

A Wolf, a Snake, and a Campfire

by Kolik

I

Thunder boomed across the sky. Flocks of birds abandoned their perches to avoid the coming rainstorm. On the jungle floor, a young wolf girl halted in her tracks.

Zoey stood on her tiptoes and sniffed the air twice, then doubled her pace. She was on an important mission – her first as an adult huntress – and the cargo she was carrying would be ruined if it got soaked. She carried a thickly woven basket about as wide as her slender hips and a hand deep, packed densely with small bundles. They bounced as she ran.

The wolf girl's grey coat cut through the underbrush like the dull metal of a knife, never stopping for more than a heartbeat before getting her bearings again. She had made good time out from her village in the last day, but there was still a lot of ground to cover. Zoey passed through a small clearing and stole a glance up at the sky: darker than it had been half an hour ago.

She did not bother doing the math – it was monsoon season, and if she could not make it to shelter before the storm hit then there would be nowhere around for her to hide. Zoey briefly considered dropping the spear and tools she carried in her free hand and around her waist in a simple pouch, but that would not have helped. Besides, her gear was part of her new life as a woman of her tribe. She had worked hard to prove herself was in no hurry to part with it.

Hot, heavy breaths pounded in and out of her lungs. Zoey put her head down and dug deeper. *You're a huntress. Push through it.* The strength in her petite figure had lasted this far, but she was starting to falter. She had been running for hours.

A raindrop struck her nose. She looked up to find darker clouds swirling above her and wind whipping through the trees. This storm was going to be a bad one.

She broke out from a dense patch onto a long, low grass field. There was a small mountain at the other end, and her goal rested at its base: the yawning mouth of a cave. The rain was pattering down quickly now, not soaking Zoey but threatening to. She broke into a dead sprint, grey legs pistoning up and down while the dull roar of the wind rose behind her.

Zoey reached the cave just as a flash of lightning lit up the sky. She did not have room to slow down, so she threw herself forward and curled around the basket in midair. She hit the rocky ground just as the first deluge of rain fell behind her with a crash.

The wolf girl rolled once and thudded against the cave wall. Instantly she was inspecting her cargo, but it was fine – the basket and her own body had cushioned it from the fall. Zoey allowed herself to sigh once and leaned back against the cave wall.

Then the wall moved. That was odd because walls weren't supposed to move. Zoey glanced over her right shoulder: whatever she had hit was black like the cave's stone, but with lighter patterns of grey running along it. The whatever-it-was moved again, and as it shimmered in the dull light coming from the entrance, Zoey saw it had scales.

Walls did not have scales. They were not supposed to hiss, either, but that was exactly the sound Zoey heard creeping over her left shoulder. She slowly brought her head around to see what the source of the noise was.

“You *ssscared* me half to death tumbling in like that!”

II

Zoey let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. "Sorry, Sylvia. I was just really worried about getting your gifts wet."

Sylvia the lamia huffed and put her hands on what would have been her hips if she had legs for them to attach to. She was a black wolf from the waist up, with long and wild black hair reaching down her back and hanging over half her face, but the rest of her body was that of an enormous black snake. The glossy black scales bore grey rectangles in a steady pattern down to her snake tail, and they matched the grey of her underbelly.

A normal wolf tail sprouted from the end of her wolf body, and she wore a simple red sash and loincloth for modesty. Piercing red eyes were the final features that marked her as something very different from the wolves of Zoey's tribe.

"There's no sense in worrying about gifts if you're going to hurt yourself." She glanced out at the storm and the dim grey light filtering through the cave entrance. Even that light was rapidly dwindling beneath the onslaught of clouds and rain. "Come on. Let's go farther in before we're totally blind in here."

Zoey sprung to her feet and held out the basket in a deep bow. "First, as a representative of the wolf tribe, I hereby—"

Sylvia waved her hand sharply. "None of that. It can wait."

Zoey glanced up. "But I'm supposed—"

"It can *wait*. In the meantime, get your things and hop on. I'll take you the rest of the way so you don't trip and break something important."

Zoey had already picked up her fallen spear and pouch before she realized exactly what Sylvia had told her to do. "You want me to . . . ride on you?" She looked at the lamia.

