

# **Second-Hand Dresses**



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## Chapter 1

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# A Change of Color

The honorifics in Tarsan society indicate marriageability and relationships. For example, *bespire* and *bedame* respectively describe young men and women eligible for marriage. The other honorifics are “mo-” for children, “ta-” for married, and “ku-” for those undesirable for marriage.

*—Introduction to Tarsan*

**L**ily ran her fingers along the bolts of fabric in her stash. The different textures tickled her skin, from the smoothness of the Masaton Silk to the rough flutters of her Kormar velvet. As she lingered, she could remember when and where she bought each one, a history of her life for the last decade laid out on narrow shelves and hooks.

She took a deep breath and enjoyed the delicate scent of flowers and incense that permeated the fabrics. The smells came from the magical runes that glowed faintly along the floor. The various arcane symbols protected her stash from fire, flood, insects, and thievery. The spells were all expensive, both to install and also for the annual maintenance, but it was better than losing thousands of jems worth of textiles.

Her fingers caressed a smooth fabric with tiny ripples and a floral pattern. She stopped and smiled. It was the right texture and weight for what she needed.

She tugged the bolt of deep purple cloth from the shelf and held it underneath her arm. As she turned, her own lace dress fluttered against the fabric and caught against one of the wooden shelves before she eased it free.

Her shoes tapped against the enchanted floor as she walked the length of her stash. The narrow aisle ran the entire length of her store. Shelves were on both sides, reaching up high enough that she needed a stool to reach. She kept her rarer and more expensive fabrics near the ceiling. Most of her customers were content with the more common supplies.

At the back of the store, she slipped through the door leading into her sewing area, and then into the fitting rooms. Her customers, Dame Juliet de Kasin na Maifir and her daughter, Nirih, stood in the center while idly looking at the painting and posters that lined the walls. Both women were narrow with pale skin, button noses, and wheat-colored hair.

To Lily's experienced eyes, she could see the effort both went into presenting their best. The dame's corset strained to contain her belly and her hair was too even in color for anything that didn't come from a spell. The shade of her makeup didn't hide the amount of it on her face. But, for a woman in her thirties and in High Society, she had the right posture and presence.

Her daughter, almost a copy of her mother, didn't need nearly as much magic and makeup to be stunning. She had smaller breasts and narrower hips than her mother, but her youthful skin and natural grace would be the envy of most debutantes in the coming weeks.

Lily smiled brightly as she entered. “Dame and Bedame de Kasin, I think I found something you’ll love.”

Nirih looked at the bolt and frowned. “It’s the wrong color. It has to be Delicate Whispers of Gold, not... not that,” she gestured to it, “purple. Yellow, it has to be a yellow... the yellow.”

Before Lily could respond, the mother turned away but not enough for her voice to be muffled. “Doesn’t she know that? How can she not know this?”

Lily fought the urge to frown. She glanced over at the large poster near the door. It had this year’s plan for the Social Season including swatches of the official colors, style of dress, and even the feathers for the hats. The poster had cost her nearly a thousand jems, but it was necessary for her job as a seamstress.

Lily had been selling dresses for seven years, but it took decades to command higher prices. Her relative inexperience limited how much she could charge which was why Juliet and her daughter stood in Lily’s store instead of Lily’s mentor’s receiving room. The dress the two would order from Lily would be for one of the minor social functions; the expensive dresses would be used for the grand affairs.

Over the half year of Nirih’s first year presentations, she would wear dozens of dresses to over a hundred functions, both small and large. High Society would inspect her for her grace, beauty, and her desirability as a wife. One of those merits would be her collection of outfits. The more seamstresses and shoemakers that contributed to a young woman’s wardrobe, the more men fought over her. Many of the outfits would be worn once and abandoned.

Juliet held up her hand to her daughter and pointedly looked down at the bolt of fabric. “I was told you were an excellent seamstress with a keen eye for color and balance. But, if you can’t even understand the most basic,” she

drawled out the word, “necessities of color, I can’t understand why Dame da Kasin ne Pavin would have recommended you over far more established women of the trade.”

She turned to her daughter. “Come on, Nirih, let’s find a more competent woman. One who understands the needs for society. One that commands a reasonable price. Good day, Kudame nea Genifir.”

Lily struggled for a moment with the sudden flash of anger. Being called a “kudame” was an insult because Lily was still of marriageable age for another few months. She deserved the honorific of “bedame” like Juliet’s daughter. There was no question that Juliet knew that.

Being referred by her father’s family, Genifir, added to the insult since she was born and raised a Kasin. She also had to be a Kasin to own a shop in town. If Juliet respected her, she would have used “dea Kasin.”

With a tight grip on the cloth, Lily took two deep breaths. As she did, she forced a smile and cleared her throat. “Excuse me, Dame and Bedame de Kasin, but I need your opinion on the texture of the fabric, not the color.”

As she spoke, she gathered her power and let it flow through her hands. It tingled along her skin as it spread out across her palm and into the fabric.

Juliet guided her daughter’s elbow toward the front door, speaking without looking at Lily. “There is a delicate balance of color and texture. Just giving us a poor sample won’t tell us anything. As everyone knows, dyeing the fabric... will...”

The older woman glanced over her shoulder at Lily, then froze. Her eyes widened in time with her mouth opening slightly.

Lily kept her eyes on the mother and her smile steady. The tingling of her power increased, flowing through the fabric. From the corner of her eye, she saw the tip of purple



lighten into the perfect shade of yellow for the season, Delicate Whispers of Gold. She knew it would also have the proper highlights and shimmer. There wouldn't be anyone in the city that would find a more accurate hue of color either.

"... change everything?" finished Juliet.

Nirih started to go through the door, but her mother's hands held her in place. She frowned as she turned to her mother, presenting a profile of a young woman right on the cusp of being presented to the families of Tarsan. "Mother?"

Lily spoke respectfully. "As I was saying, Dame and Be-dame de Kasin, I'm more interested in how you enjoy the texture of this fine cloth than the color. Hue is something easily and frequently changeable in my hands." She held out the now yellow bolt of cloth.

Nirih turned and looked. Her eyes widened as did a smile across her face. "It's... beautiful."

Both mother and daughter rushed over to the bolt, snatching it from Lily's hands and unrolling a few feet to stroke it along their cheeks and wrists. As they did, Lily looked over their dresses to get an idea of how much they would be willing to spend.

It was hard to place a Kasin in their own city. Only members of the family were allowed to live in the city and most of her customers had Kasin in their names. But it appeared that Juliet was one of the more affluent members judging from the quality of her outfit and the overbearing tones.

Because they were asking for a dress mostly of cream with the Delicate Whispers of Gold as a trim, Nirih was obviously the debutante for the year. It was her first, best, and probably only chance to find a husband after being presented to the various families of Tarsan. She had the same look as the other young women that showed up at

Lily's door in the last few months: flawless skin that only spells could maintain, pink lips colored by expensive makeup, long eyelashes sparkling with glitter, and even a small bust that was currently in fashion. The younger woman also wore a corset discretely underneath her dress. It was invisible except to someone who fitted corsets herself, though the girl wore it for style not necessity.

Her mother, Dame Juliet, wore a beautiful dress. Lily recognized the stitching as Penir da Kasin's, the woman who had taught Lily how to be a seamstress. The way the fabric complimented Juliet's figure and the faintest discoloration around the hips told Lily that it was recently altered by someone other than Penir.

Lily decided to charge Juliet a high price for her attitude. She noted it and then joined into the discussion between the mother and daughter. She emphasized the richness of the fabric and the rarity of the texture. It was somewhat of an exaggeration, but after seeing so many debutantes come through her store in the last nine years, she had a good idea of how to describe her dresses in the perfect terms to sell it to their mothers and aunts.

One conversation led to the other and soon they were picking out designs from hand-painted picture books that Lily had gathered over the years. When they couldn't find the perfect outfit, she pulled out her sketch book and drew ideas. And then redrew it again and again until they figured out exactly what they wanted.

"How much?" came the final question, Juliet's shoulders tensing.

"Please allow me a moment, Dame and Bedame de Kasin," answered Lily before taking her copious notes to a corner desk. She already knew the price, eight thousand jems, but it took her a moment to write down an itemized list of colors, fabrics, and patterns on the page to justify the

amount. She added her own labor, which doubled the price, along with a few random numbers to make it look like she wasn't making everything up. When she finished, she came and discretely handed the paper to Juliet.

With the bill in hand, Juliet turned away to read it. Lily watched as the woman's eyes scanned the page, growing wide for a moment when she reached the back. It took her almost a minute before she looked up. "What is this insurance line?"

Lily smiled. "That is a new service, offered by the Welkers' down the street. For that price, they will ensure that your daughter's dress will be available no less than..." She glanced at the day to double-check her memory. "... the fourth day of the second week, just in time for the sixth when this dress will be needed."

"And if it isn't? If you aren't going to make it in time, then there won't be enough time to make another." There was enough concern in Juliet's voice that her daughter looked worried.

"And then the bank will give you a hundred times that amount." Not that Lily would ever miss a deadline.

"But then my daughter still won't have her dress. That is unacceptable. I'll—"

"The bank will pay immediately, in jems. With that much money, you could easily afford a Patrir nea Riven or Samual de Kasin da Robin dress." As Lily listed the two famous dressmakers in the city, Juliet's eyes opened. Having a Patrir or a Samual would launch Nirih's presentation into the eyes of High Society.

Sensing that she could get Juliet to purchase it, Lily changed topics to fit the more sour aspects of the older woman's personality. "In addition, failing to make the dress would destroy my reputation as well as my mentor's." Lily gestured to Juliet's dress, "I would not sully Tadame Penir

da Kasin de Golid's honor by failing to fulfill my commissions. So, I promise you, your daughter will have her dress on time."

"A hundred times?" asked Juliet, her eyes flickering back and forth.

"A hundred times. In coinage." When the bank suggested the insurance, Lily almost balked at it. She never would have thought the promise of insurance would be a selling point of the dresses, but the one line item had sold two dresses that year already.

Juliet sighed and then smiled. It was a little forced, but it didn't show in her voice when she spoke. "Very well."

"Mother, how much?" asked her daughter.

"It is not for a polite lady to ask," snapped Juliet.

Lily put on the appropriately demure face. Inwardly, she was brimming with joy. Between Nirih's dress and the three others already ordered for the first few weeks, she was set for having a good year. She stood up and held out her hand for Nirih. "Come, let me measure you so I can get started."

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## Chapter 2

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# A Moment of Quiet

The tears of answering to a title that strikes deep into the gut must remain hidden. It is part of the show that cast-off actors must continue to play until they can slip off stage.

—*The Forgotten Daughter* (Act 3, Scene 9)

**When** the Kasin women left, they were bubbling with excitement. Any concerns over the high price or Juliet's insults had faded with a few sweets, a bottle of red wine, and the casual conversations as Lily measured the younger woman.

Lily hoped they would come back to her for the outfits in the later weeks of the Social Season, the summer weeks. If Nirih presented well on the first few weeks, they would probably return to have Lily make the remaining dresses for the season. If two of the debutantes did that, Lily would be comfortable until the next season.

Most of the time, when there was a poor presentation, it was blamed on the dress, makeup, and everything but the young lady wearing it. A strike like that would make it hard for Lily to pay her bills.

She sat down on the chair and let out a sigh. Juliet calling her kudame and not using her mother's family name

hurt more than she thought it would. She was still a be-dame, a woman capable of being betrothed, but there was only a few months left of that. Then she would become a kudame for the rest of her life, a spinster incapable of being married and doomed to spend her days sewing for the young women of High Society.

The excitement of the sale faded quickly. With a hiss, she reached over and pulled the last wine bottle from the ice bucket. Between the three of them, they had finished almost three quarters of it. No reason to let the rest go to waste. She refilled her narrow wine glass and breathed in the scents of the mid-vintage wine.

Outside the front door, she saw pedestrians strolling by. It was late afternoon, which meant most of them were heading to their final stores before getting in the carriages to return home for a rest before the formal dinners started. Very few people ordered dresses in the latter part of the day, not after eating and walking, but she couldn't afford a single missed customer if she closed early.

Instead, she leaned back in the chair and sipped at her wine. As soon as the sun touched the horizon, she would be heading to her mother's home for a night of dinner and then quiet reading. There were no more suitors or parties in her life. In many ways, she was already a kudame.

A group of women walked across the front of Lily's store, their dresses and bags fluttering in the wind. In the center was a young girl wearing a cream dress. She had the same hopeful and excited look that Lily had nine years ago.

Back then, Lily was seventeen and ready to find her husband. Her mother and her aunt had gone with her, picking out the perfect dresses for every week of the Social Season, each one with brilliant color and a perfect fit.

They were so excited then, going from store to store as they argued over the patterns and the trim for her outfits.

Stories of the formal events, games, and concerts had swum in her head. She was going to be married to a rich husband and enjoy the bounty of the Kasin family's connections for the rest of her life.

And then on the day of her presentation, there was a brawl between two men fighting for her hand. Instead of gracefully putting in a bid for her hand with her father, they had a bloody fist fight on the horse track. It didn't matter that Lily wasn't involved, everyone knew they were fighting for her and her reputation suffered. The event also tarnished her family's reputation but she managed to dance and laugh her way through it.

The next party sealed her fate when two men dueled over her. If it had just ended with one man slinking away, she could have used the incident to show her desirability. Instead the loser refused to acknowledge defeat and started a brawl that had to be stopped by the family heads while Lily's mother's manor burned. The party ended as did her chances of finding a husband.

A reputation of bad luck settled down over her shoulders and suddenly the offers for her hand faded away, withdrawn in superstition and the further tarnishing of her family's reputation.

A tear ran down her cheek. She was supposed to be happy by now, maybe even with a daughter of her own as they spent their nights planning debutante dresses and dreaming of the man her daughter would marry. Instead, she sat alone in the front of a dress store and watched everyone else enjoy their lives while she was doomed to become a spinster until the end of her days.

Sniffing, Lily drained her glass and set it down. After a few seconds, she emptied the bottle into it and stared at the last inch of red wine that pooled in the bottom of her glass.

There was a flash of movement. She looked up just as a black-suited man rushed into the store and closed the door behind him. A bowler slipped off his head and bounced off his shoulder. He caught it before it landed. She only saw a flash of an angular nose and blue eyes before he turned his back to her and peered out the window.

Lily stood up, slightly woozy from her drinking. She struggled to wipe the tear from her cheek, hoping that it didn't ruin her makeup. "E-Excuse me."

The stranger held his out his hand toward her. "Hold on."

She stared at the back of the stranger. He wore a black, pin-stripe suit that was fashionable a few years ago. The edges were scuffed and she spotted large blotches of discoloration from too many hours in the sun. The long tail fluttered against the back of his legs, the fabric of his trousers clinging to his legs. His muscles flexed along his thighs and shins as he balanced up on his toes. His shoes, a rich polished black, creaked with his movements. They were new and she could see signs that the suit had been recently, and poorly, mended.

He pressed his left hand against the glass. There was no marriage bracelet on his wrist. He pulled his fingers down against the glass, leaving streaks on her polished window.

Annoyance rose inside her. He had intruded in her store and was marring her window with his hand. She pressed her knuckles against her hip. "Excuse me!"

"Hold on, just need to wait..." His voice trailed off as three men in suits rushed by. They were all wearing suits and had unsheathed swords in their hands. She spotted the Martin crest on the hilts, one of the families a few towns along the coast.

The lead man's weapon glowed faintly of magic. As he passed in front of the glass, a previously invisible rune flickered to life and trailed after him. Knowing that reso-



nance from the weapon could cause her expensive glass to shatter if it got too close, Lily stepped forward. “No, not just a second! You don’t come into my store and ruin my glass and—”

He held up his hand. “Quiet, tadame.”

The anger flushing her cheeks, she grabbed the empty wine bottle and stormed toward him, brandishing the bottle like a weapon. “I am not a tadame. I am ku—”

Lily froze in the effort to prevent the wrong word from escaping her throat. She stopped and gulped as she felt her face grow pale.

He waved his hand. “Sorry, kudame.”

The simple, distracted response set her off. She straightened her back and planted her hands on her hips. “I am Be-dame Lily da Kasin de Genifir! And you will look at me when you’re in my store!”

His head jerked up. His shoulders tensed and she saw a ripple of muscles against the back of his suit. “I knew a Lily before...” He turned and looked back at her.

Lily stepped back and pressed a hand to her lips. Nine years ago, he had stolen her first kiss as they danced in the gazebo of her mother’s home. There was no way she could have forgotten his strong lips or the way rain trickled down his throat right before he walked away. Even the thin scruff of a beard wouldn’t have hidden his high cheeks or detracted from the bright blue eyes that stared back at her.

It was Kendrick, the man who had won the duel that had ruined Lily’s life.

His mouth opened with surprise. He smiled and held open his hands. “Is that really—”

Without thinking, Lily slammed the empty wine bottle into the side of his head, shattering glass and scattering bright flecks of crimson across the front of her store.

A bolt raced through her body, a shock of the impact and her own reaction.

The broken bottle slipped from Lily's hand, one sharp edge dragging against her finger before the glass plummeted to the ground. She didn't have time to raise her hand to her mouth before it struck the wooden floor.

She jerked at the loud crunch but couldn't tear her eyes away from Kendrick.

He stood there, wine running down his face and small shards of glass clinging to his hair. For a moment, his eyes softened into sadness, but then it faded under a spark of humor that she thought she remembered from almost a decade before. "You know," he said in a rough voice, "There were a lot of nights that I practiced what I would say to you if I ever got the chance to see you again."

Kendrick reached up and wiped some of the glass from his cheek. Droplets of red wine clung to his fingertips. His eyes caught hers, warm without a hint of anger from having a glass broken over his head. "I also dreamed of how you would respond. Though, I never expected this."

Lily took a deep breath, the pressure of her corset squeezing on her chest and making it difficult to inhale. Her body tingled with anticipation, a sensation of something about to happen, but she couldn't imagine what it could be. It had been years since she thought of Kendrick, though it took little effort to bring up the anger that his abandonment and betrayal had left behind.

She inhaled again, this time without surprise and more of fury. "Ten years! You ruined my life and then disappeared!" Her scream was shrill against the walls.

His eyes widened and he stepped back with his hands up. "Lily, I didn't—"

"No!" She snapped. "You don't get to use my name. I would have been a tadame if it wasn't for you." A tear

burned in her eye as she shoved him back toward the glass. "I was going to be your tadame!"

Kendrick froze, the muscles of his jaw tightening.

Tears streamed down Lily's cheek as memories came rushing back. "You left me, Kendrick. Left me, right in the middle of the great hall with everyone watching me. That was supposed to be my day, my moment. And then... and then... you just..." A sob caught in her throat. "You just disappeared."

She turned away. "You left me, Ken."

Kendrick exhaled. "Lily, I—"

"No!" she snapped back around, lifting her arm to slap him. "Never again. You never..." Her voice trailed off as she realized a jagged line of blood had snaked its way down his face, tracing the curve of his cheekbone and along the line of his rough beard.

Kendrick shook his head. He knelt down, his eyes focused on her. She felt pinned in place by his stare. The last time she was held by his gaze, he was inching closer to steal her first kiss. He almost knelt before he picked up something and stood up. As he did, he bowed his head and broke his intense stare.

Lily trembled as she watched him lean into his bowler hat and set it down on his head. A splatter of blood struck the broken glass bottle at his feet, ringing out with a soft ping.

When he looked up, his face was in shadows. The streak of blood became a black, sinister line. "My apologies, Be-dame dea Kasin. I have lost the honor to speak to you." His voice was suddenly dark and rumbling, a growl that filled the room.

Lily choked on the sound of it, her body trembling as she saw anger flash under the brim.

Kendrick reached out to the side and she followed the movement with her eyes. His hands were rough and scarred, far different than the soft fingers that had tilted her chin up into a kiss. He stretched his fingers out and a prickle ran along her senses, like a hot breath against the small of her back.

Droplets of wine swirled below his hand, gathering together into a shimmering puddle. Behind him, the splash against the glass front crawled along the glass toward him in a spiderweb pattern. The droplets left glittering trails behind.

Lily watched as the wine plucked itself off the ground and floated into glistening droplets. They hovered above the ground for a few seconds before rising up to gather in his palm.

The trickle of blood from his head joined the motion, appearing underneath the cuff of his shirt and joining the gathering liquid in his palm. The blood quickly disappeared in the darker red wine.

He turned his back to her. Up close, she could see the rough stitching and repairs to his suit. It was old and faded. Someone had recently dyed it, but the colors weren't quite a match and she knew that it had spent the last few years exposed to sun or wind.

"Good day, Bedame," said Kendrick. He opened the glass paneled door with his free hand and stepped out. The globe of floating liquid followed after him, shimmering in the fading sunlight.

A cry rose up down the street to Lily's right.

Kendrick looked over his shoulder toward the noise. He glared and turned away, storming down the street.

A moment later, one of the Martin men who was chasing Kendrick came rushing after him, running on the sidewalk in front of Lily's store.

Kendrick snapped his hand back without looking. The handful of wine and blood launched itself from his palm and shot behind him before splashing against the Martin's face. Sheets of wine and blood coated the front of her store, covering almost a third of the glass and staining everything.

Lily gasped, her mouth opening with her surprise. She screamed after him. "You bastard!"



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## Chapter 3

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# Kudame

Even social ostracization is leashed by the silken ribbons of society.

—Djan de Falin, *Tears of the Abandoned*

**A**n hour later, Lily stood on a ladder as she scraped off the glass. Under her breath, she muttered vile things about Kendrick to pass the time as she painstakingly inspected every inch of the glass for smears or drips. The sun had set, so her light came from a pair of lanterns on the ground. After working in the flickering, yellow light, her eyes ached from the strain of looking for the nearly invisible marks.

She could have cleaned the glass in the morning, but she didn't want to risk any potential customer seeing her store front less than perfect. Her momentary rage that broke the wine bottle cost her a half hour of sweeping and cleaning. Thankfully, Kendrick's magic removed the wine before it could stain the wooden floors; her own magical talent could color wood but it was exhausting to alter anything so dense.

A pale green shone across the street only moments before a carriage rolled toward her. The wheels clattered loud-

ly against the cobblestones, slowing as it came to a halt behind her.

At the brightness shining across her arms, she smiled. "Good evening, Tabithas."

"Good evening, Bedame dea Kasin," said the older driver in a purr of a voice. Tabithas was Lily's mother's driver for the last four decades. An older woman with a talent for remaining silent and attentive. Lily grew up with Tabithas always nearby and couldn't imagine life without the indispensable woman.

Lily turned on the ladder and wiped her forehead. Her cleaning outfit, with tight sleeves and legs, clung to the sweat of her body. She smiled at the older woman who doffed her top hat back. "Is it time already?"

"Yes, dinner is in one bell." Tabithas's eyes flickered to the side. "Something wrong with the store?"

Lily nodded, then smiled with an idea. "Think you can brighten your light and see if I missed a spot? It would save me a lot of time."

"Of course, Bedame dea Kasin. I'm here to serve you."

Tabithas held out her gloved hands. The green light glowed from her knuckles, but as she brought her palm facing up, the glow flowed across her gloves and into the cup of her palm. With glittering eyes, Tabithas held up her hand and the light rapidly brightened into an emerald glow as bright as the sun.

Shielding her eyes, Lily slipped into the store and then inspected the glass from the inside. She found a few spots where Tabithas's light turned the wine black. She rushed out, wiped them clean, and then returned to inspect the glass again. It took her only ten minutes to finish with the last streaks.

Content that the store would be welcoming to customers in the morning, Lily returned inside one last time to gather



her dress, place it in a travel bag, and lock up. Minutes later, she was crawling into the carriage. “Thank you again, Tab.”

“Always, Bedame dea Kasin.”

D. Moonfire

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## Chapter 4

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# Manor Rose

Tarsan has many queens. They aren't the glorious rules on a throne but simply mistresses of each of the grand houses. They rule with an iron fists and a capaciousness that would rival any country.

—No Greater Sorrow, Act II, Scene IV

**Manor** Rose was a beautiful sprawling house on the southern side of the grand city of Spire's Point. After the fire nine years ago destroyed most of the east wing, Lily's mother had it rebuilt with newer architectural designs that brought out the manor's namesake in a pervasive theme: carved roses topped the pillars, the steps were inlaid with mosaics of every color in the current season, and even the smell of roses that permeated everything. The outside of the house glowed a faint pale pink throughout the night, thanks to an alchemical glaze from inlands.

Most of the outlying buildings had no additional lights burning outside. It would be two weeks before the next social event, a dinner and dance, so there was no rush to prepare everything. Instead, it was a moment of stillness before the storm Lily knew would come.

Despite the late hour and her yawns, her heart quickened slightly at the sight of the main entrance of the house. Coming home was a comfort to her, a place of stability and control when the rest of her life had become harried and functional.

The carriage rolled to a stop in front of the double doors. Pale yellow light shone across the inside of the carriage. It mixed with the flickers of green as Tabithas hopped off the bench and came around next to a doorman who was already opening the door.

Lily scooped up the bag with the dress and handed it to the doorman. "To my room, please?"

"Of course, Bedame dea Kasin." Like Tabithas, the doorman always spoke formally even though Lily had grown up with both of them for her entire life.

The doorman stepped away as Tabithas held out her gloved hand.

Lily took it and stepped out of the carriage. She breathed in the rose scent that surrounded the house and smiled. She was home.

"Tadame da Kasin will be in her library," said Tabithas.

"She is expecting me?"

"Your presence was requested, Bedame dea Kasin."

"Thank you."

Lily headed up the marble stairs leading into the house and into the grand entrance of Manor Rose. True to its name, the manor's decorations were mostly pink marble and intricate decorations of roses, vines, and other beautiful flowers. The tips of each petal was subtly colored to match the flower's natural beauty and it gave Lily the impression of walking into a timeless garden each time she came home.

Knowing that her mother expected her, Lily headed straight up the stairs and into her mother's private wing.

The décor changed slightly. On both sides of the hallway, paintings of the Kasin family were intermixed with pastoral scenes of the surrounding countryside. Lily's eyes were drawn to the scenes with her in them, usually as a little girl with so much promise before everything fell around her. At the far end of the hall was a single empty place by her mother's library door; it would have been Lily's when she took over the household, but a spinster couldn't be the mistress of any family.

Seeing the empty spot, she twisted her face in frustration and looked away. She continued down the hall, the thick carpet tugging at her toes with each step. It was as if the woven were manifesting her mother's desire not to see her daughter.

After making an effort to bring a smile to her lips, she knocked on the door.

"Come in." Her mother spoke perfunctory, which meant she was reading or focusing on accounting. She had invested in a number of lace businesses, the stores and services that catered to society's women. Lily's store was one of them.

Lily opened the door and stepped inside, the memories rising up of the countless times she interrupted Sarlin or was presented for punishment.

In the years, her mother had only grown more beautiful. Even without expecting guests, her hair remained in its intricate braid that was popular in the last few years. Streaks of gray were carefully arranged so they highlighted the curves of her braid. The variety of blondes and browns in her hair, along with the gray, were a point of pride; Sarlin didn't use magic to remain beautiful.

Lily inched forward. "Good evening, Mother."

Her voice was muted by the floor to ceiling bookcases filled with books on hundreds of topics ranging from poet-

ry, literature, and guides for keeping households. Like most married women in Society, Sarlin's duties focused on managing the manor and any associated "lace" businesses such as Lily's shop.

Every month, Lily had to present her books to her mother and go through the accounting of her sales and expenses. In the beginning, it was hard, but over the last few years, Lily had grown comfortable with running a business under her mother's watchful eye.

Sarlin looked up from her papers. Her brown eyes shimmered behind tiny, wire-frame glasses. "And to you, my daughter. Please, sit."

Lily dipped into a respectful curtsy, lowering just a few inches, and then slipped into her mother's padded guest chair. She kept her back straight as she sat down and rested both hands, still raw from cleaning her storefront, crossed over her thighs.

Her mother shuffled through the pages, setting stacks of accounting aside to bring up a calendar. Her movements were precise and wasted no effort, but there was something about how her mother moved that prickled Lily's attention. Sarlin's nails tapped a little harder than normal and Lily could see muscles tense in her mother's neck and around her lips.

Lily's breath quickened. She glanced around the room but then brought her attention back to her mother.

Her mother's lips parted for a moment but then closed. She set her calendar on top of her papers and then looked up.

Lily waited with as calm of an expression as she could, a half-smile that all Society women mastered.

"At the end of this Social Season, you will be twenty-seven." Her mother's voice was steel, the same tone she used

when she was about to punish Lily for misbehaving or reproaching for her failing to keep her books in order.

Despite Lily's efforts, her smile dropped from her face.

"You have remained in this house as my daughter and bedame, but after this season, you will become a kudame."

Lily's heart pounded in her chest. She clutched her fingers together, unsure of what to say.

Sarlin shook her head and rested one delicate, polished finger against the calendar. It was the last day of the Social Season, marked with gold leaf. It would also be the grandest party in Kasin and would be set at the Grand Ball at the center of town. "By the last day, you must be moved out of my home."

It was hard to breathe. Lily gasped for a moment, trying to respond appropriately. The words wouldn't come out, not with the sudden order. She gulped as a burning spread across her eyes and ice water dribbled down her spine.

Sarlin's silvery brown eyes fixated on Lily. The older woman said nothing but the weight of her gaze bore down.

Finally, Lily found words. "B-But, where should I go? I don't... I never thought..." A tear ran down Lily's cheek.

Sarlin's eyes softened for a moment. "I know the... circumstances of your presentation has hung over you for years, but I always hoped someone would ask for your hand in marriage despite... the troubles. Unfortunately, superstitions made it too easy for others to forget you."

"Why can't I stay here?" Even as she asked, Lily knew the answer. Society had many rituals. A bedame may remain in her parent's homes while waiting for marriage, but a kudame would never get married. They were shuffled to smaller houses in the poorer districts to be easily forgotten in the rush of High Society. It was, in effect, how she would be banned from the elevated circles of society.

She sniffed and fumbled for one of the silk handkerchiefs her mother kept hanging on the corner of her desk.

Sarlin's hand caught hers. "Lily."

Lily's tears roll down her cheeks. "I'm sorry."

Her mother stood up and came around the desk, still holding her hand. She pulled Lily from the chair and pulled her into a tight hug. She smelled of her favorite rose perfume. "You are my daughter and that will never change. I'm not going to abandon you, I promise."

"I-I tried but no... no one wants me."

"I know. I know," whispered her mother.

"W-What do I do?"

"Kasin will take care of you. We'll find you a good home. It won't be the manor, but it will be a good house for you."

"And my store? What if I don't make enough to pay for a place... a place of my own?"

"We'll cover the payments of your store and the house for five more years. That will be enough to establish yourself. After that..."

Lily rested her cheek against her mother's shoulder.

Sarlin didn't finish the sentence. Instead, she hugged Lily tightly. "I'm sorry, daughter. I'm sorry all this happened. I wish there was anything I could do but I can't afford a scandal anymore than you."

No matter what words were said, High Society still bound both of them in their places. Lily was to become a kudame and would forever be cursed to live as a spinster.



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## Chapter 5

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# Decisions

Life doesn't stop just because of sorrow's knocking.

—Tachisomi Chiniróma

**L**ily smiled sweetly as a Dinsanas, young girl of sixteen, stammered with excitement about her new dress. It had only taken an hour to come up with a classical pattern that would flatter the young debutante's generous hips and heart-shaped face. The colors were easy to determine, the proper shade of green for fifth week events and she had plenty of sheer cream fabric for a debutante, but the rest of it required a flair of fashion.

Falim na Maifir, the girl's mother, was young. Lily guessed that she had been sixteen or seventeen when she had birthed her daughter. Both had the same smile and way of repeating their words when they were excited. The mother kept fingering her wedding bracelet. The yellow gold had been polished to a shine, no doubt to show off the small insignia of her husband's new rank: Knight of Kasin. It was the lowest military rank given the privileged to participate in High Society events.

After listening to the mother's often-repeated descriptions, Lily knew the promotion came only weeks ago, just in time for their daughter's debut.

Lily smiled and tried not to let the bitterness of her own situation darken their celebrations. Both mother and daughter were still in shock they were entering the world of Society, the first tiny step that may propel their family higher in the ranks of the Kasin family.

"Thank-thank you!" gushed the young girl.

"Come on," urged Falim, "we need to move on. We only have a few hours before the long drive home."

"I'm going to get all-all my dresses from you!"

Lily smiled politely. She had heard that promise many times, but it rarely came true. Like most of the other debutantes, they would order from as many different seamstresses as they could. She expected to see the young girl once more and then never again. With her bust and hips, Lily knew that the young girl would be a catch if she could calm down.

"Come on!" said her mother, firmly guiding the young girl from the store.

"Goodbye-bye!"

Lily waved and watched as they crossed in front of her window to go to their next stop, a milliner who specialized in making hats for young women just entering the Society scene and didn't have the money to splurge. They mentioned the name more than once.

As soon as the mother and daughter slipped out of view, Lily let out a long sigh and let her shoulders droop slightly. It had been a busy day, with four new commissions for dresses. They were all cheaper ones for minor functions and parties, but it still took time to sew and fit them. The patterns and deadlines danced in her head, weighing her down.

She headed to her desk and sat down. Her notebook rested on the side of a calendar that had dozens of lines to identify her commitments. In her mind, she could see the days before those events that needed her attention to measure, cut, and sew hundreds of yards worth of material.

Except for Nirih's and three other high-priced dresses, the rest would bring in little profits compared to the hours she needed to make them. It was tempting to cut corners and only single stitch the seams or use a simpler embroidery pattern, but she knew unprofitable orders were the cost of being an owner with a barely acceptable reputation. She had to pay the bills with secondary functions and insignificant parties before others sought her out for the formal affairs.

She marked down the young girl's party and the various deadlines needed to make that commitment. After that, she scrawled a horizontal line across the days she needed to work on the dress. As she filled in her notes, she kept catching sight of the cream cuff of her outfit.

The cream was the only indication that she was still of marrying age. It had been two weeks since her mother made her announcement and the hopes of marriage crumbled quickly. She had months until the final Social event, but there wasn't anyone interested in her. She had drifted from Society over the last few years and the idea of delving back into the formal world of dances, dinners, and flirting was overwhelming.

Her thoughts turned to Kendrick. His dark eyes still haunted her dreams. The almost forgotten memories of his stolen kiss had been rekindled when he'd reappeared in her life. She hadn't seen him since he ran off, but only part of her was relieved by that. The other part still longed to touch him again, quietly in the rain, like they did long ago on her mother's gazebo.

A blush crept up on her cheeks.

She grabbed for a nearby bottle of wine and poured herself a glass with a shaking hand. Gulping, she drained the glass and set it down harder than she intended. It rocked back and forth for a second before settling into place. She drained the bottle into the glass again but left both standing.

Lily took a deep breath and focused on her notes. She made it only a few words before Kendrick's face once again welled up across her mind.

"Damn it!"

She shoved the papers forward, crumbling the pages against the backboard of her desk. The glass tilted alarmingly and then fell over the side.

"Damn!" This time she screamed louder.

The glass bounced, sending wine splattering everywhere. It slopped up against her dress and splashed across the wooden floor and a deep-pile rug near her desk.

Frustrated, Lily almost screamed with rage. She lashed out at the glass but missed it. Shoving herself up from her seat, she started to kick again but then she spotted movement near the window.

It was not a customer, but someone hurrying past the store to another destination. The brief interruption was enough to halt her frustration.

Lily stood there for a long moment, trying to calm her emotions. Every time Kendrick's face rose in her thoughts, she crushed it down by focusing on the dresses she had to make in the new few weeks. But, despite her effort, it didn't work. She groaned and then decided to work on the wine stain on the floor. She decided cleaning would be more effective to exorcise her memories.

As she mopped up the floor, she considered her situation. She was only months away from being a kudame and

being forced from her childhood home. No one would want an unlucky bedame for their wife, which meant she was only prolonging the inevitable by waiting until the end of the Season.

She cleaned as she imagined someone calling for her, but it was an empty dream; she had burnt out of those fantasies years ago. There were only two who had ever expressed an interest in her hand: Kendrick and Hasan. The two men had come to blows during the party before each one disappeared after the fire. Neither had come back in nine years.

Lily leaned against the mop with a sad smile on her face. She hadn't thought about Hasan for many years either. If it wasn't for Kendrick returning, she would have forgotten him. She heard he got married to another Kasin about a year after the fight. It wasn't seemly for her to keep a thread on him, so she let their lives drift apart.

She tried to remember what Hasan looked like. She remembered long, blond hair and delicate fingers. His mother and father were both bureaucrats with a few toes into Society. He was destined to follow their footsteps.

The memories refused to solidify. After a few seconds of leaning there, she returned to her cleaning and let her thoughts drift toward the dresses she had to make and her obligations.

When she started to color the wood again, using her magic to bring it back to the same shade as the surrounding planks, the memories welled up and tears threatened to fall. She struggled, desperate not to remember her past despite the effort to concentrate.

By the time she finished cleaning, she made a decision. She was going to move out as soon as she could. With her work load increasing steadily, there was no time to focus on moving at the end of the Social Season. Her mother, no

doubt, would have her out on the final day, which meant Lily would be distracted by the move when she needed to focus on crafting the best dresses she could.

She finished on a heavy heart. It felt good to make a decision, but it left a sour taste in the back of her throat. Most of her childhood dreams had been of moving in with a husband directly from her mother's house, a shining lighting of everything that was right in Society.

A tear ran down her cheek before she wiped it off.

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## Chapter 6

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# A New Home

Blood is precious to every family, even that spilled on the ground.  
—Kompas Diovanim, *Children of Stone* (Act 1, Scene 3)

**L**ily sat in the middle of her mother's closed carriage and stared down at her gloved hands. She felt vulnerable and exposed despite the curtains drawn over the windows and the solid doors that were firmly latched. She glanced around at the familiar interior of the carriage and then returned her gaze back to her clasped hands.

The rest of Society would be talking about her now. Even if they weren't there when she drove away, it would be a matter of hours before the whispers would have traveled through the city. There were very few kudames that she knew about, so her fall into that title would be noteworthy for at least a few days.

She adjusted the bottom of her dress, a dark green with delicate golden embroidery. One fold had caught underneath her thigh. Even though no one could see her in the carriage, she still kept her movements discrete as she tugged the fabric free and settled back into place.

The carriage hit a pothole and everything jerked violently.

Lily slipped along the leather bench, her heels dragging against the carpeted floor. She grabbed the side railing tightly and held on. She hoped that the remaining road wouldn't be as rough.

As the rock glasses clinked loudly from the shifting, Tabithas spoke through the narrow window between Lily and the driver's bench. "Sorry, Bedame dea Kasin. I'm not familiar with this part of town but I can see it smooths out in a chain or so.

Lily gritted her teeth and held tighter. "Thank you."

True to Tabithas' word, the carriage stopped bouncing after a few yards. Lily relaxed her grip, but didn't move her hand from the railing. There would be more rough patches in store for her; it was not unlike her fate in life.

She contemplated her future home, wondering about it. It was a good place, her mother promised that, but Lily knew it wouldn't be even a tenth the size of the Manor Rose. She only had a few abstracts to cling to: a two bedroom townhouse, a small bathroom, carriage service to her store for a year, and even a small stipend. A far cry from her mother's lavish lifestyle and one that Lily wasn't sure she could accept.

She twisted her fingers together, struggling with the tears. She was a spinster in everything but title. An unwanted woman.

Her despair kept her company for the rest of the ride. The carriage came to a halt. Tabithas hopped off with the agility of a woman half her age, her white hair fluttering as she did.

Lily turned on the seat and took a deep breath. She didn't know what to expect other than the tears that threatened to roll down her cheeks.



The door creaked.

Her heart pounded.

Tabithas opened the door, stepping aside as she did to reveal the front of Lily's new home.

It was a two-story townhouse made of dark-brown bricks with white trim. The front door was ornate, white with a stained glassed window and the Kasin family crest hanging off the keystone. A wrought-iron fence protected a small garden in the front. The earth was recently tilled and brightly colored flowers filled the cramped space. The smell of fresh earth, sweet perfume, and sweat filled the air. Someone had planted two rose bushes next to the gate, no doubt to remind her of Manor Rose.

Lily took a deep, shuddering breath. "I-I can do this."

She took a step out of the carriage, lifting her head as she did to look up at the second floor. A balcony stood out above the front door, a matching iron railing giving it an empty look. Above it, the roof came to a rounded tip with a short railing along the gutters. Two stone flowers sat on the corners of the roof. The flower statues had one thick branch leading out to drain water away from the foundation.

Lily stood there, staring at it. It was tiny, not much larger than her bedroom suite. As she stared at it, trying to comprehend living in such cramped quarters, tears began to roll down her cheeks.

"Oh, no, no," whispered Tabithas as she stepped in front of Lily and blocked her view. She brought up a white silk cloth and held it in her gloved fingers. "No, don't cry. Not here."

"It... it's so small."

"Only now. In a day, it will feel big again."

"W-What did... how can I?"

Tabithas gave her a wide smile, the wrinkles around her eyes crinkling. "Because you are Kasin and you are loved by your family."

"I'm a kudame now."

"No, you are still Bedame Lily dea Kasin, the daughter of Tadame Sarlin da Kasin ne Genifir. You are strong and this is but one moment in your life."

"I... I... I don't know what I'm going to do."

Tabithas took the cloth and blotted the tears from Lily's face. "You are going to calm yourself. And then you are going to walk into that house as if you own it. Be proud, be strong, be Kasin."

Lily took the cloth to finish drying her tears. "Thank you, Tabithas."

"I serve, Bedame dea Kasin."

"But you won't serve me now."

Tabithas' eyes shimmered for a moment. "No more. But it was an honor to watch you grow up into a beautiful woman. I cherished every moment that I did serve you."

Lily sniffed and the tears threatened to fall again.

"No, no, not now, Bedame dea Kasin. You are proud, right?"

Lily swallowed hard. "Y-Yes."

"Good. Welcome home, Bedame dea Kasin." Tabithas stepped to the side, discretely taking the cloth from Lily's hand as she did.

Lily felt exposed as she stood in front of her home. She took a hesitant step and then another, each one easier than before as she walked through the open gate and up to her new home. As she held her dress off the stairs, she wondered if the door was unlocked.

She glanced back but Tabithas had remained behind. The older woman looked like she was also on the edge of tears as she folded the cloth in her hand.

Their eyes met and Tabithas gave a tiny gesture for Lily to continue.

Shuddering with emotions, Lily turned.

The front door was opened. She caught sight of blond hair as an older man bowed deeply with his top hat held to his chest. His black suit seemed to suck in the yellow light from the magical lights that shone down a hall of rich, dark wood. When he straightened, he spoke firmly. "Welcome to your new home, Kudame dea Kasin."

Her new title, or what would be her title, slapped into her. She froze as she stared at the house, desperately trying to contain the cry that rose in her throat or the tears that burned in her eyes. She clutched the fabric of her dress as she stared through the tears, the world rippling.

"I'm sorry, Kudame? Bedame?" The man's voice sounded familiar.

Lily ducked her head. She considered correcting him, but didn't. She would have to get used to the name now. Stomach fluttering, she responded softly. "Sorry, I'm not used to that title yet."

"My apologies."

She sniffed and entered her house. It smelled of her mother's roses, a touch of her previous home that brought a pang of sadness. She pushed it aside and continued inside.

"It's a good home, Lily." The man gulped. "I'm sorry that your first one..."

Lily's skin tingled as she focused on the words.

The man cleared his throat. "... wasn't ours together."

Lily straightened her back. "W-What?"

Turning around, she stared at the man who still held open the door. She didn't recognize him at first until he looked up. Brown eyes with flecks of gold looked back at her, shimmering with unshed tears. He had a narrow face, cleanly shaven, with a scar that bisected his left eyebrow.

She remembered the scar. Kendrick had made it during the duel over her hand, a mocking cut as he soundly defeated his opponent. She had stared at it pouring blood down his face as Hasan swore that he would never let her go.

Trembling, her eyes slid down from the scar to the rest of his face. The memories she had tried to recall a few days ago came rushing back, filling in the gaps long forgotten. He had held her tightly as they danced, swirling around the floor as she enjoyed the months of being wanted and desired, a debutante.

He had promised he would have her then, a whispered proclamation that had vibrated with intensity. The same intensity that burned in his gaze now. She felt pinned by his stare, held tightly just as he did during their dance.

"I... never got to have you, Lily. I'm sorry."

"H-Hasan?"

He nodded once and then bowed again. "Hasan da Kasin de Pilnok at your service, housing coordinator for the family of Kasin." He looked up. "And the man who never stopped loving you."

Lily's hand dropped to her side. She didn't know what to say, what to think. She could only stare at Hasan as he closed the door and stepped forward.

"I was supposed to be the one who got you. But, after that... incident," he swept his hand to the side, "my father had me confined to his house for a few days to clear my head. When I got out—" His hand balled into fist. "—I was forbidden to see you again. It wasn't supposed to be that way, it wasn't."

Lily's tears threatened to return. Years ago, she wanted him or Kendrick to return to her but neither did. Instead, she had been abandoned by Society: the invitations stopped showing up in the mail, her dresses for later events were re-

turned half-finished, and even her former friends went to events without her.

“Did you remember me?”

She didn’t have the heart to tell him that she couldn’t remember his face. Instead, she nodded twice.

Hasan stepped forward, a smile on his face. “I never forgot about you. Not once in all these years.”

Lily caught sight of movement and glanced down. Hasan wore a wedding bracelet.

He looked down before pulling his arm behind his back. “I didn’t have a choice. I had to get married. Mindil is a good woman but she... she isn’t you.”

Stepping back, Lily tried to regain her emotions that Hasan had ripped open. She missed him, she craved the intensity of his actions and his voice. She trembled at the idea of him holding her again, clinging to her as they danced across the floor.

She gulped and gestured to the house, unable to take her eyes away from him. “I-I... I should see the place.”

Hasan held still for a long heartbeat and then nodded. Clearing his throat, he picked up a carved wooden box from an ornate table by the door. “I’m sorry. These are your keys.”

Their fingers touched as he handed over the box. Lily jumped at the electric touch. It coursed along her skin, underneath her dress, and prickled against her senses. She gasped and snatched the box away, holding it to her chest as her heart pounded painfully.

“The Kasin family holds the mortgage for the place. You have five... six years to take title. We’ll help you throughout the time, paying bills and easing in your duties. The paperwork in the dining room—” He pointed to room to the side. “—has the schedules. I can adjust them if you need to, I have a fair amount of autonomy in this regard.”

It was almost a relief to speak business with Hasan, but not quite. She peeked at him, taking in his profile. He had changed over the years, thinner but trimmer. His suit was also impeccably tailored, unlike Kendrick's. He was the epitome of a Kasin bureaucrat, a man of means in the city. He would have been a good husband for her, one that could have cared for her.

Lily forced down her feelings, sorrow for her new life and the sparks of interest that were starting to flare up. She could have had him, he still wanted her, that much was sure.

When Hasan took her elbow and guided her into the dining room, she followed meekly with the electric touch rippling along her skin. His touch was hot and confident, almost commanding.

"Sit here," he said and held out a leather-padded chair.

She did without questioning, sinking down.

He pushed it in and sat down next to her, his leg brushing against hers. He pulled out the paperwork and started to go over the numbers.

Lily sat there, trying to comprehend the numbers and agreements. The room spun around her as she clutched to the table with one hand and Hasan's hand with the other.

It took her a moment to realize they were holding hands. She didn't remember who made the first movement, but the thrill of it sent her pulse racing and the room spinning even faster.

And then silence.

Lily looked up. "W-What?"

Hasan stared at her with his intense eyes. The grip on her hand was firm, almost tight. "Have you seen Kendrick? I heard he came into town a few weeks ago. Been missing for a long time."

Lily's breath caught in her throat.

“He was arrested that night.”

“I-I didn’t know.”

“But then his father threw him on a boat to cool his senses.” Hasan’s grip tightened. “He was only supposed to be gone two years but he didn’t come back until recently.”

“What happened?”

“All I heard that he was part of some trouble and ended up in a prison. A nasty prison off the Coal Shores.”

Lily’s chest tightened. She didn’t know that Kendrick had been in prison, or anywhere else. Only that he showed up at her store.

“He’s not a good man for you, Lily. You should stay away.”

She shook her head. “He doesn’t want me. I... hit him over the head with a bottle of wine.”

A faint smile quirked his lip. “You hit him?”

Gingerly, she nodded.

Hasan chuckled and let out a sigh of relief. “Good, he deserved it.”

Lily said nothing.

“Do you want me to order dinner?” He leaned close to her and she felt the heat of his body against her skin.

With a flush rising in her cheeks, she found it difficult to swallow. “A-Aren’t you expected home?”

Hasan said nothing for a long moment, his intense stare peering into her eyes. Then, his shoulders slumped. Standing up, he cleared his throat. “I should be going, my... you’re right. I’m expected. But, don’t hesitate to call on me any time of day or night. I’ll do whatever I can to serve you.”

Lily stood up feeling like she had said the wrong thing.

After scrawling his home address on a piece of paper, he folded it twice and placed it in her hand. “I’m sorry for everything, Lily. I... I’ll make it up, somehow. I promise.”

D. Moonfire



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## Chapter 7

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# Reparations

In many quarters, there is no such thing as a kusire. An unwed man remains a besire until the day he dies.

—Klaus de Hakrin, *The Standards of Tarsan*

Lily hummed to herself as she unrolled the fabric for Nirih's dress across a large table in the back of her store. The light material easily covered the rod-long surface before slumping off the far end. With practiced grace, she set down the weights as she pictured the pattern she would cut out.

Among all of her current projects, Nirih's dress was the most important. The girl's parents would ensure that she was seen everywhere it mattered, that her name was announced in the perfect moments of calm, and that every step she took would be in the full view of the upper echelons of High Society. For one night, Lily's work would be draped over Nirih, the center of everyone's attention.

With a sigh, Lily reached over and plucked her wineglass from the table. It was heavy despite being half-full, the glass was weighted to avoid tipping and she had just opened the bottle. It was a good year, moderate in cost and

light to the taste, but she liked to make the bottle last an entire night of sewing. Sewing drunk never worked.

She glanced at the fabric. The pattern wavered in her head for a moment as she imagined the cloth draping over Nirih's body. With a steady hand, she began to block out the shapes and lines with a stick of chalk. When she made a mistake or changed her mind, she would use her pinkie finger to erase it before redrawing the line.

The initial design was simple, most dresses had the same basic construction. It wasn't until she got into the details, how the fabric would accent Nirih's breasts or cling to her shoulders, that Lily found herself doubting her own skill. The gravity of her situation, the force of a thousand imagined eyes, made it hard to concentrate because every line had to be perfect.

She struggled with each part, working through the patterns in both her head and on the fabric. The world slipped away, lost in a haze of shifting lines, smeared chalk, and the steadily decreasing level of wine in her glass.

It wasn't until hours later that she had just redone the collar at least a dozen times. Each time, the lines didn't feel right. She tried the classic patterns and the more modern ones, but they wouldn't accent Nirih's shape in a way that felt right to Lily. Something was off but she couldn't put her finger on it.

With a hiss, she stared at the dusty fabric for a long moment while rolling the stick in her hand. She knew what she thought would work, a cowl collar instead of a scoop or even a square, but it wasn't traditional enough for a mother like Juliet. In fact, it would be somewhat shocking since it hid more than showed the girl's beauty. On the other hand, her gut feeling was that it would emphasize the right parts and the exoticness of the collar was different enough to draw attention.

Lily hated having to make the decision that would influence everything. Her dress was only one part of Nirih's presentation. Usually it was the foundation that milliners and shoes and makeup and even perfumes would enhance. Together, they made up the lace businesses. If all the businesses made the right choices and followed through with an appropriate skill, it would result in Nirih finding the perfect husband.

High Society was also superstitious. If Nirih found a wealthy mate, then every business that supplied her outfits would benefit as the next year's debutantes would flock to them in hopes of stealing a bit of that luck.

Likewise, if the presentation went disastrously, such as Lily's own, then business could dry up. Nine years ago, a seamstress and a milliner closed their doors in part because of Lily's trouble.

It was cruel to have so many businesses hanging off the actions of a few teenage girls, but that was the nature of lace businesses. They needed to be associated with enough good marriages to weather the bad showing. The richer businesses could be more selective of their clientele, but Lily didn't have the years of history behind her to avoid risky projects.

Lily sighed and erased the collar again. She started to draw out another scoop but changed her mind and drew a cowl instead. Her gut said it was closer to what she needed but she couldn't picture any collar that sang to her. Even as she marked out the pattern, she imagined herself explaining to Juliet about her decision with the collar. The conversation in her head quickly turned sour. Unwilling to keep herself distracted, Lily redirected her thoughts to her new home.

She had moved in only a few days before and it still felt like an ill-fitted corset. She couldn't get the bathroom deco-

rated right and the bedroom smelled wrong. Thanks to Hasan's workers, both rooms had been painted over twice. While she worked on the dress, they were painting the upper bathroom a third time and finding a new set of fixtures for the bedroom cabinets; Lily didn't want to be a burden but Hasan noticed her discomfort and insisted in his usual intense manner.

She smiled to herself. It was nice having him doting over her. Over the years there hadn't been many men interested in her, so even the slightest of his attention brought a smile to her lips. She loved when he scooted his chair closer to hers just so they could touch as they worked through ledgers, estimates, or designs.

The fact Hasan was married bothered her. She wanted more, to invite him to stay for dinner or let the touching growing more heated, but it was improper with a marriage bracelet around his wrist. Despite that, she found herself silently begging him to push even further, to press his firm body against her own and to kiss her.

Her body warmed up at her thoughts. She could feel it tingling along her inner thighs and along her sex. They both wanted it, that was clear. The bracelet was the only thing keeping them apart. She hoped that it would remain between them, she didn't know if she could say no if he actually kissed her.

Lily rolled the chalk in her hand, the dress momentarily forgotten. Her breath came out in short gasps as she tried to picture his lips against her shoulder. Would he kiss as intensely as he looked at her? Would it be firm hands that grabbed her and pushed her against the wall? Or would he be gentle and delicate, trailing over her skin with fingertips and heated breath?

With a start, she realized she was grinding her hips against the edge of the table. She felt hot and slick, excited

without another lover to touch her. With a whimper, she clutched the chalk stick and tried to pull her thoughts out of the dark.

The chalk snapped.

Lily gasped and let the pieces drop from her palm. She planted her fingers against the fabric and pushed herself away. She had a dress to make, she had to concentrate.

There was a creak near the front door, muted through the archway leading into her working area.

She jumped and pushed back, a blush burning on her cheeks as she imagined some stranger seeing her humping the edge of the table with some fantasy. "H-Hello?"

No one answered.

"May I help you?"

She felt a little foolish assuming there was someone in the front room of the store. She straightened her back and groaned as sore muscles protected the movement. Working on dresses was hard on the body, hours of bending over a table or the tedious hours of embroidering left little aches and pains to greet her day.

Lily rubbed her eyes and headed toward the front. "Hello? Who's there?"

When she saw a man standing just inside the store, she jumped back with a gasp.

He stood there in a black suit, a bowler on his head and his hands held behind his back. It was like a military posture with square shoulders and a straight back. Behind him, the light from a few carriages cast his entire body in darkness as they passed. "Hello, Lily."

It was Kendrick.

Her heart thumped loudly. With a shaking hand, she reached over and ran her finger along the stalk of a lamp.

It brightened the room, revealing his broad shoulders straining his jacket, the dark scruff of his beard, and even

the way his muscular legs seemed to have ironed out his trousers. His body was taut, almost vibrating, as he kept his position.

Lily's fantasies couldn't help but rise up. One man was still on her mind while the other stood in front of her. She noticed differences as the seconds stretched out between them. Hasan was slender and lithe compared to Kendrick's muscular hardness. The blond administrator was closely shaved, soft in just the right places when her hand accidentally touched him. Kendrick looked more primal, with dark eyes barely visible underneath the brow of his hat and the way his body flexed as he stood there.

She gulped and felt the welcoming surge of heat rising up inside her. Both were beautiful. She wanted to know how Kendrick would kiss compared to Hasan.

Her exhaustion made it hard to concentrate. She turned her head slightly to clear her thoughts before speaking to him. "Kendrick... I wasn't expecting you."

Kendrick chuckled and shrugged, his hands still clasped behind him. "Life has been a bit chaotic. I wanted to see you." He let out a long breath. "Years ago, actually but a few days ago also. I left in... a bit of a hurry and made a mess."

Sweat beading her brow. "H-Has... someone said you were in prison."

Kendrick cocked his head. The smile never left his lips but it grew harder. His eyes seemed to gather in the darkness for a moment and the smell of the ocean wafted through the air. "Word gets around, doesn't it?"

"Not much, but I heard that."

"Yeah, everyone is afraid the brat is going to ruin things. You'd think nine years would be enough. As soon as I come back, they assume I haven't changed."

"No, I didn't mean—"

"I know what you mean, Lily. I've been followed since the day I got off that boat. There are three of them just outside, two to the right and one to the left." He nodded with his head as he spoke.

"Martins?"

Kendrick looked at the store front, giving her a profile of his face. His beard was a little longer than before, dark hair covering his strong jaw. "Sorry about the mess last time. I was very rude for... I was rude."

Lily tensed. "To me?"

A smile and he glanced at her. Her body tingled with the look. "You broke a bottle of wine over my head."

"You ruined my life."

As soon as she said it, she knew it was probably the wrong thing. She tried to build up the courage to take it back but Kendrick turned back to her. He brought one hand from behind his back, there was a bottle between two rough fingers. "Maybe I can replace the bottle?"

Lily's heart beat faster. She struggled to keep a tremble from shaking her body. "It was empty," she whispered.

"This one isn't." He held it up. "Reparations for ruining your store?"

She considered him for a moment. He still wore the same ill-fitted suit from before, but the hat was new. He also had fresh scars on the hand holding the bottle, the red scab looked like a sword cut of some sort.

Hasan had told her Kendrick was trouble. Every night, he reminded her not to talk to the dark-haired man. But standing in front of Kendrick, Lily remembered the stolen kiss and the way Kendrick held her in the gazebo years ago. He had a powerful grip, demanding but gentle at the same time. Would he still have it?

"Just in case the Merlon 1490 didn't appeal to you, I also brought a Larvin 1508." Kendrick held out a second bottle.

His thumb had been bandaged and there was a crimson spot at the middle. The hardness in his eyes disappeared in a flash and he favored her with a smile.

