



Queen (Marinah and the Apocalypse #4)

Author: *Holly S. Roberts*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Marinah walks a razors edge, bound to lead the formidable Shadow Warriors while wrestling with the primal power of her inner beast.

As her past clashes with a perilous present, shes forced to carve her own destiny, a path where anything but her instinct spells ruin.

Then comes the Federations calculated attack on their island home and reveals a nightmare beyond imagination: the island is surrounded by monstrous hellhounds.

With every life at risk, Marinah must fight back and shatter the Federations grip to redefine the future.

She has King at her side, but she holds a secret that could destroy them.

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Main U.S. Outpost

Marinah

King's hand slid across my shoulder, drawing my attention. Comfort and strength shone in his striking blue eyes. He was dressed in military fatigues instead of his usual "tear you apart" Shadow Warrior gear. The fatigue shirt stretched at the seams, struggling to cover his broad chest and shoulders. I preferred his leather chest straps, for their practicality, of course, and because they showed off his muscles to their best advantage.

Today, we were both dressed in outpost military attire, covered from ankle to wrist. If we shifted to our Warrior forms, the material would shred. The male Warriors wouldn't care if they were nude. I wasn't as indifferent. I'd spent too many years thinking I was human to feel comfortable showing my naked bits to the people at the U.S. Outpost. If shifting became necessary, we'd deal with that problem when it arose.

The outpost had grown to three times its size since our last visit. After another outpost was destroyed, many of the people decided to band together and moved here. The place wasn't pretty. It was actually a ragtag mess that somehow managed to appear organized. They had slapped together houses, huts, and cabins with whatever materials they could find. Some had even repurposed trailers and semitrucks as living quarters. The town was divided into designated spaces, much like campgrounds from before the apocalypse, giving each family a small area of their own.

At the center of the settlement was a cordoned-off square with trade stands. People

gathered there, sorting through wares and bargaining with their own products. Paper money was good for nothing but wiping your bum in this new world. Towns like this, scattered across the outskirts of demolished cities, were the future of the U.S.

“Are you ready?” King asked, his warm breath brushing over my ear.

“No,” I admitted truthfully.

The pressure of his hand on my shoulder intensified for a second, a silent promise that he had my back no matter what I discovered inside.

We kept walking. Human eyes followed us, filled with uncertainty. It was still disheartening that so many of the new arrivals didn’t trust us. But with a mental shrug, I reminded myself it wasn’t the day to solve all our problems. I already had enough on my plate.

The woman I was about to meet had information about my grandmother. The same grandmother who gave birth to my mother, who in turn gave birth to me, a Nova Warrior, a super alien from another planet.

Even thinking those words to myself felt strange. For most of my life, I thought I was just a scared human woman with a limited number of days left on Earth. Now, I was trying to accept my role as leader of the Shadow Warriors. My Nova Warrior status had made me the leader by default, whether I wanted the title or not. And I didn’t want it.

I could only hope this woman had information that would help me figure out what the heck I was doing.

Our enemy, the U.S. Federation, wasn’t going away anytime soon, and neither were the hellhounds that had ravaged and annihilated so much of Earth and its people.

I straightened my shoulders and lifted my head. I could do this. King's hand slid from my back, and I instantly missed the contact. With a firm mental shake, I took the lead and continued toward the front door of the small cabin we'd been directed to upon our arrival.

Landan, the local governor and one of our good friends, greeted us when I knocked. He'd taken over when Garret moved to our island to be with Axel, our doctor. I was impressed with how easily Landan handled his new role. He had spoken with the surrounding outposts and offered them the safety net of combining resources and people. It also gave the Shadow Warriors we had here less area to keep safe.

"Good to see you," he said, and shook King's hand while simply giving me a nod with no physical or eye contact.

King's mating rage was getting better, and mine was all but gone except in Warrior form where it flared a little. I hadn't tested Nova because I didn't want anyone to die. Ms. Beast might grumble, but she no longer shot painful bursts of Kedorine 5, the hormone that produced our beasts, through me. We called it K-5 for short.

Landan stepped back to let us in, and my vision quickly adjusted as I scanned the four corners of the small cabin.

A young woman wearing a loose cotton dress stepped out of the bedroom and froze. So did I.

She wasn't what I'd expected. She was tall, like me, and possibly as young as me, but the resemblance ended there. Auburn hair framed a freckled face with striking blue eyes that were similar to a Warrior's. Was she a Shadow Warrior? My pulse quickened. Her jawline was sharp, and her cheekbones high. Incredibly beautiful was the only way to describe her.

She dipped her head, avoiding my eyes. That small gesture told me she had at least a passing knowledge of Shadow Warrior protocol. Given that her visit had to do with my grandmother, it made sense.

“I can handle eye contact if you so choose,” I said softly.

Her head snapped up, and our eyes met. What happened next was completely unexpected. Energy, unlike anything I’d ever encountered, flowed from her to me. It slid across my skin like liquid fire and wove into Ms. Beast’s energy in a kaleidoscope of swirling power. The sensation was overwhelming.

The woman took a step toward me, and I instinctively held out my hand to stop her. “What did you just do?” I demanded, somehow managing to keep my voice even. The fact that her surge of energy hadn’t triggered the K-5 was deeply unsettling.

Her eyes darted to King, but she stayed silent, lowering her gaze again. As soon as her focus had shifted to King, the energy had dissipated, leaving me able to breathe normally again.

Without thinking, I waved my hand. “Leave us.”

King’s Beast energy hit immediately, rolling over me in stabbing waves that were nothing like what the woman had done moments before. He was letting me know he wasn’t happy with my command. But despite his displeasure, he and Landan were gone within seconds, leaving me alone with her.

I focused all my attention on the woman. My irritation burned, and I could feel my eyes narrowing into small pinpoints of flashing anger. “I do not like repeating myself,” I said in precise English. “What is happening, or what happened a moment ago when you looked at me?”

“You have never made contact with a female Shadow Warrior,” she said with a slight shrug, her voice distinct yet soft. “It is expected you would not understand.”

Her words startled me. “You’re a Shadow Warrior?”

I felt the energy of the male Warriors on the island as if there was an invisible tether linking them to me. Since my Nova had manifested, that connection had grown stronger. But I didn’t know this woman. What she’d done was different. Her energy was like a wave of calm firing through my veins, shooting to every nerve ending I had. It aligned with an internal part of me I hadn’t known existed.

She nodded, her red hair bobbing with the motion. “I am merely Shadow and do not alter form.”

Her eyes were on mine again, soft orbs that seemed to be assessing me. The energy wrapped around me in a soothing wave of power. It was incredible. And I hated every second because I didn’t know how to control or stop it.

“What is happening?” I asked through gritted teeth, trying to mentally shake off the buzz running along my skin, desperate to keep it from invading everything I was.

Her mouth softened, and a delicate smile formed on her lips, making her even more beautiful if that were possible. Then her voice came, slipping into my mind like a gentle melody, its sing-song rhythm hypnotic.

“Women of our species are uniquely gifted,” she said. “We hid much of our capabilities from the males. The energy you feel comes from that which makes us special and also separates us from their violent ways. It’s our Shadow essence. The male Warriors do not experience the blending of energy that feeds our feminine power. This is sacred knowledge and is not shared with them.”

Slowly, I adjusted to the strange hold this woman had on me, steadying myself by pulling tightly on my own power. What surprised me most was that Ms. Beast seemed to accept what was happening. When I internally checked on her, she was rolling around like a dog that had found a dead carcass to play in.

The mental image almost made me laugh. Animals of prey instinctively rolled in the scent of plant eaters to mask their own odor to enhance their hunter abilities. Why Ms. Beast was doing this, I had no clue.

What struck me most, though, was the fact that there was a part of being a Shadow Warrior that the “big boys” didn’t know about. It almost amused me. Anytime something strange happened in my Beast form, the men would side-eye me like I was losing my mind when I asked about it. There was a learning curve to being a Shadow Warrior, and I’d been behind it since the day I was born.

“Why not share?” I asked, focusing on how the vibrations of her voice shifted as she spoke or turned her gaze.

She glanced at the table in the corner, and the energy vanished. Direct eye contact must have been what enabled her to focus the energy.

“May we sit?” she asked tentatively.

The hesitance in her voice lit a spark of ire inside me, and it had nothing to do with Ms. Beast. It reminded me too much of who I used to be: Poor Marinah, the girl who stayed alive only because her father’s position protected her.

I stomped over to the nearest chair, pulled it out, turned it around, and straddled it. The woman’s eyebrows rose. I remained silent, waiting for her to take a seat. She’d asked for this, hadn’t she?

After a few seconds, she glided over to a chair, pulled it out, and sat daintily. Her delicate movements ruffled my already perplexed feathers. She had my height and used it gracefully. That was something I had never managed before my Shadow Warrior showed itself.

Still, Ms. Beast didn't react, which was disheartening. I'd been working overtime on maintaining absolute control over her. When I needed the heavy guns, like now, she played adorable puppy without a damned care.

My Nova form was different, and I hadn't gained an inch with her. It was always an if/when scenario. Nova wouldn't come out on command, and when she decided to grace me with her presence, Ms. Beast vanished completely. I fought tooth and nail to keep Nova in line. When Nova left, Ms. Beast roared back to the forefront, and for the next hour, controlling her was utterly exhausting. So far, I'd managed not to hurt anyone during the transformations. Well, except Beck, and I did feel bad about his shredded forearm. Or at least I tried to.

"Your Beast is strong," the woman whispered. Was that reverence in her voice? I couldn't be sure. But what I was absolutely sure of was that I didn't trust her. I had none of the Shadow essence she spoke of. And on top of that, I wasn't about to let her know just how strong I actually was.

Our eyes met again, and a wave of energy floated through me. I refused to acknowledge how good it felt. Instead, I focused on the small trick I'd discovered and basked in it while masking my reaction. I did this with King. Not allowing my emotions to show while enjoying the energy had been a hard learning curve.

"Why don't male Warriors have this knowledge?" I asked abruptly, eager to prove I was still in control.

Sadly, I didn't think I was controlling anyone, including Ms. Beast. She was still

wiggling around like an idiot, grinding the energy into her fur and acting beyond ridiculous. Thank God I was the only one who knew what she was doing. King had once told me our Beast was an internal part of us, much like our internal thoughts. I didn't think he lied to me, but Ms. Beast was more than intermingled consciousness. She was her own being. I was beginning to understand that it could be different for a female Warrior.

The woman's gaze had dropped to the table at my abrupt question. I realized I'd been dealing with too many men lately. With them, only short, uncomplicated sentences seemed to work, preferably with a grunt or two thrown in for good measure. I'd come to prefer it that way too.

When the human women on the island sought me out, it was a different story. They wanted me to solve every domestic problem imaginable, and they talked entirely too much. I had to change how I handled them because barking out commands either brought them to tears or, worse, made them angry. And let me tell you, you don't want to eat food made by an angry cook. King and I had learned that the hard way.

But this woman was different. Now that I'd had a few minutes to assess her energy, I could feel the Shadow Warrior essence within her. It was different from the males, softer somehow, which made sense, but it was also more powerful in its overall capacity. That intrigued me.

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She watched me closely, her slight smile suggesting she could read my thoughts. It drove me crazy, and I almost growled.

“Male Shadow Warriors prefer death and destruction,” she said in a quiet voice that sank into my bones. “As females, we balance our need to protect with the need to nurture.”

Her palm flattened against the table, and she leaned back in her chair slightly. “Male Shadow Warriors destroyed our home planet through war and terror, dragging female Warriors with them. We warned them for centuries, but they wouldn’t listen. If it breathed and wouldn’t surrender, it needed to die. To prove themselves, they killed by the thousands. They destroyed small villages and large towns, wiping out everyone as spoils of war, including the children. A hundred years before our planet became unlivable, they smeared babies’ blood on their bodies to celebrate their victories.”

There was no anger in her words. This history had happened long before she was born. But the thought of men committing such atrocities, killing an entire planet, should be upsetting. It was to me. It also held an eerie similarity to what the Federation was doing now. A shiver ran up my spine. Was Earth on a similar path? King and I thought it was. We were fighting against it with everything we had.

She continued speaking as I studied her every nuance. “Female Warriors are different. The energy you feel keeps us connected, sharing our life essence when we meet the eyes of other Shadows. Our females do not kill other females, even those who alter form, such as yourself.”

Part of me found that impossible. I'd read most of the female history texts King possessed. Nalista, the writer, had never mentioned anything about sharing energy between female Warriors. The part about females not killing each other had also been mysteriously left out. I'd seen human women kill each other effortlessly. Sure, men were more aggressive for the most part, but women were just as deadly.

"Are there other females who alter form?" I asked carefully.

Her large eyes blinked slowly, giving nothing away, and her voice was almost too calm. "Not for more than one hundred years. After we left the men, the need to shift to Beast form disappeared for most of those who could morph. We were glad the ways of killing left us. Fortunately, the negative energy that stirred inside us has stayed buried."

"You say we like you were alive hundreds of years ago."

Her shoulders rose in a small shrug. "I was not alive, but I am now Keeper of the Past. This knowledge has filled my mind for more than ten years."

She had to be older than she looked. "Keeper of the Past?"

Her gentle smile returned. "Keeper of our journals."

"The texts?"

"Yes. Ours are the female rendition of the texts," she acknowledged.

Her answer prompted my next question. "How many female Shadows are there?"

Her smile softened even further. "We know your secrets, but we will not help with the war. We are pacifists and will have no part in what is happening."

She was insane. “Then you’ll die,” I said simply.

Her expression remained stoic. “Yes. Many of us have passed, and many more will. We accept our fate.”

My heart squeezed, and I didn’t even know this woman. “You’ll just roll over and die without a fight?”

“It is our way,” she said quietly.

Rage boiled inside me. It should have been anger, but I literally saw red. How could they not fight?

“It’s a stupid way,” I said with righteous condemnation. I had been this woman not long ago, ready to put a red stripe on my uniform that marked me as the Federation’s human fodder. I had trembled at the thought of military service. This woman didn’t tremble. She accepted her fate, and I hated her for it, because it was the old me.

Her energy surged toward me again, soothing my rage like a balm. For the first time, I admitted to myself how much I liked it. Everything clicked into place within me, and it felt damned good.

Ms. Beast paused her antics, her ears perking up in curiosity. Then, behind her in the mist, I noticed a vague outline, an imposing figure I hadn’t seen before. Nova. It had to be her. She was more than Ms. Beast, her essence a thunderous tornado of dark energy.

My defenses kicked into overdrive as I fought to keep Nova from surfacing and revealing my secret. The K-5 settled, and Ms. Beast returned to basking like it was the best thing she’d ever experienced.

“When the separation from the male Warriors came,” the woman continued, “we believed it would take less than a century for them to destroy this world, as they did our home planet. We wanted to live outside their hatred and rage, to give ourselves the best lives possible, no matter how short-lived they might be,” she hesitated for only a breath. “But a century passed, and the males’ ability to successfully assimilate into human society surprised us. It didn’t, however, change our path. We couldn’t trust the Warriors’ unquenchable need to conquer. We moved on. Our women married, had children, and built new lives with the human men on this planet.”

It felt like I was being bombarded with enlightenment. Too much all at once. I needed to focus, to ask questions that would help me make sense of this flood of information.

“Can you bear male offspring?” I asked, my thoughts racing. I knew male Warriors and human females could only produce males. I was the first known female Warrior in two centuries, and I still didn’t understand why I could shift when other female Warriors couldn’t.

“We only produce female offspring when mating with humans,” she replied.

Something in her tone shifted. Somehow, my question had disappointed her. I was missing something important, but I couldn’t grasp what it was.

I sat up straight, my gaze drifting around the room as I tried to organize my thoughts. My mother and father had produced me, but my father wasn’t a Warrior. The female’s essence, as she called it, filled my head, muddying my thoughts somehow.

With a pull of my own energy, I forced Ms. Beast to pay attention again. That’s when I realized I could gather the woman’s energy and use it to increase my power. It was like I had a rechargeable battery within me that was finally getting its full charge. The discovery gave me a jolt. I kept my expression neutral, glancing up briefly to ensure she didn’t notice. I swiveled my head, fixing my eyes directly on her.

“My name is Marinah.”

She smiled, showing a full display of white teeth. “I am Endura, Keeper of the Past. Your proper title would be Marinah, Daughter of Shadows, Leader of Warriors.”

Not good. “What makes you think I’m their leader?” I asked carefully.

We’d been keeping information from Landan. Not because we didn’t trust him, but out of self-preservation. The Federation didn’t need to know everything about us, and with so many humans joining the settlements, there were bound to be spies among them. Even Landan agreed we needed to limit shared knowledge.

Endura laughed, the sound trilling like a bird’s song. It was light and melodic. The happiness in her laugh washed over me, influencing my mood in spite of my frustration.

“Your mate deferred to you immediately,” she said. “That does not happen unless you hold dominance over him.”

Her words didn’t just ruffle my feathers; they pissed me off. “No one dominates King,” I said, my power flaring.

The intensity of my energy usually sent male Warriors running for cover, but Endura didn’t even flinch. Her calm demeanor was maddening.

Her gaze dropped to her lap. “I meant no disrespect. It would take an incredible Warrior to dominate your mate,” she said softly, her tone full of submission. “We’ve known about him for a long time. He is a great Warrior, and even though we won’t be part of the war, we acknowledge his fairness. When the humans sent the Warriors to your island, we thought the end was near again. Warriors from our past would have annihilated every human on the planet. King didn’t respond the way we expected, and

we celebrated his desire to protect his people, including the humans, over his need for revenge.”

Her eyes lifted, meeting mine squarely. “This never happened on the home planet. I may not be what you expected, but I understand Warriors. You said, ‘Leave us,’ and though King didn’t like it, he obeyed you immediately. You are alpha of the Shadow Warriors, and I am honored to know you.”

I didn’t intend for her to discover my biggest secret, so I had to tread carefully. I gave her a short nod of assent. “I am alpha,” I said simply.

Her eyes lit up, a spark of admiration shining in them. “As was your grandmother,” she said. “She worked very hard to keep that side of her quiet. She faced a great struggle and didn’t always succeed. Her wisdom was invaluable, and we overlooked her violent tendencies when they happened.”

“She wasn’t a pacifist?” I asked, startled.

Endura shook her head and leaned forward in her chair, closing the space between us. “She was our greatest pacifist. She fought her nature every single day and, for the most part, succeeded.”

I felt a pang of sadness for my grandmother. She’d carried a burden I could barely comprehend. But I needed Endura to understand who I was without revealing my Nova side. “I refuse to fight my nature,” I said firmly.

Endura watched me closely, her gaze relentless. “This is not the time for you to fight your power. You are alpha, and this world needs you.”

“But you won’t fight with us?” I asked, keeping my tone cryptic.

“We will not engage.”

I wanted to scream. We needed their help. Humanity needed them. I couldn't hide my anger at her selfishness, and the emotion boiled to the surface. Bad people had committed unspeakable atrocities, and no one should stand idly by and allow it to continue.

“Why are you even here?” I demanded, my voice carrying my anger. I felt the heat of the words and hated that this woman could see and hear my emotions so clearly.

Her smile didn't waver, which only irritated me more. “Your grandmother left her journal for the offspring of her blood,” she said. “Her daughter, your mother, refused the journal. It's been in my family's keeping since your grandmother passed.”

My heart stuttered at the mention of the journal. It might hold the secrets of my past; answers I desperately needed. “Have you read it?” I asked, trying to keep my tone even.

She shook her head. “No. It was your grandmother's private journal, containing things personal to her and her Beast. I would not invade her privacy. Along with the journal, I am also gifting you the collected histories of our women.”

Her words caught me off guard. Technically, as alpha, I was Keeper of the Shadow Warrior texts. I studied them when I had time, but I still didn't fully grasp the significance of the title.

“Why would you want me to have your texts?” I asked, narrowing my eyes as I tried to gauge her intent.

“Our history must be protected,” she said. “My time as Keeper of the Past has come to an end. The new Keeper will teach her children about our heritage. Those children

will be male or female, the first union of a Shadow Warrior pair in two centuries.”

Well, wasn't I special?

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King

Landan said a few words as we walked away from the cabin, but his voice trailed off when he realized I wasn't paying attention. He'd quickly learned the nuances of dealing with Shadow Warriors and made his escape with a muttered excuse about checking on things, whatever that meant.

My Beast had fully accepted Marinah as Alpha. Unfortunately, there were two parts of a whole inside this body, and I personally wanted to bite her head off for dismissing me so abruptly. I no longer harbored any delusions about who could kill whom. Marinah took her training seriously, and every Shadow Warrior had seen her transform into a deadly fighting machine, even without shifting into Nova form.

She'd been working on her Nova transformation too. Her control wasn't great yet, and pulling Nova forward took a lot out of her. If she was angry, the transformation came easier, which only frustrated her more. Marinah wanted absolute control over every facet of her Warrior abilities, and I had no doubt she'd achieve it. Eventually.

Mate , Beast grumbled.

I wanted to kick him, or better yet, rip his throat out.

You worthless bowl of jelly, I snapped back. She dismissed you.

Technically not true. She dismissed us both, but I wasn't in the mood to placate Beast.

He growled for good measure, trying to prove he wasn't the sissy he actually was when it came to Marinah. My Beast turned into a wishy-washy idiot the moment she was around.

With a mental shake, I made my way over to the Warriors who had come with us. They lounged under a large awning, their apparent nonchalance not fooling me for a second. They were hyperaware of everything happening around us. A team of them patrolled the perimeter, silently circling the encampment and watching our backs.

Not that the "encampment" was really a camp anymore. Under Landan's leadership as governor, the place was thriving.

Before we left today, I needed to finalize our trade agreement. Our harvest this season had been exceptional, and we had food to spare if the outposts needed it. We wouldn't let them starve, but there were things we needed too, and trade had to be mutual.

The so-called "delicacy" of a thousand cases of Spam didn't sit well with me, but that had been Landan's first offer. Even Beast shuddered at the thought.

"Did you see her?" Labyrinth asked from my left.

Slowly, I turned to face him. At least his eyes stayed lowered. I'd hate to remove his head from his shoulders, and in my current mood, that would've been far too easy. The Warriors could meet my eyes now, but the habit was hard to break, and when I was angry, like now, my ability to contain my rage was harder.

"I saw her."

His lips curved the slightest bit. "Young, old, ugly?"

The question startled me, though it shouldn't have. I'd found the only female Shadow Warrior, or so we'd thought. Now, we knew there were more. Marinah's reaction to the woman told me everything I needed to know. I hadn't felt the woman's essence, but Marinah did.

"Shadow," I said, giving him the real answer he was after.

His eyes grew thoughtful, and he adjusted the question. "Young, ugly?"

My lips twitched, even though I didn't want them to. "Would it matter if she looked like a hyena with crossed eyes?"

Now he smiled and briefly met my gaze before wisely shifting his eyes away. "No, it wouldn't. If she's Shadow and single, I'm in line."

"You think there'll be a line?"

"You've got Marinah. All the men want a Nova."

I glanced toward the cabin where Marinah was handling her Alpha responsibilities. "You don't want a Nova," I muttered.

"Your Beast grumbling?"

I turned and walked away, intending to do my own reconnaissance. Over my shoulder, I grumbled back, "Not at all, and that's the problem."

No laughter followed my admission. The men knew Marinah might be their boss, but they also knew I was still fully capable of killing them.

Mate .

Oh, shut up!

Marinah left the cabin and walked in my direction.

“We’re leaving,” she all but shouted.

We were in the air twenty minutes later, and I hadn’t been given a chance to bargain with Landan. I was disgruntled, and she didn’t speak the entire ride. I calmed about halfway back to the island and settled by placing my hand on her thigh. She didn’t object, so I left it there.

Until now, letting her take the lead had been easier than I would have dreamt it. My Beast had a lot to do with it. Her ordering me from the cabin and now not telling me what was going on was pushing things. I wisely kept these thoughts to myself and allowed her the mental space she obviously needed.

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The Island (Cuba)

Marinah

I kicked the door closed with my boot, the satisfying thump barely scratching the surface of my displeasure. It would've felt even better if I'd had a blockhead's skull to kick along with it, preferably my irritating mate's.

The island women were revolting. For some reason, they seemed to think that with me in charge, they suddenly had a voice. Because I was female, and they were female, we were sisters now? The thought made me snort as I crossed the room and kicked the wall for good measure. My Doc Marten boot slammed into the plaster, leaving a boot-sized hole. I ignored it. At least it accomplished something. I felt marginally better.

The women had always had a voice on the island, but judging by their current grumblings, they'd been too afraid of King to use it. And now they had me. I'd just spent six hours locked in a room with a delegation of them. What did I have to show for it? A list of demands and threats of a possible strike. This should've been King's problem.

Could you even strike when you weren't being paid?

We didn't live in a society where money had value anymore. Food, clothing, safety, those were the new currency. The Shadow Warriors provided the safety, trained the island men and any woman who wanted to learn to defend herself too. Other women and men of the island worked on food and clothing, with plenty of help from the

Warriors. It didn't take a genius to figure out who needed whom more. I'd lived off Federation mush for years. The thought turned my stomach, but I'd survive if I had to do it again. Probably.

I longed for the comfort of our home on the northern part of the island or even a quick escape to Jardines del Rey, christened Love Island, or just Del Rey by the Warriors. King had appropriated it as a place for me to decompress. But no, I was stuck here at the citadel, playing queen bee to a swarm of harpies.

I glanced around our chamber, taking in the details with simmering frustration. The entire citadel was stone from floor to vaulted, columned ceilings, with miles of tiled floors that echoed satisfyingly beneath my boots when I was in moods like this. Of course, the tile didn't give when I kicked it, so the walls, with their sturdy brick and mortar, were better for venting my anger.

The citadel was a sprawling, castle-like structure with hundreds of rooms, more a self-contained city than a single building. Its towering walls loomed high above the surrounding structures, offering an impenetrable defense. Inside, there was everything from offices for military intelligence, our arsenal, and our sleeping chambers. The high windows, located only on the top two floors, gave us an excellent vantage point in the event of an attack.

We had prepared for nearly everything. If the entire island sought refuge at the citadel, our food stores could withstand a siege of up to six months. The kitchens alone were a marvel. A home unto itself, with multiple ovens in each unit, a staff of over a hundred, and attached quarters for anyone who preferred to live where they worked. When King ran things, the citadel had operated like a finely tuned machine. Now, under my reluctant rule, it felt like I was mucking it up on a daily basis.

The door creaked open behind me, and I glanced over my shoulder, instantly regretting it. The last person I wanted to see stood there, and no matter how

determined I was to stay angry, his presence made it difficult.

No, I wouldn't let my eyes linger on his enormous, muscled chest that seemed to pull all the oxygen from the room. I wouldn't acknowledge the way my breath hitched at the sight of his unorthodox face, somehow put together in a way that made it impossible to ignore. I clenched my teeth to keep from groaning out loud as my thoughts betrayed me. My brain flashed to his long, golden braids brushing over my skin when we last made love.

Nope. None of that. Not today. I didn't like him right now. Not his chest, not his braids, not even those piercing blue eyes that told me he loved me.

I wasn't in the mood.

King studied me, his damned eyes scanning me like he could read my thoughts. His gaze flicked to the new hole in the wall, and one brow arched in silent acknowledgment. He didn't say a word, smart man. Instead, he strolled over to his chair in the corner, eased into it, and splayed his legs like he owned the room.

Callie, my traitorous cat, wasted no time leaping onto his lap. Her loud, contented purr filled the air as King casually ran his fingers through her sleek fur, his eyes shifting to meet mine, a smug glint in their depths.

This. Would. Not. Do.

The heavy thuds of my Doc Martens announced my approach as I crossed the room. Reaching down, I snatched Callie from his lap and ignored her indignant meow. "You're supposed to be on my side," I muttered, plopping down on the bed with her. She squirmed for a moment, then settled on my lap, her claws lightly digging into my pants. Her purrs returned, louder this time, and filled the room with their comforting rumble.

I shot King a smug smile, stroking Callie as if to say, See? I win. Her soft vibrations eased some of the tension from my shoulders, and for a moment, the disastrous day seemed a little less awful. I inhaled deeply, letting my nerves settle, teetering on the edge of relaxation until a knock at the door shattered the fragile peace.

“I’ll get that,” King said smoothly, rising from his chair.

He opened the door, stepping aside to let Beck in. Beck entered with the caution of someone walking onto a minefield, his steel-blue eyes sweeping the room like he was scoping the escape routes. His appearance was all sharp lines and discipline, the kind of lifetime military presence I’d seen countless times growing up around my father’s colleagues.

Like King, Beck’s hair was braided back, but the similarities ended there. He was slightly shorter, his muscles marginally less defined. Not that it mattered, his face held the weight of a man who’d seen too much. There was a tired edge to his expression today, though he carried himself with the same sharp authority as my mate.

Beck hesitated, clearly gauging the tension in the room. I swore he was about to turn around and retreat, but King cut off his escape.

“We haven’t had dinner yet,” King said, his tone dry. “And some of us are rather cranky. So, if I were you, I’d spit it out and be quick about it.”

Beck’s mouth twitched in something that might’ve been a grin, or a grimace, but he stayed put and lifted his head just enough to meet my eyes, then quickly looked away. Smart move. The last thing he wanted was for Ms. Beast to misinterpret it as a challenge.

“We’ve got a problem in the motor pool,” he said. “You might want to check on it.”

I couldn't resist. "Are the women revolting there too?"

His eyes darted briefly to King before he lowered his head again. "Not that I'm aware of," he muttered.

Callie chose that moment to leap gracefully from my lap, padding over to Beck and winding herself in tight circles around his legs. The look on his face told me he wasn't a fan of feline affection. In fact, he looked like Callie might make a tasty snack.

That thought burned away my remaining patience. Not that Beck would ever dare hurt her. He knew the unspoken rule. Anyone who so much as glanced at Callie in the wrong way would find themselves shuffling on their stomach searching for their arms and legs.

I'd had enough. If I wanted King and Beck to survive the rest of the day, I needed to leave. "Tell it to King," I snapped, practically leaping off the bed. I snatched my grandmother's leather journal from the nightstand, scooped Callie off the floor, and charged from the room.

I needed space, desperately. The only place I knew I could find it was one of the pools beneath the citadel. It wasn't Callie's favorite spot, but too bad. She was stuck with me for the time being.

My stomach growled, hunger clawing at me, but I ignored it. My hasty retreat wasn't just about Beck, the motor pool, or the women's demands. It was everything. Leadership had been thrust upon me the moment I morphed into Beast mode on steroids, aka Nova.

King was supposed to be the leader. The King. Now, that burden sat squarely on my shoulders, and nothing about it came naturally. I did have my moments, but those

were when I didn't think about being in command and simply shouted out orders. The biggest problem I had was overthinking. It drove me crazy. My days were a blur of frustration and mounting tension, and no matter how hard I tried to find my footing, it felt like I was falling further behind.

I trained relentlessly, pouring every ounce of energy into mastering the weapons at our disposal. A few months ago, I hadn't known the first thing about guns. Now, I could glance at a firearm and rattle off its make, model, and caliber like it was second nature. Each day, I spent hours with a sword in my hands, sharpening skills and perfecting my ability to cause damage. King and Beck drilled me constantly on military strategy, cramming so much information into my head that it felt like it might explode. And yet, despite everything, I still felt inadequate as alpha of the Shadow Warriors.

How long would it take before I started taking this role for granted? How long before I stopped losing sleep over the lives my decisions could destroy?

I carried my grandmother's journal with me. Deciphering it had been an uphill battle. While the male Warriors' history had been conveniently translated from the original language of our home planet, the women's texts had not. Of course, the female Warriors would preserve their connection to their roots through language, but for me, that meant reading this journal was painstakingly slow. If it weren't for a rudimentary dictionary one of the female Warriors had cobbled together, I'd still be stuck on the first page.

The problem didn't stop there. My grandmother, Veda, had written in a tiny, shaky scrawl that turned each line into a puzzle. Every single foreign word had to be deciphered and then translated. I'd barely made it a quarter of the way through the third chapter, and most of that progress had been trial and error.

The beginning of her journal recounted the fall of the home planet. Her insight added

a layer of vivid detail I hadn't seen in the male Warriors' history. The men had glossed over the violence, maybe to make themselves seem less monstrous. But Veda's account, passed down from her grandmother, didn't hold back. It was raw, unfiltered, and far more damning.

The male Warriors had been brutal; a vicious species that annihilated everything in their path, including each other. They had killed Veda's mother shortly after Veda's birth. I'd known about the wars but reading it through the eyes of a woman whose grandmother had lived through it made the atrocities sit differently.

There was also an underlying unrest in Veda's words, a subtle but unmistakable tension among the women. It was a stark contrast to Nalista's account, the only other female Warrior's text I'd managed to read. Nalista had been a fighter, a Warrior who had fully embraced her nature. Her history reflected that, stoic and almost detached. But Veda's journal was something else entirely.

