

BEHIND THE CURTAIN



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a Vore Story

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“In for the money or the thrill?”

“So, what’s behind the curtain?”

“VIP area, ma’am.”

Vera Halen knew bullshit when she heard it. She was no stranger to practiced half-answers delivered by men in suits who thought being curt would get her off their case. But tonight, three dry martinis past the point of no return and still riding the high of a winning streak a mile wide, she was taking none of it.

“Sounds like a challenge,” she said, cigarette smoke billowing from her nostrils. “And how does one get in?”

“Invitation only, ma’am. Your —”

“All on black.”

The croupier watched, expressionless, as a year’s worth of his income vanished before his eyes. Vera didn’t even blink.

“Well, you know what they say. When the fun stops, stop.”

She finished her drink and rose to her feet. The alcohol no longer burned on the way down; she was much too numb for that. The warmth that spread outwards from her gut made everything feel and sound distant.

Her brain told her to go. That she was done here, and that the best she could do was go back to her five-star hotel room, sink into those sheets, and brace for tomorrow’s hangover. Her gut told her to stay. Her gut told her to check behind the curtain.

Vera followed her gut. She always did. In the midst of blinking lights and slot machine sound effects, she was at home, a fish in a school. Nothing could hope to distract her; she kept her eyes on the prize, the red satin, gold-embroidered

prize that teased her from across the room. A bouncer on each side of it stared intently forward, the tops of their heads nearly scraping the high ceiling. People came in, small in comparison. People came out. Men in suits and women in designer dresses.

It didn't take long for Vera to identify her prey. He was a young man, twenty-five at most, who had stepped in minutes ago and now wobbled out. She could smell the inexperience in him. He was new, uncomfortable, unready for whatever waited behind the curtains. And he looked embarrassed. So, so embarrassed.

Time to strike.

* * *

Vera flashed the silver token at the woman in a black suit on the right side of the curtain. She took it in her powerful hands, perfectly manicured, felt its weight and handed it back.

"I haven't seen you before, ma'am. First time?"

"But hopefully not the last," Vera said, smiling.

"Cash bets only beyond this point. Everything else should be obvious once you've looked around for a while. Enjoy yourself, ma'am."

Vera pocketed the token without a word, and with a deep breath, pulled the curtain aside.

Cigar smoke and expensive fragrances mixed into an intoxicating cloud that forced its way up Vera's nostrils. Extravagance gave way to extravagance, carpet to ornamented floor tiles, and the long hallway before her promised much,

much more.

Vera liked entering places built for other species. They made her feel like she was a guest in a place she didn't belong. The high ceilings and wide doors, the furniture at shoulder-level, they were the furnishings of giants, of creatures of fairytale, wondrous and terrible. She had met a few out on the casino's first floor. Sharks in an aquarium, she thought. Dangerous yet peaceful.

She walked by the first of many doors that lined the hallway. Their electronic locks did not react to her token. She heard faint sounds coming from the other side—low and rhythmic, a throaty rattle—but as she considered putting her ear to the door, the one behind her slid open.

"The VIP lounge is just down the corridor."

A rich voice pierced through the haze of Vera's receding inebriation. It snapped her to the attention it demanded. Vera turned to face the speaker, but instead came face to face with a leonine flank, draped in coarse tan fur.

"Up here."

Vera looked up and met eyes with her first sphinx of the evening.

"First time?" she asked.

"You people keep asking me that."

The sphinx smiled; a warm smile that stretched those narrow lips just far enough to glimpse the fangs underneath. "We're all a big family. We know who comes and who goes. A fresh face is rare here; a pretty one, even more so. You are...?"

"Vera. Vera Halen."

“Vera,” the sphinx repeated, closing the door behind her.

As the lock clicked into place, she looked Vera over. Her eyes, the color of terracotta, lingered on every facet; when she was satisfied, she rested a hand on her hip and checked her nails on the other hand. Meanwhile, four lion’s paws tapped at the floor.

Her expression was unreadable.

“If you’re new,” she said, “I suggest not participating at all—but from the looks of you, I feel like that’s not actionable advice. If you absolutely must take the challenge, avoid the lamia and the hadur. The house always wins with those two.”

Vera tried to make sense of what the sphinx said, but her addled brain couldn’t keep up any more than her short human legs could. Her mind burned with questions, but she didn’t want to give herself away and ask. After all, what was the fun in just being handed the answer?

“Do you work here, then? And they let you talk to the clientele?”

“That out there,” the sphinx said, gesturing to the curtain behind her, “is for ‘the clientele’. This is a more intimate setting. You’ll understand soon enough.”

“Lead the way.”

Vera was no stranger to the hush-hush corners of the world—the kinds of places blocked from view by shadows, fogged-up windows, and willful ignorance. But this, this was different. It smelled different. It smelled of...

The sphinx opened the second curtain, her massive frame blotting out the sight. Vera followed closely, training her

struggling senses on what lay beyond. Laughter. Clinking glasses. Moans? Then the sphinx stepped aside, and Vera saw at last.

They stood in a spherical room, its dimness cut by narrow floor lights and tempered by what little made it through the skylights. Curved couches, like the twisting limbs of a spiral, laid in a circle, almost invisible against the same-colored floors. In the darkness sat silhouettes, some human-sized, others larger, much larger—Vera saw tails, horns, pseudopods, ovipositors—all attended to by near-naked valets with little pocket lights. It reminded Vera of a cross between a midnight matinee at the Grand and the fifteen-minute special at a red light district.

More lights came on. A circular stage lit up, a wine-colored pillar in the very center of the room that illuminated the familiar curves of a female form.

Not just any female form, however.

Vera noticed the horns first of all, handle-shaped and ribbed. Then she noticed the thin black hair that draped down the woman's shoulders like a veil, the blindfold around her eyes, the lack of a smile on her lips, and finally, her inordinate size compared to everyone else in the room.

Vera gasped.

"Is that a—"

"We don't use those terms here," the sphinx cut her off, her voice raspy through a smile. "*Mila* is a hadur—and one of our more popular girls. Retirement isn't kind to a lot of people."

As the lights brightened, revealing the comparatively small

bump on the naked woman's stomach, so did the whispers around the room die out. Vera could now see the strange display in all its glory. A thick metal chain, hooked to a wall and pulled taut, disappeared into her open mouth; it shook sometimes, as something tugged on it from inside.

A disembodied voice broke the relative silence, speaking with the practiced tempo of a live announcer.

"It has now been thirty minutes, my friends. For those who weren't here for the last check, our challenger gave two knocks, which means he wasn't out for the count just yet!"

A figure stepped into the light; small, squat, and wearing an ill-fitting suit, he spoke into the mic. Vera watched him approach the massive, near-naked woman. He looked so out of place next to her — so small.

"And can you blame him?" he continued. "Every five minutes, the payout doubles—this very smart gentleman decided to push his luck and go for the neat five hundred thousand. That's half a million, my friends, half a million!"

He placed a hand to the bump; his fingers, pale and skinny, contrasted the suppleness of Mila's gray-blue skin, in which it sank. Three times he thumped his fist against the belly, sending pudge rippling in all directions and coaxing a squirm out of the whimpering woman; then he placed his ear to it and listened.

He must have heard something through the groans and gurgles of a churning stomach, some muted thump or whine drowning in flesh, because after only a few seconds, he smiled.

