



Corvak's Challenge

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Description: When the clone pods were abandoned on the ice planet, two of them opened before the others. Corvak, a gladiator and a splice, ran into the snows. He carried Aidy, a confused human woman. They're on the run, determined not to get caught. Aidy has no idea what's going on or why she's been dumped in the icy mountains. Corvak, however, is convinced this is all one big gladiator game, and one he's determined to win. To do that, they'll have to avoid all the others and survive by any means possible.

Why do they need this parasite anyhow...and why do their chests keep humming?

Total Pages (Source): 80

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:56 am

CHAPTER

ONE

AIDY

"Comewith me if you want to live."

I jerk from sleep at the Terminator quote. I'm a movie buff, but that's a strange one to wake up to. Who's speaking? The voice is that of a stranger. I open my eyes, shaking off the last of my weariness, to see a big hand thrust into my face.

It's not a human hand.

The hand extended out to me has the wrong number of fingers. There are dark claws and vaguely gray skin, like I would imagine a monster would have. I bite back a yelp of distress and follow the sight of that strange hand up to?—

Jesus Christ, I don't know who—or what—that is.

The stranger looming over my bed is as inhuman as his hand. He looks a bit like the beast from theBeauty and the Beastcartoon come to life, with just a color palette swap. He's got strangely shaped ears, a bushy mane, and big, wide, gray shoulders that look like they're covered in a downy layer of fur. His mouth has a few extremely prominent teeth that might not be teeth at all, but tusks.

He's also near-naked and it's cold as fuck.

I...don't know this man. What's he doing in my room? Why's the air conditioning so fucking cold?

As I stare up at the strange beast-man, hyperventilating, a snowflake drifts past. This...isn't my home. My frantic gaze flicks back and forth, noting my surroundings. I'm in some sort of metallic...coffin? A tube or a pod of some kind with lots of flashing lights and light padding underneath.

I'm practically naked. There's nothing covering me but a sheer white shift.

And I'm fucking freezing.

I cover my breasts in horror and swat his hand away. "Where are my clothes? Where are we? Who the fuck are you?"

The hand pushes into my face again. "I will explain everything. I know how this game is played. Those that do not escape right away will be killed."

"Killed? Game?" I squeak, terrified. "What game? And I can't leave. I don't have clothes?—"

He glances off to the side, even as a snowy breeze ruffles his mane. He turns to look back at me, dark eyes intense. "Quick. Come with me. We have to go now."

I don't know what's going on—the last memory I have is fuzzy and somewhere warm with beige walls. This isn't Arizona. Arizona is warm and the sun is hard, unlike the watery sunlight here. This might not even be Earth, judging by the strange greenish tint of the sky barely visible past my freezing-ass coffin. Also judging by the big inhuman stranger holding a clawed hand out to me.

But I want to live. Whatever else is going on, I don't want to die.

"Don't look at me, okay?" I say as I sit up, taking his hand.

He scoffs. "You can worry about your naked body when we are safe."

Rude. But also, true. As I sit up, I look around and get the scope of my surroundings. This really isn't familiar to me at all. We're in a strange, snowy place with distant pink trees and jagged cliffs. Everything's covered in snow and looks highly dangerous. My coffin is in the valley between some of these alarming-looking cliffs, and mine is not the only one. I can hear the distant sound of sobbing, and as I watch, another coffin slides open.

What happens when all these people get out? Is it like the hunger games and we all have to fight for resources? I am most definitely not a fighter. I look at my new "friend" again. He says he knows how this game is played.

I put my hand in his and let him drag me out of the coffin.

The moment I emerge from the cocoon, the absolute cold hits me. I don't have shoes. I don't have a coat. The wind is the coldest thing I've ever felt, and my nipples immediately turn into rocks. I want to crawl back into the coffin, but the stranger is pulling me forward, dragging me along after him.

Two steps into the snow and I stumble.

He immediately moves to my side again, helping me to my feet. "We have to go."

"I c-c-can't," I manage, teeth chattering. "I don't have sh-sh-shoes."

He glances around again, makes a ferocious-sounding snarl in his throat, and then hefts me into his arms. A moment later, I'm tossed over his shoulder like a heroine in some fairy tale, and then he's racing away through the snow, heading into one of the

narrow canyons. My vision bounces, but I see a large figure with a spear stalking between the coffins. Somewhere else, a woman screams.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:56 am

Oh god. Oh fuck. We really are being killed. I clutch at the back of the gray stranger.
"Don't drop me!"

"Never. I keep what is mine."

I must have heard that wrong. Doesn't matter. He's my ally right now. I try to remain still and quiet, even when my stomach threatens to spill its contents. I pinch my nose and close my eyes, willing myself not to barf despite being shaken like a bowl of Jello. Even though his body is warm against my front, the rest of me feels like ice as the wind rips against my skin, and I want to sob with how awful this is.

I want a coat. I want shoes. I want to know what the fuck is going on.

He said this was a game. Given that I have no idea what's happening, I have no choice but to trust him. I think about the woman who screamed at the blue spear-carrying warrior, and swallow hard, trying to endure. You can do this, you can do this.

When he steps out of the biting wind and into a sheltered spot, I smother a moan of pure joy. The stranger sets me down, and I almost collapse again. My feet feel like bricks of ice, but I don't complain. He's been carrying me all this time, and there's a crust of ice on his mane and his beard. He helps me straighten, then moves back toward the entrance of the cave, checking to see if anyone is following us.

I tuck my hands under my arms, trying to warm them. They feel like ice, too. A glance at our surroundings shows that the cave we're in isn't much more than a hollow, about as deep as a closet. "Is...is this where we live now? Are we staying here?"

He turns back to me and shakes his head. "We rest. Then we go on. We need to put more distance between us and the others."

Go on? I'm not sure I can. I suspect I might die of exposure before another hour passes. Shivering, I hunch into a crouch on the floor, trying to warm as much skin as possible. I can't complain, though—not to the guy that just carried me through the snow and saved my life. "Thank you," I manage to choke out. "If I haven't said that yet, thank you for saving my life."

The stranger grunts acknowledgment, then glances down at me. He's completely naked except for a small white loincloth that outlines way more than it should and won't be keeping him warm. "I didn't realize humans are so very fragile. The climate bothers you?"

"It doesn't bother you?" I ask through chattering teeth.

"It is unpleasant, but I have been genetically modified to endure such things." He eyes me again. "You have not, it seems."

I manage a small, mirthless laugh. No, it's obvious that I'm suffering. Still, he knows I'm human, which means he's met others. Which means...what, exactly? "Genetically modified? What do you mean by that?"

"I am a splice, a gladiator cross-bred from several different sentient races to provide the most optimal arena fighter."

An arena fighter. "You said you knew these 'games'?"

"I know of them, yes." He watches me shiver, his hands clenching and unclenching, before he turns to glance out the entrance again. "I am Corvak, by the way. It is not a name you would know from the arena rosters. I have yet to win my first battle."

"I'm Aidy," I say. "What kind of sick game is this?"

"One that does not have many winners," Corvak says in a flat voice, constantly surveilling. "But we are going to outsmart them."

I like his optimism. Reaching up to rub my frozen nose, I notice for the first time that there's a delicate bracelet on my wrist, one that I don't recognize.

Corvak's gaze goes to it at the same time mine does. "A tracking device."

I rip it off my arm, fingers trembling, and notice that he pulls one off his wrist, too. "How did we not notice those?"

"You haven't had time to think," he replies. "But those bracelets are going to lead them to us, so now it's time to go."

The urge to whine and protest rises, but I fight it back. He's trying to save both of our lives. I clamp my jaw, willing my teeth to stop clacking together. "Ready."

He grabs my hand, hauls me up over his shoulder, and then we're out in the snow again. He moves quickly and silently, but I can't help the whimper of distress that escapes me as we go back out in the cold air. My teeth chatter, and I shiver harder, because my dress is wet and sticking to my body.

I try to endure. I really do. But each time the cold, brutal wind slices into my skin, it feels like death. My whimpers become cries before long, and I can't stop them. It's too cold.

"Leave me behind," I say to Corvak, tapping his back with frozen fingers. I'm not being dramatic—I truly cannot go further. If dying in the next moment means an end to the frozen torture, I'm all for it. "I'm just slowing you down. Go without me."

"Never." Corvak sounds furious at the thought.

Instead of being flattered, I'm annoyed. "If I want to die, let me die already!"

He tenses under my hips, and his arm tightens around my legs. "No. You're my female, and I want this chance."

What the hell is he talking about? I open my mouth to ask, but another ice-cold gust of wind steals the breath from my lungs. I cry out, and tears roll down my face, only to freeze against my skin, because of course they do. This is hell.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:56 am

Corvak seems to finally clue in to my distress. One hand touches my foot, and he doesn't like what he feels. "You're frozen. Can you survive for a bit longer, female?"

"Oh sure," I say, delirious. His hand burns against my skin and I jerk away from his touch. "Who needs toes?"

I must sound insane. Or frozen. Or both. Whatever. It sinks in, though. The stranger makes a sound of annoyance and then moves closer to the cliffs instead of traversing through the now-hip-deep snow down the center of the valley. "I see something," he says. "Another cave."

At this point, my skin is starting to burn and feel painful instead of just feeling frozen. I'll take another cave. "Let's go."

A few moments later, he sets me down in the snow, and I'm so numb I barely feel it. Everything hurts and feels hot, which I know isn't a good sign. I can't feel my toes. My fingers feel like they belong to someone else. I sag against him, hating that I'm so weak, but he just digs down in the snow at the base of one of the rocky cliffs. "Smells like animals here. I'd be willing to bet there's a den."

A den?! A freaking animal den?

I stare in mute horror as he digs out more snow with his massive, clawed hands, and sure enough, a slit of a cave appears. It's maybe two feet high and twice as long, like a mouth more than a Flintstones-type of cave, but it's either that or stay out here in the cold. I'm too frozen to care anymore. When he shoves his head into the cave, his ass goes into the air and I stare at the short, stubby tail—fluffy and stumpy like a

Manx kitten—and I want to laugh at the ridiculousness of my situation.

"Do you get delirious when you're dying of hypothermia?" I manage between chattering teeth. "Asking for a friend."

He backs out of the cave and sits up on his haunches, waving me forward. "It's not very deep, but we can both get in. Feet first." He holds a hand out to me, chivalrous once again. "I'll help you."

It might be idiotic, but I don't think twice. Taking his hand, I climb down into the bitter, hateful snow, and ease my frozen legs into the tiny wedge of a cave. There's detritus on the cave floor, but it's out of the torturous breeze, and so I don't care. By the time I slide my entire body into the cave, I'm whimpering all over again. My feet hit the back of the cave too soon for my tastes, and I glance up, my head only a foot or two away from the entrance.

And I'm ungrateful as fuck, because I'm still cold. I'm cold, and I just hit something squishy with my frozen toes, and it smells a bit like wet dog in here. This is the worst, and yet...it's better than outside.

The light disappears, and a moment later, Corvak's big feet are sliding their way past my face. I press up against the far side of the cave as much as I can, but there's not much room. By the time he squeezes his entire body in the cave, he's pressing up against me, his bigger form taking up the remaining space in the tight cave.

I should feel claustrophobic at the narrow quarters, but Corvak is warm. So fucking warm. As this registers in my frozen brain, he takes my numb hand in his and puts it under his arm to warm it. "I have you," he says. "I will take care of you. Cease your cries."

Am I still whimpering? How embarrassing. I nod, moving a little closer to him. He

wraps his legs around mine as best he can, sharing his warmth, and I'm soon plastered against his big, slightly furry body. The chattering in my teeth slows, and as the warmth begins to return to my body, so does the panic. "I'm sorry," I whisper. "I suck at this."

"At what?"

"Survival. It's just so fucking cold."

He grunts, and I feel it in his chest. "You are not built for survival, not like I am. But do not fret, female. You are mine and I will take care of you."

"Aidy," I remind him. "And I think you have me mixed up with someone else. I don't belong to anyone. I'm from Earth."

"I am not mixed up. You are absolutely mine." His hand slides down my arm, warm, and I decide I'll overlook that. "And I will try and remember your name. Aay-dee."

Out of habit, I launch into my usual explanation over my name. "Aidy is short for A and D. For..." I pause, because I know there's an answer to this. I know it's something I've said a hundred times in the past, but when I reach for it, it's not there. What is AD short for? Anno Domini? Anna Danielle? I genuinely can't remember. "I think the cold has frozen my brain."

"Tell me more about you, then."

I try to think of facts about myself, but nothing comes to mind. "I think my foot is resting in animal poop."

His breath whooshes out in a huff, and I realize he's laughing. Quiet, so as not to give away our location, but a laugh just the same. Hearing that makes me feel a little

better, animal poop and all. "We will rest here and figure out our next move, Aidy. Can you endure animal poop between your toes a bit longer?"

"As long as it's out of the wind, yes." I inch closer to him, and when he wraps his arms around me, I want to moan with how good it feels. I don't give a fuck that I'm wearing a wet shift, I'm near naked, and my feet are resting in questionable soft piles. Corvak's warm and it's wonderful. "What are we going to do when the owner of the cave comes back?"

"Fight him, of course," Corvak says, as if this is the answer to everything.

Hell, maybe it is.

CHAPTER

TWO

CORVAK

Adrenaline races through my veins. This is the moment I have been waiting for.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:56 am

True, we are in danger. This planet is inhospitable, and we've been given no weapons and no clues on how to survive. But the rules of the game are always simple—survive to win your prize. My prize is right next to me, pressing her icy skin against my body for warmth.

This is new. I don't have memories of a female. I've never been near one. Seen them from afar, of course, but my particular splicing is a newer one. I have no recollection of other battles, no implanted memories of past victories or defeats. I know what I am and the rules of gladiator games of all kinds, but no practical experience.

Doesn't matter. With this female at my side, reminding me of everything I will win if I am successful, I will fight harder than ever. I'm confident I can do this. I will establish a stronghold somewhere safe, protect Aidy, and conquer my surroundings. While it would be smarter to play an offensive game and pick off my opponents, it's clear that my human female will be a hindrance. Thus, I will need to play defensively instead. I will find a suitable fortification and wait for the enemies to come to me.

It's a good plan, I decide, and stroke my hand down the female's back again. She makes another shivering sound, her hands twitching against my body. Even though her form pressed against mine is pleasurable, my cock does not respond. Some sort of medication remains in my system, I suspect. Given a few days, I hope I will be able to claim her.

Once she is warm again, of course. Even I am not such a brute that I would expect her to see to my needs in the snows. I can be patient. Until then, I can show her what a good provider I can be. How she is wise to stay with me, and how I'll take care of her. A strong male with a solid plan will earn more prizes than an impulsive one with no

idea of what to do next.

I fall asleep, my female in my arms, and very pleased with myself.

I don't sleep for long, of course. Quick naps are the best way to stay on alert. I remain on guard, listening for the sound of footsteps as more snow continues to fall outside. The temperature drops overnight, and even my hardy form feels the sting of the cold. Aidy's teeth chatter, and I suspect that if we continue like this, she will suffer.

Plus, a mere pocket of a cave is not what I had in mind for a stronghold.

Aidy wakes up just before dawn, her stomach growling. She shifts against me, uncomfortable, but there is nowhere to go in the small cave. I've been ignoring cramps in my legs so as not to awaken her. Discomfort is all part of the game, and I choose to ignore it so I can pursue bigger rewards.

In my arms, the female makes a soft sound of dismay.

"Are you in pain?" I ask her, voice hushed.

She moves instinctively closer to me. "No. I was just hoping for a Wizard of Oz scenario where I'd wake up and this was all a dream. No such luck."

I think her words are meant to be humorous, but it's difficult to tell. "Not a dream. You are here with me."

"Yeah, I noticed." She creeps her hands under my arms again. "Sorry if I'm being clingy. You're the only warmth there is."

As if I mind? I am enjoying myself immensely, though I try to hide it so she doesn't get upset. I suspect she wouldn't be thrilled if she found out I was glad to be here.

"Touch me all you like. I am yours and you are mine."

"When I stop shivering, I'm going to ask what the fuck that means. For now, though, I'm choosing to ignore it." She shifts against me, her hands trailing over my torso. "I have to pee and I'm afraid of the answer."

"We will pick a spot a decent length away and cover it with snow again to disguise our scents."

Aidy sighs. "I was worried you'd say that."

"Then you will come back here, and I will pack the entrance of the cave with snow to ensure you stay hidden while I go out."

She rears back, looking up at me in the morning twilight. "You're leaving me?"

"We cannot remain like this. You need warm clothing and food, and a safe place to stay. I need weapons. I'll hunt for supplies and assess the situation, and then I will return for you."

She struggles with this idea. I can tell by the expression on her face. But after a few moments, she nods resolutely. "Just swear you'll come back for me."

"I would never leave you. You are the reason I fight."

Aidy looks unhappy at the thought but doesn't complain. "Let's do our bathroom business before I change my mind and decide to just pee where I am."

A short time later, a shivering Aidy has returned to the cave and I've packed the entrance with snow, then smoothed it out to hide my footprints. There's a small hole for fresh air to get to her, but she is otherwise buried, her scent nearly drowned by the

snowfall that comes steadily down. I've left her with a jagged, hand-sized rock to use as a weapon in case she is discovered, but I hope she does not need it. I should be the one fighting.

Arming her reminds me that I cannot tarry. My natural instincts tell me to go slow, to carefully hide my footprints and cut through water to disguise my scent. To scout my surroundings and assess things before making any sudden moves. But Aidy shivers hard when she is not tucked against me. I do not want to return to find my prized female is frozen solid. I will have to hope that the snow will cover most of my tracks...and if it doesn't, that I can fight my way past any trouble.

For now, I need to find supplies.

I painstakingly cover my trail just far enough away to throw off any pursuers from Aidy's scent. Once I'm satisfied, I start walking, turning my head towards any breeze in search of scents. The canyon we're in is narrow and deep, and the only scent that of the animal whose den we stole. There are no tracks in the fresh snow, so I circle around the area, not wanting to move too far from Aidy if I can help it.

As I head toward the mouth of the canyon, I catch a scent. A familiar one, of praxiian and mesakkah blended together to make something different and pungent.

Another splice.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:56 am

My hackles rise, and the wind turns, carrying more scents. Not just mesakkah and praxiiian. There's another splice with strange scents, and a...moden? I'd bet they're all gladiators.

Are they hunting for us? If so, I need to prepare. I sink down into the shadows at the base of one of the nearby cliffs and next to a scrubby-looking bush that seems more thorns than leaves. I dig out some of the snow near my legs and pull it back over my crouching form until my entire body is hidden. They will have to come examine the bush—or the churned snow—to discover me, and I will attack if I must.

I ignore the cold, remain still, and wait. I concentrate on the world around me. There is a distinct lack of insect life here, and all is incredibly silent. The high canyons make my breaths echo and carry on the wind, so I slow my respiration.

Then, I hear voices in the distance.

Male voices. I tense, preparing to fight if I must, because these are likely gladiators sent down for the games like me. They are my enemy.

They grow closer, and I realize they are traveling together. Idiots. Why would you work together? You cannot share a female. She should belong to the strongest male that can protect her. Unless all the other females are dead and they are hunting for mine. The thought makes me furious, and I can feel my claws distending in response. No one is touching Aidy.

Only me.

The speakers walk right past my hiding place, and I count three bodies. Two splices—one reptilian in nature, the other praxiian—and a heavyset moden. They carry spears and seem to be hunting, but they're so loud I doubt they'll catch anything. I could pick them off easily, but something makes me pause. They have fur clothing, and weapons. They got them from somewhere.

I need to find out where so I can get supplies for myself and Aidy.

"What if we find something dead?" the reptilian one asks the others. "Can't we just bring that back to camp?"

"Has to be alive," says the moden, his voice deep and sonorous. "The blue thing dies quickly, and we need it living to put it into someone."

Blue thing? Put into someone? I prick my ears, listening carefully.

"Bah," says the reptilian. "Feels like they are assigning busy work to us so we stay away from the females."

"We are helping save them," the moden says. "Surely they will look fondly upon us for that. The khui helps with the cold."

The praxiian says nothing, content to let the others speak. The three trudge on through the snow, and when their voices become indecipherable, I leave my hiding space and follow them carefully. I keep enough space between us that they will not pick up my scent, and the wind remains in my favor.

By the time I catch up, they have caught a slow-moving, round beast with quills. It wriggles in the hands of the moden, who grips it like a ball and ignores the beast's efforts to escape. I duck to the side, hiding in the shadows of the canyon, as the three clueless males stand around and discuss their prize.

"How do we know this creature has one?" the reptilian asks.

The praxiian finally speaks. "The eyes. They glow blue. That means the parasite is active."

A parasite. Interesting.

"Let me see it," the reptilian says, and the moden hands it to him.

Immediately, the creature squirms wildly and the reptilian loses his grip. He catches it again, only to wrench it by the neck and the creature goes limp.

"You killed it. Idiot." The praxiian's words are a displeased growl. "Now we can't bring it back."

"My hands were just too strong," the reptilian protests. "My killing instinct took over. It's because I'm such a fierce fighter."

I have to bite my lip to keep from snorting with derision. Someone thinks highly of himself.

The moden speaks up. "Open it. We can take the khui for one of us and bring the meat back to camp. All is not lost, but we must be quick." He turns to the praxiian. "You don't have a khui yet, Valmir."

The praxiian nods and takes the dead animal from the other. He pulls out a small, crude knife and cuts it open, and the scent of blood fills the wind. After a moment, he pulls out what looks like a glowing blue filament and stretches it on his fingers. "It looks like a worm."

"It is a worm, but what other choice do you have? It's necessary for survival." The

moden remains unruffled. "Be quick so the creature's death is not in vain."

The praxiian splice cuts his arm open with a claw, and as I watch, he places the filament there. It disappears before my eyes, and the praxiian shudders and collapses on the ground.

"Great. Now we have to carry him back to camp." The reptilian is disgusted. "He's not going to wake up for hours."

"You should have thought of that before you killed our catch," the moden says. He bends down to scoop up the collapsed praxiian, and as he does, I notice his eyes are a faint blue instead of the normal moden black. Interesting.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:56 am

A parasite.

Blue eyes.

Necessary for survival.

Will help with the cold.

All of this is fascinating and precious information. I need to find a creature of my own. If what they say is true, Aidy and I both need these worms to ensure we thrive in our new environment.

I watch the direction the males leave, arguing the entire time, and I head in the opposite direction. I stalk through the snows until I catch scent of game, and then a path full of old mesakkah scents. A trail of some kind. I note the game and which direction it heads and follow the trail for a bit longer, my need for supplies for Aidy outweighing the hunt for game. It must be alive when I bring it back, after all, and Aidy might not be if I don't find her warm clothes soon.

The trail eventually brings me to a small cave with a stretched leather screen covering over it. The people scents are everywhere here, and when I duck inside the cave, I want to shout with joy. Supplies are piled here. Dozens of furs and dried meat are packed neatly away in baskets and piles. There are roots and fire-making supplies. There are fur cloaks and fishing nets and a few spears. I take some of the carved bone knives and a spear, and a bag of foodstuffs. I pile several of the furs into my arms and then make the long hike back to the cave where Aidy waits for me, shivering and alone.

When I dig out the entrance to the cave, she's completely quiet. She doesn't twitch when I say her name, and it isn't until I slither my way in next to her that she gasps, her eyes fluttering open.

"Were you asleep?" I ask.

"I...I don't know." Her teeth chatter and her lips are blue. More worrying than that, her expression is dazed, as if she cannot focus. She reaches for me, and her hands are like blocks of ice.

"I found blankets and food," I say, piling them atop our bodies as best I can in the narrow confines. "Put one under you so you don't have to lie on the cold rock, and we'll set the rest atop us. Body heat is still best."

She nods and follows my lead, limply helping me move the blankets. Her shivering abates after a while, her cheeks flushing with warmth. "Well," she says, trying to keep a chipper note in her voice. "This is almost bearable."

I huff with amusement. "High praise."

"Sorry. It's hard to be optimistic when you're dying."

Her tired words fill me with alarm. This is my chance to finally play and show my skills, and I do not want my prize dying on me. "You will not die. I know exactly how we will survive this. Just be patient until I can bring a live creature here."

"A live creature? For what?"

I'm not sure how she'll take the news that she must be given a parasite to survive. I decide to omit that for now. "I brought food. I found a storage cave and pilfered from it supplies. Are you hungry?"

"Starving. You really have food?"

"And water, though it is snow that I scooped and let melt in a water bladder."

"I'll take all of it. I could kiss you right now." She squeezes her arms around me, which must be the "kiss" thing she mentions.

Her happiness makes me pleased. I rub her arm, noting how soft her skin is, and just how fragile and cold her smaller form is. Not good. "I told you I would take care of you, Aidy."

"I know. I just...I'm struggling." She manages a small smile.

I pull out a piece of the jerky I stole from the cave and hold it out to her. "Eat. You will feel better with a full belly."

We both inhale the supplies, but I save most of the food for her. It is extremely spicy, and Aidy coughs several times as she eats, but she still devours her portion. Food will help her strengthen, and we both sip the cold water. It tastes a bit like dirt, but I don't care. It's something to drink. Aidy's shivering eventually stops, but her toes and fingers remain cold against my skin.

"I saw others," I confess to her. "They were working together, possibly looking for us."

She stiffens against me, worried. "What do we do?"

"We leave this spot and head somewhere farther out, somewhere we can defend easily." I am fascinated by the soft curve of her cheek, and wonder if she is as soft there as she is on her arm. My fingers twitch, eager to touch her there, but I keep stroking her arm instead. "Do you think you can travel after you rest again?"

She makes a weak sound that might be a chuckle. "Do I have a choice? I'll figure it out."

"Just be patient?—"

I break off as I hear the crunch of snow nearby. I go still, putting a hand over Aidy's mouth to quiet her. She tenses under my hand but does not protest, her eyes wide. I don't breathe, straining my ears to listen. Did the other gladiators find us? Or is this some different predator?

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:56 am

There's another crunch of snow, and then a familiar pungent scent—the owner of the cave has returned.

I must protect Aidy.

The moment the thought crosses my mind, a shadow falls over the mouth of the cave. I catch sight of a massive feline head, and for a moment I think the praxiian splice has found us. A second later, a large paw swipes down into the cave, and the creature hisses. I swat it away from Aidy, protecting her even as she cringes back. This is not a praxiian—this is some sort of oversized dangerous snow cat with bad breath.

He's not getting my mate.

The creature shoves his head in further, trying to bite, and fangs as long as my fingers open wide.

Aidy screams.

I grab the cat by its muzzle before he can push further and shove. The thing falls back, and I keep pushing, using my feet to propel myself forward. I do not let go of the muzzle, even when its teeth cut into my palms. It begins to whip its head back and forth, trying to shake me loose, but I hold fast.

Shoving it backward, I lose control when the creature breaks free, his head no longer confined by the cave. I scramble to follow him and keep the advantage. The cat pounces on me the moment I climb out of the cave, and then it's tearing at my hide, all claws and teeth. A cold, logical part of my mind expects this and I'm able to

calmly react. Grappling with the creature, I push aside its face and try to fend off its heavy paws, all the while waiting for an opening. When I see the opportunity, I grab it—I grab one ear and then the other, and when the fierce, saliva-covered fangs are nearly reaching my face, I kick the creature's thigh. It's distracted by the pain, and I wrench its head to the side with all my might, using the energy I was storing while I let it take the lead in our fight.

There's a loud cracking sound, and then the creature slumps over, dead.

Panting, I get out from under it and wrench the head again, just in case. Good. One problem down. I turn to the mouth of the cave, a few feet away in the churned-up snow. Aidy's face is just visible in the shadows, her eyes wide with terror.

I hold out a hand. "Knife."

"W-what?" Her response is dazed.

"I had a knife with me. One made of stone. Bring it here."

"Is it not dead?"

"Oh, it's very dead." I watch as she crawls hesitantly out of the hole and into the chilly weather. "But we need its parasite."

She hands me the knife, her face uncomprehending. I kneel next to the creature, thank it for its brave sacrifice, and then sink the knife into the chest. I cut the creature open even as Aidy makes a shivering sound next to me. "Wait, did you say parasite?"

"I did." I pull organs out of the bleeding cavity, looking for the glowing blue filament. I don't see it anywhere, so it must be in the heart. Figures, since the heart is the one that is most difficult to get to. Knife set aside, I put both hands on the ribcage

and pry it apart, the cracksatisfying to feel under my hands.

There, nestled in its cage of bones, is the heart, still glowing from within. I pull it free and squish it in my hand like an overripe piece of fruit. From there, it is easy to pull out the glowing filament that writhes and squirms, hating the cold as much as we do.

I hold it out, my arms covered in gore up to the elbows, and demonstrate it to Aidy.
"This will save us."

She stares at it for a long moment. As I watch, her eyes roll back to whites and then she collapses on the ground.

I am a touch annoyed that she has no words of praise for my feats of strength, but I remind myself that it is cold and Aidy is suffering. At least her being unconscious makes it easy to implant the creature. I make a small nick on her arm and hold the parasite close. As if it can sense the welcoming heat of her body, it surges off my hand and slithers into the cut on her arm.

Hope I didn't kill my female.

CHAPTER

THREE

AIDY

I'm sowarm I must be dead.

It's the first time in days that I don't feel completely miserable and near death as I awaken. Instead, I feel languid and delicious. There's something heavy on my chest, and the scent of smoke is in the air.

Smoke...?

I open my eyes and look around me, expecting to see the ceiling of that small, shitty cave, inches from my nose. That my feet are still touching cat poop, and if I look up, I'll see endless snow and a glimpse of the inhospitable place we've been dumped. But the ceiling is nowhere near my face, and this time it's rippled, a stalactite hanging just out of my vision. There are big furry blankets pulled up to my chest and another underneath me. The smoke scent remains, and I hear the crackle of a nearby fire.

I wiggle my toes and they're clean.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:56 am

This isn't the cave we were in before. I sit up, puzzled, and look for Corvak. He's seated in the back of the cave, pulling open what looks like a briefcase-sized woven basket with a lid and sniffing the contents. He glances up at me and gives me a small nod of acknowledgment. "You're awake. Good."

"Did I miss something?" I ask, stifling a yawn. "Like a change in scenery?"

He doesn't answer that, but instead asks, "How do you feel?"

"Surprisingly good." I rub my neck, and my fingers don't feel like ice. In fact, all of me feels comfortable. Is it a little brisk? Yes, but I can handle brisk. I move the blankets to look at my feet, and sure enough, they're clean. "Did you wash my feet? Did the weather change?"

His eyes narrow. "You don't remember?"

I open my mouth to reply when a flurry of half-starved, confused memories flood in. Corvak, fighting what looked like a saber-tooth tiger. Corvak cutting the creature open and shoving all the organs into the snow as if searching for the prize in the Cracker Jack box. When he didn't find what he was hunting for, he cracked the ribs open and squished the heart and then held out a glowing spaghetti noodle to me.

Things get fuzzy after that.

"I kinda remember you dismembering the tiger-thing, but that's all."

He moves to my side and crouches, and I notice that his loincloth has just about had

it. The now-filthy fabric is in tatters, and I can see everything outlined. And by everything, I mean a rather large frank and beans. Jesus. "Show me your arm, Aidy."

I hold it out, curious, and he runs his fingers over my skin, looking for something. I don't see any cuts or bruises. He grunts, surprised, and his gaze flicks to me. He stares into my eyes for so long that it makes me uncomfortable. "What?"

"You don't feel any different?"

I shake my head. "I mean, other than I'm no longer freezing my ass off. Did the temperature go up this morning?"

"You've been out most of the day. It's now night."

What...? Have I truly been asleep so long? I look around me for the entrance to the cave, but when I find it, it's covered by what looks like a stiff partition of some kind. I can't see anything outside. The last time I was awake, the sun was just coming up, but now I think it's dark.

How is it dark?

"I'm so confused." I scrub my face with my hands, and I could swear there's a faint blue glow from somewhere around here. I glance over at him and he's still staring at me...or more specifically, my eyes. "What is it?"

He shakes his head. "I did not realize your eyes would change so vividly. I should have guessed, but it is surprising to see. The other male's eyes were not nearly as bright as yours."

"My eyes changed? What are you talking about?" I touch my temple, but there's no mirror here where I can see what he's referring to. "Changed how?"

"They are blue. Just like the others." Corvak sounds thoughtful.

"What others?"

"The other gladiators I ran into. It is how I learned about the necessary parasite."

I know I heard him wrong. The words "necessary" and "parasite" don't go together.

"What gladiators? What parasite? Wait—you ran into other survivors? Where are they?" I glance around the cave again. "I don't see anyone."

Corvak shakes his head. "You misunderstand. They are not allies. They are hunting us."

My throat goes dry. "Hunting...us? Why?"

"Because that is how the game is played. And it is why we cannot stay long in this cave." He sets the basket aside and reaches for the next item, and I realize he's wearing what looks like a chest harness of some kind made from leather, and stuckthrough holes in the leather are a half-dozen crude-looking knives.

Weapons. Because we aren't just worrying about our environment. We're worrying about others dropped here, too.

"Tell me more about this game, please," I say, feeling faint.

Corvak opens a leather pouch, sniffs it, and then holds it out to me. "Food. Eat. You'll need your strength."

I take it from him. It smells delicious, and not nearly as peppery as the stuff he brought me last time. I pull out a piece of jerky and take a cautious bite, and then a bigger one when it doesn't burn my mouth. "Don't change the subject. Tell me about

these games."

He nods, watching me eat, and then goes back to sorting the goods in the cave. "The ones that clone gladiators like me, they have many different types of games they like to bet upon. There are organized games that take place in arenas, private games between competing stables, and games like this one, where gladiators are dropped to a remote location and must fight to survive."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:56 am

I chew as I listen, but something's not adding up. "So why me and the other women? We're not gladiators. At least I know I'm not."

He nods. "You are the prize."

I cough, choking on my jerky. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Female slaves are sometimes offered as incentives to gladiators to perform well. You are here because we are expected to fight over you to win you, and probably to create more exciting drama for our owners to watch."

My lip curls at the thought. So they're chumming the waters to get the sharks riled up, and I'm the chum? "That is really, really shitty."

"It is nothing you need to worry about, because you are mine." He picks up another pouch, sniffs it, and puts it aside.

My hackles rise. Does he mean what I think he means when he says that? And if so, what do I do about it? There's no question that Corvak has looked out for me since the moment we arrived here. He protected me and carried me when I couldn't walk. He tended to me when I was unconscious. He kept me safe. The fact that he's starting to get possessive is a little unsettling, but what other options do I have than to go along with him? I can't strike out on my own.

I decide I'm going to ignore it. He hasn't tried anything. Maybe saying that I'm "his" is just some sort of translation confusion.

Sure, that's it. Let's go with that.

I take another bite of jerky. "So...what now?"

"If you are feeling well enough, I am going to find an animal and bring it back. I am going to get a creature with the glowing blue parasite to put inside myself. Then we will both be protected. The others said that if living things here do not have the parasite, they die. You have one, and I will get myself one. Then we will head out, to a place farther away from the others."

I swallow hard, my mouth dry. All this talk of parasites is worrying me. We need one to survive? Every creature here has one? I wish there was someone else I could ask, because I worry I'm not getting the full story, but there's no one. I have to trust what Corvak says.

Honestly, Corvak hasn't steered me wrong thus far. "I trust you. What do you need me to do?"

"Wait here for me to return. When I acquire the parasite, I will likely pass out, like you did. You will need to watch over me and protect me until I awaken."

I'm strangely touched that he thinks I can protect him while he sleeps. "You trust me to watch you? I thought I was just a prize."

The look Corvak gives me is quizzical. "Of course I trust you. We are in this together. Our goals are the same—we want to survive. The best way to survive is to avoid the others and to make ourselves stronger."

He makes it all sound so simple, so obvious. There's no mention of my weakness, or anything sexy. No "you are mine" chest-beating shit. This is a partnership, nothing more. I relax at that and smile at him, glad that I misunderstood. "I won't let you

down."

"I know," he says, unbothered.

But I don't like that I'm not carrying my fair share of the work. Corvak has had to do most of the heavy lifting since we arrived on this planet. It's time for me to do my part.

CHAPTER

FOUR

AIDY

Corvak heads out to go hunting in the cold, and I'm left to guard the cave and pack things. There are several leather sacks and stacks of furs to go through, and I touch and sort everything. Whoever left this all here has done a ton of work. Some of the furs are hard on one side, and some are so soft on the inside that they feel like butter. There are packs of dried meats of varying kinds, and I snack as I put them aside. There's an unnervingly large pile of bones at the very back of the cave, just like in the horror movie, *The Descent*, but at least there are no human skulls in the mix. Small consolation.

Very small.

There's plenty of food but no water, but I have a fire and I know how to keep it going. I have a vague memory or two of camping trips in the desert, followed by random flashes of shaking out shoes before putting them on. Names and faces, I don't have. But random footwear knowledge? Horror movie visuals? Got that covered. It's irritating me because I feel I should know the basics, and I don't.

However, I do know that melted snow makes water, and that's something I can do easily. I spend a good amount of time scooping up snow in one of the stiff leather pouches and then setting it near the fire to melt.

I don't find clothing or shoes, so after I stuff two packs with everything I think we'll need and set aside a couple of spears, I turn to making clothing. There are a few crude knives fashioned from pale bone lying nearby, and I use one to slice long, thin strips from one of the biggest furs. I don't know how to make anything without a needle, thread, and scissors, so I figure the best option is to pile furs on our bodies strategically and then just bind them close with the strips. I take smaller furs, covering my foot with them and then crisscrossing the straps before tying them off in a bow atop my ankle.

I test the shoes for a few steps...and they immediately fall apart.

I'm sure there's a way to make this work, so I keep experimenting, trying to come up with a method. I'm tying the now-stretched-thin strips around my foot once more when I hear a high-pitched snarl come from outside. Grabbing a knife, I race to the entrance, my heart pounding in terror.

I pull aside the partition and see Corvak approaching, arms outstretched as he holds a writhing, squirming creature about the size of a beaver. It reminds me of one, with its big yellow teeth, but there's no tail and its eyes glow eerily blue. "Stay back," Corvak calls, even as the creature twists in his grip again.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:56 am

Pressing against the wall of the cave, I stay out of the way as he enters, the thrashing creature in his hands. He storms inside, trailing snow after him, and once he's near the fire, he holds the creature down and sighs heavily. "I am sorry," he tells the creature. "Thank you for your sacrifice."

He kills the thing with a quick twist of its head and then turns to me, holding out a hand.

I notice that his lower arms are striped with scratches and lacerations. He bleeds from a dozen long strips, and his hands are covered with blood. "Oh my god, you're hurt."

"It can wait. Let us not waste this creature's sacrifice. Give me your knife."

Wordless, I hand it over. I watch as he cuts the creature open, flinching with every wet noise. He pulls out the heart and extracts the glowing filament from it, then places it on his arm, right on an open wound.

My eyes go wide as the thing slithers and burrows under his skin. "What the fuck?"

"All will be welllll..." He begins to slur before he can finish, and then topples over to the side, unconscious. I'm left with a dead creature bleeding all over the floor, an unconscious, bleeding alien, and a whole ton of questions.

I freak out. Just a little. Because what the fuck do I donow?

One thing at a time, Aidy, I tell myself, and fight back frustration and helplessness. Corvak is just as stranded as I am, but he hasn't flailed. He's always had a plan. It's

time to have your own plan. I scrub my hands over my face, take a deep breath, and calm myself. Corvak needs help. His hands are bleeding, and I don't know if he's in pain. Then I can clean up the dead animal and figure out what to do with it.

I roll Corvak's heavy body onto its side in case he vomits and tuck a rolled-up fur under his head. I clean his arms and legs while he's unconscious and check him for more wounds. His toes feel like blocks of ice, which makes me think he's not as impervious to the cold as he thinks. I take one of his feet and pull it under my shirt, pressing it against my stomach to warm it. Read that in a romance novel once, and it seems like a good method.

As I warm his feet, I watch his bleeding, and it seems to slow down. Good. His sleep is restful, but I don't know how long he'll be under for. How long was I under for when he did the same for me? Almost a full day, but something tells me his physiology will probably handle it better...which means I need to be ready for him to wake up.

I eye the dead creature with dismay. It's lying on the floor, belly up, and I try not to get sick at the sight of it. Corvak thanked it for its sacrifice, and I don't want to just chuck the thing out of the cave. Its life has to mean something, even if it's just dinner for us. Time for me to suck it up and learn how to butcher...whatever that thing is. Killer Beaver, I decide. Gotta call it something. With a deep breath, I ease Corvak's feet back under the blankets and move toward the dead thing.

The bad guys in Texas Chainsaw Massacre did this sort of thing all the time, I tell myself. You can slice a few cutlets off a damn animal. Where do you think your supermarket meat comes from?

Even though I chide myself for being squeamish, I really hate that my food is staring back at me. I drop a fur over the thing's face so I don't see his face while I try to figure out how to turn him into steak.

CHAPTER

FIVE

CORVAK

I wake up to a stiff, aching cock.

Good. At least it's in working order. The suppressants must have worked their way out of my system and my body is responding. One less thing to worry about, at least. I move a hand to touch it, to stroke the discomfort out of my flesh, but when I lift my hand, I realize that it's wrapped up and covered.

I raise it into the air and peer at the bindings. "Why am I covered like this?"

"Oh, you're awake." Aidy gets to her feet, and when I look over, she has the fire at a pleasant height, and a tripod is set over it. A pouch of something hot and delicious is filling the air in the cave. She's been hard at work. She kneels next to me and smiles, all relief. "The more I sat here, the more I wondered if it was safe for your wounds to be exposed. So I cleaned them again and covered them. I don't have antibiotics, so I was hoping for the best."

Her scent drifts toward me as she sits at my side. Her smell has always been pleasant, but today it smells even better. I can't stop staring at her as she leans over and pulls at the bindings on my hand. Has her skin always looked this soft? Her fragrance so enticing? Her lovely neck exposed by her hair pulled back in a tail, calling to me to put my mouth there and taste her skin?

"How do you feel, Corvak?"

How do I feel? I feel fine, but the erection under the heavy blanket is becoming more

insistent by the moment. It throbs and pulses between my thighs, as if responding to her nearness. Aidy pulls the leather off my hand and runs a finger over one of my now-healed gouges, making an impressed sound in her throat.

That little pleased sound makes my cock jump, and a bit of wetness trickles down my shaft.

"Your hands look so good," she breathes, her voice soft and husky. It feels as if she's touching me with every syllable, and when her hands graze over my skin, my sac tightens dangerously. "It's incredible how fast you healed."

"Perhaps...it is...genetics...something I was bred for..." I manage. There is one lock of hair curling next to her small ear and I can't stop staring at it.

