



Beast (Marinah and the Apocalypse #3)

Author: *Holly S. Roberts*

Category: Fantasy

Description: When the ruthless Federation unleashes new horrors, Marinah and King must embark on a perilous quest to protect humanity from those who would exploit it.

But Marinah's journey is also a deeply personal one.

Haunted by her past, she must confront the shadows of her origins to forge a future she can claim.

King has always sensed the extraordinary power within her, a truth that now threatens to consume them both.

To save the world, he must first save Marinah from herself, even as the hounds of hell gather at their heels.

Total Pages (Source): 28

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:36 pm

Marinah

I ignored the tangy smell of blood trickling down my face as I continued my mad dash through the darkness. A sharp, prickly branch sliced my other cheek. I winced internally as the sting of salty sweat hit the bloody scrapes and scratches that now covered most of my face and neck. Sweat also trailed between the rough, inch-long hairs covering my body, leaving a distinct scent trail behind me. There was nothing I could do about it. I'd done a decent job of keeping my breathing even, allowing my sensitive ears to pick up the slightest noise and alert me to danger. As I ran, I planned. My next course of action became clear when I spotted the perfect place to hunker down and wait.

"Danger." Ms. Beast whispered inside my head.

"Too close," I snarled back. "Damn him."

"Kill." Her whisper sent shivers through my entire body, and I grinned, displaying six-inch fangs, while I changed direction slightly to avoid a small open area. I slowed and headed for a thicker crop of trees and brush. Sniffing the air with my elongated snout, I detected nothing out of the ordinary. But I wasn't being pursued by someone ordinary, and there was no way I'd let my guard down.

"Plenty of smells, but not the ones I'm trying to differentiate," I told Ms. Beast.

"Danger."

"Of course there's danger; that's why I'm here." I melted into the brush, slowing my

breathing even further until it became indistinguishable from the sounds of the night. My knife rested in my wicked claws, ready for an attack. At least, I felt ready.

The wait seemed interminable, and restlessness crept in just as he struck. The force of the large body slamming into me hurled me into the air, and I landed on my back. Hard. I scrambled to my feet, falling into a defensive stance despite the absence of air in my lungs. My will to live burned brighter than my immediate need for oxygen.

He was fast. I had to give him that. The moment my body hit the earth, he was on the move, ready to end my relatively young life. His kick caught my wrist, and the knife flew from my grip. Damn claws. No matter how many hours I trained, I still had trouble compensating and maintaining the correct hold. Not good. My mistake wouldn't help me now.

I adjusted my position, and my next kick struck him hard in the upper thigh, hard enough to crack bone. It didn't stop him. His fist slammed into the side of my head above my left ear, and stars burst in front of my eyes. I barely managed to block the next jab, and this time I drove my claws into his side, aiming for a vital organ. My claws sliced through flesh and muscle, and a deep, guttural grunt escaped his throat.

"Hurt, didn't it?" I said with glee.

But I celebrated too early. The fist plowing into my shoulder reminded me why small victories meant nothing. I shifted my stance, pivoted, and swept both his legs out from under him. His grunt was louder this time, and the satisfying thud of his body hitting the ground matched the moment I regained the ability to breathe. A blessed rush of air filled my lungs.

What I didn't expect was the attack from behind. Why wouldn't I expect it, you might ask? I had thought I was being hunted by one person. This was the punishment for my error in judgment.

The new attacker's first blow was a wicked kidney punch that doubled me over. Even as I struggled to catch my breath, I spun away from the monster on the ground to face the new threat. He barreled toward me with the force of a raging bull, almost five hundred pounds of packed muscle, claws, and teeth. My only defense was to go with the momentum as our bodies collided. Unfortunately, I ended up on the bottom.

His arms and legs wrapped around mine, pinning me in place, but I wasn't done. I evaded his snapping jaws, lifted my hips, and brought my powerful legs up to capture him around the shoulders. With every ounce of strength I had, I thrust my body into a side roll. His grip didn't break until I drove my claws deep into the muscle of his arm.

I was free. The faint crunch of crisp leaves had me spinning while delivering a roundhouse kick aimed at my first assailant's head. My foot connected with his jaw, and his massive snout tried to shake off the impact.

A punishing kick to my hip sent me spinning again. Somehow, I spotted the knife I had dropped earlier and grabbed it. With all the force I could muster, I drove it into the second attacker's thigh, sending him crashing to the ground.

Then I froze. Cold steel pressed against my throat.

"Move, I dare you," the monster whispered in my ear.

"You sent Beck to even your odds. That's cheating," I whined, trying to keep my voice steady.

The steel didn't ease its hard press against my skin. "You're getting too full of yourself and keep making stupid mistakes," he growled.

"Give her a break, King," Beck groaned from where he lay, five feet away.

A stream of blood trickled down my neck, courtesy of King's knife. Without a sound or betraying my intentions, my hand shot up with shocking speed, forcing my fingers between the blade and my throat. Sacrificing those digits, I rolled again, pushing the knife away while striking with the blade still clenched in my good hand. King let out a sharp grunt, the big baby, and the sound was music to my ears. Using my foot, I kicked his knife away after he dropped it, though my fingers and claws dangled by a thread from my injured hand.

I backed up, keeping both men in my line of sight.

“ Kill ,” Ms. Beast whispered.

“ Oh, shut up ,” I snapped silently.

Beck groaned loudly. “I don't know about you, King, but I'm tapping out. I'll leave you two lovebirds to your courting frenzy and get some gentle mothering from my woman.”

“Tap, tap,” King grumbled.

I lowered the knife and let a wicked grin stretch across my face, my jaws inching up and out at the corners to give a full display of teeth. It was the kind of smile that would make most people piss their pants.

“I'm improving,” I said proudly.

Beck laughed, a sound that had become more frequent lately. “Yeah, you can kick all our asses, while teaching us a thing or two. That stab to my thigh came close to guaranteeing I never father children or keep Missy satisfied.”

I covered one ear with my good hand, keeping my claws in check so I didn't poke out

an eyeball. I did not want to hear about Beck satisfying Missy again. It was simply too much. He got the hint and snapped his jaws closed.

King stood, holding the slice I'd opened on his hip together as best he could with his own clawed hands. He turned to Beck. "If there were ten of you, that woman would still never be satisfied. Add the Hellspawn, and you've got monsters worse than hellhounds."

I shot King a glare and shook my head in exasperation. "Don't call Ruth 'Hellspawn.' She only lives up to the name when you do. We need to figure out how to unplug that child's monster." I raised my mangled hand, showing King my shredded fingers. "I think they're still attached enough to sew back on, but thankfully Axel is away right now. He's still mad at me for the last time I needed his help."

King wrapped his bloody arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. "I'll treat you like a tiger with a hangnail," he said with a smirk.

I rubbed my jaws against his, sinking into the delicious warmth of his body. "You always know exactly what to say to a girl." King's claws lightly scraped across the leather straps at my chest, sending a tremble through me that I refused to acknowledge.

"I'm out of here," Beck muttered, disappearing into the night.

"How bad are those fingers?" King asked huskily.

"Bad," I admitted.

"Figures," he whispered.

"I'll be as good as new in a few hours." I flicked a glob of mud from my face. "And

cleaner too.”

“How did Ms. Beast handle the double attack?” His hold on me tightened as he searched my eyes, looking for a glimpse of my lunatic Warrior side.

I blinked slowly, letting him see just a piece of her in my eyes. “She still insists I kill you. Though, this time, she wanted Beck’s blood too.”

He laughed, a deep sound that rumbled through his chest. King argued with his beast side constantly, so he understood the duality I faced. Our beasts were relentless, their solution to any fight being death to the opponent. Ms. Beast complicated things further by sometimes directing her bloodlust toward my mate. I didn’t truly think she would kill him, but she loved the chase more than anything.

“What about the mating frenzy and Beck attacking me?” I asked.

Normally, the men were careful not to get close enough for accidental contact. The last thing they wanted was King tearing them apart.

His expression darkened, his jaws tightening into a frown. “I’ll avoid Beck for the rest of the day so I don’t end up killing him.”

“You do that.”

King took my mangled hand in his massive paw, examining it with a careful precision that belied his size. “You’ll heal, but stitches will help it go faster, and that way, we can do this again tomorrow night.”

I inhaled deeply, letting his scent fill my lungs. It was the scent of the man who held my heart. “You love the hunt as much as Ms. Beast.”

He tipped my head back, his gaze piercing mine. “I love hunting you.”

“Wicked man,” I murmured.

“Would you have it any other way?” he asked with a devilish grin.

“Never.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:36 pm

Marinah

“A little gentleness goes a long way,” I ground out between my very human teeth.

I had shifted from Warrior form as soon as we entered the citadel. I couldn't stand the sensation of walking across the tile floor with three-inch claws jutting from my feet. King always laughed at me whenever I grumbled about it. Of course, he'd had more time to grow accustomed to his Beast form, which stood three feet taller than our human one. And then there was the whole jaw situation. His looked like an alligator's. Mine just looked monstrous. Add the stiff bristles of inch-long hair that covered my body, and I wasn't exactly anyone's idea of pretty in Beast form.

King, very human, made me catch my breath as he wrapped the cloth around my fingers a final time and taped it securely. His head was tilted down as he worked, but when he glanced up, I swear my heart stopped. His incredible crystal-blue eyes heated me from the inside out, making me momentarily forget that my fingers were held together more by sutures than flesh.

“You didn't complain while I worked on my handy needlepoint,” he teased softly.

I rested my forehead against his, breathing the air he exhaled, absorbing the essence that made him uniquely mine. My voice came out as little more than a whisper. “Because that hurt like crazy, and I was trying to focus on breathing.”

He pulled away slightly, his eyes searching mine with a poignancy that made me ache. Then, he leaned in and took my lips. I fell into the kiss like it was water and I was dying of heatstroke. His taste spread through me, settling into that unsatisfied

ache I carried when he was around. We'd been so busy lately, and all we could manage were these short, stolen moments.

A faint squeak from the door, left ajar, warned us we weren't alone. It was Labyrinth, one of King's elite guards. His mismatched eyes, one blue, one green, always made me look twice. He was a goliath of a man, and paired with those striking eyes, the combination was oddly disarming. His square jaw, full lips, and lethal presence were typical of Shadow Warriors, but as one of King's personal guards, he was particularly deadly. Right now, though, he just looked sheepish.

He broke the quiet moment with his deep voice. "Danger, Will Robinson. We can't find the Hellspawn, and Che's missing too." His eyes flicked to mine, and he grimaced before mumbling Ruth's actual name. Everyone knew I hated it when they called her Hellspawn. The biggest problem was the name fit her all too well. Somehow, some way, the devil or one of his demons had to be responsible for that child, no matter how much her mother denied it.

With a loud groan of frustration, I leapt from the table and bolted for the door, muttering every punishment I could think of for Ruth if anything had happened to Che. King stomped heavily behind me, his footfalls echoing through the hallway. In the forest, he was quiet and deadly but give him tile floors to pound when he was angry, and he became a walking demolition crew. We were both at the end of our patience with Ruth and her endless mischief. Everyone in the Shadow Warrior colony knew she'd be the death of us. Most likely in the most spectacularly unpleasant way possible.

The courtyard provided immediate answers. Ruth's small motorbike, a gift from Beck, was missing. In its place stood Che's bicycle. That told me everything I needed to know. Che was riding shotgun. There was no way he'd willingly stay behind.

With a deep growl rumbling in my chest, I left the safety of the citadel, our home

away from home, and charged into the unknown.

When I first arrived in Cuba, King had set up the citadel as a cover, giving me an incomplete view of the Shadow Warrior world. It served its purpose back then. Now, it's our training and medical facility. Axel, our one and only physician, was teaching a select group of humans the essentials of medicine. He helps everyone on the island, but as a Shadow Warrior himself, the warriors alone keep him more than occupied. Add in our human population, and he was completely overextended. Thankfully, with some promising human prospects, he was actively training them in everything from childbirth to setting broken bones. He even traveled the island to attend to those who couldn't make it into the city. It had turned him into a perpetually tired and cranky man.

He needed a mate, and it was something I intended to fix.

His lack of a love life was what I blamed for the explosion the last time I was injured. A simple dislocated collarbone didn't deserve his cold, biting condemnation, especially when it felt ten times better after he'd popped it back into place. I was still reeling from the verbal assault, and honestly, he was lucky I didn't bite his face off. If his mind was on a woman instead of everything else, maybe he wouldn't be so grouchy.

At least, that's what I kept telling myself. Between our medical situation, fighting hellhounds, and preparing for war with the US Federation, we were all overextended. King worked nonstop to push my abilities as a Warrior while juggling everything he did as the leader of our people. The man never stopped.

For the first twenty-odd years of my life, I thought I was human, an anxious, fumbling waste of space, if you want to know the truth. I didn't adapt well to the new world after nuclear bombs and hellhounds annihilated most of humanity, and I was smart enough to know it. My father, through his work with the Federation, kept me

alive. That was the only reason I made it.

Today, there was little left of that scared young woman, at least on the outside. I was still learning to control my Warrior body and the full extent of the abilities that came with it. King, my mate, the one stomping and huffing behind me, found it endlessly worrying.

“Where do you think they went?” he asked, his jaws clenched so tightly I half-expected them to crack.

“I’m sure they’re hunting hellhounds, no matter how many times we tell them not to. Che’s mother will kill me when she finds out.”

“Can’t we just put Ruth in front of her and solve all our problems?”

I would have laughed if I thought he was joking, but I wasn’t entirely sure he was. Che’s mother, Maylin, was assisting Axel as his nurse and juggling her six-month-old baby, Boot, while she worked. Che, who had just turned six, was under my care while his mother and little brother were away. “I’ll think of an appropriate punishment for Ruth, but it won’t be turning her over to a death rage even though that might be an exaggeration.”

It still surprised me how much Maylin had stepped up. When she’d asked to help Axel, everyone, including me, had been stunned. She was doing an incredible job, even while toting around a baby. She had become invaluable to the Shadow Warriors. Losing Boot, the baby’s father and one of our warriors, had hit her hard. King brought her into the Warrior family, but she hadn’t truly fit until now. She was finding her place, and while I wasn’t about to mention it, there was a certain Shadow Warrior with his sights set on her. Nokita, another of King’s personal guards, and Maylin would need to figure that out on their own.

For now, King and I had bigger problems. The worry gnawed at me, the fear that both kids could be hurt, or worse, dead. It pushed me onward despite my exhaustion. Over the last six months, hellhound sightings had dropped significantly, but they still roamed the island. And now, two idiotic kids were trying to prove their worth by hunting them.

Ruth was twelve going on forty, with skills that came terrifyingly natural for a human her age. Che, on the other hand, worshiped her and followed her into every harebrained scheme she came up with. Both had lost their fathers to hellhounds, and ever since, they'd been on a reckless mission to kill every last one they could find. The problem was that human children didn't stand a chance. Hellhounds' teeth and claws were deadly, and one swipe or bite meant they were dead within an hour.

My hands burned with the need to grab hold of them. They would learn to follow orders, or they'd find themselves assigned to permanent kitchen duty, and not just for the week I punished them last time they pulled a stunt like this.

And what if it was too late? My heart clenched at the thought.

We kept running, our soft breathing blending into the night. King couldn't resist teasing me about my clumsy footing, even though I'd improved my ability to move quietly, almost matching his skill at avoiding crunching leaves.

"Hellhounds will hear you coming from a mile away," he said.

I didn't answer and simply flipped him the finger which still meant the same thing after the apocalypse.

He gave a low chuckle. Despite my progress, King still worried about me. I understood why. I wasn't fully comfortable with the overwhelming abilities that came with my new form. That's why I pushed myself to the brink of exhaustion every day.

I refused to be the person I used to be, trapped in fear, doing nothing while civilization crumbled around me.

The memories of those wasted years haunted me. I had lived like a robot, too afraid to step outside my cozy little protected box. Now that I was a Shadow Warrior, I was determined to make up for lost time. But self-doubt still crept in, always at the worst moments. Shaking my head to silence thoughts of the old me, I focused my sensitive ears on the sounds around us.

With fewer hellhounds on the island, small rodents like mice were returning in abundance. The hounds had decimated everything they could sink their teeth into, causing a massive decline in our small animal populations. Now the ecosystem was beginning to recover. How long that balance would last, none of us knew, but we were making the most of it. Our food production had doubled, and we were hopeful this year's harvest would provide more than enough for long-term storage.

A faint noise caught my attention about a hundred yards away. It was something that didn't belong to the usual hum of nightlife. The dense brush obscured the source, but the sound of ringing metal was clue enough. The dynamic duo had to be close. From the corner of my eye, I noticed King adjusting his leather straps. Before I could object, he shifted.

"You did that on purpose when I wasn't looking," I whispered.

King didn't have full control of his Beast form directly after shifting. It was usually me who changed to warrior form if we needed quick action paired with coherent thought. He glanced at me but said nothing, his towering Beast form now ready for whatever lay ahead. I caught the angry rumble deep in his throat, the one he was trying and failing to suppress. Shadow Warriors had to burn off the Kedorine 5 in their bloodstream before they could do more than hunt down an enemy and kill it. We called it K-5 for short. It was the hormone that allowed us to morph into King's

current form, a nine-foot monster from another planet capable of giving even the most stable adults nightmares.

The K-5 caused irrational and dangerous behavior until the hormone spike subsided. Since the first few months after I became a Warrior, I seemed to be immune to the side effects. We'd worked out a system where I usually went in as Warrior while King stayed in human form. At least when we didn't have time to burn off the surge of K-5. I mentally shrugged. I wouldn't get a reasonable explanation for why he shifted until he was back in control. Right now, I had a five-hundred-pound killing machine on my hands, barely able to tell friend from foe. Maybe King was tired of me showing off how quickly I could dissipate the effects of K-5. It wouldn't surprise me. I'd pushed his limits enough lately, and the poor man had to be nearing his breaking point.

A small scream cut through the air, snapping both of us into action. We charged into the dense brush and found the children battling a large hellhound. It was something King and I could handle without breaking a sweat, but for the kids, it was a fight far beyond their budding human strength. We now had an antidote for Shadow Warriors if we were bitten or scratched. So far, we'd struck out for humans. What were Ruth and Che thinking?

"Go for his neck!" Ruth grunted at Che as she grappled to turn it away from him. Her long red braid whipped left and right as her thin frame twisted and dodged. Her face was set with fiery determination, her eyes blazing with an insanity that didn't belong to a twelve-year-old. She was about five inches taller than Che, which wasn't saying much. It was the fire in her gaze that made her seem larger than life.

Che spun, his thin legs looking awkward and uncoordinated. I was stunned when his strike slashed the hellhound's side, and even more so when the oversized knife in his small hands drove into the hound's neck, sinking into its throat. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it. He also had some kind of protectors

on his arms that I refused to give either of them credit for. The hound was not even close to dead, but Ruth helped it along with her own show of dexterity as she lifted her sword two-handed and cut into the neck about a third of the way.

She turned, searching the area but didn't see us. King leapt over her and made short work of the monster. An angry Ruth turned her fiery attention to King, glaring at my not-quite-stable mate. "I had it! You didn't need to take all the fun out of the fight," she snapped. She stalked toward him, dragging her enormous sword behind her. The blade scraped against the ground because it was far too heavy for her to handle for more than one or two lifts and strikes.

King's low growl vibrated through the air, and my stomach tightened. That sound wasn't a good sign. I moved quickly, intercepting the foolish girl before King decided to tear her in half and make her his next meal.

I snatched the sword from her grasp and shoved her behind me. With my hands raised, I caught King's burning gaze and held it, drawing his attention to my eyes. His blazing stare locked onto mine, and he shook his massive head as if trying to clear it.

"There, there, big guy," I said softly. "Children are not on your menu for supper, no matter how good they might taste." His eyes rolled within his Goliath head, a sight that would have been comical under different circumstances. The movement told me he was regaining control of his beast, faster than usual. Something I would need to question him about when he was calm.

I turned back to the kids, both of whom wore stubborn expressions that made my blood boil. "I've had it with your inability to follow orders," I snapped, my voice rising. "War is not your personal playtime, and you're making it impossible for us to protect the people on this island!" By the time I finished, I was shouting.

Ruth, with not an ounce of intelligence to spare in her stubborn head, wasn't backing

down. “Give me my sword, and we’ll see who talks big then!” she barked, her juvenile voice grating on my last nerve.

The sword in my hand sailed through the air, and Ruth grabbed it just before it hit her. Predictably, she couldn’t hold its weight for long, because her arms were tired from her round with the hellhound. The tip plunged into the ground, and she struggled to pull it free, her efforts laughable.

“You want a go at me? Now’s your chance,” I shouted at the stubborn little idiot.

“Babe,” King grumbled from behind me.

I didn’t take my eyes off the threat in front of me. “Don’t ‘babe’ me. It’s time to teach this pint-sized turd a lesson.”

“Girl,” he corrected, his voice lower this time.

“I know she’s a girl. I also know I could take her with one hand tied to my big toe. The problem is,” I growled, glaring at Ruth, “she doesn’t know it.” Without warning, I launched myself in her direction. She barely managed to lift the sword before I swatted it away. “It’s too big for you, but you’re too stubborn to admit it,” I snapped.

My palm connected with her face. Not hard, just enough to piss her off. Ruth’s shriek of rage filled the air as she lunged at me. I sent her flying, and her body hit the ground with a thump. I shouldn’t have felt satisfaction, but I did. If anyone deserved it, it was Ruth.

“You’re bigger and stronger; you don’t need to prove it,” King muttered.

Still watching Ruth as she slowly picked herself up, I stayed ready. When she launched herself at me again, I bent low and grabbed her scrawny ankles, flipping her

upside down and holding her aloft. Even in human form, my six-foot height gave me the advantage. She struggled wildly, her arms flailing, as she leaned up and tried to land a blow to my upper body. Even with her wiggling, my hold was too tight and she wasn't going anywhere or doing the least bit of damage.

I looked down at her. Long red hair, like a fire waiting to be extinguished, hung in the dirt. Her dirty face flushed a deeper red, making her freckles stand out even more. "Maybe your punishment should be hanging by your ankles in the courtyard so everyone can see just how stupid and irresponsible you are," I said. The idea had merit.

"I'll spit on every one of them!" Ruth shouted, twisting again. It didn't help her in the least.

"And I'll wash your mouth out with vinegar if you do," I snapped back, giving her legs a sharp shake that made her hair sway like a pendulum.

"My mother won't let you!" she sneered, her red face now edging toward purple.

"Your mother would pay me to take you in hand," I retorted, lifting my arms and slamming them downward just enough for her head to stop an inch from the ground. I glanced up to find Che staring at us, his eyes as wide as saucers. "Don't think you're off the hook either," I said, locking eyes with him. "You're under my care while your mother's away, and you just took at least a year off my life."

"Don't listen to her; she's the enemy!" Ruth screamed, still unwilling to concede defeat.

The idea of slamming her against a tree crossed my mind briefly. Too easy, I thought. Not that I'd actually do it, but this child had a way of inspiring vivid, gory fantasies in my head. Most of them ended with her losing her ability to speak, which would be

a massive step in the right direction.

“Che,” I said firmly. “Return to the citadel with King. Ruth and I need some quality time together.”

“Is that a good idea?” King asked, his tone laced with skepticism.

“It’s the only idea I have. If only one of us returns and it’s her, you’ll get your shot.”

King’s jaws opened, then snapped shut. Whatever comeback he’d planned, he wisely decided against it. Maybe he’d finally realized that my patience had run out.

“Che, come,” King commanded, taking off at a slow jog to let Che keep up. Running the boy into the ground would be a good start to his punishment. Che gave me one last look, as if weighing his options, before deciding that his best chance of survival was sticking with King.

When the sound of their departure faded, replaced by the soft chirping of crickets and the rustle of small animals, I let Ruth drop. She landed on her head just inches from the ground, tumbling into a tangled mess of arms, legs, and curses that no twelve-year-old should know. I stepped forward casually, planting my boot on her hair. She swung at my leg, her fists making contact, but I barely felt it.

“This is how easy you are to kill,” I said coldly. “For some reason, you still don’t get that. I could kick your head in right now, and there’s nothing you could do to stop me.” My hand moved to the sword strapped at my hip. It was a gift from King, designed after a sixteenth-century German Mortuary Sword, double-edged, thirty-six inches long, with two fullers to reduce its weight when I carried it in human form. The blade was perfect for removing a hellhound’s head without getting bitten or scratched. I let my fingers brush the pommel, a small, deliberate caress. “Or I could cut your head clean off before you even had a chance to move. Isn’t that what you

want?”

Ruth thrashed beneath me, her words spilling out in a frantic, incoherent jumble. I didn't release her hair, and with the way she was pulling against my boot, I knew it had to hurt.

“I hate you!” she finally yelled; her voice raw with fury when her escape attempts failed.

“I think you've said it enough times for it to finally sink in. Want to try something more original?” I asked, sounding almost bored.

“I can kill hellhounds just as good as you!” she spat, defiance blazing in her eyes.

I used my other foot to press against her shoulder, pushing her onto her back. She glared up at me with all the fury of an enraged pit bull. The fire in her eyes still held a flicker of knowledge, but it was fading fast.

“No. You can't,” I said. Kneeling down, I leaned in close and whispered, “You are human, even if you don't want to be. Killing hellhounds is dangerous for you because one scratch or bite, and you're dead. No second chances. The same goes for Che. It's bad enough you have a death wish, but Che doesn't deserve to be pulled under by your stupidity. Neither does his mother, who has already lost too much.”

She blinked a few times, and I could've sworn she was holding back tears. “You hate me,” she muttered, her voice barely audible.

Whatever demons she was battling ran deeper than any of us had realized. The bigger problem was that her reckless behavior made her a danger to our entire community. For all our sakes, I needed to adjust her insanity. So, I pushed harder. “You gonna cry, little baby?”

“You bi—” she started, her voice venomous.

I pressed a finger against her lips. “That word should never come out of your mouth,” I said sharply. Before I could finish, she tried to bite me. My thumb slid under her chin while my forefinger pressed hard against her lips, pinning them to her teeth. “I’m going to let you up and give you one shot at killing me. It’s the only chance you’ll ever get without retaliation, so you better make it count.”

I bounced back onto the balls of my feet and watched as she climbed shakily to hers. When she stood, I nudged her sword with the tip of my boot, flipping it up, and caught it midair. Tossing it to her, I widened my stance, spreading my arms to expose my chest. “Go ahead.”

“What are you doing?” she demanded, her eyes gleaming with a disturbingly creepy light.

The kid was so bloodthirsty I could’ve sworn she was part vampire. “You want to kill me? Go for it. I’m tired of fighting you.”

Her eyes darted around, and then she hesitated, taking a small step back. “You won’t just stand there and let me kill you.”

“Try me,” I said.

With a scream loud enough to wake the dead, Ruth charged at me. I stood my ground, not flinching as her sword arced toward my throat. The blade stopped a millimeter from my skin. I had to admit, I was impressed by her control, and an idea began to form.

“I could have killed you,” she accused, her voice shaking with anger.

“Yes, you could have.” It wouldn’t have killed me due to how tired she was, but it would have caused severe damage. I placed my hand against the blade, and she didn’t stop me as I pushed it away from my throat. “What I’m wondering is why you didn’t. You’ve hated me since you arrived. Why?”

Her small features scrunched up, and at last, tears began to streak down her cheeks. My heart cracked a little, but I kept my words of comfort to myself. She hadn’t completed the strike, and I needed to understand what was happening in her chaotic mind.

“She’s weak,” Ms. Beast whispered through my thoughts.

“She’s a child,” I shot back silently.

“Protect child,” came her soft reply.

“Leave me alone, and I will. You’re complicating things.”

For once, Ms. Beast retreated, leaving me to focus entirely on Ruth. “You had your chance. Why didn’t you take it?” I asked again.

She sniffled, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. Her fingers trembled, and she gulped in a shaky breath while looking down at the ground. I stood silently, waiting, giving her the space to gather her thoughts. Her first sentence came out as a mumble, but gradually, her words began to make sense.

“I’m human, and I’ll never be able to fight. Those monsters killed my father and most of the people I loved. I want all of them dead, and no one will teach me.” Her gaze lifted to mine, a flicker of fire sparking in her tear-filled eyes. “You just want me out of your hair. If I died, no one would care.” She sniffed again and kicked at the dirt in frustration.

“Getting a young boy killed won’t endear you to anyone,” I said coldly. Ruth didn’t need to be coddled right now.

“Che’s the only one who understands,” she muttered, showing a deep, painful vulnerability.

“He’s too young to understand. He lost his father, too. Actually, two fathers. He’s still mourning, and he looks up to you like you’re some kind of hero. How will you feel if he dies because of your foolishness?” I asked while trying poorly to hide my frustration.

Her hands balled into fists, and she slammed them against her thighs. “I hate being human,” she ground through her teeth. “I can’t do any of the things you can. I can’t swing a sword and take a head off in one swipe. I can’t run as fast or fight as good.” She threw her hands up in surrender. “My body will never do what yours does.” Her gaze dropped to the ground, and a heavy sigh escaped her lips. Her shoulders slumped, and all the pent-up anger seemed to drain away.

I took a moment to absorb what she was saying and to make a decision. I couldn’t believe the words as they left my mouth. “If you want to train, I’ll teach you how to kill hellhounds.”

She was right; killing those monsters wasn’t something I could do when I thought I was human. Being afraid of every bump in the night was something else I had lived with. This child held none of my old fears.

Ruth’s head snapped up, and I saw something in her eyes I wasn’t expecting. Raw hope ate up her expression, and it nearly broke me. Unfortunately, she had no idea what I was offering, but she was about to find out.

I stared into Ruth’s eyes, my Ms. Beast unchallenged by a child. “You need to think

long and hard before you say yes,” I told her. “This agreement will put you at my mercy. Boot trained me in the beginning, and it was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. I won’t go easy on you because that won’t help. You will not be babied.”

“You would train me?” she asked, her voice fragile and heartbreaking all over again.

“I don’t like repeating myself, but yes, that’s what I said.” My eyes narrowed. “However, you haven’t heard the rules yet.”

“Sure,” she said, a touch of defiance entering her voice, and she had to add, “I already know they’ll be stupid.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Even when she’d won, she kept fighting. She was everything I hadn’t been at her age. Heck, she was everything I hadn’t been at twice her age. I took a breath and laid out the rules.

“Number one: Everything I say is important. If the word ‘stupid’ comes out of your mouth in reference to your teacher, we’re finished.”

Her lips pressed together in obvious annoyance. I cocked an eyebrow, waiting for her answer.

“Deal,” she said sullenly.

Argh. I wanted to slap her again, just a tap. “Number two: You’re not the boss. I’ll speak when I want and ‘go on’ when I choose. If you don’t like it, you can take a hike.”

Her hands went to her hips, but this time, she stayed silent. I didn’t count it as a victory yet.

“Number three: You will never leave the walls of the citadel without permission.” I moved on quickly to my last rule before she could object. “Number four: You will follow my orders on everything. The first time you don’t, we’re done.”

Her gaze drilled into me with unnerving calculation, and then, ever so slowly, a smile spread across her face. Her teeth gleamed in the moonlight as she said in a clear, strong voice, “Agreed.”

Great. We’d gone from dislike bordering on hatred, to tears, to poor me, to glee. I had a sinking feeling I’d just been played.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:36 pm

King

Marinah can handle the Hellspawn, I told myself as I marched Che through the citadel to his temporary room. His mother was away, and for now, his room was right next to the one I shared with Marinah. His close proximity hadn't done our sex life any favors, but then again, nothing had in months. Two days ago, I'd managed to sneak into the shower with her for a few stolen minutes. Even that had been interrupted. I was about to lose my mind, and the guttersnipe beside me wasn't helping.

"If you leave the room again, you're dealing with Marinah, and I promise I won't save you," I warned.

"Will she hurt Ruth?" he asked, his lips quivering as his small head tilted to the side. His big eyes blinked with just enough moisture to make me question whether it was an act.

Just great. I'd like to think Marinah would knock some sense into Ruth, but I doubted it would happen. The image in my head was more of a catfight with no clear winner until one of them was dead. "Ruth will get what she deserves, and so will you." Heartless. Just add it to my name.

I opened the door and gave him a gentle push on his shoulders. He turned around, pride shining in his expression. "I almost killed one of the monsters," he said, lifting his skinny arm to show off a tiny muscle. "I'll kill one before I'm seven."

How was I supposed to stay angry, or not laugh, for that matter? I placed my hand on

his head and ruffled his hair. “If Marinah catches you again, you won’t sit for an entire year. There’ll be plenty of time to kill hellhounds once you’re older.”

I closed the door and walked away after Che stepped inside. The loss of Boot rolled over me, landing like a punch in the gut. On top of that, I worried about Marinah constantly. Just when I thought we were making progress, she’d act impulsively and terrify me all over again. She’d come so far, but handling her required a delicate balance of compassion, resolve, and aggravation. She was quite good at pushing my buttons. Not just mine, but everyone’s. Strike that. She lived for it.

In a way, she was like Ruth. Being a Shadow Warrior didn’t make her invincible, and I did my best to remind myself of the patience Greystone showed when he trained me as a teenager. It had to have been worse. Still, Marinah was so much stronger than she realized. She just didn’t know how to harness that strength, to focus it. Instead, she let her past mistakes dictate her actions, carrying the weight of her own self-doubt. She hated the idea of anyone thinking she was weak. We don’t. That weight was all hers.

