

## **ill-conceived**

by iztopher

The Darkthrop Prophecy is threatening completion, but Te'ijal has something more pressing on her mind: ending her very unplanned - and very unwanted - pregnancy.

*Content warnings:* Pregnancy, abortion (graphic, fantasy medication induced), misogyny. References to vomit, sex.

...

Te'ijal's bleeding shoulder stung like hell.

She resented it - the pain she never would have felt as a vampire, the cleansing spell Stella had to perform to ensure no infection took root. As if panting the whole hike here and vomiting into the snow for no reason at all wasn't bad enough, now she was getting injured. Her skin should have stitched itself back together without any aid but time and a hearty drink. Instead she sat on a tree stump, Stella's hand on her shoulder, her husband hovering awkwardly nearby with his newfound concern. Edward and Yemite were investigating the perimeter of the clearing, trying to figure out the next direction to take.

Stella pulled her hand away, a flurry of magic - hard to distinguish from the falling snow, really, except for its mint green tint - following suit. Torn, tan skin mended, stretching over the bloody wound and solidifying.

"And finally, while we're at it, let's do a generalized healing spell. Give me your hand."

Te'ijal reached her hand forward to Stella, who took it gingerly in her own. She pressed two fingers firm against Te'ijal's wrist, finding her pulse point, and closed her eyes and breathed deep. Te'ijal felt the spell as it slowly spread across her body, winding from her hand up her arm, to her head, to her abdomen -

The spell stopped suddenly as Stella gasped, reeled back, and broke her concentration.

Anxiety coiled in the pit of Te'ijal's stomach. That was not the reaction she wanted a healer to have. "What is it, moth?"

Galahad, who had been doing his best to avoid acknowledging the casting, suddenly stepped forward. "Stella? Is everything okay?"

Stella hesitated for a moment, then stumbled through all her words at once. "Everything is fine, don't worry. I haven't cast a healing spell on Te'ijal since she turned human, so I'm not used to being able to sense her being alive." She coughed, sheepishly pulling her hand up to the back of her head. "Lots of rushing blood and pulsing organs I wasn't expecting."

A wave of relief washed over Te'ijal. In spite of herself, she smiled. The idea that finally someone else agreed her humanity was as unsettling and unnatural as she felt sent a warm surge through her chest. "Completely understandable, moth."

Stella reached back to Te'ijal's hand. "I didn't finish the casting; let me try again. I'll know what to expect this time."

This time, the pressure of Stella's fingertips on her wrist almost felt pleasant, now that she felt less resentful of the casting. It was really quite interesting to track the sensation of healing shuddering through her body – like a pinprick itch then immediately scratched. Reaching Te'ijal's abdomen, making her way through that tangled, confusing mess of human organs, Stella pressed harsher against her pulse for a moment.

No broken concentration, no worry, just a brief moment of hesitation before radiating outward to her legs.

When she finally finished, Stella pulled away with a flourish. Her smile was as earnest as it was nervous. Te'ijal smiled back.

Later that night, Te'ijal had shrugged her coat off her once-wounded shoulder and was about to hang it on her bedframe in Thornkeep inn before Stella stopped her.

“You might want to keep that on. I was actually wondering if we could take a quick walk together.”

Te’ijal slid it back on, buttoning it to her throat. “Very well, moth. If you’d like to freeze a bit more before bed, I suppose I can join you.”

It’d been long enough since the morning hiccup that it didn’t occur to Te’ijal to be concerned until, about a block away from the inn, Stella stopped in her tracks and said, “I – I fibbed a little, earlier today, when I said everything was normal when I healed you.”

The tone of her voice was impossible to place – nervous, which was a bad sign, but not outright fearful, and surprisingly warm, which was almost reassuring. Almost – ultimately, not enough to stop a stab of fear from lancing through her chest. “Am I dying?” Te’ijal asked, almost on reflex. Humans were always dying.

“No, no,” Stella reassured her, shaking her head and almost laughing. “Not at all. Quite the opposite, actually.” She hesitated for a moment, and Te’ijal prepared to question what the opposite of dying was, but the girl took a deep breath and steeled herself. “There was a – there’s a second heartbeat. You’re pregnant, Te’ijal. Congratulations.”

“Pregnant?” Te’ijal stumbled over the word, and then the one that followed it. *Congratulations?* She touched her stomach, half in nausea, half in horror, at the idea of a – a child growing there inside of her.

Stella only nodded.

The fear inside her had never had the chance to fully dissipate, but now it solidified hard as stone and rocked through her body full force.

Vampires did not get pregnant. Vampires scarcely even had a concept of children or parents. The closest Te’ijal had had to a parent was the years she spent, already full grown, in Rashnu’s home as he taught her and Gyendal the basics of undeath.

