

SEASON #1

SEX, DEATH & MONEY

Cepelius



[Handwritten text on a piece of parchment, likely a list or document.]

SEX, DEATH, AND MONEY

SEASON 1

CEBELIUS

CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Chapter 41

Afterword

I WOKE up in a small room, maybe ten by six. It had a bed, a toilet, and a door.

I was on the bed and it was narrow but comfortable, with a deep mattress and a full set of white sheets. The toilet was one piece of solid metal with a sensor and no water in the bowl. The door was riveted metal. The walls were smooth and featureless.

A few seconds after I woke up, a female voice full of authority boomed out from a speaker. It said something I couldn't understand.

As I looked around the voice continued, and after a moment I realized I could control what it said depending on where I looked. When I looked at the toilet, I heard a word. When I looked at the door, a different word.

The voice was teaching me the language by giving me words for the things I could see.

It was disconcerting to note that no matter how I tilted my head, the voice still seemed to know with perfect accuracy exactly what I was looking at.

That was my reality for the first month of this ... strange existence. After the first few hours, images appeared on the wall across from the bed. Since I'd established that no matter what I tried, whoever it was knew exactly where I was looking, I decided not to speak.

I was in a prison, being observed as though I were some sort of experiment. My thoughts, at least, would remain my own.

Besides, it seemed likely given how I was being taught that even if I *did* say something, I wouldn't be understood.

The 'lessons' were still able to advance despite my silence because eventually, every fifty words or so, the voice began calling out words that *weren't* what I was looking at. When I looked at the image on the wall that correctly corresponded to the word used, there was a sharp clicking sound and all the images vanished except the correct one.

Every day the language lesson was unceasing, and obviously controlled by computer. It started as soon as I opened my eyes, and ended only when I closed them to go to sleep, which I was only allowed to do after some predetermined amount of time. If I tried to ignore the lesson or sleep early, I was shocked — quite literally — by a bolt of static discharge from whatever wall I happened to be closest to. It didn't care if I spoke, but whatever was teaching me wouldn't let me ignore the lesson entirely.

Every day I was subjected to a strange mist that filled the room, then was sucked out again. That mist seemed to keep me clean, because after it passed I noticed I couldn't smell myself anymore.

One meal a day was served to me, and that was the only real means I had of judging time. It marked the end of the day and I was only allowed to sleep after I received it. I had nothing to brush my teeth, but the food I was being given left my mouth feeling fresh, so I could only assume my teeth wouldn't rot. The food was bland, so much so that I couldn't even get tired of the taste because it *had* no taste.

By the time I'd received thirty meals, I had a vocabulary in excess of a thousand words. By the time I'd received sixty meals, it was over three thousand words and I'd learned the alphanumeric system along with the basic computational symbols.

At first, I hadn't spoken out of a sense of defiance and futility. Eventually, I didn't bother to speak because I really didn't think anyone would answer me no matter *what* language I used.

I had an apparently acceptable grasp of the language in ninety days, because I was woken on the ninety-first day by a novel experience.

The door opened.

I sat up, twisting sideways to sit on the edge of the bed. I left the sheet over me because the person standing in the doorway was obviously female.

Female, but not human, though there were some superficial similarities.

Her body was scaled and hairless, but the scales were snake-like rather than crocodilian, and the pattern was of brown-and-black striping where visible.

She was pretty in an understated sort of way. Her clothing was a jumpsuit sort of thing, sleeveless and primarily navy blue with silver trim. Despite being scaled, she filled it out nicely. Her angular face had all the same features as a human save the eyebrows, which were missing, but they were all a bit different. Her eyes were slitted and larger than normal, with blue irises. Her nose preceded smoothly from her brows. She had high cheekbones and surprisingly full lips, considering they were drawn into a hard line.

She looked at me with eyes I couldn't read, then — in the language I'd just spent the last three months being force-fed — said, "Stand up."

I chose not to obey for two reasons. The first and more important was that I wanted to see if I would be tased for disobedience, and the second was that I had never been given any good reason to do anything these people wanted me to do.

Over the course of the last few months I'd had a lot of time to think about my circumstances. The method being used to train me was similar to one I'd used myself to train dogs. Similar, but not the same. The difference was that I'd been

given no positive reinforcement, leaving me with no particular desire to make the people ordering me around happy.

The answer to my question came very quickly as, after several seconds of awkward silence, I was hit in the back of the neck by a bolt from the wall behind me.

She said again, “Stand up.”

A second, much stronger shock hit me after a few seconds more, and this one made me twitch a bit. It was more powerful than any other shock I’d received to that point.

She said, “I know you can understand me. You *will* stand up or you will be hurt.”

Anger isn’t new to me. I’ve dealt with it for most of my life, and I’m man enough to admit that patience isn’t my strong suit. But in the last few months I hadn’t *been* angry. I had accepted my new reality for reasons I chose not to think about, but that had to do with my anger.

In a way, anger had brought me to where I now sat. It had put me here, but the last few months I had been able to live without it. While strange and dehumanizing, the circumstances I’d found myself in were tolerable, and that was an improvement over where I’d been before. I’d had no cause to be angry.

Now, I felt it again, and because I was angry I refused to stand. Instead, I slipped back under the covers and put my head on the mattress, closing my eyes.

The shock hit my elbow and was so powerful the involuntary convulsion threw me twitching to the floor next to the bed in a tangle of bedsheets.

The woman, whoever ... *whatever* she was, then made a mistake.

She came to crouch next to me and began to speak in a tone of sharp reprimand. I paid no attention to what she was saying. I simply reached out with both hands, caught her head, and broke her neck.

It was surprisingly easy too. I was shocked at how delicate she was and used far more force than necessary.

I expected to be killed, but that was all right. It'd already happened once, let it happen again. Death no longer held any mystery for me. I remembered my life, but nothing after that. I felt it unlikely that I could escape from whatever facility I was being kept in. After all, my meals had been provided to me through a slot at the bottom of the door. I could be electrocuted through any surface. The surveillance was so good they could track my eyes from any angle. There was simply no point trying to be clever.

At the least I would die unbroken, and I wouldn't go alone.

Seconds passed, and I got my second surprise of the day. I wasn't killed.

The door slammed shut, but that was all.

Blinking, I got up, threw the sheet back on the bed, and stared down at the body, pondering it and the implications it presented.

I wondered who she'd been. What was her story? Why was she here?

So many questions.

I doubted she'd come to work with any idea that she would die. I felt bad that she hadn't even had time to scream. People — even aliens — should be given a moment or two for realization to set in so they could make peace with whatever cosmological constant they believed in before their lives were taken.

In her case, I simply hadn't had the luxury of giving her that time. Since she'd obviously been controlling the shocks, giving her time would have simply let her save herself. Whoever had sent her wouldn't have learned anything that way.

That might have been my mistake.

It was unlikely that the system administering shocks to me wasn't powerful enough to actually kill me if necessary. Given

the technology I'd been subject to I thought that possibility so remote as to be unworthy of consideration. The obvious conclusion was, therefore, that I personally was more valuable to whoever ran this facility than the creature at my feet.

It was also possible that whoever was monitoring things didn't have the authority to kill me. So it might happen later, after authorization had been sought and granted.

Either way, I had more to learn from the body in front of me. I picked up the pad and looked it over, but the face of it was blank and there seemed no way to turn it on or off, so I set it aside and had a longer look at the corpse.

Her scales seemed to cover her everywhere and though her fingers had claws rather than fingernails they were down to nubs, probably to allow her to manipulate the pad she'd been holding. I ripped open the front of the jumpsuit and saw the scales covered her belly and breasts as well, though they were so fine as to feel like skin against my fingers.

Her body was warm, but had no real muscular definition, which surprised me somewhat. I always imagined aliens to be physically superior to humans, but this one had died so quickly and easily that it left me with doubts.

I lifted one of her arms, taking the forearm in both hands, and applied gradually increasing pressure.

The forearm had two bones — just like my own — but both cracked, then snapped well before I applied maximum pressure.

Weak bones, weak body.

Carefully opening the corpse's mouth, I examined the teeth. They seemed to indicate the creature had been an omnivore. Sharp, cutting teeth in front with molars in the back. No fangs.

Taking her footwear off was a simple matter: they zipped up over the heel. The feet were much like my own, plantigrade, though they too had claws rather than nails. These too were sanded down to nubs, though, presumably so she could wear her shoes.

No natural weapons to speak of and a terribly weak frame. While it was definitely an alien, it was so weak that I couldn't really even imagine being threatened by one now that I'd been allowed to examine the corpse.

These things were nothing.

The silence was loud and obtrusive. It was the first time I hadn't been subjected to a non-stop language lesson since arriving, and I wondered what the people on the other side of my cell door were thinking as I moved the body to the far side of my cell before it fouled itself. Then I sat on my bed, idly experimenting with the data pad the creature'd brought in as I waited to see what would happen.

A quiet hour went by. The smell of excrement grew obnoxious, but the cleaning fog descended, filling the room for much longer than usual. When it cleared, so had the smell.

Once the mist was gone a new voice sounded in my cell and for the very first time seemed to be asking me a direct question.

“Why did you kill her?”

In order to answer, I would either have to speak, or get creative.

I didn't want to speak. My silence had become part of my identity in this new, unexpected second life I was living. I didn't want to cheapen it by wasting my first words on the answer to a stupid question, so I said nothing.

The door opened again and a person — male or female I couldn't tell — in what looked to me like a set of power armor straight out of science fiction stepped into the room with me.

The armor was black save for the faceplate, which was reflective gold. The only other detail worth noting to me was that the armor looked to be somewhere around nine feet tall if I used my own six foot two for comparison. I couldn't be certain, though, because I didn't trust that the body I inhabited was actually my own.

I watched impassively as the giant armored figure squared up to look down at me while a second in similar armor stepped

behind the first and unceremoniously dragged the body out of my cell.

I took the opportunity to look at myself, using the armor's reflective faceplate as a mirror.

My brown hair, which had been completely shaved when I woke up in this cell, had grown but was still fairly short. My beard was full and thick. I had that familiar Roman nose and hazel eyes. It was indisputably my face. I'd more than half expected to find a stranger in my reflection, but no, it was really me. Which meant my height estimate was probably accurate, leaving me to question if I was actually being held captive by multiple races of alien. The dead one had been slightly taller than I was but not by more than a few inches. There was no way she'd have fit in one of these armored suits unless it was more like a mechanized vehicle. While possible, there was no real motive to make such a thing bipedal.

Once the body was out the first figure seemed to hesitate a moment, then it too left.

Neither had spoken a single word to me.

Despite having learned an entirely new language in the past few months, what I learned that day had infinitely more value.

I had been reborn, but into what world, and for what purpose?

The means of my revival were of no interest. I was not a scientist and felt confident that an explanation of my present circumstances would sound like magic in any case. The armor was clearly more advanced than anything available in my time, or place. The eye tracking was so good that I rather suspected my captors could see through them. Whoever had brought me here had *almost* complete control over my life.

I had one consolation: they did not know my thoughts. They could not read my mind. Because they couldn't do that, I was still my own man no matter my circumstances.

In that moment, I decided that I would remain silent. For all they knew, I *couldn't* speak. It was precious knowledge. As

long as I could keep that secret, I could keep others.

“DESTROY IT. IMMEDIATELY.”

“No! It’s demonstrating an unprecedented level of autonomy *and* aggression. It’ll be *perfect* for SDM!”

“If it can’t be controlled it’s a disaster waiting to happen!”

“We *can* control it. *You* were careless, sending in the syban. That the specimen was able to kill is *your* fault! We’ve invested too much time and energy to destroy it now! Besides, its linguistic aptitude is practically off the charts.”

“It had *no reason to kill!* It’s *completely* abnormal. In ninety days it hasn’t self-satisfied *once*. It’s going to fail miserably in the games if it’s an asexual neurotic! Division Four will be humiliated!”

“We know it has a healthy sex drive based on its nocturnal emission and you have no idea what constitutes adequate provocation to kill. This subject is a new species we’ve never seen before. I’m willing to wager it associated the corrective shocks with the syban.”

“Even if it did, its response wasn’t even *remotely* proportional!”

“It might be if it associated *all* the shocks it’s received since waking up in that room with her. There’s no reason it couldn’t have made that connection.”

Lane listened quietly as her subordinates argued over the fate of their latest experiment. As the head of Division Four, it would ultimately be her decision, but she didn’t take part in

the debate. She already knew she wouldn't be terminating. The points about time and expense were relevant; it would be a colossal waste to simply destroy the specimen. If she *did* eventually decide to destroy it, she would at least ensure the event was broadcast. If it truly wasn't suitable for the new season of *Sex, Death, and Money*, a death game could be arranged. Perhaps a holiday special.

Mauren, the one in opposition, turned to face Lane directly as she said, "We shouldn't have used the original gene seed. We can replicate the basic genetics, and I think we should. It *is* a pretty specimen. We cut our losses, generate a new body *without* the seed, and guide its development from square one."

"We don't have any mental archtypes that fit its brain map. We don't know its development cycle. We'd have to hand raise a new species with no guidance. Starting from square one will take *years*, not to mention whatever essence a clone could provide would be geometrically less," Duo said, pointing out what to Lane was the obvious flaw in the proposal. "The gene seed gave us a viable show candidate in *three months*."

"It's *not* viable. It's a *monster*! It doesn't even *speak*!" Mauren snarled.

"Have we found out anything regarding its origin?" Lane asked abruptly, deciding to join the conversation. The Reclaimer that had sold it to her only told her it was a new species to try, but in all other respects the seed was of a standard type. The dealer hadn't given them a planet of origin and she'd had her subordinates working to find out more ever since beginning the project.

Mauren, frowning and still argumentative, nevertheless answered the question without embellishment.

"Nothing conclusive. It's a heavy-worlder compared to us, shorter but more powerful; that much is obvious from the physiology. The genetics are all over the place and it's obviously a natural evolution, but there are a few strands here and there that look like late additions. Since we have no model for comparison we couldn't risk culling them before the

experiment went live. That's another possibility, though, *when* this one proves unusable."

"It's potent *and* compatible," Duo interjected. She grinned widely as she said, "Fertility for cross-breeding is established at somewhere between one and five percent and nocturnal emissions had essential levels surpassing active harvesting for any other species we've encountered."

"Ugh! Keep your zoophilia out of this if you *please*," Mauren snapped, seething.

"*Xenophilia*. Even *you* can't pretend this one wouldn't pass any test of sentience we could throw at it. If you're going to call me out at least be accurate, *virgin*," Duo said, her grin turning vicious. "Let's not forget the long range goals of this project are-"

"-thankfully *not* my concern so please, for the love of a good lay, shut your mouth."

"No one who loves a good lay is quiet, which is something you'd know if you ever had one," Duo shot back before turning to Lane as she added, "We continue?"

"With caution," Lane agreed, watching Mauren roll her eyes at the declaration. She was the head wrangler on the project, and it had been her responsibility to craft and train the specimen.

Mauren was shaking her head definitively as she said, "This is a mistake. All joking aside, that thing in there is *dangerous*. Sure it's short. But I've analyzed the footage and autopsied the syban. If that ... *creature*, doesn't make primetime and you put it in a deathmatch, you'd better make sure it fights *multiple* hardened, *condemned* criminals. It will not die easily, or alone. I honestly think killing is all the fucking thing is willing to do. It *can* speak. We know it can. It just *doesn't*. That's. Not. Normal."

"How can you say that when we've never used a gene seed for this species before?" Lane asked.

"You haven't been reading my reports," Mauren said accusingly. "I explained this. Brain scans for this subject

suggest the seed was pre-programmed with language. It learned so fast because it could correlate what it *already knew* with what we fed it. It's not a savant, it's a ghost, and we should absolutely *not* make it public. What if it kills one of the vacays? Which, I hasten to add, it could do in less time than it takes to snap wings, much less fly away. I don't know where you got this thing, but whoever gave it to you did us no favors."

Duo rolled her eyes and shook her head as she said, "You trained it through negative reinforcement. What did you *expect*?"

"I did that to bring out latent tendencies that might have gone unnoticed with a positive reinforcement program. We got *lucky*, and our chance to capitalize on that luck is now. I warned from day three of this project that we should terminate and *no one listened*."

Lane leaned back in her chair, steepling long fingers, their nails crossing as she said, "You did not reach your post through incompetence, Mauren. I am not deaf to your opinion, but you are too cautious, and unfamiliar with the various factors at play here. You said as much when you denigrated the long-term aims of the project. Popularity is key. Our sponsors want eyes on their products, and no one goes to the zoo to see pets. They go to see exotics, and the most popular of those are always the predators."

Mauren froze, the only evidence of thought her twitching tail, its spade curling at the edges. Then she stood from her seat and said, "You are of course correct, Director. There is much I do not know, but one thing I *do* know is that when that creature kills a vacay *live* on SDM our sponsors won't be coming for *my* head. I'm resigning from this project."

"Request denied. You're my most competent wrangler. I'm not going to put someone less experienced in charge of what you're telling me is a difficult case."

Mauren's eyes closed, hiding luminous golden irises for a long few seconds as she drew a deep, steadying breath, then let it out.

“Then I quit. I can see where this is going and I’ll be damned if I take the fall for you when the tail on this gets ripped off.”

With that, she turned, her heels clacking arrogantly on the mirror-bright tile as she strode toward the double doors that would let her out.

Duo remained seated, blinking and bemused. She obviously hadn’t expected Mauren to take her objection to its most extreme conclusion.

Lane was surprised as well, but also quick to recover.

Once Mauren stepped out the door, Lane reached out and touched her intercom as she said, “Security, detain Wrangler Mauren on suspicion of breaking her NDA. Ensure she’s kept away from the experimental wing and receives no visitors. I’ll have her interviewed and make final determination tomorrow.”

“Bold move,” Duo said, her usual brazen attitude subdued. It was no wonder. She’d just watched the director exercise an authority she seldom had cause to remind subordinates she had.

“This project *will* be our primary submission for the next *Sex, Death, and Money* season. There isn’t *time* to start from scratch if we want to showcase its physique, which will draw viewers like flies to shit. The problems it presents are solvable, but Mauren is obviously unwilling to be part of that solution. How would *you* handle this creature’s admittedly very real danger?”

“Whether she gives me the credit or not, I *did* read Mauren’s reports. The seed we used has more complex information than we’re used to dealing with. Pre-existing language at least, and its behavior demonstrates it’s drawing on episodic memory of some kind. Mauren was right about one thing: it’s a genuine ghost. I’m just willing to do what Mauren *should* have done. Change the training style. I bet we could even make a deal with it. We still have a month left. I have a few ideas.”

“Relay them to Deera. She’s been eager to step up for some time and I suspect she’ll be more than willing to shoulder responsibility in exchange for the promotion she’s dreamt of. You’re not rated as a wrangler; even *I* can’t put you in direct control without raising the wrong eyebrows.”

Duo nodded and snapped her wings as she stood, green eyes glinting as she licked her lips, obviously eager to begin.

Lane watched her with a reserved expression, then added, “One more thing. Whatever you do, *don’t* get personally involved with it. I watched the footage. As easily as it snapped that syban’s neck? It would tear *your* head *off* ... completely.”

Her subordinate flashed a brilliant smile, white teeth framed by black lips as she said, “I’d be lying if I said the idea of being taken by something like that didn’t turn me on.”

“You and — we hope — millions of viewers. Mauren has a point, though; there’s a big difference between theory and practice. We want visceral thrills and ratings, not negligent homicide charges. Vacationer release waivers have been challenged — and beaten — before. We only have one shot at a big reveal. I don’t want compulsion. I want *compliance*.”

“It can be arranged,” Duo said, practically dripping confidence that only faltered as she paused in the act of turning to leave.

Glancing back at Lane, she asked, “What do you intend to do with Mauren?”

“I have a few ideas. Which one I set in motion depends on a variety of factors.”

Lane’s narrowed eyes bored into Duo’s. Her subordinate nodded once and turned, leaving out the same door Mauren used moments earlier. They both knew that Lane had more than enough blackmail material to put Duo in a death game.

Mauren though? She was clean, so far as Lane knew. Fortunately, she was also not very well connected, and too much of an idealist to have put together her own blackmail file.

Arranging something ‘conclusive’ shouldn’t be too difficult.

Lane swiveled in her chair and looked up at the monitor displaying the subject of the meeting.

It was pale-skinned with a head and face largely covered with brown hair that would have to be shaved off before it was put in front of a camera, but other than that the specimen was ... beautiful, and in an overtly masculine way. Muscle rippled across a powerful frame. Greenish-gold eyes glittered with intelligence. The sex organ was — given the male’s smaller stature — comparatively large. It would satisfy even the greediest succubus when aroused, but didn’t otherwise impede the male’s movement.

Lane licked her lips. The initial estimate for language indoctrination had been a year. That it had completed training in three months meant it could be realistically put up as a candidate for SDM’s next season, which would start in thirty-five days. It would be the first time Lane’s department had a real shot at getting one of its creatures to *feature* in primetime.

It was a good thing too. The gene seed they’d used to create it had come at great expense through less-than-reputable channels. Third-party seeds were usually subject to stringent screening, but when the dealer showed Lane the physical specs, she’d made the purchase. New species templates came in every few years. The fact that this one hadn’t gone through the normal vetting process could be easily brushed aside considering — as Duo put it — the creature’s potency and compatibility. A new species that could be exploited for population *and* food *and* entertainment? It was a hat trick few could afford to pass up, and if she pulled this off it was only a matter of time before she made one of the coveted VP spots. She’d be set for life.

There was no *way* she could let a little setback like homicidal tendencies get in the way of her star creature’s debut.

I WOKE up to the sound of the door opening.

Turning to look, I saw another one of those armored suits and twisted to sit on the edge of my bed, putting bare feet on the floor as I looked it over curiously. It was big and looked tough, but didn't have any visible weapons, or maybe it did and I just couldn't recognize them. No guns at any rate. No combat knife, no baton, nothing that looked like a weapon of any kind.

Not that I was interested in testing it. The fact that it was here meant they didn't intend to kill me. If they wanted to, they'd have just hit me with a lightning bolt and come in later to clean up the mess.

As the armored suit moved to stand opposite me two images appeared on the wall behind it, one to either side. One was the word for yes, the other for no.

"I'm aware that you have the ability to speak, but seem to have chosen not to. I will ask you a series of yes or no questions. I do not expect verbal replies, but in order to move forward we *do* need the answers to those questions, so if you refuse to speak it would be polite of you to at least look toward the relevant answer. Do you understand?"

Polite? They were expecting me to be polite? Someone must have promoted me from lab rat to, well, *human* probably isn't the word I'm looking for, and several of the holes in my linguistic education had been made clear the previous day. I hadn't been shown the alien I'd killed, or these suits of armor,

or what might be *in* the suit. I didn't know what these things called themselves.

I raised an eyebrow, then glanced toward the 'Yes' on the wall.

"Excellent!" the voice said with more enthusiasm than I thought was warranted, and I was left to wonder if the armored suit in front of me was the speaker, or if it was just here for show, to focus my attention on the veiled threat. The actual sound was coming through the room's audio system.

Either way, the first question asked was, "Do you know who you are?"

I glanced at the floor, thinking hard about the implications. Why would they ask me that question? Was it a baseline question so they could do whatever amounted to a polygraph, or was there a real, non-zero chance I wasn't supposed to know who I was?

After due consideration, I looked toward yes again more because my alternatives were not answer or lie, and lying was a complete coin toss. I didn't know what motivated these people or why I was here, so lying to them had no reliable benefit.

"If I offer you a trade deal, are you willing to consider it?"

Blinking, I shifted my eyes from yes to the armored suit. A trade deal? That implied I had something they wanted, something they couldn't just take from me. Granted, I was naked in a prison, so if they wanted something from me it had to be something I could *do*, rather than something I owned or something that could simply be harvested.

I looked toward the yes again, now genuinely curious.

"We want to take measurements of your physical capabilities. If you are willing to do your best in the tests, we are willing to upgrade your living arrangements. We have one test prepared, so we are willing to offer one upgrade in exchange for your cooperation. Either look at the no, or hold your eyes on the upgrade you want most. Provided both you

and we are satisfied with the outcome, we will conduct further tests, for which you will be further compensated.”

The options they were offering appeared on the ‘yes’ side of the wall and I took a moment to look them over.

Higher quality food.

Clothing.

A bathing facility.

Audio/visual entertainment.

A larger bed.

A female.

I stopped, blinking when I saw the last option. I was stunned, and it cost me.

“Very well. I will escort you to the testing area,” the voice said as all the options disappeared, and I came as close as I ever had to breaking my silence as I lowered my head into my hand, eyes shut tight.

Should I speak? Should I tell her that I hadn’t wanted that choice, I’d just been shocked it was *offered*? What the hell was I supposed to do with a female? The last one they’d sent in hadn’t done so well, did they think I was some sort of ...

The thought trailed off into nothing because I had no idea what they thought of me. I’d killed one of their people and they were offering me another one. What did they think I’d do?

It was then I realized that *all* of the options had been a test of sorts, and they’d be getting results for free when they ‘gave’ me a female. All this was obvious, but my own surprise had fucked me.

I started considering how I’d handle things as I followed the armored suit out the door and into a hallway that was pretty much *exactly* what I’d thought it would be. White, sterile, lined with doors, and *long*.

The door to my cell shut behind me. I looked at it before we left, curious if they had a designation for me.

Turns out they did.

A sounds-like of the characters on the plaque affixed to my door made me AAA0.

Triple A Zero?

It's like I was a company scrambling to be at the front of a phone book. The thought made me smile and I shook my head wryly as I followed the suit in front of me, the back of which was a bit more visually interesting than the front.

It had a backpack-looking thing on it that didn't seem like a jetpack and didn't really look like a weapon system either. It was also a bit oddly shaped, with two rounded protrusions at the shoulders and tails that ended past the butt. The rest of the suit looked so plain and functional it made me wonder what purpose the pack served. A heat sink maybe?

Not like it mattered. It was all fucking magic to me.

We walked almost a thousand steps to get to a bulkhead door that slid aside as the suit got close to it, and closed once I was through.

It was an elevator, though I barely felt the acceleration as we went down. Down ... meaning we were likely *already* underground, or maybe we were in a space station? Halls as long as the one I'd just gone through weren't typical in skyscrapers. A building like that would have to be ... well, *massive* doesn't cover it.

Then again, I knew fuck all about what was really going on. Catching the details like distance and such was just my monkey brain turning tricks. The fact that it was futile conjecture didn't play.

I wasn't on Earth anymore. I knew *that* for sure. Even if it *was* Earth somehow, it wasn't *my* Earth. There was nowhere for me to run. Not like any of it really mattered. I'd run out of chances and if this was my afterlife then fucked as it was, it was more than I probably deserved.

The doors in front of me opened. The guard I was with hadn't moved after stepping in so I was in front of him/her/it. I

stepped out and to one side, waiting for the whatever was in the suit to pass me as I looked at where I'd been brought.

The room wasn't *too* big — maybe a hundred feet square — but it was a lot higher than a normal space and the vast bulk of it was filled with something that looked vaguely like one of those novelty jungle gyms I'd seen in some high-dollar tourist traps. I remembered something like it in Vegas in one of the malls on the strip. All kinds of platforms, ropes, and gimmicky traversal methods leading up to a platform that was about fifty, maybe sixty feet over my head.

There was even a big red fucking button on a platform up there, like it was a discount *American Ninja* set, though none of the obstacles looked anywhere near as difficult as those I remembered from that show. There was just one catch: a complete lack of belaying equipment or deep water ... or even mats.

The floor I was standing on was featureless, white, and may as well have been solid stone.

As I considered that the female voice, now actually coming from the suit of armor, said, "You've seen the red button at the top. The test is simple: Achieve the platform and press the button at your best speed. The test will begin when you touch the course. Begin whenever you're ready."

Best speed. Simple test, and one I was quite certain I could pass, but the question I was asking myself was whether or not I should deliberately skew the result.

I had *not* intended to select 'a female' reward, so if I did poorly on this test and didn't receive one that would work out for me. I would avoid their hidden second test.

The problem was that, again, I had no idea what they were ultimately after. Did they want to measure the limits of human ability because they were preparing to invade my home planet or something? That seemed silly, and if true didn't explain *my* presence in particular.

Since it was *me*, I had to assume that whatever was going on really was about testing me specifically. They wanted to

know what *my* limits were because they had something in mind, something they wanted me to do.

While that snake chick *had* approached me the wrong way and I wasn't about to apologize for snatching the light from her eyes, I could see how that act might cost me something. It did seem, however, that her bosses were brushing off the killing. That being the case I really had no reason to be a dick about any of this and at least one very good reason not to be. At the moment I was obviously high value for ... *whatever* reason. If I flunked their test, my value would go down. While I really didn't mind the idea of dying, I wasn't so sure *that* would be my fate if my value dropped too much. Since these aliens wanted to know my limits the idea that I might be taken to a lab and dissected alive if I didn't show them what they wanted the easy way wasn't really that farfetched. The flip side was that if I *raised* my value, I'd learn more about what was going on. Just like they'd learn more about me by giving me 'a female,' I'd learn more about them, about what they wanted, based on what that female did once I got her.

So ... I'd give them what they wanted. The chick in the suit — I had to assume based on her voice that it was a she — had told me to get to the top platform in best time.

The obvious route was to navigate all the obstacles, which ascended in courses counter-clockwise around four pilons that anchored all the various cables, platforms, what have you. But the actual angle of ascent for each course varied wildly.

Since the test wouldn't start until I touched the damn thing I took my time and walked a circuit all the way around, examining the course in detail. There were sixteen total courses, *but* eight of them were skippable if I was willing to jump at certain key locations. I'd been instructed to get to the top at best speed. I hadn't been told I had to run the course as intended.

I gave it a little more thought, then examined the pilon supporting the win platform. It had a total circumference about the same as a telephone pole and looked to be made of painted metal which meant I could get a decent grip with hands and feet, considering I was naked. There were also plenty of

attachment points at intervals all the way up where I could rest if I needed to.

The fastest way for me to get to that button would be to skip all the carnival bullshit and go straight up, so that's what I did.

Wrapping hands around the far side of the pole and leaning out as I set my feet against the near side, I climbed the pole like an island Carib scaling a coconut tree. The metal *did* in fact give me decent grip and I had no real trouble. The climb was about ten body lengths and I made it to a spot under the platform in about a minute.

Of course, the button was on *top* of the platform, not under it, but the platform wasn't wide enough to keep me from getting a grip on the edge, which I used to swing out and grab one of the cables attaching the highest course. From there it was an easy clamber up and over the edge to tap the button, which actually lit up when I hit the damn thing as a buzzer sounded.

It was honestly kinda tacky.

With no instructions forthcoming in the seconds after the buzzer, I began a lazy descent using the actual courses I'd been meant to ascend. It really was weekend warrior type stuff, but I had fun with it and took my time getting back down. It was the most activity I'd had in three months, and as I moved it occurred to me that, for a man getting a single meal a day and no meaningful exercise, I was in better shape than I had any right to be. Most of my life I'd been in good to superlative physical shape, but sustained exercise had been necessary to keep me there.

I hadn't had any of that lately. A man on death row doesn't do pushups.

Yet, while I'd gotten a good workout climbing the pylon it hadn't winded me, and the descent was trivial despite the fact that most of the courses were obviously designed to test my balance, grip strength, or both.

Maybe my body, no matter how it looked or felt, wasn't really my own. That left me with even more questions. If these high-tech aliens had built me a body, why the hell would they need physical tests? Wouldn't they know what I was capable of already? Or was this not a physical test at all, but a problem-solving one, and they were just testing how the clever monkey would get his banana?

The more I thought about it, the more it irritated me. There was something funky going on and while I'd resigned myself to not knowing what the hell was up with the aliens, I was not so comfortable with the thought that I might not be normal either.

When I got back to the ground, the armored guard was waiting for me and said, "You have completed the test. Your upgrade is waiting for you in your room."

SHE WAS THERE when the door slid aside, just as I'd been promised.

Not a snake woman either.

I stepped through and the door slid shut behind me as I looked at my new bunkmate.

Her skin was so dark red that it was almost black, with lighter red markings on her wrists and ankles that might have been tattoos. She was tall too, at least eight feet using my own height as a guide, not counting a pair of ivory kudu-like horns that gave her another easy ten inches.

Her face was familiar and exotic at once. Her eyes were large and had that distinctive Romanian tilt to them, with black sclera and luminous golden irises surrounding slitted pupils. Her lips were full and pert, nose slightly upturned and straight, with smooth cheeks and a soft jawline.

She had two ivory horns spiraling up above her temples that guided wavy black hair away from her face and down over her shoulders in a rich fall.

She was also naked, and ... well put-together. Her breasts were full and rode high on her chest, not *quite* big enough to hang together, but close. Her nipples were the same brighter red as the markings on her limbs, and she had a barely discernible four-pack over a sculpted patch of truly black hair that matched what was on her head, highlighting a neat, otherwise clean slit visible more by the lighter shade at the center than cleavage.

Her legs were long and shapely, hips definite but slim, and she had wings. Honest to God wings. They were bat-like and pretty big, though I doubted they'd actually let her fly even if she'd had room unless her bones were hollow, and even that was a stretch. The wing membrane was thin enough to highlight the reddish skin pigment and they were spread as though ready to launch her into the ceiling.

She was in a slight crouch, hands forward, and I saw that she had talons rather than fingernails, though they looked to have been sanded down to nubs. Given the use of tablet computers it made sense. Typing with claws was probably a non-starter.

"Stay away from me," she said in a warble that she probably wanted to sound like a warning but came out more than a little terrified. She was speaking the language I'd been taught, which didn't surprise me, and her voice was lower than a typical human woman's, which I figured was normal given her size.

There was sweat glistening on her brow and it caught my notice considering it was somewhere in the high sixties to low seventies in the room with no appreciable humidity.

Leaning against the wall next to the door, I supported one arm with the other across my chest, tugging my lip thoughtfully as I considered what to do.

Honestly, I'd thought they meant to give me a concubine or something similar. That's the expectation when you're offered 'a female.'

As I inspected her I caught a hint of movement and noticed she had a black-skinned, lashing tail with a spade tip.

That was it then. I didn't know what she called herself, but I knew a human word that fit her appearance pretty well.

Succubus.

She had that stereotypical succubus look, but that was where the tropes seemed to fall apart. She wasn't trying to sexually dominate me, looked not at all threatening despite her almost two foot height advantage, and was clearly terrified.

Given how scared she was, she knew I'd killed that other thing they'd sent in trying to order me around and wasn't too confident about her own chances if I decided to make a play.

A big demon scared of a human? That was a new one on me. Not that I blamed her. I'm a scary motherfucker when I want to be.

Everything I'd been able to piece together told me this creature was absolutely no threat. Allowing her to kill me in my sleep had no logical upside for whoever was pulling strings. They hadn't spent three months training me to speak their language and let me get away with murder just to have my 'upgrade' do me in.

Points in her favor: she was smokin' hot. The horns, wings, and tail just added spice to an already very attractive body.

Aaand ... that was it.

Rape isn't my kink. Murder isn't either, all evidence to the contrary, and since I knew they weren't about to let *her* kill *me* ... the only thing left to do was either experiment on her to learn more about what she was and how much people like her could take, or ignore her.

I wasn't about to break my silence. Doing so had no upside for *me*.

The way she was reacting to me made it obvious she knew I was a killer, which meant she was involved in whatever was going on. They wouldn't send a comfort girl to me thinking she had good odds of winding up with a broken neck. So either she was a plant and faking her fear — something I very much doubted given shivers and flop sweat are hard to fake — or ...

she'd crossed someone higher up on her chain and been thrown to the proverbial lion as a sacrifice.

That meant even if I didn't talk to her, she'd eventually talk to me, and I had absolutely nothing but time.

Maybe if I just ignored her, they'd take her away again.

That would probably be for the best. While she had a distractingly sexy body and I *do* like to fuck, I also require consent and *clearly* didn't have it.

Decision made, I leaned away from the wall and walked toward the bed, quietly amused as she warily turned, keeping herself squared up, eyes glued to me as though she were a cornered cat.

I guess she was, come to think of it. She had the look of someone who'd lost everything and was now dangling at the very end of her rope.

Whatever power structure existed on the other side of that door seemed like it must be pretty brutal, and while that was interesting, I was in no rush to learn more.

As a wise man once said: Everything comes to him who waits.

DIRECTOR LANE BLINKED SLOWLY at Duo as the two sat together in her office. She knew she'd heard the other woman, but the idea that she wasn't telling a poorly timed joke was hard to swallow.

Unable to simply accept it, she said, "So he just ... looked her over, then went to *sleep*?"

Nodding with wide eyes, Duo said, "Got in bed, rolled over, and dozed off. Didn't say a word, didn't even *attempt* to touch her."

Lane glanced down at her desk, unlocked her terminal, and pulled up the relevant file before turning around to watch it on the video wall behind her.

Duo leaned back in her seat and watched as well, a bemused expression on her face despite the fact she'd clearly already seen the footage. She said, "See that look? He's obviously sizing her up, then gives her a hard pass riiight ... here."

Lane pulled the footage back and froze it, looking at the specimen as it leaned against the wall, tugging at its lip with an expression that was deeply thoughtful.

"Well, if we had any doubts about his episodic memory, they're gone now," she murmured.

"Definitely," Duo agreed. "Though it leaves us with a problem."

Nodding, Lane said, “We expected Mauren to put up a fight and get herself killed.”

“She *would* have *if* he’d gone for her,” Duo pointed out. “She’s one of those purity nuts.”

“I had all the reports ready to file!” Lane said, sighing in annoyance. “Wrangler decides to take matters into her own hands and gets in the cell with a dangerous experimental creature. Neck snapped, next case. *Now* what do I do?”

Duo shrugged and said, “Pull her out. He’s obviously rejected her. Leaving her in there has no upside. She might even get back on board now that she knows how serious you are.”

“Not true. If she starts to annoy him — and given her personality that’s practically guaranteed — he might still finish her for us. We leave her in. It doesn’t make any *sense* though. Why would he actively select a female as a reward, then do *nothing* with her!?”

“I won’t lie, it’s giving our psychoanalysts fits,” Duo said with a wry look. “Maybe Mauren was right and he is some kind of monster. We had all the sensors running and picked up a lot of brain activity but practically *no* visceral reaction. He might be attracted to his own type.”

“Oh fuuuck no. Don’t say that. Don’t even *think* it. That would be a *complete* disaster,” Lane groaned, rubbing her brows, eyes shut as she thought hard about how to handle this most recent twist.

Duo nodded ruefully and said, “If he’s same type or asexual we’ll have to scrap the project.”

“He *can’t* be asexual and have wet dreams, Duo. There’s something else going on here.”

“Well, he’s seen two females of two different species and reacted either violently or not at all.”

“We need a bigger sample size.”

“What do you want to do then? He agreed to testing, we could modify his rewards, keep throwing females at him and

see if one of them trips his trigger.”

“We’d have to move him to larger quarters unearned. Mixed messaging isn’t good with this one.”

“Torture?”

“Pre-existing memories in an unknown species? We have no idea how he’d respond. Even if we could reliably break him he’d wind up unsuitable for primetime. He needs to be fit and strong to play well for an audience.”

“At this point he’s a little *too* strong if you ask me,” Duo said mildly.

Lane nodded, scowling as she said, “None of this would be necessary if the thing would just *speak*. We can’t start building a reliable profile until we get him to open his mouth for more than food.”

“Presuming he’s sexually mature, attracted to females, and of above-average intelligence, his not speaking might be a deliberate response to the specific scenario he’s found himself in.”

“What kind of person wakes up in a cell and doesn’t at *least* say ‘What the fuck?’” Lane asked, somewhat rhetorically.

“Good question. I’ll pass it on to the psych specialists and see what they can come up with,” Duo wryly said. “The answer might give us some better ideas on how to handle him. Are you *sure* you don’t want to pull Mauren out before she gets herself killed?”

Lane shook her head and said, “If she lasts long enough she’ll realize the only way to survive this is molding that thing into what we need him to be. If she can do that he’ll be her meal ticket out.”

“Fat chance if she isn’t willing ... and able, to at least feed off him,” Duo said dismissively.

“Win win,” Lane said absently, but her mind wasn’t on Mauren. Despite the setback, *that* problem would solve itself.

There was virtually no way the arrogant bitch didn't get herself killed before the next season started.

Still, it was a possibility she had to be ready for. Lane said, "Make her the offer. Contact her through her implant. *If* she makes him into a suitable competitor *and* survives the game on good behavior, she gets double the wrangler bonus for raising a champion. The catch is she'll have to join his team in the games as an ally."

"That'll piss off the sponsors, especially if one of them takes a liking to him. How are you going to reserve him?"

"We won't. If one of the sponsors bids to put a vacay in with him, he'll just wind up with two succubi. Remember, I don't care if Mauren ultimately lives or dies."

"Assuming they go all the way, how are you going to keep her mouth shut once she's out?" Duo asked.

Shaking her head, Lane said, "By then she'll be in too deep. She'll have been in the public spotlight for a year passing up plenty of chances to call for help. No one would believe her after chasing the victory and accepting the prizes."

"Well, there is one other thing."

Lane raised an eyebrow, and Duo flipped her fingers over to examine her claws idly as she said, "She's going to starve to death if she can't at least get him to feed her, which I can't see her doing given her ... proclivities. If he kills her in the first few days that's one thing. If you leave her to starve ... that might come back to haunt you. We can't delete these recordings because the company reserves the right to put together behind-the-scenes documentaries. This is still a *very* dangerous play for you."

"Mauren doesn't know we can't delete the footage. Outside the directors and their aides, no one does. If we win big and they decide to do a creature feature on him they'll bend over backwards to cover up any impropriety without me having to lift a finger. As for food, I doubt Mauren's willing to starve to death for revenge," Lane said, smirking as she thought about it. "She might be self-righteous but she's not

spiteful. She'll take life over her sensibilities *or* my disgrace. Purists know full well their position is privileged. Most of us don't have the option of feeding entirely from other succubi even if we wanted to. It does raise the question of her support structure though. I can assume you've already looked into that for me?"

Duo nodded but didn't say anything, and Lane didn't press. Both of them knew that unless the director asked, dirty details were to be kept buried.

"You certainly are in a risk-taking mood, but I can't say I hate it," Duo said as she glanced up with a smile.

"You're as confident in this one as I am. He's just strange enough to be interesting, just strong enough to survive. The only question is whether or not he's smart enough to capitalize on his position."

"You obviously think he is."

Lane shrugged artfully and turned back to look at the image on her screen as she said, "I think we've got something very special here, and if we play our cards right it will make us all very rich. Have the psychoanalysts come up with some more tests so that we can justify expanding his privileges a bit before the sponsors get their review. We still have a few hard sales ahead of us."

"No kidding. Like, how are we going to get him approved when he doesn't *speak*?"

"I've got some ideas. Keep testing him. Press him harder. If he won't *tell* us just how tough he is, we'll just have him show us. I might *think* he's good enough, but if I'm going to put my career on the line to push him into the spotlight, I want to *know*."

"I'll arrange it."

"I trust you will."

“PRISONER, in accordance with your sentence you will now be shot, and may God have mercy on you soul. Ready line! Take aim! FIRE!”

I woke up, sucking in a deep lungful of air.

I couldn't call it a dream because it wasn't.

The light in the room brightened automatically. They knew when I woke up, just like they always knew what I was looking at.

Leaning up, I half-twisted and set my feet down on the slightly spongy floor. The surface reminded me of the heavy mat under a squat rack, save that it was white and flawless.

She was still there, apparently asleep in the corner next to the toilet, huddled as though the john would give her some sort of protection from me. That was unfortunate because it meant I'd have to wake her up with my morning business. Well, I didn't *have* to wake her up, but the alternative was crude and I've never considered myself that kind of man.

Stepping over to her, I reached out with one foot and prodded her lower leg, which was pulled up under her arms. She was cradling her knees with her head down, but it snapped up when I made contact and she let out a short, sharp scream as her wings instinctively flared out, one flapping along the wall, the other jamming against the toilet.

She winced as her horns rapped the wall behind her, then glared hatefully at me.

I pointed at her and jerked my thumb behind me with one hand as I waved at the toilet with the other.

She got the message and shot out of the corner and past me as though a firecracker'd gone off under her butt.

Grinning bemusedly, I got my business done and turned to find — to my surprise — that there was food waiting for me.

As I blinked at the tray, the female demon said, “You didn't eat last night before you went to sleep. The wranglers want you healthy.”

She was standing somewhat awkwardly in the corner to the left of the door and obviously had no idea what to do with herself. Her wings were pulled in behind her but didn't seem too tense, and her tail hung low with its tip curled up. It seemed her nerve had steadied somewhat, so I wandered over to look at the food.

It was the same nutrient brick I'd come to know and feel meh about. It had roughly the consistency of a rice crispy treat, but less flavor.

I picked it up and broke it, but when I looked her way to toss her half she held up both hands and waved them at me as she said, “No. That won't do me any good. You eat it all.”

Shrugging, I settled against the wall on my butt and did just that, interspersed with swigs of water from a jug they left with the food bar.

As I ate, the demon woman watched.

When I finished, she said, “My name is Mauren.”

I nodded. It sounded too ordinary to be a demon name, but whatever.

She seemed a bit nonplussed when she saw my nod, and said, “You seem much calmer with me than with the syban we sent in. You don't look like you intend to kill *or* fuck me.”

I silently chuckled at that, grinning as I kept watching her. Truth was, I wouldn't mind taking a tumble with this huge woman, but she didn't look into it and while her body was mouth-wateringly hot, it was pretty easy to keep my mind off

what I'd like to do with it given how scared shitless she'd been of me yesterday.

It still threw me for a bit of a loop that a creature two feet taller and probably eighty to a hundred pounds heavier would be scared of me, but I wasn't about to question it. I was bigger and heavier than a jaguar, didn't mean I wasn't scared of the damn things. I figured she thought of me in roughly the same way, and that suited me fine.

Mauren's frown deepened as she said, "Do you *really* intend to keep up the silent treatment indefinitely? I *know* you can speak. I was your wrangler until *just* recently."

I blinked. That was interesting. The word wrangler was a new one, but placed in context it seemed to mean she had been my handler, or the person responsible for my care. It was more evidence that she'd had a falling out with someone higher up the food chain and they'd thrown her in here with me hoping I'd deal with the problem.

That I hadn't was probably giving someone fits.

When I still didn't say anything, she said, "If you're not going to kill me then we're going to have to work out some kind of arrangement. They aren't going to feed *me*. You'll have to do that."

I blinked at her, glanced from her to the toilet and back, then gave her a queasy look that couldn't possibly need an explanation.

She obviously got it too because she full-body shuddered and said, "Oh my fuck, you are disgusting."

I just spread a hand in her direction and raised an eyebrow.

"I'm *obviously* not talking about ..."

She trailed off and put her head in her hand as she slammed her back against the wall behind her and sagged off her feet, mumbling, "Fuck's sake, what am I even doing? I'm going to starve to death while a mute monster sits there watching me like a moron."

I grinned and leaned back against the wall, pointedly watching her as though I thought she would keel over dead any second. If she was going to treat me like an idiot, I had no problem acting the part. Her despair was entertaining, and besides, I pretty much figured I knew what she actually needed. I just wanted to see how desperate she'd get before she spelled it out.

There were only two real possibilities on the table given her appearance and refusal to accept the partial nutrient brick I'd offered her. She either needed blood or spooage. I was pretty sure it was door number two given the tone of her foul language and ... other clues, but either way I had no reason to make it easy for her. If she'd been in charge of me for the past three months then her training methods ... while admittedly effective, lacked a certain human touch.

I guess now I knew why, and no one ever went to hell for a bit of schadenfreude.

Presuming, of course, that I wasn't already *in* hell.

I mean, Mauren's tits were nice, but they *were* attached to a literal demon. If someone made me guess at my location, given my circumstances and death ... I honestly think I probably would have to say it *was* hell.

I had no freedom, no idea what was going on, no way forward, and I certainly didn't deserve to live happily ever after.

"You're not a moron. You're just *spiteful*, is that it?"

I raised an eyebrow at Mauren, who was giving me a challenging stare as she said, "You woke up here with no idea what's going on and got nothing from us except language lessons. You've got no reason to talk to any of us, that it?"

Well, since she'd phrased it as a yes or no ...

I nodded and showed her an idle palm. She *had* just about summed it up.

"No gratitude?" she asked. "You *are* alive because of us, you know."

Since I had no idea if my living was a good or a bad thing, I just waggled my hand at her.

“Okay, that’s pretty clearly ambivalence. You don’t know if being alive is a good thing.”

She actually paused, looking thoughtful as she bit the nub of her thumb claw, and it was an adorable expression that just did not fit on a naked eight foot tall bombshell demon woman.

Still. I was curious just how much of an effort she’d make, and even if she was abrasive, I had two reasons to think she might not be complete garbage. The first was that *she* didn’t know how to sell things from my perspective ... and the second was that she was putting herself in my place to think about it. That implied she was capable of empathy.

That, or she really *was* complete garbage and the thoughtful expression was just while she tried to think up a good lie. I thought that unlikely because the facility I was in had to be expensive. Given I was being kept in isolation and had seen a total of ... four people in the last three months, I was probably a secret project, which meant if she’d been in charge of my care she had to have worked her way up to the position.

I felt comfortable taking her thoughtfulness as genuine.

I hadn’t expected that much consideration, but then again, the woman across from me was scared and desperate. There’s a reason people call it ‘honest’ fear.

“Look, since it’s obvious you have memories of your last life, I’ll tell you what’s going to happen. In exchange ... I’d like you to keep me alive. I need your help to get out of here.”

I raised an eyebrow at her, and her almost black cheeks darkened even further as she said, “Ye-ah ... I don’t know what your future looks like. It all depends on your performance.”

So there *was* something they expected me to do. I rolled my fingers at her in an invitation to continue, but she shook her head and said, “Not until I have some assurance that when

I've told you what I know, you'll feed me. Nothing is free in this world."

I gave her a wry half-smile, then glanced up and away as I gave it a think. The only thing she had to offer me was satisfying my curiosity early. I'd find out everything she could tell me anyway if I was patient. So the real question was, did I think *she* was worth keeping around.

No ... that wasn't quite right.

Presuming I didn't agree to feed her, she'd starve to death. At some point, her hunger would overcome her fear and she'd attack me. At that point either a bolt from the cell walls would kill her or I'd have to do the job myself.

If I knew what was expected of me, then I'd be able to figure out if she had any further worth to me.

I was about to agree when a voice sounded over the speakers.

"Another test has been prepared. Do you wish to participate?"

The 'yes' and 'no' images lit up on the wall opposite the bed, and I looked steadily at the yes.

After a solid second, the images vanished and a list appeared as the voice said, "Should you pass, you may choose from one of the following benefits."

Being very careful *not* to stare at any entry too long, I had a look at my choices.

Higher quality food.

Clothing.

A bathing facility.

Audio/visual entertainment.

A larger bed.

Everything from the previous list was still available, except the option for 'a female.' It was reasonable to assume that these were all the benefits they were prepared to offer,

which meant there were only going to be five more tests including this one.

It didn't really matter what I selected. Presuming I passed their tests I'd wind up with all of them.

I glanced at Mauren and raised an eyebrow as I gestured toward the list.

She blinked at me in shock, looked at the list, then back to me.

After a long few seconds she held up all five fingers, but wouldn't look me in the eye as she did so.

I would not have thought a naked, eight foot tall demon girl could *be* cute, but she managed it.

I focused on the fifth option. After a long second it cleared and the door slid open, revealing armored goon number one again.

Standing, I glanced at Mauren, but as I looked the voice over the speaker said, "She will not accompany you."

"It'll probably be a test of endurance," Mauren said. "Swimming or climbing."

Nodding, I offered her a thumbs-up and followed the guard out. Of the two options, it would almost certainly be swimming as I'd already demonstrated I could climb.

The walk was the same, as was the descent, which left me to wonder if we were going down as far as we had last time. I hadn't counted the seconds my first ride and didn't consciously do it this time either. The information wouldn't do me any good ... but I was fairly certain we went further down this time.

The doors opened, but I didn't step out, and neither did the guard.

Easy reason for that: no floor.

No light either.

What little light there was in the elevator car spilled out on dead calm water ahead of me that flooded a passage the height

of a normal hallway. Narrowing my eyes, I noticed that the ceiling began to slope toward the surface of the water out toward the edge of where the light could reach.

As I contemplated my apparent fate, the voice came again, sounding from the guard this time.

“Again, the test is simple. Swim until you find the red button. The test will continue until you complete it or lose consciousness, and will begin when you touch the water.”

I hesitated, looking at the guard. It may as well have been a statue.

It seemed likely this test was two-fold. I wasn't being told all the parameters deliberately. I could either ask and improve my chances with the information, or remain silent. Was it a straight shot? How long were the airless sections? Was the red button *lit*, or would I just be fumbling around in the dark until I passed out from hypothermia?

Even if I *did* ask it might not get me anything. They were under no obligation to answer me, and they obviously didn't think I was on their level.

Should I give up my silence ... with no real expectation of gain?

Fuck it. I had no one to trust, no one to rely on but myself. Asking for help here would be a show of weakness. If I wanted to sell myself to these people, I had to demonstrate strength.

As I set myself at the edge of the open elevator doors, then launched, it occurred to me that there might be another word for what I was doing.

Stupidity.

The water was cold, but not freezing. Unfortunately, swimming wasn't the problem.

It was the dark.

I coasted through the water and angled left, hit the wall almost immediately, and kept going forward. Distance was

meaningless and I didn't rush. Instead, I kept a hand on the wall, and soon realized my worst fear.

The canal I was in branched.

Backing up, I pressed off the left wall toward the right and found the same thing. Using the rough distance from the left wall to the right as a guide, I sussed out I was at a four-way junction.

With my hand at the corner between the way I'd come and the left turn, I thought through my options. The least likely to be the correct path would be going forward. If I'd swum straight ahead racing for a finish, I'd have passed these side corridors without ever knowing they were there. Since the test was obviously about more than just how fast and far I could swim, straight ahead was just as obviously not the right direction.

So either the left or right passage was the correct one, but which?

Thinking back, I tried to figure out if I'd done anything that would give away my handedness. I knew that absent any other guide, people usually chose whichever path matched their dominant hand. If I had given away that I was right-handed, I could choose the left path with fair confidence, but what could I have done that would give it away?

It was the first time in my life I could remember wishing I'd given something away. My routine over the last few months had been spartan, to put it mildly, and there wasn't much of anything that I only did with ... one, hand.

My chest started shivering as I tried to keep from laughing. I took the left-hand channel. While I hadn't jacked in the last three months, I'd shaken the last drops off multiple times a day since first waking up. I just had to hope these people were as observant ... and as treacherous, as I thought they were.

“DID HE GET LUCKY OR *WHAT?!*” Lane asked, watching the infrared footage live in mild disbelief.

“Certainly looked like he gave it thought to me,” Duo said, leaning back in her chair as she too watched the creature swimming strongly down the correct path despite making no effort to search for signs beyond figuring out there were three tunnels.

At the bottom of the channel he’d chosen there was a circular marker centered at the entrance, but he’d made no effort to find it. He’d simply measured the hallway blind, treaded water for almost a full minute, then chosen the left hand passage. He was now swimming strongly, and would soon meet the point where the ceiling lowered to meet the water.

“What could *possibly* have given it away?” Lane asked, turning toward Duo, eyes narrowed. “Supposing for the moment that we rule out luck, give me a breakdown.”

Duo spread her hands, but this time it wasn’t just the two of them.

Deera’s grin was one step short of feral as she said, “He figured us out.”

Lane twisted in her seat, turning her attention from the swimming creature on whom she’d pinned her hopes of advancement to the rainbow-haired oddity sitting across from her. Her horns were backward. Most succubi had horns set on the forehead or above the temples. Deera’s horns started at the

back of her head, circling forward to end in points just over her eyes. Her hair was a disorganized riot of color, her skin a brilliant red. It hurt Lane's soul to look at her, but Deera had a promising career and she'd been chosen to replace Mauren on pure merit.

"Explain," Lane said.

"Handedness. That creature's dominant hand is his right. We used that to choose the left tunnel because most intelligent life, in the absence of contextual clues, instinctively turns toward its dominant side. *That* male, without asking any questions, immediately went to a wall and followed it until he found the gap. *Then* he measured the tunnels. He was told it was timed, but still didn't race ahead. He thought everything through, even to the point of analyzing *us*."

Duo waved a hand as she said, "Okay? How? *We* haven't interacted with him and Mauren hasn't really told him anything."

"Hasn't she? She's *there*. Her *presence* gave us away. She told him she was his wrangler and she was clearly terrified of him. She obviously didn't *volunteer*. That means we *threw* her in there. We betrayed her. So if we were watching him, and wanted to make it as hard as possible for him to succeed, we'd have placed the goal down the tunnel he was least likely to pick first. He knows that the only evidence he's given us about his proclivities is his handedness, so he relied on that to pick the correct tunnel. He obviously knows about the sentient inclination toward the dominant side and chose the opposite direction, believing correctly that we would want to make the test difficult."

"How do you know he's right-handed?" Duo asked, waving a hand. "He's never jacked, and he eats with both hands."

"He led with his right when he killed the syban."

Lane grimaced, then twisted her head in reluctant admiration. She wasn't sure who deserved more respect, Deera ... or the creature.

Turning, she watched him find the place where the tunnel's roof lowered to the waterline.

Deera chuckled darkly and said, “*Now* we find out how he handles uncertainty. If he swims too slowly, he runs out of air. If he swims too quickly, he might miss another branch. He's kept a hand on the wall the whole time.”

“How does he know there isn't a gap on the other side that he's missing?” Duo asked.

Deera said, “It wouldn't tell us anything. Everything about this test is designed to teach us about him. We wouldn't learn anything by adding arbitrary difficulty so nothing about this test can rely on luck. He's figured that out.”

“If he's really that smart, he'll know the underwater gap can't be longer than he could reasonably swim,” Lane said.

“Ah, but we've never seen him swim,” Deera said, a note of vicious glee in her voice. “He knows that. So now he's wondering just how well we've measured his physical fitness so far. If he couldn't swim at all he'd have failed the test immediately, but beyond that we really have no idea how far he can go underwater or how long he can consciously hold his breath. We know how long his biology can withstand oxygen deprivation, but swimming underwater is as much about willpower and practice as it is about purely physical ability. He knows we'll have tried to make it a subjectively long swim, and he'll be wondering if there are any holes in the ceiling where he could get oxygen if he takes extra time to explore.”

“Are there?” Duo asked.

“No.”

“So what do you think he'll do?” Lane asked.

“He's already hyperventilating. See? He'll oxygenate as much as he can, then swim as fast and far as he can go. If he comes up and it's not far enough, then he'll pass out and we rescue him. He has to know we won't let him die during a test. He's realized there won't be any oxygen breaks because Mauren told him this was an *endurance* test.”

“She said it was *probably* an endurance test,” Duo pointed out.

“He’s obviously important to us, meaning the person put in charge of his care must be competent. With nothing else to go on, he’ll trust her opinion because she was his wrangler.”

Lane blinked. Deera was *clearly* the right choice to replace Mauren in this position. If anyone could manipulate this creature into doing what they needed it to do, it was the little rainbow-haired monster seated behind her.

Still, she had too recently come to her position, and the test hadn’t born out yet. It was too early to give her a compliment either way.

“Wow, look at him go,” Duo breathed, a note of awe in her voice.

Lane looked. For a land mammal, he was obviously accustomed to the water and a strong swimmer. He was using both his hands and feet, and had given up keeping contact with the wall in an all-out bid to gain as much distance as possible.

Glancing up at the map of the test displayed in the upper left-hand corner of the screen, she noted that the underwater portion was fifty meters. Any succubus that knew how to swim could make the distance, but they had wings to help drive them forward and this creature had none.

She blinked as he passed the fifty meter mark and kept going. When he finally came up, she absently asked, “How far was that?”

“Seventy-two meters,” Deera replied.

“Where does that put him?”

“Out of all cataloged land-based sentients? Probably somewhere near the bottom of the first quintile, top of the second. I’d have to run a comparison to tell you the exact percentage. He’s an impressive specimen,” Deera said.

Lane smiled, grinning viciously as she watched her prize. It was obvious he could see the glow of the button in front of him, and he confirmed it less than a minute later when he

swam down and slammed his foot into it, using the push to send him back to the surface.

The lights came on in the testing facility, and the door just above him opened to reveal the guard who would escort him back to his room.

“I’d say he earned his bed,” Duo commented.

“Yes,” Lane mused, unable to suppress her grin. “I’d say you’re right.”

WHEN I STEPPED BACK into my cell I found out what they'd meant by 'a larger bed,' and it came with an unexpected benefit.

The bed was now bigger than a California King ... but the real prize was that the room had been expanded to accommodate it. I hadn't lost any floor space, so in effect I'd gotten a twofer.

It wasn't just bigger either. The new bed had several pillows and was piled high with fluffy comforters. Granted, it was all plain white, but I wasn't about to sweat color schemes in a prison.

Mauren was leaning against the wall opposite the bed when I walked in, and pushed away to face me directly, wings shifting behind her but not flaring out like they had the first time we met.

The door slid closed behind me as she said, "You obviously impressed them. The actual size of the increase you'd be allotted was probably open to debate. That aside, let's talk about us."

I raised an eyebrow at her. She blew out a sigh and strode forward, stopping just out of reach and towering over me as she said, "Fine. I talk, you listen. I'm hungry. Soon I'll be starving. You need to decide if you're going to feed me or kill me, because it's got to be one or the other. Feed me, and I'll tell you everything I know about what's going on, what'll happen, and help you prepare if I can. Kill me, and you can

learn everything the hard way. You might do well but you won't do *as* well, and this is a game of inches. So what's it going to be?"

She was being almost aggressive, and I wondered what had been said to her while I'd been gone. Maybe nothing, but either way she'd clearly come to a decision and chosen to press.

Considering the nature of the test I'd just been given and the fact that Mauren's 'probably' had been right, she was going to be in my corner for the foreseeable ... unless I killed her, which would be ungrateful.

Granted, 'ungrateful' would be near the bottom of the pile of epithets poured on my name over the years. I had not been a good man and God knew it because ... well, I was *here*.

I had no assurances and no way out, but it was obvious that someone wanted me for something. Yet, it was an opportunity I'd have a hard time capitalizing on if I kept my mouth shut. Mauren had given me an ultimatum and if I didn't intend to kill her, it was finally time to talk.

Best get it over with.

"I'll feed you," I said.

She blinked at me, and her jaw dropped.

She pointed at me and promoted herself from just a little obvious to Captain.

"You spoke."

I nodded.

She stammered, "W-why?"

"Why not?"

"I ... uh. Oh for the love of *fuck*, what is *wrong* with you!? Three fucking *months* of language training and not a peep! We could have gotten things done *so much faster* if you'd just *talked to us!*"

"You weren't worth talking to," I said, more amused than anything else. She was almost hovering over me, hands flexing

as though she wanted to tear me to shreds ... but her boobs were also pretty much in my face and her face was ... well, she's one of those girls who made angry look sexy.

Probably a succubus thing, but given how terrified she'd been and how flustered she was now I still didn't really think of her as much of a threat.

“Weren't worth talking to?! We've got your *life in our hands!*”

Shrugging, I said, “I'm already dead.”

Mauren blinked, then abruptly knelt in front of me, putting her hands on her knees as she said, “You actually have memories of dying?”

I nodded. I remembered everything right up to the muzzle flashes. I had to figure someone'd capped me in the head because there wasn't anything after that and I'd always heard you got about twenty seconds to look around once the deed was done. Though, come to think of it, that might just be if you die by guillotine.

“Where did Lane *find* you?” Mauren asked, obviously bewildered.

I shrugged. I had no answer that would be meaningful for her. Anything I said trying to explain it would be a waste of breath. Even if she *did* know about Earth, it still wouldn't answer her question. Where *had* I been found? How had I been brought back to life? For what purpose?

The rabbit hole got deep quick and unless some giant floaty head came down from on high demanding a song and dance, I didn't think I was going to get much of an answer to any of those questions.

Mauren brought me firmly back to the moment as she asked, “Well ... now that you're talking, do you know what I need from you?”

“I have an idea, but if you want it you're going to have to get it yourself.”

“And you’ll quietly allow that?” she asked, eyes narrowing.

“If I get the feeling I shouldn’t I’ll snap your neck,” I said, watching her steadily.

“Ahh, and here I was thinking you might be *more* than pure violence wrapped in a sack of flesh. My mistake.”

“You strip a male naked, throw him in a cell, give him *nothing* to work with, and expect reasoned, graduated responses?” I asked. “What kind of moron are you?”

I realized as I spoke that I didn’t have a word in the new language for ‘man.’ I only had ‘male.’ It was a telling omission.