The thought of her reckless behavior, such as nearly severing her fingers, sent an involuntary surge of K-5 through my system, my muscles tightening with the rush. I hadn’t been able to show my frustration because it only made matters worse. The surge increased.

“King?” Nokita’s voice called from the end of the hall.

I growled low, launching myself at him without thought. He took the hit, crashing to the floor. Nokita was smart enough to stay down as I turned and stormed off, stomping into my bedroom and slamming the door behind me. If he had any sense, he wouldn’t follow.

My body began to shift, melding back into human form as I took a long, deep breath,

forcing my human side to take over. The first year of mating was volatile enough under normal circumstances. If the world weren't falling apart, Marinah and I would have been closed off from everyone, left alone for a year to let our hormones settle. But as things stood, we didn't have that luxury.

I peeled off my filthy pants and leather harness before stepping into the shower, letting the water wash away some of my anger. It took a good twenty minutes to calm myself. After getting out, I ordered food from the kitchen. Marinah would be hungry when she returned.

An hour later, I was still tapping my foot when she walked into the room, looking as exhausted as I'd expected. We'd been burning the candle at both ends, and the toll showed.

I stood and pulled her into my arms. "I'm guessing the hel—" I corrected myself, "Ruth is still in one piece?"

"Go ahead, call her Hellspawn. That's what she is," Marinah said, a soft growl edging her words as she pressed against me. "She's also my new student, and I'll be putting her through her paces just like Boot did with me."

I breathed into her hair, the tension in my body and mind easing as Marinah's presence mellowed the savage beast. "I doubt her mother will like that," I murmured. Ruth might be the Hellspawn, but Missy, her mother, was the one who'd spawned her. The apple didn't fall far from the tree.

Marinah kept her head against my chest, her shoulders lifting slightly in a shrug. "Ruth's first assignment is to get her mother's permission. That poor woman doesn't stand a chance. Ruth manipulated me until she got exactly what she wanted, and I'm sure Che was in on it too."

“You don’t have time to train her,” I said.

Her body stiffened at my authoritative tone, but I didn’t let her go. Sparks were probably flying from her eyes. Thankfully, she didn’t pull away. “I don’t have time to chase her around the island, either,” she shot back. “And she endangers Che, which I can’t allow. She’ll be too tired to move, much less chase hellhounds, when I’m through with her. The entire island will thank me.”

I still couldn’t see how this was going to work, but I knew it wasn’t the time to argue. I leaned back and met her fiery gaze, forcing myself to refocus. “Dinner is on the way, and you need to shower. Che is in his room for the night. I’ve had food sent to him, and it’ll give him some time to think about the trouble he’s caused.”

“I’ll deal with Che later,” she said, already heading to the bathroom. She tossed her clothes onto the floor as she walked, a clear sign of how exhausted she was. I caught a fleeting glimpse of a very naked Marinah before the door shut behind her. I groaned. Beast groaned. When it came to mating, we were in perfect agreement.

I shook my head. Training Ruth wouldn’t help matters. Marinah had too much on her plate already, and this could push her over the edge.

A knock at the door snapped me from my thoughts. “Enter,” I called, bracing myself for whatever came next.

The heavy wooden door slammed against the wall as Beck barreled into the room. I didn’t need to guess why he was here.

“The last thing that child needs are lessons in killing hellhounds,” he snapped. “She isn’t a Warrior and has no business being anywhere near those monsters. Why would your mate even suggest such a thing?”

I shoved aside my lingering sexual frustration and the fleeting plans I'd had to join Marinah in the shower and gave Beck my full attention. "I take it Ruth talked Missy into allowing her to train with Marinah?"

Beck huffed loudly and threw himself into a chair. "They're having an all-out war about it right now. It was too dangerous to hang around, so I came here to hide until the fireworks and nuclear explosions settle. I had no idea kids were this difficult."

I fought back a smile. Beck's sudden leap into family life wasn't something anyone had seen coming. Missy had shot him out of the sky when he was parachuting into U.S. territory. After he survived both the shot and the rough landing, Ruth had tried to convince her mom to give Ruth the gun and let her shoot him again. Thankfully, Missy had a backbone and refused her little psychopath of a child.

Keeping my expression neutral, I said, "That kid could single-handedly take out the entire hellhound population, and you know it. If the hellhounds hadn't already started leaving the island before Ruth arrived, I'd swear they were running from her now."

Beck swiped his hand over his face, leaning back in the chair and covering his eyes. "She has no idea she's just a kid."

"She stopped being a child the day her father died," I said evenly. "Same as the rest of us. When this whole thing started, children were the largest casualties. The ones who learned to fight are the lucky ones. And if they were very lucky, they survived."

The next part of what I needed to say wasn't easy, mostly because I was nowhere near sold on the idea myself. "The Hellspawn needs constant supervision, rules she'll actually follow, and something to keep her out of trouble. This might be the perfect solution."

Beck pulled his hands from his face, staring at me with undisguised horror. Beast

grumbled low in my chest, but I calmed him with an internal nudge. Fifteen seconds passed, entirely too long before Beck grunted and looked away, clearly unsettled.

The sound of the water shutting off caught my attention, and I glanced toward the bathroom door. “My mate will be out of the shower shortly,” I said evenly, “and if she’s naked, chances are good I’ll kill you.”

Beck shot out of the chair like it had caught fire. He was dealing with his own mating rage, and public interactions weren’t doing him any favors. As my second, his volatile energy only added fuel to my already unstable mood. “I think I’ll go for a swim,” he muttered, throwing open the door and stalking out.

I fought back laughter. Beck detested the swimming pool and often referred to it as a bacteria pit, despite the fact that any bacteria, even if present, wouldn’t harm him.

A few seconds later, Marinah walked in, just as naked as I’d predicted. Without a hint of self-consciousness, she grabbed the discarded clothes she’d dropped on her way to the shower and tossed them into the laundry bin. “I heard voices,” she said casually, “and hoped someone delivered our food.”

I watched as she moved, her body swaying and flexing effortlessly as she reached into a drawer and pulled out a pair of underwear. She lifted one leg gracefully, sliding it on, and my breath hitched. When I didn’t respond, she paused, turning to face me. The heat in her eyes flared instantly, matching the fire coursing through me.

She tossed aside the shirt she’d just pulled from the drawer and walked toward me. My body responded, and it took additional coaxing to get me out of my chair.

Of course, that was the exact moment a knock sounded at the door, announcing dinner.

“Oops, I better duck into the bathroom,” Marinah said with a playful giggle, a rare sound from her. Judging by the frustration in my expression, it was likely the cause of her amusement.

“Run away,” I muttered as she disappeared into the bathroom. My gaze flicked toward the door, my jaw tightening. “But I just might kill whoever is serving tonight.”

Her teasing laughter floated from the bathroom. I opened the door to find one of the human women from the kitchen. She was middle-aged, with a tentative, shaky smile that barely hid her unease. After experiencing Marinah’s mating rage firsthand a few weeks before, the women in the kitchen had decided that sending older, more composed women to deliver meals was safer. Though Marinah had somewhat gained control over the mating rage, they weren’t wrong.

I stepped back, allowing her to push the cart into the room. It wouldn’t do to make her run off in tears, so I swallowed my irritation and forced a polite smile.

She set the table and arranged our plates with practiced efficiency. Once the food was laid out, she hurriedly pushed the cart back out the door without a backward glance.

“Coast is clear,” I called, uncovering my plate and inhaling deeply. The aroma made my stomach growl.

“Smells delicious,” Marinah said as she stepped out of the bathroom, slipping on a shirt to cover her bare chest. Not that it would make eating any easier for me. At this point, nothing would, short of thirty uninterrupted days of sex. Who am I kidding? Ninety days, and even that would have trouble satisfying me. Shoving the thought aside, I focused on my food, though my eyes drifted constantly toward her.

Watching Marinah eat was a lesson in unapologetic gluttony. She tore into her dinner

with the kind of gusto only someone who'd survived years on Federation mush could muster. Fresh fruit, vegetables, and especially meat, which her Warrior body needed, were a luxury she hadn't had for years before coming to the island. Now she was a one-woman eating machine. Conversation was always sparse while she ate.

"You just missed Beck," I said, breaking the silence when she went for seconds.

She looked up from the soft tortilla she was piling high with vegetables and extra meat. "And?" she prompted, her tone mildly interested.

"World War IV is currently raging between Missy and Ruth." We rarely referred to the original war with the hellhounds as World War III, though technically, that's what it was. Tonight, it seemed appropriate.

"Ruth will win," she said with a casual shrug, then shoved the end of the burrito into her mouth, letting out a contented sigh as she chewed. "Good," she added after swallowing, before taking another huge bite.

Her eyes were shadowed with dark circles, and her usual edge was more brittle. She'd been grouchier lately, which hadn't escaped my notice. I'm sure I was too.

"I'm worried about you," I said carefully, knowing it could set her off.

Her exaggerated eye roll spoke volumes. "How so?"

"You go without a break," I replied gently.

Marinah decided to finish her burrito before answering. As she prepared another, her sharp tone made her opinion clear. "Kettle, meet pot. Pot, meet kettle. If you've forgotten, we're at war." Her eyes burned when she continued, "Hellhounds are killing humans, the U.S. Federation is kidnapping people against their will, and the

world could come to a complete end at any moment. If I left anything out, feel free to correct me.” She paused, waiting for a response, but I stayed silent. “If humans have any chance at survival, they need to learn how to fight and kill hellhounds regardless of age. That child watched her father get torn apart. If all she can think about is killing hellhounds, she should at least be good at it.”

She attacked her next burrito with the same intensity as the first, her frustration fueling her appetite.

When I was sure she’d finished speaking, I leaned in and went straight for the jugular. “Have you convinced yourself of this yet?”

She froze mid-bite, placed the half-eaten burrito on her plate, and slid the entire thing aside. Then she let her forehead drop to the table with a soft thunk, knocking it lightly several times before looking up at me sheepishly. “What have I gotten myself into?” she groaned.

“If anyone can take that heathen in hand, it’s you,” I said and added a grin.

“I hate kids.”

I placed my hand over hers. “You love kids.”

Her moan was even louder this time, filled with exasperation. “All she wants is to be trained, and everyone ignores her. She’s got more fight in her than I ever did. It’s so unfair that she’s human, and I’m the one with all the phenomenal strength and ability.”

Shaking my head, I grabbed another tortilla and began assembling a burrito. “This conversation is turning into a pity party.”

Marinah scooted her plate back in front of her, picked up the half-eaten stuffed tortilla, crammed it into her mouth, and pointed at her lips, signaling she was done talking, and we finished our meal in silence, both lost in thought.

For my part, I was contemplating sleep. Well, maybe not just sleep. Marinah, on the other hand, looked completely drained. Her eyes were already drooping, and by the time she finished her last bite, she was swaying in her chair.

“What are you doing?” she asked groggily as I lifted her into my arms.

“Carrying my very tired mate to bed so she can save the world, including the hellspawn, tomorrow,” I replied, cradling her close.

She snuggled against me, her voice a soft whisper that made it nearly impossible to let her go. “You smell good.”

I sat down with her in my lap, holding her as her eyes fluttered closed. Her hand rested on my chest, gradually relaxing as her breathing deepened. When the soft sound of her snores reached me, I stayed still, letting her scent and warmth reassure me that, for this brief moment, all was right with the world.

The peace didn’t last. Someone started pounding on the door, and Marinah didn’t stir as I gently placed her on the bed, doing my best not to wake her. My frustration rose as I crossed the room, ready to intercept and quite possibly kill whoever was disturbing her rest.

Beck’s hand was raised for another round of pounding when I swung the door open. “The Federation attacked an outpost and killed everyone. Missy’s people are warning the others. We need a large team there. Now.”

Before I could respond, I felt Marinah’s hand smooth across my back. Sleep was

officially off the table.

“Gather the guard and have them in the conference room in ten,” she commanded. I gave a quick nod, closing the door behind Beck before turning to face her.

“Sleep is overrated,” she muttered through a yawn, stretching her arms over her head.

“So is sex,” I growled, frustration seeping into every word.

A soft, sleepy smile appeared on her lips. “That could never be overrated.”

I pulled her close, claiming her lips in a kiss that was far too short and even more frustrating.

Marinah

The "argument room," as I've come to call it, was filled with King's personal guards. Each man had earned his place at the table. They were deadly, loyal, and proven leaders in their own right. Among them was Cabel, who had finally returned after marrying an island woman a year ago. It was good to see him back, even if he avoided smiling or acknowledging me. I knew why, but that didn't make it any less frustrating. At least Cabel had his mating rage under control, and just in time. We needed him.

Beck had taken Cabel's place as King's second during his absence, but nothing was said to realign the matter now that he was back.

"Update," King barked, as he took his seat at the head of the table.

Beck stood and delivered the report. "Two survivors. They managed to hide and witness everything that happened. It began a few days earlier with a message from the Federation. They ordered all able-bodied men and women to report to them immediately as 'red stripes.'" His voice dropped, fury dripping from each word. Red stripes were death fodder for the Federation.

"There was no second warning," he continued. "They sent in a herd of hellhounds first. The hounds caused most of the destruction, killing three of the six Shadow Warriors protecting the community. Once the dust settled, Federation soldiers somehow herded the hellhounds out of the village, entered the outpost, and executed the remaining Warriors. They lined up the citizens and murdered all but the two in hiding."

“The babies?” I whispered, horror gripping me. For years, I’d trusted the Federation. Now, all I wanted was to hunt them down and kill everyone in charge.

Beck nodded, his eyes glowing with rage. “Missy insists on returning immediately to fight alongside her people.” His gaze shifted to King. “I agree.”

A muscle pulsed in King’s jaw; his voice was tight when he finally spoke. “How many Warriors are needed for around-the-clock protection?”

Beck’s brow furrowed as he calculated. “I’d say fifty at each outpost, making it one hundred seventy with the Warriors we have stationed there now.”

King nodded, though his expression was unreadable. “Do you want to lead our men at the outposts, or do you want to hunt down the soldiers who did this?”

Bloodlust ignited Beck’s eyes. “Hunt.”

King had already anticipated the answer and wasted no time giving his next command. “Nokita and Cabel will lead the Warriors heading to the outposts. Marinah, Beck, Labyrinth, and I will form the hunting party. We leave at first light.” His gaze fixed on Beck. “Have two planes prepped for departure with enough provisions for thirty days. We’ll drop the Warriors at the outposts and begin the hunt from the site of the destruction. Alden will take charge here.”

Alden, Beck’s right-hand man, had a quiet, watchful presence, and rarely spoke more than a few words when we crossed paths. He wasn’t someone I knew well, but if King and Beck trusted him to handle operations in our absence, then so did I. I was glad it was him staying behind and not me. If King had suggested otherwise, we would have a serious problem.

From beneath the table, King reached for my hand, giving it a subtle squeeze and a

questioning look. His silent query, “Did I miss anything?” warmed me in ways I wouldn’t admit out loud. It was a gesture he’d been making more often, a sign of the growing trust between us, and it filled me with internal pride.

I turned toward Beck, keeping my focus in his direction without fully meeting his gaze, a skill I hated getting better at. “Is Missy returning to the outposts?”

Beck’s jaw tightened; his voice clipped as he answered. “Yes.”

“And Ruth will be with her?”

He simply jerked his chin in affirmation. I shifted my attention back to King. “We’ll need Maylin here for Che. Axel should probably stay too. The island needs him.”

King nodded. “We’ll locate them tonight and have them back before we leave in the morning.” His confidence in my suggestion reassured me that it was the right call.

Maybe I shouldn’t be so thrilled that King took my advice, but I couldn’t help it. My Warrior form was everything I never thought I’d have. The strength, speed, and power gave me confidence in my ability, but I was just learning about strategic planning, and I often doubted myself.

There were still times that I wrestled with accepting who I’d become, and speaking my mind was one of those times. I’d followed the Federation mindlessly for far too long. Now that I had muscle, teeth, and claws to back me up, I needed to let the past go and get beyond the insecure Federation robot, doing meaningless work and thinking each day would be my last. I had to work harder on embracing my mental badass at every turn.

The adrenaline from the meeting and hearing about the attack began to fade, and exhaustion crept back in like an old enemy. Sleep wasn’t even on the distant horizon.

There were too many things to handle: checking our gear, preparing for the hunt, and sorting through a million other details. As the meeting broke up, King's warm hand on my thigh pulled me from my racing thoughts.

He leaned in close, his breath brushing my ear. "I'll see you before takeoff. I'm going after Axel myself and will bring him back along with Maylin. Hold down the fort while I'm gone." His lips touched mine in a brief kiss before he stood and strode away.

I sat there, the last Shadow Warrior in the room. Alone.

No, not alone, I corrected myself sharply. I had a family now, people who loved and cared about me. They were my friends. For so long, it had just been me and my father. After his death, it had been only me, facing the world on my own. But that wasn't the case anymore. I stood, feeling the strength in muscles that had once been weak and unremarkable. Even my balance was something else entirely; predatory, lethal, instinctive. It was what I was designed for.

A thrill coursed through me. Without even shifting, I could feel the sheer power of who I had become. I was a Shadow Warrior. I had hellhounds to kill, the Federation to face, and a broken world to rebuild.

Piece of cake.

???

I checked on Che before heading to my room to organize our gear. I shouldn't have been surprised to find Ruth curled up on the floor beside him, but I was. How long had this been going on? She had taken a pillow from Che's bed and was using it beneath her head, with one of his blankets draped over her. It took me a moment to understand why she didn't just climb into Che's bed to sleep. It wouldn't have been

unusual at their age. Then I noticed the slight flash of silver in her hands. Ruth was clutching a knife, holding it fiercely even in sleep. She was doing it to protect Che.

I quietly closed the door behind me and sighed. Training with Ruth would be delayed, something she definitely wouldn't like. I shrugged it off internally. There was no time to agonize over something I couldn't change. I pulled out our military packs and started going through them. These bugout bags were familiar to me by now. Every man, woman, and child on the island had one, each stocked with seventy-two hours' worth of supplies and weapons.

We'd come a long way since returning from the U.S. territory. Housing areas on the island were now equipped with alarms to warn them of approaching hellhounds. Every human adult willing to fight was being trained to kill the hounds and anyone else who posed a threat. Our community wasn't just surviving; we were learning to fight back and provide food and shelter to thrive.

I glanced around the bedroom. Both King and I were naturally neat, and the room reflected that. The only thing out of place were my clothes draped over the edge of the laundry basket instead of inside it.

The peacefulness of the room hit me, giving me pause. These past months had been the happiest of my life. King had opened his world to me, and I was finally accepted. It was a heady feeling; one I never planned to take for granted.

I never felt I fit in the new world after the collapse. I was out of place and had a keen sense that something was missing. Now I understood what that something was. I wasn't fully human, and I spent my life carrying around a part of myself I didn't know existed. Finding my beast gave me peace. I smiled and got to work.

Bags first. Once I'd finished checking them, I headed out to find Alden. He was in the armory with Cabel and Nokita, deep in a discussion about the firepower they were

taking and what would stay behind. Guns were a topic King's guard had been working on for a while, or more accurately, ensuring we had enough ammunition. We'd managed to stockpile more than ten thousand rounds, enough to make our guns a legitimate option. While swords were still the best weapon against hellhounds, guns were necessary for dealing with our human enemies.

I walked over to a long rack of AKs and pulled one down. It was the rifle I'd been practicing with, and to my own surprise, I'd become a slightly better-than-decent shot. When my claws didn't interfere, I actually held the best record for distance target shooting, a fact that annoyed King's men to no end. I ran my hand along the rifle, a grin forming. For someone who had once been terrified of guns, I'd come a long way. Some of the men named their rifles, and the thought of doing the same had crossed my mind more than once. "Bertha" ran through my head, and I decided it fit. A rifle named Bertha just seemed like the kind of weapon that made people stay out of your way. Grinning internally, the name was now settled.

The men continued their conversation without acknowledging me. They knew I was there; their awkward shifts from one leg to the other made it clear. The whole mating rage thing was still a hard adjustment for me and because of it, the men didn't know how to act. Sometimes the discomfort between us was almost comical.

I placed the rifle back on the rack and turned to Alden. "I need to talk to you about Che. He needs to be watched closely while King and I are away."

Alden didn't even bother turning his head toward me. "The humans will be safe," he said, his tone clipped and, dare I say, testy.

I didn't miss Nokita's grimace at Alden's disrespect.

Alden clearly thought I was challenging his abilities, so I softened my tone, just a little. "I care about all the humans, but as you'll remember, Che is part of the Shadow

Warrior family. He's young and has a knack for finding trouble. Granted, not as bad as Ruth, but he still can't be fully trusted. He pushes his mom's patience to the limit on a regular basis. It would make me feel a lot better if I knew you were keeping a closer eye on him."

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Nokita's lips twitch, but he remained silent.

This time, Alden turned just enough to give me a side-eye glare before speaking. "All humans are safe with us," he grunted, like that added emphasis would make his words more convincing. Or maybe just more irritating.

I took a deep breath, mentally telling Ms. Beast that no, we were not going to kill Alden tonight, even if the idea held appeal. I didn't know him well, and after this exchange, I wasn't sure I wanted to. He turned back to his conversation with Cabel and Nokita, acting like I wasn't there.

This was not going to work, and I had to do something.

With a powerful leap, I landed directly in front of Alden and let out a roar. It wasn't on par with King's bone-shaking, wall-rattling growl, but it was more than enough to command attention. It was also enough to rupture a human eardrum, but Shadow Warriors weren't so fragile. It hurt, sure, but he would live.

My body wanted to shift, the urge bubbling just beneath the surface, but I fought it down. I was going to stay human unless Alden forced me to go hands-on. My eyes burned with barely controlled fury, and I silently counted to ten to keep my anger in check.

"Kill," Ms. Beast whispered.

"Shut up," I snapped, focusing on Alden.

His eyes flared with heat, the telltale sign of a Shadow Warrior struggling to suppress the change. He knew I had challenged him, and now he had to decide how far he wanted to take this. What he didn't know, however, was that I had the advantage. Even immediately after shifting, I had full control of Ms. Beast, a level of control he couldn't claim over his own beast. While most Shadow Warriors were "point and kill" machines in that first hour after the change, I wasn't. I was a thinking, plotting, calculated killing machine, more dangerous than Alden could ever imagine.

Ms. Beast reassured me we could take him. And for once, I didn't doubt her.

The temperature in the room spiked as the K-5 churned beneath our skin. Even Nokita and Cabel felt the pull, as they struggled with their beasts. Alden's reaction, however, was harder to miss. King had told me Alden was strong, loyal, and a fierce fighter but had a reputation for not getting along with others. It kept him out of the personal guard. Watching his struggle now, I decided it was worth exploring his issues further.

I stayed close to him, deliberately stepping deeper into his personal space, escalating the challenge another notch. The other men knew exactly what I was doing. Roaring earlier hadn't been a conscious choice; Ms. Beast had acted on instinct, knowing precisely what was warranted. Now it was my turn to see how far Alden would let this go.

The tension in the room eased slightly when Alden's shoulders dropped. His gaze shifted to the floor. "I apologize," he said, using a lower tone. He shrugged his broad shoulders. "I don't like being left behind when the fight is in the U.S. I'm on edge."

As apologies went, it was decent. And honest. Ms. Beast stirred again but I mentally commanded her to stand down. Extending my hand, I offered him a chance to reset. Alden stared at it for a moment before grudgingly taking it. The contact was brief, but I knew King would scent Alden on me later, and that would require an explanation.

Still, Alden had backed down from a challenge, and this simple gesture felt necessary, even if it broke the unspoken “mating code” among Shadow Warriors.

“We have work to do,” Nokita interjected after a few seconds, breaking the tension. Alden immediately snatched his hand back and looked embarrassed.

I didn’t blame him. Having a female in their ranks after years of an all-male “club” created its own challenges. Add to that the complications of the mating rage, my still-developing knowledge of war dynamics, and my adjustment to the physical capabilities of my new form made it a lot for all of us. The learning curve was mental as well as physical.

And still, Alden backed down.

Ms. Beast purred in satisfaction, and it took everything in me not to indulge her urge to strut. Another time, I thought, pushing the feeling aside. Turning back to the weapons, I pulled Bertha from the rack again, her familiar weight settling comfortably as I slung the strap over my shoulder. Next, I grabbed two Makarovs from the lower shelf and secured them to my belt. King had been teaching me about Russian weapons, which were the standard fare in Cuba when the Shadow Warriors arrived. While the AK was still my preferred companion, I’d grown equally capable with the Makarovs.

I was about to leave when Alden’s voice stopped me. “I will watch over the child,” he said.

“Thank you,” I replied, meeting his gaze briefly before turning to go. This time, I allowed a little extra kick in my step, just for Ms. Beast.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:36 pm

King

The powerful bike rumbled beneath me. I'd been working on it for the past month, tearing into the engine like any farm kid who couldn't resist the lure of machinery. One of the island men had been lending a hand when I hit snags, and now this beauty purred like a dream.

I took the winding turns effortlessly, with Beck trailing close behind. Even with a mate and child, he never slacked on his bodyguard duties. Not that I didn't try to slip away unnoticed; it's just that Beck had caught on to my disappearing acts and seemed to always be prepared for them now.

Axel's schedule had him stationed at the southern end of the island for the week, so that's where we headed. I could have used the Morse code machine to reach him, but we saved it strictly for emergencies. The small electronic pulse it emitted could attract hellhounds, and we didn't want to risk it unless absolutely necessary. Our communication with the U.S. was limited to that machine and only for critical updates.

The road twisted tighter as we left the city. Beck let out a loud curse behind me, and I turned in time to see him spitting frantically into the wind. I knew what it meant. A bug had flown into his mouth, and I couldn't help laughing at his misfortune. The stars and moon lit our path, and the cool night air filled my lungs. For a brief moment, I let myself enjoy the ride and the freedom. I needed this time to clear my head for the next few weeks and prepare for the fight ahead.

The Federation was never far from my thoughts. Missy, Beck's mate, had been a

wealth of information about the resistance. Her people and surrounding groups refused to be part of the sick, twisted minds of the government leadership. Two critical things had been confirmed after speaking with her: The Federation was enslaving humans, forcing them into military service, and they were deliberately luring hellhounds into human-populated areas. Worse, they had begun using the hellhounds to slaughter civilians. The why and how still eluded me, but one thing was clear: their plans were escalating, and we had to be ready.

I'd known for some time that the Federation had bigger schemes in motion, and we'd been preparing. Whether our next step was overthrowing the government or rescuing willing humans and bringing them back to the island, one thing was certain: it was time to act.

Since returning from the mainland, we'd fortified the island. Security had been tightened, and a comprehensive evacuation plan put in place. We also ramped up our sustainability efforts. It helped that the Warriors had adapted to island life with surprising ease. After years of relentless battles, the respite was welcome. But now, the break was over. It was time to fight again, and we were ready.

Things would've been simpler if the Federation had kept their word and honored the treaty we believed they wanted. That bridge was burned beyond repair now, and there was no going back. I'd spent sleepless nights trying to make sense of their actions. Their motives had been incomprehensible in the beginning, and they still didn't add up. But it didn't matter now. Their reign of terror had to end. The world had endured enough, and rebuilding would require both humans and Shadow Warriors working together to eradicate the hellhounds. The Federation had positioned itself as the greatest obstacle to our goal of stability. They'd made themselves enemy number one, and their time was up.

We would face them head-on. Beast agreed, surging K-5 through my veins and urging me to let him take over. Not happening. I laughed into the wind. I'll bring you

out when I'm ready, not a moment sooner.

An hour later, we pulled up in front of a modest home. The lights were off, but Axel's vehicle was parked outside. That was enough confirmation for me. "Enjoy your snack?" I asked Beck, unable to resist. It took him a moment to remember the bug incident, and he responded with a grunt.

After five minutes of pounding on the door, it creaked open, revealing Maylin. Her eyes widened, fear flickering across her face when she saw me. "Che?" she asked.

"He's fine," I assured her quickly. "A human outpost was attacked in the U.S. We're leaving at first light. You and Axel are needed back at the citadel."

Before she could respond, Axel's hand appeared above hers, pulling the door open wider. "Come in," he said. "Tell me what's going on while we pack."

Beck and I stepped inside the small, single-bedroom home. The modest space revealed Axel's gentlemanly nature. He was clearly giving Maylin and the baby the bedroom while he made do with the couch. Maylin disappeared into the back as I began filling Axel in on the intel.

When I finished, he shook his head in frustration. "I need someone on the island trained well enough to take over so I can go with you in the future. If one of the Warriors needs me, I won't be much use to them stuck here."

Before I could respond, Maylin returned, the baby cradled in her arms. "I can handle things while you're gone. Go with your Warriors," she said in her heavily accented English.

Axel immediately shook his head. "You're my best student, Maylin, but you still need more training."

Her free hand went to her hip, her eyes narrowing into daggers aimed directly at him. “Who do you think handled things before the great and mighty Shadow Warriors arrived? The women, that’s who. Men fight, and women mend the wounds. That is our job.” Her accent thickened with her anger, making her words sharper, but the meaning was clear to all of us.

Behind me, Beck muttered under his breath, “Don’t let Marinah hear you say that women have a place.”

Maylin didn’t miss a beat. “I am capable, and there are other women who are capable too. Go fight,” she commanded before turning on her heel and marching back into the bedroom, the baby held tight against her chest.

I glanced at Axel, raising a brow. “Anything you need to tell me?” The tension between him and Maylin was palpable, and I couldn’t ignore it.

Axel sighed heavily, rubbing the back of his neck. “Don’t worry. The woman drives me mad, and at the same time, she’s a medical genius. She’s smart, sarcastic, and moody. If it weren’t for the baby, I’d have ditched her a long time ago.”

From the back room, Maylin’s sharp voice rang out. “I heard that!”

Axel rolled his eyes, muttering under his breath before saying, “It’s a sister-brother thing. We love to hate each other.” Despite his words, the corner of his mouth twitched upward, betraying an underlying respect and fondness for Maylin.

With that settled, Beck and I helped them gather what they needed. Axel alerted one of his assistants at the small clinic, instructing them to take over in his absence. Written communications would soon be sent across the island to ensure everyone was on high alert. I couldn’t imagine the Federation attacking us directly, but given their unpredictable and increasingly erratic behavior, we had to be prepared for anything.

The ride back to the citadel felt agonizingly slow. The rumble of the bikes drowned out any chance of conversation, leaving me alone with my thoughts. Inevitably, those thoughts circled back to Marinah.

She was incredible. She was a miracle. And she was one reckless move away from giving me a heart attack.

There was no fear in her, and for someone who not long ago was terrified of just about everything around her, the transformation was mind-boggling. The mental adjustment I'd needed to make wasn't easy. I'd hoped that being hunted as part of her training would dim that untouchable spark in her eyes just a little. Instead, it had the opposite effect. She'd bested me and Beck both, and instead of restraint, she felt more invincible.

Due to my mating rage, the Warriors had little knowledge of her capabilities. Beck, at least, had an inkling. He'd seen her in action often enough. Marinah wasn't just a Shadow Warrior; she was something more and I was still trying to fully understand what that was.

There was something different about her beyond the obvious. Beyond being the only female Warrior among us. It was a nagging itch in the back of my mind, especially when I watched her in Beast form. Something about her movements, her aura, the sheer power she exuded. It was like a puzzle with one missing piece that I couldn't quite grasp.

And it was driving me crazy.

We, the Shadow Warriors, were an alien race. We came to Earth after destroying our home planet through centuries of infighting. Our history texts, passed down to each Shadow Warrior leader, served as a grim reminder of the price we paid for our arrogance. I inherited the volumes from my uncle, who made it his mission to ensure

I learned from the mistakes of our forebears. He forced me to read them early, long before I was old enough to fully grasp their weight. Even as a teenager, I found them fascinating, though I barely skimmed the small sections on female Warriors that were in the main texts. After Greystone's death, I read only a small amount of the female texts. The women Shadow Warriors hadn't existed for over two hundred years, and it had frustrated me to read about them. If I were honest, I would use the word saddened. When the females disappeared, it left a hole in the remaining male warriors. Even I had felt it generations later. Then Marinah exploded into our world.

Her mother, Dinah, was descended from one of the female Shadow Warriors who came to Earth alongside the first generation. Unfortunately, her secrets died with her. When my ancestors first arrived, they brought their aggressive ways with them, threatening the fragile human population. The female Warriors, unwilling to witness history repeat itself, left the men to forge their own path. This departure forced the male Shadow Warriors to change. They abandoned their ways of war and turned to farming, pouring their energy into the hard work of feeding the Earth's growing population.

If we had more than a handful of texts from the female Shadow Warriors, we might understand their legacy better. But they took key volumes with them. The originals, not copies and left us with gaps in our knowledge. Marinah had scoured the books I'd given her, but the answers we needed were missing. We had to find those lost texts.

Beast rumbled below the surface, restless as always. He'd come a long way, transitioning from wanting Marinah dead to wanting to control her. Even I knew how pointless that was. Marinah was a whirlwind, a force of nature no one could contain. She was as much a part of me as Beast was. When he demanded submission, her beast defied it. She belonged to no one, and the sooner Beast came to terms with it, the better for both of us.

I revved the bike and let the engine roar as I picked up speed. Marinah was waiting.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:36 pm

Marinah

Sharp pain hammered through my skull like a team of wild horses trying to break loose. Since becoming a Warrior, I'd rarely dealt with aches or pains. Getting my butt kicked during training didn't count; it was expected. But this throbbing headache was different, and it was souring my mood fast.

