**4**

**Fun and Games**

Side by side, they traversed the beaten dirt path. And though Froggy’s movements were slow and weary, Meg carried herself with almost contagious energy, if not grace. Her amphibian friend still carried a heavy burden deep in her gut, one that sloshed about with each hop, causing her to stumble and making it difficult to stand – but Meg had no such troubles.

Her middle was flat as a board and light as a feather. The only thing weighing her down was her newly acquired curves; the breasts that stretched her cleavage to its limit, the butt that, with each movement, threatened to rip through the thin layer of fabric that still flimsily preserved her dignity. Meg being Meg, she couldn’t resist feeling her new assets, finding great amusement in poking and pinching her supple skin and giggling like a child at their jiggling.

Froggy just smiled; a smile of both jealousy and pity for her carefree, blissfully ignorant friend. As she looked over her friend for the tenth time – still in disbelief that someone could churn through such a big meal so ridiculously quickly – her googly eyes landed on the pair of chrome handcuffs that hung from her friend’s waist. One eye blinked, then another – and a flat fingertip was pointed at it.

“Is hunter hand…” her brow furrowed, features twisting in frustration. The words were elusive, distant; after a moment, she sighed in defeat. “Hand thing, yes?”

Meg blinked; her right hand finally let go of her tit for two seconds and patted down her hip. “Huh! I’d forgotten about that. Yeah, I got it from that Great White fellow.”

“Why keeping?”

“I ‘unno,” Meg shrugged. “Reminds me of my first human meal, I guess? I like keepsakes. They keep me from forgetting.”

“Keep… sake?”

“Oh, you know, when you keep an object to help you remember things? Like a letter from a loved one, or a lock of hair, or a pebble from a nice place you’ve visited?”

Froggy fell silent. She had no answer for her friend. Life was simple in Gunung – evade predators, hunt, find a nice pond to sleep in, start over again. The repetition was comfortable, mind-numbing even. There was no need for ingenuity or innovation. Nobody to talk to or learn from. And so, her memory had slipped away. Loved ones, nice places, even the very concept of a keepsake seemed distant and alien to her.

Froggy had never realized how lonely she was in this place she now called home.

“Meg?”

The rabbit girl looked over her shoulder. “Yeah?”

Froggy had stopped. Her hands folded over her squishy tummy, her eyes looking down at her feet, one of which drew little circles in the sand. “Mind if Froggy borrow keepsake?”

“Why?” Meg noticed her friend squirm slightly; she quickly clarified herself. “I mean, of course you can, I’m just curious why you’d want something naff like this.” She looked at her friend curiously; after a few seconds of no response, she unhooked the cuffs from her waist and tossed them at Froggy.

Almost immediately, a long and sticky tongue shot out, intercepting the cuffs in midair. As quickly as it had streaked through the air, it retracted back into Froggy’s maw, which closed around them – and only a last-minute contraction stopped her from instinctively swallowing it right there.

Her mouth opened slightly, and the cuffs, now slick with saliva, fell on her awaiting hands. She examined them for a moment, running her fingers over the sleek chrome surface, as cold and soulless as the men and women who fielded them; she couldn’t help feeling a kind of kinship towards it.

She sighed. Only then, upon noticing Meg’s concerned expression, did she straighten up slightly. With a click, she closed it around her right arm, letting it loosely slide up and down her arm over her slippery skin. Then she smiled – an honest smile that Meg recognized as bittersweet.

“Thank. Now when Meg go with friend, Froggy remember a little bit longer.”

Meg beamed at her friend; a smile brighter than Froggy had ever seen. The rabbit girl fidgeted for a moment, arms resting awkwardly parallel to her body; she opened them, only to close them again.

“Geez Louise, Froggy… you shouldn’t be making me this emotional if I can’t even hug you in return.”

The apologetic, embarrassed smile that drew itself on Froggy’s wide lips were the only answer she needed.

*Snap*.

The two girls froze. Meg’s ears scanned the area like radars, honing in on the sound. At first, there was nothing; then, the telltale hiss of a tongue flicking through the air, the rustling of scale against dead leaves – the realization sent a shiver down her spine.

She looked in Froggy’s eyes; she could hear it too.

“Froggy, it’s-”

“Meg hide.”

“But what about-”

“Meg hide, *now*.”

Unable to get her friend to budge, Meg did what rabbits did best. With a sudden burst of speed, she disappeared into the tree line. Froggy turned to face the source of the noise; it moved closer by the second, rolling over saplings and bushes like a bulldozer, making not even the slightest effort to remain concealed.

Froggy’s eyes darted around. No other soul in sight. The handcuffs weighed in her hands with newfound importance, but survival instincts trumped sentimentality still. They were flung into a nearby bush – Froggy could only hope the hooked thorns and abundant foliage would conceal them.

Evidence disposed of, she stood and faced the forest. Soon enough, the lamia emerged – tall and powerful, slit eyes squinting in satisfaction, tail so thick and long that Froggy couldn’t even see the end of it. Clawed hands massaged the writhing mass of bodies that filled the lamia’s jutting and sagging gut. Over it rested massive breasts, plump and supple, weighing down on the squirming below.

Even to a voracious creature like Froggy, it was an unreal sight. Those feet and fists that slammed into the thick wall of flesh and skin that slowly but surely pressed down on them, they were not the struggles of one or two lone victims. They were the death throes of an entire family – and as the serpent emerged from the woodwork and more of her thick cylindrical tail came into view, it became clear that there wasn’t an inch of room in her belly or tail that wasn’t filled with slowly digesting human meat – some of it dead, the rest of it not so lucky.

Before the lamia’s towering form, Froggy stood still as death. For the first time in many years, she found herself knowing fear. She felt as her own prey felt; hopeless, doomed, completely outmatched. Her slippery body quaked in terror as the round shadow of a squirming belly loomed over her – she looked up into the slit pupils of the most feared of predators, and nodded, resigned to her fate.

To her surprise, the lamia nodded back. A greeting. Then she smiled, leaned in close, and whispered - her breath was warm, salty and bitter, and her voice sibilant, rich and seductive.

“*Hello, Ellen*.”

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Karen grumbled, scratching the itch that slowly spread across her body. Dirty rags and animal hides covered her spindly form, concealing every inch of pale skin under layers upon layers of unwashed fabric; she could only hope that those reddish-brown stains were wine, and not what she thought they were.

At least there were no animal ears to ruin the ensemble anymore.

“Ewww…” she complained, her thin smile barely hiding her disgust. “From the catwalk to this.”

Lily patted down her own outfit – similar to Karen’s but somehow even more trashy. “Hey, I’ve seen some of the things they made you wear. This isn’t so bad – besides, it’ll be good for us. We look just like villagers!”

The dangling old door opened, and in walked Gabi. She, too, was rocking clothes that the hag provided; but unlike with her two friends - who snugly fit in the stitched together layers of leather and wool - even those weren’t enough to cover the ampleness of her curves. Dirty old patchwork stretched to the limit to accommodate her massive tits; what was meant to be a poncho barely fit the bill as a top, and even then, it only mostly covered the upper half of her cleavage, leaving the rest of it – and a generous amount of areola – out for the world to see. Likewise, what worked as a skirt for an old and desiccated crone only barely covered Gabi’s hips and backside; Karen found herself averting her eyes whenever her friend as much as raised her leg a bit higher than usual. There was no underwear in Gunung.

Gabi spun around in place, causing the mishmash of textiles to rustle and stretch over her skin.

“So, girls, who wore it better? Me, or the witch?”

Karen pinched the bridge of her nose and huffed; she looked to Lily for validation, but the self-appointed leader of the group had nothing for her except a shrug and an apologetic look. “You’re right, Lily,” Karen said, each word dripping with sarcasm, “we’re *totally* not calling any attention at all.”

The shadows stirred, interrupting the conversation; the candles flickered and snuffed out, and a cold chill came over the three girls – particularly Gabi, in her skimpy get-up. Wisps of shadow formed a familiar outline, a mass of shifting fabric and animal parts so thick that it was difficult to imagine there was an old woman under all of that.

Cataract-covered eyes reflected the lights of candles from under a bleached caiman skull whose lower jaw draped around her neck like a necklace - or a noose. Little gouts of flame flashed at the end of her pipe, dissipating into the cold air; her fetid breath, all firewater and chewing tobacco, washed over the three like a storm front.

“It has been many years since I last donned the mantle of the Virago… it brings back pleasant and red-tinted memories, oh yes.” Spidery fingers twitched over the blood-caked obsidian knife that hung from her waist. “Perhaps my… *fresher* outfits carry a will of their own as well.”

Before the three girls’ horror, her chapped lips spread into a broad and toothless smile. “Ah, allow an old woman some fun, of course. There is no such thing as a living outfit; you’ll be telling me of magic next.” She cackled dryly. “Now you are ready to go – towards the waiting maw of She-who-is-the-river. I would advise you to not do it, I would even warn you that death awaits those who cross her…” The caiman skull she wore buckled slightly, for a moment seeming alive under the dancing candles. “…vet if helping your friend is what you want, there is no other choice.”