She tilted her head, never taking her hands from her knees as she considered me. It was obvious that she was still cognizant of me as a threat, and I was fine with that.

“Are you suggesting you’re capable of more nuanced action if you *had* clothes, resources, and the rest?”

Since I had no idea how extreme the implications of what I’d just heard really were, I simply nodded. At the very least, an unapologetic matriarchy, at worst, males as cattle. I might not be able to trust Mauren after all. If she considered me fundamentally inferior she’d have no problem breaking her word to me. It would be like breaking a promise to a dog.

I watched her look me up and down, then say, “I have no idea what your original body must have been like. Did you have scars?”

The question took me by surprise and I hesitated to answer. It had never even occurred to me that this might not *be* my original body. That I was in perfect health and at the peak of fitness despite three months of inactivity was something I chalked up to the same kind of magic fuckery that had brought me back in the first place. If I’d been brought back from the dead, clearing up scars wasn’t even worth a spare thought. My body *now* didn’t have any scars.

That hadn’t been true once.

“Why ask?” I said, wanting to know where the question was coming from.

“I just want a better picture of the mind behind the face. Now that you’re talking, I have a thousand questions,” Mauren said.

“I thought you were hungry.”

“Yes, but I also don’t want my neck snapped. If I’m going to fellate you we’ll be at each other’s mercy. If I bite, you’ll bleed out, but I saw you break that syban’s neck with no effort. I know you could do the same to me. I’m no fighter.”

So there it was. My guess had been right.

“What do you get out of semen that you don’t get out of blood or regular food?” I asked.

“Semen is prime essence. I get some from blood but it’s barely enough to keep from starving.”

“What is essence?”

She blinked at me as though I’d asked a question so basic she was stuck for an answer. Her eyes tracked right as she brought a knuckle up to her chin, then flicked her finger at me as she mused, “How to explain this to a primitive ...”

Scowling, I said, “Try using small words.”

Without the faintest trace of awareness, she said, “All right. Life is a complex web of dependent systems. Suns feed plants, which feed animals, which feed sentients, which feed us. I actually prefer to feed from other succubi, but I’m not exactly spoiled for choice right now.”

“So you could get what you need from people like you? You’re a ... is there a word in your language for things that eat their own kind?”

“Yes, but that’s not what this is. I don’t kill and grill. Do you have a concept of livestock? Certain animals can be harvested from without taking their lives.”

I got what she was saying but since I didn’t know the words in her language I just nodded as I said, “We did that,

yes.”

Pointing at me, she said, “Well that’s you, to us. You provide us with food *and* entertainment. The director is hoping to groom you for the next season of a show starting next month.”

“A show?” I asked, a bit bemused.

“It’s ... hard to explain. You’ll be competing in front of a global audience with other livestock species at a variety of tasks that challenge both the mind and body. Winners typically sell at auction for mind-bending amounts, a cut of which goes to the people who found, bred, trained, and sponsored you. There are also prizes awarded *during* the show, both to the contestants and to ... well, us. It gets complicated and there’s a lot of politics.”

They wanted to put me on TV? *For real?* They brought me back from the dead to be on a god damn reality game show?

I really was in hell.

“Gck-ack!”

I blinked, looking at Mauren through a red haze. My rage had snuck up on me again. I never consciously moved, but my hands were around her throat all the same and in that moment I couldn’t think of a single reason not to squeeze until her head popped *off*. I stood away from the wall, wrenching her in close to me, her face less than an inch from mine as I hissed, “You brought me to life ... for *nothing!*”

Her eyes bulged. Her hands were scrabbling at my wrists, but despite the fact she had to be grasping and straining with everything she had, I could barely feel any pressure. Despite her size, she really was a weakling. Her dark red skin was going black from the pressure I was putting on her throat. I wasn’t even targeting her arteries but it was obvious my grip was tight enough to shut down both blood and airways. She’d be unconscious in a few more seconds ... dead shortly after that.

There was only one problem. If I killed her I’d never get a shot at the people she worked for. Those people had put *her*

here because they thought I'd do exactly what I was doing.

If I killed Mauren — no matter how good it would feel in the moment — I'd be playing right into the hands of the people I *really* needed to hurt.

I released her with a savage shove that put her on her back, one wing caught at an awkward angle under her with the other splayed. Her tail was wrapped around her own leg, its tip curled tight and glistening as her whole body shivered.

All I could do was stand there snarling, fists clenched. I wanted to tear her apart, but she would only be a proxy. Even worse, I'd given away what I really thought about what they wanted from me. No matter how much I played along now, they'd know I hated the idea, and them.

My chances for revenge probably weren't even calculable, but I *wanted* it. I'd been resurrected to be a *clown* and by God I would make whoever was ultimately responsible rue the fucking day they made that choice.

As I stewed in rage, Mauren was sucking in one breath after another, chest heaving as she stared at me with wide eyes. When she gathered herself enough to say something, though, it startled me.

“Wow ... you actually have *real* self-control. That's amazing!”

I looked her up and down, rage suborned by disbelief. I sounded as weirded out as I felt when I said, “Your bar for me is really fucking low, you know that, right?”

“You're unusual. Most of the time when we get a gene seed it doesn't come with pre-existing episodic memory. The creatures we raise don't generally have any *real* self-control, just a kind of cunning restraint we train into them for the games.”

“Yeah, but they have sentience, don't they?” I asked.

“Well, yes. We couldn't get anything out of them if they didn't,” Mauren said.

“Which means their lack of self-control is entirely on you. And by that I mean you specifically as a wrangler. If you were placed in control of training, and all you did was drill language into people, of *course* they don’t have any self-control.”

“Well, we don’t really *want* them to have self-control.”

Taken aback ... again, I blinked at her. She must have gotten it without my saying anything because she said, “It doesn’t benefit us when our livestock doesn’t actually need us to prosper. Beyond some basic good habits we don’t encourage advanced education or complex training for our food.”

“Why, because every time someone tries it there’s a rebellion?” I asked.

“Yes. Exactly. Then we have to purge and start over. The costs are astronomical and a lot of succubi starve before we get things back up and running again. The gains aren’t worth the losses so we stick with basic education, only enough to keep them from being underfoot. Individual owners might go further but they’re held responsible for whatever the sentient does. Most don’t risk it.”

There wasn’t a *trace* of shame. Mauren looked at me with an expression somewhere between pity and pride. She really did think I was inferior. She couldn’t help it. She’d spent her entire life regarding people like me as livestock. That wouldn’t change just because I had her at my mercy.

Which meant her word — at least to me — was truly worthless. The *instant* she got a chance to reclaim her old life she’d take it.

It likely wouldn’t happen until near the end of ‘the show.’ Presuming I did well there would be an attempt to sabotage me. Mauren by then would be recognized as someone I trusted. Someone who could easily be turned. They’d make her an offer she’d have no reason to refuse.

Until then I could use her, just like she’d use me. I just had to be ready to fool or kill her without hesitation because no matter what happened she would be no true friend.

She simply wasn't capable.

MAUREN WATCHED HIM CLOSELY, searching for signs of renewed fury. The anger was easy to see but beyond that were other, higher thoughts. He had mastered his rage and was thinking of the future. She could see it in his face.

Her life depended on those thoughts. She knew it instinctively.

It wasn't the only thing she knew either.

Her tail twisted as she shifted it slowly, trying to hide the bead of arousal still glistening on the tip. When he'd had her throat in his hands she'd felt power *coursing* through him. He was so *ridiculously* strong. It was more than physical. This creature had an iron will and incredible potential.

If she could harness that potential she could take back everything she'd lost and more. Director Lane had made an offer Mauren knew she'd be a fool to ignore, just as she knew if she did she'd be passing up her chance at revenge.

But revenge was a sucker's game. Revenge never got anyone paid. It never led to the good life. Revenge felt nothing like the lust coursing through her veins in that moment.

She knew part of it was simple hunger. She was ravenous. She hadn't eaten in days and a taste of essence was less than three feet away. She could reach out and touch it, but if she did so before she was allowed she would die.

The lust itself was nothing new, but the fact that she felt it for a mere sentient was. She had hungered for them, but they'd

never made her wet. They never made her *want*. Succubi did not follow gods. They followed lust. Lust for sex. Lust for power. Lust for money and fame. Desire in all its forms drove her race, and right now she desired the creature standing before her, who held her life in his hands and might snuff it out at any moment.

Duo had been right. He was masculine with every trace of excess stripped away. No wings, no claws, no nothing. Just raw strength and a bold intellect fired by powerful emotions.

She could sense it in him, and it was new. In the three months he took to learn the language he seemed dull and lifeless to her. A pretty thing that ultimately would amount to nothing. Then he had killed the syban and she had seen his capacity for violence, for murder. Even then, there'd been no real passion. He killed with sudden and complete disregard. Now, for the first time, she saw *lust* in him. He *wanted* ... but he didn't want *her*. He wanted revenge, wanted to destroy the ones who'd brought him here. She could see it as though through a pane of clear glass.

That would have to change.

As her desire coursed through her, she had to wonder at herself. She'd spent most of her life looking down on succubi who fed on sentients rather than each other. The flavor of a succubus was sublime, the sexual delights beyond compare. Why then did her lust course so strongly for this creature?

Strength alone was not enough. Beauty of form was not enough. So what was it? She had yet to taste him. Had yet to feel him. She desired both those things with no real expectation that they could surpass what she knew.

It felt as though she had some spiritual connection with this male, and such thoughts made her gut churn. Love was reserved for higher beings, not lowly sentients.

The feeling made her dream and despair at once as she gazed at him, waiting for his decision. As the seconds passed, his rage faded. His desire waned. In his eyes she saw cold calculation. She recognized the look, having worn it often enough herself. He was thinking about how to use her to

obtain his revenge. Perhaps it was time to show him there were other things he could be thinking about.

“Will you permit me to feed?” she asked, folding her wings as she sat back up and put her hands on her knees, facing him. Her extra height put her head at his chest, but it didn’t matter. As long as she was looking up as she asked, he would see the subservience. Mauren was a student of body language. It was part of being a wrangler. Right now, it was imperative that he not see her as any kind of threat.

After a long few seconds he nodded, but his expression didn’t change. He knew what she was about to do, but the thought obviously didn’t fire his imagination.

“I promise no harm will come to you,” she said as she reached out and set a hand on his hip. His flesh was smooth, without flaw, and warm to the touch, almost hot. She knew his body temperature was within a degree of her own, but the cool air of the room made the difference. Her hand was large against his skin and were it not for the fact that his hip and ass were tense planes of muscle her fingers could barely dimple, she might have thought him a toy. He watched her like a predator watches prey, and the thought sent a quiet shiver through her as she leaned forward, gently pressing her lips to his stomach while her other hand trailed up his thigh.

He shifted, rebalancing, but didn’t otherwise move as she brushed her lips over his flesh. His stomach was hard. Ridges of muscle invited her tongue, and she caressed him with one hand as she held his hip with the other. She’d long ago sanded down her claws to make working with computers and tablets easier, but found herself wishing she’d left a few of them long. It had been a while since she’d felt the desire to tease her lover.

Yet, this male wasn’t her lover. He was a meal.

She buried the thought and gave herself to her desire. If she lusted, she would sate that lust. She wondered if this male would be receptive to her desire. He had displayed few indications of empathy and none of sympathy ... not that he’d been given many chances.

She knew her replacement — and perhaps the director — would either be watching this or would see the recording later, but the thought didn't bother her. Let them watch. Let them see her surrender, let them see her easily overcome her preferences. It wouldn't be the only surprise she had for them.

His cock was soft when she reached it. She gently brought a hand in and cupped his sack as her lips drifted with gentle ease over warm, supple flesh. He took a deep, slow breath, and she felt a twitch under her lips as his balls tightened a bit and his shaft began to swell.

Thank FUCK he's not same type. That'd be a disaster, she mused as she gently coiled her tongue around the shaft and lifted it to her mouth, suckling the flesh protecting the tip before taking it gently past her lips. His sack tightened and he swelled further inside her mouth, lengthening in a way that pleased her. It had been a long time since she'd had cause to fellate a male for food, and it was gratifying to know she hadn't lost her touch.

The crown of his shaft pushed past the flesh protecting it. She bathed it with her tongue and was rewarded by a powerfully masculine taste that made her tail flex and writhe with instinctive desire. The flavor was distinct on her palate and she looked up the length of his body as her mouth slid further down his growing length.

Her eyes met his. There was a feral intensity in him now, and as he continued to grow under her care he wrapped a hand around one of her horns.

It had no nerves, but she could feel his grip at the base and shuddered as her desire spiked. She had never before allowed her food to touch her, but wasn't in a position to deny him and the thrill it gave her was as unexpected as it was powerful.

He growled softly in the back of his throat just as she felt his cock, still lengthening, hit the back of hers. His size was more than she bargained for and she backed up a bit, lips dragging his length as her tongue swirled around the shaft, tugging it playfully as his eyes held hers.

She could see both pleasure and danger in them; the mixture was intoxicating. Her fingers swirled around his sack, drifting over the sensitive flesh, teasing it with sensation as she slowly began bobbing, unwilling to look away from him, almost unable to blink. The look in his eyes had her trapped. She felt her tail beginning to drool on her calf as it writhed and coiled around her leg.

He broke eye contact, and she could tell he'd noticed her arousal. His eyes tracked her tail and she spread her wings slowly, then contracted them again, drawing his eyes out, then back to hers as her tongue played around the pleasing shape of his cock. It pressed strongly up now and was *very* hard, yet the flesh was supple under her lips and tongue, and she began to get a taste of him as his arousal touched her tastebuds. It was precursor. Some livestock came all at once but his species seemed to be one of those that lubricated across both genders.

It wasn't copious, but she felt a luscious tingle follow it down into her belly, beginning to warm her. It wasn't enough to ease her hunger, but that it was enough to awaken her essence meant that his orgasm would probably more than satisfy. Her estimation of his value rose with the realization that he wasn't just strong and physically capable, but spiritually powerful as well. She wondered for the nth time just where Director Lane had *found* this creature. It was as though he'd been tailored to satisfy her cravings.

He growled and took her other horn in hand. Her eyes widened as he began moving her head as he willed. He was deliberate, slow, but not to be denied and the realization that she couldn't pull away even if she wanted to made her wings shiver with nervous tension.

Her hand on his hip tightened in a vain effort to pull away, but though she pushed, it made no difference.

Then he surprised her as he said, "Tap twice if you feel pain."

She dreaded what would happen next even as she continued to bathe his length with heat and the supple embrace of tongue and lips, but though she could feel his grip as his

hands flexed, he didn't shove or jerk her head. He simply held her, and as the seconds passed she grew bolder in her play as she tasted more of his flavor and her hunger began to rise.

He let out a shuddering breath as he said, "I won't last. It's been ... a long time."

"Mmmmh."

Words were unnecessary, and even had he said nothing she'd have known. She could feel the throbbing heartbeat in his cock as she plied it with lingual attention, suckling tenderly. As sensitive as he seemed to be, going hard might actually delay him and she wanted her meal. The crown of his shaft seemed particularly sensitive and she bathed it, eyes rolling back up to his as she pleaded with her gaze for his essence.

It wasn't long after that he gave it to her.

She felt his emission swell the underside of his shaft before it shot into her mouth. Jets of liquid heat that she swallowed greedily, though her suckling remained tender. That heat swelled within her, its energy spreading through her like a rolling wave that coursed through every vein and artery. Her eyes rolled back and shut as the feeling made her groan around his pulsing length. The essence was so powerful she couldn't even taste the seed from which it came. It was like nothing she'd ever had before. Her tail flexed and pulsed as a small orgasm followed the wash of essence as it filled her to the brim, overflowing into pleasures that made her shudder and clench.

The strange intensity of the sensation made her lose almost all sense of reality. Almost. Throughout his orgasm and the pleasure it caused her, his grip on her horns kept her grounded. His hands were shivering with tension and the pressure was intense. It added a savor to the experience she'd have been hard pressed to explain.

As the pulsing of his cock faded Mauren sealed her lips against it and swirled her tongue around the shaft as he drew away from her, unwilling to surrender even a trace of essence.

He only released her horns when his cock was past her lips, and his voice was quiet as he said, “You’re good at that.”

She raised an eyebrow as she said, “Succubi have to be good at sex or we starve. If I watched you chewing that nutrient brick and complimented you on your ability to do so, it would be equivalent.”

“It might very well be the *only* thing you’re good at,” he said, frowning in annoyance as he gazed steadily at her.

She said, “Ahhh, touched a nerve, did I?”

“Needlessly. Don’t bite the hand that feeds you. So far, you haven’t given me any truly compelling reason to keep you alive. Being a bitch isn’t a good survival strategy.”

“If you understand that, why have you been such a difficult case yourself?” she asked.

“Living and dying don’t matter to me, especially now that I know what you want me for.”

“What’s so hateful about your position?” she asked, genuinely curious.

He didn’t answer, breaking eye contact instead as he moved to the bed and sat down. His hands roamed the cover, then he twisted his hips and laid down, folding his hands behind his head rather than using a pillow. He stared at the ceiling, leaving her wondering if she should press or not.

Her appetite was satisfied, and that by itself was somewhat extraordinary. Succubi could satisfy one another with a single orgasm, but sentients typically needed two or three shots to be filling. It wasn’t a matter of his having not had sex recently either. The essence conferred by orgasm wasn’t tied to physical volume.

He was just unusually potent.

She pressed back to her feet and stepped to the edge of the bed, looking down at him with a speculative expression. Her nearness didn’t seem to rouse his interest, though she knew he could see her.

Mauren felt she had to engage his interest, provide value. Given how satisfying a meal he was, she knew there would be immense pressure to acquire more gene seeds from his race despite how ludicrously physically dangerous they were. Ideally, they could acquire seeds that didn't come with memory, but that was a distant problem and not one for Mauren. Her concerns were more immediate. If he tired of her, he really could simply snap her neck and be done. There would be no repercussions for him beyond losing her company, and they both knew it.

Though she had no intention of admitting it, he'd given her good advice. She shouldn't be biting the hand that feeds. Ingratiating herself to a sentient struck her as humiliating, but she had already been stripped of her possessions and thrown away. If debasing herself was what it took to survive and prosper, then that's what Mauren would do.

Besides, she now had confirmation of his empathy. How strong it was remained to be seen, but it shouldn't be too difficult to build a bond with him so long as she was patient.

She asked, "You had a name, did you not? What was it?"

I CONSIDERED how to answer her question. I had several options, but the only thing I knew for sure I wouldn't be doing was giving her, or anyone, my old name. Not that I thought it was sacred, or a secret ... but it *was* on a grave somewhere. Then again, maybe it wasn't. I sure as shit hadn't been buried with full honors — not after what I'd done. For all I knew they'd rolled my bloody corpse into a ditch somewhere and left me for jackals.

Suffice to say, I wouldn't be using that name again.

“If you remember your death, surely you remember your name,” Mauren said, prodding me.

Stalling for time, I said, “A A A Zero.”

She blinked at me, then said, “That's your address, not your name.”

Rolling my eyes thoughtfully, I said, “A a a ... Triple A zero ... Taz. If you have to call me something, call me Taz.”

“Do you have something against giving me your real name? Do you come from one of those cultures that thinks names are sacred or something?” she asked.

“What would you know about other cultures? To you, I'm not even a ...” I trailed off because I hadn't learned the word for slave.

“Just because we grow our livestock from gene seeds doesn't mean we don't know anything about where they come from.”

“You don’t know *shit* about *me* ... *or* where I come from.”

“You’re a rare but not unheard of exception. We buy our livestock from another race calling themselves Reclaimers. They sell us gene seeds that we grow in tanks and decant just past racial adolescence. Every so often they bring us a sample of a new race to try. I’m assuming that’s where you came from anyway, Director Lane didn’t tell me anything about you. She just insisted I follow a special protocol for your seed, and here you are.”

“So you can kill and clone me if you don’t like my behavior,” I said. “Why not just do that?”

“Yes and no. The gene seeds we buy from Reclaimers aren’t the same as clones we get from genetic sampling. Clones have weaker essence and the decrease is geometric. We could clone you, but while the memories would be gone the essence would be pitiful. Your clone’d only be good for entertainment value and labor.”

“I hope you and your whole fucking race burn.”

She seemed startled, and I couldn’t figure out why. Given how they treated other ‘sentients’ I couldn’t imagine having any *other* opinion.

Then again, if most of them didn’t come with memories like I had, succubi could teach them whatever they wanted. They wouldn’t know any better ... so maybe it wasn’t so far-fetched Mauren was surprised to hear my thoughts on the matter.

“Why did you feed me then?” she asked.

“Boredom, mostly,” I said, though it wasn’t strictly true. I, like most men I’ve known, have a weakness for insanely hot women and whatever else Mauren might be, she was definitely that. She was exotic without being grossly inhuman, at least, physically.

Mentally she was just what she looked like: a demon.

No matter how hot she was I knew too much about the mind behind the eyes to care about her well-being. I could fuck her the same way I’d fuck a paid whore, and that was it.

“How can I make your life more interesting?” she asked.

Raising an eyebrow, I glanced over to see her looking down at me with a pensive expression. She said, “I don’t want to die because you get bored.”

I didn’t know how to say ‘Sucks to be you,’ in her language, so I shrugged and said, “Just stay out of my way and answer my questions. I don’t mind letting you live. Your feeding feels good to me, so you benefit me at least that much.”

“So you don’t like me at all?”

“What reason could I possibly have to like you?” I asked, leaning up on an elbow to examine her expression. I wanted to see if the question was serious, or if she was leading me somewhere.

“Most species *enjoy* orgasm.”

“You did that for *you*, not me.”

She frowned as though inconvenienced. I chuckled and glanced away as I said, “Mauren, you aren’t here because you want to be. You’ll leave the first chance you get, see me as *livestock*, and your life is in my hands. There is literally nothing you can do to make me *like* you. Right now, *no one* likes you. Not me, not the people who put you here. As bad as my situation is, yours is worse. If I feel anything at all for you it’s pity, and that won’t change anytime soon. So if you want to talk say something useful, like telling me about the next test or this show you want me to participate in.”

“You’re a fucking *monster*,” she hissed.

I twisted up off the bed to stand in front of her, letting the anger show.

It was right there beneath the surface, had been since I’d heard they wanted to make me a clown. I didn’t bother considering suicide because it wouldn’t make any difference to the people who’d brought me here. Nothing would change for any of them. If there was *any* chance of me getting revenge, I had to stay alive. Beyond that I had nothing tying me to life and if things got genuinely miserable I knew I could check

out. What was God going to do? Judge me twice? They hadn't covered shit like this in Sunday school.

But I'd be damned if I took lip from *this* bitch; a demon who thought of me as a fucking juice box.

I said, "If I kill you right now, by this time next week I'd struggle to remember your name, and that's only if someone asks. No one would. My patience is limited and my temper is short. *Don't* test me, Mauren. I'll tear your arm off and beat you to *death* with it if you disrespect me again."

Mauren got down on her knees and pressed her horned head to the floor as she said, "Forgive me."

She said a word after that I didn't know, and when I asked got the impression it was *essentially* 'Sir.' Except it wasn't, because I doubted succubi had any male-centric honorifics. She'd probably just called me 'mistress' or some shit like that.

"Just call me Taz if you call me anything," I said, vaguely disgusted. "It's as much of a title as I care for."

"As you wish, Taz. So? Now that you have put me in my place, what would you have me do?" she asked.

Eyes narrowed, I looked her over, but nothing in her tone or expression gave away the sarcastic edge I was looking for. It had to be there but I couldn't find it, and I wasn't about to kill somebody just because I could imagine she was that good a liar.

"I wish you were a threat," I grumbled, turning my back on her in disgust.

"Why?"

"Because then I could kill you and get it over with."

She blinked, gazing at me in mild confusion before she said, "My being helpless makes it *hard* for you? The syban was--"

"Shocking the shit out of me right up until I broke her fucking neck," I interrupted.

“None of those shocks were dangerous. She was expendable.”

“I found that out afterward.”

“I’m not a threat.”

I rolled my eyes and asked, “Think they’d add ‘separate rooms’ in the rewards list?”

“You won’t get that,” Mauren said. “They want me dead. They’ve no intention of allowing you to put me out of your sight.”

I knew she was slipping that in there because *she* knew how much I hated whoever had put me here. Director Lane I’d heard her called. She probably thought I’d keep her alive to spite her superiors, and damn me if she wasn’t right.

I still *really* wanted to kill her. I knew if I didn’t she’d get under my skin. It would happen little by little whether I wanted it to or not because I *was* human, not a monster, and I have a protective streak I don’t typically admit to. I’d done bad things. I wasn’t apologizing because I’d *paid* for those sins with my life. If my daddy taught me anything it’s that if you pay, you own. Anyone still looking for remorse from me could fuck *right* off, but I hadn’t so lost touch that I didn’t understand the hurt I’d caused, the damage I’d done.

I could snap her neck. It’d be quick, and as painless as I could manage. She was a cog in a system that meant to grind me down for laughs. That she was in here with me was a twist of fate. She wasn’t on my side, and she never would be.

But she was *really* hot, she could suck the chrome off a trailer hitch, and she’d be doing that on the regular because that’s how she ate. I could only imagine what fucking her must be like. There was also what I could learn from her. She knew the system, would answer questions I’d never get to ask anyone else, and she was wholly in my power, at least for now.

So while I dearly wanted to snap her neck and simplify my life, I just couldn’t justify the cost.

And I *hated* it.

I thought about asking her what the next test would be, but realized I'd be shooting myself in the foot if I did. They were listening. Whatever Mauren told me would alter plans on the other side and become unreliable. The time to ask her would be right before I left with the guard, and even then they might have two rooms prepared, shunting me to whichever I wasn't ready to face.

As I thought about it, I realized it didn't matter *anyway*. They weren't prepared to let me die.

"This show, how dangerous is it?" I asked, turning again to look at her.

She was still on her knees as she asked, "For you?"

"In general."

"Very. Typically, fewer than ten of the hundreds of contestants make it all the way through the season."

"They *all* die?"

Shaking her head as she put her hands in her lap, she said, "No, of course not. Many of the middle performers get auctioned off. There's a whole separate show about that. The top twenty aren't eligible because there'd be riots in the streets if the top tier got pulled mid-season. Not all the contests involve lethal consequences, but a lot of them do. They usually open with a free-for-all of some kind and we typically lose half the entrants right there. It's all about pulling in eyeballs for the start of the season so people can invest in and pick their favorites from among the survivors."

I blinked. That sounded nothing like the reality TV I knew. Given the whole thing was run by succubi, I'd expected some kind of fucked up reverse harem shit where I was supposed to romance one of these damn demons. Instead, I was being told it would be blood, guts, and glory.

That ... that actually sounded pretty cool.

I took a seat on the bed, rage fading a bit as I said, "Tell me more."

Mauren looked at me keenly, then smiled slightly and started talking.

OVER THE COURSE of the week they tested my strength, agility, problem-solving, endurance, you name it. All the rewards they offered were eventually mine, and I got the most mileage out of the audio/visual entertainment.

For instance, I very quickly learned that succubi have shitty taste in music. As a man who'd once had serious aspirations toward forming a band, that sucked hard. The only partial exception was one group that sounded a little like Hailstorm to me. Most of it was similar to that club music garbage horny twenty-somethings bump and grind to. Suffice to say, no real rock, and nothing even *remotely* country.

So I was just shit out of luck there.

The video was more illuminating, but not in the way I initially hoped. I wasn't allowed to watch prior seasons of the show they planned to put me on, nor was I allowed to see news of any kind. What I *was* allowed to see was overly dramatic soap opera-type shit.

It was also all porn, and I do mean *all* of it. Apparently, succubi considered sex to be wholesome entertainment. There wasn't even a filter for shows that didn't have it, because there *weren't* any. Since succubi got their food via essence intake they were engaging in sexual activity pretty much from the word go. They didn't seem to *have* what a human would consider a childhood. There was no contrast between innocence and experience because innocence simply didn't exist.

That said, their tastes were ... varied, and my mental health was in legitimate danger every time I turned on a video feed. It was worth it, though, because I caught glimpses of a *lot* of other races.

The first conclusion I came to generally was that I was a midget to these people. The typical height range was from seven to ten feet, with some going higher.

I also concluded space was the wild fucking west when it came to body plans for intelligent life. There *were* a *few* similarities, by which I mostly mean bilateral symmetry and opposable digits. There were no other guarantees. A majority of species were bipedal with two arms and two legs, but there were plenty of exceptions.

I saw eighty-seven unique species, and there was an extensive porn catalog for every single one of them.

Mauren got annoyed as she watched me watching porn and eventually asked, "Why do you watch this? It obviously does nothing for you."

Her observation was accurate, but I ignored her question because I didn't want the peanut gallery to know I was cataloging weak points for each species. Fun fact: erogenous zones make *great* targets in a fight. Since I was pretty sure I'd be getting into it with the various species I was looking at I wanted every edge I could get. My research *did* get me some surprising results, though for most bipedal species with builds similar to mine the weak points were also the same.

Her question revealed something of herself, though, and I decided to redirect by noting, "It doesn't do anything for you either."

Her expression flickered from annoyance to indifference as she shrugged and said, "I prefer my own kind. Zoophilia isn't one of my kinks."

Nodding, I put her from my mind and went back to research. Being reminded she considered me to be livestock was an excellent way to keep me from thinking about her mind-bendingly awesome body. To be honest, I felt a twitch

every time I even glanced her way and it was a constant assault on my senses being in close proximity to her. If she *asked* me for sex I'd bone her until one of us passed out, but having her life in my hands made me responsible in a way she wasn't. If I brought it up myself it would be rape whether she said yes or no because her presence in the cell with me at *all* wasn't voluntary.

I'd kill Mauren before I'd rape her. Having committed my fair share I can say with authority that certain sins are easier to bear than others. Rape was one line I never had and never would cross. Killing? Sure, easy. Killing was part of living. It wasn't possible to go through life without killing stuff. Despite what a lot of touchy-feely first-worlders like to think, disagreements can and very often do make people mutually exclusive.

Rape was different. You could absolutely make it through life without rape, and I'd done it the first time around with no plans to change tactics on my second go.

I'd always thought it weird that God said no murder, theft, or adultery, but didn't think rape was worth a spot in the top ten. World might be a better place if Moses had put, 'No raping, you horny fuckers,' on one of those stone tablets.

I like to think if I'd been him I'd have chiseled that one in.

Oh well. My admittedly spotty principles hadn't gotten me to any kind of an afterlife I wanted, so fuck it. A better man might take this new life as a second chance — an opportunity to reform, play by the rules and be a good boy.

I resented being told my first game wasn't good enough. If God wanted *me* to pitch extra innings, I was going to bean some batters.

Maybe that's why *I* was here instead of some goody-two-shoes. As I glanced at Mauren again my dad's favorite psalm came back to me. He always quoted it when someone, usually me, pointed out how unfair life was.

'In their insolence the wicked boast: "God doesn't care; doesn't even exist." Yet their affairs always succeed; they

ignore Your judgment on high; they sneer at all who oppose them. They say in their hearts, “We will never fall; we will never see misfortune.””

That was just the way it was with my family. My dad taught me God’s justice didn’t come with a lightning bolt, tornado, or flood. It wasn’t famine, war, or the plague. When God *really* wanted to get a dirty job done right, He sent the very worst thing in all His arsenal: a vengeful man.

Later, I’d taken a similar, simpler refrain to heart: “Kill ‘em all. God’ll sort ‘em out.”

“What are you thinking?”

I blinked, realizing I’d spaced out, and smiled darkly at Mauren as I said, “You really don’t want to know.”

“Are you finished with this at least?” she asked, waving a hand at the wall where two creatures I didn’t have names for were doing something I could only *assume* was lewd.

“Sure, video off,” I said, and the image winked out.

“Tomorrow you’ll be shown to the sponsors,” she said.

“That’s tomorrow?” I asked, and she nodded.

“You’ll likely be restrained.”

Shrugging, I said, “They won’t be able to show me off if they keep me in chains.”

“Records of the tests you participated in will be available to the sponsors. They’ll be familiar with your stats, but they’ll want to see you in person before they make any offers. Getting a good sponsor will heavily influence how the season progresses. It’s critically important.”

“Why? What does a sponsor do for me?” I asked.

“Sponsors bid on the various events staged throughout the season. A good sponsor can steer things so those events play toward your strengths,” she said, leaning on the bed, propping her head up with an elbow as she looked steadily at me.

I was sat next to her, back against the mattress and elbows over my knees.

After a moment, she added, “Your sponsor will also determine the quality of your trainer.”

“I thought *you* were my trainer, or whoever replaced you was,” I said, but she shook her head.

“I’m a *wrangler*. My job was to make sure you’re healthy, strong, and capable of learning what’ll be required of you going forward. A *trainer* is someone who’ll teach you the finer points; strategies to help you win a given event, combat skills, game knowledge, that sort of thing.”

“I could do that myself if they let me watch prior seasons,” I noted sourly.

Mauren smiled grimly as she said, “That’d be too big an advantage and against the rules. Since everything you’ve done and seen since inception will be publicly available at some point, Lane can’t break those rules. Trust me, if she could she would. Even if she did, there are usually twists thrown in to keep things fresh.”

“What happens to you once the show starts?” I asked.

She shrugged and leaned toward me, brushing her hand down the plain white shirt I’d won for myself after one of the tests they’d had me take. I also had leggings which were essentially sweats with a drawstring. I had *not* been given shoes.

“That’s out of my control,” she said, fingertips drifting over my crotch as she made deliberate eye contact.

I knew what she wanted, and nodded as I shifted, thrusting my waistband down and shuffling the pants off as I laid my head on the mattress and closed my eyes. She was incredibly good at this, and liked making eye contact for whatever reason. Letting her get into my head wasn’t something I planned on, so lately I’d taken to closing my eyes and letting her do whatever she wanted.

As I felt her hands on my bare skin I let my thoughts drift, enjoying the physical pleasure as I mentally pictured someone else — someone I’d actually cared about — in Mauren’s place.

MAUREN WASN'T with me as I followed one of the armored suits down the now familiar corridor to the elevator. I was naked once more, hands locked in hexagonal cuffs that seemed to be magnetic. The metal was thick and padded on the insides, but didn't have enough give for me to slip a wrist through. Whether I could overcome the magnetic force binding the cuffs together was still an open question, which is how I intended to leave things. I had no reason to try the cuffs. If I couldn't break free, my situation wouldn't change. If I *could* break free, I had no follow-up and more precautions would be taken in future.

The elevator ride was quiet, but when the car stopped the doors didn't immediately open. A voice I now knew belonged to Director Lane sounded through speakers above me.

"Mauren's told you most of the relevant details for this event. The sponsors are unlikely to speak to you directly but they may have their trainers test you in various ways. Killing a trainer will destroy any chance you have of acquiring a powerful sponsor. Remember: it's in your own best interest to behave."

I made no indication I'd heard her. After several seconds the doors opened and the armored guard moved to one side.

I stepped out into an open space roughly the size of an indoor basketball court. Most of the space was taken up by an obstacle course that reminded me of something off *American Ninja*, and I grinned idly when I saw it. I'd always wanted to

try out for that show, but never had the chance. Besides, I'd done most of that shit one time or another with no water underneath me.

Above the course and across the way was a glassed-in observatory with a *lot* of succubi present. Most of them were lounging in plush chairs with attendants of various species standing by.

Of more immediate concern were the many specimens lined up in front of me. A quick count told me there were twenty-two of them, and the only thing that immediately struck me about them as a group was that they were all female.

Mauren had told me to expect that, explaining that while all the mainline contestants were male, their trainers were always of the opposite sex. I thought that was stupid, but hadn't bothered to explain why it was a bad idea because to a succubus it wouldn't make any sense.

There was a green square that I was obviously meant to go stand in, so I walked over and took up my position. No one moved, and as the silence stretched I looked up at the observation box again to see that while *I* couldn't hear anything, something was definitely being said up there. Most heads were turned toward me as flickering displays I couldn't read backward scrolled across the glass facing.

Eventually, several of the trainers moved in subtle ways, and I assumed they were listening to instructions through earpieces, or whatever served the same purpose for those species that didn't have ears.

Most of the succubi in the box seemed to lose interest, but a few stood up and moved to stand at the glass, which cleared of data as they looked down at me. Movement drew my attention back to the trainers.

One in particular was approaching with a deliberate stride, and I looked her over.

She was about seven feet tall, short on average, and shaped roughly like a human with several notable differences. The

first was that she had a muzzle rather than lips and a chin, with ears that reminded me of a cropped Doberman's.

She didn't have fur, but her skin *was* two-tone, white with black spots, like a Dalmatian. She had a black spot over her right eye in fact, both of which were blue. She also had a wild mane of hair that started at her forehead and descended behind her, mostly white with black streaks. It gave her a vaguely punkish look. Her hands had bilateral symmetry with three fingers and two thumbs, all clawed. Her body was athletic, though I could see she had a perky pair of tits under the tracksuit-style green uniform she was wearing. She stopped in front of me and looked down, then stepped aside to ensure the observation box had an unobstructed view as she lifted her hand toward my shoulder. I noted as she did so that her claws were black and sharp, and she set one on the ball of my shoulder and very deliberately cut my skin.

The reaction among the trainers was immediate and mostly disdainful from those few faces I could read. It was pretty obvious to me what was going on: I was too easily injured and wouldn't survive a fight. They'd been shown my data and no one was interested in seeing me run the course. They already knew I'd destroy it. But how easily I could be damaged was something that hadn't been in any of my tests.

"Savor the moment," I said quietly, and the trainer blinked as she looked down from the observation box to me.

"That's your one free shot. Cut me again and I won't let it go."

The trainer blew out hard, a derisive sniff that translated across all species, and said, "Looks is all you've got, little male."

Her voice was brash and confident. She sounded young. Something about the way she stood and spoke made her seem inexperienced to me, and I'd have bet money she was new at this.

I said, "Not true. I bet I can teach you something new right here and now."

“Oh?”

My eyes flicked from her to the box, then back as I said, “Better get boss’s permission first.”

The alien dog-girl’s face was quite expressive, and she struck me as intensely skeptical as she glanced toward the observation deck again. I knew that her boss had heard our exchange, and a moment later she looked back down at me and said, “Teach me something new then.”

My cuffs disengaged and as I parted my hands the trainer took up what looked like a combat stance; one foot back, both hands up, fingers spread, claws facing me. She didn’t look incompetent, but I didn’t intend to fight her. She’d cut me for free. I intended to get my shot in the same way.

I showed her my hands and smiled as I said, “Easy, easy. I don’t want to fight you. Just ... here.”

I took a careful step forward, subtly setting myself as I put my left hand conspicuously behind my back. With my right, I showed her a knife hand and very slowly moved it toward her. She watched me with sharp eyes, tension in every line of her body. She was waiting for me to try something, but all I did was gently touch her just below her breasts, then slide the tips of my fingers slowly down, looking for the spot where her sternum ended and hoping her body was similar enough for this to actually work as I looked her in the eye and said, “I’m going to teach you an equation.”

“You want to teach me *math*?” the trainer asked, visibly perplexed as she looked down at my fingertips, her body losing its combat-ready tension. It confirmed my suspicion that she was new at this, and I briefly felt a little sorry for her. She wouldn’t be properly tensed.

This was going to hurt.

I felt the hollow where her sternum gave out and stopped moving a few inches beyond, fingertips barely brushing the material of her tracksuit as I calmly said, “Yes. A simple equation. Force is equal to mass, times velocity ... *SQUARED!*”

As I shouted, using the last word as a *kiai*, my fingers collapsed into a fist as I executed a move made famous by Bruce Lee. Called the One-Inch Punch, it's somewhat misnamed. It's actually somewhere between three and four inches, that being the length of the fingers. The trick to it is a technique dubbed kinetic linkage by fight science, which is essentially the ability to efficiently transfer force up through the hips, into the upper body, and out through the knuckles.

I obviously wasn't as good at it as Bruce Lee, but was confident for two reasons. The first was that I'd practiced this move. A *lot*. My brother and I used to take turns doing it to one another because let's face it: being able to do a One-Inch Punch is fucking cool. While I couldn't send anyone flying I *could* knock the wind out of my brother while he was tensed, ready, and a grown man.

The second reason for my confidence was the fact that while everyone around here was way fucking bigger than I was, none of them seemed to be as solid. My working theory was that they were bigger due to lower gravity environments. My strength trials revealed I was *way* stronger now than I'd ever been in my first life, at least by comparison to the people around me. While I hadn't competed against anyone else, I knew my strength surpassed their reasonable expectations because they quit testing me just when I was beginning to struggle, rather than getting me to failure. In all honesty, I had no idea how weights and measures here stacked up against what I knew, and no way to make a comparison. All I knew was that all the evidence I'd been able to collect suggested to me that the things — and people — here were more fragile than those I was familiar with.

This bitch might be able to cut me without a problem, but taking my fully loaded punch would be like stepping in front of a train. Because I wasn't a *master* of the One-Inch Punch, I figured it'd be safer — for her — than simply clocking her with a legit jab or cross.

Not only was it safer, it'd be more impressive because as I said, the One-Inch Punch is just that cool.

It worked.

The trainer folded up around my fist like a newspaper in high wind hitting a powerline. She touched down on her ass several feet away and her muzzle smacked the floor between her knees before the remaining momentum unfolded her, at which point she bounced as the back of her skull thumped hard enough for me to hear it despite the cushion provided by all that hair.

Her chest heaved a few times, then her muzzle twisted to one side as she threw up a mix of her last meal and blood.

I glanced up at the observation box as I very deliberately ran my thumb over the still bleeding cut on my shoulder, then sucked the blood off and stepped back into my square, bringing my hands back together so that the cuffs could link.

A second later, they did.

I now had the full attention of *most* of the people up in that box, and I could see a few of them gesticulating wildly at what I could only assume were my stats, which wouldn't reveal the secret of my technique. It was simple physics, but I really doubted anyone up in that box was up on their fight science. To a layman, a properly executed One-Inch Punch looked like magic.

I couldn't hear a thing despite all that activity, which was a bit annoying. Turning my attention to the trainers, I saw them looking at me with new expressions, like someone had just told them I was highly radioactive.

I grinned as I looked from one to the next, but no one would meet my eyes.

Felt good man. Felt reeeal good. Might not have been the best flex of my life, but it easily made the top five.

Movement on the far side of the room caught my attention as a door slid open and another female of the same species as the one I'd just laid out jogged in. This one looked closer to ten feet tall, stronger looking, with skin that was black and tan. Her eyes were golden and locked on the downed trainer. My intuition told me this was *her* trainer, maybe a relative. She looked older and her head was shaved, leaving her standing

ears the only feature up there. I couldn't help but notice that despite being a hardbody she was stacked like a brick shithouse, which left me to wonder if fake tits were a thing here or if those blessings were legit.

She was wearing a green tracksuit similar to that worn by the others before me but unlike theirs, hers had red piping up the seams.

Reaching the downed trainer, the new one knelt and looked her over with obvious concern. She said something I didn't catch, and to my surprise the one on the ground actually managed to stammer, "I ... sorry. Don't know. Hurt bad."

The new female straightened, turning on me with lips peeled back in a feral snarl.

I met her gaze and raised my cuffed hands, smiling past them at her as I mildly said, "It wouldn't be a fair fight."

"That was hardly necessary," she snarled. I couldn't tell if she was acting with permission or not, but decided to engage because honestly, there was no way they'd let her kill me.

I glanced down at my shoulder, then at her as I tilted my head toward the wound and asked, "This was? Someone up there wanted to prove a point, so I bleed? Fuck you. That's not how I work."

"It's obvious that did you no harm!" she said, gesturing sharply at my shoulder. It really did feel like she was barking at me and I simply could not escape the impression that this woman was a canine, granted whoever made her did a *way* better job than Doctor Moreau. The weirdest part wasn't actually the muzzle, but the fact that she had what looked to me like fur patterns *without* the fur.

"She'll live," I said, nodding at the downed trainer. "Maybe next time she'll know better than to relax right before getting hit."

"You tricked her!"

"She fell for it."

The woman's snarl got even more vicious and I actually heard her growling at me. Just for that, I decided to rub some salt in and said, "Whoever trained her did a shitty job."

Her growling stopped like someone pulled a plug, and one of her ears twisted as she turned to look up at the observation deck. She obviously wasn't talking to me as she said, "I want this one. I'll come out of retirement."

She paused, obviously listening, then shook her head violently and said, "Nothing. As long as Yim is the lead, I'll advise."

"What *are* you, her mom?" I asked.

"You should be happy!" the dog-woman snarled, her head whipping back around to glare at me. "I've trained two champions."

"And her," I said, grinning viciously as I nodded toward 'Yim.'

Teeth bared, the woman in front of me clenched her fists in what looked like pure, frustrated rage. Her claws apparently weren't retractable because they visibly impaled her hands, both of which started to drip blood as she glared murder at me.

Blinking bemusedly, I said, "Doesn't that hurt?"

"Not as much as having my work insulted," she growled, lifting both fists and opening them explosively. The move flicked blood at me, which I raised my cuffed hands to block.

As I lowered them, I glanced past the still unnamed woman as Yim began to sit up, groaning. Since — given the obvious damage I'd done — that shouldn't have been possible, I looked from her to her angry senior and asked, "Regeneration?"

Pointing at my shoulder, she said, "You'll do the same."

Glancing down at my cut, I said, "Not in a few minutes I won't. Now I'm annoyed. What are you getting mad about if she's going to be fine in five minutes?"

Honestly, I was shocked. This was some serious superhero shit going on, and my being tougher and stronger was

beginning to look a lot less valuable to me.

“This was her *first* trial and you’ve humiliated her!” the woman snarled.

Her hands had already stopped bleeding.

I just watched her, waiting. I had nothing left to say. The other trainers were all focused on her, and those few expressions I could read told me they respected her.

The activity up in the observation deck was still pretty lively, and I asked, “So? What’s going on up there?”

“There’s a bidding war,” she said, no longer growling at me.

Lips twisting, I thought it over, then said, “Is your sponsor good to you?”

Her brow furrowed, and she tilted her head in a very canine expression of confusion before she said, “Good to me?”

“Good to you. Do you like working for her.”

“She’s the best,” the woman said. “I’ve worked for several and she’s the only one who offered me good compensation and an opportunity to train my daughter to replace me.”

“Fine, let’s make this easy,” I said, then raised my voice to yell, “If anyone but this woman’s sponsor wins the bidding war, I’ll kill their trainer!”

Jaws dropped. The activity up in the observation box froze like someone snapped a photo, and I grinned as I glanced over the assembled trainers. I said, “What I did to Yim was just a party trick, ladies. You don’t want to be on the receiving end of what I can *really* do.”

Several of them began muttering under their breath, and I could tell they were talking to whoever was up in the box.

The woman confronting me was staring, head cocked in obvious confusion. I met her gaze and said, “What? If your sponsor is good to you, she’ll be good to me.”

“She’s not the wealthiest,” the woman admitted. “She won’t be able to guarantee many events.”

I shrugged and gave her a vicious smile as I said, “I don’t care and it doesn’t matter ... I’ve got a champion trainer.”

“Are you mocking me?”

“Absolutely. I plan to crush everyone and everything that gets in my way with or without you. I will kill them *all*. The only difference is whether or not my trainer lives through the season.”

It wasn’t strictly true. Well, it *was*, but there was a reason I was being so deliberately and loudly arrogant. I wanted the trainers terrified of me *and* I wanted their sponsors to think I was too stupid to realize some of the games and events wouldn’t be the sort that let me kill the competition. They’d think I was a dumb, one-trick pony and drop out of the bidding war, lowering my ‘value.’ My hope was that making myself deliberately less desirable would put me in reach of this woman’s sponsor.

Lowering my value would *also* piss off Director Lane, which made me happy. I had to assume she’d be getting a cut of whatever sponsorship money came in, so whatever damage I could do her prospects while protecting my own felt like a good deal to me. If this chick really *was* a champion trainer, getting her on my team for cheap was the best of both worlds.

Another minute passed, and things in the box calmed down dramatically. The woman in front of me abruptly asked, “If my sponsor claims you, you’ll work with me?”

“And Yim, yes. Though I get the feeling I’ll have more to teach *her* than the other way round,” I said wryly.

Miss black and tan looked up at the box and nodded once, then turned to me again as she said, “My name is Pala. Congratulations, you’re now sponsored by Liminal Science.”

Nodding, I glanced past Pala at Yim as the latter climbed shakily to her feet, tracksuit spattered with blood and less recognizable chunky bits. Marveling at their regenerative power, I glanced down at my still bleeding shoulder, thinking hard about the implications. If their ability to regenerate was common I would have to go through these games with

absolutely no mercy, curb-stomping all the way. If I'd taken a shot as hard as the one I'd laid on Yim, I'd be cooling to room temp by now. If I'd somehow survived it would've been thanks in part to a month in traction.

“Do you have a name?” Pala asked.

Blinking, I shrugged and said, “Taz.”

“Is that ... short for something?” Yim asked. She was holding a hand over her middle and in obvious pain but was gamely trying to reassert herself rather than let mommy carry. My respect for her went up a notch.

“Is *Yim* short for something?” I returned.

Nodding, she said, “Yimshe, and my mother is Palashai.”

“Pretty names, and yes. Taz is short for Triple A Zero,” I said.

Both women gave me identical confused canine head tilts and I gotta say, it was fucking *adorable*.

“I HATE HIM. I fucking *hate him!*”

“I’m sure he’d be happy to hear that,” Deera said wryly.

“That bullshit stunt cost us *twenty-two million!*” Director Lane shouted. “Matripharm is sponsoring Division One. Vertasche is sponsoring two *and* five! We’ll be lucky if we get a *single event all season!*”

Deera and Duo exchanged glances, then the former said, “While losing the money is a blow, not being able to control the events isn’t as bad a setback as you seem to think.”

Director Lane’s eyes narrowed as she looked at her wrangler, then leaned back and steepled her fingers as she said, “Talk.”

“Our specimen manipulated the sponsors deliberately. He wanted to work with Palashai.”

“Palashai hasn’t trained a winner since season fifty-six and she’s been in retirement so long she’s practically a legend. The game’s changed completely since she was in,” Duo said, joining the conversation.

Deera shrugged, her tail weaving lazily as she said, “Our project’s advantages minimize training time. He asked about his trainer’s sponsor and clearly has his eye on earning out. Mauren explained all this to him. He’s going to do his best to win and — despite his display — we all know he’s far more intelligent than he looks. When he heard Liminal had limited resources he deliberately lowered his value to put himself in

their range. If he kills his trainer he's practically guaranteed to fail in the early rounds, costing the sponsor prestige *and* capital. Given the limited timeframe he had to come up with this, it was actually rather brilliant. I wouldn't be surprised if the sponsors think we colluded with Liminal to plan the whole thing."

"How does *that* help us? Corruption charges will draw attention we don't need and can't afford," Director Lane snapped.

Duo wagged a hand as she said, "We'll turn over the records. We can *prove* there was no collusion; that isn't a real concern. Losing the money we'd have gotten from a prime sponsor is a much bigger deal. Given how high the bidding was before our project forced the withdrawals, the total prize pool will be significantly smaller this year. He didn't just cost us, he cost *all* the directorates. Our problem is that the other trainers will focus on getting him out of the way early."

Deera laughed softly as she said, "Oh I can't *wait* for that. Our boy will do just what he said he will. He'll *destroy* them. It'll be delicious. We have a juggernaut in hand, just you wait and watch. Palashai may be old, but she *is* good — one of the very best. When Taz takes the championship, the other directorates will splay tails and drain their accounts to cut a deal with us for gene seeds from his species."

Lane frowned, then sighed and said, "I don't like the risks, but there *are* still rewards on offer. This situation remains *far* from ideal."

Deera shrugged and showed her hands as she said, "We just have to be careful what we reveal to Taz in future."

Duo winced and Lane caught the expression, then turned her full attention to Deera as she said in a cold tone, "And what does *that* mean?"

"*You* told Taz that killing a trainer would destroy his chance at a powerful sponsor. He used that information to control the bidding," Deera said, blithely ignoring the warning she had to have heard in Lane's voice. "Any accusations of collusion will focus on that. Sometimes, less is more,

particularly when it comes to information. Certain animals work best with blinders. I would *suggest* you run any future information you're tempted to pass on to Taz through us first so we can review it for possible abuse."

"You are flying in *very* thin air, Deera," Lane said quietly.

"So are we all. I suggest we work together to ensure a safe landing," Deera said.

"What would you suggest?" Duo asked, obviously trying to defray the tension.

"Honestly? A hands-off approach is best," Deera said as she glanced from Lane to Duo, then back. "Now that he's sponsored he'll be spending his free time at Liminal and they will kiss his *ass*. All to the good: let him forget that his success benefits *us*. Once the games start he'll focus on himself and his own progress. We can only profit. Palashai and her daughter will have a week to train him across a broad range of events and I'm confident he'll survive the opening ceremony. I'm willing to bet his little stunt will net us all a tidy profit in wagers."

"Odds will be down," Duo protested. "That ... *trick* he pulled will have everyone over-estimating his strength."

Deera shook her head and wagged a finger as she said, "Never underestimate a bookie. They'll know just like we do he'll get focus-fired right out of the gate and everyone will *also* know his regen is practically zero. Odds will be *up*, and *I* will make a *mint*."

"You seem unreasonably confident he'll survive those conditions," Lane noted.

Deera licked her lips and smiled broadly as she said, "Oh yes. Trust me. Bet the building on Taz. He *will* deliver."

"That just leaves Mauren," Duo said. "What do we do about her?"

Lane raised an eyebrow and glanced at Deera, who said, "Up to you."

“Yes it is, so good of you to remember,” Lane said dryly. “That said, what would *you* recommend?”

“Honestly? As long as the paperwork on her is airtight, I’d send her with him. I’ve been monitoring Mauren’s vitals and her tail is *soaking* for our boy. His essence is clearly top tier and she’ll be useful to him. Not to mention if *we* keep her we’re giving up on the possibility that he kills her for us.”

“Is that still likely?” Duo asked. “I figure he’d have done it by now if he planned to.”

“He hates her just as much as he hates us. He’s just waiting for an opportunity,” Deera said, her voice dripping with confidence. “That said, she’s just far enough out of pocket that we can drip-feed her information we want passed if necessary. Taz seems to consider her a credible source.”

Lane closed her eyes and took a deep breath, thinking it through. The paperwork on Mauren *was* airtight. Even if she came out with her story there was no way for her to best the directorate without any resources, and Liminal wouldn’t back her even *if* they believed her. If she got them to let her go she would be easy pickings.

“Ship her,” Lane said.

“I’ll arrange it,” Duo said, and both succubi stood and walked away, leaving Lane to her thoughts.

THE BIGGEST DISCOVERY I made as I was transitioned from Division Four to the Liminal Science facilities was that I wasn't living in a space station.

I was in an arcology.

Stepping outside, the first thing that struck me was how mellow the light was. Looking up, I saw three towers converging to a single point above my head. *Waaay* above my head. Each of the towers was built on a scale beyond anything I'd ever seen, and I couldn't even *guess* at the actual height of the structure. Between the towers was a translucent barrier. The light getting through that barrier was ... diffuse, weak. The air had a hazy quality that reminded me a little of the one time I'd been to Beijing, but it didn't smell bad and no one was wearing masks.

I was standing on a platform with a symbol painted in the middle of it, and sitting on top of *that* was a vehicle that looked vaguely like a sleek, gold-and-blue UH-60 without rotors. The guns and missile pods were replaced by sleek tubes that tapered at both ends, looking to me like fuel tanks.

Without some technofuckery, this thing was *not* airworthy. Since I was pretty sure there was *plenty* of technofuckery to go around, I wasn't worried.

I was in cuffs again, but didn't mind. It meant the people I was leaving were terrified of me and well they should be. I'd done everything reasonable to foster the impression that I was dangerous and unstable, so being cuffed made me happy

because it told me Director Lane and whoever else she had running the show with her didn't want me causing any casualties on the way out. That said, I was treated with all the care due a dangerous animal so I never got the chance to make trouble even if I were inclined.

Walking behind me was a syban — the same species as the one I'd killed back in my room. She was holding a small box, and that box was interacting with a brace around my neck. When she moved, I was forced to move along with her. I'd actually lifted my feet off the ground and been hung by my neck for several feet as the syban continued to walk without any visible additional effort. The forces involved were completely outside my comprehension, but it did make for a *very* effective leash. She was out of my reach and my cuffs not only linked my hands together but were adhered to a third band affixed as a belt around my waist. That my feet were left free when they clearly weren't necessary seemed almost like an insult, and I wondered as I walked if that wasn't exactly what it was.

Director Lane probably wasn't too happy with me. Mauren had shown real fear when I'd explained what happened at the sponsor showing, and was amazed I wasn't being punished somehow.

Since the move took place within an hour of the end of that showing, my guess was that Lane simply hadn't had time to come up with anything suitable.

Speaking of Mauren, she was walking along beside me, completely unrestrained.

She was also wearing clothes, and given how satisfied she seemed as she strode next to me I had to assume they had originally belonged to her. The top was a black halter with a plunging neckline rimmed in fur the same color as her eyes. Her belly remained bare but her pants were what I can only describe as leather and practically painted on. She wore elegant strappy sandals, and if I were being honest I'd have to admit that she looked *killer*. She was even wearing makeup, though not on her face. The lighter markings I'd noticed on her wrists and ankles were now outlined in gold. Were it not

for the wings, tail, ivory horns, claws, dark red skin, black sclera with golden irises around slitted pupils ... okay, maybe she didn't look *that* much like a club bunny, but that was the impression I got.

On my *other* side was another succubus, one I'd never seen before but who Mauren obviously hated, given the venomous looks she was throwing. Her skin was a brighter red than Mauren's; more like the color of those old Looney Toons depictions of the devil. Her hair was a wild riot of color and done up in a proper mohawk that I had to give respect. Her horns started at the back of her head and arced around to end in points just above her forehead. Her wings were pierced at each finger with studs that caught the light and gleamed as she moved, and even her tail had a pair of studs flanking the tip. She was wearing, of all things, a white lab coat. It was quite the contrast. I only knew her name was Deera because that's what Mauren hissed at her when she came in along with the usual armored guard to take me out of my cell.

That guard was walking next to the syban controlling my collar, and I noted with amusement that who or whatever was *in* that armor had a sidearm now.

I was being given the royal treatment and felt a little like Hannibal Lecter must have as he was wheeled out on a dolly in a straight jacket. The syban's obvious fear of me was so poignant I imagined I could smell it.

It was pretty cool.

A sliding door opened on the side of the craft as I and my entourage approached. Standing inside the bay of the vehicle were Palashai and Yimshe — both still wearing those green tracksuits — and a male of their species. At least, he was dog-like, so that was my assumption. His ears were floppy rather than cropped and the skin I could see was pale cream. He was wearing a breastplate of some sort — it looked ceramic rather than metallic — and was painted in blue and gold. He had a helmet on that conformed to his head and hid his eyes behind a visor. He also had a sidearm, was ten feet tall, and beefy.

As I considered him, I wondered how hard he'd be to take down. If I did it quickly enough, I could get his pistol. It was an idle thought. I wasn't really interested in making a bad impression on my sponsor, and this dude obviously worked for them rather than Director Lane.

The trainers both looked annoyed as they laid eyes on me, and Yimshe snapped, "Get him out of that restraining collar!"

Deera replied with lazy confidence, "Not until he's in your airfoil and you sign for transfer. After that, whoever he kills is *your* problem, not ours."

Deera stepped out to one side and gestured toward the syban. I didn't see what she did, but my feet abruptly left the ground as I was moved forward and deposited inside the crew space of the 'airfoil.'

I was then turned and made to sit in a chair. Restraints not unlike a chopper's seat belt were fastened over me by Yimshe as I watched the Liminal Science guard take a data pad from Deera and manipulate it briefly before handing it back.

The collar around my neck abruptly depowered, and I sagged in my seat as it was unsnapped and unceremoniously tossed out toward the waiting syban, who lunged to catch the thing before it hit the ground. I filed away the fact that the collar was apparently delicate kit. That might matter to me at some point in the future.

Mauren stepped voluntarily into the airfoil and took the seat next to mine, strapping herself in without a word. I noticed Yimshe scowl as she glanced from me to the succubus, but she didn't say anything, and a few moments later as the guard was getting back in the airfoil Deera leaned in and looked at me, obviously wanting to speak.

I gave her eye contact, and her slitted pupils widened a bit as she said, "Have fun, Taz. I look forward to seeing you go all the way this season. If you have any questions, rely on your trainers and Mauren. It's in their best interests to help you succeed. Earn out, and you'll never see the inside of Division Four again."

Considering and dismissing several one-liners, I just turned away and said nothing at all. I didn't want these people to know just how badly I *wanted* to see the inside of Division Four again. Free and armed.

It was a pleasant fantasy.

Deera's smile was cocky as she glanced toward Palashai, who hadn't spoken at all to this point, and said, "You be careful with him. I'm sure you've read our reports, but they don't do him justice."

Palashai didn't say anything.

Yimshe said, "Yes, we've read the reports. Thank you, Wrangler. We'll take it from here."

Deera's lazy look at the younger dog-girl was ripe with contempt, and she didn't bother answering before turning away, waving idly over her shoulder as the cabin door slid shut.

The trainers both strapped in, along with the guard. A few moments later the vehicle lifted without a sound. No engine whine, no nothing. I didn't even hear air whistling as the vehicle banked and shot off the landing pad at a steep incline.

I twisted my head to look out the window. Most of what I could see was a dizzying array of landing pads, towers, and lines of traffic that streamed through the air below us. Apparently, our airfoil was in something akin to airspace rather than dedicated traffic lanes, because we zipped straight over the city, flying toward ... somewhere. I couldn't get a good look ahead of us due to my position in the cabin.

"If you promise not to take advantage, I'll deactivate your restraints," Yimshe said abruptly, drawing my attention to her. She was seated directly across from me, with Palashai next to her.

I glanced between them. It was obvious from what had been said at the showing that Yimshe had the 'lead' role as my trainer, and Palashai was deliberately taking a back seat for the time being. I wondered idly if I should test that boundary but decided against it. It was too soon and there were several

reasons not to make these two any more afraid of me *or* turn them hostile.

I decided to play along, but only to a point. The offer was an obvious ploy for increasing trust — part of a good cop, bad cop routine — and it was annoying. I said, “Leave them on.”

Yimshe blinked, ears flicking around and obviously at a loss. She glanced toward her mother, who said, “He doesn’t trust us. You can ask, but don’t push him.”

Turning back to me, she asked, “You don’t want to be free?”

“I’m a prisoner and everyone who sees me should know it. Turning off the cuffs doesn’t make me free,” I said.

“Aren’t they uncomfortable?” she asked.

“Not really. If or when you’re ready to take these devices off entirely, you can turn them off. Otherwise, you’re just mocking me.”

Nonplussed, Yimshe visibly took a moment to gather her thoughts, then pulled a data pad out of a slot next to her seat and said, “I’ve reviewed the notes sent over from Division Four, but I’d like to ask a question, if you don’t mind.”

“You can ask as many questions as you want,” I said.

“That ... strike. How did you do it?”

“If you need to ask me that, you’re not a trained fighter,” I said.

“You’re right. I’m not. So tell me how you did it.”

“You’re lying. When you thought I was going to hit you, you assumed a position implying training.”

Yimshe hesitated, then said, “Okay, I have been trained to fight, but what you did shouldn’t be possible given your strength assessment. Your hand moved less than one of its own lengths before contact. That isn’t enough distance traveled to build up the kind of power you hit me with.”

I glanced down at her hands, noting the claws, then said, “Claws are for slashing, which is an inefficient movement

compared to the jab, and you have a fundamental misunderstanding of where the movement starts. The energy I hit you with came mostly from my legs and torso, not from my arm.”

“When you hit me, you spoke in a language our translators don’t have a key for. What did you say?” she asked.

“I can’t tell you. I don’t have the words in your language.”

That wasn’t strictly true, but I didn’t want to give anyone any hints about my own language. I knew everything I did, said, or even looked at would be analyzed. There was no sense giving these people even more of an advantage over me than they already had. Not that knowing a language literally no one else spoke was any kind of advantage.

“Rephrase it then,” Yimshe said.

I thought about that. This was an advanced civilization with science far beyond anything I’d ever seen. Someone, *somewhere*, knew everything about what I’d done and how I’d done it. If Yimshe really wanted to know she could probably learn with a bit of research, but I decided to throw the doggie a bone.

I said, “It’s a formula that describes energy transfer. All forces are balanced. However hard you push against something, it pushes back just as hard. The difference in effect comes from the differences in ... weight is as close as I can come. Weight, and speed, which also isn’t quite right. When you walk, you push the ground and the ground pushes you, but *you* move and the ground doesn’t because you’re smaller. The faster something moves, the more energy it has to give. My power when I hit you came from my back foot, not my fist, so the distance that energy traveled was much further than it looked because I smoothly preserved and passed the force generated through my body. That extra distance traveled means I had all that space to build up more speed.”

