

IX

Danny unlocked the hotel room he rented at a weekly rate. Emily was sitting at the round table towards the back with a knife. She was carving beautifully intricate mycelial mesh patterns into the table's surface.

"I'm glad you decided to come." He said approaching with careful respect.

"Where else would I go? The folks I was gonna stay with tonight-" She trailed off. "I can't imagine going back to any of that now."

He took a step. "I see those patterns at the beginning of one of my episodes. May I come closer to look?"

She nodded. The mesh was carved with depth. Danny admired the layers one on top of another. Each line had to be carved with intention. "It's all I see when I relax my focus. Scratching it out like this helps in some way."

"It's beautiful." He said. She looked as though she was about to say something then suppressed it. "May I sit?" He asked.

"Knock yourself out."

"So are you gonna join the other six?"

"Nah. Never connecting to that bitch again."

"Yeah fuck her."

"So why'd you start working for Cthulhu then?"

"Cthulhu is trying to save the world. Desperate times. All that."

"Can I have a smoke?" She asked. He got out two. He lit hers then his. "That's bullshit though." She said.

"Em the world is ending. I can-"

"Whatever let's say that part is true. I don't care. That's not why you're working for her." She asserted and he felt his face confirming that she was right.

"Why then?" he asked.

"Don't know, you tell me." She felt comfortable. She was getting so much information from him. Talking seemed to be a mere formality.

"I guess there's no point in lying then." He said realizing moments earlier he believed his own bullshit. "I pushed for us to try with a group. Since mine went so bad they deferred to me. I was worried that if the next individual that linked ended up like me Cthulhu would close up shop."

"Good riddance"

"I want them to succeed. I don't want the world to die, really." He paused.

"But."

"I hoped there would be another like me. I didn't plan for it. But I hoped. That's why I didn't run away from that monster." He looked at her. "Same reason you decided to take my offer to crash here, I think."

"There really isn't a point in subtly. We can read each other." She said knowingly.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"No idea."

"How?"

"No clue." He thought for a moment. "The connection with Aims requires physical contact. In your case also my relay servers. You were actually connecting to her by way of the library's internet and a potted plant I placed in there a week prior."

"Our connection. It's not like with her. That was violating. Her bits rooting through my brain. This just seems like hyper-vigilance on steroids."

"My mind feels like it's in pieces. Like my neurons were blended and used to remake an imperfect facsimile of their previous arrangement."

"Yes. I don't feel like I am the person who lived in this body earlier today."

"We are reborn." He offered.

She looked at him with realization. "You're dangerous."

He held a neutral stance and braced his body to be met by her knife. He said nothing.

"You would've killed that girl if I hadn't showed up" She continued. "Don't deny it."

"They were a safety risk. I was trying finding a way to save them from that fate."

"That didn't used to be who you were. I've seen you in a fight before. It was embarrassing."

He laughed and she lowered her body. She prepared her legs, hand and arm. "Yeah I remember." He said. "Before today, that knife was never a weapon in your hands."

"So we're dangerous. Why did this happen to us and not the others?"

"I don't know."

"What are you going to do with that safety risk that's still running around?"

"I'm working on that. Need to track them down first. I know their car, VIN number, and license plate. Legal name too. Elisa Muñoz. It was in a pocket of her med kit."

She gave him a look. She used to look at him like that a lot. "Want my help?" She asked. He said nothing. She continued. "You know without me-"

"I'd be learning first hand the ins and outs of body disposal." He admitted. "Yes I would appreciate your help. I appreciate you." He said while tracing with a damaged finger the carefully carved mesh in veneer on particle board.

"Are you glad it happened to me?" She asked. "Glad that I was reborn?"

"You know the answer to that." Their eyes met, each with a face saying absolutely nothing, they held still for a time. They were seemingly frozen but ready.

The veil of reality began to lose it's tautness. He relaxed his body and waited for what would happen next. She jumped. He rode his chair as it separate from it's cozy place under the table to it's final moments fully assembled on the ground. The chair snapped and popped in several places like a persons back but deeper: like giving CPR. She was on him. The point of her knife nested between his neck and left collarbone.

