

## *Shopping in Gemell Glen*

Araia **really** didn't want to go shopping. It wasn't that she hated shopping for things (though honestly she really didn't love it, she could never understand the idea of spending so much money on anything other than food or necessary survival gear). It wasn't even that she particularly wanted to stay out here with the dockworkers and Gemell Glen's lackluster excuse for a "port", since there was basically nothing to do out here but sit and stare at the current in the meager river as it flowed past.

She just really, **really** did not want to go back into the crowded city center.

Araia, Azazel and Pierre were all standing just outside the Southern gate of the city, trying to figure out what to do after their failed attempt to find a boat to take them down to the Sageland River. As it turns out, despite being the biggest gem exporter in the region, Gemell Glen had no water connection to the main river, and they would instead have to spend another two days on horseback to get to the Sageland and find passage south to Elistaria. Not that Araia particularly minded traveling by horse rather than by boat (she had never actually been on one before and was firmly Not nervous about the prospect of being trapped on a confined platform that was constantly moving and rocking and slightly damp), but traveling overland would slow them down, and they *really* needed to get moving towards Elistaria soon.

So, now the three of them needed to figure out what to do with the rest of their day in the city, and Azazel *really* wanted to go shopping around the market square.

"Pleeeeeease?" Azazel looked between Araia and Pierre with those big puppy-dog eyes, batting her eyelashes and pouting slightly. Araia knew this face, she had seen her use it many times in the last few months, winning over everyone from bartenders to royals with her charm. She saw the small fluttering of her eyelashes in the breeze, the slight quivering of her pink lips pursed in that frown, the way the sunlight glinted ever so slightly off of the jagged steps of her broken horn as her head tilted almost imperceptibly to the side. She had seen this face used many times, knew it for the persuasive tactic it was. And yet.

"Fine." Araia sighed and looked to Pierre, who nodded and said, "I do not care much for shopping, but I will come along for a bit if it makes you happy."

Azazel squealed in delight and almost bounced into the air, her ponytail bouncing wildly from the sudden motion as she beamed at the two of them. “Okay okay, we’ll be really quick I promise!” she said earnestly, already turning away towards the city gates to head back inside. Araia knew that wasn’t going to be true (there was no way whatever this was would be “quick”), and yet something in it didn’t quite bother her as much as it should have.

Maybe it was the way Azazel had been so overjoyed, the curve of her smile stretching almost across her entire face, putting little lines in each cheek that wound across the sides of her face like the handwoven tapestries she saw every day in the church halls growing up.

Or maybe it was just the good night sleep she just had at the hotel and the nice weather today. It didn’t matter, so she put the thought aside and began following Azazel back into the city.

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Araia had technically been in situations with this many people around her before. Technically. But those had all been battlefield situations, with combatants and friendlies in the constant chaos of moving bodies around her, the stress and life-threatening adrenaline sharpening her combat instincts and keeping her alert at all times. Now the clashing of wood and steel and the cries of battle had been replaced by the jingling of coins and the calls of merchants with their wares, and she was desperately trying to keep her battlefield instincts in check as the three of them moved through the crowded market square.

She was following Azazel as she darted nimbly through the throng of people wandering the square, her practiced skill in navigating the crowded Elistaran city-states all those years meaning Araia could sometimes barely keep up as she beelined towards yet another expensive jewelry stand. Araia dodged around passersby and resisted the urge to just push her way through the square as she tried to catch up, her heart pounding fast. She knew on some level that everything was fine, this was just a crowd of

normal civilians with no ill-intent and this was **not** a warzone, and yet the adrenaline still bubbled through her veins all the same as her eyes darted from person to person, instinctively looking for the distinct shapes of weapons or incoming spells. Perhaps it was because of this focus then that as she finally caught up to Azazel, a stray boot from someone walking past clipped her leg and she stumbled, her arms going out to balance her weight and try desperately to stop herself from falling in the middle of the square and making a fool of herself in front of all of these people-

And then she suddenly felt a hand grab hers and yank her back upright, and as she looked up she saw Azazel smiling down at her, their hands clasped together.

“Careful! You almost took quite the tumble there.” It was only for a brief moment, as her words drifted through Araia’s mind, as she gazed up at Azazel, framed by the midday sun shining behind her head and the silhouettes of the crowd streaming around them. She saw Azazel’s face, the delicate curls of her hair swirling down the sides of her cheeks, the lines of her jaw blending smoothly into the swooping curves of her neck, and the little snippets of collarbone just peeking out from under her cloak. She saw a tapestry, hung against the stone brick wall of the church of Selune in her home town, depicting the salvation of her Goddess’ return to the mortal plane, the light haloed around her face and the dark figures around her pushed away, how it displayed the drive and power that she had been raised her whole life to embody and protect.

Araia quickly blinked away the images and staggered upright, shaking her head slightly to jostle the fading visions from her eyes. “Sorry, I just. Don’t like big crowds,” she muttered as her other hand readjusted her cloak. “Oh! Then let’s keep moving to get to the shop!” Azazel replied as she turned to continue walking towards the jewelry vendor at the edge of the plaza.