“Where did you learn this technique?” Yimshe asked.

I said, “Telling you would be pointless.”

“I am aware that you have episodic memory from before you were constituted in Division Four. Where are you from?” she asked.

Since I’d already answered that question, I didn’t bother to speak. I just stared at her and waited for what I’d already said to sink in.

“If I’m going to train you, you’re going to need to cooperate with me,” she said, a note of irritation in her voice.

“If you’re going to train me it will be in areas other than combat, of which you know very little,” I said blandly.

She snapped, “It would have gone differently if it were a real fight!”

“I suppose you’ll just have to go on believing that,” I said, pouring all the boredom I could into the words. I had two reasons. The first was petty: I wanted to assert my dominance over this woman. The second, however, was slightly more reasonable. I wanted a *real* fight out of her when she squared up to me, and if she was going easy I wouldn’t learn shit about the limits of what she — and people like her — could do.

Yimshe’s lips peeled back in a silent snarl.

“You can’t solve all your problems by killing,” Palashai said as she gave her daughter a warning glance.

Yimshe clearly took the hint, because her lips closed over her teeth again.

I glanced from Palashai to Yimshe, then addressed the younger as I said, “That’s what you two are for.”

Turning to Mauren, Yimshe plaintively asked, “Is he always this difficult?”

Mauren let out a throaty chuckle as she said, “From my experience, he’s actually being unusually compliant. I think he likes you.”

I managed to stifle the laugh down to a throat noise as I smiled and glanced out the window. Mauren wasn’t wrong. I had a soft spot for dogs, and I just couldn’t get away from thinking of Pala and Yim as dog-girls despite their complete

lack of fur. The actual name of their species was packwren. I'd asked Mauren during the transition.

I didn't know much beyond that because the media I had access to was strictly for entertainment. No proper archives, no library, nothing like an encyclopedia or wiki, just drama and smut. Well, and music, but their music sucked so it didn't count. Maybe these Liminal Science people would fill that gap. Realistically, I'd have to cram my head with as much knowledge as would fit between now and the opening free-for-all. Any tidbit on any race might be crucial.

"How familiar are you with the structure of the show you're about to participate in?" Yimshe asked, drawing my mind back to the present.

"The first event is usually a kill or be killed free-for-all. After that it settles into some sort of persistent living condition with periodic emergencies injected to spice things up. What those emergencies are depends on 'a lot of different factors,'" I said, making quote motions with my fingers that had both Pala and Yim doing a head tilt at me.

It was fucking *adorable*.

I jerked a thumb at Mauren as I said, "That's what she said. She covered a few past scenarios she's familiar with and a few that are staples of the show, but said it could be almost anything and there were usually several *new* events each season that either haven't been done before or haven't been done in so long that no one trains strategies for them."

"What else?" Yimshe asked.

"The in-between times are when most of the intrigue takes place, and I'll be expected to take on allies from other defeated players. I'm not really clear on that, or why I'd do it."

"Allies serve three distinct purposes. The first is that they provide sexual opportunities. The second is that they have a variety of special skills that you'll want to make use of to pass certain events. The third is that most of the weapons you'll have access to during the show have two different settings depending on who they're used on and who's using them,"

Yimshe said. “If you hit someone else’s ally, they’re incapacitated. If someone else’s ally hits *you*, you’re incapacitated. If a mainline contestant hits another mainline contestant, the weapon inflicts real injuries and death is possible. Because not every contestant can be conversant with every kind of weapon or contest, having allies who are good at the things you aren’t lets you send them in when the risk to you is too high. The trade-off is your allies can’t finish off your opponents *or* earn special dispensations. Only you can do that.”

“That makes sense. Seems to me like having allies acquired from other defeated opponents is a recipe for betrayal,” I said, and Yimshe nodded, then shrugged.

“It’s all part of the game. It’s considered bad form to kill an ally and they can be hard to get rid of. The best way to do it is to arrange for a trade with another mainline contestant.”

“Why would anyone trade for a shitty ally?” I asked.

“Lots of reasons. They might not be as willing to betray the person to whom they’re traded. They might have skills that make it worth risking their unreliability. They might just be a really good lay. Sponsors provide their contestants with a list of desirable allies, and that list gets updated as the season goes on. If someone wants to trade you for one of your allies and you can’t figure out why, it’s probably because that person is on a desirable list for one reason or another. Figuring out their value is just another part of the game.”

I raised an eyebrow at that, but didn’t say anything. I knew by now — having watched what succubi considered ‘wholesome’ TV — that sex was just part of the game. Mauren had told me that some contestants got auctioned for good prices because they were seen as good lovers, and that allies were popular for the same reason. It was one way to gain notoriety outside actual point accrual and combat.

“What allies do I start the game with?” I asked.

Yimshe said, “The first event is mainline contestants only, though you can acquire allies during. A maximum of five

allies are the starting allotment, and you have three at the moment.”

“So all those trainers I saw back at the showing will be allies in the game?”

“Those assigned to a mainline contestant will be, yes.”

“What motivation would anyone have to participate in this game *as* an ally?” I asked.

Yimshe glanced toward Palashai, who leaned forward a bit and said, “There are plenty of awards and incentives for allies in the game, ranging from sponsorship and employment to exposure and fun. Why any given ally is playing the game is something you’ll have to learn for yourself. Knowing and catering to the motivations of your allies will be critical to getting the best out of them throughout the season.”

I nodded and turned to look out the window again. We were approaching one of the corner towers that held up the peak of the arcology we were in, and the closer we got, the more amazed I was at the sheer *scale* of the construction. I had no idea if humanity could build something like this even if they had unlimited funds. It just didn’t seem possible for a structure to be this big.

“We’re almost there,” Yimshe said, stowing her data pad. “We’ll talk more once we get you settled in. Director Chosen will be greeting us with her entourage when we land. You need to be polite, Taz. The director is the reason Liminal decided to sponsor you.”

I glanced from Yimshe to Palashai, who nodded gravely at me, but didn’t say anything. She didn’t have to. That nod told me Chosen was the good boss Palashai liked working for.

“I’ll be on my best behavior,” I said, and watched as we descended toward a pretty impressive rooftop garden. More impressive than the greenery was the fact that I didn’t see any disturbance as we moved closer. No rotor or backwash at all.

The landing was barely perceptible, and the door slid open on its own as the others in the cabin freed themselves of their restraints. Yimshe then undid my harness for me, and I stood

up and turned to face the small gathering that was waiting for us.

There were four succubi and four others. The succubi all had red skin, though the specific shade varied, as did the color and style of their hair and clothing. It was obvious to me that fashion was a major preoccupation with these people, and tended toward the skimpy end of the spectrum, which neither surprised nor bothered me. Hot females can wear as little as they like. I will *never* complain about it.

The obvious leader was a succubus around eight feet tall with crimson skin and blue-black wavy hair lain artfully over her right shoulder. Her horns were reminiscent of the hartebeest's: dark gray, ribbed, twisting up and branching out from the center of her forehead to backward points a full foot above her head.

She was wearing a dark purple skirt that was so short I caught myself looking for camel toe despite there being no wind to lift it. Her top was a blouse and bodice combination, white and that same dark purple respectively. She filled it out nicely too. The other succubi were dressed in what I can only describe as a cross between business casual and club. The colors were almost invariably complementary to their unique skin tones but beyond that it just looked like an ostentatious mess, like a bunch of bikini models putting on just enough to be passable in a business environment.

The others were species I'd seen before on the boob tube. All of them were male and all of them were decked out. Three in suits, one in armor very similar to that worn by the guard that accompanied me.

No other packwren, though the guard accompanying the obvious leader did catch my attention. His armor hid most of his body from me other than its general shape, but the exposed lower half of his face was simian and he had four arms. His tail was long, black-furred, and hung back in a way that I could only describe as posed.

Yimshe stepped forward and bowed to the lead succubus. I looked her posture over carefully so I could replicate the

move. She went down about sixty degrees, bending from the waist, with her palms flat on her thighs. Her elbows bent with her move, and Yimshe waited for the succubus to make an absent uplifting gesture before straightening.

The succubus spoke first, saying, “I thought we were assured he would give us no trouble?”

Her voice was confident, but higher pitched than most of the other succubi I’d heard.

“He has been compliant,” Yimshe said.

“Then why is he still bound?”

“He declined when I offered to depower the cuffs, Director.”

“Oh?”

She turned her attention to me, and I bowed, mimicking Yimshe with one difference: I maintained eye contact with the woman and waited for her to make the rising gesture.

She blinked, then did so and I straightened.

“I have been told that your name is ‘Taz,’ is that correct?” she asked.

I nodded.

“Mine is Director Chosen.”

I nodded again, considering her carefully. She had golden irises similar to Mauren’s and like all the succubi I’d seen her pupils were slitted. She had a soft set of what my brother and I used to call DSL when the women we were talking about weren’t around. They were luscious, full lips. Her nose was straight and she had a heart-shaped face. Her eyebrows were subtle and precise, and she was looking me over with the same intensity I was giving her.

“Not talkative?” she asked.

“No one’s asked me a question,” I replied.

One of those precise eyebrows lifted marginally, then she said, “I don’t know why you arranged to be available to us,

Taz, but I hope you realize what a terrible risk I've taken in choosing to sponsor you. I expect results."

"I'm worth far more than you paid, Director. By the end of the season you'll know just how much more," I said.

Her eyes flicked to the bandage on my shoulder as she said, "How long will that take to heal?"

I glanced at the wound. Once back in my room they'd washed the cut and glued it shut. It itched, but I'd had much, much worse, so it didn't bother me. The problem was I honestly couldn't give her an answer because my body was definitely *not* the one I'd grown up in. It looked like mine, but I knew it wasn't. I was in far better shape than I should have been, for instance, having not put in any gym time in the last three months.

I answered honestly.

"I don't know."

"Have you never been injured before?" she asked.

"I have been injured many times, often more severely."

"Then why do you not know?"

"I'm unfamiliar with your medical technology and this wound was treated in a manner I don't recognize."

"How would your wound have been treated where you are from?"

"It would have been cleaned and ..."

I trailed off, not knowing the translated word. After a moment's thought, I said, "It would have been treated the same way you would treat a rip in cloth."

As I spoke, I made a pantomime of threading and pulling a needle.

Her eyes widened slightly and said, "A barbarian culture then."

"If you say so."

"You don't agree?"

“No.”

“Mm.”

She considered me a moment longer, then tilted her head, obviously speaking to one of those behind her as she said, “Analyze him. I want a timeline for the cut along with estimates on future wounds. No experimentation permitted, but non-invasive samples may be taken. If a way can be found to accelerate his healing, administer it. I want him as fit as possible for the opening ceremony and event.”

“As you wish, Director,” one of the other succubi said.

Since I hadn't been spoken to, I made no comment. Chosen glanced from me to the guard, then twisted her head to look at the succubus who'd just answered her to ask, “Have his feeds been properly transferred?”

“Yes, Director.”

“Very good. Isolate and update them so that we alone receive the data. Division Four no longer has any legal right to the information and I won't have him in my facility until I know those feeds are secure.”

“Already done, Director. His feeds were successfully isolated just before landing. He's secure.”

“Excellent.”

Director Chosen returned her attention to Yimshe as she said, “Once he's been through medical show him to his quarters, see that his physical and mental needs are met, and begin training immediately.”

“Yes, Director,” Yimshe said.

With that the Director and her cadre went one way, I and mine another.

‘Medical’ started out as I expected. I was taken into a lab, jabbed about thirty times in various places, and the wound on my shoulder was examined. When they took the bandage off, I looked too. The glue had evened out and I have to admit it looked smoother than a lot of the stitch jobs I'd had done on me over the years. The scar would be barely noticeable.

Then things got a little weird.

The lead technician was — of course — a succubus. She was also about ten feet tall, and honestly, the size was a bit intimidating. Not just her either. *Everything* in the lab was big in a way that made me feel like a kindergärtner. The exam table they had me sitting on was so tall that my feet dangled something like two feet off the ground.

When the tech stopped in front of me and gave me another once over, I immediately knew I wasn't going to like what came next. Sure enough, she had me lay down — which I did — then she pulled my drawstring pants down without ceremony or permission from me.

Since my cuffs were still on, there wasn't much I could do either.

After that, she spent a few minutes examining my junk.

Then she twisted and said to one of the other techs, "Bring me a ..."

She used a word I wasn't familiar with, and the object that went with the word looked a little bit like a high-tech gas station squeegee.

Since I couldn't do anything with the information even if she answered the question, I didn't bother to ask what it was. In the next few seconds, I found out for myself.

She turned the long side down over my kit and pressed a button that sent a wash of blue light in a very narrow line across my privates. She then waved it slowly back and forth as she lifted my cock, then my nuts.

It was a depilator.

She did my legs too, going so far as to haul me up by my ankle so she could get all the nooks and crannies.

When she was satisfied she flipped the device around, pressed another button on the handle, and vacuumed up all the hair.

As she handed the depilator to her assistant she casually said, "We'll do the rest later. For now, this will do."

Turning back to me, she cocked her head and said, “Is something wrong?”

I chose not to answer because my hands were still bound, but in that moment had they not been I’d have probably twisted this chick’s head off. A trim up would have been reasonable, but losing it all made me feel more than a little emasculated. The only men who had a legit reason to be this bare worked in porn.

Her eyes stayed on mine for several long seconds, then I blinked as I felt something brush over my thigh.

Twisting my head to look, I watched a spaded tail drifting toward my cock as the succubus said, “I’ll be sampling your essence. May I expect your compliance or will further restraints be necessary?”

Bemused that she was actually asking *me* if I needed to be restrained, I simply shook my head, but said nothing. In truth, I was tempted to see what kind of damage I could do if I put my bare foot up between her legs, but it would be a petty revenge at best and not worth the fallout. This chick was part of the medical staff. Turning her against me would be like insulting the barber’s favorite team just before getting a straight-razor shave.

She smiled faintly and her tail proved how smooth she’d made my leg as it eased toward my junk.

I looked around and noticed that both my trainers and Mauren were nowhere to be seen. I could only guess they had other things to do, and I wondered idly if Mauren would fuck off now that she was outside the Division Four compound.

As I wondered, the medical tech succubus’ tail reached my cock and I was surprised by both its heft and dexterity. As it wrapped around me I was left with the impression that both halves of the spade were fleshy mittens hiding several fingers underneath, fingers that adroitly lifted and began to stroke my flaccid length as she leaned over me, eyes hungry as they devoured my body.

“You’re like a clothing model, stripped of everything unnecessary,” she murmured, brushing fingers over my chest.

Since I had nothing to say to that I said nothing at all, but I couldn’t help but feel a surge as my blood gave the lusty devil woman what she wanted.

Her smile got quirky as her eyebrows lifted once she had me at full stand, and said, “This is almost comically large, given how small you are. You’re of average dimensions for someone four feet taller.”

Looking down at myself, I shrugged and said, “Maybe males of your other races just have small cocks. I’ve never felt like I was particularly large. Why did you shave all my hair?”

I hadn’t intended to ask, but since she seemed intent on making a running commentary of her jack session, I felt I may as well gain some insight.

“Mm? We shave all our livestock,” the succubus said, as though it were a given.

“So ... the packwren. Do they have natural fur?”

“Yes? Why ask? Oooh, you’ve got Palashai as a trainer, right?” the tech asked, and as she did I noticed that the tone of her skin had shifted toward a deeper red. She was flushed, and her breathing was heavier than it had been.

I glanced toward where her tail was still playing idly with my shaft, and noticed that the tip of the spade wasn’t as precise anymore and the edges of the leaves possessed a sheen previously absent.

“My trainer is Yimshe,” I said. “Palashai is just an advisor to her.”

“Psh, what a load,” the succubus said. “Palashai’s pulling the strings, no doubt. Liminal’s picks have been lackluster the last five seasons since she retired and started to train her pup to take her place. This is Yimshe’s first year as an official trainer.”

“What is your official title here, in this lab?” I asked.

“Senior Medtech, why?” she asked, not looking at me. More and more her focus was drawn to my shaft. She was leaning over it now, one hand brushing up and down my thigh while the other traced absently over my abs. I could feel her secretions on my cock now as they continued to leak from her tail, the spade of which had noticeably swollen. Its tip now looked like puckered lips ready to kiss a lover, and its temperature had gone up too.

It was, without question, the kinkiest thing I’d learned about succubi. They could fuck like normal people, but when they were really into it? They used their tails.

“If you decided to place your trust in one of your subordinates to get something done, and someone they interacted with chose to come to you rather than your subordinate, how would you respond?”

“Depends on rank, but most people would take damage,” she said, sparing a glance to meet my eye. “I don’t make mistakes when it comes to delegation, that’s *why* I’m the senior here.”

“So if *I*, having been told that Yimshe is my trainer, treat her as though she isn’t?”

“Ahhh, I see what you mean. Liminal’s entry into this year’s show has some hidden intellectual capacity. Maybe I ought to place a wager on you,” she said, then sucked in a sharp breath.

I did too, because she had inverted her tail over my shaft, and was slowly, deliberately pushing it down. It felt almost exactly like a woman’s pussy, and I gritted my teeth and leaned up to watch. My hands were still secured at my waist. I could reach out and touch her tail as it came to rest on me. The spade had at least a foot of depth, so I fit easily despite her comment about my size.

Still, it was interesting to be able to see my girth visibly stretching her tail, and she set both her hands on the edge of the table, supporting herself as her eyes drifted shut.

“You must really enjoy that,” I noted quietly.

“MmHMM ...” she managed, then her head tipped back as her tail lifted until its lips were pressing up against the ridge of my glans. “You’ve ... got a *really* nice one. No spines or odd shapes, just a lovely ridge that is ... MMMmm.”

She groaned as her tail thrust down again, and I have to admit the feeling was pretty intense. Had she done this before Mauren had gotten a shot out of me, I wouldn’t have lasted long, but Mauren had a habit of blowing me first thing every morning, so I had the stamina to enjoy this.

I noticed as the succubus worked on me that her hips were flexing along with her tail as though she were fucking. Her body’s movement was completely lewd and unrestrained. The fact that she was still fully dressed as she did it was an interesting contrast too, as was the fact that the other five members of the lab team had drifted over to watch.

In a past life, I’d have never tolerated this sort of thing. I’m a private man by nature, but since being resurrected here every second of my life had been scrutinized. Knowing that, there was virtually no difference between knowing it was so, and seeing it was so. I had resigned myself to having no true privacy outside my own mind, so I didn’t object to these people watching me.

Besides, I wasn’t the one putting on a show.

All I had to do was sit still. The ‘Senior Medtech,’ on the other hand, was practically treating the table I was on like a dryer on spin cycle as her energetic tail pumped my cock, leaving a slick sheen and a frothy ring of her lust around the base as she gasped and grunted.

While it was hot, slick, and engaging, her tail just didn’t have the heft of a real woman. I’d get there eventually, but it would take me a while. I also had to keep my abs tensed to lean up because my hands were secured in front of me. It felt like I was planking during sex.

My hands were closed into fists to keep them out of the way of her tail, but as she got more and more worked up I started to wonder what it would feel like buried inside her tail when she came.

I also wondered how sensitive that spade was now that it was a swollen, fleshy cocksleeve.

Reaching out, I brushed fingertips across both sides of the spade, applying no pressure and careful not to disrupt her pace.

She sucked in a sharp breath, eyes flicking to mine as she asked, “Does that succ you came with do this for you?”

I shook my head, not breaking eye contact.

“So, am I your first?”

I nodded.

“And you’re *still* playing with me? That’s ...”

She trailed off in a huff of pleasure as I slowly moved my fingers laterally, letting her own movement generate the sensation.

It was a novel feeling. Her tail was literally pulsing with blood flow. So much so that it barely resembled a spade at all anymore. It was interesting. The more aroused she became, the more swollen her tail got.

Grinning, I continued to play my fingers across the hot, twitching flesh as it pumped my cock, and the succubus leaning against the table seemed past the talking point. She was grunting like an animal as she worked the shaft, and was practically hanging on the edge of the table, grinding shamelessly.

“Getting close?” I asked.

She lifted her head, panting raggedly as she looked at me. As I met her eyes, I said, “I’ve never had a succubus come on me before. You’ll be the first. I wonder what it’ll feel like? I wonder ...”

“What ... about ... *you*?” she panted.

“I’ll get there,” I assured her, grin broadening a bit as I added, “eventually. I want to feel you cum first. I wonder if you’re trying to hold out? It’s cute, seeing you try so hard ...”

“Nngh!”

She slammed her hips against the table and I watched in fascination as the balloon her spade had turned into began to rhythmically pulse. It tightened around the lips sucking hard at the base of my shaft and that ring of tension visibly rippled up, soon joined by others.

The feeling from the inside was more intense than any female orgasm I'd ever caused in life. It was genuinely amazing, and took me in the space of ten seconds or so from sixty to one hundred percent despite my wish to hold out longer.

The pressure was ridiculous. If she'd gripped me with her fist this hard I'd be in pain, but within the slick, silken walls of her tail there was only an immense flux of pressure sucking powerfully at my cock until with a grunt, I gave up the goods.

Closing my eyes in an effort to control my expression, I let the orgasm wash through me. It made my stomach a slab of steel. My thighs bulged as the waves of pleasure tuned me up, and it was a real effort to keep my reaction to just that.

Succubi really were something. I wondered if this one was as good as Mauren at blowjobs.

One of the other techs reached in and forcibly removed the senior medtech's tail and caught the last few rounds in a sample cup. She was a succubus as well, and I glanced toward her tail.

Sure enough, it was visibly swollen and had a definite sheen to it.

I grinned as I met her eye. Her blush darkened not in shame, but lust. It was obvious this girl wanted a go at me.

Instead, I glanced toward her senior and asked in a controlled tone, "Get what you need?"

Her head was lolling and her wings were limp as she gave me a weary look that said everything.

Deciding to rub it in a bit, I said, "Imagine how much better it would have been if I had my hands free."

“I’d ... better not,” she panted, shaking her head as she mumbled, “That essence is pure bliss. It’ll be a crime against sex if you get killed.”

My clothing was put back on, though I was annoyed that no one bothered to clean the creamy froth off my cock before they did it.

I was led from there to a suite of rooms, and as I walked in I got an excellent sense of just how much my lot had improved.

Liminal Sciences obviously planned to take care of me.

I'VE ONLY EVER BEEN INSIDE one penthouse in my life, and that had been bombed and burned months before I arrived. Still, I'd seen them on TV from time to time, and this reminded me of that.

The room in front of me was a good fifty feet square with arched ceilings, dominated by a comfy-looking leather couch and glass table combo along with a pair of *very* plush recliners. I'm talking thick like you'd see in a cigar lounge. To my right was a breakfast bar fronting what looked like a kitchenette. Beyond that was an open door that apparently led to an office of some sort. Opposite the bar were a pair of closed doors I assumed led to sleeping quarters, and directly across from me was a window that took up the whole wall and gave me a sweeping view over the tops of most of the skyscrapers that made up the city inside the arcology.

Strolling across the room to stand in front of the window, I looked out over the city. Yimshe followed me and asked, "Satisfactory?"

"So far," I said, not looking back. There was a haze over the city, like Los Angeles back in the eighties. Yet there was no way to mistake this place for *anywhere* in California. It looked more than a little like the city in *5th Element*, seen from just above and beyond.

"What else do you need?" she asked. "There are two separate rooms for sleeping, each of which has its own bathing and sanitary facilities. There is a soundproofed office for

research and study, a kitchen facility, and you will have access to a gymnasium for whatever exercise may be needed.”

“I want access to an archive that has information on everything I might find out there,” I said, nodding toward the city. “Races, locations, customs, laws, everything.”

“It might be arranged. At least to begin with, you’ll be restricted to information that’ll be valuable for you during the show, which *won’t* take place out there. Provided you do well, access might be broadened as a reward.”

I nodded, then turned from the windows toward the ‘office.’ The door — by the look of it *all* the doors in the suite — was pocket style, sliding straight into the walls. They also didn’t seem to have any automatic functions, just recessed metal fingerholds to pull or push them. Given how futuristic everything else was, I thought that was a bit odd, but since it wasn’t important I dismissed it. The central feature of the office was a broad monitor above a narrow desk and comfy chair centered on the wall across from me. There was a second chair/desk thing in the far corner next to a white board, which gave me a high school flashback. The space was eight by maybe twenty feet, also with high ceilings.

It suddenly struck me and I turned to look at Yimshe, who’d trailed after me, to note, “Everything here’s already sized for me.”

When she nodded, I asked, “How’d you do that so quickly?”

She blinked, head tilted in that canine way she had as she asked, “This is unusual? All your physical measurements were available when you were shown to the sponsors. Once we signed a contract this suite was outfitted for you. We had *hours* to get it done.”

The way she said ‘hours’ made it sound like that was a *long* time, so I just let it go. Maybe I wasn’t the only shorty out there, species-wise.

As I turned to leave the office I caught her watching me with the sort of intensity that I’ve always found

uncomfortable. Pausing, I glanced at her and raised my eyebrows pointedly, but she either didn't understand the body language or chose to ignore it, because she neither spoke nor looked away.

The eye contact got longer and I frowned as it turned into the sort of test of wills I used to get out on the training ground. Once upon a time, I couldn't afford to lose those contests.

That time was long past.

Shaking my head, I turned away from her and crossed the room to look into the bedrooms.

Opening one door, the first thing I saw was that it was obviously *not* the room intended for me because Palashai was asleep on a bed sized for her, which is to say fucking huge.

It took up most of the space in the room. There was a closet, a door leading into a tiled space that had to be the bathroom, and a small nightstand next to the head of the bed.

She opened her eyes as the light from the main room fell across her, then leaned up in bed to look at me, lips parting to speak. I noted idly that if it was a boob job, it was *really* well done.

I closed the door again and moved to the next room, not bothering to wait for whatever she had to say. I'll pass on the awkward teen moments, thanks much.

Yimshe made a noise that sounded to me like a suppressed laugh, but that'd be between her and her mom. The next room was, by default, mine. The bed was just as big, but there was no one in it.

Otherwise, it was identical to the other bedroom, and I asked, "Where's Mauren?"

"I couldn't say," Yimshe said. "Succubi go where they want."

"Not *that* one," I said dryly. If she wasn't present, she was probably getting debriefed somewhere.

Stepping through, I had a look at the bathroom, which was accessible from both bedrooms. There was a very large square

tub rimmed with a bench beyond a standing shower area behind a clear glass partition. That took up pretty much all the space right of the entrance. Opposite that was a sink and mirrors on all three walls, full length to the left and right. Just beyond where the mirrors stopped was the toilet, which was just next to the opening for the pocket door that let me in with no partition to hide it.

Pulling the door out of the wall, I looked for a locking mechanism but didn't find one.

A short trip to the bedroom door showed me it didn't have a lock either, though I don't know why I expected one.

Movement caught my eye and I looked up to see Palashai stepping out of the other room wearing nothing but a set of ... actually very sexy underwear. The bra and panties were white, lacy, and stood out on her black-and-tan flesh. The bra actually had no shoulder straps, which made me wonder how the hell it was holding those hefty tits of hers up. Most of her was black, with tan spots above her eyes, all along the sides of her muzzle, the insides of her erect ears, and covering both shoulders all the way down to the upper slopes of her chest. The demarcation had very sharp definition. She also had good muscle tone and a solid four-pack.

I took my time looking her up and down, mostly up. There was a serious height difference between the two women in front of me. Yimshe was only a foot or so taller than I was. Palashai was closer to four feet taller. If I looked straight at her I was staring at abs.

Not a bad view.

"Why did you shut the door?" Palashai asked, setting one hand on a cocked hip as she looked down at me with an expression I couldn't read. I mean, her face was mostly muzzle. Her golden eyes were intent and her ears were angled toward me, but I couldn't have said what she was actually thinking, and her voice didn't betray anything but curiosity.

Somehow, though, I had the impression she was offended. I also wasn't sure how I wanted to answer her question. I'd

closed the door to cut off an awkward moment, because fuck awkward moments.

So, not to be ignored, the awkward moment threw some panties on and chased me out into the living room. Now what?

I decided to ignore it and asked, “What the hell are you doing in here asleep in the middle of the afternoon?”

She blinked, then said, “I wasn’t asleep. I was waiting for you.”

“Naked in your bed?”

“Naked in yours.”

Jerking my thumb toward the empty bedroom next to me I said, “That one’s mine.”

“That’s for Yim and I.”

“Look, lady. I *just* had the soul sucked out of me by a succubus tail. If you want a turn, you can wait.”

“This is part of your training.”

“Then why isn’t *Yimshe* doing it?” I asked, glancing toward the Dalmatian-colored woman in time to see her glancing up toward her mother, then at me, then away.

“We have our reasons,” Palashai said, tilting her head a bit as her golden eyes flicked to Yim, then back to me.

I leaned against the wall next to me, folded my arms across my chest, and gazed at the two women as I gave that some thought. Then I hazarded a guess.

“You want to see how many times I can go?”

“That’s one of the things we’re testing, yes.”

“But not everything. So ... you don’t want *Yimshe* to do it because I fucked her up and now she’s afraid of me. *You* still think you can handle me, so decided to go first. Maybe put me in my place?”

Palashai abruptly reached out, her strange, two-thumbed hand open to grasp at my shirt.

I caught her wrist, rolled my forearm over the top of hers to lock her elbow and spun viciously outside. I'd never tried the move on someone four feet taller than me and it didn't work out quite like I wanted. An ordinary person would have hit the floor face-first.

She just took a long step past me and flexed her arm backward, flinging me away along the wall, which I bounced off of before turning to face her, fists up as I settled into a balanced stance.

Palashai also spun around and slashed down at me. Having a practically naked, giant hardbody with huge tits attacking me was a new one, but I am nothing if not adaptable. All the range advantages were obviously hers, so I took a quick step forward into a jab that she caught squarely with her free hand.

As her fingers closed over the back of my fist and her two thumbs wrapped it up from below, I knew I wouldn't be getting that back if I yanked on it, so instead I collapsed the elbow as I slammed forward.

The move surprised her and my elbow strike caught her in the external obliques. Her whole body torqued with the impact and she bared her teeth in an obvious grimace of pain, but also caught my shoulder with the hand she had free and spun me away.

Palashai wasn't just a better fighter than Yimshe. She was a whole lot bigger *and* she was *strong*.

I almost lost my balance but caught it at the last second and got set as she came in again, teeth bared.

Instead of looking to gain distance I closed, guard up and tight. If I was going to win this one, it would be point-blank.

She came at me with a middle guard and her knee shot up at my face. She was so damn big she didn't even have to jump, and I barely avoided it to the outside and countered with a hard jab toward the same spot I'd hit earlier, this time with a closed fist. It wasn't a properly grounded strike and she swatted it away, countering with an open-handed slap toward the side of my head that I caught on my raised elbow.

Her fingers slid up and closed around my forearm, but I sacrificed it as I set myself and planted a hard knee strike on her thigh.

Palashai yelped and stumbled sideways, but didn't lose her grip on me, which she used to swing me out to full extension and toss me away.

This time I *did* lose my feet *and* bounced off the wall next to the bedrooms to land in a twisted heap.

I got my feet under me and stood, but I'd hit the wall so hard I was winded.

Apparently, she wasn't in the best shape either, because she was visibly limping and put all her weight on her undamaged leg as she growled, "I hope you can see the difference here is that *I'm* not trying to hurt you."

"Your mistake," I said, taking a deep breath to make sure my ribs were okay. They seemed to be. I'd hit hard, but not hard enough to damage anything.

Palashai straightened, dropping her guard, lips rippling away from her teeth in disgust as she said, "We were to test your sexual stamina, *not* your combat prowess."

"Shouldn't have tried to grab me," I said, though I didn't lower my guard. "And I'm not in the mood."

"A contestant has to be ready and willing to fuck at *any* time," Palashai snarled. "If you'd pulled a stunt like this live, you'd have been disqualified from the event."

"You didn't tell me you wanted to fuck. You tried to grab me."

"*You* need to understand contextual clues!" she shot back, adding, "I think you *did*, you just chose to ignore them in favor of violence. And you think *us* uncivilized?"

As she spoke, she shook out her injured leg and put her weight back on it, reminding me again that these dog people regenerated like superheroes.

"Yes, I do. I *also* think you wanted to dominate me using sex as an excuse. In an intimate context I'm not going to be

able to just put you down either. I turned it into a fight because I'm nobody's bitch; I don't care *how* big you are."

She rolled her eyes and let out a gusty sigh as she looked down at me, lip curled up to show just one canine in front. She said, "No one is questioning your ability to *kill*, Taz. Dominant and submissive positions in sex are acts, not identities. I could take a submissive position with you *or* dominate. Neither would impact my pride unless I failed in the role. The point is to inflict *pleasure*, by whatever means is most effective."

"I'm not interested in *any* of that," I said, eyes narrowing.

Yimshe, who'd been watching quietly as she leaned against the wall, legs and arms folded, snapped, "We're here to *train* you, not satisfy you. You know how to fight, good for you."

She unfolded her arms just to clap sarcastically at me.

"But if you can't please your lover in the way they prefer you've got less than half the toolset you need to win in the games. *We-*" she gestured between herself and Palashai, "-aren't succubi. It doesn't matter *how* powerful your essence is to *us*. If you're bad at sex, that's a *serious* problem. During these games you may be called upon to fuck complete strangers. You need to be able to discover their desires, then actually *satisfy* them no matter *what* they are."

Lips twisting, I thought about that as I gazed steadily at Yimshe. I wasn't really *seeing* her; I was just looking at her. Just like I *understood* the argument she was making, but I wasn't absorbing it.

I could fight anybody. I mean *anybody*. I might *lose*, but I could do it.

The thought that those same rules might apply to sex just did not compute with me. Finding someone who wanted to play a complementary role was one of the essential preconditions for having sex in the first place. I couldn't even *imagine* a scenario wherein I was *expected* to fuck someone without knowing beforehand where I stood in relation to that person.

“I won’t do it with other males,” I said.

Both women blinked, exchanged glances with one another, then looked at me again as Yimshe said, “Obviously. Succubi don’t permit male on male fraternization. It’s wasteful, both of essence and viable gene seed.”

“What about female on female?” I asked, curious.

That earned me another set of glances, then Yimshe said, “I need to remind myself that while you *seem* like you have it together, your memories really don’t have anything to do with your present circumstances. Females fuck each other all the time. There’s nothing gained or lost.”

“So what happens to males who only get aroused at other males?” I asked.

“Succubi consider it a grave genetic fault in *any* species of livestock. They’re usually put down.”

“So when you say I might be called upon to fuck ‘someone,’ you really mean some female.”

Both Yimshe and Palashai nodded, eyes widening as though it should have been obvious.

I’m living with a bunch of high-tech rednecks, I thought with more than a touch of irony. I wasn’t exactly what anyone would call progressive. I asked, “So ... you two consider yourselves to be livestock?”

“That’s fundamentally what we are,” Palashai said, speaking up as Yimshe hesitated. “I was raised to take part in this particular show. Yimshe is a product of my egg and the seed of a male selected based on his genetic predispositions. I never met him. I was given the responsibility and privilege of training her to be my replacement, serving the same purpose I served.”

“All citizens are succubi. Every other species that exists here does so only because the succubi bought and raised their gene seeds,” Yimshe added. “While it is technically possible for a sentient to live an independent life, it’s rare, and most who do are pitied. You might manage it if that’s what you want but you’ll have to earn out. Given you’re an experimental

gene seed, the price on your production is probably enormous.”

“Do succubi get anything out of females of other species?” I asked, choosing to ignore the question of ‘earning out’ for the moment.

“Labor and entertainment,” Palashai said. “They’re also required for genetic diversity. Virtually all laborers and most engineers are female livestock. The vast majority of males are kept at private residences as fodder and rarely let out. You’re actually in a very privileged position: a new, unknown gene seed prototype being showcased for prospective buyers. The better you do, the more of your kind will be bought and raised here.”

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the best argument for eating a bullet that I’ve ever heard, I thought, staring at the two in front of me with no words to express my horror.

“I don’t know what you remember of your old world, but this isn’t a bad life,” Palashai said.

Pointing at her I said, “You don’t know what you’re talking about because you have *no* basis for comparison, so I recommend you shut your fucking mouth.”

“There are archives, histories-” Yimshe began, but I cut her off with a sharp gesture.

“And I’m sure they’re completely accurate accounts, not at all altered to give you precisely the impressions you’re *meant* to have, *livestock*.”

She held both hands palm up toward me as she said, “Woah, I’m not trying to make you angry.”

“Then you’re just a fucking natural at it. Take my advice, drop this subject and never ... *ever* pick it up again. When it comes to what is or isn’t a bad life, neither of you know a damn thing.”

“And perhaps the only person in the whole world who could tell us is refusing to do so. You are *such* a generous soul,” Palashai said dryly.

“You’re fucking stupid, you know that?” I shot back.

Jerking my thumb at my face, I asked, “All you actually need to know is that *I* know what *real* life is like, so let me ask: Do *I* look happy to be here? *Well?*”

Palashai didn’t answer me. Yimshe, in a subdued tone, said, “No.”

“No. Why the *fuck* do you think that is? Do I have to spell it out, or can you guess?”

Palashai took a step toward me, obviously trying to steer my thoughts in a new direction as she said, “Because you haven’t seen the rewards in store for you, rewards well within your grasp if you train in good faith with us.”

They didn’t get it. They *couldn’t* get it. It didn’t matter how good I was, how many women I satisfied or games I won or people I killed. At the end of the day, no matter how they dressed it up, they wanted me to be a monkey in a zoo, aping for peanuts.

Maybe if I’d been *raised* in a zoo I’d think that was a good deal.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose, eyes squeezed shut as I said, “You’re right. I should look forward, not back. I’ll train in good faith ... but I seem to recall Director Chosen saying that my physical and mental needs should be satisfied and right now I need to rest. I’m going to go into the *empty* room, take a shower, then go to sleep. I *need* to be alone for a while. Understand?”

“While I do understand, you should know that there are only five days left before opening ceremonies. We have a *lot* to cover in that time and eight hours left in the day. Compromise with us. Two hours for a shower and a nap, then we need to get started,” Yimshe said in a gentle, coaxing tone, and Palashai nodded approvingly.

I glanced from one to the other, then nodded and turned away, sliding the door shut behind me. Taking a deep breath, I let it out slowly and reorganized my thoughts as I started dropping clothes on the way to the shower.

The two women out there were just trying to do a job. They didn't know anything, and I couldn't tell them. That would just be cruel. Then again if I *did* tell them about my life they'd probably count their fucking blessings. What might be even worse was if they realized just how much I'd wasted.

Then they'd pity me.

As the water beat down on me I had cause to look back on my life and realize in a way I never could have before just how much freedom I'd squandered. I could have done so much more, *been* so much more. Now, I'd never have the chance. *Now*, I'd be doing everything I could to entertain literal demons for whatever bread crumbs they might decide to toss me.

I really had been reborn in hell ... a fitting punishment for my sins.

I took a deep breath as I dropped the towel and slipped under the sheets to claim my nap. Staring up at the ceiling, I resolved that if the only thing I could ever be was a performing monkey, I'd be the best monkey there ever was and get *all* them damn peanuts. Maybe, just maybe, my keepers would leave my cage door unlocked one day.

If that day ever came I had a list, and Director Lane was at the top.

I WOKE up to find that my situation changed.

Drastically.

Before I even opened my eyes I knew something was wrong because I was on my back. I don't sleep on my back. I sleep on my side. Waking up flat on my back only happened once that I could recall, and that marked the beginning of the end.

Knowing I couldn't hide that I was awake, I opened my eyes for situational awareness. My arms and legs were secured. So was my neck. I couldn't move my head, but my eyes were enough to tell me that Palashai and Yimshe had decided to take my nap as an opportunity to begin my training.

Palashai was standing next to the bed, watching me. Yimshe was by the door, which was closed.

I focused on Palashai. Her eyes were golden and bright in the general gloom of my room. The lights were off in my bedroom, but on in the bathroom. It cast a dim glow, more than enough to see by.

I said, "We had a deal."

"We secured you at the two hour mark, not before."

Since I had no proof of that one way or another, I said nothing.

"Relax," she said, and I let the word flow through me. I had little choice. I knew better than to test my bonds. My

trainers knew my stats. Whatever they'd done would be strong enough to hold me.

Instead, I asked, "Is there a point to this?"

"Helplessness is an illusion," Palashai said, looking intently down on me.

Her eyes met mine, held my gaze, and she slid onto the bed, straddling me. It was ridiculous. She was so much larger that even had I not been bound it would have felt like I was completely in her power.

"Seems real to me," I said.

"It's supposed to," she said, leaning down to set her hands on either side of my head. I watched her do it with fascination. As her fingers parted, the extra thumb made the whole hand look alien. It *was*, but there were a lot of things about Palashai that very clearly weren't human, from her two-tone skin to her muzzle. Nevertheless, the most bizarre thing about her to me were those six-digit hands. Two thumbs. Claws.

They weren't human hands. They weren't even close.

"Events and encounters during the season are very seldom foregone conclusions by design. If they were inevitable, they wouldn't be good entertainment. So when you find yourself in a position like this the first thing to do isn't to figure out how to escape, but how to turn it to your advantage."

"Okay. I'm bound and you're on top of me in underwear. Tell me, Pala, exactly how I turn *this* to my advantage?"

"Satisfy me."

I raised an eyebrow and said, "Satisfying you is to my advantage? I haven't been told that doing so will get me loose. There are no conditions here."

"There are always baseline conditions. The first thing to remember is that succubi have a maxim: When in doubt, fuck it."

"What does that have to do with *me*?" I asked.

“Seeing the world through their eyes will reveal what they want from you.”

“And how does that help me now? I have no influence over what happens next.”

“Sure you do, but we’ll get to that in a moment. First, if our positions were reversed, what would you do?”

“I’d untie you.”

“That’s boring. It won’t score you any points.”

“Points aren’t my measure.”

“They are now. Whatever you believe is wrong. Change your way of thinking. Our positions are reversed, what do you do?”

“Look, Palashai. I’m not stupid. I know what you *want* me to say and not only will I not say it, I’d never do it either.”

She stared down at me, and I had no idea what was going on behind those golden eyes. After a long few seconds of silence, she said, “There are two things the succubi forbid, Taz. The first is male on male sexual behavior. The second is explicitly non-consensual sex.”

“I think your idea of consent and mine are *vastly* different.”

“Then your idea is wrong. Right now, in this moment, I don’t care where you’re from or what you learned there. Here, sex is presumed to be consensual unless one of two conditions are met. The first is the use of the sentence, ‘I refuse your advance.’ The second is an inability to speak those words. If you are too inebriated, unconscious, or in some other way unable to speak, no one can legally fuck you. To do so is deviant behavior, and deviants are put down whenever they are caught.”

“What about conflicting accounts?” I asked.

Palashai shook her head and tapped a claw next to her ear as she said, “Everything that any livestock experiences is recorded. What you say, what you do, what you see and hear.

The records can't be altered. There are, therefore, never conflicting accounts to consider."

"I assume succubi can ignore these rules?" I asked.

She shook her head, then said, "A succubus who cannot gain consent for her meals is considered beneath contempt. They are subject to the same label and punishment. It's one of very few points of law on which they have no advantage. Even personal livestock purchased for the purpose *can* refuse consent ... though to do so would involve serious consequences."

"Such as?"

"Livestock bought for the purpose that don't produce are worthless, Taz. Succubi do not keep worthless things *or* people around. They can't take your sex, but they *can* take your life."

"Why wasn't I told about this before now?" I asked.

"I don't work for Division Four and don't feel free to speculate, so I won't," she said, and I nodded slowly. What she had just told me amounted to the only evidence I had that Palashai didn't trust her overseers. She thought if she said, out loud, that Division Four hadn't given me the consent information so as to preclude my noncompliance, it could mean trouble for her.

How that trouble might manifest was unclear, but if literally complete records of *everything* ever done by any 'livestock' were in fact on file, they could be used at any time in the future to substantiate claims against her.

And anything I say, or said, could be used the same way. Maybe being silent really is the way to go on this fucked up world, I thought.

Aloud, I asked, "What *is* Division Four?"

"Focus on the present," she said, ignoring my question. "Now that you know consensual rules, if you're me, what do you do?"

"I untie you," I said. When she frowned, I added, "I don't *care* about points, Palashai. If I found you like this I'd un-

fucking-tie you, and that's that. If I did it to begin with, I sure as shit didn't do it so I could fuck you."

"The only thing you can't do in this game is not play," she said, setting a hand on my chest and leaning over it. She wasn't light, and the mattress under me sank.

"Actually, given what you've told me this is literally the *only* game I have the option of not playing," I said quietly, then very deliberately added, "I refuse your advance."

She growled at me, then leaned up and got off to stand next to the bed, hands on hips as she glared.

"You were actually serious?" I said, honestly surprised.

"It doesn't serve me *or* my employer to lie to you, and now that you've precluded consent all I can do is make sure you *really* understand what you just did. I can't fuck you now, *at all*. That doesn't just mean now. That means *ever*."

"That's a lie."

"No, it's a setup: me teaching you. Ask the obvious question."

"How do I undo what I just did?"

"You have to explicitly, directly ask me to have sex with you. No flirting, no hinting, no assumptions. It cannot be spontaneous, and it can't be on the same day."

"I hope you weren't looking forward to this then," I said, grinning idly as I waggled my hands to show her I was still in restraints.

She shook her head in annoyance as she growled, "You stupid fuck. You think this is a game?"

"Isn't it?"

"*No!*" she barked, surging down to within an inch of my face. Her teeth were bared and I felt the hot wash of her breath on my cheeks. "No it fucking is not. My daughter and I have staked our lives and futures on you. We said we'd get results. *You* said you'd PROVIDE results. And now here you are making *fun* of me? Like it's all a big JOKE?! You don't know

what happens to us if you don't perform, well let me *tell* you: we *die*."

"I thought you said you had a good boss."

"We do! Director Chosen is the most reasonable boss I've *ever* worked for. What does *that* tell you?" she snarled. "*Think!*"

I did think. I spent almost a full minute on it, in fact. While I did that, Palashai gradually calmed down and sat next to me on the bed. She did *not* free me.

Eventually, I said, "You came out of retirement to help train me. If I fail, you lose not only your retirement but your daughter."

"Everything," she said, putting it all in one simple word. "It wouldn't normally be like that, but we fought to convince the director to take you on. She made us directly responsible."

"You shouldn't have done it."

"I don't believe that. Not yet. But you are testing my patience and we do *not* have that kind of time," she said. "You are an asset and I believe with the proper mindset and the proper training you can be a champion, but rule number one is to *play the game*. You're good at playing games. That much is obvious because you're *here*, but you need to direct that energy toward the season opener and beyond, *not* at Liminal Science, not at Division Four, not at Yimshe and *certainly* not at me! Are we clear?"

"So clear that, if it were allowed, I would consent to sex with you immediately," I said.

While my tone was brisk, it was also without humor, and Palashai took several long moments, apparently to decide if I was still trying to be funny or not.

Eventually, she rolled her pointer at me and said, "I told you that there was always a way to turn a situation to your advantage. You refused my advance; fine. But I didn't get where I am by giving up."

“What will sex with me even prove?” I asked as she stood and turned toward the door.

She paused at my question, then turned and said, “We’re on your team, Taz. Compatibility is important. There are other reasons but first and foremost, we need to get along, and I don’t know how they do it where you’re from but *here*? Compatibility starts in bed.”

“You said that like you actually believe it.”

“I do.”

“That scares the hell out of me.”

“Wherever you came from must have been a boring place.”

“You’re about to throw your own daughter at me, aren’t you, Palashai. Don’t do it.”

Palashai hesitated, then showed her teeth in a rather feral expression I took for a smile as she said, “You didn’t leave me a choice. This is important, Taz. This is a role you will be called upon to play from time to time. If you think being bound means there’s nothing for you to do, it just shows you aren’t using that big brain of yours. Yimshe is a natural bottom. If you can make her feel good as a top, you can do anything.”

“I wasn’t joking, you know?” I said, and she hesitated, the tan spots above her eyes drawing down.

She asked, “About what?”

“Where I come from, sex isn’t just another way to say hello. That you know your daughter’s kinks actually really bothers me.”

“When the people who run everything have sex three times daily to *eat* it becomes very difficult to take anyone who holds the act sacred seriously, Taz. You have a cock. It’s going to spend a lot of time buried in pussy from now on. Whatever problems you have with that, I suggest you get over them quickly.”

“Do you love her?” I asked.

“She’s my whole world. Don’t make an enemy of me, Taz. Treat her well. You may not believe it, but she’s worked hard to get where she is. Build her up. Do a good job, and she will love you for it.”

“I beat her.”

Palashai nodded and said, “I know. And she’ll be a long time getting over it. But there’s a difference between that and this. We’re about to find out if you can be whatever’s necessary. I’m a natural *domme*. It would have been easy with me because I *like* the top spot. Now? Well, Taz, you chose the hard road. Good luck.”

YIMSHE WATCHED QUIETLY AS her mother worked with Taz and marveled at how she seemed so confident, so self-assured. Taz never even tried to test his bonds, and when he woke up there was no trace of fear in him. She couldn't smell even a hint of it, and it shamed her because if she put herself in his position she would have been afraid.

Afraid and aroused.

There wasn't even a hint of that in Taz. His position clearly did *nothing* for him, and though she hadn't said anything about it when talking to him, Palashai knew that now. It was part of the test: what kind of kinks does this male have? Is he a submissive, does he like being bound?

No. If he had been, they'd have been able to smell it on him.

In the long term that was good. It was easier to make a champion out of a male with an iron will and a strong desire to win. Submissives generally had to be manipulated into victory. They required outside motivations, outside assistance. Taz would work for it because that's what he wanted for himself. Well and good.

But he still had to be *able* to submit. He still had to learn discernment. Guile. He would also have to perform ... even if he had no desire.

All this passed through Yimshe's mind as she listened to her mother confirm Taz's suspicion, then turn toward her.

Blue eyes met gold. Yimshe straightened, lifted her muzzle, and took a deep breath. Palashai set a hand on her shoulder and leaned in to murmur, “Remember, he would rather be where you are, you would rather be where he is. Empathy, sympathy, but don’t forget your place.”

“I don’t know how you do this,” Yimshe whispered.

“To submit is to seek and show pleasure. To dominate is to provide and control it. Either way, pleasure is the point and purpose. Find what he likes, get him to ask for it. Don’t posture; you don’t have the experience for that. Keep it simple but make, him, ask.”

“Not beg?”

Palashai grinned and held up two fingers where Taz couldn’t see the gesture. Yimshe understood.

Begging came later.

“How do I start?” Yimshe asked.

“With touch. If you talk, he’ll disarm you. Say nothing. All you have to do is arouse him and make him ask for more. That’s *all*.”

“What if I fail?” Yimshe asked.

Palashai hesitated, glanced back at Taz, then away again as she said, “I don’t think you will. He likes us.”

Then she stepped aside, and Yimshe had nothing between her and Taz but space.

As she closed the distance she looked him over. His face was flat, but covered with a thick coat of hair from his nose down, hiding his neck and cheeks. The hair on his head had a different consistency. If allowed to grow long, it would be smooth. What was on his face looked bristly by contrast.

He also had hair elsewhere on his body, but it was sparse and likely vestigial. His skin had a single, pale color to it. His hands in particular were strange. Rather than claws, he had simple flat formations that looked too thin to do any damage or really much of anything at all. Perhaps they too were vestigial.

His body was otherwise well-made, almost as though it were a baseline for the ideal biped. The absolute minimum required with everything unnecessary stripped away.

With one exception.

His eyes were a swirl of green and gold. They locked on her as she stopped next to him, looked him over, then reached out to set a hand on his chest.

He was a foot shorter than she was. Packwren grew throughout their lives, but despite her own youth — just barely to be considered an adult — he was physically smaller.

He was also more compact. His muscle was two-and-a-half times denser than hers and as he'd already demonstrated, he had speed to go with that power. He was heavier than she was, though not by much.

“Wait too long and you’ll talk yourself out of it,” he said.

She blinked, realized she’d frozen, and felt the heat rush into her ears. He obviously noticed, because she saw his eyes flick up, then back down to hers. She could tell he was amused.

Mindful that she shouldn’t speak, Yimshe began searching him as she settled on the bed, her hip against his. His eyes flicked down, watching as she moved her hands over his skin. His chest was hairy. She knew the succubi would clean all of that up before they showed him live, but she found that she liked it. It was obvious from the small movements he made that he could feel each individual hair when it moved. His nipples were small, an obvious and common consequence of sexual dimorphism in the womb. Yet they remained sensitive, and tightened when she brushed her fingertips across them.

She spent some time there, in no rush. Her mother had tried to drill the game into her from an early age, teaching her both sides, but Yimshe had no talent for the top, nor any desire. She wanted to writhe and squirm and plead for her pleasure, and it was from that experience, that vision, that she worked now. Taz had sensitive nipples, and Yim took the time to find out how sensitive. She used the pads of her fingers, the

tips of her claws. She used her breath, her tongue, her teeth ... all the while looking at his face, watching him, learning his signs.

His breathing deepened and eventually his head dropped back, but he didn't speak. She hoped it was a good sign, but she couldn't be sure. She'd read the psychological report on this male. It was thin, but it did say that he was a man of few words. If he didn't have something specific to say, he didn't say anything at all.

She wanted to ask, but suppressed the urge. Asking wasn't her job.

It was his.

She slid fully onto the bed, covering his legs with her body, careful not to twist his feet or hurt him on accident as she slowly, deliberately lowered her search.

I DON'T KNOW the first thing about sexual games.

All I know is that Tab D goes into Slot P. There's some extra technical details for fun but that's it, that's what I know, and that's all I ever needed. Well, at least, no one I ever had sex with complained, or if they did it wasn't to me.

Now, I made a career of being in over my head, but there's a trick to that. Keep your head down, eyes up, ears open, and file the man in the dossier six feet underground.

Lather, rinse, repeat.

Most military men these days get medals. They get COLA and leave, Space-A flights and the promise of a good retirement at forty so they can go get another job working for boat money, drinking green label and telling stories about what they did and saw when they were in.

The problem with wet work is plausible deniability, which means if you get caught, you're on your own. There are no medals. No lawyers. No trials. Not for the men in the dossiers

... and not for you. I never met a man in my line of work who made it to retirement. I heard about them, but I never met one.

In that world one mistake is all it takes, and everybody makes mistakes.

Everybody.

I was in over my head again. *How* in over my head? Arms, legs, and neck restrained, an alien playing with my nipples. That's how much. As I stared up at the ceiling, I searched all my memories for something that might help me, but the only thing I knew that came close was torture ... and she hadn't asked me any questions.

Then she started to go south, and I got worried. I didn't know the rules of the game. I had not the first clue how to play this. All I knew was that if you're immobilized with a seven-foot tall alien hovering over your crotch, you're in big, big, trouble.

Palashai had told me this was training. I had to be submissive. I knew of BDSM, but it never interested me. When your day job includes the kind of torture that gets answers out of men who'd rather die than talk, rope and riding crops don't seem like a fun way to spend a holiday.

It was obvious from context that Palashai considered me a top. She thought being a bottom would be hard for me. Because I'm in the habit of letting people believe whatever they want I never corrected her, but the truth was I had no idea about any of it. Top, bottom, port, starboard, I had *no* clue.

All the evidence I was getting seemed to indicate I was about to get a blowjob, so I just relaxed and let Yimshe do ... whatever she wanted. She'd spent a *long* time on my nipples. It was hard not to squirm after a while because they were way more sensitive than I ever remember them being.

Then again, the last time I had cause to wonder at the sensitivity of my nipples was when my brother gave me a purple purple back in grade school.

When her breath flowed over the bare spot where I'd had hair this morning it ... did something to me. I felt a twitch,

then a bit more, and rolled my eyes. I had absolutely *no* control over this situation, but Palashai seemed to think I did. Use my big brain? Okay ... nope, nothing. The only control I had was theoretical. I could use that consent phrase at any time to stop this ... in theory.

Claw tips traced my thighs. Not fingers, *claws*. She could kill me. One poke, my femoral artery would give her a facial, and I'd be dead inside ten minutes. Not the worst way to go actually, but not something I wanted at just that moment. My legs tensed, then I forced them to relax.

Why hadn't she said anything? Wasn't there supposed to be theater in this? No witty banter, no high heel grinding my nuts to make me beg?

I never had cause until that moment to wish I was more of a pervert. Then I might know what the hell was going on.

My heart rate was up. I felt another breath on my cock and shut my eyes as a searing hot tongue ran up my inner thigh. She was teasing me. It was obvious.

It was also working.

I didn't know *why* it was working, but it was.

My fists tightened, then relaxed. I had to focus on remaining relaxed. Every part of me wanted to tense. When I loosened my hands, my teeth started grinding. I forced my jaw open and my legs were straining. I settled those ... and my fists were clenched again. It was like sitting in a dentist's chair getting drilled ... except my dick was *rock* hard.

That tongue hit me again and it was *far* more intense than it should have been. She was licking my inner thigh ... and my cock twitched. My pulse kept going up. I was breathing hard. I was confused.

Why wasn't she touching my cock?

Why was she going through all this trouble to arouse me and then ... nothing?

YIMSHE HAD a hard time staying silent. She wanted to ask him what to do. What he liked. How he liked it. Only one thing kept her on course.

His penis was absolutely *rigid*.

She wanted to touch it, but a glance back at Pala got her a subtle double blink. No. Pala knew how to play this game, and she said no moving on. So Yim didn't. Yet, she was fascinated. She played her hands all around it, brushing her fingertips over the hard ridges of his abdominal muscle. She bathed his inner thighs with her tongue, but the only thing to touch his cock was the heat of her breath.

Yet, with only that, it strained and pulsed. She could smell his arousal along with his confusion. He was bewildered and a little afraid. The scent cues were all so familiar. It was something she'd noticed long ago; even across species, pheromonal cues were quite similar.

She felt a curious sort of satisfaction arise in her as she played her hands with as much delicacy as she could over his flesh. His taste was powerfully masculine and pleased her, but what pleased her even more was his increasingly obvious distress.

Yim was familiar with that distress. She loved it. By now she would be begging her tormentor for more but as yet, Taz remained silent.

His silence couldn't hide his desire. He was naked, bound, and powerfully erect. He wanted more. It was in every line of his body, every muscular spasm. He was sensitive and increasingly desperate.

Her satisfaction deepened as she felt a flicker of understanding. *This* was the pleasure to be had on top. To know and exercise control over the sensations and release of another. Taz was completely dependent upon her for satisfaction. He couldn't get it himself; he had to get it from

her. She controlled his pleasure ... and making him want it was making her wet.

She imagined his plea, imagined running her tongue up the length of him. She pictured his frustrated desire as she cradled his testicular sack ... and it was something she ardently wished for, because even that would be just a tease. He would ask again for *more*, and she would give it.

If only he asked.

Her own fear of him bled away as she let her claws drift over his hips. His sensitivity was heightened. He was aroused and in her power. He wanted her, it only remained for him to say the words.

When they came, her ears perked.

“What ... do you want from me?”

It was an oddly vulnerable question, but not the one she was looking for. Rather, it revealed with the force of revelation that Taz legitimately had no idea what was going on. He didn't know what was expected of him.

All she'd done with all her teasing was force him to admit his ignorance ... but he *wasn't* asking for more.

As she considered how or even whether to answer, Yimshe decided to reward him just a little. Her tongue swirled over his sack, wrapping it all the way around as her eyes flicked up the length of his body.

He wasn't looking at her, but he groaned audibly — the first such sound he'd made — and his whole body flexed against the restraints.

She decided not to answer him. He had tricked and humiliated her in a way that damaged her credibility as a trainer. If he couldn't figure this out for himself, his suffering would go some small way toward repaying that debt.

Besides, she was beginning to truly enjoy herself. Playing his body as though it were an instrument was intoxicating in a way. It was different from her usual hedonistic desire. It was ... more complex, not as sensational, but still *very* erotic.

Now that she'd begun, she kept toying with his sack. It was *very* soft, and since they'd removed all the hair on his sex organs it was as smooth as silk, and very warm.

"This is ... verging on torture now ... you know? If you aren't going to tell me what you want ... I'm going to put a stop to this."

Yimshe considered her options, though she never let up on her play. After a few seconds, she lifted her head enough to meet his eye as she said, "I don't believe you."

"I ref-"

"Stop!"

He didn't finish, and the two stared at one another. Yimshe glanced back at Palashai but got no help. Her mother had her arms folded and was quietly watching, though Yimshe could smell that she was aroused.

Turning her eyes on Taz again, she said, "I don't believe you don't know what I want."

"This isn't like any sex I've ever had, Yim. I *don't* know what you want. My best guess is that you're tormenting me until I give up, and I'm at my limit. I see no reason to suffer any further."

Yimshe looked down at the rigid cock laying on his belly and ran the backside of her finger up its length as she said, "You call *this* suffering?"

"If left unattended, yes. In my language it's called blue balls, and it's quite painful."

"You have a disorder that will injure you if you don't orgasm within a time limit?" she asked.

His eyes flickered around, then focused on her as he said, "Not ... quite. But if you get me this hard and I don't get off at some point, that causes pain I'd rather not deal with."

"When did I ever give you the impression you couldn't get off?" she asked.

“If you don’t tell me the rules of this game, then I *will* quit,” he said through gritted teeth, obviously frustrated. “I can’t do anything *but* quit, so start talking or I exercise that option. I’m tired of this.”

A glance down proved it. His erection was at half-mast and fading. He’d completely killed the mood. Yimshe shook her head wonderingly as she settled onto her hip next to him, gazing at him absently as she thought about what to say.

“Relax. You don’t have to say it. I’m not about to force myself on you,” she said, more stalling for time than anything as she ordered things in her mind.

“That is quite possibly the dumbest thing I have heard anyone say since I woke up in this fucked-up place,” he snarled, his body going rigid as he pulled his bonds to their extremes before relaxing all at once. “You *already* forced yourself on me.”

“Pala proved you can stop either of us anytime you want. This wasn’t force and don’t pretend you can’t tell the difference,” Yimshe said. “I find it *very* hard to believe that you don’t know what you’re doing during sex play. I’ve looked at the records of you feeding Mauren. You were completely dominant.”

“How?”

“You always gripped her horns, controlled her head whenever she was on you.”

“If she bit me I wanted to be able to snap her neck before bleeding out. The rest of it was just hate sex.”

“Hate sex?”

“I hate Mauren. I let her do that because if I don’t she dies.”

“If you hate her, why not let her die, or kill her directly?”

“She’s useful. If that changes then *believe* me I will.”

“So you’re just using her?”

He blinked, giving her an expression she had trouble reading. His voice was incredulous as he said, “*Using* her? I can’t *use* anybody. *YOU* people are using *me*. This is all just business.”

She glanced down at his naked body, then back up into his eyes, one ear twitching questioningly sideways. He shrugged and said, “Stupid business, as far as I’m concerned.”

“These are skills you need to learn.”

“If that’s true you need to actually fucking teach, not treat my ballsack like a stress toy.”

“You didn’t like it?”

“I ... can’t say that.”

“Why did you stop me then?”

“Because it felt like you were only doing it to frustrate me.”

“What if I wasn’t?” she asked, running a claw down his chest, watching absently as she stirred the hair that trailed down his abdomen as though on a path to his cock. “Don’t snap at me. Think. What if I wasn’t only doing it to frustrate you?”

She glanced back up to look him in the eye. He was silent, his eyes unfocused. She could only assume he was thinking it over.

Eventually, voice rife with hesitation, he said, “When I torture someone I want something, usually information. Sometimes, though, I need an admission, or confession. I can only assume you’re looking for one of those.”

His eyes shifted to her, looking for something in her gaze. Yimshe glanced quickly away from him, looking to Palashai with wide eyes.

The expression on her mother’s face said, ‘Handle it,’ so she looked back down at Taz, though the fear that had receded while she played with him was back in full force. She said, “You ... torture people?”

He seemed to completely ignore her question as he glanced away. His voice was musing as he said, “You never asked me any questions I could answer to make it stop, so you weren’t looking for information. A confession then ... but you hadn’t asked ...”

Taz trailed off and his eyes locked on hers, which widened slightly. She managed to suppress her desire to pull her hand off his stomach, where it rested. He said, “You wanted me to admit I liked it?”

“That’s enough,” Palashai said, her voice quiet, but full of authority. “I’ve seen enough. He’s physically capable, but emotionally stunted. Free him; continuing would do more harm than good. Meet me in the office, we’ll discuss what to do from here.”

With that, Palashai opened the door and stepped out of the room.

Yimshe looked after her a moment as she gathered her thoughts. She felt very small in that moment. Taz didn’t want her at *all*. If he had, he would have been able to make the connection. To him, everything had been a purely sensory experience. There was no emotional element, no sympathy or empathy.

