



DARK
URTH

MATED
TO THE
MONSTER

BELLA BLAZE

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MONSTER ROMANCES OF DARK URTH

BELLA BLAZE

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IVY

A bead of sweat trickled down my spine, making me shudder. I just knew that anyone who took even a passing glance at me would spot my nervousness from a mile away. The thought made my stomach turn – a nervous target is an easy one – but I didn't know how to control my emotions enough to bury the response.

I had never carried so much money on me in my entire life. Heck, I had never even seen this much. It was wrapped neatly under my shirt, in two little cloth pouches that were taped tight against my skin to avoid drawing attention. Carrying it that close to my body at least guaranteed that if anyone tried to rob me, they'd have to kill me for it.

The problem was that killing wasn't all that much of a deterrent, not for most of the ruffians I'd likely encounter on this journey. The most obvious, and likely, threat was going to be another human, someone desperate and down on their luck.

These days, there was no shortage of that. The plus side was that facing off against another human was at least a fair fight, and I'm pretty scrappy. As long as I kept my guard up and my eyes open, I was confident I could manage myself in that regard.

The real worry was any two-faced Tilarker or B'Veres aliens who saw me as an easy payday. The B'Veres liked to pretend they were too noble, too rule-oriented to engage in anything so disgusting as stealing. The Tilarkers claimed they came to Urth to protect humans, not hurt them.

That's what they said, anyway. I had seen enough to know that wasn't always the case. As a result, I was smart enough to not fall too fast for either the B'Veres or Tilarker excuses.

Hopefully, the Oovarz would at least leave me be, considering this money was going to L.A. as a bribe for them, anyway. A little 'gift' for the Oovarz, who had run rampant across the rest of California. They had recently taken another chunk of what used to be L.A. from the factions of Tilarker aliens that were warring against them. After every offensive, each side claimed that they now "controlled" L.A. when the truth was that even now, what was left of this sprawling urban jungle was too big for any one faction to control.

My settlement, largely human, didn't want a war. We just wanted to be left alone, a guarantee that the Oovarz wouldn't decimate us the way they did everything else. The band of Oovarz running Hesperia just took our money. We paid the 'tithe' whenever they asked, and hoped it would be enough to maintain the tentative peace.

This was the first time, however, that anyone asked me to bring the money myself. *Don't screw this up, Ivy*, I warned myself, already imagining all of the ways that this could go wrong.

I resisted the urge to pat my stomach to make sure that the tape, and money, was still holding. It would be a silly gesture, as I could feel the weight of it on my core. I might put my mind at ease for a moment or two, but what if I gave my secret away?

I stared suspiciously at the strangers I passed on the street, my eyes already accusing them of crimes they hadn't committed. Everyone was a threat, as far as I was concerned.

I tried to tell myself that I was being paranoid — I hadn't even left Hesperia yet! No one in this settlement was going to steal the tithe from me. It wasn't so much that I thought of anyone here as a friend. It was the simple fact that, if we didn't pay the tithe, it would risk everyone's life when the Oovarz came for payback.

Who would steal a little money now if it guaranteed a painful death tomorrow?

I hurried down the street, rushing to the edge of the settlement. The faster that I got there, the faster this would all be over. But at the gated wall, I hesitated.

“Coming through?” one of the guards taunted.

I stared up at them as they snickered, but they did not press me further. They waited for me to make up my mind, not particularly concerned with whether I wanted to come or go. It made no difference to them, if I stayed in the settlement’s safety or took my chances out there.

After a few minutes, one of them seemed to get bored with my internal debate. “Gate closes at six,” he snarked. Pulled from my thoughts, I turned to shoot him a heated glare.

The gate was intended to keep the Oovarz out and the people inside safe. Guards were there to monitor the situation and even fight the more bestial, wandering Oovarz off as needed. It wasn’t something we had to do a lot of lately, not since we started paying their ‘tithe,’ but it was still the official process.

Certain times of day, the gates were closed entirely. No emergency, no bribe, *nothing* would get them to move during those times. If you were in the settlement, you were stuck inside — and if you were out there, you were stuck, as well. But at least during those times the Oovarz couldn’t break in, either.

“I know,” I snapped, holding onto false bravery.

Right now, I wasn’t afraid of the Oovarz, or the gates closing. What concerned me was all the guards posted up and down the road heading into L.A. How far would I get, before one of them realized what I was doing and demanded a cut of the money?

The guards had the power to keep us safe, but you really could stop the sentence half-way and have it still be true. The guards had the power. Period.

Then it hit me. The bus. The bus would be safer. Once I got on board, I could just stay put till L.A. No risk of encounters with a guard with sticky fingers and loose ethics.

I turned from the snotty guard without another word, hurrying away from the gate and toward the bus station. The bus was a beat-up disaster of a rust bucket which barely seemed safer than taking my chances with the guards, but I decided that I'd rather die in a car crash than a mugging.

My pulse didn't slow the entire time but the bus finally arrived in L.A. unscathed. My stop was Griffith, one of the dozens of new walled cities that had sprung up from the old mega-city. Tilarke guards who had defected to the Oovarz side greeted me. All I had to say was that I came from Hesperia, and they seemed intuitively to know why I was there.

Before I knew it, a few of them were scurrying me off to the next destination while the bus rolled on. Wherever it was I had to go deliver the bribe — I mean, tithe. My heart rate slowed, finally feeling like I had at least found safe ground.

It wasn't lost on me how absurd it was that the Oovarz territory would ever be considered safe ground. But in this mixed-up shell of what was once Earth, absurd seemed to be the new ordinary.

They delivered me to a Tilarke. He was tall and lean, built like a soldier with golden eyes that made my breath catch curiously in my throat. His wings held steady, although I knew they would never be used to fly.

“Hello.”

He held out a hand to shake mine. Entranced by his eyes, I couldn't look away, but managed to offer my arm.

When our skin touched, his teal skin such a vivid contrast to mine, my heart sped back up. Faster than it had even been on the bus.

Absurd really was the new ordinary.

VEKEN

Normally, I would have paid moderate attention to any human standing before me in a place like this. Simply because I knew if they were this close to the Oovarz, there was always the potential for danger. I may have looked like I was on the side of the Oovarz but looks can be deceiving.

Something about this one human caught my eye, however. It went deeper than my standard response to watch out for the humans, who were too weak to stand up for themselves against the Oovarz. This woman was ... different. Special.

She had unusually dark blue eyes, a vibrant shade so deep they were nearly indigo. Tilarkers do not have blue eyes, so the color was always a bit startling and unfamiliar to me. Her eyes, however, were striking even by human standards.

Long brunette hair with sun-kissed streaks matched her tan complexion, falling around her shoulders in loose waves, and I had to resist the impulse to tug one of those tempting curves. My fingers itched against the side of my pants, dying to try it. Finally, I forced down the urge by offering my hand in a handshake instead.

“I’m Veken,” I introduced myself warmly.

There was a glimmer of wary distrust in her eyes. It was smart of her to be suspicious, here in the proverbial lion’s den. I couldn’t dare reveal, of course, that I was just as loath to fraternize with the Oovarz as her.

After all, I had carefully cloaked myself to work here as an Oovarz loyalist. The idea was despicable to me, personally.

Any Tilarker who bedded down with the Oovarz for their own selfish gain deserved a fate worse than death. Unfortunately, more and more of my kind had done exactly that, as of late.

But I had reasons to be here.

The Oovarz seemed to be winning the war. If one was only concerned with coming out on the winning side, it was a logical, yet disgusting, option.

I was more concerned with making sure that the Tilarkers *were* the winning side. If that meant ingratiating myself to these sorry sacks for now, it was a price I would reluctantly pay.

For the time being, I had a mission to do. That meant I couldn't give away my true motivations. Not even for a striking woman with impossibly tempting eyes.

Persisting past her skepticism, I pushed my hand closer, attempting to give a friendly handshake as was the Urth custom. It was an awkward ritual I never particularly cared for. But at that moment, the appeal of it suddenly clicked for the first time.

She hesitated, finally taking my hand. The instant that our skin touched, something flamed up my arm. It was a peculiar sensation, similar to the time electricity had jolted me when I held two ends of a low-voltage live wire at the same time.

This time, there was no wire. There was nothing where I was standing, nothing that I could inadvertently act as an electrical conduit for. I tore my eyes from her face long enough to check, to no avail.

What was that? She had already pulled her hand out of my grasp, and I felt empty at the loss.

I wanted to see if I could recreate the sensation from before. Carefully, I placed one hand on her shoulder, moving slowly so as not to spook her. Her eyes, big and timid, made me think she scared easily. Like a baby deer.

There it was again, like a fizzy drink bubbling over the cup. Except somehow, the feeling was in my arm itself. Within seconds, it spread clear into my heart. I felt light, almost

overjoyed, for no explainable reason, a strange desire to spread my wings over her, to shelter and protect.

That was all it took for it finally to become clear. I had heard the stories back home, the fairytales of the Supreme Urgency that would lead you to recognize your perfect mate. It was something every young Tilarker had been told, generally sitting at the knee of a parent or trusted elder.

Female Tilarkers were scarce, however. When we became young adults, the fairytale slid away, replaced by the grim reality that most of us would never have a mate like that. There simply weren't enough females to go around. If you were a member of the warrior class, as I was, odds were exceedingly low.

Why would you be given a mate if you were going to die soon, anyway? Mates were for those who stayed home to breed. We were going off to fight. To die. Not to love.

What if those two things were not at odds, the way we had always thought? What if those two things were, in fact, working hand in hand, in a strange twist of unexplainable fate?

I shook my head, trying to clear it for now. The woman was still staring at me, and her expression was changing toward one of apprehensive bewilderment. This was not the best way to make my first impression, perhaps the most important first impression I would ever be called upon to make.

I pulled my hand from her shoulder, a little too hastily, and she flinched at the movement. "Sorry," I apologized. "I guess I'm a friendly person."

"I see that," she mused out loud. Her tone was hard to read, neither biting nor particularly appreciative.

"I'm Veken," I tried again, wincing a second too late when I remembered I had already said that once.

"I'm ... uh, well, I'm Ivy," she offered reluctantly, as though she hated to reveal her name. Were names special in Urth culture? I had never noticed before. "I'm from the Hesperia settlement. They told me to find Boshesh."

Ah. Now I know exactly why she came here. “You’re here to pay the tithe,” I replied knowingly.

She flinched again, instinctively reaching for her middle. “Yes,” she whispered. Her eyes darted around, looking to see if anyone overheard.

“Don’t worry,” I assured her. “I’ll make sure you get straight to Boshesh. No one’s going to mess with me, which means no one’s going to mess with you.”

She sighed a little, looking relieved. Her shoulders relaxed slightly, losing some of the stiff tension which they had been carrying.

“Thank you,” she replied meekly. Her eyes searched her surroundings one last time, scanning. I gave her a minute until she seemed satisfied by whatever she saw.

“Follow me whenever you’re ready,” I offered. She nodded, stiffening her back again as though preparing for a fight.

I turned away from her, beginning our short walk toward Boshesh. It served two purposes as it also hid the little grin that I couldn’t seem to wipe off my face. I didn’t want her to think I was laughing at her, but I couldn’t resist the urge to smile.

As we walked, I turned the name she had provided over in my mind. *Ivy. Ivy.*

It was a pretty name. Almost musical. I liked the way it sounded in my head.

IVY

The Tilarcker walked away, leading the way to Boshesh. I hurried to keep pace with him. He was quite a bit larger than me, and his much longer legs challenged my ability to keep up.

I certainly didn't want to get lost here in the middle of Griffith. Not only did I not know how to locate Boshesh on my own, but I was still afraid of getting robbed.

Veken promised to protect me, and I figured I'd face better odds with him. I wasn't normally a very trusting person but there was a sincerity in his eyes that convinced me to believe him. His protection would only apply, however, if I stuck close by.

He seemed to realize my struggle. Glancing back once to check on me, he immediately began taking half-steps to split the difference in our strides. I appreciated the consideration, even if I had been too timid to make the request myself.

No longer having to rush, I found my mind wandering to wonder just how tall he was, anyway. I compared his body against the door frames we passed to sate my curiosity. Assuming the doors were the standard height of eighty inches, Veken was still a few inches taller than even that — just shy of seven feet, I supposed.

I kept the observation to myself; not sure how receptive he would be to hearing it. He seemed remarkably friendly for a Tilarcker but I wasn't about to push my luck. I just had to get to

Boshesh, pay the tithe and get home. No reason to go looking for trouble.

Veken stopped a few blocks later. I turned to face the buildings on the street, wondering which one Boshesh was in. He tapped me gently on the shoulder.

“Hmm?” I turned expectantly to face him, waiting for my next direction. Even so, it surprised me when he gestured to a small vehicle. “This is our transport,” he explained.

“We have to drive?” I blurted out hastily. Immediately, I could feel myself blush, inwardly regretting my big mouth.

He didn’t seem bothered by my tone. I hadn’t meant to insult him, of course. I just hadn’t expected to have to take a car ride to get there. Just how big was this territory, anyway?

Veken said nothing at first. He just studied me with piercing eyes, and the intensity of his gaze made me squirm. Then he cleared his throat, abruptly shifting to look away.

“I’m a safe driver,” he assured me, misunderstanding my concern. Staring in disbelief at the small car, I was uncertain we would both fit inside. I said nothing. Still a bit embarrassed over my previous outburst, I was unwilling to argue the point.

Instead, I just meekly nodded and scurried to the passenger side with my head bowed. With a few of his over-sized steps, he quickly ate up the distance and opened the door for me. I lifted my head in surprise. Our eyes locked again, the feeling somehow both unsettling and familiar.

Perhaps it was unsettling *because* it was familiar. I had never met this Tilarker before. How come every time I looked into his eyes, some part of me felt like I had known him for a hundred years?

I sat down in the seat, this time being the one to break the moment. He carefully shut the door and strode over to the driver’s side to take his own seat.

My prediction hadn’t been entirely wrong. We barely fit inside. It might have been more accurate to say that Veken barely fit inside. He had to point both of his knees outward at a strange angle to fold his legs into the space provided. His

elbows jutted out in a similar manner, splaying out from the wheel.

Despite my best attempts to shrink myself down, pulling to lean against the door of the car, our bodies always seemed to be in some sort of contact with each other. Whether his knee was inadvertently brushing mine, or his elbow was poking my rib, or his shoulder was brushing mine when he turned to look for oncoming traffic, it was a lot of *touching*.

The weirdest part was realizing that I didn't mind that much. For a Tilarker, I found him remarkably approachable. Besides, he was kind of attractive, even if the thought made me wonder if I was suffering from heat stroke.

We drove in silence for a while. I was still a bit confused why we had to be in the car at all, and even more confused when we seemed to just keep driving. "How big is Griffith?" I asked quietly, finally voicing the question I had thought earlier.

He laughed good-naturedly. "It's big," he admitted. "That's why we have vehicles to get back and forth. It would probably take more than a day to walk to Boshesh. With you, maybe two days."

I felt my cheeks heating up again, realizing that he was politely calling me slow. He wasn't wrong — I had barely kept up with him on the short walk to the car, so the accusation seemed well founded.

For some reason, it bothered me that he had anything negative to say about me. I really wasn't sure why. I had never tried, or cared, to impress a Tilarker before.

I could tell by his tone that he hadn't meant to be disparaging. He seemed to realize his mistake a moment too late, glancing over to examine my expression. "I take it you're not from around here?" he questioned, trying to change the subject.

I shook my head. "No, I'm originally from the Pacific Northwest region. What used to be Oregon."

"Do you like it in Hesperia?" he tried next.

I shrugged. “I mean, these days, it’s just trading one disaster for another, isn’t it? Even if I went back to Oregon, I’m sure it’s not like it was then. I do have fond memories of it before, though.”

I don’t go any deeper than that. I’m referring, of course, to before the Oovarz invasion touched my life. Before all the death, the violence, the fighting of the invasion found us. My early childhood in Oregon was mostly special because it was untouched by those things, but that wasn’t any special quality of Oregon, just that it hadn’t been attacked early on. But in the end, every part of this planet was consumed by war.

Thinking about that any further feels uncomfortable, so instead I circled back to the original question. “Hesperia’s okay. If I run their errands and do their chores, it’s not so bad. I’m mostly just there to do what I’m told, but I guess it could be worse.”

I patted the money pouch taped to my stomach. “This is the first time they had me do the tithe, though. I guess in a way, it’s kind of cool. I got to see L.A., right?”

I tried to sound enthusiastic, but even to my ear, it sounded forced. Veken must have caught it because he flashed me a sympathetic grin.

“Maybe someday you’ll get out of Hesperia and L.A.,” he offered. “Maybe you’ll get the chance to travel for real. There are still nice spots out there, you know.”

I stared silently out the window, wondering why his lie didn’t sound phony like mine. He couldn’t really believe that, could he?

VEKEN

I parked the car and helped Ivy out. Then I led her through the crowd, wishing I could walk slower. Even matching her pace, we were going too fast for my liking. I'd infiltrated his guards for long enough to know that Boshesh was a selfish beast, and I didn't want to know what he had in store for her.

I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye, keeping my head straight. I noticed her golden highlights contrasted with her dark hair. The sun washed over her briefly as we exited the shadows, and her skin glowed beautifully. I shook the unfamiliar thoughts and feelings away and continued leading her to him.

The city was bustling at this time of day. I kept a strong grip on her as we weaved through the crowd, bumping shoulders with other residents. An electric shock passed through my hand each time I tightened my grip. My heart raced when she was bumped by a resident and almost fell out of my grasp.

We arrived at the Griffith Observatory. What was once a planetarium, museum and noted park was now a meeting place for the highest ranking Oovarz monsters. The dome sat high on top of beaming white columns, and the pond out front lay still with glistening water. It was good to know at least they were taking care of something under their brutal rule.

I cleared my throat and asked the guards to open the door. They stood tall before me, giant bulking monsters with smirks on their faces. They revelled at taking any chance they could get to make someone uncomfortable.

The brutes swung the doors open, and we entered the glamorous building. I tried to slow my pace, stalling on taking her further, but one guard followed us. I felt him eye us closely as I escorted Ivy deeper into the luxurious lair.

I felt Ivy stiffen next to me in anticipation of meeting Boshesh. I wish I could warn her of his nature but doing so would only alert the guards. Besides, I wasn't sure it would do any good.

As we entered Boshesh's grand hall, I marveled at how quickly I had bonded to this human. It really was just like the stories had always said, even if we had assumed they were lying. I had met her an hour ago but she spurred a sensation in my chest I had never felt.

We strolled down the grand hall, and I looked up and locked eyes with Boshesh. He was a dreadful thing, with three horns protruding from his forehead and dark eyes as barren as the desert, the epitome of the ruling class of the Oovarzs, the intelligent gleam in his eyes a stark contrast to the bloodlust of the berserkers who roamed outside the cities, wreaking havoc in their path.

He leaned forward with a wide grin, exposing his triangular teeth and the gaps between them. I wanted to grimace.

He had five guards stationed around him. I looked at their disgusting green skin, wrinkled and dry from the lack of sunlight. They tended to dwell in the shadows, appropriate for matching their dark nature.

"Veken," Boshesh drew out my name in a low grumble. "What is this present you bring me?"

Present, a word that made my blood boil. She was not a gift, or an offering of any sort. She was here to deliver her tithe, not be auctioned off at a flea market.

"I wish to deliver my tithe," Ivy said confidently.

I grasped her arm tightly and leaned in. "Don't say another word," I commanded.

“No.” Boshesh waved a hand, dismissing my statement. “Please, Veken, let the woman speak.”

I noticed a hunger in his eyes and swore I could feel my heart constrict. I let go of her arm begrudgingly and folded my hands behind my back.

Ivy lifted the edge of her shirt and peeled the tape off her skin. She then held up the bag of money, walking toward Boshesh. “My city wishes to pay you,” she said with her head held high. “This is my only reason for coming here.”

Boshesh and his guards laughed as he leaned forward, clasping his hand over her own which still held the bag. “I’ll be the judge of why you came here, girl.”

The Oovarz had been known to take humans for their personal pleasure before. Rumors had it, they would use them as enslaved people, cooks or even sexualpartners for a short period before sending them to the underground factories to meet the ends of their lives.

I knew of a woman once who came to pay her tithe; she couldn’t have been over thirty. Because of the Oovarz’s poor treatment, she died in a year at the manufacturing plants, with whip marks on her back and a bruised eye.

Everything inside of me screamed, urging me forward. I thought about what it would feel like to slash his neck with my knife and watch his evil blood spill onto the carpet of this fabricated resort. My hand almost instinctively reached for my knife before I caught one of his guards eyeing me suspiciously.

“What does your judgment say about why I’m here?” Ivy asked, her voice trembling slightly.

Boshesh leaned back in his oversized seat. “Hmm,” he murmured while tapping his chin. He glanced at one of his protectors before looking back at her. “I think we should play a game.”

“She must return to her people,” I said, surprised at my reaction.

Boshesh glared at me. “Who are you to tell me where she must go?”

“I don’t want to raise suspicion among the humans as to why a core part of their network has gone missing,” I responded, hoping he didn’t see through my excuse. “If paying the tithe does not offer safety, they will rebel again.”

“While you have a point,” Boshesh started, looking at Ivy and moving his eyes over her body. “I think I have something better in mind.”

My heart stopped. I thought of Ivy working in the underground factories, starved and beaten throughout her short days. I wondered if she would ever see sunlight again if he put his hands on her. I thought of any words I could say which wouldn’t raise suspicion, anything which could convince Boshesh otherwise. But my mind was blank with worry.

“No,” Ivy refused firmly.

Boshesh and his guards laughed again. He stood and approached her, stomping his way over the carpet. He grabbed her by the chin and stared deeply into her eyes. “Yes,” he muttered with a smile.

IVY

I tried to shake my chin from the monster's grasp but he only held it tighter. I caught a scent of body odor and mold from him, along with his rancid breath. I tried to hold my breath to lessen the scent, but it flowed through my senses like strong alcohol.

I heard Veken try to defend me but couldn't make out his words. My mind had gone blank from the darkness in the beast's eyes. I glanced at the guards, who were smirking as if they knew my fate.

Boshesh released me from his grip, and I staggered backward. He dropped the money bag into one of the guard's hands and sat on his chair. I breathed heavily, clutching my throat. Veken reached for my arm before Boshesh stopped him.

"You've done enough," the beast commanded, throwing up a hand. "You can leave now, Veken."

"Where will she go?" Veken asked with quickness.

Boshesh looked at him as though Veken had grown another head, the monster's eyes wide with confusion. The guards circled Veken intimidatingly, and I walked to Boshesh.

"He's fine," I said firmly. "He's just curious." I looked back at Veken before turning to Boshesh. "He — " I stammered to find my words. "Needs to report my location to my family."

"Your family?" Boshesh asked slyly.

“Yes,” I said firmly, hiding my panic. “They need to know how long I’ll be away because...” I paused, thinking of something that might strike some emotion in that brute. “My mother is sick.”

“Ah,” Boshesh said, his face falling to concern. He looked at the ground. “I see.”

After a moment of silence and what felt like years of feeling my rapid heartbeat, Boshesh laughed along with the guards as he stood and approached me.

“Clever story,” he said with a low grumble. “But not clever enough.”

“Please,” I begged with wide eyes. “Let me return to Hesperia. I can bring you more money, even food, whatever you need.”

Boshesh chuckled. “Hesperia has plenty of residents; why would they need you?”

“I’m a servant,” I said pitifully. “They need me to keep things running smoothly. I assist in the kitchens and at parties. I have a purpose there, I — ”

“Servant?” Boshesh asked, cutting me off.

“Yes,” I responded, a lump forming in my throat as I wondered what I had just implied.

Boshesh glanced at his guards with a smirk. “We could use another servant around here, couldn’t we, boys?”

The guards murmured in agreement, their growling, raspy voices stinging my ears. My hands shook as I held them up, clasping my fingers together.

“Please,” I said in a low tone. “I will give you anything if you let me go back.”

The brute swiftly grabbed my arm, and I shrieked in fear. He glared at me, and I heard Veken struggling behind me.

“You’ll give me anything, anyway,” Boshesh growled, showing his sharp teeth and blasting his hot breath on my face.

Boshesh looked to the guards and Veken. He waved his hand in dismissal while grasping my shoulder with the other.

“Get him out of here,” Boshesh commanded, turning me to walk through one of the doors on either side of the throne.

“No!” Veken exclaimed as the guards ushered him out.

I glanced back at Veken, struggling to break free of the guards. I wondered why he was so upset about me being taken. Did he know something I didn't?

As I was dragged through the long, dark hallway, I thought of the word I had uttered: servant. A servant could be many things. A waitress, bartender, maid or even a prisoner. Though I was praying they would use me for the first three options, the sinking feeling in my gut told me I was here for more than my typical activities.

Boshesh opened another door, leading to a small room with wooden walls and a red carpet. He threw me in, and my body slammed into the ground. I groaned and rolled over as I locked eyes with him.

Boshesh lifted his chin toward an armoire in the corner. “Take off your clothes,” he commanded with a grin.

“What?” I exclaimed, appalled. There had to be some rules in this tyranny, some sort of morals, even if these beasts were nothing but primal predators.

“Take off your clothes,” Boshesh snarled, stomping closer.

I lay on the floor with my mouth gaping, astonished at my circumstances. Boshesh knelt before me and traced his fingertips lightly down my neck.

“Don't make me force you,” he whispered.

I cringed at his breath and tried to crawl away. He grabbed my legs and flipped me over, pinning me on my back.

“You're a feisty one,” he chuckled. “You'll learn your manners.”

I stopped resisting. He let go of my arms and stood, facing the door. My heart rate spiked, and my breathing was heavy as

I watched him turn to face me again.

