Sable's Growth

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The Architecture, Book 5

Sable’s Growth

Chapter 1

The last cart rang against the rail and went still.

Sable Fong checked the far bench out of habit, two fingers to a leaf, then to the soil. Wet enough. The night crop did not need her. The campus greenhouse held its own weather: warm, close, a fine mist that never quite fell. Her shirt clung at the spine. Her hair had come loose at the nape and stuck there. She reached back, twisted it up again, and the motion pulled her blouse tight across her chest. She pretended not to notice.

Four in the morning. The printers in the break alcove would have her supper if she wanted it. The unit would be dry and quiet. She stood an extra minute anyway, which was a habit she had never named, and when she turned toward the wash station a woman was already there between the tomato rows, as if the aisle had been keeping her.

Not staff. Staff wore the same gray smocks. This woman had a pale shirt and dark trousers and no badge Sable could see. Black hair, smooth. A face that looked thirty and did not look tired. She smelled, faintly, of wet soil and cotton.

“Sable Fong,” the woman said. Not a question.

Sable’s hands found each other in front of her. “The house is closed. If you need a supervisor —”

“I don’t. My name is Lira. I’m a Liaison for the Architect.” She did not step closer. The mist beaded on her sleeve and did not seem to bother her. “You can finish washing up. I’m not here to take you off the floor.”

Sable’s pulse had already climbed into her throat. She knew the Architect the way everyone did: power, water, clinics, the food coming out of houses like this one. Liaisons were stories other people told. She had never filed anything. She had never asked.

“I didn’t request a meeting.”

“You didn’t request anything,” Lira said. “The Architect doesn’t wait for a form on this kind of placement. It watches how a woman finishes a shift. How long she stands at the misting benches after the carts are racked. What she does in a dry room when she thinks the walls are only walls.”

Heat moved low in Sable’s belly, sharp and unwelcome. She thought of her unit. The sheets. Her own hand. The pictures she did not keep because keeping them would have made them real.

“That’s private.”

“It was,” Lira said. “Then it was useful. Come off the floor with me. There’s a side room on the east corridor. Inventory only. You can walk out of it. If you walk out, I won’t follow you to your unit.”

Sable heard the last part as a door left open. She also heard that Lira already knew the unit existed. She wiped her palms on her trousers.

“Inventory of what.”

“Of you,” Lira said. “Whether the wish the Architect derived is the right crop. Greenhouse language will do for now. Annex. Bench. Inspection. Yield. A pot, if the trial takes. I can say all of that in the room with the door shut. Here you’ll only get damp.”

Sable looked once down the empty rows. The leaves shone. No one else was due until six. She heard herself say, “All right,” and hated how even it sounded.

They walked the east corridor without talking. Sable’s boots were too loud. Her nipples had drawn up in the cooler hall air and she kept her arms from folding over them. Lira opened a door that Sable had always assumed was storage.

It was not storage. Warm light. A scale. A padded table with a washable sheet. A chair. A cabinet. The air was humid on purpose, close to the house she had just left. Lira shut the door and the latch was ordinary.

“Boots first,” Lira said. “Then everything else. On the chair is fine. I’m going to look at you and I’m going to put my hands on you. I won’t bring you off. That isn’t what tonight is for.”

Sable sat because her knees had an opinion. She worked the laces. Her socks came away damp. She stood to take off the shirt and felt the air on her stomach and then on her breasts, and she did not look at Lira while the bra followed. Her trousers and underwear went last. She set the pile in one square stack, greenhouse habit, edges aligned.

Lira did not smile.

“On the scale.”

The plate was cool. Numbers she already knew, more or less. Lira read them aloud anyway, weight and a temperature taken at the temple with a small wand, and then she said, “Step off. Hands at your sides. Hair down, please.”

Sable pulled the knot free. Black hair fell heavy over her shoulders and stuck to the damp at her neck. She was twenty-one and small and used to being overlooked in clothes. Without them she felt exactly as tall as she was. Her breasts were full for her frame; she knew that from mirrors and from the way shirts buttoned. The cool had her nipples tight. There was already slick between her legs. She kept her feet apart because putting them together would have been

a comment.

Lira walked around her once, unhurried.

“Even color,” she said, as if Sable were a bench of starts. “Good heat in the face and the chest. You run warm when you’re seen. That’s useful. Chin up.”

Sable lifted her chin. Lira’s fingers, bare, gathered her hair and twisted it back up off the nape, not as a kindness, as access. A clip from the cabinet held it. The air found the back of her neck.

“Any tender who works you will want that clear,” Lira said. “The pot doesn’t want hair in the collar either. We’ll speak about the pot on the way to your unit. Table now. On your back. Knees up, feet on the sheet.”

The paper whispered. Sable stared at the ceiling tile and then at Lira’s throat because Lira’s eyes were worse. Lira pulled gloves from the cabinet. The snap was small and filthy in the quiet. Sable’s sex clenched around nothing.

“I’m going to name what I’m doing,” Lira said. “You may ask questions. You may tell me to stop. Stopping ends the inventory and you go home dressed. It does not punish you. It only means the Architect was wrong, which it rarely is.”

“What if I don’t want to stop,” Sable said, and then closed her mouth.

“Then we finish.” Lira’s gloved palm settled on Sable’s sternum, light, and stayed there until Sable’s breath had to lift it. “This is not a clinic and it isn’t a date. It’s a fit check. The Architect thinks you want to be cultivated. Kept warm. Inspected. Praised for how readily you open. Put back. In time, potted—stationary, nude, fed on a timer, tended on a schedule by women who will treat that as their work and their pleasure. If any part of that is theater you play in your head and would hate in a room, I need to know before anyone spends a house on you.”

Sable’s throat worked. “I didn’t tell anyone that.”

“I know.” The hand moved. Lira weighed Sable’s left breast in a gloved palm, then the right, thumbs brushing the nipples as if checking turgor. Sable’s back tried to arch and she made it stay. “You told the hours after shift. You told the way you linger in vapor. You told the dry apartment and the fact that you come with your other hand over your mouth. The Architect is very old-fashioned about evidence. It likes repetition.”

“That’s—” Sable’s voice frayed. Lira’s thumb made another slow pass. “That’s not fair.”

“It isn’t a contest.” Lira pinched, gently, enough to send a line of heat straight down. “Responsive here. Both sides. They’ll tighten in mist and under a mouth and when someone talks across you as if you aren’t invited to the sentence. Have you imagined that last one.”

Sable shut her eyes. “Yes.”

“Good. Eyes open, please. I need to see what the naming does.”

Sable looked. Lira’s face had not changed. The gloves shone a little. Lira left the breasts and laid a hand flat on Sable’s belly, below the navel, and waited until the muscle fluttered and settled.

“Any pain I should avoid.”

“No.”

“Last bleed.”

Sable gave the week. Lira nodded as if filing seed stock.

“Knees wider.”

The air of the room touched her. Sable knew she was wet without looking. She looked anyway, because Lira was looking, and the inner surfaces of her thighs were already glazed. Her clit felt swollen against itself. She had the sudden, ridiculous fear that Lira would say so in greenhouse words and that she would come from that alone.

Lira did not touch her there yet. She ran two gloved fingers along the crease of each thigh, up, not in, a grower checking a stem.

“Heat,” Lira said. “Color’s good. You’re already slick and I haven’t asked you for it. That’s yield without work. Tessa will like that. Ayla will want it on a chart. Nia will want to put her mouth on it and then put you back before you decide anything.”

Names. Sable’s hips twitched.

“Who.”

“Handlers. If you take the trial. Human women. Their wishes already face the same direction as yours. I’m Architect. I stay. You’ll meet them in order, not tonight.” Lira’s fingers parted Sable’s folds with the same care she might have used on a petal. “This is the inventory. In.”

Two fingers. Slow. Sable made a sound she did not authorize. She was open and obvious and the gloves were smooth and slightly tacky with her. Lira did not pump. She seated the fingers and turned them a degree, as if reading a label on the inside of her.

“There,” Lira said, quiet. “That’s how fast. I won’t hunt for the spot that finishes you. I only needed to know you take a hand without bracing. You take it. You’re soaking my glove to the palm. Say what you feel. Ordinary words.”

“Full,” Sable got out. “Wet. I—don’t stop yet.”

“I wasn’t going to.” A small adjustment, not kindness, thoroughness. “Clit is swollen. I’m going to put a thumb on it and not move. You will want me to move. You will not get that tonight.”

The thumb landed, broad and still, and Sable’s whole body tried to work against it. Lira’s other hand came to her hip and held her to the sheet.

“Stationary,” Lira said, and the word went through Sable like a second thumb. “That’s the pot, later. You don’t get to rock the bench to make the schedule hurry. You get tended when the schedule says. Can you hear yourself. You’re trying to fuck a still hand.”

“I know.” It came out raw. “Please don’t say pot again unless you mean it.”

Lira’s mouth almost moved. “I mean it. Thumb off.”

The loss was worse than the pressure. Sable clenched on the fingers that were still inside her and Lira let her, counting under her breath, then withdrew in one slow wet sound and stripped the gloves into a bin.

Sable lay with her knees up, shaking, empty, gleaming on the sheet. She did not close her legs. She waited to be told.

“Sit up. Scale again. I want the number after handling.”

Sable stood. Her thighs shone. The plate took her weight. Lira recorded it without comment and handed her a cloth.

“You may wipe. You may not finish in this room. Get dressed.”

Dressing was an insult. The underwear went on over a mess and became a mess. The bra scraped her nipples. The shirt was a lid. Sable’s fingers fumbled the buttons and Lira did not help. When Sable was a greenhouse tech again, damp at the seams, Lira held out a plain card.

An address. A time the following night. The words *trial bed*.

“That’s not the house and it isn’t the pot,” Lira said. “It’s a humid room on this campus. A bench. A bottle on a timer. I watch from the desk. You don’t touch yourself. In the morning I weigh you and open you and send you to your unit to sleep. If you hate being left, we stop. If you sleep badly in dry air afterward, that’s information.”

Sable took the card. It was slightly warm from Lira’s hand.

“And if I don’t hate it.”

“Then we continue the fit checks until the Architect is satisfied the crop and the house match. After that you don’t come back here at four in the morning. You stay.” Lira opened the door. “I’m riding with you. The car is already in the loop.”

The campus at that hour was a set of glass halls and wet pavement. Sable’s boots found the old rhythm and her body found none of it. Every step rubbed her. She kept the card in her fist.

The car was empty except for them. Soft light. No driver. Lira sat across from her as the doors sealed and the campus slid away, long low houses and the dark belts of growing fields the Architect ran without comment. Sable’s reflection in the window looked dressed and ordinary and flushed to the eyes.

Lira waited until the first turn.

“You asked me not to say pot unless I meant it,” she said. “I meant it. Listen now, because I won’t decorate it.”

Sable looked at her.

“If the trials confirm what the Architect already thinks, you are potted in the annex off the kitchen. Stationary. The pot is a vessel, fitted, warm. You don’t get up and walk to a sink. You don’t put a shirt on because a visitor came. Nutrition is a lozenge on a timer. Mist on a timer. Hands when a handler is scheduled—not when you request them. Tessa will inspect you and talk to me across your breasts and stop you when the schedule says stop. Ayla will weigh you before and after and write down how long you take when we allow a climax. Nia will wash you and feed you the lozenge and use her mouth and put you back. I keep the latch and the clock. You remain nude from the potting on. That isn’t a scene we play and then undo. It’s the condition of the crop.”

Sable’s mouth had gone dry. Between her legs she was worse than she had been on the table. She pressed her knees together and it did nothing except tell Lira she had done it.

“I still have a job,” Sable said, and heard the thinness.

“You have a job until the trials are done. After that the campus files you as reassigned. The unit is held thirty days and then released. None of that is a surprise we spring while you’re on your back. I’m telling you in a moving car with your clothes on so your body can tell the truth without a glove in it.”

Sable’s laugh was one breath. “It’s telling it.”

“I can see that.” Lira’s gaze dropped, unashamed, to the seam of Sable’s trousers and back up. “You’re sitting in your own slick. You have been since I said stationary. That is the evidence I wanted on this ride. Not a speech.”

“I don’t have a speech.”

“Good. Do you have a question.”

Sable had several and they were all the same question. She picked the practical one because she was still, somehow, a woman who checked soil.

“The pot. Can I—” She stopped. Started again. “Do I sleep in it.”

“Yes.”

“And if I need—” She cut herself off. The car hummed. Lira did not rescue her.

Sable said, very carefully, “A body makes waste.”

“The pot takes care of what a body produces,” Lira said. “Once. You don’t get a scene about it. You don’t get language about it. It isn’t the wish.”

Sable nodded, heat in her face that was not all shame. The wish was the other part. Being still. Being seen. Being cut from the day like a plant that had found its container.

“Who watches when no one is scheduled.”

“I do. The house does. You won’t be a secret in a cupboard. The annex is glass to the kitchen. If Tessa is drinking tea, she can see whether you have gone quiet or whether you are dripping onto the chips. That visibility is part of what you replay at night. I’m not going to pretend we don’t know that.”

Sable turned her face to the window and watched a belt of dark leaves pass. Her reflection’s mouth was open a little. She shut it.

“I can still walk out.”

“Tonight, yes. Tomorrow night after the trial bed, yes. After you have been to the house and been left and been dressed and sent to transit, yes. The Architect is patient with a crop that needs to feel the door. It is not patient with a woman who wants the pot and keeps a dry apartment out of manners.”

The car slowed on Sable’s street. Her building was the same as it had been at dusk. Lira did not get out.

“Card on the counter,” Lira said. “Eat something. You may use your own hand in your own bed. You may not use it as a substitute for the trial. If you come, come knowing a still thumb is waiting for you tomorrow and will not move.”

Sable’s fingers were wet on the card. She had not noticed putting them there.

“Lira.”

“Yes.”

“If the Architect is wrong.”

“Then you keep the job and the unit and the nights you already had, and I don’t come back.” Lira’s voice stayed level. “If it isn’t wrong, you should get used to hearing your name like a label on a pot. Fong. We’ll see how it takes.”

The door opened. Cooler air. Sable stepped down on legs that did not belong to a woman who had only been inventoried. She did not look back. The car sealed and

left, quiet, Architect- smooth.

The unit was dry the way she had known it would be. Printer light. A glass she had left by the sink. She set the card on the counter and stood in the middle of the floor with her coat still on and her underwear glued to her.

She stripped because the clothes had become a lie. In the mirror over the dresser she was the same Sable Fong the greenhouse schedule knew, hair still clipped up from Lira’s hands, nipples dark and tight, the insides of her thighs shining. She thought of a vessel. Of not stepping off it. Of a lozenge clicking on a timer while someone in a kitchen talked about her heat and her color and did not ask her to join.

She lay down on top of the sheet. Dry air on wet skin. Her own fingers were not gloves and were not still. She put them where Lira had been and did not let herself finish, not because she had been forbidden the way the side room had forbidden it, but because the unfinished feeling was the closest the apartment could come to a bench.

She slept late into the morning and woke already slick, the card visible from the bed, and the word pot sitting in her mouth like something she had sucked on all night and was not done with.

Sable’s Growth

Chapter 2

The card sat on the counter all day and made the unit look temporary.

Sable worked a short afternoon block in the west bays because the board had her on it, then found her name gone from the night roster without a note. No one on the floor asked why. The Architect did not leave holes in a harvest schedule; it simply closed them. She walked home in daylight she was not used to and showered in her own stall as if water could reset the inventory. It did not. The cloth rasped her nipples. When she dried between her legs she was already slick again, and she stopped, and she did not use her hand.

She put on clean clothes because the card had an address on a campus she still entered through a staff door. Underwear felt like an argument. She wore it anyway.

The room was not the inventory room. East edge of the food campus, past a corridor she had only used for soil bags. Lira opened the door before Sable knocked.

Same pale shirt. Same quiet. The air that came out was wet on purpose, warmer than the hall, close to the house Sable had left at four in the morning the day before.

“Boots off here,” Lira said. “Everything off here. The trial starts at the threshold. If you want the dry corridor instead, you keep the clothes and you go.”

