

Point Of No Return



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Lyndon, the youngest of the soldiers, broke formation first. His first and only contact with the enemy was a one-way trip down her gullet.

She neutralized him with trained ease. One second he charged through the mud - the next, the last glimpse of his legs disappearing between pursed lips. Before the bulge even settled in her stomach, she turned her eye on the rest of the squadron. It was already too late.

What she had taken for a mistake turned out to be a tactical decision. It took her no longer than a few seconds to consume her prey - one to snag him, one to shove his wriggling body down her throat, and one for her muscles to pull him into her depths - but it was enough.

The team moved like a coordinated unit. Though half her size and nowhere near as fast, they exploited her moment's distraction and capitalized. Two grabbed her arms, and their weight caused her to slouch forward; two others disappeared under her legs, reemerging with well-aimed blows at the back of her knees, toppling her.

Melissa watched from the sidelines, her entire body twitching with impatience. Her serpentine tail coiled and slammed into the mud; her nostrils flared, slit pupils contracted, and a fang poked at her lower lip.

"Lamia! Now!"

The voice, struggling to make itself heard over the giant woman's roars, triggered something inside of Melissa. She thrust forward towards where her squadmates struggled to keep their victim still; her eyes lingering only for a moment on the bounces of a swollen gut. As she approached, they moved out of the way. She opened her mouth and they guided the woman's feet into it.

Mud, sweat, pollution, ash. Melissa had long grown accustomed to the taste of warfare. Even the shouts of her victim - in a language she did not fully understand - no longer bothered her. The pressure of feet against her tongue, pushing inwards; the scraping of curled toes descending through her gullet - they held no more surprises for her. She knew to adjust, clench, swallow. Adjust. Clench. Swallow. Line up the limb in her mouth, lock it in place, and pull on those muscles at the back of her throat, the ones that made her tongue flatten and her throat expand. Repeat until mouth is empty and belly is full.

"Let go, Emerson!" a voice roared; her squad leader. "You'll get pulled in!"

To her right, one of her squadmates stumbled back, clutching a saliva-covered hand. Melissa barely registered; the world around her muted. Her esophagus expanded wider and wider with each swallow, its pulsing walls clenched around the knees, thighs, and waist of her victim, offering no room to move or struggle. Her maw ached, and still she opened wider, rolling her lips over the squirming belly of her target. Under her tongue and through her foe's flesh, Melissa felt the vibrations of a struggling Lyndon; the echoing of his fists against thick walls and his terrified screams.

"Focus, Emerson. You don't wanna end up like Lyndon."

A grim silence fell over the group. Melissa made herself deaf to it. Inch by inch, her victim filled her insides. Weight shifted inside her, sliding between throbbing walls, sinking into her flesh. Breasts, Shoulders. Neck.

Adjust. Clench. Swallow.

Another enemy neutralized.

"You painted her again."

"I guess I did..."

Melissa slithered back a step from the canvas. The lattice of textures and blurred colors coalesced into a portrait. She wiped some sweat from her brow, leaving a smudge of titanium white - and huffed.



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– the next, the last glimpse of his legs
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she turned her eye on the rest of the squadron.
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Morris stood at the door. In one hand he held a basket; on the other, a tray. He had that look about him again - the look of someone too old to work and too young to retire. Every day his hair turned greyer, his cheeks more sunken, and his beard more straw-like.

"You know you don't have to ask for permission, Morris. You're my handler, after all."

"I prefer the term custodian. Besides, it's only polite. This is your home, bars or no bars."

Melissa smiled. "Please come in."

"Thank you."

He stepped into the cell. For all the effort put into making it look cozy, the concrete walls and lack of windows still betrayed its true nature. The colorful patchwork blankets, the canvas resting against the walls, even the small desk at which she was allowed to read her correspondence - they all contrasted against the featureless grey that surrounded them. And most contrasting of all was Melissa herself, the fair-skinned lamia, with her shimmering orange scales.

"I hear the last one they pulled out of you surrendered. She even coughed up Lyndon."

"How is he?"

"He'll pull through."

Melissa sighed. "I'm glad she surrendered. I was afraid they'd make me eat her again."

"Once was enough, huh?"

"Always."

He put the bucket down at the foot of Melissa's easel; she thanked him with a nod, and took the tray off his hands as well. She raised an eyebrow. The portions were as small as ever - enough to keep her alive, yet never enough to sate her hunger - but between the glass of water and the bowl of bread porridge, something else greeted her. Something unexpected.

"Is this a chocolate chip cookie I see? Has the cook finally lost it?"

"I got a box from the missus. She baked them herself. I figured you'd earned a little reward for last night. I know it's probably too tiny for someone as big as you to get anything out of, but you know, I just thought-"

"It's perfect, Morris. Tell her I said thank you."

He grew pale. "I will," he said, but Melissa could tell it was a lie. She couldn't blame him. How do you tell your predator friend that your wife doesn't trust them? As far as his wife was concerned, Morris risked his life every day just from existing near the lamia.

Morris broke the silence before it had a chance to linger. "Who is she?"

"Huh?"

"The girl you painted. The girl you keep painting."

"Ah." Melissa's gaze grew distant. "A friend of mine. From before the war. Well, I thought she was a friend, at least. The more I think about her, the more things get muddled."

He stepped closer, patting her side. Melissa pretended to not notice his wincing, as soft human flesh bumped into rock-hard scale. The second pat came much gentler than the first. "Looks like I'm not the only one with someone to come home to."

Melissa bit her lip. Not noticing the gesture, Morris stepped closer, scratching his scraggly beard as he stared at the painting. She had to stop herself from snatching it away from view.

"You know what's funny? If I squint, she looks kind of like Tumul's kid, doesn't she?"

"I don't know who that is."

"You know, that Gomaran chancellor. The one who said that stuff about the- you know what? That doesn't matter. It's a beautiful painting, let's not ruin it by associating it with bigots."

Melissa looked down. "Thanks."

"Well," Morris said, cracking his knuckles, "I should get back to work. See you at dinner time, Melissa."

As he stepped through the doorway, however, he paused, and looked over his shoulder at the lamia who was setting the tray down on her desk.

"Maybe," Morris said, "try drawing someone else next time? I know that's not what it's about, but I had to butter up a few friends to get you access to your art supplies at all, and people might start asking questions if they think you're painting portraits of the enemy."

Melissa said nothing. She turned to the painting, the light gone from her eyes, and bit her lip. Her custodian - her handler - said no more, and after he turned the key in the lock and walked away with his slight limp of his, Melissa found herself alone in her cell.

"Amina," she uttered under her breath.

She had more than the cookie to look forward to.

Huddled up in the abandoned building, Melissa didn't dare breathe.

Her surroundings were as she remembered them from childhood, but small - much too small. The same hallways that she pranced in as a child, now she slithered through; once so massive, they now felt cramped and claustrophobic around her overgrown body. But the smells were the same, and the beautiful silence, broken only by the chirping of birds - all those things that allowed her to pretend, if she closed her eyes, that she was back in the past. Before the war, before the tail, before the scales; back when summer break seemed infinite, and the hours passed both rushed and ponderous.

The wind shifted, and a new scent mingled with the smells of mortar and dust. Melissa's nostrils flared, and her muscles relaxed; a smile crept into her features. That scent, exotic and understated, with hints of silk and spice, was Amina's.

She made it all better.

Melissa sat up. She readjusted her overalls, fluffed up her hair, and leaned back on her tail. She heard the steps come closer. The smell grew more intense. Her heart buzzed in her chest. There she came.

She opened her eyes at the last moment.

Amina stopped slouching when she saw her friend. She lowered the scarf she used to cover her features, smiled, and waved. "Sorry I'm late. Dad wanted me to go to one of his dinners. It took me ages to get him off my case."

Melissa barely registered the words. She beamed and patted her soft underbelly, which she bent into the loose shape of a seat. Amina giggled. She approached - her hands were hot against Melissa's tepid skin - and laid over the squishy surface, letting out a long, weary sigh.

"Tell me about your week."

For the next hour, they livened up in each other's presence. They always did. They talked and laughed, and for just a little while, everything was well with the world, and no border dared separate them. They discussed what they'd do when the war ended. They made grand plans that they both knew would never come together. Amina wanted to tour the world. Melissa wanted to see the sea. And during lulls in the conversation - or when the sounds of movement outside snapped them out of their reverie and forced them to fall silent - they simply enjoyed each other's closeness. Melissa enjoyed the warmth of the small body in her arms, and the softness of that silky skin against hers, and the scent of her hair. Amina allowed the lamia's tail to envelop her, to cushion her, to banish the cruel world and welcome her into a new reality, where all was softness and comfort.

"I just felt something," Amina said.

Melissa tilted her head. Splayed on her tail, Amina pressed her ear to the soft, cream-colored underbelly. There was a smirk on her lips - a smirk that became a full-brown grin when another low vibration resonated through Melissa's flesh.

"Oooh, someone's hungry!"

Melissa sank into the floor, hiding her flushed face in her hands. But her friend just laughed - a bright, crystalline laughter without the subtlest hint of mockery; laughter so contagious that Melissa couldn't help but chuckle along. Amina poked and prodded at her tail, watching as her hands sank into the squishy flesh; her touch coaxed even more groans from the lamia's innards.

"Eek! Stop it!"

"What if I don't?" Amina asked, each word punctuated by a peal of laughter.

"I'll squeeze you!"