"Yep." Sylvia curled down and patted a thick part of her snake body just behind where she reared off the ground. Zoey hesitated, and a shred of exasperation crept into Sylvia's voice. "Zoey,

you're practically skin and bones; you won't be hurting me. Besides, you've never been in this cave before, right? You normally wait out the monsoon season with your family in your village."

Zoey cleared her throat. "Yeah. Sorry." She stepped forward and straddled Sylvia, balancing her things in her arms precariously. The snake woman slithered forward and Zoey had to raise her legs lest they drag on the rough ground. She balanced on her butt and thighs, trying to stay centred as Sylvia wound into a narrow tunnel that led to the cave's inner reaches.

After a few minutes, they came to a much larger space connected to the outside. On Zoey's left, a jagged scar in the outside rock began high above her head. It widened and lowered as it went forward, showing shreds of the sky until eventually it reached ground level and gave way to a stunning panorama of the jungle canopy. The storm had yet to pass onto this side of the mountain, so the trees and valleys below looked. Sharp stalactites and stalagmites punctuated the rocky seam like teeth. Zoey felt like she was standing inside the jaw of a great stone head set into the mountain.

On her right was the same light grey rock as the rest of the cave, rising up in a rough wall and meeting the ceiling somewhere in the shadows above the two women's heads. The "tongue" of the giant, jaw-shaped cave was a shallow slope down to the vista at the far end some twenty or thirty metres away. Down there, a small stream of clear mountain spring water ran from the wall to the "teeth" before cascading over the edge in a plume of water.

"Woah," said Zoey.

"Welcome to Biting Rock Cave," said Sylvia. She swept her arms around grandly, then pointed to a low, flat rock near the enclosed back end of the cave. "That's the closest thing you'll find to a dinner table. You can put your stuff there."

Zoey got to her feet, then walked over and put her things on the rock table. There was plenty of light coming in from the opening at the far end, which let her notice a nearby firepit and a small stockpile of wood next to it. "You can even cook in here?" she asked Sylvia.

“Yep. Pretty good, too, if you don’t mind eating off a rock.” The lamia slithered over, trailing her snake body behind Zoey. “Now, you can continue where you left off.”

Zoey snapped to attention. “Right!” She grabbed the basket laden with cloth bundles, then turned to face Sylvia. “As a representative of the wolf tribe, I hereby present you these humble gifts to help you in the season of storms.” She held the basket out to Sylvia and bowed. “May they strengthen our kinship and lead to long days and safe nights.”

Sylvia smirked. “Thank you, huntress. I was a friend to the wolf tribe yesterday and I will be a friend tomorrow.” She took the basket and sat on the ground. “That was very good, Zoey.” She began unrolling each bundle onto the table.

Zoey ran her hands through her hair, but couldn’t hide her grin. “Oh, thank you! I was so worried I’d say the wrong word or mess up the bow or something.” She breathed out deeply.

Sylvia giggled. “You know, it wasn’t too long ago that I was looking after youngsters like you and your sister for the wolf tribe,” she glanced at Zoey up and down, “and now you’ve blossomed into a fine young woman.”

The wolf girl blushed. “Well, I think Chloe did more *blossoming* than me: some days, she has to beat the men away with a stick.” Her eyes hardened as she clenched her fists. “But now I’m a real woman of the tribe! I can finally give orders to the other— to the children and they *have* to listen to me because I said so!”

Sylvia had finished unrolling the bundles, most of which were cured meat or dried fruit. She raised one eyebrow knowingly. “Is that why you wanted to become a huntress?”

Zoey deflated. “Hey, come on. I want to pull my own weight the same as everyone else. You know that.”

“Good. Now sit down and we can talk some more.” Sylvia patted her snake body. Zoey looked down, noticing for the first time that her thin legs stood between the table and the lamia’s muscular tail.

Most of the lamia's snake body was as thick as Zoey's waist, and the wolf girl could see it twitch and shift as Sylvia adjusted herself.

"Um," said Zoey. "No thanks."

Sylvia blinked. "What?"

"I-I mean I want to get the fire going first." Zoey quickly grabbed the roll of flint and sparking rocks from the table. She stepped over Sylvia and darted to the firepit.

Sylvia's eyes followed her. "Right." The lamia slowly rose and moved next to Zoey, who was crouched over the firepit and filling it with kindling. Sylvia swept around Zoey's back and hung next to her. "You want a hand?"