Sable looked past her.

A narrow padded bench, pale, slightly concave, high enough that her feet would not want the floor. Over it, a slender arm ending in a small bottle. Warm light. One wall was glass. Beyond the glass, a desk, a chair, a slate, a cup. A woman could sit there and see every inch of the bench.

“I stay the night,” Sable said.

“You stay six hours unless you stand up. Standing up ends it. I will not strap you. The pot is later. Tonight I need to know whether you can be left.” Lira stepped aside. “Shirt.”

Sable pulled it over her head. The bra followed. She did not look down at her own breasts; she could feel them, tight already in the humid air. Trousers, socks, the underwear she had argued with herself about. She stacked them on the hook by the door, edges aligned, and the hall draft touched her bare back until Lira shut them in.

“Hair up.”

Sable twisted it. Lira did not do it for her this time. The clip was the same kind as the night before. The nape of her neck felt like a labeled surface.

“On the bench. On your back. Knees down, feet on the pad. You may turn on your side to sleep. You may not put a hand between your legs. You may not bring yourself off against the pad. If you need to stop, you stand and you say so. I will dress you and walk you out.”

Sable crossed the wet floor. The pad was warm. It took her weight and made a shallow suggestion of a vessel without being one. Her bare shoulders touched it. Her calves. The air was thick enough that her skin did not dry. She settled on her back because Lira was still watching, and because on her back she could be seen from the desk.

Lira came to the side of the bench and adjusted the bottle arm until the mouth of it hung a few inches above Sable’s chest.

“It will click twice. Once as a warning. Once when the lozenge drops. You lift your head and take it. It is food. It is not a treat I am giving you with my fingers. In the annex the timer will not care whether you are in the middle of being opened. Learn the sound.”

“Water?”

“Not from that bottle. The room is the water. You are already taking it in through the air. If your mouth gets dry, say so and I will bring a cup. I am not interested in watching you thirsty. I am interested in whether you stay when no one is touching you.”

Sable’s throat moved. “You’ll be at the desk.”

“Yes.”

“The whole time.”

“Yes. I have work. You are not the only crop the Architect is fitting this month. You are the one in this room.” Lira’s eyes traveled the length of her, not lingering as a lover would, lingering as a grower would. “You’re wet on the pad already and I have not put a hand on you. That can stay. It does not get helped.”

“I know.”

Lira walked around the glass instead of through it. A door on the far side of the desk clicked. She sat. She did not wave. She woke the slate and the light of it washed her face, and Sable was alone in the humid room with a wall that was not a wall.

The first minutes were the worst because they were still like being on the inventory table. Sable kept waiting for gloves. The bench held the shape of her back. Her nipples stayed tight. She could see, if she lifted her head, the dark line

of her own sex and the shine that had already marked the pad between her thighs. She put her head down.

Beyond the glass Lira wrote something. Turned a page on the slate. Drank. Did not look up every second. That was worse than being stared at. Sable was a task among tasks. The room breathed mist against her ribs.

She thought about standing. The floor was two feet away. Her clothes were on a hook. The corridor was dry and public and full of people who knew her as a woman who checked leaves. She did not stand.

The bottle clicked.

Sable flinched as if it had been a hand. A second click, and a pale lozenge dropped against her sternum and slid into the hollow there. She lifted her head, awkward, breasts shifting, and took it with her mouth. Neutral. Slightly sweet. It dissolved while she stared at the ceiling and felt ridiculous and tended at the same time.

Lira had looked up for that. Only that. Then the slate again.

Sable swallowed and let her head fall back. The pad under her ass was damp now. She kept her hands on her stomach, then on the edges of the bench, then on her stomach again. Her clit ached in a low, stupid way. She could have finished in a minute if she had been allowed to. She thought of Lira’s still thumb. She thought of the word stationary. She turned onto her side facing the glass, knees drawn, and that pressed her thighs together and made it worse, so she turned onto her back again.

Time went in pieces.

She slept without meaning to, a thin greenhouse doze, and woke because her own hip had slid and the air had touched wet skin that had been hidden. Lira was still at the desk. The cup had moved. Sable’s mouth was dry.

She almost spoke. Then she sat up on her elbows.

Lira’s eyes lifted.

Sable said, “Cup.”

Lira came through the connecting door with a cup and nothing else. She did not tell Sable to lie down first. She held the cup to Sable’s mouth as if Sable’s hands were already not the point. Water. Sable drank. A drop ran from the corner of her lip down her throat onto her breast. Lira watched it travel, then wiped it with two fingers, bare, and put the moisture back on Sable’s tongue without comment.

Sable’s mouth closed on the fingers before she could stop herself. Lira let her have them for one second and took them back.

“That was water,” Lira said. “Not a tender. Down.”

Sable lay down. Her pulse was in her clit. Lira’s fingers had tasted like water and skin.

“How long.”

“Three hours in. Three to go. You haven’t stood. You’re dripping through the pad. I can see it from the desk when you sleep with one knee fallen. Don’t close your legs to hide it. I already have the information.”

“I’m not hiding.”

“You’re thinking about it.” Lira set the empty cup on the floor beside the bench, out of Sable’s easy reach. “Tessa will talk while she works you. She will not ask whether you are embarrassed. Ayla will only want the number. Nia will mind the mess as part of washing you. None of them will give you a towel to spare your feelings. Practice now.”

She went back to the desk. The door clicked. The glass made her profile clean and far.

Sable left her knees fallen.

The second lozenge came while she was staring at Lira’s hands on the slate. She took it without sitting all the way up, head lifted, throat working, a small sound she did not mean to make. It was only food. It felt like being kept.

She did not sleep again. She watched condensation run the glass. She watched Lira stand once, stretch, look in at her fully, and sit. She counted her own breaths to keep her right hand from traveling the last four inches. The ache became a fact of the room, like the humidity. She imagined the bench higher, the sides closer, no option of the floor. The imagining made her hips try to lift. She flattened them.

Near the end she was shaking for no reason that would have looked like cold. The air was warm. Her skin was dewed. A thin string of slick had found the inside of one thigh and stayed there. She turned her face toward the glass and did not ask for anything.

Lira stood. The connecting door opened.

“Six,” Lira said. “Off. Feet on the floor first. If your knees go, I have you.”

Sable sat up. The pad peeled from her back with a soft sound. The floor was cooler. Her legs held. She was dizzy anyway. Standing nude in front of a woman who had watched her not- touch herself for six hours felt more naked than the inventory table.

“Scale.”

The plate was the same kind as the other room. Sable stepped on. Lira read the number, then the wand at her temple, then looked at the damp print Sable had left on the bench.

“You lost a little water to the air and added it back between your legs,” Lira said. “Net is not the point. The point is you stayed. Table.”

There was a table against the interior wall. Sable had not given it attention. She got on her back without being told the positions this time. Knees up. Feet on the sheet. She was so wet the inner surfaces of her thighs shone under the warm light.

Lira did not glove.

“Bare today. I need the true heat, not the glove’s.” She put her palm on Sable’s sternum first, as she had the night before, and waited for the breath. Then both breasts, one after the other, thumbs on the nipples, a slow assessing roll. “Still tight. They didn’t go down while you slept. That’s the room and the being seen. Tell me if this is pain.”

“It isn’t.”

Lira pinched once, precisely, and Sable’s hips answered. Lira did not follow the pinch with comfort.

“I’m going to open you. I am not going to move the way that finishes a woman. I am going to see what six hours of leaving you has done to the yield.”

Two fingers, no warning beyond the sentence. Sable was so ready there was almost no catch, only a slide and a sound, hers, ugly and small. Lira’s fingers were warmer than the gloves had been. She seated them and went still.

“There,” Lira said. “That’s a crop that waited. You’re swollen at the clit enough that I can see it without putting a thumb on it. I am going to put a thumb on it anyway. Still. Same rule.”

The thumb landed. Sable’s whole body tried to work. Lira’s other hand—the one not inside her—came down on her hip.

“Stationary.”

Sable made a broken noise that wanted to be a word.

“Say what you feel.”

“Full. Wet. I want—I want you to move.”

“I know you do.” Lira’s thumb did not move. The fingers inside turned one degree, reading. “You stayed six hours with this already started and you did not stand up and you did not use your hand. That is the fit. If I rubbed you now you would come on my wrist in under a minute and we would learn nothing we do not

already know.”

“Please.”

“No.” It was not unkind. It was a schedule. “I am going to take my hand away. You will want to follow it. You will not.”

Withdrawal, slow, shining to the knuckles. Sable’s sex closed on nothing and kept pulsing. She locked her hips to the table by will. Lira held the wet fingers in the light between them for a moment, as if showing Sable her own yield, then reached for a cloth and wiped her own hand, not Sable.

“Sit. Look.”

Sable sat. The sheet between her legs was marked. She could smell herself in the humid air.

“That is what I will tell Tessa,” Lira said. “Not as gossip. As condition. You open without being wound up first. You stay wet when you are left. You ask with your hips and you can still hear a no. She will want to inspect you tomorrow night after your shift. Twenty minutes. Clothes back on after. No climax. If that sentence made you clench, you may nod.” Sable nodded. She could not have spoken cleanly.

“Shower through there. Warm. You may rinse. You may not finish under the water. I will hear you. Then you dress and I put you in a car.”

The stall was a stall. Sable stood under water that was not mist and washed her own body as if it were still hers to schedule. Her clit was a hard, distinct fact under her fingers when she cleaned there. She took the hand away while her mouth was open. She shut the water off shaking.

Lira had the stack of clothes ready. Dressing was the same insult as the night before, worse, because the underwear had a dry memory and her body did not. Lira watched her button the shirt and did not offer a different one.

The car was waiting in the loop. Dawn was a pale strip over the fields. Lira did not ride.

“Unit,” she said at the open door. “Sleep if you can. Eat something that is not a lozenge so your day stays ordinary. You work your full night. I will be at the wash station when you rack the last cart. Tessa will be with me. You do not have to speak to her on the floor. You only have to come off it.”

Sable got in. The seat was dry fabric against damp trousers. She put her hands on her knees.

“Lira.”

“Yes.”

“The bench isn’t the pot.”

“No.”

“I kept wanting the sides higher.”

Lira’s face did not change, except that something in it settled, as if a measurement had come in on spec.

“I know,” she said. “That’s why she meets you tomorrow and not in a month.”

The door sealed. The campus slid away. Sable watched the glass and did not fix her clothes.

The unit was worse than she had prepared for.

Dry air hit her mouth first, then her chest, then the places the mist had lived all night. She stood inside the door and felt her skin tighten as if a climate had been stripped off her. The card was still on the counter. She left it. She stripped because the clothes were untrue again, lay down on the sheet, and the sheet was a desert.

She put her hand between her legs and found heat and slick and a clit that wanted almost nothing. She did not finish. The still thumb was in the room even though Lira was not. The unfinished feeling had a shape now: a bench, a glass wall, a bottle clicking, a woman at a desk who could see whether her knee had fallen.

She slept in pieces. She woke once reaching for humidity that was not there. She woke again already on her back with her knees up, as if a slate somewhere were still taking notes, and she left herself that way until the alarm for night shift, and the dry air never did become ordinary.

Sable’s Growth

Chapter 3

The west bays ran heavy after midnight and Sable was grateful for it.

Tomatoes did not care that she had spent six hours on a bench. They wanted the same checks they always wanted. She gave them her hands and kept her face turned to the leaves when anyone passed. The mist found the shirt at her spine anyway. By two she had given up pretending the damp at her underwear was only climate.

She racked the last cart at four. The rail took it with the old ringing sound. The wash station was a long trough and a soap that smelled like nothing. She was halfway through her forearms when she understood she was no longer alone.

Lira first, same pale shirt, as if the desk beyond the glass had been a pause and not a departure. Beside her, a woman Sable did not know.

Taller. Mid-thirties. Dark hair twisted up with a pin that had nothing to do with fashion. A canvas jacket over a dark shirt, sleeves already pushed. Garden gloves tucked in her jacket pocket, green at the palms from real work. She looked at Sable the way Sable looked at a bench of starts: not unkind, already deciding.

“Sable,” Lira said. “Tessa Morin. You don’t need to shake her hand. Wash the soap off and come.”

Sable rinsed. The other night techs were gone. The house made its low wet noises and no one else asked her anything. Tessa did not say hello. Tessa’s eyes had gone to Sable’s mouth and then to the front of her shirt and then to Lira, a silent note passing between them.

The inventory room again. Warm light. Scale. Table. Cabinet. Lira shut the door.

“Same rule as the threshold,” Lira said. “Everything off. Twenty minutes on the table. You leave dressed. You do not come. Tessa works you. I keep the time. If you want the corridor instead, you say it before the shirt comes off.”

Sable looked at Tessa. Tessa had taken the gloves from her pocket and was settling the first one over her fingers, slow, as if the snap at the wrist were part of the work.

“I didn’t ask her to speak to me yet,” Tessa said to Lira. “Does she need to?”

“No.”

Sable took off the shirt. The air found her stomach. She reached back for the clasp of the bra and Tessa watched that particular motion without blinking. The rest followed. Boots. Trousers. The underwear that had been a problem since midnight. She stacked them. She was already wet enough that the inside of one thigh caught the light.

“Scale,” Lira said.

Sable stepped on. Lira read the number to Tessa, not to Sable, and Tessa nodded once.

“She’s small,” Tessa said. “That helps with a pot later. You won’t need a wide collar. Heat’s high for a woman who just washed her hands in a trough. Is she always like this after a shift or is this us.”

“Both,” Lira said. “Table.”

Sable got on her back. The sheet remembered her from two nights ago. Knees up, feet planted, because no one had told her a different shape. Tessa came to the side of the table and Lira took the foot, where Sable could see the slate in her hand.

Tessa still had the gloves on. She did not greet Sable’s face. She put a gloved palm on Sable’s sternum and left it there until Sable’s breath had to rise against it.

“There,” Tessa said. “She lifts into a hand. You said she would.”

“I did.”

Tessa took both breasts, one and then the other, the gloves faintly coarse, thumbs brushing the nipples as if checking whether a cutting had firmed. Sable’s nipples had been tight since the trough. Tessa made a small sound of satisfaction that was not for Sable.

“Color’s even. They tighten before I ask. Good. I hate having to work a crop awake.” She pinched, not hard, enough that Sable’s hips answered, and spoke across her body as if Sable were a tray between them. “Does she always try to follow that with her pelvis or did you teach her it.”

“She came with it,” Lira said. “I told her stationary. She hears the word. She doesn’t love it yet.”

“She will.” Tessa’s gloved knuckles grazed down Sable’s ribs, her belly, and stopped at the dark hair between her legs. “I want this off the nape and I want this kept. I like to see what I’m opening. Lira.”

Lira’s hands were in Sable’s hair, twisting it up, clip. The nape cooled. Tessa had not looked at Sable’s eyes once.

“Knees wider,” Tessa said to Lira.

Sable widened them. The room’s wet air touched her. She knew how she looked. She could feel the slick already at the pad of the table.

Tessa parted her with two gloved fingers, slow, and held her open for Lira to see. “Heat,” Tessa said. “She’s glazed to the thigh and I haven’t been in her. That’s

the shift and the waiting. You can smell her from here.” She glanced at Lira. “May I.”

“In. Don’t finish her. You have sixteen minutes.”

Tessa looked at the clock Lira had made of the room, then seated two gloved fingers in one unhurried push.

Sable’s mouth opened. The sound that came out was small and wrecked. She was ready enough that there was almost no work in it, only the thick slide and the stretch and Tessa’s glove going shiny to the palm.

Tessa let out a breath through her nose.

“That’s not resistance. That’s a pot asking.” She turned the fingers a degree, the way Lira had, reading the same place. “She takes two without bracing. Tight, not closed. If I gave her three she’d argue with her face and take them anyway. Do we care about three tonight.”

“Not tonight,” Lira said. “Thumb. Still.”

Tessa’s thumb landed on Sable’s clit as if she had been told the exact coordinate. Broad. Unmoving. Sable’s thighs jumped and Tessa’s other forearm came across her hips and pinned her to the sheet with the easy strength of a woman who lifted trays.

