

Background:

The world has the atmosphere and style of a downtrodden WWI Europe, with a strong injection of evolutionary ideas and fantasy kingdoms and magic. It takes place in a world called Chiral. A school is run by a genocidal dictator. It aims to train dark mages and soldiers. The instructors include: Kreeya, a crazy powerhungry woman; Johnathan, a good knight who is forced to work for the Dictator in order to save his small country as the Dictator has threatened to wipe it off the world unless it fights for him; and Annalise, a meek but hateful young woman who seeks to avenge her family's deaths. Among the ranks include Zhar, a muscular woman who feigns loyalty to the Dictator in order to infiltrate the ranks. This much is known about her, but her specific intentions are not revealed so soon. Zhar is assigned to look after a group of 5 students, and grows close to them. She fears the day when she will have to betray them in order to save her nation from being overrun by the Dictator. She claims to bring the Chosen Light to the school to aid the Dictator, but her true intention is that it will be his hidden downfall. Of note is that Zhar's country and Johnathan's country have an uneasy antagonism between them, one that is part alliance and part enemy. The two nations do not trust one another fully.

The five students are: Yilla, the main character, a bright eyed girl who aims to overthrow the Dictator so she can be the most feared killer in the world (but secretly hides her intentions so that she can strike when the moment is right); Haldern, the tall son of the Dictator who is utmost loyal to the cause; and more

Yilla has a pentagram birth mark in the palm of her left hand. She doesn't know what it means. Yilla has lived with poor eyesight and 'Sense', a crucial trait that bonds each individual to the world. No one made her this way; it was simply the result of random mutation, mutation that binds certain individuals to demons. In order to ensure everyone is better off, the natural order of the Spirit World has found that the only solution is to have certain people sacrifice themselves. All those born with the fire mark have a demon trapped inside of them, and are to be extinguished. However, by the mercy of the High Priests, the Fire Branded can survive in this world, albeit they have to serve the majority of society. By committing these good acts, the Fire Branded obtain Mercy- the Spirit World senses they are doing good deeds, and this suppresses the demon inside of them. But when the Fire Branded do not commit good deeds, the demon inside of them is freed a bit more, and incites in them an insatiable bloodlust- until they serve others again in servitude. Servitude is the only way to quell these demons, as the demons were all born out of arrogance, selfishness and pride. An extreme reaction must take place to counter them.

Servitude is extremely harsh and may require a fatal sacrifice at times. Those in servitude have low 'sense', as having too much sense would allow the demon to manifest itself. Thus slaves are given treatments to suppress their sense. Yilla was destined to be the Chosen One to bring light to the earth; however, she has been forced to accept the light her whole life, against her free will. The start of the story begins with Zhar and her three apprentices attacking the Yamarckian temple. Their objective: to kill the Chosen One. This does not go against Zhar's conscious, as she is not a believer in the Chosen Light. Zhar is also a pragmatist, willing to subject herself to her darkest personalities in order to achieve a means to an end.

(Do not write this elegantly; treat it as a role playing stream of consciousness. Introduce mysteries you don't even know the answer to and fill them in as you go, surprising yourself. Write what's on your mind first in a straightforward manner, and later revise your draft.)

[illegible]

Draft:

The windows shattered. The priests ran in terror, as the dark cloak of hellfire rained upon them.

A shadowy figure lunged itself at one priest and snapped his neck apart, spilling a waterfall of blood down to the tiled floor. It licked up the ruby candy- priest blood was extra sweet. “Axel!” The shadowy figure whipped its head around.

“Axel, don’t waste your time licking up this crap. The Dictator gave us a stern order- find the Chosen Light. The priests are scrambling to hide her, and we gotta find get to her before they lose us.”

“Suit yourself. I got a whole buffet just waiting for me.”

Zhar punched Axel in the nose; Axel bled immediately, but licked up his wounds with delight. Annoyed, Zhar turned around and marched towards the Grand Hall- the team already had the temple cornered, and there was nowhere else they could hide her.

A gigantic door stood in front of Zhar. She took the axe from her back, took one mighty swing at the door, and broke

through it. Zhar walked into the Grand Hall.

In front of her stood one measly old priestess, clutching a humanoid figure all cloaked in robes like a ghost.

“Priestess, your temple has disobeyed peaceful orders to hand over the Chosen Light. Now we’re here to take her by force. Give up the Chosen Light, and we won’t burn what remains of your temple to the ground.”

“... So it’s come to this. Too much bloodshed has already gone on in this temple. All for a belief that has not given any proof that it is true...” The priestess shut her eyes, and took one hand off of the ghostly humanoid. “I will hand her to you if you lay down your weapon. But if you do not, I shall attack you, and there is little chance you will get to the Chosen Light.”

“I know a priestess can never tell a lie, lest they face divine retribution. But you can speak in half truths. So why should I believe that- thing- there is the Chosen Light?”

“See for yourself...” The priestess wiped her hand in front of the white veil, and it gradually disappeared. What was underneath shocked Zhar- she had never seen someone so angelic before. Golden locks flowed down the pearly face, with red lips and irises like the petal tips of a ruby and white flower.

“Berserker, I lie to you not. This is the Chosen Light. Do you not believe me? Lay down your weapon- no sin shall be committed in this sacred temple.”

Awestruck, Zhar froze. But she regained her senses soon, and hesitantly, she lay her axe down. Suddenly, the temple shook.

“NEVER!” The priestess gasped, trembling while holding meekly onto the ghostly humanoid, “You’ll never have her- and you’ll never get past me!”

The ground beneath Zhar crumpled and cracked, and out from the tiles emerged a gigantic, wooden puppet. The priestess was controlling it. The puppet grabbed Zhar’s axe, keeping it out of reach.

Zhar shouted in fury. “You liar! You call yourself a priestess? A priestess can never tell a lie she does not disbelieve!”

“We must do whatever it takes to save this world. I’m sorry, Berserker- I can tell your soul is noble and true, but you have chosen the wrong side.”

The puppet crackled darkly- and with one fell swoop, it aimed its splintered jaws at Zhar. Zhar stared in terror- this was the end; with her weapon gone, there was nothing she could do to defend herself. She shut her eyes...

