“Grow My Monster”

It was an accident. Like gravity, it was an unstoppable, unknowable force that absolved anyone of wrongdoing. Why, to be upset in the face of such truth was, was like blaming water for being wet! Or saying fire shouldn't be hot!

Such thoughts swirled inside Barbara’s skull. Head bowed, the hybrid Creature stood inside the Nursery. Orange gunk and spools of stringy fiber were splattered across the walls. Pale seeds crunched underfoot and her once-immaculate robes were stained with yellow juices. Fans roared from overhead, spreading mist over the emerald green plants that called this place home, while the air felt stifling hot.

As far as dimension-hopping buildings went, Sinful Selections wasn’t terribly special. The pawnshop housed the storefront, where the Sivan Siblings sold cursed artifacts by the truckload; the living quarters, from the bedrooms to the kitchen; and an array of miscellaneous rooms too. There was the basement, where the Blackheart Mistle sprouted delicious Blood Tears; there was the Forge, where Barbara made handcrafted trinkets imbued with powerful magicks as a novice magesmith.

Last, but not least, was the Nursery. Here, the Sivans grew a colorful cornucopia of plants. Some were mundane, like pepper and thyme for mealtime. Others were magical, like the infamous mandrake with its deathly scream; nephiliua, whose flowers bloomed sickly gold; and grotweed, the thorns tipped with a most toxic poison.

Nol used such plants in their potions, concocting rather noxious brews. It was as much a hobby as a business. Most would never see the light of day; if somebody wanted a love potion, they’d visit a witch, not a Creature of Leng. Nol just liked… having potions around.

Hell, a whole shelf was lined with nothing but Growth Booster bottles.

Recently, however, the Nursery had become home to a new guest: a pumpkin. Tough was its rind and tremendous its gravitas. The gourd was resplendent with a healthy orange hue, bright enough to bathe the walls in the colors of autumn. Knotty roots spooled around its base, while great leaves sprouted from its stem.

The pumpkin had dominated the Nursery for months, shoving its neighbors out of the way. It was closer to a boulder in size than a mere gourd, and must’ve weighed a tonne. Heck, Barbara felt like a mouse gazing upon a mountain! Such was its majesty. Such was its overwhelming presence.

And now, it was gone. Smashed to itty-bitty pieces, coating every surface in the Nursery. The walls were stained orange, pieces of gunk dripped from the fans. The leaves of numerous plants bent under the pulpy weight, while their roots greedily ate up the fertilizer.

And Nol? Why, they were fuming! Arms folded cross, the Creature drummed the ebony-black claws that tipped each finger. The musky aroma of pumpkin juice burned the nostril, while mush squished between their toes.

“... and how, pray tell, did this happen?” Nol scowled darkly. “Why was my pumpkin smashed?”

Like all Creatures of Leng, Nol was a Nightmare. Goat-like horns curved from the base of their skull to the back while their ‘face’ was a mockery of mankind. A tangled knot of flesh and varicose veins wrapped around where eyes should be. Oily black lips framed a mouth full of sharp teeth while bat-like ears jutted from their head. Blood-red hair cascaded down their back, falling down like velvety sin, while their skin was a pale, xanthous hue.

Nol looked like a ghoul that crawled out of the grave. The corpse of a monstrous goat, whose legs bent in eye-watering angles. Some might mistake Nol for a Satyr or Fawn– their gender was fluid as the sea– but the truth was obvious to anyone with eyes to see: this was a Creature of Leng, through-and-through.

Hands on their hips, Nol loomed closer. Next to the 7-foot tall Creature, Barbara felt like a child being scolded by their mother.

"Well?"

Nol pointed to the sad remains of the pumpkin. Even destroyed, the shell looked like the hollowed-out insides of a giant seashell. A car could fit inside.

"Seven months. I spent seven long months growing the best pumpkin possible. Loving it, grooming it. Treating it like my own kin."

Nol raised a trembling finger.

"You know how 'love' hurts our kind. It was a struggle not to puke every day!" The finger curled inward with a spine-tingling *creak*. "Now it's destroyed. What will people think, when the Bramblewood Fall Festival comes around?"

Despite their lack of eyes, a forlorn look came acrossNol's face. They gazed heavenward, as if praying for a sign.

"We Sivans have won the 'Biggest Pumpkin Award' ever since the first Festival. That bitch Mari Shelby is sure to steal the trophy this year!" Nol's head snapped back to Barbara. "So tell me: why has the link in the chain been broken?"

Barbara stared at the floor like it insulted her mother. Under her breath, she muttered, "whatsthebigdeal,whynotfixitwithmagic?"

Steam simmered over Nol's head, like they were a pot of water. Barbara could practically hear blood boil in their veins.

"That's cheating." Nol flourished a hand. Silvery-blue magic danced at their fingertips, twinkling like fairy dust. "Yes. I could grow a pumpkin twice as massive in a matter of minutes. Wouldn't even scratch a nail."

Nol clenched their hand, making the sparkly cloud explode.

"That's not the point! We must beat humans at their own game."

A snake-like hiss echoed inside Nol's throat. The chimeric creature was in true form today. If they hadn't spent the past decade living under the same roof– or seen Nol in their underwear– Barbara would've felt on-edge. The Nightmare was repulsive on an instinctual level, the senses telling mortals that this Thing That Should Not Be.

"How else can we break their spirits so completely? Feast on the rich, decadent despair? Few things taste sweeter." Nol pointed a claw at Barbara. "We like a heaping helping of fear on our breakfast every morning. Don't we?"

Barbara pursed her lips. Nol was right: fear was tasty. It spread so well over her waffles, just like maple syrup. How the flavor scorched the tastebuds like fire, blazing a trail of white-hot bliss across the tongue. The hybrid Creature's mouth watered at the thought.

Not that she'd admit it, here-and-now. The less firepower Nol had in the argument, the better.

With another *tingle-tink*, a plume of blue dust swept across the Nursery. Every orange chunk, every seed, melted into nothingness. The musky stench vanished like it was never there. Barbara's robes even got a nice dry clean. They smelled like lavender.

"... But it won't taste half as good if we cheat!" Nol leaned closer, until their warm breath washed across Barbara's face. "So, dear sister of mine: What. Happened?"

Arms folded cross, Barbara balanced on the balls of her feet. Much like Nol, the hybrid Creature looked monstrous. She had horns like a goat, a wire-thin tail that stretched to the floor, and black fur covered her arms and legs. Blood-red eyes filled her face, and if someone foolishly gazed too deeply, they would spot something uncanny beneath the surface. Something inhuman about Barbara.

That said, she looked far more human than Nol. Her skin was sweet like hot chocolate and a mass of black hair swept across her back, curly like a bush. Her smile was kinder and she remembered what laughter felt like. The touch of another. The importance of protecting smiles, and the joy of a sunrise.

As such, Barbara didn't relish a lecture from someone so utterly devoid of humanity. What did Nol know? It was an accident. Besides, it's not like Nol respected her property either. The hybrid Creature couldn't count how many times Nol broke her stuff.

In truth, Barbara couldn't bring herself to feel particularly guilty. Still, the Creature was waiting, and Barbara didn't want to drag the argument out further. After a heavy sigh, she said, "... I was practicing my magic."

Barbara planted both hands on her hips, pouting at Nol.

"Like you tell me to do, all the time?" Barbara waved at the shattered shell of a pumpkin. A glop of orange pulp dripped onto the floor, before a mote of sparkly dust erased it. "I wanted to make it look bigger. You know, rounder, instead of sagging on itself like a sad balloon?"

When Nol continued to tap their foot, Barbara growled.

"I messed up, okay? The pumpkin started growing– then it exploded everywhere!" Barbara mimed a balloon popping with her hands. "I'm sorry! What more do you want from me?"