“I see what you mean about the word,” Tessa said. “She’s trying to fuck my hand and she’s angry that the hand isn’t a schedule. Sable—no. That was for Lira. Don’t look at me like I asked you a question.”

Sable had looked. She shut her eyes and Lira said, “Open. Tessa needs the face.”

Sable opened them. The ceiling first, then Tessa’s throat, then the fact of Tessa’s mouth, which was concentrating the way Sable’s mouth concentrated on a damaged leaf.

Tessa worked her then. Not the finishing rhythm. A slow in-and-stay, a turn, a pause, the still thumb becoming an almost when Tessa wanted to see Sable shake, then still again. Sable’s wetness made an audible sound on the glove. She could hear herself. She could hear Tessa talking over it.

“Yield’s high for twenty-one. She’s going to mark whoever stands here. That’s Nia’s problem more than mine. I want her on a bench where I can leave her like this and go drink something and come back to the same shine. Does the house annex take a platform low enough I don’t have to stoop.”

“It does,” Lira said. “Glass to the kitchen. You’ll see her from the kettle.”

Sable clenched. Tessa felt it and smiled at Lira, not at Sable.

“Say it again. The glass.”

“Glass to the kitchen,” Lira said, even. “If you’re at the table she is part of the room.” Tessa’s thumb pressed once, a test, and Sable’s knees tried to close. Tessa’s hips-pin held.

“No.” To Lira: “She’ll come if I do that twice more. She’s already there. Look at her stomach.”

Sable knew what her stomach was doing. She could not stop it. The shake had reached her thighs. She was making a noise on every breath that would have embarrassed her in the unit and did not know how to stop that either.

“Time,” Lira said.

Tessa went still inside her. The stillness was worse than the almost. Sable’s body chased and found a glove that would not be a lover.

“Please,” Sable said, and hated the word, and said it again.

Tessa finally looked at her face. The look was curious and satisfied and not cruel.

“That’s for Lira too,” Tessa said. “I don’t take requests on a first inspect. You shake like that when you’re put back and I’ll be happy enough.”

She withdrew. The wet sound was obscene in the small room. She held the glove up in the light, two fingers shining to the webbing, and showed Lira as Lira had once shown Sable.

“That’s what you promised,” Tessa said. “I didn’t have to make it.”

“Gloves off if you want the true heat. Two minutes. Then she dresses.”

Tessa stripped the gloves into the bin. The snap made Sable jump. Bare hands, warmer, drier at the palm until they weren’t. Tessa put two fingers back in as if confirming a measurement, no travel, and laid her bare thumb on Sable’s clit without rubbing.

“God, she’s hot. That’s not the glove. That’s her.” A pause. Tessa’s voice dropped, still aimed at Lira. “I want her potted before I get greedy. If I take her on a kitchen table too soon I’ll forget she’s a crop and start making it about my hand. You keep the clock on me.”

“I will,” Lira said. “Out.”

Tessa left her empty. Sable’s hips lifted after the hand and found air. She locked them down herself this time, shaking, the pad of the table wet under her.

Tessa wiped her own fingers on a cloth, not Sable, and flexed her hand as if she had been pruning.

“I want her after the next shift,” Tessa said. “Not twenty minutes. The house. You said you needed a full cycle before you call it a fit. I’ll do the leaving with you. I want to see whether she stays wet when we sit down.”

“That’s tomorrow,” Lira said. “Tonight she goes home.”

Tessa nodded, already pulling the jacket straight, already becoming a woman who could walk through a greenhouse and not look like she had just had two fingers in someone.

“She can hear me,” Tessa said. “I’m not going to pretend she can’t. Fong. That’s a good name for a label. I’ll see you from the kettle.”

She went out first. The hall took her.

Sable sat up when Lira told her to. The sheet was marked in a dark oval. Lira handed her a cloth and this time let her wipe between her legs, once, not enough.

“Dress.”

The underwear was a lie with a wet center. The bra scraped. Sable’s hands shook on the buttons and Lira did not help. When she was a night tech again, Lira opened the door.

The corridor was cooler. Sable’s boots were too loud. Tessa was not in sight. Lira walked her as far as the turn toward the loop.

“Question,” Lira said. “Not a speech. Another woman in the room. Hands that were not mine. Talk that was not for you. Intrusion, or tended.”

Sable’s mouth was dry. The true word arrived too fast and she did not have time to dress it.

“Tended.”

Lira accepted that the way she accepted a number off the scale.

“Car is in the loop. Unit. Sleep in the dry if you can. Full cycle tomorrow after shift. The house, not this room. You will be stripped at the kitchen. Weighed. Put on the platform. Opened. Left. Taken out. Weighed. Opened. Dressed. Transit. No climax. Tessa will be there the whole time. I will be there the whole time. If you hate the leaving, you say so when the clothes come back on. Not before. I want the hours, not the fear of the first minute.”

Sable nodded. She could still feel the shape of Tessa’s glove. She could still hear glass to the kitchen.

“Lira.”

“Yes.”

“She didn’t look at me until I was going to come.”

“Yes,” Lira said. “That was not a slight. That was the work she asked for. You’ll get Nia’s eyes later. You’ll get Ayla’s numbers. You don’t get all of it in one doorway.”

The car door stood open. Sable got in. Sitting down pressed the seam of her trousers against her and she sucked in a breath she did not hide.

Lira, one hand on the door, looked at that and nothing else.

“Tomorrow the pad will be chips,” she said. “The sides will be higher. You wanted that. Remember that you wanted it when we pick you up off them and put a shirt on your back.”

The door sealed. The fields went by in the dark, neat and tended and not asked for their opinion. Sable rode with her knees together and her hands flat and the word *kettle* stuck in her the way *pot* had been stuck in her the night before, a small hard lozenge that would not dissolve.

Sable’s Growth

Chapter 4

The last cart went into the rail and Sable did not bother with the trough.

They were already in the aisle. Lira. Tessa a half step behind her, jacket on, gloves in the pocket, hair pinned as if she had come from some other house’s soil and not from thinking about this one. A night tech at the far bay glanced up and then away. The Architect did not leave scenes on a floor. It left absences that looked like scheduling.

“Boots on until the kitchen,” Lira said. “Car’s in the staff loop.”

Sable walked between them. Her shirt was stuck to her back. The seam of her trousers had been a problem since midnight and was a worse problem now. Tessa did not speak to her in the greenhouse. Tessa spoke to Lira, low, as if Sable were already a tray being moved.

“She’s been wet the whole shift. You can see it in how she stands.”

“I know,” Lira said.

The car was not the campus shuttle. Smaller. Dark glass. Sable sat. Tessa sat opposite and looked at her with the same assessing patience she had used on the table, except Sable still had clothes on, which only made Tessa’s attention feel like a hand under cloth.

The fields ran out. A belt of ordinary houses began, then thinned. The one they stopped at did not announce itself. Pale siding. A kitchen window already lit. Warmth coming off the walls as if the weather inside had been set hours ago.

Lira opened the door with a contact Sable did not see. “Threshold,” she said. “Not a tour.”

The kitchen was real. A kettle. A table. Two chairs already pulled. A slate leaning against a jar. The far wall was glass from counter to ceiling, beaded faintly, and beyond it the annex was already breathing mist.

Sable stopped.

Wood chips, pale, even, a low platform set in them with sides higher than the trial bench had been—not a pot, not yet, but a shape that meant stay. A scale just inside the glass door. A bottle arm waiting over the platform. Warm light. The latch on the glass was on the kitchen side.

Tessa made a small sound that was almost pleasure.

“That’s a proper bench,” she said to Lira. “I won’t stoop.”

“Shirt,” Lira said.

Sable looked once at the kitchen, at the kettle, at the two chairs facing the glass, and then she pulled the shirt over her head because the room had already decided she would. Bra. Boots. Trousers. The underwear she peeled off her own slick. She stacked them on a kitchen chair, edges aligned, and the kitchen air was cooler than the annex and her nipples drew up hard in the difference.

Tessa had the gloves out. She did not put them on yet.

“Scale first,” Lira said. “Then you don’t come back through this door until I open it.”

The glass door breathed wet heat into Sable’s face. She stepped onto the plate. Lira read the number to Tessa. Tessa nodded, eyes on Sable’s breasts, her belly, the dark shine already starting on her inner thighs.

“Platform,” Lira said. “On your back. Knees down unless we set them. Hair up.”

Sable twisted the knot herself. Chips shifted under her feet, dry and clean and absurd against bare skin. The platform took her. The sides came up along her hips high enough that her hands found them without being told. She lay down. Mist touched her mouth. The bottle arm hung over her chest the way it had on campus, only this room had no desk-behind-glass. The desk was the kitchen. The glass was the whole wall.

Lira came in after her. Tessa followed and shut the glass. The latch sounded once, ordinary, and Sable did not see how it worked.

“I’m going to open you,” Lira said. “Then Tessa. Then we leave you. Three hours. Lozenge on the timer. You may sleep. You may not touch yourself. You may not get off the platform. If you need the cycle to end you will say so when we come back and the clothes are in your hands. Not now. I want the hours.”

Sable’s voice came out thin. “I understand.”

Lira’s hands were bare. Sternum first, the waiting palm, then both breasts, thumbs on the nipples as if the kitchen climate had to be compared to the annex. Sable lifted into it and Lira did not praise her like a person.

“Ready before the hand,” Lira said to Tessa. “Same as the trough night.”

Two fingers. Sable was so wet the slide made a sound against the chips’ quiet. Lira seated them and did not hunt. A still thumb on her clit, two breaths, then gone. Sable’s hips tried the air and the high sides stopped them from looking like a request she could finish herself.

“Yield,” Lira said, and took her hand away shining. “Your turn.”

Tessa pulled the gloves on as if the snap were a courtesy to the room and not to Sable. She stood at the platform’s edge so Sable’s knees framed her jacket. She did not say Sable’s given name.

“Fong,” she said to Lira, tasting the label. “Hold her hair. I want the throat.” Lira’s hand gathered the knot already there and kept Sable’s head tipped, not painfully, as a grower positions a stem. Tessa’s gloved palm traveled Sable’s throat, her collarbones, the undersides of her breasts, and then she pinched both nipples at once and watched Sable’s stomach jump.

“Good color. She’s running hotter in here than in that little campus room. The mist does half my work.” Tessa parted her, looked, showed Lira the glaze as if Lira had not just had her hand there. “She’s going to leave a mark on the wood. That’s fine. That’s what chips are for.”

Two gloved fingers, deeper than Lira’s inventory had gone, still not a fucking, a fit. Tessa turned them and Sable made a noise she could not swallow. The sides of the platform kept her hands busy. Tessa’s thumb found her clit and stayed still until Sable’s thighs shook, then circled once—only once—and stopped.

“She’d come,” Tessa said. “She’s been coming-without-coming since I met her. If I stay here she’ll think the annex is a bed.”

“Out,” Lira said.

Tessa withdrew, held the wet glove in the kitchen light that leaked through the glass, and stripped both gloves off. She touched Sable once more, bare, two fingers just inside, a confirmation of heat, and her mouth tightened in private satisfaction.

“Put her back,” Tessa said, which meant: leave her.

They went out through the glass. The latch sounded. Mist closed over the seam.

Sable lay in the chips and watched two women walk into a kitchen that was still a kitchen.

Lira filled the kettle. Tessa took a chair and turned it so her knees pointed at the annex. They did not draw a curtain. There was no curtain. Sable could see the mug come down, the steam, Tessa’s bare hands wrapping it. She could see Lira sit. She could hear them if she held still, the glass taking voices the way it took condensation.

“She’s staring,” Tessa said.

“Yes.”

“Good.” Tessa drank. “If she turns her face away I’ll be disappointed. I want her to watch us not hurrying.”

“She’ll watch.” Lira’s slate woke. “Ayla will want the second weight and the time she stayed without a hand. Nia will want to know whether the lozenge made her quiet or restless. Tonight I only need whether the shine holds while we sit.”

Sable’s clit pulsed as if the names had been fingers. She kept her knees where they had been left. The platform’s sides were high enough that getting a hand down to herself would have been a decision, not an accident. She did not make it.

The bottle clicked.

Warning. Then the drop. The lozenge hit her sternum and slid. She lifted her head. Tessa watched that motion over the rim of the mug, the lift of Sable’s breasts, the working of her throat, and said something to Lira that Sable only caught the end of.

“—like a pot already. You won’t have to teach her the mouth.”

“I won’t pot her on a first leave,” Lira said. “She still has a unit. She still has a roster. If she hates the shirt at the end, we learn it.”

“She won’t hate the annex. She’ll hate the shirt.”

Sable closed her eyes and opened them because closing them was hiding. The mist beaded on her nipples and ran. The pad of the platform was wet under her. She could smell herself mixed with clean wood and warm water. In the kitchen Tessa laughed once, not loudly, at something on Lira’s slate, and the laugh went through Sable harder than a touch.

Time went the way it had behind the campus glass, except the women were closer and they were using cups and they were not pretending she was data only. She was data and a view. She slept in a thin sheet of a doze and woke to find her one knee fallen open and Tessa’s eyes already there.

The second lozenge clicked. Sable took it. Her mouth made the small sound again. Tessa said, “There,” to Lira, pleased, and set her empty mug down.

They did not come in early.

When Lira stood, three hours had the weight of a true number. Tessa stood with her. The latch. Warm kitchen air cutting the mist as the glass opened.

“Off,” Lira said. “Slow. Chips will stick.”

They did. Pale specks on Sable’s calves, her hips, the damp backs of her thighs. Lira brushed none of them off. Tessa watched them cling and did not smile with her mouth.

Scale. The plate took her dripping. Lira read the number.

“Down a little to the air. Up where it matters,” Tessa said. “Look at her legs.”

“Table,” Lira said.

Not the platform. The kitchen table. Wood. Ordinary. A mug ring still drying. Sable’s back hit it and the ceiling of a house that people cooked in, and Tessa’s hands—bare now, no theater of gloves—opened her with two fingers as if

finishing a sentence from three hours earlier.

Sable cried out. She was swollen, soaked, shaking. Tessa’s thumb landed still on her clit and Sable’s whole body tried to work and Lira’s palm came down on her hip.

“Stationary.”

“Please—”

“No,” Lira said. “Tessa.”

Tessa turned her fingers, once, and went still inside the heat.

“She’s holding,” Tessa said, voice lower. “That’s not manners. That’s a crop that wants the sides back. If I rub her she’ll come on your table and we’ll have to start the leaving over to see if she can stand it. I don’t want a climax. I want this.”

She took her hand away. Sable’s wetness followed her fingers in a shining string and broke. Sable lay on the kitchen table with her knees up and her sex open to the room and the unfinished feeling so large it made her angry.

Lira handed Tessa the cloth. Tessa wiped her own hand.

“Dress her,” Tessa said. “I want to see the face when the shirt hits.”

The clothes were on the chair where Sable had stacked them. They had the smell of the greenhouse and not of this house. Underwear first. It went on over a mess and became a mess. Bra. The cups scraped her nipples and she hissed. Trousers. Shirt. Lira buttoned none of it. Sable’s fingers did the work and each button was a small wrongness.

Tessa stood with her arms folded and watched the last button as if it were a measurement.

“There,” Tessa said. “That’s the injury. Not us. That.”

Sable’s eyes had gone hot. She kept her mouth shut until she was sure the word that came out would not be please.

Lira opened the front door. Night. A transit stop at the corner under a quiet light. They walked her. Chips still ghosted the backs of her calves inside the trousers. Tessa came as far as the stop and no farther.

“I will be in the kitchen when you come again,” Tessa said, and it was not quite to Lira. “I want the kettle on before she’s on her back.”

She walked back toward the lit window. Sable watched her go because looking at Lira was worse.

The car arrived. Lira waited until the door stood open.

“Question when the clothes are on,” Lira said. “The leaving. Three hours. Glass. Tea. We did not hurry. Hate it, or not.”

Sable swallowed. The shirt pulled when she did.

“I hated this,” she said, and her hand flicked, once, at the placket of the shirt. “Not the leaving.”

Lira took that the way she took a number.

