

Alicia had never slept better in her life, neither as a Human nor as a Dryad. After making a nest of blankets, and dragging Katrina inside of it, she'd done her best to avoid falling asleep instantly, but had failed miserably. As excited as she was to share her first real night with Kat, she was equally as exhausted from all the training she'd done with Tabitha.

When the sun started rising, Alicia's body attempted to rise as well. This happened no matter what Alicia tried, but thankfully it was easy enough to get back to sleep. While she was awake, however, she took the time to appreciate her current situation; completely wrapped around an unconscious, and breathtakingly gorgeous, Vampire. Alicia had no idea how heavy a sleeper Kat was, but she decided to take a risk and adjust her position slightly. Apart from a small grumble, Kat didn't seem to mind.

Alicia cuddled even closer, resting her head in the soft spot just under Kat's shoulder and closed her eyes. She felt Kat's chest rising and falling as she slowly breathed, enjoying the calm tranquility of the moment.

She also noticed that, unlike most other partners she'd had before, they'd seemingly cuddled all night. In the past, mostly with Aiya, Alicia had gotten used to cuddling up at the start of the night, then calling it quits once it got too toasty to continue. For some reason, cuddling with Kat wasn't overheating her like she was used to. In fact, Kat's skin was refreshingly cool, as if she were the cold side of the pillow.

Wait, she's a Vampire, which means she's undead! No wonder she's not producing any body heat. Although, if she's dead, why is she still breathing? I should ask her when she wakes up...

After a soft giggle, Alicia closed her eyes to try and get back to sleep. Of all the possible benefits and detriments of being undead, she would have never guessed "perfect cuddle partner" would have made the list. She squeezed her girlfriend just a little bit harder and fell back asleep.

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Before long, it was time for Alicia to properly wake up. She could tell from her branches it was close to noon, and there was a limit to how late she could sleep in while the sun was shining.

As much as it pained her, she pulled herself away from Katrina, though not before giving her a quick kiss on the cheek. The Vampire stirred slightly, then quietly mumbled "Morning Alicia..."

"It's still noon, sleepyhead, go back to sleep," Alicia said.

Katrina mumbled something unintelligible, nodded, and turned to her side. It took every ounce of restraint Alicia had not to squee with excitement over how cute the Vampire was.

She merged with her Heart Tree, but before departing for her morning drink, she took a moment to examine how she felt. Katrina had mentioned the possibility that sleeping outside her Heart

Tree might be bad for her, and the idea was worrying. At the moment, thankfully, Alicia felt well-rested, but she decided to continue monitoring herself each morning to keep an eye on things.

Outside, the sun was shining brightly, and her spirits were high. She stretched her arms over her head, her aching bones creaking and cracking, and immediately felt the bitter reminders of her training yesterday.

For hours, Tabitha had drilled her on the basics of close quarters combat; how to position her feet, how to hold a weapon, things like that. To her credit, the Foxgirl had been very patient with her, and had definitely been pulling her punches. The more Alicia had learned about fighting, the more she recognized just how fluid and precise Tabitha's movements were. When Alicia had started with ORC, her basic training had mentioned that a person's base ten attributes, commonly referred to as their Ten, always reflected who they were before the Change, but there were certain limitations. The common understanding, partially thanks to a study done on various Olympic athletes, was that peak Human performance capped out at an Attribute level of 20, at least before the Change. With that in mind, Alicia was absolutely sure that some of Tabitha's Ten were above that; she was simply too fast.

As the Dryad walked further away from her house, she texted Tabitha to give her a quick update.

Alicia: Morning! I just got up, so you're welcome to come over whenever you like. Kat will be asleep until dusk, obviously.

Tabitha responded with a simple thumbs up emoji.

When Alicia reached her river, she eagerly sank her feet into the water and started drinking. She leaned back, closed her eyes, and happily soaked up the sun.