Zoey's fur stood on end for a split second but she kept her head down. "Ah, no. No. I would prefer to do it myself." She hopped to the other side of the fire pit and looked down, busying herself with with getting a spark to catch.

Sylvia stared at her for a second, confused. ". . . I'll go get some water, then." She grabbed a pair of rock bowls from next to the table.

"Okay," Zoey said curtly. The sharp *krrk* of scraping rock was all she heard as Sylvia turned and slithered away. Once the lamia wasn't looking, Zoey lifted her eyes and stared at her snake body, watching the band of black and grey muscle slide along the ground. It tapered down to a thin, nimble tail as Sylvia moved away.

Zoey returned to look at her work and found her hands quivering. Her heart was beating hard in her chest – not fast like it had during her run, but with slow, lumbering beats that almost reached up to her throat. It was the kind of heartbeat someone felt when he thought he was walking into danger but couldn't prove it. It was how her heart had beaten when she and her sister had been ambushed by Setra and Schaal not too long ago.

She shook her head. *You've known Sylvia since you were a kid.* The sparks finally caught.

At the far end of the cave, Sylvia dipped her bowls in the stream before taking in the view. It was gorgeous, and one of the bigger reasons she used Biting Rock Cave to wait out monsoons. Her real home was tucked away somewhere in the endless expanse of rolling green beneath her, everything of value waterproofed and tied down. The lamia's eyes drifted up just in time to notice a dark cloud bank creep over the top of the mountain. Thunder cracked distantly as the first raindrops fell on this side of the mountain.

"At least the storm blew itself out getting over here," she said to herself. With any luck, she and Zoey would be treated to a pleasant rainstorm rather than a whipping gale.

As for Zoey, she seemed . . . off. Sylvia had known Zoey and Chloe since they were very young; something about the way Zoey had slipped away from her was puzzling. She could not figure why the wolf girl would feel uncomfortable around her – the only thing different about the last time they had seen each other was her new role as a woman of her tribe.

Sylvia's eyes widened. That was it! Zoey was nervous around her because she was unsure how to act as a huntress. They had only ever spent time together as friends, but now there was another layer of formality between them. A sly grin crept onto the lamia's face: she knew how to fix that problem.

By the time Sylvia slithered back to the firepit, Zoey had built a sturdy campfire with some logs. She looked up as Sylvia arrived. "All clear?"

"Yes. No sign of any uninvited guests, and the water's as clear as ever," said Sylvia, setting down her bowls on the table.

"Good," said Zoey, standing and stretching her arms above her head. "I'd hate to be interrupted by a colony of bats or something."

Sylvia leaned forward, hands clasped behind her back. "Zoey, is there something you want to tell me?"

Zoey froze. There was a long pause. "No . . ." She drooped. "Did I forget something when I gave you the basket?"

Sylvia put her hand on Zoey's shoulder. "No, nothing like that. I mean something more personal."

Zoey stuck her tongue out and thought. Her hand shot up to her mouth. "You mean," her voice dropped to a whisper and she glanced back and forth, "*men?* I haven't gotten to know any of them like *that* yet."

Sylvia rolled her eyes. "No, I mean about me."

Zoey gave the lamia a sidelong glance. "You? No, I'm not hiding anything. What made you think that?"

"So me doing *this*," Sylvia darted forward, slithering into a loop from the girl's shins to her knees, "doesn't bother you?"

Zoey's pupils narrowed to tiny dots as she peered down her body. "N-not at all." She gulped.

"Oh, well then. I must have been mistaken," said Sylvia as she coiled around Zoey again. The wolf girl was trapped up to her thighs now.

Zoey watched as black and grey scales crept up her legs like tar flowing downhill. Her voice was very quiet when she spoke: "Yeah, you must have—" another coil cinched higher, and her breath caught in her throat. Now she was pinned from the waist down.

Setra wanted to eat me.

Sylvia crept higher.

I can't move my arms.

Sylvia's hand reached down to stroke Zoey's head kindly.

setra's going to eat me and i'll never see chloe again and i can't breathe and schaal's gonna

"STOP!" Zoey roared as she exploded into motion. She writhed like a caught fish in Sylvia's grasp, sucking in air and trying to jackknife madly. The sheer desperation caught Sylvia off guard and her coils fell apart like a pile of loose rope. The lamia tumbled to the ground.