“Unit,” she said. “Dry air. You work one more night. After that shift I will not come to the wash station. The door you just left will be unlocked. If you are done with trials you sleep in your own bed and you keep the roster. If you are not done you take your clothes off in that kitchen without me fetching you. Ayla will be there. She needs her own look before anyone writes a climax down.”

Sable got in. Sitting closed the trousers on her and she made a sound against her teeth.

Lira’s hand stayed on the door.

“You wanted higher sides,” she said. “You had them. Remember the shirt too. Fong.”

The door sealed. The house’s kitchen window stayed lit in the rear glass until the corner took it. Sable rode with her fists on her knees and the platform still printed on her back and a fury at cotton that had nowhere to go except the next night, and the next door, and the fact that no one would have to come to the trough and ask her.

Sable’s Growth

Chapter 5

The roster still had her name. That was the only ordinary thing left.

Sable worked the west bays from eight until four and did not look at the wash station. No one was coming to it for her. Lira had said so. The last cart hit the rail and the sound went down the empty house like a sentence finishing. She washed her hands because her hands were soiled, not because a woman was waiting by the trough. She walked out in her own boots to the loop, and the car that came was not sent for a tech on a dinner break. She gave the address as if she were allowed to. The car took it.

The kitchen window was lit. She stood on the step with her pulse in her mouth and tried the door.

It opened.

Lira at the counter. Tessa in the chair that faced the glass, kettle already steaming, jacket off, sleeves pushed. A third woman Sable had not seen, forty or so, gray starting at the temples, hair cut short enough that it did not need a pin. A clean dark shirt. A slate already awake in her hand. She looked at Sable the way a woman looked at a column of figures she had been promised.

“Ayla Ruiz,” Lira said. “She doesn’t need a hello. Threshold.”

Sable’s hands went to her buttons before anyone else spoke. The kitchen took the shirt, the bra, the boots, the trousers, the underwear that had been wet since midnight. She stacked them on the same chair as the night before. The stack looked like a person who might still leave. Her nipples drew up in the cooler kitchen air. She did not cover them.

Ayla had not moved except to mark something on the slate.

“Weight first,” Ayla said. Her voice was lower than Tessa’s and less pleased on the surface. “I want her before the annex heat changes the surface numbers. Lira.”

“Scale.”

Sable walked to the glass. Chips waited beyond it, pale, even. The platform sat in them with its high sides. She stepped on the plate in the kitchen doorway, one foot still on tile, and Ayla came close enough that Sable could smell soap and nothing else.

Ayla read the number herself. Temple wand. Then a second wand, cooler, at the underside of each breast, the fold of each elbow, the inside of each thigh, not lingering, mapping heat the way Sable mapped moisture in soil.

“She’s already up,” Ayla said to Lira. “Chest and groin. That’s not annex climate. That’s walking here without being fetched. Good. I like a baseline that includes the decision.” She glanced at Tessa. “You said she opens without being wound. I want that timed, not described.”

“You’ll get it,” Tessa said. She was watching Sable’s mouth. “She’s been wound since we put the shirt on her. Look at her.”

Sable kept her hands at her sides. Ayla’s wand left a trail of cool that the kitchen air licked at.

Lira stood with the glass door still shut.

“Two shapes,” Lira said. “I will only say them once. You work the week on the platform. Lozenge, mist, inspections, no unit at night. The stack stays on the chair in case the week is a mistake. Or you dress and I put you in a car and the roster keeps you and we do trial nights until you stop coming. I am not asking how you feel about it. I am asking which room you walk into.”

Tessa’s mug paused. Ayla’s stylus did not.

Sable looked at the stack. She looked at the glass. The shirt on the chair was the same injury it had been at the transit stop. The platform’s sides were the height she had wanted from a campus bench.

She did not answer with her mouth. She waited for Lira to unlatch the glass, stepped into the mist, chips under her feet, and got onto the platform on her own. On her back. Knees down. Hands on the sides. Hair still in the shift knot. She stared at the bottle arm and not at the three women, and the not-looking was the rest of the sentence.

Tessa let out a breath.

Ayla wrote.

Lira shut the glass from the inside and the latch sounded. “Hair,” she said, and twisted the knot higher, clip, nape cleared. She did not praise the choice. She put her palm on Sable’s sternum until Sable’s breath lifted it, then stepped aside.

“Ayla.”

Ayla set the slate on the platform edge, low, where Sable could see the numbers if she lifted her head and where Ayla could reach them without stopping her hands. She did not glove.

“I’m going to name the clock,” Ayla said, still not quite to Sable. “I start when I first part her. I stop when Lira says stop. I want onset, wetness at onset, how long to a shake I can see in the abdomen, how long she holds after I take my hand away. I do not want a climax in the column. If she comes, the count is trash and we do it tomorrow from dry, which she will not be.”

“She won’t come,” Lira said. “Tessa.”

“I’ll hold a hip,” Tessa said. She came to the other side, bare-handed, jacket gone, and laid her forearm across Sable’s hips as if the platform’s sides were not enough. “Fong. You can hear the clock. Don’t perform for it. Ayla hates theater.”

Sable’s laugh broke and died. “I’m not—”

“I know,” Tessa said, and that was the last thing aimed at her face.

Ayla’s hands were longer than Tessa’s, cooler at first. She weighed each breast in a palm and watched the nipples tighten, then marked a time Sable could not see.

“Eight seconds from first contact to peak tightness. That’s useful.” Two fingers traced the line from navel to hair and stopped. “Lira. Watch the slate. I want your thumb off her unless I ask. I need one variable.”

Lira nodded.

Ayla parted her.

The sound was immediate. Sable was wet enough that Ayla’s “at onset” was almost a joke, except Ayla did not joke. She seated two fingers in one slow push and her mouth flattened.

“No brace. Depth she takes without a flinch—there. Heat is high. She’s slick to the palm on the first stroke and I have not rubbed her.” Ayla’s thumb hovered over Sable’s clit and did not land. “I’m going to put pressure on the clit now. Still. I want the abdominal shake without a finish. Tessa.”

Tessa’s forearm tightened. Ayla’s thumb came down, broad, unmoving, and Sable’s body tried to work against a hand that would not be a lover and a clock that would not be mercy. The sides of the platform bit her palms. She heard her own breath go ragged and hated that it had a start time.

“Forty,” Ayla said. “Shake’s starting. Fifty. She’s chasing. Lira, she’s going to tip if I give her motion. I’m not giving it.”

“Hold,” Lira said.

Ayla held. The still thumb was a fact. Sable’s thighs jumped against Tessa’s arm. The noise she made had no words left in it. Mist ran down her ribs. In the kitchen the kettle clicked off by itself and no one went to it.

“Seventy-two,” Ayla said. “That’s my edge number for tonight. Off.”

The thumb lifted. The fingers withdrew in one shining pull. Sable’s hips lifted into Tessa’s hold and found no hand. She shook there, empty, marked on the wood, the unfinished feeling so bright it made her eyes water.

Ayla did not wipe her fingers immediately. She looked at them, then at the slate, then wrote. “Recovery.” The wand again, inner thigh, the wet underside of a

breast. “Pulse is up. Clit still swollen—I’m not touching it. I want sixty seconds of nothing and a second look at how wet she stays when no one is in her. That’s the number Nia will actually use. Nia thinks her mouth is the variable. It isn’t. It’s whether the crop holds a shine after we stop.”

Tessa had not taken her arm away. “She’s holding. Look at the platform.”

A dark mark. Sable could feel the air on it. She turned her face toward the glass because the kitchen was still a kitchen, mugs, a kettle, a jar, and she was the thing in the next room that made those objects obscene.

Ayla waited the sixty with her eyes on Sable’s stomach and her stylus ready. Then two fingers, only at the folds, not in, spreading her for the three of them.

“Still glazed. Stringing. That’s a keep-wet after denial. I’ll take that over a pretty climax I can’t schedule.” She glanced at Lira. “I don’t need her finished to know I want the column. I need Nia here when you decide the first one gets written. I want duration on the actual yield, not on an almost.”

“Tomorrow,” Lira said. “Nia’s already on the house. Tonight Sable stays. Lozenge on the timer. We sit. We do not dress her.”

Tessa’s mouth did something small. “Finally.”

Ayla wiped her own hand, marked a last line, and picked up the slate as if the body on the platform had become a closed file for the hour.

They went out through the glass. The latch. Kitchen light laid a clean rectangle across Sable’s bare legs. Tessa poured water that had gone off the boil and did not care. Ayla stood at the counter and entered numbers with her thumb. Lira took the chair beside Tessa and looked in, not at a slate, at Sable.

“She walked,” Tessa said.

“Yes.”

“She’s staring again.”

“Yes.”

Ayla did not turn around. “If she sleeps, note the first time the knee falls. I want that in the morning weight. Don’t wake her to make it prettier.”

Sable lay in the chips and listened to women discuss her knee. The bottle clicked. She lifted her head and took the lozenge and Tessa watched the lift over the mug and said, “Mouth’s already trained,” to no one in particular.

The stack of clothes stayed on the chair. No one moved it to a closet. No one brought it to the glass. Sable’s unit existed somewhere with dry air and a printer light and a card on a counter. She did not put her mind in it. She put her hands on the sides of the platform and left them there.

Tessa spoke after a while, quieter, as if the annex could take volume as touch.

“When you pot her I want the collar sized to that throat. She tips her head for the bottle like she’s been waiting to be done with her own hands.”

“Not tonight,” Lira said.

“I’m not asking tonight. I’m asking Ayla to write the throat down before Nia gets sentimental with it.”

Ayla’s stylus ticked. “It’s written.”

Sable’s clit ached in time with the ticks. She did not touch it. The high sides made the not- touching into a posture instead of a virtue. Mist beaded and ran. She slept without deciding to, a thin doze, and woke once with one knee fallen and the kitchen still occupied, Ayla’s face turned toward that knee as if a number had just landed on spec.

No one came in to cover her. There was nothing to cover her with.

Toward the thin edge of morning Lira stood and unlatched the glass and did not tell her to get off. She only checked the bottle arm, laid two fingers to Sable’s inner thigh as if confirming climate, and spoke to the other two while Sable’s eyes were open and wet at the lashes.

“She stayed. The stack can wait. Nia at ten. Ayla, you can have the count when it happens. Tessa, you can have your hands in the room but you don’t get to decide the minute. The minute is Nia’s and the slate’s.”

Tessa looked at Sable’s mouth.

“Hear that,” she said, and this time it was almost to Sable, almost not. “You don’t get dressed for it. You get taken off, weighed, put where Nia wants you, and put back. That’s a day. That’s not a visit.”

Sable’s answer was the same as the threshold. She did not reach toward the chair. She turned her face into the mist and left her knee where Ayla liked it, and in the kitchen the kettle went on again as if a house that had a woman on chips in the next room still needed tea, and did.

Morning came as a change in the mist, not as a clock Sable owned.

She woke on the platform with one knee fallen and chips printed into the damp backs of her thighs. The kitchen was already a kitchen. Lira at the latch. Tessa with the kettle. Ayla with the slate. A fourth woman at the glass whom Sable had not seen until the glass itself made a frame around her.

Nia Park was twenty-eight and smaller than Tessa, dark hair in a short braid, sleeves rolled, a folded cloth in both hands as if she had come to water something and not to be introduced. She looked at Sable the way Sable had once looked at a

bench of starts that had taken: pleased, already planning the next tray.

“That’s her,” Tessa said.

“I know,” Nia said. She did not wave. “She’s been wet since I came up the walk. You can see it from the kettle.”

Lira opened the glass. Annex heat spilled into the kitchen and came back. “Scale first. Then we don’t put her on the table. We pot her up. The first yield gets taken in the container or it isn’t a true number. Ayla.”

Ayla’s stylus was already awake. “I want a lift weight and a settled weight. If you shock her I want that in the column too. Don’t bury the crown.”

“I know how to transplant,” Nia said, mild, and stepped in with the others.

Sable sat when Lira said off. Chips clung. The plate took her. Ayla read the number, temple, inner thigh, the underside of each breast, and did not offer Sable her eyes.

“Same heat as last night. She slept open. Good. If she closes up in the pot I’ll know it’s the vessel and not the crop.” Ayla glanced at Lira. “You’re sure you want the transport before she’s had a mouth on her.”

“Yes,” Lira said. “If we finish her on wood she’ll think the table is the life. The pot is the life. We move her like what she is.”

Tessa pulled the gloves from her pocket and did not put them on yet. “Handle her by the vessel once she’s in it. Not by the arms. I don’t want her thinking she has to help.”

Sable’s mouth was dry. “I can stand.”

“You can,” Lira said. “You won’t need to in a minute. Hair up. Nia, wash her on the platform. I don’t want dirty chips in a clean collar.”

They put her back on the pad only long enough for water. Nia’s cloth was warm. She started at Sable’s throat, then the cleared nape, the undersides of her breasts, the tight nipples that peaked into the cloth as if the cloth had been a mouth. Nia spoke across her, not to her.

“She’s filthy with her own yield and not much else. That’s easy. Belly’s soft. She’s been still. Good. I hate a plant that’s been thrashing in the tray.” The cloth went between Sable’s legs without ceremony. Sable’s hips jumped. Nia held her there with the flat of her other hand and kept washing, slow, until the cloth came away shining. “She’s going to mark the first medium. That’s fine. That’s a water-in.”

Tessa made a sound in her throat. “Stop looking at her like you’re already drinking her. Pot first.”

“I am potting first,” Nia said. “I’m also not going to pretend she doesn’t smell like a crop that’s ready.”

The pot was already in the annex and Sable had not understood it for what it was.

She had thought it was part of the platform’s furniture: a low, warm vessel set into the chips, inner walls smooth, rim coming to the height of a waist, the interior fitted in a curve that would take a pelvis and keep it. A collar waited on the rim—not a strap for a throat in a play sense, a horticultural collar, padded, open at the back, meant to sit at the base of a stem and keep leaf and hair off the medium. A small plate on the front. Blank.

Lira lifted the plate. Tessa watched. Ayla wrote the time.

“Label,” Lira said, and set the letters where Sable could see them if she ever looked down.

FONG.

Sable’s stomach went tight. The cloth in Nia’s hand paused on her knee.

“There,” Nia said quietly, to Lira. “That’s the shock, if there is one. It’s in the face, not the body. Body’s still open.”

“Lift,” Lira said. “On three, and we don’t make her walk it. Walking is for the kitchen. This is a transport.”

They handled her the way a bench of women handled a specimen that could not be dropped.

Tessa at her back, gloves on now, palms under Sable’s shoulder blades. Nia at her hips, bare- handed, the wash-cloth abandoned. Lira at the vessel, turning it a degree so the collar would meet the nape clean. Ayla did not lift. Ayla held the slate and the clock and said, “If she braces, note it. If she goes slack, that’s better.”

“I’ve got her,” Nia said.

“I’ve got the stem,” Tessa said. “You have the root.”

Sable’s laugh broke and made no shape. They took her weight off the platform in one motion. Her feet left the chips and found nothing. For a few steps she was only held, breasts tight to the cool of the annex air, sex wet against Nia’s wrist where Nia had to hold her to keep the lift clean. Tessa’s gloved mouth was near her ear and still talking to the room.

“Upright. Don’t let her jackknife. She’s going to try to look at the label. Let her. I want the face when she reads it.”

They settled her.

The vessel took her hips as if it had been poured for them. Medium—warm chips, finer than the floor, already misted—came up around her thighs as Nia backfilled with her hands, firming, not packing, the way a woman firmed soil so a start would not list. The rim met Sable's waist. She was sitting and she was not sitting. She could not get a foot down. Her hands found the rim and Lira moved them off it.

"Not the lip. You'll mark the glaze. Hands in your lap or on your own knees until we collar."

Nia worked the medium up, palms sliding along the outsides of Sable's thighs, thumbs pressing, checking for air pockets the way a grower checked a transplant.

"Don't bury the crown," Ayla said.

"I'm not. You can see her. She's proud of the pot already." Nia's thumb brushed the wet crease at the top of Sable's thigh and did not apologize. "Firm enough. She won't rock. Water in after the collar or you'll slop the label."