The night had been brutal. I helped Nokita send dispatches to the outlying villages, coordinated supply lists, and personally drove most of the equipment to the runway. A team was loading everything as we prepped for departure. By the time I finally stepped into our bedroom, it was nearly four in the morning.

My eyes went straight to the bed. It called to me, a siren's song of rest. But I needed to clean up. A yawn cracked my jaw as I headed to the bathroom, hoping a shower would ease the pounding in my head.

I had just stepped under the warm spray when the bathroom door creaked open. A moment later, King joined me, his arms wrapping around me as he pulled me close.

"You okay?" he murmured, his lips brushing the top of my head. My forehead found its usual resting place against his chest, and I sighed.

"Headache," I admitted, the word muffled against his skin.

He tilted my head back gently, his piercing blue eyes scanning mine. "You need sleep," he said firmly.

I yawned again, unable to hide the exhaustion weighing me down. “I really do.”

“We need to be at the airport in forty-five minutes. You’ll sleep on the plane,” he promised.

Leaning back against his chest, I let my eyes drift closed. “Wake me when it’s time to leave.”

King grabbed the soap and began running it over my back and shoulders, his strong hands massaging knots of tension as he worked. When his hands slid across my chest, I let out a low groan. “You’re making me reconsider sleep.”

He chuckled but didn’t take the bait. “Relax. Let me wash you up. Then you’ll get a few minutes of rest before we go. Once we’re on the plane, you’ll sleep.”

“That’s not what I meant,” I murmured, tilting my head back to meet his gaze, hoping he could see the spark of desire still flickering behind the exhaustion.

His slight smile melted me. “I know what you meant,” he said softly. He guided my head back down to his chest, his hands resuming their slow, deliberate motions. I didn’t fight it. For now, I let him take care of me.

A few minutes later, King carried me to bed. I barely stirred until he shook me awake a little while later. My head spun from the lack of sleep, but I got up, letting him lead me to the bike.

“Hold on tight and don’t fall off,” he yelled over the roar of the engine.

“Wait!” Maylin’s voice rang out. I opened my eyes as she ran toward us, a bag clutched in her hands. She thrust it toward me. “This is my way of thanking you for taking care of Che.”

“You know I don’t need thanks,” I replied, but the scowl that usually painted her face softened into a rare smile before she turned and hurried back inside the citadel.

Sinking against King’s warm back, I cradled the clunky gift on my lap and let myself drift during the twenty-minute ride. The hum of the bike, the steady rhythm of the engine, and King’s solid presence lulled me into a hazy state.

The sound of plane engines roaring to life jolted me from my half-comatose state. I blinked, clearing the cobwebs from my mind, and glanced down at the bag Maylin had handed me. It was still there. A pang of guilt hit me for not telling her about Che’s little escapade. She’d tan his hide, which was probably exactly what he needed. But punishment wasn’t coming from me. That kid had me wrapped around his finger tighter than I cared to admit.

Once King and I dismounted the bike, I took in the scene. The airstrip buzzed with activity. Warriors shouted orders as supplies were loaded onto the planes. Amid the chaos, my eyes caught a familiar figure: Axel. I did a double take, not expecting to see him here.

He strode toward me as King headed off to join his men. “You look tired,” Axel said with concern.

He, on the other hand, looked surprisingly rested. Whatever time away he’d had, even while working, seemed to have done him good. “You look out of place,” I teased.

We both smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling in good humor. “Maylin made it clear she can handle medical emergencies while I’m gone. I’m taking her up on that offer.”

Surprisingly, relief flooded through me. I had grown very attached to our doctor. He had become one of the few people I could rely on completely. He didn’t trigger

King's ever-present mating rage for some reason, and he treated me like any other Shadow Warrior. His direct eye contact, his acknowledgment of my presence in a room, and even the occasional hug (though it did leave King grumbling) had solidified his place as my best friend. King's Beast tolerated Axel, while most of the other men set him off. That alone made Axel invaluable.

Axel's sharp eyes scanned me, stopping at my hand. The stitches looked ready to pop, and the bruising made it appear worse than it actually was. "You're a one-person walking disaster. Of course, you need me."

"Harsh," I replied, feigning offense. Under his watchful gaze, I pulled out the stitches and flexed my fingers. Shadow Warriors healed incredibly fast. It was only one of many perks.

"You need a full-time babysitter," he muttered.

King's arm slid around my shoulders, pulling me into his warmth. I leaned against him, grateful for the support. "She's about to collapse. I'm putting her on the plane where she'll sleep through the flight," he declared.

Axel didn't even blink. "Who made you doctor?" He turned his focus on me. "Get on board and sleep. Doctor's orders."

King growled low in his throat, but I couldn't help laughing. Axel might be the only person alive who didn't take King seriously. I reached up, rubbing the hand resting on my shoulder and traced along his arm. It was an awkward position, but I needed the contact. "I always follow doctor's orders."

That earned me growls from both men. Fighting a yawn, I turned toward the plane, King close behind me.

“I’ll see you after we land,” Axel called after us.

Neither of us replied. I was too tired to bother, and King was too... something. Probably just as exhausted as I was. We stepped inside the plane, and King steered me toward the back. “We’ve got the last row so you can sleep,” he said.

My legs moved on autopilot, dragging me down the aisle. I collapsed into the seat, letting out a relieved sigh. King gently pushed me down until I was lying flat, then lifted my legs onto the seat. He tucked a light blanket around me before settling into the seat across the aisle. At least, I thought he did. My brain felt foggy, and before I could even process his next move, sleep claimed me.

“Marinah,” came a small, childish whisper. I had no idea how much time had passed.

King’s pissed-off voice followed. “Ruth. What did I tell you?”

“She moved,” Ruth replied defensively.

I didn’t need to open my eyes to know what happened next. Large arms scooped Ruth up, and she floated through the air, carried away by King. My groggy mind made it seem more surreal than it was. Stretching my arms, I shifted slightly so I was more on my back, willing my body to fully respond.

King’s face appeared above me, his blue eyes flashing with a mix of amusement and sternness. “Go back to sleep,” he ordered.

I yawned and fought the urge to obey. “Hmm, I think I’m good. I could use some food. Did you sleep?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“A bit,” he said without hesitation.

“You liar,” I muttered with a smirk.

His only response was a quick grin before he leaned down and kissed me. When he released me, I sat up, my head spinning briefly before settling. The dull ache that had been pounding through me earlier was gone. Stretching again, I looked around, trying to get my bearings. “How much longer?”

King sat down in the seat beside me. “About thirty minutes,” he said.

That meant I’d slept for over three hours. It wasn’t perfect, but it was enough to make me feel human again. As if reading my mind, King handed me a burrito wrapped in wax paper. I unwrapped it greedily and shoved nearly the whole thing into my mouth.

“Hungry?” King asked with a teasing glint in his eyes.

I ignored him, focusing on devouring the rest of the burrito. Food and I had reached an understanding. For all the calories I’d skipped during my early years of trying to maintain a figure, my Warrior metabolism now let me eat anything I wanted. My body burned it up for energy, and I wasn’t about to waste the opportunity to indulge.

King chuckled at my lack of restraint, giving me one of his signature side grins. “Once we’re on the hunt, it’ll be MREs or animals we kill in Warrior form. No fires, and we’ll be on the move constantly.”

I spoke around the last bite. “I hate MREs. Go away.”

King grinned again and handed me another burrito. If he kept them coming, maybe I’d forget about the terrible meals awaiting me in the near future. I shifted in my seat, hearing the crinkle of the bag I’d put on the floor before falling asleep. After inhaling the second burrito, I placed the bag in my lap and opened it.

No way. It couldn't be. I froze, staring at the contents in awe. Slowly, I pulled out the most incredible, amazing gift ever.

Doc Martens.

I checked the size. Nine. Perfect.

"Boots?" King asked, raising a brow.

I tried lifting my foot, but my legs were too long, so I had to turn sideways. "Move to the other side so I can try these babies on." I shot him a grin. "These aren't just boots. They're Doc Martens. The most kick-ass boots ever made. I can't believe Maylin found them."

King glanced at the boots, then back at me, looking unimpressed. "Shift once while wearing them, and bye-bye boots."

I gave him a small shove to make room. Once he was out of the way, I twisted around, propped my legs up, and started pulling on the leather. As soon as my feet slid into place, I knew they were perfect.

"They don't look any different from the military boots I gave you," King said, unimpressed.

"Sacrilege," I muttered, running my fingers lovingly over the leather. "These babies have PVC air-cushioned soles. They're indestructible."

King whistled. "One emergency Shadow Warrior shift, and you'll learn that no footwear is indestructible."

I glared at him, already prepared to bite off his head, but the captain's voice came

over the loudspeaker. “Please take your seats for landing.”

“I want boots like that,” Ruth chimed in from above me. I looked up to see her standing on the seat in front of us.

“Turn around, put on your seatbelt, and do what the pilot says,” I commanded firmly. “If you do, I might let you touch my new boots.”

“What would touching do?” Ruth asked, her curiosity tinged with defiance.

I fixed her with a hard stare. “I did something good and got a reward I wasn’t expecting. I earned these boots. If you don’t turn around and buckle up, you’ll earn something too, and trust me, you won’t like it.”

My glare did the trick. Ruth sank into her seat without another word and disappeared from view. King raised an eyebrow, his lips quirking into an amused smile. Ruth actually followed my command, and the surprise on his face mirrored my own.

I propped my feet on the seat in front of me, admiring my boots as we prepared for landing. King’s grin only widened as he watched me.

“Boots are your Kryptonite. Good to know,” he teased.

“Not just any boots,” I corrected, running my fingers over the leather again. “These are Doc Martens.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:36 pm

King

We landed in the southern part of Indiana, where a large settlement of people had banded together and made their home after the hellhound invasion. The outpost founders had been smart and chosen an area with a long planting season and several lakes in the area that provided enough water.

This was where Beck first encountered Missy and Ruth. Or, more accurately, where Missy had shot him from the sky. That connection had given us critical intel about the Federation. We now knew they had been using “join or die” tactics for years to commandeer soldiers throughout the country. Now they had added exploiting hellhounds for their own agenda, whatever that agenda might be. Maybe the destruction of the world was their goal, and things were going exactly as they planned. Before the hellhound invasion, the U.S. government had been in the worst turmoil the nation had seen since the Civil War. That corrupt system led to the one we faced now.

I stepped out of the plane into weather that was about twenty degrees cooler than the island. Several Shadow Warriors who had stayed at the outpost to guard the villages were waiting for us. I clasped arms with those in charge, exchanging brief words of greeting. Marinah’s voice rang out, and I turned just in time to see her running toward her human friend, Landan.

She caught herself before slamming into his chest, realizing mid-stride that he was staring at me with the kind of fear that only came from knowing I might kill him in the next twenty seconds. Marinah froze, understanding the danger she was putting him in, and halted her momentum.

Kill. Beast growled within me, but I ignored him. I drew a deep breath, letting the simmering aggression of K-5 fade. We didn't have time for it right now, and Landan was one of the good guys.

Marinah turned away, and they both walked toward me, still a little too close for my beast's comfort, but I held him in check. Extending my hand, I said, "Thanks for meeting us." My tone was stiff, but I didn't care. Landan took my hand, and I added, "We're dropping off Warriors who will disperse to different outposts while my personal team searches for the Federation soldiers who did this."

Landan visibly relaxed. "Thank you, and good to hear. We have information that might help with your search. Half of your Warriors are patrolling on the outer perimeter of the outposts, combing the surrounding areas for Federation soldiers and hellhounds. If you can spare about twenty minutes, we can catch you up on what we've learned."

I glanced at the activity around us and noticed a small lean-to with a picnic table beside the runway. The locals had built the runway ten miles from their outpost. Without a word, I abruptly turned and strode toward the table.

"Hey, Neanderthal," Marinah called out behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder, and she lifted her hands in mock surrender. "Would you like us to follow?" she asked.

I pivoted, took a large stride backward, and grabbed her hand, dragging her along with me. The sleep had done her good because she laughed. "Come on, Landan. His majesty is requesting an audience."

I shot her an annoyed glance, which only made her laugh again. Seeing Landan had obviously put her in a good mood. I fought off a shot of K-5 and forced Beast to

behave.

“Hold it back, baby,” she whispered.

“Stop pushing my buttons,” I growled in mild annoyance.

She couldn't have cared less. Before Marinah had a chance to respond, I saw Beck and Missy walking in our direction. Another man I didn't recognize was beside them.

When they reached us, Missy stopped beside me and made introductions. “This is Garret, our governor. He wanted to speak with you.”

Missy's eyes flicked to Beck and caught his pointed stare. She moved away from me immediately, trying to avoid provoking him. She'd had a hard time with Beck's mating rage. As a human, it didn't affect her, and that fact drove Beck crazy. I hid a grin. Missy had definitely made things interesting for one of my most contrary Shadow Warriors. It had been amusing for the rest of us. Marinah and I had dealt with the mating rage without killing anyone, and that seemed to make Beck uptight. He wouldn't be outdone by us, so he kept telling himself he wouldn't kill anyone over his mate. At least, that's what he hoped. Beast grumbled again because he liked the idea of killing.

Yes, I whispered internally when Beast grumbled. We will find many to kill. Sleep had come in shallow waves during the flight, my thoughts churning with the senseless murders of innocents. My tightly coiled rage had built steadily, and I knew it would need an outlet soon. The key was finding Federation soldiers so I could let Beast free.

We reached the bench beneath the overhang, and everyone except the governor and I took a seat. He watched me warily, his eyes darting as though gauging the danger. I glanced at him as I spoke. “We need any information you have that will help us deal with the soldiers responsible for wiping out the village. I'm leading a strike team as

soon as I have that intel.”

Marinah stood and wrapped her hand around my arm, deliberately leaning into me so I stayed calm. “What King means to say,” she interjected smoothly, “is that we’re deeply sorry for the loss of life, and we take these matters very seriously. Any help you can provide would be greatly appreciated.”

Garret, a man with the kind of build that looked more suited to a battlefield than a political office—six feet tall, broad shoulders, muscular—shifted his gaze between me and my mate. His lips parted slightly as though he wanted to speak but couldn’t find the words. Marinah leaned into me a bit more, her body language clear: Play nice. She understood my distrust of politicians. Garret might be a decent man, but what kind of person willingly entered politics? The doubt lingered.

A slight pinch on my arm and a sharp glare from Marinah made me relent. With a sigh, I extended my hand. Garret stared at it, unmoving.

Marinah made a sharp noise in the back of her throat and pinned him with an impatient look. “This is the part where men play nice, shake hands, and spill the information needed to keep everyone safe. Even I’m tired of waiting,” she said testily.

Snapping out of his fog, Garret quickly shook my hand. His grip was firm but brief. I heeded Marinah’s silent command and refrained from crushing his hand, though the temptation lingered.

“Well, um, I apologize,” Garret said, slightly flustered. “I’ve heard a lot about you both, and I suppose I’m a little tongue-tied.” His gaze lingered on Marinah for a fraction too long, and Beast growled low in my chest.

Garret snapped his eyes away from my mate, and I felt a sense of satisfaction; the

tension inside me eased slightly.

We'd kept vital information about Shadow Warriors hidden from the Federation, and the mating rage was one of those secrets. Humans would be horrified to learn that Shadow Warriors easily became savage killers over their mates, at the slightest transgression in the beginning. For Marinah and me, the rage had gone both ways at first and made it even harder to conceal when we were around humans who didn't understand the rules. Marinah was controlling her mating rage better now, but I didn't entirely trust it.

Garret, thankfully, chose that moment to address me, pulling me out of my internal grumbling. I focused on his words. "They're controlling the hellhounds somehow. We think it's a noise frequency, but we don't have proof. The hellhounds attacked the village in unison, then left the same way minutes before the Federation soldiers arrived. The witnesses said it was the strangest thing they had ever seen. They also disclosed that the hounds didn't attack the Federation soldiers."

He shook his head, frustration etched into his expression. "We desperately need the help you're offering." After a deep breath, he added, "I'd like to go with you to hunt the Federation soldiers."

That was unexpected. I glanced at Marinah. Her expression mirrored my own. We traveled as Warriors, and having a human along would make things complicated. I told Garret as much.

He rested his hand on the table, his fingers splayed. "I can keep up. If not, leave me behind. I'm not a governor in name only. Keeping these people safe is my top priority." He locked eyes with me, and Beast let out a low grumble. "And I'm deadly. Maybe not Shadow Warrior deadly, but I won't be a liability."

I glanced at Marinah again, and she gave the slightest nod. I didn't agree. He would

be trouble, but my mate clearly thought otherwise.

“After we have all the intel, we’ll leave. It shouldn’t be more than an hour. Can you be ready?” I asked.

“I’m ready now,” he replied, relaxing slightly.

“I need to interview the survivors first.”

“I’ll have them brought here,” Garret said.

An hour and ten minutes later, we left to hunt.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:36 pm

Marinah

There was something odd about Garret. He said all the right things and acted the way a good politician should. Maybe that was the problem. I had taken on King's dislike of politicians in general, and I didn't see that changing anytime soon. Trusting him would take time, and even then, I wasn't sure if I'd fully get there. I was at the wait-and-see stage.

The outpost that had been attacked was about six hours away if we ran the entirety. King, however, didn't want to waste that much time. Instead, we were being dropped close to the village by parachute.

I had never parachuted before. The thought didn't terrify me, exactly, but surviving would be nice. I just needed to get the first jump out of the way. Outside of the extremely short Federation instruction in case the plane went down on my original trip to Cuba, I'd had exactly two lessons. My confidence would be higher after I survived.

Over the roar of the plane's engine, King yelled at me, "Remember what you learned about untwisting your rigging lines if needed! You'll have plenty of time to set yourself up for landing!"

We stood at the open cabin door, and my stomach felt like it was lodged in my throat. King adjusted my harness one last time and gave me a quick kiss.

I flashed him a thumbs-up that I didn't feel. King was jumping first, and I'd immediately follow. Labyrinth was next, then Garret, Axel, and finally Beck. King

was taking Garret at his word that he could keep up. I had my doubts.

King scanned the terrain, waiting for the perfect time to jump, while I desperately tried to focus on something other than falling. My thoughts drifted to Ruth. Leaving her behind hadn't been easy.

"You said you would train me!" she had yelled defiantly when she found out I was going with King.

"I will train you," I had snapped back. "And one of the first things you'll learn is that the world doesn't revolve around Ruth. Men, women, and children died. Everyone here is in danger, including you and your mother. I'm putting your safety and everyone else's ahead of your wants. Get over it."

She had spun on her heels and stormed off. I didn't envy Missy, not one bit, and I was sure Missy wanted to kill me right about now.

"It's time!" King's shout jolted me back to the present. I ran my hands over my straps, adjusting my backpack beneath the harness. I was as ready as I'd ever be. King jumped, I counted to three and made the leap. Airborne. Falling. At least we avoided the plane's engines. That had been one of my worries.

Wind whipped across my face, the cold seeping into my bones as we plummeted. King arched his body and drew closer to me. I mimicked his movement, so the land approached faster, which was ludicrous. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the others. Taking a deep breath, I allowed myself a moment to look at the beauty below. If it weren't for the wind slapping against me, I could almost believe I was suspended in midair rather than dropping at 120 miles an hour.

My gaze locked onto a clear area below us. Following King's example, I tightened my body, streamlining into an arrow to guide myself toward the spot. For the first

time, I caught sight of Beck above us, descending fast.

“Open, open, open,” I muttered aloud, just as King gave the signal to open our chutes. I yanked the cord, and the sudden tug as the parachute caught air sent me lurching upward. The exhilarating sensation stole my breath, and a laugh erupted from my throat. This was a wild and crazy thrill that surprised even me. Marinah, meet your new idea of fun.

The ground rushed toward me, the landing area now within reach. King hit first, making it look effortless. I had seconds to prepare before my feet were running across the earth. My Doc Martens connected perfectly, gripping the dirt, and I managed to stay upright just like King.

Coming to a stop, I looked over at him, unable to hide the huge grin on my face. “That was amazing,” I said, laughing.

His smile was even wider, but his tone turned all business. “Collect your chute,” he said, already gathering his own.

Within ten minutes, we’d hidden the parachutes and were ready to move out. King was giving Garret a brief rundown of what to expect. “Looking into a Shadow Warrior’s eyes is never good. After we’ve shifted, it can be deadly. Whether I’m in Beast or human form, stay away from Marinah, or you will lose your head. I don’t trust you enough to explain why, but I suggest you take what I’m saying to heart. Your life depends on it.”

“Got it,” Garret said solemnly.

I was impressed. No questions, no argument. He just followed orders. Maybe he would prove useful after all. Time would tell. He watched us shift with quiet curiosity, keeping a smart side-eye on the process without drawing unnecessary

attention to himself. Another point in his favor, so why was something bothering me?

We set out running at a steady pace, midstride for us, a manageable speed for Garret. We ran in the same order we'd jumped from the plane, and the miles passed quickly. The sharp, unmistakable stench of death hit about an hour later, and I knew we were close. There had been no place to land the plane near here, so this part of the journey would have been on foot no matter how we'd arrived.

"We burned the bodies, including your Shadow Warriors," Garret said a few minutes later, the smell clearly reaching him too. He wasn't too winded and had kept pace with us so far. If we needed to move at full speed, he would struggle, but for now, he was holding his own.

What annoyed me, though, was how quietly he moved. He'd clearly had practice at making little noise while running. I'd been working at it for months and still wasn't as good as he was. It grated on me, which was something else that wasn't in his favor.

King remained silent, and I could see clear signs of tension in his movements. The loss of Shadow Warriors hit him hard. He hadn't said anything to me, but I could feel his fury simmering beneath the surface. We would mourn after we killed those responsible.

The babies, Ms. Beast lamented within me.

Our revenge will be for the babies and the Shadow Warriors, I told her silently.

Kill, she whispered, flooding my system with an extra dose of K-5. It was nice to be on the same page, though I reminded her now was not the time.

An eerie sensation started at my toes and worked its way through my body as we entered the outpost. An old magazine, partially buried in mud, ruffled in the wind,

and a few stray papers fluttered across the ground, adding to the oppressive silence brought by death.

We'd been told the attack happened early in the morning. The three Shadow Warriors on patrol were the first to be taken out. Garret said their bodies had been discovered late yesterday and burned along with the others. Six Warriors died in total. When the hellhounds entered, there had been no alarm. The only survivors were two teenagers, a brother and sister, who'd gone fishing early in the morning. They'd come back and hidden, unable to stop the slaughter.

The sister could barely speak through her tears when King questioned her at the other outpost. Her brother had filled in the gaps, describing the sheer brutality of the attack.

We walked to the mass grave and stood with our heads lowered for several minutes. We weren't praying. We were contemplating revenge. For now, we kept our beasts under control, but soon, we would unleash hell.

If I got my wish, General Smythe would be leading the Federation soldiers. I owed him a set of teeth buried deep in his throat.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:36 pm

King

The death of my Warriors hit hard. They'd given their lives fighting for these people. Marinah had changed me when it came to my hatred for humans, narrowing it to the ones who deserved killing. Missy being with Beck had helped, too. After the Federation betrayed the Shadow Warriors and killed my uncle, who was our leader at the time, my hatred had consumed me. But not all humans were the same. I reminded myself of that again.

I looked at the freshly tilled earth holding nearly one hundred people and seethed. Marinah wiped away tears, and my anger flared hotter. How could anyone kill children in cold blood? When I found the ones responsible, I wouldn't be asking them for answers. I would make sure they suffered.

We left the outpost in the early evening, following the trail left by the hellhounds and soldiers. They had a two-day head start, but it wouldn't be enough to save them.

At midnight, I called a halt. Garret was struggling, though he wouldn't admit it. He knew I'd been serious when I said we'd leave him behind, and he wasn't about to test me. Marinah, despite the sleep she'd had on the plane, was dragging too. It was time to stop, eat, and rest for a few hours.

We didn't shift back to human. We needed to be ready for anything, whether it was hellhounds or Federation soldiers. Labyrinth took the first watch. I unrolled my sleeping bag next to Marinah's, watching her while she ate an MRE without complaint.

When she finished, she adjusted her sleeping bag closer to mine and lay down in my arms. “Dinner was horrible,” she whispered. “If this is what courting looks like, you learned from the wrong person.”

That was the Marinah I knew and loved. “I must’ve missed the courting memo.” I slid my hand across her hip and gave her a small pinch. “If we were alone, I’d go straight for your pants.”

Her soft giggle broke through the blood rage simmering inside me, calming it for a moment. I pulled her closer, her scent filling my lungs and calming me further. She nestled her cheek against my arm and closed her eyes. Minutes later, I followed her into sleep.

“Time to rise and shine,” Beck said sometime later. It was still dark, but the moon had shifted, and I knew several hours had passed.

“Please kill Beck; I’m too tired to do it myself,” Marinah groaned.

I rubbed my jaw against hers, our teeth gently clinking together. It was the best we could manage in this form. We ate quickly, packed, and were back on the trail within twenty minutes. About an hour after sunrise, the Federation soldiers’ trail split from the hellhounds’, leaving us completely perplexed.

“Over here,” Labyrinth called and pointed downward once we joined him. “There are several soldiers following the hellhounds. The others went north.”

“Are we splitting up?” Marinah asked.

“No.” I bent down, examining the tracks more closely. Three distinct sets of human footprints were on top of the hellhound tracks, clearly showing they were following the herd. My biggest question was how they were keeping the hounds from attacking

them. “We’re going after the main unit of soldiers. That’s where their leader is, and that’s who I ultimately want. Stay alert. We’re gaining on them.”

We picked up the pace, and Garret managed to stay with us, though his breathing grew heavier. I was guessing he’d been military, likely special forces. He carried himself like a soldier. Marinah tucked in behind me, and we ran single file for hours, the landscape slowly changing as we moved farther north.

Eventually, we encountered a scatter of buildings. We stopped for a water break at one that provided a bit of shade. A faded, crumbling sign revealed it had once been a post office.

Garret gasped for air. “Leave me,” he said after a few minutes of trying to catch his breath.

Marinah glanced between us but kept her opinion to herself.

“We’ll break for an hour and see where you’re at then,” I told him.

He collapsed where he stood. Once he was sitting, he pulled out his sleeping bag and flopped down on top of it. After a quick gulp of water, he was out cold. The rest of us ate our MREs. Labyrinth, who had stubbornly stayed on guard duty during our last rest, nodded off. Beck took perimeter watch.

“Are you holding up?” I asked Marinah after we’d eaten.

“As long as exhaustion doesn’t count, yes. And don’t go all He-Man on me. You’re exhausted too.”

I raised an eyebrow. “He-Man?”

Her massive jaws twitched, clearly holding back laughter. “Your He-Man, or human side, thinks you need to act tough. Your Warrior side just wants death for your enemies. Your mate, however, disregards both sides because she knows when her man is tired.”

She had no idea how beautiful her Warrior side was. I’d lived with my own for so long that, after accepting my Beast, I never gave much thought to how I looked in this form beyond flat-out terrifying. But Marinah made me see it differently. She made me appreciate the beauty in a form designed for death and destruction. Each line, each muscle, every deadly claw, and every sharp tooth had the symmetry of a perfect killing machine.

“Since my mate is calling the shots, I’ll rest my eyes,” I said. And think about Marinah, I added silently.

She patted my colossal head and wrapped her strong, hairy arms around me.

The next thing I knew, Beck was waking us. It was time to move.

“I can keep going,” Garret said after testing his legs with a few stretches.

The terrain grew rougher as the elevation rose. The rolling hills slowed our progress, but that was fine; it slowed the Federation too. They hadn’t even tried to cover their tracks, and from the looks of it, they’d used this trail repeatedly. Or someone had.

What bothered me most was the eerie absence of hellhounds. We hadn’t seen any in the area, and it didn’t sit right.

The thought had barely crossed my mind when Nokita spotted six hounds in the distance. “Stay back,” I told Garret firmly. “We’re protected, and you’re not. If you get scratched or bitten, I won’t wait around for you to die before moving on.”

For the first time, Garret objected. “I’ve killed my fair share of hounds, and nothing you say will stop me from fighting.”

“Your death is on you,” I snapped.

As a team, we charged up the trail toward the hounds. Marinah stayed a few feet behind me, her sharp eyes scanning for her target. The moment she locked onto the one she wanted, a low growl rumbled from her throat, and she launched herself into the fight.

When it came to hellhounds, Marinah could handle herself. I focused on the big one in front of me and his closest ally. With a burst of adrenaline and pure instinct, I tore into them, determined to end this fight quickly.

Marinah

Finally, something to kill. Ms. Beast was ecstatic. Gripping the Mortuary sword high, I charged a hellhound larger and stronger than the ones we'd seen on the island. I didn't stop to consider what this creature truly was. It wanted me dead, and that was reason enough to end it.

Toxic saliva dripped from its razor-sharp teeth, and its unblinking, semi-intelligent eyes locked onto me as it charged. With the sword held steady in my massive claws, exactly as I'd been trained, I swung. A crimson spray exploded around me, and the hound's head sailed through the air, landing against a tree with a loud, wet smack.

"Yes!" I cheered, already spinning to find my next target.

Kill, Ms. Beast roared the moment my gaze landed on Garret. My sword lifted instinctively, and I was nearly on him when Axel's clawed hand clamped down on my arm.

"Marinah!" he shouted.

The sound startled me, clearing my head just enough to realize what I was doing. This had never happened before. Ms. Beast hadn't recognized Garret as a friend, and I didn't understand why. "Thanks," I mumbled to Axel, relieved he'd stopped me. "I don't know what happened."

"It's the mating rage combined with the hunt," Axel said with a slight grimace. "Your hormones are still out of whack. Remember that. And also try remembering we don't

kill our friends.”

Ha-ha. Not funny. “I’ll do my best.” I glanced quickly at Garret, who, thankfully, seemed oblivious to the fact that I’d almost taken his head off. Then my eyes shifted back to Axel. He was covered in gore, his massive chest straining against his leather harness, looking every bit as deadly as the rest of us. It wasn’t a sight I’d forget. “Methinks your pacifism has taken a backslide,” I said dryly.

Axel blinked slowly, the sharpness in his eyes softening slightly. “I’ve only ever had problems with killing for the sake of killing or harming innocents. Hellhounds, or anyone who’s a threat to us, I can deal with.” A strange expression crossed his face. “I would rather heal, but I’ll have no trouble annihilating the soldiers who wiped out the village.”

And that would be sad. Axel was a great healer because he cared so deeply. Killing humans would weigh on him, no matter what he said.

“Are you two going to chat all day, or can we get moving?” King called from behind me.

Axel stepped back quickly, lowering his eyes. King might tolerate him to a point, but Axel knew better than to push it too far. “Ready, master,” the doctor quipped. Crazy man.

King rolled his eyes, then gave me a quick wink. I needed to figure out what it was about Axel that let King throw off the mating rage so easily. If I could bottle it and spray down every man who looked at me, I’d call it a win.

Within an hour, the blood drying on my skin started itching like mad. Scratching didn’t help. My claws simply sliced through flesh, making it worse. Another hour passed before King noticed. He called a short halt, eyeing me with exaggerated

suspicion.

“Do you have fleas?” he asked, deadpan.

If I didn’t itch so badly, I’d have punched him in the nose. “Big ones, and I’m afraid they’re jumping on you,” I said, rubbing the palm of my clawed hand against my leg, which didn’t do a thing to alleviate the itch.

King blew an imaginary flea off his arm or at least I hoped it was imaginary. Did hellhounds carry fleas? I’d never thought about it before. “Is there a solution to my itch problem?” I asked, trying not to sound desperate.

“Lake ahead.”

“Have I mentioned I love you lately?”

He grinned. “Not nearly enough.”

“Get this dried blood off me, and I’ll double my efforts.” I turned toward the nearest tree and started rubbing my shoulder against it, bending up and down in a pathetic attempt to scratch the unreachable spots.

“You’re an embarrassment to Shadow Warriors,” King said, laughing.

“You can’t possibly not itch,” I said, turning to look at the men. Beck, as expected, remained a stone statue. Even if his crotch were infested with lice, he wouldn’t dare scratch. Axel gave me a half-smile, and I was about to turn away when Labyrinth swiped at his arm, leaving a furrow deep enough to draw blood.

Garret, staring at the ground, finally spoke up. “I itch like crazy, and I’m man enough to admit it.”

I would have hugged him if it wouldn't have gotten him killed. Instead, I turned to King. "You'd better find that lake fast. The fleas have infested us all."

King growled at Garret but thankfully left it at that. Without another word, he led us to the lake. If itching hadn't been my top priority earlier, I would have smelled the water sooner. The scent abilities that came with being a Shadow Warrior were pretty amazing; I just needed to remember to actually use them. Or, more accurately, pay attention to them.

"Last one in is a rotten hellhound!" I yelled, bolting for the water.

King caught up to me easily, wrapped an arm around my midsection, and kept running toward the shore. Even in my massive Warrior form, he lifted me like I weighed nothing.

"Hey! I need to get my Doc Martens and leather straps off before getting wet," I protested, squirming in his grip.

"You need to completely strip," he replied matter-of-factly. "We've had this happen before with fresher hellhounds. I'll block the men's view while you wash the blood off."

I didn't want to dwell on what fresher meant. It was easier to think of hellhounds as terrifying beasts rather than what they really were: genetically modified, reanimated humans. Nope. I'd stick to the image of them as large, vicious dog-like creatures. It wasn't until King showed me one suspended from the ceiling that I'd been able to see the human features hidden beneath the monstrosity.

