

Tales of Veloria

The Wolf and The Huntress

Lashiah Warbound



**Tales of Veloria, Book 1:
The Wolf and the Huntress**

Joshiah Warbaum

Joshiah's Written Works

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Joshiah's Written Works
722 Sycamore Road
DeKalb, Illinois, 60115 www.sofurry.com/Joshiah

Dedication

Dedicated with eternal thanks to endless love to my girlfriend, Megan, who helped to inspire “The Huntress,” and helped me turn a one shot story into a trilogy that I may now share with all of you.

Contents

| | |
|-----------------------------|------------|
| Acknowledgments..... | 6 |
| Preface..... | 8 |
| Appendix..... | 261 |

Acknowledgments

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank my family for being so tolerant of my bad temper when the hotel bellhop broke my laptop and forced me to buy a new one right in the middle of finishing this book, and nearly costing me the opportunity to finish it.

A special thanks also goes out to Megan once again, for inspiring one of the main characters, some of the major characters, and keeping me going when I nearly gave up on this project and left it on the back burner until it started on fire.

Thank you, as well, to the all of my friends, fans and customers for helping me to get to this point, so that I might be able to share my work with a greater audience of people. I've said it before, and I'll say it again: I have the best friends and fans in the world. You're all amazing and wonderful people.

A final and general thanks, as always, to all of my English teachers and instructors for helping to make me the author that I am, and telling me over and over again to never give up, and to never put my pen down. I still haven't, and I dare to say that I never will.

Preface

If you'd told me four years ago that I was going to take a one shot story about two characters who were just looking to vent some sexual frustration and that one day, they'd evolve into a much deeper story, I wouldn't have believed you.

I wouldn't have believed that there could be so much depth to a wolf that was rightfully branded a monster by the people of a society he terrorized. I wouldn't have believed that the huntress who went after him could be anything but a cold blooded killer.

I wouldn't have believed that by the end of the first book, I'd actually be a little bit sad inside to have to wait to see what happens myself, as the characters evolve and grow out of my control.

Now, I sit on a stomach full of panic as I race against the clock to get the last of the formatting and editing done in time to have the book ready to read by July 10th, when it debuts. What started out as self-gratifying smut has turned into a story filled with deep and meaningful characters, who reveal themselves to be every bit as real as the people reading about them before their adventure takes a turn for the unexpected.

What will become of the titular characters as the series moves forward? Even I can't be sure at this point, but I'm excited to go on this journey with you as they act as our tour guides through the land of Veloria, a tropical world of lush, endless jungles, sparkling oceans and perilous deserts that even they have only started to explore.

Welcome to Veloria. I hope you enjoy your stay as much as I have.

I was feared.

Not the silly kind of feared that comes along with a playground bully, or the quick-passing kind of feared that comes from disobeying one's elders.

People were terrified of me.

I got the kind of respect of monsters of legend, and yet, I was completely real, living in the present, as, perhaps, those beings of myth once did. And to be honest...

I thrived off of it.

In the land of Veloria, where I lived, killed and slept, specices meant little, if anything. Those who were feared were often not feared for the literal fangs in their jaws, but in the metaphorical ones born through the stories told about them.

For what it matters, I'm a wolf. Not the feral kind that prowls around in packs and struggles to find a meal every night, mind you; I was the upright kind, walking on two legs, with all of the intelligence of a human, and all of the cunning and skill of my canine bretheren. It was the result of many years of interspecices breeding in Veloria, which had become so commonplace that the offspring started to closely resemble both sides of the spectrum. Suffice to say, I wasn't the only one of my kind.

Just as suffice, there were, in fact, tribes of our kind of wolves, but I wanted little, if anything, to do with them, and they wanted absolutely nothing to do with me. The few attempts to recruit me into tribes always ended in failure, and occasionally resulted in a loss of life for those who just didn't know how to listen to me. Still, I never met any prosecution for what I did. No one was brave enough to take on the ruler of the wild lands.

Let me tell you, it was good to be king.

Countless females had fallen before me, be it of their own free will and desire to be mated by a true, dominant alpha, or by sheer terror at the thought of

what I might do to them if they didn't accept my knot. Of course, I would never eat or kill a willing or unwilling mate; it is best to keep the good ones around, you see, and the scragglers...well, every once in a while, when I was bored, I could bend them to my will. I could make them do anything.

Wolfesses, vixens, human females, jackals, coyotes, and even a few of the feline variety had literally presented their netherlips to me without even a single urging. It felt great to be able to pick and choose. I relished in my role as the greatest alpha male in the world, and it wasn't just in my own mind. Everything about me, and how the others reacted to me, justified my stance.

Until I met her.

One of the perks of being so highly regarded, or feared, depending upon your interpretation, was that almost all creatures avoided me like a disease, unless they were females looking for a good time, or pitiful males looking to pick the last fight of their lives.

When she approached, I figured that she was no exception. Just judging by the feminine scent that radiated from her bodice, I was sure it was another female in heat, come to exploit my sizable length. Though I tried to downplay my enjoyment of taking such a female and giving her the fucking a lifetime, the nearly tropical overtones in her aroma made me undeniably enticed.

I was relaxing in a hammock on the shores of Kilaya Beach when she came. The flavors about her simply begged for me to turn around and take a look. I admit, as comfortable as I was, and as tightly shut as my eyes were in their state of half sleep, I was tempted to simply let her pass and find her another time, but she continued to approach. Each step of her well-trained feet was nearly silent in the sand behind me. If I had not known any better, I would have believed she was sneaking up on me.

Giving in to my more curious desires, I finally flipped one eye open and started to turn back slightly, and with my paws behind my head, I could even just tilt my neck one way, using the minimal effort on my part to drink in a display that had obviously taken nearly the maximum effort on her own.

She was gorgeous.

Not the kind of gorgeous you dream about, or hear about in stories of mermaids, nymphs and goddesses. She was truly beauty given a body. Her figure

didn't lend itself to anything more than being absolutely pampered; she was almost slender, but there was just enough curve in her supple, delicious rump and soft, enticing breasts to make her body more deserving of the title of 'woman.'

Long, dark trellises of slightly curled hair fell down to her shoulders, pulled back in a ponytail that ended in the faintest hints of blonde, causing me to wonder if she had perhaps dyed her hair for just this occasion. In all fairness, she would have looked angelic either way.

Her body was scarcely covered, as a thin, dark brown, perhaps even black bikini covered her chest and her more feminine areas, but as I looked over her skin, I saw what appeared to be tattoos, or maybe even tribal markings, splayed in darkness across otherwise sunkissed, silky flesh.

It had been far too long since I'd partaken in putting a human female in her place, so, as much as she seemed to be a present, all wrapped up and ready for me to tear into and use at my whims, I decided it would only be fitting to act in kind and come at her hastily, claws shimmering in the slowly setting sunlight, just to strike fear into her heart.

Fear, you see, always seemed to have a rather arousing effect on females, and it applied to both the willing and the unwilling. In moments that they were afraid, it seemed that all of my lovers were wetter, and that their slim, tight folds grew even tighter around my already filling member.

Tonight, I would not get to test that theory.

I primed my legs and readied myself to turn on a dime, pounce her into the sand, and get the show on the road. I couldn't help the sadistic grin that was played across my lips, and the fangs inside that had gone jagged from years of gnashing through my food like a savage painted a picture of a feral lust and greed that simply would not be denied.

"Don't move."

Until I felt the tip of a spear against my throat, that is.

I knew there was no spear there before. I had made sure to scan over every inch of her body in appreciating her beauty, so there was no way I would miss such a thing. The only explanation could be that she'd conjured it out of magic,

which meant that my evening was going to get a lot more interesting, but all for the worse.

Deciding to keep up my act of dominance, and feeling confident I could scare her off with just a mention of who I was, I was hardly fazed. "And just what do you think you're doing, little girl?"

The spear tip jabbed against my throat, making it difficult to breathe, and nearly drawing blood. She wasn't here to mess around. "Don't think I don't know who you are. You made a foolish mistake, entering my territory in such a lax manner, wolf."

Although, in the land of Veloir, species had become as blended as a well made mixed drink, there were still small territories and areas that had very strict rules about who was allowed. This was a wild land, with next to no laws, government, or true civilization. For this reason, those tribes that did band together were often impossibly strict about their laws and norms, and if there was one group of people who hated us canines, it was the tribal humans. Occasionally, tribal females and wolves who belonged to tribes would stray away, despite not being allowed to mate outside their packs, and seek me for a night of pleasure.

She was not such a person. "I'm afraid my name isn't wolf, and I had no idea this was your territory. If you'd be so kind as to remove that spear from my throat, I'll leave peaceably."

"Not a chance. A wolf who can speak in human tongues, in this land? You're not going anywhere...alive, anyway," she said, her voice snapping harshly at the end. Despite that it seemed that my impending doom was right around the corner, my sensitive ears couldn't help being mesmerized by her voice. It was smooth as silk against my senses, but still strong enough that I could appreciate the power this woman held.

I was beginning to lose my cool just a bit. I couldn't believe how stupid I had been. After years of being called things like 'demon,' 'devil,' and even 'dark wolf,' I was now just another 'wolf,' and a mere human was on the verge of ending my life without a care in the world. "Don't you think it would be silly and foolish to kill me? I really haven't done anything wrong," I tried to explain, suddenly dismissing my earlier question about my identity. If she thought I was just an average wolf, there was no need to try and convince her of the contrary.

I would have turned around to look more fully at her face if I could. Though human, she held a high appeal of beauty to me, and her eyes, though sharp as daggers, seemed like they might welcome the right man in. "I know all about you, wolf, and everything that you've done...one might pay a high price for a chance at your head."

Just as I was starting to think my night couldn't get any worse...she had to turn out to be a savage trader.

There were some humans in the land of Veloria who felt that they were superior to all others, and that we beasts of the forests were the lowest form of life, not even fit for true slavery. However, on occasion, we were hunted and sold into slavery anyway, and in the best occasion, used as sex slaves or household servants. In the worst case, we were sold at auction to the highest bidder to be hunted as game, or publicly slaughtered.

I'd been dodging people like this for years, and even maiming or killing them when necessary for my own survival. I never once thought that I would be on the other end of that pendulum, and with a reputation like my own, I'd sooner be swinging from it than pushing it back the other way.

I still wouldn't let her see any fear. I couldn't smell any true fear on her, but perhaps, a hint of anticipation. I knew that if her judgment was clouded, I would have a chance to overcome her. "I'm afraid I have no way to pay you off; I consider myself to be above earthly possessions. But perhaps we can work out another option? I am quite the handy wolf, as it were, and I can assure you that you won't find any prized slave more valuable than me," was the best offer that I could make her. Even one night in confinement was more than I was comfortable with, but I could easily escape the next day, when she wasn't looking.

I felt my hopes rise slowly, like a light breeze picking up in the middle of a hot summer's day, as I could catch her expression softening out of the corner of my eye. I certainly wasn't free yet, but I at least made her stop and think about the idea. "Alright, wolf. Stand up, slowly, and let me get a good look at you. If even think about running...I'll cut you down myself."

Admittedly, running was quite a tempting thought. I was entirely sure I could outrun her, but her spear could be thrown and hit me on a lucky shot, not to mention that I knew nothing of her magic based abilities. "As you wish, mistress," I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm over the last word.

I started to rise up out of my resting place, as slowly as I could. As I came to stand upon my footpaws, I felt the spear press even tighter to my throat. She still managed not to cut me, but made it increasingly difficult to breathe, showing off how talented she was with the weapon. "You will call me that soon enough, but if your voice is not sincere next time, I'll mount your head on this very spear and leave it in my area for all to see!"

Her voice grew harsh in an instant. The exclamation at the end was enough to make me gulp, pushing my neck out against the spear and causing even greater discomfort, nearly enough to make me whimper.

I was ashamed.

In literal moments, I'd gone from the most feared creature in all of Veloria to a weakling, practically begging for his life. I was gulping in fear. I could feel my stomach turning nervously, and my body beginning to quake. Things that should never happen to an alpha wolf, even in the face of death...

At least death had a beautiful face.

"Y- yes...Mistress," I barely managed to cough out, though, in the quieter tone of voice, I sounded that much more sincere, and she smirked in approval. Her facial expression was pure defiance to everything that I stood for; to be honest, it was one that I had never seen, and didn't think I'd ever want to see again.

"You won't be needing these anymore."

I sucked in a full breath of air for my lungs as the spear finally came away, but then started to gasp in terror as the tip hovered near my crotch. I could feel my head growing dizzy, as if I were going to pass out, as three slashes cut through the air like bolts of lightning.

There was nothing I could do to stop her from that, and running meant death, so, with my legs frozen in blocks of pure, unbridled horror, I looked down and watched my pants simply fall away from my fur, leaving nothing underneath but my sheath, now clear for her to examine.

Judging by the look on her face, that may have been what she was getting at all along. Perhaps I wasn't in any real danger...

"Much better. Now continue to hold still while I examine you and make sure that you're worth keeping...or I *will* kill you."

That sharp, piercing tone returned to her voice. She was dead serious, and I couldn't do anything about it. It seemed her reason for capturing me was slowly turning more and more sexual, but if she was measuring me up this way, I might still be auctioned the next day. In short, I still wasn't safe.

All thoughts of safety left my head as I felt her thumbs daintily start to probe my sheath, as if she were trying to extract the member that was hidden away. "Show me that you're worth keeping, wolf. Your life depends on it."

Her tone was slowly becoming more and more pleasant, and less as though she really wanted to kill me. My scent seemed to have that effect on women, and it wasn't the first time that a woman had wanted to kill me, only to be stopped the moment that they got close to my privates.

Not wanting to waste the opportunity to have even a little sexual contact with such a beautiful woman, I embraced the nearly lustful air that seemed to follow her, and in moments, the tip of my thick, knotted cock started to poke through. I could hear a quiet gasp down below me.

"Oh!" she quietly yelped in surprise, as if expecting it to take longer than it had. "You work on command. You certainly could fetch a high price for me, boy."

I actually snickered for a moment, but knowing that it was too soon to consider myself in the clear, I simply let my shoulders shrug down and enjoyed the moment. She quickly took it to another level, as I felt a tongue curling around the tip with a nearly feline purr.

"Rrr...quite an exotic taste, wolf boy. I don't think you know how much you're worth...I just may keep you for myself after all. You'd make a fine addition to my other treasures."

I wanted to object to the idea, or perhaps take control of the situation, but she'd scared the dominance right out of me. It didn't help that I could scarcely focus.

There is a distinct difference between human and canine tongues, you see. We of the canine variety have tongues that are longer, but also flatter, and a bit

more rough by nature. Don't get me wrong; they feel absolutely amazing during a blowjob, but there's just something about a human tongue that cannot be matched. They're shorter, but that forces a human girl to have to take more of your shaft into her mouth, and the way that a human tongue can curl around your length simply melts you. They feel so much softer, too, that it feels almost as though someone is brushing your cock with slick lace or velvet, or perhaps, even silk.

"If that is the best option I can get, I won't dare to complain," I quickly admitted. I still felt a burden of shame upon myself for letting this happen, and it was compounded by the fact that a *human* female was winning me over this way, but I had almost forgotten the danger I was in.

Almost.

The moment my cock was fully erect, she smiled in appreciation up at me and stood upright. I started to smile myself, but the look was wiped right off of my muzzle as I felt her hands clench tight around my neck. Though I could easily overpower her, I could feel strong magics starting to flow through the air, taking center upon my flesh. As they took form, a thick, harsh, steel collar rested upon me, glowing faintly with enchanted markings.

"If you try to run from me tonight, I will know exactly where you are...I will find you, and you will never run again, wolf. You are *my* slave, and no one else's...you are no longer an alpha. You aren't even fit to please me...but tonight, we will change that. Come with me."

Her words rang firmly in my head. Not fit to please her? What a joke!

I couldn't hold on to the thought for very long. The huntress, actually just the slightest bit taller than me at her full height, curled her leg around my back, and started to grind her thinly covered slit against my thick, full tip. Her thrusts were so firece that the fresh wave of pleasure was masked over in a hint of pain, and I quickly realized how much she was serious about what she said.

"Tonight, I will break you."

I was mystified.

Not the kind of mystified that comes from seeing the northern lights gleaming in the night sky, or the mystified feeling of discovering you can stand on your own for the first time, as a child, mind you.

This was something entirely different for me, though. At the heart of it, I was overwhelmed with excitement and curiosity at what this huntress might still have in store for me, and yet, I was still completely terrified at the thought that she just might follow through on her earlier threats and mount my head on a spear.

Most of all, I was still ashamed.

My mind was racing in ways that I'd never imagined before as the nameless huntress kept her spear pressed to my back. That damning phrase, "I will break you," rung out in my ears, clear as the moment she'd uttered it, as my paws truned through deep, thick greenery. Long, leafy ferns and tree branches struck at my bare legs, as the tatters of my clothes had been left behind on the beach.

"It's not much further now, wolf. Keep walking right on ahead, and you'll come to a tree with rungs coming down the side of it. Remember this place; if you try to run away tonight, it'll be the last thing that you ever see."

The voice of velvet of sweet, deceitful sugar came from right behind me as the huntress kept pushing me right along, keeping me at pace for the risk of her spear stabbing deeper into my back. No matter how sweet and gentle her voice might sound, I knew full well by now that her murderous intent was not something to be trifled with. After all, in just a little under an hour, she'd torn me down from the most legendary creature in Veloria to a common hybrid slave.

I hated that thought.

I tried to keep my thoughts clear and collected as sure enough, I came upon the trunk of a simply massive tree, multiple feet around and easily hundreds of

feet tall. It looked as though it might spire out and above the rest of the canopy. Somewhere near the middle of the tree trunk, I could see what looked like the formation of a house, floating up in the air.

"What are you waiting for? Start climbing...and don't bother trying to jump out when we reach the top. A fall from that height will just make my job easier..." her voice rang, bitter in her tongue, but still so stunningly soft upon my sensitive ears. It was still weird to me, taking cues from anyone, much less a human female, but I was still unable to think of a good way out of the situation, so, reluctantly, I grabbed the first rung and started climbing.

"You must do a lot of running, judging by how tight your backside is. Say goodbye to that after tonight," the huntress said as she started climbing up the ladder after me. At that, I simply grinned. Once again, that fear that I felt in response to her threats was gone, and in the back of my head, I'd believed all along that she was really just playing extremely hard to get...maybe she even had some kind of bondage fetish. I really had a feeling that I was right.

After climbing for at least a couple minutes, to the point that even my physique was a bit strained, I reached my head up into what must have been the living area of her home. I have to admit, as massive as the place looked from the ground, it could never compare to just how grand it was on the inside. As I climbed in and stood tall on my footpaws again, I whirled around, taking in the rather masterful craftsmanship that went into the wood work and furnishings of the home. All of the furniture was of some kind of exotic, polished wood, and adorned with soft, plush pillows. The walls were bare, save for her weaponry, which hung on the far wall away from me. There were only three ways out of the room; one that was now underneath me, one to the immediate left, and another to the far right, but with no lights, I couldn't gather what each room held.

"I didn't tell you to stop moving."

WHUD!

A sudden shove came from behind, and shamefully, as I'd let my guard down, I was easily tumbled and pushed down to the floor, taking a nasty blow to the side of the head that left me dizzied. It occurred to me, only after it stopped hurting to think, that all along...the sexual act was just her way of disarming me for what was really to come. Wincing in pain, I gripped my forehead and tried to

push myself up off of the floor with my other arm, but I felt a strong, thick presence keeping me down, unable to get up past the point of kneeling. Sure enough, her foot was pressing into my back, and her powerful, toned legs were a force enough to keep me pinned.

"I can tell just by that scent coming off of you that you really believe you're safe here...that I'm just another female clamoring to be speared on your glorious, canine cock...is that right?" she asked, her voice no longer soft on my ears...but more like the tip of a beautiful sword, piercing through my ear drums.

Of course, she'd hit the nail on the head with her assumption.

"Keep dreaming, wolf. The only way you're getting any pleasure out of this is if you're as sick and twisted in the head as I expect someone like you to be..."

This girl had done her homework about me...either that, or my reputation really was that far reaching. It was no mystery that I was quite the deviant to the females that would take up a bed with me, and that I'd killed more than my fair share of mortal beings, and she must have been well aware of that. She wasn't taking any chances, and while my head finally stopped throbbing from the pain of an intimate encounter with the floor, my attempts to stand were somehow...stopped.

As soon as my arms pushed up from the floor, I couldn't breathe. Somehow, just doing a single push-up winded me so much that I couldn't make another single motion. My lungs tried desperately, burning in their effort to take in another breath, but my neck felt like it was between a vice. It was only when I'd crumpled up on the floor entirely that I noticed the magical collar that she'd placed around my neck was glowing a bright silver, perfectly matching the metallic material it was made of.

"Having a little trouble moving, I assume? You shouldn't be that surprised. That collar reacts directly to your intentions, wolf. If you desire to resist and escape me, you'll be pinned to this floor without my so much as having to lift a finger...but if you comply to my every whim without an argument, perhaps this won't be *entirely* painful for you," the huntress explained, her voice taking on an eerily suggestive tone as she finished her speech. It only served to remind me that I had no idea what she had in store for me, still, but whatever it was, I could only imagine it wouldn't be any good. After all, she had said she was going to

break me.

"Now it's time to put you in your place, you little canine bitch..."

She wasn't kidding.

"Like hell I'd let you talk to me that way!!" I lashed out, summoning all of my earthly strength and trying to push myself up off of the floor, but the harder my muscles strained, the tighter my throat became, and my eyes grew wide with despair as I clutched the floor, and then the fur of my chest. Sweat started to bead on my forehead as I felt something long and stiff slam into the small of my lower back, sending a sharp pain up my spine.

"You really don't get it yet, do you...? You're not an alpha male anymore, wolf. As long as you're here, under my control, you're no better than a common house slave, and all slaves must learn their place," she spoke, her voice as cold and calculated as the bite of a vicious cobra. "But since you seem to be such a sexual deviant, I'm going to have to break you of that appetite, first, and show you that you're on the very bottom rung once again, and that you have no hope...not a damn, single hope of ever getting back to the top. That starts back **here.**"

Right upon that final word, the bottom of the shaft of her spear slammed hard against my backside. I'd kept my tail pressed down flat over my rump, but the force of the blow caused my tail to raise in shock, and in one more swift, trained movement, the huntress pounded the end of the shaft at my exposed tailhole, completely unlubricated. With my throat tightened so far, I couldn't even express the agony I felt as she tried to force the long, thick rod into a place it simply never belonged. At least it was forged of magic...I could only imagine the splinters I would have gotten otherwise.

As my maw flew open in a silent, magic-stifled gasp, I tried to look back, and out of the corner of my eye, I could see the huntress smiling in sadistic glee, her hands gripping tightly on the conjured spear, no doubt content to shove at my rump all day until I accepted my new position. Starting to get the hang of the collar, I accepted her advances just enough to get my voice back. "That...that will never...ahhh!! That will never fit! Not like that!" I screamed at her, and for the first time in my life, my expression was pleading, rather than demanding.

"Hopefully it doesn't tear you in half, then. We're not going anywhere until you learn to take it like a good little slave," the huntress assured me, making it clear that this was her only agenda for the evening. "Though...you are really worthless to me dead, unless I were to make you into a pelt. I suppose I should give you at least a little lubrication, for the sake of safety, and nothing more."

I dug my claws into the smooth, well-crafted wood of the floor as I felt a whole inch of the spear shaft get shoved deep into my tight, virgin backside. "There. That oughta keep it nice and snug inside of you. Clench onto this tightly while I gather up a couple supplies. If this thing hits the floor, you can forget about any kind of lubrication...and you're going to be paying for scratching up that wood. It wasn't easy to find."

Already, I could only curse my bad luck, but I immediately tried to regain my focus. The muscles in my tailhole were completely untrained for this kind of thing, and as soon as the huntress disappeared from the corner of my eye, my mind went only two places; how to keep this spear inside of me, and how to get the living hell out of this nightmare. The collar wasn't getting any looser on my neck, and so, my energy was completely capped. I could scarcely breathe, enough to the point that I was struggling to keep my thoughts clear. My tailhole was clenching down purely out of fear, something I'd never experienced before in my life, and in the haze of terror that I was fighting, I almost didn't notice an arm hooking under my armpit and yanking me up onto my footpaws.

"Don't worry. Even an alpha like you who thinks he knows everything there is to know about pleasuring a woman has something to learn, and I can imagine that's all you'll be good for once I'm done breaking you. At least I'll have someone around to sate my desires on command in the future."

I was almost getting frustrated with her flip-flopping personality. If she was going to kill me, then she might as well go ahead with the pain I was in, but then, she started talking about sex again. I was almost certain she was just trying to keep my mind distracted, and I became sure of it as I felt a tight, strong cord wrapping up around my arm. Suddenly, she pushed my wrists together, and in my weakened state, I couldn't fight it as they were bound together and yanked up over my head. I watched helplessly as the huntress threw the slack of the cord through a hook in the ceiling, and tied the other end down back into my wrists. There was a little slack, enough for me to find the bondage chain...

...Until she pushed me back down to my knees, completely straining my

arms as tight as they would go. She was going to exhaust my muscles now, too. The bitch was good at what she did, much as I hated to admit it. The only relief I felt in that moment was the magic spear in my backside slowly fading, but it was literally just a moment, as the magical energies gathered up in the palm of her hand, and took a form more suitable to penetrating a tailhole.

"This particular little plug is all that it's going to take, wolf. It's much thicker than the staff of the spear, as you can see, but it too has a magical property. The further you submit to me, the smaller it will shrink, until it can properly fit inside of you without causing you much pain at all. But the more you resist...the larger it will grow, and if you resist too much, well...I don't think I need to explain just what will happen to your backside. No doubt, it could kill you..."

I managed to gulp, my throat barely able to take in any air as the collar tightened, able to feel my resistance to the idea. My eyes traced her every movement, as the large, ebony tail plug was given a gentle bath of lubricants, leaving it to glisten just faintly in the minimal light of the tree-top hideaway. Strung up by my arms and pinned down to my knees, I couldn't even hope to move. I tried to keep my tail shut tightly over my already abused tailhole, but it was no good against the incredible strength of the huntress. With ease, she yanked my tail unceremoniously up and out of her way, before slamming the first couple thick, widening inches of the plug into my tailhole with a painful *squelch*. Spittle rained from my maw as it flew open and I tried to yelp out in pain, but my voice was completely lost to the tightening of the magical collar.

This was no longer a matter of my pride as the most feared creature in Veloria.

This was suddenly a matter of life and death that left me with only one path to take.

I sunk my head slowly, looking down to the floor as I tried to regain my calm. My arms, tense from the tight stringing of the rope, relaxed as much as they possibly could. My tail lifted up and out of the way on it's own, no longer needlessly fighting to keep the demented female away from my abused backside.

With a light breath, I could feel the collar starting to loosen upon my neck. "I...I give in..."

"What was that?" asked the huntress, a hint of sadistic glee in her voice as she could feel the plug shrinking, and immediately, she pushed another inch in without a care in the world.

I gasped, feeling a hint more pain at the new and unusual experience, but I tried to steel my resolve as tears started welling up in the corners of my eyes. "I give in. I'm...I'm yours...I submit to you...mistress."

I felt the entire length of the plug manage to seep its way into my widely stretched tailhole as the huntress stood up, and walked around to stand in front of me. She stunned me more than she had all day when she suddenly came down to a single knee, looking me right in the eyes. She reached out and grabbed my muzzle in one of her strong, yet soft hands, and gave me a look of disapproval as she saw the start of my tears.

"You still haven't earned the right to call me that. I haven't received any pleasure yet, wolf, and this is no occasion to be sad about. If being my slave is enough to make you cry, then you'll never be able to even begin to please me. All that proves is that you really can't appreciate when you receive a golden opportunity from someone as gracious as myself."

Her words didn't do a damn thing to ease my woes. If anything, I could feel the tears welling faster at her disapproval. In the back of my mind, all I could wonder is *Why the fuck should I care?* But on the surface, for some reason, I almost felt as though I had been scolded. I was feeling some need to do right by this female...something I'd never felt a desire to do before in my life. What the hell was happening to me...?

"Wait...please, give me a chance..." I whispered. The words simply came out; there was no thought behind my actions. No conscious decision was ever made to utter them.

"What did you say?" the huntress snapped at me, her hand gripping tight on my muzzle as she spoke, and only releasing it slightly when she was done speaking.

I took another breath when she was done nearly choking me. "Give me a chance to show you that I can please you...that I can earn the right to call you my

mistress..."

What the hell was I saying?

"Hmmm...you certainly do seem eager to please. Perhaps my training is working on you after all, wolf. I suppose it's only fair to give you a chance to prove why you used to be an alpha," she suggested, talking about my dominant status as if it had been lifetimes ago, instead of mere hours. "You'll get one chance, then. It's been quite a few days since I've had the chance to pleasure myself...I'm really quite backed up. If you can manage to help me to a release, maybe, just maybe, I'll reconsider my punishments for you, and give you the chance to call me your mistress."