I found myself impatient, desperate to understand the woman behind these words, and I did my best to translate and read an hour each night. Veda passed down accounts of the women's day-to-day life on the home planet and brought her closer to me, turning her from a vague figure into a real person. Maybe, just maybe, I'd finally get the answers I desperately needed. If only the island Warriors and disgruntled human women would give me a few days of peace, I might actually find those answers.

The rooms below the citadel were a maze of storerooms, the medical bays which had grown from one to three, along with our extensive armory. Among these spaces was the aquatic area. Each room featured a different pool, some transformed into tropical rainforests while others had a serene, reflective quality. The pool I headed for was special. It was the one King had brought me to the first day we met.

That day, I'd overheated, through no fault of my own, and lost consciousness. King had carried me to the Olympic-sized lap pool to cool my body down. The memory

made me smile despite my current mood.

I set Callie down near the edge of the pool and rubbed the spot between her shoulder blades. It was her favorite, though I doubted King or Beck knew that. I'd never share the secret either. At that moment, I didn't care if I was acting like a petulant child. I needed a break from the adult world, somewhere I could be a whiny baby if I wanted.

Callie lasted all of sixty seconds before she leaped away, abandoning me in favor of exploring the far corners of the room. Her small body pressed against the wall as she prowled, likely looking for nonexistent prey. Whatever went on in her tiny, furry head was beyond me, but I let her have her space.

I kicked off the Doc Martens, peeled off my socks, and rolled up the cuffs of my stretchy war pants that allowed me to shift without going naked. The cool water felt incredible as I dipped my feet in, and the tension in my body eased slightly. With a sigh, I opened my grandmother's journal to the last section I had translated.

The words weighed heavy on me as I read.

The women knew what was happening. They saw the complete annihilation coming. The men saw it too, yet they continued their wars, their revenge, their murder. This was the beginning of our end.

The weight of those words hung over me like a dark cloud. I stared at the page, running my fingers over the faint, shaky script. It wasn't just history. It was a warning.

I lifted my eyes and stared across the still, calm water. Violence had always followed the Shadow Warriors. After their ships landed on Earth, their women abandoned them, a decision that forced the men to finally make the changes needed for their survival. They became farmers, feeding humans instead of warring with them and

themselves. Their physical characteristics made it believable: blond hair, blue eyes, and massive builds that gave them the appearance of good, corn-fed farm boys.

The Warriors married human women and began procreating, much like their female counterparts. Males fathered male offspring, and I knew now that females bore females. The males somehow managed to raise their sons to embrace a pacifist way of life, mirroring what the Warrior women had done. For the most part, it worked. But not entirely.

Greystone, King's uncle, remembered the old ways. He secretly trained an emerging group of young men to fight against the pacifist mentality that had taken hold. King was one of those men.

Then the hellhounds came, and the world as we knew it began to crumble.

Hellhounds. Our name for the monstrosities that looked like hounds dragged straight from hell. Scientists, in their brilliance or madness, genetically modified formaldehyde; more specifically, they altered a protein within it, setting off a chain reaction that created these creatures. They were formed from the bodies of the human dead, melded into four-legged, hunched beasts with poisonous claws capable of tunneling through dirt and razor-sharp teeth dripping with toxic saliva that killed humans without exception.

The hellhounds ravaged the human world, and Greystone and his secretly trained Warriors rose to meet them, rescuing what was left of humanity.

But salvation came at a cost. The new U.S. Federation, which had taken power after the government collapsed, betrayed the Warriors. Their reasoning? The Shadow Warriors were a threat. The Federation wanted them contained, studied, and ultimately controlled for experimentation or some other nefarious reason. It didn't matter that the Warriors had saved them. The Federation saw only the nine-foot

monsters with colossal teeth and claws—beings they believed could not be trusted.

Another war broke out, this time between the Federation and the Warriors. More lives were lost, including Greystone, the Warriors' leader. When the dust finally settled, a fragile treaty was reached. As part of the deal, the Warriors were granted the island of Cuba. King became their new leader, a role he took on until I barreled into his life and changed everything.

And now, here I sat by the pool, surrounded by a history I'd only recently begun to uncover. A world that had been unknown to me for most of my life was now my responsibility, and every piece of it felt impossibly heavy.

With a spark of awareness, I lifted my head and glanced over my shoulder. King was heading toward me. I couldn't hear his footsteps, but Ms. Beast, the restless, seething monster inside me, knew he was coming. I'd been noticing this "awareness" phenomenon more and more, along with several other peculiarities connected to mating. It was just another question I had about female Warriors. A mated Warrior pair hadn't existed in two centuries, and I was discovering some fascinating, albeit frustrating, side effects associated with our union. A written rule book, preferably in English, would have been perfect.

I also felt an awareness of other Warriors, a sensation that was growing stronger by the day. It was nothing like the bond I shared with King, but it was there, an undercurrent I couldn't ignore. King called it the invisible threads of energy that connected the men to their alpha. Those threads hadn't abandoned him when I became alpha. My appeal that we should lead together, embracing a modern trend of shared leadership, had fallen on deaf ears. The universe, as always, hated me.

The sound of my mate's boots finally reached my ears, and I lowered my gaze to the journal in my hands, feigning intense interest. He entered the room like the silent predator he was, his presence filling the space like a force of nature that couldn't be

ignored. Ms. Beast, ever vigilant, tracked him without effort. I didn't look up when he sat beside me, but I heard the soft sound of his boots hitting the floor and the rustle of fabric as he pulled off his socks. Then came the quiet, satisfied moan he made as he dipped his feet into the cool water. A shiver of satisfaction coursed through me despite my attempt to remain unaffected.

Mate, Ms. Beast whispered inside my head.

I'd finally grown accustomed to her fiery, sometimes bloody nudges at King. Now, though, she behaved more like Callie, rolling over and purring whenever he was near. I didn't know whether to be relieved or annoyed.

He relaxed beside me while I continued pretending to read. His nearness alone was enough to distract me, the familiar scent of his musky Warrior presence overpowering the chlorine and making it nearly impossible to hold onto my irritation. My stomach tightened, betraying me further.

King's voice broke the silence. "I had the kitchen hold dinner until you're finished sulking."

I glanced at him sharply, my annoyance bubbling back to the surface. "Sulking?"

"Yes," he said with maddening calm. "You've been stomping around, brooding for days. I thought you might like a hot meal when you're done."

I closed the journal and rested it on my lap, meeting his gaze. "You're irritating."

"So I've been told," he said, completely unbothered. A faint grin tugged at his lips.

"And smug."

“Also true.”

I sighed, defeated for the moment. “I hate you sometimes.”

“No, you don’t,” he replied, leaning back on his hands, his smile widening. “But you’re welcome to keep pretending.”

My eyes snapped to his in disbelief. He did not just say that! His gaze remained steady on mine. When we were alone, he never lowered his eyes because Ms. Beast accepted him, and up until now, I’d loved that about our private time. I bit back the sharp retort bubbling on my tongue, knowing nothing good would come from unleashing it.

His voice was low, his eyes glinting with mischief as he spoke again. “Let it out, baby; you’ll feel better.”

“Baby?” I echoed, my voice tight, my lips pressed into a thin line.

“Do you want to be cuddled like a six-month-old?” he shot out.

Murder was the only logical response. “Do you have a death wish?” I asked, my tone dripping with menace.

King stood slowly, extending a hand toward me. I stared at it for a moment, considering my options, before setting the journal on the pool deck. Reluctantly, I placed my fingers in his and felt the familiar burst of energy that always came with his touch. He pulled me to my feet, his imposing height making me tilt my head back slightly to meet his gaze.

Without answering my question, he stepped closer, wrapping his arms around my waist. My fingers slid down his muscled forearms, grasping his wrists behind my

back while pushing my chest against his. The air between us practically crackled.

“Are you trying to get a reaction out of me?” I demanded. There was no other reason he’d tempt me to murder right now, not when he knew I’d been on the verge of exploding since we returned from the outpost. My head tilted back further; my eyes narrowed into lethal lasers aimed directly at him.

“Yes,” he admitted, far too casually. “But I don’t think it’s doing the trick.”

“Really.” The word dripped with consternation, each syllable a warning.

King twisted his wrists, breaking free of my hold with infuriating ease, not that I was trying to hold on. “If that won’t do the trick, maybe this will.”

I didn’t have time to react before I was airborne, my shriek echoing through the room. I hit the water with a loud splash, the shock stealing the breath from my lungs. So stunned, I forgot to hold my breath and inhaled a mouthful of water instead.

I surfaced, choking and sputtering, fury coursing through me. Someone was going to die today. Specifically, the overgrown oaf who thought tossing me into the pool was a good idea.

When I stopped choking, King would no longer be my mate or my guard. He would just be dead. My mental list of who could replace him was the only thought besides his death.

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King

Mate, Beast chided.

Wet mate, I whispered back with an internal laugh.

Flinging Marinah into the pool satisfied something inside me that had been missing these past days. The sheer joy of her sputtering indignation brought a rare moment of lightness. Unfortunately, I had all of two seconds to enjoy it before I was attacked from behind.

Claws sank into my back and wrapped around my face, aiming for my eyes. A three-hundred-pound mountain lion, or at least that's what it felt like, was out for my blood. By the time Marinah broke the surface of the water, coughing and spitting, I was in the fight of my life.

The noise coming from my throat wasn't Warrior-like in the slightest. A claw raked across my forehead, and teeth latched onto the side of my face.

"If you hurt Callie, you're a dead man!" Marinah shouted between choking coughs as she expelled pool water from her lungs.

"She's the devil!" I shouted back, my voice strained and pitched higher than I cared to think about as I tried to save my left eye from being gouged out, or worse, eaten. The hellcat clung to my head like a furry vise, wiry body somehow carrying the strength of a feral beast. She probably weighed no more than three pounds. Where did this demon creature come from?

Callie hissed, a sound that could curdle blood, just as Marinah surged forward to rescue me. Or maybe she was rescuing the cat from me before I lost my patience and used my fangs to end her reign of terror. As Marinah peeled the feline off my face, I gingerly touched my forehead, checking for damage. That's when a heavy kick hit me in the back of the knees, and Marinah threw her weight against my shoulders, sending me into the pool with an unceremonious splash.

By the time I surfaced, sputtering and thoroughly drenched, my mate and her ferocious furball had vanished.

A gruff laugh rumbled from my throat. Maybe, just maybe, this little scene would bring whatever was bothering Marinah to the surface. The entire citadel had been walking on eggshells while she stormed through the halls in those ridiculous boots, yelling at everyone like a queen at war with her kingdom.

I knew this was all new to her. I also knew she didn't want the alpha title, not until the moment quick action was needed, and she slipped effortlessly into Queen mode. It came as naturally to her as breathing, and still, she fought it every step of the way.

I rubbed at my face, feeling the faint sting of Callie's scratches. Maybe the day wasn't a total loss. If nothing else, I'd earned a little leverage against Marinah. After all, who could resist teasing their mate when her demon cat made you look like you'd lost a fight with a hedgehog?

With a small grunt, I realized I was turned on and needed the cold water. My loud laughter echoed off the walls, and I felt better. Too bad my handsome face was forever damaged by that hellcat.

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Marinah

King arrived just as I was halfway through my evening meal. Normally, we waited for each other, but after my sudden and unplanned swim in the pool, I wasn't in the mood to deprive myself of food for the extra ten minutes it might take him to join me.

The anger from earlier had dissolved, but I had no intention of admitting to King that his little stunt might have been the catalyst for my improved mood. Honestly, it wasn't the water itself. Seeing Callie coming to my rescue had lightened my spirits more than I cared to admit. She now lounged on the bed, grooming every inch of her fur with the lazy confidence of a creature who knew she owned the world, or at least our room. A small smile tugged at my lips as I glanced in her direction.

"Do you want to talk about it?" King asked, his deep voice pulling my attention as he sat next to me.

His sharp blue eyes locked on mine, their usual intensity cutting straight through me. They only softened in the privacy of our chambers, when it was just the two of us. Right now, though, they were probing and assessing my mood. King's adult life had been filled with death, destruction, and betrayal. Trust came hard for him, and his Beast side didn't trust at all. Was I becoming the same way?

I pushed the thought aside, stood, and closed the short distance between us. Without a word, he opened his arms, and I sank into his chest. His hands shifted to cradle my back as he pulled my legs across his lap, holding me like I was the only thing anchoring him to the earth.

Mate.

The whisper came from deep within, and like pieces of a puzzle clicking into place, something inside me settled. That internal, primal part of me that claimed this man as my own relaxed into the calm waters he provided. The bond between us tightened, locked into place, even stronger than before.

Why did I fight this so much?

His warmth surrounded me, melting away the last remnants of my earlier fury. His hands moved across my back, leaving trails of energy that danced on my skin. My voice came out muffled against his chest, tinged with self-pity I couldn't quite suppress.

"The women hate me."

His hand continued its soothing rhythm on my back, grounding me in the moment. He didn't offer a solution; didn't tell me it would get better or that I was wrong. He just held me, letting the silence speak for itself.

King rarely had to deal with the women on the island. His fierce, no-nonsense demeanor had shielded him from their day-to-day grievances. I wasn't that lucky. Leadership had landed in my lap, and no one seemed to care that I hadn't asked for it.

Finally, King tilted my chin so our eyes met. "They don't know what you're capable of, and they don't fear you as they should."

"I don't want them to fear me," I snapped, disgust coloring my words.

He pulled me closer. "You can't have it both ways. They respect you and see you as their leader, but they have no understanding of war or what it takes to defeat an

enemy.”

“You think they’d treat me differently if they knew what I become?”

His arms tightened around me. “I don’t know. They think they know you too well. They met you as human, and even when you’re in Warrior form, they still see the woman they knew before. They don’t see the killer.”

“They see you as a killer,” I said, my tone laced with resentment.

“And is that so bad?” he countered. “The Warriors know what you’re capable of. They’ll never doubt you.”

I held my breath for a moment, the question on my tongue heavy with vulnerability. “Do you doubt me?”

King didn’t hesitate. He lifted me higher in his arms, and his lips brushed mine as he whispered, “Never.”

“Take me to bed,” I demanded in my queen voice, my confidence slipping back into place.

The corners of his mouth quirked into a knowing smile. “Your hellcat is on the bed staring daggers at me.”

For the first time that day, I laughed, a genuine sound that broke through my morose mood. “Carry me close to the bed. I have the balls to knock her off her pedestal.”

King growled playfully against my hair as he strode toward the bed. Using his foot, he nudged Callie off her perch. She landed on the floor with an indignant yowl, slinking away to sulk elsewhere. For the next hour, she didn’t dare sneak under the

covers, and I didn't mind at all.

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The blaring emergency alarm ripped through the quiet, jolting us awake. King and I were on our feet instantly, grabbing our clothes and weapons before the sound even stopped.

The door flew open, and Beck burst in without knocking. Neither of us had the time or the patience to growl at his lack of courtesy.

"Our home is under attack," he barked. "Fifty soldiers with hellhounds."

I knew instantly what home he was talking about. Our true home, even if we rarely stayed there. The people there were part of our extended family. We trusted them, and now they were in danger.

"Where is Nokita?" I demanded sharply. He was one of my personal guard.

Beck and King both knew I wasn't asking about Nokita. It was Che and Baby Boot that I was worried about.

Beck's eyes met mine briefly. "They're at home."

Home meant they were in danger. "Is the helicopter operational?"

"I've been told it might get us that far," Beck cautioned grimly.

"Then we take it."

Ten minutes later, I was in the helicopter, my fingers crossed tightly. This mechanical

nightmare had gone down twice before, thankfully with no casualties, but there was always a first time. It was about as trustworthy as the first rickety Federation plane that had brought me to the island. Worse yet, there was the risk of falling out of the sky due to the electromagnetic pulses that always accompanied the resurrection of hellhounds.

Electronics triggered the hounds to dig themselves out of the ground, and their answering pulses were always the first sign that they were coming. The stronger the pulse, the more hounds we faced. The pulses themselves also disrupted electronics. It was an endless, brutal cycle, and stopping the cycle had become one of our biggest challenges.

The Federation, our enemy, had learned how to control the hounds. Now they used the terrifying creatures to do much of their dirty work. Thankfully, we managed to reverse-engineer one of their control devices and had our own whistles for commanding hellhounds. We hadn't planned to deploy them yet, intending to save them for an offensive against the Federation on our terms. But none of that mattered now. There was no way I would let the Federation's hounds kill my people.

"Make plans so God laughs" had become my motto, and right now, it felt like He was rolling on the floor in hysterics.

King grabbed one of the leather straps across my chest, pulling me closer to steady me as the helicopter lurched. We were all in Beast form, and at the moment, King and I were the only ones with full control. That meant the Warriors with us could differentiate friend from foe, but little else. If we pointed, they killed. It was simple and brutal.

King's control, once he shifted, had improved almost as much as mine. He said my Beast helped his, and I believed him. Over time, our Beasts had learned to work out their issues instead of fighting against our human sides. They had found balance.

We'd noticed changes in the other Warriors too. Their control over their Beasts wasn't on par with ours yet, but the time it took for them to gain mastery had improved. What used to take an hour was now down to about forty minutes. Each small gain felt like a victory even if we were unsure exactly what was triggering it.

Beast form was our preferred fighting mode. We didn't resemble any earthly animal, more like the creature from the old Predator movie, the good one with Arnold Schwarzenegger. When we transformed, our entire body underwent radical changes thanks to the chemical hormone Kedorine 5. The chemical flooded our alien systems, spiking oxytocin and dopamine levels to many times higher than in humans. The transformation wasn't subtle: bones cracked and reshaped, our jaws elongated into grotesque snapping maws lined with six-inch razor-sharp fangs, and non-retractable claws extended three inches past our fingertips. It made handling firearms clumsy, but give us a sword, and it became an extension of those deadly claws. I won't lie; we weren't exactly winning beauty contests in Beast form.

I glanced out the chopper's window, my mind drifting to six-year-old Che. He'd been working hard on his training alongside Ruth, my twelve-year-old protégé. The two of them were inseparable, two peas in a pod. Beck's eyes caught mine, and I saw a flicker of apprehension in them.

I pulled my headphones from around my neck and adjusted them over my ears, bringing the mic closer to my mouth. "Beck, where's Ruth?" I asked, my words distorted around the massive fangs crowding my jaw.

"She's with Che," he replied. "They wanted a sleepover, and Missy finally gave in."

My chest tightened further. Ruth and Che together thought they could take on the entire world, hellhounds included.

King's large hand landed on my thigh, his paw-like fingers rubbing reassuringly

along the fabric of my pants. “We’ll find them,” he said, his own fangs making his voice rougher than usual.

I nodded. “Yes, we will.”

What I didn’t say was what I feared most: they’d likely be in the thick of the fight. And all I could hope was that we weren’t already too late.

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Home

King

The helicopter dropped us about a mile from the most populated housing area near the shore. We rappelled down, avoiding a landing to keep the chopper safe. Once our boots hit solid ground, Marinah took the lead, her deadly focus in overdrive as she moved us toward the fight. According to Beck's intel, there were at least fifty Federation soldiers, fully armed, accompanied by a similar number of hellhounds.

Marinah's worry for Che and Ruth showed as her jaw tightened further, and her eyes scanned the area. Fearing for the kids was a distraction she didn't need while she was still finding her footing as a Warrior leader. Unfortunately, there was no stopping her from trying to save the world, and every good soul on it, even while managing the mundane matters on our small island. Her leadership style would settle with time, but for now, we had to endure her relentless drive to shoulder every burden.

We crept through the sand, using the jagged rocks along the shoreline as cover. One of the Warriors ahead of us gave a signal, and our attention snapped to the water. Five large rafts rested on the shore. Marinah gestured silently to one group of men, who moved to destroy them. Whoever had dared to invade our island would not be leaving the same way they came. Most wouldn't leave at all. They'd die here; their bodies chopped up so they couldn't return as hellhounds, then shoved into the ocean for a wet burial. No one attacked our people without paying the ultimate price.

The presence of the rafts told me they likely had an undetected ship offshore. Even with my enhanced Beast vision, I couldn't see anything on the horizon, but it had to

be sizable to transport this many humans and hellhounds.

The sound of steel clashing in the distance reached us. Marinah picked up speed, her braided hair flowing behind her as she ran. Our weapons were secured, making no noise as we moved silently toward the battle. Our team of fifteen would eventually be joined by others riding motorcycles to the fight. For now, our mission was to end this as quickly as possible or at least hold off the enemy long enough for reinforcements to arrive.

A loud pop echoed from a large building about a hundred yards ahead. We remained in the shadows, silent and unseen, the tension in the air electric. Marinah glanced back at us, her eyes glowing faintly, and signaled for us to fan out. No one would see us coming until it was too late.

Ahead of us lay a cleared area we needed to cross. Marinah raised her hand, signaling us to halt. Using the last outcropping of ocean rock for cover, we crouched in silence, waiting for her next command.

“We need a distraction,” she murmured. “Something to shift their focus.”

“I’ll go,” Beck volunteered immediately.

She turned to him. “A disruption only,” she emphasized. “We’ll find Ruth, I promise. But I’m not losing you before that happens.”

He nodded before he began climbing up the rocks. Less than three minutes passed, and a distant crackle of gunfire echoed through the night. It had to be Beck.

Marinah’s head lifted slightly, her nostrils flaring as she assessed the situation again. Then her lips curled into a grim smile. “It’s time to rock ‘n’ roll,” she said, her voice charged with fire. “We need someone alive, so don’t eat too much.”

Even with the weight of Ruth, Che, and the baby on her mind, she still managed to throw out a joke. If a Shadow Warrior had her sense of humor, I would have ended them long ago. Killing one's mate, however, was generally frowned upon.

"Ready, big boy?" she teased, patting my arm.

I scowled down at her, baring my teeth in mock irritation. She tugged on my braid, and before I could respond, her massive maw pressed against mine in a Beast-form kiss. It wasn't what I'd expected, but I wasn't about to complain. When she tried to pull back, I didn't let her, holding her close until she gave in for a few more seconds. Kissing in Beast form wasn't exactly romantic, or easy, but if my mate needed the connection, I'd give it to her.

"We have work to do," she said gruffly when she finally pulled away, her eyes glowing with the need to destroy. "Let's go kill some hellhounds and bad guys."

I couldn't help the grin that split my elongated jaw. "Give the command, and I'll lead the way," I taunted, eager for the fight ahead.

"That's what you think, baby," Marinah called out before darting across the open area at full speed. There was no hesitation, no second-guessing, just her charging headlong into the fray. All we could do was follow.

We made it across without detection, moving swiftly toward the heart of our home. Pandemonium erupted when we reached the main part of town, where most of the houses were clustered. Hellhounds swarmed, attacking anything that moved. One of the beasts lunged at Marinah, but she swatted it aside with a clawed hand, her strength as terrifying as it was impressive.

I stepped in to finish the creature, driving my sword deep into its neck before slicing outward to sever its head. The thick, acrid scent of hellhound blood filled the air. I

wanted to shout at Marinah, to tell her to go find the kids like I knew she wanted to, but she was already throwing herself into the thick of battle. Within seconds, she disappeared in the chaos.

The hellhounds attacked indiscriminately, their lack of focus confirming what I feared. Our people had deployed the whistles. Without clear guidance, the hounds were no longer under anyone's control, and they tore through Federation and islanders alike. My sword struck another beast, separating its head cleanly from its shoulders as its body crumpled to the ground.

"King!" one of my men shouted. I turned to see one of the Warriors who had stayed behind to guard the area staggering toward me. His chest was a mass of blood, and the gaping wound in his stomach made it clear his chances of survival were slim. He fell. I sprinted to his side, landing in a crouch to check the damage.

I began adjusting his straps, trying to keep his insides where they belonged, but he shook his head weakly. "No time," he rasped, blood bubbling at the corner of his mouth. "They attacked us and took Knet. Che and Ruth followed them."

The words hit me like a punch. Knet, another Warrior who had been tasked with guarding our homes. He'd always been reckless, more focused on proving himself than following orders. I'd hoped sending him here would keep him out of trouble. Clearly, I'd been wrong.

"The kids followed?" I asked, needing to be certain I hadn't misunderstood.

He nodded weakly. "I saw them near the rocks," he gasped. "They were trailing the Federation soldiers. Ruth had a whistle."

A surge of panic twisted in my chest. "What about Maylin and Baby Boot?"

He coughed violently, blood spraying between his Warrior fangs. “Maylin had the baby with her. That’s all I know,” he choked out, his voice barely audible.

I clenched my jaw, fury and fear warring within me. Marinah needed to know, but there was no time to dwell on what might have already happened. We had to move.

I locked eyes with him, his life force dimming with every passing second. “You did your job and will receive a Warrior’s burial. Go in peace, my brother.” His hand found mine in a weak squeeze before the light in his eyes flickered out. Like always, a part of me died with him. Even though I was no longer Alpha, I could still feel the abrupt end of a Warrior’s energy when it was extinguished. Maybe it was my bond with Marinah that kept the connection alive; my men didn’t seem to feel it.

The sharp crack of gunfire drew my attention toward the cluster of houses near the water. My home sat farther up the shore, more secluded. The humans preferred to stay close together and had avoided claiming the homes away from the village. With a burst of speed, I rounded the building standing between me and the fight.

Marinah was locked in battle with three men, though it had clearly started with more. Bodies littered the ground around her. Her lethal efficiency was on full display. Another shot rang out from above and drew my gaze upward. Missy was in an upper window, her marksmanship as precise as ever. She was just as deadly with a silent bow, but her rifle scattered the Federation soldiers, and they didn’t know in what direction death would find them.

I focused on one of the soldiers attacking Marinah and closed the distance in a blur of motion. He didn’t have time to react before my sword cut through him. Marinah made quick work of the other two. Her movements were a deadly ballet of claws and strength. The Federation soldiers, far more elite than their red stripes, were still no match for her.

A fresh burst of gunfire erupted behind us. I turned and saw more Federation soldiers closing in. A quick glance toward Missy's last position showed she'd shifted to another vantage point.

"You want to fly?" I whispered to Marinah out of the corner of my mouth.

"Sounds good, baby," she replied, her voice filled with an eager need to kill.

She turned toward me, and in the same motion, leaped up. I crouched low and then jumped, shoving every ounce of strength into her legs. Pain flared briefly in my shoulder. A bullet grazed my arm, but it didn't matter. Marinah soared through the air, shifting into her Nova form before she landed.

When she hit the ground amidst the soldiers, all hell broke loose. Claws and teeth ripped through flesh, and her roar sent a tremor down my spine. If we'd hoped to keep one alive, it wouldn't be from this group. The chance of Marinah's Nova leaving a survivor was slim.

She was amazing, impressive, and terrifying as hell. Even if Marinah sprouted two heads and six arms, I'd still find her beautiful. In Nova form, there were no words to describe her. She was bigger, stronger, and more powerful than anything I'd ever seen. And deadlier. Like a Viking berserker of old, she surrendered to the madness of battle when Nova took over.

I counted six men aiming guns at us. Sixty seconds later, no one remained standing. My mate stood amidst the carnage, her body drenched in blood, a feral growl rumbling deep within her chest. She spun, searching for her next victim, and her intensity was both awe-inspiring and chilling. A scream pierced the air, and that was all the encouragement she needed. She took off again, driven by instinct. I followed, though not to help. There was no need. I wanted to witness the spectacle. I wouldn't dream of stepping between Nova and her prey.

In the center of the town square, several men were dragging a woman across the dusty ground. A group of women surrounded them, fists flying as they tried to free her. One soldier struck an unlucky helper, sending her sprawling. Others immediately stepped in to take her place, refusing to back down.

Marinah arrived like a hurricane. The women retreated, dragging their injured sisters out of the way as my mate unleashed her fury. She eviscerated the first soldier, her claws tearing open his stomach in a spray of blood and entrails. Her massive jaws clamped onto the second soldier's throat, and his gurgling cries were cut short as she wrenched his life away. The third soldier made the mistake of running. He managed ten feet before Marinah's powerful legs propelled her into his path. He barely had time to whimper before his head was severed and sent flying toward the onlooking women in a crimson arc.

Three hellhounds bounded into the square, their black forms monstrous, their glowing eyes locked on Marinah. Her back was to them as something else caught her attention. This time, it was my turn to join the fray. Drawing my sword, I charged the first hellhound, its fangs bared and dripping with toxic saliva. A single swing of my blade took its head, and the creature's body slid to the ground.

The remaining two came at me in tandem, their snapping jaws aimed for my throat. They fought like the vicious dogs they resembled. I dodged their teeth and claws, going for the stomach of the closest one. It howled in pain when my claws raked its stomach, but it wasn't a fatal blow. The only way to truly kill a hellhound was to sever its head. As I turned to face the second, I prepared for its next lunge.

Hellhounds were born of humanity's worst mistakes. They were genetically modified abominations that defied nature. When they died, their bodies turned to ash within minutes, fueling the belief that they were creatures of biblical damnation. Religious fanatics had seized on this, labeling them as hellhounds. Their origin was actually steeped in science, though their terrifying bodies made it hard to argue against

mythology.

I turned to the remaining hellhound, grabbed its head, and twisted hard. The sharp crack of its neck breaking was satisfying, but I didn't stop there. The wounded one, missing most of its internal guts, lunged at me, its glowing eyes filled with feral rage. I sidestepped, my left clawed hand slicing through its throat in a clean, deep arc. With a vicious pull, I separated its head from its shoulders. Dropping the head to the ground, I hurled the limp body across the square.

I didn't notice my foot was standing on its entrails until the grotesque display made the hellhound resemble a kite trailing ribbons of flesh. It flew through the air before landing with a wet, sickening thud. Blood still dripping from my claws, I scanned the area, my vision hazed with adrenaline and rage, searching for more enemies.

Marinah stood twenty feet away, her massive Nova form heaving with each breath. Her claws and fangs glistened with blood, and she snapped at the air in frustration, unable to fully expel the battle frenzy coursing through her. The island women began backing away, their wide, terrified eyes glued to her monstrous form.

"Marinah, we're safe now," I said in a soothing voice. "I need you to return to your Warrior form. It's important." I didn't dare touch her. She needed time for her bloodlust to fade, process my words, and let her Nova instincts settle.

She shook her enormous head, flinging a spray of blood and saliva in every direction. The women retreated even farther; their fear written in each expression. Marinah's heavy breaths slowed, and I saw the moment she regained control. The transformation back to Warrior form started. Her massive body cracked and shifted, shrinking as bones popped and realigned.

A few women gasped at the gruesome process, but I couldn't tear my eyes away. Within a minute, Marinah stood in her smaller though still impressive Warrior form.

When she lifted her head, her intelligent eyes locked onto mine, though her fangs stayed Nova massive.

“What’th impor-thant?” she asked, her lisp through the elongated teeth endearing, though I knew better than to tell her that unless I wanted my own entrails torn out.

“Maylin and Baby Boot are safe, but Che and Ruth followed Federation soldiers. They’re missing,” I said.

Her gaze hardened instantly. “Follow-th them where?” she demanded.

“To the beach,” I replied.

Marinah tilted her head back, and a gut-wrenching roar erupted from her throat, reverberating through the square. My sensitive ears flinched at the sound, but it wasn’t meant for me. The women in the square cowered, some crying softly, their fear echoing Marinah’s rising rage. One by one, Shadow Warriors began entering the square, drawn by her ferocious call.

Abruptly, Marinah’s roar cut off. She whirled to face the Warriors now gathered, her blazing eyes nearly eating them alive with fury. “How dith the Federation geth on-th the island without us know-thing?” she shouted, her voice heavy with accusation as she pointed at the men, daring them to answer. “I don’t care whath it taketh. Finth those kiths!”

Her thoughts had cleared even if her rage hadn’t. I wanted answers too.

“Head to the citadel,” I told the women, who were still staring at Marinah like she had two heads.

“They have a whale!” Che yelled from about ten yards away.

“It’s not a whale, you dummy, it’s a submarine,” Ruth snapped, running behind him, her sword drawn.

“It’s a whale, and you’re the dumbest!”

Marinah let out a huff of air that could’ve filled a hot air balloon. Che, fearless as ever, ran up and threw his arms around her leg. “It was super cool! It came up out of the water and then got swallowed again!”

Ruth planted her hands on her hips. “It wasn’t swallowed. It was electronically controlled!”

“Tell her to stop picking on me. She’s been mean all day,” Che said stubbornly.

Marinah bent low, putting her jaws in Ruth’s and Che’s faces. The roar she let loose had everyone jumping a foot in the air. The kids covered their ears, and I was sure Marinah’s dead hellhound breath didn’t help.

Ruth, her face scrunched in what I thought was fear, pointed accusingly at Che. “It was his idea!”

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Marinah

During the next twenty-four hours, we received no demands from the Federation for Knet. Not that we actually expected any. Knet had information they wanted, and to them, he was little more than an animal. I never completely trusted this particular Shadow Warrior, but he was one of my people, so his loss weighed heavily on me.

The soldiers who attacked us simply disappeared. At least the ones we didn't kill. Having a submarine made that easier. From what we pieced together, soldiers had landed, a group captured Knet, returned to the sub, and left soldiers and hellhounds behind to kill as many humans and Shadow Warriors as possible. Those who stayed on the island died, but my rage still simmered.

