My "bath" is gross and sticky, and Ash spends the whole time complaining about how easily I let my mom walk all over me. At least until I tell her to shut up and let me suffer in silence. Then I don't hear from her for the rest of the day.

When the day ends, I feel so tired, even though barely anything happened. It turns out I missed lunch while I was napping, and I'm not particularly interested in walking into dinner smelling like I deserve to be on the table, so I skip it in favor of washing myself clean with a hot shower.

I don't know why I'm so exhausted today, but I bet Ash has something to do with it, even though she has kept her mouth shut so far. Either way, I'm so tired that after my shower, I fall right into bed and fall asleep.

I wake up to the sound of a voice in my thoughts.

*Carina*, Ash says. *I have something to report.*

As I come around, my stomach squeezes painfully, reminding me that I haven't eaten since my tiny little breakfast. I groan, sitting upright and squinting toward my clock. It's 1 AM.

*Do you not sleep?* I ask, cranky.

*I don't have a body that needs to sleep, you do,* Ash says.

I cover my head with a pillow, groaning again. *Yes. I do. What do you want?*

*I noticed some presences I've never seen before coming onto the manor grounds. I thought you might want to know in case it was your mystery thief.*

That gets my attention. *Really?*

*Yes. There are two of them. They're moving toward the gardens,* Ash says. *If you hurry, you should be able to intercept them before they reach the donation box.*

I throw on a robe and a sash - it's the easiest thing I have in my closet - and slip into my sandals. I don't want to chance missing them.

Ash keeps me updated on their movements as I make a beeline for the donation box. In the end, I have plenty of time - they seem to be stopping a lot. Which is weird. We have gates on the outside of the grounds to keep people out, but we don't have guards or anything. What would there be to guard? The manor has locks on it.

I find a well-shadowed planter with a view of the donation box and crouch down beside it, settling in to wait.

*This really means a lot to you, doesn't it?* Ash asks. *Dragging yourself all the way here for this.*

*Marwa needs this money,* I say. *I won't let these thieves take it from her.*

Ash hums thoughtfully. *Maybe I underestimated you. When I first met you, I thought you were weak and would end up being a pushover who didn't stand for much of anything, but… your devotion to her is admirable. It's a certain kind of strength that few people possess.*

My chest swells out. I don't have a lot, but I have my devotion to my friend. That will get me through anything.

*By the way, they're here.*

I peek out from behind the planter again. My heart pounds. Just as Ash said, there are two human shapes in the darkness, both feminine. One is taller than the other by about half a head. I can sort of see their faces. The taller one has shoulder-length dark hair surrounding a gaunt, angular face. The shorter one is more rounded, younger-looking, framed by a cascade of long blonde hair.

They're locked in a whispered conversation, but I can't hear it.

*They're too far away and too quiet to hear from here,* Ash says. *But I could help you with that, if you like.*

It's not such a big deal, to accept Ash's offer for help eavesdropping on them… so I do it. I crave to know what they're talking about.

The smaller one is talking. "-pissy about it. I'm just saying, you could have told me what you were up to sooner. I would have come and helped you a lot sooner."

"And how would you have helped? You're certainly not helping now," the taller one says. "You said you want to support me, right? Then shut up and watch out to make sure no one comes up on us and surprises us. Bad enough I have to help you through the place."

"There are ways for me to help besides being your lookout," the smaller one hisses. "There's barely anything in this box anyway. This place is a waste of your time."

"A little bit at a time is still worth it if it's consistent, and this place is the easiest money I've ever made. No risk." The taller one is working some metal tools on the flimsy little lock mechanism that keeps nosy visitors from getting at the box's contents. "No challenge either, but I'm fine with that."

I feel my jaw clench up. Marwa's money is disappearing - and putting her art school future that much further away - just because it's easy to take?

"I can't believe I let you drag me here," the smaller one grumbles. "This place gives me the creeps at night."

"You wanted to be involved, now you're involved," the taller one says. "Get out the flashlight and shine it on this lock. I think it's stuck again. It's such a pain in the ass."

The shorter one does as she's told.

The taller one bends over the lock again, the tools clinking as she works them. "And just so you don't have any crises of conscience, the Kairis family has plenty of money. No idea what they do with the money all those tourists put in this box, but they probably give it to the older daughter. In case you haven't seen her on one of the rare occasions when she comes out of her palace, she's a seriously spoiled little brat. She deserves a lot worse of a punishment than me taking a little cash out from under her nose."

The shorter one grunts. "I promised I would support you no matter what. Don't see why the details matter to me."

My hands curl into fists. I'm usually not so protective of my sister, but I can't stand someone lying about her. Sophia's a lot of things, most of them not so good… but she's not a spoiled brat. And she doesn't deserve to be punished. Besides, she's not the one who gets this money, anyway.

The box opens with a click that feels so satisfying to my enhanced ears. But it also means it's going to happen again if I don't stop it. I know what the contents of that box mean to Marwa, and this girl is just going to walk off with them...

I'm so angry with this girl. I've never met anyone so selfish and petty in my life.

"You see, you don't take the whole box so that they can't be sure if you were here," the taller thief says. She has pulled out a pouch and is scooping the contents of the box into it. "It's not like they count it or anything."

