I didn't know what day it was, nor the time.

I blinked awake, my mind sluggish and my body aching as though I'd been dragged through mud. I was still in Cerys' personal chambers, the air thick with a heavy mixture of incense, smoke, and... that same musk I'd endured on her bed. The memory of what I'd done flashed through me, sending a cold shiver down my spine. I quickly wiped my palm across my face, thankfully finding no trace of her… essence.

I couldn't even remember when I'd passed out.

When I tried to lift my hand up to itch at my scalp, I found that I was unable to reach. Around my wrists were fine leather bindings, encrusted with shimmering crystals, and across my body was draped a loose, finely made silken blanket. It was bright red—the same colour as Cerys' cloak.

And then I took a whiff.

It was in fact her cloak.

Disgusting.

With a snarl, I threw it across the room and tried to launch a bolt of flame at it, only for nothing to leave my outstretched hand. With a startled gasp, I at last remembered why I was in the room and not simply what had happened within it. My capture, the auction, and the control collar wrapped around my neck. With each recollection, the pit of fear in my stomach deepened.

The pain in my chest had faded somewhat, but the hollow feeling within was still ever-present, a reminder of my failings. I reached up shakily to the collar, trying to find some form of give on it, but the thing felt like a solid metal circlet, as though I'd been born with it on. I could feel the runes etched into it at the front, but there was no way for me to disturb them, as they felt carved in by at least half an inch.

To get it off, I would've had to cut my head off.

Attached to the front of the collar was a long, slim chain, linking me to the stone wall behind me. I wrapped my fingers around the chain. “**Briseadh**," I said clearly, but like before, felt nothing. Once more had I tried to use magic, the reflex too great to break.

Focus up, Teran.

Panicking will do nothing.

This thing is clearly magical—it's a binding artefact, which means there has to be some sort of controller... a master it's tied too—Cerys, clearly, but she can't perform magic, so...

She has a device somewhere in this room.

It was dark in the chambers, the crystals slotted into the cobbled stone walls humming weakly, draping me in darkness and just barely allowing me to see the lounging lindwurm resting upon her large bed, her smooth, flat chest rising and falling in soft, delicate breaths. I snarled and tried to get up, only to stumble as my chains caught me, sending me back to the floor.

“Hm?" The princess grumbled, hearing my hiss of pain. She raised her long neck, sleek-scaled maw opening wide in a long yawn. Her eyes, bright pink, glowing in the dark, locked onto me. “Oh, pet…? Go back to sleep; it's late, and I'm tired," she mumbled, falling back down, paw grabbing at her thick blankets.

“I am not your pet!" My voice cracked, fury and desperation twisting through each word. She only tilted her head, that familiar, infuriating huff escaping her as if my rage were an amusing trifle. I struggled against the chains. “Let me go, you disgusting freak!"

Calm down, calm down... This will accomplish nothing.

“No," she said simply, her voice soft with mocking indifference. She unfurled from her bed, each deliberate movement a reminder of her serpentine strength. Her limp was more pronounced without her prosthetic, but it did nothing to weaken the predatory air around her as she slid closer, stopping just beyond my reach, nostrils flaring slightly.

“Let me go," I repeated, my voice a harsh snarl, although even I could hear the desperation in it.

**Calm down.**

She tilted her head slightly, a faint smirk curling the edges of her maw. “And where would you possibly go, pet?" She asked, her voice soft and patronising, her long tongue flicking out. “The outside world isn't very kind to things like you. Here, you're at least… cherished."

“Is that what you call this?" I snapped, yanking at the chain attached to my collar in order to punctuate my point. “Chaining me up and dragging me over to your bed whenever you've got a problem."

Her eyes flashed with an even mix of irritation and amusement. “Don't flatter yourself, human," she murmured, her voice low as she lent in ever closer. “As if I needed to drag you. Last night you did exactly what I asked you to do... willingly."

A surge of anger rushed through me. “You lied," I spat. “You said you'd take it off!"

She shrugged effortlessly, uncaringly, sending a flicker of shameful heat to my cheeks. “I said I'd consider it," she corrected, her tone maddeningly even. “And I did, but your performance was so stellar I decided you looked better with it on." She lent in close, just scraping the edge of my range—not that attacking her would have done anything but curb my vengeance. “You must've been starving, because... wow. What a mess you made of me."

