



# CREATURE

IN THE VAULT

TAMMY WALSH

# **CREATURE IN THE VAULT**

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FATED MATES OF BREEDER PRISON  
BOOK 6

TAMMY WALSH

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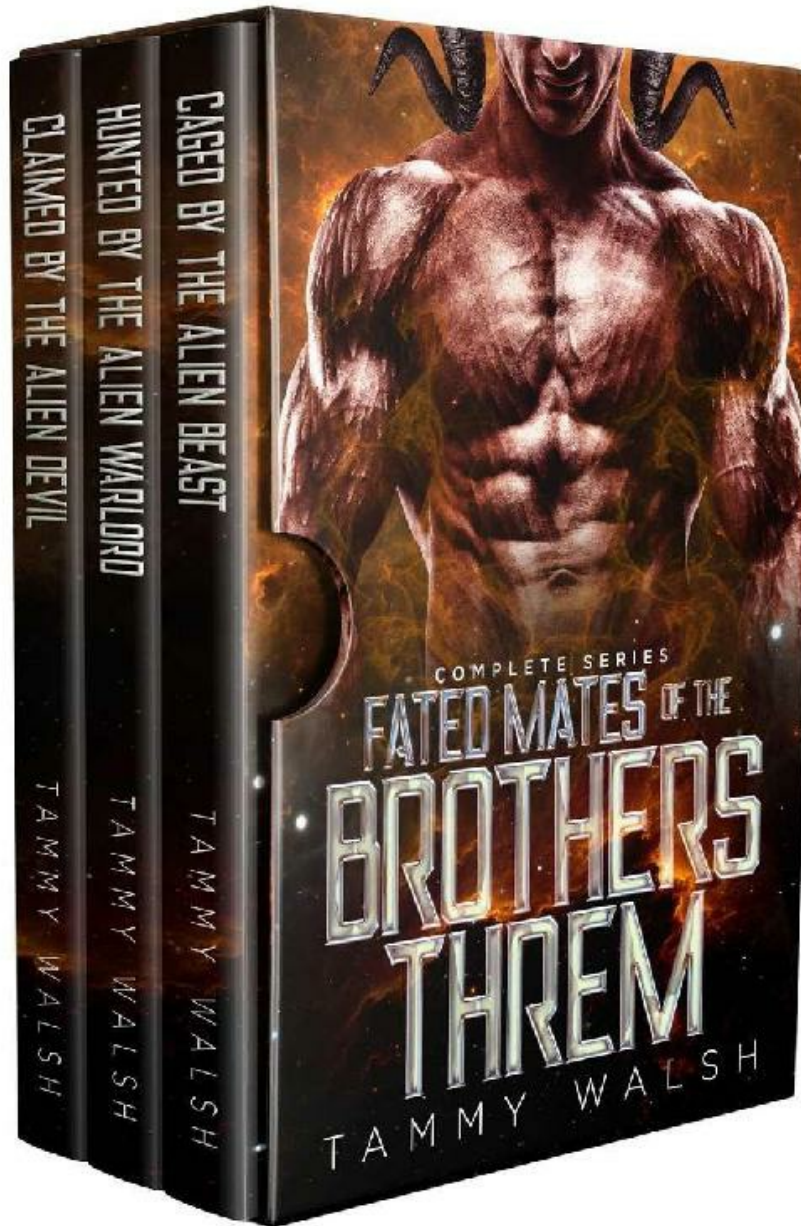
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**ELLIE**

**T**he guard shoved me forward and slammed the door shut.

Before I could utter so much as a whimper, he snapped the lock into place, and his heavy footsteps marched back the way he had come.

The way *we* had come.

Only now, it was just me in this cell.

In this *cage*, with this monster.

The room was dark; the only light source was a glass wall.

It looked out on the prison, but even that did little more than give the tiny space an otherworldly green hue as it was the middle of the night, and the other cells were silent.

I turned hesitantly toward the darkness.

Where I knew the beast to be.

Few knew this prisoner even *existed* at Ikmal.

Because, officially, he *didn't* exist.

I tried to keep the few details I knew about this prisoner from my mind.

I didn't want him to read them on my face.

I shuffled toward the dark sheathe of the shadows, my medical tools sweaty in my quivering palms.

I stopped at the darkness's edge, as sharp as a blade.

I looked back at the cell door.

It was pointless to do so as no one would come in and rescue me.

*Not now.*

I shuffled a little closer to the darkness and managed to lift my foot, preparing to step into the shadowy recesses—

And I froze, my foot hanging limply a foot off the ground.

*The shadows!* I thought. *The shadows... they moved!*

I was sure of it!

I stared into them even harder but wasn't sure if what I had seen — what I *thought* I had seen — had really taken place.

Maybe it was just a figment of my imagination.

*Was all this just a figment of my imagination?* I wondered.

I wished it was.

I wished it was all a terrible dream I would wake up from, finding myself in my comfy bed back on Earth.

The homeworld I had been abducted from.

Once again, I shook my head of the past and focused on the present moment, that darkness that might have been infinite.

Of course, it wasn't and only *seemed* that way because I knew what was in it.

I swallowed what little saliva I had in my throat and began to inch forward into the light.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," a deep voice growled.

I froze again, chastising myself for being foolish enough to go against my instincts and attempt to head into that blackness.

"If you choose to step into the dark," the voice snarled, "you must accept all that happens from that moment. Are you sure you wish to risk it?"

"W-What o-outcome?" I stammered, struggling to control my fear. "M-My n-name's E-Ellie. I'm h-here to h-help you."

Something slid across rough fabric, and heavy footsteps thumped the floor as they approached me.

I gazed up into the darkness, searching frantically for what was in the depths.

The footsteps — or were they *hoofsteps*? — grew so loud I realized the cell must be much larger than I thought.

Just when I thought the figure would appear from the shadows, they stopped.

I caught a glint of light that bounced off the edges of his horns... but no more.

Only the snorting rasp of his breath through his flared nostrils.

He breathed deeply and let out a long breath, and it sounded... hungry?

*Oh God, please help me!*

*I didn't know what I had agreed to!*

*I don't want to be here!*

I whimpered in the back of my throat.

“The future is a messy place,” the prisoner said. “Like fractals of light bouncing off a diamond’s face. Do you wish to finish taking that step?”

My foot was shaking now, and, too fearful of what might happen, I placed it back down onto my side of the cell, back into the light.

The beast snorted and returned to his bed, still wreathed in shadow.

It groaned as it took his weight.

Within moments, his breaths became heavy, and he slipped into a deep sleep.

I cast around at the half of the cell with light spilling across it.

There was no cot on this side of the room, but I was happy even for the floor.

*Just so long as I don't have to share a bed with that thing!*

I put the medical supplies down and used what I could to get comfortable.

The floor was hard and dug into my hips, but it was made a little more comfortable by the packs of bandages I lodged underneath myself.

I cupped my hands together and used them as a pillow.

I lay on my side facing the wall.

I couldn't bring myself to look into the darkness.

In *his* direction.

I had gotten off easily, I knew.

There weren't many Prizes who had escaped so easily their first night in this place.

Most would have been used by their Champions, who Claimed them after winning in the fighting pits.

But I *hadn't* been Claimed, and the prisoner in my cell was *not* a Champion.

He was something *entirely different...*

I shut my eyes and willed pleasant memories into my consciousness.

I wanted to dream of happy times, of a time and place far from here.

But all I found was a monster in the darkness.



TWO DAYS EARLIER, I had been coming to the end of my night shift at the hospital where I worked as a nurse.

It'd been a particularly tiring shift as the local football team had — against all the odds — won their match, and some of the fans had decided it was a good idea to break into the local high school and perform some late-night free running on the grounds... while drinking heavily.

A short time later, ambulances were dispatched, and they were brought to my hospital, where they all needed two dozen stitches.

And who had the honor of sewing these fools back together again?

Only the nurse with the steadiest hands.

Only the nurse with the most experience of stitching people back together again.

*Only yours truly.*

They didn't stop complaining as I fixed the assault they had committed upon themselves.

I had been coming toward the end of my shift too, and now with all these extra patients, I'd been forced to work more than two hours of overtime.

What was worse was that I had another shift beginning in less than six hours!

Exhausted and thankful the night was finally over, I tugged on my coat and began the walk home.

Taxis were extortionate at this time of night, and you were playing a game of Russian roulette about whether the bus would turn up on time.

The streets were still littered with broken glass from the celebrations of the successful football match — no matter whether they won or lost, damage was always done.

Still, I enjoyed the quietness of the main street before the full energy of the morning kicked in.

The shops were shut, and what few trucks I could hear in the distance were soothing.

Ordinarily, I would have taken a moment to pause and breathe in the cool night air, but tonight, I was just too exhausted.

I came to a stop at an alleyway that I *always* avoided due to the overpowering stink of urine and usually preferred to take the longer route, which added an extra twenty minutes to my journey.

But hey, I'm a safety girl and didn't think the extra time I saved was worth getting my throat cut.

But tonight, something beckoned me into that alleyway; something told me it would be different and worth taking the risk.

With the football hooligans having made a pass through the town's streets already, I was sure the dregs of society would have been scared off.

After all, no one liked to be confronted with the same violence they liked to dole out.

And so I turned and headed into the mouth of the alley.

It was deathly dark in there, more like a portal to another world than just shadows.

I clutched my coat closer to myself, glanced back at the mouth of the alley, the orange light of the street lamps like lanterns at the rim of the River Styx, and decided to push on.

The glowing light at the opposite end of the alley was only a few dozen feet away, I sensed no one else within that alley with me, so what was the harm?

I fortified my spirit and continued forward, keeping a close watchful eye on either side of me, my attention focused on the end.

The stink of urine hit my nostrils hard, causing me to slap a hand over my mouth and nose to block the worst of it, but it was too late.

It had already invaded my senses and made me gag.

I pushed forward to get past it, but as I scurried forward, the stink seemed to follow me — or maybe it just infected the whole alleyway, I wasn't sure — and I suddenly found myself alert and awake.

And now that my senses were on full-beam, I wondered how I had allowed myself to do something so stupid as to come down this alleyway in the first place.

Suddenly, dozens of cases of attacks flashed in the forefront of my mind, one after another; attacks, muggings, even attempted murders... all had been carried out in this alleyway of evil.

*You idiot, idiot, idiot!*

I had repeated the same mistake the foolish football fans had — and left my senses at the door and let the lazy part of my brain make the decisions.

The part of the brain that told me it was okay not to exercise, that it was only to sleep in, that it was okay to do the bare minimum at work.

And now it had allowed me to come into this alley *just to save twenty minutes?*

I hurried my footsteps forward and made a b-line for the glowing orange

of the exit ahead.

I was halfway through now, and if I kept going, if I could just keep up this pace, I would be there within two minutes.

The hard soles of my uncomfortable black shoes bounced back at me off the stained brick walls.

*Clack-clack, clack-clack, clack-clack.*

And it almost sounded as if someone were shadowing my every step.

I began to glance back, to look over my shoulder before thinking better of it.

Focus on getting out of that alley, and *then* I could look back all I wanted.

A dozen yards remained.

A dozen strides.

A dozen steps.

*Clack-clack.*

*Clack-clack.*

*Cla-clack.*

I paused, realizing my last footstep hadn't ended before the next one came to replace it.

How was that possible unless...

The blood drained from my face as I missed a step; the reflected sound bounced back at me *before my step had even been made.*

Someone else *was* in the alley with me!

Someone else *was* right on my heels!

Once again, I didn't turn to look back — I didn't want to give them any heads-up that I was onto them — and I shifted my weight instead, leaning forward and pointing my toes, going up onto the balls of my feet to race toward the exit.

I was ready to let the torture devices known as my shoes slip from my feet if necessary.

Just so long as I could escape.

I took one long stride and felt the wind press against my face.

I drew my arms back to launch into a full-on sprint and—

Powerful hands caught the nook of my elbow and, using my momentum against me spun me around and yanked me into the shadows.

I hadn't fully believed someone was behind me, hadn't completely given into the terror, and had assumed that once I reached the safety of the alley mouth opposite, I could look back into the empty concrete corridor and

breathe a sigh of relief, and even manage a little laugh at myself for being so silly.

*Of course*, there wasn't anyone else in the alleyway.

*Of course*, I was always going to get to the other end of it safely.

*Of course*, my imagination had just gotten the better of me.

And all the while, I would promise myself that I would never again put myself in that situation.

But my imagination wasn't wrong.

Someone *had* grabbed me, and now he pressed his weight against me, and his lavascious tongue dabbled at my cheek.

I turned my head to one side and screamed, but the figure's hand clamped over my mouth, silencing me.

The man wasn't taller than me, but he was strong, even as I struggled, I felt his weight pinning me to that wall.

He fumbled at his fly with his free hand and unzipped himself. "I was beginning to worry no one would come into the alley tonight. Pickings are slim when there's a win on the field."

I felt his tiny cock pressing against the front of my skirt.

My terror was complete.

I could barely bring myself even to believe this was happening.

*Fight him!* a tiny voice at the back of my mind bellowed. *Fight!*

But my muscles were rigid with panic.

I balled my fists and beat ineffectively against his chest, but he paid them no mind.

He reached toward my skirt and began to hike it up before scrabbling for my panties, hooking his hand over them with a well-practiced tug, and angled himself toward me.

"It'll be over in a minute," he said. "I won't take long..."

"No!" I yelled.

My anger exploded out of me in one single burst of outrage.

My hips were pressed against the wall, and I used the leverage to shove him back.

He was already off-balance while he attempted to enter me, and coupled with my attack, he stumbled.

I saw my opportunity and bolted back the way I had come.

I managed half a stride before something yanked on my hair.

He had a tight grip on it, and my head snapped back.

His arms wrapped around my waist, and he thrust me against the wall once more, this time knocking the air from my lungs.

“You little bitch!” he snapped. “I was going to be good to you. Now you’ve made me angry!”

He turned me around and hiked my skirt up higher around my waist.

His finger pressed against my asshole.

“No!” I screamed, finally finding my voice.

I yanked back my elbow to smack him in the face, but he was there to block it and twisted my arm painfully behind my back.

“Fight,” he said. “Go ahead. It makes it all the sweeter.”

He smacked my ass, and I felt his wet cock against the soft flesh of my thighs.

My mind had once again shifted into an expression of disbelief that this could happen to me.

It was a defense mechanism, I knew.

And that meant this *was* going to happen.

I *was* going to be abused at the hands of this asshole.

I *was* going to end up becoming one of the broken victims I saw in my hospital.

I cried, the tears of terror that had formed in my eyes earlier now turning to beads of despair.

“Hoik!”

It was a strange sound, like someone taken by immense surprise.

Then a series of snapping sounds like a bunch of twigs being stepped on.

The weight of my attacker’s body left me, and I was relieved of him.

I was in a state of shock and didn’t even think to take off.

Something heavy struck the cobbled street at my feet and as I turned, I saw the lifeless eyes of the monster that had attacked me.

He stared up at the ceiling of the alley, the look of surprise painted on his face would be the last thing he ever showed the world.

Standing over him, concealed in shadows, was my rescuer.

I felt what little strength remained in my body flood out of me and I stumbled forward and fell into his arms. “Oh, thank you!” I cried. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

I didn’t know who this man was, only that he had saved me from a terrible fate.

But it was enough.

“Zzz-ik,” he said.  
I frowned.  
I mustn’t have heard him correctly.  
I pulled back, a smile on my face.  
I didn’t care which country he came from, what nationality he was, only that he had done what so many wouldn’t, and helped me. “What was that?”  
“Zzz-ik,” he repeated.  
“Sorry,” I said, shaking my head. “I don’t know—”  
My heart stopped for the second time that night.  
My fingers were pressed to his chest — his *exposed* chest — and I felt the odd coarse scales of his skin.  
Yes, *scales*.  
I had seen enough nature documentaries to know scales when I saw them. They were rough and haggard, nothing like the smooth scales of a snake. And when he stepped into the light, his cat-like slitted eyes glared down at me.  
This thing, this creature... was not human.  
He snapped a hand over my forearm, looked up, and said:  
“Zzz-ik.”  
A bright flash of light consumed me, filling my eyes and body from the inside out.  
That was how I came to be abducted.  
And my luck only got worse from there.

THE SENSATIONS that washed over me first were of smooth, cold metal against my cheek.

My eyes flickered open, and the intense brightness temporarily blinded me.

Adjusting, I squinted and lifted myself off the ground, trying to recall the events that had brought me here.

The room smelled sterile, like a combination of antiseptic and something more foreign, almost sweet.

It reminded me of those expensive lavender candles I once bought on Earth, only with a hint of blueberries.

The hum of machinery, soft and distant, was oddly comforting.

I sat up and touched the smooth floor with my bare feet, feeling the slight electric pulse underneath.

The floor was cool, but not unpleasantly so.

My fingers played with the thin fabric I was draped in — pale blue, almost translucent.

It was surprisingly soft, feeling like a mixture of silk and velvet.

“Ikmal,” a voice echoed, and I jerked my head up.

The sound was coming from a hovering drone-like device.

The word “Ikmal” translated as if I’d always known the language.

“You’re on Ikmal,” the drone repeated. “It is a first-class moon-bound prison. Welcome, Prize.”

I blinked, trying to understand. “Prize?”

A screen flickered to life, and a holographic face appeared.

It had piercing green eyes, elongated facial features, and a gentle smile. “Welcome! Here on Ikmal, prisoners who prove themselves in the fighting pits have the opportunity to Claim a Prize. Congratulations! You are one such Prize. The Claiming ceremony will be in three cycles.”

The image blinked off and the drone floated away.

Memories began flooding back.

*The alleyway...*

*The attack...*

*My rescuer...*

But it was murky and distant, like it’d happened longer ago than I recalled.

For the next, I had to strain.

Wasn’t there a ship?

Or a tank?

I remembered thick glass, peering through the condensation that formed on the inside.

Or was that just a dream?

I shook my head.

None of this made any sense.

What was going on here?

My heart raced, and I swallowed hard.

I heard a soft whimper, turning my gaze to find others.

Females — not just from Earth but from various planets — wearing

similar revealing outfits, their faces painted with equal parts fear, confusion, and determination.

One of them, a tall human with tattoos shimmering in iridescent colors, approached me. “Hey, you’re new too?” she whispered, her voice as soft as the rustling of leaves.

She smelled like rain.

I nodded and looked her over uncertainly. “I’m... Ellie. From... Earth.”

“Nova,” she replied, extending a hand that felt as light as a feather.

“Why are we here? I mean, what’s this Prize thing about?”

Nova sighed. “It’s exactly as they said. The strongest fighters in the pits get to Claim a Prize. Mostly, it’s a symbol of prestige.”

My stomach churned at the thought. “What? No. I’m a nurse. I have a shift... I have responsibilities... I have... I have...”

The panic attack came on fast.

I bent over double or else would have passed right out.

Nova looked sympathetic and placed a hand on my back. “We all feel that way. But escaping Ikmal is no easy task. This place is fortified beyond imagination.”

I refused to let her words discourage me.

As we spoke, I took in the environment around me.

The walls were made of a transparent material, probably an alloy.

The vast expanse of space stretched out beyond, dotted with stars, galaxies, and the silhouette of a magnificent planet.

The sight was breathtaking, but the beauty did little to soothe the anxiety that bubbled within me.

The prison complex was vast, with high ceilings and a series of interconnected chambers.

From my limited view, I could see the fighting pits in the distance, a roar of cheers echoing faintly.

There were guards, humanoid in form but might have been robots by all the hardware they carried.

“Have you tried to escape?” I asked Nova.

She shrugged her shoulders. “A few times. But it’s not just about getting out. There’s nowhere to go. We’re on a moon, surrounded by the vacuum of space.”

I felt a pang of hopelessness.

A guard approached, his keen eyes scanning the Prizes. “The Claiming



Ceremony begins in thirty minutes. *Prepare!*”

The Prizes were a sudden frenzy of activity.

I just sat on a seat, trying to grasp the enormity of it all.

*What the hell is going on?*

WHISPERS and subtle giggles echoed around the dressing chamber as the Prizes — which now included me — readied ourselves.

Rows of luminescent cosmetics lay on illuminated counters, radiating in various shades.

I hesitated, not knowing where to even start.

Nova was beside me, her tattoos now coated in a luminescent powder that caught the dim lighting of the room. “Just embrace it,” she said softly, applying a shade of silver-blue on her eyelids that made them pop beautifully.

Taking a deep breath, I picked up what looked like a stick.

The moment it touched my skin, it transformed into a warm blush, highlighting my cheeks.

The scent of wildflowers arose, momentarily comforting me.

“Smell good?” a purple-skinned female from the next counter asked, her large eyes twinkling.

I nodded, feeling the velvety touch of a brush as it swiped across my collarbone, leaving a trail of glitter.

The soft murmurs, the clinking of cosmetic tools, and the distant hum of music from somewhere created an oddly harmonious ambiance.

The final touch was the dress.

Transparent yet tinted in hues of blue and lavender, it clung to my body, accentuating my curves.

I couldn’t help but admire how the fabric shimmered with every move, feeling like a gentle caress against my skin.

Then I growled at myself for being so stupid.

I was a slave!

I was going to be a Prize for an alien warrior!

There was nothing to admire or feel good about!

The room — which Nova described as the Prize Pool — where the selection took place was expansive.

Platforms rose from the ground, each designed to display a Prize.

“These platforms are new installations,” Nova added. “After new management took over.”

*New management?*

I took my place, feeling a rush of cool air from beneath, carrying a strange scent — part metallic, part floral.

The other females, including Nova, stood tall and poised on their respective platforms, their dresses billowing slightly.

Their confidence was palpable, their smiles radiant, and the entire room glittered like a starlit sky.

I tried to mimic their grace, but my heart raced, each beat echoing loudly in my ears.

Then, the doors at the far end of the room swung open.

A massive figure stepped in, flanked by armed guards.

His skin was a shade of deep blue, and old scars crisscrossed his physique.

Muscles rippled with every step, telling tales of countless battles and challenges.

But what caught my attention most were his eyes — intense, calculating, and... fierce.

He was still bleeding from two large gashes below his ribs.

The room went quiet, save for the soft, anticipatory rustles of dresses and the faint whispers of awe.

He began his inspection, his gaze moving from one Prize to another, lingering just long enough to make each one’s heart race.

Except mine.

I *didn’t* want to be chosen.

I *didn’t* want to go to his cell.

His eyes finally landed on me.

They bore into mine, making me feel exposed, vulnerable.

There was a raw intensity in his gaze, a depth I hadn’t expected.

Time seemed to stretch, and the world around us faded.

All that remained was the heavy beat of my heart and the burning focus of his eyes.

As he stepped closer, I could hear the soft thud of his footsteps, feel the warmth radiating from him, and catch a whiff of his scent — a blend of wood, musk, and something wild.

My stomach churned with fear.  
But just as quickly, his gaze shifted.  
To my left, to Nova.

My friend looked back at him with equal intensity, but there was a spark of defiance in her eyes.

A silent communication passed between them, one I couldn't decipher.

Then, in a deep, rumbling voice that vibrated through the room, he spoke. "Her."

A collective gasp filled the hall.

Relief washed over me, but it was bittersweet.

Watching Nova descend from her platform nervously, I couldn't help but think of the fate that awaited her.

Would she be a trophy, a possession, or would she find some measure of happiness?

*And for how long?*

As the Champion and his new Prize exited, a hushed murmur resumed amongst the remaining females.

I was lost in thought when a shadow loomed over me. "The Supervisor wishes to see you," an armed guard said, his voice mechanical, speaking by rote.

Confused, I followed his gaze up to a large window overlooking the hall.

A gigantic figure stood there, watching the proceedings below with a keen interest.

My heart raced once again as I considered this new development.

*The Supervisor?*

What did he want with me?

Gulping down my anxiety, I stepped off the platform, preparing to face yet another unknown in this bewildering world.

THE DOOR to the Supervisor's office slid open silently, revealing a room at odds with the elegance of the Prize Pool chamber.

It was functional, filled with screens and holographic displays of Ikmal and its many sectors.

At the center of it all sat the Supervisor, his massive bulk a dominant

presence.

He was like no alien I had ever seen — and it wasn't like I was an expert with that!

The Supervisor was not just large, he was *immense*.

Rolls of fat cascaded down his frame, each moving with a life of its own.

His skin was a peculiar shade of green, mottled with patches of yellow, and seemed to glisten under the overhead lights.

A multitude of eyes, small and beady, peered out from folds of flesh, each one darting around, capturing everything in the room.

As I stepped closer, the faint smell of musk and something akin to damp earth reached my nostrils.

The room itself was cool compared to the warmth of the Prize Pool chamber.

I could feel the soft vibrations of machinery underneath my feet, humming in sync with the rhythm of my racing heart.

The Supervisor's voice was surprisingly soft, almost melodic, a stark difference from his intimidating appearance. "You are Ellie, I presume?"

I nodded, trying to muster the courage to speak, but found my mouth dry.

"I've gone through your profile," he continued, his eyes — well, some of them — fixated on a holographic screen that showed snippets of my life on Earth. "A nurse, isn't that correct?"

Images of the hospital, my colleagues, and the countless patients I had cared for flashed before me.

It felt distant, a world away from this moon prison.

"How did you...?" I began, unable to fully form the question.

"Get so much information about you? We didn't. We simply hijack the information your governments already collect on you."

I nodded again, swallowing hard. "Yes, it was my profession on Earth."

He leaned forward slightly, the layers of his fat shifting and moving.

The light caught the wet sheen of his skin, making it gleam. "I have a proposition for you," he declared, his voice turning more serious.

I braced myself, fearing what he might suggest, but his next words took me completely by surprise.

"I need someone with your skills. One of our..." And he hesitated over the word, "prisoners has sustained injuries that our medics are struggling with. He won't let anyone near him. If you can help him recover, I will grant you your freedom."

For a moment, the weight of his words didn't register.

When it did, a rush of emotions overwhelmed me — hope, relief, uncertainty.

My senses sharpened.

I became acutely aware of the gentle hum in the room, the slightly tangy taste of the recycled air, the soft material of my dress against my skin, and the mingling scents of the Supervisor's musky aroma with the sterile environment.

"Why me?" I managed to whisper.

The Supervisor gave what could only be interpreted as a smile, his lips stretching to reveal rows of tiny, sharp teeth. "Your reputation precedes you, Ellie. I asked specifically for a female with your skills."

So it was this asshole's fault I was abducted in the first place?

I was tempted to run over and slapp his sweaty face... but thought better of it.

Yes, he might be the one responsible for me being here, but he might also help me return home.

"But," he interjected, breaking my chain of thought, "should you fail, you will find yourself back in the Prize Pool, with no hope of ever leaving Ikmal."

The gravity of his statement wasn't lost on me.

I considered the risks.

But then again, wasn't I *already* destined for the Prize Pool?

I had nothing to lose and everything to gain by his offer.

In essence, I really had no choice at all.

Taking a deep breath, I met his multiple gazes. "I accept."

The Supervisor nodded, his eyes displaying a hint of satisfaction. "Good. I hope, for your sake, that you succeed."

As I left his office, the reality of the situation began to sink in.

I had been granted a lifeline, an opportunity to escape this prison and return home.

But first, I needed to nurse a prisoner back to health.

How difficult could that be?

It turned out, *very*.

AND SO THE guards had tossed me into this cell along with the prisoner.

The cold, hard floor beneath me felt unforgiving against my back.

The cell, though not cramped, was dimly lit.

Deep shadows played along the walls, concealing more than they revealed.

Tentatively, I inhaled, picking up the musky scent of the beast on the other side of the cell.

My ears strained, and I could discern the faint, rhythmic breathing of the prisoner known as Ceara.

My task was to heal him, to get close to him... and so far, I had gotten off to a crappy start.

But if it meant I could leave here and never have to think of this place ever again, I would do anything necessary.

And I meant *anything*.

---

## CEARA

**I**t was her!

It was actually her!

How was this possible?

Had the Supervisor somehow seen my Distant Vision?

Did the Machine give him the ability to see into my mind?

But no, I knew that was impossible.

If he could see into my mind and my Visions of the future, there would have been no need to torture me.

However unlikely it seemed, however bizarre, the female was here because *Fate* had sent her to me.

I had seen her on countless occasions — never in the flesh, only in my Visions.

My life was much like anybody else's, living from one moment to another...

With one small exception.

I could see ten seconds into the future and foresee every possible eventuality.

To those on the outside, it would have looked like I was simply making decisions in my life the same way they were.

Except I *knew* what would happen next with any decision I made.

There was no uncertainty for me — at least, not within the next ten seconds.

At least, that was what I was capable of if I hadn't blocked the ability with drugs and alcohol.

*Sometimes seeing the future was as painful as recalling the past.*

The one Vision I had seen that stretched beyond that short ten-second gap in time involved the female.

The cell door had opened and something had shuffled inside before the guard locked the door again.

At first, I hadn't even noticed her enter.

But as I heard the shuffling of feet, I realized there was another person in the room.

This was new.

And new things were not something to be celebrated at Ikmal.

I figured it was just another of the Supervisor's plans to get me to reveal what I saw in his Machine.

The truth was, I saw *nothing* in it — I blocked it out and refused to see the Visions he tried to make me see.

A series of images flashed across the holo-display, images designed to stimulate my ability and project it further into the future.

The Supervisor seemed to think this machine *enhanced* my ability, but so far, he had only been met with disappointment.

I didn't know if the machine truly worked or not — I never allowed it to.

I could not be made to see Visions when I did not wish to see them.

But the Supervisor, believing I was only holding back, tortured me, injecting me with chemicals to *make me* tell him what I had seen.

Each time, I told him I had seen nothing — which was actually the truth.

No matter what chemicals he injected into me, I would only ever tell him the truth.

The small shuffling figure was not a fellow Blinker — I would have been shocked if she had been as I was the last of my kind.

The rest of my species had been wiped out by those seeking to take advantage of our ability to see into the future.

In doing so, they had achieved the only predictable outcome.