When no further explanation seemed forthcoming, Nol sighed. It was the sigh of someone who spent too many centuries alone. Who shunned people like the plague, saw customers as a necessary evil to running a business, and would rather leap out of bushes and go 'boo' to passerbyers. Nol hadn't asked to reunite with a long-lost sibling. They didn't ask to be dropped into the role of teacher, showing Barbara the ins-and-outs of magic and her heritage. Destiny decided that on its own.

Nol pinched their brow.

"But why… why my award-winning pumpkin? Why make that the first test subject…!?"

The Creature took a deep breath. Relax, relax. Breathe. 'Find your happy place,' their face seemed to say. Anger would solve nothing; not when it lacked direction. Let's think things through.

"*Time… to scheme.*"

When Nol next spoke, their voice was calmer. Upbeat, in fact. Bubbly like a cheerleader motivating a crowd to support the team, who was down three players and losing by 30 points.

"Whelp! No point in crying over spilt milk!" Nol clapped their hands together, which rang through the Nursery like a gunshot. "Let's give thanks, nobody got hurt!"

Instantly, Barbara narrowed her eyes.

"Wait, really? That's… generous of you." Barbara looked Nol up-and-down, radiating suspicion. "Who are you and what have you done with Nol?"

"Whaaaaaaaaat?" Nol put a hand across their chest, bleeding injured innocence. "Why would you say that, dear sister of mine?"

Pulling Barbara close, Nol led her out of the Nursery. Cool air washed over the Sivans as the shadowy walls of Sinful Selections greeted them.

“Have I not been supportive of your training? Have I not taught you everything I know? Since when have I been anything but an earnest teacher?” Nol waved a hand, as if shooing away hours of grousing over Barbara’s beginner mistakes. “My apologies for getting in a tizzy! Losing my temper like that achieves nothing.”

Soon, the Sivan Siblings reached the Central Staircase. From there, the magic pawnshop stretched in several directions; below were three floors of the store, where they conducted business. Above led to the bedrooms, kitchen, and library. The handrails were made of polished oak, and shimmered with blue light beneath the surface.

Not for the first time, Barbara marveled at the power of magic. Sinful Selections was huge, bigger on the inside than out. If she gazed hard enough, the upper floors would stretch into the sky like Jacob’s Ladder, vanishing into a foggy soup of clouds. Many more rooms would be revealed than the 5-story building suggested, and it’d take days reaching the living quarters.

The same was true below. The basement was a labyrinth of shelves, each covered in the Blackheart Mistle’s roots. The tendrils stretched like a cancer, choking out any other vegetation. The backrooms similarly extended forever like a mist-cloaked canyon, where fantastical mysteries awaited around every corner and monsters roamed in an ecosystem all their own.

Mighty were their jaws and dreadful their tread.

Mercifully, only the Sivans and those attuned to the supernatural could appreciate this. If any mortal climbed the staircase, they’d reach Floor 3 and be barred from Floor 4 by a locked, seemingly normal door. Only madmen or unlucky fools got swallowed up by Sinful Selections. And if Barbara wanted to spare herself miles of walking, she concentrated on her destination. When she opened her eyes, she’d arrive exactly where she wanted to go.

Stopping at the staircase, Nol spun on their heel.

“Please forgive my lapse in judgment. Here, as a token of good will!”

Pulling something from their cleavage, Nol handed it to Barbara. Still warm to the touch, the purse felt weighty in her hand.

“Buy yourself something nice. Like a book or a fancy hairbrush!” Nol gently squeezed Barbara’s hands. “You’ve earned it, sis.”

Barbara kept her narrow-eyed stare. Nol never acted so kind, not even on Christmas. Even if she couldn’t sense a curse coming from the purse, the hybrid Creature couldn’t trust her sibling as far as she could throw them.

Still, rather than risk another lecture, Barbara took the purse.

“Riiiight,” said Barbara, never breaking eye contact with Nol as she went down the stairs. She half-expected the Creature to shove her.

Fortunately, that never came, and once Nol was out-of-sight, Barbara looked at the purse. It seemed fine, the velvet bag decorated with a blue-and-red robin. It fit comfortably in the hand, about the size of a starling egg. Inside was about a hundred thousand dollars in cash, as well as a king's ransom worth of silver and gold.

The purse was magically tied to the family vault. Nol never lent it to her. Suspicion layered upon suspicion like the detritus of bygone ages. Barbara’s insides twisted like snakes, yet if she was honest? She felt oddly happy. Whatever their scheme, Nol trusted her with all the Sivan’s money.

“Hm. Guess they just want me outta the house?” said Barbara, muttering under her breath. “Maybe they’ll fix the pumpkin without me seeing? Hm…”

Well, whatever. It felt like ages since she treated herself. The hybrid Creature shrugged, then went out on a little shopping spree.

Once Barbara walked out, purse jingling in hand, Nol turned away from the banister. Black claws clinked against the hardwood floor, not unlike vermin skittering in the walls, while shadows swirled in their wake.

Under their breath, Nol muttered, “If I replace the Dryad Leafs, then…?”

Honestly, Barbara had every right to be suspicious. As a Creature of Leng, malevolence was baked into Nol’s DNA. They didn’t walk; they stalked through the night like a hungry wolf; they didn’t talk, every word was a conspiratorial whisper or grand speech of villainy. Such evil wasn’t so much a reflex as a state of mind.

Of being.

As such, Nol couldn’t let this go. It went against their nature. Perhaps it was an accident, and Barbara deserved leniency? Nol could never hate their sister. Barbara was their only family, the last survivor of the Sivan Lineage. As such, any harm placed upon her head must be gentle, like sending a child to bed without supper.

Dark thoughts swirled inside the Nightmare’s head. The punishment must be perfect, down to the last second. By the time Nol reached the Chemist’s Room, a scheme brewed within their sin-stained heart.

Tapping their claws together, Nol cackled.

“Yes. Yes! It’s perfect. She’ll never see it coming! Just wait, dear sister of mine. That blue ribbon will be ours yet. Just you wait… kehehehe~”

As the Hourglass of Time was wont to do, sand trickled downward. Days blew past and pages peeled off the calendar, one by one by one. If the Sivans didn’t know better, they’d swear a Chronophage latched onto Sinful Selections and gobbled up every last second.

Months passed, and before Barbara could blink, it was October. The spooky season, where ghosts haunted graveyards under the light of a full moon. When witches were abroad, flying upon their broomsticks as autumn leaves danced, and nights grew cold. During this time, the power of Nightmares waxed full, such that their magicks rivaled Infernas. The Sivan Siblings felt lighter, their breath like moths fluttering in the dark.

What a wonderful season indeed.

Similarly, business went well. Perhaps customers wanted spooky decorations for their homes, or felt tempted by the gothic decor, but crowds stormed Sinful Selections like a stampede of buffalo. The Sivans made money hand over clawed fist, and more importantly, sold cursed artifacts by the dozen. The Blackheart Mistle’s branches bent under the weight of Blood Tears, as it drank deep the deliciously sour suffering.

Coupled with the autumnal changes, the Sivans grew prettier. Barbara’s skin developed a healthy luster she hadn’t seen in years, softer than velvet. The mass of black curls she called hair grew silky, springy like a bed of wires. Her teeth shimmered like freshly-cut diamonds, and her hips bounced with every step. Barbara had more junk in the trunk than an eighteen wheeler truck.