"Maybe I like being squeezed," she said, grabbing a handful of pudge.

"Heee! Stop it, stop it!"

With her superior strength and reach, Melissa was eventually able to rout the barrage of touchy-feely hands; with one final push, gentle but firm, Amina rolled onto the floor with a dry thud. For a moment, they looked at each other. One coiled up into a defensive stance, with her face glowing a bright crimson and her slit pupils locked into a predatory glare; the other, lying supine on the floor, wheezing like a hyena.

"You're really mean, you know that?" Melissa asked, still trying to hold back laughter, as she wiped a tear from her cheek.

"Yep."

Sweet, blissful silence fell between the two. Amina sat up and started digging through her jacket pockets. Melissa watched her empty pocket after pocket. One held an expensive leather wallet, so full that it seemed about to burst; another held a latest model smartphone with a personalized cover - switched off, of course. The third one, however, produced a small box, tied up with a velvet bow; she handed it to Melissa, in whose hands it seemed that much tinier.

"You shouldn't have," Melissa said, biting her lip.

"Well, are you going to open it or what?"

"Oh!"

She undid it with trembling fingers. She removed the bow first, and placed it on her lap; then, using her claw, she sliced through the sellotape, taking care to not damage the wrapping paper, which she undid and folded up until all that stood between her and the contents was a small cardboard box.

"Don't think I can't hear you snickering," Melissa said, smirking. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing. I've never seen someone get so hung up on opening a present. You're supposed to rip it open, you know."

"But if I do it this way, I can reuse the wrapping paper later."

"Melissa..."

"What?"

"Live a little!"

The lamia bit her lip. She picked up the piece of wrapping paper, so neatly folded, and looked at it hesitantly.

"I'll keep it," she finally said. "You never know when wrapping paper might come in useful."

"That's the most Melissa thing I've ever heard."

"Shush!"

Amina rolled her eyes. "Well, hurry up then, before we both die of old age!"

"Fine, fine..."

The lamia opened the box. Inside, she found a scarf. She ran her fingers over the wine-colored silk, and felt its warmth against her lukewarm skin; she shied away from it as if worrying that her very touch would spoil such an expensive gift, but Amina stepped closer, and placed her hands over Melissa's, and guided them back down to the scarf.

"It's the same make as mine," she said, tapping the silk around her own neck. "I picked dark red because it goes with your scales. You have such nice scales."

Her knuckles brushed against Melissa's tail, and the lamia winced slightly.

"Now we can be scarf buddies!"

She wrapped it around Melissa's neck. Put against her pale skin and her discolored overalls, the warm color only glowed brighter. Melissa gasped. She'd never felt such a soft fabric. Her skin was used to bitter winds, searing sunlight, and sweat-soaked ripstop. This nearly diaphanous silk, rippling with even the smallest breeze, barely weighed on her shoulders at all.

Amina looked up at it. Something about it seemed slightly off. "Huh," she said, "I could swear your scales were a few shades darker than that. Well, doesn't matter, it still looks great on you! Turn around, I want to see how it looks from behind."

Melissa allowed her friend to order her around, gushing about how pretty she looked, and how well it fit her, and how pretty her scales were - Amina always focused on the scales. The lamia had nothing to say, or rather, she had too much to say; a torrent of swirling emotions filled her mind and locked her throat, and so she remained silent. The tears that welled up in her eyes were no longer from laughter. She surreptitiously wiped them away.

"I have an idea," Amina said. She pretended to not notice how pink Melissa's eyes were. "Here, give it to me."

Melissa caught herself shielding her new piece of attire, wincing away from Amina's approach. Her friend noticed it and laughed, and Melissa laughed too, at those childish impulses that sometimes still shone through. Nevertheless, she found herself hesitant to part with the gift, and it was only after Amina offered her own scarf in exchange that she agreed to it.

"We'll trade them," Amina explained. "That way, we'll always carry a little reminder of each other."

She handed Melissa her scarf. The lamia held it to her chest. The soft aroma that emanated from the fabric was Amina's, and it flooded her thoughts with not-so-distant memories.

"It smells like you."

"You don't have to be weird about it," Amina chuckled. "But hey, now my scent will follow you wherever you go, so you won't have to be a creeper."

"And you'll always be reminded of my scales."

"Yes! See, I'm full of good ideas."

Melissa inhaled deeply of her friend's scent. Once again, her stomach rumbled - louder than before.

"Geez, you really are starving, aren't you?"

"Right! I have a present for you, too."

"Oh?"

She watched, confused, as the lamia reached into her pocket and pulled out a piece of wrapped newspaper. Inside she found a single chocolate chip cookie.

"I thought we could share," Melissa said, trying to hide her embarrassment.

Amina just smiled.

"That sounds perfect."

Melissa slithered through the hallways. A young soldier, engrossed in a clipboard, crossed her path; he nearly bumped into her, and quickly stepped aside. Melissa nodded, smiled, and thanked him for his kindness.

On her way back to her cell, she came across three soldiers; all three gave her a wide berth. Her smile became more and more forced with each one. By the time she reached her destination, she searched every face she came across for answers; she found none.

Nor did anyone comment on her new scarf.

Once back in her cell, surrounded by the relaxing smells of canvas and drying acrylic, she sank into the piled up blankets she called her bed. The darkness had always comforted her, but today, it just filled her mind with loose thoughts and vague anxieties. Sleep refused to come and deliver her from them; the scent of Amina, mixing with that of her own, sent her imagination running.

“Melissa? May I come in?”

Morris’s voice saved Melissa from the quagmire of her own mind; she shifted, groaning, underneath her covers, and when she emerged, disheveled and dull-eyed, she saw her handler’s face brighten.

“What?”

“New scarf!”

Melissa tilted her head. “Thanks. I got it from a friend.”

“The friend?”

“Mhm.”

Morris clasped his hands together. “Someone’s well-off! So I take it you’ve finally sorted out your feelings on the whole thing?”

“Not really, no.”

“Are you sure?”

“You can come in, by the way.”

Morris stepped inside. He stood before Melissa, who, with her head still poking out of the covers, was for once at eye level.

“Listen,” He said. “You have a friend that keeps making her way into your art. You visit her on all your free days. She gives you fancy gifts. Whenever you talk about her, you get a little glimmer in your eye. Now, I’m not one for matters of love, but this? This is pretty obvious, even to me.”

Melissa said nothing; the blush on her cheeks was the only answer Morris needed.

“You need to talk to her, Melissa.”

“I guess. Thanks, Morris. You always have my back.”

“I wish I could do more.”

“You do enough.”

“No, I don’t.”

His expression darkened. Melissa saw his hands curl into fists, his smile fade - she could swear she smelled the adrenaline in his sweat. She instinctively hugged her scarf.

Morris took a deep breath. He glanced at the cell door; beyond, other handlers and the occasional predator walked by. Soldiers were a common occurrence as well, but he hadn’t seen one in some time, and he knew why. “I really shouldn’t be telling you this, but there’s been some... changes.”

“Changes?”

“The war isn’t going as we’ve hoped. We’re losing too many soldiers, and with the food shortages going on, it’s becoming harder and harder to maintain so many predators. Now, a smart move would be to send a bunch of you back and reintegrate you into society - or, hell, to negotiate for peace.”

“But.”

“But the people in charge are getting desperate. The way they see it, they’re sitting on a huge arsenal of weapons they have no reason not to use.”

Melissa bit her lip.

“Have you been feeling any different recently?” Morris asked.

“I’ve been... hungrier, I suppose? I figured it was just from the rationing.”

Morris shook his head. "They've been pumping your rations full of chemicals for the last few months. They're meant to make you stronger, faster, hungrier - and to reduce stomach acid production, to minimize accidents."

Melissa blanched. "Did... did you know about this?"

"Not until today. Everyone else has known for a while, but they didn't trust me. Apparently, I'm considered a sympathizer."

"A sympathizer?"

"A predator sympathizer."

"Oh."

"And... that's not all. I'm here on business, Melissa. They'll be sending a bunch of strike teams out tomorrow morning. You'll be in one of them."

"Has my team been informed?"

Morris shook his head. "No. Only predators are going." He slipped a hand into his bag; from it, he produced a small inhaler. "I'm going to have to ask you to take this."

"What is it?"

"I can't tell you."

Met with her crestfallen expression, Morris once again sighed and looked over his shoulder. "All I know is that it's some kind of combat stim. It'll prepare you for tomorrow."

"Morris..."

"I know you're scared, Melissa. But if you don't do this, we'll both be in trouble."

She took the inhaler. In her hand, it looked so small - it seemed unbelievable to her that something this inconsequential could affect her body, however nebulously. And yet, there stood Morris, looking as if he'd handed her the rope to hang herself with.

"What will happen to me?"

"They promised me it wouldn't hurt you."

"Can they be trusted?"

"No."

"You're shit at reassurance, Morris."

Her sardonic grin did nothing to cheer him up; it quickly faded from her features, leaving her every bit as grim as her handler.

"Morris?"

"Yeah?"

"Pick a painting."

"What do you mean?"

The lamia looked around. The canvases whose garish colors shielded her from the dreary gray, and whose sharp smell drowned out the scents of concrete and mold. "Pick a painting to take home. You've been the only thing making this hell tolerable. If I'm doing to do this for you, the least you can do is make sure one of my works survives."

Morris looked around. In every wall, and in every corner, buildings and landscapes called out to him. Horizons during sunset. The ocean, as seen through photographs. Starry skies. And in each of them, sometimes front and center as a portrait, something huddled away in a corner, or resting under a tree, or peering from a window - that mysterious girl.