I turned the corner and saw Maylin and Missy talking. Missy was Beck's mate, and Maylin was Nokita's. They were both strong women, but neither of them turned into an alien monster. Yes, this was petty. I just didn't want to deal with them right now.

They blocked the hallway, and Missy wasted no time getting up in my business. "You haven't slept. The only way you'll be of help to anyone is if you're in top form," she chided.

Tearing her head off and stomping it wasn't in my best interest, but the thought helped me hold onto my razor-thin temper.

"I'm heading to a meeting," I grit out. "We'll be sending a crew to the mainland to see if they can track the soldiers from the submarine." Maybe if they understood the danger of this current situation, they would back off. And pigs might fly.

“Have you thought about meditation?” Maylin asked in her strong Cuban accent.

“Meditation?” I repeated, like she was speaking a foreign language. She’d been spending too much time with Cosway, who swore by meditation. Cosway was a young woman we found in the U.S. She loved cats and was a gift to us, even if I didn’t like her very much right this minute.

“If you meditated, your head would be clearer,” Missy butted in.

I couldn’t help myself and repeated between my gritted teeth, “Clearer?”

It was Maylin’s turn again. “The women in the kitchen said you haven’t been eating enough.”

If roaring would’ve helped, I’d have done it. If running in the opposite direction worked, I’d have tried that too. To hold back a growl that might have exploded into a roar, I bit my tongue so hard I wouldn’t have been surprised if blood dripped from my mouth.

“The women in the kitchen want nothing to do with me,” I said in a stilted voice that would have warned anyone else away. “They’re scared to death of who they think I’ve become.” On a bright note, there had been no additional demands from them and no further threats to strike since the stories of my Nova form became public knowledge. If a smile could pass my lips today, I would have smiled at the thought.

“They’re worried if you don’t eat enough, you might eat them and their children,” Missy said.

“They are being as ridiculous as fuck.” A.K.A., do not fuck with me.

Missy touched my arm, something no one but King did. Ms. Beast grumbled, and in

my head, I rearranged her face into a bloody mess until she had to be dragged away for medical attention.

“You’re blaming yourself for the attack.” Missy’s eyes filled with pity, and I went from biting my lip to licking it at the thought of tearing her face off, not just damaging it.

Shit. What the hell was going on inside my head?

I faced Missy full on. Even though she avoided meeting my eyes, Kedorine 5 spiked inside me suddenly, and I realized this could end badly. These were my friends, and I was completely losing it. “I’m in charge, and that makes the attack my fault. The buck stops here.” I understood this part of leadership perfectly. The person at the top always took responsibility. I was now in charge. End of discussion.

Then it was Maylin’s turn to tempt fate. “No, it’s no one’s fault, Marinah. We need you, but it’s like you’ve checked out.”

I hadn’t “checked out,” even though King had said almost the same thing to me last night. The rage. It ate me alive, and I couldn’t see past it.

Maylin stubbornly held my gaze, and the Kedorine 5 spiked higher. I went back to biting my lip so I wouldn’t actually tear her head off. I reminded myself that she was Che and Baby Boot’s mother. I did not want her dead. I could not bite her head off. I took a slow breath, trying to bring sense into my thoughts. This wasn’t Ms. Beast leading me. It couldn’t be. I had no idea where this killing rage was coming from. Had my mind snapped? It seemed like a reasonable explanation.

Missy, for some reason, would not give up. How could she not realize she was playing with deadly fire? When I exploded, she couldn’t be anywhere near me.

“Cosway suggests meditation,” she said in a soothing voice that irritated me back into the rage I was trying so hard to contain. “She’s been using it, and it helps her.”

Cosway was responsible for this nonsense. “She’s crazy,” I said slowly. Missy’s jaw tensed, and from this new, less soothing expression, she had no intention of backing down. I took a step into her personal space. My eyes burned from within because I could feel it. They silently communicated that Missy’s life was in danger. “Do. You. Want. Me. To kill you?” My grip on my beast side was a hair below where I could pull it back.

From her expression, my threat was a spectacular failure. These women were married to hardheaded Shadow Warriors, and they didn’t seem to grasp the danger they were in right now. “I want you to lead,” Missy encouraged. “To do that, you need to eat. Once you eat, you’ll be able to think rationally.”

The stubborn fool. Too bad she wouldn’t look as pretty without a nose. The sympathy in both their eyes was more than I could take.

The walls of the citadel had felt my boot these past few days. The Warriors walked on eggshells. King purposely kept as much distance between them and me as possible. It was the reason I’d called the meeting I was attempting to go to now. I couldn’t stop swinging between rage, sorrow, and frustration. The only explanation I had was that my Nova form was wreaking havoc inside me. I simply didn’t understand, and it drove me nuts. Even I didn’t want to be around me.

With a loud growl I didn’t bother containing, I grabbed Missy’s hips, lifted her aside, and stomped away. I didn’t kill her, and that was the biggest concession I could make right now. Each stomp became a count inside my head. Three, six, nine. Maybe it would calm me enough to get through the coming meeting without spilling blood I so badly wanted on my hands.

The rumble of my guards' voices reached me before I opened the door and stepped inside. As soon as they saw me, the room fell silent. I would swear they were holding their collective breaths. King met my eyes, his chin tipping down regally, but he didn't look away. I would've sworn he was challenging me. Ms. Beast, of course, couldn't have cared less.

"Are you trying to set me off before the meeting starts?" I demanded through teeth that jammed together as soon as the words left my throat.

His gaze slid away. "Just a check to see where you're at."

"I'm here, and we're having a meeting," I all but yelled, slamming my butt into the chair. I emphasized "the" because it had been King's chair, and now it was mine, which didn't make me any happier. "We have a missing Shadow Warrior, no information on his whereabouts, and no word from the Federation. Ideas?" I looked around the room. "Anyone?" I growled.

Beck, in all his idiocy, decided to be the brave Shadow Warrior among them. "It only makes sense that they want a Shadow Warrior to experiment on."

My eyes snapped to his. Stress lined his expression, and the dark circles under his eyes told me he hadn't slept. I forced myself to take a slow, deep breath. "Okay, Sherlock, why do you think they took him to experiment on?"

"If not to experiment, then they want inside information."

"Torture," I said. The word he'd been avoiding hit the room like a stone. Losing a Shadow Warrior was one thing. Picturing torture and knowing it was quite possible were entirely different. The Federation saw us as animals, and to them, Knet was nothing more than a lab rat.

Beck's eyes dropped to the floor, but I noticed the subtle tightening of his fists on the table as he spoke. "Knet is dead to us, and we need to prepare for a large-scale attack from the Federation."

Kill. The Kedorine 5 exploded within me, and the world turned murky gray. Ms. Beast slammed through my defenses, and I was no longer in control. With a loud growl, I leapt across the table and locked my jaws around Beck's neck, ready to pull back with the contents of his throat caught in my fangs.

King grabbed my head and slammed his fist into my jaw. I released Beck and snapped at King, my rage igniting into a blazing inferno. A dark wall of red mist clouded my vision as Nokita quickly dragged Beck away. I growled in his direction, and Nokita froze in place.

Hot blood pulsed through my body, fueling my fury with every beat. Kill . The internal demand was nearly impossible to ignore.

"Marinah!" King shouted.

My name on his lips cleared my head just enough to keep me from attacking him. There was a break in the red mist, and I could finally see my mate. A few seconds later, my pulse slowed. Somehow, I managed to speak coherently: "Understand this," I ground out: "We will never forget a Shadow Warrior. Never!"

Ms. Beast stared down the men, daring any of them to challenge her. They quickly looked away. Energy swirled in the room; the temperature heated as I fought for control. The need to kill gave way just a bit. Finally, I managed to speak again. "I'm going to Del Rey."

King nodded. His eyes were nearly black as he battled his own Beast. "I'll take you," he ground out.

We fed off each other's energy, and my eruption into Beast was pushing him to his limits. I couldn't have him around me right now. Somehow, I had to figure out what was happening to me.

"No. Cosway will take me." I had to regain a sense of balance. I'd try anything. Even something as ridiculous as meditation.

I walked out of the room with my Warrior head held high, though my mind was a raging storm. Whatever was wrong with me had to be fixed.

Cosway and I were on a boat within an hour. She wisely didn't speak. I wisely didn't look at her. Even her soft smile might take me over the edge I was clinging to with everything I had.

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Del Rey (Love Island)

Marinah

“Stare at water, pretty butterfly,” Cosway instructed while petting the small tabby cat she kept for herself. It was Callie’s brother, even though they looked nothing alike.

Butterfly was the name Cosway had chosen for me. She was the only human besides Ruth, Che, and their mothers who showed no fear, even if I shifted into Nova. She accepted me completely for who I was, even though that person was extremely screwed up right now.

When we found Cosway, she’d been on her own for years and somehow survived. We’d mistaken her for a man with most of his marbles missing. I still wondered how she’d made it as long as she had. Since arriving on the main island, her skin had softened from repeated washing, and her hair no longer looked like something from the legends of Medusa. I envied the soft auburn color, with its natural waves and delicate wisps that framed her face perfectly. Her brown eyes shone with a light that seemed to draw people in. Or maybe it was her entire presence. She had a way of making you feel comforted when she was near. My polar opposite.

Some might say Cosway was simple-minded. They’d be wrong. Sure, she had a straightforward way of solving problems, but she solved them. She also had a knack for helping me sort through my tangled emotions. She’d been trying to get me to meditate for weeks, and I’d done everything I could to avoid her and the entire idea. Until now.

It had been three days. Clearing my head was impossible. My brain was too full of turmoil. Each time I thought I'd reached a safe mental space, images popped into my mind. Ms. Beast was another problem. She refused to cooperate, staying constantly agitated. My emotions were a chaotic mess, and she wouldn't or couldn't calm down. Nova remained a shadow in the background, a strange warmth surrounded her, which only added to my irritation. Anything resembling tranquility completely eluded me. Maybe I needed a heavy dose of the calm Endura gave me. Even if we found her Shadow women, I doubted they would do anything to help us. It still rankled that they were willing to lay down and die without a fight.

Argh. All of these thoughts were the reason I couldn't find the headspace to meditate and I was becoming more frantic again.

"This won't work," I said, using clipped words that spoke volumes.

"You no try!" Cosway snapped, her testiness doing nothing to help my mood. Still, she refused to give up on me.

With a deep breath, I tried again, exhaling the bad and inhaling the good. I stood on an outcropping of rocks at the ocean's edge, my mind attempting to float through what should have been fluffy white clouds. Cosway thought clouds would do the trick. My problem was that the clouds in my mind formed into a bloody red, far from relaxing. I couldn't release the image no matter how hard I tried.

In my arms rested Bertha, my short-barreled, modified rifle. I refused to be without her in my current state. I had to be able to defend myself, and I didn't trust Ms. Beast; she was too unpredictable right now. Attacking Beck had proven it. As for Nova, she was completely out of the question. If I couldn't control Ms. Beast, there was no hope of managing the more aggressive side of me. For now, Bertha and a sword were the safest option if we ran into hellhounds.

Refusing to give up, even with the billowing red clouds in my mind, I inhaled again and tilted my head back, closing my eyes this time.

“Think water, think waves, think soothing sounds, think comfort,” I murmured to myself. I pushed aside the anger until I was almost in a meditative state. But the clouds turned an even deeper red, and suddenly, I heard Che crying out inside my head, followed by Ruth. The images twisted into horrifying visions of them lying dead, their mouths open in silent screams. The blood-red clouds became a raging thunderstorm of death.

The Kedorine 5 spiked. My heart raced, and my skin grew damp as I fought the shift threatening to take over. When I finally managed to open my eyes, I realized Bertha was pointed out to sea. Before I could stop myself, I squeezed the trigger, spraying bullets into the ocean.

Cosway’s hand landed at the top of Bertha’s barrel, grounding my human side slightly. Ms. Beast, however, grumbled at the contact, sending another wave of Kedorine 5 surging through me.

“Take apart. Put together,” Cosway said, her voice distant, her words barely piercing the relentless red fog that refused to let go.

But it did make it through. With my head tipped back and the ocean wind brushing against my face, I focused solely on Bertha. Piece by piece, I took her apart and then reassembled her, each movement precise. Each step of this ritual was locked in my mind, giving my brain the focus it desperately needed. When I finished, I mentally traced my hand along her smooth barrel and inhaled the lingering scent of gun oil on my fingers.

Calm rippled through my mind, and a rare euphoria filled me. Ms. Beast lay down, closing her eyes, her entire body going slack. The shadow behind her slumped into

itself, curling into a tight ball. The rhythmic crash of waves against the rocks below filled my head, grounding me. The knowledge I'd gained this past year unraveled, breaking apart and realigning into something clearer, more ordered within the madness.

The weight of Bertha filled my arms. Clarity seeped into my thoughts, a tightly woven thread that I carefully pulled apart and inhaled its strength.

A kaleidoscope of images flashed through my mind, vivid and real enough that I wanted to grab them out of the air. Ms. Beast fighting hellhounds. Flash. My mate's strong arms wrapping around me. Flash.

Then came a flash I hadn't expected. It was Nova. Her fangs dripped blood, her energy building with power.

No, you don't, I told her silently. I control you .

Ms. Beast let out a satisfied grumble as I pulled Nova back and she seemed to disappear. Rising slowly, Ms. Beast walked to a shadow that could only be Nova and stood over it. She growled softly before lying down again, her body almost wrapping around Nova like a shield. The entire scene didn't make sense but the rest of my world seemed to.

My thoughts shifted to Homestead One and Knet's kidnapping. The pieces began to fall into place. When I opened my eyes, the world looked nothing like it had an hour ago.

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The Island (Cuba)

King

Marinah's absence was a dark hole in our daily routine. She was part of the island's life force, even though she had no idea what that truly meant. I'd tried taking things slow, giving her time to adjust. Maybe time wasn't the answer. Warriors understood war. I'd been treating my mate like a human woman instead of the bloodthirsty Warrior she'd become.

The punch of energy from Marinah's Beast had hit me like a fist to the gut when she went after Beck. Fury and confusion filled me, mirroring what I knew was going on inside her. I'd felt our mate bond before, but this was different. It pulled me along, and for a moment, I wanted to kill Beck too. I almost went after him instead of grabbing Marinah.

"Have you heard from her?" Axel, our doctor, asked. He was also one of Marinah's best friends and had been working tirelessly to save those injured during the battle. We'd lost two Warriors and six humans in the attack, not counting Knet. Axel looked as exhausted as the rest of us.

"It's only been three days," I said stiffly.

"The Warriors need her here."

My mind darkened, and my fingers itched to wrap around Axel's throat. "Something is wrong. Marinah's Beast is acting strangely."

“Could it be tied to the women’s history?”

I’d thought about that too. I shrugged. “I’m unsure.”

We both fell silent, our thoughts turning to what the journal might reveal.

Axel broke the silence first. “Should you read it?”

I wanted to. The female Warriors had always been a mystery to us. The idea that they might have developed their own community had never been considered. Our texts speculated that the women assimilated into the human world and were lost to us.

“I’ll talk to her about the journal when she returns,” I told Axel.

“Hopefully that will be soon,” he muttered, walking away.

So did I.

When I entered the meeting room, Beck was pacing the floor. He advanced as soon as he saw me. Before he could speak, I held up a hand. “No word from her. It’s only been three days.”

Beck rolled his eyes. “Maylin and Missy put some stupid idea into her head. Something about Cosway wanting Marinah to meditate.” He scratched the side of his face, clearly frustrated.

Beck expected life to line up perfectly, though it rarely happened. He was loyal and an incredible pain in the ass. I’d grown accustomed to his endless sour moods before Missy came into his life. His emotions went up and down with Marinah in the beginning, and when she became alpha, he insisted he would remain my bodyguard while I became Marinah’s.

I thought the bond with my men would fade after Marinah became Nova and I stepped aside as Alpha. When Greystone, my uncle, died, the unseen strings of Warrior energy wrapped around me almost instantly. I expected them to disappear just as suddenly, but they hadn't.

Inner turmoil clouded my thinking after Greystone's death. While I grieved for him, I also took on the role as leader. At the time, we were in the middle of fighting the Federation, and every decision I made cost Warrior lives. My days were spent attacking and killing. It wasn't a choice; it was survival. My Beast led me, and I let it. Enemies died. Friends fought beside me. Life was simpler then. War was simpler.

Now Marinah dealt with the island's politics, which had always driven me crazy. She was trying to find her place among us while learning to lead, and she constantly questioned herself because she wasn't born to war. Everyone had advice for her, even Cosway, apparently.

"The women are meditating?" I asked, confused. Maybe I hadn't heard him correctly.

Beck met my gaze for a fleeting second. "Not the women. They think Marinah needs to meditate."

"That makes no sense."

Beck flung himself into the nearest chair, and I took a seat two down from him.

"Apparently, the island women see Marinah as their champion," he said. "They caused an endless string of problems for her, making demands and expecting her to fix everything. Then she went Nova during the battle and they saw it happen. Now they're terrified she'll eat their children. Cosway, along with Missy and Maylin, think that if she acts more human, the women will trust her again." Beck's face twisted like he'd eaten something sour, his disgust clear.

“It still makes no sense.” I covered my face with my hand for a brief second, trying to picture Marinah meditating. The stupid image that popped into my head didn’t even make me smile. Marinah wasn’t exactly the meditating type, but then again, I’d never known a Shadow Warrior who would sink to any kind of new-age crap.

“Maybe you need to go to Del Rey and check on her,” Beck suggested tightly, which made Beast grumble deep inside me.

I turned my head slightly and gave Beck a full dose of alpha. “Maybe I shouldn’t.” Whatever was going on in Marinah’s head, she needed space to figure it out.

“The Federation will attack soon. We have no idea what Knet told them,” Beck pressed.

“Why do you think he would talk?” I shot back, my irritation building. Beck’s fixation on Knet was grating on my nerves. A Shadow Warrior could have his limbs removed, and he still wouldn’t give our secrets to humans.

“I don’t think he was kidnapped. I think he went willingly.”

“What?” I barked, shoving my chair back as I stood.

Beck’s eyes practically glowed with anger; his jaw tight as he spoke. “Knet hates you. He wanted to be one of your personal guards, and when he wasn’t chosen, he blamed Marinah for his own ineptitude. The men have been grumbling about Knet for months. We’ve suspected a traitor, and Knet fits the bill.”

The urge to rip Beck’s head off surged through me. He’d kept this to himself while we’d been searching for answers. We’d known there was a traitor, but we’d assumed it was someone human. “Did you share your theory with Marinah?” I demanded.

Beck had the sense to look away before answering. “I mentioned we should forget about Knet and someone almost ripped my throat out.”

He was lucky I didn’t finish the job.

Del Rey (Love Island)

Marinah

I missed King. Four days apart was too long, and I craved him like air to breathe. My head was clearer now. The meditation hadn't just helped; it gave me what I'd been missing. Cosway, with her calm understanding, had helped too. She had a different way of looking at the world, and now some of that had rubbed off on me. Or maybe this was the female Shadow essence that Endura had. It didn't matter; I felt almost like a completely new person.

I knew what we had to do. The Shadow Warriors weren't ready to attack the Federation on the mainland. The humans at the outposts weren't ready either. We only had one option, and King wouldn't like it, but what else was new? No, I told myself, that was unfair. He loved me and worried just as I loved and worried about him. He would understand even if I had to bust my boot against his head a few times. The thought made me smile.

"I pack bags," Cosway said from the doorway. I hadn't mentioned we were leaving, but she sensed what was inside me before I even understood it myself. Cosway was special in a way I didn't quite understand. She seemed at peace with our volatile world and thrived in it.

I held up a hand to stop her before she left the room. "I want to meditate before we go." She gave me a knowing smile, and I returned it before she walked away.

I picked up her cat, giving it the affection I wished I could give Callie. King was

another story entirely. I needed his arms around me. He was a part of me, and I wasn't whole without him. I was still glad I took this time away, no matter how hard it had been. I needed to find my feet and come to terms with several things.

Setting the cat down, I hiked to my favorite spot overlooking the ocean. I didn't bring Bertha with me because I didn't need her now. I had full control of Ms. Beast again. And I had it over my capacity to meditate. The ability had been there all along and now it would stay a part of me.

The breeze swept over my skin and I inhaled the salt air and distinctive taste of the ocean. Closing my eyes, I tipped my head back. The scene that came to mind was the misty corridors of the Federation compound where I'd worked. Slowly, I walked the long the narrow hallways. I had no idea why I came here or what I was looking for. I'd learned while meditating that my mind took me where I needed to go. A door creaked and closed behind me as I passed through it. I continued searching the endless halls that had been my world for so long. Each room was empty. My boots made no sound on the cement floors.

A faint buzzing in the distance made me turn my head. Familiar voices reached my ears. At first, they didn't make sense. I stood still until the enemy became crystal clear in my mind. One after the other, the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. It had been in front of me all along. Kedorine 5 surged inside me. Ms. Beast growled; her presence a solid reminder that I wasn't alone.

I moved toward the voices and saw the faces of my enemies. Blood filled my vision. It dripped from my claws and fangs as anticipation surged.

It was pure bliss.

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The Island (Cuba)

King

I'd been training all day, pushing my body to its limits in the hope that exhaustion might finally quiet my mind. If my muscles screamed loud enough, maybe I'd stop dreaming of Marinah long enough to sleep tonight. But if she wasn't back tomorrow, I'd swim to Love Island if I had to and retrieve her. I wouldn't let her shut me out any longer.

Stretching to ease the ache in my limbs, I headed to our room, where food would be delivered shortly. It wasn't just sleep that eluded me. I had no appetite and that was never good for Shadow Warriors. Marinah's scent lingered in the hallways, filling the space and haunting me.

Mate , Beast murmured in my mind, his voice more insistent today. His presence had thrummed with agitation since the moment she'd left, but this felt different.

I stepped into our room and froze. Marinah was there, curled up in our bed, her braids splayed out on the pillow, tanned cheeks showing a healthy glow of pink. The steady rise and fall of her chest told me she was real. I moved closer and noticed a small lump beneath the covers. Callie's head popped out, her soft meow breaking the silence before she nestled back down. Marinah didn't stir and I simply stood there for several moments and breathed in her scent as Beast settled into a contented ball.

I finally stripped off my clothes and slid into bed beside her, Callie sandwiched between us. For the first time in days, I closed my eyes and drifted into a deep,

dreamless sleep. If food arrived, we didn't notice.

I woke to Marinah's warm hand resting on my chest. A soft grunt escaped her lips as I rolled us over, shifting her on top of me.

"Where's the devil cat?" I whispered, my voice rough with sleep.

She ignored the question, her hand gliding down my chest until it found what it sought. "I've missed you," she murmured, her voice low and filled with longing.

Her eyes, alight with mischief and desire, drew me in. Her energy filled the room, blending seamlessly with mine. Our Beasts fell silent, their instincts syncing with our heartbeats. With another roll, I pinned her beneath me, staring into the eyes that had haunted my dreams. The pain she'd carried was gone, replaced by a sense of peace that radiated through her and into me.

I spread her legs, and slowly slid into her warmth, bringing us together as mates. Her eyes didn't leave mine as we renewed our bond. Our bodies moved in perfect rhythm, the bed rocking beneath us, sweat glistening on our skin as our need consumed us.

Mate, our Beasts whispered in unison this time, their Shadow spirit harmonizing as we gave in to the primal pull of each other.

Marinah arched her neck, and I gently bit the soft skin at the base of her throat. Her nails raked my back as a moan escaped her lips and her body grinded harder against mine. In that moment, the world faded, leaving only the two of us locked in the relentless dance of passion and bliss.

It was over too quickly, but tonight was for us, and I would take her again. More correctly, she would take me. It would never be enough.

???

“What does this change?” I asked curiously, trying to wrap my head around what she’d told me. With the war against the Federation, we’d had little time to dig into Marinah’s past. Endura and the journals had been entirely unexpected.

Marinah grinned, her confidence glowing. “It changes everything. I’ve tried to lead like you. I’ve done everything you say. I put up with Beck and follow nearly everything he insists I do. It hasn’t worked. It’s time I lead my own way. I refuse to keep beating myself up because I’m not you.” She took my hand, threading her fingers through mine. “Please tell me you understand.”

I wanted to throw her on the bed and spend the next few weeks there because I did understand. This was the Marinah I’d been waiting for. Every now and then, I caught glimpses of the leader she was destined to be, but then she’d start questioning herself again. No other woman could ever take her place as my mate, and I’d kill any man foolish enough to try to fill my shoes. But this was the Marinah that I fell in love with and my Beast mated with.

The queen was back, and even her voice sounded regal.

“Do not dress us in pink,” I said with a grin I couldn’t hold back.

She pinched my side, a teasing smile playing on her lips. “If your queen decides on a color of the day, you’ll follow her direction, or your head will leave your shoulders.”

I grabbed her hand, pulled her closer, and inhaled her scent. “You lead. We follow,” I pledged.

I let her go, and she settled back into her chair. “I have a plan,” she announced.

I gave her my full attention. “If it involves killing Federation soldiers, I’m on board.”

She winked. “You won’t like it.”

“Of course I won’t. It isn’t my plan,” I grumbled.

“We need to capture the scientist.”

I caught the specific wording. “The scientist?”

“President Barnes,” she said in case I wasn’t following.

“I don’t like this plan,” I said flatly.

Marinah sat up straight again and fixed her gaze on me. “This war won’t be won with blood alone. We need answers, and the only way to get them is by going after the man who has them.”

“Hmm,” I muttered, my doubt clear.

She rolled her eyes. “There are two parts to this plan. We need to fight the Federation on our terms. Here, on the island, we have the advantage. When the Federation attacks, we’ll decimate them.”

“What does fighting on the island have to do with capturing President Barnes?” I asked, “He won’t lead the troops, he’ll have someone else do it. The man is a coward.”

“We’re missing something big in the scientific world,” Marinah said. “Actually, many somethings. The hellhounds were either a government experiment gone wrong, a complete accident, or one hundred percent intentional. We need to find the missing

link and put the pieces together, or we'll never know exactly what we're up against."

I tossed out my own bombshell. "We may have a bigger problem. Knet."

Marinah didn't miss a beat. "He's our traitor," she said flatly.

Beck first, now Marinah. "And you said nothing?" I asked, my words steaming with frustration.

"Anger kept me from thinking clearly," she admitted. "Knet wasn't exactly my biggest fan. The Federation is planning to attack us, and Knet cleared out. That means the attack is imminent. I've wasted too much time getting my shit together."

I placed my hand on her arm, running my palm over the soft skin there. "The time wasn't wasted." This was who she was. The mate of legends and she was all mine.

"Once the Warriors begin meditating, you'll see what a difference it makes," she said, shocking me.

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to process, then reopened them. I couldn't have heard her right. "Did you just say something about the Warriors meditating? Did you mean metalsmithing?"

She slapped my arm. "I also know where the Federation is hiding," she added.

"This came to you while metalsmithing?"

This time, she pinched me. "Where?" I finally asked, cutting to the chase.

"They went underground," she said, watching my reaction.

I stared at her, unsure of what she meant.

“Farther underground,” she clarified at my silence. “Once my mind was clear, I remembered a story my friends used to talk about all the time. It was rumored that the Federation had a shelter big enough to hold thousands of people. If it existed, my friends knew they wouldn’t be part of the chosen. While my father was alive, I might have had a chance of getting in. On slow days, my friends and I would speculate about whether the shelter was true or not. Something Landan said back then popped into my head while I was meditating. ‘It’s probably under our feet.’ That was his theory.”

“When I asked him why he thought that,” she continued, “he said, ‘They talk about stockpiling supplies. We collect the products here, but where do they go? I never see trucks taking things away. If they were smart, they’d build something in plain sight.’ We teased him about it until we moved on to another conspiracy theory.”

Her words hung in the air, the pieces slowly falling into place as I comprehended the depth of what she was saying.

“Let me get this straight,” I said, barely managing to keep the growl out of my voice. “You just now remembered this conversation?”

She twirled one of her braids and smiled, completely unbothered. “It was years ago. Conspiracy theories were just a way to pass the time. At one point, we even speculated that hellhounds were actually aliens, like the Shadow Warriors.”

There was too much knowledge locked away in her mind, too many pieces I couldn’t see yet. I struggled with her use of meditation to clarify her thoughts but I wouldn’t fight her on it. “Is kidnapping President Barnes happening before the attack on the island or after?” I asked, my tone harder than intended because the thought of him always pissed me off.

Marinah

After a large breakfast, some much-needed cuddle time with Callie, and a refreshing shower, I called a meeting with my guard.

Beck, Labyrinth, Nokita, and Cabel entered the meeting room cautiously, their eyes scanning the atmosphere as if trying to gauge my mood. Alden, the newest addition to my guard, followed their lead. He'd previously been assigned to Beck because of his issues with authority. I had solved that problem, and now he was a vital part of the team.

Axel arrived next, walking straight to me without hesitating. He wrapped his hands around my shoulders and pulled me into a hug, ignoring my grumbling. He didn't let go until he was good and ready.

Stepping back, Axel gave me a once-over, his gaze moving from my toes to my face. A low growl rumbled from King's throat, but Axel didn't even glance in his direction. "You look good," he said. "Rested."

Axel had apparently decided it was his personal mission to keep me healthy. As a Shadow Warrior, I healed fast. As Nova, my healing time was even faster, leaving Axel with little to do physically. So, a few weeks before I went apeshit, he shifted his focus to my mental health. Considering the chaos in my head could drive anyone insane, I hadn't held out much hope that he'd "fix" me. Now that I was meditating, I didn't feel like I needed his psychoanalysis.

"I called you here so we could talk about it," I said, giving him a smile.

“Starting the meeting would be a good idea,” King grumbled from his seat.

Axel stepped back dramatically, winking at me. He enjoyed pushing King’s buttons, especially where our mate bond was concerned. King’s protective instincts demanded that men keep their distance from me, and I couldn’t entirely fault him for it. Axel, due to his sexual preference, got away with more than the other men. That didn’t mean King’s beast didn’t object, it just wasn’t as much. Sometimes I think King grumbled because it made Axel feel good. It was always hard to tell with King, and I kept the suspicion to myself.

While King glared daggers at Axel, we took our seats. I sat at the head of the table with King on my left and Beck beside him, followed by Labyrinth. On my right was Axel, then Nokita, Cabel, and finally Alden opposite me.

For the first time, since taking the chair at the head of the table, it felt exactly right.

I was about to speak when the door pushed open a few inches. That never happened. Eight pairs of Warrior eyes shifted to the door in unison.

“Sorry,” Ruth said, her tone utterly devoid of remorse. She was dressed as usual, which was halfway between a homeless child and a ninja in training, her red hair pulled back and plastered with some kind of oil to make it lay flat.

“Have one of your limbs been amputated?” I demanded, narrowing my eyes at her.

She dropped her gaze, and I could already tell this was going to be good. “Oh, wise one,” she began with exaggerated reverence. “I wanted but a minute of your time.” She scuffed the floor with the toe of her shoe, putting on her best “aw shucks” performance. None of us bought it.

“So, all your limbs are still attached?” I asked again, my tone flat.

She looked at her hands, splaying her fingers before giving her entire body a once over. “Yes, wise one,” she admitted, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

I made a mental note to order torture devices and start building a proper dungeon. “When you’re finished with one thousand push-ups in the training room, wait for me. I’ll be there after my meeting to hand out your punishment.”

Her eyes narrowed into evil little slits. “A thousand push-ups isn’t punishment enough?”

“Not by a long shot. I’ll make it two thousand if you keep defying me.”

“But—”

I held up one finger, then added a second for emphasis. Ruth snapped her mouth shut, her glare practically burning a hole through me, and then the door closed with a resounding click.

Seven pairs of Shadow Warrior eyes turned toward me this time, their expressions hovering somewhere between amusement and judgmental.

“A thousand push-ups for a young human is a little overkill, don’t you think?” Axel grumbled.

“She’ll have them done within an hour,” I said with a shrug. “Her arms will feel like they’re falling off, so we’ll work heavy swords later. I doubt she’ll interrupt another meeting.” I glanced at Beck, who shared a home with the devil child. He just shrugged, offering no sympathy or objection.

Finally, we got started.

“Now that I have your full attention,” I told them, scanning the room. “As I said before, the striking of knives into the table is over. From here on out, we will begin each meeting with five minutes of meditation.”

Jaws fell open in disbelief. They stared at me, forgetting to drop their eyes until Ms. Beast grumbled. Their faces turned quickly to belligerence when I didn’t back down and say it was a joke. As a whole, their expressions were almost comical.

“This is an order, not a suggestion,” I added firmly. “Once you have the hang of it, we’ll increase the time to ten minutes.”

Their expressions shifted to something resembling disgust, like they’d just stepped in fresh horse muck.

“Close your eyes,” I commanded, demonstrating by shutting mine.

The room went silent, and after about twenty seconds, I peeked through my lashes. All but King was staring at me with their eyes wide open, defiance practically radiating off them. King simply looked amused.

I sighed. This was going to be harder than I thought. I let a touch more of Ms. Beast’s disgruntlement out.