*She thinks she's so clever,* Ash says disgustedly. *Honestly, the way she walks in here as if she has the right to this… It's your friend's hard work that makes people put money in, isn't it?*

I'm silent. My teeth press together until I get a headache from the strain. I try to let myself calm down. I don't have to do anything right now. All I have to do is tell Mom what I saw, and she'll get a nicer lockbox for the donations.

*And your friend has been working quite hard. The gardens you've shown me have been so beautiful. But it's this girl who benefits, not her.*

The thief scoops another handful of money into her pouch.

But then, Mom has been unhelpful lately, and I somehow doubt that she's going to help Marwa with anything. And getting a nicer lockbox isn't going to address the real injustice. Who's to say that this girl wouldn't pick that lock, too?

*And the school your friend wants to go to… It's expensive, isn't it? She'd have to work for a long time to get there. It's so sad that the humans with the biggest dreams are often the ones who are least able to reach them.*

I remember the way Marwa looked at me this morning. How would she feel if she knew what was happening?

*And now she's going to leave here and probably steal from somewhere else, leaving a string of broken dreams behind her, all to satisfy her hunger for money and power… It's too bad there really isn't anything you can do.*

My fists tighten. I'm so angry I can barely think straight. It's not fair. I want so badly to punish her for what she's done and prevent her from doing this to anyone else.

My stomach twinges painfully, reminded of its own hunger. It feels achingly empty, the swirling rage and disgust seeming to have carved out a hole in me.

Justice demands that this emptiness be filled.

She'd never be able to hurt anyone again… And the second thief would be thoroughly scared straight, never again tempted to go down the other's path… It's almost too perfect.

I have to try to control myself just to talk to Ash, since I feel like screaming even inside my own head. *You said that you do what you have to to survive. So you don't just want to eat anyone. You want to eat people who won't be missed.*

Ash hums. *Yes, that's about right.*

My pulse is racing with the enormity of what I'm thinking of doing. But I'm going to do something big for once. *Like this one. No one would miss a scumbag thief like this. Could I eat a girl like her?*

Ash sounds surprised. *Could you? Yes, if I helped you overpower her, it would be easy for you.*

I'm running out of time - the little pouch looks like it's starting to get awfully full. *How do I do it?*

*Are you asking me to help you devour this girl?* Ash asks, shocked. *I thought-*

*Just this once,* I say, almost pleading. I've made my decision now, and I don't want to back down. *It's a special case.*

Ash hums again. *I… see. These are dire circumstances, yes. Something has to be done, even if it means breaking your rule… It's really quite simple. Instinctive, even. Your body will do what it has to.*

Ash saying it makes it feel real, and it hits me that I'm really going to devour this girl.

… No. She doesn't deserve a title that treats her as human. She's subhuman. She's a monster worse than Ash.

I'm really doing the world a favor by taking her out of it. And Ash gets the energy she needs to help me. Everyone wins.

Empowered by the thought of being the one to take out the trash, I push off, leaping out of the darkness. I can tell Ash is helping, because my leap takes me a lot further than I thought it would, and I land directly on top of my target.

She swears, crumpling to the ground easily and getting the breath knocked out of her. The pouch of money lands on the floor and spills, coins bouncing and rolling away. The other thief gives a surprised yelp from nearby.

I let my instincts take over, and I shift my weight to pin my meal-to-be to the ground underneath me. She strains to get me off her, but she doesn't stand a chance, not with Ash on my side.

It doesn't take her long to get her breath back. Her head turns toward the other girl. "Run," she says sharply.

I don't hear footsteps. My head turns automatically to follow her gaze. The other girl is still there. But she doesn't seem to be doing anything to stop me, either. She's just standing there, a hand over her mouth.

She's not a concern.

I look back down at the thief underneath me as she tries - ineffectively - to wriggle out of my grasp. She glares up at me defiantly, daring me to do something.

Her wish will be granted.

My instincts tell me to just open my mouth and stuff her head inside. My mind tells me that there's no way this could possibly work, that her head is too large and my mouth is too small, but my body obeys.

And… it works.

And… I taste her.

I'm dimly aware that someone is muffling a scream. There are fists hitting me in the chest, too. But none of that matters because her flavor is beyond perfect.

She tastes like sweat and rain, with a deeper layer of human musk covered up by faint and fading coconut face lotion. The coconut flavor is artificial but unobtrusive. Her skin is smooth and soft, and my tongue glides across it easily.

I need more, and my body somehow just knows how to get it. Automatically, I swallow hard and shift my grip on the girl to get a better grasp on her body. There is an incomprehensible voice that is coming from my own body, but it's not my voice. I belatedly realize the sounds are the girl's shouts, frantic but impossible to make out through the flesh of my throat.

Silencing her like this feels good. I feel strangely powerful. I swallow again.

This time, cloth drowns out her natural taste. I make a face and drag the clothing up further so I don't have to deal with it as much and swallow again. More. I want more, and my patience can only last so long. The clothing seems to cover my tongue forever, drying out my mouth and filling it with the unpleasant taste of damp fabric all the while, but then it's gone, and the flavor that I crave so badly is back. Smooth, soft flavor. And here at her belly it's almost completely pure, with only the faintest remains of apple-flavored soap. My tongue is so sensitive now. I groan with the blissful rush of it all.