“Zoey, what—” was all she could say before the wolf clenched her teeth and made a noise somewhere between a scream and a growl, throwing off the loop around her waist and leaping clear across the table. She landed on all fours next to her spear, grabbing it and sweeping into a low battle stance.

A deep, vicious growl rose from the wolf’s throat. Her sharp white teeth were stark against her grey fur, and the muscles of her face clenched tight around her jaw. Her eyes were crazy and wild.

The two looked at each other. It occurred to Sylvia that Zoey could really hurt her if she wanted to – the spear was tipped with a wickedly sharp piece of obsidian, and she could see every part of Zoey’s arm straining in a death grip on the weapon.

Sylvia couldn’t believe what she was seeing. “Zoey,” she breathed. The wolf blinked. Her growling stopped. Her desperate gasps slowed a bit. She glanced left and right as though she didn’t recognize the cave. “Zoey, I’m so sorry.”

Zoey blinked again. She shook her head like she had woken up with a bad headache. Her knees touched the ground as she pushed herself upright with her free hand. She looked down at her spear and dropped it, startled. Then the wolf girl looked up at Sylvia. The sight of her friend twisted into a knotted pile was bad enough, but the genuine fear in her eyes was even worse. Sylvia was frozen, her eyes wide and frightened like she was looking at some kind of rabid animal.

Zoey collapsed, sobbing.

III

Zoey took a few minutes to cool down. Sylvia wanted to do something to help her – she had always liked giving hugs in tense situations – but given what had just happened she settled for handing the wolf girl some water. Zoey drank both bowls, gulping it down like she was trying to wash something out of her mouth.

She was. The overpowering rush of adrenaline had wracked her body and wrenched her muscles around her bones. Every mouthful of clean water helped her remember where she was and what she was doing. *Sylvia is my friend.* It hurt to have to remind herself of that.

At length, the two women moved back to the fire. The wolf girl sat back, legs crossed. Sylvia settled down a healthy distance away on the other side. “Sylvia,” said Zoey, her voice almost cracking, “you can sit closer. Being near you doesn’t bother me.”

Sylvia slid forward slowly until she was sitting next to Zoey, her snake body wrapping in a semicircle around the fire and then trailing off towards the middle of the cave. “But there is something about me that does bother you.”

Zoey winced. “Yeah.”

“Can you tell me what it is?”

Zoey appreciated the difference between *can you* and *will you*. “I told you that I became a huntress after a good hunt and a lot of hard work with Chloe. But I didn’t tell you everything that happened when we were by ourselves out there.”

Sylvia waited quietly, hands in her lap. Zoey took a deep breath and began her story: Zoey and Chloe had decided to take a nap. A pair of snakes, Schaal and Setra, had snuck up on them and ambushed them while they slept. The snakes fought over them like pieces of meat – Schaal had taken Chloe to have his way with her, and Setra had taken Zoey to eat her. Zoey had been able to convince

Setra their cooked meat was better instead, but that hadn't stopped the gluttonous serpent from trying to hypnotize her into becoming a meal herself.

Zoey gulped. "Honestly, if things had gone a bit differently, we may not have made it out of there." She rubbed her palms along her shoulders, arms crossed. The heat of the campfire was doing nothing for her inner chills.

Sylvia understood now. "So when I started wrapping you up . . ."

"It brought back a lot of bad memories." Zoey shook her head. "The way they *talked* about us, it was like we weren't even people. The way Schaal spoke some kind of command he'd put in Chloe's head, and she was just a totally different woman. It was so creepy, it was so *wrong*."

Sylvia took Zoey's hands in her own. "You know that I would never do anything to hurt you."

Zoey nodded sharply. "Yeah, of course I do! I've known you since I was a kid, and I love you like anyone else in the tribe."

"Thank you. It's very good to hear you say that." Sylvia smiled warmly. The two of them sat there for a moment, looking at each other and feeling the soft heat of the fire. The lamia tried to come to terms with what Zoey had told her: she knew she needed to help the poor thing, but how to do it? She did have hypnotic powers herself, and those could cut to the heart of almost any mental problem, but that kind of power was what had harmed Zoey in the first place.

Maybe she could take a different approach – something a bit more plain, but that could still get to the heart of the matter. "You know," Sylvia said slowly, "it seems like you have a pretty simple problem – there were bad snakes who did bad things to you, and that has made you feel scared when you think of any snake. If a good snake, like me, does some good things to you, it might help."