Araia didn’t move. She had finished getting back up and was back on her feet again, but- Azazel hadn’t let go of her hand. She felt the softness of Azazel’s palm against the back of her hand, the ridges of her thumbprint as it grazed along the edge of Araia’s hand and the sensitive skin near the base of her fingers. She could easily break out of the grip, it wasn’t like she was grabbing very tightly and she had broken out of restraints much tougher than this when she needed to in the past. She didn’t need the hand, sure she had been tripped up once but now that it had happened she wasn’t

going to let it happen again, and either way she definitely didn't need to be dragged through the crowd like a child in danger of falling, she could totally make it through the square on her own.

Araia held onto Azazel's outstretched hand and let her guide her through the crowd towards the store.

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## *Post-Legal Thoughts*

It wasn't that the stone floor was necessarily comfortable to sleep on, she'd just had a lot of experience sleeping on uncomfortable ground in the last 4 years.

Araia lay in her bedroll on the cobbled floor of the holding cell, staring up at the ceiling as the tiny flickers of moonlight that streamed in from the barred window danced across the otherwise dark basement room. The air was cold, little bits of snow drifting in from outside as it settled across Everwarp, but she'd grown up in Lutland winters and so it was fine for her. It still would've been nice to have her large fur jacket as an extra layer for warmth, but she had lent to it Azazel to make sure she didn't freeze to death (since apparently they didn't have real winter clothes in Elistaria), and the tiefling was currently curled up in a little ball of fur on the other side of the room, Araia's jacket snugly wrapped around her body.

Azazel. That girl had quite possibly saved all of their lives today. She had been the one to stand up in that insane gladiatorial colosseum of a courthouse and fight on all their behalf, to stand her ground against the thousands of eyes upon her and convince them all of their party's innocence. Araia had no idea how she had done that. She could barely make it through the crowds going to and from the courthouse, let alone stand before them and bear that crushing, unbearable weight of eyes and attention and expectation.

It was... Inspiring. To watch.

She looked across the room at Azazel, snuggled up cozily in the loaned fur jacket like she was trying to fully immerse herself in it, tucked into the other back corner of the cell they had been held in for the last few days, as they all awaited trial. She watched the slight ripples in the fur and fabric as Azazel's chest rose and fell, deep and even breaths in her sleep, and the tiny glints of light shining off of the jagged edges of her broken horn as it rested against her makeshift pillow. She saw the minute movements in her face as the air moved in and out of her nose, the almost imperceptible expansions and contractions of her windpipe, every tiny little detail that showed that she was breathing, that she was alive, that she was *Azazel*.

The same Azazel that had stood up in front of so many eyes that day, so many people from all around Everwarp and possibly even beyond who had come in to watch the proceedings, to see Araia and her party members stand trial.

Word of what they had done had travelled very far indeed.

That was the thing that had really driven Araia out of the courtroom during the halftime recess. Not just all of the unrelenting attention of the crowds, but the constant reminder that word had spread, that people knew she had gotten into trouble, and that she didn't know how far the rumours had spread. That they might have even made it far enough to reach her home.

Before she had even realized it she had been storming out of the large courtroom chamber, charging blindly away from the oppressive clamor of the crowds, just searching desperately for somewhere she wouldn't feel those constant eyes upon her. Her mandatory chaperone guards had indignantly chased after her but she didn't care, she just needed to be out of sight. She eventually found herself in a tiny disused storage closet, seemingly for some kind of janitorial use. She didn't know how exactly she had found her way here, curled up into a ball in the corner, nor how long the tears had been running down her cheeks (though judging by how saturated her collar was, it had been some time). All she could hear was the deafening sound of the same thoughts running through her head, over and over again.

What if they know?

*What if they heard?*

***What if they know?***

She was suddenly aware that the light in the room had changed, and she looked up to see that there was a shadow standing in the doorway to her tiny janitor's closet. A familiar shadow, a silhouette of smooth silks and flowing lines and one slightly jagged broken horn.

She didn't know how Azazel had found her, whether she had asked one of the guards or had just been following her from the start, but somehow she had managed to find Araia, curled up in that corner with her knees to her chest, shaking and sobbing quietly. She had sat down next to her, taken her hand, and reminded her of a spell that she had

used a few days ago to stop a bar fight before it had gotten too violent. Calm Emotions, one of the first spell essences that Pastor Markov had taught her during her training all those years ago, a way to draw upon the energy of a space and momentarily hold it, to flatten it and smooth it out, and temporarily contain the stress and tension and fear of the people in that space. Azazel had reminded her of this, and helped her use it to calm the two of them down in the short time they had before they had to be back in the courtroom at the end of the recess.

Araia remembered that wave of calm washing over her, the heavy and abrasive yet gentle waves lapping against the sharp rocks of her emotions and smoothing them away, like a weighted blanket placed around the quivering mass of fear in her chest. She felt the cold tracks of tears staining her face, and the hard stone floor beneath her body. She felt Azazel's hand in hers, warm and soft and slightly intertwined with her own, like a pulsating beacon to anchor her back to reality.

She remembered that feeling very vividly, even more so than the crushing fear that had been there just moments prior. The memory of Azazel's hand meshed with hers stuck to the front of her mind like taffy, warm and gooey and tacky like sweet summer candy melting in her mouth.

It wasn't so bad, honestly.

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The rest of the hearing had been pretty much a blur. The eyes and the pressure of the crowd were still oppressive, but the spell had helped a lot in calming her down. Plus, having something to focus her attention on took a lot of the edge off of her anxieties, and so it was nice to just let her eyes rest idly on Azazel as she moved throughout the courtroom during the rest of the trial and just let the rest of the world fade away.