I clenched my fists, the bindings tight against my skin. “If you think I'll lie down and let you-"

“Oh, but you will," she interrupted, her voice a soft purr. “Right now you've got no other choice. You're trapped, bound in chains, and your magic is nice and sealed away." Her gaze dropped to the collar around my neck. “And until you realise that, all this thrashing about is just wasted energy."

My breath came fast and ragged. I wanted to lunge at her, to do anything to wipe the smug expression off her snout, but the collar seemed to tighten, a reminder of my physical limitations. The hollowness within throbbed in time with my racing pulse.

“I'll find a way out," I growled, the words empty even to me. “You can't keep me here forever."

Her lips curled into a slow smile, a flicker of dark pleasure passing through her reptilian eyes. “I'm counting on it," she replied. “It wouldn't be fun otherwise."

It's all a game to her... I just need to play along. Take it easy and find a way out.

She turned away, making her way back towards her bed, her movements slower and more languid without the prosthetic. “Now, why don't you be a good little pet and lie back down?" She said over her shoulder, her tone an infuriating mix of sweetness and cruelty. “If you behave yourself, you might get another taste."

“I'm never touching you ever again. I don't care what you do," I snapped, glaring.

“You've got to eat eventually."

My heart dropped,

T-There's no way...

“What's the matter, pet? That's an awfully long pause you've got there." Came her soft, mocking voice. “But don't worry, cute thing. I'm not going to trade mating for food like some poor tail-raiser—you're far too valuable to be treated like that. Besides, I'm a romantic~"

Desperation overwhelmed me. I focused my will into a great, hooked claw and raked it across the inside of my chest, where my mana was once kept. To my surprise, I felt the faintest, most distant of flickers. The effort nearly gave me a nosebleed, but it was there.

It's still there.

But... it was locked off, denied to me by the strength of the collar.

And yet, it wasn't how templar collars were supposed to work, I realised slowly, hope building. According to research I had done on the topic, they snuffed out the spark; they did not merely deny access as mine did.

It's ***still*** there.

“My friend said it would hurt," I recalled her saying, the memory having been previously hidden away. With a tired sigh, I sank back down onto the floor, finding that a soft, expensive-looking pillow had been placed beneath me as I'd slept. This made me pause, but I pushed the small gesture aside.

Who is her friend? A human? A Templar?

No, it's not possible. It's nothing but insane ramblings—not worth thinking about.

I need my magic back, and I can't do that while completely exhausted.

I reached out for her cloak, but then pulled my hand back as an image of her smug grin flittered across my eyes. She would definitely say something, I realised bitterly, shutting my eyes tightly and lying down upon the smooth stone flooring. It was warmer than expected but still cold without the surprising warmth of her cloak.

Sleep came slowly, fitfully, and several more times did I wake up panting, terrified and confused as to where I'd ended up, but I did manage to get myself an hour or so by the end of it.

I did not wake myself up, unfortunately, but rather was I shook awake by a tired-looking guard, an expression of vague disgust on his snout, his nostrils wrinkled as though a vile smell dared permeate his nostrils, long ears angled back. “Up, creature," he grumbled, the sound reverberating by nature of his extended neck. He then stepped away to undo the bindings on my wrists.

“Cheers," I muttered reflexively, rubbing at my sore wrists and pushing down any of the harsher comments for fear of a physical reaction—I could no longer heal myself as I was once able to, and lindwurms, whilst smaller dragons, were dragons still and more than capable of eating humans whenever desperate.

The guard froze. “That's disturbing," he grumbled, shaking his head. “Humans shouldn't talk. I curse the wretch that created you." With that said, he took from Cerys' bed a fresh change of clothing. They were finer cloth, red like the princess' but not quite the right size. The trousers were black and loose, and there were no shoes.

I held a hand up when the guard attempted to try and remove my rags, his long talons scraping against my skin. “Just... just let me do this myself. I'm not a complete idiot."

He grumbled and slithered a few feet away, looking anywhere besides me. “Is there a lavatory I can get changed in? This is kind of weird."

“Just hurry up; the princess will have my throat if her pet isn't dressed in time."

I frowned, irritation bubbling up. “I'm not her pet."

“Stop talking, creature."

"Why? Does it make you uncomfortable!?" I snapped back, unable to contain myself despite my best efforts. “That I'm not some animal and am instead an actual person with thoughts of my own?"

I thought myself a clever man and an even-toned thinker, but recently my mind had begun to unravel.