As much as she enjoyed this, however, Nol really raked in the benefits…

Indeed, never had Nol looked so phenomenal. Every time Sinful Selections sold a trinket, their claws grew sharper. Their teeth, longer. The horns on their head had never seen such dusky luster before. Nol looked like a monster straight outta the blackest pit, fitting for such a horror, and yet…

They were curvy like a supermodel who sold hamburgers for a fast food commercial. Day-by-day, their once-flat chest swelled like balloons, knocking about like the balls of a Newton's Cradle. Twice a month, Nol had to climb bra sizes just to catch up. At last count, the Creature sported a double Ds, those pale melons exposed by an ample cleavage.

Nol was like a vampire temptress, who'd seduce stalwart heroes to drop their swords and join the Dark Side for a kiss. They brought to mind a big titty goth girl, who grew up into a Grade-A MILF who still wore black nail polish. And with glamour, that's what customers saw instead of the nightmarish horror.

"Um, uh. You're awfully pretty?" asked a brunette customer. He was on the younger side, no older than 22. Something about his demeanor screamed 'virgin.' Had the customer ever held hands with a woman before? Highly doubtful. "Are you single, ma'am?"

Leaning against the counter, Nol shook their head.

"That I am!" Nol placed a hand across their buxom bosom. The pale cleavage stared back at the customer like a treasure chest of gold. "But I'm afraid this old mare packs too much kick for a young lad yourself."

Playfully, Nol tapped the brunette on the nose.

"Come back in 10 years. Then I'll consider it!"

"Oh. Okay…" he said, voice heavy with disappointment.

"Oh, don't look so glum! Lesser men wouldn't have shot their shot in the first place. Tell you what!"

Across the counter slid a small statue. It was a liondog with curly eyebrows and a muzzle full of teeth, snarling in perpetual anger. It was Ming in origin, though greatly worn from time, such that any colors painted into the stone were lost. That said, even those without True Sight could sense something mystical about the statue.

Like most artifacts in Sinful Selections, the statue bore a curse. Nothing too sinister, just the lingering resentment of a ghost who watched the dynasty fall to the Qing. A label reading $200 hung off the neck, which Nol nonchalantly plucked off.

"On discount, for the handsome fella with a sweet tongue." Nol waved a hand like a ringleader unveiling a new attraction at a circus. At the same time, they leaned against the counter. Those buxom breasts spilled across the wood, bristling with goosebumps. "Just $300, and that's the best offer you'll see all day!"

The brunette's jaw went slack. Through glamour, Nol resembled a pale-skinned beauty with long hair. Bangs covered their eyes, which were a milky shade of red. They wore black clothes accented with metal skulls and spikes, while a ruby-tipped chain hung off the neck. It nestled gently upon the cleavage, a flash of fire in a sea of milk.

Who wouldn't ogle such a dark damsel?

"G-Gee! Thanks, lady!"

Hurriedly, the customer paid for his purchase and dashed out of the store. As he vanished into the crowd, the curse interwove with his aura like the poisonous tentacles of a purple octopus. It wouldn't torment him too much; just drop his chances for romance from 1% to 0.

Waving farewell, Nol grinned from ear-to-ear. The robes clutching their buxom bosom creaked painfully, the fabric straining against the bone-colored mounds.

"Aaah! Nothing does the heart good like charity."

With a chuckle, Nol clapped a hand across their huge knockers. The customer's disappointment had tasted sour yet sweet like a lemondrop. Not enough to fill the stomach, but worthy as a snack. And soon, the Blackheart Mistle would feed off his pain for a bigger meal.

Nol's mouth watered in anticipation.

"Or the body, for that matter! Kehehehe!"

Across the room, Barbara glanced at her sibling. Save for a few mortals milling around the upper floors, and two elderly wizards arguing whether they should buy a set of magic books or a new wand for their grandchild's birthday, business was slow. It always was after 1 PM, but they expected more traffic around dinnertime.

The hybrid Creature paused in her work, setting aside the featherduster. She leaned against the counter, eyeing her sibling up-and-down.

"Someone's in an awfully good mood." Barbara frowned. It was rare for Nol to flirt with the customers, unless they were selling an expensive or especially cursed relic. The statue was neither of those things. Even the concept of love sickened the Creature, so flirting felt excessive. "Are you up to something?"

Barbara looked across the counter. Beside the register and a quiverful of quills for sale, there sat a spellbook open flat. Dozens of spells covered the yellowed pages with glyphs, each more intricate than the last. Given her brief study, Barbara didn't recognize most of the patterns, but she knew necromancy when she saw it.

"Cooking up some mischief?" Barbara raised an eyebrow. "What, are you gonna summon a horde of skeletons for the holiday?"

Nimble as a ballerina, Nol spun on their heels. This should've been impossible for someone with goat-like legs, making the dance uncanny. Those buxom breasts swayed heavily, knocking side-to-side like bowling balls.

"Close, dear sister of mine. Close!"

Politely but pointedly, they snapped the spellbook shut. Barbara flinched at the sound.

"Let's not ruin the surprise, eh?" Nol raised an ebony claw. "For this Creature, in my ultimate wisdom, has discovered a way to win at this year's Autumn Festival! With, or without, an award-winning pumpkin!"

Nudging Barbara with an elbow, Nol waggled an eyebrow. How they accomplished this without eyes was both impressive and unsettling.

"Care to guess how~?"

Much like the Great Fire of '08, neither sibling had mentioned the pumpkin for months. After the lecture, Nol acted like it never happened. Barbara half-believed they forgot about it, and focused their endeavours on other mischief. There were always more mortals to scare, new ways to extract fear. The Bramblewood Fall Festival was hardly the only scheme Nol cooked in the background.

Even now, days before All Hallow's Eve, Barbara felt taken aback. Nol still cared about that silly contest? Why? A blue ribbon couldn't mean that much to the Nightmare, right?

"'Without a pumpkin?'" Barbara raised an eyebrow. Her chores forgotten, the hybrid Creature placed a hand on her hip. "How could you possibly do that?"

Nol chuckled. Like all things with Nightmares, it was not a nice laugh. It was borne from a bottomless pit and crawled out the throat like a blood-starved beast, where it escaped lips lathered in blackest sin. Such a sound chilled one to the bone and woke children up at night, covered in a cold sweat. It rattled around graveyards like skeletons and startled travelers in a misty, forgotten wood.

Quite frankly, it was a monstrous laugh…

… and wholly unremarkable. Barbara had long since reconciled with the fact that her sibling was evil. All Nightmares were, to a greater or lesser degree. In her darkest moments, Barbara wondered if she was too?

Clicking their tongue, Nol waggled a finger in Barbara's face.

"I said, 'guess.' Where's the fun in just telling you?"

Nol turned as the elderly wizards approached the counter. Instead of paying in dollars, they traded a crystal ball. It leaked with an ethereal mist, losing untold prophecies all the time, but a Fix-It Spell could patch it up.

"Oh well! You'll see soon enough. Soon enough… kehehehe!"

The rest of the day flew by in a blur. Once the clock struck ten, Sinful Selection shut its doors. While Barbara ran cleanup duty, Nol closed the register and counted the safe. They earned over $6K in revenue and dozens of magical baubles, traded by clientele of the mystical persuasion. The Blackheart Mistle produced over a dozen Blood Tears, enough to feed the family for a week.

Not only was October the most profitable month of year, but Sinful Selections hadn't done such good business in decades. Once the holiday season was over, maybe the Sivans could go on vacation? Visit the Silver Crescent, where the waters are warm and the skies violent green? Invite Ellie along and wear bikinis on the crystal sands?

It'd be a great time.

"Sure, why not? Could always finetune my 'killer shark' routine. Would make for a good laugh!" said Nol when Barbara floated the idea over dinner. While the hybrid Creature enjoyed a plate of eggplant Parmesan and mashed potatoes, seasoned with fear, Nol ate a Blood Tear. The gemstone rolled across their tongue like a peppermint, its reddish hue bleeding away.