Zoey raised a dubious eyebrow. "How?"

Sylvia chuckled. "Oh, I have a few techniques I've picked up over the years," she said, dragging a section of her body closer and rearing up. For the third time that evening, she patted her snake body. "Sit down and I'll show you."

Zoey glanced between Sylvia's kind eyes and her patting hand. She felt nervous and unsure, like walking down a flight of stairs in the dark, but she knew that Sylvia wanted to help her. "Alright," she said, moving to straddle Sylvia's body facing towards her tail. "Like this?" There was ample room for Sylvia's wolf body and snake tail to move without disturbing the section Zoey sat on.

"Exactly," Sylvia purred, beginning to rub Zoey's shoulders. She started with soft caresses across the nape of her neck, little more than dragging her hands back and forth. After a minute, the lamia used more strength and began to press the heels of her palms into Zoey's muscles. The wolf girl exhaled in time with each movement.

"Does that feel good?" Sylvia asked.

"Y-yeah," said Zoey. "I didn't realize how tight all that running made me." Sylvia simply returned to her ministrations – running was only part of the reason for Zoey's tension, but she felt it would be imprudent to remind her of that. The lamia moved her hands back and forth across Zoey's shoulders, working the tension out of the muscle. The two women fell into a subtle rhythm, moving softly in time with each firm but tender press – each time, there was a little more give.

After a few minutes, Sylvia stopped. "What do you think?" she asked.

Zoey blinked her eyes open. There was a pleasant warmth running through her shoulders, and she could feel the muscle and skin resting loosely around her spine and collarbone. She had lost so much tension and hadn't even known she was carrying it. "That," she breathed, "was great. Thank you." She started to stand.

Sylvia held her down. "Oh, that's *jusst* the beginning. I'm a very good masseuse, and I can tell you have a lot of tension left for me to melt away."

"Well, if you say so. What's next?"

Sylvia licked her lips. "Take off your bra."

Zoey coughed. "What?"

Sylvia poked her in the back, where the wolf girl's plain leather chest wrapping was held together with a simple knot. "I can't massage you properly if there's this leather in the way. You need to take it off and lie down." Zoey twisted, looking closely at Sylvia. The lamia just smiled back at her. "Your body is nothing to be ashamed of, Zoey."

The wolf girl turned back to hide the blush running across her cheeks. "I'm not *ashamed*. It's just, well . . ." she trailed off as she heard a rustling sound from behind her. Curious, she turned again and found herself at eye level at Sylvia's breasts, which were quite a bit larger than hers. She could tell because they were right in front of her face and very naked.

The lamia spoke. Zoey heard about every third word. Sylvia swayed as she talked and was adjusting her hair, which did very pleasant things to her boobs. The snake woman's dark fur continued onto each softly globe, ending at the black areola. Each breast looked like a pleasant handful of flesh – a *large* handful – and was topped by a black nipple.

Sylvia finished unwrapping the red cloth of her top. "See?" she asked, wearing nothing but a comfortable grin from the waist up. She dropped the scrap of clothing to the rocky ground. "Nothing to be embarrassed about: we're both women here, and there are no bothersome men to interrupt us."

"Uh huh," said Zoey, still staring.

Sylvia giggled. "So can I take off your bra now?"

Zoey snapped back to herself. "I-I'll do it." She turned away from Sylvia before reaching back to undo the knot that held the leather straps in place. Her bra slid down her shoulders before falling off, exposing Zoey's small but pert breasts. Her nipples were black, just like Sylvia's. A cool breeze blew in through the cave's teeth and made her shiver. The wolf girl's breasts stuck out from her petite frame, defined sharply against the lithe muscle and bone beneath them.

Sylvia perched her face on Zoey's shoulder. "Cute," she said. "Now lie down, please."

Zoey tilted forward, pressing her arms into the scales beneath her. She realized they were indeed very soft despite all the muscle, and as she lay down she felt Sylvia's serpentine skin cradle her breasts.

The lamia's snake body was just tall enough for Zoey to rest her chest and hips on it while her legs hung off the sides and her knees just touched the ground. Her body weight was distributed very evenly – she almost felt like she was floating just above the rocky cave floor.

“This is pretty comfortable,” said Zoey, surprised.