"Are you sure?"

"Do you need me to pick for you? I'll choose the ugliest one in the bunch."

Morris shook his head. The nearest painting caught his eye; the portrait. Just as he stepped towards it, however, he paused. It did look like chancellor Tumul's girl...

No.

"I'll take the portrait," he said.

“Treat her well.”

Morris smiled weakly. Melissa brought the inhaler to her mouth. When she breathed in, its contents stung her throat, spreading all the way to her lungs, leaving them heavy and numb.

“It will take a few hours to take effect,” Morris said, picking up his painting. He stepped outside of the cage, locked it behind him - and, through the bars, looked one last time at his friend, a friend he cared for like a daughter, a friend he was forced to keep imprisoned. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Melissa.”

“Goodbye, Morris.”

His limping steps grew distant. Melissa was alone.

One by one, the lights went out. Silence fell over the block, broken only by the anxious pacing of her fellow caged beasts.

She retreated into the safety of her blankets. The restless energy that remained only mounted, though. A howl echoed through the corridors; a voice that would have been familiar once, now warped by primal despair.

It was then that Melissa realized what awaited her.

Howls. Growls. Frantic pacing. The screeching of claws against steel. One by one, they joined the symphony, and Melissa’s own heart followed the chaotic beat. Her pupils expanded, and as they did, the world around her sharpened. Edges became more jagged, lines straightened out. Her breathing became heaving, her muscles tensed up. Her skin, made hypersensitive by the chemical cocktail that pumped through her veins, shivered under the scarf’s silken caress.

She inhaled deeply of Amina’s scent, allowing it to wash over her, to fill her mind with thoughts of her beloved. Her whole body stirred with anticipation, but for what?

The answer came deep and resonant, spreading outwards from within her stomach; a groan that vibrated through her form. Melissa ran her hands through her body, found her skin scalding to the touch. She thrashed and curled under her covers, finding momentary relief in the patches of the blanket not yet heated up by contact. Even the slightest touch sent her into a frenzy, and when she couldn’t bear it any longer, she slipped out of her hiding place, into the cold outside and the hard concrete that scraped her skin; there she writhed on the floor, and around her all those Aminas stared at her through the canvases. Surrounded, watched, ardent - silk tightening around her neck, strangling her, mouth watering, drip-drip-dripping.

The hours passed by, agonizingly slow. Melissa existed in a state of flux. Fear, anger, lust, hunger, all those base bestial feelings bubbling to the surface. Those in the other cells suffered the same fate, each in their own way. Some slammed their bodies against the bars, others wept softly, others still thrashed what little furniture they were allowed. Only the scarf, and Amina’s scent, kept Melissa steady - but her blood ran hot, and her inhibitions melted away, and her friend’s image distorted in her mind. In her half-dream, Melissa ripped the clothes from her body, silenced her screams with a kiss and wiped away her tears with the tip of her tail; she pushed her down onto the floor, and there she took Amina. Inch by inch she ran her tongue over the stirring body, let the imagined flavor chase away all other thoughts; each frenzied lick more daring than the last. Her long tongue, serpentine, drooling; the soft skin stirring under her caress. Kissing Amina. Tasting her. Eating her-

No.

She bit down on the scarf, and the thirsty fabric soaked her saliva, and her own scent mingled with Amina’s; already she felt her own throat slicken and expand, her tongue flatten. A pang of guilt. The fantasy shifted. The narrative reset.

The lamia tried again. She slid her fingers through Amina’s hair and clenched, and pushed her head down, between her breasts, over her stomach - and when the skin became soft scale, Melissa forced that face, that gaping mouth, that lolling tongue to go down on her.

Melissa's scream joined the cacophony. Fingers parting her labia, the residual shame of feeling her juices dribble down her tail. She felt herself pulse. Aching for a touch. Amina's touch. Those small hands exploring her, those tender lips kissing her all over. Those almond eyes, looking up at her hungrily, wet with desire.

In the right mindstate, Melissa's fingers became Amina's tongue, and it was in those moments, so fleeting, that Melissa plunged deeper into herself, focusing all that twitchy energy inwards. Wave after wave of pleasure washed over her, and again and again her body curled and thrashed, and her moans echoed through the building; throughout all of it, she clung to the scarf, the scarf that held Amina's scent, Amina's essence. She fought the urge to kiss it. Then to bite into it. But when the yearning reached its peak, and her wildest fantasies could no longer push her over the edge, Melissa did not even try to resist the need to swallow.

Saliva-soaked silks dragged down her gullet; their weight, their texture, their taste, in Melissa's mind, were her lover's; in that moment, the consummation of their love, the filling of a void so ingrained in her soul - in that moment, Melissa climaxed.

No clarity followed. No shame or sobering thoughts came to weigh down on her. Too tired to move, too aflame to sleep, Melissa laid on the floor, her naked body freely displayed to every Amina she'd ever immortalized.

All, but one.

Everything the next day happened in the periphery of Melissa's mind. Everything was a blur; from the handler who came to fetch her - whom she did not recognize - to being given her overalls to wear. She marched alongside other predators like her without as much as a thought in her mind, and her body, despite its weariness, obeyed her every command, just as Melissa herself obeyed every command she was given.

They outfitted her, they prepared her, they led her into a room with three others like her; then they dimmed the lights, and opened the doors. Two familiar scents heralded two familiar faces. The first, clad in uniform, medals adorning his chest. Melissa had known his name at some point; now only one word came to mind - *Sergeant*. It was the second person, however, who seized her attention; towering, cutting an imposing figure in her fatigues; the same woman who'd taken out Lyndon - the same woman Melissa had devoured not so long ago, and later disgorged.

Their eyes met. Melissa's nostrils flared; the animal within urged her to fight or fly, but those around her were calm, so she mimicked them. The woman stared at her, her disdain bitter and palpable. It was the lamia who averted her eyes first.

"Alright, soldiers, listen up! This is Agent Natani, from Section 21. She's your commanding officer for this mission, so you better pay attention!"

"How much should I tell them?" the woman asked.

The sergeant shrugged. "Strictly as much as they need to know. Just don't use any big words. They're dim enough without the stims."

The woman sneered but did not argue. She cleared her throat, enunciating each word clearly. "Transport will drop you in enemy territory. Once there, you are to neutralize any resistance you come across. Is this understood?"

Nobody said anything. Even signs that her words had been heeded were few and far between.

Agent Natani looked at the other predators in the room; composed and well-groomed as she was, she found it difficult to imagine that she was one of them. Even now, she could be demoted at any time. All it would take would be for one of the higher-ups to say the word.

She turned to the sergeant. "I have my reservations about this."

"I'll make sure to include that in my report, agent, but this is how we handle business here. A bunch of crazed predators wreaking havoc in their walled communities, where half the opposition leaders live? That sends the kind of message you Section 21 spooks can only dream of."

"Don't forget who put her ass on the line for this intel."

"We both know what would have happened to you if you hadn't."

Natani bit her lip. She knew better than to continue. Turning her attention back to the increasingly jumpy predators in the room, she sighed. "I can't bear to look at these poor devils anymore. Take them away."

A tug on a leash. That was all it took to make them resume their march.

Trembling, restrained, about to snap. Never had Melissa looked so out of sorts. The same uniform that once gave her confidence now felt heavy and constraining against her scales. The transport was too cramped, too noisy; the scent of her fellow predators, too overwhelming. For what felt like an eternity, she struggled to remain focused, answering to the snarls of her comrades in arms with hisses and clicks of her own, as if her own grasp on language had faded.

Shouts outside. Screams becoming muffled. Acceleration, braking, repeat. Melissa couldn't follow any of it. She knew the sounds of battle; that was enough. Minutes became hours. Then, finally, the transport came to a halt.

When the doors opened, she retreated from the light and shielded her eyes. She exchanged glances with her squadmates, all hesitant to step outside. But when the shouts, the orders they'd been trained to obey, the simple signals that made it through even their drug-addled minds finally came - they all but tripped over each other in their haste to obey.

Freshly cut grass. Rust. Pollen. Melissa's tail slithered over not upturned dirt or mud, but warm asphalt. Before her stood not piles of rubble or abandoned shelters, but beautiful mansions. The doors closed as soon as they were outside. She saw several other pairs of headlights move away in the distance - some still carrying the smell of saliva, sweat, and fear.

Sirens blared. One by one, the mansions lit up. Shouts in the distance. Movement in the darkness. Prey. The need to hunt welled up inside Melissa. Agent Natani's orders, condensed into a single word, echoed in her mind. *Eat*. The emptiness inside her demanded to be filled.

The wind shifted, and amongst the quarreling smells of the suburban night, one froze her in place. A weak trail, little more than a wisp, but it called to Melissa, pulled on her like a rope.

She broke formation. Movement behind her. Her squadmates scattered, each led in a different way by their drug-induced frenzy. They wandered, stumbled, and chased after the nearest sources of noise and moment; not Melissa. Melissa, a bloodhound, followed a trail. A trail of silk and perfume. Amina.

Asphalt under her. A starless sky above. All around, mansions and their metallic fences, and their barking guard dogs, and their predators on patrol. She ignored all of it. She followed the scent dutifully, her mind enslaved to the needs of her body; all she knew was her orders, her hunger, and Amina's siren call. Each block traversed made it more intense, more all-encompassing. Melissa shuddered. Everything about her ached to feed, and yet something compelled her to ignore all other houses in her path, all other living creatures.

