



MY FIRST HUMAN

ADALENE MARTIS

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The life of a succubus princess is oh-so-glamorous, but can a succubus have a healthy one-on-one relationship with a human?

Labra is the daughter of a founding member of a country of daemons. Daemons, normally, can't have children and need human hosts to possess and propagate. However, Labra is special. She is the first daemon child to have been born, not made. To keep her safe, her doting mother has sheltered her away from daemons and humans in her secluded forest home.

Her isolated life is shattered when Labra stumbles across a human boy - her first servant! But, as she grows closer to this strange boy and his maddingly fearless approach to life, she begins questioning all she has been taught about the interactions between her kind and men. Labra finds herself struggling to make peace between her mother's reality and a love that isn't meant for daemons.

Will she succeed in soothing the monster within, or will her nature cause her to devour her best friend?

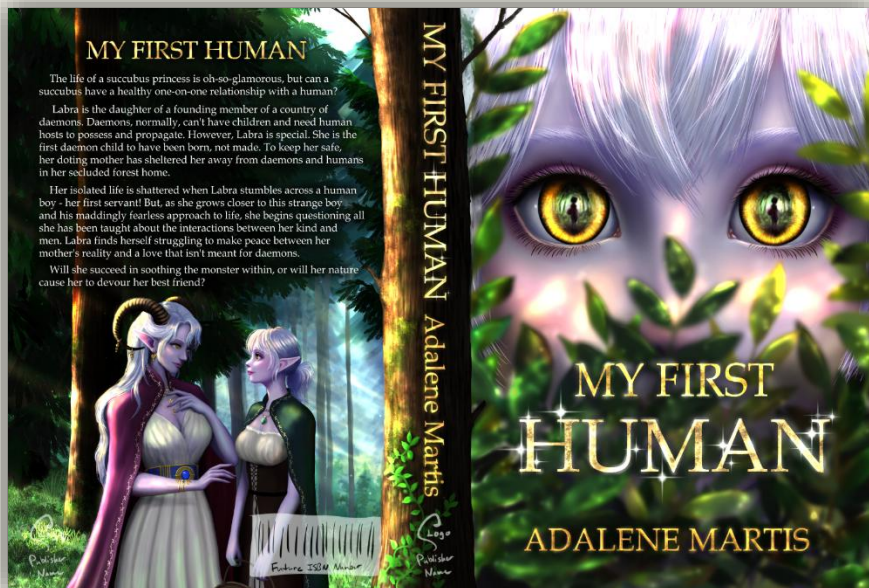


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Be Aware.

Herein the main character of this novel is a spirit of lust, a succubus. She comes from a nation which is led by others of her kind, who follow traditions of sacred prostitution which are drawn from historical examples of real-world cultures which did the same.

To find out if this story is for you, please visit the author's website: adalenemartis.com.

CHAPTER 1: LOOK AT ME WITH AWE, MORTAL

Labra woke to thunder. It forked through the sky, invading her bedroom with stark silver, making her squint against the piercing light. It shook the house and rattled the windows. In the wake of the flash, a daemonic silhouette stood in the doorway - tall and regal, with majestic horns curving upward. The scent of pine and rain-soaked earth wafted in, blending with the aroma of dried sage hanging on the wooden walls. The creature stepped inside her bedroom, tail swishing once. The daemon's tail curved skillfully upward to close the door behind her.

"Did you make the thunderstorm, Momma?" Labra asked, blinking away the sleep in her eyes.

Her daemonic mother's voice was rich and calm. "Yes, my little night bloom. The sky is alive tonight."

Labra felt the bed dip as her mother slid under the silk sheets. Momma's scent was comforting - a blend of earth and wildflowers after the rain, with a hint of spice.

She enthusiastically snuggled into her mother's embrace. "Will you teach me to call lightning one day?" she inquired with an imaginative glint in her eyes.

Her mother chuckled softly, "Let's start with the basics first."

Labra pouted but didn't argue. Instead, her small fingers gently traced the curve of her mother's horns. Labra was proud of how much she resembled her mother. She had the same opalescent hair, tail, and golden vulpine eyes. The only thing she lacked was horns and curves. "Momma, when will I have horns like yours?" She asked.

"One day," her mother whispered, her breath warm against Labra's ear. "When you're ready to become a woman."

Labra's eyes widened even more, and she gave a determined nod. "I'll be the bestest, scariest witch around. Just like you, Momma," she declared softly. Then she nestled her head against her mother's chest, her breath slowly evening out as she drifted into a peaceful slumber, surrounded by love and the scent of the storm.

Labra was flying.

Through the cold darkness, she fluttered, her delicate moth wings covered in stardust. She was seeking flowers in the gloom. Minds waiting to blossom under her touch. Around her fluttered her cousins and aunts; too numerous to count. They were ethereal, moonlit beings of the night, gently alighting upon dreaming heads, which blossomed like flowers. They took nectar as payment, but in return, they gifted dreams of love and whispers of inspiration.

On the horizon, a cascade of warm, golden light surged across the starscape. Her heart fluttered as she felt an irresistible pull towards it. Within the light, a feminine silhouette, adorned with long, flowing locks and a crown that glittered with stars, beckoned her. There was a scent, like musk, which filled her with a strange but appealing heat. Her multifaceted eyes strained to see through the brilliance. She knew this figure, didn't she? It was like seeing a memory through a veil. They had stopped their ethereal flight — stopped alighting upon the dreamers.

Nearer and nearer, she flew, her curiosity mingling with a joy that welled up from deep within her soul. Through the periphery of her compound vision, she saw her kin also drawn towards the light.

"Look closer," said a voice like velvet, her mother's voice.

Her kin had stopped. Something was wrong. Their purpose was to light upon the dreamers. Yet they flew towards the light. For what reason, Labra did not know.

"Look CLOSER," the voice urged with an intensity that shook Labra's very being.

Labra hesitated and peered again. Shadowy chains, thin as spider silk, but strong as iron, were attached to the necks of her family, guiding them to the light.

"There. Look and see. Know your enemy, my child," hissed the voice.

Labra closed her eyes, though she had no eyelids. When she opened them again, she was herself - a small girl with vulpine eyes, now piercing through the light. There, at the center of the light, was her grandmother, Inanna, Queen of Desire. Her horns regal, her beauty otherworldly, but her mouth was an enormous, gaping maw. Her smile was not welcoming but sinister, like a spider inviting flies into its web.

Labra's heart twisted in her chest. She wanted to shout, to scream a warning to her family. But no sound escaped her lips. Her family kept flying, closer and closer, until Inanna's mouth snapped shut with a deafening crunch. The illusory golden light shattered like glass. In the silence that followed, Labra's wings disintegrated into motes of light, and she felt her body tumbling into the abyss.

A chain snaked around her throat, pulling taut. She clawed at it, her tears mingling with the stars as she choked. Her small body dangled, suspended between

what was and what could never be, the taste of lost dreams bitter on her tongue.
"Help... Momma..." she gasped as the darkness swallowed her whole.

* * *

Labra jolted awake to the sound of bone-chilling screams piercing through the dawn air. Her heart hammered in her chest as she saw her mother writhing next to her, her face contorted in agony. The screams were raw, desperate cries. Her mother's back arched unnaturally, her tail lashing wildly, and her feet kicking the sheets off the bed as if trying to escape the torment that besieged her from within.

"Momma! Momma, what's happening?!" Labra cried, her small hands reaching out hesitantly, terrified of causing more pain.

The room seemed to darken, as if shadows were clinging to her mother. Labra's breath caught in her throat, her young mind struggling to understand what was happening.

Then, as abruptly as it began, the shadows receded, and her mother went limp. Her sweat-soaked body lay trembling, and her breathing was ragged. A trickle of blue blood seeped from her nose, staining the pillow beneath her. Her mother's sobs were muffled as she covered her mouth with a trembling hand.

"Momma, are you alright? Please tell me what to do!" Labra's voice quivered with panic, her eyes welling up with tears.

Her mother's voice was a hoarse whisper, "Fetch the solsarín and brew some tea. Hurry please."

Solsarín was a magical herb with silver leaves and slow-growing tubers which could heal pretty much anything. Her mother always kept a bag of the rare herb in the kitchen.

"Okay, Momma," Labra said, her voice unwavering despite her fear. As she turned to leave the bedroom, her hand lingered on the door handle, and she glanced back. Her mother's once mighty figure seemed so fragile, like a flickering flame in the darkness.

Labra's eyes darted around the adjoining room before settling on the small wooden cupboard her mother kept stocked with herbs and other ingredients. With a deep breath, she sprinted into the kitchen, her heart pounding in her ears.

Reaching into the cupboard, her fingers brushed against various jars and pouches until they closed around a small cloth bag. She opened it to

find only a few small pieces of solsarín root left – not nearly enough for a strong brew.

Labra's hands trembled as she placed a pot of water on the hook over the fire rack. She recalled the times she had seen her mother conjure flames with a mere flick of her fingers. However, for some stupid reason her mother refused to teach her such things “until she was older,” so she had to rely on flint, kindling, and time.

Sparks flew and she built the fire slowly from the wood pile nearby.

As the water began to boil, she crushed the solsarín root and dropped it in. The fragrant aroma of the herb infused the room. She wished there were more to make a proper, hearty brew, but this would have to do for now.

Carefully, she poured the steaming tea into a cup and rushed back to her mother's side.

“Momma, I made it for you,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady as she handed over the teacup.

“Thank you, Labra,” Momma whispered with a faint smile. She looked so worn and frail as she took the cup from Labra's hands, but her eyes, those piercing eyes, still held a fierce determination. She took a sip and some color seemed to return to her pale face.

Labra hesitated before speaking. “We're out of solsarín.”

“I'm too weak to get more right now,” Momma said. “Do you remember where it grows?”

“Uhm...” Labra scrunched up her nose and tapped her chin, trying very hard to look like she was just about to figure it out.

Momma took a deep breath. “By water. It grows by water, where the sun doesn't show. This time of year, the leaves are small, but don't let that fool you, the roots can be large. Dig it up but...” she paused to catch her breath, “be careful not to hurt the stem or leaves. You can take some of the root but leave enough so that it doesn't die. If you're having trouble finding it, use your eyes like I showed you. Do you remember?”