For some reason I still just didn't understand at the time, I felt joy at that prospect. My tail actually gave some semblance of a wag as the huntress stood up in front of me, and shamelessly, she tore away the strings of her jet black bikini, leaving a completely barren pubic mound right in front of my eyes. Without the fur around her nethers of a typical canine like I was used to, I could see every little detail of her netherlips, from the slightly puffy labia to her already moistened vulva, and her erect, cute little clit. It wasn't enough that this girl had to be beautiful in every other way...no. She had to have a perfect, adorable pussy, too.

"Don't keep me waiting, wolf, or you'll blow the only chance you're gonna get!"

Those sharp, demanding words were just enough to bring me back to my senses, and though I was suddenly a captive, I wasn't going to forget my canine mannerisms. As I'd visually appreciated her slit, I slowly leaned forth and took in a gentle breath, getting a full, deep appreciation for her unique aroma. She had a perfectly earthen tone to her body, with a light overtone that reminded me of citrus. I was delighted, when my tongue finally came to touch against her outer lips, that the flavor matched the scent. The feeling of her pubic bone immediately pushing down on top of my muzzle was a reaction I was used to from other females I'd tasted before, and I knew right away how much she was enjoying this, even if she would deny it...but for once, I didn't care about living up to my sexual reputation, and I wasn't thinking about trying to get away. I just wanted to make her happy.

Seriously, what the fuck was going on with my head?

"So that's what a canine tongue feels like...so wide and flat...it's able to get a lot more of me at once. You better know how to put that to good use," the huntress cautioned, as she gave a gentle tug on the cord attached to my arms. I could only begin to imagine the devious schemes she had planned if I failed, and as harsh as she'd already been on my body, I didn't really want to.

I felt like I was biting into a farm-fresh orange as moisture started to spill over my tongue, her needy folds practically wrapping around my long, wet flesh as I started to probe deeper, past her outside lips. Her body was already writhing against my crafty slurper as it curled up, managing to brush over her fully stiffened clit as I tried to test the taste of the deeper caverns of her sexual bodice. Salty...why so salty? Why was everything suddenly salty?

I looked up with eyes wide and full of concern as the huntress looked back down to me with a completely devilish grin. "You sick little canines mark territory this way, don't you? I kind of figured you would like this...I bet you do, honestly..."

I quickly put two and two together in my mind as I recognized the taste and scent of this new fluid. It wasn't enough for her to break me anymore...she now had to degrade me to mere property as she started urinating all over my tongue. In instinct, I felt a burning desire to try and pull my head away, but this was my one and only chance to save myself...I simply couldn't. Streams of the huntress' feminine pee started to drizzle out of my maw as I couldn't contain it, pouring down over my neck and down the thick muscles of my chest and stomach. Sure enough, she'd done as great of a job of scent marking me as any female could ever hope to do. To any male, such a thing uninvited would be an incredible insult...

...So why did I feel the very tip of my bright pink member starting to poke out of my sheathe?

"Good boy...I wasn't sure if you'd keep going or not, but it looks like that might have made you even more eager! I knew you were a fucking freak deep inside...I'm sure I'll have a use for you, now...now keep licking!!" she commanded, her voice fading into a heavenly moan as the last of her urine spilled forth, and I did the best I possibly could to lick it all up before getting right back to the main task at hand. I had to make her cum if I was going to

survive this evening...somehow, I simply knew that, and she was going to get what she wanted, whether or not I did.

Desperately, to a point that I'm sure she could feel it, I thrust my tongue deep into her folds, the tip starting to bend up gently as I tried to stimulate her g-spot with my tongue. Humans and canine shared at least a few sexual similarities, and I knew for sure where this one was, as I could feel a softer, spongier spot of flesh on the upper wall of her delicious inner depths. My tongue started brushing over it furiously as the gentle fuzz on my muzzle teased over her needy clit, brushing at it with a renewed vigor, and yet, a soft, gentle touch, meant to drive her even further along.

The huntress was suddenly wracked with pleasure. I looked up again for a moment to see her face twisted into a beautiful visage of pure bliss, her teeth biting down sharply on her lip as her hips started bucking forth onto my tongue. "So that's how you wanna play, wolf? Trying to make me cum fast? I guess I can't object...I've been needing this for days...come on then. Make me squirt. I can tell you already like a good bathing, after all...oooh! Work that fucking spot!"

She was certainly consistent now, that much I could admit. Her foul mouth and demanding attitude leant themselves perfectly to her dominant control over me, and I responded, surprisingly, in kind. I took a short moment to seal my lips over her clit and suckle it, and in the next moment, I could hear her shouting, "I'm close!! Fuck me...fuck, wolf, I'm so damn close!" The vulgar, naughty language she spewed was even further motivation to get her there, and so, my tongue went back to her favorite spot, and absolutely assaulted her g-spot, pressing on the spongy flesh the best that I could with my long, flat tongue. I looked up yet again to appreciate the sight of the gorgeous huntress, and this time, she was putting on a show for me, as one of her hands had slipped under the jet black top of her bikini, working the breast underneath as if she could actually draw milk from it, her palm pressing down and squeezing the flesh before her fingertips pinched and teased her stiff nipple. The display was so damn hot that I scarcely noticed my length had fully grown erect itself.

"That's good...*that's fucking good, wolf!* Gimme...gimme more...make me...cum...I'm gonna cum! I'm gonna fucking cum!!" she shouted, her voice turning from pure, vulgar lust to an angelic chrous of moans as streams of her slick, clear ejaculate sprayed all over my muzzle and my tongue. Almost unable

to breathe at the rush of juices, I leaned back, and her cum sprayed all across my cheek and over my shoulder, as if to make sure that no part of my fur had gone untouched by some kind of fluids from her.

The slick, feminine juices dripped down from my muzzle as I felt her free hand grab the hair on the back of my head and stuff my muzzle back into her slit, and as if I was a trained, veteran slave, I started lapping away once again, taking every drop of the exotic flavored cum that I could get. It wasn't until I felt her fingertips curling deep into my hair and yanking me away that I finally licked my own muzzle as clean as I could, and stopped trying to probe her insides for a deeper taste.

"Heh...heh...mmnn..." she chuckled at me, still trying to catch her breath from being lost in the throes of her orgasm. "Just a little too sensitive to keep you going down there, but I appreciate the effort, wolf. In case you hadn't gathered, I've decided not to kill you...tonight, anyway."

I gulped against the tight binds of the magic collar around my neck, but I could feel the fingertips that pulled painfully at my hair loosening, even as I did. The biggest shock of the whole night came only moments later when I felt an open palm gently pat me on the head.

"You did well tonight, wolf. Like I said...tonight, I would break you, and even if you haven't realized it entirely yourself, I have...but to truly drive the point home...I'm going to go get some sleep and try to decide what to do with you in the morning. I hope you enjoy being in that pose...it's how you're going to spend the next ten hours. If you somehow get loose and manage to play with that stiff cock while I'm asleep, don't think I won't know about it...and don't think you'll regret it more than anything else in your life."

Just like that, the huntress removed her hand from my head and walked past me. For a moment, I had a thought of clarity. I was able to appreciate everything that had just happened...everything that had changed in this increasingly psychotic day. Female cum was starting to dry on my cheek and muzzle. A gentle scent of the huntress' urine was coming up from my straining body. My arms were exhausted in their bindings, and I couldn't move whatsoever. Fluids were spilled all over the floor around a discarded, forgotten bikini.

I was completely, utterly trapped in what had always been my nightmare,

since I could ever remember.

As I faded into the warm embrace of physical exhaustion, it felt like nothing more than a really weird dream.

3

I was exhausted.

Not the pleasant kind of exhaustion that comes from the conclusion of a hard work out, or even a brisk morning jog. No...this was the terrible, awful kind of exhaustion that makes you miserable to your core.

This was the kind of exhaustion where not a single muscle in your body wants to move, and scarcely can. Where simply breathing becomes a strain, and gathering up a clear thought becomes a herculean task. Worst of all, the kind of exhaustion where you feel as though you might be sick and black out, but know that you'll only wake up to the same feelings you had before.

Praying that I was awakening from some sort of sick, twisted dream, I tried to bring my arms forward, but they wouldn't budge. They *burned*, and it wasn't going away. Consciousness rendered a stark, painful realization as my knees started to ache in the very next moment. Through the sheer grips of physical exhaustion, I'd passed out the night before, only to awake in the same pose that I had been left in; arms bound behind me, on my knees, completely unable to move of my own will.

I can't believe she really did it, I tried to fathom in the deep recesses of my mind, having been so mentally tortured that I was having a little trouble recalling everything, but the air lent a helping hand. Strong, feminine scents began to tease at my nostrils, and in any other situation, I might have been aroused, but being bound was still new and uncomfortable to me, even if I was starting to remember some semblance of pleasure the night before...perhaps not *true* pleasure, but acceptance that this was the closest thing I could get, at least, for the time. I started to recollect the splashing of urine on my tongue, and her juices spilling out over my cheek as she reached her climax...I hated to admit it, but it was all quite riveting, even if only for that moment.

“Get up and get ready, wolf. I'll be taking you to Makusa in a couple hours to see if you'll fetch a price worthy of my time.”

Despite all the other pains on my body and strains on my muscles, nothing

hurt quite so badly as the ice cold tone of her voice stabbing into my ears. I still knew her only as the huntress, or as she'd rather I call her, mistress. "...You can't do that."

I didn't realize how close she was to me until I felt strong, dexterous fingers dig into my hair and grip it tight. She yanked upwards, forcing me to look past her figure and up into her eyes. "Come again, wolf? And aren't you forgetting an honorific?"

"You can't do that," I repeated myself, and this time, far more sternly. "And if you're going to sell me out like that, I feel no obligation to refer to you as my mistress ever again!"

It was obvious to her that I knew full well what happened to creatures like me in Makusa. Some of us were sold into sexual slavery, as simply as that, but those were the lucky ones. As I had mentioned some time ago, human traders would occasionally take in wild beasts as sexual servants, or simply as work servants, but in the worst cases of all, people would actually pay a price and outbid each other just for the chance to take an unimpeded whack at our necks with the executioner's ax.

I could feel the bright jades of her eyes narrowing at me in disgust. I took a silent pride in it, personally; she was so proud of herself for managing to break the most feared creature in all of Veloria last night that I couldn't help being more than a little snarky about still being able to defy her. "I told you, **wolf**," she paused, and released my hair, "That I would decide what to do with you in the morning...and I've decided to take you to town to see what you're really worth! You didn't think I would just wise up to you and decide to be a permanent mistress for you, did you? I'm not in the business of fulfilling wishes, you foul beast!"

Her exclamation point was to pick her leg up and jab her heel into the back of my neck, pushing me forth so hard it felt that my arms my rip right out of their sockets. I was definitely awake now.

"My wish is to be free to do what...**nngh!** What the hell I damn well please, that's all!" I pleaded, my voice strangled by the pain of my arms trying to keep from being dislocated. "I should have known you'd do this to me at your first...first chance! You humans are all the same..." My fangs gritted tightly

together, showing off what would have been a ferocious grimace, if she'd cared to look.

Not shockingly, she didn't, but she did surprise me by slowly releasing the pressure on my neck, setting her foot back down on the floor.

"Your will is even stronger than I thought. I was certain that I'd broken you completely last night, but it seems you just needed a breather...and I frankly don't have the time to waste on putting you back in that state. Very well," she rattled off in a disgruntled fashion. "But, you won't fetch any kind of a price in that condition, and I could use some cleansing myself...perhaps I can get some more service out of you before someone takes a crack at your head in the Makusa courtyard."

Though I was downtrodden at the thought of being sold off so easily as this, I felt an unbelievable rush of relief as the bindings that held my arms tied behind me came undone, and the tension on my muscles instantly released. I let out a breath, and strained to bring my arms around to the front of my body so I could look at them; I almost didn't believe that they were really still there, and after being bound for so long, they needed a moment to adjust so I could properly move them. "I have to admit; I think someone like me would fetch a pretty penny there in any condition, but after all that you've put me through, getting cleaned up sounds lovely right now."

"Mistress."

"What?"

The huntress took a step in front of me and gripped my lower jaw in one of her deceitfully powerful hands. "You **will** call me mistress until such time that I say otherwise, or until you are bought by someone else...don't think that I'll have any regret missing out on the auction just for taking the time to put you back in your rightful place."

I was silent. I hated what I felt in the pits of my stomach...fear, uncertainty, and perhaps worst of all, respect. These were things I'd never known for anyone before, so why did I have to feel them for a female, and no less, for a human?

"Do you understand, wolf?"

I could feel her grip easing off of my jaw. She expected an answer, and despite that she held every conceivable advantage, my pride was still alive, even if it was on life support. “Yes...Mistress.” My voice was cold and low, dripping with regret, but she seemed satisfied with the answer. “How might I be of service to you, then?”

“At least you haven’t entirely forgotten your place,” she said, and in what seemed an unfathomable kindness from her, she leaned down and hooked her hands underneath my arms, helping me up to stand on my footpaws again. She must have known the kind of strain that muscles would endure from holding such a compromised position for so long. “You’re going to help me bathe my body, and you’ll be joining me, because I need your fur to look as clean as possible for any potential buyers. Even without my fluids dried upon you, you’re well overdue for a good cleansing. The way you lived before this must have been disgusting...”

I gritted my fangs, but otherwise managed to keep my mouth shut. I certainly wasn’t disgusting before this, but it was rare that I had to bathe on a daily basis; my lifestyle simply didn’t call for it, and every female I’d ever met before said that my scent was masculine, delicious and heavenly...certainly nowhere near disgusting.

“And I’ll be taking your performance in the springs into heavy consideration, so don’t even think about skimping if you want to make it through this evening alive.”

Now that, I didn’t expect. “You’d honestly give consideration to my freedom just for helping you get clean in a hot spring, Mistress?”

“Ha!” she scoffed, quickly drawing her hands out from under me, and my knees immediately stung as my full weight came upon them. “Your freedom was forfeit the moment I met you. Be it under my rule or under that of someone with more money and power than myself, you will spend the rest of your miserable existence in slavery, just as you beasts were meant to. I’m just offering you the chance to save your own life.”

“That’s extremely kind of you, Mistress,” I said, and though I meant it, I hated myself for saying it. In the back of my mind, I still believed that everything I had done the night before, and everything that I’d endured was for

the sake of survival, and not something I could or ever would enjoy. Then again, I don't know how **anyone** could enjoy having un-lubricated items shoved up their ass, but that's a different topic altogether. "I'll give you the best effort I can."

"Don't bother sounding so tame, wolf. Just because you try to mask your hatred for me under your voice doesn't mean I can't feel it coming off of your body. You ache for freedom and grit your fangs to keep from trying to reach out and bite at my neck...I know how much this all infuriates you, and I'd rather like to hear it straight from you, as well...it brings me a little pleasure to know just how much you can't stand to suffer through anymore of this."

The bitch was smart; I could at least give her that. "There's no point in me repeating what you already know. You've completely ruined my life and intend to somehow make it a little bit worse...why bother giving you even more satisfaction?"

I felt a sudden tightening around my neck, but I knew she wasn't grabbing my throat or anything of the sort. I'd already forgotten that enchanted metal collar, and it reminded me of its presence in a harsh way, gripping fiercely around my throat at my resistance to her whims. "Quite simply, your life may very well depend on it," she replied, and I could see a sadistic grin played about the soft flesh of her lips. "I don't think it's that high of a price to pay for your survival."

While I still hated the idea of this entire ordeal being nothing more than a quest for my survival, I'd been in such a place before. I'd never come so close to facing my own mortality, but I'd had to weasel my way out of a life or death situation. Up until now, sex or brute force usually got the job done. This time, I had to do something far out of my comfort zone.

I had to grovel.

"Nngh...urk...alright..." I tried to speak, and with my compliance, the collar finally loosened up enough to let me. "I'll help cleanse you, Mistress, and prepare myself for travel to Makusa."

"Good boy."

The huntress stepped back from me, enough so that she could tilt her head up and down as she took an appreciative glance of my figure, and then a little something more. Her eyes fixated upon whatever part of my body they pleased, and for once, I didn't feel so out of place. This, I was used to from the average female. "I'm sure you'll fetch a high price at the auction. You'd better hope for your sake that they take advantage of one of your heads, and not the other..."

Letting those chilling words mull around in my brain, she simply walked past me after that. In trying to mentally process everything that was going on, I'd forgotten to take in the fact that she was still stark naked, and her figure was something to behold. Decidedly feminine aromas followed her as she walked past me, so powerful that they made my head turn without a conscious thought, and yet, so delicate that they could only belong to a female of incredible beauty.

"Come along. I'll show you to the place where you are to honor my body."

She turned back to look at me with what now appeared to be more of a playful smirk than an evil smile. Somewhere inside, she must have appreciated being ogled in such a way, and I couldn't blame her; I was guilty of the same feelings whenever I was visually appreciated. A quick survey over her back made it clear that the markings I'd seen on her flesh the day before were indeed tribal markings, as sharp, thick black lines cut across her back, down over her shoulder blades, and met in the form of two blades near her spine, right in the center of the small of her back. I was sure there were more markings on the front, but I'd seen patterns like that before, and they left me uneasy as I obeyed and followed her to the trap door that we'd entered the night before.

"You really trust me enough to turn your back on me like that?" I simply had to ask, as she knelt down before me and opened the trap door. In my mind, I simply tried to recall the number of times a female had knelt before me in a submissive pose and proceeded to pleasure me...and I couldn't quite remember them all. What I was sure of was that this was the first time a woman had ever knelt before me and had full control of my body.

"If you so much as reached down to touch my flesh, that collar would strangle you until you passed out. I don't think you relish in such a fate, and you're certainly not stupid enough to risk that," she explained, and I took it to heart as the closest thing I'd get to a compliment from her. "Moreover, I trust that you're not so stupid to try and take me from behind like that for any reason whatsoever. I'd easily take you down, collar or not, wolf..."

For some reason, I felt a constriction around my neck, though I knew I'd done nothing wrong.

"...And you forgot something."

Oh, right.

"...Mis...tress..."

"Better."

The pressure immediately released, and I took in a gasping breath. If she kept on doing that to me throughout the day, I was liable to pass out, but I didn't have a chance to worry about it. Just like that, she was out the door and climbing down the ladder, and I knew it would behoove me to stay as close to her as possible, so I hurried down the ladder after her, taking care to shut the trap door. For some reason, the descent down the ladder that morning seemed much quicker than the ascent the night before. Perhaps it was the lack of fear for my life from that previous night, or lack of anticipation, or it may have been the energizing radiance of the morning sun peeking through the canopy of the forest. It was disorienting enough that the room she'd trapped me in had no windows, but with the trees blocking out even more light than that, the little bit of sun that did make it through was nearly blinding, if not refreshing. Still, I had to double check that my footpaws were actually on the forest floor before I actually let go of the ladder.

"You don't wake up in the forest very often, do you?" she asked, turning to glance at me with jades that sparkled in the sunbeams.

I shook my head. "Certainly not so often that I'm used to it. At least I get a beautiful view, Mistress."

"Flattery isn't going to save you now, wolf."

I could have easily told her that I was talking about the sunlight coming through the canopy, but I didn't have any luck left to push, so I left that sarcasm dripping in the back of my mind. "After the treatment I've received from you so far, Mistress, I should expect not. Truth be told, I wasn't going for blind flattery,

regardless. You really are a beautiful specimen.”

The quiet *swish* of bright green leaves filled the air as the huntress lead me through the floor of the tropical forest. “I told you it won’t work, wolf...and I meant it,” she affirmed, still not even turning back to face me when she spoke. I wondered, just by the tone of her voice, if maybe she actually appreciated the compliment and didn’t want to show off any weakness; either way, she was intent on hiding her emotions from me, still.

“Understood...I hope it isn’t much further, Mistress?” I asked, and with a glance downward, I could already see some dirt forming on the thick fur of my footpaws. Somehow, this all seemed detrimental to my getting tidied up.

“Try to learn some patience. We’re already here.”

Past a few more thickets of ferns and long, mossy vines, an opening appeared in the thick, haphazard growth of the trees that made up the forest. The beaten dirt paths around the trees quickly thickened up into lush, knee-high grass, showing off the fertility of the hot spring that we’d come upon. Though it was faint, I could see trails of steam coming up from above the grass, and a step closer, I saw the shallow, still waters of the spring, so crystal clear that you could count the pebbles resting at the bottom.

“Get in, and make sure to wash yourself thoroughly. I won’t be giving you the milking treatment until you’re properly cleaned.”

The milking treatment? I thought, but it certainly sounded a lot more pleasant than the events that would come later in the day. Before I could respond or even nod, the huntress had dipped a leg down into the waters, and light ripples spread across the spring as the rest of her body followed, the image of her beauty distorted by refraction. I decided to follow suit quickly, and put a footpaw, and then a whole leg into the pond, entering as delicately as possible. Though my usual cantor was to jump into a body of water whenever I pleased, something about causing a disruptive splash seemed like a bad idea in front of someone who did not want their view of you disrupted.

“You should really consider yourself lucky. The last few of your kind that I took to the auctions never had the luxury of experiencing this place,” she told me, as I scooped some of the delightfully warm water up into my paws. I

splashed it across my face and started scrubbing away at my muzzle, trying to get all of her feminine stains out of my fur. “Of course, none of them were likely to fetch as high of a price as you are certain to.”

I took another scoop of water up to my shoulder. The spring only came up to about my abdomen, and I didn’t feel like fully submerging myself. “I suppose I am flattered, though I’ve always been used to the best of the best when it comes to my ways of living.”

The huntress snickered with what I could only call sadistic glee, as she sunk down a little further into the water and tilted her head back, letting her hair spread out across the surface, soaking in the pure, tranquil waters. “I’m certain I already told you to forget about that lifestyle, but I’ll happily repeat myself that your old life is over. I’m sure you already know what the best life you could hope for is, now.”

“All too well, I’m afraid,” I groaned, though I noticed that she’d neglected to punish me for not calling her ‘mistress’ a moment before.

“Such a fate would be too generous for a beast like you.”

...Why?

“And I’m sure that my horrible reputation is your only defense for having such a deep hatred for me,” I scoffed, glancing away from the huntress as I finished scrubbing down the toned muscles of my abdomen.

I heard a sudden splashing, as if the huntress were thrashing about at the water, and in a flash, she sprung up from her relaxed pose and put a hand around my throat, squeezing tight on my jugular. This wasn’t just an ordinary air-choke; this was a blood-choke. While I’d doubted her combat skills to this point, and still believed she just got lucky and caught me off guard the day before, those doubts were quickly being erased. It took only a few seconds for my knees to buckle, and I slumped down into the water.

“You have **NO** idea what your kind have put me through, you insolent, foul-mouthed, **worthless** creature!! You have no right to assume that just because a few weaklings are afraid of you, and that a few slutty humans and heated beasts found you attractive that you bear a reputation so great that I would seek you out, solely for that purpose! I’ve eradicated **hundreds** of your kind, and it

had nothing to do with you, or your stupid reputation!”

I was barely conscious enough to register everything that she was saying, but I could still feel the sting of her harsh words upon my flattening ears. Not wanting to show off any need for help or any signs of desperation, I tried to prop myself up by using my tail to help my balance. Seeing how she’d nearly incapacitated me, the huntress released my neck, though her hand didn’t stray too far from me. “What...what did we do...?”

My voice was strained by her choke. “Repeat yourself...and call me mistress this time, or so help me, I’ll drown you in this very spring!”

At that, I’d had enough with her attitude. Mustering up my last vestiges of strength, I stood up on my footpaws and glared at her, looking her right in the eyes in an act of pure defiance. “What the hell did we do to you that was so bad, ***MISTRESS?!*** ”

For the first time since she’d seen me, I could tell that I’d finally rattled her. Even against the strain of the magically imbued collar around my neck trying to strangle the life out of me, I stood tall before her and showed her all of the anger that one could show over someone celebrating the attempted genocide of his kind.

“...Sit down, wolf. I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

I was stunned, in turn, by her docile reaction, but I took the opportunity presented to me and sat back down in the water, feeling the soothing heat from the spring reach all the way up to my neck now.

The huntress shocked me once again as she slumped back down into the water, but sat awfully close to me for someone who just threatened to drown me. She looked surprisingly relaxed and comfortable as she rested her back against the edge of the shallow pool. “My family has always been fiercely loyal to the Sunkurun tribes. We’ve always been regarded as one of the most powerful human tribes on the entire planet, and though I doubt you’d like to hear it, we’ve kept all manner of creatures as slaves for the last two hundred years on record. Many are treated as dirt, and just like all of the other humans, we are guilty of using some of the beasts as sexual servants.”

I knew I'd heard of that tribe before. They were one of the reasons I kept so far away from the jungles around Makusa whenever I could. "I never did quite understand that, Mistress. How do those animals perform under such stressful situations...?"

"There are all manner of herbs and natural remedies to cause a male to become fully erect in any situation, and for the females, well...a little lubrication is all it takes for the males to have their way. In any case, performance issues are never truly an issue. What has become an issue, however, is what the ruling bodies of our tribe have recently decided."

I furrowed my brow.

"Our tribe does a lot more than look down on hybrids, like you. They are seen fit only to be used as slaves and servants, or to simply be killed, and as of late, the Sunkurun elders have sent out a decree that **all** beasts are to be taken to the nearest bastion of human order and auctioned off, be it for death or otherwise. And because of what happened to me, I've come to support that decision."

Though it was faint, I could hear a tone of regret in her voice. "Earlier on, when you wolves were more likely to roam the land in packs, a small bunch of the Sunkurun tribe, including my mother and father, ran into a small pack of wolves...ten or fifteen, at most. As you might expect, they clashed, and...though the Sunkurun fought valiantly, they were ultimately overwhelmed...my father was mauled to death by your foul, disgusting brethren as he was forced to watch my mother be taken by every wolf that survived the battle, soaked in the blood of his fallen comrades!"

My eyes widened as tears started to form in the corners of the huntress' eyes. Her once bright, determined jades now seemed to waver as misery overtook her form.

"She lived, but was taken into sexual slavery herself...her last letters to escape the camps of the wolves depicted my father's death, and called the Sunkurun tribes to arms, saying that her last request was that every wolf on the face of Voloria be mercilessly slaughtered, so that they might know even a fraction of the pain that my father did...to this day, I don't know for sure whether she lived or died..."

A quiet sigh escaped my lips, and I glanced down into the water, seeing the reflection of my own sadness in my eyes. For the first time, I truly understood this woman. “I don’t mean to make small of your story, but...I know your pain, Mistress.”

I could feel her powerful glare cast upon me, even though I never made eye contact. “How...how the **hell** can you say that?!”

The sniffing in her voice made it that much harder to speak. “I won’t go into details...I don’t think that it’s really necessary, but...after watching my parents fall to the slaughter of the humans who invaded the homelands of our packs, this is just who I became-

“**LIAR!!**” she cried out, reaching across her body to bring a harsh slap upon my muzzle. If she had claws like my own, there was no doubt I’d be bleeding heavily at the strike. “Don’t you **dare** to try and make up some sob story just so you can demean the slaughter of my people and act as though you understand anything that I went through!”

I had a feeling that further words wouldn’t be of much help, so instead, I brought my gaze up from the water and looked right into her eyes, while my paws spread a little bit of the fur upon my chest. On the flesh beneath, a large gash, easily half a foot long, still rested upon my body.

Her eyes softened, once again. “That deep of a scar...can’t be left by a blade made of steel or bronze...and you beasts can’t use magic, can you?”

I shook my head. “This was the strike that a human enchantress cast upon my body in front of my parents, before she and her fellow humans went about killing the rest of my pack. I went unconscious from the strike, and they believed me dead, so they left me there...I awoke in a pool of vital fluids, dripping from the corpses of my parents and best friends...” I didn’t realize how long it had been since I’d spoken to anyone about my past. To my shock, all of the emotions that I’d kept down for the last couple decades were starting to rise to the surface.

“You...you’re serious, aren’t you?”

All I could do at that point was nod. Even yesterday, I didn’t feel quite as

vulnerable as I did now. This woman had every right and reason to hate me and every one of my kind, and even if my story was true, I had my doubts that it would do anything to influence her decision. She'd already gone this far with everything, and I couldn't blame her for wanting to fulfill the last wishes of her mother.

Not surprisingly, I felt one of her delicate, yet powerful hands come upon my neck once again, but this time, it trailed up along the enchanted collar, and past it, to rest upon my cheek. "So this is what it's like..."

Though I knew it impossible, it felt as though she was trying to absorb the sadness in my heart just by her touch. Call me crazy, but I thought for a moment that it was actually working. "What what's like, Mistress?"

"No...nothing. Forget I said anything," she replied, hurriedly bringing her hand down from my cheek. "We're running late as it is. I'm afraid I'll have to rush you though the milking treatment."