"My friends, against all odds, our challenger is still kicking



Sakura



in there!”

A single person cheered.

“What a fighter he is! Our Mila is one of our most challenging girls. Yes, she might have trained herself to be non-lethal, but make no mistake, my friends, she’s a digesting machine and even her iron will can’t keep her natural urges at bay forever!”

He paused. He knew his words weren’t landing. He was teasing, stalling for time, but his audience cared about one thing only:

How many knocks had he heard?

“And our challenger knows it well. Two knocks, my friends. Our challenger has conceded!”

A whisper ran through the crowd; even to a newcomer like Vera, their disappointment was palpable. Wads of notes exchanged hands, and in the corner, someone ordered a tray of drinks. Vera paid them no mind, however; her attention had already been commandeered. In her pillar of pink light, Mila fell forward, pressed her body to the ground, unclenched her massive jaws, and just... waited.

The chain, slick with slime, rustled against the canvas.

Almost imperceptibly, the bulge on her stomach moved upwards, subsumed into the fat, only to emerge again on the neck, moving faster. Mila retched once, her whole body convulsed, as if resisting her command; then, something shifted. Her features hardened, her muscles tensed, and she threw her head back.

The bulge, almost up to her jaw, halted. For a moment it

stayed, frozen in time, teetering close to freedom—then Mila swallowed, and it was gone. Condensation billowed from her nostrils and mouth, forming a halo around her, and then her jaws snap shut, and the chain snapped. The smell of sex permeated all.

Vera's hands were trembling.

"What is this?"

"The house always wins with the lamia and the hadur," the sphinx said. "It's not just how long you last before you digest... sometimes, the predator just decides they're done edging."

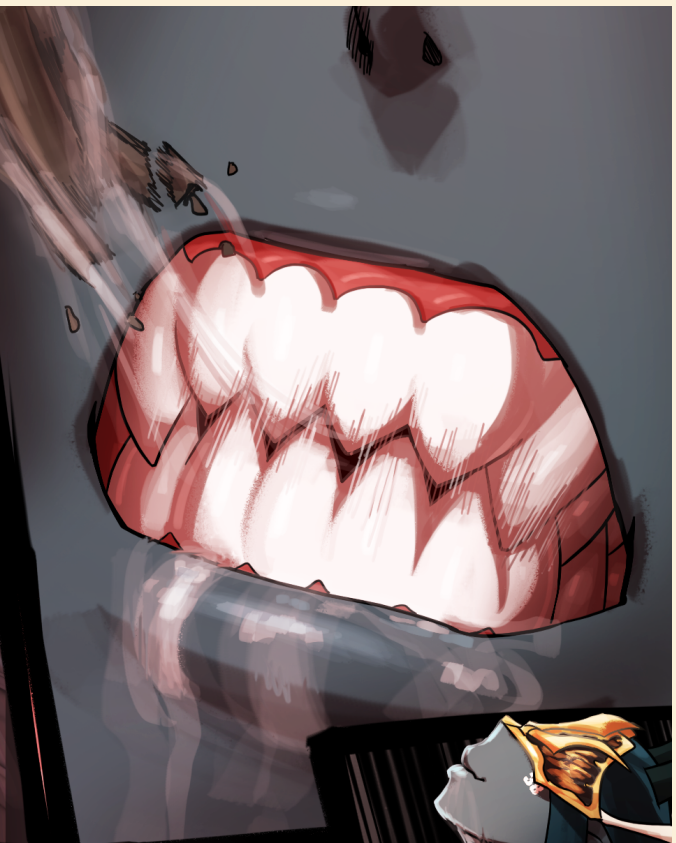
"That's... insane."

The sphinx shrugged. "You weigh your risks, I suppose, and—"

"I *love* insane."

The tragedy before them unraveled as expected. Mila lay prone on the floor, her stomach flattening against the canvas. Dense vibrations from her churning gut carried through the stage—Vera could swear she could feel them under her feet—and only intensified with each passing second. First, a whimper; soon, a quake. The bulge, back in Mila's belly, began to shift. Its form stirred and moved as some feeble force pushed outwards, barely able to make itself seen through the soft tissue, yet unmistakably moving, fighting, panicking.

Vera imagined how it must have felt. Shifting walls, rubbing all over one's body, massaging them in their warm juices. The distant song of whispers and gasps, overtaken by the gentle hums of a body at work and punctuated by an all-



encompassing heartbeat. A great weight, soft but oppressive, bearing down, compressing. She imagined the endless cavern, churning and grinding, the shifting of its walls and the throbbing of the muscles, ever shrinking, ever squeezing, until the alcove hardened into a cocoon, and the acids swallowed all with their hiss.

First, a hot flash. Then, a gentle sinking. And then, once the lights grew dim, a fading, blissful and final, like a whisper trailing off.

“Oh, poor Mila,” the sphinx said under her breath, “you weren’t ready yet...”

Her voice snapped Vera back to reality, if but for a moment—for as she looked up to meet her eyes, the sphinx’s curves distracted her. Then it clicked. The loose outfit the sphinx wore; the draping cloth over her shoulders and arms, which fluttered down to the waist, just as dark skin gave way to golden fur. She took in the sight of the large mouth, the powerful neck, the generous waist, and the barrel-shaped lower body, carried by four muscular legs.

“You’re a predator too, aren’t you?”

The sphinx did not reply. She bowed her head and stepped towards the show floor, where Mila, now in the throes of orgasm, was guided backstage.

“Wait!” Vera called out. “What’s your name, at least?”

The announcer’s voice, whose absence Vera hadn’t noticed until now, echoed through the room.

“And now for our next esurient beauty,” he said, “ready to give any challenger the adventure of their lifetime. You know



her, you love her — let's give a big round of applause for Rea!"

The sphinx took the stage and sat, cat-like, arms crossed, a smile on her face.

"We'll take a small break, friends," the announcer said. "So place your bets. Remember—starting fee is five thousand. Lasting ten minutes gets you your investment back in prize money, and every ten minutes after that further doubles it up! But be careful... I hear she skipped dinner today!"

* * *

Rea surveyed the audience.

Her job was easy. Be attractive, be present, eat. She had decades of experience in all of these practices; turning them into a living had been a lucky break. She was comfortable under the spotlight. She owned it just as surely as she owned the rapturous attention of all who regarded her.

But something was different tonight.

Her heart felt light in her chest. Her cheeks burned. Adrenaline coursed through her veins, leaving her jumpy, sublimating her, infusing her movements with a precision far different from the grace and relaxation she usually carried herself with. She was worried. She wanted to look good. Why? In the seven years she'd been the gun in this game of organic Russian roulette, and the three she'd rented out her innards before that, she never once felt as if she had anything to prove to anyone.

She asked herself why, and the answer came to mind, afloat in a cloud of fuzzy warm feelings that made her feel like a highschooler again.

I love insane.

Oh, no.

Compromised. Every mental process compromised.

Calm yourself. Carry on.

Everyone's watching.

A golden spotlight shone on her, and the familiar voice sounded. It was home. She was safe at home.

"Her family line goes back for eons! From cave-dwelling predators of prehistoric times, to ravenous riddlemasters guarding the gates of ancient cities, her kind has changed much

over the millennia, but two things haven't been touched by the flow of time — their beauty, and their appetite for humans!"