Once it turned ghostly gray, the Creature split the Blood Tear between their sharp teeth. The stone shattered like candy glass. The sound of crunching rocks filled the dining room, while Barbara plowed through a mountain of mashed potatoes.

With a throaty *gwulp,* Nol swallowed it down.

"Any other suggestions?" Nol crossed their legs, propping their head up with both hands. "A vacation would do this body good, but the last time I took one was two, three centuries ago? I'm bereft of ideas!"

Barbara bit the inside of her lip. She couldn't forget the conversation from earlier. The Bramblewood Fall Festival loomed over her head like a guillotine, ready to kill her on the spot. The hybrid Creature kept talking, in the hopes Nol spilled the beans.

"I don't know. Somewhere tropical. The Caribbean, maybe?" Barbara swiveled her fork in the air, searching for flaws in Nol's act. Any hint that their scheme was especially diabolical. How does one win a pumpkin-growing contest without a pumpkin?

The snap of Nol's fingers sounded like a gunshot.

"'The Caribbean?' What a marvelous idea! We must make plans post-haste."

Barbara's eye twitched. Also, Nol's attitude. They were too upbeat. Normally, the Nightmare was moody, sour, a real curmudgeon. The friendly act only came out when Nol was hawking relics onto customers, or they were tricking someone. That trickster facade added to the Creature's charm, but it should be projected outward, at other people.

Not towards Barbara. Nol was scheming something, and it was bad with a capital B. Barbara knew it in her bones. She just couldn't guess the angle?

Such suspicion didn't go unnoticed. Although faint, tension hung over the dinner table, invisible like carbon monoxide and twice as deadly. As the Creature kept babbling along, Nol thought to themselves.

"*Stupid, stupid. Why am I so stupid*?" Through a toothy grin, Nol kicked themselves. "*Why did I bring up the festival? Should've just taken her by surprise!"*

Deep down, Nol knew why. They played with their food too much. It filled the Creature with no small amount of glee, watching Barbara sit on pins-and-needles across the table, trying to guess their game. Sadism was the bread-and-butter of every Nightmare, but just as often, it was their achille's heel.

Worse, unlike most marks, Barbara knew Nol too well. If they had schemed in secret, hidden the plan under a cloak of shadows, Barbara would've uncovered the truth. The girl had a nose like a bloodhound. If the Creature wanted to disguise their intentions, it required a subtle balance between truth-and-lies, and Nol?

They were subtle like a shovel to the face.

"*Well, whatever*," thought Nol, as Barbara continued to eat dinner. "*Not like it's gonna matter anyway…*"

A fork raised up, ready to plunge anew into the mashed potatoes. They were scrumptious, the flavor light while the texture felt fluffy on the tongue. Flecks of brown skin peeked through the pillowy mass, imperfections to the recipe, but honestly?

That made it better, more authentic. Barbara didn't need to cook her food; as Nol pointed out, that's what magic was for. With a wave of her hand, the utensils would move on their own and cook perfect meals every time. Nevertheless, it was important. It tied Barbara to her heritage: half human, half Creature. She was a being of two worlds, and denying one for the other felt wrong on a deep, existential level.

Cooking did that for Barbara, so she went to the trouble of homemaking every meal. Nol sometimes even helped, finding clever ways of blending Blood Tears into spices. It nourished both her human and Creature body, and was just a nice gesture overall.

Though, in hindsight, maybe it wasn't wise to share the kitchen today?

Suddenly, Barbara's head felt heavy. The dining room spun in a maelstrom of moonlight and darkness. The hybrid Creature stumbled to her feet, shoving her half-eaten dinner away. As bricks filled her noggin, she groaned.

"I, whaaa…?"

Another stumble. Barbara's body refused to listen. Her feet slipped from underneath her, those tricky bastards. If she didn't fall headlong into Nol's arms, she would've tasted the floor.

Soft pillows pushed against Barbara's face. Nol's buxom breasts felt lighter than clouds and warm like cotton. As her eyelids went heavy as lead, she couldn't help but appreciate the aroma of milk.

"You… you!?" muttered Barbara, wrestling between her frustration and the feather-soft embrace of those wamba-jamba titties.

"Nighty night, sis! When you wake, we'll have that blue ribbon for sure," said Nol, before cackling like a witch. "Kehehehe!"

Barbara's eyes fluttered open-and-shut. She tried to pull away from Nol's titanic titties, but it was like freeing herself out of a whirlpool– no matter how hard she struggled, she was drawn back into the smothering embrace.

This close, they felt like the world's loveliest, most welcoming pillows.

"Haaaaate… you…!" Barbara managed to mumble out, before her eyes finally shut. There was no fighting it. Her limbs were like lead and her mind swam like a deep-sea fish, drifting along the bottom of a dark ocean. Soon enough, even these were swallowed up.

All that was left was inky darkness...

Darkness. From the heights of heaven to the pits of hell, the only thing Barbara ve Sivan knew was a fathomless darkness. It was thick like fog, yet warm like a blanket. Impenetrable as stone, yet beautiful as a night sky.

For a long time, Barbara floated in the darkness. It was a surreal space, alien to the senses, yet comforting too. It felt safe. There were no dangers in the void. No monsters waiting to leap out and say 'boo.'

No bills to pay.

Barbara was alone… save for the pressure. Below the knees, the hybrid Creature felt a pressure squeeze her body. It had no form, no substance, yet something clenched her feet like tight-fitting shoes.

In her mind's eye, Barbara imagined a boa constrictor wrapping its coils around a deer. Or perhaps a crocodile swallowing a wildebeest bit-by-bit, its toothy jaws crammed with meat. The pressure climbed like a reptilian colossus: sluggish, but with steady certainty.

One moment, her toes clenched together. Minutes later, the sensation reached her ankles, then her knees. Barbara wiggled on the spot. She couldn't move whatever the pressure touched. Her body was filled with lead. Barbara's legs were still hers, still attached, yet they felt distant. Disconnected from her body on some fundamental level.

The pressure claimed Barbara's legs for all their own.

By the time Barbara's thighs clapped together, panic finally gnawed at her heart. The darkness had felt so safe that she hadn't minded the pressure. Presumably it would leave in time? But no, it didn't stop. Anxiety finally chewed through the thin blanket of security, and Barbara's hands clawed at the void.

"Get off me. Let go. Let…!"

Then, like smoke, the darkness melted away. Light flooded back into the world like God opened the Gates of Heaven. Barbara was blinded by the suddenness of it all. Blinking rapid-fire, she waited for the colors to coalesce into sensible shapes.

Nursery. She was in the Nursery. The room was cloaked in darkness, where shadows clawed from every corner like a thousand ghostly hands. Every herb and ficus loomed like trees, their leaves coated in a silvery sheen.

Outside, however, the night was bright. Moonlight spilled through the window, spilling fountains of liquid silver everywhere. Stars studded the sky, twinkling like diamonds. There were no streetlights to tarnish the midnight beauty; no honking cars or barking dogs to interrupt the sublime silence.

Sinful Selections must've teleported far from the city to enjoy such a rapturous sight.

Barbara felt cold. Something hard pressed against her face. Shifting on the spot, she saw a wall of hard oak. Correction; that was the floor. She'd drooled over it in her sleep. Barbara had slept on the cold-ass floor of the Nursery.

"*Why*?" was naturally the first question. Barbara had never been a sleepwalker. She couldn't have crawled outta bed, stumbled into the Nursery, and dropped in for a good snooze. Nor did she recall any late-night visits. The chore wheel was very clear: while Barbara watered the plants by day, Nol watered them at night.