“Be ready in fifteen minutes,” he said with a smirk.

His eyes trailed over my body as if he could see through my clothes. He had a feral aura swirling around him as he moaned lightly, staring at my breasts.

With one last chuckle, he swung the door open and stepped outside. I heard a lock click, and I ran to the door, pounding my fists on the wood.

“Let me out!” I screamed repetitively.

My hands became raw from slamming them on the door, and I felt my vocal cords twinge from the screaming. I slid to the floor against the door and glanced at the armoire.

I would typically have thought it was a beautiful piece of furniture. Now, in this room, it seemed like a coffin which held my dignity’s final resting place. I closed my eyes, and a tear snuck down my cheek. Wiping it off quickly, I stood and walked to the armoire, undressing.

My bare body was hit with the cold chill of the room, and I shivered. I couldn’t be sure whether the tremble was from the air or the beasts I was about to face. What I was sure of was that I had no other choice.

VEKEN

I watched powerlessly as Ivy glanced at me over her shoulder, being ushered deeper into the observatory. I twisted my arms in the guard's hands and shouted to no avail. One guard twisted my arm purposefully, causing me to fall to the floor.

“That’s enough,” the creature bellowed.

I glanced at the door, but it was too late to see Ivy again. He had taken her, and there was nothing more I could do. I begrudgingly let the guards usher me out of the conservatory, thinking of anything I could have said to stop her from that fate.

Outside, I was thrown on the ground forcefully, my head hitting the stone steps. I grunted and rubbed my head, closing my eyes in an attempt to block out the pain.

“You should have left when you were told to.”

When I gathered myself to peer at the guards, they were closing the observatory doors. Two remained outside, staring straight ahead as they took their posts. I stood and glared at them before walking away from the building.

I reached the parking lot, about half a mile from the observatory when a twinge echoed throughout my chest. It was a driving force I hadn't felt before, a sure instinct that I needed to go back and get Ivy.

I turned to stare at the building, scanning for guards. The two out front of the building and four others were placed alongside the main walkway. Hedges stood tall behind the walkway, blocking the observatory from other paths.

The Oovarz had made tight security around that place. There used to be trails leading in and out everywhere, taking visitors from the main building throughout the park. Now, the hedges had grown tall, and I assumed there was some second line of defense behind them.

Curious to discover if I was right, I walked around to the side of the hedges. Darting quickly, I hoped the guards wouldn't notice.

"Dammit," I muttered.

I was met with barbed wire and iron fences. The barriers only fueled me to continue my mission to break into the observatory. From the other times I had delivered humans to Boshesh, I was aware of his quarters for parties and entertaining in the back of the building. Most of the guards also took residence here, especially those high on his priority list.

I walked around the hedges, moving slowly and being careful where I stepped. One wrong noise, and they wouldn't hesitate to execute me; they might even think I would make a good dinner.

There was a broken part of the barbed wire but it was too high on the hedge to scale. Plus, it was in front of the front door, and the guards would have surely seen me trying to enter from that direction.

As I continued around the building, I wondered how prominent that place must have been. I had only ever been in the grand hall but never had the pleasure, or curse, of going deeper.

"There has to be a way."

The back of the building had more security. Barbed wire had turned into iron bars, placed close together to keep out intruders like me. I clicked my tongue and shook my head as I walked further along the wall.

My saving grace was a part of the iron wall that seemed soaked in acid. Someone must have once had the same idea as

me. I wondered if the guards caught them before they managed to enter, as the hedges behind it looked undisturbed.

More importantly, I wondered why the wall hadn't been repaired. My paranoia spiked, and I glanced around for any cameras watching that weak point. If they were smart, they would have some positioned facing in that direction.

I saw none, however, and I remembered the Oovarz weren't all that intelligent. Perhaps it was not a trick, and they were simply careless.

I knelt and peered through the shrub, moving my hands slowly. I saw a small fountain, perfect for covering any noise I made, and a back door with one guard standing before it. The rest of the courtyard was filled with decaying flowers and brown shrubbery. I rolled my eyes; it was just like the Oovarz to keep up appearances in front but let everything die behind closed doors.

I thought of what I would do when I entered the building. I knew I wouldn't hesitate to kill that brute before anything happened to Ivy. She was a helpful part of her community, intelligent, brave, and confusingly attractive to me.

There was more than just her looks. There was the guilt from promising to keep her safe and failing. Beyond that, it was how she carried herself, how she spoke to Boshesh, and the look she gave me when they dragged her away. She wanted my help; she *needed* my help.

I waited for the guard to turn and walk in the other direction before breaking from the shrub and hiding behind the fountain. The brute didn't hear me and kept walking toward the side of the building.

With the door unattended, I took a deep breath and made a break for it, scampering over the lawn as lightly as possible. I reached the door and opened it slowly, checking for any potential witnesses inside.

The hallway was empty. I stepped in and closed the door slowly behind me, listening for any chatter that could lead me to the main rooms of the living quarters.

Luckily, I heard Boshesh laugh from my right-hand side. The laugh sounded as if it came from behind a wall, making me feel secure in continuing in that direction.

I walked up a staircase, scaled quietly over the landing, and walked down the other side. I heard multiple laughs coming from the direction of Boshesh's laughter and walked toward them. Metal began clanking, approaching my location, and I glanced around nervously.

I darted behind a large vase holding a dead plant and crouched as I held my breath. The monster passed, and I glanced at the archway from which he exited. I saw a chandelier and a dining room chair sticking out at the entrance. They were getting ready for a nightly feast, and I had a sinking feeling about who their waitress would be.

IVY

I exited the small wooden room, covering my breasts and pussy with my hands. The amount of shame that overtook me was unbearable as a guard met me outside the door.

Scanning over my body, he grinned and asked me to follow him. I heard his words and followed him as requested, but my mind was far away from that moment. Anything I could do to take myself out of that body was necessary to cope with the shame I faced.

I was led to the kitchen, where I saw two human women working. They were nude, cooking and preparing food as if they were wearing regular clothing. They seemed to be confident in their own skin or just used to this shameful existence.

The guard grunted and left the room, leaving me with the women. I locked eyes with one of them, who walked around the island counter and took one of my hands.

“You get used to it,” she said with sadness.

The other glanced at me with the same expression. I slowly uncovered my breasts and walked toward the counter, surveying their dinner plans.

“Venison and beef stew,” one woman said glumly.

“Sounds like a lot of protein,” I chimed in, feeling the stove’s heat on my breasts.

“That’s what they like,” the first woman responded.

“What am I supposed to do here?” I asked cautiously.

“Cook, walk around, serve dinner, clean the plates, and most importantly...” She looked me up and down. “Look pretty.”

I nodded and sighed. “What can I do to help?”

The woman passed me a cutting board and carrots for the stew. I began cutting slowly, thinking of Veken. I wondered where he was, if the guards had somehow hurt him, and if I would ever see him again.

I couldn't explain it but there was some unexpected connection there. When he looked at me as the guards dragged him out of the observatory, his face was infused with panic. Something told me our story wasn't over yet, but I chalked it up to wanting to create a beautiful fantasy in my head, a way to escape my current situation.

I listened to the Oovarz gather in the dining room and tried to eavesdrop on their conversation. If I heard enough, maybe one of them would spit out a time of a shift change or a secret exit somewhere in the observatory. I had to find a way to escape those wretched circumstances.

The women began making noise in the kitchen as they grabbed plates from a cupboard above them. I whipped around and tapped on the counter, grabbing their attention. I placed my finger to my lips, motioning for them to keep silent.

One of them rolled her eyes. “Honey, you're not going to hear anything,” she said in a gloomy tone. “I've tried for years.”

“Years?” I asked, shocked.

“Four years now,” she responded as she effortlessly placed venison on the plates. “They got me when I was twenty and hadn't let me go since.”

“Why have they kept you...” I paused, my words drifting off as I realized how my sentence was going to end.

“Alive?” she asked with a smirk. “Watch and learn.”

She took two full plates to the dining room. I grabbed two more, following her.

“Jappa,” she said, winking at one of the Oovarz. “You’ve been working out.”

The brute grabbed her ass and pulled her in close. I watched as she tried to steady the plates and laughed at his advances. I cautiously set a plate in front of another dinner member, watching her closely.

“Lana, you’re looking exquisite tonight,” Boshesh said, taking his seat at the head of the table.

Lana broke from Jappa’s grasp. She handed Jappa one plate, then began making her way to Boshesh. She approached him, placing the food in front of him on the table.

As she did, she whispered something in his ear, making him moan slightly. Lana pulled away and walked into the kitchen, with me trailing behind.

“You like that shit?” I asked with fury.

“Of course not,” she snapped at me. “But it’s what we have to do.” She picked up another two plates while the other woman filled bowls with the stew. “Do you want to be sent to the factory?”

“Factory?” I asked as I picked up two more plates.

She didn’t answer me. Instead, she put on another smile and walked into the dining room. I watched her breasts dangle slightly from her chest as she placed the plates before two more guests. They watched her intently, eyeing her clit barely poking out from her lips as she served them.

The only one looking at me was Boshesh. He seemed almost disinterested in Lana, even after whatever words she had whispered in her ear. He motioned for me to come closer to him.

I placed my servings down and approached him with my hands behind my back. I forced myself to smile.

“What can I do for you?” I asked, hoping he didn’t sense my snarky undertone.

“Bring me a fork,” he said, his eyes stuck on my breasts.

I glanced at his place setting, noticing he already had two. I grinned anyway and walked to the kitchen, rolling my eyes. Anything he could do to assert his power over me seemed like fair game. Speaking of a game, I knew all I was to him was a nude pawn.

I entered the kitchen and locked eyes with Lana as she walked to the dining room. “What are the factories?” I asked frantically.

“Forging metal, mining coal, you name it. You don’t *get* food or shelter down there, and you sleep in the caves and starve until you’re discarded, executed or die of malnourishment.”

The severity in her eyes scared me. “What makes them send someone to the factories?” I asked nervously.

“When someone asks too many questions,” she snarled, pushing past me with bowls of stew.

I grabbed a fork from the drawer and walked to the room before stopping and glancing at myself. I was showing these monsters my most vulnerable parts. I hated that I had to act like I *wanted* their eyes to peruse my intimate parts.

Staring at the entrance to the dining room, I brushed my fingers over my nipples to harden them and put on a smile. Boshesh would have his fork, and my false gratitude, until I found a way out of that prison.

VEKEN

I snuck around the large potted plant to the dining room wall, peering in slightly. I saw eight men seated around the dining room table, with Boshesh at the head. An attractive blonde woman brought out their food as one of the monsters grabbed her and she laughed.

Ivy walked out of the kitchen next, watching the woman intently. My mouth dropped at the sight of her body. Her breasts were beautiful and perky, with tiny nipples that I imagined would harden under my touch.

Ivy and the woman retreated to the kitchen. I watched Ivy's butt jiggle as she walked, swaying her hips slightly. As my imagination took flight, I held myself back from growing harder in my pants, my wings quivering at my back.

I thought of what I wouldn't have given to throw the plates off that table and bend her over it at that very moment. I could imagine her smooth skin under my hands as I grasped her hips, moving her body slowly onto mine as she moaned.

I imagined making the Oovarz watch the scene and boil with jealousy as I took her for my own, hoping she wanted me just as much. My mind wandered to other scenarios. Pushing her up against a wall, her coming onto me in the kitchen, and the list went on.

My fantasies were broken by Ivy and the woman returning to the room. One of the Oovarz glanced in my direction, and I quickly hid against the wall, holding my breath. I listened for any sign of recognition and heard none. I exhaled slowly. I

needed to find a way to get to Ivy, preferably through the kitchen.

I walked around the walls lining the dining room and found no door. I continued along the hallway until I heard armor clattering behind me.

I darted into a room on the left, which turned out to be a broom closet. I shut the door and held my breath again, watching through the slits in the door as an armored guard walked by, mumbling something about venison.

I waited and listened. I could hear the Oovarz in the dining room talking about their successful day and my name was mentioned. They laughed, proceeding to tell the story of my efforts to rescue Ivy and my chest burned at their words. I took a deep breath and quieted my mind before cracking open the door slightly and continuing down the hallway.

I heard the guard that passed me round a corner. Sighing in relief, I examined each door along the hallway until I came to an open arch in the wall. I heard women's voices speaking quietly behind it and the sounds of utensils clinking on plates.

I waited at the side of the arch entrance, unseen, as one woman walked out. I quickly grabbed her and put my hand over her mouth.

"Don't worry, don't worry," I repeated as she struggled slightly. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm looking for someone," I whispered. "Don't scream, okay?"

The woman stopped struggling and nodded her head. I turned her around and saw those dark blue eyes I had been thinking about all day. It was Ivy.

"Veken!" she exclaimed, throwing herself into my arms.

I staggered back, surprised at her reaction. I didn't mind it, of course, but there was still the matter of her being naked. As I debated the most appropriate thing to do with my hands, I heard the guard's clinking armor return from around the corner.

"Shit," I said, pushing her off me and grabbing her arm. "Come with me."

I led her to the broom closet quickly and shut us inside.

“Veken, I — ” she began

“Shh,” I commanded, putting my hand over her mouth.

We held our breath as our bodies pushed together in the closet. The sound of armor clanking drew closer until he finally stopped in front of the closet. I watched through the slits of the door and thought of which move he would make first in his attack so that I could counter it.

He grunted and walked off. I felt my muscles relax as I looked at Ivy. Her eyes were wide, and the locks of her brown hair were tangled in my fingers over her mouth.

“Whisper, okay?” I requested quietly. She nodded. I dropped my hand from her face, my fingers accidentally brushing her breasts. “Shit,” I whispered. “I’m sorry.”

“No,” she said with hope in her eyes.

She leaned into me and wrapped her arms around my neck. I felt her warm naked body against my armor and the fantasy re-entered my mind. I tried to push it out as I wrapped my hands around her back.

Her skin was as soft and smooth as I imagined it to be. Her hips pressed against mine as she leaned further into me. I staggered back slightly and tried to steady myself, which only threw her back against the wall on the other side of the closet.

“Uh,” I said with a chuckle. “Guess I’m not on my game today.”

She chuckled with me, her breasts shaking slightly with each laugh. I embraced her tightly, putting my hand on the back of her head and pressing it gently against my chest.

“Veken,” she said with urgency, pulling back and looking into my eyes. “Please get me out of here.”

“I don’t know if I can,” I responded regretfully.

“Please,” she pleaded. “This.” She glanced at her naked body. “Is humiliating. I can’t believe *you’re* seeing me like

this, let alone *them*.” She motioned to the direction of the dining room.

“I don’t know the passages of the observatory,” I said quietly. “I only got in here because I got lucky with a guard leaving his post.”

“So we find out which guard it was and follow him to his posts, hoping he messes up again!” she exclaimed, her agitation rising.

“I can try,” I stated.

The guard began walking by again. I pressed Ivy harder against the wall and covered her mouth as she gasped.

IVY

Once the sound of armor clanking vanished further down the hall, he released his hand from my face. Our eyes locked and intensity flowed through me. He glanced through the shuttered door, pulling away from me slightly. I felt the cold air of the observatory hit my bare skin.

“Come on,” he said, taking my hand.

He opened the closet door. We dashed down the hall, taking a sharp right turn away from the dining room. We wound up next to a library with books stacked to the ceiling. Something told me this wasn't a collection of books that the Oovarz had brought, but some the previous tenant had left behind.

“Here,” I whispered, pulling him into the library. “Maybe we can find something about the architecture of the building, another way out.”

“I'll watch, you search,” he whispered, letting go of my hand.

I ran into the library and scanned the various subjects by dividing the books. Fiction, non-fiction, romance, children's books and mystery novels disappointed me. Last, I tried the history section.

I ran my fingertip over the spines of the books and squinted, reading the titles carefully. I heard chatter in the distance and whirled around to see Veken walking toward me.

“We need to hide,” he said firmly, grasping my arm.

“Where?” I asked frantically, turning to the books.

We heard the Oovarz voices echo in the hallway. “She won’t last long,” one said with a chuckle.

They were almost at the door to the library. Veken led me to a nearby table and pushed me under it, lying beside me and holding his breath.

I glanced at the door. A couch was blocking most, but not all, of the view from us. If the Oovarz lifted their heads slightly, they would see us in a second. I put my head on the floor and looked at the table, noticing the scratches on the bottom.

I heard their footsteps reach the door as I tried to distract myself with the etchings. Some were inappropriate words, probably scribbled by children when they visited the observatory; others were hearts with initials inscribed.

The guards entered the library, speaking of the dinner and their plans for the rest of the night. I glanced at Veken, who had closed his eyes tightly in anticipation of being found.

The guards made their way around the table and walked toward the window. Veken tugged on my arm and motioned to the door. I looked at him with wide eyes and shook my head. He nodded and pointed to the library entrance, pursing his lips.

I rolled my eyes and began crawling from under the table. Glancing at the beasts standing by the window, I saw they were only staring out into the dead gardens. We crept out slowly and hastily fast-walked out of the library, making another right turn down the hallway.

We continued to make a series of aimless turns without direction. I figured Veken had no idea where he was taking me. I pulled my hand from his and froze.

“What are you doing?” he asked quickly.

“You have no idea where we’re going,” I accused, folding my arms.

“No, I don’t,” he agreed, glancing around. “But it’s better than staying still. Come on!”

I rolled my eyes and retook his hand as we entered a narrow hallway. We ran down it, my breathing beginning to grow heavy.

We pushed through two double doors to find a vast, dark room with a dome ceiling. I looked around at the rows of seats lining the strange auditorium. Veken walked to the center of the room, putting his hands on his hips.

“This must be the observatory,” he said, looking at the ceiling.

“It’s huge,” I commented, walking along the wall.

We heard more guards approaching. Veken grabbed my hand, leading me around the corner into a control room. We crouched beneath the panels and watched as a guard poked his head into the room and left promptly.

“They patrol this place pretty thoroughly,” I said nervously.

“Don’t worry,” Veken said gently as he leaned against the panel. “We’ll find a way out.”

Veken’s shoulder pressed a button, and the room lit up. I looked out the control room window to see the dome filling with beautiful images of shooting stars and swirling planets.

“Turn it off!” I said urgently.

Veken pressed the button again, and the dome images switched to ones of various galaxies on display.

“Veken!” I whispered angrily.

“I don’t know how to turn it off!” he said, desperately pressing buttons.

I leaned against the panel and sighed. “Look, they just checked the room and probably can’t see any of the light from the hallway because of the sharp right turn into here.” I paused, thinking it over.

“And there’s no sound, so I don’t think it would alert them,” I mused. “Just leave it,” I said, exhaustedly running my hand through my hair.

Veken sat next to me and glanced at the wall. I looked at him through my peripheral vision and admired his physique: biceps that barely fit into his tight black shirt and a sharp jawline that could kill.

My mind swirled with thoughts of his being. As far as I knew, he was an alien that looked like a demon and acted like an empathetic human. I wondered how those three things could exist in the same body.

“Well,” he said, nudging my shoulder. “Should we at least go watch the show?”

I chuckled and stood, looking at the planets on the dome. “Sure,” I said, exiting the control room.

We lay in the middle of the observatory and watched the images projecting, pointing at the shooting stars and planets and chuckling. I turned my head to the side to catch him staring at me.

“Look,” I said, holding my hand out for his. He took it, and I felt his warmth shoot through me. “I’ll do whatever you want if you get me out of here.”

“Anything?” he asked slyly. My heart leaped, looking at his gorgeous face.

“Anything,” I whispered, lost in his golden eyes.

His lips parted slightly as he propped himself on his elbow and leaned in to kiss me. I felt his soft lips press against mine and placed my hand on the back of his head, pulling him in for more.

IVY

I tasted his breath on mine, and a rush overcame me. He paused and lifted his head from mine, staring deep into my eyes. I felt my body warm under his chest, and his tactical vest scratched slightly against my skin.

He wrapped his arm around the arch of my back and pulled me closer. I opened my legs slightly, and he slid his hips between my thighs. He leaned in slowly and kissed me lightly. I pulled his head down hard, locking lips with him as I felt his muscles tense on top of my body.

I reached my hands around his sides and unclipped his vest, my fingers brushing at the base of his wings. He leaned on his knees and slid it over his head, rushing to take off his undershirt.

I marveled at his abs as he slid his shirt over his head, sliding the fabric around his wings with ease born of long practice. They were perfectly contoured with deep lines running across his waist. I ran my fingers over them lightly as he traced his fingertips over my hip bones, causing me to shudder.

Veken grinned and traced his fingertips over the same spot, watching my skin twitch. I felt my way from his abs to his large pecs as he placed his hand over mine. I noticed he had a spur on the back of his wrist as he pressed his hand hard onto mine.

I glanced at his left shoulder and saw a tattoo swirling around his bicep. He looked at it and smiled.

“Initiation into the legion,” he offered.

“What legion?” I asked, tracing my fingertips over the black ink.

“The Gunners,” he said, glancing at me. “Oovarz’s personal hitmen.”

“Working with the enemy?” I asked with a smirk.

He glanced at my lips and bit his own, a primal stare emoting from his eyes. “There’s a reason. But do you *really* want to talk right now?”

“No,” I said breathlessly, reaching for his face and pulling him in for a kiss.

His hands traveled up my waist to my breasts, squeezing them lightly. I ran my nails down his back, scratching slightly as I pulled him harder.

He took his finger and ran it along my neck, pushing my head to the side. He craned down and kissed my neck softly, biting slightly at my skin. I moaned and squeezed my thighs around his legs.

Leaning up, he placed his hand on my chest, touching my collarbones. He put light pressure on my chest, almost reaching my neck. I smiled and reached for his belt, undoing it and sliding it off his hips.

He used his other hand to unbutton and take off his pants. Sliding them down his thighs, I glanced at his cock protruding from his boxers. It was hard as a rock and standing straight.

He slid off his boxers hastily, and I opened my mouth in shock. He was much bigger than I imagined in the closet, his cock thick and long enough to make me gag if I put it in my throat.

Running his hand up my thigh slowly, he pressed on my chest harder. Something about the pressure made me exhale calmly as if his touch could soothe all my senses.

His hand traveled to my mound, and he ran his fingertips lightly over my pussy. I felt myself throb under his teasing. I

glanced at him and watched him grin as he parted my lips and spit onto my pussy, rubbing his saliva over my clit.

I moaned. He covered my mouth with his hand as he placed his dick on my clit, rubbing it in circles. My eyes rolled back in my head as I grasped his biceps hard.

A noise came from outside the door, and we both jolted. Veken stood and grabbed our clothes. Then he took my hand, rushing us back to the booth. We waited in silence behind the closed door, listening for a guard approaching.

A moment passed, and the noise moved away from the auditorium. We looked at each other and grabbed each other hard.

He picked me up and put me on the control panel, avoiding any buttons that might be pressed. He spread my legs and shoved himself between my hips, placing his hand on the back of my neck and kissing me hard.

He rubbed his dick on my vagina again, stimulating me. Then he put his finger on my bottom lip, dragging it down my chin as I moaned, looking at him with wide eyes.

“Ready?” he asked in a low whisper.

I couldn't respond; I was breathless. I only nodded in response.

He slowly moved his cock into me, and I felt myself stretch around his girth. He pulled out slightly and pushed inside me again, this time deeper and harder.

I felt him hit my g-spot, moving his cock in circles as I grasped his back, wrapping my elbow around his neck. He held my hips and moved them slowly onto him, thrusting in as deep as he could. I swore I could feel his cock extending deeper than I thought I could stretch.

I let out a loud moan, and he held his hand over my mouth again, breathing heavily as he stared me down.

“We're going to have to get better at that,” he said with a grin.

Again, I couldn't respond. The pleasure was unlike any I had ever felt before. My whole body vibrated, and I felt like I had left the world for a second as I rolled into oblivion.

Another noise came from the hallway, and I looked at the door as he kept his hand over my mouth. I looked at him with wide eyes.

"Fuck it," he said in a husky voice, thrusting into me.

I smiled under his grasp as I let myself fall into the pleasure again. Part of me wanted to get caught. To have the Oovarz see another man pleasuring me, taking me as his own, so they knew I wasn't theirs.

He played with my clit lightly as he continued thrusting. I tried to hold back a moan as I climaxed, but it came out anyway. Quickening his pace, he breathed heavily as I felt him grow inside of me.

Throwing his head back, he held back a moan as I felt him burst inside of me. His warm cum filled me up and made my pussy throb even harder. I almost wanted more, not just of the sex, but of him filling me up.

He took his hand off my mouth. We locked eyes as I felt him expand inside me slightly again. I gasped each time I felt his cock throb as I watched something flicker across his gold eyes. Intrigue, desire, or something else?

VEKEN

Her eyes reminded me of an ocean I saw once, where the sand drops off, and the water gets deep. They caught me in their tide for a moment before I realized I was staring at her blankly while still inside of her.

I chuckled bashfully as I slid out of her, my lips parting as I felt the cold air brush against the tip of my hard cock. She laughed and slid off the control panel, closing her legs.

I couldn't take my eyes off her. The way she dug her fingernails into my back and kissed me had my heart skipping beats. I felt it palpitate in my chest as I watched her turn to look out of the control panel window at the auditorium.

I couldn't let anything happen to her. The Oovarz couldn't have her. No one else would ever have her. I wanted her all to myself, to learn more about what made her tick, to feel her lips on mine, to understand who she was.

"We're getting out of here," I said firmly, shoving my emotions into my chest.

"Really?" she asked excitedly, spinning around.

I nodded. "We're going to need a few things, though."

"What?" she asked, watching me slide on my pants.

"Hemlock and bleeding heart."

"Bleeding heart?" she asked with a smile.

"It's a plant," I responded, sliding on my shirt. "Both of them are, but the gardens here are dead."