He looked away from her. His eyes mostly closed. *Who gifted us this fate? \ The good glory of God \ The great wraith of god.* He sub-vocalized while waiting for oblivion.

"You singing lady lamb at me right now?" her voice said pulling him away from the warmth of acceptance.

"Yeah. You know her."

"Dude you showed me her."

"Right. That song has been stuck in my head all day I guess."

The knife stayed where it was but relaxed slightly. "In the parity of this night \ I make myself believe I can sleep easily alone." She sing-said. "I've always like that line."

"I am glad it was you." He admitted still looking away. "You're a very impressive person." He said meeting her gaze.

"I've never slept with a cis guy before."

"It's an acquired taste for sure."

She stood over him now offering him a hand up.

"You asked me not to touch you ever. When I violated that boundary last I almost lost a finger."

Her hand still offered above him. "Yeah. Come on then touch me. Maybe I'll finish the job."

So he did. And she didn't.

Ava awoke to the morning song of a dove. She had slept in. She finished packing everything into their old pickup last night. It wasn't suppose to rain and the air felt as though that wasn't the case. Only the foam bed that rested on wooden slats, two 2x4's, and cinder blocks remained in the tent. They would be leaving today. No help needed from Gia.

Ava realized she wasn't in bed. She got up and quickly put on the jeans she left hanging on a pole. She unzipped the door and clipped one flap to stay open. She began looking around for any sign of her. She checked the car, around the tent for some reason, and then Ava glimpsed Gia's limp body a distance away. She was partly obscured by pioneering grass and young brush.

Ava ran toward her unnaturally laying body. Her hair thrown in front of her covering her face. Why did her body look like that? When she got close her heart was pounding.

"Gia?" Ava whimpered. Her body didn't move. It seemed too still. What could have happened. Did something go wrong with the action. *Aims would have never risked-* Ava dropped to the ground. *I should have been there. I was pissed. You weren't finding the balance you promised.* Ava realized she had to get closer. She had to check.

Ava's hand was shaking in front of her. She stepped forward and stretched her arm out to touch Gia's neck. She felt afraid to get close. Ava made contact with the skin of her neck. She looked for a pulse. Was it just hard to find on someone else or? Her skin felt cool. Ava inched closer, palpating with two fingers looking for her pulse. She couldn't find it.

Gia moved her head and Ava jumped back. She took a deep raspy breath and rolled to her side facing Ava. She held her left hand close. There was dried blood on naturally shaped fingers.

"Ava?" She asked in a haze.

"Yes." Ava rushed to be near her but didn't risk touching her. "Try not to move. We don't know how bad your hurt."

"I fell Ava. I was walking last night and I fell."

"Does it hurt anywhere?"

"Yes. I think my hand is fucked up. I don't want to look at it. Last night thing went bad. I have no idea how they ended up. I need to-" Gia looked down at her hand. It was swollen, discolored, and all manner of *no thank you*. Ava looked away from it. "So actually. Why don't you just text Daniel and drive me to the hospital." Gia said getting up.

"Sure yeah."

Olivia sat in the hospital waiting room considering legal recognition of their relationships. Living their lives, being polyamorous was simple. Monogamy or even a lot of how other folks did polyamory seemed so complex. She felt so lucky to have such free relationships. They could shift and adjust to suit a purpose, convince, need or just for fun. She loved Gia, Ava, and Valorie so much. She was often the inflexible one of the bunch.

She considered that maybe she wasn't growing toward flexibility because of her relationship with Gia. Aspects did feel a bit co-dependent. Gia's parent sat next to her. They had been there for a while now. The staff didn't let any of them into the room.

There simple relationships get complicated for hospitals. The mother got a sperm donor from a friend and was dating three trans woman and sort of quasi-adopted by one of her partners parents. But none of them were the sperm donor so they couldn't go back there. Louis could go back there. Olivia thought then laughed audibly.

"What's funny dear?" Cathy asked.

"Hospitals are so dumb." Olivia said.

"Not too late to do an at home birth." Tom suggested.

