

MONSTROUS: BOOK SIX

SERAPH



LILY MAYNE

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BOOK SIX

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Beta-reading and editing by [Kate Wood Proofreading](#)

Warning: *This m/m love story contains explicit sexual content and is not suitable for young readers. It also contains non-human genitalia, depictions of violence, serious injury, death, and one instance of violence between the MCs.*

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CHAPTER ONE

S

HELP ME HELP ME HELP ME HELP ME HELP ME HELP ME HELP

HE'S WATCHING ME AGAIN THE ONE WITH THE DEAD GREEN
EYES HE NEVER SPEAKS I NEED HELP PLEASE

HELP ME

CAN'T GET OUT

HELP ME

HURTS

I DON'T WANT IT I HATE IT MAKE IT STOP

CHAPTER TWO

As I sat perfectly still on the lip of the bar's one-storey roof, minding my own business, I heard two voices getting louder below. I immediately recognised Gloam's deep rumble as he and Rig approached.

I didn't make a habit of eavesdropping—especially when it came to Gloam and Rig. They'd only been back for a couple of weeks, but I'd quickly realised most conversations between them devolved into Rig making suggestive comments about Gloam's dick. Or ass. Or horns. Or harness. Or muscles.

Or boots. The boots came up fairly often.

But when I heard the big aytorin mention Seraph—the uncontrollable monster with many eyes and teeth, who vacillated between screaming furiously and silently pacing his cage outside the camp walls—my ears pricked.

"I'm afraid Mary's journals told me nothing about how to help Seraph, my love."

Gloam sounded concerned. I knew he genuinely cared about what happened to the beastie, who had been kept in Collector Mary's monster menagerie back west and injected regularly with an unknown substance given to her by the military. And I knew there was only a limited number of doses left.

"What?" Rig sounded heartbroken.

My mouth quirked behind my mask. He was far too soft and eager to help everyone, even those who couldn't be helped. There was no way he would have survived the Wastes if Ghost hadn't found him all those years ago.

"Nothing at all?" Rig continued as they stopped outside the bar. It was used as a storage facility, and Rig kept all his tools in there alongside the camp's cache of weapons, food stores and other necessities. Aside from Anchor, Rig was the only one who had a key for it at all times.

"Only that the military transferred ownership to her with instructions to inject him every week, and the agreement that they would keep providing doses."

“Shit. I saw some transfer of ownership documents in her desk when I was looking for a way to help you. I should’ve grabbed them.” Rig’s voice was miserable. “Maybe they could’ve told us more.”

“You couldn’t have known, my love. And I assume Mary would have noted any particularly interesting details in her journal, so I doubt they said much more.”

“Did she really not mention anything else about him around you? Like... not even what species he is?”

“No, firebrand. I’m sorry. I don’t think she knew—or cared. She just ordered me to feed him and give him his injections.”

“So... what now? What do we do? Do we keep giving him the injections? How many do we have left?”

“Two,” Gloam said solemnly. “I’ve been trying to stretch the time out between them to make them last longer, but he grows worryingly lifeless before his next dose.”

I stared down at the figurine I’d been whittling. It was beginning to take the shape of a borolash, with their three curving horns and long, sagging bodies. Rubbing my thumb over the blank face, which I’d yet to start on, I waited for them to keep talking, feeling only the briefest pang of guilt for listening in.

“I think it’s best if we give him the remaining doses,” Gloam continued. “I’ll keep reading. Maybe she found out more later. But if not, we... will just have to see what happens when there are no more, my love.”

“Fuck.” I heard the rasp of Rig’s gloved fingers rubbing anxiously at his face. “And then... If he gets even worse, I guess it might... Lilac might need to...”

Mm. My brow twitched as I carefully pressed the pad of my thumb to the sharp tip of my whittling knife. *Lilac might need to kill him.*

“He already appears to be in pain.” Gloam’s voice was gentle. “And if that gets worse, it might be the most humane thing. But I wouldn’t expect Lilac to do it. I...” He heaved a sigh. “I could...”

“Lilac’s used to it,” Rig said sadly, though I was fairly confident the sadness was due to the thought of Seraph dying, and not concern for me for being expected to kill him.

“Is he?”

“Yeah. It doesn’t bother him. Nothing bothers him.”

Gloam was silent for a long moment. “I see.”

“Okay, so we have two, maybe three weeks to try and find out more. I already asked Charlie if he knew anything about the military’s specimen programme. Maybe Hunter knows something? He kinda makes me nervous, though.” Rig let out a wary chuckle. “He’s a little scary.”

My lip curled under my mask as Gloam let out a rumbling laugh. The newcomers had shown up only a couple of hours ago—a big purple beastie and two former soldiers.

I didn’t trust them. At least the dark-haired one would be leaving soon, going off on what was, in my opinion, a thankless journey with Moth to try and get Cat out of some fighting prison further north.

I would have preferred it if the big surly one was going. Charlie seemed more agreeable. The other one—Hunter—was already acting suspicious of us despite the fact that we had allowed him into our camp. And *he* was the ex-soldier.

Plus, his muscular monster lover—Edin—had taken it upon himself to decide that they would be staying here in the camp to wait for Charlie and Moth to get back.

I didn’t overly trust Edin either. I’d heard him apologising to Aury for leaving him in the military base all those years ago and the idea of it soured me on him immediately. He’d just left Aury there, in a cell, to be tortured and traumatised for years?

I’d grown as protective of Aury as I was of Ghost and Rig, despite knowing what he could become. I didn’t know much about the rycke, but I’d gleaned that his violence and rage came from seeing those he cared about get hurt, rather than from any pain or suffering inflicted on himself.

Gloam and Rig had vanished into the bar below, so I tucked the blade of my whittling knife into the handle, then pocketed it and the half-finished borolash figurine. Standing up, I made my way to the back of the bar where I could climb down. I always used the lip of the windowsill to hoist myself up, so no one else attempted to come up here. It was where I came when I didn’t particularly want to be bothered, which was often, but also couldn’t stand to just sit in my room any longer.

Except...

“Hey, Lilac!” a voice called down from above. “You’re meant to be taking over guard duty from me. Hurry up, I’m hungry!”

I was still visible from the camp wall, and there were *always* people on the camp wall. Exhaling, I glanced up and saw Keen peering down at me,

his blond hair dull against the grey sky. Raising a hand in acknowledgement, I climbed down from the roof and made my way over to the container entrance.

It wasn't that I didn't like living in the camp. It was better than the alternative, which I'd already experienced for too long—being out in the Wastes alone.

I'd stayed in the southern California coastal city where I'd been raised until I was twenty-one. Until I couldn't take it anymore. My mind had been fracturing, stagnating in that festering cesspool of humanity. I'd developed an unhealthy loathing for the military that controlled every aspect of our lives, made worse in my young adult years once I'd started earning enough to move into a slightly nicer area of the city and out of the squalor of the poorest part, where all the orphanages were and where the military rarely went.

I had been working in one of the “illegal” professions—one soldiers enjoyed heavily and frequently, but still acted like it was beneath them. One that got people thrown out into the Wastes anyway. So I'd left. I'd packed up what little I had and walked out of the city gates, only briefly stopped by two bored soldiers holding semi-automatic rifles. After one gave me a cursory sweep, he had stepped back and shrugged at me, snapping his gum loudly between his teeth as if to say, ‘It's your funeral, kid.’

I hadn't found Anchor and Cat's camp until three years later, after wandering the Wastes on my own. It had been terrifying at first, and I'd quickly had to learn that out here, killing was a part of life. The first time I'd killed a monster had been when I stopped at a lake to wash and refill my water bottle. Within minutes, a creature had lurched from the shoreline, reaching for me with rotting, grasping hands. Luckily, I'd picked up a baseball bat at an abandoned sporting goods store, and I'd cracked the monster around the skull out of pure terror-fuelled instinct. I'd been shaking and I didn't stop to sleep for two nights, but it hadn't felt... real.

The first time I'd killed another human, he was trying to kill *me* for my meagre belongings. That time felt more real, and I'd thrown up after stumbling away from his lifeless body, but even in shock, I'd recognised that I'd done what I had to. That this was my life now. I'd made my decisions, and I still didn't regret them. There was no point regretting.

That mindset was why, when I'd joined Anchor and Cat's camp four years ago, it hadn't taken long for my spot as resident killer and assassin to

become cemented. We hadn't needed that particular skill of mine often, but it did happen. Mainly if a monster got too close to camp and got aggressive, trying to break in. We'd had two instances of another group of humans trying to take over our camp in the past. Anchor and Cat had sent me out to pick them off when they set up their tents not far away.

I could detach myself from killing. I wasn't sure why, and I'd stayed up a few nights wondering if I was a psychopath deep down, but it at least made me useful. It gave me a sense of purpose.

Raiders in the Wastes tended to mask their identities. The military was always lurking out here with us, and anyone who chose to live in the Wastes was seen to be a criminal or a monster sympathiser and therefore an enemy of humanity. We'd all heard the rumours of raiders being seized in the night and tortured for information or used as bait. Laws didn't apply out here. The military made them, and the military ignored them to do whatever they wanted when it suited their purposes.

When I joined the camp, I'd already taken to wearing a mask over the lower half of my face, but I'd still had to pick a raider name—wasn't like I'd needed one when I was on my own out here. I went with Lilac, because the most vivid, happy memory I had of my mother was of her wearing a faded purple dress, dark hair tied back in a ponytail, as she picked me up and kissed my forehead, singing to me in Japanese. I'd since gotten rusty at the language. My American father hadn't spoken it, and my mom had died when I was eight, just months after the monsters came. We'd already lived in San Diego, and it had become unbearably overcrowded as people flocked there from further inland to escape the monsters and get inside the military's quickly erected "safe zones". Resources had started running out immediately, people looting pharmacies and stores before the military got better control.

My mom had run out of insulin and hadn't been able to get hold of any more, even though there were surely stockpiles of the stuff in hospitals. My father was almost shot by soldiers after running up to them in the streets and begging them repeatedly. They hadn't cared.

My dad died two years later, when I was ten, and I'd been shunted into one of the many rundown, crowded orphanages in the worst part of the city. There were too many parentless kids in the cities, the conditions so awful and resources so poor that the simplest infection could kill and leave children all alone.

At least out here, if I got sick or injured, I would have no false hope. That was one of the worst things about the cities, in my opinion—the false hope. The promises from the military to make everything better, to drive out the monster threat in the mainland and return us all to the lives we'd had before. The façade of resources—healthcare, food, clean water, safe housing. It was all bullshit. Hardly anyone could afford enough to eat on top of rent and utility bills. The healthcare system was a joke, the costs extortionate, and that was assuming the city hospital even had what someone needed—which they never did.

At least out here, I would never have the heartbreak of thinking I could be helped, be saved, only to have it snatched away by the people who were meant to be protecting us all. Like my mother had when she fell into a diabetic coma. Like my father had when he got mugged and stabbed on the street and bled out on the front step of the hospital after someone dumped him there, and no one came out to treat him.

Out here, I helped myself. I saved myself. And that was the way I liked it.

CHAPTER THREE

From outside the diner, Anchor and I watched Moth and Charlie leave the camp to start heading north, their destination the supposed fighting prison where Cat was being held.

“Do you trust them?” she asked, dark eyes tight as she tracked them while they made their way into the container entrance and vanished from sight.

My gaze shifted to Edin and Hunter. The beastie was cupping the back of his human lover’s head and murmuring something to him, his face serious. Hunter’s eyes were tight, and I saw the tendons in his neck protrude as he clenched his jaw. He nodded, eyes sliding shut as Edin rubbed his cheek over his temple in a weird, cat-like gesture.

Hand-in-hand, they turned and walked back toward the motel, Hunter glancing over his shoulder once at the container entrance that his friend had just vanished through.

My brow quirked. They didn’t *seem* to be here on false pretences, but...

“No,” I answered Anchor, leaning back against the wall and crossing my arms. “But I’m probably the wrong person to ask.”

She snorted and nudged me with a bony elbow.

“That makes you the exact right person to ask, Lilac.” Then she sighed. “But they’re helping us. The least we can do is let them stay here while Charlie and Moth try and get Cat. Just... keep an eye on them.”

“I will.”

“Do you... do you think they’ll be able to do it? Get him out?”

The hopefulness in her voice made me consider lying for the briefest moment, but I knew Anchor didn’t want to be placated. She was tough, but she was also putting herself under immense pressure. She’d confided in me that it felt like the camp was falling apart, even with the added presence of new beasties protecting us. She worried constantly that she was making decisions Cat wouldn’t have agreed with. Cutter’s actions against Ghost had left her badly shaken. Some of the raiders here still made it clear that they didn’t like having monsters living within the camp walls.

“No,” I said in the end, trying and failing to make my voice somewhat gentle. “I don’t think they’ll be able to. Sorry.”

She was silent for a long moment, before lifting a hand to rub her forehead wearily. “Well, maybe they’ll at least be able to tell us more. Tell us he’s still alive.”

Doubtful. “Maybe.”

Anchor let out a hard breath, then reached up to tighten her ponytail. “Okay. Can’t stand around for weeks waiting for them to get back. I need to go inventory the food stores.”

I nodded, remaining against the wall while she walked off toward the bar. I watched Rig say something excitedly to Gloam before darting around and jumping on his back. He twined his arms around the beastie’s neck and kissed the back of his bald head through his mask as Gloam laughed, looping his arms under Rig’s knees to keep him secure.

My gaze shifted over to Aury and Ghost as they made their way hand-in-hand toward the vegetable patch. Aury was the only other one here who I fully trusted with the crops. He was gentle with them, and I knew it soothed him to tend to them. I’d briefly considered showing him the collection in my room, but no one went in my room, not even Rusty.

I noticed her standing beside the bathroom stalls, watching them. She wore a full-face mask, plain white with bland moulded features, so it was impossible to gauge her expression as she stared at Ghost and his beastie, her blue eyes shadowed in the eye holes.

I knew that beneath that mask she had a smattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks, and pale pink skin that flushed easily. She was the only raider here who had seen my full face. We’d been sporadically fucking for a year or so, and leaving the masks on wasn’t ideal.

It was a fairly emotionless arrangement. I remembered the night she had approached me with her proposition, and I still felt somewhat bad for my response—a tiny shrug and an “alright”. At the time, I hadn’t had sex since I left the city at twenty-one, seven years ago now, and while there were a few raiders here who had caught my eye, nothing had ever happened with them. I knew most of them were too intimidated to ask me for that kind of thing. I knew Rusty had been when she’d done it. I’d heard the nerves in her voice.

I’d considered asking Nun for a similar arrangement when I first joined the camp four years ago. She was tall and broad with strong shoulders and defined arms. She had a crossbow. I admired her no-nonsense attitude and

unshakeable air of calm. But I was pretty sure Nun was only interested in women.

And it wasn't that I didn't like Rusty. I did. She knew a little more about me than anyone else here, though not much. I didn't really share things with anyone. But she knew I'd been a sex worker before I'd left the city, which was partly why I'd made the decision to come out into the Wastes. Not because I'd been ashamed or disgusted by my job, but because of how soldiers treated *everyone* in the cities, especially in the "nicer"—used loosely—parts.

Outside of the poorest districts, the military patrolled constantly. Soldiers beat and intimidated and abused people on the streets for seemingly no reason at all, pretending they were apprehending criminals. They carried out random raids on buildings and businesses they believed were fronts for illegal activities—even though those "illegal" activities were usually just the smuggling of goods into the Wastes. Nothing worth condemning people to death for, but that was what they did—banished anyone they wanted into the Wastes, helpless and totally unprepared.

So I decided to leave before they could. I'd been living in cramped, crowded shared accommodation for a few years by then, and one morning I woke up and decided that I'd just... had enough. Enough of all the people. Enough of the mouldy yellow shower and the cockroaches in the kitchen because my roommates were slobs. Enough of never, ever seeing anything green and alive—just concrete and steel and filth. Enough of never having enough money, despite how many hours I worked, how many clients I saw. Enough of the soldiers giving me—and everyone else—dirty looks on the street, like they were better than us all, only to step into my room at work hours later, their eyes gleaming with rabid lust. We were scum to them until they got horny enough.

Rusty's situation had been different. She hadn't wanted to leave the city she'd been living in, but she'd fled to the Wastes because her father had been very, very angry when she'd told her parents she was trans.

She didn't like the Wastes. She'd chosen to come out here like a lot of us, but it hadn't really been a choice. It had been a survival tactic. She mostly tended to the crops, but would reluctantly leave the camp to forage or collect water from the river. She was terrified of monsters—all monsters, even Gloam and Aury. When Rig and Ghost had first got back with an

injured Aury after visiting the military base further south, she'd told me one night that she didn't feel safe here anymore.

She wasn't an asshole like Cutter had been. She didn't *despise* monsters and think they deserved to die. They just scared her. She hadn't voted to kick Aury or Gloam out of the camp, like some of the others. She was compassionate—more compassionate than I was—but I knew she was struggling to adjust to having them here. I wasn't Rusty's therapist. It wasn't really in my nature to be a shoulder to cry on, but I tried because I liked her. Not in a romantic way—as a friend I had sex with.

I didn't think I had it in me to be a true partner to anyone. People expected their partners to be doting. To ask about their day, to ask how they were feeling, to want to spend all their time together. I liked being alone, and I wasn't all that interested in how other people were feeling.

The camp quickly got back to normal after Charlie and Moth's departure. Edin and Hunter had disappeared into their room, though I could hear the big beastie's laugh, muffled but still booming through their door. They were in the room above mine, which meant I'd already been subjected to a night of listening to their bed thudding rhythmically against the wall.

I hoped Charlie and Moth made it back quick.

As I started heading toward the motel, I passed Rig and Gloam, the former still riding on his beastie's back. He raised a hand in greeting, but we all froze when a raw, rabid scream filled the air.

Seraph had been quiet since Edin, Hunter and Charlie had arrived. I didn't know if he could somehow sense new people and it made him wary, but I suspected it was more to do with his dosing schedule. I'd gone out a few times with Gloam to watch him try and calm the beastie down or feed him. The day or so before his next dose, he grew sluggish and listless.

It made me fairly confident that he was going to die when all the injections were gone.

Rig slid off Gloam's back and clutched his hand tight, brown eyes pinched with worry. "Shall we go check on him?"

Gloam nodded, threading big fingers through Rig's curly hair. "I will go. It's almost time for his next dose, anyway."

"I'll grab some meat from Daisy." Rig released Gloam's hand and took off for the diner.

As Seraph let out another rough wail, a door on the second floor of the motel flew open. Edin stepped out, shoulders bulging with tension and his

long tail whipping behind his legs.

“What is that?” he growled, eyes narrowing as he looked around the camp. My brow rose when he vaulted over the walkway railing and landed on the ground with a boom. His kilt fluttered up around him before settling, showing me... far more than I had anticipated.

“It is Seraph,” Gloam told him as he strode over. “He is caged. Don’t worry, your mate is safe.”

“I’d keep him safe anyway,” Edin said imperiously, but his muscles were still tense as he stopped in front of us. “What is Seraph?”

“We don’t know. The military gave him to the woman who enslaved me.”

“The military?” Edin echoed sharply, then went still when Seraph roared again. His head cocked, horns slashing through the air. Brow furrowing, he slowly said, “Let me see him.”

“You sense something?” Gloam asked, quickly leading him toward the container entrance. I followed, intrigued by the strange edge to Edin’s voice. “Aury seemed to as well. But he doesn’t know what he is—neither do I. He’s a mystery. Something I have never seen before.”

“Show me,” Edin said, his deep voice echoing in the metal container as we passed through it to the Wastes outside.

Seraph had gone quiet again as we made our way along the base of the wall. When we turned the corner and his cage came into view, tucked just within the forest’s edge beside Mary’s old RV, he let out a weak bellow and smacked a hand against the glass.

A spark of sympathy flared as we approached. This was no life for him—for anyone—but he was uncontrollable. Part of me didn’t think he’d ever get better while he was in there. I knew he wasn’t human, but that didn’t mean he was an animal. I’d seen moments of keen awareness in his eyes. I could tell that sometimes he did actually listen to Gloam.

I was positive that he wasn’t a mindless beast, but constant agony made him seem like one. He screamed in pain when he’d just had a dose. He started shivering and groaning when his next one was nearing, when whatever was in those injections had begun wearing off. Whatever the military had done to make him like this, it seemed to be irreversible. He was dependent on whatever they had given him.

He was going to die.

I wondered if he'd understand, if Gloam told him that there were only two doses left. If he was aware enough to grasp what that meant for him. If he even knew he was being given some unknown substance that seemed to make him like this.

Seraph had gone quiet again. His many eyes were fixed on Edin, who stared back in silence. Slowly, the caged beastie unfurled his long limbs and crept unsteadily closer. He pressed his overly long fingers to the glass, head cocking. His eyes, still fixed on Edin, all blinked discordantly.

"What is he?" Edin asked, voice low with a hint of horror.

Seraph jerked at the sound of his voice. His lips peeled back, revealing all those needle-sharp teeth. I could see the fine tremor running through his limbs even as he started smacking his palms against the glass, screaming and staring at Edin like he wanted to rip him apart.

His screams grew louder. Uncontrollable, mindless. His long fingers curled until he was smashing his fists into the glass, over and over.

I tensed when I heard the glass crack.

Rig had been saying ever since they got back that he thought Seraph would smash through the glass. Edin's tail was whipping in agitation, and I darted to the side to avoid its sharp, lashing tip. Just as he and Gloam took a step back, the glass on Seraph's cage shattered.

His screams grew deafening, making me want to hunch my shoulders up to my ears. My fingers twitched beside my machete as he lunged forward, long arms reaching out between the bars, straining for Edin. He slammed his body against them again and again, trying desperately to escape.

"What did they do to him?" Edin asked, voice hard, barely audible over the rabid sounds coming from Seraph. "What is he?"

"We don't know." Gloam glanced over at me. "Lilac, don't get close."

"I won't."

"This isn't natural." Edin sounded angry, and his big hands clenched into fists at his sides. "Something is wrong. They have done something to him."

"They were injecting him with something," Gloam told him. "We have only a couple of doses left."

"What? Stop giving them to him," Edin snapped. "What is it doing to him?"

"We don't know." Gloam remained patient. "But it could be all that's keeping him alive."

Edin snarled, tail still thrashing. "This is wrong. He is wrong."

“I know, friend,” Gloam said calmly, laying a hand on Edin’s shoulder. “We don’t know what will happen when the doses run out, but I am trying. Trying to get through to him.”

“Get him out of that cage,” Edin snarled.

“That’s not a good idea,” I piped up.

The big monster rounded on me, fangs flashing, muscles bulging as his fists clenched tighter. “Get him out of that fucking cage, human.”

“I didn’t put him in there,” I said calmly, looking up into his demonic face as he loomed over me. “And we don’t know what he’d do if we let him out. He’s unstable.”

“This is *wrong*.” He turned to Gloam, craggy face twisted with anger. “You can stand to see this? Allow this? I have been in one of those cages, aytorin, and I—”

“Please be calm, Edin.” Gloam’s horned head dipped in a slight bow. “Lilac is right. Seraph is unstable. And I have seen the aftermath of him fighting other creatures—I know what he is capable of. We would all be in danger if he got out, including your mate.”

That seemed to make the big monster deflate, his shoulders dropping as he looked over at Seraph. The beastie had stopped screaming and was slumped on the floor of his cage, as if the burst of rabid energy had exhausted him entirely. His flat chest rose with quick, shallow breaths like a wounded animal.

“You have the rycke here,” Edin said uncertainly. “He would protect—”

“Is that better?” Gloam asked. “To free him just to allow him to attack us and rouse Aury’s instincts? He would die instantly. Aury wouldn’t hesitate if his mate was threatened. Is it not better to try and help him first, even if that means he must remain caged for now?”

Edin slowly turned to face Seraph again. His brows furrowed as he stared at the lifeless monster panting on the floor of his cage, long limbs curled up protectively.

“How can you help him?” he asked, low voice hoarse.

“We don’t know yet,” Gloam said solemnly, squeezing Edin’s shoulder before letting go.

“Gloam?”

I glanced back at the sound of Rig’s worried voice. He was hurrying toward us holding a small black case and a plastic container with a hunk of

raw meat inside. Aury was beside him, face wary as he took in the shattered glass surrounding Seraph's cage.

"I heard the glass smashing," Rig said as he reached us, brows pinched with sadness. "So I got Aury in case..."

"You were right, my love," Gloam told him, gesturing at the cage. "You said he'd smash through the glass."

"Is Seraph okay? Did he cut himself?"

"No, I don't think so." Gloam took the case and container from Rig, crouching down to prepare Seraph's meal.

"I can lift his cage." I glanced over at the sound of Aury's soft voice to see him gazing at Seraph. "So we can clean up the glass."

"Good idea. There are chains in the RV we can attach. Um..." Rig fiddled with his jacket anxiously and turned to Edin, eyes crinkling with a shy, hesitant smile. "Hunter is kind of... barking at people demanding to know where you went."

Edin stilled, then let out a tight chuckle. "I will go calm him." He looked back at Seraph with a frown. "I am happy to help with his care, if you need it."

"Thank you." Gloam straightened, holding the container of now-injected meat.

With a final look at the lifeless monster, Edin turned and started walking back. After Rig had retrieved the long pole they used to get Seraph's food into his cage and a set of chains from the RV, Gloam carefully dropped the meat between the bars. It took a while for Seraph to reach for it, arms shaking. His face twisted into a grimace when he bit into the raw meat.

While he was distracted, Aury took the chains and flew onto the roof of the cage. After securing them, he rose up into the air, lifting the cage easily off the ground. I helped Gloam and Rig quickly sweep up all the glass. There was a trench in the ground that I knew led from the waste hole in Seraph's cage. Aury had dug it out a while back.

My jaw clenched. Edin was right. He shouldn't be in the cage. He wasn't going to get better in there, being treated like an animal, having to fucking defecate over a hole in the floor with absolutely no privacy.

But Gloam was right too. All we'd be doing if we let him out was guaranteeing his immediate death. He was uncontrollable, and he seemed to want to attack everyone. If there was even the slightest threat to Ghost's

safety, Aury would destroy him. I'd seen what the quiet, timid rycke could become.

Once all the glass was gone, we stepped back and watched Aury gently lower Seraph's cage back onto the ground. He'd finished eating, but still seemed weak, even though his many eyes darted around with panic as his cage rocked softly in the air before it settled on the grass.

As I stared at him, I tried to begin the process of mentally preparing myself for what I knew I was going to have to do.

Because I already thought it would be kinder to Seraph if I killed him.

CHAPTER FOUR

I found Gloam and Rig later that day as the sun was setting. They were sitting together on the grass outside the bar, talking quietly. Rig still looked upset, and Gloam was trying to comfort him with a soothing hand in his hair.

“I’m going to watch him,” I said as I stopped in front of them.

Rig looked up. “Who? What do you mean?”

I gestured at the camp wall. “Seraph. He’s vulnerable out there now. Something could attack him through the cage, or get in, and he wouldn’t be able to escape. So I’ll watch him tonight.”

They both rose to their feet. Gloam reached out and grasped my shoulder. “I will do it, Lilac. You don’t have to.”

I shook my head. “It’s fine. We can take turns. Or we could bring him in here.”

Rig looked up at Gloam uncertainly. “Do you think that’s a good idea? If Ghost got too close to his cage...”

“It’s not just that.” Gloam glanced around at the raiders milling about the camp. “Anchor would have to call a vote to bring him in here. And I don’t think the majority would agree to let that happen, even if he is still in the cage.”

I didn’t disagree. Seraph was unsettling even when he wasn’t screaming.

“I don’t mind.” I gave a loose shrug. “Doubt I’d be able to sleep anyway. Edin and Hunter fuck loudly and they’re right above me.”

Rig snorted, but his brown eyes sparked with intrigue. “Damn, I wonder what that looks li—”

“Rig.” Gloam raised a stern brow at him, making Rig’s face flame pink. The big beastie looked at me with a smile. “Thank you, Lilac. I will watch over him tomorrow night. We will take it in turns.”

“We’ll see,” I said dryly, eyeing Rig. “Not sure Rig would be able to handle spending every other night away from you.”

Rig’s face went pink again. He shot me a glare.

“I can handle it,” he snapped while clutching on to Gloam’s arm with both hands.

“Mhmm.” I turned to head for the diner. “I’ll go out there after dinner.”

“Thank you, Lilac,” Gloam called after me again. I raised a hand in salute to acknowledge him before slipping into the diner.

Anchor was in her usual spot at the counter, leaning over the clipboard and taking stock of our food supplies. I settled onto the seat beside her, nodding at Bo in greeting.

“Is Seraph okay?” she asked, glancing over at me with a furrowed brow. “I heard Aury telling Ghost that he smashed the glass on his cage.”

“He’s fine. Just lost it at the sight of Edin, for some reason.”

“Is he...” She frowned and wiped at her brow. “Can he get out of the cage?”

“No, but now the glass is gone, he’s vulnerable out there. So I was wondering if you could take me off any night shifts keeping watch on the wall. I’ll go guard him outside.”

Anchor turned to frown at me. “But then *you’ll* be vulnerable.”

I shot her a flat look that made her roll her eyes, turning back to the clipboard.

“I’ll sit on top of the RV. But if something attacked him in his cage, it would take too long to get down from the wall to stop them.”

Anchor snorted. “You really think anything would attack him? On top of that, do you really think anything would be able to *hurt* him?”

I gave a slight shrug. “I don’t know. We don’t know anything about him. Gloam doesn’t even know what he is. Either way, he’s stuck in that cage, and I don’t mind sitting out there.”

She exhaled with a nod. “Okay. I’ll take you off any night shifts. What about day shifts?”

“I can still do those. I’ll just sleep around them.”

“Are you sure? Don’t get too tired—”

“I won’t.”

Anchor huffed as she flicked through the pages on her clipboard to the wall roster. “I know you don’t seem it sometimes, but you *are* human, Lilac. Aury and Gloam may not need to sleep or eat, but you do.”

“I’m aware.”

She snorted. “Well, I guess that’s good to know. Make sure to grab some food before you head out there. And if you get tired, come back in. Don’t stay out there if you get sluggish.”

“I won’t get sluggish.” I stood up and left the diner without another word.