The fists that were hitting me in the chest are gone. I can feel her hands swiping at me, but with her shoulders pinned inside my mouth - her shoulders? inside my mouth? my mind can barely comprehend the concept - she can't hit me with very much force at all. Her legs are too busy trying to anchor her to the ground and pull her away from me to take a swing at me.

I don't want to taste the fabric anymore, and my body does what it can to oblige me. Without much input from my conscious mind, my hands tear viciously at the rest of her clothing, yanking it away from her. It all feels so strangely natural, like I've been doing it for years, to the point where it's all muscle memory. Her body twists and bends in my grasp, but I somehow know exactly how to move to counter every kick, every wriggle, every thrash.

Her head has reached my stomach. I can feel the weird sensation of her hair pressing into the wall of my stomach. And I'm starting to feel a shred of satisfaction to cancel out the emptiness that I'd felt before.

It feels so unbelievably good. Maybe it's just for the contrast with the intense hunger that came before it, but I don't think I've ever been full like this before.

More. I want even more. I want all of her. I don't want there to be anything left when I'm done with her. I grab hold of her legs, pushing them down my throat and guiding them on their way with quick, light swallows. There's another different flavor here, one that I can't identify even with how sensitive my tongue seems to have become. Sugary? I like it, though. I really like it.

I must sound like an animal, slurping along her legs and grunting and gulping. There's no shame in my mind, though. If anything, it feels liberating. How many times has my mother told me to hide away and not be an embarrassment? That my rightful place is in a pantry somewhere until I can be prepared and served?

Let *them* hide from *me*. It's my turn to feast.

The kicks have weakened as I make my way down the girl's calves. She's getting tired. Adrenaline can't keep her going much longer, and she's just struggling wildly, aimlessly. I'm still on the ground on all fours, bent over where she was laying. I nibble my way forward with sloppy gulps. Her heels fill up the lower half of my vision. What had once been a whole person is now just a pair of wriggling, pink feet outside my lips, and what feels like an enormous bulge in my stomach.

She's as good as gone now.

My stomach is threatening to burst, so my swallows are not getting me much of anywhere. I have to be patient, which I hate. I want her to be completely gone. My tongue entertains itself with the taste of her feet as she disappears the rest of the way. I'm almost sad that the joyous sensation of warm skin against my tongue is about to be over with.

I get to my feet and turn to find that the other girl is still standing there. All color has drained from her face, and she's just standing there with her hand over her mouth, absolutely frozen in place save for a faint tremble that courses through her whole body. I don't think she's even moved an inch since I came flying out of the darkness.

Not a great choice on her part. Right now, I feel like I could go for dessert, no matter what my groaning, complaining stomach might have to say about the matter. I step slowly toward her, challenging her. Weirdly, she's standing her ground still.

Or she's so frozen with fear that she can't even bring herself to run.

My midnight snack's toes are still visible outside my lips. They curl weakly, grasping for something, anything. There's nothing for them, of course. I run my tongue over them, reveling in the oddly pleasant texture of ten discrete little bumps. The other girl's eyes follow my tongue's movements. She's hypnotized. Can't look away.

And then I swallow one more time. She's gone. The other girl shakes in place as her eyes trace the bulge down my throat. I can feel it moving… it feels like the end of a job well done.

All that struggling made me swallow a lot of air. It comes out then, a noisy belch right in the girl's face, lasting a few seconds. I lick my lips. It tasted like my meal's apple soap. She's just as tasty the second time as she was the first.

The girl in front of me jumps, startled by the loud sound. It seems to have returned sense into her head, too. With one last glance at my belly, she runs for her life.

Good choice.

Adrenaline is still riding all of my nerves, making them jangle noisily and keeping me over-sensitized. I can hear her every panicked step as she runs. Can hear the choked sob she makes once she's far enough away from me that she thinks it's safe to do so.

None of this particularly matters to me. What matters is the girl who's inside me. Who's never coming out. I won. I beat her. She's never going to hurt anyone ever again.

*You should probably return home now,* Ash says from somewhere inside my head. *You will need time to let your body settle down and digest before morning comes.*

It takes me a moment to remember who that is and why she's there. My rational brain had totally checked out of the whole situation, and it struggles to come back online. *Yeah. You're right.*

Ash hums. *I have done this a few times before, you know.* Her voice is friendly as she says it, though.

I look toward the manor. It didn't take me that long to get here, but it will probably take me a while to get back. I don't think I can run quite as fast as I did on the way here. But I'm prepared for that. Just one step at a time.

One step at a time, as it turns out, feels painfully slow when you have as far to go as I do.

And sometimes it isn't one step at a time. See, I had thought about how hard it would be to carry around her weight and her unwieldy shape, but I hadn't thought about the fact that she would be moving, too. Sometimes it's three stumbling steps sideways to try to catch myself as my meal thrashes inside me. Sometimes the girl inside me jerks in a direction I don't expect and I fall right on my butt.

And the noise… My stomach is so loud. She's shouting something to me. Or at me. Or maybe at the other girl? I can barely make out any of the things she's saying, so I have no idea what it is she wants.

All I know is that if she wants out, she isn't going to get it. I grin smugly to myself at this thought. And… then she knocks me onto the ground again.

Through all this, my stomach is starting to be less than happy with what I had put in it. It was satisfied when I just had the girl's head in my belly. This was a couple of steps too far for it. I'm beginning to feel like I did when the cooks made a dinner I liked and I ate a second plate of it. Only, a thousand times worse.

