark tendrils of the mysterious creature that had drug the captives off to their cells were now roaming throughout the room, the fire overhead casting light on the immense form of its writing appendages, though their host body still evaded sight.

Lyselle looked up the hall. The other prisoners had noticed them; arms stretched out of cages and crates as the voices within pled for help in a myriad of tongues.

“*Ajre jo’ia*,” Lori shouted as she rushed to the nearest cage. Free to move unrestrained in the open air, her strength was much more easily demonstrated. With a quick swing of her mighty arm, the padlock on the cage was smashed by her thick claws, and its occupant freed. A pair of young demonesses crawled out of the opened crate, hugging the girl for a brief moment before she urged them off of her so that she could work towards opening more of the confines their fellow captives were held in.

Lyselle scanned the room for some tool that might let her be of help, and quickly noticed the single other open cage in the hall.

The Abyssal was missing.

Another crash. A tremendous roar. Whatever sort of creature had thrown the group into their cells, it was now facing down the camp’s invader. A massive, dark and freshly severed tendril flew across the room, crashing into the wall and crumpling to the ground in a smear of tar-like blood. Sparks of blue flame crackled to life in the air overhead, each shooting off towards the far side of the room and impacting a dark mass, the creature roaring in pain with each hit. A tentacle cut through the air towards a shimmering light, attempting to swat its aggressor out of the air like an annoying gnat. A flash of lightning later, that tentacle was torn to pieces that trailed off in flaming chunks towards the prison’s outer walls.

Lori was working quickly, smashing locks and tearing crates’ doors off their hinges. The dainty creature’s small stature greatly underrepresented her abilities. The chaos overhead barely seemed to distract her from the task at hand. If anything, the chaos was simply an opportunity to take out her anger towards their captors in a productive manner, and the tiny ball of fur that seemed so kind and sweet just minutes before was aptly demonstrating that she had been bottling up an ample supply of frustration.

Among the battered parts of former prisons, Lyselle found the remains of a sturdy wooden board that she could lift, and thus took to assailing a few locks of her own. She’d never been the strongest, but neither were the padlocks on the cages; the slavers had clearly banked on the power of hired muscle to keep their stock in line, and that muscle was presently more than occupied with other problems.

Another roar. A blinding flash of light. Though Lyselle still couldn't make out the beast's form, it was clear that it was losing. Another batch of torches were snuffed out in the scuffle. Whatever was giving the escaping prisoners cover, it was damn good at the job.

The hall the girls started in was cleared out within minutes. Moonlight had begun breaking through the dissolving ceiling, illuminating a parade of prisoners that quickly took to helping their peers. Some took up debris or utilized their natural strengths to contribute to freeing those who remained captive. Others started gathering groups and organizing movement and action.

To the Terran, it was a ray of hope, an indication that she hadn't been lied to. The Karnans acted together with a singular goal, herding and protecting the weak while the others tore through the room to liberate their peers. As bleak as this place was, seeing it crumble around her gave Lyselle an undeniable swell of joy.

Lori wrestled the door off of a particularly large crate and was presented with a towering oni lumbering out of the box, bound in rope and chain. The girl's claws made quick work of the former, which was enough for the beast of a man to brute force his way out of the latter, the hulking demon's flexing muscles bending the chains to their breaking point.

This was enough to catch the attention of some unfortunate guards, who quickly learned how dangerous some of the captives could be when they weren't snuck up on and clubbed from behind. With one powerful swing, the massive demon knocked the entire group into a pile of the freshly-emptied cells, shattering wood scattering through the air as metal bent around the poor souls' battered bodies.

The group of escapees became an unstoppable force as they pushed across the relatively strongly-guarded central walkway. Mercenaries fell, outnumbered and overpowered, the unseen assailant just one problem among now-countless others as escaped prisoners worked to increase their numbers in a vengeful fury. Swords for hire began fleeing en masse as spilled torches began to catch the emptied crates aflame. Smoke billowed over the desert as the traders' men scattered over the far-reaching sands like panicked ants.

In the light of the rising flames, Lyselle could see the creature - or what was left of it - flailing its remaining limbs in failing defense. Its

dark form stretched from floor to ceiling like an inky kraken, its oily skin parted by an array of even darker eyes, several of which had been gouged out in the battle. Bolts of light struck at it from all angles, sparks flying against its increasingly battered flesh. The monster cried out, roaring in desperation, and was clearly too preoccupied with its assailant to do its job.