She shifted again, trying to sit upright. Gravity, however, had other plans. Barbara flopped forward, her chest slamming against the floor. Her legs were asleep. Or rather, that surreal pressure still squeezed them tight. Everything below her waist felt numb.

Groggily, Barbara glanced down and realized why.

"... Huh?"

Barbara couldn't see her feet, knees or thighs. Instead, a ring of pink flesh stared back, winking like a cyclops. It was lined with veiny muscles and sinewy fibers, which clenched tight. Beyond that was a wall of fat, which was colored like lemons and twice as sour.

At first, she said nothing. Who could possibly find the words for a situation like this? Anger simmered under the surface, absolutely, but it was like a kettle over a low heat stove; it took time to boil.

When steam finally rose, however, Barbara screeched like a banshee.

"… Nol!" She snapped. "Are you friggin' kidding me!?"

To Barbara's mutual shock and outrage, she was knee-deep in Nol's ass. The Creature's hips were huge, six or seven times their usual peach-bottom size. Each buttcheek was big as a yoga ball, the jaundiced skin stretched smooth. Combined, this dumptruck dwarfed mountains. Grand was their majesty, and sublime the curvature.

In fact, the humungous hips were roughly the same size as Nol's prize-winning pumpkin, may it rest in peace. To accentuate this, a jack-o-lantern was crudely painted across the plump, ample surface. It glared evilly across the Nursery, proclaimed itself the King of Gourdkind, and the sharp-toothed grin?

Well, let's just say its teeth chomped Barbara like a cigar.

Growling between her teeth, Barbara considered her situation. Okay, Nol was eating her. So what? The Sivans ate each other all the time, at least twice or thrice a year. Siblings bicker, you get used to it.

What was surprising, however, was the technique.

Barbara looked at the humungous ass. It positively brimmed with Fear Energy, the life force which fueled all Nightmares. It radiated power throughout the Nursery like a heat lamp. When she slapped it, her hand bouncing against the smooth surface, it felt solid like a drum. Fat jiggled around like a tub of jello before a red mark blossomed across the skin.

Nope. This wasn't an illusion. Nol's ass really was that massive. The Creature must've guzzled a dozen Blood Tears to get this thicc, or scared a whole truckload worth of teenagers. The ambient energy of Halloween couldn't explain such a growth spurt.

Could it…?

Glancing over their shoulder, Nol scowled.

"Hey hey! Hands off the merchandise!"

A throaty purr rumbled inside the Creature's chest. With the utmost tender care, Nol stroked their massive dumptruck like a loyal pet. The ebony tips of their claws traced across Barbara's hair too, snagging a bit, but the gesture was more accidental than cruel. Or, indeed, comforting.

"You break it, you buy it!" The Creature cackled a bit. "More importantly, good morning! Or should I say, 'goodnight?' Somebody's feeling energetic, eh? Kehehehe!"

“Oh, I’m energetic alright!” Slamming one fist against the floor, Barbara swung the other against one of the enormous asscheeks. Even with all her strength, though, the blow didn't accomplish much but made it wobble. “And I’m gonna use it to kick your ass to Leng and back! If I don’t wring your neck first!”

Grunting like a bull, Barbara squirmed inside the ass. After much elbow grease, she flipped herself right-side up, so she faced the ceiling. This gave her ample leverage to shove against that mountainous dumptruck. Over-and-over she pushed, trying to pry herself from that tight butthole. Her hands sank into the outermost layer of assfat, which felt soft as clay and smooth from sweat…

… only to be stopped by the firm, powerful muscles underneath. It was unforgiving, implacable. As hard as Barbara pushed, those enormous glutes clenched harder. She practically felt the Fear Energy pulse through sinew, crackling like lightning.

“Oh, come on!” Barbara groaned as her arms gave out. Beads of sweat drenched her brow, while her chest heaved with heavy breaths. She glared across the Creature of Leng, noticing how their stomach bulged in the middle. It was like Nol guzzled a bucket of water, or ate a week’s worth of lemon meringue pie.

Her feet must already be tap-dancing the stomach walls. Barbara was halfway devoured, or halfway free. She preferred to imagine it was the latter.

Claw trembling, she pointed at her sibling.

“Just– *huff huff*– you wait! Imma gonna– *huff huff*– wipe that smug smirk off your face! Come hell or high– *huff*– water!”

If Nol felt the least bit concerned, they hid it well. The Creature smiled like the serpent whispered in Eve’s ear and convinced her to bite the Apple. As Barbara’s struggles grew faster, her anger boiling over like a pot, the nastier the smirk grew.

And the bigger that dumptruck ass seemed to grow…

“Squirm if you wish, dear sister of mine.” With an easygoing grunt, Nol clenched their asscheeks. Barbara sank an inch deeper, the progress almost imperceptible. “But this pit has only one bottom, and it’s mine.”

With a squelch and wet *ploink*, Barbara’s hips vanished inside her sibling’s terrible end. And to think, she was supposed to be the bottom-heavy one. If put side-by-side right now, however, Nol’s booty would’ve outstretched hers by half. Fear Energy could do a body good...

As sweat drenched her dark skin, Barbara shoved again. She threw her whole weight behind it, like she was pumping iron in the gym. Just a little headway, give her that much! Please? If she squeaked out an inch, Barbara was sure she could escape. Maybe close enough distance to grab Nol’s mane of blood-red hair?

That would surely make the Creature relent!

Another clench shattered Barbara’s hopes. Like an ice skater on a frozen lake, the momentum built from her previous attempts made her slide faster than before– and this time, her hands got swallowed too. Barbara’s arms pinned to her sides, leaving her unable to do more than wiggle like a worm caught on a hook.

“Damn it!”

A cruel cackle escaped the Creature. Waggling their humongous hips back-and-forth, the mountain of flesh wobbled like jello. Barbara was dragged behind like a dog on a leash, her face rubbing against the floor.

“What’s wrong, Barbs? Giving up so soon?”

Nol tilted their head. At the same time, the Creature patted their ass like a prized heifer. Black claws carved grooves across the pale surface. The booty was just so… *big*. The marbled fat was dense like whale blubber, yet bouncy like rubber. Even if she wasn't trapped like a fly, it was doubtful Barbara could bruise such a beast. Even Nol seemed overwhelmed by their own bootyliciousness.

"Guess those magic lessons were for naught! A true mage would know the exact spell to escape this situation."

The Creature snapped their claws.

"Matter of fact! Since we're blood, I'll show an ounce of mercy. For the next ten seconds, I won't squeeze. If you can weave a spell and escape in that time, then all sins will be forgiven!" Nol offered a hand, even though Barbara plainly couldn't accept it. "Sounds fair?"

Hope rose in Barbara's breast. This was her chance. While she wasn't afraid of death– Nol always revived her, the Sivans had an Understanding– digestion was never fun. She always tried to escape, to the bitter end.

After all, she wasn't a quitter. Mama Odele didn't raise no quitter! Barbara could only imagine Mama looking down, disappointed if she gave up too s– actually, scratch that. Barbara would die of embarrassment if Mama saw her like this.

The point was! Barbara knew this was her golden opportunity, her last chance to escape. Biting her bottom lip, Barbara focused her mind. She waggled her fingers as best as possible, scraping her claws against Nol's colon lining. Hand gestures weren't necessary for spells, but it helped visual the direction.

"Come on… come on!" said Barbara, brow furrowing tightly.

Suddenly, across the Nursery, a Golden Pothos began to tremble. Motes of blue magic weaved around the ceramic pot, spinning in circles like streamers. The plant rose off the shelf, trembling in mid-air as Barbara struggled for control.

Then, with a burst of speed, it flew across the room, straight toward Nol's dumb head!