I groan in pain, curling my hands around my stomach. I need to get back as soon as possible. But I can't do that on my own. I don't want to make a habit of relying on the demon, but since she had gotten me into this situation in the first place…

*Ash, I need your help,* I say. *I'm too weak to carry her. Can you…*

*Of course,* Ash says. *Especially since you've fed me now, I can spare a few drops of that energy for you…* I can hear a suppressed laugh in her voice. She's obviously enjoying this. Well, that's fine. As long as she gets me back…

My legs suddenly feel strong as iron and rock-steady. My eyes widen. This is so much easier! I still have to be careful not to let myself topple over as I walk back to the manor, but this time I can build up some speed.

I let myself into the manor, locking the door again behind me. This is the especially dangerous part. Now I have to find my room without running into any servants - or worse, one of the mediums who are staying here…

I keep myself as quiet as I can be. The floorboards creak under me with my more-than-doubled weight. My legs may be strong, but I'm still carrying around a second person who is easily as heavy as I am. I begin to sweat at every corner, fearing that I'll come around it and bump into one of the maids, who will take me to Mom, who will find out what I did, and...

… But to my great relief, no one finds me and certainly no one stops me. Before I know it, I'm back in my room and on my bed. My huge stomach is resting on top of me, and I finally have a chance to get a good look at it.

It's lumpy in places. If I concentrate, I can sort of see the shape of the girl that I swallowed. A hip there, an elbow here. That bulge must be her head. There's one of her hands. That's her foot. She's really too big to fit in my stomach, and it shows.

And I can feel it.

The ache I started to feel earlier has not gone away. It has only gotten deeper and stronger, even though I ignored it while I was trying to sneak back to my room. I feel like I'm going to burst. Now that I'm in my room, I give myself permission to groan out the ache.

*Well, well, it would appear that evil has won after all,* Ash says sarcastically. *Our brave heroine has been laid low by the no-good scumbag thief.*

*Shut up*, I whine, squeezing my eyes shut. I try to focus on the meditative techniques that Marwa told me about for dealing with anger. Maybe they'll work for pain, too.

But if they work for pain, it's only for static pain. And this pain is anything but. She keeps moving, and shouting things, and pressing outward, and kicking, and it seems like every time I'm starting to get comfortable with what's going on in my belly, she changes it up and the pain comes rushing back.

"You're a brave one," the girl in my stomach says. I can actually hear her - maybe now that she's shifted her angle. She sounds like she's still quite scared, but she's trying to sound brave. "Or maybe a really stupid one."

"What are… you talking about?" I manage through clenched teeth. I'm tempted to ask Ash if she can do something for the pain. "Brave… Stupid…?"

"You caught me on the Kairis manor grounds," my passenger says. My stomach gurgles noisily, drowning out her next words. "They're going to find you. I can't believe a demon decided to show her ugly face with a bunch of mediums around. I might not even be gone by the time they find you."

*That's just insulting,* Ash says. *She hasn't even seen my face. How would she know what it looks like?*

"Forget it," I say, hissing the words through my teeth. "Sorry to ruin your hopes and dreams here, but I'm a Kairis myself."

Her stunned silence says it all.

I can't help the laugh that bubbles up out of me. Strained though it is, it feels so good to make her speechless. "Yes, that's right. No one is coming for you. You're going to pay for what you've done."

"This is… over the money I was taking?" she asks, her voice disbelieving. "Are you kidding me? That was pocket change for you! Let me out of here! You can't be serious!"

"Go to hell," I say.

And then I can't find words anymore. The loss of her hopes has somehow given her new strength. Before I know it, I'm crying out. I desperately hope that no one hears and comes to investigate, because I don't know what I would tell them. But I can't keep it down.

"Stop… Stop!" I whimper. My confidence from a few minutes ago evaporates. I just hurt all over and I want it to stop. I curl my arms around my stomach, rolling from side to side in my bed. No position feels good. Everything hurts. There's no getting away from it. "Please…"

She doesn't seem to be interested in talking to me anymore. She just keeps kicking. Particularly, she keeps lunging up, kicking toward my throat. She's trying to get out, apparently. A smart move in her position.

An agonizing one in my position. I squeeze my eyes shut again, curling into the fetal position. "N… nn… gg…"

*You wanted this,* Ash reminds me. *Is it worth it?*

I grit my teeth hard. I won't have Ash second-guessing me like this. I get enough of that from my family. *Yes. Suffering for a little while so that no one will ever have to deal with her sticky fingers again? I'd take that deal in a heartbeat.*

The thief kicks inside me, and I cry out in agony, my anger with Ash suddenly dissolving into more pain. "Settle… down…"

*You could just let her out,* Ash says.

As if I didn't know that! … Well, I didn't know it for sure, but I would have asked her if I wanted to do it. No. I want to be the one to punish her. I ignore Ash, breathing sharply through my nose. "You aren't getting out."

She doesn’t seem to take that too well. I find myself grimacing again as she thrashes around. My stomach is too sensitive to handle this.

“Just… stop…” I hiss out, the pain draining the words of any impact. “Relax… let me… digest you…”

She doesn’t relax. And neither does my stomach.