She hesitated before she answered, "The Merlon would be wonderful."

Lily went to her desk and picked up two fresh glasses. When she turned around, he was sitting in one of her chairs with a small table between them. With a tiny sigh of relief, she slipped into the other one. She didn't know if she could handle being close to him; it was hard enough to resist Hasan when they sat next to each other.

As Kendrick uncorked and poured the glasses, she spoke up.

"Where are you staying now?"

"An inn near the docks. It isn't very clean or," he cringed, "or quiet. But the keeper owed me a favor and I needed a place."

He finished pouring her glass with a twist of his wrist. A single drop of red wine splashed into the glass, leaving ripples radiating out.

"You can't stay at your father's?"

Kendrick chuckled. "My father moved back to the country after... us."

"It wasn't—"

He held up his hand. "I brought shame on my family, I know that. But I'm not here for that, I'm here to pay back the wine." He smiled and she felt heat radiate along her stomach. He had a brilliant smile.

Kendrick poured a second glass. When he finished, he twisted the bottle again but this time the last droplet of wine hovered in air just a heartbeat too long before splashing. He set down the bottle and handed her one of the glasses.

She took it but his fingers weren't out of the way.



Lily parted her lips with surprise as their hands slipped against each other. Rough skin against her delicate fingers sent a thrill coursing along her body, adding to the heat and the flush that colored her cheeks. She gulped and stared at him, watching as he sipped at the glass before setting it down.

“I heard some wines need a few more years than normal to grow up,” he said as he leaned toward her.

The table between them didn’t seem large enough. She could feel his heat in the air and his breath against her skin. It smelled of ocean and surf, a hint of his magic.

Lily’s heart beat faster. She lifted her lips, tasting the wine in the air.

Kendrick’s breath heated her lips. They tingled from the wash of air. She could feel his presence even though they weren’t touching, every inch of his body somehow beating against her body.

“Ken...?”

“Seven years in that damn prison,” he whispered. “All that time, the only thing I could do was try and find the words to apologize for what I had done.”

Lily’s breath came faster, tiny pants as she felt pinned by his words. She needed to escape, but her body refused to move. Instead, she stood there and stared into his dark, brown eyes.

“I was going to find you and come to your house. To ask you to forgive me and to wish your husband the best of luck.”

“I...”

Kendrick frowned. “But you weren’t married. I don’t know how that happened, but I know it was my fault. I didn’t... I didn’t mean for that to happen. It wasn’t supposed to be what happened. You weren’t supposed to be alone.”

“It was the only... only thing I could do,” she whispered back, afraid to break the tension that stretched between them.

He licked his lips and leaned closer until they were only inches away from each other.

She trembled at his closeness. Her cheeks burned and she wanted to just throw herself at him, to close the gap. Inches away felt like miles.

Suddenly, his eyes darkened even more. Kendrick pulled back sharply. “No.”

Lily almost slipped from the chair. Her breath coming out in a rush.

“I won’t ruin your life again,” he said in a hard tone. He surged out of his seat and rushed to the door.

Lily held up her hand, trying to find the words to stop him.

The door closed shut with a crack.

Kendrick was nothing but a dark blur of movement as he crossed the street and walked out of sight.

She took a deep breath, struggling with her emotions. She gulped and looked down at the glass in her hand. With a start, she looked around for the other but it was gone. He had taken it.

For a long moment, she stared at the empty spot that he had just vacated. His presence grated on her nerves but his absence somehow felt worse. More importantly, why both Kendrick and Hasan were back in her life?

A suited man with a Martin crest ran across the front of her store, crossing the street as he did. He disappeared after Kendrick.

Lily wondered what Kendrick did to upset the Martin family. But then she reminded herself that she had a dress to make. Picking up the other bottle, she carried it and the glass back into her work area.

She'd have a few hours of pretending not to think about either Kendrick or Hasan. She was doomed to failure but at least she could struggle with Nirih's dress while she dreamed of both men.



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## Chapter 8

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# Waiting

Fear that man who stands in shadows but never steps out into the light.  
—Xartis Povaldin

**A**fter a night of disturbing dreams, Lily woke up with a gasp of relief. She reached out for the familiar end table she grew up with as a teenager but her questing fingers brushed against a wooden surface a few inches too high. Still dazed from waking up, she felt a pang of fear realizing she wasn't in her home.

She sat up with a frown and stared at the unfamiliar yellow and cream walls.

The nightmares were fading quickly. Images flashed across her mind of the various scenes that had haunted her: Nirih's dress falling apart during the show, Kendrick and Hasan dueling naked in front of all of High Society, and her being endlessly kicked out of her mother's house.

It took her a moment to remember that she had moved. Even after a week, the frustration and sorrow threatened to rise up in the back of her throat. Night by night, day by day, the room grew more familiar. She lifted her hand slightly

and ran along the carved wooden surface of the end table and picked up her schedule book.

It was Nondei, the sixth and last day of the week. No business was open which meant she could spend the entire day working on Nirih's dress without interruption.

Lily frowned at herself. The entire week had been wasted with her inability to design a proper outfit. She already planned out her Cibdei to work on some of the other dresses but the approaching deadlines for the critical dress loomed over her thoughts.

Smiling grimly, she pushed herself out of bed and started to get dressed. Twenty minutes later, she was humming a few bars of a popular melody as she sat at one of the dining room chairs and pulled on her low-cut boots.

Like all women of Society, she wore a dress whenever she considered going outside. It wouldn't be seemly to be outfitted like a child or a man. Since the store would be closed for the day, she decided to wear a comfortable outfit of flowing material that draped from her shoulders and hips instead of the more formal dresses that required a bustle or a hoop. The material of her sun dress fluttered with her every movement, the intricate pattern of flowers and vines dancing along her pale skin.

Lily loved the design it reminded her of the breezy materials she wore as a little girl, long before she became a debutante.

She finished lacing up her boots and looked them over. The black leather didn't match the yellow floral pattern of her skirt. With a shrug, she reached down and stroked her palm against the warm material. Instantly, the black melted away into a lemon wash that brought out the delicate embroidery of her skirt. Her smile grew as the magic seeped through the stitched eye-holes and up along the laces, coloring it to the exact shade of the flowers in her dress.

Lily reached up and ran her fingers through her hair, changing the strands to an array of different blondes with hints of lemon to match her outfit. It had been years since she had a natural color, but unlike Juliet's bland, magical coloring, she used a variety of different shades to give the impression of natural tones.

Satisfied, she stood up and grabbed a heavy bag and swept it over her shoulder. It had leftovers from the previous night, nestled inside a frozen canvas pouch. It would weigh her down for the trip to the store but she wouldn't have to leave the store for lunch.

Her stomach rumbled to remind her that she had skimped on breakfast, but she decided to pick up a few treats on the way to her store; the jems in her bag clinked together as she pictured the honey cream pastries she discovered a few days ago.

On the table next to her, lay her dark blue hat with two plumes of feathers and a few coils of silk along the brim. She hoisted her bag on her shoulder and picked up the hat, coloring it to match her dress as she set it on her head.

Without looking at the papers piled up on the rest of the table, she headed outside and toward her store at a brisk walk.

It was already mid-morning with just a hint of a breeze carrying the perfume of flowers down the streets. Many of her neighbors were out, strolling along the walks and through the gardens as they enjoyed the rest day. The street she lived on had craftsmen and middle-class workers. During the rest of the week, their outfits were simple and functional, but for Nondei, they pulled out their finest to stroll around town and be seen by others.

Lily loved to see the different fashions. They were a stark contrast to the High Society dresses and suits. There were colors, ruffles, and frills. She liked the hints of classical pat-

terns that had the complex parts excised into a hint of what she created. Even for the end of the week, they were as casual as her own dress with flowing material and expression embroidery that could never be shown during a Society event.

She smiled as she walked past people, enjoying the sight of rich fabrics and pale suits. The sound of heels and canes tapping against the ground punctuated the clopping of horses, the squeak of carriage wheels, and even the rumble of the strange mechanical riding devices that were becoming popular among the middle-class.

Her walk didn't require remembering anyone's lineage or even speaking to strangers. Instead of the necessity of addressing everyone, she and her neighbors simply nodded to each other or tilted their hats in greeting and moved on. If she stopped, she knew they would speak to her, but fear and duty kept her walking.

A few blocks away, she picked up a pair of honey cream pastries from the young man selling them from a stand. She continued along her way while eating them and then licking her fingers clean.

She lived over two miles from her work, but with the beautiful morning, it wasn't worth the expense of ordering a carriage. She didn't have a dedicated driver and every trip came out of her expenses; she tried to only use them when she worked past midnight to avoid falling asleep along the way.

"Lily!"

She jumped when she heard Hasan call out to her. Turning around, she peered through the thin crowds until she spotted his carriage coming up along the road. The wake behind it told her that it had just turned around.

Hasan leaned out the window, his blond hair ruffling under the brim of a black derby. "Lily dea Kasin!"



Lily blushed slightly and stepped up to the curb as the black carriage stopped in front of her. She had to tilt her head up to look at Hasan. “Good morning, Hasan da Kasin ne Pilnok.”

Hasan wiped his brow and then lowered himself in the carriage so his arms rested on the bottom of the window. “What are you doing out here?”

Lily gestured toward the Crafters’s District. “I’m making my way to work, there are dresses to be made.” Only one, though, demanded her attention.

“On Xavdei?” He used a slightly different name for the day more popular in the southern areas of Tarsan. The guttural “X” in the back of his throat made it more exotic.

Inwardly, Lily winced. “Society doesn’t sleep one day a week. More importantly, I have a lot of work to do and a day to focus would be helpful.”

He grinned. “Surely you could take one day off.”

“I shouldn’t.”

The knuckles of his hand turned white for a moment and his eyes darkened for a moment. Then, he released his grip on the window rail and held it out, his long fingers unfurling elegantly. “Then, at least let me offer the services of my carriage? To hurry you along your way?”

Lily almost declined, if anything to enjoy the day, but then changed her mind. It would give her more time for Nirih’s dress. With her warmest smile, she bowed her head. “I would be honored, tasire.”

Hasan beamed and pushed open the door. He withdrew his hand only long enough to open the door.

Lily looked down to see him kneeling on the other side, the knees of his suit dusted with the dirt. Her heart beat faster as she drew her eyes back up to outstretched fingers. It was one thing to have a carriage door between her and Hasan, it was another to have him kneeling on the floor of

his carriage as he offered to bring her inside. It felt forbidden, inappropriate and scandalous.

Blushing, she looked around but no one seemed to be watching.

Hasan smiled, his lips parting to reveal bright white teeth. He cocked his head and kept his hand out. His wedding bracelet glittered on his wrist, the intricate rope symbolizing his marriage to his wife.

Lily glanced at it for only a heartbeat, the discomfort and desire warring inside her. She gulped. She could imagine everyone seeing the sweat prickling her skin or the blush on her cheeks.

It took all of her willpower to reach out with one hand and rest her fingers on his palm. Her longest digit caressed against his wrist, just underneath his bracelet. The touch was electric. It surged along her arm, over her shoulder, and directly into her chest. The connection between them felt taut and powerful, like a burst of magic connecting them.

Slowly, Hasan wrapped his fingers around her. He easily pulled her inside the carriage, lifting himself into his seat as he did.

She followed his movement, stepping into the carriage. It rocked underneath her weight and she slid into the opposing seat from Hasan. "Thank you."

Hasan leaned out to give directions to his driver and then closed the door firmly. It made a loud thunk as it latched shut and she jumped at the sound.

Lily expected him to return to his seat, but to her surprise, he shifted to her side and slipped between the door and her. With a thumping in her chest, she slipped to the side to give him room but didn't quite press herself against the far wall.

When he settled down, his leg bumped against her own. The heat seeped through his trouser legs and past the thin fabric of her dress.

The warmth spread along her skin, adding to the electrical surges that danced along her nerves. She shivered and fought the flutter between her legs, not far from where he touched her but far more private of a spot. Trembling, she wanted to grab him and kiss him. Instead, she clenched her leg muscles and folded her hands as if her hands could hide the scent of her growing desire.

Taking a deep breath, she drew in the scent of his cologne and the faint whiff of his sweat. It smelled good and the heat growing along her sex doubled. She fought back a whimper and ground her clenched fingers against her belly. Terrified, she glanced at him.

He smiled and rested his hand on his thigh, his knuckles less than an inch from the thin fabric over her skin.

She trembled at the closeness. It was hard to hear anything over the pounding in her ears. Her eyes flickered down to focus on his lips. They were thin but looked soft. The urge to reach up and touch them clutched her heart.

“Is this better, my lady?” he breathed.

“Y-Yes,” she managed to stammer, tearing her eyes away. The closeness made it difficult to find the proper words, to follow the cadence of High Society.

Her eyes focused on his hand, it felt too far for her own desires. She needed him to reach out for her, to press his palm against her knee. Her skin prickled with sweat and she licked her dry lips.

It took an effort to look away from Hasan. She focused on the far door, unwilling to make it obvious that she was uncomfortable with her desires.

Hasan cleared his throat but made no further advances.

They rode in silence for a number of minutes, the bump of carriage rocking them back and forth. Every time, she slid closer to Hasan and her heart beat faster and her breath quickened with every passing inch. As she slid away, disappointment pricked her senses.

She didn't know what she wanted. He was a married man but his attention and focus were firmly drawn to her. She wanted to feel his caress. Even the heat of his body was alluring, tugging on her as she rocked back and forth. It would only take a slight shift of her muscles to slide against his body, to break that tiny gap between them.

Outside, the view of houses gave way to glass-fronted shops and seasonal stalls. They were entering the Crafters's District.

The carriage jerked and she started to slide against him. For the shortest of moments, she resisted by planting her feet. The image of his marriage bracelet danced in her head. But then it was replaced by the heat of his body and the tingle whenever they touched.

When the next slip came, she lifted her foot and slid across the seat, thumping against his thigh. An electric shock coursed through her, radiating from the point where their two bodies touched. Her thin dress did nothing to diminish the heat or the tingling that came from the contact. It was as if she was naked against him.

Hasan's sharp inhalation filled the carriage. His hand reached across the gap and rested against her knee. The long fingers caressed her skin through the thin fabric of her skirt, the touch searing and intense.

Lily's own breath came faster as her world centered on the touch of their bodies. The tiny bolts of electricity continued to ripple along her skin, spreading across her thighs, stomach, and breasts.

He crawled his hand up her thigh, inching slowly along the thin fabric. She could picture his long fingers spreading along her inner thigh and his thumb against the outside. Every slip of his warm palm along her skin brought a faint moan rising in her throat.

“Lily...” he whispered.

Trembling, she turned to him. He was only a few inches away, staring at her with his intense eyes. The heat of his body caressed her through the thin fabric.

“I want to kiss you.”

She froze, staring at him as his whispered words echoed in her head. She wanted to believe that she misheard, to have it as a wishful fantasy. Looking into his eyes, she knew that there was no question what he said. He wanted her.

“Lily,” he breathed and inched forward, “I’ve been thinking of you ever since I saw your name on the request. I should have never let you go, no matter what your father said.”

His fingers spread out across her thigh, almost wrapping around it as the fabric tugged against the waist and the hem rose up her shin. “Every night, every day. All I want is to go back to the way it was, that moment we had.”

Her heart pounded against her chest as a heat filled her. Her throat froze as she stared at him, silently aching for his touch even as she struggled to understand his words.

“Please. Nine years ago, I lost you. And I’m willing to do anything to get you back.”

He leaned into her. His hand slid up her thigh, dragging the fabric with it, until it was only inches from her seam.

Hasan panted and she joined in, her body flushed with need.

“Will you kiss me?” he asked.

Lily gulped to ease her dry throat. She nodded. “Y-Y...”

When the words couldn't come, she answered in action. She bridged the last inch between them and their lips touched. The electric spark that came from their hands touching was nothing compared to the bolt that drove through her as their lips met. She shuddered from the inferno that flamed inside her and then pressed firmly against him, parting her lips slightly as she kissed him.

There was only one other man who she had kissed, but the half-forgotten memories were blown away by the immediacy of Hasan's embrace. He firmly pressed against her, parting only for the tiny breaths and then to come back.

His other hand slid behind her shoulders, cradling her against him. The lower hand, the one against her thigh, slipped over the ridge to delve between her legs. The fabric drew up with his quest.

When his hand cupped her sex, she moaned loudly.

His palm reflected the heat of her growing excitement back into her body and she inhaled sharply with a whimper.

Lily closed her eyes and let her senses focus on the touch of his body against her own. He wanted her, more than anyone else had in her entire life. The feeling of heat and desire buffeted against her pounding heart and she felt drunk on his panting breath.

Hasan shifted his grip between her legs and his wedding bracelet poked her through the thin fabric.

Lily's eyes snapped opened to stare at his closed ones. She wanted him more, to keep going and keep kissing but she couldn't help but feel the sharp edges of the bracelet right above the hand touching her most delicate of places.

She broke the kiss with a gasp. "H-Hasan. We should stop."

He leaned into her, his arm pulling her close. The heat and electricity surged between them.

Lily wanted to melt into his arms, to sink into them as his fingers explored the moist heat between her legs. She couldn't, not in the carriage. It took all of her effort to speak up again. "Hasan!"

He stopped and slowly opened his eyes. The intense brown gaze was smoldering as he stared at her. His cheeks were flushed and his lips parted.

She wanted to dive back in, to push aside her dress and let their primal side take control. But the bracelet against her mons let a small measure of willpower take control. She planted her hands on his chest. "Stop."

He pulled his body away but his fingers were pressed lightly against the moist fabric of her dress. The buzz of his caress sent trembles coursing through her body.

"Stop," she repeated.

She could see the resistance but he pulled away completely.

"W-What's wrong?"

"You're married."

"I..."

"No, you are married. We can't do this. Hasan, I... I want you but not like this."

He sighed and shifted until his back thumped against the side of the carriage. Delicately, he folded his hands together over the ridge bulging from his pants and nodded.

"I'm sorry," she said with a bit of regret. She wanted it, the heat of his body replayed in her mind and she could feel the pulse still beating inside her skin. She ground her thighs together and tried not to think of the heated moisture that painted her nether regions.

"No, no," he said in a low tone. "You're right, I shouldn't have done..." He tugged on his bracelet and pulled it tight against his wrist. "I shouldn't. Mindil's a wonderful lady and I..."

Lily watched him as his voice trailed off and his eyes unfocused. The muscles of his jaw tightened for a moment before his shoulders sagged.

"You're right," he said in a broken, dejected voice.

Lily turned away, regret heavy in her heart. She wanted to him to keep going, it was more than she had ever felt before, but hearing the sorrow in his voice held her down.

The minutes passed in uncomfortable silence. The steady thumped of the carriage continued to rock her back and forth, but she kept her foot planted firmly on the ground to avoid sliding back into him.

After riding a few minutes in silence, they reached her store. As the carriage came to a stop, Lily picked up her bag. "Thank you."

Hasan shifted to avoid touching her and kept his eyes down. "I'll be... done with your move by the end of tomorrow. I-I'm sorry."

The guilt slammed into her. She looked at him and couldn't help but remember the intensity of his gaze. Her heart wanted him to stay nearby, to enjoy the little touches as they worked on paperwork or just talked.

Lily made a sudden decision. "Hasan?"

He looked up as he tensed.

"I would still like help."

"I-I..."

"And I would like to meet your wife, though." Lily froze, she wasn't sure why she said that. Having his wife nearby meant that Lily wouldn't be able to enjoy Hasan. On the other hand, it may be the divide they needed before either of them couldn't resist their desires.

He froze, his lips parting slightly.

She glanced at them, remembering how they felt against her own and a flush rose in her cheeks. "I-I want to meet the woman who made you happy for so many years."



“Are you sure?”

It hurt her, both the guilt that filled her and the desire for him, but she nodded. “Yes, please?”

Hasan brightened and his slight smile relieved some of the guilt. “Today?”

Lily nodded as the carriage driver opened the door. “Yes, if that works.”

“Mindil was going to join me for lunch only a little distance from here. I... I guess... no, I’ll send a carriage for you around the midday bell.”

Relieved, she slipped out of the carriage.

It wasn’t until it pulled away that she remembered that she was going to work through lunch to finish Nirih’s dress. By the time she turned around to stop him, the carriage was gone.



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## Chapter 9

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# Another Mistake

Magical talents may only have a single ability but creativity has endless uses.

—Noman Kortz

**L**ily spent the entire morning working on Nirih's dress, wondering what Mindil would be like. She had no idea what to expect from Hasan's wife other than she was probably a few years younger than Lily and half a decade Hasan's junior. It was not uncommon for there to be a five to ten years difference with debutantes.

Unfortunately, because of her distraction, her work on Nirih's dress suffered. She thought she had the right pattern, but after two hours of sewing, she realized she had attached the patterns wrong.

It took her the rest of the morning to pull stitches. The short threads soon littered the ground around her. With every cut seam, despair filled her. If the tiny holes were visible to her expert eye, they would also be noticed by the critical eyes of High Society.

Lily considered finding a way of hiding the holes but it was too important to risk. As soon as she finished cutting the seam, she hurried into her stash to get more fabric.

Even the confined hallway lined in fabric wasn't enough to temper the edge of her concern. She had thousands of yards worth of materials, but it was a bolt here or a partial bolt there. The colors were an eclectic array of colors but she had sorted it on texture and weight, not appearances. The smooth fabric for Nirih's dress was at the end and she hurried down while trailing her fingers over the fabric. There was a faint light in the back of the closet, where the enchanted clothes glimmered from the top shelves.

When she reached her destination, her eyes focused on the empty shelf. Frowning, she tried to remember using the entire bolt but it came back in memories blurred with exhaustion. It was for a dress last year. She had forgotten to order more bolts in the rush of the season.

She ran her fingertips along the surrounding fabric, trying to find something that matched, but everything felt wrong. One had too much tooth, another too smooth. None of them matched the shimmering. In her head, she focused on the pattern with the alternative fabrics and felt the frustration growing. She didn't have anything that could replace a dress so important.

Dejected, she returned to her sewing area. The enthusiasm of the morning had crumbled and she bore down, trying to repair as much damage as possible while she considered her options.

She could try embroidery along the holes to mask the removed stitches. She was a good enough needle-woman to pull it off, but it wasn't part of the style and would stand out to anyone who knew the inspiration for Lily's pattern. Needlework had to be used consistently to create a balance,

but that would deviate from the pattern Juliet and Nirih agreed to.

Lily cringed at the idea of Juliet ranting at her. The woman was difficult to work with, but she also stood high enough in High Society that she could make Lily's business far more difficult with a few vindictive words.

Setting her jaw, Lily forced herself to focus on working with the marred fabric. She couldn't find the line she made before with a bit of chalk. She held it up to the light and tilted it back and forth.

She couldn't.

Inspiration struck her. She concentrated on the fabric and pushed her magic through it, focusing on a dark color. At first, blackness leaked out from her fingers and spread through the fabric, but it was too dark for her. She lightened it, waves of bright colors rippling along the material until she settled on a deep purple.

With the new color, the chalk lines stood up starkly against the fabric. She found the line; it had started at the same place but then split along the one she had followed. The tiny tail would have ruined the fabric even more if she had followed it.

Lily shook her head with annoyance and then lined up the fabric to sew a new line. She steadfastly ignored the dotted holes of her ruined seam in hopes that something else would come up that would help her salvage the remains.



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## Chapter 10

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# The Other Woman

The snake-faced woman can greet a lover's wife with an easy smile and open arms.

—Mineris Tormdot, *Fear and Roses*

**When** the bell rang out across the city, Lily jumped at the sudden sound. The district bell tower was only a few blocks away, and the deep tones shook the floor and rattled the windows. A second peal of the bells ran out before the first tremors had faded.

Lily glanced at a wine glass on the corner of her sewing table. The pink wine rippled with the bell's vibrations. A third peal caused it to slosh up against the side of the glass and a few specs of dust floating on top bobbed with the movement.

The bell rang out again for the fourth, late morning. She nodded to herself and picked up the glass. That would give her two more hours until the fifth or midday bell.

The city bells rang out again.

Lily's eyes widened as she watched the ripples across the pink liquid. "It can't be that late," she muttered before slamming down the glass and hurrying over to the door between

her workshop and the front of the store. She peered past the frame into the brightly-lit street outside.

The shadows were narrow arrows pointing down from the unlit sconces and alcoves across the street. There were very few people walking outside. The two people she saw had umbrellas to protect themselves from the heat. Their feet were obscured by the wavers of heat rising from the cobblestones.

She was just about to breathe a sigh of relief when a carriage pulled up in front of her store. She recognized it as Hasan's with a sinking sensation.

Glancing back, she looked at the dark purple fabric on her cutting table. She had almost figured out how to make everything work. Just a few more hours, that's all she needed to make it beautiful but she would lose her momentum if she left it for lunch.

She sighed and turned back to the carriage. She couldn't dismiss the ride, not since it was her idea to meet with his wife. The impulsive idea she had to stay near Hasan but keep him at arm's distance felt foolish now. Already, she found herself remembering how his hand felt up against her womanhood or the way his lips tingled against her own.

Lily moaned and ducked her head. "What was I thinking?"

Part of her said she did the right thing by pushing him away, but the vulnerable side still warmed at the simple fact that Hasan still wanted her. In his eyes, she was attractive and desirable, not a kudame being shuffled out of High Society. To return to being nothing more than a cast off woman on the edges of Society was terrifying.

She sighed, the flush of being desired stirring in her thoughts and eroding her duty to finish Nirih's dress. She should work but she needed Hasan just as much.



Turning back, she gathered up her things and headed to the front.

The driver held open her door and bowed his head. He was a younger man, in his mid-twenties, with a black suit, matching gloves, and polished shoes. His suit was well-tailored but she wasn't familiar enough with the tailors in the city to guess who made it. He said, "Good afternoon, *Kudame Lily de... dea Kasin*. I am to here to escort you to *Tasor Hasan* and *Mindil da Kasin*."

Lily felt a brief surge of jealousy at the use of the *tasor* title, a married couple. The driver seemed to have emphasized the word and she wondered if he knew what Hasan was doing inside.

Blushing already, she nodded to the driver and let him guide her to the carriage.

The drive to the restaurant was short.

When they stopped, she looked out the window to The Golden Waves, a mid-scale restaurant known for lightly fried fish and excellent grilled vegetables. It was a good choice, but not unexpected knowing Hasan's attention to details. He had an interest in food that she didn't remember from years before. During their dinners together, he had commented on the texture and flavors.

The driver held open the door and offered a hand. She took it, holding her flowing skirt with one hand as she stepped down from the carriage.

The outside chairs were filled with the full range of middle class society, elegant folk wearing beautiful outfits while they drank and were seen. There was a sea of pastel pinks, greens, and blues with the black and dark blue suits of the men peppered among the tables. Many of the diners took long, slow drinks of their teas or held their forks as they spoke. It was measured, graceful, poised. She could

see how they played to the audience of pedestrians who glanced over with thinly veiled envy.

As Lily walked toward the door, there was a subtle ripple of movement. She only caught it in the corner of her eye, but she saw women tilting their head away and the men averting their eyes. They were turning their backs on her, those who knew she was now a kudame.

In the back of her mind, she could name everyone who looked away from her. They were the women who used to giggle at parties with her when they were younger. Later, some of them had brought their daughters to Lily for the unimportant functions, a pity purchase of a dress for the forgotten woman. The men were also looking away from her but not before they looked at her from head to toe before their eyes flickered away. To them, she was cursed and forbidden.

Tears started to fill her eyes, but Lily forced herself not to shed them. She couldn't cry anymore, there wasn't anything to miss. She lifted her chin slightly and strode to the front door, pausing only a mere second before one of the wait staff opened it for her.

She glanced over the audience, dreading sitting out in the sun with the others, but she didn't spot Hasan. Instead, she noticed a waiter standing near the door who made a gesture for her to enter.

Despite her attempts not to cry, she almost broke down at the effort. She was surprised that Hasan would have granted her the courtesy of being seated away from an audience, he seemed always more focused on her to be aware of her struggles.

She lifted her chin and strode forward, grateful that she could enter the restaurant with some measure of dignity. It hid the fluttering of her nervousness as the imminent meeting with Mindil loomed over her. She wondered what Ha-

san's wife looked like or even her personality. Would she be sweet? Dismissive? A sour woman?

The waiter led her down a narrow hallway to a larger room in the back of the restaurant. It was far away from the glass windows and close to the kitchen. Unlike the front tables, there were only a few couples and foursomes scattered among the tables.

Lily didn't spot Hasan until the waiter brought her around a thick post and a trellis filled with decorative plants. At first, she thought he was bringing her out the back door but to her surprise, there was a table set up in a private niche.

"Lily!" said a woman as she stood up. Her voice was clear and vibrant, confident. It was also far more informal than Lily suspected. There was no "dea Kasin" or "kudame," just her first name. It was surprising, strangers never used only first names when greeting each other.

Before Lily could recover from her surprise, she was pulled into a tight hug. Mindil didn't have the false hesitation that many Society women gave when embracing, nor did she give the feather-light touch to guide someone to the right position. Instead, she just wrapped her arms around Lily's waist and pulled her tight. Her bountiful breasts pressed up under Lily's, pushing them up in the embrace.

Despite the firmness of the hug, it wasn't constraining or tight. It was soft, like Lily's favorite stuffed animal. She relaxed in the embrace, the memories of happier times blending in with the surrealism of embracing Hasan's wife. Automatically, she took a deep breath and drew in Mindil's fruity scent. Mindil wore a Kormar perfume that Lily couldn't quite place.

"By the Couple," Mindil said after a moment. She pulled back until their bodies were still touching but no longer

grinding. Her hands slipped to Lily's hip. "You are as beautiful as I remembered."

Lily gulped and forced her attention on the woman holding her. It felt strange, as if she was pinned, and a flutter of heat radiated from the fingertips that rested right on the bone.

Mindil was shorter than Lily by about a foot. She had a curly hair that bobbed with every shift of her body. The dirty blonde strands contrasted with the soft blues and hints of green.

"Like what you see?" Mindil said in a low, playful voice.

Blushing hotly, Lily realized she was being rude. She gulped and glanced down, past the swell of Mindil's breasts and belly. Her attention focused on Mindil's dress. It was out of place, a deep red in a sea of early season pastels. Seeing neat, almost invisible, stitching along the seams of the red and white fabric, Lily guessed it had been expertly made in last year's style. Lily's gaze followed the lines of seams and fabric, picking out places where the dress had been adjusted to fit a wide body while deemphasizing the swell of her belly or the softness of her hips. Lily couldn't see even a hint of a corset or shaping underwear.

The unfettered woman in front of her was exotic compared to the countless women that entered Lily's dress shop. She looked free and happy. There was only a hint of society's chains on her outfit, less on her body and smile.

Lily licked her lips and glanced up.

Mindil grinned and raised an eyebrow. "Lily?"

Stunned, Lily tried to remember what the question was.

"Do you like what you see?"

"Y-You're... you look..." She didn't know what to say. She gulped. "You're beautiful."

Mindil's smile could have lit up the room with magic. "Oh, by the Divine Couple, thank you! I was a little nervous,

myself. I don't care for this spring's fashions but not all of my associates share my disregard for today's outfits."

Lily cringed and glanced around. They weren't obscured by the trellis and half the back room could see her. To her surprise, no one even looked at her at Mindil's loud exclamation.

"I can see why Hasan has been talking about you all week. You are still gorgeous."

A blush on her cheeks, Lily glanced at Mindil who was smiling broadly. She tensed and then glanced back at the trellis, wondering about the people beyond it.

Mindil tugged her toward the table. "Don't worry, no one can hear me if I don't want them to."

The puzzling words drew Lily's attention fully back. "W-What?"

"My talent. I can't be overheard. I could scream at the top of my lungs and no one would even bat an eye."

Hasan looked uncomfortable. "That is true. She's done it more than once. It also prevents people from looking at her when she's threatening me with an umbrella."

"And you should have never brought that cat into the house. I—" Mindil kept speaking, her red lips moving, but Lily couldn't hear a word.

Lily stared in surprise. Mindil was like an illusion that advertised services in the richer parts of the Crafters's District. Unable to hear the words, she stared at Mindil's lips. Like her dress, it was the wrong color for the season but it matched the dress. She had a full mouth, one that was curved into an easy smile.

"—of course, I just wanted Lily to see how my talent works."

Lily jumped and blushed. "S-Sorry."

“Oh, don’t be. Hasan has heard enough of me already. Come, I bet you skipped out on breakfast because you went to work so early.”

“I-I... yes.” Lily wondered how Mindil knew.

Lily went to sit down on a seat across from Hasan but Mindil’s firm hand guided her closer to Hasan, sitting her down in the chair that Mindil had vacated. Their knees touched and the electric surge between them brought a flicker of heat.

Shocked, Lily looked guiltily at Hasan, who blushed.

Mindil sat down next to Lily, her own thighs brushing against Lily’s through her thin dress. She sat just far enough that they weren’t squished together but Lily could feel the presence of husband and wife on both sides of her. It left her feeling vulnerable but also overwhelmed.

The rest of the restaurant seemed to fade away with the intimacy of their closeness.

A strand of Mindil’s curly blonde hair clung to the woman’s face until she hooked it over her ear. “I can’t believe how beautiful you are. And your dress! It’s amazing. You must tell me who...”

Lily blushed and smiled, still trying to regain her wits.

“You did, didn’t you? And this stitching, did you do it yourself?” Mindil tugged on the bottom of Lily’s dress, drawing it up to her knee and ran her thumb across the embroidery. “You really do amazing work.”

“I... I made it.” Lily shivered as her heart beat faster.

“You did a fantastic job. I can’t believe I haven’t heard about your shop before a few weeks ago.”

“Thank you.”

Mindil favored her with a brilliant smile. She drew Lily’s hem away from her thigh. “Hasan said you can change fabric colors, right? I have never seen this shade before.”

Fighting a heat fluttering through her, Lily reached down and rested her hand on her thigh to keep the dress from being pulled higher. Lily didn't dare pull it from Mindil's hand as such action might appear rude. There was something intense about Mindil's fingers that matched her husband's gaze.

Lily glanced at Hasan who was staring down at her exposed thigh. She felt excited by his desire and a tremble coursed through her body. Her plans to stay near Hasan but separated was quickly crumbling with Mindil's enthusiasm.

Hasan lifted his gaze and they stared into each other's eyes for a moment.

"Could you show me?" asked Mindil, breaking the mood.

"W-What?"

"The color magic? Please? I'd love to see it."

Fighting the urge to glance at Hasan, Lily looked around for something to demonstrate her magic. She spotted Mindil's dress. It was the wrong color for the season and would be a perfect example. She held out her hand. "May I?"

Mindil answered by gently capturing Lily's wrist and pulled it down to press her palm against her thick thigh. It was soft and hot under her touch. It was also far more intimate than Lily would have ever suggested.

Lily froze for a moment.

"Oh," Mindil released her grip. "I'm sorry, that was—"

"No, no," Lily gasped, "it's okay."

Mindil smiled broadly. "I didn't mean to be so forward. It's just..." The smile faded for a moment. "Please?"

Lily took a deep breath but kept her hand along Mindil's skin. She concentrated for a moment and then let her magic flow through the fabric. The different colors of fall filtering through Mindil's dress changed. The oranges and reds

became yellows and pale blues as the power swirled across each one.

When the flood of colors reached her chest, Mindil arched her back and stared down at her ample breasts as the flood swirled over them. Her smile came back redoubled, a brilliance as she cupped one breast and then the other. Lily couldn't help but notice Mindil's nipples were hard and denting the fabric just below the collar.

It only took a minute before the dress was completely altered.

"It's beautiful."

Feeling encouraged, Lily reached out and caressed Mindil's hat. The magic flooded through the fabric and feathers, coloring them to match. She started to lower her hand when she caught Mindil watching her. There was a look of something intimate in the other woman's eyes, a joy as intense as her husband's.

Her throat was dry, but Lily didn't pull her hand back. Instead, she ran her fingers along Mindil's hair. Her fingertips caressed along the smooth nape of Mindil's neck for just a moment.

Lily's chest felt tight as she let a bit of magic seep from her fingers and into Mindil's hair. She kept most of the hair blonde but she colored the tips to match the exact shade of the hat. It was an exotic style, one that came from the southern countries but it seemed to be perfect for the woman in front of her.

Mindil's lips parted slightly. A moan, felt more than heard, rose up.

Lily pulled away, unfamiliar with the reason her chest was so tight or why her heart was beating so fast.

Reaching down, Mindil picked up one of the spoons and looked at herself. Her eyes shimmered for a moment. "It's... beautiful!"



She tossed the spoon down and reached over to hug Lily tightly. "Thank you!"

This time, Lily was prepared and she hugged the woman tightly.

Mindil pulled back with a wry smile. "Almost perfect."

Lily gulped. "What?"

"Think you could change my lips?"

Lily's heart thudded loudly. She looked at the orange lipstick. For some reason, she hesitated before she slowly lifted her thumb. Gently, she slid it along Mindil's lips and colored it to match the dress.

Mindil let out a deep breath, her body growing hot against Lily.

For a moment, Lily didn't want to pull her thumb away. She found herself staring into Mindil's eyes, searching for a response but finding the same overwhelm intensity looking back at her. She gulped and licked her own lips before finally drawing her hand away.

The curvy woman inspected herself in a spoon again. "You are amazing."

"Thank you."

Mindil set down the spoon, this time more carefully. "I can see why Hasan really likes you."

Hasan's leg along Lily's thigh tensed. "Min!"

Lily blushed. She clutched the edge of the table.

Mindil winked as she continued. "When he heard you were getting put into some nasty house, he pulled a lot of corners to get you the brownstone. I think he used some of our money to get you a better place. He won't tell me, but I know that he did."

When Hasan didn't respond, Lily wondered if Mindil was obscuring her words.

“I was planning on being furious with him but seeing you again and hearing about what happened? I’ll forgive him.”

“T-Thank you?”

Behind her, Hasan leaned closer. “If you are talking to her without me—”

Mindil grinned but didn’t react to him. “He is a good Kasin, you know. A good family man and loyal beyond belief. A little obsessive, though.”

Lily knew that Hasan’s interest was more than just serving the family. She ducked her head.

Hasan exhaled. “Don’t mute me, Mindil.”

“Why not, Has?”

“Because she... she...” Hasan stammered.

“Don’t worry, she needs our help. No bedame should be left alone like this, I agree. In fact, you should consider having dinner a few nights a week with her.”

Lily tensed, her lips parting with shock.

Against her thigh, Hasan tensed.

Mindil smiled at her and the warm look sent a pang of heat rippled through Lily. “No one should be alone, don’t you think?”

Unable to come up with a reply, Lily was grateful when the waiter came to deliver appetizers.

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## Chapter 11

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# Visitors

The unreality of the goan board is that the players can see every move being made.

—Tobias Silverman

**L**ily sat on a stool and stared at Nirih's dress. After she came back from lunch, she had hopes of finishing at least the foundation of the outfit, but for the last few hours, she had been staring at the fabric but not seeing anything but Hasan and Mindil.

Guilt filled her, a violent twisting in her stomach that sent ripples of tension along her back and arms. Mindil had no idea that Hasan wanted Lily. The cheerful blonde had only kind words for Lily, with no mention of kudame. There was a grace in how she danced around the topic, not even hinting that Lily was anything but a good friend.

Through the meal, Hasan never stopped staring at Lily or pressing his thigh against her. Between talking to Mindil and eating, Lily kept thinking about having a dinner alone with Hasan. She could barely control herself in the carriage when he kissed her, how could she do the same over di-

nner? The heat and lust filtered through the guilt, driving the sharp edge of despair further into her heart.

She reached out for the bottle of blush wine but only held the stem. It was from before lunch and had suffocated from being left out too long. She almost picked it up, but then rested her knuckles against the warm glass as she tried to find the words to tell Hasan that it wasn't going to work.

Someone tapped on the door. It was Nondei, so she ignored it. The tapping grew louder as someone steadily rapped against the door. It was almost the beat of a clock, precise and rhythmic.

Dejected with her own thoughts, Lily released the glass and stood up. Her bare feet scuffed against the wooden floor as she strolled through the door into the store front.

She didn't see anything until she reached the door. Then she realized there was a single man standing at the entrance, his black suit shadowed by the first oranges of a sunset. He wore a Martin crest on his chest and a silver bracelet danced on his left wrist.

Images of Kendrick running flashed through her mind. She didn't know if the man in front of her was one of them that Kendrick splashed with blood and wine, but she couldn't let him stand out the door. Despite her fear, it was impolite.

Heart beating faster, she pulled open the door. "Yes?"

"Excuse me, Dame Kasin, could I take a few minutes of your time?" It was already obvious that he didn't know if she was bedame, tadame, or kudame. She was simply a dame to the stranger. For a heartbeat, she wondered if he knew and chose to use the generic term.

Lily nodded and stepped back, holding the door open.

The man, who had gray hair, bowed his head and stepped inside. He looked tense as he glanced at the dresses

pinned to the walls and the books of designs scattered on the small tables.

“May I help you, Tasire Martin?”

He turned to her and bowed again, one hand on his side where a sword would have been sheathed. “Please forgive me. I am Relik da Martin ne Golid.” The Martin families owned the next coastal town to the east, but the Golid families were from the south, away from the ocean.

“I am... Kudame Lily dea Kasin, the proprietress of this store. How may I help you, tasire?”

He held his hands in front of him and bowed again, a trickle of sweat beating on his forehead. “Please forgive me for this, but members of my other family suggested that you may be aware of a Kasin who goes by the name of Kendrick.”

Despite his nervous attitude, she could see a hardness in his eyes.

Lily’s stomach clenched. She considered lying, but she knew it wouldn’t help. She nodded once.

“Are you friends with Besire Kendrick?” asked the older man.

A number of answers flashed through her mind. She didn’t know what the Martins wanted, but their plans weren’t friendly. She decided to adopt an attitude that may reveal their plans to her. Drawing up, she imitated her mother’s furious posture. “He burned down my mother’s house and managed to ruin everything for me, including sending me on a path that led to becoming a kudame.”

The bitterness in her voice didn’t need to be acted out. She just had to remember the feeling when she was standing outside the old Manor Rose watching it burn. It was Kendrick and Hasan’s fighting over her that had started the fire. No, it was Hasan’s fault after he summoned mercenaries after he lost the duel. The fire came from the melee.

Relik's eyes widened and then he smiled. He had one bright white tooth against his others. "Ah, then you are no friend?"

"I would happily see that man run out of the city."

"We could arrange that. You see, we are looking for him. Vigorously, you might say."

Lily glanced around her store. She noticed an unopened bottle of wine, a burgundy for common customers. Reaching out for it, she held it up to him.

"No, but thank you. I found that wine dulls the hunt."

His response threw her for a heartbeat. Lily swirled the bottle in her hand. "May I ask why you are looking for Kendrick?"

Relik looked to the side for a moment and then sighed. "Besire Kendrick was in a poor place for the last few years. In exchange for... spiriting him back into town, he agreed to some tasks that we needed performed with a modicum of grace and subtly."

"The prison?"

Relik's bushy eyebrow lifted. "He told you?"

"No, his rival told me."

"Ah, Tasire Hasan? An honorable man."

A cold sweat prickled along Lily's skin. "You seem to know a lot about me."

"As I mentioned, we are vigorously looking for the besire. And he appears to have some interest in you. We were curious of the connection." At least he had the decency to look apologetic. "Please, it is important we find him, bedame."

She gulped at her dry throat. "Are you going to kill him?"

Relik held up his hand. "By the Divine Couple, no. One does not attack potential allies."

"Then why was your family armed in the city? I saw you chasing him in front of my store."

“The besire is...” Relik sighed and kept his hands up. He continued, “... just as vigorously trying to avoid his end of the bargain once he knew the full details.”

Lily set down the bottle and looked out the window. She half expected to see Kendrick or more of the Martin family waiting for her, but the street was empty. She caught a hint of movement and looked across the cobblestones where two long shadows of people were cast down the street. They were armed judging from the shadows, no doubt more Martins.

She turned back to her guest. “He won’t do anything illegal for you.”

A faint smile and a barely perceptible nod. “No, we want nothing illegal. The tasks were just more... common than he had hoped.”

Lily wasn’t sure what she wanted. She could easily dredge up anger toward Kendrick, both what he did to ruin her life but also splashing wine everywhere. He was erratic and destructive. At the same time, she remembered how alluring he was. After a second, she cleared her throat. “I’ll try... I’ll try to help.”

“Thank you, that is the only thing I can request.”

“What do you need me to do?” She felt sick to her stomach as she asked.

“Just tell us when the besire approaches you, be it here or at your home. If possible, send us a note and keep him present.”

She gasped. “My home? He’s there?”

“Yes, didn’t you know? He called on you earlier today, but you were here at the store.”

“And you didn’t catch him?”

“He is very elusive, much like his talents for manipulating water.”

“He is fickle.”

“Mercurial, one might say,” Relik said with a chuckle.

Lily nodded and ran her finger on the last glass remaining. “Yes.”

It came out more wistful than she intended. She blushed and looked up, but Relik didn’t seem to notice.

He bowed to her, a deep one of respect. “Family Martin thanks you. We will treat your assistance with the respect it deserves.”

She could only nod in response.

He let himself out and quickly walked down the street. The shadows cast along the cobblestones showed the two other men turning and following after him. It didn’t take long for their shadows to pass out of sight.

Lily leaned against the bottle before opening it. She felt guilty for hating Kendrick, almost as much as she did for her actions with Hasan. Whatever the Martins wanted, she knew that Kendrick would suffer. Despite all of her remembered anger for the man, she couldn’t help but also fear for him.

With a sigh, she poured herself a glass of wine. “What have you promised, Kendrick?”



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## Chapter 12

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# One More Time

Oh, Misnir, how I dream of you as I lay in my wedding bed. The heat in my hand and the thoughts in my head, they push me to end the sham I have joined, to finish it with the sharpest of knives and tears of blood.

—Gladir Kasin, *Misnir and Romeon* (Act 2, Scene 1)

**L**ily pushed open her front door with one hand and stepped into her house. She didn't need the flickering runes to find the rose lantern. Turning it on, she continued into the kitchen as the door swung shut behind her.

"Lily?"

Lily screamed as she spun around.

Hasan stood in the door, one hand planted on the runes. The flashes of light highlighted his face and reflected off his eyes. As the rose lantern came to life and the door's runes faded, the shadows drifted across his face.

She pressed a hand against her chest, trying to will her panicked heart to calm down. "Hasan! Don't do that!"

At first, she had thought it was Kendrick talking to her. He had a strange habit of showing up unexpectedly. She was both relieved and disappointed it was Hasan but those

thoughts quickly evaporated as she focused completely on Hasan.

“Sorry,” Hasan said in a low voice, “I had to check on you.”

He stepped inside and let the door shut behind her. The groan of the wood swelling filled the entry hall.

“What are you doing here, Hasan? It’s almost midnight.”

Hasan tugged on his coat, it was moist from the evening mist. It parted to reveal that he still wore his suit underneath his coat. “I was just enjoying a little walk and saw you come home. I needed to see you again.”

A flash of desire rose up inside her. Clutching her arms over her chest, she struggled with the rapidly growing desire and her guilt. “Y-You shouldn’t be here,” she whispered.

He walked closer, his wingtip shoes loud in the hallway. “Shouldn’t I? I want to see you again. Mindil gave me her acceptance.”

She wanted to back away, to flee from him, but her body froze in place. The memories slammed into her and she focused on his lips, trying to remember exactly how it felt when he kissed her. A heat spread out from between her legs as she recalled his hand against her mons.

Hasan stopped in front of her. He reached out and rested his palms against her elbows. His wedding bracelet clinked softly.

Inhaling sharply at the electric surge that poured through her, Lily swayed. Guilt crossed her thoughts, but so did an overwhelming euphoria. She struggled with her own thoughts, fighting the urge to sink into his arms and trying to gather the strength to step away.

“I can’t stop thinking about you,” he said. His hands slid up to her shoulders, cupping them. He toyed with the edges of her collar.

When he tugged the fabric along her neck, she shivered. Lips parted, she stared into his eyes. "W-We shouldn't."

"I want you. Now. Here."

Panting, she lifted her head up to Hasan, lining her lips up to his.

He guided her back without looking over her shoulder. Their footsteps were slow and unsteady, like two dancers learning how to work with each other. A moment later, her credenza bumped against the back of her thighs.

Lily inhaled sharply as heat flashed through her.

"No," Hasan whispered as he cupped her buttocks, holding her tight against him. His hardness ground against her belly, a swollen heat that she could feel through the fabric. With a grunt, he picked her up and set her on the edge of the dark wood.

"Hasan..." Lily murmured, unable to take her eyes away from his.

He answered by bowing his head and sliding up against her. His hips thumped against her knees and then slipped into the gap between them.

She resisted for only a heartbeat and then spread her legs, welcoming him in until he nestled in the junction of her thighs. She wondered if he could feel the heat rolling from her body. Only a few layers of moist fabric separated the two of them.

Lily closed her eyes, focusing on the heat seeping through his trousers and the hardness that ground against her sensitive crotch. It nestled into her furrow, the pressure from one end to the other drove a gasp from her throat.

Hasan's lips rolled the chain of her necklace only a rapid heartbeat before he pressed against her collar. The touch was light at first, soft and sweet, but electric. Her mind flashed with pleasure as he worked his lips along the curve

up to her neck, to nuzzle against the sensitive part at the crook.

She clutched his shoulders, holding him tight. She brought her feet up around his thighs, pulling him close to enjoy the heated hardness against her sex. Every pulse of his body, she felt as a hammer blow. It was intoxicating and overwhelming.

He hooked his thumbs into her collar and pulled it open, sliding the fabric over her shoulder. The brush of air against her skin only added to the building heat inside her.

When his marriage bracelet trailed against her arm, it was the only cool thing between them. It would be so easy to ignore his infidelity. She wanted him, needed him inside her. Every moment alone with him was one less moment of loneliness.

The image of Mindil rose up but it didn't cool the heat inside her. Instead, it fanned it with the memories of the woman's affection that was just as intense as Hasan's.

Lily screwed her eyes tightly as she build up the courage, fighting the urge to rock her hips into Hasan's hips. She leaned into him, pressing her nose against his neck and breathing in the heady scent of his excitement and sweat.

Licking her lips, she kissed him once. "Hasan."

He moaned and tugged her dress further down. The collar caught on the upper swells of her breast. She inhaled, which increased the pressure, but also rubbed her aching nipples against the inside of the silk.

"Has..." She took a deep breath, fighting the heat and desire. It would only take a moment to pull up her dress. She wanted him to do it, to slide his fingers between her thighs and plunge into her. But, she bit her lip and tried again. "Hasan, stop."

He froze, his lips pressing against her neck and his hot breath tickling her skin. His ridge beat with his excitement,

the heat seeping into her body and keeping her own passions inflamed.

"You... I..." Lily struggled with the words. "We can't keep doing this."

"I want you," he said, holding her tight.

"I... I want you too." She squeezed her thighs around him, pinning him hard against her body.

He thrust against her, dragging his hardness against her seam.

"But!" she gasped as she fought with the urge to reach down and claw her clothes away. Tears blurred her vision. "You are married to a wonderful woman and I can't ruin that. I can't be Misnir to your Romeon."

Hasan stiffened. He kissed her again.

"Hasan... Has, please." She wanted to yank him closer but the only thing she could do was relax her legs and spread them, giving him a chance to step away, to be the strong one.

He didn't move.

She pressed her hands against his chest, felt the pounding beneath the skin. It was the same beat that pulsed between her legs, the protection of thin layers of fabric was not enough to diminish the beat. She tried to push him away, but her fingers refused to move.

"I can't lose you," he finally said.

"You won't. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

He kissed her neck, a single moment that quickened her pulse.

"Has?"

Slowly, he pulled away until he was levered away from her, her hands on his chest, but his body still tight between her legs. "I know, but I can't help myself. Don't you want me also?"

"More than you can imagine."

He leaned into her to press his hardness against her again.

She moaned and panted, but forced herself. "I can't let you ruin everything with Mindil just because I want you so badly. I crave you, but I can't have you."

"You can have me," he whispered low in his throat, "just say yes. She won't mind."

He ran his hands along her breasts, following the curves until his fingertips were against her hard nipples.

Lily moaned and she arched her back into his touch.

"Just say yes." He rolled one nipples between his fingers and little bolts of pleasure arced along her skin.

With a sigh, she pulled back. "No."

Hasan bowed his head.

"I want you so badly but I can't have you. Please, I don't think I can stop you if you don't go."

He slipped his hands off her breasts. She whimpered softly, wishing she could bring them back. His fingertips trailed against her stomach and then over her hips, each caress an electric surge that filled her body. When he stopped, his hands were on her thighs. His long fingers wrapped around her skin. "I can't lose you, Lily."

"You have to remain true to her."

He licked his lips. "How far can we go without me breaking my bonds with Mindil?"

The logical part of her wanted to say "nowhere", but her longing spoke first. "Maybe just kissing?"

He looked up, his brown eyes smoldering. Leaning forward, he brought his lips to hers. "Like this?"

Guilt poured into her, filling her with a bitter brew, even as she whispered yes and leaned into the kiss. It was passionate and hot, their lips moving together and their breath intermingling. The heat of her body rose into an intense burning and she felt moisture slicking her inner depths.

His hands stroked her thighs, moving up and slow in slow movements that matched the slow, almost imperceptible rocking of his hips. The pulse, the pressure against her sex felt good.

Lily pushed him back. "That's all," she said, knowing full well that she already wanted the next one. "One kiss."

"One kiss a visit?"

"One a day... at the most," she lied.

Hasan finally stepped back, trailing his fingers along her inner thighs. During their embrace, he was only inches from her aching clitoris and she felt every inch that he traced from her hips to her knees like a brand.

When he stepped away, she could see the ridge in his trousers pushing out from the gap of his coat. It looked large and swollen, no doubt uncomfortable. He shoved it back into his coat and buttoned it close. "I-I should go."

"T-Thank you."

He looked at her, eyes bright enough to burn the clothes off her body.

She felt a ache spreading across her nipples, her desire for him.

"Good—" He licked his lips, "—good evening, Kudame Kasin."

"And to you, Tasire Kasin."

She couldn't move as he slowly made his way back to her front door. When he turned the handle, it groaned as it pulled away from the frame and the yellow runes flickered across the surface.

Lily held her breath until the door shut and then let it out with a rush. "*Detokimùsa*." It was a barbarian curse. She didn't know what it meant, but there were no polite words for the frustration, guilt, and longing she felt. She also felt crass for even saying it.

Slipping off the credenza, she had to clutch to it to avoid swooning. When she regained her balance, she took one look at the kitchen before heading up the stairs.

“I need a bath.”



## Strangers in the Dark

The delicate sensibilities of women are best left behind closed doors where they don't distract working men from their duties.

—Windorlis de Gabkin

**L**ily rolled over to her side with a groan and jammed the pillow underneath her head. Her nightgown tugged at her hip, the bunched fabric drew a tight line against her sweat-slick skin. She made a token effort to pull it down, but couldn't do it without lifting her body off the moist sheets. She was too tired to move any further. After a second attempt, she gave up. Pulling her upper knee up to relieve the pressure, she closed her aching eyes and prayed that sleep would finally come.

As soon as she relaxed her body, a maelstrom of emotions rose up: guilt from cheating on Mindil, her desire for Hasan, and even curiosity about Kendrick and Relik's deal. Blended with the emotions was the half-formed plans of how she was going to finish Nirih's and the other dresses before the looming deadlines ruined her business. There were too many things going on in her life and, for the sec-

ond time that night, she wished that Hasan and Kendrick had never reentered her life.

She didn't know what to do about either of them.

Lily craved Hasan's attention like a drug. It was addictive. When she was with him, it was almost impossible to think of anything or anyone else. She had to pry her thoughts away with a crowbar, forcing herself to sink into working on a dress in fear that her mind would drift back to his embrace.

Despite her lust for one man, Kendrick had also wormed his way into her mind. Occasionally, she would start to fantasize about Hasan but then her mind would replace him with Kendrick. She thought about the strange encounters in her store or the suggestion that he had waited outside her window at night. She thought about his dark eyes and wondered what it would be like to kiss his full lips again. What would it feel like to brush her hand along his scruff or press her thigh against his own?

Her body began to warm at her thoughts. She squirmed with flush of moisture that gathered between her legs and the way her pulse quickened. She tried to rip her thoughts away from Kendrick but Hasan slipped in to replace him.

There was no fuzzy feelings when she remembered Hasan's hands against her body, his mouth against her neck. They were real and she could feel Hasan's touch as electrical fire along her skin. She could easily recall the heat and pressure of his hands, the insistent way he stroked closer to her sex.

With a whimper, she struggled to stop thinking of either man and failed. Her thoughts bounced from one to the other, drawing curls of lust to flutter along her body and an aching heat to gather along her nipples and clitoris. She needed one of them, either of them, both of them.

Trembling, she reached down to cup her pubis. She was already wet and swollen underneath her lace panties. She drew her fingers up along the line of her nether folds and moaned at the touch. Drawing her fingers back and forth, she worked the fabric deeper into the furrow to rub the rasp of fabric against her clitoris. It was a slow, building pleasure that pulsed in time with her heart.

She started to worm her finger underneath the fabric when she froze. In her half-awake state, guilt at cheating with Hasan and the vague images of Kendrick pushed the desire away. She couldn't pleasure herself on either man, one was unobtainable and the other mercurial. Clamping her eyes closed, she rolled over to a cooler part of the bed and tried to force herself to sleep.

Oblivion refused to claim her and she let out another sigh of frustration. She reached down to cup herself again, then clamped her thighs around to both stop herself and also increase the pressure of her finger caught between her folds.

A creak outside caught her attention. She cracked open her eyes and peered at her window. Relik said that Kendrick was watching her from her yard. With fresh fantasies in her head, she wondered if he was back there. Her mind focused on Kendrick, once again wondering what was between him and the Martins.

In the distance, a dog barked a few times before it was silenced.

She yawned but couldn't rip her thoughts away. She decided to satisfy her curiosity. With a groan, she slipped off the bed and dropped to her knees. The cool boards were a balm against her heat-slicked skin. She splayed her fingers along the floor and crawled over, afraid that he would flee if he saw her approaching.

Trembling, she lifted her head over the windowsill and peered outside. Her yard with a tiny square of grass and flowers. Hasan had set up a small pond in the corner, with a few crystal lights that pulsed softly in different colors. A stone bench sat in front of the pond and along a path that wound around the yard until it reached her back door.