“Do I need to explain how to close your eyes?” I growled.

“I think you need to explain what hippie chick did to you,” Beck muttered under his breath.

Ms. Beast let out a louder growl, the sound vibrating more forcefully into the room. “I’d think the last thing you’d want is for the men to rescue you again from the big, bad, scary woman who just happens to be your alpha,” I mocked, my tone dripping

sarcasm.

I let my gaze drift over each man in the room, saving King for last. He looked like he might burst out laughing any second. The idea of eating his face off flashed through my mind, but it wouldn't do much for the calm I was trying to project. Inhaling deeply, I forced myself to ignore the urge to bare my teeth.

"You will close your eyes for five minutes," I said firmly. "If you choose not to meditate, that's on you." This time, I kept my own eyes open until they complied.

"Can we ask what this will accomplish?" Nokita questioned, showing a small bit of bravery.

I peeked his way and saw his eyes were closed. "It will calm our minds and help us see more clearly. Once that happens, it's easier to sort out our problems."

"If it works, I'm in," he replied, surprising me.

"If you're quiet, it works better," I said, giving him a direct stare, though his closed eyes missed the message.

"We just close our eyes and wait five minutes for an epiphany?" Labyrinth grunted, but his strange eyes, one blue, one green, remained shut. When they were open, the contrast was always striking, especially since every other Warrior besides me, had blue eyes.

"My, what big words you're using now. Maybe this does work," Alden teased about Labyrinth's use of "epiphany", and smirked at his friend.

Teaching Shadow Warriors to meditate was turning out to be more difficult than I'd expected. I needed more of Cosway's patience because my agitation was rising

quickly. “Deep breathing is key,” I said, trying again, my jaw clenched tightly as I closed my eyes. “Clear your mind, take deep breaths, and kill something in your thoughts.”

Someone, I think Labyrinth, chuckled softly. I ignored him. For me, mentally killing something always brought me to my happy place faster. “Picture your claws ripping through intestines. Bits of gore plop onto your mammoth feet. Imagine the smell of blood as it gushes from a mortal wound.”

I lowered my voice, softening it deliberately, hoping the men would feel the shift in the air, the meditative state taking hold. “Feel your rival’s essence fade as you claim victory. Now, inhale deeply.”

I inhaled and exhaled softly as they followed my instructions. I added several more calming pictures for them to think about. Satisfaction spread through me when my shoulders relaxed and I could feel the peacefulness meditation brought. “Now, slowly open your eyes.”

The men blinked at me; their postures seemingly more relaxed. “Now we can begin the meeting,” I said, nodding with approval. This had been hard for them, but I knew they’d improve with practice.

“Don’t you feel better?” I asked, looking around the room.

Axel tilted his head slightly, his expression thoughtful. “I have this strange desire to kill something,” he said, completely serious.

That was not the point. And Axel wasn’t even a fighter. This was supposed to take them through the killing stage and allow the mellow aftereffects to take hold.

“Maybe we should start over,” I muttered, exhaling slowly and bracing for round two.

The men glared at Axel and he winced. Cosway had shown endless patience with me, and I would do it with these buttheads even if I had to point my gun at them to make them find their inner peace.

King

After another round of meditation, we figured out it was best to play along, or we would be at it all day. The smiles and deep relaxing breaths may or may not have fooled Marinah, but she let us off the hook. Nokita's next words helped too.

"We have a submarine?" I said, narrowing my eyes as I tried to process the bombshell he'd just dropped.

"We may have a submarine," he clarified, clearly uncomfortable under my scrutiny. "It's not operational right now."

He went on to explain, "Three systems need to work for it to function underwater properly: replenishing oxygen, releasing carbon dioxide, and removing the moisture we exhale. It's complicated," he added with a shrug, as if that summed everything up.

Marinah didn't miss a beat. "How long will it take to make it operational?" she asked, cutting straight to the point.

"If it's salvageable, two weeks," he replied. "I'll need parts."

"Hmm. Are there any other toys you want to share?" she asked, her voice sharp enough to make Nokita visibly squirm.

It was rare to see someone else being grilled while I got to sit back and observe. I crossed my arms and leaned against the wall, enjoying the change of pace.

“We have a quad mini sub that’s seaworthy as soon as I fix the scrubber,” Nokita admitted reluctantly. “That should take a couple of days at most.”

“What about land vehicles?” Marinah fired back.

Nokita hesitated, then said, “We’ve got one hundred and twenty tanks in working condition. Most are Soviet models that were already here when we arrived. We also found a few older U.S. and British tanks from World War II. After we worked on them, a couple actually run.”

He shifted uncomfortably under her scrutiny before adding, “Oh, and there’s a Gatling gun we found in a scrap pile. It’s hand-crank and comes with ten thousand rounds of ammo if we can get it working. From what I’ve read, it breaks down constantly, but if we can keep it running, it’ll cause some serious damage. It also looks wicked and is a great psychological repellent.”

Marinah turned to Beck next. “Move every man, woman, and child inland to the citadel and surrounding buildings using the tunnels,” she commanded. “I’ll notify Landan at the main outpost. If he wants to fly his people here for safety, we’ll accommodate them.”

When we first took over the island, we’d built a network of tunnels to move people safely and unseen. Now, they’d become essential.

“If Landan brings all his people, we’ll be thin on supplies,” I pointed out.

Marinah turned her gaze on me, her eyes blazing, daring me to challenge her. “We will handle all their people if needed,” she said, leaving no room for argument.

She hadn’t wavered once since calling the meeting to order. Marinah wasn’t asking for advice or offering us options. This was Marinah the Nova, our alpha.

“We need a distraction,” she said, her gaze shifted to Labyrinth. “We must know where the Federation will attack first. They’ll stage off the Florida coast. If we locate them, we’ll attack from the air and buy ourselves some time.”

Her eyes lifted as if she’d already made her decision and turned to Nokita. “You have one week to get the large sub operational. One day for the small one. We need to confirm if their sub is in the vicinity, and the only way to do that is by seeing underwater. Make it happen. Cabel will handle the aircraft while you’re working on the subs.”

Cabel, who had been quietly waiting without speaking or drawing her attention, grunted in assent.

Marinah stood, her posture straight. “We don’t know how long we have before the Federation returns. You’ve been preparing for this moment since you arrived, and now it’s time to defend our home. We have firepower and we’re able to control hellhounds. The humans here have something to fight for, and Shadow Warriors are hungry for blood. This is our home, and no one is taking it from us.”

She paused, her eyes sweeping over the room. “I say we end this meeting with another round of meditation. I’ll walk us through it again.”

She closed her eyes, and we followed suit.

Five minutes later, the Warriors filed out of the room without a word. No one met my gaze while I stood by the door. If they had, we probably would’ve burst out laughing, and that would’ve put a very angry Nova Warrior in our path. It was a risk none of us were willing to take. Sometimes silence was the best strategy, especially when it came to Marinah.

I stretched my arms over my head and yawned.

“You’re feeling relaxed because of the meditation,” Marinah said, coming up behind me and placing a hand on my back.

“I think you’re right,” I replied, managing to keep a straight face.

“I’d like to check on our hellhounds and thought you could go with me,” she added.

Marinah hated visiting the captured hellhounds. I turned to her. “What brought this on?” I asked, genuinely surprised.

“I’m queen. How dare you question me,” Marinah said, her tone filled with something I couldn’t name.

“I don’t like the look in your eyes,” I replied, narrowing mine suspiciously.

She angled her hip and leaned against the edge of the table. “I don’t like looking at hellhounds, so I guess we’re even.”

Two captured hellhounds had once been kept in a locked facility inside the citadel. Now, with over two hundred of them, we’d had to find a way to keep them contained and ensure the safety of the humans on the island.

Since the toxin from a hellhound bite or scratch killed humans within a short time, hellhounds escaping was our greatest fear. Shadow Warriors injected themselves regularly with medication to combat the toxin, but we hadn’t been able to find a cure for humans. That meant taking no chances.

The solution came in the form of an old prison west of the citadel. We reinforced the concrete floors with steel to prevent the hellhounds from burrowing out, and the locked cells kept them securely contained. The old prison yard gave us a safe place to practice using the whistles to control them.

While Marinah was on Love Island, I'd placed Elright, one of our elite sniper shooters, in charge of the facility. The hellhounds had been under Knet's supervision until his betrayal. The fury over what he'd done still gnawed at me.

Kill, my Beast growled inside me.

I wholeheartedly agreed.

At the hellhound facility, Marinah had Elright bring out a small group of the creatures. She pulled a special whistle from her pocket and blew into it. Instantly, the hellhounds in their specially constructed pen turned their attention to her, snarling and swiping at the barrier separating them from us.

She blew two short bursts into the whistle, and as if controlled by a single mind, the hellhounds moved as one unit to the left.

"Elright, bring out the reserve whistles," Marinah commanded.

Elright did as she said. I wasn't sure what Marinah was planning but held my thoughts. After Elright returned with the whistles, Marinah turned to the Shadow Warriors standing at attention. "Hand over the whistles you're carrying," she ordered.

The five men, who worked daily as hellhound controllers, didn't hesitate. They quickly handed their whistles to her. My focus stayed on Marinah and her strange request, not the Warriors. She handed Elright the whistles she'd collected and instructed him to distribute the reserve ones he'd brought.

Walking toward the pen, Marinah leapt over the fencing with ease, clearing the barbed wire. She landed squarely in the middle of the hellhounds. With a sharp blast of her whistle, she directed the snarling creatures to move as she wanted.

We'd all practiced this before, so I couldn't figure out what she was trying to prove. Still, I kept quiet.

Marinah jumped from the pen and turned to the five Warriors assembled before her. "I want each of you to do what I just did. One at a time," she said.

"Why?" Campbell, a notoriously churlish Warrior, asked, his tone laced with defiance, which surprised me. We didn't question our alpha.

The other Warriors shot sideways glances at him, their expressions a mix of shock and disbelief. My beast surged to the forefront of my mind, ready to act, but Marinah beat me to it. Dressed in her Warrior gear, designed for quick shifts, she didn't even bother transforming. Instead, she strode up to Campbell like she didn't have a care in the world.

With one swift motion, she grabbed him by the throat and hurled him over the pen's fencing and into the cage. He hit the ground hard, landing on his side.

The look of wild terror in his eyes was almost pitiful as he scrambled to his feet. The hellhounds turned toward him, their snarls growing louder. Campbell screamed, dropping the whistle Elright had handed him, and leaped from the pen.

I had no idea what Marinah was doing, but she didn't hesitate. Her human form melted away as Nova erupted from within her.

The transformation was explosive. Massive teeth that rivaled our beast's gleamed as her claws extended, sharp enough to tear through steel like tissue paper. Her wild, glowing eyes locked onto Campbell, who didn't even have time to scream.

Nova lunged.

The men instinctively gave her space. Marinah grabbed Campbell's legs, yanked them out from under him, and spun him around her body like a rag doll. Then she slammed him into the ground with a force that made the ground tremble. He screamed, and his Beast broke free in a desperate attempt to save himself.

As I watched, the pieces clicked into place. Something was wrong with the whistles Elright had handed out, and Marinah had known they were defective. Campbell had known too. He was in league with Knet.

Campbell's Beast was no match for Marinah. She toyed with him, taunting him with her power. She lunged for his shoulder and wrenched it out of its socket like it was nothing. Methodically, she moved to his other shoulder and dislocated it as well. Then came the humerus bones in both arms, snapping them like dry twigs.

His legs were next. The grotesque sounds that came from his throat were horrific, but Marinah wasn't finished. She moved on to the smaller bones, breaking them one by one with precise, deliberate force.

"Should we stop her?" Elright asked, hesitantly.

I glanced at him, keeping one eye on Marinah. "If you want your arms and legs broken, go for it," I replied, chewing on a piece of straw and thoroughly enjoying the bloodbath in front of me. Marinah was giving me some excellent ideas for when I finally got my hands on Knet.

Elright shrugged, his expression dark. "Traitors deserve what they get." He'd figured it out too.

Marinah's control over her Nova form was always tenuous, so it surprised me she didn't finish Campbell off quickly. There had to be a reason. Once she was satisfied that Campbell was incapable of crawling away, she turned her massive head toward

me and spoke, her voice a guttural roar.

“Question himth before I eath him,” she snarled, her teeth bared and dripping with blood.

Oh, honey, that’s impressive, I thought, hiding my admiration behind a neutral expression. Slowly, I walked toward my mate, using my foot to flip Campbell onto his back.

“You have something to say?” I asked, my voice laced with menace.

“Fuck you,” he spat, blood and broken fangs spewing from his mouth as he writhed on the ground.

I dropped to my haunches, grabbed his braids to still him, and leaned in close, letting the heat of my breath wash over his face. My fingers circled his throat with a very human hand, squeezing just enough to make him squirm.

“The only deal I’ll make is a quick death,” I promised. “Marinah won’t be as kind. She’ll tear you limb from limb while you’re still alive. And when you can no longer scream, she’ll slowly pull out your intestines and eat them. The decision is yours, and you’ve got two seconds to make it.”

Truthfully, I wasn’t sure if Marinah would eat his intestines, but at this point, I wouldn’t put anything past her. I was still amazed she had controlled her Nova form so well.

The Warrior’s wide eyes darted to Marinah and back to me. His tongue flicked out, licking his bloody lips. “They’re attacking in forty-eight hours,” he spat, his voice thick with pain and fear. “And there’s nothing you can do to stop it.” His gaze shifted back to Marinah, and his lips curled in a sneer. “No woman will ever lead me.”

I rose to my feet, placing my boot squarely on his face. With a sharp, deliberate strike, I dislocated his jaw. More fangs flew free, accompanied by a mouthful of blood. His eyes snapped to mine, wide with panic, but I didn't stop. My foot came down again, harder this time, crushing his face beneath it.

I'd promised him a quick death. I never said it would be painless.

"Comth on, baby," Marinah called from behind me.

I turned to see her standing there, her massive hand extended toward me, making mine look like a child's in comparison. With a final kick to Campbell's ruined skull, I stepped away and joined her.

The men's faces held a mix of admiration and awe.

"Check every whistle we have," I told the men. "Destroy the ones that are defective and create as many as are needed to replace the bad ones."

We walked to our motorcycles, straddling the seats like we owned the world.

"You're controlling your Nova," I said, stating the obvious.

"Idth called medithation," she replied with what may have been a smile, her voice still carrying that guttural edge of her Nova form.

Marinah

I slept like the dead. When King walked back into the room, the smell of bacon drifted in with him, impossible to ignore.

“Wake up, sleepyhead,” he said softly.

I rolled over and squinted at him. “Why are you whispering?”

“If you were still asleep, I was hoping you wouldn’t hear me,” he replied, a grin tugging at his lips.

“Do you have any idea how much work we have ahead of us?” I asked, already feeling the weight of everything we needed to prepare. At King’s insistence, we actually slept last night instead of working through the night.

“You said it yourself,” he challenged. “We’re ready and have been for years.”

I couldn’t argue with that. The truth was, King had prepared for this moment for longer than I cared to admit. The next forty-eight hours would bring pandemonium, and sleep would be in short supply. The full night of rest would help us get through it. Tossing the bedding aside, I stood up while King set the tray down and removed the lids.

The sight and smell of food made my stomach clench in hunger. Shifting straight into Nova had taken more out of me than I’d realized. I’d had a huge dinner the night before, but my stomach had forgotten.

“Your half is two pounds of bacon, a dozen eggs, and ten pieces of toast,” King said, eyeing me seriously. “Don’t touch my half.”

“I love you and won’t touch your food,” I promised with a sweet smile, crossing my fingers behind my back.

Callie scrambled out of my way as I practically charged the table. Her hiss of displeasure didn’t even faze me. I pointed toward her food bowl near the bathroom door, where her water dish sat as well.

“Cat food,” I said pointedly, before gesturing to my plate. “Warrior food.”

Her indignant stare was almost enough to make me laugh, but I was too busy piling bacon onto my toast to care.

An exaggerated huff escaped King. “How did you know the whistles were damaged?” he asked curiously, though there was burning fury in his eyes. He’d been stewing over this since yesterday.

After the Campbell incident, we returned to the citadel on the motorbikes. The roar of the engines drowned out any chance for conversation. As soon as we arrived, one of the men reminded me of Ruth’s pending punishment. Apparently, she’d been up to her usual antics, and the entire citadel was living in fear of what she’d do next. She had a way of weaseling around the rules I set in place. It was hard to fault her, so I planned to add new rules to get rid of the loopholes she found.

I’d headed straight for the gym, leaving King no opportunity to question me. Two hours of dealing with Ruth, who could barely lift her arms by the end, and her right-hand boy, Che, who she’d roped into trying to get her out of trouble, had worn me out. King had finally put his foot down and forced me to eat while he checked on Nokita’s progress. I was asleep before he returned.

Between bites of bacon, eggs, and toast, I finally answered. “Knet and the Federation had a plan in place. It’s the only thing that made sense. Why else would Knet leave now?” I paused to take a long drink of orange juice, savoring the sweetness. “And how could the Federation implement an attack on us while losing their eyes and ears on the island? Knet must have had help.”

I used a piece of toast to sop up some eggs, shoving the mixture into my mouth and swallowing before continuing. “Since Knet worked with the hellhounds, it made sense they’d use the hellhounds against us. While I was meditating during the meeting, it hit me. The only way to use the hounds as a weapon would be to sabotage the whistles. Everything fell into place after that. I just wasn’t sure who the traitor was.”

King’s expression stayed skeptical, so I went on. “Think about it. You and I, along with the guard, carry our whistles at all times. The rest of the whistles are kept in strategic locations around the citadel, making them accessible to everyone. Our Warriors are better at killing hellhounds than directing them with the whistles. The simplest way for the Federation and Knet to cause massive casualties would be to sabotage them. It’s efficient, and it’s exactly the kind of move they’d make.”

King leaned back, mulling it over while I used another piece of toast to clean my plate.

“Hmm,” he said after a minute passed.

King said “hmm” whenever he didn’t quite know how to respond to me. He started to ask another question, then stopped, running his fingers over his braids then pulling them to one side. His eyes dropped back to his plate, still piled high with food.

Meanwhile, I refilled my empty plate because my stomach growled again. I didn’t think I’d ever been this hungry in my life. It had to be Nova. It made sense that

shifting into that form would require more fuel. Someday, I'd actually learn something useful from my grandmother's journal.

When King looked up again, his confusion was obvious in his poor Warrior eyes. He didn't handle change well. "Meditation?" he asked solemnly.

I gave him his own complicated expression right back. "Uhm."

I finished off the eggs and popped the last piece of bacon into my mouth. "We've got a lot to do, but I want to see Nokita's little submarine first."

King just shook his head in defeat. He'd come around eventually. Once he allowed different ways of thinking to replace his natural stubbornness, he'd see what meditation could do for us.

An hour later, we rode the motorbikes to the shipyard. I'd only been there once before, and it was just as creepy now as it was then. The old ships were decrepit piles of rusted steel, looking like they belonged at the bottom of the ocean instead of secured to the endless stretch of brown docks.

The towering ships bobbed slowly in the nearly black water, making eerie creaking sounds that only added to the place's unsettling atmosphere.

The first time I'd come here, I'd made the mistake of asking Nokita why the ocean water around the ships was so dark. His explanation had made the shipyard feel even creepier.

"The black water is death," he'd said matter-of-factly. "When animals, humans, and plants die in the water, their nutrients are absorbed, and they sink to the bottom. The water turns black because death lingers, and so far, the ocean's lost the battle to return itself to blue."

The memory sent a small shiver down my spine as I stared at the inky waves, the sound of creaking steel echoing around us.

I rubbed my arms as we walked the long deck between gargantuan ghost ships, searching for Nokita. “Over here!” he yelled after what felt like a mile of walking, though that might’ve been an exaggeration. We finally located him, or more accurately, he located us. He was in a mid-sized enclosed bay, working on what had to be the smaller sub.

He stuck his head out of the glass dome, grinning. “She’s almost ready.”

I peered at the dented hunk of metal that had clearly seen better days, then glanced uneasily at the black water surrounding it. “How close?”

“Give me ten minutes, and we’ll take her for a spin,” he said cheerfully.

Not happening.

Ten minutes later, I was sitting inside what Nokita had lovingly referred to as a “death bubble.” He’d explained it could descend a thousand feet before reaching its collapse depth, which would crush the entire sub and us along with it. Wasn’t it me who said this wasn’t happening?

After spending years in a small cubicle, I’d discovered I didn’t like tight spaces, especially not when they were surrounded by black water that screamed death.

“You okay, baby?” King whispered.

“Swell, baby,” I replied, not taking my eyes off the dark nothingness in front of us. I had the distinct feeling that if the water cleared, I’d be able to say, I see dead people. Worse, I’d probably see half-eaten dead people who had been decaying beneath the

water for years.

“Queen,” King said, his tone teasing.

I shot him a sharp side-eye. He knew that word irritated me.

His lips quirked, and I realized he was trying to distract me from my very real terror of being inside the bubble of death. Like that was going to work.

“Ready to launch?” Nokita asked, his chipper tone grating against my nerves as he flipped several switches on the control panel.

When he worked on planes, he was a pilot. On a sub, he was the skipper, or whatever the hell they were called. Nokita spoke with the vernacular of a man who lived and breathed engines, completely at ease with anything mechanical.

King had once told me Nokita started fixing tractor engines for his neighbors when he was a kid because he hated working the farm fields with his father. By the age of sixteen, he’d already built a thriving farm mechanical business.

And now, here I was, putting my life in the hands of that same boy-grown-man, sitting in his tin-can submersible surrounded by death water. Fantastic.

“Have you ever manned one of these things?” The second the words left my mouth, I regretted them.

Nokita turned in his seat, reading the fear in my eyes. “Never,” he said, glee dripping from his voice. He didn’t even try to hide it.

They set me up, he and King both. Here I was, finally stepping into the leadership role, and now they were taking me out into the blackest depths of death water to do

away with me. I'd become part of the muck below, and no one would even remember who I was. Even Ruth would say, "Marinah who?"

The near-silent hum of the engine caught my attention, and I was surprised by how quietly it ran. All I could hear was the soft whir of small paddles spinning through the murk beneath us. Nokita expertly guided the sub clear of the bay, backing up farther before moving forward.

"Once we're out of the yard, this baby can travel up to four knots," he announced proudly.

Yippy. I could probably tie four knots in my boot faster than this thing could move, and that was if I knew how fast a knot was.

If I'd thought the water looked bad from above, I was wrong. This was far worse and well beyond creepy.

The sub's light made it worse still. Moss hung from steel cables attached to the ships, rising from the water in slimy ropes that made my stomach churn. The rusted metal hulls of the ships loomed around us, jagged and decaying, and I couldn't help but wonder how they hadn't already sprung leaks and sunk to the ocean floor.

Nokita maneuvered us farther down, turning the sub's front lights a bit brighter. The enhanced glow illuminated the ocean floor. A military boot jutted out of the silt, an eerie marker in the graveyard of nothingness. Here and there, I caught glimpses of a pot, a rifle, and then...

It took a moment to make sense of the next discovery. Skulls.

They rested in the silt at odd angles, their hollow eye sockets staring back at me. My stomach clenched as I realized what I was looking at.

When King had arrived on the island, the population was nearly decimated, with the survivors forced into hiding. The Cubans had fought the hellhounds long after their government ceased to function. The people who remained were a ragtag group, struggling to find enough food and medical supplies to stay alive.

Don't get me wrong. Those who survived did so because of their strength and tenacity. But now, staring at the evidence of their valiant fight, the haunting remnants of their battle, it sent a chill through me that I couldn't shake.

Nokita adjusted course, navigating us into open water. As the shipyard faded behind us, he filled the silence with an animated monologue about Baby Boot's latest antics. His chatter, oddly comforting, helped distract me from the reality that we were submerged, entirely dependent on tanked oxygen and a thin metal hull.

Then, mid-sentence, Nokita stopped talking. The sub's interior went deathly quiet. For a few seconds, none of us even breathed. What lay before us took every ounce of our mental processing power to comprehend.

"Those aren't what I think they are, are they?" Nokita's voice cracked, his usual calm replaced with something an octave higher.

As far as the sub's lights reached, hellhounds floated eerily, suspended by weights roughly ten feet above the ocean floor. They writhed, claws swiping and fangs snapping, their grotesque movements forming a macabre dance of death.

"There are thousands," King growled, his voice holding restrained horror in the cramped space.

A cold dread sank into my bones, rooting me in place. Even the hair on the back of my neck was trying to retreat. "We need to go back to shore. Now."

King ignored me. “Do you see the red blinking lights on their collars? Take us closer.”

Nokita’s hand hovered over the steering lever, and he glanced at me.

“Don’t take us closer,” I blurted. My rational mind knew the fear was illogical, the hellhounds couldn’t touch us, the sub wasn’t going to spring a leak, and my boots weren’t about to get soaked. But none of that mattered.

King turned, his lips curving into that faint smirk of his, his eyes glinting with amusement. “Scared, baby?”

“I hate you,” I snapped, shutting my eyes tight. In my mind, I took Bertha apart piece by piece, focusing on the familiar motions to calm myself. After a long exhale, I opened my eyes and muttered, “Take us closer.”

The sub glided forward, dipping lower into the abyss. The water pressed against the hull with a muffled groan, as if the ocean itself resented our intrusion. Hellhounds thrashed as we passed, their grotesque limbs flailing, distorted by the murky depths. A claw scraped against one of the air tanks, emitting a screech that reverberated through the vessel, like nails on a chalkboard amplified in a cavern. I winced, every nerve in my body taut, the sound lingering like a phantom whisper.

Nokita maneuvered us farther down, the sub's lights flickering as shadows danced across the control panels. The red blinking lights affixed to the hellhounds' throats became clearer, casting eerie glows that pulsed in sync with the metallic devices embedded in a small box on each collar. Each pulse seemed to echo a heartbeat, not ours, but something alien and malevolent.

A sudden jolt rocked the sub as another claw struck the hull, the impact resonating like a death knell. I held my breath, the air thick with the stench of brine and fear, as

the hellhounds' eyes glowed with a hunger that transcended the physical.

“They’re going to release the hellhounds electronically,” I said, my voice edged with fury. Rage boiled within me, and K-5 surged through my veins. I inhaled sharply, struggling to hold Ms. Beast back as her anger slammed into me like a sledgehammer. My chest tightened, and I couldn’t catch my breath.

“Marinah.” King’s voice floated into my consciousness, his warm hand skimming over the hot flesh of my arm. I swatted him away, irritated and unable to focus. Ms. Beast growled deep inside me, pacing the confines of her intangible cage. Behind her, the shadow pulsed, the vibration inside me growing louder until it spoke a single word.

Protect.

“Marinah.” King’s voice cut through the haze, louder this time. My eyes snapped open, and the fog began to clear. Blinking a few times, my surroundings stabilized. I realized I was leaning against the cold inner wall of the mini sub, King’s hand wrapped tightly around mine. If there had been room, I would likely have been in his lap.

“What happened?” I asked, my voice groggy as the last remnants of the fog lifted.

“Your K-5 spiked, and you nearly shifted,” King murmured, his gaze fixed on me. “Then you passed out.”

“I’m fine,” I said quickly, though my voice lacked conviction. “Beast was trying to tell me something.” My mind flickered to the precarious situation we were in. If I had shifted, the bubble would have shattered, and the ocean would have rushed in. That was not a death I was ready to face.

“You blacked out and slumped to the side. That’s not fine,” King said, his tone harsh as he turned to Nokita. “Get us back to shore.”

I didn’t bother pulling rank or playing the queen card. When King went into full protective mode, he was immovable. Instead, I focused on what had happened. “Something upset Ms. Beast,” I admitted, my voice softer now. “I’m worried it’s Nova.”

King’s concerned eyes locked onto mine.

I grimaced, trying to ease the tension. “Maybe I have multiple personality disorder,” I joked weakly, though it didn’t land as intended.

King’s expression didn’t change, and his hand remained firmly locked with mine as if to anchor me.

“Nokita. After you drop me and King back on shore, I need you to locate any other waterlogged hellhounds. Use whatever means you have.”

“Yes, alpha,” he said.

I heard the same horror in his voice that King and I felt. Part of it was the underwater nightmare we had just witnessed, and part was because I passed out. Nothing about this was good.

King

We left Marinah's motorbike at the shipyard. She rode behind me, her arms loosely wrapped around my waist while I kept one arm secured around her arm to hold her steady, the other steering the motorcycle. Her skin was still pale after the strange episode on the sub, though she appeared steadier now. I couldn't shake the worry that she might pass out again, and I'd be too slow to catch her. I should've called Beck to pick us up.

By the time we reached the citadel, she declared she was fine, the universal code for "leave me alone." Ignoring my concern, she stomped toward our room. When I tried to insist she take a shower, her response was a low growl. I growled back, picked her up, and deposited her inside the tub.

"You can turn the water on, or I will," I said, my jaw set stubbornly. "Ice-cold might improve your mood." Shadow Warriors hated the cold.

"You wouldn't dare," she snapped, reaching for the nozzles. "Tell our guard we're meeting in thirty minutes," she added sharply.

"Your guard," I corrected, matching her tone.

Her brown eyes darkened slightly. "You're pushing your luck, mate, and you know it. They're our guard," she said, standing her ground.

"Keep dreaming," I replied, leaving the room. I closed the door softly, fully aware that she would have slammed it if our roles were reversed. Sometimes satisfaction

came from quiet victories.

Informing her guard was as easy as finding Beck and telling him to take care of it. My real target was Axel. I found him in his quarters, sitting at his desk with a book in hand. I stomped in without knocking, earning a glance from him as he leaned back in his chair, rubbing his eyes.

His private room was one door down from the medical bays, keeping him close to his work. Axel took his role as our doctor seriously. Over time, he had expanded his domain into a fully functional hospital, complete with a maternity ward to serve the women on this side of the island. He was setting up another near our home. Maylin, Nokita's mate, handled much of the nurse outreach, while Garret, Axel's significant other, assisted with everything from surgeries to baby deliveries.

Axel sighed and fixed me with a weary look. "I take it this isn't a friendly visit."

"Marinah called a meeting in twenty-five minutes, main conference room," I said without pausing for breath. "She passed out, or had a seizure, a hallucination, something."

Axel rubbed the bridge of his nose, his expression showing a glimmer of concern. "Was she attacked, injured, or maybe just hungry?"

I started pacing, the tension clawing at my insides. "No. K-5 spiked, and she slumped over. She was out for maybe a minute or two. The spike was stronger than anything my Beast has ever thrown at me. Nokita and I almost shifted."

"Had she eaten recently? Her transition to Nova requires a lot of energy."

"Two pounds of bacon, a dozen eggs, and half a loaf of bread," I replied, listing off her morning meal.

Axel's eyebrows shot up. That amount of food would have been excessive for anyone else, even a Warrior.

"Has she shifted to Nova in the last few days?" he asked.

"Yesterday. She did it without going into Beast form first. She had more control, and she spoke in full, understandable sentences."

"Take a seat," Axel said, pointing to a chair in the corner. His tone left no room for argument. Once I was seated, he turned to face me. "We know almost nothing about Nova Warriors. What little we do know, we've learned from Marinah."

Which wasn't much. "Our histories mention them," I said defensively.

"They mention them," Axel corrected, "but they don't explain them. Why do so few Warriors ever shift to Nova? Were they meant to rule us, or were they meant to protect our rulers? What separates a Nova from a Shadow Warrior? Yes, they're more powerful, but there were always so few. They were the monster's monster. And we know next to nothing about them."

"They were feared and worshipped on the home planet," I countered.

Axel stared at the wall for a long moment before turning his attention back to me. "I've read the texts too. Novas were incredibly dangerous. Once a Warrior went Nova, they were never fully trusted, even when they became leaders. They had one purpose, and that was war. Marinah seems to have a handle on her Nova, but does she actually control her?"

"You think her Nova is the one in control, even in Beast form?"

"I think we don't know enough," Axel replied. "She needs to be watched closely."

“She thinks her Beast is trying to tell her something,” I added.

“Interesting.” Axel rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “After we deal with the Federation, I’ll have her come in for blood tests. It wouldn’t hurt to check her chemical makeup in both Beast and Nova forms. There’s always a chance we’ll discover what separates her from the rest of us and why most Warriors can’t attain Nova status. The focus on the home planet was always war and they didn’t value science. The answers we need may be inside her.”

I left Axel’s room with more questions buzzing in my head than answers and reminded him not to be late for the meeting. When I entered our quarters, I found Marinah curled on the bed, naked, twisting one of her braids between her fingers, and staring blankly at the ceiling.

“Anything you want to share?” I asked, lying down beside her to stare up at the same unimpressive ceiling.

“The female Warriors didn’t think much of their male counterparts,” she said distractedly, gesturing toward the journal on her nightstand.

“I’m pretty sure the men figured that out when the women left them shortly after arriving on earth.”

“Hmm.” Her noncommittal response grated on my nerves.

I reached over, took hold of one of her braids, and gave it a small tug to make her look at me. “I’m worried about you.”