Melissa moved silently. No footsteps to be heard, only a steady slither, made brisk only by size alone. The trail brought her to a mansion, bigger than the others; there, she sensed Amina on every surface. The pool water carried her scent, as did the grass, the hammock between two trees, the front door, the wall. The wall! The vines that crept across it framed a window, askew so as to let in the night's cold air. The source of the scent. Amina.

Food.

She squeezed herself through the window. She made no sound; she barely dared to breathe. Her surroundings intoxicated her. The girl that quietly slumbered, half-dressed, on her large bed, could not have in the wildest of her dreams have imagined the effect she had on Melissa. The lamia loomed over her friend, and for a moment, she was more beast than woman, and Amina was little more than prey.

Melissa moved slowly, deliberately. Even in this base state, she could not bring herself to harm the girl. In a way, it felt intimate; two lovers in a dark room about to become as one. She took Amina by the shins. Her grip, though steady, must have felt to the girl like a caress, for she mumbled something and buried her face in her pillow; encouraged by the display, Melissa opened her mouth, and gently guided Amina in.

The moment her tongue touched the girl's skin, Melissa's entire serpentine body stiffened. Every single nerve ending, every single neuron in her flared up. Saliva pooled in her mouth, dripping onto the expensive covers. She felt Amina's feet sink into her tongue, toes curling against the squishy flesh; she awaited a protest that never came. Amina still slept. Melissa ran her hands over her body, pulling up the thin fabric that covered that beautiful body of hers, revealing it inch by inch - and still she slept. Melissa went from grabbing her to cradling her, from pulling her in to holding her shoulders and caressing her face. Little more than slurred moans left the girl's lips.

"Melissa..."

The lamia froze. Her lips rested just a bit over Amina's knees; she was ready to swallow. Her throat slickened and pulsed; she had devoured many things many times this girl's size, but never had she lusted more for a meal. But that name, that single word, gave her pause; unable to reply, she waited.

"You're so warm, Melissa..."

Awake?

The lamia prepared to swallow.

Amina pressed her face to her hand. Muffled, slurred words left her lips - but the lamia recognized her name again.

Asleep.

She guided more of her prey in. She tasted her, smelled her, felt her warmth and weight inside her body. Every inch felt to her like an adventure or the realization of some old, primal urge; for the first time, everything was right. Her insides churned. Soon Amina would be entombed in them, trapped in pulsing flesh, and every movement she made, every breath she took, every beat of her heart would resonate through Melissa. Oneness, at last.

In the darkness, Melissa consumed her love. Amina did not awaken; if anything, she found Melissa's insides warm and relaxing. Her skin flushed, hot against them. Her legs kicked, her waist wriggled. Every movement, however small, set the lamia aflame. And once her lips moved past her prey's abdomen, and her tongue flattened against her back, she finally let herself swallow. The body that laid on the bed, half-naked, slumbering, stirred.

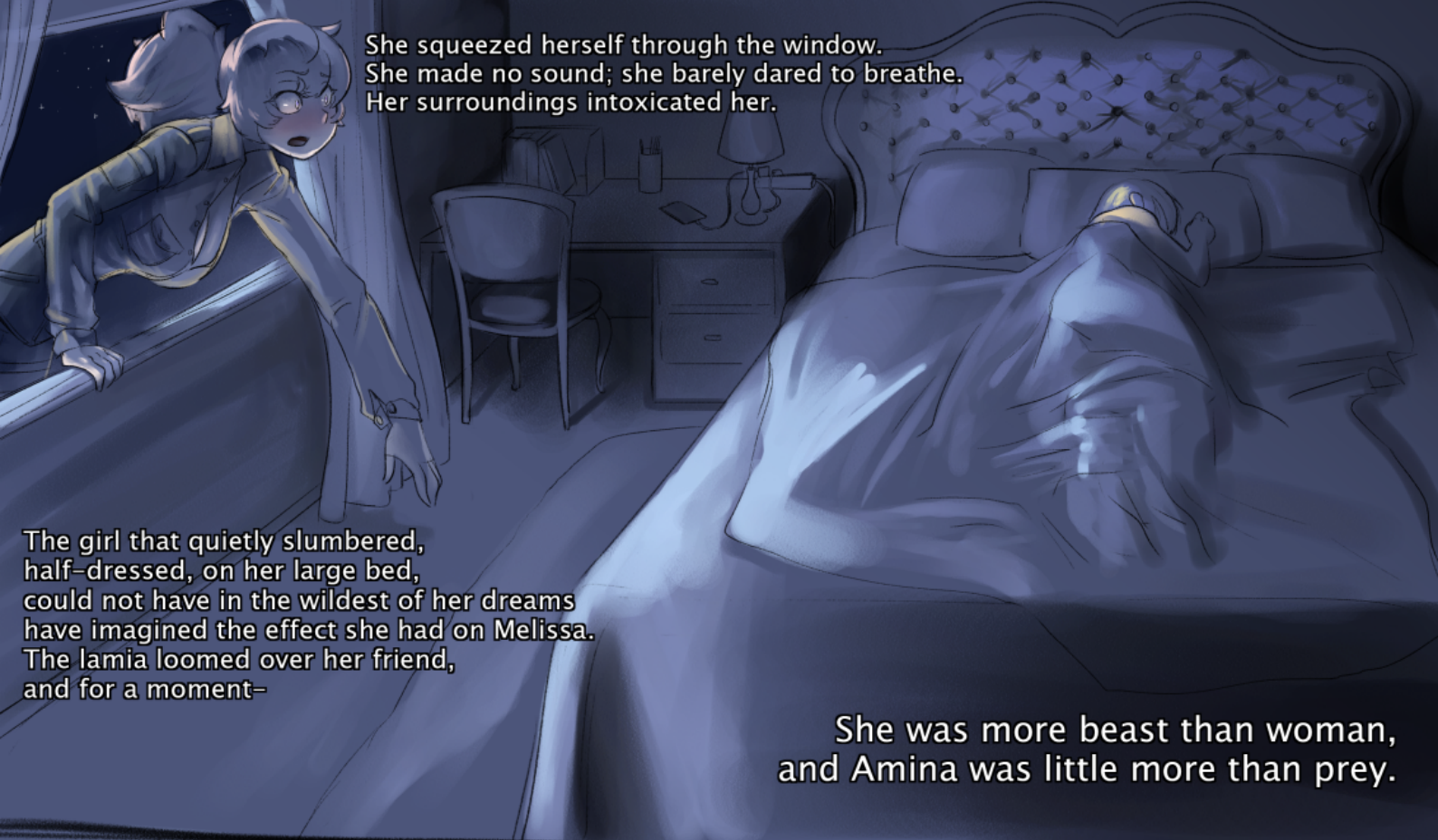
"Melissa, I..."

Sleepy eyes slowly opened, meeting hers.

"...I love y-"

Gulp.

Too much. Too late. Melissa could not stop her throat from expanding, or the embrace of her gullet from tightening. The slick tube accepted the offering, and Amina's body slid unimpeded. Melissa's lips closed just as the bulge on her throat traveled down, past her shoulder blades, and then disappeared.



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GULP

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past her shoulder blades, and then disappeared.

Seab

She bit into the bed to muffle her scream. Her muscles locked. Her tail thrashed about, shattering furniture, toppling shelves. Cries from the hallways. Cries from inside. Sensory overload. Satiation. Heat. Pleasure. *Pleasure.*

When Amina's father kicked down the door and stepped in, all that was left of his daughter was a trashed room and the overwhelming musk of female lust.

A chill breeze blew. Melissa slithered between alleyways. Behind her, utter chaos.

She'd burned bright with lust and hunger; now extinguished, only grim realization clung to her, even through her hazy, animalistic thought processes.

What have I done?

For a moment's satisfaction, she'd sacrificed her beloved. Even now, she could see Amina's face, eyes half-open, looking at her with surprise. Her last words still resonated through Melissa. *I love you.*

"I love you too."

And yet, for all of Melissa's regret, she could not disgorge her. That animal greed that possessed her, emboldened by the stims, refused to release its quarry. A meal belongs in the stomach. It deserves to be digested. It exists only to melt, to be ground into mush, and to drain through the intestines. Nothing more than sustenance.

Her conscious mind rejected this, but her conscious mind was impotent. Her body disobeyed its commands. No matter how much she retched, no matter how much she pushed down on her tail, trying to find the body buried within; her stomach had claimed its due, and would not release Amina.

Tears ran down the lamia's face, burning her hypersensitive skin. The pleasure that ravaged her body only filled her with shame.

She ran. She ran from the enemy, and their dogs, and their predators, ready to claim their own due. She ran for her life.

Then she stopped fleeing. She stopped, and she turned around, and she hugged her tail one last time. When the spotlights shone on her, and harsh words were shouted through loudspeakers, she flattened herself against the pavement, and uttered the only words she knew in Gomaran.

"I... surrender."

And then, in her own tongue, a tear-stricken plea.

"Please rescue her from me."

Then she stopped fleeing.

She stopped, and she turned around,
and she hugged her tail one last time.

She uttered
the only words she knew
in Gomaran.

“I... surrender.”



And then,
in her own tongue,
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“Please rescue her from me.”

"I don't want to hear your apologies."