…Only to sail overhead, slam into a wall and shatter to a million pieces. Barbara and Nol sat in silence. The room echoed from the shattering of ceramic, as well as the chips wobbling to a stop. The tension could be cut with a knife.

"…Shit," said Barbara, her shoulders slumping.

An incredible pressure crushed Barbara at once, not unlike the world's biggest chew toy. The hybrid Creature sank deeper, past the elbows, past the shoulders. With a slimy *sluuuuuurk*, only her head poked past the asshole. Her field-of-vision was eclipsed by those pale buttcheeks, which loomed like the walls of the Grand Canyon.

Full of disappointment, Nol said, "Wow, Barbs. I have failed you as a teacher!"

Heavily, they slapped that dumptruck ass.

"Allow me to spare you more misery!"

There came a terrible sense of tension. Power coursed throughout the humungous ass, as magic and muscle weaved together a song of destruction. It was the calm before the storm. The first tremors before a magnitude twelve earthquake struck Los Angeles, sinking it into the sea. The booty shuddered from the sheer concentration of force.

Then-and-there, Barbara knew the truth. This badonkadonk was unstoppable as an avalanche, a force of nature. The moment her feet slid between the buttcheeks, she already lost. Nol must've prepared for this day for months. Every meal, every customer, led to this moment. All so they could devour her in the most humiliating way possible.

How smart of them. How calculating. How… petty.

"You know…" Barbara said, voice straining as the pressure mounted. "You really are a bi– "

SHHHHLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLPPPPPP!!!

It was over in an instant. Barbara vanished into the enormous ass, her voice drowned out by the thunderous clap of assheeks. They mashed together like a pair of doors slamming shut, sealing her doom in a spray of sweat.

The ironclad pressure didn't stop there, however, oh no. Nol's body wrapped around her, the intestinal walls squeezing and undulating like a carpet of flesh. Prickles of pain washed over Barbara, making her bones creak. She slid deeper and deeper into the bowels on a one-way trip to hell.

"Yeah… you sure got payback, huh?" She mumbled, as she watched scarlet veins and tension-filled muscles pulsate across the digestive tract.

If the cosmos showed any mercy at all, the journey was brief. Nol's intestines didn't extend forever like a Great Old One's, mindlessly digesting souls they devoured millennia ago. After a few minutes of skin-crawling squelches, Barbara plopped into the stomach. She landed facefirst into a pool of acid, her left foot stuck in the sphincter.

With a groan, Barbara pulled herself upright. Surprisingly, everything was bright like a bioluminescent sponge at the bottom of the ocean. The stomach walls were bubblegum pink, where every fold was highlighted by shiny juices. Strands of phlegm descended from the ceiling, sloughing off in a manner most sticky. Gastric rumbles made the place jostle about, like she was trapped in a carnival ride.

Barbara half-expected the stomach to be dark as pitch, but no. Everything was clear as day. Which, insofar as she understood Nightmares, was the point. She wouldn't claw around in darkness, blind to the world. No, she had the privilege of watching herself digest.

"*What an honor*."

Worse, there were no exits. No valve hung from the ceiling, leading up to the throat. When Barbara glanced over her shoulder, the sphincter to the small intestines vanished in a puff of sparkles too. The walls were wrinkly, offering plenty of handholds, but climbing up-or-down wasn't an option.

Barbara was trapped. For all intents and purposes, the stomach was cut off from the rest of the world. A pocket dimension that existed only to digest people, floating through the void of space. A bubble of bone-melting acid, nothing more.

Which it would do with gusto. A monstrous roar rang throughout the stomach, making the floor shudder. Acid seeped from the walls, collecting at Barbara's feet while steam wafted off the frothy waters. It brought to mind a witch's cauldron, simmering with heat. More importantly, magic glyphs danced beneath the velvety folds, weaving between organs.

As a student new to the arcane arts, Barbara's knowledge was limited, but she recognized these patterns. They were in Nol's spellbook from earlier. The puzzle pieces clicked in place.

… oh, that bitch.

Barbara bared her wolf-like teeth in a bestial snarl. With all the strength she could muster, she gave the stomach wall a savage kick. The organ rocked violently, shaking it and herself back-and-forth. She heard Nol grunt through layers of muscle and tissue.

"Nol!? Are you seriously that petty?" She howled. "My body wasn't enough? You're going to trap my soul too?"

She slammed a fist against the wall.

"Over a pumpkin!?"

The glyphs, simply put, would seal Barbara's soul inside Nol upon digestion. They would be tethered like a prisoner shackled to a cop. Such spells were reserved to prevent victims from haunting their murderers as ghosts– or to be a total bitch, in Nol's case.

While most people, and Nightmares for that matter, would be more afraid than angry, Barbara knew this arrangement would be temporary. Just another step in whatever indignity Nol planned for her. Not that it softened the blow. White-hot rage pumped through her veins, making Barbara see red.

"Enjoy this while it lasts. 'Cause the instant I'm out, I'll tear off your horns and shove them so far down your throat you'll grow two extra tails!"

A hideous cackle escaped Nol, which reverberated like the screech of bats in a dark cave.

"Kehehehe! What a bone-chilling threat, sis! Guess I taught you something after all?"

The stomach shifted from side-to-side like a cruise ship out at sea. Barbara slammed against the walls, bouncing about like a tetherball on rope. If she wasn't sticky enough from the intestinal romp, she sure was now.

Hell, every inch of Barbara was coated in slime. At least it didn't burn. Yet.

What a miserable experience, and it wasn't over yet. As Nol stood up, they heaved the gargantuan gut in both arms. The jaundiced skin was perfectly smooth, stretched to the absolute limit. As it slouched past the Creature's goat-like knees, hovering over the floor, sapphire-and-ruby red veins shone beneath the surface.

The Creature breathed hard.

"Geez, Barb. I know you were a fatass, but why are you damn heavy? Feels like my spine is gonna snap in two!"

"Oh, shut up! I don't wanna hear any belly-aching from you!" Barbara snapped through gritted teeth. Difficult though it was, she kept shoving the stomach walls with all her might. At the same time, her feet stomped like a soldier marching off to war. Surely enough stress would make Nol throw up?

For a moment, escape seemed possible. The stomach walls around her rippled like water. Outside, Nol's belly bulged in opposite directions. When Barbara shoved skyward and kicked downward, huge impressions uplifted those ample breasts and brushed the floor. When she rammed her shoulder like a star quarterback player, Nol was wrenched both forward and back, nearly splitting them in two.

It was like Nol devoured a tropical storm. The Creature thrashed about left-and-right, beholden to the whims of their belly. Suddenly, this wasn't fun anymore.

Unfortunately, much like a rubber band, the stomach always snapped back into place. With an elastic *whap*, the sinew shrank and knocked Barbara with the force of a kicking donkey. This didn't stop her, but she burnt through stamina all the time.

The battle raged on, but this war of attrition had a clear victor on the horizon.

Nol heaved ragged breaths. They knew Barbara would kick up a fuss, but not this badly. It rather spoiled their image as an all-conquering, all-consuming abomination. It was hard to take the Creature seriously when they lurched across the Nursery like a dog owner struggling to train an unruly rottweiler.

"Stop it already! You're sucking all the fun outta this!" Nol squeezed their stomach, embracing it against their buxom bosom. "Behave and digest like a good girl."

"I am a good girl!" With a desperate cry, Barbara rammed the stomach wall like mountain goats butting heads. A clear impression of her face, hands, chest, and even thicc thighs formed under the xanthous skin. "It's you who's the nasty one!"

As if exhausted by this argument, a tremendous *guuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuurgle* escaped the gigantic gut. It jostled about like an old-timey car engine revving to life, as muscles both flexed across the surface and acid bubbled loudly. The temperature spiked like a pressure cooker while the digestive tract roared like a lion.