Her face scrunched up in mild confusion. “Me?”

“You passed out.”

“Ms. Beast and Nova were trying to tell me something,” she said, brushing off my concern. “I’ll have a long meditation session and figure it out.”

When she continued to stare at the ceiling, I tugged her braid a little harder. “Yes?” she asked, her tone laced with just a hint of irritation.

“The meeting?”

“Yes, I know,” she said, rolling her eyes in exaggerated exasperation. “I need to save the world,” she added dramatically, sliding off the bed and getting dressed with distracted movements. Without a word, she walked out the door.

Mate , my Beast whispered.

Contrary mate, I whispered back, dragging myself off the bed to follow my queen.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:35 pm

Marinah

After five minutes of meditation, I took a steady breath and opened my eyes. “Now that our heads are clear, do we have word on the Federation’s location?”

Beck’s eyes snapped open impatiently, and the sharp tone of his voice made it clear the meditation hadn’t worked its magic on him. I made a mental note to schedule a few private sessions with him later. “Landan reported about an hour ago that one of his scouting planes spotted Federation ships approximately eight hours away, somewhere between Key West and us. At most, we’ve got eight hours to prepare.”

Weariness tugged at me, and I stifled a yawn. “The timing makes sense,” I said, launching into the explanation about the hellhounds chained offshore. As I spoke, horror spread across the men’s faces. Even Nokita, who’d had time to process what we’d seen, looked visibly shaken. “This battle is two-fold,” I continued. “They’ll release the hellhounds first to disrupt our Warriors and kill as many of us as possible, then send in troops to finish the job. If we can interrupt the signal that releases the hellhounds, we’ll gain valuable time.”

“How did they get that many hounds into position?” Beck asked.

“My guess is they worked with Knet, and it’s been a slow process. They’ve likely been working on it for months.”

Beck shook his head slowly, and his eyes burned with hatred for Knet the traitor.

Axel cleared his throat. “It might be safer for the humans to leave the island and join

the outposts,” he suggested cautiously.

I leveled my Nova death stare at him, and Ms. Beast added another cycle of K-5 for good measure. Satisfaction coursed through me when he flinched. “They are safer here,” I said, my tone final.

They wouldn’t leave.” The women of the island had taught me that. They were terrified of the hellhounds and the Federation, but this was their home, and they were willing to fight for it with their men and the help of our Warriors. I shifted my attention to Nokita. “We need a way to jam the signal so they can’t release the hellhounds. I needed it yesterday.”

His eyes went slightly blank as he considered the challenge. After a moment, he nodded. “I’ll get it to you as soon as possible.”

“You have two hours. Go.”

Nokita left, and all eyes returned to me. I turned my focus to Labyrinth. “How many working whistles do we have?”

“Two hundred and fifty,” Labyrinth reported. “The damaged whistles couldn’t be salvaged and were destroyed per your orders. We’ve checked all the whistles distributed to the islanders, and they’re good to go.”

“Distribute the remaining whistles to anyone who doesn’t have one going as young as eight years old,” I ordered. “If Nokita doesn’t come through with the jammer, I want the humans protected from the hounds. Their parents can give them brief instructions.” My fingers drummed on the conference table as I thought. “Can we bomb the Federation ships before they enter our waters?”

“Yes,” Labyrinth said confidently.

I shifted my gaze to Cabel, who blinked, waiting for what was coming. “I’ve got a job for you. You’re not going to like it, but it’s critical.” He tilted his head slightly, a sign he was bracing himself. “We can’t wait to see if Nokita delivers the jammer; your team will eliminate as many hellhounds in the ocean as possible.”

His expression didn’t change. “We’ll take their heads,” he said matter-of-factly.

“There are thousands chained underwater, by King’s estimate,” I explained.

Cabel’s eyes met mine, his lips quirking into a small, almost feral smile. “We’ll take their heads,” he repeated, with the kind of enthusiasm only he could muster. Ms. Beast grumbled at the prolonged eye contact, and he averted his gaze.

“I also need a full map of where the hellhounds are located and their reach along the coast,” I added. “Get me numbers and precise locations. Take a hundred men. Report back once you have what I’ve asked for.”

Turning to Alden, I gave him his assignment. “The tanks and artillery are yours. Position them strategically around the citadel. Tow in the non-operational ones and make them look functional. They won’t know they’re useless, and it’ll make us appear stronger. Knet was never privy to our full battle plans outside of the hellhounds. If we can discredit him, the Federation will doubt the rest of what he’s told them.”

Beck’s low growl broke the moment. “If Knet comes with the Federation troops, he’s mine.”

“You command all the fun,” Alden said with a grin. “Does that mean if I get to him first, I have to save him for you or can I at least break a few bones?”

I looked between the two men. “I want him alive, but if he’s only barely alive, I can

live with that.”

“Done,” Alden said, his grin suggesting he’d enjoy the task more than he probably should. After the dust settled over our original disagreement months ago, I’d come to value his judgment. I couldn’t say the same for Beck, who seemed to make it his life’s mission to get on my nerves. Too bad I liked Missy and Ruth so much; otherwise, Beck might have mysteriously disappeared by now. The thought of swinging him around by his legs and listening to him scream brought me a sliver of satisfaction.

I met each man’s eyes. “We need a plan B.”

“Why?” Beck asked, because, of course, that’s what Beck does.

K-5 stirred inside me; a restless, pulsing energy that made me want to shut him up permanently regardless of his family. I wasn’t King. I didn’t have the patience for Beck’s constant questioning, and it was something I’d be addressing soon. If ripping out his throat wouldn’t work, I’d settle for something more subtle, like dislocating a few joints.

I took a deep breath, forcing the K-5 energy back down, and replied in the calmest voice I could muster. Bonus points for not speaking to him like a two-year-old. “Because if we can’t stop the release of the hellhounds or manage to cripple the Federation ships before they arrive, we need a backup plan.”

Beck knew this, of course. He drilled me in warfare constantly, enjoying every moment of making me feel inadequate. This stuff came naturally to him and King. They were born for war. Me? I’d been learning on the fly. One day, Beck had caught me reading *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu, and I’d had to endure an hour-long lecture about why it was overrated and how *Vom Kriege* (On War) by Clausewitz was the definitive text on warfare. Sheesh. I was pretty sure my eyes had glazed over five

minutes in, but that hadn't stopped him from continuing.

While I fumed silently, I noticed something odd. The men were unusually quiet, exchanging glances and then lowering their eyes, as if they knew something I didn't.

"What?" I finally snapped, irritation sharpening the word.

My mate stepped in before I lost my grip and started tearing limbs off. "You, Marinah," King said, his voice laced with a trace of humor. "You're the backup plan."

Someone strangle me, please. My patience was hanging by a thread, and I was about to snap when a soft shuffle at the door pulled my attention. I shot to my feet, crossed the room in three strides, and yanked the door open.

Two children tumbled inside. Che looked guilty, his wide eyes darting everywhere except at me, while Ruth wore an irritated expression that practically screamed, How dare you catch me?

I grabbed Che by the back of his shirt, lifting him off the ground until his face was level with mine. His big, pleading eyes stared back at me as he dangled in my grasp.

"Look at what strong muscles she has," Ruth said, her voice dripping with mock admiration. She leaned casually against the doorframe, a smug smirk curling her lips. Her defiance was as maddening as ever, and it tested every ounce of restraint I had left.

She was great during training, and she hadn't gone out hunting hellhounds by herself or with Che once, but she still defied me. Even with the added rules I set in place, I'd forgotten to mention the conference room and that she couldn't be within twenty yards of it. I needed to keep notes and that was on me. I took a slow, even breath.

“I’m sure your mother has no idea you’re here,” I said to Che, deliberately ignoring Ruth and her provocations.

“Umm, no,” he admitted in a small voice, his gaze darting away nervously. “But we want to help you kill hellhounds.” His hopeful tone carried the weight of a child’s earnestness, and his eyes silently begged me to understand.

I lifted him to the chair I’d been sitting in and dropped him into it without a hint of gentleness. His bottom hit the seat with a soft thud, and his wide eyes somehow managed to get even bigger. Turning to Ruth, I fixed her with my most withering glare.

Unfazed, she stomped over to Nokita’s vacated chair, plopped herself down, and crossed her arms defiantly. The sheer audacity of her actions radiated from her like a challenge, and I couldn’t help but marvel at how much she reminded me of a Shadow Warrior. If there were any way to turn this tiny girl-woman into one, we’d never worry about an attack again. Ruth would conquer the entire world before lunch.

But as much as I admired her spirit, I couldn’t allow her and Che to run wild. If they got themselves killed, I’d be left explaining the situation to their enraged parents. My heart would also be broken.

I looked at Beck, and his gaze slid from mine. He was no help at all.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I inhaled deeply, forcing myself to find the balance between stern and non-murderous. They were just kids, I reminded myself. Exceptionally irritating kids, but kids, nonetheless.

I paced back and forth in front of them, giving them plenty of time to squirm. Ruth opened her mouth, but I held up a hand, cutting her off before she spoke. The men stood by silently, watching me with what could only be described as wary curiosity.

If I was being honest, they were terrified of Ruth. Despite being human, she acted like a Shadow Warrior through and through. Combine that with her small stature and young age, and I couldn't blame their terror.

I took a deep breath, trying to settle my own nerves, and wished I had time for a quick meditation. Then an idea popped into my head, and I stopped pacing, turning to face the kids with a firm, no-nonsense stare.

"I'm assigning you to our most strategic job," I announced, making sure my tone carried the weight of the responsibility I was about to give them. Ruth and Che's eyes widened, anticipation practically radiating off them. "You might not like the fact that you're human, but you are, and that means you will not be fighting hellhounds under any circumstances. Instead, you're in charge of weapons."

Their jaws practically dropped. Then I saw the excitement growing behind their initial surprise. Good. I had them exactly where I wanted them.

"You'll be stationed in the armory," I continued. "Your first job is to take an inventory of everything we have. After everyone is armed, I want an exact count of what's left. This is one of the most critical responsibilities in the battle. Should I ask your mothers to help you?" I added the last part with a perfectly innocent tone that I knew would hit exactly the right nerve.

"No, ma'am," Ruth snapped, sitting up straighter.

Che nodded emphatically. "We'll be the best armory strategists you've ever seen, Marinah." His use of the word "strategists" caught my attention. I wasn't even surprised at this point. Ruth had clearly been teaching him from the war books she'd been sneaking from my collection.

"I'm counting on it," I replied, nodding at them both. "I trust you to put safety first

when dealing with the weapons. You can each choose yours before the men take theirs. When you're in charge of the armory, you need to be heavily armed with the best we have." I'd taken them both shooting and knew they understood gun and sword safety. I also knew it was drilled in by their parents too.

I watched their expressions shift from excitement to determination. But I wasn't done.

"You have a lot of work ahead of you," I said in the most serious tone I could manage. "And to do it well, you need to be rested. If you don't sleep, your mothers are going to be on me about it," I added with a pointed look. "Head to the armory now and get started. Tonight, I expect you to eat every bite of your dinner and be in bed early. Only a well-rested soldier is ready for battle."

Ruth and Che nodded so solemnly that I had to suppress a smirk. As they scrambled out of the room, I finally exhaled. It wasn't a perfect solution, but it would keep them out of trouble for now.

The kids darted off the moment I handed them the key to the armory. The sound of their shoes echoed pit-a-pat on the tile, gradually fading into the distance. When silence returned, the Shadow Warriors shifted their attention back to me, their eyes expectant.

Naturally, it was Beck who spoke first. "Didn't you assign the weapons inventory job to Kamin last week after he was late for training?"

"I did," I replied evenly.

"And now you need it done again?" His tone rose slightly, edged with skepticism.

I shook my head. "No, I need those two out of our hair and somewhere safe. If they

don't have direction, they'll be underfoot, and we'll end up leaping over them while trying to kill hellhounds."

"Do you even know what weapons are in that room?" he asked, his voice bordering on exasperation. He broke eye contact when Ms. Beast stirred, releasing just a touch of K-5 as a warning.

I let the silence stretch for a beat before answering. "Did you know they robbed the armory months ago and stashed their favorite weapons?" I didn't wait for his response. "This way, they'll head to their little stockpile first, keep themselves entertained, and not mess up the weapons count Kamin gave me. Plus, they'll include their stashed weapons on the new list." I gave him a moment to absorb what I said. "There's also a small room off the weapon's room they can be locked into if needed."

Beck's irritation melted into an expression of grudging approval, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Can Missy and I come over and take lessons from you?" he asked.

King

We were back in our room. Marinah commanded the men like she was born to lead, and her handling of Che and Ruth was pure brilliance. The kids had finally met their match, and truth be told, so had the rest of us.

Her plan for the island wasn't the one I would've chosen, but it was solid. She had a natural gift for strategizing when she didn't overthink it. She didn't root everything solely in military texts; she was intuitive, grounded, and unpredictable all at once. The Federation wouldn't know whether they were coming or going.

I'd waited until now to explain my role in her plans, and predictably, she wasn't thrilled. "I'm part of your guard for a reason," I told her firmly. "Beck babysat me, and now I'll be babysitting you through this fight."

Her response was a very unladylike snort. I glared. "You'll be where the action is, so don't worry about me getting bored."

She sighed and gave in, albeit ungracefully. "You enjoy this entirely too much," she said.

I flicked one of her braids. "It's called war, baby."

Her grin stretched into something mischievous, her eyes gleaming with that telltale spark of challenge. "You only call me 'baby' when you're trying to push my buttons."

I placed a hand over my heart, feigning innocence. “Caught me. Now eat your dinner so we can get to work, and you can save the world.”

She stared at the plate in front of her, frowning. “I’m too nervous to eat.”

“Eat,” I ordered, my tone leaving no room for argument. Her Beast didn’t like it, and the flash of K-5 in her gaze proved it. Marinah grunted in irritation, but I stood my ground, crossing my arms and planting my feet.

“Fine, I’ll eat,” she whined, picking up her fork.

My Beast stirred with satisfaction at the small victory. Once she started, she didn’t slow down, even when there was a knock at the door.

I opened it to find Nokita. Marinah barely glanced up from her plate. “Report,” she said through a mouthful of food.

To my surprise, Nokita snapped to attention. Marinah gave me a quick side-eye, clearly caught off guard by the formality. Nokita had always been comfortable around her. This shift was unexpected. It was a display of respect, acknowledgment of the stakes we were facing.

“I can jam the frequency to stop the release of hellhounds in a small area only,” he began, “I can only reach a hundred yards in all directions. It’ll stop some hellhounds, but not nearly enough.”

“Can you make more than one jammer?” Marinah asked, shoveling another bite into her mouth.

“We don’t have the parts I need on the island,” Nokita replied, shaking his head. “I could probably scavenge on the mainland, but we don’t have time. Cabel also asked

me to inform you that most of the underwater hellhounds start about ten miles out from the citadel and stretch almost to the shipyard's doorstep. The key piece of info he wanted to emphasize is that there are no hellhounds near Warrior Bay."

Warrior Bay, a mile from the citadel, was named after we took over the island. I felt a small flicker of relief at the news. At least the Federation wasn't attacking the entire island. Still, there was no denying it now: Knet was working with them. He knew we'd use the tunnels at the first sign of trouble to bring the humans to the citadel. Destroying the citadel was their main goal.

Marinah leaned back in her chair, staring at the ceiling as she thought. "I want our human archers stationed at the shipyard first," she finally said. "They'll use the explosive rounds to fire at hounds leaving the water. I want them to pull back once the remaining hellhounds get too close to shore. Have transports ready to move them to strategic locations as needed. Once they've done as much damage as possible, we'll bring them back to the citadel. If it comes to a final stand, they'll post up in the upper windows or on the roof."

Missy, Beck's mate, had started the archery group when she arrived on the island. What began as a small team had grown into over two hundred men and women, all highly proficient with their weapons now. They'd learned to shoot the throats of the hounds with explosive rounds and remove their heads. Missy wasn't the type of human to sit on the sidelines. If any mother deserved a daughter like Ruth, it was her.

Without a cure for hellhound bites or scratches, humans couldn't risk close combat. The longbows gave them the advantage of distance. For months, Missy's group had been making and stockpiling arrows, training relentlessly to improve their accuracy. Their precision had become so reliable that the Shadow Warriors could wade into a horde of hellhounds with confidence, knowing they'd have long-distance support taking down monsters too.

Marinah drummed her fingers on the table, deep in thought. “Is there any way we could make our own receivers to unlock the hellhounds?”

“We don’t need to,” Nokita replied. “I’ve been studying one of their devices. I can use one of ours, readjust the frequency, and, in theory, use a radio as a trigger to release the hounds. It’ll all come down to timing.”

Marinah nodded and leaned forward. “Have Cabel move as many of the Federation hellhounds as possible to the bay. The lack of hounds near the citadel tells us exactly where the Federation plans to strike. We’ll have an undead army of surprises waiting for them when they arrive.”

“You want the frequency interrupter set up at the docks?” Nokita asked.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “The docks aren’t as populated as the area closer to the citadel. Find a location somewhere in the middle, a place that will disrupt the signal for as many hellhounds as possible. They will use their controllers and depend on them to work. I doubt they will try again. The fewer hounds that come to shore in the outer areas, the fewer we will need to clean up after the battle.”

“I have the perfect spot,” Nokita assured her.

“Any progress with the larger sub?” Marinah asked.

Nokita tilted his head slightly, his gaze drifting past us. “There won’t be time. We’re stuck with the small one for now. That said, there are water mines in one of the military stockades. I won’t have the chance to set them up before the attack, but when this is over, I’ll make sure their sub never gets near the island again. I can also rig an underwater perimeter fence to alert us the next time they try something.” He brightened slightly. “The good news is the gatling gun is operational, thanks to one of the islanders.”

Marinah considered this for a moment before giving her orders. “The Federation doesn’t know we’re onto them, so we might not need it, but post two Shadow Warriors along the shore road near the shipyard with the gun. If we’re wrong about where the Federation attacks, the extra firepower will stop a good number of soldiers.”

She paused, and her gaze stayed on Nokita. “Also, give one of your men a crash course in operating the small sub in case it’s needed. Then speak with Cabel. He’s in charge of taking out hellhounds underwater. Make sure he works away from where you’re using the jammer and away from the docks so the archers can warm up.”

Nokita gave a sharp nod.

Each member of our guard commanded two hundred troops. Nokita’s Warriors were often mechanically inclined, fitting perfectly into his area of expertise. He also included humans in his unit. Cuba, frozen in the 1950s for generations, was full of men, and surprisingly a number of women, who knew how to keep old vehicles running. Their knowledge was invaluable in the new world. We’d take all the help we could get.

Nokita shifted into a relaxed parade rest, a slight quirk lifting the corner of his lips. “I’d also like to report the dissemination of weapons has gone smoothly.”

“Of course it has. I put Attila the Hun and her sidekick general in charge.”

“Yes, my Alpha,” Nokita replied with a slight bow of his head and a small grin before leaving the room.

I had watched the entire exchange, transfixed. This was Marinah in her element. “Why did you put the archers on the docks?” I asked after the door closed.

She smiled and shrugged. “The humans are like Ruth and Che. They don’t want to depend entirely on us for their safety. It’s why they started the archery group. They need to feel like they’re part of the fight. We need hellhounds eliminated, and they are more than capable.”

“Someone told you this?”

She rolled her eyes, clearly irritated. “The women had no problem telling me how they felt. And notice the past tense. They haven’t said a word to me since my Nova fit.”

“Nova fit?” I couldn’t help but smile.

“Nova tantrum?” she muttered under her breath.

“How about Nova Queen who saved their lives and those of our Warriors?” I said, hoping she understood.

“Tantrum and fit sound less threatening,” she grumbled, but I caught the faintest twitch of amusement on her lips.

Her expression had me moving before I even thought about it. I rose from the chair and stepped into her space. She placed her fork down beside her plate, turned slightly, and rested her head against my stomach. Her slow, steady inhale told me she was wrestling with the part of herself that doubted her ability to lead. I slid my fingers over her soft braids, my touch lingering as I noticed a small twig tangled in her hair. I wisely chose not to mention it.

“Your Nova is pure beauty,” I said. “She’s made for war, and you need to embrace her. She will save this island if it’s asked of her.”

“You’re so sure,” she murmured against my skin, then tilted her head back to look up at me. “But what if she’s made for peace?”

The question caught me off guard, and I didn’t have an immediate answer. Our Beasts were created for war, and a Nova was the most fearsome of all. “Why do you ask?” I finally said, uncertain of her reasoning.

“It’s something I read in my grandmother’s journal,” she said quietly. “You need to hear it.”

I walked to her bedside, picked up the journal resting there, and carried it to the table. She flipped through its pages and began reading aloud.

War is the world of Shadow Warriors. For Shadow Women, this is unacceptable. We are mothers, nurturers, providers. That which is war will never touch our door again. I, as Nova Warrior, have suppressed that which weakened me. My Nova will stand guard as we walk a path of harmony. She is at peace with my decision.

“Who wrote it?” I asked as she gently closed the book and looked at me.

“My grandmother,” she replied. “Most of the words written are her writing what her grandmother told her, but this came directly from her.”

It made sense. Of course, the woman warriors had been Nova. Not all Novas stayed on the home planet as our histories claimed. The lack of records about female Novas now seemed deliberate, as if the women had kept their own secrets.

“My grandmother and her grandmother were Nova,” Marinah said, her gaze drifting thoughtfully around the room. “And they turned it into a gift of peace.” Her voice softened; the realization pressing down on her. “Endura told me my grandmother was revered by the women. Do you think Endura knew I was Nova?”

“I’m unsure,” I replied. “Have you read the entire journal?”

“No, only the first two sections,” Marinah said. “I’m translating as I go, and it’s slowing me down.”

She laughed at the look on my face. My uncle had made me study our texts until I thought my brain would explode, but thankfully, I never had to translate them.

“Have you learned anything else?” I asked.

A sad smile crossed her face as she shook her head. “I’m trying to understand why the women won’t fight with us.”

I doubted we’d ever understand. The idea of running or standing idly by during a fight wasn’t in our nature. Standing from my chair, I lifted her into my arms. “It’s their choice,” I said as I inhaled her scent.

“I was too terrified to live before my Warrior came out,” she said softly against me. “They’re willing to simply die. It angers me, but more than that, it saddens me. There must be a way to fix what happened so long ago. No one is alive from that time, and we must find a way to meet in the middle.”

I had my doubts. The women had another mindset, and they separated from us long ago. They were no longer part of the Shadow Warrior world. They would keep their peaceful ways in a non-peaceful world, dying with their moral integrity intact. The person Marinah had been before she changed still bothered her. She saw herself in these women. If she would have been raised among them, she would most likely be one of them in thought and action. That she had been weak and too terrified to live, haunted her. It would also drag her down if she didn’t shake off her old mantle and realize she was no longer that person. She wasn’t a Shadow Woman. She was Warrior.

“You forget, as human, you gave your life for Che’s. It was the ultimate test, and even as a human, you passed. Your father sheltered you, and as much as I admired the man, he did you an injustice.”

“My mother and father knew what I was,” she said, steel entering the words. “They tried to make sure I never shifted or understood. I can’t shake the past and I carry a lot of anger over what they did.”

I inhaled deeply, her scent calming my beast while I rocked her gently in my arms to comfort us both. “They could never have kept your Warrior hidden. Sooner or later, you would have ignited into the incredible person you are now.”

“The women, my closest ties to the past, will die if I cannot help them.” The sorrow in her voice nearly broke me.

It wasn’t in her nature to simply let them die. If anyone could save the world, it was my queen, but even so, I had to tell her the truth. “It’s their decision. We’re Shadow Warriors, but we still have choices.” I hesitated for a moment. “You know there must be a safe place in this fucked-up world. We could simply walk away and go search for it.”

She lifted her head, her eyes blazing with the spark I needed to see. This was the Queen she was meant to be. “We will never walk away from this fight,” she said, her voice carrying the weight of the entire world in each word. “We will keep the island safe. If my grandmother’s people choose death, so be it.”

I tipped her chin up and lowered my head. Our kiss was brief, just enough to remind me why I loved her so deeply. Right now, we had an island to protect, and Marinah carried the heaviest weight of all.

Marinah

We were exhausted, and it didn't matter. King insisted we take the motorbikes out at midnight to tour the island to double-check our defenses. He was doing it to calm my nerves because I had been climbing the walls. He stayed seemingly calm, while his expression resembled granite. I wanted to punch him in the face.

Civilians were hunkered down at the citadel or in the surrounding buildings, filling every imaginable space. It was crowded, but the evacuation itself had gone like clockwork, which meant all our drills and prep work had paid off. Seeing the faces of the women and children as I passed through the endless halls had been hard. It reminded me of the fear and uncertainty I'd lived with after my father died under the Federation's rule. King had been right. I needed to settle my nerves with more than meditation.

We headed to the southern part of the island where the Federation's underwater hellhounds made their creepy dance. We took the highway curves at breakneck speed, and exhilaration filled me. Piloting a motorcycle had been another learning curve. After my first crash, where I'd sailed over the handlebars and landed in a heap ten feet away, I'd stopped worrying about injury. Instead, I learned to shift my body with the bike like it was a part of me, and now, I loved every second.

We passed Shadow Warriors stationed in strategic locations along the road, armed with weapons and radios to alert the towers if we read the Federation's signals wrong and they attacked from this direction. We were fairly certain their soldiers would come straight at the citadel, but we'd planned for every contingency we could think of.

When we reached the southernmost location, we turned the bikes around and headed back the way we came. We stopped where Cabel and his team were doing their gruesome job of beheading the underwater circus. For the strangest reason, it seemed wrong somehow. Maybe it was because they couldn't fight back, and I wasn't someone who could kill systematically. Or at least right now I couldn't. I changed more each day. Who knew what I may or may not do a year from now.

Cabel's unit had at least fifty watercraft, everything from smaller military boats to repurposed fishing vessels. We couldn't see far into the distance, but King radioed ahead, and Cabel soon steered his boat to shore.

"Do you need more men?" I asked him.

"We're good," he assured me. "We'll have this location cleared in an hour and move on," he replied confidently. "We send divers down, attach hooks to their chains, and drag them up so we can behead them from above. The Federation's been planting hellhounds for months, and we're only scratching the surface. I promise we'll make a dent in their plans." Death gleamed in his eyes.

We left Cabel to his work and headed back toward the citadel. On the way, King veered off the road, and I followed him to one of our favorite spots. He took my hand and led me to the edge of the cliff that overlooked the ocean. The waves splashed against the shore below, and the sounds of the night filled the air, wrapping around me.

I knew this spark of peace was a lie, but I took just a moment to simply be. The Federation was coming. They wanted us dead. They wished to annihilate us for the simple crime of being different. They wanted the human men and women of this island under their control or dead too.

"Waiting is the hard part," King murmured, breaking the quiet. He circled his arm

around me, pulling me close. I leaned my head against his shoulder, inhaling his familiar scent. Ms. Beast rumbled softly in approval, and King's Beast responded in kind. Sometimes, his Beast appeared like some type of aura, and our beast energy flowed seamlessly between us. It felt too steady, too calm, boring even. I felt most alive when King challenged me.

"What if only one of us survives?" I asked quietly, voicing the fear that gripped my heart. It was the one thing I didn't want to face, but it had to be said.

King smoothed his hand across my back, his touch calming me even before he answered. "The survivor will continue the fight," he said gruffly.

I looked up at him and held his gaze. "I can't lose you."

His mouth curved into a wicked smile, the scar across his cheek catching the moonlight and making him even more imperfectly wonderful. "You couldn't get rid of me if you tried."

"I won't try, then." Rising to the tips of my Doc Martens, I kissed him. His savage taste filled something raw and untamed inside me, coaxing out Ms. Beast's wild side. She purred in response, her primal satisfaction sending electrical pulses through me. The shadowed presence of Nova lingered, waiting just beneath the surface.

When we finally came up for air, I asked, "Do you ever think about what will happen when there's no one left to fight?"

He tilted his head down, his eyes locking onto mine. "I think there will always be war. It's the blight of mankind."

"Is that what you want?"

He reached out and tugged gently on one of my braids, his expression thoughtful. “You’re thinking about your grandmother’s journal. What’s this really about?”

His gaze held mine, and I wondered if he could ever truly understand how much I loved him. Probably not. “The white picket fence, a dog by the hearth, a baby crawling on the floor. Is that life even possible?”

His voice dropped an octave. “Is that what you want, Marinah?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper.

He kissed the tip of my nose. “I think you’d be bored within a week. Maybe we could compromise and find a big, furry devil dog to entertain your devil cat.” His thumb brushed across my cheek. “As for children, it’s expected of us. And when we have them, they’ll be alpha Warriors.”

I shifted slightly in his arms, loosening his hold without pulling away. “What if they want to be ordinary?”

He threw his head back and barked out a carefree laugh. “There will be nothing ordinary about our children,” he said when he could breathe again. “Our girls will be headstrong, beautiful bullies who tease their male counterparts and put frogs in their beds. The boys will be as handsome as their father and won’t know what hit them when the girls are around. Much like your men, they’ll constantly be searching for places to hide.”

“Our men,” I corrected, arching a brow. “And just how many children do you think we’re having?” I asked, trying to keep the laughter from my voice.

“A citadel full, at least,” he replied with a wicked grin.

I gave his stomach a firm jab. He let out a soft huff, though I knew it didn't hurt him. "You forget," I said, narrowing my eyes, "it's my body that has to bear the citadel full of children."

"I picture you plump and grumpy, waddling through the citadel looking for a wall to put your boot through," King teased.

"What about our home? I thought we'd raise our family there," I asked, half-serious.

"How? It won't hold all our children, and I like the walls there without boot prints."

I snuggled closer, letting his warmth calm the unease running through me. "I love you," I said softly.

He tipped my chin up, his gaze locking with mine. "Nothing will happen to either of us. We're a team. I love you, my queen. We have a war to fight. Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

Our noses touched. "You've done an incredible job preparing the island," he said. "We'll defeat the Federation, and afterward, we'll go after Barnes. His days are numbered."

Mate, Ms. Beast whispered inside me.

We took the winding ocean highway back to the citadel, the wind rushing past us as we raced against the storm of battle. My gut churned with unease. No way would this go down without a hitch. I wanted our people safe, every last one of them. A loud rumble echoed inside me, and Ms. Beast whispered one word: kill. We were fully on the same page this time. I'd kill every Federation soldier I came across if it meant saving our people.

Once we arrived at the citadel, King and I split up. He had his tasks, and I had mine. My destination was the Armory to check on the dynamic duo. Rounding a corner too quickly, I almost knocked Cosway over. I grabbed her shoulders to steady her, and her wild eyes met mine, her cat perched awkwardly on her shoulder.

“Babies in danger, must help babies,” she whispered urgently.

Cosway believed anything young, human or animal, was a baby needing her care. The island’s unofficial nurturer, she’d hand out candy to the children and even patch up scraped knees. Once, I’d asked if she wanted to assist Axel in the infirmary, but enclosed spaces were unbearable for her. Instead, she roamed the island, offering help wherever she could, her cat always draped over her like a living scarf.

People returned her kindness with small gifts, tokens of their appreciation. She was integral to the island, accepted and cherished like family. Seeing her so distressed now put me on edge. Something was wrong.

“Cosway,” I said gently, drawing her attention. “Take five minutes and center yourself with me.”

She nodded and sank to the floor where she stood, pressing her back against the wall. I followed, sitting beside her. “Breathe,” she murmured softly, her lilting voice as soothing as ever. I mirrored her, drawing in a deep breath. “Bad out, good in,” she continued, guiding our slow inhales and exhales.

As her voice softened into a comforting hum, I drifted to my sanctuary. In my mind, I disassembled my rifle, reassembled it, and lined up the sight. Through the scope, I stared into the cold, dead eyes of an imaginary Federation soldier. My hands were steady, my aim precise. I pulled the trigger and watched his head explode. In my imagination, he wore President Barnes’ face. I lined up another shot, ready for the next target, the tension in my shoulders easing slightly with each imagined kill.

Cosway's voice gently broke through my focus. "I will keep the babies safe," she whispered, stroking the fur of her cat nestled in her lap.

"Thank you, Cosway," I said earnestly. "The babies need you."

She reached over, squeezed my hand, then sprang to her feet and dashed down the hall in the opposite direction, her cat clinging to her as if accustomed to this routine.

I felt more grounded after those brief moments of shared calm. Centered and focused, I was ready to face what came next.

That thought accompanied me as I entered the armory. Ruth and Che sat on the floor amidst a sea of weapons, scattered sheets of paper between them. Both were scribbling furiously, heads bent in concentration. At the sound of my boots, their heads popped up, their faces alight with a mix of surprise and determination.

I walked closer and peered over Ruth's shoulder.

"We didn't know the names of most of the artillery," she explained, "so we're drawing scaled images to eliminate any confusion. Once we're done, we'll finish the inventory and have it to you in a few hours."

I blinked, my jaw struggling to remain in place. Ruth had even adopted military jargon. Who had molded this child? These two had worked tirelessly since I'd given them the task. I tried to keep my tone gentle.