He wasn’t dominant *or* submissive. He just had animal drive paired with a need for control.

It was disheartening in the extreme.

Yimshe activated her sub-dermal key and waved her hand over his restraints, which disengaged. Taz immediately whipped a hand up and caught her throat. His fingers dug cruelly in from both sides and she gagged as he brought her down until they were nose to nose. He then leaned up, and his grip on her throat forced her to bend cruelly backward. She raised her hands in immediate surrender, but if he noticed he gave no sign. His eyes were alien, but the way his lips were curled was an obvious display of naked savagery. He hissed, “You taught me something, now I’ll teach *you* something. If you *ever* do *anything* like this again you better sleep

somewhere I can't get to you, for the *rest of your life*. Lesson over. Do you understand me?"

She gave a long affirmative blink even as darkness closed in from the sides and what little she could still see started going gray.

Then he let her go.

She jerked reflexively away, fell off the bed, and skidded away on her butt until her back hit the wall.

He was standing next to the bed, and the way his eyes blazed as he looked down on her was as dire a threat as she'd ever seen. Despite the murder in his eyes, his voice was quiet and reasonable as he said, "I'll learn your games, but from now on you will clearly explain your lessons. I won't warn you again."

He pointed toward the open door as he said, "Get out."

Yimshe spun up on one hand as she whirled for the door, catching the metal dimple on her way out to slam it closed behind her.

Mauren, the succubus wrangler assigned to Taz, blinked in surprise as she looked down on Yimshe from only a few feet away. It was obvious she saw the trainer's distress, because she glanced past her toward the door as she said, "I take it the dom/sub lesson didn't go well?"

Yimshe shook her head, eyes wide as she took calming breaths to slow the mad hammering of her heart.

"Did he finish?" Mauren asked.

Again, Yimshe shook her head, then said, "Wrangler, if you go in there right now for a meal you might not come out again."

"What did you incompetent packies do?!" Mauren asked in exasperation, rounding on Palashai. "How hard is it to make a male beg? It's fucking simplicity itself!"

Yimshe growled, and when Mauren's golden eyes darted from her mother to her she did something she'd been taught never to do, and didn't look away. She glared at the succubus

for a long second before she said without looking at her mother, “Never mind. You go right in. As a succubus, I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

Mauren’s tail whipped and her wings flared as she stepped up to glare down at Yimshe from less than a foot away. She very deliberately took hold of Yimshe’s chin and tilted it up and to one side. The forced movement made her bruised throat ache, and she knew the damage was still visible. Then Mauren let Yimshe go and turned toward Palashai as she said, “School your child. She obviously does not know how to address her betters.”

Palashai spoke in an even tone as she said, “We are his trainers. *You* are obviously his toy. I’ve been around the games long enough to know when someone has fallen from grace, and you have tumbled *far*, Miss Mauren, to be subject to the whim of *unproven* livestock. If you ever condescend to my daughter again, I’ll let her beat you like the forsaken corpo slut that you are.”

“Succubi rise and fall, then rise again. By the end of the week I’ll be on retainer for Liminal Science,” Mauren spat. “With this little show of incompetence I can easily get you both replaced, then I’ll have the pleasure of watching while the flesh is flayed off your bones in one fucking piece!”

Yimshe knew she’d made a mistake. She knew her mother had stepped in to redirect Mauren’s anger so as to spare her daughter.

She also knew Mauren could very well deliver on her dire promise.

For one moment of satisfaction, Palashai would pay with her life. It might not be today, or even this year, but even if Director Chosen blocked Mauren’s revenge for now Yimshe knew succubi delighted in scheming, and had long memories.

Taz’s door slid open, and three sets of eyes turned to him.

He was still completely naked, but with the hair covering half his face Yimshe couldn’t really tell what his thoughts

were. He seemed completely calm, though the residue of his strong emotion was still wafting off him.

He glanced at Palashai, then at Yimshe, then finally settled his attention on Mauren as he said, “Did you want to feed? These two left me frustrated.”

“I will happily fix that to our mutual benefit,” Mauren purred. Taz stepped aside and offered a hand across his body, indicating she precede him.

Once Mauren was past he glanced to Yimshe, then Palashai, holding her gaze for a long second before turning to close the door behind him.

From the other side of that door Yimshe heard a piercing shriek, a grinding crack, then deep, ominous silence.

A moment later the door slid aside and Taz dragged Mauren’s body out by one horn. He met their eyes again as he pulled the corpse to a seated position, set his hands on the horns, and the muscle all across his body bulged. There was a rending crack as one of Mauren’s horns tore free.

Taz laid the body down, turned it, and put his foot on the head as he wrenched the other horn loose with a sickening crunch. That done, a spiraling ivory succubus horn dripping blood in each hand, he locked eyes with Yimshe and said, “Don’t forget my lesson, Yim. I don’t offer make-up classes. And *you!*”

His eyes found Palashai, glaring as he pointed a bloody horn her way and said, “You remember this. I just saved your life.”

“I won’t forget,” Palashai said quietly, cupping her elbows with her palms. Her voice was even, and Yimshe was amazed that even now there was no fear in her scent.

Taz met Palashai’s gaze a moment longer before turning to walk away. Instead of his fingers, he used one of the horns he had in hand on the door catch to slide it deliberately closed behind him.

He left the mutilated corpse behind, its broken skull dripping gore.

Yimshe slowly looked down at the body on the floor next to her. It was belly down, but Mauren's sightless eyes were open toward the ceiling. She had seen killings and dead bodies before, but never a succubus.

What was worse, she knew Taz would suffer no consequences. She could hear the summary newscast as though it were already playing: 'A succubus wrangler stepped into confinement with a poorly trained new livestock specimen against advice and was killed. As a unique specimen still undergoing trials he is too valuable to be put down, but the sponsor, Liminal Science, has pledged that additional training will be applied. For more on this particular specimen tune in to the season opener in six days, a week-long event that promises to be ...'

Her will faltered, her knees sagged. Pala caught her before she fell and turned her into a comforting embrace, holding her where she couldn't see the body. Yimshe shivered, and asked, "Why did he do that?"

Palashai drew in a deep breath, then let it out slowly and said, "He was looking for an excuse. She gave him one and he took it, that's all."

"She didn't do anything to him."

For a time Yimshe didn't hear anything but the slow, steady beat of Palashai's heart. At last, her mother said, "She threatened his trainers."

Yimshe leaned away and looked up at her mother. The much larger woman's ears were forward and attentive. She had an expectant look that Yimshe knew well. She was to think about what had happened and draw a conclusion.

She did so, and after a moment blinked as she said, "You provoked Mauren on purpose, *knowing* Taz would do what he did!"

Palashai gave her a lazy affirmative blink. That was *exactly* what she'd done.

"How could you possibly predict he'd do something so extreme?"

Her mother turned her and guided her into the office on the far side of the suite, sliding the door closed behind the two of them. She then leaned against it to keep it from being unexpectedly opened as Yimshe took the lone seat in front of the monitor.

Palashai considered her for a moment, then said, “To be an effective trainer you have to learn about your trainee. Don’t just read his files, watch and listen to him yourself. Taz is a killer. His default response to any problem is to turn the source of that problem into a corpse. He likes us and hated Mauren. I knew that if I goaded her into threatening us, he would deal with her in his preferred fashion.”

“That’s the second time you’ve said he likes us. How do you *know* that?” Yimshe asked. “He hasn’t given us any cues.”

“He sabotaged the showing to get us as his trainers,” Palashai said.

“He just wanted to get under Director Chosen.”

“He wanted that because he trusted my word when I gave it to him. Does he strike you as a trusting sort?”

Yimshe paused, then blinked twice and looked away. Palashai showed her teeth and said, “See? It’s all there. What you as a trainer need to do is properly assemble the pieces. To be a good trainer, you *must* know your trainee.”

“Do you know *why* he likes us?” Yimshe asked, head tilting curiously.

Palashai shrugged and showed her empty hands as she said, “No. I have no idea.”

I DROPPED the succubus horns absently in the corner beyond the door and went to wash my hands as I thought about what to do next.

Palashai had forced me to make a choice between Mauren's personal use to me and that of the two packwren trainers. I had chosen the trainers, and while I didn't regret the choice I did resent that I'd been pressed into making it.

Thinking about the chain of events that led to Mauren's death as I scrubbed her blood from my skin, I began to suspect I'd been maneuvered into the act. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became. While I like to think of myself as a man fully in control, I know that I am subject to many unavoidable limitations, the most prevalent of which is my own ignorance. Following a close second is the unavoidable instability of being a flesh-and-blood man.

Had I overheard the argument even ten minutes later than I had, I'd have probably spared Mauren's life. By then I would have calmed down and thought through my options.

Instead, I had been fresh off the immense emotional pressures of bondage and sexual frustration. I heard the threat, heard Mauren's intimation that she was negotiating for a position within Liminal Science, and acted based on what I knew to be Mauren's genuine desire. I'd long since concluded that while an individual succubus might interact with me in any given moment as though I were a full-fledged individual on equal footing, in the end they considered me to be

fundamentally inferior. Just as religious men I had known would lie to infidels and feel no qualms about the deceit, succubi felt comfortable promising whatever was necessary to get an immediate result out of ‘livestock’ without feeling any obligation to make good from their end when the time came.

As a man outside their social structure, any means to gain compliance from me was valid.

Still, Mauren had been an asset, one I’d trashed without going through the proper steps. I hadn’t planned to kill her until much, much later, and then only if necessary.

What was worse, I had played into the hands of Director Lane. Satisfying as it had been to kill the one responsible for bringing me into this fucked-up world, it brought me no closer to proper vengeance against the true architect of my misery.

The killing was a mistake.

All that was left was to make the best of it. Palashai and Yimshe couldn’t have any doubts left that I would destroy them just as easily as I had Mauren. After all, *they* were livestock, same as me. By the same token, I had protected them by my action and would lean on them in the future. To succeed, I had both to trust and be trusted by them. So while they might believe I would kill them just as easily as I had Mauren, I knew with absolute certainty that I had to protect them both to the best of my ability.

Fear might be better than love in most cases and I had done everything I could to put the fear in them ... but going forward I would have to foster their goodwill.

Palashai had outplayed me. It was a simple fact, and I had to respect it.

I was leaning against the wall at the head of the bed, thinking about what to do next when there was a knock at my door.

“What?” I asked in a flat tone of voice, and the door opened to reveal Yimshe.

She looked around the room, hesitating when she saw the two horns haphazardly tossed in a corner next to her, then said,

“The body’s being taken away. They want the horns.”

I shrugged, and waved a hand at them. They’d served their purpose and wouldn’t be any good to me anyway.

A second later, a man in the blue and gold of Liminal Science stepped past my trainer. It was a guard, but he wasn’t wearing a fully armored suit like the one I’d had escorting me at Division Four. Rather, it was another four-armed simian. A big fellow, somewhere around nine feet tall and thick, obviously showing off his massive size to best effect.

Instead of picking up the horns and leaving, he too moved to one side and Director Chosen stepped in.

Aww shit, I thought, and slid off the bed to get to my feet out of respect.

I wasn’t even upright before the guard was in my face and shoving me back down onto the bed with one of his arms as two more drew what looked like pistols from his belt.

I showed my hands and went still, waiting for someone to speak.

Director Chosen stayed by the door. She too glanced down at the horns, and her glance was a bit longer than Yimshe’s. I saw traces of what I took to be uncertainty in her. Her wings fluttered and her tail wrapped all the way around one thigh, then unwound as she made an obvious effort to master herself and turn to me.

“Ordinarily, it is instant death for livestock to attack — much less kill — a succubus,” she said, then waited, looking at me keenly.

I said nothing. Whatever she had in mind, nothing I could say would change it, so there was no point in giving anything away. The fact that she was talking to me at all meant instant death wouldn’t be *my* fate. I had already revealed my reasons when I told Palashai I’d saved her life. It was time to see how perceptive Director Chosen — or the team of analysts she had looking at me — were.

“Mauren was ... a special case, as you are no doubt aware,” she said when it became clear I had nothing to say.

“Nevertheless, I want it understood that if you ever attack another succubus your life is forfeit. Liminal Science will not be held responsible, and will surrender you for culling. It’s been suggested to me that I apply additional controls to your person until the season opener, but I’ve declined. Instead, I will say only this: should you take or threaten the lives of either of your trainers, your sponsorship by my organization will be in name only. No support will be given to you during the season, and no further training or operational advice will be provided. Your humiliation, failure, and eventual death in the games will be assured.”

Again, she paused and again, I waited. Most of my attention was still on the guard, who had those two guns pointed at me. One at my heart, the other at my head.

“Answer,” she demanded, wings rising higher behind her in what I took to be annoyance.

“I understand.”

“That’s all you have to say?”

“What else matters?” I asked.

Director Chosen glanced at the guard, then at me as she said, “I would have assurance that you don’t intend to cost me the lives of two very valuable trainers.”

“I killed Mauren to protect them,” I said. “Killing *them* now would be stupid.”

“What makes you think-”

“She threatened them,” I interrupted.

“An idle comment made in the heat of irritation.”

“I have no reason to believe that’s true,” I said, shifting my eyes from the guard to her. “I’ve known Mauren longer than you have, Director. Her defining trait, so far as I was able to determine, was treachery.”

“On what basis?” she asked, brows drawing together in some confusion.

“She was thrown in with me in the first place, something that would never have happened had she not crossed Director Lane. The clear expectation at the time was that I would kill her. I didn’t because I thought she would be of use to me, and she was. However, when she casually threatened my trainers she became a liability. Since I never liked her anyway, I decided to kill her before her maneuvering put her out of my reach. As is, I’m certain the only reason she was sent along with me was because Lane thought she could use Mauren to spy.”

“Mauren was negotiating with us to implicate Director Lane in conspiracy charges. Now, there’s no way to move forward.”

“I doubt that’s true, seeing as how everything everyone sees or hears is subject to review under the right conditions.”

“That’s only for livestock.”

I spread my hands and said, “Oh well. I don’t give two shits about legal processes that don’t protect *me*. Either way, Mauren can’t act against me or mine anymore. That’s far more important than anything she might do against Lane or her associates.”

“To you!”

“If you want my actions to reflect your will you need to ensure that we both want the same things. If you want my *loyalty*, you’ll have to earn it. Right now, I don’t owe anyone anything.”

“I took a serious risk sponsoring you.”

“Risk you transferred to my trainers, who are now under threat of death if they fail. Don’t lie to me, Director. You sponsored me purely to profit your company. That has nothing to do with me personally. There is only one creature in this world who has *my* best interests in mind, and that’s me. As long as that’s the case, I’ll act purely in *those* interests.”

“And what is it that you want?” she asked.

I hesitated to answer because honestly, I didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t admit that I wanted to slaughter a whole lot

more succubi. I couldn't admit I wanted to destroy absolutely everything this civilization had built, or to at least leave such a horrible impression of humanity that they made human gene seeds illegal. Nothing I *truly* wanted was in reach, so everything I might strive for were consolation prizes while I waited for an opportunity that might never come.

At last I said, "So far I haven't been offered anything worth wanting, but there are two things I *need*: a promise, and some way to trust that promise will be honored. My understanding is that succubi are never under any kind of obligation to keep any word they make to livestock ... so I'm not sure where we go from here. Right now, I'm operating off the word of trainers who work for you. They assure me you're a good boss, but that only gets us so far."

Chosen's lips twisted slightly as she glanced back at Yimshe, then at him again as she apparently decided to change the subject. "Why did you threaten Yimshe when you knew Palashai was the instigator of this training scenario?"

"Yimshe is the lead trainer. She has to sign off on any exercise, so she's ultimately responsible."

"Why did you tear the horns off Mauren's body?"

"The first was an experiment, the second was because I like symmetry."

"An experiment?"

"How hard is it to tear off a succubus' horns, and how much damage does it do?' 'Not that difficult,' and 'a lot,' are the answers in order, by the way."

"Are you trying to scare me?"

"No, Director Chosen. You're my sponsor. You have nothing to fear from me as long as our interests coincide."

She paused, apparently considering that, then said, "After having manipulated your way into my employ, you certainly aren't doing much to earn my trust."

"I'm not trying to earn your trust."

“You should. I control every aspect of your life and this comfort you’ve been afforded is *entirely* optional.”

I stopped myself before answering as I’d have preferred, and said, “Do whatever you think will best advance your ambitions, Director. That’s all I expect of you, and I’m entirely at your mercy.”

“Then why don’t you *act* like it?” Chosen asked as she thrust an accusing finger in my direction. Her wings flared languidly behind her, but I didn’t know enough to confidently read any specific meaning into the move.

It didn’t seem like a threat, so I let it go and asked, “What do I have, Director?”

“What?” she asked, one eyebrow quirking in obvious confusion.

“What is mine?” I asked. “In your own words, you control every aspect of my life ... so, what do *I* have?”

Her eyes widened, then narrowed. She said, “You believe since you have nothing to lose, you have no reason to fear?”

“Let’s say that fear isn’t a good motivator for that reason.”

“And yet you clearly use it against others, your own trainers included.”

“They *have* something to lose, even if only in their own minds. You and I both know better, don’t we, Director?”

She didn’t immediately answer me, but rather seemed lost in thought for a long few seconds. At last, she said, “I will have my analysts turn this conversation over, but for now I have enough to work with. You are wrong about one thing, Taz. You, and you alone, may determine when and how you die. Fail to take your training seriously, and you may lose even that.”

I blinked, then waved toward Yimshe as I said, “Why are you telling *me*? These two are the ones playing around without telling me anything.”

“I’ll not blame them. Your ignorance in sexual matters is astonishing when set against the guile you’ve otherwise

demonstrated. I would have thought you more accomplished in whatever life you had before this.”

That stung, but I had no retort, so I just spread my hands and shrugged. What was I going to tell her? The truth? It wouldn't serve.

“What *were* you, anyway?” she asked, hesitating at the threshold.

She hadn't turned around to look at me. I briefly considered, then said nothing.

After a pause, she said, “Have it your way. It is my hope that, in time, you come to understand that some of us don't make a habit of abusing our livestock.”

“You mean, your assets?” I asked, the words out before I thought to stop them.

Now she did turn, looking at me with an expression I couldn't read. Then she turned away. As she walked out, she said, “Yes, of course. A poor choice of words on my part.”

The guard had his pistols holstered and picked up the horns, one in each of his lower hands, before he too left and the door slid closed, leaving me alone with Yimshe.

She gazed steadily at me and I couldn't escape the impression I was being stared down by a punk rock Dalmatian, though the cropped ears marred that impression. It was bizarre, but not unpleasant. I always had a soft spot for dogs.

Not that I could tell *her* that.

That she was also a well-put-together seven foot tall female was just confusing ... and I'd be lying if I said seeing her didn't remind me of how completely at her mercy I'd been less than half an hour ago. I couldn't decide how to feel about it either. Annoyance, anger, and horny were duking it out in the back of my mind.

“Thank you,” she said.

All three feelings got dumpstered by those two simple words. Gratitude was so rare, and when present it spoke first and last in my thoughts. Now it told me that I'd made the right

choice throwing my lot in with this strange dog-woman, and her mother.

Yimshe was grateful. Honor required that I be gracious.

“You’re welcome.”

She hesitated, then asked, “Can I train you?”

I thought about that, then nodded and said, “Don’t be clever. I don’t respond well to manipulation.”

“So I’ve seen.”

When she didn’t say anything else, I asked, “What now?”

She leaned away from the wall and turned for the door as she said, “I’ll put together a class. You’re a physical paragon and cunning enough, but you have the emotional intelligence of a diseased rockhound. You’ll have to fake that part, and I need to figure out how to enable you to do that. For now, get some rest.”

“I’m not going to wake up later with one of you on top of me again?”

She opened the door and didn’t turn to look as she said, “Trust me, Taz. That will *never* happen again.”

THE NEXT MORNING I woke up on my side, which was already an improvement. It took me a moment to figure out what woke me up, because it wasn't like any alarm I'd ever been subject to. The closest thing to it would be the sound of a TV that's on, but not tuned to a channel. It wasn't a sound so much as a disruption in the air, one powerful enough to wake me up.

Once I opened my eyes, the disruption stopped.

Palashai was standing next to the bed, one hand outstretched toward me, and I got the impression the 'alarm' had come from her.

"I saw Yimshe unlock my restraints yesterday with a gesture. I take it you two have been altered?" I asked.

"So have you. All livestock are fitted with a variety of implants. Some of them are useful for monitoring, others for utility. After what happened yesterday I wasn't about to touch you."

As she turned away I said, "Palashai?"

Hesitating, she twisted her head to look at me curiously, and I said, "Have sex with me."

Her eyes widened, and I said, "There. That should satisfy the rules you gave me yesterday. Now, what's the plan?"

Her eyes narrowed, and she said, "You had no intention of having sex when you asked."

“No, but I’d have accepted it if you called me out. You didn’t, so all’s well.”

“Why bother at all?”

“Because I’d rather you have all your options open. If there’s going to be a reason for you *not* to mess with me, I want that reason to be that you simply don’t *want* to.”

Palashai turned around at that, and stared down at me. It struck me again just how big she was. Ten feet tall, black-and-tan skin, muscular, *stacked*, and with the intense, golden-eyed gaze of a Doberman.

It was a hell of a contrast. Both intensely threatening and sexual all at once.

“Maybe I *will* call you out,” she said.

Raising my chin, I stared intently at her and waited. I knew she was either bluffing, or I was in for some rough hate sex.

“Something you should know about packwren,” she said, after a long moment of silence. “We have keen noses. There might not be much for me to see on your face, but I can smell your feelings.”

“And?” I asked.

“Let’s just say neither I nor my daughter care much for hate sex. I refuse your advance.”

With that, she turned and walked out into the main room, leaving me to follow after, bemused but not unhappy.

Given what she’d explained yesterday, Palashai had made herself completely off-limits.

Fine by me. I wondered if Yimshe would make a similar declaration.

Palashai led me across the living room to the smaller study room on the far side and, following her in, I found Yimshe waiting for me ... along with someone else.

She was wearing a jumpsuit of navy blue with gold trim. Her eyes were slitted, larger than I was used to seeing, and the irises were gold flecked with green. Her hands and face were

exposed, and green-scaled. Her brow ridge was a bit pronounced, and her nose was flat and sloped smoothly down from her brow. Her face was angular, though not unattractive ... at least, in a purely aesthetic sense.

She was about my height, which meant she was pretty much a short-stack in this world, and had the curves to go with it. Her eyes widened when she saw me and she visibly trembled until a hand settled on one of her shoulders.

Yimshe was behind her, and Palashai stepped to one side and leaned against a wall, folding her arms under her chest.

It was Yimshe who spoke.

“Taz, this is Scilla. She’s a syban.”

“I’m familiar with the type,” I said flatly, remembering both the woman whose neck I had broken at Division Four and the several others who’d managed my restraints during transport.

“She’s also a volunteer,” Yimshe said, her tone going just as flat as mine.

“Hopefully, she’s getting danger pay,” I said with quiet amusement.

Yimshe’s ears flattened, almost disappearing into her spiky hair as she said, “She’s your lesson.”

“What am I supposed to learn from her?” I asked, though I suspected I already knew the answer.

“You need to learn how to get her off,” Yimshe said, confirming my guess.

“How am I supposed to do that?” I asked, waving a hand at the syban as I added, “She’s scared out of her mind.”

“Your reputation precedes you. Consider it part of your training, and remember: she’s free to refuse you at any time and should she do so, you fail.”

“I told you not to get clever with me,” I said, turning hard eyes on Yimshe, who bared her teeth, not giving an inch.

“I’m not *being* clever. I’m being blunt. If you can’t get her to consent, then make her cum, you’ll *never* make it through the season. Scilla won’t suffer any consequences for a refusal here either. Your success or failure is all on you. Now, if you’ll excuse us.”

Yimshe slipped past the terrified syban. She and Palashai both left the room, the latter sliding the door closed behind. I knew better than to presume that meant we had any privacy. We were both livestock, and there was probably a whole *team* of people watching the feeds from both of us.

I gritted my teeth and took a deep breath, then let it out slowly as I turned to consider the alien in front of me as I thought about how to do this. I wasn’t a pick-up artist. Being smooth wasn’t in my toolkit.

The syban was shivering again, over-large eyes trained on me as she took a half step back. She looked like she was about to piss herself.

I very slowly showed her my hands and took a step back myself, giving her more space, mind racing. She was a volunteer, supposedly, but that left me with questions. I might not know how to pick up girls, particularly not alien snake-women, but I *did* know how to conduct an interrogation, and there were *several* ways to go about it. First, get her talking.

“Scilla?” I asked, raising an eyebrow as I made eye contact. It was a basic first question: What is your name? Most people answered such questions automatically. It was practically hard-wired, at least it was in humans. I suspected as long as her species was social, it would be the same for her.

“They told you my name,” she said, voice shivering.

“I wanted you to tell me,” I said, still showing my hands. “If possible, I’d like you to relax. Hurting you isn’t going to benefit either of us.”

“You talk like you’re a rational creature,” she said, clearly not believing a word of it. “I’ve read your file.”

“Why did you agree to be here if you’re so afraid of me?” I asked, genuinely curious, but also keen to keep her talking.

The ice was broken, now I just had to make sure it didn't refreeze. I had no idea how to take things any further than that, but my only option was to wait for an opportunity, and hope something came up. Perhaps I could bribe her somehow.

"I came here because I ... I want to ask you a question," she said, and as she spoke her tone firmed up, as though she were coming to a decision.

Mind racing, I lowered my hands. I've heard resolution like that before, and I knew what it meant.

I said, "Don't."

She took a step forward, and a serpentine tongue flicked the air as the slits of her eyes widened a little. She was intently focused on me.

I said again, "Scilla, don't. I'm warning you, which is more than she got. You'll just be throwing your life away."

I reached back with one hand and beat on the door, then yelled, "You brought me a relative of the one I killed, you fucking morons!"

The door slammed open as Scilla hissed and launched herself at me, mouth opening impossibly wide as a pair of fangs dropped into sight from her upper jaw.

I caught her throat with one hand and swung her around to slam against the wall. She was so light it felt like I was swinging a body pillow around. It took an effort of will not to snap her neck, but I contained the desire and dropped her.

The impact had sent her marbles rolling and she slumped against the wall, dazed and on the verge of blacking out. One hand lifted, swiped feebly at me, and I stood looking down at her as I said, "If you did this on purpose our deal is off."

I lifted my gaze to Yimshe, who was looking at me with wide eyes. I knew in that expression she'd had no idea, but I put a finger up, just short of her muzzle, and growled, "You two are beginning to look incompetent to me."

Movement drew my attention back to Scilla, and I crouched next to her as she shook her head to clear it, her eyes

focused, shifted to me, and I gently wrapped my hand around her neck again as I said, "I'm not going to kill you, but I'm not about to let you kill me either. You should have waited. If you'd played along, I might have been vulnerable later."

"I'll ... remember that."

I lifted her chin with my wrist, making sure to get good eye contact as I said, "You have me to thank for that. No one would blame me for killing you."

"Why didn't you?" she asked.

I thought about that, then said, "Director Chosen told me not to ... and because I don't blame you for trying."

"Why did you kill her?" Scilla asked, voice plaintive. "She was just doing her job!"

"I doubt you know what that job was, Scilla. As for why ... I killed her because she was torturing me."

"That's a lie!"

"Is it?"

Scilla glared at me, but didn't answer. I let her go and straightened. She slumped against the wall, shaking with a release of tension that was half grief, half fear. I looked past Yimshe to Palashai and said, "*You* knew."

She gave me that long, slow blink that seemed to be the packwren approximation of a nod.

Eyes shifting to Yimshe, I said, "You really are a fucking moron. If it isn't obvious by now let me make it clear to you: I'm not the only one being tested here, and you failed."

"So did you," Palashai said, drawing my attention back to her.

I shook my head and said, "No, I didn't. Not yet. Give Scilla the option."

Glancing down at the syban woman, who was rubbing her throat as she looked reproachfully up at me, I said, "She'll be back. She's not done with me."

Scilla screamed, "I refuse your advance!"

I glanced down at her, then laughed and spread my hands as I said, "*What* advance? I was *never* going to fuck *you*. I was told to make you cum, that's all. Now, you won't even get that."

"I got something *far* more valuable. I made *you* a failure!" she hissed, sliding away down the wall out of my reach before standing up as she added, "And you're a monster!"

"Oh ... you poor girl," I said sucking my teeth. "That makes two of us."

I then shouldered my way past Yimshe and out into the main room to confront Palashai, who was gazing down at me with that guard dog look I found so ... interesting.

"Anytime, Pala. You just say the word, and I'll bring you down to my level," I said, blood still running a bit high.

"I wouldn't give you the satisfaction," she said.

"It really does sound like you hate me," I noted.

"I was getting there, but this latest gives me fresh hope."

"Don't underestimate my self-control. I kill her and Director Chosen withdraws her support. I warned your daughter not to play games with me, now I'm warning you: don't play games with *her*. She's in charge, and you're giving her bad advice. Where I come from, bad subordinates get replaced."

"Director Chosen was the one who ordered this scenario," Pala said as Yim guided Scilla out of the smaller room and toward the exit of the suite. "Yim had nothing to do with it."

"Then Yim should have looked into who Scilla was," I snapped, never taking my eyes off Palashai. Nevertheless, I saw Yim's ears flatten in shame as she approached from one side. "You're *still* playing games."

"Yes. The difference is it works with Yim," Pala said. "*She* will learn from this, and it cost you nothing. It wouldn't have mattered *what* she knew. The scenario would have played out the same. When you're live, situations will rarely be simply

what they look like at first glance. I'm actually shocked you figured out who she was so quickly. What gave her away?"

"There's a very specific feeling people get when they make the conscious decision to take a life," I said. "It's more pronounced in people who've never done it before. When I got that feeling from Scilla, there was only one reasonable conclusion."

"You make it sound like you have empathy," Pala said, her lips rippling up to show her teeth in a feral grin. "It's almost as if you can read someone's emotions, understand them, and respond appropriately."

We stared at each other for a long few seconds, then she showed me that feral grin of hers again as she said, "The psyche team said you were a psychotic. 'Fundamentally emotionally unsound,' they said. 'Put her in that room with him and only one of them comes out alive,' they said. *I* knew better. I knew if I put things in a language you understand, you would respond appropriately."

"Tell me the truth."

"Director Chosen authorized this exercise personally, but it was *my* idea. I went and found Scilla, brought her in, and offered her the chance to be alone in a room with you. The rest you know."

"Why didn't you tell your daughter?" I asked.

"She isn't capable of deceiving you. With your keen instincts, you would have known something was wrong the instant you laid eyes on her, and she had to be present to learn her lesson."

I stared at Palashai and examined what I was feeling in that moment. The only word that really fit was admiration, and there was no reason not to admit it. I said, "You play all the angles, all the time. I don't like that, but I do admire it. So where is she?"

One of her ears flicked sideways as she asked, "Where is who?"

"The girl you *really* want me to try and work on."

Palashai's grin showed all her teeth as she said, "There are so many reasons to hate you, and yet you have so much promise. Much as I would have liked to arrange something along those lines ... there *are* no real volunteers. Director Chosen insisted anyone stepping into your presence do so fully informed, and you have the reputation of a horror movie monster. I'm afraid what knowledge you gain from here on out will be theoretical."

I nodded, eyes drifting, then shrugged and said, "Let's get started."

I SPENT the next week planted in a little classroom learning very ... questionable things. It was a bizarro world equivalent of something I'd gone through once before. In my old life, I'd sat in classes like these and learned how to find people, get answers if needed, kill them, then dispose of the bodies. In this one I learned how to interact with aliens, turn them on, then get them off.

It wasn't just physical notes either. Some of the species I was 'introduced' to had very specific behavioral preferences. I'd spent time watching succubus entertainment media to learn how to kill these things. I was made to watch some of it again to learn how to titillate them.

Succubi themselves weren't in the curriculum. When I asked, I was told that practically anything I learned about any of the other species would *also* work on succubi, provided they had the relevant parts. They were the easiest to turn on *and* get off. So easy in fact that they weren't worth learning about, at least, not according to Pala and Yim.

Speaking of, they were the only two living things I saw. Director Chosen made no further appearances, and it was clear Pala hadn't been joking. I was being isolated as a genuine danger to the staff. That thought offered the only real amusement I got out of that week.

Neither packwren made any moves toward me. After getting my rocks off multiple times daily feeding Mauren it was a bit of an adjustment, and not a comfortable one. Oh well. If my trainers were teaching me anything about this world I was living in, it was that any stretch of chastity was very, very temporary, and that I'd probably come to appreciate their hands-off approach.

At any rate, I'd certainly paid enough for it.

One day before the season opener, Liminal Science was given the relevant information on the first event, and that information was then given to me.

My debut, at least, would be well within my comfort zone.

MAHAUP STEPPED into the prep area and bounced on the balls of his toes. He stood a respectable eleven feet and weighed in at just shy of three hundred pounds. He was fit, healthy, and his trainers were some of the very best. He'd chosen deep jungle for his starting area, which suited his species well, though it meant paying a penalty in starting gear.

Those were the terms. The more suited to the terrain a contestant was, the less they started with in terms of material resources. Everyone in the room with him had made the same terrain choice. Mahaup had a set of javelins in a quiver strapped to his broad back, pants, and moccasins. It would be *more* than enough.

The rules had been drilled into him, and he knew them well. Something between three and four hundred contestants would be starting all across the island in all sorts of different habitat. The first phase was over when half that number remained. While technically a battle royale, in practice alliances and factions were common, even necessary. Getting into a good one helped ensure a given set of contestants made it through the opening event, which was easily the bloodiest of the season.

“Remember,” Banai said, drawing his attention. His trainer was a duoden, like him. She was also older and much more experienced, which had been good in a variety of ways. She'd had several contestants make it to the finals, and Mahaup planned to be her first champion.

“The short, furless biped in the picture I showed you. If he’s here and you get an opportunity, form an alliance of convenience, but kill him as soon as you get a chance.”

“What’s so special about him?” Mahaup asked.

“He’s a monster. Whatever you do, don’t fight him fairly. No warning, just hit him here.”

Banai lifted her foot and tapped the tendon at the back.

“Cut one, then get away and stab him from a distance. No risks.”

“I’ll lose style points if I kill him with a cheap shot,” he said, frowning as he flexed both sets of hands, sliding fingers under his thumbs to pop his knuckles in series.

“You won’t *get* style points off this one. I was there when he got his sponsor,” Banai said, reaching up to catch Mahaup by the chin, jerking his head down and meeting his eye.

“He took a packwren down in one shot, and the only reason she isn’t dead is because he didn’t want to kill her. Do *not* blow me off, Maha. No posturing, no warning, no mercy. Do you understand me? This one’s different. Once he’s out of the way you’ve got a good shot. Matter of fact, if you see him, gather a few others and let them in on it, then gangbang him. You won’t get style, but you’ll get some social cred.”

“This thing really scares you,” Mahaup said.

“Yes he does. Don’t give him a chance to scare *you*,” Banai replied, the pointer of her upper left in his face. Then she slapped his upper right shoulder with her lower left hand as she gave him a smile.

“Go get ‘em. I’ll see you on campus once the field’s been culled. Then the *real* games begin. Good luck.”

“Thanks, Banai. See you in a week or so,” he said, and watched her walk away.

“That *ass* ...” he muttered, eyes set on it and the long, prehensile tail switching back and forth across his view of it. It was an ass that could crack nuts. He knew ... he’d watched her do it.

Shaking himself out of pleasant daydreams, Mahaup turned and looked out across the room. It was a fair-sized, bare-walled room with a padded floor and several doors on every wall. Those doors opened on tunnels that would take the contestants to final staging just below the start area. Everyone in this room would start the game within an area of about half a square mile.

Mindful that whether he ran into the dwarf monster or not, he needed allies, Mahaup began mingling. There were quite a few other duos in the room, most of them had also chosen footwear and javelins. He saw a pair of syban males, hoods pulled tight to their necks as they spoke quietly to one another, clearly already having formed an alliance of their own. Their race was also well-suited to the jungle, but rather than javelins, these two had a brace of knives each and a pouch of bullets for the slings coiled around their waists. Both of them also had blades affixed to their tails. One was about seven feet tall, the other was closer to nine.

Mahaup made contact and had no trouble joining the pair. As he was finalizing their arrangement, the swirling crowd of males parted and he caught sight of a figure standing by himself.

Well, it's a dwarf, that's for sure, he thought, as he gazed at the creature. It was hairless, furless, and wore both pants along with a full-sleeved shirt. The clothing was mottled green and brown. It too had moccasins, and its face and hands were very curiously colored. It was obviously paint, extending the mottled green and brown of the clothing over every inch of exposed skin and leaving Mahaup uncertain what his actual color was.

“That’sss him,” one of his new companions, Viver, said. “The one we were warned about.”

Mahaup glanced down to see Viver staring fixedly at the same male, and sensed his chance.

“Let’s bring him in and cut him down once the game begins. I too was warned,” he said.

The syban glanced sharply at him, then just as quickly back at the male, who seemed not to be paying any attention to anyone. He was making no effort to form an alliance, and was leaning against a wall between two doors.

“Isss it ssleeping?” Xeph, the other syban, asked.

“We agree,” Viver said. “You are a mammal and the mosst impressive of uss: you make the overture. We will wait here.”

Mahaup nodded and strode across the room. There were a few others to match his height but none to obviously exceed him. He was pleased when all simply parted and turned to watch. When a male of his stature made a move, it was wise to take notice.

He came to stand a few feet from the curious little creature and looked him over. There was little he could tell up close that he hadn't made out at a distance. The clothing the male wore was unusually baggy, hiding his physique. There was also a thick cloth belt wound around his waist, and several small pouches were attached to it. He looked rather dumpy overall and that would win him no favors with the viewers. It left Mahaup wondering what kind of incompetent trainer this creature had, to have made such a poor opening choice.

“You look like you need partners,” Mahaup said.

The tiny male opened his eyes and looked up at him, blinking several times before he said, “I do?”

Mahaup nodded gravely, then waved his lower left behind him at the two syban as he said, “Join me and my companions. We'll work together to survive the opener. Maybe form a longer term alliance. Sound good?”

He watched as the male tipped his head to see around Mahaup's bulk, then nodded and said, “All right.”

Mahaup blinked. He hadn't expected it to be so easy. He asked, “What's your gear?”

“My gear?”

“What weapons are you bringing?”

“Oh, no weapons. Just this.”

The male put his hand into a pocket and pulled out a thick, matte green bar. He flicked the end open and depressed a lever, causing a small jet of flame to appear.

“That’s it? You brought a fire starter and *no weapon?*” Mahaup asked, having a hard time believing it. If the creature *had* a weapon, it would be good to know what it was.

“No. I figure I’ll take one off the first thing I kill,” the creature said, sounding bored. “I prefer a knife, but we’ll see what turns up.”

He said nothing more, and walked ahead easily enough when Mahaup gestured an invitation. A close look at the creature’s back showed nothing hidden, though the clothing *was* baggy. Perhaps that was why.

It might also be in one of the many pouches, though beyond a sling and stones, there were few other effective primitive weapons that would fit in such small containers.

Viver and Xeph greeted the strange creature, who nodded quietly to each in turn. Mahaup asked, “So what do they call you?”

“Taz.”

“You’re a new breed, aren’t you? What’s your species name?”

For a long few seconds, the odd little creature didn’t say anything. Then, just when Mahaup was about to repeat his question, Taz said, “Human.”

It was obviously a word in a native language, but simple enough and Mahaup said it, raising an eyebrow as he silently questioned the pronunciation. Taz nodded and said, “Close enough.”

“Well, Taz, what’s your specialty?” Mahaup asked.

The human raised an eyebrow that Mahaup only now noticed, it being painted to blend in with the rest.

Viver clarified, “What are you good at?”

“Oh. Everything but sex.”

Both syban and Mahaup burst out laughing, but the human only shrugged and said nothing more.

“You are ssserioussss?” Xeph, first to recover, asked.

“We’re allies. I have no reason to lie,” Taz said, then asked, “Does anyone know how much longer until we start?”

“Not long,” Viver said. “Another ten minutesss or sssso. There mustt be time to form alliancccesss.”

“Oh. All right. Are we done doing that or do you want more?” Taz asked.

The three exchanged looks, then Mahaup said, “Four’s a good number to start. We’ll be fine with this.”

“Who should we watch out for?” Taz asked, glancing around.

It was a good question. Mahaup straightened and turned a slow circle, looking over the assembly, which by now had mostly formed into small groups of two to four, as they had done.

At length, Mahaup pointed with his lower left as he said, “That one, there. It’s a borealan. Heavier than they look, tougher, extremely good regen, resistant to toxins, and fast for their size.”

Taz looked, then nodded. The borealan was ten feet tall and rippling with muscle. His face was feline and he had fur on his forearms and lower legs, orange striped with black. Aside from the loincloth the big creature carried a great spear and nothing else, not even anything to wear on his feet.

“Could he beat you?” Taz asked, turning his attention to Mahaup.

Without any hesitation the duoden nodded and said, “They’re the best killers out of all the livestock. My trainer said there’s always only one allowed in every season, but they never win.”

“Why not?” Taz asked.

“Because it’s not all about killing,” Mahaup said, turning to grin widely down at Taz. “Borealans fuck hard, but they tend to break their toys and usually wind up getting disqualified for fighting when they aren’t supposed to. They’re also shit at forming alliances and half the time they don’t make it through the season opener because everyone gangs up on them.”

“No self-control and bad with people,” Taz said in a musing, wry tone. “Duly noted.”

“Not bad at sssex, though,” Xeph said, obviously amused. “Ssuccubi love them.”

“They can have them,” Taz said, and there was no humor in the words.

Mahaup blinked, then inwardly shrugged. This human’s motivations didn’t matter. He was going to be the game’s first casualty.

Time passed, and at length the doors all around the room flipped open. Groups began filing into them, and after each group left through a door, it shut behind, keeping others from following.

Mahaup shouldered his way to an open door and led the two sybans and their short-lived human into a tunnel of rock. It had a flat floor and a pair of cables running the length of the ceiling that glowed brightly enough to illuminate everything.

The four of them loped to the end of the tunnel, which was over two hundred yards distant, and found themselves standing on a platform ten feet square.

“Any minute now, the fun begins,” Mahaup said, grinning down at the human. “The first event is where the weak get weeded out.”

Taz simply nodded his head once up and down, but said nothing. Mahaup watched him out of the corner of his eye, and saw Taz glancing around, eyes never staying on one thing. He was extremely alert, which was natural, but a little disappointing.

The human asked, “When is the official beginning?”

“A great gong will sssound, when the game officially sstartss,” Viver said. “It’ll happen as sssoon as the platformsss all reach the top.”

The light above them grew larger and brighter as they ascended, and Mahaup turned his attention skyward. Over the rumble of the machinery raising their platform he could hear the jungle sounds and grinned broadly.

He had trained for two years for this moment. His future was truly about to begin, and he bounced on the balls of his feet as he said, “Soon now! Just a few more seconds!”

“Yesss, thiss will be a gloriousss game!” Viver said, also looking at the broadening arc of a brilliant blue sky already edged with canopy and the hoary trunks of vast old trees.

The air grew humid and hot. The sounds of the jungle grew louder.

Then with a subtle thump, their platform came to rest flush with the surrounding loamy ground. Mahaup turned a circle, looking in every direction as he thought about where to go first. The best bet with a pair of syban was to set up an ambush post with the snake men in the canopy while he drew attention from the jungle floor.

The jungle cries were shattered as a tolling gong — its sound bigger than the whole world — rent the air, vibrating even the platform beneath their feet.

That sound faded and for a moment the entire jungle was silent, as though held in spellbound awe of what it had just heard.

Then a hissing scream rent the air.

Mahaup spun in time to see Viver drop, both hands clutching his throat in a vain effort to stop the arterial spray. A few feet beyond the dying syban, Xeph had his knives out, facing off with Taz, who had one of Viver’s knives in his left hand.

Xeph slashed with his right. Lightning quick, Taz caught the extended arm, yanked the syban in, and his own dagger flashed. Once, twice, three times, and Xeph staggered away

with blood spraying from punctures in his thigh, throat, and just under his ribcage.

“Betrayer!” Mahaup roared, leaping back as he pulled a javelin from his quiver.

As he drew back, he felt a sharp impact on his chest and looked down to see the hilt of a dagger pressed tight to his flesh.

Pain like nothing he’d ever known surged through his chest, and he howled and threw his javelin. Taz stepped neatly aside, but didn’t otherwise move, waiting. Beyond him, Xeph sank to his knees, then fell on his face and spread his blood in a broadening pool on the platform.

Mahaup wobbled, pulled another javelin from his quiver, then blinked in confusion as he realized he was on his knees. He couldn’t remember falling. He threw his second missile but this time Taz didn’t have to move. Mahaup missed.

He never missed.

His last thought as he crashed headlong to the platform was the lunatic regret that he wouldn’t even be credited as the first to die.

At best, he was third.

I TOOK ALL FOUR DAGGERS — knowing I could use them — and the quiver of javelins, despite never having thrown one. I could use them to set traps. None of the footwear fit me so I left that, but the rest of the clothing was good cloth. I stripped it off the bodies to take with me.

I hesitated when I pulled the pants off the dead duoden, and looked into his glassy eyes for a moment. Then I reached out and gently closed them. Palashai had warned me that whoever offered to let me join their group would betray me the first chance they got, and because I believed her I had killed these three as soon as the bell rang. None of them had betrayed even a hint of treachery to me, but then, neither had I, and I'd done for them all.

Taking a few extra moments, I went to the syban pair and closed their eyes as well, though I wouldn't be taking any more time. I had to find a place to set up some traps.

Despite it being a jungle, the area I'd started in was relatively safe, at least compared to the jungles I had known. It apparently wasn't good TV when half the contestants died to natural hazards, so there were no natural apex predators on the island. That said, there *were* dangers that weren't part of the game. Some of the plants were poisonous, some of the animals had toxins, and most of them were unknown to me.

I'd asked, but simply been told not to worry about food and that the water was clean. Apparently, there were periodic supply drops that would be signaled by smoke. These would

draw competitors, who would fight to gain the resources made available, including food, utility items, and better weapons, though I'd been assured those weapons wouldn't amount to more than swords, shields, bows, that sort of thing. No true firearms were made available in this first event.

I already knew I could handle a week without food. Water in a jungle was both plentiful and impossible to defend. If I wanted to I could simply hole up and wait for the end of the event, but I'd been cautioned against that approach. I already had points, though how many or the nature of the scoring hadn't been made clear to me. Apparently, it changed a bit with each season depending on votes cast by the viewers. Still, three kills in the first minute of the game had probably gotten me a spot on the highlight reel, and Yimshe had told me that would be important.

When I'd asked about how my outright murder of my companions would be seen, my trainers had told me it would depend on Palashai's guess. If she was right, I'd come out looking like I'd seen through the trap. If she was wrong I would be one of the villains of the season, which would make things significantly harder for me in some ways. Since anything told to me before the season opener would be unavailable to the general public until after the show was concluded, our planning session was under wraps. As long as I kept my mouth shut, I would look like I knew more than I did. Since keeping my mouth shut was my default anyway, it would serve me well.

With my additional equipment in hand I left the blood-spattered platform and its cargo of bodies behind. There was a single mountain that formed the centerpiece of the island. I made a note of where the sun was with respect to the mountain, then made straight for it. Supply drops would begin on the second day and most of them would be on the beach, but they weren't the only means by which the showrunners inspired conflict. Scattered throughout the island would be 'allies.' Finding and collecting them was also part of the game.

I didn't have much interest in allies, but if I came across one I was perfectly willing to make use of it. Now that I had

no companions, I was free to be as ruthless as practicable, and was incentivized to be so as the lead killer from this event would score a bonus.

Given I knew I had several weaknesses on the social side of things, I *needed* that bonus, and I intended to get it.

As I moved I watched for any sign of the passage of others and so noticed a bit of bare bark where there should have been moss. Pausing, I cast about and soon found other signs of passage. Depressed jungle debris and fresh breaks in the loam.

I couldn't tell how many, but I knew more than one person had passed this way, and not long since. After a pause during which I failed to hear anything beyond the sounds I'd been listening to since arrival, I turned to follow the trail I'd discovered.

Ten minutes later I was crouched behind a clump of ferns as I watched three male competitors gathered in discussion. They were too far away to overhear, but I knew what they were talking about. Forty feet past them I could see a clearing in which were two things of interest.

The first was a free-standing metal cage. There was someone *in* that cage, though I couldn't make out any details from where I was. Pacing *outside* that cage was a large creature I really didn't want to tangle with. It was jet black and looked mostly like a panther with two key differences. The first was that it had six legs rather than the usual four, and the second was that it was the size of a Clydesdale.

The three competitors were a gray-skinned duoden about ten feet tall, a packwren male that was maybe ten five with brown skin save for a black back outlined by a band of white, and a twelve foot tall creature I hadn't seen before. It had green skin, a vaguely shark-like face, and looked ... oddly muscular. The closest thing to it I'd ever seen before were a few body builders that had used oil injections to inflate their muscle groups. It was a fetish thing, but I remember seeing the pics when they made the rounds in my unit.

This thing looked like that all over, and its skin even had a bit of a sheen like ... latex. I couldn't see its face from where I

was, but didn't remember hearing anything about this particular breed and I hadn't seen one in any of the vids I'd watched.

The air under the canopy was still and I was about forty feet away, well hidden and camouflaged. As long as the packwren didn't catch a whiff of me, I was good. Even if he did I might *still* be good, because my scent wasn't one most packwren would recognize, given I was a 'new' species.

The three split up, apparently done with their pow-wow, and the duoden stayed in place while the packwren went around the clearing to the left and the ... green pool toy-looking thing went right. It was obvious they were going to try and take the beast in the middle and capture the 'ally' in the cage.

The duoden pulled a javelin from a quiver and crouched, eyes on the beast ahead of it. I made my careful way forward, stepping in the footprints made by the much bigger feet of their group. It occurred to me to wonder which of these three would actually *get* the ally if they succeeded, but since I had no intention of letting them do that it was a moot point. The fact that the four-armed apeman was crouching to stay hidden put his vitals in reach, and I already had a dagger in hand.

It was a simple matter to cover his mouth, jam the blade into the side of his neck, then twist and rip.

He spasmed, but I'd cut his windpipe and the fact that he was crouching actually helped me, because it kept his struggle contained as I hauled his head backward, catching and lowering him gently to his back. He swung feebly at me with the javelin, but I caught his wrist with my instep and pressed it to the turf as I leaned over and cracked his skull with the pommel.

His death sounds never broke the ambient noise of the jungle.

I briefly considered which of the two to go after, but the decision was taken from me as the packwren, howling a challenge, leapt into the clearing to attack.

The six-legged panther thing spun toward the packwren and I noticed pool toy ... fuck it, that's what I'm calling him, running silently up behind with a spear clutched in both hands. The dude probably hoped to jam that thing up the panther's ass. It wasn't bad as far as plans went, but I had no intention of letting them carry it off.

I flipped the dagger, which was decently balanced, and threw it hard from where I was. It wasn't a throwing knife, but I'm pretty good with blades and knew it would do *something* interesting as long as I got it to the target on time.

Oh boy, did it.

The dagger caught pool toy in the side, just under the ribs, and he jerked sideways as an explosion of air rushed out of him. Half his chest collapsed and a wide swath of ... skin? flapped against his side.

The panther-looking thing obviously noticed because it instantly leapt backward, but so high that it actually passed *way* over pool toy's head to land behind him.

One swipe from its claws deflated the rest of the dude and sent him literally flying off into the jungle to my right.

The packwren screamed, "Brolly, you traitor!" and turned to flee, running away both from where I was still hidden and the panther thing, which leapt after him.

I heard a brief howl eclipsed by a feline scream and a crash of breaking foliage. Scratch one competitor.

Moving cautiously, I headed toward where I'd last seen pool toy and found him at the base of a tree, literally shredded. He wasn't twelve feet tall now either, but actually closer to five, and his muscles were now wiry — long and lean — rather than bulbous. He was still alive, but I could hear bubbles in his breathing and knew he didn't have long.

When he saw me he swung at me with an empty hand. His spear had flown off when he had, but not in the same direction. It was still in the clearing somewhere near the cage.

His hand hit my thigh to no effect and I raised an eyebrow at the dude, then shook my head and reached in to slash his

throat. The burbling sound got way louder for a second, then the dude sagged like one of those car sales wind dummies when the blower shuts off. The dude had literally nothing on him but pants.

I wanted to take them but carrying them would start to weigh me down and I wouldn't be able to turn what I had into rope until I found a place to settle in, so I left what I had in a heap near him and moved to have a look see at the last man and what that six-legged terror beast thing was up to.

It was at the edge of the clearing eating him, which is about what I expected.

It was being noisy about it too, and seemed to be paying no attention to its surroundings. I noticed that it had a chain around his neck, and hanging from that chain was a key, which would very obviously open the cage.

What to do? I had javelins, but I'd literally never thrown one in my life. I doubted my daggers would do much good on a beast that big. Pool toy's spear might do the trick, but going to get it would open me up to being seen, both by the creature and whoever was in the cage. She might summon the beast, and I'd be fucked.

After a moment's thought, I carefully backed away, went back to the dead duoden, slipped his javelins into the quiver I already had — which packed them in tight — then took his pants before going to pool toy to retrieve the rest. I glanced into the clearing as I worked and saw that there was one person in the cage.

It was a she — confirming that it was an ally — and she was dressed kinda like Indiana Jones, right down to the hat. She was about oh, three feet and change tall. Also green and vaguely shark-featured.

Our eyes met as I looked her way. Hers were lavender and large in her head, like three times bigger than human eyes, but otherwise a familiar shape. The rest of her face was round, pleasant, and she had a set of DSL on her that would have earned wolf whistles from some of the guys I used to work with.

I briefly considered sending a dagger her way, but decided against it. I remembered something about the weapons we had not being lethal on non-competitors, and they weren't worth any points anyway. Given the weapons were all primitive I wasn't sure how that'd work, but whatever. There was arguably still a benefit to killing this one, since doing so would ensure that whatever skills she had wouldn't go to someone else, but it would also *definitely* make me the season's bad guy.

The cage itself made me hesitate, and I briefly considered luring the animal into a fight *around* it. It could leap over — I knew that from what it had done to pool toy — but it wouldn't be able to do it fast enough to get to me before I made the corners. The problem was that it might be agile enough to beat me around those corners on foot, so the cage wasn't really of much use as a screen.

A quick visual scan showed me the spear, but it was way out in the middle of the clearing.

Not worth the risk.

Frowning, I glanced at the female in the cage. She didn't say anything, but pointed toward the beast and made gestures as though she was stabbing it with a spear. I pursed my lips, showed my hands in an idle shrug, then gave her a thumbs-up and turned away.

I had places to be, people to kill, and I wasn't about to risk my life fighting a beast that wasn't worth any points to get an ally that I would then have to defend for the rest of the event. It didn't matter *what* she was supposed to be good at; she'd be a liability even if I picked her up.

Better to let someone else do the hard work, then kill *them*.

As I picked up the load of laundry I was accumulating, I heard something like a soft grunt from behind me and to my right. I twisted and deliberately fell backward into a roll over my shoulder as something tugged the clothes out of my hands.

Winding up between two ferns at the edge of the clearing, I shifted back as a glance told me I'd just about been skewered

by a thrown javelin. Despite that, I saw no trace of whoever'd thrown it at me, and after a quick look toward where I knew the beast to be, I risked a run across the open space.

That risky run got me two things: the spear, and the attention of ye big fucking six-legged panther thing.

Well, I did just do essentially the same thing to these three poor unfortunates; can't blame the other guy for that, I thought ruefully as I made the trees on the far side and spun to put myself behind a bole.

To my shock and amazement, the cat thing yowled and spun away just before it reached me, showing its flank and the bloody streak there. Whoever had thrown at me had thrown at the beast.

Unwilling to believe my attacker had been *that* stupid, I backed up, putting another few trees in the way and flattening myself down low, relying on my camo as I watched the panther thing. It paced, roaring as it watched the trees I'd come out of moments earlier.

Another javelin flew out, but it batted the thing aside with a paw, hissing and spitting in rage.

The way it moved made me glad I hadn't tried killing it myself. Its reflexes were far better than mine. I rather suspected it wasn't something that would be killable without being either very clever, or having some more advanced weapon that would come with a supply drop.

Whoever was out there didn't attack again, and I crept down to the jungle floor and inched away, looking for better cover.

This was a game I could play.

Fifteen minutes later I was under a pair of ferns within sight of the clearing about halfway between where I'd started and where the dead pool toy dude was. I wanted those pants, but I also wanted to kill whoever'd punked me with that fucking javelin.

The cat had calmed down, though it was still pacing angrily around the cage. I had a clear line of sight on the short

stack inside. She was looking around, but wasn't zeroing in on anyone.

There were three possibilities. The first was that whoever had tried for me bugged out. The second was that they were searching for me. The third ... was they were waiting in ambush, just like I was.

If it was a packwren out there, I might be in trouble. They had good noses and I had blood on me. If it wasn't, I figured I had a better than even chance. These livestock competitors were trained to go for score. The emphasis was on showmanship, not patience. Get the kill and make it look good.

I was a different breed. I was content to sit all day, suffering the bug bites and the sweat, waiting. It wasn't riveting TV ... but ambush hunting was all or nothing.

I waited in still silence, listening to the jungle and watching the chick in the cage. If she spotted someone, she'd look at them.

The sun crawled across the sky and I stayed where I was. The cat eventually settled down, put its head on its paws, and watched the trees idly. The chick in the cage sat on her butt Indian style. She put her elbow on her knee and her cheek in her hand, looking bored.

More time passed. Noon came and went. The heat was oppressive and it was only knowing death be the wages of impatience that kept me from moping the sweat from my face. It beaded in my eyelashes and dripped down my nose. Bugs were eating me alive. It was miserable, but I was committed.

Then, without warning, I heard a voice behind me, not more than a few feet away, speaking in a low tone just above a whisper.

“Anything?”

Another voice, this one with a distinct sibilance that told me it probably belonged to a syban, answered, “No. I don't undersstand. We'd have sseen him leave!”

“We’ve been all the way around the clearing twice. He got away somehow, that’s all there is to it. Do you want to try for the doll or not?”

“Jusst the two of uss? No. The beasst would tear uss apart. We need to win a drop firsst.”

“Why do you suppose he was collecting pants?” the first voice asked.

“Pervert collecting trophiess iss my only guess. If we aren’t going to try for the doll, where to? It’ss getting late. We need to find a camp.”

“There’ll be caves in the mountain. We can find one, clear it, and hide a fire in there. My trainer said there’s always at least one drop near the summit. We’ll try for that.”

“Let’ss go.”

Relative silence descended again. The two were so quiet that even knowing they were there didn’t let me hear them leave. It forced me to wait another ten minutes before slowly turning my head to look.

Once I was as sure as I could be that the two were gone, I got up and looked at where they’d been standing. I found a few impressions, took a javelin from the quiver, and embedded it in the ground to ensure I could find the spot again. I then went and retrieved my ‘pervert trophies,’ before following the trail the two had left behind.

I’d let them lead me to a camp site, get two more kills, then work on making rope. Seven kills. It *should* be eight, but I doubted I’d get credit for the packwren I’d let the beast finish off.

While I had no basis for comparison, I figured it wasn’t a bad start. There might even be a bonus to the fact that so many of the kills were in this particular area. I could probably use that to defray my biggest disadvantage.

DIRECTOR LANE DIDN'T STAND when her doors opened, but Duo and Deera did. The succubus entering wore a black pencil skirt and white blouse combination along with enhanced eyewear that would be providing information on the three succubi in the office. Director Lane often wore a set herself when she was out and about, but had made herself familiar with this particular woman's resumé long before she arrived.

Janessa Veer was one of the senior executives for SDM Incorporated, and as she came to a halt a few feet forward of Lane's desk, it was obvious by the set of her wings and her lashing tail that she was furious.

Without a word of greeting she slammed down a tablet facing Lane as she said, "You may have been able to weasel your way out of providing purchase specifics for that gene seed, but this is a cease and desist order. You are forbidden to clone or germinate any other seed from this particular race."

Lane arched an eyebrow, glancing down at the tablet before returning her attention to Veer. She mildly said, "I would have your reasoning for this rather draconian move, if you please?"

"This ... *thing* is a menace. It's going to wreck the whole season!"

"Surely, the simple fact that he's set a record is no cause for-"

"It's day four," Veer snapped, interrupting Lane, who closed her mouth to listen politely.

“He’s killed forty-three contestants personally and been indirectly responsible for the deaths of another eighteen, seven by trap and eleven by interfering in event activities *which* he has personally completely neglected! He hasn’t acquired a *single* ally. He’s nothing but a murdering psychopath!”

“So ... what you’re saying is, he’s made the highlights?” Lane asked, still keeping a very polite tone. She had to walk a very fine line with Veer, who had more than enough clout to sabotage Division Four in future. In the *present*, however, Taz was so dominant on the leaderboard that Lane had no trouble accepting some risk to protect his progress.

“I’ve read the reports. He *killed* his *wrangler*. A *succubus*! If I’d known that before the season opener went live I’d have pulled him off the roster!”

Rather than answer verbally, Lane turned around to look as she activated the screen behind her desk. On it was a recorded broadcast announcement from earlier in the day. The announcer — a ridiculously sexy succ that even Lane would have taken to bed given the chance — was standing next to the leaderboard as she spoke. Over her other shoulder, a silent video was playing of a borealan running easily through a forest. His hair was spiky and primarily orange with black stripes, and the look in his green eyes was determined. His abbreviated muzzle was peeled back in a feral snarl, and he moved with typical feline grace.

“-Maximus, the sole borealan entrant this year. The obvious leader of his team — comprised of two duoden and a packwren — started in the jungle band but the group quickly cleared their way to the beach where they secured a supply drop early day two. They’ve been gathering allies ever since, killing any who stand in their way. All four males show promise and rank in the top twenty, but Maximus himself remains a distant second to the runaway surprise of the opening event.”

The video feed of Maximus faded out in favor of a slowly rotating camera pan around a naked Taz. As the rotation continued, arrowed captions describing physical attributes faded in and out. The announcer hovered her hand under the

video as she said, “Meet the new gene seed from Division Four! His official name on the entry roster is ‘Taz,’ but bookies and fans alike have given him the first tag of the season: Silent Knight.”

The rotating infographic faded out in favor of footage of Taz, wearing his camouflage, stalking a pair of competitors. It was footage of his fourth and fifth kills. The announcer continued as Taz reached out, caught the first of the two by the hair, and yanked him backward as he jammed a knife into the side of his throat and ripped it forward. Blood geysered from the fatal wound, but Taz had already moved on, plunging his knife into the syban male only just beginning to turn. In under two seconds Taz stabbed the poor creature in five different places, all wounds calculated to open major arteries and pierce vital organs. The syban never had a chance.

“With over forty personal kills, including *four* three on one’s and even a single *four* on one, Silent Knight tops the leaderboard by a comfortable margin despite scoring penalties for killing from ambush *and* a complete lack of alliances. Access to his feed is running six times the usual rate for an opener and his viewership numbers just broke the record for a rookie species set by the borealans over fifty-”

Lane paused the feed and as she turned back to Veer said, “*Six times* the usual rate and *still* pulling record-breaking numbers? I’m honestly shocked you’re complaining about him. SDM Incorporated is making a *mint* off my gene seed. It seems rather ungrateful that you’ve responded to the windfall I’ve provided by blocking my efforts to capitalize.”

“Director Lane, let me be clear: what you have unleashed on my games is — without question — the most murderous sentient the succubi as a race have *ever* seen. I have no doubt he’ll topple from the leaderboards when the social events begin, but the problem with him runs far deeper than his participation in Sex, Death, and Money. He has been hunting, stalking, and killing relentlessly for four straight days. Presuming he’s typical of his race, they — like the borealans — present an existential threat to our way of life. At the very *least* their use must be *strictly* regulated. Until those decisions

are made, the cease and desist is a necessary precaution to prevent your division from flooding the market with deadly livestock.”

“You need not be concerned. Division Four is extremely cautious with new gene seeds. Taz is our only specimen at present. We wanted him to prove out before investing heavily in presenting a new species to the public,” Lane said, smiling sedately at Veer.

The truth was that Lane had only bought *one*, and at the time only one had been available. The circumstances surrounding her acquisition of Taz were unique in a variety of ways, not least of which was that he’d been a gray market ‘speculative’ purchase. Getting more of his race would be *extremely* expensive, as Division Four would have to shoulder the costs of getting the new species certified for legal trading.

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t take your word,” Veer said, gesturing toward the pad she’d thrown down. “There’s a summons there as well, and an official inquiry has been ordered by the Hierarchy. Presuming everything is above board, SDM Incorporated will pay the entire cost as stipulated by law. If you’re found in breach ...”