Feeling the water flowing around her legs, she thought back to her conversation with Elias. They'd spent hours talking about how to alter the topography of the neighborhood, and it occurred to Alicia that she should probably put together some kind of a map so they could start planning.

I should have Katrina fly up and take a picture! That way we'd have an up-to-date image we can use for planning, and I can send it to Elias.

After taking in all the sunlight and water she needed, which took several hours, Alicia got up and started her day in earnest. She wanted to start preparing for Elias' visit, which meant returning to her previous task of ripping up all the gravel and concrete in the area.

Over the last several years, she'd managed to disrupt much of the stone herself by using the local plant life. Whenever a particular remnant of civilization grew weak enough, and she was able to break it into smaller pieces, she would move them to a spot outside the neighborhood that she'd turned into a makeshift dumping site. It was far enough away to be spared the

ravages of her nature reclamation project, and close enough to a road that she was able to schedule regular pickups. Of course, given her perception of time, and relatively weak stature, the pickups only happened two or three times a year.

Most of the street in front of her house had been completely stripped of asphalt, which Alicia had greatly appreciated during last night's training. The path from her home to the river was also similarly bare, though not to the same degree. It was on that path, in a space that had previously been a three-way intersection, that Alicia and Elias were planning on setting up a small pond.

To start, Alicia connected with all the plants that she already knew were present. She examined how they were growing, if they had found any lingering bits of concrete, and what the soil in the area was like. After not finding any surprises, she summoned a plethora of creeping charlie, complete with lush purple flowers, to mark the edge of the pond. She had to extend the radius a few times, as she was measuring purely with her eyes, but eventually she had an area that seemed appropriate for a mermaid.

Next, she sat in the middle of the designated area and once again reached out to the nearby plants. One by one, she snuffed out the various weeds, roots, and vines that had taken up residence underground. After another hour had passed, Elias' plot of land was free of living plants, which would make excavating much easier.

Alicia considered pausing here, wondering if Elias would have Class Features that would make moving all the dirt easier. However, the more she thought about it, the less she wanted to use the System. She thought about the Key Dungeon, about everything Tabitha had taught her last night. Delving wasn't just about clever use of Features, it was a grueling test of strength, wit, and endurance. If she had a shovel, clearing out this dirt would be a great way to keep conditioning herself.

She walked home, rummaged through the gardening equipment she hadn't touched in years, and grabbed a shovel.

During her training last night, while Katrina had been practicing her new spells, Tabitha had explained that people could still train and condition themselves like they did before the Change. With enough time and effort, every one of a person's Ten could be improved without the aid of magic or Leveling up. While the System made quite a few physical feats of prowess much easier, there was still plenty of space for hard work and determination.

Of course, Tabitha had brought it up as an excuse to keep smacking Alicia with a stick, but it was a helpful lesson all the same. Plus, getting used to stick smacks would hopefully make it easier to withstand the assaults of Dungeon monsters.

Alicia spent the rest of the day digging. She was amazed at how much more energy she had during the day, and she now understood just how helpful her Solar Regeneration Feature was. She regretted that the Dungeon was underground, and that they were delving at night, but she knew Kat's help was worth far more than consistent regeneration.

When her phone went off shortly before sunset, she planted her shovel in the ground, crawled out of her hole, and decided to take a break.

Tabitha: omw!

Alicia: Great! See you soon!

With a smile on her face, Alicia looked over everything she'd accomplished today. Although it was nowhere near completion, she'd made a sizable dent in the ground, and she was proud of her work. She took a quick picture, sending it to Elias.

Alicia: Got your timeshare started!

Elias: XD

Elias: Sorry to miss the groundbreaking ceremony lol

Alicia: How was your day? Lake doing alright?

Elias: Nothing crazy. It was pretty windy, so the lake was a little aggressive. I'm a bit winded, but otherwise business as usual. I'm just trying to get ahead on my work so it's easier to take time off.