Since then, I had lived a half-life, shuffling from one planet to another, performing party tricks just good enough to not pique anyone's interest but not so good it might make me hit the big time.

To do so would have put me on someone's radar and it wouldn't be long before they honed in on me, asking questions to figure out how I did what I did.

Then I would have to disappear, only this time, with a face known far and



wide.

I earned enough to survive, to get by and afford whatever substances I needed to quell the dull ache of the distant past.

A side effect was the dulling of my ability to see the future.

That was how they had caught me and how I had ended up here at Ikmal.

I glanced over at the figure as she shuffled towards the edge of light and still I had not recognized her for who she was.

She looked on the verge of gathering up enough courage to cross into the darkness of my cell, disturbing my peace even more than she already had.

I growled and rolled from my cot.

At my movement, the female froze, her foot floating above the ground.

She stared up into the darkness, attempting to make me out, but I knew the darkness was pervasive — it was the reason I had removed the bulbs in the first place.

The darkness was soothing to me.

In the black, I saw only dim Visions... for the most part, anyway.

I stood before her and appraised her soft skin, the tangle of her wild, wavy brown hair and the white uniform they had addressed her in.

I threatened her, assuming she was some part of the Supervisor's plan.

But I would not fall for it.

When she finally looked up, her eyes still scrambling at the dark, although she appeared to have locked onto something — by the set of her eyes, I thought it must be my horns — and knew my face and therefore my eyes had to be a little below them.

She didn't look me in the eye but I peered deeply into hers.

They matched her hair color and were flecked with strands of yellow.

*Quite beautiful.*

Her skin was smooth, her cheekbones high and prominent.

Her eyes were wide and she had a distinctive set to her mouth that was very pleasing.

In another time and place, I might have seduced her with a trick, taken her to my bed and rode her all night.

But the Supervisor had sent her and he never did *anything* without just cause.

Then I saw her face in its entirety.

I choked on my words, grateful the shadows concealed me so fully.

*She was the female from my Vision!*

There was no doubt of that now!

And here she stood, real and in the flesh, in my cell!

My Visions only showed the *potential* of what could happen in the future.

I could simply see the *steps required* to achieve a given outcome.

That was all any of us ever really needed:

To achieve our greatest dreams in life, we merely had to take the *right* steps at the *right* time.

Play the perfect moves and any game could be won.

Those most successful in life were those who could *see* those moves or at least *sense* them.

I had assumed the Distant Vision I had seen since my earliest days would no longer come true after I had been caught and sentenced to a lifetime of imprisonment in this hellhole.

But here she stood, the beacon and light of my life.

The one thing that gave any indication that a different future was possible, where I would not have to be incarcerated in this place.

Of all the locations I could have found her, where she could have appeared, *why did it have to be this place?*

It was difficult to turn around and leave her standing there after she had put her foot back down in the light.

She should not come anywhere near me, I knew.

She should remain in the light and I in the dark.

Perhaps if I ignored her she would go away, the future we were destined to share would fade away too.

I returned to my cot and lay down facing the wall.

Although sleep beckoned, for once, I could not bring myself to succumb to it.

*Not with her in the cell.*

I peered over my shoulder in her direction and saw her laying in the same position I was, folded up and facing the wall.

And still, that question kept repeating itself:

How could it be her?

Was I mistaken?

Had I only *thought* she had the appearance of my fated mate?

And that was what we were, wasn't it?

That was what our ancient texts told us:

That the one you saw in the Distant Vision was the one you would love

for the rest of your life.

The Distant Vision came to me again.

It was always the same.

The female was curled up in my lap while I lay back on a wooden chair.

We lounged on the coast of some distant and unknown planet, watching as the twin suns set — one yellow, one red — on the horizon.

Soft waves lapped at our feet in gentle strokes as if the sea were breathing.

I held her, clutching her tight while her fingers played over the hairs of my forearm.

I had seen the vision so many times I could recall every last element of it:

The curve of her cheek, the smile that played across her lips as she looked up at me, her hand resting on her belly.

I luxuriated in the unknown alien feeling of complete and utter bliss and happiness.

That scene had kept me going for many years.

No matter how dark my days had become, no matter what state I was in, it was always there.

The curiosity of it one day coming true, of one day finding her and enjoying her like that...

Of feeling that emotion for real rather than via the stranger in my Vision...

And yes, I *was* a stranger to myself in that scene.

It showed a version of me I thought I would never see, a version that had *never* existed.

I sniffed, attempting to breathe in the female's scent from across the room.

I should have breathed her in earlier to validate my suspicions but had been so shocked at her presence that it had not occurred to me.

I was not going to get another wink of sleep until I knew for certain, so I got up from my cot and crept across the darkness.

It had already shortened as the prison's lighting system flicked on, the morning routine already kicking into gear.

I gingerly stepped into the light and crossed to her.

She was still sleeping and lay on her back with her arm above her head.

She *could* have been another female, I thought, possessing only a passing resemblance to the female in my Distant Vision.

The galaxy was a big place and there would be countless females who—  
Then she turned over and I saw the *exact same profile* as in my Vision:  
The smooth curve of her cheek, the high cheekbones.  
All that was missing was the smile of immense happiness on her face and  
her glittering eyes as she peered back at me.  
I breathed her in without thinking, and she filled my nostrils.  
I stumbled back, knowing I would recognize her scent *anywhere*.  
She was the female from my Vision!  
There was no doubt of that now!  
The only question was, *what happened next?*  
It was a question I had always been able to answer with my unique  
ability, but now I was at a loss.  
I didn't know how things would pan out, if that Distant Vision would  
really take shape or not.  
And that uncertainty, more than anything, terrified me.  
I turned back to my cot and fell onto it.  
I would need to be careful, I knew.  
This could all be part of the Supervisor's plot to ensnare me and use my  
ability for his own purposes.  
And yet, I couldn't help but feel a connection with the female.  
Yes, I thought. I was going to have to be careful indeed.  
*Very careful.*

THE CELL DOOR SHUDDERED OPEN, filling my dim quarters with the harsh  
light from the corridor.

My sense of smell was the first to react, overwhelmed by the sterile  
aroma of the prison that permeated everything.

Even after all this time, I hadn't gotten used to it.

It was too clean, too artificial — void of the organic muskiness of my  
homeworld.

As predictable as ever, the guards stood there in their shiny armor, their  
eyes glinting with an unspoken expectation.

They wanted me standing at attention, as obedient as a well-trained pet.

But defiance was all I had left.

I held on to it, stubbornly refusing to grant them their wish.

The cold, metal bed beneath me vibrated slightly with the mechanical hum of the prison, a constant reminder of my surroundings.

My bare feet touched the chilled floor, contrasting sharply with the residual warmth of the bed.

I could hear their impatient grunts, the shuffling of armored feet on the metallic surface, a clear indication of their growing annoyance.

Yet, I remained still, savoring their growing frustration, each moment a tiny victory.

“Get up!”

The guard’s command cut through the air, harsh and demanding.

I recognized the voice — it belonged to one of the regulars, a gruff, relentless brute who seemed to take great pleasure in his job.

Yet, I continued my silent rebellion.

Their patience finally wore thin, and the guards advanced.

The first blow was hard, hitting me square in the ribs.

The sharp pang of pain was expected, and I welcomed it, letting it ground me in my purpose.

The strikes continued, each one more forceful than the last.

My senses amplified the experience — metallic blood, the acrid smell of my sweat, the throbbing pain singing through my nerves, the grating sound of the guard’s armor against the cold floor, and the harsh white light that threatened to blind me.

And with each assault, my defiance grew stronger.

Finally, when they seemed satisfied with my apparent submission, I pushed myself up, my movements slow and deliberate.

I couldn’t help the smirk that crept onto my lips.

My small victory in our game of defiance.

It was only when you admitted defeat in this place that you were truly lost.

As they marched me out of the room, my gaze found Ellie.

She was on the floor, looking up at me with wide, fearful eyes.

Something in her gaze tugged at my heart, a feeling that I couldn’t quite place.

For a moment, my smirk disappeared, replaced by a sense of regret.

She didn’t belong here in this dreadful moon prison.

She was a healer, with a spirit that somehow remained unbroken.

She deserved better than this.  
But then, we all did in our own way.  
As the cell door closed behind me, I stole one last look at Ellie.  
In her, I saw a glimmer of hope, a spark that could perhaps ignite a change.  
The guards shoved me forward and I stumbled down the walkway.

THE GUARDS USHERED me into a circular room, the metallic floor clanging beneath my heavy steps.

It was a cold, harsh echo that seemed to reverberate throughout the starkly illuminated space, echoing back at me like some cruel taunt.

At the center stood the machine — a monolith of dread that filled me with a deep-seated fear.

Every part of my being revolted against its sight.

Its appearance was unassuming, yet its purpose was terrifying — glimpses of the future.

Its cold metal surface glinted ominously under the harsh lights, reflecting my distorted figure back at me.

The Supervisor stood by it, a smug expression plastered on his face.

He was a large creature, with thick, splotchy skin that reminded me of the night sky back home — mottled with odd shades of black and blue.

“Will we be enjoying your cooperation today, Ceara?” he asked, his voice resonating with a cold satisfaction that made my scales itch.

A bitter smile pulled at my lips. “I’ve always found silence more cooperative,” I retorted, holding his gaze.

The sharp clatter of instruments drew my attention to the Scientist.

His real name was barely pronouncable in my tongue but it was better to think of him as the Scientists — a moniker every bit as sterile as he was himself.

He was an alien of an odd sort.

He was thin, with an elongated body and limbs.

His skin was a peculiar shade of green, and his eyes were hidden behind round, goggle-like glasses, which magnified his sharp, blue eyes to an almost comical size.

His mouth, a jagged line of sharp teeth, curled into a smirk as he prepared the injection.

His touch was cold, and his sharp teeth were bared in an unkind smile as he pressed the serum into my arm.

A burning sensation raced through my veins, making my head spin.

The room began to blur at the edges, and my senses heightened.

I could hear the faintest hum of the machine, the distant clanging of the guards' armor, and even the quiet whispers of the Supervisor and the Scientist.

The guards roughly pushed me into the chair, their cold, metal hands digging into my skin.

The tight straps cut into my scales, a harsh reminder of my current predicament.

As they taped my eyelids open, the room became a blur of lights, the colors more vibrant than they had any right to be.

I could see the large holo-screen in front of me, a glowing canvas of symbols and images.

It was known as the Orb and was a tool to aid them in seeing what I could See.

*My Visions.*

All stripped bare for them to peruse and judge.

One by one, they left the room, leaving me alone with the hum of the machine.

I could see them through the observation window, donning their goggles as they prepared to dive into my mind.

A cold shiver ran down my spine.

My heart pounded in my chest, the steady rhythm a solemn drumroll for the upcoming invasion.

The machine whirred to life, its sound growing louder until it filled the room.

The chair started to spin, first slowly, then faster, the world blurring around me.

The sharp smell of ozone filled my nostrils as the machine worked, making my eyes water and my throat tighten.

My heart pounded in my chest like a wild beast trying to escape, each thud echoing through my veins.

I clung to the armrests, my fingers aching from the tight grip.

But I held on, refusing to let the fear show on my face.

The last thing they'd see was my defiance, and the last thing they'd hear would be my silence.

THE WORLD BECAME a dizzying whirlpool as the machine swung me around and around.

It was like being trapped in a monstrous maelstrom, lost in a sea of light and color.

The nausea rose in me, a familiar sensation that came with every spin.

My stomach churned, an unwelcome rhythm that pulsed through my body.

Flashes of images bombarded the holo-screen, a chaotic symphony of colors and movement.

Yet, none of it made sense.

They were blurry and unfocused, as unclear as the path that led me here.

Bile rose in my throat, sour and acrid.

I fought the urge to retch, the feeling only adding to the disorientation.

The Supervisor's voice echoed through the speaker system, sounding distant yet annoyingly persistent. "What do you see, Ceara?" he asked, his voice a monotonous drone over the whirring noise of the machine.

"Nothing," I spat.

I would have preferred to remain silent, but the truth serum was already coursing through my veins, bending my will.

The spinning grew more intense, the centrifugal force pressing me against the cold, metal chair.

"What do you see, Ceara?"

My senses were assaulted — my vision blurred, sounds becoming a cacophony of unrecognizable noises, sharp and acrid scents filling my nostrils.

"Nothing," I responded.

I needed an escape — a refuge.

So, I let my mind wander, regressing into the back of my consciousness.

I slipped past the chaos and the fear, delving deep into a memory hidden from the prying eyes of the Supervisor — a secret sanctuary I shared with



Ellie.

“*What do you see, Ceara?*” the Supervisor demanded.

The Distant Vision, I called it.

It was our future, a possibility the universe bangled before my eyes — Ellie and me on a beach.

Sometimes the sand was purple, other times orange, but the details did not matter.

The waves lapped gently at our feet, her hand resting on her swollen belly.

*Our child.*

It was an image that brought with it a sense of calm, a soothing balm to the pandemonium of my current reality.

“*N...Nothing,*” I managed, biting out the words between clenched teeth.

It was there, in our shared dream, that I took refuge.

The beach stretched out before me, its sand warm beneath my feet, the salty air filling my lungs.

Ellie’s laughter echoed in my ears — a sound more comforting than any lullaby.

“*What... do you... see... Ceara...?*”

The Supervisor’s voice started to fade away, drowned out by the sound of the ocean waves, the seagulls crying overhead, and Ellie’s soft whispers.

The machine’s relentless spinning seemed to slow down, the world around me turning into a blur of indistinguishable colors.

With each passing moment, I felt myself sinking deeper into the Distant Vision, the sounds and sensations of the prison fading away.

The reason the Supervisor couldn’t see the Distant Vision was because it was a *memory*, not a Vision.

The memory hadn’t happened yet, not to me in any case, but the universe weaved its patterns, forming our lives, and this was one that had just to materialize.

Or maybe it was just a dream.

But how could that be when Ellie — the female in the Distant Vision I’d had since I was a child — was now in my cell?

The Supervisor *couldn’t* know what she truly meant to me.

He just couldn’t.

*Could he?*

I clung to Ellie’s image, her smile providing the anchor I so desperately

needed.

But even in this tranquility, the machine was relentless.

The spinning intensified, pushing the limits of my endurance.

I could hear my heartbeat pounding in my ears, a frantic rhythm that fought to keep up with the machine's unending cycle.

The world spun faster and faster until it was a whirl of colors and light.

My senses overwhelmed, I felt consciousness slipping from my grasp, like sand through fingers.

As darkness started to cloud my vision, I reached out for Ellie, her image flickering like a candle in the wind.

"N... Nothing..." I managed to say, but in reality knew what was before my eyes was not nothing.

It was *everything*.

With a final, desperate grasp at her smiling face, I let myself surrender to the darkness.

The last thing I remember is the feel of the warm sand beneath my feet, and Ellie's laughter, echoing in the back of my mind.

THE WORLD WAS STILL SPINNING when the guards roughly threw me back into my cell.

The harsh impact against the cold, hard floor did nothing to dispel the disorientation.

My body felt heavy, as if I were dragging a thousand suns with each breath.

My muscles ached with an intensity that bordered on unbearable, every twitch sending spasms of pain radiating through my frame.

There was a figure moving towards me, a silhouette against the dim light seeping into the cell.

I could smell her before I saw her — the faint scent of lilacs and fresh rain, a scent so different from the sterile, metallic stink of the prison that it felt like an illusion.

"Ceara," Ellie's voice was soft, filled with concern.

I could barely register it, my senses still reeling from the experiment.

She reached out to me, her touch feather-light against my arm.

I recoiled instinctively, my muscles protesting the sudden movement.  
My hands found purchase on the floor, the cold, rough surface a grounding anchor amid the disarray.

“No,” I grumbled, shoving her away.

I didn't need her pity, her sympathy.

I had to do this on my own.

Especially when I wasn't sure if she was part of the Supervisor's plan or not.

With a grunt, I pushed myself up, my legs trembling under the strain.

Each step felt like a monumental effort, my limbs heavy and uncooperative.

I could taste the coppery tang of blood in my mouth, a reminder of the injuries I had sustained.

I could feel the sting of fresh cuts and the throbbing pain of deeper wounds.

But the physical pain was nothing compared to the gnawing emptiness within.

I limped towards the bed, every step echoing in the hollow cell.

The mattress creaked under my weight as I collapsed onto it, my body crying out in relief at the slight comfort it offered.

Ellie hovered by me, her unease palpable.

I could hear her soft breaths, could feel her gaze on me — a mixture of concern and fear.

I turned my back on her, closing my eyes to shut out her pitying gaze.

Sleep was a far-off dream, yet exhaustion pulled at me.

I let myself sink into the mattress.

My mind slipped into the hazy state between wakefulness and sleep, a welcome respite from the sharp reality of my situation.

The sounds of the prison dimmed into a distant hum, the sharp clank of metal and hushed whispers a constant undercurrent beneath my thoughts.

Even as my senses started to fade, one image remained imprinted in my mind — the Distant Vision with Ellie.

It was my anchor, my refuge amid the turmoil.

As sleep slowly claimed me, it was her laughter I heard, her scent I smelled, and her touch I felt — a fleeting taste of a possible future in the harsh reality of the present.

CONSCIOUSNESS WAS A FICKLE COMPANION.

One moment I was adrift in the darkness, and the next, I was floating in a world of my own making — the Distant Vision Ellie and I shared.

I was there again, on the beach with her.

The sand was warm beneath my feet, the sea breeze carrying the salty scent of the ocean.

Ellie's laughter echoed in the wind, a delightful melody against the symphony of waves crashing against the shore.

She was radiant in the sunlight, her figure silhouetted against the sky, a hand resting protectively on her pregnant belly.

The joy was so palpable I could almost touch it, the sound of our shared laughter hanging in the air like music notes.

It was a moment of tranquility amid chaos, a haven amid the storm.

Just when I thought I could spend an eternity in that vision, a sharp sting yanked me back into reality.

I gasped, my body convulsing at the sudden intrusion of pain.

My eyes snapped open to the sight of Ellie pulling back a syringe, her face a mask of concentration.

My senses came roaring back — the harsh light stabbing at my eyes, the echoing clank of the prison walls — reality came crashing down like a tidal wave.

Anger surged within me, raw and potent. “What did you do?” I growled, my voice echoing through the stark cell.

I felt a rush of adrenaline, fueling the anger within me.

My body reacted instinctively, fueled by the perceived threat.

I lunged at her, my hands reaching for her before my mind could fully register my actions.

Yet, as swiftly as the rage came, it dissipated.

The sharp, biting pain was gone, replaced by a cool numbness that spread throughout my body.

A wave of drowsiness washed over me, a heavy blanket that threatened to pull me under.

With a sigh, I stumbled back onto the cot.

The room spun around me, the walls a blur of grays and whites.

My hands gripped the edge of the mattress, the rough texture grounding

me amid the disarray.

Ellie's scent filled the room, her presence a beacon of comfort amidst the chaos.

I turned my back on her, retreating into the safe confines of my mind, where the pain was nothing more than a distant echo.

The vision of the beach returned, this time overlaid with the image of Ellie with a syringe, her face etched with determination.

I knew then, as the darkness began to claim me, that she was not only a part of my vision but also my reality — a part of the struggle, of the fight.

Sleep took me quickly, an escape from the sterile confines of my prison cell.

The last thing I registered was the faint hum of the prison's heartbeat, a rhythm that was quickly drowned out by the gentle lull of waves from the Distant Vision.

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**ELLIE**

**T**he room was dull, echoing with the hollow emptiness of a life devoid of freedom.

I stared at the array of unfamiliar medicines, each one encased in odd-colored vials and foreign syringes.

My fingers grazed over them, feeling the cool touch of the alien materials.

These were the tools I was supposed to use to save a life and, in doing so, save myself.

The small electronic device hummed under my fingers, illuminating the darkened room with an ethereal glow.

The Supervisor had handed it to me, a seemingly simple device that held a wealth of information.

It told me what each vial was for, how to administer the medicine, the recommended dosages — everything.

The device was surprisingly easy to use, despite the alien technology.

As I went through the list, I couldn't help but feel a pang of nostalgia.

Back on Earth, I was a nurse.

The tools were different, but the goal was the same — to heal.

The metallic clang of the cell door interrupted my thoughts.

A guard stood in the entrance, a plastic tray in his hands.

The sight of food — if you could call it that — almost made me laugh.

It was a lump of gelatinous mass, the color of sickly green, wobbling ominously on the plate.

The scent hit me next, a tangy, unfamiliar aroma that did nothing to

appease my growing hunger.

I took a tentative bite, the bizarre texture and even stranger taste doing little to fill the void in my stomach.

But it was food, or at least a semblance of it, and I had no other choice.

“Do you have any human food?” I asked, the words a soft plea.

The guard merely grunted in response, the sound echoing in the bare room before he shut the door with a resounding thud.

*Nothing like service with a smile.*

I sat back against the cold wall, my fingers picking idly at the food.

My gaze wandered around the room, taking in the stark reality of my situation.

Yet, in the midst of the silence and solitude, a quiet resolve stirred within me.

Yes, I was trapped, relegated to saving a creature I barely knew, in a place that seemed hell-bent on stripping me of my humanity.

But I wasn't helpless.

I had a task, a responsibility, and a chance — however slim — of getting out of this alive.

I had faced countless nights as a nurse back on Earth, nights filled with despair and hope, life and death.

Now, I just had to do it all over again, but this time, the stakes were higher.

It was *my* life on the line.

*My* death; for there was no way I could survive in this place as a Prize for long.

I allowed myself a moment to feel the fear, the uncertainty, the overwhelming odds stacked against me.

Then, I set them aside.

I had a job to do, and giving up wasn't an option.

With newfound resolve, I turned back to the device, my mind focusing on the task at hand.

I would save Ceara, heal him with all my knowledge and skill, with these medicines and my human determination.

And maybe, just maybe, I would also save myself.

CEARA WAS A CRUMPLED mass on the floor, a sad lump of tortured alien shoved haphazardly into the confines of our shared cell.

The guards dumped him like a sack of potatoes, their gruff laughter echoing around the stark room before the heavy door slammed shut.

His body was a map of injuries.

I winced at the sight of him, the image of his bruised and battered body etching itself into my memory.

Every instinct I had screamed at me to help him, to make him comfortable, to heal him.

I sprang to my feet, my heart hammering in my chest as I rushed to his side. "Let me help you," I murmured, reaching out to assist him.

He shot me a look that could have frozen the sun, a silent command etched into his dark eyes.

"No."

The word was a growl, a low rumble that echoed in the small room.

He shoved my hands away, pushing himself to his feet.

He limped painfully towards his cot, grunting with each agonizing step.

The air around him was a mixture of sweat and blood, a pungent aroma that told a tale of pain and perseverance.

I watched him from a distance, my fingers itching to help, to ease his suffering.

But I knew I needed to respect his boundaries, even if it felt like I was failing in my duty.

His restless shifting was a testament to his discomfort.

He groaned, his body thrashing on the thin mattress as he tried to find a position that would offer him some relief.

His pain was almost palpable, a tangible entity in the room that I desperately wanted to banish.

As I studied his agonized movements, I realized what I had to do.

I knew he wouldn't let me touch him while he was conscious, so I had to wait until he was *unconscious*.

The medical device hummed softly as I dialed up the required medicine.

My eyes widened at the dosage recommended for Ceara's size and species.

It was enough to knock out a large horse!

The vial in my hand was filled with a deep, purple liquid.

I felt the cool glass, the ridges on the cap, and the dull edge of the needle.



My hands were steady as I filled the syringe, my years of nursing training kicking in despite the circumstances.

I looked over at Ceara, his body finally still in an uneasy sleep.

His rhythmic breathing was loud in the quiet room, a soothing cadence that did little to ease my nerves.

I moved quietly, my feet silent on the cold stone floor as I made my way over to him.

His body was a mass of hard round scales.

No way the pathetic little needle was getting through that shell!

I noticed the area where his scales met were much softer.

That was where I would have to go in, I thought.

I took a deep breath and placed a hand on his colossal muscular back.

I might have been placing my hand on an elephant.

As I injected him, I hoped that this medicine would give him some respite from his injuries, that it would allow his body to recover while he slept.

“Get better, Ceara,” I whispered into the cold, empty room. “You *have* to get better.”

I withdrew the needle.

And that was Ceara reacted.

It was immediate and primal, his body jerking as the needle left his skin.

His eyes flew open, dark orbs of rage that pinned me in place.

My heart pounded like a drum in my chest, his murderous gaze holding me captive.

Fear wrapped around me, a cold shroud that left me paralyzed.

He sat up and turned on me.

My eyes bulged wide, like a mouse before a rhino.

*He could crush me without even realizing it.*

He got to his feet and towered even taller.

What did I think I was doing? I thought. Thinking I could somehow *help* this beast?

I regained control of my frozen body and shuffled back on my ass.

He took one step after another, trailing me, his bloodshot eyes red and filled with rage.

My back found the opposite wall where I had slept the previous night.

*Nowhere else to run.*

Ceara shorted through wide nostrils like a bull and I just knew he was going to charge.

I turned my head to one side and pressed my cheek into it, as if I could keep pulling back and merge with it.

He pressed his face to mine, sniffing, snorting.

I had never felt more afraid my entire life.

I might as well have fallen into the lion pen at the zoo.

I let out a pathetic whimper.

But then, as quickly as the storm had rolled in, it dissipated.

I watched, breath held tight in my lungs, as Ceara processed the lack of pain in his body.

The lines of tension eased from his face, his gaze softening.

A new emotion flickered there, something that looked like wonder before shifting dangerously close to... *gratitude?*

With a final lingering look at me, he stumbled back to his cot.

He was still weak, his body a far cry from the powerhouse it should have been.

The silence in the room was deafening as he succumbed to the pull of sleep.

His body seemed to melt into the cot, his steady breathing at odds with the adrenaline that had saturated the air moments ago.

The lingering scent of the medicine filled the room, a strange combination of antiseptic and something earthy and raw.

My breaths came in shuddering gasps.

*"I can't do this,"* I muttered to myself. *"I can't do this."*

Hours slipped by in a muted blur.

Ceara slept soundly, his body still and peaceful.

I found myself watching him, studying the way his chest rose and fell with each breath, the soft rhythmic motion oddly comforting.

The touch of his skin, the firm and heated surface, was etched into my memory.

The tranquility of the moment was shattered as the cell door opened with a grating squeal.

The guards were back, their heavy boots echoing ominously on the metal floor.

I rushed to stand between them and Ceara, my protective instinct kicking in.

"He needs more time," I argued, planting my feet and squaring my shoulders. "He needs to rest."

They barely glanced my way, the light glinting off their armored suits as they moved towards Ceara.

Their laughter was like gravel in a blender, a harsh, grating sound that set my teeth on edge.

Despite the medicine and the sleep, Ceara was still weak.

He tried to resist as they hauled him up, his body swaying dangerously.

But he couldn't match their strength.

He cast a groggy look my way, the barest hint of appreciation in his gaze.

As they dragged him from the room, the chill of dread settled in my chest.

I had done all I could, but it was not enough.

I had to find a way to help him more, to give him the strength to resist.

But for now, all I could do was watch as the cell door slammed shut, the sound echoing in the now-empty room.

CEARA RETURNED TO THE CELL, a shadow of his former self.

His body swayed, and my stomach knotted as he nearly collapsed to the floor.

This time, however, he allowed me to guide him to his cot.

The touch of his skin against mine sent a jolt of unexpected energy through me.

With a newfound confidence, I turned to the guards who had followed us in. "Leave," I commanded, my voice steady and firm.

They stared at me, their alien faces unreadable.

For a heart-stopping moment, I thought they might refuse.

Then, with a shared look, they retreated, leaving us alone.

Ceara's gaze was on me, a soft smirk tugging at his lips. "Feisty little thing, aren't you?" he murmured, his voice a low rumble that I felt more than heard.

I didn't respond, but I couldn't help the small smile that crept onto my face.

The room smelled of antiseptic and iron, the scent strong enough to make my stomach churn. "Where do they take you?" I asked, keeping my eyes trained on his injuries.

He glanced at me, his eyes dark and unreadable. "They experiment on

me,” he said simply.

My blood ran cold at his words.

I wanted to ask more, to understand what exactly they were doing to him, but I held my tongue.

Instead, I focused on his injuries.

The wounds were a grim sight, but they were also a challenge.

A challenge I was more than willing to take.

The medicine they had provided was unfamiliar, but not impossible to decipher.

He explained some of the tools and medications, his voice low and gravelly, punctuated by sharp intakes of breath when pain flared.

Working with my hands was familiar and comforting.

Each stitch I made was an affirmation, a promise that I was still Ellie, a nurse, a healer.

As I cleaned and stitched his wounds, I found myself lost in the rhythm of the task.

The sound of my own steady breathing and the soft whir of the medical equipment was a soothing soundtrack.

His eyes never left me, watching with a silent curiosity as I worked.

I felt the weight of his gaze on me, a gentle pressure that warmed me more than it should have.

“Why do they experiment on you?” I asked, unable to help my curiosity.

His eyes flickered, something dark and haunted flashing in their depths before he closed them, shutting me out.

Then he surprised me with a response:

“They always wish to explain what they do not know.”

It was only a half-answer but it was more than I expected.

His body relaxing under my touch as sleep claimed him.

His silence was more of an answer than his words had been.

Whatever they were doing to him, it was more than he was willing — or able — to share.

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## CEARA

**T**he grating of the metal chair against my battered body grew more painful with each passing second.

The world spun around me as the machine whirred to life.

Each rotation was a jolt to my senses, a test to my willpower.

The smell of heated metal and ozone filled the room, overwhelming my already spinning senses.

I gritted my teeth, sweat pooling at the base of my neck.

The nauseating taste of the truth serum still lingered at the back of my throat, threatening to rise.

My heart pounded in my chest, a staccato rhythm against the swirling room.

I concentrated on my breath, steadying it against the onslaught of my swirling surroundings.

It was more difficult to resist this time.

The images on the holo-screen were still blurry and disjointed, just out of my reach.