"Your claws—they retract?"

I lift a hand and show her, and love her sharp intake of breath, the way she puts a hand to her throat with sheer fascination.

"Your eyes are blue now," she says, her gaze moving to mine. "That could have something to do with it."

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:56 am

"Could. Agreed." Can't stop imagining how that curl would feel against my skin, or to run my fingers over the shell of her ear, or?—

A low humming catches my attention. The sound is distant at first, and then grows stronger, and it seems to be emanating from her.

Aidy lifts her head, glancing around the cave, and she seems as startled as I am. "What is that sound?"

"I thought it was you," I admit, sitting up. The blanket falls to my waist, hiding my erection, but it bares my chest. As it slides down, Aidy's gaze moves to my pectorals, as if seeing them for the first time.

"Oh my," Aidy breathes. Her hand goes to my chest, and she touches it, her fingers skimming lightly over the hair furred there. "You're humming."

I put my hand over hers, pressing her palm flat against my chest, and I keep watching her face. Her pink lips are parted, her nostrils flaring as her breathing quickens. How is she the most erotic thing I have ever seen? Is this why they sent her with me? To tempt me with what I will have if I am successful in their game? If so, it is working beautifully. I'm consumed with the urge to claim her, to push her down into the furs and make her mine forever.

She takes my hand and moves it to her chest, between her breasts. "I think I'm humming, too. Can you feel it?"

I nod.

"What does it mean?" Her gaze flicks to my mouth.

"I don't know. The others didn't hum."

"Maybe...maybe something was wrong with theirs."

"Or right with ours," I counter. My hand is still on her chest, her fingers brushing over mine. She's clothed so I can't touch her skin there, but I can feel the swells of her breasts and brush one with my thumb.

Aidy's breath hitches. Her gaze flicks to mine and then she leans forward and puts her mouth on me.

I'm shocked.

I remain still, trying to determine exactly what she is trying to accomplish with her mauling. Her lips move against mine, over and over, and I do not find it unpleasant. I do not understand it, but I don't dislike it either. I wait for her to use herteeth, to truly attack, but she does not. "Aidy, why are you trying to eat my face?"

"What?" She rears back in surprise at my words. Then, she gives a little shake. "Oh god, that wasn't me just now."

It wasn't? "Who was it?"

"No, I mean..." Her hands flick through the air in a nervous gesture. "I mean that isn't something I normally do!"

I understand. We have been together for days now and this is the first time she has tried to eat my face. No wonder she is confused. "Perhaps you should eat something if you are hungry."

"I'm not hungry! That's not why I—" she sputters, then shakes her head. "You know what? Just never mind. Forget about it."

As if I could forget such a thing. But for her sake, I suppose I shall try. "Then we should go soon. We have been in one place for far too long and we need distance between ourselves and the others."

She gets to her feet. "Fine. Let's just go. I packed while you were unconscious so we could be ready."

Why does she sound upset at me? If anything, I am the one that should be upset. It was my face she mauled. My face she was planning on eating. I think I have been very understanding about her strange actions. As she turns to get the packs she has prepared, I stand up, testing my limbs. Everything feels fine, even though I was unconscious for a time. No aches, no pains, no chills.

Well, no... there is one very specific ache that is not subsiding.

I look down at my cock, jutting forth from the sad remains of my loincloth. It is clearly outlined, the thin material tenting over my length. I put my hands on my hips, willing it to subside. I'm not going to be able to walk with my cock throbbing and bouncing in the air. There has to be a way to make it subside.

But what? I have no experience with such things. "I am not certain I can journey right now."

Aidy turns around, and her gaze drops to my cock. Her eyes widen and she stares down at it, which only makes my body respond even more. My skin prickles with awareness of her interest, and if anything, the humming in my chest grows louder. As I watch, the fabric covering my cock grows a damp circle.

"My meds have worn off." I'm not sad about it. It feels too good to have my cock full and heavy, the thick weight of my sac swinging low even as my cock strains outward.

"Oh. You were taking meds. I...see. Do you...need a moment?" Her voice is husky, soft. Gorgeous. Hungry. She keeps staring down at my hips, at the length jutting from my body.

I bite back a groan. "I need you to stop speaking like that."

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:56 am

"Like what?"

"Likethat." My body tightens, and my cock lets out another fierce throb. "And stop looking at me or it will never go down."

Her tongue darts out to wet her lips, and she nods, but she doesn't stop her staring. Her gaze flicks up to me, and there's a haziness in her gaze, her pupils large and dilated through the glowing blue. My arousal is affecting her, and a sweet perfume laces the air. It seems to be coming from her.

"Aidy," I warn, but I secretly want her to keep staring at me. I want her to come closer and get a good look at my cock. I want her to reach out and touch it for me, to see if the throbbing of it will cease once she caresses me. I want...I want...her.

I want her to wantme.

Her eyes settle on my chest, and her hand goes to her own breast. "We're still humming."

"I noticed." It's so intense it's making my balls shiver, which isn't helping my arousal any. "We're going to chase off any prey in the area if we try to hunt like this."

"It might be an issue," Aidy says. "How do we stop it?"

I shrug. I'm more concerned about the jutting, throbbing problem between my thighs. One issue at a time. I want to touch myself, to stroke my cock and try to soothe the ache out of it, but I don't know how Aidy will react. Humans are skittish, and there's

some hind-brain memory in my head that tells me that touching myself in public is not acceptable.

"Right," Aidy continues, unaware of my inner turmoil. "It's not going to matter if you don't get control of your boner. Can you go jump in the snow or something to cool off?"

"I am not overheated." Well, one part of me is, but I doubt there is enough snow to soothe it. "Do you think that will work?"

"How would I know? I don't have a dick!" She gives me a curious stare. "You don't know?"

Furtively, I run my hand down my front and rub to the side of my cock, watching Aidy's reaction. She watches me but doesn't protest, so I grip my shaft at the base, through the material. A groan rises in my throat, because squeezing it feels too good. "No memories. My cock...never worked before..." I try to control my breathing so I'm not panting, but it's difficult. I just want to squeeze and rub my shaft, all while she's watching me do so. That's part of the fantasy—her fascinated gaze upon me. "My prior iterations...kept on a regimen of suppressants to keep complacent...until battle. Never had a battle..."

"Oh." Her mouth parts and forms a soft O, and my mind fills with the idea of pushing my cock into that small space.

I close my eyes and give it a quick jerk. Can't help it. Can't stop.

"How long until it...until you calm down?" Her voice is slowing again, growing husky, and I know she's watching me. I know.

And it excites me.

"Can't...say." I'm not in any hurry to stop touching myself. I know we should be leaving, but I drag my hand up my shaft again and can't seem to care about anything more than pleasuring myself. "Any...assistance...appreciated. Very...distracting."

Aidy makes an outraged little noise. "I'm not giving you a hand job just because you ask!"

That makes me open my eyes to regard her. "What is a hand job? You said you didn't know anything about cocks."

Her expression grows flustered, and her hands flutter in that way I've come to recognize is her panicking. "It's just...me using my hands on you. To make you come. People do that kind of thing."

I put both hands on my cock, hating the tangle of material that's keeping me from touching skin. I cup my sac with one hand and use the other to squeeze and drag along my shaft. "Hand job...like this?"

She covers her eyes with her hands and then peeks out between her fingers. "You should know you shouldn't be doing that in front of me."

"Why not? You don't like it?"

That sweet, strange scent grows thicker in the air. Definitely coming from her, along with a good deal of humming. She continues to watch through her hands. "I didn't say that."

"Then why not do it in front of you? You can tell me if I'm doing it wrong."

"Most people do it without the clothing."

Thank kef for that. I push the offending fabric aside, freeing my cock, and love her startled intake of breath. I put my hands on my cock again, and she's right, it improves the situation. "Much better."

"Yeah?" There's a soft little hitch in her voice. She keeps staring, her gaze fascinated. She eyes my spur, then my cock. Spur, then cock, over and over. She's entranced with both. Her hand goes to her throat, fingers curling and stroking the base of it. "Can... can you take care of yourself?"

"To make my cock go down?" I am starting to think this impossible. If anything, it is harder than ever. Feels amazing, too. Its presence is distracting me almost as much as her avid, hungry stare.

Almost.

"Yes, I think so." Aidy's gaze flicks to me again, and she shifts in her seat, clearly unsettled. "Get yourself under control and then we'll be on our way."

As if I haven't been trying to control myself? "How?"

She thinks for a moment, pursing her lips, and that movement of her mouth just makes me want to stroke myself again. "Think of unpleasant things," she says. "Things like...how cold it is here."

"But the cold means that we are under the furs together," I growl, and defiantly stroke my clenched hand up my length, to the tip. "And you pressed your naked body against me for warmth."

"I did," she whispers. "I rubbed all over you, didn't I?"

Her words tear through me like a bolt of energy. With a shuddering breath, I stroke my cock again. "Keep talking."

She hesitates, but only for a brief moment. Then her hand moves down her front, lightly trailing. "When I woke up in the morning, and my nipples were pressed against your chest, my legs twined with yours...It was the only good thing about being here on this hellishly cold planet. You were so warm, and I felt so protected and safe."

Her words ignite my need. I love being her defender. Love that she's mine. No one

else will ever harm her, not while I breathe. "You like that I protect you?" I grit out between my teeth, my hand ferociously stroking. "Like that I can keep you safe?"

"I do," Aidy breathes. "It makes me feel like I'm not alone in this."

"I'd never leave you alone," I promise her. "Never. If you were lost, I'd come find you. No matter how long it took."

Her breath hitches, and that sweet scent fills the air even more.

"Is that why you say I'm yours?" Her voice is soft, her gaze still on my cock as I stroke it. "Because you feel responsible for me?"

"Because you are mine." I claimed her. Now I'd destroy anyone who so much looks at her. She's soft and lovely, sweet and fragrant, and when her eyes close and her hand brushes over one mounded breast, I want to mark her. Claim her as mine. I drag my hand over my cock again and step closer, and then my release boils through me. It splashes over her in thick white strands, over her makeshift clothing and on her bare skin.

I love the sight of my fluids on her skin. Love it.

Aidy gasps again, but she doesn't seem surprised at my need to mark her. She shivers and stares up at me, lips parted but makes no sound of protest. I pull in a ragged breath as the last of the release flares through me, and stagger.

"Feel better?" she asks, again, her voice so very soft and gentle.

Better?

I feel incredible. When I scent the air, her smell mingles with mine. The realization

feels almost as good as my hand on my cock. Almost. But I nod and stare down at my hand, now coated with my release.

"I'll get something we can use as a towel," Aidy says. "Then we can go."

CHAPTER

SIX

AIDY

I think this parasite has eaten part of my brain.

Because I just let a stranger—a guy I barely know, a growly feral alien—jerk off and come on my tits.

And I liked it. Encouraged it. Want him to do it again.

My head is fuuuucked.

The throbbing hum in my chest almost feels like music at this point, it's so loud. The sound hasn't gone down any, either. It just hums and purrs, and I don't know how to make it stop. If it wasn't for the fact that I feel so good, so healthy, I'd be panicking. As it is, I merely treat it as an oddity. Will I be hearing it in my sleep? Absolutely. Can I stop it? No. Explain it? Nope.

It's just...humming.

But when we step outside into the snow, the biting wind is as fierce as ever, yet the edge has been taken off of it. With the piles of furs wrapped strategically around my body, it just feels like...wind. It no longer feels like ice scouring the first layer of my

skin away. Whatever this parasite is doing to me, it's keeping me warm, and I'll take it. Maybe that's why Corvak says we need it to survive. Makes sense.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:56 am

I peek over at him from under my lashes, my cheeks hot. His confusion over what to do with his erect cock was rather charming. Like he had no clue how to make it go down. I guess if what he says is true and he was on medication to suppress his needs, it'd make sense that he didn't know anything about sex.

And apparently I've grown a submission kink because I loved seeing him touch himself and talk about how he owns me. I've never been so damned horny in my life, and I barely resisted the urge to touch myself. Even now as we step forward into the snow, my clothing rubs between my thighs and chafes in a way that reminds me that I didn't get to come and my slick, needy pussy is very, very aware of that fact.

Corvak pauses as we take a few steps forward, and I wonder if he's going to notice that under the layers of fur, my nipples are tight and aching. Or that my pussy is practically squelching with each step I take. He eyes me and then gestures at the pack on my shoulder. "Give me your bag."

I don't, because he's carried most of the load so far. He's done so much while I've just struggled to survive. "I can manage. I'm going to start pulling my weight. We're going to be equal partners from here on out."

Corvak just gazes down at me, a smile distorting his mouth and making his lower tusks prominent. "Equal partners?"

He says it like I've just said something cutesy, adorable, and unbelievable. Just like that, my pussy turns into the Sahara. So much for lusting after him.

I really am an idiot for losing myself in the moment.

I scowl in his direction. "So what's the plan, Corvak? You're the one that's been scouting. Where are we headed?"

The big alien doesn't notice my change in mood. He simply rubs his chest, thoughtful, and gazes around us. "So far I have seen nothing but more dangerous rocks and ice. We will go deeper into them, to where it is more difficult to survive. The more inhospitable the better."

His line of thinking seems to be the opposite of mine. "Don't you think we should try to get out of the mountains? Find someplace better than this?"

The look he shoots me is openly incredulous, as if I started speaking in tongues. "The mountains are defensible. The snow makes things treacherous. If it is dangerous to remain in the mountains, then that is what we will do, and we will establish a fortress stronghold. Then, we will force our rivals to come to us."

"A fortress," I repeat. "In the mountains?"

Corvak nods. "We are going to outlast the others. The best way to endure is to make it impossible for them to get the upper hand. In this case, we want defensible ground. We dig in and wait to be retrieved."

It makes sense...I guess. I'm not looking forward to the thought of staying in the cold, inhospitable mountains if there are other options, but I'm not the expert on these situations. "And what happens after we're retrieved?"

He glances over at me, his brows drawn. "I'm not entirely sure."

"I don't know if that makes me feel worse or better."

"It is the game that has been set for us," Corvak replies. "All we can do is play it."

His practicality soothes my irritation. He's right. This is what's been set out for us. The only choice we have is to succeed...or die trying. And after getting a glowing worm inserted in me and sleeping in dirty caves for the last few days, I'm not keen on dying.

So we walk. And we trudge through snow. The drifts are deep, and I end up letting Corvak walk ahead of me so he can plow forward and I follow behind him in the path he's made. The pack on my back, stuffed full of furs and food, grows as heavy as stone. The stolen canteen slung around my neck feels like a brick. I regret not letting Corvak take my bag, but how much of a weenie would I be if I whimpered and carried nothing? I grit my teeth and endure it, because there's nothing else to be done. No valet is going to show up and take my burden from me. No one's going to come and give us a ride.

As the day wears on, the scenery changes. Corvak deliberately picks the most inhospitable-seeming paths, looking for a way to climb higher and ever higher. We don't see anyone else, so his plan seems to be working.

I begin to feel more and more defeated as the hours drag by. The furs that are tightly wrapped around our feet are soaked from the snow, and the sharp rocks stab at the soles of my feet, because fur isn't a great protector. It grows colder, and the environment looks increasingly awful. There's no break in the landscape, either. Very few trees, very few animals, just more snow, more rocks, and more misery.

As it grows dark, the overcast sky turns from a muddy gray into a deep, thundery near-black that looks like storm clouds. "Should we find shelter soon?" I ask, chewing on a piece of jerky as we walk. We've eaten a few bites as we've traveled, but Corvak hasn't paused to take a break, and I don't want to be the wimp that demands one. My feet throb, my back aches, and my face feels wind burned. I mention none of this, because I don't want to be a weenie.

Whatever is going on in my chest is still distracting me, too. Its hum grows louder as the time passes until my ears are filled with the noise.

To make matters worse, my thoughts have been...indecent. All day. I keep thinking about this morning and Corvak touching himself. His appealing confusion on what to do. For some reason, even though he says silly things like "you belong to me" and "you're my prize", I'm not scared of him assaulting me. They sound like bluster, especially when he touches himself and comments that he's never done it before. I don't think most guys would admit that so freely, but he doesn't know to be ashamed of it. And because it's all new to him, my brain pounces on that like a cat on catnip, and I turn over filthy scenarios in my head all day. Me showing Corvak where his cock actually goes. Me licking his cock and watching his expression as he experiences it for the first time. Me seeing what that enticingly strange protrusion above his cock can do.

It feels like exactly the wrong time to be thinking horny thoughts about my companion, but I can't seem to help myself. My thoughts continually circle back to earlier, to his cock, to his awe at how aroused he was.

What would he have done if I'd stripped down and touched myself along with him?

"This looks like a suitable place." Corvak is climbing a heavy ledge ahead of me, his strong arms and legs making the task seem easy. His ass is eye-level with me, and I can't help but stare at it. Even covered in piecemeal furs, I can still see the outline of the bubble underneath. He had a great ass in that loincloth, I recall. Stump tail or no tail, there was no hiding that fantastic muscular outline, like the ass of a male figure skater or ballet dancer. An ass you can bounce quarters off. An ass you can sink your face into and just lose yourself. An ass?—

Wait, did he say he'd found a suitable place? I force myself to pay attention, giving my head a little shake to clear it from thoughts of me with my nose buried in his

yummy backside. "I'm sorry, what?"

He finishes hauling himself up to the ledge and then leans over to hold a hand down to me. "A good place to sleep for the night. Come see."

"Am I a party pooper if I point out that we're still outside?" I ask as I put my hand in his. I don't climb so much as Corvak just hauls me bodily up to his side, and for some reason, that turns me on again. So strong. So fit. Such a good butt.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:56 am

"You are not a pooper. And I do not see any caves," Corvak says with a shrug, then points behind him. "But underneath these rocks, the wind will not touch you, and we will have our backs to stone. It is a good spot and defensible for the night. We'll continue going higher in the morning."

Sleeping outdoors. Yippee. If this is anything like the movie *Pitch Black*, we'll be dead the moment it gets dark. If this was *Predator*, we'd be found by the aliens in a flash. If this was a zombie flick, we'd be sitting ducks. I bite back my whiny response, because it's not like he can make a cave appear out of thin air. He's doing the best he can. I eye the rocky overhang. The rocks themselves are coated with ice and snow and some tendril-like vines, but underneath the rock, a bit like a half-open clam, there's bare rock, just enough for us to wedge ourselves inside and cuddle for the night.

Actually...once the thought of cuddling hits me, I don't hate it. "Sounds like a plan. Thanks, Corvak. You have a good eye for this thing."

He grunts, but I suspect he's pleased at my praise.

I crawl into the belly of the "clam," and when I sit, my head just barely brushes the rocks. Corvak's taller than me, so he must hunch down a bit more to be comfortable. After we unpack, I pile furs around the two of us, and it's...not bad. It's not as comfortable as the cave with the fire was, but it's doable. I tuck the pack under my head like a pillow and curl up, munching on another piece of jerky. "What a long day."

"Get some sleep. I will take the watch." He rubs his chest, his expression grumpy.

"I can watch too."

"You are weak and fragile and need your strength. Sleep will help."

Again with the "weak" commentary. I mean, sure, he did have to haul me bodily for the first day or two, but does he really have to throw that in my face? He's killing my ladyboner here. "Not everything you say has to be chauvinistic, you know."

"Chau-what?"

"Me big strong man," I say in a caveman-like voice. "You puny woman."

"Youarea puny woman."

I sputter. "But you don't have to be a dick about it!"

"I am not trying to be anything," Corvak all but snarls at me. "I am trying to keep us alive."

Oh sure, make me sound like the bad guy. "You know what? You can have all the watch. I'm going to wash up and then sleep."

"Good."

"Fine!" I move to the edge of our cocoon and pick up a handful of clean-looking snow. It's probably not all that clean, but it's cleaner than I am at the moment, so it'll do. When it melts in my grasp, I rub the water all over my body, bathing as best I can while fully dressed. I scrub the important bits under my clothing, wash my face, and then braid my filthy hair to keep it off my face. Corvak says nothing. He watches me clean myself, but I don't give him anything to see. Once I feel refreshed, I climb under the blankets again and pull the furs up to my nose. Fuck him for not seeing how

problematic he is. Maybe once we get somewhere safe, we can split up and he can go on his way, and I can go on mine.

I squeeze my eyes shut, determined to sleep and forget all about today.

Yet once I close my eyes, I think of him, his eyes glowing and blue and riveted on his cock as he strokes it in front of my face. Of how much he liked the sound of my voice. Of how he gives blankets and food to me first, and he makes sure I'm taken care of. He never rolls his eyes at having to help me. Never acts putout, even when he has to carry my ass through the valleys and over steep, rocky crags.

I guess if I have to be stuck with a chauvinist alien, he's not the worst. I can probably teach him to be unchauvinistic. He can learn it, just like he's learning how to deal with his responsive cock.

His responsive, thick, juicy cock.

I swear I start humming louder the moment my thoughts turn, and it keeps me from falling asleep. In fact, I can't think of anything now except his dick, and how much I'd like to see him touch himself again. My head is a mess. Ironical that I felt better in the pocket cave, my feet in cat shit, all because I was curled up next to him, our bodies pressed together.

Squeezing my thighs tight, I glance over at Corvak. He has a fur wrapped around his shoulders and he's hunched, grimly staring out at the open night.

"I doubt anyone's coming this high up after dark," I whisper. "Why don't you come lie down with me?"

His gaze flicks in my direction, moving over my body. "Are you cold?"

"No, but I felt better with you in the blankets with me." It's a bold statement. A needy one. A gamble. He might see me as helpless all over again...or he might get as turned on as I am and join me. I should keep my mouth shut and continue to be strong, to be a quiet, decent partner, but this stupid humming in my chest is distracting the hell out of me. Hard to think straight when it keeps thrumming in my ears, drowning out my thoughts.

Corvak hesitates for only a moment and then joins me. He crawls under the overhang to my side and tosses his shoulder wrap over the pile atop me. A moment later, his damp boots brush against my legs, and I grimace, because I kicked mine off. "Can you get rid of your wet clothes?" I ask. "They feel gross."

He pauses and then peers at me in the darkness, his glowing, slitted eyes the only thing I can make out. "Is this you asking to mate?"

I sputter at his boldness and the accusing tone in his voice. "What the fuck?!"

"It is a valid question," he retorts, even as he slides the wet fur wraps off his feet and shoves them out from under the blankets. "You have had a strange smell about you all day. Ever since I showed you my cock."

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:56 am

"Are you saying Ismell?" I point over his shoulder. "Get out of these blankets right now. I changed my damn mind."

"No," he says, ignoring my orders. Instead, he leans in and his nose is right in my face. "I am saying there is a strange smell. I don't know what it is. But I do know it's coming from you." He inhales deeply, and I could swear he practically groans. "Definitely your scent."

My arousal—and irritation—both die down. Now I'm worried. "What kind of smell? Like a rotting smell?" What if the parasite did something to me? Or killed something in me? "Does frostbite have a smell?"

"This is a good smell. A sweet one."

"Rotten meat has a sweet smell," I point out.

"This is not rotten. It is mouthwatering."

The way he says the last word makes my toes curl. Mouthwatering?

Corvak growls and slides under the blankets between us. "It's strongest right here."

And the man cups my pussy through my leathers.

I squeal in surprise at his hand between my legs. "What the fuck?!"

He palpates my pussy, squeezing it as if it's fruit to be juiced. "Why do you smell so

incredible right here? What is this scent coming from?"

I'm torn between wanting to squirm away and wanting him to do it again. He's making my hormones go crazy. "Like I know? Is it what I'm wearing?" Surely he's not smelling my arousal, is he? I'm wearing layers upon layers. "Exactly how keen is your sense of smell?"

"Extremely." Corvak tugs at my clothing. "I'm going to unwrap you so I can find the scent."

"Are...are we sure that's wise?" I sound breathless even to my own ears. This is a bad idea. This is a very bad idea. And yet I'm not doing anything to stop him. If anything, I want to see what he does next.

Corvak pulls the first layer of my furs away, and one of the much-beleaguered leather strips gives way with a snap, releasing the rest of my makeshift clothing into a pile of furs. "It's all right, Aidy. I just need to make sure that you're well."

"Oh, I'm well." I'm purring and horny and confused, but I'm well.

He rips aside the last of my leathers and then I feel hot breath on my thighs. His low groan is muffled under the blankets. "Aidy, whatisthis? Why do you smell so good right here?"

Shit, he is smelling my arousal. "No need to panic thanks for being a concerned friend all good here," I babble. I press my hand to his forehead, trying to maneuver him away from the apex of my thighs. "Let's drop it?—"

He grips my hips and tugs me under the furs. "So you know what this is?"

There's no way I'm getting out of this with my pride intact. Face hot and flushed, I

squeak as his thumb presses against my plump mound, heading for my cleft. "If you must know, it's natural. It's my pussy...getting wet."

"Getting wet? Like my cock when I rubbed the liquid out of it?" He growls again and sure enough, his thumb skates over the seam of my pussy, his breath hissing. "So wet here. Mine didn't smell like this."

I wheeze, my thighs squeezing together. He pushes them apart, his thumb grazing up my cleft again, and the most ridiculous sound escapes my throat. I gasp for breath, then answer. "It's like...my body lubricates...when I get aroused...in the hopes of a big cock—er, a mating partner. That's what...you're smelling."

"And you've been lubricating all day?" His voice grows husky. "Why not take care of yourself? Like I did?"

I lick my lips and ponder my answer. It's hard to think with his fingers twitching against my skin. "I don't know. Seemed weird. Things like that are private where I come from. You don't just touch yourself in front of a stranger."

"But I am not a stranger," Corvak replies, and his finger strokes through my folds, not quite teasing my clit. I quiver as he explores lower, finding the entrance to my body and testing it with a fingertip. "I am yours, just like you are mine. And you helped me."

"Yeah, but..." How do I explain that the way I'm feeling, I don't know if it would be a normal sort of release? That it wouldn't be a one-and-done? I feel too amped up, too wild. Bucking my hips against his hand, I whimper. "And you're good now? After touching yourself once this morning?"

His big finger presses against the entrance to my core again, and I rock my body, trying to get more from him. "I did not say that. I am very aroused right now, Aidy.

My cock aches. It throbs. And I want to pull it out again and spray you."

Oh god. I want that, too. "Show me."

CHAPTER

SEVEN

CORVAK

Aidy wants me to cover her with my scent again? To shoot the thick, acrid release from my cock onto her skin? I love the thought. It fills me with hunger...

...and yet I am in no hurry to leave the cradle of her thighs. She is impossibly soft and heated here. Smells incredibly good, her body wet with her wanting. Under the blankets, her scent is thick and heady, surrounding me and perfuming every breath. It makes my mouth water.

She rocks her hips against my fingers and whimpers again, the sound one of need and distress. I recognize this noise. She has made it in the past when she needed assistance. Does she need my assistance now and doesn't know how to ask? I think of how she gets vague whenever I ask her blunt questions. Perhaps I need to be blunter. Perhaps humans expect the male to demand.

I note her responses carefully, looking for clues. I slide two fingers up and down the wet channel between her thighs, fascinated by it. She's not smooth here. There are different textures and varied folds of skin. There is her fur. There is her intoxicating, delightful scent. There is the entrance to her body that practically sucks on my fingertip when I touch her there. I want to explore her even more. I want to find out what she likes, and what will make that glorious wet scent come forth even stronger.

My mouth waters, and I lift my fingers. They are coated and slick, the smell maddeningly inviting. I taste one and groan, my cock leaping in response. I press a hand to it to stop myself from spilling, but I need to taste her again. "Is it a bad thing if I want more of your taste?"

She whimpers, her voice soft as she responds. "No..."

"Good. Because I'm going to put my mouth on you." This way I can touch and taste her as much as I want, and I can save one hand to rub my cock.

Aidy moans, her thighs spreading wide. Her humming sound is even louder and makes mine feel just as wildly loud in response. I lower my head between her legs and bury my face into that slick, wet cleft. She sucks in a breath as I nuzzle her furred mound. It holds her scent and smells wonderfully. With the tip of my tongue, I trace down along the part between her thighs. My cock throbs and aches as I squeeze and stroke it, but my focus is on her. I touch one soft fold and then nip it with my teeth. "What is this part of you called?"

She draws in a shaky breath. "That...that's my labia."

"This is not something I have?"

Aidy makes a sound that might be a chuckle. Her hand steals down to touch a curious little bump near my nose. She gives it a swipe with her fingers and then moves away. "No. You have a very different set of equipment."

Interesting. "I want to learn yours."

"Sure." She takes a ragged breath. "Ask anything you like."

I trace a fingertip over that bump, mimicking her action. "What is this part?"

She cries out, her hips jerking. "M-my clit!"

It might be sensitive like the head of my cock. I drag my fist over mine and lean down to draw a circle against that bump with my tongue. Aidy whimpers again, then

moves her fingers down to press her folds apart, revealing and making that bump prominent so I can touch it more easily. "You like that?"

"Yesss," she hisses. "More, please, Corvak."

I can do more. I jerk my cock harder, my hand working up and down my shaft. I'm on the verge of release, but I'm not about to stop now. Not when her scent is coming in heavier than ever and she's letting me put my mouth on her. No wonder females are held as prize rewards for gladiators. For another taste of Aidy, I would fight everyone on this planet.

"Suck here," she tells me. "Make me come."

I place my mouth over her as she instructs, and suck on the small bud. Odd that she would want my touches here and not where my cock is supposed to go, but as long as I am pleasuring her, I do not care. She grabs my mane, crying out and writhing against my mouth as I suck on her sweet flesh and use my tongue to tease the underside. Aidy undulates, her heels digging into the furs, and I work my cock with a furious grip, stroking as fast and hard as I can. The humming is in my ears, and all I hear is the sound of our bodies thrumming together, my pulse pounding in my veins, and her soft cries as she climaxes.

By the time she comes, my face is soaked with her release, and my hand is covered in my own. At some point in her climax, I came, too. The furs are marked with my scent, but best of all, I'm covered with hers.

She pants, trying to catch her breath, even as her legs tremble against my shoulders. "For the record, I wasn't trying to get you to fuck. I just felt safer with you next to me."

"There is no need to feel unsafe," I tell her, lightly scraping my teeth over the inside

of her soft leg. I'm feeling drowsy and possessive of my female. "You're mine and I will protect you from all."

"Do you...do you think the parasite you put in us is making us like this?"

Her words confuse me. I lift my head under the blankets, but I can't see her face, and I'm in no hurry to leave this coveted spot. "Like what?"

"Like...I don't know. A couple of horny teenagers at a drive-in just before the axe murderer shows up."

I huff with amusement at that. "My cock is working now, and I am with a desirable female. You think I would not take every opportunity to claim you as my own?"

"I... guess. I was just wondering." She touches my face, stroking my cheek under the blanket. "Are you going to stay down there all night?"

Is that an option? If so, it is the one I choose, yes.

CHAPTER

EIGHT

AIDY

I expect to feel shy the next morning around Corvak, but when I wake up next to him and he gives me a delighted grin, it's hard to feel weird. I smile back, and the day seems a little brighter.

Then again, most days seem brighter the morning after you get your pussy ate.

We get dressed, and I wrap new furs around my feet, wincing at the blisters on my soles. There's a red, irritated mark on my shoulder from carrying my pack, and I feel as wimpy as Corvak makes me out to be. I add a little more padding in the hopes it'll fix the issue and then drag my pack on. "Shall we go?"

Corvak frowns down at his cock, adjusting the front of his clothing. He's not as buried in leathers as I am, but he's definitely wearing more layers than when we first met. "My cock is stiff again."

He sounds so dismayed that I have to bite back a chuckle. "I've heard that happens in the mornings."

"Every morning? I do not know whether to be delighted or annoyed." He shoots me a hopeful look.

I pretend not to see, stepping out to the lip of the trail and eyeing the sunrise. What we had last night was fun, but I'm not ready to be at his beck and call every time he wants a hand job. If we were in love, it'd be different. We barely know each other. He's going to have to learn to cope. I put a hand to my brow, squinting up at the sun. Correction, suns. There's two of them, tiny dots in the sky like a spider bite. That's new. "Weather's clear today."

Corvak grunts, and I could swear I hear him humming from across the rocks. I'm feeling a little aroused myself, this morning, but I'm also starting to grow worried about that. Why am I in a perpetual state of horniness when I should be focused on survival? It makes no sense, and I worry something else is going on. That kills my ardor. I turn around, and notice Corvak has himself in hand, furiously working his shaft with what can only be described as a resigned expression.

"I'll give you a moment," I tell him and turn my back again.

"Talk to me?" he asks, voice strained as he works his cock.

Something tells me he doesn't want to hear more about the weather, but I'm not interested in dirty talking. Well, okay, I am, but I'm also trying to set boundaries. I study my nails. "Do you think they did something to us? When they dumped us here on the planet?"

He doesn't answer, but his breathing turns ragged.

I resist the urge to peek—strong, Aidy! Be strong!—and continue to pick at a jagged nail. "I'm just curious because we're still strangers, but we're also constantly all over each other. I don't know about you, but that's not normal for me. So I'm wondering if they gave us something when they dropped us here."

"Possible," he grits out, and then I hear a deep gasp and a shuddering breath. Money

shot, if I don't miss my guess.

I peek. I'm the worst, but I peek. Sure enough, he's got his arm pressed to the rock, and his forehead resting against his arm as he leans forward, hand on cock, and works the last of his release out. There's steam rising from the spot on the rocks he just anointed, and I have to clench my thighs together again because the sight of it is arousing the hell out of me and it should not be. The thing in my chest throbs. "What about this parasite you put in us? Could it be why?"

Corvak cleans his hands on snow and then adjusts his clothing. I turn around, presenting my back again, pretending I wasn't watching. "I do not think it was the parasite," he says, and I can hear him picking up his pack. "The other gladiators were not overcome with arousal, and at least one had a parasite of his own."

Good point. I think he would have noticed if the other men had been all over each other. Not the parasite, then, though the humming is distracting. "I see."

He moves to my side, his body lightly brushing against my leg as he does, and I clench my thighs, wondering if he's going to call me out for an arousal smell. But he only eyes the desolate, icy rocks around us, as if trying to determine the best route forward.

"Where to?" I ask brightly. "You're the man with the plan."

To my frustration, Corvak shrugs. "We walk until we find what we are looking for."

"And remind me of what we're looking for?"

"I will know it when I see it."

Super. Just what a girl wants to hear.

We head out, and I notice that we head up today. Not down the sharply sloping cliffs, nor do we seek out easier footpaths or even more of the supply caves like before. Corvak heads higher and higher into the forbidding mountains, his gaze constantly landing on the tallest purple peak in the distance, the top of it hidden by clouds. I hope his plan is a good one, but I don't have a plan of my own, so it's not like I can complain.

I don't want to walk in silence, either. I think about last night and how he'd gone down on me eagerly, all because he could smell my arousal. Just thinking about it starts to make me turned on, so I decide to focus on other things. "Why don't you tell me about yourself, Corvak?" I ask as we hike. "We can get to know each other."

"There is not much to tell. I am a splice." He shrugs, unbothered. "We are given rules so we know the games, but not much else."

"See, I'm not entirely sure what you mean when you say things like that. What's a splice? What do you mean, you're given rules but not much else?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:56 am

"How come you did not touch me this morning?"

His voice is casual, but I'm not fooled. The answer matters a lot to him. Did I hurt his feelings when I ignored his requests? Can I afford to hurt his feelings? "I'm not at your command, Corvak. I don't have to do something just because you want it."

"But...I touched you last night. You enjoyed it, I think?" His expression turns vaguely smug. "I tasted your enjoyment."

Rude. I stiffen, trying not to get my back up. "I did enjoy myself, and I appreciate the pleasure, but it doesn't mean that I owe you something."

"I did not mean to offend, Aidy. I am trying to understand." He glances over at me. "Me asking you this morning...it was not correct?"

My wariness turns to chagrin. He's an alien. I can't expect him to know how to handle sexual situations with a human. Even if he'd had sex before—which he has not, it seems—he wouldn't understand our cultural mores. "I'm not trying to be a jerk, Corvak. It's just a complicated situation. I feel we should be focusing on surviving, not on personal relationships. I don't want us to get distracted."

Corvak eyes me, his expression insulted. "You think I would be so distracted by my cock that I would endanger us?"

"You tell me. You were the one that couldn't walk yesterday morning."

He scowls and stomps a few paces ahead of me, then climbs a near-sheer bit of rock

up ahead, moving higher into the mountains with skill. I move to the rock after him, wondering where I need to put my hands when everything looks smooth. Corvak lowers his hand to me, a challenge on his face.

"I'm not trying to insult you." I put my hand in his. "I just want to live."

"Bah. Do not worry about survival. I will take care of you." He hauls me up effortlessly, and I fly upward, landing at his side. I wobble and his arm goes around my waist, pulling me in close. Corvak shoots me another cocky grin. "I am far more interested in tasting your thigh mound again than worrying about survival."

Mywhat? I'd giggle, but the intense, hungry look in his eyes makes the laughter die in my throat. "My pussy. It's called my pussy."

"Your pussy, then. If I ask nicely, can I taste you again?"

He's holding me so close that it's distracting me. "As long as you don't expect that I shouldhaveto reciprocate. It should be my choice to touch you. Just like it's your choice to touch me."

Corvak's hand twitches on my back, and he leans in close. I pull back, confused, but he only rubs his nose against mine. "I understand, Aidy. You are my female, and I don't want to make you uncomfortable. I'm still learning how to please you."

He could start by not referring to me ashis, but this is close enough to an apology, and I'll take it. "You did just fine. Better than fine. And you know, I'm happy to instruct."

He rubs his nose against mine again and then gives me a wicked, knowing grin. "You smell good today, too."

"Annnd that's enough of that," I say, sliding out of his grip, blushing. "Can we just

travel, please?"

Chuckling, he releases me and points at the sloping rocks. "We're going higher. I think it levels out just above. We will see how things look then."

Lovely. I lean forward to balance myself, watching as he moves up the rocky slope. "So how is it you don't have memories anyway? What's the story with that?"

"I told you, I'm a splice. We are created beings." His stump tail twitches, making his clothing jump.

"Everyone's a created being. Created like how?"

"Someone picks out the traits they want their gladiator to have, and I am produced in a lab and sent to my new owner."

Produced in a lab...? "So, what? You were never a baby? Or a child? You just popped out of a test tube fully grown?" I take the hand he extends down to me and haul myself up after him. "How does that work?"

"Just like that, I suppose. It was not the same with you?" He doesn't seem concerned. He makes sure my footing is solid and then continues climbing.

Of course it wasn't the same with me. "Absolutely not. I have memories. I was a kid. I..."

I pause.

"Go on," he says, encouraging.

But I can't go on. Because the more I look for proof of how right I am, the more blank

my mind feels. I search for memories, assurances that what I'm saying are legit. My name, I decide. That's an easy one. Aidy's short for A.D. Which is short for...

Short for...

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:56 am

I have no idea. Hot panic flashes through me. "Ask me something, Corvak. Something I should know."

"What species are you?"

I wave a hand. "Too easy. Ask me something specific. Something that pertains only to me."

He stops climbing, sensing my panic. "Tell me about your home place."

I shake my head, because my mind is blank.

"Then tell me about who created you."

"My parents," I say with gusto, because that's an easy answer. I try to call up their faces from my memories, and when that fails, their names. Something? Anything?

But all I'm getting is...fog. If I was a radio, I'd be nothing but static right now. There are vague blips here and there, mental images of things, but everything is a mess, and when I try to focus on specifics, it all disappears. It's like trying to hold a handful of mist. I have a vague sense of a wet nose pressing against my hand, of the creak of wooden stairs. "I had a house. And a...job? At a movie theater, I think. But I don't remember anything else. Nothing's coming together."

"Stasis will do that," Corvak says confidently. "It can affect your memories."

"Really? How do you know?"

He shrugs. "I just know."

I have to take his word for it. He puts his hand out again to help me climb, and I take it, but I no longer feel like talking. How am I supposed to get to know him when I don't know anything about myself? There has to be something I recall.

Anything...?

CHAPTER

NINE

CORVAK

We travel through the day, climbing higher, heading for the tallest peak in the range of jagged, purplish mountains. I enjoy the climb—my muscles burn with the workout, and I like that I'm getting to exercise. Aidy's breathing is heavy behind me, a sign that she's struggling to keep up, but she never complains.

When dusk approaches, there is no cave to shelter in, so we look for rocks that will protect us from the worst of the wind and relax wrapped in furs, seated upright and pressed against one another.

Aidy's mood is terrible. She's no longer chatting or teasing. She's been silent since our earlier conversation, and I don't know how to break her from her sadness. I am beginning to suspect that Aidy is not a human captive as she thinks, but a clone like me. It would explain the lack of specific memories, and the fact that the hand that grips mine when we climb has no calluses, no scars of any kind.

I keep these thoughts to myself. I do not think she is ready to hear them.

I do not like her silence, though. I am good at answering her questions, but when it is my turn to ask what troubles her, I do not know how to begin. I want her to smile and say teasing things. I like Aidy best when she is joking, her mood light despite the danger of our situation. Now her expression is bleak, as if she has lost all hope. I have to give it back to her somehow. But how?

The skies darken as we sit under the furs together. As they do, the stars come out. Like grains of sand, they fill the night sky and pepper it with light. There are two moons here, but the stars are the true beauty. The skies begin to dance with greenish and pink hues in addition to the colorful nebulae splashed amongst the darkness. It is awe-inspiring to see, and I wonder if she appreciates it as much as I do. I nudge Aidy with my elbow. "Do you see the stars?"

"Hard not to." She sounds a bit like her old self, and she leans her head against my shoulder.

I like that she pulls closer to me. "Which one is yours?"

"No idea," she says. Then her face crumples and she sobs.

I panic. She is that sad today? I turn to face her fully, wiping at her wet cheeks. "Do not cry, Aidy."

"S-sorry." She sniffs hard and wipes her face, her hand tangling with mine, but the tears keep coming. "Not trying to be a baby."

"You are not a baby." I brush her hair back from her wet cheeks as if my fussing will somehow help the situation. I need her to be happy. I need her to laugh. So I think fast. "Do you want me to kill something?"

The sound she makes is a cross between a choked laugh and a cough, but it's a good

sign. "Kill something?"

"It makes me feel better to be productive."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:56 am

Aidy sniffs again and gives me a woebegone look. "Something's wrong with me, Corvak. I keep trying to find memories that I know should be there, but I can't come up with anything. It's freaking me out. I hated the movie Memento, you know. Now I'm living it."

My suspicion that she is a clone heightens, but that might alarm her even more, so I keep it to myself. "I am here with you. Whatever happens, I am with you." I offer my hand to her, palm up, and I am pleased when she slides her cold fingers into my grasp. I give them a reassuring squeeze. "How do you feel physically? Any pains? Weaknesses?"

