



Xeda

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Description: He craves freedom, and she holds the key.

Xeda was once a lethal warrior of the Blood Guard. Now he is a prisoner. A captive to a world without alliances, where the powerful elite seeks to twist him into a deadly fighter for their sinister games. Refusing to be tamed, Xeda instills terror in the hearts of all those around him. All...except one. A human female who watches him through the bars of his cell, with eyes that see beyond his scars and his vicious exterior. Ophilia is desperate for her own kind of freedom. She believes she can save them both if he trusts her. He shouldn't trust her or allow her to get close, but he does. Through her sacrifice and her unexpected tenderness, he lets her in. He lets her break past the barrier that is his hate, revealing the humanity he thought long lost, igniting a heat in him that defies reason, an impossible fire in his blood that calls to this small but brave female. As the games he's forced to play draw them closer, their bond defies all odds. But with victory comes the looming threat of destruction, forcing Xeda to confront not just the enemies that surround him, but also the darkness that threatens to consume him. Can Xeda become what Ophilia truly sees in him? Not a monster, but a male worthy of redemption?

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BEFORE

Xeda

You're Lost.

You lost.

Pathetic.

Wake up.

Xeda's eyes slid open. It was quiet in the dark. And warm. Warm like a jungle. But the ground was soft. So very soft...

Something buzzed near him, and he lurched up. Insects hovered on the white sand.

Where are you?

He unfurled himself, his tail slipping over the ground, making a jagged line in the sand. A breeze rose up, and sand brushed along his skin. The thin patches of red grass around him weaved back and forth. He looked up and saw an orange moon, no more than a sliver in the night sky. He leaned back and felt the touch of cool metal.

He didn't need to see to know how bad the ship must look behind him. He could still smell the smoke in the air from the landing. He was curled up underneath one of the broken wings.

He tilted his head up at the twisted metal. His nostrils flared, and he bared his teeth.

He wasn't alone. Something was coming.

He smelled the burning tang of metal first, then he heard—over the buzz of insects—the low hum of a ship.

The light hovered over, circling. Searching.

A guttural growl vibrated in his throat. He was too weak to fight. Too weak...

The ship hovered over the ground, and the white light blinded him.

Run.

He tensed, then bolted for the other side of the ship. His legs burned, and his sides burned even more. But he didn't dare stop. Sand kicked up around him as he raced across the dry land, raced for somewhere to hide.

He heard the ship behind him, and rage exploded in him.

He wasn't going to make it.

He heard something snap back, then the whoosh of air before he was slammed into the ground. A cord of metal wrapped itself around him, bending his limbs, coiling tight to keep him in place.

Before he could even let out his fury in a roar, something sharp stabbed him in the back and knocked him out.

* * *

Jungle...vines...wrapping around him. Suffocating him. Breaking him. Vines that were alive. Vines like metal.

What happened?

His eyes slid open, a sharp pain from light stabbing into his skull. No. He had escaped the place of death. He had failed, had suffered, but he had escaped. He had been free.

He had escaped the planet where his death or his imprisonment had awaited. Fate had given him another chance. He had found a ship and had flown through the dark for a lifetime. Or maybe only a moment. Until he had lost his way, lost himself, and crashed. Crashed on that dry land.

And for what?

He had been found after all.

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His eyes flicked over to one side, and all he could see was the blurred shapes behind a pane of glass. They were talking in hushed voices, words he didn't understand. They were not his kind. They were otherkin.

His eyes narrowed, a low growl bubbling in his chest.

The pane slid back, and the faces he loathed looked down at him. Their beady eyes studied him. His nightmare was real.

He tried to jerk and struggle in his binds but found he couldn't move. They circled him and held out sharp tools. They cut him and peeled parts of his skin, and he wanted to scream, to thrash, to kill.

The little pieces of his skin they took were stored away. Then they left him.

A nightmare.

They turned off the light and left him in the dark. All he felt was the hum of the ship at his back. He saw the faces of many in the dark, but he couldn't recognize who they were. Couldn't tell friend from foe. Could hardly remember who he was. Memories were scattered ever since he had escaped. Ever since he had failed her.

He saw her in the dark too. The queen he had served. She was nothing now but a skeleton. Nothing but black bones and red eyes.

He had no sense of time, only keeping track of the moments when the otherkin came to study him. They would talk in front of him, in their hushed tones, looking at him,

poking and prodding him. This happened several times while they flew to wherever they were taking him. Because they were taking him somewhere, that much he knew.

He knew after a time they were drawing close to this unseen place when they moved him from his immovable cage to another. A thick metal box with vents for air. Dumping him inside and locking the door. Shutting him away like an animal.

He'd show them an animal.

Whatever drug they had pumped him with was already fading. They talked and talked beside his cage, and he heard one sound repeated many times. He'd gathered in his seething silence as he listened that it was a word that meant something. Something important. A name.

Kingsway.

CHAPTER ONE

Ophilia

The day was already growing hot, and the sun had barely peeked over the jagged red mountains in the distance. There were few clouds in the sky, meaning it was going to be dry and unbearable. Just like yesterday and the day before. Only when the sun sank and maybe an hour or two after did it start to cool, then quickly the night would turn freezing cold. Hardly any reprieve.

It was her poor animals she worried about. She was lucky enough to live in the main house where the temperatures were regulated. Except for the family rooms where they could change it to whatever they liked. Even in the lower quarters where she stayed, it was far better than any of the outdoor pens, where they got little more than heatlights at night and fans and shadeboxes in the day.

Ophilia slipped outside through the side entrance, her shirt and pants billowing out from the hot breeze, thin fabric in the color of red with purple trim, the house colors. On her left arm was the patch of the spitting cat with twin daggers crossed under its chin and three suns over its head representing the three male heads of the family. Father and two sons. The crest of House Salimar.

As she crossed the courtyard and the small eastern gardens, a slender red and black cat shot out from a nearby bush, almost making her trip. It hissed at her before it bolted away.

Ophilia took a moment to collect herself before—carefully now—making her way to the outdoor pens. Injure one of the prized house cats and that was twenty lashings. Kill one and you lost a hand. Disrespect one in front of a family member and you spent a day in the glasshouse.

She passed one of the main gates into the outer yards, nodding at the guards who talked nearby. They watched her pass but didn't nod back. As usual.

Down a set of stairs, she went by the small orchard, where workers were already up in the trees, picking off the early spring crop, blood-red sunfruit the size of her palm.

Passing one last smaller gate, she was in the training barracks. She didn't dare glance over at the rows of units where, beyond the barred windows and doors, the house's fighters were kept. Meandering in the dark of their rooms. Their cells. A few hissed at her like the cat had as she passed. Some growled deep. Others remained silent. Hendrik—the house's head trainer—wouldn't be around till midday. He always slept in, usually hungover. Only a few of the boys under his apprenticeship would bother to feed the fighters. Most times, they forgot.

Ophilia got up earlier than usual so that she could do the feeding and change out the water tanks. But recently she had been scolded over it and was forced to stop.

Hendrik liked using her for help but only when he wanted it. She wasn't one of his apprentices, thank the heavens, but she was a trainer and keeper for the house's exotic pets. Somehow Hendrik decided that fighters and pets were one and the same. So, if he needed her assistance, she couldn't disobey.

Her heart sank as she got to the end of the cells, coming to the last. She almost stopped but forced herself not to, knowing the guards watched from the wall nearby. The last cell was empty, cleaned out several days ago.

Tajia had been sick for some time. Their prized fighter had gotten an infection from a knife wound in the arena, and it hadn't been properly tended to. Still, they forced him to finish the games, but the massive yet gentle lygin hadn't gotten far, collapsing in the final rounds. They brought him home and let him suffer for his loss.

That had been several months ago now, and they had left his cell unkept and uncleaned. Until now.

Which only meant they had found a new potential fighter. One that would have to be trained until the next season started.

Ophilia drifted away from the training quarters and started for the pens which were tucked into an enclosed area alongside tall borsa trees, similar to palm trees on Earth but with longer, fatter leaves with orange stripes. They gave little shade to the beasts in their pens, but they were better than nothing at all. She checked the water tanks and filters, then went for the small storage house to one side that kept their food. She prepared the day's meals, then set them each in a bin and placed the bins in a cart connected to a four-wheeler.

She drove along the dirt path, stopping at each station where a pen was housed. Some were nothing more than large cages while others were more open. It all depended on the species. The terfins for example were like large scaly birds whose billed horns

could pierce straight through your skull. Their cries were awful, like grating metal. But the long-necked killi deer were gentle and hardly ever escaped their enclosure.

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Every animal was different. All trafficked from the governing systems. A few were from Earth, like Cleo, one of the last tigers, and Neptune the seal. A couple of giraffes and zebras. And a clipped eagle named Apollo. A bird sanctuary housed some from Earth along with those that weren't. No one bothered to separate them, but thankfully they hadn't tried to kill each other.

There was a pond of fish that was used to restock the pools in the gardens. Most were from Oceanus and had to be carefully regulated. Other enclosures included Javi—tiny golden-eyed lizards with twin tails and rainbow-colored scales—and howlers—monkey-like creatures with sly fox faces. A few cats roamed the path. They were the only ones allowed to go free about the grounds. They were also the only species that was genetically engineered. A breed from Earth modified with some other nonnative feline's DNA.

Ophilia never stopped to ask how they were made. Or where they got the alien exotics. But she had heard rumors some had come with those who'd traveled from the system called Xolis. Others were from those races who joined the alliance. It was illegal to traffic anything living. But here on Katamor (known simply as K2), they didn't care about the alliance or the governing system's rules. They were outside of the governing territories after all. On K2, they made their own rules.

By the time she had finished the morning feed, Ophilia started on the cleaning. By then, Janna had arrived and had started on her side. She and Rick, their head keeper, were the sole animal caretakers besides Ophilia.

As Ophilia swept the Javi pen, Janna strolled by, examining her through the metal netting. "Hey."

"Hey," Ophilia replied, wiping her brow.

"Rick isn't taking Cleo out today. They got that new stock coming. He said he wants you at the loading bay."

Ophilia stopped sweeping to look at her. "I thought he said he didn't need us there."

"Not me. I'm getting the new pens ready. He said Hendrik needs extra hands for what's coming, so he needs your help."

Great. "Guess I'll clean up later then." She panned the pile of debris she had already made and set the bin outside the pen, locking the gate behind her.

"Be there in ten. The ship arrives soon." Janna left before Ophilia could respond, turning for the new enclosures.

They were said to be receiving two new animals—some kind of canine with a whip-like tail and a crocodile. The canine would need special handling, but the croc should be easy.

As Ophilia set her supplies back in the shed and started for the loading bay on the other side of the house, she wondered what got Hendrik so uptight he needed extra assistance.

They weren't told who their new potential fighter was going to be. It had been a last-second trade. A surprise. Only a few people knew, including Hendrik. For a man who loved to brag, she could tell it took all his will not to say a word to the staff. It had to be someone he truly thought had a chance of winning. Assuming he could break them first.

The wind kicked up, a stifling heat, making the trees sway and the banners along the

walls whip back and forth. Ophilia tied back her blue-black hair in a short tail as she picked up her pace, climbing up a set of steps toward the house, a four-story, glass and concrete monstrosity more fortress than a home. But they prettied it up with their gardens and their marble displays.

The loading dock was situated on the western side of the property, including a large hangar with several ships docked and a wide landing space in the center with high walls surrounding each side. When she entered through the tunnel and stopped at the wide open gate, she found the dock bursting with people. Even housekeepers were clumped together waiting and watching within the shade of the tunnelways meant for transporting supplies to the house. It was the most guards she'd seen together too, groups standing on the walls with guns resting at their sides. More lingered on the ground, kicking up the red dust.

"Hey, Ophilia," Kendra greeted, appearing by her side. She wore the red shirt and pants like Ophilia only instead of the crest on her left arm, it was etched onto the right side of her shirt, threaded in gold. Her thick dark hair was braided and tied back.

"Hey, Kendra. They let you out of the house?"

"Haha. I got a small break before they start brunch and tea and all that shit."

"Have you seen, Rick?"

She pointed to one side, near the landing entrance. There Rick stood by Hendrik and his two apprentices along with the captain of the guard, Garet. And his second, Tallah, a lygin female with all the cunning of a jaguar. A group of armed men stood behind them. From the safety of a shaded covering nearby, Ophilia caught the sons of Salimar—Cristan and Drake, with their cousins. The two pasty-faced brothers were shoving one of their smaller cousins out into the sun and snickering.

"Why are they here?" Ophilia asked. The sons never came to witness an unloading. It was beneath them. And something only staff did.

"They came to see their new gift," Kendra replied bitterly. "Sal is letting Cristan lead the games this coming season with a new fighter. None of the others were going to cut it, so Sal put in a huge sum this time at auction." Kendra shook her head. "They risked a lot on this one. Heard they sold off two other homes in the city and one of Drake's racers."

"Hendrik didn't choke on who it is?" Ophilia asked.

"Sal would have had him beat if he did. They wanted the fighter here in their territory before word got out. He's putting in extra security, too, and more spy searches. He wants to try to keep this tight-lipped, but that shit never works. Crazyass man who runs this house never learns."

Ophilia shushed her, looking around nervously. The guards didn't look their way. "Sal is coming too then?" she whispered.

Kendra shook her head. She glanced around and then quickly popped a bluum candy in her mouth. Sucking on it she said, "He's in the city doing some business. But he'll be back tonight."

"And Carla?"

Kendra snorted. "Like she'd get her pretty little toes dirty."

Rick turned his head at that moment and saw her, fixing her with a sneer. Even with his shades on, she could tell he was glaring.

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"I gotta go," Ophilia said. "See you later." She walked out into the open, leaving Kendra in the shadow of the tunnel. The heat of the sun burned as she approached.

Before she could say hello, Rick handed her a stunner. Ophilia looked down at it, confused.

"Hendrik wants you following as they move the fighter."

Ophilia's brow furrowed. "I thought we were moving the new animals. Why do I have to—"

"They can wait," Rick cut her off. "I'll see to them."

"Okay...but what's with the stunner?"

"You're gonna stun the bastard I got showing up, that's what." Ophilia turned around to see Hendrik's red pudgy face and beady black eyes staring at her. His beard was unshaven, and his hair was unkempt. His stomach bulged out of his pants, and his shirt was drenched in sweat.

"What?" Ophilia said, stunned.

"Like this." Hendrik grabbed the stunner from her hand and turned it on. He jabbed it at the arm of one of his apprentices who screamed out in pain, dropping to their knees. He waved it in her face. "Got that?"

From nearby, she heard laughter. Cristan and Drake, their cousins, and a few of their

bodyguards were laughing.

He shoved the stunner back in her hands. Before she could tell him 'hell no,' the wind picked up, and the hum of a ship drowned out any sound.

Ophilia looked up and saw the large cargo ship slowly descending. She backed away and covered her eyes as dust stung her arms.

There was a low droning boom as the ship released a group of thrusters and carefully set itself onto the landing pad. The crew positioned themselves accordingly as the ship powered down.

The bay doors opened, and immediately, cargo began to roll out with the help of both crew and cratebots. Ophilia stayed behind with Rick and the others waiting their turn. Large carriers like expensive groundcars, furniture, and machinery were brought out first and taken to the house through the tunnelways. Then came sets of boxes filled with anything and everything from dinnerware to foodstock to new clothes and jewelry. Spring was here, so there were new decorations, seeds, fertilizers, and flower arrangements for the gardens. Then came the weapons. Ophilia could tell by the markings on each box where they were headed. The next went to the armory, then the guardhouse. Then came the packages of bluum mostly in drop form which was all the rage currently. Even some of the house staff shifted impatiently as they eyed those boxes passing by. Many would be looking to make a trade. There were the pharmaceuticals next and the human-designed drugs like blue snow, but those didn't hit the way bluum did and so were less sought after.

When they got everything that wasn't alive off the ship, at last came "the poor bastards" as Rick called them. The creatures were stuck inside metal crates with nothing more than vents for air, only kept alive by the drugs they pumped inside.

The crocodile came first. Its long box was placed to one side, not out of the sun,

Ophilia noted, hoping it didn't cook inside its crate. The whip-tailed canine followed right after. The crack of its tail against the side of the metal cage made those near it flinch. Hastily, they set the animals aside for Rick to take later as they all rushed in together to bring out the last piece of cargo.

Ophilia watched each guardsman draw their guns, inching closer to the door. Hendrik took out another stunner and turned it on. His apprentices did the same. Ophilia refused to turn on hers, and thankfully Hendrik didn't scold her. He started for the giant crate being rolled out, and the others followed.

"Get around it," he called. "I want men on every side."

The several groups of guards around the ship moved in and flanked each side, guns aimed at the cage. Ophilia didn't understand the extra need for security. They never had this many men needed for transporting a fighter that she could remember. Tajia only had maybe five soldiers walking alongside his cage, with Hendrik and his old trainees watching closely. Many of the other fighters had fewer. What was so special about this one?

As the cage was set on a ground carrier, Ophilia tried to peek inside and thought she caught the shine of a pair of red eyes. She shivered as the carrier began to move.

"Hold up!" barked Mason, the family's head bodyguard, a hulking mountain of a man. The carrier halted. Cristan and Drake came forward with their cousins, grinning wildly from ear to ear. Mason put out his arm to halt them from stepping too close. "Just there, Master Drake, Cristan."

They leaned in, trying to peer through the narrow vents. "Can't hardly see it," Drake said. "Is it alive?"

"I saw movement, just there!" pointed one of the cousins.

Cristan craned his neck and then frowned. "Drake, see if you can see anything from that hole there. I thought I caught something." Drake inched a little closer, leaning forward. As he did, Cristan shoved him, and Drake went sprawling forward, bracing himself with his hands.

As he collided with the cage, there was a violent hiss from within, and the cage jolted to one side as if something huge had thrown itself at the side of the wall. Drake screamed as did a few of his cousins. He pushed himself away and stumbled, falling on his back. The cage shook violently again, and there was a guttural growl. A few of the staff yelled out in surprise, and the soldiers tightened the hold on their guns.

"Back off, back off!" Hendrik cried.

Cristan, laughing, tugged his brother to his feet and backed away. His brother's face was ashen. "Little piss-ant. Stop shaking. It can't get out of there," Cristan teased.

Metal groaned as the cage rattled. Some didn't look so sure.

"Let's move," Hendrik called. The carrier lurched onward, and like some ominous military parade, they moved on with it, out of the landing dock and through the tunnels toward the training grounds.

Ophilia kept up on one side, eyeing the cage from a few feet away. Her mind turned over who could possibly be inside to warrant such safety measures. Not a lygin, surely, perhaps another grex but, hell, they had so many of those already, and none sparked this much unease in the others.

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It was then she caught a curious scent in the air. Like a freshly made pot of coffee.

A soldier cursed to one side of her. She looked over and saw a few others looking wide-eyed and sweating, on the verge of firing off their guns in a mad panic as if already threatened by something. They were all silent except for Hendrik who belted out orders.

The trip was slow, but when they finally made it into the training grounds, they slipped the cage off the carrier, setting the entrance against Tajia's old unit. While Ophilia had been taking care of the other pens, someone had altered the space, confining it with thick steel bars and a new titanium door. She heard the sounds like buzzing or hissing, the bars seeming to glow a soft blue. As she neared the door, she caught an insect flying near the bars. It got too close and was zapped, turned to dust.

Ophilia stood frozen, her body tensing. They had similar electric fields on the other units but nothing this extreme. And the new steel door told her the new fighter wasn't like any of the others they had kept before.

A pair of men climbed on top of the cage, targeting their guns down on the space between the cage and the unit door. They latched the cage to the walls of the unit first, then, by Hendrik's signal, they slid open the door of the cage.

There was no movement. Hendrik moved quickly, his apprentices falling right behind. He barked at Ophilia to move her ass and so she placed herself to one side close to the doors. Her heart raced as she had a view of one vent hole that peeked into the dark. She stared in and then froze, a hiss of breath escaping through her teeth.

Were those...spikes?

She caught the end of a spiny tail whipping around. The alien was silently moving, as if assessing those around them. Hendrik called out again, and this time Tallah moved in, carrying a unique-looking gun that had wisps of steam drifting from the tip. She placed the end of the gun against the back of the cage and then fired.

A huge plume of icy cold air wafted into the cage, shooting out of the vents. There was a loud bang and an intense snarl, the cage practically jumping off its hinges. Hendrik took his stunner and let it off, jabbing it inside. His apprentices copied him on either side, electricity crackling and sparking against the icy smoke.

Ophilia's hand tightened on the stunner, but she couldn't bring herself to turn it on. She backed away. Within the strobes of light from the stunners, she saw the face of a demon, enraged and bent to kill.

She couldn't move, the breath caught in her lungs, blood draining from her face. She'd seen that face before.

A vrisha.

Ophilia heard her name being shouted like a curse.

"Get back over and stun him, you idiot girl," Hendrik barked as he jammed his stunner through yet again.

The cage moved a half foot to one side, knocking the men on top over. One of them caught the side of a vent, clinging to it, then screamed out in pain before falling to the ground.

"For fuck's sake, Hendrik," Tallah called from behind. "Just drug him already."

Cursing, Hendrik threw down his stunner and took out a unique tranquilizer she'd seen him keep on his left hip. He pointed it inside and fired. He reloaded and went again.

The cage shook a little less until eventually, it moved no more. They waited for the smoke to dissipate before Hendrik peered inside.

"Move him quick. He'll be up before we know it," he said. They unlatched the door, and a group of soldiers rushed in to drag the vrisha the rest of the way into the unit.

"You should have just done it before, damn it," Tallah hissed, her cat-eyes glaring at him as she shoved her gun into another man's arms.

Hendrik shook his head as he wiped the sweat from his face with his shirt. "He was already drugged up. Didn't want to risk the possibility of killing him." He cursed under his breath. "One thing about these guys is no one knows what's enough to really put them out and what's lethal. Or how it really affects them. But if he dies, that can be on your hands, not mine."

Tallah spat at him and moved away. Hendrik walked past Ophilia and then stopped. He gripped her shoulder in a near-breaking grip, making her wince in pain.

"Or maybe this should be on you, stupid girl." He shook her, and Ophilia tore his hand away.

"No." She threw the stunner in the sand. "There was no point in it anyway."

"Like hell there wasn't." He pointed a finger at her. "If you would have done your job, maybe—"

"Leave it, Hendrik," Tallah cut him off. She was crouching now beside the man who

had fallen from the top of the cage. Another soldier had the man up in a sitting position. There was blood on the man's shirt, staining his uniform. His eyes were growing red and swollen, the veins in his neck bulging. He gasped like a fish, choking on the air, his lips turning blue.

"What's happening to him?" asked one of the other guardsmen.

Hendrik stepped up, shaking his head in disappointment. "Idiot got stabbed by the vrisha's tail."

"It's poisonous?"

"Yes, just the tip. But it's said they can control it. Looks like he wanted to make sure one of us suffered."

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Ophilia watched as the man choked on his own blood. His body jerked and convulsed until he grew still.

They wrapped the body up and took it away, just as they slid the cage back on the carrier and sent it back to the dock.

Most of the guards left right away, returning to their stations, including the tower that overlooked the training quarters and the orchard. Few still lingered, just to make sure the alien was secured inside the unit and the door double bolted.

Ophilia could see into the unit through a small window in the door, also barred and electrified. She heard a whirring noise from behind, on the wall just below the tower, and knew they were resetting the turrets to be aimed in this direction. Even if the vrisha somehow managed to escape his cell, they would fire automatically a dozen rounds in several seconds.

And that wasn't their only defense. She saw also the same weapon Tallah had used now resting on the wall between two units, small wisps of ice still puffing out from the tip.

Even though it was only early afternoon, she felt drained. Tired. And as she set her eyes on the dark window, she felt sorry too. Her hands tightened into fists as she stared at the door.

Another one I have to watch suffer and die.

And for the vrisha, as frightening as he was, she did feel for him. She remembered

Tajia and how he had fought too in the beginning. She imagined Hendrik would do everything in his power to break this one too. And it made her sick.

"Does he have a name?" she asked aloud as Hendrik came around to assess the cell door.

"They never bothered to ask when they caught him," Hendrik answered with a low chuckle. "Guess we will have to give him one, eh? Or likely Cristan will want to. I'll ask him."

Great. That insufferable prick was bound to make sure it wasn't anything nice or respectful.

"You can go," Hendrik said. "I'll be talking with Rick later about you disobeying my orders, by the way. So, you might want to help him now and get on his good side."

Ophilia bit back a reply that she knew would only get her in more trouble. She decided then she was going to find out this vrisha's real name no matter what it took.

"Welcome to Kingsway," she whispered bitterly toward the door, then turned away.

CHAPTERTWO

Xeda

Caught.

You incredible fool.

The drugs wore off, and slowly, Xeda regained consciousness, blinking once before attempting to lift his head. He knew he was locked in a cell, he could see the sky just

beyond the barred window. There was a low hum coming from the window and door. He knew it was likely shielded in some way to keep him in.

Usually, something like that wouldn't stop him, but as he lifted himself, he became aware that they had chained him too, collaring him and wrapping his tail tightly around his waist so he could feel his own spikes digging into his skin, then chaining it to some kind of metal belt they had secured around him. They had also cuffed his wrists and ankles to a set of chains connected to the back wall. Rage boiled over instantly, and he wrenched at the chains, tugging to each side, rattling against the wall. He tried to roar but found he could only open his jaw so wide. Some kind of metal mouth cover had been fixed in place to keep him from biting. Even more humiliating, he realized they'd covered his hands and feet too in some strange metal that wrapped around each toe and finger, so he couldn't use his talons to rip and tear. He was surprised they hadn't stripped him of what little clothing he had too, but they at least let him keep his kelve pants, giving him some, if little, covering.

They had taken away his power, his ability to fight. He could do no more than move a few feet across each side of the cell, unable to reach the window or door. He had to crane his neck to see anything but sky from the narrow window and could see nothing but a field of sand and a wall from the smaller window on the door.

The cell was warm at least, though an annoying vent above him blew cold air.

He tried to keep himself low on the dusty ground. All he could do then was wait.

Every so often, he heard voices and footsteps outside. Eventually, he knew, his captors would come.

The light faded and eventually, the warmth went with it. A low red light appeared above, giving off little heat. So little it hardly seemed to matter. The night was freezing, forcing him to curl into a corner and nearly go into toper to conserve heat. It

was unbearable.

Wait.

Just wait.

He didn't sleep, but he went into some sort of dreamlike state. He saw his dead queen, black-boned and angry. He saw his brothers. He saw vines slithering across the walls. He hissed at them, not knowing if they were really there. He saw the face of one he hated. A vrisha who had betrayed him. Betrayed them all. But somehow, he couldn't remember his name.

Memories and nightmares broke apart and melded together so perfectly he couldn't tell them apart. He rode through them until he saw light crawl across his window.

The dreams disappeared and with them came the sounds of men.

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"Stay by the door," came a muffled voice. There was a sharp click, then metal sliding on metal as the door rose, blinding him with light.

A wide silhouette hugged the door. Like an animal backed into a corner, Xeda growled low, trying to meld into the wall behind him. The burly human came toward him, a rod in his hand humming low, flickering with white light.

In his other hand, he had a small black box. His fingers pressed on the box, and Xeda felt the chains at his arms and legs tightening. He flailed, but it was no use. They pulled his arms up above his head and backed him against the wall until he couldn't move.

The man stopped a few feet away, his scent nauseating. His gaze went down Xeda's body, then back up until their eyes met.

"Ugly bastard, aren't you? You vrisha could make a corpse cry." He laughed and then whistled, gesturing to someone by the door. "Get your ass in here, Ivan. He's secure."

A gangly human, thinner and smaller in stature, inched their way past the door. Xeda smelled the fear in him in an instant. His eyes were wide and his hand, also holding a rod, shook slightly.

The burly human made a clicking sound and dragged the other closer. "If you don't stop being a little coward, then you can forget apprenticing with me. I don't care who the fuck your dad is."

The young male whimpered. "You're sure it can't do anything?"

"Does it look like he can move, idiot? Just keep the stunner aimed at him. Use it when I say."

The simpering human raised his rod at Xeda, watching him with all the caution of prey before a predator. Xeda hated to be confined by them. It was wrong. Unnatural. They should be caught in his talons, ripped apart by his teeth. He could crush them all if he was free.

"Over here, sweetheart." The man gestured to him. "Eyes on me." Xeda looked over at him. "That's it, you understand, don't you?"

He did. Those men who had studied him on the ship had also fixed a translator to him. His old one had been broken and discarded. It allowed him to understand their archaic language.

The man showed his teeth. A grin, Xeda had learned, after being around other humans. "Yeah, you understand me. Good, those doctors did it right. So." He jammed his rod into Xeda's side, zapping him. The shock burned, an awful itch he couldn't scratch. His muscles spasmed, cramping. He hardly moved or made a sound, but the man looked satisfied. "This is how it is. This can go easy, or it can go hard. I expect you'll make this hard. In fact, I'm counting on it. Either way, you'll do as I say in the end. Then when you're done being a wild beast, you'll be the deadliest fighter in Kingsway."

Xeda stilled. That name. So, it was this place. And this man meant to make him fight. That at least he could do. But it wouldn't be on this putrid human's terms.

The man shocked him again. "I'll give you some time to come to terms with that." He moved aside, forcing the younger male to fall back. Another entered. He smelled like how the others had on the ship. He wasn't human this time but some species that reminded Xeda of the aquatic creatures of his home. He remembered learning about

them and encountering them on his missions. A gyda they were called.

The gyda's gills moved as he stepped closer, his watery eyes examining Xeda. His touch was cool and damp as he pressed a hand against Xeda's skin. "Seems to be in good condition." He spoke softly. "The crew healed some of the more distressing wounds."

"What about those markings?" The man pointed to Xeda's arms where he was still marked as a Blood Guard—warrior to Queen Theda.

"They've faded quite a bit." The gyda examined them closely. "His skin must not stay permanently inked like ours. Must be a pain to keep them fresh. The healing they did on the ship probably faded them quicker than usual too. They'll probably fade even more over time."

His fingers grazed over Xeda's ribs. "He was stabbed here. Could have been fatal but seems he was lucky. It's only scarred now. He has other abrasions around his upper arms and throat, as if something tried to strangle him. Interesting." His hand gripped the mouth covering, making Xeda bend his head, then he took out a small tool with a light and shined it in Xeda's face. "Curious eyes. One deep red, one orange. A rare trait."

"Doesn't matter. Can he fight?"

The gyda released him. "I'd say he can, yes. Though he is looking rather malnourished and could gain some weight. I'd do some serious strength training as well if you want him to be anywhere close to competing with the other champions. Especially Tazyn."

"Fine, Doc, whatever you say."

The gyda looked him over one last time, then left.

"You and your brother will do the feeding tonight," the burly man said to the one called Ivan. "I got someplace I gotta be." He walked out of the cell with the runt of a human following behind. Only when he slid the door shut and locked it did the chains loosen, allowing Xeda to move.

The day waned away. He watched insects buzz around his cell and listened to the sounds of men outside. He heard the crack of something going off in the distance. A sporadic noise. He heard the holler of some other creature not too far away.

When the light began to fade, footsteps drew closer, the scent of fear with them.

"He wants you to do it," said one annoying voice.

"Screw you, Dane. He wants us both," said another, quivering.

"I'm not going near that thing. Not after what it did to that guard."

"You're a fucking baby."

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There were the sounds of a scuffle and one yelping in pain.

"Let's just forget it. Tell Hendrik we fed him. He won't check, he'll be too drunk."

"Those on the tower—"

"They don't give a shit either. As long as that thing doesn't get out. I'll give them extra drops and tell them it gets fed by one of us at some point if it makes you feel better."

There was a pause. "Fine. But if Hendrik finds out, it's your ass, not mine."

The footsteps grew distant. Another day and no food. Xeda wondered when was the last meal he'd had. Vrisha could go many cycles without it if they had to. But he had a feeling his time was running thin. He could feel the pangs of hunger beginning to settle in his stomach, and his throat was sore with the need for liquid. He hadn't had nourishment since his time on that other planet. Where his queen had died.

How long ago had that been? A few cycles? Hundreds?

It didn't matter now.

Failure.

Pathetic fool.

Night approached. He watched the last bit of light slink away before he was once more drowned in darkness. Then the little red heat light above flickered on. When the

cold seeped in, he wanted to rip that light out from the top and hug it to him.

He didn't sleep. Again, the waking dreams came.

This time, he tried to keep them at bay. He tried instead to think about how he might escape. How he might break that burly human's neck.

Over and over, he imagined ways he would destroy those around him. Eventually, they would let their guard down. He loathed the idea of submitting to them just to have that happen quicker. But he knew they weren't completely stupid either. To have him fight meant eventually they would have to let him out. Perhaps then...

He had also heard the distant roar of ships several times in the day. Meaning ships came and went regularly. If he could get aboard one...

Patience. All you need is patience.

He'd kill anyone in his way. That was for certain.

Over and over, he tried to make a plan.

Before he realized it, the light was creeping back in again. And the heat with it. There was also a curious scent in the air. Dark and rich. He looked over to the window and only saw little insects floating by.

He didn't hear the usual voices of men. Instead, he caught the sound of soft footfalls passing by, then a strange shifting and scraping noise outside his window. He stared, watching and waiting, until he saw a head pop over and look down at him.

"Hey, there," said a soft, almost silky voice.

He blinked, and the first thing he noticed was their eyes. One deep blue, the other metallic grey. It was a human.

His first instinct was to snarl. He bared his teeth, even if they couldn't see them, and let out a low hiss.

The human only looked at him. They didn't back away or even look entirely frightened which baffled him. Though there was a hint of fear-scent in the air, it didn't choke his senses like the others' had. Still, this human was cautious and aware. He growled and saw them grow more tense, but they didn't move away.

"Hold on," they said, as if he could stop himself from waiting. Their head disappeared, then returned a moment later. This time, they gripped something in their hand. It looked almost like a rod, twin claws at its end clenching something dark.

He jerked toward them and snarled again, this time louder. Expecting them to fall back and stay away. They flinched but that was all. This one understood he couldn't get to them.

"Easy, easy," they said. They carefully slipped the rod between the bars. There was a loud hiss and pop before the rod broke past the shield and was within his reach. He swiped at it, knocking the dark mound off its end. The human cursed and brought the rod out, twin claws now empty.

It was then he realized it was not like the kind that burly human had used. It was just a long metal stick. He looked down at the ground and saw what had been attached to it. He picked up what had clearly once been the carcass of an animal but had been slowly cooked. The odor caught in his nostrils, making them flare. He stared at the meat in his hand, then flicked his gaze back to the human.

They watched him and smiled. "You can eat it. It's safe." They brushed back a lock of

deep black hair.

He stared back at them. Back at her. Studying her, he could see the traits of a female. And if not that, he could tell by the scent alone which was different compared to the males. He'd learned how to differentiate them.

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She seemed to grow uneasy by his staring because she put up her hand and again disappeared. He heard more shifting around before she came back again with that long metal stick, the claws holding something else. What looked like a large red fruit.

"I'll get water when I can, but for now, the fruit will work." She waited for him to take it. When he didn't, she dropped it carefully on the ground. He watched it roll at his feet, then looked back up at her. She slipped the metal stick back out between the bars.

Voices grew in the distance. The woman peered around before turning back to him. "What's your name?"

He watched her, not saying a word. She waited, and when he didn't answer, she only bobbed her head.

She was gone before others approached. They walked past but didn't enter. When it was silent once more, he looked over at the window, then down at the food. He sniffed at it. It smelled safe.

Still, he nearly crushed the meat in his hands.

How the hell was he supposed to eat it with his mouth covered?

He worked his jaw and realized the cover not only had holes but also opened slightly, just like a trap, just enough that he could work in several pieces of meat if he tore the pieces small enough. He took his time, savoring each piece. The meat was good, but it left his mouth dry. He went for the fruit and squeezed part of it open, then let the

juice run between the wide slits, licking the droplets away. The fruit was sour, but he didn't mind. It was better than nothing.

When he'd eaten what he could, he threw the remains in a corner. He was glad to have had something at least, but he refused to be grateful that one of them had pitied him enough to help him. He didn't want their pity, and he didn't care to see their gesture as aiding him either. They were all the enemy in his mind. They all deserved his wrath. One who felt sorry, even if just one, meant nothing. It couldn't.

Carefully, he hunkered down against one corner, this time facing toward the window. He stared at it, stared up at the sky. In the distance, he could see a ship growing distant, rising toward the dark of space against the purple-blue sky. There he waited.

CHAPTER THREE

Ophilia

She didn't get a chance to talk to the vrisha again after she had snuck him food. She thought she had been lucky, but a guard on the tower had seen her. She had to bribe him with quite a bit of what little savings she had to get him to stay quiet. She knew there weren't many other ways to sneak the vrisha food with him being constantly watched. She would run out of credits very quickly if she had to bribe the guard each time.

"You could always pay me a different way," the guard who'd caught her by the cell had said, smirking at her while rubbing his crotch. "If you don't have the money."

She had declined.

She had little to trade in gaining any measure of control in the situation. And Hendrik made sure to make it difficult. She knew his apprentices weren't going to care for the

vrisha. Ivan was a skittish, arrogant kid whose father, a military man, wanted him to work and put him under Hendrik to toughen him. It didn't work.

The other, Dane, was lazy and careless. As soon as Hendrik's back was turned, he was popping bluum like he was medicated for it, and when Hendrik left him on his own, he was seen hanging with the guards by the south gate or creeping around the gardens trying to get with one of the housekeepers. It was a wonder any of the fighters were checked on even once a day. Some days not at all if Hendrik had a bad night. On other days when he could get himself to wake up, he was still swaying as he walked, still consumed by his drink, his eyes bloodshot, mumbling to himself. Those days were especially bad because he usually picked one fighter to do "special" training with which usually meant beating or running them until they collapsed to the ground and then beating them after.

But the last couple of days, Hendrik had somehow managed to pull himself together. Ophilia suspected that was because of the vrisha. And the pressure the family put on Hendrik to get the vrisha ready for the games.

As light broke from the horizon, Ophilia slipped from her room and exited the house out the side, walking down her usual route toward the animal pens which would force her to pass by the training yard. She might not be able to feed the vrisha again, but she could check on him as she walked by.

He'd been silent the last couple of times she had passed by. It was unnerving how, as she had snuck a peek into the dark of his cell, their eyes would immediately meet as if he already knew she was coming. One blood red, the other a fiery orange.

He would stare back at her and sometimes growl, but most times, he didn't say a word. She wanted to ask again for his name, but she never had a chance. The guards on the tower would yell down at her to keep moving.

This time, she was determined to say something to him. Even if he didn't respond.

She walked through the gardens, watching out for cats, then down to the orchards, greeting the workers already beginning their shift. When she got to the gate to the training grounds, however, she slowed to a stop just outside the yard.

There was an awful lot of commotion that could be heard for so early in the morning. From the farthest side of the block, she could see at least a dozen men surrounding the vrisha's unit. Over the shouts of men, she heard the vrisha's rage, bestial and violent. Her heart sank as she took one step then another toward the unit until she found herself crossing the training yard at a near jog.

The men pointed their guns toward the inside, and she heard the sounds of chains banging against the walls, of the crackle of the stunners going off again and again. She wanted to say something, to yell at them to stop, but a young house guard got in her way.

"Get moving," he snapped, blocking her view of the inside. She didn't move but didn't try to push her way through either.

She knew what they were attempting to do. They did it to all the fighters. She had just hoped they would have spared the vrisha if only because they were too afraid to get that close. But Hendrik was determined to keep to tradition. Every fighter was branded with the house symbol so in the games everyone knew who they belonged to. It was a painful, awful thing, and she could tell by the way the men struggled that the vrisha was putting up a fight.

"Hey." The guard got in her face, forcing her to look at him. "Did you hear what the fuck I just said?" He pushed her back, making her stumble.

"Yeah, I heard loud and clear." She didn't say asshole out loud, but it was there in her

tone, and the guard's face twisted.

"I'm not playing, I'm not afraid to clock a woman in the face, so if you don't back up and leave, you'll regret it."

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Her hands tightened into fists. "I'm not afraid to clock a man in the face. Or should I say, boy?"

The guard came at her when another of his team shouted back at him. "Leave her, James. Stop fooling around."

James fixed her with a murderous glare, his finger pointing at her face. "Watch yourself, bitch." He turned from her, and she wanted to fight him. She wanted to fight them all for what they were doing.

A hand wrapped around her arm before she could decide to take a step toward them. She looked around and saw Janna, tight-lipped and rigid, giving her an annoyed look. "I need your assistance with the pens, so don't get into some worthless fight. I'm not getting left having to do your work while you sit in the glasshouse."

Ophilia opened her mouth to argue, then closed it firmly. Janna tugged at her arm, then let go, heading for the pens. Ophilia frowned. She looked back at the unit and at the men and felt herself shaking. She let out a slow breath, knowing she couldn't take them all even if she wanted to.

She forced herself to walk, to leave the training grounds behind and follow Janna to the pens. Rick was still working on caring for the two new arrivals so was nowhere to be seen. She got her supplies and started for the first pen, still listening to the distant shouts of men and the throat-tearing roars of rage from the vrisha.

* * *

She was scrubbing down Neptune's cage when Rick appeared, giving her his award-winning sneer.

"You got into a fight today with one of the guards?" he asked as she noticed him.

She put down her cleaning brush to face him straight. "No, I didn't."

"This after you disobeyed Hendrik's orders. You want to go to the glasshouse?"

Ophilia sighed. "No, but—"

"No more of this shit, Ophilia. You do your work and you do as told. If it had been my way, you'd have been stuck in the kitchens. Or cleaning the guardhouses. And I wouldn't be dealing with your bullshit. Thankfully, I won't have to for a while even if I'll be stuck doing the pens with Janna."

Her brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"You owe Hendrik a favor for not assisting him like asked the other day..."

Anger burned up her insides. "He wanted me to punish the vrisha for nothing! It was just mindless—"

Rick fixed her with a nasty stare, cutting her off with a gesture of his hand. "Don't." He pointed a finger. "I don't care. You're going to go see Hendrik after you finish here. He'll tell you what he wants."

Her blood was boiling as Rick disappeared. She scrubbed Neptune's pen until her hands bled, then put away her supplies before begrudgingly heading back for the training grounds.

She found Hendrik there by the yard, watching as two grex fighters wrestled and fought in the sand. A few soldiers lumbered around watching, making sure the pair of fighters didn't think to turn on their oppressors instead. Hendrik shouted at one—Zeckta if she remembered his name right—who was pinned by his opponent, his body flailing.

“Come on, you damn reptile, get him off you! Bite him, bite him! That's it!”

Sand flew up as Zeckta clamped his jaw around the other and rolled. Blood was already staining the ground.

The grex fighters had been broken for several months now, a collar around each of them. If they tried to run, the collar was programmed to suffocate them. If the soldiers didn't shoot them first. They were decent in a fight but never won in the bigger games. They were usually stuck in smaller, more private fights, for smaller parties to enjoy and bet on.

Just another thing she hated about this place.

Zeckta was able to pin his opponent and knock him out, garnering a cheer from Hendrik. The soldiers moved the unconscious grex back to his cell while Zeckta was given a treat—some fresh jerky and water—before being sent back to his. Eventually, Hendrik noticed her and waved her over. Ophilia reluctantly approached him.

"One of my trainees is sick. Didn't take too well to somethin' he ate. Or so he claims," Hendrik said as his eyes leered over her. "I need someone to clean up here." He smiled at her, as if he knew something she didn't. He took out a cigarette and sucked on it, blowing smoke toward her. "You wouldn't stun that vrisha when I asked, so maybe you'll enjoy having to clean him up instead." He tilted his head to the storerooms. "Should have everything you need in there."

Her eyes drifted over to the cell. "Alone?"

"Dane will be there too. And the guards will be watching." He leaned forward. "You can handle that, can't you?"

She looked back at him, clenching her jaw. "Yeah, I can." "You bastard."

He watched her for a long moment, then nodded his head. "Good, good." He took out a black remote from his pocket and handed it to her. "That's to keep the fighters back while you clean up their units. Don't want to get your pretty little head eaten." He chuckled. "Dane has one too." He showed her which buttons to use to immobilize the fighters when needed. "Now get on it. I want things spotless before the sun is down."

He lumbered away. Ophilia clenched the remote in her hand. She looked over at the vrisha's cell, suddenly growing tense.

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Without a word, she slipped over to the storage room. There, Dane was already collecting his supplies, slamming things down and whispering to himself. Clearly, he wasn't going to be able to sneak away with his guard buddies this time.

He glanced over at her by the door and scoffed. He picked up his supplies and nearly shouldered her as he passed. No small talk then, and that was just fine with her.

She started for the unit next to the one Dane entered. It was the grex who had lost his fight to Zeckta. He was still on the ground, but she could see him breathing. He looked to be sleeping. Quickly, she cleaned around him, mopping up the shit and piss that had accumulated in one corner, then scrubbing at the venomous drool on the walls. The smell was rancid, and she could tell the cell hadn't been cleaned in a day or two. As she cleaned the last bit of stained wall, she took out a few pieces of jerky and laid them out close enough for the grex to get to. She'd noticed the sacks of dried meat in a food cabinet to one side of the storage room and took what she could stuff in her pockets. She wasn't sure if she was supposed to feed them or not, but she made sure not to be seen just in case.

She moved on to the next unit as Dane moved to another. This time, a corax bared its teeth at her, and she was forced to tightened the chains to move him back.

"Sorry, I wish I didn't have to, but at least your cell will be nice and clean," she said, smiling.

The corax snapped his teeth in response.

When she'd gone through every other cell, she finally came to the last.

Dane came out from the unit beside the vrisha's, his bucket with supplies in hand. Instead of coming to meet her, he turned for the storage room.

"Hey, we have the last one here," she called out to him.

He turned to her, walking backward. "He's all yours."

"I can't do this one by myself. Someone will need to—"

"I'm not going in there. Good luck." And that was that. He walked into the storage room and slammed the door shut.