I still had no idea what the milking treatment was at that point, but I suddenly felt safer around the huntress than I had since she first approached me. "I assume this is something to get me ready for the auctions, then...?" I asked, doing nothing to hide the disappointment in my voice.

"It is, and it's something of a necessity," she said, and suddenly, she turned over in the water, and was straddling my hips, knees resting on either side of me. "When you're being auctioned off as a potential sexual servant, sometimes the auctioneers will use tools and devices on you to cause you to become erect, and if they use the right herbal remedies, you might pop right there on the auctioning stage. If that happens...you'll be deemed unfit to be a sex slave, and they'll just kill you instead..."

Now this was weird. I did feel something of a comfort inside; she had been meaning to take a step to protect my life all along, but this was definitely not something I would have accounted for at an auction. "So...you're going to drain me of an orgasm so I'll be less likely to do thaaaaaaat! Ooooh...damn, Mistress..."

My voice got carried away as I felt one of those silky-soft hands grab at the softer, lighter fur of my sheath. She stroked and tugged gently at the fur, encouraging my cock to come forward. "Essentially, yes. Normally, it's best to

do this only with the hands and mouth, but the auction starts soon, and I don't want us to miss it, so I'll have to use a more direct approach."

The bright, pinkish-red tip of my member peeked out of my sheath, and as soon as it did, the huntress stroked a fingertip upon it, giving my flesh a 'come hither' motion. This whole situation was unusual, but she certainly knew how to keep the air of sensuality about the ritual. "What could be more direct than that?" I asked, though I already had an idea.

Her response was to reach her other hand down and cup my sack, using the dainty touch of her fingertips to stroke each of my orbs. With how forceful she'd been with my body the night before, it was deceptive how gently she could touch my body. Each fingertip felt more like a feather tickling at my sack than a fingertip trying to coax me to an erection, but whatever it really was, inch after inch of my obscenely canine shaft emerged from my sheath, until I stood fully erect in front of the huntress. "A pleasure that no wolf has ever been lucky enough to receive from me before is far more direct than hands or even a mouth," she explained, and soon, soft, delicate fingers were replaced with something I was much more used to, and the smooth, slick flesh of her labia pressed up to the underside of my shaft. "But I warn you now, wolf...if you spill so much as a drop of your seed inside of my bodice, it could mean the end of my life, and will certainly mean the end of yours...so the moment you near your climax, you need to make damn sure that I know about it. I have other uses for your seed, anyway. Understand?"

My eyes winced closed in pleasure as her labia slid up and down along my shaft in expert strokes, coating the underside of my length with the same feminine juices that I'd earlier washed away from my face. My precum was already spilling into the water, getting the tip of my cock nice and slick to make for an easy entry. "Yes, Mistress...I...ahh! I understand completely..."

"Hmph. You're already whimpering like a pathetic little puppy. I hope your body can outlast your voice, or I'm going to be sorely disappointed with this," she cautioned me, but as I looked up into her stunning jades once more, I could see confidence and enjoyment more than I could see sadism and hatred. I was beginning to believe, much as I had the first day, that she was really just putting on an act for me, this time. "Though...I hadn't noticed last night...you're really *so big*..." she moaned, as she pushed her hips up, trying to get the sharp tip of my cock to spread her labia open so I could finally enter her. She strained a little

bit, and her face twisted up in an expression of mingled pleasure and pain, her teeth sunk into her lower lip as she desperately tried to spear herself on my cock.

She was tight...damn near airtight, even with the seemingly endless flow of juices that spilled from her vulva. "Don't sell yourself short, Mistress...you... oooh...you've got the tightest little pussy I've ever fucked before..." my moaning praises weren't flattery anymore, but the delicious, heated truth. I could scarcely believe that someone as sexually forceful as her wouldn't be a little more broken in, but I certainly wasn't complaining. She was tighter than some of the virgin cherries I'd picked in my years.

I could feel every muscle in her delightful little snatch clinging to my manhood as she reached out and dug her fingers into the fur upon my chest, finally managing to pin her body all the way down my length. I had to open my eyes so I could see it to believe it, and just as I could feel her pubic mound grinding against my groin, I drank in the sight of my entire cock buried between the tightest little labia I'd ever had the pleasure of taking. "I know how good I am, wolf...and there's no beast I can't conquer, if I so desire...you should..." she paused, pushing her hands hard upon my chest and bucking her hips, bouncing upon my length. "...Should really, really consider yourself lucky!"

"I think you're the lucky one, Mistress..." I argued, but decided to back up my words by reaching my paws out to her breasts. I never asked for permission, and I damn sure didn't intend to, but I knew she wouldn't complain as I stroked my pawtips upon the soft, supple flesh that made her perfect breasts. I took each nipple between my pawtips and thumbs, gently tweaking them each time she bounced upon my shaft. "I don't know of any lovers you've ever had in the past, but I guarantee you...I'm the best you'll ever have..."

I thought she might protest, so I started pumping my hips up in time with her bouncing, so each time she tried to take my whole length again, she got a little bit more than she bargained for. I couldn't help a delighted grin as her jaw dropped, and silent, whimpering gasps tried to escape her lips. "Ah! Ahh...don't be so...so full of yourself, wolf! I'm nothing like those loose hussies you've dined on in the past...I don't think you're ready for what I can do!"

Suddenly, I felt a clenching unlike any I'd ever felt. She was already the tightest female I'd ever had, of *any* race. But as she gritted her teeth together and dug her nails into my flesh so deep that I thought she might draw blood, I could

feel her inner muscles quivering and gripping upon my flesh in ways that no female had ever done before. I had no doubts that she was selective with her partners, but somehow, she had practiced with her vaginal muscles in ways that most women could never dream of...

...And shamefully, it was sending me right over the edge. "Careful with that, Mistress...you're going to finish the treatment a lot faster than I think either of us would like!"

Even as I spoke, I kept bucking my hips upward, my paws kneading into the deliciously soft flesh of her tits with reckless abandon to the punishments I might later endure for freely touching her body. "You're wrong, wolf," I could just faintly hear her voice over the splashing of the water as our bodies met again and again in the throes of passion, and her tongue paralyzed me with a teasing touch upon the flesh of my ear. Her breath traveled along my fur like the warmth of the sunbeams that snuck through the canopy, making my whole body shudder and writhe with pleasure. "We need to be quick, and while I did that on purpose... you just made me cum all over you...that's why you felt me quiver," she paused, making sure to clench nice and tight upon my cock at those words, "And my walls fluttered so rapidly upon your cock..."

Damn...

That was all I could manage, mentally. I knew it was for a procedure, and I knew that the purpose was just to make me more appealing as a sex slave, but she really did seem to be enjoying this even more than I was supposed to, and it was working *very* well. "That's...incredible..." I gasped, finding it hard to string together more than a few words without moaning praises to her. "You've brought me to the brink, Mistress. I don't think I can last any longer!"

Keeping the tight, unbelievable grip on my shaft, the huntress quickly stood up and off of me, tugging at my genitals so hard that I thought she might have made them longer in the process. She was lucky to have jumped free when she did, as my primal physiology took over, and the large, bulbous knot that still waited within my sheath burst free. "You cut that *way* too close, wolf...don't think I won't remember that later," she warned me, but as she looked into my eyes to show how serious she was, I was certain I could see the fires of lust burning in her irises, even if the glance was fleeting, at best. In the very next moment, I lost sight of her eyes, and as the head of my cock floated just above

the water, throbbing and waiting, she took it into her mouth, just as the first strands of my cum burst from the tip. My sack ached with how terribly she'd teased my body the night before, and suddenly, I was wracked with the absolute ecstasy of orgasm, and my hips bucked my length upwards into her throat of their own accord. Much to my surprise, however, she took each thrust easily and held on, and I could see the light bulge of my seed going down her throat as she held my knot with one hand, and swallowed all of the liquid I could give her.

I'll have to remember to thank her for simulating a tie, later on... I thought, losing my voice to nearly feral grunts of pleasure as the huntress expertly drank down every drop of cum that my body could offer. The pleasure finally started to subside enough for my hips to settle, and every muscle in my figure relaxed as I started to slump back against the edge of the hot spring.

"Mmm...you must have a diet almost exclusively of meat and fruits. Your seed is rather sweet," she commented, actually licking some of the excess of my seed from her lips as she looked up to me. Now this, I was quite a bit more used to...a female working herself to orgasm on my cock, and then swallowing all of my seed in an act of thanks for the pleasure I could offer. It was too bad the experience wasn't going to stay that way for long. "And I certainly hope that I'm right. The only reason that I drank your filthy wolf spunk was for the nutritional value it offered. I didn't have time for a proper breakfast, and I was in dire need of the nutrients."

Well, back to normal it was, then.

I watched as the huntress hooked her hand into my collar and yanked it upwards painfully, tugging me up and out of the water as my knot started to deflate, and my length sunk back into my body. It never did cease to amaze me how strong she was for having such a womanly figure, and how easily she put that strength towards causing me pain. "We don't have much time to waste. Shake yourself dry and give me a minute to dress."

I rolled my eyes at her comment. Making a blunt comparison of a bipedal creature like myself to the feral dogs that shook themselves dry after running through the water was something that we more intelligent creatures took as a low blow. "I usually dry off with a towel, Mistress, but I'll do the best that I can."

Groaning to myself, I leaned down on all fours and tried to shake my fur dry the best that I could. As I did, I looked to the huntress, who hadn't brought

any clothes to the spring that I knew of. I was right, and I watched with wonder as she plucked a few of the long, green leaves from a fern and wove her magic into them. The leaves grew rapidly as a light blue aura surrounded them, and as they reached a certain length, they started to branch off of one another. They kept up in this way for some time, and I started to get the idea. She had brought something of a top with her, an unflattering shade of brown that fell just short of her navel, but she took her pile of leaves and wove them together with a strand of that same magical aura. Suddenly, she had a skirt made of leaves that would easily keep her modesty in check.

“You’ve done just fine, I’m sure. Now get on your feet and let’s get moving. The auction will start in less than two hours, and Makusa is nearly an hour away, on foot.”

I wouldn’t deny that the huntress looked decidedly tribal with her choice of clothing. Still, it was a fitting look for her, as the clothes did almost nothing to hide the sharp black lines of the tribal markings that covered her bodice. “Very well, Mistress,” I replied, though my voice was quite morose. I had no desire to ever set a footpaw in Makusa for as long as I lived, and now, I wasn’t going to have a choice, not to mention that there was still a good chance I could be dead before the end of the day.

She had already started off ahead of me, and the light, magical tug that came from my collar told me the right direction to walk. As I followed close behind her, I could see that she’d materialized the magic spear once again, though I couldn’t fathom why. With the collar on, there was no way for me to escape her, unless she willed it herself.

“I’m sorry.”

I wasn’t sure that I’d heard the huntress properly. “Sorry for what, Mistress?” I asked, though really, I believed an apology would be in order for the night of sexual torture, nearly cutting my throat, or selling me into sexual slavery or a potential early grave. I just couldn’t say so.

Without pausing, or so much as turning back, she said, “For your family.”

As we made our way along the twisting, turning path towards Makusa, beset by thick, lush greens on all sides, and cut apart by streams and gnarled roots every so often, we were silent, except for one reply that I could muster,

“Don’t be. I’m just sorry for yours, Mistress.”

I didn’t know for sure that it was the right thing to say, and I had nearly an hour to think it over, but the only thought that I could rationalize during the journey was that maybe, just *maybe*, she and I actually understood each other, even if it was for just one short lived moment of passion in the hot springs.

Maybe she still hated me.

Maybe she hated me a little bit less.

Either way, I found my emotions betraying my better judgment, and as I followed her of my own free, though broken will, I found myself wanting to know which one it was.

I was terrified.

Not the enjoyable kind of terrified that comes along with attempting a thrilling jump across a canyon or gorge, or perhaps the kind that comes with a friend telling you a scary story around a campfire, in the middle of nowhere. No...this was the kind of terror that one feels only when they're sure that their life is soon to be forfeit.

Many of my kind had the time and the chance to sit and contemplate death before an execution. They were imprisoned for months, sometimes even years in the human colonies and cities, and though it was rare I ever saw those of my friends and kin again, those who I did encounter told me of finding an inner peace and accepting that death was a part of life before their own lives were wrongfully taken.

I didn't have that luxury.

"Makusa is just past this last thicket of trees. Once we near the entrance to the city, you must stay absolutely close to me, or other slave traders might try to grab you and claim you as their own...and I'm not going to allow that. Are you ready, Wolf?"

The Huntress, whose name I still did not know, had completely changed my life, and a day and a half after meeting her, I had to come face to face with the very real possibility of the end of my mortal life, something I'd never once had to worry about when I was free to roam Veloria as I pleased. Despite the deep, intimate conversation I'd shared with her only hours before, and the sexual pleasure that I experienced just after that, I couldn't shake the sick, lowly feeling in my stomach. It felt like I was starving to the point of nausea, accompanied by the pain of a swift, well-thrown punch to the dead center of my gut.

"As much as I ever will be, Mistress," I replied, my voice laden with dread. I knew by now that such a response would disappoint her, and perhaps bring retaliation, but I was well past the point of caring. All through our travels through the jungle around Makusa, I had hoped that she would change her mind at some point, perhaps moved by the mutual pains of the past that we shared, and

decide to give me my freedom, or at the very least, not take me to the courtyard for auction. Now, she only had fifty feet left to change her mind, and I wasn't getting my hopes up.

She turned back to give me a grimace, but her expression wasn't nearly as angry as it had been the day before. "You may want to reconsider your position and try to lay down what's left of your pride. The more appealing you are to the female slave owners, the better your chances of survival will be."

I could sense the faintest hints of guilt seeping through her stern, harsh demeanor, but sure enough, as we rounded the last bend in the weaving path through the jungle, time had run out on my chance to escape. Past the lush, bright green ferns and tall, thin walls of trees in all directions, there came an opening right ahead, and the sight was something I'd never even dreamt of.

"I'll keep that advice in mind, Mistress."

My response was dull, but I couldn't help it. I was a wolf of the woods, jungles and beaches of Veloria. I'd seen small human encampments dotted throughout the forests before, and some smaller colonies near the foothills of the mountains to the east, but this was the first time I'd ever seen a true, fully developed city. The dirt path we walked upon slowly ended, and tiles made of stone took their place, making a true, paved walkway that spread through the city. Instead of tents made from animal hides or small huts of wood, tall, brick walls stood on either side of the city entrance, and the stones at the top were carved in such a way to have a smooth, inverted edge. It made perfect sense to me; they'd be impossible to climb, and made an excellent defense out of the city walls.

"Stay **very** close. Do exactly what the guards tell you to do, and if you truly value what is left of your life, keep those claws back and your mouth shut at all other times. Do you understand?" The Huntress asked, and I was thankful for her forceful voice, as it brought me out of my wanderlust.

"Yes, Mistress," I briefly replied, actually slowing my pace so I could get a better view of the city from the outside. The paved pathway turned into a small set of stairs as we went down the side of a small hill, to the city entrance. From atop the hill, I could see the peaks of what I later came to know as buildings, tall, brick and wood structures that could be places of residence, doctors' offices, quarters for the local militia, places to eat...the inner workings of the city

fascinated me, and still do, to this day. Though I never gave humans much credit for being good at anything, I was willing to admit that they could erect some sizeable structures.

Rather than the pleasant voice of my mistress bringing me back to reality this time, a massive fist did the honors, giving me a solid shot to the chin. I'd fancied the view of the city too much once again, and the guards at the archway were not at all happy with that.

"I know you speak human tongues, wolf! When we address you with a question, you answer!! UNDERSTAND?!"

As I tried to right my head from the sucker punch, a loud, gruff and obnoxious voice made me flatten my ears down to my head. I looked up slowly, spitting a speck of blood to the ground as I followed the broad muscles of a city guard up to his neck, unnaturally thick, so much that it almost blended into his square, repulsive chin. "Nnn...yes, sir. What was the question?"

The guard narrowed his eyes at me, and then looked to his fellow guardsman, who shook his head. I really wish I'd been paying attention, now. "We asked you what you to state your name, and spread your filthy paws so we could inspect you for weapons!"

I had no clothes to hide anything in, so I wasn't quite sure where they expected me to be hiding anything, but I nodded silently and stood upright, spreading my legs apart slightly and reaching my arms out forward, palms up and paws open. The guard on the left readied his spear, and the guard who'd socked me earlier grabbed my wrists with extreme force and turned my arms over, inspecting my knuckles and forearms for any concealed blades. I wanted to grimace in pain, but I refused to give the brute the satisfaction of seeing me in any discomfort, so I did my best to grin at him and show off the proud, sharp fangs that had ended the lives of plenty of his comrades.

"Hmmp...he's clean," my inspector reported to his companion. "Now state your name already...don't make me ask again, beast!"

It occurred to me that in all of this time, I'd yet to tell the Huntress my name, and I still didn't know hers...though this might not matter at all to the guards, the moment held a certain significance to me.

"Varas."

The guard released my wrists, but leaned in close and looked me right in the eyes, before turning one of his thick, hairy ears into my face. “What?!”

Smirking, I decided to let the oaf have a taste of his own medicine. “My name is VARAS KERKECI!! Dire wolf and scourge of the jungles of Makusa, the forests of Daji, and the whole of Veloria! Men fear my presence, women melt at my feet, and only by the stroke of pure luck is it that you find me here in bondage today...happy?”

The man jumped back at my loud, barking statement, covering his ear in pain and looking to me through watering eyes. His teeth were gritted so tightly that my sensitive ears could pick up on the grinding of his gross, yellowed enamel as he looked me over...and I prepared myself for the blow as he raised his left arm up over his head, ready to drop it down upon my skull...but the sound of flesh thudding against flesh didn’t come from my head.

“You’re only so angry because you know he’s right, Burkolat, and he won’t fetch the city any money if you bash his skull in. Let it go, and wait for your chance to bid on him instead.”

Despite everything she’d done to me so far, the cold, cruel intent she had from the very beginning to sell me off in this way, the Huntress was the one who’d caught his fist and kept it from striking me. “You’ll have to forgive Burkolat, wolf. His temper reacts faster than his logic,” she said to me, and with a casual shove, she moved his titanic arm aside, freeing me from harm. I knew that she was strong, but I had no idea she was quite so powerful...I worried that she might be even stronger than I was.

The guard who held the spear so close to us finally lowered his arms and stood aside. Burkolat was shaking with rage, but he showed the respect that he had for the huntress and backed up to the wall, allowing us to pass freely. I couldn’t help sneering at Burkolat as he stood up against the wall in poor posture, hulking over from his unbalanced muscles.

Just past the archway that acted as what looked like the only entrance into the city, some smaller buildings popped up, all of them made of similar looking whitish-yellow bricks, and all of them only about twice as tall as a normal human being. Just judging by how the humans often structured their settlements, I gathered that these must have been living quarters of some kind. “Thank you for protecting me, Mistress...you didn’t have to do that.”

A harsh, stinging slap went right across my muzzle as the huntress turned back to face me, her long, wild locks of hair swinging with her. “You’re an idiot, do you know that? I **did** have to do that, because you stepped out of line and tried to start trouble with a city guard before we even got inside the walls! You’re not worth a damn thing to me or these bidders if you’re already dead, and if you hadn’t gone and lost yourself in thought about who knows what, I wouldn’t have had to put up with that slobbering oaf Burkolat! Are you **trying** to be more trouble than you’re worth?!”

I gritted my fangs together tightly; a slap to the face wasn’t painful as much as it was a blow to my pride, and it was one that I’d honestly killed men for in my lifetime...but never a female, and certainly not the one who still controlled my destiny. “N-no...I’m sorry, Mistress. I’ll try to behave more appropriately until the auction begins.”

What? What did I just say?

“You’d damn well better. If you act out of line too much more, you won’t survive long enough to make it to the stage, and frankly, that turns the last few days into nothing but a waste of my time...”

I couldn’t get over the sting that I felt inside, from two completely different directions. On one hand, I was mad at myself for allowing a human female to get so far under my skin that I actually felt sympathy for her, and perhaps, something akin to respect or admiration, but on the other hand, I was filled with rage at her for so hastily deciding that this was my fate, and that nothing could change her mind...that she would open up to me as much as she did, and yet, I was already nothing more than money to her.

“I’d like to think they were worth more than **that**, Mistress.”

She didn’t reply.

I’d sensed something of an aura of guilt about her since we’d left the hot springs and headed for the city, but it was something I couldn’t put my finger on, and I didn’t dare to bring it up to her. Though it pained me to do so, I just followed in her footsteps as she came to the first fork in the pathway. We turned right, and just like that, the gateway to Makusa was gone, and I was trapped in a maze of large, stone buildings and hostile humans.

“Walk in stride with me, wolf. If anyone other than a town guard tries to

grab you, I'll take care of them myself. You just keep your arms at your side, and don't do anything to bring any attention to yourself. I assure you that your reputation will already fetch you plenty of attention."

The Huntress wasn't kidding. My earlier prediction was right, as it seemed that the entire outside wall of the city was dotted with similar buildings, all filled with and surrounded by people; there were children playing around in front of most of them, chasing each other with sticks and pretending to murder each other in some game that I didn't understand, most of them clad in boring, beige clothing, baggy and loose tunics and pants for the men, and unflattering dresses of the same shade for the women. People with nothing better to do for the day looked out the windows, and some of the more attractive females looked my way with the same set of "Come fuck me" eyes that I'd gotten so used to seeing out of the lower class of females, as far as humans were concerned. In the wild, though we animals often roamed in packs, we didn't have much of a system of government, and we had no system of currency. In humans, I'd observed time and time again that the poorest people were the ones cast aside, and their misery due to their lowly status often turned them into a life of sexual deviance and unnatural herbal highs. I guess that made me something of an enabler, but seeing how as some of these same people might be bidding on my life later that day; I didn't feel even the slightest bit of guilt.

"They're peasants," my mistress explained, as if she knew what I was thinking about. "Here in Makusa, the poor, migrant workers live on the outside walls with their small weapons. In the event of an attack from the outside, they're the first line of defense, even before the military steps in. These people are considered to be worth even less than you, and yet, without them, the city couldn't function. It's a sad state of affairs, really."

I still felt no guilt, but I did start to feel a little bit of sorrow for the poor people that watched me walking by. All of their clothes were the same, and all were in poor shape. Their homes were drab and plain, the boys were clearly weakened by a lack of proper diet, and the girls and women couldn't afford proper make up to attract more affluent suitors. "I guess I don't understand. Why would you trap yourself inside such a terrible place, in such horrible living conditions, when there's a bright, wide open world outside these walls?"

"Don't forget your honorifics, wolf," she darted at me, though there was less authority in her voice than ever before. "These people are too poor to buy

their own land, and many of them lack the skills to be useful to a human tribe like my own. They have some working skills, but they only apply in the city, because this is all they've ever known, and no one with power wants to help them escape, because then they'd need to be replaced...but they stay because they live in the same fear as most humans do."

I perked an ear to her as we came to another corner, and this time, we were forced to go left. This place was a mystery to me, but the Huntress obviously knew her way around. "Don't you understand why bipedal animals have such a bad reputation yet? You're all branded as being the same ruthless killers that the quadrupeds are, but twice as intelligent, and even more merciless...the giant stone walls of this city offer an ethereal blanket of protection for the people foolish enough to believe that there are so many beasts just like you, just waiting right outside those walls to make a meal of them, rape them, kill them... whatever the governing body here wants them to believe. None of them could afford to have your head...but they're free to go to the courtyard and watch, hoping to see your lifeless body fall before them. Someone of your status dying at the guillotine today would be a huge morale booster for them."

My sorrow quickly faded. "So they work for almost nothing, allow people who aren't any stronger or smarter than them to tell them what to think, and want to see people like me die just because someone else told them I was a killer? I'm afraid I can't have any sympathy for these commoners, Mistress," I explained, as anger boiled over in my voice.

"You are a killer. You are a sexual deviant. You've likely had to mug people and steal from others to survive. It may not be right of them to make generalizations about all animals, in your eyes, but...at the same time, they're right about you, and if they're right about just one, fear will spread that you're all the same. Without an example to demonstrate the opposite, your life is forfeit inside these walls, wolf."

My pride told me to defend myself. These people didn't know me...but my logic told me to just remember my survival instinct and listen to her. I hated to admit it, but whether or not these people knew it, she was right about me, and so were they. There was no point in apologizing for it all now, since it wouldn't change a damn thing, and it was likely too late to change my ways...and in my heart of hearts, I had no regrets about it. I refused to let them vilify me any further than they already did.

As we trekked further on into the city, everything changed, and at first, it was such a gradual change that I might not have noticed it, but as we followed the senseless path further inwards, the city became more eloquent. The streets that we walked upon were paved down with finer, smoother stones, and along the brick buildings that lined the walkways, small huts and carts started to appear, where merchants could sell trinkets, food, clothing, and even decorative weapons. The people here had a vast array of clothes to choose from, unlike their lower class brethren. Many of the men wore robes and shirts of white, and often decorated them with sashes of blue, green or yellow. The women here could actually afford dresses that accentuated their figures, and many of them had tops of white with skirts of brilliant blue or emerald green, flaunting their affluent status. At this point, I finally started to see town guards again, and these ones were far better equipped than those at the gateway. The town clearly favored blue and green as colors, so much to the point that the guards wore green on their sleeves, and had blue accents woven into their breast plates. Each guard held a spear, at the very least, and some had swords on their sides. Being a time of peace, none of them had a helmet or a shield for protection, something that I found rather arrogant of them.

“These people are more likely to be bidding on you,” the huntress told me, and it was fortunate news, in my opinion. Though it was impossible to tell, these people just appeared to be less likely to be angry about their lives, and in my mind, less likely to kill me. Their women were generally in better shape, both of body and clearly in mind, as they smiled brightly wherever they went, and they felt no shame about ogling me, some even in front of their husbands or suitors. “They’re more wealthy than the commoners, but that doesn’t make them better people, regardless of what they believe. The men here are rarely satisfied with what they have, and the women are even worse. You’d actually be worse off being sold into sexual slavery with them...you’d likely end up in the middle of an affair and killed regardless.”

So much for that pleasant thought.

I started to reply, but I felt a sudden choking around my neck. For some reason I couldn’t understand, the enchanted collar around my neck was tightening every time I started to speak.

“I’m doing that for your own good. If people start to figure out that you can speak human tongues, they’ll start bidding on you here and now.”

The huntress gave me a knowing, warning look, striking fear into my heart with the gaze that her jade eyes cast upon me. “The truly rich and powerful ones here already know who you are...and no doubt, they’re already sizing you up. We’ll probably have a small parade following us by the time we get to the courtyard, so listen closely...do not make eye contact, don’t touch anyone, don’t speak, and don’t go losing your head in the clouds again.”

It almost wasn’t fair to me.

I wanted to ask her why she was doing anything for my own good. It couldn’t just be the money at this point, could it? Why would she go to all the trouble to bring me to the courtyard for auction if there were men here that were plenty rich enough to fetch the price she would likely ask for me?

I wanted to try and make sense of it all, as well, but I did my best to follow her orders as my mistress, for the time that she still would be. For whatever reason, she was still trying to keep me alive, and the glares that I received from some of the richer humans made me wonder just how much of a challenge that would be...until I perked my ears upright to their harsh whispers.

“Sunkurun scum...”

“That stupid bitch is back with another animal...why is she trying to poison our people like this?”

“He must be really intelligent to walk upright like that. What is she thinking bringing such a creature into our peaceful city?”

“We need to speak with the baron about her. These damn tribes need to be banished from Makusa for good!”

In the back of my mind, I simply couldn’t believe it. They weren’t glaring at me.

They were glaring at **her**.

I wasn’t sure if the huntress could hear the whispers or not. I knew I couldn’t say anything, and couldn’t warn her of the danger that might be on either side of her, but as we kept walking down the street, she didn’t seem to care about any of them. The bright, brilliant green of her magically imbued skirt swayed back and forth with each step she took, and her body was still the perfect

blend of hidden power and feminine beauty, just as it had been when she first came and found me.

...Damnit. This can't be happening...

Her hair wasn't the same dark, dusky brown that it was that day, though. It was now a lighter, softer brown, bordering on blonde, and it shined beautifully in the midday sun.

Get your head out of your ass, man...

"You can all just sit around and whisper about her, but damnit, I'm going to do something about this!"

I looked around. All the way to my right, no one was moving, or saying anything. The hustle and bustle of the street bazaar went completely silent, and as I looked left, I saw a merchant, clad in a tight, white shirt and loose, comfortable blue silk pants step away from his table of weapons, and as he passed it, he picked up a sword and drew it from the sheath, tossing it aside.

"Every time this wench comes through, she brings another animal into our midst, and we're all guilty of allowing those beasts to stay alive in our city walls after she leaves! Her people are slowly but surely leaving their animal soldiers inside the city, and we are all to blame for allowing them to invade like this! The baron warned us that if we got carried away with our primal urges, the animals would start to overrun us, and sure enough, that Sunkurun whore is back with another one!"