He didn't answer my question, lips curling in distaste, tail-tip flicking anxiously.

I dressed myself quickly and then stood there, arms crossed, waiting for the guard to say or do something. “Does the princess find amusement in dressing up her pet!?" My anger was bleeding through, but I simply didn't care. “Will she enjoy this?"

He had the gall to smile, fangs peeking over. “Probably," he said.

I huffed and went to respond, only for him to attach the handle of my chain to his tail and begin slithering. He opened the door, led me out, locked it, and began the route back through the tunnels. I tried to memorise the routes and familiar items, but it was all much the same, and I was tired and hungry.

All aside from the tapestry, which once again drew my attention.

Instead, I tried my best to learn something about my captors, specifically, the way they moved. Initially, I thought them to be legged serpents, but in truth they felt more like earth drakes whose hindlegs had been removed, as opposed to natural-born snakes.

They seemed artificial, almost.

I noticed, at last, some form of weakness—they were poor at turning quickly.

“Focus," the snake ahead of me snarled, tugging the chain once again, long tail swishing behind him as he pulled me forward through the corridors, muscular body undulating languidly. The collar, despite being a suspiciously perfect fit, still seemed to dig into all sides of my neck at once, as if it were designed to inflict pain and not simply remove magic.

After a final turn, we exited the deep tunnels and returned to the grand hall that I first spotted the other regal serpents in. It was a banquet hall; my exhausted mind supplied me, wide and long, with the dark ceiling supported by massive stone pillars, rough and cracked yet still undeniably stable. Low, red-tinged light emanated from bronze braziers hung on the sloping walls, casting flickering shadows across the ground. The walls were painted, I realised, depicting not just lindwurms but each member of the dragon family.

Archons: gold-eyed and endlessly graceful, both winged and legged—the greatest of the three. Lindwurms: untrustworthy and cruel, yet the most intelligent. Lastly, the earthen drakes: foolish, brutal beings, yet physically the strongest of them all.

Of course, only the lindwurm portion had been touched up, leaving the others to dull and crack. Spiteful creatures indeed, I thought sourly, but nonetheless I respected their intelligence—they seemed the only dragon race to live in civilised conditions and not simple hives.

The hall was full of the snakes, forcing my guard to push his way through them. Long stone tables, low to the ground and set with no regard for human comfort, were heavy with food—great haunches of meat, fish, lesser snakes, and some other strange creatures I didn't immediately recognize. Each piece was seared with spices and topped with odd, spiky fruits whose flesh ranged from dark blue to bruised purple.

Wooden mugs full of deep golden liquid made my stomach quench.

It made me realise I hadn't eaten nor drunk in nearly two days. I'd planned to visit a town near the natural energy surge and so hadn't brought any food or currency with me. Nor had I drunk anything. My stomach rumbled shamefully, and I ignored the watering of my mouth.

“You've got to eat eventually, don't you?"

…I can go another day.

Water was a serious issue, but with regenerative magic I could...

Damn it.

I knew I had to ask for it, beg for it if need be.

It's a necessary sacrifice.

I could go days without food, but not without water.

At the head of the largest of the tables were what I felt were the royals of the kingdom—Cerys was on the left, her sister on the right, and a larger, blue-scaled serpent at the head. He looked bored, almost as if all of the fantastic food and admittedly interesting conversations were of no interest to him. Along the sides of the two sisters were smaller ones that bore passing resemblances to them—cousins, I assumed, as I was brought closer to them.

Cerys' eyes brightened at my appearance, seeming genuinely joyous for a passing moment. “My lady," said the guard as he removed the collar from his tail and passed it over to her, who promptly attached it to a prong on the underside of the table. She leaned closer, not at all bothered by the unusual looks she was getting from her family.

“Good to see you in such fine apparel, pet," she purred. “Father," she said, turning to the king. “What do you think of my find? Isn't he fine-looking?"

The largest of the dragons looked up, dull eyes settling on me with the kind of distant look a lord might give a stray dog wandering through his court. “A human, Cerys?" He grumbled tiredly. “Surely you don't expect me to find it... noteworthy?"

Her jaw tightened, the only sign of frustration before she forced herself to smile. “This one is special, father. He's a mage—a powerful one, or he was before I properly subdued him!"

Her father rolled his eyes, talons tapping against the stone surface of the table. “Of course he was, dear."