She stared at the door, heat burning up her neck. "Fine, didn't want your help, anyway," she murmured. Her heart raced as she stood by the door. She suddenly felt a sinking feeling, something like dread but a little more subtle. She pressed on the keypad by the door to unlock it, then let it slowly rise.

She nearly dropped her bucket in the sand. She stood there for a long moment just staring. She felt sick. Her hands clenched again into fists, and she felt her throat tighten.

She finally entered the cell, trying not to step in the thin puddles of blood. It smelled heavily of burnt coffee and metal, stinging her nose and making her eyes water.

She stopped in the middle of the room and carefully put the remote in her pocket. She wouldn't be needing it.

The vrisha was still as he hung by the chains tightened up to the ceiling, his arms above him, his body swinging slightly. She didn't know how they managed to do it, but they had slashed away several portions of scales along his legs and the sides of his chest, showing dark purple skin underneath. His skin had been shredded by a

blade strong enough to do so. He had fought hard not to be branded by them, enduring pain she couldn't even imagine. And still, she saw it had done nothing for him in the end, for the mark of Salimar could be seen burned into the side of his ribs.

She tried not to stare. Quickly, she took to mopping up the blood, focusing solely on the ground and nothing else. She wiped the floor clean, rinsed, then repeated until there wasn't a speck of blood left.

Until she noticed more dripping off him and pooling at his feet. She gripped the mop so hard she heard the wood crack. That evil bastard.

She dared to look at the vrisha now, studying his wounds. Most seemed to have already stopped bleeding. Only one in particular, on his lower backside, still had a fresh flow that trickled down his leg.

She inched closer to get a better look and saw why it hadn't stopped bleeding. There was a piece of metal sticking out of the skin where a blade had broken.

She cursed loudly and then jumped when the chains clinked together above. She looked up, but the vrisha remained still, swinging softly, his eyes glazed over with some kind of inner white lid.

She chewed her lip. Her heart hammered in her chest. He couldn't hurt her, especially not in the state he was in. And to hell with Hendrik anyway.

She dropped her mop and marched back to the storage room. Dane was already gone as she went searching for a medical kit. She found one tucked away. With it, she grabbed bathing soap, a cleaning brush, and a dry cloth, then filled a bucket of water before heading back to the unit.

Stopping close to his side, she put down her bucket and put on a pair of latex gloves

from the medical kit now at her feet. Trying to work past her uncertainty, she didn't let herself think as she reached up and placed a hand on his ribs.

The vrisha jerked so quickly she yelped in surprise. Heart now in her throat, she reminded herself again he couldn't hurt her, and she placed her hand on him again and this time ignored when he jerked harder and even hissed low.

Even as hurt as he was, he tried to fight. He was a tough one at least.

"Sorry, but I have to get this out," she said as she cupped the side of the wound with one hand and gently gripped the broken blade with the other.

The vrisha growled and began to move, making it harder for her to keep her grip on the blade. He writhed against her touch, and she almost released him, worried she might make it worse. But if she didn't take it out now, she might never get a hold on it if he didn't remain still. Quickly, she got a better grip on the blade and then pulled.

The vrisha kicked out his leg, knocking her back. She recovered quickly, rummaging through the medikit until she found a sealant pen. Avoiding another kick, she turned the pen on and tried her best to seal the wound.

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"Just a little more," she said, more to herself than to him. She made a mess of it, but she thought she closed most of the wound before he kicked her back again. This time, he knocked the wind out of her, and she let herself sit for a minute to recover, eyeing the rest of him. His vibrant red scales were marred in so many ways. His horns even looked a little chipped at the tops.

She rose and noticed the chains at his feet. The only reason she hadn't been crushed against the wall by a more powerful kick was because the chains only let him move his legs so far. Watching him hang made her stomach twist, so she backed away and took out the little remote Hendrik had given her and fixed the chains. She let him drop to his feet but shortened the length of the chains so that he was forced closer to the back wall, making it more difficult to kick her while keeping his arms still above his head.

"Sorry I have to do this, but if I don't clean the wounds, they might get infected." She picked up the cleaning brush she had let soak in the bucket of water, then topped it with soap. She took a deep breath, uncertain how he might react. She pushed through her fear and cautiously made her way around him, then began to carefully trail the brush across his skin.

The vrisha jerked like she expected and gave her another deep growl, but surprisingly, he didn't fight her as she gently lathered his side while trying to wash away the blood. Her tension eased a little as he grew still and quiet, and she told herself he couldn't do anything even if he wanted to.

Her eyes drifted down to the brand on his ribs. "It's sick what they did. What they do," she said softly. "I'm sorry this happened to you. No one deserves this." He didn't

make a sound, and she didn't expect him to. She dunked her brush in the water and continued to wash his side, moving toward his front. "I wish I could tell you everything will be okay. That you might make it out. But you're more likely to get struck by lightning than to make it out of Kingsway."

The vrisha stirred a little. Her gaze drifted upward, and she caught his eyes. She froze as he stared down at her, those eyes entrapping her. Was he really listening?

"That's right," she said after a pause. "That's the city you're in now. In Salimar's house just on the city's edge. It doesn't matter if I tell you that. The waste is beyond the property walls and stretches for thousands of miles. And the city is fortified. But, hey, I heard vrisha are smart. Maybe you can figure something out. Hell, maybe you'd let me come with you." She smiled and laughed when she saw his eyes narrow as if to say, "Yeah, right."

"It's a nice thought at least." She stared back down, concentrating on her cleaning efforts. She didn't know why, but she felt the need to talk to him. She hadn't really spoken to anyone in so long and had them listen. Even if he might not like it so much, she wanted him to understand he wasn't alone.

"I hate this place too, and I was born here," she started. "The capital of K2, and home of the worst groups of people to ever crawl out of the governing and alliance systems." She laughed bitterly. "To some, it's a paradise, a new empire where the wealthiest and shadiest families rule. House Salimar is only one of many. And so those who are not them are treated as lesser." Ophilia frowned, her gut turning. "The staff are given some freedoms. Cared for to some extent by the house which they serve. It's better for most to have that than being out in the wastes, the under-terraformed parts of K2. Or getting killed."

She let that sink in for him, letting silence take over for a moment, as she moved along his chest. The tension in her body returned, and a little heat rose up her neck.

He was built differently than any human or otherkin she had encountered, but it was easy to see just how powerful he was, how vicious and lethal he could be if he were free. More dangerous than any creature she'd ever come close to. Her heart thumped a little faster at the thought as her hand traced down his stomach.

"Unfortunately for you, fighters here are nothing more than slaves. If they obey and win their games, they are treated well. But if they are weak or combative, they are treated worse than the animals I care for."

He hissed low in response, making her glance up at him in surprise. "I am in no way calling you weak. In fact, you're likely the strongest potential fighter House Salimar has ever had. You could be a champion." She shook her head. "But you are combative, and that will only make things worse for you. I know I can't convince you to stop fighting. Honestly, I don't want you to either. I'm just letting you know. Hendrik will never stop until he breaks you. I wish I could say to you 'don't let him, not for a second' but...it will be much worse than this. If you give in, at least you can fight and have a better life. Some choose to, some don't. It's your decision."

He seemed to watch her, but she couldn't tell if he really took her words to heart or not. She decided to let him think about it for himself. There was nothing more she could do. Quickly and without another thought, she washed off the rest of the blood until she felt he was clean enough. She rinsed him off with the excess water from the bucket, then dried him, relieved he didn't try to move or fight her, maybe only because he knew there was no point. As she dumped the brush and cloth in the bucket and proceeded to take her things, she remembered the food she had stuffed in her pockets.

She took out a piece of jerky and set it on the ground where he could get it, then a piece of fruit she'd snagged from the orchard.

"Well, guess that's all." She tried to smile at him, but she felt foolish as he stared. She

took the bucket and medikit and turned for the door.

"Sithas nis sireta nicta."

Ophilia halted by the door and turned in surprise. Did he just...speak?

She waited, and he growled in annoyance. He made a series of hisses and growls different than before.

"I don't know what you're saying," she said, annoyed too she couldn't communicate. He was definitely trying to say something to her.

Behind her came the shouts of men, then the call of the bell that signaled work was done and the sun was setting. It would get cold soon, and they would start closing off the gates. She didn't want to be left out in the night.

"I have to go." She slowly turned her body while still eyeing him. "I'll try to be back. Maybe..." She shook her head. She had an idea, but she didn't want to make any promises to him.

She walked out of the unit, then closed the door and locked it. Using the remote, she let his chains loosen from the wall. His arms came down, but he didn't move, his dark gaze still only on her. "Fight one way or the other. Survive. That's all you can do here," she said. She wished she could comfort him but knew he would lash out if she tried. So, she left him with just those words and nothing more.

CHAPTERFOUR

Ophilia

Hendrik didn't ask for her help much after that day. She wasn't sure if she was

disappointed or grateful. Every morning, she made her way down to the pens, crossing by the training yard. She knew the guards watched, so she stopped caring altogether. She'd pass by the vrisha's cell and look in to check on him. Hendrik hadn't allowed her to check his wounds again, but he did bring the house doctor to examine him. Though the gyda had little experience with vrisha, it was better than nothing. Still, the vrisha never looked as good as she would have liked if she were in Hendrik's place, but whether she voiced her concerns or not, Hendrik wouldn't bother. As long as the vrisha could walk, that was good by him.

Most days, she slowed to peer in the cell, just to see him. Each time, he would be staring back at her, his body crouched toward the door as if waiting. Not for her, she was sure, but for someone or something. Likely waiting for Hendrik to come and beat him again. It made her heart sink to think about it. Some days, if she was lucky to sneak food from the dining hall, she would carefully throw some through the bars of the door window, the edges getting burned from the shield. He didn't take it right away, he only watched her, every once in a while hissing low. One day, he said something again, she was sure, but still, she couldn't understand.

There was only one way she was going to be able to reply back to him and that was with a translator. But procuring one was going to be difficult. Or cost her.

Still, the need to speak to him felt apparent and was always on her mind. He was on her mind most of the time now. It wasn't just the usual pity she felt. Like she had for Tajia. Maybe it was just curiosity too. A sort of lingering fascination. While she had been taking a break in one of the gardens, eating a small meat sandwich and boiled egg as she sat by one of the ponds, she realized her fascination had been birthed by the fear she'd felt the first time she saw him. Because she hadn't felt that sort of fear toward another being ever, and so now she wanted to understand.

She didn't expect to be his friend. She'd heard about some of the vrisha who didn't take to the alliance. He had those same markings of the kind that had fought against

it. Even if he didn't have them, no otherkin in his position was inclined to make friends. A part of her knew she shouldn't bother getting close. It would only lead to something bad, she'd learned that years ago. But she told herself she only wanted to help and didn't expect anything in return. Only that he wouldn't be alone.

Sadly, getting close would probably only make things worse. That reminder came on those days Hendrik cared to visit him and attempt to begin his "training." Some days, she was able to drown out the sounds, other times not so much.

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The morning after a particularly bad night, she checked on him again and saw the new patches of scales ripped from his flesh. This time, she stopped and found it hard to move.

She wanted to say something, anything. But couldn't find the words. Only rage heated in her blood at the sight. Hendrik had placed hooks in his back, tightened enough by a set of chains that if the vrisha were to try to sit or crouch, the flesh would be ripped off. The vrisha didn't shake but stood his ground, his eyes on her, his gaze unreadable. She didn't want to think how long he had been kept that way.

That day, she pushed through her work harder than usual, going without a break so that she could be done earlier. As sweat rolled down her back, she rushed to the west wing of the house, to the dinner hall attached to the end.

The first groups were already taking dinner, mostly house staff who worked the earlier hours such as cleaners and gardeners. Ophilia looked around and found Kendra sitting with a group in one corner by the window, looking out to a barren garden encased by a grey stone wall.

"Ophilia, what are you doing here?" Kendra asked in greeting. "Rick didn't kick you out of the pens, did he?"

Ophilia fixed a smile. "No. I actually wanted to ask you about something."

The others stared at her with tight curiosity. They ate quietly, a few glancing at Kendra.

Kendra arched a brow. "Yeah, about what?"

"You know any of the shipment staff?"

She shifted in her seat, taking a bite of fruit before answering. "I might know one or two. Why? What do you need?"

* * *

Ophilia sat on her narrow bed, a box in her lap. Her shades were drawn. Even though it was night, she didn't trust that someone couldn't see from one of the yards. The box was a cool metal in her hands that she turned one way, then another. She wondered even now if she'd made the right decision, but it was too late to take it back now. Still, excitement drummed in her bones. Carefully, she drew the lid off the box and in the glow of the yellow lamp at her desk, she peered down.

The device—or pair of devices rather—were small. Smaller than she'd expected. Two small pieces that fit in and around each ear. The man who traded them with her had used his work computer to download the specific language she needed.

It had cost her as she expected it would. She didn't have enough in her savings, so she had to owe him the little pay she was given. One week's worth plus a pair of earrings her mother had given her. She eyed the picture of them together on her desk with a necklace dangling on the corner of the frame. A necklace that had gone with the earrings. A little set of blue diamonds on a golden chain. Thankfully, she hadn't mentioned the necklace to him, and he hadn't asked for more.

She took out the translator pieces and carefully hooked them around her ears. She went to the mirror by the door and fixed them so that they rested in her earlobe. If she wore her hair right, no one would notice unless they looked closely.

A knock at the door made her jump. Quickly, she took the translator out of her ears and placed it back in the box, then slid the box under her bed. Another impatient knock came, and she hurried to open the door.

It was the head of staff, Warren, and an armed guard.

Warren smiled, showing off his perfect teeth. His cologne stung Ophilia's nose. "Ophilia. Hope we didn't catch you at a bad time?"

Ophilia shook her head. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing with me, thankfully, but I'm afraid I need to escort you to the study."

Ophilia tensed. Sal wanted to see her. But why?

Without a word, she shut the door behind her and followed. Quietly now, since it was late, they made their way down the bare passage of the staff quarters, down to the main floor of the house. Past the doors at the end was a security clearance. They checked Ophilia's ID before letting her through. Beyond that was where the family lived. Where Sal's sons partied, where his wife gossiped with her friends, and where Sal worked.

The main floor was an octagonal space, with a skylight at the very top and marbled floors under her feet. A three-ton crystal chandelier hung just above the stairs leading to the second floor. She walked with them up those steps and down a hall, stopping at a door on the left.

Warren opened the door, then leaned toward her. "I'll be right here when he's done," he whispered.

When Sal was done with her, he meant. Trying not to clench her hands into fists,

Ophilia stepped into the study.

It was more like a large living room than a study, though several walls were filled with books. Twin windows opposite looked out over the grounds, a large desk between them. In the center was a set of couches and chairs, and from the far right wall, a long curved monitor over the fireplace showed scenes from the city.

Sal had his back to her where he lounged on one of the couches. Ophilia stood at the doorway for only a second before slowly making her way around to him.

He was an old man by anyone's standards, with slicked-back gray hair, age marks beginning to show on his temples, and his gray beard trimmed perfectly by his personal barber. But he wore a slick black suit, clean-cut to hide the aging body underneath. His black eyes caught hers, and he gestured for her to sit opposite him.

"Ophilia, my dear Ophilia," he sang as he poured himself a glass of liquor. On the table between them was a bowl of bluum drops, piled like candy. Sal popped one in his mouth before washing it down with his drink. He set his glass down, then reclined back. "How are my animals? No one's sick, or injured, I hope?"

Ophilia shook her head. "No, sir."

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He nodded. "Good. Good." His eyes drifted down her body, then back up. "You still like it there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Because you know I can give you a better position. Something in the house, maybe?"

He'd asked her before. He had even once tried to persuade her to be his wife's waiting woman, but she had refused. Thankfully, his wife hadn't liked the idea either.

"I like where I am, sir."

He shrugged, then sighed. "All right, well, listen, Ophelia, I just want you to be comfortable, you know? Happy. You want to be happy, don't you?"

"I'm...fine, sir."

"No one is truly happy working, let's be serious," he continued. "Not in that heat. Sure, people want to fill their time, but it's all distraction. Or some bullshit sense of duty, you know? Someone gotta do it, right?"

"I guess so."

"Right, sure, you get it." He took another drop and another drink. "But I'm going to be honest. I hate having to see you work out there. Your dad would hate it too. I know your family's got debt. Debt doesn't go away even in death. Your dad got that,

rest his fucking soul. And your mom, well she did too. She understood. Debt has to be paid. But"—he pointed his finger at her—"but there are other ways to pay when the money goes dry, right? Not just working, which you've been doing here how long. Four years?"

"That's right, sir."

"Four years in that heat. Fuck me, don't you want to be done with it?" She didn't know what to say, so he continued. "I'm telling you this because I can get you out of it, Ophilia. No more cleaning shit and piss out of pens and waiting for the mouths you feed to come bite you. You would be living life almost just like this." He gestured around him. "How does that sound?"

She didn't like the sound of it at all, really. Not unless he was about to tell her they had found a way to raise her family from the dead.

And seeing as that sort of technology wasn't found anywhere, even in glorious Kingsway, that only left one other option.

Her throat tightened, her body going rigid. Dread filled her veins.

"Eliam of House Lageth is looking for another wife," he answered, then put up his hand before she could speak. "I think you'd make a good candidate. You come from a prominent if less known house. You are not bad on the eyes, and you've still got that energy, that drive. Why waste your time caring for animals when you could be caring for kids? Raise them to be better than my two mistakes." He laughed. "Listen, you don't have to say anything now, but I put your name out, just for consideration. I didn't think he'd actually be interested, but I was wrong, and you see, I owe him too. Everyone has got debt. It comes full circle. I owe him a favor, and you owe me, right? So, this could be good for both of us."

Ophilia didn't know what to say. But she wanted to slap herself for not thinking he would pull something like this sooner or later. Then she wanted to slap him for actually considering it. After all, she was nothing more than another asset to her father's name. Jones. Another piece to be bought and paid for when Sal had the chance.

Her family had once been powerful too. Not like Salimar but close. Smaller with less influence in the city. But they had a very good piece of land for mining. The planet might not have had the correct levels of oxygen before it had been terraformed, but it was rich in minerals from the pockets of oxygen and hydrogen beneath the ground. Too bad her family hadn't been tough enough to withstand the bullies around them and didn't make enough allies. She was young when the assassinations had happened but not too young that she couldn't remember. Her father, mother, and two brothers all died the same day she was taken by officials of Kingsway. She spent the rest of her childhood under the roof of another house with family ties. House Myre.

But her family had owed Salimar for a trade in weapons that they never got a chance to use. The debt was still there, but all the money had dried up, the rest of the property taken. So, Sal had come collecting. And House Myre, indifferent, whether she had some tie to their family or not, let him.

She'd spent the last four years under his house. Doing the only thing she remotely cared about. She had taken a liking to House Myre's pets as well and their caretaker had let her watch and learn from him. He was the only one ever to respect her for more than her name.

"Don't look so sad, Ophilia," Sal said. "This isn't a sad thing. This is a good thing. You should be in a house getting cared for, not the other way around. And there's no other way you're getting out of this debt. Not unless you plan to work it off in the next ten years. And you don't want that, right?"

She knew being honest would only bite her in the ass. Sal would have his way whether she liked it or not. Still, hating the very idea of his offer, she said, "I'm fine working."

"Listen, we'll get it all figured out, so take some time to get the idea in your head and see it's a great decision. You'll see, I know you will." He waved his hand at the guard by the door. They swung the door open so that she could leave. In the hall, Warren was waiting for her as he promised, a smile still on his face.

"Eliam will be visiting soon. You two can talk then, and you'll see he's a nice guy."

Ophilia rose and made for the door, ready to get out of the room and back to her own so that she could scream. But not before Sal stopped her one more time.

"And Ophilia, watch yourself around the training yard, all right? I heard you've been lurking around our new fighter. You know how Hendrik gets. He doesn't want you messing around. And I don't want to be seeing you in the glasshouse because of some fuck up, right? So, be a good girl and stick to your pens. The animals Hendrik deals with are too dangerous even for you."

CHAPTERFIVE

Xeda

Time passed in its way. He watched the light come and go, watched the shadows fall. He felt nothing. Even when that burly, disgusting human—Hendrik, he learned to be his name—came to visit and try his hand at breaking him, he'd grown numb to the pain. Indifferent almost. Though there was still rage simmering on the surface, begging to be unleashed.

In time, he would let it. For now, he let the disgusting human think he was getting to

him. The branding had been a blow, but he was used to being marked. He told himself it meant nothing. They could shred him apart until he was nothing but bones. Black bones and fiery, hellbent eyes. He imagined himself walking around in such a form, watching the humans piss themselves with fear. It was a nice thought.

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But a fantasy wouldn't get him free. He had to think logically, and as the days went, he let the gears turn in his mind. But the plan to escape slowly turned into one of revenge. He tried to turn away from the idea, but it grew obsessive.

He wanted blood on his tongue. He wanted Hendrik's head.

He didn't have a death wish. Though he wasn't afraid to die, it wasn't what he wanted. But the need for revenge ate at him so badly, he could see nothing else. Not even escape.

It was all he could think about...unless that woman came around. Only she ever broke his thoughts. And only because her insistence on helping him annoyed him. That's all. He only watched her because she confused him. She didn't show the same level of fear for him as the others. Or hate. She seemed inclined to talk with him. Not that it mattered to him or anything. He listened only because her voice didn't grate on him as badly as the others. She at least had something to say that might benefit him. Like telling him about the city and how it was run. Giving him an idea of what he was working with. She didn't stink as bad as the others, and her eyes were easier to look at, he'd give her that. And her hands had been soft when she'd cleaned him up. For whatever reason, he hadn't been as disgusted by her touch. He had no explanation for that one. It didn't matter anyway.

She was still a weak, annoying human.

He found himself waiting for her in the mornings when she came, just so he could imagine the things he could say. But whenever she did, he always seemed to forget the words. When he did remember, she couldn't understand him anyway.

Annoying.

Those little moments she came around were all he had to bring him back to reality. Then he would slip back into himself and fantasize. Hendrik would come later on, and he would drive out Xeda's rage in every lash, every shock, every stab, but inside, he would still be somewhere far away.

And still, he never broke. Not for him.

He could see it was getting to Hendrik really bad, and he liked to see the meatsack squirm. Then Hendrik's little minions would come, but they could never get too close. They stank of fear so much it made Xeda gag.

He was daydreaming over and over about crushing Hendrik's skull in his jaws one night so that he'd hardly noticed the light of morning begin to seep in. Only when he saw the shadow pass by the door did he come to his senses. He blinked slowly and peered by the door to see the woman smiling back at him.

"Hey," she said softly. She looked back behind her, as if making sure no one was paying attention to her before turning back to him.

He watched her, noting she seemed excited about something. He hadn't seen her in a couple of days and found himself stepping closer. He almost hadn't expected her to come back. Not that he cared. He was just curious.

"I can't stay for long but...listen, you can talk to me now. See, look." She turned her head and pointed at her ear. He moved a little closer and saw the little black piece in her lobe. He assumed it was a translator.

She had gone out of her way to be able to understand him. To listen to him.

"I haven't tested it though, so I was kind of hoping you'd help with that. So, what did you want to tell me?"

What did he want to tell her? There were many things he had wanted to say.

"You...can understand me?" he said first.

Her eyes brightened, and she perked up. "Yes!" she gasped. "I got that."

He stepped even closer until the chains behind him could go no more. He narrowed his sights on her, a low hiss building in him. Oh, how sweet even the littlest revenge could be.

"You want to talk to me?" he said in a low, cool voice.

She lifted her shoulder. "You were trying to talk to me, weren't you?"

"Yes," he said softly. "Yes, I was."

He could see her pupils dilating, as if the thought pleased her. Her mouth widened a little more as she looked at him eagerly.

She waited, and he didn't say a word.

There was a shout somewhere behind her.

"What did you say?" she whispered hurriedly.

"You'd like to know?"

"Yes!"

"How...sweet." He stepped back into the dark corner of his cell.

"Hey, wait! What are you—"

He lunged at the door, the chains catching him just before reaching the window, making her flinch back, shock and terror forming on her face.

"I said, I don't need help from a weak little worm like you," he spat. "I'd rather eat your insides and use your bones for jewelry. I'd rather split your skull and use it to drink from. Rip open your throat and gorge on your blood. Stupid. Little. Human!"

He roared the last words, and she cowered back. There were shouts coming from beyond, and she looked panicked.

He expected her to run. Instead, she rushed forward and threw something through the bars at him. The object hit him in the face. Before he could comprehend what it was, she was gone.

He stared at the window, at the field of sand and the wall beyond. He watched the day brighten, watched the insects hover by the window, waiting to feel triumph. And yet feeling none. Instead, he only felt disappointment. And more frustrated than ever.

Well, she certainly wasn't coming back now. He should be happy for it. He had to be. She shouldn't be looking to talk to him anyway. And he didn't want to talk to her. Why would he?

Disappointment still ate at him, and he hated that the tiny bitter revenge he sought hadn't worked.

It's because it wasn't really her you wanted to hurt.

He snorted at the idea. No human deserved his kindness. No matter what.

Eventually, his eyes drifted away from the door and down to the object she had thrown at him. He picked it up and found whatever it was wrapped in some kind of cloth. He unwrapped it and found a cooked piece of tender meat of some kind. It smelled divine.

A new feeling slithered its way into his head. A feeling much like shame. But why should he feel ashamed? He was only trying to survive. Just like she had told him. Fight everyone. Trust no one. Especially not a human.

He squeezed the meat in his hands, letting pieces fall to the ground. He went to throw the rest, then froze. He tore at the meat until there was hardly anything left except for what he had spied underneath.

A slender bone no bigger than his finger with two prongs on each end.

He stared at it, then clenched it in his fist.

Well, maybe he should have been grateful to her after all.

Slowly, he slunk back into the shadows of his cell, anticipation clawing under his skin.

* * *

Hendrik showed up around midday. But to Xeda's annoyance, he didn't come within arm's reach once the door was opened. He stood watching Xeda, stinking of something strong and rotten.

"You really want to piss me off, don't you?" he said, his eyes looking everywhere and nowhere. "We are losing time with your stubborn ass. I didn't want to have it come to this, but I'll give you this last chance. If you don't obey me come tomorrow, I'll saw off each of your horns one by one. It'll put you at a disadvantage, but you've still got your tail. For now. But don't think I won't cut that too. Or maybe I'll take an eye. You only need one of those. Mark me, you bastard, your days are numbered."

Xeda wasn't worried about his threats. He just needed the putrid man to get close enough so he could show him who he really should be afraid of.

Hendrik slunk off after that, then came back sometime later with someone following.

"I was told to stay away," came a feminine voice, sounding irritated.

"Only when no one's around. And only because you'd likely get yourself killed. But I'm here now. I need help with the units." The door screeched open, and Xeda saw Hendrik looking more alert now. The woman was behind him, her blue and gray eyes refusing to look at him. "Those little pricks I'm embarrassed to call apprentices haven't been cleaning this one," Hendrik said. "And I'm told they caught you throwing food in here for him. No more of that, you hear? So, you can clean it up. Looks like he didn't want your sympathy anyway."

Hendrik tightened Xeda's chains, making sure he stayed to the back wall as the woman crept inside with a bucket in hand.

"Make it quick," he snapped before shutting the door. From the window, Xeda saw him step into the yard to talk to a pair of men.

He watched the woman pick up the pieces of now rancid meat on the ground. That feeling like shame itched across his mind again. He shouldn't have wasted the meat.

She didn't say a word or acknowledge his presence. He had to give her credit at least for having the skin to return after he had scared her.

"You should have foreseen this, human," he hissed, unable to stop himself. Annoyed that she wouldn't look at him. "Are you angry? You shouldn't be. I need no pity from you. Nothing. Stay away unless you want to suffer."

She didn't say a word.

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"Do you hear me? I don't want you near me. When I get out, I will come for your hide just for having the nerve to speak to me."

She didn't respond.

He growled. "Don't ignore me!"

When she didn't react, he stretched his leg out and dragged a piece of meat toward him just before her hand reached to pick it up. He clenched it in his hand and held it up for her to see.

The woman straightened. She eyed the meat and then glanced at him. She no longer had that look of eager excitement. Now she just looked indifferent. Or maybe even annoyed.

Xeda bared his teeth. "You don't give me that look. I don't owe you anything. I didn't ask for your help. I—don't turn away!"

"What do you want me to say?" she said in a low voice. "What? Sorry I helped you? That I was trying to be nice?" She looked back at him.

He watched her, his chest rising and falling. "Yes, an apology. Kneeling right there." He pointed down at his feet.

Her mouth opened in disbelief. "As if, asshole." She turned away again, and he hissed in frustration.

"I am not. I just expect a proper apology and that is how it is done."

She whirled around. "Maybe for your people. But not mine. And you have some nerve thinking you are owed an apology. You're one to be full of yourself in such a position. You're not the only one trying to survive here. Get over yourself. You have no power here, got that? None. And I wasn't helping you to gain something over you. I was just doing it because I felt sorry!"

"That's why I'm mad. I don't need you to be sorry!"

She threw up her hands. "Fine. I'm sorry that I felt sorry. There. I am not kneeling. That's the best you're getting."

Before he could respond, she came at him, stopping just far enough away. "And if anything, you owe me an apology. I don't need your shitty, empty threats. Or your dumb insults. You don't think I haven't heard them all? Have some originality, for fuck's sake. Split my skull and drink from it? What are you, a troll?"

He didn't know what that was, but he figured it wasn't something he wanted to be referred to as. "Oh, don't worry. I can think of many creative ways to kill you."

She laughed. Shelaughed.

"Yeah, get in line. Don't forget where you are. Someone here has probably already thought of it. You've got some competition."

He clenched his hands so tightly that the meat in his one hand splattered on the ground.

"I'm sorry, don't like that? Well, too bad," she snapped. "You might be one of the scariest, but you are in no way the toughest person on K2, as hard as that might be to

believe. I tried to warn you. Hendrik will keep to his word, and then he will just throw you in the ring, trained or not. And your opponents know what they are doing. Teeth and claws mean shit."

"You told me to fight in whatever way that means," he snarled. "To survive."

"Yes, but be smart about it!"

He was speechless. He'd never had another talk to him that way. Not an otherkin. The audacity.

"I don't need you to tell me what's smart," he growled. "I know how to survive better than any of your kind could ever hope to."

"Probably. In an offworld scenario, sure. But I know what this place is like, and you don't. I have knowledge you don't. This isn't surviving the wilds of some hellish world. This is different. This is politics and persuasion and manipulation. And cutthroat deals. If you had been smart instead of insulting me and trying to drive me away, you might have been able to manipulate me into giving away information about this place. Hell, you might not have had to try hard if you had been nice."

Xeda stiffened. Was she serious?

Heat burned beneath his skin, now more enraged at himself than her. It was true he was never one for political games even on his own homeworld. He let other more experienced kin deal in that regard. He had made a good scout and spy at best, and a skilled warrior. He liked to settle matters with his teeth and tail, it was true. Act first, talk later. At least from the less shattered memories of his mind, this was what he could recall. Only savagery. Maybe he had once been better than this, but now it was hard to remember.

And maybe it had cost him. Because as much as he hated it, she had a point. He was a fool.

Pathetic failure.

He had let his anger and need for petty revenge weaken him, make him think less clearly.

He hissed low. "You're right. What a wasted opportunity. And interesting that you would be so open about your weakness."

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She laughed again, only it sounded sadder somehow. "Yes, my weakness for broken things." She shook her head. "It's the worst kind. It's a wonder I have survived this long." She turned from him. "I know you don't want to hear it but...I hope you make it out. That spitfire anger of yours might just save you. Or it might get you killed. If you do get out, I'll be sure to run as far away as possible. I'd still like to live."

She left him without another glance. He watched her go, watched her clothes billow in the wind as she crossed the yard. A nice shade of red. Watched her disappear. Hendrik blocked his view as he and the men moved in to study him, a nasty grin plastered on his face.

* * *

Hendrik had toyed with him until sunset, this time it seemed only for the men's entertainment. Xeda took the blows, biding his time, knowing eventually the man would let his guard down. And that would be his undoing. They drank some foul drink as they laughed in his face while Hendrik prodded him, trying to get him to sit by shocking his legs. Xeda remained stubborn, resilient, and patient.

Eventually, he won in the end, Hendrik kicking him in the side in frustration, flinging all kinds of curses before he finally retreated.

"Tomorrow," he warned, spitting on the ground near Xeda's feet.

Yes, tomorrow. Tomorrow, he would see the whites of that man's eyes as he looked at him in sheer terror. Like he should have from the beginning.

When it was dark and the red light buzzed above him, Xeda slowly lowered himself onto the ground, lying on his back.

It was a vrisha's one last resort when all else was dire to go into what they called *liris silimus*. Death sleep. He would be vulnerable. Extremely so. Usually, it was meant for when one was wounded so badly they needed to shut down or if the body was in an environment that was even too harsh for them and the only way to survive it until help came was *liris silimus*. Their pulse would drop so low it would be undetectable. Only another vrisha knew whether they were actually alive or not by the subtle scent they gave off.

Coming out of it quickly was going to be a struggle, so he would have to be sure he was only just on the edge between sleep and waking. He would not be able to see, but he could smell and hear as long as someone was close by.

He let his body go limp and shut his eyes. Then, carefully, he began to absorb the oxygen in the air, sucking it into the vents on each side of his neck, letting it soak into his organs, skin, everything.

He had contemplated using this very technique to trick them into unchaining and inevitably letting him out of the cell. But that gyda doctor, clever as he was, had specifically told Hendrik not to unchain him under any circumstances, even if confirmed dead. The doctor knew something from the small information they must have on vrisha, though how much was uncertain. But it was enough to make sure they took no chances.

So, he didn't go into the death sleep to escape. He knew that was pointless now. What led him to do it was purely for revenge. And he knew he had a chance to get it. For, after that gyda doctor had told Hendrik not to free him even when dead, Hendrik had scoffed, looking every bit unconcerned. The offhand comment about cutting out pieces of him as a trophy was just a bonus. The man would let his guard down. Xeda

was sure of it.

The longer he planned to "sleep," the more oxygen he would need to absorb. Thankfully, he would only need a few hours' worth. Slowly now, he went into a meditative state, letting his body temperature lower, then letting his heart slow. His muscles twitched here and there, and he could start to feel the numbing in his hands and feet as the blood went to his center.

The only thing that made the process uncomfortable was the cold. It seeped into his bones, his very being.

He pushed the feeling away and let himself fall into the abyss.

He had no sense of time. Only to wait for the sound of footsteps and the groan of the door opening. To hear the cursing and the sound of boots.

Instead, after a second passed or an eternity, he heard the shouts of laughter, muffled but close. Then the sounds of padded footsteps and sharp voices just beyond the door.

"C'mon guys, can't we wait till morning?" said an uncertain voice. "It's almost here anyway, and my balls are starting to freeze. We shouldn't be here anyway. The guards will catch us."

"They already know. They ain't going to do shit because I told them to back off. And I don't want to wait till morning," said a more arrogant one. "If your balls fall off, I'll just feed them to the vrisha."

There was laughter and movement at the door followed by a sharp gasp.

"What the hell?" someone said as the laughter died. "Ivan, why is he like that?"

"I—I don't know," came a timid voice.

There was a scuffle, then a third voice said, "What the fuck did you two do to my fighter, huh? Is he dead?"

"No, no he can't be. He was fine just this morning."

"Yeah, well clearly, he's not. Check him."

"No way," said the timid voice. "We gotta get Hendrik."

"I'll go. Ivan, you wait here with Cristan. I'll be back." Footsteps dissolved to nothing. Everything was quiet until someone made an annoyed grunt.

"Fuck this. I wanna see him myself. Ivan, open the door and check him."

"I can't! We have to wait for Hendrik so that—"

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"You think I care? You wanna lose your job? Or maybe I'll put you in the glasshouse for arguing with me. So, do it." A loud bang rang out as something hit the door.

There was a soft whimper, then a second later, he heard the door slide open.

"We really shouldn't do this."

"Shut up."

He heard the scuffle of shoes next to him and then felt someone kick his side.

"He's out. Let's just wait for Hendrik."

Another shuffle on his other side, then the scent of foul breath. "Hendrik is shit at his job. Or my fighter just sucked. Either way, Dad's gonna know." The foul-breathed human jabbed his side. "Hey, you gotta Scipad. Take a picture of me with it." He felt the human shift over him and then place his weight on top of him. The stupid beast was sitting on him. He grabbed one of Xeda's horns and pulled on his head. "Come on, move over there and get me holding him up."

"You shouldn't do that! What if he's not dead?"

Xeda's head swiveled back and forth as the human shook him. "He's chained still, and if he gives any sign of movement, you can just shock him right? Come on, this will be a sick shot. Just make it quick."

The other human cursed under their breath as they fumbled with something. Xeda

heard them move around him as the other shifted on top of him.

Xeda started to rise from the abyss, slow and careful so as not to shock his system. Like a sea creature rising to the surface, he woke silently, creeping up on his prey that floated above unaware.

He let his body warm, let the blood pump through his veins, making his hands and feet tingle. He kept himself motionless through the process, drawing nearer to the surface.

The one on top of him tugged again on his horns before letting his head drop. "Hold on," they said. Xeda felt him shift before he felt the cool metal of a knife at his throat.

"What are you doing?" cried the other.

"Just get the shot," they snapped.

"What the hell are you doing?" shouted Hendrik from the door. "For fuck's sake, get off him now!"

The human shot up off him but continued to stand over him. "Chill out, Hendrik, he's gone, you killed him."

Xeda heard Hendrik's angry gasps, as if the man might collapse. He shouted something unintelligible, stumbling forward by Xeda's guess. The human standing over him was tugged off him as Hendrik took his place.

"Stupid boy! Do you wanna get killed? What the hell is the matter with you? Have some sense!" he screamed.

Xeda felt fully awake now. He opened his eyes a slit and saw the putrid human

standing just beside him. His leg was just in reach.

Perfect.

Without missing a beat, Xeda moved. With one hand, he slipped out the bone he had hidden beneath the belt at his back and lurched upward. He lunged forward and stabbed the bone straight into Hendrik's leg just below the knee. Blood gushed out as Xeda twisted. The man hollered like an animal, dropping to his knees, his hand smacking against the ground as he caught himself.

Xeda wrenched the bone out and slowly stood. The other humans screamed, scrambling out of the cell. Their shouts rang out into the night. Hendrik groaned as Xeda came around and kicked him on his side, forcing him to roll on his back. He dragged him farther into the cell and then relished as the man's eyes grew wide with terror, his pants soaking at the crotch.

Xeda stood over him, the bone clenched tight in his hand. He let himself gorge on the man's fear for just one more moment. Then he brought the bone down.

CHAPTER SIX

Ophilia

There was a lot more commotion than usual in the hallway of the living quarters as Ophilia stepped out of her room. From the far end, she could see Warren talking with several soldiers, with other staff hanging around them.

One of the higher-ups must have gotten thrown in the glasshouse. That was usually the reason for extra gossip, especially this early in the morning.

The last time she remembered that happening was when they had thrown the woman

who had held Warren's position in that glass chamber after they had caught her stealing rings out of one of the jewelry safes. She spent a whole day in there before the police force (run of course by the most powerful houses) came and picked her up. Ophilia remembered hearing the screams walking down by the west courtyard. The glasshouse was awful torture, the temperature so hot you were sure to pass out. And the mirrors along the walls coupled with the light spray of gas made you hallucinate the worst horrors possible. A trip so bad you'd need therapy from the trauma it caused. You were lucky if you only got a half hour inside and were only rattled for a couple of weeks. A whole day...they had to carry her body out, glass shards stuck in her neck from her shattering the glass and attempting to cut her own throat.

Ophilia kept her head down as she walked the length of the hall, attempting to pass the group unseen. She caught the tail of the conversation as she crept by.

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"...They don't know. They couldn't save him in time."

"How did the vrisha do it?" one asked.

"A bone. Somehow, he got a bone."

Ophilia slowed to a stop. Her heart suddenly punched against her chest. Her blood turned cold as a feeling of dread hit her. She turned back to them.

"What happened?"

Warren gave her an annoyed look. "Don't talk out of turn, Ophilia."

She stepped back toward them. "Did he kill him? Did he get Hendrik?"

Warren crossed his arms and sighed. "That's what we've been discussing. It happened last night. The vrisha attacked him. Cristan also claimed the vrisha came at him too, but they didn't find any injuries. Still, looks like they'll be putting him out." Warren shook his head. "Poor Cristan, he was so looking forward to having an upper hand in the fights this year."

Ophilia hardly heard him, except for the part about putting the vrisha out. "Where? Where are they killing him?"

Warren frowned. "It would have happened already if Sal hadn't wanted to be there. I'd be willing to bet it's happening right now as we—hey! Ophilia, where are you going!"

Ophilia rushed for the outer doors, shoving them aside as she ran out into the pre-dawn morning, only a sliver of red beginning to peek out past the mountains. She flew past the gardens, jumping over one of the spitting cats, then down the steps to the orchard.

From the gate ahead, she could see a cluster of people circling the training yard, mostly guards.

Ophilia flew past the gate and then broke her way through the people crowding around the edge of the training yard. At the front of the line, she froze.

The vrisha was at the center, crouched on the ground with his head bent. Chains secured by large weights were tied to his feet, arms, and neck to keep him in place. Surrounding him were Sal and a handful of his soldiers including Tallah.

"I don't think we should kill him," she heard Sal say, his arms behind his back, looking down on the vrisha with a frigid stare. "I think the glasshouse for a day would be a good idea. Then sell him off to one of the scientists. They can study him inside and out. How does that sound, vrisha, eh?"

The vrisha didn't move. He kept his head bowed. Ophilia couldn't see his face, but she thought she caught him shivering. Or maybe it was her imagination. It didn't matter anyway.

She stepped out into the yard and walked over to them. Sal saw her first. He gestured to his soldiers who pointed their guns at her.

"Hey, Ophilia, hold on now. What are you doing here?"

Ophilia stopped just a few feet away. Her mind was racing like her heart. "I heard about what happened..."

Sal nodded. "Yeah, Hendrik, poor bastard, didn't make the cut." He put his hands in his suit pockets. "Now I'm out a trainer and a fighter. Thankfully, I can probably make most of my money back on the market. A lot of people would gladly pay good credits for even pieces of him." He sighed, trailing his fingers through his slick hair. "Too bad. Really too bad." He laughed. "Don't know why I'm telling you this. Shouldn't you be picking up shit somewhere, huh?"

Ophilia clenched her jaw, her gaze shifting to the vrisha, then back at Sal. "Let me train him."

There was a long moment of silence. The vrisha stirred, the soldiers' guns returning to target him. Then Sal began to laugh quietly. "You? You don't have any experience, Ophilia, right? Hendrik had years on you and look what happened." He shook his head. "No, no I don't think so. You still owe me, and I'm not losing more money once he kills you too."

Ophilia pursed her lips. "I train the animals. And you practically think he's one. What's the difference?"

"The difference is that we both know he ain't one, right?" He tilted his head at her. "What makes you think you can do better than Hendrik anyway?"

"I just want to try."

"Well, I can't really afford try, Ophilia."

"Why not? We both know Hendrik was a drunken fool. I'll be smarter and less inclined to let my guard down." She took another couple of steps, standing closer to the vrisha. "I can try another method."

"Hendrik always had a sound method."

"Sorry, sir, but I firmly disagree. After all, when was the last time you won, even when Tajia was here? He only ever made the semi-finals. If I can get the vrisha to fight and win the games, does it matter how it's done?"

Sal watched her carefully. "I still can't risk you getting killed."

"Then I'll make sure I don't."

He laughed at that. She couldn't blame him, but she wasn't willing to back down.

"Ophilia, Ophila, come on, now. I don't have time for this."

"You owe me," she blurted.

That got him real quiet. He gave her an icy look. An expression that would usually make even a hardened soldier really nervous. A look that threatened a night in the glasshouse. "Yeah, and how's that?" he said, real low.

"Last year, when I saved Drake from getting mauled by Cleo, our Siberian tiger. I saved his life. You said so yourself. You said you'd be in my debt..."

His mouth quirked into a smile, then he laughed once more. "It really does come full circle, doesn't it, Ophilia?"

Ophilia stood rigid. "If I can win, the money I owe will go straight to your house. It will pay off my debt to you and much more."

He put up his hand to stop her. He studied her for a long moment, his black eyes scrutinizing her, likely considering whether her proposal was worth it to him or if he should punish her for even having the gall to argue with him. Then he sighed. "All right, Ophilia, all right. I'll give it a chance, only because you're so stubborn. But if you or anyone else gets hurt again by this vrisha, even so much as a scratch, he's gone, got that? I'll let the scientists pick at him, got it?"

She nodded her head. "I do, sir."

He murmured something she didn't hear, then turned to his soldiers. "All right, put him back." He kicked sand at the vrisha. "And I mean what I say, you hear that, vrisha?"

The soldiers moved in unison, grabbing the vrisha by his chains and dragging him back into his cell. For a brief moment, the vrisha's eyes met hers. She couldn't gauge his expression. She watched him being locked back up, hoping she hadn't just made the craziest decision of her life.

CHAPTERSEVEN

Xeda

That night, though he could hardly move, he was restless. The waking dreams plagued him again, but he hardly let them stay at the forefront of his mind for long. Other matters drew his attention away instead.

He had expected to be killed after what he had done. The rage and hopelessness he had carried ever since his capture had grown to such levels he hardly cared about the consequences of his actions. Death did not scare him. He had been ready for death since the trials on Tryth. Since swearing himself to a now-dead queen. No, he wasn't afraid of that.

He didn't think he could feel raw fear ever again. Until yesterday.

Death, he could manage. The pain, he could endure. But the possibility of being experimented on had never crossed his mind. It was already hard enough to be contained, to be controlled. But to be violated in such a way was an offense he could not even begin to accept. To comprehend.

It was the worst torture a vrisha could be subjected to.

And so for the first time in many cycles, he did feel fear. He had grown so still with it he hardly breathed. When that black-eyed man had threatened to send him to a lab, he swore he'd take his own life before they got the chance to touch him.