"Do your moms know you're here?" I asked, trying not to smile too broadly.

Ruth shrugged, her thin shoulders belying her intense fortitude. "We couldn't sleep, so we snuck out. This needs to be done before the fighting begins. We found a few guns that might be faulty and set them aside. If someone can show me how to fix

them, I'll take care of it."

"Me too," Che chimed in, looking up from his detailed drawing of a horseman's pick; a medieval warhammer that, somehow, had ended up in our stockpile.

I rested a hand on my side where my sixteenth-century German Mortuary Sword hung in its scabbard. A gift from King, it was special, able to cleave a hellhound's head clean off with little effort. "At least tell me you ate all your dinner," I said. I knew that arguing about their lack of sleep would be futile. These battles had to be chosen wisely.

"Every bite," Che replied with a grin.

Ruth's expression soured. "My mom made meatloaf. I ate it, but it wasn't very good."

Hmm. My stomach growled at the thought. I hadn't had meatloaf in years. "I'll have two cots brought in here. If you get tired, rest. I'll need you both alert when the Federation attacks."

They nodded. I left the armory and headed to my room. When I got there, I found King lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling in the same way I had earlier.

I walked to the end of the bed, turned, and let myself fall backward. I landed with a soft thud and bounced a few times.

"Quite the entrance," King said, still gazing upward.

"I'm exhausted," I sighed.

"Lie here for two minutes, and you'll be wide awake, I promise."

“That’s the plan,” I replied, rolling to my side so I could face him. “Is it always like this before a battle?”

“Always,” he said simply.

“I think it’s easier to march for days, find what you’re hunting, and kill it.” I rubbed my temples. It definitely would’ve been easier on my overworked brain.

He was still looking at the ceiling, but I could hear the grin in his voice. “Much simpler.”

I nestled into his chest, letting his warmth soothe me as I closed my eyes. His arm tightened around me, anchoring me in place. I took a deep breath, trying to push the tension from my mind. “I’m going to meditate for a while,” I murmured. “Don’t start the war without me.”

“I promise,” he whispered into my hair.

I let my mind empty, focusing on the rhythm of my breathing. But instead of peace, my thoughts drifted to killing. Ms. Beast stirred within me, a steady and needed presence. Meditation, it seemed, was something she enjoyed too.

King

Within two minutes, Marinah was snoring softly. I rested my hand on her back, feeling each steady breath. She was worried. So was I. I never truly understood fear until Marinah entered my life. She'd asked what we'd do if we lost each other, and I made light of it, but I didn't tell her the truth. Wherever she goes, I will follow. Our souls are intertwined, and I won't live without her.

The difference is, if I fall, she'll survive. Marinah is our destiny. She'll lead the Shadow Warriors and fulfill the purpose she was born for. She only thinks she needs me. The truth is, Marinah needs no one.

I closed my eyes, letting exhaustion take me. An hour later, the sirens shattered the silence, their screaming blare filling the room.

The sun wouldn't be up for a few hours. It was the perfect time to attack.

Marinah shot up in a whirlwind of motion. "Hurry! I didn't bother taking off my boots. Why did you?" she demanded as I laced mine up.

"I don't love and caress my boots the way you do," I replied, smirking. "Mine are fine for the floor."

"Argh," she grumbled every few seconds until I finished.

"Don't forget the antidote," I told her before she could leave the room. I picked up the first syringe and injected it into her upper arm. She did the same for me, then gave

me a piqued look suggesting we were late for the war. I stomped out after her.

We ran into Beck on our way. “Ships on the horizon,” he said, falling into step with us. “They’re not moving closer.”

“They’ll release the hellhounds first. Are Cabel and his team clear of the water?” Marinah demanded.

“Yes. Missy has the archers stationed at the shore, ready and waiting.”

“Tell them to shoot at will once they spot hellhounds coming in,” Marinah ordered. “I need to get to the armory, and then I’ll head her way. We’ll bomb their ships when I give the order.”

Beck nodded sharply and took off in the opposite direction as we continued toward the armory.

Inside, Ruth and Che were sprawled on cots, sound asleep. They were so exhausted that even the sirens hadn’t woken them. Marinah strode into the room, barely pausing as she plucked the armory key from Ruth’s slack fingers.

She locked the heavy metal door behind us as we left, her eyes already scanning ahead, her mind undoubtedly planning our next move.

“Have I ever told you that you’re brilliant?” I asked.

“She’ll be angry but alive when this is over, and at least I didn’t need to force them into the smaller room,” she replied, attempting a smile that worry refused to let through. Once the battle started, she would loosen up.

We headed to the motorbikes next. For someone who had been terrified the first time

she rode as a passenger behind me, she'd become a pro. She revved her engine and took off, tires spinning and a cloud of dust rising behind her. I watched for a moment as she picked up speed, her braids flowing behind her like a banner.

Within minutes, we reached the bay, where fifty Warriors stood at attention, waiting for Marinah's command. The Federation ships were nothing more than small pinpoints on the horizon. Marinah scanned the water, her expression calculating.

"If we can see them, they can see us," she said. "They know we're alerted to their presence. As soon as they release the hellhounds with them, we'll send the planes in."

Marinah had decided against sending our planes out to sea before the Federation ships hit our waters. I hadn't questioned her decision, and Beck hadn't been around when it was made. Marinah always had her reasons, and I didn't need to understand them to trust her.

We had four operational passenger planes and sixteen fighter jets. The downside? Only six pilots. Shadow Warriors and humans were still in training, but they weren't ready yet. Like everything else in this fucked-up new world, we made do with what we had.

The hellhounds we'd secured in the bay were still in place, without the Federation's knowledge, and we had our own frequency signal to release them. The last thing they'd expect were hounds in an area where they hadn't planted them or at least that was the hope. We climbed back on the bikes, joined by the Warriors, and rode to the closest point where the Federation planted hellhounds that they expected to come ashore.

The beach was eerily still, even though more of Missy's archers stood on the road overlooking the ocean. The waves broke far from the shoreline, and we waited in tense silence.

I removed my boots and shifted while Marinah watched the water.

The first ripples came while it was still dark, the ocean's surface betraying the movement beneath. The horde emerged; their waterlogged bodies more grotesque than ever. Some had moss dangling from their twisted limbs, while others had missing body parts chewed off by underwater creatures. They moved almost in unison, surging toward the shore like a single entity.

When they hit the beach, the water no longer slowed them down, and their speed increased. Marinah clicked her radio and gave the order. "Air attack on the Federation ships. Now."

She placed the radio back on her side strap and faced me. "Ready, baby?" She threw me a teasing smile, her eyes alight with a killing gleam.

I answered with a flash of fang. She bent and carefully removed her boots, placing them in the bike's saddle bag, adjusted her straps, and shifted to Warrior form. She sent me a blown kiss with a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth.

"Let's kill some hellhounds," she said, charging forward.

I sprinted after her, using my legs to propel me up and over her tall body so I landed in front.

"Show-off," she laughed, her voice full of adrenaline as we launched into what we were made for. Kill, Beast whispered inside me. I had no problem obliging.

I swung my sword, cleaving the first hellhound from skull to shoulder in a clean, precise arc. With a slight pivot, I drove the blade's tip into the next one's throat, slicing through bone and cartilage. Its waterlogged body made a grotesque sound as I severed its spinal column.

Nearby, Marinah raised her mortuary sword high over her head, bringing it down with a deadly force that felled another hellhound. I turned to the next target, the thrill of battle coursing through me.

Shadow Warriors fought alongside us, steadily dwindling the hordes' numbers. To the untrained eye, it might have looked like we were barely surviving, but that couldn't have been further from the truth. We knew approximately how many hellhounds the Federation ships could carry along with the numbers of those planted in the water. Knet thought he had betrayed our plans and that we were oblivious. His treason gave us the edge we needed. This current battle was ours.

Explosions lit up the distant sky, a sign that one or more of our planes had found their target. The jets wouldn't be able to completely destroy the Federation's heavily armed ships, but their purpose was to keep them occupied long enough for us to execute our plan.

After cutting down three more hellhounds, I scanned the beach, searching for Marinah. She was surrounded by several hounds, her sword moving in lethal arcs. I expected her Nova to take over, but it didn't. Instead, with amazing skill, she rotated her hips, putting power behind every strike.

One, two, three, they dropped around her like puppets with their strings cut. She moved with an otherworldly grace, a dance of death and power, her body following an unheard rhythm. She anticipated each attack before it came, striking with flawless accuracy.

A larger-than-average hellhound lunged at her from the side. Her sword moved with blinding speed, driving in at an angle that cleaved the beast cleanly in half. Marinah never hesitated or faltered. She hadn't been trained since infancy like I was, but you'd never know it. She moved like she had a lifetime of preparation.

It took me twice as long to reach the level of skill she'd achieved. She was unstoppable because of the single-minded training she put in daily. She never slacked off. Marinah had something to prove to herself and only herself. The rest of us knew what she was capable of. Her Warriors would follow her into the depths of hell, or more precisely, straight into a horde of hellhounds. Put a weapon in her hands, and she would obliterate her enemy. It was simply who she was, and I could watch her fight for hours.

She was everything the Shadow Warriors were meant to be.

Marinah finally signaled for us to fall back. We sprinted for the cliffs, where the archers held their positions. As we retreated, arrows rained down, peppering the remaining hellhounds, small explosive charges thinning their numbers further. We jumped onto our bikes and roared off toward the next rallying point.

About a mile into the winding, twisting roads, a pack of waterlogged hellhounds blocked our path.

With a bloodcurdling shout, Marinah revved her bike and picked up speed. At the last possible second, she executed a flawless slide, laying her bike down and taking out the front row of hellhounds like bowling pins.

We wore stretchy pants to accommodate shifting, and while they offered some protection from road rash, they weren't perfect. The material shredded, leaving one of her thighs bloody and exposed. She didn't care.

As she came off the bike with her sword drawn, I almost wanted to step back and admire her sheer ferocity, the grace, the unrelenting power she radiated. Marinah was breathtaking in battle. But standing there watching would make me look foolish, especially with hellhounds attacking.

I jumped into the fray, taking on the beasts two at a time. Our Warriors joined in, their roars and strikes adding to the battle. When the horde was destroyed, we regrouped and headed to the next area.

After two more changes in location, Marinah's radio crackled.

"Inbound," snapped a voice.

That was the signal. Federation soldiers were closing in on the citadel.

"Do you think we've taken out enough hellhounds to make this work?" Marinah shouted as we ran for the bikes.

"Alpha One, do you copy?"

"Copy," she answered into the microphone without missing a step.

"Sub spotted near the inlet. Boats are storming Warrior Bay."

"Heading in," Marinah responded.

She threw a wicked grin my way. "It's time to fly, baby. Eat my dust," she called before taking off like a rocket.

I couldn't help but laugh and follow.

Her version of flying meant pushing her modified bike past a hundred miles per hour, the engine roaring beneath her. She laughed, the sound carried by the wind, as we tore through the night. A ride that should've taken forty-five minutes took us sixteen. Marinah didn't just thrive in battle, she commanded it.

Marinah

Energy coursed through my veins as we sped down the winding roads. I felt alive with fire so hot, I soared. There was nothing left of the old me who clung to King's back, gripping a man she didn't trust. That man, riding beside me now, was the reason I'd become an entirely different person.

My fingers tightened and released on the motorbike's handlebars, anticipation bubbling just below the surface. Hellhounds were one thing, but humans; thinking, plotting, murdering humans were the real enemy. Bloodlust surged within me, a dark hunger I didn't bother suppressing. I'd kill them all.

As we hit the city, we weaved through the narrow side streets at breakneck speed. The bike roared beneath me, its power a thrilling vibration between my thighs. I leaned into the corners, the wind rushing against my face. Who knew I'd turn into a full-fledged biker?

We glided through the open metal gates of the citadel and abandoned the bikes, hitting the ground running. Shadow Warriors and humans scattered from our path as we barreled toward the roof. By the time we crashed through the door, I had shifted to human form, my body humming with energy.

We sprinted to the outer wall, where Missy and her group of archers made way for us. My gaze snapped to the horizon, narrowing on the small boats skimming the water.

"What's inside those boats besides soldiers?" I demanded, straining to make out the shapes.

“Field glasses,” King said in a clipped voice. Someone beside him handed him a pair, and he raised them to his eyes. “LCVPs. Each holds a twelve-man squad and a vehicle. Looks like tarped Jeeps. Judging by the height of the tarp, they’ve got mounted artillery on hardtops.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, an explosion shook the ground beneath our feet. I whipped my head toward the blast, spotting a plume of smoke rising about a mile north. LCVPs were Landing Craft Vehicles. My mind scrambled for what the “P” stood for, but there wasn’t time.

“They’re firing from the ships,” I growled. “That means our planes didn’t do enough damage. How many boats or LCVPs do you count?” I yelled, just as another explosion thundered south of us.

“Fifty,” King answered grimly.

I did the math in seconds. That was six hundred men and fifty vehicles equipped with advanced firepower.

The battle was coming, and we were outnumbered. But we weren’t outmatched.

Nokita approached us. “When do you want the hellhounds in the bay released?”

King handed me the field glasses, and I lifted them to my eyes. “The boats are moving in fast,” I said, scanning the water. “We need the hounds ahead of them. Release them now.”

Nokita nodded and raised a small device that had once been one of our radios. He smiled faintly as he pressed the button. Lifting his own field glasses, he joined us in watching the water.

It took a few minutes before the surface began to ripple and churn. The hellhounds found their footing beneath the waves and started moving. Fifty yards from shore stood a block wall, designed to hold back storm tides. The Warriors stationed behind the wall began signaling the hounds with their whistles as soon as the first beasts reached land. The hellhounds turned and waded back into the water just as the boats advanced.

Anyone watching from the Federation ships would be questioning where the hellhounds had come from. Pandemonium would ripple through their command as they scrambled to figure out what had gone wrong. The more confusion we sowed, the better our chances. This wasn't just about winning; it was about making a statement. This was our island, and the Federation would never take it from us.

I turned to Missy, who stood nearby in battle-worn fatigues. "Are the archers ready?"

She pressed the radio to her lips. "Archers, standby," she said. Her voice was calm, but her pupils were tiny pinpoints of hate. Missy had fought the Federation and hellhounds in the U.S. before mating with Beck and coming here. She'd learned the hard way to never back down in a fight.

"They're ready," she confirmed, lowering the radio.

"Tell them to fire at will as soon as the first boat hits shore," I instructed

The boats were closing in, now only fifty yards out. King stepped behind me, hooking his fingers into the leather straps of my gear. He tightened the buckles with practiced efficiency, his body brushing against mine as he worked. The motion was subtle, casual, but the comfort it gave was profound. To those around us, it probably looked like nothing more than him adjusting my straps, but I felt the silent reassurance he offered his mate.

I was terrified that we weren't ready, that something critical had been overlooked. Yet, alongside the fear, anticipation burned so hot I was surprised my eyes didn't shoot fire.

This was the fight that mattered most.

When the boats were twenty yards from shore, they crashed into the hellhounds heading toward them. It quickly became clear that at least one Federation soldier on each boat was equipped with a whistle. They used the mildly irritating noise to hold the hounds back until our whistles joined in, releasing a shriller sound than the original whistles controlling them from alternating directions.

The hellhounds, never known for their discipline, lost all control at the conflicting sounds. We had tested this tactic, knowing it was the best way to disrupt the limited organization the Federation tried to impose on the monsters. A free-for-all erupted as the hounds turned on the Federation soldiers. Their fighters were pulled over the sides of the boats as hellhounds scrambled aboard. The haunting human screams carried over the waves.

Through my field glasses, I could see the horror etched on their faces. The red stripes, the Federation's expendable cannon fodder, were doing exactly what they were intended to do. They were non-skilled humans, sent to die. My stomach churned at the thought that any one of those young men or women could have been me.

Despite the seeming disorder, the soldiers fought off the hellhounds, slowly gaining ground and pushing closer to shore. Minutes later, the first boats hit the beach, and soldiers began pulling the tarps off their vehicles.

"Fire!" Missy's command rang out, and the archers unleashed a barrage of arrows. For sixty relentless seconds, the arrows rained down, striking hellhounds and soldiers alike. The assault slowed them, stopping them from fully unloading the vehicles.

At Missy's signal, the archers fell back, and the Shadow Warriors stepped up from behind concrete barriers. They opened fire with Kalashnikov machine guns, the rapid bursts of 600 rounds per minute ripping into the enemy. The 7.62×54mmR ammunition served a dual purpose, fitting both the Kalashnikovs and our sniper rifles. A single well-placed shot could take off half a head.

The Federation soldiers returned fire, but they were disorganized, forced to dodge both bullets and the frenzied hellhounds. With little cover and the rising sun now behind us, we held the advantage.

My radio crackled to life. "The Federation sub changed course," Cabel's voice spat through the static. "More soldiers are disembarking a mile south of the citadel."

I clicked the mic. "What's the ETA?"

"The soldiers will hit shore in under ten minutes. If they head to you after that, they'll be on you in twenty minutes max," he replied.

I once more silently thanked King and Beck for all the hours they'd spent drilling military tactics into me. "Make sure they head this way," I ordered Cabel through the radio.

My strategy hinged on the assumption that the citadel would be the Federation's primary target. It was our established stronghold, and Knet knew we'd move the humans inside the walls if an attack became imminent. We'd intentionally painted a huge target on the citadel, hoping the Federation would take the bait. If a little violent persuasion was needed to nudge them along, Cabel would see to it.

"Understood. Out," he replied.

"We're ready," King assured me as soon as the transmission ended. Another

explosion rocked the area outside the citadel, this one closer than the last.

I hit the radio again. “Axel, send the women and children below. You have fifteen minutes.”

“I’m ahead of you. We’re almost situated,” Axel responded.

Click. “Labyrinth, those planes need to do more damage. We can’t let the ships return to the U.S. Either they sink, or we destroy and salvage.”

Static crackled before Labyrinth’s reply. “They hit one of our planes. We’re using the small sub for rescue. I’ll have my men take another pass at the ships.”

The connection cut off abruptly.

I turned to King. “We need to get down there.”

He gave a mock bow, sweeping his arm in an exaggerated gesture. “After you, my queen.”

I rolled my eyes, stuck out my tongue, and bolted. It was finally time to face the Federation one on one.

We reached the main floor of the citadel. A few women and children were still making their way to the basement. To my surprise, Skylar and Mila ushered the stragglers along. Mila saw me first.

“Marinah?”

I didn’t have time, but I stopped. She ran toward me and wrapped her arms around my shoulders, bringing me in for a quick hug before pulling back. She had a gun on

her hip and noticed me looking at it.

“Skylar and I have been training with some of the other people at our new home.” They had gone to the northernmost region of the island to give Skylar a chance to heal.

“Hi,” Skylar said. The sadness was still there, but she also had something else in her eyes. “We’ll defend our people with our lives,” she said solemnly.

“I never doubted it. Thank you. I need to get out there.”

“Stay safe,” Skylar said.

“Kick ass,” Mila added.

“You got it.”

The lower levels of the citadel had no windows, and its reinforced walls made it the safest place for them. I turned and headed down another corridor. A battalion of Shadow Warriors rounded the corner, led by Eagle, with Elright as his second. They were our two best snipers. Eagle brought the troops to a halt in front of us.

“I’ll lead,” King said.

The men had constructed several sniper towers on the citadel roof. Eagle and Elright would do the most damage from up there. The battalion followed King as we jogged outside, where more Shadow Warriors waited.

The sound of our heavy boots echoed against the citadel’s stone tiles, the rhythm matching the rapid pounding of my heart. My adrenaline surged as we stepped into the open air. It felt as if I’d waited my entire life for this.

The rumbling inside me said Ms. Beast was ready to explode. I held her back, forcing control, as Eagle's troops fell in line with the other Warriors. I glanced up, spotting longbows and focused faces in the windows above us, where metal grates had been strategically placed to protect the archers as much as possible. We were as ready as we could ever be.

A shadow fell over me, and I looked into King's massive jaws.

"You need to shift. I'll loosen your straps," he said. His clawed hands fumbled slightly as he unfastened the buckles on my gear. When he was done, he carefully ran a sharp claw along the bare skin of my back, sending a shiver down my spine.

"One kiss," he growled, "and we'll pick this up later in human form."

He said it like we were about to take a casual stroll through the park, and I couldn't help but appreciate his attempt to lighten the mood. My nerves were coiled so tightly I could barely breathe. Now he wanted a kiss, and I couldn't think of anything better.

I let the change take me, morphing in his arms. My body grew taller and bulkier, my girth expanding as I turned into a flavor of ugly only a mate could appreciate. With my fangs in the way, I pressed a kiss to his massive maw.

My radio crackled to life. "The artillery on the ships is keeping our planes back, but they've crippled one of the Federation's vessels. I'm changing the plan, if my alpha approves. I'm tracking the sub and want to take it out," Labyrinth said.

"Go for it!" I shouted, just as another explosion shook the ground even closer to us.

The radio went silent.

Finally, the Federation's sacrificial lambs, aka red stripes, rounded the corner. I

glanced at King, who flashed me his Warrior grin, the one that promised death.

I returned it with one of my own. "It's time to rock 'n' roll!" I bellowed to the Shadow Warriors.

With a ferocious battle cry tearing from my throat, I charged forward. My body hummed with adrenaline and rage as we surged into the fight.

My powerful legs carried me straight into the middle of the first group of red stripes before they even had a chance to fire. They went down like dominoes, stumbling into each other, scrambling to make sense of the bedlam. The air filled with gunfire and screams as Shadow Warriors tore through them, a broken neck here, a disemboweled stomach there.

Blood splattered across my face as I wrenched a soldier's gun from his hands and drove it through his jaw. The vicious crack barely registered over the roar of the battle. I didn't have time to search for King, but I felt his presence. Ms. Beast's bloodlust was sharper than it had ever been.

I turned, taking out another soldier with a brutal swipe. He was young, too young. The pain and terror on his face stayed with me for a fraction of a second before I spun to kill the next soldier, then another.

Three red stripes charged me at once. One managed to bury his knife into my side, the blade slicing through muscle and igniting a fire of pain. My jaws clamped down on his neck, crushing gristle and bone. His head landed twenty feet away.

The wound burned, but I knew it wasn't life-threatening. At least, I hoped it wasn't. There was no time to check. I grabbed the other two soldiers and hurled them in the same direction as the severed head. I didn't watch them land; the sickening sound of bodies hitting cement told me broken bones would keep them from causing further

trouble if they managed to survive.

More Federation soldiers poured into the street, wave after wave. The third and fourth groups were more organized, coming in with guns blazing. We fell back, taking cover while our archers and snipers rained destruction from above.

Breathing hard, I scanned the area, searching for King. Before I could locate him, a high-pitched voice cut through the noise.

“Take that, you big pile of Federation poop!”

I turned toward the sound, disbelief washing over me. Ruth. How had she escaped the locked metal cage?

I lifted my head and gazed toward the entrance of the side street circling the citadel. A group of red stripes stood frozen just a few feet from Ruth, clearly unsure what to do. She was facing them with the short sword I’d given her, and to make things worse, her sidekick, Che, had his own sword raised.

Relief surged through me when King leapt into the fray. The befuddled soldiers flew in every direction, no match for his brute strength. I had no time to celebrate my mate saving the day before a massive mortar bomb exploded a few feet away.

The blast stole the wind from my lungs, and my head spun. Everything went fuzzy as my brain tried to process the impact. When the dust began to settle, I realized I was still alive. My ears rang as another mortar round whistled through the air.

The next blast tore through the ranks, taking out several Federation soldiers. At first, I thought it was a mistake, but then another round hit, and I realized the truth. The Federation was firing on their own soldiers along with my Warriors.

The soldiers near me scattered, running for cover. They didn't get far. Shadow Warriors intercepted them, and screams cut through the early morning light as they fell to both us and their own artillery.

My senses snapped back, stabilizing me just in time to spot a young female soldier sprinting past. I reached out, grabbed her leg and dragged her to the ground. Her body hit the cement with a sickening thud, but she was still alive.

I raised a clawed hand, prepared to strike, but her horrified expression stopped me cold.

So young. She couldn't have been more than eighteen.

"Please," she whispered, her voice trembling.

For a moment, I hesitated.

"I won't fight anymore," she pleaded, her entire body shaking. "I surrender."

Even with her desperate words, I could see she didn't believe they would save her. Fear radiated from her as tears streaked her dirt-smeared face.

Without thinking, I grabbed her arms in one clawed hand and brought my forearm down, snapping both her wrists with a sickening crunch. Her scream pierced the air as I hoisted her up and ran toward the last place I'd seen Ruth and Che.

King was about eight feet in front of them, his massive form a wall of protection. The kids, however, stood with their swords raised, as if ready to defend him.

I might have smiled at their audacity if it weren't so utterly pathetic.

When King saw me, the look on his face was priceless. “She asked for quarter!” I yelled above the noise, dumping the trembling soldier behind him.

I turned to Ruth and Che, whose wide eyes followed the human as she squirmed and gasped on the cement. “You want a job?” I asked, though I wasn’t giving them a choice. “Keep her safe and keep your heads down. You always bring firepower to a gunfight, not swords. Now you get to babysit the enemy. I want her in one piece.”

“We couldn’t carry the big gun,” Che said.

I sighed, already regretting my curiosity. “What big gun?”

Che grinned, his white teeth flashing through his dirty face. “The one Ruth used to blow a hole in the wall to rescue us. It was awesome.” He slammed his small fist into his opposite palm, mimicking an explosion with his flattened fingers and a loud “Boom!”

Both of their dust-covered bodies told the whole story of just how "awesome" it had been.

“Someone locked us in,” Ruth added with a defiant sneer.

Their mothers were going to kill me.

Another explosion rocked the ground, too close for comfort. “Keep her safe!” I yelled before taking off again.

“You’re out of your Warrior mind!” King shouted after me.

I glanced over my shoulder, blowing him a kiss before charging toward the soldiers operating the mortar artillery. A sharp sting lanced my side, but I didn’t slow down.

Several Shadow Warriors saw me and rose from their cover, joining the charge.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught one of our Warriors going down from a rifle round to the head. The feeling was indescribable, a connection snapping, like a piece of my heart had been ripped out, leaving a searing, empty pain in its place.

Another burn tore through my shoulder, but I kept pushing forward.

I was ten feet from the soldiers when a mortar explosion detonated nearby, throwing my senses into disarray. My ears rang, and my vision blurred again.

A Shadow Warrior beside me fell, and I kept moving, fury propelling me toward my target.

The world slowed around me as energy surged throughout my body. I welcomed the pain as each part of me expanded, growing deadlier with each passing second.

The red haze clouded my vision, making it hard to see clearly, but I didn't need sight. I was connected to the people around me, sensing their locations, their weapons, and their fear. The emotions fed into me like fuel, powering my every thought.

Kill , whispered inside me, and it wasn't Ms. Beast.

A guttural roar erupted from my throat, so inhuman I didn't recognize it as my own. The sound froze the people within earshot, and their faces went slack with fear. I shook my massive head, and instinct told me they would all die.

A Shadow Warrior darted into my line of sight.

No.

I turned, seeking the true enemy.

Nova took over completely.

Time became meaningless. Seconds, minutes, hours blurred together as blood and body parts flew. I held a severed arm and used it to smash into the next person I saw. Their shattered body rolled a few feet away a second after my strike, while I searched for the next person to kill. More human pieces whipped through the air, no longer attached to who they once were. I gloried in the destruction and death, having no idea how long I rampaged.

Marinah was made for strategy, Ms. Beast for destruction, but Nova? She was complete annihilation. There was no on-off button when she faced the enemy. Nothing mattered but death to those who stood against her. I reveled in it as the red haze consumed me. I killed in multiples, using every part of my body. It went on and on and on.

Slowly, awareness returned. The sounds around me remained a cacophony of screams, groans, and cries. I heard them, but they didn't register.

"Marinah," King's voice, though faint, cracked through the fog.

"Marinah," he repeated, louder this time.

"Kingth?" My voice was foreign, distorted.

"I'm here," he said softly.

"Dith we win?"

"Yes, we won," he assured me.

Wet stickiness dripped down my face. It wasn't sweat, I knew that much. I looked at my hands, massive, clawed appendages coated in blood. They didn't work right as I tried to flex them, slowly tightening and releasing my grip.

My lisping voice suddenly made sense as my tongue ran over my sharp, oversized fangs. Dried blood crusted my lips, and the coppery taste lingered. I tilted my head down, the motion sluggish and heavy, just as King grunted.

"I'm taller," I thought, giggling at the absurd observation. The sound that came out of me was more like a dog retching than laughter.

King's expression shifted from weird to downright unnerved. He was covered in blood, too. An odd impulse struck me. I wanted to lick him. No. Bad Nova.

My gaze wandered over the battlefield. Federation bodies lay scattered, some twitching, others deathly still. Blood and gore painted the ground, limbs strewn about like discarded toys. It took me a moment to realize most of the limbs weren't attached to bodies.

A horrifying thought struck me. Had I been eating them?

Ms. Beast screamed inside me, her anguish ripping through my mind. Something was terribly wrong. A searing pain spread through my body, beginning at my waist and heading in two separate directions until my toes cramped at the same time as my fingers. I couldn't see or hear.

I had no time to figure out what was happening because my world collapsed into darkness.

King

I paced outside Axel's office, my boots grinding into the stone floor. He'd kicked me out and blocked the door with a heavy bar an hour ago, leaving me to stew in frustration. I could still bust through, and it took everything I had not to.

Mate, Beast rumbled inside me, as the bond pulled so tight I could barely breathe.

I shot a glare at the closed door, anger surging as I debated again whether to break it down. The infirmary bustled around me, medical teams treating injured Warriors and islanders, but I barely registered it. My focus was solely on Marinah.

Earlier, after the fighting stopped, Marinah hadn't reverted to her Beast. She remained in her Nova form, her massive figure radiating raw power. I'd approached her cautiously, keeping my movements slow. It took several tense minutes before she stopped tearing dead Federation soldiers apart.

When awareness finally returned to her eyes, I saw the confusion and horror flicker across her face. She didn't know what she'd done. A moment later, she toppled over.

At first, I thought she'd shift back, but her form stayed locked in Nova. Blood coated her from head to toe, most of it from the enemy she'd annihilated, but as I looked closer, I realized it wasn't all theirs. It took precious seconds to find the source of her injuries. She'd been shot in multiple places.

That's when I picked her up, no small feat, and rushed her to Axel's infirmary. Before he threw me out of the room, he identified two bullet wounds, one in her

shoulder, the other in her side, as well as a knife puncture on her opposite side.

Now I sat here, useless, replaying the scene in my mind.

I'd come out of the fight with nothing more than a bullet graze and a knife slash to my arm, with two furious kids in tow. Ruth and Che had been fuming after I left them with another Warrior. I'd told him to sit on them if necessary and warned him that his life depended on keeping the children safe. The groaning Federation soldier I'd dumped next to them barely crossed my mind.

When I reached Marinah's side, she was still standing in death. It didn't stop her, and she systematically tore the dead apart with brutal efficiency. The soldiers never stood a chance. Once she went Nova, they didn't even know what hit them.

And then, she collapsed. The scene played in my mind over and over.

All I could do now was wait.

Beck was in charge of rounding up prisoners. We'd managed to disable one U.S. ship in the bay, and Nokita was already overseeing salvage operations. The Federation had transferred their personnel from the ship before it left our coast, and for that, I was relieved. Slaughtering a mass of people or trying to imprison them wasn't something I wanted to deal with. The soldiers on the island who hadn't been killed were already going to be enough of a headache.

We'd gotten lucky with another ship as it tried to retreat. Our fighters sank it just as it left our waters. The spoils weren't bad either: thirty new Jeeps with mounted artillery and smaller Federation boats.

They hadn't used planes this time, but they'd learn from that mistake. I couldn't shake the feeling that this strike was just a test. Whether it was or not, one thing was

clear: the Federation was coming for us, and we needed to end this before they found a way around our defenses. There were too many unknowns. It was a dangerous position to be in.

I glanced at the door, wondering what was taking so long.

“Is she alive?” Che’s voice pulled my attention.

He stood in the doorway to the infirmary, Ruth trailing behind him.

“I thought I told you both to stay put,” I shouted. “Are you capable of following a single order?”

They were just kids, and I wasn’t being fair, but their antics would get them killed and quite possibly others. I was also worried about Marinah and had zero patience left.

Ruth’s face flushed red, and Che’s lips trembled, causing guilt to cut through me. What a big, bad beast I was, scaring kids now. Without another word, I marched to Axel’s door and slammed my fist against it. The two small figures shuffled up beside me.

Ruth cocked her head, her hand resting casually on the butt of a gun holstered at her hip. “Want me to shoot it down?” she asked, her voice matter-of-fact.

I ignored her and pounded the door again, harder this time.

Finally, it swung open to reveal a very tired-looking Axel.

“If you could’ve waited two more minutes,” he said flatly, “I was about to let you in.”

I shoved past Axel, my focus solely on my mate. She was sitting up on the examination table, hunched over, but she was my Marinah again. She wore a surgical robe. I pulled her against my chest, but her arms remained limp at her sides.