But the crackling stopped. Slowly opening her eyes in disbelief, Zhar saw that the puppet had split in two. What was in front of her shocked her even more- the ruby red flower had ripped the priestess in two, with only her spine attaching her two sides.

“Wh- why Yilla...” The priestess creaked her head towards the young girl, her limbs and neck behaving like a broken doll. “After everything we did for you... I thought you loved us...” Her eyes went white, and she died.

Zhar could not process what was happening. Did the Chosen Light just kill, in such a gruesome manner, her own protector? She could not find what to say- all she could mutter was, “Why?”

The young girl had no emotion on her face. But as a few moments passed, she began to lose composure, and cried. Tears flowed down her neck onto the tiled ground so quickly that the hall seemed like it would flood and drown them both.

“I’m sorry- I’M SORRY, AUNTIE, WHAT HAVE I DONE?!? WHAT AM I GOING TO DO? WHAT AM I EVEN GOING TO DO NOW?!?!?”

The doors behind them busted open. In walked Axel, who had just finished his three course dinner.

“Why, hello lovely ladies, fancy to see- WHOA- what is THAT?”

Zhar creaked her head meekly to face Axel, her face glued with a mixture of confusion, terror and utter annoyance. Axel’s intrusion had brought her back from her lost state to her usual anger at her subordinate.

“Axel... AXEL! Where the fuck were you this whole time? I TOLD you to get your ass in here!! Did you know- did you know I was almost swallowed whole by an enormous wooden puppet thing?!?”

“Geez, madam, I’m sorry, I really mean it. What puppet though- You mean- THAT puppet thing?” Axel wiped his hands on his face, then started laughing in both fear and disbelief. “How could this day get any crazier?”

“Well, there’s the Chosen Light in front of ya. She killed the High Priestess that was protecting her.”

“.... Seriously?”

The two turned to face the trembling little girl, who had nearly pushed herself to the brink of death with her crying. She had been yelling to herself incoherently the entire time, saying things such as, “OH HOLY ONE IN THE GREAT SKIES I HAVE FORSAKEN YOU” and “I WISH I WAS JUST A TREE”. The two were so deep in their squabbling that they had missed all these gems.

“So Zhar,” Axel whispered, “What do we do about that thing over there? We’re supposed to off it, ya?”

“I dunno... I just feel really bad about doing that. It- it just killed its loved one. And who the hell knows why. I would feel like a monster...”

“You DO know we’re supposed to be the bad guys, right? Hey, maybe we can get Haldern to do it, he doesn’t think about feeling bad for people like you and I do- hell, I’m not sure he even thinks at all...”

“Listen here, this girl just saved my life. And I want to know why. I’m gonna try talking to her.”

Zhar slowly encroached towards the young girl, carefully watching her steps, not wanting to escalate the situation any worse than it already was. This girl- Zhar thought to herself- she just tore that priestess in two. Who knows what she could do?

Zhar whispered, “Zhar, what the hell are you thinking? She’s totally off her rocker, there’s no controlling her. What can I even say?”

She had to speak now. Reaffirming her posture- telling herself that she’s a commander, a teacher, and was here in this army to find the answers to this whole chaotic debacle- she spoke:

“Chosen Light, we have been sent here to decimate your existence. But what you have just committed was an act that has surprised us all. Tell me- what is your reason for killing your caretaker?”

The young girl looked up at Zhar, shaken. At last, she whispered coherently, “Because I want to be free.”

<<<<

Winds blowed in all directions, creating a typhoon of chilly winter gust. A carriage was driving through the dark forest, rocking along the wet cobblestone. Underneath the covers, whispers could be heard.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this. You know we’re gonna get our asses handed to us for this? And that’s just what’s gonna happen when Haldern finds out...”

“Axel, you’re NOT making this situation any better!”

She could hear voices- faint voices, but closeby. All around her was darkness. Was this what the End was like? All the things the priestesses had told her for years were true. A final End- a void with no Senses, completely cut off from the rest of the world...

But she could feel a thread. A thin, gentle aquamarine thread hung near her. Who did it belong to? And if there was a thread- this couldn’t be the end, right? Threads... Meant Senses...

She could feel her eyelids wanting to open. Feeling was reeling itself back into her; she slowly opened her eyes. In front of her was a peculiar face- it looked like a frog. A fat, ugly bullfrog.

“Hey... How are you feeling? Guys- GUYS SHE’S AWAKE!”

“Yunip, you shut your damn mouth too! I’m surprised no one’s found us yet with all the noise you guys are coughing up.”

Suddenly, the aquamarine thread disappeared from her Sense. It was replaced with a yellow one. Her eyesight had not fully recovered- she couldn’t make out what was in front of her. Was it that bullfrog? No- someone else was in front of her now.

“Hey kid, you awake?”

It was the woman from before. She had short, autumn hair, with a muscular build and a stern face. Her skin was dirt red, scarred from years of battles.

“A-auntie...”

The woman in front of her dipped her head and closed her eyes. The whole carriage fell silent now, as the three figures- three faint threads- all gazed upon her.

The woman spoke again. “You cried so hard that you nearly lost all the fluid in your body. It wasn’t long before you passed out. We brought you here and healed you up. Yunip here- she’s good with this sort of stuff. But even she wasn’t sure if you’d make it.”

The young girl whimpered. Zhar coughed, then continued, “What’s your name, Chosen Light?”

Her eyes shone in anger. DON’T CALL ME THAT! The four all sensed a tremendous indignation rise up, seering in pain. But it subsided.

“Damn! Everyone feel that?” Axel exclaimed, “It must’ve come from that girl. But she doesn’t have a lot of energy left, it seems.”

Zhar quickly tried to save the situation. “Okay- so, um- what’s your name?” She paused, not wanting to make another mistake.

A moment passed. But a voice was heard. “It’s... Yilla...”

“Y? A Y? Just like my name!” The carriage had burst into mild annoyance.

“Yunip- again- no more shouting. You are so fucking loud, you know that?”