Her eyes scanned along the path but she didn't see Kendrick standing there. She expected to see him still in his suit, it was the only outfit she had seen him wear since he returned to her life. She tried to remember what he wore before he disappeared, but the years had faded her memories until all she could remember was the way his eyes looked into hers when they kissed in the gazebo.

Lily sighed and leaned against the cool window. "Just your imagination," she whispered to herself. "You don't need him in your life. Just stop thinking about him. He won't be there."

She took a long, deep breath. "Just go back to bed. He won't—"

Movement along the path caught her attention. It was fog rolling in from the dark shadows near the back of the lot. It moved unnaturally, a thick blanket of rolling pale moisture that only followed the stones that marked the path.

She closed her lips as the ache returned to throb at her nipples and clitoris. Spreading her fingers along the glass, she stared at the path.

When the dark silhouette of a man stepped out from the back of her lot, she inhaled sharply. She knew it was Kendrick long before she could distinguish the bowler hat and patched suit. It was the way he moved, feral and stalking. She couldn't remember if he moved like that before prison, she thought she would have remembered if he had.

The idea that he spent seven years in jail frightened her. Did her father sentence him to prison for starting the fire? Or was it something else? She had heard horror stories of men who came out of sentences changed. Two of the popular plays that season were about imprisonment twisting men into evil murderers.

Her heart thumped faster. She curled her fingers against the pane of glass. Her breath fogged it as she reached out for the handle to the door leading to the balcony over the backyard but stopped. What if he had become a monster?

Kendrick looked straight at her as he headed up the path. The mist surrounding him wavered like wings as the fog spread out across the rest of the yard. He had both hands in his pockets.

Lily wanted to see his eyes but the shadows made it impossible. She grabbed the handle of the door and levered it open. Unable to take her eyes away, she stepped sideways into the cooler air and drifted to the railing.

“Lily.” It was only a single word, low and quiet but she heard him clearly. It pulsed inside her and her heart fluttered at the sound of it.

“Kendrick, why are you here?”

He sighed, his shoulders rising and falling with his breath. “I want to stay away.”

A breeze rippled through the neighborhood. She could hear dogs barking and the buzz of insects. It was quiet, peaceful.

“Why?”

He glanced to the side, toward the sound of the child. His eyes shone in the moonlight. “Seven years. I’ve been trying to come back to you for seven years. Every day, I rattled the door. Every night I dreamed of you as I listened to the ocean crashing against the rocks. You were my obsession but also my anchor.”

She breathed deep as she clutched the railing. Her body trembled as she listened to him.

"There were thirty of us on the boat when they caught us. It was supposed to be just a fishing trip, out to the ice floes and back again with a season's worth of fish. We were riding low with the weight and couldn't afford to take damage. Twenty-two men were caught, the others drowned."

Tears began to burn Lily's eyes.

"We had drifted into Kormar waters. Broke a treaty on accident. The trial was fast, almost twenty minutes. They sailed us directly to Noctor's Point and threw us in."

The mist around Kendrick boiled up, moving against the wind as it responded to his thoughts. She spotted a squat building on top of a cliff before it faded away. Then the mist rose up around him to form the walls of a cell. It was small and cramped.

"Six feet by nine, seven bars across the door and two on the window." His voice grew haunted in remembrance. "There were eleven stones that made up the floor and three hundred and six in the walls. For seven years I sat in that cell. Seven years the twenty-two men became twelve."

When he looked up at her, she could almost feel the sorrow.

A carriage rolled down her street. She could hear the clatter of the wooden wheels against the stones.

Lily toyed with the railing as he paused to speak. Guilt and sympathy warred inside her as she watched him struggle. He was different at night, baring his heart.

"Men were twisted by fear and anger. They lashed out at crew, at the guards, at others. I started down that path but then realized I left something at home. You."

"Kendrick," she whispered.

He sighed again and removed his bowler. His dark hair was plastered against his head. "My apologies, Bedame. I didn't mean burden—"

"Kendrick? Shut up." Lily was talking before she could think.

He stopped. The mist sank around him, dissipating as he stared at her. His mouth was slightly open and she couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like to kiss him.

Tearing her thoughts from her fantasies, she sifted through her thoughts for what to do. She didn't know how to handle Kendrick anymore than she fumbled with Hasan. The only thing Lily knew was that he couldn't stand in her backyard and talk.

"I-I," she stammered, "come inside."

"Bedame Kasin?"

A flush crept along her cheeks as a heat seeped from further below. "You... I... I... let me fix your suit." The last words came out in a rush.

"Bedame?"

Her pulse beating in her ears, she gestured down. "I'm a seamstress now. Your suit really needs help. Please?"

He smiled, or at least she thought he did. "Well, my appearance is shameful. I wouldn't dare meet my own father looking like this."

She smiled broadly, knowing full well that he was looking at her in the light wearing nothing but a sleeping gown. "Through the kitchen door, I'll put on some tea."

"As you wish."

Lily didn't think she had ever taken the stairs so quickly before. Less than a minute later, she was holding her back door open as Kendrick stepped inside.

He smelled of fresh rain, a tingle in the back of her nose as she drank in the scent. As she remembered, his suit was

haggard and torn. He wasn't not living well judging from a few extra cuts and rips.

It was also hard not to look at his muscular form that strained his suit. Even though she wanted to see more of him, she also started to notice where she needed to take it out to account for his fitness. It also needed to be pulled in around his waist, it hung down the wrong way.

"Thank you, Bedame."

"Lily," she said softly while clutching the door. Her heart continued to pound in her chest and she found it hard to concentrate on anything besides his backside as he passed her.

Kendrick stopped in the middle of the kitchen and looked around. "Hasan did a good job, didn't he?"

Stunned, she stared at him.

Kendrick chuckled. "Kind of hard to miss him with bad blood between the two of us."

"It's been nine years."

"And yet both of us are visiting you late at night."

She stared at him for a long moment. "None of that in my house. I don't want to fight."

Kendrick pulled one hand from his pocket and pulled off his bowler to bow deeply. "Of course, Bedame. I have lost any chance to claim your hand when I was forced to abandon you."

She leaned against the frame for a moment. She didn't know how to respond because she didn't know if he was being sarcastic, sardonic, or honest. After a moment, she realized it didn't matter. She was practically a kudame and there would be no formal requests for her hand from anyone.

Stepping away from the door, she let it swing shut. "Put a pot of water on the cooker. Do you still drink Felig?"



He straightened. He held his hat as he looked around for something. “Sadly, I’ve lost the taste for most of the green leafs. The prison didn’t have much except for a bland black tea that tastes like dirt.”

She pointed to the small table in the center of the room.

Kendrick nodded and then swept to her sink to shake the moisture off his bowler before setting it neatly in the center of the table. His shoes, worn leather with a hole along one side to reveal to his toe, squeaked on the polished tiled floor.

“So, how about a San Germin? Or a Dosel?”

He smiled, his eyes lighting up as he turned to her. His black scruff glistened with moisture from the fog. It somehow matched with the angles of his face and the way the liquid gathered in the lines around his smile. “San Germin would be fantastic, but make it twice as strong without sugar or cream.”

“Black?” she inhaled. She didn’t know anyone who drank tea like that. It was a lower class style.

He hesitated. His hand gripped the back of a chair.

Realizing that she was making him uncomfortable. “Oh, no problem. I just never made it that way.”

“It’s easy. Just double the amount of leaf and don’t add anything else.”

The smile he favored her with sent a bolt of heat rushing through her body. There was something in his words that appealed to her, even if it was just the low rumble of his voice.

With a faint blush on her cheeks, she started the tea.

Lily didn’t know what to do so she leaned against the counter.

Silence filled the room except for the faint hissing of the fire chamber heating up the pot. She started to inspect Kendrick but then realized he was doing the same for her.

His eyes were focused but not as intense as Hasan. It didn't feel like he was stripping her with his eyes but there was some of the same curiousness; she wondered if he was thinking about kissing her.

With her thoughts, the world spun around her for a minute. She gulped and felt vulnerable. "I-I should fix your suit."

His face darkened. "I... do you have a robe I can wear?"

Lily didn't, there were no clothes that would possibly fit him. She didn't even have much spare materials to repair the suit in her house, she would have to scrounge. She blushed realizing she may have offered something she couldn't provide. "Why?"

"I'm... not wearing anything under this."

She stared at him, her mind spinning furiously. Her eyes focused on his suit, seeing bare skin the narrow gap between the buttons.

A heat blossomed inside her, surging through her veins before puddling between her legs and dripping off her nipples. She grew moist as she continued to stare. Words somehow refused to rise up in her head as she tried to think of some response.

Kendrick looked bashful as he looked around. "Maybe some cloth? It would be unmannerly to be naked as a babe in your kitchen?"

She opened her mouth but the words refused to form in her head. She kept thinking about what he would look like underneath his jacket. He already strained the fabric and she could see the lines of his pectorals. She already knew that his ass looked carved from stone from when he passed her.

"Lily?"

The heat surged inside her.

"Bedame Kasin?"

“I... I...”

He chuckled. “Do I need to come back tomorrow?”

“No!” The word came out a little more forceful than Lily intended. She blushed hotly and looked away. Seeing steam rising out of the vent of the chamber, she rushed over to it and opened the door. Heat rolled out and she almost put her hand directly into the oven. She stopped at the last minute and grabbed a thick cloth to pull the steaming pot out.

She could feel his eyes on her back as she focused on pouring tea. As she did, she tried to find words to respond properly to his revelation. They didn’t come but the effort of making his strong tea gave her a chance to calm her breath and let her think more clearly.

When she turned around, she spotted his smirk. Flustered, she almost threw the cup at him. Instead, she held it out for him. “P-Please?”

He looked down at her hands as he reached out. His fingers caressed against her own. She expected an electric tingle like with Hasan but nothing prepared her for the swelling of heat that rose up from the caress of his rough fingertips.

The cup slipped from her hand but he caught it. Pulling it close to his chest, he stepped back. The mist followed after him, curling over his right shoulder instead of straight up.

She turned to prepare her own cup.

“You don’t have to fix my suit.”

“I want too.” It was easier to talk to Kendrick with her back facing him.

“Tonight?”

“You might not come back.”

“I’ll always come back.”

She smiled to herself. "I thought you were trying to walk away?"

Kendrick chuckled. "Haven't been doing a very good job of that. Right now, I seem to be stalking you more than doing anything useful."

Lily almost asked about the Martins but didn't. She finished pressing the tea leaves to the bottom of her brewing up and then poured the rest through a sieve into a proper serving cup. "It's okay."

"Tell me if I ever step too far."

That caught her. She thought about Hasan's intensity and how they both struggled with their passions. "I-I will."

It only took a few more moments before she had to turn around. Taking a deep breath, she breathed in the citrus scents wafting from her tea cup before doing so.

Kendrick sat on one of the chairs, nursing his cup. The steam rose in a neat curl that followed his shoulder. It looked like a bandoleer but also disturbing as it refused to follow the natural swirl that lifted from her own cup.

It was almost peaceful. She didn't feel pressured by him but at the same time, there was a growing hunger as her fantasies began to intrude on her mind. She pried her thoughts away and focused on her task. "Maybe... if I promise not to look?"

He smiled. "For your assistance, I will thankfully do the same."

Her sex fluttered with heat as she remembered their touch. Taking a deep breath, she caught the fresh rain scent that followed him which only made it word. "I-I can work in the dining room. If you remain here..."

Her voice trailed off as she realized there was an archway between the two. She would be able to see him sitting in a chair as she worked. For a moment, she considered changing to upstairs but then realized she wanted to see more of

him. With a delicate cough, she continued. "I can sew on the table. I have enough fabric I can scrounge that it will look proper."

"Thank you, my dignity will never stop thanking you."

Her cheeks burning, she stepped away from the counter. "If you... then I'll get material... fabric. Just put it on the dining room table?"

"As you wish, my bedame."



## Distractions

Shame has as many faces as fear and anger.

—Kormar Proverb

**L**ily found it hard to concentrate. She stood in the dining room working with five different fabrics that had the right tooth and texture but still retained their varying colors. She kept her eyes focused on the table but her effort not to look up had caused sweat to prickle her brow and her fingers to shake.

A man's suit was a relatively simple pattern. She had only made a few under her apprenticeship under Penir da Kasin's eye. While dress patterns change rapidly, every year had some element different, suits took a decade to evolve. Kendrick's own design was old but still serviceable.

She peeked up toward the kitchen, unable to resist the sight.

Kendrick sat with his back to her. He was naked, completely and utterly nude. It didn't matter that she could only see his backside, it was distracting enough that she found herself taking little glimpses like a kid stealing candy.

The open-backed chair did little to hide the cords of muscles along his back and shoulders. His skin rippled with movement as he sipped at his tea or shifted from one crossed leg to the other. She found her heart skipping a beat every time she heard the chair creak and her gaze would snap up to catch the movement.

He was darker than she remembered. He had a reddish tan with few lines to reveal skin untouched by the sun. With the moisture that constantly gathered around him, his glistening body was more than difficult to resist admiring.

Lily forced her eyes down and back to her work. She had been working from almost an hour. Each of the sword cuts, tears, and even burns were easy to repair but there were many of them. She found it almost peaceful to clean up the sections and repair the panels neatly. The black suit was almost a rainbow of colors from her efforts.

She worked along a cuff, replacing a burnt section with some fabric stolen from one of her original dresses. The old fabric smelled of the sea, salty with a hint of rotting plants. She frowned as she finished cutting out the seam.

When she tugged the fabric free, she glanced up again. This time, her eyes locked on the pair of tight buttocks that stuck out from the bottom of the chair. They were the hardest part to pull her eyes away, from the furrow of hard muscles or the tightness. When he shifted, she could almost imagine them driving his cock into her body.

A surge of heat clouded her thoughts. She tore her eyes away and finished repairing the cuff.

While she set down a neat double line of stitches, she struggled with her plans after she finished fixing his suit. She found herself hungering to touch him, to run her fingers along the scars that lined his back or along the tight muscles that were framed for her.



The answer didn't come to her by the time she set down the last stitch. Unwilling to break the uncomfortable silence, she pulled out one of her silk nightgowns. It was one of her favorites but it also had the most material to use.

Sweeping the repaired suit to the side, she started on a new pattern. Her body hummed as she began to cut out the material for a pair of footwork underwear for him; at least he wouldn't surprise her by his nudity next time. The loose fit would also give him room to move since it was obvious that he needed agility if he was going to keep fighting.

Movement drew her attention away. Kendrick was standing up. His long legs stretched for a moment, revealing columns of corded muscles and scars. She also caught a hint of his manhood as a shadow between his legs. At the sight of his half-hard girth, she almost cut herself on her scissors.

Lily froze as Kendrick walked over to the oven and set down a fresh pot of water on it. She knew her lips were parting with an intense wave of heat that filled her but there was nothing she could do about it. She couldn't tear her eyes or thoughts away from his body as he stood there, watching the oven as if he couldn't feel her eyes boring into his skin.

His buttocks flexed.

The tip of her scissors scraped against her finger.

Lily tried to tell herself to look at her work but couldn't. She fought against her suddenly rapid breathing. She wanted to say something, call out to him, touch him.

A dripping yanked her attention back. She looked down to see crimson staining the silk fabric. She had nicked herself with her scissors. Hissing in pain, she sucked on her finger to stop the blood while using her other hand to color the fabric a pitch black. It would hide the stain along with

giving him some modesty in case some cut ripped open something closer to his private areas.

She heard him finishing preparing his tea. It took all of her effort not to look up as he returned to his chair, but she could easily picture everything after an hour of drinking in his appearance.

Sweating, she concentrated on finishing the pair of silk shorts. She was heated with her inappropriate thoughts and half-remembered fantasies. They made it difficult to finish neatly but she bore down and completed his underwear in less than hour.

She was proud she only glanced up twice more, pretending to size him but mainly to admire his body. When she was ready, she stood up and brought the clothes over to the table. "I-I'm done," she stammered.

His scent was just as distracting. The smell of fresh rain flooded around her. It had just a hint of a lightning storm, the faint tang of electricity that was more elegant than any cologne.

He looked at her and smiled.

A surge of heat danced along her skin. She swayed for a moment, suddenly dizzy. She had to grab the side of the table for balance.

"Thank you."

Lily peeked down at him even as she was mentally screaming not to. His front was just as beautiful as his backside, with deep furrows of muscles and the tan of man hours in the sun. When she caught sight of his manhood, she froze for a moment as she stared at the thick member. With a gasp, she tore her eye back up. "Sorry!"

Kendrick chuckled. It wasn't cruel or teasing, just playful.

It only made her want him more.

He reached over and dragged his suit to puddle it in his lap. “Best to keep that hidden. I wouldn’t want to be improper.”

She could only shake her head.

Kendrick glanced down at the suit. He lifted it up, barely keeping his naked length hidden. “It’s very colorful.”

“Oh, I’ll get that.” Lily reached over and caressed the fabric. Black pitch flooded through the fabric, obscuring stitching and repairs. The individual differences faded as the suit darkened in his hands. Seconds later, it looked like a custom-tailored suit with almost no differences between the haphazard panels and strips she had used to repair it.

“It’s amazing. I never knew you could do such wonderful work.”

She blushed. “Thank you.”

He didn’t say anything else. A silence stretched between them. Lily looked up to catch his eyes. He was smiling but made no effort to speak.

As the silence grew, so did a flush on her cheeks. She also wanted to reach down to kiss him, just to taste his lips on her own. Trembling, she struggled with her desires.

“I-I,” she started. “I’ll let you get dressed and see if there are any alterations needed.”

Without waiting for a response, she fled the kitchen and returned to the dining room to clean up the scraps of fabrics and threads. It only took her a few minutes. When she finished, she noticed that the false dawn was brightening the gaps between the buildings.

“Kendrick, would you like to have breakfast... with...”

He was gone, the kitchen door closed tightly and an empty tea cup on the table.

Sadness flickered across her mind as she inched into the kitchen. “Kendrick?”

He wasn't waiting around the corner or even in the hallway. She peered out the kitchen window to see his footsteps walking away from her home, the wet steps fading rapidly as the wind blew across the grass.

Lily sighed and wiped a sudden tear from her eyes. It was Pavdei and she had to work in a few hours. Exhausted, she closed the curtain and headed up the stairs, determined not to think of Kendrick, Hasan, or even Nirih's dress.

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## Chapter 15

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# Sweets

The ideal Woman of Society is slender and elegant, with a narrow waist and shapely thighs. She does not present feminine nature lasciviously nor does she have the appearance of a man. The Woman knows that her flawless skin and golden hair is precious, a gem to only be shared with the man she marries.

—*Kiss of the Golden Lips* (Act 1, Scene 14)

**Frustrated** with her lack of progress on Nirih's dress, Lily had switched over to the other dresses. She figured if she could finish those, then it would be easier to focus on the critical one. Of course, that assumed she didn't have the same difficulties with those.

It was early morning, about an hour after opening, and Lily was pleased that she had made progress on almost all fronts. Three of her dresses were up on the wicker forms that were adjusted using strings and straps to fit the measurements of the young ladies who would wear them. The other four were in various states of being assembled along with a stack of notes of designs, ideas, and details near each one. She needed more tables.

Nirih's fabrics were on a small table in the corner. Lily hadn't even gotten to sewing more than a few pieces before

giving up. It was frustrating but she couldn't let it dominate her.

She tore her eyes away from the temporarily abandoned outfit and returned to cutting out the pieces for a social event in the third week. It was a simple one, only a day's worth of work. She was tempted to cut corners but knew that her reputation wouldn't survive if anyone found out. Besides, anything could go at any time, judging from her own experience.

Lily stopped enough to sip on a glass of wine, it was from the bottle of Larvin 1508 that Kendrick had left in her store. She smiled, her lower lips caressing the edge of the glass. The memory of Kendrick's buttocks in her chair had warmed her thoughts for a few days and she wasn't ready to let that image dull by fantasizing about it too often.

Still smiling, she set the glass carefully on the edge and returned to cut along the chalked outline of the pattern. The images of Kendrick's body mixed with flashes of Hasan's kissing and touching, swirling together into a heated distraction as she worked on the dress.

The door creaked open. "Hello?"

Lily was ripped out of her heated daydream. With a gasp, she straightened up.

"Lily?" It was Mindil.

Guilt smacked Lily across the face. She tried to compose herself but it was hard with a flush on her cheeks and a heat boiling inside her. The dampness of her daydream slid along her senses, teasing her still even as she smoothed her dress.

It took her a moment to regain her voice. "Tadame Mindil da Kasin?"

Mindil entered the work area, the green ends of her blonde hair bouncing with each step. "Good morning. You

know, you don't need to be formal with me. No 'tadame' or 'Kasin' is needed between friends."

She wore a white ankle-length dress trimmed in yellow flowers with a matching pattern around a V-neck collar that empathized a deep cleavage. A waist-level band of flowers drew the attention to her curves. The design was almost scandalous because it revealed her wide hips and even the swell of her belly. Like the previous visit, Mindil wasn't wearing a corset or fabrics intended to force her shape into an hourglass.

In her mind, Lily knew that others saw Mindil as fat and uncouth, but in the moment, she couldn't see that. Instead, all she saw was a curvy woman who held herself with a confidence that few debutantes even had a prayer of duplicating.

Mindil twirled around, the hem of her dress rising up to show that she wore no stockings. "Do I meet your approval?"

A pang of surprise and guilt surged through Lily. "I—I didn't mean—"

Mindil winked and twirled again. "Don't. I like it when pretty girls admire me."

There was something the way Mindil responded that stunned Lily. She glanced down as the words echoed in her head. She hadn't been called a "pretty girl" for many years. It would have been rude to call her that, but when Mindil said it, it sent little quivers along her skin.

After a second of wringing her hands, Lily couldn't help but look up and give Mindil a bashful smile.

Mindil raised an eyebrow and held up a paper bag. It had an unfamiliar logo, Mikhanel's, on it. "Hasan said you liked honey cream pastries."

Thankful for something else to talk about, Lily grinned. "I do, one of my favorite treats as a little girl. I didn't think Hasan knew that."

Mindil rolled her eyes up while smile brilliantly. "I may have..." She bobbed her head. "... pushed Has to remember so I knew what to bring. I had a favor to ask and I thought a little treat would... sweeten the deal."

"You want something?"

Mindil ran her hand along her collar and used her finger to slide down the side. As she did, she pulled the fabric away from her pale skin. The maneuver pulled her breasts together, deepening the shadow of her cleavage.

It was slow and sensual. Lily had seen other women do it, but it had never been directed toward her.

In a different world, it almost looked like Mindil teasing her.

Lily's cheeks burned.

Mindil's smile grew wider as the fabric stretched. Then, just before the buttons holding the front of the outfit together started to strain, she stopped. "These flowers? Do you think you could color my hair to match?"

Stunned again, Lily stared with her mouth slack.

Softening her smile, Mindil let the fabric slip from her fingers and it draped back over her breast. "Please? Everyone who saw my hair loved it."

"R-Really?"

"Oh yes, I had a gaggle of socialites trailing after me for most of the last few days. Not to mention quite a few bachelors making eyes when they didn't think Hasan was looking. I liked the attention but I'm also so tired of being judged on how gold or yellow my hair is. I like your colors."

Before Lily could respond, Mindil nodded to the front room and held up the pastries. "Come on, I bet you haven't taken a break all morning."



Wordlessly, Lily followed after Mindil as the other woman led the way. Her eyes glanced down at Mindil's curved ass and then tore her gaze back up with a flush of embarrassment. Her mind bounced between the sudden revelations: Mindil's apparent teasing and the possibility of using her dyeing ability to color hair.

Lost in thought, she didn't realize she was already sitting on a couch next to Mindil until she was handed a plate with a pastry. It was a honey cream, with the yellowed filling slowly oozing out of the narrow layers of crisps.

She thanked Mindil and took a few bites. "Oh, this is good."

"Mikhanel's is amazing. She's only open for a few hours a day and there is always a wait. She hates dealing with staff, so I asked Hasan to get in line for me." Mindil took a few bites and set it down.

"And he did?"

"Yes?" Mindil said with a smile. "He almost jumped at the opportunity."

Lily's eyes widened and then she quickly looked down before a blush can come back. The fantasies that played in the back of her head focused on Hasan: the way he kissed her, the feel of his lips against her neck, and his hardness pressed against her body. She let out a deep breath and took another bite.

"He likes you, you know."

Lily froze, ice washing over her. The fork in her hand shook slightly as she looked up.

Mindil smiled back. "That isn't so bad, I think I'll like you too."

"W-Why?" She felt naked under Mindil's gaze, as if she could see the fantasies that Lily had about her husband.

Waving her own fork, Mindil gestured to the store around her. "This. Society dealt you a poor hand, all stones.

You could have just given up after the... fire.” Mindil made a face. “Has has always been possessive, hasn’t he?”

Lily didn’t know how to respond.

Mindil didn’t need one. Her smile came back. “Well, we’re about the same age. You and I were at the same time for our first year. Everyone was circling around you while pretending not to pay attention to you.”

Sadness began to seep into Lily’s thoughts. She ducked her head and used the fork to carve off another bite but didn’t eat it. Her family made a point of mentioning how desirable she was until the fire.

“No one wanted me. For two years, I went to all the parties, got all the dresses, and said the right things.” Mindil’s tone grew softer and sadder. She sniffed for a moment and then took a bite before continuing. “They were already calling me a kudame before I was twenty-two.”

“What happened?”

“Hasan. That man throws his heart into everything he does. After your fire, his relatives tried to marry him off but bad luck goes both ways. It wasn’t until...”

Mindil’s eyes unfocused for a second. “We met in this shitty little bar after a party. We were the only pretty folks there. Has was gearing up for a fight and I wanted to kick someone in the balls.”

Lily gasped. “You fought?”

Mindil looked up and grinned. “Right in the middle the bar, we had an all-out screaming fighting. It almost came to blows but... then he kissed me. Right there, no hint. One moment, we were brandishing tableware at each other, the next we were getting arrested for indecency right from the table.”

Mouth agape, Lily stared in shock.

Mindil rolled her eyes and grinned. "I didn't have all his clothes off. We were a scandal for a few days. It was fun, I've never been to a jail before."

"You were—?"

"Oh, no. They would never hold a Society woman. I just got a discrete lecture on behaving inappropriately, that dress you saw me in the other day, and someone sent for my father. Once things calmed down and we were both sober, Has came around with the bride price and offer letter. My father agreed right away and we were married. After that, it wasn't a scandal anymore, it was... what did my father say... a poor choice in wooing." Mindil rolled her eyes.

The story brought Lily back to the moment when she stood in front of her parent's manor, watching the hundred foot flames burn away priceless paintings, decorations, and her future.

In the silence that followed, Mindil finished off her pastry. After wiping her hands, she picked up the bag with the rest of the pastries and set it away from her.

Lily forced the memories away. "I never knew any of that."

"That was when you were apprenticing with Tadame Penir ne Golid. I couldn't imagine you were paying attention to anything else at the time." Mindil gestured to the dresses. "I like your dresses more though, they aren't as stuffy as Penir's."

Lily ducked her head at the compliment.

Mindil set down the plate. The gold-edged porcelain rattled slightly. "I think I've interrupted you enough, I didn't mean to interrupt you for so long."

"No, it's okay." Lily set down her own plate.

"Nonsense. I won't be a burden. What time tomorrow would you like me to visit?"

Lily froze. "Tomorrow?"

Mindil favored her another another smile. “Yes, I know this place that has a wonderful cream sauce they pour over a cake. It goes well with blush wines. Do you think that would work as a mid-morning distraction?”

“I—” Lily couldn’t come up with words. It seemed to happen a lot with Mindil.

The other woman winked. “I’ll come about two hours after opening bell. If you are busy, I’ll just come back later.”

“Why?”

Mindil reached over and held out her hand.

Lily took it and then gasped as Mindil tugged her closer until their legs were touching. There was a ripple of sensation as her body warmed at their closeness.

“As I said, I like you.”

Breathing faster, Lily realized she was scandalously close to Mindil. She pressed her lips together and tried to focus directly into Mindil’s gaze. It was hard, she wanted to reach out and touch her.

“Before I leave, do you think...” Mindil grinned, looked up and to the side before bobbing her head. “Maybe give me a little color?”

“Oh! Yes.” Lily slipped her hand from Mindil’s. Her fingertips were cool in the air but not for long. Reaching up, she brought both hands around Mindil’s neck and ran her fingers through the blonde strands. She didn’t realize how intimate the gesture until Mindil closed her eyes and a soft moan escaped her lips.

Lily’s own heart beat faster and a wash of warmth flooded her. She concentrated through the closeness and used her magic to color the tips of Mindil’s hair to match the flowers. The flat color didn’t look right until Lily started to color individual strands to match all the colors of the dress pattern.

Mindil breathed deeply, her lips pressed lightly together and her body rising and falling with each breath.

The world seemed to slip away as Lily finished coloring Mindil's hair. She pulled back slowly, not wanting to interrupt Mindil's pleasure. Her fingertips trailed along Mindil's smooth neck and then along the ridge of her shoulders.

Little trembles coursed along Mindil's body. She smiled sweetly. "Lips?"

Lily exhaled and brought her one hand up. Her body was growing hotter with every movement, a flaring heat not unlike the one that she enjoyed during her fantasies. The intimacy was overwhelming but seductive, she wanted more of it.

Her fingertips ghosted across Mindil's lips. She could feel the wax base of the lipstick against the sensitive ends.

Mindil let out another breath, it sounded like a short moan.

Magic dancing along her senses, Lily drew her fingertip along the soft ridge of Mindil's lips, pushing down only enough to feel it caressing against her senses.

Too soon, she finished the coloring. She hesitated, holding her fingertip along the corner of Mindil's mouth as the warm breath blew across her knuckles. She didn't know what to do but she knew she didn't want to let go.

Slowly, Mindil opened her eyes and looked at Lily. The gaze was smoldering, liquid puddles of topaz staring into her.

Panting, Lily reluctantly pulled her finger away. "I'm done," she whispered.

Mindil took a deep breath. "Thank you," she said in a low voice.

Then she lifted her hand from Lily's thigh. Lily didn't remember when Mindil had touched her, but she was dis-

tinctly aware of it missing. Excited and uncomfortable, Lily pushed herself away and stood up.

Mindil did the same.

"I-I should probably get back to work."

Mindil nodded. "Thank you again." Her smile came back, erasing the more sensual lines of her face with the familiar joy that she normally wore. She gestured to the plates. "Do you want me to clean up?"

"No, I can clean later. I need to go back to work."

"Tomorrow?" A simple question.

Lily's immediate answer was a surge of moisture and heat between her legs. Her nipples were hard and aching, her clitoris pulsating with the memory of her intimacy. She nodded even as she fought the urge to lean forward the touch Mindil's lips again.

Mindil took her leave after composing herself in the mirror.

Lily returned back to her working area, her thoughts now complicated by the touch of Mindil's lips. She stopped and stared at the dress, her wits lost as images of Hasan, Kendrick, and now Mindil raced across her mind.

Relief came when the door opened again. It was Falim de Kasin na Maifir and her daughter.

Thankful that she had most of Dinsanas's dress made, Lily gathered it up and brought it to the front sections. She only hoped that the two women wouldn't noticed that her thighs were slick with her inappropriate thoughts.

## Heading Home

All the jems in the world flow away as embers from a fire when spent by one dancing on the edge of wealth and poverty. A poor man lives beyond his means while the rich man strives to live poorly.

—Jamis da Martin ne Golid

**I**t was early evening and the Crafters's District was empty except for the few crafters packing up and heading home. The setting sun painted dark clouds above her with swirls of orange, blues, and purples. The stalls and wagons were already empty, they were gone within minutes of the evening bell, but a few stores still had lights on inside as their owners finished their books or stocking the shelves.

Lily walked alone, lugging a large, stiff-sided bag that contained fabric panels that needed to be sewn before the morning. She needed two hands to hold the handles otherwise it hurt her wrists. Her normal bag—with only empty lunch dishes and her essentials—bounced against the small of her back. The strap rested uncomfortably around her throat. The pressure made it only slightly difficult to breathe but she couldn't manage a way of holding both bags without discomfort.

She glanced enviously at the carriages waiting in front of the stores. If she wasn't aware of her own finances, she would have considered getting one. She didn't have the funds to get one herself, which meant an uncomfortable two mile walk. It also meant two miles of being lost in her thoughts.

It didn't take long before she was thinking about Nirih's dress. She was confident that the waist design was set, she just couldn't figure out an appropriate top. It was frustrating, to say the least. She could feel the patterns in her head but it refused to focus no matter how hard she tried. Every time she thought she had it, Juliet's reproachful tones blew away the pattern.

The puzzle kept her occupied for almost half a mile. A brief interruption of waiting for a gap between a pair of ladies riding horses drew her thoughts to a much different topic: Mindil.

When Lily continued along her route, the touch of Mindil's soft skin and the little moans echoed endlessly in Lily's head. She was far more forward than Lily had ever encountered before. She couldn't tell if Mindil was teasing her, hinting at Lily's actions with her husband, or something else.

A day ago, Lily would have never considered being intimate with a woman but Mindil had put a little insect in her thoughts and it was worming deeper. Lily found herself wondering what it would feel like to kiss Mindil's painted lips or to let her fingers travel further down past the collar.

Lily's face grew flush. She pretended it was because of the uncomfortable bag pinching her fingers but the tingling between her legs belied out the deception.

She switched her bags to their opposite sides and focused enough on her trip to pass a mechanical road. Most of the paths in the city were for pedestrians and horses but



every few of them allowed the newly introduced machines to roll past as they blew perfumed steam into the air.

It was loud near the road and she made a face. She couldn't wait until the fad of mechanical cars faded. She waited for the traffic guard to stop traffic before hurrying across the cobblestone intersection. She kept her eyes down looking for puddle of oil, a slip would ruin not only the dresses in her bag but the one she wore.

Once past the intersection, she shifted her bags again and let her mind drift.

Mindil and her husband had a lot in common. They were both intense, though Hasan's obsession felt like him pressing tightly against Lily's back while Mindil lured her in. There was no question what he wanted. Even with the recent visit from Mindil, Lily could feel the hunger for Hasan's kisses rising up to burn through her thoughts.

It didn't stop her musings to drift to the soft touch of Mindil's lips against her fingertips.

Lily was halfway home when the first droplets of rain splashed on her cheek.

With a gasp, she clutched her bag protectively and looked up.

The clouds were darker since she started. Flashes of lightning coursed along the bottom edges. More rain splashed down. Around her, she heard the faint hiss as it fell steadily.

"No, no, not now," she muttered as she looked around for shelter. Her route had taken her down a cobblestone road with sidewalks on both sides. There were glass-fronted stores with apartments above them. A number of the top windows were lit but there was only darkness among the ground level.

More rain splashed on her face and soaked into her hair. Cool pricks caressed her shoulders when the fabric of her dress did nothing to stop the water.

Lily clutched her large bag to her chest as she looked for some place she could find shelter. When she couldn't, she headed for the first stoop that looked deep enough to avoid the worst of the weather. It was a cheap milliner with dozens of feathered hats behind the glass windows.

She stepped up on the step and set her large bag carefully against the door. It was the furthest away from the rain but she wasn't sure it would be enough. Turning around, she unhooked her lunch sack from her neck and carefully nestled it into the top of the dress bag; it would catch any splashes that could ruin the fabric.

Turning around, she regarded the street. The clouds had opened up and sheets of water poured down on the street. It was only a few seconds before the stones were dark and rivers of water raced between the cracks. Papers and wrappers floated past along the gutters, traveling sedately toward the sewers.

Lily sighed. She should have ordered a carriage. It was expensive and slow, but then she wouldn't be trapped on some store's stoop with a bag filled with her livelihood.

The smell of the fresh rain blew over it. It reminded her of Kendrick. The water mage always had the same scent surrounding him. She closed her eyes for a moment and pretended he was standing next to her, his muscular body reaching out for her.

Heat rose inside her, pushing back the coolness of the rain and the frustration of being trapped. She let her eyes droop close as she sank herself into the idle fantasies of Kendrick while waiting for the rain to subside.

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## Chapter 17

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# Rainfall

Rain washes away all the mud we use as masks.

—Halador Masin, *Dance of Children*

**T**he bells rang out across the city, the ringing muted by the rain that had continued to hammer the streets. It was late—much later than she wanted it to be. However the rain had not subsided since it had started. Fat droplets sloshed into shallow puddles. Rivers bubbled along both sides of the roads, flooding the gutters. The raindrops came down in a steady drum, the glass behind her vibrated with the countless impacts.

Lily sighed and glared into the dark street. It was getting late and she needed to be home. She was anxious and her mood had soured. Even fantasies or her work couldn't keep her distracted from the time slipping between her fingers.

A carriage drove by, splashing water in both directions.

She cringed as the water sheeted toward her but fell short. It poured across the sidewalk to lap against the raised stoop.

Lily breathed a sigh of relief.

A peal of thunder shook the street. The clouds were rolling darkness punctuated by the flash of lightning and peals of thunder. The streetlights pushed back the gloom on the street, but the magical flames weren't enough to push it back completely. The sheets of rain sparkled in the light.

She was too tired and anxious to enjoy the beauty. She crossed her arms across her chest, squelching into the soaked fabric. She glared at the rain, cursing it to end as soon as possible.

Lily had worked herself into a foul mood when three men rushed down the street right in front of her. Their boots smacked loudly through the puddles as they raced by.

She gasped and stepped to protect her sewing. As she did, she caught only a sight of their swords still in sheaths and a flash of the Martin crest on their chests.

Before the water finished splashing, they were out of sight. The steady drum of their boots and hiss of water flying everything ended seconds later as they ran out of earshot.

Curious, Lily leaned out of her shelter and into the rain. The Martins were standing in front of an alley two blocks down. Without a word, they spread into a wide arc to cover the entrance. Rain bounced off their top hats and soaked into their black jackets.

The three men drew their swords. One by one, they filed into the alley.

She blinked and wiped the rain from her face to get a better look.

A heartbeat later, there was a muffled boom and water exploded from the alley. It shot out like a geyser, arching clear across the street before cracking the glass of a store on the opposite side. Two of the Martin men flew out. They hit the ground hard and rolled over.

Lily jumped at the explosion and then gasped as the Martin men slumped to the road. The rain soaked her head as she stared, looking for any sign of movement in the two fallen Martins.

One of the men pushed himself up. Blood dripped down the side of his face as he staggered to his feet. He limped over to the other one.

She held her breath as the man reached down.

When the second man reached up, she let out her breath with a gasp.

The third Martin backed out of the alley. He had his sword out and it crackled with lightning. He had it up to parry a blow. “Kal, you okay? Domin?” he yelled through the sheeting rain.

“Yeah, Mark,” said the first guy as he straightened. “Domin got some wind.” He reached down for the Domin before speaking up. “Tell me you at least nicked that shit Kendrick?”

Lily’s heart beat faster at the name.

“You are still an asshole.” The rain muted the voice from the alley. The speaker backed out, his blade brandished in front of him.

“Then stop following me!” bellowed Kendrick as he stepped out. Water spiraled around him in ribbons of sparkling water. It cut into the sides of the alley, carving away the bricks as he came out of the darkness. Above him, a shimmering curved line marked where the rain stopped falling before it joined into the swirling water.

Lily froze. Kendrick looked haggard, as if he hadn’t been sleeping well. He had a fresh cut on his cheek. His suit, on the other hand, looked untouched from when she repaired it. It gave her a little hope.

She abandoned her sewing and stepped out into the rain. It poured down on her body, soaking her instantly. She

clutched the side of the wall as she inched closer, straining to listen.

“We just want to talk, Kasin,” said Mark.

Water ran down Kendrick’s face, it traced along his scars. The droplets fell from his chin. Instead of soaking into his suit, the water beaded on the surface and continued to fall. He lifted his hand and the rain around him gathered into a sphere.

Lily was stepping away from the wall before she realized it. “Kendrick?” she called out, her voice too quiet to be heard over the rain.

Kendrick glanced in her direction. Their eyes met. Then he looked away. His image blurred from the rivulets rolling down her face.

He looked back, this time with wider eyes.

Panting, she reached out for him. She took a few steps down the street, stopping in a deep puddle.

A quick peek confirmed the Martins were also looking at her but she only had the attention for Kendrick. She stopped, panting softly. The water sheeting down her face caught on her lip, caressing it like a kiss.

“Kal and Domin, go,” ordered Mark. “We’re done here.”

Domin staggered to his feet. “Just like that?”

“Domin, now!”

Kendrick glared at them, the sphere in hand growing larger.

Mark made a show of sheathing his sword. “We will talk later. I will not do this in front of her.”

Kendrick glanced at Lily and back to the Martin.

With a short bow, the lead Martin gestured for the others and walked in the opposite direction from Lily. They turned at the next street and were quickly out of sight.

Lily turned to look back at Kendrick but he was gone.

“Oh, not again.” With a glare, she stormed toward the alley, splashing widely with every step. She had to hike up the bottom of her dress to keep it from dragging her down. At the entrance, she peered inside. “I know you’re there! Stop disappearing on me!”

Only rain answered.

“Kendrick, I’m going to hunt you down if you don’t come here!” She felt a bit foolish but he kept disappearing on her. “Even if I have to use the Martins to find you! I swear—”

Wind rushed out of the alley toward her, sending rain and water. She gasped and threw up her hands to shield herself but not a single droplet struck her. Instead, it parted and streamed around her for a moment before splashing loudly to the ground.

Heart pounding in her chest, she straightened up and planted her hands on her hips. “Ken! Get out here right now!”

A low chuckle could be heard as his silhouette oozed out of the darkness. He looked menacing and terrifying, a walking shadow.

She stood her ground with her stomach twisting and her hands trembling.

When the light peeled away from him, he was only inches from her. His black hair clung to both sides of his faces, the darkness merging with his scruff. His scent somehow overpowered the rolling rain around her. The roar around her faded as the droplets stopped.

She looked up, blinking at the water on her face. Not a single raindrop struck her face as she watched it curving away from her only a few feet above her head. She let out a soft breath and looked into his face. “Kendrick?”

“You were always hard to walk away from.”

“You shouldn’t keep running away.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

She exhaled. "It does every time you disappear."

His eyes softened for a moment. Lifting one soaked hand, he ran it along her cheek. "Lily, I'm not a good man. I don't think I ever was."

Lily leaned into his touch, just to feel his finger trace along her cheek and then to the side of her neck.

"I'm a coward. A gutless man who can't even say the things he wants to." His hand slipped around her neck, cradling the back of her head.

It only took a tiny step on her part to bring their bodies together. Her breasts bumped against his muscular chest, nipples already hard from the cool rain suddenly ached at the touch. She tilted her head even more to look into his eyes. "Why not?"

"I don't want to drag you into my mistakes. I've made too many and you are too important."

"I've made mistakes too, Kendrick."

"Not like these."

She thought for a moment. "What if I don't mind?"

He tightened and started to pull his hand away from the back of her head. Desperate not to break the contact, Lily pushed herself up on her toes and pressed her lips tight against his.

The world grew hot around him as she tasted lightning and rain on his kiss.

Kendrick hesitated, his fingers dancing along the nape of her neck, but then he held her tight and kissed back.

Heat rolled threw her body, surging through her heart and spreading out to her limbs. The cold from waiting in the rain melted away, leaving her as hot as a summer day.

His other hand slipped around her waist, pulling her tight to his body. The first touch of his firm body was interrupted by his hardness—a thick rod grinding above her hip—that pulsating through the many layers of fabric.



She smiled and kissed him again and again.

The rain fell again, splashing on her head and face as he grew more confident. His lips parted, his breath washed over hers. It left a wave of heat to ripple through her body.

Lily tried to grab his chest, to hold him close, but her fingers missed. She bumped against the fabric of his suit. Unwilling to let him go, she clutched it tightly. She opened her own lips to drink from him, flooded by the heat and smell of his body.

His tongue flashed out, caressing her lips. It was a surprise and intense, stealing her breath away.

She moaned and held him tight, her body trembling with the effort.

Lily didn't know who broke it, but when they parted, they were both gasping for breath. She smiled and released his jacket. Her knuckles were sore. Wiping her face, she looked into his eyes again. "You don't have to run."

His thick lips moved for a moment. She could feel the tension in his body, it grew tighter with every passing heartbeat.

She shook her head. "Kendrick?"

He looked away for a moment. "Why are you out here?"

"I got caught in the rain. I was trying to head home."

When he looked back, the moment had broken. The rain stopped again, halted by the invisible force above his head. He stepped away, slowly drawing his arm from her waist and his palm from her neck. The cool air rushed over her, erasing the touch they had just enjoyed.

"Kendrick?" she whispered. "Please don't disappear on me. My heart can't take it right now."

He stared at her for a long moment. Water dripped down his face, tracing the line of his nose and cheek before clinging to his lips. They were pressed together but she couldn't help but long to kiss them again.

Lily's heart beat faster.

"I'll walk you home. It's too wet for you." Kendrick turned away from her but then held up his arm, elbow crooked and waiting.

With a blush, Lily rested her fingers along his muscular arm. She gestured to her hiding spot. "I have some dresses that can't get wet. They are important."

"Then they are important for me too," he said in a low growl. Somehow, his voice made her heart flutter.

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## Chapter 18

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# Memories

The whispered words of lovers may only last a second but is echoed for decades.

—Tastin dea Darund

**L**ily and Kendrick walked in silence. With the late hour and the sheeting rain, there was no one else on the streets, not even carriages or beggars. The only light came from the streetlights which cast a hazy glow across the glistening cobblestones as the rain plummeted like diamonds through the beams of light.

She leaned into Kendrick's shoulder, enjoying the strength underneath his suit and the way he easily carried her fabrics without even straining. The heat of his body seeped through the fabric, pushing away the chill. It felt like cuddling under the blankets in the middle of winter.

Lily wondered what it would be like to wake up next to someone in that situation. Almost instantly a flush rose in her cheeks as she recalled Kendrick's naked backside. The hard muscles and scarred flesh intruded on her dreams more than once, she still ached to find out what he would feel like underneath her naked palm.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

“What?”

“You tensed.”

Her blush grew hotter. She looked down at her shoes and forced her grip to relax. “No, nothing is wrong.”

He said nothing but he rested his other hand on her fingers, the electric touch caressing her nerves. She peeked up to see him smiling down at her.

“Nothing!” she said a bit too forcefully.

“You don’t have to say anything. I’m just enjoying walking the lo... you back to your house. The streets are rather wet right now and I hated to see your work ruined.”

Lily wondered how much he was acting like he cared and how much he actually yearned for her. She didn’t want to know if he lied to her but she also craved talking to him. “I... I’m working on this dress and I can’t get it right.”

“You will.”

“It has to be perfect. She’s going to be at the Spring Lights Festival, that’s the biggest event that week. Last time I was there, about two hundred debutantes walked the platforms. The gossip rags will be there, they always are, and everyone will be talking about every tiny detail, from the perfumes to the hair to the...”

“The dresses?”

She smiled to herself. “Dresses are the first thing everyone talks about. Hair is the second. Every little thing goes into those young girl’s presentations.”

Kendrick slowed to guide her around a large puddle. “I still remember your dress. The first time I saw you, it had this frilly thing around the bottom and was kind of like an emerald shade around your waist.”

Lily stumbled. “You remembered that?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” he said it as if it was a common thing.

“It was nine years ago.”

“Not for me. Every day, every night. There was that yellow flowery thing a week later, and then the blue shimmery dress. I remember that because you had shoes that sparked this lovely sapphire color.”

Warmth flushed over her. She could picture everything about the outfits he brought up, his words dredging up memories that were masked over by the sourness that ended her prospects.

They walked in silence for another block. The rain started to subside but it still came down hard, bouncing off the invisible force above their head before sheeting down on both sides. The lightning scent lingered in the air.

He sighed. “I should have let Hasan win.”

She thought about the duel. For all the memories of the dances and social events, the actual duel remained only in fragments. She remembered Kendrick standing over Hasan, his sword at Hasan’s throat. It was raining—it was always raining when he got emotional—and it felt like half of High Society watched from the windows of her mother’s old house.

“I knew he wouldn’t let you go. Right then, when I had my sword at his throat, I could see it in his eyes.”

“You offered his surrender, you didn’t have to.” The memories were painful to bring up. Tears burned in her eyes as she remembered the horrifying glare that Hasan shot at Kendrick when he stormed off. Everyone thought it was over at that point, Kendrick had staked his claim on her and she knew her father would have accepted it.

Kendrick sighed and his grip tightened. “When all those mercenaries came in, I knew it was Hasan. But...” He paused for a moment. “I thought I was being brave to defend you, to keep what I earned.”

He snorted. The water around them stopped for a heartbeat before splashing louder. “What I earned. I was a damn

fool for thinking you were the prize, but that night you were my bounty and I was willing to kill to keep you.”

Lily bowed her head. It was part of being a debutante, a pretty girl being shown off to prospective husbands for a bride price and political maneuvering.

“Of course, my father had other ideas. He forbade me from presenting my offer to your father.”

Lily didn’t know that. She looked at the scowl on Kendrick’s face and felt a strange fluttering in her heart.

“I refused, of course. It was my own father’s men who stopped me only a few blocks from where your parents were staying. They beat me before throwing me on a ship to cool my heels. I remember being so angry at them, that Hasan was going to get what I won.”

Lily slid her hand from the crook of his elbow up to his upper arm. “He didn’t.”

Kendrick glanced at her. Then he rested his hand over hers, bringing back the electric touch. “Neither of us deserved you then.”

“And now?”

He said nothing for a long moment. “I don’t things have changed much since. Hasan is... waiting for you still, willing to fight at all costs. Not even his marriage—” He stopped abruptly.

“Kendrick?”

Kendrick pulled his fingers away. “This isn’t a contest for your heart, Lily. Not anymore. It shouldn’t have been one in the first place. There is only one person who can speak for you now. That’s you.”

“Then why—?”

Kendrick stopped sharply.

Lily continued another step, her hand slipping away. She looked down at her bareness and felt the cool moisture gathering around her. It felt empty and lonely, a painful

contrast to the warmth that she had just enjoyed. She turned around to look at him.

Kendrick stood in the rain. It sheeted down around him despite the field that protected her. It ran down the sides of his shadowed face. "I won't be like Hasan, Lily. As much as I want you, I won't force myself into your life."

She sniffed. "Don't leave me."

"You don't want me."

"You can't know that." She reached out for him. "Please, just stay. Talk, just be with me. Let me in."

Kendrick shook his head. "Not tonight. Good luck with Nirih de Kasin's dress. I know you'll figure it out. You are the only light I can see in this city."

The clouds opened up and sheets of rain hammered down on the streets. It came in a rush, shaking the ground and rattling the windows. His form wavered and then appeared to melt away in the downfall.

Lily cried out. "Ken! Don't go!"

She was dry as was her dresses. They were perfectly safe from his disappearance.

Except for her tears. She wiped her cheeks and looked at the glittering moisture on the tips of her fingers. She wanted Kendrick to stay, but she couldn't tell if it was to touch him, to kiss him, or just to hold him and tell him he didn't have to flee.

Turning around, she realized with a start that she stood in front of her house. The water shield over her had been extended through her garden and to her front door. The ground was wet from freshly fallen rain but otherwise untouched by the hammering waters.

More tears ran down her cheeks as she picked up her bags and hurried to the door. It wasn't until she unlocked it and set her bags inside that she realized that Kendrick knew Nirih's name. With a start, she turned around just as

the rain shield faded away and the downpour erased the sight of the street in an instant.



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## Chapter 19

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# Fury

No one expected an ambush any more than a smith doesn't expect their shoddy shoes to fall off the horse.

—Chinóra Fugamichyo

**L**ily hummed cheerfully to herself as she circled around her work table. Parts of Nirih's dress were spread out across the surface, pinned by stone weights. She had a few of them sewn together with brightly colored threads.

She had other parts of the dress already hanging off a customized wicker form that matched many of Nirih's measurements. Like her repair of Kendrick's suit, each of the different fabric pieces were different colors but matched in texture.

As she lined up the next two pieces together, she glanced up at the other forms. She had three other dresses blocked out and hanging from the wicker shells. They were all the proper shapes but she still hadn't finished coloring them.

It felt good to have some progress toward her obligations. After nights of dreams and mental blocks, everything eased up. It had been two days since Kendrick walked her home. She enjoyed a little guilty pleasure, teasing herself to

an orgasm to images of both him and Hasan to ease her into sleep; it seemed to quiet the nightmares and give her a chance to focus once again.

Drawing out a thread, she fed it through a needle and began to lay down a neat line of stitches. She could afford to lose herself in her work, she had at least an hour before business started.

She was about half the way through the line when someone began to pound on the door. She missed a stitch, punching the needle through the wrong bit of fabric. She hissed and started to aim the needle to reverse the stitch.

"I know you're in there! Open up!" It was Juliet.

Lily held herself still, her good mood evaporating almost instantly. She straightened and then frowned, she didn't think she was late for Nirih's presentation. Glancing at the open door between her work area and the front, she could see a bit of the front window from her vantage point. There was no point in hiding herself from Juliet.

She continued to look around until she spotted her schedule book. It would bring her across the door and reveal herself fully to Juliet. She knew it would infuriate the powerful woman but she had to be sure.

With a sigh, she dropped her work and crossed over to her desk. She cringed as she did.

"I see you, cow!" screamed Juliet. The older woman continued to pound on the glass, rattling the glass with every impact.

Lily ignored her for the few precious seconds it took to find the page on her schedule. She ran her finger along the calendar line. She still had four days before Nirih's first scheduled fitting.

Her heart sank. She was more than behind on her work. She would have to work night and day to meet the date but

it was possible. With a groan, she closed her book with a snap.

“Come on! Open the door!”

Lily turned and headed to the front door. She knew it would be bad news but she still lifted her chin and prepared for the onslaught.

Juliet didn’t stop pounding on the glass. She was dressed in a white-trimmed gold dress. The corset was slightly off, giving her a lop-sided appearance that only a seamstress or gossip would notice. She looked furious, more than even Lily would suspect for the time left until the first fitting.

A ripple of concern filled Lily but she unbolted the door and held it open.

Juliet shoved her way in.

The door smacked against Lily’s foot. She stepped back with a wince. “*Tadame Juliet de Kasin na Maifir*, how may I —”

“I just heard that you haven’t even started my daughter’s dress!”

Stunned, Lily just stared at the enraged woman.

“Well, what have you been doing? Other dresses? Someone more important than me?”

Lily started to explain her struggles but then realized there was nothing she could say to interrupt Juliet’s fury.

“T-There is no one else more important.”

“Exactly! Which is why I demand to know why you haven’t started on my daughter’s dress!”

“I-I have,” said Lily with a flush. “I was working on it just now.”

“I don’t believe you.” Juliet spun on her heels and stormed toward the back of the store.

Lily stared in shock for a moment, a righteous fury rising up. She had been working on the dress, struggling for days

on it actually. She wanted it to be perfect. “Look, I’ve been —”

Juliet was already at the entrance to the work area. She stood in the entrance, hands at her hips as she glared at the tables. “What is this? Horse shit?”

“It is not—”

The older woman spun on her. “Is that shit what you are thinking for my daughter? You will ruin her!” She pointed to the dress on the table. It was one of the lower panels with one side colored a dark brown and the other a deep indigo. The chalk marks were clearly visible where Lily had been shaping it to put in a panel that would reveal hints of Nirih’s legs during the twirls of the Five-Step Horseman, a popular dance this year, but retain her modesty while walking slowly.

Lily frowned. “No, the color is—”

“It isn’t the right shade, it isn’t even yellow! It isn’t done! You have been sitting on your fat ass doing nothing while my daughter’s future is being burned away like your stupid, pathetic, life!”

Lily couldn’t get a word inserted into Juliet’s tirade. She raised her hand but Juliet swatted it out of place.

Juliet stepped forward, jamming her chest into Lily and pushing her back. “I will not have my daughter become like you, cow!”

Tears shimmered in Lily’s eyes. “I’m working. I can change the col—”

“You are nothing but a useless shit like that damn dress!”

“I—”

“I’ll be damned if I put that garbage on my daughter!”

“No, I—”

“Shut up, cow! Let’s see how Penir da Kasin, a real seamstress, and your mother think about this!” Juliet shoved Lily back hard, forcing her to step back. A bench caught the

back of Lily's knees and she tumbled over it. She tried to stop her fall by grabbing a nearby desk, but her fingers caught on the paper on top and she continued to fall.

The impact against the wooden floor drove the wits out of her. A sharp burst of light flashed across her vision from the pain of hitting her tail bone against the hard surface.

Juliet stormed away. "Fucking cow," she muttered.

Lily heard the door slam shut, the glass rattling loudly. A few pages hanging on the edge of the desk slipped off and fluttered to the ground.

Sniffing, she tried to find purchase on the desk and the bench to pull herself up, but her fingers refused to grip anything. Her fingers slipped uselessly and she fell back.

She was trying, damn the Couple. Every night, every day. She brought it home but it just took too long to focus, to work on it, to even concentrate. She was trying.

Tears welled in her eyes. She sniffed and wiped at them but the action set off a torrent that rolled down her cheeks. Sobbing, she clutched at the pages and stared at them dumbly. Her mind rolled through excuses and reasons, none of them sounded right.

After a few seconds, she gave up trying to get up. Dropping the paper, she curled her head over her knees and let the sobs burst out. Her cries echoed against the inside of the story. She was sure that passersby on the street could hear her but she didn't care anymore.

She didn't know how long she had been crying when the door rattled open. She tried to stop her crying, but couldn't. No matter what she did, the tears kept flowing and the sobs rose in her throat.

"Good morning!" crowed Mindil. "I brought... Lily?"

Lily ducked her head, as if she could hide behind the bench.

“What’s wrong?” Mindil dropped a heavy-sounded paper bag and rushed over. Her boots were loud on the wooden floors. She stopped on the far side of the bench. Bending over, she peered through the opening. “Lily!”

Lily looked up, her vision blurry with her tears. As usual, Mindil wore a flowered dress that did wonders for showing off her wide hips and large breasts.

Mindil rushed around and then lowered herself to her knees. Her dress rode up, revealing a well-rounded thigh. Before she finished kneeling, Lily spotted a wedge of brown hair where she expected to see a pair of underwear.

Lily gasped with shock but it was quickly replaced by an unexpected rush of heat and desire. Humiliated by her own desire, she jerked away from Mindil as the other woman reached out for a hug.

Mindil moved faster than Lily and wrapped her arms around her and pulled her tight. “Come here,” she said with a purr.