Several raiders were heading toward the shower stalls to wash up before dinner after a long day of hunting, foraging, collecting water or tending to the crops. I went the opposite way, my shoulders unclenching just a little as I stepped into my room and the scents of dirt and fresh vegetation hit me.

My room was covered in plants. Every kind I could keep alive in this climate, lining the edges of the floor and almost every available surface in old mugs, bowls, broken plant pots and cracked vases. A huge monstera was tucked into the corner, its fenestrated leaves wide and glossy. Succulents lined my dresser, needled cacti and aloe vera and several types of echeveria. English ivy crept over the old wardrobe, and a tall yucca sat beside the window. On my bedside was a small parlour palm sharing space with a pink and green fittonia.

The only clear surface was the windowsill, but that was so I could climb through the window to my tiny garden area outside, filled with even more plants. I'd covered part of the space to keep it sheltered and private, and out there was where I tended to the seedlings for the crops before transporting them to the garden patch in the camp.

I made my way over and shoved the window open to peer out at them. It was getting cold, so I'd have to bring them in soon to protect them from the frost. Stepping back, I sat down on the edge of the bed and lay back, staring up at the string-of-pearls plant dangling from the ceiling.

I felt on edge, for some reason. I briefly considered going to see if Rusty wanted to fuck before I went out into the Wastes to spend the night guarding Seraph, but decided against it.

Sex calmed me. Gave me an outlet to relax the tightly wound control I kept over my body and emotions, although Rusty preferred for me to be in control when we fucked. It was good—it was always good—but it wasn't... exactly what I needed.

Still, it wasn't like there were many options out here. Sitting back up, I reached for the glass spray bottle and began misting the plants to pass the time until the showers weren't busy. The air was always warm in here because of all the life—which I liked—and it grew steamy as moisture clung to glossy leaves.

It took a while because of the sheer number of plants, and when I was done I grabbed my towel and slipped out of my room. It was getting dark early now as winter approached, but the camp was busy as raiders made

their way to the diner for dinner. The shower stalls were finally quiet, so I washed up quickly before getting redressed.

Edin and Hunter were standing at the counter in the diner when I slipped inside. I narrowed my eyes at them—at Bo and Edin laughing jovially together about something while Hunter clung to the back of his beastie's kilt, thumb stroking absently over the lavender skin just above the waistband.

Raiders eating their dinner filled the booths, lanterns and candles dotted over every surface, making the air feel cloying and the windows fog up as the warmth mingled with steam from the hot food and people's breath as they talked while they ate. I ignored them, walking up to the counter and stopping in front of Daisy, a couple of feet from the newcomers.

"Whatever you need, my friend," Edin was saying in his deep voice, reaching over the counter to clap Bo's shoulder. "I will go hunting for you tomorrow."

Bo inclined his head in a graceful nod. "That's very kind of you."

"I'm an excellent hunter," Edin announced imperiously. He reached down and patted Hunter's flat stomach. "Do you see this gut? *My* doing. My mate was all skin and bones before I started providing for him."

As Hunter's face went red above his plain black mask, I eyed his huge shoulders, the thick bands of muscle visible in his back under his tight t-shirt. The giant biceps and ropey forearms. I was pretty sure that guy had never been *skin and bones*.

Daisy snorted, already dishing up a big bowl of stew for me. "Gut? What's that American saying? You could bounce a quarter off that thing."

Bo chuckled. "That's usually about asses."

"Well, it applies here too," Daisy said stubbornly, pushing the bowl of stew toward me.

Hunter grinned at her from behind his mask. "Thank you, ma'am."

"*Ma'am*." Daisy shook her head, leaning on the counter to smack my arm with a dish towel. "Why are the newcomers more polite to me than you lot, eh?"

"I'm polite to you," I said mildly, ignoring the gazes of Hunter and Edin as they turned toward me. "Is there any more stew left?"

"Of course." Daisy was already reaching for another bowl. "Extra hungry?"

“I’m guarding Seraph tonight, so I’ll be awake for a while.” That wasn’t the reason I wanted a second bowl, but she didn’t need to know that.

Daisy’s lips pulled down into a frown as she ladled stew into another bowl. “That poor beastie. Always screaming in pain. Keeps me awake, but I feel bad for him.”

Hunter stiffened, glancing back at Edin. “You saw him, right?”

Edin nodded grimly. “He is... There is something not right.”

“Probably the drugs the military forced him on,” I said flatly, staring at Hunter.

He stared back, eyes tightening above his mask, before looking away. I nodded at Daisy in thanks as she pushed the second bowl toward me, picking them both up and leaving the diner with a final silent look at Hunter and Edin.

I managed not to spill any stew as I made my way through the container entrance and emerged into the Wastes. It was pitch black outside of the camp, and I had a lantern hanging from my belt, but I didn’t need it as I walked carefully around the camp wall and Seraph’s cage came into view, tucked into the tree line beside Mary’s old RV.

He let out a warning bark when he heard me approaching, even though my boots were near silent on the grass. I stopped several yards back from his cage and set the bowls on the ground, then straightened up as I unhooked the lantern and turned it on.

Seraph’s white eyes reflected the weak light, while the black ones gobbled it all up. He blinked discordantly in the sudden glow, lips peeling back from his razor-sharp teeth to snarl at me. I didn’t react when he smacked a hand against the bars of his cage, letting out a raw sound.

I realised that this was the first time I’d ever been alone with him, none of the beasties here with me. He seemed... calmer, and I didn’t know if that was why. He’d reacted violently to Edin earlier, and he always got manic when Aury was near. Gloam, he was more defensive around, and I didn’t know if that was because he remembered what Collector Mary had made Gloam do at her mansion, when he was under her control.

He was still tense, all his eyes watching me closely as I stared back at him, but he didn’t immediately devolve into furious snarls and screams, trying to claw at me through the bars.

I eyed his cage. There was a big glass water bottle hooked up to the side, its metal funnel poking through two bars, having previously been drilled

through the glass. Like a hamster cage. It seemed so demeaning to me, but there was no other way to get water to him. Now that the glass was gone, Aury would have to fly onto the roof of the cage to refill it. Rig and Gloam had always done it, but they couldn't get that close now.

It was quiet out here except for Seraph's low, snarling breaths, but they sounded steady—calm, even though he'd had a dose earlier, which usually sent him into fits of rage and endless thrashing. He was still watching me, clutching the bars of his cage with long, long fingers. Not moving an inch except for the steady rise and fall of his flat chest. His eyes unblinking.

"Are you hungry?" I asked quietly, aware that this was the first time I'd spoken directly to him. We all usually spoke *about* him, even in front of him—except for Gloam, who spent endless hours patiently talking to him with no success. "I thought you might want something other than raw meat."

I didn't move—didn't gesture at the bowls—but Seraph's eyes all blinked unharmoniously before darting to the two bowls on the grass.

That single, brief look told me a lot. He was aware. And he understood things. Human things like bowls of cooked food. He wasn't just a mindless animal.

He didn't react other than that, all his eyes returning to me. There were two on the front of his face, roughly where a human's eyes were, and those two blinked together, I noticed.

Seraph finally moved. Uncurling his knobbly-knuckled fingers from around the bars, he sat back in his cage against the far wall, his long legs curling up almost protectively.

I didn't know if that meant he didn't want the stew, but I'd try giving it to him anyway. Eyeing him, I tried to gauge the full length of his arms—how long his reach would be between the bars. Picking up one of the bowls, I stepped closer and set it down as close as I dared to get. When I unsheathed my machete, Seraph's eyes flared and he let out a warning snarl.

I didn't react, figuring the calmer I stayed, the calmer he would stay. Flipping the knife in my hand, I carefully gripped the blade and used the blunt end of the hilt to push the bowl closer to the cage. It wobbled precariously on the grass before getting stuck.

Pursing my lips, I tried another gentle push, and the bowl tipped, some of the stew splashing out. Glancing up at Seraph, I realised he was still huddled back against the far wall of his cage, unmoving. Docile, for once.

Knowing it was potentially a very stupid thing to do, I sheathed my machete and picked up the bowl to take a step closer. Then another. He still didn't move.

Crouching, I stretched my arm out to place the bowl on the grass as close as possible, hoping it was near enough for him to reach. I watched him, never taking my eyes off him as he stared back.

I still wasn't fast enough when he moved.

Rushing to the front of the cage, Seraph's arm shot out between the bars and those long, long fingers wrapped around my throat, yanking me the rest of the distance effortlessly. I got in one solid gasp of panic before he tightened his grip and cut off my air. I tried to jerk back, my fingers clawing at his hands, but then he was standing up and taking me with him until the toes of my boots barely skimmed the grass. His skin was cold and felt a bit like damp leather, and my already sweaty fingers slipped, unable to get any purchase.

"No," I wheezed out, panic and lack of air making black spots dance over my vision, which was filled with Seraph's unblinking eyes and too wide mouth.

He was completely silent, which was—in that moment—more horrifying than if he'd been screaming in my face. I tried to hook my fingertips under the edge of his palm, to pry it loose, but I was likely to break my own fingers before I moved his even an inch.

I reached down, fumbling for my machete at my hip, but Seraph's other hand shot out from between the bars and grabbed both my wrists in a grip that was as unforgiving as the one around my throat.

The fragile bones in my neck groaned in protest, my strength leaving me.

"No," I rasped again, instinctively fighting for freedom in one last burst of adrenaline-fuelled panic. "Seraph, stop."

I didn't know why it worked, but I felt his grip loosen. Even then, I couldn't move his fingers at all.

"Let go of me, Seraph," I croaked.

When he did, as quickly as he had grabbed me, I threw myself back and scrambled away from the cage as fast as I could on palms and heels, crab-walking backwards, unable to take my eyes off him. My limbs were trembling, and every shuddery breath felt like his hand was still there, still wrapped around my neck, squeezing the life out of me.

I choked, coughing, which felt like liquid fire pouring down my throat. My eyes were watering from the pain, but I refused to look away from Seraph. He stared back at me silently, too-long arms hanging loosely by his sides as he knelt in his cage, long-fingered hands resting innocently on his thighs.

I knew I should go see Apollo, our medic, and make sure nothing in my neck was broken or permanently damaged, but adrenaline had locked my body up. I couldn't move. As we stared at one another again, the Wastes were utterly silent. Not even the sounds from the camp drifted over the wall. I was only faintly aware of the sound of my own painful, rasping breaths, focused on the low snarls coming from Seraph, unsteady now, like he was still juiced up and eager to attack.

My throat was so raw that it felt like I was inhaling glass with every breath—like I was swallowing razorblades. But Seraph was watching me so intently, his body so still, that the lizard part of my brain reacted. I was frozen like a deer in headlights. The fact that he was in a cage meant nothing in that moment. It felt like if I moved an inch, he would get me.

So I didn't move, and neither did he.

CHAPTER FIVE

At some point during the night I settled into a cross-legged position, still facing Seraph. My eyes burned with exhaustion, but I kept watching him.

Seraph hadn't stopped staring back with his countless eyes for even a second.

I knew that when I did go to rest soon, I wouldn't be able to sleep. The moment I shut my own eyes, I'd see his stamped on the insides of my eyelids. Black and milky white, sporadically blinking, watching me with a perverse hunger that told me he wouldn't hesitate to do the exact same thing again if he could.

"Lilac?"

I recognised Rig's voice but didn't move, taking shallow breaths as I continued staring back at Seraph.

"Shit... Is everything okay?" Rig sounded wary, and I blinked and realised he was standing next to me. It was dawn, the sky turning pink. The knowledge that I was no longer alone with Seraph in the dark made me finally look away, but it took me a long moment to bring myself to do it.

When I did, I realised why Rig suspected something had happened. My black clothes were wrinkled and covered in mud and grass stains, and the stillness of the night hadn't removed traces of the deep furrows in the dirt where I'd been dragged toward the cage, then scrambled back. My bowl of stew sat untouched on the grass, but the one I'd tried to give Seraph had gotten knocked over when he lunged for me. Congealed stew had seeped into the earth.

"Fine." I winced in agony. My throat was swollen, and it had been hard to breathe at one point during the night.

"Jesus." Rig squatted down next to me. I glanced at his mask-covered face and looked away again, rubbing my gritty eyes. "What happened?"

I gingerly touched my throat and couldn't suppress a wince. "Just don't get close to the cage."

Rig exhaled a hard breath. "Fuck. Lilac, you should have come and got me and Gloam. You should have gone straight to Apollo."

I shook my head, finally uncurling my stiff legs and getting shakily to my feet. The lack of food and water made bright spots swim in my vision,

and I had to plant my boots hard into the ground to stop myself from wavering on my feet.

Rig must have noticed though, because he followed me upright and gripped my shoulder hard to steady me. A terrifying snarl from Seraph made him jump.

My heart was hammering when Rig muttered, “Jesus,” and gently steered me toward the corner of the camp wall, away from the cage. “Go see Apollo and get some sleep.”

I spun back around. “I mean it, Rig.” Every word was agony, and I was already losing my voice. “I didn’t even get that close to the cage—don’t go near him.”

He nodded. “I won’t. I promise. Shit, Lilac, I’m sorry.” He sounded upset. “We wouldn’t have left you to watch him alone if we’d—”

“It’s fine.” I shook my head, gritting my teeth when another bellow of pure fury from Seraph made Rig jump again.

As I started for the camp entrance, Gloam appeared around the corner and stopped at the sight of me.

“How was he during the night?” he asked in his low, calm rumble. I just shook my head and carried on walking, my throat too sore to speak.

It was still early, so only a few raiders were up when I made my way into the camp, and none of them greeted me. I didn’t speak to many people here—only Rig, Ghost, their beasties and Anchor and Rusty. That was the way I liked it.

Sleep deprivation was making my brain foggy. The early morning sun was piercing against my sensitive eyes, which felt dry and crusty. I hesitated outside Apollo’s door, not wanting to wake him so early. I doubted there was anything he could do for my throat, anyway.

I knocked once, softly, and readied myself to just head to my room when there was inevitably no reply, but the door swung open. Apollo was still adjusting the medical mask that covered his nose and mouth, and his brown eyes were tired as they peered at me.

“What’s up, Lilac?”

“Got choked.” It was nearly impossible to speak at that point, so I tried to sum it up as succinctly as I could. My voice was a hoarse rasp, deeper than normal.

“Oh. Shit.” Apollo stepped back to let me in, quickly scraping his long blond hair up into a bun. “Was it a sex thing?”

“What?” I cringed in pain. “No. Monster.”

I heard Apollo snicker as he crossed over to the locked doorway that led from his room to the next one over, which was used as a medical area. We all trusted each other—enough, at least—but it was still safest to keep precious medical supplies locked away tight.

“Oh right, you were guarding the new guy.” He unlocked the door and held it open for me.

The curtains were already open in there, so morning sun filled the room, but he still lit a lantern and set it on the gurney.

“Hop up for me, chief.” Apollo patted the gurney as he walked past it toward the sink, which Rig had hooked up to a rainwater supply so he had fresh water when he needed it to treat people.

I did as I was told as he scrubbed his hands before snapping on a pair of gloves.

“Throat sounds gnarly,” he commented as he made his way over.

I said nothing, but grimaced in pain as I tilted my head back a little, the stretch feeling like it would pop something in my throat. Apollo gently felt around and whistled sharply.

“Christ, Lilac. He got you good. Once this has healed you gotta tell me what happened.”

I awkwardly shrugged one shoulder as Apollo continued to prod at my tender throat. “Got too close to the cage.”

“Well, nothing feels broken, at least.” Apollo exhaled and felt around my neck as gently as he could. It was still agony. “But you’re gonna hurt like a bitch for a while. Don’t eat solids for a few days. And try to keep talking to a minimum, eh?”

His teasing tone made me give him a dry look despite the pain. I wasn’t exactly known for my conversation skills.

Gently gripping my chin, he tipped my head down to peer into my eyes, making me shift uncomfortably on the gurney and look away.

“Got some broken blood vessels,” he said grimly, all seriousness once again. He released my chin. “Can you breathe okay?”

I hesitated for a split second before nodding, and stern brown eyes met mine as Apollo looked at me silently. Finally, I relented. “Struggled a bit during the night, but better now. Just hurts.”

Apollo stepped back, brain visibly churning as he fisted his hands on his hips. “Maybe you should sleep in here today just in case. I’ll stay next door

and just treat anyone in there.”

I immediately shook my head, even though it sent shards of pain streaking down my neck. “I’m fine.”

“If you start struggling to breathe—”

“I won’t.” I slid off the table.

Apollo rolled his eyes and peeled off his gloves before slapping me on the arm. “Go get some rest.”

I thanked him and was almost out the door when he called, “Come back here immediately if you start struggling to breathe.”

I shot him a gesture to show I’d heard him as I pulled open the door and stepped back outside. It was already much brighter, and the sun felt like needles stabbing into my brain. I was over-exhausted, which inevitably meant I would not be able to get to sleep easily.

Before I even realised what I was doing, my feet were carrying me back to the container entrance. I made my way up the ladders and emerged through the hatch at the top of the wall, walking slowly until I could see Seraph’s cage.

Rig and Gloam were still down there, talking quietly as they watched Seraph, who watched them back. Gloam took a step closer to the cage, and Rig immediately grabbed his arm to stop him. He gestured to the cage, then to his throat, before waving his arm in the direction of the camp—no doubt telling Gloam what had happened. The gesture caused Seraph’s many eyes to flick to the camp wall. He crouched, gripping the bars, and cocked his head up like a curious animal.

I knew the moment he spotted me, because all of those eyes blinked in a wave that rippled across his face.

We stared at each other. Rig and Gloam hadn’t noticed Seraph’s shift in attention. Even in the cold morning air, my body prickled with sweat as I watched the monster in the cage as closely as he watched me.

I swallowed convulsively. My limbs turned to jelly from the sudden flash of pain the action caused.

I was too fuzzy from pain and a lack of sleep. It wasn’t safe to be out here. I needed to be sharp and well-rested in case Anchor needed me for anything. I turned to head back down and stiffened when Seraph howled with rage from below, the raw chords of his voice rising up like souls wailing from the pits of hell.

CHAPTER SIX

“Are you okay?” Rig blurted the moment I stepped out of my room that evening, almost making me jump.

I eyed him, tightening my ponytail as he scrambled up from where he’d been sitting against the motel wall. “Have you been waiting here all day?”

Rig flushed, fidgeting. “Just... on and off. I was worried.”

My mouth quirked. I clapped him on the shoulder once. “I’m fine.”

My voice was still hoarse and raspy, but the sharp flares of pain in my throat were getting weaker. Now, my entire neck just felt like one big bruise—which it was. I’d stared at the marks on my throat in the mirror as I got dressed. The splotches of bright red feathering across the whites of my eyes. At least I’d managed to sleep, sheer exhaustion letting me rest for a good stretch, so my head felt clearer.

“Um, where are you going?” Rig trailed after me as I took off. “Shouldn’t you rest some more?”

I shook my head, suppressing my wince as my neck twinged. “Shower. Eat. Then guard Seraph.”

“No,” Rig said firmly. “You’re not guarding Seraph again. Gloam will do it.”

I stopped and turned to face him. “I don’t mind doing it.”

“He *choked* you, Lilac!”

“That was my fault. I got too close to the cage. Remember what I said when Cutter picked up Mary’s pet?” I gestured at the camp wall. “Seraph was acting on instinct. He’s trapped in there. Vulnerable. He’s going to attack anything that gets close out of self-preservation.”

Rig’s shoulders sagged as he rubbed his forehead.

“Feels like he’s never going to get any better,” he mumbled. “And when the doses run out...”

I pursed my lips. “If he doesn’t die when he comes off the injections, he’s still unlikely to get better while he’s trapped in a cage. If you treat anything—even people—like an animal, they’ll start acting like one.”

Kind of like how city folk could act, packed together in a tiny space like too many cattle shoved into a barn. Never seeing real sunlight or greenery, never breathing in fresh air.

Rig flushed, his tone defensive when he said, “We don’t have any other choice.”

“I know.”

“If we let him out and he attacks someone, Aury will—”

“I know, Rig.”

“So what are we supposed to do?” He was gazing at me with big sad eyes, like I might have the answer.

I shrugged lightly. “Keep him safe for now. See what happens when the injections run out. If he survives but still seems to be in a lot of pain after that, I’ll—”

I paused, remembering the moments of keen awareness in Seraph’s eyes. The way he seemed to be listening to me, paying attention, understanding what I was talking about.

“I’ll kill him,” I said flatly, even as a hint of guilt crept into my gut. Rig cringed.

“God, I hope he gets better.” He scrubbed a gloved hand roughly through his hair, leaving his curls in a wild mess. “I feel kind of—I don’t know. Responsible. Like we’re making the wrong decisions and it’s my fault—”

“Rig.” I took a step closer and gripped his shoulder. “It’s not your fault. The military did bad stuff to him. So did Mary. You’re trying to help him. But sometimes people are beyond help. Sometimes, it’s kinder to ease their suffering when they can’t do it themselves.”

He shook his head, mumbling, “I don’t think I could do that.”

“And you don’t have to.” I released his shoulder. “I’ll do it, if it comes to it.”

He blinked at me, eyes sad and forehead wrinkling. “Do you... It really doesn’t bother you, huh? You don’t care about killing.”

I cocked my head, considering the question.

“It’s not that I don’t care,” I said slowly. “It’s just a facet of life, especially out here. I’d rather kill someone before they kill me. Or to put someone out of their misery.”

He exhaled, nodding miserably. “Well, that might be the only thing that ends Seraph’s misery.”

I silently agreed, but said, “We’ll see.”

“I still think you should let Gloam guard him instead.” Rig looked worried for his beastie even as he said it, his eyes darting to the bruises on

my neck.

“No. I’m fine doing it. And...” I didn’t want to upset Rig, but it was the truth. “He doesn’t react well to the beasties. Even Gloam. He was calmer last night before I got too close to the cage.” I cocked my head. “Then again, I’m pretty sure he was making himself appear docile to lure me in.”

Rig blanched, throat bobbing beneath his leather mask. He croaked, “Please don’t go near the cage again, Lilac.”

“I won’t.” But I was already wondering how I’d be able to give Seraph food. I still wanted to try. Wanted to offer him something other than a bleeding hunk of raw meat, especially because I’d seen him grimacing every time he bit into it.

“Going to take a shower,” I told Rig, and he nodded quickly.

“I’ll, um—I’ll ask Daisy and Bo to make you something before you go out there.” He hesitated, and then he was lunging for me and wrapping his arms around my shoulders in a hug, the warmth of his leather mask pressing against my ear.

I stiffened in the embrace, and after a long moment, I gave his back a single pat.

“Thank you. I’m glad you’re okay,” he mumbled. “I wanted to hug you goodbye when I left with Gloam and Mary. I... I know most people here are scared of you, but you’ve always made me feel safe, Lilac.”

I unclenched a tiny bit and gave his flank another quick pat. He cleared his throat and released me, face pink as he stepped back.

“Sorry,” he said gruffly. “I’ll—I’ll go get you some dinner.”

I watched as he walked off to the diner, then slowly turned to make my way to the showers. Half of them were occupied, so I washed up quickly and shoved my wet hair up into a ponytail as I rounded the stalls.

As I started heading for my room, I heard Rig calling my name. Glancing over, I saw him carefully carrying a big steaming bowl from the diner.

“Bo made you some broth so you don’t hurt your throat more.” He handed it to me, and I shot him a tiny smile under my mask.

“Thanks.”

He waved a gloved hand, stepping back. “I didn’t make it. I can’t cook for shit.” He chuckled, eyes growing a little wistful. “My mama tried to teach me, but my abuela always took over and kicked us out of the kitchen. Her food was better, anyway. Not that I ever told my mom that.”

I cleared my throat, feeling awkward as I looked down at the bowl of thin broth in my hands. There were little chunks of meat floating in it, as well as soft, cooked carrots and celery.

“My mom was a good cook too,” I said quietly.

Rig’s eyes brightened. “Yeah?”

I nodded, taking a step back to signal that I was done with the conversation. But I heard myself saying, “Yeah. She made good okonomiyaki.”

“Oh. Nice.” Rig paused. “Um, what’s that?”

My mouth quirked. “Like a savoury pancake.” Taking another step back, I lifted the bowl in my hands. “Better go have this.”

“Oh, sure.” Rig offered me a smile behind his mask, his brown eyes crinkling at the corners. “Well, be safe guarding Seraph. I’ll come out in the morning.”

“Don’t have to,” I said mildly, turning to walk to my door. “I’ll be fine.”

Once I was in my room, I took off my mask and raised the bowl to my lips to have a sip. It was good. Hot and salty, the little chunks of meat and vegetables too soft and small to hurt my throat as I swallowed them. Sitting on the end of my bed, I drank it slowly in silence. Most raiders tended to eat together in the diner, although I knew Ghost ate religiously in his room and never took his mask off outside of it.

I didn’t either. People saw what I let them see, which wasn’t much. I probably wouldn’t care about Rig or Ghost seeing my whole face, but they didn’t need to. It wasn’t like I ever ate with them or hung out with them in their rooms. They had each other—they’d always had each other, since the moment they met out in the Wastes and ended up here at the camp, long before I arrived. And now they had their beasties too.

It wasn’t like I even wished for the kind of friendship they had, with them or anyone else. I liked my privacy. I liked being alone. I’d never found anyone I wanted to spend all my time with, and it didn’t bother me. Not everyone was built to need constant social interaction, and I’d had plenty of that with my job in the city.

I liked the peace of the Wastes.

I finished the broth and set the bowl down to start getting ready for a long night guarding Seraph. After strapping a lantern to my hip next to my machete, I shrugged on my winter coat, because it had gotten cold the night before. I stuffed my whittling knife and the half-finished borolesh into the

pocket, knowing it was going to be a dull several hours. Hopefully, anyway. I didn't particularly want to get strangled again.

After picking up the empty bowl, I left my room and locked the door behind me. It was already dark, the camp quiet, and I could see the booths in the diner lined with raiders eating their dinner, lit by flickering candlelight and weak lanterns.

As I made my way across the camp, I wondered what I could get from Daisy and Bo to give to Seraph. Maybe I should start with something closer to what he was used to, even though the idea was to give him something other than just meat. But he'd been living on nothing but raw protein for a long time. Maybe stew would be too rich for him anyway.

When I stepped into the diner, no one paid me any attention, not until Daisy looked up and saw me. She gestured me over, which made Anchor lift her head from where she'd been frowning over her clipboard at the counter. As I approached them, I realised that I couldn't ask Daisy for anything for Seraph. I was sure Anchor wouldn't like it, and if she started asking me about it, the raiders would hear, and I knew for a fact they'd object to me using our food supplies to feed the beast in the cage. I'd already overheard some muttered conversations about beasties and strangers coming into the camp and using up the food and water we grew and collected, even though they contributed too—and the beasties didn't even eat, but Aury still tended to the crops. Gloam helped Rig all the time. I'd heard Edin offering to go hunting for Bo, and he and Hunter had only been here a couple of days.

Daisy leaned over the counter as much as her short stature would allow when I stopped beside Anchor.

"I've made you some extras in case you get hungry guarding that poor beastie," she whispered, patting my arm before reaching under the counter and pulling out a small drawstring bag. "I know your throat's hurting so I tried to keep it to soft things, but there's some jerky as well just in case you want it."

I nodded once, taking the bag and tucking it into my coat. "Thanks."

"How's your neck feeling?" Anchor asked, frowning at the visible bruises.

I shrugged. "Bearable. Sorry I missed my shift keeping watch today."

She waved a hand. "Rig told me what happened, I took you off it anyway. I don't think you should be doing wall shifts if you're going to be

up all night guarding Seraph.”

“It’s fine.” I slid my empty bowl across the counter to Daisy. “Not like I’ll be sleeping all day anyway. And we’ll start harvesting the crops soon, so I have to be up for that.”

“Still, I’ll try and keep them sparse. The new guys offered to do some, but...”

She trailed off, eyes wary above her mask. I glanced around the diner, but Hunter and Edin weren’t there. Probably in their room getting ready for another long night of fucking. At least I wouldn’t have to listen to it if I was going to be guarding Seraph every night.

Well, until his doses ran out and he inevitably died a painful death from withdrawal. Unless I ended his suffering first.

“I’ll be able to do them.” I nodded goodbye to Daisy and Anchor before turning to leave.

One of the raiders glanced up from a booth by the door, meeting my eyes. It was Tank, though I had no idea why he’d chosen that raider name. He was tall and rangy, not built like a brick shithouse like the newcomer, Hunter, was.

He didn’t say anything, but I felt him watching me as I left the diner. I was sure I must have spoken to him at some point in the last four years—he’d already been here already when I joined the camp—but I couldn’t remember it, so any conversations we may have had couldn’t have been all that interesting.

I spotted Aury’s big wings heading for the diner as the door swung shut behind me, blocking out the sounds from inside. He gave me a tiny smile when he reached me, but his eyes grew nervous as they darted to the packed diner behind me.

“Hello, Lilac,” he said in his soft voice.

Sometimes, I struggled to picture the monstrous creature I’d seen him turn into. Struggled to equate it to the gentle, timid beastie in front of me. But I’d witnessed it for myself—his alien face contorting, lengthening, jaw stretching out to protrude beyond his lips, filled with needle sharp teeth just like Seraph’s.

“Hey.” I glanced behind him at the motel. I could see a soft glow coming from behind the closed curtains of Ghost’s room window. “Getting Ghost some dinner?”

“Yes, but I...” He looked at the diner behind me again, wringing his fingers together. “I don’t want to disturb anyone. My wings might knock into people at the tables—”

“Do you want me to go and get Ghost’s dinner for you?” I asked dryly.

In the low light, I saw his cheeks flush, the right one heavily burn-scarred. “I—Only if you don’t mind—”

“I don’t mind.” I turned to walk back in, stopping at the counter to ask Bo for a bowl for Ghost.

When I turned back around to leave after he handed it over, I saw Tank watching me again.

“Getting more food again?” he asked mildly, but his eyes narrowed a little. “Didn’t you get more last night too?”

I barely glanced at him, not bothering to answer as I left the diner. He could think what he wanted. I felt his eyes on my back through the window as I passed the bowl to Aury, who gave me a sweet grin in thanks.

We walked side by side across the camp, his big wings rasping over the grass with every step.