I could feel the strain of my mind trying to decipher them, the headache building behind my eyes.

The Supervisor's voice echoed in my ears, an incessant drone of:

“What do you see, Ceara?”

But I fought back, retreating into the corners of my mind, away from the intrusion of the truth serum.

Thankfully, I could still reply with the same answer:

“Nothing.”

I gripped the chair tightly, my knuckles turning white under the strain.

All of it served to ground me, to keep me present even as I fought to stay away from the forefront of my consciousness.

I fought until I couldn't anymore, until the darkness crept in at the edges of my vision, and I succumbed to unconsciousness.

When I came to, I was met with the sight of the Supervisor yelling at the Scientist.

His booming voice echoed around the room.

I squinted, determinedly blinking the blurry images into unfocus.

*I didn't want* to see those images on the holo-screen.

Whatever purpose the Supervisor wanted me for, it could not be for anything good, and every day that I managed to resist him was a victory.

The Scientist looked even more frantic with his round goggle-like glasses, his many hands flitting nervously around the machine.

I watched as the Supervisor's anger grew, his large form looming over the Scientist, his voice reaching a fever pitch.

It was clear that he wasn't getting what he wanted, and he was far from pleased.

A cold dread settled in my gut.

If the Supervisor didn't get what he wanted from me soon, he was going to take drastic action.

I had no illusions about what that meant for me.

Perhaps he would decide I wasn't worth the trouble and have me executed.

The thought should have terrified me, but instead, it brought a strange sense of relief.

After all, who would mourn the death of a captive alien?

Who would care if I disappeared from existence?

I was alone, completely and utterly alone.

And maybe that was for the best.

Maybe death was the release I had been unknowingly yearning for.

As the guards came to haul me back to my cell, I let myself slump in their arms.

I was exhausted, drained of all energy.

The thought of Ellie waiting in the cell brought a strange comfort, a glimmer of humanity in this desolate place.

But for how much longer could I hold on?

THROWN BACK INTO MY CELL, the harsh tang of blood stinging my nostrils, I could hear the distant clanging of the cell door shutting behind me.

A sharp pang of agony erupted from my side where fresh wounds were torn open again.

“Ceara, you can’t keep doing this,” Ellie’s voice rang out in the sterile room.

She moved like a whirlwind, bringing out the medical equipment with practiced ease. “You can’t heal if they keep reopening your wounds.”

Her words cut through the foggy haze of pain in my mind, and I watched her as she worked.

Her deft fingers probed the torn skin around my wounds, her brows furrowed in concentration.

Her touch was surprisingly gentle.

The stark fluorescent lighting in our cell did nothing to diminish her beauty.

Her chestnut hair was pulled back into a messy bun, loose strands framing her face.

Her skin was a warm, sun-kissed hue that seemed to glow against the metallic sterility of our surroundings.

Her features were soft yet determined, a clear reflection of her strong will and stubborn spirit.

Up close, her eyes were even more entrancing.

They were a unique shade of green, flecked with gold and brown.

They were full of worry and determination as they focused on the task at hand.

As she worked, the scent of her filled my senses.

It was a scent that had begun to fill my dreams and memories.

My mind kept pulling me back to our Distant Vision — her pregnant and radiant, us on a beach somewhere far, far from here.

The thought sent a strange flutter through my chest, an unfamiliar warmth spreading through me.

Was it even possible?

Could we ever have a future outside of this cell?

The question hung heavily in the silent cell, pressing down on me.

I found myself admiring her, taking in her strength and resilience.

She was here in this hellhole, yet she was doing everything she could to keep us both alive.

There was a beauty to her determination, a fierce light that refused to be dimmed even in the face of the most dire circumstances.

A strange excitement built within me as she leaned closer to examine my wounds.

I felt my heart rate increase, a warmth spreading through me that had nothing to do with the fever brought on by my wounds.

But I pushed it down, tamping down the strange emotions that threatened to rise.

Now was not the time for such feelings.

Survival was our main focus.

Yet as Ellie continued to work, her touch gentle on my battered skin, I couldn't help but wonder.

Could there be more for us beyond these cell walls?

Could our Distant Vision become our reality?

And as Ellie's soft voice filled the silence of our cell, providing a soothing background to the sharp sting of the needle on my skin, I found myself hoping.

For a future beyond the pain, beyond the experiments.

For a future with Ellie.

It was a dangerous thought, a spark of hope in the crushing darkness.

But it was a thought I held onto, a beacon that guided me through the agonizing pain and the numbing exhaustion.

Because in this bleak reality, Ellie was my ray of hope, the promise of a future worth fighting for.

Pain rippled through my body, a constant reminder of the trials I had been put through.

Each breath I drew was a battle fought and won, a tiny victory in the grand scheme of my life.

Yet, as I lay there on the cot, my eyes met Ellie's, and I found myself reaching out.

It was an instinct, a primal need to connect with another being.

My hand, heavy and unsteady, moved to cup her face.

Her skin was soft, warm.

Her eyes, wide and questioning, searched mine as my fingertips brushed her cheek, a gesture so intimate that it felt almost out of place amidst our



harsh reality.

“You’re... burning up,” she murmured, her gaze flickering to the clammy sheen of sweat on my forehead.

Her words were fraught with worry, yet there was a certain softness in her voice that made my heart ache.

I couldn’t help but study her face, taking in every detail.

Her high cheekbones, the smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose, the furrow of her brows as she looked at me with concern.

And her eyes, those striking green eyes that held so much emotion and resilience, they were a sight I’d grown fond of in our Distant Vision.

My hand remained on her soft cheek.

“What are you doing, Ceara?” she finally asked, her voice barely more than a whisper.

I wished I could give her an answer, something to ease the confusion in her eyes.

But how could I explain the inexplicable pull I felt towards her, the yearning for a connection that went beyond our shared circumstances?

“I... I need to...” I started, my words failing me.

I couldn’t articulate the strange mix of emotions coursing through me, the potent mix of longing, admiration, and an underlying current of something more... something deeper.

Her eyes held mine, a silent question hanging between us.

I could see the flicker of understanding there, the dawning realization of what was happening.

Our situation was bizarre, to say the least, and yet, here we were, two souls in the middle of a war zone, finding comfort in each other’s presence.

And then, she was packing away the medical equipment, her hands moving in quick, flustered movements.

The moment was broken, the tension shattered by the reality of our situation.

I pulled my hand back, the loss of her warmth leaving a chill in its wake.

We were two prisoners, trapped in a cell, forced into circumstances beyond our comprehension.

Our shared visions, our budding connection, they were beacons of hope in our bleak existence.

But they were also reminders of the dire reality of our situation.

Yet as Ellie moved away, the flustered look on her face a mirror of my

own inner turmoil, I couldn't help but hold on to that fleeting moment of connection.

It was a glimmer of what could be, a spark of hope amidst the darkness.

And as I drifted off into a fitful sleep, my body wracked with pain and exhaustion, my mind kept going back to that moment.

Her soft skin under my fingertips, her eyes meeting mine with a mixture of confusion and understanding, the shared silence that spoke volumes...

It was a powerful moment, one that would stay with me long after the pain subsided.

It was a reminder that despite the pain, the experiments, and the uncertainty of our future, there was something worth fighting for.

A connection, a possibility of a future... with Ellie.

THE CELL FELT EVEN COLDER without Ellie's presence.

After the guards had taken her, an unsettling silence had settled, the absence of her soft voice echoing loudly in my ears.

Before they had come, we'd been exchanging stories of our homes.

"Earth," she'd said with a longing sigh, "is a planet of diverse landscapes and cultures."

She told me of sprawling cities with towering structures touching the sky, of lush green forests, and of vast oceans that stretched out to the horizon.

I listened with rapt attention as she described Earth's food, its people, and its ways of life.

In turn, I told her about my world, Varonis.

How our two suns bathed our lands in a constant warm glow.

The towering spires of Amarith City, made from gleaming crystalfire.

The smell of Zaphor blossoms that filled the air during the season of Veilfall, and the haunting melodies of the Valdrin, our sacred songs.

I spoke of the grand library in Veridant where scholars studied ancient texts and of the Great Gathering where every tribe came together in a colorful celebration of unity.

"Sounds beautiful," Ellie had murmured, her eyes shining with a curious light. "I'd love to see it someday."

"Me too," I'd replied, the pang of nostalgia so acute, it was almost

physical.

We were both trapped in a cell, miles away from home.

Our only solace lay in these stories, fragments of our worlds we held onto, our very own pieces of home.

That's when the metallic clang of the cell door had jolted us out of our shared reverie.

The guards, their menacing figures filling the doorway, sent a shiver down my spine.

I'd expected them to come for me, but to my surprise and growing alarm, they'd moved towards Ellie.

Ellie's eyes had widened, fear sparking within their emerald depths as the guards advanced.

We shared a look, a silent exchange that held all the questions we didn't have the courage to voice.

*Why are you taking her?*

*What are you going to do to her?*

I felt a surge of anger, a raw, primal need to protect her from the unknown.

Yet, I was powerless, bound by the confines of this cell.

As they led her away, I reached out, my fingers brushing hers in a fleeting touch.

It was an unspoken promise, a reassurance that I was here, that I wouldn't let her face this alone.

Now, as I sat alone in the chilling silence, my thoughts raced.

What was happening to Ellie?

Would they subject her to the same torment I had endured?

The thought made my blood run cold.

But no, I thought. She could not Blink.

She did not possess the same unique ability of my people.

All I could do was wait, the uncertainty a cruel tormentor.

And as the minutes turned into hours, the cell grew colder, the silence more deafening.

Yet, through the anxiety and fear, my thoughts kept going back to our shared stories, the fragments of our worlds we'd given each other.

It was a small comfort, a beacon of hope in the looming darkness.

I clung to that hope, praying to the twin suns of Varonis that Ellie would return safe.

For now, all I had was her stories, the echo of her voice filling the cell, and the warmth of her touch still lingering on my fingers.

A piece of Earth and a piece of her, reminding me of what I had to fight for.

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**ELLIE**

**A**s the guards marched me down the sterile, metallic corridors, my mind couldn't help but wander back to Ceara.

It was strange, really.

This alien beast who'd scared me witless not so long ago had morphed into a kind, gentle soul in my eyes.

His eyes, those rich amber orbs that held galaxies within them, haunted me.

They'd looked at me not as an object, not as a captive, but as... an equal.

There had been tenderness there, a softness that belied his beastly exterior.

It was as if those eyes had seen past the terrified human girl and seen Ellie, a woman with dreams and hopes, fears and vulnerabilities.

I shivered, the coldness of the corridor seeping into my bones.

Yet, my heart warmed at the thought of him.

He was a sight to behold, rough and unrefined, yet undeniably handsome.

His features were striking — the sharp angles of his face, his tall stature, the defined muscles that moved with a predator's grace.

It was a dangerous, raw kind of beauty, but it was captivating all the same.

And then there was his touch.

My cheeks flushed at the memory.

His hand had been surprisingly gentle against my skin, his rough fingers trailing a path of electricity that left my body tingling long after he'd let go.

His touch, as much as it was unexpected, felt right, felt *familiar*.

The smell of him was unique, an earthy musk combined with the faint scent of something sweet, something alien.

It was a comforting smell, something I found myself leaning into, craving.

It made me feel safe, grounded.

I still couldn't wrap my head around it all.

How had I gone from fearing this beast to... this?

How had I come to appreciate his rough-hewn looks, crave his touch, yearn for his presence?

It was surreal, yet it was happening.

There was no denying the flutter in my chest every time he looked at me, the way my skin burned under his touch.

But now, as the guards led me away from him, a sense of foreboding set in.

Where were they taking me?

What were they planning to do?

The Supervisor's office wasn't exactly a place I wanted to visit.

I could only hope that Ceara was okay, that he wasn't enduring the torment of the experiments.

I hoped that he was holding onto our shared moments, just like I was.

Because in this strange, alien world, those moments were our anchors, a piece of solace amidst the chaos.

As I stepped into the Supervisor's office, my heart hammered in my chest, my mind clouded with fear and uncertainty.

Yet, through it all, the image of Ceara's soft eyes and the memory of his tender touch guided me forward.

Whatever was to come, I knew I had something — someone — to fight for.

THE SUPERVISOR'S office was bathed in the artificial glow of overhead lights, casting long, imposing shadows over the minimalist, steel furnishings.

His gaze felt like ice as he stared at me from behind his sleek desk.

The Supervisor, an imposing figure with a distinct aura of authority, seemed irate. "You've made no progress, Ellie," he snapped, the bitterness in

his voice palpable.

I straightened my spine, meeting his cold stare head-on. “As fast as I heal him, he’s injured again from your experiments. How is he supposed to recover fully if you won’t give him time?”

The words fell from my lips, my voice stronger than I’d expected.

The Supervisor’s face registered surprise at my mention of the experiments. “And what, pray tell, did Ceara tell you about them?” he asked, leaning back in his chair, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

I shrugged, feigning indifference. “Nothing,” I answered truthfully. “Ceara didn’t divulge anything about the nature of the experiments; I had merely drawn my conclusions based on his injuries.”

A flicker of interest passed over the Supervisor’s face.

He stood, moving around the desk to stand a few feet from me.

His scent, metallic and slightly acidic, invaded my senses, making me wrinkle my nose in distaste.

“Well,” he began, crossing his arms over his chest, “it appears you have misunderstand my requirements, Ellie.”

I frowned, the sudden shift in his tone throwing me off guard. “What do you mean?” I asked, my heart pounding in my chest. “You put me in his cell to heal him. That’s what I’m doing.”

The Supervisor looked at me, his gaze dark and unreadable. “Ceara doesn’t just need to heal *physically*. He’s broken on the inside as well. He needs to be fixed *emotionally*.”

My breath hitched at his words.

*Emotional* healing?

How was I supposed to facilitate that?

I wasn’t a psychologist!

The concept sounded far more daunting than mending physical wounds.

I didn’t know the first thing about emotional healing — especially not for an alien species!

And yet, thinking back on Ceara’s quiet moments, his distant gaze, I could see a hint of the brokenness the Supervisor was talking about.

In our shared moments, I had seen a vulnerable side of him, a side that hinted at past traumas and deep-seated pain.

I remembered his tender touch, the way his eyes bore into mine, as if searching for some solace.

Could I really help him overcome his emotional pain?

The Supervisor's words echoed in my mind, pulling me out of my thoughts.

Fixing Ceara emotionally — the task seemed monumental, yet undeniably important.

In the chilling sterility of the Supervisor's office, my mind swam with a barrage of emotions.

Fear, anxiety, and an undeniable hint of intrigue battled for dominance as I processed his words.

Heal Ceara *emotionally*.

The task felt like a mountain to climb, but the hidden implications of his words hit me harder than any physical mountain ever could.

The Supervisor's eyes, cold and calculating, danced with unspoken meaning.

*Intimacy.*

He was suggesting emotional healing through *intimacy*.

The thought caused a visceral reaction in me, my stomach lurching as the blood drained from my face.

"I don't..." I trailed off, unable to articulate the myriad of thoughts swirling in my head.

Could I really do this?

Be intimate with Ceara?

With Ceara who was strange, unpredictable, and yet... surprisingly gentle in his own way?

With Ceara who had shown me a vulnerability that contradicted his tough exterior?

The Supervisor's voice broke through my turmoil. "You have a choice, Ellie. Heal Ceara, or I can return you to the Prize Pool."

The threat hung in the air like a chilling mist, suffocating me with its weight.

The Prize Pool — a place where females captives were reduced to commodities, Claimed by Champions of the fighting pit.

I'd narrowly escaped it once, I couldn't go back there again.

Desperation clung to my skin like a thin sheen of sweat, the sour taste of fear filling my mouth.

There had to be a way out of this situation.

A bargain.

If I had to traverse this intimidating path of emotional healing, I deserved



something in return.

Taking a steadying breath, I leveled my gaze at the Supervisor. “If I do this... if I help heal Ceara emotionally,” I began, my voice firmer than I felt, “I want something in return.”

The Supervisor raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. “And what might that be?” he asked, a hint of amusement in his tone.

“I want to leave Ikmal as soon as possible. On a private shuttle, straight back to Earth.”

My heart pounded in my chest as I stated my terms.

The thought of returning to Earth, to my normal life, was like a beacon of hope amidst the turmoil.

He studied me for a moment, his eyes narrowed in thought.

The silence in the room was deafening, the only sound the steady hum of the ship’s machinery.

The wait was torture.

After what felt like an eternity, the Supervisor nodded. “Very well,” he agreed, a satisfied smirk playing on his lips, “If you can heal him so he can perform his task, I’ll ensure you are on the first shuttle back to Earth.”

Relief washed over me, sweet and cleansing.

It felt like a small victory in an otherwise overwhelming situation.

Still, the Supervisor’s office suddenly felt claustrophobic, the harsh fluorescent lighting illuminating the metallic surfaces that surrounded us, casting long, foreboding shadows.

My heart pounded in my chest like a caged bird eager to be free, matching the frenzied thoughts racing through my mind.

I stared at the Supervisor, my gaze steady despite the apprehension bubbling beneath my surface.

If I was to navigate through this labyrinth of emotional healing, I needed control over the situation.

The guards couldn’t just whisk Ceara away whenever they pleased.

I needed time, stability.

I cleared my throat, breaking the lingering silence that hung between us like a dense fog. “I need control,” I began, my voice echoing slightly in the vast room. “Your guards.... they can’t just take Ceara away when I’m trying to heal him. I need more time with him.”

The Supervisor regarded me with an expression that was hard to decipher.

It was as if he was trying to peer into the depths of my mind, to gauge the

sincerity of my words.

The sensation was unsettling.

He leaned back in his chair, studying me for what felt like an eternity.

The hum of the prison's machinery was the only sound that filled the room, the repetitive drone mirroring the persistent drum of my heartbeat.

"Very well," he finally said, the words seeming to hang in the air before they reached my ears.

The relief that washed over me was instant, like a cool breeze after a scorching day.

But it was quickly replaced by a twisting sensation in the pit of my stomach, a gnawing feeling of trepidation.

What was I getting myself into?

The thought of getting closer to Ceara, of forging a connection that went beyond mere acquaintance, was a daunting prospect.

His world, his experiences were far removed from my own.

Could I really bridge that gap?

As the Supervisor dismissed me with a curt nod, I found my feet carrying me back to the cell.

My mind was a whirlwind of thoughts, anxiety and determination warring for dominance.

I was light years away from home, tasked with a mission that seemed insurmountable.

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## CEARA

The cell's dim lighting cast a cold ambiance, but nothing could match the chill of Ellie's absence.

Her sudden departure left an emptiness within me that I hadn't anticipated.

Only moments ago, our fingers had brushed, our worlds had teetered on the edge of intertwining, and now, she was gone.

I was disoriented, caught in a whirlwind of emotions.

I was trapped. Alone.

*Why does her absence bother me so much?* I mused, my fingers twitching with the urge to feel her delicate skin once more.

The sensations she evoked in me were unfamiliar yet intoxicating, much like the melodies from ancient lullabies — forgotten yet embedded deep within.

The truth was, Ellie wasn't just another Prize; she was my Distant Vision mate.

A concept I never gave much credence to until now.

In our culture, finding one's Distant Vision mate is a sacred rite, revered and celebrated.

It is believed that the universe binds two souls together, crafting a shared destiny.

It's an unparalleled bond, one that comes once in a lifetime.

And now, with Ellie's abrupt departure, an overwhelming fear of losing our shared future began to seep in.

I reclined against the cold, unyielding wall of the cell, letting the chill

penetrate my skin.

Memories of my childhood teachings regarding the Distant Vision played in my mind.

It was said that the moment you meet your mate, the universe hums in harmony, a melody only the two of you can hear.

This connection was cosmic, spiritual, and bound by destiny, a union of souls that even the gods celebrated.

And more than that, it was foretold to bestow incredible powers upon those who possess it...

*Had I ruined it by keeping her at arm's length?* I pondered.

The soft touch of her hand, the gentle cadence of her voice, her warm presence — all were etched in my memory, even though our time together was fleeting.

Should I have done more?

Said more?

Been more open?

My inner turmoil swelled, and the walls of the cell seemed to close in on me.

I yearned to rectify my inaction, to seize our shared destiny.

An aching longing filled me, a visceral pull that made every fiber of my being yearn for her.

It was as if I could still hear the soft shuffle of her feet, feel the heat of her body close to mine, and smell the delicate floral scent she wore.

But above all, it was hope she had given me — a tantalizing, sweet flavor of a future where we might be free, together.

A strange thought occurred to me; it was odd how someone from a world so different from mine, someone I barely knew, had come to mean so much.

But then again, that's the magic of the Distant Vision.

It defied logic, blurred boundaries, and created connections where none seemed possible.

As the hours ebbed away, my anxiety grew.

Every whisper in the hallway, every footstep made my heart race, hoping it would be her return.

But time played its cruel trick, stretching each second into an eternity of waiting.

I had to see her.

To apologize, to express the depth of my feelings, and to weave the

threads of our shared destiny together.

I knew the stakes, the barriers that lay between us, but one thing was clear: our paths were meant to intertwine.

And come what may, I was determined to hold onto the future the universe had shown me — a future with Ellie.

THE ABRASIVE NOISE of the cell door's metallic gears grated against my heightened senses.

But this time, it heralded not another torment but the return of my respite.  
*Ellie.*

She stepped in, her face pale but eyes sparkling with resilience.

The very sight of her washed over me like a warm wave, soothing the raw edges of my anxiety.

“Are you all right?” I rushed to her side, needing to assure myself of her well-being. “Did they hurt you? If they did, I swear I’ll—”

“They didn’t hurt me,” Ellie said, brushing a stray strand of hair behind her ear, looking up at me with those piercing blue eyes. “One of the Prizes was... injured during the night. They needed my medical expertise. But I’m okay, Ceara. Just a little shaken.”

The news that someone had been hurt sent a chill down my spine — after all, it could have just as easily have been Ellie if she were in their position — but I clamped down on the rising anger.

Now wasn’t the time for rage.

Instead, I focused on the relief that she was safe, that the universe had not yanked her away from me.

Drawing her close, I whispered:

“I’m... glad you’re okay.”

*Glad* was an understatement.

If she never returned to me, I wasn’t sure how I was meant to go on.

A beautiful bird released from its cage only made the room it once belonged to all the dimmer.

The truth of my words hung heavily between us.

We shared a moment of silent understanding, both of us astounded by the depth of connection that had blossomed so quickly.

I gently ran my fingers over her arm, feeling the silky texture of her skin, noting the slight tremor under my touch.

Her scent, a mix of earthly flowers, tickled my senses.

Warmth radiated from her.

The door slid open again, breaking our intimate moment.

A guard entered and I immediately stepped defensively between him and Ellie.

I needn't have worried.

He was pushing a cart laden with what looked —and smelled — like real food.

My stomach grumbled in response, reminding me of the meager rations I'd grown accustomed to.

This wasn't the bland nutrient paste they usually doled out.

Instead, the cart carried plates of roasted meats, vibrant vegetables, and even some fresh fruits.

The savory aroma made my mouth water and filled the room with a heady blend of spices and herbs.

“Thanks to me,” Ellie said with a hint of pride, “you'll be eating a little better from now on. You can't heal on that paste they give you. If I'm going to get you back to full health, you need proper nourishment.”

I chuckled, the sound filled with genuine amusement. “Is this your doing, then? An improvement in prison cuisine?”

The little human shrugged.

She was a true wonder.

Her words made me marvel at the strength of this remarkable human.

Here she was, a prisoner like me, yet she had managed to improve our living conditions with just her will and determination.

The tender flesh of a fruit burst in my mouth, its juicy sweetness mingling with the savory flavors of the meat, creating a symphony of taste I hadn't experienced in what felt like eons.

It was a delightful assault on my taste buds, and I couldn't help but let out a satisfied sigh.

The fresh aroma of the vegetables, the sound of Ellie's gentle laughter as she watched me enjoy the meal, the feel of the soft napkin on my fingertips, and the explosion of flavors in my mouth — everything was heightened.

I felt alive, truly alive, for the first time in ages.

We dined together, an odd semblance of a date in this otherwise grim

setting.

As I watched Ellie eat with a grace that belied our surroundings, I felt a warmth spreading through me.

The weight of our situation still hung over us, but for the moment, we had food, each other's company, and a glimmer of hope.

And hope, even a morsel, was a powerful thing.

After we finished, Ellie leaned close, her breath a whisper against my ear. "Maybe one day we'll eat like this, not in a cell, but under the open sky of a free world."

Her words resonated deep within, instilling a promise of a future that I desperately wanted to believe in.

A future where we were not prisoners, but free beings, united by a bond that spanned galaxies.

The future promised by my Distant Vision.

THE PLATTERS before us were a mix of both human and Blinker food, offering a rare glimpse of our shared future.

I picked up a piece of *trilax*, a traditional Blinker fruit.

Its soft, spiky exterior felt familiar under my fingertips.

"Here, try this."

I offered it to Ellie, eager to share a piece of my world with her.

She hesitated for a moment, eyeing the strange-looking fruit, then took a small bite.

I watched closely, hoping she would appreciate its unique flavor.

The corners of her lips turned upwards, her eyes gleaming with delight. "It's like a mix of mango and... something I've never tasted before. It's delicious!"

Relief and pride surged within me.

Sharing the flavors of my home and seeing her relish them felt deeply intimate.

As we continued to eat, I noticed Ellie's fingers brushing against a piece of *quenza*, a Blinker delicacy that I hadn't experienced in so long.

It was a soft, creamy dessert that transported you straight into a comforting embrace.

“You *must* try this,” I urged, pushing the plate closer to her.

The gentle chime of our laughter and the rhythmic clinking of cutlery formed a background melody.

Each bite brought memories — of home, of family, and of celebrations.

The creamy texture of the *quenza* on my tongue, its sweet aroma, and the gentle sound it made as it squelched slightly when pressed, all took me back to happier days.

Ellie seemed to notice the change in my demeanor, her hand finding mine across the table. “What’s on your mind?” she asked gently.

I swallowed, the flavors of the food mingling with the emotions churning within. “This... all of this,” I gestured at the spread, “reminds me of home. Of better days. And...” I hesitated, unsure if I should share the next part, but something in her gaze encouraged me. “It reminds me of a particular Distant Vision of mine.”

Her eyes widened with curiosity. “Distant Vision? What’s that?”

*Where do I even begin?* I wondered.

She didn’t know about my species’ unique ability, never mind the intricate details concealed within it.

Taking a deep breath, I began. “It’s... a Vision. Of us on a beach. Not here on Ikmal, but somewhere else — somewhere serene and beautiful. The sand is warm beneath our feet, the waves singing their timeless lullaby. We had a picnic laid out, much like this, and we laughed, ate, and danced under the stars.”

The words flowed freely, painting a picture of a time and place neither of us had experienced yet but felt deeply connected to. “I remember the salty tang of the sea breeze,” I continued, “the feel of the sand shifting underfoot, the distant cries of the birds, the mesmerizing dance of the flames from the bonfire we had, and most of all, the taste of the food we shared.”

Ellie squeezed my hand, her voice soft. “On my world, we call that a dream. But who’s to say dreams can’t come true? Maybe one day, we’ll have that picnic on a beach, just like in your Vision.”

A dream? I thought.

We had the same concept on my homeworld... but it wasn’t a dream.

A dream was an unconscious fantasy, no more real or a premonition of the future than fantasy creatures.

Still, the idea, so full of hope and promise, made my heart race.

Here, in this cold cell, with the flavors of home in our mouths and the



dream of a better future in our minds, anything felt possible.

Drawing her closer, I whispered,. “I’d like that, Ellie. More than anything.”

For a long while, we simply sat there, holding onto each other, lost in the promise of a shared future.

We were two souls, intertwined by fate, hoping for a tomorrow where our dreams could become our reality.

Home, and the scent of possibilities lingered in the air, reminding us both that even in the darkest moments, hope could shine the brightest.

AS THE FAMILIAR, dissonant groan of the cell doors began, I braced myself.

Being ripped away from Ellie, especially after the serene moment we just shared, seemed like the cruelest of punishments.

The silhouette of the guards materialized against the dim backdrop of the prison’s corridor.

But before I could make my resigned move for them to take me, Ellie, with an assertiveness I’d never witnessed before, placed herself between me and the looming guards.

“Stop,” she said, her voice commanding and resonant. “He needs to *heal*. If you want him to be of any use in your experiments, let him be. Give him time!”

The audacity of her words and the unwavering determination in her eyes took them aback.

It wasn’t just the guards who were shocked; even I couldn’t comprehend the transformation in Ellie, the once subdued human Prize.

There was an uncomfortable silence, the kind where the weight of the air is felt by all.

The guards exchanged glances, the metallic sheen of their armor flickering as they shifted.

Then, with a curt nod, they retreated.

The heavy door slid back into place, its thud echoing the relief that filled my chest.

I turned to Ellie, my eyes filled with wonder. “They... they listened to you?”

She stepped closer, her fingers brushing my arm. “I couldn’t let them take you away. Not now. Not after... everything.”

Every sensation was heightened at that moment — the gentle hum of the prison’s life-support systems, the cold touch of the metallic walls against my back, and, above all, Ellie’s proximity.

The space between us was thinning, driven by a force that neither of us could resist.

Our gazes locked, and the universe contracted into the space between her eyes and mine.

I could hear the subtle change in her breathing, a delicate cadence echoing my own heightened heartbeat.

My hand instinctively reached out to cup her face, her skin soft and cool against my own, grounding me to the moment.

And then it happened — the slow gravitational pull as our faces drew closer.

The world faded as our lips met.

It wasn’t just a kiss; it was a discovery, an exploration.

The sensation was electrifying, a combination of the familiar and the new.

She was sweet, reminiscent of the *trilax* fruit, with a hint of her own unique essence.

Our universe condensed into this intimate dance of touch and sensation.

The melding of our lips spoke of longing, of lost time, and of dreams yet realized.

Every suppressed emotion, every shared moment, culminated in this profound connection.