“No,” she said once, almost a whisper, and then she shook her head. “No, no. Absolutely not. I am a vampire. Vampires do not–”

“You’re a human right now, Te’ijal,” Stella said gently.

The words hit Te'ijal like a slap across the face, landing in her gut as some cosmic betrayal. She hadn't thought that would *matter*. She'd been so confident that she'd dead long enough, never having been alive in the first place, that the worry never even crossed her mind.

Instead she was jolted back into reality by Stella's firm, grounding hand on her shoulder. "It's going to be okay," she said. "You're not going to do this alone. Once you tell Galahad, he'll be thrilled to help you through it."

Te'ijal couldn't tell if it was her legs or the ground itself that felt as if it'd give way under her. The confirmation that this wasn't some amorphous spawn thrust upon her by a quirk of humanity, but something her husband had been involved in – had caused – dug deep into her skin. She wanted to claw it out.

She settled for shoving Stella away.

"No. No. He can't know, he—" Goddess, imagining the look on his face – eyes wide, lips no doubt curling up just slightly in that tiny gesture the closest he ever got to a smile, hands clasping hers – excitement, maybe even joy – made the burning pit in her stomach rise rapidly to her throat.

"What do you mean, he can't know?" Stella hesitated. "...Galahad *is* the father, isn't he?"

"Of course he is!" Te'ijal said. "That's the problem! He'll want to raise it, to be a family, to have me be a mother, and not—" she choked over the words, unsure of what her other options were, grasping desperately for some choice beyond – *human womb, growing parasite, swelling stomach, screaming agony splitting her open, new life that needs her* – "I can't, Stella. I can't."

The corners of her eyes stung with the force of holding back tears. It was pathetic, like she knew it was useless to beg the world, so she was resorting to begging this powerless girl in front of her.

But Stella's soft features twisted into an uncharacteristic grimace, and finally, carefully, she said, "that's okay. Then you don't have to."

It jolted Te'ijal enough to realize her nails were clawing into her arms. She released herself with a gasp, too uncertain for any real relief in it. "...I

don't?"

"No. You can get an abortion instead." Stella's voice was more certain now, her face settling into an easier, more natural expression. Te'ijal wanted to tether herself to that surety. "There are ways to induce a miscarriage, so the baby dies." She wrinkled her nose. "Well, *dies* isn't really the right word for it, it happens before it's truly alive, but... it stops growing, and it's removed from your body."

Te'ijal exhaled heavily, then found she could breathe normally again. "And you can do that?"

"I can't," Stella said firmly. "I don't know how. It's – it's more like alchemy, than my type of magic, and if I tried and did it wrong, I could hurt you. But I could help you find a healer with the right training, who won't put you at risk."

To anyone else, Te'ijal would have said, *I would rather be hurt than be pregnant* and meant it. But she knew Stella, had seen the girl frozen over and frostbitten as her self-imposed penance for putting someone in danger. She couldn't ask that of her. So instead, she said, "As soon as possible."

"Mel comes first," Stella said. Before Te'ijal could protest, she added, "there's no point in miscarrying if the world ends and you get yourself killed before you even start to show. As soon as that's resolved, then yes. I promise."

"And how long do you think I have? Before – anyone can tell." Galahad's name burned in the back of her throat.

But Stella caught her meaning. "Why don't you just tell him? That way you're not terrified of whether or not he's figured it out on his own. He's your husband, Te'ijal. It's – if it was going to be a baby, it would be his, too. You have a right to do whatever you want about it, but he has a right to know."

There was only one way Te'ijal could see that going, and for a moment she hated Stella for failing to understand. "Would you say that if Galahad wasn't the father? Or is it just because you like him more than me?"

Stella bristled. "I just think you should talk about it. Maybe–"

Her rising bile washed away the last of her fear, at least for the moment. “Maybe he’ll wear me down? Maybe he’ll tell me I legally have to do what he says, and you can agree with him?”

“That – that isn’t what I meant, and you know it.”

“Then what did you mean?”

Stella heaved a sigh. Her words came out sharp. “I meant that yes, okay, I would rather be giving one of my dear friends advice on his upcoming fatherhood – or how to support his wife through her abortion – than helping the wife who ruined his life keep a secret from him.”

“He’s over that now,” Te’ijal said, too wistful to mean it as argument. “I’m glad you’re not.” She was pleasantly surprised by Stella’s bluntness, if less so by her naivete. “I will tell him. Once it’s dealt with, when the only thing he can do about it is hate me again.”

Stella opened her mouth to argue, hesitated, and then finally said, “you don’t know that.”

“It will be alright if he does, moth,” Te’ijal said. She actually quite missed Galahad hating her; missed him seeing her as selfish, assertive, threatening. Not-quite-killing their not-quite-child without even allowing him a word in edgewise seemed like a good way to dispel any final misunderstandings. “I just need to know how much time I have until then.”