She swipes at her nose and gives me a wary look. "Fine, I guess."

"Are you still aroused?"

This time she snorts. "Always."

"Then I do not see a problem." And I grin.

This time, she does laugh. It's a little reluctant, but she manages a small smile. And even though my cock aches and throbs, and I want nothing more than that little smile of hers. "I appreciate the pep talk. It's just...the memories thing? It scares me."

I nod, then hold up a finger. "Do you know what this is?"

Her eyes flash with irritation and she grabs my finger and pulls it down. "Be serious, Corvak."

"I am serious. You know the basics. You know what a hand is. You know how to drink water. You know how to put on your clothing. You know how to work my cock. So you do have a few memories." I shrug.

Her gaze grows suspicious. "Why is it we always end up talking about your cock again?"

"Because it proves my point."

This time, Aidy's brow goes up. "How, exactly?"

"I did not know how things worked and you did. That tells me you have more knowledge than you think."

She grows quiet at that, her expression thoughtful. "But I don't know my name. My full name. Aidy's short for something. And I keep trying to picture my parents, but I can't see them, either. I can't remember what I did for a living, just that I had a commute that was forty-five minutes each way and traffic was a nightmare."

I decide to give her an answer—but a vague one. "We cannot rule out that you were drugged or left in stasis for so long that it has clouded your memories. The ones that sent us here have no boundaries to what they will or will not do. It is likely that this is temporary, just like the suppressants they gave me, and your memories will return with time."

Aidy brightens, hope on her delicate face. "You think so?"

I smile at her and lie because the truth will hurt her. "I do."

She buries her face against my arm, holding it to her thrumming chest. "You're the best, Corvak. I'm glad if I had to be stranded out here, it was with you. Thank you for

being so supportive."

The pleasure in her voice makes me want to pull her close. To haul her into my lap and hold her tight. Grind her against my throbbing cock, sure, but mostly to just hold her. "We are together in this, Aidy. You are mine and I am yours."

She peeks up at me. "I'm sorry I didn't jerk your cock for you this morning."

Just like that, my sac tightens, and I am ready to release. I grit my teeth. You could jerk it now.

But I still do not yet understand Aidy's moods, and she said she had to want it. That her touching me is not a given. That it must be her choice. And if I try to think like Aidy, I am thinking that she is not in a cock-jerking mood, despite the arousal that perfumes the air around her. It kills me to simply nod. "You did not want it. I am learning."

Her smile grows broader, Aidy leaning against my arm with such trust. "You're a good guy..." Her gaze goes to the night sky. "...and the stars are really pretty tonight."

"Better than on your planet?" I ask, glancing up at them. "I only have memories of a space station and laboratories, so they are new to me."

"Back home there were so many city lights that you couldn't really see the stars, not like this. I don't know if they're different or similar, but you can see them here." She points up. "And those waving green lights? I think those are Northern Lights. Like the Aurora Borealis. At least, that's what we called them back home."

"Are they only in the north? They look a bit like smoke."

"I don't know. I—" She breaks off abruptly as something white flashes directly above us. "A shooting star."

We both stare in silence as the thing flares brightly, a long tail streaking across the sky. It looks as if it lands just on the other side of the mountains, and a tiny dome of light trails after it.

"Holy shit, did it land?" Aidy's fingers dig into my arm. "What was that?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:56 am

I don't know. Perhaps a change to the game's rules? Perhaps we are not being bloodthirsty enough for those that are running this bout and so they seek to shake things up. "It might be a weapon drop, perhaps a tool of some kind. Supplies."

Her eyes are wide as she stares at me. "Should we go get it?"

I contemplate this. We are likely not the only ones that have seen this flaring light, this drop. There will be others hunting for it, which is dangerous. But if it is weapons, I cannot allow the others to get all of them and put the other gladiators at an advantage. "We should, in the morning when it is safe."

"I don't know if I'm going to be able to sleep," Aidy breathes.

Nor me.

CHAPTER

TEN

AIDY

I'm a liar—I sleep like a log. Curled up against Corvak's side, I feel safe and protected. Reassured. Content.

So much so that when I wake up, I feel the throbbing ache of arousal between my thighs, and I want to do something about it. I slide my hand under the blankets and reach between his legs, seeking his cock. "I feel like touching this morning," I

whisper to him. "Is that all right?"

He growls, his chest humming frantically, and tilts his face toward me, then moves to rub his nose with mine.

I push my hand into his pants, touching his already hard length. He's scorching hot here, my hand skimming past the strange bony nub he has jutting over his cock. I don't think it's like my clit, as he ignored it when he touched himself. I move past it, curling my fingers around his shaft and squeezing. "Is that a yes?"

Corvak hisses, his eyes closing briefly and his hand going over mine. "You need the words? Yes, a thousand times yes."

"I like the words," I say playfully. "Maybe I'll do more touching if you say my name nicely."

"Aidy." He groans the word out as if he's in pain, drawling out the last part of my name. "Why does your hand feel so much better than mine?"

"Because I'm really good at this," I tease. "And you have a really nice fat cock, so that makes this easy." He leans his head towards mine again, and I have the sudden urge to nip his earlobe. His mouth is closest, and I give his lower lip a gentle bite instead. He's so into my touch. He makes me feel like a goddess, like I'm the sexiest woman on the planet. Hell, I might be the only woman left on the planet, but he acts like he's won the lottery if I caress him.

It makes me want to do more.

His eyes flutter, still closed, and I work his cock with hard, vigorous strokes. I was initially worried this would end up a dry hand job, but he's leaking so much pre-cum that my hand is quickly lubricated. His excitement enhances mine, and I'm panting as

I work his cock, softer on the downstroke and tighter as I glide toward the head. "I like touching you," I tell him, and nip at his lower lip again. "And I like making you come."

"Aidy," he asks, breathless. "Can I ask you something?"

"Does it have to be right now?" I run my thumb over the head of his cock. His length is just right, and the head of him is thick and prominent. He's circumcised, which I find a little strange given that he's been genetically "created" but maybe his people don't have foreskins. Maybe I'm thinking about this too much and I should just be enjoying.

He opens his eyes, just a little, and the blue glow of them is as hungry and needy as the expression on his face. "I just want to know...why...you chew...on my face. Does it taste good?"

I pause. "What the heck are you talking about?"

His hand goes over mine again, a little hiss escaping between his teeth. "Never mind. Just keep touching me."

I do. I work my hand over his length as quickly as I can, murmuring filthy words to him about how good he's going to feel when he's inside me. How I'm going to taste him and cover my mouth with his seed. How I'm going to haul him into a cave and just use him for hours on end for my own selfish needs. He loves all of it, and my talk excites him. When his hand closes over mine and we jerk his cock together, I know he's close.

He moves my hand roughly over his length, and then he's coating our joined hands, the mess covering our entwined fingers as we wring out the last of his pleasure. I watch his face, fascinated by how tight his jaw gets when he comes, and how his eyes

squeeze shut, only to open again after he lets out a long sigh. His pupils are dilated with pleasure as he gazes at me, and the look on his face is downright adoring.

"You're welcome," I say softly.

"I am indeed." Corvak doesn't let go of my sticky hand. He just continues to gaze at me as if he's never seen anything better. "I never want to touch myself again. I will just wait for you to do it. Because after experiencing your hand, mine feels inadequate."

I smile up at him, my pulse throbbing between my thighs. I'm very aware of my own arousal, and how I need to come, too. "Let's wash up and then I want to take care of myself."

His tired gaze suddenly sparks. "Can I do it?"

My thighs are already open. "I thought you'd never ask."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:56 am

He doesn't stop to get a towel. His big, sticky hand is on mine in his pants, and then it's gone. A moment later, he's under my clothing, wet hand and all, and brushing over my clit with cum-covered fingers.

I make a wordless sound in my throat, because it's both hot and filthy and wrong and I'm loving every second of it.

His touch is gentle at first, and when I whimper, he moves faster, his gaze on me the entire time. It's unnerving, being stared at while someone touches me, but at the same time...I like it. It's like he's never wanted anything as much as he wants to see me come, and it makes my arousal go through the roof. When he growls my name, I clutch at his arm and let the orgasm sweep over me.

Corvak pulls his hand away and studies our mingled fluids with what can only be pride. "Now you smell like me in your best spot."

That is so fucked up that he's trying to "mark" me. Even more fucked up is how much I like it.

Panting, I slide my thighs together. I feel good, and if it weren't for the incessant humming, I'd probably be relaxed. As it is, the humming in my chest never seems to end, leaving me with a sensation of needing to come again. Which is ridiculous. I'm a little worried that this might be a pattern. What if being on this planet leaves humans perpetually horny? What do I do then?

Other than climb all over a very happy Corvak, of course.

I glance over at him, and the look on the big alien's face is dazed but elated. He wipes his hand down and gives it another pleased sniff before offering me the towel, a downright adoring expression warming his eyes.

There are worse things than a happy Corvak, I decide, and take the towel with a smile. "Shall we go find our comet?"

CHAPTER

ELEVEN

CORVAK

We are being followed.

My senses prick as we travel, constantly on alert for danger. Not that I think the other gladiators are anywhere nearby. They were a clumsy lot, lacking stealth and subterfuge. But there are other dangers out here. As we have descended from the cliffs into lower territory, I have seen great flying birds big enough to swallow Aidy whole. I have seen tracks in the snow made by animals bigger than my mind can comprehend.

And right now? Right now, I am picking up a brand-new scent.

Aidy has not noticed anything yet. She is in a good mood today, her smile as bright as the sunlight overhead. Today she is not fretting about her lack of memories. Instead, she asks me about the races I am spliced from. She is unfamiliar with mesakkah and praxiian both, and those are my primary sources. I suspect I have traces of other races as well, but which ones, I am uncertain. She asks about my tail, and giggles when the stump of it flicks with irritation.

I much prefer Aidy's laughter to her tears. If she needs her pussy fondled every morning to put her mood to rights, I would be honored to do so for her.

"What do you have in mind for our fortress? Are we thinking a cave or something more like an igloo?" she asks, even as the wind drifts with the scent of...something. It is not the gladiators, nor a human, or any species I am familiar with. The smell is foul and growing stronger by the moment.

I glance over at Aidy, unsure if I want to ruin her mood just yet. It might be nothing. I have not heard anything. "I will know it when I see it."

She makes an exasperated sound, glancing over at me. "It would be nice to have a plan of some kind."

"I will plan based on what we have been given. I cannot bet on a cave if there is no cave to be found."

"Mmm, okay, you have a point." She holds onto my arm as we move carefully down a gravel-covered slope and nearly loses her footing. I hold onto her until she straightens, and then she makes a face. "I wish they'd dropped that pack closer to us. What do you think it was?"

I turn my head ever so slightly, looking for scents again. "Whatever it is, we want it first. If nothing else, so we can keep it out of the hands of the others."

"You're scaring me with that kind of talk, Corvak."

I nod, even as my thoughts race about what could be dropped here in a supply crate. All of my ideas of what it could be are terrible ones, though. "I will not lie to you, Aidy. If it is a crate of weapons, we do not want the others to get them."

Her hand tightens on my arm. "Kinda makes me want to run back into the mountains. Just find a nice gopher hole and never come out."

I do not point out that most weapons have heat sensors and targeting, and they would find her easily. Instead, I pause. "Do you want to find someplace to hide?" Normally I would hate this idea, but normally there is not a strange scent in my nose, telling me that there is something headed in this direction. I do not want to lead Aidy into danger. "If you want to separate, I will find my way back to you."

"What? No. Not at all." She continues to hold onto me. "We're in this together."

I smile at the sincerity of her response. No wonder they put me on suppressants. I am oozing feelings right now. Aidy's smile broadens, and her gaze flicks to my mouth. Is she going to try and eat my face again? At some point she has to realize it's strange, doesn't she? Her gaze slides to the side and she stares at something over my shoulder. "Is that a bit of smoke in the distance?"

Turning, I scan the sky. Sure enough, a tendril of smoke is staining the clouds in the direction we are heading. Is that the package? "I'm not sure supplies should be smoking."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"Maybe it's something else? Or maybe someone else already got there?" Aidy shoots me a worried look.

"Either way, we need to check it out," I tell her grimly.

Our hiking takes on a hurried edge. I push her harder than I mean to, but I am worried as to what that smoke means for us. If someone else retrieves a weapons cache, it is all over. It's an advantage I won't be able to counter, no matter how crafty I am. We move steadily toward the tendril of smoke, keeping it in our sights. The valley we are traveling around loops and winds throughout the rocky mountains, and I grow impatient to see what it is we're chasing. With Aidy following my lead, I direct her to climb the next cliff instead, so we can get a good look at what exactly is down below.

All the while, that pervasive, strange scent fills my nose.

We climb to the top of the ridge. To my relief, we can see down below, where the source of the smoke is. It looks like nothing more than a scorched stain on the side of a neighboring cliff. Whatever hit left a mark on the rocks and tumbled down to the snows below, melting everything in its path. There's a large bare circle in the snow, yellowish with plants of some kind, and in the center, a black...something.

"What is that?" Aidy asks, panting, as she moves to my side.

I honestly have no idea. I squint, wishing my sight was better. It is excellent, but from this far away, I have my doubts as to the accuracy. "It looks like a rock."

"So a meteor, not a drop?"

"A what?" I ask, puzzled.

"You know, a comet? Space debris? Something falling from the skies because it made it through the atmosphere."

I have no such word in my memories, but perhaps those who created me did not see the need for it. "We should go examine it."

"What? No! Look, it's still smoking!" Aidy gestures at the "rock" below. "That thing is going to be molten hot. And it might be radioactive. Space is full of radioactive waves." Her expression turns to one of confusion. "At least...I think it is?"

I do not know what radioactive is either. Her warnings are valid, though. If it is not a gift from whoever is running this game, it might be something to avoid. "Perhaps..."

I trail off as the wind changes, and then the smell overpowers us. Aidy gags, her hand going to her mouth. The smell is rancid and foul, with a kind of stink I have never experienced before. I whirl about, ready to confront whatever sort of wild animal it is that smells like death.

But standing at the base of the slope, gazing up at us, is not a wild animal. It is a stranger. A native people of some kind. The newcomers stand on two legs, their arms long and thin, their bodies covered with a filthy pale fur and no clothing. The strange faces have large, rounded eyes, and a small tearing beak for a mouth. There is not just one waiting for us, but a dozen, maybe more.

Aidy's hand goes to my arm and she steps closer to me. "Are...are those the gladiators you said you saw?"

"No," I say. "They are an entirely new problem."

"Shit." She glances behind us. "I don't think we can jump and make it. What do we do now?"

I sling the pack off my shoulder and check my weapons. This is the moment I have been waiting for—to display my prowess to my female. Yet I didn't anticipate that the enemy would be so close to Aidy, or that there would be so many of them. I want Aidy far away from these aliens, somewhere safe....but that is not an option. "You stay here behind me. I will handle this."

And I step forward, bracing my legs slightly apart so they know I am the one to fight.

CHAPTER

TWELVE

AIDY

I'm just as shocked as Corvak is that this planet is inhabited. It's desolate and bleak and unforgiving, and for some reason, I thought it would be abandoned except for us and the other contestants. Seeing the white-furred, ape-like people is terrifying, considering they're at the bottom of the slope and we're at the top, at the edge of a cliff.

Corvak takes another step forward, and I wait to see how he's going to "handle" things. Attempt communication in some way? Scare them off with some yelling?

He takes an aggressive stance and pulls out one of his knives, then gestures with his arms wide. "Come and attack, then!"

Fuck. Of course he's going to pick a fight.

I watch the strange, fuzzy people to see how they react to this, my heart pounding wildly. Even though they're spindly in frame, they're tall—and there's a lot of them. There's only one Corvak. What if something happens to him? What if I'm stuck here, alone? My panic escalates as one of the creatures shakes his lower arm and another nearby gestures back to him.

It's almost like they're communicating. Which is...odd. They don't talk, just hoot angrily at each other.

Another stomps his foot in the snow and then steps forward. It's like he's decided to be the fighter. He hunches his shoulders and mimics Corvak's posture. Behind him, the others twitch and sway, and I get the impression that they're still talking. One lifts his hand, and I could swear his fingers move in a gesture?—

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

Corvak snarls and lunges forward.

A startled scream erupts from my throat as the creatures begin to hoot in response, shaking their clawed hands, and I'm reminded oddly enough of pompoms. Then my gaze is drawn to Corvak, and I can't look away, heart in throat, as he fights the biggest one. I hold my breath, watching as he swings in fast, sharp, precise motions, the knife slashing through the air. He doesn't hit the filthy yeti-like creature—it ducks and maneuvers, avoiding the blade.

It only makes Corvak move faster. He slashes at the creature, only for it to slam its arm into Corvak's hand, and the knife goes flying. I want to rush for it and grab it before the others do, but I don't dare move forward. All I can do is clutch our supply pack and watch as my protector lunges for his enemy again and again. It's a good fight, but it's clear that Corvak is going to win. They circle and move, and the yeti keeps dancing away, but he's slowing down. Each time he avoids one of Corvak's swings, it's evident that he's growing more and more winded.

Corvak ducks a wild slash, and then maneuvers, fast as lightning, to leg-sweep his opponent. The creature crashes to the ground and the hooting escalates to wild levels as Corvak puts his foot on the creature's chest, pinning him in place. He glances over at me, panting, and shoots a victorious grin in my direction. "You all right?"

I manage a nod. "You?"

"A few scratches." He eyes the creature underfoot, and the others. The moment he looks in their direction, they all hunch and cower, even as the hooting grows more alarmed. The one under his foot flicks his hand, and again, I could swear he's

gesturing. If he is, it's such a small movement that it's near impossible to interpret, unlike the more animated motions of American Sign Language.

I'm tempted to echo their movements for some absurd reason.

Corvak leans over the defeated creature, baring his teeth in a fierce expression. "Yield?"

The thing hoots again and shows his neck, as if this is his answer. He's given up.

Corvak grunts and lifts his foot off the thing, then moves and retrieves his knife. The creatures scurry backward, huddling in a hunch-shouldered cluster together as they watch us. The one on the ground remains on the ground, but his gaze is on Corvak the entire time.

I eye Corvak, uncertain. "That's it? You're just going to let him go?"

"You want me to kill him?" His brows go up in surprise.

"No! Of course not! I just...is it safe?" I clutch the pack against my chest.

He shrugs at me, dabbing at a thin streak of blood that has appeared over the bridge of his nose. "There is no score for killing a local, so I do not see the point. He is not a competitor."

That makes sense in a strange sort of way. Still, I don't know what that means for us, because we're vulnerable at the top of this hill and they're not moving. I hold his cloak out to him and Corvak takes it, flinging it back over his shoulders.

The strangers are fascinated by Corvak's movements. The one on the ground gets up and then the others encircle him, their eyes wide. The hooting changes tones, and

there's more footshuffling and hand-twitching. Then, to a one, they turn and stare at us with those strange, unnatural blue eyes.

"Uh oh," I whisper.

Corvak pulls me behind him as the defeated one takes a brave step forward, and then another. Then, he drops to his knees and prostrates himself on the ground in front of us. At the base of the hill, the cluster of others do the same.

Everyone's bowing to Corvak.

This baffles him. He turns and looks at me, his demeanor full of confusion. "What are they doing?"

"I think you're their leader now," I tell him.

CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

AIDY

All that shit I said about being brave and independent? Things are different now. With the pack on Corvak's back once more, I hold on to his arm as we descend down the hill, the yeti people keeping a close watch on us. It's so strange. This planet has felt deserted for days on end. Even the wildlife hasn't been teeming and abundant (though our humming might be scaring everything away). Having a crowd around us as we try to leave is awkward.

Having a smelly, adoring crowd? It's an experience, that's for sure.

The yeti people aren't going anywhere. We take a few steps and they fall in behind us, their hooting now gentle and less insistent. We abandon the valley and head toward the meteorite, and they continue to follow us.

"We should check there is nothing else around it," Corvak tells me. "Just in case. I promise we will not get close if it is merely a stone."

We cautiously approach to check out the rock. When we're about a hundred feet away, I get nervous and stop Corvak before he gets closer. There's an impact crater, a small, shallow one, and the rock itself is about the size of a football, maybe more. It's surprising that something so small has caused so much damage, and I marvel at the melted snow and the churned earth.

"Not supplies. Just a rock." Corvak glances behind us in frustration. "The snow-people are still with us."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"I noticed." The wind keeps bringing the smell. "I think they like you."

His nostrils flare with irritation, and he glares down at me as if I caused the problem.

"They are going to point the others right at us if they do not stop with their noise."

I bite my lip. He's not wrong. "Then what's the solution?"

He makes a gesture with his hands—a twist and a toss to the side.

Snap their necks? "Absolutely not. You just said a minute ago that they were noncombatants."

"That was before they were threatening our lives." His glare turns mutinous.

"Your life. I won't allow that."

I cross my arms over my chest. They're people, and a lot of them aren't fighters. I saw a female with a baby."

"It's them or us, Aidy?—"

I shut him down before he can continue, putting my hand on his chest, over his heart. His noisy, humming heart. It's a reminder that we're not exactly quiet, either. "Let me see what I can do, all right?"

He frowns. "What is it you think to do?"

"Talk to them? Can't hurt, right?"

"They don't speak. They just hoot."

I think he's wrong, though. I think they're communicating and we're not seeing it. They look nervous and twitchy, constantly moving, but something tells me that the hooting isn't the language. The body is. And for some silly reason, I feel like I can figure this out. "Give me a chance. I don't want to resort to murder."

He growls and flicks his hand at the cluster of abominable snow-people a short distance away. "Get them to be quiet, then. If your way doesn't work, mine will." I turn to leave, and he grabs my hand. "If they touch you, I will make sure they never touch anything again. Understand?"

Why does his surly possessiveness make me giddy inside? Jesus, I've got issues. I nod, trying not to show how pleased his words make me. "I'll be careful."

I give him one last reassuring pat on the hand and then turn to face the strangers. I don't know why I'm so convinced they're people, just that I am. It stands to reason that whoever lives on this planet isn't going to look like what I imagine people to look like. The suns are doubled, the mountains are purple, and I have a humming worm in my chest. Of course things are going to be different here. This means communication is different, too.

It means I need to try and talk to them. If we're going to be here for the duration of this game (however long that might be) we need to make friends with the locals.

I take a cautious step forward, not smiling. I seem to recall something in my memories about bared teeth seeming threatening, though I have no idea where I got it from. Instead, I put my hands out, palms up, and move slowly. "Friends. We want to be friends."

The tallest—the one that must be the leader, and the one that Corvak

defeated—quivers and crouches low, hunching to show submission. I inwardly wince. Do I get down on his level to show that we mean no harm, or will that just tell him we're fair game for attacking? I don't know the etiquette. I decide to go with a simple introduction and pat my chest. "Aidy. I'm Aidy. Ay-deee."

They stare at me.

In the back, someone hoots.

I try again, patting my chest. "Aidy."

The leader stands and tentatively brushes his fingers over his breastbone.

Yes! Exactly! "Aidy."

He brushes his fingers over his chest again and hoots.

Somewhere behind me, Corvak snorts.

I know I'm right, though. I'm sure I can communicate with these people. I just need to choose my words and gestures carefully. I touch my chest again, then my cheek, then brush my arm, as if to say that all of me is Aidy. "Aidy."

Then, I point at the nearest snow-man, and let my face show my questioning.

He lifts his head and hoots again, the sound softer, then gestures at me and makes a huffing sound.

"I think he's trying to say my name," I tell Corvak.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"Or he's choking."

I shoot him a look, because he's not being helpful. "He's communicating." I turn to the alien, and even though I feel like a doofus, I chirp at him.

The strange creature's head tilts, quizzical, and he makes a curious face, like I just took a dump in front of him. Okay, that wasn't it. I try again, repeating my name and touching myself before gesturing at him again. This time, he makes another chirp, but I notice he brushes his third finger over the top of his thigh. I do that, too, mimicking, and the reaction is immediate.

They all start hooting with excitement and gesturing.

I get it, now. It's not the sounds as much as it is the gestures, just as I suspected. "I think we're making progress!"

"Good. Now tell them to shut up," Corvak retorts.

Getting them to be quiet is actually more of a challenge. They don't seem to understand that they're making noise in the first place, and the more I gesture and learn some of their signals, the more I wonder if the hooting is involuntary, and they don't even realize they're doing it. Because the more I gesture and try to learn words with them, the less the hooting plays into things.

The leader is Finger-on-Leg. Behind him is a female with a darker stain on her arm, and from what I can tell, her name is Tap-Two-Fingers-Together. There are others that get excited and gesture to show their names, too—this one is a finger wiggle, that

one is a different finger wiggle. This one is a foot scuff in the snow, but a very specific foot scuff.

It takes me a while to communicate that we want them to be quiet, because the more I gesture at my mouth, the more they think it's my name. Eventually I try a different tactic. I come up with signals for my name—a hand sliding down the arm, like I showed them at first—and for Corvak. His is a curled fist held near the heart. Then I show them "yes" and "no" so we can try to communicate more. From there, we move on to "no" (which is easy, a hand held up to halt someone), and then I hoot.

The combination of "no" and "hoot" finally sinks in, and they grow quiet. They don't leave, either. Even when we gesture that we need to go, they all file in and give us expectant looks, as if they're going to come with us.

Which is a problem. I detach myself from the group and move to talk to Corvak.

"You're good at this," Corvak admits, glancing over at the others. He's still purring, and so am I. Right now, we're louder than the snow-people, who are holding hands over their beak-like mouths to keep quiet. "How are you learning their words so quickly, Aidy?"

"I don't know," I confess. "I don't think I'm crazy good with languages or anything. Just that their movements start to make sense to me after a while." Even now, I'm starting to pick up on their smaller body signals without realizing it. The sweep of a tail towards what must be a mate. The stomp of a foot in the snow to tell another to hold back. It's like it's all unfurling in my mind and I'm picking up more of their words by watching them. "I feel like they're going to follow us if we leave."

"I noticed that, too," Corvak says, voice dry. "But we can't stay here, near the meteorite. If we do, someone is sure to head this way looking for it."

So we leave. Or we try to. We put on friendly expressions and gesture that we're leaving, and...they follow us. Because of course they do.

"Maybe they'll get tired of following us after a while," I whisper to Corvak.

"Maybe."

They don't, though. They follow us as we hike away from the meteorite and deeper into the snows. The landscape changes, with strange, frond-like pink trees foresting the ground. We avoid a river of running water that smells like rotten eggs. We trudge through the snow and look for a safe place to stop for the night as it grows dark.

And we know the snow-people are back there, because every now and then, someone gives a questioning hoot.

"There," Corvak says, and points at a rocky area up ahead. "We'll set up over there."

My feet are throbbing, so I love this idea.

We set up a lean-to with Corvak's spear and some of the biggest furs to use as a tarp overhead and then dig out a rounded nest in the snow to protect ourselves from some of the wind. Corvak makes a fire, and I peek out into the dark, only to see at least a dozen glowing blue eyes out in the snow nearby. "Still there."

"Maybe they're waiting for us to drop scraps."

Oh no. I hadn't even thought about the food issue. Now that I consider it, we haven't seen them eat anything all day long. That's not good. They've just trotted around behind us like stray dogs. We've got a dozen people clustered just outside our makeshift tent and I'm going to feel like a huge jerk if I eat and they don't. I pull out the bag of jerky we've been picking at as we travel, and eye Corvak. "How do you

feel about sharing?"

He just raises an eyebrow at me. "If I tell you no, is that going to make a difference?"

The way he says it is kind, almost amused. It makes me smile, and I pull out several pieces of jerky and the cooking pouch we stole from the supply cave. "We can make a broth go a lot further."

So I make broth out of jerky, and shove some of the root vegetables into the coals. It's only been about a week since we got stranded here—dear god, how has it only been a week?—and yet I'm adapting. We picked up a little baggy of real salt from the supply cave, and I season the soup with it, then add a few flakes of vegetables. "By the way," I say to Corvak, "if I haven't said thank you yet, I'm saying it now."

"Thank you? For what?"

I shrug, feeling a little shy that he's calling me out on my comment. "For being kind when you don't have to be."

"Kind?" He looks surprised at my words, practically offended. "What makes you think I am kind?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"It's not an insult?—"

"I am a gladiator. I am created to be a fierce warrior."

Why do I feel like smiling at how indignant he is? "And you absolutely are."

"Which means I am not kind."

"You're kind to me."

Corvak's expression softens, and I could swear that he hums a little louder as he watches me. "Yes, but you are mine."

"Just for the record, we haven't established anything of the sort." But now I'm thinking about touching him. This morning was so nice, being able to just reach over and casually grab him, and I loved that he touched me back. I was looking forward to doing more, but with a dozen strangers hovering just outside our tent, sex is honestly the last thing on the menu. "And you're being kind to the people out there, feeding them and all."

"That is for you, too." He leans back, regarding me.

Oh. How sweet. "Well, thank you. I know it's going to be a hardship if we keep sharing our food?—"

Again, he snorts. "Hunting is not a hardship. It is what I am born to do."

Right, right, because he's a big fierce warrior. I fight my smile and hold my hand out. "Of course. How silly of me to doubt you. Pass me a bowl and I'll get started doling out the food."

For the next while, I stand at the fire and distribute food. We brought two of the strangely made little bowls with us for our use, but when I hold one out, it's snatched from my hands, the contents slurped down before I can say anything. The snow-people immediately begin to fight amongst themselves, pulling fur and hooting wildly, and another male attacks the one with the bowl, even as he gobbles the steaming food.

"Calm down," I call out, hating that they're being so loud. "We'll make sure everyone gets fed!"

They ignore me and keep on hooting, another one snatching the bowl and licking it clean.

Corvak gets to his feet and steps out of the tent, and immediately the chaos dies. He scowls at them, crossing his arms over his chest, and one by one, they drop to a low crouch, in the subservient pose.

I don't know how I feel about that, but at least they're not trying to kill each other over beef jerky soup? I retrieve the bowl, fill it again, and offer it to a mother with a child. She sniffs the soup, offers it to her baby, and then gives me a hungry, pitiful look while the baby eats. I turn to Corvak. "You stand out here and keep the peace. I'm going to see if we have something else for them to eat."

He doesn't get mad, which makes my heart warm. Most guys would probably lose their shit, insisting that we save our supplies for ourselves. Not Corvak. He's confident enough in himself to share, all because I want to, and it makes me appreciate him even more. I snag coal-roasted roots from the fire, holding them with

a bit of fur to act as an oven mitt, and when I bring them out, the female gets excited. I offer her a root, and she takes it, devouring it despite the fact that it's probably burning her hands.

That's how it goes for the next while—I scoop a bowl of food and supervise as someone eats, and if they refuse the soup, I offer a root. By the time we get everyone fed, it's late, the bowl has been gnawed on and licked by half the tribe, and all of our roots are gone. There's nothing but scraps left for myself and Corvak, but we've eaten as we traveled so I don't mind not having much for dinner. I wash my hands and scrape the last of the soup out of the cooking pouch into the clean bowl I kept back for Corvak. "Did you notice the women didn't eat the soup? Just the vegetables."

Corvak shrugs. "Perhaps they save the meat for the hunters."

"Maybe." It makes me wonder how we're going to feed everyone tomorrow though. "I'm sorry we went through so much food." The jerky pouch is emptied out, the last bits and flakes shaken into the stew an hour ago.

"We will get more tomorrow." He shrugs and takes a bite of the leftovers and then offers a bite to me. "Are they still out there?"

I peek out from the tent flap, not entirely surprised to see that our crowd is indeed still there. They curl up together in the snow, piling on to share warmth, and as I watch, one grooms a knot out of another's fur. "Still out there."

"At least they are obedient."

"When you're around," I tease. "They like you more than me."

"They know you are the soft one and I am the warrior."

Why does that make me blush? It should be an insult, but...it doesn't sound like one. He makes it sound like a caress. I still need to tell him that I don't belong to him, but it's lower on the priority scale right now. My feet hurt and I'm exhausted, and all I want to do is wash my hands a dozen times (I will never get used to the smell of the snow-people) and go to sleep.

Corvak continues to hold the bowl out to me, waiting for me to eat, but I wave it away. "Not hungry. I just want to clean up."

I spend the next while scrubbing my hands with snow and then rinsing them with melted water. I wipe them with the "cleanest" fur we have, and wish we had soap. I'm trying not to think about all the germs we could be ingesting, but priorities are priorities. Now that my hands are clean, I can relax. I sit down in the spread furs near the fire, wincing when my feet give an unpleasant throb. "I'd give my left tit for a good pair of hiking boots."

He looks over at me, frowning. "Are your feet bothering you?"

"A little. I'm not trying to complain," I say, feeling defensive. "Just grouching a bit. I think I'd be able to keep up more if I had better shoes than just some furs wrapped around my feet."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

I pull off the cords and furs—as always, soaked from the snow—and wince when the lines crisscrossing my feet show up bright red and unpleasant. I have to lace the furs extremely tight so they don't slide off, but it's a little painful by the end of the day. There are blisters on the sides of my feet where the cords have rubbed my foot raw, and old welts from the prior days.

Corvak makes a displeased sound when I reveal my feet. "You're hurt."

"I'm okay," I protest. "Really."

Even if they look like something from a horror flick.

He moves to my side and takes my foot in his hand, ignoring my fussing. "Let me see."

I bite back a litany of excuses and whining, all because I feel strange over him brooding over my feet. He clucks his tongue, his gaze narrowed with irritation as he examines my blisters and abrasions. "This is not good, Aidy. Why did you not speak up?" His fingers caress the sole of my foot, unfazed that my foot is probably grimy and damp-wrinkled from a day of walking. "I am supposed to take care of you, but I cannot if you do not tell me that you are in pain."

I wriggle, trying not to jerk my foot out of his grip when his fingers accidentally tickle and send heatwaves shooting straight to my groin. "What are you going to do, carry me all day?"

"Yes."

Laughter bursts from me. He doesn't laugh, and it takes me a moment to realize that he's serious. Oh. "Corvak, you can't do that."

"I don't see why not." His fingers skim over the arch of my foot.

The air leaves my lungs. I can't breathe. Can't think. My entire being is focused on the trail of his fingertip along my skin. I'm full of yearning, wanting more of this sweet gentleness...and wanting him to do more than just touch my dang foot. He explores my heel, then traces up my sole to my toes. I squirm with ticklishness again, but I don't pull my foot away. I want him to keep touching me, keep exploring me.

Keep adoring me.

"I can smell your hunger," he comments as he touches my smallest toe. "You like it when I touch you."

"I do," I agree. I'm a little embarrassed but trying not to be. Surely after we've given each other handies, the embarrassment should be put away, right? "But I'm a little surprised you can smell anything with our neighbors around."

He chuckles, shaking his head. "They are rather...pungent. And overwhelming. If someone thinks to sneak up on us, I won't smell them."

"I don't think anyone's going to sneak up." As if agreeing with me, a snow yeti gives a soft, sleepy hoot somewhere in the distance. It reminds me that they're just meters away, and we have no privacy. "But I should tell you that I'm not interested in doing anything sex-wise with an audience out there. They're too close for comfort."

"I can fix that, you know." When I give him a confused look, he makes the neck-snapping gesture again, a smirk on his face.

I laugh despite how horrible it is. "Absolutely not."

He shrugs, smiling. "You are in charge."

Am I? That's kind of nice of him to think that, considering he's the one that's doing all the hard work. "We're partners," I point out. "No one makes a decision without the other. And speaking of decisions...what's the plan now that we know it's not a supply drop?"

He stops playing with my feet and just holds them, thinking. "We are low on resources, so we will need to hunt and find more fuel for fire." He glances over at me and inclines his head towards the outside. "And a lot depends on if they are yet there in the morning."

"Something tells me they'll be there."

Corvak gives me a wry look. "I think so, too. So we must consider that they are going to accompany us, unless we do something drastic to scare them away."

Scaring them seems cruel, but I also don't want a bunch of hungry, hooting aliens following us around if it means we're going to be caught by the other gladiators here. "I guess we'll see how tomorrow goes. Thank you for being patient with them."

"Why would I not be patient?" He cocks his head. "You have a very low opinion of me, I think. Do you expect me to rage and attack everything and everyone within arm's length?"

"Of course not! I just...I don't know." I feel uncomfortable, because maybe I have been assuming things about him. "I guess I have a certain idea in my head of how a gladiator will act. Punch first, think later."

He rubs my foot again, digesting this. Then, he nods. "I can see that. However, I have learned that one of the greatest weapons is being strategic and thoughtful in how you proceed."

"Which is why you want a fortress and for the enemies to come to us instead of the other way around," I say slowly. "I get that, but why take me? I'm a liability, and we both know that."

Corvak just smiles. "No. You are my prize. My reward for succeeding."

I sigh. "We really need to have a discussion about that."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"Tomorrow, then. For tonight, I shall rub your poor mistreated feet and take care of you." And he kneads the arch of my foot, eliciting a groan from me.

Okay, well, if he wants to give me a foot rub, I'll stand my ground about this whole ownership thing tomorrow. For now, I'm enjoying the pampering, even if it does make me incredibly horny. I squeeze my thighs tightly together and hope that our fuzzy friends bail on us in the morning, because I'm itching to touch Corvak, and I can't with all of them hanging around.

The stink of them is definitely a turn-off. Imagining their fascinated gazes as I jiggle Corvak's balls? Horrifying.

CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

CORVAK

The strange snow-people fill me with ideas.

They're not gone in the morning. From the moment I wake up, their scent is in my nose, drowning out the sweet smell of Aidy's arousal. Even with them around, it is difficult to resist her. It does not matter that we are both tired and sweaty from travel—I would lick her all over given the chance. I live to watch her small movements, the tuck of a bit of hair behind one ear, the way her lashes flutter when she awakens, the dart of her tongue as she licks her lips.

She worries over the snow-people, and so I will take them on as my problem.

Now that they have seen my strength, they cower and bow whenever I approach. Aidy tries to communicate with them, using hand signals and repeated words, and she makes some headway with one female that seems more intelligent than the rest. When we need to speak, Aidy seeks that one out. She speaks to them as I break down the camp and repack things. Without as much food supplies, I manage to fit it all into one pack, so that I can give Aidy a break. She does not complain, but I don't like how her soft, delicate feet are faring. She has no callus, no built-up natural resistance to long walks.

Just as a clone would not, either. It is a thought I keep to myself.

When we set off in the morning, I am not surprised that they follow behind. Aidy gives me worried looks, but I don't let our stragglers bother me. As long as they remain quiet—and they are trying, judging from the muffled hoots—it should not be a death sentence. We head away from the fallen star, because I worry that someone else is going to come investigate it, looking for gear. The best thing we can do is go away from it, and find someplace with game and a defensible location to establish a fortress.

As we walk, I study the snows and the scents.

There is game in the area, the wind holding steady and bringing their scents toward me instead of the other way around. It is a good sign, even if I cannot abandon Aidy to go hunt. Even now, her steps are slow and tired despite a full night's sleep. She needs more rest. I want to find a defensible place soon.

The snows tell me other things. With the fresh blanket of snow coating everything, it is easy to see tracks. There are tiny ones from smaller creatures, and a few from a massive round-footed creature that I do not wish to run into. Probably an herbivore

with those rounded feet, but you never know. There are lots of tracks in the snows, but none from our fellow gladiators.

This is a good sign.

Later in the morning, as we walk, I could swear the number of snow-people following us grows. As we cut through a low-lying valley for the mountainous slope on the far side, I turn to see how our stragglers are keeping up. As I watch, three more snow-people join the cluster trailing behind us.

"More are joining," I say to Aidy.

She bites her lip. "What do we do?"

"Nothing. We let them join."

The new snow-people hoot wildly, only to stop once they join the others. We continue on for a time, when the hooting begins again. Aidy and I stop and she turns, making the "quiet" gesture. I pause, too, because they could be alerting us to danger.

One of the males—one of the bigger ones—has pounced on something. As I watch, he hauls it out of a snowy den and holds it up in the air. It is a smaller creature, much like the one I stole my khui from, and it kicks and squirms, desperately trying to break free. The snow-man races to my side, holding out the creature for me to take. Nearby, another digs at the base of a straggly looking bush and pulls it up, revealing a thick taproot.

And a new idea blossoms.

These snow-people are not a problem.

They are an army.

And as long as I feed them, they are at my command. No one will be able to defeat us if we are surrounded with a loyal army. It does not matter if they can fight. I can teach them how to fight. What matters are numbers and a defensible position.

I like this new idea, very much.

Then again, I like any idea that involves myself and Aidy winning this scenario. It is a much broader one than I had anticipated. In the memory banks I have, the games were always established with set boundaries. Supplies would be dropped, and new aspects of the game would be unveiled. The winner would get a female once the game was completed. Some of the rules are different now, but as the differences pile up, I start to wonder why this is so. Is there something else going on that we are unaware of? And if so, what?

Hopefully it is nothing an army cannot take care of.

I take the squirming animal from the snow-people, thank the creature for its sacrifice, and kill it swiftly. "This will be the start of tonight's stew."

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

Aidy's face is pale, but she nods. "It was nice of them to hunt that for us."

I cut the throat of the animal and sling the corpse to my pack so it can bleed out as we walk. As we do, I mull the idea of my personal army. They will be easy enough to arm with spears, and if that fails, they have claws. They can help with the hunting. The old and the children can hunt for roots or help melt water. The strongest can act as guards. I like this. I like this a lot.

I keep thinking of things to include in my army. Should I teach them maneuvers? Phalanx formations? The possibilities are endless.

I am not sure how Aidy will feel about this, however.

I glance over at my female. Her face is ruddy with cold, her long hair tangling about as the breeze lifts it. "How are your feet?"

She rubs the tip of her pink nose. "They're managing, but I wouldn't say no to a shorter hike today. Do you think we can find someplace safe now that it's getting rocky again?" She points at the distance, where the cliffs rise to even more jagged heights. "I feel like we're going back into the mountains instead of coming back out of them."

"Perhaps we are. I will look for a good shelter so you can rest your feet."

"Is it safe to separate?"

"It will be." I tip my chin at the snow-people trailing behind us. "We have acquired

more of them. Did you notice that?"

"We have?" Her face falls. "I don't like that."

"As if we have a choice? Tell them to go away, then." I know she will do no such thing, and smile to take the bite from my words. "You know they will not listen."

"I haven't learned enough of their words yet." She tucks her hair behind her small, rounded ear, and my cock fills with blood. The humming in my chest grows louder, and for a moment, my knees weaken as her scent drifts close. I move closer to her, and when she gazes up at me in surprise, I pull her close and bury my face in her mane. "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

"Nothing." I keep my face buried in her hair. Her scent is intoxicating, her soft body against mine distracting...and not close enough. I want so much more than just walking at her side. I want to touch her all over, to hear her make the little gasps and sharp inhales the way she did when I touched her feet. The way she did when I touched her between her thighs. For a brief flash, I resent my budding army because they give us no time to be alone.