Still, the fear of not having that chance, of being cruelly split open and taken apart, was worse than any nightmare he'd yet had. It would be like being on the ship all over again. Only far worse. As he'd knelt in the sand before everyone, he wanted to scream for someone to save him. To see one of his kindred's ships coming down to take him away. In his head, he'd prayed to Rikasha and Veradis to spare him this fate. That no matter his faults, he didn't deserve this. Not this.

Somehow, they must have heard him. For in his most desperate moment, he heard that familiar feminine voice and watched as that stormy-eyed woman stood beside him and allowed him that one last chance.

He had been so utterly shocked at what she had proposed that he had no more space for his fury. Now, as he was left alone in his room to think over everything that had just occurred beyond the barred door, out on the sand field, he could only wonder one thing.

Why?

Why had she done it? Why did she care? Clearly, she had something to gain. She had no reason to help him like she had out of pure kindness. Not after the way he had treated her.

He hated the idea of her pity, so he refused to think that was why she had saved him from a dark fate. He didn't like being in her debt either, but he found he would rather have that than be on a steel slab with tools in his guts or be under Hendrik's foot ever

again.

Still, he couldn't stop his curiosity. As he thought it over, the image of the black-boned queen paced the room, snarling, as restless as he.

You still can't trust them, Xeda, she hissed at him. She is using you. You must kill her too, any chance you get. She's a filthy human. Just because she spared you means nothing. When the time comes, you know what you must do.

As he sat against his corner, he only stared out the window, at the clear bluish-purple sky. Like most times, he didn't have an answer, just let her talk, let her seethe.

He was left alone, waiting. Night drew on, and he caught himself wondering when the human woman would come because he knew she eventually would. And he would have much to say.

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He didn't sleep, only waited for the sun to come up, for the light to spill in. Eventually, he heard the voices of men far away, he heard the ships flying far above.

He sensed her first from her scent which trailed into the room as her soft steps approached the door. Her shadow blocked out some of the light at the door before it slid open.

Unable to stop himself, Xeda rose and stepped away from the wall. The woman stood for a moment in the doorway, then slowly stepped inside. She carried a black bag in one hand and a bucket filled with water in the other. She approached him and then stopped a few feet from his reach. She placed the bag and bucket down before him.

"There's food in the bag, a canteen, and a wash sponge with soap," she said with an unreadable expression. "Feed yourself and clean up. I'll come back in a little while and take a look at some of the wounds that have yet to heal on you. Tomorrow, we start training." She turned for the door, and he took a step toward her, hissing for her to stop.

"Wait," he said. "I deserve to know why you're doing this."

With her back turned, he couldn't read her face and wondered if she would leave without answering him. She looked back at him, and he saw a storm in her eyes. "Not out of the kindness of my heart, right?" Her mouth curled a little to one side, then dropped. "I actually have something to gain here too. You're going to win the games and free us both."

His eyes narrowed. "How do you figure?"

She turned back to face him. "Something Hendrik never cared to mention is that if you become a champion, you get to retire here on K2. And become a citizen. Back on the human homeworld, Earth, in ancient times, there were games too, and the fighters were called gladiators. The houses here took this idea and made it their own. It was a spectacle for the population and a major cash grab for whatever house won. If you win, you did your job, and your reward is you don't have to fight again if you so choose."

Xeda bared his teeth, growling softly. "This would have been information I could have used earlier."

"Hendrik didn't expect you to comply with his whims whether you knew or not. Would you have if he told you?"

Xeda snorted. "No." He straightened, studying her closely. "And now you expect me to bend my head for you?"

She shrugged. "No. But I don't plan to work like Hendrik. I work smarter, not harder."

"And how's that, exactly?" he asked, genuinely curious.

"Persuasion."

"Oh?"

"You win and you go free. You just have to let me show you how. I'm not going to order you or beat you into submission. Unlike Hendrik, I know that's never going to happen. I'm trying to help you. I'll be your aid, nothing more. You just have to trust me."

He glanced at the bucket and bag. "And if I don't?"

"If you don't work with me, Sal, the guy who threatened you the other day, will know. The guards will be watching much more closely now. If he thinks you're going to hurt me or try some other stunt again, he will keep to his word. He will trade you in to the labs here on Kingsway. And trust me, they are dying to get you." She walked toward him and placed herself a little closer to his reach. "This could get you out without being hunted, and with citizenship, they can't touch you."

"Or you could just let me go. I won't be found."

She shook her head. "I can't risk it. Unlike you, I don't have a death wish."

He hissed in annoyance, turning from her to pace the back wall. He hated the idea of working with humans, but she might have to be an exception to the rule. Because whether or not he cared to admit it, she gave him the better option.

He stopped pacing. "All right. I'll play nice, for now. But only because it's the one choice currently out of this hellhole." He turned and lunged, getting as close to her as possible. "But don't think I'll kneel for you because I won't."

Even as she flinched, she smiled. "I know."

He straightened, peering down at her, trying to find any fault, any trace of deception, and finding none. Even though she was taller than others, she was much shorter than him, he noted, and smaller. But not so fragile, which he liked. Unlike the humans he had encountered before, she was thicker-boned, her gaze sharper. There was an anger there behind her eyes that he found familiar. One that might be akin to his own. He liked that too.

She looked up at him, as if she were sizing him up too, and that made him want to

laugh.

"Your name," she said after a pause. "What do I call you?"

He tilted his head at her curiously. He could lie, but what would be the point?

"Xeda," he said.

Her eyes lit up, and her smile widened. "I'm Ophilia. It's nice to finally meet you." She turned and went out the door. "Eat," she called as the door slid shut. She also loosened the chains from the wall, so he had full access to the room. "I'll be back soon."

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He used the bucket and soap Ophilia had given him to wash away the dried blood and sand that was caked on his body. The sponge ripped open, becoming nothing more than tattered cloth by the time he was finished. He dropped the sponge in the bucket of now dirty water and began searching the bag. He found the canteen and a package of thinly sliced meat. No bones this time.

He ate some, putting the leftovers in one corner for later if need be. He took the canteen and poured water on his face, both washing off the mouthpiece and drinking whatever made it into his mouth. He set the can down after and then sat beside it, watching the sky beyond the barred window. Then he closed his eyes and lightly napped.

Some hours later, when the sun finally began to set, Ophilia returned. He woke just as she came to the door. It slid open, and she walked in, this time carrying a small white box.

She placed the box in front of him and then took out a small handheld device. "This meldpen can be used to seal the wounds. There's also wraps and salve if you need them." She paused, as if considering her next words. "Some of the worst wounds are on your back. If you can't reach them..."

He stared at her, understanding what she was getting at. "I'll allow you to check them."

"Thank you." She took a step toward him and held out the meldpen.

He looked down at it and then locked eyes back with her. "You can go first. I've

already licked some of my wounds to stop the bleeding. They'll heal quickly. But since I couldn't get my back..."

She lowered her arm, giving him a cautious stare. "All right."

As he turned his back, he caught her putting on a pair of gloves. She tightened his chains so that his arms were kept over his head, then she took up her pen and moved to his backside.

He felt the lightness of her touch as she pressed against his skin before noticing the tingling sensation slowly being drawn across his back from the pen. He stood patiently as she sealed one deep gash after another where Hendrik had beaten him with a metal lash some days prior.

Silently staring at the wall, he realized something. "You said you had something to gain earlier," he said. "To free us both. What did you mean? Are you not free?"

He felt her stop briefly before moving on to the other side of his back. "I have a debt to pay. If I win, I'll be given a large sum of credits, not just what the house will get. Then I can pay it back."

"Yes, I remember now you mentioning that to the black-eyed man." He tilted his head, thinking. "But that's not really all, is it?"

She was silent for a moment, then said, "No. If I'm out of his debt, I'll be free too. I'll still keep some of the winnings, whatever is left. Then I can leave. I won't have to work again. I won't have to..."

He turned his head. "What?"

"Nothing. No one will be able to control me ever again. That's all."

He turned away. At least he could agree with her on that.

"So, don't fuck this up for me, got it?" she said.

He hissed, a short little laugh. "Don't do anything to make me ruin this for either of us. "

"Deal."

He snorted. Stupid human. He looked back at her curiously. Watched as she concentrated on sealing his wound. She pressed her hand into his skin, lightly trailing her fingers against his scales. For some reason, it made him shiver. He could have told her to stop, but she was almost finished anyway.

When she sealed the last of his injuries, she loosened his chains and gave him the pen to work on his front, trusting him not to try and attack her with it. He wasn't planning to. He understood now he had been given another chance, and he couldn't take out his revenge yet again. Not on her.

Not that he felt compelled to. She didn't try to make him submit. He wasn't worried now she would. He was willing to trust that she didn't have some ulterior motive. At least not yet.

"Tomorrow, we'll start training in the yard," she said. "You're already far behind, and we won't likely catch up, but we can at least do what we can with the little time we have left before your first fight. Hendrik assumed you would be fine on your own without much practice as long as you did as he ordered. But you should at least have some idea what you're getting into."

"I'm not worried," he said as he used the pen on a gash over his rib.

"I didn't think you would be, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't be prepared. Remember what I said. You're not the toughest fighter on this planet. Trust me."

He scoffed, remembering some of his meanest fights ever. "You haven't seen me fight."

"No, but I've seen others. "

"Yeah? And who are they?"

She was silent momentarily, then said, "In time, you'll know." She put the white box aside, and he could see she looked apprehensive. "I have to go now. Just be ready tomorrow."

CHAPTEREIGHT

Ophilia

The yard was no longer a barren field of sand. Now it was a field of sand with at least fifty or more large metal cubes, some stacked on each other, making walls or columns that went up several feet above her head. Sweating from the already hot day, Ophilia circled the course twice to make sure it was to her liking. Ivan stood close by watching in the shade of the units with a rod tight in his hand, looking uneasy. Dane was nowhere to be seen.

There were several guards watching from the tower and to the west wall, guns aimed down at the yard. She ignored them as she stepped between the field and the units and deemed the course ready.

"Are you sure you wanna do this?" Ivan said nearby. "Without having something to immobilize him at least?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Crazy," he muttered under his breath. "Hendrik would never..."

She didn't hear the rest. Mainly because he was drowned out by a low, guttural growl behind her. She turned and saw Xeda pacing inside his cell, looking ready to beat the door down.

That morning when she entered the training yard looking for Ivan and Dane to set up

the course, she'd heard a commotion and had seen several soldiers standing close to Xeda's cell. He seemed to be having a fit inside, but she couldn't gauge what he had been saying.

"Been like that all night," one soldier said when she asked what happened. "Seems to be arguing with someone who isn't there. A total psycho."

She'd gotten close to the door of his cell and saw him pacing inside, answering someone, but he was very much alone.

She knew he wasn't always right in the head. Sometimes when she had walked past his door, she caught him whispering to himself or to someone. She could imagine being locked up coupled with everything else he'd gone through was hard on his mental state. And she didn't even know about anything else before he'd come to Kingsway.

But this was the first time she'd seen him this unhinged. She let him be that morning, finding Ivan and ordering him to start setting up the course. Dane, she was told, was off somewhere else. As Ivan reluctantly did as she asked, she made her way to the pens and did her other duties. Even though Sal had given her this chance, Rick had gone and argued to him that he wasn't going to pick up her work in the process. And she couldn't leave Janna to do all the work either. She was kind enough, however, to take Neptune's pen off Ophilia's shoulders, so she was only left with the tiger, birds, and Javi. She got her work done as quickly as possible and then returned to the yard sometime after high noon. The course was only half done when she returned. She found Ivan sitting inside the storage unit, complaining it was too hot and that the vrisha was raving mad and wasn't going to listen to her anyway.

Keeping herself from losing it on him for being so spineless, she finished the course on her own, losing already precious time. She took the hand controls from Ivan and tested the course before finally deeming it ready for use.

Now there was only Xeda.

She stood staring at the course for a moment before she finally turned to Xeda's cell. She opened the door as he spun around, bared his teeth at her, and hissed.

He didn't seem to see her at first. He paced back and forth like a predator in its cage, watching her.

"Xeda, hey, it's okay. No one's here but me. But I can't let you out until you snap out of it." She clapped her hands at him several times.

Xeda stilled, then blinked with a different set of eyelids, looking dumbstruck. "What did you just—"

"I clapped at you so you would snap out of it."

He looked appalled. He let out an odd noise like a grunt. "Don't clap at me like some animal."

"Well don't act like one!"

He growled. He tried to reach the door, but the chains weren't long enough.

"Take your anger out on the course, will you?" she said, her own annoyance growing.

"Then let me!"

She stood back and took out her remote. "Are you here?"

He blinked again, and she could tell he was starting to gain focus. He looked at her now, not through her, looking pissed as usual.

"Yes, I'm here. Where else would I be?" he snapped.

"I need you thinking clearly is what I'm saying. I need you chill."

"I'm not chill. I hate being chill." He clenched and unclenched his hands.

"I mean calm, Xeda."

He breathed in, then huffed. "I'm calm. Are we doing this or not?"

Please, please don't lose control or they will kill you, she prayed silently. She could already see the guards' fingers were itching on the trigger. "Okay." She backed up and, trying to calm her own nerves, she pressed a button on the remote, unlatching the chains from Xeda's shackles.

She heard the gates being closed on each side of the yard, shutting them in. The only way Xeda was getting out was if he climbed. But the guards were sure to shoot him if he so much as tried. She heard Ivan curse as Xeda marched himself out of his cell and into the daylight.

He was towering. She had noticed that before, but the chains always seemed to weigh him down, making him crouch, or he was forced to bow his head in case his horns hit the ceiling. Now that he was free of the room, he stood tall, his head tilted toward the sky.

She let him take in his surroundings, let him stretch out and appreciate the sun and the heat. When he seemed satisfied enough, he turned to the course.

"This is seriously it?" he said, looking unimpressed.

"Not exactly." Ophelia took up the hand controls and pressed on the center. The cubes lit up and began to move. Some hovered, some moved from side to side or up and down. Some had spikes and blades that appeared and shot out from several ends. And

others let out small currents of electricity.

"I can change the course to make the obstacles move in whatever way I like, even while you're inside. And I can up the level of difficulty. Think you can handle it now?"

He scoffed as he watched the cubes move. "I'm not worried. Though I'm not exactly at my peak without my tail and claws. If I were to have those..."

Ophilia shook her head. "No can do, big guy, sorry. Sal's orders. You get those back when you prove yourself in the house trials."

"The what?"

"To prove you're ready for the games."

He grunted, as if understanding or just indifferent to the idea. He stepped over to one edge and studied the moving cubes. She could see he was considering his way through the course. After a few minutes, he crouched down, then without hesitation, he launched himself forward.

Even at a disadvantage, Xeda moved with a prowess and strength she had yet to see. Even Tajia would have had trouble keeping up. A little bit of weight lifted from her as she watched him dodge blades and electric currents and use the floating cubes to his advantage to hop over walls. She knew he had to be skilled in some way, and she was happy to see her theory was true. The only critique she had was that he didn't take his time, and she worried he was only getting lucky as the cubes missed him more so than he was actually able to wager when to move. He wasn't thinking it through just using instinct. Which could be his advantage or his downfall.

To test this, Ophilia had him run the course again only this time she set the cubes to

move randomly without a set pattern, letting them change at a whim so long as they didn't collide into each other. Like a large flock of birds, the floating cubes swayed and flowed in every direction. Blades sprang out at random, and like a storm, electricity shot through the air from one place to the next.

Xeda took a little longer to assess the course before he launched back in. He was slower this time, trying to find a flow in the chaos. He was able to dodge some of the hits but not all. A few times, he was forced to smash or kick a cube out of his way. He kept low to the ground when he could, even if it didn't keep him from getting zapped. Still, he made it out better than she expected. The third time she had him go, he lost his patience and leaped onto one cube, then using all his power, jumped over half the course, only just barely landing on one cube to jump high again before dropping to the other side. She had to give him credit for finding an easier route, but if he hadn't made that first landing, he would have dropped right in the middle and been in a bad position.

After a few turns through the course, she learned enough of Xeda's style. He was a daredevil. A risk taker. He didn't think so much as act. Taking risks was good, expected even. But sometimes so was playing it safe, taking the time to strategize. And one wasn't always lucky.

She tried to explain this to him after taking a break, but he refused to see her side.

"My instincts are what help me survive. So, I use them. Playing it safe is a fool's way of fighting. One must act first and act quickly. Not hide and cower, lying in wait."

She couldn't argue that, but she still felt he needed to slow down when it mattered. To observe and learn so he could have more than one strategy. The course was easy when it was the only thing a fighter had to focus on. But he would have several dozen other fighters to worry about too in the games.

When she mentioned this to him, she thought he considered her words, but instead, he said, "Tell me who I'm fighting then."

She got quiet, preparing for his response. "In truth, it changes every year. You can probably guess why."

He dipped his head. "Because many die and must be replaced."

She nodded. "You'll go against every kind of otherkin. A lot of corax and grex usually. Lygin too. But the bigger players every year are usually nillium, and fyrien if someone is lucky to find one. And they are skilled killers. I'm willing to bet Tazyn of house Zanis will be fighting again. He won two games back to back a few years ago. And again just last year. The only reason he didn't win others is because he didn't compete the other times. That's usually the case for the other fighters."

Xeda gave her a confused look at first but then seemed to understand. "So, there are those who play for fun then too?"

"Basically," she confirmed. "They're citizens who enjoy the fight. Enjoy killing too. So they volunteer. They won their freedom long ago but choose to continue to participate. To put the slaves down. It's awful, but the houses don't stop it. They're champions, so they are extremely popular."

Xeda tilted his head in a shrug. "I suppose I can't blame them. For enjoying the fight I mean."

"I can see why you feel that way."

He looked down at her, his mismatched eyes sharp and bright. "We fought on my home world too in our own sort of games. Just not like this."

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"Definitely not like this," she agreed. She shifted on her feet. "I wish I could tell you more. But as I said, the roster changes every year, and houses are very strict about keeping their fighters secret. Though there are always spies. I would try to find out more for you. Hendrik probably had information on his computer, but even getting permission to unlock his machine to grab that data will take too much time. All I can give you is guesswork."

He grunted, walking back over to the edge of the course. "It's no matter whether I know or not. I don't plan on losing either way."

She liked his confidence at least. But she knew it wasn't going to be easy. And soon he'd know why.

* * *

They spent the next several days training from afternoon to sundown. Mostly she used the course. Changing the levels, giving him different perspectives and different obstacles to figure out. When she felt he'd shown his ability to traverse the course well enough, she moved to fighting specifically. They used a bot as a dummy first. She was reluctant to use one of the other house fighters to practice with. Hendrik loved to pit the house fighters against each other for practice. In theory, it made sense because that was the best way to train, to fight against another real opponent. But there lay her weakness for broken things yet again. She hated the idea of putting them under harm, knowing Xeda would likely throttle them. Still, it was more important to know his strengths and weaknesses in a fight. Eventually, after sleeping on it for a few days, she reluctantly brought one of their better fighters out onto the field. A grex named Urgan.

He had several scars on his face and chest that made him look intimidating, and his height was nothing to laugh at either, though he still didn't match up to Xeda. Next to Tajia, he had been their second strongest fighter but hadn't qualified for the games. He was what the houses called a bastard champion because he only ever won in singular fights or smaller tournaments. Matches that were held year-round in smaller circles. The other fighters were considered lowly just like him and only ever fought in private fights, never strong enough for the games. She felt for them too but had no way to help them now like she did Xeda. Sal made it clear she could utilize the fighters but only for the benefit of making Xeda his champion.

So, she used Urgan and hoped he would be some match for the vrisha. She ordered Ivan to clean the units and feed the others while she brought Urgan out, knowing the boy would use a rod on him, and she was having none of that. She brought Urgan out, knowing he was tamed, Hendrik having beaten him down years ago. The grex went straight to the yard and stood before Xeda, taking a fighter's stance. He showed no fear in his eyes despite the far more intimidating opponent before him. Venomous saliva dripped from his mouth, eager to bite down on flesh.

"A clean fight, no maiming or deep wounds," she ordered. Xeda paced, looking more than ready to start. When she gave the signal, the two sprang into action.

The fight didn't last long. Xeda dodged several of Urgan's attacks, clearly the quicker of the two. Sand kicked up as the two paired off, dodging and attacking at a speed no human could ever hope to equal. Xeda was smart to stay away from Urgan's mouth as the grex's venom could be deadly. One bite could put Xeda out of the games for good.

Blood stained the sands. Xeda got an edge on the grex, pinning him down into the ground, filling his mouth with gravel. It became clear very quickly that the vrisha was as skilled as he claimed.

But would it be enough?

When it was done, she had them separate and gave Urgan a salve for his shallow injuries, sending him back to his cell.

"And that was supposed to be one of your best?" Xeda said as she returned to him, offering him a salve which he didn't take.

"He's the best we have to work with," she said. "But it's good to see you really can fight at least."

"If you want to test me, you'll have to do better than that."

"I think the trials will be more than enough to do that."

"And when are they?" he asked, sounding impatient.

Her gaze trailed over the blood on the ground. "Soon. Just a few more days."

She sent him back to his cell as the sun was beginning to disappear behind the mountains. She walked to the dining hall feeling a strange sort of way. Watching Xeda fight had been exhilarating, to say the least. And frightening. It told her what she already had suspected. He was a trained killer too. And he'd done it many times before. If he hadn't held himself back, she was sure he could have easily ended Urgan's life. In the games, he wouldn't have to hold back. And she knew he wouldn't.

On K2, it was a good thing. It was what would keep him alive, would give him a winning edge. But deep down, it made her wary, made her remember who he was. The marks might be fading away, but deep down, he must still be a terror to her own kind. As she sat down with her tray, she realized she was lucky he was even willing to listen to her let alone comply with her whims. She shouldn't let her guard down

with him no matter what. No matter how she might feel.

"Hey, Ophilia." Kendra sat down beside her. "So, have you lost your mind or what?"

"How's that?" she asked.

"Training the vrisha? You trying to get yourself killed?"

"No, funny enough, just the opposite."

Kendra shook her head. "The others are making bets on how long you'll make it."

Ophilia smiled. "I figured as much."

"Listen, I know you want out of here more than anyone. But seriously, this is not the way to do it. Once that vrisha finds a loophole out of here and then gets it in his head to run, you're toast. And I heard he's lost his mind. So, if he breaks, he's just going to turn on you. Be smart, Ophilia, think this through."

"I have. I know the risks. But I have to do this."

Kendra only shook her head again. "You do you then. I'll put in a good word at your funeral." She moved off, and Ophilia sat eating alone, aware of the eyes on her back.

She didn't care. Let them talk, let them think she was crazy or desperate. All her life, she kept her head down, kept in her place, only to know she would spend her days in servitude. No, she needed this chance. Even if it killed her.

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She was more angry now than scared.

After her dinner, she went straight to a shower and then to bed. Lying in the dark, she thought about Xeda, what more she could do to prepare him. And admittedly wondering about Kendra's words. Still wanting to believe she hadn't made a foolish choice. Come the trials, she would know. She shut her eyes and let herself fall asleep while pretending everything was going to work out in the end. That everything was going to be okay.

* * *

She woke up to the sound of someone hammering at her door. She blinked back the sleep and rose, quickly putting on a shirt and pants. Who the hell could it be at this hour? And what could they possibly want?

The hammering came again as she stumbled over to the door. Opening it, she found Dane and Ivan with two other men, guards by the look of it.

"What's going—"

"You need to come now," one of the guards interrupted.

"It's the vrisha," Dane explained before she could ask why.

Her heart skipped. "What happened?" She looked to Ivan who wouldn't meet her gaze.

"It's urgent. He's not looking too good," Dane said.

She studied them and could see the fear in Ivan's eyes and the excitement in Dane's. The guards looked impatient to leave. What could have happened? Did the grex get a bite on him after all, one maybe she didn't see?

"Let me get my coat."

She grabbed the coat off the hanger by the door and wrapped it around her, shrugged on her boots, then followed them quickly down the passage.

Outside in the icy-cold night air, Ophilia wrapped her coat tighter as they rushed for the training yard. There she found the place dark when it usually had lights directed downward from the tower. It was quiet. As she started for Xeda's cell, she saw no movement beyond the door. Heart leaping into her throat, she made for his cell.

"Xeda?" she called. A shadow passed by the door, and a pair of red and orange eyes looked back at her. She slowed, taking a breath. "Xeda, are you—"

Someone grabbed her arm and yanked her. She yelped, trying to wrench her arm away when a hand slapped over her mouth. One of the guards pinned her against him, his hand crushing her. She struggled in his grip, trying to scream or bite when his partner swung out his fist and hooked her in the stomach. The guard pinning her let her go, let her drop onto her knees as she gasped for air.

"You're a meddling little bitch, aren't you?" said the guard who'd punched her, now crouching beside her. "You couldn't just let Sal make that demon pay for what he did to our old buddy Hendrik, huh? Too bad Sal will be pretty upset when he finds your bones scattered in that cell tomorrow. But the labs will be happy to have a new specimen to toy around with." The guard stood up, and someone kicked her again in the side. "House Lageth sends their regards."

They closed in on her, and all she could do was take the blows. Beyond the throbbing in her ears, she heard a vicious roar followed by the rattle of chains and then the kicking of a door. But she could hardly focus on the source. She only caught Ivan and Dane standing close by, watching.

She must have been knocked out briefly because the guards stopped to stand over her. Blurry shadows looked down at her.

"You'll pay for that," she thought she heard a guttural voice say.

One of the guards took hold of her and dragged her toward Xeda's cell. They picked her up as the other man opened the door. She was flung inside, her back hitting something hard and sharp. As she rolled on the ground, they closed the door on her, locking her in.

She lay there barely conscious, only aware of the pain. Pain that covered every inch of her body. She could feel her face swelling, and it hurt to breathe. She thought her heart might explode as it hammered in her chest. She knew where she was, but she could hardly move, couldn't even lift her head to look around and see the pair of miss-matched eyes staring down at her.

She waited for him to move, knowing he could easily reach her. She opened her mouth to say something and spat out blood instead.

The chains beside her moved. She saw his shadow bend over her and felt him grab her arm to roll her onto her back.

She stared up at him as he gazed down at her. She felt dazed, like she was floating as she looked up at his hellish face.

She licked her lips, tasting her blood. She wanted to say something, anything, but

could think of nothing that might be worth her final words. She closed her eyes and waited for him to take his next revenge, to bring down his hatred on her.

"What the hell was that about?" he snarled.

She opened her eyes and looked up at him. "W-what?"

He crouched down beside her. "I said what the hell was that about?"

"I..." she narrowed her gaze, blinking slowly. "I don't know."

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He growled in annoyance. "Is it custom then for humans to just wail on each other for no reason?"

"...No."

To her shock, he grabbed her arms and pulled her over to the nearest wall, sitting her up against it. Then he went over to one corner and retrieved the canteen she had given him some days ago. He crouched back beside her and set it into her hands. "There isn't much left."

She took the canteen and thanked him. She took a drink and then spilled some on her face.

"Your face..." he said after watching her clean some of the blood off her. She thought maybe she was imagining it, but he actually looked concerned.

"I'll be all right." She eyed him curiously. He hadn't moved to attack her. He gave no indication of becoming hostile. He only appeared agitated, but not at her.

As she sat for a moment, trying to calm her nerves, trying not to freak out that she was stuck in a room with him, she thought over the guard's words. "I think they were friends of Hendrik's. They had hoped you'd be punished for his death. Because I stopped that, they decided to get revenge. One of them also swore their allegiance to another house, so he was obviously also looking to sabotage our plans."

Xeda hissed as he paced the room. "Well, they'll be greatly disappointed."

She watched him closely. "Is that a good indication that you don't plan on taking advantage of this situation?"

She had to ask. To know for sure. Her heart still pattered with that tiny fear that he might change his mind.

He stopped pacing to look down at her. He seemed to understand what she meant. He glanced away. "I have no reason currently to harm you. It wouldn't be wise to our plans."

She couldn't help smiling. "You mean because if you do, you'll wind up at the labs."

He seemed hesitant to answer. "I have no need to harm you, let's just leave it at that."

"All right." She shifted to her side, a moan slipping from her.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to sleep."

He snorted. "You think you can in that state?"

"I'm going to try. But it will be hard if you keep talking."

He paced a little more, then turned back to her. She went still as he reached out and lifted her hand holding the canteen, making her press the side of it to her face. The metal was cold on her skin.

"What are you—"

"Leave it there to help with the swelling."

She wanted to laugh, but she stopped herself. It was true they had no ice.

He drew away and went to sit toward the back wall. He watched her, and she tried to look everywhere but at him and failed.

"Sorry we're such a pain. I don't condone this shit either. And I don't represent the garbage part of human existence."

He tilted his head. "It's nothing I haven't seen before amongst your kind."

"That's why you hate us right?"

His gaze turned a little cold. "No. That's not why."

She nodded, let that sink in, then said, "So, why?"

He didn't answer at first. His eyes flicked toward the window, then back to her. "Because you are different."

She frowned. "That's all?"

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"No, that's not. Your kind are weak and yet you consider yourselves the center of the universe. You think you know all there is. You think you have the power to do as you please. You are small and insignificant but act as if you could conquer worlds. You think you are equal if not better than us. But you are nothing but prey with the complex of a predator. You think you can outsmart us. You think you can be trusted, but you are dangerous."

Her eyes widened. "Dangerous?"

"Yes," he hissed.

Of everything he'd said, she didn't expect that. "I can't believe that," she said. "If it weren't for the alliance, I would seriously expect your kind to have snuffed us out long ago. And you're saying we're dangerous?"

"It's not the same," he argued.

"How so?"

His eyes narrowed on her. "Because of the games you play."

She waited for him to explain further, but he didn't. She turned away and stared at the wall opposite. "I'm sorry you think that. But we're not all looking to play games. Some of us didn't ask for this. But I'm not here to defend the human race, honestly. I was just curious why. A part of me can't blame you." She turned back to him and caught him watching her.

"I will never submit to a human," he said. "You understand?"

She nodded. "I do."

"But I can acknowledge this once. That I will work with a human if there is no better choice. And I can choose to look past my hate to do so. If it means my freedom."

"And once you're free, you'll go back to tearing us apart. Got it."

He didn't say a word. He searched her face, but she didn't give herself away. "I just want to be free too," she said. "Which is why I'm helping you despite knowing you want to destroy us all. I should probably not want you to get out. I don't want to be responsible for other people's deaths...except for maybe those guys who just put me in here. You can have them."

She caught the points of his teeth through the muzzle as his mouth widened into what she assumed was a smile. He hissed softly. "It's nice I have your permission then."

"After the games," she countered. And maybe...maybe she could convince him not to harm anyone after all.

It was probably a fool's hope. But she couldn't worry about that now.

They sat in silence for some time, and her eyes started to droop as the adrenaline began to wane and her body began to shut down, wanting to sleep off the pain. Xeda spoke again, but she didn't quite catch it. She mumbled something back before her head dropped to one side.

She went in and out of sleep, at one point feeling cold and the next quite warm, feeling a small weight on her side.

"I won't..." she heard a deep voice say just on the edge of her dreams. "I won't do it. I need her..."

In her dreams, she saw Xeda walking blindly through a heavy night, the flash of what looked like lightning across the sky. In the distance was a great hulking shadow of a monster. A monster calling out his name.

"No...I won't. No,you can't have her."

She tried to follow him, to call him back, but eventually lost him in the dark.

CHAPTERNINE

Ophilia

"Oh, son of a bitch. Jenson, get out here now! Get one of those damn boys here quick and open this door!"

Ophilia woke to the shouts of men with a start. Her side hurt, and she felt groggy, like she was waking from a bad hangover. She blinked and slowly lifted herself into a sitting position, wiping the sand off her face that had stuck to her skin. Her face was tender to the touch but no longer hurt as badly as a few hours before.

She turned her head and saw Xeda standing by her side, between her and the door, staring out the window. The way he stood with his fists clenched made it seem like he was guarding her. Like a massive dog making sure no one touched their master. It was a fanciful idea at least.

She licked her cracked lips, her mouth as dry as the ground. "What's happening?"

Xeda continued to watch outside. "There are men gathering and coming this way.

They mean to get you out."

Ophilia looked up at him skeptically. "Are you going to let them?"

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He glanced down at her, his one bright orange eye narrowing. Then he turned back to the window. "I doubt they would consider letting me go for your life. You're no good locked in here with me. If we are to keep with our plan."

She couldn't help laughing at that. "My plan that you agreed to, you mean." Carefully, she stood up, groaning in the process. Her side ached but wasn't as bad as she had expected. "Well, let me see, will you?"

He side-stepped out of the way so that she could see beyond the window. A group of guards was gathered several feet away in the training yard. Then another came into her view, dragging Dane over to them. They talked casually as Dane waved his arms in her general direction.

They took ten minutes to talk it out before Dane finally marched his way over to the cell with a few men following behind, positioning their guns toward the unit doors. She didn't recognize any of them from last night.

"She's probably dead," she heard Dane say. "She probably got careless, and the vrisha took her out like Hendrik. Too bad, Sal will be—" He halted in his tracks when he saw her standing by the window.

"Hey, Dane." She smiled, relishing in the pants-shitting expression on his face. "I don't think it was me who was careless. But I'd be glad to tell them who was."

Dane didn't move as the guards surrounded the unit. The head of the east tower, Brant, glanced between them, looking down at Dane suspiciously.

"You know something about this, Dane?" he said.

Dane opened his mouth, and Ophilia was ready to hear his lies. Instead, he bolted. He didn't make it far, only halfway across the yard, before the guards ran after and caught him, dragging him back.

"It wasn't me!" he cried, trying to wrench himself away. "It wasn't me! It was Ivan. He locked her in, just ask him. I watched him do it."

"All right," Brant said, looking bored more than anything. "We'll get this straightened out. Just let her out."

Dane's face turned red, clearly in disbelief that the vrisha hadn't eaten her like he had so expected. "This is bullshit." He took out the remote and pressed the center. Xeda's chains tightened. He walked back toward the wall, and their eyes locked. She nodded to him, letting him know it was fine, then she turned for the door as it slid open.

Cautiously, she stepped out, putting up her hands as the guards gave her space. The door slid closed behind her, and they lowered their weapons.

"So, what the hell happened?" Brant asked.

Ophilia glanced at Dane. "I was told the vrisha was injured, but he wasn't. I was tricked and locked inside."

"By Dane?"

"He was there, but he wasn't the one who did it. It was a couple of guardsmen. I don't know their names."

Brant's gaze trailed across her face. "And the vrisha attacked you?"

"No, it was the guardsmen."

He frowned, clearly uncertain whether to believe her. After all, why would one of his own have reason to attack her over the vrisha?

"We need to report this, then, to Sal."

"I'd like to talk to him myself," she remarked. No way she wanted someone else to give their side of the story and have Sal believe Xeda had done this to her.

"Fine." Brant ordered the others back to their positions, keeping one guard with him to keep an eye on Dane. Ophilia followed behind them as they started for the house, letting Dane stare daggers into her back.

* * *

Ophilia sat by the pool in the gardens, her head resting on her hands, already feeling exhausted, and it wasn't even noon yet. They had gone to Sal, forced to interrupt him in the middle of one of his tennis games which he had been doing particularly well in according to the other staff. Ophilia told her side and was unsurprised when Dane conjured up a whole different story after, claiming that Ophilia had gotten herself locked in by her own stupidity and that the vrisha had indeed attacked her.

Thankfully, Sal had found it quite suspicious that Dane either knew she'd been inside from the start and hadn't considered letting her out or that he had a story at all if he had only discovered her there this morning and only by Brant's doing. He called for Ivan to get another version of the story and, not expecting to find her alive while unprepared to be interrogated, Ivan broke down and confessed he had been forced to help put her in the cell with the vrisha.

The two had to be pulled apart after Dane attacked Ivan for snitching. Sal, quickly

losing his patience, tried to get them to give up the names of the guards who did this. They went quiet then, and Ophilia knew it meant they'd probably be worse off than she had been if they told.

"Well, boys, I think I'll have to take you off duty for the rest of the season and for the foreseeable future," Sal said, shaking his head in disappointment. "I'll let your father know you'll be sent home." He started to turn away, then, as if remembering something, said, "Oh, and since you found it too difficult to remember the names of those two guardsmen, I think an hour in the glasshouse might help refresh your mind, yeah?"

Ivan burst into tears, wailing as the guards took him away. Dane went silently, his face pale like he might be sick. Ophilia would have considered arguing that it was unnecessary, that she was fine with them getting fired and punished some other way because no one deserved the glasshouse. Sal's expression, however, told her if she so much as said a word, he might put her there too. And take her out of the training yard.

"I'm disappointed in you too, Ophilia," he mentioned offhandedly. "You need to watch yourself, or I'll take back letting you train the vrisha, you got that? Hell, you're lucky to be alive. Now, go get checked by Dr. Urmari, and don't let me see you again for something like this, got it? The next time I want to see your face will be at the trials."

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She did as told, even though she didn't want to be checked out. She would rather be back at the training yard.

Dr. Urmari was gentle as he examined her, making sure she had no broken bones or internal damage. The gyda's eyes flicked over her curiously, and she tried not to shiver at his cool, moist touch.

"Nothing serious," he concluded after. "Just some bad bruising, but I will give you a salve that will clear it up before the day is out. The cuts on your face seem to be healing quite nicely on their own. It was good you put a topical on them before they were infected."

She looked at him oddly and confessed she hadn't used any medicine yet.

"Really? Strange, they've already closed up. It seems like some kind of natural healing method was used. You really wouldn't know anything about it?"

She shook her head and said she didn't. The doctor shrugged it off and gave her the salve before sending her on her way.

She was heading for the pens after, knowing despite her injuries, Rick wouldn't tolerate her taking a day off. When she passed by the pool, she felt the need to take a moment, to sit and contemplate everything that had happened in the last several hours. It was a mess, the whole damn thing, but she knew she had to move forward. She sat rubbing her temples and grazed one of the cuts on her forehead. She brought her hand back and examined it and noticed a slight sheen on her fingertips. She frowned and suddenly thought of Xeda. He wouldn't have done something to the cuts

while she was asleep, would he?

But how could he? He had no medicine...unless.

She shook her head. No, he wouldn't have touched her. He loathed the idea.

Then she remembered the dream and the feeling of warmth beside her. It was all so contradicting, but she couldn't help but wonder.

Eventually, she forced herself out of the gardens and back to the pens. She cleaned until the sun was just over the horizon. Before she returned to the house, she went to check on Xeda.

"I didn't think I'd be seeing you again this soon," he said, his eyes searching her face. "You look better already."

"Yeah, just some bruising. I was given a salve..." She almost wanted to ask him about the cuts but thought against it, thinking it might embarrass him. "I can't take you out for more training today..."

"I assumed as much."

"I think it's time, though, I tell you about the trials. And about what to expect after."

He straightened as best he could, lifting his head slightly. "Tell me."

"You'll be tested. Basically to show you can be trusted first. I'll be in charge of that. It's safe to say after last night Sal is feeling confident about you passing in that regard." Xeda snorted, and she continued. "After, you'll fight the other fighters of the house and one outsider who is a bastard champion and winner of the smaller tournaments. There will be judges of the games to watch you. If you defeat the others

and do so in a timely manner, you'll be considered for the games."

"Sounds easy enough," he said.

She hoped so, for both their sakes. "After the trials, we will be taken to the city's center. We will meet the other chosen fighters and move on from there."

"How long?" he asked.

"We have two more days till the trials. The games last several days or up to a week if not more depending on how long the others survive."

He bent his head. "Good."

"I believe in you, Xeda. Not that you need me to."

The look he gave her was hard to read but didn't appear annoyed or ungrateful. "I'll win this. And you and me...we'll be free."

"Can I count on you not to kill me, at least as soon as we are?" She meant it as a joke, but he didn't laugh, just fixed her with a serious glare.

"I never thought I'd tell a human this, but it's true, by Rikasha and Veradis, I will spare you. You have my word."

A small smile played on her lips. "I'm glad to hear it."

* * *

They trained for as long as they could for the next two days. Ophilia felt confident by the second day that Xeda would have no problem defeating the other house fighters

and would be able to hold his own against whoever they pitted him against from the outside. The morning of the trials, she was allowed to take the day off from cleaning pens in order to prepare Xeda. She put on her nicest uniform, with the house insignia on her arm, and pinned her hair back to make it look a little more professional.

The trials would be held in the small arena on the north side of the house, used solely for small tournaments Sal held during off seasons. Ophilia checked herself one last time in the mirror, then made for the training grounds.

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A group of Sal's soldiers was already there to greet her, waiting to let the fighters out.

One by one, she opened their doors, and they each popped out to form a line, knowing what to do from the previous trials they had participated in. She drew over to Xeda's cell last, seeing him pacing in the shadows.

"Ready?" she asked.

He bowed his head.

She opened the door and unlatched the chains. He lurched out into the light, towering over her. The guards drew back and made a circle around them, then together they headed for the arena.

A crowd had already formed around the circumference of the arena, mostly consisting of staff that were off duty until later in the evening as well as a handful of staff from the houses of Sal's friends and business partners. Sal and his family and friends sat above in their own shaded box to watch everything below. The judges of the games were there with him, looking down on her critically. They talked and mingled while staff offered them food and drinks.

The other fighters stood off to the side while Ophilia brought Xeda to stand before Sal and the others. Sal came forward with Cristan standing beside him. His son fixed her with a sneer as he glared down at her.

"All right, everyone. These are Cristan's first ever games. He will be representing my house this year, and I am beyond confident he will win this. But first, we must test

our fighter and show the judges what House Salimar has to offer." He waved to Ophilia to begin as everyone clapped behind him.

Taking a deep breath, Ophilia turned to Xeda. Using her remote, she unlatched the belt from his waist, letting his tail unravel and fall at his feet. Next, she took off the collar and the cuffs, then the gloves and socks on his hands and feet. Xeda didn't so much as flinch, eager to be free of them. Finally, she unlocked the muzzle from his face and carefully slid it off him, letting it fall to the ground. Xeda worked his jaw, showing off his midnight black teeth, sharp as a viper's. His tail swung back and forth, curling before her.

Now that he was completely free of his binds, Ophilia offered her hand to him. "Take my hand, Xeda, so I can show them how well-trained you are."

The fire in his eyes made her tense, but she refused to take back her statement. He knew Sal and the others had to be convinced first. Had to know he wasn't a threat.

He stepped closer, glaring down at her. When she thought he might swipe her hand away, he instead put it on top of hers.

She let out a slow breath, then grabbed his wrist and lifted his heavy arm as high as she could, showing him off to the judges and the crowd. She turned him around once for everyone to see, and they clapped and shouted in response, clearly shocked that he was actually letting her turn him and wasn't eating her instead.

"Wonderful, Ophilia, really good." Sal clapped.

As she turned Xeda back to face Sal, she noticed Cristan was gone from his side and was now walking toward her.

"Cristan, wait," she started to protest.

"He's my fighter, not yours," Cristan said as he approached, waving at his people with a shit-eating grin on his face. "So, he needs to show some respect to me. So, go on, vrisha, kneel down."

Ophilia went deathly still. She could feel the heat of Xeda's rage at her back. He started to hiss, and she whirled around to face him, putting a hand on his chest to stop him from lashing out.

Xeda bared his teeth at the boy, looking ready to kill.

"Xeda," she whispered. "Xeda, look at me." It took him a moment to cast his icy glare down at her instead of Cristan. She looked back, pleading silently. "You have to. For your sake. Please."

"Come on, vrisha," Cristan said behind her, laughing. "Be a good doggy."

She could see it took all his will to let go, to see beyond his fury. A deep guttural growl lingered in his chest. If he didn't do as Cristan wanted, the judges might not consider him tamed enough for the games, which meant another year of waiting. Or worse, Sal getting impatient and sending him to the labs.

Xeda's face twisted into something awful. Slowly, he lowered himself onto the ground even as he continued to growl and bare his teeth, looking as if the movement pained him. He knelt down, his chest rising and falling as she could see him fighting not to leap up and rip Cristan's throat out.

Cristan whooped with delight, and the staff and his family cheered. He bowed to the crowd like the idiot that he was.

"All right, all right, Cristan, you made your point." Sal laughed quietly, making some offhand joke to the judges she didn't hear. Cristan proudly walked off, back up to the

box to stand by his father's side. "Off to a good start. But it's fighting we want, right?" Sal gestured to the fighters. "Bring in the bastard champion. And let's really see what this supposed warrior can do."

They brought into the arena the bastard champion—a large corax with a mouth like a great white shark's, snapping at the others as he passed by. They ordered the other fighters into the arena as well, and Ophilia knew they meant to have Xeda fight them all at once. This would be his ultimate test.

If she was worried it would be too much for him to handle, those worries vanished into thin air as soon as Xeda rose from his knees. The look on his face told her where his rage was now centered.

Quickly, she went and placed herself behind the short wall encompassing the inner ring of the arena. She watched as Xeda stalked toward the fighters and, as they began their fight, took out all his fury on them with a wild savagery like none she had yet to see.

CHAPTERTEN

Xeda

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He spent one last day in the cell. It was a quiet night for the most part except for his dead queen telling him how much of a fool he was for trusting Ophilia and being forced to submit as he had. He ignored her, trying to remain calm, trying to remember Ophilia's words. The promise made that no matter what he endured, if he won these games, he was free, and that was all that mattered now. If he wanted revenge, he could search for it later.

When morning came, he went to the door and waited for Ophilia. When he saw her coming across the yard, he noticed she was not alone. Two others wearing blue-gray clothes in a style similar to Ophilia's, with a white band on their arms showing a blade surrounded by three stars, followed beside her. One male and one female by what he could guess.

As Ophilia came to the door, she only gave him a small glance in greeting before opening it. She stepped back and allowed him to exit into the yard.

The two strangers looked up at him, and he was unnerved to find they didn't seem particularly frightened by him, unlike the rest. The woman even grinned at him, her short tendrils of red hair swept over her skull by a breeze, her jet-black eyes examining him with excitement. Her skin wasn't as smooth as the male's or Ophilia's, and he could just barely make out the silver strands of hair behind her ears.