It wasn’t a mere joining of lips, but a merging of souls.

When we finally pulled apart, I felt both elated and breathless.

The world around us seemed to have changed, or maybe it was just the way we perceived it.

We rested our foreheads against each other, our breaths mingling, both of us processing the depth of our connection.

“I’ve never felt anything like that before,” Ellie whispered, her voice shaky.

“Neither have I,” I admitted. “It’s as if the stars themselves ordained this moment for us.”

She chuckled softly, the sound warming me from the inside. “You have such a way with words, Ceara. But yes, it did feel... cosmic.”

In that dim cell, we found a sanctuary.

A place where, against all odds, two souls from opposite ends of the galaxy found resonance.

The challenges that lay ahead seemed distant as we reveled in the present, holding onto the promise that each shared moment offered.

The memory of our shared kiss lingered, a reminder of the depth of our connection and the potential of our shared future.

And then she took me by the hand and led me toward the bed.

---

**ELLIE**

**T**he meal had been an even bigger success than I expected.

The food looked rich and bright, its flavors just as incredible.

The flavors exploded across my tongue and zipped up into the depths of my brain.

And then we kissed.

But it wasn't just a kiss.

It was something else, something so much more.

If my eyes weren't shut at the time, I swear I would have seen sparks, but not sparks of common fire but sparks of magic, or two threads from life's tapestries rubbing together to create a Moment.

A Moment of truth and honesty and, yes, intimacy.

I took Ceara by the hand and led him toward the bed.

It was little more than a cot — several pallets pushed together with a thin layer of foam acting as a mattress.

But it was all we had.

Hell, it was all we *needed*.

All thoughts of the Supervisor's plan left me and I felt calm and confident as I sat down on the bed and allowed myself to be alone with the beast.

He sat beside me and I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his.

I could still taste the sharp tang of the fruit he'd shared with me.

His tongue was long, like an eel, and it slid easily inside my mouth.

He was a surprisingly good kisser, lacking any of the haste and roughness I might have expected of a creature so large.

I leaned back onto the cot and he came with me, careful to brace most of

his weight on his forearm or else he might have ended up crushing me beneath him.

His lips never left mine, and we battled slowly, sensuously at first, exploring, probing.

He kissed down my face and found the base of my neck.

He sniffed, breathing my scent in deeply, and I noticed the change in him immediately.

My pheromones had evidently sent him into a berserker rage, except it was controlled, even if only shallowly.

His lips returned to mine and this time they were filled with passion as he kissed me so long and hard that I lost my breath.

By the time he broke it, I was panting for oxygen.

He hitched up the flimsy uniform they had given me to wear and immediately pressed his mouth to my sex.

He didn't lick or kiss me there but instead sniffed me, savoring my scent.

I felt self-conscious, as if there was something wrong, but he seemed perfectly at ease, enjoying my aroma.

Then he tentatively kissed me, gently slurping at me.

Every touch sent a shiver of fire through my body.

Then his tongue eased inside me.

I was uptight and tense but where his raging cock — and I had seen the large swell of it in the front of his pants several times already — would have struggled to fit inside me, his tongue slipped in easily.

I moaned as it found my g-spot, lapping at it like a puppy with its favorite chewtoy.

His hand lowered to my clit and he rubbed it back and forth.

Not too hard, not too soft.

*Just right.*

My hips bucked back and forth and my hands went to his horns and I didn't need to press him or direct him.

He was hitting me exactly as I liked.

“Mmmmm,” I moaned, and he paused for a moment to look up at me.

His lips were wet with my juices and he grinned up at me.

I didn't think I had ever seen a sexier sight in my life.

Then he buried his lips back on me, his tongue diving back into my pink folds, this time attacking me with greater feverish urgency.

It was too much, and I felt my body reacting to his every caress.

Unable to hold back any longer, he released himself from his pants and dove into me.

My pussy was soaking wet already but even then, it was not ready for the mammoth task he had for me.

I spread my legs as wide as I could manage.

It was just enough for him to slid that huge slab of meat inside me.

He pulled back and my head flopped back on the cot, my arms reached out for the cot's edges and found the edges of the pallets it was resting on.

I gripped hold of it tight as Ceara slammed into me.

Every stroke was a hydrogen bomb exploding inside me.

Three strokes in and I was doused with a thin layer of sweat.

Eight strokes, and I was soaked.

My pussy protested, the pain giving way to pleasure with each thrust of ecstasy.

I screamed as he hammered me hard, too many strokes to count now, but they all shoved me powerfully over the precipice and into the welcoming arms of destruction — orgasm — below.

He grunted through his teeth as he rammed me even harder, knocking the cot back inch by inch until we rested on the adjacent wall.

I braced my hands on the wall as he released his full fury upon me.

I reached up with a hand to cup his cheek and he kissed my hand, but his eyes were blazing fire and he fixed them upon me as his own end came and he filled me with his delicious seed.

He collapsed, exhausted, on top of me, taking care once more to ensure he didn't crush me.

He kissed me gently on the brow, the cheeks, the nose, so much affection for such a large beast.

And we lay there, happy, and deep in my heart I knew that what we had just done hadn't only been making love.

It was been something so, so much more that I couldn't fully explain.

My feelings of pleasure battled with my sense of guilt, that I had made love to him not for the pure act but for my own ends, and those of the Supervisor.

LYING BESIDE CEARA, cocooned in the dim ambiance of the cell, was an experience I had never anticipated.

His alien physique, with its hard musculature, was otherworldly against the softness of the makeshift bedding.

Each time our bodies brushed against one another, it sent little jolts of electricity through me, stirring a medley of emotions I was still grappling with.

His deep voice rumbled, breaking the comfortable silence. “You know, Ellie, back on my homeworld, when we share stories in intimate settings like this, it’s considered a sacred act.”

I turned my head to gaze at his face, noting how the dim light of the cell played upon the unique contours of his features. “Well,” I began, playfully tracing a pattern on his arm, the texture of his skin, both rough and soft, intriguing beneath my fingers, “maybe we should make it sacred here too. Tell me something you’ve never told anyone before.”

Ceara chuckled, the sound resonating deeply, sending waves of warmth down my spine. “Hmm. Where to begin? All right, when I was a child — well, the Blinker equivalent of a child — I accidentally set free all the spiketail birds from our village’s communal aviary. They’re quite valuable, you see. My family had to work for months to repay the debt.”

Laughing, I imagined a younger, equally mischievous version of Ceara, trying to chase after exotic birds. “That’s quite a confession! I once stole cookies from my grandmother’s kitchen and blamed it on our dog. I still feel guilty about it.”

Ceara grinned, revealing the unique structure of his teeth which always caught the light in fascinating ways. “Seems we both have a mischievous streak.”

Our banter continued, and as the hours melted away, our conversation took deeper turns.

The air between us was thick with stories of the past, dreams of the future, and the palpable present.

“I always dreamt of becoming an adventurer,” I whispered, drawing patterns on Ceara’s chest, feeling the rise and fall of his steady breathing. “When I was little, I’d stare at the horizon for hours, thinking about all the adventures I’d have among the twinkling lights of cities in the distance. But I never imagined my adventure would lie in the depths of space.”

Ceara’s hand enclosed mine, igniting a sense of warmth that seeped

through to my core. “In my culture, the cosmos is believed to be a living entity. The stars, they’re not just balls of burning gas but souls, watching over us, guiding our destinies.”

I looked deep into his eyes, their lustrous sheen reflecting the wonder of a thousand galaxies. “Do you think our stars intended for us to meet?”

His fingers paused in tracing my cheek, the sensation sending shivers down my spine.

He leaned back to look me more fully in the eye. “I believe in the Distant Vision. In destiny. We were meant to find each other, Ellie. Even amidst all this chaos.”

There he was, talking about his dream again.

And yet...

And yet, I got the sense to him, it wasn’t just a dream.

It was something genuine and real, something he expected to truly happen some time in the future.

I snuggled closer to him, finding comfort in his embrace.

“As much as I yearn for my home, there’s a part of me,” I hesitated, searching for the right words, “that’s thankful for this journey. Because it led me to you.”

Ceara’s arms tightened around me, the rhythm of our combined heartbeats almost musical in its synchronicity. “We’ll find our way out of here, Ellie. Together.”

The promise in his voice was palpable, a beacon of hope in the enveloping darkness.

The dim lighting of the cell cast soft shadows, making our surroundings feel more intimate.

As I lay there, feeling Ceara’s heartbeat synchronize with mine, I felt a closeness with him that was both overwhelming and comforting.

But I sensed there was something he was holding back, a heaviness in his gaze whenever our eyes met.

“Ceara,” I began, my fingers gently caressing the side of his face, the texture of his skin both familiar and foreign beneath my fingertips. “I feel like there’s something you haven’t told me.”

He sighed, the warm gust brushing against my face.

It smelled slightly sweet, with a hint of a spice I couldn’t quite place. “There’s a reason the Supervisor is so keen on keeping me here, Ellie. I’ve tried to keep it hidden, to numb it, so he can’t exploit it.”



Curiosity bubbled up inside me, tingling on my tongue. “What is it?”

Ceara hesitated, his eyes darting away for a moment.

When he finally looked back at me, there was a vulnerability I hadn’t seen before. “I’m a Seer.”

I blinked in surprise. “A what?”

“A Seer. A Blinker. It’s an ability unique to my species. We can... See the future.”

My heart raced, the implications of his revelation overwhelming.

What was he saying?

Was he telling the truth?

I had to remind myself he had no reason to lie to me.

“How far?” I whispered.

He took a deep breath. “Ten seconds. It’s brief, but you’d be surprised how much can change in that span.”

I tried to digest this, the rich aroma of the meal we shared still lingering in the air, mingling with the intensity of the moment. “But ten seconds... why would the Supervisor be so interested in that?”

Ceara shifted uncomfortably. “He built a machine. It harnesses and amplifies my ability. With it, I don’t just see ten seconds. According to him, I can see much, *much* further.”

A cold shiver ran down my spine, the chill stark against the warmth of Ceara’s embrace.

“He shows me images, prompts,” Ceara continued, his voice shaky, “to guide what he wants me to see. Important events, possible threats, even opportunities for gain. It’s possible I could see hours, days, sometimes even further. And I’m supposed to report what unfolds.”

My mind raced, trying to grasp the vastness of Ceara’s power and the danger it posed in the hands of someone like the Supervisor. “That’s... that’s incredible, Ceara. But also terrifying.”

He nodded, the weight of his gift evident in his eyes. “I’ve been fighting it, trying to numb the connection so he can’t get clear visions. But it takes a toll on me, and the Supervisor’s experiments...”

He trailed off, pain evident in his voice.

I leaned closer, feeling the need to protect him, to shield him from the world that sought to exploit his gift.

*The exploitation I was a part of...*

The taste of our shared meal, still fresh on my lips, became bittersweet

with the realization of his sacrifice.

He pulled me close.

And as we lay there, embraced in the moment's silence, I felt the universe aligning, ready to pave the path for our shared destiny.

His lips found mine and I responded to him.

He pulled back the sheet and the sight of me naked made his cock as hard as a sledgehammer.

And then he put it to use...

LYING NEXT TO CEARA, his revelations spinning in my mind, a question formed that I couldn't hold back. "Ceara," I whispered, touching the side of his face, the rough texture now familiar to my fingertips. "If you can see into the future, how did you get caught?"

Ceara let out a long sigh, and the warmth of it brushed against my face, mingling with the scents of our recent meal and the musky odor of the cell.

He turned to face me, his eyes filled with pain. "It's complicated, Ellie. I've always had to be careful, lived most of my life in solitude. In a universe where the smallest glimpse of the future can change the course of events, my ability... it's coveted."

I watched him closely, taking in every detail.

The sensation of our closeness felt like a balm to the chaos around us.

I could hear the distant hum of the facility, a constant backdrop to our secluded world.

"I had to be cautious with everything — especially food and drinks. People would do anything to incapacitate a Blinker and use them for their own purposes. So, I trusted very few."

He paused, swallowing hard, the sound raw in the quiet of the room.

"One day, after a particularly long vision, I was drained. I sought comfort with one of the few friends I thought I could trust. He made me a hot drink, something to soothe my senses. I inspected it closely, as was my habit," Ceara's voice grew thick with emotion. "I sniffed the drink, detecting no drugs. It seemed safe."

I gripped his hand, feeling the roughness of his palm against mine, offering silent support.

“It was scalding,” Ceara continued, “so he added ice cubes to cool it down. I didn’t think twice. It was such a simple, kind gesture.” His eyes welled with tears of anger. “But those cubes, Ellie. They were infused with a powerful sedative. The last thing I remember was the world blurring as the betrayal of a supposed friend came crashing down on me.”

The cool touch of the room’s walls seemed even colder with his revelation.

The sting of betrayal hung heavy between us. I could see the layers of pain and mistrust that had built up over time, understanding now the barriers he had erected around himself.

“Oh, Ceara,” I whispered, feeling his pain acutely, the sensation sharp in my chest.

I reached out, touching his face gently, feeling the wetness of his tears against my skin. “I’m so sorry.”

His eyes met mine, the depths of his pain mirrored in their intensity. “That’s how I ended up here. With the Supervisor.”

The bitterness in his voice was palpable.

We sat in silence, the weight of his past pressing down on us.

Yet, in that shared moment, our bond only deepened.

We both faced betrayals of different kinds, which drew us closer together.

After what felt like hours, Ceara looked at me, a small smile playing on his lips. “You know, Ellie, despite everything, a part of me is grateful for that betrayal. If it hadn’t happened, I wouldn’t have met you.”

A smile spread across my face, my heart fluttering at his words. “Funny... how the universe works, isn’t it?”

We leaned into each other, our lips meeting in a soft, lingering kiss.

The sensation of his lips on mine was electrifying, erasing the pains of the past, if only for a moment.

He nodded, a determined glint in his eyes. “With you by my side, Ellie, I believe anything is possible.”

I felt sick to my stomach.

His friend had betrayed him and it had clearly broken Ceara’s heart.

And yet, here I was doing exactly the same thing.

Could I go through with it? I wondered. Or would my empathy get the better of me?

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## CEARA

Ellie's eyes glistened like twin stars in the dim light of the cell.

The memory of our recent intimacy was still fresh, and I could taste her on my lips, sweet and tantalizing.

But the next revelation I was about to share threatened to shift the trajectory of our budding relationship.

I looked into her eyes, my gaze intense. "Ellie, the first time I saw you... it wasn't here in this cell."

She frowned, confused. "What do you mean?"

"That Distant Vision I talked about? It was a Vision. You were there, amidst a setting I didn't recognize. It was serene, calm, with a gentle breeze carrying the scent of an ocean. And you... you were radiant, smiling at me."

She shook her head. "That can't be right. I thought you can only see ten seconds in the future?"

"Usually, yes. You are the only thing I've ever seen that's further than that. We were connected long before this place, Ellie."

Tears glistened in her eyes, the enormity of our connection making her heart swell.

"I've seen you *before*," I repeated, my voice quivering slightly.

I could feel the cool, coarse texture of the bed sheet under me, grounding me, reminding me of the reality of the situation. "I've seen you every day of my life, as far back as I can remember."

Ellie looked taken aback, her face pale.

Her beautiful eyes searched mine, seeking understanding, a hint of recognition. "How... How is that possible?" she stammered.

I reached out, sliding my hands through her delicate fingers.

Their warmth was reassuring, a beacon in this cold, alien place. “Isn’t it obvious?” I murmured, looking deep into her eyes. “Because you are my fated mate.”

She gasped, her eyes widening in surprise. “Fated mate? What does that mean?”

“In Blinker culture,” I began, my voice soft and reverent, “we believe that the universe pairs each of us with a soul mate, a perfect counterpart. It is said that from the moment we are born, we carry a vision of them with us, a constant presence that guides and comforts us. That vision,” I paused, emotion choking my voice, “has always been you.”

Ellie looked shell-shocked.

She withdrew slightly, her fingers slipping out of my grasp.

She turned away, and I heard her take a shaky breath, her chest heaving.

The ambient noise of the prison seemed to amplify, the distant hum of machines and the faint whispers of guards outside, creating a cacophony of distractions.

“But... how can that be?” she asked, her voice tinged with wonder and disbelief. “I’m from Earth. Our paths would have never crossed if not for... this.”

I nodded, understanding her confusion. “That’s the mystery of the universe,” I replied, my voice filled with awe. “It binds souls across galaxies, weaving a tapestry of interconnected destinies. I’ve dreamt of you, seen you in my waking visions, and longed for our paths to finally cross.”

She turned to face me, flushed with a hint of pink on her cheeks.

“But why didn’t you say anything when we first met?” she asked.

I sighed, running a hand through my tousled hair. “I was in shock, disbelief. You were in front of me, but not as I had envisioned. You were a healer, forced into a role you didn’t choose, and I was a prisoner. It wasn’t the romantic meeting I had always dreamt of. But now,” I said, looking deep into her eyes, “now that I’ve come to know you, felt your touch, shared my darkest secrets, I can’t deny the truth any longer.”

Ellie looked at me, a myriad of emotions dancing in her eyes — confusion, disbelief, but also a hint of curiosity. “Ceara,” she whispered, leaning closer, “if I am truly your fated mate, what does that mean for us?”

I cupped her face, feeling the soft warmth of her skin against my palm.

The world around us seemed to fade away, leaving just the two of us in a

cocoon of shared destiny.

“It means,” I whispered, my lips inches from hers, “that we are bound together by the universe. Our souls are intertwined, and no matter the challenges we face, we will always find our way back to each other.”

She closed her eyes, tears glistening on her lashes. “Ceara,” she murmured, her voice thick with emotion, “I don’t know what the future holds, but I’m willing to discover it with you.”

And with that, our lips met in a kiss filled with promise, sealing our intertwined destinies.

THE METALLIC ECHO of the guard’s boots resonated through the cold steel floors of the cell.

With every step, my heart raced a little faster, the beating a testament to the swirl of emotions within me.

And while I dreaded the guards’ arrival, this time, I welcomed them with a strange sense of relief.

I hoped they had come for me, not Ellie.

She sat beside me, our fingers entwined, her touch warm and reassuring.

The soft hum of the air circulators and the low buzz of the fluorescent lights created a soothing background to the tension-filled moment.

The scent of her hair, a fragrant mix of blossoms and fresh rain, tickled my nose and provided comfort amidst the chaos.

She looked up at me, those deep blue eyes searching mine, seeking reassurance, a promise that this wouldn’t be the last time we saw each other.

I gave her hand a gentle squeeze, conveying the multitude of emotions that words couldn’t capture.

Our breaths synchronized, hers tasting faintly of the berries we had shared just a few moments earlier.

The cell doors slid open with a soft hiss, revealing two towering guards, their armor glinting in the dim light, their faces obscured by visors.

I could sense their eagerness, a palpable energy that buzzed in the air.

The chill from the corridor outside swept in, making me shiver.

“Ceara,” the taller guard barked, his voice echoing in the cell. “You’re coming with us.”

I nodded, standing up slowly, taking a moment to steady myself.

A whiff of engine oil and stale sweat emanated from the guards, a smell I had grown accustomed to over the long months of my imprisonment.

It was a stark reminder of the reality I was trapped in.

Turning to Ellie, I took a moment to drink in her appearance, to etch this memory onto my soul.

The soft glow of the cell lights illuminated her face, highlighting her delicate features and the fierce determination in her gaze.

“We’ll see each other again,” I whispered, my voice thick with emotion. “This isn’t goodbye.”

She gave me a brave smile, her lips trembling ever so slightly. “I... know,” she murmured, her voice choked with tears.

She had more to say but the sight of the guards made her hold it back.

Drawing her into a tight embrace, I inhaled deeply, savoring her unique scent one last time.

The feel of her body pressed against mine, the silky texture of her hair against my cheek, and the gentle rhythm of her heartbeat were sensations I promised myself I’d never forget.

Pulling back, I cupped her face, my thumbs brushing away the tears that had escaped her eyes.

Our lips met in a slow, lingering kiss, filled with the weight of our unspoken promises and the intensity of our newfound connection.

As we broke apart, the guards grew impatient. “Enough,” the shorter one growled, grabbing my arm with a firm grip.

His fingers felt like cold steel bands against my skin, sending a shiver down my spine.

Reluctantly, I allowed myself to be led away, the soft clank of the cell door sealing shut echoing ominously in my ears.

As I walked down the corridor, the chill of the floor seeping through my bare feet, I replayed every moment I had shared with Ellie.

Her laughter, her warmth, and her resilience were the anchors I clung to in this uncertain sea of captivity.

A newfound strength surged through me, a burning conviction that I would find my way back to her.

The sensation was like a fire in my chest, a beacon of hope amidst the darkness that threatened to consume me.

The soft murmur of the guards’ conversation and the distant hum of

machinery faded into the background as my thoughts were consumed by Ellie.

She had become my anchor, my lifeline.

And with the newfound knowledge of our fated connection, I felt invincible.

Nothing, not even the iron grip of the Supervisor or the relentless experiments, could break my spirit.

With every step, I held onto the promise of our reunion, letting it fuel my determination.

I was no longer the defeated prisoner; I was a warrior, ready to face any challenge, for I had something worth fighting for.

And as the guards led me deeper into the bowels of the prison, one thought echoed in my mind: I would return to Ellie.

No matter the cost.

THE STERILE ROOM I was led into held an oppressive air.

A whirr of machinery combined with the tangy, acrid odor of electrical discharge made the space feel even more otherworldly than the rest of the complex.

Bright lights overhead threw stark shadows on the cold, metal floor, the chill of which seeped through the soles of my feet, causing an involuntary shiver to wrack my frame.

The Supervisor stood near the central console, the machine's holomitters surrounding it in a semi-circle.

His silhouette looked menacing, even in the well-lit environment. "Strap him in," he ordered tersely.

The guards, their grip cold and unyielding, forced me into the metallic chair.

The chair's restraints snapped around my wrists and ankles with an almost sentient eagerness.

"We're trying a new frequency today," the Supervisor's voice held a note of smugness. "Let's see if you can resist this time."

I closed my eyes momentarily, seeking refuge in the dark behind my eyelids, the only escape from the clinical brightness of the chamber.



My thoughts immediately sought solace in my Distant Vision, the serene beach scene where Ellie and I shared our intimate moments.

The gentle lapping of waves, the tang of salt in the air, the warmth of the sun, and the softness of sand beneath my feet — the sensations grounded me, reinforcing the bond between us.

Only now, it wasn't alone.

I had real memories now, ones *I* had forged.

Our lovemaking, our kissing, our touching.

I reveled in it.

The holo-screen flickered to life, a bluish hue illuminating the room.

The initial images were their usual hazy blur, a medley of swirling colors and indistinct shapes.

But as my focus drifted back to my shared vision with Ellie, a strange sensation took over.

The tranquil beach scene began to merge not with my earlier memory but with the images on the holo-screen.

My heart raced, a rhythm of hope and trepidation.

The holo-images grew sharper, every detail snapping into focus, much clearer than they ever had before.

The cacophony of the machine's hums, whirs, and beeps seemed to fade as the images became more pronounced.

I saw bustling streets of a city I couldn't recognize, spacecrafts darting in the sky, marketplaces alive with chatter and barter, and... Ellie.

There she was, walking with purpose, looking more vibrant and real than any holo-image should.

It felt as if I was losing control, my connection with the Distant Vision becoming a conduit for the machine's power.

The dichotomy was unsettling.

I gripped my chair's armrests, the wires lashed about my arms digging into my flesh.

The texture of the holo-images seemed tangible, the sounds of the distant city ringing in my ears almost drowned the soothing sounds of waves in our shared vision.

It felt as if the line between reality and vision was blurring.

As the weight of realization hit me, I tried to retreat mentally, to distance myself from the invasive pull of the holo-images.

Yet, my shared vision with Ellie acted as an anchor, making it harder to

disengage.

Desperation began to rise in me; I didn't want to give the Supervisor this power, the power to see and manipulate futures.

Suddenly, Ellie's voice, soft and soothing, whispered in my ear:

*"Stay with me, Ceara."*

Though it was just a fragment of our shared Distant Vision, it was what I needed.

A beacon in the storm.

With renewed vigor, I tried to blur the holo-images, focusing all my energy on our beach, on the sensation of her touch, the warmth of the sun.

The room's sounds faded, replaced by the gentle crash of waves and Ellie's gentle heartbeat.

When I finally opened my eyes, the holo-screen was dark.

The Supervisor stared at it in frustration, his face a mask of anger.

The machinery's whirring slowed, returning the room to its eerie silence.

"What did you do?!" the Supervisor's voice was filled with rage.

Although I was exhausted, I managed a smirk. "You can't control everything, Supervisor."

The guards released me, a hint of grudging respect in their eyes.

As I stood up, my legs slightly shaky, I took a deep breath.

Despite the ordeal, I couldn't suppress a smile.

The Supervisor had his machines and his plans, but I had something far more powerful: love.

And with Ellie by my side, even in spirit, I felt invincible.

"Again," the Supervisor said.

My head snapped toward him.

The guards who had begun to release my restraints paused and looked up at their master.

I could read their expressions even through their helmets:

*Again?*

I had never been subjected to a second round immediately on the heels of the first before.

The guards, not saying a word, did as they were bid.

In their silence, the Scientist stepped forward. "Sir, with all due respect, the new frequency could kill him the second time. If we allowed hi to rest a little, to recuperate, we might see better results."

The Supervisor's tiny compound eyes bore into me and I felt an

uneasiness that I had never felt before.

He leaned forward. *“Again.”*

The Scientist turned to me with another vial of truth serum and administered it.

There was no look of sorrow on his face — I doubted the creature could even express it.

The familiar hum of the holo-machine enveloped the room, but this time, it felt more intrusive, louder and grating against my senses.

The image that took shape on the holo-screen, however, shifted the unsettling ambiance into one of deep reverence.

It was a massive tree, its bark shimmering with an ethereal glow.

Its branches reached out like protective arms, but what caught my attention the most were its fruits.

Hanging like glistening jewels, each bore a distinct number.

I instantly recognized it: the Yllandra Tree, a holy entity in our culture, bearer of the numbered fruits used in our sacred lottery.

The very sight of the Yllandra Tree invoked memories of my homeland, the feel of warm, soft wind brushing against my face, the distant sound of religious hymns, and the taste of sweet, ripe fruits from my childhood.

But, juxtaposed against the cold, sterile environment of this chamber, it felt like a cruel mockery.

As the holo-image focused, the fruits began to ripen, and one by one, the numbers on them became crystal clear.

*No... This... This can't be happening.*

Not now.

I fought the urge to focus on them, to glimpse the future they signified.

But my resistance was wearing thin.

My vision sharpened, drawn inexorably to the emerging numbers.

My mind raced, and despite my desperate attempts to drift back to my Distant Vision with Ellie, I couldn't.

“What do you see, Ceara?” the Supervisor's calm voice asked.

The truth serum's efficacy was undeniable.

A warmth spread through my veins, making my thoughts sluggish, my lips loose.

And, against my will, the numbers embedded in my vision began to spill from my mouth. “Seven... Twelve... Twenty-three... Forty-one... Fifty-six...”

The sequence flowed out, as if reciting a rehearsed script.

My heart pounded heavily, the echoing laughter of the Supervisor cutting through the dense fog in my mind.

The realization hit me with the weight of a supernova:

I had finally broken.

The one secret, the key to immense power and fortune, had been unwillingly torn from me.

“Well done, Ceara,” the Supervisor gloated, his voice dripping with satisfaction.

“You... You exploit my ability to... to win... a game of... of chance?” I said between painful breaths.

“Of course not,” the Supervisor said. “It is but a test of your ability. With the power of foresight in my hands, there’s no limit to what I can achieve. I will be *invincible*.”

Despair weighed heavily on my chest.

The feel of the cold metal restraints seemed to cut deeper, the sound of my own ragged breathing a testament to my shattered resolve.

In that moment, every sensation, every emotion, was heightened.

The tang of the serum, the cold sweat forming on my brow, the hollow echo of the Supervisor’s laughter, the shimmering light of the holo-display, and the hauntingly familiar scent of the Yllandra Tree.

And just when hopelessness threatened to consume me, a gentle whisper tickled my senses, a soft touch on the periphery of my mind.

Ellie.

Even in this dire moment, the thought of her provided a glimmer of hope.

I clung to that thought, letting her presence wash over me.

The weight on my chest lightened, the metallic restraints no longer seemed as confining.

Yes, the Supervisor had won a battle today, but he had not won the war.

The strength of our bond, the power of our shared vision, was something he could never understand, much less control.

The Supervisor, engrossed in his victory, didn’t notice the defiant glint in my eyes.

For every move he made, every card he played, I now had an even stronger reason to fight back: not just for my freedom, but for our shared future, a future where Ellie and I could be together, unhindered by the manipulations of power-hungry beings.

Today, the Supervisor might laugh, basking in the illusion of control, but tomorrow, with Ellie by my side, we'd have the last laugh.

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**ELLIE**

**T**he Supervisor's office was an expansive chamber, adorned with oddities and trophies that screamed of a mind that reveled in its conquests.

As I entered, the strong aroma of aged leather and an overly sweet, underlying scent — perhaps a fragrant flower? — greeted me.

Despite the opulence and grandeur, a cold chill enveloped the room, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

I could hear the subtle hum of the climate control system, mingled with the distant murmur of the guards standing to attention outside.

The velvety floor under my shoes felt both luxurious and unsettling, as I imagined where the soft fabric might have been sourced from.

*The hind of some unfortunate beast, no doubt.*

But what drew my attention the most were what adorned the shelves.

They were lined with items that, upon closer examination, made my stomach churn.

Hollowed-out alien skulls neatly arranged among ornate vases and shimmering crystals.

They varied in size, some as large as my head and others, heartbreakingly smaller.

Next to each skull was a small plaque, describing the species and planet of origin.

It was a macabre museum, showcasing the breadth of the Supervisor's reach and cruelty.

While I had come to appreciate the vastness of the universe and the

myriad of species it housed, these tangible remnants were a jarring reminder of the dominion one being could exert over so many.