Alicia: No monsters or anything? I feel like I remember hearing about monsters in the Lake

Elias: Yeah, people think there's a Dungeon out in the Great Lakes somewhere, but normally that stuff doesn't wander too close to shore. When it does, the aquatic Guilds are pretty quick on the draw

Alicia: Well, I'm glad I've got someone to keep me up to date on current events

Elias: Hey I'm just calling it like I see it

Alicia: It's a shame you're so busy, you sound really tired

Elias: The trick is finding ways to streamline my work

After several minutes of giggling to herself while she continued texting Elias, Alicia started wondering where Tabitha was. The Foxgirl had texted a while ago, and Alicia was fairly sure she should have arrived already. She quickly checked the time, then looked away from her phone to see if Tabitha had arrived yet.

When Alicia turned around, she found herself face to face with the snow-white fur of their Mage Knight. Alicia yelled in surprise, dropping her phone before falling backwards into the pit.

"Tabitha! Why are you sneaking up on me like that?!" Alicia yelled, huffing as she crawled to her feet.

The Foxgirl was laughing hysterically and had to wipe away a tear before she finally responded. "Oh wow, that was priceless. You should have seen the look on your face! It's nothing personal, Alicia, I promise. I wanted to test how aware you are of your surroundings. You failed, by the way, but I think falling into a mysterious pit is punishment enough. What is this thing, anyways? You girls setting up some mud wrestling? Heck, if you are, can I set up a camera for my fans?"

Tabitha held out a paw, which Alicia grabbed before hopping out of the pit. "We're doing no such thing! For your information, Kat and I are taking things slow. This is something I'm working on for Elias."

"Who's that? Friend of yours?"

Alicia paused for a moment, running over everything that had happened last night. "Shoot, that's right, we never told you. Elias is a registered delver, one of the ones we contacted, but he can't help us delve because he's a Mermaid. However, we've been talking, and I mentioned that I've got a river nearby, so he suggested setting up a small pond so he can come help us out. He's a Geomancer, so he's got some healing abilities he can use to help us recover in between delves."

"Hey, that's a good idea! The more the merrier I always say. Granted, that normally has a different context in my line of work." There was a brief pause, during which Alicia couldn't stop herself from picturing what Tabitha might have meant. It must have been obvious, as she caught Tabitha smirking at her moments later. "Is it cool that I talk about work? I know I can be a bit prickly at times, but I'm not trying to make things too awkward for you."

"No, it's okay! I've just been pretty sheltered since the Change. Before Katrina ran into me, I hadn't seen another person in years. I work for ORC, though, so I'm caught up on all the new laws and everything."

Tabitha tapped a claw on her chin for a moment, lost in thought, before speaking up again. "I guess that makes sense. I've never worked with ORC, personally. I was a camgirl even before the Change, and my Race is pretty normal, all things considered. I didn't need to change anything about my life, other than investing in some hardcore robot vacuums. Biggest difficulty for me was the huge influx in new cam workers after sex work was legalized."

"Is camming all that different from before the Change? It's still just, like, playing with yourself on camera, right?" Alicia asked. She'd watched her fair share of cam shows before the Change, but she didn't know much about the industry.

"It's harder to find a selling point. Before, so long as you were either hot or had a distinctive look, you'd find people that wanted to watch you. Now? There are tons of Races literally designed to be as sexy as possible, so competition is really stiff. I almost quit a few times because, like, how am I supposed to compete with Succubi that have to constantly host orgies just to survive?"

"What did you do about it?"

“Well, this had been true since long before the Change, but often sex work is only about sex like, half the time. The rest of the time people just want company, they want intimacy they’re not getting elsewhere. I’ve known escorts that get paid top dollar not to sleep with people, but just hold them and play with their hair. I try to lean into what makes me different; I don’t have incredibly high Charisma, and it won’t increase by leveling up. However, I’ve got crazy muscle definition from my high Agility, and that’s why I get a lot of people asking me to do parkour streams. Other than that, it’s mostly about connecting with your audience, giving them someone they can goof off with regularly.”