“I aim to impress,” said Sylvia. “Now, just make sure you breathe *in* and *out* deeply and slowly.” She leaned forward and began to massage Zoey's shoulder blades. “And look into the fire, please.” She tapped one finger against Zoey's snout, gently pushing her head.

Zoey turned as her breathing slowed. “Like this?”

“Yes, that's perfect,” purred Sylvia. She kept her hands working as Zoey settled, grinding softly away with her palms and sometimes pressing her knuckles and fingertips into firm points. Zoey flexed when Sylvia pierced into the deeper muscle groups, but as she got used to the feeling it happened less and less. Before long, the only sounds in the cave were the soft hush of Zoey's breathing and the crackling of the fire.

Outside, the storm raged, but the mountain shielded them from the worst of it. A cool gust tumbled softly through the cave's black teeth, but neither woman felt it. The gentle patter of raindrops echoed towards them from the vista at the far end.

Sylvia's hands moved down to Zoey's spine and ribs, and she relished the feeling of exploring the wolf girl's body in such detail. Because she dragged so much of her body along the ground, the lamia had a more refined sense of touch than most people, which was part of the reason she was so physical with her friends. Zoey really was exquisite, with barely any fat on her and no blemishes on her fur. Playing her black fingers through the grey fur was as stimulating to Sylvia as it was to her subject.

Zoey, meanwhile, was doing her best to focus on every little flickering flame before her. She had built many fires like this one, but as Sylvia's hands pressed into her back and the tightness in her muscles seemed to pour out, the wolf girl found that it was easily holding her attention. Her eyes lazily traced the flame's path, up from the fuel logs hiding embers in their cracks to the twigs and sticks

resting on them, and finally up into the air where the flame wavered before being extinguished into nothing more than sparks and warm air. Her gaze drifted back down to find another ember.

Sylvia leaned forward. “Zoey, you’ve been doing a very good job, but you need to breathe *deeper*.” Her hanging breasts just barely kissed against Zoey’s fur.

Zoey didn’t look up. “. . . Deeper?” she mumbled.

“Yes,” said Sylvia as she pressed her palms into the base of Zoey’s ribs. “If you breathe more deeply, you can relax better.”

“Kay,” said Zoey absently. She inhaled, filling her chest with fresh air down to what felt like her toes, then let it out in a whispering rush. She could feel her breath flowing out of her throat and over her teeth, warm now where it had been cool before.

Sylvia watched Zoey as the breath drained out of her grey frame. She was coming along nicely, and the lamia had barely gotten started. She pulled back and dragged her fingernails softly down the wolf girl’s spine, smiling as Zoey’s arms drooped down to the ground and her knuckles dragged over the black rock.

The lamia finished working on Zoey’s back, so she took a moment to appreciate the soft rise and fall of the wolf girl’s body as she breathed. Zoey was a very tempting bundle of heat right now: her soft fur and petite limbs made Sylvia tingle where they pressed into her body, and the warmth of Zoey’s skin had begun to soak into Sylvia’s core.

The serpent woman brought one finger up to toy with her lip. There was a rather significant part of her that wanted to pounce on Zoey, coil her up in a tight hug, and use her as a warm squeeze toy all night, but she held herself back.

That would come later.

“Alright, Zoey,” said Sylvia once she had gotten her impulses under control, “I’m gonna do your legs now.” Zoey mumbled something, too far gone for words. Sylvia smirked and drew back to have more room on her body that was now a table – soon to be a bed, if Zoey kept going the way she was.

She took one of Zoey's legs in her hands, bracing the knee and ankle, then gently lifted the limb onto her supple scales.

Zoey was distantly aware of the things Sylvia was doing to her, but her individual touches had melted into a hazy, pleasant soup. She could feel every part of her body slowing down, growing dimmer, tingling and flexing as Sylvia's magical hands slid this way and that.

Zoey looked at the logs, then lifted her eyes along with the shimmering fingers as she breathed in. Her chest filled as her eyes traced up one slim, waving part of the flame that danced like a bird in the sky. She could feel her body lifting up into the open space of the cave and pressing down into the lithe, friendly scales carrying her. Her breasts felt good as they were squished between her ribs and Sylvia's body. Her fur felt good as it was matted beneath Sylvia's hands. At long last, the fire twisted a hair too far and it died into a spark.