The smooth, cool texture of the skulls as I gingerly touched one only intensified the sorrow and disgust I felt.

I had to swallow hard to push the bile down.

As the Supervisor's ornate doors slid open with a faint hiss, a chill, unlike the climate-controlled ambiance of the building, wrapped around me.

He stepped into the office, his tall frame casting an elongated round shadow that seemed to stretch beyond the bounds of the chamber. "You like my collection?"

The voice, dripping with pride, jolted me out of my morose contemplation.

The Supervisor sat at his desk, observing me closely, his fingers drumming softly against the polished wood, producing a rhythm that somehow added to the eerie ambiance.

I hesitated for a moment, choosing my words carefully. "It's... extensive," I finally said, avoiding his gaze.

He chuckled, the sound reminiscent of ice clinking against glass. "Each item tells a story. A memory of my achievements. A testament to my growing power."

The reality of my betrayal weighed heavily on me.

I felt the guilt gnawing away inside, reminding me that by helping Ceara, I was actively working against this formidable figure before me.

While the Supervisor's actions were deplorable, there was an undeniable connection between us.

A connection I wished didn't exist.

Taking a deep breath to steel myself, I responded:

"And yet, memories can be fleeting, can't they? Power, even more so."

I locked eyes with him, the air between us charged with tension.

The Supervisor smirked, leaning back in his chair. "I see you are a philosopher."

I shifted uncomfortably, feeling the coolness of the room seeping through my clothing.

Every sense was heightened, from the soft murmur of the Supervisor's voice to the distant hum of a prison well-run.

"I did what you ask," I finally said, eager to break the standoff.

He stood up, pacing around his office, the soft light from the room's

chandeliers catching the glint in his eyes. “Yes, you did, didn’t you.”

A big, broad grin adorned his face, but it wasn’t one of mirth.

It was the kind that spelled triumph, the kind that emerges from victory acquired at the expense of others.

I’d thought that by upholding my end of the bargain, I would feel a semblance of relief, perhaps even a tinge of happiness.

But in its place, an empty pit gaped in my stomach.

I could only imagine what Ceara had endured for the Supervisor to wear such a self-satisfied expression.

My senses tingled with apprehension; the musky aroma of the Supervisor’s cologne, stronger than usual, filled the room.

Without a word, the Supervisor circled his desk and took a seat.

The leather chair creaked under his weight, the sound jarringly loud in the otherwise silent room.

He interlaced his fingers, studying me with those piercing eyes. “Ellie,” he began, his voice smooth, almost soothing, “I must commend you for your cooperation. Everything has proceeded as planned.”

There was no warmth in his words, only cold calculation.

I forced a nod, my fingers playing with the hem of my dress, feeling the soft, velvety fabric under my fingertips. “And Ceara?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

He waved a hand dismissively. “He’s... indisposed at the moment. But don’t concern yourself with him.”

That wasn’t the answer I was hoping for.

My heart raced, and a bead of sweat trickled down my temple.

The room suddenly felt too warm, the air too thick to breathe.

Sensing my distress, the Supervisor’s grin widened. “Now, as promised, a private shuttle awaits to transport you back to Earth. But before you leave, may I offer you a parting gift? A Mind Wipe.”

Confusion coursed through me. “A what?”

“A Mind Wipe,” he repeated, leaning back, the light from his desk lamp reflecting off his shining compound eyes. “A procedure that’ll erase all memories of your time here. You’ll wake up in your bed on Earth, with no recollection of any of this. No Ceara, no Ikmal, no guilt. A fresh start.”

The prospect was tempting.

To forget all the pain, all the anguish, to wipe away the slate clean.

My fingers twitched involuntarily, the weight of my choices threatening



to overwhelm me.

I could hear the faint buzz of the room's electronics, their hum filling the space between the Supervisor's words.

My mouth felt dry.

I would agree to wipe the Supervisor, Ikmal, becoming a Prize, the entire night when I'd been abducted, everything about this place from my mind with barely even requiring a heartbeat's thought.

But as much as the idea of oblivion appealed, there was something else.

*The memories of Ceara.*

Our conversations, the soft touch of his hand, the warmth in his eyes.

To erase all that seemed like a betrayal, even more profound than any I had committed.

Was all the hurt and pain worth losing those precious few memories?

"No," I whispered, more to myself than to him. "I don't want to forget."

The Supervisor sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "Very well. I thought I'd offer."

He pressed a button on his desk, and within moments, his assistant, a tall figure with green scales, entered. "Take Ms. Ellie to the shuttle," he ordered, not sparing me another glance.

I hesitated. "What will happen to Ceara now?"

The Supervisor looked up, his eyes cold. "He will... serve his purpose."

The vagueness of his reply sent shivers down my spine.

With a heavy heart, I followed the assistant out, the weight of my choices and the memories I chose to keep pressing down on me.

THE SHIP VIBRATED SOFTLY, sending rhythmic shivers through its metal walls as it hurtled through the void of space.

Outside, a sea of stars twinkled, their bright and bluish hues blurring into streaks as the spaceship moved at a speed incomprehensible to my Earthly understanding.

The beauty of the expanse clashed sharply with the turmoil inside my heart.

The Supervisor's assistant, a tall creature with shimmering green scales, sat at the cockpit, the multiple screens casting a luminescent glow upon his

angular face.

He didn't glance back at me, and his concentration seemed wholly devoted to piloting the ship.

Occasionally, the sound of soft beeping or the faint hiss of some machine adjusting itself filled the cabin.

Resting on the plush seat, I took in the various scents.

It was as though they tried to replicate Earth's sea breeze, and almost succeeded.

Every inhalation was a reminder of the home planet I was returning to and the world I was leaving behind, with all its entanglements and regrets.

Guilt was a heavy weight in my stomach, making the soft fabric of the ship's seat feel scratchy and uncomfortable beneath me.

Memories of Ceara's kind eyes and gentle touch surged back, amplifying the soreness of my betrayal.

And the worst part was the conviction that even if he knew what I had done, he wouldn't have blamed me.

He would have said it was my ticket out of Ikmal and I would have been a fool not to take it.

In his place, I would've drowned in resentment and anger, but Ceara?

He'd probably just wear that soft, forgiving look that had become so familiar in our short time together.

I closed my eyes, trying to block out the memories.

The faint taste of salt — whether from my tears or the replicated sea breeze, I couldn't tell — lingered on my lips.

I pulled my knees to my chest, feeling the cool leather of the seat against my skin.

It was at odds with the warmth of Ceara's embrace, a warmth that now felt like a distant dream.

A sudden lurch made me grip the armrests, my nails digging into the soft material.

The ship seemed to be passing through some turbulence, though what could possibly disrupt our path in the vast emptiness of space was beyond my comprehension.

The Assistant said something in a language I didn't understand, his voice a soothing cadence of low and high pitches, echoing in the confined space.

As the ship stabilized, fatigue began to settle in.

The adrenaline from earlier events, combined with the emotional turmoil,

was catching up to me.

My eyelids felt heavy, and despite my restless mind, the lull of sleep was impossible to resist.

I stretched out on the seat, the smooth leather cool against the back of my neck, and let the soft hum of the ship cradle me into slumber.

THE SOFT CHIRPING of hospital monitors roused me from the clutches of a deep, dreamless sleep.

My eyelids fluttered open to take in the stark white walls and sterile environment of a room I recognized all too well.

I was in St. Lumina Hospital, the very place where I worked on Earth.

Pulling myself into a half-sitting position, I noticed the soft, cottony feel of the hospital gown against my skin, replacing the rougher attire I remembered from...

I bolted upright at the recollection.

The room was flooded with the bright golden light of the afternoon sun.

Its warmth caressed my skin, filling me with a comforting, familiar sensation.

The ambient sounds of the hospital, distant conversations, soft footsteps, and the distant beep of machines, whispered in the background.

Turning my head, I was met with the faces of my co-workers — Rebecca with her curly brown hair, and Jamie, always in his favorite blue scrubs — even Dr. Fields, with his silver hair and wire-rimmed glasses, was there.

They all wore expressions of profound relief.

Rebecca rushed forward, her usual stoic demeanor melting away as tears glistened in her eyes. “Ellie! Oh my god, we were so worried about you!”

As she embraced me, I felt the warmth of her body against mine and the faint floral scent of her shampoo.

It was real.

This wasn’t another illusion or alien environment; it was *home*.

“What... what happened?” I managed to whisper, still trying to process the situation.

Dr. Fields stepped forward, his voice gentle yet clinical. “You were attacked a few nights ago in the alley behind the hospital. Some of your

things were found at the scene. And then... you up and vanished. The entire hospital staff was out searching for you. We couldn't fathom where you'd disappeared to."

Jamie chimed in. "It was like you just vanished into thin air! But then, just as mysteriously as you disappeared, you reappeared at the hospital's entrance this morning, unharmed save for a few bumps and scrapes!"

His words felt heavy, and I tried to process them.

Had everything that happened — Ceara, the Supervisor, that otherworldly prison — been just a dream?

A side-effect of the trauma from the attack?

Rebecca held my hand, her fingers intertwining with mine, offering a comforting squeeze. "It doesn't matter where you were or what happened. We're just glad you're back."

A whirlwind of emotions swirled within me.

There was relief, undoubtedly, but also confusion and a sense of loss so profound it was almost palpable.

I could still feel the texture of Ceara's scales, hear the hum of the spaceships.

Were they just figments of a traumatized mind?

Or had I truly traveled to another world?

Tears welled up, blurring my vision.

Jamie handed me a soft tissue, and as I dabbed at my eyes, the tissue's cool, soft texture brought forth more memories — of different textures and sensations from an alien world.

"We're going to run some tests, just to be sure you're okay," Dr. Fields said, a note of concern in his voice. "Given the nature of your disappearance and sudden reappearance, we want to make sure there are no underlying issues."

I nodded, the weight of everything pressing down on me.

The room felt both familiar and strange, the sensations both comforting and jarring.

After a few more moments of shared concern, hugs, and words of comfort, my co-workers left, giving me space to process and recover.

But as the door closed behind them, a deep sense of loneliness set in.

Resting back on the pillows, I stared at the ceiling, the fluorescent lights casting a soft glow.

The memories of my time away, whether real or imagined, were too vivid

to be merely the products of a distressed mind.

But for now, the challenge was figuring out how to reconcile those memories with the reality of being back in my own world.

Hugging myself, I tried to take comfort in the familiar, yet the ache for something — someone — more lingered.



## CEARA

**T**he familiar metallic chill of the cell surrounded me, yet it felt so much colder, more isolating than ever before.

A stark difference from the last time I was here, where the presence of Ellie had lit the cold, gray room with a warm, golden hue.

I could still feel the phantom touch of her fingers as they had danced over my skin, stitching up my injuries.

Those moments of closeness, of shared vulnerability, were now replaced by a suffocating silence.

It was devoid of her soft, earthy fragrance.

The cell's meager light, filtering in through the slight gap at the door, cast long, ominous shadows on the walls.

I took a deep breath, the air tasting stale and lacking the fresh vitality I'd grown accustomed to with Ellie by my side.

Each heartbeat echoed within me, a cruel reminder of the void she had left.

A surge of anger welled up.

Was this how the Supervisor played his cruel games?

By letting us bond, only to rip us apart, turning hope into despair?

I closed my eyes, yearning for the solace of the Distant Vision, that one anchor in the storm of my life.

But as I sank into the depths of my mind, seeking the familiar threads of that comforting future, they felt... frayed, broken.

Ellie's theory echoed hauntingly — had it been just a dream, a figment of my imagination?

A defense mechanism against the harsh realities of my existence?

The more I grasped at the tendrils of that vision, the more elusive they became.

Suddenly, the cell door slid open with a harsh, grating sound, jarring me from my introspection.

The acrid smell of the guards' armor filled the room.

They stood there, looking down at me with their emotionless eyes.

I barely registered their presence, my spirit already defeated.

Usually, I'd summon every ounce of energy to resist, to fight back, to show them they couldn't break me.

But now?

What was the point?

The one shimmering beacon of hope I had found in the darkness was gone.

They gestured for me to get up.

With a heaviness in my limbs, I complied, not bothering to resist.

What did I have left to fight for?

My ability, my "gift," felt more like a curse than ever before.

Without Ellie's grounding presence, the weight of the future, the pressure to see, to know — it all felt unbearable.

As I walked through the cold corridors, the familiar sounds of the facility were amplified: the hum of machinery, the muffled voices of guards, the soft echo of my footsteps.

But more than anything, I was hyper-aware of the silence around me, the palpable absence of Ellie's soft voice, her laughter, her gentle breaths.

I tried to summon her image in my mind, to hear her voice, to feel her touch.

But it felt distant, a memory fading fast.

It was replaced by a deep-seated pain in my chest, a constant, aching reminder of the void she had left behind.

The guards led me to an interrogation chamber — a sterile, white room with a singular chair at its center.

The Supervisor wasn't present, perhaps he didn't feel the need to oversee my session.

I was no longer the rebellious prisoner; I was broken.



THE WHITE, cold illumination from overhead and the soft hum of the machinery were almost reassuringly familiar.

A tension hung in the air, an electric charge of anticipation.

The Supervisor entered from a side door, slowly and at his own leisure.

His large frame overshadowed the array of machines and monitors.

His predatory grin was more pronounced than ever, his teeth glinting in the harsh light.

The smugness in his posture was palpable, and I felt a surge of disgust.

The odor was so strong that it made me want to gag.

“You know,” the Supervisor began, his voice dripping with false cheer, “you’ve made me a very happy La’ok, Ceara. Those lottery numbers you spilled? Bang on. But don’t you worry,” he chuckled, “I didn’t buy a ticket. No need to draw unnecessary attention. You, my dear Ceara, are worth *far* more than mere credits. We, together, are going to rewrite the course of the galaxy.”

His words were meant to inspire hope, perhaps even camaraderie.

But every syllable was a twisted dagger, reminding me of the prison I was ensnared in, the future I had been robbed of.

The Supervisor motioned for the guards to strap me into the machine once again.

As the cold, metallic restraints clamped around my wrists and ankles, I felt an odd sense of calm wash over me.

Maybe it was resignation or maybe it was the clarity that often comes before a storm.

The machine whirred to life, its monotonous drone gradually amplifying.

A familiar tingling sensation coursed through me as the electrodes on my temples activated.

The once-muted visual cascade inside the holo-screen began its dazzling dance.

Colors, shapes, possibilities began to swirl and merge.

But this time, the visions were different.

There was an intensity, a vivacity to them.

It was as if they were demanding to be seen, to be acknowledged.

But I wouldn’t.

I wouldn’t give the Supervisor the satisfaction.

My heartbeat echoed in my ears, a rhythmic drum pushing me forward.

With every beat, I focused on the anger, the betrayal, the loathing I felt

for the Supervisor.

The sensation of the smooth metal against my skin, the sharp scent of antiseptics, it all faded away, replaced by a singular, intense emotion:

Hate.

It was that hate, that pure, unadulterated loathing, that shielded me.

It became a wall, a barrier against the barrage of images, against the intrusion into my psyche.

After what felt like an eternity, the machine slowed its frenetic pace, settling into a more regular rhythm.

The Supervisor, impatient and eager, leaned forward, his eyes gleaming with anticipation. “What do you see, Ceara?”

With great effort, I lifted my head to meet his gaze.

Despite the exhaustion, the physical and emotional toll of the machine, I managed to muster up every ounce of defiance I had left. “Nothing,” I whispered, the word dripping with triumph.

The Supervisor’s grin faltered, his eyes narrowing. “What do you mean, ‘nothing’? Tell me what you see!” he demanded.

But I wasn’t done.

With a surge of energy, I began to laugh, the sound echoing eerily in the sterile room.

Even to my own ears it sounded insane.

It started as a low chuckle, growing louder and more manic with every passing second.

The Supervisor recoiled, his ever-present smile finally wiped off his face, replaced by a look of stunned disbelief.

“Nothing,” I repeated, my voice stronger now, every word punctuated with another bout of laughter. “I see *nothing!*”

The Supervisor’s face reddened with rage, but the damage was done.

For the first time since he’d bested me, I had managed to gain the upper hand, to throw a wrench in his plans.

And though the future remained uncertain, that small victory was enough to light a spark of hope in the ever-present darkness.

THE SUPERVISOR’S once triumphant smirk morphed into a scowl.

His attempts to unlock my visions had been in vain, every strategy and coercion method thwarted by my newfound resilience.

“I don’t understand!” he spat, his voice echoing with frustration.

His sharp scent, usually one of dominance and control, now carried undertones of anxiety.

He leaned in close, his breath hot against my face. “Why? Why won’t you tell me?!”

His voice was a guttural growl, frustration palpable in every syllable.

I looked past him, focusing on the distant hum of the machinery and the soft flicker of the overhead lights.

I let myself fall back into my Distant Vision, the dreamlike space where Ellie’s presence warmed my heart.

The memories of her soft touch, the softness of her skin, the sound of her laughter — all of it enveloped me, comforting me like a soft blanket on a cold night.

The Supervisor’s voice broke through the reverie, pulling me back to reality. “What is the difference between now and before? Why won’t you tell me what you see?!”

His voice held a note of genuine puzzlement.

“You took away my hope,” I began, my voice steady and clear. “If there is no hope, there is no future.”

It was the truth serum talking.

I never would have answered his question otherwise.

For a moment, the Supervisor seemed taken aback.

His normally unflappable demeanor gave way to genuine surprise.

The realization slowly dawned on his face, his eyes widening slightly.

“So,” he said slowly, his tone more calculated now, “if she were to return to you, would you tell me what I want to know?”

The question hung in the air, its weight pressing down on me.

My heart raced, the sound thundering in my ears.

The thought of seeing Ellie again, of holding her close, was a beacon of light in the never-ending darkness that had become my reality.

I closed my eyes, letting the sensations around me amplify.

The cold metal of the chair against my skin, the shuffling of the Scientist’s four feet, even the subtle shift in the Supervisor’s odor — everything seemed to become more intense.

My mind raced, struggling with the dilemma.

Sacrifice the future of the galaxy or sacrifice my future with Ellie?

It was an impossible choice.

After what felt like an eternity, I opened my eyes, locking onto the Supervisor's expectant gaze.

I simply held his stare, allowing my silence to speak louder than words ever could.

His body relaxed and he nodded his head. "Very well," he said.

Then he barked an order to his guards, who hauled me back to my cold, frigid cell, and I dreamed of having Ellie back in my arms.



## ELLIE

**I**t was strange coming back to what I once considered ‘home.’

The walls felt confining, every corner and nook oddly suffocating.

I paused in the center of my living room, trying to take it all in.

The room was filled with the fragrance of vanilla from the scented candles I always kept burning.

Their familiar scent now seemed out of place, a mere ghost of the comfort they used to provide.

I glanced around, the soft beige walls, the plush sofa, and the minimalist decor.

It all felt so... limited, so *diminutive*.

Before Ikmal prison, this place was my sanctuary.

Now, every inch felt like a restriction, echoing the confines of that cold, metallic cell.

Every sound from outside became an eerie reminder of my time on that alien planet.

A distant siren morphed into the wailing alarms of the prison.

The low hum of the refrigerator took me back to the ever-present drone of its machinery.

Even the soft patter of rain against the window panes reminded me of the unfamiliar atmosphere of Ikmal.

It was as if the universe refused to let me forget.

Pushing away those thoughts, I decided to get some sleep, hoping it would bring a fresh perspective in the morning.

But as I lay in bed, I could still sense the cold steel of that prison cot.

The cotton sheets contrasted greatly with the rough fabric I had become accustomed to.

And where there was once the warm, comforting presence of Ceara beside me, now there was only cold emptiness.

The next morning, the blaring alarm forced me awake.

It took me a moment to register where I was, and the realization that I was back on Earth, safe and sound, brought both relief and an odd pang of longing.

I shook my head, dismissing the thoughts, and prepared for work.

The hospital was the same as I remembered, yet everything felt different.

The long, sterile corridors seemed to stretch endlessly, mirroring the daunting passageways of Ikmal prison.

The faint scent of antiseptic and medicine filled my nostrils, but my mind tricked me into detecting hints of the metallic, otherworldly aroma of the prison's air.

As I made my way to the nurses' station, I was greeted with cheerful waves and welcoming smiles.

My coworkers had missed me during my unexplained absence, but their understanding faces only deepened the chasm of isolation I felt.

Their laughter, their chatter, their easy camaraderie — it all felt so distant, so out of reach.

Throughout the day, every shout or call for assistance from a patient felt like a cry from a prisoner.

Every time I turned a corner, I half-expected to see one of Ikmal's guards, their looming figures casting shadows of dread.

But it was all in my mind, remnants of an experience that felt both lifetimes ago and just yesterday.

In the break room, I tried to focus on the conversations around me, to ground myself in the present.

The aroma of fresh coffee wafted through the air, mingling with the scent of someone's lunch.

Yet, even these familiar smells seemed alien, triggering memories of rationed meals in the prison cafeteria, and the bittersweet fruits Ceara and I had shared.

During a brief moment of downtime, I found a secluded corner and allowed myself to sink into memories of Ceara.

His deep voice, his tender touch, the comforting warmth of his embrace.

My heart ached with the thought that I might never see him again, that the memories were all I had left.

Shaking my head, I forced myself back to the present.

This was my life now — Earth, my job, my friends.

Ikmal, Ceara, all of it, was in the past.

But as much as I tried to convince myself that maybe it was all just a dream, a figment of my imagination, a small voice in the back of my mind whispered otherwise.

The day wore on, the weight of my memories bore down on me.

The world around me had resumed its usual rhythm, but I was out of sync, lost in a dance only I could hear.

THE HOSPITAL'S clock tower chimed midnight, signaling the end of my grueling night shift.

I slipped out of my nursing scrubs, now stained with the challenges of the evening, and changed into my casual clothes.

The cacophony of a nearby football match, punctuated by cheers and the occasional groan, filled the night air.

The world seemed alive, vibrant, pulsing with the heartbeat of humanity.

Walking down the familiar streets, the well-trodden path I'd taken countless times, I felt a sense of nostalgia.

The hum of the city was as comforting as it was invigorating.

But tonight, as the smell of greasy fast food from a nearby food stand wafted towards me, and the street lights bathed the pavement in a soft yellow glow, I couldn't help but feel adrift.

Wolf whistles broke my reverie.

A group of rowdy football fans, faces painted in their team's colors, staggered past, throwing flirtatious comments in my direction.

But their attention didn't bother me.

After facing the unknowns of Ikmal and its alien threats, human males seemed inconsequential.

Their catcalls felt like mere whispers in the wind, and I ignored them with ease.

I continued my journey, the streets gradually emptying, the noise fading



until I reached that fateful alleyway.

A pang of recognition shot through me, making my heart race.

Here, in this unassuming path, my life had changed forever.

The memories flooded back — stepping into the shadows, the blinding light, and then finding myself in a completely different world.

Every fiber of my being yearned to relive that moment, to go back, to find Ceara.

His face, so clear in my mind, made my heart ache with longing.

Without realizing it, my feet began to gravitate towards the alley.

I could feel the rough texture of the brick walls, slightly damp from the earlier rain, under my fingertips as I ventured deeper.

Each step was drawn out, as if I was trudging through quicksand.

The alluring aroma of another world seemed to emanate from the alley's depths, beckoning me closer.

I could hear my own shallow breathing, the weight of my emotions making each breath laborious.

I closed my eyes, imagining Ceara's voice, the deep timbre that had once been my solace.

I found myself almost wishing for another abduction, just to see him again.

But then, like a glass shattering, reality snapped me out of my daze.

A stray cat darted past me, its mewl echoing in the confined space.

The noise was sharp.

It acted like a tether, pulling me back to the present.

Shaking my head, I stepped out of the alleyway, chastising myself for being so foolish.

The soft drizzle began to fall, droplets landing on my face and mingling with the tears I hadn't realized I'd shed.

The coolness of the rain was comforting, a gentle reminder of my surroundings.

I continued my journey home, the pull of the past still heavy on my heart.

Each step was a conscious effort to remain rooted in the present, to not let the memories of Ceara and Ikmal consume me.

The soft patter of rain on the pavement accompanied my footsteps, a gentle lullaby to soothe my troubled soul.

By the time I reached my apartment, I was drenched, my clothes clinging to my body.

But the cold didn't bother me.

I stepped inside, locked the door behind me, and sank into my couch, the weight of my emotions finally catching up.

The silence of the night enveloped me, broken only by the rhythmic beat of rain against the windowpane.

The longing for Ceara was still there, raw and unyielding.

But for now, I took solace in the familiar surroundings of my home, letting the sounds, smells, and sensations of Earth anchor me in the present.

But something was wrong...

THE FIRST SIGN was the smell.

That distinctly musky, metallic odor that seemed oddly out of place in the earthy surroundings of my home.

It was an alien aroma, one I had come to associate with the cold, sterile chambers of Ikmal.

My heart raced as my eyes darted around, searching for the source.

The silence was deafening, every creak of the wooden floor amplifying my growing sense of dread.

The dim lighting casting eerie shadows that played tricks on my eyes, but I could sense a presence — a lurking darkness that felt all too familiar.

And then, from the corner of the room, a figure stepped out, bringing the chilling memories of the past rushing back.

His title was on my lips before I could think:

“The Supervisor...”

I took a step back, instinctively, my fingers clenching around my keys, the sharp edges biting into my skin.

The faint aroma of my lavender-scented hand lotion seemed laughably out of place given the circumstances.

It seemed wrong, totally unnatural, for his huge form to occupy the blandness of my apartment.

*Like a nightmare become real.*

His cold eyes bore into mine, reflecting the soft glow of the streetlights outside. “Ellie,” he began, his voice a gravelly whisper that sent shivers down my spine, “there’s been a... complication.”

My apartment, once my safe haven, now felt like a prison.

“I had intended on keeping my word,” he continued, his footsteps resonating on my wooden floor as he moved closer, “but now I find myself in a position where I can’t. You must return to Ceara.”

Panic surged through me.

The faint chirping of the night crickets outside sharp against the suffocating tension inside.

I took another step back, my feet tangling in the soft fabric of my living room rug, sending me off balance.

But I couldn’t, wouldn’t, turn my back to him.

I could hear the faint, distant sound of traffic outside — so close yet so far away.

My mind raced, searching for an escape, a way out.

I glanced at the window, the soft rustle of the trees outside seemingly beckoning me.

But would I make it in time?

Before I could think any further, adrenaline propelled me into action.

I made a dash for the front door, my senses heightened.

I could feel the cool touch of the door handle, the slight resistance as I tried to pull it open.

But he was surprisingly fast and too strong.

In a blur, he was in front of me, blocking my way.

A guttural growl escaped his lips as he grabbed my arm, his grip firm.

The distinct tang of sweat and fear permeated the air, making it hard to breathe.

My heart thundered in my chest, and the sharp sting of tears threatened to blur my vision.

“Why?” I managed to croak out, desperation evident in my voice. “What do you want from me?”

He leaned in, his face inches from mine, the coldness of his breath making me flinch. “You are the key to his ability. Don’t you see? Without you, he has no hope, no future. I put you with him to heal him... but in so doing, you have affected him on a much deeper level than I could have imagined.”

Confusion clouded my thoughts.

What was he talking about?

Before I could ponder further, he released his grip, pushing me back

slightly.

“You and Ceara.. .you’re *connected* somehow,” he said, seemingly talking more to himself than to me. “I can’t separate you. Not anymore.”

I stared at him, a million questions swirling in my mind.

But fear, raw and visceral, overshadowed everything else.

I backed away slowly, every fiber of my being urging me to run, to escape this nightmare.

I wanted to see Ceara again, yes, but not like this — not when I had to be imprisoned along with him.

But what choice did I have?

The Supervisor possessed technology far surpassing anything we had on Earth.

There was no one and nothing that could stop him.

The realization hit me with a crushing weight — I was trapped, ensnared in a web of intrigue and danger that I couldn’t comprehend.

The Supervisor’s laughter, cold and mocking, echoed in the room, a chilling reminder of the power he held over me.

And I knew my life would never be the same again.



## CEARA

**T**he unchanging gloom of my cell was my only companion, and the unwavering coldness of the walls my confidante.

Time was a cruel blur, my once-vivid Distant Visions now a muted haze, hard to grasp.

I had grown accustomed to the numbing pain of loneliness, the quiet agony of knowing Ellie was gone forever, beyond my reach.

The cruel cacophony of silence was my reality now.

Every noise was an echo of memories — the jingle of the guards' keys, the distant chatter of prisoners, the ever-present hum of the prison's security system.

I had become indifferent to the world around me, an automaton in an unchanging routine.

So, when the familiar sound of the cell door scraping against its frame echoed in my chamber, I didn't bother looking up.

Another tray of bland food, no doubt.

The aroma was never enticing; the meals always had this sterile, processed nature about it, void of any warmth or flavor.

It was as if the food itself was a reflection of my state of mind: bland, cold, and devoid of any real essence.

But as the steps neared me, there was something subtly different.

These weren't the heavy, purposeful strides of the guards. These were more delicate, uncertain — cautious even.

And then came a sensation I hadn't felt in a while.

A gentle touch.

A soft hand on my shoulder that sent shockwaves through my system.  
The sensation was familiar, yet forgotten, like a long-lost melody now being played again.

It carried with it an electric charge, pulsating through my very core.

An energy that beckoned my heart to hope again.

Instinctively, I turned, my eyes darting upwards.

My heart caught in my throat, choking out all logic and reason.

“Ellie...”

It was as if the universe had stopped.

Before I could process the reality, my arms had encircled her, pulling her close, cherishing the warmth that seeped through her.

The rustle of her clothes, the soft sigh that escaped her lips, the pounding of two hearts racing in perfect harmony — these were the sounds that filled the room.

Sounds I had yearned for in my darkest moments.

Relief, joy, disbelief — they coursed through me in overwhelming waves.

The softness of her skin against mine, the warmth of her breath on my neck, the tender pressure of her arms around my waist — every sensation was a testament to the reality of the moment.