But eventually it was done, and they could all finally file out of the massive legal arena and leave the watching eyes of the spectators behind. And of course, their assigned "guards" (though they weren't doing a particularly good job of escorting them)

insisted that they all go out to the bar to celebrate, and of course for some fucking reason everyone else in the party agreed, so now she had to go with them. At least Quince did one nice thing by paying for an upstairs room where she could hide from the downstairs festivities.

She had been up there for some time, just lying on the floor and trying to make herself calm down after the harrowing events of the day. There wasn't even much happening anymore, everyone else was downstairs partying and enjoying themselves, the trial had gone well, and nobody had come up here to bother her all evening. She should be enjoying the desperately needed alone time, and yet some unplaceable uneasiness still nagged at her. Eventually she decided to use the spell again, centering Calm Emotions on herself and feeling that wave of magical calm wash over her again, the beautifully soothing sensation of the surf crashing against her chest. But as she felt that magical energy radiate out from her, she was surprised to feel the slight twinge of her magic hitting and affecting another being in the radius, someone standing just outside the door to her room.

"Can I come in?" The soft voice from the other side of the door came with a sudden slight hitch in Araia's breathing and yet somehow also a profound relaxation of every muscle in her body, like some unknown tension had just been released as she recognized who was outside.

"Yes" she responded as she turned her head slightly to see Azazel slowly open the door and enter the room, carrying a plate of fresh fish and potatoes that suddenly made Araia's stomach grumble. "Quince ordered this for you and said I should bring it up to your room."

Oh, right. She had forgotten to eat. Oops.

"You can set it down here, I'll get to it in a minute" she responded, gesturing to the floor next to her as she continued to gaze up at the ceiling. Azazel set the plate down and sat down next to her on the floor, and Araia could vaguely see the tiefling staring at her out of the corner of her eye, her expression betraying some unease. There was a long moment of silence before she could finally work up the courage to speak.

“You did good today, Azazel. I think you may have saved all of us from some nasty fate.” Araia was still looking away at the ceiling, but she could see the other girl blush slightly in her peripheral vision.

“Yes, well, I hope so. It was so incredibly stressful and I just... I just really hope I did the right thing.” The hesitation wasn’t long, but Araia caught it, and she could hear the tension and uncertainty underlying it.

“I suppose it’s impossible to know for sure, but I think you did. You did really good out there.” Araia still couldn’t quite bring herself to look at her for some reason, so she hoped that the warm smile she gave towards the ceiling was enough. There was a pause as she watched Azazel hesitate, unsure if she wanted to say this next part.

“During the halftime recess, after we got back, the prosecutor called me in and offered me a settlement deal to end the trial early.” Araia vaguely remembered that happening (she had still been coming off of her breakdown in the closet ~~and the comforting feeling of Azazel’s hand in hers~~), but she had just assumed it wasn’t important since Azazel clearly hadn’t taken the deal afterwards. She finally managed to get her head to rotate towards Azazel and actually look at her.

“What did he offer?” Araia could see the tension so clearly on Azazel’s face, the worry creased across her brow and the anxious fidgeting of her hands in her lap. The way her breathing was slightly quicker and shallower than normal, the muscles in her chest remaining taught as they moved in and out, straining in exertion even in the moments they remained still, like balancing on the edge of a dull knife. Araia was suddenly overtaken with the urge to kill or maim **anything** that made Azazel feel like this, that even dared to think about trying to hurt her. She was so caught up in burying this thought that she was caught completely off guard by her next statement.

“He offered to drop the charges against all the rest of us, if we agreed to pin everything on Quince and testify against him.”

Oh. Wow. The response caught Araia so off-guard that she actually sat up, her body moving to sit cross-legged on the floor as the thought echoed around her mind.

Quince was... Quince was not someone Araia necessarily liked at the best of times. And considering he was really one of the main instigators that had gotten all of them

into this whole legal mess in the first place, she had been *really* angry at him lately. But to throw him under the bus completely, to leave him out to dry with the prosecution team and likely move on without him? Sure, there were plenty of times when she absolutely fucking hated his guts, especially after this latest catastrophe, but... There was something in her stomach that just didn't sit right with that idea.

"Did you take the offer?" Azazel let out a long sigh, staring at the floor.

"No, I didn't. And frankly, I'm still not sure if I made the right choice."

Before she realized what she was doing, Araia suddenly grabbed Azazel's hand and held it tight. She looked directly at Azazel and said firmly, "You did."

Azazel finally looked up at her, their eyes finally meeting, and Araia could see the fear building up behind those big green eyes, the terror of not knowing if she had made the right call, of the uncertainty and unknown. The words just kept tumbling out of her before she could stop them.

"You made the right choice. You made the right choice because you actually *made* a choice." She could once again feel the softness of Azazel's palm against hers, the small curves and ridges of her skin grazing against every nerve ending in Araia's hand. It felt like there were butterflies rising up in her stomach, their wingtips brushing against the edges of her throat, and she squeezed Azazel's hand tightly, not sure if she was trying to soothe the tiefling's anxieties or her own as she kept rambling.

"Granny asked me after everything if I had done everything that I could, what other choices I could have made. I told her I didn't have any other options, it's not like I could have physically stopped Quince, but she stopped me and said that we **always** have choices, even when we feel like there's nothing we can do. And that the important thing is that whatever you do, you make a choice. You pick what you think is best, and you make that choice."