Sharp fingernails drew a line on the billowing smoke, flowing like a bending river, curling into big, puffy trees. “You must travel up the river, past where the corruption of man spreads and Gunung is its wildest. When the canopy becomes impenetrable and the birds do not sing, you will know that you are in the territory of the black snake.”

Lily stepped forward. “And what then?”

The skull itself seemed to grin. “Then you almost certainly die. But one way or another, you will reunite with your friend.”

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Standing before Froggy, the massive lamia seemed to embody everything wondrous and terrifying about nature. She was as tall as the sky; her slit eyes as deep as the sea, her scales as black as the darkest night. When she smiled, relief washed over the frog girl; when her full stomach gurgled, the forest itself fell silent.

Froggy blinked. There was no glimmer recognition in her bulging eyes. No change in her expression. Just pure terror.

The lamia’s smile faded. She moved back, silently looking the frog girl over. When done, she let out a deep, long sigh. “You don’t remember anything, do you? Not even your own name?”

Froggy had expected to be greeted as a meal, and instead found herself treated like an old friend. Ellen… the name sounded vaguely familiar. But no distant foggy memory was stirred up, no great revelation was had. She remembered nothing but eating, sleeping, and fleeing. She remembered no name save for Meg’s.

She stared blankly at the towering lamia as if hypnotized by her gentle swaying.

The slit eyes that stared her down glimmered with a flash of grief.

“You’re spending too much time alone in that filthy swamp, Ellen. It’s not good for you. Look at you! You’re barely hanging on to your humanity.” She gestured towards Froggy’s bloated belly. “At least you’re still keeping yourself well-fed.”

Atop a nearby tree, Meg watched the proceedings. Her keen rabbit’s ears caught every word – if only her brain could keep up as well. What was the lamia talking about? Why was she calling Froggy Ellen? Froggy’s name was Froggy, obviously – Meg would know, she’d come up with it! Serpents sure were dumb…

“Alone?” Froggy managed to mumble. Something about the word left her restless, even more than the massive predator that loomed over her.

“Alone,” the great serpent repeated. No longer did the great predator carry herself with the dignified and heartless demeanor she was known for. Her shoulders slumped, her massive body hunched down slightly. With her coils flat against the ground, she no longer towered over Froggy – rather, she kept herself at eye level, her voice low and full of concern.

“I’m sorry, Ellen. If I knew you’d end up like this, I never would have abandoned you.”

To everyone’s surprise – even her own – Froggy slammed a foot against the floor. The strength of the gesture sent ripples through her jutting gut, stirring the thick soup that roiled within.

“No! Big-snake bad! Eat Froggy friend. Eat all Froggy friend! All!” she shouted; despite all her anger, something in the back of her mind restrained her. Something about the lamia’s words resonated deep inside. And it upset Froggy immensely.

The lamia’s brow furrowed; she rested a hand over her heart and looked legitimately taken aback. “You should spend more time with humans instead of just eating them. Actually talk to them so you don’t forget where you came from. I mean, look at you – you’ve become an animal, pure and simple.” She gestured towards Froggy. “I’m not saying abstain, far from it… but maybe you should try other things. Beasts, for example. Like *rabbit*.” Her entire body wiggled eagerly at the mere thought of a rabbit meal – her gut contracted, squeezing the writhing bodies within as if to make room for the prospect of the delicacy. Her smile thinned as she loudly gulped down a glob of saliva; then she lowered herself even more, arms crossing between her massive breasts and her churning gut.

“Look, Ellen. I know I did some bad things. All of us did. Me, you, Beth, Mary… playing that board game made us go wrong. But it’s not too late.” She extended a hand; Froggy winced away from it. “Come with me? We can be friends again, Ellen, like we were before Gunung. Let me take you back to the hunters’ camp. You’ll learn to see the good in their ways. What do you say?”

Froggy blinked. From the corner of her eye, she spied Meg on a treetop, flattened against a branch and watching – and listening – intently.

The offer was tempting. She had been hunted by as long as she’d remembered – by the hunters, by the Big Snake. Living without constant fear was a notion she had long divorced herself from, yet here it was, being handed to her on a silver platter.

And her only price would be parting with her friend.

Instinctively, she peered towards the nearby bush, where her keepsake rested. The lamia noticed this; the tip of her tail slid towards it, scales coiling around the sharp thorns unharmed and crushing them under the strength of several tons of prey-fueled muscles. Long roots snapped like dry twigs under the crushing strength of the lamia’s ophidian lower half – and after a small, curious shake of the uprooted bush, the handcuffs fell to the ground.

The lamia’s entire body tensed up. Scaly skin stretched and bent; a dozen hapless morsels groaned their last breath. Her slit pupils widened into spheres. The tip of her tail wrapped around the cuffs, bringing them to her – and a terrified Froggy saw the lamia’s features distort with grief.

She held the cuffs to her bare, voluptuous bosom – they left behind a still-warm trail of Froggy’s saliva. The serpent’s eyes welled up; never had a reptile’s tears looked so honest.

“I visited Great White’s camp today,” she pushed through the knot that formed in her throat. “I had smelled rabbit. He knew I loved rabbit. He always saved the best bits for me.”

“I knew something was wrong when I entered the camp. No laughter, no drinking, no singing… I asked everyone where he was… none of them dared to look me in the eye. You *took* him from me, Ellen!”

Her tail slammed against a nearby tree, sending ripples throughout the forest. Every bird in the area took flight. In her hiding spot, Meg shuddered.

Clearly, Meg concluded, this Big Snake character had it all wrong. First off, she insisted on calling Froggy Ellen, clearly mistaking her for someone else. Second, Froggy hadn’t eaten Great White – she had! And he’d filled her up nicely! Meg had half a mind to walk up to the two and set things straight – now, if only she could shake off the paralysis that pure, unbridled terror had cast on her body…

“You’re just like Mary and Beth. You can’t stand the thought of me being happy, can you? You just have to tear it down. Repeatedly. Systematically. Over and over again, even after you’ve gone feral.” The serpent hissed, forked tongue flicking threateningly through the air. Froggy took a step back, but stumbled over the lamia’s tail, which slithered off any possible exit. Like a hunter’s trap, it was ready to snap shut at any moment, ready to snuff out a frog girl with the greatest of eases.

“You don’t remember, do you? Well, let me remind you. Let me remind you of all the friends I made here – friends that liked me for who I was and not for what I could do for them. Let me remind you of how those two bitches ate them one by one, sometimes over my begging and crying, because they ‘weren’t real’.” Her grip on the handcuffs tightened until her knuckles were bone-white and the metal left marks on her supple flesh.

“**Do you remember, Ellen!?**” With a snappy, whipping movement, she lunged close, stopping mere inches from a terrified Froggy’s face, who gulped in fear. “And you watched it happen, sat there with that stupid smile on your face, too naïve to process what was going on. That’s why I ended it all – we needed to fight fire with fire. The only language they knew was that of predation, so I became fluent. Do you remember that? Well, you should.”

Her nostrils flared and she shifted back slightly, rubbing a hand over her middle – it still bulged and sloshed, but already it was noticeably smaller than before. “They struggled to the end. They cried and begged and pleaded. Even in their last moments, right before they became just padding on my body, they never understood. They didn’t even have the self-awareness to understand karmic justice. They denied me even *that*.”

“Froggy sorry, Froggy not remember. Froggy-”

“Quiet!” The lamia raised a hand, ready to strike Froggy, who flinched but simply lowered her head, ready to accept the punishment for a crime she didn’t remember. It was enough to take all the wind out of the serpent’s sails.

Her pent-up rage was unleashed on the tree instead, culminating on a second slam of her tail. Age-old wood creaked and cracked; a shower of loose leaves descended upon the two. “I didn’t finish you off because you were different. I could have eaten you any time I pleased, like I did with them. I don’t hear them calling me skinny anymore now that they’re the curves! How’s that for justice, eh, Ellen? How’s that for justice!?”

Froggy couldn’t move. It was like watching a storm unfurl; both terrifying and fascinating.

“It was a mistake, Ellen, a mistake. You’re just like they were. You may have forgotten their name, but you’re acting like them to the end. Piece by piece, destroying everything I ever love. Leaving me alone in this horrible world *you* got us trapped in!”

From her hideout, Meg had to cover her mouth to silence a chuckle. It wasn’t just that the lamia’s meltdown reminded her of one of her own friends – no, that thought came and went without waking up more than a half dozen neurons from their peaceful slumber. It was the idea of someone accidentally getting their friends stuck in Gunung. Why would anyone do anything stupid like that? Board games were always bad news – heck, last time she’d played Monopoly, it had ended in tears…

The lamia’s bloodshot eyes one more time turned to the cuffs in her hands. The worst of her fury released, all she had left was a deep void. Part of her life was missing – and what little was left of him stood in front of her, taking the form of a puzzled, ignorant amphibian.