“Tabitha, that’s so beautiful! I had no idea cam work could be so touching!”

The Foxgirl laughed to herself. “I mean, there is also a lot of touching. I did get crazy lucky in one aspect; I was camming when the Change hit.”

“Wait, like, you caught it on camera?”

“Oh yeah. Full HD, hour long show. I start as a Human, just doing my thing, and halfway through I turn into this. I was already turned on from all the masturbating, but my entire body changing like that? I came so hard, and now it’s easily my best-selling video. I’ll give you a discount if you want to see it sometime, you know.”

This time, Alicia was completely aware of how heavily she was blushing. “I-I’ll think about it!”

With one last, hearty laugh, Tabitha slapped Alicia on the back before jumping in the pit. “You’ve got to make yourself less fun to tease, Cherry Blossom. I’ve got half a mind to ask if you two are poly, but I have a feeling you haven’t had that conversation yet. Why don’t you join me in the ring and we’ll review everything we went over yesterday.”

Alicia nodded, eager to change the conversation, and joined Tabitha in their impromptu fighting ring. She grew a pair of staves again, throwing one to the Mage Knight, and they started practicing.

Although still sore, Alicia could feel her muscle memory kicking in. Several small movements that had given her trouble yesterday now felt easier, and she was more confidently able to keep up with Tabitha’s attacks. She did her best to block with her staff when possible, but she had also gotten better at managing her barriers. Whenever Tabitha outmaneuvered or overpowered her, she was able to grow tiny barriers from her body to absorb the strike.

As Tabitha had explained yesterday, the barriers worked best as a second line of defense, or as a way to protect distant teammates. However, while Alicia still lost HP when her barriers were hit, they had several large advantages over blocking the attack with her actual body.

Most importantly, her barriers had no critical weak points. A barrier that shatters from a blunt strike, while still costing HP, has no other downsides. That same attack, however, might easily break a bone and cripple Alicia for weeks. Similarly, bladed weapons might be able to inflict

poison or slice open vital arteries, and the barriers could prevent that as well. They were the perfect tools to absorb any number of potential injuries.

Alicia's mind was racing as they continued sparring. She had to mind her own footwork, stay balanced, hold her staff correctly, but also watch Tabitha's movements and look for patterns. Whenever she fell behind, and Tabitha slipped past her defenses, she had to summon a barrier to absorb a strike on her thigh or waist.

They were in the middle of a particularly lengthy exchange of blocks and parries when something unusual happened; Alicia heard a voice in her head that, oddly enough, sounded like Katrina.

"Hey Alicia, could you come home? I'd like to test something."

In her confusion, Alicia lost focus on her fight with Tabitha. Before she could snap back to her senses, the Foxgirl had spun behind her and struck at her feet, knocking her to the ground. She tried to gasp in pain, but landing flat on her back had knocked the wind out of her.

"Gotcha!" Tabitha cheered. "You were doing pretty good until the end there, what happened?"

"Owwwww, that really hurt!" Alicia groaned. "And I'm not completely sure, but I think Katrina just like, sent me a psychic message? She wants me to come home."

The Foxgirl reached down, offering a hand to help Alicia up. "Alright, well I won't count that against you. Ordinarily I'd say you should be ready for anything, but we're still new at this and, if anything, it's her fault for testing new spells without warning us. C'mon, let's go see what Fangs is up to!"

Alicia jumped back to her feet, then decided to continue using her staff as a walking stick as they returned home. She was growing strangely fond of having a staff, both as a weapon and for general use, and hoped she would remember to bring one with the next time she traveled away from her Heart Tree. Once she made it home, she opened the front door and called out for Katrina.

"Kat, you up? I got your message!" she said.

"Oh! That's amazing!" As Kat responded, Alicia realized the Vampire was still upstairs. After a moment, she appeared at the top of the stairs and started walking down. "What did it sound like?"