It wasn’t quiet before, but now it’s starting to get downright noisy. It growls - a long, low sound - and I can hear the sound of liquid splashing around inside me now along with my meal’s grunts and yelps. The growling settles into a soft rhythm of gurgling sounds as the splashing rises. It’s a little scary how loud it’s suddenly getting to be, even for me.

But it’s all natural, nothing to be afraid of - she is food, and my stomach is working hard to digest her. That must be the sound of stomach acid being poured over her to encourage her to soften.

*Goodness,* Ash says, a hidden smile in her voice. *You do have quite the capable stomach after all, from the sounds of it. And here I was beginning to worry that you would still be carrying her around come tomorrow morning.*

My face reddens. I’m not sure how to feel about that. At least there’s the chance that this means that the agonizing pain in my stomach will go down a bit sooner than expected. But on the other hand, I don’t know that digesting people alive is something that I want to be good at.

My passenger’s grunting and groaning has given way to just more determined splashing. I don’t know if it’s that the layer of acid is making it harder for her to build up the necessary force, or if she’s just too tired to fight back as hard, but suddenly she doesn’t seem to be hurting me nearly so much.

I watch the battle in my stomach intently. It’s not much of a show, since the outcome is basically set at this point - I don’t think there’s any chance that she’ll be able to get out. But I watch and wait just the same.

The noises slow and quiet. My stomach is still sloshing with every movement, and there’s the occasional gurgle, but things have gotten much quieter than they were just a moment ago.

And then, there’s suddenly silence.

I don’t know if I noticed when it happened, but she has suddenly stopped fighting me altogether. The movements must have been slowing down for a while, but I was so entranced that I didn’t realize. She’s completely motionless now, though.

I poke at her with one hand. My stomach feels much softer than it did when I first swallowed her, and there’s a lot of give. She doesn’t resist being touched, and doesn’t start moving. She’s just still.

She’s given up. Or…

No, she’s given up.

My mouth feels dry. I have just done exactly what my mother has warned so many demon summoners do. I devoured another human being alive. And before long, she won’t be that anymore.

Alive, I mean. Or, really, a human being. She’ll digest down to mush in my stomach, and then she’ll be gone. I’ll have a memento of her in what my body gets from hers, but…

The shock of admitting this to myself weighs heavily on me. I can’t believe I did this.

But, of course, it was all for a good cause, right? The world is better off without her, and all that stuff?

I just can’t bring myself to answer that certainly.

My stomach has not been idle during all this time, of course. It continues grinding away at its contents, making the occasional glorp or burble.

Those lumps that I’d seen on my stomach earlier go smooth very slowly. My stomach goes from being a huge, bloated, misshapen mess to a single smooth, round bulge.

The contents of my stomach are no longer recognizable as the thief that I caught at the donation box today. I can’t see inside, but I’m pretty sure of that by now.

My heart flutters uneasily. What did I just do?

*Very well done,* Ash says. *I’m sure people like your friend Marwa will be much happier now that there’s not someone like that running around destroying their hard work for their own selfish ends.*

I nod blankly.

*You did a good thing today,* Ash says. *For all the good in your human society to remain, someone has to step in and stop the bad ones. That’s what mediums are for, isn’t it? Using their connection to the metaphysical to make the physical world a better place. You’re a better medium than your sister is.*

It doesn’t feel that way, but I nod. It’s a reassuring thought, at least. I close my eyes, laying my head against the pillow.

*You’ve earned your rest,* Ash says soothingly. *Tomorrow you will be able to get up and go back to your normal life. It’s hard to do something like this, but the right thing is often hard to do. That’s how you know that you did the right thing.*

I lay on my side, my arms curled around my stomach.

Ash continues talking, and her voice is so nice inside my head that I start to get drowsy, the words running into each other and melting into an unrecognizable mess, until at last they’re all gone.

I fall instead into a series of unsettling dreams.

I clutch my stomach. It contains something very precious to me, though I don’t remember what it is. I just know that I have to keep it safe. But its contents keep spilling away, and I can’t pick them up.

My mother follows the trail. She hasn’t caught up with me yet, but she’s getting closer and closer. I keep running.

I hear the voice of the thief from inside me. She’s begging me… to keep her? Not to let her out? It’s strange even to my dream self.

A woman with long, wavy dark hair approaches me, and I stop running, the threat of my mother forgotten. She reminds me a lot of Marwa, but my dream-mind tells me this is Ash.

“Can I have her?” Ash asks me. “I promise I’ll keep her safe.”

“Please,” I tell her. “I can’t have her. Mom will find out if I have her.”

The thief’s begging crescendos into frantic pleading. Ash reaches into my stomach and pushes it down. It squishes and squelches and gets smaller and smaller until it’s just my stomach. Ash pushes her hand through my belly button and drags the thief out, her clothes ragged and acid-eaten. She looks tired and scared as Ash takes her into her arms, but the look on her face goes blank soon enough.

My rational mind vaguely remembers that she wasn’t wearing her clothes when I ate her, that I had taken them off. The dream wavers as my rational mind starts digging further into this. Did I remember to clean up her clothes afterward? Adrenaline starts to fill me. What if people find those clothes and find out that I-

Ash meets my eyes, and the train of thought just abruptly ends. “Wait here, Carina. I’ll be right back. I have something for you.”

She carries the thief away, and the thief stops begging and goes limp in her arms. I wait around obediently, but Ash doesn’t come back. I’m tired. I lay down where I’m standing.