Stella rubbed at her shoulders. Te’ijal couldn’t tell if it was from the cold or her frustration. “I still think you should tell him,” she said, “and I’ll help you do it, if that’s what it takes. But...” She stepped nervously from one foot to the other, like she wanted to start walking. “It would depend on when it was conceived. Can you estimate how long ago you...”

“*Conceived* is a euphemism for sex, correct?”

Stella made a non-committal noise, and then, “yes.”

“Then December seventeenth.”

Stella stared at her for a moment. “Okay. That’s precise,” she said.

“Our anniversary.” Te’ijal winced as soon as she said it.

To her credit, Stella just nodded her head. “It’s January twenty-eighth today. So you’re six weeks along. It depends, and my only actual experience is with... bunnies, not humans, but from what I *do* know about humans, it’s probably two months at the earliest, maybe up to three?” Stella gave her a brief once over. “Maybe four in your case. You’ve been gaining weight anyways, so without connecting the other symptoms, someone might not realize.”

“Other symptoms?”

“Morning sickness – that’s probably why you threw up today – exhaustion, cravings...”

“Oh. I had assumed human bodies were merely that poorly constructed.” After she’d learned her first cold and monthly bleeding were both apparently considered normal, Te’ijal had stopped considering that the issue was something wrong with her in particular, and not just humanity in general. She supposed this was somewhere between the two. “So I have two weeks.”

“Or more. Significantly more – maybe a month, maybe more.” Stella forced a smile. “We’ll have saved Mel by then. We have to. We’re halfway to Underfall already.”

“You had better be right, moth.”

Even when the chill had finally leached from her bones, Te’ijal couldn’t sleep that night. It was hard enough to breathe, her head racing, heart thrumming. She was grateful the inn had offered only twin size beds, because if Galahad had insisted on laying beside her, she knew he would notice something was wrong.

Her stomach didn’t feel any different. She was almost scared to touch the palm of her hand to it, to slide it down to the space between the curve of her belly and the apex of her thighs. Like the thing growing inside her would come alive and claw her open from within. It was the same fear that struck her when she remembered Galahad’s involvement, when she so much as

thought the word *womb*, when Stella called this thing a *baby*. It all made it feel real, and if this was real, then she couldn't be, at least not the version of her that had existed for over eight hundred years, the only version of herself she had ever wanted to be.

Vampires ended life. They did not create it. They did not nurture it. The idea that her body was capable of such a thing, no matter how unprepared or unwilling her mind, was -

It was violating. A betrayal of the highest caliber. Her own brother trying to kill her had been easier to accept than this.

But still she pressed her hand against her skin, seeking comfort in the normalcy, and instead she found that felt awful in its own way, the idea that something had started forming inside her in December and she'd had no idea. How long would it have taken for her to notice something was wrong if Stella hadn't told her?

She took a deep, shuddering breath and reminded herself it would be fine. All she had to do was wait. This thing, this parasite, awful and unwanted as it was, was going to be gone in a few weeks time. She laxed her hand on her stomach, rolled her nightshirt back over the skin.

When the sudden shriek came from the town square, and the party jolted awake and stumbled upwards, she was grateful to no longer have to pretend to be unconscious.

It was a difficult few days. Te'ijal began to understand what Stella meant about *symptoms*. Her breasts ached under the padded coat she wore for armor, and between the constant battling and walking she felt liable to collapse. She tried not to think about it, even though she could scarcely think of anything else, because when she did her mind clouded with revulsion and her body went numb.

And when they finally arrived in Underfall, Mel slipped between their fingers. Te'ijal's best chance at vampirism followed shortly after.

Edward glanced at the portal, then the meager remains of their party. "So now we just... wait?"



Te'ijal clicked her teeth. With Mel in the Demon Realm, there was little else they could do for the sake of the world, short of tracking down and confronting her brother. "It would appear so." She glanced over at Stella, smiling at her. "I'd like to collect on our compromise, moth."

Stella shook her head. "Mel isn't safe yet. We need to be ready for when they get back, to make sure--"

Te'ijal's patience wore apart before Stella could finish. "Time does not pass in the Demon Realm. They could return in as soon as one hour or as long as one year. I do not have the time to wait if it turns out to be the latter."

Stella's eyes widened. "I hope it doesn't take that long," she said. "But in that case, you're right. We should go now. But we can't do it here."

"Why not?"

"Remember what I said about doing it safely? I don't exactly think darkling healers are the right match for that."

Edward coughed. "Excuse me," he said, his tone unapologetic, "but would either of you mind cluing me in on what's going on here?"

Stella looked at Te'ijal. "Well," she said.