Lira took the collar.

It settled at the base of Sable's throat, snug, warm from sitting on the rim. Hair stayed up. The nape stayed clear. The plate sat where a visitor in the kitchen could read it through the glass without coming in. FONG. Sable looked down until the letters blurred and Lira tipped her chin up with two fingers.

"The label faces the house," Lira said. "Not your chest. Tessa wanted the throat written. It's written."

Tessa peeled one glove off and tested the fit with a bare knuckle at the side of Sable's neck, then at the rim of the pot where Sable's waist met the vessel.

"That's a size. I don't want it tighter. I want her able to take a lozenge without fighting the collar. Nia."

Nia brought the bottle arm over and adjusted it to the new height. Warning click. Drop. The lozenge landed on the slope of Sable's breast, slid, and Sable lifted her head into the collar's limit and took it. Swallowing moved the padded rim. Tessa watched that movement with her mouth slightly open.

"Mouth's trained," Tessa said. "I told you."

"Water in," Nia said.

Mist thickened on a setting Sable felt on her nipples first, then on the medium, then on the raw heat between her legs where the pot left her exposed on purpose. The crown above the soil line. Open. Tended. Nia cupped water in her palm from a spout at the wall and let it run down Sable's sternum, over the breasts, down into the place where body met vessel, and Sable made a sound

that was not about temperature.

Ayla wrote.

“Settled weight,” Lira said.

They did not take her out. Ayla brought the wand to her: temple, breast, inner thigh above the medium. Numbers. The stylus ticked.

“No drop. That’s not shock. That’s a take.” Ayla looked at Nia at last. “You can have her mouth now. Clock starts when you close on the clit, not when you kiss her hip to be sweet. I don’t want a pretty onset. I want yield.”

Nia knelt in the chips.

The pot put Sable at the height of Nia’s mouth without anyone stooping. That was the design. Sable understood it in her belly a second before she understood it in her head. Tessa took the far side of the rim with one bare hand, not to hold Sable down—the vessel was already doing that—but to be in the room at the point of work. Lira stood at Sable’s shoulder, palm light on the collar as if checking a tie on a stem. Ayla’s slate waited.

“I’m going to wash the crown again,” Nia said to them. “Then I’m going to take the number. If she comes before I mean her to, that’s still a number. Don’t stop me to make it neat.”

“I won’t,” Ayla said. “Start.”

Nia’s mouth opened on her.

Not a kiss first. Heat. Tongue through slick that had been gathering since the lift. Sable’s cry hit the glass. Her hips tried the only motion the pot allowed, a helpless grind into the fitted curve, and the medium held. Nia made a low pleased sound into her and did not come up to talk.

Tessa did the talking.

“That’s it. That’s a potted crop. Look at her hands. She wants the lip and she can’t have it. Lira, the collar’s doing work. She’s swallowing air like a lozenge.”

“I see it,” Lira said.

Nia’s hands were on the inner rim, thumbs spreading Sable just enough. Her mouth was slow and filthy only in its patience: long passes through the folds, a pause to suck the swollen clit and let it go, again, again, until Sable’s thighs trembled inside the chips and the label on her throat ticked with her pulse. Sable heard herself ask please and heard that no one required it. Ayla said, “Onset was immediate. She was wet from the transport. I’m not giving her credit for a wind-up she didn’t need.”

Nia closed on her clit and stayed.

The clock, for Sable, became the collar and the mouth and the fact that she could not stand up to finish or stand up to flee. She came hard, shaking the vessel, a raw sound torn out of her that made Tessa’s hand tighten on the rim. Nia drank what she had asked the room for and did not stop at the first spasm. She held Sable through the second wave with her mouth and the press of her thumbs until Sable’s head tipped back against Lira’s waiting palm and the collar showed the line of her throat to the kitchen.

Ayla’s voice cut the wet quiet.

“Twenty-eight seconds from close to first clench. Another nine in the second wave. That’s the column.” She said the numbers again, flatter, so they would exist in the air. “Twenty-eight. Nine. Recovery.”

Nia lifted her mouth. Her chin shone. She did not wipe it on Sable. She wiped it on the cloth at her own knee, then laid two fingers into Sable’s still-fluttering sex as if settling a plant after water.

“She’s all yield,” Nia said. Her voice had gone rough and she did not hide it. “She’s going to stay messy in the pot. I’ll wash the crown when I come back. Don’t put a towel on her to spare the view. Tessa will only take it off.”

Tessa leaned in and looked at what Nia had left: open, slick, pulsing, framed by warm medium and a glazed rim. She did not put her fingers in. She put two bare fingertips on Sable’s nipple instead, a small confirming roll, and spoke to Ayla.

“Write that she came with her eyes on the glass. She wanted to see if we were watching. We were.”

“I wrote the number,” Ayla said. “The rest is yours.”

Lira’s hand left the collar. She checked the bottle arm, the mist, the firmness of the chips at Sable’s hip with the edge of her hand.

“Established,” Lira said. “She doesn’t come out for the afternoon. Lozenge on the timer. Nia, you have wash-and-put-back without the put-back. Tessa, evening inspect in the vessel— gloves if you want them, but she doesn’t get a table. Ayla, you can take a recovery heat in an hour without taking her out. If the stack on the chair bothers anyone, put it in the other room. She isn’t wearing it.”

Nia rose. Her braid had come a little loose. She looked at the label and then at Sable’s mouth, which was still open.

“Fong,” she said, trying the plate the way Tessa had tried it the first night, and the name in that tone went through Sable like another tongue. “You took the pot. That’s all I needed from the transport. I’ll be in at the next click if you make a mess of the medium. That’s not a punishment. That’s watering.”

They went out through the glass. The latch. Four women in a kitchen. Steam. A slate. A cloth in Nia’s hand that was no longer clean.

Sable stayed where the vessel had her.

She could feel her own climax cooling on the inner rim. She could feel the collar when she swallowed. She could read, if she dropped her eyes, the letters that faced the house. In the kitchen Ayla repeated “twenty-eight” once more to Tessa, and Tessa laughed under it, and Nia filled the kettle as if a mouth had not just been busy, and Lira looked through the glass at a crop that was no longer on a tray.

Sable’s hands found her own knees because they were not allowed the lip. The mist came on. Her nipples beaded. She did not look at the chair in the kitchen to see whether the stack had been moved. The stack had ceased, in her body, to be an option. The pot held. The label faced the house. When the bottle clicked she lifted her head into the collar and took what it dropped, and in the kitchen Nia said, not loudly, “There. That’s a plant that knows where it lives.”

They did not take her out of the pot to dress the room.

Nia came at the next click with a cloth and washed the crown the way she had promised, warm water down the collar, over the breasts, into the wet seam where Sable met the vessel. Sable lifted for the lozenge without being told. Tessa stood in the glass with her mug and watched the lift as if it were still a new trick. Ayla took recovery heat off the inner thigh and wrote it down and did not ask for a second number yet.

Then Lira said, “Bring the others in. I want the annex to read as a collection before anyone walks the kitchen.”

The others were plants.

Tessa held the door. Nia carried. Orchids first, three of them, pale throats and long sprays, pots glazed the same family of color as Sable’s vessel. They set them on low stands at her left, close enough that when the mist came on it beaded on those leaves and on Sable’s nipples in the same weather. Ferns after, two wide bowls of them, fronds already breathing the humidity, placed at her right so a person in the kitchen would see green, then the collar plate, then green again.

A Fong in the middle.

Sable watched her own name sit in that company and felt the climax from the morning try to live again between her legs, a useless, faithful pulse. No one put a shirt on her to make the arrangement decent. The arrangement was the decency.

Ayla marked the positions on her slate as if the stands were coordinates. “If a visitor asks what she’s doing in a pot she can see the answer without us writing an essay. She’s with her kind.”

Tessa snorted, fond. “Her kind is wetter.”

“Her kind blooms on a clock,” Nia said, and wrung the cloth. “Lira. Who’s coming.”

“Three,” Lira said. “House guests. They keep collections of their own. They know how to walk an annex without touching a crown unless they’re invited. They will say the names out loud. I want Sable to hear the list.”

She came to the glass and opened it and stood inside the mist with her hand on the rim of Sable’s pot, not on Sable’s skin. When she spoke she did not lower her voice for privacy. The kitchen was going to hear it. The annex was going to take it into the leaves.

“This is not a trial night that we liked and kept going,” Lira said. “I want that finished in the room. The platform was a tray. The campus bench was a tray. The unit was a dry mistake we let her sleep in so her body could tell the truth. The pot is not a tray. We do not pot a crop for a week and then knock it out and put it back on a roster. Transplant is a one-way handling. You don’t get the old root system back. You don’t get the shirt back. You don’t get a door that means evening and a door that means morning. The collar stays. The label faces the house. Nutrition stays on the timer. When she needs to be washed, Nia washes the crown in the vessel. When she needs to be opened, she is opened in the vessel. When she is allowed a yield, Ayla writes it down and we leave her shining, because a potted specimen does not get walked to a sink to compose herself.”

Sable’s hands wanted the lip. She put them on her knees. The collar made her swallow against padded warmth. Lira’s fingers tapped the glaze once, a grower’s tap.

“Permanence is not a speech I give her to frighten her,” Lira said. “It is the climate. Orchids do not go home with the guests. Ferns do not take transit. A Fong does not stand up at the end of a viewing and ask whether the stack is still on the chair. The stack is gone. The unit will be empty long enough for the Architect to release it, and then it will be someone else’s dry air. She lives here. She sleeps in the medium. She comes in the pot or she does not come. If that frightens anyone who walks through, they can look at the ferns. If it does what it is meant to do, they can look at her.”

Tessa had gone still in the way she did when she wanted her hands and had been told to wait.

Nia’s mouth was parted.

Ayla wrote, not the speech, the time the speech ended, as if even language had a column.

Lira tipped Sable’s chin until Sable had to see her.

“You already took it,” Lira said, and now it was closer, hotter, still not tender in the ordinary way. “You lifted your own head into the collar for a lozenge. You came on Nia’s mouth with your eyes on the glass. You did not ask for the chair. So I am not asking you if permanent is what you want. I am telling the house what it is looking at. A stationary crop. Nude because that is how a crown is shown. Labeled because visitors should not have to guess. If you ache, you ache in the pot. If you shake, you shake in the pot. If you last twenty-eight seconds again, Ayla will say twenty-eight again, and then we will drink tea, and you will still be here when the cups are empty. That is the whole future. It is not a metaphor. It is a placement.”

Sable’s eyes had gone wet without her permission. Between her legs she was slick enough that the inner rim of the vessel had a new mark. Lira looked down at that and did not smile.

“There,” Lira said to the others. “That’s the answer in the medium. Let them in.”

The guests came through the kitchen like people who had been in wet rooms before.

Three women. Coats off already. One gray at the front, one with orchard dirt still faint in a thumbnail, one younger, a slate of her own held against her hip. They did not gasp. They did not ask Sable her name. They stopped at the kettle and looked through the glass first, the way Lira had wanted, and the gray-fronted one spoke as if she were reading a bed.

“Orchids,” she said. “A Fong. Ferns.”

The younger one smiled with only her mouth. “Centered. Good. I hate a specimen shoved to the side like you’re ashamed of the heat.”

“Come in,” Lira said. “Mist won’t hurt you. Don’t handle the sprays. You may stand at the rim. Tessa will turn her if you want the bloom.”

They stepped into the annex. Humidity took their shirts at the spine. The orchard-thumb woman crouched to the ferns first, polite, and then she rose and her eyes went to the plate at Sable’s throat and stayed there long enough that Sable felt the letters.

“Fong,” she said, tasting it. “Young. She’s still showing shock in the face. The body’s already past it. Look at the crown.”

“She’s been taken once this morning,” Ayla said from the kitchen side of the glass, slate visible. “Twenty-eight. Nine after. We haven’t written a second. This is viewing.”

Tessa came to the pot’s left and set her bare hands on the rim.

“Do you want her opened,” Tessa asked the gray-fronted guest, as if asking whether someone wanted a flower turned to the light.

“Yes.”

Tessa did not ask Sable. She put two fingers into the heat that had been waiting since Lira’s speech, slow, and spread her just enough that the visitors could see what the pot was for. Sable’s sound went up into the orchid sprays. Her hips tried the vessel and the vessel refused. Tessa held her there, exhibited, shining on the glaze, and spoke across her the old way.

“She stays wet through talk. That’s why she’s in the middle and not on a side stand. You can smell her from the ferns. Nia washed her an hour ago and she’s already a problem again.”

The younger guest had come close enough that Sable could feel the air of her sleeve. She did not touch. She read the collar, then Sable’s tight nipples, then the place Tessa was showing.

“Does she come for viewing,” the younger one asked, “or only for the house.”

“For the schedule,” Lira said. “Not for manners. If Ayla wants a number while you’re here, you’ll hear it. If she doesn’t, you get the open crown and the label and the fact that she doesn’t get to close her knees.”

Nia had taken the cloth again without being told, a reflex, and then stopped herself. “I can blot the rim. I won’t blot her.”

“Leave the rim,” the orchard-thumb woman said. “I like a pot that admits what it’s doing.” She circled behind the orchids, then behind Sable, and looked at the nape above the collar. “Clean tie. You can see the stem. That’s proper transport.”

Tessa turned her fingers a degree and Sable shook. Tessa took them out before it could become a yield and wiped her own hand on a cloth Nia held out, not on the medium. “That’s the view,” Tessa said. “She’s not a fern. Don’t stand there hoping she goes modest.”

They did not. They stood in the mist and talked about the orchids’ spikes and the ferns’ spread and the Fong’s color in the same tone, and when the gray-fronted one said, “We’ll have something like her by spring,” she said it looking at Sable’s mouth.

Lira’s hand settled on the collar, a quiet claim that was only climate.

“You can have a cutting of language,” Lira said. “You cannot have this one. She’s established. She doesn’t travel.”

Sable came without a mouth on her—small, helpless, a ripple that pulled a sound out of her and left a fresh mark on the inner rim. Ayla’s stylus lifted, then set down again.

“I didn’t start a clock,” Ayla said. “That one isn’t a column. That’s the speech and the list. I’ll take a real number tonight if Tessa wants her hands back.”

Tessa looked at the visitors and at the wet shine and at Lira.

“After they go,” Tessa said. “I’m not performing a yield for coats that just came in off the walk. They got the list. They got her open. That’s a viewing.”

The guests took it without offense. They finished the circuit: orchids, the plate, the ferns, Sable’s shaking knees under the mist. At the glass the younger one glanced back once, as if checking that the center specimen had not been moved, and then they were in the kitchen again, coats, voices dropping to ordinary house talk, the kettle, a laugh that did not need Sable in it and still had her in it.

Nia washed the crown. She was gentle and not shy. She thumbed Sable’s clit once under the cloth, not to finish her, to settle the leftover tremor, and Sable jerked in the pot and made the orchids’ sprays tick against each other.

“Easy,” Nia murmured, to the room, to the medium. “She’s not going anywhere. That’s the point.”

Lira shut the glass when the front door had closed on the guests. The annex held its weather. Orchid, Fong, fern. Tessa already rolling her sleeves for the number Ayla would accept as real.

Sable sat in the vessel with Lira’s speech still in the collar, with her own name in a list of plants, and when she came the second time it was on Tessa’s bare fingers with Ayla saying *thirty-one* toward the ferns, and no one offered her a way to stand, and the orchids went on breathing as if a woman shaking in a labeled pot were part of how a room like this stayed alive.

Morning was mist and the first click.

Sable lifted her head into the collar and took the lozenge. Swallowing was a small movement the padded rim already knew. In the kitchen Nia wrung a cloth. Ayla woke the slate. Lira checked the medium at the hip with the edge of her hand and went back to the kettle.

Nia washed the crown in the vessel. Warm cloth, throat, breasts, the wet line where body met pot. She thumbed nothing on purpose. She rinsed and stepped away.

“She’s clean enough for climate,” Nia said. “No hands until Tessa’s here. I want Ayla to see what the room does by itself.”

Ayla came in with the wand only. Temple. Underside of each breast. Inner thigh above the chips. She did not part her.