Short, dark brown hair and a face of scraggly, unkempt beard gave the merchant something of a classless look. He wasn't puny, but he certainly didn't look like he'd be any match for the bulky strength of the town guards, or even much of a challenge for the average tribal human to defeat. "Well, hear this... you can all stand aside and watch...but I'm taking a stand, here and now! You hear me, you Sunkurun wench?! Take this foul beast back to your tribe lands and **never** return to Makusa!"

I'd seen human men do a lot of terrible things in my time, but pointing a blade on a defenseless woman was certainly not the least of it. It was also something I didn't think I could stand by and tolerate for very long, and my claws were already digging so far into my own palms that I thought I might draw my own blood. But why...? Why should I care...? Why care so much about the

woman who was still, at this point, going to sell my life away to the highest bidder?

No...no! It can't be! I refuse to accept that...

“You’re more than welcome to try and turn me away, Jiiri, but I can’t believe you’re such a wuss that you’d turn a weapon a defenseless person, much less a woman...is that what passes for a man now in Maksua? Does your wife know that you’re this much of a coward?”

I had to bite my tongue. I had no idea that the huntress had any kind of a sense of humor to her, and I never imagined it would be one that I found to my liking.

Jiiri didn’t find it so funny. “You can try to twist this and turn it back on me however you want...it won’t work! Others may not have the courage to say what needs to be said, but I’m not afraid to tell you to get lost. Take your stupid sex slave go back to your animal fucking friends, you stupid tribal wench!”

“I can’t leave now. I’m enjoying your conspiracy theory about my people far too much! I wouldn’t want to miss out on the part where you accuse us of trying to start a war by selling you animals that help build your walls, your buildings, and your streets...or perhaps the part where we sell you sex slaves that make people like you obsolete because they actually know how to pleasure a woman.” The huntress kept her composure all throughout her speech, her sarcasm so dry that sand could take a lesson. “But you will have to wrap things up...we have an auction to go to, one that your baron personally takes part in, and I’m afraid I can’t afford to be late. You’re good at not lasting too long in an exchange, right?”

“You fucking wench...” Jiiri growled as deeply as any feral wolf that I’d ever heard in the forests of Daji, and fires of hatred burned in the dark pits of his common, brown eyes. “You really think I’m above killing you to prevent all of this? Do you honestly believe that I’m afraid of putting this blade to your throat and ending your sorry life? Or maybe I should go after your fuck toy first, perhaps he means a little more to you than you’re letting on...”

Suddenly, I was anxious to hear my mistress’ response.

Why do I care so damn much what she thinks...?

“This wolf is a prized possession of mine, and he’ll fetch a very high price at the courtyard today...I’d highly recommend you to not lay a hand on him if you value your own life, but if you’re so desperate to take a shot at him, you’ll have the chance to bid on him in less than an hour. Would you mind getting the hell out of my way now?”

Certainly not the answer I was hoping for... I thought, and Jiiri wasn’t at all pleased with it, either. “I don’t feel like waiting that long to take a shot at him, if he means that much to you. In fact...I think I’ll take a shot at him now...right after I rid this city of you once and for all!!”

The crazed merchant clasped the handle of the sword tightly in his meager hand, making tiny veins bulge out through his skin. Rage poured out of his eyes like lava rushing from a volcano, and with a falsely triumphant bout of maniacal laughter, he swung the sword back, readying it for a strike as he stepped towards the huntress.

I wasn’t going to let him get there.

“This woman...” I said, as I stepped in front of my mistress, “Is the only human being on the planet who has ever earned the right to refer to me as anything less than I am...you have every right and reason to fear me, Jiiri, but not because of some stupid, fabricated war. You’ve made a much bigger mistake than making up little white lies to scare people, I’m afraid.”

The slow, weak human obviously wasn’t expecting my intervention. His movements were simple and predictable, making it easy for me to catch his wrist in my paw. With one tight, firm grip, I quickly made him drop the sword to the ground with a harmless *CLANG*, and with one swift, hard twist, I snapped his wrist cleanly from his hand, leaving his palm and fingers dangling uselessly off the end of his arm. “You made the mistake of making an enemy out of the most feared being in all of Veloria...”

There was still silence in the streets, until people heard the sickening *CRAAAAK* that accompanied Jiiri’s wrist breaking in my paws. People all around us watching the action with bated breath were finally able to release that air in the form of frightened gasps, terrified screams and wincing sympathy pain. “And let me assure you, you weak, pathetic human scum...that we beasts have every right and reason to hate your guts, and believe me, we **do** hate them...”

I released Jiiri's wrist, but only so I could punch him clean across the face to silence the pathetic whimpering that was passing through his lips. The sound was causing me great discomfort; the sound of his body crashing through the cheaply made wood of his merchant table was all too soothing. I cracked the knuckles on my right paw with a devious grin on my face, and I did nothing to hide it. Somewhere in my mind, I knew I'd just given these people all the more reason to fear me, and I didn't feel even an ounce of remorse over it. No matter how the huntress had tried to break me in the days before, I was obviously still the same wolf, inside and out...

...So why did I rush to her aid when she was in danger like that? I'd never done anything like that before...

"Why...?"

"Huh?" I asked, turning back around to see the source of the noise: none other than the huntress herself.

"Why...did you do that?! YOU IDIOT!!"

I could feel my ears flattening back down to my head at her disapproval, despite my struggles to keep them perked and upright. I was getting tired of her emotions having such an influence on me, and the attack on her life made me immediately jump to protect her, and her confessions in the hot spring earlier that day made my hidden emotions come to the surface...

"...Because I lo-"

WHACK!!

My vision went black as one of the town guards smacked me right in the back of the head with the butt of his spear, but as it did, I could have sworn I saw tears welling up in the huntress' eyes.

**

"Rise n' shine, dead boy!"

Every word from the jailer felt like a hammer pounding against my forehead.

"Nngh...wh...where..."

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

Though barely conscious, I wrapped my paws tightly around my ears and groaned in agony as the sadistic asshole slammed a long, steel pole against the iron bars that made up my jail cell. “You’re in the last bed you’ll ever sleep in, boy! I wish that Baron paid me more to rough up prisoners like you...I’d take a crack at ya m’self! And lookit those ears...flat as a footprint...does it hurt, boy? Am I causin’ you discomfort?”

I wanted so desperately to jump off of the cold slab of stone that was apparently my bed and rip his face off...so desperately that I tried, but the nausea of my concussion stopped me in my tracks, and I fell gracelessly to the ground, smacking my muzzle on a dirty, piss ridden floor...and added to the mess, as the smell went right through my nose, into my lungs, and suddenly, the contents of my stomach were gushing out.

“Well that’s no good...you dun made a mess, you’re gonna have ta clean it up!” the jailer yelled, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a key ring. He took his sweet time picking out the right key to my cell, but then opened the door hard to slam the iron gate against the stone wall with a thunderous crash. I didn’t think my head could hurt any worse...until he kicked a bucket at my face, and hit me square between the eyes.

“DAMNIT! Ahn...wh...why...**hurk**-“

I spewed again, getting the mess on the bucket that I was supposed to be putting it in. Laying in such a pose, I tried not to choke myself, coughing up what was left as I struggled to even open my eyes.

“Yer on stage in ten minutes, boy. Better get that mess cleaned up real quick.”

The jailer slammed the door closed once more and walked away, whistling a merry tune to himself. I wanted to open my eyes and get a good look at him, so I could see his ugly face...I’d **never** forget it if I ever got the chance, but at that moment, he was already too far away to see, and it didn’t seem he was coming back again.

...So this is really it.

I didn’t dare to open my mouth to speak to myself anymore; my guts still

felt like they were sitting at the back of my throat, and I could barely stand. The scent was foul beyond even the most decaying corpse I'd ever sniffed, and the floor was still a tiny bit moist...I was beginning to wonder if there were no toilets in these cells, or perhaps if the jailer was just that much of an asshole.

This is it. This is what it feels like to be truly helpless. To know that for once, you pushed your luck too far...and that you're going to die for it.

Whoever made the decision, someone was kind enough to leave my paws free to their devices, and once a few moments had passed, I mustered up the courage to pick myself back up onto the sorry excuse of a bed that rested in the cell, the only piece of furniture that there was. Lacking any coordination, I more or less crawled up from the floor and hugged the side of the bed the whole way, managing to get my torso upon it, and with a struggle, my legs pushed up the rest of the way, and I finally got my body to sit upright.

I was feared, but fearless. I was strong, there were none stronger. I was famous, there were none better known...and now, I'll be nothing.

I felt as though I might vomit once more, but I swallowed it back. It was all I could do to keep myself from crying...and it was still a weird sensation to me. I didn't like the uneasy feeling it put in my stomach, or the stinging of the tears coming out of my tired eyes, but my body was going to win this one, and my mind was barely able to stay functioning, much less to fight off what it didn't want.

It must have taken longer than I thought to climb up the side of the stone bed, because it seemed like I'd only been sitting for a few seconds when the jailer came back. "Time's up, boy! I see you ain't good for mucha shit anyway... oh well. I'll have one of the rookies clean up after ya...get on yer feet and put out yer paws."

The broken slang of the jailer caused my ears even further discomfort, but all of the pains I felt were starting to blend together into a giant, dull mass, and I knew there was nothing I could do to prevent them from growing. Using my arms to push up, I slowly stood up on my footpaws and immediately staggered, my head still spinning from the strike, and my stomach still burning from all of the earlier upheavals. My knees nearly buckled, turning weakly in towards each other, and worst of all, I felt my body win the only battle that it could that day, as tears started to stream down both of my cheeks.

But I would never let him see that.

“At least y’know how ta take orders,” the jailer said, giving his best attempt at a compliment as he took my wrists forcefully and bound them together with iron shackles. Weak as I was, I couldn’t hope to break free from them, and my mind was no better...I was so dizzy and confused that I couldn’t even attempt to come up with an escape plan. “C’mon outta there. Time ta take ya ta the stage.”

Begrudgingly, I took my first step toward my inevitable death. The jailer was more than happy to assist me now, but it was only in the form of tying a rope around the chains in my shackles and tugging harshly. "Yer gonna love it, boy. Ya get ta be a star for just one more minute."

I stumbled forward gracelessly, catching myself with what was perhaps my very last ounce of balance. In perhaps his only act of compassion, the jailer at least took a slow pace as he lead me out of the disgusting cell and into the only slightly less disgusting corridor out of the Makusa jail. The floor was clearly meant to be some sort of tan or yellow, much like the bricks of the buildings that made up the city, but they were a dark and sullied brown, with black gunk filling the cracks between. The faux mercy of the jailer was exposed as he lead me down the corridor, and along the way, each cell I passed held a different criminal...and each one gave me a disgusted sneer. These were murderers, rapists, burglars and vandals...I suppose, in a way, I was looking at a gallery of my own sins as I passed them, but it was difficult to think about when I was already swimming in misery.

"They ain't even half as bad as you, boy. **They** get ta live. **You** gotta die."

My mind was screaming at me, begging at me to ask him why I deserved such a fate. I wanted to ask every person in the city what we bipedals had done to wrong them, and why they feared and hated us so...even if I knew, somewhere in the back of my mind. Suddenly, my attraction to the Huntress felt even more ridiculous.

In what world could she and I ever have been together? In what world could we exist as equals, not just in the eyes of one another, but in the eyes of the world?

I was afraid that I already knew. *Certainly not in this one...*

The last criminal in the line, at the end of the row of cells, actually spat at

my footpaws as I went by. I could only tell because of the light of the sun finally coming into view, and as beautiful as it was, it stung my eyes from the extended darkness...and the mild concussion.

The jailer yanked on the rope once more, noticing I'd stopped to glare back at the nameless scum who would dare to spit at me. This time, my balance caved in with my legs, and I tumbled to the stone floor, nearly cracking my jaw, and knowing I'd chipped a fang when a bit of a tooth slipped past my gums and onto the floor, followed by a trail of fresh, runny blood.

"ACK!! You...ig...ignorant oaf..." I growled, scrambling up off of the ground and trying to lash out at the yet nameless jailer, but I certainly didn't have the stength to take him down. Even if I had, I was never given the chance.

"UP NEXT FOR AUCTION, OUR MAIN PRIZE AND THE MOMENT ALL OF OUR WONDERFUL NOBLES OF MAKUSA HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR, THE DIRE WOLF THAT HAS TERRORIZED THE FORESTS OF DAJI FOR AGES, VARAS KERKECI!"

My ears flew up in anticipation of my fate as two of the town guards I'd seen earlier stepped into the open corridor of the jail and easily countered my sluggish attack, each one hooking one of my arms and holding on with a tight grip. The jailer cackled in my face and handed off his rope lead to one of the guards. "Nice try, boy, better luck next time! I'm sure I'll be seein' ya in hell!"

I gritted my fangs and snarled louder than any feral beast I'd ever heard, wiping what was no doubt a smug grin from the face of the jailer. I still refused to look at his face. "Listen...to...me, **boy**. **Never** leave this place. For the rest of your pathetic, remaining years...**never** leave the walls of Makusa...for if I survive this day, I will remember your disgusting scent...I **will** hunt you down...but I will not kill you. I'll let you live...AND KEEP JUST ENOUGH OF YOUR TEETH AND TONGUE SO YOU CAN TELL THE STORIES OF THE HORRORS YOU SURVIVED, **BOY!**"

I saw the jailer's dirty, dust ridden feet jump back as I howled at him. I couldn't help grinning just a little bit, knowing that it might be the last time I ever got to intimidate anyone again in my life.

"That's quite enough, Varas. We won't be keeping the nobles waiting any longer. They've been licking their chops at the thought of collecting you all day,"

one of the guards informed me, but I could detect something of a hint of regret in his voice. "For your sake, you should pray that one of the women gets their hands on you first."

Another harsh tug lead me into the painfully bright light of the sun, and I was silently amazed at how much difference the outdoors made to the cleanliness of the bricks. No doubt, this jail was in a central location in the city; as my eyes adjusted to the light, I could see tall, extraordinary buildings reaching fruitlessly out to try and touch the sky, their bricks such a bright shade of gold that I was convinced some of them might actually be built from the precious metal of the same name. The doorways to each building, whether it was a house or a taller structure were covered by ornate, exquisitely carved arches, supported by pillars so rounded and smooth that it was fascinating to think that clumsy human hands were capable of such work.

As I lost myself in marveling at the human advancements, I saw the very parade that the huntress had mentioned earlier in the day. Down each alleyway, blocking some of the doors of the buildings, and covering the streets leading up to a giant, wooden stage, people literally seemed to be crawling out of nowhere. The streets were so densely crowded that I found it hard to believe that this many people could live together in once place...or that so few could control so much wealth. I saw some of the peasants from earlier in the day, dressed in their pathetically boring drab, and so many of them crowded the stage that they started to blend together. Their walls of mediocrity made the nobles stand out that much greater, decorated in their bright greens and blues, and the richest of all could even afford to have shiny golden accents applied to their sleeves, and for the women, to the cut of their breasts.

I tried to flatten my ears as I heard all kinds of harsh whispers coming from the crowd, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't seem to drown all of them out, especially with the terrible aching in my head draining my focus. "Pick those ears up and do your best to look presentable, Varas...and as a word to the wise, whatever the auctioneer orders you to do, do it. It'll increase your chances of survival, slim as they may be."

Trying to fathom why this particular guard was being so polite to me made my head hurt even worse, so I tried to distract myself by thinking about the very female who had put me in this situation...but as I scanned the crowd, I couldn't find any sight of her, and with her unique attire for the day, she'd stand out

brilliantly if she chose to. The dichotomy of my attraction to her and my intense hatred for her was just making my head hurt even further, so, knowing my final hour was likely upon me...I focused on hatred.

"Bunch of pathetic hethens...is this really how you get your kicks?" I asked quietly, knowing none in the crowd would hear me as I picked my ears up and tried to stroll as upright as the guards that lead me. They did have a point; I had a reputation to uphold, and the worse off I looked in front of these people, the less they would think of me. My reputation was all I had left...why not try to preserve it?

"OOOMPH!!"

Betrayal. That's why.

The guard who had been so polite to me all along turned and swung a hard elbow right into my midsection. Perhaps having heard the air on his swing, my stomach tensed up just enough that the blow didn't keel me over, and I was relieved to find no blood in my spit when I lost everything in my maw.

"Don't speak so poorly of the people who control your fate, boy! Go put on a good show for the nobles...and know that even the lowest peasant in this crowd is so much higher than you, you should grovel at the chance to kiss their dirt-ridden feet!"

The guard tossed the lead to the auctioneer, a man clad in a white robe with golden accents around every cuff, the collar, and even a golden sash around his waist...and proceeded to shove me down against the stairs. Knowing some more treachery had to be coming, I caught myself the best that I could against the stairs, and tried to keep the littlest sliver of composure that I had left.

"THERE HE IS, FOLKS! VARAS KERKECI, IN THE PATHETIC FLESH! C'MON UP HERE SO WE CAN SEE YOUR FACE, VARAS!!"

The auctioneer was obnoxiously loud, and I could tell just by looking at him that he spoke in a voice that he'd come up with just for the purpose of auctioning off highly desired beasts like myself. Everything about him seemed a bit fake, and I couldn't stand the sight of his overly bushy, unkempt mustache, or the bulbous gut hanging off over his waist. His hair was black and greasy, and even from off the stage, I could tell he'd been sweating in the sun like the pig he was for most of the day.

With regret that, to this day, I have yet to feel again, I picked myself up off of the stairs, scowled at the crowd, and stepped to the middle of the stage, just to the side of the auctioneer.

"ISN'T HE **HIDEOUS**? OR PERHAPS THERE ARE A FEW LADIES IN THE CROWD WHO SWING THAT WAY?" the auctioneer called out, making a grotesque gesture at several women in the crowd and winking at some of them...to my chagrin, most of them looked just as disgusted as I felt. "OR PERHAPS ONE OF OUR FINE SOLDIERS WOULD LIKE TO PAY THE PRICE TO TAKE THE EXECUTIONER'S AXE RIGHT TO HIS NECK?"

There was nothing standing between me and freedom but a fat man holding a rope, potentially hundreds of town guards, and a crowd of thousands of people who wanted to see me killed, or raped, at the very least. Perhaps in delirium from the concussion, for a moment, escape seemed like it wasn't quite out of reach. "There isn't a 'man' in this entire city that could take me down if you took these shackles off...you fat, **dickless coward!!**"

My words clearly didn't sit well with the auctioneer...and a chorus of jeers from the crowd showed how much they agreed. Many of the men started to give a downward thumb, and I had a feeling that it was their way of saying that survival, even as the lowest class of slave, wasn't an option any longer. Even the majority of the women started to leer at me, and as ragged as I looked, bleeding, covered in dried urine and staggering like a drunk, I could only imagine I didn't have my usual charms about me.

"YOU HEARD HIM, FOLKS! THIS MANGY WOLF IS UP FOR A CHALLENGE, BUT IT'S YOUR CALL! HIS HEAD AND BODY BELONG TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER, STARTING AT A MEASELY 1000 SIL!"

I quickly inferred that "sil" was their currency, but I had no idea if 1000 was actually a great quantity, or if the auctioneer was throwing me some sort of a last compliment, to say that the price wasn't nearly high enough for someone of my caliber. "VARAS, LET'S SEE WHAT YOU HAVE TO OFFER!"

The auctioneer certainly confused me with that one, but in a flash, two town guards were upon me, and just like that, the little bit of dignity I had left was ripped from my body. The pants that the huntress had been so nice to materialize for me were ripped to shreds, and knowing now how some of my wolf bretheren had felt before me, so was my spirit.

"THAT'S NOT WHAT THE LADIES WANT TO SEE, VARAS! YOU NEED TO PUT ON A SHOW FOR THEM!" the auctioneer called out, reaching into the pocket of his robes and retrieving an herb. Already, people throughout the crowd were shouting out "1000 SIL!" but the auctioneer seemed to ignore them, stepping toward me instead with the herb. "NOW NOW, OPEN UP AND TAKE YOUR MEDICINE LIKE A GOOD BOY!"

He was like a lamb to the slaughter, if I had the spirit to do so anymore. I could easily have bitten his chubby hand off and spat it out to the crowd, but, in a weird way, my survival instincts had been peaked by my short time spent with the huntress, and I recognized that I could escape this situation with brute strength and anger alone. Doing it for myself, and not because I was instructed, I opened my maw and chewed up the strangely shaped leaves. They weren't unpleasant, necessarily, but my carnivorous instincts told me that they weren't something I could truly enjoy, and I swallowed the rinds with a grimace. My body reacted so quickly, it shocked even the auctioneer.

"WELL NOW, LOOK AT **THIS!** I'M SURE THE LADIES WILL START BIDDING HIGHER THIS TIME! DO I HEAR 5,000 SIL?"

I was nearly ashamed at how quickly and easily my member jumped free from the sheathe. There was nothing I could do to resist it, and even as I clenched my tummy as tight as I could and thought about all of the unpleasant, terrible things I'd endured that day, my body refused to listen. "5,000, 6,000, 10,000!! DO I HEAR 15,000? CERTAINLY, THERE MUST BE SOMEONE OUT THERE WHO CAN AFFORD 15,000 FOR A SUITABLE SLAVE LIKE THIS!"

My ears pricked forward as the offers continued to climb. The auction breezed past 20,000, 25,000 and 30,000 with ease, but things started to come to a crawl just past 40,000, and the auctioneer was out of tricks to make me look more appealing. I had no regrets to that; so many people were responsible for the state I was in that I couldn't feel sorry for the fat bastard if he didn't fetch as much money as he wanted.

"I HEARD 41,000 SIL! 41,000 SIL TO THE WISE LOOKING MERCHANT IN THE FRONT!! DO I HEAR 42,000? NO?! 41,000 GOING ONCE, 41,000 GOING TWICE, THREE TIMES...AND-"

"50,000 sil."

A voice that was so purely feminine, and so soft spoken that it defied logic, managed to carry its way over the roars of the crowd, and it brought with it a deafening silence.

And I knew that voice.

"...FI...50,000 SIL? THAT'S A NEW AUCTION RECORD! AUCTION OVER, PEOPLE! VARAS KERKECI, YOUR FATE HAS BEEN SEALED BY THE WINNING BID OF 50,000 SIL, MADE BY THAT...WOMAN...RIGht...there."

The boisterous voice of the auctioneer was brought down to a normal speaking voice, and he too was finally silenced as I saw the human who would pay such a price to have the rights to my head.

Part of me was shocked. Part of me was relieved. All of me was a state of pure disbelief.

"Get off the stage, dumbass. We're getting out of here."

The people down in the courtyard around cleared in a small circle around the only person who I never would have expected to see there, in that moment, but in all of her glory and silent strength, the huntress stood defiantly against the masses of Makusan civilians, with a stance that told me we were finally going to leave this hellhole of a city.

The auctioneer remained silent as the guards climbed up onto the stage again, looking just as bewildered as everyone else was acting. I expected some sort of a jeer or a rude comment as they undid the shackles around my wrists, but they too remained silent. Whether they were all standing in awe of the huntress, or perhaps in fear of her influence, I couldn't be happier about it. The ringing in my ears had finally stopped.

"Don't make me use the collar on you."

My eyes widened and my paws shot right up to my neck, feeling the hybrid collar of metal and magic around my neck, still there and still functioning. It was only a little bit tighter than normal, but it got the point across clearly; she wanted to leave, and she wanted to leave **now**. I wasn't about to question her reasoning, and the moment my body was fully freed, I brushed past the still awestruck guards and pushed my way through the crowds, uncaring of who I offended with

the smell that they branded me with, or the still raging erection that they'd cursed me with.

"Clear a path, merchants. I have no time to deal with your meddling..." she groaned, and I got the immediate impression that her troubles earlier that day with Jiiri were certainly not the last ones she had to deal with. "Let's go, Varas. We have a lot of walking to do."

Even now, the crowds were nearly silent, with only the faintest whispers of confusion rising up. Something in the eyes of the auctioneer and the guards made it seem like they didn't want to let me leave, but as the huntress tossed a sizable bag of sil up onto the stage, they no longer had a say in the matter.

**

"...Why, mistress?"

Weeding through the crowds of people took far longer than I had hoped. Making our way back out of the town took even longer. My stomach was empty and beaten, my brains were jelly, just the same as my legs, and nothing still felt right from the concussion blow to my head.

Despite her having just spent 50,000 sil on me, the huntress didn't seem to care about any of that. "Why what?"

I tried to keep up with her pace and stay close as she deviated off of the path that we'd taken from her treehouse earlier. Now, on top of everything else, I was starting to feel lost. "Why...did you do that? Why did you save me?"

"If we get out of this alive, I'll tell you, but right now, we need to keep moving."

"What? Why...?"

The huntress shook her head and moved even faster. "You're certainly full of questions today, Varas, and if you hadn't been clocked so hard earlier, I'd be hitting you myself for forgetting your honorifics so much," she replied, shocking me again by calling me by my proper name, rather than the meaningless 'wolf.' "But more importantly, you could say that Jiiri made a charitable donation to your escape, and when the people in Makusa find out about that, we could have a lot of angry merchants and soldiers on our tails. More likely, on your tail."

Despite knowing that we had to move, I actually stopped dead in my tracks. "You...stole **that** much money from someone just to bid on my life?"

"Don't look too far into it, Varas."

"But..."

"Don't."

Do what she says...she just saved your life, regardless of her future intent...just keep moving...

I picked up the dead weight that had become my footpaws and started jogging forward to catch up her, seeing that she'd picked up her pace yet again. Though I wasn't quite in my right of mind, I couldn't smell any other people around, and my ears weren't picking up on any other suspicious sounds.

The huntress looked back, just to make sure that I could still keep pace. "I know we're not in much danger yet, but the farther we are away from Makusa before we stop, the better. The soldiers won't waste too much time on trying to retrieve you, but if we stay too close to the city, there's a good chance they'll find us, and you're in no condition to defend yourself."

My heart was warmed, even if just slightly at the fact that the huntress seemed to care about my health. "I assume your treehouse is too close, then? Where will we go, mistress?"

"We're going to take perhaps just as great of a chance...and head back to the Sunkurun tribelands."

My legs wanted to stop cold once more. There was no way that I could fathom ever taking a breath in the Sunkurun tribelands. Despite how feared I was in the forests of Daji, and almost all of Veloria, even I avoided those lands like a deadly plague, knowing my fate would be the same if I met with either one.

"Are you sure that's so wise, Mistress?" I asked, trying to focus on the pain of my intense hunger to take my mind off of my exhaustion. "If your people are truly so opposed to my kind..."

Gracefully, the huntress leapt over a small stream, and I did my best to follow suit, making the jump and just barely keeping myself upright on the other side. "This will be different, Varas. I can assure you of that much."

I tilted my head as I ran. "How could it be any different?"

"I just paid 50,000 sil to keep my hands on you...even if it was someone else's money," she explained, and I could see the edges of a grin as she glanced back to me. "There's no way I'll allow anything bad to happen to you."

If I wasn't confused earlier in the day, I certainly was now, but as lost as I was in my mind, my body was worse. A tree root that I easily would have dodged any other time took out my right leg, and I crashed into the dirt and patches of grass on the forest floor. I found myself so exhausted that I couldn't even groan in the agony I felt from the harsh smack from the wood. All I could do was lay there...and try not to lose consciousness again.

The huntress skidded to a halt in front of me, and looked back over her shoulder. Despite her pace, she was hardly breathing heavily, and for a moment, she surveyed the area around her. I couldn't see even the tops of the walls of Makusa anymore, and it seemed that she couldn't either, even as she stood above me. Letting out a breath, the huntress stepped back towards me and knelt down by my head.

"I **know** you don't understand. I can see it in your eyes, Varas."

I could feel the enchanted grasses of her skirt tickling my cheek as she knelt down by me. The warmth that radiated from her moist, smooth skin and the simply irresistible scent that came from just inches further up were only lulling me closer to sleep, but at least I felt true comfort for the first time that day.

"It may not make sense to you, but...I came to my senses, Varas...and I'm not going to carry on the way that the Makusan people do...not any longer. I still wasn't sure if I should believe your story from this morning, but...after I finished robbing Jiiri, I came to the stage and saw honesty in your eyes...real honesty. Not the same kind of honesty that people can invoke in you through fear...that's **obidience**, not honesty. I have a feeling that you don't even know who you truly are, Varas, but I saw a glimpse of who you might really be when you had no arrogance left to hide behind."

"How have you come to your senses?" I asked, my voice barely a whisper as mind, body and spirit all started to shut down at once.

