

Parents, friends, and loved ones stood up to applaud as the graduation ceremony came to a close, and students, in a sea of shimmering burgundy robes, tossed their graduation caps into the sky. A few raucous families blasted air horns.

Next to me, Cresta winced and turned to the adjacent family, whose father was blowing a horn in each hand. She made a quick swipe faster than the eye could see, destroying the plastic cones of both horns and silencing them. The guy holding them was none the wiser and scratched his head over their sudden destruction.

"I don't understand," Irapesha began, seated holding a plastic flag with Tamara's drawn face on it. "Why do humans celebrate academia to such an extent? Shouldn't this be a matter of fact? When I graduated from the Scholar's University in Granieda, my professors told me to screw off."

"You know, I'm sure every teacher at school on Earth thinks the same way. They just don't say it aloud. Besides, this is fun. Look how happy they are!" I pointed to Tamara, whose beaming smile was made brighter by the countless friends that mobbed her for photos.

"Woohoo! Tamara!" Ivory screamed. However, peeved that their voice was drowned out by the crowds, they leapt into Cresta's lap and transformed into a megaphone.

Cresta happily obliged, shouting into the Ivory-turned megaphone with a deafening volume that made people squeeze their ears shut. I snatched Ivory away when the glares started mounting.

As people began to leave the bleachers, they formed little pockets across the track field, outer campus, and parking lot to be with their graduated students. We also left to find our budding scholar and discovered her weaving between a forest of people's legs. As soon as Tamara saw us, she trotted over to tackle Cresta, Irapesha, and Ivory with hugs.

"I'm going to be a high school student!" Tamara exclaimed.

"Four years of that and it's going to be college. Maybe there will be netherfolk scholarships by then," I said, snapping pictures of them until Tamara threw herself into me.

The smile softened into a somber one.

"I wish Ange was here," Tamara mumbled dejectedly.

"Actually, thanks to modern technology... she is. Say hi, Tamara!" I faced my phone screen at Tamara, who immediately brightened up and started bouncing on her feet.

"I saw everything. Congratulations on your graduation, dear!" Ange shouted, voice a little staticky from possibly thousands of other phones in this congested school.

"This is like our magic transponder crystals. These phones have such capabilities?" Irapesha asked curiously as the other two leaned down to either sides of Tamara's shoulders to see.

It would have been heartbreaking for Tamara and Ange not to have shared this moment. Although Ange was confined to staying inside the dormitory, settling on facetime to bring her to the graduation seems to be working out.

"Now that you've graduated, we're ready to grant you one wish. Within reason, obviously. Is there anything you want?" I asked Tamara.

"Hmm... I want to eat giant parfaits all day! The ones full of fruits!" Tamara said, already drooling from the side of her mouth.

The others echoed Tamara's desire to fill their stomach.

"It's decided," I said. "Alright, Ange. We'll—"

"Ange is frozen! What happened?" Tamara gasped.

The image of Ange was stuck, her mouth slightly open and looking like she was in the middle of speaking when it happened. For some reason, everyone began to panic.

"Is the dorm under attack?" Cresta asked.

"Maybe the Black Guards had a secret member we didn't know about," Irapesha suggested.

I rolled my eyes. "Okay, guys. Calm down. It's just lag. Or the call disconnected."

"That supposed to happen?" Ivory asked.

"Well... It's just another feature of modern technology..."

Everyone came out of the parfait place satisfied except Tamara, who put away so much that she got a stomach ache and Cresta had to carry her.

"Uuu... My stomach is growling so much, I'm starting to hear things..." Tamara groaned.

"We did warn you that four deluxe-sized parfaits was too much," I said.

"But they were so tasty..." She sighed happily and rested her head on Cresta's shoulders.

Once we got home, Reggie was waiting in the parking lot. I sent my tenants inside first. Irapesha carried Tamara, exhausted from waking up early for the graduation ceremony and suffering from a parfait food coma, up to her room.

A few minutes later, Ange emerged from the dormitory to join us outside.

"Any good news?" Ange asked.

"First of all, congratulations on being the first caretaker to send a netherfolk to school and have one graduate. Because of you, we're receiving requests from other dorms about enrolling their tenants into schools, too. You're really pioneering it." Reggie patted me hard on the back.