I opened my mouth to speak, to shout at them that I wasn't some exotic pet for their princess to parade around, but the very moment I forced words into my throat, a burning shock from the collar forced my mouth shut. I tried again, only for the searing pain to clamp my teeth together again. I looked to Cerys, whose amused, narrowed eyes confirmed my fear.

W-Where's the device!? I gripped the metal bangle. Templar collars could indeed silence mages, stopping incantations and rituals, but I hadn't even seen her reach for anything.

Some of the other snakes murmured, casting glances that ranged from mild interest to that same, tired apathy their king seemed to have. It stung more than I'd expected—I was reduced to a spectacle that the majority couldn't be bothered to even care about. The only one of them that seemed to care was the little creature that had tried to intervene the previous day—Cerys' sister, I recalled.

I locked eyes with her, trying to convey my fear, and for a moment it felt like she'd intervene, but then, with a swift glare from her sister, she was silenced. “Don't be rude, Cerys," said the king, spotting the look. The rose-red lindwurm's snout wrinkled in anger, but still she said nothing.

“Betrys?" He said, referring to the smaller dragon. “What do you think of your sister's recent acquisition? Is it indeed a fine creature, or just another mouth to feed until she grows tired of it... like all of the other trinkets she's accumulated?"

Betrys looked at me, eyes almost watering. “He looks so scared a-and sad."

I looked to the king, trying to convey something, but he just shrugged. “That is merely how most of them look, dear; they're an odd species—good for menial work, but not much else, I fear. Why your sister has one, I have no idea."

“B-But…" She looked over at me, lips parting several times before letting out a breath and nodding. “Yes, father, he is a fine creature, but I fear sister will tire of him before long. Or... it will escape."

I didn't blame her for backing down, but that didn't mean her reluctance to help didn't hurt more than I thought it would have. Still, her tone at the end did give me a feeling of fleeting hope.

Cerys' voice pulled my attention back to her. “He will not, father—he will behave," she said, and I caught a gleam of possessiveness in her sharp eyes. “After all, he's mine."

Another lindwurm—a lanky male with faded burgundy scales and long, twisting scars along his jaw—raised a brow muscle. “Yours, princess?" His voice had a taunting, daring edge to it as he turned his sly gaze to me. “It's quite a fine specimen, indeed. If you're willing to share, I could help with the disciplining."

A deep, rumbling growl sounded from Cerys' throat, her entire posture shifting as her dark lips curled, revealing sharp, gleaming fangs. The change was so swift, so blindingly fierce that even her father looked mildly surprised.

“Don't you dare touch him," she hissed, voice low and threatening, her tail slamming down against the stone flooring, claws digging into the table. “He's mine. Anyone who lays a claw on him will answer to me."

The male held up his paws in mock surrender, his smirk faltering yet still very much present, clearly not expecting the reaction. “Territorial, are we, cousin?" He drawled. “Well, it's all yours, then. No need to get so defensive over a simple pet."

Cerys bared her sharp teeth, eyes narrowed until the other lindwurm turned away, backing down and rescinding his attempt at a claim. When she was certain he'd lost interest, she turned her gaze back to me, her eyes blazing with a fierce possessiveness.

It was as if she'd just staked a claim.

I wanted to recoil, to escape, but the steady hum of magic kept me rooted, reminding me of whom I belonged to, along with the strength I had lost.

Her father observed the clash with an amused glint in his eye, though outwardly his expression remained disinterested. “You're going to get bored of him soon enough, Cerys," he remarked. “Your taste changes as often as the wind whips."

Cerys didn't respond; her eyes locked onto mine, boring into me. “Maybe," she replied with a faint smile, “but for now, he's exactly what I need."

Her sister shifted slightly, her gaze flicking to me once again, and this time, I caught the sorrow in her expression. She bit her lip, glancing between me and her sister, before her father's voice drew her attention away.

“Betrys," he said, almost softly. “Eat your food or you'll stay that small forever." His youngest daughter nodded and returned to gently nibbling her fish.

Satisfied that her sister had said nothing and that a challenger had been defeated, Cerys turned back to me, her smile returning as she looked me over, her possessive gaze sweeping across me as if ensuring I still belonged to her alone. She reached out, letting her claws trace the edge of the collar, her voice a soft, mocking murmur that only I could hear.

“Remember this, pet," she whispered. “You're mine. No one else will touch you. I promise."

The rest of her family exchanged glances, already dismissing me, uninterested in whatever spectacle Cerys had been hoping to create. One by one they turned away, each muttering their parting words with varying degrees of boredom.