Rea sighed. The description got longer every day.

"The challenge is simple. The longer you last inside her, the better the prizes. Who's willing to step up?"

* * *

Vera did not wager that night. She had come unprepared for such high stakes. She sat on the black leather couch, simmering in her own frustration, watching as some lucky bastard stepped up and handed the announcer the hefty entry fee. And then it happened. Roused from her rest, the sphinx — no, Rea — took a single step forward, picked her up by the waist, lifted her without effort, and, without effort, swallowed her whole.

One second she was there, looking up at that widening smile, staring transfixed at the strings of saliva that connected Rea's fangs, peering at the infinite and sweltering void beyond. It should have been Vera there, letting that hot breath caress her. It should have been her feeling those teeth draw pink lines across her skin, a burning pain soothed by a wet tongue's massage; it should have been her shoved headfirst between those jaws without doubt or hesitation, flipped upside-down and turning dizzy as the blood rushed to her brain. That bulge down Rea's neck — her. That hint of motion disappearing between her breasts — her. The sagging weight in her expanding stomach, the bounce and gentle sound of shaking liquid, her,

her, her.

Vera kept the drinks coming. Rather than numb as she hoped, they only fanned the flames of her desire. She wanted to leave. She wanted to go back to her hotel room and forget about all of this, but instead, she stared, she stared as if she could will herself into that stomach and eject the pretender.

She looked so hard, that it took her some time to realize her stare was being reciprocated. Those terracotta eyes, glimmering under the colored light, focused on her, as if coaching her through every process. When they met glances, it was Vera who averted her eyes. Her cheeks burned like wildfire.

The minutes passed. At some point, the announcer stepped back onto the stage, tapped on Rea's belly, and put an ear to it.

"Another ten minutes!" he said, and the crowd cheered. He had no sooner finished the sentence than Rea rose, her forelegs stretching, nearly doubling her height and exposing her pale underside, where the fur was soft and downy and fat gave way to muscle.

She closed her eyes and frowned, and with a thunderous gurgle, her midriff flattened. The bulge, pushed deeper into her form, faded into her leonine lower half, and for a moment, Vera through, that was it, she was gone; soon, however, it reemerged as a tight swelling of the second stomach.

Vera was sweating. Until now, she could follow. She could rely on her imagination to carry her through. Beyond the first, humanoid stomach, however, all was unknown.

The buzzing in her ears slowly overtook all. The world

grew hazier and hazier, and good thing, too, because the entertainment didn't last. On the second check, after a mere twenty minutes marinading in Rea's gut, the pretender called it quits. Vera watched, hoping that the sphinx would echo Mila's approach, but no such luck. Rea knew what she was doing; she was a professional, nothing less, and so the bulge rose from second stomach to first, then back up the gullet, and from her unhinged jaw it slid out, covered in saliva and bile, a naked, whimpering, beet-red wretch.

Rea wiped the spit from the corner of her mouth as the challenger was given a towel and her clothes back. She showed no outward emotion, but her eyes, they wouldn't stop staring at Vera...

* * *

Come next morning, Vera would not remember the trip back to the hotel. All she remembered was warmth and a whiff of cinnamon. And though she hoped sleep and a cold shower would wash away her pining for the embrace of a sphinx's gullet, the memory of the show haunted her.

She waited by the casino's door until it reopened, then stood watch by the curtain until the showroom behind it began populating again. This time, she was prepared—money in her purse, no stupefying agents in her bloodstream, entry token between her index and middle fingers.

She entered, she took her seat, she lit up a cigar, and she waited. She was the first in the room, and got to observe the

room before it went dark; how barren it looked, how empty without a crowd and an engorged predator.

In due time, it would begin, and she hoped to see Rea on the stage again. The odds of it may have been low, but Vera had never been one to shy away from a gamble.

Carnavalesque games had only succeeded to whet Vera's appetite. A minotaur swallowed down a bag of junk and then invited a member of the crowd to shove an arm down his gullet and try to fish out the valuable gemstone hidden within before the time ran out. A frog-girl challenged the most athletic among the crowd to try and dodge her prehensile tongue for a full minute—and when the challenger failed to do so, she pulled him in, storing him in her transparent gut and forcing him to sit out the rest of the evening's festivities. A nine foot tall female bodybuilder offered her hand in marriage, and her considerable dowry, to anyone who could satisfy her in bed. She left the room with the contestant, and half an hour later, returned alone. All of this, Vera watched intently, never allowing herself to enjoy it too much; she was, after all, saving herself for the main course.

She smelled her before she saw her. Cinnamon. The lights dimmed, the crowd made itself comfortable, and a female voice announced Rea's entrance.

Even before the sales pitch finished, Vera stood up. She pushed a stack of notes into the surprised announcer's hand and approached the stage, unprompted. A halo of cigar smoke still fluttered around her, and its leathery-smoky scent mingled with the sweetness of the ancient spice.

Rea smiled.

“In for the money or the thrill?” she asked.

“Neither. I have a counter-offer.”

The announcer stepped forward, already gesturing for security to remove Vera, but the sphinx shook her head.

“Interesting. And what’s your counter-offer?”

“One hour. If I last one hour inside you, I get a date.”

For the first time, Rea seemed surprised. “You could have gotten that for free, you know.”

“I know,” Vera smiled, “but where’s the sport in that?”

A peal of laughter escaped Rea’s mouth. “Honey, I’m flattered, but you’d never last an hour inside me. At the very least let’s add in a handicap; yes, an hour, but in three sessions. A fifteen-minute one, a twenty-minute one, and a twenty-five-minute one”

“Do you think I’m weak?”

“I think you’re drunk.”

“Just a little. But fine, I’ll take the handicap. Now, shall we begin?”

Recovered from the confusion, the female announcer had already turned back to the crowd. “Did you hear that, ladies and gentlemen? Our new contestant’s goal isn’t the money or the thrill—it’s Rea’s herself! Can this adventurous newcomer the beast with the heart of stone? Or will she end up digested, nothing but fat on her would-be date’s frame? Place your bets, place your bets!”

Vera found it easy to ignore her, and instead focus on the strong, warm hands around her shoulders. The tongue slid across her neck. The tingles down her spine. Within moments,

the open maw stood before her, inches from her face, casting out waves of humid air with each measured exhale. Cinnamon. It smelled like cinnamon.

Vera melted in Rea's hands, even before the sphinx's lips made contact. What came after was expected, but no less rapturous for it. The warmth enveloped. The dampness came after, creeping through her hair down to her scalp and mixing with her sweat. Her tongue was flat and coarse, cat-like; its bristles hooked into her designer dress and tore chunks off, baring Vera's skin. The tips of the fangs rested, careful, against the nape of her neck. They were sharp, they pricked, but the pain they caused melted into bliss, just as all other discomforts did in this ocean of cinnamon and shallow breaths.

What came after pushed her into a state of shock.

The lips squeezed around Vera. The gullet widened. The tongue rippled underneath, curling around her neck and squeezing just hard enough to make her worry. The air was heavy with Rea's breath. It weighed down in Vera's lungs. Cinnamon, cinnamon. It came from within. It promised more.