“But this place is a museum,” Ivy chimed in. “There has to be a place to find them.”

I shook my head. “No, they’re poisonous to the Oovarz, and they would have burned down the plants if they found them, I’m sure.”

Ivy leaned on the panel and stared at the wall. I slid on my tactical vest and buckled the sides, glancing at her admiringly.

“What about typical foods? Things that they wouldn’t think of that might be poisonous to them?” she asked curiously.

I paused and stared at her, wracking my brain for options. “There’s always a hot pepper.”

“Hot peppers?” she asked, shocked at my answer.

I nodded. “Oovarz can’t ingest them,” I stated, winding my belt through my pants. “Their throats swell because of the spice.”

“Oh, shit,” Ivy said, running her fingers through her hair. “They’re going to wonder where I am; I’m supposed to be serving dinner.”

“Go,” I said firmly. “Find peppers if you can, and I’ll wait in the broom closet. Bring them to me, and I’ll tell you what to do.”

She nodded and left the control room, exiting the auditorium. With my hands on my hips, I sighed and looked at the ceiling. I could get executed for this plan. I shook my head, realizing that girl would drive me wild.

I waited in the broom closet quietly as I waited for her return. I heard the women in the kitchen ask her where she was. Ivy impressively began fake crying, telling the women she got scared.

Luckily, the women seemed empathetic and covered for her with the Oovarz. It had been about half an hour, and they would wrap dinner up soon. My leg began to shake from standing still for so long before I shifted to stop it, trying to regain my focus.

Footsteps landed outside the door, and I held my breath. It opened quickly before me. Ivy slid in, holding three small, shriveled red peppers. I took them from her and split them with the talons on my fingers.

“Hold out your hands,” I said calmly.

She cupped her hands as I sliced the peppers into minuscule pieces. “Put these...” I paused, concentrating. “In their dessert wine.”

“Won’t they taste it?” she asked. “Dessert wine is always —”

“Sweet, yes,” I interrupted, chopping the last pepper. “But their throats will be swollen by the time they taste the spice.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, clasping her hands over the peppers.

“Yes,” I stated, staring seriously into her eyes.

I motioned toward the door with my chin. She walked out as I followed behind her. As I rounded the corner to peer into the dining room, she walked back toward the kitchen.

I noticed the two other women servants and prayed they wouldn’t hold Ivy from our plan. Judging by how they defended her earlier, I assumed they wanted out just as much as she did.

I watched one woman enter the room carrying a platter of filled wine glasses. Another followed with a similar platter, then Ivy with a large goblet.

The first two women set the glasses before each beast, smiling and laughing at their misogynistic jokes and creepy stares. I had to hand it to them; they were great actors, which was not surprising given that their lives depended on it.

Ivy brought the goblet to Boshesh, who pulled her in by her hip onto his lap. I saw a flicker of fear rush through her face, which she quickly covered with a smile as she cautiously weaved her arm around his neck.

I waited for them to make a toast and drink the wine, but they continued talking about warfare and the places they had

dominated. They were planning to build multiple bases in each quarter of the town, and I swore I had never heard anything more useless.

Ivy locked eyes with me briefly before looking away, careful not to blow my cover. Boshesh trailed his gnarly fingers up and down her back, and I watched her shudder.

I thought of how she shuddered under my touch; it was different from the one I had just seen. When she was with me, she shivered because of excitement, craving and pleasure, not fear.

I vowed she would never shudder in fear again as rage boiled in my chest. That scene was disgusting. I wanted nothing more than to race into the dining room and slash their throats one by one, making Boshesh watch as his trusted men died in front of him.

A part of me almost took the chance until I saw Ivy stand and make her way back to the kitchen. Boshesh called out her name, and she turned around cautiously. I furrowed my brow, wondering what he needed to tell her.

IVY

“Dance for us,” Boshesh said with a grin.

I quickly turned my distaste into a smile and winked at Boshesh. “Maybe after dessert,” I said playfully.

“No,” Boshesh said as he stood, his face falling serious. “You’ll do it now, and the other women can bring the dessert.”

I sauntered to his seat at the head of the table and glanced at Veken hiding behind the wall. Everything inside me fought that moment, especially for Veken to see something as horrendous as me performing for those beasts.

I slid my fingertips across Boshesh’s shoulder. He watched as I circled back of him and stood by the side of his chair.

I swayed my hips and played my favorite song in my head, closing my eyes and pretending I was home without a care in the world. I even imagined my cat staring at me in confusion as I turned up the music.

I heard the Oovarz begin to whistle and clap as the two women from the kitchen brought out the dessert plates. I opened my eyes and looked at them as they nodded slightly. Back in the kitchen, I had told them about the hot pepper plan, and they were more than happy to take part.

One of them told me she had wanted to do it for years but had always thought the spicy peppers were only an old legend for poisoning Oovarz. I told her now would be the time to find out, and she admitted she had nothing to lose.

The dessert seemed to be some sort of cake with white frosting on top. I didn't peg the Oovarz for sweetness connoisseurs, and I grimaced as I thought of the taste. I watched in disappointment as their eyes lay transfixed on me shoving my ass in Boshesh's face rather than tasting their dessert wine.

Boshesh groaned behind me, touching my ass lightly. I felt rage build in my chest but looked back at him with admiring eyes and a grin.

"You like what you see?" I asked in a low voice.

His mouth dropped slightly as I looked at his disgusting, bulgy facial features. I hated myself every second of that night except for when I was with Veken.

I closed my eyes again and imagined I was dancing for Veken in a hotel room somewhere near the ocean. In my imagination, he was lying on the bed naked, beckoning me with a finger. I fantasized about how I could walk over to the bed and crawl on top of him.

My fantasy was ruined by Boshesh pulling me onto his lap. I felt his giant cock harden beneath my ass and restrained myself from attacking him. I continued my dance, rubbing on him as I glanced at the full wine glasses.

The women returned with more dessert, and one of the other Oovarz pulled her into his lap. As usual, she smiled and laughed, playing along as she locked eyes with me. I craned my neck back and wrapped my arm around Boshesh, rubbing my cheek against his with disgust in my soul.

I felt him harden more, but what surprised me was the feeling of Veken's cum running down my leg from our excursion earlier. I couldn't let Boshesh see, or he could kill me in a second.

I stood and turned from him, walking behind his chair and placing my hands on his shoulders.

"Won't you have some dessert?" I whispered in his ear.

"Hmmm." He moaned, craning his neck back and sniffing me. "I think I'd rather have you for dessert."

Boshesh quickly pulled me around the chair and sat me in his lap, straddling him as I faced him. The other beasts cheered as Boshesh grabbed my ass tightly.

“Sir,” one of the Oovarz said firmly.

Boshesh glared at me, striking down the brute that had spoken. “I’m in the middle of something,” he growled.

“The plan to traffic in the Venice canals needs to be finished tonight,” he stated, holding his head high.

Boshesh rolled his eyes and shoved me off his lap. I hit the floor and groaned as my wrists bent backward, barely catching me.

As I walked back to the kitchen, I stood and massaged the sore wrists. Then I met the two women, listening as the Oovarz talked of their next mission.

I glanced around the corner to see them clinking their dessert wine glasses and settling on a plan. They gulped the wine quickly, and hope spurred in my chest.

Some of them had confused looks on their faces, while some seemed not to notice at all. Within a second, they began clutching their throats and gasping for air. Boshesh locked eyes with me across the room, staring at me with pure evil.

“You,” he said menacingly, standing from his seat as his throat constricted.

I began backing away, thinking of my exit from the kitchen before he collapsed on the floor. The other brutes fell off their chairs or leaned their heads against them as they lost consciousness.

The women cheered quietly as I ran to the dining room, checking their pulse. They were soft and barely noticeable. I sighed in relief as Veken entered the room, grabbing me by the arm.

“We need to go, now,” he ordered.

“You’re not going to kill them?” I asked, a little confused.

He scowled. "I'd like to. But if we're caught, the price to pay for Boshesh's death would be unimaginable. Our best option is to use every moment we have to get further away from this place."

"WAIT," I said, turning back and looking at the women. "We have to take them with us."

Veken stared at the women. "Fine, but they have to keep up and keep quiet."

I smiled and motioned for the women to follow us as Veken led us through the observatory. We crept along the hallways, crouching and listening for any guards that might come close to us or witness the scene unfolding in the dining room.

When we heard armor clanking, we all ducked into the library again, hiding behind the couches and the table.

This just has to work. I can't come this far for nothing, I thought, holding my breath.

VEKEN

The noise passed. Slowly, we all exchanged a look. Nodding, I crawled out from behind the couch and the women followed my lead.

We crept out of the library, continuing on our way. We darted through the long-tiled hallways and heard another commotion behind us. The guards had found the other Oovarz knocked out in the dining room.

We came to a circular room with four hallways running through it. I glanced around and tried to determine which one led to the back doors I initially entered through. I took a wild guess and pulled Ivy to the left as the other two women followed.

A guard dashed around the corner of the hallway right toward us; his spear pointed at me. I pushed Ivy back and ran toward the guard, ducking under his spear and hitting him in the throat with the staff of it. He fell to the ground, gasping for air as I speared him in the head.

I turned to see Ivy and the other women, terrified. I motioned for her to grab my hand, and she hesitantly stepped over the body as I continued leading them through the maze of halls.

We came to a dead end. I kicked the wall angrily, running my fingers over my head.

“Veken, where are we going?” Ivy asked frantically.

“We should have gone to the right back there,” one of the women commented.

“That would have led us to the auditorium,” I countered, memories of my time with Ivy there sending sparks through my skin.

“We need to get out of here,” Ivy said fearfully.

“I know that!” I yelled before turning and staring at the wall.

I tried to picture the observatory in my mind from the few times I had been there. Because of my recent break-in, I knew which halls led east and west, but I couldn’t pinpoint where we were at that moment.

“Come,” one woman said, taking Ivy’s arm. “I think I know where to go.”

Ivy looked at me with a question in her eyes, and I realized I needed to let my pride slip in order to fulfill my promise. I nodded and followed the woman, who held Ivy’s hand tightly.

The guard’s voices were getting louder. Their echoes through the hallways only made my adrenaline spike. I thought of my training when enlisting in the legion and remembered the moves they had taught us when avoiding melee items such as spears. Little did the Oovarz captain know at the time that I would use those tactics against them one day.

Two beasts ran down the hallway after us. I glanced back to see one of them ready to throw a spear. I skidded to a halt and turned to run toward them.

I grabbed the spear before he could throw it, tackling him to the ground. The other brute reached for my neck, and I swatted it away with one of my talons.

To my surprise, Ivy walked over and grabbed the spear lying on the ground and struck the guard on the floor over the head with it. That allowed me to stand and choke the other against the wall until he passed out, falling to the floor.

I paused and stared at Ivy with a smile, looking at the guard on the ground.

“Very nice,” I commented slyly.

She shrugged. “I do what I can.”

“Come on!” the women exclaimed, waiting at the end of the hall.

We rushed through the halls, following the women until we came to the staircase and the potted plant I had first seen when I entered from the back. She had led us right to it.

We stopped at the doors, facing four guards with their spears ready. They snarled and growled as one stepped forward.

“What did you do to them?” he asked as spit flew from his mouth onto the floor.

“Poisoned them,” Ivy spat. “They’ll wake up; they’re just knocked out for a while.”

I grabbed Ivy and moved her behind me. The other two women crowded behind me as well. I felt them quivering against my back as I held out my arms, holding them safely.

The Oovarz speaking to us laughed. “You think you’re going somewhere?”

“I know I am,” I growled, lunging at him.

I yanked off his helmet and bashed his head against the wall while using his spear to stab one of the other guards. The third picked me up by my neck and slammed me against the wall and the other went after Ivy and the women.

I kicked the guard in the stomach, sending him flying onto the floor. I knelt over him and slashed his throat before seeing the fourth guard dragging Ivy and the women deeper into the observatory.

I shouted as I ran forward, jumping on the guard’s back and putting him in a chokehold. He let go of Ivy and the women as I leaned backward and knocked us to the ground, my back slamming under his weight.

I wrapped my legs around him as I felt him struggle beneath my grip. He gasped for air, and I tightened my biceps around his neck. His weight began to crush me, and I felt my face turn blue. My head felt like it was going to explode before I felt a warm liquid hit my face.

I looked at Ivy standing over us, who had just slashed the guard's throat with his spear. I pushed him off me and groaned as I stood, taking the spear from her and pulling her into me by her waist.

"If you're going to keep using that thing, I better teach you how to hold it," I teased. She grinned, looking pleased with herself, but nodded her agreement.

I turned and led the three of them outside and through the acidic hole in the fence I had found earlier.

We ran until we reached the middle of what used to be Griffith Park. Stopping to breathe, I ran my fingers through my hair and looked at the two women, feeling the sweat drip down my forehead.

"Where are you from?" I asked breathlessly.

"Virginia," they said simultaneously.

"If you go to the — "

"Sir." One woman cut me off as she approached me and took my hand. "Thank you." I watched her eyes water. "We can take it from here."

I nodded and smiled at them. Ivy and I stood side by side, watching them walk away. I turned to Ivy and noticed a scrape on her right shoulder. It also hit me that she was still naked, standing perfectly in front of me like a goddess.

I appreciated the view, but we were probably going to have to find her some clothes.

IVY

Watching the women walk away, my heart sank. I hoped they would be safe going home, though the matter was largely out of my hands at this point.

I wondered what they would do when they returned to Virginia. How would they even travel that far, all across the continent? Did they have families they would run to? A favorite place they would go to spend the day or a favorite meal they would cook? It was a strange feeling, knowing that we had been through such an intense experience together. Just like that, they were gone and I would now probably never see them again.

Veken turned to look at me with confusion in his eyes. He walked over to me and put his hand lightly on my shoulder. I looked down at his touch and saw a scrape underneath his fingertips. I brushed mine over it, feeling a light stinging.

“Are you all right?” he asked in a growl. “What other injuries did you take?”

“Nothing,” I said, pulling my shoulder away from him. “I’m fine. Really.”

I walked toward the edge of the hill and overlooked the city. Before Oovarz took over, I wondered what it would have looked like. I’m sure the gray smoke billowing through the towers and the tall, ugly stone walls wouldn’t have given it such a damned look.

“What is it?” Veken asked, walking behind me and staring out at the city.

“They got to go home,” I said with tears in my eyes.

I turned to face Veken and took his hands in mine, feeling the calluses on his palms with my thumbs. I stared into his eyes, pleading.

“Please take me back to Hesperia,” I asked gently.

“What?” he said, his face in disbelief. He withdrew his hands from mine. “Absolutely not.”

“Why?” I asked, throwing my arms to the sides.

“Because!” Veken said, raising his arms in irritation. “The second we show up on the road to Hesperia, they’ll be waiting for us. They’ll be watching for an escape right now!!”

“Those other women seem to differ in their opinion,” I said. “They plan on leaving immediately.”

“Those other women will likely die,” Veken said evenly. “I do not want to see you die.”

“For me,” I said thoughtfully. “There’s no other way out of the city *for me*. But for *you*...” My words trailed off as he shook his head.

“We can’t risk getting caught. I have friends here. We need to lie low for a while until something else happens, give the guards something else to think about. What happens if word of the attack on the head of the Griffith territory gets out and we’re linked to it? They’ll kill us, Ivy!”

“I would rather risk death to go home than stay here and *play dead*,” I commented firmly, crossing my arms.

“Ivy,” he began, staring at the ground and shaking his head. “No, I will not put you at risk like that.”

I stayed silent and pursed my lips. I had to get him to help me; I knew a human on their own would never be able to breach the city’s walls.

I glanced at him and thought of any weakness he might have. I had never been one for manipulation, but I had to get home. A thought that made me shudder with a sense of hope crossed my mind.

“Fine,” I said with a sigh. “I’ll go on my own,” I turned to walk away, looking behind me and waving at him. “Thanks for everything.”

As I walked down the hill, I held my breath, waiting for the reaction I expected. Almost instantly, I heard a sigh and footsteps behind me. I smiled quickly as he ran in front of me and grabbed my arms.

He sighed, staring intensely into my eyes. “Fine.” He let go of my arms and stood with his own arms crossed.

I felt something shake inside me; I had been right about my safety being his weakness. Something about him wanting, no, *needing* to protect me sent shivers through my veins.

He glanced at my breasts, blowing air out of his lips and looking at the city.

“We need to get you clothes first,” he stated blithely.

“Really?” I asked excitedly.

“Really, about the clothes or me taking you home?” he asked curiously.

“Mostly home.” I glanced at my naked body. “But clothes would be nice, too.

He smiled, and we began traveling down the hill. “Sorry we have to walk,” he commented. “But I don’t dare get pulled over in the vehicle. They can link it to me too easily.”

We settled into silence for most of the walk. At least we didn’t have to get back to where I originally came in, which Veken already said was many miles away. We just had to find clothes and a way to scale the fence.

Veken eventually spoke up, interrupting the quiet. “Why do you want to go home so badly?”

“Aside from being a slave here and humiliating myself in front of monsters?” I retorted, watching the grass pass by my feet as we descended closer to the city’s center. “I have a cat; her name is Asia. She’s been without food for two days.” I sighed and brushed my hair behind my shoulder. “While she’s probably lived off hunting mice, I need to ensure she’s okay.”

Veken remained silent before speaking again. “That’s a good reason.”

His response shocked me, and I expected him to battle me once more on the concept. A smile crossed my face as I thought of his need to protect me again. He even felt my cat was a valid reason for risking his life.

While he was an alien by nature and had the physique of a demonic beast, I felt something human emitting from his being as we entered the city’s boundary. I glanced back at the observatory on the top of the hill, paying special attention to the wall which expanded widely behind it. I turned to face Veken.

“So, how are we getting out?” I asked.

“I’m going to think of that while you wait here, and I’ll purchase you some clothes.”

I caught him stealing a glance at my hips and bit my lip subtly, hoping he wouldn’t notice.

“While the view is nice,” he cleared his throat. “I can’t very well have you traversing the roads and forests completely naked.”

“I appreciate that,” I said, trying to stop my voice from sounding too giddy.

“Oh.” He reached into the pocket of his tactical vest. “Also...” He pulled out a paper and handed it to me.

I unfolded it to see my tithe recorded on the sheet. I sighed and ran my hand through my hair.

“Well, shit,” I chuckled. “I’m glad one of us remembered the original mission.”

“You’re welcome,” he said with a sly grin.

I nudged him playfully as he laughed. We came to the edge of a row of houses, and I paused.

“Wait here,” he said firmly. “I’ll be back in ten minutes.”

He began walking away, and I stared at his back muscles moving underneath his shirt. I thought back to the observatory

and felt myself throb. He turned around quickly, facing me. I moved my eyes to his face, but it was too late after he noticed my gaze.

He smiled widely. “What size are you?” he asked.

“Small,” I responded, clearing my throat.

He chuckled and walked into the rows of houses. I sat on the grass and sighed, rolling my eyes. I had to get better about this attraction to him; at the very least, he couldn't see me acting like an idiot gaping at him again.

VEKEN

I sighed as I wheeled the cart behind me, pulling it shakily over the cobblestones and walking toward the guards at the western gate. They stood before the door stoically, stepping toward each other and blocking the entrance as I approached.

“Taking a shipment to Greden,” I stated firmly.

“Shipment?” one of the guards asked skeptically.

“Orders of Boshesh,” I commented. “A load of jewels to their leader, a peace offering.”

The guards laughed. “Boshesh doesn’t *do* peace offerings,” one shouted, his disgusting face dripping with saliva.

“It’s a ruse,” I said, switching my story. “Of course. Peace offering to throw them off before we attack.”

The guards glanced at each other before one tipped his chin toward the cart. The other walked around me and took the tarp off the cart, seeing a collection of boxes presumably filled with jewels. He began to open one when I whipped around.

“Strict orders,” I growled. “No one touches the goods but the leader.”

The guard looked at the other, who shrugged his shoulders in response. The guard checking the cart grimaced as he placed the tarp over the cart and returned to his post.

“Proceed,” he said reluctantly. I’m sure the entire scene felt bizarre to him, but as a Tilarker I could leave LA whenever he wanted. He had no reason to suspect what I was actually up to, so it never occurred to him to stop me.

I responded with a glare as they opened the gates. Freely, I passed through; the boxes clanking together behind me.

I walked down a hill from the city, my heart racing from adrenaline. Once I rounded a corner from the view of the gates, I threw off the tarp and began moving boxes out of the way.

Ivy poked her head out from the bottom of the cart, gasping for air. I extended a hand to her, and she took it, getting out of the cart.

“That was easier than I expected,” she commented as she dusted herself off, her new white blouse covered in specks of wood.

I reached out and plucked some of the wood off her. “Well,” I paused, trying to pry one off her shoulder. “They would never suspect a Tilarker who was one of them to manipulate them.”

“Still,” she said, wincing as I touched her wound.

“We should have bandaged you up,” I stated, withdrawing my hand from her shoulder.

“It’s fine,” she said, removing her hand from her arm.

I led her down the hill toward the main road leading to the nearest camp. One of the buzzers there could get us to Hesperia in under a day. She shook her head and chuckled, and I smiled at her.

“What’s funny?” I asked with a grin.

“I just can’t believe we’ve regressed to almost medieval times,” she commented. “But our occupiers still have all the transportation options they want.”

“Well,” I cocked my head to the side. “The Oovarz came wanting to dominate the Urth. I guess that means they wanted to do things their way.” I paused and sighed. “It was easier to bring the buzzers in from their planet, so they had primary control over transportation. Why would they care about the things you all had set up before them?”

“You all?” She chuckled.

“Yeah.” I laughed with her. “You measly humans.”

She laughed and crossed her arms over her shirt. I noticed her brunette hair whipping in her face and debated if I should have gotten her a ribbon or piece of twine to tie up her hair.

“Alright,” I said as we approached the camp settlement. “Wait here,” I commanded.

I left her behind me and approached the buzzer dealer. He was an elderly human. As he glanced at me, I noticed the years of work showing in the wrinkles on his face. My heart sank as I imagined Ivy spending the rest of her days as a servant for the Oovarz.

What would she look like as she aged, either , in captivity of the Oovarz and out on her own. I pictured lines wrinkling around her dark blue eyes and a smile with thin lips that brightened the room.

“How can I help you?” the man asked.

“I need a buzzer,” I stated firmly.

“Rent or purchase?” he asked.

“Purchase,” I stated, digging money out of my pocket. “How much?” I asked, counting the cash.

“Two hundred,” he stated, holding out his hand.

I placed two hundred credits in his hand and walked toward the buzzer on my right. Wheeling it out of the rack, I inspected the tires and clutch as I approached Ivy around the corner from the man’s view.

“Alright,” I said, climbing on the bike and patting the back of it.

“How do these things work?” she asked, climbing on behind me.

I felt the warmth of her body hit mine and got shivers through my core. She placed her hands on my shoulders, and I swore electricity flowed through her touch.

“Well,” I began. Starting the buzzer, I listened to its roar. “It runs on fuel cells...pretty standard,” I shouted over the

noise. I glanced at her out of my peripheral vision. “You ready?”

“Do I have a choice?” she shouted in my ear.

I laughed and sped off as she wrapped her arms around my waist. The wind in my face and her body behind mine gave me a sense of freedom and joy I hadn’t felt in ages, maybe ever.

The ride was mainly through the desert, with not much to admire. Occasionally, a broken-down car or abandoned gas station would border the road, making the ride slightly more interesting.

My sense of joy faded as I thought of the Oovarz waking up. They would remember Ivy was the one who had poisoned them, and they would immediately send out a search party for her. But it was a risk we had to take. By myself, I couldn’t fight my way through the stronghold, and protect Ivy at the same time. The thoughts spun so quickly in my head that I barely realized the passage of time.

I went through every worst-case scenario in my mind. I thought of any way I could protect her and each ended with my failure. I shook the thoughts from my mind and vowed to myself that nothing would happen to her. Besides, I would sacrifice myself in a heartbeat to ensure her safety.

We arrived in Hesperia before long. The guards opened the gates for us as I turned off the bike. She slid off the back, stretching and groaning as I put the kickstand down on the bike and climbed off, staring at her hometown curiously.

She breathed in heavily and exhaled with a smile on her face. She looked at me with concern. I furrowed my brows, silently asking her with my gaze what was wrong.

“I don’t ever want to leave,” she said with a grin.

I laughed. “That’s not happening, princess.”

“Princess?” she asked, clearly disappointed and angered.

“The Oovarz will begin hunting you the second they wake up,” I commented, walking toward her. “They know you come

from Hesperia. Where do you think they'll look for you first after they realize you've fled the city?"

She pursed her lips and nodded, turning her gaze away from me. "Well," she sighed. "I'd rather die at home than spend the rest of my life running."

Walking away from me, I watched her hips sway and rolled my eyes. She was the most attractive woman I had ever met, but her stubbornness would make protecting her a bigger challenge than I expected.

IVY

I walked through the streets of my home and breathed in the bonfire scents. Fires and dinner were a custom followed almost nightly by residents of each neighborhood. I scowled as I thought of Veken's comment.

He was right, but I didn't have to like it.

He could try to rip me away from my home, but I couldn't just forget everything here. At the very least, I needed to collect my cat. She was essentially my family, and I wasn't going to just abandon her to fend for herself.

I turned to my neighborhood and glanced behind me to see Veken following from a distance. He was looking at the houses and taking in the scenery. At that moment, I chose to ignore him. All I thought about was Asia, hoping she was okay.

My neighborhood hadn't changed a bit. I had only been gone a few days, so that wasn't particularly surprising. But for some reason, it felt like I was seeing it all for the first time in years.

Mrs. Janit's house still had the unkempt bushes in the front. I laughed. That yard used to drive me crazy, but now that I might never see it again, I appreciated it more than ever. Tanner's house still had the sign on the front door warning trespassers not to step on his territory.