“Enjoy your new pet, Cerys," her father said, a slight curl of amusement in his tone. “And make sure it knows its place."

“Oh, don't worry, Father," she replied, her voice smooth as silk. “He knows."

Satisfaction radiated from her like blazing heat, and with a harsh yank, she pulled me down into the seat beside her. I sat without resistance, not willing to endure any more pain for the time being. She let go with a cheerful hum before gesturing widely to the wide array of food. “An impressive banquet, no?" She asked, voice bright and theatrical. “A feast fit for a princess and her pet."

I couldn't help the glare that crossed my face, anger bubbling up from my chest. I opened my mouth to snap at her, to say something vile, but the collar bit into my throat like a vice, and the shock kept me silent. I coughed, frustration tightening in my chest.

Cerys leaned in closer, her voice hot against my ear. I lent away, but she just gripped my shoulder, holding me in place. “Ah, but you don't get to eat, do you?" She purred. “Let's not forget the rude comments you woke me up to say last night." Gently, she bit the edge of my ear. I recoiled, fixing her with a nasty look. She leaned back in, not at all bothered by my reaction, to whisper, “You should be grateful I even brought you here."

I pulled back further, grimacing yet unable to word just how much I despised her. She returned her attention to the food, carefully selecting an especially delicious-looking piece of roasted meat and holding it tantalisingly close to my mouth, but just barely out of reach. “Doesn't this smell delicious?" Her eyes sparkled with mischief. “But you're not getting any until you learn some manners." She took a hearty bite, the juices dripping down the smooth scales of her sleek maw.

I felt my stomach clench painfully, hunger gnawing at me as I watched her savour the morsel. My gaze shifted to the lavish spread on the table—glossy fruits, pastries dusted with powdered sugar, and succulent cuts of meat all beckoning me closer. It was a feast I could only have dreamt about.

“If you're very, very good," Cerys drawled, popping a juicy segment of violet fruit between her teeth, “perhaps I'll let you try a taste. If you impress me, of course." Her voice was laced with mock sweetness, and the fruit's dark juice trailed down her maw, tauntingly slow.

All I could do was watch as she revelled in my suffering, a cruel smile stretching across her scaly lips. “Are you going to let your pet eat, dear? Or are you just going to play with it?" Said the king; his voice was deep and dismissive, clearly uninterested in my plight but curious about his daughter's actions nonetheless.

Cerys shot him a harsh glare but quickly masked it with a playful smile. “J-Just a bit of training, father," she said. “He needs to understand his place." Her voice dripped with false sweetness.

Betrys watched from her place beside their father, her expression a mix of concern and fury. She bit her lips, fangs digging into the thin, smooth scales. She glanced between me and Cerys, as though she wished to say something at last but was unable to muster the courage to do so. I met her gaze, hoping for even a flicker of understanding, but she swiftly looked down, eyes darting away.

Cerys noticed this and turned sharply to her. “Betrys," she snapped, her tone suddenly harsh. “Stay out of this. He is mine, not yours. Don't concern yourself with him."

“Cerys…" Said their father, voice low and full of warning.

Betrys, despite his support, flinched, shrinking back in her seat, but there was still a flicker of defiance in her eyes. She seemed so very close to breaking, to speaking up, to finally doing something other than sitting there, looking scared.

Cerys returned her attention to me, her demeanour shifting back to playful dominance. “So, are you going to behave, or do I need to remind you of your place again?" She dangled another piece of meat in my place, the tantalising aroma of perfectly cooked meat and foreign spices driving my hunger higher.

I clenched my fists, the collar pulsing in time with my heavy heartbeat—a warning not to lash, and one I at last obeyed. I nodded slightly, hoping to convey my willingness to play along, if only to appease her and my raging hunger.

She studied me for a moment longer, then dropped the meat back onto the table with a self-satisfied grin. “Good boy. For now, however, you'll have to wait and watch. And remember, if you want a treat later, I expect obedience." Despite saying this, she did in fact pass me a small tankard of water. I gulped it down greedily, ignoring the paw softly stroking my right shoulder. “Thirsty puppy, aren't you!"

Disgust surged, and I considered putting the mug down, but thirst stirred painfully within me, and I continued, ignoring her watching as I gulped.