A shiver ran through me at the memory, and I pushed it aside. Thinking about dead, warped humans was better left for another time.

I checked behind us. The men waited in a tight group, their backs to the water. I didn't bother mentioning to King my lack of breasts in this form or how utterly unattractive I looked with gaping jaws and deep-set eyes. King was King, and nothing I said would change him. But I couldn't take the itching for another second.

Laying my rifle aside, I unbuckled my pack and let it drop. The amazing boots Maylin had given me came off next, followed by my sword and the assortment of weapons strapped to me. Unbuckling the chest straps with my Warrior hands took the longest, but I'd gotten better at it. Those straps carried everything: water, knives, ammo, and, as a bonus, they looked incredibly cool. If I had to go around with muscles up to my ears and teeth that could rival a great white shark, I deserved something that looked badass.

My pants and undershirt were last, and my patience was at an end. It took every last bit of willpower I possessed not to destroy them. I tossed them into a heap, then decided they might as well join me in the water for a wash. I'd put on my spares afterward.

"Are you not coming in?" I asked when King stayed where he was, just watching me.

"This is a quick break. I'll bathe with the men." His eyes burned into mine. If my hips weren't currently deformed monstrosities, I might've given them a sexy sway just for him.

The water was cold, and I hated it immediately. I stepped in anyway. After eight more steps, I sank down until the top half of my body was submerged. Grabbing a handful of sand, I started scrubbing the blood from my skin and alleviating the itch.

I was about halfway through when movement at the edge of my vision caught my attention. I froze, my heart pounding. A bloodcurdling scream tore from my throat before I could stop it.

King, still fully clothed, was in the water instantly, sword drawn. He grabbed me, lifting me to him while his sharp eyes scanned the area for the threat. The other Warriors splashed into the water behind him, weapons ready.

“There, there!” I cried, pointing frantically toward the source of my terror. My voice came out shrill, but my massive jaw, designed for housing rows of deadly teeth, dulled the effect. I sounded more absurd than terrified, but I didn’t care.

King’s massive body turned; his arm raised. “Is there a hound below the surface?”

“No!” I screamed again, trying to scramble away from him. He wouldn’t release me. “It’s on top of the water, you damned idiot. How can you not see it?” Desperate, I climbed his frame, my foot bracing on his shoulder, until I was crouched on top of him, my entire body out of the water and precariously balanced.

Without moving, King barked, “A snake?”

I didn’t like his tone. “Yes, a snake! Don’t just stand there, kill the fucking thing!”

The serpent in question apparently decided his life would be safer elsewhere. Its long, slithery body glided atop the water, barely making a ripple as it changed direction and disappeared. I finally let out a breath and became aware of the unnerving silence around me.

I shifted my gaze from where the snake had vanished and caught sight of Beck, Labyrinth, and Axel standing slack-jawed in the water, staring at me. Turning farther, I spotted Garret on the shore, failing miserably to hide a grin.

I was still squatting on King’s shoulders, and the last thing I wanted to do was get back in the water.

“Do you plan on coming down anytime soon, or should I just walk to shore with you up there?” King asked, his tone laced with laughter.

With little grace, I eased myself off him, accepting a small assist from his hands and letting out a few grunts as I was lowered back into the water. My eyes darted warily, scanning a ten-foot radius around me for any signs of the snake.

“You’ve seen enough. Go back to shore,” King growled at the others.

A snicker broke the silence, quickly followed by Beck’s unmistakable laughter. It was a sound I’d only learned to recognize since Missy had entered his life. “I’m glad we finally have someone to climb trees,” he said. “Since the last Warrior died doing it, we’ve been needing that position filled.”

Axel, Labyrinth, and even Garret burst into full-blown laughter. It didn’t let up, even after I finished scrubbing the hellhound crud off me. It finally paused when I stomped out of the water, my feet making loud, wet squelches in the dirt, and grabbed my pack. King stood with the men, all of them facing away. I stuck my tongue out at their backs, a ridiculous gesture, but I didn’t care.

Dressing while wet and dealing with three-inch claws was an exercise in a different form of humiliation. At least I could enjoy the fact that the men were still itching their asses off while I went through the process.

One of them said something I couldn’t make out, and they erupted in laughter again. Once I was dressed, I gathered my soggy clothes and hung them over some low shrubs. Then I turned to them. “Your turn. Hit the lake.”

The sound of weapons and buckles being dropped met my ears, followed by splashes as they entered the water. I stood guard with my back turned, nursing my wounded pride.

“There’s a snake, watch out,” Labyrinth yelled.

Of course, I looked. They were using a long stick, tossing it into the water like they were searching for something. I marched toward the shore, shouting, “It was a huge snake!” I held out my hands, spreading them as far apart as I could to demonstrate its size.

Their laughter drowned out anything else I tried to say in my defense.

“King, I don’t think we can have a Shadow Warrior afraid of snakes. It’s insulting,” Beck called out, making sure I heard him.

King lifted his fist to his chin, pretending to contemplate. “You might be right. I’ve heard you can snake-proof pets. Maybe we can find someone to teach Marinah.”

“Hahaha, keep laughing,” I muttered, kicking water in their direction. That only set them off again.

I sighed, knowing one thing for certain: I’d never live this down.

King

Once we were clean, we pulled out our sleeping bags and settled in for a few hours. I hadn't planned on this delay, but I changed my mind so Marinah could get some rest. She wasn't speaking to anyone, and the men smiled every time her back was turned. They'd let up eventually, and Marinah never stayed silent for long.

I couldn't help but imagine what I must have looked like to them with Marinah perched on my shoulders. The thought was so absurd it amused me, and for once, it didn't trigger the mating rage. We needed the downtime, and humor helped. I'd learned early in the hellhound invasion that you couldn't live on the edge of life and death without taking a break now and then. At least, I understood it for my men. For me, it had been different. My anger toward humans after the Federation killed my uncle had been all-consuming. Humor was the last thing I thought I needed.

And then Marinah happened.

I had smiled and laughed more since she came into my life than I could ever remember. I glanced at her now, curled on her side and pointedly not touching me. She let out a small huff, and I took a chance, sliding my arm around her waist. When she didn't pull away, I hoped her sulking was over. I drew her closer, and she sighed softly, slipping into a deeper sleep.

Axel was on guard duty, moving quietly, shifting his head in all directions. I was tired, but my thoughts wouldn't stop reeling. The same questions about the Federation churned through my mind, driving me crazy. What were they really up to? What was their endgame?

The thoughts circled endlessly, getting me nowhere. Eventually, I settled against Marinah, letting her steady presence calm me, and I closed my eyes. Sleep came quickly after that.

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A few hours later, we made quick work of breaking camp and marched on in silence through the afternoon. Running wasn't an option. We were too close now, and every step forward required heightened vigilance.

We finally left the forest behind and reached the outer edge of the city. Most of the area was demolished, but a clear path had been worn through the rubble, and we followed it. Broken glass from the destroyed buildings caught the fading light, sparkling eerily. The glittering effect made the quiet city feel even more unnatural.

During my fighting days with the Federation, I'd entered cities like this one. Even now, it was hard to comprehend the scale of destruction that had brought us to this point. Over two million people had died here at the start of the hellhound war. The smell of death was long gone, but skeletal remains still appeared here and there, stark reminders of life's cruelty. When millions die, burying the dead becomes a luxury for the survivors left fighting for their lives.

The thought of what the genetically modified formaldehyde might do if it reached these skeletons crossed my mind. We'd never seen evidence of them infecting skeletons but I wasn't the only one thinking about it. Beck silently drew his sword and decapitated the nearest skull. Without needing to speak, the rest of us followed his lead, pulling our swords and doing the same as we walked. The bones were brittle, and our swords made little noise as we worked.

Two hours after entering the city, the faint ring of metal on metal clanged in the distance. I lifted my arm, signaling everyone to stop. My rage spiked as I thought

about the slaughter the Federation soldiers had delivered to the outpost. Beast stirred, shooting extra K-5 into my system, pushing me toward the edge. I held him back, forcing myself to stay focused. I needed a clear head until I knew exactly what we were up against. Soon, I promised him silently.

Pointing to Labyrinth, I sent him ahead with a series of hand signals. We took cover in a building partially buried under debris and waited in silence. The sun was nearly gone by the time he returned; his massive form shadowed by the dying light. He held up ten clawed fingers and flashed them five times. Fifty soldiers.

He pointed further into the city, gesturing toward a cluster of half-demolished skyscrapers. Without a word, he took the lead, guiding us to a new location.

It took twenty minutes of climbing over debris to reach a tall building that looked slightly more stable than the others. Carefully, we entered and made our way to the stair shaft. Following Labyrinth, we headed upward. Near the top, the stairs were blocked by large beams.

“I climbed through earlier and found a good defensive position at the top,” Labyrinth said. “We’ll be able to see the city from there.”

Garret struggled with the stairwell. When I turned and saw him lagging behind, his expression told me he was about to tell us to leave him again. I nodded at Axel, who moved to assist him through the maze of rubble.

Garret had impressed me so far. He’d kept up without complaint, fought hellhounds alongside us, and even encouraged me to leave him when he thought he couldn’t go on. Still, I was reserving my final judgment. Whether or not he earned my trust would depend on if he made it out alive.

With Axel’s help, Garret reached the top soon after the rest of us. The space had once

been a massive office. Now, it was unrecognizable. Cubicles lay torn apart, most likely from the original bomb blasts when the military had tried to take out the hellhounds after realizing the city was lost. Desks were overturned, paper was scattered everywhere, and shards of glass glittered across the floor like jagged stars.

Labyrinth walked to a far wall with a short set of stairs. “It leads to the roof,” he said. We followed him outside and looked over the city. He pointed north. “They’ve got at least fifty soldiers and three railcars holding hellhounds. Two more had their doors open and are empty. I’m guessing they’re meant for the hounds that separated from the main group.” He shrugged in frustration, clearly wanting answers as much as the rest of us. “I didn’t know what the railcars were for at first, but then a guard banged on the side of one. The hounds inside went nuts. I’d estimate about fifty hellhounds per car, one fifty total.”

He scanned our group, his gaze lingering on Marinah. Beast stirred when their eyes met, but I pushed him back, forcing myself to focus. Labyrinth continued. “The soldiers are fully armed and probably have heavier weaponry in one of the tents they’ve set up. Their camp is in a cluster of metal warehouse buildings on low ground. It’s been there for a while.”

I took a moment to visualize everything he’d said and to analyze our strategy. Five of us against fifty soldiers and one hundred and fifty hellhounds. Garret might be able to fight, but he was human. If more than a few hellhounds attacked him, he wouldn’t make it.

Marinah touched my arm, drawing my attention. “If we can lure the soldiers away from the hounds, we’ll only need to deal with them,” she said.

Her idea had merit. “How would we do it?”

She tilted her head slightly, and even in Warrior form, her expression told me I

wasn't going to like her plan. "Bait. More specifically, me—"

I tried to stop her, but she raised a hand, cutting me off. "I'll shift to my human form, let them think I'm a spy, and run for it. Unless someone there recognizes me, they'll have no idea I'm a Warrior."

Of course, her plan would place her in danger. I turned to Labyrinth. "Did you see anyone you know?"

Marinah cut in before I could respond. "I can unbraid my hair. If we play this right, it won't matter if someone eventually recognizes me." She stubbornly crossed her arms, her stance defiant.

"They're led by General Smythe," Labyrinth said.

Marinah slowly turned to him, then back to me. A slow, evil grin crossed her face, and I could see the effort it took for her to keep her beast under control.

Axel broke the tension. "I don't think seeing a lone woman would send the entire camp in pursuit."

Marinah answered with a wave of her hand. "It would if I killed one or several of them. I can establish high ground and use my rifle. In fact, I can set up multiple shooting positions and draw them as far from the hellhounds as possible."

"What if they release the hounds?" Labyrinth asked.

Her eyes flashed. "I can outrun hellhounds and soldiers."

"Any one of us could draw them away using your tactic," I said. Marinah's plan wasn't happening. My mate would not be bait for the general.

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We decided to scout their camp to finalize our plan. Garret stayed behind after I made it clear we'd be moving fast, and his presence would slow us down if we were spotted.

Labyrinth led us to a vantage point where we could see most of the camp's layout. As he'd described, it was well-established, using several large metal industrial buildings to house the soldiers. The buildings had massive rolling hangar doors, most of them open, allowing us to see inside with our Warrior night vision. Scattered around the perimeter were several large tents, but we couldn't see inside those.

We didn't spot General Smythe, but the hair on the back of my neck stood on end as I scanned the camp. If Smythe was here, he wouldn't be leaving alive.

The railcars were arranged in a horseshoe shape beside the solid wall of one of the barracks. We moved farther north, circling the camp. On the northern side, we discovered a recently cleared path. The tracks told a story. Large machinery had passed through here not long ago. Most likely, the vehicles were used to transport the railcars and had since been moved elsewhere or were parked inside one of the warehouses. The tents weren't large enough to hold them.

Continuing around to the other side, we caught the unmistakable stench of a latrine and gave it a wide berth, along with the two sentries stationed nearby. The Federation's security was lax, and we'd use that to our advantage.

"I didn't see Smythe," Marinah said once we were far enough away.

"Neither did I," I replied. "But they've been here for a while. It wouldn't surprise me if there are more camps like this one. They could be systematically taking out the outposts, attacking, regrouping, and scouting the next target."

“We need to end them.”

She was right. We did.

Once we returned to camp, I determined we’d need food and sleep before holding our meeting to solidify the plan. A small squeak caught my attention, and I turned to see Beck holding up a mouse, a rare grin on his face.

“Sorry, not enough to share, and I’m eating meat tonight,” Beck said, holding up his prize.

“Jerk,” Marinah muttered under her breath. I couldn’t help but smile.

“The last time I suggested you try mouse, you nearly killed me with your glare,” I said teasingly. “What’s changed?”

“MREs,” she snarled, her disdain evident.

Leaning close, I whispered huskily in her ear, “I’ll find you warm food. That’s one of my jobs as your mate.”

She licked her lips, her sharp teeth just barely visible. “And what’s my job?”

“To eat it.”

She gulped and nodded. “You catch it, I’ll eat it.”

It took me about fifteen minutes, but I returned with three dead rodents. Tossing one her way, I half-expected her to jump up and run. Instead, with a quick turn of her head and a snap of her jaws, the mouse was gone.

I didn't laugh, though her wide-eyed expression almost broke me. Instead, I offered her another.

"You eat them," she said, holding up a hand. "I want to be sure this one stays down. I think I've finally discovered something that isn't great about being a Shadow Warrior." She shuddered. "I ate a mouse."

Her tone was so pathetic I couldn't stop the grin spreading across my face. "You'll live, and I promise it'll get easier."

"I don't think I want it to get easier," she groaned.

I popped the other two mice into my mouth and crunched down. The sound was loud, deliberate, and satisfying. Her glare as I licked my fingers only added to my amusement.

"You don't play fair," she accused.

"No, I don't." Stepping closer, I nuzzled my jaw against hers. "You need sleep."

"You're right," she admitted grudgingly. "And the mouse wasn't enough. I'll settle for an MRE and maybe try another mouse tomorrow. Maybe."

After eating enough to keep hunger at bay, we cleared a space through the debris and set up a bed in the corner of the office, rearranging some cubicles to our liking. Marinah had second watch tonight, and she needed rest before Labyrinth woke her. We spread out our sleeping bags and curled into each other. Her clawed hand landed on my arm, and she carefully ran her palm over my skin.

"I can lead the soldiers away from the hellhounds," she said softly. "You and the men can ambush them."

My jaw tightened. She wasn't letting this go. "They have no problem killing women," I growled.

"You know I'm right," she countered. "I'm a Shadow Warrior, and I'm a good shot. Or have you forgotten?"

"No, I haven't forgotten. Are you going to rest or argue with me until morning?"

Surprisingly, she curled into my side, making herself comfortable. "Stubborn jerk," she whispered before going quiet.

There she was, the woman I loved.

Marinah

It wasn't fair, and not getting my way made me peevish. I'd been a very spoiled child during my formative years and learned to use tears and plain stubbornness to get what I wanted. Usually, it worked. Unfortunately, my sad, moping eyes popping out of my Shadow Warrior head didn't seem to do the trick.

I needed rest, though, and I had guard duty later. King had assigned it to me specifically to avoid another tantrum. Smart man. I was almost asleep when I overheard Labyrinth whisper to Beck, "What, no temper tantrum because she isn't getting her way and luring the Federation out?"

Beck's reply was priceless. "She's right, and our mighty leader is wrong. She knows she'll get her way."

A small smile tugged at my lips as I rested against King's chest. "Don't get any ideas," he mumbled sleepily, his voice rumbling through me.

I slept until Labyrinth woke me up for my shift. King's arm tightened briefly around me before he released me and rolled over. I resisted the urge to smooth my hand over his head. It would probably end with me taking out one of his eyes. Even in sleep, the man was imposing. In his Warrior form, he was downright breathtaking. I carefully rubbed my face and stood, stealing one last look at him before grabbing my weapons and heading for the roof.

Using my rifle's scope, I scanned the silent streets; my Warrior eyesight allowed me to see into the darkness. The cleared section of the city below looked ideal. If I could

make it back here after drawing the Federation's attention, I could take out anyone who ventured through that open area.

Lowering the rifle, I gazed out over the dark ruins. In the distance, one tall building stood, almost untouched by the destruction around it. Its eerie facade caught my attention.

I headed back to our camp on the top floor, descending the stairs to ground level. The sleep had done its job. I no longer felt the oppressive weight of exhaustion dogging my steps.

My thoughts drifted to Che and Ruth. It hadn't been that long, but I missed them. I'd never really thought about having children before, and now? I just didn't know. But the feeling lingered more often than I expected. It was crazy. Who would want to bring a child into this world? Ruth and Che were more than enough. No, not just enough, a complete handful. King's child would definitely be their match.

I was too young for my biological clock to start giving me problems. There was plenty of time. Maybe, one day, King and I could talk about it.

For now, though, I had Ruth to deal with. Training would benefit her, and maybe I'd find a way to curb her irrational behavior. And maybe pigs would fly. Oh well, it was a thought.

I forced myself to tune back into the sounds around me. The street was quiet, except for the occasional rustle of small nocturnal creatures. I found a spot between two large slabs of cement that offered cover and a good vantage point in both directions.

If I wasn't on watch, I'd scout high ground for our attack. Firing off several rounds and moving to the next location could make the Federation believe we had more Warriors than we did. It might also force them to release the hellhounds.

I turned the plan over in my mind, analyzing angles and contingencies. The horseshoe shape of the railcars might work in our favor. If we used a large beam, we could block the doors. If I could keep the soldiers away from the hounds, King could sabotage the railcars.

I wasn't even sure why I was so focused on figuring it all out. That was King's job, and he always knew exactly what to do. But the itch inside me wouldn't go away. It was a craving to be useful, to contribute as much as anyone else. Maybe it went back to my human insecurities, but I wanted to prove I was just as much a Warrior as the rest of them.

I sank deeper into my thoughts, turning over the stories in Nalista's books and what they meant. The female Warriors had blamed the men for the loss of their home planet. The males had always been volatile, and when the Warriors came to Earth, the women had given the men another chance, hoping the destruction of their world had finally been enough to change them.

But it wasn't. The male Warriors began fighting among themselves, and several died. The others didn't bat an eye. They easily returned to their old ways and refused to learn from history. That was when the women broke away, severing ties and leaving the men to their own fate. They didn't want the men's violence to destroy another planet or to betray their secrets. They no longer trusted the males to keep them safe.

The destruction of their home planet might not have changed the male Warriors, but the women leaving did. Their loss wiped out any chance of a fullblood Warrior being born again. The men had known the women were right, and it had shattered them. Unfortunately, it had been too late. They finally made the decision to change their lives forever by becoming farmers and slipping beneath human radar. They survived in rural farm country, waiting for the moment they would be needed. No one knew Shadow Warriors existed until they emerged to save humanity from the hellhounds.

I couldn't help wondering if there might be another female Warrior out there. I was a descendant of one, which increased the odds. The thought had kept me awake on more nights than worrying about Ruth ever had. I had so many questions, and the only way I'd ever get answers was if someone else like me existed.

One question burned brighter than the rest: why was I able to control the K-5 better than the men? The mating rage still affected me but only slightly, and it was nowhere near as bad as King's. Unfortunately, I didn't have enough answers to know the right questions to ask.

I turned my thoughts to General Smythe, and Ms. Beast purred inside me, Kill. I wanted him dead too, by my hand. It was personal, a vendetta I couldn't ignore. I owed him for my friends as well. Skylar, Mila, and Landan, all human, had escaped the Federation stronghold with me. Skylar's husband and Kara had died. We'd all worked together before I was promoted to Secretary of Defense and sent to negotiate with the Shadow Warriors.

Skylar's husband had died during our escape, and Kara was tortured for information. King had invited those who survived to stay on the island, but Landan requested a transfer to the western outposts. After he left, Skylar and Mila moved to the other side of the island, where King kept a home away from the citadel. They found a place near it. We hadn't been to that house in months, and I hadn't seen them recently. Though, the last time I saw Skylar, her eyes still held that haunting sadness, and the shadow of her husband's death lingered still.

I owed Smythe several times over, and I'd even the score for Skylar.

My thoughts twisted again, this time to my father. He'd known I was a Shadow Warrior, and I still hadn't forgiven him for keeping the truth from me. After reading Nalista's history, I understood better. Females didn't necessarily change into Warriors like the men did. There was no way my father or mother could have known

I was a shifting female. Still, the weight of their decisions lingered, especially on my mother's shoulders. Raising me vegan? That wasn't a coincidence. She'd known it could suppress the change. Nalista had written about the practice. It was common on the home planet; the females didn't want their daughters to be part of the war mongering Shadow Warriors.

It made me wonder. Was my mother ashamed of what we were?

I shook my head and forced the thought away. Dwelling on my mother always brought me down, and I needed to stay sharp.

My focus shifted to President Barnes. The scientist.

I knew he was responsible for creating the hellhounds; I just couldn't prove it. Why would a scientist become president? Before his name popped up as the Federation's first leader, he'd been no one. And then suddenly, he was President Barnes.

The president.

Science had created the hellhounds, using genetically modified protein added to formaldehyde that seeped into buried human remains and turned them into misshapen monsters. These creatures killed everything in their path. Before the hellhounds emerged, the massive corporations that controlled agriculture and food production had run things their way, unchecked by the wealthy assholes in the house and senate, no matter who sat in the Oval Office.

For years, corporate agriculture had filled our heads with assurances about the safety of GMOs and so many other things. They paid scientists to endorse their modified products and had enough money and influence to bury anyone who tried to expose the truth. Hell, Mexico fought GMO corn for more than a decade before it finally took over their crops.

The government shut down independent research, silenced critics, and destroyed the careers of those brave enough to speak out. No one realized the full extent of the devastation until it was too late. Even when hellhounds began killing us, we didn't know they were man-made, products of science designed to cut costs.

The first wave of hellhounds had nearly destroyed the world. It was only with the Shadow Warriors' help that we managed to survive. Now the formaldehyde had begun attacking the older dead, reanimating them as more intelligent, more terrifying versions of the monsters we already knew. Their twisted bodies were even scarier. And the thought of the ancient dead awakening? That was a nightmare waiting to happen.

A small squeak in the corner of my hideout pulled me out of my thoughts. I'd known the mouse was there since I entered. No, I would not lick my lips. I wouldn't give the men any more material to mock me with.

With a quick pounce, I caught the creature in one hand, its tiny body squirming between my claws. I lifted it by the tail, its panicked little eyes meeting mine, his filled with terror, mine with reluctant hunger.

Without thinking, I plopped it onto my tongue and closed my jaws. The mouse wiggled frantically, its tiny feet scratching at the roof of my mouth. I couldn't crunch it, no matter how hungry I was. I tried to swallow, but there was no way.

I tipped my head forward and opened my mouth. The mouse sprang out and scurried away, disappearing into the rubble. Thank goodness none of the men saw that. They'd laugh themselves to death. Apparently, I wasn't much of a predator when it came to small, cute animals. I needed something bigger to hunt for, maybe a boar or something less adorable. The only reason I'd been able to eat the mouse King gave me was because it was already dead. For now, I'd stick to the wretched MREs.

Two hours later, I slid back into the sleeping bag beside King. Garret had the next watch, giving me a few solid hours of rest before we went after the Federation.

“How was it out there?” King whispered.

“Quiet.”

“Come here.” He pulled me close, and I nestled against him, finding the familiar spot where my head fit perfectly against his chest. The leather straps he still wore made it less comfortable, but King’s unique scent was all I needed to let sleep take me.

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The men found enough mice and rats to satisfy their appetites the next morning. Garret and I stuck to cold MREs, exchanging silent, squeamish looks. King missed our little exchange, but I caught his raised eyebrow when I refused his offer of a fresh catch. Thankfully, he didn’t push me.

King called a meeting, and we gathered around a dusty area. Using a stick, he began sketching a map of the soldiers’ camp so the layout would be fresh in our minds. There were two main ways in: north and south. We were currently at the southern edge of the city. King’s scaled-to-size drawing impressed me. I could barely draw a straight line.

“The boxcars are here,” he said, pointing with the stick to the cluster of shapes. “We don’t know Smythe’s location, and that bothers me.”

My earlier thoughts on handling the soldiers had shifted. “What if we block the fronts of the shipping containers with something heavy to keep them from releasing the hellhounds?” I went on before King could stop me. “One of the large construction beams,” I said, waving a hand around us, “would work. There’s a tall building about a

hundred yards from the railcars. I could stage on the roof and pick off anyone who tried to remove the beam. It would take several humans to lift it."

King shook his head slightly. "That still doesn't cover how we get the beam in place."

Beck interjected. "We take the beam in early tomorrow morning, a few hours before sunrise. It needs to be heavy enough that the humans can't lift it easily. If two of us manage it quietly, we should be able to drop it in place without being spotted."

I was beginning to understand why King wanted Beck at his back. "With me on the roof, whoever goes in will be safe."

"What about their snipers?" King asked, his words edged with skepticism.

I gave him my duh face, which probably looked identical to my bored Warrior face. "If they had snipers, they'd have spotted us yesterday when we went to their camp." I held back the eye roll threatening to break free. King was being stubborn.

"No, I'm being smart," he snapped, answering my silent thoughts. Drat the man. He knew me too well.

"A third person could take out the perimeter guards," I added, shifting my tone to reasonable.

Finally, after running the plan through his head and weighing its feasibility, King gave a sharp nod. "We need to know how often the guards change. If we attack right after blocking the containers, it could work."

"I'm on it," Labyrinth said, standing. "I'll watch the camp and get the timing." He gave me a quick smile, but it vanished as soon as King grumbled under his breath.

Garret spoke up for the first time that morning. "I'd like to scavenge the city and see if there's anything we can take back or stash for a return trip."

Axel stood as well. "I'll go with Garret. I need to check out what's left of the hospital." At King's approving nod, Axel glanced at Garret. "If we find medical supplies, you can have them. I'll know what's needed."

"Deal." A look passed between the two men, something subtle but noticeable. Or maybe I imagined it, because when they caught me staring, they raised questioning brows.

"Be safe," I said, feeling a bit ridiculous for stating the obvious.

They emptied their packs and set off, hoping to refill them. That left King and me alone. I could've used a bath, but I didn't see that happening anytime soon. We had too much time to kill before tomorrow, and my patience was wearing thin.

"Well?" I asked, raising a brow at King. "We're alone. What are we going to do to fill the time?"

King

I watched Marinah like she was prey. She glanced around, clearly trying to figure out how to keep herself occupied, but all I could think about was her. My focus sharpened as our eyes met, and I saw the exact moment she realized I was going to pounce. She was quick. Quicker than I'd expected, and though I had every intention of catching her, she eluded me. She crouched low several feet away, her breathing heavier, her entire focus locked on me.

"What do you think I'm after?" I asked, circling her slowly, the predator in me fully awake.

She turned with me, her movements fluid. "I know exactly what you're after."

"It's been two minutes, and you're already going stir-crazy. I thought some sparring was in order."

She shook her head, her sharp eyes catching mine. "That's not the look I see in your eyes."

"I'm not surprised—" I lunged before finishing the sentence. She moved fast, using a leg block and twisting her body to the right. I'd seen her pull this move before and was ready for it. My arms caught her low at the waist, my head at her hip. Using the powerful drive of my legs, I lifted her off balance and brought her down solidly on her back. She hit the floor with a huff of air.

"Now what are you going to do?" I asked, a grin tugging at the corner of my mouth.

"What is this about?" she gasped, catching her breath.

I rolled off her and settled at her side, both of us staring up at the ceiling. "I want uninterrupted time with you. Somewhere no one can find us. If I can't make love to you, and now isn't the time, sparring works."

She turned toward me, and I felt her gaze, though I kept my eyes fixed above. "It's a tough life when you're king."

"That it is."

The tension between us buzzed like a live wire. With all the energy we had piled up, if we couldn't burn it off one way, we'd burn it off another. I braced myself, expecting Marinah to make a move. Sure enough, she launched from her back to her feet with startling speed. I pushed off the floor with my legs, creating space to track her next move.

She grabbed a hefty beam beside her and swung. I barely ducked in time. "Close, baby," I rebuked.

"You're getting slow, old man," she laughed.

I launched an entire desk at her. She saw it coming, dropped the beam, and came in low as the desk sailed over her head. She went for my legs, but I was already moving. Using the wall beside me, I ran toward her and leapt over her head.

"Maybe you're not that old after all," she said, her breathing a little heavier. She has no clue why I was actually doing this. I loved watching her Warrior in action. She had a grace of movement missing from male Shadow Warriors. She's worked hard on muscle memory, and her body reacted before her brain told her to. She was symmetry in motion, a beautiful, monstrous creature who was discovering herself. Her

roundhouse kick connected with my side, and I tried grabbing her leg, but she was already moving away. I pivoted and jabbed with a front kick to keep her back. “Are you giving up?” she panted.

“You wish.” I exploded in her direction, dodging away from another kick aimed at my head and took her beneath her armpits, jerking my head back to avoid her snapping jaws. We landed in a pile of arms and legs when she tried to twist from the fall. She was nearly as strong as me, and it wouldn’t surprise me if she surpassed all of us at some point. It amazed me that Marinah didn’t see it.

She drove her elbow into my neck, and a loud grunt exploded from my chest. She lifted her ass and scissored my legs between hers, bending her knees and pretzeling my lower body. I twisted and brought one leg up high and pushed it into her crotch while pushing on her shoulder. At the same time, I grabbed her opposite arm and she was trapped.

“Good move, you need to teach me,” she said with appreciation.

I had seen her in action far too many times to fall for her fake acceptance. “Tap out or prepare for the next move.”

“You’ve been working on these without me,” she said, her voice taking on an exaggeratedly whiny tone, another one of her tactics.

“Beck is a good guinea pig.” Keeping her pinned, I realized it was me breathing heavily now.

“I’m not giving up,” she promised defiantly.

“I know.”

Her eyes turned speculative. “Can we make love in our Beast forms?”

The question hit me like a ton of bricks, and my grip loosened slightly. “Now isn’t the time to explore that option.”

“I know.” Her gaze was wide, disarmingly innocent. “I just wondered.”

“Seeing as you’re the only female Warrior, I’d think that’s a question you’d need to answer.”

Her body tensed, just the slightest bit. “So, it can be done?”

She was killing me. “It’s not like there’s a sexual guide in the history texts,” I replied, trying to keep my voice steady. “I think it’s something we could explore if you wanted.”

She moved her arm the tiniest bit, but I kept talking, pretending not to notice. “We should make our own rules.”

“Do you find this form attractive?” she asked, while shifting ever so slightly again.

I looked at her, the hair covering her body similar to mine, her muscular frame a powerful symphony of strength. “I find your Warrior form stunning.”

“Sexy?” she pushed.

My voice dropped, gruff with honesty. “Quite sexy.”

“You’re weird.” She twisted sharply, her core strength driving the movement. One of her legs shoved between mine, breaking my hold. Before I could counter, she flipped us, pinning me beneath her. She had the advantage, but I still controlled her upper

body. I wasn't letting go.

Then her teeth found my arm.

I tapped before the bite hit bone, and she released me immediately. "You let me win," she said softly.

"Maybe." I rolled toward her, and just like that, we were back where we started.

"I hate you," she muttered, though there was no heat in the words.

I touched the tip of my claw to her nose. "You love me." It wasn't a question.

"I do." Her eyes softened as she turned her head to look into mine. "Do you ever think about children?"

"Children?" I echoed, unsure where this was going.

"Our children."

My heart skipped a beat, then raced ahead. "Is there something I should know?"

She shook her head, just barely. "I never thought about having children, but now the thought pops into my mind sometimes. Then I feel guilty for even wanting to bring a child into this screwed-up world." She sighed in frustration. "So, do you ever think about babies? Our babies?"

This was a delicate topic; one we probably shouldn't be having in the middle of a mission. Still, I couldn't brush it off. "I agree with you about not wanting them to suffer in the current world." I reached over carefully, sliding my hand beneath her jaw. With the tip of my claw, I traced her lower lip, catching a flash of her sharp teeth

in the dim light. “But yes, I think about our future children all the time.”

“Is it because they’d be fullblood?” she asked thoughtfully.