I caught a glimpse of my house at the end of the neighborhood. The cacti were doing well, bringing a smile to my face.

I approached my door and got the key from under one of the rocks on the front porch. I heard Asia meow from inside, and my eyes watered as I smiled.

I unlocked the door expecting to see Asia at the door but was surprised when she didn't greet me. I cracked the door and waited for Veken to enter behind me. He walked in and closed the door quickly behind him. I wondered how he knew that was important to do with a cat; maybe he had more human experiences than I previously thought.

"Asia," I called gently.

I heard scuffling in my bedroom. Walking to the left and entering the door, I looked at my beautiful room. Handmade paper lanterns hung from the ceiling, and the teddy bear my father gave me when I was a child sat in the middle of my bed.

It was all I had from my life before the war found us, turned my world upside down.

I wanted nothing more than to lie on my bed and sleep. The last few days had drained me emotionally, physically and mentally, and I hadn't felt safe like I did at that moment in what felt like forever.

A slight chirp came from behind my dresser. I rolled my eyes and smiled as I walked over and crouched down, looking under it. Asia sat with wide eyes, crouched under the furniture. I tapped my fingers on the hardwood and ticked my tongue, trying to get her to come to me.

After a moment of staring at me, she crawled slowly toward me. I grabbed her gently and held her in my lap as she purred and nuzzled against my face. I laughed as Veken entered the room, leaning against the doorway and grinning.

"So this is why you came home, huh?" he asked with a grin.

"The main reason, yes," I said between chuckles. I glanced at him. "Do you want to hold her?"

He seemed hesitant. "I've never held a cat before," he said with concern.

“She’s really sweet,” I said, standing and handing her to him. “Just hold her like a baby.”

He glanced at me, confused, as he took Asia from my arms. He cradled her close while she purred, nuzzling against his chest. He smiled and began petting her head cautiously. She licked him gently, and a grin crossed his face.

I smiled and glanced to my bathroom. “I’m going to use the bathroom real quick,” I stated as I left him and Asia in the bedroom.

I closed the bathroom door behind me and leaned against it, smiling broadly. My feelings for Veken were intensifying, and part of me nervously wondered if I should let them continue. We had slept together, which was terrific, but I doubted I could be more than a one-night stand for a Tilarker.

I looked in my mirror at my ratty hair and dark circles under my eyes. I sighed and opened the cupboard. It was going to take more than just some homemade moisturizer to fix me up.

As I watched myself rub the soothing lotion on my face, I thought of what he said about joining the legion. He was a warrior, strong, capable and designed for fighting. I was a human girl who let herself get kidnapped by Oovarz, a girl who gave a beast a lap dance in front of him.

My heart sank as I looked into the mirror at my eyes. He was an alien, a respected member of the higher society. I had gotten my hopes up. Now, remembering how devastating heartbreak could feel, I didn’t want to risk that pain again.

Properly scolded by the thoughts in my head, I shut down my emotions. I glanced at myself in the mirror and resolved to put up walls around my heart. I used the bathroom and took a last look in the mirror as I washed my hands.

I exited the bathroom only to be met with hands ensnaring me. “Well, time to go,” a voice declared.

A strong body dragged me out of the house and to the back alley of my neighborhood. I was carried tightly by solid arms as I struggled, desperately trying to face Veken. Was he really

just going to haul me out of my house like this, without another word?

As we neared the entrance to the town, I was led to Veken's buzzer. "What are you doing?" I asked angrily.

"You." He paused, emphasizing the word. "Aren't staying here a moment longer." He glanced at the ground next to me. "And neither is she."

I looked in that direction and saw Asia tucked in her carrier. Part of me wanted to elbow him in the nuts, and the other wanted to smile. Typically, a man tying my hands and kidnapping my cat and me would terrify and infuriate me.

In this case, however, I understood exactly why he was doing it. The fact is, he was doing this for the right reasons. Whether my stubborn pride wanted to admit it or not, I needed his help. I did not know how to leave Hesperia and start over where the Oovarz wouldn't find me, and it scared me to try.

Suddenly, a feeling of relief came over me. He put me on the back of the buzzer and draped the strap of Asia's carrier over my neck. He got on the bike in front of me and started the engine, adjusting her carrier behind him.

"Ready?" he asked as the buzzer roared.

"I don't really have a choice," I retorted. Ignoring my snarky comment, he grabbed my arms and swung them around his waist over the carrier. Pulling his arms out of the hold, he clutched at the handlebars.

I leaned forward to push Asia securely between us as he pulled out of the village. Part of me wanted to look back at my home, but I was too excited about my next adventure to reminisce. Something about the chaos and freedom of being with Veken overrode my need for safety.

VEKEN

I mprovising our journey, I took turns left and right to create a distracting path for the Oovarz to follow. Ivy clung to me the whole way, sandwiching Asia between us. I worried about the air hitting Asia and wondered if she was comfortable in her carrier.

We rode out of the desert and into the Salton Sea State Park, a vast recreational preserve near the Salton Sea. I had ridden along the fourteen-mile coastline before and saw a few abandoned houses lining the sea. The location would provide safety and a physical divide between L.A., Hesperia and the Oovarz.

We sped along the coast until I saw a small dirt path leading to the houses I knew were here. I turned and rode along the route, avoiding rocks and dips as best I could. Ivy gripped tightly onto my chest, and I felt an overwhelming surge overcome me.

I thought of our time in the observatory. How she moaned under my hand and her back arched beneath my grasp. I felt myself harden on the bike and tried to shove the thoughts out of my head as we arrived at the house.

I stopped the bike and turned it off, subtly adjusting myself as I lifted her arms off me. I slid off the buzzer and took Asia's carrier's strap off Ivy's neck. She glanced at me with a look of gratitude that surprised me.

She slid off the bike and glanced at the house as I picked up Asia's carrier. She rubbed her wrists lightly, and I stepped

toward her, wrapping my hands lightly over her hands.

“I’m sorry,” I said sincerely. I hadn’t wanted to be her enemy and I didn’t like forcing her how I had.

“Well.” She smiled and sighed. “If you hadn’t, I probably would have stayed,” she admitted. Ivy looked into my eyes deeply and grinned slightly. “I’m actually kind of glad you did.”

I grinned and turned away, walking to the cabin. I opened the door and surveyed the inside, assessing the old couch and cobwebs on the ceiling. Not the ideal hotel I would have liked to take her to, but it was the best option.

Ivy entered and closed the door behind her. I walked around, checking for any holes Asia might have been able to escape through. After determining the cabin was safe, I let her out of her carrier.

“What do we need to get for her?” I asked as I watched Asia stretch on the floor.

“Well,” Ivy paused, scratching her head. “Probably something to act as a litter box. Some type of food, maybe fish and water.”

I turned to the kitchen and walked toward the appliances. I doubted electricity still ran through the cabin, but I took a shot at the sink.

Surprisingly, water flowed through the faucet. I checked the cabinets for bowls and found one. I cleared the dust off before filling it and putting it on the floor for Asia. I glanced at Ivy who was staring at me, blushing slightly.

“What?” I asked, standing and walking toward her.

“Nothing,” she said, smiling and looking at Asia. “I appreciate all you’re doing for both of us.”

The way she stared at me sent a surge through me again. I felt a pull toward her like my body craved her touch. Without any thought, I stepped forward and put my hand on the back of her neck, kissing her intensely.

I had a split second of doubt about my decision before she wrapped her hands around me, kissing me intensely. I picked her up, and she wrapped her legs around me as our tongues played with each other's mouths. She tasted like strawberries and smelled like lavender, only drawing me in more.

I walked her to the bedroom, and she kissed my neck. I moved my hands to her ass and grabbed it hard, making her moan slightly. The smoothness of her moans sounded like how I imagined angels must sing.

I placed her on the bed and took off her shirt quickly as she struggled to unclip my vest. Unhooking her bra, I glanced at her perfect breasts. They jiggled on her chest as she slid the straps off her arms. I ran my fingertips over her nipples, hardening them as she moaned and grinned.

I couldn't wait and play teasing games. I had wanted her again since the first time at the observatory. I slid off her pants gently, kissing her thighs and calves until they were off. She reached to unbuckle my pants but fumbled with the button. I grabbed her hands on one of my own and held them above her head. With my free hand, I unbuttoned my pants and kicked them off.

I glanced at her smiling down at me. I grinned in return and kissed her hips lightly. Her body moved slowly with each touch of my lips, her hips turning in light circles.

"You like that?" I whispered.

"Mm-hmm," she responded with her eyes closed.

"You want more?" I asked slyly.

"Yes," she said breathlessly.

I leaned closer to lick her clit gently. "Are you sure?"

She gasped. "Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Please," she begged, looking at me with pleading eyes.

I pressed my tongue against her clit, listening to her moans intensify. I wrapped my arms around her thighs to hold her

still, her body twitching. She reached down to press my mouth against her clit. I resisted, pulling my head up and pinning her arms above her head again while running my other hand across her neck.

“Do it,” she said, motioning to my hand across her neck.

I pressed down lightly as I slid into her, feeling her warmth and wetness surround my cock. My body tingled, and a primal surge came over me. Some part of my inner nature needed to devour her, take her for my own, and make sure she knew she was mine.

“Ivy,” I whispered as I thrust deep into her.

“Oh, Veken,” she cried out.

I loved hearing her moan, free to vocalize this time without my hand over her mouth. Her screams of pleasure as she asked me for more propelled me to a new state of bliss. I watched her eyes roll back as I concentrated on her moans, determining which movements she liked best.

I had never paid much attention to a sexual partner before. They were always just another body to me, but she was different. I wanted nothing more than to make this experience one she would never forget.

At that moment, I realized she had brought out selflessness in me, which went against my nature. I felt myself changing as I stared into her eyes and watched her smile beneath me. She was the one I had been waiting on for ages.

Everything our elders had promised us about finding our mates was true. It just took me this long to believe.

IVY

I stared at Veken, fast asleep next to me after our intense lovemaking. I smiled, realizing that a part of my soul had opened up to him that night. His lips were parted slightly as he slumbered, barely moving.

His cum dripped down my legs as I moved the sheets off me slowly, trying not to wake him. I adjusted my weight on the bed to slide off carefully, my feet touching the ground as I pulled the sheets back up over him.

I walked to the bathroom, an irresistible smile crossing my face. Walking to the shower, I turned it hot and pulled out the lever. To my disappointment, no water came out. I sighed; the water must only run to the kitchen in this shack.

I glanced around the bathroom, scratching my head. I hadn't showered in days and felt disgusting. I especially didn't want to be dirty and smell obscene in front of Veken. While he didn't seem to mind, I did.

I thought about our ride on the dirt road to the cabin. I had seen signs pointing toward a nearby lake. I grabbed an old towel off the bathroom rack, grimacing as I thought about who had used it last. I had no choice; anything was better than remaining as dirty as I was at that moment.

I snuck out of the bathroom and glanced at Veken. Asia had curled up over his ankles, obviously content with her new servant. He began to snore, and I held back a chuckle. Tiptoeing across the wooden floor, I prayed it wouldn't creak

and awaken him. He would have probably thrown a fit if he knew I was going to the lake unsupervised.

I opened the door slowly, wincing as it creaked. I looked at Veken, who turned over in bed, fast asleep. Sighing in relief, I walked out the door and closed it gently behind me.

I walked quickly away from the cabin, nervous that he would wake up to chastise me. When I was a safe distance away, I slowed down to glance up at the stars. They sparkled overhead, brighter than I had seen in years. Far away from the craziness and light pollution of L.A. and Hesperia, they could beam through the darkness here. I felt a sense of joy I hadn't felt since I was a child.

I walked along the dirt path, taking in the beautiful nature around me as I ventured toward the lake. Sounds of peeper frogs and crickets serenaded my walk as if they assured me I was in the right place at the right time.

The lake was giant; glistening ripples moved quietly underneath the crescent moon in the sky. I walked off the dirt path to the sand. Kicking off my shoes and undressing, I glanced around for any passersby.

It seemed this park had been quiet for some time. Not surprising, seeing as how the Oovarz had kidnapped most residents of small towns by now and put them to work in the major cities.

I took a deep breath and waded into the water slowly, gritting my teeth as the cold water touched my ankles. I stood still and let my skin adjust to the temperature before wading deeper.

The water chilled my skin, and I remembered what my father had told me about ripping off band-aids. The sooner you rip them off, the quicker the skin can heal. Taking something piece by piece would only prolong the injury. I held my breath and submerged myself in the lake entirely, feeling my hair whip around my face in the water.

Emerging from the water, I pushed my hair behind my head and stared at the stars. I laughed and covered my mouth

with excitement as I thought of the adventure my life had taken. My life was no longer monotonous, a daily repetition of chores and responsibilities.

I was being taken care of by a man — well, alien — that wanted the best for me. I began to realize I wasn't unworthy of his care or a bother. He genuinely wanted to help me stay safe, and I deserved it.

The quiet air brushed against my face as I began washing my body. A stick cracked in the woods next to me, and I whipped around to glance at it.

Squinting my eyes, I tried to determine where the sound came from but was unsuccessful. Because of the lake being a part of a nature preserve, I assumed animal colonies were still flourishing somehow, despite the Oovarz's tyranny. It must have been an animal of some kind, nothing to concern myself with.

I began washing my hair when I heard water rippling behind me. I spun around again and saw something swimming toward me. I dove under the water and swam quickly toward the center of the lake. But something grabbed my foot, and I was jerked back through the water.

A Tilarker warrior pulled me up from underneath the water, grinning evilly.

"Bad idea, girl," he snarled as he dragged me back to shore.

I tried to scream but he clamped his hand over my mouth. He lifted me out of the water, and the cold air hit my naked body. Three other aliens now waited for me on the shore, taking my arms and legs to help drag me out of the lake.

"Help!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, my voice rasping from the intensity.

One of the Tilarkers laughed. "No one can hear you here, girl."

I continued to scream for help but left out Veken's name. They were unaware of his presence at the cabin, and I didn't want to risk him getting kidnapped, too.

Still, a part of me was hoping he heard. I looked through the Tilarker limbs carrying me away to see if he was coming. I prayed he would run through the woods at any second and kill them, saving me from their brutish grasp.

Instead, they stuffed me into a cart made for animals with bars on the windows. A trailer hitch hooked it up to a buzzer. I screamed louder as the roaring of the buzzer drowned out my voice.

They pulled me away as I held out hope that Veken would hear my cries. I scanned the woods for any sign of movement but was unlucky in my attempts.

Falling silent, I tried to ease the discomfort, squished tight in my cage. Once again, I was held captive by monsters, naked, waiting on an alien to save me.

VEKEN

I barely opened my eyes, screams echoing through my dreams. Groaning and rolling over, I tried to shake the sounds from my mind. A second later, my eyes opened wide as I realized the screams weren't of my imagination.

I rolled over and tried to grab Ivy but only felt the pillow. "Ivy!"

I shot out of bed and heard deep, raspy laughter and shrieks from outside. I quickly pulled on my pants and walked out of the cabin, closing the door sharply behind me to keep Asia inside.

The cold night air hit my chest and made me shiver. I glanced around, trying to judge the time. The northern star had only moved slightly to the right, meaning I had been asleep for no more than three hours.

I made my way toward the commotion, following the dirt path quietly. I listened for words between the raspy laughter but heard only grunting. As I continued down the dirt track, I tried to control my heart rate.

I saw movement further down the trail and stepped to the side between several large tree trunks. Peering from behind one of them, I saw a group of Tilarkers carrying something toward a buzzer with a cart attached to the back.

I felt a twinge in my gut as I heard the scream again and saw Ivy's long dark hair being shoved into the box. Rage overtook me, and I began to rush toward the cart, stopping myself mid-step.

If I approached them now, they would kill me. From what I saw, there were several in the convoy, each wearing the gear of decorated warriors. Boshesh hadn't settled for any ordinary hitmen; he had sent the best.

Powerlessness was not one of my strong suits. Still, I knew it would be a mistake to act in haste. It would simply open her to more danger. I froze as I began to think of a plan to get Ivy out of the cart before they rode away with her.

"Help, please!" I heard Ivy scream distressfully.

My heart sank. I balled my fists to contain the rage I felt, cocking my arm back as I was about to hit the tree. Then a buzzer started. The roaring engine broke my fury, and I knew I needed to act fast.

I ran back to the cabin, scooped Asia up and put her in her carrier. Hoisting her over my shoulder, I walked out to my buzzer, frantically scanning in the distance to see if Ivy was still there. I was pretty sure I recognized one of them from Griffith.

Boshesh's men.

They seemed to be discussing something, each on their buzzer. I guessed they were planning which route to take from the movement of hand signals.

"Please!" Ivy's screams were interrupted by her voice cracking.

Hearing her cry broke my heart. I wanted to rush into that convoy and rip their throats out, drag their hearts out through their mouths and slash their wrists. But that would only scare her, and I knew I had no chance against five of them.

I calmed my brutish nature and began to think logically. Tilarokers are wise; we know the best routes, weapons and kill shots. They would have a detailed plan already in place, no doubt by order of Boshesh. They would surely deliver her to him, no matter what I did.

With the sound of their five buzzers overshadowing the noise of mine, I could follow from a distance. The trouble with Tilarokers is we always think we're too smart for anyone to

figure out our plans, even another of our species. We're tactical fighters, compared to the Oovarz, but that can also make us smug.

They began to pull off. I stepped out from the side of the cabin, barely catching a glimpse of Ivy through the crate's bars. She was looking down at the cart floor and scrunched in a ball.

I put Asia on the back of the buzzer and waited to start my engine until they were further away. I kicked the side of the cabin and punched it, swelling the knuckles on my hand. Every nerve in my body wanted to destroy, cut, slash, kill something.

I walked to the bike with my hands on my head, glancing at the stars. I wondered how I could have been so stupid to stop so soon. Were my feelings for Ivy getting in the way of her protection? Could I be the greatest danger to her with my clouded thinking?

As I started my buzzer and secured Asia's carrier, my thoughts continued to race. Mounting the bike, I slowly began riding down the dirt path, keeping the convoy of Tilarkers barely in sight as they exited the preserve.

As I rode along, I felt the air hit my face. That feeling of freedom I had before was gone. There was no time to feel joy, happiness, or any sort of relaxation. I made that mistake, and she was kidnapped again. I needed to be more on my guard, weary of the Tilarker's dedication and the Oovarz's bloodlust.

I rounded the corner out of the preserve as a thought crossed my mind. Ivy had yelled 'help,' 'please,' and screamed with no words, but she hadn't once said my name. Guilt wracked my being as I sped forward.

She was trying to protect me. Once again, she was doing my job. I had never been one to fail a mission or get sidetracked by selfish desires. While I thought I was so selfless in taking her here, I realized the change she was spurring in me might be detrimental.

I saw the cart bouncing on the road in the distance. I worried it would topple over into the sand, that they would crash, and Ivy could be killed. Even if she wasn't killed on the road, I was terrified she would be once they reached their destination.

I watched as the sun began to rise over the desert. Nightfall would end soon, and I would be more obvious in the Tilarker's line of vision. I was suspicious that they were taking her back to the Griffith observatory. If I were right, that would mean I had two more hours to ride.

I didn't slow down, didn't stop once. If they did turn and see me, I would have been ready to fight. I couldn't tell if I hated them or myself more as I sped down the beaten desert road.

I dodged two potholes and navigated a dip while ensuring Asia was secure behind me. I watched as the convoy veered off the side road and went north on the main highway. My suspicions were confirmed. She was going back to Boshesh.

IVY

My naked body scraped against the side of the cart as it bumped along the road. I couldn't see anything but sand and barren land through the bars. It seemed almost comical that my view of the world would reflect how I was feeling inside.

I had poisoned the Oovarz leader of Griffith. Punishment for this crime would be hefty, and the possibilities of what exactly it would be were endless. My mind circled through the worst options I could imagine. Being beheaded, put into the factories in the worst job, the beasts burning down my village, and the list went on.

The buzzer roars that took me away drowned in my ears, and I wondered if permanent hearing loss was one of their punishments. Whether they meant to or not, it was an excellent start to their reign of terror.

The sun was beginning to rise over the mountains, and I took in every second, appreciating the view. If they did send me to the factories for my misdeed, I may likely never see the sun again or any part of the outside world.

A vision flashed in my mind of the factories. I pictured underground rooms with dark gray walls and disheartened prisoners slaving away, clutching their backs in pain as they were yelled at to continue working.

A large thud of the cart jolted me from my thinking. I noticed we had hit pavement instead of long, sand pathways. I watched as we passed the broken-down cars on the main

highway and sighed. They were taking me back to Los Angeles and probably right into Boshesh's lair.

The sun had risen entirely over the vast mountains, and I began to hear chatter over the roaring of the buzzers. The cart stopped, and I tried to listen to the conversation over the sounds of the buzzers.

"Delivery for Boshesh," one of the Tilarkers claimed.

A brute grunted and walked around to peer through the bars of my crate. I watched as he smiled creepily, revealing his triangular teeth and disgusting bulging eyes. I made eye contact briefly before looking back at my feet, ashamed and discouraged.

"Pass through," the guard said firmly.

The buzzers moved through the gates, and I saw the city's main town square. I thought of Hesperia and how I would most likely never see my home again. I tried to hold back tears as the buzzers came to a slow stop.

Peering out of my crate, I saw the main village square. We were nowhere near the Griffith Observatory, much to my surprise.

One of the Tilarkers unlocked my crate and pulled me out roughly, twisting my arms as he ushered my naked body toward a building that appeared to be a bar. The residents stared at me in shock as they walked past. I hung my head, avoiding eye contact with them.

Dragging me into the bar, my captors were met by a myriad of other Tilarkers and Oovarz berzerkers joyously drinking and shouting. I glanced around, confused by the mixing of the two groups.

I had always thought that Tilarkers were mortal enemies of the Oovarz. While a few worked for them, I was unaware of the sheer quantity of Tilarkers that had seemingly betrayed their kind to serve the evil brutes.

"A gift for you all!" the guard who held my arm shouted to the patrons of the bar.

The monsters whistled and clapped their hands as they surveyed my naked body. I tried to cross my legs, but the guard smacked them back open with his hands. He leaned in close to me, his lips on my ear.

“Don’t be shy, princess,” he whispered.

I wanted to strike him in the face and run for my life. Why I continued to get captured naked was beyond me, but something about human humiliation was pleasing to the Oovarz and their new allies.

The guard shoved me into a chair and tied my hands around the back of it. Then he sat with me while the others got their drinks. He looked at my breasts and grinned, running his finger lightly down my neck to my sternum. I looked away, holding my chin high as I felt my lips begin to shake from holding back tears.

“You’re quite the spectacle,” he said creepily. “I would kill to be Boshesh, to have my way with a marvel like you.”

I remained silent as he pulled my chin back toward him, locking eyes with me.

“Don’t worry,” he said with an evil grin. “We’ll get you to your future home in no time.”

The words echoed in my head, ‘future home.’ The place they would sentence me to remain for the rest of my probably now brief life. I glanced around the bar, trying to distract myself with anything that could bring me a semblance of hope.

I was met with nothing but perverted glances and crude gestures from the monsters. I looked down at the table as the other guards returned with drinks and made a toast to my capture. They drank around me, talking of their recent conquests and how lucky they were to find me naked.

Hanging my head, I thought of Veken. He must have been furious with me for leaving the cabin. Guilt rang in my chest as I thought of how aggravated he must be, how difficult I had made his journey by my selfishness.

I wondered where he was and if he had given up on rescuing me due to my stubbornness. I might have, if I had put

in so much effort to save someone, only to have them lurking off on their own in the middle of the night.

The beasts finished their drinks and ushered me back to the cart as the bar patrons whistled and cheered at me again. I was shoved into the cart forcefully and given a small blanket by one of the monsters taking me to Boshesh. I saw a slight sorrow in his eyes as he handed it to me.

I almost cried as I took the blanket from him, my eyes screaming gratitude. He only slightly nodded and returned to his buzzer. I quickly wrapped the blanket around my naked body and watched as we pulled away from the central city, headed to the hills of Boshesh's lair.

VEKEN

I approached the city's gates, praying the guards wouldn't recognize me as the one who helped Ivy escape. I turned off my buzzer and looked at them with firm eyes.

"Reporting for duty," I said calmly, trying to relax my heart rate.

One of the guards glanced at Asia on the back of my carrier. "What's with the creature?" he asked in a low, raspy voice.

"Requested by the head warrior to eat the mice roaming his headquarters," I claimed, hoping my lie wouldn't be detected.

"Hmm," the guard said, glancing at the other. His partner just shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly.

"Pass through," the first said, opening the gates to the city.

I nodded my thanks and continued into the main square before turning off my buzzer. I walked through the town with Asia strung over my shoulder. I had caught a glimpse of the convoy entering the gates, which confused me. The path to the observatory was around the main walls and up a steep hill.

Wondering what they could be stopping for, I counted the guards manning the square. There were six in total. My paranoia kicked up at the sight. I walked toward one of the clothes vendors and purchased a shirt, trying to blend in with the crowd.

I threw it on and strung Asia over my shoulder again as I walked out of the square toward the main complexes. Ivy's crate would be hard to miss, hopefully.

I scanned the parking lots of the complexes, noting the abandoned cars surrounded by buzzers. The crate was the only thing that would distinguish the convoy from any other vehicle in this city.

“Oh, Ivy.”

I wracked my brain for where they might have taken her. I doubted they set her up in an apartment, as Boshesh was not a patient monster. He would want her in his lair as soon as possible.

I thought about what he would do to her once she arrived. The idea made my skin crawl. I couldn't fathom seeing her serving him naked again. Because of her crime, I was sure the punishment would be much worse this time.