The meal continued, laughter and conversation swirling enviably around me as I sat helpless, hunger gnawing at my insides. I wanted to scream, to shout, to lash out at Cerys and tell her just how humiliating it all was. But I was forced to remain silent, tethered to her whims both mentally and physically.

I wouldn't let it define me, I thought defiantly to myself. I would find a way to reclaim my voice, to break free from her grasp. And when that day came, Cerys would regret every moment she'd spent treating me like her plaything.

She would die first, that I knew for a **fact.**

After an eternity of sitting there in silence, watching the nobles indulge in their feast, Cerys finally turned away from the table, prosthetic clinking as she dragged her body away from the table, making sure to attach my lead to the end of her tail. “Well, that was delightful," she declared, tone laced with amusement. “Now, let's see what we can do about your hunger then."

My stomach rumbled at the thought of food, but the fleeting hope was quickly snuffed by the realisation that I was still under her thumb. She flicked her long tail, choking me for a moment until I stepped into line behind her. The princess led me away from the dining hall, and I followed, a mix of reluctance and hunger urging me onwards.

I glanced back to the table, catching Betrys' eyes. She held the contact, concern etched into her soft, smooth features, but I couldn't risk a word, not unless I suddenly enjoyed the feeling of my neck being scorched.

She pulled down the hallways, and once again, I focused my attention on the route we took: downward dip, left, right, white-haired baby tapestry, right again, left, painting, left, and then... The last was lost on me, much to my shame.

With a frown, I glanced to Cerys, who, I at last realised, was navigating through the use of her nose—lindwurms were dragons, I recalled as if it were suddenly news and not a basic fact of life...

We arrived back at Cerys' chambers—a spare room, I assumed, based on it not being nearly as lavish as I'd expect from a princess, although that didn't explain her sleeping in it. The heavy door closed behind us with a resounding thud, the guards once again leaving us for the time being. Cerys turned, leaning against the door with a playful gleam in her eyes and a soft sway of her tail. “Now," she said, voice soft and sultry, “about that food?"

I felt my breath quicken, anticipation and fear mixing as I waited for her to continue. She slithered closer, rose-red scales shimmering in the dim light her crystals supplied as she closed the distance in a few jerky sways. “You want to eat, don't you?" She said smoothly, feigning innocence as she tilted her snout, awaiting my reaction.

I swallowed my pride and nodded weakly, stomach rumbling shamefully. The thought of food was tantalising, but the way she looked at me… it would not come without a hefty price.

“Good!" She replied eagerly, her smile widening. “But, of course, there's a catch. I think it's time you learned that your behaviour will have consequences. You woke me up last night to say some rude things, but... since I'm generous, I'm willing to give you a second chance."

I furrowed my brown, trying to wonder what it was she could possibly want out of me—she said she wouldn't trade sex for food, and she had to have known I would not accept such a deal unless I was on the verge of death. I had no magic to offer, nor services to barter. All I had was my dignity, and even that was slowly cracking.

“First," she said, sitting down on the edge of her bed, her tone shifting to something more commanding. “I want you to entertain me; tell me stories about your life, about your world. I want to hear what makes you... you." She crossed her flesh-and-blood arm over her chest, her head tilted slightly.

I opened my mouth to voice my frustration, but the collar flared again, silencing me with a flash of agony. I felt the heat rising in my cheeks as I looked up from my seat on the floor, feeling like a child caught in a lie.

Cerys chuckled, a light, mocking sound. “You'll have to earn the right to speak again. For now, you'll communicate with your actions. Show me your charm, and maybe I'll consider letting you have something other than scraps."

Actions?

I glared at her, annoyance bubbling over, but she merely sat there, unfazed.

“Think of it like a game," she explained. “You're my pet now, and pets should entertain their owners. Just come up with some clever way to charm me, and I might even let you have your own little feast. But... disappoint me? No food for poor little you."

I scowled but took a deep breath, trying to reign in my mounting anger. I can play along, I told myself, at least for the time being. If telling her a quick story or engaging in her petty games would earn me some food, I could live with it. It would give me time to come up with a plan and gauge her wits.

I crossed my arms and took a moment to gather my thoughts. There had to be something in my past, I thought quietly to myself, some tale or exploit that might catch her interest. I was, however, also aware that whatever I shared with her could be used against me. She enjoyed wielding power in every sense of the word, so I had to ensure not to give her any more than she already had.