"I'm..." Te'ijal couldn't manage to force the word out of her mouth. "...Sick," she decided on, and then, by way of explanation, "and I need to get an abortion. To resolve it."

"How would that fix - oh. *Oh.*" Edward was very clearly trying not to stare at Te'ijal as he made sense of what she'd said. The fact that he avoided her eyes by sliding his glance down to her stomach and then back at the portal to the Demon Realm didn't do him any favors, though. It would have been funny, if it didn't make her feel so exposed. "Okay. Well. In that case, Stella is right. I doubt darkling reproduction works the same way. They might... hatch, or something. I don't know. We'd have to ask Yemite."

"Then where exactly do you suggest I go?"

Edward contemplated this. "Acropolis," he answered. "It's a nearby human

town – two hours' walk through Ashera's Tomb, not counting any time getting accosted by monsters. I've been there with Mel. They have good healers; they should be able to handle this."

"Will it be an issue that she's alone?" Stella asked.

"I mean, yes? She shouldn't go alone. The trip there and back is dangerous, especially for a preg—" he cut himself off. "Or, I guess that doesn't really matter in this case? My bad."

"Edward." Stella said his name firmly, then clarified more softly, "I meant that Galahad isn't going with her."

Te'ijal's stomach soured. She'd ask why that mattered, if each sentence they tossed back and forth with each other about her didn't make her feel further and further away, if she didn't have a nagging feeling she already knew.

"That will be fine." Edward said. "But one of us should still go with her. Then one of us should wait back here, just in case Mel and Galahad get back first."

Te'ijal found she didn't have the energy to twist her expression the way she wanted, but she did manage to say, "I'm sure they can manage on their own."

Edward turned to her, laughing nervously. "Yeah, that's what I'm afraid of. We don't need them looking for us and starting this whole quest over again because we got separated."

He had a point. "Fair enough, prince." She found herself wishing that Mel was there. Neither of them were the people she wanted to ask this of. But Stella was the one who had told her in the first place, had offered, and so... "Stella? Will you accompany me to Acropolis?"

Te'ijal couldn't help but fight rising nerves as she shuffled into the Acropolis midwifery behind Stella. Her only experience with visiting healers was seeing Rashnu at his temple in Ghed'ahre, so she'd expected a setting more austere, solemn. But despite sharing the same sleek marble architecture of all Acropolis buildings, its interior dressings reminded her more of a small

inn. A short hallway went past the entry hall in either direction, dotted by pots of pink and orange flowers placed between labeled doors.

The doors did very little to block the noise. Just muffled, one in either direction, she heard a woman screaming, a baby crying. She flinched and drew her shoulders together. Stella placed a hand on one of Te'ijal's tight shoulders and gently nudged her forward.

Te'ijal hated walking past the other patients, each in a different stage of pregnancy, save one already cradling a swaddled babe in her arms. It wouldn't have bothered her, if not for the damn voice in her head, insistent on reminding her that *she was one of them, this is what her body was capable of, what it was already doing-*

She hadn't even realized she'd reached the other side of the room until she heard the attendant's warm voice. "Hello," he said. "Reason for visit?"

"I am here to have an abortion." She had hoped her voice sounded firm, but it wavered in her desperation. "As soon as possible."

The attendant simply nodded. "Okay," he said. "Well, I'll see what we can do. Can I have your name?"

"Te'ijal Ravenfoot-Teomes."

"Well, I sure hope I spelled that close enough." He laughed a little to himself. "Take a seat. One of our healers will come by soon to talk to you and figure out when we can schedule you."

How humans of all creatures had such a misplaced concept of the word soon, Te'ijal had no idea. She dug anxious red crescent-shaped marks into the skin of her palms as time crept sluggishly by. The screaming in the background stopped. The crying, notably, didn't.

"It will be okay," Stella was telling her, the chair next to her feeling a hundred miles away.

Eventually, though, a healer wearing light blue robes drifted down the hall and stood at the doorway to the entry hall. "Teh... Teh-eye-jal? Um, Ms. Ravenfoot-Teomes?"

She bolted upwards. Stella flashed her a nervous smile. “Good luck,” she said.

“Hi. My name is Sophia. I’ll be helping you out today – and most likely, whenever your appointment is scheduled.” The healer had dark pink hair, olive skin, and a captivating, friendly demeanor that Te’ijal had always found charming in mortals before she became one herself. Now it was mostly irritating. “Would you mind telling me how to pronounce your name?”

“Te’ijal.”

“Te’ijal, thank you. Why don’t you get yourself comfortable?”

Theoretically, the room granted her plenty of opportunities: a soft-looking, simple bed, a small window outside, and two gently padded chairs. Te’ijal felt expected to sit somewhere, but instead she stood in front of the bed, leaning the tiniest bit of weight against the mattress. Everything was so damn soft here.