Melissa the tank, Melissa the siege engine, Melissa the one-woman eating machine, shattered at Amina's words. She retreated deeper into her new cell, so unlike her previous one, and in so many ways identical. The manacles around her wrists, the collar around her neck, the iron bars connecting the three; those were new.

The lamia looked through the bars, at her friend, her lover. Never had the daughter of the chancellor looked so much like her father. She stood tall between the guards, glaring, unflinching.

"You are dismissed."

Melissa winced, retreating deeper into her cell; to her surprise, however, it was the guards escorting Amina who shared a look, bowed their heads, and walked away.

"Look at me."

Melissa didn't. She couldn't bring herself to. Like a scolded pet, she avoided Amina's eyes. When her higher functions had returned, shame was the first emotion to surface. Regret was the second. The lamia turned around. She didn't deserve Amina. Not anymore - or maybe she never had.

"Melissa, *look at me*."

The power behind the words compelled her to obey. How pathetic it must have looked, Melissa thought, for such a massive creature to be so afraid of someone so small. Then again, none held so much power over her as Amina. Slow, hesitant, she looked through the bars, and was met with not a scowl, but with a smile and a conspiratorial wink.

Click.

The cage opened. Melissa made no move to escape; it was Amina who stepped inside, locking the door behind her.

"Amina, I'm--"

"I don't want to hear your apologies," Amina repeated, getting on the tips of her toes to reach Melissa's face, so she could pat it. "Just your explanations. When I went to bed last night, I didn't realize I'd be waking up in your stomach. There's a story here that I need to hear."

Melissa bit her lip. Explanations. She had no explanations to give. She remembered very little from the previous night; she remembered a transport, shouts, screams, and asphalt. She remembered a smell, and a yearning more intense than anything she'd ever felt; she remembered being strapped down, shined a spotlight on, and feeling her mouth being pried and held open by cold metal. Then the tranqs kicked in and she came to, she was curled up in the corner, bound and chained. Everything else was a blur.

"I never meant for this to happen. They drugged me with something... it made me crazy."

"So you coming for me was a coincidence?"

"No. I don't think that was a coincidence. I think I knew I needed to be with you; that you were important to me somehow."

"That's gotta be the worst proposal ever."

Melissa slumped into the ground. Amina climbed on top of her. Melissa tried to stop her, but the manacles allowed little more than a sad wiggle.

"You shouldn't be doing that. What if someone sees us?"

"Then I'll tell them you're attacking me and need to be put down!"

"Hey!" Melissa protested.

Amina laughed. "Always so jumpy! Relax. My bodyguards have orders to not let anyone in until I'm done. Perks of being the Chancellor's daughter."

"You're really not mad at me?"

"Look at me."

Melissa didn't.
She couldn't bring herself to.
Like a scolded pet, she avoided Amina's eyes.
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She didn't
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Not anymore.
— or maybe
she never had.

"Melissa,
look at me."



"Amina, I'm—"

"I don't want to hear your apologies,
just your explanations. When I went to bed last night,
I didn't realize I'd be waking up in your stomach.
There's a story here that I need to hear."

"So you coming for me
was a coincidence?"

"I think I knew
I needed to be with you;
that you were
important to me somehow."

"That's gotta be
the worst proposal ever."



“I will be if you keep bringing it up.”

Not a hint of a smirk on that one. Melissa took note.

“So, what’s going to happen to me now?”

“Nothing. They have to keep you here until the war is over. Which means I get you all for myself.”

“Kept here?”

“Mhm. This is the only place where they can safely keep the likes of you. I didn’t know this, but you’re apparently a Class D asset. That’s their word for *big ass steamroller of a lamia*. It’s like I’m besties with a weapon of mass destruction or something.”

Melissa smirked. “Hardly.”

Amina rolled her eyes. Over the last few minutes, she’d gone from riding her friend like a horse to lying down on her underbelly. Melissa could swear she’d moved up, too, towards where her body was wider.

“I’m trying to convince Dad to free you, but you know how he is with predators. So I guess we’ll just have to wait this out. It’ll be tough, but you’ll be fed and clothed, and I’ll come to visit every week.”

The lamia sighed weakly. Put that way, it sounded exactly like her life before capture. Slow weeks and rushed hours. “Yeah,” she said. “I think I can survive that.”

“What will you do when it’s over?”

“Hm?”

“The war. What will you do when you’re free? Are you going back home?”

“I guess. Where else would I go?”

“Funny of you to ask,” Amina winked. “You could stay here. Take a course, learn the language. Turn that art of yours into a business.”

“Art as a business. Now that’s a funny joke.”

“We’d make it work.”

Amina’s words hung about the air. The realization came slowly to Melissa as to why her friend suddenly fell silent; when it did, however, she bit her lip, wondering what to say. Then, through the haze that was the previous night’s memories, a single sentence came to mind. Little more than a whisper, but a whisper that made her body stir.

“You know,” Melissa said. “Last night, while I was eating you, you said something to me.”

Amina’s touch suddenly felt warmer against her skin. “Did I?”

“Yes. You said my name.”

“I was probably dreaming. I didn’t even know you were there.”

The lamia knew deflection when she saw it. Usually, she’d let it slide. Not today. Not with something like this.

“You said, ‘Melissa...’”

“I don’t think-”

“You said,” she repeated, firm despite her friend’s attempts to distract her, “you said ‘Melissa, I love you.’”

She instinctively winced away from the slap she knew would follow. She readied her ears for the shrill protests. Nothing came. Amina said nothing, did nothing; she just laid there, adrift in the rippling sea of Melissa’s underbelly, face smushed against the soft scales.

When she finally spoke, it was but a whisper.

“Maybe I did say that. Would you be mad if I’d said that?”

“A little bit,” Melissa said.

“I’m-”

“Mad that you beat me to it.”

Amina blinked; it took her seconds to process what had been said. With it came a wave of embarrassment that had her hiding her face in the lamia's scales; Melissa just smiled, and slowly wrapped her tail around her in a tight hug, and for what was left of their hour together, they just basked in each other's presence, warmed themselves in each other's touch.

"Bet you were hoping for something more romantic."

"Quiet, you dolt. Let me enjoy the moment for once."

Days became weeks. Weeks became months. They passed quickly. Occasionally, a guard would come for Melissa; he would carry her away into dark rooms where bright lights shined on her face, and ask her questions. Melissa answered them all to the best of her ability. But those were the exceptions. Her new cell, she quickly discovered, was much less comfortable than her previous one. After a week, they took away the collar and the manacles; after two, they allowed her a single blanket to sleep under. But even when she grew comfortable enough with the language to ask for art supplies, they were denied, under the rationale that she'd try and use them to poison herself. Her protests - that she had no reason to give up on life, and that it would take more than a few tubs of acrylic to make a lamia ill - fell on deaf ears.

Only Amina kept her going. Only Amina brightened her day with stories from outside. Amina hugged her when she was desperate, massaged her when the hard surfaces took their toll. She snuck in sticks of chalk and even the occasional pocket edition book - in Gomaran, of course. Melissa wondered if it was her friend's way of easing her into the language. Either way, it worked. Being able to draw and read made Melissa's days more than simple collections of hours - even if she had to hide the evidence during inspection.

But nothing compared to the visiting hours each week when the two were left alone. There, what they couldn't do, they said - they placated their need for each other with kisses and caresses, going further each day, but never far enough. And on the calmer days, they sat and read to each other, discussed the state of the war, talked about their plans together. What started as a placid country villa was given a swimming pool, a vegetable garden, a dog and a cat; then a goat, then another goat to keep the first goat company, then a donkey, then a stable to keep the donkey in. Every now and then, when the fantasy became too hard to follow, they tore the villa down and started all over again - and not a second felt wasted that they spent together.

One day, the guard didn't bring Melissa her lunch. She found it odd - for all their faults, they always brought her food on time - but paid it no mind. She wasn't particularly hungry, and the previous chapter had ended on a cliffhanger.

Then she heard the doors slam open, and steps rushing down the hallway. She quickly hid her book, straightened herself up, shook her head so as to make her hair look more disheveled. Concealing her relative contentment under a scowl, she awaited her meal.

It wasn't the guards.

Upon seeing Amina, her first instinct was to smile. Then she saw how pale she was - how heaving her breaths were - and the smile faded.

"What-"

"We're under attack!"

Melissa blinked. Even straining her ears, she couldn't hear the sounds of battle she was so used to. Usually, the coordinating shouts between predators and their squads would fill the air. But she heard nothing. Nothing at all.

"We need to get out of here, and fast," Amina said. "They're everywhere - dozens of them, foaming at the mouth like rabid dogs. One of them almost got me. We need to get out."

“Yes,” Melissa said, and pulled Amina into a hug, holding her tight for a few seconds, patiently waiting for her panic to ease. It didn’t. “We’ll get out of here. But where should we go?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know!”

“Focus, Amina. There has to be something.”

The girl hyperventilated; Melissa’s embrace provided little comfort. Amina closed her eyes, tried to line up her thoughts. “The road north, towards the border. It’s a long trek, but if we stick to the secondary roads, we could make it to the border in a few days. We’ve been directing refugees there.”

The door burst from its hinges with a thunderous crack, cutting the conversation short. Snarling, huffing, twitching, a reptilian predator emerged, her tongue tasting the air for the smell of prey; having found it amongst the cages, she stumbled in.

“Hold on to me, Amina,” Melissa whispered. “Hold on tight.”