She’d been reading more of our history. I nodded slightly. “I won’t lie. Bringing a full blood into the world would be incredible. But that’s not why I think about our children. I want a Marinah rug rat running around, getting into more trouble than Che and Ruth combined. I want temper tantrums and squishy hugs.”

Her massive jaw parted in a grin. “Squishy hugs?”

“You heard me. I’m going soft.”

Her expression gentled with understanding. “I feel it too. I want a part of you here when we’re gone. It’s almost a craving.”

I slid closer to her, our bodies nearly touching. “I’ll make you a deal.”

“I’m all ears,” she whispered.

“We’ll have a little boy and a little girl. That way, we’re both happy.”

Her eyes shimmered with emotion. “I love you, and you’re going to make me cry. But if I try to wipe the tears away, I’ll probably take out an eye.”

I pulled her closer until our bodies pressed together. “Shadow Warriors don’t cry.”

“Then don’t talk about squishy hugs.” She inhaled deeply, drawing in my scent as I did hers. “When we return to the island,” she murmured, “I want alone time with you. Let someone else handle the end of the world.”

“You’ve got a deal.”

Marinah

He'd thought about our children. Knowing that made the idea feel more real. But not now, not here, not on U.S. soil. I wanted any child we brought into this world to be born on our island, after the danger from the hellhounds and the Federation had passed, after we were living in peace. It might have been a dream, but it was a dream that would keep me going when things got rough.

What didn't sit as easily with me was the burning need for my mate. It went far beyond anything physical. It was about closeness, sharing food, thoughts, space, and simply being one. I'd never understood the bond between two people in love before. Maybe our Warrior side amplified it and pushed it into something even deeper. Why didn't matter. I needed King like I needed air.

Patience wasn't a strength of mine, and I didn't do well with downtime. King understood that better than anyone. That's why we had the quick sparring match. It had been for me, to burn off my restless energy. When we finally returned to the island, I planned to kidnap him for a month. The other Warriors could handle saving mankind and dealing with the extra bullshit. We needed time, just the two of us, away from everything.

The remaining hours passed in preparation. After a quick lunch, we left the building we'd been holed up in and scouted nearby high-rises around the Federation's camp. Some were too unstable to reach, but we found several that would work.

"Your strategizing is improving," King said after we climbed to the top of one promising building.

I gave him a questioning look. “How so?”

“You’re thinking like a Warrior,” he replied. “When you first arrived on the island, even after we discovered your secret, strategy was foreign to you. But now you’ve embraced the part of you that sees the bigger picture.”

“Did you wait for me to voice my opinion earlier?” I asked curiously.

He nodded. “I always do.”

“I’m gaining confidence.”

“Yes.” His gaze swept over me with obvious appreciation. “You are.”

We were in the middle of a war, planning an assault on a heavily armed enemy, and yet, King’s praise made me want to jump up and down like a child. He understood me more than I realized. He got what I was going through when it came to figuring out my capabilities, and that connection gave me a boost of confidence I hadn’t known I needed.

We made it back to camp before the others, but it wasn’t long before Axel and Garret arrived. They said all the right things as they unpacked their bags, but something about the way they carried themselves put me on edge. It was subtle, but it was there. What bothered me more was that King didn’t seem to notice. I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was off. I trusted Axel implicitly, but Garret? Not as far as I could throw him.

Axel and Garret began unloading their haul, spreading out their finds for us to inspect.

“It wasn’t as much as we’d hoped,” Axel admitted, “but at least they hadn’t been

picked completely clean. We also found a buried grocery store with canned goods. No one's entered it since the bombings. It's a goldmine."

He looked at Garret in a way that made my stomach churn, like there was a private conversation happening between them that I wasn't privy to. Garret snapped his gaze away and addressed me without fully meeting my eyes.

"Once this is over, I'll bring a larger team to transport everything we found. It'll supplement our food stores and help us prepare for winter."

I didn't say anything, just nodded, but I couldn't help the protective feeling rising in me for Axel. Something was going on, and it was eating at me.

Before Axel and Garret could even settle in with MREs for dinner, Beck and Labyrinth arrived, bickering as they entered.

"It was once an hour," Labyrinth said defensively.

"He took at least seven breaks. That's more than once an hour," Beck growled back.

"He didn't go all the way to the latrine on three of them. Those don't count," Labyrinth argued, throwing his hands up.

Beck's irritation boiled over, and his voice rose. "When you're on guard duty, you don't leave your post. Ever. People die when the guard doesn't do his job."

Labyrinth crossed his arms defiantly. "If you gotta go, you gotta go."

"Then piss in your pants," Beck shot back like a hammer. "You don't abandon your position for any reason."

“Okay, boys,” I said, keeping my face straight even though the usually quiet, serene Labyrinth was clearly baiting Beck. He’d been doing it more and more lately, testing the limits of the other man’s patience. “Why don’t you eat and get rid of the hangries?”

Of King’s guard, Labyrinth was the one most unknown to me. The different color of his eyes always gave me pause. Add in his goliath size and calm demeanor, and he was more than just a mystery. I rarely saw his playful side like now. Sometimes he defended me in meetings, and at other times he rejected my thoughts. His comment about temper tantrums the night before had surprised me and hit home just a little more because I hadn’t expected it from him.

Beck I understood. Nokita was also easy to read, and his antics were legend. I could even understand Cabel. He wasn’t the newest guard, but he was the newest to me. Axel was simply my friend. But Labyrinth... He’d easily deferred to me when we were held by the Federation, but I simply didn’t know him like I knew the others. I wanted to question King about him, but that would bring on the mating rage, so I couldn’t.

Two sets of eyes drilled into me and brought me out of my wool gathering. I couldn’t help the grin that slid into my expression. “Or not,” I added with mock innocence, throwing in a dramatic shiver for effect.

Of course, King growled over my shoulder, his warning clear to the men for daring to look at me like that. Sheesh, his overprotectiveness could be exhausting.

Surprisingly, Labyrinth and Beck finally shook off their bickering and joined the group. Even more surprisingly, Labyrinth winked at me when King wasn’t looking, and Beck just grumbled under his breath as he began his report.

“The tents hold supplies. We didn’t spot extra weapons, which is good news. The bad

news is a hundred more hellhounds came in today. The containers are full now. The guards switch out every five hours, but they're lax and sloppy."

Labyrinth grabbed the stick King had used earlier to draw maps in the dirt and started sketching the layout again. "The hellhounds are locked in with a simple slide bar. That's all that keeps them contained. The problem is, with all four cars full, one beam won't hold. We'll need at least two. If they get even one container open, it will be much harder for us to accomplish the mission."

He glanced at Beck before delivering the other news, and Beck's gaze shifted briefly to King. "They're using whistles or something similar. It's a sound frequency that controls the hellhounds. The closer the hounds got to the soldiers, the louder the buzz. It's irritating, but it doesn't affect us."

Something sparked in my memory. "Could they be playing with sound waves? That's what they hit us with when we were trying to leave Washington."

Beck nodded. "Well, whatever they're using now works. We need to get our hands on one of those whistles."

The meeting broke up after that. We all needed rest for what was coming. King took the first watch, leaving me to lie down and try to settle my thoughts. Beck and Labyrinth were snoring in unison, and Axel and Garret were huddled in the corner, talking in voices so low even my Warrior-enhanced hearing couldn't make out their words.

I pulled my rifle close on one side and my sword on the other. A few hours of solid sleep was all I needed to be ready. Tomorrow, we would fight.

I slept until King gently shook me awake.

???

“We leave in fifteen,” King said, standing over me.

I didn’t grumble or make any snide comments. I just wanted to get this over with. K-5 sparked through me, and I let Ms. Beast send a little more into my system. We were going to need it.

The streets were dark and eerily quiet as we made our way toward the Federation camp. When we reached the building King and I had scoped out earlier, the men left me to set up. I hadn’t told King, but I was shifting to human the moment I got into position. I couldn’t afford to miss a shot because of my claws.

I found my spot and set up the rifle. It wasn’t technically a sniper rifle, but this baby would do the trick.

My shift was seamless. In the early days, Ms. Beast and I fought for control, but now we’d reached an understanding and we worked as one unit most of the time. Her forte was killing, and especially when we were on the same page, she didn’t mind my human side taking the lead.

As the last prickle of the shift rippled through my skin, I stretched my shoulders and got to work. I grabbed a hair tie and wrapped it around my braids. Then came the boots.

Lovingly, I lifted them from my pack and slid them on, savoring the feel of the leather hugging my feet. After a small caress, I set my sights back on the task at hand. I picked up the AK, brought my leg up for stability, and rested my elbow on my knee.

Yeah, I couldn’t help admiring my sexy booted feet for a second before I focused. Through the scope, I scanned the Federation camp below. Using the marks on the

reticle, I calculated the linear distance. At 330 yards, the AK was well within its effective range.

I exhaled slowly, steadying my aim. Showtime.

I brought the scope to my eye and swept the area near where I knew King and the men were heading in. A few seconds later, I spotted them, their figures moving swiftly toward the camp. King's powerful muscles devoured the distance, his frame imposing even in the shadows. He and Labyrinth carried one beam, while Beck and Axel hefted the other. I looked back at King, unable to tear my eyes away. Watching him move sent a surge of excitement through me. I whispered a quick prayer for his safety, for the men's safety, and for my ability to keep them covered.

Movement flickered in the corner of my eye. I adjusted the scope slightly and found a sentry, his figure barely visible in the low light as he moved closer to King and the others. Another shadow caught my attention. It was Garret. He appeared silently behind the guard, and with a single, lethal strike he took him down. The fluidity and speed of his action gave me reassurance. Garret could handle himself, and that knowledge settled some of my earlier doubts.

I shifted the scope, scanning the camp for the remaining guards. I located one, standing near a railcar, but the other eluded me. My breathing remained steady.

I reminded myself of the reality we were facing. Many of the Federation soldiers had been conscripted against their will, forced into this horror. But there was no threat the Federation could have made to compel me to kill children. These men had made their choice, and I wouldn't carry guilt for their deaths.

If they'd captured the outpost survivors and taken them away, we would have followed. We would have fought to free them. But the soldiers had chosen annihilation instead. They'd left us no alternative, and they deserved what was

coming.

I steadied my hands, my eye locked on the scene below. This was war, and there was no room for hesitation.

Another flash to the left caught my attention. I spotted Garret closing in on the second guard. His quick, methodical kill ensured the man was down. For a brief moment, I thought we were in the clear. A gunshot cracked through the darkness, aimed at King and the men as they reached the metal shipping containers. My pulse spiked as I scanned the area, spotting the shooter as another muzzle flash gave him away. I inhaled sharply, steadying my aim. I pulled the trigger, and the man dropped.

“King and Labyrinth slammed the beam into place and sprinted toward the makeshift barracks. Gunfire erupted again, and I caught sight of two soldiers bolting from a nearby building. I took them both out with quick, precise shots. My heart clenched when King reached the thin aluminum siding of the barracks. The material wouldn’t stop a bullet, and every instinct in me wanted to yell at him to move.

A set of doors on the far-right building burst open, and a hail of gunfire erupted. Soldiers streamed out, firing blindly at the Warriors’ positions. I didn’t hesitate. My scope found two more targets, and I took them out before King and the Warriors surged into action.

My stomach twisted, but I forced myself to turn my attention to the rest of the camp. Movement to the left drew my focus. Two men dragged Garret between them, his body limp, his head lolling as though unconscious. Rage flared hot, and I lined up my shot. My first bullet dropped one man with a clean headshot, sending Garret tumbling to the ground. The second tried to run, but my next shot buried itself in the center of his back. He fell, lifeless.

Garret wasn’t moving. Panic clawed at me, and I knew he could still be alive. If I

didn't get to him, it wouldn't be for long. I slung the rifle over my shoulder, adjusted the sword at my hip, and headed to the stairs.

I hit the debris-strewn street at a full sprint, angling north to approach from a direction that avoided King's position. Garret had been about halfway between the north entrance and the metal barracks. If King handled the soldiers where he was, I could get to Garret and take him to safety.

It wasn't the plan, but sometimes plans were about improvising and surviving.

I crept into the camp, sticking close to the shadows of half-demolished buildings. My eyes locked onto Garret where he lay sprawled and motionless. Keeping low, I circled wide, scanning for any lingering soldiers. Gunfire cracked in the distance, coming from King's direction. Frustration gripped me because I didn't know what was happening.

Spotting no immediate threat, I darted forward, heading straight for Garret. A bullet whizzed past my head, close enough to make my ears ring. I dove behind a crumpled vehicle, heart pounding. From the leather strap across my chest, I pulled a handgun and gripped it tightly, preparing to peek around the edge.

That's when I heard the voice.

"Well, well, what do we have here, boys?"

Crap. That voice was burned into my memory. General Smythe.

Fury exploded in my chest. Ms. Beast raged in my head. Kill, kill, kill, her voice nearly drowned out rational thought. It took everything I had not to shift. My vision blurred with red as the haze of rage threatened to consume me.

Smythe might not know I was a Shadow Warrior, which gave me the upper hand, or at least, that's what I told myself. It was four against one, and even if I wanted to shift and rip their faces off, it wasn't the smart play. King was right, a bullet would stop me.

"You have four rifles trained on you, Ms. Church. Do the smart thing, or they'll fire."

After inhaling deeply, I dropped the gun and raised my arms slowly, making no sudden moves.

Where the heck was King?

The kick came out of nowhere, smashing into the side of my head and sending me sprawling onto the dusty pavement. My cheek hit the ground hard, and blood filled my mouth. Before I could recover, Smythe leaned down, pressing the cold barrel of his gun against my temple.

"How many Shadow Warriors are with you?" he demanded.

I turned my head just enough to spit blood onto the ground and sneer up at him. Smythe's boot came down on several of my braids, pinning me in place. The pressure sent pain across my scalp, but it didn't faze me.

My gaze shifted to Garret. His fingers twitched, moving slowly toward the knife strapped to his side. Relief bloomed in my chest. He was alive. I just needed to keep Smythe and his lackeys focused on me.

"There are nearly two hundred Warriors raining down on your head right now," I said, my voice dripping with hatred.

Smythe leaned in, my braids still pinned beneath his boot. His finger trailed down my

cheek in a mockery of tenderness. “You’re a liar, little miss defense secretary, a traitor to your country. And you know what the punishment for treason is, don’t you?” His voice dropped to a whisper. “It’s death.”

He straightened, aiming his rifle at my head again. I barely registered the movement behind him, but Smythe heard a noise. I seized my chance. My hand shot up, gripping the barrel of Smythe’s rifle. I twisted hard, ripping it from his grasp as I propelled myself off the ground.

Using the rifle, I slammed the butt into his face. His nose crunched, and he dropped like a stone statue.

A gunshot cracked, the bullet slicing past my ear, too close for comfort. Spinning with the rifle still in my hands, I swung it like a club, driving the stock into the stomach of the next soldier. He doubled over, gasping, just as my other hand reached for my sword.

Garret was on the ground, locked in a rolling struggle with one of Smythe’s men. Another soldier froze, his gun half-raised, staring at me with wide, terrified eyes.

I locked onto his gaze, my voice low and full of his promised death. “Run.”

The word barely left my mouth before I let Ms. Beast take over. The shift was explosive. The soldier’s scream echoed through the air as I lunged. He didn’t get more than two steps before my claws caught him, dragging him toward me. My teeth sank into the back of his neck, and with a vicious push of my hand against his spine, I ripped his spinal column free. Blood sprayed in a wide arc; the metallic tang sharp in the air as his body crumpled.

But I was already moving. Garret’s attacker barely registered me before my claws raked across his throat, the gurgling sound of his death cut short. I kicked the lifeless

body off Garret and dropped to my knees beside him.

Blood soaked the front of his shirt, the fabric clinging to his chest. My claws made quick work of tearing it open. “Where are you hit?” I demanded, scanning the mess of crimson for the source.

Garret wheezed. “Chest... knife... deep.”

I gritted my teeth while my hands worked frantically to find the wound. “Stay with me,” I growled. “I’ve got you.”

I tore Garret’s shirt completely off, revealing two puncture wounds. Using the halves of the ruined fabric, I pressed down hard on the bleeding injuries. I worked quickly, reaching for the extra strap on my chest. It was designed for moments exactly like this. King had insisted I practice buckling and unbuckling the leather in Beast form until it became easier in most circumstances.

“You’re not dying on me,” I muttered, tightening the strap securely around Garret’s chest. “Stay with me, okay?”

He coughed, the sound wet and rattling deep in his lungs. My stomach sank. This wasn’t good. “I’m not going anywhere,” he groaned weakly. His breath came in short, labored bursts.

My gaze flicked to Smythe, still alive but unconscious. We needed him for answers. I couldn’t leave him here indefinitely, but Garret wouldn’t last if I didn’t get him out of this mess first. Adjusting my weapons, I bent down and hoisted Garret into a fireman’s carry.

Before heading north, away from King, I delivered a swift kick to Smythe’s head, ensuring he’d stay out cold.

“Marinah,” Garret’s voice was faint. “You need to let me go. Leave me here. Help King.”

“No.”

“You must.”

“Shut up,” I snapped, adjusting my grip on him and ignoring his protests. The best spot to take him was my previous sniper position. King knew he would find me there. My muscles burned as I sprinted, leaping over debris and scaling cement walls nearly seven feet high with Garret over my shoulder.

Gunfire cracked sporadically from the camp behind us, the sound chasing my every step.

“Go to your mate,” Garret ground out between wheezes.

“Oh, shut up, you whiny baby,” I growled, forcing my legs to move faster. “You’re responsible for the loss of my Doc Martens, and if you die on me, I’ll chase you straight into hell to get my revenge.”

He didn’t respond. By the time I reached the building, he was unconscious. My heart hammered as I raced up the stairs, taking them four at a time.

I laid him down as gently as I could once I gained the rooftop. His chest heaved unevenly, the wheezing louder now. Blood soaked the makeshift bandages, and I tightened the strap around his chest, trying to slow the bleeding. It wasn’t enough, but it was all I could do.

I brushed Garret’s hair from his forehead, then picked up my rifle. Resting my eye on the scope, I scanned the area below. Whatever was coming, I would protect Garret,

and my mate, with everything I had.

King and the others were pinned behind one of the buildings. I scanned the camp through my scope, waiting for the next muzzle flash. When it came, I fired, dropping the man. Another flash, another shot. I ran the scope across the camp, searching for movement, but the only sign of life came when Labyrinth's head popped out briefly. No gunfire followed.

The Warriors left their cover, pushing deeper into the camp. I tracked them as they approached the spot where Garret had gone down. No sign of Smythe. My stomach twisted.

"Fuck," I whispered.

The look on King's face when he bent down to pick up one of my tattered, bloodied boots didn't help. He shook his head, and even from this distance, I could feel the fury radiating from him.

Oops.

He barked an order at Labyrinth, but I couldn't read his lips from this angle. Maybe it was better I didn't know what he said. A faint noise from Garret drew my attention, and I lowered the rifle, crouching beside him. His pulse was weak beneath my fingers.

"Can't breathe," he rasped, his chest heaving shallowly.

"I'll get Axel," I said quickly, but he groaned in protest.

"No time," he gasped. His eyes cracked open, glassy with pain. "Tell him it would've been great. Please tell him."

I slipped my clawed hand beneath his head, lifting it slightly. “You’re not dying on me,” I growled. “I just went through hell to save you, and the only chance I have of surviving King’s wrath is keeping you alive.”

His lips twitched faintly, like he might argue, but then his eyes rolled back, and he went limp.

His words replayed in my head, and suddenly, it clicked. This was why Axel didn’t trigger King’s mating rage. My mate had known, but of course, he hadn’t shared. I felt like an idiot for not piecing it together sooner.

Axel needed a mate, and Garret, apparently, had been the answer all along. I thought about what had gone through my head. Odd, strange, those were the words. I felt bad now because I hadn’t understood. Garret had to live. Axel deserved happiness just like the rest of us. There was no time to dwell. I lifted the rifle again, returning to my task of keeping Garret alive.

I found King in the scope and fired a shot over their heads, ensuring they saw my muzzle flash. Another shot followed, drawing their attention upward. Smythe could wait. Right now, Garret’s life was the priority.

The Warriors understood the message. King turned on his heel and charged back the way they’d come, heading straight for me.

“Hurry,” I whispered, my heart pounding.

King

I tore into the building where we'd left Marinah, my feet pounding up the stairs two at a time. The coppery scent of blood enveloped me on the last two flights. My heart was a drumbeat in my chest by the time I burst onto the roof.

She was kneeling over Garret, her hands stained crimson.

"He's been stabbed twice in the chest, and he's barely breathing," she said as I rushed toward her.

I scooped her up and moved her away from the injured man. Beast stayed quiet, but I couldn't help myself. Even for a second, I needed to feel her in my arms, to know she was safe.

"King," she snapped, wriggling out of my grasp. "He's injured, and we need Axel."

"He's a minute behind me. They're coming up the stairs now," I said, dropping to my knees beside Garret. I loosened the strap holding the bloody material pressed against his chest, my jaw tightening at the sight of the deep wounds.

Marinah was already moving, pulling a shirt from her bag and handing it to me. I stuffed the fabric beneath the strap and pulled it tight again. Garret's face was turning blue, his breath almost nonexistent.

Axel erupted from the stairs, Labyrinth and Beck close behind. He didn't waste a second and dropped to his knees, pulling his medical bag from his pack. Axel

grabbed a short plastic tube from his supplies and tore away our makeshift bandages.

“Hold him,” he barked.

I steadied Garret as Axel rolled him to his side and sliced deep into his flesh with his knife. Marinah flinched at the brutal cut, but Axel’s hand was steady as he jammed the tube into Garret’s chest. The hiss of escaping air was immediate, followed by a gasp as Garret sucked in oxygen.

Axel injected something into Garret and leaned in to examine the wounds more closely. His face was expressionless while he worked.

I turned to Marinah, anger rising despite myself. “Why did you shift back to human?” I growled, my voice hard.

Even in her beast form, I saw the flush of blood rush up her neck and into her face. “I didn’t want to shoot with claws,” she said, her jaw set stubbornly. The defiance in her stance stoked my temper further.

“You couldn’t have told me this before I left you?” My fists clenched as I fought to keep my cool, but my frustration only increased. She was a Warrior, and she needed to remember that. Always.

“You’re right,” she said, holding up her hands in a rare show of surrender. “I’m not arguing with you right now. Garret is still alive, and he wouldn’t be if I stayed here.”

I took a step closer, narrowing the space between us. She didn’t back down. Instead, she moved in closer, her gaze burning holes through me.

I pointed over my shoulder. “You went into the Federation camp as human, the one thing I didn’t want you doing. That was stupid and irresponsible.”

Her eyes flared with anger. When she spoke, her voice was a low growl. “Now you’re calling me stupid?”

I let my gaze drop to her feet; giant, bare, and covered in the shredded remnants of black leather clinging to her claws. Slowly, I lifted my head to meet her glare. “If the boot fits.”

The look she gave me could have melted steel. She was coiled like a spring, ready to launch herself at me and take off my head. The space around us had gone unnaturally silent, but I didn’t take my eyes off her. A physical fight wasn’t what I wanted, but Marinah might need it.

“He’s seizing!” Axel’s shout shattered the tension.

Marinah dropped beside Garret. “What do you need me to do?” she asked with none of the anger she had just given me.

Axel’s expression was something I’d never seen before. His eyes darted around frantically, searching for a solution. Raw fear gripped him.

“Grab whatever you can to keep him from biting his tongue,” he finally barked.

I snatched up his pack, rummaging through until I found a length of thick rubber tubing. Tossing it to Marinah, I knelt beside her as she tried to wedge it between Garret’s teeth. Her claws made it impossible.

“Let me help,” I said, and together, we managed to force the tubing into place.

“Hold it there,” Axel ordered. His desperate eyes met mine, and the weight of what I was seeing hit me hard.

“He’s lost too much blood,” Axel said, his voice breaking.

“No,” Marinah growled fiercely. “He’s not dying. You told me a water solution can help in these situations. I remember you saying that.”

The seizure subsided, and Garret went limp. Axel didn’t waste a moment, setting up an IV with trembling hands. Marinah turned her haunted gaze to me.

“I had Smythe in my hands,” she said. “He got away.”

Now she tells me. I looked at Beck and Labyrinth. “Get Smythe. Alive if possible.”

They disappeared from the roof without a word.

“He needs blood,” Axel muttered. “Clear fluid won’t save him.”

“Warrior blood will kill him,” he added, glancing up at Marinah with grim certainty.

“You’re sure?” she asked, her eyes locked on Axel’s every move.

Axel took Garret’s hand and held it tightly. Garret’s breathing grew shallow again, each gasp weaker than the last. Marinah placed a hand on Axel’s shoulder, her voice urgent.

“You haven’t tried mine. Female Warrior blood could make a difference.”

Axel shook his head, his eyes filled with certainty. “It will kill him instantly.”

Marinah turned to me, her gaze piercing. “We can’t let him die.”

There was nothing I could say to ease the blow. She’d risked her life for nothing, and

frustration surged through me. I turned away, trying to rein in the storm brewing inside me.

Axel's focus didn't leave Garret. "Marinah, take his hand. I'll clean and suture the wounds to stop the bleeding." His words carried defeat.

I moved to the edge of the roof, scanning the city below while they switched places. Marinah held Garret while Axel worked, his hands steady but his movements filled with resignation. Garret's shallow breaths were a fragile tether keeping him with us.

Through the scope, I spotted Beck and Labyrinth moving through the streets below. Labyrinth was carrying someone slung over his shoulder. If we had any luck at all, it was Smythe. My grip tightened on the rifle as I tracked their progress, keeping a sharp eye on the shadows around them.

This rooftop wasn't safe. We were too close to the enemy camp and too exposed. The longer we stayed, the worse our chances were. I glanced back at Garret, his pale, sweat-covered face saying nothing I didn't already know. The longer he held on, the more vulnerable we became.

Beck and Labyrinth hit the stairs, their footsteps echoing up the well. Marinah and Axel were speaking in low voices when Beck stormed onto the roof, his face a mask of frustration.

"They had a vehicle hidden," he snapped, "and Smythe got away. We picked up this guy instead." He jabbed a thumb toward the man Labyrinth unceremoniously dumped onto the rooftop floor.

The man groaned loudly, confirming he was alive.

"He pulled a gun on us," Beck said, his lip curling in disgust. "Then he decided

against pulling the trigger. Stupid man.” He turned to Axel. “How’s Garret?”

“He’ll die without a transfusion,” Axel said in a clipped voice.

“Universal. Blood for everyone,” the man on the ground muttered.

Axel’s head snapped up, his eyes narrowing. “You have O negative blood?”

“Blood, blood, more blood,” the man coughed, his words slurred and strange. His face twisted into a grin, the kind that sent a chill down my spine. The eerie look in his eyes made my gut tighten. Something about him was off. Dangerous and unpredictable came to mind.

Labyrinth hoisted the prisoner, dragging him closer to Garret. The man’s arm hung at an unnatural angle, and he groaned in pain with each movement.

If the transfusion worked, it would mean staying here longer. It was something we couldn’t afford. I glanced at Axel and caught the faintest spark of hope in his eyes. Then I looked at Marinah and saw the same mirrored in hers.

I couldn’t believe I was giving in. If we were staying here, there was a lot to do to make this rooftop as secure as possible. My mind was already racing through the steps we’d need to take. But when it came down to it, I didn’t hesitate in my priorities. If I had to choose between Garret or Marinah, the decision was already made.

He’d better decide quickly if he was going to fight to live, because we wouldn’t be able to wait forever.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:36 pm

Marinah

“All we can do is wait,” Axel said, after the transfusion. “We’ll know if he’ll survive in the next day or so. I’ll take a look at the prisoner’s arm.”

If the transfusion worked, the prisoner had saved Garret’s life. I kept my eyes on Garret. A few minutes later, I heard a snap and the prisoner groaned.

I leaned back against the short wall that bordered the roof, my eyes turned to the prisoner. He had wild green eyes, too large for his gaunt, filthy face. With his broken arm and the way Beck had hobbled him, he wasn’t much of a threat. His clothes were ragged, and his skin was caked with grime, leaving little trace of its original color. The swelling on his forehead, a gift from a boot to the head when he’d pulled a gun on Beck and Labyrinth, added to his pitiful appearance.

He stared at me, a strange light in his gaze. “Pretty butterfly,” he finally said, in a hoarse, singsong voice.

King kicked the man in the thigh. “Shut up,” he growled.

My mate wasn’t handling things well. Smythe’s escape and my shifting to human had sent him into full-on royal highness mope mode. The men liked to accuse me of throwing tantrums, but my fits had nothing on King’s when he decided to dive headfirst into a king-sized funk.

Walking a deliberate wide berth around the prisoner, I circled toward him. “I’m heading to check out the lower floors,” I said. “Wanna come?”

It was the best olive branch I had to offer, but when he turned to look at me, I instantly regretted it. His eyes were dark and unreadable, the kind of look that warned me to tread carefully.

“I’ll keep watch,” he said.

The clipped tone told me everything I needed to know. He then turned his back, his shoulders as stiff as a board.

Alrighty then.

I decided on a methodical search, starting on the floor directly below us. Our island was well-equipped, but every now and then, we came across something we couldn’t get back home. The process was slow, and I had no problem taking my time and giving King a chance to unwind. I righted desks and opened drawers to sift through their contents. Most of it was office supplies, paperclips, pens, and other useless remnants of the old world.

Then, tucked into one of the drawers, I found an old-fashioned rag doll sealed in its original package. It looked like a collectible from before the world went sideways. It was worthless now, but maybe a certain young girl would appreciate it. That was if she had any childlike innocence left in her at all.

Further digging unearthed two pocketknives. Ruth might not care for the doll, but she and Che would love the knives. They already carried sharp military blades on their hips, but these folding ones were perfect for stuffing in their pockets as backups.

I kept searching, gathering a few other small trinkets to bring back for friends. Eventually, I stumbled across something that made me think of King. A faint smile tugged at the corner of my mouth as I tucked it into my pack.

The search took a few hours, but it felt good to be doing something useful instead of standing around watching my mate sulk. My backpack was nearly full by the time I finished, and the extra space left by my destroyed boots came in handy.

It was midday when I returned to the roof. King and Beck were gone. Axel was napping beside Garret. The prisoner sat against the short wall, his eyes closed, head tilted back. Labyrinth had taken King's position as watch, his posture as rigid as King's had been.

"Boys checking out other parts of the city?" I asked casually.

Labyrinth always seemed carved in stone, but he had no problem, at least in the past, answering my questions. He kept his head turned away and nodded. I already knew I was in deep shit, and this wasn't helping.

"I found somethings for Ruth, Che, and even Maylin," I said.

It finally got his attention, and he turned to me, his gaze fixing on mine for a brief three seconds. He blinked once, slow and deliberate, before looking away again. Damn those eyes. He needed a good woman who would melt beneath them.

"It's not much," I added, "I wanted to thank Maylin for the boots I destroyed."

He didn't seem to hear me. Instead, his focus remained on the city. I was getting nowhere.

"What's the prisoner been up to?" I tried again.

"Singing with the ladybugs," the prisoner himself called out from a few feet away.

"He's nuts," Labyrinth mumbled. "We think he's been living in the city since the

bombs. Sometimes he's mentally here, and sometimes he isn't, if you get what I mean."

I looked into the prisoner's unsettling eyes, and he grinned at me, revealing blackened teeth.

"Should we let him go?" I asked.

"He tried to kill us."

I counted to ten to keep my temper in check. When I was sure I could speak without grinding the words out, I tried again. "He's been attacked by the government, and he's still alive. He didn't manage that by being nice. And I can't believe I have to remind you that he didn't pull the trigger. We need to know more about him."

Labyrinth ignored me, of course, and started a conversation of his own. One I didn't like.

"You need to fix things with King."

Wow. I do, do I? "I wouldn't change going after Garret, so I don't think an apology will work."

He finally turned to face me, locking his eyes on mine. Ms. Beast grumbled. Quiet, I told her. Labyrinth inhaled, and I knew whatever he said, I most likely wouldn't appreciate.

"You're the first female Warrior in generations. The women even took the female children with them." He paused. "There is nothing we can do to change that history. No Warrior has mated with our own kind since the women left." Another pause. "We know how special you truly are. If King held a vote, you'd be locked in a padded

room eating bonbons.”

“Try it,” I fumed.

He ignored my challenge. “King is making you as militarily strong as the rest of us. But he knows what you mean for our race. He cannot stand by and let you risk your life needlessly. I would give anything to find a Warrior female, but we have no idea if another exists. The child you create is the Shadow Warrior future.”

For a man of few words, he seemed to be on a roll. His entire speech danced around the topic of mine and King’s relationship. It didn’t seem to matter how we felt. I had a job to do for the Shadow Warrior race, and that was that. Argh, I needed something heavy to brain Labyrinth with.

I counted to ten again. “Each day we wake up, we risk our lives,” I said with frustration lacing each word. This stubborn Neanderthal was driving me to the brink. “I will not stand back and let everyone else face danger while I do nothing.”

“That’s the problem,” Labyrinth said. “King has never kept you from danger. He wants you to make military decisions and to stop thinking with your human brain.”

“Oh, and I should be thankful for that?” I shot back. “I’m either a Shadow Warrior, or I’m not.”

“The butterfly leaves its cocoon, but it’s more defenseless,” the prisoner chimed in from his spot on the roof.

I rolled my eyes so hard it was a miracle they didn’t fall out of my head.