Araia took both of Azazel's hands into her own, feeling like her entire body was trembling from head to toe with fear or excitement or something else she couldn't understand. She leaned in closer to Azazel's face, seeing her own reflection in the verdant greens of her eyes, the slight quivering of her lower lip as the tiefling girl stared back at her, wide-eyed.

“You made the choice that you thought was right. And thus you made the right choice.”

For a moment, it felt like the world stood still. Time itself held its breath as Araia gazed at Azazel, squeezing her hands like a leaf clinging on in a thunderstorm. She saw every facet of Azazel’s face, every line and every curve twisting perfectly across her visage like a melody on a church organ. She felt a glowing warmth building in her chest, like the fiery feeling she got when she channeled Selune’s more powerful magics and yet somehow different and more raw, like a blaze in her torso fighting and screaming desperately to unleash itself into the only thing left in the world, the girl sitting in front of her.

And then the moment passed. Araia let out a breath and sat back slightly looking off at the wall past Azazel’s head.

“Perhaps we do always have choices, even when we must carve them from the rock of creation ourselves.”

There was a lot that had happened that day, a near unlimited number of things to think and stress about into the night. But as Araia drifted off to sleep on the cold uncomfortable floor of the holding cell, the only thing that she thought of was that moment, when the world stood still.

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## *Allen*

I knew we shouldn't have come back here. / shouldn't have come back here.

I haven't journaled in a long time, and I don't really know what to say. I just know that the other nuns at the church used to talk about this helping them, and I haven't really done this in so many years now. I guess I'll just... write down my thoughts. I don't know if it'll help.

I guess I had been harboring some hope that it would be nice to see my mother and father again. That maybe things could feel normal again. But they're right, it's not right for me to be back here. This isn't the place for me anymore, it feels... Wrong.

I didn't want them to see this place. To see *me* in this place. I knew that some of the people at home had some... *different* beliefs, but I just hoped that- I don't know, that it could all just work out fine? And they wouldn't all have to see where I came from.

I think I'm really scared for Azazel. Have been really scared for her. It's dangerous for her here, and I know she has her whole life of experience being a tiefling, I just- I really want her to be okay and... to not have to know that this place is where I come from ~~who I really am~~

I didn't know about her horn. Now I know, and... I know that I'm part of the problem. I tried so hard to separate myself from all of the bigotry of this place and be better to her, but now that she's seen it... I know she doesn't want to be around me anymore. For me to be around her anymore.

It hurts a lot.

~~I like Azaze~~

~~I like being friends with Aza~~

I don't know why. I don't know.

Araia stared down at the piece of parchment on her desk, the ink slowly sinking into the fibers of the paper as the candle on her desk flickered its dim firelight across the room, the wax inexorably melting and sinking under its own flame.

She crumpled up the piece of paper and shoved it away, off the corner of her desk into the gap where it met the wall and fell away to who-knows-where. She couldn't bear to look at it anymore, the weakness and the fear and the pain of it all.

She knew some of the nuns liked journaling to look at their feelings, that it felt better to finally look at them with courage, head-on.

~~*So then why did these feelings hurt so fucking much to look at?*~~

Araia did not sleep much that night. Her mind wouldn't let her. It made sure she would have to continue turning the events over and over and over again in her head. That she could feel even a taste of the hurt that she had done.

Early the next morning, she picked back up her quill and drew out a small scrap piece of paper from her desk.

Azazel,

I am sorry about last night, and I know you may not want to hear from me right now, but I need to make sure you know this. This town is not safe for you, and I think if you are seen in public there is a good chance there may be serious harm done to you. I cannot control your actions, but I must implore you to **not interact with Pastor Markov at all costs**. Please.

I will be leaving Allen by the end of this day. I understand that you may not wish for me to continue adventuring with you, and I will abide by that. I cannot stay here in Allen anymore, but I will be able to live on my own if I do not continue with all of you.

I wish you all the best of luck in Phostor. You and Pierre especially are some of the brightest souls I have ever encountered. Please do not stop bringing that light into the world and making it a better place in your wake.

Araia

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## *Viercourt*

Ow.

She finally understood why people always got so grumpy when they were hungover.

Her head was pounding like a blacksmith's anvil, and even with her eyes closed she could still feel the room spinning around her like a hurricane. The sounds of birds and the glow of sunbeams drifted unbidden through the curtains of her room at the inn, and her body staunchly refused to let her go back to sleep. She was vaguely aware that she had probably been "awake" for some time, but given the amount of sleep it felt like she got that was probably true of most of the night.

Eventually, some part of Araia's brain prompted her with a memory of a spell, a restoration spell that she had used many times in the past to cure people's hangovers and residual intoxication. Once she could finally muster up the energy to channel it, she felt the familiar cool wave of healing magic wash over her, like a crest of cold prickling pine needles that pushed the headache and nausea out of her body. The room slowed down and gradually returned to its normal alignment, and eventually Araia was able to sit up and take stock of her situation. She was in her room at the inn, late in the day, in just her warm underlayers and with her face encrusted with the stains of tears and vomit. Oh, and there was a bucket on the floor next to her bed that was now half-full of bile and other regurgitated stomach acids.