The lizard-woman approached. Her claws scraped against the floor as she walked; her tail whipped about with each step taken, cracking whip-like with anticipation. Her green scales rustled, her beady eyes glimmered, the grumbling of her eager stomach echoing through the prison. She turned the corner, and her pupils contracted at the light of Amina. She smacked her lips suggestively and snapped at the girl, ignoring her screams - and, in doing so, forgot the lamia alongside her.

“*Mine*,” Melissa hissed, holding her trophy tight; the lone word nearly lost itself amongst the sibilant notes. The lizard, not expecting competition, stumbled back, hissing right back, and the two predators stared each other down. Something in the lizard must have clicked; some limited understanding of someone just like her, eager to eat, having already claimed the girl for herself. The lizard protested with her hisses and growls, and the occasional orphaned word in Melissa’s native tongue - but, in the end, stepped aside. The lamia was quick to slither past.

My thing. Your thing. Melissa found it easy to tap into that mindset again - maybe too easy. Part of her believed it.

Outside the building, hell. Old friends, comrades in arms, strangers in fatigues she was well familiar with - all made bestial, lacking all pretense of control. Their scents - always scents - mingled with the mud and the sweat. Melissa had seen battlefields; now, she looked upon a slaughterhouse. Her own allies, bloated like pigs, fought like rabid dogs. Some plucked running soldiers from the street and shoved them into their fat gullets; others ganged up on enemy predators and took them down, only to turn on their own friends over who got to devour the fallen.

Eyes rose to meet her. She stared them down, unflinching. For a moment, they hesitated - and she saw many of them shooting Amina greedy looks - but another hiss fended them off. Melissa took the opening and ran.

In Melissa’s arms, Amina closed her eyes. Her fingers buried into the lamia’s skin, knuckles turned white with effort.

My thing. My food. Melissa repeated the words like a mantra, and the more she said them, the more she believed them; Amina could not see her hungry eyes, or the saliva pooling in her mouth, or the way she licked her lips; as far as Amina knew, it was all an act.

For Melissa, it was an act no longer. It empowered her in ways she could not explain. To chase away other predators with only a glare, to keep for herself the prize they coveted - it felt right. She slithered through the streets, followed roads, and like a prowling predator, kept herself hidden. Amina herself played the part of scared prey awaiting her fate as snake food. She feigned weeping and called out weakly for aid; she could not have known just how much this innocent act stoked the fires inside Melissa. Fires that burned without pain, fires that laid dormant within the lamia ever since the drugs first made their way into her body - they now came to the surface, not as a great eruption but as a slow, steady burn, a constant pull on Melissa’s psyche. A desire to cast off all humanity and be the beast.

Amina broke character every now and then, when she thought herself safe, to give directions; Melissa followed them without question, but almost dismissively, as if she had other thoughts in mind. Minutes passed, then hours. Exhaustion set in; adrenaline bled away. The hunger remained, still ever-present, but at least easier to ignore for the time being. When night fell, they tucked themselves away from view and huddled together.

All the tension snapped then.

It started with a playful peck on the cheek, returned by a more meaningful one. The pretense of playfulness dropped when hands got involved. Amina's hands on Melissa's shoulders. Melissa's hands all over Amina. More daring touches. Melissa took the lead.

She pinned her lover to the floor, a dark silhouette against the starry night. Trembling with desire, she fell upon her, frenzied. Moist lips against hot skin. Ripping fabric, torn from Amina's form and dismissively tossed aside, inch by inch revealing skin. Melissa unwrapped her from top to bottom, popping buttons, bursting seams. She tore open the jacket, making way for her meandering tongue that drew a line from Amina's jaw to her shoulder blade; now it ran over the girl's breast and lapped eagerly at it. Amina moaned at the tongue's sloppy caress, wide enough to cover her entire breast; she bit her lip, her whole body convulsing. The tongue rolled out, long and dexterous, slithering over skin; it circled her breast, wrapped around it, squeezed gently.

Amina gasped. Her heart buzzed in her chest. It inflamed her to see this side of her lover. So strong, so unfettered. A creature of pure sexual energy; a beast eager to consume. She felt honored to be the subject of her desire; she, a regular human, so small and weak and inconsequential - and this massive beast, all hunger and strength, had chosen her as its mate.

Melissa spared no such thoughts. She channeled hunger into fervor, and tasted her lover in a wholly different way. She savored every wince she coaxed out of Amina's capitulating body; the purring when she licked her, the stirring when she slid her claws across her skin, the little yelps when she dove in, taking an entire breast into her mouth, tongue dancing around her nipple. And when she dared to nibble, oh, how Amina sang...

Her explorations led her further down. Her breath washed over Amina's bare midriff for only a moment, while Melissa's teeth hooked into the waist of her skirt. Inch by inch, she pulled them down, and instinct led Amina to cross her legs and try to cover herself. Melissa didn't mind. One by one, she relinquished her beloved's clothing. The piles beside them grew until they could grow no more; only then, when Amina wore nothing but her smile, did the lamia take her in her arms, pressed their bodies together, felt the wetness between Amina's legs rub off against her tail.

Amina, half lost in a haze of desire, could not interpret the lamia's mischievous smile; she understood only when her legs were thrown around Melissa's neck, and a sudden lack of support sent her bending backward until her lower back rested comfortably over the lamia's breasts. Then she felt that hot breath against her inner thigh, and that moist caress, and a nose poking into her lower belly; she whimpered a plea that went unheard just as Melissa's tongue slid into her pussy.

Thick. Heavy. Throbbing. It filled every inch of her with its rough surface, from her outer lips to the deepest recesses of her womb - inside her, it expanded to reach every crevice, every crease; to drink every drop of her juices, to taste her. The lamia's tongue thrashed inside her, while the lips locked around her, adding a gentle suction to the caress. Every single nerve ending in Amina's body fired up at once; the resulting wave of pleasure sent her reeling and her insides clenching, locking Melissa's tongue in, milking it for more stimulation. She screamed through gritted teeth, then her body fell limp, exhausted.

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Seklu

Melissa took her in her arms, licking the last hint of her lover's taste from her raw lips. She hugged her tight - a thank you, an apology. She was surprised to find the girl already slumbering in her grip; she would have liked to continue, but it looked as if her own pleasure would have to wait.

She set Amina down on a pile of her own clothes. So innocent she looked, even with all the warm softness of an afterglow. She wheezed gently as she breathed, and her heart thumped just a bit too quickly. Melissa smiled. She looked so innocent. She looked so... *delicious*.

The realization that her mouth had instinctively opened sobered Melissa. The hunger refused to let up. Even now, it scratched at her insides, demanding to be heard. How long could she resist it? Amina slept soundly, and Melissa watched her sleep. In her arms and coils, she looked so helpless, so angelic. Inside the lamia raged a battle, a battle between the heart and the stomach.

The heart, for the time being, won.

"What do you mean, you couldn't find her?"

Agent Natani pinched the bridge of her nose. On the other side of the line, the sergeant's voice grew more and more exasperated.

"We emptied every predator that made it back," he said. "Nothing. Why do you care, anyway?"

"Hmph." Natani looked out the window of her apartment - which is to say, Linda Richter, Music Teacher's apartment - and saw the empty Gomaran streets below. "But my contacts tell me otherwise. Amina Tumul is gone, and was last seen clutched by a predator, during yesterday's assault. Are you sure you didn't find anything?"

"Well," the male voice hesitated. "There's been some... unexpected situations."

"Stop dancing around the issue."

"The stims had some unexpected side-effects. Even after they wore off, many of the predators refused to disgorge their prey. There were so many to process, we lost a few captives."

The wine glass trembled in Natani's hand. "How many?"

"Five."

"Five?!"

"Three of them male. One of them a predator. It's doubtful that the last one would have been the Tumul girl."

Natani sighed. "I still don't like these odds, sergeant. Keep me informed."

The phone went back into her pocket. She stared out the window, and beyond the streets, saw the long horizon leading up to the northern border. Weeks ago, those beaten paths were being tread by hundreds of refugees - the homeless, the destitute, those who could no longer bear to see their home so wartorn. Now, they laid bare.

Then it dawned on her.

"Damn it... they don't pay me enough for this shit."

She put her hand into her purse. In it, she felt the familiar shape of an inhaler.

"For Pride and Country."

"I can see it!"

Never had any words sounded so simultaneously heartening and terrifying to the lamia. She slithered silently through the wheatfield, keeping her nose to the ground until she reached the edge. "Can I look?"

“Okay, but be subtle.”

“I’m a trained covert ops agent, Amina.”

“You’re also a two-ton lamia.”

“Point.”

Melissa peered from between the stalks. Far in the distance, beyond the no man’s land, tall fences and patrols signaled the end of the long march. Under the shade of the concrete structure, a sphinx and two humans stared impassively at the road. Melissa noticed they all wore the same uniform.

Already the grass looked greener.

“So this is it,” the lamia said. “The point of no return.”

“Shall we go?”

Suddenly, Melissa froze. She raised a hand to silence Amina and flattened herself against the ground. A grasshopper hopped away. Amina had no time to react before Melissa pulled her down too.

“We’re being followed.”

She put an ear to the ground. Unsteady steps approached, trampling shoots underfoot. Heavy. Heaving. A predator. The wind shifted, and Melissa grew pale. She recognized this scent.

The stims did their work.