“Guarding Seraph again?” he asked softly. When I nodded, Aury sighed. “I filled his water earlier. He didn’t like me being on top of his cage, but there’s no other way...”

“No. Although I’m sure you’d be fine if you got too close anyway.”

He flushed and glanced over at me, his big black eyes lingering on my neck. “I wouldn’t want to hurt him. Are you in pain?”

“I’m fine.”

“I am happy to guard him, Lilac—”

“It’s okay.” I didn’t voice that Seraph grew particularly manic when Aury was near, because I knew it already made him sad that everything feared him instinctively.

“Make sure you rest enough.”

I stopped to be polite when we reached Ghost’s door. “I will.”

“It is dangerous for you to sit out there,” he said, gazing at me anxiously.

“I can handle it. Not like anything comes close to the camp that often anyway.”

The door beside us opened, Ghost’s unmasked face peeking out. I’d seen him without his gas mask before, during my awkward attempts to make him feel better when Aury had briefly left him.

“Oh, hey, Lilac.” His eyes darted behind us to make sure no one else was around before he pulled the door open wider and looked at me with sympathy. “Rig told me what happened. Are you okay?”

I took a step back, uncomfortable with all the attention. “Fine. I better go.”

Ghost blinked. “Oh, okay. Well, I hope, um, it goes better tonight.”

“Thanks.” Nodding at them both, I turned to head for the container entrance.

I heard Aury murmur something softly to Ghost before their door clicked shut. I could already hear Seraph screaming and smashing into the bars of his cage before I even emerged into the Wastes, the sound muffled as it reverberated through the metal containers.

He hadn’t stopped once by the time I made it around the corner and his cage came into view beside the RV, but as I got closer, his rabid bellows tapered off until all I could hear were his heaving, snarling breaths.

He let out a warning snarl as I approached. Unclipping the lantern from my belt, I turned it on and looked at him in the low light.

He was crouched on his haunches in the cage, long fingers wrapped around the bars. All his eyes blinked, lips peeling back from his teeth, but he stayed quiet.

Without saying a word, I headed for the RV. Seraph watched me, shifting in his cage to keep me in sight. The door was unlocked—there was nothing of value left in here, and we would have noticed if someone got close enough to slip inside.

I lifted the lantern as I stepped inside, spotting a nest of blankets and pillows in the living area where one of the couples—Gloam and Rig or Ghost and Aury—must have slept as they were travelling back to the camp. All the surfaces and cabinets were now bare. I’d helped Rig gradually take everything from here into the camp in the days after they got back.

The only things left were the nest of blankets, a thick coil of chains and the long, thin pole Gloam used to give Seraph his meals. I picked it up and headed back outside, making sure to give Seraph’s cage a wide berth.

Kneeling on the grass, I set down the lantern and pulled the muslin bag out from within my coat. Loosening the drawstring, I tilted it toward the light so I could see what Daisy had given me.

A ripe plum, some soft dried apricots, several sticks of jerky and the little tin she always gave me pecans in, knowing how much I liked them. I

took the tin out and tucked it into my coat pocket, then tightened the drawstring again.

After grabbing the pole, I straightened up and looped the handles of the bag around the hook at the end. Seraph was still watching me, his eyes unusually focused for once. They darted to the bag swinging from the end of the pole as I brought it toward his cage. He let out a warning chuff as it got closer, huddling back against the far wall.

“It’s just food,” I told him quietly, noticing the way his eyes darted back to me the moment I spoke.

Then they dropped to my throat. He blinked rapidly and let out another sound—lower, almost miserable. I had no idea what it meant.

It took a few seconds for me to get the bag off the hook, twisting the pole and jerking it until the handles finally slipped off. The bag landed on the floor of Seraph’s cage, and he scrambled back with a snarl.

As I returned the pole to the RV, I wondered if he’d even be able to get the bag undone. It would be a good test of his critical thinking skills, at least. Stepping back outside, I stopped and watched as he slowly, cautiously crept closer to the bag.

He picked it up and sniffed it. There were two thin slitted nostrils flat on his face above his wide mouth, in the tiny space that wasn’t filled up with eyes. I let out a sigh when he ripped the bag in half with ease, scattering the food across the floor of his cage.

He snarled in shock, but hesitantly reached for a piece of jerky. After sniffing it, he dropped it again and picked up a dried apricot. His eyes darted up to me, so I gave him a nod.

“It’s safe. You can eat it.”

As if he understood me, he slowly nibbled on the apricot, his sharp, jutting teeth surprisingly gentle. His eyes flared. He stuffed the rest of it into his mouth and reached for another.

He clambered around his cage on all fours, picking up all the apricots and eating them quickly, hunched over with the knobs of his spine forming a bridge down his curved back. I stuffed my hands into my coat pockets as I watched him, feeling the tin of pecans in there. Maybe next time I’d leave them in for him. He could use some fat. He wasn’t quite gaunt—his body was lean, with rangy muscles and long limbs. But I knew fat aided with brain function, and maybe it would help him become more lucid. Controlled.

Once all the apricots were gone, he ignored the jerky and stretched out a long arm to reach for the plum that had rolled just outside of the cage. I wondered if he would stuff the whole thing into his mouth, but he nibbled on it delicately, juice dripping onto his chin. Letting out a sound almost like a sigh, he settled back cross-legged and carefully tore chunks of flesh from the fruit, the plum cradled almost gently in his huge hands.

While he was distracted, I walked around the RV to the ladder and climbed up to settle on the roof. I'd left the lantern on the grass near his cage, so I watched him pick every last tiny scrap of flesh from the plum pit with the points of his sharp teeth.

When his tongue emerged to lick the pit clean, my brow twitched. That was... a long tongue. It tapered into a point, and was mottled pink and black like some kind of gory cow print. As he threw the stone out of his cage and wiped his chin in an oddly human gesture, his gaze lifted.

He went very still before scrambling up to the edge of the cage. Letting out a bark of distress, he gripped the bars and looked around frantically, all his eyes swivelling independently.

I cocked my head as I watched him from the roof of the RV. He barked again, eyes widening with panic. Was he... looking for me?

When his chest started to vibrate with an impending scream, I slowly said, "I'm up here."

He went silent and hunched over further to peer up at me on the roof. His long fingers slowly uncurled from the bars, and he looked around his cage until he spotted a piece of jerky. Picking it up, he stared at me as he flung it out of his cage, toward the RV.

Toward me.

My brow quirked, but I said nothing. He didn't move, but his eyes flickered down to the jerky on the grass before returning to me.

I let out a dry snort. "I'm not coming near your cage again, Seraph."

His eyes flared, but he still didn't move for a minute. Eventually, he let out another of those snarly sighs and sat back, picking up another piece of jerky. He stared down at it, lifting it to his nose and grimacing as he sniffed.

Even though it was cured and not raw, I wondered if he associated meat with his injections. I already suspected he could taste them in it, because he always seemed reluctant to eat those dosed hunks of meat, but knew that he ultimately had to. It was all he was given.

"It's safe," I said quietly. "There's nothing in it."

He watched me warily for a few seconds, before slowly bringing the stick of jerky to his mouth. His sharp teeth sliced through the tough meat with ease, but he chewed slowly, still unsure.

Finishing it, he reached for another, and another, until all the food scattered in his cage was gone. His gaze locked on the piece he'd thrown onto the grass. Eyes darting to me again, he slowly crawled forward and stretched his arm out to reach for it.

But he'd thrown it too far. He let out a weak snarl as he strained to reach it, long fingers with too many knuckles trembling from the effort. Eventually he gave up, sitting back with a morose snarl.

Sighing, I climbed down from the RV roof and walked around to stop in front of it. Seraph went still, watching me with unblinking eyes. Settling onto the grass, I threw the jerky closer to him and pulled the tin of pecans out of my pocket.

He was still watching me as he started chewing on the jerky, eyes following my hand as I opened the tin and picked out a pecan. I knew they would hurt to eat, but I wanted them. I slipped it under the edge of my mask to pop it into my mouth. My jaw ached as I chewed, and I couldn't suppress my wince when I swallowed and stabbing pain shot through my throat.

Reaching up, I absently rubbed my sore neck, fingertips pressing lightly into the bruises. Seraph went still, watching my hand. His eyes all blinked rapidly, and then he looked away, mouth pulling down as much as his jutting teeth would allow.

He almost looked... ashamed. If that was possible on his monstrous face. Shuffling back, he curled up into a protective ball against the far wall of his cage and tipped his head against the bars wearily.

His many eyes flickered back to my face, and we stared at each other in silence. Neither of us made another sound for the rest of the night.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I watched as Gloam gave Seraph his last dose, dropping the hunk of raw injected meat into his cage.

There were no injections left.

I'd been guarding Seraph every night for over a week, and I was starting to get tired, though I didn't show it. I couldn't sleep as well during the day, every tiny sound from the camp disturbing me. I was used to staying up sometimes to do night shifts on the wall, but those were shorter stints, and they were easier.

Seraph and I were both far more vulnerable out in the Wastes, not sitting high up on a wall, so I had to stay more vigilant. Keeping still and alert for any tiny sound coming from the forest or behind the RV, scanning the darkness periodically to make sure no monstrous eyes were peering back, creatures waiting to pounce.

I knew if I told Gloam or Aury that it was exhausting me, both would offer to take over guarding him, but I didn't want that to happen. Seraph reacted badly to the beasties, and he seemed to be getting used to me. He stayed relatively calm at night, even falling asleep sometimes, which made me all the more determined to keep him safe. He looked vulnerable when he curled up in a ball in his cage, spine protruding from his curved back, his flat chest rising with shallow, snarling breaths.

He still seemed to be in pain, even in sleep. His limbs would twitch, lips peeling back from his teeth every now and then as his closed eyes squeezed even tighter.

It made me... sad. I sat there watching him while he slept, trying to prepare myself to kill him when the pain didn't stop, or his suffering grew worse once he was off the drugs. Part of me wondered if we should just set him free. We weren't actually helping him, like Gloam and Rig wanted. We were just holding him captive and witnessing his internal torture.

I doubted setting him free would be any better. He wasn't lucid enough. He would be confused, he would lash out. He might even try to get into the camp, but if he simply ran off, it wouldn't be long before he came across something that would give him a painful death anyway—fearful humans or

another rabid beastie. The military might even find him and do more terrible things to him.

At least if I did it, I could make it quick and as painless as possible.

The temperature was dropping rapidly, particularly at night, and a few times I'd seen him shivering as he curled up into a tighter ball. I wanted to give him a blanket—to see if he understood what it was—but I wasn't going to go near his cage again. Despite what had happened, I wasn't scared of him, but I also wasn't an idiot who was going to repeat the same mistake twice, even if he did seem to be relaxing more around me. For all I knew, he was just trying to lull me into a false sense of security again.

I could drop a blanket into the cage with the pole, but I didn't think startling him awake would be a good idea—especially because he didn't seem to sleep much, the pain keeping him awake even when he wasn't screaming and thrashing from it. I didn't want to disturb him when he finally managed to rest.

He was watching me as he tore off chunks of sinewy raw meat, lips twisting into a grimace as he chewed. I pursed my lips under my mask, darting my gaze over to Gloam and Rig. I considered asking them to give him fatter cuts, but if he already disliked having to eat it, I doubted that having to bite into thick slabs of raw fat would make it any more agreeable.

I'd been giving him food every night from the packages Daisy gave me after dinner. My throat was hurting less, so she'd started including more than soft fruits. Crackers, little jars of kimchi and pickles, crunchy slices of dried apple, oranges, more jerky and pecans.

I gave it all to Seraph. He seemed to like fruit the best, and he always left the jerky for last before reluctantly eating it. He got into the tin of pecans with ease, and I wondered if he'd watched me do it the first night I'd brought him food. It took him a while to figure out how to open the jars of pickles. I mimed twisting the lid, and he watched me carefully before engulfing the jar in his huge hands and pulling too hard. But he got it open, pickling vinegar splashing onto his hands before he guzzled the rest and tipped the pickles into his mouth.

The first orange I gave him, he bit into whole and still seemed to enjoy even with the bitter rind. The next night, I'd started to peel it before putting it back in the drawstring bag to drop in his cage. He'd begun to carefully open the bags instead of ripping into them, and he pulled out the orange

first, eyes darting to me as his long fingers carefully picked at the peeled rind.

He still bit into it whole, more like an apple than an orange, but he'd let out what I could only assume was a pleased grunt as the fresh juice from the segments burst onto his tongue.

"How has he seemed to you, Lilac?" Gloam asked me, watching with a sad frown as Seraph slowly finished the last of his meat.

"He's calmer at night."

Seraph's head jerked up at the sound of my voice. His eyes all blinked in a wave, but he didn't move from his slumped position at the side of his cage. He'd been getting weaker and more listless each day before his next dose, and I knew it took a while for him to bounce back after he'd been given another.

"Yes, I have noticed how much quieter he has been at night over the last week." Gloam looked at me, textured brow furrowing. "Why do you think that is?"

I pursed my lips, considering telling him that I had been giving Seraph food. That he seemed to be calmer when he wasn't being gawked at or when beasties were near his cage. Every time Aury flew onto the top to refill his water, Seraph went wild. Thrashing, throwing his long body into the bars, trying to reach up onto the roof with grasping fingers.

Edin had been out a couple of times with Gloam to see him, and he reacted the same. Screaming furiously, pressing his body up against the bars and reaching frantically for Edin like he wanted to rip him to shreds.

In the end, I just folded my arms and shrugged slightly. "Think he's just getting used to me."

"That's a good sign," Rig burst out, startling Seraph and making him jerk with a warning bark. "If he's getting used to you, that means he's at least... somewhat aware."

"He's definitely aware, at least some of the time." Gloam wrapped his arm around Rig when he nestled into his side, watching Seraph sadly.

"Most of the time," I corrected, because I believed he was. I believed Seraph was aware of what was happening to him.

Gloam looked over at me sharply. "Yes?"

I nodded, watching the monster in the cage. "It's the pain that makes him less lucid. I'm pretty sure he's in constant pain, but I think it ebbs sometimes. Let's him focus more."

Gloam sighed, slipping his fingers into Rig's hair in a self-soothing gesture. "No matter how much I try to speak to him, he never speaks back."

"Maybe he just can't talk. Or maybe he doesn't understand you."

"I have tried many languages. I know most from our world, so surely he would recognise one of them." His great shoulders rose in a despondent shrug. "Then again, I have never seen anything like him before."

Rig's eyes darted nervously to Seraph. "What if... what if he's not even from the monster world? What if he's like a... a cryptid from this world?"

I quirked a brow at him. "You believe in cryptids?"

"I mean, is it really so unbelievable?" Rig gestured at Seraph, whose chest was rising with quick panting breaths as he watched us, listless in his cage. "Who knows what was already here before the monsters came? Or what if there are other worlds with portals to this one? He could be from... somewhere else."

Gloam smiled down at Rig, showing off his short tusks and fangs. "An excellent theory, firebrand."

Rig flushed with pleasure. I looked at Seraph again. Rig was right—it seemed foolish these days to write off what were once mad conspiracy theories. Who knew what was out there? Who knew what other creatures we had already shared our world with, or what other worlds and dimensions existed alongside ours?

I wasn't interested in getting into a discussion about it though, which I could tell Gloam was gearing up to do. Just as he parted his lips with a thoughtful expression on his face, I took a step back and said, "Got a shift keeping watch on the wall. See you later."

Rig looked over quickly, frowning. "You need to sleep, Lilac."

"I slept this morning." For a couple of hours, before raiders talking right outside my door had woken me up.

"You still look tired," he said doubtfully.

"I'm not," I lied. "I'm fine."

I knew it was a bad idea to sit out in the Wastes when I was this tired, but Seraph had just had his last dose. That meant he had about a week before we began to witness what would happen to him when he started going into withdrawal.

I wasn't going to make him spend what could potentially be his last week alive being guarded by the beasties who sent him into fits of furious

rage. He was used to me now. If I could ease his suffering even just a little, make the time he had left somewhat bearable, I would.

Not waiting for Rig to argue with me, I turned and walked away, rounding the camp wall to get to the entrance at the other end.

I was already wondering what other food I could get for him. I couldn't offer him much, but he seemed to enjoy eating other things, so I was determined to give him some kind of comfort while I could.

When I emerged through the hatch at the top of the wall, I looked down at the vegetable patch. Aury was there, his big wings stretching and contracting languidly as he knelt beside the plants. It would be time to harvest some of them soon—carrots, beets, radishes and turnips. The lettuce, spinach and kale were big and bushy, and Bo and Daisy had been cutting leaves off when needed for a while.

As I made my way along the wall, I wondered if Seraph would like fresh vegetables as much as he liked fruit. I decided to take some before I went out to guard him later. I knew I should have technically asked the camp—or at least Anchor—if I could use some of our crops to feed Seraph, but I didn't care—and I knew the answer would likely be no, so I just wasn't going to ask. It wasn't like anyone was going to starve if I took a few carrots and radishes. Besides, I was the one who oversaw the crop-growing. I always made sure we grew a surplus so Daisy and Bo could pickle and preserve them. We had jars and jars of preserved fruit and vegetables in the cold storage Rig and Cat had dug out behind the diner years ago.

Rusty glanced up as I sat down beside her, legs dangling over the edge of the wall.

"Hey." Her blue eyes showed through the holes of her mask. "Taking over?"

I nodded, already leaning forward to look down at the edge of Seraph's cage, just visible from where I sat. He was still slumped in the corner, but his head turned and all his eyes shifted up to me as if he could sense me watching him.

Rusty followed my gaze and shivered. "How... how's it been, watching him at night?"

I shrugged, leaning back. "Fine."

She was silent for a moment, before gently resting her hand on my thigh. "You look tired."

A furious snarl from below made her jump, drawing my gaze back down. Seraph was scrambling onto his knees, and I could see the unsteady tremor in his limbs from here. He gripped the bars of his cage, still staring up at us as his lips peeled back from his teeth.

Rusty's fingers tightened on my leg as she sucked in a sharp breath. Seraph roared, throwing his body into the bars, making Rig jump where he was still standing a short distance away with Gloam. I heard the beastie's low, rumbling voice trying to soothe Seraph, but he was going wild. Screaming until his throat was raw, gnashing his teeth and slamming his body against the bars. All his eyes still staring up at me.

I cleared my throat and glanced at Rusty. She was cringing back, leaning into my side.

"God, he's so..."

"He's in pain." Gently unpeeling her clawing grip from my leg, I said, "You can go. Your shift's over."

She nodded and stood, but before walking off she softly asked, "Do you want to come to my room tonight, before you go out there?"

I considered it, but my body was too weary. And sex was the last thing on my mind when the beastie I had been guarding was potentially going to die soon, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

Or I would end up being the one who caused it, if it seemed like the kindest option.

I shook my head, glancing up at her. "Maybe another time. Thanks."

"Okay." She squeezed my shoulder as she walked past, heading for the hatch.

Seraph let out a rabid snarl from below, but then the burst of energy seemed to drain from him and he slumped back down in his cage, chest heaving with his shallow breaths.

Shudders wracked him, whatever was in those injections coursing through him and starting to take effect. Maybe all they were designed to do was cause him pain—to keep him rabid and mindless, an uncontrollable killing machine. Maybe all we'd been doing was prolonging his suffering by keeping him on them.

Maybe he was going to get better now that there were none left.

But I doubted it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Once my shift on the wall was over, I made my way down to the camp and went into my room to grab the smallish hemp sack I used to collect seeds and cuttings when I was out in the Wastes.

There weren't many raiders around the vegetable patch when I stepped back outside, just a small cluster standing around the water tanks talking. None of them paid me any attention as I made my over and slowly walked along the neat rows of crops, checking to make sure they were all okay and no disease was spreading. The soil was dark and damp from being freshly watered, and all the weeds had been pulled up. I knew it was mostly Aury who did the work when I couldn't, and he was the only one I really trusted with it anyway, but some of the raiders still helped, and I knew we'd need more hands when we started harvesting in a couple of weeks.

I crouched down beside a line of carrots, inspecting them to find the one that looked most ready. Grasping the biggest, frondest top in the row, I tugged gently. The carrot slid from the earth in a shower of dirt, smaller than I would have liked, but I was pulling it up a little early. I pulled out another and tucked them both into the bag.

I moved over to a row of radishes and knelt again. Brushing away the top layer of dirt to reveal a bulbous pink top, I carefully dug my fingers into the earth and loosened it. A shadow fell over me as I dug out a second, but I didn't look up.

"I thought you said they needed another couple of weeks."

I paused at the sound of Tank's voice.

"They do," I answered flatly as I pulled a third out of the ground and placed them all in my bag.

"So why are you harvesting them now?"

Straightening up, I brushed the dirt off my hands and gave him a flat look before turning to walk away. I let out a tiny sigh through my nose when he followed me.

"You didn't answer me." He sounded confused. "I was just wondering."

"Okay," I said mildly, still heading for the entrance as I sensed him stop.

"God, you're such a dick," I heard him mutter before walking off.

I knew I should try and get a few more hours of sleep in before guarding Seraph, but I wanted to wash the dirt off the vegetables before giving them to him—and I wasn't particularly interested in being questioned about it again. Figuring I could forage for a few more things to give him, I started heading for the river. I probably should've told someone where I was going, but I wouldn't be long, and the beasties were at the camp in case anything happened.

I'd heard a couple of the raiders muttering about me after Rig had returned with Gloam in tow a few weeks ago and the camp had voted to let him stay.

"Think Lilac will take off now he can't be the big hero of the camp?" someone had said outside the toilet stalls while I was taking a leak.

The other raider had snickered. "Yeah, not like we need him anymore now there's two big beasties to protect us."

They'd both gone red above their masks when I emerged from the stall and walked past them without saying anything. I was sure other people thought it too—that I had moulded myself into the camp killer because it made me feel important. It wasn't true, but they could think what they wanted.

I liked having the beasties here, mainly because they made Rig and Ghost happy. I wasn't threatened by them because they were stronger or bigger than me. A lot of people were bigger than me—I wasn't all that tall. I didn't have some burning desire to be needed—to be feared or admired because I could kill anyone or anything that threatened the camp. I just did it because other people didn't want to. For people like Rig, it would traumatise them. It didn't traumatise me, even if it probably should have.

On my way to the river, I found some fruit trees and added a couple of apples and pears to the bag, as well as a long lump of wood I could use for whittling, which I tucked into my belt. Something skittered through the long grass as I walked, making my fingers twitch for my machete, but it went the other way.

There was a beastie I saw often out here drinking from the river further down the bank when I reached it. It had six stubby legs and a long neck with an oddly blank face, but I had never been attacked by one, so I ignored it as I crouched down and started pulling everything out of the bag.

It was getting dark, the sun sinking below the horizon as I washed the fruit and vegetables in the water and left them on the grass to dry while I

scrubbed the dirt from under my nails. Movement in the corner of my eye made me glance over, but it was just the beastie lifting its long neck from the water.

Its head turned to look at me, its black eyes tiny in the centre of its strange face. Sensing I wasn't a threat, it turned and lumbered off slowly on its short legs.

Something winked in the distance beyond where it had been standing. I finished washing my hands and straightened up, squinting to try and see what it was. From the setting sun, I could work out that it was to the north-west. The day had been cloudy, so only a few rays of dying sunlight broke through the grey canopy, the sky already a faint mauve.

Light winked again, flickering. It was tiny, just a speck, but after a few long moments of staring, I realised what it was. Fire. A campfire.

Lips thinning into a grim line, I put my hands on my hips and kept watching. I tried to gauge how far away it was. Any kind of firelight was visible for miles out here, because it was a single beacon in an otherwise empty landscape.

Without looking back, I knew that the camp wall wasn't visible from here, so it definitely wouldn't be from there, but I still wondered if whoever was camping over there knew it existed. They weren't close enough to worry about yet, but if they started heading this way, I knew I'd have to keep an eye on them.

Finally looking away, I crouched back down to put the clean fruit and vegetables back in the bag, then slung it over my shoulder to start heading back. By the time I made it back to camp, it was fully dark, so I went straight to the diner to collect my food package from Daisy. I refused a dinner, which was Bo's version of a shepherd's pie, made with whatever kind of meat and root vegetables he could get his hands on. It was good, but I could just eat some of the food package tonight seeing as I'd collected other things for Seraph.

After stopping off in my room to get my winter coat and lantern, I headed back into the Wastes without talking to anyone. I quickly realised it hadn't been the best idea to walk all the way to the river on so little sleep before having to stay awake and alert all night. I felt sluggish, my brain a little foggy with exhaustion, my legs aching.

You'll be able to sleep when Seraph's dead. The uncomfortable thought popped into my head before I could stop it, just as I rounded the corner and

his cage came into view.

He had perked up a little since earlier, looking far more alert than he had the night before as he scrambled onto his knees and gripped the bars of his cage, watching me approach. I turned on the lantern and went to grab the pole from the RV before settling on the grass a short distance from the cage.

“Got you some other things tonight,” I said, opening the bag from Daisy to see what was in it.

I opened the tin of pecans and took half of them, because Seraph seemed to like them. I kept the jar of pickles for myself, and one of the two lumps of pemmican. I suspected Seraph didn’t overly like meat, but it had fat mixed in, so I wanted him to have it. I took out an apple and a pear from the hemp sack before looping the handles of both bags over the hook at the end of the pole.

Seraph was trembling finely as I extended the pole to his cage, but he looked relatively calm—he had started to get what I guessed was an expression of anticipation on his inhuman face every time he was about to get food from me, like he was excited to see what was in the bag.

I assumed the tremors were from the drug and the pain it caused. Even though it made my gut twist with discomfort to think about it, sometimes I wondered just how much agony he was constantly in and how much he had grown to simply live with it. I’d known someone with chronic pain back in the city—one of my roommates in my squalid shared apartment—and she’d told me that you just had to learn how to function with the pain. It wasn’t going to go away, but neither was life.

I wasn’t hungry yet, having eaten an apple on my way back from the river, so I pocketed my food and watched Seraph as he opened the hemp sack first, no doubt intrigued by the less familiar bag. I’d trimmed the stems and roots off the carrots and radishes with my whittling knife, because I knew he’d probably just eat them if I didn’t.

My mouth quirked under my mask as he bit into the carrot and made a noise of surprise. I was starting to be able to differentiate between the sounds he made—his warning barks, angry snarls, weary sighs, and raspy snorts of pleasure while he ate. The last one was the most infrequent, but some foods he seemed to particularly enjoy—oranges and nuts and soft fruits.

He was definitely liking the carrot, crunching on it noisily while he picked through the bag. He pulled out a radish next and stuffed it into his

mouth between bites of carrot. He was kind of a messy eater thanks to his jutting teeth, but who cared? At least he was getting some pleasure in his tortured existence.

After finishing the vegetables, he bit into the apple. He ate the whole thing, including the core, then made his little snuffle of pleasure when his teeth sank into the soft, ripe pear. Then he started on the contents of the drawstring bag, peeling his orange carefully with over-long fingers, fiddling with the little tin to get to the pecans inside, before finally, reluctantly, pulling out the pemmican and nibbling on it.

I'd sat down on the top step of the RV, my back to the door. I knew it was safer for me to stay up on the roof, but I didn't bother most nights. Seraph stayed calmer when he could find me easily, and he still watched me often, but it was less guarded and mistrustful now. Probably more because I was the only half-interesting thing to look at here since the only other things in his line of sight were the RV, the forest and the camp wall.

He ate the pemmican slowly, like he always did with the jerky. Once he'd finished, he gathered up the bags and crept to the edge of his cage to throw them toward me. At first, I'd had to fish them back out with the pole once he was done. The first time I'd done it, he'd snarled rabidly at me, baring his teeth. But after a few nights, he'd hesitantly thrown the empty bags out of his cage for me to collect.

He was intelligent. He was aware, and able to think rationally when he was calmer. It made me angry despite not knowing exactly what the military had done to him. Part of me was glad all the injections were gone, even though it meant he might die. Surely dying was preferable to living trapped inside his own mind, too wracked with pain to think clearly most of the time, lashing out at anything and everything so he remained caged and isolated.

I wasn't a big talker, and I had rarely spoken to Seraph over the nights I'd guarded him. But he might have had only a week left alive, and I wanted to... I don't know. Give him something else normal. Let him know he wasn't going to be alone for it.

I cleared my throat as I shifted down to the bottom step and stretched out my arm to grab the bags, stuffing them in my coat pocket. "I'm not a big fan of meat either. I wouldn't eat it if there were more options out here, but protein is protein."

Seraph blinked at me in silence. Even though I'd just decided to talk to him, I had no idea what else to say. So instead, I pulled out the tin of pecans to start eating them.

But a faint sound made me pause, my fingers going still on the lid. Seraph froze too, going stiff and alert as his eyes darted about. He stayed silent at first, but when another rustle came from the forest, he let out a bark of distress.

Moving slowly, I put the tin back in my pocket and unsheathed my machete. Seraph barked again, and I resisted the urge to shush him as I stood up and tracked my gaze over the dark forest next to us.

No eyes peered back from between the trees, but I stiffened again when another sound came from my left, behind the RV. A twig snapping, or a click.

My eyes darted to the right when another click came from that direction. Then another, directly in front of me. They started coming more rapidly, tiny clicks ringing out closer and closer together, converging as whatever things were making the sounds began to cluster.

I eased as close to Seraph's cage as I dared, a split second before a line of small figures stepped out from between the trees.

CHAPTER NINE

I'd seen some weird stuff out here, but it took a few seconds for my brain to process the creatures in front of me. They were about three feet tall, walking upright on their back legs, which were bent like a cricket's. Their front arms were bristly and folded like a praying mantis, but that was where the similarities to earthly creatures ended. Their bodies were squat and oval... and transparent. I could see their organs pulsing beneath their clear, blue-tinged skin, tiny hearts pumping rapidly, something like intestines undulating in a constant wave.

As one, they all took a step closer. I quickly counted—ten that were visible at least. There could have been more still hiding in the forest. Seraph barked in warning, and deeply sunken eyes in upturned teardrop heads all turned at the same time toward the sound. Thin proboscises emerged from their narrow mouths, darting in and out as if they were tasting the air. I swallowed when I saw tiny barbs shooting from the ends.

The one closest to Seraph clicked, something snapping open and closed on its back to make the sound. Then the one next to it clicked, then the one after that. They shuffled closer to the cage, clicking frantically when Seraph snarled in warning.