The wolf girl exhaled, bright blue eyes sinking down to the base of the flames like a pair of gems dropped in a tranquil pond. Indeed, her eyes were the only things moving as she breathed. The wolf girl was all but asleep as her dear friend Sylvia did something to her leg – she wanted to look down and see what was making her leg feel so good, but Sylvia had told her to look at the fire so that was that.

Zoey tried to scrounge around in her mind, wondering if there was anything else she could do. Then the fire crackled and her attention went back to the pretty shades of red and orange.

The lamia had moved to her other leg at some point, but that was done now. Zoey wanted to say Thank You or something like that but the words sputtered out as soon as Zoey tried to shape them in her mind. Why? Maybe the dancing flame would tell her. She inhaled and raised her eyes again.

Sylvia leaned forward, slithering behind Zoey and resting one elbow along her own body to prop her head up. Her free hand swept softly across Zoey's head, petting her like a tame animal. "Zoey, how do you feel?" Sylvia asked sweetly.

Zoey's mouth twitched – she felt very good and very relaxed. She wanted to tell Sylvia that but her voice had stopped working. "Mnnfmm," was all she could manage.

Sylvia chuckled. “Ooh,” she cooed, “I’d say that means you’re feeling *very good*.”

With great effort, Zoey managed a single word. “Yeah,” she said weakly.

Sylvia drew her finger around in a circle on Zoey’s head. “Do you want to keep feeling good?”

Her voice reminded Zoey of the sweetest fruit she had ever eaten.

“Yeah . . .”

“As you wish,” Sylvia said, licking her lips. She curled her tail over to the wood pile and grabbed a stick, then held it over the fire until it caught. The serpent woman slid her tail and the torch away from the fire, and she delicately moved Zoey’s head with it. When she finished, Zoey’s entire frame was aligned along Sylvia’s snake body.

The torch hung in front of Zoey like a lightning bug against the pitch black of a moonless night. “Now I want you to look at this fire, Zoey,” said Sylvia. Zoey murmured something as her eyes focused on the waxy light of the torch, two blue dots against one orange. “Follow it as it swings back and forth,” said Sylvia, beginning to move the torch left and right slowly.

Zoey was hooked: the other fire had only moved up, but this one was moving from one side to the other, a tantalizing novelty. Every time she thought it would drift off into the night, the hot streak would slow down and move back towards the centre. Her eyes swung along with the torch raptly, but the rest of her body still felt heavy. Why was it heavy? The torch moved again. She didn’t care.

Sylvia voice pierced Zoey’s haze: “That fire is your thoughts.” The words shifted around in her mind like sand as she tried to figure out what they meant. Sylvia had been so nice and made her feel so good so she thought that Sylvia knew what she was doing. The torch swept by and Zoey heard Sylvia’s voice snake into her ear again. “That fire is your thoughts.”

Zoey was having trouble thinking. The fire was a pretty shade of orange and she liked looking at it, but the words pulled her in another direction. Thinking about them was like handling a bundle of twitching strings tied into a knot. She tried to untie it, but the torch was so clear in front of her that it sucked up all her attention whenever it moved.

“That fire is your thoughts.” Zoey’s brow furrowed. Swing. She relaxed.

“That fire is your thoughts.” Zoey thought about the fire, about how warm it was. Swing and blank again.

That fire is your thoughts. Zoey took the words into her mind so she could hear them better. She liked thinking about fire so she tried to do it more. Fire was warm and so was her body wherever Sylvia had touched her.

That fire is your thoughts. But Sylvia hadn’t only touched her body. The lamia had touched her mind as well, and given her the fire to focus on. Maybe that fire—

That fire is my thoughts. Zoey finally understood. “That fire is my thoughts,” she said softly. The only part of her that moved were her eyes, languidly slipping back and forth as they reflected orange torchlight. She began to repeat her newfound mantra in a faraway voice.

Sylvia giggled to herself as she unwrapped Zoey’s loincloth. It had taken time to get her this far, but it had been worth it: the wolf girl was putty in her hands, to be shaped and fondled as she wished. She tossed the useless scrap of clothing away and leaned in to ogle Zoey’s nude butt. Like the rest of her, it was tight and petite with no fat – she was a svelte young thing and never shied away from running or climbing.

Sylvia’s hands ran over Zoey’s ass, gently kneading the tight flesh. Sylvia felt her own breathing get quicker and heavier as she played with the supple, vulnerable skin: Zoey was a woman by her tribe’s measure, but her body was youthful. Sylvia lowered herself, getting as close as she could to her prize. She pinched and pulled, the black lines of her fingers contrasting against Zoey’s soft grey body.