But that army will keep her safe.

Reluctantly, I let her go. Her face is full of confusion as she gazes up at me, and I lightly rub my knuckles along the curve of her jaw. "I was just wishing that we were alone."

Her pink mouth curves into a smile. "Good wish."

Behind us, the hooting escalates, and I turn to see another one of the snow-people has caught something. He brings it to me, the creature writhing and still alive. I am the official executioner, it seems. I eye Aidy, and there are dark shadows under her eyes

today. She seems tired, and I know her feet must be bothering her. So even though I would prefer to be much, much farther away, I make a decision. I point at the rocks in the distance. "We will stop there for the day. The game seems to be plentiful, and we will cook our food and look for a strategic place to claim as our own."

Aidy's smile of relief is telling. "I love that idea."

The distant cliffs are riddled with jagged edges and broken rocks. It is strange to me—I had always pictured that a mountain would be a solid block of stone, to be climbed like something in an obstacle course. What I am learning is that mountains here are made up of steep slopes and uneven stone, rockfalls and deep slices that make impossible-to-scale cliffs. There are crevices that seem to be nothing but ice packed between taller rocks, and snow. So much snow. It hides the sharp, small rocks and the places where footfalls are precarious, and I worry even more for Aidy's delicate feet. I do not climb higher, but instead, follow a new, foul scent that permeates the air, and in the next rocky crevice, there is water, trickling through the rocks.

It is the cause of the stink, but this time I welcome it. The water steams and flows into a bright greenish-blue pool, with jutting tumbles of rocks all around it.

Aidy is thrilled at the sight. She clutches at my arm, not just for balance, but because she is delighted. "Running water! That must be some sort of hot spring. You think it's drinkable?"

I glance over at my army. "We watch them to see."

I find a good place to sit and pull Aidy into my lap. She is stiff at first, and then relaxes, sighing with contentment. The purring in her chest grows so loud it feels as if I can hear nothing else. Her scent surrounds me, and my cock remains hard and aching, flooded with the need for her. Instinctively, I shift her, settling her hips

against mine and her back to my front. She sucks in a breath but doesn't move away. She takes one of my arms and loops it around her waist, as if wanting me to hold her closer. I jerk my hips, flexing upward, all so I can press my cock harder against those soft, gloriously scented parts of her.

Her breath catches again.

I bite back a groan. My female. Mine. My Aidy. My?—

"Look," she says.

It takes a moment for her voice to penetrate my hazy thoughts. I force myself to pay attention, to look up as she commands. When I do, I see that the snow-people are moving toward the running stream. There are sticks on the edges of the water, tall reeds of some kind, and they approach carefully. One of the males moves into the lead and carefully skirts the water's edge. Then, he leans over and grabs at the closest reed, hauling it from the water and retreating. As he does, I see there is a flopping, angry blob on the end. It looks like an ugly, rounded fish with giant teeth. The snow-male grabs the end of the reed and bashes the fish against a nearby rock. Then, he looks over at me for approval, just like they have all done every time they have brought me a kill.

The snow-people grab another fish-on-a-reed and bash it, and as we watch, the other reeds retreat, heading to the far side of the pool. Some of the snow-people follow, while others crowd in the now clear area and dip their hands into the warm water to drink.

"Piranhas on a stick," Aidy muses. "Terrifying. I'm glad our friends are showing us the safe way to approach the water."

I grunt, because my army is proving more handy than I realized. "We will stop here

and see where we can set up camp, then. If the water is safe, it is a good advantage for us."

"And I would really love a bath," Aidy says, voice wistful.

The longing in her voice ensures that I will do everything in my power to ensure that she gets her bath. "You will have one. I swear it."

CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

AIDY

I'm so grateful for the chance to sit down for a while. Corvak hands the bag and the dead animals off to me, so I decide to start cooking. One of the snow-people comes forward with handfuls of roots, offering them with a little bow. It makes me uncomfortable to see how they're acting like worshippers, but it just emphasizes that I need to learn their language so we can communicate better. I start a fire—not the easiest task even with a fire-starting flint—and set up the cooking tripod and the smooth, hand-sized stones I use for heating the water.

It's hard for me to butcher the meat. I have to pause several times, gagging, but I manage to get the hides off and the organs out of the carcass. The whole thing goes into the pot, and when someone creeps up to snatch the discarded organs, I let them. It turns into another fight between two juvenile males, complete with hissing and snarling and angry hoots. One of the females steps in fearlessly and slaps each one on the back of the head, and the fight ends as quickly as it began. They slink off with their prizes, and I kick a bit of snow over the butchering spot.

I roll the skins up because I'm not sure what else to do with them, and then move to the edge of the water (all the reed piranhas are gone, thank goodness), and wash my hands. As I do, the female lingers nearby, watching me and my hands, a puzzled expression in her large, unblinking eyes. She reminds me a bit of an owl. The female gestures at my hands again, and I realize she thinks I'm trying to say something. "Oh. I'm just washing," I tell her, and mime cleaning myself. "Wash."

Her expression remains blank. Maybe...they don't wash? I don't know. The smell of them indicates that they don't, but what do I know of their people? Seems kinda mean to assume. Then again, I look at the dirt crusted on her fur, the food stains near her mouth, and wonder if I'm not far off the mark.

"Wash?" I ask, and flick my hands in the water again, then rub my arm. "Wash?"

She makes the hand gesture for confusion.

Right, well, maybe I should start with communicating about basic things before I move on to hygiene. If it hasn't killed her yet, I guess she can stay smelly for a few more days. I move back to the fire and use some of the long, clean bones we'd taken from the supply den to carefully move a hot rock from the coals and into the bag. "Cook," I say, and make a stirring motion with my hand above the pot. I'm going to try adding hand signals to my words in the hopes of us communicating faster. "Cook."

She mimics my motions and then makes the "eat" gesture near her mouth.

"Yes!" I'm excited at the progress. Now we're getting somewhere. "Cook to eat!"

She hoots with excitement, then covers her beak as if she's done something naughty, and I laugh.

For the rest of the afternoon, I cook soup to feed everyone and work on words with Pinkie. Her name gesture is a subtle tap of her pinky finger to her beak, so Pinkie she is. Pinkie picks up words as quickly as I give them, and I learn some of their gestures, too. I've never been good at languages in the past (at least I don't think so) but something about this seems...easy. Obvious. It's like I've been given a superpower to grasp their language suddenly. After a few hours, I'm able to start stringing together gestures to talk with Pinkie and some of the other women.

I can't help but notice that I've been left by the fire to cook for the men—the females only eat roots, so I'm basically cooking for the guys. It feels downright sexist, and I add it to my list of grievances to complain to Corvak about. It's going to go right below the whole "You belong to me" thing I need to talk to him about. For now, though, people are getting fed and my feet are no longer throbbing like hot coals, so I'll do a bit of cooking.

Two more snow-people arrive, these two scrawnier and filthier than the others. They hoot loudly as they approach, until Pinkie makes the "quiet" gesture to them. Quiet. Food. No quiet, no food.

They immediately go silent, crouching nearby and watching the food get ladled out.

I pinch my fingers together, almost like a shadow puppet of a duck, in the symbol that means family. Pinkie family? I ask, gesturing at the two newbies. I don't recognize them, but that doesn't mean they haven't been here. Their dirt patterns might have changed (sadly that's the best way for me to tell them apart).

She gives the hand-flick that means no. Not her family, then. Friends.

I point at another one hovering nearby.

Friend, she agrees. Travel friend.

As I point out more people, she keeps using the "travel" and "friend" gestures. We're acquiring more of the snow-people by the hour, it seems. I could swear there's at least twenty now, and I don't know how many are with Corvak. I keep handing out bowls of food, though, because they're friendly and many have babies, and the last thing I want is to starve a child when I've got food.

Why travel, I ask Pinkie.

It takes a bit for us to communicate the "why" part, but eventually she understands, and tilts her face up to the sky. Long travel, she says, and points her face to the sky again. Sky water. Great One come, so people come.

At least, I'm pretty sure that's what she's saying. My instincts tell me I'm close, even if the words and hand symbols aren't exact. But some of what she's saying is confusing. Water in sky?

Water, she agrees, and makes a slithering motion with her arm. Water every night in sky. Moves. She makes the slithering motion again.

It dawns on me. The Northern Lights. They move and slither in the sky, a bit like waves. Does she think they're water?

She keeps gesturing. Then fire in sky. Great One come.

Page 33

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

I'm afraid to ask.Fire?

Fire, she agrees.We meet Great One near fire.Walls say fire, Great One. Yes fire. Yes Great One.

They must think the "fire" was the meteor. I guess it did look like it was trailing smoke.Great One?

Just then, Corvak returns. He's followed by several of the males, his expression crafty. "You'll never guess what we found."

Pinkie immediately drops into the "worship" pose and makes the gesture with her hand even as she presses her face to the rocks.Great one.

The others see her in repose and immediately sink to the snow, making the same pose.

Oh no.

These people think Corvak is some sort of god sent by the comet.

"We need to talk," I say to Corvak, getting to my feet. "Got a moment?"

He frowns as I move forward and grab his arm. "Is everything all right? Have you been threatened? Are you hurt?"

I shake my head, pulling him along with me. Some of the snow-people try to follow,

but I give them the "no" gesture and point toward where Pinkie is still crouching, waiting. "Go and sit with her."

They drop to a hunch, and I could swear their expressions turn sulky, but they don't follow. I pull Corvak away with me to a safe distance, away from the precious hot spring and the fire and the food I've been handing out. It's probably a bad idea to leave it unattended, but we need to have a big conversation quickly, because I'm going to freak out. "We have a problem."

To my surprise, he breaks into a wide grin. "Not any longer. I have found our fortress." He gestures up the crumbling, rocky slope, covered in ice and rock detritus. "There is a cave up there, big enough for both of us. We can fortify the slope around it, ensure that no one can get up the path?—"

I shake my head. "That's not the problem. We have a bigger problem."

"What's that?"

How do I put this mildly? "I've been talking to some of them and...well, they think you're divine."

"I'm what?"

"That the comet and the Northern Lights are signs from...someone. The planet, some god, I don't know. That they followed them and now they found you. Corvak, they think you're a god. That you were sent to lead them." I try to keep the panic from my voice. "And I'd bet money that more are coming."

He rubs his hands together and a crafty look crosses his face. "Excellent."

What?! "No! This is bad!"

"Only if we let it be." The sly smile on his face worries me. "I have plans, Aidy."

CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

CORVAK

"This seems like a bad idea,that's all I'm saying." Aidy holds onto my arm as I lead her up the steep, unwieldy path to the cave I have claimed for us. "It never ends well for the guy that lies to the locals about being a god. Never."

"You have run into this scenario before?" I put my hands on her waist when one of the boulders proves too large for her short legs to navigate and heft her onto it.

She anchors her hands to the sheer rocks as we climb even higher, her breath puffing in frosty clouds. "Well, no, but I've seen a lot of movies. Like, alotof them. I'm just not convinced this is smart."

"You worry too much. Let me handle things."

"Me big strong man, you stupid woman," she comments as she climbs.

I go still, fury blistering through me. "Did those creatures call you stupid? I'm going to snap their necks after all."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

Aidy glances back at me. "What? No! I'm just—you know what? Never mind. How much farther?"

"Wait here," I tell her and climb ahead. Once I've established a foothold, I lean over and hold a hand down to her to help her climb the final section. "Look at how defensible this is. No one will be able to get to us without a struggle. We will move some loose rocks and scatter them on the path to make the footing dangerous for interlopers."

"I don't think I'm going to be able to climb down, either," Aidy comments as I haul her up and pull her against me.

We gaze into each other's eyes for a long moment, and I could swear that the incessant humming grows louder. Her lips are shiny and pink, and for a moment, I almost wish she would try to gnaw on my face again, just so I could feel that warm mouth on mine.

Her gaze drops to my chest, and then she pats me. "I should ask Pinkie about the humming. No one else seems to be doing it."

"If you like." I shrug and then gesture at the cave mouth. "Behold. Our new fortress."

She stares at it in wonder. "How did you find this?"

"The snow-people did. They showed me. And you'll never believe what's inside."

Even though the mouth of the cave is narrow and irregular—another feature I like

when I consider defense—it is very tall. It spans my height twice, and from the entrance, one can see that the interior is spacious and open. So far the caves we have found have been cramped sorts of things, but this one has promise. I can tell by the wonder on her face that I have done well to bring her here, and a hot curl of pleasure makes my sac tighten. I imagine Aidy showing me her happiness with small touches of her hands, her fingers fluttering down my chest to caress my cock...

"Can we go in?" she asks, interrupting my fantasies.

I nod, and when she steps forward, I adjust myself. Not right now. Mornings are for touching. My cock just needs to learn this instead of springing to life at all times. It must be because I was on suppressants for so long. Now it is uncontrollable and aches whenever Aidy so much as breathes...which is all the time.

Her face tilts up in wonder, her delicate hand skimming over the stone as she moves through the entrance. "It's so big."

My cock surges at her words.

I manage a grunt. "Very big." Then my mind goes to dangerous places, and I dig my claws into my skin, trying to focus. "This front chamber is not as large as the next one, and there are more chambers farther down in the tunnel."

"How fascinating." Aidy turns back to look at me, her eyes glowing blue from the parasite. "These mountains are practically honeycombed with caves, aren't they? I guess we're lucky in that aspect. How far back does ours go?"

"I did not go all the way to the back. The tunnel narrows down to a crawlspace, and I had no interest in scurrying about on my hands and knees. There is more room in these front chambers than anyone could need."

"Any monsters?"

I give her a wicked grin. "Just me."

"Very funny."

"Are you pleased?" I ask, following behind her. "This is the sort of place I have been hoping to find. It is difficult to get to from below, and spacious. The game in this area seems to be plentiful, and there is running water. This is an ideal place for our fortress...and for privacy."

I am thinking about that privacy more than my fortress lately.

Aidy turns to face me, worry on her face. "And what about the snow-people? More and more of them keep showing up."

"I know why." I lead her to the far wall of the front cave and gesture at it. When she squints hard, I realize it's too dark for her to see anything with her poor human eyes. So I take her hand in mine and lift it to the stone, where it has been flattened out.

She gasps in surprise. "Carvings?"

"Yes. Can you not see them?"

"Not really. What do they say?" Her fingers move over the wall, touching everything.

"It is of a male in a feathered cape, or he has wings of some kind." I move her hand along the carvings as I describe them. "There is a panel with a bunch of wiggly lines on it?—"

"Water, maybe?" Aidy interjects.

"Maybe." I move her hand along to the next section, where there are a bunch of smaller people. "And these are his followers."

She turns to me, her eyes wide. "They freaked out when you put on your cloak, remember? That's when they started bowing."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"I know. I think they think I am this male, in this carving. They brought me here and would not come inside, but they were not offended when I entered. It's like they expected it."

Aidy's fingers drift over the carvings, her touch delicate, and it makes my cock throb and ache, because I want her to be touching me like that. She feels everything out again and then purses her lips. "I'm worried. I don't like how they're acting. It feels like a trap."

"I will handle it." I am not thinking of the snow-people right now, but of Aidy and her hands. Aidy and the soft caresses she's giving the rock. Aidy and the humming in her chest. Aidy when she smiles up at me even as she reaches for my cock...

"Corvak, I'm afraid they're becoming a problem." She takes a few steps back toward me, concern etching her brow. "I swear more of them are showing up every time I turn around. The fact that they look at you as some kind of god...that's bad."

"Why is it bad?" I don't care if they worship me or not, but if they do, it makes things easier.

Her eyes widen. "What happens if they expect you to do godlike things and you don't? Or you can't? Feeding a handful of them a shitty soup for one night is very different than feeding a hundred of them for days on end. And what if it's not just a hundred? What if it's a thousand? Ten thousand? What if they all show up expecting to be fed because the Northern Lights told them you were here to save the day?"

"I will handle it," I say again. "There is no sense in worrying over things that have yet

to happen. For now, we can enjoy this cave and relax for a few days. Your feet can heal. We will have privacy."

Her eyes narrow, and I can tell she's annoyed with me. "Can you stop thinking with your dick for five seconds? I'm interested in being alone with you too, but we've got serious problems here."

I move toward her, because I find her magnificent and compelling when she is angry with me. "And I have said I will handle things. Trust me, Aidy. Let me show you your new home."

She groans as I take her hand in mine, but she lets me tug her along. "I'm adding this to the list of grievances."

"If you like. Let me show you why this is perfect for us. For you, especially, my female." I have been keeping the best part of this cave for last, because I know that the moment she sees it, all her doubts will melt away. She will fling herself into my arms with gratitude, and then we will get the privacy and the caresses I have been dreaming of.

Both her hands clutch at the one I am leading her with. "I can't see a thing in this darkness."

"I can see. I will lead you. Just keep holding on to me."

She moves so close that her toes step on my heels, and I can practically feel her breath against my back. "Go slow."

"Have you. You think we would come this far only for me to have your delicate head knocked against a cave wall? Have confidence in me, Aidy."

Her little chuckle warms me. "It's not that I'm not confident in you. It's that I'm not confident in me."

"You should be. You have been doing amazing."

"No, I've been managing, and poorly. You've been doing all the hard work. I promise I'm going to try and do more."

"You say that, but I have not asked for more. You have done what you can, given your smaller, weaker human body. You have been learning their words, too. This is important work, just as important as me exploring caves or finding meat."

"I guess." But she squeezes my hand.

"Not much farther. I think you will like this next part."

"I hope so. Is...is it just me or is it getting warmer?"

I smile to myself in the darkness, because I'm excited to show her this. I cannot wait to see her delight. "Almost there."

The rocks slope downward, the tunnel narrowing, and then it opens up into a humid, rounded cave. There is a large hole at the top of the cave, probably worn away from eons of steam flooding upward. It provides enough sunlight that Aidy should be able to see. Just barely visible above the hole is the edge of a cliff, hiding the treasure below. There is a narrow lip of wet stone around the edge of the cave, and then the interior of this final chamber is nothing but hot, steamy, crystalline water.

Aidy gasps. "You are kidding me."

"I am not. There is hot water inside. I hope you do not mind the smell."

"I don't give a crap about the smell," she says excitedly, shaking my arm with her enthusiasm. "Oh my god. This is incredible. And gorgeous." She moves towards the water's edge, releasing my hand, and peers down at it. "It's so dang deep! I can't see the bottom even though it's clear!" She turns back to me, her eyes wide. "How the heck did you find this?"

I point at the steam escaping above. "I was curious where that was coming from."

Her head tilts up, and she laughs, the sound that of pure joy. "Incredible. I've changed my mind. I definitely want to live in these caves."

"I am pleased."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

She flashes me another delighted look and then leans over the waters, peering in again. "Those piranha things aren't here, are they?"

I had the same concern initially. "The water is still and clear. I threw in a bit of leather earlier and nothing happened. It should be safe."

Her happiness changes to such yearning, and her hands go to her tangled hair. "Can I...can I have a bath? Or are we saving this for drinking water?"

"It is your water. Do as you please."

Aidy beams at me. "Thank god. I have felt so grimy. And my hair is disgusting. I just want to wash all over." She pulls on her clothing, tearing at the straps that bind it to her body. My gaze goes there immediately. I had hoped she would want to show me her happiness in some way...but I am quite happy to just watch her bathe. She pulls one leather tie free and then pauses, glancing down the tunnel behind me. "Um, what about the snow-people? Do we need to worry about them joining us?"

I move a step toward her and tug on another one of her leather laces. "They think this cave is mine, remember? They won't enter. You have your privacy." I pull the lace free and her skirt—comprised of multiple skins piled around her waist—falls to the ground.

"God, I never thought I'd be so happy to hear that." She finishes flinging off her furs, tossing them into a pile at her feet, and then kneels to pull her makeshift boots off. As she does, she glances up at me. "Are you going to bathe, too?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Absolutely. I prefer both of us freshly bathed and clean. Have you seen my nail beds? They're horrendous." She tucks her fingers down against her palm and displays her short, square nails to me.

"I see nothing but perfection," I tell her, admiring the bounce of her breasts as she stands.

Aidy snorts. "Then you need to have your eyes examined."

"You can examine them for me."

Her laughter peals, and she shakes her head as if I have said something amusing. "You, get naked. I'm jumping in." She holds her nose and then jumps into the water, feet first. There is a bit of a splash, and I watch her sink down a little, and then Aidy swims gracefully back to the surface, her hair sleek and dark against her head. "Oh my god, this is amazing."

The sound of her voice, husky with delight, is enough to make me groan. I kick off the last of my furs and grip my cock in my hand as it juts forth, impossible to hide.

She glances up at me, her eyes sly and knowing. Her hand splashes as she lazily treads water. "Are you getting in or not?"

As if I could resist her.

I jump in, and immediately it is like treading through too-thin sand. I sink. And sink. This...is not right. I claw at the water, trying to fight my way back to the surface, panicking. How is this so difficult? Am I going to die because I foolishly jumped into water, thinking I would float?

A hand grabs my arm and pulls me upward—Aidy.

I emerge from under the water with a gasp, clinging to the side of the pool.

"Why did you jump in if you don't know how to swim?" she shouts. "What the fuck, Corvak?"

"I didn't realize until after I jumped that I had no such knowledge in my memories." I hold on to the rocky lip, water streaming into my face from my mane. "But you do?"

"Yes! A lot of people grow up swimming where I'm from." She puts her hand on my back. "You scared the shit out of me."

"I scared the shit out of me, too," I admit. "Whatever shit is."

A laugh bubbles up from her throat. "Never mind." Her hand roams over my wet shoulders, down my arm. "Are you all right now?"

"As long as I hold on to the ledge." I experiment, allowing one hand to float free, and my body is light thanks to the water. With one hand and keeping my foot against the side of the rocks, I'm able to float next to her easily. The warmth of the water is pervasive, sinking into my body and relaxing me all over.

Aidy's smile grows brighter, and she gives a happy little shiver. "This is the best thing we've found here. I'm so happy right now." She swirls around in the water and presents her back to me. "Help me scrub?"

"Scrub?"

"Just rub my skin. We don't have soap so I'm hoping the heat and some rubbing will get rid of any dirt." She lifts her wet hair and runs her hand over her neck.

My mouth goes dry at the sight.

I lift my hand, my claws sheathed, and skim my fingers down her spine. She shivers with delight, turning slightly to smile at me. "That feels incredible."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

I say nothing. What is there to say that will encompass all that I feel in this moment? Her skin is so soft, wet and gleaming. She is fragile yet strong, and I want to touch her all over. I think of the time I put my hand between her thighs and made her gasp and moan, and I want that more than anything. Being able to only use one hand to touch her is torture. Instead of holding on to the wall, I want to let my hands roam all over her naked form.

As I run my fingers down her back, she scrubs at her arms, paddling with her legs to keep afloat. Her hands move over her abdomen and she even ducks under to quickly clean her legs. When she emerges, she splashes, wiping water from her face. "I'd kill for some soap right now."

"I do not think our snow-people have any," I point out, gathering her streaming hair in my hand. "Judging from the smell."

She giggles, the sound lighter and more carefree than I have heard from her before. "No, I guess not." I tug lightly on her thick hair, wrapping it around my hand. I'm fascinated by the silken feel of it, and even more than that, fascinated at the idea of trapping her against me. With one little pull on her mane, I can drag her so close she can't escape. It is the predator in me thinking that way.

To my surprise, she moans. Aidy turns her head slightly and leans back until she's pressing her spine against my chest.

"You liked that?" I give her hair another gentle tug. "Like when I'm rough with you?"

"Not rough," she corrects. "Firm. There's a difference. I like a sexy hand in my hair

but not a cruel one, if that makes sense."

I growl low in my throat at her words, imagining pinning her down with her hair and holding her tight under me. "You like my strength."

"I like that you can be strong to others and gentle with me," Aidy whispers.

"I'd never hurt you. You're a gift." I lean in and nuzzle at her wet head. "You know I would do anything for you, yes?"

"I know." She tugs her head free from my grasp and then turns in the water to face me. Aidy slides her arm around my waist and pulls her wet body flush with my cock, pressing it against her belly. The water laps at her breasts as she gazes up at me. "I still need scrubbing. My front could use some attention."

Is that so? With my free hand, I cup one of her breasts. It is small but full, the tip dark, and I stroke my thumb over it. She moans, her eyes closing, and leans back slightly, as if giving me room. I caress the rounded globe, watching her face to see which touches make her shiver, which ones make her breath speed up, and which ones give no response at all. If I run a finger along the underside of her breast, her purring grows louder. If I touch her nipple, she whimpers and arches against my hand, and the tip hardens.

"Suck on it," Aidy whispers. "Put your mouth on me."

My mouth? Right now? I love the thought. I sink deeper into the waters, lowering my head. She cups her breast and lifts it, an offering.

I tongue that hard little peak, and she cries out. Pleased, I wrap my arm around her waist and nuzzle at her breast, lapping at the nipple and toying with it. Experimentally, I take the entire tip in my mouth and suck on it, and love the hiss that

escapes between her teeth. Her hands go to my hair and she holds me to her breast, panting.

This is the most exciting moment of my existence. Not even a battle could make my blood pound quite like this. I am so aroused that my cock is leaking into the heated water, and I long to push between her wet thighs and sink deep. I rub my face in the valley between her breasts and move over to the other one to give it attention. "You are perfect in my arms."

"I don't know why we didn't do this days ago," she agrees, her fingers digging into my mane. "God, that feels good."

I suck on her nipple, glad that I am pleasing her. I release it with a pop and then tilt my head up. I think of how when she gets excited, she mauls my mouth. I want that. I want her wild excitement. "Now eat my face."

My words have the opposite reaction. Her expression turns to one of sheer confusion. "W-what?"

"Put your mouth on mine and chew on my face like you did before," I tell her, giving her tight nipple another hungry lick. "When you get excited."

Her lips part. She blinks several times and then shakes her head slightly. "That's akiss, Corvak." She puts her hands on my cheeks and pulls my face towards hers, legs tangling with mine in the water. "It's not to eat someone's face. It's to show affection and give pleasure with your mouth and your tongue."

"You bit at my lips when you did it."

"Because you have amazing lips," she agrees, and then brushes hers lightly over mine as if to prove this. "Kissable lips. Gorgeous lips. The poutiest mouth I've ever seen on

a man. It's unfair, really." She nips at my lower lip as she has before, and then strokes her tongue over it to soothe. "You think I'm trying to eat your face? It'd really freak you out if I put my mouth on your cock."

My world tilts as I imagine this. "You want to put your mouth on mycock?"

"Soon." She presses another light "kiss" to my mouth. "Right now I want to fuck." Another kiss. "I want you inside me, filling me up."

My groan is so loud it echoes in the cavern. "I want that, too."

She smiles and puts her mouth on mine again. I hold still, waiting to see what she does next. Her lips move over mine in light, fluttering caresses, as if she's teasing me more than anything. Then, her lips part and her tongue darts out, grazing the seam of my mouth. I part my lips, curious, and her tongue flicks against mine.

I feel that flick right in my cock. No wonder she wants to use her mouth all the time. She pulls back to study my face, and I lean in close, not wanting to stop. "Do that again."

Her mouth settles on mine again and we do this "kissing" for a very long time, so long that a haze falls over my mind and the world falls away. I forget about gladiator games, my army, our survival—everything but Aidy's soft, wet mouth. Sliding my tongue against hers feels almost as good as when her hand was on my cock. It is strange and erotic, and I am not surprised she has put her mouth to mine so many times. Now that I know what this is about, I plan on tasting her with kisses over and over again.

She pulls back from our locked mouths, breathing hard, and studies my face. "You can't make me pregnant, can you?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"From kissing?" I frown at her as an uncomfortable realization hits. "Do you not know how sex works, Aidy?"

She rolls her eyes at me. "Yes, I know how sex works. I'm asking if we have sex, are you going to shoot sperm or are you firing blanks? Is it possible that you can make me pregnant even though we're two different species?"

I consider this, then shake my head. "I am not permitted to breed. That is why I was on suppressants. And I am not born from any race. I was created in a lab from samples of many different types of people."

"Right. I forgot about that." She leans in and gives me a smacking kiss. "That is fantastic news because I think we should have sex."

My nostrils flare, as if my body is automatically trying to pick up her arousal scent. She is still in the water, floating next to me, so I can scent nothing but her warm skin and the sulfur stink of the heated pool. "I would like that." I scan the room and then look back to her. "Where?"

"Well, the needy girl in me says the water would be nice." Her hands roam over my shoulders and then down to my cock. She strokes it, then leans in and kisses my mouth again. "But I don't want you to drown."

"If I die between your thighs, so be it."

Her smile is positively wicked. "I think riding you in the water would be a lot of fun. Shall we?"

I nod, pulling her in to kiss on her mouth again. She twines her arms around my neck, holding me close, her breasts pressed to my chest. I love the way she feels in the water—she is all silky, slippery limbs. Me, I am wet hair all over, but she touches me and makes little sounds of pleasure as if she is enjoying herself. Aidy hooks one thigh over mine and reaches between us, guiding my cock to the heated place between her legs. I hold my breath, watching her face as she guides me to her pussy...

...and then stops.

"Maybe I'll make you work for it," she teases, and I love this fierce, playful side of her. She drags my cock over her cunt, sliding me into place only to tease away again before I can enter her. Like an animal, I snarl and gnash my teeth at her, but she only gives me a playful kiss, this time on my jaw. "Be patient."

She wants to tease? I can tease her back. I slide my free hand down to her cunt and find that little spot that has been haunting my dreams. The moment I touch it, she gasps, shuddering and clinging to me.

"Unfair," Aidy pants. She rocks her hips against my hand.

"Then you want me to stop?" I rub the little bud, noticing that she is slick here and it feels different than the water. Thicker, slipperier. I bet if I pulled my hand away her smell would cling to my fingers, and I love the thought.

"No. I want your fingers inside me." She hitches herself higher against me, her heel digging into my flank. "Please, Corvak."

I rub through her wetness, seeking the entrance to her body. When I find it, the tip of my finger dips in, and it is the best thing I've ever felt. Ever. The sucking heat of her clasps around my finger, and I imagine it as my cock. With a guttural sound, I erupt, coming in the water.

"It's okay," she whispers as I shudder, fire boiling from my sac and spurting my release. She strokes my cheek and murmurs to me, soothing me as I climax.

When I finish, I curl around her, holding her tight against me. "That...was not how I anticipated things going."

"You're just a little trigger-happy. We can still have fun." Aidy peppers my face with more kisses. "It's all right. I like that I could make you come so quickly. You know how to flatter a girl."

Flattered or not, I'm irritated with my body for not obeying. I'm supposed to be a warrior, a gladiator who has total control of his form and uses it to battle others. Yet the moment I stick a fingertip into my female, I fall apart. I haven't even made her feel good yet. My annoyance at myself turns to brief shame, and then determination. I slide my hand between her thighs again. Now that I can breathe and think straight, I turn my focus on Aidy and her pleasure.

I sink my finger into her body, and this time I watch her face. Her eyes flutter, her mouth parting, and I can tell this feels as good to her as it does to me. The thrumming in my chest is non-stop, but it seems to heighten this moment. "Can I make you come?"

"Yes." She bucks against my hand, then slides her arms around my neck again, holding on to me.

Instinctively, I thrust a finger into her the way I imagine my cock would. I pull back and thrust again, and again, and add a second finger because I like the thought of stretching her, making her body take me. She moans, rocking against my hand, and the water splashes and churns around us. She cries for more and tries to touch her clit herself, but I use my thumb there. Suddenly Aidy is biting down on my shoulder, her hips frantic as she works herself against my hand. I feel the hot clench of her when

she comes, the ripples of her cunt around my fingers, and a fierce satisfaction rolls through me, almost as pleasurable as my own release.

I move my hand so I can hold Aidy as she comes down from her climax, and I want this moment to last. I want to spend all day here in this pool, my female in my arms, my sac filling again with my need to be inside her. My cock throbs, alerting me that my body is quickly recovering. Perhaps she will want to have sex now? Just thinking about the possibility has me erect. I imagine Aidy's cunt squeezing around my cock, tightening and rippling as she comes again and...

I want that. Right now.

Aidy lets out a long, dramatic sigh and pushes her wet hair back from her face again. "We should get out of this water before we turn into human prunes. Well, a human prune and an alien prune." She leans in and gives me another quick kiss, then slides out of my arms and hauls herself over the edge to sit on the rocks at the side of the heated pool. She wrings her mane out with her hands, checking it over. "Just making sure I don't have random cum in my hair."

"I see." I stay in the pool, holding onto the ledge and looking up at her. I watch as her rounded bottom shifts and moves as she stands, watch as her thighs part and reveal the darker flesh of her sex. When she leans over to wring her hair out, her breasts hang and sway, the tips calling out for my mouth.

She glances over at me, straightening. "You coming out?"

In answer, I climb from the water and stand upright on the ledge next to the pool. My cock is erect and throbbing, and Aidy's gaze falls there. Her lips part, and then she glances up at me with a little smile. "Wasn't enough for you?"

"Never enough," I say, and close the distance between us. The head of my cock

brushes against her skin as I pull her close. She is tiny when she stands against me, but she tilts her face up and I lean in, and we are able to kiss mouths again. Her hands go to my backside, and she clutches at it, hard, her fingers digging into my skin. I like it. I want more. I want her with her legs around me again, but this time not in the water. "Can I pick you up?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

In response, she lifts her arms.

I grab her by the hips and pull her against me, her legs going about my waist. I need an anchor to steady us and move a few steps to the cave wall. Pressing Aidy up against it, I hold her slippery body close. "Guide me in?"

"No teasing this time," she whispers, and reaches between us.

Her gaze locks on me as she takes my cock in her hands and moves me to the entrance of her body. Once I'm there, she nods, and I thrust forward, sinking the head into her warmth. It is the most amazing sensation, a dozen times better than my fingers inside her heat. I can feel everything, the clench of her cunt around me, the hitch of her breath, the throb of my blood, and even the humming in my chest, all through my cock. She shifts her weight, settling against me, and I slowly push deeper into her, sinking into her warmth.

"Good?" she asks me, her thumb stroking my skin.

"Incredible," I manage, voice thick. With small, careful strokes, I continue to push into her until I am fully seated, and the prominent nub of my spur rubs against her clit.

She squirms, her eyes widening in surprise at this newest revelation. Her hand slides between us. "Oh."

I stiffen, worried. "Bad? Should I move it?" I go to put my hand where hers is.

Aidy bats me away. "No! It's good. Really good." I thrust lightly, experimentally, and her thighs clench, her cunt shivering in response. She whimpers. "Really fucking good."

Fighting back a growl of possessiveness, I reach up and take a handful of her wet hair. I remember what she said, about liking my strength, and I want to feel her come again. I want her to clench around me and squeeze my cock like a vise. I wrap my hand in her mane and tug as I thrust. She gasps again, the sound needy and hungry. Her fingers dig into my biceps, as if encouraging me to go faster.

As if I can stop. Now that I am inside her, swallowed by the heat of her, there is no controlling my primal side. I anchor her against the wall and piston into her, fast and wild, her hair trapped in my hand. Aidy makes little moans and mewls as my cock hammers into her, and the sounds turn into my name as she nears another climax. Her legs clamp my hips, and her excitement makes my sac tighten, filling with the need to release. When her eyes close and her face contorts in her climax, I feel it—she squeezes around my cock so tight, her body taut with her release. "Corvak!"

I do not say her name. I have no words. I just surge and surge into her, claiming. Branding. Marking as my own. My mate. My everything. I spill inside her heat, filling her with my release. My seed. Even when my sac is emptied, I still move within her, slowly, reluctant to stop this intense feeling. I am inside her, Aidy's limbs wrapped around me, and this is like no pleasure I have ever felt before. I am one with her.

Resting my head atop hers as we catch our breath, I could swear that the humming in my chest eases a bit. It relaxes, just like I have. Maybe it's somehow tied to my pleasure.

Gradually, my breathing slows, and I become aware that I'm crushing Aidy's smaller form against the uneven wall of the cave. I ease off of her, still cradling our joined

bodies, and brace my hand over the small of her back. "Did I hurt you?"

She snorts. "You can hurt me like that any day." At my frown, she adds, "But no, you didn't."

Good. The thought of harming her with my needs is devastating.

Her hand plays against the pelt over my pectorals. "Did they shoot you with some sort of woman-attracting pheromone in that lab? Because I'm not sure I'm supposed to be this addicted to you. All I can think about is touching you. Being near you."

Huh. Is that so? I'm rather pleased to hear that. Pleased, and surprised. I try to play it down, though. I don't want to seem too eager. "I don't know. You've been good at keeping your hands to yourself."

"Have you seen my hands? They were filthy until our swim." She holds one up as if by example. "And I don't know if you noticed, but our friends smell like three-day-old roadkill."

I chuckle, because how could anyone ignore that smell? "They are eye-wateringly foul."

"Just thinking about them makes me want to wash my hands again," she admits, and then tilts her head, giving me a sly look. "Wanna scrub my back for real?"

My cock twitches with interest. "Insatiable female. You know I will."

"I swear I really mean it," she protests. "Scrubbing, not sex."

Sure, sure. We both know she is lying.

CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

AIDY

Over the space of a few days, our new cave becomes home. It'll never be the tiny rancher with sun-yellow walls I sometimes dream about from back home, but it's spacious and roomy and my heated cavern with the pool in it makes up for so much that I can't even be disappointed. This is just temporary until we win, I remind myself, but the thought of it being temporary no longer feels like the "out" it was before, when we first were stranded here.

What happens to Corvak once we "win"? Do they separate us? Do we go our separate ways? I hate the thought, so I push it from my mind and focus on my surroundings.

The second cavern isn't as big as the first one, but it feels more private, especially since when we wake up in the mornings, there's at least one of the snow-people peering in, looking for Corvak. The main cavern will be the work area, I decide, and the second one, closer to the pool and slightly warmer, will be our bedroom. I establish a firepit in the main cavern and line it with a heavy double-row of rocks, then do the same in the "bedroom." I make a bed for us out of the comfortable, soft furs that we'd stolen from the supply cave. In the front cave, I keep the fire going at all times and cook the food that's constantly being brought up to us by our snow-people allies. I use a sharp-edged knife and scrape the gunk off the back of the skins from our more recent kills, but I don't know how to make them soft and pretty like the ones we stole. They're still gross and smelly and hard from dried-on bits. We're going to have to use them at some point, though, because we need clothing and shoes and a jillion other things.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

If I don't stress about what we're going to wear, or the fact that more snow-people show up in the valley below every damn day, I'm loving my cave and I'm loving being with Corvak. He spends a fair amount of each day with the snow-people, training them...or trying to. They don't listen very well, but he doesn't give up. He's determined to have his army.

Once he's had his fill of them for the day, however, he comes home to me. We spend time in the pool and then the rest of the evening pretty much twined around each other. The sex is incredible each time, to the point that I'm just as ravenous for him as he is for me. I've never thought of myself as the type to be addicted to a man, but the moment Corvak returns from hunting, it's all I can do to keep my hands off of him.

Some days are trickier than others. Like today? Today I can't stop staring at the entrance of the cave, waiting for him to return. I keep imagining all the filthy things I want to do to him as I make another brothy stew, this time with fish and rabbit-like meat. When a shadow darkens the cave mouth, I perk up, resisting the urge to fix my hair and primp a bit.

It's only Pinkie, though. She hovers near the entrance, tapping her fingers with her name-gesture to let me know it's her. I'm disappointed but not surprised. It's early yet, and no doubt Corvak is busy trying to show the snow-people how to hold a spear. They tend to throw it away and run the moment there's a threat, which would be funny if they weren't supposed to be an army. "I'll come to you," I say/sign to her. "Stay there."

I grab a handful of roots that I roasted in the coals earlier, because for some silly reason, the women never eat the meat, and I want to give Pinkie some food. I scoop a

bowl of soup for her small son and bring it to the cave entrance with me. Corvak has thoughtfully set up a large rock in a safe, level spot just outside the cave for me to sit on. I sit down and set the food next to me as Pinkie warily approaches.

If there's one thing I've noticed with the snow-people, it's that they're heavily into gender roles, to the point that it makes me uncomfortable. In addition to not being allowed to eat meat, the women aren't allowed to fight, either. They hide whenever Corvak approaches, scuttling behind the nearest male.

I try not to think about how I've done the same, seeking protection with Corvak, but it's different. I hope. I don't bow and scrape to my partner the way the females do to the snow-people males. Pinkie cringes around the males in her group, racing around to serve them to the point that she's even handed them her food and gone hungry. She defers to the males at all times, dropping whatever she's doing to groom the one that I think is her mate (I privately call him Dick, because he seems like a dick to her). She defers to her toddler son, too, who is kind of a brat, so I make sure that she always has food when she comes to visit me for language lessons.

Pinkie blinks her big, owlsh eyes at the roots and approaches me warily. Food for son? she asks with her hand gestures.

"Food for Pinkie and son," I agree, then hold out both roots and the bowl in my other hand.

She takes the bowl first, offering it to her grabby son, who snatches it out of her grip. When he's slurping down the food, she takes one of the roots I hold out and scarfs it down as if I'm going to snatch it away from her.

I let her eat, and when she finishes, I offer another root. She snatches this one too, but chews a little slower, bits of root falling out of her beaky mouth. More roots today, she says. Roots good now.

I smile at that, even though inwardly I'm cringing. I learned that Pinkie only brings roots every other day because she's convinced she has to sleep on them first. Then, after a full day of using them for a bed, she's convinced they taste better. I eye her matted, gross fur and it just reminds me to never eat anything unless it's brought to me by Corvak. We even have different cooking tools so things don't get cross-contaminated. The snow-people are sweet in their way, but they're also horribly unhygienic. I know we're roughing it, but I can't stop thinking about germs and microbes and what sorts of things they could pass on to us.

So Pinkie's roots stay far, far away from my roots. It's why I cook for them in the front chamber of the cave and for myself and Corvak in the back chamber, in our bedroom. I gesture to her, indicating the cave. "You want to go inside? It's cold out here."

She makes the "no" symbol, a frightened look on her face. Great One cave.

"It's all right! I just wanted to ask." I always ask, and they always decline. I decide to change topics to put her at ease. "Thank you for the roots. You've been hard at work."

Good roots, she says, gesturing. I bring. Good for...

And then she makes a fluttering sign over her chest that I don't recognize. "What is this?" I ask, repeating her signal. "What does this mean?"

She repeats the gesture. Flutter. Chest. It takes me a moment to realize that she's talking about the incessant humming. I've noticed that she doesn't hum, but I've heard some of the other snow-people doing so.