“I take a deep breath, like this,” Labra demonstrated by taking a deep breath, “and I close my eyes... till I feel the whoosh.” Labra felt a whoosh of energy. “Then I open them and...” Her voice trailed off as she looked at her mother and saw a faint glow of light around her. The aura was throbbing, painted red, streaked with black lines. Seeing the aura caused an empathic pain in Labra's own body which made her lip quiver. “Oh, Momma, you hurt.”

Momma gave her a weak smile. “It’s good you remember. If you’d been born in the Twilight, you’d already be an expert with your eyes by now.” Her voice was softer now. “What you’re seeing is the world as it truly is -a tapestry of emotions and energy. Try to keep your focus and your eyes open in the woods. If you bump into anything big, use the concealment spell I taught you, alright?”

Labra nodded, her expression resolute. But inside, she didn’t have any intention of hiding. These woods were the Witchwoods. And she and her mom were witches. This was her territory. She was way scarier than anything out there. Well, except for maybe a bear. Or a boar. Or a wolf. Or the big cats from the mountains. Or...

“I promise, I’ll remember the spell,” Labra said, her voice filled with determination.

Labra stepped into the Witchwood, a place as familiar to her as her own home. The towering trees with their gnarled branches seemed to whisper secrets to each other as they swayed in the breeze. A dense canopy of leaves filtered the sunlight, casting an enchanting, dappled light onto the forest floor, which was carpeted with moss and fallen leaves.

The Witchwood in the spring was a place of magic. Wildflowers bloomed between the trunks of ancient oaks and beeches, their fragrances mingling with the earthy scent of the woods. The air was cool and moist, and the only sounds were the distant calls of birds and the rustling of leaves.

Labra knew she had to find a woodland stream. She recalled her mother’s words: solsarín grew where the sun didn’t show, by the water. Labra ventured deeper into the forest, stepping over roots and rocks, occasionally brushing her fingers over the leaves and bark of the ancient trees. The pulse of life coursing through them made her stomach rumble.

Compelled by hunger, she pressed her lips to the bark of a towering tree filled with a vibrant energy. The rough bark grazed her skin. With closed eyes, she drew forth the essence of life, the very loosh that ebbed within the tree, sipping it as one might sup water directly from a crystal spring.

After a few swallows, a warmth radiated through her. The loosh from the tree was bland and left her mouth feeling sticky, like it was coated with sap. It was unpleasant, but she felt sated. She heard her mother’s voice in her ears, telling her to be grateful as she touched her hand to the tree in silent thanks, then continued her search for solsarín.

As she walked, she saw how the Witchwood was both wild and cultivated. Here and there, she spotted the signs of care taken by both her mother and the nearby residents of the village of Elmswatch - a tree carefully pruned, a grove of medicinal herbs protected by a ring of stones. Despite the enormity of the forest, she could sense that every tree, every plant was cherished and looked after by the women of Elmswatch. And the reason it was only the women of Elmswatch, was because Momma was a daemoness. Aside from the huntsman, Hagen, only the women of the village were allowed to come into the woods. And even then, only on Deus Day.

But that was silly. Momma liked girls just as much as she liked boys. Even sillier was that the Deusians couldn't comprehend that some of their women liked her too – especially those who had been forced to marry men. Their lives were actually very sad. Momma helped them feel better. The only reason women were safer in the woods is because they weren't as rude as the men. Man or woman, if they were nice, they wouldn't have to worry about getting drained. Momma was a good daemon.

Labra marveled at how productive the humans were within the woods, even with only one day of the week available. They kept it clean, cultivated, and free of underbrush – which was immensely helpful in her current quest.

Soon, the gentle babble of water tickled her ears. Excited, she followed the sound until she came upon a small, clear creek running through a shaded glen. Ferns and moss lined the banks, and she noticed a fallen log that had become home to a thriving ecosystem of mushrooms and insects.

Labra took a deep breath, like her mother had taught her, and closed her eyes until she felt that familiar thrum of energy. Opening her eyes, she looked at the world around her through her auric sight.

The creek before her was a ribbon of pure, flowing energy, and she could see the auras of the trees surrounding it like pillars of light. As she scanned the banks, she spotted a faint silver glow coming from a patch of tiny leaves near the water's edge. Solsarin!

She hurried over and knelt, her heart pounding with triumph. As she began to dig around the roots with her hands, she realized something was amiss. The ground around the Solsarin had been disturbed, and the soil was looser than she had expected. Upon examining the plant, she saw that its root had been carefully pruned, leaving almost nothing left.

Labra felt a mix of emotions. On one hand, she was relieved that whoever had taken the root had done so with care and respect. On the other hand, she was left with a dilemma; there was hardly anything for her to take without endangering the plant.

She thought of her mother, lying weak and in need of this very herb. But then her mother's words echoed in her mind, *Leave enough so that it doesn't die.*

Labra took a deep breath and gently patted the soil back around the plant. Her heart was heavy, but she felt a sense of resolve. She would find another solsarín. All she had to do was find another patch of dark, on another bank, in another undisturbed part of the forest.

I can do it, she told herself.

As Labra was about to stand, she heard a rustling in the foliage behind her. She stiffened. Her mother had told her to use the concealment spell if she encountered anything big. But her curiosity was too strong.

She turned to look, and what she saw made her catch her breath in wonder.

In the clearing stood a young human, who appeared to be around her age, perhaps no older than twelve. This human had tousled dark brown hair, loose and unkempt, which framed their face in a way she hadn't seen before. They were kneeling slightly upstream from her, intently digging at something in the dirt. What caught Labra's attention most was how different this human was dressed from the others she had encountered in the Witchwood. Instead of the long dresses typically worn by human females, this one wore trousers—a rare sight that piqued her curiosity.

Labra's eyes grew large as realization struck her.

Woah. It's... it's a boy! That's not a girl, that's a boy. He's not the huntsman either. What is he doing here? Men aren't allowed in the Witchwood. If he sees me, momma will get angry.

That's when she noticed what he was digging at: solsarín.

"That's mine!" She shouted without thinking.

As Labra's voice broke through the quiet of the clearing, the boy's startled movement sent a few loose stones clattering down into the stream. He quickly turned to face her, and the sight that met Labra's eyes made her heart twist with an unexpected pang of sympathy.

The boy's face was marred by signs of a recent, harsh beating. One of his eyes was swollen shut, surrounded by a dark bruise that seemed to

spread across half his face like a shadow. His nose was swollen and crooked, as if it had been broken not long ago. Despite the clear signs of pain that must have been throbbing across his features, when his good eye found her, it widened in a mix of surprise and something warmly akin to joy.

Then, as if the sight of her had momentarily washed away his discomfort, his lips stretched into a brilliant, albeit lopsided, smile. The smile transformed his face, lighting it up with such a genuine brightness that it seemed to push away the shadows of his injuries. Even in his battered state, there was an unmistakable spark in him, a resilient spirit that not even his wounds could dull.

As they locked gazes, Labra's auric sight revealed more. His aura was a tapestry of sunshine yellows, calming blues, and energetic reds. The colors danced around him as if reflecting his very spirit – open, curious, and full of life.

But what caught Labra's attention more than anything else was what came next. The scent that wafted toward her – it was... intoxicating. A blend of spring leaves, earth, and something more, something alive. It was him. The life energy he exuded, his loosh, was rich, aromatic, and it called to the very core of her being. As a daemon, her essence was drawn to life energy, to loosh, and his was like a feast compared to the bland sustenance she had drawn from the tree.

She restrained herself, but her mouth watered and her heart raced.

"Don't worry, I didn't take any. This little guy has already been harvested. I didn't take anymore." Said the boy, his voice chiming like a gentle bell.

Labra was shocked. He was obviously hurt, but he was more worried about killing the plant than healing himself. He wasn't at all like the selfish and brutal Deusian men that were in her bedtime stories.

She kind of wanted to talk to him, but no... she didn't want to get in trouble.

"Forget you saw me," said Labra, then she started to turn away.

"Wait! My name is Johan Faust," said Johan. "Who are you? You're so pretty. I've never seen anyone with gold eyes and silver hair before."

Labra paused for a moment, but then turned her back to him. She really should go...

"Aaah! Holy Maker, you have a tail! That's amazing! Are you a daemon? I've never met a daemon before." His words tumbled out in an endearing rush.

Labra's heart swelled, and she found herself smiling. She turned back around and puffed out her chest.

"I'm not just any daemon," Labra replied, her voice proud. "My name is Labra and I'm the daughter of the witch, Natylipsis! I am a princess of the Twilight, second in line to the Throne of Desire. Look at me with awe, mortal."

Johan's eyes danced with excitement. "Your mom's the White Witch?! That's so cool! Everyone tells stories about your mother. Is she *really* as beautiful as they say? Mr. Smith said he saw her once from a distance and that he's been enchanted ever since. He can't forget her, no matter how many times the priest cleanses him."

"My mother is the crown princess of Desire. She's the most beautiful woman on the planet." Said Labra confidently.

"Woah," said Johan, mind blown.

Labra raised an eyebrow. "Aren't you scared? Humans are easily enchanted by daemons like us," Labra said with gentle firmness. "That's why only women are allowed in the woods, and even then, only on Deus day. You should be careful."

Johan gave her a mischievous grin. "Hah. I'm not scared of someone just because they're pretty. Anyway, what are you doing here?"

Labra's expression turned serious as she remembered the solsarín and her mother's pain. "I'm here for the same reason you are. Solsarín. My mom needs it. But it looks like someone already harvested the plants here and left almost nothing," she said, her voice tinged with worry.

Johan's exuberance seemed to fade for a moment as he looked at her with concern. "Solsarín might be hard to find. The Church told the herb pickers to gather as much of it as they could find. But I saw another stream not too far away. Maybe there's more there?" Johan pointed further into the woods.

A small flicker of hope ignited in Labra's chest. "Could you show me?"

"Sure!" Johan's smile returned in full force.

As they began to walk, Labra found herself continuously aware of the life energy emanating from Johan. It was so potent and enticing. As a daemon she was stronger than he was. She could easily overpower him and draw on his loosh. But the thought of harming this kind-hearted boy made her heart ache.