Then they pounced.

Three of them lunged on their back legs toward the cage, only one managing to make it between the bars while the other two bounced off them and clicked in confusion. That told me their sight was bad—and their clicks were a form of echolocation, telling each other where they were.

And where their prey was.

The one inside the cage jumped again, onto Seraph's leg. As he snarled and swiped at it, I chanced a quick glance up at the top of the camp wall. Surely the raider up there would notice and alert others. But there was no figure up there—no one guarding.

I didn't have time to think about it. The two creatures were scrambling up off the ground and making their way between the bars, but there were still seven others converging. The moment I ran toward them, several turned and clicked rapidly, proboscises darting in and out.

I managed to slice one in half, its body popping like an overfilled balloon and thick clear liquid gushing out. As I swung for another, I felt sharp bristles catching on the back of my coat, scurrying up my back. One of them latched onto my boot and tried to pierce the leather with the barb at the end of its proboscis, but I shook it off and stomped on it.

Two more latched onto my coat. Bristles pulled at my hair, frantic clicks coming from just behind my head, and I gritted my teeth when something stabbed into my neck. Jamming my machete over my shoulder, I impaled the creature's head and yanked it off my back, feeling its short barb slide out of my neck and blood splashing onto my jaw and mask.

I didn't have time to look over at Seraph, but I could hear him snarling frantically, hear the manic clicks of the creatures as several more rushed into the cage. I slashed at the ones attached to my coat, slicing through the thick fabric, but another shot up my back to try and reach my neck again.

Gritting my teeth, I reached back and closed my hand around its head, tugging until it flew off me and landed on the grass. Jamming my machete into it, I finally risked a glance at the cage and saw Seraph ripping one of the creatures apart with his hands, snarling with rage. But several more were crawling up his legs, and another was attached to his back, its proboscis penetrating his skin and undulating as it sucked his blood. Its body was no longer clear—it was filling up, turning dark with Seraph's blood, getting fat and bloated as it gorged itself.

Cutting through two more that appeared in my path, I ran for the cage and reached between the bars to grab its back legs. The bristles cut into my hand, but I squeezed and pulled as hard as I could until it separated from Seraph's back with a wet sucking sound. Blood dripped from its proboscis before it vanished back into the creature's mouth, but as I tried to fling it out of the cage, its bloated body got caught between the bars and... popped.

Blood and clear goo drenched my face, stinging my eyes and soaking through my mask in seconds. The metallic taste of it, combined with something sour and rancid, filled my mouth as I dropped the dead creature and brought my machete down on another scurrying into Seraph's cage.

I could feel myself getting sluggish, my movements slowing, my arm getting weaker. I didn't know if it was from expending so much energy after not enough sleep for over a week, or if the creature had envenomed me when it jabbed its barb into my neck.

Panting, I barely managed to lift my machete and cut through the one flying toward me, springing from the ground on its back legs. I stumbled toward the one scurrying into Seraph's cage, but he grabbed it and tore its head off before I could reach it.

My knees buckled as I teetered away from the cage, vision briefly going double. It was quiet for a few seconds as I looked around, trying to spot any movement from the small dead bodies littering the ground.

Just as I was hunching over and resting my hands on my knees to try and catch my breath, more clicks came from the forest. Swallowing the rancid taste in my mouth, each breath wet through the soaked mask, I exhaled shakily and lifted my machete again as I stumbled closer to the forest to try and ward them off before they could get to Seraph's cage.

Six more leapt from between the trees, barely giving me time to react before they were converging on me. I cut through two of them sluggishly, trying not to list to the side as my vision winked out for a split second. That was all it took for one to latch onto my shin, and I clenched my jaw when its barb pierced my skin and scraped against my tibia.

I jabbed down wildly, almost slicing through my foot as I blinked fast to try and clear my vision. Part of the creature slid wetly to the ground, but its proboscis was still embedded in my leg, so I had to rip it out as I swung at another lunging for me.

I spun around when I couldn't spot the last two, almost falling flat on my face as my head swam. There was definitely venom in those barbs. I could feel it making me drowsy, far weaker than I should have been just from exhaustion. My chest heaved as I stumbled toward Seraph's cage where the last two were wriggling between the bars, but before I could get there he stomped on one, grinding it to pulp under his foot as he grabbed the other by the head and slammed it into the bars until it crumpled.

One of my knees buckled completely, and I landed heavily on it before forcing myself back up on shaking legs. Spinning unsteadily back around to face the forest, I waited, panting and trying to keep myself conscious as my vision wavered.

Seraph barked in distress behind me, but I didn't move for long minutes, until I was sure no more were coming. No more clicks came from the forest. The night was still and quiet once again.

Turning slowly, I stared through bleary eyes at the bodies littering the ground. I couldn't work out how many there had been in the end, partly

because a lot of them had been chopped into several pieces, but mainly because I was seeing double.

Well. If their venom was going to kill me, there wasn't much I could do about it now.

I stumbled over to the RV, losing my footing several times, and collapsed against its back tyre. Blinking hard to try and focus my vision, I looked over at Seraph in the cage. He was crouched down, gripping the bars and staring at me. But he didn't seem to be in any more pain than usual, and he looked alert—almost frantic. I guessed whatever was in their venom didn't affect him the way it was affecting me.

I finally uncurled my trembling fingers from around the hilt of my machete and reached up to tug my blood-soaked mask off, letting it drop to the grass with a wet slap. Taking a deep, shaky breath, I tipped my head back against the RV and found my eyes sliding shut before I could stop them.

Open your eyes. Not safe. Seraph vulnerable.

Seraph made another distressed noise, but I couldn't lift my heavy eyelids. My arms went lax, and I had a split second to wonder if I was about to die before I fell unconscious.

CHAPTER TEN

My eyes snapped open, anger and confusion immediately stiffening my limbs even though I could tell that I hadn't been unconscious for that long, mainly because the blood coating my neck, face and hair still felt wet and sticky.

I blinked fast, but my vision was clear again. Whatever those things had jabbed me with didn't seem to be long-lasting, which made me sigh with relief as I lifted my head.

My mouth tasted like shit. I reached up and clawed back the wet strands of hair stuck to my face as I looked over at Seraph. He was already watching me, still in the exact same position I vaguely remembered seeing him in before I'd passed out.

Something was wrong with him. He was letting out a low, trembling whine as he clutched the bars of his cage, all his eyes blinking at me.

I grabbed my machete and stood up quickly, wavering for only a second before my head cleared. I looked around for whatever had spooked him, body stiffening as I anticipated hearing more of those clicks from the forest and seeing another line of squat bodies step out from between the trees.

Standing still, I strained my ears to try and hear any sounds. There was nothing. It was completely silent, and when I looked back at Seraph, I realised he was still watching me. His monstrous face was twisted, and the low, constant whine turned into a snarling whimper.

"What's wrong?" My throat felt dry, and my mouth still tasted bad from the blood and monster goo that had coated my face. I bent down to pick up my discarded mask, grimacing when I touched the damp, sticky material.

Seraph whimpered again, making me pause. It was a frantic sound, one I'd never heard him make before. Less rabid. More aware. Like he was trying to tell me something.

Muscles tightening, I looked around again and back at him. "Did more of those things come? Are you hurt?"

He reached for me, arm straining through the bars, but it wasn't a frenzied attempt to try and get to me like he wanted to hurt me. He whimpered again, then seemed to actually gesture at me. A controlled movement, not just mindless clawing.

“What?” I asked, taking a single step closer.

He reached for me again, long fingers flexing. His eyes all blinked rapidly. He gestured again, one long finger stretching to point at me. At my face.

Was this because I wasn't wearing my mask? I stared hard back at him, trying to work out what he was saying.

Seraph let out a frustrated snarl and pointed again, then clawed at his own throat.

“I don't understand what you're trying to tell me, Seraph.”

His crowded teeth flashed in a snarl. He shoved his fingers in his mouth then gripped his throat again before pointing at me. Desperately trying to reach for me.

“Your throat hurts? You're hungry? You need water?”

Seraph snarled, angrily this time. He smashed his fists into the bars of the cage, clearly frustrated, before slowly sinking to the floor, long legs folding underneath him.

I swallowed, grimacing at the taste in my mouth, and reached up to try and wipe away some of the blood on my face.

“It's not my blood. I'm okay,” I said, even though I doubted that was what he was trying to say.

Then I remembered the barb going into my neck, so I carefully felt around and winced when my fingertips pressed into a sore spot. The hole was tiny and didn't seem to be bleeding anymore.

I took stock of myself as I sank back onto the grass and reached into my coat pocket for my water bottle. Tiredness blanketed me, but I didn't think the venom was affecting me anymore. I felt wired—hyper alert from typical over-exhaustion. My limbs weren't tingling, my fingers weren't numb. My heartbeat was steady. I could breathe okay. There was no pain in my body except a low-level ache in my arm and shoulder from swinging my machete around forcefully.

Letting out a quiet breath, I took a long gulp of water to try and wash the taste out of my mouth. Those things had obviously been bloodsuckers, like huge, grotesque mosquitoes, so I was guessing—hoping—that their venom was simply designed to make their prey sluggish so they could drink without being disturbed. They had acted almost like a hivemind, using echolocation to alert each other, all working as one to take down their prey.

It was pretty impressive, but I was struggling to truly appreciate the wonders of predatory technique in the animal—or monster—kingdoms when I was this exhausted. I knew it was foolish to be sleeping so little—I'd just proven that to myself. I'd been sloppy. I shouldn't have let one even get behind me, let alone crawl all the way up my back to pierce my neck.

Hopefully I'd be able to sleep through any camp sounds for the day, because I wasn't willing to stop guarding Seraph at night. Especially now. Especially after that. If I hadn't been here, he wouldn't have been able to escape and those things would have overpowered him and sucked him dry.

He was quiet in his cage now, curled up against the bars and still watching me. His mouth drooped in a miserable expression, but when he noticed me looking at him, he sat up and once again tried to convey something to me. Grabbing his throat, opening his mouth wide and pointing a finger between his teeth.

I cocked my head, brow furrowing as I tried to work out what he was telling me. I drank another gulp of water, then slowly pulled the bottle away.

"Are you worried I swallowed blood? Or..." I gestured at one of the deflated bodies. "Monster goo?"

I eyed the thick, clear liquid seeping into the grass. I was pretty sure I hadn't swallowed any of that—I would've felt the viscosity sliding down my throat.

But the thing that had exploded over my face had been filled with Seraph's blood. His dosed blood.

My throat bobbed convulsively as I stared at him. That was what he was trying to tell me—he'd just had a fresh dose, and his blood could have gotten into my mouth. Whatever was in those injections...

"I..." I swallowed again. "I don't think I could've ingested enough for that to be a problem."

Even though I had no fucking idea if that was true. We had no clue what was in those injections. What they actually did to him.

What they could do to me.

Seraph's head cocked. His hand slowly lowered from his face, and he let out a weak, snarling sigh as he curled up in the corner of his cage. His eyes kept darting between me and forest.

"Don't worry, I don't think any more are coming," I told him absently, because I was still distracted by the thought of Seraph's blood getting into

my mouth.

What was it going to do to me?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I threw up around dawn, managing to get to the side of the RV just in time as my stomach started to heave convulsively.

My vomit was tinged pink, but I tried not to let it worry me. I felt fine, so I was pretty sure it was just my body expelling unwanted contents and not internal bleeding.

I hoped.

I was rinsing my mouth out with water when Gloam appeared from around the corner of the camp wall. He stopped dead at the sight of all the little bodies and severed parts scattered around Seraph's cage. After a few seconds, wide, horrified eyes shot to me.

"Lilac." He rushed forward, thudding to his knees in front of me, his long horizontal pupils taking in the dried blood all over my face.

"I'm fine," I said vacantly. "A swarm of something attacked us. The blood's not mine."

"Seraph?" His head swung around to look at the beastie in the cage.

Seraph had been sleeping the last couple of hours, making me feel even more tired as I watched him, but he was wide awake now and watching us with his many eyes.

"He's fine, I think. They were bloodsuckers—one of them latched onto him before I could pull it off."

Gloam's wide-boned face turned a paler grey. "Lilac, you shouldn't have got close to the cage—"

"I wasn't going to let him get swarmed."

He swallowed, sitting back on his heels and looking around again.

"Typilds. They are nasty little things."

"One of them got me too." I gestured at my neck and flatly asked, "Is it gonna kill me?"

Gloam exhaled slowly as he eyed the tiny wound on my neck, but he shook his head. "No, thankfully. It's just a very mild toxin that makes their prey docile enough to let them drain it of its blood."

Gesturing at the countless dead bodies, he added, "As you obviously experienced, they travel in large swarms and target bigger prey so they can all drink as one."

I let out a slow breath, relief that neither Seraph nor I were going to die—right now, at least—making me sag back against the RV.

Gloam placed a gentle hand on my shoulder, eyes solemn as he looked at me. “Lilac, I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but you look like you badly need to rest.”

I couldn’t argue. “Yeah. I’ll go sleep.”

He helped me stand, gripping my shoulder to keep me steady when my knees buckled. Seraph snarled in his cage, smacking a hand against the bars.

I looked around blearily at the bodies. “I’ll clean this up first—”

“No,” Gloam interrupted firmly, already steering me toward the camp wall. “I will do it. Please go and sleep.”

I was too tired to argue. “Okay. I’ll be alright to guard Seraph tonight.”

“No,” he repeated. “I will do it.”

Somehow mustering up a final burst of energy, I turned to look at him. “No offence, Gloam, but... he doesn’t react well to any of the beasts. Even you.”

That was evidenced by the low, rumbling growl rising up Seraph’s throat, all his eyes narrowed and locked on Gloam.

The big beastie sighed in despondence, but gave a tiny nod. “I know. He probably remembers me from Mary’s place.”

“Probably.” I pursed my lips. “Maybe if he ever gets better, you’ll be able to explain everything to him.”

Gloam stared at Seraph sadly. “Perhaps.” His eyes cut back over to me, still bleak. “Do you think he will get better, then?”

My heart thudded. I looked over at Seraph. I didn’t want to answer while he was listening—when he could potentially understand me.

And I wasn’t even sure what my answer was. I knew he was aware. I knew he was intelligent. But those things didn’t stop the constant pain coursing through his body. And now that the injections were gone, that pain was only likely to get worse. And worse.

I gave a tiny shake of my head, hoping Seraph didn’t see it, and turned to walk back to the camp. Before I made my way into the entrance, I fixed my mask back over my face with a grimace. At least the fabric wasn’t wet anymore—just crusty and stinking of old blood.

I’d almost forgotten about the blood coating my hair and face as I stepped into the camp—until Rig spotted me and dropped the mug he’d

been carrying to his room.

“Oh my god.” He almost tripped as he ran toward me. “Lilac—”

“I’m fine.” My auto-response. “Beastie attack. They’re dead.”

Other raiders had stopped to stare at me. I could see Anchor already striding over from the diner, dark eyes flashing with worry. I sighed, not wanting to be fussed over when I just needed to go and sleep.

“What the fuck happened?” she demanded when she reached us. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I repeated. “Not hurt. It’s not my blood.”

“What about Seraph?” Rig blurted, eyes darting behind me to the container entrance. “Is he—”

“He’s okay.” I glanced up at the wall, spotting a raider in the usual spot where someone should have been last night. Looking at Anchor, I asked, “Who was keeping watch last night?”

She frowned, glancing back to follow my gaze. “Uh... Tank was on the north wall for the first half of the night, and Bishop was on the south wall.”

I shook my head. “No, he wasn’t.”

She stared at me. “What do you mean?”

“He wasn’t up there when the beasties attacked. I looked up thinking he’d see it and alert the others.” I shrugged. “It was fine in the end, but...”

Anchor let out a hiss. “He wasn’t *up there*?”

She spun around and spotted a nearby raider, who was lingering as he stared at my blood-soaked face in horror. “Spike. Where’s Bishop?”

He blinked, looking around. “Uh...”

“Will you go and get him, please?”

“Um.” He glanced at me. “S-sure.”

After he had hurried off, Rig anxiously said, “I’ll go get you a towel so you can wash up.”

Once he was gone, Anchor looked at me, her brow creased with worry. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Maybe one of the beasties should guard Seraph from now o—”

“No. He’s used to me now. And he might not have long left. It’s not fair to distress him any more than he already is, and the beasties stress him out.”

Anchor exhaled. “Lilac, I know what’s happening to him is awful, but —”

“Here you go.” Rig reappeared and thrust a towel at me, twisting his gloved fingers together anxiously once I took it from him with a nod. “Do you want me to get you something to eat? Or—”

“No. Thanks.” I gave him a tiny, weary smile behind my mask before my gaze shifted over his shoulder as two figures approached.

Spike peeled off, walking away quickly to avoid whatever confrontation was about to happen. Bishop looked wary as he walked toward us, having clearly been woken up. He was in sweats, feet stuffed into unlaced sneakers. His tired eyes grew wide as he spotted me.

“Uh... Spike said you wanted me?” he asked Anchor warily, still staring at me.

Her jaw clenched under her mask as she turned to face him. “Where were you?”

He finally looked away from me to stare at her. “Huh?”

“On your shift last night.” She gestured up at the wall. “Where were you? You weren’t at your post.”

His face drained of colour, throat bobbing nervously as his eyes darted from Anchor to me, then Rig, then back to Anchor. “I—I was there—”

“No, you weren’t,” I said wearily, eager to get this over with so I could shower and go to bed.

He went pink, fidgeting nervously as he took a step back. After a few seconds of silence, he blurted out, “Okay, I went around to the other side to talk to Tank, but it was only for, like, a few minutes.”

When Anchor just stared at him incredulously, he shot me another fearful look and blurted, “I looked down to check Lilac was alright before I left. He—He was fine. He was just sitting there near the cage.”

Anchor let out a controlled breath, narrow shoulders tensing as her hands clenched into fists. “Does he look fine now?”

Bishop swallowed and glanced at me briefly before looking at the ground. He mumbled, “I’m sorry.”

“I can’t believe you, Bishop,” Anchor seethed. “Even if Lilac hadn’t been out there, you were *meant to be watching*.”

“It was only for a few minutes!” he protested weakly, but his face was bright red.

“Long enough for Lilac to get attacked,” she snapped. “What was so important that you had to go and talk to Tank, huh? Why don’t you share it with us, if it was so pertinent that it couldn’t wait ‘til your shift was over?”

His face deepened even more in colour. “It wasn’t—We were just... shooting the shit. Everyone does it!” he added desperately. “No one just sits at their post the whole time. It’s—It gets boring.”

I quirked a brow but said nothing, even though that wasn’t true. Even Cutter hadn’t been enough of an asshole to walk off while he was keeping watch, leaving an entire side of the camp wall vulnerable.

“You’re going out on the next scavenging run,” Anchor told Bishop, her voice trembling with barely controlled rage. “You and Tank.”

Bishop blanched. “What? But—that’s Ghost’s job—”

“Next time, it’s your job.”

He looked around desperately, as if searching for backup. “But it—it’s dangerous. We have beasties now who can—”

“None of the beasties abandoned their fucking post and left us vulnerable,” Anchor seethed, gesturing at me. “Left *Lilac* to fight off a monster alone.”

I didn’t bother pointing out that it had been many, many monsters, not just one. Bishop looked at me again, a hint of bitterness creeping into his eyes.

“Isn’t that what *Lilac*’s good at, though?”

“Get the fuck out of my sight, Bishop,” Anchor snapped. “You can tell Tank that he’ll be joining you on the next run. I’ll start making up a list.”

He stood there for a few seconds, breathing hard through his nose, before turning and stomping off back toward the motel.

“Wow,” Rig said hesitantly. “What an asshole.”

“I can’t believe him,” Anchor muttered, wiping her brow.

I found myself jerking upright when Rig grabbed my shoulder, and I realised I’d been listening to one side.

“Okay, you need to sleep.” He steered me with firm hands toward the shower stalls, not letting go until we stopped outside one. His face went pink above his mask as he asked, “Um, do you... need help? I don’t want you to pass out and bang your head—”

“I’ll be fine.” I clapped him weakly on the shoulder. “I know I’ve seen your bare ass before, but that doesn’t mean you need to see mine to make it even.”

He snuffled with laughter and nodded, reluctantly walking off as I turned to go into the stall. Once the door was shut, I slowly stripped off and piled all my stuff up in the corner. The water was frigid when I pulled the lever

and it started filtering down, making me shiver violently as I scrubbed the blood from my face and hair. Grabbing my mask, I washed it as best I could seeing as I'd be putting it back on to cross the camp to my room.

I dried off and grimaced as I pulled my clothes back on. They smelled faintly of blood and that sour tang from the monster goo, so once I was dressed I walked as quickly as possible to my room, getting lightheaded on the way from exhaustion.

Rig was hovering outside my door, but he didn't say anything—just passed me some crackers, a mug of tea and a fresh bottle of water before squeezing my shoulder and walking off. The moment I was inside my room, I dumped all my stuff and stripped off to get my pyjamas on.

Sitting down heavily on my bed, I managed a few sips of tea and a cracker, knowing I should eat something, but my gut roiled as I swallowed. My mouth tasted sour from throwing up, so I gulped down some water before crawling into bed and passing out instantly.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I slept hard for the entire day, but I didn't feel any better when I woke up. I felt worse.

My stomach churned the moment I struggled up in bed, shoving my hair back from my face and wiping my eyes tiredly. I swallowed and cringed at the rancid taste at the back of my throat, my tongue feeling thick, mouth dry.

Reaching over to the nightstand, I grabbed my water bottle and sat in bed sipping it slowly, the camp quiet outside. My insides felt shaky, low-level nausea making me want to lie down and curl back up to try and relieve the ache.

Water sloshed in my belly as I forced myself to get up. I nibbled on a cracker as I got dressed, trying not to think about Seraph's blood potentially working its way through my body. Doing things to me.

I could see that it was already dark outside. After misting my plants, I opened my bedroom window and stuck my head out, immediately shivering from the prickly cold air that rushed in. Climbing out into my tiny yard, I grabbed the tray of seedlings and struggled back inside, trying not to tip them.

There were a couple more plants that needed to come in for the winter, so I slid back through the window and landed heavily on my feet, wavering for a few seconds as my head swam. I blinked quickly to clear my vision, listening to the sounds of Ghost's hens clucking softly from their coop at the other end of the motel as I carefully lowered the plant pots through the window to my bedroom floor.

The cold air helped to wake me up, make me feel less unsteady on my feet. I took a moment to suck in a few more deep breaths without my mask before I went back inside and closed the window behind me.

Walking over to the pile of stuff I'd dumped before going to sleep, I kicked the dirty clothes to one side to wash tomorrow, then strapped on my machete and shrugged into my winter coat. The pecan tin shifted in the pocket, knocking against the bulk of the apple and pear I could feel in there. I left them, figuring I could give them to Seraph seeing as I hadn't been able to go and forage for more for him today.

After pulling my hair up into a ponytail, I fixed my mask on my face and left the room. It was past dinner, only a few raiders still eating in the diner and a big stack of plates on the counter waiting to be washed. The camp was quiet, so before I went to get my food package from Daisy, I walked swiftly to the deserted vegetable patch and knelt beside a row of big, bushy greens.

Using my whittling knife, I sliced off several leaves of spinach and lettuce. The hemp sack was still stuffed in my coat pocket, so I put all the food in it before tucking it inside my coat and zipping up. When I straightened up, I saw a raider standing by the shower stalls. Watching me.

It was too dark to make out who it was, but their build was tall and lean. I stiffened when Tank's voice rang out as he started walking closer.

"What are you doing?"

This again? Suppressing the urge to roll my eyes, I turned to walk to the diner. He followed.

"What the hell, Lilac? Why were you cutting leaves off? That food's for everyone."

"I know it is." I grew it. For everyone.

"So why do you think you can just keep taking whatever you want for yourself?"

"I don't."

"So what were you doing?"

My shoulders stiffened when he grabbed my arm and forced me around. When I stared at him in silence, he let go quickly and stepped back, clearing his throat.

"I was just... You've been acting weird. Weirder than normal," he added in a mutter.

Letting out a tiny sigh, I crossed my arms. "Are you hungry?"

"What?" His brow creased. "Uh... no. I just had dinner."

"You always get enough food, right?" I gestured at the diner. "Daisy and Bo cook for you every day. You don't help with the crops. Why are you so concerned?"

"Because I—" He spluttered, taking another step back. "We've got all these new people coming into the camp now."

I quirked a brow. "The beasties don't even eat."

"No, but there's that new guy Hunter. And—and the one who went with Moth—"

“Charlie was here for one night. You were worried about him eating all your food in a single night?”

In the faint candlelight coming from the diner, I saw him go red.

“No, obviously not,” he snapped. “But it’s still... Our resources are getting stretched thinner. The beasties still use water to wash, and... and the one in the cage is taking all our meat.”

“He’s not taking any of your meat,” I said flatly. “Gloam hunts for him, and Edin said he’d go hunting as well. What else?”

His brows twitched above his mask. “Huh?”

“What else are you worried about?”

“I—” He looked around as if for inspiration. “I... I have a problem with you digging up food to keep for yourself.”

I was done with the conversation. Turning back to the diner, I said, “I’m not keeping it for myself.”

“Then what are you taking it for?”

I ignored him, pushing the diner door open and stepping inside just as he muttered, “Fucking prick.”

Hunter was at the counter talking to Bo without his big beastie in tow. He briefly glanced at me as I stopped beside Anchor where she sat in her usual spot.

She looked up, brows furrowing as she took me in. “How you feeling?”

“Fine.” I nodded at Daisy in greeting and pulled the empty drawstring bag out of my coat pocket to pass it to her. She walked off into the kitchen, no doubt to fill it for tonight.

“I think one of the beasties should guard Seraph tonight,” Anchor said quietly, gazing at me with concern. “You still look tired.”

I couldn’t be bothered to get into that argument again, so instead of acknowledging her, I said, “I think I saw a campfire in the distance when I went to the river yesterday.”

That succeeded in distracting her. She tensed up, forehead wrinkling. “Campfire?”

I nodded. “Really far off, but I’m pretty sure that’s what it was.”

She frowned. “Shouldn’t some of the others who collect water have spotted it too?”

“Probably not. They always go to the same spot further up. I walked through the forest.”

She glanced at me. “Why?”

I knew I could have just told her that I had been foraging for Seraph, but instead I just shrugged. “Scenic route.”

Anchor exhaled a heavy breath, wiping her brow. She looked tired. Weary. “Shit. That’s just what we need.”

“I’ll go back out tomorrow to try and spot them. It was probably just a trader or nomad setting up camp for the night.”

“Yeah, hopefully,” she muttered. “We could do with a trader stopping by, to be honest.”

“Are we running out of some things?” I asked just as Daisy returned and furtively slid the drawstring bag across the counter to me.

“Nothing essential.” Anchor waved her hand. “But fuck, I could use some coffee.”

I tucked the bag into my coat pocket. “Get Tank and Bishop to get some. Send them to the raider market.”

She snorted. “I’m still going to make them go on a run, but I’m not hopeful they’ll actually bring back anything worthwhile.”

I nodded. “Are you still going to assign them to wall shifts?”

Her jaw clenched under her green mask. “Yes, because we need them. But not at night, which galls me because they should be punished, but I can’t trust them to watch out for you while you’re out there with Seraph.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said mildly, taking a step back. “I should get out there. See you later.”

“Nun will be up there tonight,” Anchor said hurriedly before I could leave. “You can trust her to stay at her post.”

I nodded. Nun was calm and reliable and eagle-eyed. And good with her crossbow.

Not that I thought more of those things were going to come tonight. Typilds, Gloam had called them, and had said they hunted in swarms to take down their prey together. We’d killed them all last night, so I doubted there’d be more still roaming the forest.

I could be wrong though, so I wasn’t going to get complacent as I sat out there. At least I’d got in a good stretch of sleep, though the hint of nausea curling through my gut hadn’t gone away. It was faint enough for me to ignore, and was probably because I hadn’t eaten much in the last day.

If it was because of Seraph’s blood... well. There wasn’t anything I could do about that except see what happened. Just like we would have to do with him.

He was going wild when I stepped out into the Wastes. I could hear him screaming and smashing into the bars of his cage. Glancing up, I saw that the moon was already fairly high, which meant I was coming out later than I usually did. I wondered if that was why he was losing it.

I switched on the lantern still sitting out there from last night when I reached the RV. Seraph let out a final grunt and went quiet, crouching down and gripping the bars of his cage as he stared at me. His eyes all blinked discordantly, except those two near the middle, which opened and closed at the same time.

He let out a little chuff, a sound he'd started to make every night when I came out. I wondered if it was his version of a greeting.

Several of his eyes swivelled down to my neck. The bruises were fading now, turning light purple and yellow, and my throat didn't hurt anymore, though the bad taste was still coating the back of my tongue. Hopefully it would go away when I ate, but the thought of food made my gut clench uncomfortably.

I ignored it and sank onto the grass, unzipping my coat to pull out the hemp sack and drawstring bag.

"How's your back feeling?" I asked quietly, unsure if he'd know what I was referring to. He'd been going wild when the creatures stormed his cage, so he may not have even felt the one latched to his back, sucking his blood.

He cocked his head, but after a few seconds he hesitantly looked over his shoulder, trying to peer down at his back.

Obviously, I didn't expect any kind of response to the question, so I started pulling the food out of the drawstring bag. More jerky, an orange, an apple and some of the flatbread Daisy made often. I kept the apple, seeing as there was already one in the hemp bag, and a few sticks of jerky before adding the rest to the sack.

All the dead creatures had been removed from the grass, and the pole was resting on the top step of the RV, no doubt from Gloam using it to drag the little corpses away from Seraph's cage so he could clear them. Seraph had kicked all the remains out of his cage with an angry snarl before he went to sleep the night before.

Hooking the bag on the end of the pole, I extended it toward the cage and dropped it in. But Seraph didn't begin rooting through it immediately like he normally did—he stayed where he was, on his knees, staring at me as he gripped the bars of his cage.

“Not hungry?” I asked mildly, unhooking my mask from around one ear and bringing the apple to my mouth.