I walked across a nearby bar and noticed five buzzers outside, with her crate attached to one. My heart lifted slightly as I walked toward the bar, sneaking around the side.

I heard cheering and whistling from inside. Peering into one of the side windows, I saw Ivy, naked, being held by one of the guards for the crowd's viewing pleasure. I bristled with antagonism.

She was tied to a chair, and I watched as the Tilarkers grabbed drinks. The one sitting with her ran his finger along her neck, and I almost punched the side of the building. My rage was virtually uncontrollable. It was in my nature to storm villages and slash the throats of my enemies, not wait in silence.

I thought of any weakness of the Oovarz I could use to my advantage. Their stupidity was one downfall, but I needed more if I was going to kill Boshesh. Getting Ivy out safely was the main objective but the urge to murder him took over me.

A Tilarker inside the bar looked in my direction. I crouched beneath the window quickly, shutting my eyes and feeling my heart begin to race. I listened for the sound of the

bar door opening, expecting him to come out and ask what business I had peering through the window. It never came — the cheering and shouting inside was all I heard.

I popped my head back to the window, watching as the guards finished their drinks and led Ivy out of the bar. Sneaking around the front of the bar, I watched as they put her back in the crate. One of the guards handed her a blanket, and sympathy crept into my chest.

I wanted to thank him for having a little decency amongst these primal, wretched creatures. One of the other guards gave him a strange look as he mounted his buzzer, and he maintained eye contact firmly. I would spare his life once I got to the observatory, a thank you for his small act of kindness.

They pulled away. I walked to the front of the bar, taking someone's buzzer and starting it with the key left in the ignition. The theft was one of the most insignificant crimes I had committed lately, and the charge of grand theft auto was the last thing on my mind as I followed the convoy to the observatory.

I stopped my buzzer at the bottom of the hill, wary of them seeing me once they dismounted theirs at the parking lot. I walked up the hill with Asia still on my shoulder, amazed by her ability to stay quiet.

Placing her carrier down, I peered through one of the holes and checked on her. She glanced at me with sleepy eyes and meowed. I smiled and stuck my finger in, petting her behind the ear. I had to get her food soon. Once I surveyed the situation at the observatory, I would forge a plan for feeding Asia.

I climbed the hill and watched them take Ivy in through the front doors. The blanket dropped from her, and the guard who gave it to her picked it up as they walked inside. While he may not have the best intentions, working with Boshesh's goons, I felt more assured that someone was caring for her, even slightly.

I realized I needed more help to get Ivy out of the observatory. Boshesh had indeed increased his level of

security since we had broken out, and I wasn't great at being stealthy.

I thought of the layout of the observatory. If they were to shut her in anywhere, it would most likely be near Boshesh's chambers on the third floor, where guards would be ready at their posts.

The observatory doors shut. I glanced at Asia with a sigh, thinking of my next move.

Only one possibility came to mind. One I'd sworn not to use, unless it was the direst emergency. But with Ivy's life on the line, there was no longer any choice.

IVY

My arms were burning as the guards dragged me into the observatory. I thought of the night at the cabin with Veken, trying to distract my mind from the terror I was about to face. I thought of his skin against mine, how he grasped onto my hips tightly with his hands, and how he gazed at me with tenderness in his eyes.

My heart sank as I wondered again how irritated he must have been with me. I looked at the white walls marking my newfound prison, and my thoughts dissipated. I knew I needed to accept my new reality and the punishments that came with it.

I was led into the grand hall, where Boshesh and his army of turn-coat Tilarckers sat. The main doors swung open, and all heads snapped to stare at me. I walked in shamefully, avoiding eye contact with all of them.

I saw Boshesh stand from his throne at the end of the room out of my peripheral vision. He laughed menacingly, and a burning ignited inside me. I felt a rapid twinge in my gut, like my body was screaming for me to fight, to run, to defend myself. Unfortunately, I did the opposite and froze as I raised my gaze to Boshesh.

“Unhand her,” Boshesh commanded as he stepped down from his throne toward me.

He approached and circled me. His eyes scanned every inch of my body. I wondered why he needed to when he had seen every vulnerable inch of me before. I felt his ghastly

fingertips run over my shoulder and along my arm and tried not to grimace.

He circled back in front of me and stood close enough for his chest to touch my breasts barely. My nipples naturally hardened at the pressure against them, and he glanced down, grinning widely.

“Excited, are we?” he asked, pressing closer against me.

I staggered backward slightly against his pressure. Remaining silent, I looked off behind him, trying to avoid smelling his nasty breath against my face. He wrapped his hand around my waist and pulled me close, forcing my naked body against his.

“What a smart girl you are,” he said in a low voice as his hand moved to grasp my ass slightly. “Escaping from me is not an easy feat. Tell me...” His other hand brushed my hair behind my shoulder, and I felt my hands begin to shake from fear. “How did you do it?”

I didn’t open my mouth and tried to think of a story that wouldn’t incriminate Veken or the other women we helped escape. As I was about to speak, he grabbed my chin and forced my face to look at him, his nose almost touching mine.

“How did you do it?” he snarled.

“You, you fell asleep,” I stammered, looking around at the other guards. “And you wouldn’t wake up,” I paused. “We tried to help you, but you were too unconscious.”

I stared into his deep brown eyes, and the back of my neck burned. My nerves told me to run and escape as quickly as I could. Even just being in the presence of evil sent warning signals throughout me.

“And we thought you might be dead,” I looked at the ground as he continued to hold my chin. “So we tried to get help.”

“Bend over,” he commanded, turning me quickly against him, my ass pressing against his groin.

His hand shoved my back down. My hands dropped to the floor as I felt him back away from me. Fear rippled through me and I felt my breasts dangle from my chest. I heard a loud whoosh of air as I felt a hard smack against my ass.

I screamed in shock as he grabbed my hips, pulling me against him once more by my hair, so my back rested against his chest.

“Tell the truth, girl,” he growled.

“That is the truth.” I grunted, wincing at the pain of him pulling my hair.

“Again,” he snarled, bending me over.

I felt his dick harden behind me as my ass pressed against him. My left cheek still hurt from the spanking. I hoped he would veer to the right, but instead, he smacked the same spot, harder this time.

I almost toppled over before he grabbed me and whipped me around to face him, pulling my hair back and digging his nails into my ass.

“I don’t have time for your lies, girl,” he shouted as his lips traced along my neck.

He threw me to the floor, and my face smacked the tiles. I writhed in pain as Boshesh looked at the guards.

“Take her to the interrogation room until dinner,” he commanded before spitting on my face.

I winced and tried to wipe the spit off before one guard picked me up. He took me out of the room and down the hall. The rest of the spit dripped from my face as I winced at the stinging sensation on my ass.

The interrogation room was small and dark, with a small lamp in the corner. There was a large wooden board with ties strapped to it. The guard shoved me onto the board and latched the ties, restraining my hands and feet.

Another Tilarker entered and spun me upside-down on the board, tracing his fingers along my stomach.

“Ready to talk?” he whispered demonically.

I shut my eyes and pursed my lips. I heard him walk backward, and I felt the blood rushing to my head. I vowed at that moment that no information would come from my lips, no matter what they did to me.

After an endless time, a new voice broke through my misery.

“Change of plans,” another guard announced, bursting into the room. “Boshesh says she needs to prove herself as a servant. He wants her back in the kitchen where she belongs.”

The guards exchanged a skeptical look and then shrugged. One of them began to untie me, promptly escorting me back to my original place of servitude.

Badly bruised and in anguish from the abuse, I entered the kitchen where two new women were preparing the beast’s dinners. I walked to the plates prepared as I felt their eyes on me, and I uttered no greeting as I walked the dishes to the dining room. I knew the routine, this time.

As I entered, I had a flashback of the monsters lying unconscious on the floor and in their chairs. I also thought of the closet Veken and I had hidden in, and my heart sank. Each time I thought of him, guilt overtook me.

How could I have left his side?

I placed Boshesh’s plate in front of him and began to walk back to the kitchen before he grabbed me. He glanced over my bruises and smiled as he passed his plate to the Tilarker on his left.

“Eat,” he demanded to the guard.

The guard looked at the food suspiciously before cautiously taking a bite of the venison. Boshesh watched as the guard swallowed and opened his disgusting mouth for Boshesh to check. After waiting a few minutes, Boshesh nodded at the guard and turned to me.

“You’re not pulling any tricks this time, girl.”

VEKEN

Making my way to the central city, I replayed the diagram of the observatory in my mind. I remembered getting to the dining room, observatory itself, closets, and living quarters as I entered from the back. If I were to have approached the building from the front this time, I might not have had the directional knowledge to find Ivy quickly.

I walked along the row of large houses and admired them as they gleamed in the sun. I wondered what sort of place I could get for Ivy when I got her out of there. I looked at the various architecture surrounding me, daydreaming a bit.

I arrived on a street that brought memories to my mind. There was a house here I knew. One I stayed in when I first came to Urth, myself and several other Tilarker warriors, before Boshesh and his band took over Griffith. It was a stressful time, but I still fondly recalled some of our less serious exploits. There were many mindless activities, jokes and games that we had played to ease our minds and reduce the pressure of our tasks.

The memories of the loneliness crept in as well. While I was free to do what I wanted in the past, I never had obligations to anyone. Being so untethered left a hole in me, something hanging out with the boys couldn't fill.

Now, I had Ivy, and I had a duty and a responsibility to care for her. There was a sudden sense of completion, a filling of that void that could only happen with purpose and connection to another being.

Arriving at the last house on the block, I adjusted Asia's carrier on my shoulder and knocked on the door. I waited, glancing around at the neighbors' yards. Nothing had changed, and I hoped it would be the same here.

Two familiar faces answered the door.

"Veken!" my old friend Edic exclaimed as he scoured the streets for any unwelcome watchers. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I actually need your help," I admitted, as I caught him staring at Asia on my shoulder.

"Help with what?" Xpen, his roommate, snapped. "You know you're not supposed to be here."

"I think our chance has come." I looked around suspiciously. "Is there anyone else here?"

"Really," Edic said, opening the door and motioning for me to enter.

Edic closed the door behind us, and I set Asia's carrier on the floor. Xpen walked slowly toward her, surveying her as any suspicious Tilarker would before pointing at the carrier and looking at me.

"What's that?" Xpen asked, chuckling.

"That," I said, untying my shoes. "Is a cat."

"Well, obviously," he responded, making his way to the living room. "But why do *you* have a cat?"

"It's Ivy's," I looked at him firmly. "The one I care about who's in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" Edic asked with a serious face, sitting on a chair in the living room. "And what do you mean we have a chance?"

I pointed to Asia. "Can I let her out and get her some water?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure," Xpen said happily, walking to the kitchen and filling up a bowl.

Xpen brought the water to me, and I let Asia out of the cage. I petted her back slowly and felt both of their eyes scan over me, pondering what I was doing here. I walked to the living room as she wandered around the house, and I sat in the living room chair across from Edic.

“You don’t happen to have any fish or chicken, do you?” I asked.

“Uh.” Xpen paused and laughed, looking at the fridge. “Yeah, we cooked some chicken last night.”

I pointed to Asia over my shoulder as I stood and walked to the kitchen. “Do you mind if I give her some?”

They looked at me with shock and confusion.

“Sure, yeah, go ahead,” Edic said, motioning to the kitchen.

I walked to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator, scanning until I found the chicken. I took a piece out and put it on a plate, setting it on the kitchen floor. I looked at the living room, and the guys sitting with both of their arms crossed.

“Veken, what the fuck is going on?” Xpen asked. “You didn’t really come here to feed your cat, did you? And what do you mean our chance has come?”

I sighed and walked to the living room. “There’s this human,” I began, rubbing the back of my head. “Her name is Ivy. She’s been captured again by Boshesh,”

“Whoa,” Xpen exclaimed, uncrossing his arms. “Captured by Boshesh?”

“Again?” Edic again.

“I know.” I scratched the base of my horns, trying to make it sound reasonable. “It’s crazy. I got her out the first time, but...”

“Wait.” Xpen’s scowl deepened. “We’ve been laying low for two years now, trying to build the network to bring that bastard down, and you risked it all for a human?”

I couldn't blame him. Xpen had a mate of his own to worry about.

But I couldn't give up on Ivy, either.

"I can't leave her there," I said, the ache in my chest from her absence growing stronger by the minute. "From the moment I saw her I knew, she's mine, just as much as I'm hers." And now time for the terrible truth. "For some reason Boshesh is just as obsessed with her. He won't let her go easily."

Out the window, the sun began to set. Nightfall would be the perfect time to leave the house and walk to the observatory. Oovarz weren't known for their keen night vision; maybe we could catch them after they had a few glasses of wine.

"I see," Edic said, shooting Xpen a look. "Let's go back to the beginning. How did you get her out the first time?"

"Hot peppers," I admitted. "It's not going to work again. And now he has her back, I have no idea what she's going through." My head sunk low, every vile possibility running through my mind until I thought I would go mad. "Guys, this is killing me. No matter what, I'm going back in."

Edic and Xpen looked at each other seriously, then at me. Xpen smiled, and Edic rubbed his face with his hand. "All this planning, for what? A mad dash inside Boshesh's headquarters?"

Xpen leaned forward in his seat, folding his hands. "Was there really going to be a better time?"

Edic snorted. "Would have been nice to at least pick the day we were going to die."

"Nobody's dying," I proclaimed. "We're just stepping up the timeline."

"Fine," he sighed, then grinned, ready for the coming battle. "What's the plan?"

Locking eyes with them, I leaned forward and explained my idea.

IVY

I glumly walked into the dining room with the plates in hand. I avoided eye contact with Boshesh's guards as I placed their dinner in front of them. I could tell they all had resentments against me, rightly so, but I kept reminding myself I had to do what I needed to survive.

I felt Boshesh stare at me as I walked back to the kitchen to grab more plates. I caught a glance of my arm, bruised from the beatings I had gotten earlier. My naked body was covered in blue and purple patches, which only seemed to make me more appealing to the beasts.

I carried the last two plates to the dining room and set them in front of Boshesh and his right-hand man. Boshesh glanced at me and frowned, his eyes almost filled with sorrow.

"Oh, Ivy," he said, glancing at my arm.

My chest filled with rage and fear. These brutes didn't have sympathy; all they knew was bloodlust and rage. I prepared myself for whatever trick he was about to play.

"Come here," Boshesh said, beckoning me to him.

I walked to him and stood with my arms behind my back. He glanced at my breasts and smiled.

"Turn around," he commanded softly.

I turned around, and he ran his fingertips over the bruises on my ass from the spankings. "This is unacceptable," he announced to the room.

I turned around; I was so shocked. Was he telling them to take it easy on me? I wondered where that sudden burst of empathy came from as I heard him stand and felt him bend me over. I winced in disbelief that, for a second, I thought he had some humanity in him.

“We have to leave full handprints on her,” Boshesh said as the guards laughed.

Boshesh spanked me hard, and I screamed out in pain. He trailed his fingertips along my back, tricking me with a soft touch before spanking me in the same place again. I winced and kept my mouth shut, hoping my resistance to the pain would bring him less joy.

Boshesh grabbed me by the hair and spun me around, pulling me in close. He brushed my hair behind my ear as I kept a straight face.

“Such a shame,” he said, trailing his finger along my lips. “Such a pretty girl.” His finger ran down my breasts and over my nipples, hardening them beneath his touch. “And such a great liar,” he growled, smacking me across the face.

I hit the floor and held the side of my face, holding back tears. I crawled to the corner and curled against the wall to soothe the pain.

“Ratten,” Boshesh said, looking at his right-hand man. “Eat,” Boshesh glanced at me as he sat in his chair. “I want to ensure there aren’t any more tricks in place.”

“Sir,” Ratten nodded as he took a bite of the steak.

The room was silent as they waited for the results. After a few moments, Ratten nodded to Boshesh, giving him the go-ahead to enjoy the next course of dinner. I watched them eat as I struggled to pick myself up from the floor.

“Oh, Ivy,” Boshesh said with a mouth full of food. “Bring me my wine.”

Without a word, I walked to the kitchen with a slight limp and got the bottle out. I set it on the counter and paused, placing my hands on the counter alongside it.

Looking at it, I felt defeat and rage overcome me. I had no energy to fight; it was best to bend to their will. Any wrong move would only mean more torture.

I debated drinking the wine myself, feeling the burning soothe my throat as the alcohol made me forget my circumstances. Knowing how the Oovarz were about their alcohol, I decided it was best not to take the chance.

I poured a glass of wine for Boshesh and delivered it to him. Once I set it on the table, he forcefully pulled me onto his lap and held the glass to Ratten for testing.

We watched as Ratten took a sip and handed the glass back to Boshesh, nodding again once he deemed it safe. Boshesh adjusted me in his lap, and I found my ass over his hard dick.

It was larger than I thought it would be. I imagined Oovarz as cowards, assuming their manhood would be disappointing. I realized I was wrong as Boshesh put the glass to his lips.

“So, girl,” Boshesh began, setting his glass on the table. “Are you ready to talk?”

I remained silent, watching all the guards stare at me. “About what?”

Boshesh pulled my hair, and I felt his breath on my cheek. “About how you escaped.”

“I told you,” I said, my voice strained. “You passed out; I went to get help.”

“And why — ” He pulled my hair harder as I screamed. “Would you want to help a beast who kidnapped you?”

I remained silent as I thought of a response. I figured I could give flattery a shot since I had nothing more left to lose.

“I don’t think you’re a beast,” I said through gritted teeth. “I was...” I paused. “Worried about you.”

“Worried?” Boshesh said softly, trailing his hand along my hip bone. “About me?”

“Yes,” I said, my voice straining harder.

He ran his fingertips along my inner thigh, getting closer to my vagina. I tried not to wince or move. The other women said flattery worked for them. Maybe if I acted as they did, I would have a chance.

“Liar,” Boshesh whispered before he threw me against the wall.

The guards laughed along with Boshesh as I lay on the floor, staring at the red carpet. I saw a small hole in the carpet, with a hardwood floor underneath. Dazed from the pain, I stared at it and wondered how the hole got there, drifting along on the edge of consciousness.

VEKEN

We approached the armory under the cloak of night. Hiding behind a wall we watched the guards switch shifts. The switch gave us a solid thirty seconds before the new guards arrived.

Edic motioned for us to follow him as he popped out from behind the wall, dashing to the armory entrance. Using his key, he unlocked the main door and ushered us inside, closing the door behind us quickly.

I felt around for a wall in the dark before Edic hit the lights. I glanced at the armory in front of us; a vast array of chest plates, helmets, gambesons carefully cut to accommodate a Tilarer's wings, and all sizes of boots lined the walls. They had every armor rank available, and the nanotechnology built into the materials would automatically shift and mold the garment to best fit the body structure of the wearer. I chose a style and went for a suit that seemed versatile enough to follow me into combat.

"No," Edic said, pointing at me.

I froze. "How else will we access the back of the observatory?" I asked, throwing my hands to the side. "The only way to the back of the building is through the west gates."

"These," Edic responded, walking to a collection of blue and silver armor.

"Those are level two," Xpen said with a chuckle.

“And they always station level two at the west entrance at night,” Edic responded firmly. “Because it’s not a main traveling gate.”

Edic threw the gambeson at Xpen, who caught it with a stare of disapproval. I walked over, dressed in armor, listening to the guards take their positions at the front of the armory.

“How are we going to get out of here?” I asked, sliding the chainmail over my head.

Edic nodded toward the back. “Back entrance,” he claimed as he slid on a pair of boots. “No one guards this place from the back.”

“Sounds like a security issue,” Xpen said teasingly.

With another look of disapproval, Edic dressed and walked to the weapons room. Grabbing three spears, he handed them to us. I took the weapon in my hand and exhaled deeply, preparing to kill Boshesh once and for all.

We exited the back of the armory, peeking our heads out the door to survey the walkway. Once Edic deemed it clear, we made our way toward the west gates, walking side-by-side with stoic faces.

The city was surprisingly quiet. Maybe I had never paid much attention before, but it was somewhat peaceful. As we continued walking, I caught a glimpse of the observatory atop the hill, and the soft feeling dissipated quickly.

“Good evening,” Edin said to the guards at the west gate.

The guards were young Tilarkers, no more than twenty years old. They jolted and pointed their spears in our direction.

“Who are you?” one of them asked as I watched his spear twirl in his hands.

“New assignments,” Edic said confidently, staring the kids down. “You’re stationed at the town square now.”

“No,” one of the young men said, stepping in front of the other and lifting his chin to meet Edic’s gaze. “That’s not what our commander told me.”

“New orders,” Edic growled. “Move,” he commanded loudly.

The young men looked at each other with wide eyes. Reluctantly, they abandoned their post as we stood in front of it, surveying the roads in front of us for any passersby. Once the men were out of sight, we opened the gates and closed them behind us quickly.

Making our way to the observatory, I played out the plan in my mind again. We had gone over it about five times at Edic and Xpen’s house before leaving. The only thing that relieved me at that moment was that Asia was safe at their house.

Hopefully, Ivy would be coming back with me when I returned to fetch the cat. A glum feeling struck me as I imagined what it would be like if Ivy could not make it back.

I shook my head, telling myself nothing had happened to Ivy; she was fine, and I was making worst-case scenarios. Boshesh liked playing with his captured playmates. He wouldn’t kill her immediately after she arrived.

It was cold comfort, but that was all I had.

We approached the observatory wall, and I led the group around the side to the acidic hole in the fence. I poked my head through, glancing at the back doors to find two Oovarz stationed in front of them. My heart sank as I realized Boshesh *had* doubled up on his security, protecting him at all hours of the day.

“Damn it,” I exclaimed quietly, crawling out of the bush to the outside barrier.

“What?” Xpen asked, concerned.

“Two guards at the back doors,” I stated, taking off my helmet.

The men took theirs off as well, glancing at each other. Edic sighed and ran his fingers through his hair while Xpen looked at the sky.

“Okay,” Xpen said, looking at me. “I’m going to walk around the side of the hedges here,” he stated quietly. “When I get far enough away, I’m going to scream. They’ll run for me, and you take your shot at breaking in.”

“No,” Edic said firmly. “I’ll go around the side and — ”

“You’re the stealthy one,” Xpen replied. “Trust me.” He grinned. “Chaos is my specialty.”

Xpen walked off around the hedges, and I sighed as I looked at the stars. Edic placed his hands on his hips and looked at the building.

“Is she worth it?” he asked to my surprise.

I glanced at the ground and thought of Ivy. There was no part of her I could imagine wouldn’t be worth this. I had broken into a high-security building twice, poisoned the leader of the Oovarz, enlisted my friends in a fight against tyrannical monsters, and pseudo-adopted her cat.

“Absolutely,” I stated seriously, looking at Edic. He simply nodded in return.

We heard a scream and armor clunking away from us around the side of the observatory. I poked my head through the brush again and motioned for Edic to follow me through the courtyard.

Once we were through the back doors, I ran up to the third level. Even the guards stationed outside Boshesh’s room had fled to deal with the sound. The Berzerker Oovarz are not known for their intelligence, but I had underestimated just how easily that little fact could be manipulated to our advantage.

I swung the door next to Boshesh’s chambers open to see Ivy chained to a bed, fast asleep. Guilt, rage and sorrow tugged at my heart as I walked toward her slowly, examining her body. She was naked again, this time covered in bruises and scrapes, and almost every part of her body was damaged from their abuse.

IVY

The sound of the door hitting the wall jarred me from my sleep. I shot up and was pulled down quickly by the chains cuffing my hands and feet to the bed.

“Ivy,” I heard Veken say softly.

“Veken?” I asked giddily as I began to smile.

The bruises on my face made me wince, and the smile quickly faded. Veken walked to the side of the bed and knelt, brushing my hair behind my ear.

“Ivy, I swear when I find them, I’ll kill them,” Veken stated as I watched his jawline flex.

“Veken,” I said weakly, unsure of what I was going to say.

“No, it’s okay,” he said, running his hand over the chains and strapping me to the bed. “Don’t speak; I’ll get you out of this.”

He leaned in and gently kissed me, trying to be mindful of my injuries. I wanted to pull him in and show him how I felt about him, but my body and mind were too weak to operate.

I laid still as I listened to Veken pull at the chains behind me. One tugged on my left wrist, and I cried slightly. Veken ran to the side of the bed again.

“Are you alright?” he asked, staring intensely into my eyes.

“Yes, just get me out of here,” I whispered.

“Alright,” Veken said softly, walking back to the chains.

He freed my feet, and I bent my knees for the first time in twelve hours. I would have thought that was the best feeling in the world until he unchained my hands and picked me up.

I felt the dull pain of my bruises from where he was holding me, but looking into his eyes made me immediately forget. I stared at his golden eyes and watched him smile. I had convinced myself he was never coming back, believing it was better to lose hope than be disappointed. Somehow, I found myself not surprised that I was wrong about him.

The door to the room burst open, and two Tilarkers walked through. I grasped Veken's neck hard.

"Veken," I uttered fearfully.

"No, no, it's okay," he assured me. "They're with me."

I looked at them and noticed their armor was loose. Veken was telling the truth; these were not guards Boshesh would employ in his lair.

"This is Xpen." Veken motioned to the bulky Tilarker on the right. "And Edic." He gestured to the other, who seemed worried.

"Veken, I stalled for as long as I could," Xpen said through his helmet.

"They know we're here," Edic stated, looking at the hallway outside the door.

"Let's go," Veken said firmly as he carried me out of the room.

I held onto Veken's neck tightly as the pain of my bruises returned with every step he made. I tried to drown it out by listening to his heartbeat through his armor. We descended the staircase and turned left, heading toward the back door.

I smiled as I thought of life with Veken outside that hellscape. Hoping I never had to see the inside of that observatory again, I let my muscles relax.