As the cells left to empty dwindled in number, the prisoners' rampage spread quickly. Numbers began fanning out of the hall and into the shoddy outpost they'd doubtless been paraded through, just as Lyselle's group had before. The shouts of straggling vendors and their shady customers rose quickly as Lys and Lori continued to work, releasing the last of the jailed victims.

It was as the last lock fell, with Lyselle ushering a cat-like child to run to the other escapees, that she heard the click behind her.

"You," hissed the familiar voice of the operation's stout ringleader. "Turn. Now."

The Terran tensed, turning slowly. She found herself staring down the barrel of a pistol, the man's furious eyes boring into her from behind the weapon. Behind him, the lizardman, Carl, had Lori in a chokehold, a large knife held up to her head as she shook in fear, though anger still flickered in her eyes.

The man chuckled through clenched teeth as he shook his head. "I *knew* that damned haul was too good to be true! The *fuck* kinda terror y'all workin' with, girlie?"

Lyselle's chest felt tight. She'd been through so much, had hope teased and dangled in front of her, taken away, and teased again. Now, staring down the barrel of a gun, she found herself shaking, though not in fear. Her grip on the board tightened enough to make the wood creak in her hands. She stood up straight and stared the stout man in the eye, nostrils flaring as she uttered one single command:

"Let the girl go."

He laughed outright. "Really!? *That's* your priority right now!?" His arm tensed, a ringed finger resting on the gun's trigger. "Worry about yourself, bitch! Lettin' all my stock out!? Guess God gave you more tits than brains!"

"Would you expect me to leave them all to rot? To have their freedom stolen by some gaudy little asshole!?" Lyselle couldn't believe

what was coming out of her mouth. A fire burned within her, an anger held back for years now clawing its way up and out of her throat.

The man's eye twitched as his gun lowered to Lyselle's heart. "Y'know, girly, *most* folks have an instinct regardin' *self-preservation*. It'll be a real waste if you make me blow a hole through them tits."

Lyselle glanced down towards the gun, but caught something of interest beyond it. She glared up at her captor, still furious. "Is that all you see when you look at me?"

He chuckled up at her. "They're strong assets, darlin', and they'll help you sell for a *real* pretty penny when I'm done collectin' my debt off-a you. And rest assured..." The man grinned, prodding Lyselle's naked breast with the barrel of his weapon. "I *do* intend to collect."

She didn't flinch. "You're going to 'collect'? How?"

The man rolled his eyes. "With my *pecker*, you stupid slut!"

She glanced down. "What pecker?"

"The *fuck* are you-!?"

As he looked down incredulously, the next thing the man saw was a steel pole being vaulted up directly between his legs. Lyselle had stomped down on a piece of bent metal left lying on the ground, which quickly found its mark as it shot up into the man's crotch. He cried out in pain, and the resulting opening is all Lyselle needed to hit him across the head with her wooden board, cracking it into splinters across his skull.

"Boss!" was all Carl could get out before his lapse in attention gave Lori an opening of her own, biting his hand to break the lizard's grip on its knife. He reared back in rage, tightening his hold around the girl's neck and winding up to show her how easily he could crush her skull.

A gunshot.

Lys crouched over the stout man, one foot digging into his wrist with her shoes, her other knee pressed against his neck as he struggled under her. She'd acted quickly and with certainty, the anger within urging her to action. Carl stumbled backwards, a freshly-made hole in his chest shooting blood, as he stared at the smoking gun in the Terran girl's hands.

Lori fell to the ground, hand to her neck, coughing from the lingering ache of the man's grip on her. The reptilian, blinded by rage and howling in pain, barrelled towards Lyselle.

His effort was short-lived. Lori swung her leg out, causing Carl to stumble directly toward his employer. Lyselle pushed off of the man, diving out of the way of the collapsing lizard and breaking the Terran's wrist under her foot in the process. The leader's pained howl was cut short as the large creature's weight landed forcefully on his tender human stomach, knocking the wind out of him for one blissful moment before he managed to find his voice again..

"Bitch!" The slaver was sputtering, coughing. "Whore!!" A trail of blood ran down his face from where the board had hit him, a scattering of splinters still clinging to his swelling cheek. "I'll fucking kill you!!"

The lizardman moved to rise off of his boss, but was quickly halted by Lori climbing to his back and striking his shoulder with a piercing blow, her thick claws breaking through his scales as easily as a stone piercing through the surface of a pond. The creature's hands writhed in pain as his arms gave out from under him, the Terran man groaning as the beast's full weight fell down onto him again and covered his shoddy suit in blood.

