

Ange descended from the stairs just as Instructor Elaine was leaving in her car. There was a hint of disappointment in the succubus' eyes, seeing the schoolteacher leave without getting the chance to hit on her.

While we were speaking on the front porch, I had told Ange and Cresta to keep Tamara company upstairs. Poor girl picked up Rakka and raced straight to her room as soon as we got back. She refused to let anyone in, even me and Ange, until Cresta got off work to convince her.

When I texted Cresta what happened, she sprinted home faster than I could climb a flight of stairs. Too bad she lost her Rocket Burger hat along the way.

"I suppose settling on seeing her plump posterior shall suffice," Ange remarked, landing next to me.

"You could at last take this a little more seriously." I sighed.

"If I did, the matter would have already been resolved. Tamara's bullies would believe themselves to be dogs and act as such for the rest of their lives," she said.

Realizing that Ange wasn't joking in the slightest, I could only vow to be more careful about what I said going forward. We were lucky Professor Markel didn't call me about the incident at Tamara's school. She had, without a shadow of a doubt, pulled some sort of mind control on the faculty to coax the answer out of them.

Judging from past incidents, there was no way in hell that the professor wasn't already aware. That we weren't punished yet was proof that he had been sticking his neck out for us. But the more times Ange committed these infractions, the greater we risked being punished.

"Your heart is in the right place, Ange. Your methods, however, not so much. From what Elaine told me, this was a usual case of bullying," I explained.

"What about this is usual?" Ange fired back. "Are you telling me your kind actively engages in tormenting children?"

"Well, shit. How am I supposed to answer this?" I asked myself and her both. There was no satisfactory answer here, because the only answer was yes. The human world was just as cruel if not worse even without super strength and spells being flung around.

The last thing I wanted to tell Ange and Cresta was that Tamara's classmates pulled on her hair and horns, called her names, and insulted her appearance. I dreaded to think what they might do. As her guardian and caretaker, my only option was to lodge a complaint to the principal and report to the professor. Instructor Elaine had already promised to bring this up to the school board's attention at the end of our talk.

"Ange," Ines called from the top of the stairs. "Tamara wants to take a nap, but she's having trouble falling asleep. If it isn't too much to ask, could you work some magic to soothe her?"

The succubus looked at me for permission. "It is minor enough magic that no one will notice, not even the professor."

I nodded to give her the okay.

As Ange flew upstairs, she was quickly replaced by Ines who also had a thing or two to say.

"Hope you won't mind me eavesdropping, but I think your girlfriend's got a serious case of projecting," Ines said, lowering her voice.

"How do you mean?" I asked.

Ines glanced over her shoulder to make sure they were alone. "I think she sees the same demons that killed Tamara's parents in the bullies. Her overreaction in how to deal with them is a little excessive because... Well, I think she wants to be punished for her role in their deaths."

"But how does— Man, I don't know if I can handle a psych lesson right now."

We moved our conversation to the kitchen so I could pour myself a glass of water. When I offered her the same, Ines declined and pulled a bottle of wine from the cabinet I only just now learned was there. She met my judging gaze regarding her suspect beverage of choice.

"You can't shame me, kid. I'm an adult," the college graduate said.

"Okay, adult-college-student-psychologist. Putting Ange aside for now, what can I do to help Tamara?" I asked, myself at a loss. "Because at this rate, she might not like school anymore."

"Same thing you and I did back in school. Grit your teeth, pester the faculty about it, and make friends who care about you instead," she answered.

"You're a therapist when I don't ask for advice, but a grandpa with relic-aged wisdom when I do. What's with this dichotomy?"

Ines grabbed the wine bottle and raised her glass to toast me as she left the kitchen. I remained, brewing within my own thoughts and experiences to figure out the best solution. Every thread, however, came back to leaving it in Elaine's hands.

What the hell was I going to do or say to make the situation any better? I used to be a student who went through the same shit myself and never got an answer on the right way to deal with it. No one ever figured it out. It was why bullying was still a thing no matter the generation. We just grew up.

Later at night, no one came down for dinner. I brought a hefty plate of mixed fruits up to her room and found Tamara sitting upright on the bed and against the wall, fast asleep between Cresta and Ange, who were also snoozing. A blob of blue slime rested atop Tamara's head. Two slits opened to a pair of eyes the second I walked in.

I sat the plate down on the desk, and Remmy reformed to my side to pick up a piece of fruit to eat.

"You've been in here, too?" I quietly asked her.

Remmy nodded. "I didn't want Tamara to feel lonely."

As far as I could tell, Tamara was in good hands. Talking with her could wait until tomorrow.

Ange strongly insisted that she come drop off Tamara, but after enough convincing I managed to talk her out of it. I drove Cresta to work first, so that Tamara and I would be the only two in the car. It came as no surprise that her excitement didn't match the same energy as the previous morning.

The two of us sat in the car as students continued to pass by on the sidewalk. Cars filled the parking lot to the brim with vehicles of parents and faculty alike. I watched as Tamara pressed her fingers together in the seat behind me, searching for the courage in those small hands to step out.

"You know, Tamara, when I was still going to school, I got made fun of for being a little weird. Even my parents teased me about always spending my free time playing games or reading comics."

"Did it ever stop? The being made fun of part, I mean?" Tamara asked.

"Nope. I just graduated away from all that," I answered. "But let me teach you a fun way to deal with all that annoying stuff— say something to make fun of me. Anything!"

She thought long and hard for an insult, but someone as pacifistic and kind as her would find that a difficult thing to do. The look on her face, an expression of a person who knew the pain of being insulted and hurt, didn't want another to feel the same way.

"It's a free pass. Just call me weird," I urged.

"Nn... Akira, you're... weird?" Tamara mumbled.

I took a deep breath and screamed at the top of my lungs, "I'M SORRY FOR BEING A WEIRD!"

People outside the van gave us weird looks, but the windows were too tinted for them to see anyway. Tamara's eyes widened and mouth hung open in astonishment, stunned by my outburst. She only giggled at first, then fell into an uncontrollable laughing fit, and because it was so contagious, I joined in the laughter as well.

"Wahhh! That surprised me so much, I didn't know what to think. My heart almost jumped up to my throat!" Tamara wiped the tears from the corner of her eyes, still giggly from my over-enthusiastic apology.

"Tamara, if someone ever calls you names or makes fun of anything about you, do just that and pretend like nothing happened. I know you don't like fighting, but if someone ever tries to hurt you, then you have my express permission to headbutt them with your horns. I'll take responsibility," I assured her.

The sound of her seatbelt unbuckled. I thought she was about to finally face the world again, but she hugged me from behind instead. My only regret was that the car seat was in the way.

"Thanks," she said warmly, then clenched her fists to psych herself up. "I'm going to make friends at school if it's the last thing I do!"

"Atta girl!"

Tamara threw the car door open and jumped out.

She screamed with all her might, "GOOOOOD MOOORRRNNIIIIINNNGGGG!"

Then raced toward the entrance where Instructor Elaine and two school security guards waited. Instead greeting them normally, she tackled her schoolteacher through the door which was fortunately open as they tumbled through.

"Well... if Tamara didn't make an impression on her first day, she certainly did this time."