I have to get up. Something bad is happening to someone, and I have to go help them. The thief. Ash took the thief away, and I’m never going to see her again. My dream-mind says it with absolute certainty. And a sadness that I don’t fully understand. I know that no one is ever going to see the thief again, don’t I? I wanted that.

But I feel sad about it, anyway. So sad, so heavy, so tired. My eyelids grow heavy, and the dream falls apart. The rest of the night is a deep, blank void.

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In the morning I feel better than I’ve ever felt. I feel energized, complete, powerful. I spring out of bed, my bare feet landing with a loud thunk on the wooden floor as my whole weight hits it. Then I straighten up, stretching up tall. I’ve never had a night that left me feeling so perfectly rested and ready.

The memories of the strange dreams tug at the edges of my consciousness, asking for my attention, but I feel so good that I don’t want to think about them.

I look down at my stomach. It’s back to being flat… well, maybe a little bit softer and rounder than it used to be. I’m still satisfied after my huge midnight meal, and the prospect of breakfast isn’t quite as tempting as it would normally be.

But I still want to go. I want to face Kimiko and Mom and Sophia. I want them to face me. I don’t like this change in Mom, and today’s the day I’m going to tell her to her face.

I run a hand over my stomach slowly, admiring the feel of it under my hand. I somehow can’t find it in me to feel sorry for the girl who used to be in here anymore. She deserved it. Kimiko eats girls who are much less deserving, no doubt, and no one does anything about that.

I haven’t heard from Ash since I saw her in the dream last night, and I don’t mind that very much. I’m sure she’s as satisfied as I am now that she got that meal she was looking for.

I put on a pair of jeans Marwa got me for my birthday this year, along with a sweater from last Christmas. I doubt anyone has noticed me enough to know what I look like to know whether my figure has changed, but I’m not going to take the chance.

I’m the last one to breakfast again, but this time I don’t mind so much. I have nothing to hide from them. Let them even try to confront me.

“Good morning, Mom,” I say cheerfully. “I went to the kitchens yesterday. I think I’ll pass on doing that again. It was a little too sticky for my taste.” Although my voice is pleasant, my body is tensed, ready to go off on her response.

My mother lifts her head and fixes me with her gaze for a few moments. “So I heard, Ekaterine.” Then she turns her head back to her breakfast.

My brilliant telling-off dissolves on my lips. So she heard…?

I clear my throat and raise my voice, staring at the top of her head. “So I’m not going to do it again. So don’t bother asking me again. Did you hear that?”

“Yes, I did, when you told me about it just now,” my mother says, a note of irritation in her voice. She doesn’t even look up this time.

So… she’s fine with it? She’s not going to force me to? I did it once and that’s all she wanted?

The last of the tension in my body dissipates, and I take the seat across from Kimiko and Yumi. I scoop a bowl of oatmeal and begin picking at it unhappily. It doesn’t make sense… just yesterday, Mom was pushing me so hard. Is she trying to look good in front of Kimiko and Yumi?

“What did you do, little Kairis?” Kimiko asks.

Her usual teasing tone is totally absent. Her voice is quiet and serious, her eyebrows are lowered, and she’s staring at me with the most suspicious expression I’ve ever seen on her face. I remember that today is no different from yesterday. I’m in a room full of mediums and I’ve got a demon taking residence in my head. Staying here this long was probably a bad idea.

But there is one difference - today I don’t feel like running and hiding. I grin at her with my teeth bared. “What do you mean?”

“There is something different about you,” Kimiko says. I notice that she’s shifted herself slightly so that she’s better positioned between me and Yumi. How cute. “I felt it when you entered the room. And I have never seen you act this way toward your mother. What did you do?”

“I didn’t *do* anything. I decided that I wasn’t going to take Mom’s treatment anymore,” I snap. “And I’m not taking *yours*, either.”

After I say it, I remember her threat about my rebellious thoughts. I steel myself, prepared to hear her threaten Marwa again.

But she doesn’t even look up from her breakfast. No, wait. Not her breakfast. She’s got a little packet of paper on the table in front of her, and she’s reading it.

My eyebrows lower. Is she really that wrapped up in whatever it is?

Sophia clears her throat, and she reaches out to put her hand on my arm. “I felt it, too. Are you being haunted, Carina? You have more of a presence than usual.”

“Shouldn’t you know if I was?” I fire back. I jerk my arm away from her hand. "I thought you were supposed to be the big medium. You'd better get it together soon, before Mom has to retire and you have to become Lady Kairis. It's all on you!"

Sophia's eyes drop to the table, and she folds her hands in her lap. It was a little bit of a cheap shot. I know she doesn't want any of that. But I don't need her fake concern.

"My, it seems that the little Kairis has finally grown up," Kimiko says with a smirk. "A pity that it comes so late. Had you turned away from your sister earlier, I might have gotten to taste you."

"Shut up, Kimiko." I glare at her. "I don't need Sophia's help to deal with you."

Kimiko raises an eyebrow. "Curious. And here I thought I had you trapped with no hope of escape. The only thing that kept you alive and free was your sister stalling for time long enough for your mother to arrive."

I grit my teeth. "That doesn't mean you would have had me. I could have gotten out."

"I do admire your confidence," Kimiko says, resting her chin on her hand. "But once it starts, it's almost impossible for anyone but me to stop. Pulling yourself out? You'd be the first."