Nol's belly was a monster unto itself.

Faintly, Barbara felt a strange tug. Like the invisible hands of a ghostly seamstress, something grasped her inner Nightmare, then dragged on it inch-by-inch like thread off a spool. While the acid would melt her human flesh, the stomach would absorb her Fear Energy. Steal it and integrate it with Nol's essence, making them scarier than before.

Two Creatures, one body. What a dreadful combination.

The sensation felt surreal, like Barbara was becoming a shadow of her former self. Glancing down, her outline flickered. Her hands became transculent, allowing the lake of acid to peer through. The pain grew mild like a hot bubble bath and every movement of her limbs felt distant, like she puppeted an animatronic of her own body.

"*So that's why Nol's ass was so strong…*" thought Barbara as the horror dawned on her. The Creature had fed on her anger, fear, everything from the beginning. Barbara fought not just Nol, but her own emotions. It shouldn't be possible for Nightmares to cannibalize each other like this; or rather, it was very, very rude.

Alas, before Barbara could center herself and fight with a reinvigorated strategy, other things demanded her attention. The stomach grew oppressive, as if the air was solid as concrete. The roiling heat sank into her bones, cooking her from the inside-out. Barbara's head swam, while her eyelids stuck together like glue every time she blinked.

It reminded Barbara of how she wrapped herself in blankets during the winter, dozing by the fireplace with its generous warmth. The vision was both cozy, yet terrifying. If she allowed herself to drift off to Dreamland, she'd surely digest.

"Ugh…" The hybrid Creature shook her head, clutching it gently. "You… you'd better not steal my stuff while I'm gone!"

She gave the stomach wall a petulant kick for emphasis. At least, she tried to. Barbara's foot was so insubstantial she didn't feel it touch the rubbery surface. There wasn't even a bulge. At best, she tickled Nol's insides like a featherduster.

"'Your st**uff**?'"

Nol's voice echoed inside the stomach. No, it was worse: it came inside Barbara's head, whispering like the wind. The voice had Nol's nasally timbre, perhaps a guttural growl like a werewolf hunting by moonlight, but it sounded different too. It was deeper with a silky smooth, feminine undertone. Such a melodious voice could win awards at music shows, or perform opera like the greatest stars.

In fact, two voices spoke at once. Their harmony was pitch perfect like professional actors sharing lines. To Barbara's horror, she recognized the second voice. Why wouldn't she? She spent her whole life listening to it…

Gently, Nol stroked their gargantuan gut. Barbara felt the touch like an evil mastermind petting a white cat. Her fingertips also tingled, as if her own hand stroked the doughy, family-melting belly. The Sivan Siblings were becoming one, in every way possible.

"**Dear sweet sister, don't you mean… 'our stuff?' Kehehehe~**"

A shiver shot down Barbara's spine. She wiped her barely tangible robes with an invisible hand.

“Eeeeugh!” said Barbara, her face turning green. Of all of Nol’s tricks, this one of the few that still gave her goosebumps. “Stop. I *hate* when you do that! You know that, right?"

“**Why else would I do it~**?” asked Nol, even as tremors made the belly bounce like a geyser ready to blow. With victory near at hand, the Creature’s smug tone returned full-force like they had complete control the whole time.

After another gastric *guuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuurgle*, digestion went underway. The stomach walls collapsed inward like a deflated balloon, forcing Barbara to curl into a ball. The lake of acid climbed, reaching from her knees and chest, before enveloping her head. Bubbles leaked from her lips as Barbara held her breath.

And still the stomach squeezed, eking out every ounce of protein from its meal. Relentless was its hunger and sublime its strength. The gentle tug on Barbara became an insidious pull, like a mosquito drawing blood from its prey. Fear Energy wept from the hybrid, draining her dry of magic.

For a second, tension hummed through the stomach walls like a plucked violin string. It wrestled with Barbara, drawing so taut against her body that a perfect outline formed. Everything from her horns to tail was clear.

If Barbara wasn’t struggling to exist at all, the pressure would’ve been suffocating.

Then, with a final exhalation of breath, Barbara faded away. She became but a whisper, a ghost that haunted Nol’s flesh like a marble statue from a bygone era. The stomach folded like an accordion without its prey, until it fell flat once more.

“**Oooh, yes! That feels…that feels…**!!”

Nol hissed as sublime strength flooded their veins. As ice-cold fear coalesced with their essence and nestled into their bones like black-hearted ravens. Jolts of red-and-gold magic coursed beneath the pallid skin like waves on a sea of blood. Nol’s outline grew sharper like a poltergeist forcing themselves onto the mortal plane.

Like a law of reality made manifest, demanding everyone acknowledge its existence.

More and more, they grew. Such suffering shouldn’t be concentrated into one Creature. The world grew darker, a worse place to be, just through Nol’s presence. Shadows across the Nursery deepened like the blackest pits of hell. Floorboards groaned under their gravity and the whole of Sinful Selections shuddered in their oppressive wake.

How long the transformation lasted, none could say. Moonlight still filtered through the window, bathing Nol in an ethereal glow. Once their chest stopped heaving up-and-down and the Creature sighed, however, they stood to their full height.

“**Oh. Oh yes…**” Nol swept a hand through the air, leaving trails of red magic in its wake. “**First place, here we come. Kehehe**– ***hack hack kauff*!!**”

Suddenly, something caught in Nol’s throat. The pain was cutting like a chicken bone, yet it was bigger. Harder. The Creature beat a fist against their chest to keep from choking, but the obstruction was stubborn. Everytime it bobbed in the throat, fire flashed across the nerves. It wasn’t until Nol made an amateurish attempt at the Heimlich Maneuver that it came loose.

With a wet *plorp,* a skull popped past Nol’s lips, still connected by strings of saliva. Between its hollow sockets and skeletal grin, it was unrecognizable. Only the goat-like horns on the cranium revealed the skull’s owner.

As their buxom bosom bounced like a litter of pupp dogs eager for milk, Nol grinned from ear-to-ear.

“**My my! Aren’t we a pretty lass?”** Nol tapped the skull with an ebony claw. It stared back, silent as the grave. “**You’ve never looked better, sis…**”

Dreams are made of powerful stuff. Like the wind, they lift the wings of eagles and allow men to soar through the sky. Like a song, they whisper sweet serenades and inspire great works of art. Like a kiss, they stir butterflies in the breast and make love burn like fire.

Like a stone, they can drag you down to the bottom of the sea. Helpless, starving for air, broken beyond repair. Shadows loom darkest over broken dreams.

This Mari Shelby knew most intimately of all. For years, she had one dream: win big at the Bramblewood Fall Festival. The contest didn't matter. Whether she danced at the Monster Mash Hoedown, or baked the most delicious apple pie, she wanted to stuff her trophy case full. After all, Mari was born a winner, and refused to accept anything less than first place.

This year, her hopes were high. Mari participated in every contest to improve her odds, and what's better? Word on the street was that those damnable Sivan Siblings wouldn't be in attendance. Out of all her competition, those fugly orphans were the bane of Mari's existence. Every year, Nol beat her in the Biggest Pumpkin Contest, denying Mari the blue ribbon. Instead, her waste bin overflowed with silver trophies.

"*But not this time!*" thought Mari. Dressed as the Bride of Frankenstein, she strutted through the fairground. While her magnificent breasts heaved with every breath, big as watermelons, the buxom MILF sashayed her hips back-and-forth. Onlookers stared and blew wolf whistles, but she didn't give them the time of day. "*Once I win the Costume Contest, David should arrive with Ol' King Duke.*"

Mari clenched her fist tightly. Through months of hard labor, she grew a pumpkin that weighed a whoppin' 972 pounds. If the record books were correct, it was the biggest pumpkin ever grown in Nebraska. She already won several lesser contests with it, until the great gourd was dubbed Ol' King Duke by fans.