He went very still, then leaned forward, pressing his face between the bars as he stared at me, all his eyes blinking rapidly. I watched him back in silence as I chewed on a hunk of apple, trying to ignore the nausea filling my mouth with saliva. It hit my stomach like a rock, but I forced myself to take another bite.

Seraph let out a snarly sigh before slowly sitting back on his heels and reaching for the bag. He went for the pear first, but he didn’t eat it with his usual gusto. He shifted to sit cross-legged, his back hunched over morosely as he ate.

I watched him as I finished my apple, wondering if he knew how limited his time potentially was. I hoped he would get better if he made it through the withdrawals, but realistically I knew it was unlikely. He was clearly dependent on them. He grew shaky and weak and lifeless when his next dose was approaching.

Well, there would be no next dose. My mouth pulled down as I threw the apple core away and reluctantly started chewing on a stick of jerky. I could only manage half of it before I tucked it back into my coat pocket.

Seraph had just finished his orange and was pulling out the little tin of pecans. He stared down at it, then looked at me. My brow quirked in surprise when he leaned over and threw the tin toward me, his movements surprisingly gentle as if he didn’t want the lid to pop open when it hit the ground.

I looked at the tin, then back at him. He did the same, staring pointedly between us.

My mouth tipped up the tiniest amount. “Thanks.”

Without thinking, I leaned forward to grab the tin. In an instant, Seraph’s hand shot back out and wrapped around my wrist.

I froze, staring down at those long, dark fingers circling my wrist. My other hand tightened around the tin, twitching for my machete, but I didn’t let myself react. I was sure it would rouse his instincts if I started struggling and fighting his hold.

He wasn’t letting go, but he also wasn’t moving. Wasn’t trying to drag me closer. Slowly, I lifted my head to look at him.

He was already staring at me, but a strange expression was twisting his monstrous face. His eyes blinked rapidly, tightening, his mouth pulling

down.

My pulse sped up when he raised his other hand to my throat, his body pressed tightly to the bars of his cage so he could reach me. But he didn't try to strangle me again. I swallowed when leathery fingertips feathered over my Adam's apple, shockingly gentle.

Then he trailed his fingers up and tapped my chin. I blinked at him. He grunted in frustration and tapped my chin again, then my mouth. All his eyes slid closed, turning the top half of his face into a blank, dark mask. I went stiff when long fingers prised my mouth open and he tapped against my teeth.

I jerked my head back in alarm, which made him bark and open all his eyes. He was still gripping my wrist, but after a few seconds of staring at me in silence, he slowly let go.

My heart was beating faster as I sat back, my hand sweaty around the tin of pecans that I was still clutching. Seraph let out a miserable sound and retreated to the far end of his cage, curling up in a tight ball. But he tilted his head toward me and kept watching me, his expression strangely sad.

He didn't sleep all night. He didn't scream or howl or slam into the bars of his cage. He watched me, trembling lightly in a tight ball, his eyes never once leaving my face.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

S

HE STINKS OF DEATH IT'S EATING HIM HOLLOW

NOTHING LEFT SOON

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Something's wrong with me.

I tried not to let panic grip me as I hobbled out of the bathroom stall. I couldn't keep food down, everything passing straight through me or coming right back up. My appetite was diminishing, but I was forcing myself to eat. Maybe it would be better for me to stop.

My gut ached, feeling empty and bloated at the same time. My skin was clammy, and when I'd looked in the mirror in my room that morning, I'd noticed a very faint yellow tinge around my mouth. I had no idea what that meant.

Apollo didn't know either. He'd told me to drink plenty of water and eat things that didn't upset my stomach too much. Daisy had made me broth, but I just threw it back up, my throat burning and stomach heaving long after it was empty again.

At least my mask covered the tinge around my mouth. I took a deep, shaky breath and straightened up, refusing to hunch over clutching my stomach as I made my way across the camp.

I strode with determination toward the motel, intent on going to bed for a few hours. I'd just let myself get run down, that was all. From guarding Seraph every night and not getting enough sleep. I just needed to rest, and I'd be fine.

"Lilac." Ghost's brows pulled into a frown as he approached, blue eyes tracking over me. "You don't look good."

I quirked a brow. "Thanks."

"No, I mean... Are you sick?" He peered at my face. I could feel how clammy my skin was, forehead shiny with cold sweat. "You're really pale."

"I think I have a stomach bug," I admitted quietly, glancing around to make sure no one else heard. "I just need to rest for a few hours. I'll be fine."

I didn't see the point in telling Ghost that I might have swallowed some of Seraph's blood, and was potentially sick from it. It was done now—it would either run its course through my system and I'd get some form of withdrawal, or it would kill me. It wasn't like we had any kind of antidote

to whatever was in those drugs—we didn't even know what had been in them.

"Do you need me to bring you something?" Ghost asked, brows pinching with concern above his blue eyes. "Some water or um... maybe crackers?"

"I have water. Thanks." It was the only thing I could keep down if I sipped it slowly enough.

"Okay." Ghost sounded anxious. "Well, if you need anything..."

Before walking off, I took a few seconds to look at him. Just in case I was going to die from Seraph's blood. He and Rig were the closest things to friends I had. I probably didn't show them enough that I... appreciated them.

"Thanks." I clapped him weakly on the shoulder, all my muscles aching and trembly.

I could feel him watching me as I turned to walk to my room. The moment I was inside, I wearily stripped down to put on my pyjamas. As I tugged on sweats and the loose crop top I liked to sleep in, I hesitantly peered down at my stomach.

It was usually flat, but my belly was slightly distended. A little swollen, even though there was nothing in it. Swallowing, I pressed my fingertips gently to the skin and gasped when a sharp stab of pain flared through me. Sweat prickled my brow, so I quickly walked to the bed and climbed in, not wanting to look at it anymore.

After forcing myself to sip some water, I shakily lay down and stared up at the ceiling, feeling it slosh around in my stomach. Why would Seraph's blood cause my stomach to bloat? *His* stomach was lean, almost concave under his ribcage. The drug didn't make him bloated. What was it doing to me?

I felt sick constantly. I could have sworn my face had looked a little thinner in the mirror this morning, but maybe the yellow tinge around my mouth was making me see things.

When my gut cramped up again, I wrapped my arms around my middle and rolled onto my side, curling up into a ball to try and alleviate the pressure.

I was tired, a bone deep exhaustion that made it hard to do the simplest things or even move, but I'd been trying to push through it. After grabbing a few hours of sleep this morning, I'd walked back to the river to forage for

Seraph and try to spot anything unusual—like whether whoever had made that campfire was still in the area. None of the raiders who went to collect water had mentioned seeing anything, so I'd walked further west, in the direction I'd spotted the fire before.

I'd found another campfire a short distance from the riverbank. It looked new, and when I poked through the ashes with my machete, I saw charred fruit pits from a meal. And there were impressions on the ground. Flattened patches of grass around the fire from where people had sat. Holes bored into the earth, evenly spaced apart, where they'd set up tents.

I'd glanced around warily, going very still to try and hear any sounds. There was nothing except for the rustle of trees and steady rush of the river. Whoever had been there was gone, but they had gotten closer to the camp.

I'd taken a longer route back to try and spot any other signs of people, even though I was already flagging from the walk, my stomach growling with hunger but the nausea still there—always there. By the time I made it back to camp, black spots were dancing in my vision. I'd gone to my room to try and eat some crackers, but had to immediately rush to the toilet stalls when my stomach had gurgled threateningly.

I'll tell Anchor about the campfire once I've slept, I thought, forcing my eyes closed and trying to ignore the way my mouth kept filling up with saliva, like I was on the verge of vomiting. There was nothing in me, but that hadn't stopped me from throwing up thin, watery bile several times already.

I was finally managing to drift off when a flurry of muffled sound reached me through my closed door, making me tense as my eyes popped open.

A raider's voice rang out, faint and sounding high up, like they were on the wall keeping watch.

"Wait—what is that—"

"Oh my god," someone else barked, their voice already raw with panic.

"Fuck—get Lilac—"

"Oh my god—f-fuck—"

"*Where's Lilac?*" someone shouted, their voice cracking with distress.

My breath caught, and I tried to sit up. I collapsed back onto the bed and gritted my teeth, rolling to my side and reaching for my machete. I had no idea what was going on, but I needed to get out there.

"Fuck, it's in the camp!"

A burst of gunfire made me tense, and I clenched my jaw as I manoeuvred myself up on shaking arms.

I had just managed to slide one foot out of bed and place it on the floor, trembling with the effort, when a raider's terrified shout made me freeze.

“It's the Soul Eater!”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

My door burst open, making me jump so violently I dropped my machete.

I stared in disbelief as the towering, ghoulish figure stepped into my room, kicking the door closed behind him with his boot.

Horns curled back from the depths of his dark hood. Heavily scarred hands with black-stained fingertips twitched by his sides.

When he started walking toward the bed, I reacted out of instinct, scrambling back to try and get away until my shoulders bumped into the headboard.

He didn't say a word—just grabbed my ankle through the sheet and yanked me unceremoniously down until I was flat on my back. My breath shuddered out of me when he placed a knee on the mattress, tendrils of black hair slipping out from under his hood as he loomed over me.

He clasped my face in a clawing, unforgiving grip. My eyes went wide, and I shoved at his arm weakly before my hand flew out to the side to grab my machete. He huffed and kicked it away, so I started frantically patting over the nightstand for something, anything.

My fingers closed around a figurine of a bear I had carved years ago. As his cold black fingers pressed into the hinge of my jaw, forcing my mouth open wide, I smashed it over the side of his head with as much strength as I could muster.

The Soul Eater grunted and shook his head sharply before a low hiss sounded from the blackness of that hood. Before I could hit him again, he ripped the figurine out of my hand and flung it across the room.

“I'll kill you myself if you do that again, human.”

I went completely still at the sound of that distorted voice, goosebumps prickling over my skin and scalp. One last burst of adrenaline in my weak body made me buck, but he pressed a knee into my already shrieking stomach, making me let out a shuddering breath and collapse back, the last of my meagre strength gone.

The pressure on my bloated gut was agony. Sweat bloomed over every inch of me as I panted, my vision winking in and out. And then I heard him take a long, deep breath.

My body reacted, for some reason. My gut heaved, mouth filling with saliva like I was about to vomit. The Soul Eater drew in another breath, and I *felt* something rising up, churning in my stomach—like someone had funnelled an entire can of soda directly into my gut, and the bubbles were filling me to bursting. I squirmed in alarm, but the Soul Eater’s long fingers were still clamped on my face, keeping my jaw open wide.

He took another deep breath, and the pressure in my stomach suddenly eased before something squirmed up into my oesophagus. I started to heave again, my body convulsing, eyes watering from the intense pressure rushing up into my throat.

A rancid taste hit the back of my tongue a split second before thick black goo started streaming from my mouth, funnelling straight up into the dark hood looming over me in an undulating column. I couldn’t stop heaving. It felt like he was sucking all my organs out of my body, liquefying them and drawing everything out until I’d be left an empty sack.

It went on for seconds that felt endless, black goo pouring from my mouth in a constant stream, thick and viscous and sour like bile. When it finally stopped, I sagged back onto the bed, completely weak and drained, my eyes streaming.

But something felt different—better. Like the instant a migraine finally eases up—a cool, relieving balm was spreading through me and making me realise just how much pain I’d been in.

All I wanted was to close my eyes and sleep for a long time, to bask in the relief settling over my trembling body, but I couldn’t. I stared up into that dark hood as I sucked in shuddering breaths.

“What—what did you just do to me?” My voice was hoarse, but I managed to keep the emotion out of it somehow.

The Soul Eater huffed in disgust and gave my cheek a none-too-gentle slap after releasing my jaw. “Saved your sorry life, human.”

I stared up at him, breathing hard as he straightened. His head cocked, then that shadowed hood tilted up to the ceiling before turning toward the door.

I flinched when he strode over to it, flinging it back open. He stood there, framed by the light coming in from outside. A looming, demonic shape with curling horns and twitching, black-stained fingers.

I jumped again when he spoke, his distorted voice seeming to ring out in every corner of the camp.

“Edin,” he barked.

Somehow finding the strength to roll out of bed, I collapsed on my hands and knees on the floor, trying to force myself to get up. With a trembling hand, I stretched out and grabbed my machete, then heaved myself up on legs that immediately threatened to buckle. My stomach convulsed, pain streaking back through it.

I stumbled after the Soul Eater, gripping my machete in a clammy hand. Someone shot the moment he stepped out of my room, and my heart lurched as I plastered myself against the wall beside the door to avoid getting hit.

The Soul Eater vanished, black smoke curling up, the bullet passing harmlessly through it to pierce my bedroom wall. When he reappeared in the same spot a second later, someone shot again.

This time when he resolidified, he let out a distorted snarl at the raiders. “Stop fucking shooting at me.”

No one seemed to know what to do. Anchor was staring from the doorway of the diner, Daisy and Bo behind her, with Daisy clutching a kitchen knife like it would help. Every single raider was frozen in place, many of them armed with the guns that Ghost and Aury had brought back a while ago. But it was pointless shooting at him—that was already obvious.

The camp was utterly silent until I heard a faint grinding sound from above before a whistle pierced the air. A bolt from Nun’s crossbow drove into the Soul Eater’s shoulder, but he didn’t move an inch. Huffing in disgust, he ripped it out as his hood tilted up to look at her above us on the camp wall.

“I *said* stop shooting at me.” His voice seemed to come from everywhere at once, low and threatening, but somehow still faint like a thousand screams were carrying over on the wind. My skin prickled, fingers tightening around the hilt of my machete.

“Edin,” he barked again, making everyone jump. The door of the room above mine flew open.

“Calm down, you old bastard. Just had to get my kilt back on.” Edin chuckled as he emerged onto the walkway.

Rather than take the stairs, the big beastie vaulted over the side of the railing and landed with a booming thud that shook the ground. His kilt fluttered up, revealing everything, and I heard a choked, “Jesus Christ,” from one of the raiders.

Edin was smiling wide, fangs glinting as he strode toward the Soul Eater. Hunter appeared above, eyes tight with apprehension and face flushed above his mask. He hurried to the staircase at the end of the walkway.

“I thought I could sense you nearby!” Edin reached the Soul Eater and clasped his shoulder in a friendly grip. “What are you doing here?”

“Why do you think I’m here?” the Soul Eater said flatly. “What, exactly, are *you* doing here?”

Before he answered, Edin finally seemed to notice that every raider in the camp was standing around with their weapons aimed at his ghoulish friend. He paused, then chuckled as he slung his arm around the Soul Eater’s shoulders.

“Do not worry, humans.” His fangs gleamed as he grinned wide. “Wyn is not here to harm any of you.”

“That depends on whether they keep fucking shooting at me,” the Soul Eater muttered.

I gripped my machete tighter, agony still curling through my belly as I clasped an arm around it protectively. I tried to straighten up but couldn’t, sweat beading on my forehead. My legs were weak and trembling, but I clutched my knife and kept my eyes on the Soul Eater, waiting for him to move. Maybe I’d be able to get one good hack at him before he turned into that oily black smoke again.

Anchor’s legs looked unsteady as she approached, gripping a pistol. Further down the motel, I noticed Rig and Gloam silently watching, the big beastie grasping his war hammer. He smoothed a hand over Rig’s curls and murmured something to him, but Rig’s eyes were still wide with worry as he stared at the Soul Eater.

I wondered where Ghost and Aury were, but I couldn’t say I wasn’t glad that the rycke wasn’t here. I didn’t know what he would have done if the Soul Eater had startled him, invading Ghost’s camp. Threatening his mate’s safety.

Although, the Soul Eater *was* just standing there, arms crossed, with Edin’s thick arm slung over his shoulders.

“What do you want?” Anchor asked as she reached the two monsters, voice tight with tension and fear. She squared her narrow shoulders, forcing herself to look up into that impenetrable hood. “Why are you here?”

The Soul Eater snorted, uncrossing his arms and carelessly flicking a black-fingered hand. “I don’t *want* anything. And I don’t have time for this.”

“Wait!” Edin blurted, his arm sliding off as he turned to face him. “Wyn, don’t be such an ass. I want to see Danny.”

My brow twitched. Who the hell was Danny?

A derisive snort came from the depths of that black hood. “As if I would ever bring Danny inside a raider camp.”

Edin just huffed. “These people are *fine*. You were going to get me to bring him here, anyway!”

What was that?

“Hunter wants to see him too,” Edin continued, but Hunter didn’t look at all eager to get involved in this little spat between two unfathomably powerful, otherworldly monsters as he watched from a short distance away.

“Then I will take you to him, but he is not coming in here,” the Soul Eater said, voice tight through clenched teeth.

Edin waved a huge purple hand. “Gah. Bring him here. It will be good for him to meet more people. Make new friends.”

“Did you sustain a brain injury since we last saw you?” the Soul Eater snapped, fingers twitching by his sides.

Edin rolled his eyes. “You can’t hide Danny away from everyone, Wyn. He’ll turn into a monster if he’s stuck with just you forever.”

The Soul Eater’s blackened fingertips twitched violently, then clenched into fists. Even though I couldn’t see his face, I knew that the urge to murder Edin was probably written all over his features.

“Edin,” he seethed, making the big monster chuckle.

The normally stoic Hunter looked frantic as the Soul Eater snatched Edin’s wrist in a clawing grip and dragged him toward the container entrance. Whatever he said in his eerie voice was too low for us to hear, but Edin’s deep rumble rang out loud and clear, echoing as Wyn shoved him into the container.

“Relax, you old bastard.” It got fainter as they made their way out of the camp. “We’ve been here a while now. It’s fine. Now, where have you stashed Danny? I can’t—There he is! *DANNY!*”

We all jumped as Edin’s booming yell seemed to shake the ground. Anchor slowly looked around, wide, dark eyes finally settling on me.

“What the fuck is happening?” she asked.

I shrugged one shoulder, the action making my belly shriek in pain, as Rig and Gloam made their way toward us. My brain was still foggy from whatever the Soul Eater had done to me, and I could taste the rancid sourness in my mouth from the black goo he'd forced up my throat, so when Rig stopped dead at the sight of me, it took me a long moment to realise why.

The brush of my mask over my mouth and nose was conspicuously absent. Rig's eyes jumped over my face, taking all of it in for the first time. I absently wondered if that yellow tinge was still around my mouth.

Rig's gaze slid down, and I gritted my teeth when I realised I was still wearing my fucking pyjamas.

"You're wearing a crop top."

I forced myself to straighten up, despite the way my belly shrieked in protest, and gave him a flat look. "I sleep in it. It's comfortable."

Rig's wide eyes were still fixed on my exposed stomach. "You have your bellybutton pierced."

"And?"

He finally looked up and chuckled, giving me a sly grin. "Lilac, you dog."

I refused to be embarrassed. Not that I was embarrassed about my body or my piercings, but I didn't like people seeing what I hadn't knowingly allowed them to.

"Shouldn't you be more concerned with the soul-sucking monster in our camp?" I asked him dryly, even though Edin and the Soul Eater had vanished through the container entrance.

Rig's face went pale as his eyes darted up to Gloam. He shuffled closer to the big monster, who was eyeing me with a calm expression.

"He went to you?" he asked in his low, rumbling voice.

I gave a clipped nod and Gloam sighed, absently raising a hand to stroke it through Rig's curls.

"I'm sorry." He dipped his bald head slightly. "I should have realised and picked up the signs. I'm not all that au fait with—"

"Wyn, uh, probably isn't here to harm anyone," Hunter interrupted as he approached us, but his eyes were tight with tension as he glanced over at the container entrance. "Edin knows him."

"Then why the fuck is he here?" Anchor shoved a hand through her hair.

Hunter's cool eyes fixed on me. He stared at me intently for a few moments, taking in my sallow skin, the dark circles under my eyes. "Well, he—"

Edin reappeared at the container entrance, pulling Hunter's attention that way. He still looked concerned, even though the monster was wearing a big, shit-eating grin as he sauntered back over to us. I went still when I heard a new voice echoing in the container.

"No, Wyn, I want to see Hunter and hang out with Edin for a while."

The Soul Eater's voice was tight. "My sweet—"

"Wow. I've never been inside a proper raider camp before."

The guy who emerged from the container was tall and lean, dressed all in black with a sleek helmet tucked under his arm and a baseball bat resting on his shoulder. He had dark hair, piercing blue eyes and golden skin, and was almost as beautiful as Moth.

What, exactly, was this guy doing with the Soul Eater?

And had that creepy hooded death monster just called him *'my sweet'*?

The Soul Eater stepped out after him, shoulders hunched with tension, but his hand appeared gentle when he placed it on the guy's nape. "Danny —"

"Baby, it's fine. I'm not gonna get hurt. Or have you forgotten already?" He nudged the Soul Eater and shot him a blindingly brilliant smile, all white teeth and wide mouth.

The Soul Eater huffed. "Still—"

"Hunter!" Danny interrupted him yet again, strolling toward us. "Good to see you. Um, hi."

He gave us an awkward little wave with the fingers around his baseball bat, his throat getting splotchy and cheeks going pink.

"Hey, man." Hunter smiled behind his mask, eyes crinkling at the corners. "Good to see you."

"You can't just—" Anchor spluttered, looking at me with panicked eyes. "You can't just let people into the camp. We let you come in as a sign of—"

"Relax, human." Edin waved an imperious hand, then shot the new guy, Danny, a cheeky grin. "Danny is precious. He wouldn't harm a thing."

"Oh my *god*, Edin," Danny muttered, cheeks going even darker.

"Relax, humans," Edin repeated, raising his voice and making it boom across the camp. He gave all the shellshocked raiders still standing around a

wide, fanged smile. “We are just catching up with old friends. They mean you no harm. Go about your day.”

Hunter muttered something under his breath as Edin waved an imperious hand at the raiders, shoos them away. Anchor choked on a breath.

“I—Y—you can’t stay,” she told the Soul Eater and his... human companion. “You have to go.”

That made the Soul Eater go very still. His hood slowly cocked as he crossed his arms. “Do we?”

Anchor shot me a desperate look, like I might have a solution. I just stared back. I very much doubted I’d be able to get rid of the Soul Eater, especially when I was this weak.

Having just had thick black goo sucked out of my throat by a monster.

“I have known Wyn for a very long time,” Edin told Anchor, giving her what I assumed was supposed to be a reassuring grin. It just looked mildly threatening thanks to the fangs. “He is not here to harm anyone.”

The Soul Eater huffed and slyly began, “Well—”

He stopped when Danny elbowed him in the gut with a frown, turning his hood away with a sniff.

“Ma’am.” Danny stepped forward, shooting Anchor a sweet smile. “We were just travelling through the area. We won’t cause any trouble, I swear. But we were hopin’ to bump into Edin and Hunter anyway, and since they’re here...”

Anchor stared at him in disbelief for a few seconds, before looking around at the rest of us with wide eyes.

Rig’s throat bobbed as he glanced up at Gloam, who still looked calm. Taking a hesitant step forward, he held out his gloved hand to Danny. “H-hi. Um, I’m Rig.”

Danny beamed, shaking his hand. “Nice to meet you.” He let go and turned to Gloam, chuckling. “Damn, another big one.”

Gloam rumbled out a chuckle as he shook Danny’s hand, then stepped back to wrap his arm around Rig’s shoulders. I sidled closer to them, still watching the Soul Eater warily.

“Where are Aury and Ghost?” I muttered, not sure I wanted to see how the rycke would react to the ghoulish monster invading his camp.

“Went out foraging,” Rig whispered, gaze growing nervous as he eyed the Soul Eater and Danny. “Um, hopefully he really isn’t here to hurt any of us.”

He didn't seem to be. He was just standing there, and when Danny went back to his side, he curled a protective arm around the guy's shoulders and tugged him closer.

Anchor let out an unsteady breath and glanced around again. A few of the raiders had wandered off, but most were still standing around watching.

"Okay, you can... stay to catch up," she said wearily, wiping her brow. "But if you—if you—"

"I have no interest in destroying your little camp, human," Wyn drawled, blackened fingertips dangling over Danny's shoulder, adorned with pale, pitted rings. "It would be child's play," he added in a conspiratorial mutter to Edin, a hint of amusement in his distorted voice.

Edin chuckled as I stared hard at the Soul Eater. Wasn't that what he did, though? Tear through raider camps murdering people? Sneak into the cities and leave empty husks behind after sucking out their souls?

Except that wasn't what he'd just done to me. He hadn't come here to kill me. He'd come here to do something else to me, but I had no idea what. He'd said he had saved my life.

Anchor turned to look at me, brow furrowing over her dark eyes.

"Watch them," she said, making Danny glance over at me. I saw his blue eyes dart down to my machete, brows rising at the sight of it.

I tried to pretend that I wasn't standing in my pyjamas, without my mask, still weak and trembly from whatever the Soul Eater had just done to me.

"I will."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Despite what I'd told Anchor, I backed up into my bedroom after she walked off so I could get dressed. It was making me uncomfortable to stand out in the camp without my mask, so I shoved a sweatshirt on over my crop top and fixed my mask to my face.

I was only inside for a minute at the most, but by the time I stepped back out, still gripping my machete, most of the raiders had dissipated, realising there wasn't going to be some big battle with the Soul Eater. Gloam and Rig were still standing with Danny, Wyn, Hunter and Edin. All the camp's monsters together, except Aury.

And the one stuck in a cage outside the walls.

"Wow, Wyn, would you look at that," Danny was saying, giving the Soul Eater an overexaggerated jab with his elbow. "Hunter and Edin. *Together.*"

The Soul Eater rubbed the spot on his side as his hood tilted toward his partner.

"Yes. I see it." His creepy voice was a weird mix of disgruntled and pleased.

Hunter chuckled sheepishly. "Uh, yeah. Decided to stay out here with this guy in the end." His tone was stoic, but his hard face softened as he and Edin looked at each other.

Danny nodded enthusiastically. "I knew you would. We were just talking about it recently, *weren't* we, Wyn?"

The Soul Eater grunted. "It came up."

Danny snickered and stepped closer to Edin. "It's good to see you, big guy."

He laughed through a breathless grunt as the purple monster threw his arms around him and lifted him up into the air.

"It's good to see you too, Danny." Edin set him down and ruffled his hair with a huge grin. "You seem different somehow. Is Wyn treating you well?"

The Soul Eater huffed in annoyance at the question.

"No complaints," Danny said cheerfully, shooting Wyn a smirk.

"And you, you old bastard." Edin gave Wyn's shoulder a good-natured shove. Somehow, the Soul Eater didn't budge an inch. "How's your head?"

“No complaints.”

I got the distinct impression that the Soul Eater was smirking back at Danny beneath his hood, especially when the guy’s face went red.

Edin chuckled. “And I see your horn’s fully grown back now.”

“Aw, don’t worry, Edin.” Danny smiled up at him, gaze briefly lifting to the monster’s broken horn. “Your horns are still great.”

Edin drew back instantly, his big purple eyes widening as they darted between Danny and the Soul Eater. He cleared his throat and took a step back, then pulled the silent Hunter into his side.

“I... I am very flattered, Danny, but I am with Hunter.”

“Huh?”

The Soul Eater made an odd, strangled sound within his hood and turned away, his shoulders shaking once.

“What?” Danny insisted, staring between the two monsters with a little wrinkle between his brows. “I don’t get it. *What*, Wyn?”

“Nothing, my sweet.” His voice was tight.

Danny let out a frustrated sound and grabbed his sleeve, tugging him away from the group. I watched as the Soul Eater cupped his face in a long, black-fingered hand. Whatever he said made Danny go bright red, his throat getting splotchy.

He gave the Soul Eater’s shoulder a weak shove and spoke loud enough for us to hear.

“You ass! Why didn’t you tell me that?”

They made their way back over, and I caught the tail-end of Danny muttering something under his breath about tying Wyn up and leaving him for hours “instead”. I quirked a brow at that, not entirely sure I wanted to know what those two got up to.

I was still trying to catch up to the fact that the Soul Eater—the ghoulish monster that roamed the Wastes murdering people and leaving behind twisted husks—appeared to have a... human partner.

“Sorry,” Danny muttered to Hunter, cheeks still pink. “I didn’t realise.”

“Realise what?” Hunter looked between him and Edin.

“The horn thing.” Danny shot a quick, embarrassed look around at the rest of us silently watching. “What it means to... I don’t think of Edin like that, I swear. He’s like a big, annoying brother to me.”

“Like what?” Hunter’s brows pinched. He looked even more confused.

Edin chuckled, palming the side of his head to yank him closer and rub his cheek over Hunter's hair. "I'll explain later, josdo."

"I don't get it," Rig said, and Gloam chuckled as he leaned down to whisper in his ear.

After a second, he burst out laughing, which made Danny go even pinker.

"Don't worry about it, man. It's probably all bullshit," Rig said to Danny, then gestured at Gloam. "Gloam has cute little horns, but he *definitely* has a big—"

"What—What's going on?"

I stiffened at the sound of Ghost's voice, because that meant Aury was back, and I had no idea how he'd react to the Soul Eater's presence.

Turning, I saw Aury and Ghost standing a short distance away. Ghost's eyes were wide and horrified as they locked on the Soul Eater, but Aury looked calm, if wary.

Wyn snarled, grabbing Danny and shoving him behind his towering frame. "Edin."

"Aury's fine," Edin said quickly. He jerked his craggy chin toward Ghost. "He is mated to Ghost here. He is not dangerous" —he paused— "as long as you don't try to hurt Ghost."

"He is the *rycke*," Wyn seethed, taking a step back and pushing Danny behind him again.

That made my brows slowly rise. Was the Soul Eater scared of Aury?

"I—What—" Ghost looked around wildly at us, his face deathly pale above his mask. "Is that—"

"Okay, don't freak out, Ghost." Rig stepped forward, holding up his hands. "He's not here to hurt anyone. Um, apparently. He knows Edin. And this is Danny, his... uh..."

"Husband," Danny said with a big smile as he peered over the Soul Eater's shoulder, giving Ghost a little wave. "Hi there."

I side-eyed them before looking back over at Ghost. Aury was gently clapping his shoulders from behind, and his big eyes were fixed calmly on Wyn, who was practically vibrating as he stared back, letting out a low hissing sound. When he tried to push Danny back again, Danny rolled his eyes and shoved Wyn's arm.

Aury murmured something in Ghost's ear, giving his shoulders a tiny squeeze before urging him closer.