Lily found herself pressed against Mindil’s breast, her cheek hot with shame. She took in a deep shuddering breath and caught scent of Mindil’s perfume, it was a citrus-scent with a hint of flowers; it wasn’t Mindil’s usual scent.

“There, there,” crooned Mindil. “Let the tears out.”

Lily fought for a moment, struggling with the despair and desire. Then, she just sank down into the embrace as nothing more than a comforting warmth. Another sob rose up and she buried her face into Mindil’s chest to let it out.

“Tears turn to vinegar when held in. Just let it out.”

Growing up, Lily’s mother always demanded that Lily stop crying or at least excuse herself. Lily had never been with anyone who encouraged her to let her cry. A fresh sob came but Mindil only held her firmly as it burst out.

Lily's cries broke apart. She snaked one arm around Mindil's waist and hugged her tight to keep her balance.

Mindil stroked Lily's back with one hand. "Let it out, let it all out."

The sobs filled the room, raw and ragged. She tried to speak. "I-I wanted to tell her... I could change the color... she didn't, she did—"

"Shush, cry first and then talk. I won't leave."

After a while, the tears slowed until they burned Lily's eyes. She didn't move at first, it was too comforting to be held by Mindil. She smelled good and she was nice to Lily, even if Lily was cheating on her with her husband.

Guilt prickled Lily's thoughts. She pushed herself up.

"Oh, now we have something else in that pretty head of yours." Mindil smiled as she held Lily into a sitting position. She kept her forearm on Lily's shoulders while her other hand slid down to Lily's far arm.

Lily kept her own arm around Mindil's waist. "I-I... I'm not—"

"You are beautiful."

Words failed her. Lily looked at her in shock.

"You were about to say something degrading, weren't you?"

Lily blushed.

Mindil grinned. "Well, don't. You are beautiful. You have talents that women would kill for and you have a successful business."

The tears threatened to return. "I... She said I was—"

"Well, she's fucking a horse."

Lily gasped. "Min!"

Mindil leaned forward. "Want to tell me who's fucking a horse?"

"I-I can't. That's wouldn't be—"

"Ah, Juliet de Kasin."

“I—”

“I saw her ranting in a carriage as I was walking up. Well, you’re right, she’s obviously fucking the horse.”

“Min! That’s...”

Mindil shrugged. “Everything else is true though. You are a wonderful, beautiful young lady. Don’t let anyone forget that. I am... I can list half a dozen wo... people who would want to be in your store today.”

A tremor raced along Mindil’s arm.

Lily spread her fingers along the small of Mindil’s back. She stared into the woman’s face, taking in the bright brown eyes and the red-painted lips. The curiosity that had been plucking at her imagination rose up again as she wondered what it would be like to kiss them.

“I don’t mind.”

Lily tensed.

Mindil cocked her head slightly. “You were thinking about something. I could see it in your eyes.”

“I-I... I was...”

A soft giggle. “You are blushing.”

Lily looked down away from Mindil. She was aware of how close they were, with her arm still around Mindil’s waist and their breasts almost touching. She peeked back at the red lips and then away again.

“Are you afraid I’m going to say no?” Mindil’s voice grew quieter. It was ironic since her power made sure no one could ever overhear them, but the intimacy of the quiet voice felt like fingers down Lily’s sides. She trembled at the sound.

“Y... No... yes.”

Mindil slipped her arm off Lily’s shoulder. She traced her fingers down Lily’s spine, the touch was hot with the fabric between them. Then, she stopped at the small of Lily’s



back, spreading her fingers not unlike what Lily was doing herself. "Maybe if you ask?"

Lily panted softly. She was hot and flustered, it rolled over her body and seemed to center on the fingers against her skin. The rest of her body was responding in kind, with nipples growing harder with her thoughts and a heated moisture between her legs. She could feel it clinging to her own panties, a reminder that Mindil had nothing underneath her own dress.

She looked up. Mindil was watching her carefully, her eyes scanning back and forth. She was still smiling, the perfect soft lips that were drawing Lily in. She gulped and trembled with her indecision.

It wasn't that Mindil would lash out at her. She was confident that Mindil knew exactly what was on her thoughts. It was the long, teasing that made it hard. The tiny shred of doubt as she considered something completely scandalous.

Screwing up her courage, Lily licked her lips. "I..."

Mindil didn't say anything.

"I want to kiss you."

Lily cringed, waiting for Mindil to be shocked or angry.

Instead, the other woman tilted her head to the right. "I want you to kiss me. Actually, I've wanted to you to kiss me since I saw you one year during the High Moon Ball. You were about twenty girls ahead of me and I thought you were the most beautiful woman I had ever seen." Mindil took a deep breath. "Both Hasan and I have been dreaming of you for so long."

"I-I..." Lily was too stunned to feel guilty about Hasan's affections.

Mindil leaned forward, pressing her breast against Lily's. "In fact, I would ever much like to kiss you right now."

They were only inches apart.

Lily's world spun around her as she leaned into it. Her body burned with an infernal, caught in the closeness of the embrace and the anticipation. She hesitated and then brought her lips to Mindil's.

Soft. Sweet and tasted of citrus. She realized it was Mindil's lips were the source of the scent, but the sharpness was a beautiful contrast to the softness as they pressed together.

Lily inhaled, drinking in the warmth, and then kissed again.

Mindil's hand against her back pulled her closer as she shifted her body to nestled up against Lily. She kissed softly at first and then more eagerly. The only moment she pulled back, it was to breathe and even then her lips remained touching Lily's.

Lily moaned. She pulled herself even closer, lifting one leg and her hips enough that Mindil's leg slipped underneath it. The pressure against her sex, already aching and soaked, sent a surge of pleasure through her body. She wrapped her free arm around Mindil's shoulders.

They kissed harder, mouths open as they sank into each other. All the despair and frustration faded away. Lily swam in the pleasure, moaning as she ground her body tight against Mindil's.

They bumped against the desk and the feet scraped against the noise.

Mindil giggled into the kiss. She let out a soft breath, the citrus scent flooded Lily's lungs before she broke the embrace.

Lily whimpered softly and kissed her back. The intensity faded slightly but the softness against her lips and the heat along her body was difficult to pull away. She smiled. "Thank you," she whispered.

Mindil giggled. "You're welcome. I think we both wanted this."

"I-I wasn't sure." Lily started to pull herself off Mindil, but then realized she didn't want to move. Instead, she nestled down firmly on Mindil's thigh and shifted her body up until her crotch rested against her friend's belly. She watched Mindil to make sure she wasn't going too far.

Mindil responded with a kiss. "Now, do you feel better? No more tears?"

Lily giggled herself and shook her head.

"Are you sure? It still feels pretty damp down here."

With a frown, Lily looked to where Mindil ran a finger along Lily's thigh. The wave of heat rose up from the touch, gathering between her legs. With a flush, she looked up unsure of what to say.

"I know, probably a bit forward."

"I've never done this."

"Neither have I, so it is going to be new for both of us. That is, if you want to do it again."

Lily nodded.

"Then, my lovely little Lily, you have a dress to finish and a horse fucker to prove wrong."

"Min."

"What? She's obviously fucking horses with an attitude like that."

"You shouldn't say things like that."

Mindil grinned and kissed Lily again. "Then I will shut up once you finish that dress."

Reluctantly, Lily pulled away.

"Besides, I got some delicious nut muffins to have for breakfast. They have little hunks of sausage and egg in them and they taste divine."

Feeling much better, Lily helped Mindil up and they both fixed their dresses. As Mindil turned to retrieve the

bag of food that had spilled on the floor, Lily noticed that there was a bright red hand print on the woman's dress, right where Lily was touching her.

With a heated blush, she promised to discretely recolor it before anyone else noticed.

## Cross Sell

High Society thrives on the appearance of the natural. Gone are the bright colors of the lower class leaving only golds, browns, and blacks.

—Juminar da Golid, *The Perfect Society*

**“Thank-thank** you!” said Falim na Maifir. “She looks so beautiful!”

Lily smiled and looked up at Dinsanas. The teenage girl couldn’t be smiling any more and still have her head on her shoulders. The sea-green dress flowed down over her wide hips and became a shimmering wave that ended with a debutante sheer cream. She had used her magic to color the individual folds so there was an even transition from color to cream.

The top of the dress drew attention away from the young girl’s shoulders and breasts but the flared collar worked perfectly to cradle her face, argumentatively her best asset.

Mindil, sitting primly on the bench next to Falim, handed a silk cloth for the crying mother. Her ever present smile brought a flutter to Lily’s heart; they had been stealing kisses from each other most of the morning. For the most part, though, Mindil minded the front of the store

while insisting that Lily work on finishing Dinsanas's dress for the first of two fittings.

Lily was thankful for the time. The dress fit better than she hoped, the young girl was dedicated to maintaining her figure for her presentations. There were only a few adjustments needed. She ran her hand along the chiffon and adjusted the colors slightly.

She looked up at Dinsanas. "Do you like it?"

"I... I... it's so beautiful! I love-love it!" She spun around, her eyes shimmering with her own tears. The hope and joy was palatable in the store.

Lily enjoyed it, basking in the joy. Yes, it was one of the minor events, a sports game in early evening with a celebration dinner. It wouldn't have the attention of most of the city, maybe only a few rags and gossips, but it was still one of her better jobs and she was proud of the work.

It was unfortunate that Juliet didn't see that.

Mindil cleared her throat.

Lily looked up guilty. When she saw Mindil shaking her thumb at her, she ducked her head and forced the despair from her heart. It took her a moment. As she calmed down, she noticed that Dinsanas wore simple slippers. "Have you gotten shoes for this dress? I might have to adjust for the heel."

Falim sighed. "We haven't had much luck. There isn't a single debutante shoe in this part of the town."

Mindil perked up. "Why don't you head over to Simil's? She has these beautiful three laces with an inch heel. They would look perfect with that dress."

Surprised, Lily started at her friend in confusion.

Falim made a low noise in her throat. "We tried that. She has beautiful shoes but they are all late season colors."

There was something mischievous about Mindil's smile. "Lily dea Kasin can color them to match the dress. It will be perfect."

Heat rushed through Lily. She had never thought about coloring shoes to match dresses before. The revelation made it hard to breath as she stared at Mindil and Falim.

Both the mother and daughter stared at Lily. "You-you can do that?" asked Falim.

It wasn't any different than coloring wood or hair. "Y-Yes."

Mindil winked at her. "I'm sure she'll do it for a discount since you already bought the dress. Maybe two hundred jems? Buying the proper shoes of color at this point will cost you five or six hundred."

Falim's smile grew wider.

Lily could only nod.

"In fact," Mindil continued as she arched her back slightly. "I also bet if you reserved a time for the day of the party, Lily would come to your house and color your daughter's hair and lips too. She would be perfectly matched from head to toe."

Falim stammered.

"There won't be another debutante who will coordinated so perfectly. She will draw everyone's attention, I promise you."

Dinsanas reached up to stroke through her hair. It was a light brown, nothing remarkable but it had the brittleness of being recently colored with magic. "Can-can you really... I thought it had to be blonde or brown. They said I couldn't do blonde because my hair wouldn't take the alchemical mixture." She look sheepish. "It always came out light blue."

Lily rarely thought about hair color. She couldn't remember her natural color after so many years of changing it reflexively. The idea of a High Society woman not having

browns, golds, or blondes was unheard, but she did remember a style a few years before where women would tint the ends of their hair.

She started to speak but then Mindil interrupted. "She can make you a blonde too with just a hint of color. Trust me, it will be stunning. She'll do your nails too. You get them polished, any color, and she'll make it match. It shouldn't take more than an hour plus a carriage fee."

Unaccustomed to Mindil's forward speaking, Lily fought showing her blush. She was capable of doing everything Mindil said, she just never thought about before and had no idea how much it would cost. She guessed it would be about the same as the shoes, a couple hundred jems.

"Bedame dea Kasin didn't mention these services earlier," Falim said sharply.

"The bedame doesn't trust her own ability. You've seen how she can change colors of fabrics."

"That is fabric, hair—"

Mindil stood up interrupting Falim. She swayed over to Lily, the look in her eyes hungry and dominating.

Lily felt a flush of excitement as she rose up. She was a prey to Mindil's look and already knew what the suggestion was. With a trembling hand, she reached up and combed her fingers through Mindil's orange-tinted hair. The magic rippled along her senses and the hair adjusted in color to match her dress.

Both mother and daughter gasped with surprise.

Lily lost herself in Mindil's eyes as she cupped the back of her friend's head. It was hard to resist the urge to pull her into a kiss, a deep one. It seemed like the only response to the gaze being focused on her.

Mindil pursed her lips, then parted them slightly to lick them.



A heat fluttered between Lily's legs, a rush of heat that tingled her clitoris. She fought back a moan as she reached out with her thumb and caressed Mindil's lips. The wave of heat redoubled inside her as the lips took on the same hue.

When she finished, she stared at the results for a long time.

Dinsanas giggled.

Lily pulled back with a gasp. "Sorry."

Falim coughed into her hand—she was smiling—and then stood up. "Let me see."

She made a show of inspecting Mindil's hair and lips carefully but even Lily could tell that she was getting excited. Her daughter hid her hopes even less, she was bouncing on the fitting pedestal as she brushed her own lips.

Mindil winked at Lily.

"How much-much?" asked Falim, her eyes darting back and forth.

Lily started for the paper, to give her a chance to work out numbers.

"Twelve hundred jems, plus a carriage," said Mindil confidently.

She froze. Mindil had just listed a price that was a third of the original dress. Trembling, she peeked at Falim to see the response.

"That's a lot of money."

Mindil shrugged and then gestured to Dinsanas. "How many times does she get to make a first impression? Can you imagine having her walk in with something no other debutante has? Can you imagine the looks when she stands out among all those other girls?"

Falim glanced at her daughter who was giving a pleading look back.

“How about nails? They run about two hundred, don’t they? And the hair? Did you request coloring or just dressing?”

“Dressing, the coloring was—”

“About five hundred, right?”

Falim’s shoulders slumped. “Seven.”

“And Lily’s magic lasts the entire night without smudging. She’s done mine twice now and it can handle drinking, dancing, and talking without a problem. Imagine all those problems you and I have had during our presentations? She wouldn’t have to worry about any of that.”

Lily noticed Mindil didn’t mention her presentations, but that made sense. There was bad luck associated with Lily.

“That’s still a lot of money.”

Mindil’s grin grew wider. “Well, if you do the shoes, she’ll do the lot for a thousand. Shoes, hair, lips, and nails. Plus she’ll be at your house and gone before you know it, no distractions, no worries. You can be sure the color will be exactly what Society requires.”

Even Lily could tell that Falim was sold. It only took another twenty minutes of negotiation and cajoling before she signed the order. When both mother and daughter left, they were talking more excitedly that they were practically saying the same sentences twice.

Outside, it was late afternoon. Warm enough that the traffic had lessened but not enough to color the streets with a sunset.

Mindil turned and gave Lily a big smile.

“What did you do?”

She arched her back again, the opening over her cleavage straining to contain her breasts. “I was thinking that you really aren’t confident in your abilities. That is strange since you are utterly amazing.”

Lily’s retort died in her throat. She blushed instead.

Mindil stepped closer, slipping one arm around Lily's waist and drawing her close. Their lips were only inches away once again.

Lily's heart beat faster as the heat between her legs grew almost boiling.

"You just need someone to stand up for you."

"Why?"

"You are fantastic, I said that." Mindil rolled her eyes and then kissed Lily right on the lips. It was soft but more aggressive than before. Mindil was in charge of the embrace and it sent little flutters of heat coursing through her body.

Lily would have swooned from the intensity but Mindil held her tight, grinding her large breasts against Lily's. The hard points of her nipples, thimble-sized and peeking through the fabric, poked into the softness of Lily's chest. It felt good and strangely erotic.

When Mindil broke the kiss, she whispered to Lily, "Later, I'll show you how to thank me properly."

Lily didn't know what it meant, but the sultry whisper brought an intense wave which buckled her knees. She let out a soft moan.

Mindil guided her to a bench and sat her down. She slipped an arm around Lily and drew her into another deep kiss. The softness of her lips was intoxicating.

Lily gingerly reached up to cup Mindil's breast. She could feel the large nipple hard against her palm and she gave it a slow circle as she lost herself in the softness of Mindil's kiss.

Too soon, Mindil broke the kiss and pulled back. "You really shouldn't do this in front of the street. Someone might see."

Lily glanced at the workshop door. A sigh slipped from her lips. She wanted more, she already craved it and could spend hours touching and caressing.

“Not that anyone will look,” Mindil said with a sly grin. She started to pull Lily back, but then stopped with a hiss. Frowning, she let her arm slip from Lily’s waist and brought it between them to rest on her own belly. “I really wish I could stay, but I should have arrived at Pavin’s Starlit Edge hours ago.”

“Pavin’s Edge? What’s there?” Lily tightened her fingers on Mindil’s breast. She couldn’t leave, not after kissing her so sweetly and then shaking up her world by offering new services. Lily wanted to find out what she meant by learning how to “thank her properly.” It was a promise of something and she was anxious to be taught.

“Our two girls have spent the winter at my daddy’s manor. He’s a Pavin but there are a few Kasin cousins who also live there.”

“Children? Hasan never mentioned you had children.”

Mindil rolled her eyes. “Typical. He wouldn’t have thought about that.”

“You never mentioned girls either.”

Mindil’s smile grew wider and she rolled her eyes again. “Typical, but in my case, I was so interesting in talking to you I completely forgot about Emiris and Kilin.”

The intimate moment cracked. Lily let her hand slip from Mindil’s breast, her fingertips catching on the hardened nipple for a moment. Then she realized she had left a red hand print on Mindil’s breast. With a flush, she reached up.

“No, please don’t.” Mindil looked down and then giggled. “Okay, you might want to fix that.”

Lily grinned herself as she spread her fingers across Mindil’s large breast. She could feel the heat underneath her palm along with the rapidly beating heart underneath. It excited Lily to know that her touch brought a moan to Mindil’s lips.

With a push of her power, Lily repaired the color and tweaked it to match the season.

It was hard to concentrate with Mindil's soft gasps and the way she pressed her breast into Lily's hand, but she managed to finish. Reluctantly once again, she let her hand slip. "H-How long will you be gone?"

"Four days or so. I'll be back with the girls. The housekeeper and cook are still at home, so Hasan won't starve or walk out naked. He doesn't do as much if I'm not there."

Lily flushed at her previous sessions of pleasuring herself at the idea of Hasan's naked body.

"If you are willing, you might see if he wants to have dinner with you. I know he would like to get to know you better."

Guilt stabbed Lily. Hasan has been a lot more than curious about her. She could still feel his fingers up against her inner thighs, inches away from her most private of places. The proper thing to do was to tell Mindil, but that would ruin her trip and maybe throw everything into chaos.

It made Lily feel worse that she was keeping a secret from the woman who swept her off her feet.

"Something wrong?" asked Mindil.

"N-No, I just was thinking." Unable to look Mindil in the eyes, Lily stared down at her hands in her lap. She wanted to cry as the guilty knife twisted back and forth, reminding her that she had almost ruined their marriage.

"Well, if it is about your new services, don't worry about it. It will take a day or so for gossip to get around and someone to build up the courage to ask you for the same thing. Shoes are much cheaper if you don't have to get them in the right color."

"I don't... that isn't it."

Mindil hooked her finger under Lily's chin and tilted her head up. "You are beautiful and talented, Lily. No matter how much the horse fuckers—"

Lily snorted with her laughter.

"—scream and yell, just remember that. You will figure out that dress, it will be on time, and you will stun this city with your abilities."

"T-Thank you."

Mindil sighed. "I don't want to leave but if I don't get started, I will never hear the end of it from daddy."

She stood up then picked up her bag next to the empty paper sack that had sweet sandwiches from the morning. "But you need to not charge any less than twelve hundred. Start at fifteen and make a show of lowering the price. And don't schedule anything before Dinsanas, she gets the first one. That teaches everyone to jump faster."

Saddened and wracked with guilt, Lily could only nod.

Mindil slipped her bag over her shoulder. The action caused her cleavage to press tightly together and the dress to ride up on one generous hip for a moment.

Lily wondered what it would be like to slid her hand up underneath the fabric. What would it feel like to touch another woman's naked sex? Would it feel like hers? Would it get wet?

"Well, this wasn't what I had planned today. I wasn't expecting to get distracted by the prettiest girl I have ever kissed. It was worth it, even if I have to pay the driver to ride as if death followed him."

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## Chapter 21

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# Dinner Service

The ideal wife as the dinner waiting for her husband as he walks in the door. Even if she is but guiding cooks from a seat, it is her hand that prepares the meal.

—Edastin Kismir, *The Cook's Affair* (Act 1, Scene 2)

**L**ily sang under her breath as she hopped up on the curb and continued her way home. She had her two bags, Nirih's dress was always with her now, but she had found a comfortable position to keep them without strangling herself with the heavy weight. It didn't matter though, the intense high from a successful day kept her company.

Her thoughts were chaotic, bouncing back and forth between everything that had happened. One moment, she relived Mindil's kiss. The memories were enough to bring a flutter to her heart and a moisture between her legs. Her pussy ached and she couldn't wait to get home to pleasure herself.

A pair of women followed by an escort passed her. That ripped her thoughts away from Mindil and to their outfits. She could see now how her services could be used to color their boots, gloves, and even hair to match or contrast with

the colors of their evening dresses. It had the greatest potential of ensuring her steady business for the rest of her life, if she could pull it off.

The specter of Nirih's dress returned to her. She had to get the outfit right, even if she worked day and night. She worried her bottom lip for a moment and then accelerated to get home earlier, having a quick dinner, and then work late. Mindil had asked her to invite Hasan over but she had a few days.

It would also give her a night to figure out how to tell him no. She liked Mindil, more and more the longer she spent with her. Both Hasan and her were intense, forceful, and commanding. They made it difficult for her to deny them, mainly because she didn't, but she felt guilty about her relationship with Hasan.

The excitement had cooled by the time she reached her block. She came around the corner with determination, ready to work for the night.

When she saw Hasan's carriage standing outside of her house, she stopped. "No," she whimpered. At the same time, the little fantasies she had been using to pleasure herself bubbled up, caressing against her inner thighs and along her nipples. She had an entire night with him to do whatever she wanted.

Guilt rose up, choking her. She wanted Hasan, but she also wanted Mindil. The kisses that kept her going at night were still buzzing around inside her, pushing her to the edge. There was no way she could find relief with Hasan.

Lily's cheeks flushed as she tried to come up with a plan for entering her house. When she started to practice how she would tell him no, her fantasies twisted it around as she imagined herself being pinned against the wall, his hardness pressed up against her aching sex and his hands caressing her body. She could almost feel the heat of his



breath against her neck, right in the sensitive spot that always made her shiver with pleasure.

Lily froze. No, she wasn't supposed to think about Hasan having his way with her. She was supposed to drive him out so she could work. With a frown, she steeled herself to tell him to leave no matter how much she wanted him to stay.

Marching down, she was painfully aware of the slickness between her legs. The throb of her clitoris and the ache in her nipples made it even harder to remain confident. She stumbled before she made it to her own gate.

"Okay, Lily, just tell him to go home."

The door was unlocked. She trembled as she opened it.

The rich smells of cooking poured out. There was seasoned meat and spiced apples. Even the scent of sweet breads rolled over her, reminding her that she hadn't eaten since Mindil had left. Her stomach grumbled.

Hasan leaned into sight from the kitchen. "Welcome home, Lily."

He wore his normal black suit but had taken off the jacket to reveal his slim lines. A flowered apron protected his black trousers and his pale yellow shirt. The front of it pinned his matching orange tie to his chest. There was even a neat little bow right above the curve of his buttocks.

Lily froze, her wits slipping away from her as she stared at him.

Hasan always looked impeccable every time she saw him. There wasn't even a single food stain on his shirt or pants. In fact, she didn't even see one on the apron. If it wasn't for the steaming food on the counter behind him, she would have thought he was posing for her instead of actually cooking.

He stepped fully in view. He had a bowl in his hand where he was mixing something in it with a wooden spoon. "I wasn't expecting you for another hour."

Lily's mouth opened. He was baking, that was a woman's duty. Something inside her flipped and her heart beat faster.

He smiled. "Come in. I'm almost done with the cherry cream."

She stepped inside. "I didn't know...?"

He hefted the bowl. "Oh this? Yeah, Min..." he gulped for a moment. "I learned over the last few years when the cook took a vacation and... I had a desire for something sweet and tasty."

The look he favored her when he finished sent another flutter of excitement.

"Mindil likes sweets?" She tensed even as she said it, she didn't want to remind herself that Mindil didn't know what Hasan was doing.

His shoulder slumped slightly and he nodded. "Both of us, to be honest. It was one of the things we both found we had in common. Not a lot, but many different tastes."

"Like me?" The words were out of her mouth before she realized it. With a gasp, she froze.

A slow smile crossed his lips, it was predatory and hungry. "She told you about that."

Her nether lips tingled with her lust as she stepped inside. Carefully, she set the bag with the dress to the side before closing the door behind her. "It wasn't hard to tell that you fancied me."

He started to say something but then closed his mouth. He seemed to settle with a smile and then returned to the kitchen.

Lily followed after him, her heart thumping. She knew she needed to tell him to leave but the smells and his smile drew her further into his trap. Guilt hung behind her in a cloud, hanging there but no longer shielding her from his attractiveness.

Hasan had prepared a rich meal for them. There were already two sets of plates set out along with the requisite flatware. Steam rose from the top of the oven door and there was a heavenly scent coming from the pots on the ceramic disks with the heating runes underneath them.

"It smells good."

"Thank you. I find cooking relaxes me. Most of the time, the cook does it. For special occasions, I take over the kitchen."

"I bet she likes it."

"No, that old bog hates it. I don't ever put dishes away properly and she doesn't like how I arrange the spices. I'll never understand organizing based on flavors instead of frequent use or tastes."

Lily giggled. When he looked at her, she ducked her head and blushed.

"I should have everything ready in about fifteen minutes."

"I... I..." Lily stammered for a moment. "I should clean up then."

Hasan looked at her, his eyes were a molten brown.

Her body responded with a surge of heat deep inside her. She turned and fled for her bedroom in fear that she was about to rip her dress off. Her body burned with lust and she couldn't think straight with the pulsating between her legs.

Upstairs, she closed the door firmly behind her. "What are you doing?" she gasped. She fumbled with her dress, the lashes and buttons that she had easily handled for years were suddenly too complicated for her. She whimpered for a moment, her skin flushed and her breath coming in short pants.

A humiliating minute or three later, she stood nearly naked in the middle of her room. She wore her underwear, a pair of silk panties that hooked over her hips and nestled

between her legs. They were damp and the fragrance of her excitement rose up around her. Trembling, she reached down and ran a finger along her furrow.

The pleasure of her touch set off little sparks along her skin. An orgasm was dangerously close, more so knowing that there is a man who infinitely desired her waiting downstairs. She smiled and stroked harder, working her fingertip between her folds to search out the nub of pleasure. When she found it, she leaned back against her wardrobe and rubbed slowly, enjoying the flares.

Lily got the idea of masturbating to relieve the pressure and help her handle Hasan without her own lusts getting in the way. She peeled the fabric of her panties aside to plunge directly into her wetness. Every stroke against her sensitive skin brought a curl to her toes and a soft moan slipping from her lips.

With her other hand, she reached up and caught her breast. The soft mound was tipped with an aching hard nipple. Smaller than Mindil's but it was connected directly to her clitoris. Squeezing and twisting it brought sparks of pleasure coursing along her nerves.

The thought of Mindil blurred her thoughts. She imagined her friend's naked body in front of her, gloriously standing there. No, next to Lily with her lips against the nape of Lily's neck.

The pleasure inside flared at the imagination.

"Little... more..." gasped Lily. She stroked faster and harder, closing her eyes as she tried to imagine the sensation of Mindil's body up against hers, grinding and stroking.

What would her fingers feel against Lily's sex? Would she be dominating in bed as she was in the store? Commanding? Lily imagined Mindil reached up to grab Lily's long

hair and wrapping it around her palm. The pressure would feel good as would the submission to the younger dame.

Her thoughts pushed Lily over. She clamped one hand over her mouth as she sank to her knees, sawing her dripping fingers back and forth across her furrow as pleasure consumed her thoughts. She cried out into her palm, sobbing with ecstasy as the orgasm burst into brilliance.

For a long moment, she leaned against her wardrobe and floating in the afterglow of her orgasm. She panted slowly. A smile crossed her lips as she felt the sweat prickling along her skin and the moisture dripping from her finger.

Slowly, she pushed herself to her feet. She sniffed at her fingers, enjoying the sweet tangy scent of her own pussy.

Now she could handle Hasan.

Licking her lips, she headed to her bathroom to clean herself off and find a more appropriate outfit for a chaste evening dinner before going back to work.



## Refined Tastes

A well-crafted meal artfully presented on the table is proof of a woman's skill and talent.

—Ridokinar Satiov

**E**ven though her stomach was full, Lily considered a plate filled with roasted apples in caramelized molasses sugar, curls of citrus, and what appeared to be sweet root shavings. Her stomach said she was full but it looked good enough to brave the discomfort.

“Anything else?” Hasan’s voice was low, a purr that seemed to tickle her skin and caress her ears. Little flutters danced over her skin and she clamped her legs together in fear of him smelling her rising desire.

It didn’t take much effort to look over to him, he was sitting next to her instead of across the table. It was the same as when they were doing books, but the heat of his body and the smell of his skin made it hard for her to concentrate enough to hold her fork. Her thoughts kept drifting back to their kiss days ago or her failed attempts to relieve her lusts by masturbating upstairs. Now she craved more

than her finger, she wanted to feel his touch against her slick lips or the press of his body to her aching nipples.

His eyes scanned back and forth. She knew he could see she was excited, she could feel the heat on her cheeks and the way her body trembled every time he inched closer. There was no doubt she was screaming her intentions but there was no way to silence the flush on her cheeks or the flutters between her legs.

Lily gulped and looked down at her lap. The material of her summer dress was thin and dangerously translucent. She had forgotten—or chose to forget—when she pulled it on. Now, she regretted it as she watched the muscles of her thighs flex or could imagine the shadow between her legs was something more than just light; she was slick enough that any touch would soak through the pattern as easily and matched the moisture of her underwear.

She knew she should respond, but it was hard. Her mind had fallen into a rut. She opened her mouth and closed it, struggling with the words that didn't start with "I want you..."

Hasan reached out with his hand, his fingers spreading as he held them over her knee.

Lily fought back a whimper. She wanted him to touch her.

She also knew she shouldn't, not with Mindil's friendship.

Her knee swung out slightly, centering her leg underneath his hand.

Smoothly, Hasan lowered it and ran his fingertips along the top of her leg.

She tensed as the heat flared inside her. Her insides felt liquid, boiling with her thoughts. Her guilt over Mindil eroded under the part of her screaming for him to reach



higher along her limb, to touch the places she had awoken earlier.

Slowly, she lifted her eyes.

Hasan was tilted toward her, his shoulders facing her and one leg starting to sway to center his body on her. It was intimate and close, dangerously close. He stroked one finger against the inside of her leg but said nothing.

She wanted him to do more. Her inner war was losing with his proximity.

“Anything at all?”

“Y-You made so much,” she whispered.

He added a second finger to slid back and forth against her inner knee. The fabric of her dress rose up slowly, tickling her shin as he worked it along his palm. He gave her a bright smile and leaned closer until she was surrounded by the scent of his cologne. “For you, anything.”

Lily’s inner muscles clenched at the low purr of his voice. She leaned closer to him, breathing deep as she stared into his warm, brown eyes. Her knee spread further apart.

He rewarded her by sliding four fingers along the bottom hem before tugging up her dress until his knuckles stroked along the bare skin of her thigh. He smiled and leaned into her, riding his hand up her thigh.

Her insides flared with heat with every inch his hand pulled her dress up. The fabric bunched in her lap, pressing against her clasped fingers in a silent request to pull away and give him full access to the liquid heat caught between her legs.

Lily resisted as much as she could.

He stopped when her thighs pressed against him. The touch was electric as he held it there, gently stroking against skin that no man had touched in a very long time.

“Lily?”

“Y-Yes, Hasan.”

“I want—”

Her heart jumped. She panted as she leaned into him. Their lips were only inches apart. “Yes,” she breathed.

It wasn’t a question, it was a request. The last vestiges of guilt burned away as he stared into her eyes.

“Yes,” she repeated in quiet whisper. “I want you.”

In case he didn’t understand, she spread her legs further apart, moving the furthest one away from him. The bunched fabric draped down and tickled her sex, teasing it through the lace of her underwear. It was a promise of what was to come, one that she had craved for many days.

Hasan smiled and drew his hand up, moving faster than before. His long fingers cupped her and he pressed his palm against the moist fabric.

The rasp of lace against her nethers stole her breath away, it was hot and rough at the same time.

“You’re wet.”

She gasped softly. “I am.”

He trailed one finger up and down her furrow, tracing it through the fabric. The other fingers rested lightly on the bare skin of her thighs and along the curve of her sex, bracing himself as he teased her. The gesture was insistent and teasing, a promise of what would be coming not soon enough.

Lily tilted her hips toward him to welcome him. She reached across the distance, only an inch, and pressed her lips against him. The first touch shocked her, a tingling burst of pleasure. She inhaled and kissed him again, shifting into his stroking fingers as she kissed him passionately.

Hasan leaned into her, his finger stroking faster as he ran it up and down her slit. The pressure flicked along her clitoris, adding heat to her fire.

She gasped, breaking the kiss only long enough to inhale, and then dove back in. Her hands reached out but she didn't know what to grab. After a second of having her body stroked and teased, she gripped the table with one hand and Hasan's shoulders with the other.

"Oh, Lily," he murmured in the tiny gap between kisses.

She smiled and clutched him tighter. She opened her mouth wider, welcoming his questing tongue. It tasted sweet and salty, the different flavors of their meal and the heat of their bodies mingling. Her hips rose up to meet his finger, rocking wildly back and forth.

Hasan started to stroke to the side. He found the edge of her lace panties and then worked his slick finger underneath the fabric. The tip swirled through the short hairs pressed against her skin, tugging and teasing as he dove back down.

The first touch of his bare finger against her clitoris forced a gasp and a moan.

He chuckled and lifted himself partially out of the chair to plunge his finger into her wet opening and back again. Every stroke from her entrance to her clitoris and back again fired intense waves of heat coursing along her body.

She moaned loudly. Digging her fingers into his shoulder, she ground her body against the finger as he added a second into the space of her soaked folds. She pushed into every thrust, craving the pleasure as he teased her inner walls and sent off fireworks along her senses.

It wasn't enough. His fingers and kisses were only making the fires hotter.

Unable to breathe, she broke the kiss. "Hasan?"

"I want you."

"Now, please?"

He smiled broadly and stood up. His cock formed a ridge along his trousers.

She started to reach for it, to see what he had underneath, but he caught her wrists and tugged her up to her feet.

With his other hand, he swept plates and flatware from the table. Roasted foods and sweets plummeted to the floor. A few plates cracked.

Lily wanted to cringe, but her attention was ripped away when Hasan pushed her against the table and then reached around to grab her buttocks. With a hungry growl, he lifted her up and planted her rear on the edge. As soon as she was secure, he pawed at her dress, yanking it up to reveal her soaked lace.

Heart pounding in her chest, Lily waited with anticipation as he grabbed the waist of her underwear and drew it down her leg.

He was rough and fast, the fabric bunched against her knee until he yanked it free. The sight of his wild eyes brought a wave of heat rolling across her. She couldn't wait.

Seconds later, she was bare to his sight. She shivered with the intense look in his eyes and slowly spread her legs to give him a better view of her sex.

Instead of dropping his trousers, though, Hasan suddenly dropped to his knees.

"Has—"

The words froze in her throat as he leaned forward and planted his lips right on her sex. The shock of his actions stunned her; she had never heard of anyone willing to lick down there. Before she could recover, his tongue lapped at her clitoris and opening. Each liquid touch sent tiny little bolts of pleasure rippling. He seemed to find every sensitive spot of her body and plunged his tongue against it.

Words forgotten, Lily let out a cry of pleasure. She grabbed him for balance; her fingers caught on his blond

hair and she gripped it tightly. With her other, she managed to brace herself on the chair behind her.

Hasan leaned forward, spreading his lips wide over her sex and lapping harder and faster. The tip of his tongue swirled around her clitoris, pushing her toward an orgasm.

The pleasure was like nothing she had ever felt before. It was nothing her fingers or imagination could every picture. With a startled cry, she ground his face into her sex and let the pleasure explode inside her.

Stars swirled across her vision, leaving behind little trails. The pleasure didn't have a focus, instead it suffused her entire body.

Her other hand slipped on a puddle of gravy and she fell back, smacking against the table. She brought Hasan with her, forcing his mouth tight against her entrance as she lost herself in a shuddering orgasm that left her gasping for breath.

When it subsided into lapping waves of pleasure, she looked up and smiled. "I-I... never done that."

Hasan stood up. He grabbed a napkin and wiped the glistening juices from his face.

Lily's eyes slid down to his crotch. His cock was straining his pants, a thick ridge that had a soaked spot near the tip. Her inner walls clenched with anticipation, the afterglow of her orgasm only adding a sharpness to her hungry need for him to be inside her.

He finished and neatly folded the napkin in two. Setting it down, he ran his hands along her inner thighs. "Lily, may I?"

"Please," she moaned.

Hasan breathed deeply as he stepped back. His fingers fumbled with the buttons of his trousers for a moment. He wore underwear, a crimson red silk. When he managed to open them, his cock bounced out of the opening. It was

startling as was the length; he looked longer than any of her previous lovers.

It took him too long to pull his underwear over his length and then pushed it down. She stared with hunger at it, it was long but also reasonably thick. An arrow-shaped head looked perfect for entering her and she trembled with anticipation.

When Hasan finally stepped out of his pants, he stepped up between her legs. His cock, reddened with his lust, bounced with his heartbeats.

She reached out for it, stroking the silky length in her palm. He was soaking wet also, his juices coating his entire length. She smiled and explored it, tracing the narrow head down the length to his hair-covered balls.

Hasan panted, his eyes staring down at her hand.

Lily pulled him closer, aiming his cock toward her entrance. When it was close enough, she ran it up and down her slit, gathering up her own moisture. The heat and hardness was just as intense as his tongue. She couldn't take it more and brought him down to her opening, pulling him in until his cock head lodged itself in her body.

She tightened her inner walls around his heat, enjoying the sensation of having Hasan's cock filling her.

Hasan reached out and grabbed her hips. With a sharp movement, he plunged it deep into her body.

Lily cried out, gasping with pleasure as he filled her. His length was hard and pounding inside her, a different beat just as fast as her own heart. It has been many years and she had forgotten the pleasure of being joined.

He didn't hold himself still for long. With a moan, he pulled most of his length out and began to pound into her. His hips smacked against her inner thighs, spreading them further apart as his cock plunged deep into her body.

Lily gasped and reached out for him, clutching the front of his jacket for balance as she stared into his eyes.

He focused on her, his eyes almost glowing as his hips drove his hardness into her with rapid deep strokes. Each one filled her completely, reaching her innermost limits, before sliding out of her. The ridges of his veins and his tip teased against her inner walls.

Pleasure built up rapidly, honed to a sharpness from her earlier orgasms. She begged for it to keep going, pulling Hasan into her just as much as he entered her with abandon.

“Li... ly,” he gasped. “I-I can’t...”

She stared into his eyes, he was straining to keep himself from coming. She wanted it, needed it actually. She wanted to feel the hot seed against her inner walls, soaking her with pleasure. Unable to talk, she nodded and yanked him deeper.

Hasan plunged into her hard, shaking the table and sending more platters cascading to the ground. His fingers dug into her hips as he drove his hardness into her with deep strokes that filled her completely.

Every ridge against her inner walls pushed her closer. She felt an orgasm riding, not fast enough for him, but still enough.

He came with a grunt. His cock drove in and out, splattering cum everywhere as he lost his rhythm. Then, he drove it hard inside her and held it there, painting her insides with his seed.

Lily’s orgasm faded but she was sated. She released his jacket, her knuckles sore from her grip.

“I,” he gasped. “I finally got you.”

“I know.”

They stood in place, his hardness jumping deep inside her soaked insides. The pleasure faded, leaving behind a ruddy afterglow that filled her body.

Lily panted, her body slick with sweat. She couldn't stop smiling and, judging from his face, neither could he.

Finally, he pulled out. A few globs of cum oozed out. Half-naked, he held out his hand. "May I?"

"Where?"

"To your bed, you didn't come."

"I did. I really did."

"Not enough," he said with a wink.



## The Morning After

Only the shiftless, lazy, and poor are still in bed when the third bell coming ringing.

—Faminish dea Tolpear

**L**ily woke up with Hasan's hand between her legs. It was strong and sure as it slid up and down, stroking her pleasurable sore lips with two damp fingers. She moaned and lifted her hips into it, sliding her knees along her sheets to give Hasan more access to her sex.

He had his thumb nestled between her buttocks and up against her sphincter. At first, she thought he was trying to force it into the tight opening but he only kept it in place with a light pressure.

She rocked her body in time with his two fingers dancing along her opening.

Every time he pulled up, the pressure would increase before he slid his fingers back down.

She clutched the sheets, keeping her face planted against her pillow. A muffled moan rose up as she spread herself even more and completely lifted her hips off the bed.

“Good morning,” Hasan said. He nestled his fingers between her nether lips and spread them open, tickling her with the warm air of her bedroom. He drew his fingers together and then eased them into the tight channel.

The faint discomfort of their night of sex was nothing compared to the fresh pleasures of being filled once again. He seemed to know exactly where to touch her, his fingers spread inside her to caress against her inner walls and along the tiny niches of pleasure that ignited the first waves of an orgasm inside her.

Lily moaned and ground against his hand. “M-Morning,” she said with a smile. Her voice was muted by the pillow, but she didn’t think he cared. She rocked her hips against his hand, growing accustomed to the pressure at her sphincter while enjoying the deep plunges of his fingers inside her.

“Should I keep going?”

She nodded.

He gripped her tighter, holding her in place as he fingered her faster. His knuckles smacked against her wet entrance. The impact sent tiny flashes of pleasure coursing along her body.

She ground her face into the pillow, closing her eyes to concentrate on the enjoyment of being pleased. It was nice, sweet, sexy. It was also something she hadn’t ever had.

Lily grinned. She liked waking up this way.

Hasan shifted his position to lean over her, one hand resting against the small of her back and the other driving deep. His movements were long and measured, drawing almost completely out until her lips clung to his digits and then sliding deep inside. His knuckles ground against her lips before he wiggled his fingers inside. When he drew out

again, he kept his fingers spread and she moaned even louder.

She lost herself in his fingering, her world nothing more than two digits plunging inside her. The pleasure burned inside her, rising up rapidly. She let out a muted cry and jammed herself back as it crested into a short burst of ecstasy that burned in her veins.

He chuckled and slowed down, stroking her in long, slow movements as she sank into the pleasure.

Lily dropped to the bed. "That is the best way to wake up."

Hasan wiggled his fingers and she became aware that his thumb was no longer resting against her anal opening but slightly inside. It felt huge despite being less than an inch inside. She started to squirm but then lost her focus; it felt surprisingly good despite being dirty.

"Do you mind?" he whispered.

"With what?"

He wiggled his thumb. The sensation radiated against untouched nerves, a strange mixture of discomfort and pleasure.

She tensed with a moan. "I... I..." Having something teasing her ass shouldn't feel good. Her inner walls clamped down on his fingers, squeezing down firmly.

"I like it."

She smiled to herself. It did feel good but she didn't think she could take anything more. A proper lady wouldn't even consider having a finger much less what he wanted inside the forbidden entrance. Clamping down on his thumb, she pushed it out. Pulling away from the pillow, she looked at him.

Hasan was naked like her. He knelt on the bed with his long cock bouncing in front of him. It was red and already dripping with his own excitement. The clear juices dribbled

down the bottom edge of his length, tracing along one bulging vein to another.

He pulled his hand away from her back and then fisted his cock, pumping down and smearing it with his juices.

A hungry desire filled her. She wanted it inside her again. Not looking away from his hardness, she said, "I'd rather have something else filling me."

Hasan's smile grew wider. He lifted himself enough to straddle her legs, pinning her hips back down to the bed as he pressed his length along the valley of her buttocks. He was hotter than she remembered. When he drew back, there was little friction but plenty of weight as his arrow-like head nestled against her buttocks and down into the valley. It stopped along her rear opening, a silent question.

"Not there," she giggled and lifted her hips. She was trapped between his legs but there was enough room to bring his cock to the proper entrance. With a gasp, she planted her hands on her bed and pushed back.

His cock slipped inside her pussy. The hardness felt incredible against her sore lips, a balm of pleasure as she managed to guide a few inches into her sex.

Hasan moaned. His hands clamped on her hips, holding her down. With a gasp, he leaned forward and his hardness sank deeper into her sex.

Lily let her head fall back to the pillow. It was hard to concentrate on anything besides the cock that drove into her and the way his weight pushed her to her mattress. She bit down on the pillow and clutched the sheets.

She met every stroke of his with a lifting of her hips. The smack of their bodies filled the room growing faster as the pleasure intensified. Tiny little bursts of pleasure radiated from her sex, spreading across her entire body.

Hasan's cock grew harder and hotter, filling her even more. He gripped tightly as he stroked into her, plunging

deep into her body as he grunted with every stroke. She could feel him coming closer to an edge himself, it was hard to miss the heated liquid that painted her insides or the way his movements were growing more erratic.

She ground her body against him, trying to get more of him inside her. She grunted into the pillow; she knew a woman should be making more mewling or kittenish noises but didn't care anymore. She only craved the next burst of ecstasy as it flared along her senses.

"I'm..." Hasan said, his voice cutting off. He lifted himself even further and the angle of his thrust tilted down, stroking against new pleasures.

Lily let out a cry as her body tightened into an orgasm. Her insides clenched around his cock, adding to the friction of the slick hardness that stroked along hypersensitive pleasures.

Hasan let out a long gasp.

Flooding inside her, he came inside her. She could feel it filling her, teasing along her senses before dribbling out from the junction of their bodies. His strokes grew wetter with every smack of his hips against her buttocks.

A few more strokes and Hasan shuddered to a stop. Slick with sweat, he fell against her. "Thank you," he gasped. "That was wonderful."

Lily smiled. "Thank—"

Her words stopped when she realized someone was knocking on the door. It was an insistent pounding, intended to be heard but also steady as if they had been knocking for some time. She frowned, no one should be calling on her so early.

Lily glanced at her clock. When she saw four glowing symbols, she did a double take. "It's after the fourth bell?"

Hasan tensed. "F-Fourth!?" He looked at the clock and then scrambled off her, the tip of his cock splashing cum in

an arc as he grabbed for his clothes. "I was supposed to be somewhere at the fourth. This isn't good."

It was Mumdei and she should have been at the store herself. She jumped out of bed and started for her wardrobe, but the insistent pounding halted her. Someone needed her attention and they didn't want to wait. For a moment, she considered getting dressed properly but that would add precious minutes to answering a door, something a proper lady should never do.

On the other side of the room, Hasan shoved his manhood into his pants and buttoned it up. "I probably shouldn't be seen leaving."

Lily blushed, the hard reality of their lovemaking bearing down on her. He was a married man, she wasn't married to him. Going through the back door wouldn't be better than the front, he would have to climb over a fence which would draw more attention.

The knocking continued.

She had to answer the door. With a grunt, she gathered up her sun dress from the night before and pulled it on. It slid along her naked skin, hiding a few scratch marks from Hasan's passion and her own hard nipples. There was nothing she could do about the moisture seeping out from between her legs, hopefully the dress and a quick spritz of perfume would make the evidence of her morning.

On the stairs, she used a bit of magic to darken the fabric. It wouldn't change the material but it wouldn't be obvious that she wore the same thing as the day before. It would also hide many of the stains from dinner and sex.

Lily couldn't wait long, someone still pounding on the door.

Taking a deep breath, she opened it.

Tabithas held up her gloved hand to knock again but stopped. She gave a short bow. "Forgive the early morning \_"

It was obvious to both of them that it wasn't early nor would it be morning for long.

Lily tensed, Tabithas wasn't smiling.

"—however I have a summons of importance for you."

"S-Summons?" A prickle of fear and concern cooled her fading lusts almost instantly. She found herself panting as she waited. "Is there something wrong? My mother?"

For the briefest of seconds, there was a flash of pain in the old woman's eyes but then it faded. "Your mother is healthy and safe, however she demands your presence immediately at Manor Rose."

All the muscles in Lily's chest and back tightened. She gulped and stared at Tabithas for a moment. "Do you know why?"

Tabithas said nothing, her face impassive.

Lily sighed and then opened the door further. "Come in, I'll get ready."

"Thank you, Bedame." The driver only took a few steps inside and to the side of the door. She looked around briefly but then her gaze turned toward the dining room.

Lily followed it, a feeling of dread hanging over her.

There was platters on the floor among the lumps of deserts and treats. The meat courses had congealed over the night, one chunk of roasted beef balanced on the edge of a chair with a puddle of brown sauce underneath it. Sweet rolls were tossed to the side, one of them rested listlessly underneath a painting.

The only clear spot was in the middle, where Hasan had swept the table clear. A single piece of clothing marked the spot, her abandoned underwear curled up in silent testimony.

The blush on Lily's cheeks became a burn. "I-I..."

"Who was it?" asked Hasan as he started down the stairs. He was tucking in his shirt. When he spotted Tabithas, he stopped and all the color drained out of his face.

Tabithas looked up at him and then to Lily. Slowly, she returned her gaze to Hasan but focused lower, on the golden marriage bracelet around his wrist.

Lily blushed and looked away.

The older woman sighed loudly, the disapproval obvious in her tone. "I'll wait outside for you to clean up properly." There was a final sound to the last few words. "It would be prudent to be presentable in this situation. Please do not tarry."

Without another look toward Hasan, she let herself out the door and closed it behind her.



## Guilty Thoughts

The dedicated wife is the hallmark of a just and proper society. – Estalian Mecoir

Lily sat in her mother's carriage with her hand rested on her lap and her back straight. The air around her was hot and stifling, but she was too embarrassed to open the curtain and let fresh air into the dimly lit cabin. Her perfume swirled around her, it had been applied a bit stronger than she would have liked but the faint hint of sex still clung to her skin despite the rapid washing with a cloth.

There was no way anyone would have known she spent the night with Hasan, but she couldn't even look Tabithas in the eyes when she got into the carriage.

The older woman had said nothing, only shut the door behind her and crawled up to her seat to drive.

She twisted her hands together. She shouldn't have fucked Hasan. It didn't matter if it was one of the best times in her life, or that she had orgasmed so many times in the hours that had followed. If she relaxed, the fading afterglow of her last orgasm still caressed her memories. She could easily feel his kiss on her neck or his hardness be-

tween her legs. Even his thumb against her sphincter brought up warm memories.

Lily ground her teeth together and forced her thoughts away. She couldn't think of sex now.

Her thoughts spun furiously as she yanked her lusts away from Hasan's touch. Images flashed through her head but they quickly coalesced into the other pressing difficulty in her life: Nirih's dress. It wasn't just the young girl's outfit that was a problem, it was the other dresses she had to complete. Knowing that Nirih's presentation would make or break her made it difficult to find the "perfect" way of making the outfit, a struggle that Kendrick, Hasan, and even Mindil only added to.

At the thought of Mindil, she was struck by a stab of guilt. She found herself liking Mindil as much as the other men intruding in on her life. She went nine years being abandoned to having the overwhelming attention of three. It didn't matter that Mindil was different, all three of them brought different emotions up when she thought of her. Her friend was sweet, compassionate, and kind.

That didn't make her kiss any less powerful.

Gulping, Lily looked down at her hand. She could too easily imagine how Mindil would respond if she found out about Hasan spending the night. The pleasures and orgasms weren't worth it if it ruined her relationship. If it wasn't for Mindil, then Lily would have never had the idea of using her magic to expand her services.

A tear ran down her cheek and she felt sick to her stomach. One night of passion wasn't worth a friendship. Sniffing, she wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. It wouldn't be appropriate to arrive at her mother's manor crying.

It took a few more tries before the tears actually stopped.

Lily thought about how she could hide her growing affection from Hasan, more so after the one night they spent together. Hasan's intensity would make it almost impossible to obscure his passions. She was afraid that he would be emboldened by their night of passions and it would lead to their secret being inevitably revealed.

Tears threaten her again.

She leaned back in her seat and struggled to regain her composure. Just when she thought she had it, the guilt stabbed her again. She had read the stories and heard the tales enough to know that it would only get worse when—not if—Mindil found out.

To prevent the tears that threatened to spill, she made herself a silent promise. She would say no to Hasan and tell Mindil as soon as she could.

The decision didn't make anything better. She couldn't imagine how Mindil would response. Would she scream and attack? Would she level her wit against Lily, destroying her reputation with sly whispers that no one else could hear? Each moment made the decision harder to follow, even in thought. She didn't want to lose Mindil as a friend but she knew that it was too late to stop it.

Her mind stewed and simmered with guilt until she felt the road underneath the carriage grow smoother. Gone were the rattle of cobblestones to be replaced by the gentle clicking of the neatly paved roads of the richer area.

Lily continued to let her mind dwell on her guilt. She knew it wasn't helping, nothing else could be done until she met with Hasan to tell him no and Mindil to confess. Nothing.

"I... I have to," she said knowing it would ruin their friendship. But it would have been far worse if it went on days, months, or even years of keeping it a secret.

“That’s the right thing,” she said trying to convince herself.

She just wished it didn’t feel like she was on the precipice of something more terrible than being a kudame for the rest of her life.

## Marching Orders

Only a foolish commander attacks from a single direction.

—Wastin dea Hamin

**T**he carriage came to a halt in front of Manor Rose. She could see the familiar colored walls through the ripples of the curtain over the nearest window. The sight of it brought a welling of fear and sadness inside her. She missed calling the manor her home. If it wasn't for the summons, it would have felt like coming home after a long vacation.

It only took Tabithas a moment to get off and open the door. "Bedame Lily dea Kasin?"

Lily struggled to look at older woman. "Thank you, Tabithas."

Tabithas smiled and gave a brief nod. She gestured to the front door with her free hand. "Gaston will know where your mother is. And don't worry, no matter what your mother says, she isn't going to cast you off."

The words helped relieve some of Lily's anxiety but also made them worse in a different way.

At the top of the steps, Gaston stood in his black suit despite the midday sun. He wore a top hat with the Kasin

symbol on the side. A matching sigil marked his lapels and his cuff links. He tugged on one of them before coming down to meet her. "Welcome again to Manor Rose, Kudame dea Kasin." He had already dismissed her as no longer a be-dame.

Lily took his offered hand and continued up the stairs.

"Tadame Sarlin can be found in the Golden Rose room," he said. "Do you wish an escort?"

She hesitated, one hand reaching for the door. Gaston had never offered to escort her around the house before. It didn't make sense, she had lived there since it was rebuilt. Her hand lowered. No, it wasn't her home anymore. It had been a month since she moved away. She felt her composure crumbling. "N-No," she gasped. "I know the way."

"Very well, Kudame."

The way he said "kudame" felt malicious. She gritted her teeth and headed inside.

It had been a month since she had last visited her old home. Very little had changed other than a few pictures her mother had always rotated in the front entry. Lily could tell that the Ralain family had just visited or was visiting judging from the number of scenes with the two families.

The Golden Rose was one of her smaller rooms. Her mother used it for close friends because it had larger chairs and a well-stocked selection of fruit and ice wines.

With being called a "kudame" still stinging, Lily walked down the hallways of portraits. Her stomach twisted with discomfort and she felt disconnected, as if something terrible was about to happen. She had to keep her hands clasped in front of her to avoid rubbing her eyes.

At the door, she knocked thrice.

"Get in here." Her mother sounded curt, which meant she was furious.

A tingle of fear raced along Lily's nerves, scraping against her senses. She took a deep breath and opened the door, pushing it gingerly open and looking inside. When she saw her mother walking toward her, she opened it fully.

Sarlin stopped in front of Lily. Her face was twisted in a frown.

"Mother, I—"

Sarlin stopped in front of Lily and slapped her.

Lily's words froze in her throat. As the sting of the impact spread across her face, she stared at her mother unable to come up with a response.

Her mother, on the other hand, had a second response. The second slap hit the same spot, sending bursts of sharp pain and white spots across Lily's vision. "You ungrateful girl!"

"I—" Lily pressed her hand against her cheek, tears burning in her eyes.

"Quiet! I spent thousands of jems on your little business. I pulled strings to get you mentored by a good woman, a great woman, just because you showed some minor talent with cloth and sewing!"

Lily staggered back, cringing as the tears began to fall again.

"I did all this despite you being spoiled meat, a hunk of bone and gristle that not even the dogs of society would gnaw. I did this. I did it and how did you repay me? By breaking your promise with Juliet's beautiful daughter!"

"I haven't broken—"

"Silence!" Sarlin lifted her hand to slap Lily again.

Lily backed out of the room, her hand still on her cheek.

Sarlin followed after her. "Don't you dare run away, girl!"

Tears running down her face, Lily struggled not to turn and flee. She kept her palm pressed against her cheek as she glanced to her sides.

On both sides, there were large portraits of the house matrons looking at her with their stern looks on their faces. It was the usual expression that she had grown accustomed to seeing for her entire life, not one smiled in portraits. However, at that moment, it looked like they were looking down at her with disapproving glares.

She turned back to her mother.

Sarlin stopped for a moment.

Lily opened her mouth but, when her mother raised her hand further, she closed it with a snap.

“Juliet is a good friend of mine, do you understand? She has remained with me as a proper lady of this society. One who knows her place and has flourished in it.”

When there was a pause, Lily realized she was expected to give an answer. “I’m working on it now. It isn’t due until next week and I’ve—”

Sarlin’s face darkened. “You will work on nothing else besides her dress until it is done.”

“I can’t do that. I have other client—”

“No other dress! No other party, nothing else! I owe the writ to your store and I will tear it up!”

Lily flinched with every screamed-out sentence. She lifted her foot to step back but didn’t. Slowly, she put it down and tensed.

Sarlin’s hand rose up again. She shook for a moment, then stepped back. “You may have been my daughter, but don’t hesitate for a moment to think I won’t cancel the loans you made for your business.”

It felt like her mother had punched her in the stomach.