"Um, like a voice in my head? I don't know if there's another way to describe it." The girls kissed quickly before Alicia continued. "Of course, it distracted me and let Tabitha throw me to the ground, so I didn't get a lot of time to examine it."

“Alicia, I’m so sorry! I didn’t know you two were practicing!” Katrina leaned in, hugging Alicia tight before checking for injuries. “You’re not hurt too bad, are you? Did you get lots of time in the sun today?”

“I’m fine, Kat, really. I had plenty of time earlier to let my Regeneration do its thing.”

“Man, you’re lucky,” Tabitha said, “I’d kill for some Regeneration. Plus, normally that Feature requires a bunch of food to power itself, but all you need to do is sunbathe? Talk about winning the Change lottery.”

“I mean, all Races have their downsides; I’ll never be able to travel, for one thing,” Alicia said.

“I’m pretty sure Vampires get some kind of latent Regeneration type thing since we’re undead, but I won’t bore you with the details of how much I hate my Race.” Katrina squeezed Alicia’s hand as they talked, and thankfully Tabitha didn’t ask for any elaboration.

“Yeah yeah, I know. Everyone gets something different. I really shouldn’t complain, two of my Ten are in the twenties, and with a few Spells, I can make it four,” Tabitha said.

“I’m sorry, back up. You can get FOUR of your Ten above twenty?!” Katrina said, clearly shocked.

“I mean, yeah. Beastkin always get crazy Attribute levels, I thought you of all people would have known that.”

“Okay, but that many Attributes above twenty is insane! I think I understand why your fans pay you to tackle parkour courses, I’ll bet that’s incredibly impressive.”

Tabitha smirked, then winked quickly at Katrina. “Oh, is someone interested in watching my shows? Maybe I’ll let you choose my outfit next time; my most popular ones are a blue bikini with way too many straps, and a gold bikini I wore for my collab with TheSexiestSlayer.”

Katrina’s eyes went wide, and her jaw dropped as Tabitha finished talking. “Hold up, you did a show with TheSexiestSlayer? Seriously?!”

Alicia, feeling a little out of her element, pulled Katrina closer and asked, “Should I know who that is?”

“She’s probably one of the most famous streamers in the world! She’s a Greater Succubus with some obscenely high Charisma score, it’s like forty-something, but she’s also an incredibly skilled gamer and cosplay creator. Personally, I think she’s one of the reasons that camming became as commonly accepted as it is today, once sex work became legal, obviously.”

“So, she’s like... super pretty?” Alicia asked, a little nervous.

Thankfully, Katrina found the subtext in the question. “Well, yeah, but that’s not really the point. Sure, the System gave her a ridiculous Charisma score, but honestly, I never really watched her

shows for that. She's worked with delvers in the past, and it's pretty significant that she became as well-known as she did. It was the first time a sex worker got, like, super famous."

"If she's ever in town again, I'll see if I can set up a meet and greet. If you're interested, that is," Tabitha teased.

"How about we cross that bridge when we get to it," Katrina said. "Besides, it might never happen, and we've got a Dungeon to tackle. You two need to get back to your sparring, and I've got more spells I need to create."

"Right, your spells!" Alicia said excitedly. "What was the one you used on me?"

"I haven't named it yet, but if it's working as intended, it just lets me send a short message to whoever I want. It's not the most common spell, but I've seen enough people get similar magic to understand how it works. The closer someone is, the less mana is required. On the flip side, with enough mana, I could theoretically reach anyone, anywhere in the world."

Katrina jumped back up the stairs, quickly grabbed her guitar, and rejoined the group as they prepared to return to their training.

Once back outside, after quickly showing Katrina the pit she'd started for Elias, Alicia returned to her practice. At this point, while she still put everything she had into improving, the novelty of learning to fight had started to wear thin. During one of their short breaks, she thought about the timeframe they were working with, about how they only had a few weeks to beat the Dungeon. They were going to need all the time they could get, which meant delving and fight training were going to be a part of her daily life for the foreseeable future.