Some of her motions actually resembled massage techniques.

A few minutes later, Sylvia had satisfied herself. She stretched her hands and arms out, taking stock of things. Outside, the rain had dimmed and there were some gloomy rays of sunlight peeking through the cloud cover. Zoey was nearly catatonic on Sylvia’s body, droning on as she stared. The only thing tethering her to waking life was the torch.

Sylvia licked her lips. This was her favourite part. She slunk forward, casually slithering over top of Zoey's back and crisscrossing her body with a couple hefty coils. She could see Zoey's face was barely moving enough for her to speak and follow the torch – if she noticed the new weight, she did not react. “Zoey,” Sylvia cooed, “how are you?”

“—fire is my thoughts,” said Zoey.

“Yes it is, and you've been such a good girl about following my instructions,” said Sylvia. She stopped her tail. Zoey stopped halfway through a word, staring dumbly at the torch. Sylvia rested on the ground, casually throwing an arm around Zoey's shoulders. “Now if that fire is your thoughts, what happens to it when it goes out?” she asked.

Indeed, most of the stick had burnt away and the naked flame was getting uncomfortably close to her scales. Zoey was still quiet, not even breathing, not even blinking. “Well, Zoey, I'll tell you,” said Sylvia. “When that fire is extinguished, the same thing will happen to your thoughts.”

Zoey was trying her best to focus on what Sylvia was saying, but the fire had stopped moving and all of her thoughts had stopped with it. She felt like she was standing on top of a cliff, ready to jump into the comforting air below – but she couldn't. She wanted to, she knew it would feel so freeing to close her eyes, leap off, and glide on the wind but there was some tiny piece of string tying her to the ground. She tried for the hundredth time to speak again.

Sylvia flicked the stick out of her grip. It clattered onto black rock, dying in a single orange flash. Zoey's eyes closed before it had even touched the ground.

IV

Zoey swam up from the murky depths of sleep, surfacing after what felt like a week. She blinked once, twice, trying to get her bearings in the early morning light. One thing she could see was the ashy firepit in front of her, which did get her attention. She tried to sit up, eager to see if there were any embers left, but found she could barely move. The wolf girl glanced down and found herself bound by black and grey scales, each coil as wide as her waist and reaching up to her shoulders.

She felt the muscles flex around her, slithering against her fur all the way to her ankles. She inhaled sharply.

. . . And let out her breath without a second thought. The lightning bolt of tension she had expected had never come. “Huh,” she said.

“Morning, Zoey,” came a kind voice from behind her. Zoey craned her head and found Sylvia acting as a pillow. “Feel better?”

“Yeah, actually, but I can’t remember much. What did you do?”

Sylvia waved a hand. “Oh, the usual. Deep tissue massage and a good night’s sleep will cure just about anything.” She smiled. “I’m really glad that you liked it, Zoey. It’s been a while since I had to put someone that deep and I was almost worried I’d lost my touch.”

Zoey nodded, searching her memories. There was the fight, then the fire, then the massage, then a blank space she couldn’t remember except for a warm, happy feeling. “Wait, ‘put me deep?’ Did you hypnotize me?”

Sylvia shrugged. “I didn’t just use old reliable,” she pointed at her eyes, which briefly shimmered with a cascade of bright colours, “to rewire your head, if that’s what you were worried about. That’d cause more problems than it’d fix.”

The wolf girl was confused. “So . . .”

“So I had to remind you about all the good things I can do for you. Now you’re not liable to jump out of your skin the next time I give you a hug.” Sylvia squeezed snugly around Zoey.

“Ah,” Zoey tensed at the compression before relaxing and letting her head lie back against Sylvia’s belly. She wriggled against her bindings, feeling their coolness seep pleasantly into her skin. “That *does* feel good.” In fact, there was quite a lot of her skin touching that coolness. “Hmm?” She tilted her head quizzically, moving her arms around and trying to take stock of herself.

“Yeah?” asked Sylvia.

Zoey ran her hands across her body. “Hmm.” The wolf girl realized something. She turned back to Sylvia and realized another something – or, rather, two large and soft somethings.

“Why are we naked?”

“Um,” said Sylvia. “Funny story . . .”