“While you think," Cerys said, lifting a small wooden platter of food up. “I'll get you something small to nibble on." She gestured to the tray, which was filled with fruits and small, salted pastries. I felt my mouth water at the sight. “But remember, make it interesting. Nothing comes for free."

It was my chance to play her game, but I couldn't let her take complete control. If I was to survive this, I needed to stay one step ahead, even in this twisted contest of wills.

While Cerys busied herself with the food, I focused on the memories I could share—stories that would keep her entertained and maybe even earn me some respect. My childhood, the struggles I faced, the magic I'd wielded before being trapped here... There had to be something in there that could serve as a bargaining chip.

Cerys returned with a small platter, her expression teasing as she placed it before me. “Now, let's see if you can make this worth my while," she said, her tone playful but with an edge that warned me not to disappoint.

I stared at the small platter Cerys had set before me, my stomach growling and my hands twitching to reach out. But I knew better than to grab it immediately. I took a steadying breath and prepared to let my story speak without words.

Just do it... Do it, eat, and regain strength.

The collar can't be broken while dying of starvation.

First, I planted my feet and began moving one foot in front of the other, mimicking a determined march, my eyes focused as though on an unseen horizon. Cerys raised an eyebrow, intrigued, leaning in slightly. I pointed to myself, then held up my fingers to show several others beside me, gesturing to a band of companions with broad sweeps of my hand.

Next, I lifted my hand and traced intricate shapes in the air as if conjuring a spell. I drew invisible symbols with practiced precision, letting my hand sweep fluidly to show the purpose of our journey: to cleanse a forest. With every gesture, I wove magic from thin air, my hands alive with an imagined energy. Cerys watched intently; her interest kindled as my performance unfolded.

I shifted my expression to one of grave concern, furrowing my brow and shaking my head slowly. Then, I widened my eyes in mock fear, taking a step back as if confronting something massive. I held up my arms, indicating an enormous figure, and then pointed to the floor to convey the troll's towering size. Cerys's attention sharpened as I staggered back, glancing up at the invisible giant, my shoulders tensed as if preparing for a deadly clash.

I raised my fists, my stance low as though ready to dodge, and swung at the air, each movement punctuated with exaggerated effort. I swayed and shifted my weight, dodging blows from my imagined enemy, then let out a breath, pausing to take in the suspense of the battle. With a look of grim determination, I threw one final “strike," driving my fist forward and landing an imaginary hit. I held my head high, a triumphant glint in my eyes.

Cerys's eyes gleamed with excitement, her lips curling into an amused smile. Encouraged, I continued, motioning to the side as if rallying my companions, signalling them to unite with me. I spread my hands, as if pulling energy from them, and made a fierce, focused expression, showing our coordination as we brought down the troll together.

Finally, I enacted the creature's fall, my hands imitating a heavy, lumbering descent. I stumbled back as if the troll's weight had shaken the ground, then dropped to one knee beside my imaginary foe, panting, chest heaving as if exhausted from the battle. After a beat, I straightened and pointed to the fallen troll, then to myself, raising my fists high in victory.

Cerys clapped her claws together, a delighted grin spreading across her face. “Bravo!" she exclaimed, sounding genuinely enthused. “You're quite the entertainer, aren't you? A human who fights, what... giants? Who knew?"

Pride flared briefly at her reaction, but it quickly soured as she flicked her tail, and that familiar mocking glint returned to her eyes. “But don't be too proud," she added with a smirk. “It will take much more than that to earn a real meal."

Still, I was granted a handful of small figs, which I greedily devoured, savouring the juice and feeling of a partially full stomach. By the last of the fruit, she had climbed off the bed and was sitting opposite from me, watching me as I ate.

The last bite of fig barely touched my hunger, leaving a hollow ache that gnawed at me. Cerys watched me, her satisfaction only growing as she leaned back, savouring my need.

“You know," she murmured, voice rich with false sweetness, “I could be tempted to give you more. But you'd have to put in a bit more of an effort. Stories are fun—and that was fun—but I need something a bit more... physical."

Every nerve in my body braced as I waited for her demand. She let the moment stretch, then raised a clawed finger to her cheek, tapping it lightly. “How about a small kiss, right here?" she suggested, her voice deceptively light.

I swallowed down my frustration, trying to focus on the thought of food. A kiss on the cheek? I thought, realising I could manage it. Just a quick touch, and I'd be done with it. I nodded and leaned in, determined to make this fast and to earn myself something more than a few small fruits.