The swallow came languid, like an afterthought, a shift in balance that sent Vera sliding forward, inch by inch at a steady pace. Her head pressed through between the tonsils, always guided by the coarse tongue. Rea's uvula, dripping with slime, dragged across her face. Inwards-curving canines slid seamlessly over her bare skin, easing her in, yet threatening to punish a stop. Rea enveloped her, and it felt otherworldly. Even as the rings of the esophagus locked around her face, even as her shoulders squeezed past the first row of incisors, even as her everything became steam and motion and oppressive

sweetness, Vera remained still, a passive observer of her dream come true.

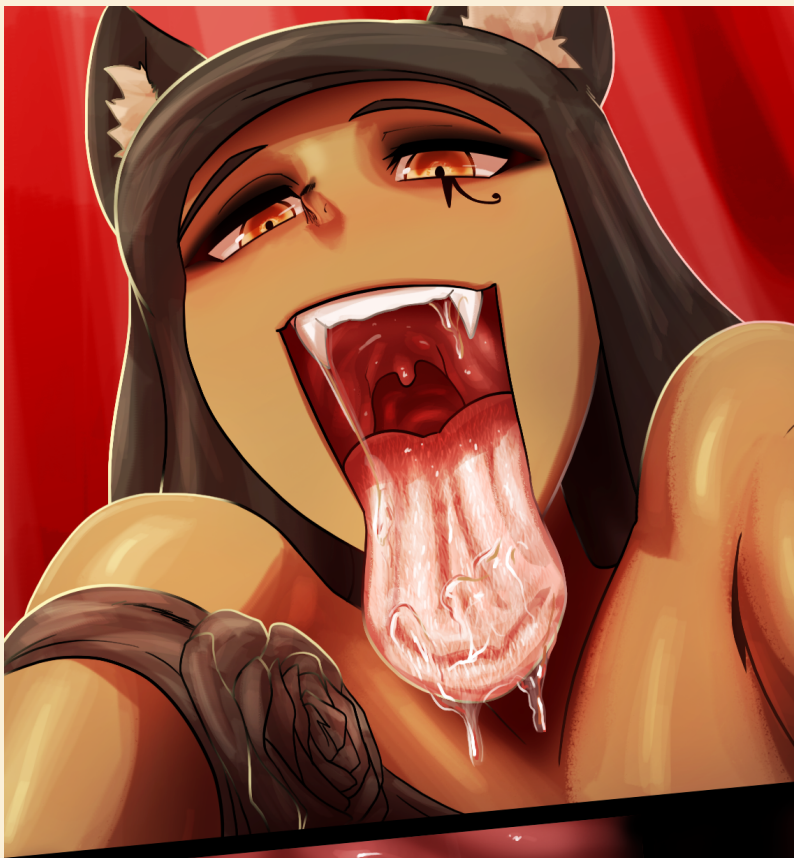
Soon, she found herself trapped, locked between flesh and flesh, contained in a soft tube that constricted and released in rhythmic motions, each of them easing her into a minute drop that brought her closer to the stomach, one inch at a time.

Her head poked into the stomach first. Its entry released a flood of slime and saliva, which dripped down her features and mixed into the foam below. She gasped for air, and her lungs filled to the brim with the sweet, humid air that permeated Rea's innards. The scent nearly overwhelmed her. It pooled in her lungs and carried outwards, from her heart through the bloodstream, a sense of need and longing, a desire beyond desire. Cinnamon. Lust smelled like cinnamon.

Lips closed around her feet. Now every inch of her was encased in Rea. From her head, pressing down on the floor of the stomach, to her toes, wiggling their way across the tongue; there was nothing beyond. The heartbeat echoed. Searing warmth emanated from every wall, fueled by the burning of calories in preparation for another intake; it softened her skin, relaxed her muscles, and left her flushed and inert, like a sauna. And as more of her body pushed into the cramped alcove, it only became more unbearable.

Yet a dopey grin crossed her lips from cheek to cheek. Saliva flowed down the corner of her mouth—hers, Rea's, was there even a difference anymore?

Slowly, she came to a rest. The stomach warped around her to give her enough space to curl up, and no more. Everything else, it resisted on its overwhelming weight alone.



Gastric juices bubbled around her. Its thick fumes crept further into her mind.

Time lost its meaning.

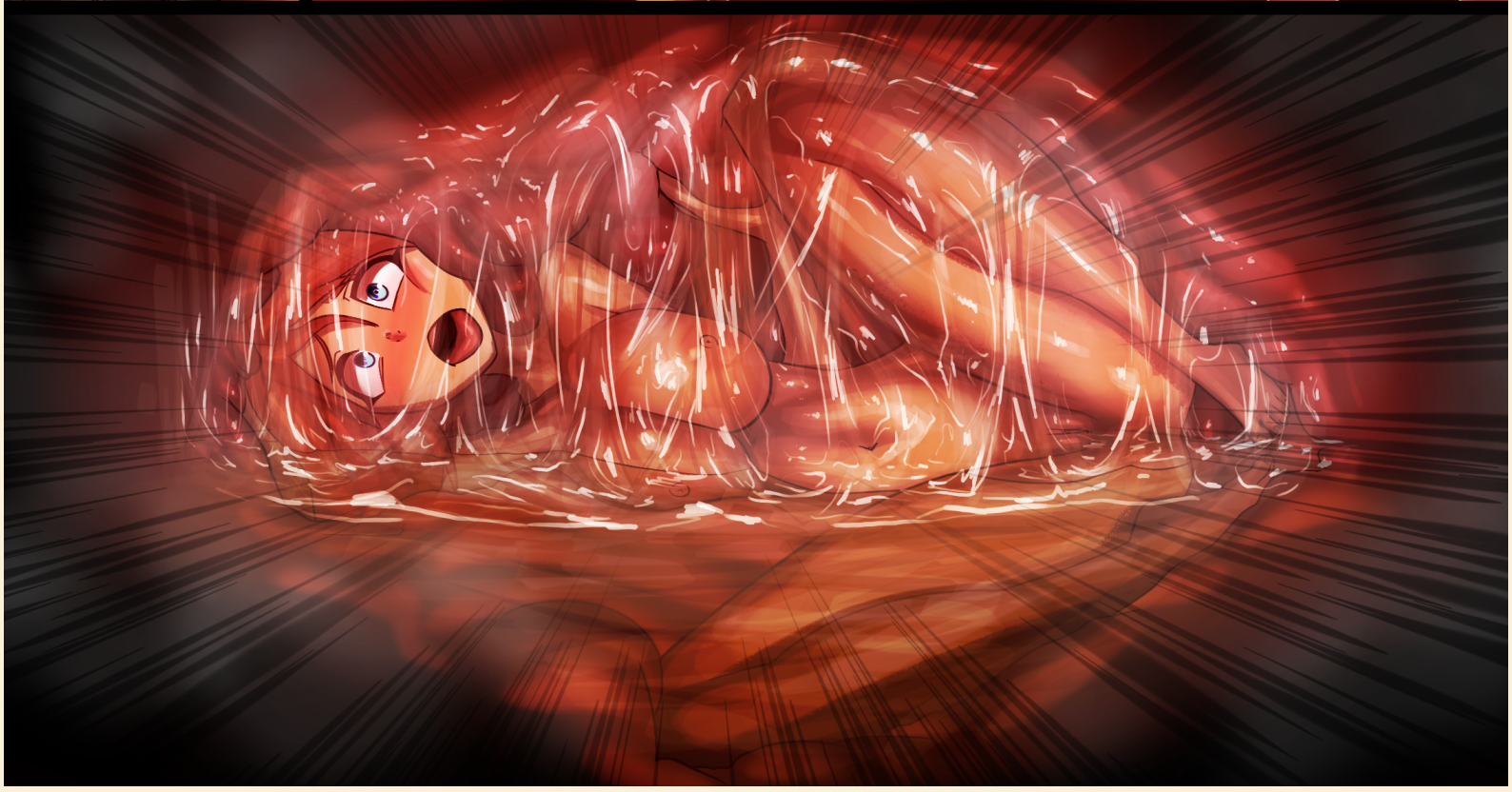
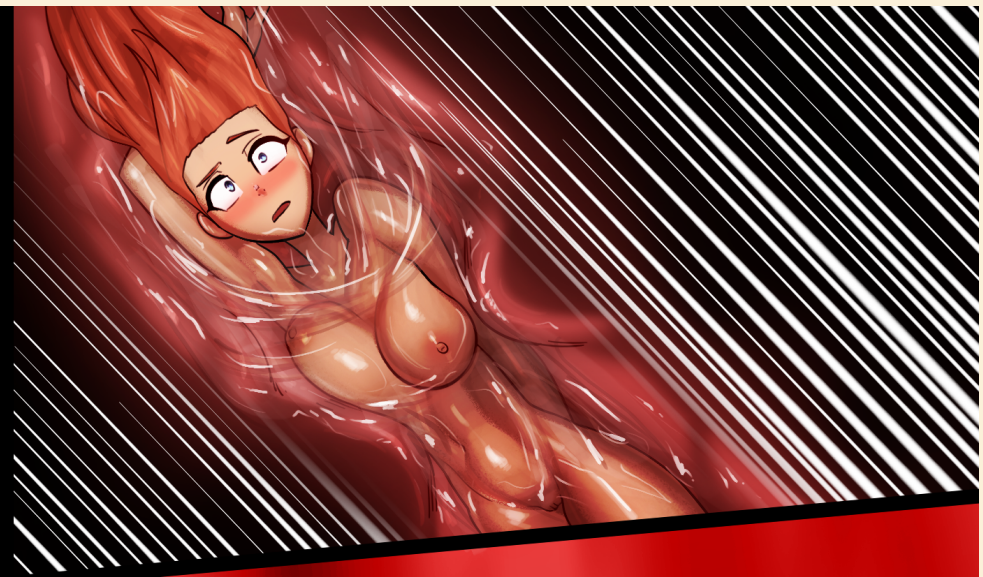
When the knocks came, she barely heard them. She couldn't tell if it had been a minute, or an hour. Outside the audience awaited her response, but she found it difficult to care. She was in heaven, with what remained of her clothes dancing through the shifting juices like seaweed, and comfortable darkness setting her mind at ease.