Despite the disgusting stink that now seemed permanently embedded in my fur, and the blood running down my cheek, I felt delicate, angelic fingertips

brushing through, down to my flesh. "I knew your story was true when I saw the look in your eyes of a terrified little boy who had undergone nightmares untold...but even deeper still, the look of a man who stood up to the gods themselves to willingly accept his judgment. That's the kind of man who deserves...no, who **commands** respect. In a way, I saw the kind of man in you that my mother always told me to seek out, in a mate...how could I leave you there to die when you filled a void that no human ever could?"

I felt a smile creeping across my lips; not one of arrogance, or of delirium, but a sincere, grateful smile. I wasn't sure when I last smiled in such a way, but it felt good...it warmed the pits of my heart so that all of my bodily injuries, all of my dizziness, confusion, all of my discomfort simply faded away.

"Your mother was part of the reason you sought out to hunt down demons like me..." I paused, taking in a deeper breath. It seemed my body decided it was finally time for a nap. "*Ahnn*...would you really deny her dying wish?"

The wonderfully soft fingertips that stroked along my bruised cheek stopped, cupping against my flesh in such a way that even the most affectionate females could never compare. "Hatred breeds hatred, Varas. Destruction breeds destruction, war breeds war. Your people and my own have lived in this cycle of pain for thousands of years, and *nothing* fruitful has **ever** come of it...I have lived out the wishes of my mother, but...I think she would smile down upon me if I decided to take a new approach to changing this world..."

I closed my eyes.

"And I'll start with you..."

5

I was defeated.

Not the kind of defeated that comes with humility, like being bested in a spar with your friend, or the kind of defeated that accompanies your mind when you start a puzzle that you know you'll simply never finish.

No...this was the kind of defeat that a man who has come through hell and back for literally **nothing** feels. The kind of defeat that only those who have fought, tooth and nail against an army of an entire nation, only to fall just short of victory feels.

And it was painful.

"C'mon...wake up, Varas...we have to get going! We were lucky to make it through til the morning, but we have to go now!"

The Huntress, still nameless to me that day, shook my broken body violently against the ground. Her hands, despite their small and demure size were insanely strong, and I jerked awake in a coughing fit.

"*Kaff! Kaff!* AHhh...ah...what...what happened? What's...what's going on??" I asked, trying to sit upright, but there was the remnants of a concussion, keeping my body flat against the ground where it was. I started to open my eyes, but immediately closed them at a wave of nausea and the sudden, blindingly bright beams of morning sun that broke through the endless walls of trees around me.

Another shake just made me wince my eyes shut tighter. "This isn't a joke, Varas! GET UP NOW!!"

I thudded against the ground helplessly. I was awake now, no doubt, but even if I had determination to give, it would have done no good against the rigors of the day before. I gritted my fangs as I started to recall it all...

The fierce, brutal strikes to my stomach at the gates...

The harsh, stinging slap of my mistress as I made a spectacle of her at the town...

The foul, putrid stench of urine about my fur as I woke up in the jail cell in a pool of my own blood and vomit...

The drugs that had been forced down my throat and tricked my body despite my horrid condition, making me into nothing more than a public sex toy...

And yet, I was still alive.

"Alright. Let's go."

With a struggle greater than any strain my arms and legs had ever experienced at any point in my life, I pried my eyes open and lifted a paw to my forehead, trying to shield the light from my eyes. The Huntress, in what I still considered unfathomable kindness from her, saw my strain and moved into my line of sight, blocking the sunlight from my vision. Like the angel I suddenly thought her to be, the sunlight broke around her visage, highlighting the bright, golden blonde of her hair and shining over her like a halo, so much that I felt that perhaps I had died in the night and been taken up to heaven in all of God's infinite mercy.

This was not the case, but certainly, for me, it was close enough.

"That's a bit more like it."

"Glad you think so."

"Stop forgetting your honorifics."

She might have the voice of an angel, but her tongue was still sharp as a razor's edge, and she still felt the importance of keeping me in my place. "My sincerest apologies, Mistress," I replied dryly, and to my shock, there was no tightening around my neck, and no impact to my head. Instead, there was a dainty hand offered out to me, with one of the mostly kindly smiles I'd ever seen.

"Not anymore."

My jaw dropped. "W...what...?"

I remembered her hand reaching out to help me, but it turned out I was wrong about that after all. I felt the harsh grasp of enchanted steel clenching around my neck, and as I admired her smile, I started to wonder if perhaps her

smile was a lie, or maybe, I was still delusional from my injuries. My head was still spinning like a top, and my eyes were blurred as though they'd been smeared with oil...but even as I was relieved when my vision cleared, it paled in comparison to the relief I felt at unrestricted, fresh air filling my lungs.

"Mistress...did you just...?"

I saw the enchanted steel slowly disintegrating, turning into a light blue aura and dissipating into the air around me, accompanied by the calming sound of what seemed to be tiny shards of glass shattering upon the bricks of a human city.

The same hand that just freed me, despite her never having fully broken me, came up to stroke lightly at the fur upon my cheek. "It's Aiyana, actually."

My mind was still swimming in total disbelief. This couldn't really be the same female who had captured me only two days before, could it? Even if she had stolen from someone just to save my neck...even if she had gone back on the promise she made on her mother's death...why couldn't I trust her? Had she really changed?

"That's...beautiful. A beautiful name," I said, still a bit breathless at the sensation of being able to breathe again, ironically. "Do you have a last name, Mistress?"

"Verza...and I told you, not anymore," she reiterated, lifting her hand away from my cheek to cover her soft, kissable lips, and a playful giggle. "That title never felt right on me, Varas. I'm sorry I imposed it upon you over these past few days. Would you be willing to forgive me...?"

"On a couple of conditions, of course," I replied, taking her delightfully delicate hand in my coarse, well-worn paw. I stood upright, and she stood up with me, and for the first time, I was able to stand face to face with her and truly appreciate all of the beauty she'd been blessed with. "First and foremost that we walk and talk at the same time. I've kept us stalled plenty long enough."

Aiyana gave my paw the most subtle of squeezes, so much so that I wondered if maybe I had just imagined it, and released it as she turned away. She started walking on ahead, and against the foul odors that the other pitiful humans had stained me with, I could smell a delicious, feminine and tropical scent trailing off of her as she lead the way out of the forest. Before she'd turned, I was

sure I saw hints of a blush highlighting her cheeks, and bringing the bright, beautiful jade out of her eyes. Her hair was certainly blonde now, and it shined brilliantly in the morning sun as it moved over our heads.

"And what are the other conditions?" she asked, as I started walking along just behind her. She'd turned a new leaf, or perhaps, turned back to an older one, but in all that had happened the days before, I was still hesitant to walk right in line with her unless she instructed me to.

"That you keep shaking me until I wake up from this wonderful dream, or, if I'm dead, stop lying to me and tell me I'm already in Heaven."

She rolled her eyes at me, much as I'd expected, but there was no malice left to stare me down. "I suppose my change in personality is a little bit too much for you to handle so suddenly?"

"It's certainly not what I expected," I admitted, nervous that she might strike me for the wise crack, but I felt no sting. "Are you that kind to all of the slaves you sell?"

"Every single one of them," she played along. "But I guess you've probably figured me out, then; that almost everything you've seen of me up until now has been me wearing a disguise...even if I had my reasons."

I raised a brow. "I didn't think you were hiding anything quite so deep. What parts were true?"

"The part about my parents."

I gulped.

"And the part about wanting to live up to my mother's death in a new way."

Then, I sighed with relief.

"Varas...I really am sorry for what I did to you, but...I guess I'm really not that simple as a person. Everyone has an expectation for me to be a fierce goddess of battle, while being some unattainable sex symbol that makes most men quiver with fear and doubt just from being around them. It's frustrating to maintain, but when you so wholly and completely ignored all of that about me, you helped me see back into my true self, even if I was too angry to realize it at the time. I didn't want to admit or accept that I might not be so angry or

vengeful, so I kept up that charade around you. The loss of my parents still hurts, and everyone in Makusa has drawn my ire time and time again, but...all you ever did wrong to me was live up to your reputation, while trying to deny me my own."

"..." I wasn't really sure how to respond to her. My whole life growing up and interacting with women of any species, tribe or background, none of them had ever really talked about their feelings with me, and I never got the hint that any of them wanted to, nor did I ever have the time or care to listen.

This time, I had to at least give it a try. "I guess I didn't realize that you were so complex, Aiyana. I really did believe that you were nothing more than a girl who was out to destroy my kind, and look damn good doing it." *Smoooooooooth*, I thought in cursing myself.

"You sure know how to compliment a woman," she said, and her gruff tone made me unsure if she was being sarcastic, or legitimately annoyed.

"I'll admit, it's not something I've ever had to do a lot of in the past to get what I want, but you have at least peaked my interest, Aiyana...so what are you, really? Just another angry huntress wanting to avenge her family and tribe against crimes by scum like me, or a calm, wandering spirit who got forced into a way of life she doesn't necessarily like?"

At that, I could at least see a genuine smile forming. "Somewhere in the middle, Varas. You'll just have to find out; but I'm curious to know...what are you, really? Just another horny animal that will have sex with any woman that walks his way, or a silly young wolf who is lost in the world because he was never properly raised?"

I snorted. "I happen to have *exceptional* taste, actually."

She chuckled, and for the first time, when I joined a woman in casual laughter, it was real...it actually meant something. I wasn't trying to bed her, or get her off my back about something with fake laughter...this was *real*.

It didn't hide my pain, though; that was just as real. "I guess it wouldn't do any good to lie to you, Aiyana. Having empty sex with anyone I could did just enough to keep me from feeling as hollow as those carnal relations themselves were, but it was my only little version of revenge against you and your kind...I knew the fates of human females that would go to bed with a wild beast like me.

I knew that some of the females of other species I slept with were in heat or impregnated, and I walked away from them without even a **moment** of hesitation...so why on earth are you suddenly being so nice to me?"

"Because...what I did to you was every bit as unfair as anything you've ever done to anyone else, Varas, and slave or not, I want you to stay with me for a little while."

I couldn't help raising a brow. "Why...?"

"You may not be my slave anymore, but I think I have one more task for you, if you think you can handle it. Given what you just told me, I have no doubt that you can."

The idea of doing any further work didn't really appeal to me. The reality of the fact that I was free to make my own decisions again hadn't really set in until the prospect of further work was brought about, and at that notion, I wasn't exactly thrilled. "I was kind of hoping to walk away from all of this completely free, but you did save my life back there. I suppose that whether or not I like it, I'm still indebted to you for at least a little bit."

"You owe me no further form of a debt," she confirmed, and as she did, she paused in her stride. "But if you were to accept this task, I'm afraid you wouldn't be truly free ever again."

I stopped right alongside of her and turned to face her. Her tone was suddenly so serious upon my ears that I could feel the very weight of her words. "If you were intending to keep me broken, you should have left the collar on me, Aiyana."

She shook her head. "Not broken. The decision would be one of your own will; the fruits of that decision would keep you bonded to me forever."

"What decision? What could you *possibly* be planning?"

Her hands, strong in their will but delicate in their touch, grasped my much larger paws, and brought them towards her, letting them rest right upon her perfectly toned stomach. Still feeling the effects of my body being so heavily drained, I didn't even attempt to resist her touch. "I can think of only one way to honor my mother's wishes that won't end in bloodshed, and even this one still may, but...another war is not the answer, Varas. You've proven that to me by

showing me the true strength and character of a beast with nothing left to lose. It's admirable..."

I may not have always been the wisest man alive, and certainly, I wasn't the best at picking up subtle hints from females when the norm was closer to them throwing themselves at my footpaws, but the tone of her voice, the way she held my paws upon her stomach, and that soft, pleading look in her eyes that betrayed the very strength she'd shown me, and yet, reinforced it by letting me see it in the first place...this was no ordinary plea for my cooperation.

"Aiyana..."

"I've yet to meet a single man in my whole tribe, no...in my whole **life** who is a better measure of what it means to be a man than you are, Varas. I've never met a man who I could ever consider remotely worthy of leaving me their seed, but you-

"You **can't** mean..."

"Let's break down those walls in ways that our parents never dreamed of, Varas."

And suddenly, I was faced with the most difficult decision of my entire life.

6

I was dumbfounded.

Not the kind of dumbfounded that one feels when they expected to do well on a test and receive it back, only to find they failed, or the kind that one feels when they make a valid guess at a question, only to find that they were completely wrong.

No, this was the kind of dumbfounded that I never imagined I could ever experience. This was the kind of thing I could only imagine a man would feel when the girl of his dreams shocked the very life out of him by coming forth with her feelings first, beating him to the punch.

In a way, that very thing had just happened to me, as my paws rested, still as an untouched pond upon Aiyana's toned and powerful abdomen.

"It won't work, Aiyana. You know it as well as I do."

"I'm not worried about the opinions of others, Varas. I want to do this for myself."

I wished so deeply that I could remove my paws, but it felt as though ethereal chains of destiny kept them pressed right upon her flesh. Fate wouldn't allow me to deny her request. "It's not even that. A human being and a feral can copulate, but...a human and an upright? It simply won't work."

"And who told you that?"

"No one ever told me such to be true, but to the best of my knowledge, it's never happened before..."

Aiyana chuckled quietly. "Does that mean you're trying to come up with excuses because you're afraid of intimacy where potency actually matters?"

"**No!** When would I have ever been afraid of that?" I barked back, though once again, she saw through me as though my fur was transparent.

"It's likely you've got illegitimate little babies running around all over this planet, but none of them with a feral or a human, I would imagine. Are you

telling me you'd be opposed to trying to form a child with the latter?"

"I've never really been much of the fatherly type," I replied. "Most women who ever came to me for sex weren't exactly looking for something long term anyway, whether or not that was what they received."

"So it's your commitment I should be worried about," Aiyana pondered aloud. "Perhaps I should have kept the shackles on you after all."

"Is that really how you'd want to bear a child? From the seed of a man who you held against his will?"

"Of course not, albeit, I don't think you would mind it all that much, knowing what I do about you now."

I wanted to be bothered by the fact that she'd gotten to know me so well in such a short amount of time, and I was actually bothered by the fact that she'd found a new sexual niche for me that I never would have bothered to explore otherwise, but sure enough, she was playing into my desires like the pied piper, and I was following whether it was my will to do so, or if she was just playing the right tune.

"You still never properly answered my question, Varas."

Her voice was an arrow of distinction that always found a way to strike my heart and bring me out of the wanderlust. "What about your tribe, Aiyana? Do you really think they'd approve of you bedding a monster like me intentionally?"

"Who I take to bed with me is none of my tribesmen's business if I don't want it to be," Aiyana quickly replied. "But moreover, you do have a point...my actions this past weekend will likely reach my tribe before we do, and that means I have to make a rather difficult decision..."

"What is that...?"

"The one thing that might hurt my mother more than falling in love with a beast. I have to **quit** the tribe."

I finally broke my paws free from her stomach, as I felt I might actually have to catch my jaw to keep it from dropping. "Aiyana, you **can't** be serious! If humans are anything like we were, deserting your tribe is grounds for death! If they don't execute you on the spot, they'll hunt you down to the ends of Veloria!"

"And that's their decision, if they truly wish to carry on the burden of hatred that my family was cursed with, but where has it gotten us? Where has it ever gotten anybody to hold onto a grudge like that?"

She was right. No matter how long I'd spent wandering around and sleeping with anything I found attractive, and no matter how many human females I ruined for exactly the purpose of carrying a grudge, it had never gotten me anywhere in life. It was just a continuous loop of empty sex and trying to escape the bad name I'd created for myself.

I sighed. "I can't argue with that, but even so, you've left a mark on me that isn't going away anytime soon, and I just couldn't let you endanger yourself in such a way..."

"I'm free to make my own decisions, Varas. You couldn't stop me even if you wanted to, so you may as well support me on this one."

As headstrong as ever, I thought. *At least that hasn't changed about her.* "And if we encounter resistance when you announce your decision?"

"Then we do exactly what we did in Makusa: run for our lives and find a place to hide overnight so we can recouperate."

"And if they catch us?"

Aiyana smirked and reached out, taking one of my paws in her grip, gentle, yet surprisingly strong. "Then I guess we'll get to see just how much of the legend about your fighting skills is real, and how much is just a legend."

It scared me to think that I might actually have to put my old fighting skills to the test someday soon, and I was sure that Aiyana could feel it as she held my paw. It trembled just slightly in her grasp, a sign of my nerves at the conflict to come, but even though I was no longer shackled, I was behind her every step of the way.

"You don't end up with a reputation like mine for no reason, Aiyana. I certainly wouldn't mind if you could outfit me with a weapon, though."

"We'll have to head west to Kanadul, then. It's one of the few vestiges of interspecies peace left on this side of Veloria. Think you're up for the journey?"

The rumbling in my stomach was loud enough to answer for me, and I

could hear her dainty giggle over the sound as she looked down at the empty belly hiding under toned muscles. "Long as we stop to get a bite to eat somewhere first, I think I can handle anything."

"Good," she replied quickly, "Because I've got my own needs for you to fulfill along the way."

She gave a firm tug on my paw as she kept about blazing her own trail through the jungle. No doubt, she knew the way to Kanadul better than I did, and no doubt, we were going to get sidetracked before we got there.

Somehow, I didn't have a problem with that.

I was satisfied.

Not the kind of satisfied that comes from having a cool sip of water after a warm day in the fields, or the kind of satisfied you feel when you've completed a task that was frustrating you for a long time.

No, this was a satisfaction I'd never known before. It was rare that I went without a meal for a long time, so when my fangs sunk into the freshly cooked flesh of the hapless deer that was foolish enough to cross my path, I was brimming with satisfaction. I was **overflowing** with satisfaction.

"Maybe the legends are true," Aiyana observed, as she rather meticulously went about eating her smaller portion. "I don't think I've ever seen any beast act quite so ferocious before."

I didn't have a human response for her just yet; only low, rumbling growls of feral delight as my fangs tore through the flesh like a rake through loose soil. In some way, I thought I'd actually scared a little sense into the girl, and I suppose that wouldn't have been unreasonable to believe, but all the same, there was an excitement in her eyes that I was a little bit afraid of...

When the deer realized that she had it pinned down from the other side with her spear, it dashed away, and I pounced in from the side. Purely feral beasts simply don't have the evolved senses to avoid a simple trap like that, so I took it down easily, and my fangs were around the neck of the poor creature in a flash. I could feel bones cracking and breaking under my powerful bite, as I turned my head and tore the neck away from the rest of the spinal cord. It might have looked violent, but all in all, it was as merciful a way to kill a beast as any other: a moment of excruciating pain, followed by the end of all sensations, and finally, darkness to wash it all away. Blood stained my muzzle and the fur upon my cheeks, turning my pearly white fangs a nasty shade of faded red, leaving me the look of a murderous creature, no doubt...but that look in her eyes was more stunning to me than any other part of the hunt.

There was a glimmer. A bright, powerful glimmer in her already strong jade eyes that I couldn't have possibly missed as I looked back to her with narrowed

blues. If she had a tail, I was sure it'd be wagging, a bit of a twisted thought when considering what she'd just watched. It took me a minute to switch gears after killing the innocent creature, keeping me from speaking in human tongues for a moment, but in the back of my mind, I couldn't stop pondering that look in her eyes.

With each bite of the delicious deer, however, I was pushing the thought from my mind and focusing more on my full belly.

"Nnngh...Mmm. That's good," I replied, not even addressing her statement at first. The small fire that she'd prepared after the hunt was just enough to cook any potential disease from the creature, leaving it as close to raw as possible, and right to my liking. "And I guess I have a bit of a tendency to harken back to my four legged ancestors when I hunt. There's been a couple times where I blacked out with an empty stomach, and woke up full and satisfied."

I wasn't entirely fibbing that last part of the story, but I used it to gauge her interest. Though not as bright as when I made the kill, I could see hints of that familiar glimmer in her eyes. "I have to admit, I'm a little envious of you, Varas," she said. "As a beast, even an upright one, I think people expect you to lose control and act like an animal from time to time. As a member of such a proud human tribe, doing such a thing would be unheard of for me, or my people...to really get back in touch with nature and be an animal is something we're simply not allowed to do."

I swallowed down another bite of meat with a pleasant growl. "You're missing out, then," I told her. "The feeling of being what nature intended you to be is an extremely liberating feeling."

"What did nature intend *you* to be, Varas? You're not a wild beast, after all."

"I guess I'm fortunate in that regard. I can be whatever I want to be, whenever I want to be," I explained, not having ever pondered the concept myself, yet knowing what my answer would be without a thought. "It's very easy for me to embrace the human nature that I've been given, but also to get back in touch with feral nature and be a wolf temporarily, if I really need to be."

"You have freedoms that I can't help being a little jealous of, even after I tried to take them from you. You can embrace either side of yourself...you really are a fascinating creature, Varas," she complimented me and set her portion of

meat down, hardly having touched it since we set up camp for the night. "And I want to explore more of the side that you can't fully control. I want to know...want to **feel** what it's like to be a beast."

My stomach was dominating my thoughts still at that point, so much so that I almost didn't notice Aiyana standing up and taking a step closer to me. She knew how hungry I'd been, and with good reason; I was near to the point of **starvation**, but with at least part of a meal in my stomach now, she must have decided that I was in good enough condition to show her in the most intimate way what it felt like to be a beast.

I knew there was nothing under her loincloth, as usual. I could smell her femininity whenever she was anywhere close to me, but that apparently wasn't good enough for her. The inside of the loincloth draped over my neck and the back of my head as she knocked the meat from my paws and pushed her swollen labia right up to the front of my muzzle.

"This is what they do, right? The feral females...? They entice a male with their heat, their absolute *need* to be bred by a virile male like yourself...and then they give up their body as an offering to the alpha of their choice?"

As tightly pressed as her delicate folds of flesh were to my lips, I couldn't properly answer. The long, slick flat of my tongue drew forth almost by instinct, spurred on by the need that I easily could have picked up with my nostrils from a distance, but she literally forced into my senses. It was intoxicating, and hard to believe that a human could have such a delicious scent.

"It's not *exactly* like that," I replied, a hint of teasing in my voice as I leaned back from my dessert just enough to reply. "Typically, one heated female will draw a number of potential suitors to herself, and when a pack is nearby, the alpha always goes first, and determines if anyone else even gets a chance...but when a lone wolf like myself comes along, a female in her cycle will do **anything** to entice me, it seems..."

"It's quite an overwhelming sensation," Aiyana replied, expressing her discomfort in a way that a feral female never could. "Is there any way to put out the fire that burdens my loins?"

I grinned. I hadn't figured Aiyana to be the type who would want to pretend to be a fully wild beast, but the idea was getting me in touch with my own wild

side, and after all that she'd done to me when we first met, this was the perfect way to get a revenge that both of us would enjoy.

"I'm afraid there's only one thing that'll do, Aiyana," I warned her, letting the warm, steamy air of my breath tickle over her exposed nethers and drift around her proudly erect clitoris. "You have to be bred by a male that's *worthy* of you."

I could feel her thighs trembling, her knees going weak around my muzzle as she nearly lost her balance. A thin veneer of her arousal soaked my snout, and the pure extract of her need was left on my nostrils, making it impossible to escape her delicious scent. "And h-how do I know that you're worthy, Varas?"

With my stomach full and my strength returning, it was time to show Aiyana how powerful I really was in my peak condition. Even from my haunches, I wrapped my paws around the back of her thighs and easily pushed her down to the ground. She yelped in surprise at how quickly I could move, landing upon the ground gracelessly, unceremoniously...just the way I meant for her to. If she meant to play up the role of a needy bitch in heat, then I was going to respond in kind, and as she'd quickly find, males that are drunk with lust aren't always the most gentle lovers.

"That really isn't up to you to determine."

Now *this* was exhilarating.

The very first time I saw Aiyana, I underestimated her, and it nearly cost me my life. This time, I used all of my cunning to distract her, and all of my speed to bring her to the ground. My strength, far greater than that of any human I'd ever encountered, was more than enough to keep her pinned to the ground as I pressed my paws down to her shoulders. Perhaps just playing along, I felt her body wriggling under my touch, but she had no chance to escape my clutches now.

Revenge was going to be sweeter than the nectar of the rarest flower in the jungle.

"**V-Varas!**" she cried out, as a hint of fear, a very understandable fear, welled up in the beautiful irises of her eyes. In those same eyes, I'd seen anger, hatred, and pure wrath, but I didn't see her fear as a weakness. I saw it as a depth of her character, that she was experiencing something new for the first time and

reacting as anyone in an unsure situation would, as she watched the length of my member growing between her thighs and hovering near her folds. The loincloth had spilled out of my way, and now, whatever goodness was left in my heart was the only thing keeping her womanhood in tact.

It didn't last.

"Go on, keep calling my name like that. You're only gonna make it *worse* for yourself," I warned her. She learned very quickly that wolves had very little concern for foreplay, as the very tip of my length rested against her swollen, pouted labia and started to push against her.

Before, I'd only been given a small taste of her body for a the sake of a ritual, and I was left wanting.

This time, I wasn't going to stop until I was satisfied.

"Prove your worth, then, Varas..." she mumbled out, her reply a low, pleased groan as the heat coming from my cock teased at her flesh. I gave a gentle push, penetrating her rather easily to start, and appreciating just how tightly her human walls gripped around me.

If she kept this up, I was going to become addicted to human snatch.

I dug my claws into her shoulders and gave a hard, deep thrust, spearing her on my length and watching with sadistic delight as she winced her eyes shut and gasped aloud into the forest, as if praying for the spirits of the trees to comfort her. I could tell with just one hump that she was fuller than she'd ever been, and even if her body couldn't handle it, her spirit willed her onward.

It was my turn to put her in her place, this time.

8

I was in heaven.

Not the kind of heaven that comes from spending a day at the spa, or even from finally being free from all the worries and stresses of the world.

No, this was the kind of heaven that I hadn't experienced with anyone else, ever before. I'd had women of every species, ranging in age, experience and different desires...and no one even came close to comparing.

We were already two orgasms deep and nearing a third as Aiyana clenched down on my length once more, her inner walls fluttering with the telltale signs of a female climax, and one that I imagined she wasn't very familiar with. I felt a sympathy for her, knowing that her former lovers were so inadequate, or perhaps, just lacking in skill.

I was making up for all of their piss poor work.

"Varas, again! Yes! I'm gonna cum again, you magnificent *beast*!"

It was good to be king, once again, and this time, I was holding all the cards. Aiyana was marked, just as female should be, her back and her rump coated with the drying remnants of my first two releases. After going on short dry spell before we met, I had plenty of extra love to give, but much to her chagrin, I was holding back just a tiny bit, and she knew it.

She wanted proper, canine breeding.

She wanted my knot.

"Then do it already, you cum hungry little bitch!" I howled back at her, my eyes glowing with lust as they met with hers, desperate and pleading for what I simply wouldn't give her. She took to doggy style for our third romp, and she was playing her part perfectly, looking and acting every bit as desperate and needy as a heated bitch.

I wanted to hate to admit it, but I was over my shame. I **loved** it.

The sun was completely hidden from view as the canopy of trees around us

started to glow gentle, ethereal blue from the rising moon above. Mother Nature herself seemed to support our mating, and the way that Aiyana started panting as her body was wracked with the pleasure of another climax simulated a female wolf for me perfectly, even if she didn't need to. I'd torn through nearly every female of my own breed on the planet in my lifetime, but only dipped into the pool of humans a couple of times.

None of them could take me like Aiyana. "*Nnnngh...no!* Not until you give me the big, thick knot and **breed me properly!**" she demanded, knowing that it was up to me if I decided to fulfill her desires. She squeezed, milked and clenched at my cock with her inner walls, bringing me right to the edge of my own third orgasm, but whether or not I would give her the knot, I still hadn't quite decided.

The first two times, making a mess of her had been a fantastic revenge for what she'd done to me a couple days before. She wanted me to finish inside of her so badly, and I denied her, twice, even denying myself a bit of pleasure for the sake of punishing her actions.

This time, I didn't know if I could deny myself again. It had been **months** since a female let me knot her properly, and here, in the form of the woman who was changing my life, I finally had a willing vector for it.

Freedom from the enchanted collar that choked me was one thing.

Being able to put Aiyana properly in her place, on her knees before me, knotted and unable to escape my clutches would be a *far* stronger statement.

I gave in.

Sweat poured down her back, over her hips and down her forehead as she bucked back against my proper, exhausting herself as much as she could in her quest to be fulfilled. Despite her female anatomy allowing her to have multiple orgasms if she so choose, I could tell that she was running out of steam, and her exhaustion, quite frankly, was a huge turn on. Her cheeks were flushed, her tongue hanging from her lips as she breathed, and her hands dug into the ground, tearing through vibrant green grass as she awaited her reprieve.

I could feel every muscle in my body start to tense, not denying myself even one more moment of pleasure. I didn't think her smaller, tighter body could handle it, but at this point, I wasn't going to be denied. My claws tore down her

sides, marking her deeply with painful wounds as I bucked **hard**, my hips slapping firmly against her taut ass and nearly buckling her over as my knot spread her poor labia wider than they'd ever been. I nearly hesitated, but...