Thankfully, even as practice became more routine, it was obvious that Tabitha was a great person. Had Alicia not known about her cam work, she still would have guessed that the Foxgirl was great with people. It seemed effortless for her to read Alicia's movement, switch up methods when Alicia was growing tired of a specific move, and offer breaks when needed.

Alicia, for her part, had begun wondering if her Dryad physiology might offer any unique benefits in combat. She began experimenting with her ability to control plants, trying to shift the terrain to her advantage and trip Tabitha up. While her control only extended so far, and she couldn't exactly summon vines to instantly trip Tabitha, she felt confident it was something worth exploring. She also remembered that she was able to grow roots from her own body, and had started rooting her feet to the ground whenever she wanted a stronger stance.

In the background, Katrina continued providing music for the training combatants as she iterated on her spells. The music wasn't quite as performative, she frequently stopped and restarted sections as she wrestled with her newly discovered magic, but it was beautiful to listen to nonetheless.

By the end of the night, Kat had cemented two new spells in her repertoire; a Scan and a quick, magical push that would hopefully keep enemies away from her. She practiced her scan on

Tabitha, with the Foxgirl's consent of course, and spent a solid minute marveling at her incredible Ten; she had 25 Agility and 21 Dexterity even before applying her own Attribute Boosting spells.

As excited as Alicia was to see Kat so excited about delving and exploring her magic, the Dryad began feeling a twinge of jealousy; this was the second time tonight that Kat had gushed about another girl.

She had a feeling Tabitha noticed something, as they ended training earlier than they had yesterday. The Foxgirl gave her a big hug, squeezing her tight and congratulating her on her hard work, then returned home to give them some space.

"Whew," Kat said as they walked inside, "what a night! You get a lot done with Tabitha? It seemed like you were making great progress, though admittedly I was spending a lot of time with my own practice. She seemed impressed, if nothing else."

"Um, yeah it went well," Alicia said quietly.

"Alicia? Hey, is everything alright?"

Alicia paused, not entirely sure how to voice her thoughts. She wanted to be open about what she was thinking, but it had been so long since she'd engaged with these kinds of social dynamics. "I-I'm not entirely sure how to phrase this, but... I guess I'm feeling a little self-conscious right now. It's really cute seeing you get excited about all this delving stuff, but seeing you rant and rave about that streamer, and then about Tabitha's Ten..."

There was a small moment of hesitation before Kat responded. Her eyes were unfocused, darting back and forth across nothing in particular, and Alicia suspected she was combing through her memories from the last few hours. "Shoot, Alicia, I... I didn't mean it like that, I promise. I'm thrilled to be with you, Alicia, I really am, and I'm sorry I made you feel that way." The two hugged tightly as Alicia buried her face in Kat's shirt.

"I'm sorry to bring it up, this is just all so new to me, and I guess I got a little used to having you all to myself. It's my first time dating post-Change, and everything is so different now," Alicia said. "I don't want to ruin our first week as a couple by getting all moody like this."

"Hey, don't say that." Kat moved closer, cupping the side of Alicia's face and tilting her head higher. Their eyes met before Kat spoke up again. "You're amazing, and I want to hear these things. Tell you what, how about we go sit in our floor bed, and you can share everything you're worried about. Honestly, isn't the start of a relationship the best time to do this?"

Alicia nodded quickly. "O-okay."

Once the girls were back in Alicia's bedroom, they sat on their massive pile of blankets and looked at each other. Katrina spoke first, gently grabbing Alicia's hands. "Tell me everything, Alicia. I want this to be the best relationship we've ever had."

"I don't know, I guess I'm just a little jealous. I was talking with Tabitha before you woke up, and she told me how camming actually got really difficult after sex work was legalized. About how hard it is to stand out against Succubi and all the other Races that get huge Charisma bonuses. When you got all excited about Tab and that Slayer person, I think maybe I was a little nervous that you'd rather be with someone like that. Someone with a crazy Ten that's super popular and stuff."