My Ellie was here, real and alive.

Yet, even as I reveled in this unexpected reunion, a shadow loomed over the moment.

Pulling away slightly, my gaze drifted past Ellie, landing on the all-too-familiar figure of the Supervisor.

He leaned casually against the door frame, an enigmatic smile on his lips.

A smile that was all too reminiscent of our previous encounter.

The air suddenly grew thicker, the weight of unspoken agreements pressing down upon us.

His eyes locked onto mine, the icy blue depths communicating a clear message: he had upheld his end of the bargain.

*Now it was my turn.*

But for now, words were unnecessary.

The universe had granted me a fleeting moment of happiness, and I was determined to savor every second of it.

Holding Ellie close, I whispered promises of a better future, of days filled with love and laughter.

Promises that I hoped I could keep.

In this room, amidst the cold walls of my prison, love had found a way.  
It was a gentle reminder that even in the darkest of times, there was always a glimmer of hope, a flicker of light.  
And for now, that was enough.

THE INITIAL RUSH of our reunion had me intoxicated, with each sensation amplified a hundredfold.

Every detail of Ellie stood out — the gentle swish of her hair, the soft patter of her heartbeat, the scent of her that felt like home.

But as the wave of elation began to ebb, I noticed the subtle nuances that played on her features — the fleeting shadow in her eyes, the slight hesitation in her touch.

As we sat side by side on the hard bed, the room seemed to shrink around us, becoming cozier.

Every rustle of our clothing, every inhalation of breath, became a testament to our shared reality.

The gentle hum of the prison's ventilation system served as a background to our conversation, reminding me of the confines we were still trapped within.

“I managed to stop them, Ellie,” I started, excitement evident in my voice. “The Visions. I figured out how to block them out.”

Her eyes widened with a mix of astonishment and concern. “How?” she whispered, her voice tinged with a curious apprehension.

“Determination, mostly,” I confessed with a sheepish grin. “The pain of your absence, the thought of never seeing you again... it provided a shield, a barrier that kept the Visions at bay.”

I could see the cogs turning in her mind, processing the information. “That made the Supervisor angry?”

I nodded, chuckling softly. “Frustrated is more like it. Without the Visions, he lost his precious insights into future trade deals, everything. His entire operation was threatened.”

A silence enveloped us — a comfortable silence, but one filled with unspoken words and lingering doubts.

“Because of that,” I continued, a twinge of pride evident in my voice, “he



had to pull you out from the Prize Pool. That's why you're here with me now."

Ellie's reaction was not what I expected.

Instead of sharing my happiness, her face remained an enigmatic mask.

The soft glow of the room's lighting cast intricate patterns on her face, highlighting the depths of her emotions.

She took a deep breath, the sweet scent of her exhaling mingling with the sterile, metallic undertone of the cell.

"Ceara, that's... it's just..."

I watched as she struggled to find the right words, her fingers nervously playing with a strand of her hair.

She seemed... uncertain.

I hadn't anticipated this reaction.

The thrill of our reunion, the exhilaration of having her close, had clouded my judgment.

I had failed to see the deeper conflict within her, the battle between wanting to be with me and the yearning for the familiar comforts of home.

Drawing her closer, I could feel the warmth of her body, the delicate rhythm of her breathing.

I took a moment, letting the complex web of emotions wash over me — happiness, confusion, and a hint of sadness.

"Ellie," I murmured, our foreheads touching, "I'll do everything in my power to make sure you have everything you need to be happy here."

Tears glistened in her eyes, the salty aroma filling the space between us.

She sniffled, a soft sound that tugged at my heartstrings.

"I know, Ceara," she replied, her voice breaking. "It's just...complicated, that's all."

We clung to each other, seeking solace and understanding.

The myriad of sensations — the softness of her skin, the taste of her tears — all melded into a symphony of love and longing.

For now, we were together.

But the path ahead was uncertain, filled with challenges and choices.

The delicate dance of happiness and doubt had just begun.

STRAPPED DOWN, I felt the cold, metallic embrace of the machine's restraints on my arms and legs.

The sterile scent of the room assaulted my nostrils, a harsh reminder to the warm, earthy aroma of Ellie's presence.

The mechanical hum of the apparatus filled the room, a low droning that seemed to reverberate through every fiber of my being.

The Supervisor stood to my left, his grin broadening as he flipped switches, activating the machine.

I could hear his muffled laughter, the cruel delight evident in his tone. "Ready to see the future again, Ceara?"

A part of me wanted to shut down, to block out everything.

But Ellie's image floated to the forefront of my mind, giving me strength.

I would endure this, *for her*.

A soft buzzing began, almost tickling my senses.

Then, the holo-monitor above me blinked to life.

Swirling patterns morphed into a detailed image.

An opulent chamber emerged, adorned with intricate carvings, glowing sigils, and grand draperies.

The muffled murmur of a gathered crowd was evident, their conversations blending into a soft cacophony.

On a raised dais stood an alien politician, his scales shimmering in shades of blue and gold, his triple set of eyes scanning the gathering.

From the shadows, a hooded figure stepped out, a futuristic weapon clutched in its hand.

The weapon, unlike any I had ever seen, had a sleek design, almost fluid-like in appearance.

It pulsed with a soft, violet hue.

Before anyone could react, the hooded figure aimed the weapon at the politician.

A brilliant beam of light, almost blinding in its intensity, lanced out.

The politician crumpled, his scales rapidly shifting from vibrant shades to a lifeless gray.

The room erupted in chaos.

Screams pierced the air.

I tried to pull away, to distance myself from the violent spectacle unfolding before me.

But Ellie's face kept me grounded.

I focused on the hooded figure, tracking its movements as it weaved through the panicked crowd, skillfully evading capture.

As I concentrated on the scene, my senses began to expand, reaching out beyond the immediate chaos.

My enhanced senses picked up on a series of hidden doors and passageways.

The hooded figure slipped into one of these, making its way to an underground tunnel system.

The dampness of the tunnels was evident.

As the assassin navigated the maze, I committed each turn, each hidden alcove to memory.

The vision began to wane, the images fading.

The machine's hum receded, replaced by the Supervisor's voice:

"What did you see, Ceara?"

Drawing in a ragged breath, I relayed the sequence of events, detailing the assassin's escape route.

The Supervisor jotted down notes, nodding in approval.

"Excellent," he murmured, rubbing his hands together. "This information will prove invaluable."

As the machine's restraints released me, a wave of exhaustion washed over me.

My body felt drained, every muscle aching.

But the physical pain paled in comparison to the emotional turmoil raging within.

I felt dirty, tainted by the violence I had witnessed and the information I had provided.

While the knowledge could potentially prevent future tragedies, it also meant that I had, albeit indirectly, played into the Supervisor's manipulative games.

As I was led back to my cell, the weight of my actions pressed down on me.

But amidst the overwhelming guilt, a glimmer of hope remained.

If enduring this torment meant keeping Ellie safe, then I would face any challenge, bear any burden.

For in the darkest corners of space, even the faintest spark can ignite a blazing beacon of hope.

STEPPING into my dimly lit cell, the familiar aroma of rust and stale air greeted me.

It was a scent I had grown accustomed to, but today it was undercut by something else — the soft, comforting scent of Ellie.

It filled my senses, a gentle balm to the whirlwind of emotions that had consumed me in the machine room.

There she was, leaning against the cold stone wall, her normally bright hazel eyes looking distant and pensive.

Her golden locks cascaded down her shoulders in waves, shimmering faintly in the ambient light.

She had always been my beacon of hope in this grim place, yet today, she seemed... dimmed.

“Ellie,” I whispered, moving closer.

The simple fabric of her dress rustled with her slight movement, a subtle sound in the silence that dominated our chamber.

She didn’t respond immediately, and I could hear the gentle, steady rhythm of her heartbeat, slightly faster than usual.

Finally, she looked up, her eyes searching mine. “Ceara,” her voice was soft, barely more than a murmur. “You’re back.”

In that moment, I wished I could sense what she was thinking, to peer into the depths of her mind and understand the storm that seemed to be raging within her.

But all I could perceive were the cool, smooth walls of our prison and the distant echoes of guards patrolling the corridors. “I am,” I replied, closing the distance between us and pulling her into a tight embrace.

Her body was rigid against mine, her warmth seeping through the fabric of our clothes.

I could feel the slight tremble in her fingertips as they brushed against my back.

Pulling away slightly, I tilted her chin up, trying to meet her gaze. “Ellie, what’s wrong?”

Her eyes welled up with tears, and she blinked them back hastily.

The salty tang of her emotions filled the air, mingling with the underlying bitterness of our surroundings. “It’s just...everything has changed, Ceara,” she murmured, her voice trembling. “I can’t explain it, but it’s like I’ve

woken up in a different reality.”

I frowned, cupping her face in my hands.

The soft texture of her skin was at odds with the harshness of our surroundings.

I stroked her cheek gently, savoring the feel of her. “Talk to me. Please.”

She hesitated, biting her lip.

The sight tugged at something primal within me, and I had to resist the urge to pull her close and lose myself in her embrace.

Instead, I waited, giving her the space she clearly needed.

“I don’t know,” she finally whispered. “There’s something I can’t... or maybe shouldn’t tell. It’s all tangled up inside.”

The thought of her keeping secrets from me was like a dull blade twisting in my chest.

But I understood, perhaps better than anyone, the burden of secrets.

I leaned in, pressing my forehead against hers.

The sensation of her skin against mine was electrifying, grounding me amidst the storm of emotions. “I trust you, Ellie. Whatever it is, whenever you’re ready... I’m here.”

We stood like that for what felt like hours, drawing comfort from one another’s presence.

A part of me wondered if I was being selfish, holding onto her when she might be happier elsewhere.

The Prize Pool, with all its temptations, might be a better place for her.

But the mere thought of losing her — never mind *sharing* her — was unbearable.

“Ellie,” I began hesitantly, “if you ever wanted to... leave, to go to the Prize Pool or anywhere else, I’d understand.”

She pulled back, her eyes searching mine with an intensity that took my breath away. “Ceara, don’t say that. It’s not about leaving or the Prize Pool. It’s just... something I need to figure out. For myself.”

I nodded, wrapping my arms around her, drawing her close.

The world outside our cell, with all its intrigues and games, faded away.

In that moment, it was just us, two souls intertwined in a dance as old as time.

The journey ahead was uncertain, the path littered with challenges.

But as I held Ellie close, I knew one thing for sure — come what may, we would face it together.



## ELLIE

The cold metallic walls of our prison cell seemed to reflect my inner turmoil.

With Ceara by my side, I should have been elated.

We were together again, two souls reunited against all odds.

Yet, a gnawing weight sat heavy in my chest.

The secret deal I had made with the Supervisor, a decision made in the heat of desperation, now haunted my every waking moment.

Every morning since my return, I'd wake up, feeling the smooth, coarse fabric of the prison bedding against my skin, and the steady rhythm of Ceara's heart next to mine.

The faint, musty smell of the prison air filled my nostrils.

He was my anchor, pulling me out from the depths of regret and uncertainty, even if he didn't know the reason behind them.

This morning, as he was led away for another one of those grueling sessions with the machine, I wanted to scream.

I wanted to tell him everything, about the deal, about my desperation to save him.

But fear — of his disappointment, of shattering the fragile bond we had — kept me silent.

Left alone, the monotony of the cell seemed even more oppressive.

My thoughts were interrupted when the door slid open, and a tray of food was pushed inside.

Glancing up, I saw a guard looking down at me, a flicker of something — pity? — in his eyes.

“We’ve been instructed to give you the best,” he muttered, nodding at the tray.

Curiously, I approached the tray.

The vibrant colors and mouthwatering aroma hit me immediately.

Delicacies from across the galaxy were spread before me; there were azure fruits from Jeliona that burst with flavor in your mouth, a steaming bowl of spicy Terakian stew, and a piece of Velon cake, its soft, sweetness promising a momentary escape from the bleak surroundings.

But as I took a hesitant bite of the fruit, the rich taste turned to ash.

Nothing seemed right without Ceara.

The food might have been fit for a queen, but in this environment, its extravagance seemed like a cruel joke.

Tears stung my eyes as the reality of my situation sunk in.

Here I was, trapped in a prison, torn between love and freedom.

With Ceara away, the weight of our situation, the weight of my choices, bore down on me.

Two days passed like this.

Ceara, lost in a haze after his sessions, and me, grappling with my secrets.

It was on the third day that something unexpected happened.

The guard, the same one who had delivered the sumptuous meals, entered.

This time, however, he didn’t bring food.

Instead, he paused, looking directly at me.

“You’re free to wander the prison,” he said, almost casually, as if he was offering me a stroll in a park.

I blinked, processing his words. “What?”

He shrugged, opening the door wide. “Orders from the Supervisor. You can roam around, as long as you don’t try anything foolish.”

Stepping out hesitantly, I felt the cool air of the prison corridor on my face.

The hum of the overhead lights was deafening in the sudden silence, while the distant murmurs of other inmates echoed faintly.

It was a freedom, of sorts, but it felt strange, surreal.

Taking a deep breath, I ventured further.

The cold floor beneath my feet, the sharp tang of antiseptic in the air, every little sensation was amplified.

For the first time, I saw the prison not just as a place of confinement, but



as a living, breathing entity.

Everywhere I went, I was met with curious glances.

Some inmates nodded in recognition, others simply stared.

Hours seemed to pass as I wandered aimlessly, lost in thought.

And then, as I turned a corner, I found myself standing before a large window.

The view took my breath away.

The vastness of space stretched out before me, stars twinkling like diamonds against the inky blackness.

A sense of perspective washed over me.

In the grand scheme of the universe, our problems, my secrets, seemed so insignificant.

And yet, to me, to us, they meant everything.

The corridors stretched ahead of me like a maze, each turn leading me deeper into the bowels of the prison.

Every step I took echoed eerily, the sound amplified by the silence that surrounded us.

My guard was always there, always watching, his heavy footsteps matching mine.

The feel of his piercing gaze on my back was palpable, a constant reminder that freedom, even the limited kind I had been granted, came at a cost.

Strange faces stared back at me from cells and communal areas.

Some looked on with mild interest, others with open hostility.

The murmur of their conversations, in languages I couldn't understand, was a cacophony of clicks, growls, and harmonious melodies.

The scent was overpowering: a mix of musk, alien foods, and the antiseptic tang that seemed omnipresent.

As we passed a particularly boisterous group, I felt a shiver of apprehension.

Their intense, unfamiliar eyes sized me up, weighing, evaluating.

For a moment, I felt like prey.

But then they noticed the armed guard following closely behind me and abruptly returned to their odd game.

The next part of the prison was even more disconcerting.

It was the Prize Pool.

Rows of cells, each filled with females, all different shapes and sizes,

colors and textures.

Some were eerily beautiful, with shimmering scales or luminous skin.

Others looked fierce, with sharp claws and teeth.

All were dressed in the finest garments their cultures had to offer, presenting themselves like prized jewels.

A soft, rhythmic music played in the background, its ethereal tones making the whole scene feel dreamlike.

The reality, however, was much different.

I could see it in their eyes.

Some looked hopeful, staring intently at every passing Champion fighter.

Others looked resigned, their spirits broken by their circumstances.

I could feel the desperation in the air, a thick, cloying sensation.

They were trophies, to be won by the strongest, the most cunning.

I was snapped out of my reverie by a sudden roar.

Following the sound, I found myself at the edge of the fighting pits.

Massive, stadium-like structures, they were the heart of the prison's entertainment system.

Inside, two beasts locked in combat, their roars and snarls echoing through the arena.

Each blow, each movement was magnified on large holo-monitors, ensuring that every spectator had a front-row seat.

The creatures were like nothing I'd ever seen.

One was feline, with sleek black fur and eyes that glowed a fiery orange.

The other was more reptilian, its green scales glistening under the artificial lights.

They circled each other warily, muscles rippling, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

The crowd was in a frenzy.

Spectators cheered, shouted, and waved banners in support of their favorite contender.

The excitement for bloodlust was palpable.

The whole scene was an overload on my senses.

The intense light, the overpowering smell of the beasts and the crowd, the deafening roars, and the feel of the cold metal railing under my grip as I watched, horrified.

As the feline creature landed a vicious blow, sending the reptilian beast crashing to the ground, the crowd erupted in cheers.

The victor roared in triumph, standing tall over its fallen opponent.  
Suddenly, I felt a tap on my shoulder.  
I turned to find my guard signaling that it was time to leave.  
As I followed him out, the sights and sounds of the fighting pits still ringing in my ears, I couldn't shake off the weight of what I'd witnessed.  
The desperation, the violence, the sheer brutality of it all.

THE WEIGHT of the prison felt more oppressive than ever, and I trudged through the expansive corridors, trying to get my bearings.

The prison was a labyrinth, each pathway a swirling vortex of colors, noises, and emotions that threatened to pull me in.

But then, something shifted the oppressive energy.

As I rounded a corner, I stumbled upon a massive holo-monitor.

It took up almost the entire wall, casting an eerie glow over the corridor and everyone in it.

Alien text ran across the screen, paired with visuals of various interstellar events, news bites, and commercials for products I couldn't even begin to fathom.

However, one news clip grabbed everyone's attention.

It showcased an opulent setting — a massive hall filled with members of some unknown species, all of them dressed in rich, flowing garments, jewels that sparkled like galaxies, and body markings that shimmered and shifted with their emotions.

The leading figure, standing atop a podium, was a distinguished-looking alien with ethereal wings that fluttered gently behind him.

His skin was the color of molten silver, with multifaceted eyes that sparkled in deep shades of violet.

He spoke with a passion, voice resonating with authority, charisma, and hope.

Even without understanding the language, it was evident he was a politician, a leader, someone who was adored and respected.

But then, the broadcast took a dark turn.

A shadowy figure emerged in a hood, wielding a weapon that gleamed with futuristic energy.

The crowd's harmonious chatter turned to screams and gasps of horror.

The sequence played out in slow motion: the leader's eyes widened in realization just as the weapon was activated, emitting a blinding burst of light, and when the haze cleared, the once-commanding figure slumped lifelessly on the podium.

A collective gasp rippled through the prison corridor.

Even the guards, typically so stoic and unresponsive, looked taken aback.

Conversations erupted around me, prisoners expressing their shock, their disbelief.

The murmur of different languages merged into a symphony of anger, confusion, and sadness.

I leaned against the cold wall, trying to process what I'd seen.

I could hear disgruntled discussions, the growls and clicks of disagreement, and the occasional wails of those who mourned.

What surprised me more was the smell.

An bizarre emotion, unfamiliar yet oddly comforting, wafted through the air.

It was a scent of unity.

Despite being in a prison, and despite the various races, there was a shared moment of empathy, a moment where they were all united by the loss of a significant figure.

Lost in my thoughts, I was brought back to reality when a soft, warm hand brushed against mine.

Startled, I looked to my side and met the eyes of an elderly male, his skin the texture of tree bark and colors that shifted like an autumn leaf.

He murmured something in his language, his voice a gentle lullaby, yet his eyes held a deep sadness.

It must have been a very rare or little-known language as my translator took a few moments to process it:

"He was meant to be a new beginning, a new hope. But now the fulcrum of history has been decided."

I nodded, letting him know that I appreciated his sentiment.

There was a silent understanding, a bond formed out of shared grief.

For a brief moment, amidst the chaos of the prison and the overwhelming uncertainty of my life here, I felt a sense of kinship.

Shaking off the melancholy, I decided to return to Ceara.

I needed to share this with him, to process the impact of such an event.

As I walked back, the prison's sounds faded into the background, replaced by the rapid beating of my heart and the shuffle of my footsteps.

There was a great change coming, a seismic shift in the intergalactic landscape.

It was far too early to know its full ramifications but I sensed, somehow, I was an intricate part of it.

THE STEEL GRATING of the cell felt strangely comforting to my feet as I returned, their previous roughness now a well-acquainted texture that signified safety and Ceara.

My entire body ached from the day's explorations, but the fatigue was a sweet reminder that I had tasted a semblance of freedom within these prison walls.

I had barely settled on our shared bunk when the door slid open, revealing Ceara's towering frame.

The bruised blue of his skin seemed less battered today, and his usually weary eyes lit up at the sight of me.

A soft sigh escaped me, the gentle sound of relief and warmth.

His presence was like a balm, soothing away the sharp edges of my turbulent emotions.

His lips curved into a tired smile, but the joy in his gaze was unmistakable. "Ellie," he murmured, his voice like the soft hum of an old song, a sound that had begun to feel like home.

I grinned back, heart swelling.

Despite the bleakness of our circumstances, there was a silver lining — our moments together.

The aroma of the prison's unique cuisine wafted into our cell, hinting at dinner time.

But neither of us moved.

Instead, Ceara's face took on a serious expression.

"I sense your turmoil," he began, his deep voice resonating with the raw honesty of his feelings. "I know you're not completely happy with me here any longer."

I blinked in surprise.

The reality of our situation, combined with my lingering secret, had created an invisible barrier between us.

But I hadn't realized how palpable it had become.

Before I could voice my protest, he continued:

"I've made a decision. I shall ask the Supervisor to return you to the Prize Pool."

His words hit me like a sledgehammer, each syllable a crushing blow.

I felt like I'd been plunged into cold water, every sense heightened in sudden panic.

My eyes stung, my ears ringing with the echoing finality of his statement.

"All I wish is for you to be happy," he said, although it was clear that taking that action most certainly wouldn't make *him* happy.

My fingers instinctively reached out, gripping his arm.

"Why would you do that?" My voice was raw, a blend of confusion and desperation.

He hesitated, a cloud of sadness veiling his gaze. "You're clearly not content here with me. I can't bear the thought of you being trapped, Ellie. If there's one thing I want above all others, it's for you to find happiness. Even at the cost of my own."

Tears threatened, but I fought them back.

Closing the distance between us, I looked deep into his eyes. "I *am* happy with you, Ceara," I whispered, tasting the saltiness of my unshed tears. "I don't want the Prize Pool. I don't want to be a Prize to be won. What I crave is freedom... *our* freedom. Together."

His gaze held a storm of emotions: hope, pain, longing, and love. "Ellie, the only liberation I can offer is within these walls," he murmured.

The weight of our reality pressed on me, but in that moment, I knew I'd choose a cage with Ceara over an endless sky without him.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I whispered:

"Then let this be our world, for now."

Gently cradling my face, Ceara leaned down, his lips finding mine.

The world outside faded as warmth flooded my senses.

The kiss was a promise, a binding contract sealed with love and longing.

As we pulled apart, I nestled my head against his chest, taking solace in the rhythmic beat of his heart.

Without saying a word, he reached for my dress and pulled it up over my head.

He took me in, admiring my naked form.

Then he brought his lips to my skin and sent powerful ripples of excitement coursing through me.

*This*, I thought. *This* is our freedom.

But on the outside, for now, our cell was our universe, and our love, the stars that illuminated our path.





## CEARA

The dim lights of our cell painted a warm, yellowish glow against the cold walls, creating a cocoon of intimacy around Ellie and me.

Tucked beneath the rough blankets, I felt Ellie's gentle breaths against my chest.

The ambient sounds of the prison — distant footsteps, soft murmurs, and the ever-present hum of machinery — faded into the background.

The musky scent of Ellie's hair, mixed with the faint aroma of the prison's cleanliness, was oddly comforting.

I'd grown accustomed to, even fond of, these tiny reminders of our world here.

Her fingers traced random patterns on my skin, sending little jolts of electricity up my spine.

"Ceara?" she murmured, her voice soft and drowsy. "What do they make you see in that machine?"

I hesitated for a moment, reluctant to pull her into the harrowing world of visions and predictions.

But the weight of the unspoken between us pressed heavily on my heart.

I sighed, my exhale tasting slightly metallic in the recycled prison air. "They strap me into a chair and make me focus on images. People, places... events. I have to tell them what I see in their future."

Her fingers paused. "And have any of those predictions come true?" she asked, curiosity and concern evident in her voice.

I nodded, feeling the rough fabric of our pillow against my skin. "Yes, of course. They wouldn't subject me to this if they didn't."

She propped herself on her elbow, her clear eyes searching mine for answers.

I could hear the subtle change in her heartbeat, the increasing tempo revealing her anxiety. “Like what?”

Drawing in a deep breath, I decided to start with something light. “Well, the lottery results, for one,” I said with a chuckle. “Imagine, predicting the most sought-after numbers in the universe. If only we could use that knowledge, huh?”

Ellie laughed, the melodic sound echoing softly in the confined space.

The levity was a welcome respite, but it was short-lived.

My smile faded as I remembered another prediction, one that was far from funny.

I hesitated, but Ellie’s searching gaze prompted me to continue.

“There was another... A great tidal wave, engulfing an entire city on the planet Yilthor. Thousands lost their homes.”

My voice broke a little.

The pain and despair of that vision still haunted my dreams.

Ellie’s fingers tightened around mine, her touch grounding me. “That’s terrible,” she whispered.

Nodding, I took a moment to gather my thoughts.

But it was the another vision, one of the first, that weighed heavily on my conscience. “There’s one more,” I said slowly.

The weight of it pressed on my tongue, making my words sluggish. “An assassination.”

Ellie stiffened, her blue eyes widening in alarm. “Who?”

“A prominent politician from the Galactic Council. He promised to persecute the unjust and unworthy. I saw him during a grand assembly, and then...” I swallowed, feeling the knot in my throat tighten. “A blinding flash. Chaos. He didn’t survive.”

She sat upright, the sheets pooling around her waist.

Her eyes, once soft and filled with mirth, were now sharp with intensity. “Did you tell them? The Supervisor?”

His reaction caught me by surprise. “Yes.”

She looked at me, an array of emotions playing on her face: anger, fear, sadness.

But most of all, understanding.

She knew the burden of foreknowledge, the heavy responsibility that

came with it.

Reaching out, she cradled my face with her hands, her touch gentle yet firm. “It’s not your fault, Ceara,” she whispered. “You didn’t choose this. You’re just a tool in their hands.”

I closed my eyes, leaning into her touch.

The coolness of her skin against my fevered brow was soothing.

I whispered back, “I know. But that doesn’t make it any easier.”

We lay back down, wrapped in each other’s arms.

The weight of the future, with all its uncertainties, lay heavily between us.

“I heard some news today and it might come as a bit of a shock...” she said.

ONCE FAMILIAR AND ALMOST COSY, the muted tones of the cell now felt constricting.

Ellie’s face was a mask of emotion I hadn’t seen before.

The pale prison light highlighted the strain in her eyes, and a nervous energy surrounded her.

I could hear the tension in her voice and see it in her chest’s rapid rise and fall.

“While I was out,” Ellie began, her fingers playing with the edges of the thin blanket, “I saw something on a holo-monitor. The assassination you mentioned? It’s happened, Ceara. It was broadcast all over.”

I bolted upright, surprise making my heart race.

I could feel the cold, hard floor beneath my feet as I placed them down.

The sensation momentarily distracted me from the weight of her words.

“It... already happened?”

She nodded slowly.

The pungent, metallic undertone threatened to choke me. “Exactly as you described it. The assembly, the flash, the chaos...”

Silence enveloped us, broken only by the distant hum of machinery and the soft murmur of prisoners in distant cells.

It felt suffocating.

The feeling of moisture, tiny droplets of sweat, began to form on my brow.

“I get the lottery numbers, Ceara. That’s harmless. That’s fun even,” she continued, her tone shaking. “But this? Being an unwitting accomplice to an assassination?”

I looked into her eyes, searching for understanding, seeking forgiveness. “Ellie, they were going to do it anyway. I just... I just confirmed their success. Made it certain.”

Ellie’s face contorted with frustration and disbelief.

I felt a pang in my chest, sharper than any physical blow.

Her warm hand met my cold, clammy one. “Is that supposed to make it better? Knowing you didn’t *cause* it but simply sealed someone’s fate?”

I tried to swallow the lump forming in my throat, my mouth suddenly dry despite my heightened senses.

The silence in the room grew louder, almost oppressive.

I could smell the subtle mix of her perfume, the lingering scent of food from earlier, and beneath it all, the ever-present clinical aroma of the prison.

“Ellie, I had no choice,” I murmured, feeling as though my words were being drawn out from deep within me. “They strapped me in, made me see. I can’t control what visions come or how they use them.”

She took a deep breath, her eyes glistening, threatening tears.

The salty scent of impending tears reached me, adding to the heavy atmosphere of the cell. “I know you didn’t choose this life, Ceara. I know you’re a victim too. But we can’t let them use you like this.”

She took another deep breath. “Or me.”

Her eyes flicked up to mine. “There’s something I haven’t told you, something you need to know.”

I felt the fear rise inside me.

Few could truly harm me in this place, but that look, that broken look on Ellie’s face now, could floor me unlike a blow from anyone else.

“What?” I asked tentatively. “What is it?”

THE AIR in the cell felt denser than usual, or perhaps it was the weight of Ellie’s imminent confession pressing on me.

The ever-present humming from the prison’s systems was distant, like the backdrop to our enclosed universe. “It’s about me,” Ellie began, her voice

sounding distant, “and how I came to be here.”

I could feel the cool, firm touch of the metal bed frame beneath my fingers, but my full focus was on Ellie.

Her scent, usually so calming — a mix of fresh flowers and the faintest hint of a spice I couldn’t identify — was overshadowed by a subtle tinge of nervousness.

I inhaled deeply, trying to draw comfort from her familiar aroma.

She took a shaky breath, her delicate hands fidgeting with the thin fabric of her dress.

The soft rustling sound it made seemed abnormally loud in the quiet cell. “When I first met you, it wasn’t by accident. The Supervisor recruited me, not just for my medical skills but also... to get close to you. He wanted me to heal you physically and emotionally.”

My heart pounded loudly in my chest, so much so that I felt certain Ellie could hear it.

I kept my gaze on her, although the cell around us started to blur, my senses becoming overwhelmed.

“You were broken, Ceara,” she continued, her voice quivering. “They thought that someone like me, trained not just in physical ailments but also with a high degree of empathy, could get through to you. And, well, it worked. You got better. You became responsive. In exchange, the Supervisor said I could go home. But something unexpected happened along the way.”