“Hello,” he said softly once they’d come to a stop beside Gloam. “I am Aury. The rycke.”

“Nice to meet you,” Danny said cheerfully, seemingly unaware of how tense his monster... husband was.

“It is not *nice*,” Wyn exploded, hands clenching into fists. “Edin, you let me bring Danny in here when the *rycke* lives here? I’ll rip your fucking horns out myself.”

Edin gasped, placing a hand on his huge chest. “Wyn.”

The Soul Eater turned to Danny. “We are leaving.”

“No we ain’t.”

Wyn’s fists squeezed into even tighter fists, before his shoulders rose and fell with a long, drawn-out exhale. His fingers slowly uncurled and twitched madly, before he began tapping out a pattern across his rings with his thumb.

“My sweet.” He attempted to make his ghoulish voice calm. “Do you remember how you were convinced I was going to kill you when we first met? I’m not saying I would ever do it, but we are getting very close to me taking out my anger on everyone else in the vicinity.”

Everyone went very still. I gripped the hilt of my machete tighter, but Danny just snorted and shoved the Soul Eater’s shoulder.

“Relax, old man. It won’t kill you to spend a few hours here. Or maybe a bit longer,” he added, shooting Edin a tiny smirk. The big monster grinned mischievously behind Wyn’s back.

Slowly, I dragged my gaze over to Hunter. He was friends with these people? He looked entirely unimpressed with the situation unfolding, and when he met my eyes, we shared a look. I’d barely spoken to him—and when I had it had been guarded and unfriendly—but in that moment, I felt kinship with him.

Danny and the Soul Eater were... strange.

“So that’s settled then.” Edin clapped his huge hands together. “You will stay. We can catch up on everything you have done since the prison. And you can get to know the others,” he added cheerfully, gesturing at Gloam. “Wyn, do you remember the aytarin we saw chained to the side of a vehicle?”

Wyn went still and slowly turned, hood tilting as he took in Gloam.

“Yes,” he said, a hint of intrigue in his voice. “That was you?”

Gloam inclined his head in a graceful nod. After a pause, Wyn huffed and threw his arm over Danny's shoulders, tugging him back into his side.

"I suppose we could stay for a while," he drawled, obviously interested in Gloam's story.

"Excellent!" Edin grinned widely, fangs glinting. He palmed Hunter's nape and yanked him closer to kiss the side of his head. "Well. This is quite a sight," he added, looking around at the three other monsters in our group. "Four of the last remaining old races, coming together in this new world."

The Soul Eater huffed, an unimpressed sound, and crossed his arms over his chest, hood turning away while Aury gave a small, uncertain smile. Gloam looked down at Rig, pulling him closer with an affectionate expression on his broad face.

"We should form a union," Edin said brightly. I side-eyed him but stayed silent.

"Why would you form a union, scratch?" Hunter nudged him with his elbow, eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiled beneath his mask. It made the skin tighten and pull around the scar just visible on his left temple and cheek.

"I don't know, but Charlie was telling me about them. He said his father was in one for farmers. He brought it up when he was complaining about something you made him do at the homestead."

Hunter rolled his eyes. "Fucking Charlie."

"I'm guessing Charlie went back, seeing as he's not here," Danny said, his voice tight with worry.

"Went back?" Rig looked at Edin and Hunter in confusion. "You mean to your homestead?"

"He went with Moth to get Cat out of the prison," Hunter said quickly. Too quickly. I narrowed my eyes at him in suspicion, our brief moment of kinship gone.

"Who's Moth?" Danny asked.

"A nomad we're friendly with," Rig answered. "He's half monster."

Danny's blue eyes widened.

"A half monster? Cool." He looked at Wyn. "Can we stay 'til they get back so I can meet him?"

The Soul Eater stiffened. "I don't think—"

"Wait," Danny interrupted him, looking around. "What happened to the raider who was infected? Are they okay? Did we get here in time?"

Infected? My cheek twitched, but I managed to contain most of my reaction. “I assume that was me.”

All eyes turned to me, but I ignored them to stare at the Soul Eater. “What was I infected with?”

“A parasite—a monster parasite.” Danny answered instead, stepping forward and clasp my shoulder, making me stiffen. “But don’t worry, Wyn got rid of it for you. Dude, you shouldn’t be up! You need to rest. Where’s your room?”

I shot a look at Rig and Ghost as they watched this stranger try and coddle me. They did nothing. Rig’s brown eyes were wide with shock, face slack like he was trying to process what Danny had just casually revealed. Ghost already appeared frantic at the thought of a monster parasite, looking up at Aury with wide, terrified eyes.

“You had a parasite?” Edin was staring at me, brows drawn, as if I’d have the answer. It was news to me too.

The Soul Eater huffed. “And you didn’t even notice.”

“That’s not my fault!” Edin protested immediately, palming Hunter’s nape and jerking him closer. “Hunter has been particularly frisky the last few—”

“Edin, shut the fuck up,” Hunter muttered through clenched teeth, his face flaming red above his mask.

“And anyway”—Edin sniffed, tilting his chin—“I can’t suck them out of people like you do. I would’ve had to cut open his belly and rip it out. He would’ve died anyway.”

Several pairs of wide eyes slowly turned toward the Soul Eater, then to me. Danny went pink, quickly releasing my shoulder to hold up his gloved hands.

“Okay, that makes it sound worse than it—He doesn’t—Um, it’s not—”

“*Suck* them out of people?” Rig said slowly, his eyes darting up and down the Soul Eater’s tall frame.

“It’s not a sexual thing,” Danny blurted, his throat getting splotchy. “It’s just—um... It’s... it’s through the mouth,” he mumbled, probably realising how little he was helping.

“He forced black goo up my throat,” I said flatly, because I wasn’t particularly interested in anyone thinking the Soul Eater had sucked my dick. Specifically, had somehow sucked a parasite *out* of my dick. “And swallowed it.”

I suppressed my cringe, because I wasn't really helping either.

"Anyway," Danny said hurriedly, clearly wanting to move past it. "You need to take it easy for a while."

"I'm fine," I said straight away, even as a wave of stomach cramps made me want to double over.

"You look like shit," Danny told me bluntly. I narrowed my eyes at him, ignoring the low, warning growl that came from the Soul Eater's hood.

"You need rest," Danny repeated. "You've had a parasite growing in your belly. You're gonna feel like crap for a few more days while what remains of it dissolves."

I blanched at the thought of some foreign monster growing in my fucking body. And I hadn't even realised.

What would have happened if the Soul Eater hadn't got here when he did?

"Okay, what the fuck. Lilac had a parasite?" Rig stared at the Soul Eater, then Gloam. "Wait, is this... Is he the one you told me about before? One of the old races who hunts parasites?" He turned to stare at the Soul Eater again. "He's... He's not just murdering people for fun? Sucking out their souls?"

Gloam chuckled. "No, my love. Wyn is a telyth. They hunt the parasites that infect humans."

"So he... he saved Lilac's life?"

"Yes."

The Soul Eater made a disgusted sound and crossed his arms, even as Danny beamed up at him with pride.

All eyes turned to me. What—were they expecting me to *thank* the ghoulish demon who had kicked in my door and loomed over me in bed, forcing black goo up my throat and out of my mouth?

When no one said anything, I muttered, "Thanks."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Is Lilac going to be okay?” Ghost asked frantically, staring at me with worried eyes.

Edin chuckled. “If he isn’t dead now, it isn’t going to kill him. Don’t worry.”

“Okay, good, but how...” Rig eyed the Soul Eater fearfully. “How did he get it? Are the rest of us infected?”

When Danny stayed silent and turned to look at Wyn expectantly, the Soul Eater huffed.

“No one else in the camp is infected,” he said flatly, then gestured at the wall. “The parasites tend to crawl into humans’ mouths while they are asleep. They would struggle to get inside thanks to your junk wall. So this one”—his hood jerked in my direction—“must have taken a little nap out in the Wastes.”

My eye twitched. “I didn’t—”

I stopped, realisation thudding into my tender gut like a lead ball.

I’d taken my mask off when it got soaked with monster goo and Seraph’s blood, when that swarm of creatures attacked us. And then I’d passed out. It hadn’t been for long, but evidently long enough.

That was what Seraph had been trying to tell me. He’d seen the parasite crawl into my mouth.

I was hit with a sudden, overwhelming urge to go and see him. To make sure he was alright—that he wasn’t infected too. Not that it would matter much, if he was likely to die soon anyway, but he had to sleep out in the Wastes, on the floor of his cage. Completely vulnerable.

“So it wasn’t—They’re not in our food or anything?” Ghost was asking anxiously, clutching Aury’s hand.

“No,” Wyn said bluntly, sounding bored by the conversation.

“Do they infect other monsters?” I asked him tightly. Gloam glanced over at me but said nothing.

Wyn’s hood cocked. “Some species,” he drawled, then gestured at the other beasts. “But none of the old ones. They need hosts that eat so they can absorb the nutrients while they’re laying their eggs. Older species have built up a resistance.”

I felt myself go pale, resisting the urge to clutch my stomach. “Eggs?”

“Yes,” Wyn said airily, inspecting his blackened fingernails. “The one in your belly had already started laying its eggs. You’re lucky I got here when I did, human. Another couple of days and you would have been a husk.”

I tried to push past the knowledge that something had been laying *eggs* in my stomach to focus on the rest of what he’d said. The parasites needed hosts who ate. Seraph ate.

I took a step back, cringing when my gut cramped. “I need to—”

“Is there a way to prevent us getting infected?” Ghost was asking anxiously. “Anything we can do to stop it happening?”

I considered just walking off to go and see Seraph. None of them were paying any attention to me. But if Seraph wasn’t already infected, I wanted to find out if there was a way to prevent it in the short time he might have had left. So I paused, waiting for the Soul Eater to answer.

“No,” he said easily, making my shoulders droop a little. “But the masks will help if you sleep outside of the camp. In here, you are more protected than most. Like I said, they would struggle to get over the wall.”

“Hey,” Danny said suddenly, tugging on Wyn’s coat. “What about the tethering? Would that help?”

Gloam went very still, his fingers tightening on Rig’s shoulder as he stared at the Soul Eater.

“Tethering?” he asked slowly.

Danny nodded enthusiastically, turning to Wyn. “I never asked you if it could stop me getting infected. Does it?”

Wyn nodded. “Yes. Your body would reject a parasite now.”

“Awesome.” Danny turned to Hunter and Edin. “That’s what we were coming to find you for.”

“For what?” Edin asked cautiously.

“To tell you about the time place. If you go there, you can—”

“The Caen an Sin,” Wyn interrupted, his voice shockingly patient as he smoothed a hand through Danny’s hair.

Gloam froze again, before his arm slowly slipped off Rig’s shoulders and he took a step forward. His textured brow pinched with desperate yearning.

“You went to the Caen an Sin?” His wideset eyes darted between Danny and Wyn. “And it... it worked? It worked with a human?”

“Yep,” Danny answered him cheerfully.

“What’s the Caen an Sin?” Rig asked hesitantly, mangling the unfamiliar words.

Danny chuckled. “Oh man, it’s pretty trippy. It’s this huge, like, fortress in the monster world where you go to tether your lives together, and it’s guarded by these giant dudes—I mean like *giant* giant—”

“You’ve been to the monster world?” Hunter asked, brows drawing into a frown. “How did you get through the tear?”

“Oh, Wyn just knocked all the soldiers out as his smoke thing and we”—Danny shrugged—“just walked through.”

“It truly works?” Gloam asked urgently, staring at the Soul Eater. Edin had gone very still, his big hand wrapped around Hunter’s arm and gripping tight. “The Mabs allowed your union?”

Wyn sniffed. “Of course they did.”

“Yep.” Danny beamed up at his monster. “Wyn’s stuck with me for, like, four thousand years now.”

Hunter’s eyes widened, and he glanced in confusion at Edin. “Huh?”

Wyn grunted under his breath and muttered, “It’s like pulling teeth. Yes, human,” he added louder, his distorted voice condescending. “If you go to the Caen an Sin and tether your lives, all your remaining years get shared between you both. Edin probably has about—what, another six thousand or so left? So you would get half of that. And you would give him half of the dozen or so years *you* have left.”

Hunter blinked rapidly, trying to absorb all that information, before his face went pink.

“I have more than a dozen years left, assho—” He stopped himself and took a steadying breath. “So I could... I could live as long as Edin?”

The big monster in question let out a shuddering exhale and turned to clasp Hunter’s face urgently.

“We have to go, josdo,” he said hoarsely. “Now. We have to go there now so I don’t ever lose you.”

Hunter’s hard face softened as he stared up at Edin, raising a hand to lay it on the monster’s chest. His throat bobbed, eyes dazed as he clearly tried not to get overwhelmed.

“I want to, scratch,” he croaked. “Of course I do. But... but we can’t go anywhere until Charlie is back. We can’t just leave without telling him.”

Edin’s huge shoulders sagged. He released Hunter’s face. “No, of course not.”

“W-wait, so, could we do it too?” Rig looked up at Gloam, his brown eyes getting glassy. “I’d never even thought about the fact that you’d live so much longer than me.”

I could tell that Gloam had though, his brow pinched with anguish as he stroked Rig’s cheek.

“I don’t see why it wouldn’t work for you too,” Wyn said gruffly, then gestured at the silent Aury and Ghost, the latter looking completely shellshocked. The Soul Eater’s voice held a faint sneer as he added, “And the *rycke* has endless time left. If those two did it, they could live forever.”

“Holy shit.” Rig was tearful and deliriously happy. “I could kiss you right now,” he told the Soul Eater.

“Do not.”

“Live forever?” Ghost wrung his hands anxiously. “Shit, I—I don’t know if my brain could handle that.”

“We don’t have to do it,” Aury said softly, cupping his mate’s face. “I go when you go, Ghost. Whenever that may be.”

I felt a bit like an intruder as I silently watched these monster-human couples realise that they wouldn’t ever have to be without one another. For some reason, the urge to go and see Seraph rose back up inside me again, making my tender gut clench.

I knew it wasn’t any of these monsters’ fault, but it didn’t seem... fair that they had found their people and would get to share their long, long lives with them, while Seraph had been twisted and tortured into something that would probably never be able to find someone. Never be able to have any love or physical contact. If he even managed to survive coming off his drug.

“Okay, so how would we get through the tear?” I could see Rig’s mind churning, trying to sort through the practical details as he placed his hands on his hips. “None of us have a, um, smoke form to knock out all the soldiers guarding it.”

“Wyn can do it,” Danny offered cheerfully, making his monster husband stiffen. “So I guess that means we gotta stick around until Charlie and the half-monster dude get back.”

“Wyn.” Edin stepped forward to place his hand on the Soul Eater’s shoulder. Longing filled his craggy face, eyes a little shiny. “Will you do this? For me?”

The Soul Eater sighed within his hood, reaching up to briefly cup the side of Edin's neck with long black fingers. "Yes, Edin. We will wait here to take you. Overemotional boor," he added in an affectionate mutter.

Edin's demonic face split into a wide, fanged smile. He tipped his head forward briefly until their horns almost touched, then stepped back and rounded on Hunter, his eyes gleaming.

"We must go celebrate." He somehow hefted the huge man into his arms with ease and headed for the staircase at the end of the motel block.

I heard Hunter chuckle. "I can walk, scratch."

"Not for long," Edin rumbled lasciviously, but he froze when a raw, tortured scream rose up from beyond the camp wall.

The Soul Eater stiffened, his hand shooting out to grab Danny and yank him to his side. "What is that."

"Seraph," I said quickly, because I was confident that Wyn would go out there and tear him to shreds if he thought Danny was in danger, even if Seraph was stuck in a cage. "He can't hurt anyone. He's in a cage."

Wyn had gone utterly still except for a twitch of his fingers.

"Seraph," he said slowly, and in the next instant he had vanished as a long, thick column of oily smoke shot into the air.

"Hey!" Danny called, frowning up at it.

It was surreal to see the twisting tendrils of black smoke halt in mid-air, before changing direction and winding back down to the ground. Wyn reappeared, clearing his throat and brushing invisible lint off his sleeve.

"Fine," he rasped gruffly. "We'll walk."

He started striding for the container entrance, dragging Danny with him. Everyone else turned to follow, Rig glancing up at Gloam with a worried expression.

I clenched my jaw and took a step forward. My stomach shrieked in protest, making sweat bead on my forehead, but I followed them, still gripping my machete because I didn't know what the Soul Eater would do when he saw Seraph.

"He doesn't like crowds," I said tightly, resisting the urge to clutch my stomach as I brought up the rear of the group stepping into the Wastes. "Or other monsters."

Wyn didn't slow, waving an imperious hand as he strode along the base of the camp wall, following the sound of Seraph's screaming and snarling. "I just want to look at him."

Gloam paused, waiting until I had caught up so he could squeeze my shoulder gently. "He might know something, Lilac."

I clenched my jaw, giving a stiff nod as I gripped my machete tighter. The Soul Eater had seemed to react oddly just to Seraph's name. Almost like he'd heard it before.

By the time Gloam and I rounded the corner, the others had stopped a short distance from Seraph's cage. He was going wild, screaming and throwing himself into the bars, his many eyes wide with something like panic.

But when he saw me, he let out a weak snarl and sank to his haunches, quieting enough for me to hear Danny say in a shocked voice, "H-holy shit."

But it wasn't disgust or horror colouring his tone. He was staring at Seraph with recognition in his wide blue eyes.

Wyn huffed and crossed his arms, hood cocking as he watched the monster in the cage. Then he turned to eye the rest of us.

"Why do you have the splice here?"

"The... splice?" Gloam repeated slowly as we all stared at Seraph.

"I remember him," Danny blurted, gripping Wyn's sleeve. "From the base."

"What base?" I asked, my voice tight.

"The military base further south." Danny flushed, glancing around at us raiders. "I was only in the military for about six months. And then they captured Wyn, and..."

"The military managed to capture you?" I asked, making Wyn hiss at me.

"I *let* them capture me. So I could get into the base and burn it to the ground."

"Why didn't you just infiltrate it in your smoke form?" Rig asked hesitantly.

"Because that wouldn't have been as much fun," Wyn snapped, crossing his arms petulantly. "Or as satisfying."

"Wait, though." Danny turned to Wyn. "He was already gone by the time you got captured. *Let* them capture you," he corrected hurriedly when Wyn grunted. "How do you even know about him?"

"I listened to them talking about him while they were watching me in my cell," Wyn replied carelessly. "They assumed the cells were

soundproof.”

“What did they say?” I asked, stepping forward and looking at Seraph. He had gone very still, all his eyes fixed on the Soul Eater.

“That Seraph, the first test subject for *Project Divinity*”—Wyn sneered the words—“had been unsuccessful, but they wanted to continue monitoring him so they had taken him to a secure location where they could keep tabs on him. But it really sounded like they just wanted to wash their hands of him,” he muttered disdainfully.

“Project Divinity?” Hunter asked cautiously, watching Seraph.

“Mary.” Rig turned to grip Gloam’s harness, staring up at him with frantic eyes. “They took him to Mary. They must have already been working with her by then, so they knew they could keep an eye on him.”

“What did you mean by splice?” I demanded. “What did they do to him?”

I could feel Wyn looking at me from the darkness of his hood, before his head slowly turned to Seraph’s cage.

“He was human.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Utter shock jolted through me, making my breath leave me in a sharp puff. Everyone had fallen silent. All eyes turned back to Seraph.

He was staring at me, chest heaving with snarling breaths as he gripped the bars, kneeling in his cage.

“Wh-what?” Rig whispered, sounding devastated.

“Human?” Ghost’s blue eyes were painfully wide as he stared at Seraph. “H-how...”

“There is a reason they took samples from all of us while we were in there,” Wyn said. “Gassing us in our cells so they could knock us out to brand us and draw our blood and cut off skin and hair and nails. They were collecting our DNA to try and create a new species of monster. Siphoning bits from the ones they deemed most dangerous or impressive.” He jerked his chin at Aury. “Like him. And you, Edin.”

Edin’s face was slack with shock when I glanced at him. Aury’s brows were pinched with anguish, his black eyes focused and unwavering on Seraph as he took an unsteady step forward.

“Another rycke,” he whispered. Wyn snorted, making me want to stab him.

“Not quite. Thank fuck for that,” he muttered. “He’s a melting pot of many species. He was just a soldier at first. One they took to experiment on, trying to harness our powers and strengths to create their own bioweapon to fight us. As if they think they are gods,” he snarled.

I couldn’t tear my eyes from Seraph. He’d been human. A human soldier. Nothing about him looked human anymore, his skin a dark, leathery grey-black, his body stretched and hunched, with sinewy limbs and impossibly long, spindly fingers with too many knuckles. His feet were big and tipped with little black claws. His nose was nothing but two little slits in the centre of his face, and his ears were just tiny, gnarled bumps. He had far, far more teeth than a human, sharp and crowding his wide mouth, jutting out past his thin lips. And all the eyes. Different sizes and shapes, black and white, blinking independently. Except for the two at the front, the ones I’d noticed before—those were uniform and blinked together. Like a human.

He'd been *human*. How much agony had they put him through to turn him into this?

"How... how is that possible?" Rig asked faintly. "Surely—surely they haven't been able to develop the technology or... I don't know, medical procedures to do that."

"Why do you think all the city humans still live in complete poverty?" Wyn drawled. "The military doesn't care. They don't spend their money on making anyone's lives better. If they keep the humans in squalor, enlisting becomes the best option for an even somewhat decent life. They can swell their ranks with minimal effort while channelling all their resources into research and developing new equipment and weapons. Including ones made from the very monsters they want to destroy."

I finally tore my gaze from Seraph to look at Hunter. He had gone very pale above his mask.

Good, I thought viciously. He had spent years willingly serving the organisation that had done this.

"You said *first* test subject." Gloam's voice was thick and pained as he watched Seraph. "Does that mean there are others? Did they try again after deeming Seraph a failure?"

My jaw clenched under my mask. He was watching us—*listening* to us. His eyes were focused, and he was keeping quiet. We shouldn't be calling him a failure. We shouldn't be standing around his cage, talking about him like he was nothing but a mindless zoo animal.

"Yes." Wyn pulled Danny closer and cupped his neck, stroking his thumb over his pulse point in a self-soothing gesture. "There are others."

Right then, I didn't care that there were others. I cared about the one in front of us, the one we'd kept locked up in a cage. The one we'd kept on the drugs the military had been giving him.

"So the drugs." My voice was tight with controlled anger. "What were they doing to him? Keeping him like this? Making him worse?"

"Drugs?" Wyn's head cocked.

"When the military gave him to Mary, they kept providing injections that she ordered me to give him," Gloam said solemnly. "When Rig and I brought him back here with us, we brought the remaining doses so we could keep him on them, because we didn't know if they were the only thing keeping him alive."

"We gave him the last one a few days ago," Rig added sadly.

Wyn grunted, turning back to look at Seraph. “They probably were the only thing keeping him alive. Keeping his DNA altered. Look at him. He’s too far gone to ever be human again.”

“S-so is he... is he going to die?” Rig whispered, his eyes filling up. Gloam gathered him into his arms and kissed the top of his head.

“I imagine so, yes.” Wyn’s tone wasn’t flippant, just blunt, but I still stiffened with anger.

“That’s enough,” I said tersely, because Seraph’s eyes had begun to dart around in panic. “We need to stop talking about him like he’s not even here. He can hear us. He can understand us.”

“Can he?” Wyn asked, his distorted voice lifting with mild intrigue.

“Yes,” I gritted out. “So if you want to keep talking about this, go back into the camp.”

Rig flushed with shame, which made me fall silent. I hadn’t meant to make him feel bad, but we shouldn’t have been discussing Seraph’s impending death in front of him. His chest was heaving with panic, a low, snarling rumble emanating from his throat, eyes still swivelling madly like he was looking for a way to escape his cage. To escape what was going to happen to him.

Aury took one last sad look at Seraph before cupping Ghost’s shoulders and gently urging him away. Edin was still staring at Seraph in shock until Hunter took his hand and tugged him back. As Wyn and Danny followed behind them, I felt the Soul Eater’s cold gaze on me, but he didn’t say anything, just disappeared around the corner with the others.

Gloam squeezed my shoulder gently. “I am sorry, Lilac.”

“Why?” I said tightly. “You haven’t done anything to me.”

“No, but... you are right. We shouldn’t discuss this in front of Seraph. I believe you are right—that he is more aware than we’d first thought.”

I took a step closer to the cage and jerked my chin toward the wall. “I’ll be back inside in a while. I’m going to—”

“No,” Rig said firmly, grabbing my shoulder. “You *need* to rest, Lilac. Please. Gloam will watch Seraph tonight.”

It was already starting to get dark, the temperature dropping. I shook my head stiffly and opened my mouth to refuse, but my stomach gave a threatening gurgle before cramping up.

I exhaled slowly as sweat beaded on my brow. I wanted to stay out here, but I also didn’t particularly want to shit myself. I was already dreading

what was going to come out of me.

"I'll go and sleep for a couple of hours and then—"

"No," Rig repeated, steering me toward the corner of the wall. "You need a proper night's sleep. You won't get better otherwise."

"I will stay out here, Lilac," Gloam said. "I won't leave him."

Rig paused, glancing back at him worriedly. "Okay, but can you come inside first? I'm going to have to try and convince Anchor and the others to let Danny and Wyn stay. You're better at explaining stuff than me."

Gloam gave a tiny smile and shook his head. "You will be fine, my love."

"Please." Rig gazed at him pleadingly.

After a few seconds, Gloam sighed and nodded. Then he looked at me solemnly. "I will come straight back out after, Lilac. I promise."

I didn't bother arguing again, because I knew I was going to come back out here whether or not Gloam was guarding Seraph. He had less than a week left before he, at best, started deteriorating rapidly, and at worst, died within a couple of days of when his next dose should have been.

Once we were back inside the camp, Rig started leading me to my bedroom door, but I shook my head as my stomach churned again. "I need to use the bathroom."

"Okay." He finally released my shoulder and gazed at me anxiously.

"What—what do you want us to tell them? About the parasite?"

I shrugged weakly, feeling my body flag. "You can tell them, if it'll help them understand why the Soul Eater came here. My vote's a yes, by the way. To let them stay. You can vote on my behalf in my absence."

"Of course." Rig hesitated, then shot me a grateful smile under his mask. "Thank you, Lilac."

I knew why he was thanking me. Because voting to let the Soul Eater stay here meant he could lead all the monster-human couples through the tear to that time place and allow them to tether their lives together. Never be without one another. They just had to wait for Charlie and Moth to get back first.

My stomach gurgled again, but I clapped Rig briefly on the shoulder. "Wonder what you'll be like in a thousand years."

He blinked rapidly, as if he hadn't even thought about what it truly meant. "God, that's... wild."

I gave him a tiny smile under my mask. “Gonna be weird seeing you never age while I become an old man out here. Hopefully you’ll remember me when I’m long gone.”

Rig stared at me, his eyes dimming with sadness, so I quickly patted his arm and took a step toward the toilet stalls.

“Your big beastie will be good company.” I nodded at Gloam, who shot me a little smile. “And I’ll be around for a while. Hopefully, anyway.”

As long as I didn’t get infected with any more parasites once the Soul Eater was gone.

At the thought, my stomach cramped up again, so I nodded at Rig and Gloam before walking swiftly to the toilet stalls. At least they were all empty, everyone gathering in the diner to vote on whether the Soul Eater and his human partner could stay.

I wondered which way the vote would go. And then I wondered what Rig and the others would tell the rest of the raiders about Seraph. Would the fact that he had once been human make them more sympathetic? Or would it horrify them so much that they would prefer for him to be gone? Out of sight, where they didn’t have to think about the horrific things that happened out here. Where they could just be grateful that it hadn’t been them and move on with their lives.

I tried to picture Seraph’s face as more human-like as I sat on the toilet, not allowing myself to think about what was being emptied from my bowels. As hard as I tried, I couldn’t imagine it. Did it matter anyway? It wasn’t like he’d ever look the way he had before. It wasn’t like he was going to be alive for much longer.

Once my stomach finally settled, I took a shower, trying to enjoy the peace of the quiet camp. But I couldn’t wash off the crawling sensation all over my skin. I couldn’t cleanse away the feeling of something still inside me, growing and feeding itself off my body. Laying eggs in my stomach.

I was dragging my feet by the time I walked back to my room, as exhausted as I had been the last few days, but still feeling better than before. The nausea was gone, and when I got into my room and pulled off my mask to look in the mirror, I could have sworn the yellow tinge around my mouth was already paler.

I stripped off my sweatshirt and crawled into bed, sitting up to sip some water before I lay down. Like a long, drawn-out sigh, my body gradually

relaxed as I huddled under the blanket. The room was chilly, and wind whistled through the fresh bullet hole piercing my bedroom wall.

Despite my eyes burning with exhaustion, I couldn't close them. I couldn't stop thinking about what we'd just learned. About Seraph sitting out there alone, with potentially only a few days left to live.

I was still awake when I heard the muffled voices of raiders pouring out of the diner. Still awake when heavy footsteps pounded on the walkway above my room, Edin's booming laugh rumbling down, followed by the Soul Eater's distorted, unimpressed voice as a door was opened. Guess that meant the raiders had voted to let them stay then.

My jaw clenched with anger at the lighthearted sounds as I lay there, staring at the tall corn plant against the opposite wall. Had they just forgotten about Seraph already? Written him off because there was nothing we could do?

When the camp quieted back down, I got out of bed and pulled my mask and sweatshirt back on. Then I struggled into my coat and grabbed the hemp sack that held the fruit I'd foraged for Seraph when I'd walked to the river earlier. There were some other things already in the coat pockets that I hadn't eaten the day before—the tin of pecans and a wrapped lump of pemmican, which made me realise just how little I'd been eating.

I slipped out of my room and glanced around to make sure Rig wasn't nearby to order me back inside. Then I headed to the vegetable patch to pull up a carrot and some radishes, not caring if anyone saw me, daring them to question me. After rinsing them in some water and adding them to the bag, I walked through the containers to the Wastes, pulling my coat closer around me as I shivered in the cold night air.

Seraph was screaming again, his throat raw. I heard the faint thud of skin hitting metal as he threw himself against the bars of his cage. Gloam was sitting against the side of the RV when I rounded the corner, his huge war hammer propped up beside him. His head jerked up, and in the weak light from the lantern, I saw his textured brow pull into a frown.