I know that all too well, but I'm not going to tell her as much.

"Stop fighting, you two," Sophia says, already recovered from her earlier frowny face. "You're not going to settle this in an argument."

"Maybe we should settle it in the hedge maze, then," I say. "This time, without Sophia to interrupt things."

I expect my mother to protest, but she doesn't even look up. She really is engrossed in whatever it is.

Kimiko is immediately interested, and leans toward me. "You do know that if your sister is not there to stop me, I am going to have you for lunch, little Kairis. And I am going to very much enjoy it. Do not expect me to take pity on you for your idiocy."

"Kimmy, don't," Sophia protests.

"No, let her," I say. I fold my arms over my chest. I feel invincible. Kimiko's tricks won't help her this time. "If she can catch me, she deserves it. Come on, then. Let's go already."

Yumi puts her hand on Kimiko's arm and whispers something in her ear. Kimiko shakes her head. "Later. This afternoon, perhaps. I have other things to deal with."

I stand up, leaving my half-eaten oatmeal where it is. "I'll be waiting."

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*You have quite the mouth on you today,* Ash says. She sounds a little worried for once. *Challenging a medium to try to catch and eat you? What were you thinking? Honestly, you humans cannot handle your meals…*

Honestly, at this point even my confidence is starting to fade. That pleasant sense of invulnerability from this morning slowly drifted away, to be replaced by a gradually building sense of dread. And that was all before Yumi led me in here blindfolded and got me turned around. I have at most a few minutes before Kimiko shows up. And if it's anything like last time, she'll make a beeline straight for me.

*I know. It was stupid. All I'm asking you is whether you can help me.*

Ash hums. *Of course I can. And you might stand a chance. I do not think she is taking you especially seriously. Nor does it seem that medium training has survived all that well since last I visited. She is powerful, but I doubt she is prepared to handle a struggle with a freshly-fed demon even if she knew that she was facing one. But you will need surprise on your side.*

Surprise… I look around the maze. Maybe I can hide around a corner and pop out on her suddenly. I go down a dead end passage, tucking myself in just around the bend of it. Yeah, this could work. She'll be expecting me to be running from her, won't she?

*The medium is getting closer now,* Ash says.

I slow my breathing, making myself as quiet as I can. I keep still and flat, avoiding touching the hedge and rustling it.

The sound of blood rushing in my ears threatens to drown out everything else. It's otherwise quiet here in the maze - I can't hear the murmur of the visiting crowds anymore aside from an impossibly distant background noise. At least that might cover whatever sounds I do make.

I can hear Kimiko moving through the maze - can hear the sound of her sandals tapping the ground and her voice calling out to me. "I'm coming for you, little Kairis. When I find you, it will be the end."

She definitely isn't taking me seriously, I decide. She's not even trying to stalk me. She's trying to flush me out, maybe, and she thinks that being loud enough to spook me will work.

Well, she is certainly spooking me. My heart is in my throat.

*She is not far now,* Ash says. *Coming up the passage that you came from.*

This is it. This is the moment that decides whether this was a creative suicide method or a means of getting back at Kimiko.

I bend my legs in preparation to leap.

"I know you're here, little Kairis," Kimiko says, but her voice lacks the confidence of her words. She's very close now. Almost… Almost… "Aren't you going to run from m-"

*Now,* Ash says.

I lunge blindly around the corner, already mid-tackle even before I see her. Kimiko screams, her eyes going wide.

We land in a tangle of limbs.

"Get off me, you little brat," Kimiko says, her composure lost. She struggles with me, but I weigh more than she does, and she isn't as strong as I am with Ash's help, so I pin down her hands easily.

When I have a moment, my hand darts into her robe where I saw her reach before, finding paper. I snag a handful of it and pull it free.

There - the hex-strips that she used on me earlier. Will these even work for me?

She pushes at my face with one hand, trying to grab at the paper I took with the other. I ignore her, pinning her hand down and wrapping the hex-strip around it.

It flashes blue-purple, and the ring of light remains. Huh. Guess they do work for me, even though I'm not a medium. Kimiko looks as surprised as me, giving me a chance to pin down her other hand to the other side of her head.

Ash's voice in my head is very appreciative. And a little relieved. I think she was actually quite terrified of Kimiko. *Very good work.*

The next hex-strip… wait, this isn't a hex-strip. I unfold it, sitting on top of the mostly-helpless Kimiko while she tries to twist her body in order to kick at me. It's very well worn, looking like it's been unfolded and re-folded a million times. It has some handwritten Japanese on it. I don't understand Japanese, so I can't read it.

*How sweet. It's a love note from Yumi,* Ash comments.

*What does it say?*

Something clicks in my head, and suddenly I can understand it. I stick out my tongue, pretending to gag. I won't reproduce the contents here, but suffice to say that they're very, very mushy. Ash hums in my head, and the text goes back to being unreadable.

"Give me that," Kimiko pleads.

I crumple it up and throw it as far as I can. "Forget it. You won't need it where you're going."

Kimiko looks hurt, then confused, then concerned. "What?"

"You heard what I said," I say, grinning. I pull up my shirt, slapping my rounded belly noisily. It has a little bit more jiggle to it than it used to.

"You couldn't. You are not a medium," Kimiko says, but she seems not to believe it herself.