Sarlin glared at her. “I swear to you, if you don’t have her dress done by the end of the week, I will do it. Daughter or not, you are a kudame and already a stain on my reputation. I have no other daughter to lift myself, so I must carry



the burden you have heaped on me. I will not let you drag my reputation down any further.”

She turned away from Lily and stormed back into the waiting room. One hand snapped out and she slammed the door behind her.

Lily winched at the sound.

There was a thump as Sarlin sat down heavily in her chair.

Then silence.

With tears in her eyes, Lily turned and headed out of the house.



## An Unexpected Comfort

Society is built on the governance of those less fortunate. They help us as much as we guide them.

—Fadion da Ralain

**L**ily sobbed in the back of the carriage. Hot tears ran down her face as the guilt, fear, and frustration tore at her. She couldn't find any solace in her fantasies and every remaining thought send her into a spiral of despair. She didn't think she could finish Nirih's dress a week early, not with her struggling to find the perfect pattern.

She could picture a dozen patterns she could use. She could throw together something and be done but it would also ruin her own feeble reputation. If it didn't stun Society when Nirih stepped out, her mother would blame her just like everything else. Lily had to find the right one, she just wasn't sure what to pick or how to make it perfect.

Wiping her tears only made her eyes ache. She closed them tightly and struggled to calm herself. Slowly her sobs became ragged gasps of air. Her lungs hurt but she just let the tears run out until there was nothing behind but a sore throat.

The carriage jostled and her attention was dragged back to her seat. She gripped the railing next to her and held herself still. They had left the richer district and started over cobblestones again.

In her mind, she replayed the visit with her mother. It felt like a stranger had been yelling at her, not her own blood and bone. Their relationship had always been strained after the fire. With the passing years toward Lily becoming a kudame, she could feel a distance but it had never been so serious or violent. It was obvious that her mother had become less of a parent and more of an investor, a demanding investor despite Lily doing her best job.

She pressed a hand to her cheek. It still stung a little from being slapped twice. Realizing they had drifted apart hurt more.

Lily stared at the far end of the carriage, her thoughts finally calm and the despair had faded with her tears. She felt broken, empty, adrift. With a sigh, she kept her body still as the carriage rolled over rough cobblestones and past crowds.

Finally, it came to a stop.

Without looking, Lily wiped her eyes one last time and winced at the soreness. She looked around for her bag but realized she didn't bring it with her. For a long moment, she stared down at her feet, trying to push her thoughts through a feeling of deadness that had draped over her mind.

The door creaked open.

She looked as Tabitha crawled into the carriage. The older woman looked sympathetic as she sat on the opposite side. "I heard. How are you feeling?"

Lily didn't know what to say.

Tabithas sighed and then looked at the windows. With a grunt, she lifted herself up and switched to sit next to Lily. Without another word, she lifted an arm and rested it on the back of the seat behind Lily. "I know it hurts."

"It's like she isn't my mother."

There was a pause. "I know."

Lily wanted to look up, but couldn't. "She slapped me."

Nothing.

"She slapped me because some horse—" She paused as she realized she was about to repeat Mindil's description. "—woman said I wasn't doing my job. I am, I'm just having trouble. I want the dress to be perfect but nothing feels right. The edge fits Nirih's face but not her shoulders. The swoop collar fits her face but not the curve of her shoulders. I get the buttons right for her eyes but then they don't fit her bust. I think I have it and then things come up and I lose it. One thing after another."

"Because of him?" There was no question who Tabithas was asking about.

"He's part of it." Lily sighed. "Maybe a big part... maybe not."

"He's married."

Lily blushed hotly and nodded. "I know."

Tabithas sighed and pulled Lily into a hug. "Hasan has always been in love with you. The fool is the reason the manor was burned down. I'm not surprised he came around again. If I knew he was brokering your house purchase, I would have driven you away."

"You know who he was?"

The older woman laughed and squeezed Lily playfully. "Girl, I've been Sarlin's driver for close to forty years, ever since she was barely out of nappies. I was there when she started making deals for her own presentation and drove her around when your father was out on duty. I've probably

met every Kasin, Martin, Golid, and Rabus in a hundred leagues of here. I know everyone, including your lover and his wife.”

Lily stared for a moment in shock.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to tell anyone. What we say here, stays in here.” She gestured to the inside of the carriage.

“Thank you.” Lily gave her a little smile.

“There we go. I remember that smile.” Tabithas ran her hand along Lily’s chin. “It’s going to be okay.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. You are finally learning how to stand on your own. Everything right now is probably new and somewhat scary. Finding comfort in someone is...” Tabithas waved her hand for a second. “... perfectly reasonable. You are a young woman and have most of your life ahead of you. You have a chance to explore it instead of being... tossed into some marriage.”

Tabithas leaned back. “You’re going to make some beautiful decisions and horrible mistakes.”

Lily blushed hotter. “How do I know how to avoid the mistakes?”

“You don’t. You never do. I mean, rarely does fucking a married man work out for anyone but a playwright, but the rest of the questions are harder to answer. One mistake and you can never go back. Trust me, an enraged wife can be a terrible thing.”

Guilt stabbed her. “Mindil is becoming a friend of mine.”

“That makes it—”

“And I think I’m also falling for her,” Lily blurted.

Tabithas stopped, her mouth opening slightly.

Lily glanced up and then spoke quickly, as if the courage would slip away. “I mean she’s sweet and friendly and Juliet

started screaming at me and then... and then..." Lily gasped. "Then she kissed me."

"Well." Tabithas sounded surprise. "Did you enjoy it?"

Lily nodded. "I did."

"Since you didn't see her after I pick you up, you slept with her husband after you kissed?"

Lily's nodded turned more ragged. Tears blurred her vision. "Yes."

"Feels like a mistake, when I say it that way. Doesn't it?"

"Yes." A sob rose up. "I didn't want to but he was touching me and it felt so good just to be... to be..."

"Wanted?" Tabithas tugged Lily into a hug.

Lily sank against the older woman's shoulder. She let out a shuddering breath. "Yes."

"It's nice being wanted, isn't it?"

Lily nodded. "Yes."

Tabithas sighed. "I can see why you have a problem. From what I heard, Mindil has a temper and Hasan is still in love with you. That is just asking for trouble. No matter how it works out, you'll have to choose between one, the other, or neither."

"I have to tell her."

"Your friendship is that important?"

Lily sniffed. "Yes. I know the stories, it never ends up well if I try to keep it a secret. I have to tell her, even if it means I'll lose a friend."

"No, no," laughed Tabithas, "it never works out to keep it in the dark. Sooner or later, it always comes out. I used to tell you those stories while we waited for your mother to come out of meetings, right?"

Lily nodded.

"Oh," Tabithas said with a wry smile and shake of her head. "I loved to hear the gossips those days. Every little dirty detail always brought a little joy to my life."

The humiliation came back. Lily ducked her head. “D-Did that change?”

Tabithas said nothing.

Lily looked up at her.

The older woman had a strange look on her face. She looked around for a moment and then sighed. “Rumors are ugly things. People jump to conclusions and it haunts the victims for years. I saw it with a... friend’s daughter about nine years ago. Hearing the whispers behind her back ruined it for me.”

She leaned back and hooked her arm on the back of the seat. “It is different when it is someone you know. You can’t laugh as hard or giggle when they turn their back on you. You have to stand there and feel their pain.”

Lily wasn’t sure, but it sounded like Tabithas was talking about her.

Tabithas leaned forward and patted Lily’s shoulder. “I think you are making a good choice by telling. Secrets are poison for the heart.”

They sat in silence for a minute. Outside of the carriage, Lily could hear people walking along the road and the creak of passing carriages.

Lily thought about Hasan’s hands, the way he touched her and the feel of his mouth against her sex. She tried to tear her thought away but it only slipped over to Mindil’s embrace. With her cheeks burning, she focused on the opposite side of the carriage and stared at the nails holding the leather in place.

“You’re thinking about him. He’s hard to resist, isn’t he?”

Lily jumped slightly and then sighed. “Yes.”

Tabithas pushed Lily into a sitting position. “Come on, then we probably should probably get to you inside.”

“Where are we?” Confused, Lily let Tabithas lead her out of the carriage. They were in the more common areas of the



city. She could see lower-class people walking around; their brightly colored hair tucked underneath hats that weren't polished black. It was a stark difference between the ever-present blondes and browns she saw in higher society; the blues, purples, and reds were as bright as their outfits.

She looked up at the store they had parked in front of. It was an alchemy shop. The thick glass windows had warnings in three different languages. The front sidewalk was also painted a bright yellow, the store was a danger to anyone who had powerful magic or possessed an artifact.

Tabithas smiled warmly and drew her inside.

"Tabithas? What are we doing?"

"If you are going to be fucking, I want to make sure you are safe and clean. Come on, you have time to learn about life but I'd rather you not be doing it with a child on your hip."

Humiliated that she didn't think of it, Lily quietly followed.



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## Chapter 27

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# Focus

The sharpest blade is the one in your back.

—Jakushikyo Nichyoti, *Tears of the Sun Queen*

**L**ily was once again back in the carriage. It was early evening and she could hear the rattle of wooden wheels on the cobblestones blending with the vendors trying to hawk the last of their wares before packing up for the day.

She was uncomfortable. Her back ached from just below her shoulders to her tail bone, a strange rippling sensation from the purity spells that Tabithas had purchased for her. The magic was subtle but the old man who cast them was not a Kasin; his energies were causing random muscles to jerk and twist as her body and magic adjusted to the presence of the new spells.

Squirming, she leaned against the side of the carriage and took a deep breath. Spending a few hours having the spells laid on her had helped her calm down but she still felt the pressing need to work on Nirih's dress. She couldn't afford to pay off her mother's—no Sarlin's—loans before the end of the week.

The only concern was Hasan. She let out a soft moan. Even with her fear, part of her wanted to rip off her clothes and let him have his way with her well into the morning. Her body warmed at the thought but she clamped down on her fantasies. She couldn't afford to let him spend another night, not with Nirih's dress or Mindil's friendship.

She took another deep breath to steel herself. She knew he would be waiting for her when she returned home. It didn't matter if he had something to do, he would drop everything for her. She loved it and craved it, but she had to say no.

Lily wasn't sure if she had the strength to do so.

The din outside of the carriage grew quieter. She peeked out of the window and saw they were only a few blocks from her house. She tensed with anticipation and a twinge along her back scraped against her nerves.

When the carriage stopped in front of her house, Lily gathered her things.

Tabithas opened the door before she finished, the older woman bowing as she held it open with one gloved hand. "Welcome home, Bedame Lily dea Kasin."

"Thank you." She held out her hand. When Tabithas took it, she stepped down.

Tabithas swept up her bag behind her. "Does the bedame need help with her guest?"

"Guest?" Lily looked around and then up at her house. The front windows were open and the smells of freshly cooked dinner drifted out of them. She could also see new flowers in vases on either side of the door. "Oh."

She took another deep breath. "No, no. I should deal with him."

Lily turned to Tabithas. "Thank you. You've done so much for me and you didn't have to."

“One cannot see a young girl grow up and then just abandon her on the side of the road.” Tabithas smiled. “However, you can’t count on me watching you for everything. You are a wonderful young lady who has a bright future in front of you.”

“I can tell him no, right?” Lily glanced back up at the front door.

“Do you want him to stay the night?”

She sighed. “Yes...,” she started, “... but he can’t. I can’t, right?”

Tabithas glanced around and then leaned forward. “Do what you have to, do what is right for you. It doesn’t matter what I think about him. It doesn’t matter what he thinks. You need to take care of yourself, whatever that means.”

It took a moment for Lily to digest the words. “Thank you.” She leaned forward and hugged Tabithas tightly.

The old woman tensed for a moment and then hugged her back.

Lily wondered why for a moment and then realized she had never hugged Tabithas before. The older woman had initiated them before, but they were matronly not in friendship. In fact, she hadn’t shown any affection for any of her mother’s staff before. With a blush, she pulled back. “S-Sorry.”

Tabithas shook her head. “No, don’t be.”

“I’m not supposed... to do that.”

“Then why did you?” Tabithas asked with a wink.

“Because it felt right.”

“Then it probably was.” With a smile, Tabithas carried Lily’s bags up to the door. Turning around, she tapped her heels together and bowed again. “Anything else?”

Lily smiled warmly. “Thank you but I think I’m good.”

Tabithas returned to her carriage. Getting up on the seat, she called out. “Send for me if you need me.”

Lily nodded. She watched as the older woman drove away, leaving her alone with a man she desperately wanted but had to say no. Gritting her teeth, she picked up her bags and went inside.

Hasan had been cooking for a while. There were platters on the table already, covered in bowls and steaming. She could see that he had made another feast. There was far more than either of them could eat.

She set down her bags. "Hasan?"

He walked out of the kitchen. He wore a new suit with her apron over it again. There was a smear of flour on his chest and along one sleeve.

Lily stumbled. He looked beautiful in that moment, a strange contrast of domestic and desire. Her body fluttered with heat as she remembered how he kissed her and how he dove between her legs to pleasure her. The heat grew as she struggled with the words.

"Lily," he said in a low voice. Walking up to her, he pulled her into his arms. The warmth and comfort surrounded her, reminding her that he was hopelessly in love with her.

Lily wanted to say no. She had practiced it endlessly on the carriage ride home. Even the pressing need to work on the dress faded away as she looked up into his warm brown eyes and let her gaze travel along his lips. She loved his kisses, she loved the way he touched her skin or ran his tongue along the inner part of her thigh.

Hasan brought his mouth to hers. "I missed you," he whispered.

Inwardly, Lily's emotions fought with her sanity. She wanted to say no but her heart jumped at the thought of being kisses gain. With a soft gasp, she leaned into it, bridging the gap between them.

The touch of his lips against her own was electric, a surge of lust that rippled down her spine and directly into

her sex. She grew liquid in an instant with the soft caress and touch of his hands spreading along her hips.

Hasan's breath tasted of honey and wine, a tangy scent right on the edge of her senses. He broke the embrace long enough to inhale and then dove back in. He ran his lips against her own and flicking out with her tongue. He was aggressive, leaning into his kisses.

Lily's bags slipped from her fingers as she leaned back. She lost herself for a moment to enjoy the embrace.

"H-Hasan, I have..." It was too hard to speak.

His fingers danced along her side and around her back. Hasan brought his palm to the small of her back, right along the tight muscles, and pulled her close.

She inched forward until she could feel his hardness pressing into her stomach as a heated brand. Even the thick fabric of his suit wasn't enough to hide the lust that was inside. She could too easily picture the long length poised to enter her deeply, to fill her until she cried out with pleasure.

Lily pulled back. "No, we have to stop."

Hasan held her firmly. He moved his kisses to the side of her cheek and then down to the sensitive spot between her neck and her shoulder.

Her body grew hotter and a liquid flooded between her legs. She gasped, her eyes fluttering with the effort to resist. With a soft moan, she stepped back up to his hardness and let him guide her into another kiss.

With his spare hand, Hasan brought his fingertips up along her flanks, then up along the side of her breast. He spread his fingers over her nipple and held her, adding to the pressure as he kissed her harder and faster.

Lily gasped. It felt good to be held. Her aching nipple ground against his palm, little sparks of pleasure racing

along her skin as she rocked her hips up against his sheathed cock.

“I want to taste you,” he said softly.

She knew exactly what he meant. Even though she had never thought of it before—she didn’t even know it was possible—the memory of him pressing his lips up against her naked sex had burned itself into her memories. It was the purest pleasure she had ever had. Her body grew hotter with the memory, a desire rising up and making it difficult to say anything. She gasped.

“Please? I need you.”

Her willpower crumbled and the tension left her body.

Hasan tugged up her dress, pulling it along her bare thigh and drawing it up. At the same time, he broke the kiss and lowered himself to his knees in front of her.

Lily’s pulse beat inside her as she stared down at the man. Her body tensed as he finished pushing up her dress against her hips, revealing her bare legs and the pair of panties that rested between them.

Hasan smiled and drew his hands down, sliding his fingertips underneath the fabric and tugging them down.

Lily whimpered softly as he exposed her sex to his hungry eyes. She could feel his attention on her, it was a heated flame.

Without hesitating, Hasan leaned forward and parted his lips. His tongue reached out to trail through the curly hairs over her pubis. He swirled around, painting her dampness with his tongue.

Lily clutched the side of the table tightly. She wanted to ask him to stop but couldn’t. Her eyes remained locked on his mouth as he worked his way further down, tilting his head as he brought his tongue up against the heated and sensitive slit.



When he delved his tongue between her nether lips, she let out a low moan. It was so different than being impaled on his cock. His tongue swirled around her labia, caressing her delicate folds as he worked his way deeper into her sex.

Hasan tilted his head further back, laving her clitoris with wet slurps. Every stroke ignited more fires inside her, adding to her liquid heat. His eyes closed as he savored her, drawing his tongue up along her sensitive clitoris in long, deep strokes that curled her toes and stole her breath away.

She could do nothing but focus on the sensations. Her body trembled and tensed with every lap. She pushed her hips down to meet his strokes, silently begging for him to delve deeper into her body.

After an infinity of pleasure, he brought his hands up between her legs. Gently spreading her limbs apart, he worked one finger into her sex. The opening clung to his fingers, squeezing down as he pumped slowly into her sensitive opening.

“Oh, oh!” she gasped, shaking more as he plunged his finger deeper into her slick opening. She could feel him caressing her insides, teasing and exploring as he drove deeper with every stroke.

Soon, his knuckles were against her labia with every stroke. The wet smacks against her sex shot through her body and she could feel him curling and teasing deep inside her sex. Her inner walls clung to his fingertips, squeezing down as he swirled inside her liquid depths.

Hasan lapped harder and faster, adding a second finger into her opening. Her insides stretched around his digits, the pleasure of being filled doubling with the second finger.

He continued to plunge in and out with slow, deep movements. With every stroke, she pushed down to meet his hand.

Lily panted as her orgasm was teased out of her. It was hard to do anything else with a tongue lapping at her clitoris and two fingers pumping in and out of her aching sex.

Her orgasm rose up inside her, slow and sexual. She gasped with the pleasure rising inside her. She pushed down and met his strokes. "Faster," she whimpered.

He obeyed, plunging his fingers into her with short strokes. His digits swirled inside her, caressing against raw nerves, before he drew it out slowly. She could feel every ridge and bump of his fingers as they slipped past the tight opening.

She whimpered and ground down, striving for the orgasm that built up inside her. She had to grip the table tightly for balance as she did, but when she found the right angle to impaled herself, it transformed her pleasure into an orgasm.

With a strangled cry, she slumped down on his hand. It impaled her fully, filling her completely as her body clenched and jerked with her pleasure. Muscles tensed into rock hardness as she slowly fell down, pulling his mouth from her clitoris.

Hasan teased her with his tongue. He lapped her pubis and then up over her belly and then to her ribs as she sank to the floor in sated pleasure.

He smiled at her. "I missed you."

Panting, Lily stared at him. She felt sick that she couldn't resist him. Even as she considered kicking him out, her body cried out for another orgasm. She wanted him so badly. She craved to feel his hardness driving inside her or his tongue against her clitoris with more licks.

"Lily?"

Lily struggled with her emotions. He stood over her, his cock hard with his own desires.

Guilt filled her. She couldn't ask him to leave with his hardness tenting his pants. At the same time, she knew that she had to for Mindil's and her sake.

She looked up at him and fought the sudden tears. "I-I'm sorry."

Hasan stepped back with a frown. "For what?"

"I need to stop." She wanted to say something about Mindil but the words froze in her throat. "I have too much to do tonight and tomorrow."

Hasan looked heartbroken. He rubbed his hard cock.

Lily's heart almost snapped in two. She wanted to take back her words, to beg for him to stay the night. She knew it was wrong, but she didn't think she had the strength to tell him no.

"Why?" he asked in a low, desperate voice.

She didn't think she could answer him directly. With a whimper, she leaned back against the table leg that she had fallen in front of. "P-Please don't ask. We can't. We can't do this."

Hasan sighed and stepped away. His marriage bracelet clinked against itself. He looked down at it and then back up to her. "No, it's okay."

Lily found strength. She pushed herself back up. Trembling and fighting herself every step, she reached out for his hands.

He took them, eagerly thrusting them into her palms.

Lily took a deep breath. "I love you, Hasan. I really do. Last night was... the best night I had ever had. But I also love your wife—"

She hesitated, the words weren't coming out as she intended. They were coming out though, to her surprise, but she had already committed to finishing the sentence.

Hasan's eyes widened.

"—and that means I can't spend the night with you."

“She won’t mind.” He shook his head.

Lily shook her head. “No, I mind. Please? Please let me go without making me fight for it?”

Hasan nodded and sighed dramatically. “I can, for tonight.”

Lily was crying and she didn’t know why. “T-Thank you.”

Head hanging, Hasan untied his apron and carefully set it on the table next to her. He looked at the kitchen once and then headed for the door.

It broke her heart to see him rejected, more so that he was leaving her. It took all of her willpower not to call out to him and beg for him to spend the night. Sniffing, she turned away from the door as he opened it. The kitchen was as good of a place to focus as anything. With blurry eyes, she stared at the steaming platters of food he had made for her.

She managed to hold herself still until the door shut behind her. Trembling, she waited a long count before peeking over her shoulder, half afraid he remained inside waiting for a second chance.

She was alone.

She wasn’t sure why, but a profound sense of loss flooded inside her. She slumped forward as the tears began.

# Intuition

There are two types of crafters: those who create with patterns and those who create from emotions.

—Casandra Midori Rail

**L**ily worried her lip as she dragged the cutting blade down the length of parchment paper. She kept one finger on each side of the paper while working the blade kept in the “V” of her digits. As she concentrated on the straight line, ripples of color radiated from her fingertips. It made it easier to concentrate though, as she cut in time with the waves of reds and blacks that ran along the paper.

After a night of twisting and rolling over, she woke up dreading work but knowing she didn’t have much time. The appointment with Juliet and Nirih was on Mumdei, a week of six days away, and she knew that Juliet would be brutally critical of the dress.

Lily wasn’t sure if she could do anything to pass the approval of the cow, but she had to try. All that mattered was that Juliet allowed Nirih to wear the dress, the response to the young girl’s debutante presentation would be the true test.

She sighed and returned her concentration to the rippling paper. As she cut along the parchment, she could picture how the fabric would lay against Nirih's chest, shoulders, and throat. She realized she was cutting wrong and moved up to slice another thin piece before resuming her cutting.

The collar was one of the most important parts of the dress; the negative space of the girl's skin would draw attention from everyone. Too low and it would be scandalous, too high and it would turn away potential husbands who were looking for a young beauty.

She finished the cut and picked up the piece of parchment. It was the right size for the collar and exactly as she imagined. It was also rather large, which made her worry because it looked too low. She worried for a moment and then pushed it aside while she finished cutting a mirrored piece for the other side.

It took her an hour to pin the pieces together and then fit it on a dress form that she had sized for Nirih's measurements. The form already had the other parts of the dress hanging on it, the components that Lily felt comfortable adding after mocking up with a few stitches to hold the fabric together.

With every passing second, she knew the collar wouldn't work. She could see it from the corner of her eye as she pinned the parchment to the fabric. It was too low, too wide, and exposed too much.

It took a masochistic determination to keep working despite knowing she had failed. The collar design was what her intuition said would work. She had to know if it looked good because she hoped the knowledge would let her work on a dress that High Society would accept.

When she finished, she closed her eyes tightly and stepped back. She wasn't sure if she was ready to inspect her work. It took her a moment to open her eyes and look.

The dress was beautiful. Even put together with different materials including parchment, it would fit Nirih perfectly. It had curves in the right place, the lines were perfect, and it would steal the breath away from anyone looking.

It would also never work. Tears swam in her eyes as she stared at it. As much as the patterns fit together, the collar was far too low to be socially acceptable. Changing that would force her to come up with a different waist to keep the entire style cohesive.

The design would look good on Mindil. It would push up her breasts to any curious eye and tempt someone to reach in and stroke them. Lily could almost imagine herself stroking along Mindil's body, kissing the expanse of smooth skin. A flutter of excitement raced along Lily's skin and tickled between her legs before she could drag her thoughts back to the effort of inspecting the dress.

Nirih, on the other hand, would never wear it. There was no way Juliet would ever let her daughter go out in public with an outfit that revealing.

Sniffing, she turned away and rushed over to her wine. Her latest glass had been sitting for too long so she dumped it down the sink and poured herself a fresh one. The effort wasn't enough to forestall the tears, so she fled for the front room of the store and sat down heavily on one of her chairs.

With tears in her eyes and a wineglass in her hand, she stared at the light traffic outside.

It was Nondei. Most of the stores across from her store were empty and she couldn't help but feel a little bitter for the proprietors that weren't being haunted by mental blocks, threats of their businesses, and guilty thoughts a-

bout poor decisions. She sipped at her glass and stared at the far side, waiting for her thoughts to calm down to try again.

Twenty minutes later, she still didn't have the desire to get up and correct the collar. She didn't think she could do it. She couldn't figure any design that both felt right in her heart and also with her understanding of High Society.

She stared at her half-filled wineglass. The deep red liquid rippled with her heartbeat. She swirled it back and forth slowly, coating the side of the glass with the burgundy.

Lily knew she should get out of the chair and return to work. She only had a week to complete the task before her mother would destroy her business and her life with it.

She sighed and swirled the glass again. She considered pouring herself another glass. Lifting up the glass, she drained it and set it down. Getting up, she started into the back to get the bottle but stopped. No, she didn't need to drink yet, she had a dress to make.

The dread returned but she pushed through it. She could do it, she just had to keep the theme of the design she liked and find a way of making it socially acceptable.

A knock on the front door stopped her. Her heart jumped in her chest as she pictured a furious Mindil pounding on her door or Kendrick fleeing the Martins again. Slowly, she looked over her shoulder.

There was a familiar old man standing in the door with a top hat in his hand and a cane in the other. It was Relik da Martin. He gave a little wave with his hat and nodded his head.

The muscles in her chest and back tightened, squeezing down on her ribs and making it hard to breathe. Sweat prickled her brow as she stared at Relik for a long moment. She considered continuing into the work area and pretend-



ing she didn't see it, but their gazes had met and there was no way she could do it without snubbing him.

Lily didn't want to answer the door. Nothing good happened when Relik showed up at her door.

It would be rude to ignore him though. She took a deep breath and turned to answer the door.

Relik stepped back as she opened the door. As soon as it was opened, he bowed deeply. "My deepest apologies, Be-dame Lily dea Kasin, I would not dare to interrupt you on Nondei without a serious and pressing concern."

Lily started. "W-What? What's wrong? Is Kendrick safe?"

Relik's eyes shimmered as he spoke in a low, serious voice, "May I come in?"

She stepped back to let him inside. When he entered, she closed the door. "Is there something wrong?"

He turned and bowed his head. He switched his hat to the same hand as his cane. "I'm afraid that I need your assistance. As you know, we've been watching Kendrick closely as he struggles with his decision."

"Y-Yes...?" The tightness in her chest increased, crushing her ribs. The world spun around her as she stared at the older man.

"I'm afraid he has taken a turn for the worse."

Lily gasped. She pressed two fingers against her lips to quiet her.

"For his safety, I have to break the common courtesy that we have afforded him during this time to ask for your assistance. I'm aware that you are struggling with your own difficulties, but in this case, our mutual friend may need your help."

"What happened?"

Relik sighed and looked up. "As you may recall, Kendrick has taken to watching your house at night. It is somewhat of an obsession but he is aware of your activities at night."

A burning taste rose in the back of her throat. She knew where Relik was going, Kendrick had seen her spend the night with Hasan. He didn't even have to see it, she was sure her screams of pleasure could be heard by most of the neighborhood.

She blushed hotly and it was her turn to look away. "I can guess."

"For two nights now, he has remained in the bar room below his temporary quarters." Relik sighed. "When my men attempted to question him about his decision, he responded with more violence and less control than before. Three of them were put into the hospital and one required magical healing otherwise he may not have made it."

Lily's jaw dropped in shock. She stared at Relik as she tried to comprehend his words.

Relik sighed. "While the aggression between our two families in Kendrick's matter has been less than courteous, I'm aware that he is struggling with a decision that has far-reaching consequences in his life. I have attempted to give him as much space to make that choice but there are others in my family who want their due. They have felt that Kendrick's reluctance would result in him reneging on his word and have attempted to aggressively bring him into compliance."

"So you aren't sending the men after him?"

Relik shook his head. "I am not. I rather work through negotiations. I also feel that he would benefit my family more if he is to agree willingly to honor his terms."

"And if he isn't?"

Relik didn't answer for a moment. Instead, he toyed with his hat for a few seconds. Finally, he said, "Every business experiences a loss of a failed investment. If I felt that his decision against us was made with both his heart and intel-

lect, that I would regretfully write off our expenses and walk away.”

The world continued to spin around Lily. She could too easily see Kendrick lost in a bottle as he drank himself to images of her fucking Hasan. The tears were already in her eyes, now they were threatening to spill out.

“Would you please assist us?”

“What is your deal?”

Relik pulled back. “It is not honorable—”

“He needs both of us, right?”

Relik stopped and bowed with a slight tilt to his head. “A well-made point.”

He looked around and then gestured to the chair Lily had just vacated. “This would be easier...”

They sat. Lily offered wine but Relik waved her off. As soon as they were settled, the older man continued.

“As you know, Kendrick has a very useful magical ability with water. He’s a mage, capable of doing many things, which makes him valuable in any regard. He is also a competent weather mage, capable of bringing or sending away rain.”

She nodded.

“When we helped his departure from the jail that he had spent years at, he agreed to serve the Martin family in that capacity for our fleet. He would shape water to ensure favorable travel rates, halt inclement weather, and effectively give us a significant boost in our shipping capabilities.”

“That sounds serious.”

Relik favored her with a smile. “It is, which is why this is an investment. His obligations would only be for ten years. If he is useful, the Martin family would not hesitate to heap rewards to ensure a more... long-term relationship.”

She frowned. “Why would he be running then?”

“The problem?”

“Yes.”

“To put a fine point, you.”

Lily stared in shock. “Me?”

“Yes, through his poor self-control, Kendrick has demonstrated that he still retains a heart-flame for you. You were the first thing he looked for when he came to shore and it continues to be a driving force. He wants you. I also have...” Relik’s voice trailed off.

“What?”

“Even in this circumstance, there are some things that I shouldn’t speak of. Every man should have his secrets.”

It was frustrating. Everything about Kendrick was wrapped in shifting obligations and words. Lily sighed. “Please? I need to know.”

Relik toyed with his hat. “As part of a renegotiation, he has requested a sizable sum of jems to be set aside for a large purchase.”

The muscles in her neck twitched. “W-What reason?”

Relik stared into her eyes. “I presume your bride price. He intended to purchase your hand.”

The air in her throat froze. Lily stared in shock, her body utterly still as she tried to comprehend the words. Kendrick wanted to marry her? He still loved her that much?

Her heart beat faster, pounding in her chest.

“The amount was for your original debutante price, as noted on Suterbay’s from nine years ago. It was a fair and generous amount but one that many of my family balked at. I agreed to it unaware that it would cause a rift with the more accounting-based forces within the Martins.”

“H-He... he wants to marry me?” The tears were returning.

Relik nodded. “Yes, but I’m afraid he is drinking it away now and destroying his chances to request your hand. I know that both of you have resisted you becoming a ku-

dame which is why I am here and violating the sanctity of our gentleman's agreement."

"M-Me?" She couldn't get over it.

Relik smiled. "As you know, you are still a desirable woman. The two men who have fallen for you nine years ago are not deterred by your reputation of bad luck."

She smiled to herself. Kendrick wanted her.

Then, confusion. "Why wouldn't he take the deal?"

Relik set down his hat on the table. "There is a price to his employment. In specific, the employment."

"Working for the Martins?"

"Yes, in part. A weather mage is not... a position that has high regard in our Society. Since we are not his family fleet, it would be considered a subservient role and therefore not worth of keeping his Kasin titles."

It took a moment to realize what Relik said. "You mean, he won't be a Society man if he works for you?"

"Yes, and by his position, you would also cease to be a lady of High Society."

It was another blow that stole her breath away. Her ears began to ring as she stared at him, watching his lips move but not hearing the words. Her heart slammed into her chest and the sick feeling rose.

"... with your current reputation as a seamstress, it would mean that you would also be shunned by the rest of High Society and would lose a significant portion of your income in the process," he finished.

"Kendrick knows this?"

"Yes, it was one of the many questions he asked me."

She panted for breath.

Relik waited, watching her carefully with a look of compassion on his face.

"If he agrees to you," she said with an aching heart, "then either he leaves me alone or asks me to marry him and we lose our titles together?"

"Yes, Bedame."

She stared down at her hand. She wasn't entirely sure what to do, but her heart and mind were warring with each other just like they were on the dress. Her intuition said to rush to Kendrick to help him, even if he felt she betrayed him, she couldn't let him drink away his future because of her choices. On the other hand, her mother was adamant about her not doing anything besides work on Nirih's dress.

"As I said, I apologize for interrupting you. I know that you are struggling with many things in the last week. I have have not interrupted your work but I'm truly afraid of the consequences of his current choices."

She glanced up at him. "How much do you know?"

Relik looked embarrassed. "More than appropriate, I'm afraid."

"What do you think I should do?"

He sighed. "I can't tell you, it isn't my place."

"What do you think?"

He shook his head. Standing up, he bowed. "I'm sorry, Bedame. There are some things an old man should never reveal."

It was a good idea. She stood up with him. "How do I find him?"

"You will help us?"

She nodded.

"I will send for a Kasin carriage. It wouldn't do well to arrive in a Martin."

Lily glanced back at her work room. The dress will have to wait, there were some things more important than a store or her mother's reputation.

## Drinking Alone

The Divine Couple are the template for the perfect marriage: lovers who fell for each other over the first of the light and remained true until the end of time.

—*Marriage Under the Divine Couple*

**F**or the last twenty minutes, the smells of the docks had been seeping into the cracks of the rented carriage. The fishy scent was almost overwhelming but she could also taste tar, rotted plants, and sea water swirling together. It was an entirely loathsome stench that she had rarely needed to experience.

The cobblestones were also in poor repair. The wagon jostled violently as the single-horse carriage struggled to take her to her destination. She could imagine her hip was bruised after slamming against the insides of the carriage; she knew it wasn't true but it felt that way.

Her stomach clenched with anxiety as she considered her destination. She had no idea what mood Kendrick would be in. Would he be sullen or angry? Would she see that mask of rage that she spotted years ago during the ill-

fated duel? Every passing second made her fear grow until she was shaking from her thoughts.

The carriage came to a rattling stop. She tensed, waiting for it start again, but then she felt the drive sliding off the seat and coming around.

Shifting forward to rest her buttocks on the edge of the street, she double-checked that she had her small tri-fold tucked into the waistband of her dress. It had a few jems and her identification, anything else would be risking pick-pockets or thieves. She had also left her jewelry at home, no reason to tempt anyone. The only thing she wore that was fancy was a light yellow dress with flower embroidery along the ankle-length hem.

The driver opened the door and gave a short, sketch bow. "Kudame Kasin."

Over the shoulder of the driver, she could see a pair of men watching her curiously from the eave of an empty stall. Both of them held large clay mugs in their hands. They wore mismatched suits that set her nerves on edge, the fabric of the jackets didn't mesh with the pants and they wore baggy shirts underneath.

With a flush on her cheeks, she stepped out of the carriage. Her shoe, a sensible one with a wide-footed heel, splashed into a deep puddle of icy water. She only had a second to register before stumbling forward.

The two men laughed.

Cheeks burning, she got up on the wet sidewalk and regained her balance. She looked around. When she saw a sharp line between wet and dry, she did a double take. With a gasp, she looked in the other direction to see the same circle of wetness was centered on the front of the public house. Slowly, she turned to the bar in front of her.

It was painfully obvious that Kendrick remained inside. Fog obscured the windows. Thick droplets of condensation



ran down every surface, splashing into wide puddles. The double doors leading inside were ajar. The paint had bubbled away from where it had split, colored water still ran down the front before blending into the puddles on the ground.

Steeling herself, she headed for the bar.

“I wouldn’t go in there, Lady.” It was one of the men watching her. He had a low, raspy voice.

“Yeah, there is some asshole mage ruined my favorite place for everyone. Kicked everyone out and none of us can get back in. Go inside and you’ll get yourself rightly doused.”

She flushed hotter. “I-I’ll be okay.”

They looked at each other and shrugged. Then, they smirked and held up their mugs in a mock salute.

Humiliated, she hurried across the sidewalk. The door trembled underneath her palm as she shoved it open, desperate to get away from the two men teasing her.

Inside, the main room was dripping wet. Sheets of water poured down from the ceiling and there was a large puddle where the bar used to be. Tables, chairs, and even the paintings were all soaked completely. Even the bar fared poorly with formerly empty glasses half-full of water and condensation forming over everything.

Kendrick sat on a stool in the middle of the room. His back was slumped as he balanced on the edge. From her vantage point, she could see the curves of his buttocks as the damp fabric strained over her muscular backside. His right arm dangled from his side, a half-full bottle caught between two rough fingers.

He sat in the middle of a cleared area in the main room. The other tables and chairs were pushed away from him. On the ground, deep gouges filled with water marked their passage.

It broke her heart to see him there, alone and isolated with only alcohol for company.

“Didn’t you hear me the third time?” Kendrick growled as he lifted up the bottle. He didn’t look back at her.

Lily opened her mouth to respond but he didn’t stop.

He turned slightly, giving her an angled view of his scruffy beard and hard glare. “I told you shits to leave me alone!”

Kendrick chucked the bottle in his hand up above his head.

Reflexively, Lily looked up to watch it. When it began to glow with a rippling blue energy, her eyes widened and the breath froze in her lungs.

The glass instantly filled with water which began to bubble out of the top of the bottle. It started as a splash but then became a jet. A rapid heartbeat later, the bottle exploded into a ball of water rushing directly toward her.

Lily screamed out, but the water struck before any sound came out. It slammed against her face with enough force she staggered back. The icy liquid soaked her face, chest, and thighs in a continual wave of pressure.

The water caught on the back of her throat, splattering cold against it before dripping down her throat. She gagged on it, coughing violently but every time her lips parted, more water rushed in.

Desperate to clear her mouth and lungs, she backed away from the pressure and out the door. She could feel her heels catching on the boards of the walk but she couldn’t see where she was going. Her eyes could see nothing more than the water sheeting against her face.

Then her outstretched foot caught nothing but air. With a gurgling scream, she fell back against the carriage.

The water pressure relented for more seconds. She could do nothing but grip the edge of the carriage door and the wheel as she fought the urge to cough violently.

Then, just as quickly as it started, the water pressure died down and a ton of water splashed across the boardwalk and cobblestones.

Lily looked back at the drenched building for only a second before she choked on the water from her lungs. Bending over, she coughed harder to clear her air.

A wet ripping noise filled the air and she felt the fabric of her dress tugging along her hips and thighs. There was nothing she could do about it while coughing, but she inwardly winched as the ripping grew louder and she felt cool water splashing against her naked skin.

When she finally caught her breath, she straightened.

The two men were laughing loudly.

“Told you, Lady. Ain’t no pretty face going to get near that dick. You’d have better luck coming over here.”

The other guy smacked his friend with the back of his hand.

She reached back to inspect the damage to her dress but then another bout of coughing caught her. She sobbed as she struggled to breathe. With each wracking cough, more of the fabric ripped.

When she finally regained her senses once again, she could hear the two men still laughing.

Flushed, she looked down. The dress she had picked had not fared well with being soaked. The white material was almost transparent revealing the faint lines of her lace thong and her breast straps. Even the inner material was partially translucent and she could see the shadow of her nipples through the clinging fabric.

The rip was at mid-thigh, a ragged cut that exposed far more leg than any proper lady should ever reveal. The far end was caught on a screw from the wheel.

Grumbling, she freed the remains of her dress from the wheel. When she saw that most of it had ripped off, she carefully tore the scrap off. It left her thighs bare to the cool air and brought another roar of laughter from the bystanders.

She had to clutch the bottom of her dress to avoid it rising up on her ass. The color changed under her fingertips but no tint could hide the translucency of the soaked fabric. She gave up, leaving the fabric a dark blue.

Sheepishly, she looked toward the men watching her.

They laughed loudly as they held up the mugs to her. "Told you, Lady," said the one who spoke the most.

Humiliation burned on her cheeks. She turned away to avoid looking at them and focused on the front of the bar. Kendrick had tossed her out without even looking at her. With her thoughts, she tightened her grip on her dress until she realized it was pulling up along her thigh. She tightened her jaw, clamped her hand on the bottom of the dress to avoid it riding up, and then stormed into the public house. "That was very rude, Kendrick!"

By the time she reentered the bar, Kendrick had turned around on his stool and was staring at the entrance with bloodshot eyes. There was also surprise on his face along with unexpected look of vulnerability and hope. His expression stopped her and she came to a stop.

"K-Kendrick?"

Slowly, he lowered his gaze down her body. She could almost feel it caressing her skin, prickling the flesh underneath the translucent material. His look lingered around her hips and she tightened her grip on the fabric over her

ass which caused the soaked fabric to stretch tightly over her barely obscured pubis.

Lily's nerves danced with the thrill of his look.

Kendrick finished sliding his gaze down her body and brought it slowly up, lingering at her bare thighs, belly, and breasts before focusing on her face.

Her skin tingled with his look and a welcoming flicker of heat danced along her erect nipples and between her legs. She gave up trying to speak and waited for him to respond.

He didn't say anything for a moment. Then, his eyes hardened. "Why are you here, Lily?"

She flinched at his accusing tone. Even if Relik hadn't told her, she could see that Kendrick knew about her night with Hasan. It haunted and pained him, a fresh wound directly into his gut. She clamped her arm tight against her hip to keep her dress in place. In a soft voice, she said, "You needed me."

Kendrick waved his hand toward the door. "Just... go away."

"You need me here," she repeated.

His eyes flashed and the muscles in his neck tensed. "For what, Lily? To stab me again? To rip my throat out every time I think of you f-fucking that asshole?" His voice cracked. He looked away for a moment to take a loud, shuddering breath.

"Hasan is a good man." She knew it wasn't an excuse but she couldn't think of anything else to say.

He turned on his stool and reached out for the counter. A few of the still-filled bottles began to rattle as they rocked back and forth.

"You are also a good man," Lily finished. "A good man who needs help."

“There is only one good man for you. Go warm his bed and leave me alone. This bastard should have stayed forgotten.”

She flinched at his words.

One of the bottles launched itself in the air, bobbing and weaving as it sailed into his grip. It hit with a thick smack. The cork popped out of the bottle in a spray of liquid. The spray stopped in mid-air and then sucked back into the bottle.

He stared into the neck before he said, “You knew how important you were to me. It was the only way I could survive prison. But when I told you how important it was, you just ran into that sheep-fucking man’s arms. Just like that.”

Kendrick said the last one only inches from the bottle, almost whispering into it. He swung the end up and caught it in his mouth, draining the bottle in seconds. The rest of it went down his chin and splashed on his muscular chest and drenched undershirt.

She watched for a moment and then came around. She wrapped her fingers around the bottle and pulled it from his lips. “I’m here now, Kendrick. Right here.”

Kendrick’s eyes teared up. He looked back at his bottle for a long moment before raising his blue gaze to her. “I know I said you had the choice, not me. I believe that. I just wasn’t ready for you to make it.”

The guilt and frustration slammed into her. Lily let her other hand release her dress. The fabric rose up along the curve of her ass almost immediately but she ignored the cool air against her bare buttocks. “I haven’t made a choice.”

“But—”

Lily held up her finger to silence him. “I’m not ready to make that choice.”

His face darkened. "You already did. Half the neighborhood heard you make it." His sentence in a low growl.

"Kendrick," she said in an icy tone. Her grip tightened on his hand, forcing the bottle further away from his mouth. It would have been a useless gesture if he resisted, but he didn't. She said, "I haven't made a choice, not for my life."

"So what was Hasan?"

She fought the tears in her eyes as she glared at him. "Does it matter? I'm here."

"It matters because it was him in that bedroom." He sighed and looked away. "He got you, not me. He won."

He choked for a moment. "I should have pounded on that door. I should have stopped him."

Lily shook her head and held him tightly. "No, I'm not a prize. This isn't between you and Hasan, not anymore."

Kendrick started to say something, then stopped. A question furrowed his brow but he didn't ask anything.

She took a deep breath. "Nine years ago, you two fought over me. A house got burned down, you went to prison, and he was forced to leave me alone. We were all young. Now, I'm a kudame and—"

"Not a kudame," he said quietly.

She lost her chain of thought for a moment with his response but managed to regain them. "You two are done fighting over me."

When he started again, she squeezed his hand. "Yes, Hasan and I had sex."

Kendrick's expression darkened.

"But it won't be more than that. He is married to a..." she struggled as a flash of Mindil's smile raced across her mind. "... wonderful woman and I won't get between them anymore. Our nights are over. There won't be a second night."

A faint smile caught her eye. She could see the hope in his eyes again, the brief moment where the tension faded from his shoulders and his grip on the bottle.

Lily wagged her finger. "But, Kendrick, there are things we need to talk about."

"What?"

"Do you know why Hasan was there?"

"In your bed?" His expression darkened again. "Because he's a good fuck?"

Her attempts to be calm snapped, "No, you insensitive horse's ass! Every time I saw him, he made me feel wanted. He made me think I was pretty and special. Every time he talked to me, I felt like the most precious thing in the world!" She realized she was talking louder with every step but didn't care. "He didn't disappear every time I turned around! Every time I just think I'm falling in love with him, he didn't vanish like the Couple-damned rain clouds!"

When Kendrick stared in shock, Lily felt a prickle of fear. Did she go too far?

Outside the bar, the men laughed loudly. "That lady is schooling him," one bellowed.

Kendrick's expression twisted in a scowl and she felt a surge of fear. In their grip, the bottle began to vibrate. Liquid surged out of it forming a jet of liquid. The pressure shoved the bottle from her grip but Kendrick tightened to keep it in place as the wine poured out even faster.

The stream of liquid spiraled around both of them and then shot out the front door of the bar.

The laughter ended with a thump. Seconds later, men bellowed with anger but faded quickly as they hurried away.

Kendrick released the bottle and reached out. Another bottle sailed across the room into his palm. He popped off the top and took a deep gulp.



Lily reached up and grabbed the second bottle. "Kendrick, please? This isn't good for you."

He glared at her. "At the moment, nothing is good for me. That includes you."

"I'm good for you." She reached up for him, half afraid to touch him.

He shook his head. "I spent years thinking about what I would tell you. Practicing and memorizing. But when I see you, my tongue twisted up and my heart started pounding faster. I panicked. I shouldn't have. You were... everything to me."

"I wanted you too."

He froze, the bottle slipping in his hand. "What?"

With tears in her eyes, she stepped closer. "I've been dreaming about you too. At night, when I'm supposed to be working. Hasan wasn't the only... man in my fantasies, Kendrick. You were too."

She rushed forward, reaching out for him. "I looked for you from my window. Every time it rained, I thought about you. On my walks home, while sewing, while... everything. You were there too. You and Hasan and..." Her voice trailed off, she couldn't admit to falling for Mindil also.

Lily sniffed as tears burned in her eyes. "I needed you, I really do. At this point, I need you to be here."

Kendrick's lower lip trembled for a moment. He sighed. "Well, shit on me." He looked at the bottom inch in the bottle and then drained it. "I shoved myself up a horse's ass, didn't I?"

"Kendrick?"

He looked around at the destroyed bar and the empty bottles. "This was my big break, a chance to prove myself."

"By buying me?"

He looked at her. "Your bride price? Yes, I got—"

"I'm a kudame, I don't—"

Kendrick stood up sharply and she flinched. "You are a bedame! Damn the Couple, don't give up. You are until those bastard rip it away from you! You can't roll over."

She sniffed. "You did. You gave up."

Slowly, he sank back down. Lifting up the bottle, he looked at it. "Yes, didn't I? I did then. I did now."

"It doesn't have to be that way though. I still haven't made that choice. You can still be in my life, if you want."

Kendrick looked hopeful. "Really?"

Lily wiped the tears from her eyes. "There is a lot going on in my life. Both of you have rushed in just when I thought it was over. I know Hasan is married, but... I still love him. I know you are struggling yourself with choices you have to make. If you are having trouble, why can't I?" She finally reached out and caught his hand, prying it off the bottle. "Kendrick, I want you in my life. I want to choose you too."

"And Hasan?"

She thought about Mindil. "He may not remain with me. I have... I can't leave what I did with hidden from Mindil. It isn't fair to her or him."

He wrapped his fingers around hers, holding her tightly. "You still want him?"

She sighed. "He is a good man, loyal and hard working. When I'm around him, I feel special. Around you, I also feel like my heart is going to explode with how much I want you. I'll admit, I want both of you more than I can describe."

They stared into each other's eyes for a long moment.

Kendrick leaned forward.

Heart racing, Lily did the same. Her body tingled with anticipation.

Kendrick stood up still holding her hand to his muscular chest. "Lily, I've been an ass but I'm not stupid." He swayed

slightly, his body shifting. “I-If you are willing to give me a chance, I’ll do anything to stay in it.”

Lily hugged him tightly. “Thank you.”

He swayed even further. “I... I think I shouldn’t have stood up. I’m going to pass out now.”

“W-What?”

As he collapsed, she let out a scream.



## Morning Embrace

The quiet slumber of her beating heart is woken by a hardened beast rising from the shadows.

—Mistin de Romins, “Her Morning Embrace”

**Lily** woke up to the smell of old fish and moldy fabric. It was starkly different than the scents of her bedroom with the perfume and lace surrounding her. She wasn't sure she liked it, no lady would ever get used such a stench. The only thing that made it tolerable was the musky scent of a man teased her senses. It was a warm smell with just a hint of rain on the edge of her perceptions.

It reminded her of the night a week ago when she was hurrying home before the storm hit. The scent brought fond memories, of walking quietly next to Kendrick as they headed home, the feel of his arm underneath her palm, and even the smells of lightning that surrounded him whenever he did magic.

Lily smiled to herself and took a deep breath of man and ozone.

Slowly, she opened her eyes and looked around. She was in a small inn room barely half the size of her closet. The

only exit was a rotted wooden door on the opposite wall. It had three shiny locks on it and a bar crossing over the middle. A small dresser, no more than a yard tall, stood next to the door. Two bags rested next to it and she could see clothes sticking out of both.

The bed she was on was narrow and cramped. The straw bale underneath the sheet was hard in many places but her left leg rested in a furrow made by the previous tenants who had worn it down over the months. She tried to shift to a more comfortable position but a heavy weight pinned her down and into the groove.

Kendrick shifted and a warmth flooded across her senses. A low groan rose up, muffled by her thigh. His body, heated and heavy, spread her thigh slightly further apart. His muscular body was stretched out across the bed with his head on her lap. The black hair quivered with their heartbeats. His shirt had dried overnight but the unnatural creases told her that it had dried while he slept.

Lily stared down at him with the shadow of regret hanging over her. Last night was exhausting but it was also a night of revelations. Did she say too much? Had she made a mistake by revealing that she wanted Kendrick? Not only in her bed but maybe for the rest of her life?

Her emotions rose in her throat. There was nothing she could do to erase her words, except maybe hope that Kendrick had drunk himself into a blackout.

Immediately, she felt guilty. She had meant the words, she wanted Kendrick just as much as she wanted Hasan and Mindil. She just wasn't sure if her confession was entirely honest. She had just made the decision to not fuck Hasan again. Did she confess her passion for Kendrick to distract herself? Was he nothing more than a bandage for a lost passion?

Lily worried her lip and reached down to stroke his hair. It was damp under her touch and she smiled. It was always damp, even nine years ago when they were kissing on the gazebo. She caught a strand of his hair and ran it along her finger, enjoying the way the scent of lightning rose up from the touch.

It was the same smell from so many years ago, the decade had done nothing to fade it. A deep breath brought her back to the gazebo where Kendrick first kissed her. She was so young then, excited and wide eyes as she was passed from one dance to another. Kendrick had started as just a random man who danced stiffly but then they got to talking.

She smiled as she remembered skipping out of her dance card to follow him to the gazebo. That was where she had her first kiss, right as the rain started. The air had the same smell of lightning.

Her body grew warmer. The first kiss ended with his hand on her hip and the other cupping the side of her face. It was warm and tender. She didn't know the strange feelings that filled her now, but as the years passed, she could remember the flush that coursed down her spine and pooled between her legs.

She remained in place while she enjoyed her memories, but it didn't take long before she grew uncomfortable. While there was a pillow behind her to brace against the wall, her legs were spread underneath Kendrick's body. Her knees rested on each side of his muscular chest, which meant the ripped dress and a silk thong were the only thing between her and his head.

A flare of heat blossomed from between her legs. Being spread open, she could too easily imagine his powerful hand spreading her thighs further apart and moving the only few inches needed to press his mouth against her

pussy. She wondered how Kendrick would lick her. Would it be tender and deep like Hasan or primal like she imagined?

The heat grew more intense, rising up. Her nipples perked up with her thoughts.

A flare rose up and her hips lifted slightly. She could feel the moisture gathering along her sex, teasing her. Soft gasps rose from her lips as she imagined Kendrick's powerful hands against her thighs, his tongue lapping deeply along her insides.

Her toes curled with her fantasies, her hips rising and falling in tiny strokes.

Kendrick groaned and shifted.

Lily gasped and froze.

He shifted, one hand stretching out off the bed to clutch into a fist.

The faintest whiff of her pussy rose up from around him, the sweet tangy scent of a woman. Along with it came a blush as she realized he was waking up to the smell of her excitement.

Heart pounding, she stared down at the black-haired man who shifted in her lap.

Slowly, Kendrick lifted his head. His blue eyes came into focus. The scruff of his chin was only inches away from her pussy.

She panted as she watched him, knowing that if he took a deep breath he would know her thoughts.

"L-Lily?"

"I... I have to go the bathroom."

A brief smile cross Kendrick's lips but he pushed himself up to kneel between her legs. He gestured to the door. "Out, to the right, and down the hall. No one else should be here." His voice was rough from drinking too much.



Blushing, Lily quickly extricated herself and stood up. Her torn dress rose up on her ass as she did and she felt the warm air brushing up against damp, sensitive flesh. She let out a gasp and grabbed at her hem to pull it down. Her fingertips missed and the fabric bounced up, revealing even more of her body to him.

With a gasp, she spun around in reflexive fear that he saw her soaked pussy.

He was once again face-down on the bed.

She let out a soft exhalation of relief slipped past her lips. For as much as she wanted him, desired him more than she could imagine, there was years of having a sense of proprietary rammed into her as a High Society lady. It would have been scandalous if anyone knew that he was staring at her wet lips. Or that he was drinking in the scent of her excitement every time he inhaled.

Lily let out a soft giggle. She reached out and unlocked the door. Even though Kendrick said the inn was empty, she still hesitantly walked down the hall. There were many rooms on the floor but each one was empty. There were chairs and dresses set up for new tenants but the beds were neatly made and untouched. Doors were propped open.

Curious about the lack of other people, she was still thankful when she encountered no one by the time she found the bathing area at the end of the hallway. It was well-appointed with a common area and eight wooden stalls, four on each side of the room. The furthest wall had toilets with curtains. The nearest stalls had showers. A large metal tank above all four of them protected a fire rune that continually heated the water inside.

She smiled and glanced around. When she spotted a pail of bathing supplies, she grabbed it and stripped down to take a long shower. She stopped when she peeled her silk thong from her legs; it was sticky and slick from her excite-

ment. Smiling to herself, she ran her finger along the sensitive folds. The intense pleasure brought a shuddering gasp to her lips. She delved her finger further in, sliding back and forth along her aching clitoris.

"No, no!" she whispered to herself. The last time she masturbated to ease the pressure, it had ended with her being fucked repeatedly across the dining room table, the stairs, and her bed.

Her body grew even more flushed with the memory of Hasan fucking her.

As much as she wanted an orgasm, she couldn't risk spending the day in Kendrick's bed when she had Nirih's dress to finish.

Naked, she dove into a shower to scrub herself down and prepare for the day. When she finished, she felt much cleaner and erased the embarrassing hints of her excitement from her tingling sex and aching nipples.

She went to put her dress on but hesitated. It was far too short to return home without igniting gossip across the town. If she wanted to avoid embarrassing herself, she would have to find some way to make it longer. Looking around, she spotted her breast strap and her silk thong. She smiled to herself, she could unwrap both and extend the bottom of her dress a few more inches closer to proper.

Leaving her strap and thong off, she slipped on the dress. It settled down across her body, hanging off her breasts and hips. Her nipples were still hard, peaking up through the thin fabric. The material was also translucent and she could see hints of her pubic whenever she stepped into the light coming through the windows.

Feeling embarrassed, she gathered up the material and headed down the hall back to Kendrick's room. She stopped at a few rooms and peeked in the dressers, looking for needle and thread to repair her dress. Each one was empty.

When she reached Kendrick's room, she slowed down and inched the door open to peek inside.

Kendrick was still face-down on the bed. One leg had slipped off the edge of the bed, revealing a hard leg and an unmistakable bulge visible even from the door frame. He looked vulnerable and powerful at the same time, a beast sprawling out on a rock.

A different heat fluttered inside her, a hunger to see Kendrick more. She fought it down and eased into the room, walking on bare feet to his dresser. Slowly, she tugged it open. It was packed with clothes, tools, and books. With a grin, she gathered her underclothes with one hand and used it to lean against the wall as she dug into the other drawer.

She found a needle in the top drawer, but the leather straps next to it were too thick to use. With a sigh, she pushed the drawer close and bent over to open the next. There were more clothes. When she found a heavily-frayed pair of pants, she grinned. She could use some of the threads to lengthen her dress.

Kendrick's thick hand cupped her bare pussy, one thick finger pressing down the entire length of her slit and the tip rested right above her clitoris.

She jumped with a gasp. Her hand against the wall splayed opened, dropping her underwear as she braced herself. "Kendrick!"

He didn't say anything but his hand responded when he brushed his thumb up along the line of her buttocks, past her sphincter, and up against her tail bone. The effort felt like he was clamping his hand across all the sensitive areas of her body at once.

Gasping with the pleasure already building rapidly, she looked over her shoulder at him. She dragged her hand

down the wall, trying to turn without prying the questing hand from her sex.

He grinned as he reached past her with his free hand. Slowly, he spread his hand over hers. When she didn't stop him, he carefully planted his palm over her wrist and pinned it to the wall. His much larger body loomed over her as he settled into place, one hand tight against her sex and the other holding her in place.