Even as she still felt more hungry and dehydrated than she had ever been (it felt like her stomach was empty enough to echo like a cathedral), the spell was slowly returning her mind to her control as she tried to reconstruct her memories. She knew she had been drinking, far more than she ever had before, but why? What happened last night that— oh. Right.

The memories sluggishly slotted into place like a disheartened jigsaw puzzle. She remembered dragging herself downstairs to the bar, trying to drown out the feelings that had been boiling inside of her and eating away at her soul. She remembered sitting down next to Quince and Pierre, and speaking in Celestial so that Pierre wouldn't hear what she was saying, because she was— dear Selune, she had told Quince everything, hadn't she? And then proceeded to throw up onto him for his troubles. Fuck.



Eventually, after much time slowly convincing her body to continue doing its normal job despite its protests, she got dressed and went downstairs to get herself some food. As she reached the bottom of the stairs however, she saw Quince sitting at a round table eating his meal, with Deut and Billious chatting nearby. And worse, Quince noticed her, too.

“Ah, Araia, you’re awake. Come, take a seat.” He gestured to the open chair next to him with another platter of food in front of it, and she begrudgingly came over and sat down next to him. She stared boreholes into the diner food in front of her as she spoke flatly.

“I feel like shit.”

“That’s no surprise.”

There was a pause as Araia tried to figure out what to say. She eventually settled on an apology.

“Did I really... I am sorry, Quince.”

“Sorry for what.” It didn’t sound like a question, and it momentarily caught her off guard.

“For... All of the above.” Quince just leaned back in his chair and chuckled slightly.

“Oh, don’t worry. I am familiar with people with poor... *abilities* to cope with the problems that they face. This is nothing, you’re still even allowed to sleep here! But I digress. Eat your food.” He pushed the plate of breakfast at her, and while she would normally rather stab out an eye than give into whatever Quince wants from her, she was still extremely hungry. She wordlessly began shoving the meat and potatoes into her mouth. After a long while of silence, she surprised herself by speaking. Maybe it was that she had already been so candid with Quince last night, but the words just tumbled out of her mouth.

“I have been having an, admittedly, *rough* time since we got to Allen. I believe it is not in the will of Azazel or Pierre to have me here, but... I don’t know.”

“Ahh, but there you are mistaken.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him staring at the side of her head. “I have had extensive conversations with Pierre after— well, don’t worry about that. Once you feel better, we’re going to go talk to Pierre.”

That caught Araia fully by surprise. Her head whipped towards him and she stared at him in confusion and panic. She was very sure that Pierre did *not* want to talk to her right now, and so she did not want to talk to him, and so going to talk to him was one of the last things she wanted to do right now.

“What!? Why?”

“Because we are an adventuring party! You can’t refuse to speak with each other. You have to stay in the Sortie, which will be impossible if you stop talking to anyone in the party. If we are to avoid getting killed by some roadside brigand or bandit troupe, we must be operating as a unified front!” He was staring daggers into her now, and she looked back down at the table in embarrassment. But, his gaze quickly softened as he continued. “So, I talked to Pierre about your... misgivings, and he does not hate you. So, we are going to talk.”

Quince sat back in his chair with finality, still staring at Araia as she hung her head. He had talked to Pierre about her, about *everything*. All these feelings that had been tearing apart her insides ever since her argument with Azazel back in Allen, about what she had said and done to her... But she knew how a conversation would go. She knew how Pierre felt about her now, because she knew how Azazel felt about her now, and because Pierre had practically told her so when he had come up outside her tent a few nights ago as they were travelling.

He had asked her about the note she had written Azazel the morning they left Allen, about whether she had been wrong while writing it or simply lied to curry favor. She knew he didn’t want her here, that Pierre was angry about her promising in her note to leave if Azazel wanted her to and yet being convinced to stay with the party all the way to Viercourt, that Pierre just wanted what was best for Azazel because unlike her, he was actually a good friend. She knew how another conversation with Pierre would go, just another reminder of everything she had done wrong and the parts of her she could never take back. Maybe it was what she deserved.

“If you... If you really think that’s for the best. I have done real wrong, I have said many things I should not have said, to Azazel–”

“Don’t worry about that.” Quince abruptly cutting her off startled her, so much so that she actually looked back up at him.

“What?”

“After we talk with Pierre– well, listen, you have to be able to talk with everyone. Pierre cannot serve as a go-between. So, hopefully everyone will be getting along by the end of today.”

There was a horrible sinking sensation in Araia’s stomach. She slowly forced out the words, “...What do you mean by that?”

“You have some problem with Azazel, yes? We are going to solve it. You two will sit down and have a conversation. Pierre and I will be mediating it. Because it is clear to me that if we do not solve this now, we invite weakness, and we will die from this weakness.”

She felt panic jolt through her body like lightning. She couldn’t talk to Azazel, she had barely been able to *look* at her over the last several days as they all traveled together. Last night as Azazel and the others went out into the city, she had holed herself up in her room so that she wouldn’t have to see her, and the confusing tangled knot of feelings in her stomach that came up whenever she looked at Azazel kept stabbing against her insides like a sea urchin trying to claw its way up her throat. It felt like she was drowning, being dragged under the sea by the weighted boots of her armor, watching Azazel’s face disappear behind the water as she sunk inexorably beneath the waves.

It took every ounce of self-control that she had to not bolt out of the bar at that very moment. Eventually, she said to Quince, very shakily, “...Are you *sure* that this is a good course of action?”