But just as my lips brushed against the smooth scales of her cheek, she suddenly turned, catching me completely off guard as her sharp claws dug into my shoulders.

I barely had a second to react before her mouth crashed against mine, rough and unyielding. I jerked back, hands pressing hard against her smooth, scaled chest, but her claws clamped down on my shoulders. Her left arm—the cold, unfeeling metal of her prosthetic—pressed into my collarbone, its chill sinking into my skin.

Her lips crushed against mine, forceful and intent, with a flicker of satisfaction in her eyes that made my skin crawl. Before I could twist away, her forked tongue forced past my clenched lips, flicking against mine in a taunting, invasive tease that turned my stomach.

Disgust twisted in my gut. I threw all my strength into pushing her back, desperate to break free, but the cold, mechanical weight of her prosthetic arm pinned me down. She shoved me onto my back, pressing me into the cold stone floor.

My heart lurched as her weight bore down on me, the unyielding grip of metal locking me in place. A sickening thought flashed through my mind—Is she going to take things further? The idea made my breath hitch, fear clawing up my throat.

I pushed against her chest with everything I had, but she only leaned closer, savouring my helplessness. Her tongue moved in slow, possessive strokes, her breath mingling hotly with mine, the cloying sweetness from the feast filling my senses—a reminder of the food she withheld. Her metal claws raked down my shoulder, locking me in place with bruising force, leaving me fully at her mercy.

A low, pleased sound escaped her, her cheeks flushing faintly as she watched my futile struggles. For just a moment, I saw something like hesitation in her expression, as if even she was surprised by her own boldness. She quickly masked it, the metal grip at my neck tightening, a brutal reminder of who held control. My fists clenched in anger, but I was trapped beneath her weight and her cold, unyielding arm.

Finally, rage flared hot enough to burn through the terror, and I shoved her back with all I had. She stumbled, eyes flashing in surprise before her smirk returned, though colour lingered on her cheeks. She glanced away for an instant, a hint of embarrassment crossing her face before she recovered, tilting her head with a smug, knowing smile.

“Oh? Such spirit," she teased, her flesh-and-blood claws wiping mock dust from her prosthetic. “I can respect that."

I held my ground, chest heaving as I swallowed down the fury burning inside me. Her claws had left faint, painful indentations in my shoulders, a reminder of how easily she'd forced this humiliation and how easily she could force others, but for some reason hadn't.

She laughed softly and dropped a small piece of cooked meat at my feet, like tossing a treat to an animal. “There," she said, her voice dripping with condescension. “A reward for that… spirited response. Next time, you might want to relax. It would be easier that way."

Every part of me rebelled against picking up the meal, but the hunger was stronger. I forced myself to bend down, feeling the heat of anger flush my face, and took a bite.

“See?" She purred, turning back to her seat with a smug flick of her tail. “That wasn't so hard, was it?"

Her cheeks were still tinged faintly with colour, her breathing a touch faster, as if that moment had unsettled her, too. I kept my expression stony, trying to mask the disgust lingering in my mouth. I would play along only as long as I needed, enduring until I could find an escape.

Fucking liar!

“L—" I tried to speak, and the pain surged into my neck, burning like fire. I shook my head and forced my mouth open, determination and hatred fuelling me. “Liar," I spat quickly, pointing at her with a shaking finger.

She looked at me, her mouth opening in surprise before her lips pulled into an indignant frown. “And just how did I lie?" she demanded, crossing her arms, the flush still vivid across her cheeks.

I tapped my cheek, then swept my hand aside in a clear no.

Her mouth opened again, only to close as she exhaled slowly, her gaze shifting slightly. “I…" She reached for another piece of food, then paused. “I didn't lie," she said, her tone becoming more deliberate, more confident. “I said I'd give you food if you gave me a peck on the cheek—which you did. So, I gave you a small piece." Her gaze dropped for a moment, then flicked back up to meet mine. “The part at the end was... a bonus for your performance."

Her lips pressed into a thin line, her eyes darkening. But this wasn't over—not by a long shot.

“You should really listen properly, Teran."

All of the confidence I'd gained by managing that word and diverting her arrogance vanished in an instant. The raw shock on my face was more than I could have conveyed verbally. Her subtle frown was replaced with a wide, cruel grin, sharp fangs peeking over her dark, thin lips. “Don't look so surprised, pet." She raised a talon up to the side of my collar and scraped the sharp digit across the metal. “Your name is embroidered right… here…"