"D-don't...don't stop, Varas...**do it**..."

Her hair fell down round her face in a gorgeous, golden cascade, framing her narrowed eyes as she looked back at me with no longer a pleading, but now, a demanding look. She was every bit as determined to take my knot as I was to give it to her, and with my paws holding onto her hips, claws dug in for traction, I pressed onward, watching her folds stretch even further as they accomodated the widest part of the bulge.

"VARAS!"

Just a moment after her orgasmic cry, there was a small, quiet **pop**, as my knot completely sunk into her passage. I gritted my fangs, and then howled in delight at the rising moon as the last of my seed finally poured inside of her, warm, sticky and virile. I could feel it coming back onto my own flesh as I filled her poor human womb to capacity, her body simply not made to handle the average canine yield.

Just like that, I was tied to a human for the very first time...and the look in her eyes made it clear that if she could handle it, she'd want to do the whole thing all over again.

My howling was enough to make the tiniest of hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. I could feel the shiver running through her body at the sound, rattling her all the way down to her most delicate features and giving my shaft a pleasant vibration as it slowly oozed off more of my seed.

"S-sure hope you're not planning...*ah*...on going anywhere for a bit," I taunted her, as she continued panting into the ground, completely lost in a haze of forbidden pleasure.

It took her a moment longer to reply. "You...you just w-wait until I get...*ah*...*ha*...I get my turn...to be on top!"

"You already had your turn," I quickly reminded her. "Sounds like you never should have let me out of that collar."

Aiyana ponded that thought for a moment, and in that moment, I gulped just a little bit, worried that she might try to conjure up another enchanted collar, but as my seed spilled over, dripping out of her petals like nectar and spilling down to the forest floor, she just smiled back at me, satiated for the moment, but there was a tell in her look, one that said she was nowhere near done with me just yet.

One that said she planned to keep me around, as more than a mere slave.

"I don't need a collar to keep you from straying away, Varas. I can't imagine you howl like that for all of the females you breed," she pointed out, a quiet, low groan of delight escaping her human lips. The humans always made slightly different noises than we wolves did, but I could almost hear faint hints of a rumble coming from her throat, as if she were a female of my own race.

"And you really think that a lone wolf like me is going to settle down with just one female?" I asked her, giving her a knowing grin. This wasn't a kind of flirting that I was used to, but once again, Aiyana was full of surprises. I was actually enjoying this.

Wait a minute. I'm enjoying this?

A quick squeeze around my drooling length made me gasp in delight. It seemed Aiyana wasn't content to just let me relax in the tie. "Give me time. I know I take a little warming up to, but I think you'll find flying solo with me isn't as bad as I made it out to be, before."

I only nodded in reply as I tried not to give the prospect too much serious thought. Making an emotional decision when drunk with lust never paid off for me before that point, and it didn't seem the right time to choose, just yet.

Still, a life with Aiyana didn't sound too bad right then, and the peaceful sleep that whisked us into the night was almost as lovely as the tie that we shared, even in our sleep.

9

I was confused.

Not the kind of confused one becomes when they aren't sure what kind of food to have for lunch or dinner, or the kind of confused that comes with trying to solve a wise man's riddle.

No, this was a deeper, *thicker* kind of confusion that clouds the judgment of a man and makes him wonder if his path is the one he's meant to take. The kind that makes you ponder if your entire life has been wrong until that moment, and someone finally learned how to reach you, to *show* you that you were wrong.

At some point in the night, my knot had deflated and Aiyana and I fell asleep. She stayed still in my arms the whole night, spooning with me in the way that all of the romantic females always talked about when I'd bedded them before.

This was my first time actually doing it, and I awoke slightly disappointed to find that I was laying by myself on the forest floor. I actually having a battle with my emotions, wondering why I'd feel any sadness or emptiness at waking up alone. I'd ditched hundrds of females, and the idea of it happening to me was almost cathartic, perhaps even deserved.

I rubbed my eyes with tired paws and looked up, only to see Aiyana standing in the face of the morning sun, a golden halo of light surrounding her body and illuminating her form as if she was an angel sent down from the stars above.

Very subtle, Mother Nature, I thought, as I watched her whirl around, noticing immediately that I was awake. Her flowing, golden locks swung and bounced a little bit as she smiled down at me. I had no idea how long she'd been conscious, but I could see her body was already cleaned, and her loincloth was returned to normal. She was doing a very good job of hiding the fact that she'd been ravaged by a wolf just the night before.

"Glad to see you're finally awake, sleepy wolf. I was starting to think I was a little bit too much for you after all!" she teased, her voice even lighter than it

had been the day before. It was a surprise to me, but not an unwelcome one; the cold, cruel huntress that wanted my head on a platter only days before was evolving before my very eyes, and suddenly, she was becoming a real person. She was showing that there was someone inside of her that maybe, just maybe, I could love after all.

I leaned up a little bit, pressing my paws into the dusty ground in the forest and propping myself up to my haunches. "Last night was just a warm up, Aiyana. If you had trouble handling that, I worry for what'll happen when I *really* give you all I've got." I was being bold, and she could almost certainly see through my exaggeration.

She didn't hide the fact, letting out a quiet giggle and shaking her head just a bit. "If that was just a warm up, you would have killed every girl you've ever slept with," she pointed out.

I grinned.

"But as much fun as this morning banter has been...if you're going to get cleaned up, hurry up and do it. Otherwise, we *really* need to get moving. If the people from Makusa are still pursuing us, they'll be catching up again by now, and we likely won't be safe until we reach Kanadul, and we're still at least a few hours from there, by foot."

"Do you really think that Kanadul is as accepting as the legends say it is? I don't know if we can really risk venturing into another town, after what happened last time."

"We weren't exactly on the same team, last time," she pointed out, giving me a glare. "And for what it's worth, Kanadul is by far the best chance that we have to find a weapon you can make real use of. The amount of magical energy I'd have to expend to keep you armed constantly would kill me in **hours**, perhaps two days at the most."

That certainly wasn't worth the risk. "I guess we may as well give it a shot, then," I agreed. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and sprung right up, my body finally restored to proper health now that I'd had a delicious meal, and an even more delicious female. "But do you really have any money left to purchase anything? I know you stole the money you spent on me in Makusa, but I wasn't aware if you had any more money before that."

The small satchel that Aiyana had been carrying around with her since i met never jingled or clinked with the sound of small, metal coins, so I didn't think it likely that she'd have much money to throw away. "I've got a couple hundred Sil left over from the auction I sent off before you, but that isn't likely to get us anything great. We're taking a pretty hard line here, really."

"Naturally," I replied, "Nothing can be easy for the two of us. If Kanadul ends up being a bust, do we have a backup plan? We can't really go back to your tribe if you're planning on leaving."

"I hadn't quite gotten that far," Aiyana admitted. "I do have a couple ideas, but they'll be long shots as well, honestly. As much as the idea of running away with you and trying to spring a little seemed really romantic yesterday, reality is hitting me like a ton of bricks..."

The familiar anger, the first thing I ever saw in Aiyana's eyes, was returning to them as she suddenly felt every bit as hopeless about our situation as I did when we'd discussed it the day before. "Any idea is a good idea at this point, Aiyana. Just let me know what you had in mind."

It was weird for me to be comforting to a female, and I could tell that it was weird for Aiyana to be comforted. Still, she managed a very tiny smile as she took a look towards the West. "We can keep on heading past Kanadul, all the way until we reach the western coast of Mid Isle."

"And from there?" I asked.

The world of Veloria, as it was mapped, was divided into three very large continents, surrounded by smaller sublets of island chains that were all heavily populated, but hard to map because of their small size. Everyone that traveled off of Mid Isle, the largest continent on Veloria, had a general idea of where the island chains were and how they were ruled, but beyond that, things got a little bit tricky when traveling the planet.

Mid Isle was a chaotic land, but the largest and most heavily populated. Though technology was relatively mild and basic there, the most massive human cities all resided there due to the warm, tropical climate, fertile soil and nearly endless resources. The upright beasts claimed that they lived on Mid Isle first, but there was no documented proof of such being the case, and naturally, the two different cultures clashed heavily when they first met. Though no longer

officially at war, that original conflict was the very reason why so many tribes of humans and upright beasts still fight to this very day.

To the far west, across a long ocean from Mid Isle was the continent of Kanduria, literally translated from an old human dialect, meaning "Deserts of the West." Kanadul, the city westmost on Mid Isle, literally translates to "Door to the Desert," and many who make the long journey from anywhere on the Mid Isle to the west pass through the city. Though I'd never been there, I knew from rumors that Kanduria was supposed to be a much friendlier land to beasts, though, the rumors also followed that the lands were completely divided by tribes, with no central government and very little order to speak of.

Somewhat to the southeast of Mid Isle was the place I knew that we wouldn't be going. It was the continent of Sektemal, a land that was considered to be forgotten by time. As the old legends go, an extremely advanced civilization once flourished there, and created a society that couldn't be touched by either the humans or the beasts, but whoever was once there, the society collapsed in on itself, and their advanced technologies destroyed the land, rendering the entire continent useless and uninhabitable. As far as I knew, no one had ventured to the continent in hundreds of years, and anyone foolhardy enough to even mention the trip was labeled as a maniac.

Given our choices of places to go, nowhere really sounded that appealing.

"The humans of Makusa wouldn't expend the effort of chasing us all the way across the ocean to Kanduria. If we could find a ship and sail our way across the Western Sea, I think we might find a peaceful life there, Varas...perhaps even together. "

She winked at me as she mentioned our staying close, no doubt wanting to tease me about my lone wolf nature. Perhaps more shocking than her change in demeanor was the fact that it didn't bother me at all. Instead, I found myself playing back. "You really think you could keep a hold of me all the way across the ocean? You must have never taken that collar off after all!"

Aiyana beckoned at me to follow her as she kept on moving west. "Like I told you last night, Varas. I don't *need* a collar to keep you by my side."

I wanted to argue with her. Perhaps I could have said something witty in reply, or even pretended to stand my ground for a moment or two.

Instead, I proved her right by following in her footsteps, until I was by her side again.

I was amazed.

Not the kind of amazed that you feel when something gently surprises you, or the kind of amazed that comes along with something going better than you expected.

No, this was the kind of amazed that could only be accomplished by witnessing something I literally thought I'd never see in my entire mortal life.

Kanadul was the strangest city I'd ever seen, both in structure, and in nature. I couldn't believe my eyes, as upright beasts and humans walked together, some walking hand in paw, others chatting and being as friendly as they would with anyone else. There was an air about the city that lacked the malice of Makusa, and the humans there didn't remind me at all of the tribal warriors that I'd become so accustomed to.

In a way, I felt bad for forming my opinion about humans just based on the ones who tried to kill me, but then again, that was the only kind I'd ever known. This...this was *entirely* different.

Without a giant wall to protect the outside borders, it was hard to tell that Kanadul actually *was* a city, but indeed, dirt roads, tampered down by years of different creatures walking across them were surrounded on both sides by different shops, huts and gathering places like any normal city would have. Some of the huts were clearly homes and places of residence, others were more easily identified as trading posts by the people gathered around them with small sacks of currency and other unusual items to hand in.

It really was a functioning, normal city where humans and beasts could intermingle, like the ones I'd seen in my dreams.

"Looks like everything was just as advertised," Aiyana said, bringing me out of my daze as we entered the gateless city. "I wonder if there's any shelters here for us to stay the night...I'm pretty well exhausted after the trek."

I nodded my agreement. "No need to push on too much further, really. We're in the middle of nowhere, other than this city, and we'd still need to find a

ship to take us over to Kanduria..."

The townspeople looked friendly enough, some of them even waving to us in a subtle greeting as we entered. It wasn't like the walk through Makusa, where we were only hated more and more the further we walked. It seemed that these people really were content to live the way that they did, and lucky for us, they didn't mind at all if we shared in that experience for a little while.

"Well, I'm guessing any sort of a resting place is gonna cost us, and so is a weapon, so we might as well find a ship before we do anything else. It's gotta be at least a couple more days to the coast anyway, so who knows if we'll even find someone with a ship to take us from here..."

Aiyana was right, unfortunately, but as we marched down the dirt streets, passing humans, wolves, foxes, lions, cheetahs, deer and even raccoons, we saw a small gathering place that looked like it might be at least one of the places we were looking for.

I'd never seen such an arsenal in my life. Swords, axes and mauls were just the tip of the iceberg here. There were far more exotic weapons: flails, whips, crossbows, glaives and tomahawks just to name a few, but all were in full supply, and all looked to be relatively affordable.

They **looked** to be.

"Welcome to the my arms shop!" A voice called out from behind a shoddy counter made of fallen trees. A short, black bear was standing there, stout and strong, but still smiling at us, just as everyone else had. "You two look to be quite the strong warriors. Are you heading over to Kanduria to join the war, or are you going towards Makusa to raise some hell for the prejudiced folks?"

Wait a minute. War in Kanduria?

Aiyana had a look to match my thoughts. "We didn't know there was a war going on across the sea. What happened?" she asked, her eyes suddenly brimming with concern.

"Some of the humans from the bigger cities here on Mid Isle are trying to fully colonize the continent, but the uprights aren't having it. The poor bastards are **horribly** outmatched, though...they've got no chance against the overwhelming number of humans. They're heading over there on ships every

day, trying to expand the reach of their empires..."

History was repeating itself, and this time, it was interfering directly with everything that we were trying to do. "And I don't suppose that you know of any ships heading over there that are safe harbor for uprights, do you?" I asked, my optimism heavily shaken by the news.

"There are some uprights heading over there, and they do have the occasional ship coming from here in Kanadul, but even then, things aren't really what I'd call safe. You'd likely be drafted in to fight for the uprights, and if this lovely lady decides to team with you, the humans will brand her a traitor and try to kill her..."

Aiyana snickered. "A little late for that, I'm afraid."

"Oh ho! So **you're** the mixed pair that the carriers were talking about! Your arrival today almost seemed like too strong of a coincidence to be one. Word of your daring escape from Makusa actually preceeded your arrival!"

Weapons dealers from Makusa were making their way into the more peacefully blended cities. *Great*, I thought. *No doubt those assholes already put some sort of a bounty out on us.*

"I've had more than a couple bounties out on my head and I've never been caught," I pointed out, trying to look every bit as smug and confident as I had before Aiyana ever met me. "If they're really foolish enough to go after the both of us as a pair, I don't think the humans will find our capture an easy task."

"I've seen no bounty for her, just yet," the bear replied. "Everyone has seen bounties for you, wolf, but the news we received said nothing of a bounty for her. Going after a tribal female without a damn good reason is basically a suicide mission."

Aiyana scoffed. "After what I did, I'm remiss to think of what my tribe would do if I went crawling back to them...but going after me without permission would be a pretty dangerous move. The problem is that we're expecting some company thanks to our new found fame, and I was hoping to outfit my friend here a bit more properly for battle."

"You're in the right place!" the bear exclaimed, picking up an axe from his rack of wares with impressive ease and brandishing it wildly before us. "Forgive

me my manners. My name is Urthal, and I'm the best arms dealer this side of the human empires. You certainly wouldn't be the first upright that came to me looking for a little extra protection, though with a reputation like yours, I can't imagine you really need it!"

I raised a brow. "What do you mean?"

"They've sent small armies after you and ended up with nothing but corpses and disappointment! I've met some seriously **bad** guys before, but you? I can't believe you feel the need to reinforce such legendary claws!"

"I was more interested in a *sword*, actually."

"For what purpose?"

"Self-defense."

"The cheapest one I have is about 5,000 sil."

Like I said, they **looked** cheap.

Aiyana placed a hand on her hip and narrowed her eyes at the shopkeep. I could nearly see veins bulging from the side of her head as her trademark temper started to flare. "How on earth do you get away with charging such **ridiculous** prices? Even in the richest parts of Makusa, the finest swords barely run 2,000 sil!"

I could tell at first that the bear was offended, and I was worried that we might have to fight our way out of another jam, but before the expected lashing out, there was a soft, sad sigh. "Larger cities like Makusa are entirely ruled by the humans that are trying to enforce a unified system of government on Mid Isle. As a result, the costs for my raw materials can be influenced by the very same people who chased you from the city. They know I'm an upright, and they know that I'm living in an area that supports our kind, and with Makusa being one of the only places to get the raw metals to make my weapons, there's no way I can avoid paying excessive rates myself, and have to charge almost as much just to break even. I've barely turned a profit in years."

It was disappointing news to say the least, but it was news I was plenty familiar with. The fact that Aiyana was unaware clearly disturbed her.

"So you mean that there aren't any mines on Mid Isle that aren't influenced

or controlled by the humans, either? The uprights have no access to raw materials for the same prices as we do?"

"Of course not!" the bear shot back, starting to lose his temper a little, even at an honest question. "Everything is more expensive for us, no one wants to do business with us, and if our shops dare to stray too close to human cities, they're **ransacked!**"

I knew by now that Aiyana wasn't faking the sympathy she felt for me when we'd finally opened up to each other about how similar we were. Even then, her sympathy didn't feel entirely real sometimes, because of *how* we first met.

As I looked into her eyes for just a moment, awaiting her reply, I could see a sympathy in them that could not be more real.

"I...I'm sorry," she replied slowly. "This is all very new to me, still...my tribe made me to believe that uprights were the cause of so many problems in the world...I had no idea that humans caused so many issues for the uprights, themselves. My relationship with them has never been anything but seedy business, driven by misinformation...had we the money to afford it, I would gladly pay full price for that sword."

Perhaps Aiyana was learning resentment. She certainly didn't seem to have any when we first met, but as time continued on, I could see that it was really just how things *seemed*. Aiyana was a much deeper person than that, and as was often my mistake with women, I didn't give her enough credit. I was just glad that I was being given a chance to see how complex of a person she really was.

"Considering the troubles you two have faced, I couldn't, in all good conscience, ask you to pay full price for a sword...but I do mean it when I say that you should try less to branch out into different defenses, and instead consider enhancing what you already have," the bear replied with a calmer demeanor. "They'd still be 500 sil, but I do have some metal guards that can be equipped on a tail. It would add a small blade to your backside and give your enemies something else to worry about."

My tail was prehensile, but I'd never once thought of using it as a weapon. It was plenty lengthy enough to choke someone if I were so inclined, but that thought never occurred to me.

"I'd be more than happy to pay that price," Aiyana cut in before I could tell

her it wasn't worth the money.

"Maybe let me try it on first, before we jump into that decision?"

"O-oh. Of course, certainly." I'd apparently flustered her a bit.

Urthal rummaged around under his makeshift counter, going through a couple different baskets of metal products with the occasional **clunk** and **clang** as different pieces of the armory banged into each other. What he came up with was something I'd never seen before, but something I thought might certainly come in handy.

It looked just like a long bulky cuff or bangle that one would wear on their wrist, but it had a couple small screws in it to adjust for tightness. Jutting out rather loudly from the middle of the whole arrangement was a long blade, curved and sharpened to perfection, around eight inches in length from where it was fused to the guard. Placed near the tip of my tail, I could see how one quick swing would make the object a dangerous addition to my skillset. Thankfully enough, as Urthal clipped the guard into place and tightened it just faintly around my fur, it fit comfortable enough for my tail to sway naturally, but tight enough that a quick, trial swing didn't send it flying through the air.

"Look at that! Fits you just like a glove, *if* you two think it'll be worth the extra money. Looks like you have some other needs, as well," he said as he pointed down at my lack of clothes. I'd been naked as the day I was born for a couple days now, and luckily, I had the wherewithal to keep my body mostly under control. Truth be told, it seemed that most of the people in Kanadul hadn't really noticed or cared, but I definitely wanted to have pockets again.

"Right now, our biggest needs are preparing some equipment and finding a ship over to Kanduria," Aiyana admitted. "Finding a place to stay for the night and getting him a pair of pants are the least of our concerns."

Urthal had a look of complete disbelief. "Even after what I told you, you two are **still** planning on heading to Kanduria? I understand that some angry village idiots from Makusa might still be after your friend, but he's obviously used to living his life on the run. I don't think he has too much to worry about, if he's used to that."

"There's other concerns that will keep us from being safe here on Mid Isle," Aiyana confessed, though she didn't go into detail why, just then. "I'm afraid our

only real option may be heading to Kanduria and trying to find a peaceful place to lay low for a while. The entire continent can't be embroiled in war."

"Not the entire thing," Urthal replied, "But certainly, a greater portion of it is, and I don't know how far you'd make it inland before you got swept up into the fighting. If you're really looking for a place that'll accept you two as you are, honestly, you may as well stay here in Kanadul!"

"We reached your village this quickly. If we're still being pursued by Makusan citizens, they'll be here in a day, two days tops. We don't need to risk them catching up to us and chasing us over even more of Veloria. I'd rather they lose our trail while we're ahead and keep them from finding it again."

It was obvious that Aiyana had put more thought into our plan than I had, but I wasn't one to argue with her whatsoever. I'd never had a plan or direction for any reason in my entire life, and at this point, it was either stick with her for a bit and see what happened, or go with the flow as I always had. The idea of going back to sleeping with any attractive woman that passed by me might still be somewhat alluring, but something told me Aiyana wouldn't approve of that lifestyle choice, and she'd already proven that she could kill me for less.

To Kanduria it was, then.

11

I was sleepless.

Not the kind of sleepless that comes with knowing you have a tough day ahead of you, or the kind that comes with a change in your sleep schedule, throwing you off of your rhythm.

No, this was the kind of sleepless that you feel when it's just you and your thoughts as you stare up at the infinite stars in the night sky, wondering what is going to become of your entire life when you make a crucial and difficult decision.

It's **exceptionally** difficult when you've never made such decisions in your life before.

"Still aren't asleep, are you?" Aiyana asked, as we rested out in a small field just outside the village limits of Kanadul. Given the vast set of survival skills between us, a small fire, some leaves and sticks for shelter, and small game for a meal was a lot cheaper than trying to find a house or lodge in the village to put us up for the night, and we'd both dealt with much worse before anyway.

"Couldn't sleep if I wanted to," I replied dryly, looking at the heavens with a bit of wonder. "Passing up on a view like this would be pretty foolish."

"I keep forgetting that you canine types are at least partially nocturnal," Aiyana admitted. "Must be a whole lot easier to hunt at night when things can't really see you coming."

"Their eyes adapt just as well as ours do. It's not as easy as you might think."

"Perhaps you can show me sometime," she suggested, and I was sure that a faint hint of that twinkling I'd seen in her eyes when she saw me hunting the first time was glowing once again, even if I wasn't looking at her.

"I'll think about it."

"Good enough for me, Varas," she said, deciding to leave it at that. "Do you mind telling me what's really keeping you up, though?"

The truth was that I really was just enjoying the view at the moment, but even when she was polite about asking me my thoughts instead of forcing it, I found it hard to resist her. "I guess this is all just still really unusual for me. We're about to run headlong into a war zone...I've never dealt with anything that serious before in my life. I've never even had a *direction* in my life. In some ways, it's all a bit overwhelming...at the very least, it's a departure from the norm for me."

I was rather surprised to feel a hand draping across my chest. Really, all of it was just a little bit unusual. I suppose it was to be expected, with how rapidly our relationship was changing. "We'll find a way to avoid the war, Varas. The fact of the matter is that I still have a promise to keep to my mother, even if I'm not doing it in the way she would prefer."

I actually chuckled at her. "Still on the warpath to try and make me a father, hm?"

"Only if that's the way that I end up keeping my promise to her," Aiyana quickly shot back. She glared, but she was grinning just a little bit. "I still say your fear of commitment is a bit comical, given all of the things you *aren't* afraid of."

"I feel like I'm married already," I teased, grinning back down at her and giving her the slightest bit of a nudge. It was still so unusual to me to be flirting with a girl without bedding her as the only intention in mind. I hated to admit it, even then, but I was starting to care for her...and given the lengths she was willing to go to keep me away from the Makusan people, either she cared for me as well, or she was still plotting to do something horrible to me by herself, somewhere in the back of her mind.

"I never said we were getting married. I just wanted a baby out of you," Aiyana pointed out. She put emphasis to her point by sliding that paw down from my chest, through the valley of my abdomen and down towards my sheath, her thumb dipping into the tiny opening and teasing around a place that very few females ever ventured.

Warm, night air filled my lungs as I sucked in a gasping breath. "S-so! Just gonna get what you want from me and let me go back to my old ways, huh?"

I really couldn't believe it. There I was, teasing back and forth with a human

female...and I had no intention of being gone the next morning. I didn't hold any malice against her for her birthright. I wasn't going to kill her, I had no intention of fucking her with my hatred...

But I **definitely** had intention of fucking her, and as I felt the deceptively delicate tips of her fingers tickling down over my sack, I could tell she was more than happy to oblige me. She traced over each soft, swollen orb with devious intention, knowing that she was riling me up, and giving me a look with those bright, enchanting jade eyes that was begging me, perhaps even *challenging* me to make a move, to do with her what I'd done the night before.

"I think they're over here! I can see a small fire and an upright!"

Blue balls had never been so painful, and red blood had never been so satisfying, as they would both be on that night.

I recognized the voice instantly. It was Jiiri.

"I think I see the Sunkurun wench there with him! You go ahead and sneak up on the wolf...that bitch is mine. Maybe I can have a little fun with her before I kill her for embarrassing me outside the city!"

That second voice was definitely Burkolat. They thought they were speaking in whispered tones, but they no doubt forgot just how sensitive the ears of a canine can be. Aiyana didn't notice a thing, but I immediately whirled my head around, ignoring her attentions and looked through a thicket of trees and overgrowth from the jungle.

"Aiyana, be very quiet. We have company."

My ears continued to flicker, following the carry of their voices as they drew closer. Even then, I could tell Aiyana didn't hear them just yet, but as talented of a huntress as she was, she trusted in her instincts, and thus, trusted in me as I looked through the darkness. My canine heritage was coming in extra handy as I could just see the outlines of their pathetic bodies. Those fools really came all this way just to track the two of us down.

I'd make sure it ended up a mortal mistake.

"Which one do you want...?" she asked, her voice barely more than a whisper, and completely silent to our intruders, but to me, it spoke volumes

louder than anything she'd ever said before.

"I'll finish what I started with Jiiri back in Makusa, if you think you can handle the big doofus."

Particles of burning orange and viridian green started to swirl around her right hand, and thankfully, she pulled it away from my junk before she continued with the summoning spell. Her spear started to come into life in her hand, razor sharp at the tip and balanced perfectly in its enchantment. "That **asshole** starts something with me every time I try to enter Makusa, even on my own personal business, so I was already more than happy to put an end to his worthless life, but if you're going to challenge me that way, I'll have to make a spectacle of it."

I wasn't sure exactly how serious she was about this. The illusion of the huntress being a bloodthirsty murderer had already been shattered for me by her change of demeanor and ability to act like a normal human being, but she was content to prove that perhaps, everything hadn't been fabricated in the first place. Her hands clutched tightly around the shaft of the spear, thin, smooth muscles springing to life as her forearms readied for the attack.

"Jiiri, make absolutely sure you have the drop on him before you go making any rash decisions. He's too dangerous to fight hand to hand!"

Burkolat was still too stupid to realize that I could hear everything he was saying, and the sad part of it all was that I really didn't need to. I put up a paw to Aiyana, making sure she stayed right where she was next to the fire. Using the guise of the night as I had so many times before, I dashed off to my right and into the trees, my black fur blending in with the darkness of the forest and rendering me invisible to our human pursuants.

"Don't worry. Looks like the yellow bastard left Aiyana all by herself," Jiiri replied, my movements a little too quick for him to track in the partial darkness. "I guess we can just take turns with her..."

My fangs gritted so tightly I feared my gums might bleed, and my claws dug deep into the bark of the tree unfortunate enough to be providing my cover. As much as I'd had such a pig-like attitude myself in the past, I finally felt at least a little possessive of a female, and I wasn't going to stand by and listen to a couple of unworthy vermin talking about her like she was a dinner buffet.

"DIDN'T THINK WE'D FIND YOU, EH?! DROP YOUR WEAPON AND

STEP AWAY, AND MAYBE WE'LL LET YOU LIVE!" Burkolat called out in his oafish, deep voice, as if he really thought that Aiyana would answer to scum like him so easily. She stood her ground, standing up next to the fire and brandishing her spear for battle, looking every bit as ready for it as I'd ever been for combat myself.

Aiyana was about to prove that she was the real deal. "I'm sorry, Burkolat. I didn't realize that looking like a little bitch in front of your guard buddies would upset you so much!" she replied rather calmly, mocking him from a distance and goading him further. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised, though. You spend all day, standing outside the castle walls and having dick-showing contests with all of your weak, pathetic friends...having your strike blocked by a woman must be quite the insult."

If I hadn't hated Burkolat so much, I might have actually felt for him a bit. Aiyana was holding **nothing** back, and even from my hidden distance, I could see how deeply he was seething with rage. His hands balled up into tight fists around the same spear that he held at the city gates, and without a second thought, he pointed it at Aiyana and readied himself to charge, all while Jiiri just sneered at her.