Sophia seemed to hesitate for a moment before deciding to rotate a chair so it faced the bed and sitting down in it. Te’ijal found that the suddenly exaggerated height difference did, in fact, help her feel comfortable.

“Alright. To start, do you have any magical affinity?”

“No.”

“Okay. And you’re here to end a pregnancy, correct?”

“Correct.”

“And is this prompted by any risk to your health?”

“No.” For a moment, there was a steady, detached rhythm to the conversation. It was easy.

“Okay. Do you want to tell me why? You don’t have to, but it could help us

better tailor your care.”

The beat stumbled as Te'ijal found herself confused by the question, suddenly almost too easy. *Wasn't it obvious?* “I don't want a child.”

Sophia nodded, her soft, healer's smile replaced by one broader at Te'ijal's tone. “That's why my sister got her abortion, too.” She stood from her seat. “So, the first step is a basic casting – I'm not doing anything to you, just sort of sensing around inside. I'll have to touch your bare stomach. Are you okay with that?”

Barely suppressing a shudder at the thought, Te'ijal realized she wasn't. “Asking is just a pleasantry, isn't it?”

It earned her an uncomfortable but light chuckle. “I can and will wait as long as you need to feel comfortable, but yes, unfortunately I'll have to do this to start preparations.”

Without further prompting, Te'ijal went to unbutton her coat and dropped it on the bed behind her. The long-sleeved black shirt she wore under it was easy enough to roll up and bunch just below her breasts. “Very well. Get on with it, then.”

The healer walked over to her. Despite the warm glow of the casting surrounding her skin, her hand was cold. Te'ijal tried to ground herself in that external sensation, not the discomfoting feeling of magic rooting around inside of her. It was seeking something out, circling around it, and suddenly *discomfoting* turned to *disturbed* as the magic coiled tight around the thing, forcing her to feel it, tiny and unformed as it was –

If Sophia had waited any longer, Te'ijal would have reeled her body back, unable to take any more. But the woman withdrew her hand, and the pit in Te'ijal's stomach bloomed out like a slowly opened fist. She fought back a gasp as she hastily rolled her shirt back over her skin. On reflex, she wrapped her arms around her stomach next, suppressing the urge to curl in on herself.

“Do you need anything?” She couldn't see Sophia's face through her shut eyes, but she heard her voice, the concern. It sounded warm and genuine and it made Te'ijal's skin crawl.

She was not going to cry. She was not going to cry at all, least of all in front of this stranger. “I need to be alone for a moment,” she managed to grit out.

Sophia nodded. “Okay. Let me go talk to Kostas about scheduling. I’ll be back in a little bit.”

As soon as the door closed, Te’ijal let herself rasp out a shaking exhale. She breathed deeply as she could, feeling her body settle, the last of the magic-tension replaced with regular, mundane nervous tension.

There was a gentle, rhythmic knock on the door. “Te’ijal?”

“Come.”

Sophia returned, her previous, calm demeanor repainted on her face. But the smile she cracked was nervous. “I’m sorry for not warning you about that. Typically, the spell’s only that intense for those with magic themselves.”

“I didn’t want to be so *aware* of it.” She’d meant it as biting, but she winced once she heard it, worrying she sounded petulant.

“If it helps any, it’s not going to be there long, and I can promise you, you won’t have to feel that way again. Your next steps are to take a brewed potion, which shouldn’t feel any different than drinking a particularly strong mug of tea, and then you’ll need to rest in an alchemical bath. It might hurt a little, but not much, and it shouldn’t feel so... precise.”

Less than ideal, but certainly an improvement, and a small price to pay regardless. Te’ijal nodded. “Very well. When do I start?”

“Right, so that’s what I talked to Kostas – he’s the one who checked you in – about. We require patients to stay here afterwards for half a day, so you have two options. You can stay overnight in our recovery ward, and get it done tonight. Or, if you’d like to be home for the night, you can come the next free morning we have, which is two days from now.”

Te’ijal could barely bring herself to wait until the woman had finished speaking. “Tonight.”

The next time Sophia came back to the room, she was holding a particularly pungent smelling mug of tea. Te'ijal wrinkled her nose as it was handed to her.

“Unfortunately, you do need to drink this. It’s a potion brewed so it won’t hurt you, but once it’s ingested, it will stop the pregnancy from growing. Afterwards, the next step is to flush out what’s left of it inside.”

Te'ijal took a cautious sip. It was bitter, but no more unpleasant than any other human beverage she’d forced herself to stomach. And she found she enjoyed the feeling of the ceramic mug in her hands. When Galahad had tried making her tea, it’d near burned her to touch; she barely stopped herself from dropping the mug. This was warm, but not painful, not numbing.