She hesitated for a moment, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “I fell in love with you,” she whispered. “It wasn’t supposed to happen. But every day, as I watched you heal, as I became a part of your life, I realized you were becoming a part of mine.”

I tried to absorb her words, to understand the depth of her confession.

The constant hum of the prison was now punctuated by our synchronized heartbeats, resonating in a rhythm of intertwined emotions.

“When my mission was over, I returned home,” Ellie continued, her voice steadier. “Life went back to its monotonous routine. But every day, every moment, I felt a void. I missed you, Ceara. Every scent, every sound, every sensation reminded me of you. Then, to my surprise, the Supervisor came back.”

My eyes narrowed, anticipating what she was about to say next.

The bitterness in the recycled air grew more palpable, a reflection of the surge of emotions I was experiencing.

“He said he had to bring me back here, to you,” Ellie murmured. “I did want to see you again. But this,” she motioned around, indicating the prison, “being trapped here wasn’t part of the plan.”

Silence settled between us.

My mind raced, processing her words, her confession.

I took a moment, focusing on the tactile sensation of her hand in mine, grounding myself with the feel of her skin, warm and soft.

“I’m so sorry, Ceara,” Ellie whispered, her eyes searching mine for understanding, for forgiveness. “I never meant to deceive you. But my feelings for you, they’re real. They always have been.”

A myriad of emotions coursed through me: betrayal, understanding, anger, love.

The feeling of betrayal settled deep within me, creating a chasm of doubt and distrust.

The dim light in the cell glinted off Ellie’s tear-filled eyes, casting dancing reflections on the walls.

The soft whir of the prison’s air systems seemed louder than usual, a constant reminder of our confined reality.

I stood up abruptly, the cold metallic floor chilling against my bare feet. “So it was all a game?” My voice, filled with pain, echoed throughout the cell. “Just another part of the Supervisor’s twisted plan?”

Ellie hesitated for a split second, then in a rush of motion, she was in front of me, the warmth of her hands as they cupped my face contrasting with the coolness of the prison air. “Ceara, look at me,” she pleaded.

“Yes, I was brought here under the Supervisor’s orders, but what I felt for you, what I still feel for you, is real.”

I pushed her hands away gently, tasting the bitterness of betrayal. “How can I believe you? All this time, you were playing a part, dancing to his tune.”

A flash of desperation crossed Ellie’s face. “If I hadn’t been part of his plan, I never would have met you. And meeting you... falling in love with you, Ceara, that’s the realest thing that’s ever happened to me.”

The sincerity in her voice, the raw emotion on her face, it was hard to doubt.

But the wound was fresh, and it stung. “All those moments we shared, were they just part of your mission?” I growled.

Ellie closed the distance between us. “Every laugh, every touch, every

whispered secret, was genuine. It was us, Ceara. Not the Supervisor's game."

She leaned in, her lips grazing my ear. "Believe in us. Please."

I inhaled her scent deeply, letting it envelop me, trying to drown the doubts with the familiarity and warmth of her.

Pulling back to look into her eyes, a resolve started to form within me. "Yes," I said, my voice filled with newfound determination. "I know. And I love you too. It's this place. It's the Supervisor. It's whose who fund this program. It's all of them. I might not like how we met... but we *did* meet, and that's all that matters."

Ellie whimpered and she leapt forward and hugged me tight in her arms. "I love you, Ceara!"

"And I love you too, little human."

We kissed and I felt the warmth radiating out from her.

Then I pulled back, a new sense of determination coming over me. "It's not right how they're using my power, manipulating the future against innocent people."

She nodded, tears glistening in her eyes. "What can we do?"

I glanced around our small cell. "We escape. We find a way out of this hellhole and leave the Supervisor's wicked plans behind."

"But how?" Ellie's voice quivered with a mix of hope and fear.

The hum of the prison's energy core, a distant vibration in the background, filled the silence as I pondered. "I'm not sure yet. But if there's a way in, there's a way out."

Ellie stepped closer, wrapping her arms around my waist, her face buried in my chest.

The sensation of her warm breath against my skin, the comforting weight of her body leaning into mine, provided a momentary reprieve to the cold, hard reality of our surroundings.

"I trust you," she whispered, her voice muffled against my shirt.

"And I trust you." I rested my chin on her head, the softness of her hair a balm to my frayed nerves. "Together, Ellie, we'll find a way. The Supervisor and his plans be damned."

She tilted her head up, meeting my gaze.

Her eyes, always a source of solace for me, now shimmered with determination. "Together," she echoed.

The path ahead was uncertain, fraught with danger and unknowns.

But as Ellie's fingers interlaced with mine, hope and love prevailed over

the bitter tang of betrayal.

Our intertwined destinies were now poised to challenge the very powers that sought to control them.

“Together,” I confirmed.”





## ELLIE

The journey out of my cell was more daunting this time.

My heart beat like a trapped bird against its cage, every step echoing in the hollows of the vast prison corridors.

The gentle hum of the overhead lights and the distant murmurs of the prisoners became my company, but I was very aware of the towering presence of the armed guard behind me.

Although he was the embodiment of our captivity, a symbol of the prison's power over us, I couldn't help but feel a strange sense of security with him by my side.

This labyrinth was unfamiliar territory to me, and his presence was a beacon, a safety net.

The tang of the prison's metallic air, slightly pungent, mingled with the stink of the prisoners.

The walls felt cold and unyielding beneath my fingers, their surface rough from wear and tear.

The floors hummed softly with the energy that powered the entire facility, causing a gentle vibration underfoot.

The sounds of life and machinery, of murmurs and clanks, built a haunting melody.

The occasional sharp hiss from the air vents above startled me, but not as much as the gaze of the prisoners.

Their eyes followed my every move, their thoughts a mystery to me.

Some whispered among themselves, while others just stared silently.

I was lost in the symphony of sights and sounds when, out of nowhere, a

prisoner lunged at me.

The world seemed to slow.

His scales glistened, reflecting the overhead lights, and his claws reached out hungrily.

His hot breath, a mix of rotting meat and sulfur, assaulted my nostrils.

A scream lodged in my throat as he tried to pull me into his cell.

But before I could even fully register the threat, a sharp *crack* echoed in the corridor.

The butt of the armed guard's plasma rifle came down on the attacker.

The alien recoiled, hissing in pain.

The guard's prompt response and the sudden turn of events left me both grateful and petrified.

My heart raced, and I could feel a tremble start from the tips of my fingers, spreading through my body.

"Back to your cell!" The guard's voice was a deep growl, both a warning to the prisoner and a reassurance to me.

The defiant alien slunk back, his eyes seething with anger but also filled with fear of further retribution.

I felt the world spinning.

My legs wobbled, and I wasn't sure I could continue. "I want to go back," I whispered, my voice shaky.

The cold, oppressive walls of our cell never seemed more appealing.

Suddenly, amid the cacophony of prisoner murmurs, a familiar voice pierced through, sharp and clear. "Ellie!"

I froze.

My eyes darted around, scanning the cells and the faces, trying to locate the source of the voice.

No one I knew had any idea I was here... did they?

Somewhere in the depths of the prison, someone knew my name, someone who might be an ally — or another threat.

But that shout, filled with surprise and concern, gave me a glimmer of hope.

Maybe, just maybe, Ceara and I weren't as alone in this fight as we'd believed.

THE VOICE ECHOED through the prison corridor again, “Ellie!”

It took me a moment to recognize the soft, melodic tone as I hadn’t heard it for several days now; and even when I had last heard it, I didn’t think I would be hearing it again.

When I pinpointed its source, a smile tugged at my lips despite the dire circumstances.

Emerging from the tangled maze of prisoners, Nova, the confident human Prize I had encountered during my early days in this prison, approached me.

Beside her, the contrast almost comical: a *massive* Champion with sharp features and muscles that looked as if they had been carved from granite.

He had a perpetual scowl etched on his face, but there was an undeniable gentleness in the way he looked at Nova.

It reminded me of the bond Ceara and I shared — complex and full of contrasts.

Nova’s iridescent tattoos seemed to reflect the light, creating an ethereal dance of colors around her.

Her laughter sounded like the tinkle of tiny bells as she flew to greet me. “Oh, Ellie! It’s been ages! How have you been?”

She landed gracefully on my shoulder, her touch as light as a feather.

I could feel the warmth of her body through my clothes.

I chuckled. “You make it sound like we’ve been apart for years! But I’m glad to see you too, Nova.”

She winked, her eyes shimmering like dew-covered leaves under the morning sun. “In prison, every day feels like an eternity. But come, let’s walk and talk.”

Nova’s Champion lover trailed behind us, his footsteps heavy and thudding.

He seemed disinterested in our conversation but kept a watchful eye on his companion.

The corridor was abuzz with sounds — shouts, jeers, laughter — but it all faded away as Nova and I became engrossed in our conversation.

She regaled me with tales of her time in the Prize Pool and the Champion she’d been with.

The walls of the prison seemed to recede, replaced by her vivid descriptions of passionate nights and heart-racing moments.

As Nova narrated, her face showed a mix of emotions — excitement, glee, but also a hint of wistfulness. “The passion, Ellie, is undeniable,” she

sighed, “but there’s nothing like love, like intimacy.”

I remembered my nights with Ceara, the tenderness and love that went beyond physical passion. “I think I know what you mean, Nova. Passion can be fleeting, but love... love has depth.”

Nova looked at me with twinkling eyes, “Oh? Sounds like someone’s had quite the journey since we last met.”

I blushed, the warmth spreading across my cheeks. “I’ve fallen in love, Nova. With Ceara.”

“Ceara?” Nova asked. “I don’t think I’ve heard of that Champion.”

I shook my head. “That’s because he’s not a Champion. In fact, I’m not sure if he’s really a prisoner at all—”

Nova’s Champion lover might not have an ear for what we were discussing but my armed guard certainly did.

He cleared his throat; a warning for me to end this line of gossip immediately.

I decided to stick to the romance part of the story as I was sure that was what Nova was interested in anyway. “It’s not just about attraction anymore; it’s much more profound than that.”

Nova clapped her tiny hands in joy. “Oh, Ellie, that’s wonderful! True love in a place like this is a rarity. Cherish it.”

The Prize Pool loomed ahead, a vibrant, bustling place.

The sounds of laughter, the heady mix of perfumes, and the sight of females presenting themselves to their Champions — it was a sensory overload.

The air was thick with anticipation and pheromones, creating an intoxicating cocktail that made my head spin.

Nova turned to me as we stood at the entrance. “Would you like to join us inside?”

I paused, glancing at the entrance and thinking of Ceara waiting for me. “Thank you, Nova. But I think I’ll pass. I need to get back to Ceara.”

She nodded. “I understand. Take care, Ellie. And remember, in this place, love is your greatest weapon.”

I smiled, touched by her words. “Thank you, Nova. Stay safe.”

As I made my way back to my cell, the sounds of the Prize Pool faded behind me.

But Nova’s words echoed in my mind, strengthening my resolve to find a way out of this place — with Ceara by my side.

I FOUND myself inexplicably drawn towards the fighting pits.

The raw energy that emitted from them was palpable.

The distant growls, the clash of weapons, and the mixed scents of blood, sweat, and excitement were intoxicating.

The entire atmosphere was a blend of danger and excitement.

The fighting pits were unlike anything I'd ever seen.

Two contenders, whether beasts or skilled fighters, faced off in a fierce battle while spectators cheered and jeered from the stands.

The air was thick with tension, the pungent smell of anticipation, and the tang of blood.

Occasionally, the ground would shudder beneath my feet as a beast lunged at its opponent, sending shockwaves through the arena.

As I wandered closer, trying to find a vantage point, I bumped into the old prisoner I had spoken with the day before.

He seemed out of place amidst the chaos, like a relic from a forgotten time.

His wise eyes looked up at me, reflecting the bright lights from the pit.

“Ah, the inquisitive one. Back for more stories, or perhaps a flutter on the fights?” His voice was raspy, yet there was a melodic quality to it, like an old song.

He was taking bets, scribbling odds on pieces of paper and exchanging them for credits or trinkets.

There was a certain rhythm to his actions — take a bet, scribble, hand over a ticket, repeat.

Watching him was almost hypnotic.

“As you were kind enough to lend me your ear yesterday, how about a free bet?” he said, holding out a tattered piece of paper. “On the house. Or should I say, on me?”

I hesitated. “I don't know anything about these fights or who's who.”

He chuckled, a sound that reminded me of rustling leaves. “Doesn't matter. Go with your gut. Choose at random.”

Taking a deep breath, I pointed to a name on his list — *The Jjilar* — a name that felt right in that moment.

“An excellent choice,” the old prisoner said, scribbling something down, then handing me a ticket with a knowing smile.

“Keep it close,” he whispered. “It might just come in handy.”

His words sent a chill down my spine, causing the fine hairs on the back of my neck to stand on end.

There was something about the way he said it, an underlying hint that there was more to this bet than met the eye.

My senses were heightened.

The stench of the pits, the clamor of the crowd.

As I tucked the ticket into my pocket, I couldn't shake off the feeling that someone — or something — was watching me.

But this sensation wasn't threatening.

In fact, it felt quite the opposite.

I was being watched over, protected.

It made me smile, filling me with positivity.

Was it Ceara's presence I felt?

Or perhaps something more mystical?

As the day wore on, I watched the battles unfold.

Some were short and brutal, others dragged on, testing the stamina and willpower of the fighters.

Through it all, I held onto the ticket, occasionally rubbing it between my fingers.

It was a strange source of comfort amidst the chaos.

My fight wasn't until later in the day and I wondered why the old prisoner had chosen that particular time slot for me.

The events of the day might have seemed insignificant on the surface, but deep down, I felt they held more significant meaning.

It wasn't just about a ticket or a fleeting sensation.

It was about hope.

A glimmer of positivity in a place of darkness.

I couldn't help but turn to my armed guard and asked him what the name of the Champion I had chosen, *The Jjilar*, meant in its native tongue.

There was no reason to expect the guard to reply, but he surprised me by doing so.

He snorted.

“What?” I asked.

“Fate,” he said. “It means Fate.”

My grin grew wider and wider as I walked back to my cell, to Ceara,

I held onto the ticket tightly, believing that, in the end, it would guide us

to our freedom.





# CEARA

**T**he machine hummed to life, its familiar tug pulling me into the realm of visions and time.

The chamber was cold, a contrast to the warmth of my last moment with Ellie.

Its metallic touch on my skin sent shivers down my spine.

As images danced before my eyes, my thoughts raced.

The weight of recent revelations weighed heavily on me.

My visions, my gift, had inadvertently led to the death of an influential politician.

A force of positive change gone, and the trajectory of the galaxy forever altered.

How many other destinies had been manipulated by my unwilling prophecies?

The thought left a bitter taste on my tongue.

Then there was Ellie.

Her betrayal stung, but her honesty, her choice to unveil her truth, had mended the fraying threads of our bond.

The fragrance of her hair, a combination of exotic flowers from her home planet, filled my mind, a comforting anchor amid the whirlwind of visions.

Suddenly, the machine's constant hum was drowned out by the palpable fear from the holo-monitor's images.

A heavysset Titan, his usually proud and fierce demeanor replaced by apprehension, skulked through dimly lit corridors.

His hurried breath sounded loud, even in the vastness of the chamber.

Each footstep, though muted on the plush carpets, betrayed his anxiety.

My eyes, despite the overwhelming barrage of images, remained fixed on the Titan as he slipped into an office.

The room was lavish, adorned with precious metals and gems that twinkled and emitted soft harmonies when light hit them.

But the Titan wasn't there for the treasures.

He sought information.

He rummaged hurriedly through the drawers, his fingers brushing against papers, creating a soft rustling sound that seemed to echo in the otherwise silent room.

Finally, his fingers found what they sought.

A set of papers, bound together, with a glaring title:

OPERATION MIRAGE

My heart raced, the name alone suggesting covert and possibly dangerous plans.

As the Titan scanned the documents, I too saw glimpses of their contents.

Diagrams of vast chambers, similar to the one I was currently strapped in, references to “phased energy”, and plans that hinted at large-scale manipulation of reality.

Could it be that my visions were not just predictions but were, in some twisted way, *shaping* reality?

That thought sent a jolt of electricity down my spine.

*Operation Mirage.*

The name lingered in my mind.

This could be the key, I thought, the way out for me and Ellie.

*A mirage.*

I felt a gentle touch on my shoulder, the machine's way of signaling the end of a session.

As the restraints released me, a plan began to form in my mind.

THE MOMENT I stepped out of the chamber, my entire being was buzzing with electricity.

My senses were heightened; the dim lights of the prison hallway felt blinding, the faint murmurs of guards and prisoners seemed like they were

shouted into my ear.

But amidst the chaos of sensory overload, my mind was clear and fixed on one thing:

Creating a *mirage*.

I nearly ran back to our cell, excitement giving me a rush of energy.

Bursting through the door, I found Ellie, her mere presence soothing. “Ellie!” I blurted, my words tumbling over each other in my haste. “I’ve got it, the way out! Mirage! We can create a mirage!”

She looked up at me, her brows knitted in confusion, her soft green eyes trying to keep up with my frenzied state. “Ceara, slow down! I can’t understand a word you’re saying.”

“Mirage! Our escape! It’s all right there!” I tried to explain, but my words were coming out all jumbled, and my thoughts were a whirlwind.

Ellie reached up and gently grabbed my shoulders.

Her touch had a calming effect, sending waves of warmth and security throughout my body. “Deep breath,” she instructed, her voice soft yet firm.

I took a deep breath, the cool air filling my lungs and giving me a moment of clarity. “Okay,” I began, trying to organize my thoughts. “I think I’ve figured out a way to use my gift, to turn the tables on the Supervisor.”

She gave me a patient smile. “From the top, Ceara. Slowly.”

Taking another deep breath, I began:

“I’m going to create a mirage!”

Ellie frowned. “That’s no clearer. What do you mean?”

“During one of my Visions today, I saw a Titan stealing plans about something called ‘Operation Mirage.’”

“Operation Mirage? What’s that?”

“I have no idea. But it doesn’t matter. Look, instead of passively seeing the future, what if I use my imagination? I don’t look at the images on the holo-monitor and instead see clear images *I* make in my mind?”

“But the truth serum. It will make you tell them what you see.”

“Yes,” I conceded. “But only what I *choose* to tell them. It has to be the truth but if I leave out certain details, they won’t know I’m secretly talking about our escape and not whatever they want me to see! I’ll narrate a story to the Supervisor, making him believe it’s about a future *he* wanted to know about. He’ll take actions based on my fake Vision while we escape.”

Ellie looked thoughtful for a moment. “So, you’re suggesting we play a trick on the Supervisor using your Visions as bait? It’s risky.”

“Exactly!” I exclaimed. “It’s the perfect cover. They trust my Visions. If I show them our escape, they will react. And in their reactions, we can find the cracks in their defense.”

She bit her lip, an action I had come to recognize as her thinking pose. “But Ceara, what if they figure out you’re faking?”

I nodded, understanding her concern. “There’s always that, risk, Ellie. But right now, this might be our only shot.”

Ellie sighed, brushing her fingers against my cheek.

The sensation was comforting, a promise of her unwavering trust and belief. “You really think this will work?”

“We only have one chance at this,” I said, my voice resolute. “But I believe it can work. We need to trust each other and our bond.”

She smiled, her lips soft against mine as she pulled me into a kiss.

The world faded away, leaving just the two of us, our hearts intertwined.

When she pulled back, her voice was filled with determination. “Then let’s create our mirage.”

THE FAMILIAR HUM of the machine grew louder as I was strapped into the chair.

The pressure against my temples was more intense this time, and the cool, antiseptic scent of the chamber made me draw a sharp breath.

The ambient noises, the hushed tones of the technicians, and the distant hum of machinery echoed around me.

The familiar taste of the truth serum, metallic and sour, flooded my mouth, reminding me of its impending effects.

As the holo-monitor flickered to life, I closed my eyes, trying to calm my racing heart.

All our plans, all our hopes rested on this moment.

I could no longer simply be a passive observer.

I *had* to take control.

The first image on the holo-monitor was of a dark, winding corridor, but I pushed it away, focusing my mind and my energy elsewhere.

Instead, I imagined Ellie’s face, her determined eyes, and that faint hint of defiance she wore so well.

Beside her, I saw myself.

I could see us, as if I were floating above, watching the duo as they darted through corridor after corridor, avoiding guards and taking hidden routes.

I imagined the heat of the walls as we pressed against them, listening for approaching footsteps, and the tension in the air, thick enough to cut.

“What do you see?” The Supervisor’s voice broke through my concentration, insistent and demanding.

Taking a deep breath, I began my tale. “I see a figure. He... seems to be on the move. He has someone with him.”

“Who?” the Supervisor interjected.

*Ellie.*

*It’s Ellie.*

But I couldn’t admit that, not without giving away our plan of escape. “It’s... a female with striking green eyes, and the other is a tall, muscular male. They seem to be plotting, planning an escape route.”

I continued to weave the story, giving vague descriptions, mentioning corridors, hidden alcoves, and secret passages, all the while emphasizing the need to intercept and prevent their escape.

I felt a bead of sweat form on my brow, the weight of the lie pressing down on me.

Despite the truth serum coursing through my veins, I wasn’t lying about the vision; I was simply choosing which parts to share and which to keep hidden.

I could only hope the Supervisor wouldn’t see through the ruse.

At least, not yet.

There was a pause after I finished speaking, a heavy silence that settled in the room.

I could hear my own heartbeat, thudding loudly in my ears.

I strained, trying to pick up any sound, any clue to the Supervisor’s thoughts.

*Had he bought it?*

After what felt like an eternity, the Supervisor finally responded, his tone unreadable. “Thank you, Ceara. Your information is invaluable.”

I exhaled, relief flooding through me, though I was careful not to let it show.

As the machine powered down and the straps were released, I felt a wave of exhaustion hit me.

My limbs were heavy, my mind foggy, but beneath it all was a shimmer of hope.

For the first time, I felt like we were one step ahead.

The guards carried me back to the cell, but for once, I didn't mind the journey.

I felt the cart come to a stop and heard the faint sounds of footsteps and murmured conversations.

The door slid open, and the dim light of the cell welcomed me back.

As the door closed behind me, I allowed myself a small smile.

For once, the odds seemed to be in our favor.

And with each passing moment, freedom felt closer than ever before.

THE CHILL of the cell seemed more pronounced when I entered, but seeing Ellie's face warmed me instantly.

Her eyes searched mine, looking for answers.

Before she could voice her thoughts, I declared:

"We're leaving."

Ellie's brow furrowed in confusion. "When?"

"Now."

A momentary panic set into her eyes, and she glanced around our small prison. "But how do you know when?"

I hesitated, realizing my Vision hadn't provided a clear timeline. "I don't," I admitted, frustration tingeing my words. "But the Supervisor might realize the story I fed him is fake at any moment. Seconds, minutes, hours... days? I can't be sure. That's why we have to act *now*."

My mind raced as I tried to process our next steps.

The Vision, always a consistent force in my life, never once misled me.

All it required was a starting point — a singular act to set the rest in motion, like a series of dominoes.

I thought of my Visions, of the vivid threads of destiny that seemed to weave and intertwine, but this time, I wasn't merely an observer.

This time, *I* would choose the path.

I approached the cell door, feeling the cold metal beneath my fingertips.

With a deep breath, I accessed my unique ability, the one that allowed me

to project ten seconds into the future.

A flurry of images flashed through my mind, each presenting a potential outcome.

There I was, banging on the door, my palms stinging from the repeated impact.

When that didn't work, the potential outcomes split off into a dozen other possibilities; I kicked at the door, ran at it with my shoulder; in one reality, I hurt myself, in another, I repeated the act over and over again.

Countless iterations of the same action filtered before me over and over again.

In another Vision, I hurled my cot through the air, crashing against the door in a futile attempt to break it down.

Yet another vision showed me leveraging my cot, trying to pry the door open.

All to no avail.

I felt Ellie's eyes on me, the weight of her concern pressing against my back.

Then, an anomaly.

A Vision different from the rest.

It had succeeded where the others hadn't.

It was subtle, almost lost amidst the more dramatic attempts.

I saw myself knocking gently against the wall, right where I knew an electronic panel lay on the other side.

I watched as the rhythmic tapping caused the wires behind to fizzle and malfunction, leading to the door swinging open.

My decision made, I walked confidently to the wall and began tapping.

The pattern was consistent, persistent — almost like a code.

Ellie approached me, her voice edged with curiosity. "Ceara, what are you doing? I thought we were meant to be getting out of here?"

Before I could answer, there was a faint sizzling sound, followed by a click.

The cell door slid open, revealing the dimly lit corridor beyond.

A smirk tugged at the corners of my lips as I met Ellie's surprised gaze. "Just playing a little tune," I replied, winking.

The urgency of the situation gripped us, but it felt liberating to find moments of levity amidst the chaos.

Ellie grinned, shaking her head. "After this is all over, remind me to sign



you up for a magician's course.”

I chuckled, feeling the warmth of her laughter wash over me.

It was these moments — fleeting as they were — that reminded me of why I was fighting so hard.

For us, for our future.

With the path forward clear, we stepped out of our prison, ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead.

I knew the journey wouldn't be easy, but with Ellie by my side and the power of my Visions guiding us, I felt invincible.



## ELLIE

**T**he cold steel beneath my feet seemed to resonate with the rapid thudding of my heart.

Every echoing footstep in the vast corridors threatened to expose our clandestine escape.

Yet Ceara moved with an otherworldly grace, always seemingly one step ahead of potential disaster.

At every crossroads, Ceara paused, his eyes glazing over.

I could almost see the gears turning behind those deep, captivating eyes of his, predicting our safest route.

It was mesmerizing.

Every time he made a decision, it felt like we were playing a game of cosmic roulette, and he was consistently betting on the winning number.

His lips would twitch upward, a hint of a smirk appearing when he'd choose a direction, making me feel as if the universe itself was bending to his will.

It was a stark reminder of where we were.

One wrong turn, one misstep, and our dreams of freedom would be crushed under the heels of our pursuers.

As we approached another corner, the anticipation made my skin prickle with sweat.

The familiar sound of a guard's heavy boots echoed closer.

I instinctively started to turn, but Ceara's hand shot out, halting me just in time.

The warmth of his touch felt reassuring, reminding me of our shared

resolve.

We pressed ourselves against the wall, holding our breaths.

The guard passed, the scent of his musky cologne momentarily overpowering the prison's sterile aroma.

As his footsteps faded, Ceara winked at me.

It was incredible, the things he could do.

His innate ability to see mere moments into the future, while seemingly insignificant at first glance, had been our lifeline more times than I could count.

Our spirits were soaring, every avoided encounter heightening our confidence, but it was short-lived.

Suddenly, the blaring sound of an alarm pierced the silence, instantly flooding my senses.

The harsh red emergency lights illuminated the hallway in a grim, pulsating rhythm, casting an eerie glow that painted everything in shades of crimson.

“Our secret's out,” I whispered, feeling the weight of our situation press down on me.

Ceara nodded, his brow furrowed. “We need to move faster,” he said, his voice carrying a determination that fortified my spirit.

We sprinted down the corridors, guided by Ceara's Visions.

The dissonant chorus of alarms, the distant shouts of guards, and our frantic heartbeats provided a frenetic backdrop to our escape.

Our hands brushed together, electric, as we ran.

It was a bond, a promise to each other that we would make it out together.

The warmth of our fleeting touches, the rapid exhale of our breaths — it all blended together, creating a symphony of senses that kept us moving forward.

It was while navigating another junction that we stumbled upon our most formidable obstacle yet — a security checkpoint manned by several guards.

Their glinting armor and the unmistakable hum of charged batons signaled trouble.

Ceara pulled me into a nearby alcove.

My back pressed against the cold metal wall, and the sound of our ragged breaths mingled in the tight space.

“We can't turn back now,” I murmured, my voice trembling.

Ceara's gaze locked onto mine, those deep eyes filled with determination

and a hint of mischief. “Who said anything about turning back?”

Before I could process his words, Ceara emerged from our hiding spot, pulling me along.

He darted forward, using his gift to anticipate and dodge the guards’ every move.

We weaved through them, their failed attempts to stop us feeling like a dance choreographed in our favor.

As we cleared the checkpoint, I could barely believe what had just happened.

Ceara’s audacity and the sheer power of his ability had given us the upper hand.

Breathless and elated, we continued our sprint to freedom.

The alarms still blared around us, but with Ceara’s gift guiding our path and our shared determination fueling our steps, the dream of escape felt within our grasp.

THE ECHOING of the prison’s alarm was deafening, the crimson hue of the emergency lights creating a labyrinth of shadows and illusions.

But Ceara’s hand in mine grounded me, and every sense was heightened.

The coldness of the steel beneath my boots, the sharp tang of metal and disinfectant that hung in the air, and the frantic beating of my heart created a symphony of intensity.

As we sprinted through the corridors, an authoritative voice resonated through the speaker system, instructing all prisoners to return to their cells.

For a moment, I was reminded of schoolyard drills, where we’d be ushered back to safety by our teachers.

But there was no safety here.

Some prisoners obeyed immediately, filing into their cells like conditioned animals.

Others seemed confused, caught in the crossfire of their desire for freedom and the compulsion to follow orders.

The atmosphere was charged with uncertainty, fear, and the tinge of hope.

We rounded a corner, and the metallic aroma of sweat from the gathered prisoners assaulted my nostrils.

Their conversations, filled with speculations and anxieties, buzzed in my ears, creating a cacophony that I had to push through.

Suddenly, the distinct sound of guards' boots pounding against the metal floors grew louder.

Without hesitation, Ceara yanked me into a different corridor, trying to evade them.

My eyes darted everywhere, searching for an exit.

But as we continued, it became painfully clear that we were getting cornered.

A sudden chill ran down my spine, every fiber of my being screaming that we were trapped.

Sure enough, as we skidded to a stop, guards were closing in from both directions.

Their stern faces hidden behind masks, their eyes cold and unyielding.