She let the threat hang in the air as she turned on her heel, tail whipping. It was obvious she wasn’t at all satisfied with the meeting.

Lane *was*, and let the other woman leave without another word. Once she was gone and the doors closed, Duo and Deera resumed their seats. Duo looked worried, but Deera was grinning ear to ear. Lane, as usual, found her position to be somewhat between the two.

Lane said, “We need not concern ourselves with the inquiry. The panel will include a marked associate, and my acquisition bill of sale will withstand challenge. As long as the paperwork surrounding Mauren is in proper order, SDM Incorporated just pissed away a *lot* of money.”

Deera said, “I can’t wait until his essential potency becomes general knowledge. We’ll have agencies beating down our door for ‘human’ gene seeds to raise as executive

bodyguards. This species might even displace the duoden in the role. Their reputation alone would be enough to keep most other livestock in line.”

“We’re a long way from that,” Duo said, frowning as she nervously stretched her wings. “This inquiry, whether we win it or not, will draw the wrong kind of attention to us. We already have a bit of a shady reputation. If it gets too much worse reputable companies won’t deal with us. Not to mention when SDM loses their challenge they’ll shit all over us when it comes time to forward contestants in future years, just for spite. They can do everything from giving us shitty sponsor time slots to forcing reviews on every future submission. The fees and bribes we’ll have to pay long term are going to be exorbitant.”

She hesitated, then leaned forward a bit as she said, “I’m beginning to see where Mauren was coming from. Taz is ... just a fucking *nightmare*. The announcer gave us a pass when she neglected to mention that four on one was him killing a sentry then slitting three sleeping throats. If he doesn’t absolutely *shock* me, Veer is right: he’s going to drop like a stone when the more social events come around. It’s SEX, Death, and Money, not Death and Money. My spies in Liminal say he completely bombed out of any sexual training and the one volunteer they got tried to kill him.”

Deera waved a dismissive hand as she said, “I heard about that and I guarantee Palashai set it up that way deliberately. I wouldn’t worry. The medical report we got from Liminal was absolutely *glowing*. Trust his trainers. Palashai is the best in the business, and she’s risked everything coming out of retirement to help her daughter train him. She’ll get him to the finish line.”

Lane showed her hands to her subordinates as she said, “We’ll just have to wait and see. The next event is still officially in negotiation, but Taz’s performance has seriously weighted the discussion. Liminal won’t be able to off-set, so whatever comes next is practically guaranteed to be completely non-violent.”

Both women nodded, then Duo's expression shifted. Her eyes widened and she said, "Lane, turn on the broadcast! There are four kills left until the end of the event, and Maximus' group is closing in on that doll Taz has been goaltending."

Lane knew that Duo had one of her links tuned to the broadcasts at all times, and asked, "Is he there?"

Duo nodded and said, "He's there."

"Woah," Deera said, and for the first time since she'd been put on the project, Lane saw her looking worried.

"Our physical assessment of Taz is that he's a heavy-worlder, but the borealan is that and *more*. They're a restricted species for a reason. To be honest, it's the only confrontation where Taz has no physical advantage. I was really hoping they wouldn't match up."

"It's worse," Lane said, frowning as she watched the broadcast, which had opposing breakdowns on screen. "Maximus has three companions. Taz is alone."

Duo, head cocked in a way that told Lane she was listening, said, "The odds-makers are giving six to one against."

"That low? I expected at *least* ten to one," Deera said, glancing at Duo, who nodded.

She said, "He's been using the shadowcat assigned to the doll to help him, then feeding it the bodies. It's not friendly, but is unlikely to attack him now without provocation. For the purposes of this encounter, the bookies are considering it his ally. There's also the fact that he's got traps in the area. Almost all of his kills have been within a square mile of where he is now too, which means-

“-THIS WHOLE PLACE SMELLS LIKE DEATH,” Bayman said, wrinkling his nose.

Maximus nodded, eyes flicking around as he listened to the jungle sounds. He could smell it too. There was blood, piss, and shit everywhere around them.

He said, “This is more than just one confrontation. A *lot* of contestants have died here, several recently.”

Brophy, one of the two duoden, glanced around, then sniffed and shrugged. They weren’t known for their sense of smell. He grumbled, “Just smells like jungle to me.”

“Take my word for it,” Bayman said wryly, his ears flicking around. “And keep your eyes open. The killer could be standing right next to us and I wouldn’t be able to smell him over all this.”

The other duoden, Map, pointed as he said, “Look there.”

Maximus saw what his companion had. There was blood spatter on a tree nearby, and a sizable stain at the base. It was black with age and flies were buzzing around the site, but there was no body. That was interesting. His trainer had told him bodies were typically left until the event was over. Whoever’d completed the kill had moved the corpse, but hadn’t otherwise tried to hide the deed.

Brophy moved to the spot, waving the flies away with his lower left hand as he crouched to look more closely. Maximus kept an eye on him, but was listening for unusual sounds.

He was confident, with good reason. His was the most powerful livestock species the succubus had. They were so strong that SDM Incorporated only allowed one borealan per season, and he'd had to fight several others — all of whom had trained for years — to earn his spot. The three with him were also competent in their own ways. Brophy was thoughtful, Map observant, and Bayman's packwren senses were even keener than Maximus'. With the three of them, the opening event had so far been a breeze, and it was expected to last another few days. There were somewhere between three and four hundred contestants, and half of them had to die before it was over. His group had accounted for almost thirty, and Maximus felt confident they held the top four spots. Each of them had also acquired an ally, per their agreement. Maximus intended to keep them as a pack as long as possible. Together, they could dominate the games.

It was the strongest possible start, but something about this area felt off to him. He said, "We're on someone's hunting grounds. There's got to be a draw somewhere around. Find it, but be careful."

Brophy straightened, looking around with a frown as he said, "Whoever made this kill is probably short, but I can't tell much else."

Maximus asked, "Short? What makes you think so?"

Brophy reached out with his upper right and touched a spot on the tree as he said, "This was made by a spear at an upward angle and it's only eight feet up."

"Aired-out doll?" Map asked, but Brophy shrugged and shook his head.

"Doubt it. Aired out, they aren't very strong. Certainly not strong enough to put a spear all the way through a body *and* two inches of tree."

"If he's short, it's probably the new gene seed we've been hearing rumors about," Maximus said.

Bayman nodded and said, "My trainer said something about him. Short, very strong."

Map grinned and popped his lower set of knuckles as he pulled a javelin out with his upper right and said, “Whoever gets the kill takes the next ally?”

Bayman grinned. He said, “I’m good for that.”

Maximus frowned, but he could tell Brophy liked the idea as well and so said, “All right. But if your nose isn’t telling you to be careful, take my word for it. Whoever did this isn’t like the others, and I doubt he’s alone. Go in pairs. Bayman with Map, Brophy with me. If it’s *not* the new gene seed, the wager doesn’t count.”

“You’re just saying that because as lead, the next one *would* go to you,” Brophy said, his grin souring.

Maximus stared pointedly at the duoden as he said, “That’s right.”

The words hung in the air between them for a moment, then Brophy nodded and looked away, unwilling to challenge Maximus for his place.

A wise choice.

Map and Bayman went left, while Maximus went right with Brophy. The duoden had a javelin in his upper right and drawn a sword obtained from the supply drop with his lower right. He’d clearly set aside the mild confrontation in favor of the moment. He might be ambitious, but even he clearly sensed that whatever had done this wasn’t to be taken lightly. He was also wearing a ceramic breastplate and faulds that covered his upper legs and carried a massive shield in both left hands.

Maximus carried no weapons, wore no armor, and needed neither. His claws were thick, sharp, and long. He was stronger than any of his companions, far heavier, a better fighter, but most crucial of all, he was tough. Maximus could be bled, but in all his life he’d never been truly injured. The only genuine concern he had was being shot, and the best defense for that was avoidance.

Bayman was a passable archer and the only one among them to choose a bow from the supply drop. Map now carried

a pair of swords in his upper hands and daggers in his lower. Of the three, he was easily the most competent with blades.

Maximus was quietly grateful that this first event kept things primitive. Firearms negated most of his own natural advantages, so their lack meant he was practically invincible in this first round. It had allowed him to amass what he felt to be a comfortable lead.

He and Brophy moved quietly, and the ambient noise of the jungle seemed no different than usual. It was only the persistent smell of death all around them that kept Maximus on edge. With every breath he tried to pick out a unique smell that might be the new creature, but there were simply too many traces, all blending together in a melange of carnage in his nose.

A hoarse scream abruptly tore through the jungle, ragged with agony. As it tapered off Maximus heard Bayman howling, an obvious call for help. Beyond that, Maximus heard another sound: the roar of an animal.

Brophy turned and tore off through the jungle, dodging trees with admirable agility. Maximus followed him, but moved more cautiously. By the time he arrived Brophy was already working with Bayman to help Map. When Maximus saw what had happened to him, he couldn't help but feel revulsion coiling in his guts.

The duoden's left foot was a complete ruin.

Stepping carefully, Maximus knelt to examine what had done the damage.

The hole was less than two feet deep, but there was a sharpened wooden stake at the bottom and two more angled down anchored in the sides of the tiny pit. All three were now soaked with blood and chunks of flesh.

Map was screaming as he rolled around on the jungle floor, completely lost in his agony. When he'd stepped in the trap the bottom spike impaled him. He'd obviously panicked and ripped his foot back up out of the hole, which had allowed

the angled wall stakes — harmless at first — to bite and make the injury many orders of magnitude worse.

Brophy seemed on the verge of panic himself as he glanced up at Maximus, clearly at a loss. They had no bandages and none of them had any medical training. It hadn't been part of their preparation for this event.

Bayman met Maximus' eye as he said, "We need to silence him."

As he spoke, the packwren pulled a dagger from his belt, but Maximus stepped forward. He knelt on both the screaming duoden's arm pairs, then wrapped his hands around Map's throat, choking him into silence.

At length, Map lost consciousness, at which point Maximus let him go as he said, "He's your packmate, Bayman. We don't kill our own. We made a deal to protect and help one another, and we'll honor it. Brophy, take off his armor and pants. Use the cloth to wrap the foot, tight as you can. Bayman, you watch over him while he works. I'm going to take a look around."

Bayman wasn't happy, but nodded and sheathed the dagger, taking up his bow again as he said, "Well, whoever set the trap knows we're here now. You may be tougher than we are, but your foot wouldn't look any better than his if it'd been you. Be careful."

Nodding, Maximus turned away. A scent had been tickling his nose, and he remembered the animal scream from earlier. A slow look around revealed a clearing not far away. He could tell by the change in the light coming down through the trees nearby and pointed as he said, "I'll bet there's an ally cage over there. Guarded by an animal."

"Still?" Bayman asked, glancing that way as well. "With this much death in the air, why wouldn't the ally have been claimed?"

As Bayman asked the question, Maximus realized the answer.

“Bait. Whoever did this is using the presence of the ally to lure in other contestants.”

Bayman nodded, and glanced around again as he said, “Which means whoever did this really *is* close by.”

“Probably,” Maximus agreed.

Though he kept it from his voice, Maximus was angry. Map was ultimately his competitor, but at the moment — in the here and now — he was part of Maximus’ pack. Someone had mutilated him. Worse, had done it with an unguarded trap. Something that did not care who or what it claimed. It was cowardly. Whoever had done this was weak, no matter what they thought of themselves. The strong confronted their opponents and fought as males should: face-to-face.

Yet, whatever he might think of his unseen foe, one thing was certain: his traps would take the strong and the weak alike.

Advancing cautiously to the edge of the clearing, Maximus saw the cage, and that it was still occupied. The beast was also there, already focused on him. It was a fair-sized creature, black-furred and feline, with six legs. It had also eaten well — given the many carrion piles scattered throughout the small glade. Now it was hunkered down, golden eyes glimmering as it bared fangs at him, ready to pounce. Maximus knew as long as he stayed out of the clearing, it probably wouldn’t attack him. It was obviously a guardian for the cage. He could see the key glimmering as it hung from a collar around the beast’s neck.

Inside the cage was a doll. She was aired out, seated with her arms around her knees, and looked thoroughly miserable. When she noticed him she abruptly stood and wrapped her hands around the bars, facing him. Like all allies, she wasn’t allowed to speak until someone claimed her. There was an intensity in her blue eyes, a quiet desperation unlike anything he’d ever seen before.

Her reaction more than anything told him that something was very, *very* wrong here. It was understandable to an extent. The way scoring worked meant allies were secured once

found, not left to stew amid mauled corpses. The carrion piles all around her were buzzing with flies and Maximus could well imagine the horrors she must have endured these past few days. In a sense, all allies were bait. Their presence drew the contestants into conflict. But here, that had been taken to an extreme. One or more competitors had chosen to goaltend this girl, and she was probably regretting her choice to participate in the game.

While Maximus was confident he could take on the beast, he wanted his packmates there to watch his back. Whoever was guarding her would have to make a move when he attacked the guardian or they'd lose their bait *and* the ally. It was also unlikely there were any traps in the glade. The guardian wouldn't have allowed it.

Decision made, he backtracked to rejoin his companions.

All three were dead.

Maximus stood staring, completely dumbfounded. Bayman was on his back, sightless eyes open to the sky and a slowly growing halo of blood around his head, draining from a gaping wound in his neck.

Brophy was slumped over the body of Map, whose throat had also been cut. Brophy himself was dead by a sword, which had been plunged between his neck and shoulder to the hilt and left there, as though to make a statement.

The smell of death was so strong it blotted out Maximus' other senses for a moment. His eyes were open, but sightless, his ears received the jungle noise but failed to process it. He'd left them for just a few short minutes, and his pack had been wiped out. Worse, he didn't know who had done it, or how. He'd been given no chance to defend them, and now he was alone.

Maximus knew he was individually powerful. He was heavier, stronger, and tougher than any other species the succubi had. Yet there was one thing that filled him with disquiet, and that was being alone. He craved structure, and now had none. There was no one below him, no one above him. He felt lost in a void of uncertainty, and as the seconds

ticked past his lips peeled back in an unconscious snarl. His claws flexed, itching for blood. With a last glare around, he strode back toward the clearing knowing full well that his enemy was watching him that very instant.

He loudly called, “You’ve taken from me! Now I’m going to take from you! Stop me, if you can!”

Without any hesitation he strode into the clearing. The guardian beast was on him in an instant, galloping forward before it raised its upper body, back four legs remaining on the ground for stability as it slashed at him with brutal paws.

Maximus batted aside the slash with almost casual disregard, then caught the cat across the jaws with a backhand that staggered the creature, knocking it off its feet. For all its size, its gene seed hadn’t come from a heavy-world. It might as well be made of paper: capable of slashing him to death in a purely technical sense, but only if he allowed it. His own strength exceeded the beast’s, but his concern wasn’t and never had been with it.

His guess proved correct, though his assailant gave no deliberate warning. Maximus spun on his heel to catch the spear aimed at his back. The creature on the other end of that spear was a perplexing figure. He *was* short, no more than six feet, and dressed in clothing obviously colored to help him blend in with the jungle. He’d taken that even farther, coating his skin with paint to further the illusion. There was so much of it that Maximus couldn’t actually tell what color he really was.

Despite appearances, there’d actually been real force behind the spear thrust, meaning that, like him, this creature was from a heavy-world. Yet, while there was strength there, it was still far inferior to what Maximus had.

All this he gathered in the instant he caught the spear shaft. His opponent tugged once, then released the haft and leapt backward.

Maximus shifted his grip on the spear, setting its butt in the turf as he leaned forward abruptly, presenting the point behind him. The weapon shivered as a feline scream of agony rent the

air, then Maximus released the shaft and stepped past it toward the strange little creature, snarling, "Where are your friends? You'd better call them if you expect to take *me* on."

He got no verbal response. The creature hurled a javelin at him that Maximus effortlessly batted aside. It was clear his opponent was no good with the weapons, and didn't try again. Instead, he pulled a pair of daggers from his belt and threw aside the quiver on his back, obviously preparing for battle. His green-gold eyes never wavered from Maximus, but there was no expression on his painted face. Seeing that complete lack of emotion disturbed Maximus more than any depth of passion. He had the crazy impression that what he faced was beyond him somehow, though he had already taken the creature's physical measure and found him, if not harmless, certainly not a deadly threat.

His foe displayed an easy familiarity with the daggers that sounded a cautious note in Maximus' mind, but now that he had the male in front of him there was no rush. He began circling, both closing the distance and forcing his opponent to turn.

The male matched him, though for every step closer Maximus came his opponent took distance the other way. When they were only six feet apart, Maximus had the male backed against the now still corpse of the cat creature, pierced through by the spear.

The male glanced down and behind him, frowning.

Maximus thrust, leading with his claws, but pulled the blow to slash with his other hand as the creature whipped a dagger up to meet the first attack. Just as quickly as he changed tactics, so did his enemy, and though Maximus slammed the creature back to fall over the corpse behind him, he got a long gash on his forearm for the effort. It was a shallow cut of little consequence, but he licked it absently and waited for his opponent, wanting to see what he'd do.

He got up, though his shoulder was a ruin of blood and his left arm hung limp below it. That left hand was closed in a tight fist, though the dagger was gone. Maximus looked for

pain on his face, but didn't find it. All he saw in those green-gold eyes was death.

"Surrender to me," Maximus said abruptly. "I'll bind your wound and the two of us will finish the event together. You can be in my pack until the end, when circumstance will force us apart. The two of us can dominate any physical events. We'll gather a few others to replace those you've cost me. You don't have to die."

For the first time, he saw some expression in the other's face: curiosity. He asked, "Your pack?"

"That's right. Those others you killed were my pack. You watched, didn't you? You saw me take care of them. Saw me protect my own. I'll make the same arrangement with you. What is your name?"

"Taz."

"I am Maximus. I keep my word. I have the lead in this event. I'll pull you along with me."

"The lead?" Taz asked, raising an eyebrow.

Nodding, Maximus said, "I've finished fourteen myself, and my pack has over thirty total kills. All of us had allies, and here's another. I'll tell you what: join me, and I'll let you have that one as a sign of good faith."

It was more than *just* a gesture of goodwill. Dolls as a species were ill-suited to his personal use. They were too easily injured. Giving this creature a free ally was no great loss.

"If you all have allies, where are they?" Taz asked.

Blinking, Maximus said, "Once acquired, they're transported off the island to await final results."

"Huh."

Taz's lips twisted, and he glanced over his shoulder at the doll in the cage, who was watching them both with wide eyes. He said, "Sorry. If I'd known that I'd have gotten you out days ago. I figured I'd have to feed and protect you for the rest of the event."

“Do you accept?” Maximus asked.

Taz turned to face him again, and seemed to consider in silence. Then he said, “Ordinarily, I’d agree then shank you once I got in close, but you seem like a decent sort, so I’ll be honest. No, Maximus. I will not join you. My nature is to strive, to seek, to find, but not to yield. I’m going to kill you.”

“But ... why?” Maximus asked. “You’re strong, but clearly not strong enough. You must know that now. If you keep fighting, you’ll die.”

Taz smiled at that as he rolled his remaining knife expertly around his fingers. He said, “No one can kill *me*, Maximus. It’s just not possible.”

“I’m sorry you think that way,” the borealan said, flexing his claws.

Taz flipped the knife in his hand up. It twirled in the air, and Maximus followed the glittering arc of the metal with his eyes. It was an involuntary reaction, one that almost cost him his life. Yet, just as instinct drew his eyes, it drew his hand, and a second knife buried itself in his palm instead of his throat. He lowered it in time to see Taz catch the knife he’d lofted even as he launched himself to attack.

With his uninjured hand, Maximus slammed Taz to the ground then stomped on his chest, growling deep in his chest as he glared down at the strange little creature staring back up at him, bloody froth on his lips.

“Last chance,” Maximus growled, pulling the thrown dagger from his palm and tossing it aside. “We could go far together, and I hate being alone. Join my pack, and I’ll spare you.”

“Hahaha ...”

Taz’s laughter devolved into a coughing fit, then he said, “Spare me? You ... think you can? Let me ask you a question.”

Maximus reached down and, though it took a bit of effort, pried the knife from Taz’s hand, tossing it away as he said, “Ask.”

“When have you ever decided?”

Brow furrowing, the borealan asked, “What do you mean?”

Taz’s hand, now free and empty, groped blindly in the dirt, reaching for something, anything. Yet there was nothing in reach to help him. As Maximus watched that hand, Taz said, “No matter what you get, or what you do, in the end someone else decides. That beast there was better than you. No one else ... ever looked through his eyes.”

“I hold your life in my hands. I decide whether you live or die,” Maximus said, unable to help the growl in his voice. He didn’t like what this creature was saying, but had no ready rebuttal.

Taz smiled and closed his eyes as he said, “You’d like to think that, wouldn’t you? You’re wrong, but I understand. Reality’s ... never been a friend of mine either.”

For long seconds, Maximus hesitated. Taz’s hand was still wandering, still aimlessly searching for something, but the rest of him lay unmoving. His eyes were closed, but the expression on his face was strange.

He was smiling.

Just as Maximus made his decision and put his hesitation away, the jungle echoed with a vast, almost incomprehensibly loud sound.

It was a gong.

Maximus blinked, then lifted his foot, glancing around, then down at Taz. He hadn’t opened his eyes, but as Maximus watched, Taz’s smile turned into a grin, and he started laughing.

“You’re lucky,” Maximus said. “The event’s over. I’d be disqualified if I killed you now.”

He stepped over his fallen foe to crouch next to the dead guardian. Until they were picked up by the retrieval teams, he’d still be able to acquire the ally. Yet though he looked, he couldn’t find the key.

Frowning, he searched the ground nearby and found the collar to which it had been attached. It was cut, and the key itself was gone.

Taz got painfully to his feet in the meanwhile and their eyes met, then the male passed him, blood dripping down his left arm as he walked up to the cage. He put his right hand under his clenched left fist, which he opened to drop the key. Raising it in his right, he fit it to the lock.

“That’s mine by right!” Maximus roared, leaping toward him, but too late.

Taz ignored him as he unlocked the cage, then turned and jerked his thumb back at the girl as he said, “I’d bet good money this one wishes you’d finished me off when you had the chance.”

Behind him, now freed, the doll stepped from the cage and said, “Hardly. I’ve been waiting for you to claim me for *days*. If you’d lost to that borealan I’d have been pissed.”

Taz blinked and glanced back at her as he said, “I *did* lose. I got my ass handed to me.”

The doll shook her head and said, “You won. Your little death poem made him hesitate, and when the event ended you were able to claim me. You beat him.”

Maximus flexed his claws, itching to attack, but he knew he couldn’t. The event was over and Taz was right. He’d missed his chance.

“Next time I won’t hesitate,” he growled.

Taz met his gaze for what felt like a long time. There was no fear in his green-gold eyes, and though he didn’t show it, something within Maximus shifted. Once more, he had the impression that there was something different about this male. Something beyond the physical. At length, Taz pursed his lips and nodded thoughtfully, but said nothing as he turned and walked away, blood dripping steadily from the fingers of his limp left hand.

Maximus glanced from him to the doll, who was smirking as she gazed at him.

“What?” he snapped, angry and unable to vent his frustration properly.

“You said you were first, right? Fourteen kills, wasn’t it?” she asked.

When he nodded, eyes narrowing in suspicion, the doll spread a webbed hand to indicate the clearing and said, “While you’re waiting for pick-up, count heads. *All* of these are Taz kills, and I know he’s got more than what you see here. You really *should* have killed him when you had the chance. See you ‘round, borealan.”

Maximus watched her hurry after Taz, then glanced around the clearing, not really wanting to count but unable to help himself.

When he finished, he stared after the strange little male and wondered what kind of world could create such a monster.

I GOT PICKED up from another clearing not far from where I'd fought that ridiculous fucking cat man, but honestly don't remember the ride from there. The little green short-stack alien tried to talk to me, but I don't remember what she said either. As soon as I was secured in the transport, I fell asleep.

I hadn't slept in a week. Food was easy: I'd gotten some from almost every kill I made off competitors who'd secured supplies from one of the drops. Water was also pretty easy, though I had to go out of my way a bit to get to the stream. Sleep, however, was a non-starter. Alone in a hostile jungle as a competitor in a death game, I just couldn't afford to risk it.

So I killed as many as I could, as fast as I could, figuring my only hope was to end the game before my need for sleep knocked me over. Thankfully, I wasn't the only one working on it, and someone else finishing the job had kept me not only in the game, but alive.

I wasn't sure how I felt about that. When Maximus put me down, I'd felt sure my number was up ... but I hadn't exactly been disappointed. That came later, when he proved too much of a pussy to finish what he started. For a creature that looked to me like an underwear model crossed with a horror movie monster, he'd been surprisingly reluctant to kill.

Those claws were insane. They could have come off a harpy eagle. Maximus broke my shoulder with one shot and ripped it up pretty good in the process. He'd also fractured my ribs, though I wasn't sure how many, when he stomped on me.

Maximus had superior senses, superior reach, superior strength, superior toughness, and comparable speed despite superior size. In a word, I was outclassed.

Ironically, it had been that which saved me. Maximus hadn't been threatened enough by me to 'go for the throat' as it were. If I ever faced him again I'd have to go in with an edge or I was a dead man.

All this went through my mind as I waited for transport, but the painkiller and emergency medical treatment let me go to sleep, so that's what I did.

When I woke up I wasn't back at Liminal Science as expected. Instead, I was in a rather spacious bedroom I didn't recognize. As I thought back on the briefings I'd gotten from Yim, it occurred to me she'd said something about winding up on a campus of some sort along with the other contestants.

So from here on out I was on a scaled-up Big Brother set ... great.

Rolling out of bed, I took stock. The first thing I noticed was that my injuries were gone. My shoulder felt fine, though I had some thin scars, and since I had no trouble breathing my ribs were good now too.

I was also naked and clean. There was a door to my immediate right and another directly across from it on my left. Next to the latter was a sizable TV that took up a good portion of the wall. More interesting to me, though, was the wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling window next to it. The wall I'd rolled off to face was blank, which I actually found a bit odd until another look around showed me no decorations of any kind save the black drapes currently pulled back to reveal a secondary, filmy privacy curtain straight out of a hotel.

Next to that was a pair of mirror doors I could only assume opened into a closet. I noted with vague annoyance that there were also mirrors on the ceiling over the bed.

Opening the closet revealed several identical jumpsuits in blue and gold: Liminal Science colors. I dressed, including the slip-ons provided for my feet, then confirmed my guess about

the bathroom, where I satisfied my needs as I took in the glassed-in, ridiculously over-sized and *deep* bathtub with rainforest-style showerheads. There were literally several steps to get down into the bath, and just outside the clear glass wall that had the door was a *huge* rack with towels so big I could have used one as a toga.

There was no paper, but the toilet had a *very* thorough bidet built into the seat — complete with air dryer — and was larger than I was used to. I wasn't about to fall in or anything, but the commode had obviously been built with bigger butts than mine in mind. The counter had three sinks, was almost a foot higher than was comfortable for me, and had soap in hand-wave dispensers.

The space was mirrored above the mid-point with light tan tiles below and on the floor, edged at every joint by a row of black-and-white tiles sporting a geometric design.

Well, at least the digs were comfortable, though the number of mirrors was obnoxious. The whole place was so similar to a high-end hotel that it seemed like a case of convergent design, which I thought was actually pretty cool.

I crossed the bedroom to the other door and hesitated there a moment. Both doors were pocket-style, with grooves for fingers and, more crucially, no visible locking mechanism.

Oh well. Privacy was just a memory now anyway ... like freedom.

Frowning at the thought, I slid the door open but didn't step through yet, taking in the next room, which wasn't empty.

Oddly, the floor was lowered by a full two steps, which I'd be obliged to take when I did step out. Beyond were an array of couches and comfy-looking chairs upholstered in Liminal blue. Seated there were three women, two of whom I knew and one of which I'd at least seen.

There were other doors on the far side of the room and a space in the far corner to my right that had a counter, fridge, and other basic kitchen stuff. The wall to my left was another window, though the drapes were pulled. The lighting was

recessed behind crown molding, and this room, unlike mine — which was carpeted — was a hard, smooth floor of some kind. It was off-white and obviously not wood or tile, but that's all I could tell about it.

Yimshe, Palashai, and the little green girl with the oversized eyes I'd 'rescued' from the cage in the jungle were all looking steadily at me as I took in the room.

The newcomer's eyes really were huge, taking up fully half her face, and a brilliant blue. She had green skin, a full set of what my brother would have called 'dick-suckin' lips,' and her nose was little more than a pair of slits above them. Her face looked like it had been streamlined forward, reminding me a bit of a shark. I also didn't see any ears, and her head was narrower than I was used to. She had no hair at all that I could see, and was dressed in a jumpsuit of blue, red, and gold. It had a boob window, and she either didn't believe in bras or hadn't been issued one. I could tell she had *four* nipples on each boob. For someone even shorter than me, this girl's tits were impossible, and I *mean* that. They were about the same size as Palashai's, and *she* was stacked at ten feet tall. On someone her size they were freakin' ginormous, and with her seated they pretty much took up all the space between her knees and shoulders.

As I thought back, I knew for *sure* she hadn't looked like that when she was in the cage. I guarantee I'd have noticed.

"Are you coming out or what?" Palashai asked somewhat testily, giving me a level look.

Blinking, I shrugged and stepped down into the living room, then crossed the space to stand next to a couch tall enough that I could lean against it, which I did as I folded my arms and said, "So? Where are we?"

"We're on the SDM campus," Yim said.

"I meant on the scoreboard," I said wryly, glancing at her. "I know where we're *located*."

"Oh, you're on top of the leaderboard at the moment, by a wide margin," she said. "You actually set a number of records

for the opening event, and — combat kills and traps combined — personally accounted for thirty-four *percent* of T.D.C.: the total death count. Your nearest competitor was Maximus, with combat kills on fourteen and assists on twenty-three more. Your performance was so outlandish that you've been given the season's first competitor tag, which usually doesn't happen in the opening event.”

“What's that?” I asked.

“A nickname. It's how you'll show up on the leaderboards from now on. They're calling you ‘Silent Knight.’”

“Well ... I've been called worse,” I said, bemused.

Palashai said, “It's good you have such a commanding lead too, because from here on out you're at a serious disadvantage.”

“Which is?” I asked.

“You're socially retarded,” Pala and Yim said in near-perfect unison.

I snorted, unable to help the grin, but Yim gave me a narrow-eyed look as she said, “This isn't funny, Taz. You need to seriously up your game if you want to stay in the top twenty, much less hold the lead.”

“Okay, we'll talk more about that in a minute. Who's this?” I asked, lifting my chin toward Tits McToo'Beaucoup.

She stood up when I asked about her and I won't lie: I almost fell over. As she straightened, her boob size translated to height. I mean it literally flowed out of her chest and into the rest of her. I'd estimated her height while seated at maybe four foot something. Once erect, she was *my* height, and her boobs were ... there, but c-cups after what I'd just seen looked kiiind of tiny by comparison.

“What the fuck?” I muttered, looking her up and down. What I had just witnessed was, without question, the weirdest thing I had *ever* seen in real life.

“Name's Phoebe,” she said, then smiled, revealing very sharp triangular teeth as she added, “and I'm guessing I'm the

first doll you've met."

I was dumbfounded. All I could do was nod.

Phoebe glanced at Yimshe and said, "I'm going to have so much fun here."

"Someone explain to me what I just saw," I said, finally taking the scattered remains of my thoughts and putting them into a complete sentence.

"Dolls are aquatic," Phoebe said, holding up a hand and spreading her fingers by way of demonstration. She had five fingers and a thumb, but they were all completely webbed. Rather than human-like nails, she had short, nubby claws at the ends of her fingers — all of which looked like they'd been deliberately blunted. She then tilted her neck and pressed a finger in at the base, which caused her flesh to split in several long slits that could only be gills.

"Our species is capable of retaining fluid — liquid *or* gas — to change our shape and weight. Originally, we used it to control buoyancy, but the ability has ... other uses. It's not comfortable to keep my height while seated and I look funny sitting on a gigantic ass, so I put it all in my boobs instead."

"That's ... nuts," I said, blinking in complete amazement.

Phoebe, obviously amused, grinned as she said, "Yim's told me a bit about you and after watching you work yeah, you're a bit of a horror show ... but I really, *really* like your body plan, so let's do our best to get along, okay?"

"My ... body plan?" I asked, looking her up and down.

"Mmhm. There's practically nothing sharp on you. I love it. A lot of the other livestock species have pointy bits that can do me serious damage, but as far as I can tell you'll be *completely* safe to play with even when we get rough. I can't wait to try."

I gazed fixedly at her with one eyebrow glued to my hairline, trying to think of a response. At last, I managed, "I was told that allies I would pick up during this first event would have some area of expertise. What's yours?"

“Duh, water sports,” she said, giving me what looked — to me at least — like a downright fiendish grin. Her teeth really could have been plucked out of a shark’s mouth.

“I’m also killer when it comes to eating contests, and a bomb in the sack,” she added. “I’m actually a series star, which means you got *super* lucky when you picked me up. We’re going to have *so* much fun together.”

Palashai rolled her eyes as Yimshe glanced left, looking faintly embarrassed, and that made me grin. I knew it was at my expense, but it was still funny. I wasn’t too invested in what those two thought of me sexually. As long as they got me ready to compete, everything ... or *anything* else, was just an extra. They were both exotic eye candy, and that was enough.

This new girl though? She was aggressively assertive. I hadn’t expected that given she hadn’t said a single word in the jungle.

Something she said caught my attention, and I looked at Yimshe as I asked, “What’s a series star?”

“SDM Incorporated keeps a rotating stable of regular allies for these competitions. They’re called stars, and they have their own built-in fanbases. Phoebe here has been through ... four?”

The doll nodded, and Yim went on. “Four seasons.”

“And I’ve *never* been traded,” Phoebe added with that grin that was somehow both carnivorous and carnal at once.

It was the teeth and those D.S.L. It was a combination that shouldn’t work, but did.

“Traded?” I asked.

Phoebe’s grin vanished when I asked, but Yim said, “Trades are part of the game. Allies have a variety of special talents or particular skills, but it’s very easy to wind up with a lopsided team because which allies you get in the field is mostly a matter of luck. Allies can be traded for anything. Usually, it’s a swap of some kind, but score can also be transferred.”

“So, I could conceivably trade her to someone to up my score on the leaderboard?” I asked.

“Conceivably,” Yim said with a wary glance at Phoebe, who *definitely* wasn’t smiling now. “I don’t think you should trade her. You’re considered a strong swimmer, but dolls are the best amphibians there are and her scores in the water are way higher than yours. While eating contests aren’t common, they do happen, and it’s almost a given she’d win something like that too. They can pack away food like literally no other species.”

“I’ll bear it in mind. So what’s next?” I asked.

Yim and Pala exchanged glances, then Palashai asked, “Are you hungry?”

“And thirsty, and still a bit tired, yes,” I admitted. “How long was I asleep?”

“A full day. You spent half that time in a tank, after which they brought you here. There are six days left until the next event. The time between events is for socializing, which can be worth score. The leaderboards shift around quite a lot during downtime — though the quintiles are locked — and after four events the middle performers start getting auctioned off,” Palashai said.

I nodded, then tipped my head toward the fridge as I asked, “Is that stocked?”

Yimshe said, “Yes, but before you eat, there’s something else we should get done.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“You need to select a second ally,” she said.

“Select?”

“You took out eight competitors who’d secured allies for themselves, but just because you killed their rescuers doesn’t mean you automatically get them all for yourself. You can choose one, and the others get recycled into future events.”

Phoebe, clearly sensing I and my trainers were done with her for the moment, sagged back to a seat on the couch. My

train of thought jumped its track as — eyes widening — I watched her settle ... and then keep settling, getting shorter as her chest ballooned out until it once again filled her lap.

By the time I blinked and shook my head to clear it, she was grinning again.

“Yeah ... dolls *are* pretty fun to watch,” Palashai noted wryly, grinning at me.

“And play with!” Phoebe said, one hand shooting up as though to answer a question in class. “I need you to fuck me, *soon*, or I’ll get depressed. I have been *aching* to play with you ever since I first saw you out in the jungle.”

“Why?” I asked, unable to help the question. “Because I don’t have any pointy bits?”

She nodded enthusiastically as she said, “Doesn’t even matter how big your cock is, I fit all sizes. *All*, sizes.”

“I uh ... well, I’m sure you’ve noticed I’m on the short side,” I said, frowning as I glanced at Palashai. I wouldn’t exactly thrill the crowds if fucking Phoebe was like tossing a hot dog down a hallway, and her teeth meant there was *no way* I’d be getting head from her. Outside boob jobs and butt stuff, I wasn’t sure there were many other ways to go about it, and I legitimately didn’t even know if Phoebe *had* an asshole, or if anal was an option even if she did. She *was* an alien, after all.

Palashai’s grin never wavered though as she said, “You’re cock’s actually pretty big for your body plan. Despite being several feet shorter than most of your competitors, you’re solidly in the middle of the pack when it comes to that. Had you managed it, neither Yim nor I would have been disappointed. There are only a few species you won’t thrill, and I’ll let you know if it ever comes up.”

“Managed it? You mean ... he hasn’t fucked *either* of you yet?” Phoebe asked, already large eyes going wide, at which point they took up fully half her face. It was a comic look, but I wasn’t laughing, and Palashai wasn’t about to cut me slack.

She said, “Nope. Neither of us. We aren’t losing sleep over it either. Trying to train him was a disaster.”

“Speak for yourself,” Yim said, baring her teeth in a canine expression of frustration. “It’s been giving *me* fits.”

“Yeah, but not because you’re missing out,” Palashai said with an airy wave.

Yim glanced at her mother and didn’t answer, but I saw the move for what it was. Palashai was trying to get under my skin. Get me angry enough to prove myself. Reverse psychology is a cheap trick, though, and while I *did* get annoyed, I wasn’t about to show it.

“So, what, is he impotent?” Phoebe asked.

“Nooo,” Yim drawled. “But let’s deal with that some other time. We can’t sleep on ally selection.”

“You handle it,” I said, and both my trainers blinked in surprise.

Phoebe laughed and said, “Oooh, you *are* special, aren’t you?”

“What the hell’s off about having them choose?!” I asked. “I don’t know what this contest requires, or how best to balance this group. They do, so let *them* fucking pick!”

Phoebe leaned back, balancing an elbow on one oversized boob as she covered her mouth with her webbed hand, gazing steadily at me for a long moment before glancing toward Yimshe as she said in a stage whisper, “I see now what you’re dealing with. My sympathies.”

“Listen here, you little shit, you’re pissing me off now. Condescend to me one more time and I’ll trade you to the spikiest competitor I can find for half a smile, and next season you can brag about *that* to whoever puts a key in your lock. Be helpful, or be *quiet*.”

That shut her up, and I returned my attention to Yimshe, whose look of surprise had faded a bit, then returned and had kittens when I took my shot at Phoebe. Palashai just put her head in her hands, hiding her face entirely. It wasn’t a good sign, but fuck it. I’d be good and god damned before I let a leaf-green titty monster make a fool of me.

I said, “Now, explain to me, *without* sarcasm, why you can’t do this simple thing I’ve asked you to do.”

I learned something about packwren in that moment. They blush with their ears. The insides of Yim’s turned hot pink, and she opened her mouth a long second before any words came out. Then she said, “I-if ... whatever ally we pick for you learns that *you* didn’t choose her, or even take part in her selection, she’ll be less likely to do well on your behalf. Allies don’t suffer if their competitors fail, die, or get disqualified. They just go back in the pool. One of the most important parts of the game for competitors is ... um, keeping allies happy.”

Yimshe glanced pointedly at Phoebe as she said that last, and I rolled my eyes and asked, “Why didn’t you say that during the *week* we had in the lead up to this stupid fucking game?!”

Yimshe cringed at that, but Palashai lifted her head and barked, “Because it never occurred to us that you’d be deliberately hostile to people who are *on your team*! Fuck’s sake, Taz! What part of the definition of ‘ally’ don’t you get? Phoebe isn’t here just for you to use. SDM is a *social* game. Alliances are *mutually beneficial*! If you can’t make friends you’re going to fail spectacularly no matter *how* good you are at murder!”

I sucked in a deep breath, blew it out, then turned my full attention to Phoebe as I said, “Let’s get one thing straight: I’m not here for your entertainment. I’m not ungrateful for what help I receive, but I *don’t* respond well to mockery ... or threats.”

“He really, *really* doesn’t,” Yimshe hastily added, and something in the way she said it made it clear, at least to me, that she was talking about Mauren.

Phoebe, however, had not blown up the way I expected her to. Instead of hopping off the couch and making for the door, she had her hand over her mouth again and was gazing speculatively at me in a way I wasn’t sure I liked.

At length, she said, “I cannot imagine what kind of training program you were put through to wind up with such a

disagreeable personality. You came from Division Four, right? What did they *do* to you?"

"Nothing," I said with a scowl. "I'm just a shit person by default."

"Flaws of this sort usually don't show up until livestock has been around for *years*. How old are you?"

My mouth was open before I caught myself and closed it again. Whatever answer she expected, 'thirty-eight' probably wasn't it.

When I failed to answer, Yimshe said, "He's somewhere between four and six months old. Division Four hasn't released his exact decant date."

Phoebe was watching me carefully, but I shrugged and glanced away, then said, "Any other questions?"

"Several, but they'll keep," she said. "You should take part in your ally selection."

Raising an eyebrow, I said, "You're not leaving?"

"I can't just *leave*, even if I wanted to, which I don't. You've altered my expectations, Taz, but my performance isn't *just* a measure of how much I may or may not like *you*. Since I stay with the show, I have a reputation to maintain. I'm not some useless vacay."

Vacation allies. I knew about *them*. They were generally the worst, with below-average event skills. They literally paid the organizers to be in the show and were generally only in it for the sex with competitors. Most of them were succubi, but it wasn't healthy to call them out specifically for that. It also wasn't healthy to actively avoid them, and they were almost impossible to trade. Winding up with one was generally considered a setback, though there *were* still ways to gain score off them, particularly if the succ was a good proxy for the audience. Palashai had told me what I knew, and made it clear that in my case having one would definitely be a mixed experience. On the one hand, they'd *love* the amount of essence I provide, but on the other, they'd be a tremendous social burden given my short fuse.

All this flickered through my mind as I nodded and glanced from Phoebe to Yim. The doll hadn't any trace of sarcasm or mockery in her voice anymore, and I found it refreshing that she hadn't chosen to fire back at me or somehow continue to grate on my nerves.

"All right, how do we do this evaluation? You got a tablet with the relevant data I can look over?" I asked.

Yim blinked twice — a packwren negative — as Pala hid a smirk behind her hand.

Yim said, "No, of course not. Now that you're awake, I'll send notice and they'll all be assembled in a room. You'll interview them and make your selection that way."

"Together?" I asked.

Yim nodded.

"All at the same time?" I asked, not quite believing it when she nodded again.

"Are they allowed to lie to me?" I asked.

"Good question, and yes," Pala answered. "There are never any rules against lying. It's part of the game."

"I like this game less and less," I muttered, then made eye contact with Palashai as I asked, "Are there *any* protections for me regarding allies beyond their good will?"

"Phoebe mentioned one. Star allies don't like it when they're traded. It hurts their reputation, so they tend to work hard for their own sakes. In a similar way, many livestock are put in the games by their breeders and trainers to show off their value for future sale. These actually make up the bulk of the allies in any given season. Those that do well command a higher price and are generally treated better than they otherwise would be if subject to standard sales or auctions. They'll *also* want to work hard for their own sakes."

"Is there any way I can guarantee accurate information? Am I given *anything* in advance before the interview?" I asked.

Palashai and Yimshe both shook their heads, and Yim said, “And don’t blame us. We don’t know who they are either. Other than the leaderboard, we don’t have access to what’s broadcast. No one on the inside does. The only people inside the game who knew anything about the allies are the people you killed.”

“And the only thing they know about *me* is that I killed the people who rescued them?” I asked, raising a pointed eyebrow.

“That’s not necessarily a bad thing,” Phoebe cut in. “I’d have been *pissed* if that borealan got me. Those things are *way* too rough. Allies have preferences for who they want to work with just like anybody. Now, granted, that cuts both ways.”

“Ugh. Fuck, whatever. Just send notice and we’ll get this over with,” I muttered, moving past the three as I added, “In the meantime, what the hell do we have to *eat* in here? I’m starving.”

INTERVIEW 1

“Hi! My name is Valenteen. As you are no doubt aware, I’m embedded here on the Sex, Death, and Money campus to help cover the event. I’d like to interview you, do you mind?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Thank you. First off, tell us your name and a little about yourself.”

“Okay, um, my name is Miriam. I’m twenty-two and won a slot this SDM season because I’m skilled in music theory and composition. I also dance and sing.”

“Oh! So you aren’t a vacationer?”

“Hell no! I’m here to make a name for myself!”

“And when you saw Silent Knight, what was your first impression of him?”

The interviewer was a beautiful succubus with skin so dark red it was almost black, wearing a skintight one-piece that was a dark blue work of art. Her white hair was wound into a tight bun atop her head, held in place by a pair of crossed golden pins, and her wings were chased with gold makeup that also accented her eyes and lips. She wore techspecs, though hers had clear lenses and golden, sharp rims.

The woman across from her in the tell-all room was another succubus with bright red skin and black hair. Her one-piece was also blue, but a brighter shade, and her otherwise beautiful face was twisted with annoyance as she grudgingly admitted, “He looked damn good, that was my first impression. Short, but I can get into that. Sometimes the short ones are more fun. It was like someone took a biped design and cut away all the extra stuff, you know? Basic ... but what I saw was super solid.”

“And how much did you know about him?”

“Other than that he killed Bayman? Nothing. I never saw him during the first event.”

“Were you excited to be one of Bayman’s allies?”

The interviewee’s head wobbled ambivalently from side to side as she said, “I ... I mean, packwren are okay, I guess? Of the four of them I’d have gone with Maximus if I got to pick, but they had a deal worked out in advance. Bayman was going to get whoever was in the cage. It just *happened* to be me.”

The interviewer smiled faintly, then composed herself as she got to the question she knew everyone really wanted answered.

“So what was your reaction when he did what he did?”

“Are you kidding?! How would *you* feel?! He walked in, looked us over, then pointed at Astra, said, ‘You,’ and walked *right* the fuck back out. He didn’t talk to *any* of us!”

Whatever Valenteen might have thought, she kept it to herself as she leaned forward and said, “So what are you going to do now?”

“There’s always at least one music event every season. I’m going to put myself in the campus games. Every serious competitor needs someone good with music, so I’m pretty sure I’ll get picked up quick.”

“You won’t have much influence over which competitor you wind up with,” Valenteen commented.

“I’ll have more than I would if I waited for the next open event and that won’t be for a month! At least this way my prospectives will *talk* to me. I *still* can’t believe that fucker blew me off! I’ve *never* been treated that way by livestock before! I’ve got *real* skills and he treated me like some vacay bimbo!”

Valenteen’s expression remained placid as she said, “He treated you exactly the same way he treated Astra.”

“No, he fucking did not. He *picked* her. Why? Do *you* know?”

“It would be a contractual violation to say if I knew, which I do not. Is there anything else you’d like to tell our viewers?”

“Yeah. You’ll see me in the music event and whoever that asshole’s team puts up — and that’s *if* he even makes it that far — is getting *crushed*. Count on it. We’ll see how *he* likes being humiliated!”

AS I WALKED BACK toward the building my suite of rooms was in I had the privilege of watching Phoebe giggle, and am now aware why ‘giggle’ and ‘jiggle’ sound so similar.

At a guess, she’d noticed me checking out her boobs, so when she followed the trainers and I down to the interviews she stayed short and left her chest huge. I’m not going to say it didn’t work either, because I looked.

A lot.

Eight nipples? Hell, I’d suck ‘em all, just not at once. There is something about a jiggly girl wearing a tight-ass top with a boob window that just *does* it for me.

My *trainers* were *not* laughing. Palashai was just shaking her head, but Yimshe looked like she wanted to blow up at me and the only thing stopping her was being out in public.

Then there was the new girl, following along like she didn’t quite know what just happened.

She was my height, maybe an inch shorter, and had an athletic-looking upper body with no boob to speak of. She had *wide* hips, which led down to some extremely thick-looking thighs that gave out just below the knees to legs that could have come off a bird. It wasn’t the only similarity either. Though I could see black skin at her throat which vanished into her red-and-gold one-piece, she didn’t have arms or hands, just wings. Almost all her feathers were black, but here and there she had accent feathers that were *bright* red. Her eyes were red too, and set wide on a face that was mostly

wickedly curved beak. Atop her head she had a crest like a cockatoo. The cap feather was black but the underlying feathers were red. That crest had gone all the way up when I picked her, but was down flat now.

She also had a walk like a roadrunner's. She'd take twenty steps or so and stop, wings set close to her body and vaguely reminiscent of a girl bent forward a bit with her hands behind her back, waiting for the rest of us to catch up and pass her, then she'd do it again, making no effort to actually keep pace.

She also hadn't said a word yet. I didn't even know her name, and didn't much care at the moment.

She was a flier, so any events that required flying were covered. Succubi also had wings, but this girl was obviously specialized to fly, and that'd been good enough for me.

I'd stressed about how to conduct the interviews while I ate the filling but thoroughly unsatisfying food bar that was *all the suite had*, and by the time I'd gotten to the room had decided that the only thing that couldn't lie to me was what these people actually looked like. My only other requirement was that whoever I picked clearly cover something I was missing in my group, and when I saw this chick ... girl, she was the obvious choice.

So I picked her, turned around, and left.

Phoebe'd been giggling almost nonstop ever since.

And though the giggling jiggle took up what I will admit was more of my bandwidth than she probably deserved, the rest of the 'campus' did grab my attention. It was ... idyllic, I suppose would be the word. There was a quad that seemed central to the rest that was all manicured lawns interspersed with white stone walkways and fountains. There were shade trees widely spaced, and the sky was blue and clear. The buildings themselves were also obvious works of art, though since I don't know anything about architecture I can't really describe them well other than to say it looked like they'd gotten the guy who did the Burj Al Arab to design the place.

There were a hundred-eighty-six competitors left in SDM, and all of them had suites similar to mine. That was in *one building*. The whole place was like some Saudi oil prince's wet dream of a future city. The only other thing I can say with certainty is that I was no longer in the arcology where Division Four and Liminal Science were headquartered. For all I knew I wasn't even on the same planet.

It was balmy, maybe high eighties low nineties and moderately humid. There was a steady breeze, though I couldn't have said from what direction because since I clearly wasn't on Earth anymore I had no idea what a compass would tell me.

Once across the quad, we passed through an automatic door into the cool of a lobby that was white-and-gold marble with blood-red furniture. The first thing I saw aside from the digs as I stepped in was a succubus aggressively sucking the dick of a duoden, one of those four-armed apemen, in one of the lounge areas. She was seated, he was standing, and they were *into* it. I blinked, but then reminded myself that privacy in this world was *strictly* an illusion, and walked on. I didn't need to see that noise; I'd had it from Mauren and I knew that dude was living his best life ... at least in the moment.

They were far from the only people in the area either, and several of them were obviously competitors lounging with their trainers and allies in various stages of interaction ranging from serious conversation to one woman with six tits in two vertical rows, blue skin and gold nipples bouncing aggressively on the lap of a male that looked to me like the Swamp Thing.

I got to the elevator, which was pretty much just a high-tech version of what I'd have seen back home, and waved my hand in front of the sensor. It ID'd me and opened the doors. I would only be allowed onto the floor that actually had my suite, probably to cut down on contestants murdering one another, though I didn't know if that was actually allowed.

Probably not, but I made a mental note to ask. I mean, I just spent four days slaughtering my way through a jungle, my allies could lie to me, and there didn't seem to be too many

rules for anyone else, so why not? I could end the whole season over a weekend.

Which ... probably meant it wasn't worth asking about.

Even with my two packwren trainers, Phoebe, and the bird girl, there was still *plenty* of space in the elevator, and it was a quick ride with some pretty extreme acceleration at the start, something I made a note of. Violently efficient machinery can be an opportunity given the right conditions.

The hallway carpeting was red down the center with gold edging, and our room was the second to last door on the right. The entire left wall was windows, and looked down on the quad.

It wasn't until the door closed behind Yimshe that she opened fire.

She spun me around, grabbed me under my arms, and hoisted me up off my feet against the wall so that we were eye to eye as she growled, "You obviously still think this is a joke. My life, my *mother's* life, depend on you doing well. If we don't impress the hell out of *everybody*, my mother loses all her prestige, and with it all her value. Female livestock don't provide essence to succubi. What we're worth is tied up *entirely* in what we do and Director Chosen trusted *us*. If we let her down, we die. If you sabotage our lives, so help me I'll see you suffer for it before all is said and done."

I was impressed. Yimshe had me three feet off the ground and she hadn't worked hard to get me there either. Granted, I was against a wall, but still.

Meeting her eye, I asked, "Why isn't Pala the one putting it to me? I thought she was the dominant one of the two of you."

"She isn't in charge!" Yim snarled. "I am! I'm responsible! Me! And you're making us *both* look like fools!"

"What's so bad about her?" I asked, looking at the new girl.

Yim blinked, then scowled, showing impressive canines as she said, "We aren't talking about your choice, we're talking

about *how you made it.*”

“I can’t fly. None of you can fly. She can. She looks like she’s pretty good at it too so ... what’s the problem?” I asked. “I don’t need to interview people to know who can and can’t *fly* ... unless.”

I hesitated a moment, then leaned around to look at Phoebe and asked, “You can’t puff up and go lighter than air, can you?”

Phoebe choked, then literally fell over, laughing her ass off. As she rolled from side to side her boobs slammed into the ground so hard they literally bounced her whole body the other way, which was ... *really* entertaining to watch.

I honestly do not know what that jumpsuit of hers was made of, but whoever came up with the material for it deserves a medal.

Still, I was being hung up on the wall and my trainer was *really* pissed, so I turned my attention back to her and said, “Look, you know me well enough by now. They could all have lied to me. I knew as soon as I saw wings that we needed a flier, so why should I subject myself to all that nonsense when I can go with a sure thing? She’s not a succubus so she’s not a vacay. That means why *ever* she’s here, she’s in it to win it. Right?”

I glanced around Yim again, this time searching for and finding the red-eyed avian woman, who blinked at me, her crest going up again before she bobbed her whole upper body rather than her head and said her first words.

“Yes yes. Um, thank you for choosing me? I’m ... happier now that I know why you picked me.”

“It wasn’t obvious from the start?” I asked.

“I ... I guess it was, but I was so startled I didn’t think it through,” she said.

Yim wasn’t having it. She dropped me and turned to Pala, waving a hand at me as she practically whined, “I know this is supposed to be my ball but for fuck’s sake, *help* me! *Talk* to him!”

“Yim, you can’t crack under pressure like this,” Palashai said as she stepped forward to stand in front of her daughter, looking down at her with what I read as a pensive expression on her canine face.

“But he’s ruining *everything*, and he’s doing it *on purpose!*”

“He is not. You and I *both* keep forgetting that Taz is ... special. He has thoughts most livestock don’t have. That means, among other things, that *some* of his choices may be sound whether we see his reasoning in the moment or not.”

I waited to see what would happen, more curious than angry or annoyed. Pala was referencing my past without giving away that I had one, and I was reminded again just how careful I’d have to be every minute of every day. I could never give away that I had a memory.

Yim’s ears flattened, then perked again as she said, “So ... how do I get through to him?”

Pala licked her lips as she glanced down, then looked at me and said, “Sex, Death, and Money is entertainment. The means *is* the end. Does that make more sense?”

I thought about that, and saw what she was driving at. I was on a reality TV show. It wasn’t *just* about correct tactical and strategic decision-making. People were watching literally everything, and they wanted drama. But if that was the case ...

“Okay, I get that, but didn’t I just stir up some fun shit for the viewers at home?”

“That’s precisely what you *didn’t* do,” Yim began, but Palashai set a hand on her daughter’s shoulder, which made her pause and look up.

“He’s right,” Pala said. “Think about it. They’ll put the allies that didn’t get picked in confession rooms and interview them all, looking for juicy reaction shots. I wouldn’t be surprised if they come here and want to interview ... I’m sorry, what was your name?”

“Astra,” the avian promptly said. “Premier product of Division Six.”

I blinked, then suspiciously asked, “You’re supposed to say that whole thing every time you give your name, aren’t you?”

Astra chirped, which was cute, then nodded, which was both a whole body movement and a source of great annoyance for me, because it meant I’d just bought myself a living, breathing commercial break.

Phoebe, who’d finally managed to stop laughing, started again as she sat on the couch, though she said between giggles, “Man, this is *not* your day!”

While I *was* annoyed, it wasn’t Astra’s fault, so I said, “Fine, whatever. Let’s be clear: you *can* fly?”

“Of course!” she brightly exclaimed.

“And you’re good at it?”

“I can fly rings around any other sentient.”

“Great. Welcome to the team. We’ll talk later. Phoebe?”

She blinked, then looked askance at me, waiting.

“You have, without question, the craziest physique I’ve ever seen, I haven’t been laid in two weeks, and I want a closer look at your body plan. You game?”

Phoebe smirked and slipped off the couch, growing up to my size and attaining normal proportions as she did so. She sashayed toward me and then past, hooking a finger into my collar to pull me along as she said, “I’m so glad you didn’t forget me. I’ll be sure to show you everything.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Pala and Yim both looking at me with that curious dog head tilt, astonishment written all over them. Astra just looked vaguely lost, insofar as I could read her at all.

I said, “What? I’m supposed to fuck, right? Well?”

Yim just kept blinking while Pala glanced skyward and said, “Have fun, and be attentive. If she has kinks, try and accommodate her.”

“If she’s into me doesn’t that *already* qualify as a kink?” I asked.

Shaking her head, Pala said, “Xenophilia isn’t a kink, it’s the norm. Dolls are usually ... well, you’ll see.”

“Yes he will!” Phoebe said, voice full of promise as she slid my door aside and pulled me through it.

CLOSING the door behind left me alone in the room with Phoebe. She glanced around, up at the mirrors above the bed, then turned to grin at me. It was a seriously intimidating grin. Shark teeth are no joke.

I tipped my chin up at her as I asked, “How come your whole thing is no sharp edges, and you’ve got more than a few yourself?”

She shrugged and said, “Fish is like, eighty-five percent of my diet, and my species supposedly once had to catch them live.”

“Meant to ask about that too. What’s up with being called a ‘doll’?”

“We have a name, but no one ever uses it. I’m sure it’s in an archive somewhere but if you found and said it, no one would know what you were talking about. Doll’s just ... easier. Are we fucking or what?”

“How does fucking work with you? Got any no-go spots, special instructions, kinks?” I asked.

“You’re supposed to figure that kind of stuff out on the fly.”

“I’d rather not. For all I know, I rub you the wrong way in the wrong place and get hit with a poison barb or you take a chunk out of me on reflex with those awful fucking teeth of yours.”

She hesitated a moment, then nodded thoughtfully as she stepped up to me and turned, presenting her back as she said, “I suppose that’s so. Most livestock wouldn’t think about that. You should know there are no livestock species with ... hidden dangers of that particular sort. With most, what you see is what you get.”

The jumpsuit she was wearing had something akin to velcro. It acted essentially the same but didn’t make any noise. When she turned her back to me I caught the sides at the nape of her neck and smoothly pulled them apart.

She slid her arms up and out of the top and it fell to hang around her hips as my hands slid over her sides. It was the first time I’d touched her and her flesh felt cooler than mine, smooth, and a bit damp.

“So ... what’s inside you now?” I asked, fingers drifting up until they found the rounded undersides of her tits. The physiology behind what was going on with her fascinated me. I knew now that the pool toy dude I’d seen on day one had been a male ‘doll’ but that was it. I needed to know more, and as she answered me, I palmed her breasts, which were only slightly larger than my hands at this point, and found that she really did have four nipples per.

“You’re very curious about things most livestock never think to ask,” Phoebe said as she leaned back against me, letting me explore her. Her breasts had the same feel as a human woman’s — at least in terms of heft and give, warmth and suppleness. It’s a feeling I don’t get tired of.

I didn’t comment. Instead, I rolled fingers around her lower outer nipples, using a delicate touch to see if they hardened.

“Not going to answer me?”

“You didn’t ask a question,” I said, leaning in to brush my lips over her neck, just above her jawline and the subtle lines of her gills. Her nipples weren’t responding to my fingertips, and the only thing I felt from the kiss was her grin.

It wasn't the response I needed, which meant it was time to try something else.

I remembered what she'd said earlier and slid my hands up a bit, then slowly, deliberately squeezed.

Phoebe shuddered all the way through her body and groaned, "Oooh, there it is. For someone everyone thinks is a sexual washout, you sure catch on quick. Mold me, Taz. Shape me any way you like."

I dropped an arm around her waist, lifted her into an underarm carry, and took her to the bed.

As I did I felt her weight shifting strangely, her center of balance constantly in flux. It made no difference as her total weight was still far less than my own, and I tossed her onto the bed. She bounced and came to rest on her back. Her chest was once more truly massive, breasts settling to all but pin her arms at her sides as I looked down on her, stripping my clothes off absently.

Her eyes were huge and focused on me with strange intensity as she said, "I couldn't help but notice you staring at my tits, Taz. How big do you want them?"

Since she wasn't much taller than four feet now and her chest pillows really *were* the size of pillows, each, I didn't think she needed a verbal answer. Not when my cock was pointing up past my belly button.

"Holy fuck!" she said, eyes wide as she noticed it. "You might be half the size of most, but there's nothing small about *that*."

I grinned at her and said nothing. It had already been made clear to me that, at least compared to my height, I was well-endowed.

Kneeling next to her, I settled a hand on one of her tits and said, "I want you to let me know if anything I do hurts. I have a reputation, and while it's not undeserved, I really don't want to leave you with a bad impression."

"Squeeze as hard as you like, as hard as you can. Unless you twist and rip, you really can't hurt me," Phoebe said.

“I’ll go hard if that’s what you want, but I’m not a brutal lover by nature.”

“Oh? What kind of lover are you?” she asked, eyes dropping to my hand on her, which still hadn’t moved.

“I’m no kind of lover. Chasing girls was ...”

I trailed off, not willing to finish the sentence. Chasing girls had been my brother’s thing. I, on the other hand, was always the one looking to brawl. It wasn’t fair, given how we’d led our lives, that he’d gone so young and I was allowed to go so long.

“I’m pretty sure I know what the deal is with you. I’ve seen it once or twice before,” Phoebe said, leaning up into my hand, which almost disappeared into her boob. She wrapped an arm over my shoulder and pulled me down. I could have resisted, but didn’t bother, and she wound up on top of me, literally resting on her chest, which covered mine completely.

I blinked and looked down, then up into her sharkish grin as I said, “I gotta say, I don’t mind this.”

“I figured you might not. I have some advice, if you’re willing to hear it,” she said as she folded her arms across the upper slopes of her chest and rested her chin on her hands, looking down at me.

“Shoot,” I said.

“Let it go. You being here isn’t your fault. It’s nothing you did. The Reclaimers don’t explain themselves, ever, and the succubi are just following their desires.”

“You say that like you know m ...”

I trailed off, but she nodded, then shrugged. She said, “It’s not a bad life, Taz. Someone like you could go far.”

“Within certain limits,” I said wryly.

“In my experience, that’s never not true,” she said. “You just have to understand the shifting tides and swim with the current rather than against it.”

As she said this, her boobs deflated a bit and I felt her shifting into place atop my still very hard cock. She didn't slide down, her body simply got ... taller. Her hips tilted, and she started stroking me with her pussy. I'd caught a glimpse earlier, and she had the same parts down there I was used to seeing. She knew how to use them too, though I suspected that was never *not* going to be the case here.

My eyes shut as I slid hands over her ass, which literally swelled against my palm. She shifted again, then sighed. I grunted as I felt her flesh give around me. She was hot, but not wet. In fact, she was as dry as a bone but it made no difference because she was also as smooth as silk. It was a weird but very, *very* intense sensation.

"I can tell you're verging," she said, quiet amusement in her tone. "You can't tell if my snatch is painful or pleasant. Most mammals get wet when aroused, but dolls don't. Our internals work ... differently."

"MmHm! Noticed."

She gave me that shark's grin as she heard the strain in my voice, then tilted her head, pressing herself up with her hands on my shoulders to look down at me as she said, "I like your cock, Taz. It's got a nice shape and it fits me well."

As she spoke, I could feel the flesh under my hand swelling further and watched in fascination as her tits shrank. Then she rolled herself back and forth, and her now almost excessive backside felt plush atop my thighs.