Lyselle and Lori breathed heavily in exertion. Their gazes met, both hesitant to believe that they'd emerged victorious. Lori came to accept it first, a wide grin and proud holler punctuating her joyfully jumping on the lizardman's back, unbothered by his blood still dripping from her claws. The man trapped under the body was none too pleased with this behavior, though his loud complaints only managed to encourage the girl to stomp with extra vigor before she'd had her fill and scurried to Lyselle's side.

Behind them, the cries of the shadowy kraken grew weak and sparse. Any prisoners who hadn't already fanned out to overtake the camp had fled at the sound of gunfire.

The man struggled under his subordinate. "M-My baby! What is happening to my-!?"

He was cut off by another severed tentacle flying over him, smashing into the wall with a loud *splort*. It slumped to the ground, multiple eyes attached to the oozing sinue that twitched in futility on

the ground. The man looked upon the remains of his now-silent pet in terror as footsteps approached where he'd been pinned down.

"My, my," came a familiar voice. "It seems my new friends fared even better than I'd hoped."

The man's eyes grew wide. "*You-!*"

Lyselle turned to see the Abyssal coming down the walkway behind her, fallen debris withering to ash in her wake. Her hair waved like a white bonfire trailing behind her as she strode towards them, hands still cuffed behind her back. Her robes were tattered, revealing a glowing trail of cerulean tattoos twisting across her body. A shining azure gemstone radiated from her chest like a beacon.

"I don't understand," the man growled. "We had you restrained!!"

The Abyssal smiled. "Ah, yes. The Hazurite. Most magical creatures would not have the strength to break these bonds." Her eyes narrowed as the smile left her face. "*Most.*"

Her arms tensed, her lean figure flexing, revealing a surprising amount of muscle concealed within the demon's thin frame. In one swift, easy motion, the link of the cuffs was broken. She brought her arms before her, looking to ensure that she was holding the slaver's attention before balling her elegant hands into fists. The cufflinks cracked, streaks of white light piercing through them, and then shattered into shards so delicate that they drifted into the air like dust.

"What in the hell!?" The Terran was pale. "Th... That's impossible!! Who *are* you!?"

The woman strode past Lyselle, elegant and smooth, never breaking eye contact with the frantic man as he struggled and pushed at the weight on top of him, desperately trying to break free.

"Who am I?" Her voice was cold. "I am one who protects Karna and her people. I am a guide to the lost and defender to the powerless. And to men like *you...*" She kneeled down and stared into the man's eyes so closely that he could feel the demon's breath coming down upon him. "I am a *hunter.*"

"No...!" The slaver trembled on the ground, panic overtaking him as he wrothe under his underling's weight. "No!! Carl! *Dammit*, Carl!!"

The lizard didn't respond to the man's cries, nor to the fist frantically slugging into its injured shoulder.



“You brought in a god damned *witch*!! You fuckin’ iguana!!”

The demoness stood upright, towering over the man as she cocked her head down at him. “You think me a simple *witch*? As if the gods would ever show a man like *you* such a pity.”

The man could only manage to whimper a pitiful “Eh!?”

The woman swung her arm in an arc to her side, evoking a powerful gust of wind. Her tattered clothes seemed to molt away into a brilliant black gown as a green cape flew back from her shoulders. A wide-brimmed, pointed cap appeared on her head, matching the cape in hue, and under its shadow the demoness’s shining eyes seemed to peer out from an absolute void down at her prey as she leaned down over him. She rested her weight against a long, gnarled staff that seemed to grow out from her palm like the roots of a tree, now sitting in her grasp like it had been present all along.

“A cowl,” the Terran hissed. “A fucking *cowl*!?! Dammit Carl, wake the fuck up!!” He punctuated his words with more pummeling, but the lizardman remained unresponsive.

“Everett Hector,” the Abyssal roared, “you have been witnessed by countless numbers as the undeniable head of an operation of supreme sin, a willful and persistent violation of the Sacred Law.”

“Jesus Christ,” protested the stout man. “No need to be pretentious about it!”

The demoness drove the base of her staff into Everett’s shoulder. The man hollered in pain as he struggled to move something, *anything* away from her.