The male was hairless with icy blue eyes that studied Xeda as well, his mouth curled to one side as if he were amused by something.

"Lovely, just lovely," said the woman. She circled him before stopping again to face him. "Xeda, is it? It's all right, you can speak. Everyone in the games will have

translators programmed to understand vrishan, so you'll be understood loud and clear."

Xeda looked between them suspiciously, then glanced at Ophilia who only nodded her head. He turned back to the woman. "Yes, Xeda," he replied.

"Good, good. I am Warden Margo, and this is Warden James. We are so excited to have you participating this year, Xeda. I'm willing to bet you'll be one of our best contenders."

Oh, you have no idea, he thought. After his fight yesterday, he felt more than confident. He'd practically ran circles around the other fighters even as his rage had blinded him. But that was all he would need to win.

"He will definitely be one of the most anticipated fighters," commented Warden James. Without even hesitating, he gripped Xeda's arm, as if testing his strength. It took all Xeda's will not to lash out and cut his throat with his talons, his fingers clenching and unclenching as the male's hand moved up his arm and then his back as the man continued to examine him. Xeda's gaze flicked back to Ophilia and narrowed. She stared back with that pleading glare—a warning for him to bear it for now.

The man stepped away and smiled. He whispered something to Warden Margo who nodded. "Yes, I think so too," she said back to him. She smiled again, that wide grin, speaking again to Xeda, "And I think it's time we get you out of here and over to the city center. The wardens have deemed you fit for fighting in the games, and I have to say I am willing to fully endorse you if anyone should challenge that claim. After your fight yesterday, you are going to be truly something. And I think everyone else will fully agree at the opener." She turned to Ophilia. "Everything is in order. I take it you've got all you need from here?"

"I do," she said.

"Good, good. Then let's get on with it!"

They turned for the gates, and Xeda cautiously followed, aware of every guard walking beside them or on the walls with their guns aimed at his back should he suddenly decide to make a break for it. The wardens ahead of him talked with the guards casually as the gates were slowly opened.

Ophilia came to walk beside him. He peered down at her and felt himself relax a little.

"What's at the opener?" he asked.

"You'll be showed off as we make for the gaming center where all fighters will be staying. Then you'll be prepared for the festivities."

"Festivities?"

"Pregame celebration," she explained. "You'll meet the other fighters while the representatives of each house basically party until the sun comes up."

He hissed low. "I thought we only had the games. You didn't say anything about having to participate in more than that."

"It's part of the whole thing, Xeda. It's all for show. And understand, you will be judged on your actions outside the arena as well. The more liked you are, the more you'll be sponsored."

"The hell does that mean?"

As they passed through the gate and made their way to the shipyard, Ophilia explained, "Money. It's all about money. The more credits you have, the better enhancements you can afford. Stuff like armor, weapons, and even specific drugs that can give you an edge. Make you faster and more agile. But they are expensive, and the only way we can afford them is if individuals donate to you."

"Why doesn't the house provide the credits?" he asked, annoyed and confused.

"They do. You have a pot of funds from Sal, but the rules of the games state a representative can only put in a max amount from their house at the start. The rest must come from others willing to give. It's all a part of the game and ensures it's not totally a pay-to-win scenario. Of course, people do find workarounds, and I'm sure Sal has a few friends up his sleeve who will be putting credits into the bank but likely so will those allied to other houses participating. You want to have as good a chance as possible, so any extra credits you can garner from outside Sal's influence the better. Which means—"

Xeda growled. "Don't say it."

"Which means you need to be on your best behavior," Ophilia said. "I know it sucks, but it's one more step toward your freedom and mine. Better this than being stuck in that dirty cell."

"Yes, I get that," he said, his eyes staring daggers into the wardens' backs. "But you can't expect me to suck up to these people just for some armor." Though he had to admit it would be awfully nice to have anything to cover him. "I can win without it if I have to."

"I'm not saying you can't," she argued. "Yes, some without enhancements have done better, even against enhanced fighters. But I'm telling you it's rare. And, once more, I remind you, we need every advantage possible, no matter how confident you might

be."

He clenched his hands, picking up the pace as he could see the ship now in sight. For a moment, he couldn't help but wonder how easy it would be to infiltrate the controls and take out the crew inside. Then he could just bypass this mess entirely. Assuming he could fly it, he could take off and be out of atmosphere before anyone could follow.

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But he knew such ideas were too good to be true. They couldn't possibly trust him so easily as to let him have free rein of the ship. They wouldn't possibly make it that easy, otherwise other fighters would have done the same, and he was sure Ophilia would have told him about it.

As they came into the shipyard, soldiers, both of the house and from the outside, greeted them. A small group of otherkin that wore similar clothing to the wardens' stood by the ship waiting for them. One held a box, and Warden Margo went over to them and opened it.

She turned and presented him with...a necklace?

Confused, he watched as she gestured to Ophilia who broke from his side. As Ophilia approached Warden Margo, she took the necklace from her hands.

"You'll wear this, Xeda, as a show of your agreement to participate in these games," Warden Margo said. "It represents your house and ensures our trust."

Ophilia came to him with the necklace, a silver and white band with the house symbol at the clasp. No, it was not just a necklace. It was a collar.

Xeda bared his teeth. He suspected it was no mere collar either. He could see a strip of light around the band, blinking slowly.

"What is this?" he asked.

Ophilia's gaze seemed a little clouded as she answered. "It's so the guards don't have

to follow you or watch you every second while in the city center. And ensures everyone is safe in case you..."

His eyes narrowed. "Decide the games aren't for me," he said, glancing up at Warden Margo who only smiled in response.

Ophilia nodded. "It's just a precaution, Xeda. But if you try to run or hurt someone, the collar..."

"Will stop me." His eyes peered around at the soldiers, imagining how many he could take out before they got him down. Or how quickly he could scale the wall of the shipyard before they followed. He knew it was futile because they would track him. They would hunt him no matter where he went, and he doubted he could get to another ship before they found him. He could try still, but the risk was high. And deep down, fighting in the games to win his freedom was much more appealing than being hunted by them like some animal that had escaped its cage.

Reluctantly, Xeda bent his head, letting Ophilia fix the collar to him, heat rising in his chest as he felt the clasp click in place.

For the first time, he watched the soldiers relax, lowering their weapons. A part of him felt chained all over again, even if he could move freely. The heat turned in his stomach even as he tried to convince himself it was the better way. The smarter way.

Warden Margo clapped her hands. "Awesome. Time to go," she called as she headed into the ship. "Roll out. We have a party to attend."

* * *

The city was bigger than he expected. As the ship floated down toward the center, he could tell that they had clearly established themselves on the planet for some time.

Towers and glass buildings took up the major part of the middle with smaller structures taking up the edges. Beyond the walls, there was nothing but the wastes. A desert of rocky terrain.

They landed on a dock just outside a tower that appeared different from the rest, made of some kind of polished stone and colored glass. It wasn't as tall as some of the others but still impressive. When he asked, Ophilia told him it was the gaming center, where they would be staying. Behind the tower was the enclosed arena, a massive structure almost as long as the tower was tall.

Between the dock and the gaming center were crowds of people from all manner of otherkin, melding together to stare at him. He hated their stares, hated how they hollered and cheered as he passed by. Only Ophilia by his side grounded him. Somehow her calm, collected attitude kept the edge off. Because she was the only one he felt he could trust now, he kept close, trying not to show his irritation.

Inside the building, the noise and chaos died down, yet his tension still remained. They were led up several floors by wardens who then brought them down a passage to a set of intricate-looking doors. They pushed them open and waited for them to enter. As he saw the room, he froze at the doorway.

The inside looked similar to that of a den from his home world. Dark, with low orange lighting and little flames in glass jars. It was warm, as warm as he could remember it being back home. The windows were even tinted slightly. To one side, there was a lounge with seats and a small flame in the center, then to the back wall, he could see an inground bed. To the far right wall, he could see a pool that extended out toward a balcony looking over the city.

It wasn't perfect compared to the dens of his homeworld, but it was close enough that he felt a small ache in his chest at the sight. A place he would likely never see again. He slowly stepped inside and stared around him, lost for words.

"My room is through this door over here," Ophilia said. She walked over to a door to the left and opened it into a much brighter, airier room, with colored glass bulbs hanging from the ceiling and a bed to one end set above the ground. There was more, but she didn't enter to look around. Instead, she turned back to him. "We should get you ready for the party."

"What exactly does that entail?" he asked.

She gestured to the pool. "Bath. Then when you're done cleaning..." She moved around to a chest someone had set by the door. She lifted the lid and inside were pieces of kelve clothing, from pants to straps. There were also pieces of grivhide armor, armguards, legguards, and shoulderpads.

"Where did they get that?" he hissed.

Ophilia shrugged. "They find ways to trade anything they can get. You don't think your own kind wouldn't trade with someone from here? It's nothing new." She let the lid close. "But there should be everything you need to look the part."

She left for her own room to prepare, leaving him to bathe. The pool was warm too and felt amazing after so long without a bath. He cleaned the grime, dust, and sand that covered his body, discovering sand even in places he never imagined. Glad to be rid of it, he soaked until he felt he was clean of that cell, including the stench. He let himself dry before returning to the chest.

The new kelve pants fit him well enough. He also donned a pair of armguards, fastening the straps accordingly around his upper arms so the grivhide covered from shoulder to elbow. For the first time since fleeing from that dreaded planet known as Illdara, he felt more himself again. A warrior. At least he looked the part.

When he was ready, he went to Ophilia's door and rapped on the surface with his tail.

"I'm finished," he called.

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She didn't answer right away, and he was about to rap on the door again. "Are you there? I said I am—"

The door opened, and whatever he was about to say as she appeared before him got choked in his throat.

"Please don't be upset," she said, putting her hands together.

He stood there staring down at her in stunned disbelief. A range of emotions swept through him, but the most shocking of all was the sudden stirring of heat in his lower belly. The heat rose into his chest, and he didn't know whether to be absolutely furious or resoundingly impressed.

She wore kelva like him. A female vrisha's garment. Only it had been altered for her body type with the top covering across her chest. She had a singular armguard across her shoulder and arm. The bottoms were tight-fitting kelva that hugged her ankles. At her feet, however, she wore human shoes, flats with leather straps that camouflaged with the rest. Her hair was braided back against her skull and hugged the back of her neck.

The only thing she was missing was a crown of horns. For a human to be in the fierce warrior clothing of his people, he should be outraged. If anyone else had, he would be. He would tear the clothing from their body, games be damned.

But for her, he found it exceedingly difficult to label what he was feeling because he knew it wasn't just anger but something far deeper. Something that couldn't be described.

"It wasn't my decision," she continued, looking at him desperately. "They want to have trainers and their fighters in matching outfits for the opener, as stupid as that is. We could do something different if you like. But I figured you'd be more comfortable in your own clothing and that maybe I could just..." She put a hand over her eyes as if embarrassed to look at him. "I shouldn't have done this. I'm sorry. I'll change." She went to close the door, and he stopped her.

It took him a moment to find the words. His eyes couldn't stop trailing over her, and he had to force himself to look away. "It's fine," he said, struggling. "Stay as you are."

"You're sure?" she said, uncertainly.

He turned back to his own room. "Yes, I don't care. Humans can never do the attire justice, and I should probably consider it insulting, but you've managed to make it look presentable at least." He tried to keep his tone as neutral as possible. The heat in his lower belly stirred again, and he was glad he wore the pants offered to him, feeling the ache between his thighs. He shook it off. It was nothing. He just missed home, and she wore a female vrisha's clothing, and that was just another reminder of home, that was all.

He heard her exhale. "All right." He heard her step into the room, and he glanced over to see her eyeing a cabinet set against the wall near the pool. She opened it and rummaged inside. "Before we go, let me help you with this." She brought out a dark green bottle of contents he didn't recognize.

"What is that?" he asked.

"A skin toner and shiner," she said.

He looked at her like she was mad. "Whatever for?"

She smiled at him teasingly. "To enhance those pretty scales and horns of yours of course."

He scoffed. "Unnecessary."

"Trust me?"

He glared back at her, his eyes taking her in yet again, unable to turn away. He scratched at his throat, trying to ignore the heat still lingering within. He hissed in annoyance. "Fine."

She smiled and pointed over to the lounge of seats. "Sit, please."

Hesitantly, he did. She came around to him, and he caught a whiff of her rich, strange scent, which frustratingly somehow made the ache between his legs worse. He was just confused. There was nothing to it other than that, and he would soon put it past him as a silly, insane, and extremely rare occurrence that only ever happened once.

She poured some of the golden gel onto her hands and then took his left arm first and rubbed it around, massaging the muscle. He let her work her hands along his forearm, realizing he hadn't bothered to stop her or demand he do it himself. He stayed quiet through the process, telling himself she could do a better job in applying it than he could anyway.

If he really wanted to get defensive, he could argue that it was good to have someone serve him for once. And he didn't mind it being a human, especially not Ophilia. After all, Queen Theda had said when she was alive that they could play with them or have them as temporary pets as long as they proved useful.

He thought of his warrior brethren, specifically the one who had betrayed them. That warrior had deceived the pack and fought against them because of a human. But Xeda

didn't have to betray his kind like that broken warrior had. He could still hate the humans and see them as useful in some fashion.

This line of thinking helped him feel less guilty as he allowed Ophilia to move her hands across him. Yes, this was fine, wasn't it? She could be an exception, after all. He wasn't betraying the Blood Guard or anything if he allowed her to serve him. And only that.

Her hands went across his chest, and he had to clench his hands tightly into fists as he rested them against the seat. He watched her work, noting how he didn't feel repelled by her touch, perhaps because he had grown accustomed to her and so it was easier to handle. In fact, it was nice really. Nothing wrong with a gentle hand, even if it was softer than he was used to.

She applied some down his belly next, and this time, he watched her face, noting it seemed a little redder than usual, her eyes shining bright. Her gaze met his, and she stilled her hand, lifting it away.

"Sorry, this is probably too much. Have I made you uncomfortable?"

He could still feel the sensation of where she had touched him, heat still lingering below where her hand had been. He stared at her, curiously.

If uncomfortable meant how alarmed he was by his reaction to her touch, then...
"Yes," he said.

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She brought her hand back and started to step away. He lunged forward and caught her wrist, pulling her gently back to him. "But you can finish."

She looked confused and uncertain but didn't question him. Quietly, she finished rubbing the gel on his ribs and then had him bend forward to get his back. Next, she shined his horns and rubbed the back of his skull, and, by the elders, it felt so divine he almost asked her not to stop.

When she was finished, she stood before him as if she wanted to say something. Instead, she cleared her throat and returned the bottle to the cabinet. The whole situation was quite bizarre to him, and he started to laugh. Never in his wildest dreams did he think he'd find himself being pampered this way by a human and actually liking it.

"What's so funny?" she asked in a clipped tone.

"Hmm, nothing. Nothing at all."

She didn't question him further. "Well, that's it then." She looked at the little screen connected to a band on her wrist. "They'll be starting soon. We should go."

He took a deep breath, wondering if he would make it through this day without breaking his composure, then stood and followed her to the door.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Xeda

They were led down to the tower's center by another two wardens—one lygin, one human—who seemed more robotic than real. It still unnerved him to see otherkin that were not intimidated by him. This made him wonder about the other fighters. These servants of the games were clearly used to seeing the most vicious of players, so even he was no longer the most threatening thing in the city.

As they stepped into a glass box that took them down to ground level, he peered down at Ophilia who was unusually quiet. He could practically smell the tension in her.

"Have you seen them, the other fighters?" he inquired, wondering what made her so nervous.

She shifted beside him. "No. But I know about the ones I've seen fight before."

"Is that why you're so nervous?"

She glanced up at him. "The fighters aren't the only thing I worry about. That's your job. But the other trainers..."

He studied her. "You're seriously worried about them?"

"I'm...an outsider. And many of the trainers had ties with Hendrik."

He suddenly understood. He straightened, staring ahead. "If they so much as touch you, they will wish they were dead."

He thought he heard her inhale sharply, as if shocked by his statement. "Just let me deal with them. You can't compromise your place in this at all. One wrong move outside the arena, and they will ban you, possibly for good."

His fangs slipped from his upper lip. "I guess we will both have to watch our backs then."

"Yes, we will."

The doors to the glass box opened, and beyond was a dark, circular room with a deep sea-blue floor. The two wardens had them wait just before another set of doors, to be announced before entering.

"Just remember," Ophilia said. "You're not here to make enemies. If anything, you want allies. If not that, then you must stay neutral. Talk as if you aren't about to fight. Act as if you are already a champion. And don't let them upset you no matter what they say."

The doors opened, and Xeda entered with Ophilia into a large central room with a ceiling high above, stretching all the way to the top of the tower roof. He stepped onto the gold and blue floors and saw the banners of the different fighters hanging from pillars around the wide open space. Floating above was a cylindrical monitor that his face appeared on.

"Welcome, fighter Xeda of House Salimar," boomed a female's voice.

Strangers applauded him. Hundreds of well-dressed individuals and all manner of otherkin crowded around him.

For a panicked moment, his instincts rose, wanting to lash out, a growl nearly escaping from his throat. He quickly pushed his instincts down and forced himself to remain calm. He kept his head high and stayed still. Ophilia beside him was doing a better job at playing the part. She smiled and waved, even putting her hand on his arm. She took his hand and rose it above her head as if in victory while she paraded him around the room.

He had to admit he was impressed by her cool, collected manner, even after they merged with the others and began to mingle. She kept her smile, her air of excitement, and did all the talking as people came up to them, asking questions about him.

He remained quiet, saying only a few words, mostly yes or no, when someone asked him something directly. It was bizarre to see so many people looking at him with such awe and praise when he was only used to terror and disgust. He wasn't sure what to make of it or if he liked the attention or not, but he remained calm, only going rigid every so often when he felt someone dare to touch him. He had to take deep breaths and try not to lose control, to not become overwhelmed, knowing he was being watched carefully by the game wardens nearby.

As if she sensed he was becoming uncomfortable, Ophilia thanked those around them and then led him away toward separate rooms past the central chamber. It was then he could start to relax and also pay more attention to his surroundings and specific people. He caught sight of other fighters and had to make sure not to stop and stare. There was a grex with a pair of extra metal arms. Then a massive corax, larger than the one he had fought at the house, and as tall as him, wearing some strange metal suit and some kind of jaw piece that gave him an extra set of teeth. There was a lygin who must have been genetically altered because they were also larger than the rest and looked more feral, with talons longer than Xeda's own and a mouth with a detachable jaw which he showed off to a group of onlookers.

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These were monsters far removed from their own kin, freaks of nature, altered by labs and fixed with metal parts for the others' entertainment, looking more than happy to be played with. He hated the sight of them and could feel his anger rising the longer he looked at them.

He was forced to linger and watch as Ophilia showed him around, presenting him to the most elite houses, the highest officials, and the most powerful drug lords.

Eventually, they found that shit of a human who was his representative, Sal's son. Xeda was forced to stand there as the insufferable meatbag bragged about breaking him in and taming him. Xeda had no choice but to remain silent. Only Ophilia's hand on his arm, which she squeezed every so often as if to comfort him, kept him from jumping the boy and ripping out his spine by his skull.

He didn't know how long he endured standing there, pretending to feel nothing as they talked about him. Luckily, when he thought he wouldn't be able to take much more, a low drumming began to play overhead, and everyone turned quiet.

"Good, I'm out of here," said the meatbag before finishing the drink in his hand and handing it to a servant. "This party is boring. At least I don't have to stick around in it like you two." He laughed. His eyes lingered a little too long on Ophilia, dragging down her body as he wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "But you know, Ophilia, you can come up to my apartment after, wearing that. Maybe suck me off a little, eh? Maybe I'll return the favor." He curled his fingers in front of her in a vulgar gesture.

Xeda didn't need to be told what he meant. He could guess. A low growl started in his throat and, as if unable to control himself, he went to step toward the male when

Ophilia stopped him, pressing her hand hard to his stomach.

The meatbag smirked at her and then moved away, waving to a group of men who hollered back at him as they disappeared through the crowd.

Xeda caught Ophilia's expression. Her skin had turned red again, but the fire in her eyes was different. A fire he understood well.

"That boy is asking to die," Xeda said in a low voice.

She blinked, and the fire was gone. "Don't worry about it. Come on." She started for the door back to the center.

"Where are we going now?"

She paused and turned to him. "You are going to meet the other fighters."

He leered down at her. "And you?"

"To meet the other trainers."

He caught her arm as she tried to leave again. "We're seriously being separated?"

"Just for a little while." She gently pulled away. "Remember what I said, Xeda. You've got this."

"But the others—"

"They won't try anything here. Not with so many eyes on them."

He wanted to believe her but remembered how she looked that night they had thrown

her in his cage. He didn't know what he might do if she showed up later with bruises on her again.

He bent his head toward her, pulling her closer so the others couldn't hear. Her face turned red again, her eyes brightening, but he ignored the change. "Then remember what I said. Watch your back."

She nodded, and he took it as a sign she understood. "I will," she whispered. "Believe me, I will."

CHAPTERTWELVE

Ophilia

Don't let them see you as weak.

The voice might have been her father's or brother's. Or even Xeda's. Maybe a combination of them all. Either way, they were words she clung to as she found her way into the section of rooms designated for the game wardens and the trainers. Elegant rooms with lavish seats, colored glass chandeliers, and wide windows looking out over the city. Long mosaics covered the inner walls showing off the victories of the previous champions. In the main room at its center was a pit where two low-end fighters unfit for the games had been brought in as entertainment. Several wardens watched from the rails along the pit, talking and laughing, careless that the grex fighters were tearing each other apart bit by bit.

Not interested in watching, Ophilia moved off to a small connecting room where a buffet had been set up for dinner. Despite a loss of appetite, she picked up a plate and filled it, then grabbed a glass of pink champagne and took a careful sip. She wasn't much of a drinker but tonight—and maybe the next few days—would be an exception.

As she found a spot in a corner near the window, she picked at her food while observing the room. She knew she should be mingling, but she needed a moment to study the crowd, to get a feeling for the others. On the other side of the room, she saw a few trainers she recognized that had come to visit the house a few times. Andron of House Myre, a proud-looking man with an eerie smile. She knew him well enough as a kid from her time at House Myre, secretly calling him Mr. Hyde because his friendly demeanor was only a front for what was inside. A terrifying man with a temper Sal could only admire. He once maimed a man so badly that they had to use a special machine to identify him after. It had been one of his own apprentices. He was charming but cold and calculating, able to manipulate emotions. Hendrik's training method had been inspired by him.

She saw trainers from other lesser-known houses stroll past including a lygin man with a short mane and scar across the side of his head. He wore light armor similar to his fighter. She saw a tight-lipped older woman with icy gray eyes wearing a tight-fitting suit, also likely after her warrior, and a large man who reminded her of Hendrik only somehow more grotesque, with one arm encased in metal. Then she spotted the trainer from House Zanis, a nillium male with golden bronze skin, short jet-black hair, and dark rod-like horns. He wore a dark pair of hides like those Tazyn wore. She couldn't remember his name, but she knew he was more a representative than an actual trainer. Because their champion no longer needed training. Tazyn was in a league of his own.

The next member she spotted was Marius of House Lageth. She had been thankful to not have encountered Eliam—one of the heads of that household to whom Sal had so nicely tried to sell her off to. She had been too busy making sure Xeda had behaved. Marius, unlike the other trainers, was also a family member of that house. He just liked working with the fighters. His dark complexion and black eyes made him seem mysterious, but he had a charming, friendly smile. That didn't mean she wasn't still put off by him, knowing he might end up her brother-in-law if she didn't win these damn games.

She set her plate aside and drank down the rest of her glass, knowing she'd better start making small talk or they would think she was deliberately avoiding them. She thought of Xeda and laughed a little, knowing he wouldn't give a shit what they thought. But she had to care for the both of them. She suddenly imagined Xeda splayed out on a metal slab, and it chilled her to the bone. She tried to imagine a better outcome instead of the bad and promptly envisioned them free of this place, in some paradise. A beach maybe. Him reclining back on some seat. Her next to him...massaging away his pain, her hands freely on him as he purred with pleasure.

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Heat rose in her face, and she cleared her throat, recalling how he had pulled her to him to finish putting on the toner. His mismatched eyes had glared at her with an intensity that burned. Her hands had moved along him, liking the smooth touch of his scales.

Her blood throbbed in her ears, and she shook the thought away, telling herself now wasn't the time to daydream about crazy, impossible things. She went to step away from the window when someone blocked her way.

"Ophilia Jones, right?"

Ophilia looked up at the man before her and caught his dark green eyes first before noticing the rest of him, tall, blond, and wearing a black uniform with violet and orange threads and silver cuffs. The symbol of a serpent holding two daggers in its mouth could be seen on the right armband. She grew still, recognizing those house colors and the symbol. The brand of House Capura.

She nodded, forcing a smile on her lips. "That's right."

His smile was genuine, pairing nicely with his handsome face. He offered his hand to her. "Zachary Collett of House Capura."

She'd heard of him but knew little of his training style. Few did. Mainly because House Capura hadn't participated in the games in several years. She hadn't seen Capura's banner in the main gaming hall, but if Zachary was here, it meant they were participating again. And she could only guess who was fighting for them.

She took his hand and shook it without flinching. "It's nice to finally meet you. I didn't know House Capura would be in the games this year. It's been so long."

He squeezed her hand before letting it go. "It was a last-minute decision, actually. They didn't even have time to place the banner."

"It's lucky then that they could get you in."

He shrugged. "Anything is possible for our best champion."

She tried to remain calm or at least indifferent, but deep inside, she was screaming, her blood boiling. "I thought Kaxek retired."

"He's decided to come back this year. Someone needs to put Tazyn down a peg or two." He laughed. "But now with your fighter, Xeda, this will make for one of the most anticipated games in a decade. If not ever." He placed his hands in his pockets as he studied her. "I don't think we've had the pleasure of two vrisha in the arena before."

No, they hadn't. There was a reason Kaxek had remained undefeated. He'd won more games back-to-back than anyone. He—or his house rather—had claimed he had once been a top warrior of his kind, in line to become a predomis, a guardian to a vrisha queen, before he had been captured many years ago. She remembered watching the games, remembered how brutal they had been. All because of Kaxek. He'd put himself in retirement after, when it was clear no one could beat him, and he hadn't been seen since. Knowing now he had returned was a literal game changer. A gut punch to the stomach. He'd kill Xeda the first chance he'd get to prove his dominance. In fact, she was willing to bet that was why he was coming back. He'd gotten wind of Xeda and now he saw what might actually be a challenge.

"It will certainly be a show," she said, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

Zachary glanced around him as if making sure no one was in hearing distance. "I'm sure you also noticed there will be two fyriens participating this year."

She had. She'd noticed from the banners above, her only indication of who they'd be up against. The fyriens were incredible opponents too. But they were not only hard to find, they also never stuck around for long. A few would become mercenaries for a couple of the more established houses but would then eventually disappear. No one knew why for sure. Any who became champions also didn't stay. They were a mysterious race, just as much as the vrisha. They held no loyalties and kept no ties. They were lone fighters, but they were vicious and agile. The only one that ever lost, lost to Kaxek long ago.

"One is representing House Myre if I'm not mistaken," she mentioned, remembering seeing the Myre symbol on top of the banner.

"That's right. A male named Aeriz. And the other is House Lageth, a female named Vyn. Rumor is they are related. But then, most think all fyriens are related somehow since there are so few. Aeriz was one of Myre's mercs, and Vyn was a hired assassin only caught some years ago. Aeriz only works for them to protect her. He went into the games because she did or so I've heard."

Great. "That means they'll likely be working together," she said aloud.

"That's what I was thinking. And if you know anything about fyriens, they can be strategic and sneaky bastards."

She eyed him curiously, wondering why he was telling her this. Then it dawned on her. "This means others might need to band together too."

He caught her gaze and smirked. "That might be wise. At least in the beginning."

"You think the games will last that long?"

He shrugged. "Probably not. But better to have that edge with a partner. I was thinking our fighters would have no problem taking these two out but only if they did it together. And in the more intense playing fields, it will be good to have an ally, don't you think?"

She couldn't deny it, it was tempting. Better to have Kaxek as an ally in the beginning. If they took out the rest, then Xeda would only have to worry about one fighter instead of a couple dozen. But Kaxek would be a greater challenge than any of them. The chance of Kaxek being taken down early would be non-existent, especially if they took out the fyrien pair first. Zachary must be certain they would target Kaxek alone and wanted to have someone to support him when they attacked.

"I'll talk it over with Xeda," she said carefully.

"Excellent." He scooped up a pair of drinks from a server passing by and handed one to her. He touched his glass to hers. "Let's make this a game no one will forget."

CHAPTERTHIRTEEN

Xeda

He felt sick.

The sky looked like a deep emerald green from the glass ceiling above him. The glass, knitted together by metal, covered the full length of the garden he now stood in. A garden ripe with all manner of plants and fruit that could be picked off at a whim. Fountains and statues of unknown warriors decorated the space. It was all so clean and prettily made, it made the fighters look even uglier and out of place by comparison.

A cage, even a gilded one, was still a cage.

He hated the beauty of it all, a mockery of those who stood around, hardly admiring a thing. Just beasts who stomped around like they would in a forest. The corax he'd seen before was sitting by one of the pools, catching sea creatures in his claws and then tearing them apart with his teeth, their blood dripping down its jaw. The lygin tore apart a tree to show off his claws, and the grex with four arms, two made of metal, ripped out another, flinging it into one of the nearby ponds. Both laughed as if they played some fledgling's game.

They didn't fight at least. None of them did, knowing they would be banned and severely punished if they did.

He stalked along the path and hardly let his eyes linger on any of them. Most kept to themselves, including the fyriens who hid in an alcove, talking in whispers, and glaring at him when he passed. Their dark armor shined against their purple skin, their white hair cropped short so it didn't fall across their eyes. Their twin blades at their sides were ready to be wielded. Their orange eyes glowed in the shadows as

they slipped off somewhere unseen.

He came to a break in the garden and found the nillium, Tazyn, next, sitting with a long double-bladed weapon on his lap. His skin was more white gold than the bronze Xeda had seen on others, and his eyes were more silver. His dark hair was set in braids across his back, and his horns curved slightly across his skull. He smiled at Xeda, showing off a set of short fangs.

"They said there would be another of you," he said. "This will be interesting."

Xeda stopped a few feet before him, his tail weaving. "What do you mean?"

His smile widened. "You aren't the first vrisha."

Xeda grew still. "There is another?"

"What? Did you think you were the biggest threat in this place? I've seen how your kind fight. Impressive. Though I'll be glad for the challenge. I'll be looking forward to seeing what you can do." He pointed his weapon at him. "But, funny, you're not the one whose blood I want the most on this blade."

Heart beginning to race, Xeda passed by him, leaving him. Somehow, he hadn't wondered if there would be another of his kind here. Truly, he didn't want to believe it. He searched through the garden, anticipation making him grow more tense. He set down one path, passing through the arch of a viney plant with blood-red flowers, and came to the back of the garden where a statue stood of a vrisha warrior. Underneath its shadow, he saw him.

He froze as they locked eyes, and for a clear, horrifying moment, he thought he was staring at a warrior from his past. The very warrior who had betrayed his queen.

"Vrexus," Xeda hissed low. The fury that rushed through him was so powerful, so wild, he began to see red. He was going to fight him here, games be damned. He was going to kill him.

The warrior stood. He was at least a half foot taller, but he had no markings. His eyes were a murky, clay red, his scales a reddish-orange almost like Xeda's. But he was built like Vrexus, the enemy that had gotten away.

Don't do this. Not yet. Wait. Wait until it's time,said a soft voice, sounding like Ophilia's. He saw her pleading before him.Don't do this, Xeda.

He clenched and unclenched his fists, his tail weaving and curling, wanting desperately to strike. He took a deep breath, focusing on her, focusing on her voice. Knowing she was right. He saw her as he had only a few hours ago, and the memory helped calm him. Helped him remember what he was really fighting for.

The male before him tilted his head, eyeing him curiously. "Vrexus. I don't know that name. Was he your brother?"

Xeda took another deep breath. "No. He was my enemy."

The warrior's eyes narrowed. "I see. It is fitting then." He stalked a little closer, and as if on instinct, they began to circle one another. "I have been anticipating your arrival. I knew someday, one of my own would come. Though it's sad to see a vrisha captured by these pathetic lot."

"Were you not also captured yourself?" Xeda growled.

The warrior stopped and so did Xeda. "No. I came here of my own will, fleeing the alliance. They told me if I wanted to stay, I had to play. So I did. I played their little game and won. I liked it so much that I did it several more times and won every

single time. They told me I needed to retire to give others a chance."

"You fled the alliance...you allied with Queen Theda?" Xeda hadn't seen him before but then Queen Theda had many of her Blood Guard working from afar and could have easily had new recruits coming before she'd died.

The warrior scoffed. "No. I'd heard of her but hadn't sworn myself to any queen. I command myself and only myself. But that meant fleeing our world to pursue another. I would not ally myself to those lesserkind, those weaker species of the alliance."

He sounded like Xeda had when Queen Theda was alive. And Xeda couldn't deny he'd felt the same. His bitterness had only grown worse since his capture. But that didn't mean he'd trust this warrior. Not yet. Not after Vrexus, his ex-commander whom he had hated more than anyone, had betrayed them all. This warrior wasn't a Blood Guard either. He was a lone rogue which made him more dangerous.

"I need to win this to free myself," Xeda stated. "I don't suppose you'll consider backing down? I'd hate to fight one of my kind over something like this."

"I'm afraid you'll have to," the warrior said. "But if you swear yourself to me, I will reconsider."

Xeda glared at him with stunned outrage. No. He would never swear himself to him. Never another warrior. Or anyone. The only one he would consider was another queen and only if she was worthy. He wanted to kill him for even considering it. "I guess we will have to fight."

The warrior dipped his head. "Too bad. But if you change your mind, Kingsway needs more of our guidance, brother. There is no one here for you, that would ally with you. Want you. You are like me. Only I would accept you at my side. But I'm

also willing to put you in your place if I must. And trust me, I will."

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Xeda bared his teeth as the warrior passed him without another glance, disappearing down a path. Rage burned his insides, but he let him go, knowing he would have his chance to prove otherwise. In time. Even as the warrior's words slipped into him like a knife, he stood his ground.

In time, he would show this warrior he was a force to reckon with.

CHAPTERFOURTEEN

Ophilia

She waited by the side of one pillar within the tower's central room, staring at the banners that hung across each side showing each fighter. It was growing late, her dinner party coming to a close, only a few groups lingering around, eager for tomorrow for the first game. She knew Xeda had to be returning soon. She couldn't go back to their rooms without him.

She worried about what his reaction would be to Kaxek. She didn't expect it to be a cuddly little reunion. Kaxek might be a vrisha, but he and Xeda weren't the same, or at least she wanted to think that. Xeda only wished for his freedom. Kaxek enjoyed taking it from others, with their lives.

But don't forget who Xeda really is, she thought. He wasn't the good guy either.

It hurt to admit it, but she wanted to believe Xeda could see beyond his hatred. Someday. She turned over her and Zachery's conversation and wondered if Xeda would be more than happy to work by Kaxek's side after all. If he would see the

warrior in himself. She imagined them fighting together, growing closer, feeling a mutual connection. A mutual hunger for bloodshed.

The thought twisted her insides. She didn't know which outcome might be worse, having to fight Kaxek or join him. To become another vrisha who enjoyed the games. Could she stand by after and watch him become that person? If it meant her own freedom?

She closed her eyes, trying to not let her growing anxiety and guilt eat at her. Whatever happened was beyond her control. It was up to him which path he chose after. All that mattered in the end was their victory.

She stepped out of the shadow of the pillar, looking to inch her way closer to the entrance of the inner gardens. She forced a smile as a couple walked past, noticing their fancy gems and designer clothes, wondering which house they belonged to.

"Ophilia, my dear Ophilia," came a sing-song voice behind her.

Ophilia tensed. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Sal with a drink in his hand, the buttons of his clean-cut suit open at the collar. Beside him was a man she didn't recognize. He wore a black and white suit much like Sal's. His hair, peppered with gray, was slicked back, and one side of his face had a dark birthmark that covered from cheek to jaw. His hazel eyes examined her closely, scrutinizing her. Something about him seemed familiar to her.

Sal put an arm across her shoulder, gently pulling her toward the stranger.

"Ophilia, I'm so glad we ran into you. I have to say, you've done a great job getting that vrisha of ours looking good in such a short amount of time. Impressive, real impressive. This is Eliam by the way, my good friend. I mentioned him before, remember? Eliam, this is Ophilia, our star trainer. How do you like that?"

Ophilia felt nauseous as she took the hand Eliam offered and shook it. Eliam Lageeth. The one Sal wanted to sell her to. She understood why he looked familiar. His features were similar to those of Marius, Eliam's brother and house trainer.

"So good to finally meet you, Ophilia." Eliam smiled, showing off fake gold teeth. Despite his smile, his eyes continued to scrutinize her, glancing down at her outfit, his nose wrinkling as if he didn't find the look very appealing. She imagined he'd prefer her in a dress, covered from head to toe. She pulled her hand away, and he reluctantly let it go. "I gotta say I was surprised when Sal told me what you did. Standing up to him, what a brave girl. And him letting you train that vrisha. Crazy. I still think it was crazy, Sal."

Sal shrugged. "She made a hard offer, I gotta say. Hopefully, it was worth it." Sal locked eyes with hers. "It better have been worth it," his eyes told her.

Ophilia forced a smile. "I don't think you'll be disappointed."

"I'm sure I won't." Sal's hand was on her back, keeping her in place. "But at least if you do lose this, Eliam here will have his chance, that right?"

Her blood throbbed in her ears, and she wanted to spit in his face. Instead, she kept her ground, knowing one wrong move even now might cost her. "I'm sure we can talk things over if it comes to that," she said carefully. "But I'm determined to win this."

Eliam glanced at Sal with a smirk. "Well, for Sal's sake, I hope you give it your best. For my sake, however...I'd be glad to have you in my house, Ophilia." His eyes drifted down her again. "And maybe wearing something a little less barbaric."

Sal laughed. "Or nothing at all." He smacked her ass, and she had to place her hands behind her back to not send her fist into his face. As he drank from his glass, his gaze went past her head, and for a clear moment, she thought she saw him flinch. "Speak

of the fucking devil."

Ophilia twisted around slowly and saw Xeda standing near the entrance of the room. The other fighters were returning to their trainers. His eyes met hers, and she didn't know what to make of his expression. Feeling suddenly hot from his gaze, she looked away.

"I think we are going to have to say good night," she said. "Xeda needs rest for tomorrow."

"Yeah, sure he does," muttered Sal. "All right, Ophilia, tomorrow then. You know where I'll be. I'm counting on you."

"Until next time, Ophilia," said Eliam as he and Sal turned off to continue their party somewhere else.

A moment later, Xeda came to stand beside her. "What was that about?" he asked.

She licked her lips, her mouth suddenly feeling dry. "Nothing. Just reassuring Sal that we're going to win. Come on, let's get out of here."

* * *

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As soon as she closed the door to their room, Xeda stalked over to his side and began to pace.

"You never mentioned another vrisha," he growled.

She took a deep breath. "I didn't know. I hardly knew who any of the fighters were. And I didn't think Kaxek would compete again. Not after so long."

Xeda slowed. "Kaxek," he said, more to himself than to her. "No, never heard of him. He must have left Tryth some years ago."

"He's been fighting in these games for some time." She leaned against the door frame between their rooms, crossing her arms. "He's never lost. But that doesn't mean he can't be defeated. Not when he has an actual opponent that can equal him."

He glanced at her, seeming thankful for the subtle compliment. But he also looked uncertain. "I've fought vrisha like him before..."

"That's good," she said. "That means you'll at least have some idea of what you're dealing with." When he didn't look at her, she had to ask. "Did you ever win against any of them?" He didn't speak, and her heart started to race. "Xeda. You're still standing, so surely you held your own..." He stared straight at her, and she could see the cloud of anger and sadness in his eyes.

"No," he whispered, his voice laced with seething anger. "I didn't beat them. I lost. I..." He turned away from her, and he bowed his head, bending forward as his body began to shake.

Panicked, Ophilia went for him. Without thinking, she placed a hand on his back and then jumped when he bolted upright as if surprised by her touch. She put up her hands, showing them to him, showing she meant no harm. "Please, Xeda. I know this is hard. But I believe in you. This is your moment. This is your chance to prove they can't beat you. You are stronger. And I know you won't give up easily. You'll fight till...till it kills you."

He stared down at her, and she could see a fire burning in his eyes. Even his deep red one seemed to glow. His gaze flicked down to her lips, then her neck, then to her open hands. Without warning, he took her hand in his and pulled her closer. A small little gasp passed through her teeth as she felt the heat of his body from being so close. He bent his head and, gripping her wrist firmly, examined her palm.

"What happened here?" he asked as he brushed a taloned finger over the skin of her palm. Goosebumps traveled across her arms and legs as she shivered at his touch. She looked down and saw the tiny moon-shaped prints in her skin, some even bleeding lightly.

She had hardly noticed that she had been clenching her fists so hard while talking to Sal that she had made the indents.

"I, um, had to keep myself from punching Sal in the jaw, among other things," she explained.

They both stared down at her hand, watching as his thumb brushed over hers. "I would have liked to have seen that," he said.

"Yeah, me too." She shivered again and gently pulled her hand away. "Well, I guess we should call it a night, tomorrow being the big day and everything."

He tilted his head at her, and she could practically see the gears turning. "I need to

clean first." He stepped farther into his room and began to undress in front of her, taking off the grivhide.

She caught herself staring and looked away, heat tickling her neck. "Right, me too," she said, turning away, not wanting to look like a weirdo watching him.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

She stopped and looked back at him, confused. "To clean up?"

He hardly looked at her as he untied a piece of armor from his arm. "You can do that in here as well as serve me."

She grew still, unmoving by the door. "I'm sorry, serve you?"

"Yes." He dropped the piece into the chest. "You put this shine on me. I think you should also take it off." He glanced up and fixed her with a lazy yet cutting stare. A gaze not unlike the one she had imagined on him back at the dinner party. "After all, you are my warden as well as trainer aren't you?"

She got the gist of what he was saying. He expected her to groom him in some way. Keep him looking and feeling his best. She smiled at his sudden arrogance. "That may be true, but I should remind you many trainers don't so much as lay a hand on their fighters. And fighters don't ask it of their trainers to do so."

His eyes narrowed, but she could see the spark of amusement in his gaze. "Then I guess that makes both of us an exception. Seeing as you've touched me many times. And now I am asking."

Her mind turned over that remark. He waited for her reply, and she shifted on her feet, wondering if he was truly serious. "You're sure?"

"I wouldn't have mentioned it otherwise," he said.

"I mean it won't upset you?"

He paused to look her over, then dipped his head in a shrug. "I'm used to your presence, and it doesn't upset me nearly as much compared to the others."

"I should be so lucky," she said. She hesitated, then took a careful step into his room. Well, it wasn't like it would mean anything, right? Maybe in his culture, they had public baths. Or naked beaches. Maybe no one cared about that sort of thing like her culture did. He didn't see her as anything but a pesky human anyway, so surely she had nothing to fear.

She tried to keep this mentality in mind when they walked over to the pool on the opposite side of his room. But as she stood looking down at it, her confidence waned. If he loathed humans, there was no way he wanted to be naked with one. She could imagine the look of disgust on his face already.

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"Maybe I'll just sit on the edge and help clean off the toner from there," she suggested.

He pulled off his kelve pants and dropped them by the pool. She wished she had an ounce of his confidence as he stood naked before her and walked leisurely down into the pool. Then again, he didn't have anything to show. At least not yet. She knew they kept their privates hidden, protected in the v-shaped sheath between his legs.

He looked over at her and almost appeared hurt by her suggestion. "I'm not going to bite you."

"That's not exactly what I am afraid of."

He studied her curiously. His tail weaved across the surface behind him. "Then what?"

She shifted on her feet. "Have you ever seen a human naked?"

He blinked at her in surprise, then seemed to think it over. "Hmm...no."

"And you've never cared to, right?"

"Is that honestly why you're afraid?"

She bit her lip, looking down at the water. "Yes." Her heart flipped as she said it. "I think you might regret it...and I don't exactly look like...like the others."

He leaned back against the edge. "Well, lucky for you, I have no other human to compare to." When she didn't respond, he huffed. "Don't fear my reaction. I promise not to laugh or to get upset. And as I said, I wouldn't have asked if I didn't want you here in the first place. Trust me."

Because it doesn't mean anything, she thought to herself. Somehow that made her feel less self-conscious. Playing with the ties on her waist, she decided to let herself go. Before she lost her nerve, she took off the small armband first, then unclasped her top and let it fall. Without hesitation, she peeled off the bottoms and placed them to one side.

She hugged herself and took a step into the pool, then froze when she caught Xeda's gaze, a quiet intense stare like none he'd given her before.

"Who did that to you?" he asked softly.

She didn't move, paralyzed by whether she should quickly put her clothes back on or submerge herself in the pool. Instead, trying to keep her courage, she stood firm and slowly dropped her arms. Her eyes drifted down, and she caught the scars that went across her breasts in an ugly asymmetrical X. One point ended at her left nipple, another at her collarbone.

She took a deep breath and finally decided to walk farther into the pool. From a dispenser on the ledge beside him, she squeezed soap onto her hands, then lathered them before getting closer. Her little daydream of them on the beach resurfaced in her head, and she cleared her throat, waving it away. She trailed her hand over his shoulder and down one arm, washing away the oil of the toner.

"My immediate family was assassinated when I was very young," she started, wanting to give him a clear answer. "It was an otherkin hired by someone who wanted what my family had. Some say a lygin, others a nillium or a fyrien. No one

remembers or cares anymore. They killed my mom, dad, and brothers. The story everyone tells is that, when the assassin got to me, he couldn't bring himself to finish the job because I was just a child. And that's how I survived. But that was a lie. He wanted to take his time with me instead. He cut me deep with his blade." She moved her hand across Xeda's chest, drawing the X with her fingers, tracing the way the blade had moved along her in a slow caress. "I screamed and begged him to stop, but he only laughed." Her voice felt distant as that night surged back into her memory. "The only reason I survived is because he took too long and didn't notice one of the family guards had survived his blade. They shot him several times."