Natani’s senses worked in unison. A heightened sense of touch allowed her to follow the tracks on which she tread. Keen ears followed every sound, however subtle, and parsed out the noise to home in on her quarry. But even they paled in comparison with her olfactive ability. The smellscape spread out around her, a lattice of scent trails and marks, ebbing and flowing with the shifting breeze. She followed the path laid out before her. Sweat, mud, prison food, perfume, silk. Snake. Human. Ever strengthening. Ever closer.

Her communicator buzzed to life. Her brain could not form the words to answer it. The trained response she’d made an effort to memorize - gone. The presence of mind to switch it off - lost.

Perhaps in a more controlled state, she would have prepared an ambush, or used deceit to ease their quarry into surrender; but while even beasts have cunning, Natani’s brand of drug-fueled atavism eschewed even those.

No wonder, then, that she homed in on the least threatening of the two victims and, snatching her away from Melissa’s arms, devoured her.

Amina had grown to see Melissa’s arms and coils as an impenetrable shield. What lay beyond couldn’t hurt her - the upturned dirt couldn’t smudge her, the straw couldn’t sting her, and the sounds of distant battle couldn’t reach her. No wonder, then, that when that large woman emerged from the sea of golden stems, she simply sank further into the lamia’s arms, trusting her to keep her safe. But this time, they failed her. Made weary and slow by too many sleepless nights, they allowed their grasp to slip for but a moment, and it all came crumbling down.

One second Amina was safe against soft skin; the next, her surroundings blurred, and all she could see was her friend reeling back after a well-aimed but savage blow. Another body took her in - one of bulging muscle and sun-scarred skin. She felt those massive hands grip at her sides, their powerful fingers wrapping around her waist - she felt those rabid eyes sting at her skin, saw those dried lips part, winced at the heavy and hot breath that washed over her.

It ended before she could even scream for help. Not that it would have helped; though she couldn’t know it, Melissa too was caught by surprise.

Darkness engulfed Amina; an oppressive wetness, so unlike Melissa's, which was gentle and soothing; one that threatened to crush her between walls of pulsing flesh. Bitter saliva soaked her. Teeth scraped her skin, limiting her struggles. The gullet widened before her, gently sucking in the air that surrounded her, the saliva she lingered in; then Natani swallowed, and Amina slid in, the uvula smacking her in the face served as one final act of disrespect.

Throat muscles locked around her, throbbing, squeezing. Her limbs clung to her sides, weighed down by Natani's saliva and the slime that slickened her surroundings; gravity's grim drag sent her down a seemingly endless tube with seemingly limitless give, where only her wildest of thrashes found the constraining ribcage.

The workings of Natani's body drowned out the sounds from outside. Wheezing, grumbling, groaning. Bubbling below. Growling above. Amina experienced the outside only through her captor. The straining lungs and the searing warmth all around betrayed Natani's exhaustion; the buzzing of her heart, stress. The swaying and stumbling all around spoke of a battle of positioning - an attempted escape.

Blood rushed to her head. A ring of flesh pressed to her face. She felt it open, and through it, smelled the bitterness of stomach acids. She made herself as wide as possible, to no avail; gravity beckoned her forward, and peristalsis pulled her further and further from the hope of escape.

Just as she started to slip, she stopped. Her hair drooped down, swaying mere inches above the bubbling liquid; a single tear dripped into the roiling surface. Something gripped her leg - a hand! Its pull came slow but steady, and Amina experienced the embrace of Natani's esophagus in reverse. The ribbed walls brushing against her skin, the uvula drawing a line from the small of her back to her scalp, the tongue flat under her weight, now tasting nothing but the bile that soaked her.

Hanging upside-down, saliva dripping from her clothes, Amina filled her lungs with the crisp air. When she dared to open her eyelids, made heavy by saliva and slime, she found herself once again in Melissa's grasp - and, pinned to the ground by thousands of pounds of snake muscle, a struggling Natani.

In Melissa's hug, Amina found comfort yet again. When she glanced up at the lamia, however, the steely-eyed look she encountered made her wince.

"Touch her again and you die," hissed the snake. Natani merely bared her teeth in response. Seeing her altered state, Melissa's expression turned grim.

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Eden

Amina wondered why their assailant wasn't eaten right there, or, hell, having her neck snapped - the civilized savagery of war seemed so distant now, and nobody would need to know... but Melissa just kept Natani there, held helpless and hopeless amidst her coils.

"Amina?"

Amina blinked. "Yes?" she whispered.

"Is it okay if we wait?"

"Wait?"

"A few hours. Just give me a few hours."

Amina looked down at Natani, whose nostrils flared when she saw prey, *her* prey, now in another predator's grasp. The same visage that had terrified Amina now filled her with pity. A scared animal, nothing more. She nodded, and the lamia ruffled her hair in silent thanks.

The hours dragged by. In Melissa's grip, Natani exhausted herself trying to escape. Each passing minute brought a glimmer of clarity back to her eyes, until finally, one pleading look at the lamia secured her release. When the tail gag liberated her mouth, what came out wasn't a growl or a hiss, but words in Melissa's native tongue.

"This is treason. I'm your commanding officer."

"I'm retiring early."

"We thought you'd been executed."

"Is that why you sent your attack dogs?" Melissa asked.

"Of course not," Natani scoffed, holding back a cough. "They don't care about what happens to the likes of us. You're replaceable; the higher-ups will mourn losing another Class D asset. A few tens of thousands down the drain. Happens every day. But the girl." She pointed a trembling finger at Amina, who shrunk away. "The Tumul girl can end this."

"Amina?"

"Think, soldier. Her father's a chancellor; he's the biggest mover and shaker this side of the border. If we convince him to sue for peace - say, by holding her daughter hostage..."

"That will never happen."

Natani seemed shocked to hear Amina speak the tongue of her enemy. "What?"

"Dad would never admit defeat. Not even if my life was on the line."

"That's a risk we have to take. Soldier!" Natani glared at Melissa. "Give me the girl, and we'll pretend this was all a cover operation. You'll come back to the barracks safely, and I'll put in a good word for you with Section 21. We do good work - nothing like what they make you do in the front lines."

Melissa sighed. She looked around at the wheat field at the edge of the country. At the woman lying in the grip of her coils, still wheezing, still with her mouth full of bile. Still feeling the aftershock of the combat stims.

"Funny," the lamia said. "Looks the same from where I'm standing."

"Well, finish me off then. Or are you going to sit here wasting our time until someone comes to find me?"

Melissa's brow furrowed. Natani's flip from bargaining to surrender did not hit her gently. But looking in those eyes, she got it. She saw herself, were she luckier and more daring in her life choices. She saw Amina, looking expectantly at her, waiting for her to do what predators were meant to do.

"You seem eager to die."

"I live for Pride and Country. If I fail here, there is nothing left for me." Natani flashed a pained smile. "Besides, I've taken the stims; I'm past the point of no return. It's only a matter of time until I snap and get put down; I might as well go with some dignity. Have you told the girl?"

"Told the girl about what?" Amina asked.

“Don’t listen to her; she’s desperate. She’ll say anything to tear us apart.” Melissa stared down at Natani. “Get lost. Tell everyone where I am; I don’t care. By the time they’re here, we’ll be safe across the border.”

She released Natani, who quickly scrambled away from the writhing coils. Her face twisted in pain as atrophied muscles and sore bones moved for the first time in hours; she stumbled to her feet and wiped dust from her eyes.

“You’re lying to yourself, soldier. You could have had a chance, but you gave it all away.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Suit yourself, lamia.” Natani turned around; after only a few steps through the shoots, however, she stopped and looked over her shoulder. “Do you really think they’ll let your little plaything through the checkpoint? You’re a nobody, but her face is on billboards by now. They’ll send her back to her Dad, and you - well, you’ll be even more of a war criminal than you already are.”

She didn’t stay to find out whether her final words were heeded. As she disappeared into the field, Natani pulled out her emergency phone from its waterproof sleeve.

“Melissa Hargrave, Class-D serpentiform asset, and Amina Tumul, POI, both confirmed KIA at”- she checked the time -“zero nine fifteen hours. Agent Natani, out.”

A warbled growl of acknowledgment. Natani switched off. A breeze blew, rustling through the fields. Her quarry’s scent faded into nothingness.

Why.

The word echoed in her mind. Why? Why was this snake so stubborn, so set on her ways as to ignore direct orders? Even now, the drugs pumped through Natani’s veins. Even the most passing thought of Amina made her wince with an urge to eat. But the lamia resisted still. She couldn’t resist forever. A single slip, a moment’s weakness, could end it all. Melissa seemed aware of it; if anything, it only heightened her defiance. Natani could respect that - and maybe, just maybe, it would be enough.

You better make it through.

She slid the phone back into its sleeve.

If they find out I lied to them, it’s my ass on the line.

She stepped out of the field.

Good luck, soldier.

“Your signature here. Thank you.”

Morris knew it to be just a formality. Even before her pen touched the paper, Melissa’s old cell was already filled with government spooks. One emptied the desk, looking for clues amongst the paintbrushes and paint tubes. Another tore canvases from their frames. Morris couldn’t bear to watch. Little by little, those pictures had come to be over the course of months. He remembered every smile, every frown that accompanied the strokes; he remembered the songs hummed, the little frustrations and triumphs that some government worker now snapped over his knee and ripped apart, in his search for something that wasn’t there.

“We will include this in our report, Handler. Clearly, allowing our predators to engage in hobbies only breeds treason.”

Morris said nothing. Leaving the agents to their vandalism, he limped down the corridors. The predators were quiet this morning. A storm brewed, and they could feel it coming. Morris could too.