“You okay?” I whispered softly, careful not to push too hard.

She shuddered against me, sinking further into my embrace. Still in Warrior form, I gently ran a hand over her back. My claws brushed the edge of a bandage, and I froze, pulling back. Carefully, I lifted her face so I could see her eyes. They were hollow.

“What is it?” I whispered.

She turned her head away. “Something’s wrong inside me,” she murmured. “Ms. Beast is acting strange. My Nova too.”

I glanced over her head at Axel, looking for answers.

He shrugged; his expression unreadable. “She started mumbling about something being off before she fully woke up. I don’t know what it means. I’ve removed the bullets, stitched the knife wound, and cleaned the road rash, but I’m at a loss. She’s stable, but something’s bothering her.” His gaze flicked to my arm. “You need stitches, too.”

I grunted, brushing off his concern.

Marinah watched us and remained silent. That alone should’ve been Axel’s first clue that something was terribly wrong.

I stood there for a moment with no idea what to do.

A spark of awareness entered her eyes, and she took my hand, her grip weak, and offered a faint smile. “Sit here and let him stitch you up,” she said, pointing to the empty space on the examination table beside her.

I glanced around and spotted a chair in the corner that looked far more comfortable. I scooped her up and carried her there. As I settled into the chair with her in my arms, two small heads peeked around the doorway.

I shot them a warning Beast stare, and they quickly disappeared. I was too drained to deal with them right now.

Axel pushed a tray on wheels over to me, efficiently disinfecting my shoulder and setting to work on the stitches. Marinah lay quietly in my arms, her head pressed against my shoulder without moving.

When Axel finished, I stood, cradling Marinah carefully, and carried her to our room. Post-battle tasks could wait. Right now, she needed me, and I wasn’t letting her go.

Marinah

We had been lying in bed for over an hour, King's warm arms wrapped securely around me. He hadn't asked questions beyond checking if I needed anything. I was grateful for the silence and used the time to meditate.

In my mind, I took Bertha apart and put her back together with practiced precision. I could feel each piece in my hands as I moved through the process. I inhaled deeply, allowing my thoughts to drift, but they didn't wander far before snapping back to what happened earlier.

My body had gone Nova, and I'd had no control over the shift, which was nothing unusual. She came out when she was ready and not on my schedule. But her frenzy went on even after the enemy was dead, and I didn't understand. Yes, it had happened the first time with Smythe, but this was very different.

I had the sensation of being kicked in the gut, causing all air to leave my chest. Before I could process it, searing pain shot through my insides, and Ms. Beast's scream echoed in my mind.

I pushed the memory of the pain aside and dug deeper into my thoughts. Images flashed in my head, and then I saw her, Ms. Beast. She stared back at me, growling low, almost challenging me.

There was something in her mouth.

She dropped it at my feet, and as it hit the ground, the pages fluttered open. It was my

grandmother's journal.

"How are you doing?" King's voice, whispered close to my ear, startled me.

"I was meditating," I mumbled into his shoulder, annoyed at the interruption.

He brushed the hair from my face. "You must be feeling better. What do you remember about what happened?"

"Death," I replied bluntly. "I think I might have eaten someone."

He gave me a small squeeze, his eyes sparkling with amusement. "You didn't like their limbs attached, but you didn't eat anyone, I promise."

"Eating people would be bad," I muttered.

"There are worse things," he teased lightly.

"I think I'm going to be sick," I said, the sudden nausea hitting me hard.

I barely made it to the bathroom before I vomited violently. When the first wave stopped, I slumped against the cold tile, only to brace myself for the next round a moment later.

King knelt beside me, holding my braids from my face. "I'm taking you back to Axel," he said, leaving no room for argument.

I couldn't respond, too busy trying to keep my stomach from tearing itself apart. Between rounds, I managed to croak, "I need to read my grandmother's journal."

"There's something wrong with you, and your grandmother's journal won't fix it," he

argued.

Stubborn man. Always so damned stubborn.

With King's help, I finally managed to walk back to the bed. He stayed long enough to settle me, then left the room, saying he was bringing Axel to me.

As soon as the door closed, I grabbed my grandmother's journal and did something I hadn't done before. I flipped through the pages, skimming until I found the home planet's word for Nova. My pulse quickened as I reached for the alien dictionary. I began deciphering the strange letters slowly taking shape into words I could understand.

By the time Axel arrived, I'd moved to the table to make writing easier. My body felt steadier, and my focus was entirely on transcribing. I scribbled notes directly above my grandmother's words, reading each sentence aloud as soon as it was translated.

Axel checked my vitals while I kept working. He said something to King, but I barely registered it before he left. I was too immersed in the flow of words and too driven by the need to understand.

I didn't know how much time had passed when a plate of food appeared in front of me. I devoured it without pausing and immediately sent King back to the kitchen for more.

The cycle continued. I ate, read, translated, and blocked out everything else. King tried to talk to me once, but I waved him away, too consumed by the journal to answer.

At some point, exhaustion won. I lifted my head groggily from my arms, realizing I must have fallen asleep at the table. The room was quiet, the dishes from our meal

gone, and King was nowhere in sight. The weight of the day pressed down on me.

I dragged myself to the bed and collapsed into it, where sleep pulled me under almost instantly.

I woke to the comforting warmth of King's arms wrapped around my midsection. He was awake, his eyes focused solely on me.

"How's the soldier?" I asked groggily, my voice rough from sleep.

He knew who I meant. "She survived. Axel operated on one wrist and put both in casts. What do you plan on doing with her?"

My heart felt heavy as I rolled to face him. "I don't know," I admitted. "I couldn't kill her. Even Ms. Beast couldn't do it."

"Hmm," he said, his tone noncommittal.

For a moment, an almost-smile pulled at the corners of my lips, but the weight of our losses dragged me back. "How many of our people died?" I asked quietly.

"Your people," he corrected gently. "Seven Warriors. No humans."

The ache in my chest deepened. "Who?"

He recited the names, and each one hit me like a blow. Two of them had families. One had just become a father for the first time.

I pushed myself up partially, my muscles protesting. "The men need us. What are we doing in here?"

King wrapped his arms around me and pulled me back into bed again. “You have only one choice. You can read your grandmother’s journal, and eat,” he said, “but you’re not leaving this room until you’re healed. It’s not up for discussion.”

I wanted to push back, but the hard look in his eyes made it clear I wouldn’t win. “The men need to see me,” I tried one last time.

His expression didn’t change. “The men know you’re injured. They also know you saved us. They won’t think less of you because you need to recover.”

I let out a loud, frustrated huff, but the fight drained out of me.

King’s lips quirked into a small smile for the first time since I woke up. “You won’t feel as grumpy after you eat.”

Like handling Ruth, I had to pick my battles. Fighting this one would only exhaust me, and I’d still lose. I couldn’t believe I was letting him alpha me like this.

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I behaved like the good little queen, at least until the next day. King had left early, ordering me not to leave the room until after lunch. Sticking out my tongue at him had no effect, though it did earn me a steamy kiss before he walked out.

After he was gone, I took a long shower, letting the hot water soothe my sore muscles. I ate everything from the breakfast tray that had been delivered earlier and did the same when lunch arrived. In between meals, I worked on deciphering my grandmother’s journal, my frustration mounting as the hours ticked by.

By the time the afternoon sun angled through the windows, I’d had enough. I fastened my gear, determined to reclaim my autonomy, and left the room. My first stop was

the armory, where I had punishments to delve out.

Che and Ruth were in the middle of overseeing a wall remodel when I arrived. Ruth barked orders like a seasoned drill sergeant. “If it was this easy to blast through, you need better materials. These walls need steel reinforcement, or it’ll happen again,” she declared rigidly.

The Warriors ignored her entirely. If they had snapped at her, I would have applauded.

One of the men noticed me, his eyes lighting up with unspoken relief. He stopped working, and the others followed suit, their collective expressions practically begged: Save us!

“Ruth. Che. Come with me,” I said firmly, not waiting to see if they followed.

They deserved a thorough butt-chewing, but it wouldn’t happen in front of the Warriors. Still, judging by the men’s barely concealed relief, I had a feeling they would enjoy watching it.

I led them down the hall into one of our meeting rooms, closing the door behind us.

Che immediately wrapped his arms around my leg, holding on tightly. I placed a hand on his back and used the other to ruffle his hair, taking a deep breath. Relief coursed through me, knowing these two little hellions had survived.

“You don’t look so good,” Ruth said, squinting as she gave me a once-over, her eyes traveling from my boots to the top of my head.

“I don’t feel so good either, so be nice to me, please,” I replied, wincing at how pathetic I sounded.

She crossed her arms and tapped her foot.

“What?” I snapped.

“Do I get a hug?” she asked, her expression holding unending defiance.

I sighed and pulled her into my arms, keeping Che in the mix, and breathing in their youthful scent. No matter how infuriating they could be, I loved these two brats. After thirty seconds, I released them and pointed to the chairs. “Sit.”

Ruth wasted no time stirring the pot. “Uh-oh, we’re in trouble, aren’t we?” She wrapped her arms around herself and gave an exaggerated shudder. Her smug grin made me itch to knock the cocky right out of her.

I fixed my scowl firmly in place. “I ordered you to stay in the armory,” I said sharply.

Her expression grew even more insolent. “The room shook, plaster fell on us, and you wanted us to stay in there and die because you ordered it? If the roof caved in, we’d have been squished, and our guts would’ve slid out and become one with the floor.”

Someone really needed to curtail this child’s dramatic reading material. My patience snapped. I had to make it clear that disobedience wouldn’t be tolerated.

I locked my gaze with hers. K-5 swirled dangerously within me.

Ms. Beast erupted.

Ruth tumbled backward out of her chair as I stormed around the table. I hooked a claw into the front of her t-shirt and twisted. The fabric tore, but it was enough to haul her toward me, fangs bared.

“My, what big teeth you have,” she sing-songed, her voice mocking even now.

I saw red.

My roar ripped through the room, a primal sound that silenced everything.

The terrified look on Che’s face brought me crashing back to reality. The urge to throw Ruth across the room evaporated as I realized how far I’d let my anger take me.

I was out of control. It took me a moment to regain it, but I knew the thread could break again in an instant. I leveled my gaze on Ruth.

“If you were a Shadow Warrior, I would kill you for putting lives in danger. Even after training you, you have betrayed my trust.” Finally, Ruth’s eyes showed something besides challenge, but I wasn’t sure what it was, and it sure as hell wasn’t guilt. I could take no more. “Return to your rooms,” I ordered. “You will not leave until I give the word. If you disregard my order, you will be banned from the citadel.”

Without waiting for a response, I stormed out of the armory, the weight of my failure to control my anger pressing down on me. I felt like an idiot for losing it with children. As I moved through the halls, Shadow Warriors lowered their gazes in submission. A few murmured Alpha in greeting, but I didn’t stop or acknowledge them.

My destination was the infirmary. When I arrived, I found Axel taking the blood pressure off the young Federation soldier I’d saved. She was the only prisoner among the crowded room of injured Warriors and humans.

“Where are the other prisoners?” I demanded, my loud voice cutting through the steady buzz of the infirmary. Heads turned, startled by my tone.

The young woman flinched, shrinking back against her pillow. Her thin face was pale, green eyes wide with terror. Axel shot me a testy look. "Let me finish here, and we can talk," he said.

I turned on my heel and marched into his office, slamming the door behind me. What the heck was wrong with me? My anger was spiraling out of control, and now I wanted to bite his head off too.

It took Axel five minutes to join me. By the time he walked in, we'd both had a moment to cool down, at least a little.

"Take the table," he said, nodding toward the examination table. "I'll answer your questions while I remove your stitches."

I glared at the table like it had personally offended me. So much for calming down. With a frustrated growl, I dropped onto the metal and crossed my arms.

"Something's wrong with me," I admitted miserably.

Axel studied my face for several seconds. "Start from the beginning?"

I sighed and recounted everything: passing out the first time after going on the minisub, the strange sensations since then, chucking up my guts, and the outburst I'd just had with Ruth and Che.

Axel listened silently, without interrupting once. When I finished, he took a breath. "You need a complete physical," he said with no wiggle room in the words.

"Do it." My shoulders slumped. I didn't believe he'd find anything, but if this was the only way to move forward, I'd endure it.

He smiled gently and rolled over a tray loaded with medical supplies. My eyes narrowed at the array of instruments. “I hear you’ve been reading the women’s texts,” Axel said casually, trying to distract me as he prepared to poke and prod.

I let out a low grunt, already dreading whatever he was about to find, or not find.

“It’s her personal journal,” I muttered sourly. “Maybe it will finally give me the answers I need.”

Axel rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “This is just a theory, but I think your Beasts are in a power struggle.”

I made a dismissive sound. “Pfft, Ms. Beast doesn’t stand a chance.”

“You might think that, but I’m not so sure,” he countered. “How much control do you really have over your Nova?”

I shrugged, feeling the weight of his question pressing down on me. “I thought I was getting better at it, but during the battle, the rage was overwhelming. I lost control. Maybe that’s just how she operates.”

“Do you try to control her when you’re in Nova form, or only during the transformation?” he asked.

I shook my head glumly. “Yes and no. I haven’t figured out the exact science of bringing her out. The other day, I thought it was just going to be Ms. Beast, but Nova came instead. It felt, I don’t know,” I shrugged, “different.” The frustration built inside me.

Axel checked my blood pressure, reflexes, and wounds. As he removed the stitches, I sighed with relief, finally free of their constant pull. Warrior healing was fast, but it

didn't make the process painless.

When he finished, he rolled his chair back and gave me a small smile. "You've been under a lot of stress. Doctor's orders: do whatever warlords do after a battle and then head to your love nest with King. You both need a break. Want me to write a prescription to make sure you actually follow through?"

I couldn't help but smile. "You think I'm a warlord?"

"I don't know what else to call you," he said evenly. "You're a one-woman wrecking crew, and the amount of information you've absorbed this past year should have melted your brain. You don't give yourself enough credit. There's no such thing as a perfect leader. Mistakes happen, and you'll learn from them and move on. You're alpha, and the only person doubting that is you."

I'd heard this before and thought I'd overcome it. "So, a potentially exploding brain is your professional diagnosis?"

He groaned in annoyance. "That diagnosis is as good as any," he finally replied, his voice laced with sarcasm. Then his tone shifted. "When was your last period?"

The world froze.

"I don't know," I murmured, my voice barely audible. My head spun, a thousand thoughts crashing into each other.

He handed me a gown and quietly left the room to give me privacy. I stared at the soft fabric in my hands, unblinking. Slowly, my gaze dropped to my stomach.

Protect, Ms. Beast whispered softly, her voice resonating from within.

King

Seven Warriors lost their lives with several humans in critical condition, but so far, none had died. Marinah's strategy to keep humans away from hellhounds and act solely as support personnel or long-distance archers had paid off. With the loss of the Warriors, she didn't see it that way. Each one of us, including her, understood the risk each time we went into battle.

I gave an internal sigh. I took the deaths as hard as she did, but I didn't want my mate suffering the same guilt I carried. It was wrong of me; I simply didn't know how to break the pattern.

My thoughts weighed heavily as I sought out the wives of two of the fallen men. From past experience, there was a look people got when death became a certainty. I wanted to reassure them, to make them understand that as the wives of Shadow Warriors, they would be cared for and had a home with us, even after we left the island. If we ever left. These thoughts kept turmoil raging inside me.

I spoke to the wives but the grief in their eyes left no room for comfort. Death didn't care for promises.

Would it ever end? The thought gnawed at me as I walked away.

I didn't have the answer. When we came to the island, the plan was to take over temporarily. The people here had put up little resistance. They were starving, short on medical supplies, and needed us as much as we needed them. We'd thought once the world was settled, we'd return the island to its people. But on days like today, I

couldn't see a future.

Beck found me as soon as I returned to the citadel. "There's a problem at the shipyard," he said without preamble. "Nokita's asking for you."

Of course, there was a problem at the shipyard. I changed direction.

The sun beat down as Nokita launched into a detailed explanation of the parts he needed for the submarine. I stood there, trying to track his words while wondering what had elevated this to a crisis. He droned on, and I fought the urge to tap my foot.

Abruptly, he stopped speaking and looked down at the ground.

"What is it?" I asked, my patience stretched thin.

He glanced up at me briefly before turning his eyes away. "Maylin is pregnant," he said quietly.

That caught my attention. "How old is Baby Boot?" I asked, tilting my head.

"Almost a year."

I couldn't help but smile. "You could have waited a little longer, but if Maylin's happy about it, I don't see a problem." I paused. Maylin wasn't exactly known for her cheerful disposition, but working with Axel in the infirmary and having Baby Boot with her had softened her edges somewhat. Nokita had known exactly who he was choosing when he mated with her.

"She's happy," he admitted, but his tone betrayed his unease. "I'm worried."

I motioned toward two benches along the dock and stomped over, sitting down

heavily. “Alright, papa. Tell me what’s got you worried,” I said, trying to inject a bit of humor into the conversation.

“Che’s on lockdown after the stunt he pulled with Ruth. Baby Boot grows bigger every day and needs more time than Maylin has to give, and now we’re bringing another child into this fucked-up place.” Nokita looked up at me, his features strained. “Do you ever wish we were still farmers?”

The question caught me off guard. I hadn’t thought about my farm days in years. Back then, I’d resigned myself to a future of pushing a plow and following in my father’s footsteps. Even with commercial farming taking over, my father had owned plenty of land, and our future had seemed secure. But I didn’t want it.

“No,” I answered honestly. “It was never my dream. Is it what you want?”

He sighed heavily. “I don’t want war.”

That admission startled me more than his news about the baby. Nokita was part of Marinah’s guard. I trusted him completely, but his words gave me pause. “Would you like to take over Cabel’s old job?” I offered carefully.

Cabel, after finding Mary, had been overwhelmed by the mating frenzy and had needed time to adjust. We’d transferred him to agriculture, giving him space to regain control of himself. Eventually, he returned to Marinah’s guard. Nokita hadn’t experienced the same intensity with his and Maylin’s union, likely because he had better control over his beast than Cabel.

Nokita scratched his head, gazing out over the water. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I just want my children to grow up in peace. Che is human. He’s not as capable of surviving this world as we are. I don’t want what happened on our planet to happen here. That’s what I fear most.”

His words hit me harder than I'd expected. I'd never considered the possibility that it could be Shadow Warriors who might destroy this planet. For me, war and strategy came as naturally as breathing, not because I loved it, but because it was all I'd known for so long. My Uncle Graystone had trained me for war and it came easy. But Nokita's revelation was something new, something weighty. It was a truth I couldn't ignore.

Marinah

I swore Axel to secrecy. He didn't like it, but after a long pause, he finally agreed. The fainting, he explained, was caused by hormone fluctuations due to pregnancy. The hormones relaxed my blood vessels, limiting blood flow to my brain. It was a problem I couldn't afford to dwell on right now. Axel handed me vitamins and ordered me to rest as much as possible. But rest wasn't an option, not with the war still raging and the only way to truly protect my child being the elimination of President Barnes.

I left his office and spotted the female soldier I'd rescued. Her face was pale, and her eyes went wide with terror when she saw me. Warriors moved aside as I stomped barefoot across the floor, stopping at the foot of her bed. Her hands trembled, clutching the blanket. I wasn't in Warrior form; it was just me now. For a moment, I stood there, unsure of what to say. The words wouldn't come, and I almost turned to leave when her soft voice stopped me.

"Thank you," she whispered.

I grunted in response and walked out. The Federation was full of red stripes, young, frightened soldiers following orders without truly understanding whether their side was right or wrong. They only did what they were barely trained to do.

On the second floor, I ran into Labyrinth. "Notify the guard. Meeting in one hour," I ordered.

"Yes, Alpha," he replied, immediately changing direction.

It hit me again. When I didn't overthink, being the leader gave me no trouble. But when I let myself reflect, doubt crept in. Seven dead. In the grand scope of war, it was a low casualty count. But my heart couldn't accept it. Seven lives were on me, and I had to find a way to live with it.

My hand instinctively went to my belly. I'd never been a mother, but strangely, I wasn't terrified. The principles of war applied to raising a child too: you plan, do the best you can, and pray. Taking a deep breath, I squared my shoulders. It was time to grow up and hopefully for the last time.

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The meeting started with the short meditation I preferred. Instead of dismantling and reassembling Bertha, I used the time to turn inward, searching for clarity. Ms. Beast was restless, pacing in the recesses of my mind. I tried to focus on Nova, but all I saw was a shadow, an indistinct shape that filled me with unease. It bothered me that I couldn't clearly detect Nova. Answers had to be in my grandmother's journal, and I was running out of time to find them.

I turned my attention inward, seeking our child. Going inside myself wasn't a physical act; it wasn't like peeling back layers or parting organs to find something tangible. It was a mental fog, a space in my mind where Ms. Beast resided. When she made her presence known, it was usually a sensation deep in my gut first, followed by a third-dimensional awareness of her. She was there, always there, but untouchable. I didn't know what I would do if I looked and she was gone. She was too much a part of me now.

As I focused, Ms. Beast raised her head and growled. Her massive form shifted slightly; her eyes fixed on something within the fog. Slowly, the shadow I'd thought was Nova began to take shape. Ms. Beast wrapped herself protectively around a small, moving bundle.

This wasn't Nova. It had never been Nova. This was the child King and I had created. Ms. Beast had been guarding the baby all along. A wave of warmth and awe filled me, settling deep in my core. I opened my eyes, and the men in the room waited, their heads bowed in quiet reflection. Maybe.

"We need to send a team after President Barnes now, while the Federation won't expect an attack," I said, breaking the silence. Heads snapped up, and the men faced me.

"He's our target," I continued. "The tunnels they blew up were a decoy. They had another way out, an entire underground city, most likely. That's where they're operating from."

"What do you know about the tunnels?" Beck leaned forward.

I nodded. "Years ago, there were rumors that the Federation built a haven for their key players in case things went south. Their army is mobile, but I don't think their strategists are moving with them. They're using low-key operatives to lead attacks, even against the outposts. Since Smythe died, someone else has been pulling the strings, and I doubt it's Barnes. We need answers."

My gaze shifted to King. He sat quietly. His lips curved into a small, reassuring grin, and something warm settled inside me. He would have my back no matter what. If my decision wasn't the right one, he'd be the first to let me know. That's what mates were for.

I pushed aside the lingering self-doubt. A mother doesn't have the luxury of second-guessing herself. It was time to act.

"How many men?" Cabel asked.

“Four of us, Labyrinth, Alden, King, and me. That’s it,” I replied.

Beck’s fist slammed against the table, the loud impact drawing our attention. Ms. Beast rumbled in response, but I ignored her. King’s Beast energy spiked beside me, reacting to Beck’s outburst. I turned my alpha stare on Beck. He didn’t need to agree with my decision, but he would follow orders.

“You, Cabel, and Nokita are mated,” I said. “You’re staying on the island.” I tried not to grit my teeth. “If we don’t return, you’ll take over as Alpha, with Nokita and Cabel as your seconds. Too many people depend on us. We need a contingency plan, and this is it.”

I hadn’t discussed this part with King, but the warmth in his eyes told me he agreed.

Beck rose from his chair, his fury unmistakable even though he wouldn’t meet my eyes. “I’ll be back shortly,” he ground out with restrained anger.

“Sit down,” I barked, my voice dipping into a deeper Nova tone that surprised even me. I hadn’t known I could summon it at will. “Save your sulking for later. We need you here.” It was an order.

Beck’s chest rose and fell as he exhaled sharply, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. After a moment, he looked at King and seemed to deflate. “I wouldn’t have let you go without me. Bring her back alive. The last thing I want is to rule. If you get yourself killed,” he turned to me then, “don’t expect me to start meetings with meditation.”

The tension in the room shifted as the sharp spike of K-5 eased. I turned to Nokita, waiting for his response. He dipped his head in acceptance. Cabel nodded. I looked at Labyrinth, and he grinned. Alden saluted.

Our plan was straightforward: get in, get out. Additional men would increase the risk of failure. I had to make hard choices, and this was our best option.

When they eventually discovered I was pregnant, my decisions would come under closer scrutiny. Too bad. Being queen came with at least one perk, and keeping the mated men alive was the one I chose to claim.

Over the next two hours, we looked at images of the Federation stronghold where I had worked and where they housed the government. Before I turned Shadow Warrior, King had a human man on the inside. He strategically took the photos with an old camera. Thankfully, darkroom equipment was alive and well on the island. King had also commanded several night flyovers for aerial photography. It had been extremely dangerous, but the combined photos painted a picture.

Those images showed no movement in any direction, beginning a week before they blew the tunnels. My division in analytics was unaware of any movement at all, though there were rumors. The way I saw it, key departments were moved out one by one. In analytics, they gave us lies to work with, and we would have been on the tail end of movement. We estimated roughly five thousand people were relocated. They could not have gone far. The number did not include the military.

As analysts, we worked on the basis that there were roughly ten thousand military personnel, two-thirds being red stripes. As red stripes died, more were brought in. I'd never dwelled too much on where they came from, and the word volunteer was always used. What would I have done back then if I knew they were forced to join or were killed?

No, I had to stop doubting the old Marinah. I was past it. The numbers we had before could not be relied on today. We had to think double the military personnel. And also add double well-trained soldiers to the tally. We had no choice but to deal with it.

The answer for why they blew the tunnels had been in front of us all along, but we had not taken the time to truly study the photos. Adding to that, the Federation troops had three small encampments within a mile of each other. After what I thought of as the stronghold blew, they seemed to hold little significance. Now I realized what I thought were small camps were actually camouflage. The real might of their military was below ground. The camps had never been big enough to concern us, though outposts had people keeping an eye on them.

The latest intelligence had many troops going in and out without the size of the camps changing. From the metro system, government bunkers, utility and pedestrian tunnels to the old D.C. trolley system that had been abandoned in 1962, the Federation had what amounted to a large major city below ground. What we were dealing with was daunting, but this was our best chance to examine their infrastructure.

We discussed each possible contingency for hours. I glanced at each of my guards, no longer willing to argue with King about who belonged to whom. These men would die for me, and I would die for them.

“We leave in six hours,” I said. “That will give us just enough time to shave our heads.” We were tired and hungry, but the countdown had begun

The Island (Cuba)

King

“You’d think your power was in your hair, the way you whiny babies are handling this,” Marinah said as she looked at us. “When this is done, I’ll start calling you Samson One, Two and Three?”

Personally, I had resigned myself to my fate; it had just taken a bit longer for the others. She leveled them with her alpha stare, pulled out her sword, and hacked off a section of her braids without a second thought. The men caved after that, shooting me pitiful looks while we sheared our heads. Beck had wisely kept his mouth shut the entire time. Maylin finally stepped in to clean up the disaster we created.

Six hours later, I settled in my seat on the plane. The looks on Alden and Labyrinth’s faces mirrored my own. We were unrecognizable as Warriors without our hair. Honestly, I’d rather have dressed in pink, but no way would I say that out loud.

Without thought, I ran my hand over what I considered prickly stubble on my head. Marinah’s hand landed on my opposite arm, and I pulled her close so she could rest her head on my shoulder. “Sleep,” I whispered, threading my fingers through her short hair, which was maybe an inch longer than mine.

Her wicked eyes followed the movement of my other hand rubbing my nearly bald head. “Poor furbaby,” she teased. “It’ll grow back, I promise.”

“What did you just call me?” I asked, feigning indignation.

Her laughter filled the plane. Labyrinth and Alden glanced over, both rubbing their shaved heads. “We really need sleep,” she said when her laughter faded.

“As you wish,” I replied, closing my eyes.

We had an eleven-hour flight to reach the drop point. I faded in and out. After a few hours, sleep was overrated, or at least Labyrinth thought so. He had questions about the female Warrior who had given Marinah the journal. He said that he and Alden planned to travel to the Shadow women and return with mates. Of course, the women had a choice. I wasn’t as sure about their choice as Labyrinth was, but they were on a mission to find their own Marinahs, and who was I to deny them?

It also reminded me of Nokita speaking about a future without war and death, a vision that felt almost impossible. Beck was happy with Missy, and I was sure they’d have a child soon. Cabel’s wife was expecting their first baby any day now. Alden and Labyrinth deserved their own happiness, but I couldn’t help wondering if there would ever be a time without war. It had been woven into my life for too long.

As a child, I’d known I was different. I wasn’t meant to be a farmer. The last thing I wanted was to grow up and work the land. After my first shift to Warrior, I spent a year resenting my Beast. It was Uncle Greystone who saved me, who showed me what I was capable of and what I was made for.

War. It made for a bleak future when I actually considered it.

When we finally reached the drop point, we parachuted in as humans, our shaved heads and outpost daily wear helped to sell the deception after we were on solid land. If someone from the Federation saw us, we wanted them to see what looked like ordinary outpost citizens, not the real threat we posed. If they saw us parachute, all bets were off.

After landing safely, bundling our chutes, and hiding them, I turned and scanned Marinah from head to toe. There was nothing left of the frightened woman I encountered when she first came to the island. Her eyes met mine. She carried more strength than all of us combined. If anyone could bring an end to war, it was her. With her by my side, I wouldn't be a farmer, but we would find something that settled us both.

Marinah's plan was straightforward: if we couldn't get the president, we'd take a lesser official, someone who might have the answers we needed. We also hoped it was someone we could use as a bargaining chip though information was our key goal.

The escape, however, was the messy part of the mission. Whoever we kidnapped wouldn't stay quiet during the extraction. Marinah had come up with the idea of using Federation uniforms, and while I didn't have a better plan, it still felt dicey. We'd likely have to use the hostage, or hostages, as shields. This mission relied on a mix of stealth and the unexpected. While it wasn't perfect, it was the best we had.

We had landed about fifty miles from the first enemy encampment and set out at a steady jog. Labyrinth and Alden carried a large, insulated box with extra equipment and clothing, which included the Federation uniforms we'd gathered after the attack on the island.

We found an old gas station on the edge of the city. Marinah, Alden, and Labyrinth changed out of the fatigues and into plain uniforms with red stripes on one arm. I wore an officer's uniform that was in good condition with no holes. We figured the man had been taken out by a percussion round. It was a little tight, but Marinah said there were few uniforms that would fit me, and we got lucky that this one was close. I caught her eyes after I slipped on the shirt. She winked and whispered, "Later, baby cakes." With a look in her eyes that should have mine glowing.

We had to blend in to execute the next stage of the plan. Marinah gave us an overall

inspection. Beast didn't like it when her eyes went to Labyrinth and Alden, but I shoved him back.

"The idea is for you to appear human," Marinah said. "It would help if you shrank six inches, lost fifty pounds, and maybe scowled a bit less. It's okay for King in the officer's uniform, but the rest of us are just dumb fodder, ready to die with smiles on our faces. In the name of country and all that."

Alden snickered, clearly not accustomed to Marinah's brand of battle humor.

"Dismissed," she said with a cheeky smile.

"Isn't that my line?" I snapped back with my own grin.

"You'll get your chance, big boy."

We stashed the insulated box behind the gas station, in dense shrubbery. If at all possible, we planned to pick it up after completing the mission and heading to the rendezvous point.

We entered the soldier-filled camp thirty minutes later. With our size, it was hard not to draw attention. The key was to act like we belonged, and that's exactly what we did. Our destination was a small brick building to the east, maybe twenty by twenty. Small groups of soldiers entered and left the building at regular intervals, but they weren't carrying food or gear. It only made sense if it was connected to the tunnel system.

A large group of soldiers drilled on the west side of camp; their young faces eager to impress despite the inevitability of death. I didn't know why Marinah had spared the red stripe who attacked us. Sometimes she hesitated when it came to killing, and that was dangerous. The hesitation came from her human side, warped from too many

years of brainwashing. Or maybe it was the fact that she was a female Shadow Warrior. I still dwelled on thoughts of peace from my conversation with Nokita. The females left the males for a reason. I didn't want to be that reason, but our future seemed cemented in war.

I opened the heavy steel door at the entrance to the small building. A soldier almost ran into me. He was a foot shorter, probably in his twenties, his attention focused elsewhere. "Pardon me, sir," he said, snapping a salute. I gave him the expected response along with a slight grunt for inconveniencing me. He moved on without another glance.

The room was dark, with small lights at knee level marking a path to the stairs. Marinah, Labyrinth, and Alden followed me silently as we descended. The sidewalls were steel making it perfect when it came to repelling hellhounds. Marinah had been right. The Federation had been hiding underground for a long time. We would have eventually figured it out, but I gave Marinah all the credit.

Voices echoed from below, and I heard someone ask, "Are you hitting the party tonight?"

A party. I'd forgotten how the Federation operated. Invade the Shadow Warrior island, try to kill them all, then throw a party even if they lost. I inhaled slowly, suppressing the K-5 from rising to the surface.

After two flights of stairs, we reached a long, narrow tunnel that stretched in both directions. We turned right, passing closed doors on either side until we arrived at a central area. It was a busy cafeteria filled with soldiers milling about. They sat in groups, talking and laughing. They were safe in their confined world and paid us no attention.