“I have half a mind to open you up, just to see if he’s still in there. Give him the proper burial he deserves. But no… it wouldn’t help anything. He’s gone, you killed him. My nights will be spent alone. These cuffs will never lock around my wrists again.”

She paused. Something in Froggy’s saucer-wide eyes disagreed with her. Confusion – confusion and fear. The Great White was first among equals, unmatched by hunter or beast. This pathetic creature shivering before her, and the equally pathetic creatures melting away in her gut, were simply too weak and cowardly to best him, and much too stupid to outsmart him.

The lamia brought the cuffs to her mouth. Her forked tongue pressed down on the cold surface, sliding over it. Vivid images crossed her mind – musk, sweat, gunpowder, and whiskey. Burning wood. Rabbit fur. Saliva. Chlorophyll and mud.

“The slippery one,” she hissed. “Of course. Ellen?”

Froggy didn’t respond; her head tilted to the side slightly, tongue drooping lazily from the corner of her mouth. Only after being shot a death glare did she remember that this Ellen was supposed to be her, and nodded nervously.

“I am going rabbit hunting. If you find her, you know where to bring her. Otherwise, pray you never cross my path again, or you’ll be joining those two bitches and countless others in my ass and tits.”

Froggy shuddered at the thought.

“And if I find out you’re with her… well, you can guess what I’ll do to both of you, but make no mistake; the hunters taught me some interesting butchering techniques that I’m eager to try out.”

A dry gulp and some uncontrollable fidgeting were the only answer the lamia needed. With that, as suddenly as she had emerged, she stormed off and disappeared back into the thicket, her ebony scales and tanned skin making her invisible among the lattice of lights and shadows. The tail unwound from around Froggy, who finally allowed herself a deep breath of relief. Muscles locked by terror finally relaxed, causing her to fall on her back, wheezing.

Seconds passed, then minutes. Once Meg found herself able to move again, she hopped down from the branch and made her way to her friend – as chipper and carefree as ever.

“Did you get that? That crazy snake thought your name was Ellen! Who’s that Ellen person, anyway?” She reached to help Froggy up, but her offer could not be accepted, for reasons that were obvious to at least one of them. “I mean, what kind of stupid person forgets the names of their friends? That’s such an Anna thing to do.” She paused, furrowing her brow. “Wait, Anna? Karen, I meant Karen.”

Froggy chuckled politely – it was a lifeless, dry sound that grated on Meg’s sensitive ears. The rabbit girl looked down at her friend, her own smile dying at the sight. The cheerful, happy-go-lucky girl she had met in the swamp was nowhere to be seen; this Froggy, despite her best efforts, looked worn down, confused. Hurt.

It pained Meg to see a friend like this. She opened her mouth to say something – but what could she possibly say? She didn’t understand what was going on, or why Froggy was suddenly this depressed. After all, the lamia wasn’t mad at her, she was mad at that Ellen person!...

…*oh*.

“Oh, geez Louise…” she mumbled, shifting around in embarrassment. Then, an idea crossed her mind – she clapped her hands together and, feeling like a genius, decided to deal with the situation the only way she knew how.

“I know how to cheer you up, Froggy. How about a nice meal?”

Froggy smiled weakly. Her friend’s single-mindedness would have been annoying if it wasn’t so pure and innocent.

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Gabi fell to all fours, running a finger over the muddy ground. Karen and Lily shared a confused look; there was nothing about the muddy overgrown path that seemed in any way remarkable, but then again, Gabi was the team’s tracker. She sniffed the floor, whistled appreciatively, and jumped to her feet.

Her matter-of-fact words threw the two for a loop.

“This isn’t a path.”

Karen let out a single ‘ha!’ before realizing it wasn’t a joke. Lily’s eyes narrowed at her friend, then at the surrounding area. It certainly looked like a path – narrow and winding as it may have been, it was still clearly manmade, with not as much as a sapling growing on the otherwise fertile ground underfoot.

Gabi flashed a shit-eating grin at the two girls. “This isn’t a path,” she repeated. “These are snake tracks.”

Lily took a step back. “Wait, do you mean-”

“Uh huh,” Gabi nodded proudly. “We’re dealing with one hell of a critter. Probably the apex predator in the area – notice how she doesn’t care about concealing her tracks. It’s either a warning or a challenge.”

“And those are both really bad news for us,” sighed Karen. “There’s no way we can handle something like that.”

“Eh,” Gabi shrugged. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. Right now, I’m less worried about being eaten and more worried about not starving.”

“You would, wouldn’t you,” Karen muttered.

“Come on now, girls.” Lily’s words sounded with surprising authority – a testament to how well she was growing into her role as the leader… and how much Karen and even Gabi had mellowed out since the beginning of their joint adventure. “Stay on target. Remember why we’re here in the first place. It’s not to deal with this snake business, and it’s not to engage in gastro-tourism.”

“Right,” Karen nodded. “Meg. I hope she’s okay. I can only imagine how terrified she must be right now.”

Lily patted her friend on the shoulder. “Keep your chin up! Meg’s fine, I’m sure. That girl’s got more wits than you give her credit for. I look forward to telling her just how worried you were, though!”

“Oh, shut up, you.”

Lily was kind enough to not bring up the violent blushing that had taken over Karen’s features.

The further the three traveled into the thick jungle, the quieter everything got. Where once the entire world was a cacophony of mating calls, warnings, and songs, now – despite the ever-thickening tangle of roots, branches and lianas providing plentiful shelter – there was nothing but silence. Even the crickets dared not chirp in the river serpent’s domain.

It was amongst this silence that a male voice echoed, hoarse and smug, only made louder by the stillness of the air.

“Halt!”

The three girls froze; the rustling of leaves heralded an arrival. The lamia’s mate? Perhaps another beast altogether?

A lanky figure jumped onto their path, wearing a mishmash of rags and cheap leathers over his bare skin. So impoverished-looking he was, that it was hard to tell the man’s age – anywhere from late twenties to early fifties seemed like a fair guess. With his arms crossed and an air of smug superiority on his face, he regarded the three girls for a moment.

“Easy, boys! No need to get testy, it’s not it. Just three little beauties following the Queen’s track.” He snapped his fingers, chuckling at the sight – part relief, part mockery. “Oi! You three! We don’t take kindly to strangers around here – how about you turn around and bog off to wherever you came from?”

Lily step forward. She could hear Gabi, next to her, biting her lip and growling threateningly. She placed a hand on her friend’s shoulder, whispered something in her ear – as Gabi stepped back and crossed her arms like a grumpy child, so did Lily approach the tall man.

When she stepped closer, she saw the villager’s hand raise high – she quickly realized it was a signal to keep steady. Rustling among the leaves around path only confirmed what Lily already know – there was an ambush waiting in the woods.

“Yeah, you’re not half dumb, are you, kiddo? You know exactly what’s u-”

He had the wandering eyes of any vulgar village bachelor; that much was clear. He had spent the entire time quite shamelessly checking the three girls out – and while Lily and Karen warranted only a pleased nod and a whistle each, when Gabi’s turn to be ogled at arrived, he instead stumbled back in horror. His jaw dropped, all sense of superiority immediately abandoning him.

Lily bit her lip. Her land slid into one of her secondhand outfit’s many pouches, squeezing the fox figurine within. Had the witch’s spell not worked?

“Oh. *Oh*,” the tall man mumbled. His raised hand turned into a gesture to stand down; soon, from the foliage, a few men and women covered in bright yellow warpaint emerged. All, like their leader, were lanky to the point of malnourishment. Lily, however, figured such appearances might be deceiving; in fact, many of them wore trophy necklaces made of teeth, dried ears, and other bits and bobs ripped from fallen foes.

Their leader stepped forward and kneeled. Karen winced at the sight of a man willingly lowering himself into the thick, bubbling mud. She could only imagine the number of leeches swimming around in there.

She winced again when she saw all the others mimic his gesture.

“My apologies, blessed ones,” said the tall man. “I am a blasphemous fool; I had not seen the signs of your holiness. I can only beg your forgiveness.”

Gabi once again growled – it looked like some big cat habits were harder to get over than others. But even as she opened her mouth, undoubtedly to speak her mind, Lily patted her on the back.

“Calm down, Gabi,” she whispered. “I think this is what the new outfits were about. The witch is clearly seen as some kind of goddess around here, and that’s why she gave us her clothes.”

At first, she feared that her words would not reach the incensed Gabi; but to her surprise and relief, after a few seconds of fuming, the former lioness took a deep breath, closed her eyes… and put on a forced smile. “That old bat’s always five steps ahead, isn’t she?”

“Please! It would be our honor to invite you to our village, o blessed ones. Allow me to introduce myself; I am Elias, the leader of this small community. Would you be so kind as to grace us with your names?”

Before Lily had time to come up with fake names, Gabi introduced herself. Karen did too, and Elias repeated each of their names under his breath as if they were the epithets of exotic deities from lands far away. Rolling her eyes slightly, Lily followed suit, and the three allowed themselves to be led away from the path.