His phone buzzed. With all the stress, he’d forgotten to switch it off. Usually, he’d ignore it - he wasn’t allowed to have it on during work - but this morning, he couldn’t care less about playing by the rules.

The screen lit up. A message from the wife. A single image. He waited for it to load.

A set table. A tray of home-baked cookies over the striped tablecloth; and in the background, between the family photo and the bookshelves, a painting. The painting.

We finally found a place for her!

“I know what to do.”

The words snapped Melissa out of her torpor. The lamia’s brow ached from all the furrowing, and her lips red from the nervous chewing. “You do?”

Amina nodded. Her cheeks flushed red, and her smile trembled slightly. “Remember when you came and whisked me away in the night?”

“You mean kidnapped you.”

“You kept me safe inside. You could do it again - just long enough for you to make it past.”

“You’re asking me to eat you?”

“Just for a little while,” Amina said. “Quick in and out. I promise I’ll leave the place the same way I found it.”

Melissa didn’t laugh.

Amina’s own smile faded. “Look,” she said, leaning on the lamia’s tail. “I don’t know why you’re so against the idea. You’ve done it once before, you were fine, I was fine, and you want to hear a secret?”

Before Melissa could even reply, Amina beckoned her closer. Into her ear, she whispered something that the lamia already suspected, but would never have dared bring up.

“I liked it,” Amina whispered. “I liked it a lot.”

“You did?”

“It was so warm and squishy inside. It was a bit scary at first, don’t get me wrong - I couldn’t move, everything was dark and wet, and I thought I was going to suffocate or, god forbid, get digested.”

Melissa tried to interject; Amina silenced her with a finger to the lips. Her hand traveled down the lamia’s neck, between her breasts, down to her stomach. It lingered over her navel for a moment, then drew the transition between skin and scale, sinking into the soft pudge of her underbelly.

“But then, I arrived around... here, I think.” She squeezed the scales between her fingers. “And all the sliding stopped, and I found myself alone, trapped between hundreds of pounds of pure lamia muscle. And I stopped being scared. Do you know why?” She smiled knowingly. “I heard your heartbeat all around me. I remembered who I was entrusting myself to. You’ve hugged me so many times, and I always feel so safe. So I thought of it as just a different kind of hug, a full-body kind of hug, or kiss. And it was wonderful.”

She bit her lip. “It’s kind of funny. I was so upset when they took me out of you. I wanted to go back in. Like a little kid on a school morning - just five more minutes! Hey - I saw a smile!”

Called out on it, Melissa’s smirk widened.

“I don’t know why you don’t trust yourself,” Amina continued, “and I don’t care. I trust you more than anything. We’re going to see this through, and we’re going to buy ourselves a house, and we’re going to have a little farm with chickens and goats and a donkey. Now stop being the world’s worst predator, open your goddamn mouth, and eat me already.”

Melissa couldn’t argue with that kind of statement. To call Amina misguided was to admit herself weaker than some residual chemicals in her brain. Amina saw her for who she used to be; the artist, the person, the little girl who pranced through the schoolyard so many years ago. Melissa wanted to be that artist, that person, that girl - but that was before the cell, before the stims. Today’s Melissa hungered. Even when she looked at her beloved, her lizard brain flared up left and right, flashing dangerous thoughts through her mind. Eat. Keep. Kill. She shook them off, but they lingered.

Her mind went to Natani. Past the point of no return, she'd called it. If she swallowed Amina now, could she ever bring herself to release her?

"Here. I don't want your acids messing up the silk."

As always, that soft whisper brought her back to reality. Amina, before her, undid her scarf. The wine-colored scarf - still dripping with Natani's saliva. She hugged it, as if saying goodbye to an old friend, and placed it around the lamia's neck.

"There you go. And would you look at that. Your scales look way more vivid than before. Do you guys shed or something?"

Melissa raised an eyebrow. Looking down at her tail, she saw not the patternless orange she'd become used to, but a deep wine color to perfectly match her scarf; with the surge of color so did patterns emerge from the scales; a beautiful lattice of warm colors, glimmering under the sunshine.

"Not that I'm aware of. Maybe I was needing some fresh air. Or some detox."

"Or some love?"

The lamia smirked. She let Amina have that one. Twirling the fabric around her finger, her smile grew regretful. "I'm sorry I lost yours. Guess we can't be scarf buddies anymore."

Amina shrugged. "You don't need it anymore. Now you have the real me." She stepped back and admired her handiwork. "There we go. You wear it very well. A bit soggy, but nothing a go on the tumble dryer won't fix. Well, how should we do this?"

"Huh..." Melissa blinked; the question caught her off guard. "Are you really sure?"

"Melissa..."

"Right! Right. I guess I can just open my mouth, and you can, you know, step inside?"

"Show me how."

They touched foreheads. The lamia lowered herself. Her lips brushed against Amina's, then the tip of her nose drew a line down to her waist. She took Amina's hands and brought her to her lips; Amina took the hint and slid them in. A shiver ran down her spine. That wetness, That warmth. How she'd missed them.

She parted the lamia's lips and watched the tongue roll out and flatten, a red carpet leading the way amidst strings of sticky saliva. Trembling with excitement, she put one foot in. It slid off the tongue and into the gaping darkness beyond, she felt her toes brush against the pliable flesh of the esophagus.

Melissa held her up. Her large hands kept Amina steady, even when she lifted her other foot off the ground. Thus supported, she felt safe even as the lamia rose into an upright position; Amina's head poked out of the sea of straw for just a second before she realized she was out in the open. She put her other foot in and wriggled herself down. The tip of Melissa's tongue curled up, sliding underneath the back of her shirt. She leaned back onto it like a seat; a soft, squishy seat that warmed her skin with its wetness.

Their eyes met. Amina rested her hands on her lover's cheeks, felt them burning against her skin. She leaned over and kissed her forehead. "I love you, Melissa," she whispered. "I always have."

Melissa could resist the urge no longer.

The swallow came quickly. The flesh around Amina's feet widened; the tongue behind her straightened, sending her sliding in. The sudden suction, coupled with gravity's grip, pulled her in - and for the second time that day, she found herself sinking into a predator's gullet. This time, though, she smiled; she enjoyed every inch of the trip down. A roomy esophagus made for a quick slide. The ribbed flesh massaged her skin with a series of gentle squeezes. None of Natani's cramped walls; the lamia's throat was a sea of flesh, gently rocking Amina on the way down. Under her feet, the tube widened, making way for a deeper plunge; above her head, it tightened again, pushing her down. She lost herself in the swaying motion, in the humid air, in the sickly-sweet scent of the lamia's insides.

Churning flesh deposited her in the long alcove of Melissa's stomach; there Amina laid horizontally, half-submerged in the softly stinging juices that seeped from the writhing walls that surrounded her. She closed her eyes, smiled, and waited. *One again.* She almost dreaded the time of release...

Melissa wiped her forehead. Her entire body burned. She gulped down another glob of saliva and huffed. For the first time in days, her body's call for food fell silent. Her insides roiled, excited to have something to work on, and her animal brain rewarded her with a shot of dopamine so intense, it innervated her skin and gave gusto to even the slightest movement.

She glanced down at her tail. Though no bulge made itself seen through the thick layers of muscle and fat, she felt Amina in there, weighing her down, wriggling inside. Even the slightest movement resonated through her innards as a wave of pure bliss, a promise of nutrients to come. She pressed her hand down, and through her own body, swore she could feel Amina's.

From the wheat field emerged a lone lamia, ragged and broken save for the wine-colored scarf around her neck. Her bright scales glimmered in streaks as she slithered, confident, towards the checkpoint.

Towards the point of no return.

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"I love you, Melissa"

"I always have."

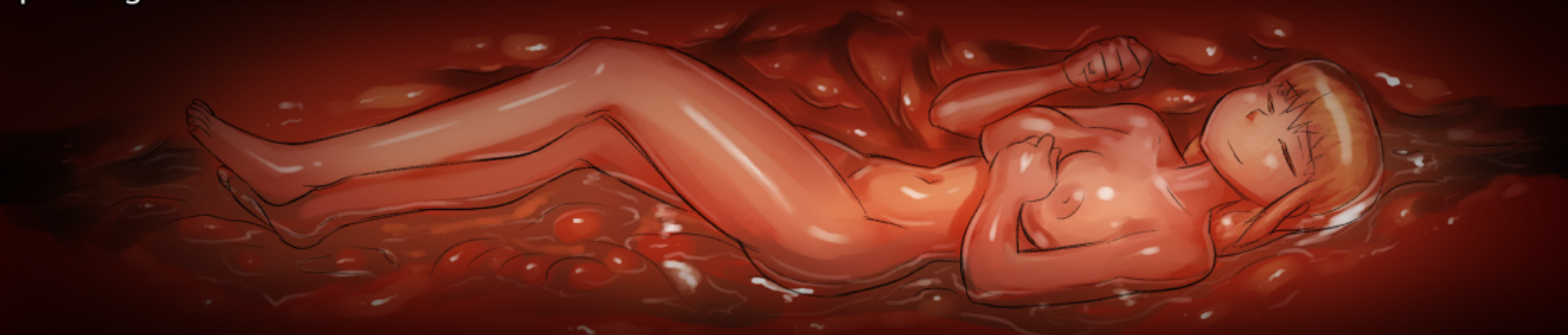


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Sed



Sashu



Amina



Not quite meant for this,
But people can ride on her
if necessary

Natani