He stood up, beginning to clear off the empty dishes from their table, and looked at her almost annoyed.

“Of course! Our lives are on the line. And I do not want to die. Once Pierre comes down, we will get this all in motion.”

Araia felt herself mindlessly getting up from the table, still shaking. Everything was suddenly moving far too fast around her, like she was stuck in slow-motion as things were whizzing around her. She had only just last night begun to start to come to terms with all of her feelings, and suddenly she was going to have to *talk* about them with the very person who made her feel like the heavens themselves were going to swallow her alive? She felt paralyzed with fear, a massive boulder bearing down on her with nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, no way to escape the emotions that pierced through her body. She realized she had been idly following behind Quince as they walked towards the stairs when Pierre suddenly came down them and stopped before the pair. Araia’s eyes went wide with fear as Quince said, “Ah, and there’s Pierre!”

She and Pierre stared at each other for a long moment. She could feel the blood draining from her face as the elf stared back at her, as blank and unreadable as ever. She knew she had to say something, *anything*, her mind pushing desperately against the inside of her skull and screaming at her to do something. After what seemed like an eternity, words slipped out of her mouth.

“Pierre... I am sorry for my behavior last night.”

“I appreciate the apology. I will not lie, did not feel good, so I appreciate the apology. Also, I do not hate you! In fact, I am glad you are here.” He punctuated this last sentence with a wide smile that hit Araia like a thrown brick. She was momentarily too stunned to speak.

“Well, I– I assumed last night, that you would not want to speak to me after what happened with Azazel.” There was a pause as Pierre looked away, like he was picking his words almost as carefully as she was.

“Well... I think Azazel is real swell. I think she is a great person. And I think she will be much happier if you two resolve what is bothering you. And, I think you are also alright! So, it is in my best interest if everyone, you know, is friends and gets along and everything is good, yeah?”

Araia suddenly couldn't stop herself from asking the question that jumped to the forefront of her mind. "Then what was that outside the tent?"

Pierre's face did not change, but his eyes suddenly became cold and sharp, not quite full of anger, but with some other distant emotion she couldn't place. He spoke even more carefully than before.

"That was... Unrelated. I had a question, I wanted an answer."

"I was truthful, when I said that if Azazel did not want me to come with, I wouldn't."

"Oh no, yes, I believe you. The..." He took a deep breath. "Araia. What I asked you then, maybe I did not ask you well. I asked if you did not know what you were doing, or if you were telling a fib. There was no "true and false" sort of... You were mistaken, and I wanted to know if you were mistaken on purpose."

Araia was taken aback. She had been so sure that she had known what that conversation with Pierre had been about, that he was angry at her on Azazel's behalf, and yet here he was apparently telling her that she actually didn't hold that grudge against her? But then, what had his interrogation outside her tent been about?

"Mistaken about what?"

The silence suddenly went cold, her words hanging in the air like misty breath in freezing winter. Pierre's eyes narrowed at her, and for a long moment she was once again being buffeted by the cold winds of unidentifiable emotions whirling behind those bright green eyes. She almost thought she saw flashes of hurt and pain in there, tucked away so deeply like a tiny island in the middle of a raging sea. But then the moment passed, and all she could see was the unreadable face of Azazel's best friend. Slowly, he said, "I think, probably... It does not matter much."

They continued to stare at each other, as Araia was vaguely aware of Quince standing next to them, his eyes nervously flicking back and forth like he was waiting for a fight to break out.

"Well, putting tents aside... I do not hate you! Not only that, I think both of our lives could be way better if you and Azazel make up."

Araia felt so lost and confused, her mind a complete jumble of words and emotions strewn about in every which way. She felt so aimless, more than she had ever felt before, even after she left home all those years ago and was suddenly out on her own in the wilderness trying to figure out what to do, what she *wanted* to do. Dimly, she realized that it was because now she had finally known what it felt like to want to do something, to have people in her life that she actually *wanted* to be with.

And now, the thought of losing that, of going back to the way things were before—felt more terrifying than anything she had ever felt before.

“You really think so?” she asked Pierre. He beamed at her happily.

“Yes! And do not worry. There are plans on the ground. There are roads being built. We are making so much progress towards this goal you would not believe it.”

She was still trying to gather herself back together, but something in that last sentence snagged on her brain like a tree branch. “... ‘We’?”

Quince suddenly stepped up by Pierre’s side and said triumphantly, “Yes!” As the two of them high-fived, the horrible realization settled over Araia that Pierre and Quince were *working together* on this plan. She knew that she was unsuccessful in keeping that emotion off of her face, but it didn’t seem to bother the other two as they celebrated the start of their plan coming together. Pierre looked her dead in the eyes and said, “Araia, we are getting the band back together.”

Dear Selune, this is going to go *so* badly.

\*   \*   \*

As Pierre led her and Quince up the stairs (the latter following behind seemingly to prevent Araia from escaping this endeavor) her mind raced with all of the potential outcomes and consequences of what could happen in the next several minutes. She was mostly sure that Azazel wouldn’t be outright materially hostile, but— she knew it wasn’t likely to be a friendly encounter.

Near the top of the stairs, Pierre turned to her and said quickly, “I will go get Azazel from her room,” darting away before she could say anything in response. This just left her and Quince suddenly standing there at the top of the stairs, staring into the silence of the empty hallway. After a moment, Quince moved past her to lean on the wall.