“Sorry, Teach.”

A pause. Nothing for a moment, but then:

“It’s just so SO rare to find someone-”

“Shut up!”

“Okay.”

Zhar spoke again, “You’re probably wondering why we didn’t end your life. Lithe girl, let me tell you, I don’t always play by the rules. Once you get to know me better, you’ll tell I’m one hateful bitch, but I’m no one’s bitch.”

Yilla was confused. This woman here didn’t make any sense- what did they even want from her? That yellow thread from before began pulsating even stronger, and finally it revealed itself fully. It was a harsh, golden-red texture, noble and defiant. It... Intrigued Yilla a great deal.

But it gradually faded away again. The aquamarine thread revisited her. A calm, soothing lightness filled her body, and reinvigorated her. Water flowed from the thread into her veins, and suddenly Yilla gasped awake.

“Yunip, how’s she doing? Did she regain her energy?”

“Yeah... She should be good for now.”

Yilla began to lighten up, but then felt a harrowing sadness fill her. Auntie was gone. Yilla knew it would happen one day. She thought about it for a long, long time, imagining all the ways she could have died. Even, in the darkest of thoughts at times, by her own hands. But not like this.

“Wh-what did you say your name was?”

Zhar smiled, relieved that the girl had gained a speck of stability. “It’s Zhar.”

“Zhar... I’m truly grateful that you have spared my life. My- un, unWORTHY,” Yilla gritted her teeth in anger and beamed her eyes shut.

Zhar sensed this annoyance. “Yilla, I can tell you’re acting under a guise. Because I’m good with reading people with this kind of stuff. We’re in a carriage, hiding in the middle of nowhere, invisible to the eyes of all nations. Stalling for time. Well, until I think of a plan and talk my way out of this... Anyways, the point is, you don’t have to act the way you did before. You’re free to do whatever-”

Free. The words ringed in Yilla’s ears like a newborn birth. Free, what could it mean?

“My- my goddamn-”

Free.

“- life!”

Zhar was taken back, surprised. Yunip put her hands to her mouth, suppressing a chuckle. Axel grinned.

“So, now that we’ve gotten past that barrier.... It seems we can get some answers, can we?” Zhar leaned in close to Yilla. The golden-red thread intensified- she changed her whole demeanor. She was a mother bear before; now she was a wolf, hungry for answers. Yilla trembled. But at the same time, she knew that nothing bad could harm her.

“Y-yes. The person I k-killed... I called her my Auntie.”

“What was she like?”

“She... She was a strict woman.”

“Hmm... Interesting. Not an answer I expected. Did you like her?”

“Y- no... Yes. No. Yes. Yes!” Yilla’s eyes darted throughout the carriage.

“Are you stuttering because you’re hiding the truth?” Zhar’s eyes leaned inwards. “Or because you don’t know?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“Did she ever do anything to you that you didn’t like? Did she ever hit you?”

A pause. “No.”

“Then why didn’t you like her?”

“Because she forced me to do things I didn’t like! I had to serve her fruits... I had to wash her feet... I had to read from that stupid damn book every single damn day!!!”

Zhar hummed, thinking. “Ah... I seemed to recall learning about this. You’re one of the Unclean ones, aren’t you? Didn’t think the Chosen Light would be one of them. You’re a slave to the Yamarckians. Unable to lead a free life. Unable to choose what you wanted to be. Not even able to decide what you wanted for breakfast in the morning.”

Axel chuckled, "Wow, that must suck!" (He whispered to himself: "I love breakfast...")

Yilla bent her head down. "Yes. It was a terrible life. If we had any thought of our own, we were punished. No food for days. Because all our own thoughts, unlike the thoughts of everyone else, were impure. We had-"

"How long have you thought about killing your Auntie?"

"I DIDN'T WANT TO KILL HER!" The carriage roared. "I ONLY WANTED TO- I only wanted to escape from her."

"But you did- you DID think about it?"

"THAT'S NOT SOMETHING FOR YOU TO KNOW!!!"

The threads rattled wildly, and Yunip was shaking. Axel, eyes wide open, muttered, "Geez."

Zhar sighed, and regained her stern composure. "Okay. Yilla, I apologize, I overstepped my boundaries."

The winds howled, and horses neighed into the empty chasm of the woods. Moments passed, counted by the movements of the moonlight. Yilla spoke again.

"I told you.... I TOLD you. I mean, I was trying to tell you. I have the soul of a demon inside of me."

Zhar replied, "Yeah, I know about that. All Unclean ones do. Well, don't be afraid to express yourself. We're all a bunch of murderous bastards around here. Welcome to your new home."

Yilla looked up, and glared at Zhar. Their eyes locked for a second, but Yilla looked away, intimidated by the large woman's intense stare. She looked towards the aquamarine light- Yunip, smiling at her from her bullfrogish face. And Axel, staring off into the distance, bored out of his mind. These people were unlike the old priests and priestesses in the temple she lived her whole life in. There was no harsh judgment. No fearful, paranoid thoughts about whether she was considered 'clean' or not- whether today, she would be praised as good or bad, or whether she had any impure thoughts raging inside of her that she couldn't control. Here, she felt a bliss at last. In her total, bittersweet agony, she gritted through her mind: I am so glad Auntie is dead.

<<<<

There was something bothering Yilla. Something was off about this whole thing. Suddenly, she realized what it was.

"Hey... I don't see anyone driving this carriage. How's it even moving?!?"

Zhar replied, "It's a magic carriage. Magic horses- I told them where to go. Which is.... To wander aimlessly." Yilla still looked confused. Zhar continued, "Don't worry, we're invisible too. So... It seems we haven't given a proper introduction about who we are yet, and why I haven't just taken you here to interrogate you for answers. As you know, I'm Zhar, that's Yunip, and this ugly looking thing here is Axel." The shadowy figure peered at Yilla in the distance. It had swathing, brown hair, elegant like a prince, but it was veiled in a black assassin's garb, its face- save its bright opal eyes and messy hair- all covered in cloth. It spoke: "Nice to meet you. That was quite a show you put on back there."