Sounds of guards running down the hallway shot through my relaxed muscles. I glanced over Veken's shoulder to see a group barreling toward us with their spears ready.

Xpen and Edic turned and walked behind us, prepared to fight the hoard. Veken continued to walk with me in his arms, picking up his pace as he made another turn along the hallway.

I was knocked to the ground and heard Veken grunt in pain. I tried to move my arms, but my body gave out. I lay on the floor, too weak to move my muscles. I stared at the wall and tried to keep myself awake as I overheard Boshesh begin to speak.

“That was a good try,” Boshesh chuckled. “But we were prepared for you this time.”

“Go to hell,” Veken responded furiously.

“Not before you,” Boshesh whispered as I heard a loud slam.

A burst of adrenaline ran through me. I mustered every ounce of energy I had to roll over and glance at the situation. Boshesh stood over Veken’s body as he lay on the floor, trying to push himself up.

“No,” I said softly, reaching for Veken’s hand.

Boshesh turned and stepped on my hand, pressing his weight onto it. I squealed and looked away before I felt his weight lift from me. I glanced back and saw Xpen and Edic pulling him off me and cuffing his hands behind his back.

Veken scrambled over to me and held me in his arms as we watched Boshesh pull from the grasp of the other two Tilarkers, his hands still cuffed. The beast whirled around, facing Xpen and Edic. I glanced at Edic’s hand and saw a remote. Edic smiled at Boshesh and held the remote up, pressing a button.

Boshesh shrieked and dropped to the floor. Veken held my head tightly against his chest as I watched the brute’s body vibrate uncontrollably, his eyes rolling back in his head.

“What is that?” I asked Veken over the sound of Boshesh’s screams.

“Electric handcuffs,” he stated, catching his breath. “He’s not going anywhere.”

Boshesh stopped shaking, and Xpen clamped his foot on the brute's throat. The beast opened his eyes slowly and grinned at Xpen as he began to chuckle.

“Did you really think I wouldn't call for reinforcements?” he asked slyly.

We heard the front doors slam, and shouting came from the front of the building. Veken set me on the floor and began to stand when Xpen held out a hand, motioning for him to stop.

“Stay,” he commanded, rounding the corner.

Edic stood over Boshesh with the remote, twirling it in his hands. Boshesh laughed as Veken moved us away from him, remaining on the floor.

“Edic!” Xpen exclaimed from the hallway.

Edic tossed the remote to Veken and rounded the corner, dashing to assist Edic. Veken picked me up and walked me away from Boshesh. He set me on a nearby couch, removed from Boshesh's limp form but where the monster would still remain in my line of sight.

“If he comes toward you,” Veken said firmly. “If he even flinches, you press this, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, taking the remote from him.

Veken began to turn and walk away, grabbing his spear off the floor and holding it to Boshesh's neck. I couldn't hear his words to the brute, but I assumed it was a threat. I propped myself on my elbow and observed Boshesh as sounds of fighting neared our section of the hallway.

VEKEN

I pulled my spear from an Oovarz chest, then elbowed another approaching from behind me. I held the head of my spear in one hand and a staff in the other. Slamming the staff against the other monster's neck, I pinned him roughly against the wall.

Xpen speared the beast in the side before turning to fight more guards. We were outnumbered by far, and it was hard to concentrate on counteracting blows when I thought of Ivy alone in the hallway with Boshesh.

Edic had assured me the handcuffs would work when we left his house. Being the genius that he was, I believed him. Now, it was only my paranoia of the worst happening to Ivy which made me doubt his abilities.

The Oovarz berzerkers tackled me to the ground. I kicked one of them out of the way and grabbed his spear as he fell, stabbing the other in the stomach. The second fell over in agony as I pulled the spear out and slashed the first across the throat.

As he bled out in front of me, I turned to help Edic, who was fending off a giant guard. I walked behind the enemy and tapped it on the back with the end of my spear. As it turned around, ready to swing at me, I speared it in the eye and watched it drop to the floor.

Edic nodded thanks as he continued to fight. I glanced at Xpen and watched him flawlessly kill three Oovarz within a

span of seconds. I ran to help Edic and found myself on a killing spree as well.

I had been in battle many times, but never like that. It was like a wave of dissociation crossed over me. The only thing I saw was Ivy, safe and protected. Nothing else mattered, especially not the lives of the horrid Oovarz.

As more blood spilled, I noticed Xpen joining us in our fight against the last of the Oovarz. We each killed two until they had all dropped to the floor. Breathing heavily, I surveyed the mass grave we had created.

My ears rang from the sounds of their screams, and I felt my mind go blank. I stared at one body, in particular, looking at me with wide, dead eyes.

“Veken.” I felt Xpen grab my shoulder. “Let’s take care of the last one.”

I nodded and walked alongside Edic and Xpen as we rounded the hallway. I saw Ivy on the couch, safely holding the remote while Boshesh lay on the floor. The beast looked at me with fear, and I snapped out of my daze.

I picked Boshesh up by his neck and slammed him against the wall, leaving a crack in the foundation.

“What was the plan here?” I snarled. “To abuse her until she died? Make her work for you to repay some bullshit debt?”

Boshesh chuckled, and rage filled my being. I slammed him harder into the wall and watched him grimace as his arms dug deeper into his back.

“Please,” I said with a sick grin on my face. “Tell me what’s so funny. I would love to know.”

“You asked what the plan was.” Boshesh struggled to respond under my grip on his throat.

“And what was it?” I shouted.

I glanced at his yellow, rotten teeth as the brute smiled. Sick of his games, I threw him to the floor and knelt on his neck.

He continued to chuckle. “She was going to be mine,” he said, staring me down. “In every way.”

My mind played a vision of Boshesh sleeping with Ivy. I imagined his intentions as he walked into her room naked, how horrified she would have been as he came toward her. I saw all the details of his heinous, hypothetical act in a second.

I looked at Ivy, who stared at me with fear. Standing from where he lay, I walked to Ivy and knelt in front of her.

“Hey,” I said, gently pressing my forehead against hers. “He can never hurt you again.”

She nodded as a tear flowed down her cheek. She glanced at him in silence, and my heart dropped to my gut as I raced toward him.

“What did you do to her?” I asked, stomping on his neck.

“No, Veken!” Ivy cried. I turned to face her. “He didn’t touch me.” Her eyes fell on him with sadness. “Not like that.”

“This is ridiculous,” Xpen stated angrily. Shoving me aside, he picked Boshesh up by his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” Edic asked nervously.

“Giving Veken the pleasure.” Xpen grunted as he adjusted Boshesh to stand in front of me. “Of ending this beast.”

Xpen handed me his spear and positioned Boshesh in front of me. The brute tried to look at Ivy before I shoved him against the wall, facing away from her.

“Oh no,” I said quietly through gritted teeth. “She’s not going to be the last thing you see.”

I positioned the spear perfectly in my hand, ready to drive it through his chest. My hand gripped the spear’s shaft so tightly I thought it would snap in half.

“The last thing you’re going to see,” I continued. “Is me.”

“Dammit, Veken, enough already!” Xpen exclaimed in frustration, walking toward him. “Stop narrating. Slice his throat and get it over with!”

I held my spear to the beast's throat, pleased that I would be the reason for his death. I thought of what it would feel like to have his murder on my record.

“Do it,” Boshesh urged with a grin.

I pulled back my arm and began to strike at the monster when Ivy screamed from behind me.

“No!” she cried.

I froze before I slashed Boshesh's throat and turned my head to look at her sitting on the couch. I was surprised I could hear her over the sound of my head pounding from my racing heart. Her eyes were wide with fear.

“No,” she said, softer that time. “Don't do it.”

IVY

It took some coaxing, but I convinced Veken and his allies to hold Boshesh. They promised to keep him still, which wouldn't be difficult as he was still in handcuffs and it was three versus one.

I didn't explain myself, much to Xpen's annoyance. I simply said I would be right back. Then I went back to the room where the Oovarz boss had kept me tied up.

Here, he had stored the remnants of his previous 'toys'. I searched around for some spare clothes that fit and used the momentary distraction to calm my pounding heartbeat.

By some insane miracle, we had managed to do what no others had done on the West Coast. We had cornered one of the most powerful Oovarz leaders, and now had him at our mercy. With the precision of a surgical strike, Veken and a couple of others had single-handedly quelled the Oovarz insurrection of one of the lost regions of LA in an attempt to rescue me.

My hands still shook. I wasn't sure if it was from anxiety, fear, or excitement. Only I knew that I had faced enough sick torture at the hands of the beast chained in the other room, and I knew that Veken would only hold back for so long on exacting his own revenge.

I picked out the rest of the clothes quickly. Ripped leggings with shorts and a cropped top didn't cover much — but it *covered*, and that mattered. No one was ever going to see me naked again unless I wanted them to.

And the only person I wanted was Veken.

When I stepped out another moment later, I was more composed and prepared. The sight that greeted me was a salve to my nightmares. Three Tilarer men, which included my lover, had bound the Oovarz leader, holding him pinned to the floor. I approached the scene, and glared down at Boshesh with open hatred across my features.

“You asked us to hold him Ivy, now what?” Veken asked patiently. One of the other men huffed as Boshesh struggled against his restraints but Veken’s golden eyes remained composed.

I kept my eyes locked to his own. “Do you still have a weapon?” I asked tersely.

He nodded, and reached one hand down to his pocket. All the while, he still maintained a strong grip on the line that held the Oovarz leader. From his pocket he produced a large hunting knife which was sharp and elongated, just shy of a short-sword. Without a word of question, he handed the blade over to me.

His show of trust in me made my heart swell. In resolute silence I accepted the dagger, and turned back to Boshesh who tried to glare fearfully up at me. A moment later, he felt my response to his attempt at intimidation. I stepped up and kicked him hard, right between his legs.

Never before had I heard an Oovarz wail in agony. The three Tilarer men and I all held smiles that matched. To see my captor, a monster who had brought so much suffering on others, humiliated and on the ground was enough for me to practically sing with joy.

Instead, I brought my blade to the underside of his jaw.

“You’re a monster, Boshesh,” I spoke calmly, as if detached. “You’re a cruel and vicious thing, and you’re going to die like the pathetic beast you are. Here and now.”

Edic flicked a glance over at Veken. “Should we really let her be the one — ”

“Someone needs to hold his head,” I interrupted, closing the debate before it could be opened. I had to be the one to do this. For myself, for the women who had been broken by him before me, and for all the other humans who had perished at the hands of any Oovarz.

Xpen grabbed Boshesh by the chin without hesitation, lifting back to expose the bulge of the Oovarz leader’s throat. Even in his last moments, Boshesh snarled at me, to try to frighten me into his release.

“You slave!” he spat. “You wretched bit — ”

I brought the blade straight down to pierce into his throat and drove it all the way through. Boshesh choked to death on his own words and blood. His swears turned into gurgles as he was silenced forever.

The moment I tore through his flesh, ichor sprayed across me, but I failed to notice it. I was entirely caught up in snuffing out the leader’s life. We all paused to absorb the enormity of what had just unfolded, which marked a potential end to the terror of LA. As the Oovarz blood pooled onto the floor, the realization of what we had done set in.

We had incited rebellion. Yes, the remaining Oovarz had strength and numbers, but this act alone might rally plenty of humans and Tilarker soldiers alike. Sure, there were traitors who had sided with the Oovarz for glory and gain, but they wouldn’t stay against a united uprising.

But we couldn’t live in fear forever. We had to draw the line and make a stand somewhere.

At the very least, the Oovarz of Griffith territory were now leaderless, disorganized, and vulnerable to attack. Everyone who saw the start of a new future stood in that room, looking back and forth at each other.

“We should go,” Veken spoke first in a low, calm voice. I barely heard him over the dull ringing in my ears, but the other men responded immediately. They overturned Boshesh’s sagging corpse, and set about covering it with sheets to hide the stains.

Meanwhile, Veken grabbed my arm and pulled me close. The press of his warm body seemed to shake me from my stupor, and I curled into the circle of his embrace.

“It’s alright,” he murmured, caressing through my tangled hair. “You’re safe now.”

I shuddered into his reassurance. “I-I didn’t know it would be like that,” I stammered.

The sensation was strange. I had felt so in control moments ago, yet now I was a mess. It was a hollow, bitter victory, but it was a victory all the same.

“It’s over now, and I’ve got you,” he said more firmly. “I know you needed to do that. But right now, we need to get out of here.”

I did hear his words more clearly at that point, and nodded in assent. He kept me close, and I felt safe in the pressure of his grip as he guided me out of the room.

The other Tilarker men followed closely behind while Veken checked for guards. Together, we could only hope for another miracle as we all moved to make our escape.

VEKEN

The compound was complex, but stealthily we navigated our way through. We dodged what guards we could, and were quick and silent with the ones we could not. Although I only had a basic knowledge of the back area that Boshesh had claimed as his personal chambers, I was able to swiftly guide us around and out.

Edic and Xpen had maintained an alert sense of calm, which I appreciated in the moment.

Every few seconds, I stole a glance down at Ivy. She no longer trembled, and remained resolute, but I was worried her calm demeanor could easily crack. But she had done a hard thing, and I was incredibly proud of her for it.

She had earned her retribution and gained her justice. Ivy had unlocked a strength within herself that she had not yet realized. I secretly vowed I would show her how to harness that strength.

In that regard, we were a perfect match for one another. I almost halted in realization, but I quickly remembered our mission and continued at a brisk pace. There would be time for that later. As we traveled down the hill where the old observatory rested, I reeled in my thoughts.

The universe had truly created a perfect mate for me. One to compliment every one of my rough angles with a smooth edge. I did not feel hindered by her weaker, human constitution. My need to protect her allowed me to hone my skill with a finesse that was unmatched.

All of my priorities had shifted to ensuring her protection and happiness. That alone had created a determination within me to fight and strive in a way I had never considered before. Ivy had quickly become my whole world. I would burn down anything, which included this city if necessary, to keep her safe.

Luckily, the observatory was just north of the center of the city. We merely needed to get to the old swath of highway that was marked with the 'Pasadena' sign. From there, we could head northeast, away from the city and Oovarz territory.

Getting out would be no easy feat, that I already knew. But I was ready to cut through an entire swath of Oovarz hordes in order to protect Ivy. I knew Xpen was impatient to get back to his own mate Dama, and Edic had easily accepted coming along for the ride.

While we cut our way through the property, we made sure to reinforce ourselves and equip as much of an arsenal as we could carry. Xpen had seemed fine with blowing a hole right through the walls of Griffith territory. in order to escape, but Edic and I suggested a more stealthy approach. The less attention we attracted, the better our chances would be for survival out in the wild.

I also helped reinforce Ivy's clothing with some shin guards and shoes. The shoes were a size too big, but durable enough for the journey ahead. She shot me a look of gratitude that made something in my chest lighten. I passed her a few more knives as well, satisfied with her new armament.

We crossed over the highway and dropped into the nearby waterway in time to avoid a returning scout patrol. The night was our ally and cover as we slowly made our way through the maze of city rubble. The ruins of a once-bright and bustling metropolis had been re-purposed to shelter the refugees and laborers that had become the slave playthings of the tyrant Boshesh.

He had died at our hands but we could not celebrate until we got into the safety of the wild. The Oovarz had mainly kept to the cities upon their invasion. They had not had enough time

to venture into the more rural, isolated areas of the planet. Therefore, I had reasoned our surest bet was to make it to the edge of the city, where Dama waited. From there, we would break for the wilderness.

Our first meeting with trouble was a random patrol that made their way through an old burial site we had ducked through. I had Ivy shelter herself behind one of the grave markers. Meanwhile, my companions and I took down the Oovarz, plus the two other Tilarker guards in the area. Boshesh must have heightened security in our absence. *A fact that mattered little now*, I thought gleefully as I recalled his bloated corpse.

The berserkers gave us some trouble but with a quick slash I silenced the last before he could call for reinforcements. Edic and Xpen were capable and adept fighters who had no issue dispatching their opponents. After they had been dealt with, we threw their unconscious bodies into a mausoleum Ivy had spotted.

From there, we continued eastward. Not too far beyond that, it seemed we reached the highway at last. My friends clasped each others' shoulders, and I spun Ivy in a quick twirl of joy.

However, daylight had begun to break, which meant that our window for a stealthy escape had grown short. I knew we could travel north and go up to the outside of the Pasadena area, but I could no longer guarantee we would be able to do it without a high-risk fight on our hands.

It was Xpen who came up with the solution. He had worked with a travel convoy for a while, and had delivered supplies in and out of L.A. before, so he knew the routes well. Our comrade had the suggestion to steal one of the convoy trucks on the morning run from the city. We would look less suspicious, and make better time if we had good transport at our disposal.

Initially, I worried for Ivy's safety but she agreed to the plan readily enough. Edic also acquiesced easily. I think he enjoyed the risk factor.

It was a plan that involved a little bit of patience, but a convoy soon approached. We acted with a synchronicity of a hastily-formed team.

Our prey left us with an old, banged-up human vehicle. The label declared it to be something called a 'Jeep.' It had seen better days but the tires were good.

With that, we were on our way. The sun washed away the eerie shadows cast by the streetlights. With them gone, our fears seemed to dissipate as well.

Dawn crested as we passed the sign that marked Los Angeles city limits. Xpen floored the pedal. As the wheels spun, Edic gave a loud whoop of shout at our victory, while I leaned over to kiss Ivy in her seat. With Boshesh dead, and the city in our rear view, we were finally free.

IVY

We reached the far outskirts of the city in the early hours of the new morning. The two other Tilarker men took watch point at the front of the vehicle, while Veken and I took up the rear guard in the backseat.

Well, Veken might have been a rear guard. I pressed my head to his shoulder, only to hear his soft, whispered command. “Rest.”

I relaxed into the long line of his body. Somehow, within moments, I had fallen asleep. With my sore feet eased and the promise of safety ahead, I dozed off as exhaustion overtook me.

The men appeared to need very little direct communication between them. I noted they worked well as a team. They seemed to be heading in a predetermined direction, and I was too tired at that point to do anything other than trust they knew where to go.

Besides, after forty-eight hours of hell, I was reunited with Veken at last. I trusted him with my life. He had helped me, rescued me and returned for me in my darkest hour.

I finally woke as we rolled to a stop outside a dingy but still operational gas station. As I blinked into Veken’s goldeneyes, I was hit with an epiphany. *With him, I would go anywhere.*

“Can you stay awake for a little while?” he asked. “We need to refuel, for the road ahead. Also, I brought you something.”

I perked up at that last bit. Regardless of my trust in the Tilarker, he didn't strike me as the type to stop and pick up a gift on the way to a rescue mission.

With his words, I squirmed into a more upright position. He motioned out the window. I glanced back over my shoulder, only to see nothing other than another female Tilarker that approached. She had curved horns, skin the color of a sunset, wild hair that feathered outward, and a satchel slung across her body.

A familiar, multicolored satchel that squirmed. I recognized it immediately.

“ASIA!”

Unable to contain my excitement, I jumped up, springing out of the vehicle before anyone knew what had happened. Without compunction, I ran up to the woman and threw open the carrier to find bright, slanted eyes that blinked up at me.

“Asia! My pretty kitty! The best kitten in the whole world!”

I continued my cooing as I reached in to nuzzle my beloved companion. The large Siamese reached up and swatted at my temple, annoyed it had been disturbed from its nap. I resolutely continued my affection. All was right with the world.

A throaty chuckle close by pulled me away from my feline reunion. Asia snuggled back into the satchel. As I looked up, I met with the female Tilarker up close. Her eyes glittered and twinkled as she smiled at me.

“Although it may not act like it, I think your little friend missed you,” the woman spoke in a friendly tone. She adjusted the carrier and passed it over to me, before she clasped my forearm in an open grip. “My name is Dama. I am mated to Xpen.”

“Thank you, Dama.” I returned her greeting, a motion I had seen the other Tilarkers do before. It was how allies recognized one another.

“My name is Ivy. I appreciate that you’ve looked after Asia and kept my cat safe.”

“No no, I can only take some of the credit,” Dama returned, and raised her spurred hand in an easygoing gesture. “It was your mate who did most of the heavy work. He made sure your pet was fed and watered, all the way up until they left for the raid.”

By that point, Veken had also climbed out of the vehicle to join us. He gathered the satchel and deposited it in the backseat, then returned and wrapped his long fingers around my waist. Now that I was more awake, his touch sent a delighted shiver of awareness along my spine.

He leaned in close and nuzzled my hair. “Did you enjoy your surprise?” he asked softly. It was a simple act of affection to anyone who gazed at us, like Dama, but I could feel his fingers graze lower as they stroked the tops of my thighs.

I had known that Veken was a clever man. More so than the others around him gave him credit for. To think that would be clever enough to use his fingers so boldly, where anybody could see, sent a thrill through me that dripped onto my thighs.

A simple look and a few touches were all this man needed to have me wanting to curl over him with desire. Dama must have seen something in the look on my face, because her smile suddenly turned sly.

“Veken, Ivy must be worn from her ordeal. Why don’t I go say hello to my mate while you take her for a walk to stretch her legs and restore her energy?” Her suggestion was innocent enough, had it not accompanied a devilishly mischievous expression.

At this point, I hardly cared about being polite. I *had* been through an ordeal — and I had been wet for Veken since I witnessed him pin down that wretched Boshesh.

Veken seemed to be of the same mind. His grip tightened as he subtly rubbed himself behind me. “That sounds excellent Dama, thank you for your advice.”

That was the only civility he maintained before he dropped the pretense altogether and pulled me away from the sound of Dama's low laughter. I almost wanted to chastise him, but the only sound that left me was a sharp gasp of lust as he pushed me up onto the building wall.

We were on the far side now, away from the eyes of our companions, but not far enough to mask sound. I felt another tremor of desire at the thought. Veken crowded against me and pulled down my leggings before he hiked my legs up around his waist.

My eyes rolled back as I could feel his full length pressed along me. The friction of his pants as they rubbed my clit sent a shock of pleasure through my body which made me arch into his lean and muscled form. I panted lustfully, and couldn't really be bothered to care about oxygen when I felt his hands on me.

He pulled impatiently at my top, lifting it to expose my breasts. The nipples were already puckered by his greedy touch. All the while, he never ceased the grind of his hips, making thrusts that had me writhing against the cinder-block. He growled as he kissed along my neck, a sound that settled delightfully in my pelvis.

"I am going to take you Ivy, *here and now*," he muttered, sinfully low. He followed his promise with a soft bite to my collarbone. He then soothed it with his long tongue.

"And you're going to take all of me. You will take me so well, that years from now, all you will remember of this day is the bliss I am going to give you. Are you ready for me?"

"A-ah- yess," I answered back, already half-delirious with rapture. I didn't care at all if the others were listening. A part of me wanted them to know who was making me wail with joy. Who I truly belonged beside.

The moment he took to pull down his pants felt like an eternity. I only saw the patterns of his erected flesh for a moment before he pushed inside me. With one long, smooth thrust, his entire member was engorged inside of me, turgid

and swelled. With no time to recover, he slid halfway out, only to sharply thrust back in.

I moaned and writhed on top of him, lost to sensation. His passes into me brought a pleasure so sharp it bordered on pain. It was a feeling I had never experienced before Veken, and it made me come alive with craven lust. I threw my head back and sank my hips deeper.

“No one can touch you like this, can they?” He grabbed at my breast, a hardened nail scraping tenderly along my nipple. That was followed with another thrust.

“No one can come inside you like I can, can they?” Another deep thrust followed his words.

I shook my head, too overwhelmed to speak. He smiled almost cruelly at my blissed-out expression, then gripped my calves to spread my legs wide. That was my only warning as he began to hammer wildly into me.

The scrape of the stone surface at my back was the only thing that grounded me in reality. I could barely hear my stuttered gasps and breathy whines over the surmounting joy between my legs. Heat glued our hips together, wet and sticky as he slammed me into the wall.

I was too stretched out on bliss to notice any discomfort. All I could do was beg in short whispers for more, harder. He obliged unrelentingly. The only motion I could make was to let gravity drop my hips deeply onto his thick cock.

Quickly, with the forceful energy that drew us to each other, my bliss reached its peak. I started to shout then was cut off as the ecstasy rolled through me in tidal waves. The pleasure I felt as he filled me overwhelmed me. Even though the blinding pleasure of my orgasm had me drenched, feeling his climax pulled me into another, more gentle state of elation.

Together, we leaned against the wall, until the stretch of my legs became too much. I shifted to mask my discomfort, but Veken was clever and he easily caught my attempt. With a chuckle, he set me down, keeping his forehead rested against mine.

I closed my eyes and settled into the affection while we took a moment to regain our breath. Silence blew through the air, until I let out a tiny huff.

“So,” I began, shattering the tender moment. “Do you think anyone heard us?” I teased.

Veken pulled me back against him in a fierce embrace, then threw back his head and gave a great roar of laughter.

VEKEN

I set Ivy down and watched as she pushed herself gingerly from the wall. The stone was hard, and I had been unrelenting. I knew there would be marks across her back later.

Perhaps I should have been remorseful or at least more careful with my mate. Instead, I only felt the joyful pleasure of having Ivy within my embrace again. This time, I would not let her go, or be so careless as to lose her.

She was special to me. With her, I tasted a *real future*.

Once separated, I passed her my shirt to clean up. She shot me a look of gratitude that made my heart beat faster. After, we returned to our new-found comrades who all wore matching grins. Mercilessly, I rolled my eyes, while I secretly enjoyed Ivy's embarrassed flush.

Their teasing meant nothing to me, and I knew that Ivy had enjoyed herself as well. She also chose to ignore their jeers and went to tend to her feline companion. I walked over to the others, in order to assess the situation.

"We shouldn't stay here much longer," Edic began, as we all stood around the hood of the jeep.