I lean down toward Kimiko's cheek, licking it just like she did mine. She tastes even better than the thief from last night did, and I shudder all over. She turns her head away, her face twisting into fear and disgust. It's so tempting. God, I just want to devour her right here, right now.

*My, it has been a long time since I have tasted a medium,* Ash says eagerly from inside my head. *Even longer since I've had more than a taste.*

Oh, I want more than a taste so very badly. But even I know that would be very, very stupid. There's absolutely no way I could explain that to Mom and Sophia and everyone else. My secret would be done, and so would I.

But Kimiko doesn't know any of this. Kimiko strains against the hex-strips. She's trembling. I don't think I've ever seen her this scared.

I love it.

"You can't do this," she says again, more firmly this time. She's so desperate to believe it, it's adorable. "There are few enough medium families as it is. Do you want to be the reason that there is one fewer?"

"If it means getting rid of you, then yes," I say, baring my teeth in a grin. "Say goodbye, Kimiko."

Her eyes go wide with terror, and she stammers out a panicked shout. "S-Sophie! Sophie, come quick!!"

Apparently now things have gotten dire enough for her to call for help. So embarrassing. Even I didn't do that when she had me cornered. She jerks away from me, straining to pull herself to safety, but her hex-chains are just as inescapable for her as they were for me.

I stand up, dusting myself off.

She stares at me a moment, confused. Then she continues thrashing against her restraints and calling for my sister.

I just shake my head and walk away. "Goodbye, Kimiko."

She apparently doesn't trust that I'm done with her, so I can still hear her shouting and struggling as I make my way out of the maze. Whatever. I did what I came here to do. She'll think twice before bothering me again.

*You're giving up on her?* Ash asks, disappointed. *But you had her right where you wanted her! Surely you could have taken advantage a little bit longer after the way she's treated you…*

I shrug. *Sophia is probably coming. I don't really want to answer her questions.*

Right on cue, Sophia bumps into me on her hurried way into the maze with Yumi in tow, her eyes wide and frightened to match Kimiko's. I don't see what she's so concerned about. Like I would have really done anything.

I stop in at the donation box out of habit. I pause, and it takes me a minute to realize that I won't have to worry about checking this for a while yet. At least, assuming that the other thief learned her lesson.

The memory of panicking about the thief's discarded clothes in my dream bubbles up to the top of my brain. I should have come out here earlier to go looking for them, to clean up after myself before anyone saw. But it doesn't look like I've forgotten them here.

… Nor do I remember bringing them with me to my room. What did I do with them?

I know for certain that I didn't imagine the whole thing. But Marwa would have surely brought the clothes to my mother if she'd found them in her morning sweep of the grounds. And my mother would have made a huge deal out of it if she had.

I look around, suddenly uneasy. I didn't hide them in the planter or anything, did I? … Nope. And Marwa would have found those, anyway.

*What are you doing?* Ash asks.

The flash of memory extends, and I remember that Ash made me forget about the clothes in the dream. Maybe she knows something about it. I tell her about the thief's discarded clothes and how I don't know what happened to them.

*Curious,* Ash says. She sounds uneasy. *I… did not have anything to do with that, no. Perhaps the smaller thief came back and took them?*

That would be weird, but it's as good of an explanation as any I can come up with. Still, I can't help feeling like I messed up, and it might come back to haunt me any time now.

"Carina."

I jump at the sound of Marwa's voice calling to me from nearby. Why does she always insist on showing up at the worst times lately?

She doesn't sound particularly happy to see me. I don't really want to talk to her about what happened last time I saw her, so I pretend to be busy, rustling through the inside of the planter and crouching down to look around behind it.

She comes up close to me and stops. "Carina."

"Yep, what's up?" I say, staying partially hidden behind the planter and hoping that I'll sound sufficiently unapproachable that she'll assume I'm too busy for her and go away.

"I want to talk to you about… yesterday," she says cautiously. "When you have time. But that can wait."

*Well, well, look at her, waving yesterday over your head like that,* Ash says sarcastically. *What a nice, friendly thing to do.*

My jaw clenches, but I force it to relax. "Okay. Fine. What do you want?"

She hesitates a minute, then puts her hand on my shoulder. "I need your help. And… it's kind of urgent. You told me all this stuff about mediums and demons and stuff, and I think you might be able to help me with this."

I turn to face her. I wasn't expecting that. "Oh. Okay. What do you need?"

Marwa gestures off to the side, to someone standing on the other side of the planter. "Actually, it's not for me. Nadine is the one with the story."

I stand up so I can see the other person, this Nadine I've heard so much about. I put on an easy, approachable smile to match her awkward, uncomfortable one. Our eyes meet as I straighten.

And then I freeze. My teeth clench, and my hands curl into fists. This is not possible. And yet it definitely is. It's a little different to see her here in the sunlight in the middle of the day, but I'm absolutely sure of it. The soft, rounded cheeks. The long golden hair.

It takes her a little longer to recognize me, but recognize me she does. Her lips form the word "no", and the color drains from her face. She's completely frozen in place, so perfectly still she might as well be a statue. But then she starts to shake, staring at me like I just crawled out of her worst nightmares.

And I probably did.

Marwa's friend Nadine is the girl who got away last night.

Ash is the first of us to find words again.

*Well, this is a little awkward…*