Zhar punched Axel in the shoulder. "Ah-hem, not the best thing to say, Axel. Anyways, I serve as a commander in the Boastful Leader's armed forces. The Boastful Leader, or as some call him, the Dictator- you've heard of him, haven't you?"

Yilla nodded. The Boastful Leader was a powerful man, hellbent on conquering the scattered nations, including Yamarck. He belonged to no nation, but had risen up from a grassroots cause fueled by unabashed greed and pride. His supporters did not shy away from hiding their intentions. They did not believe in a 'greater good', nor did they think what they were doing was morally just. They were a pact of business people allied together to drive their selfish economic and political interests. Many of them were former enemies- coming from strictly opposite ideologies, coming together only for a temporary truce for greater power. Predictably, this resulted in a myriad of squabbles and infighting, and so the Dictator's movement is not centrally united under one ruler and instruction, but is merely united under one sparse ideology.

"Well," Zhar continued on, "The Dictator is a bastard, we all agree with that. But he knows what he's doing. Unlike all the other leaders in this era, he's got a plan, he's got a single goal, and he knows how to achieve it. He knows how to pull this

dying international economy out of its trenches, and he's giving money to all of his supporters. Giving more money to his strongest supporters. That's why we're all gathered here, so we can leech off that fool's money. That's why I've pledged undying loyalty to him, even though he hasn't given me a lick of compassion or aroused any real fervor in me, because I believe he's the only one who can do *anything* in this turmoil. I hate his other officers with my guts, but I would spill those same guts for them- just cause we work for the same boss."

"So what about these other two guys? They're not part of the army. They're kids. You can't really tell it with Axel, since it's hard to know the age of anyone from his race, the Tornifts, but he's a teen. They're students of the Boastful Leader's (a-hem, Dictator's) Glorious Academy of Happy and Loyal Students- or as we abbreviate it, BDGAHLS. Which doesn't mean anything. You can just call it the Academy of Boastful Dicks. I like to call it The Academy. And after seeing what you could do, and getting to know you a bit, I can see that you'll fit in just fine. That is, if you want to come with us and enroll."

Yilla wrinkled her eyebrows. This was so much to take in. A school- they have quizzes there? Would she have to be quizzed on this? She started to get a headache. School better not be worse than slavery...

"I... this is just way too much for me. Why would I want to go to your school? You're asking me to make my first decision in life, and you want me to decide right now if I think I have any idea of what I want? How can I enroll in the school if just a few moments ago you wanted to kill me?!?!?"

"I understand where you're coming from. Don't worry about the logistics of it; I can talk my way out of it. And trust me, when I first heard about this school, how it started, where its roots were, I didn't know why anyone would even go there. But I had a feeling it'd suit you. And after getting to know you, I think we have just what you need to wean yourself off that terrible life you had before. Equestrians- stop here!"

Axel sputtered, "Zhar, are you crazy? YOU were the one saying we gotta conceal ourselves, now you're being a damn hypocrite?"

"Trust me, fool, I know what I'm doing. I've... Finally come up with a plan. I haven't felt any other threads besides our own for a while now. Unless we've got assassins after us, which I doubt because you would've detected them, it means the horses must have taken us into the Empty Lands. Relax, sometime ago along the trip I told them to go quite deep into them. Not a soul would live here."

Zhar hopped down from the carriage. Yunip and Axel took one look at one another, and they reluctantly followed. Zhar leaned against the carriage, peering in to take a look at Yilla. "It's safe now. Come out here; the Yamarckians won't find you."

Yilla leaped down. Beneath her was a frozen, black ground, fungi crawling underneath the solid ice. She heard the priests speak of this land before- a dead land, one abandoned long ago, for no vegetation would ever grow there. It was all being consumed by the encroaching fungi, a violent plague that sucked all hope for life ever proliferating from the ground. That was 1000 years ago. Why had the horses come here?

Zhar reached into her satchel, and pulled out a small knife. "Catch." She tossed the knife at Yilla.

Bewildered, Yilla puckered up and caught it. Zhar smirked, "I see your life of servitude has given you keen awareness. You don't want to mess up, lest you get punished. Young one, you've heard of this place, the Empty Lands. Everyone has. Legends tell of a horrific plague that wiped away all traces of food, causing massive poverty, and farmers scurried off in fear. What they didn't tell you was that it wasn't some disease, nor was it some evil curse, that did it all in. It was life."

Yilla whispered, "What? What does that even mean?"

"In this world, we've all got to share what little we have with each other. But sometimes, we don't have enough for everyone. That means someone's gotta pay the price. In this case, a thousand years ago, it was the people. You see, in a faraway land, there once existed a peaceful forest of creatures called Yalmonin. They had no material, physical existences. They were the dreams of the roots beneath the forest, roots that were all connected with one another to burst these imaginations into life. But something happened that destroyed the Yalmonin. No one knows for sure, but what's important is that their forests, one day, had exhausted themselves. With nowhere left to go, the Yalmonin had to find somewhere else to live. They searched for ages. With a dying breath, the forest sent out spores that scattered through lands far and wide. They tried outlands, jungles, frozen tundras; they all perished painfully. Do you know what it's like to extract a dream from a Yalmonin root? It's... It's like sucking your brain through a straw. Not a good way to go." Yilla breathed deeply, and out

slowly. She started to see where Zhar was heading with all this.

Zhar continued, "But finally, after much suffering, the Yalmonin found a place to live. It was right here, in the Empty Lands. Or what they were once called, the Green Pastures. They had a mineral that their roots needed and could not live without. This was the key ingredient behind why the Yalmonin could thrive and create all the wonderful art they dreamt up. It had been depleted before, but now, miraculously, it was found somewhere else. And yet... This same mineral required something sacred. Something precious. It came from the ground before, but now, it needed another source. In order to create life, it had to take it."

Yilla gasped. She had a feeling this grim revelation was coming, but she could not hold it in. She stared beneath her toes down into the icy lake- the fungi-like network pulsed periodically, like a living heartbeat. This was the Yalmonin, she thought to herself.