"I've heard so many stories about daemons," Johan chatted happily as they walked. "Do you really have magic powers? Can you fly?"

“Yes, we’re very powerful,” Labra said with a slight smile. Then, after a moment’s hesitation, she added, “You should be careful around daemons, Johan. Some of us can be dangerous.”

He looked at her with a grin. “But not you, right?”

Labra nodded, but glanced away with a guilty heart as she swallowed a mouthful of drool. Johan reminded Labra of an energetic little bunny so much that she wanted to pat him on the head. She struggled to shut the thought of how good he would taste out of her mind. He was too cute to turn into breakfast.

They arrived at a spot by the stream where, sure enough, there was a patch of solsarín. Labra quickly knelt and began to carefully dig around the roots, thanking Johan with her eyes.

As she cleared the soil around the roots of the solsarín, her heart sank. This plant too had been carefully harvested, leaving behind only enough roots to ensure its survival but not enough for her to take without killing it. The soil around it was loose and fresh, indicating that someone had been here recently. Her heart ached, for she knew her mother needed the solsarín desperately.

Labra’s shoulders slumped as she whispered a soft apology to the plant before patting the soil back into place.

Johan, who had been watching her intently, frowned. “Does your mom really need it? I thought she was a powerful witch.” He said.

She looked up at him, her golden eyes glistening. “Even daemons can be hurt. We heal from physical injury almost instantly, but wounds caused by magic are different.” Labra explained.

Johan scratched his head with a puzzled expression. “Yesterday was Deus day, right? I saw all the women in the village heading into the woods early in the morning. They brought all the solsarín they gathered back to the church. The wardens haven’t come to pick it up yet, so it’s probably still there.”

Labra’s heart raced. “Really?”

Johan nodded eagerly. “Yeah, like I said, they store it in the church. But you can’t go there. They don’t like daemons near the village.”

“I know,” Labra sighed. “But my mother needs it.”

Johan’s eyes darted around as if contemplating a daring plan. His eyes settled back on Labra. “I didn’t want to steal from the church. But, if I didn’t find solsarín on my own I planned to do it anyway. Follow me, but we gotta be sneaky.”

His small hand reached out and grabbed Labra’s.

Labra's breath hitched as Johan's hand grasped hers. His touch was gentle, and an electric sensation traveled through her as their auras entwined. Johan's aura, a vibrant mix of yellows, blues, and reds, seemed to flow like a vivid stream down his arm and into their clasped hands.

Labra's own aura, which had been a turbulent mix of purples and grays, began to respond to Johan's. The very moment their hands touched, the vivid yellows and blues from Johan's aura seemed to gently weave through the darker shades of her own, as if strands of sunlight were piercing through a dense cloud.

As they stood there, clasped hands slightly raised between them, it was as if she could see the energies dancing; his vibrant and full of excitement, hers more intense and anxious. But something beautiful was happening. His aura was like a soothing breeze, calming her anxiety. The purples and grays in her aura began to brighten as her anxious energy shifted.

She looked into his eyes, which shone with genuine delight at the thought of helping her. Was this boy a simpleton? Had he been enchanted by her somehow, even though she hadn't used magic? Did he want something from her? Was he trying to lure her into a trap? As Labra kept trying to think about why he was helping her, the aura he was giving off kept saying the same thing. He was having fun.

Maybe he's just really kind. No, no, that couldn't be. Such people didn't exist. Momma had said so. Everyone wanted something. Yet, looking at Johan, it was hard to imagine him planning to betray anyone.

As they dashed through the forest, Labra forgot about looking around for predators, and instead found herself gazing in wonder at this strange human... at Johan. She felt energized as they moved through the trees and foliage, his infectious aura seeping into hers through their touch. And as her mood lightened, her desire to consume this sweet boy continued to fade, to where it was nothing more than an ambient noise buzzing softly behind her buoyant thoughts. It was such a noticeable shift that Labra began to wonder if he was using enchantment on her.

Johan began laughing as he tugged her along at jog.

"Come on, Labra, hurry up." He said.

"Human, if I chose to hurry, I would leave you behind crying and wondering where I'd gone." Said Labra.

"But then you wouldn't get your solsarín." Said Johan.

"Are you trying to coerce me, mortal?" Labra asked.

“C-Coverce? I don’t even know what that means! Just hurry up, we need to get there while the priests are still doing morning prayers.” Said Johan.

“Are you sure you’re not trying to trick me? I promise you’ll regret it if you are.” Said Labra.

“I’m not.” Said Johan.

“Then why are you so happy?” Labra countered.

“I dunno. Maybe because I’m holding hands with a princess!” Johan cheered. His buoyant giggles echoed through the forest as they ran. His joy was infectious, and Labra found herself laughing.

They reached the edge of the forest where the shadows of the trees met the sunlit outskirts of Elmswatch, the human village. Johan was still holding her hand when he started to tip sideways. Labra caught him.

“Are you alright?” She asked.

“I... who...” Johan looked at Labra as if he was suddenly confused. “Oh right, you’re Labra, and I need to get solsarín from the church.”

Johan’s aura fluctuated chaotically, going dim around his head where he was wounded. The scent of loosh wafting from him faded slightly.

“Johan?” Said Labra, her heart pounding.

“I’m just a little dizzy from all the running. Wait here,” Johan whispered. “I’ll be back with the solsarín.”

Johan slunk off through the streets of the village, staggering slightly. Maybe he was hurt worse than she thought. Humans were so weak. She didn’t know much about what kinds of ailments could afflict them, but if he got solsarín he should be fine.

Hopefully he wouldn’t collapse before he brought her the solsarín. That would be sad.

Labra could see the top of the church in the distance, with its pointed steeple and timbered framework. It reminded her of the towering trees back in the woods, but in an odd, artificial way. Close by, only a few villagers milled about, clad in simple, rustic garments. The whole scene was like one of those tales her mother would tell her about the human world.

As Labra stood at the edge of the village, she became suddenly conscious of her appearance. Her silver hair, which cascaded down her back in luminous waves, caught the sun’s rays, making it shimmer with an opalescent sheen. Her heart raced; the last thing she needed was to draw the attention of the villagers.

She recited a mantra under her breath to help her focus her will. She didn't need to do this to use magic, but it was a crutch that helped her focus her intention and give form to the magic. A vibration of magic flowed through her spiritual vessels, originating from the magical core located in her dantian, and flowing outwards into her aura, which concentrated upon the surface of her skin as she expressed her desire to disappear. Then, the air around her wavered and she faded from sight, blending seamlessly with her surroundings.

The illusion wasn't perfect but, if she didn't move, she was practically invisible. Now concealed, she could observe without fear of being detected. In the distance, church bells rang out. These bells echoed for miles and could be heard well into the forest. Momma had said that it was the signal for prayer.

The villagers that had been milling about disappeared into buildings. As if on cue, Johan emerged from down the street that led towards the center of Elmswatch. His movements were agile and swift as he made his way back to her – much steadier than before. He quickly snuck around buildings, avoiding the view of open windows.

She could feel her heart pounding in her chest, and for a moment she was overwhelmed with the enormity of what they were doing. Humans were weak. They could easily get sick and die. Even something silly like falling out of a tree could kill them. Solsarin fixed all that. For a little while, it made humans heal just as fast as a daemon. The magical herb was extremely valuable.

Labra knew that without Momma's help that the solsarín wouldn't grow, so she was fine taking it from the humans. But for them each bite of solsarín was a lifesaving treasure. Though she didn't know human laws, she knew enough to realize that Johan was putting himself at serious risk by helping her. So, she was relieved that no one was following him.

When Johan reached the tree line, he paused, looking around with a puzzled expression. The wounds on his face were less swollen and his nose had straightened. Both of his brilliant blue eyes were open now, giving him a much better appearance. Seeing him made her feel funny inside, like the way she felt when she saw a cute bunny.

"Labra?" He called softly into the underbrush.

Labra then remembered he couldn't see her. She cut off the flow of magical energy flowing through her aura that was shaped by her intention and released her spell.

Johan jumped back slightly in surprise as she materialized in front of him, but his shock quickly turned into excitement.

“Was that magic?” His eyes twinkled with awe as he stared at her.

Labra couldn’t help but puff up with pride at his reaction. It had taken quite a bit of effort to master such an advanced illusion, and it felt nice to be praised. However, Johan was far too conspicuous this close to town.

“Shhh... quiet. Yes, it was magic. I’m a daemon, so it’s normal for me to do at least this much.” Said Labra.

Johan eagerly turned out his pants pocket with a beaming smile and showed off his collection of around half a hand-full of solsarín root.

“Here,” he panted. “It’s solsarín. I sucked a little on one of the pieces. I hope you don’t mind.”

Labra’s eyes welled up with gratitude as she took the few pieces of precious herb from him. “I don’t mind. Thank you, Johan.”

“You’re welcome.” He said, his eyes shining. “Uhm, Labra, can you... can you teach me magic? Please?”

Labra paused for a second, staring into his too-human eyes, blind to the flow of auras and ignorant of the fact that he lacked the basic internal parts required to turn loosh into magic. Yet he begged her with his gaze, overflowing with pure excitement.

“Maybe one day,” she replied. It might be possible. She just didn’t know how.

Johan’s face lit up. However, as he realized she was about to leave, Labra could see his aura flicker. The brilliant yellow rays dimmed, and a gentle blue hue enveloped him - a sadness mingled with the kindness that seemed so natural to him.

“I’m really glad we found solsarín for your mother. I hope she feels better. She helps so many people with her medicine, so I’m glad I got to help her too.” He said. His voice was soft, almost a whisper. He paused and took a deep breath. “I know you have to go, but, uhm, would you... like to be my friend?”

Labra felt something in her chest. It was a little thrill, like when her mom tossed her up real high. Then she felt Johan’s aura as it moved to envelop her, seeking connection. It was like a soft, cozy blanket, and it made her feel nice inside, even though it was a little blue and sad too.

She had never thought about having a friend other than her mom. Momma and her always had each other, and that was enough. But

standing here, holding Johan's hand, Labra felt like maybe having him to play with would be... well, it would be amazing.