"Does this mean the chest song?" I ask and then mimic the sound with a low purr. "Yes?"

Yes, she agrees, and makes the flutter symbol again. Makes good mate. Flutter always yes.

I digest that, trying to make sense of it. Some bits of language are easier to follow than others. Nouns, piece of cake. Concepts? Tricky. "Why flutter?" I ask. "What's the purpose?"

She is quick to gesture a response. Make good here. Pinkie indicates her privates. Much good. Mate good.

My face gets hot. So the song in my chest makes me...horny? I guess that tracks. I didn't start humming until I got the parasite inside me, and now that both Corvak and I have parasites, we've been unable to stop touching. I'd still be attracted to him without it, but with the darn thing, I can't stop thinking about him at all times. It's a full-on obsession, and one that has worried me sometimes. It's good to know that it's due to an outside influence and not just me suddenly turning nympho.

Good flutter, Pinkie gestures again. Happy family.

Well, she's not wrong there. Corvak makes me very happy. I clear my throat. "Yes, happy. You, um, fluttered to your husband too?"

Pinkie affirms it with an enthusiastic gesture. Make son.

That's not going to happen with us. Corvak and I are two different species. I haven't even allowed myself to consider what our relationship means. We're together, we're having fantastic sex, and we're surviving. That's all I need for now. One day at a time. "And a cute son he is!"

Pinkie hoots with pleasure and furtively snatches another root to eat. I pretend not to see, watching her son lick the bowl of stew I brought for him. I think half of it ended

up in his fur, judging from the looks of things. He finishes with the bowl and then flings it at his mother.

"Hey now," I protest, getting to my feet. "Let's be nice."

Pinkie cringes, and I could swear her kid looks indignant that I'm chastising him. I need Corvak to talk with them about respect. Not for me, but for the women of their tribe. They're nice enough to me, but I don't like how overbearing they are to Pinkie and her snow-people sisters. I glance down into the snowy valley far below, where, like every day, there are dozens of snow-people females digging for roots or scrounging plants. The valley has pretty much been picked clean at this point, so they're having to venture out farther just to get enough food. As I pick up the bowl, I notice that there's a lot of snow-people huddled at the base of the cliff.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

Like twice as many as I'm used to seeing. Dozens and dozens.

That's...not good. I set the bowl aside and sit down again, trying not to frown.

"Pinkie, are there more snow-people down below? More today?"

Yes, she tells me. All come.

"All?" I choke out and remember to sign it. "What do you mean, all are coming?"

All people, she agrees. Skies say come. Say Great One here.

And Corvak is their Great One. "You mean the water in the sky?" I ask, using the words she does for the Northern Lights. "It told all your people to come?"

Fire and water, she says. Pictures in mountain. Water fill sky. Fire come to ground.

She must mean the meteor. I suppose they think the cave art is telling them something, and the Northern Lights and the meteor must have "confirmed" it in their heads. Greaaat.

I sign, I see.

Sky fire always bring people, she continues. Always people.

I frown to myself. "What do you mean? What people?"

Some like you, she says. Some color of water. Some...She makes a gesture for horns

on someone's head. All different. All come with sky fire.

"You know these people?" I ask, fascinated.

No. They... She makes the gesture for yesterday and then repeats it so many times that I know she means "long ago." Others here now.

"Others like... Corvak? Other gladiators? Others in the game?"

She makes the gesture for horns and then adds, live at big water.

Big water. A beach? There's a freaking beach here and we're living in the freaking arctic mountains?! For a moment, I'm absolutely furious. "A warm beach?"

Warm here, she says. Snow here, snow there.

That soothes my irritation. Not a warm, tropical beach. A shitty cold one just like the shitty cold mountains. "And people live there? Near the water? People that look like me?"

Smooth people, yes. She touches her cheek, running her claw down it in the gesture we've established for "human." Come from the skies.

Other opponents, then. Gladiators. "And then they leave? Once the game is done, they leave?"

Her expression turns puzzled. No leave. Stay at big water. Many family. Many people.

A knot forms in my stomach. Corvak has said repeatedly that when the game is over, we'll be pulled from this awful planet and sent somewhere else. But if what Pinkie is saying is correct...

What if no one leaves this planet? Ever?

I'm terrified at the thought.

CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

AIDY

I fight to contain my unease as I make food all day long.

No leave. Smooth people come from skies. Stay at big water.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

The thought plays in my head over and over again throughout the day as I cook. I've noticed the amount of food is growing. My soup pouch bubbles all day, and the coals are crammed full of roots. The snow-people are bringing us a ton of food at least. If the roots look chewed on or some of the fish smells like it's been rotting on some rocks, I don't judge. I just toss it into the stew pot and cook it, because the snow-people are not picky.

But feeding them is quickly turning into a full-time job.

By the time Corvak returns to the cave from a day of hunting and training, I'm exhausted and my fingers are blistered from handling hot roots. He enters the cave and puts his carrying sack and weapons down near the opening, then approaches me. "Did you miss me, Aidy?"

I tilt my face up for a kiss, because the moment he arrived, my chest started humming and the longing unfurled in my belly. "Always."

"I brought food for us," he says. "A big bird of some kind."

My heart drops. More cooking. I'd almost prefer we go hungry tonight, I'm so tired of leaning over the fire. Birds are messy, too. The feathers have to be plucked and put aside, the organs removed, and then the flesh spitted and turned so it roasts evenly. It's more work than I want to do, but how can I protest? He hunted all day and I sat here in the cave, safe. "Gotcha. Let me just finish out here."

"I am going to clean up in the pool," he says, nuzzling my face and giving my ponytail a gentle tug, letting me know he's feeling amorous. "I'll be back."

I nod and move to the fire, pulling off my cooking pouch. I'm out of stew and roots, but there are still more snow-people waiting outside to eat. "No more today," I sign to the male waiting near the entrance of the cave. "I'm out."

He crouches where he's at, as if saying that he'll wait.

A second comes and sits behind him, and they both stare at me, hungry. Great. Just fucking great.

I'm completely wiped and close to crying at the realization. It doesn't matter how much food I make—it'll never be enough. I head back into the tunnel, towards the pool. "Corvak, I need you to talk to the snow-people. They're not listening to me."

No response. He probably can't hear me from this far away.

I burst into the tears I've been trying to hold back on. I'm so tired. Is this what the rest of my life is going to be? Making batches of stew in a cold cave for people that smell like wet dog fur and treat the females like they're shit? And aren't I part of the problem, staying back and letting a man handle everything? But I'm terrified of hunting.

I'm trapped. The thought is overwhelming, and I can't stop the frustrated tears rolling down my face. It's weak and I don't want to seem weak and helpless and girly in front of Corvak. I want to be a strong partner, but god, I'm so tired. I try to compose myself, wiping at my face and taking deep, shuddering breaths. When I glance out at the entrance of the cave, though, I see the glowing blue eyes of the snow-people that are waiting to be fed.

And I just cry even harder.

"Aidy? What's wrong?" Corvak appears, rushing to my side and skidding on the

slippery rock floor. Naked and dripping, he grips my arms gently and studies my face. "What is it? Did someone threaten you?"

I shake my head. "It's nothing?—"

"It is not nothing," he says hotly. "Tell me what's upsetting you."

I gesture at the front of the cave. "I'm out of food and they still won't leave. They just ignore me and?—"

I stop because Corvak immediately lets go of me and storms towards the entrance. He snarls, raising his hands like claws, and mock-lunges for the entrance. With a flurry of hoots, the snow-people scatter and disappear.

"We shouldn't scare them," I tell him, even though a small shameful part of me is relieved. "There's so many of them and only two of us. The last thing we need to do is aggravate them."

"They are not aggravated. They worship me, remember?" He returns to my side, tipping my face up and studying my eyes as if waiting to see the tears dry up.

Yeah, they worship him, all right...and ignore me because I'm female. Well, unless I'm feeding them, which is a female's job in their eyes. I bite the inside of my cheek, determined not to cry again, but it's tricky.

"Go on," he says gently. His thumb strokes along my jaw. "Tell me more of what bothers you."

"It's going to sound whiny."

"It will not. I promise you."

I hesitate for a moment longer and then spill it out. "I'm just so tired. I cook for them all day. There's an endless stream of them constantly climbing up here and just waiting for me to hand them something to eat. Every time I turn around, someone's bringing more food that has to be cooked. I have roots. I have questionable fish brought to me. I have dead rodents handed to me. And I'm trying to be a team player, but it's exhausting and my fingers are burned and I can't cook fast enough..." I raise a hand, gesturing weakly. "And now you've brought more food that needs cooking, and I'm not mad at you for doing that, I'm just tired, and?—"

"Aidy," Corvak says, so very gentle. "May I speak?"

I hiccup. "Of course."

"You are always the one that initiates cooking. I have never asked you to. I thought you enjoyed it, so I have not volunteered to take this task from your hands. I can cook a bird. I can cook all the food if you like."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

I can feel my mouth hanging open. He thought I liked cooking? I think back to all of our interactions near the fire, and how I'm always trying to prove my worth, putting on water to melt, or food to cook. No wonder he thought I liked it. I've never shown otherwise. I feel silly. "Oh. I don't like it, but it's something I can do, and I want to help out."

"There is a difference between helping out and exhausting yourself. I would rather eat raw roots than watch you be miserable because you have to stand over the fire." He brushes his fingers over my temple, pushing my hair behind my ear, and searches my face. "You have to tell me if you're unhappy. I will not know if you pretend everything is fine and it is not."

I'm a jerk, because he's right. I let out a long, heaving sigh, and absently wipe at a bead of water trickling down his chest. "You say that, but I have to help out."

"When have I said you are not helping?"

"But that's the thing—ever since we got here, I've been useless. I can't fight. I can't track. I can't teach the snow-people how to carry a spear. I want to help out—and I want to help you. The least I can do is cook while you work hard all day training the army."

Corvak tilts his head, regarding me. "There are a great many things that can be done around camp. If you don't want to cook, I will. And you have been a great help. Just because you're not strong doesn't mean that you're not helping me. You guard the cave. You work on clothes and refilling our waterskins." He squeezes my arm, as if I've forgotten something important. "You speak with the snow-people and learn their

language."

Somehow I feel more pathetic when he lists out my accomplishments. "Meanwhile you're keeping us alive."

He gives me an exasperated stare. "And you are keeping me sane as this game drags on. Do not speak poorly of yourself, Aidy. I won't have it. If you were not here, I would be dead already."

I'm skeptical of that particular fact, but I know he's trying to make me feel better. I move into the circle of his arms and lean against his chest. He's damp, but I don't care. He's comforting and strong and I adore him. "I'm sorry. Really. I'm just tired from cooking and leaning over the fire all damn day. There's more snow-people every time I turn around."

A grunt of acknowledgment. "More arrived today."

"See? And they need to be fed. I'll keep up, I promise. I just want permission to whine a bit." I press my face to his pectorals and kiss his skin. He smells good. There's a lingering hint of sweat that clings to his skin, but I like his sweat smell. "Wanna have sex? I can wash up and?—"

"Aidy," Corvak says, ever calm. "If you want to cook, you can cook for me if it makes you happy. But you do not have to cook for every single mouth that opens. The snow-people fed themselves before we arrived. They will continue to feed themselves if we do not."

He makes it sound so simple, but I know there's more to it. I shake my head and run my fingers over his chest, wrapping some of the longer pelt on his chest around one finger. "You don't get it. If we feed them, they're well-behaved. I'm scared to think of how they'll act if we stop feeding them."

Corvak is silent, and I know he's thinking of the same thing I am.

Yesterday, we had a situation. Two of the larger snow-people males had approached the cave, wanting food. There was a cluster of them already waiting on the cliff, clinging to the rocks like mountain goats and waiting eagerly for me to come out with another bowl. The moment I did, the two males pushed to the front and tried to snatch it from my hands. Startled, I'd dropped the bowl at my feet, and a frenzy started. The males attacked each other, hooting frantically and tearing with their sharp claws. The fight was horrific and others were pulled into the fray. A young juvenile was knocked down the cliff and another male retreated, covered in blood and clutching a broken arm.

Corvak had been nearby and stepped in, and only his anger made them calm down.

After that, everyone was nice and orderly. There were no more incidents. But these people don't seem to have long memories or a lot of self-control. I worry there's going to be another incident. I worry there'll be a whole cluster of incidents if we stop being friendly and handing out food.

I'm truly starting to question this whole "army" plan.

"I will handle it," Corvak says, and rubs my arm. "They listen to me. If you don't want to cook for them, then do not. We will deal with the repercussions."

"No, I'll keep cooking for them," I say. Being tired is better than being dead. "Just...be careful, all right? How is the training coming along?"

He sighs, and the sound is as exasperated as I feel. "They are not good listeners, but I think we are making progress. I am paying special attention to a few that are smarter than others. If I can set them up as leaders, I can assign smaller groups to them." He pauses. "At least, that is the hope."

I snuggle up against him again, because I can hear the frustration in his voice. He's been working hard at this army of his, but it's a lot like herding cats. They don't listen well, and just because they look like people doesn't mean they act like any people we know of. Their attention spans are brief at best, to go with their hair-trigger tempers. But we can't give up, just because there are so many of them, and they're devoted to Corvak. That devotion means safety for us, if we can get things organized.

I think of Pinkie's comments earlier, about the ones on the beach that never leave. "Have you seen anyone else? Any of the other gladiators?"

"No one. I think we are safe from them this far away from where we were dropped."

I choose my next words carefully. "Pinkie says she has seen others like me. Smooth-faced ones that live by a beach."

He stiffens against me and then relaxes. "Not close to here, then? That's not a problem."

"She also said they never leave. They just stay there and make families." I hold tightly to him. "That...that worries me, Corvak. How long is this game supposed to go on?"

Corvak wraps his arms around me, as if sensing my need for comfort. "Just because she hasn't seen them leave doesn't mean no one has. And I doubt very much that Pinkie went to the beach and came here in the same time frame we did. That seems like a lot of traveling. She's probably making it up to make you happy."

I'm not convinced. "She volunteered the information. I didn't ask. She just pointed it out as if it was something we should know."

He's not concerned. "She might be referring to a different group of gladiators. None

that I have seen are 'smooth' like you." And he squeezes my butt.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

Corvak has a good point. He said that the others he'd seen were like him—splices. Maybe she is telling stories just to please me, or maybe I misunderstood her subtle hand gestures. "I'm sure you're right."

"Have faith in your mate." He draws little circles on my butt cheek, clearly getting amorous.

He's not the only one. I run my hand down his side and move to his back, squeezing his tight, high bubble butt. It's really the nicest butt. Muscular and firm. "You know she told me that the parasite makes us horny? I feel like that explains a lot."

Corvak chuckles. "I do not need a parasite to be attracted to you."

I'm the same. Perhaps the parasite makes me aroused even when the situation is inappropriate, but there's so much to love about Corvak that I can't imagine feeling differently about him. I love his protectiveness, his self-assured manner. I love how attentive he is to me. When I have suggestions or complaints, he truly listens. I'm so grateful that we were stranded together, whatever happens.

And of course, he's smoking hot and impressively muscled. Can't forget that, either.

I lean in and kiss away one of the droplets of water on his chest. He rumbles approval, his hand trailing up my back. I decide to take charge this time. He's already naked, after all, and clean. I have access to all the fun bits by simply sinking to my knees, and I do. I smile up at him and then take his cock in hand, licking the head.

It never fails to make his breath hitch, his entire body jerking in response to that small

touch. God, I love that. I love the way his gaze turns heated right away, as if I'm the most stunning creature he's ever seen. As if he's lucky that I'm touching him, when I feel like it's the other way around. I have vague memories of other men, other sexual encounters back on Earth, but all of them pale in comparison to the way I feel around Corvak.

Surely not all of that is from the parasite.

I swirl the tip of my tongue around the head of his cock, playful and teasing. His hand goes to my hair, holding my head just the way I like—firm, but not too controlling. I move in, taking more of his cock into my mouth and working him with lips and tongue. I've learned the things he likes in the last week of constant sex—that the cartilage-like protrusion above his cock doesn't have much feeling, but the underside of his shaft and the ridges there absolutely do. That he likes a little bit of teeth, but only strategically and never near the ultra-sensitive head. I've learned that he likes his balls gently gripped and tugged on just before he's about to come, and that when he does, it's so much that I'm never going to be able to swallow it all down.

I've also learned that he likes to cuddle afterwards for a few minutes before he uses his tongue on me. Not that I'm going down on him to ensure I get my turn. I just love making him feel good. I love his reactions, the musky taste of him, the feel of his heated, heavy length against my tongue. I love toying with his sac, and like clockwork, he comes the moment I tug.

"My amazing Aidy," he murmurs, caressing my jaw afterward as I wipe myself clean. "Know that I would do anything to keep you safe. You do not need to fear anything with me."

"I know," I whisper. And I do.

We'll take things as we always do, one day at a time.

CHAPTER

NINETEEN

WEEKS LATER

CORVAK

This is a problem, I decide, as I survey my "army". Where I once had maybe two dozen snow-people to train and monitor, there are now hundreds. The more that arrive, the more that my training is harder to enforce.

And the more that arrive, the more badly behaved all of them become.

Aidy was right all along.

I wanted to believe that I could mold them into an army, but all they are is a massive problem. They are messy. They are violent. They are loud, because they never remember that they are to be quiet.

The only things that they remember are that they worship me as their Great One, for some reason...and that they want to be fed.

Always, always, they want to be fed.

My Aidy worries that they will turn on us if we do not continue to feed them, so while I go out amongst them every day in the hopes of forming them into an army, she continues to cook and hand out food. It is as if they have forgotten how to take care of themselves now that we are doing so. They know how to hunt well enough, but instead of eating their own kills or cooking them, they bring them to our cave for Aidy to prepare. She does what she can, but it is never enough, and every

night, the sound of vicious fights in the valley below echo around us, the ones who did not get to eat taking it out on their neighbors.

Aidy has not complained again, but I know she worries.

I worry, too. When I look out over the valley, I see a sea of dirty white heads, and hundreds of glowing eyes all looking to me for guidance. They want me to do something for them...but what? Aidy talks to them, and I have learned a few of the signals, but so far they have not said what it is they want.

I am their Great One and so they follow.

And follow.

And follow.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

This morning, I walk along the edges of the bowl-like valley. Behind me, the mountains rise into the clouds. In front of me, the valley with churned snows, snow-people, and a now-barren landscape. Every edible root, every small creature in the area has been hunted down. The valley cannot sustain the always-hungry and always-growing population. We are having to venture out farther and farther to find meat, and roots are not even an option at this point. I am failing to feed my mate.

Using my spear as a walking stick, I head out to hunt. A few valleys over, I saw a herd of four-legged creatures. Just one of them would be enough to feed myself and Aidy for days, and we can dry the rest. It will take me most of the morning to get there, but I'm looking forward to getting away. I'm tired of people following me, even if they're "my" people. I'm tired of the endless hooting, the watchful eyes, the expectant stares.

I thought I'd enjoy having an army for protection. Now I would rather they all just went away.

I set a brisk pace, taking the most difficult route possible to deter any stragglers. I climb sheer cliffs and crawl up loose rocky slopes. I choose places that have no footholds and nearly tumble down one of the slopes. Still, I am followed. Every time I look back, I can see a trail of fuzzy white heads following me. I grit my teeth every time I hear a hoot.

Something has to be done. But what? This is a mess of my own making.

Gritting my teeth against my irritation, I make it to the bottom of the next valley and wait for my "followers". They straggle over the rocks, coming into view. Once they

appear, I make the "stay here" gesture that I've learned. I point at the biggest one in the lead so they know I'm talking to them, and make the gesture again.

The big male repeats it. Stay here.

I turn to go and take a few steps, then check over my shoulder, because the smell of them lingers.

They're still following. With an irritated sigh, I shake my head and stare at the snow at my feet as I think. How do I lose them? They're going to chase off the herd if I get any closer. The snow-people are decent at catching smaller animals, but they've chased away all the bigger game.

As I stare at the snow, I notice footprints.

Not so unusual, given that I haunt these valleys and the snow-people do, too. There are tracks heading towards my cave all over the snows from the snow-people that arrive every day.

These tracks are heading away, though. I lean in and touch one. The foot is large like mine, and the trail cuts through the mountains, heading in the direction of the herd I'd seen a few days ago. I lean in, because the tracks are fresh, not covered by the snowfall from yesterday morning. There's a lingering scent of leather...and other.

A gladiator.

Here.

Finally. I've been waiting to play this game for far too long.

CHAPTER

TWENTY

AIDY

The smell of the snow-people's soup this afternoon is making me nauseous.

I stir it at arm's length with a long rib-bone, covering my mouth as I do. Some days I don't ask if the food they're bringing me is fresh, because I've learned that they'll eat it either way—rotting or newly dead, it's all the same to them. I cook it regardless, figuring that heat will destroy most of the pathogens. Sometimes it smells unpleasant.

Today it smells stomach-turning.

I think I've come down with something. It's the only explanation for how sick I feel. I threw up this morning and have felt ill all day. Given our environment, it was bound to happen, but I'm concerned I've caught some sort of non-helpful parasite from the water or food. Who knows what's living inside these things? I touch my chest. To make matters worse, my chest worm has gone quiet. After weeks of incessant humming and singing and making me horny at the drop of a hat, it's gone on vacation. It purrs a little when Corvak comes home at night, but it's so much quieter that it concerns me.

I hope my sickness isn't killing it. All I know is that I need the dang thing to survive.

I continue to rub my chest as I scoop a bowl of food and head with it to the front of the cave. There are several waiting snow-people, and they all shoot me hopeful looks. Pinkie hovers nearby, her head jerking up the moment I emerge.

"Two more bowls after this one," I say to the waiting crowd. There's at least seven of them waiting, watching me with hungry expressions. "Only two."

The closest one takes the bowl and then races a few feet away with it, the others pressing against him in the hopes of stealing a bite.

Roots?Pinkie asks with a subtle gesture.

I pull the last sorry-looking, withered root from the folds of my clothing and offer it to her. She snatches it so quickly that her claws scrape my arm. I draw back and as I do, a new smell hits me. I turn and see that someone—several someones—have crapped on the path up to the cave.

It's too much for my stomach. My food comes up and I puke all down the steps. I wipe at my mouth, horrified, and then retreat back into the cave. I'll clean that up later. I sit down in the cave, sip some water until I feel better, and then hear a questioning hoot outside. I glance over and sure enough, there's a snow-person waiting at the cave entrance, clutching the empty, battered bowl. He wants to be fed. They all do.

With a tired sigh, I get to my feet and take it from him. Like it or not, I have a job to do.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

By the time it grows dark, my stomach has more or less settled. I'm hoping it's just a temporary bug, and I finish the last of the snow-people food and dole it out. Normally they bring a bunch of dead things for me to cook up—fish, rabbits, whatever—but today there's nothing. Just a bunch of hungry mouths. I give out what I can and try not to think about what it's going to be like when we run out of food for them.

Once it's gone, I take the pouch and the cooking utensils with me to the pool and clean them in the hot, fresh water. The heat makes me languid, and after everything has been rinsed, I curl up on the rocks to take a quick nap, my arm propped up under my head. It's not the most comfortable spot to sleep, but I'm so tired I don't even care. The heat is nice, the rocks underneath me toasty warm.

"Aidy."

I wake up to gentle knuckles stroking my cheek. Drowsy, I smile and open my eyes gazing up at him. Corvak looks tired, his thick lion's mane of hair slightly damp from the snow. He's still wearing his makeshift layers of outdoor gear and there's an expression of concern on his face as he regards me. "Is something wrong?"

With a yawn, I sit up. As I do, I feel the aches and pains of sleeping on hard rock. Not my brightest idea. The bowl I was cleaning has floated over to the far side of the pool and the leather pouch hangs perilously close to the edge of the water. My stirring rib is nowhere to be seen. Shoot. I must have knocked them in while I slept. "Sorry, I was taking a nap."

I lean over to pick up the pouch, and as I do, my stomach protests. I press my hand to my mouth, willing the nausea to go down.

"Aidy?" His hand touches my hair and Corvak kneels next to me. "Are you well?"

When I can speak without puking, I nod and say, "Just a little off today. I think I ate something that disagreed with me. You all right? You look unhappy."

He studies me for a bit longer, as if not quite believing that I'm well. After a long moment, he decides to speak. "I saw footprints today. Other people—other gladiators—are nearby."

Oh. It doesn't scare me like I thought it would. I've felt so secure in this cave, so removed from the game entirely that I haven't given it much thought, other than the fact that my memories should be returning and they haven't. Corvak looks upset, though. I'd have thought he'd be celebrating the chance to go after someone else, but he just looks pensive instead. "And...?"

"And we are not ready." His lips flatten into an unhappy line and he rubs a hand over his mouth. "You know the snow-people are not prepared."

"They're the world's worst army," I agree. I feel a little better, so I get to my feet and pick up my things. I'll retrieve the bowl later. "Come on. Let's go to the bedroom. It's not as warm as it is in here."

He follows after me, still quiet. It's unnerving, because I honestly expected more excitement from Corvak at the thought of progressing the game. Our "bedroom" is the next chamber over. It's dark inside, the fire out—I usually transfer a few coals from the other fire in the front cave for cooking—but I know the contents here by heart. The firepit is in the far corner, and closer to the warmth of the pool is our bedding, a pile of thick furs a few steps away from the crawl-through that leads here. I tug Corvak over to the bed and begin the process of pulling damp clothing off of him.

In the last few weeks, I've gotten better at making decent clothing. Well...my standards of "decent" have changed, but at least they're no longer just furs strapped onto our bodies. With a sharp, jagged rock, I punched holes along the edges to feed the leather straps through, and I was able to "sew" things together. They more or less fit like real clothes now, even if they're a bit more bulky and shapeless than what I'm used to. They're warm, and that's all that matters.

I help Corvak undress, loosening the laces on the sides of his tunic so he can pull it over his head. "Tell me what you're thinking," I say. "You're so quiet."

"I'm trying to conceptualize battle plans, but the problem I keep coming back to is the snow-people. I can't be stealthy with them around. I can't prepare a trap. I can direct them to attack my opponent and overwhelm him, but there is no honorable game play in that."

"I don't trust them to do what we want anyhow," I admit, listening as he tugs the tunic over his head in a rustle and then tosses it onto the bedding. When I reach forward in the dark, his chest is bare and warm, and I press my fingers to his skin. His chest is humming, but it's such a soft, gentle hum compared to what it was before that it worries me. "The only way to ensure they'd attack someone is to cover them in soup."

He chuckles. "I don't want to just slaughter my opponent. I am a gladiator, but I am also honorable. It is one thing to have a trained army to protect our stronghold. It is another to just send a horde of ravening beasts after someone."

I make a sound of agreement. The snow-people aren't a tool we can utilize like we thought. They're a nuisance more than anything. "What if we don't kill your opponent?" I ask, an idea coming to me. "What if they're friendly? What if they're on our side?"

Corvak huffs, touching my hand on his chest before shifting his weight and

continuing undressing. "I doubt that."

I'm not so sure. "No one's attacked us, remember? Or come after us."

"They did that day I spied upon them?—"

"But what if they weren't looking for us to kill us but to help us? We found that cave full of supplies, right? What if they left those out for us? To assist us? What if they're nice?" The thought fills me with hope. We've been isolated here in the mountains, surrounded by volatile snow-people and nothing else, and I didn't realize how much it was weighing down on me. Maybe it's my sour stomach, but the idea of friendly allies is such a comforting one that I nearly weep with the thought. "What if we're not alone?"

Corvak must sense my emotions. He cups the back of my neck, tugging me close and pressing a kiss to the top of my head. "I value your words, my Aidy, but I doubt they are on our side. No game would work that way. The goal is for us to destroy each other."

I know he's right, but I can't shake the feeling that there's something we're missing. "It's just...things aren't adding up, you know? This game has gone on for so much longer than you thought it would. My memories haven't come back, even though we thought it was temporary. Pinkie says there are people like me on the beach...permanently. None of this matches your memories of the game rules. Something else is going on. I'm not sure what, but I know it can't hurt to have more information."

To my surprise, Corvak laughs.

He pulls me against him in a bear hug. "That's the answer."

"What is?"

"We find this other gladiator and torture him for information, of course. You are full of good ideas."

I sputter. "Wait, what? I never said to torture anyone!"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

He toys with a lock of my hair. "But it's a very good idea."

"No. Absolutely not. No torture." I slide out of his arms and grip his hands in mine. "But I do think it wouldn't hurt to meet up with the other guy. See what he has to say. Get information from him."

Corvak isn't sold. "And if he's the enemy, I will be walking into a trap with my hands out."

Good point. I think for a moment longer, and then offer, "Okay, what if you capture him? Without injuring him? And bring him back so we can question him."

"Mm. That is more difficult."

I squeeze his hands. "But you love a challenge."

"I do indeed." Corvak tugs me against him again, nuzzling at my hair. "You are very clever, my Aidy. I am so glad you're my female."

I let him pull me close and snuggle me. "I'm glad I'm yours, too." Weeks ago, I was annoyed at his constant claims on me, but somewhere along the way, I've turned to liking it. I don't think he grasps the word "love," but when he says that I'm his and that he can't imagine his world without me? When he takes care of me? I feel loved regardless. I feel pampered and cherished.

As long as he shows me, I don't care about the specific word too much.

He strokes my back, tucking me against him. Undressing is forgotten and he just wants to touch me for a while. I certainly don't mind that, not after the day I've had. I sink against him, eyes closing, and breathe in his scent. How is it that even after a day of hunting, Corvak still smells so good to me? I want to bury my nose against his skin and just inhale him for hours on end.

"I did not bring meat home," he tells me. "I failed you."

"It's fine. I'm not even sure I could eat it if you cooked it." I rest my cheek against his broad, warm chest. "I'd much rather you cleaned off the path. Our friends are leaving turds everywhere."

I can feel the tension in his body. He continues to stroke my back, running his fingers up my spine. "I don't like that you are sick. Is there something I can do?"

"It's probably just something I ate or touched. All we can do is wait it out." His chest-worm is purring, but it's not the same wild sound it was before, and I'm concerned. Before, I just wanted it to shut up so I could think, and now I'd give anything for it to be loud and insistent again, just so I know nothing is wrong. "Our chests have been quieter. Did you notice that?"

"I did. It makes hunting easier."

I manage a smile at that. "I bet it does."

"And it makes noises every time I'm close to you. Yours does to me, too."

It's true. Our humming is quieter, but my chest still thrums whenever he's around, and his does when I'm close. "You don't think they're sick, do you? I know we need them to survive, but what if we're supposed to do something to help it?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Water it?" I chuckle at my own ridiculous response. "Maybe it was just upset about something for a while and now it's not. I'm probably seeing shadows where there are none."

"You are being cautious, and there's nothing wrong with that." Corvak's voice is steady and reassuring. "And your advice today has been wise. We'll set a trap for this other gladiator and capture him and insist that he give us answers."

He makes it sound so easy. "Just don't hurt him or we won't get anything out of him."

"I won't."

"Bind his arms really well. The bad guys always escape in the movies when the ties aren't tight enough."

"Will do."

I tap a finger on his skin. "And don't get yourself hurt, either. If you're not around, these snow-people aren't going to listen to me at all."

He doesn't laugh at my words. He only strokes my hair and sighs. "I wish I had listened to you when you said they were a problem. I grow weary of our friends, and yet more and more of them arrive every day."

"Don't beat yourself up. You wanted strength in numbers. It'd make sense normally. It's just...they don't behave like normal people. They might talk, but that doesn't mean they're civilized. You couldn't have known." I lean back to gaze up at him. "And I'm not sure they would have listened even if you told them to go away. You're the chosen one, remember?"

Corvak's expression remains solemn. "I just worry what will happen when this valley runs out of food. It's easier to feed a dozen mouths than a dozen's dozen."

It's the same worry I've had, too. We're going to run out of resources. It's not a matter of if but a matter of when. "Just be careful when you go out, all right?"

Page 48

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

He nods and focuses his intense glowing eyes on me. "While I'm gone, I don't want you leaving the cave. For anything. They won't come in, and you're safe as long as you're in here. Understand me?"

I nod. As if I have a reason to leave anyhow? There's nowhere I want to be but this safe cave, with Corvak right beside me.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-ONE

CORVAK

It takes several days to trap the enemy.

Obviously stealth is not in my favor. Not with a flood of hooting, messy, stinking snow-people trailing me at all times. They will not be silent, no matter how many times I make the hand signal for quiet, so I think of other methods I can use in which to ensnare my enemy without killing him.

A pit trap seems the most logical. It simply requires grunt work and patience.

I scout the area for two days in search of footprints, ensuring that he remains nearby. His scent and his trail are all over the nearby valleys, but it does not seem that he has realized that Aidy and I are close. Our scents are likely masked by the snow-people and their overwhelming stink.

Once I establish the perfect spot for my pit, I bring the snow-people with me. We dig one night, and they are thrilled to be doing this for me. With a dozen flinging snow about, the narrow, deep trench is quickly built in the heavy snows. I cover it with some of the hard, crusty skins that we have been saving, the ones that we cannot figure out how to make soft like the ones we stole. Once the trench is masked with the skins, we pile snow atop them to hide the sight. When it's finished, the moons are almost gone from the sky and the trench itself is completely hidden. The snow here is churned, but that is not so unusual. Everywhere the snow-people go, they leave a trail of destroyed snow.

Satisfied, I plant the butt of my crude spear into the ground on the far side of the trench. When my enemy enters the valley, he will see it and wonder. Hopefully, he will approach it.

And then he will be snared.

The trench is just deep enough that he won't be able to climb out easily. Snow can be dug at, though, and if he shares the same memories I do, he will be crafty. I cannot leave the trench abandoned, then. I find a perch deeper into the valley, high in the rocks, and wait. The snow-people hover around me, making hiding impossible, but hopefully I will not need camouflage.

I need to capture him today. This is taking too much time.

The weather is cold this morning, the skies looking as if they are about to pour snow down upon us. My stomach growls with hunger, but I ignore it. There has been no time for hunting while I prepared my trap, and I hate that I am leaving Aidy alone for so long. She is the reason this must be done quickly. Whatever sickness has gripped her lingers, and she has not eaten much in the last few days.

It worries me. What do I do if she continues to grow sick? There is no medic here, no

lab. I feel helpless, and nothing matters if I do not have Aidy. I cannot imagine playing this game without her. I cannot imagine leaving this game, because it would mean we separate.

There is no life after Aidy. I will be with her, or I will be done.

These morbid thoughts consume me as I wait for my prey. The snow-people hoot and snap at each other behind me, and two of them break into a fight. I hiss at them to stop, but there is no heat behind my gestures. I'm tired of them. Aidy jokes that they are an army of tantrum-throwing toddlers. I have never been around a small child, but if they are as unruly as this, it's a wonder that anyone breeds.

The hooting increases, and I turn to shush them again when one starts jumping and excitedly gesturing below us. I turn to look and someone is approaching the pit. They are covered in pale white furs, so I cannot make them out, but the size could be that of a gladiator. I make the "silence" gesture and the snow-people go quiet. I hold my breath, watching as the male below spots my abandoned spear, pauses, and then warily approaches it, his own at the ready.

He takes a step forward.

I clench my fists, willing him to keep moving.

The stranger pauses, looking around the canyon. The wind is in my favor—he will not pick up my scent. With luck, the snow-people will be silent long enough that he will not notice them until it's too late. Keep going, I say silently. Two more steps.

The male in the snows below hesitates a bit longer, then takes another step.

And another.

On his third, the ground below his feet dissolves. His arms go up and he disappears into the pit.

I whoop with joy, surging to my feet. At my side, the snow-people hoot alongside me, a cacophony of noise that for once doesn't bother me. Scrambling down the steep cliffs, I race to the edge of the pit, determined to make it there before my enemy climbs his way out.

When I move to the edge of the pit, I see him seated below, his hands cradling one bent leg. His furs are scattered around him, and instead of looking afraid, he seems angry. Pissed, Aidy would say. He glances up at me with glowing blue eyes and his lip curls. "I don't know what kind of game this is, but I'm not in the mood. You broke my keffing ankle, friend."

It's not what I expected him to say. Nor did I expect him to look the way he does. I thought he'd look a bit more like me, to be honest. That he'd be a mixture of all races—mesakkah, praxiian, some moden, some a'ani, whatever is thrown into the mix to create the strongest candidate. I thought he'd look as tired and worn as we are, wearing tattered furs and eating whatever this miserable planet tosses our way.

The male below is praxiian, though. Perhaps not pure-blooded praxiian (there's something a little too flat about his features and his coloring to be a true praxiian), but it is clearly the majority of his genetic makeup. His mane is a striped dun, stark against his white fur cloak. His clothing is well-made, too. The foot he cradles is shod in a boot that would make Aidy envious, and he has a variety of knives and weapons at his waist, held by a tooled leather belt. He looks healthy. Clean.

He's thriving.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

I realize in that instant that Aidy and I are not. We are struggling because it is only the two of us, and the snow-people are more of a hindrance than a help. Our energy is spent every day preventing them from fighting when we could be using it in other ways.

For a brief moment, I feel a stab of resentment toward this male, that he is doing so well here on this planet and I, for all my scheming, am not. "We are not friends," I say back to him, hiding my frustration. "And you know very well what sort of game this is."

The male bares fangs at me. "What are you talking about?"

"The game." I gesture at our surroundings. "We have been sent here to play, and I am determined to win. Give up now and I will take you captive. Do not force me to eliminate you."

It's a bluff—Aidy has asked me to bring him back and I will, because I refuse to disappoint her. But this male does not know that.

His nostrils flare with irritation, his gaze flicking to the top of the pit, where I loom over him. I can practically see his thoughts, see the plans as he discards them, one by one. The snow-people are lining up around me, and he is obviously outnumbered. "Very well," he says slowly. "I will go with you if you promise I'll be safe. And you help me bind my ankle."

I flick a hand at him. "Toss your weapons up and my army will get you out of the pit."

He eyes me dubiously. After a long hesitation, he tosses up a dagger. Then another. His spear is snapped in half at the bottom, and he tosses each end up to me. Each time he flings up a weapon, he shoots me a look of pure disgust and loathing. Eventually there are seven knives, the spear, and a bola tossed up to me.

"Is that everything?" I ask.

"What, you think I have a knife shoved under my tail?" the stranger snarls back at me.

"It'd explain the attitude," I retort back. "This is nothing personal. It's just gameplay."

"What keffing game?" he shouts up to me. "Are you a madman?"

"You know very well what game," I say, though the more he protests, the more I think about Aidy's comments the other day. How she wonders if there is something different about this game because nothing is going as we expected. How the "smooth people on the beach" do not leave. Unsettled, I gesture to a few of the snow-people to jump down into the pit to lift him up.

Six of them do and they're able to lift him by working together, and I use a hand to haul him the final distance to the surface. He glares at me, eyeing his weapons now at my belt, but doesn't reach for them. "Who are these strangers?" he asks.

"They are my army."

"Yeah, well, you should tell your army to wash. I smelled them two valleys over."

I bare my teeth in an unfriendly smile. "And yet you still fell into my trap. What does this say about you?"

He scowls. "It says that I let my curiosity get the better of me, and that I should never go hunting when distracted."

"The smell is that much of a distraction?"

He's silent.

"What are you doing hunting this far into the mountains?" I prod, wondering if they have come looking for us or if he's lost. He seemed surprised to see me earlier.

The praxiiian doesn't answer. Instead, he hobbles forward and then hisses, shaking his head. "You're going to have to carry me to your healer because my ankle is keffed up."

"There's no healer down here," I reply.

He groans, staring up at the sky as if his patience is completely exhausted. "Why me?"

"You aren't afraid?"

"Should I be? You would have killed me already if you'd intended to. And I imagine that it's better to go with you for now, because if you don't kill me, someone else might when I don't return." He grimaces.

Unsettled, I pick up one of the furs that fell into the pit with him. It's difficult to inspire fear in an enemy that's merely annoyed by you. He should be worried, not mildly irked at being inconvenienced. I spread the fur on the ground and gesture at it. "You can sit and I will drag you, if you cannot walk."

His annoyance increases. "You should let me go."

"Why would I do that?"

He doesn't answer, his long tail swishing. Instead, he looks unsettled for the first time since I pulled him from the pit. "I need to go back. That's all. I'm needed...elsewhere."

Page 50

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"I don't care. I need answers. You're coming with me." I point at the fur again. "You can sit and I can drag you, or they can carry you." And I gesture at the snow-people.

The praxiian's nostrils flare and he shoots me a disgusted look. Favoring his bad leg, he leans over and eases himself onto the fur, then gestures at me as if he's the one in charge.

I drop the end of the fur blanket and gesture to my army. Pull him with us.

The male is swarmed by the snow-people and he makes a sound of pure disgust that warms my heart.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-TWO

AIDY

My stomach is worse today. I move between bouts of cooking for the snow-people and vomiting in a quiet corner of the cave, in an empty bag that's going to need to be tossed when Corvak returns.

If he returns. I don't like that he's been gone so long. It's been days since I've seen him, and I know he's trying to trap the enemy. I just wish he'd check in, or let me know that things are going all right. Something. What if he never returns because he's been caught—or worse—and I'm stuck in this cave until the game is over?

What if the game is never over?

The thought makes me retch again.

Sweating and pale, I forget all about cooking for a moment and move to the front of the cave. The snow-people are just outside, hovering in wait. I don't see Pinkie—she hasn't been coming to the cave since I ran out of roots. I know she has to feed herself, but I feel like I lost a friend. The ones clustered just outside are all males, hungry for soup, and today's dish is fish that smells like it turned a week ago. I boil it up anyway, because they'll eat it, and I'm afraid not to feed them. As long as they keep bringing me carcasses, I'll keep cooking.

Right now though, I need fresh air. So I don't go quite to the front of the cave. I stay at least an arm's length or two back, lean against the cave wall and sink to the floor, and just breathe in fresh, cool air as it wafts in.

"Aidy?"

I jerk awake, horrified to realize I've fallen asleep—or passed out, more like. Scrubbing a hand over my sour mouth, I blink at my surroundings. Corvak crouches in front of me, a look of concern on his face.

"More sickness?" he asks, as if he can smell it on me.

"I'm fine," I say, blinking off the last of the disorientation. "Just a little off today. How did it go? You're safe? You're well? No injuries?" I run my hands over his crude clothing, looking for rips or dried blood. Corvak isn't the type to complain if he's wounded, but I'd still want to take care of him. "Let me know if you have any scratches. You could get infected with anything."

He touches my arm. His mouth flattens into a thin line and my spirits plummet. Oh

no. Failure, then. He wasn't able to capture the stranger. I reach out to reassure him?—

There's a cacophony of hooting outside, and the sounds of a scuffle.