"They killed him?" Xeda hissed softly.

"No, actually. He survived but was severely maimed. He tried to flee but was caught by the local enforcers. He took the blade to his throat after, before they could get anything out of him." She glanced up and caught Xeda's eyes. Her face burned, as if he saw through her.

"Maybe I was wrong then," he said in a low voice.

Her brow furrowed. "About what?"

"Maybe...not all humans are as weak as I thought. There are a few rare exceptions."

For some reason, that made her smile. "Is that what I am?"

"Yes. To me. And I'll fight any who says otherwise."

She didn't know why but the way he said it made it sound like it had a deeper meaning. "Well, if that's considered a vrisha compliment, I'll take it." She continued to wash off the toner. Her hands slipped down his side, letting her fingers trail down each rib. She knew he watched her, and she pretended not to notice even though her

pulse raced.

She went to add more soap when she suddenly felt something slither across her thigh. She jumped so high she splashed them both, a curse spilling from her lips.

"What the hell?" she gasped.

Xeda snickered. She felt something trail across her legs again and realized it was his tail.

"Still a jumpy little thing though," he hissed. "I can still scare you any time."

"I was startled, not scared," she corrected.

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"Oh, really?" His tail went across her back and pulled her a little closer. He reclined back with his elbows on the ledge, waiting for her to apply more soap. His tail continued to graze across her back as she squeezed more soap into her hands. She hesitated to rest her palm on him again, and he noticed. "Don't go timid on me now." He gave her a sly grin, and she fixed him with a fierce glare, even as a smile tugged at her lips.

"None of the other trainers can know how much I spoil you. They'll think I'm weak," she remarked.

"But the other fighters would be jealous," he said.

"I should think so."

He grunted with approval. He was silent for a moment as she reached up and lathered his neck and massaged the back of his head, along the horns. He closed his eyes, and a soft sort of purr or growl rumbled in his chest. "If I make it through tomorrow, I demand more of this."

She laughed. "If you make it, then it's a deal."

One eye cracked open to peer at her. "Having a human servant might not be so bad."

Ophilia let out a short laugh. "Don't get too cocky." She slowed for a moment, thinking it over, then decided to hell with it, and said quickly, "But how about a friend?"

Both his eyes opened. "A friend?"

She felt the heat rise in her face. Maybe it was too soon. She recovered with, "Someday maybe?"

He fixed her with that intense, quiet gaze. "Yes, maybe," he said softly.

She smiled and continued to massage the back of his head, her heart swelling a little. His friendship was better than she could ever hope for. And if it was all he would give, she would take it.

CHAPTERFIFTEEN

Xeda

He was hunting.

The night was clear, a bright moon guiding his way through a jungle as he stalked his prey. He didn't see them, but he could smell them and knew they were near. Oh, how he loved their scent. He wanted to bury himself in them, rub the scent over him. Yet the one who carried it fled from him.

Unthinkable.

He was obsessed with the need to catch this prey. And he wouldn't stop until he did. Soon they would tire, soon they would be his.

Swiftly and silently, he weaved through the trees, catching a glimpse of them in the distance. Yes, he was close, so very close. A thick, silky fog wrapped around his ankles, but it was no matter. He jumped over rocks and streams with ease, as if they were hardly there.

Closer. Closer.

A soft thumping drummed in his head. He had his sights on them now and saw their hair flying across their shoulders as they ran. He could hear them panting as they strained to lose him.

They broke into a clearing. A clearing with crumbling statues of long lost warriors. His prey stopped in front of one that blocked their way and turned to him.

He slowed and came to a halt.

Breathless and skin glowing in the moonlight, Ophilia stared back at him. Knowing she was caught, she slowly approached him. She wore the female attire of a vrisha, this time paired with a crown of horns.

He on the other hand was naked.

It occurred to him then he might be dreaming. But he didn't feel compelled to wake.

"Be good, Xeda," she purred at him. Her blue-gray eyes cut into him like a blade.

He didn't want to be good. He wanted to be wicked.

He closed the distance between them. Growling low, he let his tail drift across her thigh...then along her stomach...then her chest, letting the bladed tip brush along her throat.

She lifted her head, her eyes half open, her lips parting. He couldn't explain it, but the expression made the heat grow worse between his legs. He let his tail fall, then slither down between her thighs and heard her inhale sharply.

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Her hand pressed on his chest, then slowly drifted down his stomach. The hunger was rising, and the heat with it. He was growing mindless with the need. Needed her to touch him where it pained him most. He watched her hand move, and when she did finally trail her fingers along his sheath, he hissed with pleasure, his cock sliding out slowly.

She lifted her hand and showed it to him, now covered in his oil. She pressed her finger to her lips, and he shuddered as she tasted him. "Be good, Xeda," she repeated. "And don't move. Show me how well trained you are."

He grew still as she knelt before him. He didn't dare move as she took him in her hands first, pulling the heat from him. Then she covered him with her mouth, and he let out a sharp bark of surprise and ecstasy, so engulfed by her it nearly broke him. It was unnatural, obscene, and forbidden to have a human on him like this. It was wrong. But Ophilia felt so right. And he relished in every stroke. Slow and deep, then faster until he finally snapped, roaring as his body convulsed.

The scene swirled, then tore apart around him until there was nothing left, and he was being shoved awake.

His eyes flew open, and a soft moan spilled between his teeth. He looked around and saw he lay on a soft pad in an inground bed. The pad was ripped to shreds.

He had been dreaming and yet his body still throbbed. He growled in annoyance and slowly sat up, noticing his cock was still out of its sheath and his belly and legs were damp.

He stared down at himself and sat there in stunned silence, his mind turning over what the hell had just happened. Eventually, coming to terms with the disturbing dream, he stood and climbed out of the bed. Yes, that was all it was. A very disturbing dream. He couldn't help how his body reacted.

"You're disgusting," hissed a voice in the shadows. He saw her at the corner of his eye but didn't dare look at her. His dead queen paced along his periphery, looking more twisted every time she appeared. "You disgust me. You're being entranced by a human. You're letting her tempt you. Weak. Pathetic."

He bared his teeth. He bent his head and tugged at his horns. "No," he hissed back. "It's not true. It's not my fault."

"Control this now or it will consume you."

He straightened. Yes, he needed to get a hold of himself. It was nothing. It was just a dream.

He peered down at himself with irritation and pushed his cock back into its sheath even if it pained him. The throbbing didn't cease, the heat didn't dissipate. But surely it would. He just needed to calm himself.

He lumbered over to the pool and quickly sank down, cleaning himself off.

The games would be starting soon, and he needed to have a clear head. He needed to be ready.

* * *

He was tying the last piece of grivhide on his arm when he heard Ophilia's door open and click shut behind him.

"Morning," she said in a cheerful voice. "Wow, I didn't think you'd be ready so soon. You know the games don't start for a few hours, right?"

He didn't look at her as he said, "I just want to be prepared."

He heard her soft footsteps approaching, but he couldn't bring himself to turn and look at her. "Are you hungry? I can send for food."

"I'm fine."

"All right." She was silent for a moment, then said, "Did you sleep well?"

He froze, growing tense. Then quickly, he yanked the last tie tight. "Not really."

"Yeah, me either, honestly. A little too wired for today, I think."

He still couldn't look at her. He stared out one window instead, out toward the city beyond. Even after cleaning off, he had found it hard to relax. His body still throbbed, the heat simmering low but still there, the ache between his legs now a dull pain that wouldn't go away. He walked to the door and stopped. "I'd like to go to the training area."

"All right," she said slowly. He knew she was studying him, could practically feel her eyes on his back. "No problem. That would probably be wise. That way, you can get warmed up."

Without waiting, she took him straight down to the training area. He wasn't surprised to see others there already. Not Kaxek, but one of the fyrien was throwing their blades at a target. He locked eyes with Xeda before pulling back his blade from the target.

"I'll be close by," Ophilia said. "I'll come back for you in a little while."

She left him, and he was grateful to be alone. His body was still tense, but he planned to remedy that while focusing on the fight ahead. He moved over to a rack of weapons and took up a curved blade that reminded him of a scythe. Gripping it tightly, he moved on to a target and took out his frustration on it one cut at a time.

* * *

By the time the fighters had moved on, readying themselves for the game to begin, Ophilia had returned, and he felt a little better after tearing the target to shreds.

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"It's time," she said. "Are you ready?"

He was. He felt better enough to look at her, catching her steel blue eyes first and forcing the memory of the dream away. She wasn't clothed in the vrisha garment again, thank the elders, just a red uniform cut to her form with the house insignia on the arm.

"I'm ready," he said. He needed to focus. The games were what was important. Not...whatever the hell was happening to him. He needed to just let it go. Think on his freedom, on winning. That was all that mattered.

Ophilia led him away. They passed through the training area, then through the tower's center and down a set of stairs. A long tunnel took them below the city footpaths. Here, he saw guards stationed at points and walking the opposite direction, their hands itching for their guns as they passed. When they reached the end, they took another set of stairs up to the surface and found themselves at a set of gates. A female warden in a gray suit with bright yellow hair grinned at them from ear to ear.

"Welcome, hopeful champion," she said. "Follow me, please."

She took them into a room with a high ceiling. The door opposite was etched with gold and silver figures fighting to the death. From a table by the door, she took up a leather strap with a metal emblem of House of Salimar. "Would you like me to fix this to him?" the warden asked Ophilia.

"I would like to," she said.

The warden handed her the strap and bowed. "Good luck to you." She left them alone, and Ophilia came to his side.

"While you were in the training room, I got wind from another trainer about what you'll face," she said as she attached the strap to him, clasping it around his torso. "This game will be all about survival. Last until the clock runs out and you move on. There will still be fighting, but there will also be other obstacles. And there will be more than just fighters trying to kill you."

"Sounds like fun," he said.

She glanced up at him, and he almost winced at the sharp ache in his center. "There's something else. I didn't mention it last night because you seemed upset about Kaxek and I figured your answer would be no, but...I should have given you a choice. I'm sorry."

His eyes narrowed. "What is it?"

"I spoke to Kaxek's trainer. He thought that it might be beneficial if you and Kaxek worked together. Teaming up is allowed in these games, and it would give you an edge."

He growled low. He stalked to the door and then back. No. No, he was done working with another vrisha he couldn't trust.

"I understand you don't like the idea. But remember, whatever it might take for you to win. Because I guarantee he'll come for you during this game otherwise. But if you show him you're on his side..."

He paced back and forth, then stopped to stare at the door. "Let him come for me. Let him try."

"It's your decision, Xeda. Whatever you think is best. But try not to let your emotions get in the way. It's about survival, remember that."

A low drumming sounded overhead, and Ophilia moved for the door they had come through. "I have to go." She stopped at the door, then turned back to him, giving him a small smile. "You got this."

He watched her go, hands clenching and unclenching, words wanting to spill out of his mouth, but he swallowed them back. No, he would make it. He would see her soon. He turned back to the gold and silver door and waited.

Some time passed before he heard the drumming again. He heard the door unlocking and took a warrior's stance as it swung open.

He expected to be blinded by light. Instead, he stared into deep, murky darkness. The only light came from quick white flashes like that of lightning. A fog rolled across the surface and in the distance, he heard the impressive roars of an animal lurking somewhere within.

Still, he felt no fear, only an eagerness to sink his claws into something. Ophilia was right about not letting his emotions get in the way. So, instead, he would use them as fuel to drive him to victory.

And no one would be safe.

Without hesitation, he stalked out into the dark.

CHAPTERSIXTEEN

Ophilia

As Xeda started his fight out in the arena, Ophilia now had her own silent battle—keeping her composure in a room with Sal, his family, and a few of his friends. Sal and his sons thankfully didn't so much as nod to her in greeting. They were focused on the center console in the middle of the room, a giant 3d screen that showed every fighter, every obstacle, in real time, giving them a full bird's eye view of everyone and everything in the arena just outside the room. The back window that would look out to the stadium was filmed over with a cityscape instead. There was no point opening it as nothing could be seen in the dark. They would rely solely on the holographic monitor to show them what was happening.

Servers brought food and drink when they called for it, and there were chairs placed near the wall where Sal's wife and sister sat, looking annoyed they had to be sitting there at all but uninterested in the games to have to stand and watch. Their cold eyes lingered on her as she stood at the monitor. She ignored them when the last signal went off and the doors opened.

Quickly, she searched for Xeda and found him near a back corner of the arena. The field was massive, almost a quarter mile long and more than a hundred yards wide. The whole thing was covered in obstacles from walls to pits to drones that circled a particular area. There were metal trees scattered across the length of the field that gave off huge violent bursts of electricity at random, like lightning. All the fighters had been spread out and were each working their way to the center where a platform had been set. Among them were monstrous beasts, genetically enhanced to hunt and kill. Beasts spliced from the DNA of any poor animal that had been stolen or traded on Kingsway. One looked like a tiger mixed with a reptile, sporting a long snout and matted fur. Another appeared to be a large raptor with a barbed tail and thick horns. They traveled across the arena searching for their prey.

Her heart began to race as she saw one closing in on Xeda, what looked like a giant skinless bear with quills along its back but that moved just as agilely as a cat. It stalked him at first, but when Xeda caught sight of it, he took off. The beast bolted

after him as Xeda leaped over walls and avoided pitfalls.

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"Look, there he goes!" said Cristan's brother Drake, nearly spilling his drink on to the monitor as he pointed Xeda out. "Dad, do you see?"

Sal said nothing as he sipped from his glass, his black eyes scrutinizing the board. His silence only made Ophilia more nervous, and she wondered how much he'd already had to drink. He was an angry, vicious drunk, and the last thing she needed was him making a scene if Xeda made a wrong move.

She tried to keep her focus on Xeda instead. He weaved across the course with the beast on his tail. She dug her nails into her palm as it snapped at him. Before it could grab him, Xeda leapt into the air and flipped onto the bear's back. He shot his tail down into its skull in one fell swoop, splitting the skull, killing it instantly.

The beast went down, but before Xeda could recover, one of the tigers leapt at him. It missed him by a hair as Xeda jumped out of the way. He ran toward one of the metal trees, and the tiger followed. He was agile like the cat and just as fast. As he passed the tree, he made a sharp turn, using his tail to swing himself around the trunk. The tiger skidded, trying to catch up. As it straightened itself and leapt at Xeda, he kicked it back into the tree just as an electric current struck it down from above, simultaneously hitting the beast and cooking it, its fur catching on fire.

The beast dropped to the ground dead, and Xeda continued on without pausing.

Cristan and his brother whooped in excitement. Ophilia let out a slow breath. As Xeda was left alone for a moment, she checked on the other fighters, looking for Xeda's biggest threats. Tazyn was just pulling his two-handed weapon from the chest of a fallen beast. The male fyrien, Aeriz, was watching two other fighters caught in

battle. He waited for a victor so that he could swoop in and kill them when their guard was down. The female fyrien, Vyn, was stalking another fighter she had caught sight of who was searching for someone or something to take down.

Ophilia searched all over for Kaxek and finally found him at the edge. He had found the grex with the four arms and ripped off the metal limbs before slitting their throat. Her stomach turned as he left the body and casually slipped away as if it had been nothing. He was in no hurry. He'd do the same to whoever he ran into.

Whenever a fighter perished, a picture of them would pop up and hover over where they died. In fifteen minutes, six of them were gone. There were twenty fighters all together. This is what she'd tried to explain to Xeda. As she expected, these games weren't going to last more than a week.

Her eyes flicked over to the clock above the monitor. They had two hours. She fidgeted where she stood, feeling so tense she could hardly speak. She wished she'd had more time with him before they started. Hell, she wished she'd had more time with him in general. More time to train, more time to talk, to understand one another. Maybe even to have another moment like they had last night.

There will be more time for that when he survives, a little voice said. Because he has to. "Oh, damn, look at that!" Drake shouted. "He just destroyed him!"

Her heart leaped as her eyes followed where Drake was looking, panic tearing through her chest, immediately thinking of Xeda. She caught sight of what he was shouting about, and saw it wasn't Xeda but the fyrien male. Aeriz had waited for the fight to end after all and had slit the lygin victor's belly open. The lygin collapsed, and the fyrien disappeared once more.

The boys hollered. They cheered and shouted at the monitor every time a fighter made a fatal blow or died some awful way. Whether by another's hand or by a beast

or by some other misfortune. By the time the half-hour mark came, four more fighters were gone. And Xeda had his first fight. The feral corax showed himself, his jaw wide, ready to take a limb.

They fought for five minutes, dodging each other's blows until Xeda found an opening and snapped the corax's jaw in half.

Even that got a slow clap from Sal. He was watching just as intensely as she. He wanted this win badly, House Salimar being one of the few to ever win.

But she wanted it more. So much more.

Bodies covered the arena, a true bloodbath. And it was hardly over. Only half remained, but that meant they were the half that would survive longer.

Thankfully, many of them scattered after the next half hour as another wave of beasts were set loose to chase them. Their focus was no longer on each other but on killing every spliced beast that stood in their way. In that time, the female fyrien, Vyn, also got her mark and killed the fighter she had been hunting, a fighter that looked like a mangy wolf or dog, not unlike the animal he had been trying to take down before he was assassinated.

At the end of the first hour, two more fighters perished.

At this point, the arena began to change, walls moving, pitfalls appearing and reappearing. There was so much chaos it was hard to follow more than one person or thing, but her eyes were locked on only one person now and that was Xeda.

He was doing his best to keep up with the changing scene like everyone else. When the arena finally stopped moving, he continued on without hesitation, going toward the center now that the arena had also shrunk, a brilliant green forcefield shimmering

to life and pushing the surviving fighters in.

Xeda prowled along the edge of the forcefield as did the two fyrien who finally found one another. Just as Zachary had predicted, they didn't fight but, as a team, quickly began to scout around for the others, moving parallel to the forcefield. As for the rest, they moved toward the center. Kaxek got to the platform first. The second fighter to appear—an amphibious-looking female with jet black eyes and shiny green skin called a skra—saw him and turned away, either too scared or too smart to know they couldn't win.

Tazyn was close to the center now too. He fought another corax similar to the one Xeda had fought, only this one was slimmer with dark blue skin unlike the gray she had seen on the others. The corax was quick but Tazyn was quicker. The only thing keeping the corax from dying was the weapon they wielded, a staff with one end like a trident, the other end a pointed blade.

Tazyn showed his true skill with his bladed weapon along with his ability as a champion to not only dodge attacks but block them with ease. The corax fought him off for several minutes before it became clear Tazyn was only playing with them. He let the fight go on until the corax began to tire. They tried to flee at one point to regain their strength, but Tazyn wouldn't let them.

They continued fighting until eventually Tazyn got bored of his little game and lopped off the corax's head with one clean swoop.

The last hour was slowly drawing to an end. There were only seven left. Kaxek, the two fyriens, Tazyn, and Xeda were the true contenders. The feral lygin that had been genetically altered to be larger and meaner than his kind had been too busy tearing the remaining beasts to shreds to go looking for the others. The skra had somehow managed to keep hidden even more than the fyrien. Ophilia realized it was because she wore a special suit that made her invisible, only seen by spectators. Ophilia

watched as the skra passed by the last lygin fighter without his knowing, but she didn't yet attack, likely assessing his weak points, trying to consider if it was worth taking him on.

As the forcefield got smaller, Ophilia noticed the fyrien pair turn inward as did Xeda. The fyriens crept for the platform. They were going to try to take on Kaxek.

Ophilia's pulse throbbed in her ears. Sal clapped his hands, this time with impatience. "Come on, come on," he snapped, eyes growing wild. "Let's finish this."

The fyriens were only a few walls away when one of the bear-like beasts cut in their path, flying toward the platform, trying to get to Kaxek first. Kaxek wasn't unprepared. He slashed at the beast's side, but it didn't go down. Instead, it tackled him, sending him off the platform and into a wall. The only way he could free himself was to climb and so he did. The beast followed, and they disappeared to finish their fight on the other side.

It was then Xeda finally reached the platform, only to find it empty. At least he thought so. But from Ophilia's vantage point, she could see the fyriens slowly approaching. They peeked past one wall and saw him. They seemed to be discussing their next move when Vyn suddenly broke off and began to circle behind Xeda with her blade unsheathed. Aeriz started around his front.

Ophilia's heart leapt to her throat, her blood going cold. "No," she whispered. They'd changed their plans. With Kaxek disappeared from their sight, they were going to try to take Xeda out instead. "Please, notice them, Xeda!" she cried softly.

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"Oh, he's done," said Drake. Cristan cursed, threatening to beat Xeda's corpse if he lost.

Ophilia held her breath as the fyriens moved in while Xeda paced the platform, waiting for anyone to appear.

Aeriz attacked first. He flung out his blades one after the other in quick succession. The first, Xeda blocked with his armored arm. The second caught him in the side. Out of instinct, Xeda didn't falter. Even wounded, he rushed for the fyrien, now weaponless, and slashed at him with his tail. Like the others, Aeriz was swift, dodging and moving out of the way. But Xeda was relentless, his strikes as fast as a cobra.

One clean stab and it would be done. Even the fyrien wouldn't withstand the poison. As they circled and exchanged attacks, Ophilia saw Vyn rush in. She leapt into the air behind Xeda and brought her blade down and stabbed Xeda between his shoulder blade and throat. Dark blood seeped down his chest, staining him.

A low whimper escaped from Ophilia's mouth, her legs feeling like they might give out underneath her.

Xeda kicked the female away, and Aeriz took that moment to retrieve his blade that Xeda had blocked with his arm and throw it again, catching Xeda in the back. Xeda whirled around as the male got his attention again. Aeriz wanted Xeda to focus on him. But Xeda was no fool. He kept his eyes on them both. He took up his stance, ready to fight to the death against them, and in turn they both came at him, ready to take him out together.

Before they could reach him, Kaxek bolted over the wall. He landed on the platform and eyed Xeda, then the two fyriens. The fyriens halted and faced him.

There was a stand still until Kaxek moved first. He went for Vyn and took her blade to the chest before he got in her space and grabbed her by the throat, hauling her up and then swiftly stabbing her in the stomach with the tip of his tail.

She fell onto her back and convulsed, the poison already doing its job. Aeriz roared with fury. He took a step toward Kaxek when Xeda got in his way.

They all looked ready to attack when something made them grow still and look around them. They couldn't see but she could. The forcefield disappeared and one wall taking up a corner of the arena split open, spilling muddy water onto the field in a great wave, crushing walls as it passed.

The fighters hardly had time to act. Those who noticed the trees had stopped producing electricity quickly ran for them and climbed. The feral lygin, too busy eating one of the beasts it had killed, didn't make it in time and was consumed by the water. Tazyn, as if knowing what was coming, had already prepared himself by climbing up one tree to the very top and crouching to watch the destruction below. The skra held on just below him.

Kaxek, Aeriz, and Xeda split from the platform, each running for their own separate trees and climbing them as fast as they could. Xeda got halfway and stopped.

The water rushed in all around them. The platform they had been on sank down into the ground and became like a giant drain, sucking in all of the water, the debris, and the dead.

When it was finished, there was only an inch of water left. The others slowly climbed down from their trees. Xeda got a few feet down, then dropped. He fell to his knees,

dark blood falling into the water.

Sal's face was red, standing deathly still by his sons who cursed Xeda's name. His eyes met hers, and she felt the blood drain from her face. She glanced down again and saw Kaxek approaching Xeda. He stood before him, and she almost called out Xeda's name as if he might hear her.

Despair twisting her insides, her eyes peered upward and saw the clock. It had stopped. The time had run out.

"No," she said. "No, it's done. He can't touch him!" Her voice grew louder with each word. "It's over, he can't touch him!"

The low drumming sounded, signaling the end of the game. Kaxek was speaking to Xeda, but she couldn't hear what he was saying. He then moved away, leaving Xeda kneeling on the ground.

He was alive. She could see his tail moving. Quickly, she moved over to one side of the console and pressed on one of the pads.

"This is the warden station," someone replied.

"My fighter is alive, but he's badly hurt. By rules of the game, he survived the time. I want medical attention right away."

"Hold please," they said.

She knew they were discussing it. She paced back and forth, uncaring of Sal's glare or of his son's shitty jabs. She only cared that Xeda lived.

A minute later and the warden station replied back, "A team will be out to retrieve

him. Stand by."

She thanked whatever gods might be, closing her eyes and leaning against the monitor. Her eyes stayed on Xeda until she saw a team of medical bots reach him. He didn't let them carry him. He preferred to walk himself, but they stayed with him, following him until he returned to his designated door.

Ophilia let out her breath, wanting to collapse on the ground. Instead, she slipped away from the monitor and made for the door.

"Where are you going?" Cristan called after her. "No one said you could leave."

She turned and faced them, not giving a fuck what they wanted. "I'm going to see to my fighter." She turned and left before they could argue otherwise.

CHAPTERSEVENTEEN

Xeda

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:11 am

He was led into a medical bay and pulled into a room filled with bright lights and noisy monitors. The staff tried to have him lay on a metal slab, but he refused. His anger overpowered any and all pain, his senses scrambled, his instincts wanting him to shove them out of the way and find a dark place to heal and recover. But they wouldn't let him leave, and he wouldn't let them near. The facility stank of chemicals, and the lights hurt his eyes. He growled and swung his tail at those around him as they tried to calm him. But he couldn't be calmed.

He had almost lost, barely surviving those final moments. Maybe he should be grateful, but he wasn't. He still felt like a failure for letting the fyrien catch him off-guard. For not defeating Kaxek.

"You still have a chance," Kaxek had said to him as Xeda had knelt on the ground. "Join me or die."

He had said nothing, but he wished he had told that bastard warrior to go drown in a boiling sea. Like hell he would let Kaxek have that chance. Next game, he would need to watch his back.

Xeda hissed at one of the staff who held a needled gun in their hand. He growled, irritated that they were frightened enough by him to not come near but not enough to leave the room. He was about to yell at them that he could help himself when the door opened, and Ophilia walked in.

"Everyone out," she said.

The staff grew quiet, stunned by her sudden order.

One of the staff scoffed. "We need to administer a healing agent, or—"

"He doesn't need it. Just leave the tools and go."

The staff looked at each other then, without a word, left. Xeda stared at Ophilia as she stood her ground while they passed. He found he liked this side of her, this intimidating, commanding side. It was then he noticed that, impossible and frustrating as it was, even beyond his injuries, he could still feel that ache throbbing in his insides, growing worse at the sight of her. Even in pain, he couldn't quell the feeling.

As the door shut behind her, Ophilia stepped up and placed a hand on his chest, pushing him back gently. "Sit," she commanded.

He blinked, then slowly lowered himself onto the cold slab. She moved to a nearby table and took a wet cloth, dipped it in some clear salve, then began to wipe the blood from his skin, cleaning his wounds. She was silent as she cleaned him.

He didn't say anything at first either, watching her hand move. He found it interesting that she wouldn't look up at him.

"You're upset," he said, learning that silence and avoidance from a human meant something was wrong.

She paused and glanced up at him. "Not at you."

He grunted, understanding. "The damn fyriens. If I had seen them coming sooner..."

"It's all right. You made it, and that's all that matters." She cleaned the last of the blood off, then took up one of the mending tools she'd used on him before. She hesitated before turning it on. "The blade wounds are deep. If anything is ruptured, I'll need to bring in staff right away."

He touched at one of the wounds on his side. "No need. From what I can feel, none of my internal organs are hit. The blade didn't puncture through all the way, tough skin and all. Only this one"—he pointed to the wound on his throat—"would be of slight concern if it had not hit one of my vents." He showed her the narrow holes along his neck and shoulders just under a set of scales. "It will be damaged slightly but nothing more."

She sighed with relief. "Good." She turned on the tool and began to seal the wound on his side first. She carefully trailed her fingers along his skin to make sure it was fully mended, and the touch made him shiver each time. The ache in his belly was in full swing again, only having dulled out in the games. He rested his hand over his center in hopes she couldn't see the bulge rising in his pants as his cock slid out slightly from its sheath. Now that the first game was over, he had to worry about this again, why his body was reacting this way. He thought of the dream again and quickly shoved it away, afraid that might push him over the edge.

Trying to regain his focus, he said, "I wouldn't have let them take me out. They got lucky with their attack, but I'd be damned if I let an otherkin defeat me. One is gone now, and I'm not worried about the other now that I know what to expect. The next game will be different."

She didn't say anything as she fixed the last wound on his back. When she was finished, she set the tool down and came around his front where they locked eyes.

"I'm just glad you're all right," she said softly. She brought up her hands and placed one on each side of his face, as if holding him. He blinked at her, shocked. The gesture was intimate, but he didn't pull away. "What you did out there was amazing, Xeda. You survived something few could. You are the bravest, toughest person I've ever known. You truly are amazing."

He stared back at her in stunned silence. The ache in his belly grew painful while his

heart beat a little faster.

She let him go and pulled away, and he found he wanted to pull her closer. To embrace her. He wanted to embrace a human, to feel her. And it went against all his conviction, all his anger. He didn't see a human anymore, he saw something much more. And that realization both scared and amazed him.

Before he could decide what to do, she stepped toward the door. "Let's get you better cleaned up. And have a big feast. I'm starving," she said, smiling. "You deserve it."

He sat there for a moment, finding it hard to move, watching her as if it was the first time he was truly seeing her. Then, carefully, he rose and followed her out of the room.

* * *

He let the water rush over him, cascading over his back and neck as he rested his forehead against one wall. The shower was nice, reminding him of the many waterfalls from home. He'd noticed it in Ophilia's room and asked to use it instead of the bath, liking the idea of the water flowing over him. She had happily let him, saying she was going to order the food while he washed himself, washed off the remaining blood and muck from the arena.

He should be thinking about what he had just gone through. Or about the next fight. Strategizing the others' fighting styles, thinking of ways to train and prepare himself, how to best beat Kaxek. But every time he tried to focus on any of those things, his mind would wander to Ophilia. How her hands felt against him, how her soft body might meld to his own, how her scent intoxicated him. And then of course there was always the dream.

Every little betraying thought made the pain between his legs worse. Soon, if he

didn't relieve himself, he might grow mindless with the need for release.

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He understood now what was happening to him. And it couldn't have happened at a worse time. Few vrisha had to worry about going into a heat cycle when unmated. They were usually able to keep it contained until they found a mate or queen to satisfy. But every so often, if it had been too long, or something triggered the need, an unmated vrisha would go into heat. And the side-effects could be concerning at best and alarming at worst. It was such a rare occurrence, few usually had to worry about it happening on a mission.

But now he did have to worry. If he didn't find someone to give him release, soon it would be all he could think about and nothing else would matter.

He closed his eyes and saw Ophilia. He shouldn't be thinking of her. It was impossible that another who was not vrisha could do this to him, and yet he couldn't explain it any other way. She infected him, took over his senses. He let this happen.

It was too late to try to quell the heat. So, he would have to endure it. Somehow, some way.

No longer trying to contain it, he let his cock slide from its sheath, hard and slick with need. He growled in pain and frustration. Embarrassed, he gripped his shaft, slowly massaging. Vrisha shouldn't have to do this themselves. It should be with their mate. But he was alone, and what could he do?

Ophilia is right outside, said a devious little voice in his head. Call her into the shower and have her reenact your dream. Wouldn't that be nice?

He groaned as he thought of it, his tail twisting behind him, his legs shaking. Yes, he

could do that. Or he could go to her if she didn't care to do it in the shower. They could try the pool again or his own bed. There were many places he would take her. Really, anywhere was fine with him. He'd take her on the damn balcony for all he cared, as long as he could just make this need go away.

He bared his teeth, ready to either call out to her or find her, when another intruding voice broke his thoughts.

Disgusting.

He growled again, his heart sinking. What was he thinking?

It didn't matter. He shouldn't act on it, that's all. He would keep himself from betraying his kind. And he and Ophilia could remain...where they were now.

He rubbed his shaft and hissed with pleasure. An image of Ophilia's mouth on him took over the rest of his thoughts and, by the fucking elders, he was done fighting. Thoughts meant nothing, nothing at all. And no one had to know. He let his mind go, let the images of her swarm him, then closed his eyes, letting his hand move, imagining it was her.

It didn't take long for him to feel his release, to feel the heat pump from him onto his hand. He let out a slow hiss of breath and knew such relief was short-lived. He had to make it through, he had to endure.

He stood in the shower for longer than he meant to, trying still to understand what she was doing to him. And wondering if this was what Vrexus had gone through. And, if it was, then it was now all starting to make sense.

A slow dread started slithering up his insides. This was the power they held. No matter what Ophilia did to him, she held this power as well. And the struggle to keep

himself sane, to keep himself from being consumed, was a battle, he realized, he might not be able to win.

CHAPTEREIGHTEEN

Ophilia

She stood by the open door between their two rooms, looking into Xeda's. The groundmat was laid out with all the food she had ordered, and the room was dimmed with only the small flames and the reflection of light from the pool. It was a lovely scene, and she hoped Xeda would appreciate it, if only a little.

Even with the first game over, she couldn't shake her uneasiness. Xeda had made it, true, but next time...he would be a target not just for Kaxek but them all. She tried to push down the anxiety in her chest, telling herself he was strong enough, he would make it. He had to.

After she had left Sal and the others, all she could think about was what she would do if he died. She could openly admit to herself that she hardly thought of her own fate now. It felt miniscule in comparison. She wanted Xeda to live, not just for herself anymore. She understood that now. She wanted him to live because she wanted to know they still existed in the same space. Even if that space was millions of miles away. Her heart wrenched at the thought of after. If he won, he would likely leave and go on to some other world far away, always running. Maybe he would find a secluded planet and live his life in solitude. Maybe he'd get caught again and sent back home. Who knew. She wouldn't see him again, she was sure, whatever his fate might be. And she had to be fine with that.

She knew she would have to let him go. She had to put aside her feelings and see the logic, that he would either die or he would disappear. But at least if he lived, she'd know somewhere he was out there, and maybe they'd even be looking up at the same

stars.

She wished she could be stronger, wished she didn't feel anything, because it compromised her. She had to be happy with winning and that was all. Set aside her feelings and know they could mean nothing.

She'd keep her focus on the games, what they needed to prepare for next, what training he could use. Now that so few fighters were left, they would likely try to extend the games in some way for entertainment purposes. Just a few days tops, as they prepared the final arena.

A knock came at their door, and she went over and opened it. A warden smiled at her.

"Afternoon," she said with a little bow. She handed Ophilia a small ISpad. It turned on in her hand. "The next game will be in three days' time. Until then, you will find the itinerary on this pad for your convenience. There will be a set of scheduled duel combat fights. You will also now have access to your fighter's credit pool. The more he participates, the more prizes may be earned. There will also be midgame celebrations and events. You will find those also on the calendar. Thank you and have a lovely rest of your day."

As they walked away, Ophilia shut the door. She slipped over to the groundmat and took a seat. As she waited for Xeda, she looked through the ISpad, a counterfeit one by what she could see, as the company that made them was owned by Grayhart. She popped through his credit pool first, and her eyes widened.

Well, at least there was one positive in all this. He'd gained several sponsors, and his credits had shot up in only a mere few hours.

Excited, she went to the shop and saw what they could afford, which was much more than before. She looked over at her room, then smiled. She had a few things in mind

that she thought Xeda would greatly enjoy.

When she was finished browsing and picking out the few things from the shop, she heard a soft clicking behind her and saw Xeda standing at the doorway, watching her, his fingers tapping the side of the wall.

She tried to ignore the fluttering in her chest as she set aside the ISpad. "Hey," she greeted, giving him a small smile. When he didn't say anything, she eyed the food before her, then glanced back at him. "Hungry?"

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He slowly unlatched himself from the doorway. He settled himself opposite her, carefully lowering himself into a sitting position, curling his tail behind him. "Starving," he said in a low voice.

"Well, good, 'cause I got a lot. I didn't know what your favorites would be, so I picked almost everything they had. A lot of meat mostly. I hope you like it..." She caught his eyes and grew tense as he leered at her. "Is...everything okay?"

There was a shadow over his expression that she couldn't explain. A dark fire burned in his gaze that made the goosebumps rise along her arms and neck.

"I'm fine," he said in a husky voice. He bared his teeth at her, and it took her a moment to realize he was trying to smile.

Her brow furrowed as she smirked back at him. "Good." She took her plate and reached for some food, taking some meat and fruit. Xeda followed soon after, taking only meat.

"So, the next game won't be for a few days. Until then, they are having the fighters entertain in other ways. They'll be bringing in bastard champions, and you'll be having a couple singular fights, nothing crazy, just something to show people your power while also getting to see your single combat skills. Tomorrow will be that and the showing."

"Showing?" he said.

She cleared her throat, finding it hard to look at him. "It's unfortunately another way

to embarrass the fighters. To have the houses show you off like some prized breed. It can be anything from fighting dances to just feats of strength. For instance, Tazyn usually shows off with his bladed weapon in a series of dances. Some do nothing more than pick up insanely heavy objects that no one else could, like a ground vehicle. It's just to show your abilities."

Xeda's face twisted. "I am not dancing."

She chuckled. "I figured as much. Don't worry, I already have an idea for it. And it won't involve anything too embarrassing."

He snorted as he picked at his meat. She noticed he didn't actually eat it, just tore it apart more with his talons. He stared down at it, as if he wasn't really seeing what he was doing. She eyed the rest of him and noticed his pants were torn, even though they were a new pair.

She thought about asking him if everything was all right again, but she didn't want to pry too much. "These are all just ways to entertain the people until they complete the next and possibly final course, Xeda. Nothing more."

He grunted, but she wasn't totally sure if he actually heard her. He must be thinking about the next game, she thought. She doubted he was worried about it, but she could imagine after what he just went through, it would make sense that it would occupy most of his thoughts.

He did look a lot more tense too. She remembered then about the deal she had made in the pool if he won. She smiled and said, "I owe you another massage, don't I? If you'd like me to..."

That shadow passed over his expression again. He put his plate down as if contemplating it, then said, "Not tonight. I want to go down to the training center

instead."

She frowned. He'd just gotten done in the game. He had to be exhausted. But maybe he was worrying after all. "You don't want to tire yourself out," she said, cautiously. "And you're still healing..."

"I'll be fine. I'm not tired. I just need to...distract myself for a little while."

Distract himself from what? The games? That had to be it. "All right," she said slowly. "If you want."

He rose. "I won't be down long."

She nodded, then stood. She didn't want to argue. It was whatever would help him. If he thought he needed to train now, so be it. He knew what was best for him, she was sure.

"If this is about what happened in the arena, Xeda..."

"It's not." He turned his back to her, ready to go out the door.

She nodded again, eyeing the food in disappointment. She would have it boxed up for later. "Okay."

She could feel the tension in the air now from him, like a storm brewing. She opened her mouth to ask about it but then decided against it and instead passed by him to open the door. When she went to hit the door pad, she froze as she felt a breath of warm air on her neck. Xeda was right behind her. She noticed one arm stretched out to one side of her, his nails digging into the wall. She hadn't even noticed he'd moved. He was so close now she could feel the heat of his body against her back.

Something was up with him. He was acting strange. She felt tense suddenly near him, as if he might bite her. Or pounce on her. For the first time since letting him out of his cell back at the house, he made her nervous.

She stood there for another few seconds, contemplating whether she should turn around and face him and found she was too much a coward in that moment to do so. Instead, she hit the pad and opened the door and let out a breath as she turned down the hallway, knowing he followed close behind.

CHAPTERNINETEEN

Xeda

He was truly going to kill someone.

He stood underneath one of the observation boxes, clenching and unclenching his fists. He could hear people speaking above him, clapping every so often as one of the fighters on the field tackled another. The clapping, the laughter, the clinking of their glasses grated on his senses. He could see on the opposite side of the enclosed space within the arena other observation boxes where more people looked down, watching the fights while they drank and ate fine food. He hated them all, and he hated that he had to pretend that he didn't. Everything was an illusion, even the sky above him. It showed gray clouds with the warning of storms, but it was only a holographic fakery.

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The small arena was located near the one where he'd had his first game. Here, they pretended to be outside in the wilderness, with trees and grass, something they had little of on the outside. So, they pretended. And made him and the others do the same, controlling everything.

Somewhere above, Ophilia was pretending too. But she was far better at it than him. Soon, he thought he might break, if only he could tear down everything he saw. Instead, he watched the fighters. Watched them beat each other for everyone's entertainment.

This was only the first day of this “bullshit,” as Ophilia would call it. He just wanted to get this over with, get to the next game. But he was forced to entertain his so-called sponsors.

He would rather eat them alive.

They had brought in several groups of bastard champions from different districts. Most fought each other, but they had a few spar off against Tazyn just for fun. It was part of his showing. As Xeda watched the atrocious fool smile at the crowd, he wanted to take the nillium's bladed weapon and shove it down his throat.

If the others thought he seemed more pissed off than usual, they were smart enough to stay clear of him. He'd been on edge since last night. He had worked himself to exhaustion in the training center, then took a tonic Ophilia offered to help him sleep. The dreams...by the elders, the dreams were more wild, more unhinged than the last. And when he woke up, he felt groggy, his body throbbing, his blood running hot through him. He was in a cranky-ass mood that morning and was only able to quell it

a little for Ophilia.

"I have a surprise for you," she'd said with a smile as she came into his room. Oh, he had several ideas of what that could be, and his mind played out each one of them in turn. She went to the door and opened it to reveal two large chests. She rolled them inside and lined them up for him. "Go on, open them. They are for you."

Hesitantly, he approached. He eyed her first with a quiet need, then pushed the feeling away to bring his focus to the chests. He opened the first and peered down. It was another set of kelve outfits and a full suit of grivhide armor. A row of spikes went down the sides and across the shoulders. Atop the armor was a set of blades. Not scythes, as even those would be too hard to find, he was sure, but these were curved steel with twin points on opposite ends, the handle carved into the middle. He picked them up and found the weight to his liking.

"Well, what do you think?" she asked.

He flipped the weapon in his hand. He wasn't prone to using blades, but he would certainly find these useful. "It's no scythe, but I'm impressed enough. The grivhide, however, that is quite something."

"Do you like it?"

He glanced back at her and saw she eagerly wanted his answer. "Yes, it's...beautiful." He didn't take his eyes from hers as he set the blade down, and he saw her face turn a little red in color. She cleared her throat and moved to the next.

"Now this one." She tapped the lid.

He moved to the next and opened it. Inside was a rack full of colored glass bottles. "What are they?" he asked.

"Enhancers." She picked one out and showed it to him. "If you want to use them. They are temporary, and before you say anything, know all the other fighters will be taking their own too. Even Kaxek. One can be for more strength, another for agility. Most fighters only get a couple, but you have the set to choose what you like. Just know, you can't use more than two at a time." She set the glass bottle away and closed the lid.

"What happens if you do?" he asked.

"You go into cardiac arrest and die probably." She shrugged. "A high chance at least. I'll let you think over which you'd like to use for the next game."

He watched her roll the chests to one wall, taking note of her backside. "Where did you come by them?" he asked, trying to keep his mind clear.

"I bought them with the credits from your sponsors. I told you those would come in handy. And so I was able to get these for you."

He felt awkward standing there, not knowing what to say or what to feel except grateful, which was rare, especially for him. It was the only moment so far today that he hadn't felt tense or angry. And the second time he felt compelled to close the distance between them and embrace her. She was too nice to him. And he didn't deserve it.

Once he stepped into the arena and was forced to stand around and wait to perform for these people, he felt it all come back to him. The tension, the anger, and the need to kill someone or something before he lost his mind.

On the field, Tazyn did a flip before cutting the chest open of one lygin warrior, sending him flying back. The crowd cheered and, as Tazyn landed on his feet, he took a bow.

By Rikasha, how much he wanted to take his head.

Xeda shut his eyes and tried to calm. It didn't help that he felt the heat pull at him again, growing worse, only making him more on edge. He shifted on his feet and took to pacing to try and work off the tension. He could smell Ophilia above him, and he wished badly they could have at least conjured up a fake fucking breeze to clear the air. She was nervous too. He could tell by the fear lingering in her scent. And he could only guess who was making her nervous. Those little meatbags that were Sal's witless kin. They made comments to her every so often to get some kind of reaction from her, but she shot them down each time. They would laugh, and the cycle would continue.

That nearly sent him over. And then there was Kaxek. He was nowhere to be seen. Somehow, he had been exempt from the showing or the fights. Probably only because he was champion. It was still utterly rage inducing to know he had the arrogance and entitlement to set himself above them, and it made Xeda want to fight him right then and there, if he only knew where he was.

Another low end fighter walked past him and, unthinkingly, he hissed at them to get out of his space. Thankfully, they had the good sense to do so. The heat made him unpredictable, and he might lash out at someone who even looked at him wrong. He needed to let loose, but the only way to do that was by fighting.

Tazyn finally ended his showing, and it was the fyrien's turn next. Aeriz, he'd learned was his name. The fyrien took a stance some paces away from a set of moving dummy targets that hovered over the ground. He shot his blades out, landing one right in the center of a dummy's chest, then another right in the head. He performed this act several times at longer distances and with smaller targets that moved at quicker speed. The people loved him.

When he was through, they had him fight a pair of grex who worked as a team. Xeda

studied them as well as the other bastard champions and could see they looked wary. He could smell the fear scent on them. They were being forced into these fights just like any other, only this time they didn't expect to win.

When Aeriz was through with them, the grex could hardly stand. They were carried out and sent to the medical bay along with those Tazyn had fought as well. Neither Aeriz nor Tazyn had been wounded badly which showed the difference in their power against the others.

With Aeriz finished, it was Xeda's turn on the field. Ophilia had given him a brief idea of what he was to do, and it sounded simple enough. He waited for the staff to set everything out, then when it was ready, he stalked out into the open.