I agreed, as did Xpen and Dama. Theirs was a unique relationship. Tilarker women were rare, and even rarer to find away from our home world. Yet here she stood alongside her mate, dressed in combat gear, equipped and battle-ready.

Fleetingly, I wondered how Ivy and I would look, standing alongside each other, mated and free. How it would be if we

were *truly free*. Beyond being on the run; beyond the dangers of Oovarz raids and tithes. If we found somewhere we could start a new life.

“There are rumors of a place like that,” Dama answered. I was startled and realized I had spoken my train of thought aloud.

Xpen nodded in confirmation. “A place that can be found if you travel east. But before the fortresses of the coast.”

“There were a few scattered reports of a few humans and Tilarkers in isolated encampments up in the highlands. South of the Dakota Mountains, according to the old human maps. The rumor has it that they resisted an early patrol’s offer to relocate them in safer structures further east,” he concluded.

Edic chimed in. “There were some pretty large-scale terraforming projects back on the East Coast when we first arrived here. The landscape was heavily altered to buffer and stall the invasion. There should be huge swaths of land that are unreachable and difficult for the enemy to get through.”

“Perfect for hiding. If we manage to shake whatever the Oovarz decide to send at us, we could actually get there,” he added. “It should be challenging terrain for anyone. Not an easy trek with limited resources.”

“I can help with that,” Dama interjected easily. “I stashed a prepped mobile unit a few leagues off from the road here,” she explained. Upon seeing our looks of surprise at the information, she continued.

“When Xpen explained what had happened, I had a feeling it would come to this. I also tried to pack plenty of supplies, in anticipation that we might be in hiding for a while. We may have to make it stretch and be creative but it should work.”

We continued to look astounded, and Edic spoke first. “How did you manage to get a hold of an entire hovercraft?”

“What? You guys weren’t the only one building a network for years,” Dama replied with a casual shrug. “It’s not a large one, and she’s an older model, but it should be enough to get us where we need to get going.”

“Thank you, Dama,” I breathed in appreciation. With this, I could get Ivy to safety, faster. We now had a plan.

Xpen beamed at his mate. He smiled proudly and kissed her shoulder in affection. “You always were the clever one,” he complimented with sudden charm.

I had only before seen the fierce, warrior side of my comrade. As I witnessed the easy way in which he interacted with his mate, I thought of Ivy, and how things would be between us in the days to come. Could we share something like the connection they had?

“Is there a name for this place we’re going?” I asked instead. “Something that will be a good reference point for Ivy.”

“The land is different now,” Xpen said as he rolled up the map. “But before the invasion, the humans called the area the Badlands.”

We stayed out of sight while Edic and Xpen retrieved the hovercraft. I stayed behind and kept a close eye on Ivy while she tended to her cat. Eventually, the others returned, and the five of us were headed on our way.

Dama hadn’t exaggerated when she claimed to have procured an older model. The vehicle was practically an antique but the fuel packs lasted an extended length. Another benefit was that this car would attract less attention than the loud Jeep we had stolen and used for escape. We kept her lifted at a low altitude which allowed us to stay off most radar, and let us go off-road while we maintained our line of vision.

As we traveled, the landscape we had known melted away, from rugged hills to sharp peaks. From there, mountain cliffs gave way to desert plains, with vast empty wastes and pitted grasslands. We didn’t stay for long in these lands and kept our guard up for the host of enemies at our backs.

Ivy didn’t say much during our journey. She kept an eye on the shifting territory, like the rest of us. I imagined she wasn’t keen on the idea of another ambush, nor did she seem to mourn the former life she had left behind. While the hovercraft

powered east, I watched over her and hoped that the life I was offering would be enough for her.

Never before had I felt the need to care and provide for another. Not the way I felt with Ivy. The more we remained near each other, that invisible bond between us only seemed to grow. I found myself wanting to explore every aspect of the petite, human woman by my side.

As the night fell upon us once more, we cautiously made our way back to one of the long stretches of highway. The roads were more exposed and left us vulnerable, but they offered remnants of a fallen civilization that we could take advantage of.

We pulled up to an old motel, long abandoned and derelict. However, there was running water, and solid walls that still held. Together and safe, we all settled in for the night.

IVY

Xpen and Dama both stashed away the hovercraft while Edic did a perimeter sweep. There had been little opportunity to stop and rest along the way. I took the time to stretch and take care of nature's business behind a scraggly bush. Asia stayed snuggled in the satchel, the only member of our makeshift group who was completely nonplussed by our circumstances.

We had parked somewhere outside of what I believed was Oklahoma, at some derelict motel that would serve as our shelter for the night. The glow of a bold, red sunset lanced across the sky, and I thought about the monumental changes that had upturned my life in the past month.

If I had known what my life would become before the tithe, would I have done things differently? I wondered. When I thought about all the things that had occurred, and that I had been subjected to, I still shuddered. I had been imprisoned and enslaved. I had been forced to go on the run and had even learned to kill.

Veken stepped out from one of the rooms, striking an imposing figure against the peeled paint. "There is running water in this one," he gestured inside. "Also electricity, but it might attract attention to us. I wouldn't recommend using it."

I looked over at him as he leaned against the door-frame. His huge form made a silhouette of cut muscles and sharp angles, the tips of his wings peeking up over his shoulders. More than the body of lost god, however, was a man who had become my protector and my own savior.

In that moment, I knew I would face any nightmare if it meant that this dark angel remained by my side. Never before had someone been so committed to my safety and well being. Veken had proven time and again that he delivered on his promises. Being around him made me feel powerful and secure in a way I had never felt before in my entire life.

Without hesitation, I walked over to him and reached up to pull him down by his neck. He obliged me willingly as I brought our lips together in a slow, languid kiss. He returned the kiss just as easily. His tongue slid over mine in a dance that had us both out of breath when we parted a moment later.

“Thank you,” I said softly, as I gazed into his flecked irises. “It’s perfect.”

“Not yet,” he replied as he disengaged my arm from around him. He clasped my hand with gentle pressure as he stepped away from the wall. “Go on in and get comfortable. I’ll finish helping the others.”

I nodded, too tired to do much else besides. Once inside the small room, I found that the tap water did indeed work and proceeded to take an extended shower. There wasn’t much in the way of luxuries but I dried as best as I could, then beat out a few blankets to get the dust off the bed.

When was the last time I felt the comforts of a real bed? I rested heavily for a few moments and only stirred upon Veken’s return. There were a few light thuds as he moved around the room, then a flicker and the soft glow of small warmth.

I opened my eyes to find several candles scattered over the room. Some sat on the nightstand, and some were isolated on the floor. It bathed the room in a pale, amber light, as if this small, golden circle was all that kept the darkness back.

Veken was at the center of it all, smoke curling around his frame from the aftermath of a struck match. Without a word, he shucked his pants and climbed into the space beside me, the both of us across cool sheets. Everything about him was mesmerizing. I found I could not look away.

From the way he regarded me, it appeared Veken felt the same. He reached over to caress me, tracing a sensuous trail along my face and jawline, down my neck, over the top of my breasts and rib cage, which finally settled in the hollow of my waist.

“You are so beautiful,” he spoke after a moment. “I was never going to let him have you.”

“He could never have taken me,” I breathed in answer. I returned his affection by tracing patterns along his pecs. Even as I spoke, I looked him in the eye.

“Not when I belong to you.”

Veken surged into me in response, his lips crashing against mine. He pulled our bodies even closer, and ran rough kisses along the path he had previously marked out with his fingertips.

I moaned and arched, my body bent as if pulled to his. He moved to settle over me but pulled up and away, out of my desirous reach. There was a whine in the back of my throat as I mourned the loss.

“Shh,” Veken replied as he moved lower. His hands expertly parted my legs, and he settled in the cradle, even as he pulled my mound to his lips.

“Let me take care of you,” he murmured, eyelids lowered. “Let me taste you.”

With that, he began to devour me. Pressed against my most intimate parts, he feasted on my juices and pulled them from the deepest reaches inside me. I writhed on the bed, overwhelmed with pleasure.

His tongue worked inside with all the ardor and firmness of a man starved. He licked and sucked as I thrashed between pleas of ‘yes,’ and ‘more!’ The throb of his wet muscle had me dripping all over my thighs, as pleasure crested over me.

How had I lived before, without knowing there existed such bliss? I cried out as I climaxed, and Veken kissed me deeply to keep my voice muted.

As I came down from my orgasmic high, my ears caught onto a slight squeaking sound. That was when I realized that Veken was thrusting into the mattress, a desperate attempt to relieve his lust as he witnessed my rapture.

How could someone so much stronger than me make me feel so omnipotent? “Come here,” I whispered, too blissed-out to pull him to me.

He shifted upward, anyway, and drew me in for another all-consuming kiss as he thrust his long shaft deep within me. I gasped at the full sensation, breaking the kiss. He only held onto me and pressed further, until he was fully seated inside.

I panted harshly against his chest, fascinated as I watched him disappear into me. I felt full and stretched, practically impaled on his lengthy prick. The sensation had me rolling my eyes back in a throbbing pleasure that caused my legs to shake.

“M-move,” I begged as my hips unconsciously jerked along his length. My body felt as if it was being tortured with bliss — given a teasing taste, then pulled back.

Veken silently acquiesced and began to thrust. With rough, short, grinding movements that stimulated my clit, he soon had me arching once more.

I panted and groaned, and he only gave into my body’s guttural demands. With a slight adjustment, he gripped my thigh and pushed me into the mattress. He changed his momentum to strong thrusts that pulled pleasure from me like a bow across a fine instrument.

There was nothing I could do but yield to the force of his desire. I gave in willingly. I pushed my hips against his in encouragement, and he took my appreciation with enthusiasm.

He swore in Tilarken and bit the inside of his cheek, before he increased the power of his strokes. I froze in agonized delight as he struck a spot deep within me that had stars exploding behind my eyes.

With no time for a warning, elation ripped through me as another powerful climax sent fissures of joy along my nerves.

My body rolled into his and then he was gone as well, the heat of his release dripping out of me and onto the bed.

I breathed harshly. My body sweated and ached in the best possible way. We spent a moment in silence, wrapped up in each other before I shifted, then stilled.

Veken still pulsed inside me, just as hard as when he first entered. I could feel him rigid and strong, and I shivered in delight. He cocked an eyebrow down at me and gave me a smug smile.

“You enjoy taking me, don’t you, Ivy?” he asked slyly. I glanced down to where our bodies were joined, slick and warm, letting the press of my pelvis provide an answer.

He bit back a groan, and began to slide inside me once more. “You’re so tiny, at first I couldn’t believe your body would accept mine.”

“But you take it so well, as if you were born for it. *My mate.*” He growled filthy praise in my ear, and I keened in delight. Never once did he cease his movements.

“Everything I have is yours, Ivy, my love.” He panted along my jaw, and I delivered soft kisses to his cheek. We moved together now, in a harmonious push and pull that had ecstasy sparking through me.

“I will not leave this room until you are satisfied,” he vowed.

His dark promise broke me. Rapture as I had never known raged through my body, starting a chain from deep within and spilling outward over my legs and from my throat as I gasped my love for him.

Ecstasy shattered over us and danced through my being as I reached the heavens. Veken followed, and we spent the rest of the night surrounded by each other, oblivious for once to the rest of the world. The sun would rise the next morning, and we would continue onward to brave the new dangers and perils that awaited us.

But in this moment, for truly the first time, our entire world consisted of each other. It was a connection we explored

throughout the entire, sweet night.

VEKEN

Several days had passed on our journey to the Badlands. I stepped out of the hovercar, currently parked in a small field while everyone else slept.

I sought out to investigate a loud crash that had awoken me. Opening the main door, I quietly stepped onto the grass and dirt, glancing at my surroundings. I saw no movement in the trees around me but heard the sound continue further away. I walked back to the vehicle to grab my spear. Armed, I headed once more toward the noise.

There was a dense cluster of bushes closer to the source of the sound. Along with the constant crashing, I could hear what sounded like the screams of a younger woman.

I crouched behind the bushes and heard low, husky laughter over the screams. I pushed my hands through the bush and peered through the leaves.

I had stumbled upon an Oovarz berserker camp. At least forty of the beast-like fighters were sitting on stumps and logs in front of their tents, gleefully drinking their beer and liquor as others put on a show of torturing humans. A woman was chained to a board in front of the party, with a line of more humans standing by her side.

I watched as a high-ranking Oovarz whipped and hit the woman. The abuse was bad enough, but she also appeared to be heavily pregnant. The very idea set a ball of rage to boil in my stomach. The bystanders cheered the beast on, raising their glasses to the woman's pain.

The woman raised her head slowly and locked eyes with me in the bushes. I had only seen that look once before, a stare of defeat and shame. She could have been Ivy if I hadn't gotten her out of Boshesh's observatory.

If she could have screamed for me, she would have. The Oovarz monster forced her to look at him as he continued his torture. I backed out of the bushes and returned to the vehicle quickly. The rage that clouded me needed to be expressed, and those brutes deserved all of it and then some.

I leaned into the vehicle. "Ivy," I said, shaking her leg. I only felt a little guilt at disrupting her sleep. I knew she wouldn't want to miss this.

She groaned and opened her eyes slightly. "What, Veken?"

"You need to get up," I said firmly. "There's an Oovarz camp nearby, and they're torturing humans."

Her eyes widened, and she shot up as she yawned. "We have to get the others."

"I will," I said as I kissed her forehead.

While Ivy got dressed in armor provided by the craft and Dama, I awoke Xpen, Dama, and Edic. They were all too happy to help me stop the monsters nearby.

We dressed in an assortment of armor. I glanced at Ivy, watching her slide on her protective vest. I wanted to tell her to stay here, to keep safe, but I knew this was something she needed to do. She wanted to reclaim her life from the horrid Oovarz, who had destroyed nearly everything that she loved. I couldn't, or wouldn't, stand in the way of that.

I decided I would keep a close eye on her as we crept toward the camp. We reached the wall of bushes, and the screaming and jeering hit our ears. We lined up against the bushes and peeked through them slowly, observing the scene.

"Okay," I whispered, pulling out from the bushes and watching the others do the same. "Ivy and Dama, take this," I said, handing them one of the two cans of accelerant I had taken from a tool box on the hovercraft. "Pour them over the

bottom of the tents. Edic, Xpen, and I will storm the camp and fight them off.”

I motioned for Edic to give me his spear as I opened the other can of fuel. I dipped his spear in it and handed the can to Dama.

“Edic, you stick your spear in the main fire and follow their trail while Xpen and I distract the others,” I continued.

The group nodded in agreement. I motioned for Ivy and Dama to start pouring the liquid on the tents. It was the only task I could think of to give them that would hopefully keep them out of the primary battle while still filling Ivy’s need to externalize her anger.

I glanced at Xpen and Edic, and they grinned. We stood and screamed as we stormed the camp. I took the right-hand side while Xpen took the left, hoping to draw the monsters from the central fire burning in the middle of their tents.

The first few kills were easy, as the beasts were unsuspecting of our arrival. After the first five, the real battle started. Through slashing throats and dodging spears, I noticed Edic lighting his spear in the middle of the camp.

An Oovarz approached him, and Edic stabbed him in the face with his flaming spear. He pulled it out and ran to the back of the tents to follow Ivy and Dama’s gasoline trail. I smiled at him, admiring his newfound bravery as I stabbed a monster in the heart.

A hard rock hit the back of my head, and I fell to the ground. Rolling over, I saw a berserker holding up a boulder, ready to drop it on me. Before moving out of the way, I watched a spear slice through his chest. His blood dripped on me as the spear retreated through his back. He fell to the ground, dropping the boulder.

Ivy stood behind him with a grin on her face. She held out a hand. I took it, standing up in shock. I smiled at her before I felt the heat from the fire surrounding us.

“We have to go! Get the humans!” I yelled, running toward the line of men and women.

Xpen unchained the last few from each other as I did the same from the front. Once they were free, we pushed them toward the bushes we entered through, dodging the flames as we ran.

When we made it over the bushes, I watched as the humans continued running. Xpen, Edic, and Dama were next to me but I didn't see Ivy.

"Ivy!" I yelled, watching the tents in the camp collapse in flames.

I ran back toward the camp and was about to jump through the bushes when she emerged with the woman who had been on the board; both were coughing from the smoke. I pointed the woman in the direction of Dama and held Ivy close, listening to the camp turn to ash behind us.

IVY

I watched the camp burn as I felt Veken's heartbeat race. Wrapping my arms around him tightly I grinned at the destruction.

It was about time those monsters got some of their own back.

"Veken," Xpen's voice called out.

Veken and I broke our embrace and turned to see a group of humans standing with Xpen, Edic, and Dama. They were staring at us, and some of the women were crying. The one I had rescued from the board approached me and hugged me, sobbing into my shoulder. I wrapped my arms around her and felt myself tear up as well.

Releasing my arms from her, I turned toward the other humans.

"You are welcome to come with us to the refuge," I said, looking at Veken. "There are lands where we can be free without the threat of the Oovarz."

There were murmurs among the humans as they exchanged looks with each other. A few of them nodded, while others looked at me skeptically. One man stepped forward and bowed his head.

"With due respect, ma'am, I have a family in New Mexico. The monsters ripped me from them years ago for factory work before this band captured us. I must go home, see if I can find them. ."

I nodded at him. “Absolutely,” I said softly. “It is not a requirement that you come with us, but it is an option.”

Some humans bowed their heads to us as they turned to find their way home. The remaining ones had a mixture of gratitude and shock on their faces. I looked at Veken, who smiled at me.

“We can’t fit them all in the hovercraft,” I said softly.

“But the craft has supplies that can hold us until we reach the Badlands,” Veken commented as he wrapped his arm around my shoulder, looking at the humans. “The food stored can last us until then if we hunt along the way.”

I stared at Veken and took a moment to appreciate his features. Amid the battle and chaos of our adventure, I barely had time to notice his intricacies. His eyes were golden, but I hadn’t seen the stripes of black around his pupils. His jawline was defined in a way that brought out his solid cheekbones and lean structure.

I smiled and kissed him before walking toward the humans. I ushered them toward the craft, thinking of the obstacles Veken and I had overcome together. I felt good karma had come back and delivered blessings to me with each battle we won.

The humans waited outside the craft while the five of us rummaged through the materials. I counted bags, tarps and other building materials and swung them over my shoulder. Walking out of the craft, I saw Veken and Edic packing food into crates, rearranging with the thought of feeding extra mouths.

The humans jumped in quickly to help them, almost taking over the operation. I smiled and thought of the goodness of humanity, the small ways we helped each other that the Oovarz would never understand. Good still existed amidst all the strife the monsters had caused our world.

I reflected on our strength in numbers as I walked to the front of the pack. Once they were ready to set out, I began leading them to what would hopefully be our new home in the

Badlands For now, Xpen and Edic followed behind with the hovercraft and our supplies, a few of the weaker humans riding along with them. Occasionally we would stop to switch positions, letting someone who was tired take a rest.

About two hours into the walk, the woman who had been trapped on the board walked alongside me. She had been riding in the hovercraft most of the time, but had finally insisted that she was fine and wanted to stretch her legs. She grinned and extended her hand to me.

“I’m Eliza,” she said calmly.

“Ivy,” I said, shaking her hand and smiling.

“Thank you,” she said, looking at the desert in front of us.

“Of course,” I replied, sighing. “They don’t deserve the pleasure they get from our pain.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” she responded, adjusting the bag on her back. “When we get there, to the lands where we’ll be safe, what will we do?”

“What do you mean?” I asked with a quizzical look. Wasn’t safety enough?

“Well.” She inhaled sharply. “Will we continue to fight the monsters, try to take back our cities, and rescue more humans, or will we just...” She paused and chuckled. “Live freely?”

I looked at the smile on her face as she said the final words and grinned. “Let’s start with living freely.”

She remained silent, and I glanced at her out of my peripheral vision. I hadn’t seen such happiness in years. Living without the constant threat of kidnapping and torture had become a myth to humans, and I hoped we could provide a safe living space away from tyrannical abuse.

I looked behind me to see Veken smiling at me. I grinned and rolled my eyes as I turned back to the view of the desert. The sun was beginning to set, and we needed a place to rest without being out in the open. I noticed a small area of brush to our left and directed the crowd to follow me.

That was our routine: walk, talk, rest. Each day we traversed more land, exhausted ourselves, and replenished with food and sleep at night. We would set up our tarps and make fires to cook whatever Xpen and Veken had caught that day, along with the canned food from the hovercraft.

I was the only one awake in the camp on the third night. I stood and walked out of the brush into the sand of the desert. I glanced over the horizon and imagined the lights of Los Angeles miles away. I felt the weight on my shoulders lift as I realized how far we were from the city that tried to kill me. The city that almost killed all of us.

I crossed my arms to warm myself from the chill of the desert. I looked up at the sky and saw a shooting star pass through the dark of the night. I had always told myself that seeing a shooting star meant I was in the right place at the right time, but this was the first time I felt my theory was confirmed.

VEKEN

Packing up the tarps and equipment from the night before, I thought about the distance our group would traverse that day. We were about half a day from the Badlands. Once we got there, we would need to find a place to set up camp for good. Whether we found any of the other human settlements, it would be enough just to get these people safe for now.

I glanced at Ivy as she laughed with Eliza. They had bonded along the trip, and we had learned some of the basics of her pregnancy. She estimated that she had about a month before she should deliver, though that was still pregnant enough to require some caution. Ivy had been taking care of her along the journey, ensuring she was fed and had an ample water supply.

I smiled and shook my head. When I first met Ivy, bringing her to Boshesh to give him her tithe, I had no idea we would wind up here. I remembered trying to stop Boshesh's men from taking her deeper into the observatory and the feeling I had in my gut when they kicked me out.

If I hadn't followed my gut that day, I would have regretted it for the rest of my life. Standing in this brush, surrounded by humans and my friends, looking at the woman I had fallen in love with, I realized I had never been so happy.

The troop had packed their belongings and were ready to begin the day as I walked out of the brush and onto the sand. I glanced behind me to see Xpen on the left side of the group, Dama on the right, Edic behind them, and Ivy walking up next to me.

“Come here often?” she joked, grinning at me.

“Only on special occasions,” I replied playfully.

“Hmm,” she said, squinting at me and nodding. “And what’s the special occasion today?”

“Finding a home for my mate and me,” I replied, staring into her eyes.

“Mate?” she echoed with an amused smile.

I nodded. “Mate.”

“Like in the stories?”

I laughed. “What stories?”

“When I met my first Tilarker in Hesperia, I became friends with their daughter. In secret, of course. She used to tell me these stories of Tilarker mates and the supreme urgency., I always wrote it off as a myth or something.”

“Or something,” I scoffed with a grin.

“I was young!” she defended herself with a smile before she glanced at me thoughtfully. “Do you really think I’m your mate?”

I smiled and looked at my feet, walking along the hot sand. “It’s more of a feeling.”

“What does it feel like?” she asked, nudging my shoulder playfully.

“It feels like a pull toward someone, from deep in your core. Beneath all the thoughts and emotions, there’s a force that just...” I paused, looking for the right words. “Shoves you toward someone.”

“I think I know what that feels like,” she said softly, smiling at me.

I grinned and took her hand as we continued over the desert, kicking up hot sand on my heels. It was hot, and we had a quarter of a day’s walk left.

Once we reached the rough terrain of the badlands, I turned to the group. I looked at their tired faces, and my heart

sank.

This was, perhaps, the most demoralizing part of our journey. The hovercraft could go no further. We would have to park it somewhere nearby and carry our supplies down the steep canyon side by hand.

“I know we’re all tired,” I shouted so the members in the back could hear me. “But this is the final stretch, and we’re almost there. Please help each other, as the rocks are jagged, and there will be steep parts of the terrain.”

I looked at the wasteland in front of us and saw a steep hill leading to myriad canyons. If we could get the troop down the mountain safely, we would have many options on where to set up camp.

“Your enemies don’t travel on this terrain,” I continued, looking at the group. “Their aircrafts can’t fit into the canyons, and their buzzers wouldn’t survive the harsh rocks. Even on foot, they have declared the Badlands a point of no return. With only a few more steps, you will finally be home.”

The crowd cheered at the idea. Everyone did their best to chip in, the youngest and healthiest doing extra work to make up for those who could not.

I turned to Ivy, nodding at her as I grabbed Asia’s carrier last. With that done we began our way down the slope. I stepped carefully on each rock and held my hand to her, helping her down.

We heard an outburst from above. I looked up at the top of the hill to see Eliza struggling to walk down.

Before I could try to stop her, Ivy climbed to Eliza. She sat with her for a moment as other humans continued to make their way down the slope. I paused and waited as Ivy helped her down the ragged rocks. Giving me the nod to go ahead, I continued down the hill to lead the group.

We reached the bottom with everyone intact. No one had fallen or injured themselves, a concern I had when I first saw the slope. I glanced around at the terrain at the bottom of the mountain.

There were a few canyons to our right, a thick brush to our left and a large cave in the middle of a canyon wall. Unaware of the animals resting in that area, I decided to walk toward the canyon, avoiding predators in the brush and cave.

Making a home close to the brush and cave would be helpful for food and resources. I led the group through a winding canyon for about two miles before the narrow walkway opened to a large clearing surrounded by canyon walls.

I looked at the vast space and grinned. Ivy walked next to me and exhaled with a smile on her face. I wrapped my arm around her and looked into her deep blue eyes.

“What do you think?” I asked her. “Does this feel like home?”

“Only if you’re in it,” she responded, giving me a kiss.

I turned around to face the crew in the canyon, holding up my spear. “We made it!”

The group cheered wildly. Some hugged each other while others knelt on the ground and said their prayers. I felt a sense of accomplishment flow through me, feeling their gratitude waft over me.