"That is ... so ..." I trailed off both because the feeling inside her was *really* intense, and because I didn't have a word. Weird wasn't quite right. Cool might be better. It was completely unique, at least in my experience. It was as though her insides were a warm silk scarf wound loosely around me, shifting and swirling. It felt good, but it was intense in a way that didn't jive with the fact that she was barely moving on top of me. I already felt like I was most of the way there.

"You're just about to finish me," I managed. "The feeling inside you is ..."

“You’re cute when you try and finish sentences during sex,” Phoebe said, voice full of quiet amusement.

“Are you even ... getting anything out of this?” I asked.

“Mmhm,” she said, closing her eyes as her head drifted up. “I’m a bit of an empath.”

“What does that ... mean?”

“It means I can feel what you feel. It means I’ll cum when you do. It means you’ve got me really close ...” she murmured, hips shifting around. She had practically no tits at all now, but her ass was gigantic. It covered my legs almost down to my knees, but her weight was no more than it had been. It was disconcerting, but inside her I still felt as though someone were teasing me with that silk scarf. It shifted and swirled, catching my glans from every angle. The feel of it was so intense it was almost like being shocked.

“You certainly do have stamina,” she murmured. “Most males have popped at least once by now.”

“Reassuring,” I groaned, hands sinking into her fleshy flanks as I squeezed hard.

That earned me a low groan from her and a quickening of the shifting, insubstantial and yet intense contact inside her. My whole body shuddered and in the next instant I was cumming. It was a seriously intense orgasm, far more so than what I was used to, and my eyes rolled back in my head as I instinctively hauled her ass hard down on me, every muscle in my body tightening until it felt like my tendons might snap.

Phoebe made a sound that reminded me of steam hissing through a cracked pipe, and her whole body jiggled on top of me.

I opened my eyes as soon as I could manage it, and was just in time to see her collapse toward me, jaws open.

My hands whipped up, one catching her neck as the other closed into a fist, but I checked the blow when she simply hung from my grip on her, limp and panting. I belatedly realized that *her* eyes were still closed.

“You’ve got ... really, *really* serious trust issues ... Taz,” she panted, not bothering to open her eyes.

“I’ve led a rough life,” I murmured, relaxing my arm and letting her settle, watching in fascination as her boobs visibly swelled, plumping up on my chest as she came to rest in a somewhat more balanced configuration, though she hadn’t pulled herself off my still twitching cock.

“I won’t ask, and don’t ever tell,” she said, opening her eyes to look down on me. I knew what she meant, and nodded.

Nothing I said would ever be missed or forgotten. While it was known I had a past, it wasn’t *generally* known. Some would guess based on the conversation I’d just had, but perhaps not many. I still didn’t really know what the ramifications were, so it was best to stay silent on the matter.

“How long are you gonna stay on me?” I asked instead.

“How long are you gonna stay hard?” she returned. “You’re still rigid.”

“I guess you’re just that good,” I said, grinning. “Thank you for not moving, though. I get really sensitive after orgasm.”

“Most species do, and I’m not a sadist.”

“I’m beginning to get why you were never traded.”

“High praise, at least, coming from you. How long until you’re ready to give me another shot?”

“Another minute or so.”

“How many times can you go in a day?”

“Never really tried to find a limit. Mauren sucked me off four times at one point, but I stopped her from going for a fifth.”

“Succubi get greedy. If they take too much on any given day they’ll sicken who they feed from.”

“Who cares?” I asked. “Since they own us, what does it matter?”

Phoebe didn't answer me directly when she said, "My own question went in a bad direction. That isn't what I meant."

"It's fine. I'm kinda enjoying having you on top of me like this," I said absently. She still had me inside her and I was still hard, but she wasn't moving and I wasn't in a rush. It really was a good feeling, and I wanted to savor it.

"I wouldn't have pegged you for the lazy sex type," she said wryly. "Can't say I love it either."

"Yeah, I figured. You like it rough."

"Mmhm. And it's really hard to get it that way too. Dolls are considered fragile because our physiology makes it easy to inflict serious damage on us."

"I'm kinda stuck between wanting to ask how you work because I'm really curious and not wanting to ask because I won't understand your answer," I said.

"Don't ask. It's better that way. Just ... if I tell you not to do something, don't do it. I really do have some fairly intense vulnerabilities."

"Like what?"

"You remember that guy you hit with a dagger? How half his chest blew off? Like that. Dolls *can* be strong — really strong — but the stronger we get the more fragile we become. I choose not to inflate that way, at least, not most of the time. I save it for more pleasant experiences."

As she said that she wriggled her hips and I got the point. I set a hand on her still sizable backside and squeezed with slowly increasing pressure. As I did, she at first shuddered, then her head tipped back and her eyes rolled up.

She groaned, "I have a ... very fine pressure sense. The more tension in my skin, the more pleasure I feel. Usually, I need to blow up as big as I can to get the most out of a session, but your hands are so-ngh! So *strong!*"

I rolled, settling myself atop her, still buried balls deep in her body. Her tits bounced off the bed, then each other, and it felt like my eyes were bouncing along with them. Taking one

in each hand, I leaned forward, slowly pressuring her. Despite Phoebe seeming to think I was safe to play with, I wasn't about to take the chance that I'd ... pop her?

What a weird thing to have to worry about.

The harder I squeezed, the more tense she got, but she didn't look like she was in pain. Phoebe's orgasm — when it happened — was in keeping with the rest of her, which is to say, completely different.

I felt a clench all around the base of my shaft that glued it to my cock as the interior of her pussy literally flooded. She groaned, arcing back, and some of the size in her tits obviously contributed to what was going on down south because I saw her belly — which had a pretty decent four-pack — swell until it looked like she was a few months pregnant. Her entire body jerked and twitched, then settled as she lay beneath me, panting.

“That's all it takes?” I asked, settling on my left hand just past her shoulder. I left my right on her diminished but still ridiculously oversized boob. When I slowly began squeezing again her hands whipped up to catch my forearm, which made her bounce, as she said, “No! No wait ... Oh fuck ... *please* wait ...”

I relaxed my hold, and her arms dropped bonelessly aside as she panted, “What an iron grip. Only a borealan could squeeze that hard, and if they did they'd pop me with those fucking claws. Shit, Taz ... you ... you *have* to keep me. I'll do anything. Just ... so long as you'll do this for me ... every so often.”

“I thought you experienced orgasm when I did? If *this* is how you cum ... what gives?” I asked, glancing down, then moving a hand to her now rounded belly.

When I touched it, she squeaked and reached for my hand again as she said, “If you press there, it'll make a mess!”

Her eyes met mine, I gave it some thought, then grinned savagely down at her as I pressed.

Hard.

Her eyes widened, then rolled back. She made a noise like she was trying to hold it in, then her body jerked as though I'd tased her and she flooded the sheets under my knees.

Grinning, I leaned back and settled, watching her twitch. It really did look like I'd hit her with twenty thousand, and she spent most of the next minute shivering, tongue lolling out of her head.

The only sounds were her panting and the fluid dripping off the bed. Eventually, I said, "You *are* a fun one. You don't have to worry. I'll keep you."

Phoebe's eyes focused for a moment, then closed. She lifted a hand that trembled in the air a moment, then wearily gave me a thumbs-up.

It was a curious bit of convergent culture, and made me grin.

I HEARD the bathroom door open as I stood under the spray of water and turned, but there was too much steam on the glass for me to see who'd stepped in. I guessed who it was anyway by the shape of her shadow. There was only one woman that big who'd come in here.

I watched curiously as she stripped, then opened the glass and stepped into the shower with me.

Pala's body was magnificent. Her black-and-tan colors did nothing to hide the clean lines of her physique, and she had a rack that was both literally and figuratively outstanding. It was more, though; she had broad hips, a muscular ass, and her pussy lips were mature and swollen, at least, that's how they looked to me.

"Don't tell me this is the only shower in the suite," I said, looking her up and down with a raised eyebrow.

"Actually, it is," Pala said with a feral grin. "Not only that, it's the only toilet."

I thought about that, then rolled my eyes and looked pointedly up at her. It wasn't that I didn't believe her. I did, but it frustrated me to no end that even the design of my quarters was purely for the benefit of people I'd never met, and would likely never see.

"I'm not into water sports," I said.

"Could have fooled me. There's a janitor in your room right now cleaning up and changing the sheets."

“How’s Phoebe?”

“Recovering on the couch.”

“Is she okay?”

Pala straightened a bit, her head cocking to look curiously down at me, then she leaned against the wall and crossed her legs as she folded her arms under her chest and said, “Dolls are — succubi excepted — the most sexual creatures in the world. They’re capable of three different types of orgasm, and in your first romp with her you gave her all three. She’s *fine*. She’s just tapped out.”

“So what are you doing in here?” I asked.

“Have sex with me,” she said.

“Okay,” I said, not sure if she was just throwing me a peanut for being a good monkey or if she actually intended to go through with it.

For a long few seconds I couldn’t tell, because she didn’t move. Then she said, “You didn’t finish more than once. You told us it was painful if you got hard and didn’t cum.”

“Second winds don’t work the same way. I’m fine, but thanks for thinking of me,” I said wryly.

“Can you get it up again?” she asked.

“That’s more your decision than mine,” I said. “The question is whether you really want to or not.”

She hesitated, then wryly said, “I’m still thinking it over. Watching you two was really hot.”

I thought about that, then scowled and said, “I really wish I was surprised to hear you were watching.”

“That you aren’t just goes to show you *can* adjust to changing conditions if you try. Violence isn’t the *only* answer to life’s problems.”

“No, but it *is* the answer far more often than most people like to admit,” I said. “People who condemn violence always wind up hiding behind people like me.”

“They hide *from* people like you.”

“Funny how that works. I guess there really *are* only two types of people in this world.”

“Well, in any case, I’m glad you’re willing to fight. There’s no such thing as a champion pacifist. I just want you to broaden your skillset a bit. Phoebe was a good start. I’m glad things between you didn’t turn to violence.”

“And that’s why you’re here?”

“I wanted a shower. You just happened to be here.”

Nodding, I took a step then stopped. Pala’d leaned away from the wall and was now blocking the way out, arms still folded under her chest as she looked down on me.

Not at me. On me.

I felt a flash of annoyance but stifled it as I looked up at her, waiting patiently.

Her head tipped one way, then the other, ears flicking the damp away as she considered me a moment, then said, “Have you ever used your mouth on a female?”

“Once or twice,” I said. “It was usually mutual.”

“This time it won’t be. Well, Taz? Are you willing to get your trainer off?”

I blinked, and despite myself tipped my head just like Pala did as I tried to figure out what her game was. Then again, maybe there was no game. Maybe she’d just watched two people fuck, was horny, and wanted to get off.

If that were the case, she could do it herself.

I was sure she knew that too, which meant she was training me. Everything Pala did was training. Every move she made, every word she spoke.

And as I watched the steam beading on her skin, dripping down her breasts and the rippling muscle of her stomach, I could think of worse things than letting her train me a little.

Stepping forward, I set my hand on her stomach. It was hard, but I knew from past experience that I was at least as strong.

Frowning, I made an effort of will to put the automatic comparison away and focus on the feeling of her skin beneath my fingers. I needed to get her off, and she'd covered packwren in our classes last week. Compared to Phoebe, they were practically human. They had pretty much all the same parts, and were sensitive in the same places.

Still, I wasn't exactly experienced when it came to jacking off women, and she wasn't making it easy on me. She'd broadened her stance a bit to give me access but otherwise wasn't moving, and she wasn't talking.

My hand turned as I slid it down past her belly button, and found the pad of fat just above her pussy. It felt soft and thick, made for getting pounded. It was also smooth, warm, and hairless. I rippled my fingers, looking to see if I got a reaction. I didn't need to look up at her face. I knew it was easier for people to hide their thoughts when they know someone is looking. Instead, I set my other hand on her hip, sliding the pad of my thumb until I found her pulse. On someone fatter it wouldn't have worked, but Pala only had fat in a few places. Everything else about her was hard planes, and I had no trouble finding what I was looking for.

My fingers drifted down, then split, massaging her outer lips. I'd been told not to go for the clitoris right off and followed that advice.

Pala was the one to give it to me, after all, and she was the one I was trying to impress.

For a long minute I worked on her, fingers exploring, massaging, sinking into the plush folds of her pussy. Her pulse stayed steady, but just as I was beginning to get frustrated I noticed the scent.

It was a bit of a head rush, but though it made me light-headed it also told me I was on the right track. Packwren released powerful pheromones when they were aroused. While

I could smell her now, the scent didn't really do anything for me beyond let me know I was on the right track.

"I didn't ask for a fingerbang, Taz," Pala murmured, and I spared a glance to see that she had her muzzle down, almost touching her chest as she looked at me.

No, she hadn't. But that didn't mean I immediately had to change my plan. So long as I got to it eventually, I figured I'd be fine.

Pressing my palm over the top of her sex, I curled my fingers in, still looking up at her.

She closed her eyes in a long blink, then opened them again, but made no sound. It took a moment for me to remember that was the packwren equivalent of a yes, so I kept going, fingers now slick with the proof that I was *definitely* on the right track. Her juices were almost syrupy in texture, and it made me glad I was already in the shower. When I *did* go down on her that stuff was going to make a mess of my face.

I added a finger and got my first real hint that she was enjoying herself as I noticed that her nipples, practically invisible in her areolae when she'd stepped into the shower, were now drawn to thick peaks.

She was also baring her teeth at me, which I took to mean I better move on.

As tall as she was, getting down on my knees put me right at crotch level for her, and though the stone floor wasn't what I'd call comfortable, my comfort wasn't my concern.

The smell of her as I got close was absolutely overwhelming. It was liquid sex, filling my nose and so strong that without even opening my mouth I could taste it on my tongue.

I pressed my fingers as deeply into her body as they would go and lowered my palm, exposing her clit as I leaned in and deliberately ran my tongue up between her lips. There was so much drool coming out of her that I had to swallow by the time I reached her clit, which was swollen to the size of the last knuckle on my thumb.

The breath left her in a rush as I closed lips around it, but I kept my teeth away from her and just used my tongue, all the while slowly but rhythmically pumping my fingers into her body.

Her pulse was speeding up now, though I couldn't see her face past those mammoth tits of hers. She hadn't even unfolded her arms, but there was tension in her belly, her muscles were quivering with strain.

I kept steadily at it, in no rush. This wasn't about me, or if it was it wasn't about how quickly I could do the job. I swirled my tongue over her clit, never really settling on a rhythm. By contrast I kept my fingers at work, never thrusting hard, but always deep, curling my fingers a bit inside her, then pulling out again to repeat.

Minutes passed, and I began to think I'd lost my sense of taste entirely. I wasn't sure I'd taste anything but packwren pussy ever again. It was so thick and cloying, and more kept flowing out of her. I could hear the sloppy sounds over the rain of the shower behind me, but now that I had my head in the game I just kept at it, working. Either she would cum, or she would tell me what she wanted next.

She came.

After almost ten minutes of steady, slow cunnilingus, her cunt started pulsing erratically, and another minute after that it snugged down around my fingers and her lower body shuddered.

Her orgasm was obvious and powerful, but she never made a sound, never uncrossed her arms, and when her pussy let my fingers go I started to pull away.

That was when she finally moved, taking a long step forward to kneel and bowl me over in the process. When she came to rest I was on my back and she was pinning my arms with her shins.

I looked up at her with wide eyes as she hunched, setting her hands on the tiles past my head as she growled, "Who told you to stop?"

Before I could answer she shifted and splayed her knees, burying my face in packwren snatch. She rolled her hips, coating my face in cum as she practically barked, “You eat that pussy until I tell you to stop!”

As I buried my tongue as deep in her body as it would go, I reviewed my options. I could barely breathe. My nose was coated in goeey fluid and I had to huff to get a breath. The way she had my arms pinned gave me very little leverage, and she was so big that even if I kipped I wasn't sure I could dislodge her. Not that I *could* kip. I'd been on my knees on hard tile for the past ten minutes and had pins and needles flooding my lower extremities now. I'd been careless and Pala was taking me for a ride.

Well, okay then.

Since there was no way I was going to turn this into a fight, the only thing left to do was let her have her way. Besides, she didn't taste *bad*, just ... powerful. And with the kind of volume she was forcing me to swallow I might have to skip dinner.

She growled low in her throat as she stared down at me, hunched almost double with her tits hanging like a pair of black-and-tan melons over my head. Her golden eyes were full of strange intensity, and I could feel her insides squirming and twitching as she hunched, grinding her clit against my nose.

“Thaat's it. Good boy. Your tongue is a bit short, but it's sooo strong. I love the way it wriggles. Mmm, feels good. I've *finally* made you useful.”

Annoyance flared and my brows drew down but before I could move, she palmed my head like a basketball and pressed me deeper in as she said, “Oooh, no you don't. You eat that pussy. You do what I tell you, Taz. This is training. I know you can dish it out ... but if you can't take it you'll fail in the end. Make me cum again. Then I'll consider letting you up. Confirm my command, and I'll let you breathe.”

I hesitated, then gave her a long slow blink. She relaxed her hold just a little and I gasped, then wound up buried again; the full, swollen lips of her cunt split over my chin as she

rubbed herself on me. I did the only thing I could since she'd shifted my tongue out of her. I caught her clit and sucked hard, lashing it with my sooo strong tongue.

She growled, her body shuddered, and she bared her teeth at me as she said, "More! Don't you dare stop! Don't you dare stopnnnnNNN!"

And then I couldn't breathe again as she hauled my head down away from her and slid forward to sit on my face. Her ass clenched hard around my head as she howled, leaning all the way back to pin my thighs with her hands as she rode out her orgasm on top of my head.

In the moment, I couldn't breathe, much less think. The only thing that flashed through my mind was gratitude to my asshole instructors for putting me through so much hell in the pool and on the beach. I relaxed so as not to use up my oxygen and waited patiently to either get a breath, or black out.

Pala eventually shifted off me and smeared her cum all over my face with one hand before licking the residue from her fingers. It had the added benefit of clearing my nostrils, and I got some air for the first time in a while.

She settled against the shower wall and looked down on me with those penetrating golden eyes, then sighed and said, "I suppose we'll have to work on you more."

I blinked and sat up, then stood up and stepped under the shower, not bothering to reply. I filled both my hands with soap and scrubbed hard at my face and hair to clear it of her goopy mess.

She watched me do it, panting lazily. It struck me as an intensely self-satisfied expression.

Once I was done I moved to step past her, but one of her hands snapped out to wrap my lower arm and stop me.

Glancing down at her, I said, "I've had about enough of your lesson, Pala. Don't push me."

"You never got hard," she said.

"You expected me to?" I asked.

She gazed steadily at me, then said, “You’re the first who didn’t.”

“Don’t take it as an insult. You’re hot; I’m just not into being suffocated.”

“I feel a bit bad about that,” she said. “If you’d gotten hard, I’d have taken care of it for you.”

I thought about that, shrugged, and looked pointedly at her hand on my arm. When she let me go I said, “I’ll work on it.”

“Taz?” she asked as I turned away.

“What?”

“Why do you like Yim and I? You don’t like anybody else, but you liked us right off. Why?”

“I love dogs.”

“What’s a ‘dog’?”

I gave her a wistful smile as I thought of a dobie I’d grown up with and said, “All I’ll say about it is that where I come from dogs are considered a man’s best friend. You look like a breed called ‘Doberman.’ Your daughter actually looks like another breed called ‘Dalmatian,’ though the ears are wrong in her case.

“Man?”

“A male responsible for his own life.”

“No such thing.”

I just smiled grimly. She tilted her head at me, then shrugged and said, “Well, Yim and I aren’t dogs.”

“Yeah, no shit. Any other questions?”

She looked at me, then smiled slightly and said, “You made good progress today, Taz. Keep it up.”

Eyes narrowed, I asked, “Yim isn’t going to jump me when I step out of here, is she?”

“Doubtful. She’s hiding it as best she can, but my daughter’s completely terrified of you.”

“You should be too. You took a big risk, playing me like this. Had I been in a bad mood, you’d be bleeding out about now.”

“I admit I wasn’t really thrilled about taking that risk, but I’m glad I did. It’s hard to be afraid of someone who smells like my cum.”

“Still?” I asked, nostrils flaring as I sniffed. All I smelled was soap, but she nodded and her tongue lolled for a moment before she reeled it in.

“My mark will be on you for a while. Get used to it.”

“Never thought I’d be grateful for my poor sense of smell,” I grumbled, stepping out of the shower as she chuckled softly behind me.

THE CHOW HALL was full and rowdy as I stepped in. Like everything else on the SDM campus, it was high class. One whole wall and most of the arched ceiling was glass that let in the morning light, and the tables were circular and widely spaced enough for people to move despite it being crowded.

Everywhere I looked there were aliens. Quite a few duoden and packwren, and other breeds I was aware of. I'd killed examples of most of them, but there were more than a few I couldn't have named if asked.

All along the wall across from me was a vast, winding buffet with stations where chefs prepared made-to-order dishes.

All the tables had expensive-looking table cloths and there were chairs in a dizzying variety of styles to fit a dizzying variety of hind end.

Above this was an absolutely gargantuan display. On it was a leaderboard with the top twenty names, and to the left of that there was a visual on a packwren along with a name and several relevant details. The packwren was in fifteenth place, but before I could read what was written there it shifted and displayed the swamp thing I'd seen fucking in the lobby yesterday, who was apparently in sixteenth place.

A look at the names on the leaderboard confirmed that the one in first place was Silent Knight.

Me.

As I gazed around I noticed a drop in the ambient noise, and that more and more people were looking my way. There was a ripple effect that eventually brought about a near silence.

Behind me, Phoebe giggled and said, “Wow. You sure know how to make an entrance.”

“All I did was walk in,” I said, glancing back at her in annoyance.

“A male with a reputation as deadly as yours doesn’t need to do much else,” Yim said, stepping up next to me. “You’re on top of the leaderboard for being a one-male massacre.”

Hearing her call me a male rather than a man annoyed me, but there was no point making an issue of it. I hadn’t wanted to come here but there was literally nothing available in the suite to eat except those food bars and I wanted something with *taste*. I didn’t even care if it tasted *bad*, so long as it was different.

So here I was, now the center of attention for being hungry.

It was fucking annoying, so I glanced up at Yim and asked, “So what’s the protocol here, go get food, take it to an empty table, and eat?”

She blinked once, then said, “Yes, normally, but you’re at the top of the leaderboard so it’s a little different for you.”

She pointed, and I looked to see there was a table on a dais at the far end of the room. It was empty, and I said, “You’re shittin’ me.”

“What? Ew. No. We sit there and people will come and ask us what we want. They’ll serve us.”

I turned around and said, “Fuck that. I’m not about to sit and get stared at-”

I bounced off Pala’s abs before I could finish and she said, “That is *exactly* what we’ll do. We’re here, we eat. You’re not the only one who’s hungry.”

“Did you really have to be *right* behind me?” I asked plaintively, looking up past her boobs at her.

“If I gave you space you’d have too much momentum for me to stop you,” she said, giving me a feral grin.

“You knew I’d-”

“Yes I did,” she said as she spun me by the shoulder and shoved me along in front of her as she said, “Now move. I’m hungry.”

By now the place was rowdy again as most people returned to their meals and conversations, though as I passed I heard my nickname more than once.

The chairs around the table were obviously suited to the various members of my party, and I was fascinated to see that the one for the avian Astra was literally a series of wooden poles. She gripped the lowest with her feet, bent her legs around the next highest, and leaned back against one at shoulder height with nothing at all under her ass.

She caught me staring and said, “Tail feathers. I don’t sit like you mammals.”

She did indeed have a rather impressive set of black tail feathers accented in red, and I could see how sitting might be a technical impossibility for her, but I asked, “And ... that’s comfortable?”

“Yes yes! Thank you for your concern but I’m fine!”

“Suit yourself,” I said and took the only seat sized for me, ignoring the fact that it was tall enough to be a bar stool.

A brightly cheerful voice behind me got my attention.

“It’s an honor to see you, Silent Knight. What would you like to eat?”

I twisted to look, then blinked as I saw *way* too many eyes blinking all out of sync at me out of a face defined by furry white pedipalps curled in front that hid everything beneath the largest pair of eyes. They were nothing but white with *huge* black pupils. The two biggest were focused on me, but the others seemed to be darting around at random.

“Is ... is something the matter?” the creature asked, raising a serving dish with white armored arms to hide her palps. Those arms ended in more articulated fingers than I could easily count, all of which had too many joints and ended in sharp points.

“Uh ... first of your kind I’ve seen,” I stammered.

“Oh! I do hope to make your first experience a pleasant one,” she chirped, lowering the dish again as her palps spread apart and lifted as though to smile. That gave me a view straight down her gullet, which was lined in swirling bands of curving fangs that flexed in a pulsing rhythm, seemingly with her good humor.

With wide eyes, I managed a slow nod and tried not to let the fear show. I knew the packwren with me would smell it, but hoped this ... weird fucking monster wouldn’t pick it up.

“What can I get you to eat, sir?” she asked, palps mercifully closing to hide her mouth. “And please rest assured, a complete chemical work-up was provided to the kitchen. Nothing we serve you will be in any way harmful.”

“Two pounds of mammalian meat cooked until the center is pink, and two different kinds of vegetable, seasoned appropriately. Just water to drink,” I said, taking my mind off the horror show by concentrating on food, though my appetite had mysteriously vanished.

The femme taking my order was tall and willowy, with a fluffy head of white hair and wearing a jumpsuit of red, blue and gold. She had no boobs to speak of, but since she looked like a three-way cross between human, spider, and *lamprey*, I’d have been kinda shocked if she had. I thankfully couldn’t see her lower half as she was standing behind me and I resolutely didn’t look down.

“Certainly!” she said, her voice still eerily bright, at least from my perspective. She turned from me and got orders from the others as I lowered my eyes to the table and tried to get my heart rate down.

Under the table I felt a hand that, given she was sitting next to me, could only be Pala's. She leaned in and murmured, "Despite how they look, chiele are the friendliest, most outgoing people you'll ever meet. Relax."

"I just looked down a man-sized spiral of death and she tells me to *relax*," I muttered, thinking of the dozens of aliens I'd spent the last week killing.

All that, and the scariest thing I'd seen since waking up on this world was the waitress.

"That shit's gonna give me nightmares."

"Well, have them later. I know some contestants get arrogant with the servers but there's no cause for it, and they can be helpful down the road, depending on circumstances. Be *nice*."

"Right! No problem. I can be nice. Sure ..."

The back of my neck tightened until it made me shudder as I shook my head, trying to reset. Being nice would be easy because I didn't want her to *eat me*.

Phoebe said, "And *that* is a completely perfect example of genetic memory. Don't worry about it, Taz. Every species reacts that way to something."

"Oh yeah? What gets to a borealan?" I asked.

Phoebe's big blue eyes wandered, then she said, "Every species but that one."

I rolled my eyes and took my mind off it by looking around the room. Here and there I saw aliens staring back, though I couldn't always be sure because some of them didn't have pupils ... or recognizable eyes.

"Succubi fuck *all* these species?" I asked no one in particular.

"With enthusiasm," Pala said wryly.

When the food came I didn't ask what animal it'd come from. It was grilled, it was a bit bloody, and it tasted ...

I grit my teeth to hide my disappointment, then took another bite. It tasted like beef liver. I'm not one of those that hates liver, but I'm also not a fan. Had it often enough on hunting trips, and when mom insisted, but never touched it again once I actually got control over my diet.

Still, if it tasted like liver, I could at least hope it was as nutritious. And, it must be said, it didn't taste like nothing. That was a technical improvement.

I finished the meat in five minutes and the vegetables in another three. They were good palette cleansers and I knew I'd need the roughage. Once done I set my utensils down, finished the water, and noticed that everyone at my table was staring at me.

"What?" I asked, glancing around.

"No one's going to steal it," Yim said, making a face at me as though disgusted. Her plate was still two thirds full. As I glanced around I noted that was about par for the course. These people obviously lingered over their food. Telling them I bolted my meals so I could get back to work wouldn't do me any good, so I didn't bother.

Frowning, I stood up and said, "You're right, because it's *gone*. You guys take your time."

"Where are you going?!" she asked, but I just waved and walked away. Privacy might be an illusion, but even so I could use a few minutes on my own to explore.

As I moved toward the exit I noticed Maximus stand from his table and start moving my way.

Not wanting the confrontation to be in the middle of the chow hall I pretended not to see him and left. The passage leading to and from was broad and glassed in, same as the main hall, with morning light filling the space. There were a few people still straggling in but no one leaving yet. The borealan caught up with me about twenty yards down the hall. I noticed his clawed hand enter my peripheral but ducked before it landed on my shoulder, turning to face him with hands spread.

“Relax, I’m not here for a fight,” he said, raising his hands peaceably. “I just want to talk.”

“What about?” I asked, eyes flicking past him to catch sight of a succubus hurrying our way. A pair of what I could only assume were drones hovered over her shoulders, and she had the determined look of a reporter.

I said, “Make it quick, we’ve got company coming.”

Maximus blinked, then twisted to look over his shoulder. “Her? That’s just an SDM rep.”

I took a deep breath and let it out, reminding myself that this *was* a reality show, and there was no way a confrontation between the top two on the leaderboard wouldn’t rate a few extra cameras.

“What do you want, Maximus?” I asked, tone flat.

He said, “What you said out in the field bothered me. I wanted to ask about it.”

“I’ve got nothing to tell you.”

“You don’t even know what my question is yet.”

“Maximus, nothing I say can help you, me, or anyone. Go live your life for whatever you can get.”

As I turned, I caught movement out of my peripheral and tried to twist aside but didn’t quite manage it. Maximus caught my jumpsuit at the shoulder but before he could tighten his hold I grabbed his thumb and broke it with a sharp twist.

He clearly wasn’t expecting the response and hissed like a cat as he let me go and jerked his hand back, looking at his disjointed thumb with wide eyes as he said, “What did you do that for!?”

“You’re too smart to ask me that,” I said, voice flat. “The next time you touch me plan on violence, because that’s what you’ll get.”

He covered his thumb and wrenched it back into alignment as he glared down at me, but his expression was more

frustrated than angry. I had to give it to him: Maximus could take pain like a hardened professional.

He said, "I want to team up with you."

Blinking, I paused. I had not expected him to say that.

"What for?" I asked. "We're both killers. You don't need my help and I *certainly* don't need yours."

When he didn't immediately answer I said, "You don't even know what you want."

"I want to win!" he snarled.

"Why?" I asked, tilting my head to look curiously up at him.

He blinked, and the relative silence told me all I needed to know about his motivation.

I grinned and said, "Yeah. Good luck. You'll need it."

"You'll never survive without a team!" he called after me as I turned away.

"Probably not!" I cheerfully agreed, lifting a middle finger over my shoulder idly as I walked away. He wouldn't know what it meant, but it made me feel better anyway.

The truth was, Maximus scared me. He was stronger than I was, bigger, just as fast, and he'd beaten me as easily as I'd beaten everyone else. I didn't want someone like him learning my tricks, and I didn't think sparring him would help. If I was going to beat him, I had to do it some way other than combat.

"Silent Knight!"

Shoulders sagging as I sighed, inwardly begging God for patience, I turned and said, "Yes?"

"My name is Valenteen, embedded on the Sex, Death, and Money campus to help cover the season. May I have a few minutes of your time?"

I looked her up and down pointedly and had to admit whatever time I gave her would be at least *visually* appealing. She was so dark red as to be almost black with a skintight,

dark blue thing that exposed a *lot* of that skin. She had all the curves and her hair was done up in that sexy teacher style, complete with glasses. Her wings had golden accents which I thought were a nice touch, and her tail was swaying in a way I could only describe as sultry.

Yet, given my preferences, I'd have turned her away were it not for Yim's *explicit* instruction: "You are to grant all interviews and *be polite!*"

"What can I do for you, Valenteen?" I asked, folding my hands behind my back as I squared up and faced her. She was a little taller than Mauren had been, but not by much. That meant looking her in the face would eventually give me a crick in my neck.

"What does *this* mean?" she asked, aggressively thrusting her middle finger up between us.

I raised an eyebrow, thought for a moment, then said, "It means, 'Have a nice day.'"

Her eyes narrowed — which she somehow made sexy — then said, "I think you're lying."

"*I* think you're right," I said, smiling pleasantly. "However, as was made very clear to me, lying is part of the game. Was there anything else?"

"You aren't supposed to lie during interviews!" she said sharply.

"Oh? I didn't realize this was an interview. You just asked me for a few minutes of my time," I noted. "*Interviews* are supposedly conducted in private, which this most certainly is not. Was I misinformed?"

As I said this, I made a mental note to thank Yim for filling me in on the details of this particular facet of the game, which she had done this morning before breakfast because she *knew* I'd be confronted like this at some point after what I'd done during the ally selection.

I also noted that a crowd was beginning to gather around us, with allies, other contestants, and a few others in the red,

blue, and gold colors I'd come to associate with functionaries of the game. Even Maximus was hanging around, watching.

Valenteen drew in a slow breath and straightened a bit, turning her head to look down on me out of one eye with speculative intensity. Then she said, "I suppose I have to let it pass. Do you intend to form any alliances at all this season? What we just witnessed marks the second time you've turned down Maximus. If not him, what kind of ally are you looking for?"

"I was under the impression allies were gathered from the events. Maximus is a competitor. All competitors are ultimately my enemies."

"So you intend to participate in the inevitable team events with random contestants?"

I'd been warned about the team events and neither Yim nor Pala had really offered a solution to that particular problem. Neither of them believed I could form any kind of reliable alliances with the other competitors, which was the real reason I wouldn't be trying to do so. Still, the fact that I now had an audience meant I could break the rules without *actually* breaking the rules. Sometimes, when one has a reputation, the best thing to do is lean into it.

Hard.

I shrugged and said, "If necessary, I will take control of any such group and ensure they work smoothly together for the duration of the event, even if that means I'm the only one of the team to actually take the field."

"Violence is-"

"Always an option, yes," I said, smoothly interrupting her. "You must understand that if my choice is between losing because my team is uncooperative and losing because my team is injured or dead, I will choose the latter course. Should that result in my disqualification entirely I will make *sure* they're dead because if I go, I won't go alone. I'm not here to make friends. I'm here to do what I can to justify Liminal Science's faith in me, and they *certainly* didn't sponsor me for my

charming personality. They sponsored me because I'm the deadliest fucker to ever walk this planet. One thing that every competitor in this game should understand is that they are *all* already dead, and if they get in my way I'll prove it to them."

As Valenteen gaped at me, I smiled my most insincere smile and asked, "Now, was there anything else?"

"What is *wrong* with you?" she breathed.

I wasn't sure if the question was deliberate or if it just slipped out, but I'm not one to miss an opportunity. I said, "I've always found killing easier than talking."

Valenteen's eyes widened behind their glasses, but her jaw dropped when I furrowed my brow and looked away with a deliberately conflicted expression on my face as I musingly added, "Division Four seemed to encourage it too. They even offered me my own wrangler to do with as I pleased. I wanted to let her live because she was the best dick sucker I've ever encountered, but when she threatened my trainers ... well. Let's just say the team events coming up won't be the first time I've had to ... forcibly improve the company I keep."

I met Valenteen's shocked gaze with a smile and a wink, flipped her the bird, then turned and sauntered off. The now sizable crowd parted like the Red Sea for Moses to let me pass. The silence in the hallway was complete.

Heh.

Let Director Lane sort *that* shit out ... if she could.

My work here was done.

“OKAY, I get why you did it,” Yim said as she sagged off her feet onto the couch.

It was a long road that started with me getting hoisted, again. I’d have to break that bad habit of hers.

Nevertheless, once I explained my reasoning she chilled right out.

Phoebe said, “Well, while that’s scary as fuck, since that’s pretty much precisely what you were going for, I’ll have to admit it was a slick way to get around the rules. By this time tomorrow every competitor still in the game will know you’re willing to get yourself disqualified killing people who don’t play nice with you. I gotta say, I don’t think anyone’s ever managed to get that kind of message across in season. I wish I could see what the broadcasters are making of it. I’ll bet the bookies are shitting themselves trying to figure out if your idea will actually work.”

“I’d say it has a decent chance,” Pala said, waving a hand idly from her place on the far side of the couch Yim was sitting on. “Even the trainers are scared of Taz at this point. When competitors ask them for advice, most of them will probably encourage their people to play along with you just on the off chance you weren’t bluffing.”

“I *wasn’t* bluffing,” I said, conscious of the fact that even now everything being said was also being monitored and recorded. If there was a leak anywhere in SDM, word of this would get out if I admitted it was anything but the stone cold

truth. “Anyone who gets in my way assumes room temperature.”

Pala gave me a long, steady look, then nodded and said, “Well, in that sort of situation none of us would be there to stop you, so let’s just hope everyone else got the message and plays along.”

MAN she’s slick, I thought, looking at her with an easy grin. Not only did she catch my meaning, she warned everyone else not to press the point.

Phoebe was nodding, but Astra was staring at me with ruby-red eyes open so wide I wondered if her species was subject to terror heart attacks like some birds and goats.

Yim obviously caught the message as she said, “All that aside, you *really* don’t intend to make *any* alliances? I know we told you the chances were good you’d be betrayed, but that doesn’t necessarily happen right away, like in the first event. Most of these teams don’t break up until the last quarter of the season when it gets down to making the hard decisions.”

“The only reason those decisions are hard is because the people making them are dumb enough to form alliances in the first place.”

“The only reason those alliances get made is because people who don’t make them almost never get far enough to make the tough decisions.”

I pointed at Yim and said, “*Almost* never.”

“You just better *hope* you’re the exception that proves the rule,” she dryly replied.

“I don’t hope. Hope is for suckers. I *work*,” I said with quiet conviction. “And speaking of which, what’s next? There’s most of a week before the next event and I don’t intend to spend that time sitting on my ass.”

To my vague surprise, Yim didn’t have an immediate answer for me. Instead, she looked at Pala, who shrugged. Yim then met my eye and said, “Actually ... this is the part where you feast, fuck, and essentially have a good time.”

I blinked at her, twice, and she frowned and said, “I’m serious! Enjoyment is part of the game!”

“Is it worth score?” I asked.

“Not ... specifically,” Yim said, obviously hedging. “At the end of the week — just before the next event — there’s an audience vote that awards a flat amount to the top twenty based on where you fall in terms of popularity. The more people that like you, the higher the award. Those who don’t make the top twenty get nothing.”

“Well, no sense chasing that. Any *other* ways to get score?” I asked.

Yim’s ears drooped and she lowered her head, then yelped as Pala smacked her shoulder and said, “None of that! You’re his trainer, answer his question!”

“He asked me if there’s a way to get score, I tell him, he blows me off!” Yim said in what was practically a whine. “What am I *supposed* to do?!”

“What other ways are there for him to score during down time?” Pala said, asking a painfully obvious leading question.

Yim’s eyes wandered, then she opened her mouth to answer but actually let out a startled yip when Pala said, “*Him*, not me!”

Looking chastened, Yim faced me and said, “Technically, you can gain score by ... getting SDM staff to vouch for you.”

“Now we’re talking. How do I convince them to do that?” I asked.

“Um ... generally, you fuck them,” she said, glancing away. “If they like you best out of all the others who’ve propositioned them, they vouch for you.”

I gave her a long, steady look, and eventually she threw up her hands and said, “Why do you think I didn’t mention it?!”

“Because you don’t think in terms of what *can* be done, only what *has* been done,” I said sourly. “But that’s okay. Fortunately for *me*, I’m used to lateral thinking.”

“You are *not* — under *any* circumstances — to threaten the staff!” Yim barked.

When I furrowed my brow at her, she bared her teeth at me and said, “I *mean* it!”

“Why the hell would I *threaten* them?” I asked.

“I think that’s the dumbest question you’ve asked yet,” Yim shot back, staring hard at me.

I rolled my eyes in momentary thought, then held up both hands in surrender as I said, “Okay, yeah, I suppose I can see where you’re coming from on this one, but I really don’t intend to threaten anyone.”

“So ... what then?” Yim asked.

“Well, this is essentially about convincing the staff to vouch for me. They’ll only do that if they like me. So far so good?”

When Yim gave me the long slow blink, I said, “Well, that’s easy then. It’s time I got to work.”

LANE STOPPED JUST inside her suite's entry hall as the door slid smoothly closed behind her. Ahead, the mood lighting she preferred gradually revealed the artfully decorated living room beyond which was a magnificent view of the Thule arcology from high enough up on the northeast arm to reveal almost everything from one end of the vast construction to the other. The lights of the night skyline were mesmerizing as always. Here and there her tech specs allowed her to see augmented reality advertisements floating over the city: everything from hundred foot tall nubile succubi modeling the latest fashions to more pedestrian signage in brilliant colors. She stared at that view for a long few seconds, then took off her specs with slow deliberation and set them on the table next to the door so they could charge.

She was almost three steps into her suite when she finally lost her composure and snarled, "That savage, brutal, treacherous, ungrateful, ignorant, arrogant, *murderous* little *monster!*"

She ripped her heels off and threw them across the room as she screamed, "*FUUUCK!*"

Lane had spent all day answering some *very* pointed questions from the vice-head of divisions and been required to lay out some *very* hefty bribes, not to mention call in almost every favor she was owed, and all it got her was a moratorium. The Hierarchy had yet to officially announce an inquiry into the rather fantastic claims made by Taz *live* on SDM, but it was only a matter of time. When that inquiry was launched her

hold over her subordinates would be truly tested. If she went down, a good chunk of Division Four would go down with her.

What was even worse, she couldn't retaliate. Not yet, and not soon. Anything she did to sabotage Taz could only reduce the payout her division received. Assuming she survived the shit storm that little asshole had unleashed on her, he had to win in order to get her paid, and she now *needed* that money after his wild accusation rather precipitously drained her accounts.

An SDM champion could make a division head fabulously wealthy, and it galled Lane beyond endurance that she had to continue to support the male that may just have crippled her career.

"But once you win for me I'll see you conscious on the dissection table, you little shit," she vowed, staring out at the city, but seeing only his face. "*Nobody* spites Annabelle Lane."

INTERVIEW 2

"VALENTEEN, SDM EMBED. YOUR NAME?"

The succubus winced slightly as the chielen female made a sound almost too high for her to make out, then squiggled a blunted claw in one ear as she said, "Fantastic, and what do people *call* you?"

"Oh! Mis'tle. Is that okay?"

"That's fine. You've vouched for Silent Knight, and you're the sixth staff member to do so over the course of the last three days. Can you tell us why you decided to give him your endorsement?"

"Oh certainly! He's the nicest male I've ever met! He came to me, asked me what I do, then spent hours helping me with my work! He's very fastidious, you know? And so strong! With his help I finished a day's worth of tasks in just a few hours! When I asked him why he was doing it, he said that

he wanted to get used to people like me. He said he was sorry for how he treated me at breakfast and wanted to make up for it.”

“How he treated you?” Valenteen asked, a bit bemused.

“Oh, he tried to hide it but he was *terrified* the first time he saw me. I could smell it all over him. But by the time he finished working with me there was no fear on him at all! I thought it was wonderful of him to want to get to know my species, so I vouched for him! No competitor has *ever* offered to help me with my work, and I almost never get sex offers, so I’ve never really been motivated to vouch for a competitor before. He’s my first!”

Valenteen nodded thoughtfully, then asked, “Were you at all *interested* in sex with SK?”

“What? Nooo, of course not! I could tell by his pheromone cues that he wasn’t interested in me that way. We are friends now, though! I like him a lot!”

“Don’t you think it’s a bit mercenary of him to bribe you for your vouch by doing your work?” Valenteen asked.

“How’s that any different than bribing me for my vouch by giving me an orgasm?” Mis’tle asked, head tilting curiously. “Not that anyone ever bothers trying that. Some of my friends have even gotten in trouble for slacking when competitors pull them from their duties for sex. Thanks to SK, I’m actually *ahead* on my chores! I hope he keeps the top spot! He-”

“Thank you for your time, Mis’tle,” Valenteen smoothly interrupted with a radiant and very practiced smile.

The cheerful chielen lifted her palps, exposing her mouth in what amounted to a smile from her species. She then twisted her palm away and lifted one of her many fingers — Valenteen could only assume it was the middle one — then turned to leave, her myriad legs clacking rhythmically as her segmented body wove smoothly away down the hall.

Valenteen watched her go and made sure to cut her feed before muttering, “Yep. It’s official! I hate him.”

“SO YOU’VE GOT the next event?” I asked, stepping down into the communal space from my room. I’d just gotten out of a shower when Phoebe slid open the door to give me the news. I had a towel wrapped around me like a toga because why not — it was faster than dressing and this was one piece of news I was eager to get.

Yim gave me a feral grin and held up two fingers as she said, “I know the next *two* events.”

Blinking, I glanced around the room, but no one else seemed surprised so I asked, “Is that usual?”

Yim wagged a hand in ambivalence as she said, “Some of these events require extra prep time from the contestants, so it happens from time to time. The next event is the triathlon deathrace.”

I gave her a raised eyebrow, then said, “Triathlon ... *deathrace*? Didn’t someone tell me this event wouldn’t be violent?”

Nodding, she said, “Yes, but the sponsors have what amounts to a draft system to select the events. Apparently, someone pulled strings to ensure this event came up even though by now everyone knows your ... particular skillset. The three stages are the run, either *another* run or flight, and the last is a swim.”

“I’m in trouble,” I said quietly. “As soon as the race starts I’ll get mobbed.”

“It doesn’t have to be you and no, whoever it is won’t get mobbed, at least not right away,” Yim said. “The competitors start in leaderboard order and the time between each is determined by the score gap. Our runner will have around a three-minute head start. After that, the next portion starts as soon as the last finishes. There’ll be a baton that has to be handed off and kept throughout the race. Lose the baton and you forfeit. It’s thirty miles: ten cross-country, ten aerial or more cross-country, and ten miles in the water.”

I glanced at Astra and pointed at her with a big grin as I said, “I *knew* you were the right pick.”

Astra chirped at me, feathers to either side of her face fluffing to hide her beak as her crest went up, then settled again. I knew it was a blush because I’d seen her do it before, and returned my attention to Yim as I said, “Okay, no problem, and what’s the event after that?”

Yim’s grin faded markedly as she said, “It’s a musical competition. You need to either perform a piece from the hot one hundred, current or legacy, or compose an original piece of music. You’re allowed to have help and won’t be required to play any instruments, but you’ll actually have to either have an ally sing, or do the vocals yourself.”

“So, presuming I do an original piece, I can record the instrumentation in advance?” I asked, getting a little excited despite myself. My brother and I formed a garage band in high school since mom had put us both in music lessons *very* much against our will. I could play the drums and keyboard, and my brother had been a wicked guitarist. We could both sing, but spent most of our time back then screaming the lyrics ... such as they were. We’d gotten a few gigs doing covers of tamer stuff, though, mostly weddings in town. We weren’t proud of those gigs but they’d gotten us running around money, and that experience would now serve me well. Once he and I signed up he’d done music as an extra duty while I ... went another way. I’d picked up the guitar in his memory, after, but never got quite as good as he’d been.

Well, maybe I was, but the music in my memory was always better than anything I could play.

When Yim blinked affirmation at me, I smiled and said, “No problem then.”

“Who are you going to have do the land portion of the race?” Yim asked.

“I’ll do it myself,” I said, as though it were obvious. “Phoebe will do the swim, and Astra will fly.”

“Are you sure that’s best?” Yim asked. “You could have Pala or I do the run. Remember, allies can’t be killed by competitors without disqualification. If either of us runs, you’ll be safe.”

“What’s your best time for the ten mile?” I asked.

“I can do it in an hour and five minutes. I’m faster than mom.”

“Okay then. Like I said, I’ll do the run.”

“Have you ever run that far?” Yim asked.

“Trust me. I’m faster than you are at that distance. Leave it at that,” I said, giving her a warning look.

Her ears switched around as she gazed at me, obviously still dubious.

I said, “Let’s start work on this music thing. Is there a terminal I can use? What about a recording room? I need to select the instruments and figure out the notation. Then I’ll teach ... wait, who among you can sing?”

Astra’s crest flexed, but her feathers were still covering her beak as she tentatively raised a wing. I nodded and smiled at her as I said, “Great! You can be supporting vocals. I’ll teach you the words, once I write them. Anyone else?”

Pala glanced over at her daughter with one eyebrow up, and Yim grudgingly said, “I’m an okay singer.”

“Outstanding. Two female voices on supporting vocals will work great. We’ll blow the competition out of the water. I’ve got a song that’ll crush it for sure.”

“I didn’t know you were musically inclined,” Phoebe said, looking speculatively at me. “I’ve never heard you sing.”

Shrugging, I said, “I usually only sing when I’m happy.”

That hung in the air unchallenged, and I nodded after a moment and swept a hand as though to brush it away as I said, “So the next two events are easy.”

Pala chuckled darkly and said, “While I have no idea how justified your confidence is, I’m sure right now you’re giving bookies all across the planet fits.”

“Let’s keep them guessing. I’m going to go ahead and assume if I look out that window right now I’ll see a lot of running idiots?”

Phoebe started laughing, which made her jiggle in a very fun way as she nodded and said, “Endurance runs aren’t something that comes up very often and most competitors don’t train for it. They’re either naturally good at it or they aren’t. Certain allies specialize in long distances, though.”

“Like you?” I asked, and got a shark-like grin that I returned.

“How are borealans on distance?” I asked, mind inevitably turning to the only male I saw as genuine competition.

Yim glanced at Pala, who wagged a hand as she said, “They’re sprinters. They *can* go the distance, but I wouldn’t say they’re particularly fast beyond about a mile. Their bodies are so fuel intensive that when pushing they tend to burn out on long distances. Inside a mile, though, they’re the fastest ... and it isn’t close.”

“But you’re saying I’ll have a three-minute head start on him?” I asked.

When Yim gave me the affirmative blink, I grinned, the tune I planned to introduce to the world already playing through my mind, making me nod along. Unless Maximus could do a sustained sixty miles per hour, I’d beat him out of the first mile and after that it was all me ... though that first mile would be rough. I’d have to give it everything I had to get out of it in the four twenty that was my best time, and that would inevitably slow me up later.

That aside, the race didn't worry me that much. I might not *win* the land race, but as long as I beat Maximus I knew my allies would handle the rest and we'd average into a comfortable first place overall.

"So we've got two days until the race, right?" I asked. Yim nodded.

Phoebe asked, "I admit, I'm *really* curious about this music you seem to have in mind."

"Oooh, you'll hear it. *Everyone* will. I absolutely cannot wait. This is going to be the most fun I've had since those fuckers woke me up. Someone show me how I can set the instrumentals."

As it turned out, the suite had an office similar to the one they'd given us at Liminal Science, and one of the features of that office was that it could easily be converted into a sound booth at the literal touch of a button.

Drums and keyboards are apparently pretty much the same no matter where in the universe one is, and their stringed instruments came in both acoustic and electric varieties. Though they came in odd shapes and sizes, I could make do. There was also a very elaborate recording program I could use and the keyboard could synthesize pretty much any sound, so I had everything I needed.

I spent the rest of that day in a sound booth, tuning instruments, programming the keyboard, and setting up microphones and sound-capture software while I worked out the differences between the musical notation I remembered versus what these people used, which turned out to be wasted effort when I found a software function that would simply give me the notation for whatever I played. I knew anyone watching my feed would realize I had experience with this and if they'd reviewed my history would also know neither Division Four nor Liminal Science had trained me in music, but there's a point past which secrecy isn't really as useful as getting the job done. The sooner I got this song recorded, the sooner I could iron out the kinks in the live performance.

I gave the next morning over to working with the SDM staff, as had become my habit, then retired back into the recording booth to do all the various instrumentals.

The day before the race, once I finished more SDM staff chores, I brought Yim and Astra into the booth with me and taught them the lyrics I'd written. I'd had to finagle the words a bit to update the rhymes, but kept the beat the same and by the end of the day we had a *very* rough cut to work off of.

I knew I had a winner when — after dinner — I heard Astra absently humming her part with a happy little head bob going on.

Then the day of the race dawned, and — at least for the moment — I set music aside.

It was time to run or die.

I KNEW I'd made a serious miscalculation as I looked in despair at the terrain I had ahead of me. For some reason I'd assumed I'd be running on a straightaway, and that was *not* the case. Yim had even *said* it would be cross-country but the implications had blown right past me, and now I was in serious trouble.

We were back on the island where the season opener had taken place, on the beach, and the target for the run was the summit of the motherfucking mountain. It was *literally* ten miles from where the competitors would start to the summit, but *practically* it might be twice that far depending on how one ascended the slope, which started as dunes that led into jungle then light forest before bare mountain rock.

I'd gone *most* of the way during the opening event, but never *all* the way. I knew there was a trail and that it would probably be my best bet, but anyone who'd spent the last few days studying maps of the terrain rather than writing fucking music would have a serious advantage over me. I couldn't even fault Yim or Pala for not warning me about this. They *had* warned me. The fact that I'd blown them off and not looked into the details was my own damn fault.

I glanced over at Maximus only to see him gazing steadily at me, his 'baton' in one hand, the other flexing absently.

The baton was actually a dagger, which I figured was probably a step worse than the whole 'don't run with scissors' thing my mom used to yell. We were all down to what

amounted to spandex and not only were there no pockets or places to secure the dagger, it didn't even have a sheath. I made a mental note to ask Yim if SDM Inc. sold a deadly blooper reel. My bet was 'yes.' The way they set up these events, there'd certainly be enough material.

"Last chance."

Glancing up, I met Maximus' eye. He'd approached while I was distracted and now towered over me, casting me in shadow. The other competitors were all grouped up here and there, some with their allies but most of those would be participating at various stages of the race and were already in their respective start positions elsewhere.

"For what?" I asked.

His ears flattened as he said, "Join my pack and I won't kill you on the way up the mountain. I have your scent now. If you don't belong to me when the race starts I'll track you down and kill you before finishing the ascent. You already know you can't beat me with weapons far more effective than *these*."

He waved the dagger as his lip curled in disgust.

"Either join me, or I'm going to end your run right here."

I glanced around, but while there were SDM reps scattered throughout the crowd, none of them were looking our way at the moment. I frowned up at him and seriously considered his offer.

"Why are you so intent on joining me rather than just killing me?" I asked.

"Structure is important," he said. "A powerful pack is more efficient at everything, and we can control the pace of the game."

"I was told no borealan ever won SDM, so I'm not sure your strategy is really as good as you seem to think it is," I noted.

"A combination of corpo interference and ... instinctive mistakes," Maximus said. "I won't be making those mistakes,

and I have one of the most powerful sponsors in the game. This event was arranged because *I* asked for it. I knew you'd want to run the first segment and here you are, at my mercy. I *will* win this season."

"Sounds like you don't need me then," I said, raising an eyebrow.

"Everyone needs *someone*," Maximus hissed, glancing around. "Why can we not be comrades!? You're strong, smart, and with my leadership we can block out the top four, maybe all five spots! I respect you and I *really* don't want to kill you, but if you don't join me I'll have to when the time comes. I can't afford to let you stay in the game unless you're on my team."

I considered him for a long moment in silence, weighing the pros and cons. The easiest thing to do here would be to agree to an alliance and break it later, but something about what he'd said raised a question in my mind and I said, "You said 'under your leadership.' What happens if I agree to that?"

"Our scores will swap," he said.

"Hah! Yeah, that's not happening," I said. I had my answer.

"Then you're about to die!" he hissed.

I looked him dead in the eye, smiled, and said, "Good luck."

He snarled in pure frustration and whirled, stalking away.

I, meanwhile, returned to my examination of the mountain and sighed as I tossed out the idea that I could just make straight for the summit. Maximus had told me his whole game plan — which was both very thoughtful and very, *very* fucking dumb — but it left me in an awkward position. I had to figure out a way to beat him before I could reach that peak alive.

Fortunately, I had a great deal of experience in jungle survival and more than a couple ideas knocking around in my head. Maximus would have his work cut out for him if he expected to trail *me* down, and a nasty surprise in store if he managed it.

Still, it would be a shame to kill him. Maximus seemed so strangely earnest to me, and the last thing a killer wants is to feel like a mark has value independent of his cooling corpse.

“Five minutes to start. Please assemble in the designated area.”

The voice was so sultry that the actual meaning of the words took an extra second to sink in.

“Great. A succubus with a megaphone,” I grumbled as I turned toward the place where they had a very elaborate start-line set up, complete with a small cloud of floating camera drones and ... yes, Valenteen, along with a few of her buddies.

The one thing that was improved over the last time I'd been on this island was the footwear. The soles were grippy. Even better, they were custom fit and pretty much vacuum sealed to my feet, which would keep debris out. I'd been assured they were essentially tear and puncture proof, so that was one less thing. Other than that, I had the dagger that was my baton and a skintight uniform that was *not* camo. It was in fact almost precisely the opposite: Liminal Science blue and gold, which *sucked*. I'd be visible for fucking *miles*.

As I took my place at the head of the line of contestants, I noticed more than a few eyes and eye-like paraphernalia turned my way. I was the man to beat. I knew it, and everyone in that line knew it. If any of them found me they'd try to kill me ... which was fine because that's what I intended to do if I found any of *them*. The speed factor would cut out ambush hunting, but it also meant I'd probably have plenty of warning if someone was coming up on me.

The only real rule for the first leg of this deathrace — aside from the staggered start — was that no fliers were allowed.

I gave them all a half-smile, then deliberately turned my back to take my place ahead of them. Given the chance I'd kill all these fuckers and good riddance.

As I waited for the start gun, or gong, or whatever, I idly wondered what would happen if I just waited at the finish line

of the first leg and killed every single one of these assholes as they came in.

It appealed to me, but I eventually had to discard the notion because not all the people waiting in line behind me were competitors. Many were allies, and I wouldn't be *able* to kill *them* — at least, not according to my trainers. I might be able to steal their batons, but it seemed like a lot of work and if any of them got past me I'd have wasted my advantage.

I glanced around and saw that there was an estuary about half a mile to my left. It would lead back to a stream that almost certainly wound up the mountain. I'd need that watercourse to make my admittedly rather hazy plans come together, so when the gong sounded I took off, then veered left as soon as I was in the trees out of sight of the start line. I was running as fast as I could considering the debris, but I'd only just reached the water when I heard another gong.

Maximus was loose, and he'd be hunting me.

Time to go to work.

MAXIMUS LOPED through the trees following the rather obvious scent trail left by his quarry. As he moved, he wondered what motivated the odd little creature he found himself chasing. There was obviously something strange going on with him. He was more than a killer, but seemed content to lean into his reputation. That made sense, because every other competitor in the game was completely terrified of him. Given the chance they'd avoid contact, which in turn would give Taz a clean race.

The problem — for Taz — was that Maximus *wasn't* afraid. He knew the so-called 'Silent Knight' wasn't a real threat. Without his traps or any equipment, not to mention the time constraints, there was almost no way he could escape.

So why had he seemed so confident?

Regardless, Maximus was done giving the self-proclaimed 'human' chances. With his final refusal to relinquish the top spot, the only way to get it from him was to remove him from the leaderboard entirely. Maximus didn't have an ally who could fly, so the second leg of the race would cripple his overall time.

His only real recourse was to kill Taz and anyone else he encountered on his way up the mountain, hopefully clearing away several of the leaders so that his own score wouldn't suffer too much.

He knew that Taz *did* have a flier in his pack, and scowled at the knowledge. If Maximus somehow failed to catch and

kill him, Taz would only expand his lead.

He slowed as he smelled water up ahead, and his eyes narrowed as he saw a fast-running stream that had cut a wide trench through the area. The scent trail he'd been following ended at the water, and Maximus paused on the bank, listening and looking.

Another gong sounded, signaling the start of another competitor, but it didn't worry him and he ignored it as he carefully examined the bank on both sides toward the mountain. As close behind Taz as he had to be, he should still have been able to scent him in the air over the water. The only explanation was that Taz had submerged himself, which meant he couldn't be far away. The stream was too shallow to swim properly and too fast running to pull along at anything but a cripple's pace.

After almost a full minute, he caught the glint of gold on his side of the stream about twenty yards up, buried in a mudbank.

Scowling, Maximus began to creep forward, dagger ready in one hand, claws of the other flexed to strike. Taz was hiding, hoping Maximus would overlook him and give up the hunt to strike on toward the peak. He must know that without a flier he didn't *need* to finish first to win the overall race.

Still, it was a shame. Maximus truly felt a strange kinship with this male. He wanted to learn more about him, and knew there *was* more to learn.

As he got closer he saw that Taz *had* been clever. He'd deliberately collapsed part of the bank over himself. It would have hidden both his sight and scent, and had Maximus not seen the gold, would have been stumped.

He crept forward with infinite care and made no sound audible over the fast-rushing stream by his side. At last, he stood over his quarry, then crouched, turning his dagger. He could use his claws, but the dagger was longer and more likely to be immediately fatal. There was no reason to make him suffer.

Maximus drove the dagger into the mud, and at almost the same instant felt an intense pain in his ankle that bloomed into such a radiant agony that he twisted instinctively away and howled as he fell into the water, clutching his leg.

Twisting, he got his head above water with a gasp and looked to see a completely mud-covered but otherwise naked Taz standing where he had just been, a bloody dagger in one hand. He looked down at Maximus, then crouched and picked up the dagger Maximus had left buried to the hilt in the mud.

The dagger Maximus needed to complete his leg of the race.

Maximus roared and leapt to his feet but immediately fell again when one of them refused to support the move. The pain was unbelievable, far beyond anything he'd experienced before, and he twisted his leg to see the tendon connecting his muscle to his foot had been entirely severed. The muscle was bunched up above his knee and the source of his agony.

As he rolled over to get onto his hands and one remaining foot, Taz flipped Maximus' knife and hurled it with considerable strength.

Maximus ducked, but the knife missed him by so wide a margin that it was obvious Taz hadn't been aiming at him. He quickly twisted to look and saw it disappear into the brush almost fifty yards distant on the far side of the stream.

The sound of rustling drew his eyes back to find that Taz had fled, and for a critical moment, indecision wracked him. He might still catch his enemy, but if he did he would lose precious time retrieving the baton he needed to finish the race. If he went to it now he could find it quickly, but if he went after Taz it might take a dedicated search to locate later.

Between his indecision and his pain, Maximus lost his choice.

Taz was gone.

Maximus roared, putting every ounce of his pain and rage in the sound, then twisted and made for his baton. Once he had it he shredded his uniform to make an impromptu bandage.

His natural healing would stop the bleeding, but he would need surgery once he finished his leg of the race. Until then, he was crippled.

Maximus began his slow, arduous trek up the mountain, dogged by pain almost beyond endurance. Humiliated anger filled his mind and he lamented that if he had a pack, it wouldn't have happened this way. There'd have been someone to watch his back.

Taz had taken that, and now he had proven that *he* didn't need a pack. He might not be as strong or as large or as good a fighter, but there was something about the little human that seemed to put him beyond reach.

Maximus vowed that whatever that nebulous quality was, he would make it his own. He would finish this race despite being crippled.

He would prove borealans were more than just mindless killers. That they could form alliances and connections and be worthy of the same affection given to so many other races.

His was not a race to be feared, but cherished. They would all see.

He would win SDM, no matter *what* he had to do to make it happen.

Yet as he inched his way up the mountain, teeth gritted against the pain, he also knew that he had no solution to the problem of the human. He had been outwitted, but even that wasn't the worst of it.

Maximus knew with dread certainty that in the initial attack, Taz had spared him.

Instead of a clean kill he'd crippled Maximus, subjecting him to what would doubtless be the longest ten miles of his life.

Why?

Why had Taz shown him mercy?

VALENTEEN CAUGHT me practically the *instant* I passed my dagger to Astra. I watched the black-and-red-feathered alien fly away and spent an extra few seconds at it before turning to acknowledge her frantic attempts to get my attention.

I was exhausted. I was naked, filthy, cut and bleeding in several places, cold, tired, and I'd put four more competitors in the ground on the way up this fucking mountain. I was *not* in the mood for this bitch, no matter *how* well she did the sexy teacher thing.

Though, it must be said, she did it *very* well.

“Everyone’s talking about your incomprehensible decision to spare Maximus. Care to comment?” she asked, looking at me as though I were about to tell her the secret to life’s greatest mystery.

Fucking journalists.

“No.”

I started to turn away and she dropped a hand to my shoulder as she said, “Don’t you *dare* walk away from this! Why did you spare him!?”

My eyes slowly drifted from her eyes to the hand she had on my shoulder, then back. By the time our gazes locked, her hand was gone, and I said, “Valenteen, there is a difference between a public interrogation and a private interview. This is the second time you’ve made that mistake and I am under no obligation to give you information of strategic value to me

while other people involved in the games can overhear. Now, if you have any *other* questions, I'll answer them if I can."

As I waited for Valenteen to figure out what she wanted to do with that, it took every ounce of willpower I possessed not to reach out and throttle this ... creature. It wasn't even really her fault. I wasn't angry at her specifically.

I was angry at me.