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Wisps of smoke billowed into the air from the small fires that licked the ground. He could see the hot coals that had been placed there. Among the coals hovered a set of dummy targets like the ones Aeriz had used. Xeda stepped onto the coals and shifted his feet. They'd burn anyone else, but a vrisha could withstand them.

He positioned himself and focused on the targets which flew at erratic patterns to try and thwart him. He ran at them, and using tail and talons, he caught them, slicing them one by one as he kicked up embers, creating sparks and fire along the field. The people cheered for him too, but he felt nothing for it. This was stupid and pointless, and he felt like a trained beast, dancing around for their enjoyment. He imagined ripping into one of them then another until they all ran screaming.

When he was through, they wiped the coals and what was left of the targets away. As he waited for them to clean up so that he could finally take out his frustrations on one of the fighters, his gaze turned toward the observation box, searching for Ophilia.

Just when he thought his mind was clear, he couldn't help looking for her, just to make sure she was still there. She was his anchor and his weakness. He needed to concentrate, but he needed to know she was still watching to keep him in check, lest he decide to fall off the edge and give in to his violent urges. But she reminded him why he was here.

When he found her near one side, he froze. She wasn't alone. There was another man with her, one Xeda hadn't seen before. He was standing close to her, a glass in his hand. He wore house colors matching Kaxek's.

The man leaned in and said something to her. She smiled and laughed.

Xeda paced one side of the field as he watched them like a damn predator. Or, better yet, a heated male seeing a threat. And threats needed to be destroyed.

His concentration should have been on the low end fighters coming out to meet him, but he hardly acknowledged them. He never thought about the males that had gotten close to Ophilia before, until now. She never appeared happy in their presence, until now. She seemed relaxed with this one, and it didn't come off as pretending.

"Hey, warrior, are we going to fight or what?" said the corax before him.

Xeda bared his teeth at him and snarled so violently the corax backed away a step. The grex and skra with him looked wary to start the fight.

"Come on, you damn demon, fight them!" someone called from the observation box. Xeda looked over and saw Cristan in time as he threw something at him, one of his glass cups. Xeda side-stepped before it could hit him and growled. "Stop being a pussy," Cristan yelled. He swayed a little, and Xeda gathered that the idiot was drunk.

Xeda's tail swayed, anger burning up his insides. Oh, he'd show him a fight.

He noticed the skra had a small knife on him, and he got an awful idea.

Without warning, he attacked the corax first. With his tail, he hit him squarely in the chest, sending him flying several feet. Then he went for the grex, kicking him into the pillar of one of the boxes. The skra came at him with his knife, and Xeda dodged him, then picked him up and slammed him to the ground. He yanked the knife from him, then threw him, letting him land against the corax.

With the knife in hand, he threw it. Straight at Cristan.

There was a collective gasp as the knife embedded itself in the railing in front of

Cristan right at the same level as his genitals, sparing him from being maimed. Xeda didn't miss a beat. Rage turning his vision red, he went for him, ready to climb up the damn box and make him piss himself with fear.

He heard shouting around him and saw wardens and their guards coming around at the corner of his eye. He heard the collar around his neck start to make a bell-like sound, likely indicating it was going to set off. None of these things stopped him, not even Ophilia's voice in the distance. When he got close enough to leap up at the insufferable human, someone blocked his way.

Kaxek.

The vrisha stood firm, forcing Xeda to halt. He hadn't even seen where he had come from. Too angry to back down, Xeda got close to him, almost touching.

"Get out of my way," Xeda growled.

Kaxek's eyes narrowed. "No."

Xeda tried to side-step one way, and Kaxek blocked him again. "You are a fool," he said. "You would lose your chance to fight me over this insignificant human?"

"You have no idea how much he deserves to feel my wrath," Xeda said.

"He is not worth your time. Besides, we both know he is not what angers you so badly." Kaxek leaned in, his nostrils flaring. "He is merely a spark in the already growing fire, is he not, brother?"

Xeda glared at him. "What of it?"

"You don't think I can't sense what's off about you?" Kaxek said in a low voice.

"Come, brother. Besides your need to fight, I could smell your heat from the other side of the arena."

Xeda grew still. Kaxek hissed with laughter. "Yes, you can't hide from one of your own. That is what tears you apart inside. And that is what will make you lose if you don't get control of it. But I know those who can help if you only ask. Think of it as a sign of my favor."

Xeda's fangs slipped from his upper lip. He dared not look at Ophilia. If he did, he would give her away. And no way in hell did he want Kaxek to know who caused his heat. Kaxek would use her against him in every way possible, and he would delight in humiliating him.

"I don't need your help," Xeda hissed. "I don't know what you're talking about. But I will take you out in the next game, mark me."

Kaxek's lip twitched. "Lie to yourself and to me if you like. If an opponent wishes to keep themselves weak, who am I to stop them? I don't show mercy either way. But I'd prefer you to be at your strongest. It will make your downfall that much sweeter."

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Kaxek walked off, turning his back on him. Xeda was still working through what Kaxek said, and he forgot about Cristan above him. He looked up and saw he was gone. They all were, including Ophilia. Only Sal looked down on him now.

He didn't say a word. Maybe he was too scared to. Or too pissed. It didn't matter. He didn't intimidate Xeda, even if he held some power over him.

Sal only glared down at him in warning before he walked off with the rest. Xeda watched as the wardens and their guards swarmed him.

“Xeda of House Salimar, you will be given a penalty for your actions today,” said Warden James. “We will be escorting you to your room now.”

He was about to argue that he wouldn't go anywhere until he saw Ophilia, but then she appeared from the stairway leading from the box. The look she gave him was pure disappointment, and he couldn't blame her. But he couldn't be sorry either.

They led him back with Ophilia next to him. He said nothing, knowing there was no point. He thought about Kaxek's words and how incredibly vulnerable he felt, how close he was to breaking. Hating how right Kaxek was.

CHAPTERTWENTY

Ophilia

Ophilia stood close to the glass, looking down from the balcony to the small training field below. Xeda stalked along one side as he watched the set of fighters in combat.

Practicing only, not drawing blood. He, along with the finalists and the low end fighters the wardens had brought, had been stuck together in the small space to test their will to not tear each other apart. An open training event for trainers and family to watch as they had their morning meal.

Ophilia stood alone to one side of the balcony, ignoring the other trainers and house members that moved and talked around her. Most of them hardly took notice of the fighters below, too deep in conversation instead, about the next game or about their trade. Sal and his lot were nearby, but his sons were missing this time. Likely too hungover or drugged up from drops to come down from their apartments. She was glad she didn't have to hear another complaint or snide remark from Cristan. It was all she had to endure last night when they held a private dinner in Sal's unit.

The showing had been a disaster. After the wardens had escorted her and Xeda back to their room, she tried to ask what had gone through Xeda's head. She knew he was angry at the situation, but his behavior had changed since the first game. He seemed more and more ready to lose his composure. To strike out and hurt someone. She wondered how much the game must have affected him. Or if it was something else she had missed.

"I just want this done," Xeda had answered when she had confronted him. He paced before her, unwilling to look at her. "I'm sick of waiting, sick of these people, sick of having to play nice."

"I understand. But Xeda, you put everything at risk today. They could have disqualified you for what you did. Now you'll take a penalty, and that sets you back," she explained. "I know this is hard—"

He growled and turned from her, starting to take off his armor. "Don't think I don't know that," he hissed. "You have no idea."

She grew quiet, watching him. "Then what?" she asked after a long moment. "What can I do?"

He didn't say anything. He kept his back to her, and she so badly wanted to rush at him and force him to turn around and look at her.

"Please. Xeda, tell me what I can do."

He dropped his shoulder pad on the ground. He bowed his head, and she waited for him to tell her something, anything.

"Nothing," he whispered. His tail weaved back and forth like an angry cat's, and his hands clenched and unclenched, but he refused to let her in. "It's nothing. I can't..."

"Can't what?" She took a step toward him. "What's going on?"

He groaned, raking a hand over his face. He murmured something, but she didn't catch it. Then he hissed softly, and she realized he was laughing. Finally, he turned, and the look he gave her chilled her to the bone.

He approached her slowly, then circled around her back, and she jumped as she felt his tail graze across the back of her legs. She grew still as she felt his breath on her neck.

"Tell me, do I still scare you?" he asked, close to her ear.

An odd, unexpected question. She licked her lips, thinking it over anyway, and decided to answer honestly. "Yes," she whispered back. "Sometimes."

He hummed, as if that was an acceptable answer. Then she felt his talons graze down her arms, making her shiver. She could feel his front brush against her back, his heat

warming her.

"Maybe you should be," he whispered in her ear. But the way he said it wasn't like a threat. It almost sounded—broken.

Before she could turn and say something, there was a knock at the door.

As if he'd been shocked, Xeda quickly distanced himself from her. She watched him disappear onto the balcony without looking back. She wanted to go to him, but the knock at the door came again. Annoyed, she went over and opened it.

"Good afternoon," said one of the staff, a petite woman with short blonde hair. "Mr. Salimar requests your presence tonight."

No reason for him to just call her. That would have been beneath him.

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She was tempted to decline, but after what Xeda had done, she needed to do some damage control. She told the woman she'd be there, then she went to her room to wash and change.

Before she'd left, she had found Xeda's room still empty, imagining he was still on the balcony somewhere. She left him a recording on the ISpad telling him where she was going, then forced herself out of the room, up to Sal's apartment.

When she'd gotten back that night, it was late, and she was exhausted both mentally and physically. She'd gone to bed assuming Xeda had too, worried about facing another day of uncertainty.

That morning she had felt uneasy still. Xeda had hardly said a word as she brought him down to the training field for them all to watch. She knew he was losing patience. But the more she watched him now, the more she could see how distracted he was. Struggling to focus on his fight. Just like the day before, he seemed agitated but also unable or unwilling to acknowledge those he fought. And every once in a while, though she might be imagining it, she thought she caught him wincing in pain. He never mentioned being hurt. His wounds from the first game were already healing over. Then she wondered if it was something within. That he had an internal injury that for some reason he wouldn't tell her about.

That got her scared. If something wasn't right in his system and his organs failed him, death was certain. She had to know right away what was wrong. Maybe that explained his odd behavior. Maybe he wasn't thinking straight from whatever pain he might be in. She looked toward one of the wardens talking with the trainer from House Myre. She could have them call on one of their doctors to examine Xeda after

his practice. Xeda might not like it, but they had to be sure. She would have to make him understand.

"Xeda doesn't look too interested in his fight," said Zachary, coming up beside her.

She didn't want to say anything in front of him that might give Xeda away, but she couldn't be too cold either or Zachary might suspect something was wrong. She'd exchanged niceties with him yesterday in an attempt to still show she wasn't threatened by him or Kaxek but she was willing to be cordial. It was the game she was forced to play.

"He's just impatient to start the next round. And possibly the final one."

"Here's hoping," Zachary said, fixing her with a smile. "The games can be tedious. Yesterday was especially aggravating."

She smirked. "He had a bad moment, that was all. But he plans on keeping his focus on what's important from here on out."

Zachary nodded. "What's important..." he repeated. "Yes, the games are pretty serious. But, just curious, do you think maybe there's something else that could be distracting him from that fact?"

She looked over at him suspiciously. She remembered how Kaxek had confronted Xeda yesterday. Had Xeda said something to him?

"What do you know?" she asked bluntly.

Zachary glanced at her, then shrugged. "Kaxek wants to fight Xeda at his best, we both know this. But we also know Xeda isn't at his best nor will he be if he doesn't get his focus back into the game."

She studied him sharply. "Kaxek knows what's wrong, doesn't he?"

"Yes," Zachary said.

She looked at him waiting for an answer, or to tell her what he wanted in return for the information. He glanced at her again, and his smile widened. "Don't worry," he said. "I'm telling you with no strings attached. As I said, Kaxek wants Xeda's focus on him and only him. He doesn't like sharing others' attention. He's strange like that." Ophilia's brow furrowed. As he faced her, he looked around again to make sure no one was close, listening. "You fighter is distracted because he's in heat."

Ophilia stared at him as if he had just told her he could fly or breathe fire. Then his words really set in. Her eyes widened at the realization.

Heat rose up her neck and face. She turned back to the glass, clearing her throat. "That's—a problem," she said, her voice cracking slightly, a little too stunned to help it. She didn't even know vrisha could go into heat. Then again, the little research she'd found on them hadn't mentioned anything about it. Which meant it might not be a common thing.

"In this situation, I'd say so," he replied. "Xeda can't fight if all he wants to do is fuck."

Zachary's bluntness almost put her out. She choked down her stupid schoolgirl laugh and forced herself to be serious. "Right, yes, that...that makes sense."

"Thankfully, we have a solution," he said, not missing a beat. "Tonight you know we are having a finalists' party in anticipation of the second game. Just another excuse for everyone to get drunk and high on drops again, but it's a perfect time for Xeda to hopefully take out all his pent up needs. I have several female otherkin that would be happy to do the job and can arrange for them to meet in a private suite."

Ophilia rubbed at her temples, hoping Zachary didn't see how flushed she looked. This was all so sudden, she was still in shock from even learning about Xeda's problem. "You're really sure this is what's wrong? Maybe Kaxek got the wrong idea..."

Zachary shook his head. "Afraid not. The vrisha have a way of understanding each other, unlike we do. He was certain."

Ophilia's eyes drifted down to Xeda, who was now sparring with a grex. A sudden sinking feeling made her stomach twist, her throat tighten. At first, she felt angry. How could he not tell her? Then she felt sorry for being upset. It was his business, and it was personal. He likely didn't feel comfortable telling her, and she shouldn't be mad at that.

The sudden thought of him with another also crossed her mind. She searched her feelings and found that...she didn't like that either. Even though she had no right to keep him from another. He was not hers. Not like that. If he chose to be with another, what right did she have to stop him?

"We have no female vrisha. He may not take to another kind..." she said.

Zachary waved the idea away. "Kaxek has been with plenty of otherkin without issue. Surely with Xeda's heat, it is only a matter of having the choice over none at all."

Damn if she could argue with that. If his heat drove him to act as he had, then he might be thankful for anyone at all. Of course, as long as they aren't human, a little voice said at the back of her head.

"Shall I make the arrangements?" Zachary asked.

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She found it hard to speak. The sinking feeling was still there, falling into her gut. She had to do this for them. If they wanted to win. She closed her eyes and willed herself not to feel anything more about it. "Y-yes," she said, ignoring the sharp pang that hit her chest. "Go ahead. And...thank you for your help."

Zachary smiled. "Excellent. Let's hope tonight will give him some needed relief. And then we can get him back on track."

Ophilia opened her eyes, wishing she could feel just as casual about this as Zachary. She also hoped Xeda wouldn't be too offended by the idea either. He would be taken to the room, but he didn't have to do anything if he didn't want to.

Zachary left to make the arrangements, leaving her alone to think over everything they'd just discussed. Technically, this was a better scenario than what she had originally thought when she worried he might be injured in some way. And yet, she didn't feel much better.

They were here to win and do what had to be done...

She watched Xeda, imagining him pulling some woman to him, biting, scratching, and possessing, desperate, hungry, and wild with need. Taking out his hot rage on them one beat at a time. Her face burned at the thought as she felt a slow ache between her thighs.

No, never her. She had to let it go.

* * *

She let the water spill down her head and shoulders as she leaned against the shower wall. She'd let Xeda stay in the training yard for longer, to give him something else to focus on and to give her a moment of peace before the party. Afterward, she gave him some time to prepare in his room alone while she did the same. She had gotten very close to telling him what she knew but then backed out each time. If he hadn't told her himself, then he might not like learning that she found out some other way. She didn't want to embarrass him. Tonight she would act like nothing was amiss, tell him it was for the party and nothing more. Let him enjoy himself.

She closed her eyes and let the water fall along her face and neck. She imagined the laps of water like a warm tongue, if Xeda were to—

No. Enough.

Frustrated, she turned off the water and stepped out of the shower. She used the heat vents above to dry herself quickly, then stepped into her small room. The marbled floors were cool on her feet as she padded over to the closet. She threw it open and looked for something to wear.

She eyed the kelve outfit first. And felt now it wouldn't be appropriate. She found a slim black dress instead, with gold thread along the sides, and went with that. She fixed her hair and even did a little make-up, not something she usually wore but felt compelled to this time around. It was to be a semi-formal affair, but they'd also expect her to be dressed appropriately. She was sick of the uniform and deep down maybe for once she wanted to be a little seen.

Because tonight she would be alone. Waiting around for Xeda to return to see his calm, ecstatic face. Her stomach twisted, and she waved the thought away. Or maybe she would actually try to find company this time. She might not like any of the people around her, a bunch of thugs and criminals in fine suits, but surely someone could keep her company.

She thought of Zachary then. Maybe they could just spend a night talking. He seemed pleasant enough. He was suave and charming. Maybe it was him she should be thinking about.

She tried to think of him in a more romantic way but found it wasn't the same. He was also too secretive. There was something about him that he hid well and that rubbed her the wrong way.

Still, he might be someone to make good conversation with, and that was all the distraction she would need.

There was a sharp tap at her door as she fixed herself in her mirror. Heart flipping, she went to the door and opened it to Xeda.

He peered down at her quietly, his mouth widening slightly. His eyes drifted over her dress, and she tried not to let the heat of his gaze affect her. "Ready?" she asked.

His eyes met hers. He wore his kelve pants and a single armband but nothing more. "If we must. It's too late to ask if we can stay behind, is it?"

Oh, how she wished she could say no to that.

"I wish we could," she said softly. "But they'll be expecting us for at least part of the night. But it doesn't have to be long, if you don't want."

He grunted. "I don't."

She nodded and passed by him quickly to the outer door. "You're going to have to be on your best behavior with Sal. He's still pissed about the showing."

Xeda blew out a breath. "I gather as much. His son better stay away."

"I'm sure he plans to." She lifted her hand to the doorpad, then turned back to him.
"Just...try to enjoy yourself tonight."

He scoffed. "Doubtful."

Oh, you might be surprised, she thought, feeling a moment of bitterness, then quickly shoving it aside as she turned and pressed on the doorpad.

CHAPTERTWENTY-ONE

Xeda

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Another night, another pointless celebration. It seemed the people only delighted in making up reasons to drink and gorge themselves on food till they were sick. It only made him hate them more. And worse, it seemed he was one of the few fighters to even be in attendance. Of course, Kaxek wasn't present. The only one Xeda saw actually enjoying himself was Tazyn.

He knew he had to make up for the showing, and he figured that was the reason Ophilia forced him into this situation. Make sure everyone knew he was still obedient, that he was still of sound mind and could be trusted around them.

But he couldn't be. He really shouldn't be here. They couldn't change him no matter how they tried. All he could do was bide his time and hope he didn't snap.

He let Ophilia parade him around like before. Let others approach, let them smile and talk to him. Only this time, he could see the unease in their eyes. Could smell the faint scent of their fear. They didn't touch him this time either but kept an arm's length away. They were learning.

Only when he saw Sal with his group of men did he feel the rage rise again. But even they stayed clear of him, and for that he was grateful.

He hardly gave them notice anyway. He spoke little and stayed close to Ophilia's side. It was her he found his focus shifting toward throughout the night. He focused on her scent, the way she moved, how her hand rested on him, and let his mind wander to places freely, uncaring how shameful or forbidden they might be. Funny, it calmed him even as it pained him.

When the thoughts weren't enough, he even risked letting his tail glide across her leg ever so slightly, as if by accident. It was a dangerous game he played, knowing it only served to make his heat worse. What was more frustrating was Ophilia's reaction, which was basically non-existent. She didn't try to kick him away or tell him to stop. But she didn't even look at him or smile either. She ignored him completely, and that only made him feel worse.

At one point when she went off to get a drink, he glared at her in hopes she would look at him. Just one look. That's all he wanted. If they were alone, he would have demanded it. But here, he knew how bad it would appear for both of them if he tried to command her in front of the others.

He could tell how tense she was. That she wouldn't directly look at him made him wonder if she was starting to fear him more too.

Are you afraid?

Yes, sometimes.

He felt a painful need to just call it quits and convince her to let them leave this awful party behind and go back to their room. He wouldn't try to scare her more or anything. But maybe he could get that massage she promised. Yes, that was all. Nothing more than that. And how nice it would be.

Before he could attempt to gain her attention, Ophilia turned to him. "One moment," she said, and slipped away. He watched her again, disappointed at first, then agitated when he saw who she was approaching. That man from the showing, who he assumed was Kaxek's representative.

The man smiled at her as she came to stand beside him. He put a hand on her shoulder and leaned down, whispering something in her ear. She nodded in response,

and he slipped away.

Xeda watched him sharply, his fangs slipping from his upper lip as if ready to snarl. Then he fixed his expression when Ophilia returned to him. She gave him one of her forced smiles, but her eyes seemed far away.

"Come with me," she said. She led him toward the elevators, and he began to feel relieved. They were leaving, thank the elders.

They got onto the elevator, taking it back down. Yes, this was perfect. He could ask her to send for food since he didn't care for anything at the party. They could spend the night in each other's company, and then he'd ask her to sit by him and maybe rub the sore parts of his body, let her hands move across him and then down where it was sore the most. And then after...

The door slid open, but not to their floor. Disappointment and confusion ate at him as she started down an unfamiliar passage.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

She turned to face him, and once more, he saw that strange faraway look in her eyes, like she was seeing through him. "A...private affair." She reached out her hand to him when he didn't move. "Something for you."

He looked at her with an odd expression but trusted her. She didn't look worried or upset exactly, just strangely distant. He cautiously followed her to a door down the hall, and when she opened it, he found another nice room similar to theirs, only a little more open, with an inground bed in the middle bigger than the one in his room. There was a table set with food and drink, and it was dimly lit and warm just like he liked it.

It was empty too. Heat simmered low when he assumed they might be alone here together and that this would be a perfect place for them to have their moment. He walked in eagerly, looking around at how nice it was. Then he turned back to the door and noticed Ophilia still stayed outside the room.

"There will be others to join you," she said stiffly. Then she gave him that forced smile. "When you're ready, just come back to the room."

"What is this?" he asked. "What do you mean by others?"

Her face turned red, and she cleared her throat. "It's a...gift, Xeda. To help with...to help you get through the next game."

His eyes narrowed. Help him get through the game?

She laughed nervously. "You'll see." She turned to leave, then stopped herself. "But if...if nothing is to your liking, we'll arrange something else. If you like. But you can enjoy yourself. You're allowed that too." She shifted on her feet, as if she was desperate to get away. "Anyway, I'll see you soon." Before he could tell her to wait, she was gone, the door sliding back.

Stunned, he stood there, watching the door as if Ophilia might reappear again and tell him she was messing with him. When she didn't, he looked around the room. It did look like they made it just for him. Maybe this was only meant to be a time for him to relax, giving him a moment away from everyone. But he would have had that just fine with Ophilia in their room. Why couldn't she stay? And who else, exactly, was supposed to be joining him?

He hung about the room for some time, waiting, picking at some of the food left at the table, trying out the bed and finding it nice enough. There was a bathing area too, in another room with a large bath just like the one in his room. But none of them were

more impressive than what he already had. He was starting to worry that maybe this was his new room and that for some reason they had decided to separate him from Ophilia, that this would be part of his punishment for his actions at the showing. But the more he paced and thought about it, the more that didn't seem to make sense. Maybe she chose to separate them, but he couldn't understand why she would. He was becoming increasingly bored as time passed and more impatient as he wondered about Ophilia.

When he finally had enough waiting, he went to leave when the door slid open before him. He froze as a group of otherkin appeared on the other side.

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"Oh," said a female lygin closest to the door. "You must be Xeda." She smiled at him. Her skin was silky and shiny, and her mane of hair was smooth along her head. She wore—very little, a strip of red cloth around her torso that also draped between her thighs and a red wrap along her chest. She also wore dozens of gold bands and a collar of jewels. She had a pattern of spots along her thighs and across her shoulders. The others were dressed almost exactly the same only in different colors. There was another lygin, a skra, and even a grex who was bigger than the others. They were all female, and they passed by Xeda to enter the room.

"How lovely," said the other lygin, smaller than the first. "And so warm."

"And what an interesting bed," said the skra, hopping down into it.

Xeda watched them, first with utter confusion.

Then he quickly realized why they were there.

His insides turned to fire, his body going rigid. The heat of both his need and his rage swirled inside him. Kaxek had done this. He had sent them. And Ophilia had been told what was wrong with him. That explained her distance.

The smaller lygin, with lighter fur than the spotted one, approached him and grinned mischievously. "Well, won't you join us, Xeda?" she purred as she dipped her head toward the others who now lingered or sat on the edge of the bed.

He didn't move. His logical brain told him this was what was right. Just mindlessly take from them what he needed, and be done with it. Then he could move on. No

more guilt or shame or worries. They still weren't vrisha, but it mattered little in this situation. Even the most honorable vrisha would understand that, when it came to the heat cycle, one worked with what they had.

Only problem was his body didn't react to them. His heat came from and reacted to one source, and that source was not here. Some part of him knew no matter how much he took from these women, it wouldn't satisfy, wouldn't calm the heat. It would be like trying to drink from an endless pool but always being thirsty.

"It's all right, Xeda. We will do all that we can to please you," said the lygin. She rested her hand on his chest, and the touch didn't feel right. No, it didn't feel right at all. It only reminded him how much he didn't like to be touched by others. And only made him yearn more for the one who he wanted to touch him the most.

He stepped back toward the door. "Where is Ophilia?" he asked.

The lygin frowned and glanced at the others. "Well, she would likely be waiting somewhere. We don't know for sure."

"Oh, but I believe Master Zachary said he would keep her company," chimed in the skra. "Until you were satisfied."

Xeda glared at her. "What?" he hissed. Ophilia was alone with that man. A man who could easily be Ophilia's match.

He had a sudden image of them together in the way he had seen himself and Ophilia together, and all his composure snapped.

A low growl began to rise in his chest, and the lygin female backed away in fear. His lip curled back, and his fingers clenched tight as his tail weaved. Before they could stop him, he turned and shot out the door, making his way for the elevator.

She could be anywhere with this Zachary, but he would search every room, hunting her down if he had to, starting with their room.

Weak, fool, came a soft hiss, the dead queen whispering in his ear. Pathetic. Letting a human do this to you.

He ignored her as he came to the elevator, only to find the damn thing stuck at the top. Snarling, he went for the stairs to one side and started to descend.

The queen's shadow began to weave at the corner of his eyes. Trying to stop him.

You're making a mistake, Xeda, she said. You're losing yourself, you know that? Everything you fought for. All to waste. All for one of them.

He made it to their floor and turned down the passage.

Don't become like Vrexus. Don't let a human bring you down too. She's nothing. Stop this now before it's too late. She will break you, Xeda. She will ruin you!

"Enough!" he roared, turning on the image of the queen. "Die already!"

The image of the queen disappeared, like smoke on the wind. She was nothing but a hallucination, a bad illusion that his mind had conjured up to take the form of his guilt. He knew that now, and he was sick of it. He was done giving a shit. Without another thought, he rushed for his and Ophilia's room. As he came to the door, he slammed his fist on the pad, forcing it open.

Inside, it was dimly lit. At first, he thought it might be empty until he looked over at the few seats facing a small bowl of fire and saw Ophilia sitting there with the man.

Ophilia shot from her seat. "Xeda, what—"

He growled at the man who stared back at him with shock and, yes, fear. That was good, he was afraid.

Xeda stalked into the room, his tail whipping behind him.

"Get out," he growled to the man.

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The man stood slowly and glanced at Ophilia. "Should I call in the wardens?"

Ophilia stared back at Xeda, then shook her head. "No, that won't be necessary. I think you should probably leave." She said something to him under her breath, and the man only nodded, then swiftly made for the door. He passed by Xeda with a small smirk on his face, but Xeda could still smell the fear on him as he quickly disappeared. Xeda let him go, letting the door shut behind him.

Now that they were left alone, Xeda slowly moved across the room, keeping his sights only on her.

"What happened?" Ophilia asked, her body tense, face a little pale, clearly shocked by his reaction.

"I didn't much care for the gift," he said.

Ophilia straightened, her face now turning pink. "I'm sorry, Xeda, I thought..." She shook her head. "I didn't want to embarrass you."

He bared his teeth. "A little late. But I blame Kaxek for that."

Her brow furrowed. "Zachary, told me he could help."

Xeda growled, starting to pace the room. "I don't want their help."

"I was trying to help too," she explained. "Xeda, I just wanted to—to make things better."

He stopped and looked at her. "You really do, don't you?"

She took a step toward him. "What can I do? Tell me, Xeda, what do you want?"

He looked at her, pain settling between his thighs, making his legs shake. He stalked closer to her and reached out, letting his talons brush along her neck, her shoulder, then down her arm. Then he gripped her wrist and gently pulled her closer. His tail slithered across her back as if it had a mind of its own. As if needing to possess.

With one swift move, he led her hand to his chest, then down his stomach. "Touch me."

CHAPTERTWENTY-TWO

Ophilia

She watched as her hand, grasped in his, moved down the center of his chest, then his stomach, her fingers trailing over the sleek red scales that were thinner there than those along his arms and legs. Her heart leapt into her throat, gasping as he brought her hand lower.

She let him guide her, stunned by what he was doing. "Xeda," she whispered.

"Please," he growled softly. He led her over to the edge of his bed, then still holding onto her wrist, he began to untie his kelva pants. Quickly, he had them off and kicked away. Ophilia's eyes drifted down and saw his cock already freed from its sheath. The shaft was fully extended and curved upward where she could see a set of sleek ridges along the thick base. "Please," he said again, begging her to touch him.

Her eyes moved back to his. He really wanted this. And not just from anyone, she now knew. The sinking feeling she'd had all day now lifted and swelled.

She let him move her hand down to the base of his cock, letting her fingers trail over the slick shaft. A hiss of breath escaped him followed by a low guttural groan. Her gaze flicked back down, and she took hold of him firmly. He in turn loosened his grip on her wrist to grasp the back of her neck, holding her in place.

"That's it," he hissed softly, groaning again as she let her hand slide against him, slowly working him. "That's good." His legs trembled and his tail, she noticed, began to slide its way up her body, moving across her chest and along her neck, the tip gently trailing just under her chin, making her tilt her head back. She parted her lips, letting out a slow breath as her heart raced. Her expression made something snap in him. His nostrils flared and his pupils dilated, his fangs slipping from his upper lip as he sucked in a breath of air through his teeth.

She felt him throbbing in her hand, his seed pumping out to spill on to the floor. His face twisted as a growl ripped up his throat.

She let go of him but didn't dare move away as he held her still. His teeth were bared in a sort of twisted smile as his mouth came down and bit her throat.

He didn't break the skin, but it was enough to make her yelp in surprise. He drew back and glared at her. "Ah, I forgot. Such soft skin." He trailed a talon across her collarbone teasingly. This was so unlike him. It was like he was drugged up. Or drunk. Drunk on his need. This heat had really messed with him badly. The relief he showed only told her how difficult it had been.

"Xeda," she said carefully. "Are you really sure this is what you want?" She knew how he felt about her kind. Even if she wanted this too, she worried this was only some effect of his heat and nothing more. That after he calmed, he wouldn't even be able to look at her.

He fixed her with an intense, almost lazy expression. "I wouldn't have come here

otherwise." His sharp fingers moved across her shoulder and, with one flick, tore the strap of her dress. His other hand kept a hold of her neck, her hair tangled in his fingers. His eyes narrowed on her. "And how curious I am," he said in a low voice, "to know what you feel like."

Her blood rushed to her face, her body growing warm. Slowly, she peeled away her dress and let it fall to the floor.

He stared at her with half closed eyes, studying her with his hungry gaze. Not the look of indifference she might have expected or the look of disgust she feared.

She swallowed hard, letting reality sink in and trying to be honest with him and herself. "I don't know if I can fit you," she said. "It's been a while and you're..."

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He seemed to understand. He moved her to the ledge of the in-ground bed, then wrapping an arm around her, easily stepped down onto the bed, carrying her down with ease.

"Only one way to know," he said with such a silky tone she almost didn't recognize it as his. He moved her against the edge, her back to him, letting her bend forward, keeping her upper body pressed against the warm ground while her legs remained against the wall of the bed. Then he moved himself behind her.

Ophilia inhaled sharply and shifted to move her hips up, arching her back as his hand came down between her shoulder blades to keep her in place. She braced herself as she felt the slick tip of his cock press against her center. His powerful legs held her against the wall of the bed as he slid into her.

It wasn't so bad at first. In fact, the thick head made her moan involuntarily, sweat forming on her nape and lower back. As he slowly slid deeper, however, the more it stretched her, and she writhed under him, panting for breath. He stilled for a moment, jutting his hips slightly, and the movement made her moan again through her teeth. He moved again, inch by excruciating inch, until he could go no farther, pinning her down.

If it weren't for the natural oil that he produced, she didn't think he would have gotten so far. She moved her hips and shivered as he rubbed against her.

"So this is why...the others are with humans," he said with a soft hiss, more to himself than her. "Now I understand."

She didn't know what he meant nor did she ask. She shifted, and a soft whimper caught in her throat as she felt him press harder against her. He bent down and flicked his tongue out, lapping at her shoulder. She kept her head to one side and from the corner of her eye could see him watching her.

His hand rested on her back, talons trailing up her spine in a lazy caress. "You took me well," he said. "I admit I worried..."

She shook her head. "It's okay." She licked her lips, her mouth exceptionally dry. "I'm all right. You went slow, and that was good." She felt her face heat up, feeling his cock pulse inside her. She could feel her own wet heat running down her thighs, her body aching for him to move.

He tilted his head as his hands moved along her, exploring her. Then he grabbed her hip, pressing his talons to her skin before sliding out, then back in. Doing it more to see how she would react, she realized. And she did react. She arched her back more and lifted her head, another whimper tearing from her mouth.

"Yes, you feel so very good," he purred as he gripped at her thigh. "Now, bend your leg up, that's it." He moved his hips slowly, his tail coming around to twist around her waist, the spiny end pointing up her back. "Yes, good, now move your hips with mine, like that."

He moved her hips with his hand to the rhythm he liked, and she kept it steady. Every thrust sent her body coiling tighter and tighter.

"Xeda," she cried softly as her body slid along the ground. She felt a small sharp pain from his talons at her thighs, but it was nothing compared to his movement between them. "Xeda," she cried louder.

He was beginning to lose himself again in his need, his powerful movements growing

more fierce, more wild. He lifted his leg above hers and drove deeper.

She shut her eyes as her body shattered underneath his in a quiet storm, her mouth opening in a silent scream. She heard him hiss sharply, as if noticing her body's sudden tightening and throbbing. A snarl ripped from his throat, and she felt him pulsing then spilling inside her even as he continued to move. He slammed into her once more before quickly slipping out, unfurling his tail from her, and backing away as if stunned by his own body's reaction.

Ophilia laid there, still as death, her only movement her breathing. She clenched her hands tight into fists, feeling a shiver overtake her now that Xeda's heat was no longer atop her.

She thought she heard him mumble something sharply that sounded like a curse. Slowly, she twisted her body around to look at him and saw him standing over her, his eyes alight like a blazing fire.

"Ophilia," he said under his breath. "What have you done to me?"

She turned all the way to face him, sitting on the ledge. He reached out and let his tail caress her thigh.

Ophilia took a slow breath, trying to keep her body from trembling. I wonder the same, she said silently.

They both stared down at each other.

"Are you all right?" she asked first, out of impulse.

He looked at her both with amusement and annoyance. "You're asking me that?" he said. "I'm...more than all right. Are you..."

"I'm fine," she said. More than fine. "But I'll definitely be sore."

He seemed to relax. He glanced behind her, then his mouth widened in a sort of smile. He gently took hold of her arm and pulled her up as he stepped out of the bed. "Come on, I want that massage you promised me," he said, pulling her to the pool.

Ophilia got in without complaint. In fact, she relished the warm water on her skin. Xeda got in after her. He circled around her, playfully flicking water at her with his tail.

She giggled, feeling high still from the adrenaline coursing through her veins. She pursed her lips as she waded through the water, finding it hard to look at him.

"Your heat," she asked. "Is it gone now?" She tried to not sound disappointed as she said it, telling herself she wanted him to be better over her own pleasure.

He gave her a sly look. "For now," he said. "But I don't expect it to be gone from just this one encounter alone." He dipped his head as he eyed her sharply. "No, far from it. I'm afraid you'll have to help me more often." He fixed her with an equally sly expression, his tail teasing her thighs.

Ophilia flushed as she jumped at his touch, unable to keep the smile from growing on her face. She walked to the edge of the pool, flicking some of the water back at him. She chewed on her lip, looking down at the water as she asked, "Why did you choose me over the others?"

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Truthfully, she feared his response, but she had to know. Why her? The kind he loathed the most. It still made no sense.

He didn't say anything at first. Her curiosity, now stronger than her fear, made her look up at him. He seemed to be thinking over his answer.

"In truth...it was you who triggered this heat in me," he finally said. "So, it would respond to no one else. You are the only one here I can trust. So, who or what you are doesn't matter." He moved to stand closer to her. "My body wants what it wants, and I couldn't have it any other way. And now it doesn't matter as long as I have you this way for myself."

She wasn't sure how to feel about that response. But joy and confusion were two emotions she noticed the most.

She broke the distance between them and lifted her hand to his chest. He didn't move back, in fact he relished in her touch, and at least she had that. She let her hands move freely over him, loving that he responded to her now so well, loving that he wanted it. He hummed as he closed his eyes, bending his head to rest it on her shoulder as she massaged his skull and neck. This was more than she could have ever hoped for. Though she knew deep down she still didn't have all of him. That this could just be temporary, that when his heat dissolved, he might not feel the same.

She forced these thoughts away. No, she wanted to just be in this moment with him. And happy that she had this now. That she had him even a little. It would have to be enough.

CHAPTERTWENTY-THREE

Ophilia

She woke to something slithering across her leg. Her eyes fluttered open as she twisted on her side. Coming out of sleep, she noticed the bed under her was damp. The body next to her was so warm it made her sweat.

Xeda stirred beside her. When she looked up at his face, she saw the inner lids covering his eyes. He was still asleep, and yet his tail had a mind of its own, curling across her thigh.

Groggy from sleep, she lifted her arm to check her wristpad. It was late afternoon. They hadn't gone to sleep until the sun started to rise.

She moved onto her back and winced. As she'd predicted, she was sore—her center throbbed with a dull ache. Along her thighs, she could see a smattering of bruises and, underneath them, tiny little cuts from Xeda's scales. Funny, she hadn't felt them when they had sliced her. Gently, she traced her fingers along them, feeling the small sting. She would have to find a salve for them.

She turned her head slowly and looked up at Xeda's face again, his head close to hers. His lip twitched in his sleep, as if he were dreaming. Careful not to wake him, she lifted herself slowly to a sitting position. She took a moment to just sit there quietly, watching his chest barely move, his tail twisting beside her. Her mind wandered to last night, and she felt her heart begin to race again at the memory. How they melded together so well despite their differences. How strange yet perfect he felt. She closed her eyes, her toes curling, soaking in the feeling of silent bliss that melted her. If only it could last forever. If only she could stay in this moment and leave when she was ready.

But they were not free yet, and so this moment was only temporary. A brief few hours of happiness before they were forced to face whatever came their way. Before she had to face the end result. She didn't want to think about it now, even in a positive way. She just wanted to have this moment and keep it for herself.

Carefully, she stretched her legs and arms, trying to untighten her muscles. As much as she would love to just sit there and watch him, she felt gross from the sweat that had lingered on her in sleep and now wanted to shower. She reached a hand out to Xeda, then pulled away. Instead, trying not to wake him, she leaned across and ever so lightly brushed her lips across his. She pulled away quickly, her heart pattering, then relieved when he still didn't wake. Smiling, she slowly rose and climbed out of the bed that was like a nest, striding back to her room. She called for food before she washed so it would be ready when she was done and when he woke.

Today, for once, was a free day. No fights, no games, no showings or parties. People would be recovering from the night before and looking for a break, if only a small one. Ophilia thought about what that meant for her and Xeda. They could actually spend the day together. She might not be able to take him out of the confines of the game hall, but they could go to the gardens or back up to the roof when no one was there.

Or they could stay here, and Xeda could do whatever he liked with her.

She'd have no problem with that, even if her body could use a break. She could pamper him instead, and she liked the idea of that too. He'd been through a lot the last few weeks. They both had.

When she'd finished showering, she tied her hair back and slipped on a silky robe. She returned to Xeda's room and stepped over to the door, opening it just in time for their food to arrive. She started arranging it on the groundmat near the bed, her mouth watering from the smell.

"What do you think you're doing?"

She looked around and saw Xeda leering at her as he sat up from the bed. A playful expression, not angry. For once, he seemed relaxed enough to just be himself, not hidden by his rage.

She turned back to the groundmat. "I figured you might like to eat something."

He hummed as he reclined back, watching her. "Come here and I will."

She gazed back at him in shock. And saw his mouth widen in that sly sort of smile. But she didn't think he could know about that kind of intimacy. More that he was implying she was a tasty morsal he'd like to bite into. Still, she laughed. She searched over the food and took a bowl of sweet fruit dipped in a sort of syrup along with a plate of seared meat. She slid back over to the bed, seating her herself on the edge, letting her legs dangle down. She placed the food beside her.

"Try this instead," she said, picking up a small fruit that looked like a large berry of some sort, curious to see his reaction.

Xeda gave her a funny look as he unfurled himself and came to kneel beside her, placing one arm on the edge of the bed. He opened his mouth, showing his black teeth, and Ophilia carefully placed the fruit on his tongue. He snapped his mouth shut and swallowed in one bite. His face started to twist, his mouth widening as he gritted his teeth.

Ophilia tried to contain her laughter. "Didn't care for that, did you?"

He licked his teeth as his nose wrinkled. "No," he said. "Too sweet. Disgusting."

She smiled at him as she popped a berry into her mouth. "Too bad." She picked up

the plate of meat next and took a piece between her fingers. "How about this?"

His eyes rose to hers as he leaned forward, taking the bite of meat between his teeth, his tongue sliding over her fingers. Ophelia shivered as she felt the graze of his teeth.

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He savored the meat more, his eyes alighting with surprised delight. "Yes, this is very good." He went to grab more, and she quickly placed it out of his reach.

"Show me how nice you can be, and you can have more."

Her heart hammered, hoping she hadn't just stepped over the line. She made sure to keep her expression amused to show she wasn't as serious as she sounded.

Xeda's eyes widened as his nostrils flared, clearly in shock by her audacity. But he was no fool, she knew. His mouth tightened into a sort of creepy, unhinged sneer. "Nice?" he hissed.

Ophilia bit her bottom lip. "That's right."

Slowly, Xeda rose to tower above her, his lip curling to one side, showing one sharp fang. Ophilia leaned back, gripping the end of the plate, heat tingling up her neck, watching him closely. She stretched her arm out, holding the plate back as he leaned down, placing an arm on either side of her.

A low growl sounded deep in his throat. "You dare try to tell me what to do?"

Her smile tightened, trying not to be intimidated. "Yes. Do as I say, or you get no more."

He leaned in closer, baring his teeth. "You insolent little human. You'll regret that."

Something moved at the corner of her eye. She glanced over and saw his tail trying to

sneak its way up the side of the bed and over to the plate in her hand.

Quickly, she reacted, pushing the plate away, letting it slide across the floor several feet.

As Xeda hissed in annoyance, Ophilia tried to scramble out from under him. As she crawled her way for the plate, Xeda grabbed her ankle and pulled her back, making her yelp in surprise.

He laughed as he climbed over her toward the food, and quickly she gripped his legs, trying to stop him, but he kept on going, dragging her with him.

"Xeda, no!" Ophilia called as she slid across the floor like a rag doll underneath him. "Don't you dare—"

He clawed his way over, his laughter turning wicked. Thinking quickly, she tried to stop him by distracting him, jabbing his sides, trying to find one sensitive area on his body to pinch or grab, but nothing worked. He was over the plate now and about to devour the whole thing when, in one last effort to stop him, she leaned up and bit the underside of his thigh.

She thought she heard him inhale sharply and felt triumph when she saw him go still. She dipped her head and saw him looking down at her, his pupils dilated, a pained look on his face. She glanced back to his lower half and saw, between his legs, his cock beginning to slide out from his sheath. Clearly, she had hit a sensitive spot. She watched it slide out, slick and hard, fascinated by how different he was.

When he was fully exposed in front of her, she fixed him with a mean smile. She reached out and lightly grabbed hold of him, letting her thumb rub against the underside along each ridge.

Xeda hissed, then groaned. "Isharit," he said, like a curse.

"Don't you dare touch that plate, or I'll stop," she said.

"Little hellion," Xeda growled. She caught drops of saliva falling from his mouth onto the plate. But he didn't move. Gently, she stroked him, and he shuddered.

Feeling now very in control and enthralled by his reaction, she was hungry for more. "If you be nice and obedient," she said coolly, "and don't eat from that plate like I command, I'll reward you."

His chest rumbled above her. She knew he could just take what he wanted, but it wouldn't be as sweet as what she offered. So, he was letting her play her little game. He didn't move as she continued to stroke her hand along him.

"That's good," she said softly. "Now slide the food away."

He did as she ordered.

"Put your hands behind your back and don't move."

He did as she asked, hesitantly shifting up to a kneeling position as he crossed his arms behind him. He glared down at her, his eyes nothing more than slits, his lips tight, fangs slipping out. She could see he was drunk on her touch already and wanting more.

She watched him watching her for a moment. Then, without a thought, she moved her head and let her mouth trail along his shaft, letting her tongue graze across him.

Xeda let out a sound like a bark or a yelp, his body jerking. She tasted the oil from him and found it not unpleasant, not tasting like much at all. She moved along him to

his head, then her lips encased him, sucking gently in case it was too much. She reveled in the feel of him and in his reaction as he shuddered for her. She could tell he was desperate to move, wanting to thrust his hips, but he was being very good and keeping in place, not wanting her to stop.

She stroked him this way as much as she could until she felt him tense and heard a low snarl rip from his throat as he throbbed and spilled on her tongue.