Despite the reverence with which they were treated, Lily couldn’t help finding the way the hunting party was looking at her slightly off-putting. They stared at the three, particularly Gabi, with a shamelessness so unabashed that it bordered on innocence; they were ogling, sure, but there wasn’t any lechery behind it that she could see. If anything, it was admiration.

She only realized why when they arrived at the settlement. Above, massive trees competed for every little bit of sunlight, forming a canopy so thick that not a single ray, no matter how faint, found its way down to the forest floor. Massive stilted huts made of wood and roofed with banana leaves hung to the sides of trees; tents and hammocks scattered across the area with haphazard purpose.

Despite this lack of natural light, the village was not a dreary place – far from it. Sconces hung from the walls and the sides of the mightier trees; instead of holding torches, they held flowers upon which hundreds of fireflies landed to feed. This soothing, flickering orange light bathed the entire settlement.

Karen’s eyes followed one of these fireflies as it fluttered towards her. It circled her once, then again, before landing on her outstretched arm. Her knee-jerk instinct was to flick the icky bug away, but instead, she found herself watching, hypnotized, as it took a few steps up and looked curiously at her with its big compound eyes. By the time it flew away, she felt as if she had made a new friend.

Gabi, meanwhile, was less interested in the fauna and more on the locals. Despite all of Lily’s admonishments, she couldn’t help quietly size up the prospective meals all around; it was, after all, only fair, given how intently they were watching her. She wasn’t impressed. There wasn’t a pound of fat between the entire village; men were skinny and emaciated, with leathery skin and barely any muscle on their bones; women were flat and lanky, with features so understated most didn’t even feel the need to cover them. These were people who had been living through hardship all their lifetime; it had left them rugged and strong, if not shapely. Maybe that was why they were so fascinated by her – her generous diet of hunter after hunter had left her quite curvaceous, after all.

While Karen soaked in the dreamlike atmosphere of the little hidden village and Gabi basked in the adulation and sneakily licked her chops whenever nobody was looking, Lily followed Elias in silence. He asked the usual questions – where they’d come from, what they were looking for, how long they’d been on the road. As she answered them – sometimes truthfully, mostly not – her eyes slowly got used to the orange light; she started seeing shapes where there were none moments ago. What had been merely an oddly-shaped tree in the middle of the village gained curves, posture, and intent; its roots turned out to be a coiling tail, lined with keeled scales, its branches became massive round breasts and arms outstretched in an all-encompassing embrace.

They had come to the village to find the lamia – and there she was, immortalized in a wooden statue right before their eyes.

Lily glanced, alarmed, at her two friends – as usual, neither of them seemed to be paying attention. She held back a sigh of frustration and followed her guide through the village.

Eventually, they reached a longhouse – a monster of wood, hide and thatch that towered over the other huts. With a sycophantic bow and an apology, Elias disappeared behind the wide leaves that covered the entrance. A few muted words later – some alarmed, some ecstatic – a line of a dozen or so villagers stepped out, kneeling before Gabi before walking away.

“What was that?” Lily asked.

“The longhouse is the only place in the village worthy of being inhabited by those blessed, of course! Do go in, do go in…”

*Not ominous at all*.

The three stepped through the doorway. The so-called ‘only worthy place’ was little more than a glorified shack consisting of three cramped rooms divided by wooden frames. Bedrolls had been hastily piled up against the walls; the only furniture remaining was a trio of hammocks hanging parallel to each other, and what vaguely resembled a wooden hot tub in the corner.

Karen saw them and gasped, eyes widening in disbelief. After countless nights sleeping on the ground and on piles of sharp hay, these primitive nets looked like the clouds of heaven.

Seeing the tears of joy in her eyes as she slumped on the nearest hammock and let out a laugh, clear and bright, the likes of which they’d never heard coming from her, Gabi and Lily shared a look and a knowing smile. Karen had earned a break – and so had they.

It did not take them long to accustom themselves to their new status as blessed ones – whatever that meant. The villagers proved to be graceful hosts, providing them with a massive feast of fresh fruit, berries, roots, and nuts. When asked about the lack of meat and fish, Elias shrugged. “The jungle is bountiful, but all that bleeds belongs to Her,” he explained.

Once the three had eaten their fill – or, in Gabi’s case, all that the poor locals had to offer – the villagers resumed their daily routine. Even Elias, after a series of sycophantic bows and apologies, asked to be dismissed, assuring them that he would always be a shout away. They were quick to grant him his wish.

Finding themselves suddenly alone, the three girls let out a collective sigh of relief.

“Finally, something good happens,” said Karen, mid-stretch. Her body splayed languidly over the hammock, a single leg hanging from the side and gently kicking back and forth. “About damn time.”

Gabi, lying prone and with her massive breasts flattening against the netting, said nothing – though she did offer a thumbs up of agreement.

“I don’t know, girls,” Lily whispered through a thin smile, as if afraid of being heard. “This is weird. We still need to find Meg, and I’m getting a very cult-y vibe from everything. I mean, did you girls see the statue?”

Karen groaned, eyes rolling. “Shit, Lily, you really can’t stand having a good thing happen to me once in a while, can you?”

“You know it’s not like that at all, Karen. They had a big, idol-looking statue in the middle of the town. Of the lamia… not of a snake, of the *lamia*.”

All smiles in the longhouse faded. The expected follow-up question – a *why* or a *how* – was stopped dead on its tracks, as once more the flaps opened and a few locals stepped in, as if on cue. The three had expected guards; instead they were met with beautiful girls of indeterminate age, dressed even more skimpily than their warrior counterparts. The hollowed-out gourds they carried over their shoulders released thick steam that pooled near the ceiling; it smelled of sweet oils and fragrant herbs. They bowed wordlessly and made their way to the tub in the corner, pouring out the contents of their gourds. Five or six times they came and went, leaving the three girls not a single moment to finish their conversation – and when the tub was nice and full, instead of leaving, they simply gathered around the bewildered trio. One stepped forward, tugged at Karen’s shirt – the girl instinctively pulled back with an ‘eep’, causing the villagers to immediately fall to their knees, apologizing as if their lives depended on it.

They explained that it was their job to bathe them, just as they did Her whenever She graced the village with her presence. Karen, of course, wasted no time – within mere seconds she had discarded all the heavy, sweaty, filthy rags that the witch had let her borrow, and, covering herself with her hands, lowered herself into the water. Little ripples of lukewarm, scented liquid licked at her bare body, loosening muscles that had been tense for days, washing off the dirt and mud from her skin. She pinched her nose between two fingers and dove in, disappearing for several seconds before emerging again, amongst the thick clouds of steam that slowly but surely took over the building.

She was enjoying it so much her two friends couldn’t resist joining her. They were more patient – they allowed the three servants to remove their outfits. Skilled fingers danced over the fabric, avoiding their skin at all costs. Quilt and hides were plucked from their forms and carefully folded to be washed. Inch by inch, the two girls’ bare bodies were revealed – and Gabi’s particularly got a few gasps out of their attendants.

They were allowed a few minutes to get used to the water, while a fourth figure stepped in and took away their clothes. Eventually, the eerily quiet attendants gathered around them, kneeling by the edge of the tub. Their soft hands, covered in scented and warm oils – a far cry from the calloused and leathery claws of the other villagers – pressed to their shoulders, squeezing and massaging their weary, but slowly relaxing, forms.

Lily looked around. She had to admit; she could get used to this. Gabi, to her left, sat back with a huge, smug smile on her face, as purifying concoctions were poured over her blonde hair, melting away grime and washing away leaves and twigs. Karen, to her right, had all but melted into the water – her eyes half-closed, her mouth hanging open, tongue lolling out, drool dripping from it.

“Hey, uh… what’s your name?” Lily asked the attendant currently in the process of pressing boiled leaves to the back of her neck.

The girl blinked, a hand resting over her heart. “Uh, me, o blessed one?”

“Please, call me Lily. And you are…?”

“Oh, I mustn’t…”

“Come on, you!” Gabi called out, beaming with pride. “We’re the blessed ones, and we command you to treat us like regular people!”

“Oh, yes, of course, o blessed on- er, Lily. I’m Arina, the apothecary’s apprentice.”

Lily nodded. “Alright, Arina. I had some questions to ask you about the village, if that’s alright.”

“But don’t feel the need to stop the massaging while you answer them!” Gabi once again shouted, chuckling, clearly very satisfied with herself.

The attendant nodded and whispered a hushed apology; more leaves found their way around Lily’s neck, shoulders, and even cleavage. “I am at your command, o Lily. Ask and I’ll answer.”

“It’s not that we aren’t thankful, but why the special treatment? We’re just regular people, same as you.”

“Oh, but you’re not!” the girl was quick to correct. “You are the heralds of Soo Zann, She-who-is-the-river, the great black terror that looks after us. You have her features – your friend is particularly blessed!”