Lily felt a surge of heat burn through her. She had one free hand but even the briefest sense of helplessness seemed to stir her insides. Her nether lips tingled with anticipation and she couldn't help but buck her hand up against his palm as she let out a shuddering breath.

Kendrick leaned over until the hairs of his scruffy beard brushed against her bare shoulder. His breath was hot against her skin. "May I, beautiful?"

"W-What do you... want to do?" Lily knew exactly what she wanted. Her body tightened reflexively as she imagined his fingers plunging into her pussy.

"I want to say I'm sorry."

Lily clamped tighter on the dresser, her body growing tense.

"I've been a weed. I know that... I shouldn't have assumed that nine years left everything the same. You should have never been a prize." As he spoke, he dragged his one finger up and down her slit, working his way past the slick folds toward the fold of pleasure nestled inside.

She found it difficult to concentrate, her attention drawn to the powerful palm that was rubbing against her sex and the ridge of his thumb near her asshole. Hasan's words drifted back and she wondered if Kendrick had ever thought about anal sex.

Her thoughts brought a fresh wave of heat coursing through her body and a soft moan to slip her lips. She

bucked against his hand again, enjoying the wide, powerful grip that held her tightly in place.

Kendrick grinned and rubbed his entire palm up and down her opening, swirling her juices across his skin and lubricating her folds. His finger never left her clitoris, swirling back and forth.

“Now, I believe last night, you said this was your choice.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but she couldn't get the words out. Her body was inundated with pleasure and she could only rock back and forth between the wall and his exploring fingers.

“And you don't have to make a choice now,” he said in a low voice, “but I want you to know that I was very hard when I woke up this morning.”

Another whimper.

“I found myself face-down on the lap of this most beautiful woman.”

As he spoke, Kendrick added a second finger to her pussy, working it back and forth along her slit. He also spread his digits to part her labia and exposed the sensitive flesh to the warm air.

Lily took a deep breath, drawing in the scent of both of their excitement. The sweetness of her pussy and the deeper tones of his cock. She wanted to see if he wore pants, he smelled fantastic, but she couldn't tear her eyes away from his gaze.

“When she began to start humping my chin while thinking about... what I think is sex, it got really hard.” He grinned. “It smelled so good, all I wanted to do was shove your thighs apart and just lick until you screamed.”

Lily moaned. “Y-Yes...” It had only been days since anyone had pressed his lips against her pussy but she was more than thankful that Kendrick was also willing to try.

Her fantasies slammed into her, increasing the heat and liquid gathering inside her.

He chuckled. Drawing his fingers back away from her clitoris, he swirled them through her slick lips until the tips were pressed against the gate to her depths. They were rough, a worker's hands, but also strong and sure.

Still staring at her, he pushed them inside.

Lily's vision blurred as she let out a long moan of pleasure. The pressure and girth of his fingers was intense. She could feel every ridge and scar as it teased and pumped into her, stretching the tight tunnel around his digits. With two fingers, he was already thicker than Hasan and it only added to the pleasure as he buried himself to the first knuckle inside her.

She gripped the dresser tightly and leaned against it, pushing her hips back and drawing his finger deeper into her pussy. The dresser began to tilt and she let out a soft cry before dropping it to plant her other hand against the wall.

"I will admit, though, all my willpower cracked when I lifted my head to see you bent over this dresser, with your pretty little cunt—"

No one had ever used that word in front of her. It felt dirty and exciting at the same time. She trembled with need.

"—sticking out and begging to be touched. So I had to do the right thing and come right over her."

"Kendrick—"

He shoved his two fingers deep into her pussy, burying clear down to his knuckles. The thickness spread her wide open, filling her with delicious pleasure.

Lily stared with an open mouth.

"Sorry," he said. He didn't look entirely sorry as he slowly drew his fingers out of her sex. The ridges and pleasures rippled along her senses, leaving her feeling on edge but

also empty. He stopped when his fingertips once again danced against her opening.

She whimpered.

"It's your choice." Kendrick leaned the few inches over. "It will always be your choice now. And, if the choice is just to have one day with me, then it will be the happiest day of my life."

Tightening her inner muscles, wishing his fingers were once again inside her, she sniffed. "I do."

He raised an eyebrow. "You do?"

"I want you."

"Now?"

She bucked her hips back. "Please, inside me."

"As you wish."

But, even as he said the words, he pulled his hand back.

Lily whimpered, unable to look away.

It only took a second for the heat to return. A moment later, she realized that he had moved up behind her and it wasn't fingers that pressed against her entrance. The thick, rounded head of his cock was already slick and hotter than anything she had felt before.

Surprised, Lily still wanted it more than anything else. "Yes," she whispered.

He guided it into her slicked entrance. There was little friction but a lot of pressure. He was thicker than anything she imagined, wider than his fingers and lined with deep ridges. She could feel her body opening around it and the girth stretching her insides.

Lily moaned loudly and pushed back, enjoying how her body resisted the intrusion from girth and size more than anything else. It only added to her excitement, flooding her pussy with juices as the immense cock slid deeper into her.

Tiny bolts of pleasure raced along her skin. Her eyes blurred as she focused on the cock that impaled her.

Kendrick took his time, holding her tight against the wall as he slid inch by inch into her, filling her completely to the brim with his hardness.

Lily spread her legs further apart, begging wordlessly for more.

It felt like both an eternity and an instant when his hips ground against her buttocks. He wasn't as long as Hasan, but the thickness made up for it. It seemed to stretch all of her insides into tightly-bound coils of pleasure.

Reaching over her other shoulder, Kendrick planted his damp palm against her other hand, pinning it to the wall. His body loomed over her, muscular and powerful.

An explosion of pleasure tore through her, setting off an orgasm as she felt dwarfed, protected, and vulnerable all at the same time. With a cry, she shoved back on his cock, grinding it down against his body.

He responded by driving it forward. His muscles were powerful as he shoved her forward and then drew back. It didn't take long for him to find a rhythm of powerfully thrusting inside her and drawing back. With every thrust, he picked her off the ground until she was supported by only the cock impaling her and the two hands pinning her to the wall.

Lily lost herself in pleasure as he drove into her, each thrust harder and faster. Soon he was slamming into her, jerking her entire body, as his cock pummeled her insides with raw ecstasy.

Soft cries of pleasure began louder moans and then screams. She thrust back as much as he drove forward, their bodies meeting with wet smacks as he drove his cock until she thought she would melt.

When he pulled back, her feet touched the ground but her legs wouldn't hold her weight. She started to collapse



before the cock drove back into her, picking her off the ground and thrusting deep.

Lily screamed out, enjoying orgasm after orgasm that tore through her body. Her helplessness, her pleasure, and even her love only magnified the sensations as he pumped.

She felt his orgasm first, a searing hot flooding of her insides, but he didn't stop. Instead he kept driving into her. Each thrust grew wet and liquid, filling the room with splashing along with the powerful scent of ozone.

Kendrick kept going, pounding hard and fast despite the river of cum splashing to the ground. His motions were just as powerful, she hadn't felt his orgasm she would have been convinced he was still going.

Another blast of cum filled her and he kept going.

Lily lost herself in her own orgasms, the pleasure igniting the liquid heat that flooded her and then poured down, running down her inner thighs in rivers.

Kendrick let out a low growl of his own. His hands tightened across hers and he began to slam into her, pounding harder and faster. Each thrust completely plucked her off the ground, impaling her fully as her body exploded into tiny orgasms with every stroke. He yanked out and drove back in.

His cock swelled inside her, straining her insides even further as it grew harder and longer.

Then he came.

It was a powerful jet of hot liquid, powerful and primal. It flooded her completely, soaking her insides with his seed before pouring out in a thick river of cum. The wet, stick cum teased her insides in ways even a cock couldn't, setting off another wave of orgasms.

Every part of her body tightened around his cock as she screamed out in pleasure. It tore through her, radiating

from her sex and insides to consume her entire body with wet, liquid ecstasy.

He froze, his cock thrust deep inside her and her feet off the ground. The final surges of his cum poured into her and splashed out. She shuddered with her final orgasm as she ground herself on it, loving every second of pleasure.

When it broke, he gently set her down on the ground and staggered back. His cock, an angry purple bobbed with his movements before he sat down on the edge of the bed. A few droplets of cum splashed down to hit the mattress.

Lily turned and leaned against the wall. Her legs were shaking and her breasts slick with sweat. She smiled as she looked at him.

Kendrick grinned back. "Your choice."

"I... was thinking of getting your fingers back in me, not... not..." she pointed to his half-hard cock, "that."

He looked down and then back up "What? You didn't like it?"

"Oh no," she moaned, "I liked it very much." She ran a finger down her trembling side, enjoying the afterglow that still pulsed inside her. It took all of her willpower to not throw herself back into bed, or straddle his hips and guide that shaft back into her. "In fact, I'd..."

Her words trailed off as she focused on the light coming through the window.

He cocked his head. "Something wrong?"

Lily sighed. "It's Pavdei, isn't it?"

Kendrick nodded, his cock deflating.

"I'm sorry, I have the store and... Nirih's... dress."

He got up smoothly, a few droplets running down his limp cock. "I'll order you a carriage." He stopped and looked at her with a grin.

She blushed. "What?"

“Might want to stop by home. That dress is...” His voice trailed off. He stepped up to her, his dark body pressing her against the wall for a moment.

Her blush grew hotter and a surge of heat flooded across her skin. A prickle of sweat dotted her brow.

He winked and leaned over, his mouth coming inches of her hard nipples. Grabbing his trousers, he stepped back and headed for the door.



## Betrayal's Knife

No blade is sharper than the broken glass of a friendship shattered.

—Laovin Degrasil-Mast

**L**ily hummed to herself as she sat in one of the front chairs and worked on the embroidery of Nirih's dress. It was fine detail work using a classic pattern. Penir, the famed seamstress who taught Lily, had made her memorize hundreds of them before forcing her to spend months sewing each one until she could do it blindfolded or while distracted. Now, embroidering the pattern was soothing and calming.

It also meant her thoughts could bob in the sea of her concentration. Most of them were focused on her morning with Kendrick. Every time she imagined his fingers thrusting inside her or the feel of his thick cock, her pussy grew wetter. It was far more distracting than the embroidery, though her needle never wavered from its design.

After hours of thinking of sex, her needle started to miss its mark. In fear of making an irrevocable mistake, she kicked off her shoes and folded one leg underneath her. She pressed the ridge of her foot along her slit and ground down. It was obscene and inappropriate, but even the small

pressure helped relieved the rapidly growing desire to throw everything down and rush back into his arms.

Lily returned to her work, rocking slowly against her foot as the inches of the embroidery slowly formed underneath her needle and fingertips. Her humming returned as she enjoyed the sunlight coming through the store front and the unsteady flow of people walking in front of her without anyone stopping to come inside.

The bell on the front door rang out.

She jumped, pricking herself with a needle. Looking up, there was a brief fear that Juliet was coming for Nirih's dress. When she saw Mindil standing there, bags in each hand, the surprise flowed away leaving both joy and guilt behind.

"Lily!"

Mindil wore an emerald dress with a cream portrait collar trimmed in white lace. Stretched across her breasts, the collar gave the impression of her about to fall out of it; the effect was magnified when she held up her hands for a hug.

It was the wrong color for the season but Lily knew how to fix that. She smiled to herself and set down her embroidery. She had to take a moment to make sure she hadn't soaked the seat with her inappropriate thoughts before coming over to sink into Mindil's embrace.

"Oh," whispered Mindil, "I missed you." There was something brimming in the woman's words.

Lily felt a surge of heat rise inside her. Tightening her inner muscles, she winced when her nether lips slid together with the slickness of hour-long fantasies burning in her head. Blushing, she pulled back but stopped when Mindil didn't release her. It was a light pressure against her back but one that felt like chains.

The heat rose inside her as she realized how close she was to Mindil's lips. The urge to reach over and kiss her rose up, filling her with a hungry desire.

Mindil's eyes flickered as she looked into Lily's. She was searching for something.

The guilt cut into Lily. She had cheated on Mindil and it was only a matter of time before their friendship was ruined. Tears threatened to form in her eyes. She pulled back, breaking Mindil's embrace. "D-Did you have a good trip?"

Mindil trailed her hand on Lily's shoulder before they parted. She cocked her head slightly and a ghost of a frown crossed her face. Slowly, she lowered her arms down.

Lily tensed. She backed away and looked away, afraid that Mindil would see what she had done.

"It was a good trip. The children were in high spirits." Mindil's voice sounded subdued. She gestured to the couch opposite of Lily. "Working on the girl's dress?"

Wishing she had the courage to just tell Mindil before it got too far, Lily nodded and returned to her own chair. She started to sit down with her foot underneath her, but then realized she couldn't risk touching herself. Despite the slickness between her legs, she sat properly on the chair.

Mindil smiled but there was a little less brilliance to it as she sat down. "Did you have problems?"

Lily flushed and then realized it was a general question. "I... my mother sent for me."

Mindil frowned. "What did she say?"

"I... I..." Lily struggled for the words. "That she will call my loans if I don't get this dress done." She held up Nirih's embroidery. The tears started to flow.

"What a horse-fucker."

Lily stared in shock. She had never heard of anyone talk about Sarlin that way.

“What? You are a good seamstress and you have an amazing talent for High Society. Your ability to color fabric so easily? There are dozens that would kill just be able to use any fabric or pattern and have it magically fit the season. If she can’t see that just because some cow has her ear, then she’s an idiot for not seeing her talented daughter in front of her!”

As Mindil spoke, she rose off the seat. When she finished, she sat down. Frowning for a second, she looked around and then held out her hand, palm up. “That’s an Evening Tide Curve, right?”

It didn’t surprise Lily that Mindil knew the pattern, it was one of the more elegant and popular ones. She nodded.

“Let me help.”

Lily stared for a long moment, the guilt rising up. She wanted to tell Mindil about Hasan but the words refused to come up. She didn’t want to lose her friend. “I-I should do it myself,” she said quietly.

“Horse shit. I’m decent with a needle and you need help. Don’t worry, I’ll have Hasan bring over dinner and we’ll get it done. We’ll make a party out of it.”

Lily blanched at Hasan’s name but mutely handed over the piece she was working on.

The thread dangled off Mindil’s finger for a moment as she looked it over. “You are very good,” she said before taking up the needle. “I could never get the pattern started when my mum made me do this. But once I got started, it was easy enough.”

Thankfully the topic moved away. Lily breathed a sigh of relief. She picked up the next piece of cloth and started another line of embroidery. As she did, she let color seep through the thread creating a rainbow pattern that made it easier to focus.



They worked in silence for over an hour. Lily peeked over at Mindil, struggling with the need to speak up about Hasan and also with her desire. Mindil looked beautiful, tongue sticking out from her lips as she concentrated and an easy smile on her lips. She looked so comfortable and happy just helping her.

The sight of Mindil only jammed the knife deeper into Lily's ribs. Why couldn't she resist Hasan? Why did he have to be so attentive, and loving? Why couldn't she stop him from touching her in places she craved? Even the brief nights with both Kendrick and Hasan made the longing for Hasan even worse. He was attentive and licked her in places even the Couple would forbid. Kendrick was primal and driven. Both were addictive as much as Mindil's lips.

"Was something else wrong?"

It was a soft question.

Lily blanched. "N-No."

Mindil didn't look up. She was almost done with a cuff. "Did Hasan bring you dinner?"

A stab of guilt. Lily missed her target and pricked herself again. Biting back a curse, she pulled her hand away before blood soaked into it; even if she could make the color go away, the texture would change. She brought it up to her mouth to suck on it.

There was a scuff of movement and then Mindil was kneeling on the couch next to Lily. "Let me."

Lily's heart thumped loudly. Trembling, she froze, her finger inches away from her lips. She didn't know what to do, what to say. All she could care about is how close Mindil was and how much she wanted to kiss her lips.

Mindil leaned forward and took Lily's hand. "I really did miss you."

"I-I know."

With a delicate gesture, Mindil wrapped a lace cloth around the droplet of blood. Lily started to relax but then froze as Mindil used one finger to lift the next finger over up away from her hand. Slowly, she drew it forward and kissed the tip.

An electric surge raced through Lily. It seemed to scratch and pulse all the way down to her clitoris before exploding in a tiny surge of pleasure. Inhaling with a shuddering breath, she could do nothing but stare as Mindil kissed it again and again, drawing the digit deeper into her mouth.

The softness of Mindil's lips and the heat of her body was almost too much. Mindil inched her leg further up Lily's thigh, pressing her knee against Lily's and then moving forward. Her breasts, barely contained by her dress, teased Lily as Mindil crawled closer.

Her lips never left Lily's finger. She kissed it again before drawing her finger up. "All better?" she said with a smile.

Lily nodded, unable to make the words come out.

Mindil shifted closer, straddling Lily's thighs. Her own were much thicker but soft, an enjoyable pressure as was the breasts pressed up against Lily's belly. "Anything else you'd like me to kiss?"

A surge of heat rose inside Lily. She desperately wanted Mindil to kiss everything, from her toes to her lips. "I..."

"If you are willing," Mindil said, her breath hot against Lily's throat. "I would very much like to kiss you again. I've been thinking about you a lot on this trip."

Heady with lust, Lily struggled to find some amount of willpower to stop Mindil. She was falling for the woman again and she couldn't make the betrayal worse. Tears burned in her eyes as she swam between the urge to kiss Mindil back and to crawl away fleeing.

Mindil stopped, the ghost of a frown crossing her face. Then she sat up and away from Lily.

Around her, the sounds of the street came back. It was like the soft sounds had been muted with Mindil's attention and they slowly returned to their normal levels.

A tear rolled down Lily's cheek as she watched Mindil stand up. The beautiful woman's hips rocked for a moment to straighten her dress.

Turning around, Mindil held up the other cuff. "Do you mind if I finish this at home? I'll bring it back in the morning?" To Lily's regret, Mindil didn't seem upset, only concerned.

"I... I..."

"Oh, butterfly," Mindil reached out to run her thumb along Lily's cheek. "It's always okay to say no to me. I understand."

"T-That isn't it."

Mindil watched her for a moment. Then brought her thumb across Lily's lips. "If you ever want me to kiss it again, just ask."

Lily's heart almost cracked. She didn't deserve to have a friend like Mindil. The guilt hammered into her as she watched helplessly as Mindil gathered up her things along with part of Nirih's dress, and then headed out.

She managed to keep her composure until after Mindil's carriage pulled away. Then Lily fled for the back room before her sobs began.



## A Warm Welcome

For all the positions of power, there is only two that are blessed by the Divine Couple.

—Teachings of the Couple

**T**he second time Lily returned to the harbor district, the smell wasn't quite as bad as before. It still was awful and she wished it would go away, but the rising joy in her heart held back the worst of the scents and left her looking forward to arriving at the public house.

The Martins had provided a carriage just as the sun dipped low. She was surprised to see it pull up but it was clear that Relik was interested in keeping Kendrick stable, and if that meant ferrying her across town at night, Lily was willing to go with it. Kendrick was a safe lover now, one that didn't have the burden of betraying her friend or resisting Hasan's affections.

The memory of Mindil's frown tore at her. Lily silently berated herself for not speaking up, for not being honest. She wondered if she didn't because Mindil offered to help with the embroidery or because Lily wanted to feel her kiss, but both reasons made her feel even worse about herself.

She took a deep breath. "Just... Kendrick. That's all I need."

The words were hollow as she thought about Mindil sucking on her finger or Hasan's head buried between her legs. She wanted all of them, she didn't want to choose. She wanted Kendrick's wildness, Hasan's affection, and Mindil's seduction. Three sets of mouths against her body, fingers probing every hole as she writhed between them.

Realizing her thoughts were growing more heated, Lily clamped her thighs together and tried not to think about the moisture already gathering. Her nipples peeked out of the fabric of her dress, a thicker one that could handle being drenched without being scandalous.

She forced herself to concentrate on the humor. Kendrick's mercurial nature was alluring, that much she couldn't deny. She was sitting on a carriage, anxious to return to his arms.

The carriage came to a bouncing halt. She had two bags with her, one propped against the side of the carriage to pad her from the jostling and the other with some of Nirih's dress and her embroidery. She hoped to not need the dress, but Kendrick's nature made it difficult to know if she would be abandoned in a fit. She also had enough money for a carriage home nestled near the bottom.

Heart beating quickly, Lily waited for the driver to open the door and offer his hand. She took it and stepped down, careful to avoid the puddle that had gathered along the curb.

The two men were back in their place, mugs in their hands. "Hello, Dame," one said with a nod of his head.

"Good evening for a visit." They were less mocking than before. She wondered if being drenched had anything to do with it.

She blushed. "Y-Yes. I guess."

The first one pointed to the public house. “Any chance your man cleaning up means Old Nag’s will be opening again? Me and Pol aren’t exactly welcomed over at the Spire or the Cask.”

Lily froze, her mouth opened in surprise. “My... man? Cleaning?”

“All day,” said Pol, scratching his chin underneath his beard. “He’s been scrubbing out the place since this morning. Haven’t said a thing, but I know what soap smells like even from here.”

“Old Nag would have thrown him out on his ass.”

“Old Nag made a lot of money when the dame’s lord had to buy the place. I bet she’s waist deep in pretty boys now.”

Both men shuddered, looked at each other, and then grinned at Lily.

Confused by the conversation, Lily hurried past. She didn’t know what to expect when she entered, but it wasn’t a shirtless Kendrick mopping down the floor. His scarred body was beautiful with the ridges of his muscles flexing. She could see a burn along his right shoulder and fresh, red marks from recent fighting. But, for all of the signs of damage painted on his skin, it was the way he moved that caught her attention. Even cleaning, he gave the impression of a cat hunting prey. It was primal, powerful, and utterly focused.

She stopped in shock.

Kendrick looked up with a tired grin. Setting the mop aside, he stepped over a large pile of broken glass and walked up to her. The smell of ozone and rain surrounded him like a cloud, teasing her body and drawing out more heat to dance along her skin. “Sorry the place is a mess, the maid took... a few weeks off.”

Up close, she could smell the sweat on his body and how the ozone clung to his limbs. It teased her senses as did the warmth of his body from his closeness.

He leaned against his mop, his body stretching slightly as he stared at her. "I'm glad you came back."

She stared into his eyes, losing herself in the blue for a moment. Her eyes flickered down to his lips and a longing rose up inside her. She looked away in fear that she would lurch forward to kiss him. Noticing his jeans, she did a double take when she saw small rips and tears along his legs. His bare legs, corded with muscles, were visible in the gaps of the ruined fabric.

Lily started to say something before she realized he had inched closer. It would only take the briefest of moments to reach out to press her hand against his muscular chest. She could already feel his body underneath her palm.

Her heartbeat began to drum faster. Sweat prickled her brow as she stared back into his eyes.

Kendrick sighed. "I can't describe what I want to do right now."

She let out a little whimper.

His jaw tightened, the muscles barely visible underneath his dark scruff. His feet scuffed slightly as he stepped back. "I need to finish cleaning."

Lily lurched forward. She let out a little exhalation of disappointment.

Kendrick sighed and shook his head. "I need to clean."

"Why?" it came out in more of a whine than she wanted.

He gestured to the ruined bar, his hand ended with two fingers pointed toward the broken glass. "This was supposed to be the greatest thing in my life, the prize that kept me sane for nine years. I had it in my hand, a large purse for the prize that was never on the table."



Kendrick favored her with a wink and then headed toward the broken glass. "The worst part was I was sitting at that bar thinking that everything was ruined. There was no point to anything, no reason for living, no reason for ever leaving that Couple-damned prison."

He sighed and stared at the cracked stool at the far end for a long moment. As he did, the bottles on the bar rattled for a moment before he took another deep breath. Shaking his head, he grabbed the mop and shoved a bottle toward the pile.

Lily watched him for a moment. She could see that he was struggling with his inner demons. She could press him to ask question, to force the words, but then she knew he would then just yank back. The only thing she could do was let him come around.

With a start, she realized Mindil had seen the same thing in her. The guilt and fear was no doubt burning in her eyes just like Kendrick's shadow hung over his shoulders. Lily closed her eyes tightly for a moment, trying to steel herself against the sharpness of her betrayal.

When she opened her eyes, she held out her hand. "Can I help clean?"

Kendrick shook his head. "Not this time."

"Why?"

He looked back at her, darkness pooling in his eyes. The air around him grew wetter, streamers of fogs seeping out from around his feet. "Please, I did this. I made this mistake."

Kendrick straightened his posture. He spoke again, "Please, Lily? I have to."

She nodded, her own thoughts darkening. "Yes."

Lily had to tell Mindil tomorrow.

Tears in her eyes, she looked around. She couldn't help him clean but she had to do something. Near the door, she

spotted her bags. Maybe she would need to work on the dress. With a smile, she grabbed the one with a dress in it and found a dry corner to sit down.

A few minutes later, she had the dress on her lap and her attention back on her outfit.

It only lasted twenty minutes before she looked up at Kendrick. He was struggling with the mop, using it more like a broom. She wanted to suggest he change, but kept her mouth silent. Instead, she just spent a moment watching him move, enjoying how even a mundane task like cleaning would cause his body to move like a primal creature.

She smiled and ducked her head. Concentrating, she worked her way through a few more whorls of the pattern before peeking up again.

Kendrick looked away sharply but there was a smile on his lips.

She blushed and returned to her needlework, peeking up and down every few moments. She caught Kendrick smiling at her and she grinned at the little thrill that quickened her heart.

Lily enjoyed the strange sense of peace and surrealism. Here was the man she lusted after for days, driven by her fantasies and fueled by an amazing morning. Instead of ripping each other's clothes off, they were sitting on opposite sides of a pub doing very domestic tasks.

She grinned and returned to her work.

"How is her dress going?"

Lily jumped. "W-What?"

"The teenage girl, the debutante? You've been working on it for a while."

She looked up in shock. "How did you know?"

Kendrick leaned on the broom he was using. His entire body tensed as he looked at her. "I may have some slight stalker tendencies."

She snorted and pulled the needle away. Gesturing toward his torn outfit. "I got that hint. The last time I repaired that suit of yours, you were standing in the middle of my backyard."

He grinned.

She remembered how he looked as he sat naked on the chair. Her body tingled with growing affection, the surreal feeling peeling back to a familiar ache of desire.

"I didn't stay long in that suit, did I?"

Her heart beating rapidly, she carefully set the dress down. "You tore it again."

Kendrick leaned the broom against the bar.

Lily stood up, a rush filling her. She started toward Kendrick and then stopped. Holding up two fingers, she carefully put the dress in the bag and closed it tightly. "I don't want this drenched."

Kendrick grinned and cocked his head.

She finished and came around the table. "But, as I was saying, it took me a while to fix that suit of yours. I had to steal a bunch of fabric. There is still a hole in my couch."

"I remember, I was sitting in your kitchen." He took a step toward her. "Naked."

She rocked her hips and swayed closer. "You know, I should fix it again. It looks like you've been in a few sword fights."

"I don't need swords, I never needed them," he said in a low, rumbling voice. It sent a thrill across her skin. He drew closer until he was only inches away from her.

"No, you soak the front of stores with wine."

"You hit me over the head with a bottle." He was almost whispering.

She reached up, her hand trembling. Her palm hovered over his pectoral for a moment, feeling the heat of his body.

She held herself still for only a heartbeat before spreading her fingers along the hard muscles of his chest.

A breeze rippled around her, tugging at her dress and caressing her skin. It moved unnaturally, tracing the back of her buttocks and coiling down over her thighs, knees, and then to her ankles. It left a dampness against her skin, cool and sparkling at the same time.

Lily moaned softly and inched closer. She focused on Kendrick's chest, drawing her hand along the ridges of his muscles and his scars. Underneath her touch, an electrical surge pulsed through her body. It tingled along her nipples, clitoris, and even her toes. Her breath came in soft gasps as she traced along the bottom of his pectoral muscle and then down to his ridged abdomen.

She breathed, "You are so beautiful."

"Isn't that my line?"

With a grin, she shook her head and smiled. "No, you're beautiful."

His smile brought a thrill. "And what are you?"

She glanced down for a moment, the thrill rising into a playful hunger. The front of his was ridged with his hardness. She knew exactly what strained underneath the fabric and couldn't wait to feel it sliding into her where it belongs. With a grin, she brought her hands to his waist and hooked her thumbs on his belt. "Someone who is going to fix these trousers."

"Am I'm going to be sitting naked in a chair?"

She pushed him gently toward a chair behind him. He resisted only for a moment and her breasts bumped against his chest. Her hard nipples dragged against his skin, the fabric of her dress rasping against the sensitive tips.

The moist wind slid underneath her dress, sliding up and down her inner thighs in silent encouragement.

As they approached the chair, she worked her hands to the front of his trousers. She danced her fingers along the seam, enjoying the heat and hardness of his cock underneath the fabric. The thickness felt exhilarating as did the anticipation of having it inside her soon. With years of practice, she easily undid the buttons and peeled open his pants.

His cock bounced out. The tip had soaked through the silk boxers she had sewn for him, darkening the fabric. She ran her palm along the top, smearing the slickness around as she wrapped her fingers around his heft.

Kendrick let out a low, guttural moan.

Lily looked up and smiled. She tightened her grip on his shaft and slid up and down a few times. "You like this?"

He reached up with both hands and cupped her chin. She froze in his steel-like grip, the sensation of being wonderfully trapped sending flares along her senses. With a growl of lust, he pulled her close and kissed her passionately.

Lightning arced between their lips, an intense bolt of pleasure that snapped through her body.

She jumped and gripped him tighter, grinding her hand around his thick shaft for balance. Her other hand dug into his hip, her fingernails not quite breaking skin.

He growled before he kissed her again, driving his body into hers.

Lily gasped, losing herself in the embrace until the world seemed to blur around them.

When she regained her senses, the world remained blurred behind her and Kendrick. It took her a second to realize that the main room had flooded with a thick mist that obscured everything but a hint of the bar and a shadowed wall.

Kendrick grinned and nodded to the door leading outside. "I'd rather those two guys not catch me in the buff. They'd get ideas."

"What about me?" she said, stroking his cock again.

His cock grew harder in her palm, if that was possible. "You've already caught me."

"Yes, and now that I have you, you need to get these pants off."

The hardness jumped again.

It took effort to unwrap her fingers from his hardness to grab his trousers. Pulling the fabric further apart, she pushed it down over his hips. When she reached the limits of her reach, she sank to her knees in front of him while guiding his trousers to the ground.

Kendrick released her head. Her hair slipped through his fingers, tugging on her scalp. The little tugs felt good against her skin and encouraged her to keep lowering herself to her knees.

The smell of his cock surrounded her and she licked her lips as she got a close view of the wet silk draped over his hardness. Thoughts of Hasan's mouth against her sex—and the intense pleasure that came from it—raced across her mind. She looked at his cock with new ideas; there was no doubt he would enjoy her lips against his shaft as much as she liked feeling Hasan's mouth against her clitoris.

With a moan of desire, she tugged the waistband from his body. The tip of his cock caught on the fabric and she had to pull it even further away to try clearing it. The smell of his excitement, the musky desire of a man who hungered for her, grew stronger with every passing second. She licked her lips again and tugged on the fabric, stretching it to get it eased around the swollen head.

Kendrick watched with intense eyes. His chest rose and fell with his deep breathing. Even though he didn't say a

word, she could feel the tension shaking through his body. His cock also jumped with his heart, twitching back and forth.

Lily pulled the boxers down the far side of his cock. The fabric slid down along the thick ridge, smearing precum along his darkened shaft. The band caught on the top of his black-haired balls before she pulled it free.

Seeing his naked cock in detail, since the first time was when she was bent against the wall, brought a low moan of pleasure. It was just as beautiful as the rest of him. She loved the ridges of his veins and how they glistened with his juices and the heft of his balls covered in dark hairs.

The idea of kissing his cock rose up again. It was slick and glistening but smelled good. She took a deep breath and leaned into it, parting her lips.

“Oh, Couple,” Kendrick whispered. His cock jumped in her mouth, swelling slightly until the head was smooth and shiny.

The first touch of her lips on his cock was just as electric as his lips.

He shuddered, his body tensing as his hands reached out for the side of her head but then dropped it. His cock surged against her lips, moisture painting her lips.

Lily giggled and kissed it, tasting the saltiness on her tongue. “I’ve never done this.”

He let out a low sound, it may have been words.

She kissed his cock again. The warmth caressed her lips. She licked her lips and then his head, trailing the tip of tongue along the ridge of his glans. When he moaned loudly, she was encouraged to keep going. She had to tilt her head to work her lips down the side of his shaft to his balls and back again.

“Hold the shaft,” he whispered with a cracked voice. “N-Near the base.”

Lily wrapped her hand around the base and squeezed the thick member as she opened her mouth around the top, swirling her tongue along the top. The clear liquid flooded her mouth as she tried to pull more of it into her mouth but it was too thick. She was content to soak his head with her lips before sliding down the side with her mouth.

“L... Lily...” Kendrick said with a low, guttural growl.

She looked up, her mouth still on his twitching cock. She smiled around it, enjoying how he was watching her with rapt lust.

“I can’t take much more,” he said in a low voice.

Lily pulled from him, sucking on his shaft until her lips popped. Licking her lips, she smiled broadly. “You want me to stop?”

“Yes,” he said with a moan. “If you keep going, I’m going to cum—”

She grinned wider and stroked his dripping shaft.

“—but I spent all day thinking about you impaled on my shaft.” At her surprised smile, he shrugged. “It kept me company while I was cleaning.”

Lily loved how he was using sex to distract her just as she was doing the same while embroidering.

“Well then,” she said as she stood up. With one hand still on his shaft, she pushed him back toward the chair she had been aiming for.

It only took a heartbeat until the back of his knees hit the edge. The legs of the chair scraped against the floor a few inches before he sat down. His cock slipped out of her grip before his bare buttocks smacked heavily against the top.

Lily considered stripping off her dress in a dance, to tease him further. She knew that he would love to see her drawing her dress up over her buttocks and breasts. But looking down at his cock, oozing precum and bobbing with



his rapid-beating heart, she realized he didn't need to be teased any further.

Reaching out, she straddled his hips. As soon as she got close enough, she planted one hand against his shoulder.

Kendrick grabbed her hips, guiding her up toward his cock. She felt the heated length thump against her thigh and then bounce up between the heated space between her legs. His cock head rubbed against her thong, smearing the soaked fabric with his own juices, as both of them worked to aim it toward the entrance of her sex.

Panting with need, Lily hiked her dress up enough to jam her hand between her legs. Clawing at her thong, she managed to catch her fingertips on the soaked fabric. Yanking it aside, she whimpered as she used her knuckles to guide the swollen, slick head up against her entrance.

It sank in slowly despite her slickness and the pressure of her weight driving down. His head was too wide to easily penetrate her. Instead, he impaled her with incredible pleasure, tracing out the sensitive parts of her inner walls. Her labia clung to his shaft, tracing out the thick ridges and veins with waves of pleasure.

They both moaned as she put more of her weight down on his cock, driving him deeper into her. It only took a few seconds for her to reach his base, but it felt like an eternity of being penetrated.

She held herself still, enjoying the feel of his pulse vibrating along his entire length, teasing her insides with growing pleasure.

"I've been waiting—" Kendrick started.

"Shush," she said with a smile. "I'm enjoying this."

His hands tightened on her hips. He smiled at her but said nothing.

Rocking her hips, she swirled his shaft inside her depths for a moment. Then, with a flex of her legs, she pushed up.

His cock slipped out of her inch by inch, teasing her sensitive nerves with his ridges. Even his thick cock head dragged down her inner channel, stretching her out again and sending waves of pleasure to inundate her system.

She thrust back down, impaling herself again with a smack of her inner thighs against his. She let out a gasp of pleasure and did it again, pulling herself further up before shoving down harder as she grew more accustomed to his length and girth.

Kendrick's muscles and legs tightened as he helped her move. She clamped one hand on his palm and kept the other on his shoulder. Staring into his eyes, she impaled herself repeatedly on his cock.

Lily lost herself in the pleasure, impacting with wet smacks that filled the room. With each thrust, she let out a louder moan than Kendrick mimicked with his own grunts.

He met her thrusts with ones of his own, the muscles of his legs bunching powerfully to lift his body from the chair and into her descending sex. It didn't take long before he was thrusting up into her as much as she was driving down. The connection of their bodies, his hard cock, grew hotter and slicker with every thrust.

Kendrick let out a guttural growl and released her hip to grab her breasts, digging his fingertips into the soft flesh as his thrusts grew more powerful. His powerful legs drove her completely off the ground, impaling his shaft deep into her pussy as he picked her off the ground. His face twisted with pleasure.

Her feet tapped against the ground at the same time their legs smacked together. His balls seemed to thrust up against her clitoris and labia, driving the pleasure deeper into her tightly stretched pussy with a wave.

Lily's moans of pleasure turned into short gasps. The crest of her orgasm flooded through her, taking her to an

edge that needed only the right touch to set her off. She pounded herself against his hips, taking his cock deep with rapid burst of energy.

He caught her nipple and dug his nails into her nips. Pinned in place, he slammed into her with powerful thrusts. Each one drove it deeper and deeper into her.

Lily's orgasm exploded. Pleasure coursed through her veins, wracking her with an intense wave of sensation that left her screaming out in ecstasy. She clamped down on Kendrick, thrusting repeatedly with shorter and more erratic strokes.

A liquid explosion flooded her insides. Kendrick let out a growl as he came inside her, painting her insides with his own cum as they both lost themselves in their orgasms.

The strength fled her legs and she settled down, enjoying the throb of his heartbeat deep inside. Still staring into his eyes, she rocked back and forth in slow waves, enjoying the afterglow that fluttered through her body like a thousand butterflies.

Kendrick slid his hand to cup her head again. Pulling her close, he kissed her tenderly. "You don't have to fix these clothes tonight, do you?"

She moaned and then giggled. "No."

"Good, because in about five minutes, I would like to continue this in my room."



## The Invitation

An artist survives between two bowls. In the first is the time to concentrate and sink into the heated depths. The other is the acidic virtues of conflict.

—Sadenmúsa Kanachyo, *The Painter of Blood and Ash and Sorrow* (Act 1, Scene 3)

**L**ily almost floated over the chair as she finished the last of her embroidery for Nirih's dress, her needle working steadily as she rocked against the ridge of her foot. The grinding pressure against her sore labia felt good as she smiled to herself.

It was late morning on Reldei and the world felt right. At least until she looked over at the nearly assembled dress and focused on the collar. She still hadn't removed the incorrect piece that was attached with only a few stitches. It was too low and scandalous but she was afraid of falling into a pit struggling with the perfect design instead of completing the rest of her dress.

She sighed and returned to her embroidery. Running her thumb along the delicate whorls and patterns, she smiled. The thread color was wrong but she wasn't ready to tint it

until she finished everything else. The contrasting colors, bright greens and yellows, looked better to her eyes.

Pulling herself up, she winced at the ache between her legs. Last night with Kendrick was active and enjoyable, enough to keep her smiling, but it was also sore on her nethers. It was a good sort of pain, she decided, before walked over to the dress form to attach the sleeve.

The bell on the door rang out. The door creaked as it opened.

“Good morning,” said Mindil. She spoke with a guarded voice.

Lily froze, one hand on the dress form’s shoulder and the other holding a needle. A wave of guilt slammed into her, scraping against her nerves before pooling in her gut with a sour taste. As sweat prickled her brow, she stared at the dress form and struggled with a sudden urge to race out of the room.

“Lily?”

Tears blurred her vision as she gathered up the courage to turn around. Her hand tightened on the needle, bending it with her cowardice. Taking a deep breath, she slowly turned around to face her friend.

Mindil leaned against the door, half in the store and half out. Like usual, her dress was out of season with a frilly collar and deep colors. It would have been perfect for fall with the royal reds and oranges. The material was light though, fluttering with the wind that blew in from the street. The ripples caught on the hang of her belly. Lily caught a glimpse of a black garter when the wind blew up her skirt. Mindil’s thigh was pale and curvaceous, it looked perfect for Lily to rest her head. It also looked like the perfect place to rest her head for other reasons; she wondered what Mindil would taste like underneath her tongue.

Flushed, Lily sharply looked down to avoid distracting her thoughts.

“Something wrong?”

“I... no, nothing is wrong.”

Lily turned away, berated herself mentally for not speaking up. She had to tell Mindil, she had to confess before it ate her up inside. She peeked up at Mindil who looked worried. The guilt stabbed Lily in the gut again and she looked away to avoid the sharp agony of betraying her friend.

“How was your weekend?”

Images of Hasan’s head buried between her legs flashed across her mind along with the incredible sensations of Kendrick’s cock driving deep into her body. A flicker of heat raced along her skin, quickening her breath and crinkling her nipples.

Inhaling sharply, she shook her head. She couldn’t get her lips to form the words over the overwhelming fear that Mindil would be devastated. She wiped the tears from her eyes. “It was good.”

She turned back to the dress form and grabbed her needle. Her hand hovered over the fabric, though, the storm of her emotions preventing her from doing anything. She sniffed and stared at it, silently willing Mindil to leave before Lily said the wrong thing.

The breeze continued to tease through the building, the door was still open.

Slowly, Lily looked over her shoulder at Mindil who remained in the door.

“Honey, what’s wrong?”

“I... I,” Lily choked on the words. “I think I did something terrible.”

Mindil rushed from the door, dropping her bags and opening her arms.

Lily cringed but let her friend hug her tightly.

“Oh, what happened? What your mother did? Something else?”

The tears started to fall. “No, yes. First there was mother because Juliet talked to her. But just when I got to focus, Kendrick was drinking himself to death and I had to do that and then I... I...” Lily babbled but it trailed off as she almost came to confessing herself. Guilt and fear stopped her, she didn’t want to lose Mindil.

“Oh, honey,” breathed Mindil. She ran her thumb underneath Lily’s eyes, wiping away the tears. “Your mother and Juliet are a problem. But this Kendrick? Was he really that bad?”

Despite her fear and guilt, Lily shook her head and found a bashful smile.

“See, not everything is entirely bad. Was he fun?”

Lily nodded.

“Well,” Mindil said with a smile. “I really want to hear how that turned out.”

“Really?”

The curvy woman leaned forward until they were only inches away. Her large breasts rested lightly against Lily’s. “Of course. I would never get in the way of you having fun.”

Lily trembled underneath Mindil’s touch.

“Though, I’m also hoping that you still have a little bit for me.” Her lips curled into a smile. “A certain kiss has kept me company for quite a few days. I’m hoping to continue yesterday’s welcome.”

Blushing, Lily nodded.

Mindil lifted herself up and brought her lips to Lily’s. It was a light, electrical touch between them. It stole Lily’s breath as she found herself transfixed by the kiss, a moment when her body and mind were stunned by the caress.

When she broke it, Mindil stepped back. “There we go. I like to see your smile.”



“T-Thank you.” Lily smiled, feeling better about herself despite the guilt still gnawing at her stomach.

“How about lunch? Hasan is going to pick me up after shopping and I’d love to just chat.” She grinned. “You know, without distracting your work.”

Lily froze again, staring at Mindil.

“I’ll bring the carriage around noon? Maybe fifteen minutes before?”

Unable respond intelligently, Lily just nodded slowly.

Mindil beamed happily and kissed her again. “I can’t wait.”



## Confession

A meal plagued by guilt and regret is nothing more than ash on the tongue.

—Juliet dea Gavin, *Tears of My Father's Sister*

By the time the carriage stopped in front of Decon Eur's restaurant, Lily was tempted to lock the door and pay the driver twenty jems to drive away. Sweat prickled her skin and fear caused her heart to beat faster. She didn't know if she wanted to fold her hands in her lap or tug on the sides of her corset. She glanced out the window, at the crowded store front, and then back to the seat.

She couldn't do it. She couldn't confess sleeping with Hasan. She knew she needed to, the imperative to do so was clear in her mind, but the words refused to rise up even as she tried to practice them. "Mindil, I..." she whispered to herself while trying to imagine how her friend would respond.

She sighed and shook her head. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

The door creaked open "Ku—Bedame dea Kasin?"

Trapped and out of time to practice, Lily could only take the offered hand. "Thank you."

Like most dining establishments at noon, the outside tables were all crowded with the upper middle class mingling with High Society. Even as someone who spent years on the edge of Society, Lily could identify most of the couples that went to the same parties with her when she was younger. They were almost friends many years ago, but time had separated them and she felt a gulf had formed. They were married, apparently happy, and living their lives as members of High Society. She was a kudame, one step away from being cast off.

She fought her tears as she ducked her head and headed toward the doors. A ripple of silence followed after her and she could see looks shot in her direction. Humiliated, she slammed into the door; it didn't open at first and she had to fumble with it before she managed to pry it open.

Inside, she slammed the door behind her and leaned against it. Panting, she managed to slow her heart before she looked up.

The diners inside were still looking at her curiously. Their gazes were intense, easily penetrating the thin fabric of her sun dress and making her feel like they were staring at her naked body.

A burning flush rose up on her cheeks. She clutched her hands to her sides tightly. She didn't know where to look to avoid the staring gazes.

"Lily!"

Mindil came bounding up. She still wore the same dress as before, the reds completely out of place among the flowered dresses of yellows and greens. Lily could see the women around her judging as much as they were glaring at her wide hips and large breasts, a stark contrast the delicate doll appearance that High Society preferred.

Then, one by one, everyone looked away as if she no longer existed. Eyes slid to the side, conversations stalled as people stared at each other. In a matter of seconds, Mindil went from the center of attention to being invisible with Lily disappearing with her.

Mindil swept Lily into a tight hug, grinding her body up against her. "I was so afraid you wouldn't come."

The guilt slammed into her. She glanced away. "I... couldn't say no."

No one was looking at them, not through the glass doors of the restaurant or inside the place. They were in a pool of silence as conversations began to slowly rise up around them.

"Come on," Mindil said cheerfully. She slipped an arm around Lily's waist and tugged her toward the back of the restaurant. "I got a little table in the back, away from all of these people and their judging stares." She gestured to the dozens of people ignoring both of them.

"How are you doing this?"

Mindil grinned. "My talent. No no one will pay attention to me if I don't want them to."

"You mean you could do anything and they wouldn't notice?"

"Like strip naked in public? I used to do that as a teenager all the time." Mindil's grip around Lily's waist tightened for a second as she bumped their hips. "It was making dares too easy though."

Lily gasped. "You did? And you didn't get caught?"

Mindil grinned wildly. "Maybe...?"

Something pricked Lily's thoughts. She bumped Mindil back and grinned. "Then why did you and Hasan get caught fucking on the table?"

Mindil stumbled. "You remembered that story?"

Lily nodded.

“Well,” Mindil rolled her eyes. “I might have wanted to get caught that time. Not to mention it gets really hard to use my talent when being eaten out. He is exceedingly good at that.”

Lily’s ears burned in a different way.

Mindil started to say something else but they reached her table. It was a small one nestled behind another trellis and screened from the majority of the restaurant. Hasan sat on one side, toying with a knife as he stared at the opposite end of the table. He looked up sharply and then a broad smile crossed his face.

“Lily,” he breathed.

Shoving his chair back, he surged to his feet and stumbled toward her.

Lily froze, hesitating with a response. She shot a guilty look at Mindil but then Hasan was sweeping her up in a hug of his own. In seconds, she was wrapped in his arms, breathing in the scent of his body not unlike the night they spent together. Heat rose inside her and her skin tingled as she sank into his embrace.

Slowly, she looked up as he gazed into her eyes.

A flash of heat rose inside her. It would be so easy to just embrace him and let their secret continue, to fuck when Mindil was out of town or not watching.

But she couldn’t do it. She couldn’t lie to Mindil, she couldn’t betray her. She turned her head away and gently pushed him away.

Hasan resisted for a moment, then relaxed. His hands trailed along her shoulders, leaving tingling lights of pleasure behind, before he stepped back with a sad look on his eyes.

She glanced at him, the guilt rising, and then sat down in a chair.

Mindil, apparently unaware of the interchange between Lily and Hasan, sat down next to Lily. Her shoulder brushed against Lily's. "You'll love their soup and they have the best Chanis sandwiches this side of the desert."

Lily nodded curtly. "Sounds good."

Mindil held up her hand and snapped her finger. There was a twist of the air and a sense of a veil being pulled away. It rippled through the crowds, spreading out in a wave that flooded the inside of the building in less than a second.

Two waiter's jumped and looked directly at Mindil.

She held up her menu.

They rushed over.

Behind them, Lily caught sight of sly looks aimed in her direction. She had seen it a thousand times over the years, the subtle art of watching intently through casual glances and repositioning of the body. They were watching the three of them.

She turned away to catch Hasan staring at her. Unlike the subtle glances, his gaze was an intense beam of lust and desire. She could feel his eyes against her naked skin and it sent flutters of lust coursing along her body. Heat pooled between her legs, reminding her how intense he made love to her.

Lily couldn't look away.

"I want this, and this, and this. Oh, and definitely this." Mindil was trailing a finger down the menu.

"Small portions as usual, Tadame Kasin?"

Mindil made an agreeing noise.

Lily's attention was piqued. She had always noticed that Mindil was always bringing in food into the shop but she only vaguely noticed that Mindil rarely took more than a bite before setting the rest of it down.

Mindil gasped. "Oh, will the cook still make those yummy fruit cakes. The ones with the peels?"

"For you, Tadame, we will serve everything."

"Two of those, one for my husband and one for my lovely companion. She'll love the candied lemons."

The waiter nodded and gracefully took the menu away to send in her order.

Lily found the strength and curiosity to break gazes with Hasan.

Mindil smiled at her. Reaching out, she slipped her hand around Lily's palm. "I missed you," she said.

Struggling with her emotions, Lily glanced one more time at Hasan and then around at the women stealthily watching them from other tables. She could spy the sideways glances and the way they leaned toward them. There was a faint prickle of magic in the room, gathering as Mindil, Lily, and Hasan became the center of the attention. As the pressure built, she closed her fingers along Mindil's and ran her finger along Mindil's index finger.

Mindil glanced around at the women Lily had noticed. Her eyes narrowed. "I could do without the rest of these ladies though. Every time I drop the silence, they are there listening. It doesn't matter how far or how quiet you are, they are listening."

Lily thought back to her order. "Your order?"

Mindil cocked her head and grinned sheepishly. "I really like the different flavors. Of course, they see that I'm fat—"

"You aren't that—" Lily started.

"Love," interrupted Mindil. "I'm fat. It's okay. I know it and Hasan knows it."

Lily glanced over.

Hasan grinned and shook his head. "I love you, Min."

Mindil reached over with her other hand and stroked his hand. "Nothing wrong with being fat, except for those Soci-



ety cows. So I like different tastes and flavors. I order a bit of everything to enjoy that and just ignore the horses when they assume I'm devouring plate after plate."

"Love, you are going down the path," Hasan said in a low voice.

Mindil stopped speaking for a moment. Then she smiled brilliantly as she looked at Lily.

Slowly, the veil sensation draped over the restaurant. One-by-one, the gazes slid away. Women lifted themselves slightly to adjust their position, turning away from Lily and Mindil.

Lily glanced around again, thankful they weren't looking anymore.

Her friend spoke wistfully, "You know what it is like as a debutante. You starve yourself to fit into the dress, shove up your tits to attract some husband's attention, and then spend the rest of your life trying to keep that look for as long as you can. My mum wouldn't let me eat for a week before my presentation. I got water and wine and nothing else."

Lily remembered those days. Her mother had done the same thing, she could still taste the flowered wine that was rumored to keep women beautiful forever. It was one of the many traditions of being a debutante.

Mindil ran her fingers along Lily's palm, the light touch was electric against Lily's skin. "Of course, you managed to do that naturally. You are just as beautiful as the day I saw you at your presentation. You stole our hearts away, you know."

Lily blushed and smiled back. It helped temper the growing guilt inside her.

"When Hasan came in my life, I was so happy that he let me do my thing. He didn't mind these being so big," she grabbed her breasts and hefted them.

Lily's attention drew to the hands squeezing the soft mounds. She wanted to reach out and do the same thing, to let the heavy softness roll in her palm. She could almost feel the hard nipples teasing her fingers as she brought them up to her lips.

"Nor did he mind having a large ass planted on his face. In fact, he loves me for who I am without question." Mindil's attention shifted to Hasan. "He's probably the best husband I could ever ask for."

The knife twisted harder and Lily had trouble breathing.

Her gaze returned to Lily. "But then... are you crying?"

Lily looked up, tears burning in her eyes. "I-I'm sorry."

Mindil tightened her grip on Lily's fingers. Leaning forward, she asked "For what?"

Lily tried to pull them away but couldn't.

"Lily, you can tell me."

"I didn't mean to. He was so nice and he wanted me and... and..." She glanced at Hasan who had paled. She looked down at Mindil's hand gripping her own. "I spent the night with Hasan. I'm sorry."

"The night. All night?"

The tears splashed down. "I know I shouldn't have, but he was there and I... I tried to resist and I couldn't. I really tried and I'm so sorry."

She glanced up to see Mindil's lips pressed into a tight line. The muscles in her neck tensed as did the lines along her jaw.

A sob rose in Lily's throat. "Mindil, I-I... I'm so sorry."

Mindil turned and looked at Hasan.

He cleared his throat and looked away.

"Has? How could you?" Her voice was hard and tense, forced out like a punch.

Hasan opened his mouth, but no sound came out. Lily stared as his lips moved and he gestured with his hands.

Surprised, she looked back at Mindil who was also speaking without sound. Unlike Hasan, her gestures were violent and angry.

With a start, Lily realized that she had just been excluded from their conversations. The only thing she could do was watch as Mindil screamed at Hasan in mute silence.

The guilt rose to choke Lily. She had ruined it, destroyed a friendship that she had grown into and also lost a man who adored her. All because she couldn't keep control of her lusts. She looked down and let out a cry, sobbing as the tears rolled down her cheeks.

The table jumped underneath her, the thud shaking the ground. Mindil lifted her fist and pounded it again, screaming silently at Hasan.

Hasan stood there, his face pale. He would look away but then snap his head back to look at Mindil as she continued to pound the table.

Choking on her sobs, Lily glanced around. No one was looking at her, Mindil's talent was hiding her from the scandal. Glancing back at the fighting couple, she realized she had to leave. Then, they could go their separate ways and forget how Lily had ruined their relationships.

Grabbing her things, Lily pushed herself away from the table and fled. She stumbled around the corner and into the main restaurant. Unsure of how far away Mindil's magic would protect her, she wiped the tears from her face and kept her head low.

Seconds later, she was rushing down the street, trying to get away before the sobs started again.



## Confrontation

While women rarely fight with knives, the words they wield and the snubbing they employ are far more devastating than any blade.

—Xarmiv da Lam ne Robin

**Lily's** eyes ached from her crying as she struggled to finish up Nirih's dress. There was only a few parts left until she was done. It should have been a moment of relief but she felt broken instead. Listlessly, she finished sewing a shimmering panel along the waist, her needle working in quick flashes as she secured it with a double row of stitches.

Except for the collar, the remaining pieces were relatively simple and didn't tax her at all. She focused on them, finishing element after element with neat work that brought no joy to her as she connected it to the dress.

To keep from distractions, she had moved all the other dresses out of the back room and closed the door. That way, no one would get the impression anyone was in the store as she focused. She wasn't in the mood for anyone: Kendrick, Juliet, or even her mother.

After a pause to sip from her wine glass, she grabbed the third to last piece and fitted it along the design. It was an expensive, shimmering fabric from the eastern countries; the delicate fabric had a faint cream glow that lit up along her fingers as she shaped it to fit. The material costs a thousand jems a square yard but she only needed a few narrow strips for accenting the embroidery.

The bell on the door rang out, a few jingles before silencing.

Lily closed her eyes for a moment. She wasn't up to talking to anyone, much less fighting with Juliet who no doubt was anxious to see her daughter's dress completed.

"Lily?"

At Mindil's voice, a sob rose up in Lily's throat. The fabric in her hand fluttered as she looked fearfully at the door leading to the storefront. As much as she hated it, she'd rather deal with Juliet's abuse than face a furious Mindil. Fear rushed through her veins and she spun around, looking for some way of escaping the inevitable fight.

Spotting the door to her stash, she dropped the glowing fabric and rushed toward it. Her fingers slipped on the handle. Crying, she grabbed it with both hands and yanked it open, stumbling inside, before closing it as quickly as she could. The wood thumped against the frame and she winched at the noise.

The smells of the stash flooded around her, a comforting scent that used to bring a smile to her lips. Her sobs were muted by the folded fabric around her. Pressing one hand against her mouth to quiet herself, she backed away from the door in hopes that Mindil wouldn't think to look inside.

Her heart pounded in her ears as she continued to back away, past the shimmering wards protecting the fabric and the thousand smells that blended into an indescribable perfume. Her eyes remained locked on the door, a tiny sliver of

light along the bottom and a crack near the top the only brightness in the narrow chamber.

Seconds seemed to stretch into minutes. With no clocks in the darkened room, the only measure of time was the soft sobs ravaging her through and the rapid beats of her heart. Her vision blurred with her tears as she silently willed Mindil to leave her store.

The door cracked open.

Lily clutched her hand tight across her mouth and a wail rose up.

“Are you in here, Lily?” Mindil asked as she stepped inside holding the strip of glowing fabric. The cream fabric lit up her red dress, giving her a rose-colored halo as she stood in the entrance.

Lily slowly sank to her knees. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” she said in a muted cry.

“Oh, Lily, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

It took Lily a moment to realize that Mindil wasn’t yelling. She sounded strangely calm. Terrifying calm, actually.

Mindil had to turn slightly to squeeze down the narrow corridor between the fabrics. Where Lily could walk down down the narrow space barely touching the sides, Mindil’s stomach and breasts tugged at the fabric as she worked her way down.

Lily’s heart pounded faster, slamming against her ribs. She clutched herself and tried to look away but there wasn’t anything to look at except at the mostly empty shelves next to her. It gave her a little more breathing room, but not much else.

Unable to find some excuse for looking at wooden shelves, she looked back.

Mindil was only a few feet away, looking down at her. “You can talk to me, right?”

Sobbing, Lily shook her head. "I'm sorry, I'm so—"

"Lily," Mindil said. "It's okay."

"But—"

"It's okay."

Lily pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around. "I—"

Mindil held out her hands and made a down gesture. "Lily, I'm not mad."

Opening her mouth to respond, Lily realized she didn't have any words. She closed it slowly. Her nose was running from her crying and she sniffed.