“Once Azazel is ready, we will move to my room for the discussions.” Frankly, Araia was perfectly happy for the wait, since it gave her more time to desperately think of what she was going to say once Azazel was in front of her. Her thoughts swirled in desperate clouds, trying to form into coherent words to say to the tiefling but still just vapor in her fingers every time she tried to grab them.

It was in this state that Araia was completely unprepared for the moment when at the same instant that Pierre and Azazel stepped out of their room into the hallway, another door opened further down and someone else came out into the space. They were short (even shorter than Araia, who rarely ever saw above anybody’s eyeline), and dressed in lavish robes with an absurdly tall pointed hat on their head that made up at least 30% of their total height. And even more absurdly, when Pierre and Azazel saw this newcomer, both of their eyes widened in recognition and surprise.

“Anastasia?!?”

“Azazel?? Pierre??” The new person (apparently Anastasia) bounded forward and immediately began fervently and excitedly chatting with Azazel, apparently much to the chagrin of Pierre who had turned away and leaned his forehead against the nearest wall. None of that was what pulled Araia’s attention however, not whatever they were excitedly exclaiming to each other or the distressed silent looks exchanged by Pierre and Quince around her. The thing that kept Araia rooted to the spot, feeling like the world ripped a hurricane around her as she was frozen in place, was that Azazel was smiling.

She was talking animatedly with Anastasia, gesturing with her hands and gasping in disbelief, and a smile, bewildered and bright and warm as an Autumn sun, danced across her face. It was like every muscle in her lips and cheeks had simultaneously decided to dance in unison, drawing upwards into a tapestry of unexpected joy and delight that wove back and forth through the tiefling’s expression. Araia hadn’t seen her smile that way in weeks.

Araia was vaguely aware that she was staring, her jaw hanging slightly open as she dimly registered Anastasia saying something about “going out on the town”. Mostly she registered this because it marked a noticeable change in Azazel’s expression, as her smile dropped and she looked in consternation at the rest of them standing in the hallway, before her eyes landed on Araia’s and suddenly they were staring at each other and Araia felt her heart leap up into her throat. Thankfully, the moment is quickly broken by Pierre suddenly piping up from the side.

“Yes, we will all go out and have a great time reuniting! However, Azazel must first, uh– get ready for the escapades!” He began hurriedly dragging Anastasia down the hallway towards the stairs, and Araia caught the desperate look he shot at Quince before the latter chimed in, “Yes! Azazel needs to have an important talk about, erm– party dynamics before she leaves today!” He began quickly pushing Araia towards the door to his room, and after unceremoniously buffeting her in he left to go do the same to Azazel, who for a moment look just as bewildered as Araia at everything happening around them. Araia watched as Quince pushed Azazel into the room with her, before looking meaningfully at the two of them.

“Now, the two of you need to talk about things and work it all out. I’ll leave a note at the bar of where we’ve gone should you wish to join us when you’re finished.”

He closed the door into the hallway and suddenly it was just the two of them, alone in the room together. The air suddenly felt stale, stifling, like the hot atmosphere in the library stacks during the peak of summer. Araia sat in a chair on the far side of the space, staring into the floorboards of the hotel room. Azazel stood over by the door, seeming to be as still as the walls holding fast around the two of them. Araia wasn’t sure how long the deafening silence stretched on for, desperately trying to calm the incessant pounding of her heart in her ears, before she finally mustered up the courage to speak.

“I am– sorry. For everything that happened in Allen.” She stared intently at the floorboards, not able to look at Azazel at all right now. The reply drifted cautiously across her ears, almost sounding a little bit startled.

“I mean, I... What you said really hurt me. I know you know that– I need to know that you know that.”

Araia paused, speaking very carefully so as to choose the right words and to keep the shaking from entering her voice. “I am sorry for the things that I said. It is true that I wanted you to be safe, but I am sorry that I was nervous about letting my parents see you with me and I am aware of how hurtful and wrong that was. I am sorry that the others have coerced you into bringing me along with.”

She felt the guilt welling up in her chest again. That familiar feeling of the weight bearing down on her, like a celestial body trying to crush her flat into the dirt. She knew this was a bad idea. She knew this wouldn’t go well, and yet she had stupidly gone along with Pierre & Quince’s plan anyway, and now she was going to have to sit through all of this pain again and feel that terrible wrenching feeling in her chest when she thought about leaving Azazel behind. *Good*, she thought. She deserved it, after everything that she’d done to her.

“They didn’t coerce me. I think you are— a valuable asset to the party, okay? If I didn’t want you to come, I would have said so.” Araia froze, down to the beating of her heart. Azazel *didn’t* ask for her to leave? After everything that Araia had done to her? It was so surprising that the her thoughts came involuntarily tumbling out of her mouth before she could stop them.

“Then why didn’t you!?” It came out as almost a shout, the emotions escaping from her like heat pouring from an open flame in her chest. She managed to lower her voice but failed to keep out the shaking that was now wracking through her entire body as she continued.

“Why didn’t you say so? I know what I said was wrong, and I understand why you don’t want to be associated with me. You’ve seen the place I’ve come from, and my parents, and— they’re fucking racist! My parents, the pastor, everyone that raised me!” She was rambling now, the truth a deluge of seawater crashing through from the waves that roiled within her, and she couldn’t hold it back.