“Do not *hasten* me, *jeju*.” The witch’s voice dripped with contempt. “To violate the *kegi* of another...” She paused for a moment and looked to Lyselle. “The, ah... ‘autonomy,’ is how you said it?”

Lyselle was still struggling to process that she’d shot a man, never mind what was happening in front of her since. Nonetheless, she managed to give a baffled blink and a shaky nod.

“Right, yes.” The woman turned back to Everett, her face still glowering down over his. “To violate the *autonomy* of another is an incomparable crime. And yet, you felt comfortable stealing the wills of *many*, did you not?”

Everett writhed in pain, glaring up at her with grit teeth and loathing in his eyes.

The Abyssal continued, speaking slowly, and clearly seething in her own right. “By law, such a crime as selling a single Karnan’s *kegi* is punishable by death. And here you are, a worthless man who thought he should sell lives beyond count. How many do you think it’s been, hm? Hundreds? Thousands?”

The Terran responded by spitting in the Abyssal’s face.

The witch did not flinch. “A simple death is not befitting of what you have done. So long as others continue to suffer due to your actions, it is only fair in my eyes – which you have so kindly blessed with your *filth* – that you suffer as well. Their agony is your burden.”

The woman stood tall, staff still driven into the man’s shoulder, and looked over at Lyselle as she spoke to him. “This seems as good a start as any. As I recall, you and your man violated this poor girl while she was powerless against you. Quite wicked...” She turned back to Everett and cocked her head. “Don’t you agree?”

“Bitch got me back plenty,” the Terran growled. “Look at my damned face! Or my fuckin’ hand!”

“Yes, I see your face, unfortunately. It hardly seems damned enough for such a man, if my opinion bears any weight.”

“Fuck you! Be lucky if this damn eye still works!”

“Is that so?” There was mischief in the witch’s voice.

“Interesting choice of words from a man whose luck has so clearly run out. Personally, I think it’s *incredibly* lucky for you that you continue to draw breath.”

“Not with this fucker on top of me,” Everett grumbled.

The woman shook her head. “You clearly still have enough air in you to complain. I admit, you go numb far more quickly than I’d like. Does this not bother you already?”

She twisted her staff into his shoulder. Everett screamed in agony as blood began to spill where it pierced into his flesh.

“Excellent,” the witch cooed. “Now, hold onto the pain this time, so you have something to compare to what’s coming.”

The man’s spit frothed at the edges of his mouth. “The... The fuck are you-!?”

The Abyssal leaned back over him. “As I said, your face is *far* from damned *enough*. Leering over girls, tearing their clothes... Those eyes of

yours get you into a lot of trouble. Maybe you could see the error of your ways more clearly if you weren't so busy focusing on *bokara*."

"I don't know your ding-dang demon wor—"

He was cut off by the Abyssal snapping her fingers.

In an instant, his undamaged eye burst into a plume of blue flame. Everett hollered in pain, struggling in vain to put the fire out. He attempted to close his eyes, but that simply caused the lid to burn away in a plume of ash. Trying to smother the flames with his functioning hand left his palms burned and skin melting, blood and melted skin doing little to douse the rampaging fire dancing within his skull. The air around them flooded with the stench of burning flesh, yet still, through the screams and agony, he could not stop. Instinct drove him to fight the fire, no matter the cost, and he clawed at his own face in desperation until trails of blood poured from his ripped skin.

The flames died down, but his screams didn't. Everett, face scarred and deformed by the fire on one side and swollen and splintered on the other, writhed in agony under his bleeding subordinate, twisting and contorting in desperation, bashing his head against the ground to try and deflect some of the pain as his screams choked through his throat.

"That's better," the witch remarked. She pulled her staff out of the man's shoulder and his screaming peaked anew, blood pouring from the wound and onto the ground.

"Bitch," shrieked Everett, the word slurring through his gnashing teeth. "Bitch! Bitch, bitch, bitch, *BITCH!!*"

"It was but an introduction to what you are owed, Mister Hector." The Abyssal produced a cloth from within her cowl, finally wiping the man's spit from her face before flinging it onto his bleeding wound. "As I said, you will suffer as long as those you've sold have. You can appreciate death only after I've found and freed every last soul you've enslaved."

The witch's demeanor changed drastically as she turned and approached Lyselle, a gentle smile settling onto her face. "Here, my dear. Until we find you some proper coverings."