She pointed at Gabi, who had to fight to repress a laugh. Was this all about the size of her boobs? Oh, how she wished Karen was paying attention just now.

“She-who-is-the-river, who’s that?” No sooner had the words left Lily’s throat than she was regretting them already. The massaging stopped. Wet leaves flopped sloppily on the floor. A firefly buzzed sadly. Lily bit her lip; she had to think quick. “As blessed ones we are… curious about how much you know about her.”

The three attendants looked at each other; one shrugged, the other shook her head, and finally, Arina nodded shyly. “Soo Zann protects us. We are her servants, her children, and her sustenance. As the story goes, she used to be a normal, gigantic serpent; while her fellow beasts preyed on humans and hunters freely, she instead looked on us with pity and ate only animals. One night, as she and her fellow beasts – the Hare, the Frog, and the Hyena – sought prey, they came across a dashing young Hunter. They ambushed him, but he fought back – and Soo Zann was so struck by his courage that she fell for him. She helped the Hunter fend off her allies, but when the battle was over and she rested, exhausted, by his side, he looked at her – and she realized she would never be more than a beast to him.”

She recounted the story with surprising ease, recalling words and gestures as if she had heard it a thousand times. “So, she sought the Virago from beyond the jungle.”

The word itself made the other two attendants stop what they were doing and whisper a prayer under her breath.

“The Virago was ancient and powerful, more powerful than even our protector, and she knew how to harness the magic of blood and bones; she agreed to cast a spell to make her human. But the Virago hated men; when she learned that the serpent wished to become human due to her love for the hunter, she ended the spell – leaving the transformation unfinished. In a rage, Soo Zann stormed out and rampaged through the land, only to come across the very Hunter she’s saved – he saw in her the serpent who had saved his life, and in turn, saved hers by providing much-needed solace... and true affection.”

She paused, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye. “Now she slithers among us; some see her as the black serpent that dwells in the dangerous waters and swallows boats whole, but the enlightened see her true, hybrid form – half boa, half woman. She is the only being in Gunung who is both Beast, Hunter and Human.”

“I see,” said Lily, every inch of her from the shoulders up now soaking under the juices of boiled jungle leaves. “And she protects you?”

“Yes!” Arina exclaimed. “She devours the beasts who would threaten us, and her pact with the Hunters keeps them from demanding tribute… though they don’t like venturing this deep into her jungle even with the promise of safe passage. All she asks in return is our loyalty, and the lives of those whose time is running out due to age or illness.”

She smiled. “We knew Soo Zann would grace us with her blessings again. As we faced our darkest hour, she sent us you! Someone as well-endowed as your friend can only be one of her chosen!”

Karen’s right eye opened. “Wait, what? What did I miss?”

“I see, I see,” Lily said. Everything was starting to make sense – but there was still nary a mention of the very reason they were here. Still, maybe she had something to do with this ‘darkest hour’ business. “Well, we’re here now, so uh… what seems to be the problem?”

Arina’s face sank, the other two girls looked down in shame. “The Terror,” she said. “It comes at night, steals people from their own beds.”

Gabi tilted her head. “You guys seem able enough, why don’t you just put up more sentries? You don’t need the lamia for that.”

“We have, o blessed one, we have. It developed a taste for them, instead. We’ve lost six sentinels in the last month alone.”

Nobody saw Gabi’s eyebrows raise, or her tongue roll over her plump lips in anticipation. Mischievous thoughts had been put into actions, and a brain wired to hunt “Well, you said it yourself – we’re the blessed ones. I’m sure this Terror won’t come over while we’re about.

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Unable to tell day from night, she instead waited until everyone was asleep. She glanced at her friends; Karen huddled up in the fetal position, holding her idol to her chest for comfort, while Lily laid on her back, hands crossed over her stomach.

With their newly-acquired human forms, the lack of meat being served during the feast was not a problem… well, not for them, at least. But Gabi hungered still; it was a hunger no amount of tropical fruit, no matter how delicious, could ever hope to satiate.

She clutched her lion figurine, just in case. She had no idea what to expect – it tends to happen when encounters leave no survivors.

So that’s what others felt when she was around. Huh. An interesting thought that she decided to banish from her mind and never follow up on again, lest it brought her too close to true self-awareness or some of that yucky morality thing Karen kept shouting about.

She prowled the area. The streets, if one could call them that, were empty save for the swarming fireflies – only the bravest of guards dared leave their homes at night. She found her way out of the village, hopped onto the low branch of a nearby tree, and waited.

Gabi looked down at the little lioness in her hand. How would she go about activating it when the time was right? The witch had given her no advice on how to do that. It had no buttons, no switches, no magic words carved on its surface to be read. It was, for all intents and purposes, just a cheap trinket.

As she looked at it, she felt a sharp prick on her stomach – a few inches above her bellybutton. It wasn’t the hunger pangs, though she could feel those as well; no, it was like a needle piercing her skin. Running a hand over her middle, she found nothing, be it wound or stinging insect; then she remembered the witch’s incantation.

“Well, okay, then…” she shrugged, pressing the idol to her gut. A shiver immediately ran down her spine, every hair on her body standing on end. Her hair parted to allow for two circular ears to emerge, covered in soft, tan-colored fuzz. From the small of her back, a long furry tail popped out, swaying from side to side before growing a tassel at the very end.

As far as the world around her was concerned she was, once again, a wild lioness.

Voices nearby attracted her attention. Her ears turned in their direction; she recognized them as the timid whispers of two guards patrolling the area. Gabi knew that, armed with nothing but primitive spears and their wits, they would be easy prey for any semi-competent beast out there.

And sure enough, when the wind blew just right, she smelled it. Fur – coarse but well-groomed. Feline. She was no longer the only big cat in the playground.

*This is going to be good…*

This Terror was good, she gave them that much. Their scent marked them as close, and yet, despite her keen hearing and good night vision, she couldn’t see or hear anything other than the guards and their panicked whispers. Had she been a less experienced hunter, she would have thought her nose was betraying her – but Gabi knew to trust her senses.

It stalked them for several minutes, biding its time, unseen in the thicket. Gabi caught glimpses of the beast – a furry tail disappearing behind a tree, a pair of eyes glimmering amidst the shadows, a claw mark on a branch. It was getting restless. It saw an opening.

Finally, she saw him, emerging from the tangled leaves and lianas like a beast out of hell; a male black panther. He was lean but powerfully built, with a mane of unkempt olive hair and tanned skin covered in scars. His clawed fingers dug into the tree trunk he climbed down from with gravity-defying ease – it was in watching him do so that Gabi realized he had a limp on his left leg.

Shot by a hunter, perhaps, or constricted by the lamia? It didn’t matter; what mattered was she now knew where his weaknesses laid – and how to exploit them.

She saw him wind up for a pounce, flat feline tongue licking at his chops. She gave it a second, two. Down at ground level, the two guards had no idea they were even being watched. Poor hapless fools not long for this world.

The panther’s body coiled tightly, like a spring – and the moment it was about to release, she leaped into action.

The two large cats found themselves face to face, sizing each other up. As far as the terrified guards could tell, these were just two massive felines ready to fight; the words they exchanged were little more than growls and roars, baring teeth and flicking tails.

They could never have guessed an entire conversation was taking place before their very eyes.

“Move,” the Terror hissed, claws out, smile large and deformed. “These ones are mine, you can get your own. There’s a village full of them – we can even share.”

Gabi shrugged dispassionately. “Sorry, buddy. As much as I appreciate the offer, we have a mission to accomplish here… and you’re getting in the way.”

“Come on, we’re both predators, both cats. I bet you want to get rid of the snake, too. I could help you with tha-”

“Opening!”

Gabi’s sudden shout caught the panther off-guard; his sensitive ears twitched in pain as he stumbled back and instinctively shifted with weight onto his bum leg. She was quick to take advantage of this; claws bared, she rushed him down, ducking under the desperate horizontal swing that buzzed mere inches above her ears. She grinned and brought down her forehead into his nose – the panther’s pained growls echoed through the jungle.

What a joke! All that bravado, and he couldn’t even put up a proper fight. Clearly, he was unused to hunting prey that fought back. So much for the feared Terror!

She locked an arm around his head, another around his shoulders. He tried to shake her off and buried his claws into her skin, but the sharp pain only caused even more adrenaline to pump into her bloodstream. Her grip tightened, she grinned down at the struggling panther.

“You’re used to living in the dark – you’ll *love* where you’re going.”

What a sight it must have been to the two guards. A powerful lioness pinning down a panther like that. The way her jaws opened wide enough to comfortably take in his head. This lioness would not go for the kill; there would be no bloodbaths here. Only a series of humiliating swallows, one after the other, as her lean feline form stretched and expanded, worn by the panther like a bulky, ill-fitting glove. Hisses and growls went silent when they had to go through several inches of meat and fur to be heard.

The once proud panther grew desperate. No amount of struggling offered even the illusion of a chance. The elastic walls that surrounded him squeezed him tight, making it impossible to move. He protracted his sharp claws but found himself unable to even turn his wrists enough to bury them in the slippery flesh that housed him. The only purchase they found was on his own hide.