But what if she didn't reply? Would it be taken as a concession... or an assumption that she was done for? Would she be forced back into the cold?

She thumped the creased wall twice—a sign that she was alive, and good to continue. The attempts to contact her ceased. She was alone again, at last, alone with Rea. She settled in, but as she did, everything shifted.

The already cramped walls contracted around her. The thick juices rose to submerge her. She took a deep breath of the last pocket of cinnamon-scented steam and braced. Digestive juices filled the alcove, tickling at her numb skin, coating her in a thin membrane of slime and enzymes. Then, with a roar, some fleshy valve gaped underneath, draining them in an instant. Vera barely had time to breathe before the walls collapsed around her, dragging her into the pulsing darkness beyond.

Crushing muscles carried her helpless body through a winding road of squelches and groans. Her slick skin slid effortlessly, and everything felt like it floated, like all had weight but her, a machine of sweat and slime with her stuck in the cogs.



The second stomach welcomed her in its foamy bath, a far cry from the claustrophobic confines of the previous chamber. This barrel-shaped alcove, low to the ground and gently swaying, allowed Vera to stretch her limbs a bit. There the juices roiled like a stormy sea, waves crashing against her supine form. Her mind swirled, her body slept. Stronger acid bit at her skin, and she barely noticed.

* * *

Vera waited by the door, cigarette in her trembling hand. Her eyes darted from side to side; her foot tapped against the floor. The smell of cinnamon had been on her mind all day. She had not slept. Three showers had failed to wash away the slickness from her skin, but the scent, the scent had faded almost immediately, and she felt empty without it.

Those who regarded her, did so with worry or annoyance. Vera didn't blame them. She had made a pest of herself all day, trying to spin her charm with any casino employee she could find, trying to learn more about Rea, desperate for any crumb of information that could bring her a step closer to her. But the locals were tight-lipped, probably used to dealing with people like her every day. Her charms had failed.

So she waited as the minutes dragged into hours, finding perfunctory hope in every figure that walked by, hoping that one of them would be her shortcut into the back room. Each disappointment was more bitter than the last.

But when the doors behind the curtain did unlock and she

was allowed to make her way in, she elbowed her way into Rea's mouth for round two of three, and it felt right. Like her entire existence could be this.

And as the familiar scent innervated her nervous system, firing off every nervous receptor and rewarding her with a wave of satisfaction, she let herself sink, sink, sink into the predator's gut one more time.

* * *

Vera woke up in a hospital bed. Her flushed skin was raw, oversensitive, but it was the aching of her bones and muscles that truly bothered her. She felt as if she'd been through a shredder; every single part of her was sore. A nearby television played an old music video.

Vera sat up, and felt an IV line tug at her arm.

"What time is it?"

The nurse cleaning the next bed checked her phone.

"Half past seven."

"Day?"

"Miss, you shouldn't—"

"Please."

"Saturday."

Vera breathed a sigh of relief. She still had time to get back to the casino, a few hours at least. She tried to get on her feet, but the nurse rushed to stop her.

"Miss! You're in no state to—"

"I need to go."

"Miss, you were brought in showing symptoms of severe exhaustion and dehydration. You've been rolling and mumbling in your sleep all day. Please, you need to lie down and rest."

"Who brought me here?"

The nurse bit her lip. In her averted eyes, Vera saw the hesitation of someone who knew to ask no questions. It gave her her answer.

"I'm going," Vera said. "You can't keep me here. Call me a taxi."

"Look, miss, a friend of yours called. They wanted to talk to you, but you weren't conscious—they're on their way now, to pick you up."

Vera's eyes went wild. No. No, no, no. She had no friends; no friends that wouldn't just make this worse, anyway. Whatever this was, was a bluff, just another move to stand behind her and what she wanted. What she *needed*.

"I'll call the taxi myself. Where are my things?"

The nurse rolled her shoulders. Just another day on the job.

"Beside your bed."

* * *

Vera spared no thoughts for the impression she made on the taxi driver, still wearing nothing but her underwear and the hospital gown. Instead, she tapped her fingers on the armrest and continued asking the driver if he couldn't go any faster.

Her eyes were glued to the clock. What if Rea was on first? What if they skipped the preliminary entertainment tonight? What if she missed it, and they considered it a concession on her part? No, she needed to get back there. She needed to win, she needed that date.

She needed Rea all around her for the rest of time.

She paid the driver and rushed into the casino. Nobody did anything about her; they just carried on as usual.