Once her husband's truck rolled onto the fairgrounds, Mari would present the pumpkin to the judges and collect her blue ribbon. It was as simple as that. As far as Mari was concerned, she already won. Who else stood a chance against the King? He would squash the competition.

Ahead lay a three-tier tent, which brought to mind the circus. While music boomed inside and flashing lights filtered through the flap, the tent was decked out with Halloween decorations. Strings of cotton thread covered the fabric, mimicking spider silk, which entangled plastic skeletons. A damp mist poured from a smog machine, swirling across the ground, and the rubbery hands of a zombie climbed from a Styrofoam grave.

At the entrance stood a volunteer, who dressed like a mad surgeon. While blood splattered his gown, he held a fake bone saw in one hand. He waved it all friendly-like, making it wobble like rubber.

"Here for the contest, ma'am?" asked the volunteer. Arms folded cross, which thrust her ample bosom with authority, Mari nodded.

"Damn right I am!"

"Best of luck! You're gonna need it. Competition is lookin' stiff this year!" He nudged the zombie mannequin with his shoe. "Stiffer than this guy, in fact."

"Pffft! Who needs luck?"

Mari gestured to her costume. Between the pale face paint, ratty medical bandages, and knee-high dress, it was a painstaking recreation of the 'Bride of Frankenstein' from the original film. The black-haired wig even stood on-end like ten-million volts zapped through it, complete

with skunk stripe. If Elsa Lanchester had been half as busty as Mari, the movie would've been twice as successful.

"Who could look away from this little number?"

Gulping hard, the volunteer tugged at his collar.

"G-Good point, ma'am. You look bea– ahaha, that is to say! The costume looks great!"

Sweating up a storm, the volunteer opened the flap. As fire burned inside her breast, Mari waltzed into the tent, head held high. Oh, she couldn't wait for the judges to get a gander at this. That trophy would look terrific beside her blue ribbon!

"Hello, everyone! Please, applaud at your leisure!" Mari took an ever-so-humble curtsy. "This year's winner has arr…!"

Mari's voice died in her throat. Not because of the crowd, which was big like every year. Not because every last person stared in the same direction, heads craning to get a look. Not even because the tent was dead silent, save for the festive Halloween music.

She stopped because of what they stared at.

Nol. Goddamn. Sivan. The bitch had come after all– and undergone a massive transformation.

Nol was massive, a giant among men. They stood head-and-shoulders over everyone else, looming over 8 feet tall. A long shadow followed in their wake, so deep it seemed to swallow light itself. They were like a Renaissance statue, bigger than life, and had curves to match.

Those mighty breasts, how they heaved with every step. Larger than pumpkins, those pale mounds stretched Nol's robes to the breaking point. Nipples the size of dinner plates bled through the fabric, and the mustard-yellow areola of the left breast even peeked through a hole. The outfit was indecent, yet nobody seemed eager to complain.

More striking, however, was Nol's hips. That dumptruck was humongous. Each buttcheek was heavily built like a truck and supported by thicc thighs broad as marble pillars. Forget a shelf of an ass; a family of five could eat dinner off that table and have room for dessert.

One glance was enough. Mari and every other woman in the room felt inadequate in the presence of such femininity. Like, why even bother with makeup? Nol was more beautiful than everyone else in the room.

That wasn't even counting the costume. The dumb bitch dressed like a demon this year, and boy howdy! Was it scarily authentic.

Not only did Nol have claws on their hands and feet, sharp enough to slice the air like swiss cheese, but they wore two sets of horns. How they curled around the skull, with a lower set guiding the eye straight to the ample cleavage. A crown of flame danced on the Creature's head, flickering like the real thing. Nol even sported a set of draconic wings, which flapped like a bat.

The costume was scary, but Nol's beauty was scarier. They would handily win first place in the Costume Contest. Mari gawked as black despair welled in her soul… only to stamp a foot.

"T-talk about overkill! Am I right?" Mari snorted through her nose. "Hasn't she heard 'less is more?' How about less flash and a little more substance?"

Mari pointed at Nol's goat-like legs.

"Someone's clumsy on those stilts too! Practice more next time, eh?"

Much to Mari's chagrin, nobody paid her any mind. Only one woman in the room was the center of attention, and that was Nol ve Sivan. Even without that 'costume' and scandalous body, the Creature had a perverse magnetism that drew the eye. That captured hearts, and made mortals quiver with feeling, good & bad.

For is awe not another form of worship? Don't men adore and fear the gods in equal measure? Nightmares might hold a black mirror up to humanity, reflecting our inner darkness, yet nevertheless. Nol dominated the Fall Festival without equal.

"**Thank you, thank you! You're too kind,**" said Nol. Waltzing onto the stage, the Creature waved to the audience, who gave a round of applause. A judge handed them a trophy, tearing it away from the previous winner, a buxom blonde in a mummy costume.

Gently, Nol fondled the trophy, the faux gold cold to the touch. Swiveling on their heel, Nol then raised it overhead, beaming like a black hole sun.

"**I deserve this**!" shouted Nol. The crowd cheered and cried like madmen.

Naturally, the blonde didn't appreciate having her victory stolen out from underneath her. After going to the trouble of handcrafting this mummy costume and exposing so much skin, she didn't deserve to be snubbed.

"Hey! Who do you think you are?" The buxom blonde thrust both hands on her hips. While not supernaturally pretty like Nol, she still was easy on the eyes. Mari would've accepted her as a worthy opponent. "I won, fair & square!"

"**Beat it, Tiffany.**" Nonchalantly, Nol bumped the blonde with their humungous hips. She cartoonishly bounced off like a tennis ball, pinwheeling her arms wildly. **"There's only enough room for one winner, and that's me.**"

"Waaah!" cried Tiffany, before she fell clear off stage. Luckily, her boyfriend Chaz caught her in the nick of time. The bandages of her mummy costume came loose, however, and exposed the blonde's ample breasts.

She hastily shielded them, those pink nipples peeking through her fingers.

"No! The shame. How will I ever live this down!?"

Despite this display of callousness– or perhaps because of it– the crowd roared louder. Who didn't love a Queen of Mean? Especially on Halloween? Nol was the perfect monster and exemplified the holiday spirit better than anyone.

From the crowd, Mari continued to glare daggers, fuming that Nol stole the contest before she could participate… only to notice a glint of metal. There, tucked between those milk-colored breasts, was another trophy. It half-vanished into the cavernous cleavage, swallowed by the mountainous flesh, but it was clearly a first place prize. How did Nol win that, what contest was it from?

And… was that the ribbon for the Biggest Pumpkin? Her blue ribbon!?

"Okay, that tears it!"

Rolling up her imaginary sleeves, Mari marched towards the stage. Thunderclouds rumbled over her head, powerful enough to resurrect a real Bride of Frankenstein. Obliviously, Nol continued to drink in the crowd's adulation, their absurd curves jostling about like the Seven Deadly Sin of Lust on parade. Good lord, those titanic titties were bigger than her head.

"Nobody upstages me!" Mari seethed like a volcano, hissing between her teeth. "This bitch doesn't even have a pumpkin! I call foul on this sham of a contest. Foul, I say!"

Alas, as Mari neared the stage, she didn't hear the gastric rumble of thunder. How it started low, growling like a dire wolf in its den, only to climb great heights like an eagle. How it sent ripples across the punch bowl, as if an earthquake was about to strike. Hungry was the belly, and it would have its full.

Darkness had descended on the Bramblewood Fall Festival, and this was a Halloween nobody would soon forget…