The truth was I knew why I hadn't killed Maximus when I had the chance. I'm good with knives. I could have done it. His throat was exposed *twice*, not to mention the free chance at his groin that I'd had when he crouched, but I never took the shot.

Something held me back. If I were a better man it might have been my conscience, but I knew that fucking thing was still dead and buried with my brother's body.

The fact was, for whatever reason, I liked Maximus.

It was a serious problem, and it pissed me off. I'd hate-marched the rest of the way up the whole fucking mountain raging at myself for not taking the shot when I had the chance.

Mercy wasn't my style.

So I had to play it off as a strategic move. Most people would armchair quarterback that one to death, but if anyone figured out I was a softie I was fucking *done*.

It was a weakness I couldn't afford. Not when my ability to control the people around me depended almost entirely on their belief that I was essentially a rabid dog that might slip the leash any moment.

After several long seconds of silence, Valenteen actually surprised me when she said, "No, that was it. I'll arrange for a private interview later."

"I look forward to it. Now, if you'll excuse me," I said, flipped her the bird, and walked off.

As I did she called after me, "I still don't think that means what you said it means!"

“Too fuckin’ right,” I muttered, and about then Yim caught up with me.

As usual, she started with a complaint.

“Please don’t piss off the interviewers. They can make or break public opinion of you.”

I gave her a weary look, then said, “Maybe I should just offer to fuck next time she rolls around. *That’d* score me some points.”

“Actually yes, it would. She’d almost certainly accept and even for a succubus she’s *hot*. Your audience rating would skyrocket.”

I just rolled my eyes and said, “Anywhere I can get a shower around here?”

She pointed, then walked with me to a temporary building set up as a locker room. The summit of the mountain was a vast caldera and while a lot of it was taken up by a picturesque lake, it was also windy as fuck and *cold*. We were on a small artificial island in the center of the lake: the last few hundred yards of the race had actually been a floating bridge over the water.

Despite my best effort I hadn’t been first up the mountain, but I was too tired at that point to care. I just wanted my hot shower, and pressed through the door to get it. Yim startled me when she walked right in after and started stripping down.

I stopped to watch, eyebrows raised, and she paused when she noticed. The insides of her ears reddened, which I saw because they were white and the contrast was really stark. She said, “I’ll clean you up. I’ve got some cream that’ll take the sting out of those cuts and help them heal faster.”

“Suit yourself,” I said and stepped into the communal area that took up fully half the temporary and turned on the water at one of the central pillars. It sprayed down at me from the ceiling *and* the pillar, and I groaned as the crusted mud and blood started to slough off. I set my hands on the pillar, leaned over and just closed my eyes, letting the water pound my weary flesh.

Yim's hands were so gentle that I almost didn't register the touch, gliding slowly up my back. Once they got to my shoulders she dug her fingers in and got a groan out of me.

She leaned over me and murmured, "I know why you spared him."

"Yeah? Well, don't say it out loud. Someone's always listening," I said, head lolling as she kept working my shoulders.

She kept going for several long minutes, and I gotta admit, it was a small slice of heaven amid the hell I found myself in generally.

"Will you say it?" she asked.

I blinked, then leaned away from her and twisted to look, causing her hands to drop away as I asked, "Say what?"

She gazed steadily at me, then reached out and set a hand on my chest. Her hand was half again as big as mine, but her touch was gentle as she said, "If you want more, will you ask for it?"

As I watched, she lifted her other hand to cup one of her breasts. The soft flesh melted into her hand and the sight of it was ... well, it had an effect on me. She was bigger than I was, but seemed vulnerable in that moment. Her eyes were liquid as she gazed at me, ears forward, hair plastered to her head as she stood before me, glistening under the spray.

I was pretty sure her mother'd put her up to this, and before she'd filled her hand with boob sex'd been dead last on my list of things to do. She'd bumped it *waaay* up that list, but I was hurt, tired, and honestly?

"I just want more of what you were doing earlier," I said.

She nodded and stepped in close as she said, "I will. First, let me wash you."

She did, and she was *very* attentive about it. It took about three times longer than it had to, and while I'm usually not patient with that sort of thing a combination of my weariness

and the fact that Yim was probably making a real effort even *trying* this made me put up with it.

The fact that it felt really good made that easier.

When she replaced soapy hands with a supple tongue, I didn't complain. Instead, I set a hand on her head and explored the base of one of her ears with my fingers. Her eyes momentarily crossed as she leaned hard into my hand, and I grinned when she looked up at me with accusing eyes and said, "I'm supposed to make *you* feel good."

"I enjoy this," I said, fingers settling again and rubbing absently. "It puts me at ease."

She tried valiantly to keep playing with my cock, but eventually wound up with her cheek on my thigh, tongue lolling out of her mouth as she leaned into me while I rubbed her ears.

It was obvious she was better at receiving than dishing out.

Settling down at the base of the pillar from which the water sprayed, I sighed and closed my eyes. Yim laid down with her head in my lap and rolled her head toward me, quietly accepting her lot in life.

"This isn't what I had in mind ..." she murmured at one point, but when I didn't answer she didn't press.

After a while she absently said, "Smooth fingers are so much better. I love the way you can dig in and it doesn't hurt."

"Thanks for this," I said, not bothering to open my eyes.

"I still don't understand why you like it so much."

"I don't know the word for it. It's like being young again, when the world was full of promise and life ... when everyone I ever loved was still alive, and we could dream impossible dreams together. Stay like this with me for just a little longer ... okay?"

Yim wrapped her arms around my middle and pulled herself fully onto my lap. I slid off the pole to lay on the tile, but she covered me and set her head on my chest. I could feel

all the curves, but kept my fingers working behind her ears, switching every once in a while.

It was a long time before I finally came a little back to myself and opened my eyes. I glanced down to find her staring soulfully at me, her muzzle on her hands on my chest, and when our eyes met she said, “I’m ... so sad for you. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone so deeply unhappy.”

I smiled and leaned up. She did as well, but I caught her cheek with one hand and leaned in, kissing the tip of her muzzle lightly as I said, “Well, you made it better, if only for a little while. Come on. If I stay under the water any longer I’m going to shrivel up.”

“Really?!” she asked, ears flicking to focus on me, abruptly alarmed.

I rolled my eyes, shooed her away, and finished my shower. There was a fresh set of blue-and-gold clothes waiting for me and I dried, then dressed as Yim quickly washed. I waited for her, and we left the temporary together.

Pala was leaning against the wall outside and glanced up when we appeared, then raised an eyebrow. I noticed her nose flexing as she scented the air, then her brow furrowed as she looked at her daughter.

“She was exactly what I needed,” I said. “Has Maximus finished yet?”

Pala blinked twice in answer to my question as she asked, “What do you mean? I don’t smell any sex. She was supposed to seduce you.”

I just gazed at her for a moment, then said, “She did. Completely.”

They didn’t follow me as I walked away, but I heard them talking. Since I didn’t care what they might say I went over to where the leaderboard was displayed. Most of the first-leg contestants that weren’t dead had already arrived and passed their batons on for the next segment of the race.

Astra had already passed her baton off to Phoebe, though my doll hadn’t finished her leg yet.

Valenteen was there, but as she glanced my way I smiled and gave her the middle finger. She scowled and turned, obviously looking for someone *else* to interview.

Felt good man. Felt *reaaal* good.

Eventually, Pala and Yim found me on a bench set up for those waiting to participate in the second leg. It was otherwise empty save for one lone duoden female, obviously Maximus' ally. She was sitting as far from me as possible and giving me furtive glances, but I didn't give two shits about her, so it didn't bother me.

"Our transport is waiting," Yim said. "It'll take us down so we can greet Phoebe when she finishes her leg. She'll be done in the next ten minutes. We should hurry if we want to make it."

"You two go ahead. I'm going to wait here."

"Why?"

It was Pala asking, and her tone was flat. I glanced back at her, then said, "Because I fucking want to, that's why. If I need a better reason you've got a fight on your hands. Now git. I'll be along later."

Yim said, "How? If our transport leaves without you then-"

"Then I'll climb back down this fucking mountain in the dark. I'm *staying*."

"But-"

Yim's protest cut off with a yelp of pain, and I heard Pala muttering as the two walked away: "It'll be good drama."

It'd been somewhere around noon when I crossed the finish line. It was evening when Maximus limped into sight on the far side of the bridge. By then almost everyone had left the checkpoint, though there was a medical team standing by, obviously waiting for the borealan.

Valenteen was there as well, though she'd kept a wary distance from me that I appreciated.

The duoden stood up, as did I. Yet while she advanced to the pass line, waiting in an obvious agony of concern for her ally, I stayed where I was at the bench, watching.

Maximus was moving awkwardly, using both hands and his lone foot to advance, but when he reached the floating bridge he passed it up, jumping into the lake to swim the distance instead. It was probably far easier than making it on foot, but it was obvious that he was bone weary and even swimming his progress was torturously slow.

Nevertheless, he made it, crawled ashore, and took the baton from his teeth to pass it to his teammate, who then raced off across the bridge on her way back down the mountain.

I glanced over at the medical team but they were all staring at me, as was Valenteen.

Since they were giving me the moment, I strolled up to Maximus, now on his back, panting and on the verge of blacking out by the look of it.

His eyes focused when I came into view. I nodded once and knelt next to him. I knew I was in range, knew he could reach out and snap my neck as easily as I had snapped the syban's, but he lay still. I leaned close to his ear, inhaled deeply through my nose, then murmured, "So that's what failure smells like. I always wondered. Now I know."

I leaned away to look him in the eye. After a long few seconds, he blinked, unable to hold my gaze.

I raised my eyebrows, staring with deadly intent at him as I said, "Remember this feeling, Maximus ... but if you ever forget it, don't worry. I'll be here to remind you."

Standing up, I looked down on him and added, "Get well soon."

He stared at me, then closed his eyes. I'd expected more rage from him, but apparently he was too tired. I turned and — as the medical team closed in — walked away.

If I was lucky, I'd put the fear of mankind into the big pussy, and Maximus wouldn't try for another direct confrontation. If I was unlucky ... well, honestly, he'd

probably have his revenge. That was the real reason I'd stayed, why I'd said what I said. I wanted to make sure that if he ever did try again, he did absolutely everything he could to kill me as quickly as possible knowing that if *he* missed, *I* wouldn't.

The only thing left to do was figure out how to get off this cold-ass fucking mountain.

“STOP STOP STOP ... STOP! Astra, you need to *sing*. If *I* can't hear you, neither will the audience.”

“But-”

“No buts! When you did your part in here by yourself you were awesome. Why are you so quiet now that we're together?”

Yim stepped away from her microphone to lean against the wall, bemused but apparently willing to let me handle things with Astra, who obviously had a bad case of stage fright ... which was complete bullshit since there was *no audience*.

“I- I want to make sure they can hear *you!*” she stuttered, practically babbling. Her beak was half-covered by her feathers and she was crouching away from me as though afraid I'd hit her.

“They'll hear me. *Believe* that. But the backup vocals are important. *You* are important. The whole point of this song is the message, and if you sound like you're scared to be there it falls apart. We're going to be doing this live in front of who knows how many people and we only get *one* shot at it.”

“I could withdraw and-”

“No. Too late. I've *heard* you sing and you're awesome. I want *your voice*.”

“But if I mess up on stage you'll *kill* me!” she abruptly screeched, then bolted for the door. She caught the recess with a foot talon and flipped it open in a move that I couldn't help

but think would easily disembowel me, then slammed it shut with a perfect backspin. Her moves were so unexpectedly awesome that it took me a moment to realize what she'd actually said.

Then I looked at Yim and said, "Help me understand what just happened. When did I *ever* threaten her?"

Yim showed her hands and said, "It's not that you ever threatened *her*, it's just that you *are* threatening. When you get heated, it scares her."

"You are fucking *kidding* me."

She just blinked twice at me in packwren denial, then shrugged.

"This is not a daycare! What the *hell* am I supposed to do about that?" I asked, gesturing after the departed. "We've got to perform this in one week!"

"You could *try* being nice to her," Yim said.

"I did *nothing* but compliment her!"

"Great, now do it *gently*."

"Oh for fuck's sake!"

Yim raised an eyebrow and said, "You *could* try practicing on me, because, you know, *I* don't exactly appreciate being yelled at about something I didn't do and which isn't my fault."

"So you can't do *anything*?" I asked, trying to moderate my tone as I waved toward the door.

"Certainly. I'm doing everything I can, right now. I'm *your* trainer, not hers. The problem here isn't her anyway, it's you. You've spent a great deal of time and effort building up your image as an unstoppable, merciless killing machine. Congratulations, job done. Now, you have to deal with the consequences. *All* the consequences."

"But she's *on my team*."

"So was Mauren."

That one stopped me cold and I winced, then glanced away as Yim gave me that steady, ‘You know I’m right,’ look.

“There was a good reason for that,” I said, knowing even as I said it that it was a lame excuse.

“That you might kill her for failure is not an *unreasonable* assumption at this point, Taz.”

I tipped my head up toward the ceiling, absolutely *hating* the fact that she wasn’t wrong.

Taking a deep breath and doing my best to let all my frustration out along with the air, I stepped out of our impromptu recording room to see that Astra hadn’t just fled the session, she’d fled the suite entirely.

Pala was reading a data pad on the couch. I glanced her way she confirmed my suspicion by jerking one of her four thumbs toward the door leading out into the hallway.

She didn’t even look up.

“Fuck it. I don’t have time for this. Yim, you and I will-”

“No. Go find her and bring her back,” Yim said, smoothly interrupting me as she leaned against the doorframe behind me, arms folded. “You said it yourself: she has an amazing voice. If you try and rely on me alone for backup vocals the song won’t sound anywhere *near* as good. Just remember, *calm*.”

“I’m *not* calm.”

“Lying is part of the show.”

“I fuckin’ *hate* this show!”

“It’s not exactly in love with you either, but you are crushing it right now and in order to continue doing that you need to make nice. Go. Find her.”

I stared at her, she stared back, and my frustration boiled over. I jerked my thumb over my shoulder and said, “Out.”

She frowned at me, but when my stare didn’t waver she moved away from the door. I stepped back into the recording

room and slammed the door closed behind me as I muttered, “Fucking prima donna bullshit. God *dammit!*”

Hands mindlessly flexing, I stared at the equipment as though I’d find the answer to my dilemma there. It struck me as *completely* stupid to try chasing someone who can *fly*. If she didn’t want to be found I’d just spend hours running around accomplishing nothing except to make myself look like a fucking fool in front of the cameras.

With a sigh I grabbed an instrument that I may as well call a guitar off its rack and sat down, strumming absently as I thought about the problem. As usual, my fingers started following an old melody and I wound up letting it all go as I sang Alan Jackson’s *Drive*. After that I sang Alabama’s *Mountain Music*, then started John Michael Montgomery’s *Letters from Home* ... but that one I couldn’t finish.

Some memories never lose their sting.

Instead, I picked things up again with Travis Tritt’s *T-R-O-U-B-L-E*, then segued into Montgomery Gentry’s *Speed*, then Kenny Chesney’s *I Go Back*.

By the time I started Chris Cagle’s *Chicks Dig It* I’d forgotten all about Astra, succubi, and fucked-up gameshow bullshit. I had my eyes closed and was completely in my own world.

Finishing the song, I opened my eyes to see Director Chosen watching from the door, which was closed behind her.

Blinking, I put the guitar aside and stood as I said, “Sorry, Director. I didn’t notice you come in.”

“Clearly,” she said with a wry smirk, then tossed something at me.

I caught it, then turned it over in my hands.

“It’s a bracer. Put it on. It’ll snap into place, then follow me,” she said.

Bemused, I did as she instructed, noticing as I did that she wore a similar bracer.

She slid the door open, but instead of the rest of the suite the portal now let out into a ... space. The smell of mildew was strong in the air, and there was turd-brown, worn, stained carpet under my feet that gave way to walls that were the most repugnant shade of yellow that I have ever seen. The ceiling was peppered with florescent lights that buzzed audibly, almost loudly, in the otherwise muted silence.

The room we were in gave way on all three sides to other spaces that were neither corridors nor rooms. Just ... spaces. Some were as wide as a hotel lobby while others narrowed down to multiple narrow entrances between pillars that seemed to serve no purpose other than to be in the way.

“What the hell?” I asked, turning as I did so to make sure I could still get out of what was one of the most profoundly disturbing places I’d ever visited. The door behind me was still open, and let out into the impromptu recording studio.

“Don’t close that door,” Director Chosen warned, turning to face me.

“Don’t worry,” I hastily assured her. “Where *are* we?”

“We are in liminal space. My company is named after it, and was founded for the express purpose of researching its properties,” the director said, glancing around.

“Why’ve you brought me here?” I asked.

“Because one of the many properties of liminal space is that what happens here can’t be monitored from outside save by direct observation. Your senses are usually recorded. Those transmissions are continuous and automatic, but here they simply don’t reach their receivers. This conversation is private.”

“You’re demonstrating a great deal of trust,” I noted, looking her up and down.

“Not really. If my heart stops a bomb powerful enough to leave nothing but shadows and dust will take my vengeance for me. Should you attempt to take me hostage or render me unconscious, that bracer will inject you with sedatives that will prevent you from escaping or doing further harm. My guard is

on the other side of the office door. In five minutes, should we not return he'll step through and from inside the office will be able to follow us here."

"Okay, so you *don't* trust me."

Her smile was cold as she said, "Not even a little bit. However, our conversation requires a certain discretion, and we don't have long. I'm already paying an exorbitant fee to cut your feed for this private chat."

"What did you want to tell me?" I asked.

"Several things of note have occurred that you ought to be aware of if I'm to align your interests more closely with my own," she said. "First, there's now an official inquiry into the circumstances surrounding your existence, and all the preliminary evidence seems to support your being an illegal acquisition. That doesn't have any immediate consequences to you personally, but no further 'humans' will be permitted without a thorough investigation, which may take years to complete."

I very carefully said nothing, watching the director intently as I hid my relief. What she'd just said was a balm to my soul.

Once it was apparent to her that I didn't intend to give anything away, she asked, "You have no thoughts on this?"

"None. What else?" I asked.

She frowned at me, then shrugged and said, "You are no doubt unaware of this, but while your feed is continuous, what you've been recording inside that studio isn't available to the general audience. Prep work for this next contest is very carefully curated to prevent people from losing their anticipation for the main event. It *has*, however, caught the attention of some of the executives inside SDM, and they've offered Division Four a recording contract. Division Four hasn't responded yet because Director Lane is busy with the initial stages of the inquiry, however, should it go through you'll be required to compose and perform several more songs so that an album can be put together."

"Why would I do that?" I asked.

“They’ll likely offer you very little if any recompense, so I actually recommend that you refuse,” Director Chosen said, now smiling faintly. “My understanding is that you would like to earn out, which is to say, come as close as livestock can to freedom. In order to do this you’ll have to negotiate a sizable royalty share in the profits from your recording *and* that recording will have to be good enough for advertisers to put it on air. SDM’s producers think you can do it. Your ability to compose and perform has vastly increased your perceived value. Good for Division Four, not so much for Liminal Science. We’ve already had two offers to buy out your sponsorship, and there is a point past which I’ll be forced to accept should your value rise too precipitously.”

I thought about that, then said, “So how do I place myself more directly under the protection you’re about to offer me?”

Director Chosen’s wings spread a bit, and she lifted her chin as she smiled at me and said, “Demand that exclusive rights to your audio go to Liminal Science. That’ll put a hard stop to your personal price increase. Do this, and we’ll request an injunction to freeze your value at its current level and offer you a royalty that will go toward paying that price. Once you’ve achieved that value you’ll earn out and be as much under your own recognizance as it is possible for livestock to be. You’ll be able to forge your own rental agreements, make and spend your own capital, and — within certain limits — travel as you please.”

“Will I be able to leave SDM?” I asked.

“Your ability to earn enough to make that happen before the end of the season is, even now, practically zero. I’m offering you a path, nothing more. Should you not take it, whatever you produce will enrich Division Four, your own success will drive your price further out of reach, and you’ll never, *ever* get out from under the corporate thumb.”

“I can get out any time,” I said with a wry smile. “I still have nothing that’s really worth living for.”

“You seem to be enjoying yourself well enough. I think being on SDM agrees with you.”

“I’m just working to justify your faith in me.”

Director Chosen folded her arms under her rather eye-catching chest, and raised an eyebrow at me as her tail flicked my way. She said, “There’s no point lying to me here. Remember, nothing that we say will be overheard. You want to destroy Division Four. I wouldn’t mind letting that happen. When they come to you offering a contract, refuse and send them to Liminal Science to bargain. Make sure you tell them you’ll only work through me. We’ll get you the best deal you’re going to get. And before you ask why I’d bother, it serves me personally as well as you. You get a concrete method of earning out, I get an influx of capital I can use to fund a few personal projects of mine.”

“I want final signatory authority over whatever contract you hammer out. In other words, if my signature’s not on it, I won’t honor it,” I said.

Chosen’s eyes narrowed, and in that moment I knew I couldn’t trust her, no matter *what* she said. She was a succubus after all. A succubus dealing with livestock.

I shook my head before she could answer and said, “Never mind. No deal. I don’t trust you. Unless you can provide me proof that our agreement is binding, I’ve got no reason to help you more than I already am. You’ve heard my music. Clean it up and use it as is. It’s not like I could stop you.”

“Even if we cleaned up the quality there’s no translation. We still need you to polish it. I’ll find a way to convince you that I’ll honor our bargain ... but you’re right to question me. Shall we adjourn for now, then?”

“What’s *with* this place?” I asked, waving my hand around and wrinkling my nose at the musty smell.

Looking around herself, Chosen said, “No one knows. The Reclaimers come to us from here, that’s how we found it. It follows its own rules and seems completely endless.”

“Why does it look like this?” I asked.

Chosen shrugged and said, “It just does. There are other ... spaces, connected to this one, and we can use it to transit from

one world to another within our solar system. It's how we colonized the various planets that were habitable, or could be made so. This place seems to have no reliable boundaries. It functionally goes on forever."

"Seems like it would take a while to walk between planets," I said dryly.

She held up her bracer and said, "We have some small skill at manipulating our location within this liminal space, and have beacons planted, though they're often sabotaged. Transitioning between those locations is as simple as stepping from one room into the next, provided you have one of these. Unfortunately, some of the potential inherent in an endless space like this remains out of reach. While we can move from one point to one far distant, we can't prevent this place from moving things around on its own."

"So, long-term storage is a no-go, but it's a great place to dump waste," I said.

"Not so great a place to dump waste. Waste tends to attract the entities that also dwell here, and many of them are far more dangerous than you. Even were that not the case, the Reclaimers don't like it. Needless to say, our research is ongoing and expensive. For now, most of our revenue comes from transport and ... confidentiality. Shall we go?"

I walked past her to the boundary between the room we were in and the space beyond, but no matter what direction I looked I didn't see anything ... substantive. Endless walls with turns and corners that made no sense. The stink of moldy carpet. Oppressive florescent lights that buzzed and flickered ominously.

It was a horrifying place.

"Researchers get lost here with fair regularity, and those that are found alive have often lost their minds. Even if no entity finds you, should you become lost in here the fate that awaits you will most likely be ... unpleasant."

Director Chosen had stepped up behind me and was looking over my shoulder. I could feel her presence, and her

boobs were practically on top of my head.

I turned to face her, which put me in her cleavage, and that I did not mind.

She tilted her head down at me and the faintly amused look in her eyes told me she didn't mind either. I said, "Danger turn you on?"

"It is one of my many interests, but if you want to indulge that interest, it's best we do so elsewhere. My company is responsible for studying this place, but it exists independent of our effort. Some claim it has a sort of intelligence of its own, but while not everyone cleaves to that idea, one thing *is* certain: it punishes the careless and unwary."

"Yeah, I can see that. There's something deeply unsettling about this place. As for your interest ... maybe. For all that I don't trust you, you're the closest thing to a friend I think a succubus could be, and I don't mind friendly sex," I said, then slipped past her again, heading for the way out with a determined step.

Something deeply primal was warning me that I shouldn't linger here in this ... liminal space.

ASTRA JOINED us at breakfast the next morning as though nothing had happened.

I glanced over at her, but she wasn't looking at me as she talked with Phoebe about their respective legs of the triathlon. We'd averaged into second place, but my huge lead from the first event left me on top of the charts and since the first place winner in the race hadn't been in the top twenty, nothing changed. At least, not for me.

We were still at the head table, and I was trying yet another red meat. So far I hadn't found one I liked, though they were all at least passable and nutritious.

What I wouldn't give for a good old-fashioned ribeye.

"Talk to her," Yim said, muttering at me out of the side of her muzzle. I glanced from Astra to Yim, who was sitting just next to me.

Shrugging, I said, "Not out here in public. No sense letting people know things they don't need to know."

"What if she doesn't come back to the suite after breakfast?" Yim asked.

"Sounds like something *you* should look into, doesn't it? I mean, you're not *just* my trainer. You're also my ally. Let her know I've got a few things to discuss with her."

"Why me?"

I blinked as I looked her in the eye and said, “You’re the nicest person I know, outside Astra herself. She’s a real sweetheart.”

“You’ve barely had five minutes worth of *actual* conversation with her.”

“My old man used to say he could spot an asshole in eight seconds or less,” I said wryly. “Works the same for softies.”

“I thought you weren’t-”

“Yeah, I wasn’t. Doesn’t matter anymore, so fuck it. Let ‘em all know for all I care. What are they going to do, pull me out of the game? *Send me home?*”

“It does seem unlikely,” Yim conceded.

I nodded and waved a hand in absent dismissal as I said, “From now on, the gloves are off.”

“The idea that you’ve been soft-pedaling so far terrifies me,” Yim said.

“It shouldn’t. Which reminds me: thanks for sticking with me after the way I used you during the sponsorship trial. I’m not sorry for what I did, but I don’t think I ever thanked you properly afterward.”

Yim gave me the head tilt, then said, “It was Pala’s decision.”

“Maybe, but you went along with it.”

“I didn’t have a choice ... but you are welcome. It seems to have been the right decision.”

“On that note, you’ll help me with Astra?”

Her head tilted the *other* way, then she showed her teeth and growled, “If you’re going to play on my sympathies, try not to be so transparent.”

“I won’t deny that was the point of doing this now, but even if I hadn’t needed your help with her I’d have gotten around to thanking you at some point. It needed saying.”

Her ears flicked around in a way that told me she didn't quite know what to make of that, then she turned her attention to the food and said nothing more.

Since I was confident she'd do it, I didn't press.

The meat that morning tasted like bear.

Pass.

By the time I finished whoring myself out as cheap labor to the SDM locals for recommends or whatever they call it, Astra was waiting for me in the recording room. Rather, she was diligently practicing when I walked in, but stopped abruptly as the feathers on her cheeks spread to cover her beak.

"Relax," I said as I walked in and sat down on my stool. "I'd like to try something a little different with you today. Are you willing to work with me?"

She thought about it for a moment, giving me the impression she was seriously thinking of refusing, but at length she bobbed her whole body in an affirmation that was so cute it softened my cold, dead heart.

"What do you want to do?" she asked.

"I want to switch roles with you," I said, trying for a smile without teeth.

"You want me to sing the lead part? I haven't practiced it," she said, but I shook my head.

"No, that song's mine. For reasons I won't explain I am *really* looking forward to singing that one personally. But I have another one I wrote for you."

All the feathers across her body fluffed up, then smoothed down as she stretched her neck toward me, head turned so far it was almost upside down. It was *bizarre*. Her words were practically a squeak as she said, "You wrote a song for *me*?!"

"Mhm," I said, though in truth I was just cribbing songs from other, better artists. Since I wasn't even in my own solar system anymore, I doubted anyone who'd mind would notice.

I offered her a data pad with all the notation and lyrics she'd need, setting it in the stand in front of her to make it easy for her to take it in. She'd memorized for our main song after some practice, but she demonstrated either a keen mind or a great deal of enthusiasm in working through the new material, because after only five minutes or so with close to zero punctuation she said, "Okay okay okay can I try it I'm ready I want to try it can I?"

"Sure. I recorded the instruments yesterday, so when you're ready I'll start it and we'll go through it. I'll back you up, though I don't have much. This will be all you."

She bobbed eagerly, so I started the track and let her give it a shot.

As God is my holy witness, she pretty much nailed it on the first try.

Now I gotta say *some* of that was my song choice. I had a feeling I knew how *she* felt, just based on our limited interaction, and I'd chosen the song to allow her to express some of those emotions.

But the rest of it, the voice, the power, the raw *feeling* ... that was all her, and she did so well that I wondered if I was just kidding myself. The song I'd chosen for me was quite *literally* a joke. It was a *fun* joke, and a catchy tune, but it was a joke nonetheless. *Astra's* singing had real emotion, and I think it put the piece I planned to sing to shame.

Nevertheless, I knew better than to ask her to swap with me. Given the stage fright she'd demonstrated with just Yim and I in the booth, she'd never go for being the main singer during the live performance.

So instead I asked, "Did you hear me?"

"Nope!" she said cheerfully. "Not a bit!"

Once she realized what she'd said her feathers covered her beak and she stared at me with a panicked expression until I burst out laughing.

"Why are you laughing?!" she asked, feathers fluffing in agitation as she hopped one way, then the other.

“You didn’t hear me because you were focused on your own performance. That’s *fine*, by the way. Here. Listen. I recorded us.”

I started the playback, and she didn’t move a muscle as she listened. Not so much as a feather twitched until it was over. Then I gently asked, “Did you hear me that time?”

Her head twisted as she stared at me out of one eye, then again as she looked at me with the other, as though getting something unique from each image. Then she said, “Yes yes! You sounded amazing! Your voice lifted mine up!”

“And yours will lift *mine* up when we sing that other song. *That’s* how it’s supposed to sound. Want to try?”

She did her enthusiastic bob, and before she lost her nerve I swapped the instrumentals and we gave it a shot. Then I went and dragged Yim in for another go and Astra stayed strong throughout.

Once it was over Astra begged Yim to stay and listen to the recording she and I had made. When it was over, Yim looked at me with wide eyes and forward ears.

I just smiled, folded my hands behind my head, and gave her my best self-satisfied look. Her lips pursed, but she had nothing to say.

Afterward, things were completely different with Astra. I’ve never seen someone pull a one-eighty personality shift like hers in my life, but once we finished for the day she spent the rest of it hopping around after me, singing snatches of the song I’d given her.

That happiness lasted until the late afternoon when I got a visit from a succubus I didn’t recognize.

She was wearing a sexy, Santa red skirt and bodice over a white blouse. Her skin was black as night and her horns curled around her elfin ears like the drop handlebars of a road bike. With lips curled into a knowing smile in a face made for the camera, she gazed at me with blood-red eyes lit with an avaricious glint. Her hair was a startling white and drawn up into a topknot that flowed down almost to her waist. Her

wings were jet and folded demurely behind her, their thumbs visible over her shoulders as she looked down on me from what had to be almost nine feet up.

Christmas was never my favorite time of year, and I couldn't help but think that if Krampus had an ex-wife, I was about to meet her.

It was hate at first sight.

The impression was further soured by the presence of not one, but *two* armed guards. Two multi-armed armed guards. Both were duoden and twitchy enough to demonstrate they'd been 'warned' about me in advance.

Krampus' ex said, "Hello Taz. My name is Duo Fells — I work with Director Lane. We received a proposal from SDM and I'm here to follow up on it. Step into the office over there."

I considered cutting to the chase, but I wasn't sure if it would help or hurt the cause to let Duo know I'd already spoken with Director Chosen about the 'proposal.' After a moment's thought I turned and walked into the office with the succubus sauntering after me and her goons trailing.

The girls were all looking my way but whether they knew anything was an open question, and none of them tried following us.

Once inside, one of the guards shut the door while the other folded his upper arms across his chest and set both lower hands on pistol butts as though he were a gunslinger ready to make his play.

It was comical, but since I really wasn't in the mood to get shot I didn't laugh. I knew whatever those guns did, they wouldn't kill me. That said, I was pretty sure whatever they *did* do wouldn't be worth the chuckle.

Duo strolled around the space, looking at the instruments and other paraphernalia with the air of someone who's never seen most of it but is only pretending to be curious. I waited in silence.

She said, “You are a creature with many hidden skills, Taz. Had you told us you were a competent singer while under our care we might have given you the means to further those skills.”

I waited.

At length, she glanced at me with a raised eyebrow, then her lips parted in understanding as she said, “Ah, yes. ‘You didn’t ask a question.’ Not one for making small talk. I understand. I’ll get right to it then: Sex, Death, and Money has notified us that they’d be willing to produce an album of your music. Provided it catches on, it would make you an overnight sensation and quite dramatically improve your chances in the games by swaying the popular votes. Would you be interested in taking this unique opportunity?”

I made eye contact, then shook my head.

Her lips twisted, but she seemed not at all dissuaded as she said, “Compensation, right? It can be arranged. What would you like? Granted, whatever we agree on would be deferred until your run in Sex, Death, and Money is complete. SDM Incorporated wouldn’t allow us to give you preferential treatment while the show is ongoing.”

“I’m not interested,” I said. “Not for anything you could offer me.”

“Oh don’t be petty,” she said with an airy wave. “We’re aware you aren’t fond of us, but the fact is your success and ours are tied together. Unless you want to live in squalor and failure your spite is meaningless. You may as well enjoy the fruits of the table you’ve set for us.”

“I will only create an album for Liminal Science. Unless Director Chosen comes to me with a deal, I’m not making anything that isn’t relevant to the competition,” I said.

This time Duo’s expression twisted into something almost hateful before she curbed it. Her full lips thinned and for a long moment I stared into those ruby eyes and waited to see her next move.

At last, she said, “I see Chosen has already wrapped her fingers around you, and perhaps her tail. Very well. It is in my nature to apply pressure only where I believe that pressure will yield *positive* results. I will reach out to Liminal Science. Expect a representative of theirs in the not-too-distant future.”

Her almost immediate acquiescence left me uncertain what to make of Duo Fells. Mauren had been a woman of dramatic swings and Chosen was tightly controlled, but also felt to me like someone with powerful emotions tugging at her psyche.

Despite my instinctive dislike of this woman, I was impressed. Duo was the first succubus I’d spoken to who seemed more calculating; someone who listened first to her thoughts, *then* to her feelings. Given her position within Division Four, she represented an opportunity, perhaps of unique quality.

I said, “Should Division Four ever have business with me again, I’ll only go through you. Don’t bother sending anyone else.”

Her eyebrows were as white as the hair on her head, and when she arched one it was a startlingly vivid expression. Her lips pursed in a subtle smile as she said, “Mmm, and if I have personal business?”

Our eyes met, and I said, “As long as it’s mutually beneficial.”

“We’ll be in touch, I’m sure,” she said, and the glimmer in her eye was back as she turned and left, an absent flick of her tail calling the guards after her.

I watched her go until her rather shapely ass was replaced with literal gorilla butt, at which point my attention fled the scene.

Pala refocused it as she stepped in and slid the door closed behind her, eyes on me.

I met her gaze evenly as I said, “I’m not in the mood for another ‘lesson,’ Pala, fun as the last one was. I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

“That you think I was here for your sex is an entertaining notion. I’m both amused and disappointed,” she said, leaning against the wall with her arms folded. “I came here to talk to you about Yim.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, what’d I do this time?” I asked with instant, weary annoyance.

One of her ears flicked to one side, then toward me again as she said, “Nothing bad. You’re probably not aware, but going for head scratches on a packwren is a *very* dominant move. The only real options for us when someone tries it are to submit or fight. Yim’s prone to submit, but ... I thought you should know before you try it on someone less accommodating.”

“Like you?”

“It has to do with how it feels,” Pala said, both ignoring and answering my question. “Just be aware that Yim wants more, and at some point she might come asking for it. I don’t mind you giving it to her but I have one request: don’t mix it with sex.”

“Oh?”

She gave me the long affirmative blink as she said, “It can cause what amounts to a physiological dependency. When the games are over we’re unlikely to see each other again. I prefer it if you not force her to go through withdrawal.”

I gave her a slow nod at that, and said, “All right. I can promise you I’ll do one or the other, but never both at once.”

She gave me another long blink, then leaned away from the wall, swaying toward me as she said, “That’s kind of you, and I appreciate it. Now, about that lesson ...”

“I’m sure the stuff in here is expensive and I’d rather not have to replace it,” I said warily.

Her eyes narrowed, but something about the way she tipped her head to look at me made it a sultry expression as she said, “Not for me. For Yim. Do you think you can do to her what I did to you?”

I thought about that, then gave Pala a weary look as I said, “Not sure I’d be into it.”

“The idea of pinning Yim and filling her with cock doesn’t appeal to you?” Pala asked, eyebrow raised.

“Well, yeah, but what you did and what you just described are two fundamentally different things.”

“Not so much. If you don’t want to demean her, don’t. She would enjoy it, but it isn’t required. What *is* required is that she feel as though everything that happens to her is entirely up to you. The less agency she feels, the better.”

“Why the hell-”

“Because a submissive prefers trust to self-mastery. Yim craves to bare her desires to you and have her desperate hope for satisfaction fulfilled not because she deserves it, or even thinks she deserves it, but because it’s a gift from you.”

“Or whoever she submits to.”

Pala bared her teeth and said, “Such a thing is not so easily done as you may imagine. I know that the very idea of submission is alien to you, but to her it is a deeply held desire. While some submissives can give their desires to anyone, Yim isn’t that sort. She requires emotional content in order to be truly pleased.”

I opened my mouth, but she held up a hand to stop me as she said, “You can’t pretend to me that you don’t know why she’d choose you. Her very first interaction with you was *intensely* humiliating. She’s *never* forgotten that feeling. It’s deep inside her now and it won’t go away just because *you* say you’re sorry. If you really want to *apologize* to her, you’ll walk through the door you opened in her spirit and dominate her. Pleasure her and leave her a panting, sopping mess. Do that, and she’ll look back on that sponsorship trial with dreamy eyes.”

“You people are fucking weird,” I said, frowning as I considered what Pala was asking me to do. I suppose in an intellectual sense I could understand what she was telling me, but the emotional content she was describing simply did not

exist for me. I felt *nothing* about what I'd been told beyond that it seemed like a lot of work.

As though she could read my mind, Pala let out a gusty sigh and said, "I feel sorry for you. For all your intelligence and efficacy, when it comes to your capacity for happiness, you are like a child in a cage."

"You're getting on my nerves," I warned.

"Of course I am. Your capacity for *anger* is unmatched," she said with a wry note in her voice.

"I don't need your pity so fucking save it. This isn't *about* me, it's about *your* daughter and *her* wants."

"Ultimately, this is about *your* ability to discern the desires of those around you. Since you lack a fundamental emotional connection to ... well, *anything*, it has to be explained. It has to be acted out. You need to learn to recognize the cues somehow. Even if you don't resonate with those cues, you need to at least be able to fake a suitable response."

"Yeah? I'm beginning to wonder. I haven't seen any hint of any events that require me to have this knowledge. Seduce SDM employees? I don't need sex for that, *as I have proven*. To please the succubi? I absolutely could not care less about *them*. I'm beginning to think these 'lessons' are just your way of patronizing me because *you* need to feel like a boss and if we actually fought to see who'd come out on top I'd beat you like a fucking drum."

"Every time we have this conversation you get angry and confrontational. I have no way to know if your whole race is emotionally stunted or if it's just you, but my instincts tell me it's *you*. As for my need for control ... well. If you can't understand submission I can't even *begin* to explain dominance, but here's a hint: It's not about *me*."

With that, she turned and let herself out, leaving me to my thoughts.

I GLANCED up when the door slid open and gave Phoebe a raised eyebrow.

She glanced at me, then around, then back at me as she said, “Reading? Honestly, I think you’re the first contestant I’ve ever worked with that I walked in on *reading*.”

“There’s a lot of material I need to get a handle on,” I said, dropping the data pad to my lap as I added, “In or out.”

She came in and closed the door behind her, then wandered over to the bed and reached for the pad. Since I had no reason not to show her I let her have it and she glanced over the contents, then at me, those big blue eyes of hers strangely depthless.

“I can’t believe you’re actually reading scholarly papers on dominance games.”

Shrugging, I said, “Well, considering I’m apparently the emotional equivalent of a child in a cage, I have to get the information from *somewhere*. I’d rather that not be through a series of fantastic failures *or* an oversized ‘dommie mommy.’”

“I dunno. That second one sounds pretty fun.”

“I had a sample and wasn’t impressed.”

“Not impressed with Palashai? Damn. That’s probably a first.”

Rolling my eyes, I watched her shimmy up onto the bed. She was wearing that boob window costume she had, but all

that did was push them together and squeeze ‘em out *through* that window.

It was distracting, and by the knowing glance she tossed me as I stared at the view, she was well aware.

“So ... what? She just doesn’t do anything for you?” she asked after she flopped down against the headboard next to me and leaned in, dumping her chest in my lap.

“Oh, she’s certainly got everything a man needs. It’s the mindset I don’t get.”

“So you’re reading up trying to find something that clicks?”

“There’s no clicking. This is more like looking at a set of directions on how to build something and hoping I remember them when it comes time to do the work.”

Phoebe glanced up at me, then rolled her eyes and said, “Wow. I mean, I’m not really into the D/s game but even I *get* it. Sometimes it’s fun, but I’d rather just get to the good stuff. Don’t tease me, *squeeze* me. All the rest of that nonsense is just window dressing.”

“*Right?! I don’t see the point. It seems like a lot of work with no payoff.*”

Phoebe frowned, thinking, then asked, “Ever feel jealous?”

“Not of a woman, no.”

That got an interested look, and I waved a hand and said, “I’ve felt jealousy of stuff that someone has that I wish I had.”

“How’s that different from jealousy of a woman someone else has that you don’t?” she asked.

“I never want someone else’s woman. If she’s interested and I’m interested we fuck. If those conditions aren’t met I don’t waste time on it.”

“So you’re considered handsome among your own kind?”

“Reasonably.”

“And you’ve never had to work to get pussy?”

I thought about it, then shrugged and shook my head as I said, “Not really. If I want sex I go where the girls are and pick one who’s interested. Most of the time it’s just a night, then we go our separate ways.”

“Have you *ever* had an emotional connection with someone you were banging?” she asked.

“Sure, when I was young.”

“What happened?”

“I left. Got a goodbye while I was training, and that was the end of it. Next time I saw her she was two kids deep into a relationship with someone else.”

“How did that make you feel?”

“Good for her. Glad she found someone.”

“And that feeling you had when you were with her wasn’t good enough for you to want it again?” Phoebe asked.

I didn’t answer, because I wasn’t exactly sure how. Eventually, I said, “Nope.”

The truth was a bit more involved, but I didn’t feel like spilling my guts to an alien just because she happened to be pestering me. The line of questioning had gone off the rails, and if it didn’t help me nail down the process for this ‘D/s’ stuff — as she called it — it wasn’t worth going over.

“Well, I can certainly see where Pala is coming from.”

“*That*, does not help *me*,” I said dryly, resisting the temptation to thump her atop the head. I really didn’t know how she’d take it, and all the relationship talk had me thinking a bit more closely about how I was interacting.

“Oh, you were asking me for *help*?” she said, giving me that shark’s grin of hers. “I don’t remember that part of the conversation. Remind me?”

I frowned hard at her, but her grin only got bigger and, almost incidentally, more threatening.

Eventually, at somewhat of a loss, I said, “If you have any suggestions, I’d love to hear them.”

“Spend more time with Yim,” she said without a second’s hesitation.

“With Yim.”

“A-yup! Or me, but honestly she’d probably get you where you want to go faster. I’m a little too much like you to make it work right. I’m too easy.”

“You think I’m *easy*?”

“Extremely. You *just* told me your love life essentially boiled down to: go find a girl who’s interested, fuck, then leave.”

Since I couldn’t dispute that, and that fact annoyed me, I decided to change the subject because her boobs were still planted on my chest, and they were so ludicrously huge that *not* playing with them seemed like it should be some sort of crime.

I set a hand on one as I wrapped an arm around her shoulders to pin her and gradually began squeezing.

Her eyes widened, rolled up a bit, then focused on me before crossing as she said, “Nng! I tell you ... to do Yim, and this is ... I am not Yim!”

“I still haven’t heard a complaint,” I said as I pinned her boobs together, one on top of the other on my chest, and applied pressure to both. They had more elasticity than any other tits I’d ever encountered, which made for an interesting experience. The bulge out the window of her costume got *really* impressive, but Phoebe’s eyes were rolling with obvious bliss as her jaws dropped open. Her whole body started trembling, but I eased off after a moment and she groaned, head on my shoulder as she panted.

“You don’t need much of a warm-up,” I noted.

“Nnnooo I don’t. My horny is more like a motion sensor,” she said dreamily, eyes focusing on me as she asked, “Why’d you stop?”

“Well, you’re not Yim.”

“I can pretend if that’ll get me another squeeze.”

“Seems like you’ve got even more than you did the other day.”

“I do. A certain amount of what I take in gets converted for personal use. As time goes on I take in more and more. Eventually I genuinely *need* to get rid of it, but I’m nowhere *near* that now.”

“So it’s not water?”

“It *can* be, but this isn’t.”

I blinked, then glanced down at her curiously.

She said, “I can chug water and use it if I need to, but water doesn’t have the ideal physical properties. Different viscosity, density, etcetera. Using water instead of prima is kind of like the difference between running across a sand dune rather than a running track.”

“You call it ‘prima’?”

“Mmhm. My species uses it for a lot of things: ballast, shape-shifting, energy storage ... it’s the good stuff.”

“Milk?”

“Older dolls feed younger ones to help them with their elasticity and growth. Our prima essentially trains their bodies how to make it better for themselves.”

“What would happen if *I* drank it?”

Phoebe laughed, but her eyes lifted to mine as she said, “While you’re free to do what you like, I have actually been told to caution you in the *strongest* terms not to try it. Prima is a very complex compound. Certain species find it harmless, healthy, or just delicious, but for most it is a rather remarkable mutagen. Since there’s literally only one human, SDM would rather you not turn yourself into a footnote in someone’s science paper ... at least, not until the show’s over.”

“And it didn’t occur to you to issue me this warning *before* you bathed my dick and lower body in the stuff?” I asked, one eyebrow raised. “You came all over me last time we fucked.”

“Has to be ingested,” she said, waving a dismissive hand. “Just don’t eat me out or suck on my nipples and you’ll be fine.”

“Damn, two of my favorite things off the table.”

“I doubt *that*,” she said, giving me a wry look. “Given what you’ve told me, cunnilingus doesn’t seem likely to be in your skillset.”

“Pala didn’t complain.”

“As your trainer, I doubt very much she was going to critique the details when the *point* of the exercise was to see if you’d submit.”

“Since we’re on the subject, does *packwren* pussy juice have any weird effects?”

“You can’t ask me that because *no one* knows what *anything* will do to your species in particular. I suspect there was some lab testing done, and I’m sure if there was a danger Pala would have been notified.”

My head thumped the wall behind me as I sighed. “There’s so much I don’t know.”

“That’ll never *not* be true. If it makes you feel any better, you probably know more about the various species you’ve interacted with than most of the other contestants. Intellectual curiosity isn’t fostered in livestock generally.”

“Yeah, I was told. Cuts down on revolutions.”

“Mmhm. The contestants in SDM are a cut above because they’ve gone through a *lot* of very specialized training to be here, but as a ghost you’ll always be a few steps ahead of them since you have so much more experience to draw on.”

I didn’t want the conversation to go down that road so I returned it to my own rather more puerile interests as I asked, “So how big can you actually get?”

“Wanna see?” she asked, giving me that sharkish grin.

“Yeah. I’m actually *extremely* curious.”

She rolled over until she was straddling my lap, leaning on her boobs, which formed such a large cushion between us that she was closer to perpendicular than parallel. Her completely ridiculous tits were like a pair of water-filled beach balls stuffed into her costume, but as I reached up to give them a squeeze from both sides she caught my hands gently and said, “Wait wait. Before you send me over the moon ... if we’re going to do this, I need you to understand a few things.”

“Okay?”

“I’ve already told you dolls can be very vulnerable, but that is *never* more true than when we’re overfilled. It is *ridiculously* fun, but also very, *very* risky for us. I need to know I can trust you to follow some simple rules with me.”

“What are they?” I asked.

“If there’s ever a point at which I can’t speak, you absolutely *must* shut the water off — quick as you can. That’s rule one. Rule two is what I say, you do. I’ll eventually be completely helpless, so before I agree to this, you must *absolutely* be willing to do whatever I ask.”

“I’m beginning to wonder if I should back out. I don’t want to put you at risk just for a little fun.”

She smiled as she tilted her head and said, “Aww, see, that’s exactly why I think I’ll be safe. You might be a honed killer, but you’re deliberate about it. I’ll bet you’ve never killed *anyone* by accident.”

I immediately shook my head as I said, “No. Never. I’ve regretted it once or twice, but it was always my choice. Any more rules?”

Phoebe’s head tipped back as she stared down at me. Even on her alien face, the expression came through as thoughtful. At length, she said, “Yes, actually. Taz ... I want you to enjoy yourself. If you’re only asking me for this to satisfy an intellectual curiosity I don’t want to do it. I want to have fun, and I want *you* to have fun *with* me. Can you?”

It was an odd request and, brow furrowed, I said, “Well I can’t promise I’m going to act like a kid or anything, but yeah

... I think this'll be fun. If I didn't I wouldn't ask."

"Okay. I'm *trusting* you now ... this isn't a casual thing for me."

"Are you sure you-mph!"

She cut me off as she abruptly surged forward, smothering my face with boobs as she waggled a finger and said, "If I weren't sure, I'd have backed out of this alliance by now. Just remember: you gave me your word, and *I'm* not a succubus. I expect your words and deeds to match. Come on."

PHOEBE TOOK me into the shower/tub thing in the bathroom and looked around, then nodded and said, “This’ll do. Help me out of this, will you?”

I knew damn well she didn’t need my help to undress but I’d just promised to have fun so I stepped up as she turned her back on me. I was fascinated to see her gain almost two feet in height as she turned, her chest shrinking dramatically in the process. It put her at almost my height, and the clasp and weird not-quite-velcro seam at my fingertips.

I pulled it apart to reveal a green back that seemed surprisingly muscular. The layout of those muscles was familiar to me, unsurprising as she was bipedal with two arms and two legs, just like a human. She needed to move in all the same ways I did, so the fact that the muscles were laid out in a similar way made complete sense.

What didn’t make sense was how they shifted and grew more defined while I watched. Phoebe glanced back at me and said, “I never get tired of seeing that shocked expression on your face.”

Rather than answer, I set a hand on her shoulder and ran the other up over her back. They felt real enough until I applied pressure. Where normal muscle would shift and soften, hers deflated, though her groans were certainly getting-a-good-massage worthy. Once I moved my fingers, I watched in fascination as her muscle smoothly swelled up again.

“You’ll find this difficult to believe, but most people can’t do that,” she said.

“Do what?”

“Force my prima out of my muscles.”

“Didn’t sound like I was hurting you.”

She shook her head, turning to face me. All eight of her nipples were a bit swollen despite the fact that she was now sporting breasts that might actually have been proportional to her frame. I looked her up and down, noting that in this configuration she was rather svelt.

“You just run the gamut, don’t you?” I asked.

Nodding, she said, “I can be any size and shape you like.”

“So why have you been wandering around with all your prima in your tits?”

“It wasn’t. I kept a lot in my ass too, otherwise I’d have fallen over,” she said with a sharkish grin. “You just didn’t notice because once I was up on the bed I shifted it forward.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” I said, sliding hands around her hips to her ass, which felt traditionally muscular until I gave her cheeks a hard squeeze.

Her butt shrank under my hands and her eyes crossed as her mouth — open to answer me — slackened. She made a noise I can only call distracted before her eyes sharpened on me again. She said, “I did, actually. I said, ‘I can be any size and shape *you* like.’”

“I like *this*.”

“That’s because I’m naked and in your hands. When I look more ... normalish — I suppose would be the word — your eyes slide past me. But when I’m funbags from the collar down, you stare.”

“That doesn’t mean I-”

“AND you start putting out fuck me pheromones. Remember, Taz: I might not have a packwren nose but dolls have keen senses, even out of water. You can lie to me about a

lot, but not about what turns you on. You, for whatever reason, really like *massive* boobs. I think it's cute ... and if I want them to be mine are the biggest around."

"Speaking of which?" I said, giving her a pointed look up and down.

She smiled and said, "Ah yeah, I did promise you a show, didn't I."

Phoebe stepped out of my arms, pulled down one of the shower wands, and adroitly spun off the sprayer, which she set aside. She then tested the threads with her fingertip, seemed satisfied, and offered it to me as she asked, "Want to put it in?"

"Uh ... where?" I asked, looking her up and down.

"Well ... you can't fuck me if you put it here," she said, spreading her labia in a deliberately lewd display I quite enjoyed. "And I can't talk if it goes down my throat, so ..."

She turned around, bent forward, and I watched her boobs rapidly increase in size again, all that mass moving from her ass, which slimmed down until it revealed the puckered ring of her asshole.

I had to step forward to wrap an arm under her hips as her center of gravity shifted too far and she started to go, but she only giggled and said, "Hehe, I knew you'd catch me. Come on, push it in."

"Don't try this at home, folks," I muttered wryly to myself as I looked at the threads at the end of the hose, which turned out to be some sort of plastic. Even with a hard press of my thumb they didn't feel like they'd cut, which was probably the same test Phoebe had done a moment earlier.

I caught her watching me and raised an eyebrow.

"I love being right," she said with that wide, toothy grin of hers. "It's safe enough, Taz. Remember, I've done SDM for quite a while now. I've stayed in these suites before. If there's kinky shit to be done, I've probably done it here."

"Well, shoving a water hose up a girl's ass definitely qualifies as kinky," I said, still bemused as I pressed the end to

the pucker, thought a moment, then put a finger in first.

Given she was an alien, it didn't even really occur to me until after I had my finger three knuckles into her backside that she might not be clean, but all I felt was a wet heat that was ... probably normal. I don't know, but Phoebe shuddered and said, "Aw, you're even going to open me up to spare me the threads. So courteous."

Taking her words as a hint, I exerted pressure on the lower edge of her sphincter and she made a pleased throat noise as her asshole spread open. I'm pretty sure had I done this with a human girl she'd be *incredibly* uncomfortable with this, but Phoebe clearly wasn't and I decided to just ... do what she told me to. This was her session, after all.

Finger and thumb inching it along, I pressed the tube into her butt as I asked, "How far in?"

"Oh, half a foot or so should be fine," she said in a conversational tone utterly at odds with what was going on.

"It occurs to me that *you* could have done this yourself," I noted.

"I can also masturbate, but that isn't why either of us is here," she tartly replied.

Estimating I had it about six inches in, I let her go and she wobbled, then wrenched herself backward to keep from falling on her face ... well, her boobs.

I held out an arm and she fell into it, giving me a narrow-eyed expression that looked really exaggerated with her huge blue eyes. I only saw that later as I got what *I* wanted out of the move. Her tits bounced in a way that made me grin.

She must have decided to let it go because she said, "All right, Taz. I'm going to control this as much as I can, but if you want, you can play with me. I know you're weird about this sort of thing so you don't have to, only remember that--"

"I'll do what you tell me to without question. You have my word," I said.

She nodded, then glanced meaningfully at the taps as she said, “Not hot.”

“This may very well be the weirdest thing I have *ever* done,” I said absently as I reached over and pulled the lever for the cold water a quarter of the way out.

She raised an eyebrow at me and said, “Unless you want us to be here all day, more.”

I gave the tap another quarter pull, and she smirked at me and said, “Wuss.”

Annoyed, I opened it all the way up and she jolted a bit, then gave me a grin full of teeth as she said, “Thaaat’s the way.”

For a few seconds, nothing really happened. I could hear the water, but that was it. She and I stared at one another, and I eventually noticed Phoebe getting taller. She’d started at four foot nothing, but was now four and a half feet tall and still getting taller. Her boobs were still just as massive, and she was standing with her feet spread a bit and one hand on the wall to balance as she gave me that cocky shark’s grin.

“Woah.”

I was mesmerized. What I was seeing didn’t seem possible. Granted, everything about Phoebe challenged my sense of normalcy, but I’d accepted the idea that she had a lot of extra fluid inside her she could move around. That didn’t mean I was used to seeing it happen.

I asked, “So ... is that going into your stomach or what?”

She shook her head and said, “All my orifices are multi-purpose. I can shunt incoming fluids into my interstitium from anywhere.

““Interstitium?””

“It’s the fluid-filled space between the hypoderm and organs. Everyone has it.”

“If you say so. That kind of biology was never really my ... focus.”

As we talked, I watched as she just kept growing taller. It wasn't exactly a fast process and seemed to be getting slower, but she was growing another inch every twenty seconds or so.

Her eyes were on me and she was silent now, watching. I knew she was waiting to see what I would do, and since I had no reason not to further explore I reached out and set a hand on the upper slope of one of her breasts. I could feel a subtle fluid rush under my fingertips and said, "That's wild. And it doesn't hurt at all?"

She shook her head and said, "Not a bit. It actually feels really good. My species grows throughout life, but that growth isn't linear or stable. It's more of a ... *capacity*, for growth."

"So the older you get ... the bigger you *can* be?" I asked, and she nodded, getting close to my height.

She said, "Are the technical aspects of this *really* that interesting?"

In answer I stepped in close, wrapped an arm around to cup her ass, then gave the mountain of titflesh in my other hand a slow squeeze.

Her eyes lost focus and her eyelids drooped a bit, but my hand sank in so far that it was clear there wasn't really enough tension there yet to get her more than pleasantly distracted.

I squeezed her ass and she showed her teeth in a grin. I felt her butt cheek push back along with the rush of a current of fluid under flesh that swelled against my hand.

"Hmhm ... fun, aren't I?" she asked teasingly, and her tongue slipped from between her teeth to flick my cheek. It was long and supple, but I wasn't tempted to kiss her because yeah, shark teeth.

Instead, I squared up with her and pressed myself into her once she reached my height. I'd been rigid for a while, and wasn't about to miss this.

Her insides were cool, almost cold, though her slit was silky and dry. Yet I could feel the rush of the water flooding into her right past the head of my cock and it was *really* intense. Like, zero to sixty in two point two intense.

I started to pull out again but she wrapped her arms around my hips and caught my ass with both hands, slamming me back inside as she hissed, “What’s the matter? Too much?”

“*Way* too much!” I grunted, almost too overwhelmed by sensation to notice that she actually had the strength to keep me pinned to her.

I glanced down at her arms and saw they were corded with muscle that bulged and writhed as she strengthened her hold on me. Those nubby claws of hers dug painfully into my butt as she turned to pin me against the wall, eyes intent on me as she said, “Can you last? How long? A minute ... less?”

Less. It was definitely less. Don’t ask me how *much* less, but it was less.

I came hard and it genuinely felt like I’d been tortured into orgasm.

She cooed as she felt me spurt, then lifted my chin with one hand. It was only then that I realized she was now half a foot taller than I was. She said, “Do remember: you put it in. All I did was finish what you started.”

She leaned in, nipped my ear, and whispered, “Maybe next time I tell you *not* to press my full belly you’ll remember this, mmm?”

Phoebe was now so tall that I’d slipped back out of her and were it not for the fact that my face was about to disappear between her tits I might have fallen over. My legs were that shaky. I said, “You ... did that to get *back* at me?”

“Not really. I actually loved what you did, but I *did* say not to do it. You get the kind of energy you produce, you know? Be merciless, get no mercy.”

And with that, my head was completely enveloped in boobs the size of medicine balls. I also noticed there was more tension in her skin now.

With post-nut clarity, I realized Phoebe wasn’t actually reprimanding me. She was telling me what she wanted. No mercy ... you get the kind of energy you produce? Well, if *that* was the case ... I was pretty good at being merciless.

It might even be what I was best at.

I wrapped my arms around her, locked my hands, and squeezed.

“Nn ... NNn!”

Phoebe bowed backward, though her tits just settled over my shoulders and didn't let me free. But I felt the water flow readjusting inside her. I squeezed harder, then harder still, and felt her ass begin swelling dramatically as the flow to her upper body stalled.

“If you don't say something, I'm going to let you go,” I said, and was gratified when she immediately answered.

“Don't you *dare*. I've ... *never* been squeezed so tight! It's like you're wrapping your arms around my *spine*!”

It was beginning to feel like that to me too, and it worried me ... but Phoebe'd sounded *ecstatic*. I don't think I've ever experienced such a disconnect between the content of speech and its inflection. It was painfully obvious that she was *loving* what I was doing, when what I was doing would quite literally kill a normal person.

Then again, what was normal? It certainly wasn't *me* ... or her.

So I shifted, spreading my legs for better leverage, and slid my hands past each other, inching them along until I caught my elbows. Once I had them, I hauled in with every ounce of strength in my body.

As I did, I actually *did* feel the bones of her spine pressing against my forearms, but instead of breaking her back, what I seemed to be doing was simply spreading her vertebrae apart. They literally seemed to fold around my arms both above and below. Her body bent completely backward as though I truly *had* broken her back, and I finally saw the light again as her boobs hauled her upper body back and down until she was folded over my arms like one of those noodle balloons when squeezed hard in the middle. Whatever organs were supposed to be there obviously had enough freedom to slide out of harm's way, and in the next moment I was completely

drenched from the waist down as Phoebe let out an unintelligible shriek of pleasure. Whatever water and fluid she had in her lower body *flooded* out with dramatic force. She just hung limp in my arms as the weight distribution rapidly shifted with the loss.

Eventually, I eased up, pulling her legs out from under her back so she wasn't literally folded in half, and looked down at her curiously as she lay in the bottom of the tub.

All that fluid that was in her upper body seemed to rush to her lower half until there was some semblance of balance again, and it left her looking somewhat normal ... but only for a moment.

The shower hose was still inside her, and the water was still flowing.

The absolutely blissed-out expression on Phoebe's face told me she was checked out and doing *nothing* to control the flow. As I watched, it began to distend her belly more than anything, and I sat on the bench next to the tap to watch.

I considered turning the water off as she seemed pretty much insensate at the moment, but since I knew how much more she could take and that she was nowhere near that limit I decided to let it ride for a little while to see what happened.

Her belly just kept expanding is what happened. It eventually got so big I started to worry a bit as she still seemed completely out of it, so I turned the water off and moved around the bench to sit next to her head, waiting for her to recover.

Phoebe's eyes were glazed, her jaw was slack, and her black tongue was limp on the tile. I noted in passing it was at *least* eight inches long and forked for the last two of those inches.

After several minutes passed, I reached out and prodded Phoebe's cheek gently with my toe as I asked, "You dead?"

I knew she wasn't dead because I could see her breathing, but I'm not known for my bedside manner.

I got no real response, so I sighed and stepped over her and out of the tub, absently grabbing a towel and wrapping it twice around myself as I walked out into the main area and said, “I think I broke Phoebe.”

Pala was the only one in the room and glanced up from her data pad, one tan eyebrow lifting as she looked curiously at me, then past me as she asked, “Is she breathing?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you didn’t break her. You probably just paralyzed her.”

“You say that like it’s not a big deal.”

“Well, for a doll it really isn’t. *Most* of her internal structures aren’t actually breakable. What did you squeeze, her spine?”

I gave her an incredulous look and waved my hand toward the bathroom as I said, “Will you just get in here and tell me if I did something wrong? I have no fucking clue, but she said if she couldn’t talk anymore I needed to stop, so I did.”

Pala tossed the data pad aside and stood, then strolled past me, a studious lack of concern on her face.

Trying to get with whatever program she was on, I walked after her. She stepped into the bathroom, opened the shower door, and started laughing. I looked around her hip and saw Phoebe in pretty much the same position. Her belly made her look like she was a year overdue to have the octuplets and her expression was still slack-jawed, tongue lolling, eyes glazed.

“You laughing kinda tells me I shouldn’t be concerned,” I said dryly.

“You did right to turn the water off,” Pala said, leaning against the wall as she folded her arms, a feral grin on her face as she looked down at Phoebe. “It’s a shame livestock in the audience can’t vote, or you’d have every doll rooting for you for the rest of the show.”

“Isn’t it sad to you that a doll’s best friend is a metal press?” I asked, waving a hand at her. “There was no skill

involved in this. All I did was squeeze her until she ...”

I trailed off, not certain how to describe the scene, but Pala had no trouble with it.

“Came literal buckets, yes. So I see,” Pala said, glancing from the comatose Phoebe to me. “Don’t underestimate the accomplishment. It takes a great deal of raw power to do something like this to a doll. *I* certainly couldn’t do it. A borealan could, but the chances are good they’d wind up shredding any doll crazy enough to ask. Another doll is strong enough, but they aren’t *hard* enough.”

“Dolls are really that strong?” I asked.

“When properly inflated and in control, a mature doll is stronger than any other livestock, *including* a borealan. They’re just delicate at the requisite pressures, so their strength isn’t really useful for combat.”