"Lilac," he said sternly. "You should be in bed."

I ignored him, walking up the RV steps to go inside and grab the pole and some blankets. When I re-emerged, Gloam watched in silence as I hooked the handles of the hemp bag on the end and carefully draped a blanket over it. The freezing air prickled at my skin, making me want to shiver even though I was wearing a thick coat. Seraph's skin looked tough

and leathery, but that didn't mean he couldn't feel the cold. He'd been human, and we had no idea what the different parts of him had mutated into from the monster DNA that had been forced into his body against his will.

Seraph had gone quiet, and he was watching me as I extended the pole to his cage, his long fingers wrapped around the bars and trembling finely.

"What are you doing?" Gloam asked, but his tone was calm and non-judgemental.

"He needs to eat," I said flatly, waiting until Seraph had unhooked the bag before stepping back with the pole. The blanket had slipped off and was hanging halfway out of the cage, but he ignored it to carefully open the sack. His eyes kept darting to Gloam warily.

"You've been feeding him?" Gloam asked in a careful voice. "I give him meat every day."

I gritted my teeth as I sat down heavily against the RV, a short distance from him. I didn't like the way he'd worded it—like Seraph was nothing more than a wild animal I'd been trying to tame with treats.

"He likes other things." My tone came out terse, even though Gloam hadn't done anything wrong. Out of everyone, Gloam and Rig had been trying the hardest to help him.

"I see," Gloam said after a pause. We both watched in silence as Seraph ate a pear, juice dripping down his chin. When he started on the apple, Gloam sighed and turned his head to look at me.

"Lilac, please go to bed," he rumbled. "Your body has been through a lot. You need to rest."

I shook my head, dragging the other blanket over me and huddling underneath it to try and stop shivering. "He shouldn't be alone."

"He isn't," Gloam said calmly. "I am here. I won't leave him."

I just shook my head again, too tired to argue. My eyelids started to droop, so I rasped, "If I fall asleep, you need to watch him. If a parasite infected me out here..."

"I asked Wyn whether he could be infected," Gloam told me. "He said it was very unlikely, seeing as he has Aury and Edin's DNA."

Relief coursed through me, relaxing my muscles. The big beastie sighed, his goat-like eyes bleak as he looked back at Seraph.

"Do you think that's why he reacts so badly to them?" he murmured. "To Aury and Edin. Perhaps he can... sense that a part of him is like them."

I rested my head wearily against the cold metal of the RV, watching as Seraph carefully nibbled on a pecan and watched me back.

“Maybe he was trying to tell them,” I said quietly, looking into those two human eyes on the front of his face. “Maybe all he’s been doing is trying to ask us for help.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I ended up falling asleep at some point, shivering against the side of the RV. When I started to wake up, I realised Gloam had tucked the blanket tighter around me in the night, but it felt cold and damp as frosty early morning dew coated the grass.

The moment my eyes blinked open, they went to the cage. Seraph was awake, curled up in the corner and already watching me. All his eyes blinked sleepily, like he was tired but had forced himself to stay conscious.

Maybe he knew how little time he had left and didn't want to risk sleeping most of it away.

"How are you feeling?"

Gloam's deep voice made me finally look away to glance over at him. He was sitting in the exact same position against the RV, thick forearms draped over his raised knees as he gazed at Seraph.

"Better," I said hoarsely, shifting upright and wiping my face.

My ass and hip hurt from digging into the cold ground all night, and I was chilled down to my bones, but I *did* feel better. Still groggy and tired, but my body felt calmer. More settled. Like mine again, no longer being shared with a parasitic monster.

Seraph let out his little chuff at the sound of my voice, uncurling his long limbs to creep forward until he gripped the bars of the cage wall closest to us.

"He has been remarkably calm all night," Gloam said quietly. From the corner of my eye, I saw him glance over at me. "I think you soothe him."

I shrugged stiffly, not wanting to voice what I was thinking—that I treated him like a person, not an unthinking animal, because Gloam did too. Gloam had tried for hours and hours to talk to him. It wasn't his fault that Seraph responded badly to his mere presence, no doubt remembering him from Mary's mansion.

I wanted to ask Gloam how long he thought Seraph had left, but I refused to be a hypocrite and do it in front of Seraph when I had got angry at the others for doing the same thing. So instead, I silently struggled to my feet and balled up the blanket. The one I'd tried to give Seraph was still

exactly where it had fallen, hanging halfway out of the cage and damp in patches.

Gloam rose too, grasping the handle of his war hammer.

“Do you want me to stay out here for the day?” he asked carefully, eyeing me. “You really should go and get some proper rest. Even if you don’t sleep, go and relax and get warm.”

I knew I wouldn’t be able to relax. I briefly considered going to Rusty, to try and relieve some of the churning pressure inside me that no longer had anything to do with a parasite growing in my belly, but the idea held absolutely no appeal. I didn’t want to talk to anyone, let alone be that close to another person.

I wanted to stay out here, to stay with Seraph so he wasn’t alone for even a moment of his final days, but I knew Gloam wouldn’t let me.

“You don’t have to stay out here all day,” I said woodenly. “I’ll get some sleep and come back out.”

Gloam sighed but didn’t argue, as if he knew it was pointless. As he gently gripped my shoulder and steered me away from the RV, he said, “And eat too. Please. Rig is very worried about you. So am I.”

“I’m fine,” I said automatically, still clutching the blanket.

Gloam huffed without much humour. “You’re always fine, Lilac.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I stayed silent as he led me back into camp and directly to my bedroom door.

“Please,” he said again, lips pulled down into a frown as he gazed at me. “Just warm up and rest for a little while at least. Rig will not be happy that I let you stay out there all night.”

I nodded wearily and turned for my door, but Gloam placed a gentle hand on my arm to stop me.

“He won’t be alone, Lilac,” he said solemnly. “We will make sure he is not alone.”

I nodded again and stepped back, wanting to get away. But I found myself swallowing and saying, “If it doesn’t kill him—the withdrawal—and the pain seems to be getting worse... I’ll do it.”

Gloam was silent, but I couldn’t look at him. I stared vacantly at the giant head of his war hammer resting on the ground, feeling empty.

“You don’t have to, Lilac,” he said eventually, voice low.

I shook my head. If the kindest option for Seraph ended up being his death, I wanted to be the one to do it. I wanted to make sure it was quick

and painless. I wanted to try and explain it to him before I did it, because he deserved that much even if he was completely incoherent by that point.

I wanted him to know I was there at the end.

After getting into bed, I dozed fitfully for a few hours, and when I woke up my stomach was growling with true hunger for the first time in days.

As I got dressed and tied my hair up, I listened to the typical faint sounds of the camp outside. Raiders talking and laughing. Motel room doors opening and closing, the thud of footsteps on the walkway above. Edin's booming laugh followed by a low, distorted snarl made me remember that the Soul Eater was here in the camp with his human lover.

Honestly, I was surprised the majority had voted to let them stay. But I was glad—glad for Rig and Gloam, and Aury and Ghost if they decided to tether their lives too, though that hadn't sounded like a sure thing. I wasn't sure that Ghost would handle immortality well.

After putting on my mask, I left my room and walked across the camp to the diner. As guilty as it made me feel, I was glad that I didn't spot Rig or Gloam. I didn't want to have to insist I was fine again, or argue about spending my nights guarding Seraph. I knew it was only because they cared, but it made me uncomfortable.

The moment I stepped into the diner, Daisy gasped and rushed around the counter. I stiffened when she grabbed my masked cheeks and peered up into my face.

"Oh, my sweet boy."

I glanced around the diner, relieved to see it empty except for Anchor at the counter and Bo through the hatch, preparing lunch. He peered around to give me a smile behind his clean white mask and say, "You're looking better, Lilac."

"You're too thin," Daisy cried, patting my cheek before shoving me toward the seat next to Anchor. "Sit down. I'll make you something."

I didn't argue, because I was finally hungry. As I slid into the seat beside Anchor, I glanced over to give her a nod in greeting and saw that her eyes were wide as she stared at me.

"Are you okay?" she asked worriedly. "Rig told us about the—the parasite—"

“I’m fine. It’s gone.”

She let out a relieved breath, shoving back her curly hair. Then her eyes darted to Daisy, who was bustling through the door into the kitchen and barking something at Bo.

“I need to show you something,” Anchor whispered, flicking through the sheets of paper on her clipboard with knobbly fingers. “I wanted to show you as soon as Rig told us about Seraph, but I didn’t want to disturb you.”

I went still, staring at the clipboard. I didn’t answer, waiting for her to show me whatever she had. About Seraph.

“When Ghost went to the old military base, he brought back some papers. Military documents,” Anchor was saying. She tugged a few sheets of paper free, and I quickly scanned the thick black letters at the top.

CLASSIFIED DOCUMENT

REF: PROJECT DIVINITY

Reluctantly, I tore my gaze away to look at Anchor as she turned in her seat to face me.

“I quickly read through them at the time, just in case they happened to mention Cat—in case they’d captured him for some reason. But... they weren’t about Cat.” She shook her head and looked down at the papers, swallowing thickly. “I didn’t really understand what they were talking about at the time, but I reread them last night and...”

I licked my lips, gaze dropping back to the documents clutched in her fist. “Can I see them?”

She nodded, but as she handed them over, she blurted out, “I’m sorry. It only mentions Seraph’s name once near the end, but I—I should have remembered when he got here with Gloam and Rig. I can’t believe it didn’t click that it was the same... person.”

I didn’t answer, already scanning the blocks of text on the first page. It was just long paragraphs of exposition about the progress of Project Divinity despite the setbacks with “Test Subject 01”, who had turned out to be unstable and “unsuitable for obedience levels needed in combat”. A request for a Captain Hamish to sign off on the transfer to a private buyer in a secret location in the Wastes where they could continue to monitor him and keep dosing him to see if he “improved”.

When I flipped to the next page, I froze.

A grainy black and white face stared back at me. Stoic and unsmiling, the collar of a military uniform visible at the bottom of the photo. Dark, closely cropped hair and dark eyes. Skin that looked maybe tanned or brown, not pale.

It took me a long time to tear my eyes away from that face, but I forced myself to so I could read the text alongside the small, printed picture. My gut squeezed into a tight knot as I scanned the words.

PROJECT DIVINITY TEST SUBJECT 01—SERAPH

NAME: LUKE JOSEPH BUCKLEY

PRE-ENLISTMENT LOCATION: NEW GEORGIA

ORIGINAL ASSIGNMENT: SPECIMEN PROGRAMME – LOCATION
NEBRASKA COMPOUND

SEX: MALE

ETHNICITY: MIXED – WHITE & AFRICAN AMERICAN

WEIGHT: 190lbs

HEIGHT: 6'3"

KNOWN BIRTH DEFECTS: NONE

KNOWN MEDICAL CONDITIONS: NONE

KNOWN ALLERGIES: NONE

KNOWN LIVING RELATIVES: CONFIRMED NONE

At the bottom of the list was his date of birth, and I quickly worked out his age. Twenty-four. There was another date beneath it, titled DATE OF FIRST TREATMENT, roughly four years ago.

While I'd been settling into my new life at the camp, Seraph's torture had begun not all that far from here at the Nebraska military base.

I tried to control my breathing as I stared down at the page, going hot all over. Beneath the details of who Seraph had been before the military turned him into the monster in the cage, there was another list.

SPECIMEN SAMPLES USED:

BATCH 1:

001

002—ESCAPED
003

BATCH 2:
004
005
006
007

TEST SUBJECT 01 RECLASSIFIED AS SPECIMEN 008 OUTSIDE OF
PROJECT DIVINITY; ABSORBED INTO SPECIMEN PROGRAMME.

DOSING SCHEDULE MAINTAINED TO AVOID FATALITY AND
CONTINUE MONITORING OF PHYSICAL ALTERATIONS.

NOTE: SAMPLES TAKEN FROM TEST SUBJECT 01/SPECIMEN 008
AND TESTED ON FURTHER SUBJECTS CONSISTENTLY RESULT IN
FATALITY.

The paper crinkled in my hand as I gripped it too hard. So even after forcing monster DNA into his body, they'd continued to torture Seraph by locking him in a cell and taking *samples* from him. His blood and skin—that was what Wyn had said they'd taken from all the monsters they'd captured.

And when they'd realised they had no use for him that way either, they'd sold him off. Got rid of him. Washed their hands of the monstrous problem they had caused.

I wished the Nebraska base hadn't been gutted so I could go there and murder every single soldier I came across. I had rarely felt this kind of rage before, so intense that I couldn't speak as I stared at the photograph of who Seraph had once been.

They had picked him because he had been young and healthy—painfully young, barely an adult when they started experimenting on him. And he had no family—no one to miss him when he vanished. When he never went back to New Georgia on leave.

They had picked him because he had already been all alone in the world.

I didn't look up when Daisy returned and placed a bowl of oatmeal in front of me, patting my arm. Forcing my fingers to relax on the crumpled paper, I realised there was another page. Flipping to it, I stared blankly at a different face, this one wider with a squarer jaw, pale eyes and light cropped hair.

PROJECT DIVINITY TEST SUBJECT 02—CHERUB, the text beside it said.

I knew it was callous, but I didn't care about the others. I set the pages down and smoothed them out silently on the countertop, before folding them together into neat quarters as I tried to calm down.

"I... I can't believe the military is doing that," Anchor said shakily. "Experimenting on people..."

I could. I picked up the bowl of oatmeal and stood.

"Can I keep these?" I asked, even though I was already sliding the folded documents into my pocket.

"Sure." Anchor's eyes were tight as she looked at me. "I'm sorry, Lilac. I'm sorry I didn't realise—"

"It's not your fault."

I couldn't blame her. Seraph's name had only been written once in those documents, and who would realistically link that photo of a young soldier to the monster outside the camp? Plus, Anchor was incredibly stressed, fixated on finding Cat, trying to keep the camp running without him.

And it wasn't like knowing all of this helped anyway. He was still going to die. I was even more sure of that now—the documents had said that they kept him on his injections to "avoid fatality". But not for his sake—not so he didn't die alone and in pain, locked in a cell. Just so they could keep watching him. For research. To see what they could turn him into.

I had never hated the military more than I did in that moment.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I sought out Danny and the Soul Eater later that day, after eating my oatmeal in my room and sleeping for another few hours.

They were lounging against the camp wall beside the motel with Edin and Hunter, the latter's face stoic as he checked his gun—which I'd already noticed him doing a lot. He was leaning into Edin's side with easy familiarity, resting his elbow on the monster's enormous thigh as Edin chuckled at something Danny said.

They all looked up when I stopped in front of them, refusing to acknowledge the weak tendril of fear that crept through my belly when I felt the Soul Eater's cold gaze fix on me. I forced myself to look into that hood and cleared my throat.

"Could you go to the old military base to see if there are any more injections there?"

I didn't know if it was the right answer—to keep Seraph alive for longer when he was in so much pain—but surely we had to try. Maybe if we gave him smaller and smaller doses, stretching out whatever might have been left at the base, we could wean him off them slowly. Maybe he had a chance to survive it.

Wyn huffed, crossing his arms as he relaxed back against the metal wall. "I could. If I wanted to."

I clenched my teeth beneath my mask as Danny smacked his arm and frowned at him.

"Don't be an asshole." He scrambled up and shot me a hesitant smile. "He means he'll go. Um, how are you feeling?"

I gave him a brisk nod. "Better. Thanks," I added as an afterthought when the Soul Eater hissed at me.

He let out a long-suffering sigh and stood gracefully, threading his fingers briefly through Danny's hair.

"If you are so eager to prolong the splice's suffering, I suppose I can go," he drawled, then dipped his head to kiss Danny's cheek within his hood. "Stay close to Edin. I won't be long."

"Be careful," Danny told him, making my brow twitch.

Wyn grunted in response before vanishing, a thick column of black smoke twisting up into the air and disappearing over the camp wall. Danny turned to me with another smile.

“Um, do you want to hang out with us while we wait for Wyn to get back?” He gestured at Edin and Hunter on the ground.

My eyes slowly slid over to them. Edin gave me a grin before my gaze settled on Hunter and turned cold. He was looking back at me, eyes tense above his mask.

I wanted to ask him if he’d known about Project Divinity. About what the military had been doing. He hadn’t seemed to know what it was when Wyn mentioned it, but he could have been lying. I didn’t know how long he’d been in the military before abandoning it to stay with Edin, but he’d probably enlisted at eighteen, like most people did, and he looked a little older than me.

“No thanks,” I said flatly, looking away from Hunter. “I’ll find him later when he’s back.”

I turned to walk away, but Edin’s deep voice made me stop. “Wait. Lilac.”

Turning back warily, I watched him stand up and brush off his kilt. He took a step closer, craggy brow pinched.

“How is he? Seraph?”

I shrugged stiffly. “The same.”

For now.

Edin frowned harder, looking away. “I want to go and see him, but I don’t want to cause him any more distress. He doesn’t react well to me.” Something bleak filled his big purple eyes as he looked back at me. “I am the last of my kind. It is... unsettling to know that there is some isdernuc in him. I am not sure how to feel about it.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, because I wasn’t overly interested in helping this beastie sift through his feelings about what the military had done to *Seraph*, not him.

“Yeah, well.” I took a step back, my voice emotionless. “You’ll be the last one again soon, so you won’t have to think about it.”

Edin’s purple eyes flashed as he stared at me, frown deepening. “No one is revelling in his suffering, human. None of us are hoping for him to die.”

I knew that, logically. I also knew that it wasn’t Edin’s fault—he had been captured by the military and tortured too. He was just as much an

unwilling pawn in all of this as Seraph.

But he wasn't the one suffering anymore. Seraph was.

Casting one last look at the silent Danny and Hunter, who were watching us, I turned without answering Edin and walked away.

There were still a few hours of daylight left, so I decided to head out and forage for Seraph. Some raiders were tending to the crops, and I could see Tank loitering with Bishop by the water tanks. I didn't have the energy to field his accusations again.

I stopped by my room to grab the sack and my coat before heading out. The air was getting colder during the day now, and thick grey clouds blanketed the sky as I traipsed through the forest behind the camp. I kept my eyes peeled for any more signs of people, realising I'd forgotten to tell Anchor about the campfire I'd found closer than the one I'd spotted before.

I didn't see anything that hinted at other people, but it was still making me feel uneasy. I made a note to go the opposite way tomorrow, to see if they'd travelled in that direction. Hopefully they'd just skirted around the camp and gone on their way. No traders had turned up, and there was no way they would have skipped such a big camp to trade for stuff out here.

I collected some plums for Seraph and ate one while I walked back to camp. It started to rain, just a light drizzle, but my hair was plastered to my head by the time I was walking into the diner to collect my food package for the night.

It wasn't quite dark yet, but I headed back out into the Wastes after getting my whittling stuff and the lantern from my room. Seraph had been quiet, but he let out his chuff when he saw me round the corner of the wall.

"Hi," I said quietly, heading straight for the RV to grab the pole.

After giving him both bags, I sat down on the top step under the small awning above the door to stay out of the rain. Turning on the lantern and setting it down beside me, I pulled my whittling knife and a fresh lump of wood out of my coat pocket.

I still hadn't finished the figure of the borolesh yet, but it could wait. I glanced up at Seraph repeatedly as I started slicing into the soft wood, taking in his long limbs and curved spine while he bit into a plum and let out a pleased snort.

When he finished eating and threw the bags back toward me, I set down my whittling knife and grabbed the pole to drag them closer. As I leaned forward, I felt the crinkle of paper in my pants pocket.

Lips thinning into a grim line, I dragged the bags closer and shoved them in my coat pocket. Then I looked up at Seraph, who was sitting in the centre of his cage to avoid the rain creeping into the sides, his back hunched and arms wrapped around his knees.

Was there any point telling him what I now knew? Would saying his name—his human name—give him comfort or send him into a panicked tailspin at the reminder of who he'd once been? The reminder of everything the military had stolen from him to further their sick agenda of destruction against the monsters.

Before I could decide what to do—which would be the kinder option—Seraph went stiff and let out a panicked bark. The Soul Eater appeared beside me out of thin air, tiny wisps of black smoke curling from his shoulders as the rain made dark splotches on his grey coat.

“I couldn't find anything.”

I clenched my jaw, resisting the urge to ask him if he'd actually looked properly or just given the place a cursory sweep. Before I could say anything, Wyn spoke again.

“I scoured every inch of the building. I found the area where they must have been conducting their *experiments*”—he sneered the word—“but most of it had been destroyed. There were refrigerators in there, but they were empty.”

I exhaled slowly and nodded once, woodenly saying, “Thanks for looking.”

The Soul Eater didn't move, except for his hood turning toward the cage. Seraph had huddled back against the far wall and was letting out a low, constant snarl. Maybe he still possessed some of the instinctive fear all humans seemed to have of this monster.

“He is in great pain,” Wyn murmured. “Death is already beginning to cloak him.”

As Seraph snarled, the sound panicked and confused, I gritted my teeth to prevent myself from telling the Soul Eater to shut the fuck up. Instead, I muttered, “What do you mean?”

“I see death,” he said simply, hood turning back to me. “He doesn't have long.”

“Don't,” I gritted out. “He can understand us.”

“He already knows,” Wyn said, then let out a tiny, distorted sigh. “Humans are so cruel.”

I wanted to retort how rich that was coming from a death monster who terrorised the Wastes and everyone in it. Except... that wasn't what the Soul Eater even did. He was saving people from the parasites.

He was right. In this situation, humans were the monsters.

They probably were in most situations out here.

"Maybe one day you will evolve to be better," Wyn said mildly. "But I doubt it."

"Maybe," I muttered, picking up my whittling knife and bending my head, effectively dismissing him because I wasn't interested in getting into a philosophical conversation with the fucking Soul Eater.

"If you need me to end his suffering, I will do it," Wyn said, vanishing into black smoke before I could reply.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Seraph started getting weaker the next day.

I noticed the moment I went back out around midday, after leaving him at dawn to get a few hours of sleep. He let out his little chuff at the sight of me, but it was quiet and thready. He was huddled in the corner of his cage, shivering so violently that I could see it from yards away.

Something close to panic gripped me as I stared at him. This was it, then. The beginning of the end.

I stayed out there all day. It began to rain again, so I sat under the RV awning and whittled to pass the time. Rig brought me out some dinner when it started getting dark, as well as a bag of food that made me wonder if Gloam had told him I'd been giving it to Seraph.

He hesitated after stepping back, fat drops of rain splashing onto his fringed western jacket. "Gloam can come out and—"

"I'm fine." I forced myself to give him a tiny smile, but it dropped the moment I looked back at Seraph, who was huddled in the centre of his cage again to avoid the rain. "I want to be out here."

"I know you do, Lilac," Rig croaked, "but you're going to get ill if you —"

"I'll rest after—" I stopped and took a breath. "I'll rest after," I finished woodenly.

Rig's eyes tightened with sorrow, drifting back over to Seraph. But he didn't say anything.

After he had walked off back into the camp, I gave Seraph his food and forced myself to drink the thick vegetable soup Rig had brought me. Then I picked up my knife and carried on whittling, turning on the lantern when it got fully dark. The lump of wood was starting to take the shape of a long, hunched body with curled up limbs. I was rushing it, so it was rougher than my usual work, but I wanted to get it finished.

When dawn approached, I went into the camp briefly to use the bathroom before coming back out and sleeping in the RV, crawling into the nest of blankets on the living room floor. By the time I woke up and stepped outside, Gloam was out there, sitting against the side of the RV with his war hammer and watching Seraph sombrely.

I sat down beside him without saying anything, and he handed me a small assortment of food—some jerky, an apple, a little jar of pickles and the pecan tin.

“For you,” he said sternly, then fell silent again when I reluctantly started eating.

I watched Seraph while I forced the food down. He was huddled into a corner of the cage, shivering violently, his breaths heavy and snarling as they rasped out of him. His eyes all blinked sluggishly.

Eventually, Rig appeared and asked Gloam to help him fix something in the camp. The big beastie stood up after squeezing my shoulder and walked away.

It had stopped raining, so once he was gone I moved to sit as close to Seraph’s cage as I dared. Not that I was really concerned about him attacking me. He didn’t seem to have the energy to do much at all.

I whittled as the hours dragged on and the sky grew dark. A few times during the night, I felt the prickling cold presence of the Soul Eater at my back. But he never said anything. Just stood there for a few minutes before I saw thick black smoke snaking over the camp wall out of the corner of my eye.

I repeated the routine the next morning. And the next. Go inside, use the bathroom, collect my breakfast from the diner before coming back out to eat and sleep in the RV. When I stepped back outside late morning on the third day, Seraph was curled up into a ball on the floor of his cage. He was quaking so hard it looked like he was having a seizure. The blanket I had tried to give him days ago was still in the exact same place, sodden now.

The air got colder and colder as the day progressed, and that night it started to snow. Seraph was still curled up in a ball, the bag of food I had tried to give him untouched. His heavy snarling breaths turned into pained whimpers, and as snow swirled into his cage and settled on his dark, leathery skin, his constant shivers grew violent and jerky.

I couldn’t take it anymore. He didn’t even lift his head when I stood up and ripped open the RV door. Grabbing several blankets from the nest inside, I marched up to his cage and knelt, my knees instantly getting cold and wet from the snow seeping through my pants.

Seraph let out a single weak snarl, eyes blinking sluggishly. He was panting like a wounded animal on the brink of death—tiny, shallow breaths that rattled in his throat and barely moved his chest.

Grabbing the first blanket, I pushed it between the bars and stretched my arms as far as I could, my shoulder digging into hard metal. I managed to get it over half of him, and he jerked as the thick, warm fabric settled over his arms.

When he weakly shuffled toward me with shaking limbs, I went still. But he just settled back down on the other side of the bars, shuddering as the snow drifted down onto him. His long feet curled, trying to escape the cold.

I couldn't get rid of the lump in my throat as I draped the blanket over him fully, covering every inch of him below his chin. Then I grabbed another and laid it on top. And another, until he was an indiscernible lump beneath the mound of fabric.

I sat on the ground cross-legged, pulling my coat tighter around me as snow settled in my hair. Hesitantly, I rested my gloved hand on his shoulder through the blankets. A few of his eyes slowly blinked open, barely able to focus on me, but he let out a weak, lifeless version of his little greeting chuff. I swallowed thickly, blinking fast as my eyes began to burn.

"I'm here," I told him quietly, my voice wavering the tiniest amount. "I'll be here."

He sucked in a low, rattling breath, like he was struggling to fill his lungs. Slowly, I let my hand drift higher to lightly trace his tiny, gnarled ear. He shuddered and tried to get closer until he was pressed right up against the side of the cage. Tipping my head against the bars, I settled my hand on his neck. I could barely feel his weak, thready pulse through the leather of my glove.

"My—my real name is Jesse." I wasn't sure why I said it. My mom had wanted me to have a western name, fully invested in the American dream until the whole world turned to shit. But it wasn't like it was important.

Seraph made a tiny sound and tried to get closer again. A shaking hand crept out from under the blankets and reached between the bars, long fingers curling around the edge of my coat and clutching weakly.

Not knowing if it was a stupid or painful thing to do, I swallowed and said, "Do you remember your other name, Seraph? What you were called before."

Some of his eyes blearily opened. His wide mouth parted, but only a faint croak escaped.

“Luke,” I said shakily, my throat closing up when more of his eyes opened and blinked rapidly.

Then they grew shiny. His chest hitched with shallow breaths, before a hoarse, ugly sound escaped him as tears began to drip from those two human eyes in the centre of his face. He clutched my coat tighter with trembling fingers, so I quickly reached down and curled my hand over his.

I sat there in the dark, in the snow, and held Seraph’s hand as he cried weakly on the floor of his cage.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I was still sitting there at dawn, my eyelids drooping and head resting heavily on the cage bars.

Seraph had finally dozed off, falling into a restless, fitful sleep a couple of hours ago. Or maybe he'd fallen unconscious and wasn't going to wake back up. Maybe I'd already said my final words to him.

I didn't move when I heard heavy boots crunching through the snow behind me. They stopped suddenly before starting back up again, slower and more hesitant. When I realised I could also hear the drag of something big and heavy over the ground, I worked out that it was Gloam.

He wisely didn't admonish me for getting close to the cage, because I was pretty sure I would have threatened him with my machete if he had. His voice was thick and sombre when he said, "I will watch him while you rest."

My body was completely stiff from the cold, and I'd moved so little during the night that a flurry of snow fell from my hair and shoulders when I finally, wearily lifted my head from the bars. I knew I had to go and warm up. I knew I'd already let my body temperature drop too much, but the thought of stepping away from the cage made it hard to breathe.

I forced myself to though, gently uncurling Seraph's long fingers from my coat and tucking his hand under the blanket. He didn't wake up, his breaths still quick and shallow in sleep, eyes unmoving behind his lids.

My limbs felt like they would snap when I stood up unsteadily and took a few steps back, staring through bleary eyes at Seraph hidden under the blankets. When I was finally able to turn away and walk over to Gloam, he handed me a bag of food. I took it wordlessly and stumbled to the RV. He sighed but didn't say anything.

The RV was only marginally warmer, but enough to unclench my stiff limbs just a little. I stared down at the food package in my gloved hands before setting it on the kitchen counter.

In the next instant, my vision went blurry. When my chin started wobbling under my mask, I clamped my jaw to try and stop it. To force back my emotions and lock them away tight. I had gotten good at it. I had grieved for my mother for a long, long time, young enough to still need her

desperately, her warmth and comfort and guidance, but old enough to comprehend that her death had been preventable. Old enough to understand why my father had withdrawn into himself, inconsolable but still trying his best.

When he had been killed, I went numb. Everything else I hadn't already lost was ripped from me in moments. I was shunted out of my home and into one of the city's many filthy, overcrowded orphanages, never able to be alone to grieve, constantly surrounded by other children who shoved and stole each other's meagre belongings and wailed all night for their dead parents.

It was easier to retreat into myself. To feel nothing. To never let anyone get close, to realise that I could only look out for myself.

Seraph didn't even have that. His own agency had been ripped from him, turning him into a monster that was uncontrollable because of the pain coursing through his tortured body. And now he was going to die.