"Get your hands off! They don't belong there!" shouts an unfamiliar voice. "The tail is off-keffing-limits, you idiots! Hey, you! Call off your lackeys!"

Corvak exhales entirely through his nose, his face set in what can only be resignation. He gets to his feet, and I stand, too. He deliberately places himself in front of me, as if trying to block my view of the cave entrance. I peer out from behind his shoulder anyhow, too tired to complain that he's being overbearing. I'll add it to the book of grudges to discuss later.

A moment later, a large figure limps to the cave entrance, favoring one leg. He leans on the rocks and glares at Corvak. "No, no," he drawls. "It's fine. I can manage on a broken ankle. Don't get up."

"I found him. Our enemy," Corvak says, his hands moving back as if to brace me. "And he won't be silent."

I'm surprised. For some reason, I hadn't given much thought to what the other aliens we landed here with would look like. I'd assumed they'd all look more or less like Corvak. The man at the entrance looks...well, he looks like a cat. Where Corvak seems to have a few feline traits, this stranger looks as if someone mushed an oversized human with an equally oversized cat and made a person out of them. He's even got the split mouth and muzzle of a cat, unlike Corvak, who has heavier-but-still-human features. His triangular ears are flat with dislike, and I can see his tail swishing. That's different. Corvak has the Manx-like stump, but the stranger's tail is long and fully furred. He's tall and broad, but the downy fur that covers him is short and a pale gray with a hint of striping, like a tabby, whereas Corvak is dark gray all

over. This man even has whiskers.

"You brought him back," I whisper to Corvak. "Thank you."

"You won't be thanking me in a few moments," Corvak continues, voice dry. "Like I said, he won't be silent."

The man hobbles a few steps more into our cave, and then his nose twitches. He recoils and looks at us in horror. "I thought it smelled bad outside, but what the kef are you cooking?"

"Nothing you'd want to eat," I reply, and for some reason, I want to smile. Is this one of the gladiators we're supposed to be fearing? He seems cranky and a little fussy...much like a cat. He's not instilling me with fear, either. He seems more like a put-out guest than a dangerous enemy. I rest my hand on Corvak's back, staying behind him just in case I'm reading things entirely wrong.

The man shakes his head, limps in a few more spots, and then sits down away from the cooking fire. He leans against the wall heavily, panting, and his long tail thumps on the ground like he's irritated. "Your nose must be useless if you can live with all these smells."

"Don't you worry about my nose," Corvak growls at him. "Just sit there and behave. And don't talk to Aidy."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

The cat man smiles, even as he stretches out his wounded leg with careful precision. "Aidy? Is that her name? I see why you were so eager to get back here."

Corvak growls, and I can practically see him bristle. "Do not?—"

The cat man waves a hand at us, dismissing Corvak's fury. "Don't worry. I'm not interested." He grimaces, leaning forward and rubbing his calf muscles. "I'm Valmir, not that you asked, and I'm far too tired to get into a pissing contest with a male that hasn't had the stones to mark his door."

"Mark his door...?" Corvak bites out the words, baffled. He glances back at me and then at the stranger. "What are you going on about? What is it you think you know?"

"Guess that's not an instinct thing, then? Huh." He shrugs. "Like I said, not interested in your female. I'm...already taken. Sort of. And I'm keffing tired. And I hurt. You don't have any herbs do you? Something for pain?"

"I could knock you out," Corvak growls. "Tempted to do it regardless. Just keep running that mouth of yours."

The cat man—Valmir—grins, showing sharp feline teeth. He leans back again, eyes closing, and slumps against the cave wall. "Of course. Just pretend I'm not here."

Corvak looks like he's going to bust a blood vessel. He cups my elbow and steers me into our bedroom. His eyes are glowing slits, but I don't have to see his face to know he's pissed. I can feel it in the air. Even the soft vibration in his chest sounds a little pissy. "This was a mistake," he tells me in a low voice. "I don't like him here. I don't

like that he knows where we are."

"It's going to be okay," I reassure him. "I'm not getting bad vibes from him. And we don't have to like him. We just need to get information from him."

"He was too smiley when he talked to you," Corvak growls. "I don't like that. I don't like how he looked at you."

"How exactly did he look at me?" I've been eyeballed by creeps in the past and you learn to pick up on that sort of thing, and Valmir was sarcastic and rude, but he wasn't giving me predator vibes.

"Like...like...I just didn't like it." He heaves a gusty breath. "I don't like that he's near you. It makes me nervous because you're less protected now. I am failing you."

Is this all because he's never been around another guy since we got together? Is he jealous? "I'm not interested in him."

"I know. I just..." He sighs. "Part of me wants to fling him off the nearest cliff. He is so smiley."

I bite back a laugh. Maybe this is the first time he's ever been jealous. We've never talked about it too much, but Corvak mentioned that he's never been in another competition before, and that women like me are the bait or the prize. He's probably been around very few women, if any. All these feelings must be new to him. "It's going to be all right, love. I promise. We'll just use him for his information about the others. And it's not as if he can escape, right? So we don't have to worry about him running off with intel about where we are. We'd catch him before he got anywhere."

"I guess." Now he sounds sulky and it's rather adorable. I jump when rough fingertips touch my cheek in the darkness. "That's the first time you've called me that."

"What?"

"Love." He strokes my face. "You are not miserable here with me, then? Even though things are bad?"

"Are you kidding? If we take the snow-people out of the equation, we're doing better than we ever have. We've got clothes and a swanky cave. We've got hot water and our defensible stronghold. True, we've got a lot of annoying people underfoot, but let's focus on one problem at a time." I take his hand in mine and kiss his palm. "And I do love you. You take care of me and you make me happy. I'd be lost without you."

"I feel the same." He curls his hand around mine, then presses both of them against his chest. Even through the thick layers of clothing, I can feel the vibration of his chest, his heart parasite humming along. "No, I feel more than that. The words are the same, but they don't feel like enough to convey how I feel."

"I understand. We can just show each other." I squeeze his hand. "But maybe not with our guest around."

He chuckles, the sound reluctant. "Perhaps not."

"What the fuck is he anyhow? He looks like a cat."

"He is a race called praxiiian. I have some of their genes."

"You don't look anything like him."

"Good," he growls. "I don't want you to find him handsome."

"I absolutely do not. I have a thing for tall, dark, and domineering." And I tap his chest with our joined hands. "Please don't worry about that, all right?"

"I know. I'm being foolish. I know I am the moment the words leave my mouth, and yet I cannot seem to help myself." Corvak sounds annoyed with himself. "He's in my territory, in my home, eyeing my female. I will tolerate it, but I don't have to like it."

Tolerate it, huh? I roll my eyes in the dark. Another comment for the book of grudges, but now isn't the time.

My stomach growls, and Corvak goes still. "You're hungry?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

I'm really not—the thought of eating meat makes me queasy all over again, but I don't want Corvak to have another thing to worry over. "Doesn't matter. There's nothing to eat in the cave and I don't want you leaving again."

"I am absolutely not leaving your side. Not while he's around."

"It's not that he seems dangerous. I just don't like it when you're gone. I miss you too much." The last few days have felt endless. I can deal with him leaving the cave for hours every day as long as I know he's coming back. I live for the quiet nighttime swims in our heated pool, the cuddling under the blankets, the foot rubs he insists upon giving me, but more than anything, I miss our conversations.

Corvak shakes his head, rubbing my arm to reassure me. "It's all part of his plan, I'd bet. He'll disarm us with his poor attitude and then wait until our guard is down before he strikes."

"You're the expert."

He releases my hand, and then a moment later, something hard, cold, and lumpy is pressed into my palm. It takes me a moment to realize it's a root. A second later, a few more are pushed into my grip, all of them small and oddly sized, but enough for a meal. "I pulled a few of these for you while we were traveling. I didn't like the thought of returning to you empty-handed."

I could cry. Not because I'm hungry, but because it's so thoughtful. Even when he's gone and busy trying to take down the enemy, he's trying to think of me, trying to take care of me. "You're incredible."

"Just don't let the snow-people see. I want you to eat these, not them." He rubs my arm. "I'll get the soup served to the ones waiting outside and see what information I can get out of our guest. I can make a fire in here, too. You stay back and roast your roots and swim, yes? You look tired, and I can handle this."

He might be trying to keep me away from Valmir because he doesn't trust him, but I don't care. I'm suddenly exhausted, and a soak in the pool, a roasted root or three, and a nap suddenly sounds like the best evening ever. "Are you sure?"

"Very sure." Corvak kisses my forehead. "I will handle everything."

CHAPTER

TWENTY-THREE

CORVAK

Aidy retreats into our room without complaint, and it only worries me more. She doesn't like to be seen as weak, or useless. The fact that we have a stranger here and she is not fighting to ask him questions tells me how poorly she truly feels. Surely she would say something if she was not fine...wouldn't she?

I cannot help but worry over her. Aidy is everything to me. I regret that I had the idea for the army. I regret that I've encouraged the snow-people in their worship. If I had not, Aidy would not spend her days cooking for them. Perhaps she would be less sick, less tired. I hate that I spent the last several days hunting down the stranger, only for him to annoy me with every word that comes out of his mouth.

Now that I am back at the cave, I can at least do my share and Aidy can rest.

With a glare at Valmir, I stalk over to the cookpot and scoop the battered bowl into

the stinking soup. It smells foul and the contents look worse, but the snow-people don't care. They wait outside hungrily for what Aidy cooks them, as if it is their right to demand food from us.

I'm growing very tired of them.

Bowl in hand, I move to the front of the cave and make a furious gesture. Kneel. The waiting males drop to the ground where they are, hooting and sniveling. The nearest takes the bowl when I hand it to him, and I head back into the cave to wait for him to be done. I crouch at the entrance, keeping one eye on the snow-people...and one on the stranger.

"Neat trick," Valmir says. "How'd you teach them how to do that?"

Should I tell him the truth of it or let him wonder? With a narrowed gaze, I watch my opponent and gauge him. "It is no trick. They worship me."

His brows go up. "How did you manage that?"

"I am sure you would like to know." Does he take me for a fool? Does he think I will spill everything if he asks in a friendly tone? I am not an idiot and this is not my first fight...well, it is, but he doesn't have to know that.

Valmir shakes his head, closing his eyes once more. There is strain on his face, and his ears are flat with pain. He rubs his knee as if that will somehow help his foot, making a face as he does. "I guess I'm more curious why you'd want to spend all your time with a bunch of crazy metlaks instead of heading out to the beach with the others. All the gladiators have gotten a little soft since arriving, but they're friendly. And there's always things to eat, people to help out." He opens his eyes and pointedly stares at my crude clothing. "People that can teach you how to take care of yourself and your mate."

He implies I am not taking care of Aidy, that I have not done everything I can for her. He doesn't know what we've been through. He doesn't know that her illness is destroying me inside because I can't help her. He doesn't know that I would take on all of it, that I would be sick instead, if it would only make her feel better. He's just trying to get under my skin.

It's working, too. I hate that most of all. I force myself to be calm, because Aidy wants answers from him. "Metlak," I say slowly, turning the word over in my mind. "Is that what they are called? The snow-people?"

Valmir rolls his eyes. "They're not people. They're wild animals."

"They are people." Not reasonable ones, not clean ones, but they are people. They have their own language and their own beliefs. But if he dismisses them as non-threatening, it is better for me. "You do not have metlak on the beach?"

He huffs. "Not at all. They avoid that side of the mountains because we're there. The only reason I've come this far on my hunt is because"—he stops immediately and then rethinks his words—"because of curiosity."

Interesting. There's something he doesn't want to tell me. "Are you alone?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"Why wouldn't I be?" He smiles, all sharp teeth, and I know he is lying. Somewhere out there are more gladiators, then, likely traveling with him, banding together to ensure their success in the game.

"Why are you out here? Why so far away from the beach?"

He smirks. "Hunting, of course."

It sounds like bullshit to me, but it's also obvious he's not going to tell me his real reason for being out here. "Tell me more about this beach you are so fond of, then. You make it sound like we should go there, yet you tell me nothing of it."

"Why do you care if you're not planning on going there?"

"Intel," I say bluntly. "Information is everything in a game like this."

He scrubs clawed a hand down his face. "There's no keffinggame."

"How many live at the beach?" I continue, ignoring his protests. "Five? Ten? Twenty?"

He shifts his weight, trying to get comfortable in the spot where he collapsed, and grimaces in fresh pain. "Look, I'll tell you whatever you'd like, but my ankle is killing me and I don't want it to set crooked. There's not a healer anywhere on this side of the mountains—unless you or your mate know something I don't—so can you give me something to splint it?"

I eye his bad leg. This is not faking, I know. There's a limpness to the injured foot that tells me it is as broken as he says it is. I can only imagine the pain, but he is managing to hide it well, which tells me he is stronger than he wants to let on. I nod and get to my feet, as there is no honor in maiming your opponent so he cannot fight as well. "We have extra bones and some cord."

"Bones and cord. Fantastic. Just what I was hoping." His sarcasm bleeds through his words. "Can totally see why you're hiding out here." He gestures at our surroundings. "Why give up all this?"

I throw the longest bone I can find in his direction. "I didn't ask you."

"In case I only mentioned it about five times, there's a healer at the beach," Valmir continues. "She can heal almost any injury with just a touch of her hands. This ankle would be child's play for her. Whatever is going on with your female would also be no problem."

So there is something wrong with Aidy? More than just bad food? She reassures me that she's fine, but I worry. Always I worry. I rub my chest, the humming increasing when I think of my brave, lovely human. "There is nothing wrong with Aidy."

He doesn't respond. When I move to hand him the cord I promised, both of his triangular ears swivel towards me. "Keffing hells, man. Are you...resonating?"

Resonating? I frown. "I don't understand what you are asking."

He gestures at my chest, eyes wide. "The humming. You and the woman? You...you don't know what that means?" At my scowl, he continues. "How did you know you needed a khui to live?"

"I followed a group of you and watched them take one for themselves."

"But...you don't know what it does." His voice is flat, the words a statement and not a question. "Did you know that you and the woman are clones?"

I guessed as much for myself. And with Aidy's lack of memories, I'm not surprised that she is one, too. I dismiss this with a flick of my hand. "We know. Tell me more about the parasite, the khui. I know it ensures survival. Tell me why."

Again, he doesn't answer me properly. "You are humming when you are around the female?" He rubs his mouth again. "Kef me, I thought you two couldn't get any messier than my situation. Here I am, wrong again."

"What does it mean? The humming?"

The male just eyes me. "You and Aidy...you've mated, I assume?" When I scowl at him, he puts a hand up. "I'm not asking because I want to muscle in. I'm asking because if you have, I think I know why your female is sick."

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FOUR

AIDY

I wake up slowly, a warm body curled around mine. It feels deliciously warm and comfortable to be in Corvak's arms, and I roll over and nuzzle against his chest, content.

Then, my stomach turns at the sudden movement, reminding me that whatever sort of sickness I've picked up is still lingering. I fight back nausea, mentally picturing all the things that could be wrong with me. Giardiasis, trichinosis, worms of some kind...horrific. I already know parasites exist on this planet, so it's just a question

of what's infected me and how I get rid of it.

"You're awake?" Corvak asks in a low voice, gently stroking my hair back from my face. "Your breathing changed."

It absolutely did. I've found through practice that tilting my head back and taking deep gulps of cold air sometimes helps my stomach calm. "I'll be fine in a moment. Is it dawn yet?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"It is midday." He continues to comb my hair with his fingers. "You needed to rest."

But I'm terrified now—the snow-people get angry when there's no food. It's why I cook for them even when I don't want to—I'm afraid of what they'll do next. "Corvak—the army?—"

"I am cooking what little they brought. Don't worry. It's handled."

"You shouldn't have let me sleep in."

"It's handled," he says again, voice patient. "And I cooked you a root in the coals. When you feel well enough, I want you to sit up and eat it, and then we will talk."

The last thing I want to do right now is eat. I want to ignore my stomach entirely. "You eat. I'm not hungry."

"If you don't eat one I will cook three and insist you eat all of them."

Grr. I sit up slowly, testing my queasiness. When everything stays down, I put my hand out to him. "Fine. I'll choke it down." His eyes crinkle with amusement at my dramatics and he hands me the root. I take the world's tiniest bite and chew slowly in the hopes that maybe my gut won't realize I'm eating. "Did you sleep well?"

"I have not slept at all," he says. "I came in here to check on you. The rest of the time I have been speaking with Valmir."

"You talked allnight?" I take a bigger bite, because I have things to ask him, too, and

the longer I take to eat, the longer it takes to get answers.

"He had much to say."

It's a curiously vague statement, and one that concerns me. "Are you...okay?"

"It is a lot of information to digest," Corvak says, reaching for me. His fingers brush the hand in my lap. "If what Valmir has told me is true, we have a problem. Actually...we have many problems."

My stomach churns and the mouthful of root I have tastes like ash. I force myself to swallow, terrified. "Like...what?" He hesitates, and I realize he doesn't want to tell me, which freaks me out even more. "Corvak..."

"There is no game," he says, choosing his words carefully. "I have been wrong all this time."

I stare at his outline in surprise. There's just enough light in our cave that I can make out his features and the defeated slump of his shoulders. "What do you mean, there's no game?"

He holds my hand tight, as if what he's about to say pains him. "I...all the memories I have, all the information I have been programmed with...it's not matching up. It is as you said—if this is a competition, where are the rest of our competitors? Where are the weapons? Where are the vid recorders? Why are we given so much land to maneuver? Why are they letting us interact with the local people? I don't have this in my memories. The game is supposed to be more contained, more structured. But when we woke up, I was certain that this was a battle scenario. That we were to fight to survive, or that we were to hunt for some sort of object, or?—"

I stop him before he can go on because he looks tormented. "Corvak, I'm not blaming

you. God knows I have no idea what's been going on. But if it's not a game, what is it? What's going on?"

"There is no game. There was never a game. We were abandoned here. No one is monitoring us. No one is coming to retrieve us." His voice is heavy with regret. "I was wrong about all of it and I misled you."

My gut twists, but I don't know if it's sickness or anxiety over what he's saying. "I'm confused. You say there's no game, but that doesn't explain how I got here. I'm from Earth. There's nothing in that explanation that says how I managed to land halfway across a galaxy in the pod next to you. What's the point of that? And why would someone kidnap me from Earth just to dump me on a snowy planet with no people?" I pause. "There are no people, right?"

"There is a village at the beach. That is where Valmir says he is from. And there is another village in the mountains to the south, but they are all mesakkah."

I still don't understand. I feel as if I'm missing a big piece of the puzzle. "So the thing with the parasite...was that a lie too? Is that why I'm dying?"

"It was not a lie—" He sounds anguished.

Squeezing his hand, I correct myself. "I'm not accusing you. Just...we're going off assumptions. I was wondering if they were lying to us, if they were pretending like they needed this parasite to live and it was really a set-up. That they were tricking us and hoping it would kill us..." But even that doesn't make sense, because if what Corvak is saying is true, they're not the enemy.

I'm starting to question everything that's happened since I woke up.

"Is the parasite why I'm sick?" I whisper, horrified.

He hesitates. "In a sense."

Oh god. Visions of worms crawling through my guts fill my mind. I think of the chest-burster from the movie *Alien*. Is that what's inside me making all the noise? "Fuck. It's eating me from the inside, isn't it?"

Corvak's hesitation makes me want to weep. "I...don't think so?"

I put a hand to my stomach, imagining it full of...things. I want to throw up a dozen times over.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"I am not an expert on how young are produced, though."

My brain has a record scratch moment. I jerk my gaze to him. "What?"

"What?" he replies.

"What young?" I repeat. "Young...parasites?"

"No. Human young."

I pull my hand from his and press it to my forehead. My palm is sweaty and damp. I feel dizzy. All I know is that I'm dying. "I...I'm confused. Start over."

"The parasite is necessary," Corvak states again. "There are bad things in the air and the parasite makes it possible for your body to adapt. But it also serves another purpose. When it hums in your chest, it will only hum to another person. It wants you to mate with that person."

Aha. So my initial suspicions were correct. "So it's a horny parasite? And what, like, after we mate with someone elsethenwe die? That's why it goes quiet?"

"No, it goes quiet because it has accomplished its mission. It wants us to mate so we create offspring."

Wait.

Waaaitwait wait.

I touch the half-eaten root in my lap, my mind racing. I'm trying to recall all the times that I've been sick recently. How just certain smells make me nauseous, and how it comes and goes. Does the nausea always come on in the mornings? It seems to be most prevalent then...but that could just be coincidence, right?

It's far too early in a pregnancy for morning sickness. Besides, Corvak can't make me pregnant. We're not even the same species.

But...he doesn't know anything about babies and how they're made. He just said so.

I need answers. Real answers. And it's clear that whatever we think we know isn't right. Staggering to my feet, I toss the cooked root down on the blankets and head for the front cave. There, the cat man is sprawled in the same spot he was last night, but this time he's got his foot propped on a stack of pelts and it's heavily wrapped in a concoction of bones and leather straps. He's whittling at a bone and looks up when I surge into the room. "You two know I can hear everything you're saying, right?"

"You can?" I repeat, feeling stupid.

His ears—big, triangular, feline ears—flick. "Yeah. And yes, you're pregnant. The khui—that's the parasite in your chest— isn't killing you. It's keeping you alive. And in return, it picks who it wants you to mate and have offspring with. That's why it was singing so loud for a while. The fact that it's all quiet now tells me that it's accomplished its mission."

I feel faint. So whatever is growing in my stomach isn't some sort of worm-like alien monster...it's a baby.

Oh my god. This is the worst place in the universe to have a baby. I point back at Corvak, frantic. "You're wrong. I can't have his baby. He's not human?—"

"The parasite doesn't care. There are so many cross-breeds in the village, you wouldn't believe it until you saw it for yourself. Doesn't matter what your biology says—the khui reworks it so it gets what it wants."

I press my hands to my temples, my thoughts whirling. "How do you know all this? You—you were dropped here the same time as us, right?"

"I was, but others were dropped here long before." He gives a lazy shrug, unaffected by my panic. "And it's a keffing baby factory over on the beach. I swear by all the stars in the universe that it's the worst place to be if you hate kids."

"Which you do...?" I sink to my knees, feeling weak.

He only gives me a vague, wry smile. "Let's just say I'm rethinking my position. You got any other burning questions you need answered?"

That's enough for now. I cover my face with my hands, trying to think.

"I didn't know, Aidy," Corvak says. He comes up behind me and sinks to the floor at my side, wrapping his arms around me. It's like he's trying to protect me from the news. He obviously feels responsible, even though I'm equally to blame. I knew that sex causes babies, and I still jumped him.

But none of that matters now. What's done is done, and now I'm pregnant. I try to fight the idea, to think of when the last time I had my period was, but I haven't had it since we landed here, and I'm definitely overdue. I thought I'd missed it due to stress, but I've been ignoring all the signs, haven't I?

Sick in the morning—check.

Missed period—check.

I bet if I squeezed my boobs right now they'd be tender. Ugh. I'm an idiot with her head in the sand.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"There's really no game? No big competition?" I ask Valmir.

He shakes his head. "We were dumped here. Discards and unwanted scraps, if you will."

"I'm not a space scrap," I protest. "I'm from Arizona! This isn't possible?—"

"There are entire species that make a good living kidnapping humans and enslaving them," Valmir says. "You might have been from Earth at some point. Now..." He gestures with one hand. "You get to call this place home."

Fucking great. I ignore the swell of panic in my chest and eye my surroundings. There's a warm pool, yes. Big cave. Great. But just outside the entrance are dozens of hovering snow-people, waiting to be fed or they'll pitch a fit. The valley is picked over. It's cold and bleak and isolated and something has to change.

I am not having a fucking baby here.

I pull free from Corvak's arms and turn to face him. "New plan. We're not staying here."

"Where do you want to go?" he asks.

I gesture over my shoulder at Valmir. "To this beach. I want to be with others if I'm having a baby. There's no way I'm doing this alone."

"You're not alone. I'm here."

I don't answer that, because he knows nothing about babies. Hell, I know nothing about babies. I shake my head. "It's not enough."

The look of hurt on his face is quickly gone, but I know I've wounded him with my answer. "We will do what you want."

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FIVE

CORVAK

I dislike Valmir intensely.

I know I shouldn't. I know he is injured because of me and doesn't want to be in our cave. I know if I was in his position, I would be unwilling to help anyone. But the more he talks to Aidy, and the more she asks him questions, I find myself imagining things. I picture picking him up and tossing him down the cliff. I think about going over and just snapping his neck, or bashing his smiley, smirky head against the wall.

"Who was the last person to have a baby out there on the beach? What was she like? How old is she?" Aidy is asking.

Valmir makes a face. "I don't know. I don't pay attention to who is breeding." His tail thumps, all agitation. "Are we planning to go back to the beach soon? When? Because the sooner I get this ankle looked at, the better."

"We need more answers before we establish a travel plan." Aidy turns to look at me. "What am I forgetting to ask, love?"

Crossing my arms, I try not to scowl too much. It's not Valmir's fault that I hate him

simply because Aidy is so focused on him right now. "How many days' travel from here is it?"

"With me and my bad ankle? And with a female in tow? Many."

Aidy makes an outraged sound and stands up. "You act like I need to be carried. I can walk."

Valmir shoots her a doubtful look and glances over at me, repeating himself. "Many days."

"You're the one that's going to need a piggyback ride," she mutters and gets to her feet, shooting me an aggrieved look that warms my heart. It makes me feel better that he annoys her, too. My chest—my khui, as he calls it—purrs with contentment.

Aidy moves to the cookfire and scoops the snow-people's bowl in the pouch, getting the last bits out. She heads to the entrance and hands the bowl to the nearest waiting male. He snatches it from her hands and turns away, hunching over it so no one will try and steal his food, while the others clustered nearby hoot angrily, waiting their turn.

"That's all the food," Aidy comments to me. "And this valley is completely denuded at this point. Maybe we should think about leaving sooner rather than later."

"Good, because I've got somewhere to be." Valmir's tail swats on the floor again, his only sign of agitation. He is doing his best to seem bored, but I am not fooled. He's mentioned several times that he wants to leave, and it's not just because of his ankle. Something else is on his mind, but he won't say what.

"Tell me more about this healer first," I demand. "And babies. She can make it come out of Aidy? Safely?"

"It's called giving birth," Aidy says to me, a smile curving her lips for the first time this day.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

Her smile warms my spirit, but I am not easily swayed. It is my job to take care of her, and I am going to make sure that this journey is safe before we step one foot out of this cave. "Whatever it is called, I want to make sure it's safe for you. There is no sense in us traveling for many days," and I give Valmir a pointed stare, "if there is no true assistance for you."

"It's about more than that. It's about community. Sharing knowledge."

"Getting my ankle fixed," Valmir grumps.

The snow-people are getting agitated, and Aidy moves to the entrance again, putting her hand out for the bowl. It's quickly handed to her, and the metlaks hoot and jostle each other, wanting more food. There's a smaller one at the front, and he makes the hand signal to Aidy for "eat" over and over again.

She shakes her head. "I'm sorry, no. There's no more food." She gestures with her hand even as she says the words aloud. "That's all for today. That—yipe!"

The creature swipes at her arm with his claws, gashing her soft skin. The bowl clatters to the ground.

Red flashes in my vision. They dare to hurt my female? After all she has done for them? She gives them hours of her time every day and they attack her? Fury boils in my gut and in this moment I hate all of them.

Aidy stumbles backward in shock, clutching her bleeding arm. I lunge forward, growling, and pull her protectively behind me.

She cries out. "Wait?—"

I am done listening, though. I grab the metlak by his scrawny shoulders, wanting nothing more than to throw him off the side of the cliff. It's only when I stare down at him that I realize how young he is, how small.

"That's Pinkie's son," Aidy tells me when I hesitate. "Please don't."

I fling him away from me. "If he's Pinkie's son, he should know better." I turn to the metlak and make the gesture for "kneel", utterly furious.

The boy immediately drops to his knees and presses his face to the snow. Behind him, others drop. Every single one of them kneels in front of me, just as they have been trained.

Because to them, I am their Great One. Their leader. But Aidy is nothing to them.

I cannot allow that.

"Stay where you are," I gesture, so angry that I can't think straight. Even the hooting has gone silent.

I storm back into the cave, moving to Aidy's side. She has a skin clutched to her arm, fur side down, and the scent of blood is heavy in the air. Her face is pale and she looks uneasy.

"I'm okay," she says before I can speak.

"I will be the judge of that." I cradle her wounded arm gently, peeling back the fur she has stuck to it. The gashes are deep, but not so bad that they have injured muscle. It bleeds freely and I hate the sight of it, hate the thought of her being in pain. "I

should have protected you."

She shakes her head. "I didn't realize they'd lash out at me. I should have known, though. They get vicious when they get hungry."

"What did you expect?" Valmir says, adding himself to the conversation. "You've been feeding them and training them like pets, but there's a reason everyone avoids metlaks. They're uncontrollable."

Aidy frowns in his direction. "Now is not the time?—"

I interrupt her. "No, he's right. I should have known."

My heart is heavy. It should have been me wounded. I could handle such a thing. The scratches on me would be trivial. But Aidy is smaller and has a soft hide. And she has been sick.

All of this makes me even more miserable.

"I should have guessed," I continue. "And now they have harmed my mate and there is none to blame but me." I cup Aidy's face in my hand. "Go wash your wound in the pool, love. I will take care of the snow-people."

She hesitates, then nods, moving towards her beloved heated pool. I ignore Valmir and his accusing gaze. I don't want to see it right now. I head to the front of the cave again, eyeing the snow-people waiting. They have sat up, but the moment they see me again, they press their heads to the snow once more, like naughty children caught misbehaving.

"Go," I say to them, my voice firm and loud. "Go away! You are not welcome any longer!"

They ignore me.

"Go," I say even louder, making the gestures as exaggerated as I can. Some sit up, eyeing me. One backs up a few steps and then crouches again, waiting. The others simply watch.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

I pick up a rock and throw it in the direction of the crowd. There must be hundreds of them in the valley now, far more than I could possibly fight. They move to avoid the rock, but continue to watch me, as if I will somehow produce more food for them.

They are not going to leave, I realize. They have no intention of it.

Angry with them—and with myself—I storm back into the cave.

Valmir clears his throat from his spot against the stone wall. "I don't want to say I told you so, but...I told you so."

"Silence," I snarl.

"You created this problem, friend. You need to create a way out of it or it's going to be bad for all three of us."

He's not wrong. But how do I convince the snow-people that I am not their Great One after encouraging it for so many weeks? And how do we get away from them safely?

CHAPTER

TWENTY-SIX

AIDY

We're trapped inside the cave.

At least myself and Valmir are. Corvak can come and go as he pleases, since they worship him. But after being attacked, I no longer feel very hospitable towards the snow-people. They sit at the entrance and clutch the bowl, waiting for handouts, but I steadfastly ignore them.

Corvak is furious and feels responsible. When I woke up the next morning, he apologized to me a dozen times, then gave me a knife. "I have to go hunt because I will not let you go hungry and there's nothing to eat in the cave."

"What's the knife for?" I'd asked.

"Shove it into Valmir if he tries anything," Corvak replied. "I do not like the thought of leaving you alone with him, but I have no choice. You will not starve."

"I can still hear you both," Valmir had called from the other room.

Corvak had just pressed the knife into my grip harder, reminding me that I can trust no one but him.

That was earlier. Now it's afternoon, and I pointedly ignore the plaintive hoots of the snow-people. They lick the bowl as if it's going to magically fill itself, and when it doesn't, one throws it at me angrily.

"Nasty things," Valmir comments from his spot in the corner. He's tried moving around a bit, mostly to relieve himself in an unused container, but it's clear he can't walk much. "Your mate sure knows how to pick them."

"Shut up. It was a good idea." It would have been an even better one if they acted like adults and not toddlers throwing tantrums. When they turn away from the entrance, I know Corvak's back. I breathe a sigh of relief when his large form fills the doorway and jump to my feet. "Thank goodness."

His expression is grim, and he produces a few sad-looking roots. "The game in this area is completely gone."

I nod, unsurprised. The snow-people—metlaks, Valmir calls them—have brought nothing today. Not even dead things. It makes it easier to refuse them, but I still feel guilty. Pinkie came to the cave earlier, her expression hopeful as she made the "eat" signal over and over again. It feels like I'm abandoning a friend.

But they're not really friends, and the wound throbbing on my arm reminds me of that. I've got it wrapped and bound with cord, but I'd give anything for some antiseptic or a real bandage. All I can do is hope I don't catch anything, germ-wise, before it heals entirely.

I try to take the roots from Corvak, but he only pulls me close, kisses the top of my head, and then moves deeper into the cave. "I can roast them for you. Rest, Aidy."

"I feel fine today and you've been gone hunting," I protest. "I can shove a few roots into coals."

"Just let him take care of you. Kef me, you two are annoying," Valmir comments with a roll of his eyes. "Either let him feed you or don't."

I make a face at him. Being cooped up in the cave with him all day hasn't bonded us as friends. If this is what all the others on the beach are like, I'm not sure I want to be around them. But it's not just me I have to think about. I have a baby growing inside me and we can barely manage to keep ourselves fed. There's no way we'll be able to survive with an infant in tow. Like it or not, I need to be around others of my kind that have had the same experiences. I need to know who else has had an alien baby and what that was like.

I need to know if we're really going to be on this snowy world forever.

Turning to Corvak, I say, "I'll take the roots." He gives me a searching look, as if he's wanting to see if I'm ill or not. I feel better today and smile up at him, putting my hand on his chest. It's been days since we've really touched. I've been sick, and with the addition of Valmir, our life here in the cave has been thrown into chaos. I miss him fiercely in this moment. Impulsively, I grab a fistful of his crude shirt and tug him down toward me, giving him a quick, hard kiss. "I love you."

His expression brightens.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

I release him with a playful smile. "Tell Valmir if he doesn't shut up you'll break his other ankle."

"Hey!" calls Valmir.

Corvak chuckles at my sass. Not that I think he actually would injure Valmir again, but it can't hurt to try to shut him up, even if just for a few minutes. I stoke the fire in the middle cave, push the roots into the coals so they can cook, and listen as the men talk. Their voices are low, but I hear Valmir give a hiss of pain.

"Told you," he says. "There's no walking on it yet. I need another day or two."

If it's truly broken, he's going to need more than that. It worries me because our cave is high up in the cliffs. If we can manage to make it past all the gathered metlaks, there's a lot of steep ground to cover before we get to a lower elevation. One problem at a time, I tell myself. For now, we eat and we figure out how we proceed.

I go to the heated pool and unwrap my wounded arm, washing the skin again. It's healing astonishingly well, despite how deep the gouges were. The metlaks have filthy claws, and I was terrified it'd get infected, but everything is scabbed over and there's no redness. Maybe people heal faster here on this planet than back at home? I examine my arm closely but everything looks good. Once I've rewrapped it, I use a stick to roll the roots back out of the fire and wrap them in a skin so I don't burn my hand. I head out to the main cave, pointedly ignoring the eager, burning stares of the metlaks waiting at the entrance and instead pass the roots to both Corvak and Valmir.

"You eat mine," Corvak says, shaking his head and trying to hand his back. "You

need your strength."

I refuse it. "If we leave here, who do you think is going to be carrying the majority of our gear? The sick woman? The guy with the busted ankle?"

He sighs heavily but doesn't take a bite until I sit down next to him and nibble on mine.

"As soon as my ankle is healed, I need to leave." Valmir eats his root in two bites. "I can't wait around."

"You've mentioned that," Corvak says. "Repeatedly."

"Just making sure it's clear."

I glance over at the front entrance, where the snow-people are waiting hungrily. It's starting to make me angry, because they know how to feed themselves. They fed themselves before we ever arrived. They just want to do it now. "It doesn't look like the snow-people are leaving, even if we're not feeding them. You think they'll lose interest and eventually leave?"

Corvak sighs and takes a big bite out of his root. "Not as long as I'm the chosen one. Even more arrived today."

Ugh. I rub his knee sympathetically. He was so excited about having an army and now it's all backfired horribly. "So we just, what, wait for them to starve? We'll starve, too." I gesture at the front entrance. "The only thing keeping us safe is that they won't come in. I worry that superstition won't be enough to stop them when they get hungry enough."

"I can't wait around for that," Valmir says, sitting up taller. His tail lashes furiously,

and he seems twitchy this day. "I'm not trying to be a keffing ass, but you don't understand how urgent it is that I return. I...I just can't stay."

"Yes, we know." I turn to Corvak. "And I don't want to stay."

"I don't, either. I want you safe with your people." He strokes his chin, thinking. "We need to get away from them somehow. Perhaps trickery of some kind will be needed. They're not intelligent. I've tried to teach them even the most simple commands for soldiers and they don't listen. We need to make them think I'm returning to the stars somehow. If I'm no longer here, perhaps they would lose interest."

"They want food from you—what if you poison them?" Valmir asks.

I'm horrified. "Oh my god, no. They're still people!"

He puts his hands up. "Just a suggestion. It could be a very light poisoning, just enough to make them sick. Maybe if they're shitting their guts out they won't be so quick to jump on a handout."

If Valmir annoyed me before, I'm disgusted by him now. What a disturbing thing to suggest. "Absolutely not."

"There is no glory in that," Corvak agrees, much to my relief. "They have followed me because they trust me. It would be cruel to abuse them because of that trust. I would not do such a thing, no matter how much they act up. It's not honorable."

"Yeah, well, honor's doing great things for you so far," Valmir retorts, pointing a finger at the entrance. "Your army is in revolt and your woman is injured and sick. Good job, friend."

Corvak bares his teeth in a snarl, tensing. I put my hand on his leg just in case he

decides to attack Valmir. Like it or not, we need Valmir. He has to lead us to the beach people.

I squeeze Corvak's leg. "We're not killing anyone. And honestly you've done a great job, love. If this were truly a game, there's no question that we'd win. You have a devoted army, however chaotic it might be. Unfortunately for us, there is no game and your army's going to turn against us. So let's think about solutions. I think Valmir is on to something, though. What happens if they think you died?"

He stares at me, brows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I haven't worked out the logistics, but what if we faked your death? What happens to the metlak army if the chosen one is dead and gone?"

Corvak considers this. "They would disperse?"

I shrug. "That's the hope, anyhow. They're banding together because of you, because they think the skies told them that your arrival was foretold in the carvings. If you're not here, they've got no one to follow, right?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"The metlak are idiots. Those aren't eventheircarvings," Valmir scoffs, waving a hand and dismissing my words. "Those are from the Ancestors. The ones that live below the mountain. Not a bunch of smelly metlaks."

He's missing the point. "It doesn't matter who made the carvings. All that matters is that they think Corvak is their Great One, so they're massing to worship him. But if he's gone..." I spread my hands. "No Great One, no problem."

"I see a problem," Corvak says. His hand rests over mine, tightening. "If they think I am dead, they will no longer follow me, but it does not solve the problem for you or Valmir. They arehungry and angry, and if I am dead, they will still be hungry and angry. They will attack you and I will not be able to help."

He's not wrong. "We're still workshopping our plan."

"Workchop as much as you like, but I will not put you in danger," Corvak murmurs, leaning closer to me. "That I will never allow."

I nod, because I know this. And as much as Valmir irritates me, I wouldn't endanger him any more than I would endanger Pinkie or her son. "We need a way to extricate ourselves from the situation before things go down."

Valmir points at Corvak. "Couldn't you just shake a fist and demand that they leave us alone?"

"If it were that easy, do you think I would let my woman get harmed?" Corvak grits out.

"I don't know, would you?" sneers Valmir.

"Boys. This is not helpful." I raise my voice, even as I link my fingers with Corvak. I've eaten my root, but I've noticed he's only taken a bite of his. He's probably going to offer it to me later, because he's sweet and thoughtful like that, and it makes my heart ache. Love doesn't have to be grand gestures—it can be little things that show your partner is considerate, and I know Corvak is always thinking of me, always trying to figure out how to keep me safe and happy. "Valmir, the problem with the snow-people?—"

Valmir shakes his head. "The metlaks?—"

"Whatever," I snap. God, he's obnoxious. "The problem is that they lack impulse control. There's no switch in their heads that tells them to stop and think. They're all action and no forethought. That's why they're impossible to teach. So Corvak could tell them to leave us alone until he's blue in the face and the moment they see us, they'll do whatever they like because they don't think before they react."

He grunts.

Then smirks. "Blue in the face, huh? As opposed to gray?"

"It's a human expression. Can you fucking focus, please?" Now I'm the one losing control. "Our lives are at stake here, and my language is full of all kinds of phrases you've never heard before, and if we're going to get anywhere, can you quit being a dick for five minutes and offer some helpful suggestions? If you don't have any, shut the fuck up. Please."

Valmir shrugs. "If you want a suggestion, then mine is to disguise your smell."

"What?" I'm so fired up I can't think straight.

"Your scent. Not everyone has a dead nose like you." He taps his more feline one, his whiskers twitching. "Even if you got away from this cave, your scent would tell them where you went if they have any sense of smell at all."

"Oh. Okay. That's a decent suggestion. Thank you." Now I feel a bit like a jerk for yelling at him but...he still kinda deserved it.

"I think we should all consider scent masking as part of our plan," Corvak agrees. He traces little circles on my hand with his thumb, a constant reminder that he's at my side, here with me. "Perhaps you two scent mask while I lead them away from the cave. When I am gone with them, it is your opportunity to slip away."

"Good idea," Valmir states.

I don't know if I'm as on board with this plan. "Okay, you might lead them away, but that doesn't explain how you come back to us safely, Corvak. I need you to come with us too or I'm not going."

"We workchop one piece at a time," he tells me. "Scents is a good idea. If there is a way to cover yourself in metlak scent, that seems the easiest way to disguise. They will not notice another metlak or two in all the metlak scents in the valley, but they will pick up a human and a praxiian easily."

The thought of smelling like one of the metlaks for a while is rather stomach-turning. "How do we get their scent without alerting them to what we're doing? Do we rub up against them?"

Corvak frowns and pulls me a little closer to him. "You're right. That doesn't seem safe."

"What if we got some herbs?" Valmir asks. He snaps his fingers and then points at us.

"There's a tea made from this springy-looking plant that grows on the sides of the cliffs, and it stinks if you crush the leaves. We could use that if it grows in this area."

"I will go looking for it tomorrow." Corvak perks up a bit, pleased with ironing out one part of our plan.

"While you're out, look for somewhere for us to meet up," I say. "Someplace we won't miss—like a landmark—so we can wait for you to return." He nods, and I feel like we're getting somewhere. "Okay then, all that remains is figuring out how you're going to lead them away and fool them into thinking you're dead."

"That's all," Valmir adds sarcastically. "Normally I'd pretend to kill you and it would bring me great pleasure, but your loyal followers would kill me before I could take a single step. So it will be you and you alone."