She looked at Johan, pupils dilating as she felt a rush of excitement. Her mother had read her many stories about the great Daemon Queen Lilitu and her adventures in the mortal realm, so she knew exactly what to say in this sort of situation.

"You've done me a great service, human. So, yes, I will allow you to be my servant... uh, I mean, my friend. I'll even let you play with me!" She exclaimed. "But for now, I must go. Wait for me at the witching hour."

With that, she took a step back and recited her mantra, blending into the trees. She was confident that she had said the lines right and that Johan would be in awe.

"Aah! You disappeared again!" Johan said in a loud whisper. "When? When can I see you? When is the witching hour?"

Labra froze. The book didn't mention anything about this sort of question. Lilitu had just vanished. Come to think of it, she didn't even know where he lived.

"It's at midnight," said Labra.

"But I'm asleep then. Can't we meet at another time?" Said Johan.

"Uhm... what about after lunch? Momma lets me play in the forest around then. We can meet at the stream where we first met." said Labra.

"OK, I'll see you tomorrow. Bye," said Johan, squinting in her direction with amazement.

"Bye~e," said Labra, as she plucked a leaf off a nearby branch and waved it at him. The look of surprise on his face made her giggle.

As she raced through the Witchwood, her heart was lighter than it had been in ages. Not only had she obtained the solsarín for her mother, but she had made a friend – a human who didn't fear her. She couldn't wait to see him again. She wasn't supposed to talk to humans, but her mother didn't need to know.

CHAPTER 2: DON'T SPEAK HER NAME

After Labra gave her mother the solsarín she had collected with the help of Johan, there was a noticeable improvement in her condition. Momma, still weakened but now able to move, had gone straight to the basement hatch and climbed the long ladder down to spend the night meditating in the crystal mine nestled deep in the roots of their home tree. The crystals' energy aided her recovery, though she was far from her full strength.

The next morning, while Labra was doing her daily chores around the house, she heard a distinctive knock on the front door – three quick taps followed by two slower ones. It was a pattern she had come to recognize. She opened the door to find a little plant man, a fey known as a dryad, standing on their stoop. His body was a tangle of leaves and vines, with small beady black eyes peering out from the greenery. In his outstretched arms he held a basket woven from vines and grasses filled with an assortment of fruits, vegetables, and tubers.

"Thank you, Bushie," Labra said with a smile, taking the basket from the fey's arms. She had given him this nickname because of his bush-like appearance.

The fey made a sound that was somewhere between a grunt and a rustle of leaves. "It's not 'Bushie,'" he muttered, but there was no real annoyance in his tone. They had this exchange often enough for it to have become a part of their routine.

The fey shifted his weight, looking more serious. "Labra, there's something else. A spirit beast has been spotted coming off the mountain at the border of the forest. Your mother should know."

Labra's expression turned somber. "Momma is sick," she explained. "She can't deal with a spirit beast right now. Can you tell the huntsman to take care of it?"

The fey's leafy eyebrows knitted together. "Hagen... alright, I'll tell him. But your mother should be informed too."

Labra nodded. "I'll tell her, but she really can't do much right now. Thank you, Bushie," she said, offering him a fang-toothed smile.

With a final nod, the fey scuttled off, disappearing into the underbrush as quickly as he had appeared. Labra closed the door, her mind now racing with the news of the spirit beast. She hoped the

hunter would be able to handle it. The last thing they needed was more trouble, especially with Momma still recovering.

As Labra made her way towards the kitchen, her thoughts preoccupied with the spirit beast, a thought struck her with the suddenness of a thunderbolt. She was supposed to meet Johan in the woods today. The knowledge hit her with such intensity that her hands involuntarily loosened their grip on the basket. Fruits, vegetables, and tubers tumbled to the floor in a cascade of color and soft thuds, rolling in every direction. But Labra barely noticed the mess; her heart pounded in her chest, fear and concern for her new friend consuming her. She knew she couldn't let anything happen to him. Dropping to her knees, she hastily gathered the scattered produce.

Labra's heart raced with worry for Johan. They were supposed to meet in the woods after lunch, and the thought of him possibly encountering the spirit beast sent a shiver down her spine. She needed to inform Momma about the beast, even though her mother was still weak from her illness. When she was healthy Momma would have easily dealt with such a threat, but now...

Clutching the basket's handle in her teeth, Labra prepared to make her way down the hatch leading to the crystal mine beneath their home tree. She rarely came down here, as it was her mother's sanctuary – a place of quiet meditation.

Labra grasped the top rung of the long wooden ladder, its rough texture under her hands. The ladder creaked slightly under her weight as she began her descent into the earth. The air grew cooler and damper with each rung she descended, the darkness enveloping her like a thick blanket.

The wood of the ladder was worn smooth from years of use, its surface polished by her mother's hands and feet. Labra could feel the slight grooves and indentations, evidence of the passage of time and the many journeys made into this hidden sanctuary. At first, Labra couldn't see; however, her daemonic eyes adjusted quickly to the lack of light, her senses heightened by the change in environment.

Reaching the bottom of the ladder, Labra removed the basket handle from her mouth and stepped off onto the cool, earthen floor. The temperature here was markedly lower than above ground, the air tinged with the scent of moist soil and ancient stone.

She navigated through the twisting roots that snaked their way downward, her footsteps echoing softly in the cavernous space. As she moved deeper into the mine, a faint glow began to illuminate her path.

The light grew stronger with each step until she found herself in the heart of the crystal mine.

The mine was a place of wonder, a hidden gem beneath the earth. Crystals of various sizes and colors adorned the walls and ceiling, sparkling like stars in a subterranean night sky. Their light cast a kaleidoscope of hues across the cavern, bathing the space in a soft, otherworldly glow.

The crystals ranged from small, delicate formations to large, imposing structures that jutted out from the rock like natural sculptures. Each one pulsed with its own energy, creating a symphony of light and color that danced across Labra's vision.

Labra had always found the crystal mine mesmerizing, a magical place that seemed removed from the rest of the world. But she was a little bit too worried at the moment to investigate the crystals as much as she normally would.

In the center of the mine, where the light was brightest and the crystals were most dense, she found her mother. Momma was seated cross-legged on a plinth carved from crystal in the middle of a cavern, her eyes closed in deep meditation. The glow of the crystals reflected off her skin and horns, casting her in a radiant light that made her seem otherworldly.

"Momma, I have some news," Labra called softly, not wanting to startle her. She approached cautiously; her heart filled with concern for her mother's well-being.

Momma's eyes fluttered open, revealing the depth and warmth that always seemed to reside within them. She accepted the basket Labra handed her and listened attentively as her daughter relayed the warning about the spirit beast.

"Hagen will handle it," Momma said calmly, her voice still carrying a hint of weakness. "The fey are adept at concealing themselves, and there should be no villagers in the woods until the next Deus Day. Hagen will have enough time to track it and take care of it before then."

Labra tensed. She wanted to tell Momma about Johan, but she couldn't without getting in trouble. Still, this was a good opportunity to finally learn more about her mother's condition.

"Momma, we don't get sick like humans, so how... what happened to you?" Labra asked

Momma sighed, a look of weariness crossing her features. She set the basket aside and gazed into the distance, as if gathering her thoughts. "I

couldn't tell you before, but now that I'm feeling a bit better, it's time you knew the truth."

Labra leaned in, curious.

"Your grandmother doesn't want her descendants to know the truth of her cruelty. When she gave you that dream, I thought she wouldn't notice my presence if I interfered, but I was wrong. In revealing the truth about her I triggered a curse she placed on me long ago. Her magic has a way of... reaching out, even from afar. You see, whenever someone thinks of her face, or her name, she knows it."

Labra's eyes widened. She remembered the dream vividly, the light, the chains, and her grandmother's sinister smile.

"This place," Momma gestured to the cavern, "disrupts your grandmother's magic. The planet is alive, Labra, and the pulse of life through these walls muddies her vision. Makes it difficult for her to hear us."

Labra's eyes widened at this, and she glanced at the glowing crystals. "But Momma, I've never even met grandmother before, why is she sending me bad dreams?"

"Because, more than anything else, your grandmother wants to remain in power. Inanna is one of the six thrones. She was created from primordial lust and has existed since the dawn of life. For her to continue to hold her throne, the base desires which created her must remain the dominate form of desire in this world." Momma explained.

"But why is she coming after me?" Said Labra, plaintively.

"Because you're my daughter. Because I led a rebellion against her. Because you could grow up to threaten her one day. As a princess of desire, beings from the Twilight and beyond will look to you as an example of how to love."

Labra furrowed her brow in disbelief. She didn't see how she chose to live would affect anyone other than herself.

In response, Natylypsis flared her aura, and countless thin filaments which were normally hidden stretched out into the distance, blending with the ambient light of the crystals surrounding her. She gently scooped a handful of the fragile filaments into her hand.

"These are all the beings I have lain with who still live. We are always connected, and they are connected to others in turn. Who you choose to love and how you treat them will send ripples through the hearts of creatures across this world. If you do not follow Inanna's way, it is a direct

threat to her rule. And she would do anything to stop that from happening.” Said Momma.

Labra felt a chill run down her spine. The thought of her grandmother’s insidious influence was terrifying.

“That’s why I left the Twilight, our home, despite the risks of coming to the human world. Many other daemons have done the same. Together, we created a nation of free love to continue our fight. I’ll show you it to you one day, when you grow older.” Momma’s eyes met Labra’s, “But, Labra, if you ever see that face again, even in a dream, you must promise me to run. Come and find me as soon as possible.”

Labra took her mother’s hand, squeezing it gently. “I understand, Momma. I promise to be careful.”

Natylopsis smiled weakly. “Good. Good.” She said, relieved. Then she tapped her chin. “While we’re both here, would you like me to teach you how to meditate?”

“Uhm...” Labra began, thinking of how Johan might be in the forest right this moment, along with a hungry spirit beast.

“Darling, I know it seems boring, but it will help you control your thoughts. It makes magic safer and more efficient. I can’t teach you more dangerous magic until you master the technique. Aside from that, it’s good for your emotional health in general and will help you control your urges when you get older, so you don’t hurt your lovers. Useful, huh?” Her mother pitched, trying to convince her.