"The stuff beneath us? That's not the Yalmonin. That was what they had become. They couldn't live in the roots of trees anymore. They had to live within this... No one knows where it came from. But the only way it could expand, to thrive, was by seeping the minerals from the bones of the people who had once danced upon its meadows. Only these people had this mineral in their bones. Long ago, their ancestors developed a mutation that gave them these minerals. It made them excellent dancers. Their people were sought after for dearly, courted by many from nations from afar. And so a beautiful community developed. But anything that is sought after and desired also lives in fear of predators and hunters- those who would give their lives just to get a lick of their blood. The Yalmonin... Found a way to survive. Many thoughts debated with one another, in their own world, about what was right and wrong. Some believed the Yalmonin's time was up; they were an ancient society, and had lived many happy existences for ages. But yet others did not want their culture to disappear. All that they had built up, all the technologies and knowledge they had accumulated- it could not just die. And so wars were fought. In the end, it was not who was morally right who won, but who had more power. The ones who ate the people... They had more energy to fight, more energy to build weapons of war. The people did not stand a chance, and eventually their bodies were harvested. Farmed like cattle. The people seemed to be long dead, but here's what most people don't know: they aren't. In our world, it doesn't seem like they're conscious. But they're dreaming. And their bodies are being puppeteered by the Yalmonins to constantly reproduce, so that the mineral could continue to be fed upon. We don't see it, but deep inside this damned network, lies the inner workings of that monstrosity."

Yilla was speechless. Axel began to clap, and Yunip chuckled meekly. "Well done, well done!" Axel said, "That's why you're our teacher. Couldn't have given a better explanation."

Zhar sighed, and took the axe from her back. She slammed it bluntly into the ice. It began to crack.

"Yilla, I want you to know, the Yalmonin have grown far too massive to topple. It wouldn't help the people they're harvesting, those with their consciousness stuck in their dream world, if we were to off a few of these fungal bastards. Nothing we do to these people's bodies would make them wake up, and their minds would simply be transported to another area in the network. Not that I think you'd care. In fact, I think what you'd enjoy wouldn't be to save the people beneath the ice."

Yilla gripped her knife. How could Zhar read her mind so well? A dark secret lurked between the two- something they did not say to one another, but that both knew. Yilla looked Zhar in the eyes again. She did not look away. She nodded.

"Yilla, the Yalmonin are not all evil. In fact, it would be hard to say any of them are. They are fairy-like creatures, pure beings who only love peace and art and technology, which has benefitted the world in so many ways. The ones who wanted to preserve this art did so with the intention that, in the big picture, it would help many more than it has sacrificed. We have all reaped the fruits of the Yalmonin's continued existence, and all around us, the good guys don't want to mess with the Yalmonin just because they help us so much... Doesn't that sound familiar?"

Yilla began to tremble. Her tendons were rumbling, her threads that she could hardly feel dancing madly with emotion.

"Madam, I was told all my life that there was a demon inside of me, and that it was a remorseless one who could not feel for the suffering of others. They called him a sociopath. They told me to never talk to him; I still don't know his name. But could I- may I have the pleasure of, just this once, getting to know him?"

"Yeah!" Axel exclaimed, "That's what I like to hear!"

Zhar grinned. "Yunip, you remember how to walk into the Yalmonin's world, right? It was a forbidden art. Off-limits, cause

none of us are allowed to ever interact with them. They must be pretty lonely, some of them having never seen a human in their entire lives before. Why don't we welcome them and introduce ourselves?" Yunip giggled. "Okay, Teach, I got a concoction that's just what we need!"

Yilla's heart beat ever faster. Her cheeks flushed, and blood began pouring out of her eyes and mouth. Zhar crackled manically, and slammed her axe against the ice with all her might. A tremendous cry was heard- a calling for peace, confusion ringing out of a thousand innocent voices, but that day, not a single merciful pleading was heard. A new student had just joined The Academy.

<<<

"You did WHAT?"

Zhar kept her head up high. The officer before her, Kreeya, was raging uncontrollably.

"You- Woman- were supposed to *kill* the Chosen Light. We took our best forces to take that temple, and, out of all the officers, YOU were the lucky one that stumbled upon her. So you've done what now?"

"She is a POWERFUL being. You haven't even met her. You don't know what she's capable of. In fact, I believe she's the key to winning this upcoming battle."

"To overtake the capital? That'd take a miracle to overcome--"

"So you agree?"

"All I know is that you disobeyed the Dictator's orders! You're nothing! You're nothing but a menace to our cause... Oh how I wish he never accepted you. You fucking bitch."

"The Dictator doesn't know what he's doing all the time. If you obeyed his every fucking order, you'd just perish like the lapdog you are. Trust me- the Chosen Light is our key to winning this next battle. Mark my words."

The officer walked towards Zhar. Keeping her chin up high, she breathed a fiery breath towards her. "Fine. You know, the only one who will answer to your crimes is the Dictator. Let's see what he says."

"Then let's go."

<<<

In a quiet, royally lit room, Axel took an odd, red fruit from a bowl and began feasting away. Just a few feet from him was a soft bed, and on it, Yunip and Yilla were chatting.

"So Yilla. That's a nice name. What does it mean?" Yunip beamed at the flowery girl.

"It's, uh, an ordinary name. It just means 'pretty'."

"Hmm... I don't buy it."

"Really! I wouldn't lie!"

"But you're the Chosen Light. Surely your parents must have thought about that and given you a grander, more important meaning name!"

"They didn't know. No one knew I was the Chosen Light until when I was 8 years old. Only the priests knew, and my parents never found out. All my parents knew about me was, when I was about 4, they were told that I was an Unclean one. Just an ordinary Unclean one. My demon wasn't considered very powerful. When I was just a few years old, I was taken away from my parents. I had no way of finding them ever again, and I don't know how to even start. All Unclean ones are taken away when their demons begin showing signs of being released. ."

"Ah, I see. So how did they figure out you're actually the 'The One'?"

Yilla let out a nervous laugh. "It's a long story. But, from what I was told, everyone was surprised when they found out.