Labyrinth smirked, clearly amused. “You aren’t defenseless, but you are rash, and one of these days, you’ll get someone killed. We pray it’s not you who dies.”

So, they'd been talking about me. Big surprise. "Thaaanks," I said, my voice dripping sarcasm.

Labyrinth turned his eyes back to me. "You have no idea what an anomaly you are. We're all stepping carefully around you and King. He's volatile when you're not around, and vice versa. And when the two of you are together? Add in the mating rage, and we're running for cover. This hasn't been easy for anyone."

Oh boy. Tell me how you really feel. "So, what you're saying is, I'm bad for King," I said, daring him to agree.

He didn't hesitate. Instead, he stood and took a step in my direction, looming over me, his eyes locked onto mine in a silent challenge.

Ms. Beast went on high alert. Kill .

Labyrinth looked me up and down, really looked, his gaze assessing every inch of me. "You're a miracle," he said finally.

I studied his amazing eyes, trying to read his expression. Beast forms made that difficult, but his tone left no room for doubt.

"I don't feel like a miracle," I admitted, speaking quieter now.

He shook his head slowly. "That's because you haven't fully accepted who and what you are."

I looked away, unable to meet his gaze. He was right, and we both knew it. "I don't know how to be a Shadow Warrior," I said softly.

When I glanced over, Labyrinth tipped his head back, his jaw lifting as a laugh

erupted from deep in his chest. Not a small laugh, oh no, it was the kind that came straight from his diaphragm.

It's great to be laughed at. NOT.

It took him a solid minute to get himself under control, and I'll admit, I briefly hoped he'd try to wipe a tear and accidentally gouge an eye out. No such luck.

His next words hit me harder than I expected. "We lived for so long hiding who we were. None of us knew how to be Shadow Warriors, except for Graystone, King's uncle. We're still learning, and now it's sometimes hard to remember we were once farmers. Back then, a bad day was broken equipment." He shifted his rifle off his shoulder and cradled it in his arms, leaning back against the wall. "It's your job to teach us to be Shadow Warriors." The last sentence didn't contain a smile. He was completely serious.

"What could I possibly teach you?" I asked, confused.

He shook his head slightly; a frustrated gesture that told me I wasn't getting the point. "The female Warriors left the men because of our violence. Now we have you, and the last thing any of us wants is for you to leave. You're a Warrior, and you're more human than the rest of us. That's what you have to teach us. We're men, and it's not something we can change easily."

"But we need Warriors," I argued, still not following him.

"Yes, we need Warriors," he stated. "You. Are. A. Warrior. Get it through your head. You'll never be exactly like us because you aren't. You're female. In the animal kingdom, many females are deadlier than their male counterparts. Our race was no different. The difference was the women carried compassion. They thought differently, and that's not a bad thing."

He paused, his voice softening as he continued. “King weighs the good and the bad and decides what’s best for the majority. You think differently. You think in closer bonds. You went after Garret, and we wouldn’t have risked this mission for him. We’d already written him off.” He shrugged. “You got caught because we decided to retrieve his body and take it back with us.”

His eyes shifted to Axel, who was resting beside Garret.

“You’re saying I’m a Warrior, and I’m not a Warrior,” I said, even more frustrated now.

“No.” Labyrinth’s tone was firm, but not unkind. “I’m saying you’re like no Warrior we’ve ever seen. Instead of trying to be us, be yourself. You came to us for a reason, and the last thing we need is for you to be just like us.”

Now it was my turn to laugh, though it came out bitter. “You have no idea what I was really like before becoming a Shadow Warrior. I didn’t have a brave bone in my body.”

He raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. “You saved Che at the expense of your own life, and you thought you were only human when you did it. How many hellhounds did the poor little scared girl face down?” He didn’t even give me the chance to answer. “Those aren’t the actions of a coward. Get over yourself.”

It sounded so simple when he said it. I just wasn’t sure how to do what he wanted and most likely what I needed.

King

It was late, more precisely, early morning, when we returned. Marinah was still asleep. We'd scoured the city for any sign of Smythe but came up empty. The storm raging inside me wasn't doing me any favors. I wanted my hands around that man's throat, and until it happened, there'd be no peace for me.

Sliding into bed beside my mate, I pulled her close. She instinctively rolled against me, her body fitting perfectly against mine out of habit. She mumbled something under her breath, too soft to make out, and fell silent again. I wasn't even sure she'd woken at all.

My mind, however, was far too restless.

"They come at night." The prisoner's gruff voice cut through the quiet.

I turned my head to look at him. Before we went to search for Smythe, my attempt to pry useful information from his broken mind had been a complete waste of time. His answers were nonsensical, crazy blabbering that never led anywhere. I had no idea how he'd managed to survive this long. He was a danger to himself and to anyone unlucky enough to cross his path. Killing him would be a mercy. There was no way he could survive alone much longer and taking him back to the outposts wasn't an option. He was too unstable.

"They come at night," he said again, curling into a ball with his knees drawn tightly to his chest. He closed his eyes, shutting out the world.

His words stirred something in me, a grim reminder of how it had all started. In the beginning, the hellhounds had come at night, hiding during the day. But that didn't last long. Soon enough, daylight couldn't hold them back, and their terror descended without mercy.

The urge to leave right now overwhelmed me, but with Garret's condition, that wasn't happening anytime soon. Frustration gnawed at me, but I shifted closer to Marinah, burying my face in her hair and allowed her scent to fill my lungs.

I closed my eyes, trying to push it all aside.

I would reassess tomorrow.

???

I woke before Marinah and grabbed our packs, pulling out the breakfast MREs. The prisoner was already sitting up, his attention fixed on my sleeping mate. Beast didn't seem to care, so I let it slide for now.

Slowly, he tore his eyes away and looked at me. There was a flicker of clarity in his gaze that hadn't been there before. "She's one of you," he said.

I didn't answer. Marinah was in Warrior form, and his declaration was obvious.

"She's special," he added, his tone shifting to something close to worship.

Great. Now he was obsessing over my mate. And still, Beast didn't react. Very strange.

"I have a name. I do," he said, his voice childlike.

We'd tried getting this information from him before, but I went for it again. "What is it?"

"A name. Just a name," he sang, his words spiraling into nonsense again.

Marinah stirred, sitting up and carefully rubbed her eyes with the backs of her hands. She glanced at me, her expression questioning. I wasn't sure if I was ready to let go of my anger just yet.

She smiled, and Beast perked up immediately, the idiot. She scooted closer, leaning into my side. "I know it won't help, but I'm sorry," she said softly.

I heard the sincerity in her words, but that didn't mean I believed her. If the situation played out all over again, she'd do the exact same thing and put herself in danger without question.

I'd led my men for years. I was decisive and exacting. None of them would call me thoughtful or generous, but they respected my leadership because I made the hard calls. A bad decision meant more people died, and there was no room for compromise. My orders were meant to be carried out as given.

Then there was my mate. Marinah threw all my rules out the window. She wouldn't keep herself safe. She did whatever she wanted, and the consequences be damned.

"The butterfly is awake," the prisoner muttered, breaking my train of thought.

Marinah turned her head toward him. "What's your name?" she asked politely, her tone gentle.

It worked.

“Cosway. Cosway is my name,” he said, his head jerking as he looked around nervously.

Axel walked over, glancing at him with a practiced eye. “I need to check your arm,” he said.

“Arm good,” Cosway replied, lifting and lowering it at the shoulder while carefully avoiding any movement of the broken bone below his elbow.

“If the swelling’s down, I’ll tighten the bandage. It should feel more comfortable,” Axel told him.

The prisoner glanced around again, his jerky movements making him seem even more unstable. He didn’t respond. Axel wouldn’t like what I had planned for him, and neither would Marinah. If we left him behind, he’d be a danger to anyone Garret sent back for supplies. His fate was sealed, but I wasn’t ready to share that decision yet. I’d save that battle for when we were ready to leave.

“How is he?” I asked Axel, nodding toward Garret.

Axel glanced over at the man, then back at me and Marinah. “He’s critical,” he said.

The vulnerability in his eyes hit hard. Axel’s life had never been easy. His sexual orientation wasn’t an issue for us, but he carried his own scars. He’d grown up in a small, conservative farming community where coming out to his parents went about as poorly as one could imagine. They’d sent him to gay conversion therapy, which only drove him to run away repeatedly. Each time they brought him back, he’d escape again.

Despite everything, Axel was brilliant and a straight-A student. Eventually, his parents agreed to pay for medical school, hoping that if he became a doctor, maybe

their church would overlook what they saw as his “shortcoming.” His Shadow Warrior father barely spoke to him, and by the time my uncle found him, Axel was a broken man. Graystone brought him into our group, and despite his past, Axel somehow managed to keep up with his hospital internship while following my uncle’s rigid rules.

He had been a gift ever since, saving countless Warrior and human lives.

I looked at Garret again. If he didn’t make it, Axel might never get another chance at finding someone truly compatible. That thought twisted something deep inside me.

Marinah leaned closer, her warmth separating my anger for a moment. She was a whirlwind and drove me to the brink of insanity half the time. But I was happy, at least when she wasn’t throwing herself into danger.

“When will he be able to travel?” I asked Axel grimly.

He sighed. “A week, if he survives the next two days.”

“We leave in three days,” I said, leaving no room for argument.

Marinah whipped her head around, cutting Axel off before he had a chance to speak. “Leaving that soon will kill him,” she snapped.

I hardened my voice. “We’ll carry him if needed. We leave in three days.”

Her loud huff was full of displeasure, but I didn’t flinch. She set her MRE can down with a deliberate thud, picked up another, and marched over to the prisoner, completely ignoring me.

“Can you eat with your injured arm?” she asked, crouching beside him.

He cocked his head, studying her as though she was the most fascinating thing in the world. “Pretty butterfly,” he murmured.

“Thank you,” she said curtly. “You need to eat.” She handed him the opened can, and he placed it on the ground, hunching over it protectively as he began eating with the fingers of his uninjured hand.

“I’ll get you water,” she added, again ignoring me as she grabbed one of her canteens. She shook it, testing how much was inside, before walking back to Cosway.

What kind of name was Cosway ?

She glanced over her shoulder at me, her expression daring me to object. I stayed silent. Beast, who usually paid Axel little attention because of his preferences, was also ignoring this man. Strange. But Beast wasn’t ignoring Marinah’s displeasure. Her irritation stirred him, and he grumbled inside me.

“Thank you, butterfly,” Cosway said, handing the canteen back after taking a long drink.

Marinah smiled and walked toward me again. Her current displeasure showed in her steel gaze. I ignored it.

“What are we going to do with him?” she demanded.

I looked at the prisoner, then back at her, saying nothing, but something must have shown in my expression.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “That’s not happening.”

What is it about authority that Marinah does not understand? This decision was out of

her hands, and I didn't bother replying.

"King?" She leaned in closer, her anger burning like hot coals. "You are not killing him. He's not all there mentally, and he's not the enemy."

"He's dangerous," I replied.

"No, he's scared, and he didn't shoot. He's also the reason Garret has a chance and he hasn't shown any violent behavior since he got here."

"That was a few hours ago," I countered. "Not nearly enough time to make that determination."

One of her claws flicked out, pressing just enough to prick the skin of my arm. "It's been twelve hours. I'm not going to stand by and let you kill him," she said with authority she didn't have.

Beast grumbled at her defiance, stirring uneasily inside me. "This is not a democracy," I said flatly.

Her entire body went rigid, and her dark eyes seemed to deepen, growing darker still. "Mating is a democracy," she snapped, "and if it isn't, I'll be rethinking things."

She was actually sexy when she was irritated, but I wasn't nearly dumb enough to point that out. "Look around you, Marinah. My men will follow my orders. You are one of my men, and the sooner you accept that, the better."

Her claw slid away without breaking skin, which surprised me. She straightened, turning her back on me, and crossed the rooftop to Axel, who had returned to Garret's side. I was sure he was doing his best to stay out of our argument.

Marinah and the doctor began talking quietly, their voices blending into the background noise as I tuned them out. My nerves were frayed, stretched thin by the constant tension. We were in danger, and my mate was upset.

Same day, different country.

Marinah

I refused to allow myself to dwell on King. His panties were in a tight twist, and the poor man was suffering. It couldn't have been comfortable. I also knew there was nothing I could say or do that would make a difference. He needed time to stew over his own idiocy.

If he insisted on enforcing his edict about Cosway, we'd have another problem on our hands, and it wouldn't be pretty. But deep down, I knew King wouldn't kill the prisoner. Cosway was about as dangerous as a newborn foal. He needed care and proper food before we could even think about making decisions regarding his future.

The biggest problem we were going to face over the next few days wasn't Cosway, it was boredom. Sitting still was not my strong suit. I'd spent too many years waiting for death, and I no longer thought of myself as expendable.

To kill time, I rummaged through my pack, reorganizing my treasures at the bottom so the essentials were easier to access. The task killed all of ten minutes even with claws. I wiped the sweat from my wide brow with the back of my hand. It was going to be warm today, and it was a sad state of affairs when I could smell myself and didn't like the odor. A bath was no longer a want, it was a necessity.

Across the roof, King, Labyrinth, and Beck were deep in conversation. I ignored them, focusing instead on Cosway, who smiled at me with his too-wide grin. I moved closer.

“You wouldn't happen to know a place to take a bath, would you?” I asked.

His green eyes lit up. “Pretty Butterfly,” he said in that same reverent tone as before.

“Stinky butterfly,” I corrected.

That made him laugh, a raspy, unhinged sound that still managed to make me smile.

“River, yep. Water good,” he said, nodding enthusiastically.

“There’s a river?” I asked, my excitement rising.

“Good water, yep,” he said again, bobbing his head up and down.

I already knew this would be a no-go for King, but the idea of clean water was too tempting to ignore. “Can you give me directions?”

Cosway’s head snapped around in quick, jerky movements as he scanned the area. For a moment, I thought I’d lost him to whatever flying grasshoppers lived in his mind. Then he looked back at me, his grin enormous. “Map, yep. Show map.”

I couldn’t help but smile in return. At least he was trying.

I pulled a map from my pack and handed it to Cosway. He unfolded it carefully, his grimy finger running across the surface as he studied it. Being this close to him for so long wasn’t easy. If I was ripe, then he was completely spoiled, and swimming in urine.

A shadow fell over me where I was squatting beside Cosway. I glanced up and saw King looming above us. “He says there’s a river with clean water,” I said, watching his jaw clench so tightly that his massive teeth crisscrossed. I crossed my arms and waited.

King dropped his gaze to the ground, and I almost smiled. I did the same thing when I was counting, and I understood the need. It helped. But when his eyes met mine, I knew he hadn't counted long enough.

"This is not a resort," he growled.

I stood up, putting us almost at eye level. "Is that really what you wanted to say?"

He dropped his gaze again, clearly counting a second time. When he looked up, his anger hadn't faded; in fact, it seemed worse. "If the princess wants a bath, she'll get a fucking bath," he snapped.

I blinked once. Then twice. "Do you want a bloody nose?"

He threw up his hands in exasperation and stomped away.

I looked down at Cosway, my new best friend, the man who knew where I could take a bath. "You get to go too," I said.

"Good, good. Feed the kiddies," he muttered.

That caught my attention. "The what?"

"Feed the kiddies. Kiddies hungry," he said, nodding enthusiastically.

Oh, hell no. "King!" I shouted, making Cosway jump.

King turned, his eyes narrowing as he marched back toward me.

"He has children," I said urgently. "We need to go. Now."

The “kiddies” were supposedly a short distance from the river, according to Cosway’s directions. We divided the men evenly, leaving Labyrinth behind with Axel for added protection. Beck, much like King, didn’t trust our prisoner at all. He grumbled as much as King did, and his irritation was obvious in every step he took.

Beck tied a rope around Cosway’s neck, and I held my tongue. For now. If it came down to it, I’d fight both Beck and King to protect Cosway’s life. They weren’t killing an innocent, no matter what they thought. I also stopped dreaming about water. If we found children, getting them to safety would be far more important than a bath.

As we moved through the metal and cement debris littering the main road, a coyote darted away from us in the distance. Besides the mice and rats, we’d seen scurrying about, it was the first animal we’d come across.

About thirty minutes in, Cosway led us onto a smaller side road, even more hazardous than the last. The thought that this might be a setup crept into my mind, but I kept it to myself. Cosway seemed to know his way and kept us moving, though I couldn’t help expecting the scenery to change. It didn’t. He kept us firmly within the city.

Two hours later, I was thoroughly lost, but Cosway pressed on. Occasionally, he reached up to rub the skin beneath the rope. It must have been chafing, but Beck ignored the action along with my killing glares.

King was brooding and remained silent. He must have found it incredibly difficult having me as one of his soldiers. The stress of our disagreement was starting to wear on me too, and Ms. Beast wasn’t helping. She’d decided everyone needed to die, which didn’t exactly make things easier.

“Kiddies, kiddies,” Cosway shouted suddenly, pulling against the rope in Beck’s

hands.

We weren't in a wooded neighborhood like I'd imagined. Instead, we were in what had once been a prime corporate center. Broken glass littered the ground, and gutted skyscrapers loomed over us, their windows dark and empty.

Then I heard it. A faint noise. Cosway tugged harder, his excitement growing.

"Hungry," he said, pointing ahead.

I spotted a small area that had been converted into a makeshift shelter. A potted plant sat beside the swath of material being used as a door.

King stopped me with a firm hand on my arm. Without a word, he moved in front of me and threw back the swath of material covering the shelter's entrance. He leaned in for a look, then quickly pulled his head out. The expression he gave me was confusing. His jaw clenched, teeth grinding again.

Then I heard it, a soft "meow," followed by another.

"Kiddies, kiddies," Cosway chimed from behind me.

I pulled back the blanket myself, and sure enough, his "kiddies" were kittens. Five of the most adorable little things I'd ever seen, no more than a few weeks old.

Inside the shelter, a can of powdered milk sat on the ground beside a tin plate holding a mixture of milk and water. The kittens mewled and pawed at each other, a tangle of tiny bodies.

I stepped inside, scanning quickly for weapons. All I found were books, small trinkets, and a picture frame. I picked it up and studied the photo. A man and a

woman with a small girl standing between them. Probably something Cosway had found and kept.

“Send him in. It’s clear,” I called out.

A moment later, Cosway entered the small enclosure, dropping to his knees. The kittens immediately swarmed him, climbing up his arms and legs as he scooped them up, one by one, and cuddled them against his chest and neck.

Glancing over my shoulder, I caught King watching from the doorway. I couldn’t help myself and mouthed, You’re an idiot.

He knew exactly what I meant. Killing a man who rescued kittens? Really? King just shook his head when I shot him the same evil glare I’d given Beck earlier.

Cosway fed the kittens, carefully refilling their bowl even after they’d finished their meal. It didn’t take much to realize he’d been doing this for a while, likely leaving food behind in case he couldn’t return right away.

And the smell? The urine stench I’d pinned on Cosway. That was all kitten. They weren’t litterbox trained, and the entire hut reeked of them.

After tending to the kittens, Cosway led us to the river. It wasn’t far, and the sight stopped me in my tracks. The entire area was beautiful, an oasis in the middle of the city. It must have been stunning before the world fell apart.

Beck didn’t bother putting the rope back on Cosway, and I moved faster, heading straight for the water. No one stopped me as I carefully pulled my shirt over my head, my back to the others. It wasn’t until my pants came down that I heard King growl. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Cosway watching me. But then he turned around and lifted his upper clothing off, pulled down his pants, and walked into the water

with me.

“Fuck,” King muttered under his breath.

I had no idea what he was complaining about until I took a good look at Cosway’s nakedness. Holy fuck. He was a she , and King had noticed the moment she removed her clothes. Beck stood slack-jawed at the sight while King moved further away, mumbling something I couldn’t make out. “Nice water,” I said cheerfully, deciding this was my mate’s just desserts.

King

Cosway was a woman. If I could be right just once, it might help in dealing with my mate. No, I was not killing a damn woman.

Beck and I didn't bother bathing. We gave the women time to enjoy the water. If Marinah didn't like my smell, too damn bad. War wasn't exactly the time for roses and perfume.

"We need to grab the kittens on the way out," Marinah said once we were finally ready to leave.

"We are not taking the kittens with us," I commanded with enough force to shake trees.

Twenty minutes later, we were on our way with five kittens.

Maybe we needed a marriage counselor because this mating thing was harder than it looked. Marinah carried one damn cat with all their food stuffed into her pack. Cosway carried four of the kittens in a pack that had been in her make-do cave. Now I had a human woman, an injured human, and five kittens to contend with.

I didn't think the situation could get worse, but I bit that thought off quickly. Of course, it could get worse, especially with Marinah in the picture. There was no holding back a growl.

Beck was doing everything he could not to laugh in my face, and I couldn't blame

him. Point me in any direction, and I'd find something to kill, no problem. Collecting people, and now cats, wasn't my thing.

I glanced at Marinah holding the smallest kitten, a scrappy little thing that looked like a patchwork quilt. She brought the tiny creature up to her massive jaws, and the kitten rubbed its small head against her teeth.

This was worse than when she climbed my shoulders naked to avoid a snake. And, of course, it was me who wouldn't live it down. Not to mention, I didn't like cats.

"Are we starting the official Shadow Warrior Humane Society?" Beck called out from about ten feet away, clearly smart enough to keep his distance.

If looks could kill, he'd already be on the ground, and Missy would be a widow. Instead of removing his head, I said, "You have a mate too. I don't know why you're giving me a hard time."

"That I do," he replied with a grin. "Never knew life could be so interesting."

"I'm the one thinking rationally here," I muttered. "We can always eat the cats if food gets scarce."

Beck laughed, knowing full well Marinah would scalp me if she heard that. My cold stare did the trick, and Beck wisely slowed his steps so he was farther away. Marinah approached, cradling her kitten. I already knew it was hers. Like there was any doubt. I could make a fool of myself again by telling her no, but I wasn't in the mood for the blowback from my men. In the end, we all knew I'd give her what she wanted.

"Here, you need to hold him," she said, thrusting the tiny ball of fur at me. I had no choice but to take the kitten.

“Isn’t he precious?” she added, her tone practically glowing.

I brought the kitten to my nose and sniffed. “Smells like food.”

She batted my arm, her claws leaving faint scratches. “No, he doesn’t. He’s adorable.”

The kitten squirmed in my hands, its tiny paws scrabbling against my fingers. I glanced at Marinah, completely perplexed.

“Cuddle him, and he’ll stop squirming,” she said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Cuddle him. I needed a deep, dark hole to jump into. I glanced toward Beck, who was watching me while losing the battle to hold back his grin.

Here goes nothing.

I lifted the kitten higher and tucked him between my jaw and shoulder. A few seconds later, he stilled and began to purr, the vibration surprisingly soothing against my neck.

“I knew you could do it,” Marinah said, smiling with satisfaction. She looked so damn proud, and that almost made it worse.

I handed the kitten back to her. “Take him.”

She lifted the tiny creature from my hands with a mock bow. “I’m on it, your majesty.”

The next two days were going to be hell.

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That evening, Garret managed to sit up for five minutes. It happened after Axel helped him to the ledge to relieve himself. When he lay back down, he was out cold again.

Axel said it was a positive sign.

I told everyone to keep a close watch on Cosway and to make sure she stayed far away from the weapons. I didn't trust her. Not fully. There was always the possibility she'd flip and try to kill us all. Yeah, I was probably reaching, but I didn't like the unknown, and Cosway was the definition of it. To survive as long as she had, she'd needed instincts, guts, and the will to do whatever it took. The cities were the most dangerous place in the country and it wasn't just the hellhounds. Food became scarce and people did whatever it took to survive. She'd killed before. She had to have, or she wouldn't be alive.

On the third morning, we packed our gear. We planned to leave at noon, giving Garret a few extra hours. Axel would carry him when we set off. Marinah had claimed two of the kittens now, while Cosway carried three. The kitten food and a few items from Cosway's makeshift home were divided among our packs. The picture Marinah found, of a young Cosway with her parents, was coming with us.

My biggest concern was General Smythe and the possibility of an ambush. We'd seen no sign of anyone else in the city, but the quiet had stretched too long. Yesterday, Beck and Labyrinth had disposed of the soldiers' bodies below the building before their stench could reach our rooftop camp. It had been eerily calm since then.

Too calm.

I glanced toward Marinah, who was talking to Garret and Axel. Beast didn't react.

That, at least, was a small relief. I shifted my gaze to Cosway. Normally, a Warrior could easily scent the difference between a male and female. But with Cosway, the overwhelming smell of cat urine had made it impossible. I should have paid more attention to Beast when he hadn't reacted to Marinah being near her.

I took point when we set out, Marinah behind me, then Cosway, followed by Labyrinth, Axel carrying Garret, and Beck taking the rear. We moved at half the speed we'd used coming into the city.

Axel didn't argue about leaving. He understood the risks, and he knew I'd already given him more time than I should have.

Once we were out of the city, I veered us off the original path. I didn't trust it. There was too much chance it had been compromised.

Our breaks were quiet, with little talking. Axel focused on caring for Garret, while Marinah tended to Cosway and the kittens. I kept to myself, licking my pride wounds, mostly. I was completely out of my depth with Marinah, and I had no idea how to handle it.

The first night was awkward and tense. She slept beside me in my arms, but little was said. I lay awake, her scent filling my lungs, as I tried to make sense of this new reality. The crushing weight of knowing I might not be able to keep her safe gnawed at me, and it was slowly killing me.

Halfway through the second day, we were marching along a high ridge when someone appeared in the distance, coming from the south. We immediately took cover. A few minutes later, I could make out Nokita heading our way. I had no idea how he'd found us, but something was wrong.

We started a slow jog toward him, and he quickened his pace when he spotted us. It

took ten minutes to meet up.

“There’s a large contingent of Federation soldiers descending on the northern outpost,” he said grimly. “They have hellhounds, but we don’t know how many. We’ve already pulled Warriors from the other outposts, and they’re in transit. After you left, the women and children were moved to the northern outpost, and now they’re in imminent danger.”

I glanced behind me, quickly making a decision. “Labyrinth, you’re traveling with Axel and Garret.” Then I turned to Marinah. “You’re staying with them for added protection. Beck, you’re with me. We’re moving fast.”

I turned, ready to leave, when Marinah’s voice stopped me.

“King?” she called urgently. “Take me with you.”

Her refusal to follow orders made the situation even more dangerous, but I knew arguing would only waste time. I nodded sharply, and she fell in beside me.

Axel spoke up before we moved out. “Take Labyrinth too. I’ve got these two, and you need the help.”

I hesitated, then looked at Labyrinth. He didn’t wait for further instruction, falling in with us as we prepared to leave.

“Bye-bye, little butterfly,” Cosway said sadly, watching Marinah hand off the kittens. Her tone was wistful, and for a moment, I caught a glimpse of something almost fairylike about her.

Then we took off, running toward danger.

Marinah

King was still angry, and I didn't know how to open the door to let this go. I hated the tension between us, and it made me feel insecure in ways I couldn't fully explain. It bothered him that I didn't obey his orders, and I promised myself I'd do better. The last thing I wanted was for someone to die because of me.

But deep down, I also knew I'd struggle if someone needed saving, and it was deemed "too dangerous" for the little Shadow Warrior.

I groaned silently. I didn't like any of this.

We ran at a much faster pace than we'd taken the past day. Even so, it would still take us three days to reach the outpost. No airplane to speed things up this time. We slept for just two hours the first night before starting off again.

The last thing I'd do was complain.

None of us talked much. I couldn't stop thinking about Ruth and Missy, and I knew Beck was just as worried as I was.

Three days felt like a lifetime when the people you loved were in danger.

???

We reached the northern outpost at midnight. The eerie quiet set my nerves on edge. It was too quiet.

“Marinah!” Ruth’s voice cut through the silence, and before I could react, her spindly little arms and legs wrapped tightly around me.

“Ruth!” Missy ran after her, grabbing her daughter and pulling her back. “I told you no! It’s too dangerous. Get back inside, now!”

Missy shook Ruth like I’d never seen her do before. From the look on Missy’s face, I thought better of mentioning how Ruth’s brains were probably rattling in her skull and wisely kept my mouth shut.

Before I had a chance to greet Missy, Beck swept both her and Ruth into his arms, lifting them several feet off the ground. Missy buried her face in his chest while Ruth squirmed free, dropping to the ground. She looked at me with a shrug and an expression that screamed, totally gross.

Missy leaned back slightly from Beck, her voice tense. “We think the attack will come in a few hours. They sent us their conditions three days ago, saying we had a week to comply. They want all able-bodied men and women sent to the Federation.” She paused, her expression tightening. “But they’re not giving us the week.”

She tucked her head back into Beck’s chest, her voice muffled. I barely caught her next words. “We have the Shadow Warriors hidden outside the walls along the upper ridge. We figure if the Federation sends hellhounds first, like they did at the other outpost, it’s safer.” She rested her head against him for a moment, her exhaustion evident. “We didn’t think you’d make it here in time.”

“Inside,” King said curtly, herding us toward the house Missy had been using.

As soon as we were inside, Ruth piped up. “Can we train tomorrow?”

“Ruth!” Missy snapped, obviously at her wit’s end. It was clear Ruth had been a

handful since we left. Normally calm and composed, Missy was now visibly disheveled, her nerves stretched thin. Part of it was the stress from the Federation's looming attack, but the rest? I had no doubt it was due to the pint-sized hellspawn standing beside her.

I gave Ruth a slight smile. "How about we take a few minutes and train right now? You never know what tomorrow will bring."

Missy's panic was immediate, her wide eyes darting to mine. I softened my tone. "I'll just improve her grip on her sword and teach her to strike properly. It'll take five minutes, and she can practice while the rest of us get ready. No one's sleeping tonight anyway."

Missy hesitated, clearly torn, but she knew Ruth needed something to occupy her, or she'd be a hindrance.

"Does it need to be a sharp sword?" she asked, her tone full of the usual "mom" skepticism.

Ruth whooped with excitement. "The sharper, the better!"

"That's what I was afraid of," Missy mumbled before giving me a reluctant nod.

"Can I use your sword?" Ruth asked, her voice filled with rapt fascination as her wide eyes stayed glued to the shiny silver blade I'd removed from its sheath.

"You can use it only in emergencies when you or someone you know is in danger," I told her. "Help me unfasten the strap, and you can wear the scabbard on your hip."

Her pants were held up by a belt that barely did the job, but she eagerly reached for the sword. I moved it back. "You unbuckle me, and I'll hold the sword. Is there

enough room to practice in your bedroom?”

She bounced on her toes, practically vibrating with excitement. “Yes, there’s room!”

“Okay.” I slipped the scabbard off my belt after Ruth handled the buckle, then had her refasten it on her belt under my direction. When she finished, I slid the blade home.

“Do not remove the sword, or I won’t show you how to use it properly,” I warned, handing it to her. “The adults need to talk, and I want you waiting in your room. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“You’re sending her to her room alone with the sword?” Missy’s irritation was written all over her face.

I looked at Ruth and asked, “Will you take the sword out?”

“No, ma’am,” she said solemnly.

Every head in the room turned toward her, jaws dropping at the unexpected “ma’am” that had just come out of the hellspawn’s mouth. I ignored their stunned expressions. “She won’t take the sword out,” I assured Missy.

Missy gave Ruth a wary look, but the child was already racing toward her room. “Walk,” I called after her. Ruth slowed her pace but added a little skip as she made her way to her door, closing it behind her.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Missy mumbled.

“So do I,” I admitted. “But I promise, she won’t remove the sword.”

Missy nodded once. “That child has so much hero worship for you, I doubt she will.” Her lips curved into a small, worried smile. “It’s a mother’s job to worry. Ruth is willful and rash. Maybe she’ll listen to you.”

Her words echoed inside my head. She was saying exactly what King and Labyrinth had told me before: rash behavior will get you killed. And they were right. I was rash. Ruth didn’t obey her mother, and by ignoring her, she put herself in danger.

The problem was, I didn’t like obeying orders either. It rubbed me the wrong way, made me feel like I was being treated like a child. But was that really what King was doing?

The truth hit me hard. King wasn’t treating me like a child. He gave me the same orders as he gave his men. He didn’t leave me behind and he trusted me to fight. He expected me to pull my weight, and I did.

It was exactly like my theory about Ruth. If I made her feel useful, she’d stay out of trouble. King made me feel useful, and when I didn’t follow his commands, he lost his mind. It was all on me. My heart went out to those weaker than me and part of that was I saw myself in them. I didn’t look at the entire picture and sometimes that picture saved more lives. It wouldn’t be easy to change, but I had to. I couldn’t live with someone’s death on my shoulders if it happened because of one of my rash decisions.

My thinking had to readjust or something horrible would happen.

I no longer wanted King to worry about me. I had to do everything in my power to obey his commands and find a way to save my questions for after the threat passed. It was time to grow up and act like a Warrior with a leader and there was no better leader than my mate.

I walked over to King, placing my palm on his arm. He glanced down at my claws before slowly lifting his head to meet my eyes.

“I’ll follow all orders,” I said firmly.

I swear I felt the relief course through his body.

“We need to leave in the next ten minutes,” he said.

“It’ll take me five minutes to handle Ruth, and I’ll be ready,” I assured him.

“If the Federation sticks to their usual strategy, they’ll send the hellhounds in first.”

“Are we waiting for that to happen?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

When a Warrior smiles in true form, it’s unsettling. When King smiled just then, it was downright terrifying. “We won’t be waiting.”