I want to learn! Momma rarely taught her magical techniques. Her lessons mainly consisted of language, math, rhetoric, history, sewing, singing, dance and human husbandry – none of which helped her become better at magic.

Natylopsis patted an empty space on the plinth next to her. Labra was tempted to sit, but the image of Johan’s smile flashed across her memory. She stamped her foot in frustration, then turned on her heel, calling over her shoulder as she ran.

“Sorry, mom! Gotta play. There are trees in the woods and it’s warm and I like climbing. You know how it is. Things to do. Ok, bye!”

She quickly darted off, leaving Natylopsis staring after her with a strange look on her face.

* * *

Labra's heart raced as she sprinted through the Witchwood, her senses heightened and alert. The dense foliage was a blur as she navigated the familiar paths with a singular focus - to find Johan and warn him to go back to the village. Her auric sight, a rare gift from her daemon heritage, painted the world around her in a kaleidoscope of colors, each representing the life force of the creatures and plants in the forest.

Suddenly, a large and menacing presence loomed through her auric vision. Labra skidded to a halt, her eyes widening in alarm. She quickly cloaked herself in invisibility and, with agile movements, scaled a nearby tree, her powerful claws digging into the bark as she ascended with the nimbleness of a squirrel.

Perched high in the branches, Labra held her breath as the creature emerged from the underbrush. It was an enormous mountain lion, its massive form exuding a powerful aura. The creature's fur was a deep shade of black, blending seamlessly with the shadows of the forest. Its eyes glowed a fierce red, and its muscular body moved with a predatory grace that was both terrifying and awe-inspiring. The cat's tail flicked back and forth.

Labra's heart pounded in her chest, the sound deafening in her ears. She placed a hand over her mouth, trying to muffle the sound of her heavy breathing. Spirit beasts were normal animals that had become possessed by thought forms known as egregors. Spirit beasts possessed by egregors were paragons of their kind. They were larger, more powerful, and some could even use rudimentary forms of magic.

Through her Sight the large cat's aura roiled a desperate mix of deep red and purple. The creature's eyes were wide, unblinking and it was constantly sampling the air. It seemed desperate to find prey. Labra guessed it had been infested with primal egregors of hunger or rage, both of which could push it to leave its home in the mountains.

This is dangerous.

Labra held her breath as the mount lion crept closer. The lion paused, its nostrils flaring as it sniffed the air where Labra had stood moments before. Its ears twitched, scanning the surroundings with an unnerving attentiveness.

For a moment, the cat's gaze drifted upwards, its glowing eyes piercing through the foliage. Labra froze, praying that her concealment would hold. After a tense moment, the lion seemed to dismiss its suspicions and moved on, its powerful limbs carrying it effortlessly through the woods.

But Labra's relief was short-lived. The lion was heading in the direction of the stream – the very place she was supposed to meet Johan.

Panic gripped her as she wrestled with her options. What if Johan hadn't come today? He was a human, after all. A weak, pathetic human. He should have had second thoughts about being friends with a daemon after a night alone. Enough to stay home. Yet, even as she told herself this, her thoughts kept drifting to that goofy, enthusiastic face of his as he held her claws with his delicate hands.

He didn't seem to have any awareness that she could have ripped him in half. Would a clueless guy like him really rethink visiting her?

Her internal debate was shattered by a familiar voice echoing through the forest. "Labraaa! Are you here?!"

It was Johan, his voice clear and *stupidly* loud in the quiet of the woods. Labra's eyes widened in horror. The mountain lion immediately lifted its large head, its ears swiveling towards the source of the sound.

Time seemed to stand still as the cat's predatory interest was piqued by Johan's call. Labra's mind raced. She had to act fast. If she didn't do something, Johan would be in grave danger. Her heart ached with the thought of her adorable, yet also unwittingly helpless human friend, facing the wrath of such a powerful spirit beast.

"Johan, you idiot..." she whispered to herself. She knew she had to intervene, but how could she face such a formidable creature? Queen Lilitu would sometimes sacrifice her servants in these types of situations, but Johan was her *first* and *only* servant. She couldn't just let him die.

Labra's heart raced as she bounded along the treetops, her feet finding purchase on the branches. Her tail swayed with each leap, aiding her balance as she made her way towards Johan. The forest canopy was a blur above her, the leaves rustling in the wind of her passage.

Below her, she saw Johan, innocent and unaware of the danger lurking nearby. He was laying out a blanket, and it looked like he had brought some food for their meeting. Panic gripped Labra's chest at the sight of him so vulnerable, so exposed.

Without thinking, she screamed, voice cracking, at the top of her lungs, "Johan, run! Go home! It's not safe here!" Her voice carried through the trees, echoing through the forest.

Johan, hearing the rustle in the bushes, turned with a hopeful expression.

“Labra?” he called out. But his hope turned to alarm as the mountain lion pushed its massive head through the bushes, its eyes locking onto him with predatory intent.

In an instant, Johan’s expression changed from hope to something more intense. He bent down quickly, his hands scrambling to pick up a rock from the stream. With a snap of his wrist, he threw it directly at the cat’s eye. The beast snarled, clamping its eye shut as the rock hit its mark.

The lion, enraged, swiped at Johan with a massive paw, scattering the picnic he had prepared. Johan barely managed to jump to the side, narrowly avoiding the beast’s lethal claws.

Labra, watching from above, reacted on pure instinct. The wind was whipping by her face before she had a chance to think, her body hurtling through the air as she leapt from the treetops. She slammed squarely onto the lion’s back, her claws digging deep into its shoulder blades. Without a moment’s hesitation, she sunk her fangs into the beast’s spine, biting fiercely, again and again.

The daemon cat roared in pain and surprise, its body bucking wildly in an attempt to throw Labra off. But she clung on. It was impossible to fall off and survive. Her tail swayed with each movement, helping her maintain her precarious balance atop the enraged creature.

Below her, Johan scrambled to his feet, his eyes wide with shock.

“Labra, run away! Don’t worry about me!” He shouted as he picked up another rock. “Labra?”

Johan watched in disbelief as Labra fought, her small form latched to the back of the massive beast. The picnic he had prepared lay scattered and forgotten, the peaceful scene turned into a battleground.

The mountain lion swiped at Labra with surprising flexibility, its claws slicing through the air. Labra dodged nimbly. She knew she couldn’t let go, or she’d be doomed.

With every bite, Labra poured her fear and her desperation into the attack. She could feel the lion’s blood, warm and thick, coat her mouth and chin. The taste was metallic and filled her with a primal loosh as she drank it, fueling her fight.

Johan, still holding a rock in his hand, looked around frantically, searching for something, anything, he could use to help Labra. But he was outmatched, and he knew it.

The lion, enraged and in pain, let out a series of guttural roars that echoed through the forest. Its movements became more frantic, more

dangerous. Labra knew she couldn't hold on much longer. She needed to end this, and quickly.

Then, to her surprise, the beast stumbled and slowed down as if it had suddenly gotten exhausted. Labra didn't question it. She took the opportunity. With a final, desperate effort, Labra repositioned herself. She bit the back of the cat's neck as her claws flayed open its throat, causing great gouts of blood to spray out with the last beats of its heart. The beast let out a final, pained gurgle before collapsing to the ground, its body shuddering before finally lying still.

Labra released her grip and tumbled to the ground, panting heavily. Her clothes were torn and drenched in blood. Her body ached from the struggle.

Johan stared at her, stunned for a moment, a thick aura of fear hovering around him. She must look horrifying, she realized, covered as she was in blood with chunks of flesh still clinging to her claws. She could see her first friendship ending in the whites of Johan's wide eyes. Well... at least she had paid him back for helping her mother.

But Johan didn't run away. Instead, he rushed to her side, his face etched with concern. "Labra... you... you saved me. That was incredible. But you're hurt! W-we have to get you a doctor. I-I can take you to the priest, or... no, maybe your mother?"

What?

He wasn't scared *of* her. He was scared *for* her. Labra tossed her head back and began to laugh.

"You really are a dummy," spouted Labra between spouts of laughter.

"I'm not dumb! How am I supposed to know where to take you to get help if you don't tell me?" He said, indignant.

Labra shook her head, then hopped to her feet and pounded a fist to her chest. "Don't worry about me, mortal. Daemons heal quickly," she said proudly; then her voice dropped to a concerned whisper. "More importantly, are you alright?"

Johan looked down at his unscathed body, then back at Labra. "I'm alright, thanks to you... but that stupid cat ruined the picnic I brought you. I had pie and everything," he said, his voice tinged with a hint of regret.

Before Labra could respond, a rustling of leaves and the crunching of twigs underfoot announced the arrival of another visitor. They both turned to see the old huntsman emerging from the woods. He was a grizzled man, with a weather-beaten face and a thick gray beard peppered

with white. His eyes, sharp and keen, swept over the scene before him. He carried a powerful war bow in one hand, its wood polished from years of use.

Labra had seen Hagen from a distance several times before. He was the only man allowed in the woods and was a regular sight among the trees. Although, this was the first time she'd ever met him face to face. She quickly wiped the blood from her mouth. She didn't want him getting scared and deciding to shoot her.

Hagen stalked closer to them before smacking Johan on the back of the head with an open hand. "You should worry more about your life than a spoiled picnic, boy."

Then Hagen turned his attention to Labra, his expression softening slightly. "The Witch of the Wood sure has gotten small since I last saw her. No wonder she needed help."

Labra, a little shy under his gaze, corrected him softly, "The witch is my mother. You... won't tell anyone you saw me, will you?"

Her mother would be very angry if she found out she had been fighting spirit beasts and interacting with humans. Now there were two humans who had seen her. It wasn't looking good.

The huntsman's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "I thought daemons couldn't have children..." his voice trailed off as he looked at Labra in wonder. "Well, it's not any of my business. The beast is dead, and I don't have any problem taking credit for the kill." Then he looked over to the mountain lion.

Labra noticed Hagen's gaze and glanced back at the fallen cat, where she saw an arrow protruding from its heart. Realization dawned on her; Hagen had helped them.