They couldn't believe that an Unclean one could possibly be the Chosen Light. There had to be some mistake. The temples talked about it for a long time, but in the end most of them decided that it was better to believe it was true. So, my parents must have hoped I would be treated better than the others, once hushed rumors leaked out that I was somehow special and all. But I wasn't."

"How, how was the Chosen Light treated then?" Yunip inquired, clearly drawn into Yilla's tale.

"Even more strictly than the others. They wanted to make sure my demon never, ever manifested itself. Because doing so would mean the failure of the prophecy."

"What did they make you do? I mean, you said some things, but nothing too deep. Your life was so strange; I wanna know more!"

"They..." Yilla started, but trailed off, showing a slightly uncomfortably demeanor. She looked as if she was about to cry.

Axel reeled his head towards the conversation. "Hah, it looks like you've hit a nerve there, Yunip. You're never good with reading people. I'd suggest you do something to save yourself."

Yunip's eyes widened. Scrambling for something to say, she sputtered, "You know, my name, Yunip, means something pretty cool. It means 'The True Light'."

Yilla sniffed a few more times, but got a hold of herself eventually. "That's... Interesting." She was visibly not interested.

Not noticing the lack of interest, Yunip excitably continued, "My parents sent me to The Academy because they think it's a wonderful way to build character. You see, before The Academy, there was a long standing tradition of boarding schools that taught mages, warriors and hunters. My father used to tell stories about them all the time. He's a big, powerful rich man with lots of friends! But some time ago, these schools all lost their funding, I guess because there's been so many wars and all. Kids were sent into armies without any training, just because there was no time and money to train them all. My father and mother really, really, hated all this. How could kids build ANY character if there was no school? They yelled a lot, and I missed my father's stories. When The Academy was set up, they got really excited again. I got excited again too! I had just turned 13, so it was just the perfect time for me to enroll. That was a year ago."

Yunip paused, trying to catch her hurrying breaths. Yilla didn't seem to change her expression, so Yunip rattled on, "On the very first day, my mother packed my lunch with Pink Fishes (my favorite!) and told me that she heard great things about The Academy. All around us, she said, were people who lacked character. You see the Bread Boy coming around to deliver the loaves? He's got a lack of conviction. Sally, over there, prancing around with not a worry in sight as the bombs dropped on the city? She's got a lack of conviction. My mom's used-to-be 'friend' Beth who just sits there and watches her children frolik without a care in the world? She's got a lack of conviction too!!!"

Yunip's round face had turned harshly red now. Exasperated, she began to catch her breaths. "And that's why I'm proud to be at The Academy. When I was paired up with Teach, she gave me a run down on conviction. Don't play by other people's rules. You gotta fight to your teeth to get what you want. It's a dog eat dog world. She had different ideas than the other teachers here. I was so, so shocked at first when she didn't say the Glorious, Boastful Leader's name right. But she told me that's what we gotta do to build conviction. It took a while, but I'm starting to get the hang of it. And I think you'll like the way she does things too." Yunip finally finished, and smiled. Yilla was relieved inside. She thought to herself: Thank the gods that's all finished.

A long, awkward silence followed. Axel finished chewing his last bites of his fruit, and not looking down to where his hand was going, reached down into the bowl. It was empty. He sighed.

The next moment, the doors burst open, and in strided in a red haired, tall young man. He was clad in white and golden armor, with a large sword sheathed close to him. His face was stern- beneath it, pure anger.

"Haldern!" Axel exclaimed, "It's good to have you back! I thought the priests must have clubbed you to death with their walking canes!"

The young man ignored him. He shouted, "You know what you're all doing is wrong! When Father learns of the crimes you've committed, you will surely all be expelled and imprisoned!"

He glared at Yunip, who gulped and said nothing, and then shifted his red eyes to glare at Yilla. "I suppose this one here. She's the one we are to extinguish?" His gloved hand gripped the blunt handle of his sword.

Yilla could not look at him. His gaze was so fierce, so set on only one goal: to end her life. She clutched the bedsheets, and began sweating intensely. She looked to the Senses for safety, searching in a panic for that aquamarine thread. When she finally found it, her heart dropped. It was hardly there- so thin, so terrified just like her.

Haldern began to unsheath his sword, the titanium-like metal vibrating with encroaching vigor. The next moment, Axel took a few steps in front of him. They locked eyes.

"Gotta wait for Zhar," Axel said to Haldern, softly and menacingly.

Haldern glared at Axel. "I'm not surprised Zhar would do something like this. Word is that she thinks the Chosen Light can be of use to us? I know Zhar... I know she has good reasons... But how could the one who Father has been seeking to eliminate all this time be of any use? Axel, stand out of the way. I'm here to do what I believe Father would want."

"Hey, bud, you *don't* know what your father wants. So you gonna wait, or what?"

Neither of the two budged. They continued to lock eyes.

Haldern sternly spoke again, "We shall see what Father says. Until then, I will not move."

"I like taking it nice and slow too."

<<<<

Zhar smirked.

"So... Gonna eat your words?"

Kreeya muttered in disgust. She wouldn't even face Zhar. Instead, she could only walk off in the distance.

Gallantly striding back to her quarters, Zhar struck her doors wide open. In the room were her three apprentices, and her new one.

"Good news everyone! We got a new student with us!"

Yilla's ears perked up. She could hardly believe what was happening. It felt so sudden, that only a moment ago she had met a few of her new classmates. And one of them wanted to kill her. But here she was now, ready to start at the new school.

Haldern turned around, removing his locked eyes from Axel, who was grinning with victory. Haldern faced Zhar, grunted, and finally looked in her eyes. Tall and elegant, he scoffed. "Well, I guess if Father allows it, we'll have to accept it."

Yunip snapped at him, "Haldern. With you it's always: Father, Father, FATHER. Can't you think for yourself?"

The boy snapped back at her, "You think YOU would know what you're doing? Quiet- you know you haven't made one good decision so far."

"ENOUGH!" Zhar shouted. "Let's not ruin this moment with conflict. We're here to welcome our new student." She walked towards Yilla, gracefully with prideful steps, "You're probably wondering what you're gonna do in this new school. It's all very confusing- what to do at first, what to prepare for--"

Axel interrupted her, "Forget that!!! Come with me, I'll show you around!!!"