Mindil smiled and held up the glowing fabric. It lit up her smile and shimmering eyes. She folded it over and then set it on top of one of the many piles of cloth. "This stuff is expensive, you probably shouldn't leave it on the floor."

Lily watched cautiously, her breath still coming in choked sobs.

"Oh, poor girl." Mindil reached out and caught Lily's chin. The electric surge was there, dancing along Lily's skin. Mindil ran her thumb underneath Lily's eye, wiping away the tears. "You are so scared. You don't have to be, I promise."

"M-Mindil?"

"You ran away before I had a chance to talk to you," whispered Mindil.

"I'm—"

Mindil moved her thumb to silence Lily. With a smile, she leaned forward. "Lily, I really want to kiss you right now. I've always wanted to do it, but right now, I so desperately want to kiss you."

"I..." Fear fought with a sudden desire. Then Lily nodded. "Yes."

Mindil's smile grew brighter as she leaned forward. Their lips touched, a warmth spreading across Lily in a flash. It



was soft and delicate and loving instead of the hatred she expected.

Lily gasped and trembled, unsure of how to respond. Her lips parted slightly as she let herself be pinned against a shelf support with nothing more than a kiss holding her down. She felt heated and helpless at the same time, an intoxicating sensation that stole her breath away.

She let her feet slide along the floor until she was stretched out. The feeling of being vulnerable increased, adding a flickering heat to the passion already growing. A soft moan rose up as she reached for the woman leaning over her. Her hands caught Mindil's hips and she clutched to the softness like an anchor.

Mindil released Lily's chin and planted her hand on a shelf before leaning further into Lily. The intensity of their kiss increased with the pressure. Waves of heat and tingling traced the lines of her limbs and adding to the ache that radiated from her nipples, neck, and between her legs. She was hot and slick already, the raw emotions somehow magnified by their closeness.

Mindil eased herself down with a muted grunt. One knee slid on the side of Lily's leg but then the other straddled it.

The fabric of Lily's dress stretched tight over her leg, pinned by Mindil's weight. Held down even further, Lily broke the kiss with a gasp. She panted as she looked into the shadowed face of her friend.

"Hi there," said Mindil, pushing her hair over her ear.

"H-Hi."

Mindil's smile seemed to light up the cramped quarters. "I would like to kiss you again. Do you mind?"

Lily nodded, not trusting her voice. Then she realized it was the wrong answer. "N-No," she whispered. "I want another."

Reaching out with her other hand, she slid it behind Lily's neck and held it firmly as she came closer. Her fingers were soft but insistent as she spread her legs and settled her thick thighs over Lily's. Moments later, Lily felt her friend's belly press against her stomach and then her breasts against her own. Mindil's soft breath washed over her, it tasted of wine and sweets.

This time, there was a new insistence as their lips caressed against each other. The touch wasn't a gentle tingling as before, but more of an overwhelming pressure, a hungry need. Her grip on the back of Lily's neck tightened as she tilted her head and opened her mouth.

Trembling, Lily lost herself. She arched her back to lift her breasts up against Mindil's larger ones, enjoying the soft pressure and hard nipples against her skin. Her lips parted for Mindil's tongue even though she had never kissed anyone like that before. It was exhilarating to have Mindil slipping past her lips, the tongue exploring and swirling inside.

Lily moaned into the embrace. She slid her hands up Mindil's side. Her fingers traced along the rolls of fat up until she could bring her palms to cup Mindil's large breasts. Her lover's nipples were hard against her thumbs, rubbing them caused Mindil's breath to quake and a shiver to shake her frame.

Lily tried to lift a leg, just to test her bondage, but found that she couldn't. It was erotic to have her body pinned: breasts holding her against the shelf, a knee between her legs pinning her to the ground, and even the hand on the back of her neck that would let her break the kiss but not slip away. Each one added to the flames boiling inside her.

Mindil broke the kiss with a soft giggle. "I can't tell you how much I was thinking about this?"

"Kissing me in my closet?" Lily grinned.

Mindil bit her lower lip. "Not just kissing though. I always thought this would make a really soft place to do something." She pulled her hand back to trail her knuckles along Lily's ear. "I bet this place would also mute certain noises."

Mindil inched her knee further up, prying Lily's legs apart. "I always wondered if you were a screamer."

A surge of heat filled Lily. The shifting fabric dragged along her sex, reminding her of how slick she was from the kissing.

"So, are you one?" Mindil asked quietly as she kissed Lily's lips, and then on the chin, and then trailed her lips along Lily's neck. The sensitive spot brought more heat and electrical surges.

Lily inhaled sharply, her body trembling. A low moan rose in her throat, scraping against the soreness from hours of crying but no less pleasurable.

"Oh, not quite the answer but I'll find out soon enough." Her hand reached up to cup Lily's breast, catching the hard nipple between her fingers. She dug her fingers into the soft flesh.

Lily inhaled sharply. She lifted her body into Mindil, desperate for more but also losing herself on the pleasure coming from the soft lips against the sensitive part of her neck. "Oh, Couple," she breathed.

"Closer," Mindil said with a grin. She clawed at the front of Lily's dress, dragging her nails through the thin fabric. The buttons behind Lily strained from Mindil's effort to get to her.

Lily reached up herself to cup Mindil's breasts again. Unlike her own outfit, it only took the slightest tug to pull the soft material away from the softer flesh underneath. She had never touched another woman in the same way, but she knew how much she loved having her nipples clawed

at. Mimicking Mindil's pawing at her chest, she dragged her fingernails along Mindil's skin and caught the puffy nipples.

"Oh," gasped Mindil against Lily's neck. Her mouth clamped wetly against the skin as she ground her body up against Lily's while clawing at the fabric caught between their bodies.

Lily kissed Mindil's neck.

"Lily?" moaned Mindil. "Suck my nipples. Please?"

The world spun around Lily as she considered doing something new. The same sensation came with a rush of excitement and desire. Slowly, she ran her lips down the front of Mindil's breasts, lifting up the heavy mounds at the same time to bring the puffy nipples to her lips.

"Oh, Couple," moaned her lover.

Lily rolled the sensitive flesh along her tongue and lips. Every time she sucked, Mindil would moan. Encouraged, she ran her hands along Mindil's wide hips and down to her thighs. They were wider than her hands, but no less beautiful as she sucked harder and faster.

Mindil cried out.

Not entirely sure what she was doing, Lily drew her mouth to Mindil's other breast as her hands continued down until she felt the hem of her lover's dress. With a grin, she drew the fabric up and enjoyed the feel of soft skin. The smell of a woman's excitement, sweeter than her own but just as intoxicating, rose around her as she tugged the fabric higher.

The sound of ripping fabric filled the stash closet as Mindil's fingers caught a seam. She shoved her hand into the tear to grab Lily's sensitive breasts, squeezing and mauling with desperate passion.

Swooning from the pleasure, Lily brought her hands up between Mindil's thighs. Her questing fingers found a roll

of Mindil's belly. To her surprise, she didn't find herself repulsed by it but only encouraged by the heat underneath, Trailing her finger along the curve, she found the soaked curls of hair caught underneath and followed them to the furrow of her lover's pleasure. It was slick and hot.

Her touch brought an intense moan of pleasure from Mindil.

Remembering how she pleased herself, Lily worked her fingers past the thick folds of her lover's labia to the wet, soaked insides. It only took a heartbeat to find Mindil's clitoris and rub her finger around it, teasing it with her fingernail.

Her lover gasped and broke her mouth away from Lily's neck to draw in a shuddering breath. "Suck harder," she mewed.

Lily obeyed, sucking with all her might as she lapped at the nipple caught in her mouth. At the same time, she added a second finger to her lover's entrance, moving her entire arm into thrusting deeply. She curled her digit to plunge into the wet hole she found, enjoying how Mindil's entire body tense with every thrust.

Mindil's moans grew louder, beating against the stacks of fabric.

"I don't know what I'm doing," whispered Lily.

"Could have fooled me," gasped Mindil. "Please don't stop."

Mindil's fingers tore Lily's dress further open, ripping it wide so she could jam her other hand into the ruined fabric. Shoving down, she trailed her finger along Lily's belly and further below.

The pressure of their bodies grinding together made it impossible to get their fingers and limbs in all the right places. Lily continued to suck and stroke, twisting as much

as she could to guide Mindil to where she wanted to be touched.

Mindil drew back with a sigh. "This is..." she gasped, "better on a bed."

Lily released the nipple in her lips. "Then let me finish."

She increased the tempo of her fingers, sliding back and forth before plunging two fingers into the slick opening.

Mindil cried out.

No other words were said as Lily continued to stroke until her fingers hurt but the cries never stopped. Mindil thrust her hips against Lily's fingers with short, powerful movements, guiding and thrusting back.

The moisture soaking Lily's hand grew hotter and wetter.

Mindil suddenly ground her body tight against Lily as her cries rose into a high-pitched scream. Juices poured out of her, flooding Lily's palm and dripping down her wrist. Her orgasm carried into long seconds of pleasure, surrounding both of them with the sweet smell of a woman's pleasure to blend with the many perfumes already there.

Panting, Mindil slumped against Lily and then rolled to the side. She supported herself against the stack of fabric. "Fuck," she said with a giggle, "I love you."

Lily panted happily herself. Her body still hummed with the need for her own orgasm but seeing Mindil happy left her with an intense glow. She hadn't ruined everything.

With tears in her eyes, she leaned over and kissed Mindil. "Thank you."

Mindil's thighs clamped around Lily's fingers as she kissed Lily back. "This is the way it was supposed to be."

"What went wrong?"

"Hasan," breathed Mindil. "He should have told you that you were on the list."

Lily drew back, confused. "List?"

Mindil rolled her eyes. “A silly thing we started years ago. Who are the ten people we would have sex with despite being married, no matter what? I had ones like Vinor Masaratin and Dougal Makran. He has Genifar and Kariul.”

“Vinor the cello player?” Lily smiled.

“Have you seen those fingers of his? I also have a thing for black-haired beauties with just the right amount of chest hair.”

Lily grinned and flicked her trapped digits in the tight channel wrapped around them.

Mindil’s eyes rolled up. “Your fingers are better though. I can feel those.”

“I was on Hasan’s list?”

“You were on both of ours.” Mindil said. “You always were.”

Lily blushed and kissed Mindil. “Thank you.”

“However, Hasan should have told you that it was okay. That’s the point, you should have never thought you were cheating on me with him. I mean, I was hoping to be the first to have you here, but I wasn’t upset that he had his chance.”

“I... I worried that I ruined everything for days.”

“He should have said something. He knew that. He’s good at knowing exactly what you want but not so much when his own obsessions are driving him. It’s that damn talent of his, he get distracted easily.”

Lily smiled. “I’m glad you don’t hate me.”

“Hate you? I will never hate you. Has should have made sure you knew that.”

Mindil suddenly grinned before she continued. “He needs to be reminded to speak up.” Mindil said with a grin. “Want to spend the night with us? I’m sure he can apologize properly with his tongue.”

The idea of having Hasan and Mindil in her bed brought a surge of lust. She already knew what Hasan's tongue felt like on her sex; her hips rose with the memory.

Mindil kissed her. "I bet I can make him kiss your pretty ass. He's really good with his tongue. Trust me, there are places there that will make you cum just right."

Lily squirmed.

"I want to see his cock inside you so badly."

The growing pleasure sputtered. "I... I have to see Kendrick tonight."

"The guy you were telling me about? The water mage?"

Lily finally drew her fingers from Mindil's pussy. She rubbed them together, enjoying the slickness. Unsure how to answer, she nodded.

"Think he likes guys?"

Lily did a double take. "W-What?"

Mindil squirmed for a minute before leaning back. Her hair looked black with the light behind her. "Hasan really is into backsides: touching, fucking and licking."

Lily flushed at the idea of Hasan licking between her legs. His finger sliding along her sphincter felt good.

"He even takes it himself. Over the years, I've been using this fake cock but been threatening to have a real guy do it for years."

Lily's head swam. Mindil and the others kept finding new ways to expand her horizons. She wondered how it would look, one man fucking another. Her curiosity and lust rose up and she had to squirm herself with the fresh wave of moisture that soaked her clothes. She had no clue how to even ask.

"I don't mind being on top now and then," Kendrick said from the entrance of the stash.



Both Lily and Mindil let out a scream as they stared at the man standing silhouetted in the door. The light from the glowing fabric next to him lit up his grin.

He leaned to the side. "Though, I don't think I could ever bottom for that man."



## Negotiations

A long-lasting relationship cannot be built in the heat of passion, it must be anchored in a foundation of trust and communication.

—Jator Marisaf-Punasar

**With** a blush on her cheeks, Lily finished pouring the third glass of Cauten 94. A few wisps of condensation rose up from the fruity blush wine. She set the chilled bottle back into the vase with a tiny cooling rune on the bottom before picking up the three glasses and carrying them into the front room of the store.

Kendrick took his. He still wore his black suit. That wasn't out of place but he had obviously washed it. She caught the scent of the same soap from the shower area. His outfit was damp in a few places, but she couldn't tell if it was from the shower or his own magic.

Mindil plucked hers from Lily's other hand before settling back into one of the small couches Lily had in her store front. One leg was hooked up, the fabric bunched at her hip to reveal her soaked panties. The look she gave Lily sent a shiver of desire down her spine.

Lily hesitated as she tried to decide where to sit. Both Kendrick and Mindil were on the two small couches. She had room to sit next to either one but she didn't know which one. It felt like she was on the cusp of some decision, one she hoped to never make.

Unwilling to choose, she grabbed a chair and pulled it to the front of them, positioning herself between two of the loves in her life.

Kendrick chuckled and leaned back, stretching one arm across the back of the couch. The muscles of his arms pulled the fabric taut, highlighting the cords of his strength. Her body grew warmer as she remembered nestling into those very arms while he made love to her on his makeshift bed.

Turning away, she blushed even hotter. "Sorry."

"For what?"

"I... I..." She didn't want to admit she couldn't choose between either of them. Or for wanting Hasan either, now that she was given permission.

"Nothing."

Lily's eyes trailed over to Mindil who slowly lifted one leg, hooking it as she pressed it against the back of the couch. The fabric of her skirt, already disheveled, slid up her thigh to reveal more of the wet patch on her panties. A few damp hairs stuck out of the elastic, reminding Lily that her fingers were there only a few minutes ago.

None of them said anything.

The seconds passed by in awkward silence.

Lily didn't know how to address it. She could catch whiffs of Mindil's pussy drifting around her when she sipped her wine, the sweet taste was caught on her fingers. At the same time, she didn't know how to explain or even respond to Kendrick's wry response.

She cleared her throat. "I... um..." Her blush grew hotter.

Mindil raised an eyebrow and gave a slight, imperceptible nod toward Kendrick.

Relieved, Lily nodded.

“So, Kendrick, you into boys?”

Kendrick’s eyes never left Lily’s face. “Not the first thing I look for in the morning, but I’ve had a few years to try it out.”

“In the jail?” Mindil said with a purr. Her legs ground together.

Kendrick finally looked away and smiled. “We had a lot of time to kill. There are some entertainment that is cheap and easy. It was either that or playing dice or reading one of the three books.”

Mindil’s lips parted with surprise as she froze. She obviously was thinking something else.

Kendrick grinned. “Though, I’m not sure you really want Hasan and me in the same bed.”

“Why not?” Lily said sharply.

Kendrick’s attention returned to her, his eyes probing. “I’m still a little bitter.” He sighed and looked down at his glass. “On the other hand, I had a lot of time to think about you and what I’ve done.”

“You think Hasan should have won?”

Kendrick snorted and shook his head. “He’s always been pushy, more than I wanted. I’ve been stubborn and ass-headed. I think neither one of us would have been a good husband for Lily back then.”

He glanced up at Lily.

Lily smiled back, the fluttering in her heart rising up. “And now?”

“It’s your choice. Now and forever.”

“Really?” asked Mindil.

“If Lily says no, I’ll get up and leave.”

“And won’t regret it.”

Kendrick turned his head toward her. "I didn't say that. She's the only reason I haven't taken up the Mar... a job offer." He toyed with the glass.

"A job? One for a man of High Society?"

Lily held up her hand. "Min, you don't—"

"It's okay," said Kendrick. He sighed for a moment. "I was helped out of prison by the Martins. In exchange, they offered me a job as a weather man on their ships. It would be a few months out to sea, and then a few months back, probably for our lives."

"Well," Mindil said smiling into her glass as she sipped it. "We'd be willing to keep your wife... Lily company."

Lily found that she didn't mind the idea of being Kendrick's wife. The surge of heat that followed surprised her. She bashfully looked at Kendrick. Seeing his stern face, the flickers of desire cooled down instantly. She knew that accepting the job also meant that they wouldn't be considered in Society anymore. They may be at the upper edge of middle class, but still below the sharp edge that identified High Society.

Kendrick's gazed matched her own. She found herself staring into his blue eyes, wondering if he was considering the same thing.

A different type of silence flooded through the room.

"You are beautiful," he said.

"So are you," she responded.

She lost herself as she imagined what it would be like to live with him, to lose the trapping of High Society. Would they live above the bar, where he is now? Would her mother cease to speak to her? What about the loans for the store? A thousand different paths raced through her head, twisting her stomach but also elating her.

“Wait,” Mindil said. “How could you work for the Martins and still be Society... oh...” Her voice trailed off. “You wouldn’t, would you?”

Kendrick broke his gaze with Lily. “No. I’d have to give up all this.” He gestured down to his black suit and the glass of wine in his hand. The smell of ozone rippled across the room.

“Lily’s father won’t let you marry his daughter if you aren’t Society, you know that.”

Lily tensed, she hadn’t thought of that.

“Even if she becomes a kudame, her bracelet still has value. Gainik Kasin will always see her for that, his pride, and hopes for any child she breeds.” Mindil sighed. “Same thing all fathers want.”

It had been a long time since she heard her father’s name. Ever since the fire at Manor Rose, he had left her life completely. Even the loan was from her mother.

“Hence my struggles.” Kendrick’s voice was sullen.

Mindil finished off her glass and set it down delicate on her knee. The bare skin trembled as she scooted it closer to her hip, revealing far more to the room than any proper lady should.

Lily glanced at the window but then realized Mindil was using her powers to ensure no one would see her forbidden position, not unless she wanted them too.

Turning back, she regarded the two, friends and lovers. “What do we do?”

“Well,” Mindil said, “first we get rid of that horse-fucker, Juliet. Which means you need to focus on getting that dress perfect.”

“Yes, but—”

“And,” she sighed, “I can’t believe I’m saying this but it also probably means you shouldn’t be distracting yourself

with mind blowing sex.” She grinned. “I assume that dark and handsome over there is just as good as me?”

Lily’s ears burned. She ducked her head but smiled. Pee-king up, she looked at Kendrick who shook his head in amusement.

Seeing her looking at him, he shrugged. “She is forward.”

“Damn the Couples, of course I’m forward. I’ve been lust-ing after her almost as long as you. I want to make sure she’s happy and focused when I convince her to eat me out.”

Lily’s mouth opened in surprise.

Mindil grinned. “I also want to stick it to that cow who makes her life miserable. You should have seen her lording it up in here.”

“I have.”

“Oh, well, she deserves it. And the best way is to make something she couldn’t lull about. You, my talented little seamstress, need to make something amazing.”

Encouraged, Lily nodded. “I think I can.”

“No,” Kendrick said. “I know you can. If you need to me to do anything, I’ll do it.”

Mindil straightened. “Of course, we’d do the same.”

Stunned, Lily looked back and forth. The world spun around her and she had to tighten her grip on her wineglass in fear of dropping it. “W-Why?”

“You’re our friend.”

“You deserve it.”

Kendrick and Mindil looked at each other and grinned.

Mindil said, “You are the prettiest flower in our lives but we aren’t looking for someone to move in with us. I don’t want a second wife. We just want a little fun now and then. I can tell you love Kendrick—the puppy eyes make that obvious—then I want you to be happy.”

“I am happy.”



"Then let us take care of you. You make the dresses, we figure everything else. We only have a few days until the girl's presentation. I'm sure we can keep our fingers, tongues, and everything else out of Lily's dress until then?" She looked pointedly at Kendrick.

"Nirih," said Kendrick.

"What?"

"The girl's name. Juliet's daughter is Nirih."

"Oh..." Mindil's enthusiasm seemed to be tempered for a moment.

"Otherwise, I can manage to keep it in my pants for a few days. Though no promises if she comes home with me."

The idea of going a few days without sex wasn't appealing, but Mindil was right. She needed to focus and if that meant remaining chaste, it would be one less thing to distract her.

Kendrick said, "Very well. I will make sure she makes it home, untouched and happy."

Lily took the opportunity to jump in. "Thank you. I really appreciate it." She knew she could finish the dress properly, if she just had time to focus. Right now, it felt like everything was settling into place, not where she expected but she could see hope rising along the horizon.

Mindil stood up. "That said, I really should be heading home. I wasn't intending to molest Lily." She grinned. "Glad I did." Turning to Kendrick and holding out her hand. "It was a pleasure. I hope we have a chance to get to know each other." Her voice took a more playful tone.

Kendrick stood up and reached out, grasping her fingers to gently pull them to his lips. He kissed the back of her hand. "You are more than I expected, Tadame Mindil da Kasin ne Pavin."

Mindil held up her other hand. "No dames or sires here, deal?"

Lily didn't need to see the look to realize that Mindil was referring to her being a kudame or bedame.

"As you wish."

"Good, now I need to go home and have a talking to Hasan." She strolled toward the door, swaying her ass. Lily caught Kendrick watching with slightly parted lips.

At the door, Mindil stopped. "Oh, and Lily?"

"Yes?"

"There many successful skilled dressmakers who are not High Society. Ones that I would be more than willing to encourage for the rest of their lives, if need be."

Stunned the second time in the night, Lily watched as Mindil slipped out of the store and closed the door behind her. The bell rang out and then quieted.

"She is a force of nature, isn't she?" asked Kendrick.

Lily nodded. "She's beautiful."

"You are more so."

With a smile, Lily turned back to him. Kendrick had slipped off the couch and knelt in front of her. She inhaled sharply, a warmth spreading over her.

"Are you okay with what she suggested?"

"To help me with the dress?"

"Yes, but also continuing their relationship as much as ours?" He took her hand and kissed it. "I am nothing without you."

She pressed her thighs together as she enjoyed his lips on the back of her hand. "But you're everything."

"For you? Anything. I've spent so long, I'm not going to let my pride get in the way this time."

She leaned over and kissed him. The firmness of his lips tingled along her skin and the warmth of his body seeped into her bones, warming her from deep inside.

They kissed for a long moment before he broke it. "Do you want me to get the carriage for you?"

She thought about her options. Remember the public house. “Do you... do you think you could just be here while I work a little?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Got a broom?”



## Penir da Kasin

Even years later, a mentor still has his knife against his student's throat.  
A single word or turn of phrase can destroy more than one life.

—*Tears of Child*

**I**t was a bright and sunny morning. A morning breeze brought the faintest whiff of the ocean streaming between buildings and along the cobblestone streets. Not even the acrid smell of steam cars and horses could erase it completely.

Lily hummed to herself as she stepped back on the boardwalk and headed toward her store. She carried her sewing bag with both hands, spreading the strain of the heavy material on both shoulders.

In the back of her mind, she worried about not bringing a meal but Kendrick had promised he or Mindil would feed her. She wanted to disagree, but he insisted with a kiss. He even offered to get a carriage for her but that was a bit too much for her.

She waited for the traffic before crossing the next street. When she stepped back up on the walk, she noticed there were two carriages standing in front of her store. The ne-

arest one, a black carriage with gold and silver trim, had Juliet's personal driver standing next to the door.

The joy of the morning crumbled almost instantly.

Lily hesitated, one foot on the boardwalk and the other on the street. A sick feel twisted in her gut. She shook her head, closing her eyes and then opening them in hopes that the carriage was for another store.

A horn blared behind her.

She jumped off the street and on the boardwalk. Turning around, she saw a pair of women wearing goggles sitting in a car. The seat was almost hanging off the front with a large cage of iron dominating almost two thirds of the vehicle. Bright yellow paint covered the inner coils of the metal but the outside was painted black. She spotted a pair of Kasin crests mounted along the side.

"Sorry!" Lily said loudly and then hurried away from the street.

She made it a few yards before she realized she was heading into a trap.

Juliet's driver was looking at her curiously, his arms held stiffly behind his back and his head cocked at an angle.

Gulping, she stopped again just long enough to take a deep breath and then headed past him and into her store.

The bell on the door rang out, filling the store with the cheerful ringing.

The first thing Lily saw was Juliet's back. The older woman was standing with both hands on the back of the chair, rocking it back and forth with sharp strokes. The legs of the chair smacked against the ground in a steady beat. "—is she?"

Juliet spun around, her face twisting in a mask of rage. "Where, in the Couple's Favor, have you been!? You're late!"

Lily started to flinch but then realized she had to stand up to Juliet. Taking Mindil's advice from earlier, she stood

up straighter and faced her. "My store hours are half past the seventh hour."

"You are still late!"

It took all of her effort not to snap back. To stall, Lily set down the bag by the door. "By a few minutes only. I apologize for the delay."

"You should be! I'm not going to have my daughter's dress made by an incompetent—"

From the door leading into the workshop, Mindil came in carrying a tray of fruits. "She is not... Lily."

Juliet glared at Mindil and then turned back to Lily. "For the amount of money I'm paying you, you should be waiting in your store the second the bell rings!"

"She had someone here, you impatient—!"

"Don't you dare call—!"

"That is enough, Tadame Juliet and Tadame Mindil," came a familiar voice from one of the couches, instantly stopping both Mindil's and Juliet's words in their tracks. The sound of it sent a cold shiver down Lily's spine.

Penir da Kasin—Lily's mentor—stood up smoothly from the other couch. She wore a beautiful lace dress without even a hint of a seam or stitch in it. Even the patterns were seamless in what appeared to be a single piece of fabric. The rich blue color swirled around her as she stepped forward and Juliet stepped out of the way.

She held out her hand for Lily. "Good to see you, Bedame Lily. Your store is beautiful."

Trembling with fear and nervousness, Lily took the hand and bowed her head toward it. It was an older style of address, appropriate for a matron of the family. "T-Thank you, Tadame Penir da Kasin ne Golid, you honor me with your presence."

Juliet muttered something under her breath.

Penir smoothly gestured to the chair and the small couches. "I see you went with the Loinier's. She always had a gift for creating something comfortable."

"Your wisdom is always timely, Tadame Kasin."

Penir turned slightly with her back to both Juliet and Mindil. "Not everything. I suggested a more red theme."

"I can change it, if you wish."

"I know you can, dear. However, you have chosen a well-coordinated color scheme. It suits you, light and airy. A good foundation for a talented bedame."

Her gray hair was done up in a complicated bun that highlighted two lines of clear crystals. "You have a beautiful talent. Your magic is wonderful and I've heard good things of your skills over the years." Her eyes sparkled. "Of course, eight years of working your craft will make an expert, wouldn't you say?"

"Not an expert, Tadame. Only one who is starting to excel."

She glanced at Juliet who smiled broadly. "A few complaints recently, though."

Lily's shoulders slumped.

"Everyone has detractors, dear. There is always someone vocal, no matter what you do."

Lily tensed. She didn't know where Penir was leading the conversation but having her mentor there didn't bode well. She clasped her hands together. "Is... there something wrong?"

Penir tilted her head and glanced around the store. "Sometimes those complaints spread out like roots, spreading through the soil of Society. They fester in the darkness, passed along with gossip and whispers. It's a rot, you know, a half-hidden disease that eats away at the soil of Society."

Lily's blood ran with ice. She gulped.



“Occasionally, that rot is brought to the light. And gardeners have to cut it out. Sometimes they cut out more they need to, digging up flowers of anything related to that rot.” Her eyes grew hard as she looked directly at Lily. “Your mother is a terrible force, young dear. A tad indiscriminate in what she’s willing to dig up.”

A sob caught in Lily’s throat.

Juliet made a pleased giggle, half muffled.

“Damn the Couple,” whispered Mindil before she turned and stormed back into the workshop.

“I... I,” Lily blinked away the tears. “I’m doing my best.”

Penir cocked her head. “Show me? I want to see this dress—”

“Hideous dress,” Juliet interjected.

“—that apparently would destroy both of our reputations.”

Lily wasn’t sure she could face her mentor’s disapproval. The urge to turn and flee the store rose up, an overwhelming urge to run to Kendrick and hide forever. She tensed.

Penir held out her hand. “Please?”

“Y-Yes, Tadame.”

Penir reached out and took Lily’s hand. It wasn’t the grip of a lover but one of a stern teacher. She brought it to her elbow and deftly guided Lily toward the back room.

Behind them, Juliet followed, a grin still on her face.

Except for Juliet and the wine, the workspace was exactly how Lily left it the night before. Juliet stood near the desk, her body tense as she held her own glass. She sighed and set down her glass on the desk before picking up the tray. “Tadame Penir da Kasin ne Golid?”

“Thank you, Tadame.” Penir took the offered glass but then set it down on the table away from the fabric.

Lily couldn't help but smile. She remembered how careful Penir was to keep her drinks away. Lily tried to have the same habit but she forgot on occasion.

Penir looked around the room before centering her gaze on the dress form with Nirih's dress.

The dress was only mostly completed, with a dizzying array of different colors to mark the different panels and cuts. The only thing that was the proper color was the glowing cream strips; her magic couldn't easily affect cloth that was already enchanted.

Her mentor released Lily's hand and strolled over to it.

Lily tensed as she looked at her handiwork. She should have colored the fabric by now but she still struggled with the collar. It had the original one she put on, the one that showed far too much cleavage. She sighed as she felt another strike against her.

"Look at that thing," Juliet said. "It's hideous."

Penir didn't seem to respond. Instead, she ran her finger along a seam. Lily's neat stitches melted away, evaporating in wisps of white smoke.

"And that collar, I would die if I had to wear it."

Lily took a deep breath. She needed a drink.

Penir finally spoke. "Your stitching still a little sloppy. Sufficient, but not expertise for my reputation."

Juliet giggled and shot a triumphant glare at Lily.

Using her fingers, Penir erased the entire seam. Then, she clamped the fabric together between her fingertips and stroked back down, tracing her hand along the two edges of the fabric. As it slipped from her finger, the material had bonded together into a perfect edge, one without stitches or discoloration.

She worked in silence, redoing almost a quarter of the outer seams in a matter of seconds. There were even a few of

Lily's best ones, but no needle could ever match the perfection and smoothness of Penir's magic.

Juliet's glee increased with every passing second.

Trembling, Lily looked over at Mindil.

Her lover looked furious. Her jaw was tight and her hands balled into fists. She looked back at Lily and then back to glaring at Juliet.

Ducking her head, Lily sighed.

Penir reached up for the collar. "Is this the collar you wanted?"

"It's hideous," repeated Juliet.

Lily considered lying but her gut feeling still said it was correct. It was daring and exotic, though it would reveal far too much naked flesh. She gave a half-hearted nod and the repeated more confidently.

Juliet stared at her, mouth opened. "You'd put my daughter in that dress? I'll be the laughing stock of High Society? They'll think she's nothing more than a cheap whore! I will not have—"

"Tadame," interrupted Penir.

"—my daughter dressed up like a cheap harlot." Juliet dug into her pocket and grabbed a piece of paper. It was one of Lily's receipts, the one for Nirih's dress. "You see this? You see it!?"

Lily didn't need to look at it closely. "Yes."

"You said insurance. If you couldn't make it, then you'd give me a hundred times. You aren't going to make it, you aren't even going to get close. Now give me my money so I can get a proper one!"

"It's almost done," Lily said, trying to keep her voice calm.

"It isn't even close, you stupid, greedy incompetent!"

Mindil stepped forward. "Don't you dare!"

"Shut up, you fat cow!"

Mindil's lips parted. She stepped forward sharply. "Don't you dare call me a cow, you fucking horse-fucker!"

"Mindil," Lily rested her hand on her lover's shoulder.

Mindil looked at her, tears in her eyes. "It isn't fair," she whispered. "You've been working on that dress for weeks. It's beautiful, I know."

"What would you know?" Juliet snapped. "All you do is eat and spend your husband's money. At least I wasn't caught fucking on some table!"

Mindil's body tensed. Then she glanced at Lily before returning her gaze. "I'm going away before I ruin Lily's hard work. You are already tainting it with your presence, I will not do the—"

Her words silenced sharply as she used her ability to draw attention from herself. Then, with a surge of power that crackled in the air, she disappeared.

Lily gasped. She reached out for Mindil but both her hand and her focus slid away from the spot where Mindil had stood. She frowned. "Mindil?"

Juliet stared with her mouth open. After a few seconds, she said, "You better run—"

"This is a good dress," interrupted Penir.

Juliet jerked and did a double take. "What!? Like the hell it is!"

Penir raised an eyebrow.

Stepping back, Juliet cleared her throat. "S-Sorry, what?"

"This dress. It's beautiful. I think the collar needs a little work but her instincts are good. It followed the new trends from the eastern and southern cities, the scoop collar."

"She'll be practically naked!"

"Nonsense, the collar isn't done. Lily, do you have some Klafin Sheer?"

Klafin was an expensive sheer fabric with a delicate lace pattern. It was very expensive and usually only purchased

when needed. Lily tore her attempts to see how Mindil had disappeared and shook her head. Even as she did, she wondered how she could get some of it in her hands; her mentor's question was obviously a suggestion.

"Try that. Keep the low collar but bring the sheer up to a tight scoop with a lace trim."

Lily smiled, she could picture it. The sheer fabric would hide the scandalous exposure of Nirih's chest but still give hints of the feminine body underneath. It would be right on the edge of shocking, but on the correct side of being properly demure. "Thank you."

"But the colors!" Juliet sputtered.

"Lily's talent will cover that, she has an artist touch with coloring. That is the one thing that I wasn't worried about."

"It looks hideous!"

"It is also not due until Mumdei, is it? Two days from now?"

"Y-Yes, but—"

"No, buts. The dress is mostly done, only the final touches are needed. I have no doubt Lily will be capable of finishing them on time. Your daughter's dress will be beautiful."

Juliet's lips pressed into a thin line.

Penir reached over and took the receipt. She looked at it and then shook her head. "You will accept this dress and your daughter will be the talk of the town."

"But..." Juliet's voice trailed off.

"I will, of course, join you and be back here at the noon hour in two days."

Penir strolled over to Lily. Taking her hand, she reached up and kissed Lily's cheek. "I'll talk to your mother. There will be no more threats. This old flower knows how to talk to gardeners."

The older woman looked into the room and smiled. She reached over to pick up her wine glass, took a sip, and then headed toward the front door.

Juliet sputtered and then raced after her. "Tadame Penir! Tadame!"

Lily listened to them leave the front door, the door bell ringing out thrice before it settled into place. Then she staggered back to sink heavily into her chair.

Mindil was suddenly there again, holding her tightly. "Oh, Lily. I couldn't hear what she said. I'm sorry."

"H-How did you disappear?"

Mindil shook her head. "Not now."

Lily looked into her lover's eyes and saw tears. She felt the same swimming her own eyes. She had never been so frightened or tense before. Penir's words echoed in her head. Her mentor had liked her dress. She was given a compliment by one of the famed seamstresses of the entire family.

Days of misery and suffering and weeks of self-doubt meant nothing in that moment. She opened her mouth to say something but only a gasp came out. Trembling with relief, she sank to her knees and burst into tears.

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## Chapter 38

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# Changes

The promise of passion is to a lover as a blueberry to a starving rat.

—Degumóni Choís

**L**ily sat at her desk and struggled to keep her script neat as she penned a hasty letter. It was the fifth one she had written that morning, the four previous ones were sent out to the various suppliers of fabric in hopes that one of them would have a yard of Klafin Sheer for sale.

She could imagine the delicate whorls of the fabric in her head. The pattern was famous for looking like frosted glass with an alluring design, but it was also difficult to purchase in a hurry. Like the glowing fabric she used for trim, the Klafin carried a hefty price and was treasured by most seamstresses across the city.

A young man stood across from her, his cap was balanced on his head as he rocked back and forth on his heels.

Lily glanced up at him and then down to the letter. She finished her entreaty to Masuin da Kasin, a supplier on the north side who had slightly shady reputation. She wasn't Lily's first choice—Mausin never was—but rumors are that she had an eclectic selection.

With a flare, Lily finished her letter. Signing it, she blew on it lightly to dry it. As she did, she glanced up again to see the young man staring at her.

He turned his head. "Sorry, kudame."

Lily tensed for a moment, wondering if she was working too hard to follow Penir's suggestion. She had spent most of her free money on couriers asking for a bit of expensive material; the perfect fabric to finish the collar.

The young man took the letter.

She tightened her grip.

"Kudame?"

Lily stared at him, her mind spinning furiously. Images of the Klafin raced across her thoughts as she pictured it in place. The whorls would fit nicely into the collar, following the curves of the young girl's chest, and drawing the appropriate attention.

"Kudame?" repeated the courier with a gentle tug.

The fabric was a perfect choice, one that would be the talk of High Society for months.

It was also Penir's choice. It would be her touch on Lily's dress. It would be Penir's reputation that marked the outfit.

The courier tugged again.

Lily stirred and pulled the letter from his hand. "Hold on, I need to make a change."

The courier let out a quiet sigh. "Yes, kudame."

Lily set it back on the table. With a sigh, she looked over the letter. The muscles in her back tensed as she stared at it, her mind once again flashing through the sheer materials that would work in the collar.

She settled on two of them, a Piliot and a Warchoisn. Both were sheer but didn't have a classical whorl pattern of fish bone lacing. Instead they were designed around tiny dots and curves. With a smile, she crossed out Klafin and replaced it with her own choices.



With her heart beating hard, she dried her letter and handed it back, this time with a fifty jem bill. "Please, deliver with haste."

The courier's eyes widened at the cash, it was double the normal rate. Instantly, he bowed his head. "Yes, Kudame dea Kasin."

The door bell rang out. Mindil came in. Her flowered dress fluttered with every step she made, showing off a generous amount of her thick thigh. She smiled broadly before stepping aside to let Hasan come in after her.

Hasan carried two large cloth bags with him. They would have lunch for all three of them, along with an appropriate selection of wines and treats.

Lily smiled to both of them.

"Good afternoon, Lily... oh, you have company?" Mindil smiled and looked him over. "Is he getting a dress?"

Both Hasan and the courier blushed.

The young man ducked his head. "I-I need to go. Thank you again, kudame."

Before anyone else could say anything, he rushed out of the store with Lily's letter.

Mindil turned to watch him. When she turned back, she was grinning.

"Did you have to ask about the dress?" asked Hasan with a hurt tone.

"Well, you won't wear one for me." Mindil headed over to Lily to give her a hug. Her fingers splayed against Lily's back as she ground her breasts against Lily's chest. "Another letter for the lace Penir asked for?"

Lily kissed Mindil on the lips, a chaste one. "No, I had a different idea."

"Are you sure?"

Nodding, Lily slipped back. "Yes, I think I am."

Mindil stared into her eyes for a moment then stepped back.

Hasan came back into the front room without his bags. "Lunch is set up on the empty table, is that okay?" He came up to Lily, his intense eyes focused on her the time it took for him to walk the length of the room.

A flutter of heat rippled inside her.

He took her in his arms and held her tightly. The smell and warmth of his body enveloped her. Breathing in, she tasted his scent in the air.

She let out a soft moan and lifted her lips.

Hasan kissed her, his slender body tight against her frame. His hand cupped her ass, holding tight as his lips captured hers. Almost instantly, she felt his hardness growing between them.

Lily smiled and then pulled away. "No distractions."

Hasan resisted for a moment, his fingers digging into the softness of her cheek.

Then he jerked and relaxed his hand. He looked over his shoulder at Mindil.

Lily followed his gaze to see Mindil's lips moving silently. There was a stormy look in her eyes.

With a sigh, Hasan stepped back. "All right. No more distractions," he said sullenly. He glanced back at Lily, his intense gaze boring into her and sending a flash of warmth coursing through her veins.

"Not until after the party, Has." Mindil's voice came back with a wry tone. She pointed at both of them with a grin. "Then, I think Lily dear is more than willing to show me what you two were doing when I was out of town."

Lily and Hasan both blushed and looked away.

Mindil hummed as she turned and headed to the back room, her hips swaying as she walked. "Come on, lovers.

Lily needs lunch and I got some of those lovely lemon treats to enjoy.”

They had just entered the back room when the door bell rang out again.

Lily, in the rear, looked back. When she saw the fogged glass and the figured by the light from the street. His dark shape was familiar as was the scent of ozone that flooded through her store. She smiled broadly and rushed over to him. “Kendrick!”

He swept her into his hard, muscular arms. “Well, you seem happy. Did you find the fabric?” His low voice rumbled against her nerves, caressing her as she sank into it.

“No, but I found a better choice.”

“Oh?”

“Either Piliot Glousin and Warchoisn Fagoin. Both are sheer but they... they...” She struggled with the words for a moment. “They fit my design better.”

Kendrick tensed, his arm “Warchoisn? I saw that name.”

Lily gasped, pressing her body against his as she looked up into his blue eyes.

He frowned for a moment. Then he smiled broadly, his teeth shining. “I saw a bolt of that at Dame Masuir da Kasin’s. She asked what I thought of it, but I was looking for Klafin Sheer.”

Tensing, Lily gasped. “You did?”

Kendrick grinned and kissed her. “I’ll get—”

“What are you doing here!?” snapped Hasan from behind her.

Kendrick’s head snapped up.

“Get away from her!” Hasan came striding up, one hand pulled back. There was fury on his face.

Kendrick relaxed his arms and gently pushed Lily to the side. She could feel the tension in his body, the way his

back leg shifted back to protect himself. "Good afternoon, Hasan da Kasin."

Hasan slapped Kendrick.

Kendrick turned his head back slowly, the muscles in his neck and chest flexing. Around him, the air grew more humid and wisps of mist spread out along the ground at his feet. The scent of ozone grew stronger, an acidic scent that teased the back of Lily's throat.

Fear flooded through Lily's veins but so did rage. Stepping forward, she grabbed both men by their shoulders and shoved them apart.

She couldn't move Kendrick, his weight and hardness felt like a wall.

Hasan, on the other hand, stepped back. He waved his hand angrily. "Get out of this, I'll deal with him." He looked over his shoulder. "Quiet!"

Mindil closed her mouth with a snap. She jerked for a moment in shock. Then a look of rage crossed her face. Her mouth opened but no noise came back, nothing to indicate that there were words coming out as she screamed at Hasan.

Hasan flinched.

Kendrick sighed. "Let it go, Has. I'm not here to fight."

"You'll—" Hasan's voice silenced but his lips continued to work.

Mindil finally caught up to him, slamming into his back with both hands.

He lurched forward, his face smacking against Kendrick's chest. With a gasp, he flailed for a moment before he managed to shove himself back to his own feet. His cheeks were bright red with his emotions. Turning around, he glared at Mindil and then at Kendrick.

Lily panted. "Hasan?"

His hand balled into a fist. His gaze bore into Kendrick, the hatred almost visible in the air between them. It rippled through the misty air that surrounded Kendrick.

Kendrick continued to stand tensely, his eyes narrowed as he watched his rival.

Mindil screamed at him, her voice silent and mute. It was surreal watching as she berated her husband.

Hasan closed his eyes. "Warchoisn?"

Kendrick stepped back.

Surprised, Lily said, "Yes. Over on Twenty-Seven and Tulip."

"I'll get as much as I can." Hasan glared at Kendrick.

Kendrick stepped aside.

Without another word, Hasan stormed out of the store.



## Pleasurable Rewards

A man will walk over flame and fury for the woman she loves.

—Charise Decos-Mandina

**L**ily held her breath as she worked the delicate needle into the fabric. Nirih's dress rippled underneath her wrist, the strips of glowing brilliance contrasting with the rapidly changing hues that rippled along the fabric wherever she touched it. She frowned as she finished a line of neat stitches hidden in the lace.

"You are beautiful when you do that," said Mindil.

Lily locked her hand in place for a moment. The tip of the needle quivered with her heartbeat.

"Oh, sorry," came the bashful response a second later.

"Just give me a second," whispered Lily. She resumed connecting the final piece to the dress. With delicate tugs, she tested the entire length of the seam to ensure it wouldn't split apart with a strong breeze. When it didn't, she did it again with a stronger force.

She was happy with the result. Standing up, she stepped back and looked at her work.

The dress was nearly perfect in shape and patterns. The Warchoisn Fagoin fluttered with her movements, the nearly invisible material had a stippled flower pattern similar to the embroidery she had done along the edges. One petal on each flower of the Fagoin was slightly different than the embroidery; she could fix it but it would take days of effort to say the least.

Worrying her lip, she took another step back until her buttocks pressed against her work table.

“Is that it?” asked Mindil as she sat up from a chair in the corner. There was a faint clinking noise as she set her glass down.

“Yes, I think it is.”

“The colors? Horse-Fucker will have a fit for tomorrow’s presentation.”

Lily smirked. Mindil didn’t hold back her opinions of Juliet. She reached out and ran her hand along the fabric, enjoying the feel of silk along the tips of her fingers. Color spread out from her touch, rippling through the fabric as she concentrated on the exact shades of cream and yellow she wanted.

Mindil inhaled sharply.

Lily’s magic coursed over the fabric, slowing down only along the glowing strips but not stopping. More colors ran over the lacing, attachments, and thread. The metal for the fasteners resisted her—hard materials always did—but she focused on each one until they changed.

When she finished, there was a smooth shade from cream at the top to Delicate Whispers of Gold at the bottom. The effect looked like a waterfall of gold and yellows.

“Oh, the Couple,” whispered Mindil. “I don’t think... I... it’s... beautiful.”

Lily smiled to herself and blushed faintly. “Thank you.”



A wave of weakness sapped Lily's strength. She stepped back and clutched the side of the table.

"What's wrong?" Mindil's voice took on a more concerned tone.

"Nothing, I'm just tired from the last few days. Coloring metal always drains me."

Mindil came up, the large woman reaching out with her hands to pluck Lily's free one from the air and hold it close. "The dress is perfect. With that, you need a break and a bit of celebration."

She tugged Lily away from the dress.

Lily hesitated, staring at the embroidery. The mismatched flowers with the Warchoism scraped on her sense of completeness. It was wrong and stood out like a screaming fen-feather bird. Tugging, she took a step toward the dress.

"No, no," Mindil said. "It's perfect."

"It's wrong."

"It's perfect," she repeated.

Lily started to resist but then Mindil grabbed her face and pulled down into a kiss.

The sudden press of soft lips against her own and the shock of being caught sent a pulse of heat racing across Lily's body. She let out a tiny gasp, muffled by Mindil's lips, and then relaxed. Her eyes fluttered as she let her senses focus on the touch of soft hands on her face and the softer lips against her own.

Mindil kissed her passionately, tongue flashing out as she drew Lily closer.

Lily fought against her obsession.

Mindil's hand slipped from Lily's cheek and slid down, tracing along the curves of her neck to her shoulder and then down to cup her breast.

Lily's nipple grew harder under the gentle touch.

With a smile, Mindil caught it between her fingers and rolled it around, evoking a soft moan from Lily as waves of pleasure racing along her skin. She broke the kiss long enough to whisper, "There we go."

"I—"

"Nope, still talking." Mindil dropped both of her hands to caress Lily's flanks. Her fingertips brought a strange sense of sexual heat and tickling as she trailed down to the waist of Lily's light summer dress. Without another word, she tugged up on the fabric, bunching it underneath her palms as the hem slid up Lily's legs.

"Mindil, I thought we were—"

"The dress is perfect."

"But—"

Mindil looked into her eyes, a burning look that caught Lily's breath. "The dress is perfect."

Lily's dress drew up to her waist, exposing the bare skin of her thighs and her thong to the warm air in the back room of her store.

A flash of heat rippled through her frame. Her inner walls clenched as she felt herself growing wetter with anticipation. She took a deep breath as Mindil finished gathering up her dress.

"No, pretty lady, I want you to sit up on your table. I had to wait days and I want my dessert now."

"W-What?"

Mindil grinned. "You know what I want. Has told me you've never had a mouth kissing both sets of lips before him. I want a taste. Now."

With a nervous giggle, Lily braced her hands on her table and boosted herself up, sitting on the edge. Her bare skin caught on the faint texture of the table's surface. Her pussy tingled with her growing need. The smell of her exci-

tement, the faint sweetness, drifted up as she felt her pussy lips grow wetter by the seconds.

With a look down, Mindil let out a soft growing noise. "That looks tasty enough to eat."

She pushed the fabric back and then drew her hands between Lily's thighs. Soft fingers caught the edge of Lily's thong. With a slow movement, Mindil pulled the underwear away from Lily's nether lips.

The scent of her desire rose up around her, wafting in the air like perfume. It was both familiar and forbidden, a musky scent of need for the woman standing between her knees.

"Pretty as I thought it would be," was the only thing Mindil said before she pressed her mouth against Lily's slit.

Lily moaned, her body trembling with the pleasure that shot up her spine.

Mindil spread Lily's legs further apart, working her head between her lover's thighs. She took a long lick from the opening to the tip, swirling around the achingly hard clitoris and through the damp folds. It was hard to tell, but Lily could tell her lover was using the tip of her tongue to burrow past the hairs and opening before using the flat to splay her open.

It didn't matter for long. Lily threw back her hair and gasped as Mindil drew her mouth up and down, lapping deep against her sex.

Tiny ripples of pleasure sheeted along her body, setting her skin on fire and causing Lily's breath to come out in soft gasps.

Lily's hand slipped back on the table. She caught herself in an uncomfortable position. As she lost herself in the pleasures radiating from between her legs, she struggled to get a better grip.

Mindil's eyes were closed as she concentrated on licking.

Lily whimpered again, splaying her fingers out for balance as she found a position that let her see Mindil's bobbing head without her buttocks falling off the edge; not that would happen with Mindil grabbing each cheek with a firm grip.

The pleasure grew rapidly as did the wet slurping sounds. She giggled but it ended in another moan as she arched her hips up into the soft, hot mouth that caressed along her labia and the tongue that delved deeper into her.

Mindil's thumbs spread and relaxed against Lily's cheeks, pulling apart her body as she slurped and sucked. Her mouth rose to clamp down on Lily's clitoris, sucking between her teeth. The sharp edge was enough to set off a rippling wave of pleasure.

Lily gasped, her body tensing from the sudden orgasm. Her hands slipped and she slumped back against the table with an inarticulate sound. A roll of discarded fabric caught underneath her head and she bunched it up into a makeshift pillow that let her look between the curves of her breasts down to the woman pleasuring her.

Mindil looked up over the glistening pubic mound and then went back to sucking and teasing, alternating between sucking and lapping at the tiny fold of pleasure that drew Lily's entire focus into it. Slowly, she drew her mouth away and little strands of clear fluids connected their bodies until they snapped. "You comfortable?"

The empty feeling of not having lips against her pussy fought with the mild discomfort. Lily lifted her head a bit more and smiled. "Yes."

"Mind if I keep going?"

"Please?" whimpered Lily.

"Tell me if you don't want to do anything," Mindil said in a low voice. There was a strange, almost playful tone to it

but it only sent prickles of anticipation racing along Lily's senses.

Mindil lowered her head again and tightened her grip. She laved her tongue up and down Lily's pussy, parting it to suck on the inner folds. Then, she lifted Lily's cheeks higher as her mouth lowered.

Lily took only a moment to realize that Mindil was going to lick her sphincter before she felt the hot, slick tongue caress against the wrinkled opening. There was intense burst of pleasure, magnified by the forbidden pleasures but also the shock.

"Oh, Couple!"

Mindil smiled as she burrowed against Lily's opening, teasing and swirling her tongue around to lave against every sensitive fold and ridge. Every touch set off tiny orgasms, the waves of pleasure set off white sparks racing across her vision. She gasped and shook, the ecstasy ravaging her consciousness and left her whimpering for more.

One of Mindil's thumbs slipped up into the crack of Lily's ass and then pressed against the spit-slicked opening.

Lily gasped as she remembered how it felt when Hasan had done the same thing. She pushed down on it, arching her back slightly to enjoy the pressure.

"Good girl," whispered Mindil as she eased her thumb into the tight opening. With the slickness, it easily slipped deeper.

Lily's inner muscles clenched against it for a moment, the strange pleasures and discomfort warring with each other. The pleasure won and she let out a low cry of ecstasy as she sank further into the intruding digit.

Mindil let out a growl of her own and clamped her mouth back over Lily's pussy. Her tongue worked furiously, swirling and lapping against the soaked opening and sensitive clitoris. Her other hand gripped Lily's hips tightly, hold-

ing her down as she continued to work her thumb in and out of Lily's back entrance.

The pleasure surged inside of Lily, blossoming and redoubling, searing along her veins in liquid hot ecstasy. It rose up in her chest, catching her breath. She gasped for air. She was at the edge of a cliff, lost and dizzy with exhilaration as bolts of pleasure wracked her senses.

It was too much.

"Oh, Couple!" screamed Lily as her body exploded with white-hot flames of pleasure. She shuddered violently, limbs flailing out as she grabbed Mindil's hair and pulled her lover's mouth tight against her pussy.

Mindil's mouth found all the right places, drawing the pleasure into intense wave after wave assaulted Lily.

Lily writhed with pleasure, enjoying the intensity. Her eyes fluttered but she wasn't seeing.

Until she spotted Kendrick standing in the door of her workshop. He leaned against the side with his hands in his pockets and a smile on his lips. There were a few swirls of mist rising off his shoulders.

Lily gasped. She wanted to call out to him but she was lost in her orgasm and her body wasn't working correctly. Her mouth opened and shut but only soft moans slipped out. Her gaze locked with Kendrick's as she came again and again.

Mindil moaned, her lips parting away for only a moment. "Tasty."

"Looks like it," said Kendrick in amusement.

Mindil gasped and stood up. "Kendrick!"

Lily looked up. Mindil's face was glistening with Lily's juices. She looked like a child with her hand caught in a candy jaw. Lily clenched her sphincter, no, Mindil had her thumb still inside. The surreal moment caught her and she giggled.

“Look, this isn’t—”

“I’m going to say the dress is done.” Kendrick stepped away from the door. He was still smiling as he strolled into the room.

“Yeah...” Mindil said bashfully. She slipped her hand from Lily’s asshole, leaving behind a feeling of emptiness behind.

Lily clenched her body at the touch.

“I couldn’t wait, sorry.”

He shrugged. He leaned over to peer down at Lily’s bare pussy. With a grin, he glanced up at her.

Lily, blushing hotly, nodded. Her eyes trailed down and noticed that he was obviously aroused. His cock bulged in his jeans, swelling it out in the familiar hardness that she craved as much as Mindil and Hasan. The heat flushed hotter as she forced her eyes back to his face.

Kendrick nodded toward Mindil with his head but his eyes never left Lily. “Do you mind? I’d like a taste.”

Lily inhaled sharply, the heat simmering from her afterglow surged hotly. “Y-Yes.”

Mindil opened her mouth. “W-What—?”

Kendrick pulled his hands out of his pocket and caught Mindil’s face between his large palms. He didn’t hesitate as his fingers pressed against the damp skin or soaked hair. With a smile, he drew her closer.

Mindil’s eyes opened wide, her lips parting with surprise.

Kendrick’s lips caught her own. He let out a low growl as he kissed her passionately, his mouth opening against her own. Lily could see her tongue spearing inside and then Mindil responding with equal passion.

Lily felt the flush surged intensely. Her pussy clenched with desire as her two lovers kissed each other. She trembled as another orgasm raced along her body.

They kissed for a moment, then Kendrick broke. "Do you mind if I jump in?"

"Want a taste?" Mindil purred.

"I was thinking of something a bit harder." He nodded down toward his ridge.

Mindil followed his gaze and then reached out for his crotch. Her painted fingernails trembled as she traced the length with one finger, exploring the ridge through his tight trousers. She panted with lust as she explored the thicker base and then up to the top where the flared head was visible even through the fabric.

She jerked and looked up. "Oh, I'm sorry. May I?"

Lily giggled.

Kendrick chuckled and reached down to gently clasp Mindil's hand. He pointedly pressed her palm against his hardness. "Go right ahead."

Mindil's smile could light up the room.

She ducked her head and used both hands to work the buttons straining over his ridge. It took her a moment to get the first one off but then his trousers peeled open easily as his thick cock fell out.

Mindil snatched her hands back. "Oh, my Couple," she gasped.

With wide eyes, she looked up. "They grow them big on the coast don't they?"

Kendrick shrugged with a grin.

She quickly regained her composure. "Well, you won't be getting this sword in my bum. But still..." Reaching out, she wrapped her hand around his thickness and slid up and down. She exhaled slowly as she delved her hands into his trousers and fished out his hairy balls.

Kendrick and Lily watched in rapture.

Mindil slowly lowered herself to her knees, spreading her thighs apart as she brought her head even with his



cock. Her lips were parted as she stared at it lustfully. It took her a moment to settle and then she brought it closer to her painted lips.

Taking a deep breath, she nuzzled up against it.

Kendrick exhaled. "Oh..." he said.

Lily thrust her fingers into her slick lips, driving two digits into her clenching tunnel as she watched her lovers.

Mindil parted her lips and kissed his cock. With a grin, she worked her mouth up and down his length, leaving little smears of her lipstick behind. She panted as she moved up and down, her large breasts thumping against his legs as she did.

It didn't take long before the tip of his shaft oozed clear fluids that quick coated his large head. Kendrick reached out into the air, clenching his hands, but then reached over to grasp the table Lily sat on.

Fingering herself with one hand, Lily reached out and rested her hand on his. She enjoyed the warmth of his body and the rough texture of his skin. Lifting her gaze, she caught his gaze again and lost herself in his blue eyes.

Kendrick's focus wavered.

Mindil had the end of his cock sliding in and out of her mouth. She wasn't going far, just swirling around the head like a treat before she popped it out. With a grin, she looked up at Lily. "I think he's ready."

"W-What?" asked Kendrick.

She grinned. "What? I'm not going any further until you and Has work out your differences." She glanced down. "Though, I had to have a taste."

Looking back up, she grinned. "But right now, I want to see this beautiful manhood bury into the prettiest woman I've ever seen. While you do that, I'm going to finger myself to an orgasm and then probably let myself out while you two birds finish fucking."

Lily stared at Mindil in shock for a moment. "Are you sure?"

With a nod, Mindil grinned. "Trust me, you need it too."

Mindil hefted Kendrick's hard cock. A few droplets of clear precum dripped down her hand. "Good. And after the dress and presentation, I'm going to ask both of you to fuck this beautiful thing as hard and long as I can."