"As for the boy," Hagen said gruffly as he gripped Johan by the scruff of his neck. "I'll take him home for punishment. He shouldn't be bothering you in these woods anymore."

Labra's eyes widened. "You can't! Johan's my - he's my friend. Don't tell anyone he came, please, Mr. Hagen. It's lonely here, and he's the only friend I have."

Hagen released Johan and turned to him, his expression serious. "Is what the little witch says true? Are you really her friend?"

Johan nodded enthusiastically, a broad smile on his face. "Not just any friend - she's going to be my *best* friend. I've decided."

Hagen raked his hand through his hair and sighed deeply. "Fine by me. I'm not going to go against the witch or her brat. But," he added,

walking over to the lion, “I’ll be taking the beast’s magic core as payment for my silence.”

The huntsman kneeled by the corpse and expertly gutted the cat, extracting a glowing stone from its insides. He looked it over with an appraising eye before shoving it into his pocket. Then, retrieving his arrow, he prepared to leave.

As he was about to depart, Johan called out to him. “Mister, how come you can enter the Witchwood? You’re a man, so aren’t you breaking the rules too?”

Hagen paused, turning back to Johan. “This is my job. Whenever the Witch is busy, it’s my duty to keep the forest safe. But I’m getting old,” he said, eyeing Johan thoughtfully.

“Hey, boy, you showed some real mettle back there. When it’s time for your apprenticeship, tell your father that Hagen agreed to teach you. I could use some help around my cabin, and if you apprentice with me no one will know about you visiting the little daemon girl.”

Johan seemed to get excited for a moment, but then his shoulders drooped.

“What’s wrong, boy? I’ve been hunting beasts that’d make even the archwarden shit his pants for over thirty years. Am I not good enough for you?” Said Hagen.

“It’s just... my father really hates the Witchwood. He’s always told me to keep out. I don’t think he’d let me,” said Johan.

Hagen waved off Johan’s worry with the back of his hand. “Your father has been after me to train scouts for him for years, and I always turned him down. He won’t pass this up, trust me.”

Johan practically vibrated with enthusiasm as the old man winked at him and then turned away to disappeared into the woods.

Labra looked at Johan thoughtfully. Her mother had said that Hagen was an uncanny archer, an expert at trapping, and good enough at tracking that he could find her even if she was invisible. He was strong, and worthy of respect.

“You’re going to learn to be a huntsman?” Labra asked.

Johan beamed with pride. “Yeah, I guess so.”

Labra’s heart swelled. Johan might be a little dumb, but he was cute, smelled delicious, and the huntsman that her mother respected was going to train him personally. All things considered; she had found a great first servant.

CHAPTER 3: I JUST WANT A TASTE

The warmth of the midday sun filtered through the windows, casting dancing shadows on the wood walls of the kitchen. Labra's mother, Natylipsis, stood in front of the open hearth, her hand weaving a gentle pattern in the air. The flying pan she was controlling levitated above the flames, sizzling with the sound of cooking meat. The crystals embedded in the panhandle glowed softly, connected to threads of her mother's aura. The mountain lion steaks sizzling in the pan filled the room with a rich, tantalizing aroma.

Labra watched her mother's technique intently. She attempted to mimic the movements with her learner pot. Her tongue poked out slightly in concentration as her pot shuddered, giving a reluctant nudge before settling back down. Frustration flickered across her face, but her determination didn't wane.

"It's unusual for Hagen to share meat from his kills," Natylipsis commented, breaking the silence. Her voice was light, but Labra could detect the undercurrent of curiosity. "He usually hoards it for himself, claiming the spirit beast meat keeps him young and strong."

Labra, still focused on her pot, replied without looking up. "Maybe he heard you weren't feeling well and decided to share." She said innocently.

Natylipsis chuckled, a sound rich and warm. "How sweet. Is he trying to flirt with me, I wonder?" She mused aloud, a playful glint in her eyes. "He might be able to keep up with me after eating some of this."

Labra's attention snapped to her mother's statement. "What do you mean, Momma?"

"The meat of spirit beasts helps humans recover lost blood and loosh. It's an ideal food for them to eat when preparing to receive our warmth. What do you think, darling? I know he's old, but should I go visit him?" asked Natylipsis.

Labra laughed nervously, her attempt at lifting the pot forgotten. "He's probably just being friendly," she said quickly. She didn't want her mother to go to Hagen and find out where she had been and what she had done.

Sorry mister huntsman, no momma for you.

Natylipsis shrugged as she sampled some sauce she was mixing with her free hand. “You’re probably right. He’s always been too frightened to make a move in the past. A shame. He would go well with this sauce.” Her tone was light, but Labra caught the edge of lament in her voice.

The kitchen filled with the sounds of cooking and the subtle dance of magic. Conversation shifted away from the huntsman and onto the topic of steak sauce and side dishes, but Labra’s thoughts lingered on the earlier topic. Her mother’s casual mention of tasting a human made Labra curious about Johan. She was supposed to meet him after lunch today. If she brought some meat to help replenish his loosh, could she... have a taste?

“Momma, can you make me some extra and pack it all for me?” Labra asked, trying to mask her excitement with a casual tone. “I was thinking of going on an adventure today.”

Natylipsis raised an eyebrow, a hint of amusement in her gaze. “An adventure, you say? And here I thought you’d spend the day trying to master that learner pot of yours.”

Labra nodded eagerly, her previous frustration with the pot momentarily forgotten. “Yep! I want to try something new today. A~and, it’s pretty outside. I think it’s the perfect time to explore.”

Natylipsis plated her portion of the mountain lion steak and began packing Labra’s share into a container. “Alright, but remember the rules,” she said, her tone turning serious. “You can go where you like, so long as you stay away from the mountain, the deep woods, and Elmswatch. Those places are out of bounds.”

Labra’s eyes sparkled as she nodded in agreement. “I’ll be careful, Momma. I’ll stay in bounds and be back before dark.”

Natylipsis handed her the packed container, her expression softening. “Be safe. If you run into trouble too far from home, ask a dryad for help.”

Labra took the container, her heart fluttering with a mix of excitement and nervousness. “I will, Momma. Thank you.” She hugged her mother quickly, then, with a glance at the sun’s position through the window, grabbed her cloak. It’d make an excellent picnic blanket.

As Labra stepped out of their home, the fresh, vibrant scents of the forest greeted her. Today was a day for new discoveries, for pushing boundaries, and maybe, just maybe, for sharing an extra special meal with her first servant.

Labra ran up the forest path that led to their new meeting spot. Their old spot by the stream was tainted by the decaying scent of the beast entrails and was no longer suitable. Instead, they had chosen a glade graced by a solitary rowan tree, its branches swaying gently in the breeze. The tree's vibrant white flowers nestled amongst emerald-green leaves, while the dappled sunlight filtered through the leaves, creating a patchwork of light and shadow on the forest floor.

Johan was already there, waiting for her beneath the rowan tree, clutching a small bundle wrapped in a clean, white cloth. As Labra approached, her heart skipped a beat in anticipation, the thrill of their secret meeting adding an edge of excitement to her steps.

They both ran up to each other, stopping just a foot apart, the momentum of their excitement halting in a sudden pause. There was a long awkward silence as their eyes met in furtive glances.

What should I say? Would 'can I taste you' be too forward?

"H-Hi, Labra," Johan stammered, his voice a mix of nervousness and delight. He shifted from one foot to the other, his hands gripping the bundle a little tighter.

"Oh hey," Labra replied, her eyes darting to the bundle in his hands. "You're early."

Johan chuckled, as he ran a hand through his hair, which shone a bit brighter than before. She sniffed the air and noticed the scent of mint blending with the sweet scent of his loosh.

"Yeah, well, I couldn't wait. I, uh, brought something for you." He held out the bundle, his cheeks coloring slightly.

Labra leaned in closer, her nose twitching as she took a deep inhale. Johan's scent filled her senses—sweet and rich, intoxicating in a way that made her heart race. But before she could comment, Johan misinterpreted her action.

"They're butter cookies I helped make this morning," he whispered, pride swelling in his voice. "I added mint in the batter to make it special. Do you like mint?"

"I like it in tea... uhm, thank you," Labra said, accepting the bundle even though she'd never had 'cookies' before. "I brought lion steak."

Johan blinked, his excitement giving way to confusion. "Lion? As in... yesterday's lion?"

Labra nodded, setting her cloak down on the grass and carefully undoing the cloth securing the wooden food containers. “Uh-huh. It’s super good for you, so you *must* eat it until you’re stuffed.”

Johan eyed the meat with uncertainty as Labra laid out their picnic. The steaks were thick, the aroma inviting, yet the idea of eating such a formidable creature seemed to be daunting to Johan.

“Did you bring any utensils?” Johan asked, his eyes scanning their makeshift picnic setup.

Labra picked up one of the steaks with her claws and ripped off a chunk with her teeth. “What are utensils?” She asked while chewing.

“Uh... you know, forks and knives?” said Johan. “To cut it up.”

“You don’t need that, just eat it,” said Labra as she shoved the container towards Johan.

He hesitantly picked up a thick steak with his hands and began to gnaw at it. His efforts were comical, his blunt human teeth struggled to tear through the flesh.

Labra watched him for a moment before asking, “Do you want me to tear some chunks off for you?” Her offer was genuine. She hadn’t known that humans were too weak to chew up their own food without tools. That was inconsiderate of her.

Johan paused, the steak halfway to his mouth, and his cheeks flushing with embarrassment. “Yeah, maybe just a small piece,” he said, handing the steak back to her with a sheepish grin.

Labra took the steak from him and bit it into tiny chunks with her teeth before spitting them back into the container. Johan had an odd look on his face as she handed the container back for him to eat.

“What?” Labra asked.

Johan just stared at her with his mouth hanging open, completely silent. His aura was so conflicted that not even Labra could understand what he was thinking. So, she decided he must have been impressed by her prowess. She nudged the food closer to him.

“Don’t bother thanking me. Go ahead. Eat, eat,” she said.

“Do I really have to?” Johan asked.