"Less to do with me. Tamara's the one who braved through it," I said, recalling the journey it took for her.

"Regarding Ange's house arrest, unfortunately Grace still isn't budging. The good news? Professor Markel woke up. Doctors are keeping visits strictly for family members for now. Old fart is too hardy to go down yet." He chuckled.

Thank god the professor was okay. Despite some of our differences in the past, he had always looked out for mine and my tenants' interests. Sometimes going as far as cutting corners.

"I'm happy Professor Markel is doing well, but couldn't you have sent us an email or text if that's all you had to say?" Ange asked.

"No, actually. I'm here to propose a plan. Magic on Earth is fine; there are plenty of netherfolks whose magic we didn't take away. It's just that after your little stunt at Tamara's school, people are cautious. Grace is all numbers. What I want to do is show her that it can be more useful than dangerous," Reggie said.

"And the plan involves..." I squinted at him.

He checked his watch. "In about half an hour, Grace will be going on a date. Lemme tell you, she has the worst tastes in guys. I want Ange to work a little succubus magic on him."

"This feels like a trap. Like you're trying to bait Ange into using magic so you can deport her"

Ange and I folded our arms, searching his carefree demeanor for answers.

"I know how it looks." Reggie threw both hands up as though to repel our oppressive glares. "At the end of the day, our shared duties need both of us to accept that Ange isn't a threat. Unless we change the status quo, deportation is the only outcome I see."

"I'm willing to take the risk," Ange said to me with a sigh.

"If shit hits the fan, I'm moving to Weyera with you." I shrugged.

We hopped into Reggie's van and drove back out into the city. Thankfully, the windows were heavily tinted. Police would have descended upon us had it not been marked as a government vehicle on the license plate. It did make me wonder— If we were trying to be inconspicuous, shouldn't we have gone in a regular car instead?

Reggie pulled into a crowded plaza of expensive restaurants, filled to the brim today with families who came for their kid's graduation. Summer was here, too. Many of the youths were hitting up the city in force.

He parked behind an high-end Italian restaurant, normally where employees parked. In fact, one man slipped out back with a cigarette in his mouth, took one look at us, then walked elsewhere for his smoke break.

Once the man was out of sight, Reggie had us exit the car and come around the back. He threw open the van doors to reveal a whole surveillance setup like right out of a movie.

"Come on. Get in here before someone sees us," Reggie urged.

We entered as Reggie booted up the computers. One screen displayed cameras inside the restaurant, currently packed full of patrons. Servers hurried from one table to the next to take and deliver orders.

I sucked in a deep breath and said, "It feels like we're doing something illegal."

"Only if I get found out." Reggie grinned.

"What exactly do you want me to do?" Ange asked.

Reggie pointed to the screen and zoomed in on two people at a table. Grace and a man. The guy was handsome, had a smile that could tug young women's heartstrings, and a beautiful head of hair that wasn't balding anytime soon. He switched something on, and we were able to hear everything going on inside down to metal clinks of silverware.

"Two domestic violence charges pending and history of animal abuse. Still lives with his mother at 32. Somehow, he managed to make it pretty high on the corporate banking ladder."

"Okay, but... with how high rent is in the state, I don't blame him for living with family," I said in defense of him.

"Fine. Fair point. The worst part of him is that he invests in NFTs. Like, come on. Man, just open a stock portfolio. What I want you to do, Ange, is to work a little magic to make him more truthful. No more, no less than that," Reggie explained.

"You have one problem." Ange gestured to the armlet that's binding her magic.

Reggie procured a jagged crystal in the shape of a pen with multiple gold bandings on it. He waved it over the armlet, causing the gaudy piece of jewelry to loosen enough to slip off. Ange caught it in panic and stared at him in horror.

"Chill," he said. "It won't send a signal. For all they know, I'm with you guys doing maintenance on it or something."

"Okay, one more problem... Ange has to be next to the guy to use her magic on him. You're not going to have her walk into a crowded public place, are you?" I asked.

"Nope. We'll draw him out." Reggie swiveled around to another computer and upon turning on the screen, showed the perspective from within another car. Like a dashcam.