Zhar grunted. "A-hem, I think it's best if you come with me first."

Yilla perked up, excited that she had a choice. Zhar stuck out her hand towards her, inviting her to clasp it. Immediately, Yilla tucked her hand inside the large woman's palm, and off they went on their new adventure.

<<<<

They stood outside a foreboding glass shop, peering into its mysterious realms. A faint smell of blood loomed just inside. It was so close that Yilla could taste it.

“What is this place, Zhar?”

“You can’t tell just by your Sense? Ah... That’s right. Okay. We’ll take a few steps in, and I’ll let your imagination fill you in on the rest.”

Zhar creaked the old wooden door open, and the pair walked in. They passed through a narrow, dimly lit hall. As the shadows crept past them, Yilla glimpsed at images of various machinations. Sharp, dangerous, and timely. What could they be?

As they walked further and further in, the depths of the smell of blood filled Yilla’s lungs. She coughed- it was so strong now, that it felt like it was all just dripping right onto her tongue. She coughed even harder, and had to shut her eyes to cut off all the awful tastes penetrating into her.

“It seems like you feel it now,” Zhar spoke. “It’s only been a few days since you’ve weaned off the priest’s hexes, and you’re slowly regaining your Senses. Can you touch the threads just dangling above us?”

“... I...” Yilla coughed again. “I’m sorry, Zhar. I can sense *something*... But I just can’t piece it all together. The hexes that they gave me were so strong... They said I won’t ever recover them fully. Maybe a little bit, but... I’ll never...”

“I understand. Don’t worry about it. Just shut your eyes and enjoy what you have. We’re here to treat ourselves, after all.”

Yilla smiled. Treat themselves in this warehouse of blood, that surely sounds like quite a trip. Something the priestesses would have screamed about in objection and utter disgust.

“Maybe your eyes will do a better job of filling you in. There- look above you.” Zhar pointed upwards.

Yilla squinted her eyes, and gasped. She didn’t know what to feel. Above her, a chain hung down. A gigantic pig’s shout was hanging off it. She couldn’t see the rest; it was covered by darkness.

Zhar reached into her satchel and took out a match. She flicked it on something dry, and it lit up dimly. Holding it up, she shooed the remaining darkness away. What laid before them was a sight of utter horror.

It was not a pig that was hanging up right before them. It was a man hanging upside down from the chain- a man with lacerations so thick, fresh blood was dripping down like a hungry river. But he did not have the face of a man. As Yilla’s eyes darted down, she saw that he had the head of a pig. It was not sewn onto him- rather, it appeared he was born with this disfiguration.

“Yilla, that abomination right there is a mutant. A rather severe case. Quite orderly however... Most mutations are nonsensical, causing things just as tumors in all the strangest places you could imagine. But here, he caught something, perhaps from a virus, that made him this way. When he was born, his mother must have died from such severe shock. And he must have not had an easy life either. When he was... Captured, for these experiments... You can say that just put the final nail in the coffin of his horrible, horrible life.”

Yilla shook her head, seething with a mixture of adrenaline and shock at something she never knew could exist before. “Zhar, just what IS this place? You know I can’t Sense things well. Just TELL me already!”

“Okay, okay, fine. Alright: it’s a butcher shop. We’re not here to buy meats. Certainly, not after seeing where it comes from. We’re not going to eat THAT. We’re here to find you...”

Zhar flicked the match, and Yilla jumped just as the match illuminated something before them that she could never expect at all. Her mind froze in that split second, just as she was processing what she was seeing: a pool of black liquid, of an oily substance, a dark conglomeration of secrets...

She didn’t have time to react. Suddenly, the whole room lit up in flames. The match triggered a sharp reaction of fires plowing up from above the black oily pool, illuminating all the horrors that hung just above them. Staglamites of blood drooped down, like a bastard child of a butcher shop and a forbidden cavern. And all along them hung the finest axes

anyone had ever seen.

“Take your knife out of your satchel.”

Yilla immediately reached in, grabbing something sharp and jolting back in pain as her fingers were pricked by the sharp knife. They were laced with cuts now. Zhar took one glance at her and scoffed.

“Looks like the knife did all the explaining for me. That thing right there- that’s not a weapon for you.”

“... Then why did you give it to me?” Yilla glared at Zhar.

“It was the only thing I had at the moment. It's easy to carry around, just in case I can't reach my axe. But knives are deceitful creatures. They lie to you, don't tell you what they're heading for. Perfect for backstabbers like Axel. But not for someone direct like me and you.”

“I'm not dir-” Yilla started, but stopped. It was all very confusing for her. Someone was imposing a trait on her, and she didn't know if it was right or wrong. Such is the life of freedom.

“You need an axe. And as a new student of the academy, I'm gonna treat you to only the finest. Boris, GET OVER HERE, WE GOT A FRESH ONE.”

From the depths of the black pool, amidst the dancing flames, slowly emerged a chef's hat. Yilla watched in timid fascination. A few seconds later, just beneath the chef's hat was another pig. And just beneath the pig was the figure of a man's body.

“A- another one?!?”

“BORIS! Glad to see you, yer fucking pig.”

The chef beamed at Zhar, and in what seemed like an eternal second, a twisted, deformed smile crept up on his face. He let out a mighty laugh, bursting out of his squealing tongue and lungs. Like a dying pig.

“Hello, why, HELLO. Who do we have here?”

“Her name's Yilla.” Zhar pat Yilla on the back, and whispered out of the corner of her mouth: Introduce yerself.

Yilla stammered, “P-leased to meet you! I'm, er, Yilla. I'm a new student at the Academy!”

Boris glared at her, then let out a squealing bellowing laugh yet again. In one fell swoop, he lunged himself at Yilla, who darted backwards, and in one split second she found herself face to face with the terrifying pigman. She looked down- he had a man's torso, but just beneath his hips was the body of a snake. A lamia. Was this a mutation? Yilla drew several short, hurried breaths. No. There were stitches.