“Of course you have to eat it! You’re far too weak right now, and the lion meat will make you strong. In her Guide to Ethical Human Husbandry, Lady Carnax says a good daemon should always take care of her humans. ‘Make sure their bellies are full and that they always feel safe and secure.’ So, you must eat.” Said Labra as she wagged her finger at him.

Johan hesitated for a moment before picking up the chunks with his fingers and tentatively eating some of the steak. After chewing thoughtfully, he admitted, "It's much more tender this way, but, uh, could you go a little more into human husbandry? Because I'm starting to feel like you're fattening me up for dinner."

Ack! He found her out already. Should she be honest? Honesty was important when dealing with your chosen. Momma said so.

"Well... now that you mention it, I was kind hoping you'd let me taste you," she said, blushing furiously.

This is so embarrassing! How did anyone talk about this stuff?

Johan looked seriously concerned as he paused midchew to talk past his food. "You want to *what*? Taste me? As in, take a bite out of me? No. No way."

Oh no! She'd gotten it wrong. She was screwing this up. Labra started to panic. "I don't want to EAT you. I just want to taste."

"And what comes after tasting, Labra?!" Said Johan, alarmed. "This is a *really* bad idea."

"Wait, Johan, you don't understand. It's not... It's not actual eating. I'm not gonna take a bite out of you or anything. I just want a lick," said Labra.

Johan's eyes grew big, and he asked, "*Whyyyy?*"

Labra took a deep breath. "Look, daemons need to consume two things to live: food and loosh. We need both, but loosh isn't something that you can normally see, it's more like... energy. I promise I'll be gentle. It won't hurt, in fact, in all the books I've read, they say it feels really good to share loosh with a desire daemon like me."

Johan looked at her skeptically. Labra hurried to reassure him, "I don't want to hurt you. I saved your life, after all. But all the loosh I eat comes from trees. It's so nasty. But you smell *so good*. I know it's a lot to ask, but it would really mean a lot to me. You'd be the first human I've ever tasted. *Please.*"

Johan, still unsure, took a moment to process her words. His aura was waffling. He just needed one more push.

"I'll let you taste me if you let me taste you. Maybe, if you can suck some of my loosh from me, you'll be able to use magic," said Labra. She'd never heard of a human doing that before, but who knew – it might be true.

After thinking for a moment Johan extended the back of his hand toward Labra, his gaze locked on hers. “Here, just a lick. But you have to promise, no biting. Your fangs look like they’d hurt.”

Labra thought to the back of her Lilitu books where more practical manuals for daemon to human relations were detailed in vivid, lurid drawings. Appendix V of book six mentioned that the tastiest parts of a human are where the blood flows closest to the skin—the underside of the wrist, the crook of the elbow, the neck, the lips, and other places. She glanced at each of those parts on Johan, her curiosity piqued. But she gently pushed Johan’s hand back down.

“Finish your meat first,” she said, glancing away. “Sharing loosh isn’t supposed to hurt... but it’s not exactly great for you either. The lion meat is special. My mom says it helps.”

Johan looked up at her with concern, “What will happen?”

“I’m not really sure,” Labra admitted, “but I don’t want it to be a bad experience for you. So, please eat the meat first.”

They ate in silence, Johan staring intently into Labra’s eyes as if trying to make a decision. Labra found it hard to meet his gaze directly, the weight of what she had proposed hanging between them. Finishing her meat before Johan, Labra decided to try one of the butter cookies he had brought. It was incredibly sweet, far sweeter than any of the berries from the forest, with a savory aftertaste that surprised her.

“This is really good,” she commented, genuinely impressed. For some reason, the cookies smelled a little bit like Johan. It was like a spice, which made them extra tasty. She popped another one into her mouth and happily munched away.

Johan’s face lit up a bit at her approval. “I’m glad you like it.”

After he gulped down a particularly big bite, Johan broached a subject that seemed to have been lingering in his mind. “Am I really your friend, Labra? Or did you just save me because you think I’ll taste good?”

“It wasn’t *just* because I thought you’d be tasty! You helped me, so I wanted to help you too,” said Labra. Johan kept staring at her as if that wasn’t a good enough answer. She continued, reluctantly, “But, I’m not sure what it means to be a friend. I’ve never had a friend before, so I’m not really sure what I’m supposed to do.”

Johan swallowed a bite of his meat and waved a stern finger at her as he spoke. “Friends are good to each other. We have fun together. We don’t lie to each other, and we help each other when we’re sad,” said

Johan, his voice very serious. “And! No matter what, a friend keeps their promises.”

Labra nodded, the seriousness in Johan’s voice grounding her. She glanced around the glade, taking in the vibrant greens and browns of the forest that enveloped them. Wind blew through the canopy causing the shadows on the ground to dance. The rowan tree under which they sat seemed to stand like a silent guardian, its leaves rustling softly in the breeze, a natural symphony that underscored Johan’s words – words which resonated within her.

“I think I can be a good friend then. Momma says a good daemons never breaks a pact, and that she should always protect her humans. Also, desire daemons like me are the funnest kind of daemon around. We’re absolutely the best at whatever kind of play you’re into,” said Labra confidently.

“Well, that sounds alright, then. But I’m still kind of scared about losing my... what did you call it? Loosh?” Johan asked.

Labra nodded.

“Yeah. I’m kinda worried about that. I’ve heard lots of scary stories about daemons eating people’s souls. Sucking energy out of me sounds like that,” said Johan.

“*Eating souls?*” Labra balked, as she waved off Johan’s words. “Who told you that craziness? You can’t eat a soul – at least not a human one. That’d be like a pond swallowing an ocean. It doesn’t make any sense. But I hear the quality of a person’s soul does affect the taste of their loosh, so I can see how you might get confused.”

Johan cocked his head to the side, his expression vacant as if he was completely lost.

“Souls always have loosh, but loosh doesn’t always have a soul. Does that help?” Labra asked.

“Not really,” Johan admitted, looking even more confused.

Labra was incredulous. “Do your parents not teach you anything?!” She couldn’t hide her frustration.

Johan shook his head, a sheepish look crossing his face. “No, they never mentioned anything about friendly daemons or loosh or... any of this.”

Labra flipped out a little, pointing at Johan with a claw. “Eat while I teach. This is the most basic of the basics, you *have* to know this stuff” Labra waited until he was chewing to continue.

“Your loosh is your energy, emotion, life.” She said as she drew a five-pointed star onto the dirt. “This,” she said, her voice taking on a lecturing tone, “is the star of protection. At the points are the thrones of Desire, Order, Excellence, Justice, Freedom – and the center is Heylel, Lord of the Forgetting.”

Labra tapped at each of the corners in turn as she was listing them off. “I’m a Desire daemon, and we’re kinda friends with Order and Freedom, but we really don’t like Excellence or Justice. We find them too extreme. We call them the thrones of Pride and Wrath. That’s what we protect humans from. So, if you ever feel stressed out, get overworked, or someone is bullying you make sure to come to me. I’ll protect you.”

“By licking me?” Johan asked.

“That’s right! Desire daemons protect people by making them feel good, and we get loosh in return. Got it, now?” Labra asked.

Johan thought for a moment and then nodded. Then he stood up and walked around to Labra’s side of the picnic and sat beside her to look over her diagram while he munched on some meat. For some reason, this simple shift in his location made her feel all warm inside. She leaned into him slightly and her tail curled towards him as it slapped the ground contentedly.

“So, you’re from here?” Johan asked, pointing at the lower left corner of the star.

“Not exactly. That’s just the symbol of protection. It shows how daemons relate to each other,” she explained. “Daemons come from the Twilight. Most of us, anyway.”

“Where’s that?” Johan asked.

“It’s here, but not here,” said Labra. “Like, beside this place.”

“What?” Johan balked.

“It’s hard to explain. Momma said to think of this world and the Twilight like opposite sides of the same sheet of paper. The two worlds are really close, but if you’re living in this world, you can’t see the other – unless you have eyes like mine,” said Labra, flicking her golden vulpine eyes to Johan.

Johan turned to her, his blue eyes staring into hers, peering at her closely. As he leaned in, Labra’s spiritual sight became completely enveloped by his aura. It was an encounter unlike any she had ever experienced. Johan, this close, was no longer just a human boy to her enhanced senses. He became a being of light, his aura boiling off him in waves, wrapping around Labra like a cocoon.

Through this intimate proximity, Johan's features took on an otherworldly aspect. His face, lit by the inner light of his soul, seemed to shimmer and shift, edges blurring into the radiance that surrounded him. His eyes, a deep and vibrant blue, sparkled with flecks of what looked like stardust, drawing Labra in even deeper. The aura itself was a kaleidoscope of emotions and intentions, swirling with colors that spoke of curiosity, kindness, and a budding affection.

And the *smell*—Labra was dunked in a fog of loosh, an intoxicating, overwhelming scent that was Johan. It was a sweetness, a richness that defied description. It was as if she was tasting the air around him, each breath she took filled with the essence of his being.

For a moment, suspended in this bubble where only they existed, Labra felt a connection to Johan. It was as if their souls were touching, communicating in a language that needed no words.

Then, curiosity apparently sated, Johan pulled back. His aura retracted and diverted its focus. Labra was suddenly, jarringly, plunged back into the reality of the forest glade. Her heart thudded in her chest, her breathing heavy, as she tried to process the intense, overwhelming experience.

Johan glanced sideways at her. "You have really pretty eyes," he said casually, as if nothing had happened.

Labra blinked, a flush creeping up her cheeks, not from the compliment but from the residual feelings the aura exchange had stirred within her. It was hard to believe the entity she had just seen, and the weak human boy named Johan, were the same person. Was this normal? Did all humans look like that up close? *No way*. Her mother had told her about souls and inner light, but she had never described *that*. Could Labra really have *that* as a servant... a friend... have it in her life at all?

Johan set his empty food container down and turned to Labra, curiosity lighting up his eyes.

"Can I see your hand?" he asked, his voice laced with genuine interest.

Labra hesitated for a moment, then extended her hand towards him. She watched as Johan took her hand in his, his touch gentle. He examined her claws closely, his gaze drifting over her thick, muscular fingers and dense callouses from years of climbing trees. The scrutiny made her feel exposed, yet there was no judgment in his eyes, only wonder.