"Yes it is Tom. She's already dilated 2 centimeters." Cathy stated.

"Your right. I was mostly joking."

They were quiet again for a time. Olivia found herself wishing Gia was there. She wanted to hold her feral, little punk girlfriend. *Why aren't they here?* Olivia asked herself knowing the answer.

A nurse she recognized approach them and bent down. "So I talked to the case manager and her doctor. They said it's fine for you three to be back there. Just if more come let's limit the room to three people. We don't want the room to get too full."

"That's exciting news. Thank you Sheryl." Cathy said.

"Follow me please."

Gia got herself into the truck. Ava stood by the door to help.

"Let's go Ava." Gia exclaimed.

Ava rushed around the front of the car, flew into her seat, and grabbed her phone from the dashboard. Her face told Gia that something was up. Daniel would only have messaged Ava if things had gone real bad. Gia started to consider the possibilities. She and Daniel really pushed to do the linking at the first meeting. Perhaps that was dumb. Her original idea was to have people come here through a broad network of friends. Danny thought that was too fragile. It needed to loosely connected groups all over. He thought without each group being autonomous they'd end up with a cult worshipping Aims. Gia didn't see that happening. But she didn't see what he saw.

"It's Valorie." Ava said "She's going into labor."

"Well shit let's go."

"But your hand."

"Right and we'd be going to a hospital."

"In like five hours."

Gia shrugged. "If I miss this I think Olivia would actually kill me."

Emily woke to a throbbing, burning sky above her. It was shimmering through the hotel ceiling. She turned to face him laying next to her. He glowed with ember light from behind the fragmented coals that composed his body. Steam bellowed around them in a dream like haze. She inhaled the smoke as she climbed onto his charred, glowing body. Veins of light

interweaving all over him. She could still feel where inside herself where he had been the night before. Charcoal clicked and popped as she straddled around him, her weight pressing him down. She exhaled the smoke and laid flat on his firm chest. She felt the movement of his pectoral muscles twitch. She listened for his heart.

The tearing glimmer of tendrils from the ceiling retreated as she found that heart beat. The smoke cleared and the torn fabric of the ceiling healed itself. Her mind felt calm as she laid in his safety. She didn't think of herself as someone into guys. And a day ago that might have been true. He didn't really seem like a guy. He was safety embodied. Everything else was horrid and dangerous she realized. Sex with him didn't feel like it had with others. There used to be more feelings she dimly remembered. Her past memories made little sense to her.

He awoke as she began gripping him tighter and tighter. He looked down and kissed the top of her head. She let her entire body go limp.

"I've never done that before." She said looking toward the room's large mirror. The top half of their reflections were blocked by a closet. The darkness obscured what little she could see.

"Sex?"

"With a guy yeah."

"You mentioned that last night." He said. "So what do you think?"

"Whatever part of me-" She stopped herself. "I can see myself acquiring a taste for it. How was it for you? was fucking a gay girl straight everything you hoped it'd be?"

"Hun. I think you're just a bit bi. Or maybe I'm trans."

She giggled. "That would be too bad. I don't think I like girls anymore. I'm serious. I think you fucked me straight." They shared a bemused look.

It was nice to pretend to be human with someone who knew you weren't. They laid there for a time in a strange peace. She didn't move from on top of him. This is just where she exist now.

"I just realized I haven't burned. I don't think I need to. It's weird it's normally bad in the morning." He said.

"It started when I woke up. That's why I crawled on top of you I guess. It helped."

"Well the burning also helps make the neurolink non functional like a day." He said and moved to get up. She wouldn't let him budge.

"Can I see it. Before you burn it I mean."

"Sure." He presented the bandage on his left forearm. She looked at the back of her right hand with an almost entirely healed cigarette burn.

"Why is mine in a different place than yours?" She asked.

"It's arbitrary. The back of your hand must have been resting against the table or where ever her mycelium was growing on that you were touching in that moment. It can be moved within the first few months or so. It can't be removed though. It's not just the link. You have an immune response that prevents genetic change now. Also cancer apparently."

"Can I?" She asked as her right hand delicately moving toward his bandage.