“I can sit with you, or I can leave you be. Or I could go get your friend from the hall.”

Te'ijal tried not to laugh into her potion at calling Stella her friend. She wasn’t sure the girl would agree with the assessment. She took another steady sip, for good measure, before answering. “Collect her for me.”

There was something comforting about knowing each drink drained life from another creature. This time the creature was growing inside her, so it wasn’t quite the same, but the knowledge certainly made her feel more like herself again, more in control of her body. She tried to replace the bitter taste with her clearest memory of blood.

By the time Sophia returned with Stella in tow, Te'ijal had drained the draught.

The healers split directions, Sophia to prepare the bath, Stella to sit across from Te'ijal. She lacked the easygoing confidence of a healer who practiced on people she didn’t know personally – her smile was stiff and awkward, her shoulders hunched inward – but she was smiling. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Better,” she said after thinking it over. Not *all right*, which would require not being pregnant, and not *good*, which would require not being human,

instead of well on her way to both, but certainly better. “I’ll be here overnight, so you should head to the inn.”

As if on cue, Stella suppressed a yawn. “I like the sound of that.” But she still didn’t get up yet, looking at Te’ijal with an uncharacteristic intensity. She hesitated, and then, “is there anything you’d like from me first?”

“No. That’s all.”

“Okay.” Stella got up. “I’ll come check on you tomorrow morning.”

They’d never gotten along. Stella was too scared of Te’ijal’s brother and too sympathetic to her husband for that. It was strange, then, to suddenly be on the receiving end of her compassion, rather than the exception. It should have frustrated, unsettled her, like Galahad’s change of heart.

Instead, Te’ijal found she was deeply grateful. This wasn’t because she was human, or Stella had suddenly decided she was fond of her. It was because she was hurting, and Stella was a healer, and that meant she wanted to do what she could to stop it.

“Moth?”

Stella turned from her spot in the doorway. “Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

She was relieved that the medicated bath, which looked far too vibrant a blue to be natural, smelled far more pleasant than the tea. It helped that she actually liked baths.

“So, you’re supposed to lay in this for about two hours. It will break down what’s left of the pregnancy and push it out of your body. If there’s any more discomfort, it will be here. You might also see some blood or tissue, so I’m sorry if you’re squeamish, but it’s nothing to worry about.”

Te’ijal couldn’t help herself. She cracked a smile at the thought of laying in a bath of gore. If she could ignore where it was coming from, the idea might



have been pleasant. “That’s just fine.”

“I can stay with you, but if you’d rather bathe alone–”

“I would,” Te’ijal answered, although she didn’t have a strong enough sense of modesty to wait to start unbuttoning her shirt. Sophia nodded and swished out the door.

Te’ijal finished undressing, folded her clothes on the floor, and stepped inside the tub, tentatively sitting down. She was a little tall for the size of the basin, so when she stretched her legs out, she had to keep her knees bent.

Gradually, she felt the stress leech from her bones, seep from her skin, into the warm bathwater. When the pain came on, not unlike the cramping from her monthly bleed, it was too reassuring to bother her. The pink-tinged trails of water and the tiny, formless tissue, clotted over in blood, carried with them a comforting finality. The pain in her abdomen reduced to a warm, throbbing ache. This was not quite over, but it was about to be.

Before she could realize it or stop herself, Te’ijal was crying.

The tears came on quiet, slow – not quite as embarrassing as a sob – but relentless all the same, streaming steadily down her cheeks. She curled in on herself, chin to her collarbone. She hated crying – hated the saltwater taste now that she was human – but more than anything she hated crying of fear, frustration, sadness. It made her feel weak and pathetic.

This, though. This was the feeling of relief crashing through all of those, and so she wouldn’t fight it. She let herself cry the tears she’d refused herself when she found out she was pregnant, when she’d been forced to feel the budding life inside of her.

It was gone now. She was safe.

Te’ijal slowly undid herself, leaning back in the by now tepid, stained bath, feeling not unlike a wrung-out piece of laundry, twisted and emptied. She rubbed at her cheeks with her knuckles, blinked the singing nettles from her eyes. Goddess, how she wished she could lay down in a coffin and shut herself against the world for a moment.

Instead, she closed her eyes and drafted a letter to Mel. *Dear Mel, she'd write, I know I have not added to my list in quite some time, but I have determined the worst part of being human of all.*

*21. Pregnancy. Vampires, obviously, do not get pregnant. Aside from those few of us who emerge directly from the grave, new vampires are deliberately chosen. It feels thrilling, powerful, even, to turn a new vampire. Humanity's method of multiplication is haphazard and parasitic.*

*Stella took me to Acropolis to correct my condition, but I do not know how I could ever accept being a human if it comes with this capability. I cannot wait to become a vampire again.* Then she'd sign her name with a flourish.