She brought her head back and saw a dark fire in his gaze, burning so deep it made her heart race and her body warm. She smiled up at him sheepishly as she pulled herself out from underneath him. Then she carefully took up the plate again and stood before him.

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"You did really well," she said, trying to keep her hands from shaking.

He bared his teeth in a smile, a low hiss of laughter, amused by her game. "You are a clever, wicked little thing, I'll give you that." His gaze drifted down her naked body as her robe had come undone. His eyes lit up again, this time with a mischievous look. "I can see I was rough with you last night."

She knew he meant the bruises and cuts on her thighs. "Yes, a little."

"That wasn't very nice of me at all, was it?"

She shook her head. "Not very. Maybe you should fix that."

He grunted, then leaned in toward her. His tongue grazed the underside of her thigh along the tiny cuts, and she tensed, air sucking into her lungs. He trailed across the area between her thigh and center, his long tongue curling.

When he hit her center, her grip on the plate was lost. She let it fall, hitting the ground with a clang as a whimper spilled from her mouth. As his tongue slid against her, she reached out and gripped his horns. Her legs buckled, and he caught her before she hit the floor, gripping her hips as he kept her in place. She arched her back and gasped as his tongue slid into her center, heat curling, twisting.

She writhed against him as he stroked her much like she had done for him, and it didn't take long for her to tighten and buck against him, a scream ripping up her throat through her teeth, her legs trembling.

She lay there as he lifted from her, licking his teeth, his expression much like how it had been when she had first given him that bite of meat.

He crawled over to settle himself beside her, lying on his stomach. She shifted on her side to better look at him. She studied his scars, letting her fingers trail over them.

"You're not ashamed of this with me, are you?" she couldn't help asking.

His gaze caught hers. Then he seemed to think it over. "No," he said at last. "Strangely, no. Though I feel like I should only because of...everything in my past."

She didn't pry him. She knew some of what he felt from what she was told about the Blood Guard. But she didn't know how deep or intense his hatred went. She couldn't help wondering again, however, how much of what he felt now was affected by his heat, but she couldn't bring herself to ask.

"It doesn't matter if I should feel ashamed now or not, anyway," he continued. "Things are different here. With you. With these games. Everything."

She wondered if they would remain the same after. Or would he change his mind once he was free? Would having a way out mean leaving her and all this behind him? Would what happened here on Kingsway remain on Kingsway? Would she have to let him go?

These questions slipped through her mind like poison, but she was too afraid to ask them aloud. At least not yet. Let them worry about getting free first. Because if they weren't free, none of it mattered, anyway. And she would rather see him free than forced to be tied down to this place and therefore to her because he had to. She wanted him to choose her still when the time came.

She pet his side, thinking. "There are no events planned today. I was thinking you and

I..."

"Whatever it is, my answer is yes," he said.

She grinned. She was about to offer a few ideas when a knock came at the door. Her smile dropped, and she quickly wrapped her robe around her. Anxiety pulled at her as she went for the door.

She opened it and her heart sank. One of Sal's men glared down at her. He glanced behind her shoulder, and she turned quickly to see Xeda sitting up with his pants on, glaring back. "He wants to see you," the man said and left her without an answer.

She closed the door and stared at Xeda.

He stared back at her. "I really do want to kill that man."

* * *

Smoothing out the top of her uniform, she stepped into Sal's apartment, unease growing in her gut. Every room was nothing but mirrors and marble, with sleek black furniture. It was cold-looking, unlike the warmth of Xeda's room. As she walked down the front hall, she had to avoid one of the cats who hissed at her as she passed. She slipped by one room and saw Sal's wife with his sister talking in whispers. They noticed her and gave her a cold stare before she moved on.

Down one side, she came to a door with one of Sal's men guarding it, not the same that had come to her door earlier. He gave her one look, then knocked on the door before opening it. "It's Ophilia," he said to Sal within.

"Good, bring her in," she heard him reply. The guard allowed her to enter Sal's private study. She stepped inside and stopped just after the door, hearing the guard

shut it behind her.

Sal was at a table looking over a 3d display of a map of one of his properties. Next to it was a set of data she didn't recognize.

"Ophilia, Ophilia," he greeted as he studied the map. He glanced up at her and frowned. "Well, what are you standing all the way over there for? Get over here."

She hesitated, then slowly made her way to the opposite side of the table. "You wanted to see me?" she asked.

"Everything going okay with you?" he said. "Getting a good sleep?"

"Yes, just fine."

He nodded. "The vrisha hasn't kept you up?"

She stiffened. "No, sir."

"Good. Good. And he hasn't hurt you at all, I assume? Even with his shitty attitude?"

She tried to keep her face blank. "No, sir, he hasn't."

He watched her for a long moment, then turned back to his map. "Hm. That's good at least." He tapped his fingers on the table as if thinking. "You look good, so it must be true. You have a sort of glow about you. Who did you have to fuck last night to make you look like that, huh? Was it Zachary? You've been talking to him a lot. Working your magic to get on his good side, right? Trying to figure out how you two can get those vrisha to work together before they tear each other apart." He shrugged. "It's a good strategy, I can give you that. Maybe it will actually work. Or maybe he's playing you while Kaxek gets ready to strike. What do you think?"

She listened to his words but didn't let them affect her. He had no idea. "We have talked," she said. "We were thinking of getting them to work together, but it's likely not going to happen. Xeda is too threatened by Kaxek and won't trust him. Kaxek is out for blood and not looking to make an ally."

"I see." Sal shook his head as if disappointed in her reaction, her answer, or both. "I'm not going to lie to you, Ophilia. I'm concerned about our star fighter. Really concerned. First he almost fails on us the first game, big fucking mistake, then he

loses it at the showing. On my son, no less. I don't care what that little shit says to provoke him, I would see that vrisha whipped until I've cut off enough of his scales from his body to make a damn suit of armor, do you understand?" He took a seat by the table and reclined back, taking a bluum drop and popping it into his mouth. "But, lucky for him, I want to win the game more than maiming him. He's already going to be penalized in some way or another by the wardens, anyway. Which is bad for us. I don't need him being weakened more and dragging our chances down. I just need to know that he's better now. That you got a hold of him."

Ophilia hardly moved. "He is better. I don't expect another issue again."

Sal watched her with cold black eyes. "So, you've made him aware of the situation. Because one more move like that, and I'll kill him even if he wins."

Though her blood went cold, she forced a smile. "It won't happen again."

"And as for you." He pointed. "I know you plan on running if he does win. You'll take your part of the prize money and fuck off to wherever. But don't think you're off the hook just because you'll be out of my debt. If my son is even so much as verbally threatened again by that scaly sonofabitch, I'll see you responsible. And I will make you pay. Got that?"

"I do, sir," she said softly.

"Good. With that out of the way"—he leaned forward in his chair—"I have some good news. The next game is the day after tomorrow. And I got some dirt on what it will be. So, listen carefully, and make sure that damn vrisha is ready to win."

CHAPTERTWENTY-FOUR

Xeda

He strapped the grivhide to his shoulder, cinching it tight. Flexing his arms, he felt he could move freely despite the armor covering him. He eyed the blades and took them from the chest, placing them into a pair of sheaths strapped to his chest. He hoped he wouldn't need them. If he was going to defeat his opponents, he preferred doing it with his bare hands and tail. But with the fyrien, Aeriz, still alive and Tazyn known to use his double staffed blade, he considered they might come in handy against those who wielded weapons to kill their opponents, giving him an equal advantage.

Except, for this game, he might not need to wonder about a fight at all. Because, this time, from what Ophilia had told him, they meant to have them compete in an obstacle maze.

A race. Or rather a hunt. Apparently, they were meant to track down something within the maze before they could make their way out of it.

He loved a good hunt, but he hated the very idea of it in this moment because it only meant to prolong the fight once again.

"Everything is very intense this time," Ophilia had explained. "There's never been this many champions and high-end fighters in one game. Fighters who have been in the games for a long time and have a lot of money on their heads. No matter what, they are going to lose champions and peak fighters that will take years to find replacements for and train them up to their level. So, they're trying to stretch these games out even if only a few more days."

Basically if he lost this idiotic hunt, he would lose all enhancements in the next game. And apparently those were vital to have for the finals if one wanted any chance to win. Some would also lose their weapons.

It didn't matter to him either way whether he lost anything or not. Because he wasn't planning on letting there be a next game.

For the last several days, his growing impatience to finish this once and for all had reached its peak. It spilled over into worse frustration when Ophilia had given him the news about the next game being nothing more than a fill-in.

That next day after she'd returned from Sal's, he was thrown into a ring with more low end fighters for everyone's entertainment. It was only those times in between fights that he was able to let off steam about how pissed he was over the situation. He'd call Ophilia to him and would pull her into a vacant room, to relieve his heat but also the tension.

"We have to be careful," she had whispered breathlessly to him as he pinned her against a wall, still latched to her even after his release, letting her tight warmth encase him. "We can't let them know, Xeda." Her little nails dug into his arm.

He understood. But he couldn't care. If he didn't have her right now, he feared he would have given up having to pretend long ago. And he'd still be in that damn cell if it wasn't for her.

But he needed out of this game. He was so close, yet freedom still felt so far out of his reach.

And if he wasn't already pissed enough about that, there was always Kaxek. Whenever they passed each other in the ring between fights, he always had something to say, some remark to make Xeda's blood boil.

"You didn't care much for the females I offered," he said with a glow of amusement in his eyes. "Tell me, did your little human satisfy you enough then?"

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Xeda knew not to say anything, lest he give Ophilia away. But the desire to rip his throat out there and then, rules be damned, was painfully tempting.

"Whatever you've done, it's worked for you," Kaxek said as they circled each other. "That's all that matters. In fact, I'd say it looks to have energized you quite considerably. Perhaps I should try her too. Did she cry when you took her? I like when they cry."

Xeda's lip twitched, but he refused to appear affected. Kaxek wanted to get to him in any way he could. But Xeda couldn't let him. And he remembered he could be vicious too.

"I'd rather cut her inch by slow inch than touch her like that," he hissed. "So, I found hurting her was a good distraction, a good substitute for my body's betrayal. And she complied out of fear and desperation. I refuse to be with anyone but vrisha. All else are lesser."

Kaxek's eyes had narrowed on him, and Xeda doubted he had convinced him fully. "We must work with what we have, brother," was his remark. "And you can find a little enjoyment in them at least."

That was when Xeda had decided he was going to take Kaxek down in this next game. Even despite Ophilia's warnings that a surprise attack didn't always mean an advantage. But there were no rules saying he couldn't attack at all, and that's what he cared about. When Kaxek was distracted with his hunt, Xeda would make his move.

And if he could win this today, he and Ophilia would be free, no one could touch

them. He'd make sure of that.

When he was done fixing his armor, he waited for Ophilia to return from a meeting with the wardens. He hadn't forgotten he was going to be penalized in this game for his actions at the showing, giving him a disadvantage.

Again, it didn't matter. He just needed to find an opening and take out Kaxek right away, then worry about the others after.

When Ophilia returned to take him down to the arena, he could tell the meeting hadn't gone well.

"You aren't going to be able to start the obstacle until after the others. A ten-minute delay. They wouldn't see that it would be hard for you to catch up even in that amount of time," she said, clearly irritated. "You'll have to take one of the enhancements now if you want any chance. I suggest the agility or the stamina."

He felt that wasn't the only thing that bothered her. Something else seemed to be affecting her, but she wouldn't say. She went over to his chest full of enhancements and started sifting through them, cursing under her breath.

He crept behind her, pulling her to him, pressing her back to his chest. "I'll get through it, don't worry," he said. Unable to stop himself, he nuzzled the top of her head, letting her scent overtake his senses. Then, he realized that was a mistake as he could feel the dull ache returning between his legs, even when she had just satiated him that morning. Her hands gripped the arm he had around her. "I just need this to go right. For us both. We can't afford to have anything stop us now." She turned in his arm to face him. "I know you're strong, Xeda. But anything could happen."

He leaned down and bit her shoulder gently. "Don't worry. This will be over soon."

She pulled away to peer up at him, her brow furrowed in concern. She was about to say something but was interrupted by the sound of a low bell, which signaled it was time for them to head to the arena.

"Let's do this," Ophilia said, grabbing a couple of vials from the chest. "We're so close."

Closer than you think,Xeda thought as he followed her out the door.

* * *

He stared at the large door before him, the same one he'd stared at in the last game. The waiting room was much the same as it had been the first time. Ophilia once more strapped the emblem of House Salimar to him, making sure it was secure. He turned to watch her adjust it, and a growing eagerness filled him. He thought about what would come next once Kaxek was dead and he and Ophilia were free. He knew the first thing he would do and that was find a ship. He couldn't return to Tryth, his homeworld. He knew as soon as he stepped foot on that soil they would hunt him down and drag him to the underkeep where he would spend the rest of his days. But there were many other worlds out there...somewhere had to be one they could settle on.

But how safe will you be?

Being on an uncharted world wasn't the problem. But unknown strangers traveling the stars were. He knew he likely had a price on his head. And hunters would always be searching.

He studied Ophilia, feeling a strange but intense warmth in his blood. There was her to consider too. If he convinced her to come with him, she would be in danger also. He would have to hide her somehow, and he knew she wouldn't like that. They might

have to run for some time before others stopped giving chase.

He didn't think further on what came next. Not yet. He didn't allow himself to consider how much had changed in a small span of time. He and Ophilia would be running free soon, and he could laugh at himself later that he had stolen away with a human. How strange life was.

Ophilia patted his chest and smiled up at him. "You got this." Her smile dropped. "When you get inside...you'll be looking for others with this same seal on them." She tapped the emblem. "Hunt them down and take the seal, then find the exit before time runs out." She brought the enhancement vials out of her uniform pocket. "Which one would you care to choose? Stamina or speed?"

He looked between them. "Both," he said. The more advantage he had to take down Kaxek, the better.

Ophilia frowned. "Are you sure? Xeda, you won't have them for the final game..."

"It's not a problem."

She looked at him suspiciously but didn't say a word as she handed them over. "Be careful. Even two at a time could be taxing on your body."

"I'll be all right. I have to catch up remember?" He smiled at her, feeling his blood beginning to heat knowing what was to come. He reached out and touched a lock of her hair, then let his fingers trail lightly over her jaw, tilting her chin back with the tip of one talon. "It will be over quickly."

Her eyes searched his. Then she rose on her toes and, pulling him down, touched her lips to his own. It felt intimate though it was not a touch he was used to, but he enjoyed it all the same because it came from her. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the

feel and taste of her, pulling her closer, letting himself have this moment. The tenderness was unlike anything he had experienced. As an aggressive kind, it was not something vrisha were used to, and it wasn't something he expected to like. He'd seen such moments in the other humans he'd encountered before, but he never thought much of it, never thought it could mean anything till now.

Now he understood.

He embraced her for a long moment, just enjoying the feel of her against him and knew it didn't matter what form she came in, his spirit called to hers. And he believed hers called to him.

The sound of the low bell went off again, signaling the games were beginning. The other doors would have opened to allow the fighters to enter the arena, but his remained closed and locked, having to wait the ten minutes.

Ophilia pulled away. "I have to go. But I'll be watching close."

Xeda squeezed her arm and released her. "I'll see you soon."

She nodded and smiled. "Soon." She turned and left, and when the entrance door closed behind her, he popped the lid off each of the vials and swallowed the gross liquid down. Then he waited.

He paced in front of the arena door, letting the enhancements take effect. His heart rate shot up, wild energy rushing through his veins like fire. His skin tingled and his muscles tensed, ready to spring. His heat came back with a vengeance from the rush, but that was fine by him. He'd enjoy the bloodlust first, then Ophilia later.

He braced himself in front of the door. Then, when he heard the lock slide back and the door begin to open, he bolted, shoving the door away with his shoulder and breaking out into the arena. He didn't stop as he found himself in an enclosed maze, flying down one passage, then the next. He glanced above and saw a thick blue-green

fog that he couldn't see past. But with the fog, he could see the shimmer of yellow sparks and had an inkling he wouldn't be able to penetrate the fog and traverse the maze above. To test it, he jumped up and swung his tail and, no surprise, he felt a sharp, quick pain as the tip of his tail grazed the surface of the fog. He gathered it was to prevent them from cheating and hopping from one wall to the next.

A growl slipped through his throat, and he pushed his legs faster. Blindly, he swept down one passage and turned sharply down another. He searched for a specific scent, Kaxek's scent. As he turned the corner of another dark passage, he spotted a shadow fleeing up ahead.

He rushed for them, turning down the way the shadow had gone. He spotted a person fleeing and, hunter instincts kicking in, he focused in on them and sped toward his prey.

He caught them by the back of the gray jumpsuit they wore, nearly ripping it from them. They cried out in terror as they looked at him.

A human.

"D-don't," they said, their knees buckling. A young human man with a shaved head stared at him, tears spilling over in his large blue eyes. "I messed up, but I don't want to die, please." He sobbed.

Xeda's eyes narrowed as he looked him over. He saw on his chest was a seal to House Zanis, Tazyn's house. The seal looked to be stitched into the fabric of his jumpsuit at first, but looking closer, Xeda pulled on the seal, and the man yelped in pain. Then Xeda understood it was not just stitched to the suit but was somehow melded into the man's skin. The only way to get it out would be to tear it out.

The man trembled in Xeda's grip, and he let him go. He dropped to the ground, trying

to scramble away from him.

In another life, Xeda would have gladly torn this man to pieces and enjoyed it. But that wasn't his objective. He was looking to kill one of his own instead. He had a feeling all of the targets were human. He remembered how rigid and uncomfortable Ophilia looked when she had mentioned the hunt. Likely these people angered whatever house they now had embedded in their skin, and this was their punishment.

It didn't matter. He wasn't looking to play this game the way they wanted, anyway. But he could use these targets to his advantage.

A plan evolved in his mind. It might be impossible to find Kaxek in this maze on his own. So, he'd just have to bring Kaxek to him.

He took out one of his blades and stepped toward the man. He sliced his own hand, then grabbed the man again and pulled him toward him with the bleeding hand. He smeared his blood on him, and the man groaned in disgust.

"What are you doing?" he cried.

"Using you to lead the others astray." Xeda didn't know why he bothered to answer. His scent would hopefully mask some of the man's, throwing Tazyn off, making it harder to track his target. If he lost his weapon after this, it would be an advantage for Xeda.

After he smeared enough of his blood, he let the man go to run off and hopefully not get caught right away. Then Xeda moved off again, searching for another target. Using his sharp sense of smell, he moved for the next closest human that he sensed. Unfortunately, he still had the walls of the maze to block his way from them. As he traversed his way through the maze, he eventually caught another, this time of Aeriz's house. He did the same to them as he did with the man. Then he let them go.

He didn't see another for some time, and he feared he might have lost his chance. Then he heard soft crying somewhere close by and sensed one on the other side of one wall. He went around one way, then another, until he was forced to go off some ways to find a passage heading back toward the voice. After zig-zagging his way through, he found another lone human at a dead-end, pushed up against a corner, trying to press themselves into the wall, their legs bent up, their face hidden behind their hair.

He crept up on them and saw how small they were, too small. And that was when he realized it was a fledgling. A human girl. He slowed as he approached. She caught sight of him and began to cry harder.

He thought of Ophilia then, remembering the story she told him about her encounter with the assassin. Remembering her scars. He might have attacked humans in his past, but he had no reason to harm a child. And he wouldn't become what Ophilia feared.

Still, a bad feeling slithered up his insides as he made himself pick the girl up to see which house she was the target of. As she uncurled her body, he saw the seal on the front of her jumpsuit and couldn't contain his low growl which only scared the girl more.

House Capura's seal stared back at him. He couldn't imagine what the hell a child could have done to upset that house, but he had a feeling it wasn't her fault but likely her parents'. Capura was punishing them.

He held the girl in one arm, holding her tightly. Her cries would definitely bring someone around, but that was fine with him. He just hoped Ophilia could forgive him for what he was about to do.

He retraced his steps out of the dead-end passage and onward, forcing himself to slow

down a little to not injure the girl, glad he wore his grivhide which was smoother than his sharp scales. He ran from one passage to the next until finally he found the perfect place to encounter Kaxek. He stepped into an open courtyard within the maze, a circular opening with dozens of passages leading in and out. Large, fake trees were spread out within to try to have more places to hide. The fog rose a little higher here like a dome encasing the space, then tightening again around the passageways.

At the center was a lone statue of a headless beast. Xeda brought the girl to it and set her down.

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"I know you're afraid," he said to her. "But stay here." He pointed to the spot.

The girl barely seemed to hear him. But she did look at him even through her tears. He took that as a sign she understood, though he didn't know if she would do as he asked. As long as she remained in the yard, that was all that mattered.

Quickly he slipped away to hide between a tree and the entrance of one passage where he could clearly see her, waiting to either see movement or hear someone coming.

Time seemed to go by excruciatingly slowly, but Xeda was apt at being able to remain still for a long time just as he was good at keeping hidden. He worried, however, about how much time remained. But he knew Kaxek wouldn't lose.

The girl's soft sobs would surely draw him out and, moments later, Xeda saw Kaxek's tall shadow emerge from an entrance, looking straight at the girl. He appeared unimpressed that she was just a fledgling. Didn't seem to care at all as he stalked toward her, his claws flexed, ready to rip the seal out.

The girl screamed, and Xeda moved with such speed he felt he could fly. With Kaxek's back to him, he launched himself into the air, blade out, and dropped down on top of him.

Before Kaxek could turn, Xeda's blade indented between his ribs and ventways. Kaxek roared as he whipped around, but Xeda got on his back and sank his talons into the slitted vents along Kaxek's throat, then bit down on the other side of his neck, trying to tear his head from his shoulders. At the same time, he jabbed the tip of

his tail into Kaxek's side.

Kaxek snarled and grabbed Xeda's horns, yanking hard, then his tail sliced across Xeda's thighs and back, trying to wrap around him. He backed up into a tree and tried to smash Xeda against it.

Xeda refused to let go. This was it. He had him. He was going to win.

He heard the whoosh of something flying, then felt a sudden awful pain across his arm as something dug deep into his very bones, a cold metal slicing through his armor into flesh. The pain blinded him, but desperation made him still latch on as Kaxek smashed him again into the tree and tried to wrench him off.

Xeda saw at the corner of his eye Tazyn rushing at them. Weaponless. And he realized it was because his weapon was embedded deep into Xeda's arm.

Tazyn jumped and pulled it out, nearly taking Xeda's arm with it. Xeda felt the tendons tear in his muscles, felt the nerves unravel, and realized he couldn't move his arm. It went limp at his side. Still, he crunched and shook his head, trying to tear Kaxek's throat.

Kaxek lurched forward, and his claws raked down Xeda's face, one catching near his eye, making Xeda lose temporary sight. Kaxek then rolled, taking Xeda down with him. Xeda clung to him until he tasted blood while Kaxek hit Xeda's face several times till he broke his nose.

Xeda held on even still. Until he felt Tazyn's weapon cut into his side, the pain making him lose focus. At the same time, Kaxek took hold of his horns again and rolled as he pulled.

This time, with one arm damaged, he couldn't hold. He took some of Kaxek's scales

and flesh with him as he was thrown off, sliding against a nearby tree.

Kaxek slowly stood, his face twisted with rage. Blood trickled from the bite on his throat and from the wounds Xeda inflicted with his blade and tail.

"You'll die for that," Kaxek hissed. "There is no such honor in you. You truly are scum. The worst of our kind." He pulled Xeda's blade out and gripped it tight. Tazyn rose his weapon and stood beside him. He didn't try to fight Kaxek at all. He hadn't even tried to take advantage of the situation. Somehow, they had become allies, and Xeda wondered for how long. "You are a fool, Xeda," Kaxek said. "A miserable animal and nothing more, forced to use trickery to win a fight. Because you know you could never defeat me head on. Now you'll pay for it."

Xeda rose to his feet, his one arm cut so badly the bone was broken. Not even his grivhide was able to withstand Tazyn's heavy weapon. But if it hadn't been for his armor, Tazyn would have sliced the arm clean off.

The wound on his side was bad too, Xeda knew. Tazyn had gotten him through a break in the armor and so it had sliced through his scales and skin, and he knew it had hit vital organs. He would bleed internally. He staggered back, hating them both.

The girl cried and screamed, and he couldn't help her, couldn't save her. He had no hope that he did enough damage to kill Kaxek. And even if he did somehow succumb to the injuries, there was still Tazyn. Xeda had no hope to win against them both, not like this.

He thought of Ophilia and wanted to roar and scream with rage. No, it couldn't end like this.

But damn if he wasn't going to do something before he lost.

With the enhancements still coursing through him, he knew they were the only thing now keeping him going. With all the strength he had left, he bolted for the girl and grabbed her up, then ran.

He started for one passage straight ahead, then felt Tazyn's heavy weapon smash into his back.

The girl went flying across the ground, landing on her side as he fell. He could feel the blade deep into his spine. He couldn't move.

The girl screamed as Tazyn and Kaxek moved on either side of him. Tazyn wrenched his blade out of Xeda's back, the pain nearly making Xeda lose consciousness. He stared up at the nillium who smirked down at him.

"I don't suppose you'll let me have the final blow, will you, Kaxek?" Tazyn said.

"Go ahead," Kaxek said in a tone of disappointment. "He's not worth anything to me."

Tazyn grinned. He raised his weapon, ready to smash Xeda's skull in. He went to let it fall when the grin on his face dropped, and his eyes widened in shock. Then Xeda saw his eye being punctured open by an invisible blade.

The skra with the invisible cloak had jumped on him from behind and stabbed him in the face. Tazyn snarled in rage and swung his weapon around, hitting her in some way because she reappeared and smashed into a tree nearby.

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As Tazyn covered his face with one hand, Kaxek leaped over Xeda to kill the skra when twin blades hit him too, one in the jaw, then in the arm when he quickly shielded himself.

Aeriz appeared and leapt for Kaxek, freeing his blades and attacking again.

Xeda could do nothing but watch as they fought. Watch as Tazyn went for the skra, enraged as she slipped away. Slowly, he was losing consciousness, and desperately, he tried to claw his way back to the surface, to stay a little longer.

He saw the girl crawling away. As he couldn't hang on, all he could think was at least she might make it and hopefully Ophilia would too. One last bit of rage swept through him, then only despair as he slipped away.

He'd failed his old queen long ago, and now...now, he failed Ophilia.

CHAPTERTWENTY-FIVE

Ophilia

As soon as the elevator doors slid open, she broke out into a run, flying past a couple of guards down the passage to a set of doors ahead, slamming into them as she stumbled into the facility beyond.

Bright lights and cold steel greeted her as she passed room after room, glass walls keeping them apart. People stared at her as she went by, but they were barely an afterthought. She felt numb save for the dread that sank like a pit of coal in her

stomach, poisoning her.

She had been forced to watch to the very last second of the game, watch Xeda lying on the ground unmoving as the others fought around him. Aeriz was able to hold his own until Kaxek got a blow on him across the chest, sending him flying back into a wall. Kaxek was distracted long enough that the little girl Xeda had saved was able to get away just before the time ran out.

The fury on Kaxek was impressive to say the least. Tazyn wasn't too happy either, unable to grab the last seal from his target as he chased the skra female who had injured him. He sliced her good just before the end, but still he had lost. None of them had gotten all their targets in the end, too busy going after each other. Xeda had instigated that fight. He had brought them all down in a way, but it hadn't mattered in the end.

As soon as the timer had run out, she had sprung for the call button on the console, calling to the wardens, begging them to send someone for him.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, Ophilia?" Sal said, red-faced. "He's dead. That fucking worthless vrisha is dead. He botched the game. He's done."

She didn't listen. She didn't care. She screamed at someone to get him out just as Sal smashed his fist on the console pad, breaking it. The call went out.

"He's done. And you're fucking done, got that?" he said in a low voice.

She shook her head at him, not wanting to believe it. "No," she said softly. "No, he made a mistake, but he's alive, he has to be. We just need to get him to—"

He struck her firmly across the face, sending her to the ground. "Get out of my sight. I'll deal with you later. This is over. The game is over."

This time, fury took hold of her, and for once, she lost her composure. "Fuck you, Sal," she said, shaking. "You bastard."

"What the fuck did you just say to me?"

"I said you're a monster!" she screamed. "He did everything he could. I did. You only care about your money, your fame. But it's bullshit!"

He lunged for her, then stopped as Cristan yelled at him.

"They're taking him," he called, standing near the monitor. "The medics are taking him out. Look at his readings." He pointed to the console where it showed Xeda's energy level and heartrate. It was low, dangerously low, but it was still beating. "He's still alive."

Sal straightened, wiping his mouth. Hands on his hips, he stared at her before turning back to Cristan. "It doesn't matter, Cristan. He's maimed. He can't fight. Better just put him out of his misery."

"No," Ophilia cried softly.

Sal looked back at her, and this time he actually seemed sad, as if he pitied her. "You got a soft spot for that beast, don't you? It's a shame, real shame, Ophilia. You let your feelings get the better of you." He shook his head. "You'll live and learn, kid. You will." He sighed and waved his hand. "Get out. If you try to run, you know I'll find you. I'll take you back and put you in the glasshouse for a week if you set foot outside the gaming center, you got that? So, be a good girl and just go back to your room. And stay there till someone comes to get you."

Shaking, Ophilia rose to her feet. Without a word, she slipped out of the observation deck and as far away from him as possible.

She did go back to her room, but only because she needed the ISpad she was given. Thankfully, Sal had been too furious in the moment to take away her trainer privileges. She took all the sponsor money Xeda had left, and she poured it into his medical fund. He would lose all his enhancements, weapons, armor, everything. But she'd be damned if he would lose his life or any piece of himself.

As soon as she transferred the funds, she called down to the medical bay and told them exactly what they were going to do with him.

To hell with Sal. She knew he would punish her for what she'd done, but he was going to do that, anyway. She would take it all if it meant saving Xeda.

As soon as the medical staff understood what she wanted, she flew out of her room and down to the medical bay. Now, as she walked down the bay hall, she searched wildly from one room to the next until she came to one larger than the rest and saw, through the glass, Xeda lying on his stomach on a table. A surgical machine worked to fix his arm, his back, and the other wounds he'd received. His face was shredded from Kaxek's claws, surgical tape placed over one eye. Tubes were hooked up to his throat and along his working arm, pumping oxygen and medicine. Her eyes fell down to the straps along his legs and lower back, used to secure him, and she wondered if he had even bothered to put up a fight.

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Ophilia stared at him, hardly able to move, the poisonous dread making her feel sick. Slowly, she stepped into the room. Xeda's eyes flickered over to her, but they seemed unfocused. He raised his working arm toward her in a slow movement as if he was too weak to hold it up.

She went to him and took his hand, crouching down beside him. "Xeda." Her voice shook.

He didn't say a word. His eyes turned toward one corner of the room where a medical staff member was monitoring the scene. She saw Ophilia and nodded.

"It's a slow process," she said. "His arm was nearly cut off. His spine splintered. It will take a few days to mend well even with what we have. And after that..."

Ophilia understood. "Thank you. May I please have a moment?"

The woman nodded and left them.

As soon as she was gone and they were alone, Xeda tried to move, and Ophilia promptly pressed against his shoulder to still him.

"You're okay." She tried to smile. "You're going to be okay."

Xeda closed his eyes, then opened them slowly. He seemed tired or drugged up. "The girl..." he slurred.

She gave him a real smile and nodded her head. "She got out. Kaxek didn't get her in

time."

He closed his eyes again and squeezed her hand. "I was...so close. I thought..."

She shook her head, her smile dropping. "You were right to try. You would have had him if not for Tazyn." She pet his arm, letting out a shaky breath.

A weak growl rumbled in his chest. "I didn't think I would see you again..."

She clenched her jaw, blinking back tears. "Well, you were wrong. Because you're going to get up, Xeda. We'll fix you up and then..."

He squeezed his eyes tight, wincing as if in pain. "I can't go back to that cell," he said. "I can't go to a lab. But I can't fight." He looked up at her again. "If I can't fight...I failed. Failed us."

"We will think of something," she said. "We'll get through this, together."

He studied her. He didn't say anything for a moment. He just watched her. Then he squeezed her hand. "I never told you...why I became a Blood Guard. Why I did what I did," he said slowly. "Why I sided with...the mad queen."

Ophilia pursed her lips, shaking her head slowly. "You never had to explain."

"I know. But you asked me why I hated humans. I told you why, remember?"

"I do. You said we were dangerous."

He dipped his head, rubbing it against the metal table. "And that was truth...and the reason was truth too...but it wasn't the whole truth. Humans are dangerous because...they are frightening."

She stared at him, unable to respond, so he continued. "I was a newly made warrior when the first human queen arrived on Tryth. After we were told a deadly virus had been defeated. It all seemed so suspicious, that one of our own would choose one of you. I and others couldn't fathom it. So, we worried that perhaps somehow the virus had evolved, infected the human and the vrisha alike, making him choose her to spread itself among us. Years went on and nothing came of it but still some of us couldn't accept it. Your kind were so different, so opposite of us.

"Then the Xolis exodus came. And suddenly we were making alliances...but we knew so little about humans and others. Everything was moving too quickly. Many of us worried what it could all mean. We didn't trust the alliance or that it was made for peace. Then Queen Theda told us that there were awful things happening. Things that were being hidden. Experiments. Betrayals. Trafficking. And then I experienced it for myself. As I was scouting for new resources for our world, I came upon a human camp on a mineral rich world. They were building a mine there. I told them I only wished to take some back and they said they didn't wish to cause trouble. As I was excavating, they set a trap and..."

Ophilia hardly moved, listening closely. He looked away from her as if the story pained him to recall. "They toyed with me for several days and nights. They didn't even have a plan. They never said why they did it, they never said they were going to try to sell pieces of me or put me up to some lab. Nothing. They only wished to hurt me because I scared them. And in return...they scared me." His hands squeezed hers tighter. "I got out...I won't tell you what I did. When I got my revenge, I left and sought out Queen Theda, so enraged I dedicated my services to her. And she made me one of her Blood Guard. From then...I sought only to harm those who I believed only wished to harm me. I thought humans lesser and being frightened by them was humiliating. And I promised myself I never would be afraid again." He tied his fingers with hers. "You've made me see beyond my fear and face it. Thank you, Ophilia."

Ophilia bowed her head, tears stinging her eyes. She blinked and let them fall, her mouth twisting. She stood and let out a soft sob, letting go. Letting herself go. She bent forward, letting her head fall to his. "I love you, Xeda."

He wrapped his good arm around her, pressing her close. "By Rikasha and Veradis...I love you too."

She leaned over him, knowing that they were not going to see each other again. Knowing Sal was going to send her away and Xeda, though alive, would be gone. She didn't let herself think about where and what he was going to endure. But she knew neither of them were going to be happy. "You have to fight," she said. "Fight, however you can, Xeda. Don't stop fighting."

He squeezed his arm around her as if it say, "I'll try."

She stayed with him for as long as she could, finding a chair and sitting by his side as the surgical machine worked over him. She rubbed his head and neck the way he liked, comforting him, her tears finally drying out.

A tingling at the back of her neck made her turn, and she saw the medic from before speaking with a tall dark man, who glared straight at her. One of Sal's men coming to collect her.

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Thankfully, Xeda had started to fall asleep, whether from the drugs or pure exhaustion or both. Only his lids stayed half open, watching her as if afraid she would disappear as soon as he closed them. "I'll be here," she said. "I'll be right here." She rubbed his head some more until eventually he let his lids fall, his head leaning into her.

She stayed for as long as she could until Sal's man could wait no more.

She pressed her lips to Xeda's temple, then forced herself up, not allowing herself to look back as she slipped away.

* * *

"You really want to disappointment me in every way possible, till the very end, don't you, Ophilia?"

She stood once more in Sal's study, standing rigid but standing tall, her hands locked in front of her. Sal sat at his desk, shaking his head as he sucked on a bluum cigarette. Smoke rose in front of his face.

"I told you the vrisha was done. But you went against my orders anyway. Waste of credits, waste of time," he said, sighing. "But maybe something can come out of all this. I doubt he'll be ready for the next game. But there's always next season, right? You see, I thought it over, and I've decided not to throw him to the labs. Not just yet. He just needs some more work, a more firm hand to prepare him for next time. I gave you this chance, Ophilia, and you blew it. A real shame."

Ophilia clenched her jaw, knowing she should just keep her mouth shut. There might not be any point in arguing with him. But for Xeda, she had to try.

"I did everything I could," she said carefully. "Xeda was determined to win. He was certain he could have taken Kaxek down if not for Tazyn's interference."

Sal waved her comment off. "Doesn't matter. He messed up and so did you in not giving him better direction. You two were supposed to be communicating, strategizing the best move to make. You were supposed to command him on what exactly he had to do. The very fact he acted on his own tells me you don't have what it takes. I don't expect you to discipline him either like you should. You've gotten too soft for him. Admit it."

She didn't argue that, and he laughed knowingly.

"I was a real idiot to let you do this," he continued. "Thinking I could trust someone like you to be able to handle this. No more. I think my debt to you has been more than paid. I gave you this shot, and you failed." He shrugged. "It happens. We make mistakes." He sucked on his cigarette, then put it out. "I've made arrangements after this game. I've been talking to the trainer of House Myre. He's willing to fix this for me. That vrisha will be licking the ground at his feet when he's through with him. And next season will be different. One more shot, I'll give him. One more." Sal stood, rising with the smoke. "As for you, well, you already know how this goes. What little you have will be packed up. I'd say you have till tonight to say goodbye to friends, but you don't have any, so you're getting transferred right away."

Ophilia pursed her lips. "There is someone. Please let me talk to Xeda before I have to leave for House Lageth. Let me at least...tell him what's happening." So that she could warn him of what was to come and that maybe, if he kept fighting, he could win the games next time. He would have to endure worse, but she knew he was strong. He could make it. And someday, if he won, maybe she would see him again.

It was all she could hope for.

Sal smiled at her. "Oh, Ophilia, about that." He leaned on the desk, tapping his fingers on the surface. "There's been a change. Eliam met someone here, so he's no longer interested in you. I could still sell you as a staff member maybe, but they have all the help they need. But it's no matter cause I gotta another offer for you. I know it came as a great surprise to me too. And they're even willing to pay more, isn't that funny? I'll just send some of the money to Lageth for what I owe and all will work out. At least for me."

The door opened behind her, and she whirled around to see a large lygin male and burly human man stroll inside. The seal they wore on their uniforms was not House Salimar. It was House Capura.

She stared at them, her blood turning cold. "Why?" she heard herself say aloud.

"They didn't really say," Sal replied. "Guess they see some use in you that I don't. Doesn't really matter. You are no longer of House Salimar. So, get out of my sight."

The men grabbed her by each arm and didn't stop as they dragged her away.

"So long, Ophilia." Sal waved.

Ophilia fought in their grip as she was forced to walk between them. She'd never wished for a man's death. But for Sal, she wished worse.

CHAPTERTWENTY-SIX

Xeda

She's waiting for you.

Get up.

He woke in a slow haze. The drugs he had been pumped with made him lethargic and unfocused. He blinked with both his eyelids, trying to see in the bright light. He heard the sounds of machines whirring around him, a chemical scent stinging his nose. The cold slab under him was uncomfortable to say the least.

For a clear, panicked moment, he thought he was in a lab. He jerked up on instinct and found himself strapped in. One strap snapped open as he tried to pull himself from the table.

His mind finally came around, and he thought of Ophilia. He went to reach for her and found only empty air.

"Hold there, big guy," came a voice. "You're gonna hurt yourself again."

He went still. That wasn't Ophilia.

A low growl ripped from his throat, and he tried to pull himself up again when he felt something hard press against his temple. He looked up and saw some kind of weapon, what he assumed to be a low-grade shooter. A large human male with lightless eyes looked down on him from the trigger. Xeda's gaze turned toward the one who had spoken, sitting beside him.

Sal.

"You look a lot better," he said, popping something into his mouth. "I'm glad. Despite the circumstances. It's too bad it cost you so much."

Xeda tried to sense Ophilia somewhere close but didn't catch her scent anywhere. He bared his teeth at him. "Where is she?" he hissed.

"Ophilia? Oh, I wouldn't worry too much about her. You won't be needing her guidance anymore. She didn't have what it took to push you to your limit. She babied you too much, and now you've gone and fucked yourself up twice because she made you think you could best the others as you are. It was partly my fault, I'll admit. I had too much confidence in the both of you." Sal leaned in closer to him. "And you lost because of it. Live and learn, I guess."

Xeda growled low. "She's the only one who could have convinced me to be a part of your pathetic games."

"Maybe. But then also maybe you just never had enough pain put in you to be convinced any other way. That's why we're gonna have to train you better. I messed up trusting Hendrik and Ophilia, but now I see what needs to be done. As a businessman, I learn from my mistakes. I sold weapons to anyone who would buy them, members of Kingsway, groups in the alliance, Grayhart even. I made sure whenever there was a fault that it was fixed, that if there could be improvement, it was made. You're just another weapon at my disposal. And I'll bend you until you break. Then I'll put you back together. The way I want you."

Xeda shifted, and the gun on him pressed harder. He didn't know how long he had been out, but it couldn't have been more than a day. "The games aren't finished," he said through clenched teeth.

Sal laughed. "Buddy, you are in no position to fight. You nearly lost your arm, and your back was broken. You're lucky if you can even move. The machines might have fixed you up to keep you alive, but you are disabled, maybe for a long while."

"I'm not like you," Xeda said. "I recover far quicker."

Sal snorted. "That's true, you're not. But I doubt even you can be in any sort of position to fight a day, maybe two, from now. Can you? Shit, I'd be impressed if you did. But either way, there's no way you're going to get past Kaxek at this point. Or even Tazyn now. I'm usually an optimist, don't get me wrong, but not in this case. I'm moving forward. You should too. When the games are done, you'll be transported back to my house, and we'll work from there. Got it? A new trainer and a new you."

Xeda clamped his hands around the edge of the table. His tail had been tied down, otherwise he'd be using it to swipe away the gun on his head before he leaped for Sal to take him down. "I'm not going anywhere without Ophilia," he snarled.

Sal put his hand up, stopping his man from shooting. "Damn, you two really had something going, didn't you? Shit, don't tell me. I don't want to know the details."

"I don't care what you think," Xeda said. "I'm not leaving."

"You will. Because even if she was coming back, you'd be on the first ship home, and she wouldn't be near you. But she's gone now, and there's no one here for you. She's not here, do you understand?"

No, he didn't. "She isn't gone."

"She is. You can argue that all you like. I don't really give a shit. Get yourself together and be ready to go. I'll be ready to cage your ass all over again, start from square one, if you refuse." He got up and left without another word. His man, however, stayed awhile to make sure Sal got out just fine. Then he too left. Xeda realized he could do nothing even if he wanted. The collar around him would make sure of that.

He pushed himself up with such force he ripped off the last of the straps around him.

Then he threw his head back and roared.

* * *

He couldn't leave. He found that out when he tried to walk out of the medical bay and heard his collar begin to make noise and saw a light flashing. There were guards at the doors too, with guns. The healers tried to keep him in his room, but he refused. He stalked the halls, pacing, trying to think of what he could do. How he was going to get out. How he was going to find Ophilia.

His body wasn't in great shape, he could admit that. The arm that had been nearly severed and put back together with the machine was stiff and slow to move. He could only raise it a certain amount before it locked. His back was sore and stiff as well, and he could only turn his torso a little ways around before the muscles in his back tightened so much he couldn't move any more.

The healers had mended his other injuries, but he knew one of his organs had been damaged, and even through surgery, it would not be like it was after fully healed. Which only further weakened him.

Still, he wasn't willing to call it quits. Not now. Not yet. Ophilia was out there, who knew where, and he was willing to bet it wasn't somewhere pleasant. Not if Sal had

any say. Xeda expected Sal would punish her for his failure. He had to think of something. Had to find a way out.

He strode past several occupied rooms and noticed he was not alone in this place. Dozens of other fighters were being treated and recovering from injuries they had been dealt days before, some by him. They saw him as he walked by, but they only looked back at him curiously or dropped their eyes altogether.

As he came to one darkened room, he peered in and grew still. A pair of large orange eyes stared back at him.

Aeriz was standing by the tiny skra female who sat on a raised bed. She looked over at him with wide eyes, her green skin paler than others he had seen. Her invisibility suit hung on the edge of a seat by the bed. Now she only wore dark pants and wrappings around her torso where Tazyn had clearly damaged her.

They glared at each other until Xeda walked inside. The fyrien didn't go for his blades, which indicated to Xeda that he didn't currently see him as a threat.

"I thought Kaxek would have killed you," Xeda remarked.

Aeriz's eyes narrowed. "I thought the same for you," he mumbled.

"He certainly tried." Xeda glanced at the skra, then back at Aeriz. "Might have succeeded if not for you."

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Aeriz crossed his arms. "I thought it a good opportunity to knock at least one of your vrisha asses down. Seems harder than it looks. He was injured though, I know that."

"Guess not enough since he's not here."

Aeriz huffed. "That's because he's too good for this place. He has his own medical team. He can do what he likes whenever he likes."

Xeda flicked his tail. "What do you mean?"

"He means Kaxek has full control here," the skra said, beside them. "He owns everything."

Xeda glanced at her, surprised. "By everything you mean..."

"Everything," she emphasized. "The games, this city. He runs it. He puts people in place to make it seem like it isn't so, but it is. He and Tazyn have had a partnership for a while. He let the nillium be the champion while Kaxek ruled everything. Then you came along."

Xeda glared at her. "Me?"

She dipped her head. "Kaxek sees everyone here as beneath him. Even Tazyn. The only one he would ever consider a true opponent worth his time was another vrisha. So, that would be you. So, when you show up, he decides to put himself in the games again, for his own amusement but also to show everyone he is still champion of Kingsway. If he can best another vrisha, he proves it."

"The last game, however, messed that plan up a bit, no thanks to you," Aeriz mentioned.

"How so?" Xeda asked. "He beat me down. If anything, he showed them exactly what he wanted to."

Aeriz clicked his tongue. "Except that you showed the people otherwise with your sneak attack. You almost had him. If it hadn't been for Tazyn having to step up, it was clear you had a chance."