She never stopped to wonder why.

The bouncers at the curtain took her token. Beyond, the door-lined hallway led to the dark room. She could hear the crowd settling. She was just in time.

Her steps echoed across the corridor. The air smelled of bleach and perfume. Once she crossed into the showroom, someone stopped her. The announcer from the first night. He looked confused.

"I'm so glad you came," he whispered. "I thought you wouldn't show up."

"I wouldn't miss this for my life."

The announcer blinked. "Really? Huh, okay. In that case, on to the stage with you. The show's about to start!"

He didn't need to ask twice.

Vera hurried to the stage. Her heart swelled up with excitement. Dozens of eyes stared at her figure in the dark, judging, whispering, some commenting on her appearance or state of dress. Neither their praise nor criticism even registered. Nothing mattered to Vera but seeing Rea, feeling Rea, being within Rea.

She stepped onto the stage. A purple light faded in, and from the haze, features emerged – unfamiliar features.

“And tonight, my friends, a special treat! Covering for our lovely sphinx Rea who’s absent tonight... you know her, you love her, you’ve seen what she can do... put your hands together for Merethis, the lamia!”

The barely-visible figure moved her head, and even through the dim light, Vera knew she was piercing her with her eyes.

“You look surprised,” she said. “Did nobody tell you Rea isn’t here today? Visiting a friend who’s in the hospital, from what I understand. I wonder who that could be...?”

* * *

Rea sat in the waiting room’s corner, flipping through a fashion magazine as she waited. New styles for lamia were about to hit the market; she couldn’t help but smile at how much they looked like oversized Christmas socks. Sphinx and centaur section, on the other hand, was more of the same. So much for that. Fur didn’t often agree with fabric.

The woman behind the counter looked up from her screen. “Can I help you?”

“Yes, I’m here to see my friend. Her name is Vera Halen.”

“One moment.”

She tip-tapped a few keys, and waited—a bright blue reflected on her spectacles for a moment, before giving way to white streaked with black.



“Miss Halen has already checked out.”

“Really?” Rea asked, putting the magazine down and rising to her feet. “When?”

Before the receptionist had the chance to reply, she caught herself.

“Ah, if she could walk, I’m sure she’s doing fine. She probably went back to the hotel to rest. I wonder if she’ll show up tomorrow night...”

* * *

Vera didn’t have it in her to say no. She was too frustrated, too tired; she felt as if she’d die if she didn’t get another hit of that cinnamon smell. This lamia, this regal-looking creature with ornamented scales and gold baubles woven into her braids, this idol around whom awestruck followers gathered; she seemed as if she could do anything, be anyone. If there was a chance of her providing a fraction of what Rea had given her, then Vera had to take the gamble.

This was no longer about odds.

This had never been about odds.

But Merethis just stared, amused. Her smile was wide; too wide.

“You don’t seem too bothered. Rea seemed so insistent that you were only doing this for the date...”

Vera blinked. Merethis’s words floated in her mind, long after that honeyed voice stopped ringing. Her eyes darted across the room. So many faces staring at her. So many people

watching. She wanted to escape their gaze, dive into a haze of cinnamon, and melt.

“I don’t know why I’m doing any of this.”

“I do,” Merethis says, “and I’m sure you do, too. It’s alright. You don’t have to feel bad for doing what comes naturally to you. We all have a role to play. I eat and digest. You are eaten try not to digest. Money exchanges hands, and all is well with the world. Rea isn’t here today. You don’t have to do this, yet here you are, because you’re not doing what you’re doing because of her. Her natural pheromones have done their work and now you need them.”

Vera bit her lip. Her mouth was dry.

Merethis leaned back. Her body was made to be at rest. her head sank into one of her slithering rings, cushioned by the fat of countless prey; the tip of her tail wiggled at the end, and everything was in motion.

“You’re addicted, Vera dear.”

Merethis smiled.

“You may find what you crave inside me.”

Her tail, thick as a tree trunk, wrapped around Vera’s body. She let it.

“You might even live enough to enjoy it.”

It lifted her off her feet.

“Then again... I wouldn’t bet on it.”

It dragged her body feet-first towards the smiling lamia.

“You’re very obedient. Rea trained you well. But I’m not so kind a mistress, Vera dear. In fact, some have called me...”

She twisted her tail, and it wrung the gown from Vera’s

body. The paper-thin fabric ripped without resistance, and its torn pieces fluttered to the floor.

"...capricious."

The soft underbelly scales ground against's Vera's perspired skin; an endless web of muscle pulling and pulling, squirming and thrashing, finely controlled. They delivered her to a maw that unfurled; a thick tongue rolled out and slithered around her ankles.

Merethis's mouth was warm. It was also soft and spacious, so spacious that Vera didn't even notice her feet were in until they dipped into the steaming pool of saliva. The tail around her loosened its grip, and it was enough for gravity to enact its pull, and before Vera knew it, she slid inside.

Something halted her descent. Merethis's lips locked around her waist, soft, full, cushions against her weary skin. They slid back up to her chest, up to her breasts. The throat around her shins receded, paused, then crept upwards again. Those moist lips slid up and down her body, that thick tongue worked her body from tip to toe, and the crowd hummed and gasped as the lamia leaned back further. Something soft surrounded Vera—Merethis's breasts pulled together, easing her in, easing her out.

Vera's skin flushed a brilliant crimson. Merethis handled her naked body as if it were a penis, engulfed then released, breasts working her sides, tongue working her legs, and the rest of her lost in a maelstrom of lust and shame. She felt mocked. Insulted. Used.

She didn't want her to stop.



When those lips dragged down her back once more, something felt different. The tail had let go. Only gravity remained.

Merethis swallowed, and Vera sank.

Sank down the welcoming tube through which heavy breaths exhaled, each one widening the gaping flesh, then allowing it to relax—and it was this motion, steady and rhythmic, that eased Vera’s descent into the abyss.

In a moment, all went dark. Gurgling took over the soundscape. Wet stickiness replaced all sensation. It didn’t smell like cinnamon—it smelled like sweet and bitter death.

The esophagus felt as if it went on forever. Vera’s eyes

stuck to her body; her eyelids were too heavy to open. All she could do was brace herself and try to withstand the pressure. In her chest, her heart raced, degrees of magnitude more rapid than Merethis's hammering—a hum, a buzz, a whisper amidst a quake. Fear welled up in her chest; a sudden realization of her frailness, and the overwhelming danger of her surroundings. Unlike Rea's innards, unlike the cinnamon-scented bath that soothed and caressed, Merethis felt oppressive. She was too big. Too strong. Vera couldn't trust a body that could claim her at a whim. And now, as she felt her feet poke out of the fleshy sphincter below, and the burning fumes from the stomach tickled her sensitive skin, she knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that she had made a mistake.

Rea had never meant to hurt her.

Merethis meant everything.

She fell into the stomach, sank into its juices. They burned. Sweat ran down her back her forehead—thick droplets shattered against her breast, then faded from feeling. She felt more awake by the second; the burning inside told her to run, give up, run. She slammed her fists on the walls, clawed at the vertical creases that bled slime and acid into the pool.

Merethis's stomach did not budge. It absorbed her blows into the sheer density of her frame. She called out, but her voice, too, was claimed.

Nobody would hear her. By the time the announcer came to check on her, it would be too late. Already, she could feel herself begin to fade...