She should get to update Mel in person soon enough. Hopefully her rabbit was no worse for wear for her time in the Demon Realm.

A knock came on the door. "Te'ijal?" Came the healer's voice. "It's been two hours. You can get out, if you'd like."

Stepping out of the water, exhausted and sore, Te'ijal found herself smiling for the first time in a week.

The next morning was blurry. She'd slept soundly, with no Galahad to move her into bed, and no existential dread to battle, but she woke with a nervous haze settled over her. With this nightmarish chapter of her existence nearly over, her patience for finishing it was wearing thin, and the reality waiting for her outside of it was beginning to dawn on her.

She consented to the casting exam and dutifully rolled up her shirt for today's healer, a tall man she didn't quite internalize the name of, to place his hand on her stomach. He closed his eyes, breathed deeply, and chanted something that made his hands glow telltale red. Te'ijal winced and tried to brace herself for the insistent, probing feeling that came with the spell, but

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It was as if her body was air, and he'd swept his hand through it. She felt the magic move, but it glided it through her, crisp and clear before dissipating.

Next came a generalized healing spell, and then the healer stepped back from her and opened his eyes, smiling. “Your pregnancy was successfully ended, and all looks well. Congratulations.”

Her relief sharpened to joy, and it broke through the blur.

Nearly a week later, Te’ijal lounged on the couch, cheek against her fist, watching Galahad pace angrily back and forth across their lended room in Thais castle. Things were almost – *almost* – back in place, as they should be. Mel and Galahad were their usual selves. So was Te’ijal. The world was saved, for the time being. All she had left to do was convince her husband to return home to Ghed’ahre with her after Edward’s coronation.

So far, she was doing a terrible job at it.

“I cannot believe you would curse yourself,” Galahad said, with a shocking sincerity for how asinine the words coming out of his mouth were. “I cannot believe you would *make me party* to you cursing yourself.”

“You weren’t exactly going to do it without the push, husband.”

“Why would you want me to do it in the first place? You had been spared.”

She hated that he still had to ask that. The reasons were too many to count, too many to summarize into a pithy explanation. She tried anyways, sitting upright. “I wanted to be in control of my life again. Humans are so powerless, so–”

“Control of *your* life, or others’?”

*As if he hadn’t relished in the opportunity to lord power over her.* “My own,” she said, irritated. “My own life, my own body.”

He scoffed. “You would call a separation from all things good and living control. A gnawing hunger that drives you to murder and the lack of conscience to excuse it power. As if your humanity ever cost you anything. As if vampires possessed half the control that humans–”

“I got *pregnant* because I didn’t know that I could!”

Galahad stopped in his tracks, staring at her.

Te’ijal stared back, nearly eye level, realizing she’d stood up. She had meant to tell him eventually, but she’d meant to be composed, level-headed. Not like this, hissing out a crashing wave of indignation at the idea that she was supposed to stay content dying with a body that failed her at every opportunity.

He hesitated, swallowed. “You were... with child,” he repeated. “*Our* child.” He said it as if he needed to speak the words aloud to make sense of them. Te’ijal forced herself to nod, but it felt so weak she wondered if he even caught it. “And yet you turned yourself. Then what... happened to it?”

“It was already gone,” Te’ijal said, suddenly feeling self-conscious. When she’d first imagined this moment, she relished it. Now it made her mouth feel sour. She’d grown protective of her decision, of the comfort it’d brought her, and no longer wanted to open it up to judgment or scrutiny. “I had an abortion when you were in the Demon Realm.”

“...Excuse me?” There may have been anger in his voice, but if there was, it was drowned out by the confusion.

Somehow that was worse.

“It’s fairly self-explanatory, husband.”

Galahad shook his head. “You should have told me,” he said, but he was using that well-intentioned, patronizing tone she’d always been the exception to. “As husband and wife, we have obligations to each other. It should have been our decision together.”

In spite of herself, Te’ijal nearly laughed. “That’s exactly why I didn’t tell you. There would have been no ‘*our*’ decision. I’d made my choice, and I didn’t need you trying to convince me otherwise.”

“But I could have helped you! I could have made you realize you didn’t need to do that!”

“And what, exactly, would be my alternative, Galahad?”

“You could have accepted the gift of humanity we’d been given. You could have been a mother.”

He said it as if it was a good thing. As if it was a loss that she hadn’t. For a moment, Te’ijal went numb with anger. She wasn’t sure what was worse: the suggestion, or the earnestness with which he said it. “You cannot possibly be serious.”

“Of course I am, wife. You never had the chance to become fully accustomed to being human. So you didn’t feel ready, especially on your own. But when the time came, when the child was born, you would have been.”

“How can you know that?”