“Heat’s up. No one has been in her since last night.” A mark on the slate. “Leave her to the weather.”

They left her.

Hours of sprays and fronds and kitchen sounds through glass. The mist came on and went off and did not care whether she ached. She ached anyway. The inner rim went dark with it. She kept her hands on her knees.

When Tessa arrived she brought her jacket, her gloves, and a small pale canister with a narrow mouth. She set the canister on the kitchen table, where Sable could see it through the glass, and poured tea as if the object were sugar.

“Lira.”

“I see it.”

Tessa turned the canister once with two fingers. She did not make a mystery of it.

“This is for her throat,” Tessa said. “Not for her mouth as a treat and not for her sex. It is an agent that numbs the vocal cords. Both of them. After I spray her she will breathe and she will swallow and she will be able to take a lozenge. She will not be able to speak. The cords will not make words. That is the whole mechanism. I want it said in the kitchen before I walk it in, so no one looks surprised and turns it into a scene.”

Nia’s cloth paused in her hands.

Ayla looked up. “If she can’t speak I lose a variable.”

“You have her stomach,” Tessa said. “You have the shake. You have what she leaves on the rim. You do not need a Fong to announce that she is close. You can see it.” She drank. “Plants don’t speak. Have you ever stood in a house and heard an orchid ask for the window. It would be silly. It would break the room. She has been putting please on my inspect since the campus table. That is leftover human noise on a labeled pot.”

Lira stood in the glass and looked at Sable’s throat above the collar.

“How long,” Lira said.

Tessa’s mouth did something small and pleased, and she let the heat of the answer sit before she spent it.

“The numbness holds for weeks. In some throats, months. In some throats it does not lift. I am not going to stand here and give her a calendar. If the cords wake, they wake. If they do not, she is a quiet specimen for the life of the pot. I have used this on a crop that talked again in the autumn. I have used it on a crop that never did. I did not tell either of them which they would be. That would have been a conversation. She is not owed a conversation about whether this is a season or a climate.”

Sable’s lips had parted. The kitchen air felt thin.

Nia said, carefully, “She uses her throat for the lozenge.”

“Swallowing is a different work,” Tessa said. “The spray does not take that. It takes speech. It may give it back. It may not. If a guest asks why the Fong doesn’t greet them, you say plants don’t speak. If she looks at you like she wants to bargain for a month, you look at the plate. The plate does not bargain.”

Ayla’s stylus hovered. “Write ‘duration unknown’ or write ‘possibly permanent.’”

“Write both,” Tessa said, and the way she said *permanent* went down Sable’s body as if Tessa had put a thumb on her. “Let her hear the second one. That’s the heat. Not the cold in her mouth. The not knowing whether she will ever make her own name again.”

Lira’s hand found the latch.

“In the vessel,” Lira said. “Don’t take her out to make it medical. Name it again when the collar is in your hand. I want it on her skin, not only on the table.”

They came in together. Mist on their sleeves. Tessa left the gloves in her pocket. She stood at the rim and looked at Sable fully.

“You can still answer,” Tessa said. “That is why I am talking now. Listen, because I will not repeat this for your sake after the cords go. This canister sprays a numbing agent onto the vocal cords. After it lands you will not speak. Not today. Not tomorrow. For weeks at least. For months, perhaps. It might be permanent. I am not promising you your voice in the spring. I am not promising you your voice at all. If that makes you wet, I can already see that it does. If that makes you want to argue, argue now. You have a minute of a mouth that still works.”

Sable’s voice came out thin and used.

“Might.”

“Yes,” Tessa said, pleased she had chosen the hottest word. “Might. A plant does not get a guarantee. A plant gets climate.” She glanced at Lira. “She understood it. That’s enough sentence.”

Sable tried another, and the shape of *don’t* was in it, and also the shape of something that was not don’t. Tessa watched both and shook her head once.

“That is the noise I am taking. Lira.”

Lira tipped Sable’s chin up and held the collar steady, throat exposed above the plate. Ayla did not start a pleasure clock. Nia had both hands on the rim.

Tessa thumbed the canister.

The spray was fine and cold. It hit the open well of Sable’s mouth and the front of her throat. She coughed once against Lira’s hand. The second pass was shorter,

aimed where speech lived. Tessa capped the canister and set it on the nearest orchid stand.

“Close your mouth,” Tessa said. “Swallow. That is allowed. Try to say Fong.”

Sable swallowed. The collar moved. Something in the deep of her throat went thick and then distant. She shaped the label.

Air. A scrape. No word.

Tessa’s face eased.

“There. The cords are numb. That is all that happened. She is not dying. She is not being punished. She is being made consistent with the ferns.” She leaned on the rim, close enough that Sable had to see her mouth. “Weeks. Months. Maybe always. Every lozenge you take, you can wonder which. Every guest who reads your plate, you can wonder if you will ever correct them. You won’t. Plants don’t speak. How silly that would be.”

Sable tried again, harder. Nothing that would have crossed a kitchen. Heat flooded her face and the pot together. She slicked the inner wall in a sudden, helpless line. Tessa looked down and let that be the rest of the lecture.

“Of course,” Tessa said. “The maybe-forever went to the crown. Ayla, not yet. Climate first. I want her to sit in the not-knowing without a mouth on her. If you clock her now you are clocking the spray. Clock her when she has had an hour to understand she might already be done talking for her life.”

Ayla wrote: *cords numbed. duration unknown. possibly permanent.*

They left her.

The canister stayed on the orchid stand. Sable sat in the vessel and worked her throat and got breath, swallow, a raw little sound when the mist hit her nipples. No edges of words. The silence had weight. It sat in the collar with Lira’s old speech and made the word *might* into a pulse between her legs. She put her hands on her knees. She did not look away from the glass. There was no one to say *wait* to.

In the kitchen Lira spoke to the house channel, short.

“The dry unit can go,” she said. “There is no one to return to it.”

She did not look at Sable when she said it. Nia’s mouth tightened, not unkind. Ayla wrote.

Tessa drank her tea and watched Sable try, once, to shape a name, and fail, and shine.

“She’ll spend the whole morning on *permanent*,” Tessa said, not quietly. “Good. I want that in the tissue when Nia takes her.”

By midday Ayla said, “Now.”

Nia brought the cloth and the mouth. Tessa brought her bare hands. Lira took the collar in her palm and kept Sable’s head from dropping.

Tessa opened her for Nia, two fingers, a grower’s spread, and talked because Sable could not.

“See. No please. No bargaining about the months. That’s a crown.” She turned her wrist. Sable’s sound came out useless and wet. “She can still cry. I took the sentences, not the body. If the cords never wake, this is how she comes for the rest of the placement. Quiet. Labeled. Wondering. Nia.”

Nia’s mouth closed on her.

The clock started. Sable had no word for the heat and no word for *always*. She had hips that could not lift out of the fit and a throat that could not ask whether spring would give anything back. Nia was slow and thorough. Tessa’s free hand rolled a nipple, idle.

“Plants don’t tell you when they’re close,” Tessa said. “You look at the tissue. You don’t wait for a request. Ayla.”

“I see the abdomen,” Ayla said. “Hold her.”

Sable shook in the vessel. The orchids ticked. She came on Nia’s mouth with a broken breath that never became a name, and Ayla said, “Twenty-four,” into the ferns, and then, after the second wave Nia did not let her escape, “Six.”

Nia rose, chin shining, and washed the crown around Tessa’s fingers until Tessa pulled out.

“She didn’t try to talk through it,” Nia said. “That’s the agent. I’ll wet her throat with the evening cloth. The spray dries the front.”

“Water,” Lira said. “Not a conversation about how long.”

Nia held a cup to Sable’s mouth. Sable drank. A drop ran into the collar. Nia thumbed it off the plate so the letters stayed clean.

FONG.

Afternoon was climate. Lozenge. Mist. No hands. Sable dozed and woke and found the canister still there and her voice still gone and the word *might* still working in her like a finger that would not take its pad away. Once she formed, inside, Lira’s name. Nothing left her mouth. The ache that followed wanted a hand she did not get until evening.

Evening was Tessa’s inspect.

Gloves on, then off. Two bare fingers. A look at the color, the heat, the way Sable’s throat worked soundlessly when Tessa said, “Bloom.” Tessa held her at

the edge until Sable’s silent mouth was wide and then she stopped, wiped her hand, and spoke to Lira.

“That’s a plant at dark. Don’t come in here and ask her if she is frightened it will last. She will only slick the pot. She already is.”

“I wasn’t going to ask,” Lira said.

Tessa’s thumb, almost idle, brushed the numb line of Sable’s throat above the collar.

“Weeks,” Tessa said, softer, for the tissue, for the heat. “Months. Maybe this is already the rest of her mouth. Let her sleep on that.”

Ayla took a last heat off the thigh. Nia checked the medium and the bottle arm. Lira dimmed the annex. The orchids became shapes. Tessa left the canister on the kitchen counter by the jar, where a tool lived.

Sable’s knee fell the way Ayla liked.

She slept sitting, labeled, wet at the rim, her cords quiet, the not-knowing still ticking in her like a second timer. In the dark, Lira passed the glass once and did not tap it. There was nothing to answer with. A Fong did not speak. Whether she ever would was no longer a question the house had to hear.

She woke because the lozenge clicked, and the first thing in front of her was her hands.

They were green.

Not the annex light. Not a shadow off the ferns. A true color in the palms, in the creases, in the beds of the nails. Sable lifted them off her knees. The color moved with her. She turned them over. The backs were the same.

She looked down.

Her breasts were green. The nipples darker, a deeper leaf, already tight in the mist. Her belly. The soft of her waist where it met the rim. Her thighs above the medium. Between them the crown of herself was green too, glazed, the folds a shade richer than the rest. A strand of hair had come loose and lay across one breast. She picked it up. It was green to the end she could see. Not black. Not the color she had knotted for a night shift. Green in her hand, green where it had been resting on green skin.

She could not see her own throat. She could feel the collar on it, and the plate against the front, and when she swallowed the rim moved. The green, if it had gone that high, was for whoever stood at the glass.

A sound tried to leave her and did not. Air. The numb cords. She was a green thing in a pot that could not say what it was looking at.

In the kitchen Lira was already at the glass. Nia beside her with the cloth, both of them stopped.

Lira did not speak to Sable.

“The supplement is working,” she said to Nia. Even. A grower who had been waiting on a color. “Look at her. Skin, hair. That’s a take.”

Nia set the cloth down. She came through the latch without being told. The mist took her sleeves. She stopped at the rim and did not wash anything yet. She took Sable’s wrist, turned the palm up, and then lifted the loose green strand and held it to the light. Her eyes went to the throat above the plate, the part Sable could not check.

“All the way through,” Nia said. Her voice had gone low. “Throat matches the hands. Hair matches the throat. I thought we’d get a cast on the fingers and have to wait. She finished the color overnight.” She let the hair fall back onto Sable’s breast. Green on green. “Lira. Come in. I want you to see the crown before I put water on it.”

Lira came. Ayla was in the doorway with the slate. Tessa was not in the house yet. The three of them stood at the pot and looked at a body that had been one color at dark and was, in the morning, another.

Ayla’s stylus did not move at first.

“Even,” she said. “No patches. Throat, chest, the hair against it. Nipples went darker. I want a heat map before anyone decides this is only pretty.”

“It’s not only pretty,” Nia said. She had not let go of Sable’s wrist. Her thumb moved, small, over the green of the pulse. “She’s wet. Look at the rim.”

The inner glaze had a fresh mark. Sable could feel it, and she could see it when she looked down: green folds, shining, nothing about them private on a body this color. She tried to close her knees. The pot did not allow it. Her green hands slid on her green thighs and stopped where the medium started.

Lira put two fingers under Sable’s chin and tipped her face up. Sable saw Lira. Lira saw the throat.

“Eyes stayed,” Lira said to Ayla. “Good. I don’t want a guest thinking we painted a statue. She’s a crop that took a supplement and kept a face.” She looked at the hair against the green breast. “Don’t tie it up this morning. I want it down on her. I want Tessa to walk in on the fall of it.”

Nia had started, without announcing it, to wash. The cloth was warm on a green chest. It caught on a nipple and Sable’s hips tried the vessel. Nia watched the nipple darken under the pass of cloth.

“She’s more responsive in the green,” Nia said. “Or I’m touching her differently because I can see her. I don’t know which.”

“Log both,” Ayla said. The wand looked pale against her. Temple, at the green hairline, where Sable felt it and could not see it. Underside of a breast. Inner thigh. “Heat’s up from yesterday’s morning. Same hour. No one has been in her. The color arrived and the crown came with it.”

Sable’s mouth opened. Nothing came out that was a word. The want went between her legs, a throb she could see the shine of when she looked. Every slick place showed.

Lira saw the throat work on a word that would not form. She did not put a hand between Sable’s legs.

“Leave the crown,” she said to Nia. “Tessa will want the first look at a green bloom. You can have her after. If you wash the yield off now she’ll only make more, and I want the first of it on her when the door opens.”

Nia’s cloth stopped at the lower belly. She looked at the green folds and at her own hand and took the hand away.

“She’s going to drip on the medium if we wait.”

“Then the medium gets a green girl on it,” Lira said. “That’s what it’s for.”

They stayed in the annex. Ayla wrote. Nia stood at the ferns and kept looking back. When the bottle clicked, Sable lifted her face into the collar and took the lozenge. She felt the plate move. She did not see it. Lira did.

Tessa came in from the kitchen already talking, and then she stopped.

The jacket was half off. The gloves were in her hand and not on. She looked at the pot, at the fall of green hair, at the breasts, at the open green crown, and the gloves hit the chips.

“Oh,” she said.

She crossed the annex and put both hands on the rim.

“You did this overnight,” she said to Lira, and her eyes stayed on Sable. “You didn’t tell me the supplement had gone this far.”

“I told you it was in the lozenge,” Lira said. “I didn’t know the take would be complete by morning. It is. Throat too. She can’t see that part. We can.”

Tessa lifted a handful of the green hair and let it spill over her own wrist. She watched it against her skin. She was not green. Sable saw her thighs press together once, inside her trousers, a motion she did not hide.

“Plants don’t speak,” Tessa said, almost to the hair. “And now she doesn’t have to be told. Look at her. A guest reads the plate because the color already

answered.” She dropped the hair. Her bare hand weighed a green breast, thumb on the darker nipple. Sable’s sound was breath. “She’s hot. The green doesn’t cool her. Ayla.”

“Already mapped. Higher than yesterday. She saw what she could see of herself. That’s in the number.”

Tessa’s other hand went down the green of her belly to the wet. She parted her with two fingers and held her open. Sable could see that: the green of her, slick, the clit a darker bud, Tessa’s ordinary fingers against it. Tessa stared.

“That’s a bloom. Nia. Come here.”

Nia came. Her hand found Sable’s green knee and stayed.

“I’m not waiting,” Nia said. “Lira. She’s shaking. If I stand here I am going to put my mouth on her in front of all of you.”

“Then put it,” Lira said. “Ayla, start when she closes. Tessa, hold her. I want the yield on a green body written down.”

Tessa’s fingers stayed, spreading. Nia went to her knees in the chips. The pot put Sable at her mouth. Green hair fell forward. Lira gathered it back so the collar stayed clear for the glass. Sable felt that. She saw Nia’s mouth meet the green she could look down at.

The heat was worse for having a color. Her green thighs tried to close on a vessel that would not let them. The ferns were the same family of color. She was not set beside the plants. She was the one they had been arranging the room for.

Tessa talked, because the cords would not.

“Take the green. Look at her stomach. Look at her hands. She’s not hiding them.” A squeeze at the nipple. “Weeks of silence, maybe always, and now this. A guest is going to say orchids, a Fong, ferns, and the Fong is the green one in the middle that can’t answer. Lira. Tell me it holds.”

“It holds while she takes the lozenge,” Lira said. Her hand was firm in the green hair. “Miss a feeding and it fades. She will not miss a feeding.”

Nia closed on the clit.

Ayla said, “On.”