Katrina squeezed Alicia's hand tight, only speaking up when she knew Alicia had finished. "Y'know, I don't think it's come up much, but I'm a pretty introverted person. Yes, in recent years I shut myself off because of my Race, but even before the Change I wasn't very sociable. You want to know my favorite thing about us? I can be myself around you."

"Well, yeah, but maybe you could do that with Tabitha too," Alicia said, sniffing.

"Please, Tabitha flat out admitted she likes to push people's buttons. I don't want a relationship to be a challenge, I want it to be comfortable and supporting. Plus, dating someone famous sounds like it would be so much *work*. When you and I went to the Dungeon Camp, no one knew who we were, and I loved that."

Alicia didn't say anything at first, instead, turning away from Kat before leaning back into her lap. "I have heard that dating celebrities can be a challenge."

"Another thing? Once people get a high enough Charisma, it becomes supernaturally powerful. Like, you physically can't stop yourself from staring at them, and that honestly sounds really stressful."

"I sometimes have trouble not staring at you, Kat," Alicia admitted with a smirk.

"And I only have nineteen Charisma! Imagine someone with forty; how are you supposed to get anything done when you're living with someone whose very presence is practically a mind-altering drug? With how much the Change rewired my brain, I've had more than my fill of unnatural urges and desires, thank you." Katrina's hands settled on Alicia's shoulders before she continued. "I'm happy with you, Alicia. I'm not trying to change the topic away from your feelings, I'm sorry if it seemed like that. I think I'm just trying to say that a person's Ten isn't who they are. Someone with thirty Wisdom might not be kind, someone with thirty Charisma might not be empathetic. It's not a fluke that we're together, and I would choose you again in a heartbeat. Even if TheSexiestSlayer were here."

Alicia found herself giggling, and she pulled Kat's hands closer in a makeshift hug. "I never really thought of that, I guess."

Katrina leaned down, gently kissing Alicia before speaking up again. "Was there anything else?"

"Um, actually, this isn't something I was worried about, but since we're talking about the relationship... Tabitha asked me earlier if we're planning on being monogamous."

“Seriously?” Kat asked, and Alicia nodded in return. There was another pause before she continued. “That certainly sounds like her. I’ve always been monogamous in the past, but that was more from circumstance rather than personal choice. In theory, I’m not against it, but... I really don’t think this is the right time to make that decision. We only just got together, Alicia, and I want to focus on you. This is my first real, honest relationship since the Change, and I still don’t know who I am when I’m not alone. Because of you, I think I’m starting to figure that out, but it’s a process that needs time.”

The girls squeezed each other, and Alicia could hear the weight in everything Kat was saying. Before she responded, she took just as long to collect her thoughts. “I think you’re right. Like you said, I’m used to being alone too. It wouldn’t feel right to add someone else to the mix when we still don’t understand who we are as a couple.”

Kat squeezed Alicia tight. “How about, if Tab asks again, we just say we’re focused on us right now.”

“I like that.” Alicia sat up again, grabbing Kat’s face and eagerly kissing her. “Look at us, being a real couple and talking about feelings and relationship dynamics and stuff. Thanks for listening, Kat. I was kinda nervous to bring this all up, and I appreciate you taking it seriously.”

“Anything for you, Alicia. And, moving forward, I’ll try to be more mindful when I’m talking about delving stuff. Do you want to cuddle up and get some sleep?”

Alicia nodded quickly, then got off the bed to free up the blankets. After rearranging everything back to normal, the girls crawled under them and got back to cuddling. This time, rather than burying herself in Kat’s shoulder, Alicia was the little spoon for the night. Just like yesterday, the stress from all her sparring practice caught up with her pretty quickly, and she knew she would be in for another sore morning. With Katrina holding her, everything felt right, and she fell asleep within minutes.