The process was watched with a mix of terror and awe. The guards had expected to kill two birds with one stone – let the creatures fight, and finish off the wounded winner. They had not counted on the lioness dominating the fight so thoroughly.

Now, even with their spears in hand, even with the massive feline slumped to the side with her stomach jutting out, they weren’t sure they wanted to bother it.

The youngest of the two took a deep breath, fingers clenching the shaft of his weapon until his knuckles were bone white. He pointed the sharp end at the lioness and took one step forward, under his breath uttering a prayer to the guardian serpent herself.

To his surprise, his prayer seemed to work. As soon as he spoke her name, the lioness before him began to change. Her fur retracted into her skin, her snout flattened, her features slowly shifted from feline to humanoid. Muscles faded underneath a thin layer of pudge and her blocky shape had its mass rearranged; arms and legs became thinner and lankier, breasts and backside expanded to an almost absurd degree. Only the sagging, squirming gut remained unchanged – even now, the horrid screams of the black panther resonated across the deep jungle.

It was no vile beast that stood before them – it was one of the chosen ones! Spears were dropped and knees hit the muddy floor; trained warriors became supplicants.

These men really knew how to make a girl feel special! Gabi found herself blushing at the thoroughness of the praise she was getting – then again, maybe that was just because she was naked at the moment.

She looked down at the two; slowly, her expression became grim. “You’re welcome. Too bad I didn’t get here in time to save you from the panther.”

The two sentries blinked in confusion; such serious, mirthless words seemed out of place during a time of celebration. The younger of the two had his bravery rewarded by a powerful kick to the head that sent him flying into the nearest tree. His consciousness faded; he didn’t even get to hear the screams of his friend.

No witnesses. How much of it was a justification for her own urges? How unreasonably far was she stretching the definition of a witness? In Gunung, her actions were lauded; they were seen as a divine gift. In the right company, she would not be pursued for devouring humans, much on the contrary.

Why, then, adhere to a strict no witnesses policy? Force of habit, perhaps? Or was it something else altogether, something darker? If you look far enough, you can always find a witness – she knew this all too well. And perhaps – just perhaps – the idea of devouring someone lost just a little bit of its appeal if there wasn’t anyone around to be horrified by it.

Either way, the fate of the two guardsmen had been decided. She had saved them from the panther, after all. They owed her their lives, they had said so themselves.

She was just collecting the debt.

The younger guardsman slowly awoke. A wet warmth around his bare legs and waste was bothering him. When his eyes once again got used to the dim orange light of the fireflies, he saw exactly what was going on – and his scream of surprise and terror echoed through the forest.

She saw the girl from beyond the jungle, the one with the shape of a goddess, pulling his legs into her gaping mouth. Her stomach had more than doubled in size since he’d last seen her. Not one body, but two wriggled within; soon, he figured, he would join hunter and hunted both.

“Don’t do it, blessed one! You’re making a mistake – I’m still far from reaching the age of sacrifice! If you’re hungry, there’s those in town who would be eager to feed you!”

The only answer he got was another small gulp. He shivered in terror and guilty pleasure as her sloppy tongue reached further up his back, and her lips took in his hips.

“I have always been faithful! I served the great serpent dutifully, I- I never disappointed her! Please, forgive my transgression! I didn’t know, I couldn’t – I couldn’t know!”

The eyes that started past him were emotionless. His words did not reach her; her decision had been made.

Hands grasped his skinny form and pulled. With a wet squelch, he felt himself sink into the bottomless pit that was her gullet. That uncomfortable hotness moved up his body, stopping only for a few seconds – the time it took for her to, with a true predator’s strength, take hold of his wrists and shoving them in with the rest.

“Please, o blessed one! Soo Zann will be displeased! I am faithful, always have been! She’ll… she’ll know of this!”

*Gulp*.

The incessant wails became muffled; sound became vibrations spreading through her body from the inside out. The painful mewling of a human being brought to his lowest was replaced by a pleasant feeling of fullness. Her stomach stretched; she wrapped her tongue around the wiggling fingers that jutted out of her mouth, and pulled them in. Her lips closed – the guard would never see light again.

In fact, he wouldn’t do much at all, other than melt.

“No, she won’t,” Gabi said, matter-of-factly, as she struggled to stand back up. Her meal’s fallen spear was repurposed as a walking stick; the figurine, she clutched tightly in her hand. The first few steps were taken easily enough; as soon as she heard muted steps in the distance, however, she slumped over the spear to feign weakness – but not before bringing the sharp tip to her mouth and using it to scrape a few irksome panther hairs from her tongue. *Ugh*. She hated furry meals!

“Hey, so I… wait, no.” She cleared her throat, lowering her voice and putting on a grimmer tone. “Hey. You won’t believe what happened… right, much better.”

Gabi limped her way back to the village, only to find all the locals awake and armed, ready for the worst. Spears and clubs and hatchets held tightly in twitchy hands welcomed her – as did her friends. Karen, unsurprisingly, retched at the sight, covering her mouth with her hands to avoid any nasty surprises coming out, while Lily crossed her arms and tapped her foot. Both wore the witch’s outfits again; at least now they seemed clean, even if of the red stains had washed off.

Elias lowered his bow. “Weapons down! It’s the blessed one.”

“Hey. You won’t believe what happened!” Gabi started, before anyone had the opportunity to ask. She slouched, making a show out of groaning in pain at the thrashing inside her and breathing very heavily. “The Terror, it was horrible! It was this massive beast, as large as two men, pitch-black and with massive sharp teeth! When I got there, it was… oh, it was terrifying. The guards fought bravely until the end, but they were no match, it ate them both. They did wound it… and I managed to finish the job.” A punch from inside had her once again wincing exaggeratedly and moaning in discomfort. “It’s still fighting… I can only pray to Soo Zann that I can keep it in.” As proof, she handed Elias the salvaged spear – and without it for support, stumbled towards the nearest tree.

The village leader looked down at the tip of the spear. The thick, straight hairs of some large mammal did indeed cover the crudely sharpened stone; this, and the blessed one’s dramatic account, were all he needed.

“You have our gratitude forever, chosen of Soo Zann. They were both good men, and we’ll miss them. I suppose I should go inform their families, and arrange the funeral tonight.” He scratched at the corner of his eye. “We will celebrate their lives, however short, and of course, the slaying of the Terror. We would be most honored if you joined us.”

Gabi nodded solemnly at Elias and excused herself.

Unable to fit on the hammock, upon reaching the longhouse she just slumped on the floor like a sack of potatoes. A tired but contented sigh emerged from her lips, and she looked down at her bulging gut with pride. Maybe being some kind of chosen one wasn’t that bad a deal, after all! She allowed the gentle rumblings of her stomach and the slowly weakening struggles to lull her into a sense of deep relaxation akin to a meditative state, broken only by the conversation going on outside.

“Karen?”

“Yeah?” Her voice was weak and queasy, still whispered through her hands.

“Do you mind…”

“Oh, no, not at all. I’ll keep myself busy; I want nothing to do with any of this. You go handle your own.”

“Thanks.”

Gabi rolled her eyes. Killjoy in three… two…

“Gabi?”

Bam.

She looked up at her friend who stood at the doorway, leaning against the wooden frame. Her unamused expression said it all; when Lily spoke, her words came out flat and emotionless, but still somehow disapproving. “Convenient story, Gabi. Very enthralling, too.”

“Thanks.”

“Was it *really* the Terror that ate those two guys, Gabi?”

Gabi smiled up at her friend, hand gently patting her nicely filled belly. “C’mon, now. Why would I lie?”

Lily sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. Without saying another word, she stormed off, leaving Gabi to digest her hefty – and very rowdy! - snack undisturbed.

Karen and Lily didn’t come back to the longhouse that night. Gabi didn’t know where they were, nor did she particularly care. If anything, she appreciated the opportunity to have a nice rest after a tiring hunt and a big meal. As the hours passed, she just sat there in a lethargic bliss, enjoying the fruits of her labor. She offered no teasing, no explanation, not even the slightest acknowledgment to the contents of her churning stomach – from the moment she’d decided to devour them, they had ceased to be anything more than just food. Only crazy people talked to their food.

It was all so comforting. The warmth around her middle, where her prey slowly – but steadily – lost their shape. The way the desperate thumping inside slowly gave way to sloshing and roiling. And, especially, the way her massive stomach steadily deflated, as the nutritious broth that had once been two humans and a beast was absorbed by her body and pumped into her blood. Soon, it would be reconstituted as a nice, supple pudge layering over her form and enhancing her womanly features even further.

It made Gabi feel *right*.

When the morning came, someone came to wake her up, and to her surprise, it was not Lily or even Karen. Arina herself stepped into the room, shyly nudged her awake; when Gabi’s eyes opened and saw someone who wasn’t either of her friends, her first instinct was to strike; luckily for the poor girl tasked with the job, Gabi had the presence of mind to restrain herself.