"I can handle that," Corvak says. His expression is thoughtful. "They'll need to see my death as well as smell it."

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"So a dead animal...?" This is getting rather morbid and I'm not a fan. "What if you just disguise your scent with a different herb that day than the one we're using and so when they go to check on your body, they associate that herb with you?"

Corvak nods. "I think that is the best option rather than hauling about something dead and hoping they don't guess just how dead. So now we just need to figure out how I die."

"Jump off a cliff into the water? Do they swim?"

I suddenly panic because Corvak doesn't swim. He's gotten a little better over the last few weeks thanks to our warm pool, but he's not what I'd call a strong swimmer.

But Corvak is stroking his chin. "It's not a bad idea."

"Isn't it?" I ask. "I'm not sure swimming is the right call."

"I can't jump off a cliff and hope to survive the fall." Corvak gives me a wry smile. "And snow would be too hard. I can tell them that I am planning on returning to the skies and so when I disappear, perhaps they will take it as such."

I don't like it, but I don't know what else to do. "Where, though? Where would you jump?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Corvak says, smiling at me and gesturing at the back of the cave. "Into our pool. I will step off the cliff above and into the waters below."

"But then they're going to expect you to come back out."

He nods. "I might have to wait a few days until they get the idea. They're bound to leave eventually."

"Or not. Corvak, I don't like this."

"We welcome your alternate plans, Aidy," Valmir drawls.

I glare at him, but he's not wrong. What alternative is there? "Surely we can come up with something."

I won't let Corvak sacrifice himself.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-SEVEN

CORVAK

We set the pieces of our plan into motion slowly over the next week. Nothing can happen right away, because food must be collected so Aidy will not starve as they journey. Valmir tests his ankle a little more each day, but I don't trust him to be able to hunt for her, to provide for her. He will not care if she is hungry or not...but I care, and so I will ensure that they have enough to eat. It means ranging farther and farther afield each day, but it suits my purposes.

I scout the area for food, for roots, for small animals to toss into our stew pot. I find the pungent herbs that Valmir mentioned and pull the entire thing, roots and all, from the sides of the cliffs, so the leaves do not get crushed and emit their awful scent. I find another herb to use for myself, and begin wearing its perfume and rubbing

myself with the leaves every day as I emerge from the cave to make the snow-people associate me with the scent of it.

They still follow me wherever I go, and as we walk, I talk to them with my hands, repeating the gestures that Aidy taught me. I tell them that my purpose here is nearly done, and I will return to smoke soon and disappear with the Northern Lights. It's a lie, of course, and I hope the Northern Lights go away so my story has the hint of truth to it. They were absent two nights ago, and last night it was cloudy.

I gather and hunt, and I plant the seeds of my disappearance for my followers.

With each day that passes, I am more convinced that this decision is the right one. Aidy's sickness comes and goes, but the valley remains barren of game. It takes all of my efforts to find things for my mate to eat. Of course, the metlak also expect to be fed. They no longer bring their finds to Aidy, but they still show up at the cave, expecting for food to magically appear. When it does not, they grow surly. They fight one another, and they are vicious. I have had to break up many scuffles between the males where they are close to killing each other, simply because of the lack of food. They can hunt and scavenge. They would rather just sit in front of the cave as we have trained them to do, and expect handouts.

This is my fault. I acknowledge this and acknowledge that the only thing we can do now is attempt to extricate ourselves without causing more pain.

I scout the area around the cave, venturing as far as I dare and looking for someplace that will be safe for Aidy and Valmir to take refuge in. There are rocky outcroppings and small caves aplenty—the mountains here are riddled with holes—but nothing that feels safe enough to send my mate to.

When I return that night, Aidy is in the bathing pool, and Valmir is alone in the front cave. I move toward the fire, stoking it with a few jabs of the rib bone we keep to stir

the coals. "No luck," I tell him. "Nothing feels safe enough."

"No sense in doing work that's already been done," Valmir says, speaking slowly and thoughtfully. "You could use one of the sa-khui caves. The ones with all the supplies."

I turn to look at him. "There is one nearby?"

"There's one to the southeast," Valmir says, voice casual as he works on a reinforced bone-and-leather splint for his ankle. "I was there not long ago. It has supplies already and it's safe."

I turn to him, startled. This is the first he's mentioned of supply caves. But I remember I'd found one when we were on the run, and I'd wrongly assumed it was full of supplies for the combatants of the game. Since there's no game... "Explain to me about this cave. What is it like?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"The sa-khui—those are the natives, the descendants of the mesakkah that were stranded here generations ago—go on long hunts. They fill the caves in the area with extra skins and food and supplies. The hunters make sure that these caves always have weapons and skins and fire-making implements, so no one is caught in the wild without supplies. There's one in particular that's a half a day's brisk walk south of here, in a valley that's thin and shaped like a crescent. Do you know the one I'm speaking of?"

I have to think for a moment. There are many valleys and crevices all around the mountains. The most narrow one I can recall was in the south, and I have to think for a moment. "The one with the hot stream flowing through it?"

"That's the one." Valmir seems relieved that I recall the location. "Excellent. It will take me and Aidy a little longer to get there, but I know there are supplies and weapons. It's a safe spot, and they shouldn't notice us if we're that far away."

I nod slowly. "I like that idea. I want Aidy to be safe, more than anything."

"I understand, trust me." Valmir's expression is sober for a change. "I'll look after her until you join us. And since there's already a good deal of supplies there, we don't need to wait any longer. I can manage walking on my ankle. We've got the scent plants and enough food for a day or two. We're ready to go."

Are we? I want to turn back to where Aidy is bathing in the warm pool. She's been floating on her back, just relaxing in the water. Today is one of her bad stomach days, and she says the heat helps her. She can float all day if it makes her happy. I just want to take care of her. Even so, I'm not sure if we're ready to go just yet. There is more

we can do. More weapons to be crafted, more herbs to be gathered to mask scents, more reminding the metlaks that I plan on leaving. Aidy and I have been piecing together a costume that looks a bit like the carvings, so I can wear it when I lead them out and reinforce the idea that I am their Great One...and that I am leaving. But the costume is not done. I rub my jaw, thinking. Valmir is far too eager to leave and it makes me want to stay for that reason alone. "I will need to talk with Aidy."

Valmir pushes up from his seat, as if he can launch himself in the air. "About what? There's nothing to wait on? Are we leaving or not?"

I scowl at him, readying my reply?—

Snarls break out on the ledge. The hooting escalates to a furious degree, and there's a sharp yelping sound followed by scuffling and what sounds like a high-pitched, animalistic scream. Another fight is breaking out. I rush to the entrance, ready to step in. I'm shocked to see that the snow-people have piled onto a smaller one and are ripping him apart. Blood spatters the snow, and they hiss and hoot and tear the weaker one to shreds.

"Stop!" I bellow and signal at the same time. "Stop it!"

They ignore me, still fighting. The snow turns red around them, and I'm revolted at the sight. No one is stopping the attackers—because they see them eating, and now they want a bite. They don't care that moments ago the murdered creature was one of them. They just want fresh meat.

How did I ever think this would be a good army? They might be people, but they are not like any people I care to know.

"Corvak?" Aidy asks in a soft voice.

"Don't come out here," I say, turning around to face her. She has a thick fur wrapped around her, cloaking her naked body. There's a look of confusion on her face, and I stride across the cave to her side. I don't want her to see what the snow-people are doing. She has a soft heart and it will hurt her. She will feel responsible. "Don't look, Aidy."

"Are they fighting?" she asks, gazing up at me when I block her view of the entrance. "Is everything okay?"

I shake my head. "You don't want to see it, love. Trust me."

Her expression falls. "Oh." There's another pained yelp from outside and she flinches.

"They are beyond listening." I want to cover her ears, because the sounds they make are horrible. "I'm so sorry."

She is quiet, leaning against me for strength. "It's our fault. We created this problem. I'm worried, Corvak."

I stroke her wet hair back from her face. The time for waiting is over. I can prepare forever, but no amount of prepared food will win against the savagery of what they're doing outside. What if they decide that they should enter the cave? What if they tear Aidy to pieces? The thought makes my blood cold. "That is why you are leaving in the morning. You and Valmir will head out once I lead the snow-people away. He knows the place to go."

In the distance, I hear Valmir sigh with satisfaction. "Keffing finally."

She looks up at me, startled. "What? Tomorrow? We're not ready?—"

"We're not staying. Not while the snow-people get more violent. We're ready

enough." I hate the sight of her panic. Her gaze roams over me, her body tense, and I know she's going to protest. "You and Valmir will go to a cave full of supplies and I will lead them away and fake my death. Just like we planned."

"But..." She trails off, as if realizing her protests are not going to get anywhere. Then she bites her lip. "I hate this."

"I do, too, but it is the only way we extricate ourselves from a problem of our own making."

She nods, then pulls away from me and heads into our room. Her shoulders are slumped, defeated.

I follow after her. "This will work. I will come back to you."

"I know. I have faith in you." But she doesn't sound convinced. Everything about her screams defeat, misery. "I'm just not ready. I don't want you to go. It feels like...if I let you out of sight, I'm never going to see you again."

She drops the blanket, revealing her naked body, and I can see how much thinner she is than when we first arrived. The scratches on her skin, the gouges haphazardly bandaged on her arm. This is no life for her, and I feel even more remorse that I thought I could make this work.

"You will not be able to get rid of me that easily, Aidy." I move behind her, rubbing her bare arms as I pull her against me. She leans into my embrace, but she is trembling. She is on the verge of tears, I realize, as she sniffs. "Come now. Do you think I would give up my coveted prize to Valmir without a fight?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

That elicits a watery laugh from her. "You aren't giving me up to Valmir."

"No, I am not." I turn her and cup her face in my hands, forcing her to look up at me. "Even if I were to die, I would haul my broken carcass after you. I would crawl over the mountains with broken bones and mangled limbs just so I could beat him for daring to look at you. Trust me?"

"You say the most romantic things," Aidy murmurs, her fingers twining in the thick pelt on my chest.

"I mean it. All of it. You want me to climb the mountains for you? Done. Is the path too rocky? I will let you walk on me. Better yet, I shall carry you so your delicate feet never have to touch the ground." I wind her hair around my hand, slowly, drawing her closer. Her eyes grow hooded with arousal as she gazes up at me, that enticing scent filling the cavern. "Tired? I shall feed you and rub you all over."

"But then I won't be tired," Aidy says in a teasing voice. "I'll just be turned on."

Hunger for her surges through me, and I pull her naked form against mine even though I know it's not a good idea. "We shouldn't. Valmir is in the next chamber. He will hear everything."

She shakes her head and puts a finger to her lips, indicating quiet. "I'm not going to leave you without touching you again." Her voice is a soft whisper as her hands slide down to my cock. She presses against my shaft through the layers of clothing, rubbing my length. "I need this. Need you."

The breath hisses from between my teeth. As if I can refuse her? Even the thought of Valmir listening in isn't enough to make my cock droop. I hunger to touch her. It's been days and I've been doing my best to ignore the ache because she's been sick. But if she wants this, I'm not fool enough to turn her down.

Aidy sinks to her knees in front of me, rubbing her face against my fur clothing. I keep one hand in her hair, the other hastily going to my leathers to undo the various straps and ties I use to keep everything in place. Her hands are on my clothing as well, and between the two of us, we manage to drag my pants down just enough so my cock springs free. With a pleased little noise, my mate takes me into her mouth, teasing the head with her tongue.

The sensation is incredible. The wet, sucking heat of her eager mouth steals my breath. She encircles my shaft with her hand, stroking me gently even as she tongues me.

"Let me touch you." While I love her mouth on me, I want this to be for both of us.

She pulls back slowly, releasing my cock with a pop. "Soon. I want to make you feel good first."

I groan, forgetting all about being quiet. Aidy doesn't mind, though. She lets out a soft little giggle and drags my cock over her face before teasing the head back into her mouth.

"My gorgeous mate," I breathe as she works me. "My perfect female. My love. My—ah—sweet Aidy." The things she can do with her mouth are incredible, and my breath catches each time she sucks on me. I pump into her mouth, rocking my hips in a steady rhythm.

She moans around my cock, letting me know that she's enjoying herself. Her arousal

scent is thick in the air now, mixing with the scent of my seed as she slides my leaking cockhead over her face and lips. She drags her hand up my length, teasing the head with a gentle squeeze before releasing me. "Okay, now I want sex."

"Good. Perfect." It's taking all of my control not to growl with pleasure.

Aidy gets to her feet and turns her back to me. She shuffles over to the cave wall and plants her hands on it. Then, she bends at the waist, presenting her ass into the air, and glances at me over her shoulder.

Aha. Is this how we're going to do it? I've never taken her standing up, but I'm intrigued by the novelty of it. Even so, I pause. "What about my spur?" Normally it rubs against her in good places, but at this angle, it doesn't seem as if it has anywhere to go.

She chuckles at my confusion and reaches over, spreading her ass cheeks for me and exposing the tight little ring buried between them. "I'm sensitive here, too."

My eyes widen. Fascinated, I practically stumble forward in my haste, forgetting that my pants are around my thighs. I catch myself before I fall over, stagger to her, and put my hands on her hips. I reach between her thighs, testing to see how wet her cunt is. I've learned that she enjoys sex a great deal more when her cunt is slick with arousal. I dip my fingers into her, loving the way she reflexively tightens around me, a whimper escaping her throat. "You are already so wet for me, Aidy."

"I love touching you," she whispers. "Is that so wrong?"

"Not wrong at all." I finger her sweet, slippery cunt until her body is making wet noises, and Aidy is mewling with need. I could do this all day, I realize. Enjoying the hot, slick feel of her and listening to her sounds as I pleasure her, all the while, my cock throbbing and full. The edge of my unfulfilled pleasure is no longer a trial, but a

delicious tease. I will come, eventually...but I need my mate to climax first.

I sink two fingers into her, stretching her cunt, and she pants. "Please, Corvak."

"Shh. We're supposed to be quiet."

"Fuck all that. I need you inside me." There's an urgency to her tone, a tension in her body. She shifts her hips, pushing her backside out further. "When I come, I want it to be around your cock."

"Are you close, then?" I stroke her greedy cunt once more. "You need this filled?"

Aidy moans.

"I think you do." I love the husky little noise of assent she makes, and I step forward, closing the distance between us. I pull my hand from her body—ignoring her whined protest—and take my cock in hand. I push it between her thighs, rubbing against the folds of her cunt. It wets my shaft and teases her at the same time. When she's squirming against me, I press the head of my cock against the entrance to her body, dipping in barely before pulling back again.

"Corvak," she begs, my name sweet on her lips.

My beloved mate. I give her what she wants—what we both need—and sink deep into her with one swift stroke. The gasp she makes echoes mine. I'm always amazed at this feeling, my cock deep inside her body, seated and penetrating deep, filling her until I spill my release and mark her with my scent. I put my hands on her hips, gripping her, and withdraw until just the tip is inside her, then thrust deep again. She quivers, the sound she makes raw and full of hunger. "Am I hurting you?" I ask, pulling her ass cheeks apart so I can view my spur, pressing against that second hole. "Should I stop?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"You...should...go harder..." she pants at me.

I growl. Yes. She's so perfect. Mine.

With that permission, I slam into her, and when she makes an excited sound, I keep going. I piston into my mate, hammering into her soft cunt. She grips me tight, and taking her like this allows me to hold her at the perfect angle. I rock into her, our bodies moving together in sync, building the pleasure between the two of us. Her little moans become soft cries, then louder ones, and still I want more. I need her to come apart. I need her to climax so hard that Valmir hears me possessing her. I need him to know that she is mine, branded with my seed, my child, my khui. Lifting one hand from her hips, I grab her hair by the fistful and slowly, gently, tug her head back. Aidy's breath hitches and her cunt tightens around me?—

—and then she is coming, her channel squeezing and convulsing tight around me. Her mouth is open in a wordless cry, as if she is climaxing so hard that nothing can escape her throat, and I somehow like this better than her loudest screams. I pound into her, losing control at the sight of how beautiful she is, how tight she squeezes me.

This can't be our last time together. I won't let it.

With a growl deep in my throat, I come, pinning my mate against the wall as I empty my sac into her body. She pants, trembling, as I pull out before I can finish spilling and I paint her backside with my seed, marking her all over like a wild animal.

Mine.

Mine.

Mine.

When the blistering pleasure recedes, I pant and press Aidy against the rocky wall of the cave, pinning her there. My hand curls around her throat possessively and I tilt her head back. "You will go with him," I whisper, "but you're still mine. Every breath you take is mine, every smile is mine. You may cover up my scent for a time, but know that when I return, I'm going to make you wear it all over so the people at the beach know that you are mated and no one can touch you but me."

She bares her teeth in a feral smile. "Promise?"

I love this female. I love that she's as wild as me in her own way. "I promise."

CHAPTER

TWENTY-EIGHT

FOUR DAYS LATER

AIDY

I stare out of the entrance of the supply cave—the hunter cave, as Valmir calls it—and wait for a sign from my mate. I watch the snows, scanning for a tall, dark head without horns, but all I see is more and more white as fresh snow begins to fall and my panic begins to rise.

He's coming back for me. I know he is.

These have been the longest four days of my life. It's been impossibly hard to travel

away from Corvak, knowing that he's staying behind with the increasingly vicious snow-people. Knowing that he's going to willingly jump off a cliff into a pool of water, and him not being the strongest swimmer. What if they don't buy his faked death? What if he hits the rocks on the way down? What if he dives too deep and can't swim his way back to the surface? What if they find out what he's up to and take out their fury on him?

What if, what if, what if? I squeeze my eyes shut against the intrusive thoughts and turn to Valmir. "Do you think he'll be here today?"

"Do I look like an oracle of some kind?" He sits by the fire in the cave, reinforcing a boot with bone splints. His ankle was healing well, but after three days of slow travel to get to this cave, it's growing painful and weak, and we're nowhere near the beach.

"I'm just asking. Making conversation. Being friendly. You should try it sometime."

He just ignores me and pauses to rub his chest, tail flicking with annoyance.

I turn back to the entrance, watching the snow come down. If I close my eyes and breathe deep, I can still smell the eye-watering stink of the curled-leaf plant that we rubbed ourselves with four mornings ago. We'd waited for Corvak to lead his followers away, and it wasn't until the last straggler disappeared over the horizon that we grabbed our packs and left.

It took three days to get to this cave, three days to get to safety. Valmir and I moved as fast as we could, but the snow is deep and my legs are short, and his ankle has been bothering him the entire time. At the end of the first day, we hid at the base of a cliff, huddled in blankets because there was no shelter to sleep in. Not that I could have slept—I was on edge the entire time, expecting to hear hooting or to see round, glowing eyes watching us from the darkness.

The snow-people never came after us, though. They truly aren't interested in anyone but Corvak. It should make me happy that everything has gone to plan. Instead, I want to weep because I left Corvak behind and it's been days since I've heard from him. He's the only thing I've got left. I don't know what I'm going to do if he doesn't come back.

When we made it to the cave on day three, I should have been relieved. Instead, I spent the entire time waiting at the entrance, watching for either Corvak or for snow-people, some sign that something has happened, good or bad.

Since we got here the waiting has been horrible. I've barely eaten. Who can eat jerky at a time like this? And that's all the food there is—a few withered roots and lots and lots of fish jerky. I'll eat when Corvak arrives, I tell myself. "If he doesn't come today, should we go out looking for him? What if he's injured? What if he hurt his ankle in his fall like you hurt yours?"

Valmir just sighs heavily again, because he's heard all my worrying a dozen times already. "There's no point in scouting. He knows this location. We can see the entire valley easily. If he's around, he'll come here, injured or not."

"But what if?—"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"What if nothing. We're sticking to the plan." He's lost his patience with me.

"For how long?" I ask. "I need numbers. At what point do we realize that something's gone wrong with our plan and we go after him?" Because I'm ready to go now. The thought of a two-day trek through the snow back to the cave doesn't scare me nearly as much as the thought of Corvak injured and unable to get to me. We can return, I reason, as I pace near the entrance. Fake his death some other time. We can try again?—

There's a crunch of snow outside the cave.

My eyes widen and I look at Valmir. Did I hear that right? The cat-alien is grabbing a spear, trying to haul himself off the cave floor. His reach for a weapon makes me realize that this might not be Corvak. It might be one of the snow-people, who's noticed our scent underneath the herbs and has followed us all this way?—

A tall humanoid figure in a puffy hat pulled down to the high collar of their fur cloak appears. A mittened hand waves and steps into the cave.

Immediately, Valmir begins to vibrate, the song in his chest insistent, heavy, and angry.

"Corvak?" I ask, confused. Why is Valmir suddenly resonating to him?

The hood is pulled off, revealing long, dark hair on a human woman with sharp, high cheekbones, bright khui-blue eyes, and a searching gaze. She sees Valmir first, and her lips form a snarl. "Where the fuck have you been, pussycat?"

"Greetings to you, too, April," he says in a bored tone. "Come on in."

The human woman notices me, and I instantly stiffen. Instead of accusation, though, a broad, relieved smile creases her wind-chapped face. She's tall, this woman, and built more strongly than I am. She steps into the cave, shaking off the snow and unloading layers of furs. "Did I take a wrong turn in Duluth? Hi stranger! You must be one of the missing people."

I'm a little thrown by her cheerful tone and the ease with which she greets me. "You...know who I am?"

"Well, given that there's not a lot of strangers running around on this planet, I assumed. You know what they say about assuming, though." She pulls the heavy fur cloak off her shoulders and reveals more leathers underneath, all of them seemingly buttery soft and well-put together. I'm suddenly embarrassed at my tunic of crude skins pieced together with a few knots and cords. "And you, motherfucker. Not cool to disappear like that for two weeks. Not fucking cool at all."

I turn to Valmir, expecting him to make some snotty comment like he always does. Instead, he just rubs his chest as if the song there pains him with its intensity. "Ran into a snag."

"So did you get it?" she asks, tugging off her mittens. Her expression is as casual as she can make it, but I sense an urgency to her words...or maybe it's just the angry song of her khui influencing that thought.

I look between the both of them, utterly confused. "Get what?"

The woman sniffs. "Do I smell intisar?"

"Yeah, we had to rub ourselves down with it and the smell is lingering." Valmir

volunteers the information. "Don't ask."

She looks over at me, her gaze bright and curious. "Did I not introduce myself? Hi, I'm April. Me and a few of the others were out looking for Valmir, because he's been missing for a while now. You okay, buddy?" She leans over and puts her hands on her knees to address Valmir. "Did you get lost?"

He scowls at her, even as he devours her with his gaze. "Not that you care, but I was injured."

April tilts her head. "Aw, does he have a boo-boo?"

He gestures at his ankle indignantly.

I purse my lips, trying not to laugh. All this time Valmir's been making me nuts with his casual sarcasm and this woman comes in and immediately starts busting his balls. I kind of love her for that.

Her gaze flicks over him and then back to me as she straightens. "I guess I should thank you for bringing him back."

"I walked! I was the one bringing hersomewhere!" Valmir retorts.

"Yeah, yeah, you're amazing." She makes a talking gesture with her hand and rolls her eyes. "We're all so impressed."

He hisses at her like a feral cat.

I can't ignore the fact that they're both thrumming—resonating, Valmir called it—very loudly. My khui was that loud once upon a time, when Corvak and I were first getting to know each other. It only calmed down after we started having sex

regularly, and I remember what Valmir had told us. That the khui decides who your mate is so you can procreate. "Can I ask?" I begin, indicating the two of them. "Are you guys...you know..."

"Resonating?" April looks annoyed. "We're not acknowledging that at the moment."

Valmir just seems irritated at her answer. "Have her tell you all about the tasks she is making me perform before I am worthy of her."

"I like to think of it as a honey-do list," April says cheerily.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"So you guys haven't..."

"What?"

"Fucked?" I ask bluntly. "Made a baby? Isn't that what resonance does?"

For the first time, April seems a bit flustered. She toys with her damp hair. "Like I said, we're not acknowledging things at the moment."

I'm surprised. When I hummed the loudest, I could think of nothing but jumping Corvak. I wanted to touch him constantly. My thoughts were that of a woman possessed—a very horny woman possessed. The fact that April and Valmir are controlling themselves so well is startling to me. Not acknowledging something doesn't change how it works. It just strikes me as stubborn and fool-headed. But maybe that's the best way to deal with Valmir. Who knows.

April gestures behind her out of the cave. "So like...should we go? The others aren't far behind. They're searching the next canyon over and I told them I'd check over here." She turns to me. "You're welcome to come with us, by the way. Always happy to have a friendly face at the beach."

Leave? Like...right now? I shoot a panicked look at Valmir, who isn't paying attention to me. He's utterly focused on April, who's doing her best to ignore him. "Oh, we can't go. We're waiting for Corvak."

"Who's Corvak?" she asks, puzzled.

"My mate." I straighten, saying the words proudly. "And I'm Aidy. I don't remember more than that, just that my name is Aidy."

She doesn't seem surprised at my admission. "Yeah, some of us didn't get a lot of memories with the whole clone thing. It's not a big deal. You'll manage."

"Clone thing?" I echo. "What clone thing?"

April eyes Valmir and then looks back to me. "Uh...so remember that little bracelet that we got dropped here with?"

I have to think for a moment. There was a small bracelet on my arm, now that I recall. "You mean the tracker?"

"Tracker? What tracker?"

Now I'm the one that's confused. I press a hand to my brow, rubbing the headache that's starting. "Maybe you should sit down so I can tell you my side of things." When she looks reluctant, I add, "And Valmir needs to finish his boot or he's going to hurt his leg worse."

That gets her attention. She moves deeper into the cave, coming to sit next to the fire and tucking her legs underneath her. She pointedly doesn't look at Valmir, and I notice that they're both trying very hard to ignore the other. There are signs that all is not well, though. April's eyes are overbright, her khui song dissonant and angry and loud. On the other side of her, Valmir's big hands are shaking as he tries to stitch a bone splint into his leathers. I'm suddenly glad that Corvak and I didn't fight our attraction. I like that we've been on the same page ever since we got here.

And if April thinks she's going to pry me from this cave before he returns, I'm going to fight tooth and claw to make sure I stay. So I clear my throat and try to figure out

the best way to tell my story...and the way that will take the most time. "I guess it started on the day we arrived here..."

By the time I finish the story, April's eyes are wide and Valmir is looking at me skeptically. "You two really had a fucked up idea of what was going on, didn't you?"

I shrug. "We did the best we could with the limited information we had. I think all of Corvak's decisions were the right ones. He kept us alive and safe, even when we thought we were surrounded by enemies. I don't regret anything."

"But he didn't tell you that you were a clone," April points out. "I feel like that's information you need to know."

"He didn't know I was a clone," I say, defending my absent mate. "Or he would have told me. Right, Valmir?"

Valmir suddenly looks very busy, all of his attention on the intricate web of splints he's making for his boot. "There's a lot of information flying about. I'm sure certain things get lost in the, uh, mix."

Impossible. He would have told me. The fact that I'm a clone—that every human here is a clone—is a big fucking deal. It explains my lack of memories in a way that feels like relief, not terror. I've been thinking for weeks now that I've had some sort of traumatic brain injury and that's why I can't remember more than the fact that I'm Aidy, I'm a horror movie buff, and I hate bugs. I especially hate the scorpions that constantly came up my bathroom drains, and never keep my feet bare. I don't know why that's the particular bit that's stuck with me, but I cherish it. It's all I've got for my identity—movie references and an affinity for flip flops. "He didn't know. He must have misunderstood."

"If you say so." Valmir shrugs. He slowly eases his boot over his swollen ankle and

begins the laborious process of lacing it up, pain written all over his face.

I watch him work, my stomach tied in knots. If he gets his boot on, is he leaving with April? He's resonating to her, and he wants to see the healer. There's no way he'd stay behind with me just to keep me company...but I'm not going anywhere. Not until I see Corvak again. We don't know how long it'll take for the snow-people to abandon the cave after he fakes his death. What if they wait around for weeks?

"We'll ask him when he gets back," I say, as if that answers everything. "Which will hopefully be any moment now."

For a second, April looks flummoxed. She glances at the cave entrance. "I can't stay. Others are going to be looking for me. I'm out with Nadine, Thrand, and U'dron. They need to know where I am."

Then, she looks pointedly at Valmir.

My heart sinks.

Valmir looks between the two of us, then shakes his head. "Much as I would love to go with you, April, I cannot. I promised Corvak that I would look after his mate until he returned." His smile of apology turns feral. "Nothing says you can't return and tend to me, though."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"Ugh." She makes a face at him and gets to her feet. "Flattering offer, but no thanks. I'll let the others know I found you and bring them this way." She moves to grab her wraps and then turns to look at me. "If that's all right? Or would you rather wait alone?"

I shift in my seat, suddenly nervous. Would I rather wait alone? No. The thought of having company—people to talk to—is both exciting and terrifying all at once. I feel weirdly shy. What if they don't like me? "This is your people's cave, right? I can't say no."

"It's for anyone that needs it," she corrects. Her expression turns a bit more friendly, more understanding. "As long as you leave it as supplied as you found it, you're welcome to anything in any of the hunter caves. I'm sure the others would agree with me. If you're not ready to meet anyone, just say so."

I'm overwhelmed with gratitude at her kindness. She's not trying to push me into anything. She's just stuck between a few moving pieces. "I'd love it if you guys came back—I'm sure both of us would. Company is always welcome."

And I mean it. The more I play with the idea in my head, the more I like the idea of talking to more people, talking to others in the same situation. Hearing what they've done to survive. I want to know all the details.

April nods and shoots one last look at Valmir before tossing her wraps over her shoulders and adjusting them. As she does, she glances out the entrance of the cave, pausing. "Looks like I might not have to go far after all. Someone's coming."

I jump to my feet, and it takes everything I have not to shove April aside. I squeeze in next to her instead, staring hopefully out into the snows. The day is overcast and a gentle snow is falling, which means everything is gray and gloomy and visibility isn't fantastic. There's a large humanoid figure on the horizon, though, moving steadily towards our location. They're too far away to make out who it is...

My khui begins its song, gentle and welcoming.

With a happy cry, I burst from the cave and rush out to greet my mate.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-NINE

CORVAK

The sight of Aidy, alive and well, is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. The exhaustion I feel in my bones eases for just a moment, and I stagger toward her. When she flings herself into my arms, wrapping herself around me, I feel content for the first time in days. Her scent is warm and welcoming, with just a hint of the herbs she'd rubbed herself with before she'd left my side. I hold her close, just enjoying the moment.

This is what I have been fighting for. This makes everything worth it.

"Where have you been?" she asks, laughing. There's an edge of tears in her voice, though, as if she's trying to hide her anxiety. "You took your time."

"I wanted to make sure none followed me," I say.

The truth seems like so much more. Do I tell her about the last few days and how

terrible they have been? How I led hundreds of the snow-people up into the mountains with me, to the cliff I had picked out that loomed over our swimming hole? Do I tell her about the cries of sadness they made when I gestured to them that I was leaving? That the time had come for me to ascend back to the heavens? How the closest ones had clung to the "ceremonial cloak" I was wearing and made the "no" gesture over and over again?

I felt like a monster, a terrible father betraying his children.

I cup Aidy's face in my hands, tired and shaking with fatigue, and study her features. She looks good, my mate. There are tired rings under her eyes, but the ever-present scratches and burns that have covered her arms and hands from her endless cooking are gone. She no longer looks thin and worn, like a hide stretched too tight over a frame. She glows as she smiles up at me.

I decide I'm not going to tell her any of it.

Not of my fear as I'd lifted the heavy weight of my cloak, extending it with the long bones we'd worked into it so it would act like a curtain. I'd stood on the edge of the cliff and stared at the pool of water far below, terrified. Lightning had cracked overhead in that moment, the storm finally marking its arrival, and I knew I could wait no longer. I'd swallowed my fear and stepped into the pool.

It was a move we'd practiced on the edge of the pool inside the cave—holding out the cloak overhead and then dropping it at the perfect moment so it would seem as if I was disappearing into thin air. A magic trick, Aidy called it. Like sleight of hand, only bigger. I stepped off the ledge and let the cloak fall as we'd trained. The screams of the snow-people and terrified hoots that followed as I'd plummet through the air told me that I'd been successful in that much, at least.

Then, the water had slammed into me, and I went under the surface. I'd gone under

for so long and so deep that it seemed I would never make it back to the surface.

How do I tell Aidy the terror I felt in that moment? That I'd feared I would never make it back to her side? That I would die in the pool and no one would ever know what happened to me? That she would have our child alone because I'd abandoned her?

But my head had eventually broke the surface and I'd fought back a sob of relief.

I'd forced myself to keep quiet, keep calm, because I could hear the snow-people moving about above, calling for me in that strange hooting way of theirs. I climbed from the waters and covered myself with the scent of the crushed leaves, burying any remnants of their Great One that they might follow.

They had lingered by the cave for two more days, and it took everything I had to remain quiet all that time. To move without making a sound, even pissing in silence. I did not sleep for fear that I would make noise and alert them to my presence. I kept out of sight of the entrance, hiding in the middle chamber and listening, waiting for them to leave.

I didn't think it would work. I had thought they would be cleverer, see through the laughably thin ruse. But as Aidy has said before, they think like children.

And like children without a guardian, they had eventually wandered away.

It takes a full four days before I dare enter the front cavern and move to the entrance. The stink of them lingers, but when I look out to the path, I do not see them waiting. Only tufts of dirty fur and metlak scat left behind mark their existence. I wait until dark before I take my first few cautious steps out of the cave, worried that I'm going to be ambushed and then have to start all over again.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

All is quiet, the valley silent for the first time in weeks.

I run. I race as fast as my legs will carry me, moving towards where I will meet up with my mate. My dreams have been full of nightmares—that Aidy and Valmir did not get away. That the snow-people found them escaping and tore them to pieces. That they grew lost in the snows and froze to death. A dozen horrible scenarios had filled my mind, making me run even faster. My legs threatened to give out and my lungs burned and still I ran.

And now she is here in my arms, and the scent of strangers is nearby and I find I cannot care, because Aidy is here and beautiful and laughing and I feel such joy as I hold her close.

Nothing else matters.

"How did it go?" she asks me, breathless. Her gaze is wide, hungry for details.

I lean in and press a kiss to her forehead. "It went as we planned."

"Then we're free?"

"Free," I agree. The word feels...incredible. Like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders. I am free to do as I choose, free to spend my time with my mate and no one else. There is no army to direct, no game to be forced through. I am...unchained.

It is a glorious feeling.

Aidy pulls back and gazes up at me, her expression uncertain. "There's a stranger in the cave, just so you know."

I stiffen. "Not another metlak?"

Her lips twitch with a hint of amusement. "No, this is a woman. A human woman. She says she traveled looking for Valmir and she was with two others. She knew who I was."

I say nothing. If there is no game, what will they think of the fact that I took Aidy away? Will they think I stole her from them? Valmir was a gladiator. He knows that females are prized and usually kept apart from us.

She squeezes my arm as if to reassure me. "If you don't want to go with them, we won't. I'll go with you wherever you feel most comfortable. We're a team. Always have been."

"Will they try to separate us?" When she shakes her head, I ask a second, equally important question. "Is it true that they have a healer?"

"They do. April—that's the woman—was teasing Valmir about being injured out here." She grimaces comically. "They're resonating and not super cool with it, it seems."

My fears are laid to rest, though. If there is a healer, and they will not separate us, we want to be with these people. Aidy is safer with them, and I am...tired. Tired of fighting alone, tired of having to spend every moment trying to survive. I would like to spend a few hours in bed with Aidy and not worry that our situation will fall apart. "If they will lead us to the village, I am ready to go."

Aidy beams up at me with relief, hugging me once more. "I have a feeling

everything's going to be all right."

I hope so.

CHAPTER

THIRTY

CORVAK

Even though I know we are meeting up with others, I am unprepared for the first glimpse of them. April had said that they were hunting for Valmir, and I had expected to see another praxiiian, or perhaps another human. I expected them to look as tired and worn as Valmir.

I'm unprepared for the bright red, vigorous male that raises an arm and waves us down from across the valley, or for the hulking male a few steps away from him with the thick neck and strange fur patterns. He looks to be a formidable opponent, and I immediately calculate the best way to get him off guard. A leg sweep, perhaps? A thumb dug into the underside of one arm or between the ribs? Is he part praxiiian or something else?

"Ho," calls the bright red male—an a'ani. He's covered in tattoos and his dark hair is shorn short, but there's a cockiness to his expression that tells me that he is a gladiator. When he looks at me, he sizes me up at a glance. I recognize that look, and I am determined to show no weakness. Him being a'ani already tells me much—the ancient race is cloned for grunt work, but if he's a gladiator that means he is crafty and skilled, and one to watch out for.

I don't like it. It immediately sets me on edge, and I instinctively move closer to Aidy, wanting to protect her.

"Looks like we found a few new friends," he calls out, a big grin on his face. There is a smaller female at his side, one with dark skin and fascinatingly beautiful curly hair. She holds a spear and has two long plank-like things tied across her back, as does the a'ani male. "Greetings! I am Thrand and this is my lovely mate, Nadine."

Nadine nods at us, her gaze watchful, as if she is deciding if we are friendly or not.

"And this is U'dron, but his mate is back at camp taking care of the kits." Thrand gestures at the thickly built male with the strange fur pattern.

I indicate myself and then Aidy. "I am called Corvak, and this is my mate, Aidy." I eye U'dron suspiciously and decide to get the biggest question out of the way. "What sort of splice are you? Mesakkah and what else?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"I am no splice," the man claims, speaking in a strange tongue that the embedded translator in my brain picks up.

How does one battle an opponent there are no records on? What are his weaknesses? His strengths? What if he has hidden abilities, like the poison barbs of the Threshians...but wait. There aren't battles.

There are no tournaments here, no gladiator competitions.

I do not know how to get over this.

"We're so happy to meet all of you," Aidy says at my side. Her voice is sweet and full of smiles, and my mate extends her right hand out to them. The human female takes it, and they move their joined hands up and down.

Then the human female looks at me again. "Has anyone ever told you that you look like someone?"

I shrug. "I am a splice. I imagine I look like a great many someones."

"There are many splices at Icehome. You are in good company," Thrand says.

"And they all have better manners than Valmir," April pipes in.

Valmir just growls.

I decide I like April.

Nadine steps forward, pulling a pouch off her waist and holding it out. The scent is that of dried meat, and she offers it to Aidy. "Are y'all okay? Because you look rather rough, no offense."

I bristle at her words. We look like survivors. We look like warriors. To my surprise, Aidy smiles and then begins to cry. She steps forward to take the bag, sniffing. "It's been a long few weeks."

"Oh, honey," Nadine says, and pats my mate on the shoulder. "I can only imagine."

They share an impromptu hug, and when they pull away, Aidy is smiling. I am not. I should be the one comforting my mate. The fact that a human stranger gives her more comfort than I do eats at my gut. I am not enough for her, and the realization wounds me.

I am not programmed to make friends. My memories are all of competitions and battle rules. I am made for rivals. But...there are no games here. I must keep reminding myself of that. These people are allies. They are not enemies, and I should not view them as such.

"Now that everyone's met again, can we please focus on me and my broken ankle?" Valmir snaps. "I'm not going to be able to walk back to the village. It's healed wrong, and trying to put pressure on it is like being stabbed over and over again."

"I'd like to stab you over and over again," April mutters.

Idolike April.

Even though we just packed up and left the cave, we retreat back to it again. Nadine directs U'dron and Thrand in the making of some sort of platform, using their flat sticks for the bottom. April repacks bags, and I am left to sit with my mate while we

snack on Nadine's food. I am not hungry, but if I do not eat, I think Aidy will stop. So I slowly chew on pieces of jerky and watch my mate.

"They seem nice," she says in a low voice. "What do you think?"

"Nice," I agree, though the word feels foreign in my mouth. A victory isnice. A good meal isnice. People are simply competition.

Aidy turns to me, arching a brow. She knows me well enough that I cannot deceive her.

"This is difficult for me," I say in a low voice. "I have no memories of friends. Only competitors. It is hard for me to see them as anything but rivals."

Her expression turns sympathetic and she squeezes my knee affectionately, moving closer and pressing up against me. "We'll figure it out. Just...if you get nervous or upset about something, talk to me before you react? I can tell you my point of view and we can compare."

This seems wise. She's not dismissing my concerns, merely wanting to talk them over first. My Aidy is so clever. "I am glad we are together."

Her smile brightens. "We're not doing this any other way. We're partners."

I hand her another piece of jerky and vow to be the best partner possible.

Once the dragging contraption is built, U'dron hauls it outside while Thrاند lets Valmir lean on him. I'm not sure if he's simply pretending to be injured worse than he is or if his ankleis truly that bad. The limb is slightly swollen, but I also notice that he seems to be more affected by it when April is paying attention. He makes faces and groans as he's lowered onto the platform with legs—Aidy tells me it's a "sled"—and

then U'dron grabs the harness and hauls it along. Valmir holds onto the sides and looks over at April, who is pointedly ignoring him. The sound of their resonance is louder than any conversation and makes the mood of the group awkward.

We walk until it grows dark, and then a tent is pitched. There is no cave nearby so the females pile into the tent to get out of the wind, and we males sit near the fire to keep warm and to watch over things.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

As it grows darker, the skies clear and I'm relieved to see that there is no sign of the Northern Lights, the "sky waters" as the snow-people call it. They will think I took the sky waters with me, hopefully, and it will reinforce our story.

U'dron sprinkles a handful of herbs into a warming pouch over the fire, making tea. Valmir eyes the tent, as if hoping that April will appear and fling herself at him. Thrand eyes me.

"How many tourneys?" the a'ani asks.

I wonder how much information to give him, then decide the truth is easiest. "None."

His dark brows go up. "None?"

"I am a new splice. There is nothing to recall in my memories yet save rules and fighting moves." I straighten, glaring at him. "And there is nothing wrong with that."

"I didn't say there was." He puts his hands up. "If you were as famous as Crudden the Ruiner, though, you might have a hard time adjusting to life here. There are no tournaments, no glory, no nothing here. Everyone here has children and wants to live a quiet life."

"Even you?" I cannot imagine what an a'ani child would look like, or how it would act.

"Even me."

"You will like everyone," U'dron says. His tone is mild, unruffled. For an enormous sort, his demeanor is easy. I can see why he is well-liked. "We all get along in the village."

I grunt. I am not sure how I'm going to "get along" with many strangers, but it is not my decision. Aidy will be safer there, so we will go there.

"You don't have to like everyone," Thrand points out. "I don't like Valmir."

Valmir throws a handful of snow at him from across the fire.

I snort, amused by the easy ribbing. This I am familiar with—even gladiators banter amongst one another. "No one likes Valmir."