She looked away, and shut her eyes. Boris spoke.

“So, if you're a new student, and you're visiting my little shop, so it could only mean one thing. You want an axe, don't you?”

Yilla felt a pat on her back again, and jumped. She heard a female voice whisper: Don't just stand there, answer him.

“Yes!” Yilla opened her eyes. Boris was heavily breathing right before her. The smell of dead pork reaked right through her nostrils.

“Good... Good. Wait here, young lady. I have just what you desire.”

In a violent twist of chaotic motion, the lamia pig-man lunged back into the black pool. Seconds passed, then minutes. Yilla took a deep breath, and calmed herself down. Her nerves were getting to her. Fear? Just a little. She felt tingling feelings that she had felt only so rarely before. Forbidden feelings that the temple never allowed her to encounter. She wanted to know what came next. A new journey, something for her to hold that gave her a way out of the drenching misery. She

thought to herself: Perhaps... This is what hope feels like?

Suddenly, a harsh swishing came forth, and a tall splashing of dire black oil tangled with the flames. From this violent column emerged the pig-man lamia, clutching a raw, golden-jade axe. Spots of dried blood were littered upon it.

“Lucky, lucky girl,” Boris hollered, “I found this old beauty just lying here waiting for a good owner. And today is a beautiful day for both of you.”

Boris lunged at her yet again; Yilla tried not to flinch, but she did. Boris spoke: “Open your palms.”

Yilla held her hands out, and the axe was placed into her palms. The seering hot black liquid stung her, but the pain quickly subsided. Excitement jostled through her veins. This is it, she thought. Her first weapon. Her own, personal, weapon. Something the priests and priestesses said she would never own.

“You like?” The pig lamia man grinned. “It’s just for you. For you, no worries about bartering trinkets with me. It’s on the house.”

“It’s... Beautiful. It’s so bright. I- I love it!”

Boris crackled mightily again. “Ha- ha- HA! That is GOOD to hear!” He turned to face Zhar, who had a smirk upon her face. “And that,” he continued, “Is my favorite part of the job. It is why I live in this muck. It’s these kids, I tell you.”

“Boris, you old bastard, I can’t thank you enough. Well, we got a lot of shopping to do. So as much as I’d like to stay, we gotta head off now.”

“Yes, yes, that is true. Well, WELL,” he turned to face Yilla, “It was a pleasure meeting you.”

“You too! Thank you!”

“Safe travels.” A strong gust blew through the damp cavern. And the flames disappeared.

<<<<

When they emerged out of the shop, the dusky purple sky shone down upon their feet. All around them stood old, grey buildings with dying letters scribbling onto their walls. Cold cobblestone just beneath their toes. As the pair started walking into the humming night, with lamp posts and lanterns resting once every block, a horse ran past them, neighing loudly and freely. Yilla turned and watched as it strided away, marveling at such a new sight she had never seen before.

“The horses in this town- they just run freely like that?”

“Yes. They have no owner. They are natives to the forests that surround this town, and they come and go through its alleyways as they please.”

Yilla’s heart fluttered. The freedom the horses experienced was something she once envied, but now, she felt a bond with them. She thought to herself: the horses are so beautiful. I wish I could own one.

Sensing something ironic, she quickly passed on to other thoughts. “Hey Zhar,” she pipped up, “How... How did you get everyone to accept me like this? I’m... The Chosen Light, aren’t I? That’s not something people like around here.”

“That’s true. And you’re wrong- people haven’t accepted you.”

Yilla bowed her head down, sad to hear those words coming from her new teacher. Zhar continued, “But I told them something about you that they DO like to hear. The reason I had you in the carriage was because I hadn’t decided what to do with you yet. I had a feeling there was more to you than just being the Chosen Light, but I didn’t know what it was. If I was wrong about you... Well, I would have killed you.”

Yilla turned paler than usual. Zhar continued, “So I got to know you better. Once I learned you had a demon inside of you, I came up with a plan, and sent my horses to the Empty Lands. That moment when we slaughtered those Yolomnin... That wasn’t just for our pleasures. It was there to prove to them that your intentions are with us. That your heart and soul aren’t with them. Think of it, in a way, as your entrance exam.”

“R-really? So even though I’m the Chosen Light, everyone can tell that my soul is dark and full of impure desires?”

“Not everyone. In fact, many are still in denial over you, clinging to their stupid dogmatic beliefs about how the ‘Chosen Light’ is destined to bring order and cooperation to the entire world. What that means, of course, is total self-sacrifice and subjugation. Even if it means some have to perish, by learning a lesson of what it means to be a *hero*. It’s a good thing you’re with us, as the Boastful Dictator doesn’t care for such irrationalities. He’s got some of the strongest Sense I’ve ever felt in all the lands- he could feel someone’s true intentions just by the scent they leave on other people. And when he felt the tattered, butchered threads of the Yalmonin that fell upon me during that night- the threads that were undoubtedly littered with YOUR scent, the scent of the Chosen Light that he has sniffed every day of his waking life in unhealthy obsession, he knew. He’s got a practical mind.”

“So... This means I won’t be hunted anymore, right?”

“Wrong again. Some are still gonna treat you like you’re the biggest threat they’ve ever met. But with me and the Dictator by your side, they’re not gonna harm a hair on your head.”

Yilla breathed a sigh, a mixture of both shuddering fear and relief. She was satisfied with that response. Now she had other questions in mind.

“That pig-man... Lamia... Person. What was he? I saw stitches. Was he a mutant?”

“Let’s just say some people are envious of the suffering that some are chained to. To them, it’s both pain and pleasure. And let’s leave it at that.”

“Okay.” Yilla was satisfied with this answer too. Right now wasn’t the time to be even more shocked and confused. They were going to buy something important. They were going to buy clothes.

<<<<

Skip to other part, draft:

“Wow, this is the school? I’m so excited to be here!”

The school was gathered around. It was the school pep rally, and a man was being lynched. The school was gathered around to watch a man being lynched.

<<<<

Skip to other part, draft:

“Someone tell her she’s in the wrong school...”

<<<<