"And that pisses Kaxek off more than anything," said the skra. "He wants you and everyone to think you are not worth his time. That you had no chance. But we saw." She shifted anxiously on the bed. "He'll be weakened now too. Which is why we need to take advantage of this moment."

Xeda studied them both. "You're talking about the final game, aren't you?"

Aeriz shook his head. "No. Forget the games. They'll make sure to give Kaxek an advantage. Either he'll make us wait until he's healed, or they'll fix something in the game."

Xeda bared his teeth. "He would cheat?"

"More or less. Why else would they bar us from leaving?" Aeriz leaned against the wall. "Kaxek wants us here to wait until he's planned this out while he recovers. Which is why we strike now. He's too full of himself to think we'll do anything. But there are enough of us now we can do something."

"Who is us?" Xeda asked. "We alone can do little."

"The other fighters," the skra replied. "The ones Kaxek sent in to have us beat up for

everyone's entertainment." She leaned forward to eye him sharply. "You don't think they want revenge too?"

Xeda thought of those in the other rooms. They didn't look afraid or defeated. They looked angry, ready to fight again.

"How do you know all this is true?" Xeda asked. "About Kaxek and the others?"

He saw a small spark in the skra's eyes as she fixed him with a sly expression. "My suit, of course." She pointed to it on the chair. "My master has me keep it on most times even outside the games. He wanted me to spy for him. I heard many things. Didn't you think it odd Kaxek never was around for anything but the games? He was planning out his next moves. The last game for instance was all about him having an excuse to hurt or kill some of those who opposed him, by having us hunt those people down. It's all a part of his game."

"But this time, we are going to have the advantage," Aeriz said softly. "Because I'm not dying here. Not for Kaxek's benefit." His head bowed as his eyes narrowed. "Not after what he did to Vyn."

"I don't want to die either..." the skra added. "Or at least, I'd rather die trying to get out than even attempt winning in that game. I know I have no chance."

Xeda watched them carefully. "What of your trainers?"

"They've checked on us once and won't likely do so again. They do as the wardens say who answer to Kaxek," Aeriz said. "They wait on their orders either to release us or prepare us for the next game."

Xeda thought of Ophilia, and he felt a sinking dread. "I was told that mine was gone. But I don't think Kaxek would allow that. I think...I think they have her here

somewhere."

"At this point, no one would be allowed to leave this place, not until the games are over," the skra remarked. "He'd make sure of that. From what I've heard, he plans on culling some of the heads of houses along with those connected to them." She glared back at him sharply. "Especially those who conspired to take him out. Once it's over, those who lost...will lose more than the game."

Xeda clenched his hands into fists, his insides tightening. It was as he feared but didn't want to consider. His actions put Ophilia in danger. Sal wanted him to think Ophilia was gone, but Kaxek would not allow her to leave. He not only wanted Xeda defeated and put down permanently, he wanted to punish her too, believing she had been a part of Xeda's plan to attack him unaware.

"I need to get out," Xeda said.

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"What do you think we've been talking for?" said the skra.

He moved to the entrance, then turned back to them. "Tell me what you plan to do."

CHAPTERTWENTY-SEVEN

Xeda

He sat on the metal bed, slowly wrapping his bad arm in a heavy stretchable cloth, mostly to make sure he didn't easily pull it if he were to move too quickly. As he wrapped it, he watched the healers come and go. They checked him every so often but left him alone. Sometimes guards came to make sure he and the other fighters weren't lingering around where they shouldn't, telling them to stay in their rooms. He wondered why they didn't just lock them in, until he realized it was to keep them from thinking they were prisoners. Make them think they had some air of freedom to move around.

Xeda also suspected the men were only made to look intimidating with their guns, but they likely had no skill in combat. Just aim their weapons and hope they didn't miss.

The collars made sure he and the others didn't get out of line. They were the most important factor in their escape.

Niks—the name the female skra gave herself—told him and Aeriz that deactivating the collars was most vital. The guards were only secondary.

"They likely can control the deactivation from a computer or some other device,"

Niks had said quietly when they stood between her door and the hall. "With a certain code."

"What makes you so sure?" Xeda asked.

She'd gestured to a doorway down the passage. "That's where they take fighters who don't make it. They take the bodies to store them. There's no need to keep a dead person collared right? I'm going to sneak in there with the next body and see how they do it. And hopefully steal the code."

As she made her plan, Aeriz snuck into one of the head healer's offices and got into their machine's system, finding a map which he memorized. Xeda's job was to distract to make sure no one saw him. He bashed in a glass pane with his tail, making it look like an accident, but with enough noise to make every healer and guard come running. They sent him to his room and cleaned the mess. Some time after, he'd snuck back to Niks' room. There, Aeirz had already returned. He had also taken a writing tool and some cloth he found and started drawing the map from memory.

"We are on the arena's north end, just below it," he said, drawing out shapes to indicate buildings. "There are only two ways out of here. One is through a staff passage to the gaming center which I guarantee will be packed with full security, trapping us in. The second is the arena itself. No reason anyone should be there now, and it gives us plenty of room to maneuver. We can move across it to the gaming center to the southeast. As for this medical facility, there is also a lab connected by a storage room, a supply bay, and the place where they keep the bodies of defeated fighters. The lab is where I have the most interest. On their database, I saw a list of supplies. They're carrying several biochemicals made for enhancements. I think they are making them here."

Xeda stared at the map with keen excitement. "We could certainly use some of those."

"My thinking also. But not just for giving us an edge. The chemical components can make for a deadly weapon if mixed with other components in the medicines they make. Along with bluum they are secretly storing as well. Together, well...let's just say no safety measure is going to keep this place standing."

Xeda's eyes narrowed as his mouth widened. Bomb-making was never one of his strong suits, but he learned a few basics from his brethren in the Blood Guard who were experts. "I'd be happy to see this place burn," he said in a soft hiss.

"You should lead us out," Niks said. "You can help us make a path of destruction, taking out anyone in our way. Then we get to the ship port that brought us here."

His eyes flickered over to her. "I'll lead you out. But after that, you're on your own. I have to stay."

Her expression twisted. "Why?" Then her eyes widened. "You want to seriously try to take out Kaxek?"

"Not just that. There's someone I have to get out first."

They looked at him suspiciously.

"Who?" Niks asked, confused.

"His trainer," Aeriz said, before Xeda could respond. The fyrien's hand gripped the hilt of his blade. "I saw her here. Saw her by you. You care for her."

Xeda dipped his head. "Yes," he said softly. "And I'm not leaving without her."

The fyrien glared at him for a moment, then let his hand fall from his side.

"Do as you wish then," Niks said. "But know Kaxek will come for you if he can. And getting her out might be impossible."

Xeda flicked his tail, gaze turning back to the map. "I know."

They talked over the rest of the plan. One fighter a room over hadn't woken up since Tazyn had bashed part of his skull with his blade. Somehow the grex had clung to life for this long, but Niks had overheard the healers getting ready to put him out for good, unable to revive him. As she waited for them to come and wheel him out so she could sneak away, Aeriz moved out to start telling the other fighters to be ready. According to him, the others wouldn't move unless Xeda was with them. Having a vrisha on their side meant a better chance of escape, especially one who almost took down Kaxek. They'd heard what happened, how he might have won if not for Tazyn, and saw him as someone worthy enough to lead them out in a small rebellion.

Xeda didn't care what they wanted to think as long as the plan worked. After their discussion, he returned to his room to wait and prepare.

He finished tying the cloth to his arm and stood. He wasn't in peak shape, but he was going to fight like a savage to get to the gaming center where he believed Ophilia must still be. Once he had her, then they could figure out what came after.

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As for Kaxek...Xeda just had to hope the monster was in as bad of shape as him and that there was no one else to interfere.

Aeriz slipped by his room, standing outside making sure no one was around to see. "Niks has snuck in. The others are ready on our mark," he said.

Xeda dipped his head as Aeriz stalked away. From the doorway of his room, he could see down the hall to the guards standing there by the entrance. Only a matter of time. But time was running out.

* * *

They waited longer than expected, longer than Xeda could stand. Eventually, he turned to pacing the halls again when he saw the door leading to the body disposal open, a healer walking out. To most eyes and senses, they couldn't see her, but Xeda could spot just the tiniest reflection from Niks' suit.

"Back to your room please, or I'll have to tell the guards!" said the healer as she walked quickly past. Xeda turned, knowing Niks was now right beside him.

"Well?" Xeda asked.

"I've got something," she whispered. "Tucked in my suit."

They headed for her room and, when no one was looking, slipped inside. Niks peeled off the head piece of her suit, then took something out from under her sleeve. A slender handheld device with a small screen like a tranciever. At its end was a short

metal rod.

"They used this," she said, waving it at him. "I saw a nurse woman put it to the back of the grex's collar. She plugged in a code into this screen."

"Did you get the code?" Xeda asked eagerly.

"Only one way to know." Niks jumped onto her bed. "Turn around."

Xeda eyed the door, then quickly placed his back to her. She pressed the metal rod into his neck, and he waited.

He heard her curse as she pressed the rod harder against him. The collar flashed, then beeped twice before he heard a soft click.

On instinct, his hands flew to the collar. Claws curling around it, he ripped it off.

The collar split open, then fell to the ground.

A wave of powerful energy pulsed through him as if the collar had been keeping his strength at bay. He wanted to roar with victory but knew now was a time to keep silent.

Soon. Soon, his true victory would come.

A shadow moved at the corner of his eye, and he looked over to see Aeriz standing there, staring.

"It worked," he whispered.

Niks jumped up and down in celebration on her bed. "Come on, Aeriz, you next."

Aeriz stood before her, and just like Xeda, he tugged his off as soon as he heard the soft click. He showed his teeth in a wicked smile, then took the device and turned it on Niks. Freed of their collars, they knew they were one bad encounter away from one of the healers calling for the guards.

"Go to the others quickly," Xeda said to Niks as Aeriz handed her back the device. "Get everyone freed of these. Then tell them to be ready to follow me. If any oppose you or try to run before we're ready, tell them I'll end them myself."

Niks didn't hesitate. She slipped her suit up all the way, then turned ghost and crept out of the room.

"We'll have to be extra swift in the lab," Aeriz said. "The guards will find a way to call on reinforcements before we can stop them."

"Whatever we can do will have to work," Xeda said, watching the door for Niks. "I'll get everyone to the lab, then up to the arena. After that...do what you have to without me."

"You really are going to risk getting that woman back? A trainer?"

Xeda bowed his head. "Yes."

"I don't think you need me to say it but...you won't make it out of here if you do. We won't wait to take off, and they'll lock down the ports as soon as possible. You understand it's either her or your freedom."

Xeda knew. "Get as far as you can," he said, without taking his eyes from the doorway. "Destroy everything you can. And don't look for me."

CHAPTERTWENTY-EIGHT

Ophilia

"Ophilia...Did you hear me?"

She raised her eyes to meet Zachary's. Her gaze burned into his as she gave him a timid little smile. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

"I said the sunset is beautiful, isn't it?"

Her eyes shot over to the large wall of glass that stretched across the back of the room. Beyond a set of glass doors was a wide balcony, and beyond that was the cityscape followed by the sun drifting below the horizon.

"Yes...it's nice," she said, meaning it only a little. The red ball of light hurt her eyes even when she wasn't directly looking at it.

Her gaze drifted a little lower, to the roof of the arena below. Capura's penthouse towered over it several levels above. Just a few levels above Sal's apartment and several more above where she and Xeda had stayed. If the elevators weren't being monitored, it would only take her less than twenty seconds to make it to the ground floor. If she could reach the stairs, it would likely take fifteen minutes tops if she took two steps at a time.

"How's your steak? Not too well done I hope?" he asked as he took a bite of his own.

She looked down at her plate, only a bite or two taken from the slab of meat before her. "It's fine," she said. The sleek black table they sat at was filled with food. Bowls of soup, vegetables and bread. She looked at it all but didn't touch.

He watched her as he swallowed. "You must be hungry. Here, I'll help you fill up." He started to rise from his seat.

"I'm fine. I'm not very hungry."

He sank back in his seat, then reclined, a small smirk growing on his face. He knew she was hungry. They hadn't given her anything since she had been brought up to the penthouse. Only just an hour ago did Zachary unlock the door and let her out of the room they had thrown her in, smiling at her and asking her to join him for dinner as if nothing was amiss. As if he hadn't heard her screaming and pounding at her door for hours.

He also offered her a new uniform, black with orange and violet. She changed into it only because her old uniform had been ripped in several places when she tried to fight the grip of Capura's—i.e. Kaxek's—men. After she'd changed, she met Zachary in the dining room where he told her they were having steak.

She didn't give a fuck what they were having or about him wanting to play nice. But she knew trying to run wasn't an option right now either. Men stood by the entrance, and the one time the door did open, she saw, through the foyer, the elevator being guarded too.

"I know you're nervous for the next game," Zachary replied. "I am too."

She tapped her fork against the edge of the plate. Of course they hadn't given her a steak knife. But Zachary had one. If she could somehow get to it...

"Kaxek has decided to give Xeda one more chance. He's letting him into the final game."

Ophilia glared back at him. "We both know he's in no condition yet to fight."

His brows rose. "Kaxek took damage too. Perhaps it's only fair."

Ophilia looked back at her hands, one clenching the fork, the other in a fist, her nails digging into her skin. "Kaxek wants to see him dead...he doesn't want to play fair. He just wants to show he's better."

"You don't know that."

"If he really wanted to have an equal fight, he'd let Xeda try again next season..." She hated the idea of him going back to Sal's, enduring the torture they would put him through. But he would still have a chance to win come next season and gain his freedom then. If he were to fight now, he could die. And she knew they knew that.

They wanted her to watch. To see him suffer before Kaxek made the final blow.

Zachary shook his head. "Kaxek has been more than fair. Xeda was allowed treatment despite certain rules. They both have been weakened. But they both can still fight. And the games must go on. Sal has been told and understands this. And so will you."

She let her fork clatter to her plate. "Let me see him then. He still needs me, and he can't get a new trainer this late on."

Zachary sighed. "Afraid not."

"This is bending of the rules, and you know it. Just so Kaxek can have his way."

Zachary smiled. "Do you really think you can do any more for him than you already have? A few words of encouragement will hardly be enough to give him an edge." Zachary leaned forward, clasping his hands together. "Let it go, Ophilia. Let him go. He will fight and he will try. If anything, Kaxek will show him mercy by killing him swiftly. Then everyone can see who the true victor is, and it can be done and over with."

"And then what?" Ophilia said as her throat began to tighten. "Why am I even here?"

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He bent his head. "You have to be an example, Ophilia."

When he didn't give her more of an answer, she wanted to scream at him, "what the fuck does that even mean?" Shaking, she started to rise from her seat when the doors to the entrance banged open.

Kaxek stalked toward them, his deep red eyes locking on her. He looked better off than she cared to admit, despite the injuries he had sustained in the last game.

Zachary stood as Kaxek stopped just before them. Kaxek stared at her for a second longer before turning to him. "Are the enhancements ready?"

"Ready and waiting," Zachary said.

"Good. Tomorrow is the last game. Make sure to call down to the wardens and have everything finalized." He dipped his head at her. "Make sure she's ready as well. I want Xeda to see me slit her throat before we start."

And there was her answer.

He turned to leave when Ophilia leapt from her seat.

"Xeda isn't ready to fight you," she snapped at him.

"Ophilia—" Zachary tried to stop her.

She ignored him, stepping closer to Kaxek. "If you were a true fighter—a true

champion—you'd fight him when you're both at full strength. Not when he is weakened so you can have an advantage. You're just a coward who knows he almost had you. If it weren't for Tazyn, you would have lost!"

Kaxek turned on her. Before she could barely take a breath, he had his hand around her throat. As he picked her up, he stepped up on to the table, kicking bowls and plates away to smash on the ground before he slammed her back on the surface.

Ophilia opened her mouth in a silent cry, gasping for air, trying to pry his hand away as he crouched over her. He leaned in close, his hand squeezing.

"He'll die quickly so everyone knows he was hardly worth my time," he hissed in her face. "But I think I'll enjoy killing you slowly. Just for my own amusement." He showed her his fangs in a cruel smile. "I know he feels something for you, the weak fool." His talon grazed the side of her face. "He said to me he liked to hurt you, to cut you slow for his own pleasure. I didn't believe him. But I could see how tempting the idea could be." His talon dug into her skin, and she writhed under him, silently screaming and kicking as she felt the sharp, blinding pain from his talon slicing down the side of her cheek.

She tried to free herself from him, but he was so immensely more powerful than her that he barely moved as she struggled under him. Her vision was starting to go black.

"Kaxek..." Zachary snapped.

Kaxek moved to cut her again, this time on the other cheek.

"Kaxek, stop!"

Kaxek snarled as he looked up. "You dare tell me—"

“Not because of her. Look!” At the corner of her vision, she saw him pointing toward the glass.

There was a low rumble like thunder, the glass vibrating. Kaxek growled and let her go, pushing himself off her. Ophilia gasped for air, her back arching as she twisted her body to one side, her hands clutching her throat. She tilted her head back and watched them as Kaxek moved to the doors of the balcony.

Past Kaxek was an orange glow, not like the light of the sun which was nearly gone. This light was coming from below.

There was a large crackle like the sound of splitting stone or metal, then a resounding boom. The very building shook. The orange glow turned into a bright flash, then she saw the smoke.

As they moved to the balcony, she rolled to her knees, panting for breath. She spied Zachary's steak knife on the ground and looked up to watch them as she slid herself off the table and grabbed it, sliding it under her sleeve while gripping the sharp end.

As Kaxek turned his head, she lifted herself slowly to her feet, blood dripping from her cheek onto the carpet.

"I'm going down," she heard him say.

"Wait, Kaxek." Zachary pointed to something below.

Kaxek's tail weaved like a furious cat. He turned and started for her, fury in his gaze. She stood rigid, head held high, ready to slide the knife out, when he slipped past her, forcing her hip into the table.

"Keep her here," he roared as he flew for the door, wrenching it open, then

disappearing out of sight.

Ophelia started for the glass doors, stepping onto the balcony. She approached the rail and peered down, looking where Zachary was staring.

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The arena was on fire, the roof covered with cracks and open wounds where fire and smoke were seeping through. Out from the flames, she saw a figure running across.

A painful whimper rose in her throat as she nearly collapsed against the rail.

Xeda was flying across the rooftop, dodging bursts of fire and jumping over open vents. Rushing toward the building, toward her.

"He's crazy," she heard Zachary whisper. He brought his hand up, glaring down at his wristpad. He plugged something in, then brought it up to his mouth. "I need all available security active right away. We need to go into lockdown."

Ophilia let the knife slip from her sleeve. She gripped the hilt, then took a breath and lunged. As he whirled around, she caught him in the gut. Zachary staggered back, cursing.

"You bitch," he said in surprise. He tried to backhand her across the face, but she side stepped away. He fell to the ground, clutching his stomach, his back resting against the rail.

They stared at each other as blood coated his lips. "Kaxek will have this victory," he mumbled. He grinned at her with bloody teeth. "He always does."

She tugged the knife from him as his body went limp. She turned back to the fire below, looking once more for Xeda, and found him along one side more than halfway across.

Then she saw Kaxek, who had somehow climbed his way up, coming to meet him.

Heart dropping, she looked back at Xeda. With all her breath, she leaned forward and screamed his name, tearing her vocal cords.

Xeda slowed and looked up, and they locked eyes.

He looked ready to fly to her when she quickly pointed her knife toward Kaxek who was rushing toward him at top speed. Xeda turned his head just as Kaxek leapt into the air.

CHAPTERTWENTY-NINE

Xeda

He saw Kaxek appear out of the smoke, falling toward him, his talons swiping across Xeda's arm as he blocked him just in time. Xeda leapt back as Kaxek came at him again, striking with impressive speed.

Xeda was able to dodge the first few until Kaxek lashed out with his tail. As Xeda blocked again, Kaxek kicked with enough force to send him flying.

Xeda rolled, then landed on his hands and feet in a crouch. The heat of the fires roared behind him, embers catching on his head and shoulders.

"You really thought you could escape?" Kaxek hissed. "You are weak. Less than a warrior. You're a loser." He showed him his fangs. "I may not have a queen, but I am predomis alone. Here, I am king. You don't escape me."

Xeda slowly rose. His bad arm was already starting to ache, but he didn't let any pain show. "No," he said, keeping a fighter's stance, ready to strike or defend. "You are a

disgrace to our kind. You are no vrisha. You are nothing."

Kaxek roared, then charged him.

Xeda, this time, was ready. He shot toward him, meeting Kaxek head on.

Fists and talons struck, tails flew, striking hide, sending scales flying. Kaxek tried to get a hold of him, but Xeda slipped out of his grip every time.

The fires grew worse around them, the cracks in the roof spreading, creating bursts of flames and heat. Xeda could feel the vibrations under his feet wherever he stepped.

Kaxek whipped his tail toward Xeda's head, and as Xeda ducked, Kaxek kicked him again, this time sending him back into a burst of fire.

Xeda hissed as the flames licked against his back and shoulder. Even this heat was almost too much for him. He leapt back out of the flames in hopes of blocking Kaxek's view through the smoke, losing him in the smog that started to spread.

Xeda searched around him, circling, waiting. The ground beneath him began to shake, and he wondered how long the roof would last before it collapsed.

As he decided to start running for the edge again in case it did, Kaxek broke through a pillar of smoke and slammed into him, sending them both falling then rolling across the surface. As Xeda tried to stand, Kaxek rushed him again, tackling him back to the ground. Kaxek tried to go for Xeda's throat, but Xeda twisted his bad arm, using it as a shield. Kaxek bit into it, crunching into bone. Xeda barked in pain, trying to wrench him off.

As Kaxek tore into him, he kept Xeda on his back, slashing at his chest, digging his talons into his side as Xeda tried to kick him off.

Xeda bucked and writhed but couldn't move him. He was beginning to feel his strength waning already.

No, not again. Not now.

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Kaxek let go only to send his fist into Xeda's face. Xeda tugged his tail from under him and stabbed Kaxek in his side. Before he could do it again, Kaxek caught his tail and gripped it tight. Then he slammed his hand into Xeda's jaw and forced his head back.

Kaxek laughed, bringing the end of Xeda's tail up, meaning to kill him with his own spine. Before he could send it into Xeda's throat, Xeda twisted with all his strength, turning his head while sending his knees up. Kaxek's hand slipped on his jaw, and Xeda caught it in his teeth, crushing it in his mouth, tasting blood.

Kaxek let go of his tail to hit him while trying to tear his other hand away. As Kaxek ripped his hand out, Xeda grabbed it, pulling him down while shooting forward and elbowing him.

Kaxek took the blow, then bit once again into his arm as they rolled.

Like an animal, Kaxek tore at his already messed up arm, shaking his head, knowing it caused Xeda immense pain. Xeda roared, trying to shake him off, hitting him across the face, striking him with his tail.

Through their struggle, they got close to the edge of one of the large open faults along the roof, spewing smoke and fire.

Kaxek didn't seem to notice as he pulled, and Xeda knew then he was trying to maim him, knowing once he did, Xeda would be no match.

Xeda couldn't tear him away. Kaxek pulled him across the surface.

The fault was growing closer. Kaxek would kill them both.

There was no other choice.

So be it.

Without a thought, Xeda pushed himself up, then, with all his strength, sliced his own arm using the spine of his tail while tugging away. His arm tore off and, as Kaxek stumbled back in surprise, Xeda kicked him as hard as he could.

Kaxek went flying into the fire, his eyes wide with terror as he fell to the edge, falling into the fault and down into the fiery arena below, his shriek consumed by the flames.

Xeda stared at the fire, sinking to his knees. He clutched the stub where his arm had once been, where blood now spilled.

The ground shook beneath him, and he shot up, then flew once more for the end of the arena. He didn't look back as he rushed across, fire flashing on either side of him. The pain was numbing now, and all he could think was getting to the building before him. He looked up to where he had seen Ophilia and no longer could see her through the smoke.

When he reached the end of the roof, he leapt onto a wide bridge connecting the arena to the gaming center. It was broken apart at one spot, meaning Aeriz, Niks, and the others had already been through. He ran on past the broken doors into the building.

The place looked as if a storm had blown past. Walls were smashed away, debris littering the ground. He charged past it all without a second glance until he made it to the central chamber.

The banners had been ripped away, pillars broken, the floor blackened by fire. Men lay all around, their guns either taken or broken.

Tazyn was there waiting for him.

His eyes flickered down to Xeda's arm, then back up at him. "Kaxek is dead, isn't he? You actually did it?"

"I did," Xeda said. He knew he didn't have the strength to take Tazyn on. But he would do whatever he had to do to get past him. To get to Ophilia. "Stand aside, or I'll be forced to kill you too."

Tazyn gripped his weapon in both hands. "We both know you don't have it in you to fight me now. Bow down and name me the victor, and we can be done with this."

Xeda moved closer, but he didn't bow. "The games are finished. Let it go."

Tazyn pointed his spear at him. "They are not until you bow or fight me."

Xeda growled. "You're a fool." He was ready to lunge, to take him on too, when he heard something whip through the air.

Tazyn howled and dropped his weapon as a slender object flew and severed several fingers on his hand.

A dark blade.

Aeriz came out of the shadows, his other blade in hand, ready to throw or strike. He looked to Xeda and bowed his head, before eyeing his arm.

"That looks bad," he said.

Xeda growled again. "Why are you still here?"

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Aeriz tilted his head. "I guess we enjoyed the fight too much. Got distracted. Ports are shut down by now. No matter. Now we'll take our revenge first."

Xeda looked around and saw more of the fighters, some that hadn't started with them in the medical bay, who had been freed of their collars. Likely found in whatever rooms they had been locked into and let loose. They were taking over the building, going up each level and hunting the people who wronged them. He heard the screams of these people, heard shots in the distance of guards trying to keep them back.

Xeda looked back at Tazyn, who was clutching his hand.

"You still want to fight me, Tazyn?"

Tazyn snarled at him, taking up his weapon in one hand.

"Let me." Aeriz moved to block his way. "You had your victory. Now let me have mine."

Xeda didn't protest. He didn't have time for another fight anyway. As he stepped aside, he caught the shimmer of movement behind Tazyn.

Niks.

Xeda moved onward as Tazyn and Aeriz circled each other, then he made for the elevators. He found a strip of a ripped banner and grabbed it, quickly cinching it around his severed arm, halting some of the blood loss for now.

When he got to the elevators, he found they had stopped working. Cursing, he made for the stairs instead, leaping from one set to the next.

He hadn't had a chance to gauge which level Ophilia was on. He only knew she wasn't in their old room judging by the height. She was somewhere farther above. Five, maybe four, floors from the rooftop.

He rushed up to the top, using his sense of smell to hopefully guide him, but finding it weakened from the smoke. When he had passed at least ten floors, he knew he had to be getting close. He started to slow, then halted at one level when he caught a familiar scent.

It wasn't Ophilia's. But it was one he knew just as well. And she might be in the same place.

He kicked down the door to the passageway and saw several men on the ground, including one fighter who had already made his way up but had gotten mowed down by gunfire, taking out a few before he died.

He slipped past them without a thought, then kicked down the door to Sal's apartment.

Gunfire burst out, and he took one shot in the leg before quickly dodging out of the way. He rushed the man with the gun whose aim was thankfully way off and jumped him, sending him to the floor. The gun fell from his hands, and he kicked it away before knocking the man out. He kept going, kicking in doors, the scent of fear getting stronger, till he got to the back room and found a group huddling by the window.

Sal was there. With his sons and his woman. Xeda couldn't deny he felt a thrill at seeing their terror and their tears.

Sal got to his feet, putting out a shaky hand.

"Xeda," he said softly. "Listen, let's talk this out."

"Where is Ophilia?" Xeda growled in his face.

"Sh-she isn't here, okay. She's with House Capura now."

Xeda lashed out and grabbed Sal by his collar, dragging him closer, making sure Sal saw the points of his long teeth. "Where?" he hissed.

"Two floors. Their apartment is two floors up."

Xeda picked Sal up by his feet. "Do you think you deserve to live for just that information alone? Do you think you should be forgiven?"

The woman wailed, clinging to her sons. Cristan wailed almost as loud as her.

He heard noise at the door and turned his head to catch some of the freed fighters—a couple grex and corax—stalking inside, catching sight of them.

"It's just a game," Sal said. As if that was a good enough answer.

Xeda turned back to him, his expression twisted, a growl tearing up his throat. "And you lost."

Sal didn't deserve a swift death, and Xeda didn't have time to make it slow. He let go of him, letting him fall back to the ground.

The fighters came around, looking at them hungrily.

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Xeda leaned forward and gave them the most nightmarish expression he could possibly give. "Let's see you win your way out of this."

He turned and left them to cower in the corner as the fighters passed by him. As he heard their screams, he made for the stairs.

* * *

Capura's apartments were just as destroyed. Bodies of men strewn about, the doors blown in.

His heart sank to his stomach as he stepped inside, trying to catch Ophilia's scent through the thick smell of blood. Fighters had already been present, he could see by the glass everywhere from shattered lamps, furniture broken and ripped apart. He was waiting with dread to come into a room and find her mangled body.

Every room was empty. He came to the back room and found an empty table with plates scattered on the ground. He rushed past to the balcony and found Kaxek's trainer, slumped to one side.

But not Ophilia.

He went back inside and, growing panicked, called to her. He walked every room again and shouted her name.

Nothing.

He turned back to the room beside the balcony and was ready to start destroying more of the place himself, when he heard something shift and clatter behind him. He drew closer to the sound and caught a familiar scent.

"Ophilia?"

A large grate near one wall popped open and there Ophilia's arm reached out with knife in hand. She let it fall so that she could use her hand to crawl out of the vent. Xeda reached down and grabbed her arm, sliding her out.

She slid on to her back, coughing, rubbing dust out of her eyes. She blinked and looked up at him. Then her face twisted as if she were in pain. "Xeda," she whispered.

He picked her up and brought her to him, wrapping his arm around her as she clung to him. He let his face fall in her hair, breathing in her scent. "Isara si na kissala," he said softly against her.

Shaking, she drew out of his embrace to face him. Then her eyes locked on to his missing arm, and her face paled.

"Your arm. Oh, Xeda."

He let his one hand cup her face, thumb grazing against a cut on her cheek. "It was worth losing it in order to get here. To get to you."

A few of her tears wet his fingers, and he moved his hand around to the back of her head, pulling her closer, his mouth brushing against hers before trailing down her jaw, then nuzzling her neck.

"Let's get out of here," she whispered.

He liked that idea very much.

CHAPTERTHIRTY

Ophilia

The air was cool as she opened the door to the small office. A relief from the heat she had to endure in the cramped, stuffy room with no windows and a small vent for air. She felt a little lighter now. A little calmer.

She stopped at the doorway and turned back to the gyda man that sat at his desk, his computer next to him and a little holographic chart beside it. She stared at the chart, her throat tightening.

“Thank you, Dr. Sybrim,” she said softly. Her voice was still raw, still healing from the damage it had been dealt a day ago.

The man bowed his head as he eyed her and those outside his make-shift office with quiet apprehension.

She closed the door behind her, then slid to one wall, pressing her back against it, tilting her head back and closing her eyes, taking slow breaths. She listened for a moment to the sounds around her, to the voices of people, to a cart rolling by, to the sound of rain pattering against the roof above like soft white noise.

She bent her head forward and stared ahead.

The hangar was a decent size, meant for storing supplies and smaller low-land vehicles, but had recently been turned into a waiting area and a medic bay. Crates had been pushed back against the walls while some were used as seats. Some of the fighters had sustained minor injuries, mostly bullet wounds. But all were so thick

skinned that they hardly seemed to notice them.

It had taken her to persuade some of the medical staff to come and treat them. And it took Xeda to make sure the fighters didn't harm them while they did. Some of the staff were willing while some refused, leaving as soon as they opened the medical bay where they had been locked in by Xeda and the fighters to make sure they didn't send for more security.

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Those who stayed did so only because they understood the rebellious fighters weren't there to hurt them. They understood what they had been fighting for. Hell, some of them had been rooting for them too, seeing some of the worst injuries and therefore hating the games just as much as some of the fighters.

Not all of the fighters were happy with the rebellion. A few actually tried to protect the very families that broke them and forced them to fight. They were either taken down or forced to flee.

Some of the members of the powerful houses got away too, but most didn't.

She learned what happened to Sal and his family. And she admittedly felt nothing when Xeda told her. Maybe they deserved it, but most of all she was just glad they could no longer hurt anyone.

No one could hurt them.

She took another deep breath and pushed off the wall. She walked past medical staff and some of the fighters sitting on make-shift cots as medics checked their wounds. Instinctually, she rubbed at her throat, wrapped now in a heavy cloth. A gyda medic named Tora had examined her, informing her that her windpipe and vocal cords had been damaged.

"Drink this once a day," Tora had told her, giving her liquid medicine. "It will take time, but eventually your throat will get a little better."

She had been checked for clots as well and was thankfully clear of those. Her brain

function was also normal. Still, they told her to get examined every so often for the next few months and to monitor for any other symptoms.

She slipped by a group of fighters, making her way toward the entrance of the hangar. She slowed as she saw a different group to one side.

They were not fighters but staff. Those forced to aid and work in the games, just like those forced to work for the powerful houses. They stayed close together, talking softly, eyeing the fighters warily.

Not all of them had been spared either, getting caught in the crossfire. She felt for them. Thankfully some sense was talked into the rebels.

Sitting with them, she saw Warden Margo. She and Ophilia locked eyes. She gave her a sad smile, then turned her gaze away.

Ophilia continued on until she got to the open side of the hangar. There she saw Xeda standing, staring out past the rain. She came to his side and peered out in the rain too.

A ship sat just outside on the landing bay, water pouring down its sides.

It was being packed with supplies some of the fighters took, ready to be flown out of the city and off world.

The flight staff had mostly fled too, along with city officials. Most of the security had been inside the gaming center. Funny enough, the games were more enforced than the actual city, and no one wanted to start a battle with these fighters, not after the collapse of the arena. There wasn't enough enforcement—most were just thugs or bodyguards for families living in the city.

She stood quietly beside him for a moment, then took his hand. He squeezed hers in

response. The stub of his missing arm was now sealed shut and wrapped.

"They'll be going soon," Ophilia said, breaking the silence. It hurt to swallow, and she tried to not clear her throat. "Have you decided...where you want to go?"

He gazed back at her, the heat of his eyes warming her even in the cool air from the rain.

"Where we want to go, you mean," he said.

She couldn't help smiling at that. "Where we want to go," she repeated.

He looked back at the ship, a shadow falling across his gaze. "I can never go back to my home world," he said. "I have...committed too many crimes, being a part of the Blood Guard. I can't take you to any alliance or governing world either for the same reason. It's strange, all I wanted was to escape this place, not realizing I had nowhere to go."

Ophilia looked back at the ship. There were other habitable worlds not tied to the systems, small port cities and towns or working planets, but who knew how long it would take to find one that suited them. They would also be alone. Completely alone, and always having to watch their backs. And, worst of all, she knew deep down Xeda would never stop being hunted. Though his tattoos had faded, they were still slightly noticable. He was a target for bounty hunters and alliance spies. No port would be safe.

They would have to go far, and who knew what other dangers lay outside the systems.

If only there was a place that was safe, where they could be accepted. Where they had some control of their life.

She closed her eyes. "We should stay here then."

She opened her eyes and saw him staring down at her.

"You can't be serious."

She shrugged. "Kind of? You took down the very person who controlled most of the city. There is no law or real system here. It was always just whatever the most powerful houses deemed as law. Then just Kaxek's law. But he's gone, and most of the houses are crumbling as we speak. There will always be danger wherever we go, we can't stop that. But we already have an idea of the kind of danger we face here. We are still free. No one can dispute that now." She turned to face him, and he did the same. "Those who were a true threat are gone or have fled. Maybe, we can make things work here. Make things better. Better for us, better for..." She looked back at those behind them, then caught his gaze.

He studied her, still looking uncertain. "Some that survived might want revenge."

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"Then we'll face them together if that happens. But everyone knows you took down Kaxek. And Kaxek considered himself king. I'm pretty sure in some cultures that means whoever is the strongest..."

He snorted. "I'm no king." He looked back at her with quiet knowing. "But you. You know diplomacy more than anyone I know. Maybe a king isn't what they need..."

She stared at him, then laughed a little and winced from the pain. "I don't know about that."

His eyes brightened. "My world is run by queens. They are wise and cunning. Brave women and fierce leaders. I think I see a fine queen before me."

She flushed at that. "Maybe we try something with a little democracy," she mumbled. Then she smirked at him. "Honestly, I just want to find our home more than anything. Let's start with that. If it doesn't work...we go."

He watched her for a moment, then bowed his head. "All right."

"So, you really plan to stay then?"

She turned with Xeda and saw Aeriz leaning against the side of crates close by. He had one white scar down his face where Tazyn had got him just before Aeriz had made his final blow. The nillium of House Zanis was one of the few that got away, fleeing the city. Going into hiding.

Xeda glanced at Ophilia who nodded her head. "Yes, that's right."

Aeriz broke from the crates to approach them. "Not going to become another Kaxek, are you?"

"No. I don't plan to," Xeda said.

Aeriz eyed him sharply. He took out one of his blades, flipped it, then pointed it at him. "Know, if you do, I will hunt you down personally."

Ophilia glanced at Xeda nervously but saw his expression brighten. "I wouldn't expect anything less from you."

Aeriz dipped his head, then sheathed his knife. "I'll be seeing you around." He walked out into the rain and disappeared.

She watched him go, then jumped and yelped when she felt an invisible finger poke her ribs. She heard a soft giggle as Niks dropped the hood of her suit.

"So, what will you do then?" she asked, clearly having heard their conversation.

"We have a few ideas," Ophilia said, smiling and swatting her hand away that tried to poke her again. "Help rebuild a better city, try to get others to join. Find a home..."

"And if that fails?" she asked.

"We'll go," Xeda said.

Niks nodded. "Well, I have nowhere to go either. I think a lot of us don't. We could use some guidance till then." She smirked at them, then pinched Ophilia's shoulder playfully. "I'll stay with you. You'll need a spy and an assassin. At least for a little while. Throw me some credits and give me a place to sleep. Deal?"

Xeda huffed, but Ophilia took her hand and shook it, making Niks look confused. "Deal."

Niks smiled and ruffled Ophilia's hair before she too disappeared.

"Are you sure you want this?" Xeda asked. "To stay here?"

She took his hand in both of hers. "Let's just see where this goes. Remember you're no longer a prisoner here, Xeda. We can leave whenever you like. We can leave right now." She gestured to the ship.

He glanced at the ship, then back at her. "We both have bad memories here. Are you sure it won't be easier for you to leave it behind?"

She reached up to him and let her fingers brush over the scars along his face. "I don't think it will matter. And we can make new memories," she said, letting her hand drift down to his chest where she saw the faded tattoos, one in the shape of an X. "Better ones." She rested her head against his chest, feeling his arm wrap around her waist protectively. "And in time, we can forget."

EPILOGUE

Xeda

He tied his armor against his shoulder, making sure it was doubly secure. It was the final piece of grivhide left to fix. He had his whole arm covered as well as his chest. He even had grivhide along his hips over his kelve pants. He kept a blade sheathed and strapped across his chest, just for the hell of it.

He moved to the mirrored wall across the room just to make sure nothing was amiss.

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He noticed he'd put on muscle, no longer as slender. His horns, though a little chipped on one end, shined bright as did his scales. He wished Ophilia could have been there to massage the toner on him as he always liked, but this time, she had a good reason not to be there.

He turned, checking the grivhide on his arm, then turned to the other side and checked the black metal arm. It shined too. He bent it and flexed the hand, finding the movement smooth as usual.

The cybernetic arm had taken him some time to get used to when the healers had first put it on him. He hadn't even considered it at first until Ophilia had surprised him with it.

"Don't thank me, thank Dr. Sybrim who designed it," she had said when he accepted it.

He had been grateful to him and her. And now he hardly ever remembered it wasn't his real arm.

He flexed the arm one last time, then lowered it. When he thought he looked decent enough, he turned and peered around his and Ophilia's room.

It was almost like the one they had shared in the gaming center. Dark and warm, but a little more open, with a terrace to one side and their inlaid bed on the other end. Through another doorway was their equally large bath.

He thought back to earlier in the morning before the sun rose, how he had woken her

up, her soft body trembling and moving under his. It was pure bliss. He closed his eyes, feeling the heat turn in him yet again.

Tonight. In time. First there was something a little more important.

He made for the door and entered into the main passage. The house was quiet for once. Because everyone was outside, waiting. The house was also dark like their room, with tall, thin windows and soft lights that gave off an orange glow. Everything was soft stone or glass. There were a few giant plants here and there but no vines, as he strictly requested.

As he slipped down a set of stairs, he turned a corner only to almost run into someone coming his way.

"Xara," he hissed in annoyance, gripping her shoulders.

The fledgling vrisha female looked up at him with big red eyes. "Oh, I was just coming up to check on you."

"Or were you sneaking upstairs to get your blades? Where is your sister?"

She looked at him slyly. "She's down at the hill. We were just going to play."

Xeda huffed. "You can wait until after. Come on."

The female huffed back and followed.

She and her twin sister, Rayza, were a damn handful, but Xeda wouldn't have them anywhere else. Even when they pissed him off, he was still grateful to Ophilia for discovering them in one of the underground markets and saving them from being sold.

They slipped through the main foyer of the house to the back, then passed one of the gardens. Xeda cursed when one of the damn cats Ophilia had saved from Sal's home got in his way, yowling at him before bolting away. Xara hissed with laughter behind him. He could hear the birds in the distance squawking as the cat went their way. So many animals she had to save, but those cats were the worst.

They stalked through the garden, then passed a short little grouping of trees, coming onto a large hillside, looking over a valley and a lake.

Most of it was the wastes, but he thought it was nice, unlike most. Their house wasn't far from the city but far enough to keep his mind at ease.

People from that city were there already waiting. A platform had been set between them and the house. Xeda gestured for Xara to go to her sister as he moved on to that platform. He looked over the crowd who seemed to be staring up at him with wide eyes, as if he was some champion standing before them. Maybe he did look it for once.

He saw familiar faces. First the representatives of Kingsway, chosen to take care of different districts, replacing the houses. Dr. Sybrim was one of them, as were a few old champions.

There were also members of his home. Workers, like the dirra of his world, who chose to serve them, many who left the fallen houses. Ophilia always made sure they were well cared for, paid fairly, and treated better than they ever were anywhere else. A couple were allies of hers from House Salimar, one she even called a friend. Some were from House Myre that she grew up with. Then there were the old fighters who chose to stay by his side. A strange but powerful pack.

He looked past them to the back and saw Aeriz there, reappearing since the last time they had seen him, never mentioning where he went. He bowed his head and Xeda

bowed back.

His eyes scanned the rest, and he saw Xara and Rayza tussling in the back. He sighed and looked past them and saw Urxik.

The old vrisha stared at him, and Xeda stared back. Urxik came to Kingsway a few months after the twins. It was so strange that so many vrisha were showing up, but he took it as a sign. Urxik, however, almost didn't make the cut. Xeda almost killed him, thinking he had come to threaten him and Ophilia. He had the same faded markings as Xeda. An old member of the Blood Guard who had gone into hiding, finding his way to K2. He had been one of Queen Theda's bomb experts.

But he wasn't looking to fight. He had been injured in an escape to get away from some bounty hunters. His leg was so mangled he limped when he walked. He was a male of few words, and it took some time for Xeda to trust him. Only when he confessed he too learned the error of his ways, that the mad queen had truly been mad and he wanted to start again, did Xeda give him a chance. But he made sure he knew first that one wrong move and Xeda wouldn't hesitate to banish him.

A shimmer at the corner of his eye caught his attention, and he turned to see Niks on the stage beside him.

"Nice view," she said with a grin.

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"Glad you think so, now get down."

She flicked her tongue at him and moved off. "She's coming, you know!" she called. "I saw Ophilia coming through the garden."

Xeda straightened. He turned toward the house and looked over in time to see her coming down the garden steps. Fire rushed in his blood at the sight of her.

She wore not just a full kelve attire like the one he remembered her wearing from the games, she also wore a pair of grivhide on each of her shoulders and along her chest. Her hair was braided back, her lips blackened with paint with a stripe going down her chin. She looked at him and smiled, showing blackened teeth. Behind her came Mawla— an older lygin female of their house, carrying a torch in one hand and a set of horns in the other, a thin piece of rope under her arm.

They approached the dais, and Ophilia stood beside him, her steel blue eyes bright with their own fire as she gazed up at him. Mawla handed the torch to Ophilia first.

They turned to face each other. Xeda placed his metal hand atop hers as they gripped the torch together. Mawla took the rope and wrapped it around their hands. They rose the torch a little higher as Xeda recited his oath.

"I will protect her, I will guide her, I will be her fire in the dark, and her shadow in the light. As by a predomis' will, I will be hers."

They brought their other hands up to hover above the flame. Ophilia wore a special glove so her hand wouldn't burn. They connected their hands within the fire and held

them there.

“By this flame, we are whole,” they said together.

They separated their hands, then Mawla untied them from the torch and traded it for the crown of horns, giving them to Xeda.

Xeda placed the crown on Ophilia’s head, fixing her hair, brushing a stray lock aside.

This was not exactly how the ceremony went on his home world. They did not have the representative queens to watch them or the proper attire. On his home world, the rituals were a little different. They didn’t have a way to sign in the oath, placing them in the records with other past predomis and queens or to perform the many other intricacies that went along with the special rite.

But here, there were no such rules. Here, they made their own. Everything was different. But to him, this was perfect. This was theirs.

The witnesses and onlookers congratulated them, hollering and roaring, heads tilted to the sky, but Xeda hardly saw them. He took Ophilia’s hands in his and leaned down, resting his forehead against hers.

Of all the trials he faced, it was in this moment, with Ophilia by his side, their home behind them and their family beside them, that he felt victorious.

The Blood Guard Saga End