As he held her hand, Labra found herself once again enveloped in his aura. It was a second heady dose of the experience, wrapping her in a

warm, comforting embrace. His aura, vibrant and swirling with colors, seemed to explore her being just as his eyes and fingers explored her hand.

Then, as gently as he had taken it, Johan released her hand. The connection faded, leaving Labra feeling both elated and a touch melancholic, yearning for the closeness to return.

Lucky, Labra thought to herself with glee, *I'm really lucky. My first human is amazing.*

"Your claws are cool," said Johan. "I wish I had claws. Or magic. Or was super strong. Or had eyes that could see into other worlds. And I really like your tail too."

He then turned to her tail and poked at it with a finger, but she danced it out of his finger's path. He chased it with his hands, giggling as she made it dart from his grasp. Finally, she let him grab it and examine it, the sensation of the connection flowing over her again.

"Woah, it's like holding a snake. It's really strong," he said as her tail coiled around his arm. Then he glanced up at her. "Can I see your teeth too?"

Labra obliged by opening her mouth. Her heart pounded in her chest, riding the wave of his aura as he examined her fangs. He could touch her as much as he wanted.

Johan's eyes widened in amazement as he pressed his fingers to the tips of her canines, testing their sharpness. With his fingers so close, her tongue got curious and started tapping them to see what it could taste.

"Whoa, your tongue is so long!" Johan exclaimed. "Can you touch your nose?"

Labra, a bit surprised but going along with it, extended her tongue even further. "I can do way more than just touch my nose. Watch this," she said, a playful spark in her eyes. Then, with surprising dexterity, she curled her tongue upward and jammed it into her nostril, going "Blah, blah, blah," and making the silliest face she could muster.

Johan burst into laughter, clutching his sides as he watched Labra's antics. "That's so gross!" he managed to say between giggles.

Labra pulled her tongue back, grinning widely at Johan's reaction. She was pleased to see him so happy. His squeals of joy were infectious, and she found herself joining along. Time passed, and as their laughter died down, they settled back into a comfortable silence. Johan, still smiling, glanced at Labra with a newfound affection.

“You’re really fun, Labra. I’m glad we’re friends,” he said, his tone sincere. “You... you can taste me if it helps you. I don’t think you’d try to hurt me, right?”

“Never. I promise I’ll never hurt you on purpose,” said Labra. “And daemons like me always keep their pacts, so you know it’s true.”

Johan extended his arm toward Labra, his skin exposed and looking so vulnerable under the dappled sunlight filtering through the canopy above. The moment seemed to slow down: the birds chirping and the leaves rustling as the wind stirred Labra’s hair.

Labra demurred, holding out her own arm in response, the differences between them stark in this intimate proximity—her skin, a pale shade tinted slightly blue, against his, so distinctly human. “Taste me first,” she instructed softly, her voice barely above the natural symphony around them.

Johan hesitated, then took her hand gently in his. His tongue, warm and soft, made contact with the back of her hand. The sensation was odd, not unpleasant, but definitely a new experience for Labra.

“Tastes salty,” Johan remarked.

“Try again,” Labra urged, flipping her arm over to expose her wrist, pointing to it. “The wrist is supposed to be better.”

He did as she asked, but after a moment, shrugged indifferently.

Frustration began to bubble within Labra. She wanted him to experience what she could, to find something special about her taste as well. “Try here,” she said, pointing to the crook of her elbow. Johan leaned in, his tongue running over her skin. As he did, Labra felt waves of his aura washing over her, a sensation that felt shudder-inducingly good.

He started to pull back, but Labra, caught up in the moment and her desire for him to truly experience her, said, “You need to suck the skin a little bit, try to pull the loosh out.” She realized she was asking a lot, trying to bridge the gap between their worlds with this act, but she hoped he could feel even a fraction of what she did.

Johan ran his tongue over the crook of her elbow, leaving a trail of drool that tickled slightly. He sucked at her skin as well, causing a pinching sensation which caused her to wince slightly. Finally, Johan pulled back, wiping some slobber off his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Well? How was it?” Labra asked, her heart pounding in anticipation of his response.

“Okay, I guess,” Johan replied, his shrug sending a pang of disappointment through Labra.

Then Johan extended his own arm toward her. “Your turn.”

As Labra leaned in, her hands trembled—excitement, fear, and a strange sense of privilege. Her tongue lolled out and she inhaled deeply as she ran her tongue over the length of Johan’s arm. His skin was warm under her tongue, the sensation entirely different from anything she’d experienced. His taste wasn’t just salty; there was an underlying sweetness, and a richness that was indescribable.

The moment Labra’s tongue made contact with Johan’s skin, it was as if a gateway to an entirely new realm had been flung open before her. The taste of his loosh was an explosion of sensations, far beyond the simple binaries of sweet or savory. It was a symphony of flavors, complex and rich, interwoven with threads of pure, vibrant energy that seemed to dance upon her tongue.

As she tasted him, Labra was hit with a wave of ecstasy, a rush so intense and all-consuming that she shook. The sensation was akin to taking a plunge into a sea of warmth and light. Johan’s essence, his soul’s light, lingered on her tongue, and for a fleeting moment, Labra felt as though she had tapped into Source itself. She became one with the universe, a part of the vast web of life that connected all things. It was a transcendent feeling, elevating her to a state of being that was both euphoric and deeply serene.

In this exalted state, Labra felt more complete than she had ever imagined possible. The pleasant buzzing sensation that filled her was not just physical—it was spiritual, a profound connection that tethered her to the very essence of existence. She knew, with a certainty that bordered on revelation, that she never wanted this feeling to be out of arm’s reach.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still as she stared into Johan’s eyes, her head spinning from the intensity of the experience. His gaze was an anchor in the storm of her swirling emotions. In his sky-colored irises, she saw not just a weak human boy, but a soul that was kind, brave, and infinitely precious. The depth of the connection she felt to him in that moment was overwhelming.

Labra pulled back slowly, reluctantly, the sensation of his skin on her tongue fading but leaving behind a lingering warmth that suffused her entire being. She took a deep, steadying breath, attempting to return to herself, to pull her consciousness back to the glade, under the rowan tree, beside her friend.

Johan, looking a bit bewildered, furrowed his brow. “Are you okay?”
“Uh-huh,” said Labra, a smile breaking through her daze.

As they sat together, the forest around them continued on as normal. The wind whispered through the leaves in the usual way, the birds sang their age-old songs. But for Labra, everything had changed.

CHAPTER 4: I'M NOT WAITING

As the seasons turned, the rowan tree in Johan and Labra's secret meeting spot transformed. In the spring, its branches were adorned with clusters of delicate white flowers, their sweet fragrance a constant presence in the glade. But in the summer, it grew berries, and the cicadas went *ree-ree-ree-uh* as they sang amongst the leaves.

Over the hot, humid months Johan and Labra met almost daily, despite the forbidden nature of their liaisons. Johan had proven adept at sneaking away and kept his promise not to tell anyone about her. If he *had* said something, the Church wouldn't have been silent about what he was doing.

Labra's days had never been so thrilling. Sneaking out to play with Johan every day was like a secret adventure.

However, whenever Johan couldn't sneak out, Labra was frustrated. It was super annoying to wait for hours only to be left alone. Even though Johan always had a good excuse, it was maddening. Lilitu wouldn't have put up with this insolence. She would have snuck into Elmswatch to find another servant.

"Mom, I'm lonely," she said one day, after Johan hadn't shown up to see her for a *whole week*.

Her mother was sitting at her desk, examining a map of the region which was annotated with X's and O's. She didn't bother looking up as she answered. "Would you like to go see the Gur'ee this year? There should be a caravan migrating through after the fall harvest."

"I'd love to go!" Labra cheered.

"Lovely, it's about time we introduced you to some humans. The Gur'ee are convenient because they're nomadic. You can follow their caravans all over the continent. Each caravan has at least one sourcerer, and they're usually single and overworked. So, they are always in need of our kind." Said Momma. Then she looked up from her map and stared wistfully out the window. "Casual sex, and a great source of loosh. It's the best way to travel."

Labra looked down at Momma's map and saw how big the continent was in comparison to their tiny woods. She found herself wondering what the rest of the world had to offer. The more she thought about visiting

the Gur'ee, the more excited she got. More servants, more fun! She could hardly wait.

However, as the rowan tree's berries ripened to a deep red, new worries came for Labra. Her studies in human husbandry, a subject her mother had insisted upon, revealed a troubling fact: humans under sixteen were protected by law.

I'm a bad girl!

Licking Johan was illegal in Khem, the nation led by daemons that her mother hailed from. Apparently, young humans were vulnerable to feeding trauma, so consuming their loosh was forbidden. That night, Labra couldn't sleep.

"Momma, is it really that bad to feed on young humans?" Labra asked, while lying in bed beside her mother, the light crystals off.

"Mphf... yes. Don't taste the unripe. It's bad for them. Bad for you." Mumbled her mother, sleepily.

"But *why*?" Labra moaned. She really enjoyed tasting Johan, and she was very careful to be gentle.

"Because, baby, young humans are very delicate creatures," her mother said, waking up a little. She turned to Labra, her golden eyes reflecting the moonlight. "Even the smallest intimacies can cause them permanent harm."

"*Permanent?!!*" Labra cried. "H-How do you know if they're hurt?"

"Why so interested? Is there something you'd like to tell me?" Momma asked.

"I... I just want to know how to tell if you're hurting them. Isn't that a normal thing to worry about?" said Labra, dodging the question.

Natyliapsis sighed.

"The symptoms of feeding trauma are listed in your book. Since you aren't horning yet, a little nibble probably won't hurt – so long as they're well fed. But..." Her mother's voice faded, and it looked as if she was debating with herself about something.

"But?" Labra asked, leaning in with anticipation.

"But you mustn't try the stuff that's in your Lilitu books on him. And, if at any time he looks uncomfortable or asks you to stop, you must listen. Is that understood?" Said Momma.

Labra felt her blood freeze. *Have I been caught?* A tense silence stretched as Labra searched through her memory trying to think of any instance where Johan had shown reluctance after giving her permission to taste him. She couldn't think of any, not even his aura had been disturbed.