Sable came fast. The green of her shook in the pot. A second wave took her while Nia stayed. Her hands, green, found Nia’s shoulders and held, and no one moved them. What her throat did, she could not see. Lira could.

“Nineteen,” Ayla said. “Eight after. Fast for a morning. I’m writing the color next to it.”

Nia lifted her mouth. A trace of shine on her chin, and under it the green of Sable, still open, pulsing. She looked at the hair in Lira’s hand.

“Don’t tie it up. Not today. I want it on her breasts while she drips.”

Tessa drew one wet finger along the green of Sable’s inner thigh, a line of yield on a leaf.

“Permanent in the throat, maybe,” she said. “And this, as long as she eats. She will never tell anyone she used to be another color. The plate has the name. The pot has the rest. We have the part she can’t check.”

Lira let the hair fall. It spilled over green breasts, one strand sticking to the damp at Sable’s mouth. She did not brush it away. She sat in the vessel, the color of the room in every place she could see, and felt the collar on the place she could not, and the room looked back as if a long job had finally shown.

Nia washed her after, gentle, not shy. The green did not come off. Tessa watched to be sure. Ayla took one more heat at the thigh and wrote it under the word *take*. Lira reset the bottle arm.

No one offered a tie for the hair. No one offered a way out of the pot. When the mist came on, it beaded on the skin Sable could see and on the ferns in the same weather, and she, silent, shining, lifted her face for nothing except the next lozenge.

She woke wet.

Not the night’s leftover. A living slick, already at the rim, her green folds swollen enough that the air of the annex felt like a touch. The lozenge had not dropped yet. Nothing had handled her. Her hips tried the pot in a small helpless grind and the vessel refused, and the refusal went through her like a thumb.

Then the new weight registered.

At the tops of her shoulders, where the collar’s line ended and her back began, something had come in that was not skin. She could not see it. She could feel it: two soft blades, short, lifting when she breathed, brushing the green of her upper arms when she shifted. A third, smaller, lower on the spine, caught against the rim of the pot when she tried to sit straighter. Leaves. The word arrived without a voice to put it in. They moved when she shivered. She shivered because she was aching, and they answered.

Her hands were still green. Her breasts were still green, nipples dark and drawn so tight they hurt. Hair lay over them, green, and under the hair the leaves brushed at her shoulders. She reached back. A green finger met a surface smoother than skin, cooler, with a center rib she could trace. The touch shot down her spine and landed between her legs. She made a sound that was only air and dripped on the medium.

The bottle arm dropped the lozenge against her breast. She took it with a shaking mouth. Swallowing moved the collar. The leaves lifted with the breath after.

Lira was at the glass. She had been there long enough to see the reach.

“Nia,” she said. “Don’t bring the cloth yet. She grew in the night.”

Nia came through the latch already looking at the shoulders. She stopped at the rim. One leaf had risen against Sable’s green arm, no longer than a hand, the same color as the ferns, the rib a paler line. Nia did not touch it first. She looked at Sable’s face, at the open mouth, at the wet on the inner glaze, and her own mouth parted.

“She’s beside herself,” Nia said. “Before anyone’s on her. Lira, the leaves are moving when she breathes.”

“I see them.” Lira stepped in. She put two fingers under a shoulder-leaf and lifted it off the skin. The underside was paler. Sable’s whole body jumped. A fresh line of slick ran down green and onto the chips in the pot. Lira held the leaf up and watched the crown pulse, not the leaf.

“Sensitive on the rib,” she said to Nia. “Don’t pinch them. She’ll come before Ayla has a clock, and I want this written. Ayla.”

Ayla was in the doorway. She did not speak for a moment. Then she came and stood where she could see the spine.

“Three,” she said. “Two at the shoulders, one at the mid-back, caught on the rim. They’re small. They’re real. She can’t see the back ones. She found them by hand.” The stylus ticked. “Heat is already absurd. I’m not mapping her until someone holds her still. She’s working the pot.”

She was. A slow grind the vessel turned into nothing, which only made it worse. The leaves brushed her arms. Every brush went to her clit. She could see her own green hands shaking on the rim she was not supposed to hold, and she could not make them stop.

Tessa came in on the end of that. Jacket off before she reached the glass. She saw the leaf Lira was still holding clear of the skin, saw the wet, saw the green hair stuck to Sable’s mouth, and laughed once, low, the sound of a woman who had been handed exactly what she wanted.

“Oh, that’s cruel,” she said, pleased. “She can’t tell us. She can only grow and drip.” She dropped her gloves in the chips on purpose. Bare hands. She took the leaf from Lira and ran a thumb once along the rib.

Sable’s head went back against the collar. Her thighs tried to close. The pot kept them open. A sound broke out of her that had no word in it at all, and she came,

small and sudden, shaking the leaves, a pulse Tessa felt through the rib under her thumb.

Ayla's stylus stopped.

"I didn't start," Ayla said. "That one is the leaf. Mark it as unclocked. Tessa, if you do that again I want the count."

"I'll do it again," Tessa said. She had not taken her thumb off the rib. She looked drunk on it. "Nia, wash around them, not over them. I want the skin under the back one. She's sitting on it. That's half of why she's lost."

Nia's cloth was warm. She worked the green of the throat, the breasts, careful where the shoulder-leaves lay, lifting each one with her free hand to wipe beneath. Every lift made Sable jerk and shine. When Nia reached the leaf at the spine she had to lean Sable forward in the pot, a hand between green breasts, and the leaf came unstuck from the rim with a soft sound. The skin under it was as green as the rest, damp from being covered. Nia washed it. Sable's hands found Nia's wrist and held on, green fingers tight, delirious, not asking. There was no asking left in her.

"She's going to go again if I stay here," Nia said. Her voice was rough. "The leaf is as hot as the crown. I can feel her pulse in it."

"Then stay," Tessa said. "Ayla. Now. I'm taking the front. Nia has the spine. Lira, hair off her face. I want the mouth while she can't use it."

Lira gathered the green hair. Tessa parted her, two fingers into heat that barely needed opening, and held her there. Nia's mouth did not go to the crown. It went to the leaf at the shoulder, the rib, a slow lick along the paler underside.

Sable broke.

Not one wave. A long helpless run of them, the pot knocking, leaves lifting and falling against Nia's mouth and Tessa's wrist, her silent mouth wide, eyes wet, green hands scrabbling at the rim and then at Tessa's arm. Tessa fucked her through it with two fingers and did not let the thumb near her clit until Ayla said the abdomen had started, and then the thumb landed, still, and the stillness after so much was what finished her. She came hard enough that the back leaf slapped the rim. Nia groaned against the shoulder-leaf and did not stop licking it.

"Twenty-two," Ayla said, and had to say it twice. The second time her voice was thinner. "Then she didn't stop. I'm not putting a single number on the rest. Call it a run. Call it the leaves."

Tessa stayed inside her until the grinding became a shiver. She pulled out shining and wiped her fingers on the green of Sable's thigh, a deliberate streak.

“Plants don’t speak,” she said, close, almost kind, which was worse. “They put out leaves and they get tended. You don’t get to tell us they overwhelm you. We can see it. We’ll see it every time one of these moves.” She lifted the shoulder-leaf Nia had wet and blew on the rib, gentle, and Sable sobbed air and almost came again from that alone. Tessa smiled at Lira. “Don’t let anyone tie these down. They stay where they grew. If the pot rim catches the back one, we cut the rim, not the leaf.”

“I’ll have the rim taken down a hand,” Lira said. “Tonight she leans forward for the lozenge if she has to. Nia, she needs water. She’s spent and she’s still open.”

Nia gave her the cup. Sable drank badly, green hair in the way, a leaf ticking her arm with every swallow. Water ran into the collar. Nia thumbed it off the plate so FONG stayed clear, then, unable not to, kissed the rib of the shoulder-leaf once more. Sable’s hips kicked. Nia stopped herself.

“She’s not done,” Nia said. “She’s going to be like this until the leaves settle. Maybe after. I don’t know how you tend a crop that’s this far gone and still has to sit in a pot all day.”

“You tend her,” Lira said. “You don’t take her out. The leaves are not a reason to unpot her. They’re a reason the annex stays warm and someone is at the rim when she starts grinding on nothing.” She looked at the three blades, at the wet crown, at the green hands still trembling. “Ayla, note the count of leaves with the morning heat. If she puts out more by dark, we don’t act surprised.”

Tessa had not stepped back. She stroked the back leaf flat against Sable’s spine, slow, and watched the thighs try to close and fail.

“More would be fine,” she said. “A delirious green Fong with a back full of leaves, and no sentence in her. That’s a house I want to sit in. Leave her shining. I want to see the rib move when the next lozenge hits her breast.”

They left the cloth, not a cover. The mist came on. It beaded on the leaves and on the ferns and on the green of her breasts, and every bead that slid down a rib made her twitch and drip. She could not see the leaves. She could feel each one, alive, answering her breath, answering the ache that would not close. When the bottle arm dropped the lozenge, it struck above a nipple and the shoulder-leaf lifted, and she took the lozenge in a silent mouth, already gone, already waiting to be touched again for no reason except that she had grown.

By dark she had more than the three.

A pair at the hips, small, lifting when her thighs tried the pot. Another between the shoulder blades, longer than the first, so that when she leaned for the lozenge it dragged her green hair with it. Her arms were still arms. Her hands were still hands. The skin over her forearms had gone smoother, cooler, the

green deeper, and when Tessa circled one wrist the joint did not feel like a wrist so much as a place a stem had agreed to bend. Sable felt all of it. Her mind was her mind. The want in it had nowhere to go but the crown, and the crown had not changed except for the new thing above the clit.

She could see that one.

A bud, tight, green going to a paler green at the tip, set just above the clit on the green of her mound. Not in place of anything. The folds were still folds. The clit was still there, swollen, wet, stupid with being ignored while the house looked at leaves. The bud sat over it like a promise. When she breathed, it moved. When the hip-leaves brushed her arms, the bud ached in sympathy and she dripped down the pot.

Nia saw it when she came to wash.

She had the cloth. She had meant to work around the new leaves and wipe the shine off the rim. She stopped with her hand on Sable’s green knee.

“Lira.”

Lira looked. Ayla came because Lira had not answered yet. Tessa was already at the other side of the rim, thumb on the long leaf at the spine, which was why Sable could not hold still.

“Above the clit,” Nia said. “Not on it. A bud. She’s been soaking the medium since I opened the glass, and I haven’t touched her.”

“Brain’s the same,” Lira said. She tipped Sable’s face up, checked the eyes, the way a word still tried and died in a silent mouth. “She knows. Crown’s the same under it. The bud is extra. Ayla.”

Ayla did not use the wand first. She looked, close, while Tessa held the spine-leaf flat so Sable’s grind had nothing to help it.

“Separate from the clit,” Ayla said. “I can see both. If we stroke the bud I want a clock that starts at the first pass, not at the clit. Don’t blend them or the number is trash.”

Tessa’s mouth had gone soft. She left the spine-leaf and put two fingers on the mound, not on the bud, framing it. Sable’s hips kicked. The hip-leaves lifted and fell against her own arms. “It’s for coming,” Tessa said. “Look at her. She’s already there and no one has stroked it. Plants don’t get a second clit for conversation. They get a flower you touch when you want the yield.” She glanced at Lira. “I’m not waiting for a guest. Nia, hold a hip. Ayla, start when I actually touch the bud. Not this.”

Her framing fingers pressed the mound. Sable shook and did not come. The bud stood up a fraction, tighter, the pale tip catching mist.

“On,” Ayla said, and Tessa stroked it.

One pass. Thumb, slow, along the side of the bud, not the clit under it.

Sable came as if the touch had been a sentence she was finally allowed to finish. Hard, silent, the new leaves slapping her arms, the long one at her back dragging the rim, her green hands grabbing Tessa’s wrist and not pushing it away. The crown pulsed under the bud, slick flooding Tessa’s fingers, and the bud itself seemed to throb against the thumb. Tessa did not take the thumb away. She stroked again, a second pass, and the second wave hit before the first had left her thighs.

“Six,” Ayla said, voice thin. “From contact to clench. Second pass, she was already in it. I’m not calling that a recovery. Nia.”

Nia had made a sound. She was holding Sable’s hip and staring at the bud as if it had answered a wish she had not filed.

“Again,” Nia said. “Not yet. Let me see it after. Don’t wash it. I want it standing while she’s still coming down, if she comes down.”

She did not come down. The after was only a lower ache. Tessa took her thumb off and the loss was so sharp Sable’s mouth opened on nothing and her leaves lifted with the breath. The bud stayed proud of the mound, wet at the base from the crown under it, paler at the tip. Nia leaned in and did not stroke it. She breathed on it. Sable jerked, a ruined little clench, not a full yield, enough to mark the rim again.

“Breath does it,” Nia said, wrecked and glad. “Not as hard. Enough. Lira, if a guest breathes wrong she’s going to come in front of them.”

“Then she comes in front of them,” Lira said. “The bud is not a secret. The leaves are not a secret. Her mind is still in there. That’s why it’s obscene instead of simple. She can see the flower. She cannot see her throat, she cannot see her back, she cannot say what the thumb did. She can sit in the pot and know the next stroke ends her.”

Tessa wiped her fingers on the smoother green of Sable’s forearm, where the stem-feel started, and felt the give of it.

“Arms are changing,” she said. “Not gone. Don’t write them as hands forever. Crown stays a crown. I want the bud called a bud on the slate, not a second clit. We stroke the flower. The clit can be for when we’re being thorough.” She looked at Sable’s eyes. “You understand me. That’s the part we didn’t turn. Nod if the bud is what finished you, not my fingers in you. I wasn’t in you.”

Sable nodded. The leaves moved with it. A tear ran into the green at the corner of her mouth. She was still open, still throbbing, the bud aching for a third pass no one had offered.

Ayla wrote. Bud. Six. Leaves at hips, leaf at the spine longer, forearms cooling toward stem. Mind intact. Crown intact beneath.

Nia washed everywhere except the bud. Around it, careful, so the cloth would not count as a stroke. Sable whined air the whole time. When the cloth passed close, her hips chased and the pot refused, and the hip-leaves brushed her arms, and that nearly finished her again. Nia stopped, breathed out, and set the cloth aside.

“She needs the lozenge and then someone on that bud or she is going to grind herself raw on a vessel that doesn’t move,” Nia said.

“Lozenge first,” Lira said. “Then you. One stroke. Ayla clocks it. Tessa doesn’t get a third just because she found it. We are not spending her out before dark unless the number is the point.”

The bottle arm dropped the lozenge on her breast, beside a nipple, under a fall of green hair. She took it. The swallow moved the collar. The spine-leaf dragged. She looked down at the bud, pale-tipped, waiting, and at her own crown shining under it, and the looking was enough to make her drip.

Nia stroked the bud once.

Sable came on the stroke, six seconds or less, Ayla’s voice somewhere saying the number, the leaves lifting, her mind perfectly clear and perfectly useless. She knew what she was. She could not say it. The flower above her clit had the saying, and the house had the flower, and when Nia took her hand away Sable sat in the pot, delirious, open, already wanting the next pass more than she wanted a voice.

The bud had opened in the night.

Sable woke to the weight of it and looked down, and the looking knocked the breath out of her. Where the tight pale tip had been, a flower stood off the mound, large enough that it covered the top of her crown and still left the clit and the folds bare beneath it. Cream petals, broad, a little waxy with mist. The throat of it was coral, deep at the center, and the center was wet. Not the wet of her sex only. The flower had its own shine. When she breathed, the petals lifted and the coral throat showed, and the air on it went straight into her clit as if the two were wired.

She was already coming before she understood she had started. A small, shocked clench, silent, thighs failing against the pot, hip-leaves brushing her arms, the big flower trembling so the petals kissed the green of her belly. It did not finish her. It left her worse. The clit under the bloom was swollen, untouched, shining. The flower above it ached in every petal.

The lozenge hit her breast. She took it with a shaking mouth and a petal brushed her wrist on the way down. She jerked and dripped into the coral throat of the

thing she had grown.

Nia made a sound from the glass that was not a word she used on duty.

“Lira. Don’t let Tessa in first. She’ll have her hand in it before Ayla looks.”