“Do you want me out here while you finish strategizing?”

“No. Get Ruth squared away,” he said, pulling me close. His jaw brushed against mine, the rough texture of his affection reassuring me. For a moment, we stood there, holding each other tightly. I loved this man with everything I had, and tonight, one of us might not make it.

The thought burned in my chest, unsettling me. The last thing I wanted was to break down in Beast form. With one final squeeze, I pulled back.

I headed into the room with Ruth, ready to do what needed to be done.

“See, I didn’t remove it. It’s still in the sheath,” Ruth announced proudly the moment

I opened the door.

I couldn't help but smile. She was so proud of herself. "Very carefully pull it from the sheath," I instructed. "Remember, it's double-edged. Both sides will cut you if you're not careful."

She slid the blade out slowly, her eyes lighting up as the steel gleamed in the candlelight. "It's so beautiful."

"And deadly," I reminded her. "If a hellhound catches you with a claw or tooth, you'll die. It won't matter that you killed the hellhound. Your mother will mourn you for the rest of her life, and I'll miss you."

She stared at me for several seconds, her expression growing serious as my words sank in. "I'll be careful. I promise."

I believed her. "It's for self-protection only. No charging out to kill hellhounds. Promise me that."

"I promise," she said solemnly, then glanced down at the small knife secured to her hip. "Should I leave my little knife here in the room?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "Let's get both situated on you. A girl can never have too many knives or swords."

She grinned. "No, they can't."

I helped her adjust the scabbard, showing her how to hold the sword properly for maximum striking power. Her thin arms managed to lift and hold it, and I had to blink back the sting of tears. Revenge against Federation soldiers was one thing. But this little girl? I loved her too much to even think about her dying tonight.

I pulled her into a long hug. She squirmed in my arms. “Don’t kiss me. That’s gross,” she protested.

I snapped my jaws twice in mock frustration, and she laughed.

“I want teeth like that when I grow up,” she said, pointing to my sharp incisors.

“What? No girly teeth for you?”

She shook her head firmly. “I want to be beautiful, just like you.”

Out of the mouths of babes.

Marinah

Cabel met us outside the outpost walls and led us to a large group of Warriors. The tension in the air wrapped around us like a suffocating fog. Missy had told us earlier that over a thousand soldiers had joined the Federation camp just two miles away. They'd had a hundred men before the reinforcements arrived. This morning, the soldiers began collecting their belongings. They were either leaving or preparing to attack, and I doubted it was the former.

King spoke in hushed tones, his voice low enough that it wouldn't carry in the stillness of the night. The air was chilly, with no breeze. I hated the cold. Times like this made me miss the warmth of our island even more, but I pushed the thought aside. I needed to keep my head clear, and daydreaming about home wouldn't help.

We had nearly two hundred Warriors against more than a thousand Federation soldiers. If it weren't for the hellhounds, it would almost feel manageable. There was no doubt in my mind that Smythe was leading this force. The question was whether he realized the Shadow Warriors had allied with the outposts.

Spying in this new world wasn't what it used to be. Satellites were useless now. You needed eyes on the ground, and the Federation wasn't known for their subtlety. A thousand men was nothing to them, and I suspected most of these soldiers were red stripes. Their job was simple: die first. The thought made me shudder, but I forced myself to focus on King.

"If they release the hellhounds first, we'll send Beck's force," King said, nodding toward Beck. "You'll have fifty Warriors. The humans in the outpost are ready to

fight, and with Shadow Warriors coming from two sides, we should be able to take out the hounds.”

After everything with Ruth and the recent reminder about the importance of following the chain of command, I needed to learn and understand our strategy. So, I listened and absorbed every word.

King pointed to the makeshift map drawn in the dirt. “We’ll establish a line of Warriors here and here. We’ll hold our main forces back and avoid revealing our full numbers unless absolutely necessary.”

Beck stepped forward, pointing to what looked like a ridge. “With your permission, I’ll take the left flank with Cabel. It’s closest to the outpost, and we can charge in once the hellhounds attack.”

King nodded. I watched him work, the way he didn’t second-guess himself. He saw a problem, found a solution, and moved forward. That was King. His intense eyes met mine.

“I’m taking fifty men,” he said. “Your squad will take the front. Here.” He pointed to the spot he wanted me to lead.

For a moment, I couldn’t process his words. One of my claws flicked out involuntarily, pressing against my chest. “Me?”

He didn’t answer, just held my gaze, searching for something deeper. My soul, my courage, whatever he needed to see, he found it and nodded again. I straightened my spine and met his eyes. “I’ve got this,” I said.

King’s attention shifted to the men as I tried to slow my racing heart. “Double-check that every Warrior has hellhound antidote in their packs and ready to go,” he ordered.

“I want everyone administering a dose now. If we’re lucky, no one will go down with a hellhound bite.”

We had discovered by accident that administering the antidote an hour before a potential bite weakened the poison, allowing Warriors to stay on their feet longer. If a human went down in this fight, it was still a death sentence.

I took a slow breath, steadying myself. I was in charge of ensuring that the Warriors under my command did as told and survived to fight again. The reality hit hard, an almost unbearable weight settling on my shoulders. Thinking everyone would walk away unscathed was ridiculous, and deep down, I wasn’t ready for this.

“Marinah,” King said, his voice cutting through the spiral of panic building inside me. “I need five minutes.”

He nodded toward a spot about fifty feet away, where scrub brush offered a bit of privacy. The meeting dispersed, and we walked side by side in silence. My thoughts were a chaotic roller coaster, and I couldn’t hold back any longer.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, breaking the quiet. “How can you possibly think I can lead Warriors?”

King turned to me and his piercing blue eyes locked onto mine. For a moment, I wanted to drown in their depth. “Why do you think I’ve pushed you so hard?” he asked. “You’re part of my guard, Marinah. Your job is to lead and I’ve never had more faith in you than I do right now.”

The pride in his eyes hit me like a punch to the gut. I loved this man more than ever in that moment.

“And if I don’t think I’m ready?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

His jaw shifted to the side, and a grin spread across his face. The kind only a Warrior could wear. “It’s a small skirmish,” he said lightly. “You’ll do fine.”

To King, one thousand U.S. Federation soldiers was a small skirmish. I couldn’t help my own grin, holding up two claws an inch apart. “It’s not small, it’s tiny.”

He pressed his teeth-filled mug against mine, pulling me into a hug. His arms were solid, a momentary shield against what was coming. He leaned back just enough to lock his eyes on mine. “Don’t do anything stupid,” he said softly.

He was my world, and the thought of losing him was unbearable. “I’ll try,” I promised, knowing full well how precarious those words were.

Our moment of quiet ended all too quickly. It was time to move. The Warriors split into four groups with the kind of precision that spoke of long-practiced drills and deep trust. The first two units peeled off toward their positions.

The outpost was nestled at the base of a large peak. It had once been a bustling college town; it was now a desolate wasteland. Anything worth scavenging had been stripped away long ago.

When our two units reached the destination, the view stretched south for miles. King gave me one last firm slap on the back before splitting off with his group. His confidence in me made my chest tighten.

I stood with Forty-eight Warriors, their lives in my hands. It was a staggering responsibility. These were faces I knew and men I trusted. Panic clawed its way up my spine. If we fought, the odds said we wouldn’t all survive.

What made King think I could do this?

I drew in a long breath, then exhaled slowly, forcing my body to calm. Are you ready, Ms. Beast?

Kill .

She was ready.

King's orders were clear: intercept stray hellhounds and Federation soldiers, keeping them from overtaking the outpost or escaping. Strike and run. Strike and run. That was the plan.

We still didn't fully understand how the Federation's whistles worked. Did the sound agitate the hounds, calm them, or simply keep them away from the soldiers using them?

It didn't matter. I made it my personal mission to capture one of those infernal devices. If we could get it back to the island, we could test it on the hellhounds we'd already captured. Figure out how it worked. Make more.

Because survival meant being smarter, faster, and deadlier than the Federation. And we couldn't afford to fail.

The sun slowly crept over the horizon, and the slight chill in the air began to dissipate, though not by much. At this elevation, I didn't expect any real warmth. The valley below remained quiet, but then a horn blared in the distance, its echo rolling across the hills.

I reached into my pack, pulled out my field glasses, and lifted them to my eyes. Several of my men did the same. Ryan, one of the Warriors who stood guard at the citadel, was beside me. King had appointed him as my second, and it was a solid choice. Ryan was steady and level-headed, never one to overreact or let his temper

get the better of him. He was everything I wasn't.

No, that wasn't true. I was just as deadly as he was. King wouldn't have placed me in charge if he didn't think I could handle it. He'd also given me the lead when I'd gone with Labyrinth to the Federation. It hadn't been tested, but he'd trusted me then too. Unfortunately, I was completely full of myself and my newly discovered Shadow Warrior abilities. I was too stupid to understand that people could die because I made the wrong decision. It was time to prove I had what it took.

Through the glasses, I saw a large column of Federation soldiers forming in the distance, exactly as the survivors of the last attack had described. They had a rotary cannon with them. King's force was our last line of defense. He'd be holding his men back, waiting to see if the Federation had any tricks up their sleeves. I didn't envy him the waiting.

I swept the glasses to Beck's position. Nothing moved, and I couldn't see the men, but I didn't doubt they were there. I changed my focus to Nokita and Labyrinth's location. Same. Everything was still.

Then, in the west, I caught movement. They were bringing in the hounds. I followed the scene carefully, noting the soldiers' formation. Six men spread out around a large group of hellhounds, easily two hundred of them. It was hard to make out the whistles in the soldiers' mouths, but the slight movement of their cheeks gave it away. The hounds stayed in their group, avoiding the soldiers entirely as they were herded.

The larger column of soldiers in front of the outpost split down the middle, creating a path for the hellhounds to pass. Every one of them was blowing a whistle. That solved one mystery: the hounds avoided the sound, and that's how the Federation controlled them.

I lowered the glasses and turned to Ryan. "Be sure to grab any whistles from downed

soldiers,” I said.

He nodded, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the valley.

I raised the glasses again, studying the enemy’s movements. My jaw tightened. Those whistles would be ours before this was over.

I offered a quick, silent prayer that King had figured out whatever Smythe was planning.

We set out at a fast jog, picking up speed as we raced down the mountainside. Staying low to avoid attention, we kept as much cover as possible between us and the enemy. The last thing we wanted was for the rotary cannon to turn on us. This was going to be a gunfight, not me standing in a window as a sniper. I wasn’t ready. Not by a long shot.

When we were a hundred yards out from Smythe, I lifted my hand for the men to halt.

Smythe was talking to one of his men near the vehicles. I watched as he climbed onto the back of a truck and took over for the soldier manning the rotary cannon. My stomach twisted. I wasn’t sure how I knew what he had planned but I did. Smythe wasn’t just giving the orders. He planned to fire on his own men and he wanted to be the person doing it.

With the bullet spread of a rotary cannon, there was no way to choose who lived and who died. Everyone in its path would go down. Smythe didn’t care, and that cold reality hit hard.

I silently thanked King for forcing me to learn my weapons and, for once, wished I hadn’t complained so much about it.

I lifted my rifle, and the Warriors around me followed.

Ryan leaned close; his voice low. “Kamin, Elright, and Eagle have the best sniper skills.”

“Move them into position,” I ordered. “Tell them to take out the soldiers on the trucks first.”

That meant I wouldn’t hear Smythe’s last breath, but if it kept my men alive, I could live with it.

I raised my hand, signaling the team, and brought it down sharply.

I didn’t even glance at Smythe, there wasn’t time. Instead, I lined up my first shot and fired, then fired again.

They returned fire immediately, though we had the high ground. Soldiers scrambled for cover behind the trucks, but there weren’t enough to cover them, and they were practically ours.

“Take out the tires on the trucks!” I yelled.

I didn’t want them driving out of here. If we could disable the vehicles without destroying them, the outpost could salvage the trucks and hopefully some tires would survive. With most vehicles sitting idle for years, tires were often dried out and useless. I’d rather lose a piece of rubber than a single man.

My breath came fast, adrenaline coursing through me as I prepared for the next move. Smythe had to go down, but first, we had to hold our ground.

Ryan’s snipers did their job, and soldiers without cover dropped one after the other. I

caught a slight movement near one of the intact tires and waited. When it happened again, I fired, and the man went down.

Lifting my field glasses, I scanned below. Hellhounds tore through the fray, and red stripe soldiers were breaking formation. A shot zipped over my head, but I stayed focused.

“We need to go in hard,” I said, lowering the glasses. “Can your men lay down fire and get us closer?”

Ryan gave a subtle nod. “Yes. Who do you want on the team?”

“I’ll rush with twenty Warriors,” I told him raising the field glasses again. “We’ll run full out and fire as we go if you can keep shooting over our heads.”

A claw pressed into my arm, and I turned, startled that Ryan had actually touched me.

His expression was serious. “You’re our leader,” he said firmly. “We need you here, calling the shots. I’ll take the men in, with your permission.”

He was right. Charging in myself would be rash, and I knew it. I thought of King, how badly he must want to fight but held back to lead his men. I needed to do the same.

“Stay safe,” I told him. “We’ll shoot on your command and give you cover.”

For a moment, he stared into my eyes, and I could see his surprise at my easy concession.

“King made a good choice,” he said solemnly.

I managed a small grimace. “I hope so.”

He blinked, still holding my gaze, and it took me a moment to understand.

“King made a good choice,” I repeated, the words heavier now.

Ryan gave me a quick nod before collecting the men he wanted. The rest of us held position, waiting for his command. As soon as he signaled, we began shooting, providing cover as they sprinted forward. That’s when I spotted Smythe’s bulbous head, peeking out from behind the third truck.

We kept firing, and Ryan’s team advanced steadily. Return gunfire forced me low. A heavy thump landed beside me, and I turned to see the Warrior on my right go down. My chest tightened, but there was no time to react. I had to hope he wasn’t dead. I lifted my head just enough to fire another shot, but my gut clenched as Federation soldiers started running toward Ryan and his men.

“We’re moving forward!” I shouted, already up and running, my men close behind. I dropped a soldier in my sights as his rifle aimed at one of the Shadow Warriors, and I kept pushing ahead.

Ryan went down and my heart dropped into my stomach but there was no time to speculate. Adrenaline surged as I closed the distance on the third truck. Sliding in low, I pulled my legs up to avoid snagging the ground and used the momentum to get halfway under the vehicle. My brain must have short-circuited. It was the dumbest move I could’ve made. There was barely enough room to wiggle, let alone maneuver.

Pandemonium continued around me and I didn’t know if we were successfully stopping the general’s force. I saw another Warrior collapse, and rage fueled my next decision. King was going to kill me for this.

I shifted to my human form and yanked the knife from my chest straps, turning myself around until my head faced the front of the truck. Digging my heels against the tire, I kicked off with every ounce of strength I had, propelling myself forward. The leather straps on my back shielded me from the worst of the scraping rock, but I could still feel burning raw skin.

The second I cleared the truck, I powered upward, twisting mid-motion to face the soldiers behind it.

Smythe's shocked face locked in my vision, and triumph surged through me.

I dropped the knife as I lunged, shifting mid-leap. It was incredible, a shift like none I'd ever had. The unbelievable power raging inside my body blurred my vision, but it didn't stop me from seeing Smythe through a red haze. He lifted a handgun, and I knocked it away with ease. Then, I smiled with teeth that felt even larger. His terrified scream was music to my ears. My claws tore through clothes, skin, and muscle on his chest. His eyes grew wider because he knew the damage was already too much to survive, but I wasn't finished. I moved to his throat. Once, then twice. Blood sprayed in hot arcs. My final blow took his head, and it settled on the ledge of the rotary cannon.

A low, primal sound split the air, and it took me a moment to realize it was me.

The men surrounded me, firing at other soldiers. The Federation dropped quickly, and the barrage of gunfire forced the remaining soldiers back toward the main fight.

Even without his head attached, I continued driving my claws into Smythe's chest and stomach over and over. No one stopped me. His warm blood soaked into my clothes, and in some twisted way, it felt good. Too good.

When my vision cleared, I dropped his body and looked at Smythe's ruined face,

completely unrecognizable. He was staring blankly up at the sky, or at least one eye was. The other was gone. His features were unrecognizable, shredded beyond anything human. I had no idea how long I'd been tearing into him.

He was more than dead. I took a step and picked up the head, holding it around the throat because he had no hair.

“One down,” I whispered to the one staring eye. “President Barnes is next.”

King

I lost track of Marinah after she took off toward the vehicles holding the rotary gun. She must have figured out what Smythe had planned. My men were ready to enter the fight. We left our position and circled the area. The enemy was flanked on all sides. Many of them began running toward Marinah's location, desperate for a place to hide, but I didn't have time to dwell on the danger she was in. Beck's men had already made it inside the outpost and were successfully tearing into the hellhounds. A few stragglers remained. My men drew their swords and cut them down.

The Federation soldiers realized the battle was lost and began laying down their weapons. A hellhound about twenty feet from me grabbed one foolish man. His muffled screams stopped when the hound tore his face off. A hound charged me. I cut it down with my sword as I ran. Half my men pointed their rifles at the surrendering soldiers, who seemed to decide being shot was a quicker death than being eaten by hounds. After the hellhound attacked their fellow soldier, they held their weapons but kept them pointed downward.

Once we took out the remaining hounds, the soldiers began tossing their guns to the ground again.

"I'm going to Marinah; I need twenty men with me," I yelled.

Nokita appeared out of nowhere and stayed a few feet behind me as I took off. Beck gained ground until he was running beside me.

"No human casualties," he reported. "Two Warriors injured from my team."

I heard him, but my focus was on Marinah. We crested the rise, and I saw the trucks in the distance. Warriors surrounded the farthest truck on the left. It was the one with the rotary gun that Smythe had jumped onto. The Shadow Warriors had their backs to the truck like they were protecting something on it. I didn't see Marinah and picked up speed.

I noticed a Warrior down and sent Nokita in his direction. I didn't want to see what was behind the men, and from the looks in their eyes, they didn't want to see it either. My heart plummeted into my stomach, and my knees almost buckled. A smoky haze clouded my vision, and I couldn't find air.

Then I heard her above the roar in my ears. She was alive. I shoved aside the Warrior in front of me, and I froze where I stood.

It was Marinah, but not the Marinah from earlier. She was larger, scarier, deadlier. She had grown a foot taller, and it wasn't just her height. Her entire body was larger. I had read about this phenomenon in our history texts.

The book passage spoke of rare, elite Nova Warriors. They stayed behind on the home planet when the ships left, sacrificing their lives so others could live. What I was seeing before me was pure Nova. It was said that when they went into rage mode, they grew in size and became nearly impossible to defeat.

Marinah was covered in blood, and still she slammed her claws into Smythe. Or at least I thought it was Smythe. Hard to tell now. Beck moved next to me. "Are you going to stop her?" he asked.

I didn't take my eyes off my mate. "Hell no, are you?"

"I value my life more than that." There wasn't an ounce of teasing in the words.

Marinah raised her arm. Halfway to pummeling the body again, she stopped the downward momentum. She stepped toward the head and lifted it. I saw the moment the world came back into focus. Her gaze remained on what she held. A minute passed before she looked up. Our eyes met. I could only describe the look she gave me as, lost. She didn't seem to understand what had happened. But I did. Blood and gore slid down her face. Incredible didn't even come close to describing what I saw. She tossed the head to the side.

The men turned toward her and slowly dropped to one knee; their faces filled with awe.

Her eyes left mine, and she looked at them in confusion. Her gaze returned to me, and I saw fear. I smiled and slowly knelt on one knee.

“What are you doing?” she yelled in an even deeper voice than her normal Warrior form carried. She leapt toward us and landed with a thump that made the ground rumble. “Why are you on your knees?” she demanded while quickly scanning the men then focusing on me again. “Are you crazy? Get up. We're still in danger.”

“No, we aren't crazy. We were paying homage to our new leader.”

Marinah was King, and she didn't have a clue what had just happened. I opened my arms, and she walked into them. The men around us backed away, giving her room. She bent slightly, trying to get into her usual position. It was impossible, and she shook her head in confusion while looking down on me.

“Did you shrink?” she asked carefully.

“No,” I said, my chest rumbling because I refused to let my relieved laughter out. She'd survived and she was bigger and better than ever before. I pulled her closer and adjusted her slightly with my arm around her shoulder. “You okay?”

“I don’t know.” She looked at what remained of the body before turning back and looking down to meet my gaze. “What happened?”

“I think that’s Smythe up there, or at least what’s left of him.”

She shook her head again. “I killed him, didn’t I?”

“I only caught the tail end, but that’s definitely your kill.”

It took her a moment before she responded. “I’m killing President Barnes next.”

“Of that I have no doubt.”

She leaned closer to me. “You’re acting strange.” Her eyes scanned the area. “The Warriors are acting strange. What did I screw up now?”

It wasn’t the time for this discussion, but she needed to understand what happened. Once she had her bearings, she’d insist anyway.

“Do you remember the history text we were reading a few weeks ago? The one about the Warriors who stayed behind on the home planet to save as many as possible and gave up their seats on the ships?”

“Weren’t they super Warriors or something like that?” she asked cautiously.

“Anshi.”

“An what?” Her dark eyes remained filled with confusion.

“Anshi... Nova Warriors. We didn’t think there were any who made it off the home planet. But obviously someone’s grandmother or great-grandmother did.”

“Where?” She glanced around before her gaze returned to mine. “King,” she whispered.

“Yes, Anshi.”

“No.” She stretched the word out, and her goliath jaws trembled.

I couldn’t stop my proud grin. “You’re Anshi, and you are amazing.”

“This is a joke.” She stepped back and gazed at me, beginning at my feet and finally ending at the top of my head, which was obviously a foot lower than hers.

“Do you need the men to take another knee?” I asked carefully, though my laughter was almost too much to hold back.

Horror filled her voice. “Please tell me I don’t look grosser than before?”

It was more than I could handle, and I began laughing. It was partial relief that she was safe and part hilarity over what had stayed hidden from me until now. The men close enough to hear what she said started laughing too.

It was Beck who finally tried to calm a very irritated Marinah. “I’m still guarding King, but I doubt you’ll need my help.” He lost it and bent double, laughing like the rest of us.

“You think this is funny?” she shouted in outrage.

Her hand came up, and she placed it against her throat.

“Careful, mate, your claws are bigger too,” I said, still laughing.

“This can’t be happening,” she groaned. “How could I be bigger? I want to return to my normal Warrior size.” She took several deep breaths. “Oh God, how will you keep me fed?” Her head snapped to the side of the vehicle then in different directions. “Ryan?”

Beck’s smile disappeared, and he shook his head. “He didn’t make it. You’ve got another team member seriously wounded and one with a bullet in his shoulder. They’re being transported to Axel right now.”

Marinah turned to me, and I saw her jaw tremble again. I placed a hand on her back. “Hold it together. We’ll mourn when it’s time.”

She didn’t respond, but the look in her eyes told me everything. She would never forgive herself for Ryan’s loss.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:36 pm

Marinah

King placed his arm around my shoulder. It didn't feel right. He gave me a small tug and led me toward the outpost.

"None of the humans in the outpost died," he said. "Ruth and Missy are safe."

My thoughts went to Ryan. He took my place and died because of it. If I had gone, he would be alive. His death would haunt me forever.

King dealt with this each time a Warrior under his command died. He took each death personally. I felt it now. The pain clawed at my insides. How would I live with this?

We finally walked through the outpost gates, Ruth spotted me and started running.

Two feet away, she came to a dead stop. "You're... huge. And bloody. Cool."

From beautiful to huge. This wasn't sitting well with me.

"Yeah," I said. "I think I'm a lot bigger."

"Are you meaner?" she asked seriously.

Oh, this child. "I hope not."

Her lips curved downward, and her eyes turned stubborn. "Then it's not that cool."

Nokita came closer. “She stabbed the general with her claws until there was nothing left of his face, and then she sliced off his head with a single claw,” he said, clearly not worried about how much he wasn’t helping.

“You did?” Ruth asked, wide-eyed.

I turned my gaze to Nokita and hoped the fire burning in my eyes conveyed that he needed to shut up.

“I did,” I said, turning back to Ruth, refusing to lie because she would hear the truth again from others.

“Okay, that’s cool then.” She nodded like I needed her approval to be cool. She scuffed her boot into the dirt and looked up at me hopefully. “I didn’t get to kill a single hellhound. Maybe we can find some on the island.”

King stepped in to help. “Marinah’s coming with me for now, Ruth. We need some adult time.”

She rolled her eyes. “When we’re in training, no one gets to interrupt us, even for adult time, because I know what that means, and it’s gross.”

“We’ll do our best,” King said with a straight face.

He earned an evil glare from Ruth but turned away without understanding that she was armed. I glared at her when her hand went to the sword.

“If you do, I will end you.” My voice was much lower now, and it carried more weight.

Her hand slid down to her side. “Sorry,” she mumbled.

It was my turn to give her my back. King's arm went around my shoulder again. Weariness crept in, and I could feel the exhaustion throughout my body. It felt weird to be taller than King, and I didn't like it. This messed up our hugability.

My brain turned to the passage from the book that mentioned Nova Warriors. If I remembered what it said, I could choose between this size and my usual one. I closed my eyes and silently mouthed the words, "Make me smaller." Nothing happened. Figuring out how this worked could be interesting. I remember the shifting rage when I went from human to Warrior. I wasn't sure if that's when it happened or if it was after I laid hands on Smythe, which I now remembered. Even so, my brain was mush.

King led us inside Missy's place, and I spotted Garret sitting up against the couch with cushions behind his back. He looked pale, but at least he was upright, and they'd made it back to the outpost. Relief swept through me.

"Axel is helping the injured," Garret said wearily. He glanced between me and King, his head tilting upward as his eyes met mine. "Something I should know?" he asked.

King grumbled, clearly annoyed. I elbowed him, having no idea until then that I wasn't just larger, I was more powerful. King's grumble turned into a startled grunt.

"I'll explain later," I told Garret. "King needs to speak with me."

Garret wisely said nothing, and King led me away. He opened the door to the room next to Ruth's. It was a bathroom. He turned on the shower. They didn't have hot water unless it was heated for a bath.

"The blood needs to come off you first," he said.

I stared at the water and shivered. "It's too cold," I whined, though it didn't sound like my normal whine.

The corners of his mouth tilted upward. “Sissy.”

When it came to cold water, I sure as hell was. But I did need to get the blood off. King shifted, and this time when I tried, I slid easily into my human form. We quickly undressed. King stepped into the tub beneath the spray and grabbed my arm, pulling me in with him.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“No,” I admitted, thinking of Ryan and not the cold water streaming over us.

“You did what had to be done. Ryan’s death isn’t on you,” he said, understanding it wasn’t my new form that filled my head.

“When you lose a Warrior and you say that to yourself, does it work?”

“No,” he admitted. “It hurts, and I fucking hate it.”

He did understand. I didn’t want to be put in charge again because the hole in the pit of my stomach hurt too badly. “I remember killing Smythe,” I said to change the subject and keep from crying. “It’s still a little hazy, but it was definitely Smythe.”

“You’ll need to practice becoming Nova and see how badly the rage affects you after you shift. It might be harder to control than your beast form.”

“You’re right. I’m not even sure when it happened, but I haven’t felt that amount of rage since I first shifted.”

“Welcome to our world, baby.” He gave me a gentle smile.

I stuck out my tongue, but King caught me off guard, kissing me before I could pull it

back. His lips moved over mine, massaging softly, while his tongue explored with gentle insistence. His calloused hands ran over my skin, as if reassuring himself I was okay. I did the same, feeling every perfect muscle beneath his flesh. He grabbed a bar of soap and washed me first, and then I returned the favor.

After we were completely clean of blood and gore, King shut the water off and pulled me back into his arms. His scent and taste filled me, sending sparks from my toes to my ears. His chest warmed me, and I no longer thought about the cold. Even off the island, I was home.

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We left two days later. I had worried we might lose Axel if he decided to stay with Garret, but it turned out to be the other way around. The settlement lost their governor, and they elected Landan to take Garret's place. We also brought Cosway and her five kittens, or "kiddies," as everyone called them now. Ruth and Missy were adopting one, and I was hoping to talk King into taking the calico. I just hadn't worked up the courage to ask.

Ruth was impossible the entire plane ride, and I knew training her would have to become a priority. If I didn't, the kid was going to drive everyone crazy, and there was a big chance we would have mutiny on the island.

My thoughts kept going back to Ryan, and sadness overpowered me. When King saw my expression, he grabbed my hand and squeezed without saying anything. I stepped from the plane, my feet dragging as I thought of Ryan's funeral.

"Marinah! Marinah!" Che yelled and threw himself into my arms.

My heart warmed. I glanced over his head at Maylin, but she wasn't looking at us. Her focus was on Nokita. We were all stunned when he walked over, lifted Maylin

into his arms, twirled her around, and kissed her.

And what a kiss it was. Maylin was visibly flustered when he set her back on her feet. Her cheeks turned red as she placed her hand on his arm, and then they walked away together.

“So gross. I’ll never do that kissy stuff,” Ruth muttered.

Honestly, I wanted nothing more than to do that kissy stuff with King. Somehow, some way, we would find time to be alone. Between the whistles we’d confiscated, the injured, and Ryan’s funeral, finding time alone would be nearly impossible but we had to.

“I’ll see you in our room,” King whispered in my ear after Che released me.

I talked to Che for five minutes before a Warrior called me over to ask a question I could actually answer without King’s guidance, and we began unpacking the plane. When I finally made it to the room, King wasn’t there. I took a long hot shower, hoping he’d join me, but it didn’t happen. I ended up falling asleep, consumed with thoughts of Ryan.

King

It took hours to solve a few issues and get things in place to put my plan into action. When I entered our room, Marinah was asleep. I quickly packed a bag for both of us. She didn't stir the entire time. I was exhausted, but nothing was going to stop me from having this alone time with her.

Beck was attending the funerals in our absence. It was the one thing that had made me hesitate with this mad scheme.

Beck hadn't let me dwell on it. "Take this time with your mate. You've got more problems than simple mating rage. When you come back, you get the hellspawn, and I'm taking Missy away."

I just hoped Marinah would forgive me for making her miss Ryan's funeral. His loss had hit her hard. I still remembered the first Shadow Warrior who had died under my command. It never got easier but that one haunted me in a different way.

Once I collected everything we needed, I gently woke her. "Remember I told you I was kidnapping you?" I said when I was sure she was awake.

"I think," she mumbled groggily.

I scooped her into my arms. "It's happening."

With two bags slung over my shoulder and my mate in my arms, I left the room.

“I need clothes,” she whined after a moment.

“I doubt you will, but I’ve got it covered.”

She breathed against my neck. “We’re really getting time alone?”

“Yes, and if I have to kill someone to make sure of it, I will. They’ve been warned.”

“I love you.”

I held her tighter, carrying her all the way to the courtyard. I placed her on the back of my bike and situated myself in front of her. “Hold on,” I told her.

“I’m never letting go.”

“The airport?” she asked, surprised after I made the final turn about ten minutes later.

“If we don’t get off this island, we’ll never find peace,” I said.

The plane was small, and the flight short. We strapped on our parachutes, and this time Marinah wasn’t as apprehensive as she had been during her first jump. I pointed down at our destination. “That’s Jarnines del Rev Island. Maybe you should rename it.”

“You want me to rename an island?” she asked, shocked.

“I think you should. We’re claiming this island as our own, and whenever we need to get away, this is where we’re coming.”

“Love Island,” she said with a grin.

I smiled inwardly. “Now let’s get on with the loving part of our island.”

She laughed and didn’t wait for me before propelling herself out of the plane. She had no idea what was in store for her. We landed about a mile from our destination and gathered our chutes.

“I just realized we don’t have any way to get off the island,” she said.

“That’s the plan.” I gave her my most wicked grin.

She replied with a tempting smile. “Quite a plan,” she teased, licking her lips as we picked up our bags and started jogging.

I had sent a team to the newly christened Love Island before we left for the U.S. Alden had assured me everything was ready, just as I’d requested.

A few minutes later, she pointed ahead. “Is that a cabin?”

“It’s our cabin.”

She took off running full tilt. “Wait,” I called after her, running to catch up. I scooped her into my arms. “I’m carrying you over the threshold.”

“You’re a silly man,” she giggled.

I set her down inside, and she glanced around, her eyes wide. “It’s beautiful.”

“Maylin decorated it for us.”

“It’s perfect, and I love it.”

“I love you.”

Marinah turned and walked into my arms. I scooped her up again and carried her to the bedroom. When there was nothing between us, I lifted her and placed her gently on the bed. Her hair was its usual wild mess, and I brushed it back from her eyes.

“Hi,” she whispered.

Our lips met, and the restlessness that had dogged me for so long faded. We were tired, but none of that mattered. What mattered was this connection, the pull I felt whenever she was more than a foot away. Now, I was whole.

My hand found one of her breasts, and she sighed into my mouth. “More,” she groaned.

“We’ve only just begun,” I murmured.

Her groan grew louder this time, and her fingernails dug into my back, trying to urge me along. That wasn’t happening. I wanted to savor every inch of her, to feel every detail, and I wasn’t about to let this end before it truly began. Ignoring her insistent hands, I focused entirely on her body.

I took her nipple into my mouth, sucking gently until she bucked beneath me. Then I turned my attention to the other, eliciting a gasp of pure bliss.

“King, please,” she begged desperately.

Marinah would be doing a lot more begging before I was through.