If you absolutely must take the challenge, avoid the lamia and the hadur.

The house always wins with those two.

Rea's words echoed in her mind. For the first time, she understood them – she understood the fear of losing.

If she didn't find her way out, she would never see Rea again. She would never catch another whiff of cinnamon.

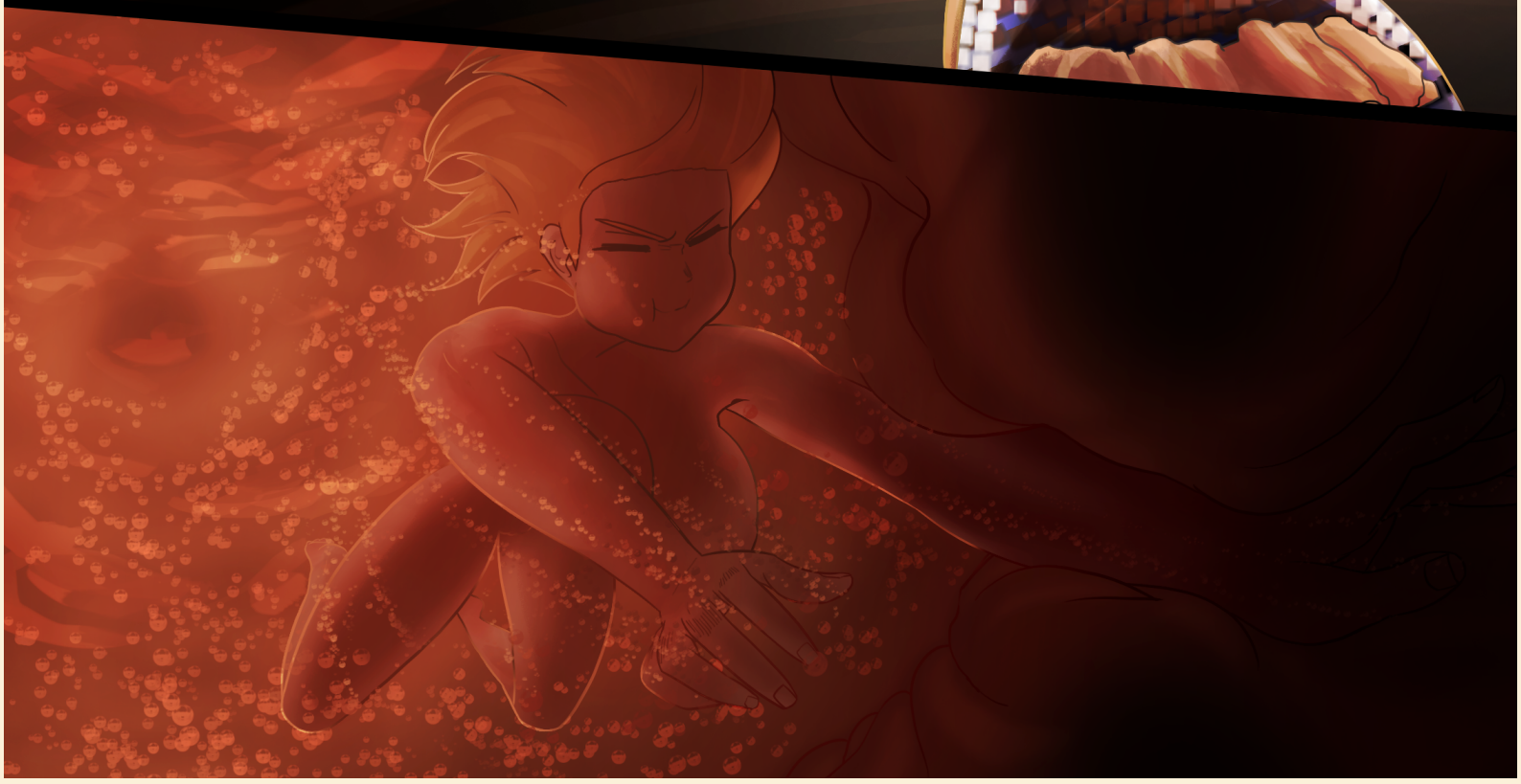
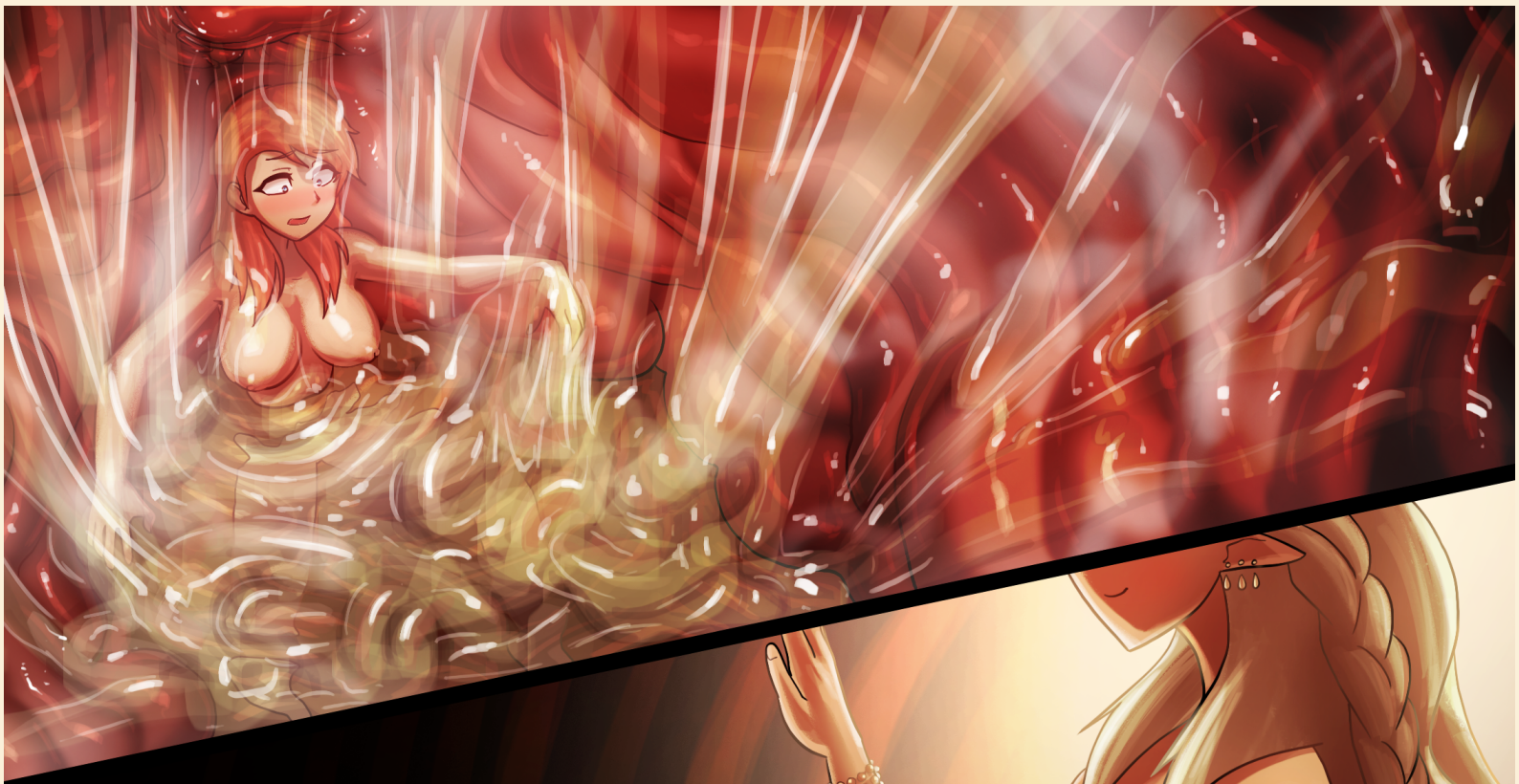
Never.