“I’m sorry, o Blessed One – but your friends are outside, waiting for you.”

“Wha? But the funeral celebration…”

“I’m afraid you slept through it. Don’t feel bad about missing it, though – you achieved great things yesterday, and your rest was well deserved.” Arina smiled sadly; her eyes were bloodshot, but her expression maintained a mask of cheer.

Gabi sighed. Damn. She’d missed the feast!

Arina saw her dejected expression. She forced a bigger, faker smile and affected a chipper tone – hiding her own grief to try and be as comforting as possible. “Besides, I am sure that, in their last moments, your presence gave them hope. That’s more than any eulogy could ever do! Now come on, let’s help you get dressed.”

Lily and Karen waited outside, at the edge of the village. Locals surrounded them; some asking for blessings, some pestering them with questions, most silently praying to their ophidian goddess.

Gabi took her first step. A loud ripping noise accompanied her movement, and she felt a breeze up her… well, judging from Arina’s gasp and how red her face got, it was more than just an undone stitch.

All eyes were on her – she was, after all, the most voluptuous of the three, and thus the most blessed. But she had put on a lot of weight in the last few hours. Sure, it was in all the right places, and sure, she was more than happy to have her hourglass figure enhanced even further… but why couldn’t the witch have given her less constricting clothes?

She held her breath and took another step, this time trying to not bend her arms or knees. On the upside, her clothes didn’t rip further. Unfortunately, she vaguely resembled a walking plastic soldier – a fact that wasn’t lost on her two friends who, unburdened by any kind of religious devotion, giggled under their breath.

Gabi puffed up her cheeks, embarrassed. The weird walk wasn’t helping her case any. Hey, her clothes were made of leather and hides. They could stand a couple of steps, right?

She closed her eyes and prepared herself. Behind her, Arina waited, confused as to why the door was being blocked. Finally, Gabi took a deep breath, and-

*Bad idea.*

Her lungs filled and her ribcage expanded. Her ribcage expanded, and her breaths pushed against the fabric that already struggled to contain her. Her top stretched as far as it could go, and then some. The first stitch popped. Then another. And another. The pops became rips just in time for one final shipment of body fat to be delivered to her bum.

Gabi’s outfit didn’t as much as rip apart as much as it *exploded* off her. Her patchwork top split in two, finally allowing her humongous lady pillows some well-deserved freedom. Her hide skirt finally snapped off and fluttered down into the mud. To add insult to injury, these must have been load-bearing clothes or something, because the moment they snapped, the entire ensemble crumbled like a sandcastle.

She found herself completely stark naked in front of a bunch of strangers. A firefly landed on her right boob. She looked down at it, it looked up at her. It groomed its bulging compound eyes, buzzed – which reminded Gabi of a cackle - and flew away. Even the damn lighting system was making fun of her now!

Everyone stared in silence. Lily and Karen were red as tomatoes, both from second-hand embarrassment and the strain of trying to keep their giggling under control. It was the locals that worried her. They stared, wide-eyed, their expressions unreadable. Instinctively, she covered her shame with body hands – unsurprisingly, it didn’t make her feel any less exposed.

“Uh… hi?”

The entire village fell to its knees, hands raised towards the heavens, praising the great Soo Zann and her very voluptuous servant.

Her cheeks burning, Gabi squinted at her two friends. Karen’s head was buried in her friend’s cleavage, her hysterical cackling muffled by her breasts. Lily patted her in the head and halfheartedly told her to calm down, while at the same time incapable of holding back her own laughter and wiping away tears from the corner of her eye. At least *they* were having fun!

“Uh… guys!?” Gabi shouted out in a hilariously squeaky voice. “The Blessed One really, really needs clothes right now!”

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The fire burned strong. Over it, the hammered copper kettle, charred from use, swayed under the pressure of the boiling water inside. Its whistling was quiet for now – in only a few seconds it would become deafening. Around it, four figures huddled; two men, two women. It was not for warmth; even in the early hours, the river banks were as hot and steamy as the rest of Gunung. It was out of instinct – fire keeps the beasts away… most of the time.

A middle-aged woman, clad in garishly dyed cloth, stirred the herbs inside her terracotta cup with the tip of her spidery finger. Her movements were slow and tired; she broke the silence with slurred words. “I still dun’ think this was a good idea…”

A bald, older man’s nostrils flared; without missing a beat, as if he had been expecting this for a long time, he grumbled. “Rest yer concerns, Maria. If I say it’s safe, it’s safe. Ain’t no beasts in a mile from here.” Seeing his wife’s mouth begin to open, he turned towards the river – at the three figures who stood on the river banks, more interested in skipping stones on the placid waters than keeping an eye on their fishing rods – and shouted. “Oi! Any bites yet?”

“Nothin’ yet, pa!”

“Don’t seem right. Fished here a couple times m’self, they’s always bitin’,” said the second man as he removed his wide-brimmed straw hat and fanned himself with it. He looked down at his wife, who, without even acknowledging his words, busied herself by stoking the fire with a long, thick branch. “Innit so, Alva?” No response. “Alva?”

The woman poked at the fire again, this time with a stiff and jerky movement. Almost defiantly, she hummed a song as she did so – the song she had taught her daughter so many years ago, before her disappearance.

All the smiles around the fire faded.

Her husband sighed, scratching at the thick scruff on his upper lip. Even the warm glow of life itself had drained from his face. “Alva… jus’… jus’ lemme think of somethin’ other than that, just for a couple hours.”

No response again. The song, too, faded – and the awkward silence was thankfully broken by the kettle’s whistling.

Meanwhile, boredom slowly set among the trio that stood on the river banks. The fishing rods weren’t budging, and they were running out of flat pebbles to throw. With boredom, came thinking - and with it, came the painful memory of loss. The youngest of them had lost a friend; the other two, a dear sister. The wound was still fresh.

Of the three, Jules had the least in years and good sense both. His parents often spoke of having a great eagle somewhere in their family tree; what was meant as a simple joke about the size of the noses in the bloodline, Jules had taken as absolute truth.

It was only appropriate that he would be the first one to spot something in the distance. Something small and fuzzy and black, hopping around the grassland. A rabbit!

Without a word, he left the company of his two friends. The rabbit’s ears twitched; it noticed his presence, standing on its back feet and staring impassively, nose scrunching. He approached; the rabbit did not move.

“Oi, yer son’s wanderin’ off again,” said the villager in the straw hat; indeed, when his friend looked over his shoulder, there he was, carefreely walking into the distance.

“Feck, yer right! C’mon, Maria. Gotta make sure he dun’ get lost in the forest again.”

With a sigh and a groan, his wife rose to her feet.

Jules’s approach did not seem to bother the rabbit; in fact, the little fuzzy critter seemed to enjoy leading him around. It would allow him to get close – close enough for his fingers to graze its long ears, or its fuzzy tail – only to coyly put some distance between the two. This back and forth continued for several minutes, and where once Jules had seen only a curiosity to be examined, he now saw a new friend to play with. Only when he found himself exhausted, resting his hands on his knees and panting, did the little critter stop; it tilted its head at him, rubbed its face with its front paws, and approached.

“Aww, ain’t ya the cute lil’ guy,” he mumbled between wheezes. The rabbit’s ears folded parallel to its body; he took it as an invitation to pet it.

A shaky hand moved down towards the rabbit.

Big eyes looked up at him. A nose wiggled adorably. An ear twitched.

His fingers finally came in contact with the soft fuzz.

“Jules!”

He looked in the direction the voice of his father had come from; his parents had come to join him. He smiled brightly at them, his fingers brushing the rabbit’s fur.

The hasty steps of his parents finally slowed, and a sigh of relief was breathed.

It turned into a scream halfway.

The rabbit’s mouth suddenly opened. For a fraction of a second, it was a distorted, reality-defying mess of fur, gum, and teeth – then it closed up again. Just like that, half of Jules had disappeared inside the rabbit’s maw.

They couldn’t believe their eyes. Their brains struggled to associate such a small creature with such flexibility and control. For a moment, they hesitated, too dumbstruck to act – but Jules’s kicking and screaming were enough to snap them out of it. They rushed to his aid; each grabbed onto one of his legs, and they both pulled with all their strength.

It achieved nothing. Defying all logic, the small rabbit was as heavy and inert as a boulder, its grip on the body of its morsel unbreakable. In fact, they could see a glint of malice in its eyes, just before it pursed its lips and slurped.

They could never have prepared for such powerful suction. Their son’s legs disappeared inside the rabbit, whose form now expanded and distorted like a slowly filling sack, seemingly without limit. Maria’s grip failed her, hands slipping off Jules’s saliva-covered legs. She fell on her back, forced to watch as her husband, refusing to let go, was pure and simply sucked in – slurped as easily as a noodle, and just as noisily, too.