When neither of us could stand it, I slid inside her. She always felt new and sweet, and damned sexy. We rocked the bed as my powerful strokes filled her. She finally

let out a scream of completion, and I could hold back no longer.

The electrifying thrill ran through my entire body.

Finally, I sank down on top of her and rolled us to the side, circling her in my arms, our sweaty bodies entangled.

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Marinah

I was too tired to sleep. My finger twirled absently through the hair on King's chest. He was awake too. "Why did the men take a knee when I went into Nova Warrior form?" I asked.

King rolled over so we were facing each other. My hand slid to the side, but he caught it and placed it back on his chest.

"You won't like the answer," he said. "I can tell you when we're ready to leave, and then you won't need to think about it until it's time to return."

That didn't sound good, but I had no idea why. "You're scaring me."

"We should enjoy our time together."

"How am I supposed to enjoy it with this hanging over me? You need to tell me now."

He rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. For several long minutes, he didn't say anything. If his eyes had been closed, I might have thought he'd fallen asleep. Even though it killed me, I gave him the time he needed.

“Shadow Warriors were different on the home planet,” he finally said.

“From what I read; they were homicidal maniacs.”

“That about covers it. Only the strongest became leaders.”

“Okay, that’s something I know,” I said, my unease growing.

“There were different levels of strong. The Nova Warriors were far above others, and they are the ones who ruled.” He stopped, letting the words sink in.

“What exactly are you saying?”

He rolled back toward me and gently brushed hair from my cheek. “You’re our king. Or, more precisely, our queen. You lead the Shadow Warriors by default.”

What did he just say? I lay there stunned for a moment.

“Do I have a say in this?”

I saw his slight smile in the darkness. “You have a say on everything. Your word is a command.”

I covered his mouth with my fingers. “Stop. I’m not ready for this nonsense.”

His hand moved to my breast, and my fingers dropped from his lips.

“Are you ready for more of this nonsense?” His eyes sparked with desire.

I groaned when he put pressure on my nipple. Only one more thought entered my head before I gave into temptation.

If I thought the world was crazy before, it was completely insane now.

King

Marinah handled it better than I expected. She refused to mention a word about her Nova or being Queen. Like I said, better than expected. Before we came here, Beck asked if she understood what had happened. He laughed when I asked if he was planning to tell her. His exact words were, “Throw me in a pit of hellhounds first.”

Wise man.

We held our own service for Ryan as we watched the sun go down during our second night on the island. I told her stories of Ryan when we fought for the Federation that made her laugh and then cry in my arms. I wiped her tears and then gave her time alone. When she returned to the cabin, I held her until she fell asleep.

We had four incredible days of bliss before she decided to voice her concerns about being Nova. We were in bed in the early afternoon, enjoying some uninterrupted adult time. Her head rested on my chest, her body half on mine, when she said, “I can’t be a leader. I’ve just commanded my first unit. Leaders need experience.”

“They do,” I agreed.

“How the heck do I gain experience? No, wait. I don’t want that kind of experience. They’re your men, King. Don’t do this to me. You can’t.” Her fingers dug into my hip.

I spoke very softly, telling her the truth. “They’re your men now.”

Her agitation reached a new level, and she sat up. “It won’t work.” She slammed her fists on the bed beside me. I fought the urge to smile. Now wasn’t the time. “You can’t possibly feel good about this. You’re the leader of the Shadow Warriors, and I can’t take that away from you.”

“Was,” I corrected.

“How can you not hate me?”

I reached out and placed my finger on the tip of her nose. “You’re my mate. I could never hate you.”

“But I’m a Nova Warrior, and according to your ridiculous books from a time when the men on your planet destroyed everything, I’m just supposed to take over?”

“It’s already happened. The men accepted you as their leader.”

She growled, a low, deep sound rising from her chest.

I sat partway up, lifted her onto my lap, and leaned back against the headboard. “I knew you were special from the first moment you shifted. No,” I hesitated a moment, “It was even before that. You haunted my dreams since you fell down those stairs and landed at my feet. I love you for who you are, every inch of you, human, Warrior, and Nova. My uncle chose me as the next leader because I was the strongest. He was never easy on me, and I did everything I could to live up to his standards.” I rested my head against hers and inhaled the fear radiating off her. “If Greystone had an inkling you existed, he wouldn’t have looked twice at me. From the beginning, I trained you to be a leader. The men on my guard earned their positions. You? You demanded it.”

“No.” She shook her head.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“No,” she said again, her voice more adamant. “I can’t lead thousands of Shadow Warriors. I can’t strategize, nor do I understand war like you do. It won’t work. The men will never respect me as their leader.”

She was the most stubborn woman on the planet. I knew this would be hard, but I didn’t expect to be talking to a brick wall. “Did your squad have trouble obeying your orders?”

“No,” she said, her frustration clear. “They did exactly what I asked.”

I fought the urge to smile again. Asked was a misnomer. With Marinah, there hadn’t been any asking involved.

“The men recognized you as their leader. No hesitation. No Shadow Warrior in our history has worked as hard as you or come so far in such a short amount of time. You’re the only one who doubts your abilities.”

“King.” She leaned up and placed her palms against my jaws, her gaze locking onto mine. “You are the King of the Shadow Warriors. It’s who you are.”

I couldn’t help but smile as I conveyed what I truly felt. “Not anymore.”

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Marinah

We spent three weeks on the island. Missing Ryan’s funeral was hard. My heart ached every time I thought about him. I would visit his family after we returned.

Missy and Beck came for us and we reluctantly headed back to the main island. Ruth came with them, but she wasn't speaking to me. She sat at the end of the boat, pouting with her arms crossed and wearing a do not mess with me look on her face. Someone had promised her training, and that someone was me. I didn't say a word to her.

Beck nodded my way, his head slightly down, and I swore he looked nervous. I hated it and needed something to occupy my mind. King and Beck started talking in low tones about the whistles, but selfishly, I didn't care about them right now.

"How are the wounded?" I asked Missy.

"They're up and moving about, even Garret. He's living with Axel, and he's in medical training. Axel wants to kill him for overexerting himself, but Garret is strong and obeys the doctor about as well as you do."

"That bad, huh?" Then something occurred to me. "Is Maylin losing her job?" I asked, concerned.

"No, she's helping train Garret, and he helps her with the baby, who just started crawling. Baby Boot is under everyone's feet, and Garret has been a godsend." She lowered her voice at the end and peeked over at Beck. He didn't hear her, and she sighed in relief. I got it. If I said what she did, King would've been doing his snappy growl thing.

Being around someone who understood the difficulties of Beast mating rage was nice. "Baby Boot will be as bad as Che in no time."

"Yes," she agreed with a small laugh. "He's already a handful."

I decided to get a little nosier. "How are Maylin and Nokita getting along?"

She rolled her eyes. “For the most part, better. Nokita has made his intentions clear to the entire island, and he’s patiently waiting for Maylin to figure out she can’t live without him. Maylin still drags her feet, but she’s mellower, if that makes sense.”

I had no idea what “mellow” meant in this circumstance, but I nodded anyway. I’d never been accused of being mellow. “Any word from the outposts?”

“Landan’s doing good as governor,” Ruth said, butting into our conversation.

My eyes snapped to hers. “You’re on guard duty. If your focus is on us, you aren’t doing your job. Expect a punishment.”

“What for?” she immediately shot back, her face going as red as her hair.

“Disrespect. I’ve been proud of you for sitting quietly and watching out for our safety. Now that’s ruined.”

She stomped her foot for maximum effect, shaking the entire boat. “I wasn’t looking out for your safety. I just wasn’t speaking to you.” She folded her arms in triumph.

She had no idea who she was up against. “Good. I like that even more. Add guard duty to your pout and get back to it.”

“Hmph.”

I turned away and addressed Missy again. She had watched the exchange closely. “I hope you know what you’re doing,” she muttered, much like she had when I gave Ruth the sword.

I went back to ignoring Ruth’s pouting and moved on. “Has the Federation made additional threats against the outposts?”

Missy shook her head. “Silence. No communication or sightings.”

I didn’t share my thoughts on the situation. This was a test. The Federation wanted mass casualties of Shadow Warriors and humans. I was sure Smythe wasn’t intended to die, but I knew that wouldn’t slow President Barnes. He had more planned for us.

Missy and I talked about other things, like the gardens and food production, after that. Ruth didn’t say another word. When we made it back to the citadel, she quickly walked away.

“Hey,” I called from behind her. “Grab your sword and have your butt in the gym in ten minutes.”

Her eyes lit up for a moment, then she remembered she was mad at me and stomped off. This should be fun. I headed to my room to change, with King on my heels.

“You’re starting with Ruth already?” he asked as I tore out of my clothes. I planned to be five minutes late so Ruth would be waiting for me. Today would set the tone for what I had planned, and she’d learn exactly who was in charge.

“She’ll have Sundays off but otherwise will train with me daily. I’ll give her enough to work on that she stays out of our hair,” I said, yanking my shirt over my head.

“And your other duties?”

That was something I refused to discuss. “If you need me in a meeting, let me know.” I pulled on new socks and slipped into my old workout shoes. For a moment, the loss of my Doc Martens hit hard. I had loved those boots, but saving Garret had been more important. I knew both he and Axel agreed.

“If you don’t schedule a meeting, there won’t be one,” King said, in a maddeningly

calm voice.

I blew out a frustrated huff of air, glad I was heading to the gym to release some of the stress. After three weeks with my mate, it shouldn't have been this way, and I wasn't happy about it. I tried so hard not to give in to King's manipulations, but it was impossible.

"We need to figure out the frequency of the whistles. The sooner we can duplicate them, the better."

"Would you like me to get someone working on the whistles?" he asked patiently.

With a low growl, I walked to the door. "Do what you think best." I stepped out, not missing the laughter behind me. He was pushing, and he knew it. I was not the leader of the Shadow Warriors.

When I walked into the gym, Ruth was sitting and waiting for me.

"Get your butt off the floor," I said sharply. "I expect you to be warmed up before I enter the gym. Place your sword against the wall. You won't be needing it today."

"Then why did you have me bring it?" she demanded defiantly.

I turned and gave her my full, hard-eyed attention. "I will answer this question once and only once. In this gym, my word is law. I won't be questioned about what I tell you to do. If you don't like it, there's the door. If you're unclear on something, you have permission to ask respectfully. Anything else will earn you punishment." Her attitude deflated a little under my gaze. "As for the sword, mine is against the wall. A warrior never goes anywhere without her sword. If someone needs saving, we need our weapons close at hand."

Her eyes began to shine with excitement. She'd never be a Shadow Warrior, but our new world needed humans who could fight. Ruth would be a soldier by the time I finished training her.

We started the session, and I used the same techniques that had been used on me back when I struggled with simple things like keeping my balance. Ruth turned out to be a great student and soaked up the attention. I'd expected complaints, but to my surprise, there were few. When she did complain, I dealt with it using a sharp look and a set of pushups.

When we finished, I went over the warmup she'd be doing before I entered the gym each day. "You will do these, unless something comes up that I can't get out of, I will meet you in the gym at six in the morning. You'll arrive earlier and be ready to start the moment I walk through the door. If I'm more than thirty minutes late, you'll know I have something more important to attend to, and you can leave."

"Yes, ma'am," she said.

"Good job today. Next week, we'll start working with weapons."

Her eyes lit up again. "Will you teach me to shoot?"

"Eventually," I said with a small smile.

I walked over to the bag I'd brought in and handed it to her. "I found this for you. It's not much, and you're probably too old for it, but I wanted to bring you something special since we had to delay your training."

She didn't even know what was in the bag, but the look in her eyes told me I'd done good. She opened it slowly, like it might break. When she pulled the doll out, her eyes went huge. One moment she was holding the doll, and the next her arms were

wrapped around me, and she was crying.

I held her close. “At least tell me you like it.”

“I love it so much,” she said, her muffled words pressed against my stomach. After one last squeeze, she ran from the room, the doll clenched tightly in her arms.

She was still a child who had to deal with adult matters because it was the world we lived in. I was glad I went with my gut and brought the doll.

By hiding out to avoid what came next, I had killed as much time as I possibly could. It was time to find King and face the music. My life sucked so badly right now.

King

Marinah's avoidance didn't bother me. She needed time to think through her new responsibilities. What she didn't understand was that she was a leader, and she was strong enough to command the Shadow Warriors. I remembered my own doubts in the beginning. They ate me alive. The difference was that Marinah had me at her side. I wouldn't let her flounder.

Labyrinth began testing the whistles after I passed along Marinah's orders. I informed my guard that Marinah didn't have any meetings or training planned for the day.

"You told her who she is?" Beck asked.

"She took it as well as expected."

"That bad?"

"It could have been worse." Then again, so could the earthquake that took down San Francisco in 1906 but I kept that piece of wisdom to myself.

"You want us twiddling our thumbs?" Labyrinth asked.

The man was a lummoX, and I doubted thumb-twiddling was even in his skill set. "Until we have our orders, go for it."

He nodded, lifted his massive hands, and twiddled those monstrous thumbs. That's when Marinah walked into the conference room. The men immediately came to

attention, and it hit me. I needed to stop calling them my guard. These men belonged to Marinah now.

She gave the men a little finger wave and walked to her usual seat, which was not at the head of the table. She shot the empty chair a scowl for good measure, and thankfully, no one snickered.

“Is this an official meeting?” I asked sincerely, keeping my voice as even as possible.

She ground her teeth hard enough to break them before answering. “Do cows fly? Of course, this is an official meeting. Everyone’s here.”

Someone’s workout might not have gone too well. There was no way I would point out that Axel was missing.

We took out our knives and jammed them into the wood. She gave us an evil glare, then sat. We followed her example. I didn’t take the head seat either. If Marinah wasn’t sitting there, it would remain empty. She glared at me, then finally placed her arms on the table, lifted her hands, and sank her head into them.

“I can’t do this,” she said, her voice muffled. Then she looked up at the men, her frustration etched into every word. “I mean, I. Can’t. Do. This.”

They remained silent.

She met each man’s eyes. Beast didn’t make a peep, which meant the three weeks alone with Marinah had helped calm the mating rage. It couldn’t have come soon enough.

“You can’t seriously think I’d make a better leader than King?”

Silence.

“Argh. Someone say something, anything,” she demanded.

Beck lifted a finger. “If I may?”

The question only irritated her more. “Whatever it is, just say it.”

Unlike the usual Beck, his voice was soft when he spoke. This was new. He usually managed to inflect a sneer in his tone, particularly when dealing with me, specifically when I was being difficult, though I was sure he’d have a better word for my volatile behavior.

“Greystone trained King to take over as leader when the time came,” Beck began, his gaze flicking briefly to me before looking away. “From reading our history, this can be a very volatile time for Shadow Warriors. King’s transition was seamless. The biggest reason was that our Beasts accepted him as the true leader. No internal quibbles, no desire to challenge, just absolute acceptance. When you morphed to Nova, it happened just as quickly. My Beast knew. King’s Beast knew.”

Marinah stayed silent for all of two seconds. “And that’s supposed to make this easier?”

I stepped in to help her out. “He’s telling you this so you understand. You are our leader. Our queen.”

“Don’t call me that again,” she snapped.

“Yes, your highness,” I said, my tone just enough to provoke.

Her glare practically shot flames, and I watched as she fought for control, struggling

internally with Ms. Beast. It went on for several minutes. The men looked everywhere but at Marinah. Meeting her eyes would be difficult for them now. They'd avoided looking at her out of deference to the mating rage, but now, she was alpha. Soon, even she would feel the effects.

I wasn't planning on mentioning it. She'd figure it out on her own.

She slowly inhaled, then exhaled. And again. Her fingertips started tapping the table, and she finally blew out a huff of air that sent hair flying off her forehead. "I don't even know where to begin. What exactly am I supposed to tell you to do?"

Now the men started shifting uncomfortably. They needed a decisive leader, not someone trying to get their bearings. But that wasn't Marinah. She was the type to jump into a pit of snakes, okay, maybe not snakes after her last adventure with one, but she handled whatever was thrown at her and moved on to the next target. She'd adjust.

"Say something. You can't just throw me out here and expect me to swim. I need help." She turned her eyes to me, full of frustration. "Help!"

I opened my hands in a calming gesture. "We need to debrief what happened in the U.S., go over what went right, what went wrong, and where we can improve."

She blew her hair off her forehead again, this time in relief. "Perfect. We'll go around the table." She looked at the men expectantly.

This was a disaster. The men shifted awkwardly, avoiding eye contact. She turned to me in desperation. "You go first."

Finally, an order. Maybe not an intentional one, but it was a start.

I laid everything out, beginning with our preparations before leaving, which had gone smoothly, and leading up to finding the soldiers in the city and our confrontation there.

“Our departure from the island went smoothly, but I think it could be better,” Beck added when it was his turn. “We need a metal building at the airport to store supplies. It would make it easier than transporting them when we need to leave quickly.” He shot a quick glance at Marinah, then lowered his eyes.

It took her a second to respond, maybe because we’d caught her daydreaming. “Good. Great,” she finally said. “You’re in charge of getting the building set up. You’ll need to assign someone to maintain the supplies.”

She turned her attention to Labyrinth. He wasn’t someone who usually had much to say, but when he did, it was to convey something he felt strongly about.

Labyrinth blinked slowly. We always wondered if his brain was like his muscles; massive and requiring extra effort to activate. “The decision to remain in the city after our confrontation with the Federation was wrong. It placed more lives in danger, and we were fortunate Nokita found us when he did, or another outpost might have been destroyed.”

Marinah nodded, not agreeing or disagreeing. “So, you vote we let those weaker than us die.”

He nodded. “With all due respect, Garret knew what he was getting into when he came with us.”

Her fingers splayed on the table, likely to keep from forming fists. I held back a smile, enjoying the rare sight of someone else handling this kind of crap. “If we do it your way, we might as well kill all the humans and take over the fucking world. Wait.

If we did that, we'd have no one left to control." She added an exaggerated eye roll for effect, then turned to Nokita. "Next."

Nokita looked at me and winked. Marinah was doing exactly what she claimed she couldn't, and she didn't even realize it.

"There are two hundred Warriors at the outposts," he said. "We need to make plans to switch them monthly."

"Good." Marinah smiled, looking like she was getting the hang of things. I stopped myself from rolling my eyes. "You're in charge of that," she added.

She took another deep breath and glanced around the table. "Where's Axel?"

"He's testing something with the whistles," Beck grunted. "He says as soon as he has more information, you'll be the first to know."

The queen didn't like that, and her eyes became small pinpoints of fire. "He will be at tomorrow's meeting. Eight sharp. He will give me an update then. See to it because I thought the whistles were Labyrinth's duty." She shot an evil look at the man in question then stretched her arms above her head like we'd been in a meeting for hours instead of thirty minutes. "Is there anything else we need to cover?" she asked with a yawn.

Four sets of eyes stared back at her in silence.

"Alrighty then. Meeting over." She jumped up like her seat was on fire and flew out of the room.

"This will take a bit of getting used to," Beck said after the door closed.

I stared at the door. “She’ll get the hang of it. She’s fighting it now. I had rage on my side when I took over, which made it easier.”

Beck grinned. “Oh, she’s got plenty of rage. We’re just glad you’ll be the one getting the brunt of it.”

Marinah

They were laughing at me, and I couldn't blame them.

I could not lead thousands of men, scratch that, Shadow Warriors. I had no idea what I was doing. The entire meeting replayed in my head. They were like children, and I couldn't believe I was supposed to point them in a direction and tell them what to do.

Stupid.

And King had been doing this for years.

Nokita had offhandedly mentioned Cosway as I left the room, and it reminded me I needed to check on her. I started my search and eventually gave up and asked one of the door guards. He pointed me to the outside courtyard, where I found her playing with the kittens.

"Pretty butterfly," she said when she noticed me.

She was a pretty butterfly herself now. Soap, water, and good food had transformed her. She looked younger, and someone had even worked on her teeth. I guessed her to be in her mid-twenties. "Hi, Cosway. Do you mind if I join you and play with the kittens?"

She pushed the calico in my direction, and I caught him before he could scamper off. "He likes the pretty butterfly."

“I like him,” I said, cradling the little guy in my arms. He started purring the moment I scratched his soft, round belly.

“You keep him. He is yours,” she said simply.

It was more than I’d heard her say since we found her. “King might not agree with you. I don’t think he likes cats.”

She snapped her fingers, her expression turning serious. “King no say.”

I thought about it. “You know what? You’re right. Yes, I want this little,” I tipped the precious bundle over to adjust my hold, “girl. Are you sure you don’t mind?”

I should have realized the kitten was a girl since calicos usually were. I guessed I’d been around too many men lately; everything defaulted to male. It would be nice to have another female in my life.

“Pretty butterfly needs kiddie,” she said with conviction.

I lifted the little gal and stared into her blue eyes. “You need a name. I’ll think about it, and when I come for you, I’ll have something that works.”

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The next two weeks were more of the same. During our morning meetings, I felt like an idiot. No, an imposter. I was being stubborn by not asking King for help. Deep down, I wanted him to take this back. If I did a horrible job, maybe he’d reconsider. It was a ridiculous plan, but it was all I had to get myself out of this mess.

The biggest news came from Axel, who had managed to replicate the whistles. “Their frequency makes it impossible for the human ear to hear. It also has little to no effect

on Shadow Warriors besides annoyance,” he explained, looking at me with a smile. “Frequency was too much for poor Labyrinth’s brain to handle.” He added a friendly smirk for Labyrinth.

The Goliath only grunted.

For reasons I couldn’t explain, his smirk irritated me, but I pushed it aside and focused on the good news. “Is it possible to give one to every human on the island?” I asked, hopeful.

“We should have more than enough within ninety days,” he replied.

“What about the outposts?” I pressed. They needed them just as much as we did.

“I sent the prototype, and they’re making their own.”

He kept looking at me, and I placed my hands in front of me as though warding him off. “What?” I grumbled. He was acting weird.

Axel looked away, but I caught the grin tugging at his lips.

“What is this about?” I demanded, looking around the table. “You don’t get to pretend something isn’t up.”

The men were pointedly staring. At me. They wanted to laugh. I could see it in their barely contained lip twitches. I’d had just about enough.

Kill , Ms. Beast whispered in my mind, louder than ever. It felt like the Nova transformation had put her on steroids.

Maybe, I told her.

Beck leaned forward, his eyes intense, and that's when I lost it. It felt strange too. Ms. Beast pushed the K-5, forcing my shift. It was a stronger dose than she'd ever used. If I completely lost control, someone would die. These were my friends. Okay, irritating friends. I shoved back against the K-5 and forced Ms. Beast into her hidey hole somewhere deep inside me. But that didn't stop my rage.

I glared at Beck. "If I were you, I would lower your eyes."

He blinked, unmoving.

"Now!" I shouted. My hands clenched, and I wanted nothing more than to wrap them around his throat. No, better yet, I wanted to tear it out.

All eyes at the table, including King's, dropped.

Why was he doing this? King hadn't made me look away from him after we mated. It was hard not to grab him and shake him until he conceded and took this crap back. If I stayed in that room a second longer, I was going to remove someone's head. They were driving me insane. Without saying another word, I stormed out.

I was waiting for King in our room when he finally decided to make an appearance. He walked in calmly, kissed my cheek, and sat at the table where we ate. I stayed on the bed, facing him.

"Would you like to talk about it?" he asked calmly.

For once, there wasn't a hint of a grin or teasing in his expression. His tone didn't ruffle my feathers, and that alone caught me off guard.

My main problem was that I'd refused to ask King questions about what was expected of me, and we'd barely spoken at all. The weight on my shoulders seemed

to pile higher each day. I wasn't sleeping, and I knew there were things I should have been doing. King always stayed busy, constantly putting out fires. For fuck sake, the island ran smoothly under his leadership, and he should be the one in charge. Right now, I felt like a complete failure.

More than anything, I wanted to curl into a ball and cry. "I have no idea what I'm doing," I said, barely holding back the tears.

His soft smile calmed me. "You're doing great."

That ridiculous response made me angry again. He didn't get to brush this off so easily. "Bull. And what's with the eye thing? Why were they all staring at me?"

"They're trying to force alpha tendencies on you," he said matter-of-factly.

"What? Why?"

"It's something about being the strongest. It took me nine or ten days to feel it. I went berserk at one point, and several men had to pull me off Beck."

Oh, that was rich. "You didn't think this was important information to share?" I demanded.

He tilted his head, and his blue eyes held mine as he spoke. "I can't help you if you won't help yourself. Finding the balance as a leader takes time. I made plenty of mistakes in the beginning. The men need security, and one thing I learned was to be decisive in my commands, even if I had no idea what I was doing."

He got up from the chair and walked over to me. "When you stop fighting who you are, this will get easier."

I bent forward, resting my head against his stomach. “I don’t want this,” I murmured.

His fingers threaded gently through my braids, lulling me into a false sense of comfort. And then he dropped the bomb. “I think you do.”

My head snapped up so fast it should have yanked out an entire braid. “How can you say that?”

His comforting smile disarmed me. “You hate authority, especially mine. You’re a natural at giving orders and making sure everything runs like a well-oiled machine. You have no fear, even when you should. Your only obstacle is Marinah the weak. Once you let her go, everything will fall into place.”

Marinah the weak. He hit the nail on the head. I’d spent so much time hiding from life, from challenges, from responsibility. I was weak.

“You don’t miss the old me?” I asked quietly.

His smile turned wolfish. “Not in the least.”

“No fair,” I whispered.

King took my hand, pulling me up from the bed. His arms circled me as he gazed deep into my eyes. Ms. Beast didn’t protest, and I felt a wave of relief. “You are not weak,” he said before kissing me. He was wrong because by the time he finished, my knees could barely hold me.

“Can we forget about who leads and who looks into my eyes for now?” I murmured.

“Your wish is my command,” he said with a grin.

I wanted to complain about his choice of words, but then his hands found the sensitive area beneath my breasts. A woman shouldn't complain when a man was making her feel so good. "I have something for you," he whispered. I needed him to stop talking and move his hands higher.

Instead, they dropped, and he left me standing there while he rummaged in our closet. He returned with a bag and placed it on the bed. "I found these in the city when I went scavenging."

I looked inside the bag, and tears immediately welled up. Boots. And not just any boots.

Doc Martens. Size nine. Camouflage.

He'd found these while he was angry with me.

"You like them?" he asked softly.

"I like them," I said, my voice trembling. "And I love you." I wiped away a tear as my lips quivered. Then I remembered my gift for King. It was stupid, really, and nothing compared to these boots. "I have something for you too," I said hesitantly.

He was going to hate it.

I rummaged in the nightstand drawer and pulled out a small bag. Handing it to him, I watched nervously as he opened it.

King pulled out the silver chains. They were from a novelty store, cheap metal that probably wouldn't last. As he fully removed the necklaces, he could see the charms at the ends. Script writing. One said KING, the other QUEEN.

My embarrassment grew as he stared at them silently. Then he lifted his head, and I saw pure love in his expression. “Come here,” he whispered.

I stepped into his arms, and he held me tightly, rocking gently from side to side.

“I’ll wear mine if you wear yours,” he said softly into my hair.

I pushed back slightly, and he placed the necklace around my throat. It took him a few seconds to work the clasp. When his hands dropped, he pressed the word QUEEN lightly into my skin with his finger before handing me his necklace. I secured it, turned the clasp to the back, and pressed his KING into his skin in return.

That’s when a multicolored blur caught my eye. The kitten leapt onto the bed and then bolted off just as quickly. King noticed too. “Was that a cat?”

I nodded. If he wanted decisive, I’d give him decisive. “She’s my cat. Her name is Callie, and she’ll be staying in our room from now on.”

Without batting an eye, King turned his attention from the cat to the boots on the bed. “I’ve had this fantasy,” he said.

“A fantasy?” I asked skeptically.

“Take off your clothes and put on the boots.”

I laughed. “You’re crazy.”

But King wasn’t laughing, and the heat in his gaze sent a wave of desire rolling from my toes to every sensitive part of my body. Slowly, I did exactly as he asked. If my mate wanted me in nothing but Doc Martens, that’s what he’d get.

He stripped off his clothes too, and a minute later, we stood facing each other, me in my Doc Martens and necklace, him in his necklace. My mate. The man who loved me.

His eyes, hot and unrelenting, traveled over me. He stepped forward, lifted the charm at the end of my necklace, and kissed it.

“You are my queen. I love you,” he said possessively.

King

Marinah continued working with Ruth, who was making progress. There hadn't been a single complaint about the child in weeks, which was the biggest surprise. No excursions with Che to fight hellhounds, and no screams that pierced the ears of every Warrior at the citadel.

Ruth followed Marinah everywhere like a personal guard, the sword Marinah had given her always on her hip, her hand resting on the pommel as if daring anyone to threaten her instructor.

"King," Beck called urgently. "We have news from the northern outpost."

Here we go. It had been too quiet. "I'll grab Marinah. Have the men meet us in the conference room in five."

I didn't ask what the news was; it wasn't my place. That was Marinah's job now. Beck should've gone to her first, but that was something she'd have to address. Eventually, everything would fall into place.

I entered the gym and found Ruth holding her sword with trembling arms, sweat dripping down her face. Her jaw was set stubbornly, a look that reminded me of Marinah's determination during her early training. The sword was extended in front of her, chest high, arms fully locked.

Marinah glanced over at me as I approached. "You're needed in the conference room. Urgent," I told her.

“That works. Someone’s punishment can continue without me here.” She adjusted Ruth’s arms, lifting them a little higher. “Ten more minutes, and then you’re done for the day. If this is what you want to do tomorrow, smart off again.”

“Yes, ma’am. I mean no, ma’am.”

I didn’t laugh. Marinah had a way of making yes and no feel impossibly complicated.

Without another glance at Ruth, Marinah walked out of the gym, and I followed her. “Do you actually think she’ll finish the punishment?” I asked, curious. Marinah had done so much with the child when no one else thought she was worth the trouble.

“Oh, she’ll do it,” Marinah replied confidently. “She knows the punishments I give her make her stronger. They’re no fun, but there’s always an end goal. She’s come a long way, but she’s still fighting authority.”

“Sounds like someone I know,” I said and couldn’t help my smirk.

Marinah shot me a side glare, flipping her braids out of her face. “What’s going on? Why are we meeting?”

“Beck has an urgent message from the northern outpost,” I replied.

She looked at me like I’d lost my mind. “Then why are we walking?”

She took off at a fast jog, turning what would’ve been a three-minute trip into sixty seconds. I kept my thoughts to myself and followed.

The men were already waiting. No one blinked when Marinah, without thinking, took my old chair at the head of the table.

We took out our knives, and she lifted her hand. “Not happening. The knife in the

table thing is over.”

I sat down beside her, staying silent.

She looked at Beck. “Spill.”

“The northern outpost sent people to the city. They gathered enough supplies to get through the winter,” Beck began. “They’re interested in trading for additional items they need. They have approximately four hundred cans of Spam they’d like to start with.”

I glanced at the men’s faces, and they mirrored Marinah’s, a mix of disbelief and restrained amusement. She blinked once, then made her decision.

“I think we’ll let them keep their Spam for extreme emergencies. Have them send a list of the items they’re interested in, and we’ll negotiate. What else do you have?”

“They’ve replicated the whistles, and they said to thank you.”

“That’s it?” she grumbled.

“No. President Barnes wants to negotiate with the outposts and is asking them to send emissaries. They would like your opinion.”

Her eyes sparked with heated interest. “That’s easy. Won’t happen. Barnes has never kept his word, and he won’t do it now. He has something up his sleeve.”

“They thought you might say that,” Beck continued, “and asked if you would be interested in bargaining for them with the Federation.”

Marinah’s eyes darkened, and her expression turned lethal. “Oh, I’ll bargain with them. Barnes can come here to the Island, alone, and we’ll talk. Until then, the

Shadow Warriors will have nothing to do with the Federation or their atrocities. Next.”

Beck hesitated, and I realized he wasn’t finished. “A woman showed up at the northern outpost. She wants to speak with the female Shadow Warrior.”

Marinah blinked a few times, clearly thrown off. “Why?”

“She says she knew your grandmother and has a message for you.”

Marinah shot to her feet. “What?”

Beck stayed silent.

Marinah looked at me, her gaze befuddled. I shrugged. “You wanted answers. I think we’re about to get them.”

Her eyes circled the room. “We have things to do before I can go back to the outpost. I want you to double time the items you’ve been assigned.”

She turned her gaze to me again. “You’re coming with me.” Her eyes swept over the men once more, daring them to object. None of them made eye contact.

“What are you waiting for? I’ve given you an order.”

The men shot up from their seats and cleared out faster than I’d ever seen them move. Beck grinned at me from the door before stepping out.

Once we were alone, I turned to Marinah. “I’d like to officially be one of your guards.”

“Duh,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“‘Duh’ isn’t very leaderish,” I teased.

She shook her head, the realization hitting her. “I did it, didn’t I?” She looked almost shocked as it sank in.

“You did,” I confirmed.

She stood, adjusting the sword at her hip, then glanced at me. “I’m scared,” she admitted.

“I’ve got your back.”

Her smile was hesitant but genuine. “Thank you.”

It was time to change the subject. Marinah was better at taking action than overthinking, and it slowed her down. “Are you ready for possible answers about where you came from?”

“I’ve been ready for a long time.” Her grin widened, and excitement practically poured off her. “We need to hurry; get moving,” she said, racing out of the room.

She might think she knew what she’d just done, but it hadn’t fully sunk in yet.

The Queen of Shadow Warriors had made her debut.

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