Lyselle looked up, slowly pulling her gaze away from Everett's smoldering eye towards the Abyssal's unexpectedly kind face as the witch removed her cowl and placed it over the girl's shoulders. The

Terran pulled the flowing garment tight over herself, the adrenaline of the moment abating and giving way to the recollection of her own nakedness. A blush rushed over her face as she muttered an ashamed “thank you” and turned her eyes to the ground.

“Apologies for allowing you to go through all of this,” said the woman. “I would have intervened back on the wagon, but to be quite honest there was information here that I needed.”

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

“Indeed,” the witch admitted. “A fleeting and rare bit of wisdom on your part, from one perspective. But I learned something quite valuable when I was sneaking about and saw you selling off your little volunteer.”

*The other Terran*, Lys recalled.

“You’re crafty,” the Abyssal continued, “but also quite cheap. Every slave you sell has their will suppressed with a cursed band, yes?”

From a small satchel at her waist, the witch produced a simple, silver and red necklace. “Mass produced and nearly identical, each and every one,” she remarked. “It will still be a long search, but at least I know what I’m looking for.”

Everett hissed through his adorned teeth in frustration and pain.

The woman returned her attention to the girls. “You both did quite well,” she chimed. “Even better than I’d hoped.”

The image of their cage’s broken door crossed Lyselle’s memory. “You’re the one who freed us?”

The Abyssal smiled. “Indeed. The way you were taking care of each other told me all that I needed to know.”

Lyselle didn’t understand. “Which was what?”

“That you were the types to help others in need.”

Lys’s breath caught in her throat. *Helping others...*

In the heat of the moment, she hadn’t even considered what she was doing to be anything more than what needed done. Yet now, looking around the room, she couldn’t deny the evidence of emptied crates any more than the distant shouts of the vengeful captives she’d helped free.

The witch continued speaking. “I believed that you two would not flee without aiding the other prisoners. It seems that belief was well-placed; we are the only ones left in the hall, and you even managed to bring down these two—”

Metal flashed. Everett’s knife came flying out from behind the witch, nearly piercing into her skull before she turned and repelled it with her staff.

On the ground before them, Carl had awoken from his shock-induced blackout, and had grabbed the knife from his boss’s belt and lobbed it in one final, desperate attack. Seeing it fail, he tore open Everett’s shirt, ripping out a patch of cloth.

The Abyssal’s eyes went wide. “*Bik!!*”

She readied her staff, but it was too late. The lizardman slammed the torn fabric onto the ground with surprising speed. In a flash of light, a cloud of dust kicked off of the floor, spreading over the hall like a shroud.

When it finally settled enough to see, the pair of criminals had vanished. A ring of ash lay in their place, blurred sigils within it rubbed away by the outburst of wind and settling of dirt.

For a time, the witch stood over the ring, her grip tightening around her staff. The flames in the hall ebbed, naught left to burn but smoldering embers, as moonlight overtook the ruins of the building. Finally, the woman slumped down onto her knees, removing her cap and covering her face with her hand.

Lyselle and Lori came up behind her, the Terran still gripping the green cowl tightly around her shoulders as the heat of the dying fires gave way to the cold evening wind.

Lori rushed ahead to the witch’s side. “*Tiemoku?*”

The Abyssal turned her head slowly, facing the creature from even height for the first time. She spoke words Lyselle still couldn’t understand, but did now recognize to be Lori’s language, as she ran a finger through the girl’s hair. Lori responded with a reassuring smile and a hug more delicate than one would assume her clawed arms to be capable of.

The witch rose to her feet. Her shoulders heaved with a heavy sigh as she gave one last, long look to the evidence of her targets’ escape.

She turned her head to speak to Lyselle behind her, the demon's voice quiet and tired. "Do you have anywhere to go, Terran?"

Lyselle nervously clutched at the cloak. "I don't."

The witch nodded, solemnly. "As I thought," she said, turning to leave the crumbling ruin around them. "Come then. Surely we will find something among the abandoned stalls that will fit you."

The Terran smiled bashfully. "That would be appreciated."

The witch began to walk out into the camp, but stopped suddenly, turning back to the girls. "Something occurs to me. I never introduced myself."

The Abyssal bowed with incredible elegance, especially considering her stature. Lyselle couldn't help but look at the witch's figure against the night sky and think that they were anything less than sisters; the violets and blues of the demoness's skin shimmered under the similar hues above, and her white hair shone like a great star looking down on them from above.

"I am called Nidrah, Witch of the Green Cowl," she stated, "and for the time being you can consider yourselves under my care."