As despair threatened to envelop me, a sneering voice rang out. "No guard to protect you this time..."

My heart dropped as I recognized him.

The prisoner who had attacked me just days before.

He stood with a cruel smirk playing on his lips, muscles tense, ready for a fight.

My fingers tightened around Ceara's, drawing strength from his presence.

Ceara stepped forward, placing himself between me and the imminent threat. "We don't want trouble. Let us pass."

The malicious laughter of the prisoner sent shivers down my spine.

But before he could retort, a shout from a guard drew our attention.

Reacting quickly, Ceara pulled me into the nearest room — the prisoner's cell.

The air in the cell was stifling.

But the harsh overhead light revealed the intricacies of the prisoner's personal space — drawings, tokens, and a bed that had seen better days.

The space felt invasive, an unwelcome glimpse into the man's life.

He growled, infuriated by our intrusion. "This is *my* space!"

"Quiet," Ceara whispered, pressing his ear against the cold door.

The muffled sounds of guards running past and barking orders filled the tense silence.

I could feel the prisoner's hot breath on my neck, and I recoiled, pressing closer to Ceara.

Minutes felt like hours, but finally, the distant echo of boots faded. Ceara nodded, signaling it was safe.

We quickly exited, not sparing a glance at the prisoner who was still seething in the corner.

Navigating the maze-like prison, we once again found ourselves pursued by guards.

Their shouts and the heavy stomping of their boots were an ever-present reminder of the danger snapping at our heels.

In a desperate bid, Ceara pulled me toward the fighting pits section of the prison.

The familiar roar of the crowds filled my ears, and the scent of blood and sweat was almost overpowering.

We darted through the maze of tunnels beneath the fighting pits, using the sounds of battles above to mask our movements.

The muffled cheers, the clang of weapons, and the grunts of fighters resonated around us, each noise a distraction, a shield against our pursuers.

Every turn, every corner, and every shadow held potential threats.

But with Ceara leading the way, I felt a glimmer of hope that we might just make it out together.

THE SOUNDS of the prison intensified around me.

The raw, rhythmic chant of fighters in the pit combined with the raucous cheers of onlookers.

The thick musk of anticipation and excitement clung to the air, permeating every breath I took.

Amid the chaos, I could feel the insistent tug of Ceara's hand, leading me through the darkened tunnels, the vibrations of footsteps indicating the guards were hot on our heels.

Every step was fraught with urgency, each shadow presenting a possible hideaway.

My mind raced as rapidly as my heart.

It felt like we were moments away from capture when a familiar gravelly voice pierced through the turmoil.

“You still got that ticket, young one?”

My head snapped in the direction of the voice, and there, bathed in the dim light from above, was the old alien with deep-set, knowing eyes.

The sight of him anchored me to the memory of our previous encounter, the feel of the paper ticket, the hint of mystery that accompanied his advice.

“Ticket?” Ceara asked quizzically.

There was that feeling again, the sense of being watched, that all was not as simple as it seemed.

As I approached the alien, my fingers instinctively reached into my pocket, brushing against the rough texture of the ticket.

The realization of what I was holding — and the potential it represented — made my pulse quicken.

Without hesitation, I pulled out the ticket and handed it to the elderly figure.

The wrinkled skin of his fingers brushed against mine, a sensation that was oddly comforting in the midst of chaos.

“My, my,” he commented, producing a hefty sack of credits with a wink. “A wise bet indeed.”

The glint of metal coins against the faint light caught my attention.

I was momentarily entranced by the sight, the scent of worn leather and cold metal filling my nostrils.

But the rapidly approaching sounds of guards refocused my mind.

Without pausing to think, I grabbed the sack and, with all the force I could muster, hurled it into the air.

The credits spilled out, shimmering like a cascade of stars against the dim backdrop.

Their metallic clinking sound was like music, ringing out clearly above the din.

The effect was instantaneous.

Like a magnetic force, prisoners from every direction lunged for the falling treasures.

The tunnels echoed with shouts, growls, and the thud of bodies colliding.

The intoxicating allure of the credits overpowered their senses, their focus shifting from the alarm to the potential fortune that lay scattered on the ground.

Ceara, quick to capitalize on the diversion, pulled me with renewed vigor.

As we weaved through the ensuing pandemonium, freedom had never felt so sweet.



The once-imposing guards now seemed flustered, trying to maintain order among the frenzied inmates.

Their authoritative shouts were drowned out by the clamor of prisoners, and they seemed to have forgotten — or at least distracted from — their original objective.

*Us.*

My skin tingled with the rush of cool air as we made our way up a staircase and out onto a balcony overlooking the fighting pits.

From this vantage point, I could see the whole arena, a sensory overload of colors, sounds, and emotions.

I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding, and my laughter mingled with Ceara's.

It was a moment of pure elation, and as our eyes met, I could see the same exhilaration mirrored in his.

"We did it," I whispered, squeezing his hand.

Ceara's grin was infectious, his eyes sparkling with mischief and relief. "We did. But we're not out yet."

I nodded, taking in our surroundings.

We had the advantage of elevation, and for now, the chaos below served as a shield.

But we needed a plan, and fast.

He drew close. "Trust me," he murmured against my ear, sending pleasant shivers down my spine.

With a firm nod, I replied, "Always."

And with that, we turned away from the balcony, ready to face whatever challenge lay ahead, together.

THE HUM of distant machinery assaulted my senses as we darted through the door.

I could feel the cool, metallic touch of the floor beneath my boots, and the air had a sterile tang to it, reminiscent of antiseptic.

The large docking bay stretched out before us, filled with crates, robotic loading arms, and various other logistical equipment.

Above us, the expansive ceiling bore an intricate network of lights, each

illuminating a section of the hangar, giving the vast space an almost ethereal glow.

My ears were filled with the muffled noises of the prison facility — the distant alarms, the shouts of guards, and the low hum of the magnetic barriers that separated sections of the facility.

I could see the sleek lines of the delivery shuttle at the far end, its smooth surface reflecting the ambient lights.

The security door blocking our way was thick and imposing, with no visible access panel.

Our options seemed limited.

Breathing heavily, Ceara stepped closer to the door, placing his hand on its cool surface, as if trying to discern its secrets.

His palm flattened against it as he closed his eyes.

I watched, fingers itching with anticipation, willing him to find a way.

Moments later, his eyes reopened, and the weight of despair within them was unmistakable. “It’s no good,” he admitted, voice strained from exhaustion. “There’s no way past this door in the time we have. I need to see *further*... I need to understand the broader patterns.”

My heart sank. “But the only way you can do that is with the Supervisor’s machine,” I whispered, tasting the bitterness of defeat on my lips.

Ceara nodded, looking dejected. “Heading back now would be suicide.”

We both jumped as the clang of boots against metal sounded from behind.

Spinning around, I was met with a nightmarish tableau.

Guards, dozens of them, stood on the upper ramparts.

Their rifles, glistening under the hangar’s light, were trained squarely on us.

Between my racing heartbeat and the steadily approaching footsteps, the world seemed to blur around me.

The sharp odor of ozone filled my nostrils as plasma rifles powered up, and a sense of impending doom settled heavily on my shoulders.

Then, the final figure emerged:

The Supervisor.

His demeanor was calm, almost serene, as he stood there observing us, a slight smirk playing on his lips.

“Well, well,” he began, his voice dripping with amusement. “Looks like we have ourselves a little predicament.”

I felt Ceara’s hand squeeze mine.

Even in this dire situation, the warmth and strength of his touch brought a shred of comfort.

I could feel the subtle tremors in his grip, a testament to the stress he was under, yet it felt grounding amidst the chaos.

“I must say,” the Supervisor continued, “I’m somewhat impressed. You’ve gotten farther than I anticipated. But did you really think you could just waltz out of here?”

He waved a device much like a remote control back on Earth.

On it was a single large red button and I immediately knew that pressing it would open the door behind us.

Ceara met his gaze defiantly. “It was worth a shot.”

The Supervisor chuckled, the sound echoing eerily in the vast chamber. “Perhaps. But now it’s over. I have you right where I want you.”

The coldness of the situation, the finality of the Supervisor’s words, sent a shiver down my spine.

My senses were heightened; I could hear the subdued whispers of the guards, feel the pressure of the atmosphere.

Yet, amidst it all, Ceara’s presence was a calming anchor.

“I won’t let you use him,” I said, voice filled with determination.

The Supervisor raised an eyebrow. “Oh? And what can you possibly do to stop me?”

Before I could answer, Ceara interjected:

“If you let Ellie go, I’ll cooperate. Fully.”

“Ceara, no!” I whispered urgently.

He turned to me, eyes filled with resolve. “I can’t let them hurt you, Ellie.”

A pregnant pause filled the room, the weight of Ceara’s words hanging heavily in the air.

The Supervisor seemed to consider the proposition, his fingers tapping a slow rhythm against his chin.

The Supervisor finally broke his contemplation. “Deal. But from now on, you, Ceara, will not hold back. No more escape attempts. No more lies... or half-truths. Anything you do to slow down my progress will be paid for by punishing Ellie.”

Ceara nodded, resignation clear on his face.

It was over and I had lost him.

I had lost Ceara.



## CEARA

The fluorescent lighting of the docking bay buzzed overhead, casting sharp and unforgiving lights over the guards' armor and weapons.

The sharp tang of ozone was thick in the air from the plasma rifles, and it stung my nostrils with its pungency.

Around me, acrid heated metal and cool synthetic blends of the delivery shuttle pervaded the atmosphere.

"I'm sorry, my love," I said, pulling Ellie in close for what I feared would be the very last time.

I breathed her in, felt her small warm body against mine, and hugged her close, expressing how much I truly cherished her.

We had tried and we had gotten close... but not close enough.

I pulled back and swam in the tears that quivered in her eyes. "Ellie, I—"

In that instant, as I faced the Supervisor and his legion of guards, a blinding flash consumed my vision.

It wasn't the painful, searing brightness of a physical light but the deep, profound illumination of a Vision.

The sensation was a rush, as if I were being dragged away from this moment and thrust into another time and place.

With it came the muted sounds of waves crashing against a shoreline, the distant laughter of children, the rustling of alien flora in a gentle breeze — sensations from that distant beach with Ellie.

But this was different; it wasn't *that* Distant Vision but a new one.

In the background of this Vision, I sensed freedom.

The details of our getaway were clear and precise, from the steps we

would take to the decisions we'd make.

This was our path to freedom, and it unfolded before me with startling clarity.

As I snapped back to reality, the familiar hum of the prison facility's atmosphere control system vibrated through the soles of my boots, and I felt the weight of my own body, the realness of the current moment.

I gazed deeply into Ellie's worried, beautiful eyes, the myriad of blue hues reflecting the docking bay's light.

My fingers reached out, caressing her cheek with a gentle touch, feeling the warmth and softness of her skin. "It's you," I whispered, my voice laced with gratitude and awe. "It's always been you."

Her expression, previously filled with fear, shifted to one of confusion. "Ceara, what are you—?"

Without waiting for her to finish, I did something that probably seemed insane to her.

I turned away from the safety of our momentary sanctuary and sprinted directly towards the armed guards.

My every sense was heightened.

The metallic clink of their armor adjusting, the sharp and distinctive sound of plasma rifles being readied, the way the light reflected off their visors — all of it came rushing at me with heightened clarity.

Not that I needed clarity *because I had seen it all before*.

In my Vision, the one that stretched beyond the limiting borders of my usual ability.

Ellie's scream of horror and desperation echoed behind me.

In that moment, it was a heartbreaking symphony of love and fear.

But even amidst the chaos, I could clearly recall the sensations from my Vision, the tangibility of our escape route, and the exact moves I needed to make.

I felt the floor beneath my boots grow slick with some liquid, probably a spilled lubricant from the machinery.

Using that to my advantage, I slid under the first guard, feeling the cold touch of the ground and the rush of air as a plasma shot narrowly missed me.

The tangy scent of singed fabric reached my nose as I realized my clothes had barely escaped the plasma's touch.

"Don't kill him you fools!" the Supervisor bellowed. "Take him *alive!*"

Using the momentum from my slide, I sprang up, grabbing a crate, and

hurled it at another guard.

The weighty thunk and the guard's grunt of surprise were oddly satisfying.

Dodging and weaving, I maneuvered through the guards, using the snippets from my Vision to guide my every move.

With each step, I felt the adrenaline pumping through my veins, and hear the rhythmic beating of my heart, synchronized with Ellie's desperate cries.

When I reached the center of the formation, I realized that all their attention was on me, leaving Ellie momentarily forgotten.

That was exactly what I had hoped for.

THE GUARDS THUNDERED down the stairs, their metallic boots striking each step with a rhythmic clatter that echoed through the corridor.

It reminded me of a march, one that heralded their doom.

A mixture of their synthetic leather armor and the pungent stench of fear wafted up the staircase, a smell I was intimately familiar with.

It felt satisfying to be on the other side of that fear for once.

Due to the narrowness of the staircase, their overwhelming numbers became a hindrance rather than an advantage.

Their bulk and weight, meant to intimidate, worked against them, making them slow, clumsy, and predictable.

As the first guard reached the bottom, I struck, using the element of surprise.

My fingers snaked out, grabbing him by his armored collar and pulling him into a chokehold.

I could feel the heat of his breath, short and rapid against my arm, and the desperation in his movements as he tried to free himself.

Another guard opened fire, but I had already sensed his move.

The heat from the plasma shot was a mere whisper against my cheek as I dodged, the bright hue reflecting in my peripheral vision.

Without hesitation, I lunged forward, snatching a plasma rifle from a third guard.

I squeezed the trigger, and the rifle hummed to life, spitting out bolts of searing plasma.

One by one, the guards crumpled, their armor charred and smoky, filling the air with a burnt, acrid aroma.

In the chaos, my ears picked up a distinctive sound: the soft shuffling of someone trying to stealthily retreat.

Turning my attention from the fallen guards, my eyes locked onto the Supervisor.

His flabby, sweat-slicked skin glistened under the corridor lights.

The remote control dangled precariously from his pudgy fingers, his ticket to regain control of this situation.

Seeing that he was the focus of my attention, a hint of panic flashed in his eyes, making them widen comically.

I could hear the rapid thumping of his heart and see the fluttering of his pulse beneath the translucent skin of his throat.

Without warning, I aimed the plasma rifle at him.

The shot grazed his arm, the scorching heat causing a blistering wound that forced him to release the remote.

The device twirled in the air, reflecting the chaotic scene of the stairwell in its glossy surface.

The Supervisor lunged, desperation evident in his movement, his fingers splaying out to take control of the remote once more.

But it was in vain.

His short stature and portly figure hindered him, and he was a breath too late.

The remote descended, and as if time had slowed, I extended my arm, feeling the texture of the device's cold, hard casing as it settled into my palm.

The subtle vibration of its active state hummed beneath my fingertips.

I took a deep breath, letting the mixture fill my lungs.

My fingers danced over the remote's surface, accessing its multiple functions.

The Supervisor, his face a mixture of rage and terror, hissed:

“You think you've won? This is only the beginning!”

His voice was raspy, a dryness evident as if the very moisture had been sucked from his mouth in the midst of his fear.

I smirked. “For you, maybe. For us, this is the end of captivity and the beginning of freedom!”

The remote buzzed in my hand, signifying the unlocking of doors and the deactivation of security measures throughout the prison.



The way to freedom was now clear.

THE VIBRATIONS of the shuttle's controls hummed beneath my fingertips, a sensation both familiar and foreign with time.

As we soared into the cosmos, the prison complex shrank in the rear-view monitor.

The dark foreboding structure that once held us captive was now just a speck among the vastness of stars.

Beside me, Ellie's wide eyes were fixed on the stretching starliners ahead.

The golden glow of distant suns illuminated her face, casting a halo-like shimmer around her, making her look even more ethereal.

I could smell the lingering scent of her — a mixture of flowery perfume and a natural sweetness, mingling with the sterile, ozone-like aroma of the shuttle's interior.

It was intoxicating, grounding me in the here and now.

Her voice, tinged with a note of wonder and curiosity, broke our shared silence. "Ceara, how did you know how to escape? There was no way out. How could you see it?"

I took a deep breath, gathering my thoughts, and faced her, noting the strands of hair that had fallen over her face.

They tickled my nose when I leaned in closer, their silken touch igniting a trail of tingles on my skin.

"Ellie," I began, my voice hushed, "there's something about fated mates that I haven't shared with you."

Her eyes, always so expressive, showed a mixture of curiosity and concern.

"It's a gift," I continued, "a power that is bestowed upon the Blinker when they find their fated mate."

I reached out, intertwining our fingers.

The soft warmth of her hand enveloped mine, sending an electric charge up my arm.

It was a sensation I'd come to cherish, one that connected us in more ways than one.

"When I'm with you, Ellie, when I'm connected to you, I can see beyond

the usual ten-second glimpses. With you, I can see into the Distant future. Our future.”

My thoughts drifted to the familiar sandy beach, the one from my Distant Vision.

The one where we were together, laughing and carefree.

A soft gasp escaped her lips, and I felt her fingers tighten around mine. “So, you mean... the machine at the facility, you don’t need it? As long as you have me?”

I nodded, letting the weight of our discovery settle between us. “Yes. Maybe the machine could never boost my ability. I don’t know. All I know is you do. It’s *you*. It’s *always* been you.”

The realization dawned on her face, and a smile, bright and beautiful, spread across her lips. “And I’ll always be with you,” she whispered, her words barely audible over the gentle hum of the shuttle’s engine.

I could hear the thumping of her heart, a rhythm that perfectly matched my own.

Pulling her close, I pressed my lips to hers.

And for that moment, everything else ceased to exist.

It was just us, floating amidst the vast expanse of the universe, bound by love and destiny.

Drawing back, I looked into her eyes, finding my future reflected in them. “As long as I have you, Ellie,” I murmured, “our future will always be bright, always be happy.”

She nestled her head against my shoulder, and together, hand in hand, we navigated our way through the cosmos, leaving the darkness of our past behind, racing towards a future that promised endless love and boundless horizons.

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**DEMON IN THE CHAMBER |  
SNEAK PEEK**

---

## NOVA

**N**o one wants me, not with these tattoos.

And for the longest time, none of the Champions did - and my luck was about to run out.

The humid air wrapped around me, a smothering cloak that made my negligee cling even tighter to my skin.

The fabric was sheer and short, hardly covering anything, making me feel even more exposed.

The dim lighting, infused with an otherworldly glow, made the Prizes' skin glitter.

I could hear the soft murmur of conversation and the shuffling of feet.

I kept my eyes closed, trying to calm my racing heart - to block out the reality of where I was.

I imagined the scent of fresh roses, their velvety petals, and a gentle breeze rather than the metallic tang that pervaded the air here.

My reverie was shattered by the distant roar of the crowd from the fighting pits.

The noise grew louder and more intense until it reached a crescendo, signaling the end of a bout.

And then the door to the Prize Pool swung open.

He entered.

Sneik.

His very name sent shivers down my spine.

I'd heard stories about him — his brutality in the pits, his ferocity, and his complete lack of mercy.

Every sound in the room seemed to amplify — the dripping of water, the stifled sobs of some of the other girls, the deep rumbling of his breathing.

My bare feet felt cold on the platform, my toes curling involuntarily.

I wanted nothing more than to be anywhere but here.

I risked a glance.

Sneik was massive.

His dark, leathery skin was covered in scars and markings from battles long fought.

His eyes, glowing a vivid yellow, scanned the room, assessing each of us.

My heart went out to the other females, each one as terrified as I was.

There was said to once be a madam here by the name of Lily and that she would watch over us.

With her around, there had been some semblance of protection, but she'd managed to escape with another prisoner, leaving us vulnerable.

Sneik began to move.

Each step he took was slow and deliberate.

He paused by a blue-skinned female, his fingers grazing her chin, tilting it upwards.

My heart reached my throat, fearing for her.

But then, as suddenly as his interest was piqued, it waned.

He moved on.

The sound of soft music floated in the background, its light tone juxtaposing our grim reality.

The sweet melody was supposed to soothe us, but it felt more like a mockery.

Every now and then, the scent of some exotic flower wafted in, their perfume trying to mask the acrid stench of fear that permeated the room.

Sneik was almost at the end of the line.

I exhaled, thinking perhaps I would be spared tonight.

My heart reached out to the female he seemed to have chosen, but there was no way I'd offer to take her place.

Suddenly, he turned, his eyes locking onto mine.

There was a momentary pause, a brief eternity, where the world seemed to stand still.

Then he began to approach me.

Every footstep echoing like a death knell.

“No,” I whispered to myself.



But it was of no use.

His massive hand reached out, fingers wrapping around my arm with a grip that was firm and painful.

I looked into his eyes, searching for some hint of mercy, a sliver of humanity.

But all I found was an inscrutable void.

As he dragged me from the Prize Pool, I stole a last glance at the other females.

Some looked relieved, others pitiful, but all were thankful it wasn't them.

The door shut behind us, leaving me alone with the one creature in the universe I'd hoped never to encounter.

The realization sunk in.

*I had been claimed by Sneik.*

WE MADE our way through the corridor, lit by low, oscillating orange and purple lights.

Every step on the cold, metallic floor sent a shiver up my legs.

The eerie hum of the prison generators echoed in the distance, accompanied by a symphony of hushed whispers from the other male prisoners.

Sneik walked with a sense of authority, his grip on my arm unyielding.

His towering presence made it clear why he was known as the Champ.

My senses felt heightened, every noise magnified, each whiff of the stagnant air intensely registering.

The recycled air was stale, like long-stored water.

"Look, Sneik," I began, trying to keep my voice steady. "I *really* think you're making a mistake. I'm not the Prize you're hoping for."

My eyes darted around, noting the other prisoners eyeing me with a mix of envy and hunger.

A wave of fear washed over me, but I held my ground.

He continued walking, seemingly oblivious to my words.

But I wasn't about to give up.

"Honestly, there are *far* more experienced females back in the Prize Pool. Ones who wouldn't disappoint you. I mean, have I mentioned I snore? *Really*

loudly. And I have this thing where I sing in the shower, terribly off-key. It's genuinely awful. Trust me, you don't want that."

His gaze remained forward.

I might as well be talking to a brick wall.

The look on his face was inscrutable, but I pressed on.

"And then there's my inability to cook. Anything. At all. The last time I tried to make a simple soup, it turned into an inedible sludge." I let out an exaggerated sigh. "Really, you'd be so much happier with someone else. Shall I make suggestions?"

There were a couple of bitches back at the Pool that I would *love* to see Claimed instead of me.

The sounds of the prison seemed to become more pronounced, from the faint, melodic hums of some far-off machinery to the distant calls of prisoners communicating in coded language.

I continued my pleas, each one more desperate than the last.

I could feel the heat from his body, a strange juxtaposition to the cold metal of the prison.

A scent, both foreign and oddly comforting, wafted from him, an amalgamation of musk and something more ethereal, like the aroma of a distant forest after the rain.

I glanced behind us to the two guards closely trailing, their faces stern and unyielding.

Their uniforms made them seem almost robotic, with their aluminum sheen and the bright lights emanating from their visors.

I toyed with the idea of reaching out to them, of imploring them for help.

But the emptiness in their gaze, the cold detachment, told me all I needed to know.

They were here to do a job and nothing more.

Resigned, I turned my attention back to Sneik. "I'm terrible at sex," I said. "I didn't want to admit that, but I've never pleased a man once in my life. Seriously, if you want a good time, you should find someone else."

We reached his cell, the door sliding open with a soft hiss.

HE PULLED me back and thrust me forward into his room, finally releasing me from his grip.

I hesitated, then stepped inside.

The cell was surprisingly spacious, decorated with various trophies and trinkets from his victories in the pits.

“Sit,” he rumbled, pointing to a plush-looking seat.

I complied, my senses still on high alert.

The seat was softer than it looked.

I looked around, noting the subtle scents — hints of exotic spices.

Strange, I thought, for a prison cell.

Sneik moved closer, his eyes locking onto mine.

For the first time since he claimed me, he spoke. “Your attempts to dissuade me are... amusing,” he remarked, his voice deep and grating. “But unnecessary.”

“But—”

He held up a clawed hand, silencing me. “I claimed you, and you shall be mine. You are here for my pleasure. Your enjoyment is not necessary.”

I blinked, confused.

What did he mean? Before I could probe further, he turned away, leaving me with more questions than answers.

As the door to the cell slid shut, sealing us in, I couldn’t help but feel a mix of dread and sheer terror.

Sneik’s reputation was clearly valid.

And I was going to be the one that bore the cuts, welts, and bruises.

THE BED WAS massive in size; its sheets looked worn and told the tales of *many* encounters.

It dominated the room, a looming testament to the Champ’s conquests.

Before I could process any of this, Sneik’s strong hands were on me, tossing me onto the bed.

The softness of the mattress briefly enveloped me, at odds with the rough manner in which I’d been thrown.

The scent was a mix of musky masculinity and the faintest hint of some foreign flower.

*His previous conquest?*

But comfort was the last thing on my mind.

With adrenaline fueling my movements, I sprang back to my feet, making

a dash for the door.

My fingers grazed the cold metal, searching for an exit button or some way out.

*Nothing.*

Panic set in, and I pounded on the door, each thud echoing the rapid beats of my heart.

The rising panic threatened to overwhelm me, and the recycled air in the cell felt heavy, suffocating.

Behind me, I heard the rustling of clothing, a sound that only heightened my distress.

Turning, my eyes widened as I saw Sneik, now stripped of his battle attire.

His physique, though impressive, was riddled with scars and marks.

Each one narrated a tale of battles faced, of adversaries defeated.

His skin shimmered in the dim lighting of the cell, highlighting the rough, battle-hardened textures.

And there, clawed across his abs, were what appeared to be scratch marks.

They were *under* his armor and unlikely to be from an adversary in the pits.

*They were from his previous Prize, who had struggled to fight him off... and failed.*

My heart quailed at the thought that soon it would be *my* fingernails that scored his flesh.

As he approached, the distance between us felt too short, each step echoing in my ears like a menacing drumbeat.

A mix of dread and determination filled me.

I wasn't going down without a fight.

Backing up against the door, I drew a deep breath, prepared to scream for all I was worth.

But before I could let out more than a gasp, there was a sudden, sharp knock at the door.

We both froze.

The knock was unexpected, almost out of place in this scenario.

Sneik's glowing eyes, which were previously fixed on me with a predatory focus, now flicked to the door.

His expression changed from one of single-minded intent to genuine

confusion.

I seized the opportunity, scrambling to the farthest corner of the cell, trying to create as much distance between us as possible.

My senses were on high alert — I could hear the erratic beat of my heart, and feel the chill of the hard walls.

The knocking came again, more persistent this time.

“Who dares?” Sneik roared, his voice echoing in the confines of the cell.

There was a pause, then a muffled voice replied, but I couldn’t understand the words he said.

Sneik hesitated, shooting me a quick glance.

*Anger.*

*Shear anger.*

If I didn’t escape soon, he was going to turn all that rage onto me.

The incessant knocking was like the constant buzzing of an insistent fly.

It echoed in the cell, becoming more irksome with each passing second.

I could almost feel the tension in the room thicken, the air heavy with a mixture of confusion, anticipation, and Sneik’s rising irritation.

His nostrils flared with every knock, his growing anger both intimidating and intoxicating.

The subtle hum of the cell’s machinery was drowned out by the knocking, and the taste of anxiety lingered on my tongue.

For the first time since being thrown into this room, I found myself curious about the visitor rather than purely fearful.

Sneik’s patience, which already seemed to be hanging by a thread, finally snapped.

With a swift, fluid motion, he stomped toward the door, yanking it open with enough force that it momentarily caused the walls to vibrate.

The sight that greeted us was unexpected.

Standing there was another male, his posture defiant yet respectful.

He wasn’t as colossal as Sneik — no one was — but he wasn’t exactly small either.

His skin had a smooth luminescence, and his eyes — *oh, those eyes* — were like twin galaxies, vast and mysterious.

“Sorry for the intrusion,” the alien began with a sly smirk, his voice a rich baritone that resonated within the cell.

His gaze flitted around the room before finally settling on me.

I felt it immediately.

A strange, indescribable pull.

It was as if an unseen force tugged at my very core.

Our eyes met, and in that fleeting moment, everything else blurred into the background.

It was a connection so tangible that it felt like an audible “click,” akin to two perfectly matching puzzle pieces finding their rightful place.

But the moment was abruptly shattered by Sneik’s low growl. “What do you want, Ashale?” he hissed, his tone dripping with disdain.

Ashale’s confident demeanor didn’t waver.

He pointed a slender finger in my direction. “I believe you have something that belongs to me.”

Sneik’s stance turned even more menacing. “She is *mine*,” he growled, stepping forward in a protective manner.

Ashale sighed, a playful smile dancing on his lips. “I understand why you might think so. But you see, there’s been a mistake. She shouldn’t be here in the first place.”

Sneik snorted, clearly not buying it. “A mistake? She was in the Prize Pool. I claimed her.”

My heart raced as the two exchanged barbs.

I felt the cold metal beneath my feet and the intense heat of the situation.

The room was thick with tension, a mélange of musk, and a hint of something sweet — perhaps Ashale’s natural fragrance.

For what felt like an eternity, the two stared each other down, the atmosphere thick with tension and unsaid words.

My senses were overwhelmed — the musky aroma of Sneik’s anger, the alluring scent of Ashale, the sight of two powerful beings at an impasse, and the sound of my own heart thundering in my ears.

Ashale’s eyes met mine once more, a silent promise communicated in that gaze.

He looked like he was deciding something...

Whether or not to intervene?

If I was worth the trouble?

His eyes flicked down to my arms, my shoulders, my exposed legs, and he seemed to come to a decision.

He turned his face up to Sneik, and his smile was tight and strained. “Very well.”

I couldn’t have predicted what would happen next in a million years.

**I HOPE you're enjoying DEMON IN THE CHAMBER. If you are, why not check out the complete book.**

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## **CREATURE IN THE VAULT**

by Tammy Walsh

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