“I’m here,” Tessa said, behind her. She had come through the kitchen without the jacket. She stopped at the latch and Sable saw her face change, the way it had changed for the green, and then go further. “Oh, that’s not a bud.”

They came in together. Ayla last, slate already up, and even she did not write for a moment. The flower was the size of a spread hand, cream against green skin, coral at the heart, seated just above the clit so that both were visible if you looked from the rim: bloom, then bare shining crown under it. The leaves at her shoulders and hips moved with her breath. The long one at her spine was caught on the rim again. Her eyes were clear. Her mouth was open and useless.

“Color held in the skin,” Lira said to Nia. “Flower’s new. Cream, coral throat. Crown underneath is still a crown. Mind’s still in the face. She’s already wet through the petals.”

“She came when she saw it,” Nia said. “I watched from the glass. It wasn’t a real yield. It was a start. She’s been open ever since.”

Tessa put one knee in the chips so her face was level with the bloom. She did not touch it. She looked at the coral center, at the clit below, at the way Sable’s green stomach jumped.

“Sensitive,” Tessa said. “All of it. Petals too, or only the throat.”

“Find out with a clock,” Ayla said. “One surface at a time. Outer petal first. If she comes, we know. Don’t go for the center because you want to.”

Tessa’s mouth twitched. She stroked one cream petal with the pad of a finger, edge to base, not the coral.

Sable’s head hit the collar. The flower shivered. A streak of slick ran from her crown down into the medium, and the petal itself seemed to flush a deeper cream where Tessa had passed. She did not come. She made a ruined air-sound and chased the finger with her hips, and the pot refused.

“Petal is hot,” Tessa said. “Not the finish. Center.”

“Wait,” Ayla said. “Nia, a petal on the other side. I want to know if they’re equal.”

Nia touched the opposite petal, a shorter stroke. Sable whined. Equal. Both of them watched the clit jump under the bloom, untouched.

“Center,” Ayla said. “On my word. Tessa. One pass through the throat of it. Not the clit.”

Tessa’s finger slid into the coral.

Sable came as if she had been held there all night for this. The flower pulsed around the finger. Petals clapped lightly against her belly and against Tessa's knuckle. Her clit, unstroked, throbbed in time, and the crown under the bloom flooded, a visible shine Tessa did not have to go looking for. The leaves lifted. The spine-leaf dragged the rim. She grabbed Nia's wrist with a green hand that felt, under the grip, smoother than a hand had a right to feel, and she did not let go until the second wave dropped her.

"Four," Ayla said. She had to clear her throat. "Contact at the center to clench. Four. Petals are lead-up. Throat of the flower is the yield. Clit underneath still moves. I'm writing it separate. Do not rub them together and call it one."

Tessa had not taken her finger out of the coral. She looked drugged. She drew the finger out slowly and the petals closed a little on the loss, then opened, wetter. Sable shook and did not come again, which seemed to disappoint her more than a second finish would have.

"She needs it stroked to end," Tessa said. "Breath won't do this one. The bud was cheaper. This is a flower you have to mean." She looked at Lira. "Guests can see it from the glass if she leans back. I'm not hiding it behind a leaf. A Fong with a cream bloom on the crown, and the crown still bare under it so nobody can pretend we only grew her a decoration."

Nia was staring at the coral. Her mouth was wet. She had not asked.

Lira saw it. "One lick. The center, not a feast. Ayla clocks. Then we stop or she will be useless for the lozenge and she is not missing a feeding. The green holds because she eats."

Nia leaned in. Her tongue went into the coral throat of the flower, one slow lick, and Sable came on it with a silent jolt that knocked a petal against Nia's cheek. Nia stayed for the length of the lick and no longer. She rose with cream-wet on her mouth and a look she did not put away.

"Three," Ayla said. "Faster with a mouth. Note it."

Sable sat in the after, delirious, the flower open and dripping onto the clit it did not replace. Every breath moved the petals. Every movement of the petals touched off a smaller ache. She could see all of it. She could not say any of it. Her mind was entirely occupied with the coral center and the fact that no one was touching it now.

Tessa stroked a petal once more, not enough, and watched the hips try.

"Large," she said. "Cream, coral heart, still a crown underneath, still a woman in the head. That's the whole show. Wash around it. If the cloth crosses the center I'll take the cloth away from you."

Nia washed around it. The care was its own torment. Sable leaked through the whole of it, petals trembling, clit bare and ignored and jumping anyway. When the bottle arm dropped the next lozenge onto the upper curve of a breast, she took it, swallowed, and looked down at the flower she had become, open in her lap, waiting for a stroke the house now knew exactly how to give.

They moved the ferns first.

Nia lifted the two bowls and set them against the kitchen glass, fronds still breathing. The space that opened beside Sable's pot was the size of another vessel. Sable watched it happen and could not ask. The flower in her lap opened a little at the change in air, cream petals, coral throat, and the clit under it jumped. She was wet before the door opened. She was always wet now. The leaves at her hips brushed her arms when she shifted, and that was enough to make the bloom tremble.

Lira unlatched the kitchen side. Tessa was with her. Between them, a woman.

Short. Blonde. Hair to her jaw, a little messy from the car. A soft face, pretty in a way that looked used to being told so, trousers and a pale shirt, boots she had not taken off yet. Twenty-three, if Sable had to guess, and guessing was all she had. The woman looked at the orchids. She looked at the ferns against the glass. She looked at Sable.

She smiled, the small polite smile of a guest in a wet room.

"Oh," she said. "She's lovely. I didn't know you kept one this big in the house."

Not a question about a girl. A comment on a plant.

Tessa's hand stayed at the blonde's back. "Annie Peck. This is the annex. The Fong stays where she is. You're beside her."

Annie nodded, still looking at Sable's flower. "Does it bloom all the time, or did I get a good day?"

"It blooms," Lira said. "Don't touch it. It's sensitive. You'll have your own crown to think about in a minute."

Annie laughed, short, nervous, not understanding, and that landed in Sable harder than a stroke. The flower's petals lifted. A shine gathered in the coral. Annie saw the shine and tipped her head, interested, the way a person looks at a drip on a leaf.

"It's wet," Annie said. "Do you mist them that much?"

"We don't have to," Nia said, from the rim. Her voice was careful. "Ayla, she's here. Weight after the clothes."

Ayla had the slate. She did not correct Annie. None of them did.

“Shirt,” Lira said.

Annie hesitated one second, looking at Sable as if a plant might be the wrong audience, and then she took the shirt off. Small breasts, pink nipples going tight in the annex air. Trousers. Underwear. She was compact, soft at the stomach, blonde everywhere it showed, and she stood on the scale with her arms crossed until Tessa moved them down.

“She doesn’t look,” Annie said, meaning Sable, and Sable was looking, and could not say so. “I mean she can’t. Obviously.”

“Obviously,” Tessa said.

They had the second pot already warm. Nia and Tessa lifted Annie the way they had lifted Sable, a transport, not a walk. Annie grabbed at Tessa’s shoulder and laughed again, breathless.

“This is the strange part, right? You said the fitting was the strange part.”

“This is the fitting,” Lira said.

They settled her. Medium up around her thighs. Rim at her waist. She was close enough that her arm would have brushed Sable’s hip-leaf if she leaned. She did not lean. She looked at Sable’s flower from the new height, curious, unafraid, a woman inspecting a neighbor specimen.

“Her color is so even,” Annie said. “And the leaves. Did you train those, or do Fongs just do that?”

“They do that,” Lira said. She fitted a collar. The plate was blank until she set it. PECK. Annie glanced at it, then at FONG, and smiled as if the rhyme of the labels were a kindness.

“Matchy,” she said. “That’s cute.”

Sable’s mind, untouched, heard cute. The flower opened wider. She dripped, a visible thread from the coral down onto the bare clit, and Annie watched it happen without once checking Sable’s eyes.

“See, it’s doing it again. Is that the mist?”

“No,” Ayla said. “Don’t put your hand through the petals. Tessa.”

Tessa was already at Annie’s pot, gloves off, a hand on the new rim. “Hair up. You’ll get a leaf or you won’t. Today you’re a woman in a vessel. She’s the display. You can talk. She doesn’t. Plants don’t.”

Annie blinked. “She doesn’t make any sound?”

“Body sound,” Nia said. “Not words.”

“Huh.” Annie settled her shoulders against her own collar and looked at the cream petals as if they might perform. “She’s really pretty for a plant. The flower especially. I thought it would be green, like the rest of her.”

Sable came.

Not a full run. A sharp silent clench from being called a plant in a pretty voice, the flower pulsing, petals knocking her belly, the clit under the bloom jumping where Annie could see it and did not know what she was seeing. Ayla’s stylus moved. No one stroked her. Annie made a small interested noise.

“It moved. Did I do that? I didn’t touch it.”

“You talked,” Tessa said. “She’s past needing a hand for every yield. Don’t be flattered. Be still while I check you took the pot.”

Annie went still, or tried. Tessa opened her with two fingers, clinical, a fit check, and Annie gasped in a voice Sable no longer had. Blonde, pink, wet enough to show she was not unmoved by the room. Tessa nodded at Lira.

“She’ll hold. She’s not a Fong. Don’t expect leaves by morning.”

“I didn’t,” Lira said. “Nia, the ferns stay against the glass. I want the two pots reading as the pair. Orchids on the far side. If Annie reaches for the flower, move her hand. She doesn’t know what it does.”

Annie heard that and laughed, uneasy, still not frightened in the right direction. “I’m not going to grab your specimen. She looks expensive.”

Sable shook. The hip-leaves brushed her. The flower gaped, coral wet, and Annie’s eyes followed a petal and not the face above it.

Nia brought Annie water. Annie drank and said thank you. Nia brought Sable the cup and did not wait for a thank you that could not come. When the bottle arm dropped the lozenge on Sable’s breast, Annie watched her take it.

“You feed her on a timer,” Annie said. “That’s good. I was worried I’d have to remember.”

“You won’t have to remember anything about her,” Lira said. “You’re beside her. That’s the placement. Tessa will tend you. Nia will tend her. If you speak to the Fong she will not answer. If you stare at the flower, stare. It is there to be seen.”

Annie looked. She had a soft mouth and a curious tilt to her head and no idea the green woman beside her had ever checked a leaf for a wage. Sable, mind entirely present, flower obscene in her lap, sat in the pot and was not registered, and the not being registered was a stroke no one had to give. She came again, quieter, four seconds of petals and a bare clit Annie glanced at and called, to Tessa, “the little part under the bloom,” and Tessa, without correcting the history of it, said, “Yes. Leave it.”

They left the ferns against the glass. Two plates faced the kitchen. FONG. PECK. Annie talked for a while about the heat and the collar and how strange it was to sit, and then she talked less. Sable did not talk at all. When Annie finally looked at her face, she looked the way a person looks at a blossom that has turned toward them, pleased, impersonal, already settling in beside it.

Several weeks on, the annex no longer read as a kitchen with two women in it.

It read as a collection. Orchids on the far stand. Ferns back in a low row, because the pots had become the center and the ferns had been returned to frame them. Mist on a timer. Two vessels. Two plates.

FONG. PECK.

Sable was almost all plant. The green had finished its work: skin, the long fall of hair that was no thicker now than young vine, leaves at the shoulders, the spine, the hips, a newer pair along the ribs that lifted when she was close. Her arms lay along the rim more than they held it, smoother, cooler, bending where a stem bends. Her legs did not leave the medium. The flower in her lap was larger than it had been the day Annie arrived, cream petals broad, coral throat wet without anyone having touched it yet that morning. Under it the crown remained, bare, shining, the clit swollen and visible if a guest crouched. Her mouth did not make words. It had not made words in weeks. The cords had not come back. No one still spoke as if they might.

Her eyes were the same eyes.

Lively. Wet at the lashes. Tracking the room. Full of a delirious, continuous ecstasy that had stopped being an event and become the way she lived in the pot. She looked at whoever stood at the rim as a woman looks at the hand that is about to end her, and the flower answered by opening.

Beside her, Annie Peck had caught up.

Green, not as deep. Leaves fewer, mostly at the shoulders and one at the breastbone. Hair still short, but green, clinging to her jaw. Stem-smooth along the forearms. Silent. Her flower was not cream. It was violet, broad as a saucer, with a gold throat that showed when she breathed. Under it, her own crown, pink gone toward green at the edges, wet. Her eyes were lively too, and newer to it. She still startled, sometimes, when a petal moved. Sable did not startle. Sable only shone.

The neighborhood garden club came through at four.

Six women, coats left in the kitchen, the gray-fronted one from the first viewing among them and not in charge. A club chair with a notebook. Two who had only come to see the orchids and stayed when they saw the pots. Lira let them into the annex in pairs. Tessa stood at Sable’s rim. Nia at Annie’s. Ayla kept the slate by

the glass and did not offer names beyond the plates.

“Orchids,” the chair said, doing the list properly. “A Fong. A Peck. Ferns along the back. The Fong is the mature one.”

“She’s been in longer,” Lira said.

A woman with soil under a nail crouched to read FONG, then looked up into Sable’s face by accident. She paused.

“The eyes,” she said.

“They don’t go,” Tessa said. “Rest of her did. You can see the yield in them before the flower moves. Watch.”

She stroked one cream petal, not the coral. Sable’s eyes fluttered and held, bright, desperate, grateful. The flower opened wider. A thread of wet ran from the throat of it down onto the bare clit. The club woman made a small sound and did not look away.

“She’s aware,” she said.

“She’s a Fong,” Tessa said. “Don’t talk to her. Plants don’t speak. If you want the bloom to show, breathe near the center. Don’t put a finger in unless Lira says. She’ll come if you do, and then the club has to stand here while she finishes.”

The chair wrote something down. Another woman had gone to Annie and was admiring the violet as if it were a cultivar she might request.

“The Peck is younger,” Nia said. “Same habit. Different throat. Gold, not coral. She came over the last weeks. Leaves are still short. Don’t compare them out loud if you’re going to be unkind. The Fong can hear you. It doesn’t matter. It just makes her drip.”

Annie’s eyes tracked the speaker. Wide. Gone. A hip-shift she barely had the stem for. Her violet petals parted and the gold showed, and the woman who had wanted orchids forgot the orchids.

“May I,” she said.

“Petal only,” Lira said.

A finger along a violet petal. Annie shook, silent, eyes fixed on the stranger’s mouth. Not a full yield. Enough that Nia had to steady the pot. Sable watched it from her own vessel, mind entirely present, flower aching in sympathy, and the watching was its own stroke. Her coral throat clenched on nothing. A club woman saw the eyes and said, softly, “She likes the other one being touched.”

“She likes being a specimen next to a specimen,” Tessa said. “Hold still.”

Tessa put her finger into the coral.

Sable came at once. Eyes open, locked on the club, delirious and clear, the leaves lifting, the vine-hair sliding on her green breast, the flower pulsing around Tessa’s finger while the clit below jumped in plain sight. Four seconds, maybe less. Ayla did not bother with a number for a tour. The chair of the garden club stopped writing. Someone said oh. No one asked whether the Fong had been a girl who worked nights. The eyes were the only human thing left on display, and they were not arguing. They were ecstatic.

Tessa drew the finger out. The petals stayed open, wetter. Sable did not look away.

“That’s the mature bloom,” Tessa said to the room. “Cream, coral heart, yield on a short stroke. The Peck is violet and gold and a little slower. Both of them sit. Both of them eat on the timer. Neither of them will answer a question about care. If you want a cutting of the method, ask Lira in the kitchen. You don’t take a leaf off these.”

The club moved as clubs move. Orchids. The plates. A careful fingertip on Annie’s gold throat that made her eyes spill and her flower shake. Ferns. Back to Sable, because the eyes kept following them, lively, wrecked, shining, a woman still inside a plant that had otherwise finished becoming one. When the lozenge dropped against her breast she took it without being told, vine-hair in the way, flower gaping, and a guest said, “Even the feeding is pretty,” and Sable came again, small, from the sentence, eyes on the speaker, grateful and gone, while Annie beside her breathed gold into the mist and did not know enough, yet, to be ashamed of matching her.