“So what do I do about Phoebe?” I asked, looking toward her. “Should I press on her or something?”

“I wouldn’t. I was right, she’s paralyzed. She can hear us, but I doubt she’ll remember what we’re saying. If you push on that bulge there’s no telling where it’ll go and it *is* possible to do her harm. If she were just asleep looking like that you could play with her all you wanted, but she’s way past sleep right now. She’s living in a frozen moment, stuck at the height of pleasure.”

“That sounds more like a drug reaction than an orgasm.”

Pala shrugged and crooked a finger for me to follow her as she said, “You’re not wrong. It just has to do with the way dolls are wired. She’ll ride that high for most of an hour before she starts to come out of it. Like I said, don’t worry. What’s going on now is probably what she really wanted from you all along.”

I turned away from the shower but glanced back, frowning. Phoebe *had* practically told me to do what I had done, but still. I could only hope I hadn’t just given one of my allies an addiction.

I WOKE UP, but I wasn't in my room.

Above me was a fitfully lit florescent tube, audibly buzzing in its sockets. The smell of mildew was strong, and I could feel the damp soaking into my clothes from the carpet under my back.

I sat, then stood, looking around. Brown carpet riddled with stains, yellow walls, endless spaces that were neither corridors nor rooms.

Liminal space.

Glancing down at my wrist, I wore no bracer. There was no door near me.

I was alone.

Turning slowly, I sought bearings that simply weren't to be had. In one direction most of the lights were out, leaving the area underneath in perfect darkness. In every other direction the lights revealed the same endless, random spaces. In places the ceiling was higher or lower, sloped or arched. Pillars of varying sizes stood next to each other in obvious disorder, but there was no one to ask, no one to tell.

In every direction there was nothing. Darkness ... or nothing at all.

“Now, *this* is a proper hell,” I said with quiet satisfaction, and started walking.

I woke up.

Pala was staring down at me as she pulled her hand away from my head, her golden eyes luminous in the near dark. The only light was flooding in from the door to the main area of the suite. She'd used that internal whistles of hers to wake me and I sat up, looked around, then at her with a raised eyebrow.

"Today's the day the competition begins," she said. "The first competitors will perform in about an hour and a half. I wanted to see if you cared to have breakfast before we go watch."

"We have to watch? Aren't there like, a hundred eighty-something competitors left?"

"A hundred seventy-two," Pala said. "Fourteen were killed during the triathlon."

"And how long's it going to take to go through all those performances? Don't we go *last*?" I asked, squinting at her in annoyance.

"Only twenty-eight of the competitors will actually perform. It'll be over by the end of the day," Pala said.

"Whaat?"

My trainer smiled a feral smile as she said, "All the rest have admitted they don't have what it takes to perform in one way or another. Most of them had no training. You expect the audience to sit through a hundred fifty shitty performances?"

I'd actually taken quiet joy from the likelihood that the audience for this event would be sitting through massive amounts of suck before getting to the good stuff.

"I admit the idea made me smile," I said, frowning.

Pala showed her teeth at that, and said, "SDM isn't interested in boring their audience. All of the practice sessions were reviewed and those not deemed worthy of the stage were disqualified over the course of the last few days. I don't have numbers, but I promise you most of the competitors didn't even attempt this event. Should we win it, it will go a long way toward keeping you on your throne. No one outside SDM expects you to have any musical ability."

“So they *do* expect me to sit through everyone else’s garbage,” I said with a sigh, and rolled out of bed.

Pala watched me, one hand on her cocked hip, as I got dressed out of the closet of identical jumpsuits. The colors annoyed me, but at least the damn things were comfortable. When I was done, she tipped her head toward the main room and followed me out. The others were waiting there, already dressed.

As I looked around, I said, “Aww, thanks for letting me sleep in.”

Yim rolled her eyes and said, “You’re welcome. Let’s do breakfast and get ready.”

I glanced at Astra, who was literally bouncing, and asked, “Excited?”

“Yes yes! I love music!” she chirped, hopping toward me, then away as she tilted her head, feathers covering her beak a moment before she ran to the suite door, opened it, and fled.

“What gives?” I asked no one in particular as I followed her out.

Phoebe chuckled and said, “She likes you.”

“She runs away from people she hates *and* the ones she likes, apparently,” I noted blandly as we strode toward the elevator at the end of the hall. There was a bay of windows to my right, and the pre-dawn light illuminated the courtyard below. A better man than I’ve ever been might have appreciated the beauty there, but I mostly ignored it.

As though reading my mind, Yim said, “No matter *what* happens today, you need to get out of the suite more, Taz.”

“I go out every damn day.”

I turned to face the elevator doors as the others parted to my left and right, flanking me. The doors closed and we hurtled toward the ground as Yim said, “You know what I mean.”

“I’m *ignoring* what you mean. There’s nothing out here I care to see or do.”

“Most of the serious competitors have picked up at least one new ally playing the various games available. You should consider it,” she said, though she sounded both exasperated and somewhat hopeless. It was obvious she didn’t think I’d be doing it, and she was right about that.

Pala said, “You’re giving up too easily.”

At first I thought she was talking to me, but before I could reply, Yim snapped, “I don’t want to hear that from *you*. I expected *way* more help with him than I’m getting.”

The next thing I heard sounded like a muted *thwap* that I could only imagine was Pala smacking her daughter upside the head. Since Yim yelped at practically the same time, I would have put good money on my guess being right.

I thought about stepping in, but what was I going to say that wouldn’t just turn Yim on me and get me nowhere? I had no dog in that race ... so to speak, so I kept my mouth shut and pretended not to hear what was going on.

Pala said, “You may take it on faith that I’ve provided more benefit than you realize. You may *also* take it on faith that if you don’t assert yourself *in some meaningful way*, your career in this business will be *very* short.”

The brushed metal in front of me showed me colorful shadows of the people standing behind, but no more. That was enough to pick out Pala and Yim, standing just behind me to my left and right. Astra was next to Pala, Phoebe next to Yim, but the two packwren were staring fixedly at one another, though I didn’t hear any growling.

In a flash of inspiration, I thought Pala might be implying Yim try and assert herself from a subordinate position, rather than attempt to maintain a dominant one. I’d read something about it in one of the many papers I’d consumed over the last few days. What had they called it? Topping from the bottom.

Dismissing the thought, I sighed and said, “I don’t care which one of you says what, unless I have a concrete reason to go out and mingle I don’t plan to. I already offer my services to the SDM staff, what *other* benefit is there to going out?”

Yim said, “Director Chosen provided us with an ally she wants you to try and obtain.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked, glancing back at her, one eyebrow raised. “Is it a succubus?”

Yim winced, and that told me all I needed to know. I waved a dismissive hand as I turned away from her and said, “Forget it.”

“She’s a singer,” Yim blurted.

“So?” I asked, turning to look at her as I waved a hand toward Astra. “I’ve already *got* a singer.”

Astra’s crest went up, then she preened, but didn’t say anything as Yim said, “She wants you to pick this girl up to help with some sort of deal you two made. She wouldn’t tell me the details.”

I frowned, but when I didn’t immediately answer, Yim added, “She’ll be performing today.”

“We’ll see what happens. Chosen hasn’t offered me a deal, and until she does I’ll be damned if I saddle myself with a fuck’n’suck.”

I’d actually meant to say ‘fuckin’ succubus,’ it just came out wrong. Since it still worked, I didn’t bother correcting myself.

Phoebe made a throat noise, then several more. I glanced over to see her lips tightly shut as she tried valiantly to stifle her laughter, looking sidelong at me. As the doors opened with a bright chime, I leaned toward her and asked with all the faux concern I could muster, “Are you okay? You sound like you’re choking on something. Shall I escort you to the infirmary?”

Her shoulders dropped as she made a high, whining sound, then shook her head violently and took a swing that glanced off my shoulder as I leaned away with an easy grin. The force of her swing bounced one of her boobs off the other and took her farther around than she intended, and I caught her as she spun back into me. Leaning down, I whispered, “You seem a little shaky. Not still off-balance from yesterday, are you?”

The green of her cheeks got darker as she said, “If I am, whose fault is it?”

“Yours, naturally.”

She leaned away and turned to look up at me as she said, “How do you figure?”

“You get the kind of energy you produce, Phoebe,” I said.

Her eyes rolled up, then left as she tilted her head and grinned.

“You aren’t scoring any points, talking like that,” Yim said without a trace of humor. “Most livestock aren’t free to vote. The bulk of the audience are succubi. I shouldn’t have to tell you it’s not healthy to bite the hand that feeds you, Taz.”

“Fine, I won’t say succubi aren’t good for anything,” I said, glancing up at Yim. “If she impresses me today I’ll scout her. Who’s she working with?”

“Baester. He’s eighteenth on the leaderboards right now and took first in the triathlon.”

“What is he?” I asked.

“He’s a Darter.”

I stopped, turned to Yim, and held out a hand in sarcastic invitation as I stared pointedly at her.

She rolled her eyes, pulled up an image, and handed her data pad over for me to look. Apparently, Baester was a four-armed, two-legged, four-winged ... hornet-lookin’ thing. No abdomen, just a thorax. He was obviously chitinous, and his head was a fair likeness of a hornet save that his eyes actually seemed to curve over the top of his head and his antennae were long, multi-segmented, and drooped behind him to his middle back. His upper body was golden, but below the second set of arms he sort of grayed toward black at his feet, which were completely alien looking. He was wearing purple and green, but I couldn’t hold that against him. No one in the games chose their clothes.

I handed the data pad back as I asked, “Can that thing fly?”

“Yes, he can.”

“Why haven’t I seen him before? I figure I’d remember something like that.”

“He’s three and a half feet tall and probably stayed the hell away from you on purpose,” Pala said wryly. “Darters can be dangerous, but they’re also not all that strong. He was second leg for his team and left before you arrived at the mountain top.”

Nodding as I resumed my walk toward the chow hall, I found myself wondering what use the succubi might have for something like that, but chose not to voice that curiosity out loud. Pretty sure the answer would scar me. Unless they were just like ... delivery boys or something. I opened my mouth to ask, then firmly shut it.

I’d either learn or I wouldn’t.

Hopefully not.

Instead of meat I asked for scrambled eggs and though they tasted just about right with salt, they were purple.

Mis’tle practically fawned over us, and since I’d gotten used to her I made sure to be on my best behavior. Working with her and the other kitchen staff had turned out to be a breeze — most of them were grateful for the help and seemed genuinely friendly.

As I was finishing off the last of my eggs, Yim nudged me and pointed with one of her thumbs as she said, “That’s the succubus. Miriam Lorentz.”

The succubus she pointed out had bright red skin and black hair. Her horns were actually pretty small, ivory, and arched over her ears to stop at points just off her temples. She was wearing a skin-tight, bright blue one-piece tight enough to tell me that was *all* she was wearing, and like all succubi, she had all the curves and a model’s face.

“Where have I seen her before?” I asked no one in particular as it struck me that I *had* seen her somewhere.

“She was one of the potential allies when you selected Astra.”

“Oooh, so she’s pissed at me.”

“Very likely.”

“Why would Director Chosen want me to take on a hostile succubus?” I asked, glancing in consternation at Yim, who showed her hands.

She said, “Don’t ask me. I just work here. No one tells me anything.”

Since she didn’t have anything useful, I turned to look at Pala, who was finishing something that’d been moving when the plate was set in front of her. She glanced at me then shrugged and said, “Any number of reasons. Drama or sex ordinarily, but it could also be that there’s some behind-the-scenes reason. Some corporate deal. It might just be that she or her backers are wealthy potential contributors. Yim told you that Chosen mentioned some sort of deal, and if you know anything about *that* you’ve yet to tell *us*.”

“There is, no, deal.”

“But there *might* be a deal in the future?” Yim asked, drawing my attention back to her.

“It’s looking *increasingly* unlikely,” I said as I looked out across the hall to where Miriam Lorentz was just sitting down at a table with a few other females and, yes, hornet-dude.

The little guy was in a booster seat, bless his heart.

As I saw him, my curiosity gripped me again and I did an unconscious head tilt, something I’d picked up from the packwren I lived with.

Yim and Pala said, in stereo, “It’s his wings.”

“Huh?”

I turned to Yim, who said, “They vibrate ... *really* hard.”

“I didn’t ask!”

“Yes you did,” she and her mother said, once more in stereo. Yim tilted her head to look at me as she added, “*This*, is a packwren gesture of open curiosity. You can’t *not* know that.”

“So every time you two do that to me you actually expect me to *say* something?”

“You, or anybody,” she said with a long affirmative blink. “It’s usually obvious what we’re curious about. You’re wondering what the succubus use his kind for, right?”

“Y-yes,” I reluctantly drawled. “That *is* what I was curious about, but I had no intention of asking.”

“Why not?” she asked.

“There are some things I’m better off *not* knowing.”

“So don’t ask next time.”

“I didn’t ... never mind. Is there anything we need to do for setup before we watch this shitshow?” I asked.

She shook her head and said, “All the instrumentation is recorded already. All we need to do is show up.”

“No costumes?”

“Ooh! You’re right! Liminal Science arranged for-”

“Fffuuuck. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Phoebe started laughing, and since I had nothing else good in my life at just that moment, I couched my cheek in my hand and watched her jiggle.

She caught it and showed me all her teeth as she said, “Anytime you want ‘em, they’re yours.”

“Ooooh, don’t tempt me,” I said as I got up, turned to smile at Mis’tle, and added, “And thanks, as always, for serving us.”

“You are *sooo* welcome, Taz. The girls and I will be watching today!”

I grinned, despite myself. The song we’d play might literally be a cosmic joke, but that didn’t mean it wouldn’t be

good.

“I’M GONNA KILL HER. I’m gonna kill every single *one* of those *motherless song-stealin’ FUCKS!*”

I and my group were sitting in a box, one of many that hovered above the audience watching the various performances of the day. We’d been ushered in and it had simply floated up into place.

Fortunately, it had a bathroom as well as a changing area.

Now at times in my life I have felt rage surpassing what I felt in that moment ... but I’d never been angrier in this hell.

On stage, Miriam Lorentz and two of the other girls from Buzzy McVibrator’s party were in the middle of rick-rolling the audience, a pleasure I had reserved for myself.

What made it even worse was that, despite it being an all-female performance ... they were *nailing* it.

And the crowd was eating it up just like I’d *known* they would.

“I’ll kill ‘em all,” I said quietly. “This means fucking war.”

“You’ll be disqual-

I interrupted Yim to snarl, “Oh, who gives a *shit!* This game is rigged! SDM gave my song to another performer! It makes NO DIFFERENCE now who I kill! They want to break their own rules? Fine, I’ll show ‘em how it’s *really* done!”

I was lifted off my feet and spun into the wall, where Pala held me pinned with her hands wrapped around my upper

arms. She stared hard into my eyes as she said, “There’ll be no proof, and it’ll be your word against a succubus’. If you go on a murder spree, Yim and I are dead. Right now, you need to calm down and think of a way out of this. We can’t use that song anymore. Do you have a backup?”

“A backup!? *One* song, that was the deal!” I said, trying hard to get a handle on my rage. Pala was, incidentally, making it easier for me to do that, since a man pinned three feet off the ground looks kinda stupid when he’s raging. I’m pretty sure she knew it too ... Yim could say what she liked, but her mother really *did* know what she was doing.

It also occurred to me that I now knew where Yim had gotten *her* habit of picking me up from.

I said, “I don’t have the instrumentals or a translation for anything else, and we’re on in less than twenty minutes!”

“Um ...”

Pala twisted her head as I tilted mine, and both of us looked at Astra, who was fidgeting as she said, “If you don’t mind we could do the song you made for me I’d sing it I would I would I think people would like it can we do that instead would it work do you think?”

“I thought you had stage fright?” I said, looking curiously at her.

“Stage fright? Oh no! I love singing in front of people I was just scared of *you*.”

“Pala, put me down.”

She did, and I walked over to Astra, who crouched a little away from me as her feathers covered her beak and her crest, previously up, plastered itself to her head.

“Astra, if you would like to sing for me, I will happily back you up. I just want to make sure you’re okay with it,” I said quietly.

Her crest shot back up and she put her beak right in my face then did that whole body bob thing as she hopped side to side and said, “Yes yes yes! *Please* let me sing for you and

everybody! I love my song and I know they will too I know it I know it!”

I rubbed at my eyebrows as I said, “Pala, Yim, you get a stay of execution. I doubt we’ll get first but as long as we place well — and with Astra’s help we certainly will — I’ll find some other way to take vengeance on the people who did this to me.”

No one spoke, and I knew why.

Astra was giddy with happiness, but Pala and Yim were probably dreading what ‘other way’ I’d cook up. Phoebe was watching the performance, and it was a rare thing that I didn’t know what was on her mind, but she wasn’t talking *or* smiling.

Since she was essentially an SDM cast member, maybe she was wondering just how far I’d take my revenge. Maybe she was wondering if I blamed her for stealing the work.

I knew she hadn’t. In a world where anyone in charge could just hijack my eyes and ears, the idea that they’d need an inside man to do *anything* was just silly.

Returning my attention to the performance, I watched in silence. The irony of having a song I’d cribbed off someone else stolen before I could take credit for it wasn’t lost on me.

That didn’t mean I liked it.

It also didn’t mean the theft was justified. *Someone* would pay, and if I had my way they’d pay in blood.

As my bloody dreams developed, our little floating box suite began drifting down toward one side of the stage. There was precious little setup for each performance since in almost all cases the instrumentals were pre-recorded. I wondered what they had ready for us. How deep this treachery ran. Whoever was running the schedule would know, wouldn’t they?

That question, at least, had a ready answer. Miriam called the song *The Rules*.

Presuming that’s the title the stage manager had to work with, he/she/it wouldn’t know that *my* song was the same thing.

Our suite docked backstage as the next act came on, and their music was pretty damn obnoxious as I walked in with Astra and Phoebe flanking me. Oddly, Pala and Yim were keeping to the background.

The stage manager turned out to be a succubus who was, to my absolute shock, not a complete knockout. In a word, she was chunky. That said, if one liked that sort of thing she was ... shall we say, peak chunk. As I was not a fan, I found this succubus strangely endearing because our first meeting was not an assault on my senses. She was wearing a very functional set of clothes, albeit in SDM colors, and seemed to be controlling all the action through a tablet that was floating around in front of and slightly to the right of her prodigious bust.

Her eyes were like smoldering coals as they settled on me and she smiled in a not-at-all nice way as she said, “Silent Knight, you and your group are on next. Ready?”

To my surprise, Phoebe spoke up before I got the chance. She said, “Actually, we need to change the song we’ll be performing. It’s in the database, all you need to do is swap the instrumentals.”

“Last-minute changes don’t go over well with the producers,” the succubus said, her eyes straying from me to Phoebe.

She said, “Well, if you don’t make the change there’s going to be a blood bath that’ll probably start with *you*, so please just do the thing so everyone here gets to live all the way through today ... please?”

Blinking as I glanced back at Phoebe, then back to the now openly gawking stage manager, I tried to be helpful and shrugged as I said, “You *are* in range ... just sayin’.”

“Are you threatening me?!” the woman said, bristling.

“No no, of course not!” Phoebe said hastily, hands waving. “Taz just isn’t known for his restraint, you know?”

“Don’t listen to her, I *am* a threat,” I said mildly. “Change the fucking song or I snatch the heart from your chest and eat

it on stage. Go ahead. Test me, bitch. I'm hungry."

"Ah ... uh ... what's the title of the file?" she stammered, eyes flicking to her little floaty techno-widget as she took a hasty step back. I took one forward, eyeing her deliberately. I'd made a threat; she needed to know it was credible.

Astra chirped, "It's called *Catch My Breath!*"

"Ahhh ... ah ... AH! Found it! I've set it up, you're good to go!" the succubus said, still backpedaling and increasingly distressed by the fact that I was walking after her.

"If the wrong music plays it'll be your fault, and *everyone* will know it," Phoebe noted, her hands now folded behind her back as she smiled, keeping her lips closed over her teeth. "There's no way our feeds aren't being viewed, and this confrontation has been too long for the built-in lag to hide."

"I don't make mistakes!" the succubus snapped, traces of her attitude momentarily returning.

"Yelling at my ally is exactly that, *fuck off!*" I snarled. The once more terrified succubus turned and fled.

It almost made me feel a bit bad as I watched her go. Of all the succubi I've met, she was the only one I didn't instinctively dislike.

I glanced back to see Yim and Pala looking on impassively and said, "Yim? You okay? You're usually covering your head by now."

"No point, getting used to it," she said, showing her hands. "Yet another behind-the-scenes enemy to deal with. Good job."

"Long as the right track plays, I don't care."

"Clearly."

"Actually, in this case it was necessary," Phoebe said, setting a hand on my upper arm, which was about as high as she could reach at the moment. "The producers really *don't* like last-minute changes. Once you threatened her life, though, she could make that change without getting in trouble. You

have a reputation for violence, Taz. May as well make the best of it.”

“You sneaky little shit,” I said, grinning down at her, not passing up the opportunity to look into her exceptionally ample cleavage. “That’s brilliant! Could have warned me in advance.”

“Right up until we saw her I had no idea how we were going to get them to swap songs. It just came to me and I rolled with it. I guess I have my moments. Now go out there and make sure Astra has *her* moment,” Phoebe said, giving me that sharkish grin of hers.

“Astra, you ready to blow this audience away?” I asked, glancing over to find the bird-like alien girl literally bouncing in place, her crest bobbing all over the place in her excitement.

She didn’t even make a comprehensible answer. She just chirped excitedly.

“All right then. Your voice is amazing, and you’re about to let the whole world know it. Let’s go.”

AN HOUR later the performers were all called back to the stage and crammed into little boxes that were stacked into a grid like an oversized parody of *Hollywood Squares*. We were supposed to stand and wave at the crowd as the votes came in, and our numbers were displayed right under the windows through which we were visible. We couldn’t see those numbers and I thought the whole thing was retarded, but for Astra’s sake I stood there like a moron, waving and smiling where appropriate and feeling like a complete fool the whole time.

Then a succubus I knew and — let’s be honest — hated, took the stage.

Valenteen was incredibly sexy in her white sparkly whatsits, looking to me like a college co-ed going for broke to get a role as an announcer as she bounced around the stage

with vibrant and apparently bottomless energy, hyping the crowd and teasing the results.

After almost fifteen minutes of this, by the end of which I was more than a little tempted to jump out of the little booth I was sharing with Astra to strangle her, she made the cut to the last three, of which Astra and I were one.

I wasn't surprised. Given the popularity of the song I'd chosen and how well Astra'd sung it, I thought we had a genuine shot at second place, though I doubted we'd win.

Rick Astley is a hard act to follow.

Third place went to Maximus' group, which pleased me for reasons I chose not to examine too closely. After the precipitous drop he'd suffered with the triathlon results, he needed the rank to stay in the top twenty, and third place kept him there. Dude's got a set of pipes on him, but the song he'd sung obviously hadn't been written by him and its content was pretty forgettable pop nonsense that Maximus didn't really have the stage presence to pull off.

Gotta say I'd pay good money to see him do some Drowning Pool. That'd be epic.

It was down to the song-stealing succubus and Astra. As Valenteen went back into hype mode, I glanced down to see Astra looking up at me with liquid red eyes and said, "You earned first. Whether you get it or not, that's my take. It might not be worth much, but there it is."

"Thank you, Taz," she said, and that she paused before saying my name meant that, at least for her, she spoke with deliberate effort. "I never thought I would have so much fun during this event. Thank you."

The two of us missed the final build-up, but when Valenteen announced first place, I heard one voice and recognized it.

The voice belonged to Miriam Lorentz, screaming a denial. She sounded like someone'd just shot her dog.

I smiled, just a little.

Astra had earned her recognition and her place, twice over now. Choosing her may have been the best decision I ever made, and I'd only done it because she had wings.

Sometimes, for just a moment, I could almost believe that God was looking out for me. Then I remembered what I'd done to get here, to this hellish place, and my smile faded.

If anything, God was looking out for Astra.

Well, whatever works.

The woman in question disrupted my thoughts as she jumped on me, swung around my middle, and settled on my back with her ankles locked around my hips as she crossed her wings over my chest, shrieking fit to burst my eardrums.

I almost threw her off on reflex, but managed to suppress the urge as the box she and I were in slid out of the grid and floated down to the stage.

The front of it opened and I stepped out, still feeling like a complete fool. One with a bird girl on his back. I hated everything about what was happening around me, and it was all I could do to keep walking toward Valenteen rather than pull a left face and stride offstage.

"You're a man of hidden talents, Silent Knight," Valenteen said as she smiled down at me.

I had to look twice, but I saw the glint in her eye. She wasn't any happier than I was to be there, and since I knew that was all my fault it lightened my mood a bit. I glanced up and said, "The credit should go to my ally. Trust me, had I sung that song, it would have gone differently."

"He wrote it for me!" Astra chirped, leaning so far over my head to speak that I could see her throat. "I got a song all for myself hihi I'm Astra premier product of Division Six!"

Valenteen's attention flicked to Astra, then back down to me as she said, "Is it true? You wrote the song specifically for her?"

"It seemed to fit her," I said.

“Did it,” Valenteen mused, then turned to the audience with a grand gesture as she said, “I’d say it struck a chord with the audience as well, though the voting was close.”

The audience cut loose with a tremendous roar and as the sound of that roar covered the stadium I said, “Having both songs in the top two *is* pretty neat.”

“What?” Valenteen said, turning to me and bending to get closer, abruptly ignoring the still thunderous noise of the crowd. “*What* did you say?”

“You either heard me or you didn’t. I don’t repeat myself. As for the win ...”

I took a step away from Valenteen and so got out of her shadow as I bowed to the audience, their cheers had only just begun to subside, but renewed at my gesture. Since Astra was still on my back, she went with me and chirped in surprise, then cooed and leaned hard on me as I reached up to pat her neck.

When the applause subsided enough for whatever amplification the stage somehow provided, I straightened and said, “Thank you for your votes. Astra did her very best to reach you. Seeing you reward her like this makes me hate everything about this mess just a little bit less.”

There was a faltering cheer, but mostly just visible confusion as far as the eye could see.

Since I’d said all I planned to, I turned and quietly left the stage.

WHEN THE DOOR opened I glanced up, then blinked as I saw Director Chosen step through out of that yellow-and-brown hell she called liminal space. The door stayed open as she silently tossed a bracer to me.

I caught it, put it on, and followed her back out into that strange, endless world of meaningless walls and musty carpet. The buzzing of poorly connected fluorescents assaulted my ears, and I could only wrinkle my nose at the smell.

“Division Four has sold the rights to your music to Liminal Science at great cost. I’ve also gotten your value on the market frozen. Provided your music is as profitable as anticipated, you should be able to earn out within a few years if that is truly your wish.”

“Straight to the point, huh?”

“This private time with you is very expensive.”

Turning from the disturbing vision ahead of me, I looked at her and said, “Where’s my copy of the contract?”

“You should know by now your signature has no validity of any kind in our legal system. Providing you a contract would be a gesture of meaningless deception, so I brought nothing.”

“Then how do you expect me to work, knowing I may get nothing in return for my effort?”

“You’d have preferred a lie?”

I thought about that, then frowned and said, “Okay, fair. That still doesn’t give me any motive to work for you beyond this SDM shit I’m already involved in.”

Director Chosen spread her hands and said, “Taz, you’re livestock. I can say anything I like to you, make any promise, and no one will hold me to any of it. I’ve wracked my brain but I can’t think of *any* way to get you to trust me. If *you* have ideas, I’d be open to hearing them.”

“How did my music get into the hands of another team, and why didn’t you warn me?”

“Behind-the-scenes action is half of the nature of Sex, Death, and Money. This particular event is often used to launch the careers of promising starlets, and the music they perform is more often than not provided by writers from outside the show. Typically, they have what they need memorized before the season begins, but in this case another corporation paid to have your work stolen and performed so as to cripple your chances at success. I knew what happened as soon as the instrumentals for Miriam started to play, but that was still far too late to give *you* any warning ... not that you needed any.”

“Do you know who it was?” I asked.

“Even if I did, the answer wouldn’t do *you* any good. As it happens, I have no idea. It could be someone who has it out for Division Four, but it could just as easily be the executives of SDM proper. You’re making waves, and not the good kind. The idea that you might win terrifies a lot of people who can read between the lines. A race like yours poses an existential threat to our way of life, but your abilities are also a powerful incentive to bring more people *like* you in. Ten of you could shift the balance of power.”

Holding up a single finger, I said, “*One* of me can do that.”

Her wings flared a bit, then subsided as her tail flicked and she nodded once. She said, “Yes, I believe that’s true. Were you not in so public a venue, someone would almost certainly have terminated you by now.”

I looked at Chosen, and she gazed back. The buzzing of the lights was the only sound as I struggled to think of some way to bridge the gap between us.

Unfortunately, I only had one idea.

Chosen was wearing a sexy black pencil skirt so tight that it rippled all the way to where it stopped at mid-thigh, revealing a lot of toned crimson leg. Above a solid leather belt was a filmy, pleated white shirt — long-sleeved — that she hadn't bothered to button past her belly, revealing the inner curves of an impressive chest and the black undercarriage of the bra holding her cleavage together. Her wavy, blue-black hair hung forward over her left shoulder, and the golden eyes and hartebeest horns did nothing to detract from her smartly sexual allure.

Or maybe they did, and I'd just spent long enough in this alien world to not be bothered by the details. I mean, one of my allies was a balloon shark for crying out loud.

At eight feet tall she was imposing, but when I stepped up to her she didn't hide the way her breath quickened. Her wings flared again and stayed out, cocked as though ready to fly away as her tail writhed half around her leg in a display of nerves she either couldn't or chose not to hide.

As I took this in, something in the back of my mind clicked, and I raised a hand, palm toward me, and crooked my finger.

To my vague surprise, she bent forward, cocked at the hip, and I gently laid my hand on the side of her neck and asked, “Do *you* think I should be terminated?”

She was definitely breathing harder now, her eyes wide as she looked into mine and said, “Of course not,” with admirable calm despite all the body language I was reading.

“You're very trusting,” I murmured, lifting my other hand to cup her cheek, locking her head in place as I stared into her eyes.

“There's a bomb-”

“I don’t care if I live or die. *You* do. Right now, your life is literally in the palm of my hand. How does that make you feel?”

Her lips trembled, but she didn’t answer me. I don’t know if she could. Without letting her go, I slowly, deliberately looked down toward her tail.

It was visibly swollen and there was a delicate sheen on the tip, which was parted, pointed my way, and showing delicate, glistening inner folds.

Just as slowly, I lifted my eyes to hers again and raised an eyebrow as I said, “I think ... there might be a way for us to trust one another.”

“O- ooh?” she said, the slight tremble in her voice revealing her increasing lust.

“Mmhm.”

I lowered my hand from her cheek to her shirt, caught the first button that was actually done, then flicked them open one by one, my eyes never leaving hers.

Her lips were parted and I could feel her breath on my cheek. She seemed frozen, mesmerized by what was happening to her.

Once her shirt was open to the belt, I slid both hands into the collar at her neck, slid the shirt over her shoulders, then jerked it down to her elbows.

The fabric went no farther, obviously being held by where her wings protruded from her middle back, and it was loose enough that it wasn’t a real restraint, but I noted that she kept her arms tight to her sides when I let them go and said, “Get on your knees, Director.”

Hiding my surprise as she did it, I watched impassively as she looked up at me and asked, “What do you want?”

“I’ve been told my essence is strong,” I said. “Is it true?”

“Ah ... according to the medical reports, yes?”

“Then I’m going to stand here, and you’re going to taste it for yourself.”

“I could take that any time I wanted,” she said, ending breathlessly when I wrapped my hand around one of her twisting horns.

I softly asked, “Is that how it feels right now?”

As I spoke, I caught her other horn, staring down at her as I said, “I remember the last time I had a succubus by the horns ... do you?”

“Oh my *fuck*,” she breathed, shuddering, and I heard a muffled thump that made me glance down. Her tail had hit the musty carpet and by the new stain there it had obviously ejaculated. This succubus was hardcore into danger, and I was pretty sure she’d just had an orgasm.

“Open my pants, take my cock out, and suck like your life depends on it, Director Chosen ... because it *does*,” I murmured.

She shivered, but did as I bade, and to my own vague surprise I was as hard as rock as she took me out. Her lips were pillowy soft as she set them against the underside, kissing me with a curious delicacy before a serpentine tongue slid out, wrapped under my glans, and pulled me smoothly past those lips into a wet heat that got a low growl of pleasure out of me.

“Mmm, time is money, *Director*,” I said, smiling grimly down at her. “The longer you take, the more you pay for the privilege.”

Her eyes rolled back and drifted closed as she took me to the root with practiced ease, then began fucking me with her mouth. I’ve had a blow job or three in my life, but even Mauren had never done it *this* way. Drool was leaking from the corners of her mouth and her tongue had a good portion of me wrapped up. She was twisting me a bit as she slobbered and kissed the root again and again with a desperate sort of edge to her. I glanced down at her tail and saw the puddle in front of it was even bigger now. I said, “Give me your tail.”

She started to pull off me but with one hand on a horn I pulled her down to the root again. Her eyes shot open and met mine as I said, “That wasn’t a request.”

With a muffled moan, her tail lifted shakily off the floor and I got the distinct impression she was having real trouble controlling it. So much the better. I held my hand out, palm flat, and kept her pinned to me as I watched. She did too, her eyes desperate as she flexed and writhed against me until finally, with a wet slap, her tail landed on my outstretched palm.

I eased my hold, and she started face-fucking herself again as I cradled her swollen tail in my palm. It was too big to really fit, but she kept it balanced there, its wet end drooling all over my wrist. Twisting my hand a bit, I put a thumb at the swollen, open petals near the tip of her spade and pushed it in.

Her tail had amazing internal dexterity, grasping and suckling on my thumb with almost the same intensity that Chosen was using on my cock.

Speaking of which, I was getting close. In just a few minutes, she had me on the verge and clearly knew it. The way she was sucking me changed. Deeper, slower draws, running the head of my cock across her palate, using the tip of her tongue to tease the slit.

“Finish me ... or I will finish you,” I said quietly, and she groaned around my cock, sucked hard, and the spade of her tail abruptly sealed around my thumb and inflated. I could feel the fluids rushing around my digit and was impressed by how sensual it felt. It was alien, yet intensely erotic. She was cumming hard, and in the next instant, so was I.

My neck tightened until it made me shudder as my cock leapt against the roof of her mouth. She sucked so hard I wasn’t sure if I was cumming into her or if she was sucking the cum out of me. Either way, she didn’t spill a drop of mine, though at last the seal around my thumb seemed to burst as a flood of warm, almost hot fluid drenched my arm and side.

It wasn’t until I began to come down from the high that I noticed both her hands were busy between her legs, and her

pencil skirt was rucked up around her hips. Not only was she fucking my cock with her mouth and my thumb with her tail, she was frantically masturbating with both hands, and the shit-brown carpet of the liminal world had yet another dark stain on it from her effort.

I have to admit, it was *really* hot.

Once my orgasm was finished I pulled my hand away from her tail, slid both under her armpits, and hoisted her easily back to her feet. Remembering something I'd read about the way these sorts of control scenarios went, I carefully, gently pulled her shirt back up over her shoulders.

She stood in front of me, shivering, as I buttoned the buttons I'd loosed, then straightened her collar before stepping away from her. Chosen seemed like she was in a trance as she slowly, reluctantly pulled her skirt back down into place.

That done, I said, "I have something you personally want ... and you have something I want. Give me what I desire, and you can have more of it."

"You'll ... you'll make the music?" she asked, with each word seeming to regain more of her earlier presence.

I nodded gravely and said, "For now, we have a deal."

"I'll honor it ... in my own self-interest," she said, looking at me with a sort of quiet conviction.

Finding no fault in her apparent sincerity, I said, "Then we're done for now. I look forward to hearing from you again ... Director."

THE NEXT TIME my door opened, Pala filled it. I glanced at her, then flicked my hand in an invitation. She stepped in and slid the door closed behind her, eyes never leaving me. I noticed her nostrils twitch, and she said, “I see you’ve finally begun to understand the utility of my lessons.”

Now, I’d taken a rather thorough shower after my encounter with Chosen so I was a bit annoyed at having been so easily discovered, but annoyance is not surprise. I said, “A little, maybe.”

“The succubi love games, Taz. They live for sex, but precisely because that’s so they find it routine. Games are what they love. Games of power, games of pleasure, games to excite and inspire. Livestock who master these games can go far in this world.”

A question had been brewing in the back of my mind, and when she said that something clicked and I asked, “Is that why my ... why Miriam Lorentz didn’t win?”

She nodded gravely and said, “Romantic love is an abstract notion not many succubi truly grasp, and what understanding they have of it they mostly get from livestock species. Feeling downtrodden and suddenly liberated, on the other hand, that’s inspiring for everyone. All of the succubi you’ve met are in positions of some power on this world, but the vast majority are not. Many of them are in far worse circumstances than your own.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“That’s because you only see the value of freedom and nothing else.”

We stared at each other for a long moment, then I said, “Everything worth having is based in freedom, Pala.”

“You’re an idiot, Taz. You’re tossing away a pearl because at its heart is a grain of sand.”

“And I suppose you’d stay with someone even if you knew he had a heart of stone?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

Blinking, I said, “Bad analogy.”

“I think it’s perfect. It just proved *my* point, not yours. Emotional intelligence is — in your case — a practical contradiction in terms. Being stunted doesn’t mean you’re useless, or that I can’t care for you and improve your life.”

“You’re in this because-”

“I’m in this for my daughter’s sake. Does that make it the only goal I can pursue? Are you *so* narrow-minded?” she asked, interrupting me as she came to sit on the bed just beyond my feet. I marveled at how well the bed held up under her weight. Even sitting, Palashai towered over me. She could reach out from where she was and touch my nose with the barest lean, and I was stretched out. She was wearing the jumpsuit thing, but it wasn’t done all the way up. In fact, it was open from just past the point where I’d run a measuring tape if I wanted her numbers, and the valley was impressive. Granted, she wasn’t Phoebe. *Everything* about Pala was impressive, and there’s something to be said for proper proportion. That she had no hair and a Doberman’s coloration gave her a severe look that took very little away from her allure. Her ears were pointed my way, and she was gazing intently at me with golden eyes.

I got so distracted drinking her in that I didn’t answer, and it wasn’t until she set a hand on the headboard next to my head that I snapped out of it ... which was far too late. She kissed me, and unless I wanted to bite her my only option was kissing back, which I did to the best of my limited ability. She had a

lot of tongue and filled my mouth with it as her other hand came to rest on my shoulder.

When the kiss broke, I looked into those golden eyes and said, “There’s nothing to me, Pala. You’re wasting your time.”

“I disagree, and since your opinions on emotional matters are inconsequential to me we’ll leave it at that. You’re mine, and I take care of what’s mine whether he likes it or not.”

I was completely stuck for words, and she seemed to sense it because she shifted her arm, curling it under my head to draw it up as she settled, her breasts spreading as they covered my chest. Her weight pinned me all the way down, and she looked steadily at me as though patiently waiting for the words I didn’t have. That she knew I didn’t have.

After a long silence, she said, “You’ll get there eventually. I’ll see to it ... it *is* my job, after all.”

“You have a funny way of doing your job,” I said, and her lips peeled back to show her teeth in a feral grin.

She said, “Given I can feel you prodding my stomach, ‘sexy’ might be a better word. Do you want me?”

“Yes.”

“I doubt you’d have admitted that a month ago.”

“You weren’t laying on top of me a month ago,” I said, deadpan.

Pala blinked, then dropped her head and started laughing on my shoulder. I waited until she calmed, then said, “That dominant ‘I take what I want’ mask slips when you laugh in the middle of the act. Just figured I’d point that out.”

“I can afford slips because unlike my daughter, *I’m* not acting,” she said as she lifted her head to resume eye contact, her smile faintly mocking.

“I meant to ask: how were you allowed to have a daughter at all? Yours is the only family bond I’m aware of in this fucked-up world,” I said.

“Sometimes livestock is bred to preserve certain abilities. Sometimes a child is allowed as a reward. In my case, it was a bit of both,” she said.

“But you didn’t get to choose the sire?” I asked, not having the word for father, and she shook her head.

She said, “I also didn’t bear her myself. My egg was extracted. She and I were both produced by Division Seven.”

“Do you have any real children?” I asked.

Her brow furrowed as she said, “Yim is as real a child of mine as it is possible to have. I have never given birth, if that’s what you’re asking. Natural breeding is rare and frowned upon. Most owners don’t allow it, and breeding males at all is unheard of. All the males you see are first-generation gene seeds.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Successive generations have weaker essence,” Pala said with an idle shrug. “With females it doesn’t matter because we don’t directly feed succubi.”

“That makes sense,” I said dryly, and her eyes narrowed as she looked keenly at me.

She said, “That wasn’t sarcasm.”

“Not a bit.”

“You think you know the secret to the strength of essence?”

I nodded, then said, “Given how strong mine is and the hints that have been dropped to me over the course of things, yeah. Pretty sure I have it figured out.”

When she gazed at me in obvious expectation, I gave her a quick negative double blink, then said, “If I told you, they’d probably kill you to keep the secret. As long as I never say, they’ll just assume I’m lying.”

“Why would you lie about something that important?” she asked.

“Anything important is worth lying about,” I said. “Does essence get weaker the longer someone’s been around?”

When she gave me the long affirmative blink, I shrugged and said, “Then yeah, I’ve got it.”

“It isn’t age, and it doesn’t *always* happen,” Pala said, but I worked a hand free and set it against her muzzle, silencing her.

“Stop trying to guess. I mean it. Let’s get back to you, and why your clothes are still on if you came here to fuck.”

“Sometimes fucking with clothes on is hot,” she said mildly, and since I didn’t disagree I just waited, tilting my head with the obvious question in my eyes.

“About your earlier encounter ... I know she’d never come out and ask. You had to intuit what she wanted,” Pala said.

Since she seemed to be going out of her way to keep Chosen’s name out of the conversation, I did likewise. I said, “It just occurred to me. Since I have nothing to lose, I acted on it.”

She asked, “Did it turn you on?”

“I was turned on, but I can’t say it was the scenario that did it,” I said.

“How did it end?” she asked.

“We came to an agreement,” I said.

Pala sat up and set her hands on my chest, which essentially covered it. Her thumbs crossed at my solar plexus and her *other* thumbs wrapped down my sides. It was an odd juxtaposition of images. On one hand, a huge woman was sitting on me with her tits ballooning between her arms. On the other, I was looking up into the golden eyes of an alien with more than a passing resemblance to a Doberman. A Doberman milf with a *very* hungry look in her eyes.

“I want to fuck you,” she said, in a completely matter-of-fact tone.

“I have no intention of stopping you,” I said, gazing up at her, a curious welter of conflicting feelings warring inside me.

I didn't like the idea that this woman thought she could control me. A month ago I'd have blown her off, then — if necessary — *thrown* her off, if she pressed.

Now ... I was hard as a rock and fully intended to see where she wanted to take me. I still wasn't comfortable with the idea of playing a role for her, but within certain limits I was willing to let her have her way. It was certainly true that the lessons she'd been hammering into my head helped me secure a connection, however tenuous, with Chosen.

The more I'd read about these sexual games, the more I'd begun to understand that they might be — if carefully arranged — a somewhat reliable method of ensuring that agreements were adhered to. If Chosen betrayed me, she certainly wouldn't be getting any more of the encounters she seemed to like so much. Rather, she'd get one final encounter, and that'd be the end of it.

All this flashed through my mind as Pala examined me, nostrils flaring. She was being cautious. More than anything, that convinced me the power I was about to give her still belonged to me, and she knew it.

So I met her gaze and passively waited to see what she would do.

Eventually, whatever she saw there must have satisfied her, because she reached up and slipped a finger into her top, then opened it all the way. I couldn't help but smile when it literally sprang open as those heavy breasts of hers got free, and she shrugged her shoulders and tossed the garment negligently aside as she said, "I like to have my nipples bitten and sucked. It's safe."

That she had to say it raised a warning flag in the back of my mind, but when she leaned forward, setting hands to either side of my head, I wrapped an arm up under her shoulder to support myself as I caught a handful of flesh in the other. It flowed over my fingers with a pleasant, warm weight as I kissed the nipple proffered to me, then sealed my lips around it. I didn't bite right away, but rather explored the surface with my tongue and gradually increased the suction, eyes on her.

Her own eyes grew heavy-lidded as she gazed down on me, then shifted, leaning on one hand as she lowered the other out of sight. The sound of tearing cloth told me what she was doing, and a moment later she shifted up a bit, though she hunched over me to leave her breasts within reach. I felt heat press over the length of my cock, and she started to stroke me with the folds of her sex, eyes never leaving mine.

It felt good, as did the weight of her tits in my hand and on my face. I bit her nipple, tugged on it, and suckled hard. Her eyes closed briefly in the slow blink of acknowledgment as she shivered, and kept slowly stroking me downstairs as she said, “That’s it. Good boy. I know you can hurt me if you want ... it pleases me that you don’t. My life ... and more importantly, pleasure, are in your hands.”

I knew she was talking shit now precisely because my mouth was full but credit where due: it was a good play. I wasn’t about to let go of her tits to argue so I silently let her comment pass, switching from one pendant breast to the other as she continued to grind herself against me. It was an interesting mix of sensations. She seemed in no rush and I got a little lost in a world of tangible pleasures. Soft warmth and weight, slick heat and the subtle, wet sounds of a pussy grinding over my cock. The heavy smell of packwren heat tickled my nose. The sounds she made weren’t verbal, but *were* sexy.

It was ... good. Then it got weird.

The door slid open. I couldn’t see it, but I heard it, and a moment later Yim’s voice as she pointedly asked, “Mother, *really?* You were supposed to bring him out to talk about the next event, not smother him in your scent.”

Smother him in your scent.

The words shot through me and I could tell as her eyes met mine that Pala intended to do precisely that. She wanted to hide what I’d done with Chosen. *That* was why she was rubbing her pussy on me. I raised an eyebrow at her and she smiled a feral smile in return and said, “You’ll have to get away from my tits if you want to lodge a complaint.”

As soon as I leaned back to speak, she leaned forward and pinned me to the bed, burying me in breast flesh as she said, apparently to her daughter, “Go sit on that hand over there; I’m curious what he’ll do.”

It wasn’t until she said it that I realized my arms were splayed and Pala had a hand on my elbows to keep them that way. A moment later, I felt the bed shift slightly and then a warm weight settled directly on the hand that had earlier held Chosen’s tail. I could tell by the way it felt that her butt was toward me, which put her sex in easy reach of my fingers. The fact that she was still wearing pants didn’t bother me at all. I curled my fingers up and began to explore, discovering immediately that she only had one layer on and it wasn’t thick.

When my fingers made contact I felt Yim lean forward over my palm, rolling her hips a bit as she spread her thighs to drop herself more comfortably over my hand.

Pala’s voice was somewhat muffled as it came to me through the soft weight of her tits, but was clear enough as she said, “See? He’s learning.”

“*Any* male would finger a female that did this,” Yim said, somewhat breathlessly.

“Are you sure? Think back. Would he have done it the first time you and I were in his bedroom?”

The silence afterward stretched, and I rolled my eyes despite it being a valid point. Then again, it wasn’t that I wouldn’t have done for a girl back then, only that I didn’t really have context, which was and remains important to me.

Light flooded around me as Pala leaned up, and my eyes met hers again as she looked down on me and said, “I want you to take care of us both.”

She didn’t phrase it as a question, but that was how I heard it. Movement caught my eye and I glanced not toward Yim — now grinding against my busy fingers — but toward the side of the bed where I saw Phoebe and Astra watching. Phoebe was standing behind Astra, her proportions curvy but not outrageous, and she was running her fingers just under and

behind Astra's beak, which the bird girl seemed to *really* enjoy. She was leaning back against Phoebe, but though her eyes were heavy-lidded, they were on me.

It was the first time it had ever even occurred to me that Astra might have a sex drive. She was so completely off my radar that ... yeah.

Glancing back up at Pala, I found her smirking at me and said, "You're really enjoying how uncomfortable this is for me."

"Yes. Despite that discomfort, you are still *very* hard."

"The dick wants what it wants," I said wryly, and she chuckled and hunched over me, tits ballooning on my chest as she pressed her muzzle to my lips and filled my mouth with tongue.

Yim's single layer was now soaking wet, and the sounds coming from that hand were getting pretty lewd. Phoebe let Astra go, and the bird girl crawled up on the bed, crossed my legs, and disappeared in front of Yim.

I felt hands aside from mine over Yim's pussy and heard the ripping sound as she tore the cloth protecting her from my bare touch. Astra chirped and Yim gasped, then softly moaned as I pressed fingers into wet, slick heat.

"Finger her. Make her cum I want to see!" Astra said in a breathless tone, despite the fact that I was already two knuckles deep doing just that. Pala broke her kiss and leaned away as Phoebe leaned in, eclipsing my view of Yim as she gave me that shark's smile.

"I'm getting fucking dogpiled," I said, just before Phoebe shut me up with *her* tongue.

It occurred to me to wonder if my ratings were going up or down right now, and whether this was something someone had requested.

Phoebe's kiss broke when Astra let out a strange sort of keen and begged, "Someone help me!"

Phoebe glanced over me at Astra, then whispered in my ear, “Her limbs make it impossible for her kind to masturbate, poor girl. If you’ll excuse me ...”

Yim was covering my hand at her snatch with one of her own, pressing my fingers deeper in as she ground against my arm, moaning and paying absolutely no attention to the frantic little bird girl in front of her, staring at the show she was getting and obviously too worked up to bear it any longer.

Phoebe slid over on her belly and between Astra’s awkwardly splayed thighs. Her tongue slipped in and Astra shuddered, red eyes rolling back, then closed as she began to hunch, babbling, “Thankyouthankyouthankyouthankyou!”

A moment later she fell over and out of sight, leaving me with nothing to see that way but Phoebe’s ... well, yeah. She spread her legs and must have known I was looking because a moment later her fingers appeared from beneath her as she began to work on herself.

“Eyes up, Taz.”

I returned my attention to Pala and watched as she lifted me, then settled down. Her whole body shivered and her eyes lost focus as she eased forward on me, then settled back and began circling her hips as she breathlessly said, “Oh you *do* feel good.”

“You doubted that?” I asked curiously, and watched her chest quiver with a quiet chuckle.

She said, “Not really, but it’s been a while for me, and I’ve been waiting.”

“For what?” I asked, curious.

“To reward you for something,” she said without a trace of sarcasm. “You’ve been *such* a good boy recently.”

I was *just* about to make a hotdog down a hallway joke when I felt her tighten along my entire length. It was as though there were a fist inside her, closing around my shaft with the gooey hot walls of her cunt in between. Her cream *was* gooey too, thicker than that of a human woman and clinging to me in

a froth that was beginning to coat her mound and my inner thighs.

“Ffuck that feels good,” I muttered, joke lost to the sensations going on inside her. I could see her taut belly flexing as she rolled her hips on me, and was only gradually aware that she was staring down at me with a very intent look.

I wanted to ask about that, but before I could Yim jerked my fingers out of her as she abruptly said, “Fuck it, I need more!”

Glancing over her way, I was just in time to see her spin on one knee to straddle my chest, cutting off my view of her mother as she looked desperately down at me, showing me her sopping cunt as she said, “Lick me? Please?”

“Ask your mother,” I said with a wry grin. It was a mild tease, so I was astonished when Yim whipped her head around to stare desperately at Pala.

She begged, “Please? Please tell him to lick me! Please tell him to get me off! I need it! I’ve been good!”

“Taz?” Pala asked from somewhere up past the pair of black-and-tan boobs peeking out around both Yim’s shoulders.

“I’m here,” I said.

“Do you think Yim has been a good girl?”

“Mostly.”

“Do you think she deserves an orgasm for her effort?”

I met Yim’s desperate eyes as she turned them on me, then deliberately waited a few moments before giving her a long affirmative blink as I said, “Yes.”

“Then by all means, give her one,” her mother said as Yim yipped and slid forward, pressing her whole cunt against my face as she grabbed my hair and pulled me up, pinning me to her.

Getting my nose free enough to breathe put a strain on my neck but it buried my chin in her slit and gave me access to her clit, which I sucked past my teeth and captured, rolling my

tongue around it hard. She wasn't being gentle with me, so there was no call to be gentle with her.

Apparently, she loved that, because she grunted deeply and hunched over me, curling around my head as though to protect it as she babbled, "Oh fuck *fuck*, Taz, make me cum, please? Please make me cum I've been *such* a good girl ..."

I wrapped an arm over her thigh to hold my place and kept at it, all the while trying to suppress my instinctive urge to mock her for what she'd just said. Context was everything, after all, and I had no cause to tear down people who had so little opportunity in the first place. None of them had ever tasted freedom save maybe Phoebe. They had no context for me, but I was beginning to understand that these pleasures might genuinely be the only such available to people who lived their entire lives as 'livestock.'

Besides, I liked them, despite myself. That they were oversized aliens had lost its significance at some point. Pala and Yim had become important to me, I had every intention of protecting them, and didn't that extend to their emotional needs?

Slipping my other arm under Yim's thigh, I brought my hand up and pressed fingers into her as I continued to concentrate on her clit with my mouth. First two fingers, then three, and I was gratified to feel the shuddering pulse inside her as she began tightening on me, whining with desperation as she hunched over my head, gripping it with both hands now, eyes shut tight.

A piercing shriek came from my left and though I couldn't see it, I was pretty sure that was Phoebe finishing Astra off.

Beyond Yim, I could feel Pala still rolling her hips over mine. As I thought of her, I could hear her breathing, heavier than earlier, with a ragged edge that told me she was getting along just fine without my active help. That she was using my cock to do it seemed almost incidental.

I focused on Yim, and while I knew I wasn't exactly a pro at this sort of thing, Yim wasn't hard to please. Not when she wanted it so desperately in the first place. She tightened

further around my invading fingers, then hunched all the way over, wrapping her arms around my head. Her tits muffled what little sound her thighs weren't cutting off as she let out a squeak that would have been cute if I could breathe. Since it was obvious she was having an incredible orgasm, I held my breath and waited it out, fingers trapped inside her as she squeezed hard all around me, incidentally making a gooey mess on my face.

When she finally shuddered and relaxed, I was slimed from the crown of my head down and it was ... well, kinda nasty. Yim's orgasm was nothing if not productive, and I wondered if every packwren female came that way. I suspected they did, and had a good guess why.

Testing the theory as I swiped some of her gooey emission from my nose and mouth, I dryly said, "Consider me marked."

Yim's eyes were heavy-lidded, but when she heard me they focused on my face, then opened wide. She yelped and leapt off not just me, but the bed entirely as she stammered, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I didn't ... mean ..."

I didn't smile as my eyes tracked her, then shifted to Pala, who'd gone very still atop me, both her hands wrapped around my sides. Our gazes locked, and I said, "I don't appreciate this."

"It wasn't entirely for your benefit," she said softly, still not moving. In fact, she was so still that I could clearly feel her pulse through the walls of her pussy, which was still clenched tight around my shaft. Her heart was hammering, but there was no evidence of that in her expression. She was either hornier than she looked, which didn't seem likely, or thought she was in danger. A month ago, she probably would have been.

"You knew this would happen *and* that I wouldn't like it," I said quietly.

"Sex is messy, Taz. You need to roll with it and not spoil the mood when something unexpected happens. Trust me when I say you'll be better off the more you keep your petty annoyance to yourself."

Her gaze never wavered as she spoke, and I considered her words a moment longer before I said, “I suppose you have a lot of practice there.”

“More than most.”

I glanced down to where we were still joined and asked, “You gonna finish that?”

She rolled her hips, muzzle lifting slightly as though to ponder my question before she bared her teeth at me in a feral grin. She said, “You’re still hard. I may as well.”

Nodding wryly, I said, “Carry on.”

Her rolling hips did indeed carry on. I closed my eyes, reaching up to wipe more of Yim’s pussy drool off, but when my hand was caught I opened them again.

Yim was leaning over me, looking into my eyes, and a moment after they met she very deliberately leaned in and licked my face. Since it was obviously an apology I closed my eyes again and let it happen. A moment later I felt her settle on the bed next to me.

As Pala lazily rode, her daughter very *very* thoroughly washed my face with her tongue, pausing periodically to thrust it past my lips in needy kisses I accepted and returned. I wasn’t sure how much of it was her wanting kisses and how much was her wanting to coat my mouth with even more of her flavor, but she did both with rapt attention.

When I was apparently clean enough to satisfy her, she leaned in next to my ear and murmured, “Forgive me?”

I thought about that, then tilted my head toward her and gave her a long affirmative blink.

She showed her teeth in a momentary smile, then promptly laid her muzzle across my throat.

Making eye contact with Pala, I raised an eyebrow and got a long, slow blink from her as she said, “You recovered well. She’s happy and satiated. Now it’s your turn.”

“Take your time,” I said lazily, folding my hands behind my head. “I’m really enjoying this.”

“That makes me ... so happy to hear ...” Yim murmured.

Pala sighed softly and said, “Truly. Progress *has* been made.”

I considered that, wondering if it was a good or a bad thing. Pala rode me steadily for what seemed like a long time, routinely slowing down, tilting her hips, rolling them, bringing me to the very edge before leaning back, burying me deep, and holding still until my orgasm subsided. Thanks to my reading, I knew it was a technique called ‘edging.’

I also knew what was expected of me, and though I tried to hold out I eventually had to look Pala in the eye and say, “Please.”

Her ears flicked toward me and she leaned over me, setting her hands to either side of my head as she stared into my eyes and asked, “Please what?”

It was hard. Every masculine instinct in my soul screamed at me not to say it. It felt like if I gave her what she wanted I’d be handing in my man card for good. Yet, there was also now a foundation of knowledge in me, knowledge hard won, that told me I was playing a role for the benefit of someone I cared about.

“Please ... let me cum. Only you can give me what I need.”

Pala shifted forward a bit more, tilting her hips until she was squeezing and teasing the head of my shaft just inside her entrance. The muscle there was strong and by now I was so swollen and sensitive that she didn’t have to do much.

She drank my gaze in and cupped both sides of my head, breath hot on my face as she expertly rolled her hips. I rode the peak for what felt like an agonizing eternity, then tumbled off the edge as she softly said, “Good boy ...”

I’m not sure if it was the fact she got me to the edge so many times, or made me wait so long, or what, but the orgasm was the best I ever remember having. It just seemed to go on, and after my initial spurt she leaned back, settling herself all the way down on me as she squeezed the length of my cock,

hips rolling as she stared down at me with the smuggest expression I think I've ever seen on anyone, human or otherwise, ever.

By the time the pleasure started to roll away, I was too wrung out to call her on it.

Yim still had her muzzle resting on my throat, and I wasn't sure what to think about that. I reached up and tapped her lightly as I asked, "You doze off or what?"

"Mm-mm. Just basking," she murmured. "Moments like this, when you aren't screwing up or scaring anyone, are rare enough to savor."

I clicked my tongue in annoyance, but before I could lean up and get her off me her mother flopped down, head coming to rest on the back of her daughter's shoulder as she lay atop me in a heap.

"Did you even finish?" I asked, doing my best to hide my annoyance.

"Me finishing wasn't the point, but that you asked means you know it's important, which makes me happy," she said without moving. "I'm proud of you, Taz. It takes a lot of courage to bury your pride, but you finally managed to do it today."

"I left a marker. I'll dig it back up later," I grumbled.

Both packwren chuckled at that, but neither seemed inclined to get off me and I glanced over to see Astra laying on her back, tail feathers, legs, and wings splayed, her rather thick, blunt tongue hanging half out of her slack beak. Her eyes were closed and she seemed completely passed out.

With her fingers laced together on the bird girl's belly and her chin propped atop them, Phoebe was giving me a sharkish grin.

"Don't you say it," I said.

"Say what?"

"I don't know, but whatever has you grinning like that you keep it to yourself."

The silence stretched, but Phoebe never stopped staring at me and she never lost that stupid, slightly predatory grin. Eventually, I gave up and looked her in her very big blue eyes as I said, “Okay, I give up. What?”

“I’m just happy you finally managed to sub, even if it was only a little bit and *obviously* an act. Miriam Lorentz is a top. Satisfying her desires will be a lot harder than satisfying Palashai. With *her*, you’ll have to look like you really enjoy it.”

I sucked in a deep breath, then let it out in a long sigh as I said, “Couldn’t let me have the moment, could you.”

“I did. It’s past, now we focus on the next moment,” Phoebe said. “She’s not a vacay either. She’s got real talent, so you can’t just rely on whoever has her now to trade her free and clear. She *did* come in second overall in the music competition, and while she might not be good for future events I can *promise* whoever has her is earning audience score letting her top him. If that male is a genuine bottom, he might not give her up at any price.”

“Fine. I’ll just find, corner, and kill him later,” I said, covering my eyes with a forearm. “I don’t want to think about this right now.”

“Killing a contestant doesn’t win you his allies. If it did you’d be *swimming* in pussy by now,” Phoebe said, voice dry.

“I *know* that. But if I kill him she goes back to the general pool. If she doesn’t pull out entirely, she winds up available for pickup here on campus, right?”

Pala shifted, but didn’t get up, and I couldn’t see her face as she said, “That’s true, but you haven’t got any idea what those pickup games are like. You’ve been ignoring them ever since the game started.”

“What are they like then?” I asked.

“Phoebe, this is *your* fault,” Pala said wearily as she pressed herself up and twisted to look over at the still grinning doll. “And one of those very rare occasions where I’m forced

to agree with Taz. Let it rest. We'll figure out how to secure Miriam later.”

“My trainer has spoken!” I hastily declared, one arm pointing at the ceiling before I dropped it to thump on the bed and closed my eyes.

“For now, let me rest.”

AFTERWORD

Wow, so this is awkward.

Hi, I'm the guy who actually wrote all that. I'm pretty sure most of you reading this will already have met me from some earlier project of mine but this one's uh ... a bit more. I also have some explaining to do, but I'll keep that brief because an afterward isn't the place to tell long stories. That's ... kinda what the books are for.

The short version of the longer story is that this started as a project for my patreon and just kept going. Eventually, I decided to go ahead and publish it despite an earlier decision to move away from harem publicly.

Sex, Death, and Money was fun for me to write, and that's why I did it. I did not expect it to ever see the light of day, so to speak, and if you made it this far I thank you for indulging me.

My main focus remains paranormal romance, but I will probably eventually come out with another one of these. Now that it's out I can go ahead and start putting out chapters for Season 2 on the patreon. I have several other projects that take precedence, but as I said, this was fun for me and I'll probably continue it in all its angry, pervy glory.

That said, if you *really* just can't wait, drop by my patreon, and/or my discord, and pester me about it.

As always, I want to take a moment to thank you for reading my book, and for giving me a chance to entertain you. If you're interested in getting notice when my books go live,

Amazon is *really* not a good option, but never fear, intrepid reader, I have *several* good solutions for you.

First, you can join me on my discord server. This is in many ways your best bet because people in my discord are *always* on top of what I'm up to. "What project are you working on, when's the next book out, where in the world is Cebelius Writes?" Just ask. I'm usually around.

[Join Ceb's Discord!](https://discord.gg/typxgpE) (<https://discord.gg/typxgpE>)

Another excellent option is to join my mailing list! White-list cebelius@cebeliuswrites.com in your email program and receive all the critical updates. When I release a new audio or e-book, I always send out a notification through my mailing list. So if discord's not your thing but you still want to know the day the book goes live, this is your option.

[Join My List!](http://eepurl.com/dyLyaT) (<http://eepurl.com/dyLyaT>)

If you enjoy the more prurient of my offerings, or simply wish to express your appreciation in a form that will keep me in coffee and gas, you may also support me through my Patreon. I only have two levels at the present time, but I try and post at least once a month in the form of short stories and scenes set in the universes I write in. Patreon members also get sneak previews and other goodies as I write. Interested? Check that out here:

[Celestine After Dark.](https://patreon.com/cebeliuswrites) (patreon.com/cebeliuswrites)

There are also a few excellent facebook groups where you can meet fellow fans of the harem genre and get endless recommendations for other books from authors new and old:

[Harem Lit](#)

[Harem GameLit](#)

Then of course, my own home on facebook.

[Cebelius Writes](#)

Last but not least, well, least at the time of this writing but perhaps one day it will be more important to both of us, I'm putting together my own page where I will probably start selling books in future. Without going into too much detail,

Amazon being the only place where I can sell my work leaves me with a single point of failure, so I am keen to fix that.

This book will be the first that I sell directly to my fans before releasing it to the general public. If you want to know when those books are coming out, or get hold of them earlier (and in so doing more directly support me) please feel free to check out my site, which I will put more into in coming days. (I'm not a web developer so yeah, it probably won't look the best, but what the hell.)

Cebeliwrites.com