An entire grown man, gone in under a second. The sheer shock of it all was too much; Maria couldn’t even gather enough resolve to move anymore, let alone try to escape. Tears ran down from her cheeks, mucus from her nose; her eyes, bewildered and bloodshot, could not even bear to look at the blob of black fur before her and instead stared blankly at the sky above.

Meg rolled around her second prey’s lower body in her mouth, squeezing every little hint of flavor from his slathered form. But, while already partly full, her stomach still demanded more, and so, not without some disappointment, she obeyed and swallowed down. More weight shifted into her massive, and pleasurably squirmy, tummy – and she was happy to note that she no longer had nearly as much difficulty moving with several people inside her.

She looked down at the crying villager before her. “That first one was so yummy! I thought the older ones would have more meat in their bones, but turns out the soft ones are where it’s at.” She waddled closer, rubbing her hands on the surface of her gut. “You know, at first I thought I’d feel at least a little bad about all of this… but all I’m feeling is peckish! This is just a game after all. Don’t feel bad for them, they’re just a bunch of lines of code… or words, or drawings, or something! Besides, you’re next!”

Meg’s words were nothing but a devilish chittering in Maria’s ears – not that she minded. Meg liked talking; she didn’t care if anyone was actually listening. Her maw opened again – wide, cavernous, seemingly limitless. Maria found herself looking down into the dark depths of a rabbit’s gullet; it was enough to send a shiver down her spine and a burst of adrenaline into her bloodstream. Finding some control over her body, she crawled back, stumbled to her feet – and ran. She ran faster than ever before, unable to even see where she was going due to the tears that covered her eyes; tripping on every stone, limping on every depression on the gravel, but still miraculously managing to outrun the lagomorphic abomination.

“Hey! Get back here right this moment, you!” panted Meg, struggling to keep up. As fast as their movements were, it was still difficult to maneuver with a stomach that full – even burying her hands into the supple flesh and heaving it up achieved little other than making her look absolutely ridiculous. Like those ladies on television who had to lift the hem of their long skirts to avoid tripping. Man, she missed television…

Maria saw her friends in the distance, still huddling around the fire. No matter how much she wanted to scream at them, her voice died in her throat. Nothing came out but a low, raspy growl. Everything else got stuck in the knot in the throat.

She raised her hands up, waving in desperation.

Then, from the river, it emerged. Among a shower of murky water, a green form leaped high, oily skin glistening in the sunlight. Its toothless mouth opened wide, ropelike tongue hanging from the corner of her lips and flapping about. Before the first drop of water hit the sand, one of the two who stood by the river was already gone; scooped up into the slippery depths of Froggy’s throat.

“Eek!”

The frog girl ignored the ear-splitting scream of the noisy morsel next to her. Her attention was focused on meatier quarry; the two by the fire. Jules’s friend got to see that mouth open again and batter him with a wave of her hot breath, accompanied by the muted screams of his dear sister as they echoed up the frog’s gullet.

*Fwoosh*. The slobbering pink tongue fired out of the massive maw, scattering droplets of sticky saliva as it whipped through the air. It slammed right into to the husband’s chest, causing him to lose balance and fall on his back – the wife attempted to pull the pulsating appendage off of his chest, only to find her hands glued to its surface.

Two birds with one stone? Froggy could get behind that. Her tongue retracted, dragging the two struggling bodies through the gravel and into the sand; the more they kicked and struggled, the more they covered themselves in the molasses-like saliva of the frog girl, and the more difficult they found it to move. The journey to Froggy’s mouth was slow and torturous; they knew full well they had no chance of escape, and their pleas, insults, and screams didn’t even register to the gargantuan amphibian whose salivating maw they saw open before them – eagerly awaiting.

When they did get dragged onto its warm embrace, when it did close around them like an inescapable cage – it was almost a relief. The grim certainty of death was at least somewhat comforting.

She swallowed nice and slow; her eyes already turning to face the two remaining humans, full of hunger and greed. In their desperation, they had found some solace in each other’s arms; aunt and nephew, crying together, knowing that even if they could escape the beasts, life without their loved ones was not worth living.

The poignancy of the situation almost – *almost* – got a little bit of sympathy out of Meg, who had finally caught up to her dessert. Whatever faint hope the villagers held that the two beasts would fight each other and leave them was quickly crushed. The frog approached from the river, slow and methodical, smacking its lips together in satisfaction. The rabbit cut off escape through the sand, moving steadily closer with an ease that defied explanation – almost like these weren’t animals at all, but massive and voracious creatures who merely gave the illusion of being small and innocent…

“Hey, Froggy?”

The frog girl tilted her head, glancing at her bloated and jolly friend. “Hm?”

Meg was all smiles, as always – but there was something about having a full belly and the taste of human still fresh in her palate that made the rabbit girl positively radiant. “Oh, nothing! It’s just that you said earlier three whole people was too much for you.”

Froggy blinked slowly – both eyes at the same time, for once. After a moment’s thinking, she shrugged. “Froggy get hungry when nervous,” she explained. The corner of her lip curled into the beginnings of a mischievous smile. “Also, Meg bad influence on Froggy. So bad, Froggy think can fit one more!”

The two victims watched, terrified and flabbergasted, as the beasts loomed over them… and high fived each other.

Froggy went first. Her tongue lolled out of her mouth, slumped over her meal’s shoulders. Slowly, like a creeping snake, it slid between the two weeping figures, pushing them apart; meeting no resistance but the inertia holding them together and the stickiness of the appendage itself, it easily pried the orphaned young man from the arms of his aunt. Her tongue slid over his body, leaving behind a trail of gooey saliva as it wrapped around his neck, and slowly – but intently – pulled.

His entire weight was lifted off the ground; as limp and stiff as a ragdoll. His motionless form slid over her slippery stomach, weighing down – through a small layer of flesh, of course - on the struggles of the rest of his family. It bent and shaped itself to match the curvature of Froggy’s gut; only when her lips parted and he found himself submerged in a puddle of sickly-sweet frog saliva, did his body break out of the shock and begin to wriggle and thrash again.

Of course, by then it was much too late. His desperation warranted no special behavior from his predator; not even a hasty swallow. His chance of escape was nil, he and the frog both knew that.

Froggy hummed happily as her toothless maw bit gently into the soft flesh of her meal. She threw her head back – grinning in amusement at the kicking feet that jutted out from between her lips – and released her tongue’s grip around his neck.

He simply sank in. There was no purchase to be found in her slippery insides – not in her mouth, not in the shifting and rippling walls of her gullet, none even in her bloated stomach, where familiar shapes awaited him in the dark.

Maria was forced to watch all of this. She couldn’t bear to look at it – or look away, for that matter.

The rabbit had rested its head over her shoulder, admiring the show just as she was. Somehow, it knew. It clicked and chittered sometimes – a play-by-play of the death of an innocent, delivered with an amusement and malicious glee that not even complete unintelligibility could conceal.

Only when the final glimpse of a foot was gone from view – only when a fourth form joined the squirming, kicking, and weeping in the frog’s massive gut – did the rabbit deign to finish the job.

Darkness came upon her – warm, sticky, comforting. Sharp incisor teeth pressed down on her chest and back. They could have snapped her in two right there, she knew they could, and yet they held her steady without pain, as if a single drop of blood would ruin the delicate flavor of her skin. The rabbit’s soft underbelly, stretched and rumbling, pushed up against her knees and swept her off her feet – two paws held her legs and flipped her upside down.

Blood rushed to Maria’s head. Her heart beat fast to the point of pain. She saw nothing. Whenever she tried to scream for help, saliva flowed into her mouth, threatening to drown her; whenever she inhaled, her nose filled with the twin smells of fresh grass and unwashed cloth.

The rabbit swallowed, and Maria’s head, shoulders, even her chest slid easily into the outstretched maw of the beast. Meg’s tongue raised up – tilting her prey just enough to allow the natural slickness of her mouth to do the rest.

A cold breeze blew outside. She never felt it. In fact, she felt nothing at all but the deafening pulses of the rabbit’s gullet, pushing her down to die with her own.

Meg let out a small hiccup – and covered her mouth with her hand, a flush of red taking her over her features and a small, embarrassed smile forming on her lips. “Oh, excuse me!” she mumbled, giggling at a sudden yet particularly tickly punch on the inner lining of her stomach. A single look at Froggy – who had slumped into the water, eyes only closed, tongue hanging from her mouth, and letting out long and drawn out groans with each breath – immediately made her feel better about herself, at the very least!

The two girls looked at each other and smiled. They remained silent; the gurgling of their tummies said more than any words ever could. Better yet, when they closed their eyes and focused on the sounds and motions of their own bodies, they could both feel them – the bittersweet sobbing of two families, reunited right before the end. At least they would have a few final hours to spend together… and while Froggy’s meals were a few days too late to meet up with their lost sister and daughter, they at least got to be part of the same body that had melted her down.

It was Froggy who finally broke the silence.

“Feel better already.” Her voice rung in the rabbit girl’s ears with a newfound sense of calm and meaning. “Big thank. Froggy not as afraid of remember, anymore.”