"You're just digging yourself a deeper grave, you stupid wench! I can't wait to lop your head off and carry it back to your tribe on a stick so they can see the punishment for someone who has disgraced the city of Makusa!"

I'd had about all I could stand of Jiiri, at that point.

I released the tree I was using for cover and moved through the tall, overgrown grasses of the jungle with ease, feeling right at home as I closed in on my target.

I could have bitten him around the neck and bled him out.

I could have stabbed him with my claws and pierced all of his internal organs.

I even could have torn his limbs literally apart from his weak little body.

As I rested my paws on his shoulders, standing behind him with a grin that dripped with sadistic glee, I still think back to that day as imagining I had mercy on him.

"How about the punishment for the man who insults a woman he isn't even worthy to look at?"

Jiiri started to whirl around the moment he felt my paws, but my grip was faster. I grasped his long, greasy hair in one paw and his chin in the other. He spun to face me from the right, and I twisted his head to the left, snapping his neck in one clean, quick motion. His body immediately went limp standing up and crumpled into a heap before me, a literal puddle of useless flesh and bones.

Burkolat, certainly much stronger than Jiiri but also much slower, whirled around a moment later to see his traveling partner dead before he hit the ground. He lifted his spear at me without warning and prepared to swing, but Aiyana showed off both her impressive fighting skill, and her terrifying ferocity as she darted forward, impaling Burkolat through both of his arms and locking them together where they crossed to hold the weapon. Ichor and crimson spewed from his forearms, cascading over the jungle floor and staining the vibrant green with a red that I delighted in the sight of.

"AAAAARGH!! Y-YOU FUCKING WENCH!" the fool cried out in pain, still trying to swing down at me with his spear, but I easily stepped to the side and evaded his attempt. Blood flung down to the place I stood before, marking his failed attack, as if the lifeforce of his own body was mocking him for attempting something so foolish.

"Save it," Aiyana spoke, her voice rash with hatred as she approached the wounded giant. Unintentionally giving him more of a show than he ever deserved, she showed off even more of her fighting skills and impressive flexibility, her leg flying up like a bolt of lightning and striking Burkolat cleanly across the jaw, buckling his knees and bringing him to the ground. No doubt by way of her planning, the head of her spear sunk into the ground as Burkolat fell, and I started to wonder just how many times she'd performed the maneuver before.

It was over in a flash, and with the greatest of ease, Aiyana felled the massive warrior, leaving him bloodied, permanently wounded, and dazed, but somehow, alive. She had a tactful nature to her approach that I simply couldn't match.

"I know you're still conscious, if just barely," Aiyana said as she stood next to the kneeling giant. "So here's the deal...if you even want the chance to walk

back to Makusa alive, you're going to tell us who, if anyone, sent you, and how many more of you idiots might be coming for us."

Burkolat was still gasping in pain as he tried rending his arms from the weapon, but it was no use. The spear went cleanly through the bones of his forearms, making escape almost literally impossible, and with the concussion coming only moments after, he really might not remember any of the details.

"D-do you really think...that I'd tell you anything...after what you j-just did?" he asked, his breath heavy and his voice wobbly as he struggled just to keep himself upright. "F-fuck the both of you right to **hell!**"

Aiyana just shook her head with disdain. "Such language from an honorable guard of Makusa. How do you guys have such a high reputation?" she asked, continuing to mock his very way of life as she tapped her foot against the ground impatiently. "You seem rather pitiful to me...and you lack timeliness. We have places to be, Burkolat, and I really don't have concern enough for your life to let you keep it much longer. Give us some answers, or I'll happily give you the sweet release of death, and sell your **pitiful** spear in town for a little cash."

To insult a member of the Makusa militia was a dangerous move to start with, but to insult their weapons was downright mental, especially when she was actually taking a jab at his underwhelming manhood as well. I couldn't deny that I was enjoying the interrogation, but Aiyana wasn't making up her lack of patience, something that I knew firsthand.

"Then...just kill me, you stupid bitch."

The kind of patience and mercy that a person in control of someone's life can exhibit is often an overwhelming thing.

Perhaps an even more overwhelming thing is when that person follows through and fulfills the last wishes of a man she owes nothing to.

I watched in shock as Aiyana pulled a small dagger from thin air, summoning it using the same magics that created her spear, and stabbed Burkolat square in the throat. Rather than slitting his throat and bleeding him out, she kept the blade in place so that the blood would flow back down his esophagus and drown him, demonstrating a cruelty that went well beyond what I thought she was capable of.

"You always were a miserable fucking *fool*, Burkolat. I hope you know that when you burn in the endless fires of Henedor, you could still be alive if you hadn't been so damn stubborn."

I learned a couple things, that evening.

First, and perhaps foremost, I learned just what might have happened to me if I had tried to run away from Aiyana on the night we met.

Second, I learned that her people had a rather interesting word for what they considered eternal damnation.

Whatever they might call it, I was sure that Burkolat was burning like a funeral pyre within it as Aiyana turned from his body without so much as an offering for his soul. "I'm sorry we aren't going to get much rest tonight, but the fact that Burkolat refused to divulge any information alone tells me that there are *definitely* more bufoons on our trail. It might be best for us to look for a ship out of here before we try to get some shut eye."

I knew how much Aiyana hated Burkolat. I hated him too, both of us with good reason, and yet, I could almost feel an air of remorse coming from her being as she faced the fire. Aiyana was capable of so many things that she probably didn't get much credit for, and at the end of it all, as admirable as her skills were, it was clear that she wasn't always happy about having them, or having to use them.

"Don't worry about it. You said it yourself that my kind is partly nocturnal anyway...we may as well make good use of the night if we have to be awake."

We'd still never found anyone with a ship leaving for Kanduria earlier in the day, but at this point, we'd just have to start hoofing it for the coast.

Having plans and directions wasn't off to the best start, for either of us.

12

I was lost.

Not the kind of lost you feel when you're a little bit off course and need to ask for directions, or the kind of lost that comes with hearing a difficult question and not being sure of the answer.

This was the kind of lost that comes with thinking that you had a solid plan, and suddenly, the world derails the plan entirely and leaves you wondering if you should continue on that course of action.

Aiyana certainly seemed to think so, as she charged ahead, leading us through the streets of Kanadul and hoping to find anyone that would be awake so early in the morning, but as we walked past huts, houses and shelters, all closed and none appearing to be a place that would cater to the sea, I wasn't so sure.

"At this rate, I've got a bad feeling we're just going to have to sneak on a human ship off of the coast and try to make the best of a bad situation," Aiyana said, thinking aloud and making me pause in my stride.

"...You can't be serious," I immediately replied. "If there wasn't already a bounty for your head on Mid Isle, there will be as soon as anyone finds Burkolat. They'll know that the kill wasn't done by a wild beast or an upright, when they see the wounds that he has...and if word is really traveling that fast across Mid Isle about our exploits, I can't imagine how hard it'll be just trying to get to the coast now, much less sneaking onto a human ship."

She barely stopped, clearly not wanting to give up on the search, even if she could barely read the signs in the poor lighting of the dawn. "And what do we do, exactly, if we can't find a ship that caters to both humans and uprights?"

"I...I don't know. I haven't really gotten that far. Something tells me that **you** haven't either."

I didn't mean to sound snippy with her, but her decision making already lead us into danger once, even if she couldn't help it. In my own opinion, I was reasonably disturbed, having just added *another* human to my casualty list, and now, we were really running out of options. The people of Kanadul seemed

reasonable, but if they got the impression that we were bloodthirsty murderers, there was no doubt in my mind that they'd be telling us to shove off long before anyone came looking for our bounty.

"Of course I haven't, but we did kind of just make up this plan on the fly, didn't we?" Aiyana reminded me. "There was never any doubt in my mind that things were going to have to change throughout the course of it. I don't know if we could even call it a plan, really...more of an outline."

"I'm not too worried about the logistics of what we're calling it," I admitted. "I'm more worried about how we fix things before they get completely off track and we find ourselves alienated from every place on the planet."

I wanted to say that it wasn't likely that we'd end up **completely** alienated, but I wasn't one to ignore my instincts, and given how much of my life I spent alienated by silly rumors, I couldn't imagine what it would be like for those rumors to become backed up by facts, simply by means of us having to defend ourselves.

Aiyana wasn't amused by my answer, but she was having trouble countering it right away. "As fast as word is spreading around Mid Isle, there won't be many places left for us to go if we try to stay here. Merchants and traders will keep carrying the rumors around the continent with them, and going to Kanduria won't be any better if there really is a war going on. A legend like you will get sucked into the battle in no time..."

Staying where we were wasn't going to work out, and going to Kanduria wouldn't be any better.

There was one option left, as stupid as it might sound right off the bat.

"Why don't we try and make it to Sektemal?"

This time, Aiyana was the one who stopped firmly in her tracks. "My ideas might not be the best, Varas, but at least they aren't suicidal! What the hell is the point of going to a continent of death if we're trying to **avoid** dying?!"

"That's all legends and rumors, Aiyana. We knew plenty of legends and rumors about each other before we met, and now that we really know each other, we know that a lot of it isn't at all true...maybe there's a better reason why so many of the people who ventured to Sektemal never returned. Maybe they didn't

want to."

The continent wasn't quite an allegory for the relationship that we were developing, but certainly, all Aiyana knew of me when we first met was the legends and rumors, and they nearly lead her to kill me. All we really knew of Sektemal was rumors and legends, and no matter how hard we might try to dismiss that fact, we had nothing to base our prejudice on.

"It doesn't matter if they're just legends, Varas! That place is associated universally with death! Going there would be no better than just staying here and waiting for a team of hunters to come and find us!"

"That isn't true and you **know** it," I barked back. "The fact of the matter is that you took a chance at looking past the rumors about me and decided that my life was worth sparing. If you only have it in your heart to do that one time, that's fine, but I think we at least need to consider every possible option here!"

Aiyana was definitely startled by my words, but whether or not they were truly reaching her, I couldn't quite be sure. "We have considered every possible option, Varas. That was never really one of them."

"Maybe it should be."

Aiyana wanted to start walking again, but I reached out, taking one of her delicate, smooth hands in my paw and giving it a tug. "I'd rather we not die in pursuit of something pointless, Varas..."

"It isn't pointless. It could be the safe haven that we've been looking for. As much trouble as we're having finding a ship here, we can easily find one once we reach Kanduria, and if we can get a ship of our own, we could make the voyage with or without other people to slow us down."

"And what if we end up being wrong? What if we end up in a place that is every bit as terrible as it's rumored to be? What if we **never** even make it there in the first place?!"

This time, I was the one without an immediate answer. "...I guess people might be off our backs by then?" I suggested, trying to think of a positive if I ended up being every bit as wrong as she thought I could be.

She was visibly frustrated, but she truly had no answer for me. My answer

wasn't the best, of course, but Aiyana finally turned back to look at me, a hint of doubt in her eyes, one that I'd never seen in them before.

"Varas...do you really think that going to some deserted continent that is rumored to be a land of death is a better idea than going to an island with...a...war...on...it. Huh."

She paused a moment.

"I guess I didn't realize just how similar those two things sounded until I said them out loud."

I couldn't help a small chuckle, but thankfully, Aiyana didn't seem too upset by it. "It feels like we're damned if we do and damned if we don't here...but the only thing I know for sure is that we can't risk staying on Mid Isle any longer, and Kanduria won't be safe for either of us if the humans are waging a war. The best thing we can possibly do is find a ship that won't mind letting us do a little exploring...and perhaps give us the chance to pioneer a new land of our own."

Sektemal would likely be every bit as barren as the deserts to the east of Makusa, and if our hopes were right, there would be no one there to keep us from living how we wanted. Maybe it was a bit of a dream, but at that moment in time, things still didn't feel real to me. I had trouble comprehending what I'd gotten myself into every time I looked into Aiyana's eyes.

"First thing when these lazy peace-lovers wake up, we're gonna find a ship. We've got some sailing to do."

13

I was eager.

Not the kind of eager that a child feels when they know they're getting a gift for their birthday, or the kind of eager that comes with a long awaited meal.

This was an eagerness to begin an adventure on a land far, far away from the human oppression that I'd known my whole life, far away from the unjust laws, the unfair living conditions and the people who enforced those things, who wanted nothing more than to end my very existence.

"We have just a little bit over 500 sil for our entire journey. You really think we're going to pay you 250 a ticket just to get across to Kanduria? Your boat isn't anywhere naer full!"

Aiyana was doing what I like to call 'peaceful negotiating,' where she hadn't drawn her spear, and I wasn't jumping over the counter yet. Like everything else in Kanadul, the ferry that we found to take us over the sea was extremely overpriced, and it didn't seem that we had any sort of a bargaining chip to our name.

"Never is full," came a raspy, tired voice. The irony of calling sailors 'sea dogs' wasn't lost on this old man, a canine of indiscernable origin who was covered in a coat of matted, dirty gray fur, as if it were permanently stained with salt water. "Not anymore. Business is slow thanks to the human colonists. You wanna get across that ocean? I wanna stay in business."

Ratty, tattered black pants of what was once silk and a small cutlass, held up by a red belt made this man the spitting image of a pirate, although one who long since hung up his black flag and had moved past his days of plundering. "We'll give you 100 sil a piece and not a bit more," Aiyana shot back, narrowing her eyes at the sea dog. "And you should mind the venom on your tongue. Not all humans are trying to colonize peaceful lands."

His breath was foul, as rotten and yellowed as his gumline as he opened his maw to reply. "You're all the same to me, lady. I'll give you 150 sil as a rate, each, because you're bringing an upright along and it seems that he trusts you."

"125," I replied, resting a paw on the small table that we were congregating around in the center of the town. "This human saved my life from the hunters in Makusa. I do much more than trust her."

"If that's the case, you two should really just stay here. We wouldn't allow the hunters to come trampling through our town looking for trouble," he said, but he didn't seem in any mood to further negotiate. "I'll go 140."

Aiyana lifted the satchel from her side as if she were about to pay, and I could almost see the shining currency reflected in his eyes as she moved the bag up to the table. "135. There won't be any way for us to make a living across the sea, so we'll need everything we can get."

I was nervous about trying to make it anywhere else on just our remaining 230 sil, but Aiyana seemed to have a plan, and the ferry captain wasn't arguing. He held out his paw. "Very well then. Fork it over, and we'll talk details."

Up until this point, our captain was very secretive. He wouldn't mention the whereabouts of his ship, and he never disclosed just how long it would take us to reach Kanduria. Hell, we never even got his *name*.

We got an incredible deal, all told. Aiyana handed over the requested amount, and I kept myself at the ready, just in case our captain decided he had more important places to be without warning. At this point, I was wearing the shackle-blade on my tail, knowing that the locals in Kanadul would have no problem with a militant upright, and I could easily strike him down from where I stood.

He must have noticed it, too, because he didn't budge an inch. "*Good, good!* Let's get down to business, shall we? My name is Ren. I'm the captain of the Crimson Duria, named for the lovely shade of red that the waters of the ocean turn in the sunrise. Even before the humans started to colonize and brought about a war, I've been running my little ship back and forth for years, providing arms, food and small construction materials for the uprights that live peacefully on Kanduria. I've come to know the route so well that I can sail it blindfolded, it's the truth!"

Now that we'd paid up, it seemed like Ren didn't want to *shut up*. "If you two are really in the business of heading over there looking for some new sort of freedom, I'm afraid you're a couple decades too late, but I admire your

adventurous spirit. It's the reason that I first ever took to the seas, and the reason I refuse to keep my paws on dry land. Anymore, it's the reason I keep on heading back there...seems that almost every single trip I take now, I get a little bit closer to being pirated entirely by the humans. I supposed it's karma for my wasted youth, doing the same to them, but hindsight is perfect, or so they say..."

"That's all very fascinating," Aiyana replied dryly, "But we didn't really ask for your life story. I thought you said we were getting down to business?"

"And we certainly are," Ren replied. "The humans left me with a rather nasty notice this last time around, and I don't intend to deal with them if I can avoid it, but I'm afraid a conflict is all but a guarantee this time around, so I'll cut you two a deal instead, if you're willing to take it. Knowing the reputation you have, Varas, I'm sure you'll be up to the task."

There went my reputation, preceeding me for the hundreth time.

"I'd like to know the details of what I'm getting into before we go any further," I replied, not giving Aiyana a chance to answer for me. It wasn't likely that she would, anymore, but this time, I didn't want to take the risk.

"The humans guarding the coast on the eastern shortline of Kanduria are a ballsy lot, but they're stupid as dirt and piss poor fighters, to boot. If we run into any trouble and you guys get me out of a sticky situation, I'll refund you each 100 sil, soon as we take care of all the dirty work. Sound like a deal to you?"

Truth be told, the **last** thing I wanted to do was run up my body count, especially if it was unnecessary, but if Ren was telling the truth, it was going to be very necessary, and pretty much impossible to avoid. "Only if we can't simply avoid them," I said quickly, once again keeping Aiyana's temper in check the best that I could. "I'd like to leave the upright who took pleasure in killing humans back here as a llegend on Mid Isle."

Whether or not I was just trying to impress Aiyana with my desire to be peaceful, even now, I'm not really sure I know. Showing mercy to humans just seemed like the right thing to do at the time, even if I wasn't going to be allowed to live out the attitude. "Trying to escape the darkness of that past isn't going to be easy where you're going, Varas. The ocean itself would run red with the blood of all the people you've slain!"

"Making him feel guilty about what he did out of necessity isn't a great way

to keep him as a customer," Aiyana interjected. "In fact, I wouldn't really recommend it as a business practice. **At all.**"

It wasn't exactly necessary for Aiyana to stand up for me, but I couldn't deny the little bit of warmth in my tummy that welled up, butterflies of affection that I still wanted to deny at her standing up for me. "I can promise you that they weren't all out of necessity, lass," he mentioned, and of course, he was right. I'd killed for pleasure before, just as many of the humans that I killed had. "But you'll find yourselves doing it all the time, once you reach Kanduria. If there are really hunters from Makusa still on your tails, we'd better get you across the ocean posthaste, so you can go fight the humans over there instead!"

Neither option sounded attractive to me, at this point, but of course, Ren had no idea that we were planning on heading to Sektemal instead, even if Kanduria was a necessary landing stop. "How early can you get us off the continent?" I asked, and for a moment, I thought it curious that we'd been in Kanadul as long as we had, and yet, the hunters still hadn't caught up to us, short of the two buffoons that we'd already killed.

"There's a small inlet, a little river that comes nearly up to Kanadul, that we can walk to in just hours. If we had to march all the way to the coast from here, it'd be at least half a day. Think you guys are ready to leave tonight?"

Aiyana and I locked eyes for just a moment. Her eyes wanted to leave right that moment. Mine were more apt to stay for a little bit and make sure that we were ready.

Her eyes, as strong and brazen as they ever were, won mine over. "We'll be ready within an hour. Is your ship seaworthy?"

"Hundreds of trips without a single mishap! I'll give her a once over when we get there, but I'm sure everything will be perfectly fine. You two go get yourselves ready, and meet me on the western edge of town when all of your things are gathered. "

I *personally* counted being attacked by human pirates and soldiers as a mishap, but the grin that Ren was wearing was so honest, I waws inclined to believe that he stole it, thinking that a former pirate couldn't make a face that kindly and mean it.

"Let's go, Aiyana. We'll be off this continent by nightfall."

I was impressed.

No witty quips or comparisons this time around. I was just legitimately impressed, for the first time in ages, at the secrecy that Ren treated his ship with, and furthermore, the fact that he was able to keep it so well hidden from the rest of the townsfolk, and yet, keep it so close to Kanadul that he could reach it by a two hour walk.

Brandishing only a small satchel full of sil, my tail blade and a very vague idea of where we were going, we were packed extremely light, and Ren seemed rather pleased with that. After all, the lighter the ship, the faster the trip, and it seemed that we were going to have a very light ship. There were no other humans on our particular voyage, and only another pair of uprights; two black cats with eyes as green as the swaying ferns that made up Aiyana's skirt. They were plated with very thin steel armor, and each one brandished with them a sword and a shield.

"No doubt, you two are here to help the uprights win the war across the ocean as well," asked the older of the pair. Given their extremely similar appearance, I imagined that they must be a father and son pair, both proud warriors of their respective clans. I had to admit, I didn't know of any upright clans that actually armed themselves with wearable steel, but it was an impressive sight, and one that showed me just how seriously some of the uprights were taking this war.

"I sympathize with our brothers in arms, sincerely I do," I admitted, "But we aren't headed across to fight in a war that isn't ours. We're trying to escape capture from the hunters in Makusa. If we were to go to war with the humans, it would be the ones here on Mid Isle, and they're doing a fine job killing each other *without* our help."

My answer shocked the father. "You mean to tell me that you expect to find **peace** on Kanduria? The war started inland, but now, there is not one inch of that continent that isn't embroiled in turmoil! The *moment* you two step off the boat, you'll be sucked into the battle whether you like it or not!"

"We've been hearing that a lot," Aiyana replied very simply.

She was right, of course. It seemed that we were being told to be ready to fight at every turn, no matter how often we declared a peaceful intention.

"I sincerely hope that the two of you find your peace, but I cannot imagine it being an easy task," the father said. "We uprights on Kanduria have united against the human colonists, but if you refuse to join in the battle, you could be very easily branded as traitors, even if it is just for your love of peace. The upright generals on Kanduria want *soldiers*, not *excuses*."

"Neither one of us is a stranger to violence or clan warfare," I quickly shot back, "But if the uprights honestly expect to win a war against the humans, they're going to have to change their tactics pretty rapidly. Humans outnumber uprights on this planet by a great measure; if the uprights want any chance of surviving this conflict, they need to stop trying to outnumber the humans on Kanduria, and just keep them from coming across in the first place."

The son finally spoke up. "It's not *nearly* that simple."

"What?"

"The humans have done everything in their power to control the ports. Mr. Ren knows of the very few safe ports that are left for us to travel to...it started out looking hopeful, but the armada of human ships can attack us from the sea, while their troops attack us from the other side on the ground. If we lose anymore of the seaports, the humans will be able to slaughter any uprights that attempt to enter the island before their paws can even feel the soft, welcoming embrace of the grass. The mission seems a bit hopeless, but we have one mission left, and that is to keep **every single port** open to the uprights. Perhaps once we succeed in reclaiming them, we can keep the humans from getting in."

The father sighed quietly. "It's a shame...truly a great, *horrible* shame that my child, who was born of a peaceful heart and mind, is being forced to fight a war against people that he is forced to hate...but if we give up now, we may *never* retrieve my wife and daughter from human captivity. We may *never* be able to live peacefully on Kanduria as we did in the time of our ancestors."

"Keep their memories alive in your hearts," I replied without thinking. This time, it was my heart controlling my voice, instead of my mind. "I was born into this world seeing the very worst of what the humans are capable of...It's only

recently that I've had the fortune to see the good in their hearts, as well. Don't let your hatred blind you into senseless killing; let your passion to save your family guide you back to them, and you'll see them again one day..."

Even Aiyana was taken aback by my statement. Even *I* wasn't sure where it had come from. "Well, Varas, who knew that you had such a way with words? Or a *heart*, for that matter..."

Two pairs of jade green eyes widened in shock at the mention of my name. "You don't mean Varas Kerkeci? The very same Varas who watched his entire family and clan slaughtered by the human tribes that fill the Makusan jungle? *That* Varas?"

I nodded. "The one and only, in the flesh."

I knew that my reputation was great, but I had no idea that uprights from Kanduria knew of my story. It was a powerful tale, if you knew all of the details, but for it to have the ability to carry across the very ocean was a bit humbling.

"And you really expect us to believe that you're **not** traveling across the ocean to kill every single human you can find?"

"Those days are actually pretty well behind me," I suggested, though, considering what I'd done to Jiiri only the night before, it was simply that: a suggestion. "We were headed to Kanduria to get away from all of that, before we found out that there was a war across the sea."

"I already told him it probably wouldn't work," remarked Ren, as he carried a small box of cargo on his shoulder and tossed it up onto the ship. The pathway that took us out to the docked boat was a simple and flat dirt path, but one that had a guarded entrance with some rather tall shrubbery, and an exit that made only one escape possible. If you weren't leaving here on a boat, you were swimming, mostly upstream, and the waters looked rather unforgiving. Small waves rocked the boat, even this far inland, and white, foamy crests capped the waves that splashed up onto the dirty shore. "But they insist on going, and I could really use the money, so the five of us are headed over to Kanduria. Should only take us three days, four at the most, if we have favorable seas. Is everyone *absolutely* sure they have everything they need before we depart? Boat leaves in five minutes, and I'm not waiting for any stragglers for *any* reason!"

No one had any objections to the captain's request.

"All right, then! If you're all prepared, we'll just leave on time for once! I never thought I'd see the day!"

It was a little ironic for Ren to admit that he hated keeping his paws on dry land, because the hubris of his statement nearly shook the earth of victory beneath his feet.

"Not with those criminals, you aren't."

I **knew** it. I simply **knew** it wasn't going to be that easy.

With a human in our midst, it was hard to tell if I was just smelling Aiyana, now that it had been a couple days since she'd bathed. Her scent was thicker, and tended to mingle with other, more earthy scents of the world around us as we closed in on the ship. It felt like I was just having a hunch that we were being followed, and I had to give the humans credit. They were quiet enough in following us that I wasn't able to hear them creeping along the trail, and they kept their scents to a minimum, as well. Other than an unusual, gut feeling, there was never any real evidence of their presence.

"You any good with that sword, kid?"

He seemed fazed by my question.

"ARE YOU ANY GOOD WITH THAT SWORD?!"

This time, he gripped it tight within his paw and gulped, nodding at me.

"I don't know if this is your first battle, but if you're looking to fight a war, this is a pretty good warm up."

I'd only heard one voice in the bushes, but as the falchions of our enemies cleaved through the innocent greenery, I could see at least five men, fully armored in the proper attire of Makusan soldiers, and standing right behind them, another five. I whipped my head around to the other side, and there were ten more men standing there, cutting their way through the bushes. Their approach wasn't hasty, like a chase, but slow, calculated and ominous, much more like a pack of the very thing that they were coming to kill.

Namely, me.

"You're completely surrounded, uprights. Makusa supports their fellow man

in the colonizing of Kanduria, and as such, **all** uprights are hereby regarded as enemies of the state, regardless of their supposedly peaceful intentions. Lay down your arms and come forth in an orderly fashion. We are authorized and more than happy to use deadly force if we need to, if you refuse to comply."

I gritted my fangs as Aiyana summoned her spear from thin air in the same bright and dazzling orange light show that it always had. As the sun set behind us, the guards winced their eyes closed at the powerful light, and for a moment, perhaps the first moment in my life, I had more of a "flight" mentality than a "fight."

The thought faded from my head as the guards needlessly closed in around the black cat's son, obviously having picked out their target long before they actually stopped us.

"If you lay a hand on my son, I'll end the whole lot of you, and wear your blood as war paint while I *slaughter* your bretheren across every inch of Kanduria!"

So much for my speech about not embracing your hatred, I thought, as I unfurled my tail and readied the blade for the first use it would get in real combat. Ren, much to my surprise, kept his boat docked and withdrew his cutlass, his head on a swivel as the five of us backed up to each other, keeping a tight perimeter. i'd never been so glad to have comrades with experience in battle before, taking the burden of taking the lead off of my shoulders, at least a little bit.

"This is your last warning, uprights! Stand down **NOW!**"

Aiyana gripped her spear tighter.

The nameless cats readied their shields.

Ren held his cutlass out in front of him, his intentions as deadly as the blade he wielded.

"Very well then. Looks like the uprights have brought the war back to Mid Isle, men. Leave no survivors."

I was alive.

Not the kind of alive that comes with doing something scary for the first time and finding out that you loved it, or the kind of alive that you feel when you're realizing your true purpose for the first time, and the freedom that comes with it.

This is a feeling that leaves you empty inside when it passes.

This is a feeling of gut wrenching delight that you know should be wrong, but everything about it feels so *right*, if only for the moment.

It was the excitement, the absolute *thrill* of my tail blade slashing across the throat of the first Makusan guard foolish enough to try and break our perimeter.

There was something primally delightful about watching the blood spray from the side of his neck. It was a deep, proud red mist that immediately soaked the surface of the water next to the boat, and as the poor fool clenched his neck with both hands and crumpled down to his knees, the fear in his eyes that warned of his nearly immediate death was keeping that feral spirit of a hunted animal alive in me.

Some people might have felt mercy for him.

I was too busy thinking about my next kill.

"QUIT STANDING AROUND AND KILL THEM!"

I'd be able to pick and choose targets, at this point. Aiyana was a well trained fighter and skillfully adept in basic magic, but the average Makusan soldier was far outclassed by even the weakest of uprights. We were faster, stronger, and more cunning than our human counterparts, and it was only by sheer numbers that the humans were winning the continent to the west. As I watched the two black cats defend themselves effortlessly against the human onslaught, my nerves started to calm, as even with the enemy outnumbering us four to one, it didn't look like any of us, even the youngest warrior, were in any real danger.