We crossed to a single door that led to who knows where and stepped into another

long hallway. It was empty.

“We need somewhere secure,” Marinah whispered.

“We could go back and check out the rooms down the first hallway,” I suggested.

“No, we move forward. They’re having a party tonight. Let’s crash it.”

In the midst of the enemy, Alden and Labyrinth smiled.

About fifty yards later, the hallway ended, and we entered a massive rotunda. The glossy marble floors reflected sparkling lights from the ceiling. The Federation’s emblem took up one wall, an official sign of domination. This had to be the government section of their underground complex: fewer soldiers and more opulence. Several men, paying no attention to us, wore actual suits.

“Wearing suits in the current world is ridiculous,” I growled under my breath. Idiots. It was also ridiculous that women here were dressed in skirts including short ones like what Marinah wore when they sent her to the island. They were each young and pretty. My thoughts shifted to Marinah. She had told me once that she’d worn military fatigues. Her so-called analytics job had been a complete sham.

“We’ll place the band here,” a man said, standing about twenty feet away. He held a clipboard, not a gun. Beast grumbled in my chest at the stupidity.

I crossed the room like I owned it and headed toward an exit door, which led to another hallway with rooms on either side. I started checking doors until I found one unlocked. I opened it, glanced inside, and we entered.

Folded tables and chairs were stacked against two walls. It was a storage room.

“They’re having a party,” Marinah hissed.

“With a band,” Labyrinth added.

We all smiled. It wasn’t that we didn’t celebrate on the island. The harvest festival had become a yearly tradition. The humans partied while the Shadow Warriors stood guard. It was our job to keep them safe.

“Hopefully, it will be a large party and President Barnes attends,” Alden said.

A heavy “Humph” escaped Marinah’s throat. “He’ll be here. There’s no way he would dream of missing a chance for pomp and circumstance.”

“Are those verbs?” Alden asked her with a grin.

“They are now,” Marinah replied, heading to the back of the room where another door was located. We followed her. The smaller room was about six by six, with a sink and cabinets lining one wall. “We’ll wait in here until the party starts. If they come in for tables, they might not open this door, and we’re good,” she said, then looked at Alden, who stood closest to the door. “Kill them if they do enter and ask questions later.”

My mate was definitely wound tight and on the bloodthirsty side right now.

She turned to Labyrinth. “Find another way back to the tunnel we came in through. We may not be able to go through the converted ballroom when we leave.”

Marinah gave me the look after he left. For her, the hard part was waiting for the action. I didn’t care for it either, but I’d done it more times than she had. We sat silently; in case someone entered the first room. I clasped her hand, and she gripped mine back.

Labyrinth returned within twenty minutes.

“The hallways form a square around the government’s main room, now set up as a ballroom,” he explained. “If we go in the opposite direction from where we entered, there are stairs leading to an area above ground. Each hallway has a separate exit to a different military camp. I’m unsure where the fourth set of stairs leads.”

We wouldn’t worry about it on this trip.

We sat quietly again. An hour later, someone entered the outer room. It was more than one person by the sound of it. We stood and went on high alert, with Alden at the door. They shuffled tables and chairs and avoided death by staying on their side of the wall.

“If we go in as Warriors, terror will be on our side,” I said softly to Marinah once the crew had left the outer room. It was a conversation we had back on the island, but I was trying one last time.

“We don’t know if they’ll shoot,” she whispered. “They had no problem killing their red stripes. We need to at least try to get President Barnes out of camp without alerting anyone.”

The outside door opened again, and we went quiet. Someone moved a few chairs, muttering a soft curse. Marinah stepped closer to Alden and leaned into the door, turning the handle carefully before cracking it open an inch.

Without warning, she burst into the outer room. A short scream echoed, cut off almost instantly. I was at the door fast enough to see Marinah break the woman’s neck. She caught the body, lowered it silently to the floor, and dragged it into the smaller room.

She looked up at me, and for the first time, I saw something in her expression that I hadn't seen before. It said she understood war now, really understood it. People died so we could live. It was them or us, and there was no time for second-guessing.

I cocked my head, silently asking what she was doing.

"I need a dress for the party," Marinah said softly. No sadness showed over the life she'd taken, just determination. I glanced down at the woman. She was, in fact, wearing a black gown.

"Black won't show as much blood," Marinah added.

Marinah wasn't the same woman she had been by a long shot, and she was thinking purely as our leader.

We stripped the dress off the body and turned our backs while she changed clothes.

"I'm decent," she finally said.

I tried not to smile as I watched her struggle to stay upright in the heels. She wobbled slightly, but she caught herself before falling.

"If I break a leg, leave me behind," she declared.

One: she was beautiful in the dress. Two: she was taller than the woman she'd taken it from, which made the fit imperfect. The slit at the side was indecent when she walked, something she was still trying to do with a bit more grace. She saw me looking and slid the fabric aside, revealing her knife strapped to the opposite leg.

I glanced at Alden and Labyrinth. The looks on their faces made Beast growl. Labyrinth winked and turned away. Alden quickly turned his head, but I didn't miss

the grin tugging at his lips. They knew I was mostly in full control of the mating rage, and they were jerking my chain.

“What do you think?” Marinah asked, catching my attention and turning slowly. She lifted her leg and stuck it out in a vampish pose. My eyes burned as they traveled over her body.

“I prefer your boots,” I said, which might have been a lie. In truth, I preferred her in Warrior form, or naked when she was human, but that was just me.

She stuck her tongue out. “Party pooper.”

She preferred her boots too. I was half-surprised she hadn’t named them yet. I was still waiting to hear what she’d named her sword. Honestly, if she told me she’d named her big toe Adam, I’d roll with it. My mate loved ownership, and her way was to baptize what she coveted.

She took another short trip around the room, finding her balance, and looked like she’d been born for the heels.

We waited another two hours. Marinah eventually slipped out of the shoes, muttering about how much they hurt her feet. I fought back a grin. An hour into our wait, the band started playing, and the muffled music drifted into our hiding spot. We stayed put, knowing the timing had to be perfect. We needed the celebration in full swing.

“It’s party time, boys,” Marinah finally said.

We each knew the plan inside out. Dressed in our standard Federation uniforms, we’d stand out too much in the ballroom, so we were staying behind. The mission rested on Marinah now. Her job was to locate President Barnes.

She left with sultry eyes that needed no makeup, short hair giving her sophistication, her posture elegant, and perfectly balanced on the shoes.

Marinah

I struggled to hide my feelings from King. I'd just killed a woman for her dress. In order to do it, I'd brought Ms. Beast to the forefront, but I did it knowing the outcome. Who was I and did I want to be this person? I looked at my hands and saw the slightly trembling fingers. I needed to leave the guilt behind and bring it out when danger had past.

I straightened my shoulders and steadied my hands. I didn't see how we would get out of this without killing again. I could only hope there was more cause than a dress.

I looked around the rotunda. The party turned my stomach. Starvation, death, and helplessness plagued the world while these people laughed, drank alcohol, and pretended they lived in a different era. As I strolled slowly around the room, several men smiled at me with inquisitive looks. I met their eyes and gave assessing smiles of my own while projecting confidence.

You belong. I silently repeated like a mantra.

It took twenty minutes for President Barnes to make his appearance with his wife on his arm. I'd forgotten about her. She was more than the first lady. She was a scientist like her husband, and her perfectly styled hair and regal posture made it seem as though the world belonged to her alone. Her sparkling jewelry mocked the hardships outside these walls. She lived in another reality entirely.

I had never liked her. I always thought she kept her distance from most of the government's workings. But whenever I saw her, I felt like a lab rat under scrutiny. I

hadn't been able to place the feeling then, but I understood it now. She looked down her regal nose at everyone. I used to respect the Barneses. Now, I was disgusted by everything they represented. No, I didn't like this woman.

A small ache went through me again over the dress I was wearing. The memory of snapping the woman's neck made me cringe. I had to convince myself that it was necessary. This was life or death and we had a purpose. The Federation had attacked our home and I had no doubt they would have killed the women and children on the island like they had at the outposts.

We couldn't turn back now. This plan was mine, and we were all getting out of here alive.

I moved carefully through the crowd, following President Barnes and his wife as they greeted guests. I kept people between us to avoid being seen by the president. The possibility that someone here might recognize me was real, but my short hair helped, as did the sheer improbability of my presence in this place.

Mrs. Barnes was dressed in a green sequined gown, her hair piled high with carefully placed wisps seeming to break free. She had a thin face with high cheekbones and elegant, long fingers with several diamond rings flashing on them as she walked. Earrings adorned her lobes, and an inch-wide diamond collar surrounded her throat. Did she even know there was a war going on?

"You're new." The man had approached me from behind. His dark hair was cut short though not in military fashion. He didn't radiate power like an officer, but you could see in his eyes that he thought himself better than most people in the room. I had no doubt he was another politician. "Are you part of the entertainment?" he asked suggestively.

It took me a moment to understand. Then I realized some of the women here were

brought in for entertainment of a sexual nature.

Kill , Ms. Beast said forcefully. I shoved her back without giving an internal response.

He leaned closer. "I like them tall," he whispered and placed his hand possessively on my waist.

Ms. Beast roiled inside me, and it took everything I had not to grab my knife, turn, and slice his throat. Unfortunately, I would lose what little advantage I had.

"I'm a guest for a special gentleman," I said, moving enough to disconnect from his touch.

He looked me up and down in appreciation. "Pity," he said and immediately grew bored and moved on.

As a Shadow Warrior, even before becoming alpha, I was just as important as any man. The women on the island were treated the same way. If they decided to join our protection squads, they were equal to the men. We even had men who preferred to cook, clean, and take care of children while the parents worked. Everyone held a job, but they all had a choice as to what that work entailed.

I had no idea why I thought bringing in women for entertainment was something in the distant past. How wrong I was and how horrible to think nothing had changed after so much war and destruction. I had to clear my mind and work, but anger seethed beneath the surface of my skin.

I needed to be closer to Barnes, but by following them, I could draw attention to myself. I casually looked toward the main door like I was waiting for someone. I tapped the toe of my shoe against the shiny tile to the beat of the soft music. The

game was wearing thin, and time was not on my side.

Mrs. Barnes eventually separated from her husband and headed toward the doors at the far end of the ballroom. I decided to follow. Beyond the first door, I found two more, marked as restrooms. She entered the one marked “Madam.”

Even the bathroom was nicer than anything I saw while working for the Federation. A bank of sinks rested against one wall. It all looked shiny and new. Mrs. Barnes was in one of the stalls and I slid into the one next to hers.

“Could you pass some tissue?” she asked, her voice slightly disgusted as she extended her hand beneath the divider. Apparently, the cleaning crew hadn’t bothered to stock toilet paper before the party, and someone would be in big trouble if her tone was any indication.

I pulled some from the roll and handed it over.

“I can recommend my manicurist,” she said casually after she grabbed it.

I glanced down at my broken, misshapen nails. It had never occurred to me to do anything about them. The idea that someone still had a manicurist during an apocalypse was fucking pathetic. This woman was emblematic of the sickness that had invaded our country, spreading hatred and destruction. I felt less for her than I had for the woman I’d killed earlier for a dress.

What I wanted was simple: for my child to grow up in a safe world.

The toilet flushed beside me. If I stayed in the stall, she would leave. If I walked out, there was a chance she’d recognize me. My next decision seemed to come from nowhere, but it settled like iron in my chest. Mrs. Barnes was now the target.

Sliding my knife from its sheath, I threw the stall door open.

Her startled expression lasted only a moment before it twisted into a scream. I cut it off with an arm around her throat, pressing the diamond collar into her skin while pressing the tip of the knife just below it. A small whimper escaped, but nothing more. I shoved her hip into the counter and turned her so she could see my eyes in the mirror.

“You have two choices,” I said in a cold, thick voice that spoke volumes. “Come with me quietly or die where you stand.”

I had no problem killing her, and I wouldn’t need to depend on Ms. Beast to do the job. There was no middle ground here. If she needed to die, I would kill her and stuff her in the garbage can below the counter. I actually liked the idea.

She gave a very subtle nod, her eyes round globes of hatred.

“You will walk out of here with your new best friend,” I continued when she remained quiet. “I don’t care if I die, but I promise you’ll go first. Head to the east hallway like we have a destination planned. If you deviate, I’ll slit your throat and turn into a ten-foot monster. That monster will kill your husband and anyone else who stands in my way.”

Her body trembled, but I didn’t let up. “If you haven’t noticed, there’s a war going on. You should have guards at these events, but you’re so confident in your safety that your husband forgot that simple detail. You both make me sick, and I would love nothing more than to kill you. Give me an excuse, please.” I drew out the last word.

I could barely lock my jaw in place when I thought about this entire event. As I’d circled the ballroom, I hadn’t seen a single armed guard.

Mrs. Barnes' eyes narrowed into hard pinpoints as she realized exactly who I was.

"You're a disgusting animal, and my husband will kill you," she spat.

"Not before I kill you." My tone was ice-cold, daring her to test me. I watched as her expression shifted, her mind clearly calculating her chances. She didn't think I'd go through with it.

"I won't just kill you," I said, letting heat seep into my voice. "I'll eat your organs and spit out the bones. You mean nothing to me. I am a monster, and I have no problem proving it."

Her expression faltered, and fear flickered though she tried to hide it. For the first time since I put the knife at her throat, she believed me. She gave another nod.

We left the restroom and the next several minutes felt like an eternity. I kept the knife low, hidden between us as we walked. At one point, she hesitated, her body tensing as if she might call out to a group of people we passed. I gave her a jab with the tip of the blade. It was precise, and the knife was sharp enough that she inhaled harshly in response, her composure breaking for a second.

"Keep walking," I whispered, barely moving my lips.

No one stopped us. A few people nodded in our direction, their obliviousness both shocking and infuriating. My smile stayed firmly in place, masking the tension rippling through me. I expected someone to call out at any moment, or for her husband to alert someone that his wife hadn't returned from the restroom. I looked up and saw him whispering something in a younger woman's ear. She wore a very tight dress with more skin showing than material and I understood why he wasn't missing his wife.

We reached the hallway and I steered Mrs. Barnes with a firm grip on her arm and directed her quickly toward the storage room. She stumbled and I grabbed her higher, almost at the shoulder and half-dragged her along.

As soon as we were inside, I slammed the door shut and shoved her against the wall, my hand pressing into her throat again. The men emerged silently from the smaller room; their eyes locked on me.

“Meet Mrs. Barnes,” I said. “She’ll be coming with us.”

“You’ll never get me out of here,” she snapped with sudden defiance.

“Night, night,” I said, my tone dripping with mockery. I delivered a calculated punch to her jaw, watching as her body went limp and slumped to the floor. Her head hit with a resounding thud. Oops. I probably should have caught her.

There wasn’t time to change out of the dress. President Barnes would eventually send people looking for her. I kicked off the shoes as Labyrinth checked the hallway. King cradled Mrs. Barnes in his arms like she was a drunk partygoer who’d had one too many glasses of champagne.

I wiped the blood from her nose with my dress, glancing down to see if it was noticeable. I winked at King, smirking. “It hardly shows.” I turned my focus back to the mission ahead.

We posed as Mrs. Barnes’ guards, holding her upright with her feet barely touching the floor. It was our best chance to get out in one piece. Leaving was always going to be the deadliest part of the plan.

Our target exit was down the third hallway. We made it through one corridor before running into a group of partygoers.

“Mrs. Barnes,” one of them said, stopping abruptly.

He was dressed in a suit, and the women dressed for the party. I hit the woman, who fell down hard and didn’t move, while King broke the man’s neck. We kept moving. The exit was within sight when an ear-splitting alarm blared through the compound. Charging up the stairs, we burst into the camp above. Chaos quickly erupted, and soldiers ran in every direction, assuming the alarm meant an external attack. We ducked behind a line of cargo containers, taking a brief moment to choose the best escape route.

Labyrinth pointed to another group of crumbled buildings in the distance. If we stayed low and undetected, we might have a chance. I took the lead, with King behind me, followed by Alden, who held Mrs. Barnes, and Labyrinth covering the rear.

Twenty yards from our destination, bullets started firing in our direction. We sprinted toward the container. A bullet zipped so close to my head that it scorched my cheek. Now that they’d noticed us, we were sitting ducks, and they didn’t realize who we had with us as a hostage.

The cluster of crumbled buildings was thirty yards away. Vehicle lights flickered on behind us, and the gunfire intensified. We left cover and ran as we shifted form, tearing off our military uniforms that we no longer needed. I pushed past Ms. Beast entirely, going full Nova. She didn’t even grumble. The shift gave us the speed and stamina we needed to keep moving after we made it behind the crumpled building.

The heart of the ruined city was our only chance now. Our rendezvous point was a highway in the opposite direction from where we were running. The hope was that the Federation would lose our trail and assume we were headed for the airstrip outside the city.

We were planning to fly out right under their noses. Once they realized what we’d

done and stuck those noses in the air to see us, I hoped they got nosebleeds and bled to death. Nova had no problem with that scenario.

“Marinah, stop!” King’s voice cut through my thoughts.

I turned in time to see Labyrinth stumble and fall.

King

Marinah hoisted Labyrinth over her shoulder as if he weighed forty pounds instead of close to five hundred. The black dress hung in tatters, barely covering her massive Nova form.

Mrs. Barnes groaned and opened her groggy eyes as I set her on her feet, giving her a moment to steady herself. She stumbled forward, crying, sniffing, and squealing as she tried to run away. All traces of presidential bravado were gone. I met her once when we fought for the Federation. Her superiority complex had stayed in my memory. With an exasperated growl, I grabbed her, flipping her over my shoulder in the same way Marinah carried Labyrinth. Her shriek was music to my ears, but the noise was a liability. I slapped the back of her exposed thighs hard enough to make her shriek again. She quickly decided silence was the better option.

We made it to the buildings, weaved through them, and found a path leading through trees. We took off without stopping. Thirty minutes later, we went in the opposite direction at full speed. Labyrinth wasn't moving, but it was my hope that he didn't want to make things harder for Marinah. The woman I carried struggled and received another slap, this one harder.

It took an hour to reach the rendezvous point. Mrs. Barnes crumpled to the ground the moment I set her down. I didn't bother helping her up. She could rest there and wallow in her misery.

Alden's gaze stayed locked on the president's wife. "Don't eat her," I said sharply before turning away.

Marinah, still in Nova form, crouched beside Labyrinth. Her top half was soaked in blood where Labyrinth had rested against her during the run. It was too much blood, far too much.

Her jaws parted, and she spoke through them, her voice rough. “Shathow breathing.”

Labyrinth had been shot multiple times, his chest a mangled mass of torn flesh. He shouldn’t even have been alive. I knelt beside him, and his pain-filled eyes fluttered open, locking onto Marinah.

“My queen,” he whispered, his voice weak.

“Reth,” she murmured softly, as if she didn’t even realize she was still in Nova form.

“I’ll rest when I’m dead,” he said, forcing a smile before blood bubbled from his lips. He coughed more blood.

Marinah glanced at me; her grief visible even in her larger, animalistic eyes. I placed my hand gently on Labyrinth’s arm, the weight of loss already settling over me.

“Be at peace, my friend,” I said quietly.

“No,” Marinah demanded. Labyrinth’s gaze remained on hers, and his massive jaws opened. “If you have a boy, name him after me.”

The light in his eyes faded.

Marinah made a low sound that sent chills across my skin. She gathered him in her arms and made the sound again. Even in her grief, she knew she couldn’t alert Federation soldiers.

In the distance, I heard the plane's engines and exhaled in relief.

I had to get Marinah back to the island.

Marinah

Ms. Beast paced inside me, her feet stomping angrily across Nova's intestines. Protect, she whispered over and over, her voice a constant pressure in my mind. I sat at the back of the plane, holding tightly to Labyrinth. Somehow, he was meshed with the baby inside my brain. I had to get Labyrinth to Axel. Axel would fix him. He had to.

For a brief moment, I tried shifting back to human form. The pain was unbearable, and it simply wouldn't happen. Keeping Labyrinth safe was more important than my discomfort. My mate checked on me often, and I bared my teeth at him. I couldn't sleep. Internally, I begged Labyrinth to hold on and glared at the men when they looked at me. I disregarded the sadness in their eyes. They knew nothing.

When we landed on the island airfield, a vehicle waited. Carefully, I stood with Labyrinth, cradling him as I carried him to the Jeep. Even during the drive to the citadel, I didn't let him go, keeping his limp body on my lap.

My thoughts were fragmented. Nova was in control, and I finally understood something I hadn't before. She wasn't just about rage and destruction. She was part of me—a side that had always been there.

Protect, Ms. Beast whispered again.

I carried Labyrinth into the citadel, taking him straight to the infirmary. Axel looked up from a young man he was treating as I entered. Gently, I rolled Labyrinth onto one of the beds, but his body didn't land right. He was stiff, too stiff. Axel walked over;

concern etched on his face.

“Fixth,” I said, the word slurred between my fangs.

Axel hesitated, glancing over my shoulder. I turned and saw my mate standing there, no expression on his face.

“Fixth,” I demanded again, louder this time. All eyes in the room were now on me.

“Marinah,” Axel said with so much sorrow. “I can’t fix him.”

The words snapped something inside me. My hand shot out, claws curling inward just in time, and I struck Axel in the chest with my fist. He flew back several feet, crashing into a tray of supplies.

I stepped toward him, rage boiling beneath my skin, but my mate’s hand landed firmly on my shoulder. “He’s gone, Marinah,” he said gently, but it didn’t quite break through the haze.

“No. Fixth!” I roared, my voice shaking the room.

“Give her something,” my mate snapped at Axel as he struggled to stand.

“I can’t,” Axel said, his voice filled with regret.

“If you don’t, I’ll send you across the room again, and this time you won’t get up so fast,” King yelled, his anger no longer contained.

I turned to look at Labyrinth on the bed, and his lifeless form blurred in my vision. My head spun, and my knees buckled. I thought I felt my mate catch me, but I couldn’t be sure. Everything went dark.

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A nightmare jolted me awake.

I was in our room, disoriented for a moment. Then my thoughts went to King. Rolling over, I saw him sitting beside the bed in a chair he'd pulled close. His blue eyes were dark, simmering with anger, and they suggested terrible things. I lifted my hands. I had human fingers, no claws. My gaze flicked back to King.

"You said nothing," he said with accusation.

"Axel told you," I replied evenly.

King shot to his feet, pacing across the room. My eyes followed him as he moved. He stopped and stared at the wall, and I wondered if he was going to put his boot through the plaster. I should have felt bad. I tried to summon some guilt but came up empty.

"I'm Alpha. Pregnancy doesn't change that," I said, wishing my voice sounded stronger.

His entire body snapped toward me, but he didn't move closer. That wasn't a good sign.

"Your Nova wouldn't let anyone near Labyrinth, not even me. You wouldn't shift back. What the fucking hell, Marinah?"

Oops. Someone had dropped a very bad word. I placed my hand over my stomach, and his eyes followed the movement. "Nova was in protective mode," I explained. "I think Ms. Beast was controlling her."

"You think?" His voice rose as he took a single step in my direction, his eyes still

locked on my stomach, but he stopped himself. “We went on a dangerous mission. You risked your life and the future of the Shadow Warriors.”

That was the wrong thing to say.

“I’m not some engineered baby factory.” The anger grew inside me. “You and Beck have done nothing but pound into me that I’m in charge,” I spat. “Well, it finally sank in. I will make the best decisions for my people. Get used to it. Axel telling you I was pregnant was not how I wanted this going down.” My voice had risen with each word.

“How exactly did you want this to go down?” he yelled back.

I had never seen him this furious. His fists clenched, and red crept up his neck. If I wasn’t careful, he might give himself an aneurysm.

“We had a limited window to get Barnes, and you know it as well as I do,” I said, glaring at him. “We had to go in when they least expected it.”

King took another step toward me, then stopped abruptly. He turned on his heel and marched out of the room without saying another word. Sadness settled over me like a heavy weight. I hated fighting with him. But I had made my decision knowing he would be furious. I had understood the risks, and if I’d thought he would be reasonable, we could have discussed it.

Doubt crept in. King might have even agreed mine was the only way, dammit. I hadn’t given him that chance. I’d taken it away from him.

My thoughts drifted to Labyrinth. His incredible eyes that were now lost to the world. “If you have a boy, name him after me,” he had said before he died. Even through the haze of Nova’s influence, his words had touched something deep inside me.

The hole in my soul left by the Shadow Warriors who died when the Federation attacked was nothing compared to Labyrinth's death. He had plans. He wanted a future and a Shadow Warrior bride. Tears ran down my face.

I gave myself a few minutes, wiped them away, and rose from the bed, craving something I rarely did: comfort. It was also time to take Ruth and Che out of confinement and give their mothers a break. It would give me something else to think about.

Missy answered the door, her red-rimmed, swollen eyes meeting mine. Without a word, she pulled me into the room, wrapping her arms around me in a tight hug. From the corner of my eye, I saw Ruth peek out from behind her bedroom door. The moment she saw me; she jerked back and slammed it shut. Apparently, no one was happy with me today.

"I need to speak with you," I told Missy.

"Hopefully, you're taking me off restriction, because I can't stand it any longer," she replied, wiping her eyes and attempting a weak smile. She had told me once that restriction didn't work as punishment for Ruth because the child made everyone else miserable instead. I hadn't thought about that when I'd sent the children to their quarters.

"Has the confinement been that bad?" I asked.

"Worse."

"I'm pregnant," I blurted.

Missy's mouth dropped open.

“King hates me,” I added, and then, to my own surprise, I burst into sobs.

The Island (Cuba)

King

I headed to the training field and beat down every challenger who dared step forward for the next two hours. By the time I was done, my men looked at me with something close to fear. I was going to be a father, and I should have been ecstatic, but all I felt was terror, an emotion I wasn't accustomed to. Strangling my mate seemed like it might help.

A baby.

We could have lost our child before I even knew he or she existed.

My thoughts circled back to strangulation.

When I finally left the field, my men practically collapsed with relief. I headed back to my room to shower, grateful that Marinah had found somewhere else to be. I needed time before I dealt with her again. After a quick shower, I dressed in fresh clothes and stepped out of the room.

Labyrinth's body was in his quarters, awaiting the funeral that would take place tonight alongside the ceremonies for the Shadow Warriors we'd lost during the Federation's attack. Outside his door, Beck, Nokita, Cabel, and Alden stood in unity.

"Marinah is with him," Beck said sharply, his tone rebuking. He was still angry he hadn't gone on the mission with us. Marinah had made the right decision about which

men to take, and I wouldn't fault her for it. She's the one who shouldn't have been with us.

I placed a hand on the doorknob and hesitated. I wasn't ready to face her. But I turned the handle and stepped inside anyway.

The bed took up one wall, and Marinah was on her knees on the floor, her body leaning over Labyrinth's legs. Her shoulders shook, and it didn't take long to realize she was crying.

The anger I'd been holding onto disintegrated. I stepped closer and gently placed my hand on her back. At my touch, she rose from the floor and flew into my arms, her sobs breaking free. I held her, letting her cry.

"I know the exact moment he died," she choked out between sobs, "but Nova wouldn't accept it."

I kept rubbing her back, trying to soothe her. "Each time we lose one of our own, they take a piece of us with them," I said softly. "I'm sorry you feel that connection, but it's also what makes you alpha."

She lifted her head, and our eyes met. "I'm sorry," she said. "You had a right to know about the baby."

I pulled her back against my chest, taking a deep breath to steady myself. I loved her. She would always push my buttons, and I would always love her for it. "The men would like some time with their friend," I said gently. "And we need to question Mrs. Barnes."

She leaned down and kissed Labyrinth's cheek. She then grasped my hand like it was a lifeline. We left the room and the men nodded at her when she passed, but she kept

her gaze straight ahead.

Two hallways later, I stopped. Marinah looked up at me with swollen eyes.

“Do you need a break before we question Mrs. Barnes?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No. This is a good time. Don’t let me kill her.”

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“I’m not who you think I am!” Mrs. Barnes protested a second after we entered the room.

“Did your husband engineer the hellhounds?” Marinah demanded without missing a beat.

“No, you don’t understand,” the woman cried as tears formed in her eyes.

Marinah moved faster than I expected. What happened next told me just how close to the edge my mate was. The snap of Mrs. Barnes’ leg reverberated through the room, followed by a piercing, pain-filled scream. When Marinah had broken the soldier’s wrists during the battle, she’d been in Nova form. But now, it was her human form that carried the raw brutality.

Mrs. Barnes whimpered, curling into an awkward ball, her broken leg resting at a grotesque angle. If Marinah snapped her neck, I wouldn’t have had time to save the woman.

“Did your husband engineer the hellhounds?” Marinah repeated, her voice even colder.

“No!” Mrs. Barnes cried; her face contorted with pain. She whimpered when Marinah stepped closer. “I swear I’m telling the truth. Please don’t hurt me again. I’m simply a pawn for the men. They do horrible things to the soldiers. It isn’t my fault, I just wanted to live.” She let out a sound that almost resembled a howl. “They kept me prisoner,” she cried. “My husband is an evil man, and he treated me like dirt. He hated your kind. I’m sorry that the hate leaked into me, but it’s not how I really feel. Please, I can help you,” her eyes shifted quickly between me and Marinah.

Marinah turned abruptly, her expression unreadable, and walked out of the room. I secured the cell door behind us, locking Mrs. Barnes inside before following Marinah.

She moved quickly. I picked up my pace to catch up with her.

“She’s lying,” she said as she marched with angry strides. “You should have seen the disgust in her eyes when she figured out who I was. She cannot be trusted.”

We reached the infirmary door, and Marinah threw it open. The people inside turned their eyes as one. Marinah’s gaze locked on the young soldier she had saved, and she strode toward her. Fear entered her eyes as Marinah closed the distance.

“What is the worst thing the Federation did to you?” Marinah demanded.

The young soldier glanced at me, then back at my mate. Her lips trembled, her terror making it impossible for her to answer.

Marinah inhaled slowly, and something inside her seemed to calm. Even in her rage, she understood that this woman wasn’t the real enemy. I had no idea where she was going with her questioning. I, however, knew she’d figured out something I missed.

“Please answer the question,” Marinah said. “No one will harm you, but I need

answers.”

The woman inhaled just as Marinah had done. Her lips quivered, and tears streamed down her face. “I know what you’re asking,” she replied softly with quivering lips. “They,” she hesitated. “They injected us,” she finally said. “When we die, we become the monsters.”

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:35 pm

Marinah

“Labyrinth wanted a family. He wanted peace,” I said to those gathered to honor him.
“The only way we’ll ever have peace is if we make it.”

Eight Shadow Warriors rested on tall funeral pyres along the shore, their bodies illuminated by the flickering light of the torches. I had ordered that every adult on the island attend the funerals. My speech for Labyrinth was the last one.

I told the islanders and Warriors about the Federation’s atrocities, about how they were turning their soldiers into hellhounds.

Ava, the young soldier we had saved, had shared the horrors I was still struggling to process. Captured as a child, she had been forced into military service. The injections began when she was sixteen. The Federation had experimented on her and others, unsure how much of the poison their bodies could endure. Many of her friends died.

She described the punishment for refusing injections or refusing to fight: execution followed by something worse. Those who resisted were placed inside cages after death, and the red stripes were forced to watch their transformation into hellhounds. According to Ava, death became an even bigger fear. They would do anything to avoid becoming one of the monsters.

After hearing her account, I immediately issued an order: every Federation soldier we kill had to be beheaded immediately.

The weight of what Ava shared still lingered on my mind. The Federation had been

experimenting on humans for years. We had thought they attacked outposts to conscript young men and women for their army. In a way, they did. But once those soldiers were no longer useful, they became fodder, then tools and controlled killing machines.

I looked at the people gathered around me. Translators repeated my words in Spanish for those who hadn't learned English. Most of the islanders were bilingual, but I wanted everyone to fully understand the gravity of what we were facing.

Ruth stood next to Missy in the crowd. Che wasn't with his parents, and I was grateful for that. He had seen enough death in his young life.

I spoke about Labyrinth the man and Labyrinth the Warrior. Somehow, I managed not to cry.

"If you have a boy, name him after me," repeated in my head. I silently made that promise now. Regardless of gender, Labyrinth would be my child's middle name. He or she would grow up knowing who this great Warrior was and what he had sacrificed.

King leaned in close as I lit Labyrinth's pyre. "I'll stay if you need to sleep," he offered.

It was because of the baby, but I shook my head and threaded my fingers through his. This was our job, and Labyrinth deserved our respect. I stood by King's side as the fires burned through the night. Near dawn, Labyrinth was gone.

The walk to our room felt like miles, but I made it. Once inside, I unbuckled my leather straps and tossed them aside. I was about to strip off my pants when King stepped up behind me, his hands resting gently on my stomach.

"I love you," he whispered.

I turned to him, and he pulled me into his arms. The tears came again.

“I promise you,” he whispered against my hair. “Our child will know peace.”

We had Mrs. Barnes as a bargaining chip. We had Shadow Warriors at our side and humans ready to stand with us. We had allies at the outposts. And we had my Nova.

The Federation had no idea what was coming.

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