“They don’t like you, and I understand why you don’t want to associate with me there and why it was so hurtful and what I did and I just... I want to be able to leave you in peace so you don’t have to deal with the associations of me, of my town, of everything.”

There was a moment of silence that hung in the air, as Araia felt her emotions sloshing around in the pit of her stomach, like she was going to be seasick. Azazel's reply was quiet, reserved.

"It almost sounds to me like you want to leave."

It hit Araia like a tidal wave. Like the entire world crumbling down around her, like staring into the nothingness beyond everything and feeling its eternal despair. A shudder and an uncontrolled sob escaped from her as she finally raised her head and met Azazel's gaze, staring deep into her bright verdant eyes as words from somewhere deep in her mind that she couldn't identify left her lips.

"Of course I don't want to fucking leave. All of you are the only friends I have ever known. I've never had— I've never had any kind of friends before. No, I *don't* want to go back to living on my own, travelling from town to town, not seeing another soul for days, weeks, months at a time. I like all of you, and I like travelling with you, Azazel. You are so kind and caring and unflinchingly warm and bright, and you insist on spreading that joy to everyone around you and it is beautiful. And I do not want to take that away from you."

Araia had given a lot of speeches in her life. Being essentially raised as a church figurehead from age 10, she had been tasked with giving many motivational speeches, leading sermons or rallies, giving all manner of preachings, teachings, and words of wisdom to every person in her home town at least five times over. And she had believed in what she said, because believing what you say is the best way to get other people to believe it too.

She had never been as certain of anything as the words she spoke to Azazel now. It felt like they had come from deeper in her than any thoughts she had ever had before, and yet that they were also here the entire time, merely waiting to be said. Like the deepest darkest unknown fears and terrors that have actually been sitting quietly next to you the entire time. She liked Azazel. More than any person or being she had ever met, more than she had ever had words to describe in all of the tomes she had ever read. It was a truth so terrifying and yet so pure, like the cleave of divine magic in her veins, like the heavenly ordainment of Our Lady in Silver Herself.

She stared into Azazel's face and the rest of the world seemed to melt away as she saw in it saw all of her expressions in the last months that they had traveled together; the joy, the sadness, the laughter, all the beautiful ways in which those lines could rearrange themselves into the visage that Araia had spent so long trying and failing to not get lost in. She could see her— laughing and joking with Pierre on the road, gazing with fascination and longing at the jewelry in Gemell Glen, smiling confidently and righteously at the courtroom in Everwarp. She could see that light and beauty that the tiefling girl always infected every room she entered with, and Araia knew more than anything else in the world that she wanted to be with her for it.

In this moment, though, Azazel looked— speechless. Her violet lips were hanging open in shock as she stared back at Araia for a long, long moment. Eventually she seemed to gather herself, and tore her eyes away from Araia's before responding.

“You won't take that away from me. I don't think you can. Besides, you're probably better than the average person on tieflings, so... As long as you don't hate me, it'll work out fine.”

In hindsight, it probably made sense that that last part may have been a joke. But in the moment, Araia was too frazzled to take it as anything besides purely literal, and her response came out instinctively.

“No, I don't hate you! Why would I, or even feel any sort of anger or contempt towards you, Azazel?? You have done nothing but be kind, and caring, and the be the better person when I couldn't. When I was too scared to. I have never hated you, Azazel, and I don't think I ever will.”

That last sentence came out a bit too firmly. Or, maybe it didn't. Maybe it came out exactly how she felt it. She saw the tiefling's cheeks flush slightly, turning a shade of purple just a hair darker. She still wouldn't meet Araia's gaze as she spoke.

“Well... I suppose that's that then. We have addressed what we needed to address.”

Araia looked away, lowering her head back down towards the floor as she took a long deep breath to try and calm herself down.

“Thank you, Azazel. Thank you. I... I don't know what I would do if I was not still here with you.”

There was another pause as those words hung in the air between them. She still hated how vulnerable it made her feel, and yet she still couldn't stop herself from saying it. It felt so terrifying, to be so reliant on someone else, to want something so bad that it hurt so much to lose. But those words hung out in the air now, and she couldn't take them back anymore.

Eventually, Azazel said, "Then it's settled. We can tell Quince and Pierre that their plan worked." Araia let out a small chuckle, and was too tired to keep her mutterings internal as she mused, "Who let the two of them work together..."

The other girl laughed, that beautiful tinkling laugh that made Araia's heart glow like a beam of moonlight. "Well, I suppose we should get back to— whatever it is we're doing. I am going to catch up with Ana."

Araia looked back up at her curiously. "Anastasia? You two are— friends from before?"

Azazel was still looking away, and her blush deepened again. "Yes... Friends. I suspect we're headed out to a party somewhere, given her tendencies." Suddenly she turned and looked at Araia, making eye contact again, like she was staring straight into her soul.

"You know, you're welcome to come too if you like."

Araia felt her heart skip a beat in her chest. "May— maybe. I find large cities like these rather stressful."

They stared at each other for one more moment that seemed to stretch on forever, as though time itself had slowed down to take it all in. Araia wasn't sure how long it lasted— maybe a few seconds, maybe several minutes. It was nearly silent, nothing but the whispers of their breathing, the quiet insistence of life against the stillness of the universe.

It was really nice.

Eventually, Azazel turned to the door and opened it, leaving out into the hallway. She shot one last glance back at Araia before closing the door, and leaving her alone with her thoughts once again.