Guards were dropping rapidly as swords clashed, sending sparks into the air and leaving openings for Aiyana and I to deliver lethal blows. Each of the cats wielded their shields brilliantly, defending when necessary, and the humans displayed a complete and total lack of tact in their assault, coming at us only one or two at a time and making it easy for our perimeter to maintain its shape. Twenty soldiers quickly dwindled down to ten, and their captain, who had done nothing but bark orders and try to look classy, was shivering so heavily that I could hear his armor jangling on his cowardly flesh.

"W-what...what hell is this? What pits of fire could spawn demons like this?" he asked, his lips trembling as the assault finally halted with the sickening spray of blood into the air, as our youngest warrior impaled another Makusan warrior on his blade, clean through his thin armor and right out the other side. The human warrior looked to him with pleading mercy, knowing that the blade in place was the only thing keeping him from bleeding out, but the child didn't see a human begging for his life.

He saw his mother and sister begging for *theirs*, and a human standing over them with malicious intent.

One twist and pull was all it took, as a crimson river spilled forth from the armor, and the young warrior freed his blade. The Makusan dropped into a growing puddle of his own ichor stains with a dull, pitiful **THUD**, and the assault came to a screeching halt.

The silence that followed was thick and uncomfortable, as if everyone on the battlefield suddenly had a lump in their throat that they couldn't swallow.

"I *knew* you pathetic fools couldn't handle it. Didn't I warn you that a warrior of the Sunkurun tribes could easily handle twenty of your finest soldiers on her own?"

Where only ten soldiers remained, a couple more humans stepped out of the shadows, but they weren't clad in armor, like the Makusan forces. They wore only leathers and tribal markings, and carried spears and bows instead of swords. At just one glance, I could see that they were proud hunters, and the messy brown of their hair didn't look natural, the same as it hadn't on Aiyana when I first saw her.

I'd seen some of them before, in my travels. I was terrified to realize who

they were.

"Sunkurun warriors would also never associate with the Makusan scum!" Aiyana shot back. Where I'd been surprised before that the Makusan warriors were able to sneak up on us, if they'd been assisted by the Sunkurun, it was no surprise at all. Aiyana was among the greatest of their ranks, but even the lowest among them knew how to move almost silently, mask their bodies for scents, and mask their hair and skin to match the darkness of the night.

There were only five of them, obviously acting as guides for the Maksuan force, but even just one of them scared me far more than twenty of the former.

These were not your *average* hunters. These guys were *elite*.

"The Sunkurun have always been steadfast in the winds of change, Aiyana, but no matter how deeply rooted in tradition, there can come a wind that we simply *cannot* stand against. While you were out on your excursion, the tribe leaders came to a decision that you may have voted against...but your vote would have been meaningless. In the war to come against the uprights, who have always been our enemy, we have decided to align ourselves with Makusa-

"Don't say another word, Beril. *Not. Another. Word.*"

If a tone of voice could kill, everyone within earshot of Aiyana would have dropped dead. "My decision to leave on my hunting excursion was my own, and I gladly would have faced my punishment for doing so without declaration, but to align with the very people who have spent my entire natural life attempting to smother out our heritage is a betrayal against our ancestors, *far* greater than *any* betrayal I've ever leveled against our clan!"

"Is that so? What would your mother say of the fact that you saved the very beast whose kin is responsible for her **rape**? For her **murder**?"

Aiyana lifted her spear, her teeth gritted so tight that my sensitive ears could pick up on the quiet, painful grind of enamel turning to dust. "The sins of his fathers do not make him a monster, Beril! Don't you *dare* turn an innocent creature into a monster, and don't you *dare* bring up the death of my mother to me as if you know the details better than I do!"

Beril, as he'd been called, scoffed as he kept his spear at his side. I could nearly smell the murderous intent on his person, but his body language made it

look as though the Sunkurun weren't here to fight. "**Innocent?** Don't make me laugh, Aiyana! That creature that you so mindlessly defend and protect is the most well known on all of Mid Isle! He's a rapist, a murderer, a thief, and a *foul beast*, just like his parents before him! The money you could have brought our tribe for his sale in Makusa was nearly a fortune!"

"And when have we ever cared about money in the Sunkurun lands, Beril?"

"The winds of change, Aiyana. You were gone mere weeks, but the changes made were as profound as a creek growing into a river. Our way of life...it simply *can't* continue in this modern, changing world. Despite your traitorous actions against us and the Makusan people, they were kind enough to offer to align with us, as the uprights align against both of us. To help make this alliance more official, we agreed to adopt more of the ways of the Makusan people."

"And did they adopt any of *ours*?"

Beril was silent for a moment, and the air was quiet enough that the low, angry rumble in my throat was the only sound anyone could hear. It was never easy to stand by and be verbally assaulted, and if it were only the Makusan warriors, I would have happily run forward and slaughtered them all, but the Sunkurun were *different*. They were *trained*. They could actually fight back on a nearly equal footing, and I saw at least two bows, meaning there were likely at least one or two more hunters hidden in the greenery, waiting for the first among us who was foolish enough to attempt a strike.

"We're still discussing that, but-

"But nothing. You didn't form an *alliance*, Beril, you and the other elders rolled over and took it from these monsters like a bunch of *pussies*. Did you even once consider fighting for our freedom? Did the thought ever cross your mind to try and stand up to them, instead of just rolling over and showing them your yellow bellies?"

Though the spear stayed lowered, Beril's hand clenched tighter around it. I could see he was losing his composure, and it gave some of mine back to me as I grinned. "The Makusan were never our enemies, Aiyana, so it made no sense to try and fight them. It was years of misunderstanding between our cultures that made us fight before, not a desire for change. Now, our people have a common enemy, and you stand among four of them."

Anyone could see through Beril's rhetoric. He was trying to act as though the Sunkurun *wanted* to align with Makusa, as if all of this wasn't forced, but even I knew just how deep the hatred ran between the two civilizations. This was a pathetic front, and Aiyana didn't have the patience for it.

"And you would strike me down where I stand for being among them?"

Now she was just goading him.

"I'd much rather strike you down on the bed, under me, where you belong, but if this is the way you prefer to take a spear..."

I narrowed my eyes. There was a history between the two that Aiyana hadn't told me about, but Beril was filling me in the worst way that he could, and the powerful muscles in my legs were ready to spring. I was filled with abandon at the danger that I could face in attacking him.

A single finger, soft, delicate and soothing to the touch, pressed against my chest. "Don't let him spur you on, Varas. Our parents betrothed us at birth...nothing more."

"Now now, Aiyana, don't be bashful. I could tell your new wolf slut all of the wonderful things that you love to do while you're bathed in moonlight..."

Even if I trusted Aiyana far more, I didn't really know who to listen to. She could be sparing my feelings for the sake of battle, to try and keep me level headed. She could be telling the whole truth...there was no way I could be sure.

"Having to spend my life with you as a husband is a fate *worse* than death, Beril, and if that is to be my punishment for my betrayal, I'd welcome it with open arms before I ever welcomed you."

"Didn't stop you from welcoming me into something else when you were still loyal to our people, Aiyana. What did he do to you? What did he show you that made you suddenly realize your love for having sex with animals?"

My clawtips were so deep into my palms that blood started to trickle over them. I always took pride in my intelligence, but the animalistic side of me, my birthright, was bubbling over, and all I could think of was killing this man in cold blood, not for his worthless meat, but for sport.

For *me*.

"Varas isn't an animal, Beril, he's an upright, and more a man than you could ever hope to be! If this alliance is merely an act of jealousy on your part, then so help me-

"What? What will you do, Aiyana? Is it within you to betray your entire clan and completely trample on the dying wishes of your parents?"

"The souls of my parents are tortured to see the kind of man you grew up to be, Beril...*spineless, brainless, worthless, pathetic!*" she cried out, particles of orange magic shaking out from her spear as she clenched it so tightly, I feared she might shatter it into oblivion. "You don't deserve to call yourself a Sunkurun...and you certainly don't deserve my love. The only thing my parents would want more than my happiness in this life is to see me burying your traitorous body in the ground and pissing on your grave marker..."

Perhaps there was some sort of a romantic history between the two of them, but even if there wasn't, those were powerful words. Where Aiyana had it within her to hold me back, however, I couldn't do the same to her. There was no doubt in my mind that one of us would strike first.

That was, until, my ear flickered at the distant sound of a *fwip* from an arrow coming at us and whizzing by. I was right; there was at least one more hidden Sunkurun, but Aiyana wasn't their target, nor was I.

It was the youngest among us, and once again, the Sunkurun displayed the cruelty with which they approached battle.

Thanks to his thin, steel armor and the shield he carried, there were very few targets that even a skillful archer could strike from a distance, but one of them was one of the most vital. Gaps in the armor left openings on his shoulders, near his thighs, and of course, the neck and face. The neck was no doubt the intended target as the arrow flew past, and I still can't decide if it was good or bad fortune that it only grazed his neck, only pecking open a tiny hole near his carotid artery.

It was good for him. It was bad news for Ren, who took the errant arrow right in the back of his shoulder blade. "**ACK!** D-damnit...where are they shooting us from?!" he asked, his voice in a panic as he whirled his head around, but even with his keen canine senses, he couldn't quite locate the hidden archers.

"**BERIL! STOP THIS MADNESS, NOW!**" Aiyana hollared at him, but her

plea fell on deaf ears, and my ears could already pick up on the sound of another arrow being strung. The creaking of the string made the fur on my neck stand up as if I were charged with static, and as the arrow cut through the thick, tense air of the humid, fetid jungle, our perimeter was broken.

The second arrow hit the child right in the shoulder, making him drop his sword to the ground. Fate smiled on him that it didn't sail a bit higher, or else, he'd have been dead for sure, but it was an effective shot nonetheless, and it left us down a warrior. Aiyana broke containment, her temper welling over as she went right for Beril, but her anger made her movements too predictable, and the swing of her spear was easily blocked.

I could have snuck in then. I could have killed him. The human side of me wanted revenge.

The animal side of me knew that I had to worry about protecting the less fortunate members of my pack. Ren stayed in close, but one of the Sunkurun drew a pair of hatchets; small, extremely sharp axes used for close range fighting and sometimes for throwing, and went in for the attack. With his right shoulder completely immobilized, Ren tried and failed to defend himself with his left arm, his cutlass blocking one axe, only to have the second one fall and graze across his chest, sending him tumbling to the ground with a flash of crimson.

Hell was breaking loose upon us, and I wasn't sure how any of us were going to escape with our lives.

I was overwhelmed.

Ren was on the ground, bleeding, our two black cat companions were huddled close and fending off Makusan guards who were finding their second wind, and Aiyana was entangled in a fierce battle with Beril.

And I was simply overwhelmed.

The whole scene reminded me of when I stood and watched as the Sunkurun hunters came into my village all those years ago and slaughtered my whole family, and only by the grace of whatever powers might be did I survive. I was helpless, then, but so *completely* overwhelmed.

This time, I wasn't helpless.

I'd always been a lone wolf, since my pack was taken from me at such a young age. I wasn't about to let it happen again.

The Sunkurun warrior who was so distracted with killing Ren didn't even blink when my tail blade cleaved a chunk right out of the side of his neck and gave him a death sentence. I was covered in a quick, sudden spray of his blood as I ducked down, whipping my tail back around behind me to cover my back side. My ears had picked up on a Makusan warrior trying to sneak in for a kill, and the blade kept him off balance. The perfect hybrid of an animal and a human, I bolted forth on all fours at his clumsy legs and bit down on his ankle to bring him to the ground, rending the flesh from his bones and leaving him permanently disabled. His tendons were stuck between my fangs...but where he was going, he wouldn't need them anymore.

I moved about the battlefield like a god of war, piercing the throat of the wounded Makusan with my claws and leaving him in the dirt to drown in his own blood unceremoniously, before heading right off to my next target. Aiyana could handle herself, and as her spear danced and moved, looking for a weak spot in Beril's defense, I could see that she had the upperhand. Ren managed to stand up on his own power, but the three Sunkurun warriors that remained were focused right on him, and arrows were still flying in, grazing at our flesh as we

moved around the battlefield. Even I was struck a couple times, small cuts forming on my right arm and the lower left side of my abdomen, but they were scarcely visible under the fresh coat of the blood of my enemies.

As impressed as I was with myself and my pack as Ren and I teamed up to stab another Sunkurun hunter to death, I couldn't avoid the reality that as long as the archers remained hidden in the jungle, it was only a matter of time before one of them got off the lucky shot that would leave us all reeling. Aiyana was too embroiled in her personal conflict to care, but Ren could sense it as well, and our feline companions were struggling against the combat skills of the trained Sunkurun. The eight Makusan warriors who were lucky enough to survive were already starting to fall back, but with a sense of pride, the Sunkurun stayed, even though only three remained.

"We n-need to get on that ship...a-and get out of here, **now!**" Ren declared, his breathing raspy as he tried to cope with his wounds. He'd already lost a lot of blood, and I knew he couldn't be depended on to fight anymore. "G-get the boy on the ship!"

Offering myself up as a shield, I split the father and son apart and took on the Sunkurun they'd been struggling with. They stood and watched in awe as his hatchets missed me by a fraction each and every time they swung, but the swipes of my claws always seemed to mark his flesh. My experience in fighting the tribe for so long made it easy for me to predict his movements, and as I scattered his blood across the battlefield, Beril was finally starting to see the reality that his team couldn't keep us from leaving any longer.

A clash of magical spears just to my left was an amazing display, if you had time to look. The orange particles of magic flying from Aiyana's spearhead looked like sparks, flinging off and dissipating into the night sky as the red magic used to summon Beril's spear looked like rivulets of blood that rained with each clash. Neither warrior managed a blow, even then, and Aiyana was safe from the archers, who displayed a hesitance to attack their former comrade.

"This struggle is *pointless!* Do the right thing, Aiyana: leave these foul creatures behind and return to your homeland!"

Aiyana pinned the head of Beril's spear to the ground and spit at his feet. "I'd sooner die than side with cowards like you...cowards who could so easily

turn their backs on the years of suffering and sacrifice that our ancestors had to bear for our freedom!"

A quick, upward swipe of the spear left Beril with a small wound across his chest, but he was deft enough to jump back, leaving his magical spear to fade into the air to avoid what could have been a lethal blow.

"And these foul creatures, as you so call them, have forgiven me for the crimes my tribe has made me commit. They welcome me as their traveling companion, and treat me like a human being more than any of you ever did. It is no surprise you fail to see the humanity in them, Beril...because I fail to see the humanity in *any* of you."

Aiyana started to step forth for the death blow, but to protect their chief, one arrow finally flew between the two of them, obviously not meant to hit her, but just to throw her off balance enough for Beril to create a greater distance.

"If you fail to see the humanity in us, Aiyana, it only serves to prove that they've stripped you of whatever humanity you ever had. Enjoy your voyage across the sea, you filthy, dog-fucking *traitor*. We've got work to finish back inland."

"Wait. Beril...you didn't!"

The words were ominous, and as we looked up over the canopy of trees that surrounded the small dock, Aiyana's fears were confirmed. A header of red and black smoke flowed up into the night sky, like a dark river that carried the souls of the unjustly killed up into heaven.

"The people of Kanadul weren't as peaceful as advertised, I'm afraid. We gave them the option to stand down and join us, or to be the first victims of the war here on Mid Isle. Good thing none of the uprights will survive to tell the tale; we can just spread the good word that we were merely defending ourselves."

The homes of innocent people, and the flesh of their bodies rose up over the trees in billows of sickening smoke. Peace loving and having no ability to fight, the people of Kanadul never stood a chance, and the Sunkurun, alongside the Makusan forces, showed no mercy.

"Aiyana...let's go."

I had to calm her down. I had to bring her back to reality, or she'd hunt Beril down to the very ends of Mid Isle.

"We **can't** leave now, Varas. These criminals have to pay for what they've done wrong...the innocent people of Kanadul must be avenged!"

"In due time, we'll see Beril cast into an early grave, but tonight...if he dies, so do we," I reminded her, as the aforementioned walked into the safe cover of his archers.

"But...Beril...let me warn you. If you follow us to Kanduria...every river on the island will run red with the blood of your men...and when I've murdered them, down to the very last woman *and* child...their flesh will be the tinder upon which I burn your pathetic, lifeless corpse!"

Beril was a trained leader. My words were as cold and dark as the water of the ocean at night, but he wouldn't let anyone see how badly he was shaken by them. He simply kept walking back down the hidden path, back to Kanadul, to finish what he had started.

Aiyana and I turned back to the boat to do the same, and we could see Ren struggling to board.

"Heh...heh...those Sunkurun sure did a number on my old bones...heh..." Ren laughed, letting his every chuckle cover up a painful, struggling breath. "Go on and get on the ship. I'll untie us from the dock and we'll be outta here in no time..."

The father and son team of black cats was already on board the ship, and I ushered Aiyana on board next. The father came back down to help with untying the ship from the dock, and then, the two of us leaned down to Ren, helping him up from the ground. It was a miracle he was still moving, all told, and not one to let his customers see his weakness, he walked on his own power. The father hopped up onto the ship as it started to creep away from the shore, and I waited for Ren, who kept on lagging behind. The ship would be well out of his reach, slow as he was moving, by the time he got to it.

"A-all right, all right...heh...I guess I could use a helping hand, Varas. Mind giving me a lift up to the side of the boat?"

"Gladly, Ren. We couldn't have survived that battle without you," I replied.

His presence was definitely needed to take the heat off of the younger black cat, and his wounds were a small price to pay for all of us to walk away from the battle with our lives.

Beril wasn't going to let that happen.

Further away from the lush jungle now that we were on the shore, my ears didn't flicker until I could turn to see the arrow rushing through the air. Time slowed down for a moment as the captain that we'd become acquainted with, the one who started out so coarse but turned out to have a warm, caring heart, took an arrow through the organ of the same name. A small spritz of blood stained my shoulder as the head of the arrow went clean through his chest, coming out the other side after going all the way through his back. It was one wound too many for the hearty captain, who fell against me with a cry of agony.

"**AGGGHH!** Hlk...ulk..." his cries faded to the sound of him choking on his own blood, spitting it up into my fur as I held him up, his legs almost immediately turning to dead weight. Infuriated beyond reason, it took the wish of a dying man to keep me from rushing into the jungle and tearing Beril to pieces right then and there. "G-go...get out of h-here. Find peace in Kanduria...ulk...hlk..."

Even in his dying moments, Ren knew that my assault would be a suicide mission. I welled up inside with regret that we hadn't gotten to know the man better as he found a way to smile at me, even though meeting me was the very reason that his life had come to an end. The bounty placed on me by the Makusan people was like a curse, and while it had only caused turmoil to others before, it had now claimed its first life.

Refusing to let him die without dignity, I placed the honorable captain on my shoulder and jumped to the edge of the boat, my claws digging into the firm, solid wood and climbing up onto the deck.

We were wounded. We were tired. We were *livid*.

But we were moving.

I was mournful.

Not the kind of mournful you feel when someone passes away but the time was right, or the mournful you feel when you wrong someone that you love, even knowing that they'll forgive you.

This was a mournful I'd never fully known before, one that came with the life of an innocent man hanging on your head, not because *you* had killed him, but because someone else did, just for knowing you.

I was a pox on other people, and as our boat drifted out to the end of the small, inlet river that carried us away from the continent of Mid Isle, I vaguely considered jumping from the side of the boat and swimming to the nearest shore to let our traveling companions live in peace, and to protect Aiyana. She didn't really *need* any protection, but with me around, she was going to be a target for the Sunkurun, no matter how far we traveled from Mid Isle.

"You should really stop beating yourself up, Varas. There was nothing more you could have done to protect him. He would have fallen in the battle well before then if you weren't fighting by his side."

She also knew just how much it was eating me up inside that an innocent man died for being my acquaintance.

"I could have untied the boat. If we let him on first, he likely would have survived his other wounds."

Aiyana shook her head. "This ship was his prized possession; his life. He would never have let someone else do the honors. To be honest, it almost feels wrong that we're still sailing on it, knowing that he'll never get to captain it ever again."

Laying flat on his back on the aft end of the ship, Ren was definitely dead. His chest, still soaked with blood from his wounds, refused to rise no matter what we did to treat his injuries. Aiyana had no magic that could heal such a deep wound, and we were hilariously low on supplies. We had just enough food to make it through the three day voyage, and in the sickest way, Ren's death

looked like a blessing, as five people might not have survived on the small rations of food and fresh water that we carried.

"Ren loved the ocean, though...he loved sailing on this water. He would never have wanted his paws on dry land again if he could avoid it. Floating on this boat is the way he would have wanted to die, I'm sure, if he could have had his way about it."

"Then perhaps we can give him a proper funeral."

The father black cat was standing with his son, having treated his wounds the best that he could, near the front of the ship. He turned back and walked toward us, his eyes on Ren, and filled with appreciation at his sacrifice. "This ship has two life boats...just one is enough for the four of us, if we need it."

I immediately caught onto his idea, and it resonated well with me. I stood up from the deck of the ship as it bounced across the small, subtle waves of the ocean and looked for a loose plank, tearing it up from the boat with ease and placing it in Ren's paws. I crossed his arms over his chest so that the plank might never leave his grasp, and Aiyana, catching onto the idea, helped me lift his corpse into the life boat.

"I'm sorry I couldn't do more for you, Ren. You may not have lived to know it, but you've already done the world for us in freeing us from Mid Isle."

My words were a sad attempt at a proper eulogy, but no one else had anything to say as we lowered the life boat into the water and cut it loose. Perhaps it was just my looking too far into symbolism, but the life boat sailed alongside our larger boat for what seemed like hours, as if the boat itself had a heart and soul, not wanting to let go of the captain who had been faithful to it for so many years. It wasn't until the sun started to rise over the horizon that the life boat started to drift just a little bit away from ours, but by the time the morning light was over our heads, the boat was gone from our view, scarcely leaving behind tiny waves to remind us of our fallen comrade.

"It'll be a dangerous trek inland once we reach Kanduria. The likelihood is that humans will have completely taken over the port that Ren was familiar with, meaning that we'll be swinging our swords again the moment that we get off the boat."

"You two can rest when nightfall comes again, then. You'll need to regain

your strength and recover from your wounds so you're fresh for the battle."

"What about you?" the son asked, finding his voice again. He'd been silent since the battle before, and though he was a growing young man who was eager to fight, it was clear to me that he'd never been in a fight for his life before. He was still trembling, even now, and I could hear it in his wobbling words. "You've been wounded in several places, sir. You should really have the first rest."

"The name's Varas, and if you *really* know the legends about me, you know I've had worse than this," I reminded him. "A couple cuts here and there will heal in no time at all. I'll be ready to fight again well before we reach the Kandurian coast."

The boy nodded at me, and his father gave me a genuine smile. "Having a warrior as legendary as yourself in our midsts makes me a bit more confident about our chances to make it inland. I know you two aren't looking to get involved in the war, but can you at least accompany us to one of the upright camps? Ren agreed to do that much before he passed...and we will almost certainly need the help to get there."

As usual, Aiyana and I didn't really have a plan for how we were somehow going to get to Sektemal from there. The truth was that with the continent of Sektemal being to the east, and our ship headed due west, it would take us weeks to sail even from the southeast coast of Kanduria back to our destination. No doubt, we'd need to stock up on supplies, food and fresh water before we left, but how much we needed was an unknown, and where we would be able to get it, an unknown as well.

"We'll be more than happy to accompany you to the camp if they can outfit us for a longer journey ahead," Aiyana suddenly replied. She gave me a wry smile, and immediately, I knew to just listen to her plan. "So long as you live up to that end of the bargain, we'll happily escort you to an upright camp on Kanduria."

The father was elated. "You really mean it?!"

"Absolutely. In exchange, we'll need fresh food and water for three weeks, but you've already seen what we're capable of; that kind of fighting power usually comes at a much higher price. Still interested?"

"We'll give you whatever supplies we can spare at the camp. Just don't be

surprised if they try to rope you into fighting alongside us against the humans when we get there! My name is Kyan, and this is my son, Kyanwa. I'm sorry we didn't introduce ourselves earlier, but the opportunity didn't really present itself."

"No worries," I cut in, reaching out to shake his paw. "We didn't need your names to know that you were good company."

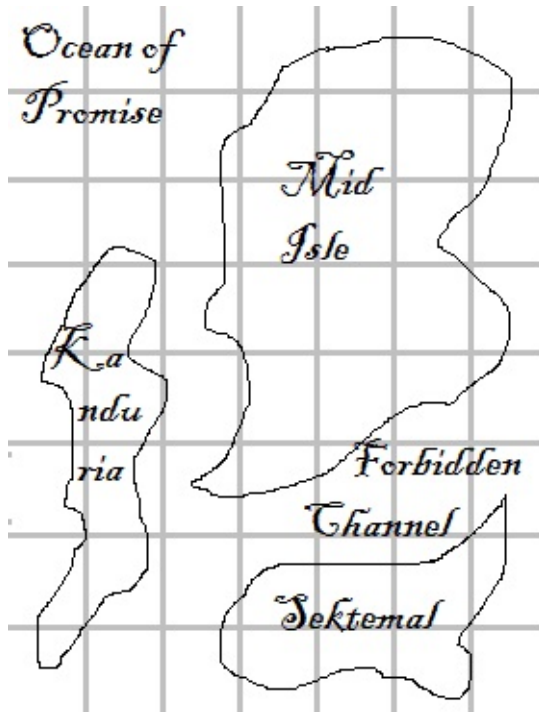
"That's high praise coming from a pair of legendary warriors. I had no idea that you were traveling with the famed hunter Aiyana Verza. With the two of you escorting us to the upright camps, we'll make it there in no time!"

I wanted to tell the man he was giving us too much credit, but we'd never been off Mid Isle before. The reality was dawning on me just how huge of a place the world really was, and if our reputations were really that far reaching, perhaps it was time for me to believe in them as much as other people did. After all, Aiyana was a legendary hunter, so it was no surprise that she knew who I was, but if two random uprights I'd never met before knew both of us in that great of detail, there had to be some credence to the rumors...unfortunately, that credence applied to the good and the bad.

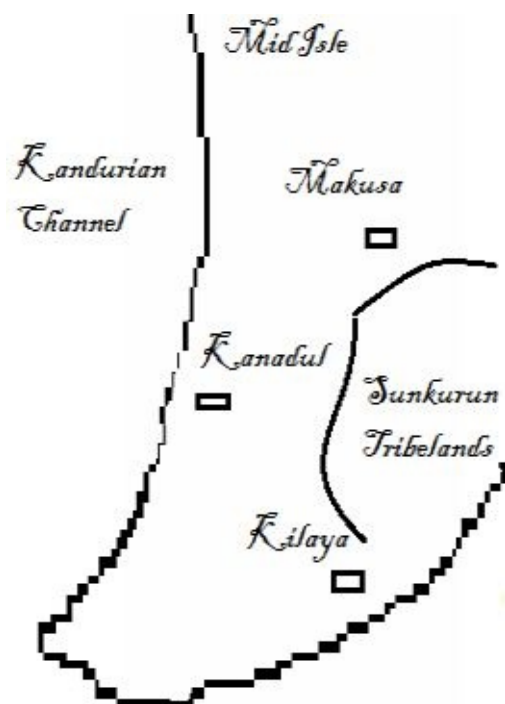
As we sailed across the blindingly bright waters in the morning sun, I hoped to leave most of that bad behind on Mid Isle, and focus only on the good in Kanduria. I was on a good boat. I was surrounded by good people. I had a good woman at my side, and she had a good heart. There really was a lot of good in the world to be had, if I simply knew where to look.

Kanduria was the wrong place to look, and by the end of our journey there, I would lose almost everything I considered good in my life.

Maps of Veloria



A very poorly drawn topography of Veloria as it is known, likely done by a child or something. Featured on the next page is an equally poor drawing of the Makusan peninsula, likely done by the same child.



Mid Isle: The main setting for the first installment of Tales of Veloria. The population here is dominated by humans, both in cities and in tribal lands.

Kilaya: A small town on the outskirts of the Sunkurun tribal lands, this place is considered a paradise. A town that deserves the reputation it has, Kilaya is renowned on Mid Isle for being the place to hook up with strangers, get blotto drunk, and pass out on the beach, regardless of the consequences.

Makusa: The second largest city on Mid Isle, and the largest in the Makusan peninsula. Merchants and the poor alike live in false harmony here, united only by their hatred for the upright beasts. Behind the scenes, the uppermost echelon of citizens are pushing to take over the whole peninsula so they can exterminate the uprights for good.

Kanadul: A village even smaller than Kilaya, resting right near the coast of the Makusan peninsula. Humans and uprights live here in peace, a model village that the world would do well to follow. It is one of the only places in the entire world of Veloria where humans and uprights can intermarry.