The praxiian turns his scowl upon me. The others smile, though, and I relax a little. Perhaps this will not be so difficult after all, being normal. Perhaps I will manage to blend in after all, and Aidy will be happy.

"I personally am wondering why you ran away," Thrand comments. He leans forward, arms resting on his knees, a challenge in his expression. "Your bracelet said exactly what was going on."

"I thought it was a tracker." I shrug. "And I thought quick reflexes would get us out of the situation before others had time to attack us." It's a partial truth. The moment I saw the lid on Aidy's pod open, I thought she was a prize, and I was determined to run off with her and make her mine. There was no part of me that wanted to leave it open to chance.

Thrand grunts, considering this. "I might have done the same. But the khui? How did you figure it out?"

"He watched us," Valmir comments dryly. "He stalked us and learned from our group when we got khuis for the women."

"And you never saw him?" Thrand arches a brow at the cat-alien. "So much for the vaunted praxiian senses."

Another handful of snow heads Thrand's way. "I was distracted, idiot."

"Doubtful," I say, just because it's fun to needle Valmir. He's been annoying me for days now and it's nice to hear another giving him trouble. Snow gets flung my way, too, but I don't mind it. I am relaxing, bit by bit. "So tell me about living on this beach. What am I to expect? How can I prove myself as a warrior if there are no competitions?"

Thrand gets to his feet and scoops a bit of the tea into a bone cup, skimming the leaves off the top with a finger and flinging them into the fire. "You won't miss them. There is very little time to do anything like that. I remember when I was a fighter, waiting weeks between bouts, doing nothing but training and practicing over and over again for a brief moment of glory. It was monotonous, and that moment was over too soon every time."

"And now your very brief moment of glory comes between the furs when you claim your mate, eh? Has she complained about your speed?" Valmir jabs.

"No joking about mates," U'dron says in a stern voice. "That is off limits."

"She has not," Thrand retorts, ignoring U'dron's warning. "And at least I get to touch her. How's it working with April, friend? She tossed any more food in your face?"

Valmir just scowls. U'dron clears his throat, breaking the tension.

"I thought so." Thrand turns back to me. "One thing about living at the beach—you will never find it dull. There is hunting to be done, always, and supplies to be made for hunts. There is fishing, too, but my brother Vordis has far more patience for that than I do. Skins to be cured, meat to be smoked, clothes to be sewn, dishes to be carved..."

"Drums to bang and songs to sing," U'dron adds with a small smile. "And then there are the kits."

Thrand chuckles, a fond expression creasing his face as he drinks his tea. "The kits are never, ever boring."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"Your offspring?" I am curious, suddenly. I have never been around a young creature. My memories of the lab are brief, cloudy, and only feature fully adult people. "What are they like?"

Valmir makes an irritated noise, crossing his arms over his chest. "Now you've done it."

But Thrand and U'dron share a fond expression. "It is the greatest experience in the world, being a father," Thrand begins. "You think nothing can be better than resonance, and then your child is born and placed in your arms." He holds his hands out, juggling the tea cup, and pretends to cradle something. "It is the tiniest, most fragile being in the universe, and when it looks up at you, everything changes."

"They can go on all night about their kits," Valmir complains, all but glaring at the fire. "Ask them about the diapers, or when the kits interrupt when they're trying to have sex. Ask what privacy is like after your child is born. Ask how S'bren's daughter threw up on his face when he was trying to take care of her. Or how when Jethani was teething and kept Juth and Steph up with her cries all night."

"The tiniest package with the most potent stink when they relieve themselves," U'dron muses. "But I would not change the crying, or the belching, or any of the things they do. It is special."

They speak as if they have been mind-wiped, and I am a little skeptical at this. A defecating, screaming thing does not sound appealing to me. Perhaps Valmir is not all snarky comments. "How big are they? Aidy says she is carrying but I have not noticed any change to her size."

Thrand scoops the cup into the tea again and walks across our small circle, avoiding the fire, and holds it out to Valmir. The praxiiian takes it with a grudging nod of thanks. "How big do you think a baby will get?"

"I...have no idea. I'm not entirely sure how it comes out of her," I confess.

"The same way it goes in."

The same way...but my reproductive DNA goes over to her body by way of my seed, does it not? I frown intensely. "That is not a very big opening." I put out my closed fist, eyeing it and comparing to the pretend cradling that Thrand was doing earlier. "It has to be smaller than this? But how does such a thing survive?"

"My Deeni was a big baby," Thrand says proudly, and extends his hands out an impossible length, as long as his forearm. "I swear she was this big when Nadine gave birth to her."

"No," I say flatly. Horrified. How is something that big inside my mate? "Impossible."

"Truth," U'dron adds.

"But how do...where do her organs go if such a huge creature is inside her? Aidy is small." I put my hands to my waist, trying to imagine where the feet, the arms will go. "I do not understand...?"

They laugh with sheer delight and I try to figure out what is so funny.

We travel for two more days through the snows. The skies drop white fluff on us constantly, but Thrand and Nadine know these trails by heart. They lead our group, and U'dron and I take turns pulling Valmir's sled while the male seems to be in pain

only when April notices him.

He is ridiculous...but I suppose it is working, because she has been noticing him. She rolls her eyes every time he speaks, but as we continue to travel, she walks at his side more and more.

On the evening of the second day of travel, we stop at a large, well-stocked hunter cave. "We'll stay here and dry out," Nadine says, pulling her damp furs from her body. April has made a fire and is feeding bits of fuel to it, and the women take their wraps off near the warmth. "And tomorrow morning, we'll be at the beach, bright and early. You'll love meeting everyone."

Her smile is directed at Aidy, who is beaming back. My mate has become friends with these people easily. She talks with Nadine and with April constantly, and they laugh and joke about everything, from the terrible weather to Aidy's equally terrible clothing. Our clothing suits its purpose—it keeps us warm—but compared to the soft, form-fitting leathers that Nadine wears and the decorated collar and sleeves on April's tunic, it makes me realize that clothing can be more than functional. This did not occur to me. Even now, my mate wears leggings and a tunic that Nadine lent her. They hang loosely on Aidy's form, but she looks clean and happy, and I am struck with guilt.

I was not a good provider for my mate. Finding a cave for us to live in is one thing, but it's becoming increasingly clear that survival is about just more than a belly full of food and a decent place to sleep. I didn't think of clothes. I didn't think of friends.

It is clear to me that my Aidy needs both...and more. So much more. This village full of people will be beneficial to our survival, but I grow increasingly worried that Aidy will realize she doesn't need me. That she doesn't want such a terrible mate.

That she's better off without me.

"Come on," Thrand says, slapping my shoulder and jolting me from my thoughts. "Quit moping over your female. I saw a herd of dvisti not far from here. Let's take one down so we have fresh meat and we can replenish the cave before we leave it."

"A good plan." At least I can hunt. I know I am successful at that.

A few hours later, it is completely dark outside and we have taken down one of the smaller dvisti that we managed to separate from the herd before it scattered. The creature's legs are tied to the spear shaft, the ends of the spear hoisted over my shoulder and U'dron's, since we are of a similar height. We haul our kill back to the hunter cave, where the women are waiting. U'dron points at a rocky outcropping in the distance. "Let's butcher it there so we don't draw predators towards the cave itself. Corvak, can you get the skinning tools from the cave? This will make a good hide, and more hides are always needed."

I nod and leave them behind, slogging through the increasingly deep snow towards the cave and my sweet female. The hunt was a good distraction, but now that we are returning, my thoughts are full of Aidy and worry that I am a bad mate to her.

As I approach the cave, I hear voices.

Valmir is speaking. "I don't know why he didn't tell you. I said directly that you were both clones. It's not right that he kept that from you."

My heart sinks.

Aidy has said nothing about the fact that she knows she is a clone. She has not said anything to me about it or that I kept it from her...and now Valmir is picking at the wound, because he likes to cause trouble. I tense outside the cave, not breathing, waiting to hear Aidy's answer.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

After a moment, she makes a noncommittal sound. "You've got him all wrong. He must have misunderstood you. That's all."

"I'm not so sure," Valmir continues.

This time, Aidy sounds exasperated. "Look. I know Corvak better than you. He wouldn't keep something that important from me. When I say he didn't know, he didn't know. We've been under a lot of stress for the last few weeks, and if something slipped his mind, I'm not holding it against him. Don't try to start something, all right?"

"Me? I would never," says Valmir in a tone that implies he very much would indeed.

Aidy continues. "If you want to pick on someone's relationship, how about you and April tell us all about why you're fighting resonance, hmm?"

"Oooo," Nadine says. "Burn."

I grin despite myself. Aidy is so fierce in her defense of me, deflecting back onto the others.

"Why am I fighting resonance?" April cries, voice carrying. "Have you met Valmir? I'd rather put a fork in a light socket."

"What I want to know," Aidy continues, "is what Valmir was doing so far out here if you two aren't going to do the whole resonance thing anytime soon. It seems like a weird time to hunt."

"Oh, did she not tell you?" Valmir is all purrs now.

"Shut up, Valmir," April says. "Just. Shut. Up."

He laughs, and this is a good time for me to make my presence known. I make a few heavy footfalls and clear my throat before moving into the light at the entrance of the cave. I pretend to be surprised to see all of them gazing up at me, and gesture back at the valley behind me. "Do we have skinning implements? We're going to keep the hide."

Nadine holds a long leather-wrapped bundle out. To my surprise, Aidy grabs it and jumps to her feet. "I'll come with you. I need to get some fresh air. My stomach isn't liking all this smoke from the fire."

Immediately, I'm concerned. Is she not feeling well again? She looked good inside the cave—healthy, cheeks bright, eyes no longer hollow—but perhaps I've missed something. As we step out into the snows, I notice she's not wearing her cold weathergear and I take my cloak off, wrapping it around her. "Shall I carry you?"

Aidy looks at me in surprise. "What? Oh, no, I'm fine." Her cold hand steals into mine. "I wanted a chance to walk with you. That's all."

We walk, steps slow. When the snow gets deeper, I move ahead to forge a path for her, and she follows behind me, our hands yet together. "I...did know we were clones," I confess, unable to stand it any longer. "You were sick and I worried it would make you even more miserable, so I thought I would bring it up later."

"I figured it wasn't malicious."

Her answer surprises me. "You're not mad?"

Aidy laughs. "Oh, I was furious at the moment. I've been stewing over it a few days now, and I no longer want to grab you and shake you, but I haven't forgotten. I would never bring you down in front of the others, though. I'm not going to let them think less of you because of something like that. We're a team."

I feel even more miserable and guilty, because she protects me even when she is hurt by my actions. "Wearea team," I agree. "Thank you, love."

She squeezes my hand tightly. "You need to remember the team part though. If you keep stuff from me because you're afraid of how I'll react, you're not seeing me as an equal. You're seeing me as someone to protect from the world. We're in this together. We have to be united. Now more than ever since we're bringing a baby into this world." Her voice trembles a little. "Do you understand?"

I pause and turn to face her. "I am sorry. I never meant to hurt you."

Aidy turns her face up to me, the breeze blowing her long hair about her face. "And that's why I'm not more angry than I am. I'm hurt, but at the same time, I get it. I haven't been feeling mybest, and with the snow-people and Valmir and everything...it's been a lot. But no more secrets between us, all right? If I can't trust you to have my back, who can I trust?"

"You must be able to trust me." I acknowledge that I have made a mistake. I did not trust her instincts, and I should have. But I still hesitate, because something she said is pressing on me and I have to say it aloud. "Idosee you as someone to protect, though. I want to keep you safe. I want to make your life comfortable, and I want to bring you joy the same way you bring it to me. I don't know if I can change that part of who I am."

A small smile curves her mouth, and she plays with my fingers. "Okay, well, you can still protect me and look after me, because I plan on doing the same to you. But

there's a difference between doing it because you love and respect someone and hiding things from them because you think they can't handle it. Understand?"

"So I can still rub your feet and take care of you?"

"Absolutely. I'm not a monster." She brings our joined hands to her mouth and kisses my knuckles. "Are you sure you're okay? You seem...rattled."

Because I am. With every day that passes, I worry that I'm not going to fit in with these people. That once we reach this beach destination, she will realize she doesn't need me. That I am not a good provider and a worse protector, and that she can do better. She deserves someone that handles delicate situations with ease and doesn't hide them from her. She needs someone that will look at strangers and see them as allies, instead of someone that sees nothing but potential rivals.

But...I want to be her male. I don't want anyone else coming near her. I don't want anyone else receiving her smiles or her laughter. I want her to come to me with her problems so I can fix them. Increasingly, I worry I am her problem. "I am out of place with strangers," I admit. "It is...difficult."

Her eyes widen with surprise. "You've been doing so well! I had no idea."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

That is because I am trying very hard not to let it show.

"Everyone is so nice," Aidy continues. "Well, except Valmir, but he's consistent, at least." She shrugs and gazes up at me with bright eyes full of hope. "I'd forgotten how wonderful it is to have friends."

And I have not forgotten that I am not made to have friends.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-ONE

CORVAK

I stare out at the cluster of huts dotted across the beach, and I am overwhelmed.

The land is strange. The mountains are behind us now, falling away to a steep cliff and then a strange calm flatness. The flatness edges out to the waters, which roil and crash against the shore as if they have a vendetta. It is my first glimpse upon the ocean, and I can stare and stare and there is yet more to see. There are small birds circling over the waters. Chunks of ice drifting offshore. Craggy rocks rising from the distant waters like fingers.

And the people. There are so many of them. Everywhere I look, there are people on the shore. I see at least two dozen huts and several cookfires. I see people fishing and children running on the sand. Someone points in our direction as we head down the steep path towards the village, and then it feels as if all eyes are upon us.

I do not realize I am clutching Aidy's hand too tightly until she squeaks. Immediately, I am ashamed and release her. "I didn't realize?—"

"It's okay. Just maybe don't grip that hard?" She eyes me with concern even as she slips her hand back into my grasp again. "Don't tell me you're shy?"

"I am not," I bluster. Shy sounds...not very warrior-like. "I am just uncomfortable with so many people staring at us."

"I imagine they're curious. They don't know anything about us, remember? They'll stop staring after a bit." She gives me an affectionate squeeze. "It's going to be okay. I'll be at your side."

Again, I feel unworthy of her affection. Aidy is such a good mate and I am...useless. A gladiator with no tourney to fight, a warrior with no war.

People begin streaming towards us. Thrand and Nadine wave, and U'dron pulls the sled faster, dragging it ahead of Aidy and myself. I deliberately slow my steps even more, letting him pass, but also giving myself a chance to watch the reactions of others as they approach. They are smiling, their faces full of curiosity as they view us. These are not rivals. They would not look at us with such eagerness if we were here to fight them. I watch as a male approaches, one with four arms. Such an interesting build. I wonder if I could ask for more arms, because they would make grappling easy...and then I remember I am a gladiator no longer.

If what they are saying is true, I have been rejected and abandoned here with the other clones. I am not wanted as a fighter. I clench my jaw against this painful realization. Part of me had hoped that we were being misled, that this was a ploy to flush us out and get us to a more easily accessible fighting arena. There is no ploy, though, and I should not be as disappointed as I am.

"I am J'shel," the male with four arms says as he approaches. He is the first one to move directly to myself and Aidy. He speaks in a tongue that is foreign to me, but my translator implant easily adjusts it as quickly as it does to Aidy's language. "We are glad you have joined us. All are welcome."

"I'm Aidy," my mate says, and then touches my arm. "This is Corvak. We ran when we were dropped with the others. We thought it was a game of some kind."

"I was not dropped," he replies, an easy, welcoming smile on his face. "I am from the island."

"There's an island?" Aidy asks, tone bright.

J'shel's smile fades. "No longer."

"Oh." The silence grows uncomfortable for a moment as we stare at one another. Aidy's hand feels clammy in mine, and I realize she is nervous after all.

I clear my throat, nodding at J'shel. "We are glad to be here. Survival alone is...difficult."

The male's face creases into a broad grin. "This I know well. I look forward to hearing your story, and I will tell you mine across a fire sometime." He glances behind him, watching as another male comes forward, this one with impossibly tall, arching horns that seem to point at the sky. Less useful in battle, for all their deadliness. They are too easily grabbed, I decide.

"I am R'jaal of Tall Horn," the male says as he approaches. "Now of the Icehome Beach. This is my mate, R'slind. She is one of your people, and we are glad to see you." He gestures at the solid, pale human female with a yellow mane at his side. The female seems timid, less like my Aidy, and she gives us a shy smile.

"You're a clone, too?" Aidy asks.

R'slind nods. "Everyone that arrived in the same drop is a clone. It was on the bracelet..." She gestures at her wrist. "You didn't get one?"

"I didn't know what it was, so I took it off," Aidy lies easily, touching my arm again. "But the clone thing makes so much more sense than me thinking I was losing my mind."

R'slind laughs. "I can see that. Some of us definitely have more memories than others." She gestures behind her, where there are more and more people gathering and staring at us. "Do you want me to introduce you? I can point out our group. Icehome is actually several different groups all coming together. It'll be confusing at first, but I promise you'll be comfortable quickly."

Aidy glances up at me. "Oh, that sounds lovely, thank you." She steps forward with R'slind, who is immediately approached by several other human females.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

I hold back, noting the suspicious looks they are sending me. Aidy is welcome, but they are not so certain about me. I do not look like them. I understand it. I will not look like anyone, because I have no people. I am a mix of many people and belong to none.

"Well, well, well," calls a female voice. "Look what the cat dragged in. Literally."

Another yellow-haired human female strides forward, this one slightly older than the others if I had to guess. She is followed closely by an ugly, battle-scarred mesakkah male with a tall, rangy form and a scowl on his face. The female crosses her arms over her chest and eyes me speculatively.

This is the leader, I suspect. She has that air about her.

"I am Corvak." I gesture at Aidy, who is being surrounded by human females and pulled farther away. "Valmir has convinced us to join you."

"Valmir did?" Her brows go up. "That's...impressive."

I look around at the crowd, trying to count heads, but there are so many. I see all kinds—a moden splice, another a'ani with vivid red skin, and others I do not recognize. "I did not expect it to be so...crowded. How many of you are here?"

"Too many," the yellow-haired leader says.

I freeze at that.

The ugly male behind the female nudges her.

"Oh, shit. I was kidding!" She puts her hands up in the air. "I figured if you were used to Valmir, you could take a bit of ribbing." She thinks for a moment, counting on her fingers. "Well, there's those of us from Croatoan, and then there's the islanders?—"

"Exiles," the scarred male adds.

"Yup, there's exiles, too. And the Ancestors. Not the real ancestors, but I'm not calling them Those Who Remain because that's too much of a mouthful. And the splices. And the human clones. Oh, and the dragon. Can't skip him." She rolls her eyes. "He'll never let us forget it if we do."

"Visitors," her mate says, interrupting again.

"Yeah, them too, but they don't really count as part of the tribe since they're just hanging out for a while, right?" She tilts her head, gazing up at him thoughtfully. "Though do we count Bek and Elly's kid? She was born here but they're Croatoan...though they're not in a hurry to go back?—"

Her listing of all the different peoples makes my gut clench. If there are so many, how can they all possibly be fed? Are two more going to be seen as a burden? "Are we welcome here?" I ask, voice flat. "Or should we leave?"

They both turn and glare at me, as if I am annoying them. "Everyone is welcome."

Aidy returns to my side, her hands on my arm. There's a look of concern on her face. "Everything okay?"

I nod. What else can I say?

"Do you want to see my baby girl?" Nadine asks Aidy, all smiles. "I swear you won't see a cuter kid on this beach."

"Lies," the blonde female in front of me says, her tone practically a snarl. "You know my kids are the fucking cutest, you monster."

But Nadine just laughs at her, waving away her words. "You are far too competitive, Liz. Come on, Aidy. Corvak can manage without you for a moment, right?"

"Actually I'll stay with him," Aidy says, ever loyal, and holds me even tighter. "Until we get settled, at least."

The female leader, the Liz, points a finger at Aidy and Nadine. "Do we need to have a cute-off? Because I'm game. Wait until you see my little Ahsoka. She's got a gap between her front teeth that would make the Gerber baby shit a brick in jealousy. It's the fucking best."

"It is pretty cute," chimes in another female, who moves forward and puts a fat, enormous infant into my mate's arms. "But not as cute as this baby!"

"Oh my goodness," Aidy breathes, juggling the heft of the child and giggling. "So big! Just look at you!"

I swallow hard, remembering the conversation about babies and how they emerge when the stomach is distended. I cannot picture it, and the thought terrifies me. The creature in Aidy's arms is so much bigger than I envisioned, and the realization makes me dizzy. "Is...is the size of that thing normal?"

Aidy laughs, jiggling the child in her arms as it puts a fat hand on her chin. "What a big, perfect girl you are. Or boy. Or whatever."

“Boy,” the mother says shyly. "His name is Varukhal.”

"Come on," Nadine says to Aidy again. "Liz is probably rounding up all her girls so you can ooh and aww over them."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

Her arms full, my mate looks up at me. Her eyes are sparkling with delight, and it is clear to me that she wants to see the babies, all of them. There is no reason for me to hold her at my side, other than that I am uncomfortable and feeling isolated even amongst so many strangers. "Go on," I say softly, encouraging her. "Have fun."

Again she hesitates, and I shake my head. I don't want anyone thinking that I'm forcing her to be at my side. She is free to come and go as she pleases. She tilts her face up for a kiss, leaning in, and we kiss quickly over the baby before she goes and follows the other females.

I am left with the scarred male standing in front of me. He continues to glower as if I have offended him, arms crossed. I glance around, looking for a familiar face, but I do not see Thrand or even Vordis. U'dron has his arms wrapped around a female and a child of his own, sharing a private moment. I am alone.

"Brothers?" the scarred male asks suddenly.

I'm not sure I heard him correctly. "What?"

"Do you have brothers?" he repeats.

I shake my head, puzzled. "I am a splice. I am created in a lab?—"

"Thrand and Vordis were created in a lab. They are brothers."

"They are a'ani. It is different." A'ani are often grouped together when sold to instill camaraderie and a sense of teamwork. I am a gladiator, created to be a fighter. There

is no teamwork involved.

He grunts, then flicks a hand, indicating I should follow him. "Come. I would have you meet someone."

Who? There is no one I can imagine meeting here, no one that I am to seek out. Now I am curious, though, and I follow behind the tall, surly mesakkah as he strides through the group. We leave the cluster of people behind, heading out for the far end of the beach. I glance back at Aidy, making sure that my mate is safe. She is surrounded by women, holding one baby and talking happily to a much smaller human who has the same thick curls that Nadine does. Aidy glances up, her gaze seeking me out.

I nod at her and indicate she should stay where she is. She is safe and happy, and that is all that matters. So I follow the male, wondering where exactly we are going.

It becomes apparent soon enough. Not all of the tribe joined us when we arrived, it seems. There is a male on the beach, holding a long stick of some kind and watching as a child races around on the flat sands. He turns as he sees us approaching, his tail flicking.

As we get closer, I stare.

And stare.

It is another splice...and he looks just like me. When I pause to stand in front of him, I realize he could be my brother. Our manes are the same shade of dark gray, tufted around the face and neck. He has the same build I do, the same lack of mesakkah horns but the mesakkah ears. When he narrows his eyes in suspicion, it is like I am looking at a reflection.

"Gren," the scarred mesakkah says, gesturing at me. "This is Corvak. He is the splice that was missing from the pods. He and his mate have come to join us."

Gren nods slowly, eyeing me.

"Brothers," the male mutters again, and then turns and leaves. I am left with my look-alike near the waves.

And I do not know what to say.

I rub my mouth as we stare at one another. "Not brothers," I say, just in case he misunderstands. "I am a splice?—"

But Gren nods, grasping what I am trying to explain. "Same lab, though. We look very similar. Could be from the same pool of genetic material."

The realization that he is here is shocking. "Valmir did not say anything to me about you. That another splice looks just like me."

He rolls his eyes. "That male does not notice anything save that which concerns him." His tail twitches. "I do not care for him."

Nor I. It is another thing we have in common.

Gren squats down as the child races over to him, holding out a mollusk shell. "Look, Papa!" the small boy cries, and this child is even bigger than the one Aidy held, which makes me break out into a cold sweat. He would come up to her waist. Surely...surely not.

"That one is too small," Gren tells him with clear affection. "A good catch, but it will go back so it can grow bigger, yes?"

The boy nods and races back to the edge of the waves, setting the shell on the shore and then stepping back as he watches it get swept away again. He skips back down the beach, to where he was digging, and attacks the sand again with his stick. The young one looks like Gren. His mane is not as thick and it curls about his head, but the color is the same. His tiny brows are heavy and furred, but the rest of his face is smooth and pale. As he kneels over the sands, his tail swishes back and forth.

This is Gren's child, I realize. He has one with a human female.

This is what my child will look like when Aidy gives birth. I point a trembling finger at the boy, looking to Gren for confirmation. "He...you...?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

Gren nods. "Our son."

"Was he that big when he came out? Where is your mate?" Did she die, producing such a giant creature?

Gren shakes his head. "Babies are much smaller when they are born. They grow over time. Shade is almost four years. Yours will be tiny and fragile when your mate has it."

Relief hits me, so strong it makes me dizzy. I exhale loudly and bend over at the waist, head spinning. "Thank kef."

"Never seen a child?" Gren asks.

"Not until we arrived, no." I straighten, glancing over at him. "Are you a clone of a gladiator?"

"No. I am the original, as far as I know." His mouth curls wryly. "In a sense."

"Did you...have many battles?"

"Enough." The splice shrugs, his gaze on his son as the boy starts digging another hole. "That sort of thing does not matter now."

"It is all I know," I confess, voice bleak. "I have no battles, but my knowledge is rules and regulations, strategies and nothing more. If there are no games here, no competitions, what do I do with myself? What is a gladiator without a challenge?"

Gren eyes me, and then his expression softens as his son comes running up again to show him another shell. "What is a gladiator without a challenge? A father. A good mate. A provider and protector. A friend to others." He shrugs. "You are mourning a life you never had. Embrace the one in front of you."

"Good size?" the little boy asks as he holds up a shell, his small body quivering with excitement.

"A fantastic size," Gren tells him, ruffling his hair. "Good job, my son."

The boy breaks out into a grin, showing a gap-toothed smile, and something inside me softens. Embrace the future. Embrace this life.

The child turns to look at me, squinting up. "Who are you?"

"I am Corvak," I say, kneeling down to his height. "And I am new here. What are you digging?"

"Shells," he says. "But only shells with critters in them. Mama wants them for dinner."

"I have never hunted shells," I say, admiring his digging stick. "And I will need dinner for my mate. Will you show me how you hunt them?"

"It's easy," the tiny boy says, holding out his stick to me. "Come on."

CHAPTER

THIRTY-TWO

AIDY

What a wonderful day. I'm overwhelmed in the best way by our welcome at the beach camp they call Icehome. I've met so many people, all friendly and open and happy. Everyone looks like they're thriving, and I can't tell the clones apart physically from the "natural" humans. It just tells me there's nothing to worry about when it comes to that, and I'm relieved.

I've hugged every baby on the beach. I was never into babies all that much before, but now that I'm pregnant, I can't seem to stay away from them. I snuggled each one and wondered what my baby would look like, and it made me want my baby even more.

We might not have intended to get pregnant, but I can't say I'm unhappy with the situation. Nor am I unhappy with the fact that we seem to be stranded here. It's not ideal, but with a loving community around us, I feel so much more hopeful than I did before. It means Corvak and I can stay together. I can't picture my life without him at my side or going to sleep without his arms around me.

Everyone asked my name, and each time I announced it, it was a reminder that I don't know what Aidy is short for. Just that it's short for something. But the more that I met the others, the less it seemed to matter. There are two other women—Vivi and Natalie—who have no memories of their lives before, either, and they're both doing well. It reassures me that I'm going to be just fine.

Once the early introductions are done, Corvak insists that I sit down with the healer to get looked over. The healer turns out to be a human woman named Veronica. She's the most unassuming, mild-looking woman, but her little home is the biggest and her mate is a golden-scaled, flamboyant alien called Ashtar. They have two cute little boys that get into everything and do their best to distract their mother while she puts her hands on my stomach and "listens" to my body somehow.

"You're pregnant," she confirms. "Did you two have any issues conceiving?"

"Considering that we weren't trying? No issues at all."

Her brow furrows. "Interesting. I wonder what's different."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"Hmm?"

"Oh, just thinking aloud. Your mate looks very similar to Gren, but there must be something different in their physiology. He and his mate weren't able to conceive easily." She prods and feels my stomach again. "But I didn't tell you that."

"Um, okay."

"I can't communicate with your baby because there's no khui, but your body seems healthy enough. If you're getting sick in the mornings this early, it might be something to do with vitamins or electrolytes, which I'm clueless about." She lifts her hands and wiggles her fingers. "I'm practically a faith healer. But there's a fantastic herbal tea that the sa-khui make that helps with an upset stomach and you might try that."

"So there's nothing wrong?" I touch my stomach, still flat and completely normal looking.

"Not a thing." Veronica smiles up at me. "Extra nausea during pregnancy is normal when you're carrying a half-alien baby, I've noticed. Just take it easy and eat small bites of roots or porridge in the mornings."

"We have porridge?" I'm stunned.

Veronica laughs and begins digging through a basket of supplies. "Don't get too excited—it's made from crushed seeds, but it still hits the spot pretty nicely. Do you want some hand-me-downs to wear? You look about the size I was before baby

number two. I have some clothes that I no longer wear because my ass never recovered."

"Your ass is magnificent and I want to take a bite out of it," Ashtar calls from the other room in their tent, where he's watching their children. "Do not make me come over there and prove it to you."

"We're just talking," she yells back, a charming pink tinge flushing her cheeks. She pulls out a tunic with a decorative fringe and some flowers embroidered in the leather along the hem. "Try it on, see if it fits?"

Hours later, I'm wearing Veronica's soft, soft clothes, snuggled into a makeshift bed in a supply hut near the main firepit, where most of the cooking is done. There are baskets of roots and tea leaves stacked everywhere, and rolled up skins, along with piles and piles of bones that will be re-used to make utensils. There's barely room for a bed for us, a fact which leaves a lovely, kind woman named Gail absolutely chagrined. "Tomorrow morning, we're going to clean that hut out for the two of you. It's not right to make you have to sleep in our clutter. You can come stay with me and my mate Vaza tonight if you'd like."

It's sweet of her to offer, but after being around people all day, I kind of just want to be alone with Corvak, and I'm positive he feels the same. "The supply hut is more than generous, I promise."

We have a pallet of piled-up furs to sleep on, and a thin mattress made from feathers that goes on the stone-and-mortar floor. The moment the door-flap goes down and we pull the covers over our bodies, I'm hit with a wave of exhaustion. Corvak curls his arm around me, tugging me close, and I gratefully snuggle in against his chest.

"What do you think?" I ask in a low whisper.

His thumb strokes my bare arm under my short sleeve. "I think they like to talk a lot. And someone handed me food every time I made eye contact."

I smother my giggle, because he's not wrong. "We must look hungry and pitiful."

"But they are...kind," he admits. "And full of advice. And it is good advice. They are not all like Valmir."

Thank god for that. I'm sure Valmir is fine in small doses. I touch Corvak's bare chest. He's no longer wearing a deep rust-red tunic given to him earlier. It hangs on a hook nearby, and I have to admit, he looked really good in it. I don't know where it came from, though. I was pulled between people all day long, and I know he was, too. I pluck at his nipple, teasing. "They dressed you, too?"

He chuckles. "We must indeed look pitiful."

I sigh, because I know it has to wound his pride that we're taking handouts from people he considered enemies not so long ago. It was nice to not have to scratch out survival for a meal. To have a hot, delicious bowl of food handed to you. I don't mind working, but when there's no end in sight, it wears on you. I draw little circles on his chest, because he's quiet, and I don't want to influence his thoughts too much if he hates it here. "I saw two women and a man attaching hides onto frames and scraping them. Very Clan of the Cave Bear, but I'd like to learn how to do that so we can make our own hides."

You know, just in case we don't stay.

"I want you to rest until you feel better," he says.

That doesn't tell me what he's thinking. "And...then we'll head off into the mountains again?"

He pauses in his stroking of my arm. "Do you want to?"

"I want to do what you want to do," I answer cagily, trying to keep emotion out of my voice. "I don't want to stay if you're miserable. We need to do what's best for both of us. I'm willing to leave if that's what you need to be happy. I'm not emotionally attached to being here, but I do know that I'm going to be miserable as hell if you leave without me."

Corvak rolls over in bed to face me. His gaze locks onto mine, and he traces my jaw with his fingers. "I would never leave you behind. Never."

A knot forms in my throat. "Good."

"A few times today, I felt overwhelmed," he confesses. "There were so many people, so many faces, and everyone wanted to talk to me...and I did not know what to say. I do not know how to make friends."

"Just be yourself. Look at Valmir. He's not trying to impress anyone. He's an asshole and he doesn't give a shit. And they didn't kick him out. He's part of their family as much as anyone else."

He chuckles. "I noticed. I just...I want to be good at this. I want us to be a good family. I don't want you to feel disappointed in me."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"Never!" I press my hand over his and hold it to my cheek. "Don't ever say that. You're the bravest, strongest, smartest guy here."

"I am not," Corvak admits. "There is a lot we can learn from these people. Many of them were gladiators before—Thrand, Ashtar, Vordis, even Valmir—and I can learn from them how to be a good warrior if there are no battles to be fought." He pauses and then continues after a moment. "Did you see Gren? He looks just like me."

"You're handsomer." And he is. Gren is like a pale copy in my eyes. Gren's features are slightly different, his tail long, his eyes less curious. But I'm biased.

"Even so, it is good to see a face that looks like mine." He slides our joined hands down and presses them over my heart, where my khui is humming softly. "It feels like having a family. And there is a healer here, and she can look after you. Many of the females have had young, and they will know what to do when ours comes."

"So...?" I prompt, wanting his answer. "Stay or go?"

"Stay, I think." He says the words slowly, as if tasting them. "If we view all of this as a battle strategy, it makes sense to have allies and to hone our skills."

"You do realize everything isn't a challenge?" I ask, teasing.

"It never hurts to be prepared."

I laugh, and it feels good that we're on the same page. I give his shoulder a gentle push and tip him onto his back, and then I lean over him and kiss his smiling mouth.

"I love you, Corvak."

"I love you, too, my Aidy." He pauses. "Can I ask you something?"

Tilting my head, I study him. "What's that?"

"You won't laugh at my question?"

"Why would I laugh?"

He makes a wry face. "Because I asked something about babies earlier and everyone laughed at me."

Immediately, my anger blisters white-hot. I sit upright. "Who laughed at you? Do I need to fight them? Teach them somefucking manners? Because you can ask me anything, love. And I'm not going to laugh."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

Corvak is quiet for a moment, and then he puts a hand on my stomach. "How does something as big as a baby come out of your body?"

That's not such a weird question. "Well, your body stretches to accommodate the child."

His glowing eyes squint up at me. "But some of the children I saw were up to your waist! Look at Nadine's child Deeni! How is that possible?" His voice drops to a horrified whisper. "And did you see Steph's son? Pak is nearly as tall as her. No cunt can stretch like that."

Oh no.

I'm a liar. Because I'm absolutely going to laugh. I press my lips together hard, trying to compose myself. "Those children were different ages, Corvak."

"Just to confirm...Deeni did not come out of her body that size?"

"Absolutely not."

He lets out a huge, gusty sigh of relief. "That is very good to know. People keep mentioning children's ages to me as if it should mean something, but I am clueless as to what."

I bury my face against his neck, fighting giggles. Of course he doesn't know how age affects growth—he only knows full-size people. I can only imagine the mental gymnastics he's been going through trying to figure out why everyone's kids are different sizes. When I can hold it together, I give him an adoring pat on the chest. My god, I love this man. How can he be so innocent and yet so clever at the same time? All I know is I adore him with my whole heart. "Let me explain to you how children grow, my love..."

EPILOGUE

TWO MONTHS LATER

AIDY

There are few pleasures as enjoyable as watching your mate work. I stand back, admiring the strong flex of Corvak's back as he loads heavy rocks onto a sled with Gren. The stones are gargantuan, but they're also flatter down at the far end of the beach, and Corvak said he wanted them for the floor of our hut that's currently being

built. The two men set the enormous flat stone down on the sled they brought for transporting. They look pleased at the accomplishment when it crashes onto the sled and the entire thing shakes but holds together.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

"Good stone," says my mate, unaware I'm standing nearby. "Aidy will like it."

I hate that I'm going to have to ruin his day. "Do you have a moment, love?"

Corvak's face brightens as he realizes I've arrived. I love how just seeing me—even though we were in bed together hours ago—puts the biggest smile on his face. "Done already?" he asks. "I thought they would commandeer you for a while."

"Nope, we're all good. It was a short lesson today." I've been sitting in with the Ancestors—Those Who Remain—that are living above-ground with the Icehome village. There's no language-translating chip for them like there was for myself and Corvak, and so they recently went to an old, crashed ship to get what Harlow calls a "language" dump. That worked and they can understand our words now, but a party is going to return to the people underground, and they want to make a language guide to help with learning.

Somehow, I'm the best with languages in the entire group. There are nuances to the Ancestors' language that can't be communicated easily. I noticed this when Rosalind was trying to explain to Set'nef the differences between two words that sound the same in English—the "sea" and "to see," and I jumped in to help. I've also been able to understand the Spanish that Marisol and Callie switch into constantly, before the translator kicks in. It's like my khui has some sort of language superpower, where I grasp the concepts quicker than others. As a result, I've been working with Rosalind, Set'nef, and Tal'nef to go over common words in the Ancestors' language (with Rosalind recording things on parchment skins) so we can establish a travel "guide" for future visitors.

Today, however, our lesson was cut short due to weird circumstances. "I've got good news and bad news," I say to my mate. "Which do you want first?"

He glances over at Gren, nodding at him, then wipes his brow and moves to my side. Gren goes to check on his son, who's stacking smaller rocks nearby, his constant little shadow. Ever since we arrived at Icehome, we've gotten along with everyone, but there's a special bond between Gren and Corvak. It's like Corvak's found a brother in the quiet gladiator, and I'm so happy for him. I know Willa, Gren's mate, is equally thrilled. There's community, and then there's family. It doesn't matter if Gren and Corvak aren't truly brothers—they feel like they are, and that's all that matters.

"Are you not sewing?" Corvak asks, approaching and placing a kiss on my forehead. He cups my face and then slides a hand to my neck, rubbing it. "Is your stomach all right?"

Aw, he's so sweet. "I'm okay, really." Morning sickness continues to be a beast, but I've been drinking that awful-tasting tea Veronica suggested, and it helps. I have it in my waterskin right now and sip it throughout the day, hot or cold. "I need to talk to you, though. I have bad news."

His gaze immediately flicks to my waist, panic on his face.

"No! It's not about the baby! It's about the hut."

Corvak sags, and then pulls me into a tight embrace, squeezing me against his chest. My nose is buried in sweaty pectorals. "Don't scare me like that."

"Sorry," I say, voice muffled against his chest. "But we need to wait on the hut."

"Wait on it? Why?" He pulls back a little, letting me breathe.

While it's nice to be able to draw air into my lungs, I kinda miss being cuddled up against his pecs. He's got such a nice chest. It's muscled and covered in thick dark hair, and I just want to touch him. Or bite his skin. I stare at his nipples, arousal hitting me out of the blue. Being pregnant has made me incredibly horny as well as pukey. Silver lining, I suppose. "Um. Devi says it's going to be snail season."

"Snail," he echoes. "What is a snail?"

"Well, to be technical, she said 'ammonite,' but they're in snail shells so I just keep picturing giant snails." I shrug, trying to focus on something other than my mate's glistening, sweaty body. "Four years ago a bunch of them came up on the shore to lay eggs and destroyed all the houses. She said the waters are showing signs that it's about to happen again, which means there's no point in building a hut right now if it's just going to get crushed."

Corvak puts his hands on his hips and glances over at Gren. "Do you know anything about this?"

Gren comes over and I repeat everything Devi told me. At my words, annoyance crosses his face. "I remember this. It was not a good time." He gestures for Shade to come join him. "And if what you say is true, I need to speak to Willa. We can move our things to caves to prepare, so we do not lose supplies."

"I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news." I edge a little closer to Corvak, wanting to breathe in his scent, just because I love it when he's sweaty. He smells so damn good. "But I guess the rocks for our floor can wait."

Corvak nods, distracted, and slides the heavy rock off the sled while Gren and his son take off back towards the village. "I don't like this," he says when we're alone again. "I thought we'd be safe here."

"We are. From what Devi tells me, the creatures are harmless, just bulky and determined. As long as we stay out of their way, we'll be fine. I'm okay with living in a cave again for a short while."

He grumbles, sliding his arms around my shoulders and tugging me close again. "I will build you a hut anyhow, if you want. I will fight all the snails if they try and crush it."

I giggle at the thought, shaking my head and sliding my arms around his waist, running my fingers up and down his back. "I can wait a few weeks more. I truly don't mind." I brush my lips against his chest, letting my tongue flick out and taste a bit of sweat. "And now that your afternoon is free...?"

He growls low in his throat, one hand sliding to cup my ass. "You want me to take you behind a pile of rocks and fill your cunt?"

Oh sweet baby Jesus, do I ever. "Yes, please."

It's later, when we're back in our hut and curled up in bed, that I remember the other thing I was going to tell him. "I forgot to tell you my good news."

"Mmm?" He leisurely kisses down my arm, then moves over to my belly. Nothing's changed there in the last three months, except that now it feels hard. Corvak's eager for me to start showing, if only so it'll ease his fears that I'll somehow have to pop out a toddler instead of a newborn.

"My name," I breathe. "I remembered it."

He sits up, astonished. "What? How?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:57 am

I'm delighted at his reaction, because it's as big a deal to him as it is to me, and it just makes me love him all the more. "I was talking with Mari and Penny. They're both pregnant right now, too, and we got to talking about baby names. Mari said she was going to name hers after her mother if it was a girl, and I automatically said that it was what I was named after. It's like I didn't even think about it—it just popped out. I'm named after both of my grandmothers, Agnes and Dorothea. My mother wanted to honor them but thought the names were too old ladyish, so it became A.D. Aidy."

"Agnes Dorothea," Corvak echoes. "Such a long, lovely name. I like it. We will use it for our daughter." He leans down and kisses my stomach again.

We'll see. There's something nice about having it again after "losing" my name for so long. I might want to keep it for myself for a while. "It might be a boy."

"Whatever it is, I will love him—or her—as much as you."

The things he says make my heart swell. "You're just trying to get laid again, aren't you?"

He chuckles, pressing another kiss to my still-flat belly. "Is it working?"

"A thousand percent," I say, and take my alien lover into my arms again.