"Knock yourself out."

She removed the bandage. In the darkness not much was visible. Though it glowed gently woven amber on smooth skin. She saw her skin responded to his. *Okay fuck it.* She touched their links together. His body shot up immediately as there bed bypassed the roof and rocketed into space. And together they saw a world without their goddess haunting it.

Gia and Olivia looked at their son through the glass of the maturity ward. Gia's left hand was in a caste. They had given her pain medicine. The world was floaty.

"How's your hand?" Olivia asked breaking their silence.

"It'll be fine I think."

"What did the doctor say?"

"He said the words full recovery." Gia lied.

"That's good. Why weren't you here."

"Come on I made it in time for the birth!"

"I needed-" Olivia eyes watered. "I wanted you here. There was a problem that turned out to be nothing. And the baby came early. The whole time I was just thinking how I wish you were there. And so I wasn't really here either."

"I'm so sorry Vee. I'll do-"

"You didn't do anything wrong." Olivia sighed. "I know you. But I let my longing for you build into expectations I rationally would have known you wouldn't meet."

"No Olivia. I'm shit. The expectation that I'd be here is like a perfectly normal one."

"No. That's normy shit. You are beautiful. I love my little feral girl." Olivia stated.

Gia blushed at a loss for words.

Olivia continued "The way you are is so lovely and good. I can't domesticate you, nor would I want to. I can't live outside the way you and Ava have been. At least I don't want to."

"So what are you saying?"

"That we're very different. That difference helps build a strong, resilient social dynamic. But also that I'm completely obsessed with you. I think about you all the time."

"I think about-"

"And I don't want to." Olivia interrupted.

"Wait." Gia said "Are you?"

"Nothing has to change really. Except my own expectations. We can still co-parent and live together. Maybe just lean away from the other stuff."

"I don't wanna lean about from you." Gia wanted to be held by Olivia so bad but didn't dare move.

"Gia that's what has already been going on. We've just been in denial about it."

"I'll stop the woods repair. I'll come back full time. I'll be here for you and the baby and everyone."

"Imagine that happening for a moment. Think about all that it would entail. Do you actually want to do that?" Olivia asked.

Aims rushed into Gia's mind. If Gia left who would help her? not Daniel. He hadn't responded to any of their messages. They still had no idea how things went down. All abilities to connect with Aims were back on the land or in some undisclosed city somewhere. Gia had to get back soon. There was no way it could be tonight though.

Gia looked at Olivia. She held a blissfully neutral face. Gia could say anything to her right now. She thought of where their compatibility stemmed from.

Olivia knew, through her own curiosity, the magic system involving the random bits of trash that flowed down one specific creek. How the spirit of that creek used these items to give Gia's body powers so that she could become spiritually impregnated and help give birth to a new creek. They had talked about that delusion for hours over many different nights. Olivia listened, she

didn't believe, but she was curious. She pointed things out about Gia's delusions that Gia hadn't noticed. All the while with that neutral face and incomprehensible white noise non verbals.

Gia didn't want to live without Olivia close by her side. She concluded. "I do. I really do. There are somethings I'd need to wrap up maybe. I want the grad students to still be able to complete their paper. Also we just left a few things precarious, like the tent, when left but that can all wait at least a week." Gia said.

"Okay. But I still need space. I want to hold you and kiss you so bad right now. But I think it's bad for me." Olivia stated her face twisted in pain.

Gia approached her. She put a hand of support on her shoulder. Gia didn't want to lose her. She got on her tip toes and kissed Olivia knowing that of course she was right. Olivia kissed back. Olivia was so often right. Gia felt like an exception to that. A hand wondered onto Olivia chest. She disrupted Olivia's life as a feature.

They both knew it wasn't a good idea. Without words, they found the nearest patient restroom and locked the door. Olivia shivered when her bare back touched the floor. Gia helped warm her up. It was fortunate that they were in a room designed to be cleaned. There was a number of knocks on the door, that at the time, didn't seem all that important.

Whatever happened next, Olivia would be close by Gia's side. Gia was certain.