"Oh, god... You're really having us do illegal shit out here... Reggie, are you in love with Grace?"

"No chance." Reggie gagged, stunning both me and Ange. "Nah. Grace is like a dumb older sister— don't tell her I said that— you just want to see succeed in life. Hell, she spent most of her 20s fighting a war when most people her age are partying and drinking. Help me out here. I want her to find someone that can make her happy, not sink her savings into some digital scam."

Ange and I traded glances, but the decision was ultimately up to her. She agreed, and I supported her resolve.

To begin with the plan, Ange was made to wear a large hoodie to cover her physical succubus features. We nodded to Reggie that she was ready. He pressed a button on the computer, and a car alarm blared in the distance.

Many people inside the restaurant only gave a single glance out the window to the commotion and returned to their food. Grace's date had a look of concern, then excused himself to check it out. That was Ange's cue. She exited the van to intercept him.

Reggie clacked away at the keyboard and put us on a camera from an elevation in this parking lot. We watched with bated breath as Ange leaned against a car and pretending to mind her own business, waved a hand to presumably cast a spell as he passed her, and then quickly left to return to us.

"His mind remains his own, but he can only be truthful from now on," Ange said, hopping back inside.

"Nice job. Now we watch," Reggie said.

When the guy got back to Grace, their conversation picked up again right away.

"So, *what are your plans after this?*" Grace asked.

"*I was hoping to take you back to my place to have sex,*" he said.

Reggie and I covered our mouths in laughter as Grace returned an appalled look.

"*I... appreciate the honesty, but we're maybe a few more dates before that happens.*" She frowned, getting noticeably more uncomfortable.

"My goodness... Now I'm feeling terrible for doing that," Ange said.

"*Look, I'm shelling out for this date. The least you can do is put out. This is almost \$300 I could have put into my Bored Chimp collection. They're going to be worth millions in a few years. You're going to leave a future millionaire like me hanging?*" her date asked.

We saw the gears turning in Grace's head from mounting frustration. She didn't say another word. Instead, she called for the check, paid it herself, and left Mr. NFT alone with the next entree.

"Did this go as planned?" I asked the mastermind.

"I, uh... No. It did not. The guy was trash, but now I also feel terrible for ruining her date." Reggie sighed, then snapped back to his seat with eyes glued to the screen. "Wait a minute... Where did she go? Wasn't Grace just outside the restaurant?"

Someone rapped their knuckles against the van's backdoor. We knew right away we were busted.

Reggie swallowed hard, then opened the door to Grace, arms folded and in no mood for jokes. Her eyes noted Ange first, to me, and rested angrily on her peer.

"Maybe it's all those years I worked in intelligence, but something told me you had something to do with. Is someone going to give me an explanation?" Grace asked.

"We only had Ange put the lasso of truth on him, I swear! Thought I'd hit two birds with one stone, getting that guy off your back and convincing you that her magic's got a lot of application. Look, can you at least let these two off the hook? It was all me. They were against it from the start," Reggie insisted to her.

"First of all," she began, "I don't need you to investigate my dates. Akira, Ange... This is about being trapped in the dormitory, right?"

We nodded slowly, hoping she wouldn't also notice that the armlet had been taken off her.

Grace pulled out her phone and said, "Well, I've been waiting for Professor Markel to come to consciousness and make a decision on our behalf. I already explained to him everything that happened. He gave me the okay to give Ange her freedom back."

"Wait... really?" I stammered.

"Hold on, he told you but not me? I thought we're a team!" Reggie exclaimed.

"Well, blockhead... You're the one who's always taking shortcuts. The professor is obviously going to trust me more," she teased.

"Akira, that means I can go to the beach with you and everyone. Then to Japan to visit your family!" Ange squeezed my hand in smiles.

Which meant I would be able to see Ange in a swimsuit. There was a god out there. As much as I wanted to jump for joy, I reigned it in to not look any more weirder in front of my handlers.

"As for you..." Grace glared at Reggie with murderous intent.

"H-How about I introduce you to one of my friends. He's into Call of Duty, so your favorite kind of toxicity is there. Let's stay calm and talk about this!" Reggie backed away further into the van as Grace stormed after him.