Kendrick said, "I'd like that."

"Good," said Mindil with a grin. Then she took a tighter grip on his shaft and tugged him toward Lily.

Kendrick chuckled and stepped into the movement. His cock seemed to swell in Mindil's hand as the other woman guided him up between Lily's thighs. He looked down at Lily. "Hello."

Lily spread her pussy open for him. "I missed you."

The sensations of Mindil's hands sliding against her thigh and the heated hardness of Kendrick's shaft was almost too much. It flared along her senses and pooled between her legs. She stroked her clitoris slowly as she lifted herself up to see the thick head being fed into her, pushed past the lubricated entrance and into the slick tunnel.

"Oh, Couple," said all three of them almost in unison.

Lily laughed which quickly became a moan as Kendrick slid deeper into her. His thickness was still intensely new inside her body and she craved the hardness as much as his warmth.

He didn't take long to find a rhythm, pulling out and driving home in slow, steady beats that flamed the heat inside her. His hands caught her hips, gripping her tightly as he pinned her to the work table.

Lily gasped and writhed on the table, her legs clamping around his tight buttocks as she urged him deeper into her body.

On the side, Mindil leaned against the table, fingering herself as she watched the junction between their bodies. After a moment, she reached in with her free hand to stroke along Lily's and Kendrick's thighs before bringing her fingers to either side of Kendrick's slick shaft pistoning into Lily.

The added inclusion of a third person's hands against her body pushed Lily into an orgasm. She slumped back with a gasp as the pleasure wracked her body, surging through her with an intense ecstasy that only magnified by the thick shaft filling her and the expert fingers teasing her clitoris and nether lips.

Lily reached out for Mindil. Her questing fingers quickly reached down, past the swell of her belly and along the folds until she found the soaked opening.

Mindil made a soft cooing noise and spread her legs further, welcoming her.

Kendrick's cock never stopped thrusting. it drove deep into Lily' body. It filled her completely and every ridge along his swollen shaft teased against her sensitive nerves as his strokes grew faster and harder with every passing second.

Lily came again, a sudden orgasm slamming into her. Her inner walls tightened around Kendrick's shaft and he hesitated with the additional friction.

His grip tightened on her waist and then he was driving into her fast and hard. Each thrust shook Lily to the core as his cock plunged deep into her body and out again. Wet sounds filled the air, muted only by the scraps of fabric on the table that soaked up their pleasures.

Just as Lily was coming off another orgasm did she notice Mindil had pulled away. Her lover tugged her dress down and blew her a kiss.

Lily reached for Mindil, wanting her friend as much as the man fucking with them.

Mindil shook her head. She mouthed, “later”, and the slipped out of the workshop.

Feeling lost, Lily focused back on her lover. Her pussy felt flooded, he must have come inside her. The heat and liquid pouring out her and trailing down to the crack of her ass pushed her into another wave of pleasure, her eyes blurring from the intensity that it wracked her body.

Panting, Kendrick slowed down again. He smiled and brought his hands up to her head, pulling her off the table enough to kiss her.

Lily’s body continued to jerk on his cock, the thick pole easily driving into her with slow and steady strokes that were fanning new flames inside her.

She moaned and kissed back, praying to the Divine Couple that he would never stop fucking.

## Morning Kisses

A woman cannot accept the hand of a suitor for she is prone to hysterics and foolish thinking. Only a man, a father, truly knows what is best for his daughter's future.

—Kikoil dea Fanior, *The Pride of Tarsan*

**L**ily woke to the comforting pressure of Kendrick's arm draped over her right shoulder and his fingers dangling against her nipples. Every time she inhaled, the hard tips of her breasts would press into his rough fingertips. Tiny motes of pleasure danced along her senses, not overpowering, but a simple pleasure of waking up next to her lover.

As she grew more aware, she ran her hands along the rasp of his scars against his back and the muscular hardness of his thigh resting between her legs and pressed up to her sore pussy.

Reflexively, she tightened her thighs to enjoy the muscular hardness that kept her pried open. She smiled and rocked her hips back, grinding her buttock against the thick warmth of his cock.

"Don't do that," Kendrick murmured in her ear,. His voice was slow and gravelly from waking up. The heat of his breath tickled her ear and teased her hair.

"Why not?" she said with a smile.

"You have less than an hour before the carriage shows up. You can't be late presenting your dress. Nor smelling of sex."

A ripple of tension rolled through her body. She leaned back, nestling in the curve of his arm and against his broad chest. "It is really happening? It wasn't a dream that I finished it?" Her body grew warmer as she recalled the feel of Mindil's tongue against her pussy.

"Yes," he said in a whisper. "It looked amazing."

She turned her head and kissed him. Her buttocks ground tighter against his crotch.

He spread his fingers and caught her breast, pinning her tight to his chest as he kissed her back. His lips tasted like fresh rain.

When they broke, Lily sighed. "I wish we could sleep in. I like this. Sleeping on a soft bed and a wonderful man next to me."

"Almost wish you could do it every morning?"

The tone struck her first. There was meaning hidden in his words and she could feel it to the bottom of her being. It had a longing inside it, the wishful dreams that resonated with her own growing fantasies.

He wanted her. More than just two lovers, he wanted more. He wanted to marry her.

An intense wave of white-hot sensation raced along her skin, flaring along her nerves and leaving her shaking inside. She was at a cusp of something incredible, a path that would be chosen by her next work.

Sweat prickling her brow, she stared into his blue eyes. "Yes," she whispered.

He smiled and the tension left his body. His fingertip danced along her nipples as he drew her close.

She lost herself in his shimmering eyes. Unable to look away, she kissed him. The softness of his lips was marred only by a slight scar on the corner. She thought it felt beautiful.

“Thank you,” he said when they broke apart.

“Why?”

“Because without you, I would have nothing.”

Lily wondered what would happen next. If he worked for the Martins, marriage meant that she would be forced out of High Society. Women like Mindil would continue to patron her but if Nirih’s dress went poorly, then it would mean the end of her dress shop.

A tear threatened to well from her eye. She sniffed and wiped it.

Kendrick kissed her. “Your dress is perfect.”

He kissed her again. “You are perfect.”

“You are my everything,” he finished.

Lily blushed and rolled over to nestle her body against his. Her lips sought his as she lost herself in kissing, enjoying being in the arms of a man who wanted her for the rest of his life.

She reached down with her hand, running her fingertips along his scarred flanks and down to his hip. Her fingers danced lower as she searched for his cock.

“No, no, pretty flower,” Kendrick said with a smile. He pulled his half-hard cock away from her. “You have a dress to present.”

“Just five minutes?”

He gave her a hard look and then smiled. “I last a lot longer than five minutes.”

Her insides tightened with anticipation.

Kendrick leaned back to kiss her again even as he was slipping off the bed. "You have fifteen minutes to get cleaned up. I'll get you something to eat for breakfast. Min and Has are planning on having you for lunch."

She grinned.

"... plan on bringing you lunch."

She thought the other idea sound better.



## The Dress

The battlefields of silk and satin are waged on the floors of the seamstress. The blood pours out as ribbon and the cries of the victorias are but gasp, praise, and coos.

—Neio Machifu-Kasor, *The Thread of Our Lives*

**L**ily reached out for the dress for the fifth time in a few minutes.

“It’s perfect, sweetie,” Mindil said from the other side of the room. She didn’t even look up from a flower arrangement she was toying with. The flowers glowed faintly in the light of the workshop and the perfumed scent drifted through the room.

Lily pulled back her hand. “I know, but that stitch is bothering me.”

“No one will see it.”

“They always see it. Everyone sees it, every tiny little detail. And then they talk about it.”

“And yet you were the darling of your presentation despite that.”

Lily grinned. “Until Hasan started that fire. Then no one cared that my right cuff had a slight tear in it.”

Mindil looked up for a moment, then shrugged. "If I was a guy, I'd probably consider starting a fire too. You are beautiful." She winked. "I'm not a guy though, I figured I'd wait a few years and see if I had a chance."

She grinned and returned to her flowers. "Oh wait, I did."

A flicker of lust raced along Lily's senses. She smoothed over her dress and forced a deep breath from her lungs. Her hands hovered over the ground as she tried to pry her thoughts away from the dress that she couldn't afford to ruin with a last minute alteration.

The bell rang out from the front door.

Lily's heart almost skipped a beat. She spun around and stared at the door, wondering if she could step into it to risk a look. She didn't know if Juliet would storm in with her daughter or if it was someone else.

Mindil let out a soft laugh as she strolled away from the flowers. She peered through the door and the smiled. "Has, you brought lunch?"

"Yes, but you only have a few minutes. I just saw a trio of carriages at the end of the street."

"Is it the horse-fuckers's?"

"Mindil," Hasan chided. "Be nice. And yes, Juliet is in the front so please be on your best behavior. I don't want to get you out of jail again."

Mindil stared at him and sucked on her finger slowly.

Hasan gulped. He walked over to Lily. Taking her hand, he drew her into a kiss that quickened her heart. "You'll be wonderful. I'll gag Mindil."

"I'd like to see you try," snapped Mindil playfully.

Lily giggled.

Hasan's scent swirled around her, the faint musky and flowery scent bringing a smile. "Don't worry, she can't talk with her mouth full."

Another smile.

Mindil beckoned for him. "Come here."

Hasan gave Lily another kiss and headed for his wife.

The front door rang again. This time, Lily could hear many women entering the store, their shoes clicking on the floor and the rustle of fabric.

Taking a deep breath, she glanced at the couple.

Mindil mouthed, "You'll be great."

With a smile, Lily stepped into the front room.

Juliet and Nirih were the first ones she noticed standing in her store.

Juliet wore a beautiful green dress with golden trim. It fit her curves almost perfectly. At first blush, Lily thought it was her mentor's work if it wasn't for the style of embroidery along the hems; Penir was talented at sewing fabric but avoided the northern region style of large flowing lace. In her hand, Juliet had a matching parasol.

Nirih, on the other hand, almost looked like a pale shadow next to her mother. Like all High Society women, she wore a dress but it was a plain one made of cream fabric and known as a "fitting dress" because it was held together by ties on both side.

Penir came around the two women with her hand out. She and Lily hugged before she whispered. "Are you ready?"

Birds dancing in her stomach, Lily nodded. They held the embrace for a moment before Penir stepped back.

The only other visitor was Lily's mother. Sarlin made no effort to embrace her daughter. Instead, she headed straight for one of the couches and sat properly in it. There was a coldness in her behavior.

Lily's heart almost broke as she watched her mother looking pointedly out of the window. The gulf between them had widened in the last few weeks and she wondered if there would ever be a connection again.

Instead of taking charge, Penir gave her a comforting smile and sat back down opposite to Sarlin. Juliet looked confused, her gaze going between Penir and Lily.

Lily knew that her mentor wasn't going to offer to help. She breathed a sigh of relief and then held out her hand to Nirih. "Come on, let's get you fitted."

Nirih glanced at her mother who looked at Penir.

Juliet gestured to the door. "Aren't you going back there?"

Penir leveled a look at Juliet. "Why? Lily is more than talented. She can handle a fitting while we wait."

There was a subtle emphasis on the "we" of the sentence that even Juliet couldn't deny. She sighed and nodded to her daughter before pulling up a chair to sit with the other women. She toyed with her parasol for a moment. "Do you think—"

"Hello, vis Kasins," Mindil said cheerfully as she came in holding a tray of wine glasses and a freshly misting bottle of Renault '73.

Juliet closed her mouth with a snap.

Behind Mindil, Hasan slipped from the workshop. He gave a bow to each of the five women in the room before carrying his bag out the store.

Sarlin's gaze followed him as he walked in front of the glass front.

Lily waited for a comment but her mother said nothing.

After a heartbeat, Lily took Nirih by the hand and drew her into the workshop. As soon as she could, she closed the door.

Nirih looked around, her hands grasping her dress. Sweat glistened on her brow and her wheat-colored hair was plastered to her face.

"Nervous?"

"Yes," Nirih whispered. She started to say something but then her gaze focused on her dress. A gasp slipped from her

lips. When she looked back at Lily, her eyes were shimmering. “I-Is that... mine?”

Lily smiled, a rush of excitement flooding her veins. “Yes, do you like it?”

“It’s beautiful.” Nirih let out a soft sob. “I-I’m sorry, I didn’t think it would be... I mean, I saw the different colors... and...” She pressed her hand against her lips as she gasped. “It’s so beautiful.”

Beaming herself, Lily gestured. “Come on, let’s impress our mothers.”

It took almost an hour to fit Nirih into the dress. There were a few minor alterations around her breasts and waist, but nothing that a few seconds of sewing couldn’t fit.

As she worked, she and Nirih started talking about the other parties she had already been to and her prospects. It felt hollow to Lily, after being turned away for so many years, but she couldn’t help but long for Nirih to have a different life than her own. She also couldn’t help but smile at the little gossip and tales the young woman had to share.

Finally, Lily finished and stepped back. The sheer fabric and the collar looked better than she expected. The dotted pattern obscured Nirih’s cleavage while giving emphasis to the swell of her breasts. When she moved, there were only little hints of something more.

“What do you think?”

Nirih looked at herself in the mirrors set up in the corner of the workshop. “I love it.”

Lily started to offer to take her up front but then stopped. “Do you want me to color your shoes and hair to match?”

“You can do that?”

An image of Mindil’s lips against Lily’s thumb brought a rush of excitement. She forced it out of her thoughts before

it distracted her. With a smile, she knelt in front of the young woman. "Yes. Here."

It took only a few minutes to color Nirih's shoes, hair, and eyelashes. Lily used the same colors as the dress except for the faintest hint of a pale blue that would complement the Delicate Whispers of Gold and creams that colored the dress. She finished with a sweep of her thumb against Nirih's lips to paint them.

When Nirih saw herself in the glass, she started to cry. She looked every inch a debutante as society wanted to see her: perfect skin, excellent posture, and dressed in gold.

"Ready to show your mother?"

With a brilliant smile, Nirih nodded.

Lily held her breath as she opened the door and gestured Nirih to follow.

Penir and Juliet stood up as before the young woman arrived. Lily's mother, on the other hand, remained sitting primly with a look of impatience.

Nirih came into the main room.

The gasps stopped her.

"Oh, my baby..." Juliet stepped forward, her hands out. There were tears in her eyes. "I never thought—" The words stopped as she looked at Lily. A muscle in her chin flexed for a heartbeat. "It is beautiful," she finally said before rushing for her daughter.

Penir walked over slowly, her gaze hard as she inspected the dress from a distance.

Lily's nervousness increased, though it fought with the intense high of seeing Juliet and Nirih cooing over a dress she had made.

Penir stopped next to Lily and turned so they both could watch the mother and daughter admiring the dress. "While there were choices you've made that I would have not, the results speak for themselves. There is no greater compli-

ment than being ignored in this joy. You have honored me with your skill.”

Lily had to fight a sudden tear. Looking away, she struggled to regain her composure.

As she did, she saw her mother take a casual glance toward Nirih’s dress. She looked away, much to Lily’s heartbreak.

Then Sarlin’s eyes widened and she looked back sharply. There was a look of surprise on her face that filled Lily with an intense joy as seeing Juliet’s response and getting a compliment from Penir.

Sarlin stood up, her mouth agape, and walked past toward the girls.

“Okay,” Penir said in a whisper. “That response would be right up with the Divine Couple walking in. You did a beautiful job and she’s going to attract more than her share of attention.”

The old woman gestured with her chin toward the front of the store.

There were pedestrians standing in the glass. They were peering with various looks of surprise and joy on their face. A pair of young girls and their mother looked the most interested. When the mother looked up to the store sign, Lily almost lost it again.

Feeling dizzy, Lily could only watch as she struggled with her emotions.





## Breakdown

In the wars that never end, it is the silence as you stand over the last bloody body when you finally come up to the question you can never answer: what's next.

—*Child of Blood and Steel* (Act 1, Scene 4)

A dull throbbing woke Lily up. It took her a moment to realize that the throbbing came from her head, a fuzzy taste coated her tongue, and she desperately had to pee. She had all the hallmarks of a hangover, an excessive once since she didn't remember anything besides celebrating Nirih's dress with Mindil.

With a groan, she pushed herself up into a sitting position. It took her a moment to focus enough to identify her location. When she saw the familiar walls of her bedroom, she let out a breath of relief.

Automatically, she reached behind her to seek out Kendrick, unsure if he had joined her when she lost track of her night. When her fingers stroked against a warm body, she smiled and continued to explore.

To her surprise, she didn't encounter Kendrick's muscular body nor his scars. Instead, there was only smooth, soft

skin underneath her fingertip. She stopped as she caressed along one soft roll, unsure if she could explore up or down but absolutely certain it was Mindil naked in her bed with her.

Her heart almost skipped a beat.

She smiled and closed her aching eyes to focus on her touch. She caressed along the curve and then pushed her hand up along the mound of Mindil's breast.

Lily had to turn slightly before she caught Mindil's nipple in her fingertips.

Mindil moaned. "This is my favorite way to wake up, you know."

She stretched, one thick thigh pressing against Lily's. "Well, sucking on it would be better."

Lily smiled. She turned around and opened her eyes.

Mindil was on her back, one leg hanging off the edge of the bed. Her large breasts had flattened with her position but two hard nipples stood out like tiny peaks. Below, the valleys and mountains of her belly lead into the darkened mound framed by her short dark hairs and her thighs.

"What do you think?" Despite the sultry tone, there was doubt in Mindil's voice. Lily knew where it came from. High Society had the perfect woman in mind, the ideal beauty. Mindil was far from it. She was fat, loud, and had no hint of the submission that had been driven into Lily all her life. She was barely a lady of High Society but she was everything Lily wanted.

Without hesitation, Lily turned and rolled over to her knee. She crawled a few steps slipped one knee between Mindil's. She still wore a thong from the night before, the fabric ground against her lover's leg as she spread her knees for balance. Looking into Mindil's beautiful eyes, she stretched her self across her lover and brought the hard nipple between her fingers to her lips.

Mindil moaned quietly.

Lily grinned and sucked on the nipple, pulling it into her lips enough to caress the tip with the end of her tongue. She sucked harder, working her face into Mindil's breast as she cupped the tit to hold it up.

"Oh, Lily..."

With her other hand, Lily trailed her fingertips over the bulge of her lover's belly and then down to the padded mound. Mindil was already growing damp as Lily worked one finger and then another past the thick folds and to heated depths.

Mindil moaned. "Oh, yes... no, no."

Lily drew back, popping the nipple from her lips. "What's wrong?"

"I really, really have to pee." She grimaced.

Lily's own bladder made a twinge. "Me too."

"Good. Come back in a few minutes? I'd really like to continue, if you are willing."

Lily gave Mindil's nipple a lick. "Yes, but I only have one bathroom." She rolled off Mindil and tried to ignore the pressure. "You first."

With a giggle, Mindil rolled off the bed and rushed to answer nature. As soon as she finished, Lily went in to relieve her own bladder, freshen up, and brush her teeth.

Just as Lily was about to leave the bathroom, she hesitated. She still wore her underclothes, a mismatched pair of underwear consisting of a satin underbust corset and a thong. The colors were identical, like always, but the lace patterns were starkly different. Her small breasts stood up from the fabric.

She turned to stare at the mirror. With a trembling hand, she cupped her breasts and stroked her aching hard nipples.

Her pussy clenched with heat and desire. The flutters rippled along her stomach. She was going to have sex, wonderful and enjoyable.

The corset would get in the way. She tugged on the laces along the side, working them out enough for her to pull the two halves of her underwear apart and peel it away from her skin. Her underwear quickly followed, the thin fabric tossed into a hamper and out of sight.

Breathing deeply, she cleaned herself up again, wiping away the sweat and giving her breasts a swipe and then up between the legs. Her fingers stroked along her pussy, her lips were already slick with her desires.

Lily finished and stared at herself in the mirror. She wasn't sure what she was doing, but she knew she wanted it.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and crossed the hallway. The door was unlatched but almost closed. Trembling, she pushed it open.

Mindil was back on the bed, sitting up as she stared at her toes. A nervous look on her face faded almost immediately as she looked up. She smiled broadly.

Seeing her lover on the bed, Lily stopped and admired her a moment.

"A-Am I okay?"

"You are beautiful." Lily stepped into the room and crawled up on the bed.

"Oh, Couple, so are you," breathed Mindil with a moan.

"Where was I?" Lily straddled Mindil's thigh for a moment, lowering herself enough that her own slick pussy pressed against the soft skin. Then, she lifted her other knee to slip it down between her lover's thighs.

She drank in Mindil's scent, the flowery perfume mixing in with the smell of a woman's pussy. It was sweet and musky at the same time. She lowered her head to catch

Mindil's nipple in her mouth again and sucked the hard tip into her mouth.

Settling down, she pressed her own breasts against the swell of Mindil's stomach and slid her finger down to cup the soft, puffy mons. Her lover was slick and two fingers easily slipped inside. She swirled her fingertips around, exploring the hard fold of flesh that brought soft gasps of pleasure from Mindil's lips.

Lily sucked on the nipple harder but her attention was focused on her fingers as she swirled around the wet folds. Her fingertips slipped down until she found the clenching opening. She slowly plunged one finger into Mindil's tunnel and began to pump in and out.

Mindil clenched the sheets, tugging them as her back arched.

Encouraged, Lily added a second finger.

Underneath her mouth, Mindil's body shook as her hips rose to meet each of Lily's thrust. She gasped and tugged at the sheets harder.

Lily used her other hand to cup Mindil's breast for a moment, teasing it up into her mouth. She loved how she could bury her entire face into the softness of her lover's breast until she was blinded to everything but the nipple in her mouth and the slickness clenching at her finger.

She pulled back, took a deep breath, and buried her face again.

Mindil writhed underneath her.

Lily rode it for a while as she built up her courage to do something else. She knew what Mindil wanted, the same thing Lily wanted to give her, but Lily still had some trepidation. It was exciting and terrifying at the same time.

Finally, she was ready. Taking a deep breath, she released Mindil's nipple and pulled her fingers out.

Mindil whimpered. "The other one? Please?"

“Sure,” Lily whispered. She lifted her hand from Mindil’s crotch to cup the other breast with her glistening fingers.

She smiled up at Mindil but then slid her body down. Her nipples traced along Mindil’s belly, the hard tips flipping against the rolls before she settled into the gap between Mindil’s thighs.

“Oh, Couple,” came the gasping response.

Lily took a deep breath. The smell of an excited woman flooded her senses, heady and sweet at the same time. She took another before lowering her mouth to the heated flesh.

The first taste of woman was sweet and tangy, a perfumed scent that clung to her tongue.

Mindil’s thighs clamped around her, muffling out the cry of pleasure.

Surprised, Lily was pinned in place. Her tongue lapped against the flooded clitoris but she couldn’t pull back even if she wanted to. After a moment, she bore down, forcing her mouth hard against Mindil’s pussy and lapped harder. At the same time, she used her hands to pry the clenching legs apart.

Despite Mindil’s thick thighs, the powerful muscles underneath resisted her for a moment. Then Mindil relented and parted them. She thrust her hips up against Lily’s mouth.

Lily lifted herself up on her knees, backside sticking out, and bore down to lick. She slid her fingers up along Mindil’s inner thighs to bring them to the wet opening. Once again, she thrust into Mindil with her fingers.

Juices flooded her mouth. Mindil’s cry filled the air.

Lily closed her eyes and continued to focus on her task of bringing Mindil to an orgasm with her fingers and tongue. After a few seconds, her jaw hurt but she didn’t care.

The little cries of pleasure kept her going as she alternated between lapping and sucking.

Just as Mindil reached another orgasm, a clenching of her thighs and a flood of juices, Lily was about ready to stop. With a gasp, she lifted her head and looked up Mindil's beautiful body.

A tongue against her own pussy stopped her.

Lily's eyes grew wide.

"It's Hasan," panted Mindil.

Hasan's tongue swirling along Lily's pussy as his hands gripped her buttocks tightly. Already on edge from her own pleasuring, it felt like liquid pleasure coursing through her body.

Lily lumped forward, pressing her chin against Mindil's pubic mound as she clutched her lover's thighs.

He lapped at her pussy, his thumbs holding her labia apart, as his tongue swirled and probed.

Lily gasped and writhed, her pleasure growing into an intense fire. Her legs trembled as he dug the tip into her pussy, swirling it around the drenched channel before sliding up.

When he tongued her sphincter, her eyes opened wide and flare of ecstasy flashed in her veins. He continued to swirl the slick tip against the clenched opening, teasing and probing it.

Lily's eyes rolled up with pleasure, her entire world focusing on the intense pleasures. She panted and leaned into Mindil's crotch, her breasts grinding against the thighs.

"Is he licking what I think he is?"

Hasan lapped harder, his fingers digging into. She felt the tight opening parting, making it easier for him to probe deeper.

The forbidden pleasures grew stronger as she found herself pushing back.

“Does it feel good?”

“Y-Yes.”

Mindil smiled broadly. “You want him to continue?”

“Oh, Couple, yes.”

“More?” The question hung in the air. Mindil was asking if Lily wanted Hasan to fuck her. More than fuck her, he wanted to drive his hard cock into her ass, to fill her in a way no man ever had.

Lily let out a deep breath. Her insides were burning with desire. Both Hasan and Mindil had showed her the pleasure of teasing her backside. She rocked her hips against the probing tongue.

She wanted it. There was nothing that either of them has indicated it would feel less than pleasurable.

Hasan stopped, pulling his mouth away. “Lily?”

Lily looked over her shoulder at him. His intense gaze brought a quiver of pleasure coursing through her. He wanted her, more than anything else in the world.

She wanted it too. She nodded. “Please?”

Hasan smiled and shoved his face back into her ass and pussy, lapping and swirling.

Lily turned back and gasped. She tried to lap at Mindil’s cunt with the same speed and fervor but it was almost impossible. She moaned and ground her face against her lover’s pussy.

Mindil reached down and ran her fingers through Lily’s hair.

Gasping, Lily tried to lap at her again but the probing tongue made it impossible to get the words out. She tried, her lips working, but it took an intense effort to form them.

Just as she managed to gather her senses, two of Hasan’s fingers drove into her pussy. There was little resistance as his digits swirled into her liquid depths. The caresses along her inner walls brought more pleasure.



Hasan withdrew his fingers after only a few seconds. Then worked his fingertips up and against her asshole. The pressure was slick and persistent.

The tight opening relented as he eased on finger in.

Lily's mouth opened wider as she froze, her body trembling with the effort.

Hasan was gentle but firm, sliding his slick finger in and out of the tight opening until he could feel it relax around him.

"Mindil stroked her face. "There you go, just let him go. It feels good, doesn't it? Feels good?"

"Y-Yes," whimpered Lily, her eyes blurred as she pushed back against the probing finger. Hasan's digits were long and steady, it felt like a tiny cock sliding in and out of her back passage. Every time she pushed back, she could feel the ridges of his knuckles caressing against untouched places inside her.

Hasan twisted his finger and continued to pump into her.

Just as she felt opened up, he added a second finger. The pressure was intense, growing with every stroke and second. Her opening resisted his fingers, the tightness making it hard to thrust, but she wanted to feel more.

He continued to slide in and out. His mouth lowered down to kiss her tail bone and along the curve of her buttocks. His hand came up to cup her pussy, easing two fingers into her cunt as he thrust into both holes with steady, irresistible pressure.

Remembering Mindil, Lily forced her mouth against her lover's pubic mound and drove her tongue into the fleshy folds. The taste of woman flooded her tongue as she lapped harder. Her gasps puffed out her cheeks, tickling Mindil's cunt before blowing up in the tiny space between the two sets of lips.

When Hasan pulled his fingers out, he left behind an empty feeling. Lily moaned, knowing he was about to replace it with something much harder. Her pussy drooled with desire, coating her inner thighs with her growing lust.

The bed shook as he positioned himself. His knees pushed Lily's apart. His cock, narrow but long, rested against the crevice of her buttocks. The heat of it seeped into her skin as he rocked back and forth, sawing it along her tail bone.

"Ready, flower?" asked Mindil.

Lily looked up, her mouth pressed against the soaked opening. Her blurred vision made it hard to focus past the Mindil's belly but she nodded anyways. "Yes," she said in a muffled voice.

Mindil looked up and nodded. "Be gentle."

"Always," Hasan said in a husky voice.

His cock slid back.

Lily moaned as she felt the head slide down to her crack, dropping to lodge against the slicked opening. Hasan's fingers stroked along her inner cheeks, pulling them apart. His cock pressed tighter against the opening, opening her up even more.

She held her breath.

Then Hasan's cock slipped down to slide along the furrow of her labia and press against her opening.

Lily's eyes widened with surprise, her mouth opening as she ground against Mindil's pussy.

Hasan drove into her pussy, plunging his entire length into the searing hot depths of her body. Every ridge of his achingly hard cock teased against her senses as he filled her to the furthest depths.

His balls smacked against her clitoris before he drew back, plunging it back in.

Lily moaned as her face was ground into Mindil's body. She felt comforted by Mindil's thick thighs as much as the padding underneath her face. She smiled, remembering how she ground her face into her lover's large breast.

Hasan thrust quickly but deeply, each thrust plunging deep until his hips smacked against her ass.

He only took a few more strokes before pulling out. When the cock pressed against her, the dripping head was once again aimed directly against her clenching sphincter.

Lily managed to pry her mouth from Mindil. "Please?" she gasped.

Hasan gripped her tightly as he eased into her. The hardness of his cock easily penetrated the tight opening, prying to open. It felt like a burning brand, huge and swollen. He moaned deeply, his body trembling, as he pulled back and slid it deeper.

The hardness inside her opening was something she had never felt before. Untouched nerves screamed out in ecstasy as his cock head slid along her inner depths, filling her completely as the tight ring of her ass traced every ridge and bump.

Mindil panted with desire, her fingers stroking Lily's hair and face. Her pussy grew wetter, soaking Lily's face with every thrust of her hips. "Does it feel good?"

"Oh... yes..." Lily whimpered. "So hard."

Hasan thrust faster, plunging deeper into her relaxed opening as he took deep strokes that filled her completely. Soon, he was balls deep in her ass, sending her toward a cliff of ecstasy.

Lily gasped and whimpered. She tried one more time to lick but couldn't. Instead, she lifted her head and let Hasan's thrusts drive her into Mindil's pubic mound. Her lips trail up until she was kissing her lover's belly while Hasan fucked her lovingly.

There was no way of stopping the pleasure that crested inside her. She lost herself in a world of pleasure and ecstasy, punctuated by their moans.

As her tight passage clenched around his cock, Hasan thrust faster. It grew slicker as he pounded faster, driving into her until she was right on the edge of pleasure and discomfort.

Shudders coursed through her body. She cried out loudly as she came again and again, her body shaking.

Her orgasms rose and fell. After countless ones, she felt Hasan finally reaching his end. His cock swelled inside her, his thrusts grew more erratic and powerful. Every drive of his cock that plunged into her ass ground her tighter against her other lover's body.

Hasan came, a flood of molten cum painted her insides. He groaned and rammed it home, keeping it there as his cock surged again and again inside her.

He slumped against her back, pinning her. "Thank... you," he gasped.

Lily sighed happily, the afterglow of her orgasms still pulsing in her veins. She was felt comforted and safe in their arms. They had supported her so much in the last few weeks, helping her finish the dress.

She realized she was crying. Tears ran down her cheeks as the stress seemed to crack inside her. Her struggles to manage her life, to finish Nirih's dress, or even survive becoming a kudame came rushing back.

Mindil gasped. "Oh, flower? What's wrong?"

Hasan pulled out of her and rolled to the side, concern in his eyes. "I didn't..." his voice trailed off. The intenseness in his eyes was back again, but it had switched from seeking to pleasure her to something else, he was worried about her now. She could feel his desire to take care of her, to comfort her. He pulled her into his arms. "Come here."

Somehow, seeing his intenseness fading away felt right. She sank against him, burying her face into his shoulder. A sob wracked her body.

“Has?”

“She’s okay, she just realized it was over. She just needs to let it out.”

Mindil scooted up to Lily and held her from the other side. Together, the three clasped each other as Lily cried.



## The Event

Around the budding youth of the virginal flower, the gardeners circle around as the flower's beauty reflects their own efforts.

—Magolan dea Kasin, *Child, Offer Your Hand*

**Lily** sipped on a glass of wine as she strolled through one of the many gardens of her former home, Manor Rose. Everywhere she looked, she felt a pang of sadness about leaving. With her one hand, she traced along the delicately-shaped stone roses that marked the balconies before pausing to look at the giant statue of roses installed in the largest of the pools.

Her glass trembled as she took a deep breath. The pressure of her corset dug into her ribs and sides, reminding her that after tonight, she was officially no longer a be-dame. She would be a kudame for the rest of her days, slowly shuffled off to the edges of High Society to serve those who followed.

“Care for refreshments, kudame?” It was a serving boy, one that Lily remembered holding as a baby. He didn’t seem to recognize her despite the years going to the same parties.

"No, thank you."

"Yes, thank you," said Mindil as she swept up. With one casual hand, she snatched up two pieces and popped one into her mouth. She wore a beautiful flowered dress that emphasized her large breasts and large hips. It has been expertly adjusted so there was no strain on the stitching or buttons but it followed every curve of her body. The color, thanks to Lily, was perfectly matched to the rest of the party.

Mindil grinned and ate the other piece. "Oh, your mother's cooks were..." She stopped. "The cooks here are talented."

Feeling slightly ill, Lily could only nod.

"I'm sorry, Flower. I didn't mean to remind you."

"No, I should be used to it by now."

"Worried?"

Lily shrugged. She looked at the people around her. In the side garden, there were mostly younger members of High Society, in their twenties and thirties. She spotted a few debutantes in the center of circles of attention. The young girls had spent much of their lives training for nights like this and she could see it their forced grace and polite jokes.

She remembered when she was the same place many years ago. Being surrounded by attentive besires was exhilarating. Every time they laughed, her heart would beat faster in hope one of them would offer their hand. Even ten years later, she remembered the desperate longing she felt to make them smile one last time. She also remembered the thousand rules of etiquette that haunted her thoughts, not to mention weeks of posture and grace training.

And then came Hasan. He was handsome and attentive, more so than anyone else. There was no question he would submit a bid to Lily's father for her hand, but there was al-



ways a thrill when multiple suitors made an offer. In many ways, a bidding war was a woman's peak in High Society; Sarlin had almost a dozen men vying for her hand. Wealth and comfort followed her mother's life ever since.

At least until the fire.

With a sigh, she looked across the pool covered in golden roses to an empty spot on the far side. Before the fire, there was a gazebo there, surrounded by tall hedges and a perfect spot for the whispered conversations for a debutante wanting a few minutes to breathe.

"You look upset," said Mindil. "What are you thinking about?"

Lily chuckled. "Hasan."

"Well, girl, you can't have him."

Lily looked over. Mindil was grinning.

"At least to yourself. We come as a pair and he isn't allowed to have a second wife. So, if you want to ride his cock —"

"Min!"

"—then you better be willing to let me eat you out too."

Blushing, Lily stared in shock. When Mindil grinned back, she giggled. "I can live with that."

They shared a laugh until Hasan came up. He wore a pitch-black suit with a yellow tie and matching undershirt.

"Good evening, vis Kasins. How are the two most beautiful women in all of Tarsan?"

Mindil kissed him, an appropriately chaste public kiss of a husband and wife. Their marriage bracelets clinking as he caught her hand and held it up. When they broke, Mindil looked into his eyes for a moment and Lily could feel the affection between them.

Hasan broke the embrace and addressed Lily. "And Dame dea Kasin?" The missing "ku" or "be" was poignant but appreciated.

Society said that he couldn't kiss her in public but she wanted to kiss him just like Mindil. She ducked her head demurely and held out her hand. Her breath quickened as he brought it up to his lips and kissed the back of it, his eyes locked on hers with the same intense look of desire that warmed her so many years ago.

His lips lingered on her skin for a moment. Then he straightened. Another second passed before he let her hand slip from his grip.

They chatted for a while, pretending that they weren't all fucking only bells ago in her bedroom. It was a ruse, one that Lily found herself easily settling into. She smiled as she imagined it continuing, pretending to be distant but enjoying the passions in the privacy of their rooms.

In the middle, Hasan interjected with a sudden question. "Lily, do you think Kendrick will be here?"

She had the same hopes, a girlish fantasy of Kendrick putting a bid for her hand in the same place which placed her on a path of becoming a kudame. She worried her lip for a second before remembering it wasn't womanly. She sighed and finally said, "I don't know."

Mindil held up a small dish of quiche. She had taken a few bites out of it. "Has, you need to get the recipe for this, it is delicious."

Hasan nodded but didn't look down. Instead, his eyes scanned across the crowds. Lily saw him ball his hand into a fist for a moment before relaxing it.

Lily watched him. She could tell that he was focusing again, a razor-like intensity to his actions. "Hasan?"

"Sorry," he said slowly turning back. "I was looking for someone."

"Who? Him?" asked Mindil and then gestured to a familiar man in a black suit approaching them.

It was Relik. The older man seemed at ease in the crowds despite not being a Kasin. “Ah, via Kasins, I bid you a good evening.”

Lily smiled and held out her hand. He took it and gave a brief, chaste kiss before doing the same for Mindil.

“I have to say, this is quite an expressive affair.”

“Mother always had a talent for these events.” Lily glanced at Hasan and then to the empty spot where the gazebo was. An unsettling feeling gnawed at her gut before she returned her attention to the older man. “I’m surprised to see you here.”

Relik chuckled. “Because I’m a Martin? Normally, yes, but it isn’t unprecedented. I’ve enjoyed the company of many Kasins over the years in our own family presentations. The opportunities to establish agreements between families has always been a tradition, though it can be expensive to marry outside of extended families.”

Like only had hints of the marriages between families, she had lived her entire life in Soldir tca Kasin, her birthplace.

Hasan stepped closer. “Why were you here?”

Relik looked at him and then to Lily. “I was providing collateral in an important financial transaction.”

“Collateral...” her voice trailed off. As far as she knew, there was only one thing the older man wanted: Kendrick working for him. He had provided money to Lily’s lover for her hand but then Kendrick had ruined it in a drunken rage. She frowned for a second and then looked at him quizzically.

Relik tilted his head and nodded slightly with a faint smile.

Lily pressed her hand to her lips to mute her gasp. Her heart beat faster as she stared at him.

Hasan looked back and forth before a scowl crossed his face.

“Flower?” asked Mindil. “What is he talking about it?”

Lily sniffed at the sudden tears in her eyes. “I-I think Kendrick is going to make an offer.”

Mindil gasped and hugged her. “Oh, Flower, that’s wonderful.”

Relik bowed. “If you’ll forgive—”

“Lily!” called Juliet. The older woman was beaming as she rushed over.

Lily didn’t have a chance to even stiffen before she was pulled into a tight hug.

“She has offers! Multiple! Five of them in the first hour!” She was sobbing as she embraced Lily. “Thank you! Thank you so very much.”

Unsure of what to do, Lily hugged Juliet back.

Juliet broke the embrace after a few moments. She wiped the tears from her eyes before saying, “I’m so sorry for being a weed. I didn’t know, but your dress was so beautiful and... and... five offers!”

She stepped back, still wiping her face. “My baby is getting married!”

Lily stared at her until long after Juliet was gone.

“Well, you’ll be charging a hundred times more for your services after this,” Mindil said with a giggle.

Relik bowed. “It sounds like I am no longer needed. Please, having a good evening, vis Kasins. I wish you the best of luck in the coming years.”

For the second time, Lily watched someone leaving. She felt elated and surprised, as if all the puzzle pieces had settled into place. She smiled, struggling with the urge to cry herself.

“Where’s Hasan?”

Lily jerked, as if ice poured into her. She looked around but Hasan wasn't near. "Maybe he's getting you more food."

"Maybe," Mindil said with a wary tone. She didn't sound convinced either. She turned and leaned against the balcony, her large rear sticking out.

Lily worried her bottom lip for a moment. "I'll wait too. I'm sure he's just getting something."

Both of them stood quietly. The tension grew in Lily's gut. It gnawed at the elation of having Nirih's success and the hope that Kendrick would make an offer for her hand. She didn't have to be a kudame, she could become a married woman. Of course, that meant she would cease to be High Society if Relik had his way, but the idea of spending the rest of her life with Kendrick brought a smile to her lips.

Time slowed down, each passing minute feeling like an hour.

Mindil finally stood up. "He better be getting food."

"What if—?"

She glanced at Lily. "You don't think he refused to let Kendrick go, do you?"

"The last I saw, he was listening to us talk to Relik."

A glare furrowed Mindil's brow. "That shit-headed, piss-guzzling excuse for a sloppy asshole. If he is trying to start some duel again, I swear on the Couple, I will..."

Her voice trailed off as a ripple of noise raced along the crowds.

As one, Mindil and Lily looked at each other.

Lily started forward, but had to hike up her dress to rush toward the center of the noise. She could hear Mindil following after, their heels tapping loudly on the ground as they entered the main hall.

When she saw Hasan and Kendrick on the main stairs leading up to the floor, her heart skipped a beat. Hasan had

two swords in his hands, brandished the sheathed weapons at Kendrick who was coming down the stairs. Behind Kendrick was Sarlin and Lily's father, Gainik. Both of the Lily's parents looked both shocked and annoyed as they watched the two younger men speaking.

"... damned by the Couples if I let you ruin her life!" Hasan announced.

Kendrick slowly put his arms behind his back, hooking his thumbs together. The air around him wavered slightly and wisps of mist began to crawl up the stairs.

Lily gaped for a moment and a sick feeling gathered in her gut. Hasan had done the the same thing ten years ago, nothing had changed.

No, something had changed.

Setting her jaw, she stormed forward. "Hasan da Kasin ne Pilnok!" she yelled over the whispering crowds.

Hasan jumped and looked around until he saw her. His eyes widened. "Lily—"

Above him, Kendrick looked surprised also.

"No!" Lily screamed. "Not this time!" She reached the stairs and stomped up them, cracking a heel in the process. Stumbling forward, she grabbed for his swords but missed. Her hand caught his elbow.

"Lily," Hasan started in a quieter voice, "I just—"

She used her other hand and grabbed the swords. Yanking them out of his slack grip, she fumbled with the surprising weight. They were heavier than she expected but the anger gave her enough strength to throw the weapons down the stairs.

Tears burned in her eyes as she glared at him. "Not this time. Not with everything else going on."

"B-But, I—"

"No, I—" This time, his mouth kept working but there was only silence coming from his voice. She could feel the

vibrations of him speaking through her hand but not from her ears.

A pressure draped over her, muffling the world around her as she felt an urge to look away. It was Mindil's power prying her away.

Lily reached back and slapped Hasan hard, her open palm cracking against his cheek and shattering the silence around him.

Mindil gasped as she came up the stairs.

Lily sniffed as she looked at her lady lover. "We need to finish this, right here."

Mindil looked like she was going to say something, but then nodded. Closing her eyes for a moment, she twisted her face in concentration.

Ripples of power rolled over her and Lily felt the urge to look away from Hasan fade away. Peeking up, she saw that most of the rest of the audience was also looking away including her mother and father.

Kendrick stood there, tense as he took deep breaths.

Lily gasped and turned back to Hasan. "What are you doing?"

"I won't let you marry him."

"Why not?"

"I... I..." There were tears in his eyes. "I love you."

"I know that. I've known that for a long time."

"I don't want to lose you, Lily. Not after all this."

Frowning, Lily glanced at Mindil who shrugged sheepishly.

"I'm sorry, Lily, we never really got a chance to talk about what we decided."

Hasan looked back and forth. "Decided?"

Lily took a deep breath before she relaxed her grip on his elbow. She looked him in the face before responding. "Hasan, you aren't going to lose me. I love you, Mindil, and

Kendrick. All of you are wonderful, bright people who have brought me joy.”

“If you are married...”

“What? I’m going to stop fucking you?”

Kendrick snorted.

Hasan let out a whimper.

Lily smiled and wiped the tears. “Don’t be a fool. You are on my list, right? Just like I’m on yours?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Then, what’s wrong with us just enjoying each other? As two couples? Four lovers?”

In the silence pooled around them, Hasan took a shuddering breath. “We can?”

Lily kissed him right where she slapped him. “As long as you stop being a weed. It doesn’t have to be public, but that doesn’t mean the occasional night together is inappropriate for us, don’t you think?”

Hasan shook. He looked at Kendrick who shrugged.

“All that matters is Lily is happy, Has,” Kendrick finally said.

With a frown, Hasan looked at his wife. Then he did a double take. “Mindil?”

Lily turned. When she saw a trickle of blood running from Mindil’s nose, she gasped. “Min!?”

Mindil wiped it. “S-Sorry. There are a lot of gossip magics trying to break me. You might need to hurry.” She smiled and wiped it again. “I’ve never shielded a fight in the middle of a party like this.”

Lily’s heart was beating faster. She turned back to Hasan. “If you can still have me, will you back down?”

He nodded.

Lily turned to Mindil. “And you are okay with the four of us?”

Mindil grinned.



With her heart growing. "Husband-to-be?"

"Anything you wish."

Lily suddenly had a playful idea. "Even fucking Hasan's ass for being a weed?"

Hasan inhaled sharply.

Kendrick's smile grew and she saw a bulge growing underneath his jeans. "Only if he wants it."

Lily finally turned back to Hasan. She stroked her palms along the sides of his suit coat. "Hasan? Are you okay with this? All four of us. No more cheating, no more sneaking around."

Hasan looked back and forth between the three of them.

"You'll stay married and still get to enjoy all four of us. But it won't be me and you or Mindil and you. It is all four. Together sometimes, pairing off sometimes. But you have to share. You are going to have times with your lovely wife and my husband-to-be. There will be times when it is you and me and him. All of us, together."

Hasan took a deep breath. "I'm sorry."

"Do you agree?"

A tear rolled down his cheek. "Yes!"

Lily pulled him into a tight hug. She held him as she felt his body trembling underneath. Then movement caught her attention.

Looking up, she saw Relik bowing to her as he stepped back and walked away. Her mouth opened in surprise as he appeared to be completely unaffected by Mindil's magic.

It only took a moment. She pulled back. "No, you men need to resolve this publicly. I know you have rules that I don't understand but I also know that he cannot just ignore your threat. I don't care how, but Kendrick needs to win my hand. He's still High Society for tonight."

She glanced at Kendrick for confirmation.

He nodded.

“Good. Now lose for my husband-to-be.”

## Birthday Wishes

What is done in the privacy of closed doors, darkened houses, and in the backs of carriages is known but never spoken.

—Sinisal Dakor-Gains, *Affairs of Society*

**L**ily entered inn room and closed the door behind her. It was the same room that she had woken up in before—Kendrick’s room—but over the last year they had remodeled it to make it far more comfortable to enjoy for more than a night.

The straw bed had been replaced with a giant bed with thick posters and a mattress made of the finest silk. The top quilt was a payment in trade for a dress as were the embroidered pillows. She smiled as she ran her finger along the mattress and then headed over to the dressers to set down her bags.

She considered working but then let the urge pass. It was her birthday, the one day of a year she didn’t have to work.

Instead, she worked the laces of her dress open and tugged the fabric off her shoulder. The warm air brushed across her skin. She pulled the laces further apart to tug it

down off her breasts and reveal her satin corset and the matching panties underneath.

She pushed it down to her ankles and stepped out of it.

“Well, I thought it was your birthday,” Mindil purred from behind her.

Lily’s heart and pussy twinged with excitement. She straightened and looked over her shoulder.

Mindil stood in the opening of the door between the two rooms. She wore a silk nightgown that hung off her breasts and hips. Her breasts stuck up from the shimmering fabric, tipped by two already hard nipples.

Lily smiled broadly and turned to face her lover. When she stepped forward, she left her dress behind and was wearing only her corset and panties. “Hello, beautiful.”

Mindil held out her arms and stepped forward to give her a hug. “Happy birthday, my beautiful flower.”

Lily caught Mindil’s chin and kissed her. It was soft and sweet.

Mindil moaned and tightened her grip, splaying her hands down Lily’s flanks to her hips. Her fingertips slip underneath the strap of Lily’s underwear, tugging away from her body as she reached down to cup Lily’s ass.

Lily melted in the embrace, kissing passionately as Mindil’s expert fingers caress the delicate flesh between her legs. She lifted one leg, dragging it along Mindil’s thigh until she found a comfortable spot against the wide hip.

Mindil slipped her fingers around to cup Lily’s pussy, then slipped her finger past the silk covering her pussy and up against her clitoris. “Happy birthday,” she whispered.

“Does that mean I’m going to get a present?”

“This isn’t enough?”

“Not until Ken comes home.”

"Well," Mindil said with a kiss. "How about I give you a substitute? She looked over her shoulder. "Well, come on, Has."

Lily's smile grew wider as Hasan came into the room. He wore nothing but a yellow ribbon tied around his already erect cock. She giggled as he turned around, showing off his slender body to her.

To Mindil, she said, "That is the perfect present."

"Good because I really want to enjoy our desert together," purred Mindil as she sank to her knees in front of Lily.

Lily gasped as Mindil grabbed Lily's leg and hooked it over her shoulder. Her red lips tilted up only moments before she pressed it against Lily's sex. The liquid slickness of her tongue sent waves of pleasure coursing along Lily's senses.

She let out a coo and clutched Mindil's head. Digging her fingers into her lover's hair, she leaned into the lapping tongue.

Hasan walked behind her, grinning widely.

When he dropped to his knees behind her, inches from her ass, a surge of heat and lust flooded through her body. She moaned and ground her hips into Mindil's face.

Mindil made agreeable noises and lapped harder, the tip of her tongue teasing Lily's clitoris as much as the wide edges swirling around her opening.

Hasan's breath was hot against her ass as he drove his mouth between her cheeks. His tongue was just as sure as it teased against her puckered opening.

Lily whimpered loudly, reaching back for Hasan to keep balanced as the couple assaulted her body with slick pleasures. Her hips rocked back and forth, trying to get more as they laved her to one orgasm and then another.

Soon, her entire body was writhing between the two. Her fingers slipped off their heads as she slumped forward but caught us.

Mindil pulled back, her face glistening. "Think she's ready, Has?"

"I hope so," he said as he stood up. His cock, hot and slick, ran along her thigh. She leaned forward but his arms slipped underneath hers to cup her breast and pull her body tight to his.

"I would very much would like the fuck the birthday girl." His breath was hot against her ear.

She moaned and reached back. "Yes."

Together, they inched over to the bed. She rolled on her back, hiking up one leg and the the other to reveal her spit-slicked folds.

Hasan waited no time lining up his shaft to her pussy and sliding in. The orgasms and pleasure removed any resistance for his member and it slid to the balls with a single stroke.

She arched her back and cried out.

Her lover thrust tenderly, driving deep into her with wet strokes. The sound of their excitement, wet and splashing, echoed against the walls and blended with Mindil's moans as Lily's other lover leaned against a poster and stroked her pussy.

Lily's world focused on the hard shaft pumping into her, the ridges teased against her inner walls. Another orgasm rushed through her, fast and sweet. She clutched Hasan's ass to encourage him to thrust faster.

He took the silent command easily, driving into her faster until both the bed and her body shook with the impact of his hips against her upturned pussy with every stroke.

The door clicked open.

Lily glanced over. When she saw Kendrick coming in wearing his uniform, she smiled and then returned her attention to Hasan. Trembling, she clutched his buttocks tighter, enjoying the flex of muscles as she pried his cheeks apart.

“Got started early?” asked Kendrick.

Mindil pushed herself off the bed and came over to him. She started working on his shirt. “She’ll be ready when you are.”

Kendrick kissed her as he stripped. With one foot, he shoved the door shut. Even from the opposite room, Lily could smell water and ozone coming off his body.

“Hello, sailor,” Mindil purred as she knelt in front of his thick cock. With a grin, she slipped it into her mouth.

Hasan thrust faster, driving deeper.

Lily looked up at him. She knew what she was going to ask next and it brought an intense heat boiling deep inside her. “Has?”

He looked at her, his cock growing harder by the second.

She gave him her sweetest smile even as she was pulling his cheeks further apart. “For my birthday, could Ken have you first?”

Hasan’s cock exploded inside her, an intense heat flooding her depths. He groaned and drove hard into her, holding it still as his length pulsed deep inside her clenching sex. With a shudder, he pulled out and drove it back in, forcing his cum from her slit.

“Is that a yes?”

His cock flexed again. He nodded and tried to say something. It came out as a croak. Then he cleared his throat. “Yes.”

Mindil popped Kendrick’s cock head from her mouth. “There you go, all ready?”

Kendrick looked down and then at Lily. “Planned this?”

She moaned through the orgasm of anticipation driving through her. It tickled against her senses, searing the ends as she waited. “Y-Yes!”

Her husband, her beautiful husband, didn’t say anything as he walked over and positioned himself behind Hasan’s thrusting buttocks.

Lily whimpered and then gasped as another orgasm took her.

From her vantage point, she couldn’t see anything but Mindil’s delighted gasp and Hasan freezing told her exactly where Kendrick’s cock head was. With a slow moan, he reached out to grab Hasan’s shoulder and slowly pushed forward.

Hasan’s cock grew larger and hotter with every inch. He pushed forward but it only seated him fully into the saddle of her legs. His eyes flickered as he let out a gasping shudder.

Then, his cock once again flooding her insides, he pushed back against Kendrick.

Kendrick let out a moan as he sank further. Lily could feel the vibrations of his cock through the hardness of Hasan’s cock. It twitched and moved differently as Hasan was filled completely.

Mindil crawled on the bed and peered up. “You okay?”

Hasan shuddered and nodded, a nervous smile playing across his lips. “I’ll never get used to this.”

“He’ll be gentle,” Mindil assured.

Kendrick made an agreeing noise before he began to thrust into Hasan. Every slide shoved Hasan’s cock deeper into Lily’s cunt, driving with an intensity that matched his gaze.

Lily stared into his eyes and pulled him tightly. She could feel Kendrick’s hips and shaft teasing her fingers. She loved the slickness and the heat as it drove into her, and then the



welcoming thrust of Hasan as he impaled himself on Kendrick's cock before driving into Lily.

Kendrick didn't last long. He thrust faster into Hasan, strokes that shook all three of their bodies. The bed rattled with the impact of his force. Then, he let out the familiar groan as he came.

Lily's pussy clenched as she remembered how it felt to have her husband's cum flooding her body. She pulled herself up to kiss Hasan who had frozen, his body shaking with his own pleasures and his cock pouring liquid heat into her body.

"Fuck," whispered Mindil. She held her belly up with one hand while fingered herself with the other. Her movements were frantic and desperate.

Lily reached over and added her own fingers, thrusting into the liquid depths as Hasan and Kendrick finished coming.

Kendrick pulled out gently. "Not exactly where I thought I'd start."

Hasan chuckled. He sighed and pulled out. His narrower cock dripped with their juices, clear and creamy. "Me either."

Looking down, Kendrick held up his finger. "Let me clean up, then I'd like to fuck the birthday girl."

Lily squirmed for a moment. Her thoughts were burning with lust. It took her a moment to concentrate enough to resume fingering Mindil.

When Kendrick came back, Lily pointed to the bed. "On bottom. I want to ride you."

He chuckled and crawled on the bed, his weight drove it down and she slid toward him. He managed to gracefully get fully on the bed, head on his pillow.

Lily moaned with lust as she straddled his body and grabbed his cock. It was thick and slick in her hand, just as

she loved it. With a shuddering breath, she slid it to her pussy and sank down on it. Unlike Hasan's shaft, it was far thicker and stretched her out. She loved his shaft as she settled down on his cock before pumping her body.

After a few strokes, her body was humming once again with pleasure. Throwing back her hair, she looked over at Hasan who was slowly pumping his shaft with one hand and fingering Mindil with the other.

"Come on," she said and wiggled her ass.

Mindil let out another giggle. "I like this idea. Mind if I use that husband of yours?"

Lily clamped her inner walls on his shaft. "This is mine."

Mindil crawled up, her breasts and body swinging for a moment. "I only want his mouth right now." She got up on her legs and unsteadily crossed the bed.

Hasan crawled up behind Lily. His cock, still slick with her juices, bumped against her tail bone. He stroked his hand around her sides to cup her breast.

Lily moaned and lifted her ass up. "There is one place Kendrick can't go."

Her sphincter clenched as she felt Hasan position himself. His head was slick and hot as it pressed against her puckered opening. She sank down against it, forcing the member into the tight opening even as she impaled herself on Kendrick's shaft.

Mindil finished straddling Lily's husband's face. Sinking down, she ground her own pussy against his mouth before leaning forward to grab Lily's face with both hands.

"Happy birthday to the loveliest dame I have ever known."

Though the words failed her, Lily couldn't disagree. She drove herself down on the two cocks impaling her body and kissed Mindil passionately. She had everything she wanted now: a husband who would do anything for her, lovers

who played together, and a life that was stable. It was a far cry from a year ago. She wasn't a kudame, she wasn't really a tadame either. She was just a dame, a woman who found everything she needed.



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## About D. Moonfire

D. Moonfire is the remarkable intersection of a computer nerd and a scientist. He inherited a desire for learning, endless curiosity, and a talent for being a polymath from both of his parents. Instead of focusing on a single genre, he writes stories and novels in many different settings ranging from fantasy to science fiction. He also throws in the occasional romance or forensics murder mystery to mix things up.

In addition to having a borderline unhealthy obsession with the written word, he is also a developer who loves to code as much as he loves writing.

He lives near Cedar Rapids, Iowa with his wife, numerous pet computers, and a pair of highly mobile things of the male variety.

You can see more work by D. Moonfire at his website at <https://d.moonfire.us/>. His fantasy world, Fedran, can be found at <https://fedran.com/>.



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# Fedran

Fedran is a world caught on the cusp of two great ages.

For centuries, the Crystal Age shaped society through the exploration of magic. Every creature had the ability to affect the world using talents and spells. The only limitation was imagination, will, and the inescapable rules of resonance. But as society grew more civilized, magic became less reliable and weaker.

When an unexpected epiphany seemingly breaks the laws of resonance, everything changed. Artifacts no longer exploded when exposed to spells, but only if they were wrapped in cocoons of steel and brass. The humble fire rune becomes the fuel for new devices, ones powered by steam and pressure. These machines herald the birth of a new age, the Industrial Age.

Now, the powers of the old age struggle against the onslaught of new technologies and an alien way of approaching magic. Either the world will adapt or it will be washed away in the relentless march of innovation.

To explore the world of Fedran, check out <https://fedran.com/>. There you'll find stories, novels, character write-ups and more.





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