Her heart and lungs burned. The thick acid weighed her down, restricted her movements. If she fought, she would exhaust herself. She had to think. She had to be precise.

There was no way back up. All she could do was try to find the other way out.

She took a deep breath and dove, feeling around the bottom for a familiar shape amidst the squishy flesh. She followed the creases to where they converged; a small ring, blocking the way down. She pushed it, punched it, lined its circumference with her hands. Finding the cavity at its center, she slid a finger in, and for the first time since she had been swallowed, something gave. It swallowed her fist, then her arm up to her elbow, and when she forced it further, *fwomph*, it gaped, pulling her into the vacuum and the second stomach beyond.

Vera noticed the difference immediately. The cavern beyond was cramped to the point of crushing; its weight pinned her against the slippery floor, making it hard to move. Steeling herself, she crawled. She pushed herself through the endless tunnel, one elbow after the other, squish, squish, squish, in the pitch-black depths. The heartbeat grew distant, giving way to the rushing of blood through veins as thick as



fingers. Over that backdrop, every squelch, every gurgle was deafening.

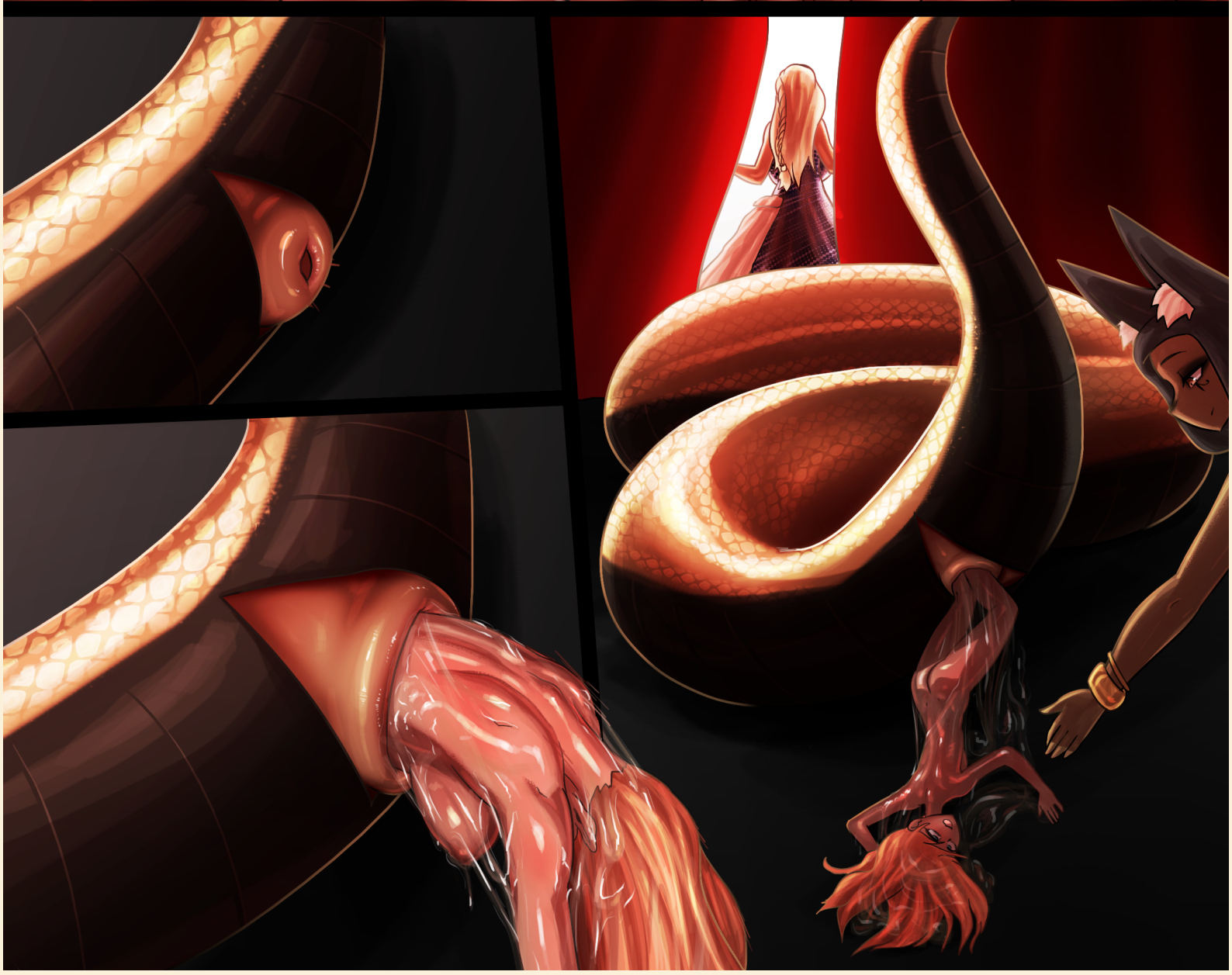
She braved the sweltering depths, and one by one, her senses faded. Her vision was long gone. Her sense of smell, overloaded by the bitterness of acids. She couldn't feel where her body ended and Merethis's began. The endless cavern chipped away at everything, inch by inch, until all that was left was the fire inside, and the overwhelming need to see Rea's smile one more time.

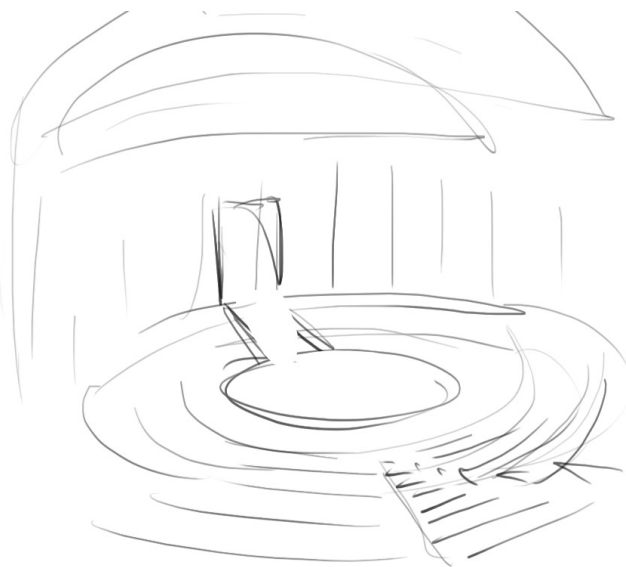
Another valve opened before her. Another sea pulled her in, one that didn't burn, one in which she drifted.

A candle in the wind.

A white void.

A hint of cinnamon.







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