She’d asked it out of exasperation, not curiosity, but he answered her anyways. “That’s how life works. Mothers love their children.”

Of all the ways Te’ijal had felt towards Galahad over their centuries together, disgust had never been so keenly amongst them. “No,” she spat. “You’re wrong. The world does not work the way you think it does. There isn’t some magical reality where I have your child and we’re some... happy family.”

Galahad hesitated. “You only believe that because you won’t let yourself accept otherwise.”

“I could say the same for you.”

He opened his mouth as if to argue, but wavered. Instead he settled on, “there should have been. I wish there was.”

Te’ijal tried not to hate him for that, for this entire conversation. “And I wish it had never even been a possibility.”

About two hours after Galahad left the room, muttering something about being tired and not bothering to close the door behind him, Mel walked up

to the threshold and knocked on the empty doorframe. “Hey, Te’ijal.”

She’d sat back on the sofa and hadn’t moved since. She was tired, and ready to go home, whether her husband was coming with or not. “Hello, rabbit.” She turned her head to face her, waving her in. “How are you feeling?”

Mel shuffled awkwardly from one foot to the other before stepping into the room. “Um, pretty good. I think I’m mostly done with people telling me I tried to kill them or I locked them up in darkling jail, so that’s good. Unless you have anything to add to that list?”

She smiled. Laughed a little. “I do not.”

“Good. Stella told me you wanted to talk to me about something, so I was worried.”

“She did?”

“Okay, not exactly. Technically she told me *she* wanted to talk to me about something, but I should talk to you first.”

Te’ijal barely suppressed a sigh as she realized what this was about. She could track Stella’s thought process here clearly – that this was personal, and whatever role Stella had played in the process, she shouldn’t be the one to share. But Te’ijal was not in the mood for this conversation again, even if she knew Mel would react better than Galahad. Even Stella’s encouragement, Edward’s surprise, would have made her feel more fragile than she wanted to right now.

But she pulled in her legs anyways, resituating herself on the sofa so she was sitting up properly, and patted the space beside her. “Sit down, rabbit.”

Mel did, eyeing her a little nervously. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine. At least now it is.” Comparatively, it was true.

And it earned her a nervous laugh. “That’s less reassuring than you think it is, Te’ijal.”

*Dear Mel*, she’d remembered drafting in her abortifacient bath, all subtext.

In the moment, she didn't bother. "I had an abortion. Stella took me to the midwife's."

Mel was quiet for a long beat. Finally, she said, "Nice one, Te'ijal." When her laughter was met with silence, her expression turned serious. "Wait, no shit?"

She couldn't articulate why, but just once, Te'ijal wanted someone to react without the shock and confusion. "Is it that surprising?"

Mel surprised her by shrugging. "That you had an abortion? I guess not really. I'm kind of getting stuck on the fact that you needed one. You seem like the type of person who should be immune to pregnancy."

Te'ijal froze, too distracted by the warmth blossoming in her chest to react for a moment. She'd been forced to confront that she was the only one who felt as much, and here Mel was saying it like the most obvious thing in the world.

*After all, Te'ijal thought, wasn't it?*

"I'm not sure you know how much good it does me to hear that," she managed.

Mel quirked up an eyebrow. "Don't tell me I'm the first person to tell you that."

"I wish I couldn't, but you are."

Mel laughed. "Goddess. No offense, but you'd make a terrible mother."

She'd half-apologized as if it was an insult, but Te'ijal beamed like it was a compliment. "None taken. Thank you."

"I've thought about it before," Mel continued, her tone suddenly a little less steady, a little more sheepish. "You as a parent. Not like, of your own kid, the thought had never even crossed my mind, but. Well." She looked away and coughed. "I didn't have parents growing up, and in a lot of ways, you were the closest thing I've ever had. And sometimes I wondered if... if maybe my life would have been easier, better, somehow, if I'd met you

sooner. And... honestly, no. I think you came to my life at exactly the right time.” She looked back at Te’ijal, eyes shining a little, smiling nervously. “You make a much better weird, older friend.”

Te’ijal couldn’t help herself. She leaned forward and pulled Mel into a tight, awkward embrace. She wasn’t very good at it, and she was fighting back tears, but Mel hugged her back all the same.

“Needed that?” Mel asked, a friendly tease in her voice as she pulled away. Te’ijal nodded back and realized she’d failed to successfully suppress her crying. She wiped at her eyes and realized with a rush of relief that her knuckles came back bloody.

Maybe her husband would never understand that she’d made the right decision. Maybe most of her friends would never realize how violating it had felt to be put in the place to make it. But maybe one day they would. Mel did.

More importantly, Te’ijal did, and she was back in her body again – *hers*, strong, and undead, and no one, nothing else’s.

That was enough.