Turning to Ivy, I took her hand and began walking to the middle of the canyon. I glanced at her and noticed a tear running down her face. I pulled her in and kissed her, pushing her hair behind her ear.

“There’s no need for that,” I said softly.

“I just...” She paused, wiping another tear from her face. “Thinking about a home with you is the only thing that got me through the time without you in the observatory.”

I pulled her close and set my chin on her head as I looked at the sun setting over the canyon walls. I thought about how I wouldn’t have minded looking at that sunset every night for the rest of my life as long as she was by my side.

IVY

I awoke wrapped in Veken's arms. The sun was beginning to rise over the canyon, and the sleeping bags we had packed weren't quite enough to keep me warm through the night. I glanced at the rest of our crew nestled in a cluster around us. Humans didn't have the luxury of running hot, as Tilarkers did.

I snuggled into Veken's chest for a moment and breathed in his scent. Half-asleep, he kissed me on the forehead and placed his chin on my head. I smiled at the feeling of safety, something I had missed for years.

I tried to drift back to sleep but found myself restless. I was excited to get up and begin making our camp habitable. I slowly moved Veken's arm off me and began to stand when a force pulled me down.

Veken had wrapped his arms around me again. I laughed, trying to keep quiet.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked in his low, raspy morning voice.

"We have work to do," I said with a grin.

"Right now?" he said playfully, kissing my neck softly.

"Veken!" I exclaimed quietly. "We are literally in a nest with about fifteen humans right now."

"Yeah, that's a good point," he remarked, releasing me from his grasp.

I rolled my eyes and stood, looking down at him and extending a hand. He scoffed and rubbed his eyes as he glared at me jokingly. Finally taking my hand, I helped him stand as we walked toward the materials we brought from the hovercraft.

The sun rose over the canyon walls as we set up our first tent using canvas and metal rods. The tent was big enough for the two of us, and we had plenty more to make room to accommodate everyone. We had been too tired to bother the night before, settling for just sleeping bags. Still, we would need the tents soon, a temporary housing to get us through the months it would take to build permanent shelters.

The group began to wake up. One at a time, they joined us in pitching tents around the canyon site. Veken rallied a group of hunters by the canyon wall and handed them all weapons from our makeshift armory.

“I’ve recently been told by a person more knowledgeable on this territory than myself,” he yelled to the crew. “Among these Badlands are bison, sheep, foxes, prairie dogs, and more.” He gave spears, knives and assorted items to the last few group members as he continued.

“The predators you must watch out for are coyotes, mountain lions, and rattlesnakes. Any of these are viable for a meal but must be cautiously approached. If you come across an Oovarz or a Tilarker you have not seen before, retreat slowly and come get me, Edic, Xpen, or Ivy immediately.”

The crew cheered as Veken led them out of the canyon through the narrow passageway. Before he walked out of my sight, he turned and winked at me. I smiled as I continued to help the others build their new homes.

Hours went by as those of us building continued to work. Every so often, someone thought of something we had not considered and broke away to deal with a new task. A small group went scouting for nearby water sources, while another group collected firewood for when evening fell.

Eliza approached me as I pitched a tent at the southern side of the canyon. She grinned as she waddled over to me, holding

her pregnant belly with both hands.

“Hey, Eliza!” I chirped, trying to throw a canvas over the metal bars.

“Here,” she said, standing on the other side of the tent. “Throw it over to me.”

I threw the canvas to her, and she caught it. Walking around to her, I took the fabric and strung it along the metal poles before sticking them in the ground and setting it up.

“How are you feeling today?” I asked as I stuck the rod in the ground.

“Great,” she beamed. “I can’t believe we’re here.”

“Me, either,” I chuckled, standing to face her. “Can I get you anything?”

“No,” she shook her head. “I’m fine for now, but I did want to say one thing.” She paused, looking at the narrow passageway out of the canyon. “You and Veken are an amazing couple.”

“Thank you,” I said with a bashful smile.

“No, really.” She ran her hand over her tummy. “I haven’t seen a love like that in a while.”

“Did you have someone special back home?” I asked, staring at her brown hair wisping in the wind.

She nodded. “I did.” She glanced at the passageway again. “I wish I could have told him we were here.”

I placed my hand on her shoulder. “We’ll get him the message somehow,” I assured her. “Is he in one of the Los Angeles territories?”

She nodded and began to cry slightly. “Yeah, he is.”

“Hey.” I placed my hands on her shoulders and turned her to face me. “We’ll find him, I promise.”

Eliza nodded and hugged me tightly. I smiled, realizing I had finally found a friend amidst the chaos of this adventure. As we broke from our embrace, I noticed the sky beginning to

darken with the sunset. I looked at the passageway as worry began to creep into my mind.

“Do you think they’re all right?” I asked Eliza.

“After what you all have been through?” she asked, chuckling. “I’m sure they’re fine.”

“Right.” I nodded and turned to pitch the next tent.

An hour later, the stars began to appear. I enlisted some members to help me make a fire in the middle of the canyon. I had started to think the worst, that the Oovarz had kidnaped Veken and the others. That they had run into a band of berzerkers, or traitorous Tilarkers. As I thought about putting together a search team, I heard a commotion coming from the passageway.

The crew and I looked toward the noise, and I smiled brightly. Veken and the others had returned, holding large bison carcasses. I put my hands over my mouth in shock and ran to assist them.

“No,” Veken said with a grin as I tried to help with the bison. “You’re going to need to focus on the cooking.”

I scoffed teasingly. “Sexism at its finest, I see.”

VEKEN

After placing the bison carcass by the fire, I walked toward Ivy. She stared at the large slab of meat in confusion. “I appreciate the effort, but I can’t believe you expect me to cook that thing.”

“Don’t worry,” I assured her. “I’ll skin and carve it for you. I never assumed you were a butcher. Though you did a fine job with Boshesh,” I teased.

Her eyes sparkled at me in humor. “You’d do that for me?”

“Of course,” I replied. “You are my mate, after all.”

“So.” She paused and turned to me. “Exactly how does that work?”

“Hmm.” I put my hand around her waist and led her to our tent. “Well, a demonstration is really the only way to go. I’m going to have to show you.”

“Veken,” she smiled. “You scandal.”

I laughed, but meant every word.

After dinner we dropped Asia off with Dama, who was creating an enclosure for her by her tent. Ivy and I entered our own and pulled the canvas door closed, listening to the commotion of the crew still working outside in the darkening daylight.

She stood in the middle of the tent, running her fingers through her hair as she looked at me. I approached her slowly and wove my hands around her waist. She exhaled and began

kissing my neck softly. I ran my hands down her hips and around her ass, pulling her close.

She moaned slightly, and I felt my cockharden. The noises she made never failed to turn me on. I pulled back from holding her, looking into her eyes as I slowly lifted her shirt over her head. I watched her perky breasts hang perfectly from her chest as she lifted off my shirt, dirty and stained from our hunting expedition.

She traced the lines of my abs with her fingertips as I pulled her hair gently, craning her neck back. I kissed and licked my way down her neck to her collarbone, biting it slightly as she grasped my hair.

I made my way to her nipples, licking them softly as they hardened in my mouth. I listened to her exhale slowly as I knelt at the top of her pants, lining her hips. Unbuttoning them, I stared at her. She grinned back at me with bedroom eyes.

I unbuttoned and unzipped her pants and slid them down her legs, leaving her underwear hugging her hips. She stepped out of her pants. I lay on the ground, holding my hand out for her to join me.

She straddled me and rubbed her slick folds along the outline of my hard cock. I rolled my eyes and sighed lightly as I reached to grab her breasts. She leaned down to kiss her way down my chest and to my pants, running her hand over my dick.

I couldn't take the teasing. I wanted to make slow love to her, but the pull toward her was too strong. I flipped her on her back and unbuttoned and unzipped my pants. She reached down to take off her underwear, but I pinned her hand to her side.

"Leave them on," I whispered as I slid off my pants and underwear.

Leaning my weight on her, I ground my cock against her vagina through her panties. I felt her clit harden as she dug her fingernails into my back, dragging them down slowly.

I reached my hand into her underwear and began stroking her clit slowly in circles. Her back arched, and she moaned as I watched exhilaration take over her.

Using all three fingers of my other hand, I stuck them inside her wet pussy. I never stopped the gentle strokes of her clit from the first hand, however. She gasped loudly, and I put my other hand over her mouth.

“Can’t be too loud,” I said breathlessly, moving my fingers upward to hit her g-spot.

I watched her struggle to remain quiet as I took her to oblivion. I felt myself harden further as I watched her pussy gush with cum. She grabbed onto my biceps tightly and moaned my name through my hand as I smiled.

Pulling my hand out of her dripping pussy, I licked her juices off one of my fingers. She grabbed my hand and sucked on them, tasting herself on my fingers as I pulled her underwear off with my teeth. Once I could see her pretty pussy, I positioned my dick at the opening of it.

I rubbed the head of my cock against her lips in circles, driving her crazy. She tried to pull me into her but I held back, as hard as it was.

“Please,” she begged, pulling me in close. “I want it.”

“How bad?” I asked slyly.

“Bad,” she said between heavy breaths.

I sighed as I looked at her with glazed eyes. Sliding into her, I felt her tight pussy wrap around and warm my cock. I grunted as I filled her tight pussy. She moaned loudly, and I kissed her, keeping the noise low.

I began thrusting slowly and ran my fingers through her hair. She kissed my neck and bit my ear slightly, making me pace faster inside her. I wrapped my arm around her back and pulled her in tightly as I thrust harder, making her squirm with every push.

I felt a magnetic pull toward her, and something took over me. It was a mix of love and a sense of need. As if she knew

how I was feeling, she pulled my hand to the side of her hip, close to her ass.

I dug my fingernails into her hip as she cried out beneath my kiss. I groaned into her ear and pushed deeper into her, making her back arch again as she reached for my arms to grasp onto them.

She threw her head back in pleasure, and I scratched harder as I felt myself about to burst. Her pussy tightened as I felt her warm cum surround my cock. I released my load inside her, grunting as I watched her blissful expression.

She smiled as I came down from my high. She placed her hands on my cheeks and pulled me in for a kiss. I ran my tongue over hers as I grasped onto her hair. She ran her hands down my back, warming me underneath her touch.

“Is that how it works?” she teased breathlessly. “That’s what I earn as your mate?”

“That’s it.” I smiled as I looked at her. “Worth it?”

“Oh, definitely,” she said with a grin. “Consider me yours.”

“You’ll always be mine,” I said softly as I kissed her again.

I lay beside her and stared into her eyes as I heard cheering coming from the camp. She laid her head on my chest, and I played with her hair as I kissed her forehead. I knew before long we would have to get back to work with the others, and I still had the rest of a bison to deal with.

But for now, it was all I could ask to just enjoy this quiet moment with her.

IVY

The following day, I woke and stood, feeling a dull pain in my thigh. I glanced at it to see a red mark on my skin where his fingers had grabbed. I smiled, thinking about the feelings he stirred in me the night before.

I had never had intimacy like that before, even with him in the past. It almost felt like our souls had opened up to each other, like every piece of ourselves intertwined. I never thought I could feel that way about someone or that sex could be that amazing on every level.

I looked at him, sleeping soundly next to me. I quietly stood, dressing in my clothes from last night. One of the crew members yesterday had successfully found a water source, and I decided I would look for it later to wash Veken's and my clothes.

I pushed the canvas door of our tent aside and walked out to see the sun beaming down on the canyon floor. A few humans were awake, gathered around the remnants of last night's fire.

Eliza sat among them, chatting with another young woman. I approached them with a wave and a smile, and she patted the space on the log next to her.

"Well, you tapped out early last night," she commented with a smirk.

I smiled and ran my fingers through my hair. "Yeah, we were pretty exhausted."

“Honey,” Eliza put her hand on my thigh. “I know that glow.” She tapped her belly gently.

I laughed at first. Then, as a moment passed, the meaning of her words began to sink in. “Wait, you mean...?”

“Come get me later,” the other woman said, smiling politely at Eliza and me.

“Alright, Amber,” Eliza chirped.

Amber walked to her tent, and I glanced at Eliza, my mind spinning with questions.

“It’s been done before, you know,” she said.

“Humans and Tilarkers?” I asked cautiously.

“Mm-hmm. For ages, it’s been happening in secret.”

“Really?” I asked, shocked.

“Absolutely,” she commented. “Naxel and I met years ago when I was working as a cook for the Oovarz warriors, and he was a guard out front of the dorms.”

“How did you keep it a secret?” I questioned as I leaned forward on the log.

Eliza chuckled and looked at me. “Every night at shift change, we would sneak around the back of the building.” She sighed and looked at the sky. “The rush was unreal, but all I knew was that I wanted to be with him.”

“And so it’s...” I paused, glancing at her belly. I’d assumed that the father of her child was another human.

Apparently I’d been wrong. Very wrong. “It’s possible to get...”

“Pregnant?” she asked as my voice trailed off. “Oh yes,” she responded as she held her baby bump. “Hybrids aren’t common; they mostly stay in isolated areas for fear of being caught by the Oovarz.”

“But can a hybrid baby be — ” I paused again, gulping anxiously. “Healthy?”

She stared at me with a smile and remained silent for a moment before she glanced at her bump. “I only met one once,” she began with a grin. “He was a part of a clan in Albuquerque, secluded from the city’s main walls underground. This was before I was shipped to Los Angeles.”

“What was he like?” I pried, impatient to hear her story.

“He was funny and kind,” she commented as she stared at the bonfire remnants. “He was helping others escape from the city. I never did ask him about his parents, but he must have been in his mid-thirties.” She went quiet abruptly, jolting forward.

“Are you all right?” I asked fearfully, reaching for her.

She laughed. “I’m fine,” she exhaled slowly. “That was a big kick, buddy!”

I stared at her stomach and thought of the possibility of a hybrid baby — a half-human half-Tilarker being who was happy, healthy, and kind. I had never heard of hybrids, much less considered them real until that moment.

I thought of being pregnant with Veken’s baby. Visions flashed through my mind of inviting him to feel the baby kick, his excitement when I told him the good news, and him holding my hand as I gave birth to our child.

“What did he look like?” I asked curiously as I withdrew my hands from Eliza.

“He was tall, like all Tilarkers, with long blonde hair. He barely had horns, not nearly as high as our men, but his wings were well shaped. His skin was almost the color of the sky, between the striking teal of his Tilarker father and his mother’s white skin.”

“So he was...” My voice trailed off, uncertain of how to end the question.

She laughed again. “Yes, normal. Perfect speech, an attractive figure, and was very intelligent. I might even say he was better than us, having the benefits of both species.”

“How so?”

“Well...” She adjusted her position on the log. “He was strong and witty like the Tilarkers, but he had empathy. The stoicism of the Tilarker kind wasn’t rooted in him, but the desire to protect the ones he loved was.” She paused and ran her hand lightly over her belly. “And I hope my little one has the same.”

I remained silent as I pictured the child. I wondered how Veken’s and my baby would look. I envisioned deep blue eyes with golden streaks, pale teal skin, and brown curly hair similar to Veken’s.

“You can do it too, you know,” Eliza commented, breaking me from my trance.

“Do what?”

Eliza ran her hand over her belly and lifted her chin toward my tent. I turned to see Veken exiting our tent and stretching, and I turned back to her, and we locked eyes.

“Have a baby,” she said with a smile. “It’s possible, and even more than that, it’s beautiful.”

I smiled slightly as I placed my hand on hers. “Thank you.”

She smiled and placed her hand on top of mine. “Always.”

VEKEN

I smiled when I saw Eliza and Ivy talking by the bonfire in the center of the canyon. Knowing she had found a friend brought me joy. I wondered what type of life we would build here, who her friends would become, and who we would help along the way.

I approached them and smiled, glancing at Eliza holding her belly. Ivy seemed deep in thought, staring at the burnt logs as Eliza talked. As I approached, she ceased speaking and turned to greet me.

“Well, good morning,” Eliza chirped.

Ivy whirled around like she was nervous. “Hi, honey,” she said in a strained voice.

“Well, good morning, ladies,” I said with a grin, leaning down and kissing Ivy’s head.

Eliza tried to stand from the log, and I extended my hand. She took it and stood, wobbling slightly as she found her footing.

“Whew,” she said with a chuckle. “This baby is not making my life easy; I’ll tell you that much.” I forced a smile as I watched her take Ivy’s hand. “Have faith,” she said with a smile before turning and walking to her tent.

My brow furrowed in confusion as I sat next to Ivy on the log. I looked at her, cocking my head to the side curiously.

“What was that about?” I asked nervously.

“Nothing,” Ivy said with a straight face. “We were just talking about finding a nearby water source.”

“Oh,” I said, pretending to believe her. “I found a lake embedded in the brush at the end of the narrow passage.”

“Great!” Ivy said excitedly. “We should start making a list of all the water sources nearby.”

I sighed and stared at her seriously. She rolled her eyes and looked down at her hands, picking at her fingernails.

“I was just curious,” she began. “About if— ”

A scream cut Ivy off. I glanced in the direction of the sound and saw two women holding Eliza up next to her tent. She was conscious and alert, but her expression revealed something was amiss.

Ivy and I stood and surveyed the situation. I noticed water dripping down Eliza’s leg, and my heart skipped a beat. She was in labor, and I wasn’t familiar with hybrid birth necessities.

“Oh my God,” Ivy said, turning around and grabbing a pot.

“What are you doing?” I asked as she started running toward Eliza.

“Getting a pot to boil water? I don’t know!”

I sighed and dashed after Ivy. We got to Eliza and helped her inside the tent, laying her down on a pillow.

“Hey, hey,” Ivy said, pushing Eliza’s hair behind her ear. “You’re okay; we’ve got you.”

“What do we do?” Ivy asked in a whisper, turning to me briefly. “She’s really...” She paused, glancing at Eliza’s belly. “Big. Bigger than women get when they’re pregnant with human babies.”

“I don’t know,” I responded, rubbing the back of my head. “I’ve never seen a hybrid birth.”

Ivy picked at her nails as she glanced at Eliza, who let out another scream. “Well, maybe somebody here has?” she offered uncertainly.

With that, my brain kicked into gear. We needed someone who knew more than the two of us, that was for sure. I rushed out of the tent and saw most of the residents were already crowding around the tent, curious.

I put my hands on both sides of my mouth and screamed over the din. “Is anyone here a doctor?”

A woman in the crowd raised her hand and jumped up on the balls of her feet. “I’m a nurse!”

“Come here,” I commanded.

The woman passed through the crowd, and I heard Eliza scream from behind me. I placed my hands on the nurse’s shoulders and stared intensely into her eyes.

“Do you know anything about hybrid births?” I asked firmly.

“Hybrid?” she asked with confusion, glancing around my shoulder. “I — ”

“Have you ever delivered a baby before?” I cut her off.

“Yes, yes, why?”

“She’s giving birth to a hybrid. The baby is likely to be larger than the average human child. We need someone in there who knows what to do.”

The woman stopped and stared into Eliza’s tent for a minute before looking at me determinedly. “I need tools.”

“Like what?”

“A clamp and a hook. If there’s a problem, I need to dilate the cervix.”

“Alright, go; I’ll get them.”

I motioned to the tent, and the nurse walked by me into the scene. I ran toward the bundle of tools by our tent and began rummaging through them. I found a set of clamps and a pair of tongs. I knew they weren’t what the nurse precisely needed, but it was all we had.

I brought the instruments back to the tent and looked at Ivy, waiting worriedly as she looked at Eliza. The nurse was positioned at the opening of Eliza's legs, talking to her in a soothing voice.

"Here," I said softly, placing the instruments beside the nurse. "Will these work?"

"I don't know; we might not have time," she claimed nervously, whispering so Eliza wouldn't hear. "The baby is coming quickly."

"What can I do?" I asked fearfully.

"Wait outside," the nurse said firmly. "We'll be okay."

I nodded to her and motioned for Ivy to join me outside the tent. We walked out into the crowd and stood right next to the opening. I glanced at Ivy and saw her begin to cry.

Wrapping my arms around her, I put my chin on her head. Her chest rose and fell with each hyperventilation, and I rubbed her back slowly as I tried to calm her down.

"Hey, she's going to be okay," I said softly.

"I, I just met her," Ivy said through sharp breaths.

"She's going to be alright," I repeated, peeking through the crack in the tent.

I saw Eliza scream and blood splatter on the floor. I averted my gaze and tried to focus on Ivy, but a part of me wanted to see first-hand that a human-Tilarker birth was possible.

IVY

Veken broke his embrace when a human approached us. They held out some flowers that they had picked nearby, placing them near our feet in front of the tent where Eliza labored.

“Veken,” I whispered as I tugged on his sleeve. I realized that there were several people waiting to make offerings of their own, little items they had found over the weeks here or snacks they had saved. It occurred to me what was happening, and how it was a variation of the longstanding human tradition to bring gifts to a birth.

No one here had much to give. But it didn’t stop them from making their best effort.

Veken turned to watch the crowd, gathering to bring small offerings to the tent. Once they placed an item in front of us, they stood in a half-circle, waiting patiently for the birth results.

My eyes began to water again as I heard Eliza scream. The noise this time was wild, almost primal. I shut my eyes and felt myself start to shake. Veken took my hand and held it tightly as we waited.

The next sound we heard was a baby crying. We raced into the tent, eager for the news. Everyone crowded close to the flap of the tent, just as excited as we were.

We walked in to see the nurse cutting the umbilical cord between the baby and Eliza and handing her the newborn, its wings still wet and tiny pressed into its back.

Eliza was smiling as she took the baby in her arms. The nurse looked sweaty but proud and relieved.

“Congratulations, momma,” the nurse stated, her voice thick with emotion. “You have a beautiful baby boy.”

Eliza laughed through her tears as she soothed the crying baby in her arms. The infant was larger than I expected, with its feet almost dangling off Eliza’s arms. She locked eyes with me and smiled. I felt my eyes water as I grinned back.

I turned to exit the tent, thinking of everyone waiting for news. I faced the crowd of worried faces and wiped the tears from my eyes.

“It’s a boy!” I yelled happily.

The crowd began to cheer when Amber spoke from the circle’s center. “And Eliza?”

I nodded as I cried. “She’s fine!”

The crowd cheered, and I felt Veken approach behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist. “What did I tell you?” he said softly.

“I know,” I said through a snuffle. “I just thought — ”

“Hey.” He turned my body to face him. “They’re all right.”

I leaned into him and wrapped my arms around him as I cried. Knowing that hybrid birth was possible changed everything. Veken and I could not only have a life together, but we could create one for a baby. I pulled from the hug and kissed him as the hot desert sun beamed down on us.

Later that evening, everyone gathered around the bonfire with the daily catches. Some residents turned the meat roasting in the fire, cooking it to their preference. Others were more interested in entertainment. They ignored the food to dance around, linking arms and smiling.

A tent being pushed open caught my attention. Eliza walked slowly, painfully, out of their tent, holding their baby. I approached them, looking at the infant swaddled in a blanket.

“Eliza, I was so worried,” I said, touching her arm lightly.

“No need,” she responded, looking at her baby.

“He’s beautiful,” I said as I looked into the baby’s eyes.

The child’s eyes had brown and gold speckles, which lit up even more when he smiled at me. He reached a hand out to my face, and I noticed he had the same spur on the back of his wrist as Veken did, and his skin was a vibrant teal.

I laughed in delight just to see him. Gently, I stroked my finger down one chubby cheek, marveling. “What are you going to name him?”

“Actually.” Eliza paused, looking behind me.

I turned to see Veken approaching us with a grin. He stopped behind me, wrapped his arm around my shoulders, and looked at the baby.

“I think we’re going to name him Veken. Veken Emmerson Naxel.”

Veken’s and my mouths dropped open in shock. “Emmerson, like — ” I began.

“Like your last name, Ivy,” Eliza said, smiling. “You two saved us. I would have died, probably before I ever even gave birth. And what kind of life would he have had, if he had lived? Without you two...” She looked back at us. “This wouldn’t be possible.”

“We’re honored,” Veken said, rubbing my shoulder gently.

“You must be sore, at least,” I gently admonished Eliza. “Why don’t you go back to your tent and lay down. I’ll bring you some food.”

Eliza nodded gratefully. “Actually, that would be fantastic,” she admitted. “I thought I’d be okay, but I’ve been walking for about three minutes and I’m already exhausted.”

Watching her walk away, Veken squeezed my arm gently.

“You think that will be us one day?” he asked.

“What? Pregnant?” I teased.

He grinned but did not say anything in response. I decided to answer him honestly and turned to look at him, beaming with joy. “I would love that,” I said as I wrapped my arms around his neck.

He ran his hands along my waist and looked deeply into my eyes. “Do you have a timeline in mind?”

“Hmm,” I said, looking at the sky. “I think we should probably get started soon.”

“Soon,” Veken rocked me back and forth slightly. “Like tonight?”

“Like tonight,” I laughed as he dipped me over into a kiss.

“Veken,” Xpen called from behind us.

Veken leaned me up and turned to face Xpen, who walked toward us with a crew of men and women behind him.

“We’re going back out there,” Xpen stated firmly. “We started talking about what all of this means to us, and what it would mean to the families who already have children. People who need safety. We want to get the word out.”

Veken seemed to reflect on this. Finally, he nodded. “Do it, but make sure they stop miles away from us. Tell them we’ll meet them there and bring them to the settlement. Don’t give anyone our exact coordinates. Come up with a meeting place they can’t easily track us from.”

“Understood,” Xpen said. “We’ll make an official plan in the morning and head out soon.”

I glanced at the face of the man I loved, illuminated by the bonfire flames. The gold in his eyes flickered as he looked at me with a grin. “So, it looks like I might be taking a little trip.” Veken took me by the waist again. “How soon is tonight?”

I laughed and took his hand, leading him back to our tent. “We can start right now.”

Alone, together, I gazed up at him.

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