I reached up and scrubbed roughly at my stinging face, removing any traces of the single hot tear that had dripped onto my cold cheek. Then I grabbed more blankets and carried them outside, barely noticing that the Soul Eater was now standing beside Gloam. I ignored them both as I walked back over to the cage and sat down, piling the blankets over my shoulders when I started shivering again.

"No, Lilac." Gloam's voice was stern, almost angry, but I ignored him as I buried my hand under the mound of blankets covering Seraph to grip his lax fingers.

"Lilac, you *must* get warm and rest. You are going to make yourself very ill—"

"He's fine for now," Wyn said quietly. "Still healthy. Just tired."

After a long pause, the Soul Eater added, "He shouldn't leave now if he wants to be here when it happens."

My chest tightened so much I struggled to breathe. I gripped Seraph's hand harder, tipping my head against the bars to try and hide my face from the monsters watching.

I heard Gloam suck in a shaky breath, before he said, "I—I should go and get Rig."

"No one else," I heard myself croak, trying to keep my wet sniff inaudible as tears dripped onto the edge of the blanket. I didn't want a crowd here, gawking as Seraph took his final breaths in his cage.

After a few moments, I heard the crunch of boots in the snow as Gloam walked off. I could sense the Soul Eater still behind me, watching in silence.

“He is clinging on,” he said eventually, his voice like howling wind. “There is a chance he survives it.”

I didn’t know if that was his fucked up way of trying to make me feel better—though I doubted the Soul Eater cared how I felt—but I couldn’t bring myself to believe it anyway. I couldn’t let myself hope.

I wanted the Soul Eater to go away, so I could have at least a few more moments alone with Seraph before Gloam returned with Rig. After another minute he did, saying nothing else before I sensed his unsettling presence vanish.

I didn’t look up when I heard Rig and Gloam return. Didn’t look up when I heard Rig sniff and say in a wobbly voice, “I wish we could’ve helped him.”

You tried, I thought woodenly, because they had. But in the end, it hadn’t mattered.

“Maybe you should go back in, Adam,” Gloam said quietly. “It is very cold, and... there isn’t anything we can—”

“No,” Rig said tearfully. “I’m—I want to be here. For him and Lilac.”

I listened to Gloam gently urge Rig to wait in the RV where it was warmer. The big beastie sat in the doorway, watching us in silence.

At some point I heard the crunch of footsteps and new voices—Edin and Hunter’s sombre tones as they spoke quietly to Gloam. Then they left again.

Ghost and Aury came out when it started to get dark, standing well back from the cage. No one else had tried to approach, and I knew I’d probably stab them if they did.

The Soul Eater came and went several times, never speaking as he stood behind me in the snow, watching.

Eventually, Gloam ushered Rig back inside the camp, pausing to tell me that he would come back out once Rig had eaten and gone to bed. I didn’t acknowledge him.

Then Seraph and I were alone again. He hadn’t moved at all since the night before, but his breaths had become longer and slower. Still rattling, but drawn out, as if he had dropped into deeper sleep. I hoped that at least meant he wasn’t in so much pain.

In the end, I physically couldn't keep my eyes open any longer. I was already slumped against the bars, still loosely gripping Seraph's hand under the blankets. Panic and grief flared in me as I felt myself falling asleep, unable to stop it, sure that when I woke up he would be gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I was warm for what felt like the first time in weeks.

As I started waking up, I could tell I was indoors. All the sounds from outside were muffled from the snow, but I knew I wasn't in my room. The air smelled musty and faintly metallic, like old blood. When I shifted my arm to rub my prickling face, I realised I was under a mountain of blankets.

Someone moved, making me tense up as my eyes shot open.

"Hey. How're you feelin'?"

I couldn't place the southern twang at first, but as my gaze lifted I saw Danny kneeling beside me, his dark brows drawn into a worried frown. He was wearing a thick winter coat that looked brand new, his cheeks flushed from the chill above a black scarf wound around his neck.

My gaze shifted behind him to take in the ugly pattern of the RV couch. Snow was falling thick beyond the window, condensation building up on the inside from the warmer air in here.

"Is he still alive?" I croaked, struggling to sit up and almost flinching back when Danny reached out with gloved hands to help me.

"Yes." The distorted voice came from behind me, making my head whip around. My neck cramped, stiff from lying on the floor.

Wyn was standing by the kitchen counter, arms crossed as he looked out the window. His hood turned toward me.

"He's still alive," he said, looking away again. "I dragged you in here when you passed out. Danny did the rest," he added dismissively, waving a black-stained hand in the general direction of the blankets slipping into my lap.

I tried to get up, but Danny clamped a hand on my shoulder and pushed me down with surprising strength. He held out a water bottle.

"Drink first."

I reluctantly took the bottle, my gloved fingers trembling as I unscrewed the lid. The cool water soothed my dry throat, but I forced myself to sip it slowly and not gulp it down.

When a shrill shriek came from outside, I froze before shoving the bottle back at Danny and scrambling to my feet. He let me this time, screwing the lid back on as he followed me up.

“What is that?” I asked, stumbling to the living room window that faced the cage.

“They’re trying to get him out,” Danny said quietly, coming to stand beside me.

I stared out, the thick snow impeding my view, but I could see Aury on the roof of Seraph’s cage. His wings were curved forward protectively, like he was shielding something, and when he shifted, I realised Rig was up there with him. Snow was settling into his curly dark hair as he held an angle grinder to the top of the cage, squinting to protect his eyes from the flying sparks.

Gloam was standing a short distance back, textured brow heavily creased with worry as he watched him. Beside him stood Edin, seeming unaffected by the thick snow which melted the moment it hit his bare shoulders. Hunter was wrapped up in a winter coat next to him, zipped up to cover his chin and mouth, eyes grim as he watched. Ghost was on his other side, blue eyes frantic with worry as he stared at his best friend and partner on the roof of the cage.

My eyes snapped to the cage. Snow was piling up around its edge, but I could still see the unmoving lump within, Seraph completely hidden by the mound of blankets. My throat closed up.

“Gloam said the cage was hooked up to power at the, um, the collector’s place,” Danny told me. “The hatch at the top unlocked through a control panel on the wall. Which...” He hesitated, like he didn’t want to tell me. “Which also sent electrical currents through the cage to shock him until he passed out. So Gloam could carry him to the fighting ring,” he finished quietly.

No wonder Seraph was guarded around the big ayturin. I had no doubt Mary had made Gloam do all the dirty work, which meant Seraph had witnessed him pressing the button that sent even more pain coursing through his wracked body.

“Why don’t they just pull the cage apart?” My voice was tight with urgency as I turned to Wyn, who was still standing by the kitchen window. “Surely you’re all strong enough to bend the bars or rip them off.”

“Yes, but they need the cage intact,” Wyn said. “In case he survives.”

I gritted my teeth, marching to the door. Wyn stepped back quickly, getting in my way.

“If he survives—”

“If he survives, they’re not putting him back in the fucking cage,” I seethed, trying to get past him. He blocked me again easily, looming over me.

“Don’t think that if he does survive he will magically get better, human. He is still rabid. That isn’t his fault, but it doesn’t make it any less true.”

“Look at him,” I snarled, pointing a finger at the window to Seraph’s unmoving form huddled under the pile of blankets. “How does he look rabid to you?”

“Right now, his body is working very hard simply not to give up,” Wyn said bluntly. “He has nothing left to expend on attacking the people currently surrounding his cage. But that doesn’t mean the instinct isn’t still there.”

“I don’t care,” I gritted out, trying once more to get past him.

He let me this time, stepping back and turning to watch as I stormed to the door and threw it open. Snow immediately pummelled my face, fat flakes getting into my eyes and settling on my lashes. I blinked them away, gaze fixed on Seraph’s unmoving form as I crunched through the snow toward the cage.

Everyone knew better than to tell me not to get close. I fell to my knees beside the bars, reaching through them to place a gloved hand on the unmoving mound. Even through the many blankets, I could feel Seraph quaking violently. Clenching my teeth, I looked up and was almost blinded by the snow. I wanted to scream at Rig to hurry the fuck up.

It felt like an eternity passed before something metallic clanged above and the angle grinder finally switched off. I looked up again, seeing Rig’s face flushed and damp with sweat. He was blinking hard from the constant sparks, but his brow was furrowed with determination as he leaned back.

“Okay, set me down, Aury.”

Aury gently set him on his feet beside the cage. Rig wavered as Gloam rushed forward to gather him in his arms and pull him back. I stood up on unsteady legs as Aury rose into the air and lifted the hatch on the roof of the cage, letting it fall open with a bang. Seraph didn’t stir at all from the loud noise.

“I’ll get him.”

I heard the Soul Eater’s distorted voice a second before oily smoke poured through the open hatch. It surrounded Seraph under the blankets and lifted him with shocking gentleness. Some of the blankets covering him

slipped off, so I reached out to grab them before they could hit the icy cage floor.

I stumbled through the snow to follow as Wyn's smoke form carried Seraph into the RV, Danny standing beside the open door and watching anxiously. When I made it up the steps and inside, Wyn's looming form was back, standing over where he had laid Seraph down in the nest of blankets.

I slipped past him to pile more on top, before gently lifting Seraph's heavy, lifeless head to tuck a couch cushion beneath it. Kneeling beside him, I stared down at his face. Long, raspy breaths rattled out from his parted lips, and he was still shivering violently.

I didn't look up at first when I heard the heavy thud of boots coming up the steps, finally tearing my gaze away to see Gloam watching us with a concerned frown. He was gripping his war hammer, the head resting on the floor.

"I will stay in here with him," he rumbled, then looked at the Soul Eater grimly. "Barricade the door behind me."

Wyn nodded once, hood turning back toward me and Seraph. When I didn't move, he huffed and crossed his arms.

"Come on, human. Time to go."

"No."

He let out a sigh and cocked his head. "There is nothing you can do but wait—"

"Then I'll wait here."

Wyn made an impatient sound and looked at Gloam. "Shall I drag him out?"

"No, please don't." Gloam shook his head and took a few steps closer, before kneeling by Seraph's feet. "Lilac, I understand that you want to be here. But if he survives—if he wakes up, it will be very dangerous—"

"I'm not leaving," I gritted out, burrowing my hand under the blankets to grip Seraph's slack fingers.

Gloam sighed and looked up at the Soul Eater. Neither of the monsters spoke for a long moment, until Wyn unfolded his arms to gesture at the thick coil of chains on the dining table.

"We should chain him to something, then."

I went stiff, glaring up at him. "No."

"It's for your benefit, human," he said mildly. "If he recovers and attacks, it might buy you enough time to get out."

“No,” I repeated in a tight voice. “We’re not fucking chaining him up.” Gloam sighed again and straightened. His tone was firm when he said, “If you insist on staying, we will have to, Lilac.”

I shook my head. “I’ll take the risk—”

“I will not,” Gloam interrupted in a hard voice. “I will not risk you any more than I already... Think of the people who care about you, Lilac. Who would miss you. Don’t become frivolous with your life.”

I stayed silent, because I didn’t know what to say to that. Rig and Ghost would be sad if I died. So would Anchor and Rusty. But they’d move on. They’d be okay eventually.

Wyn let out a distorted sigh. “What if Seraph woke up and attacked you in an uncontrollable rage? What if he then got better and realised what he had done—killed the one person he had... bonded with? Don’t you want to be here to see if he can get better, human?”

I gritted my teeth hard under my mask, staring down at Seraph.

“The rycke is protective of you,” Wyn added bluntly. “If he killed you, it would rouse Aury’s instincts. He’d die anyway. Painfully.”

At length, I muttered, “Fine.”

Wyn grunted and reached for the chains. I listened to the clink of them uncoiling on the table.

“The table is bolted down,” he said. “Probably the most secure thing in here.”

After handing one end to Gloam, he knelt and reached under the table to wrap the other around the single thick pole in the centre. I watched, stiff with tension as Gloam slowly tucked the corner of a blanket around Seraph’s ankle before winding the chain over the top, so the cold metal didn’t touch his skin. At least he was trying to make it as comfortable as possible, but indignation still burned in my chest at witnessing Seraph being restrained like a wild animal.

Wyn yanked on the other end of the chain, testing it to make sure it wouldn’t come loose from the table leg. Once the two monsters had deemed it secure, they stood up.

“I’ll go and tell Rig that Lilac and I are staying,” Gloam muttered, turning to leave the RV.

Once he had stepped outside and the low murmur of voices drifted in, the Soul Eater grunted and turned for the door.

“Good luck, human.”

“Wait.” I finally scrambled up as he paused, hood turning back. “You said before that you can... see death.”

He nodded, hood shifting toward Seraph.

“It still shrouds him,” he said in his inhuman voice. “But he is fighting it.”

I nodded, swallowing as I looked down at Seraph, the top of his head barely visible above the mound of blankets.

“Will he get better?” I asked hoarsely.

The Soul Eater didn’t say anything at first, before he let out a sigh and turned back to the door. “I can’t tell you that, human.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

For three days, Seraph didn't wake up.

I didn't leave the RV once, using the tiny bathroom to go to the toilet. My hair was greasy and flat in its ponytail. I could smell the stink of my unwashed body, and I was sure it was unpleasant for Gloam, but I didn't care.

At first, I sat beside Seraph and held his hand under the blankets. When I started tipping forward, drifting off, Gloam made me go and sleep in the bedroom at the other end of the RV so I would be safer while I was vulnerable, in case Seraph woke up. I was too tired to argue, and I didn't miss anything anyway. He wasn't waking up.

But he also wasn't dead yet.

Gloam had ordered that none of the raiders come out, in case Seraph recovered and managed to escape the RV. But first, Rig and Aury had gone back onto the roof of the cage and done something to the hatch. I asked Wyn what they were doing when he appeared through the vent on the RV roof and solidified from his smoke form. He said they were welding a new lock onto the cage that they could secure with a thick, heavy-duty padlock.

Because if Seraph survived, he would have to go back in there.

No, I thought savagely as I sat on the old couch and watched Seraph, still unmoving under the mound of blankets. He'd stopped shivering at least.

I could... I could work with him to rehabilitate him. I was good at keeping him calm. He responded well to me. Surely if he made it through the withdrawals, he would be able to improve?

I whittled to pass the time, alternating between sitting on the floor near Seraph or the corner of the couch. My limbs were stiff and aching from moving so little, but at least it was somewhat warm in here.

Gloam stretched out on one of the benches at the side of the table, head tipped back against the window. I knew he had to be bored and missing Rig, but he never complained.

Aury delivered food and water for me every day, passing it to Gloam through the window and watching Seraph sadly in silence for a few moments before walking back to camp. But on the third day, when he

appeared, his eyes immediately locked onto Seraph and flared with dark fire.

He didn't look away as Gloam opened the window to retrieve my food. His hand shot up to prevent Gloam from closing it, before it slid to the pane and flattened, long fingers splayed over the glass. They flexed once.

"Can I see him?" he asked, voice still quiet but... strange.

Gloam hesitated, glancing back at me, then Seraph.

"Why, friend?" he asked calmly.

Aury blinked, never taking his eyes off Seraph. "There's... I can sense something."

I nodded quickly when Gloam looked at me. He went to the door and opened it as Aury vanished from the window. They hadn't barricaded it in the end, in case I needed to escape if Seraph woke up and lashed out in confusion and pain.

The rycke's tall form stepped carefully inside, his wings folded as tightly as possible behind him and dusted with snow. They rasped against the ceiling of the RV as he approached slowly and knelt beside Seraph. I slid down onto the floor behind the lump of blankets, resting a protective hand on Seraph's shoulder.

When Aury started gently pulling the blankets away, my hand shot out to grip his wrist.

"What are you doing?" I asked tersely.

He looked up at me with sad eyes. "I won't hurt him, Lilac. I promise."

It took me a few seconds to uncurl my fingers. I sat back stiffly and watched as Aury uncovered Seraph's chest and carefully rolled him onto his back. His arm and shoulder settled heavily on my knees, a dead weight that made my chest tighten.

I didn't think he was going to wake up.

I cupped the back of his smooth head to support it as Aury rested a gentle hand on Seraph's sternum, right over the centre. After a few long, silent seconds, he let out a tiny gasp as his pale fingers flexed.

To my shock, he was smiling when he looked up at me, black eyes wide.

"He has a life seed."

"What?" Gloam stepped forward quickly.

Aury nodded, his smile widening as he looked up at the big aytorin. "I can feel it. It's tiny—much smaller than a rycke's would be—but it's there."

“What’s a life seed?” I croaked, unable to let myself hope even though Aury seemed to think this was good news.

“It is what gives the rycke life.” Aury smiled softly at me. “Ghost said it is almost like a human heart. It pumps the life around my body. And I can feel one—a tiny one—doing the same for Seraph.”

“Could you not sense it before?” Gloam asked, kneeling beside him.

Aury shook his head, gazing down at Seraph. “No, it wasn’t there before. I would have been able to feel it even from a distance. It’s like...” His head cocked. “It’s like his body is going through one final change, trying to settle into what it will... remain as, now that he is no longer being given new doses. His human heart is still there, still working, but it is dying. The life seed is growing. Taking over.”

“So he’s going to survive?” I rasped.

Aury looked up to give me another sad smile. “We cannot be sure of it, but... I think this is good.”

“Very good,” Gloam said quickly, shooting me a tusked grin. “This is excellent, Lilac.”

I didn’t smile back. I couldn’t bring myself to. Not until Seraph woke up and I saw for myself that he was getting better.

“Can you sense anything else?” I asked Aury, looking back down at Seraph. My thumb stroked the back of his head once before I forced it to stop moving.

Aury hesitated, his hand still pressed to Seraph’s sternum.

“He feels... less chaotic inside,” he said eventually. “Like a storm is quieting, but... it’s still there.”

“What is?” I asked hoarsely.

“The pain. The torment. The... disjointed sensation. Maybe it will fade with time, but...”

My chin wobbled, so I clamped my jaw. So even if Seraph survived this, he might still be in too much agony to ever fully function. To ever control himself enough to live outside of a cage.

I tried to remind myself of what I had silently promised I would do if his pain got worse. The thought of killing him now, even quickly and painlessly, was... I couldn’t bring myself to think about it for too long.

But after clearing my throat, I forced myself to say, “If it doesn’t fade—if it gets worse... I’ll do it.”

Aury shook his head. “No you won’t, Lilac.”

“I can do it,” I insisted hoarsely, even as my throat closed up. “I—want to. I want to make sure it—”

“No, Lilac.” Aury lifted his hand and reached across Seraph’s lifeless body to gently grasp my arm. “I know you do it for the camp so others don’t have to, but I think this would be the one that breaks you. Even if it is the kindest thing for him in the end.”

I shook my head, feeling too exposed even though my mask covered my trembling mouth. “No, I—”

“One of us will do it.” Aury looked at Gloam, who gave a grim nod. He turned bleak eyes back to me. “Or Wyn. He will make sure it is quick.”

I didn’t trust the Soul Eater to give Seraph a painless death, and it must have shown on my face because Gloam said, “He isn’t as cruel as the stories that travel among humans make him out to be, Lilac. You have seen that for yourself.”

That didn’t mean he should be the one to end Seraph’s suffering. Gloam was right—he hadn’t been cruel, but that didn’t mean he actually cared. If the only way to stop Seraph’s pain and torture was his death, it should be someone who cared that did it.

When I stayed silent, Aury sighed and got to his feet. “Make sure you eat, Lilac.”

I gave a clipped nod, watching Seraph’s slack face as Gloam walked Aury to the door, the two monsters murmuring quietly to each other. Seraph’s chest rose and fell slowly with his breaths, so after glancing over to make sure they weren’t looking, I tentatively placed my hand on his sternum, where Aury had.

I could feel something in there. Something that thrummed weakly, so faint I could barely detect it under my fingertips. Sliding my hand higher, I settled it over where his heart should have been.

It was thumping slowly. Painfully slowly and irregularly. Giving up.

Swallowing thickly, I slid my hand back down to the life seed to halt the grief threatening to choke me. I focused on it, trying to will it to be enough. To keep him alive once his heart gave out.

My gaze darted back over to the door. Gloam was standing in the doorway, still talking to Aury who had stepped outside. While he was distracted, I shifted back and carefully laid Seraph flat on the floor. Then I leaned down to press my ear lightly to his sternum, to see if I could hear the

life seed better. To try and convince myself that it would be enough to keep him from dying.

I could hear it. A slow, rhythmic *whoosh* under his leathery skin that stuttered occasionally, like it was still working out its purpose. Operating in tandem with Seraph's failing human heart, which I could faintly hear under the life seed's thrum.

My eyes slid shut so I could focus on it better. His skin wasn't cold anymore, but still tough and slightly textured under my ear. He smelled like heated earth, warm and organic and full of life even though he was still lying there lifelessly.

Feeling calmer, I went to sit up. But before I could, Seraph's lungs stuttered beneath me. His heart gave a mighty, stilted thump, then stopped completely.

My mouth started to tremble and I couldn't stop it. I kept my eyes shut, squeezing them tighter, like I was a child pretending it hadn't really happened.

But then huge hands gripped my head, painfully firm and unyielding. When my eyes flashed open in alarm, they met a sea of unblinking ones staring down at me, wide and unfocused and filled with panic-fuelled rage.

Seraph was awake.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

His breath started coming in thick, unsteady snarls, chest heaving beneath my pinned head. My throat bobbed, but I didn't dare try and yank my head back. If he squeezed just a little tighter, he'd crush my skull.

His chest vibrated under my ear, readying to loose a rabid bellow as his trembling fingers gripped my scalp, tangling in my greasy hair. Then he opened his mouth wide, his crowded, sharp teeth glistening, and screamed in my face.

I was vaguely aware of Gloam's deep voice gritting out a foreign curse. The pounding of his boots as he ran across the RV, the drag of his war hammer's head when he picked it up.

Fear shot through me—not for myself. For Seraph.

My throat painfully dry, I opened my mouth and croaked, "Seraph—"

He flung me away with a roar, like I was nothing more than a ragdoll. I hit the hard edge of the sofa with a pained grunt, blinking hard to get rid of the spots in my vision. Before I could move, fingers were curling around my ankle and yanking me back—but it wasn't Seraph. Gloam picked me up and practically tossed me to Aury. As he hurriedly carried me outside, I strained my neck to peer frantically into the RV. Seraph was fighting his tangle of blankets, snarling furiously and kicking out as Gloam hesitantly approached, gripping his war hammer in both big hands.

"Seraph—" I heard him say in a low, calming tone before freezing air hit my sweaty skin and my feet were set in the snow.

I met Aury's gaze, knowing my eyes were wild, and his weren't much better. I could see him trying to fight the change, turning his face into a horrifying facsimile of what it usually was. His eyes were sinking in, jaw elongating, and he was shaking as he pushed it back.

"Get inside the camp." His voice was more guttural, but still frantic. "Please."

He turned and loped back inside, his back hunched and the barbs bursting through his coat as they grew. Knowing it was the stupidest thing I could have done, I stumbled up the steps after him.

Seraph had managed to untangle himself from the blankets and was standing, but his spine was still curved over as he screamed and swiped at

Gloam, backed up into the corner as far as the chain around his ankle would allow. His many eyes darted around wildly, like he was looking for a way to escape.

“He’s just defending himself,” I burst out. “He’s confused—He—”

“Get into the camp, Lilac,” Gloam boomed.

But Seraph had gone quiet as all his eyes fixed on me and blinked rapidly. I went still, staring back at him. For a second—a weak, tiny second—I thought he was going to give me his usual greeting chuff. That he was going to be okay.

But then his gaze darted to the two monsters between us, Aury breathing hard as he fought to hold back the beast inside him, Gloam gripping his war hammer tight.

Seraph screamed and threw himself toward me, jerking to a painful halt when the chain wrapped around his ankle snapped to its limit. He snarled and strained forward, long fingers flexing as they reached for me. When that didn’t work, he let out a raw, furious scream and started yanking on his own tethered leg. The table groaned, its single pole starting to bend. Bones popped, his thick skin peeling back, caught on the rough metal. My eyes widened with horror.

“He’s hurting himself.” I rushed forward, but Aury’s big hand smacked into my chest and held me back.

“You’re making it worse,” Gloam shouted to be heard over Seraph’s furious snarls. “Please, Lilac.”

But I couldn’t think clearly anymore. I darted under Aury’s arm and reached for Seraph. I could calm him down. I knew I could. His hand shot out to grab my wrist, to drag me closer as he screamed at Aury and Gloam. The latter cursed roughly as he dropped his war hammer with a booming thud that shook the RV and reached for me.

I was ripped from Seraph’s grip by one of them, but I fought wildly, a distant part of me knowing I was being an idiot, knowing I really was making everything worse, but only white noise filled my head as I kicked and strained, watching with horror as Gloam grappled with Seraph and tried to pin him down.

“No,” I heard myself croak, fighting even harder before I was unceremoniously tossed away and Aury rounded on me.

His chest was heaving, face even more monstrous now as he loomed over me while I scrambled up from the floor.

“Get out,” he snarled, eyes just sunken black holes now. “Get—out.”

Behind him, oily black smoke had shot through the vent into the RV before the Soul Eater’s hooded form appeared. My eyes widened, terror filling me at what Wyn might do to Seraph. I managed to dart past Aury as he snarled, but I felt him grab the back of my shirt as I tried to push between Gloam and Wyn to get to Seraph.

In the fray, someone’s elbow caught my face, sending pain shooting through my nose and mouth. It stunned me enough to allow Aury to drag me out of the RV and dump me onto the snowy grass.

“You are—not—helping.” His voice was getting even more distorted, and his body looked bigger than usual. “Get—away. Trying to—fight it.”

Maybe the shock of the cold finally woke me up from my mad episode as I stared up at him, chest heaving and blood trickling from my nose under my mask. My heart was pounding, sweat coating me despite the freezing air and snow seeping into my pants.

Aury’s dark gaze lifted to something behind me. “Get him—away, isdernuc. Now.”

My pulse lurched when I was suddenly dragged backward, away from the RV. Shockingly hot skin surrounded me as I was picked up and carried like a football toward the camp wall. I fought again out of instinct as Edin’s deep voice filled my ears.

“Calm, human. They will not hurt him.”

But they might. I pushed against Edin’s huge chest, straining to break free from his hold. The blood from my nose was soaking through my mask, enough that tiny droplets landed in the snow, making a trail as he carried me away.

“You must get into the camp where it is safe,” Edin rumbled, voice tight. “Until he is back in the cage.”

“No.” I fought even more, my voice ragged. “They can’t put him back in there.”

“They have to, human,” Edin said solemnly.

I finally realised that there was absolutely no way I was breaking free from his monstrously strong hold. For a brief moment, I considered reaching for my machete and stabbing him so he dropped me. But I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

“Please,” I rasped instead. “At least let me—I need to see him.”

I needed to see that they hadn't hurt him. That his leg was okay. That he hadn't hurt *himself* any more.

Edin sighed and slowed his jog until he stopped. He set me down in the snow on legs that trembled wildly, but kept a hand clamped around my upper arm as he gazed down at me with big, stern eyes.

"From a distance," he rumbled. "We will watch from well back, preferably where he cannot see you."

I nodded quickly, knowing it was the best I was going to get with his huge hand wrapped around my arm, keeping me tethered to him. He led me back to the corner of the wall and stopped, the cage and RV just in sight.

"Do not speak," he ordered. "Do not call for him. The rycke might kill me for not getting you to proper safety."

I didn't answer, staring as the RV door was flung back open and tendrils of thick black smoke crept out, followed by the rest of Wyn's smoke form carrying a thrashing Seraph. He was screaming with fury, eyes darting around in panic as he was lifted into the air. His long fingers curled around the edge of the door, fighting the intangible hold that the Soul Eater had on him.

Gloam appeared and uncurled his fingers from the doorframe, narrowly avoiding a swipe to the face. Seraph snarled and twisted in the air, trying to slash at the thick smoke carrying him toward the cage, but his arms just passed through it harmlessly.

When he saw where he was being taken, he grew even more manic. Screaming, thrashing, gripping onto the hatch when Wyn tried to lower him into the cage.

"Where's the padlock?" The Soul Eater's distorted voice rang out from everywhere at once.

Gloam frantically dug into his pocket and handed the heavy padlock to Aury, who had calmed down and looked like himself again. He flew toward the cage just as Wyn managed to get Seraph inside, black smoke pinning him down while Aury closed the hatch and padlocked it shut.

As Aury flew back to Gloam, the black smoke released Seraph and drifted out of the cage before the Soul Eater appeared a short distance away. Seraph scrambled up from the floor, but immediately collapsed again when his left ankle buckled. He snarled, crawling to the edge of the cage to push himself against the bars, straining to get out.

My vision was blurry as I stared at him, breathing hard. Blood was trickling down the back of my throat, my mask completely soaked. A tooth wobbled when I swallowed thickly, but I barely noticed it as Seraph let out a weak snarl and collapsed on the floor of his cage, chest heaving with shallow breaths, like the burst of rabid energy had suddenly drained from him. All his eyes blinked sluggishly before rolling closed, his body going lax.

Even unconscious, he started shivering as snow drifted into his cage, a thin layer already crusting the floor under him. Edin's grip had loosened, so I managed to rip my arm free and stride forward.

"He needs to stay warm." I marched toward the RV, but Wyn stepped in front of me to block my path.

"I will get them, human. Stay away from the cage."

"Just let me—"

"Lilac." Gloam's voice was tight with anger as he strode toward us. He grasped the back of my neck in an unyielding grip and turned me back toward the wall, marching me forward. "That's enough. Get into the camp. You are trying to get yourself killed."

"He's back in the cage now." The words made sorrow pierce my chest. "He can't—"

"I am not talking about Seraph." Gloam didn't relax his grip as he led me to the camp entrance. "You haven't eaten or slept properly in days. You are pushing yourself too far."

"I'm fine—"

"Enough, Lilac." Gloam jerked me to a halt and turned me to face him, his wideset eyes tight with anger and concern. "Rig is very worried about you. So are Aury and Ghost. So am *I*. Please, for us, just let yourself rest. Seraph isn't going anywhere."

I gritted my teeth, trembling lightly. "I can rest in the RV."

"No." Gloam made a noise of frustration and pushed me through the container entrance. My teeth ground together, fingers twitching for my machete. "You need to bathe and eat and sleep in your own bed, in the warmth. Do not let yourself fall into this... I know what it is like, Lilac. To watch someone you care about... lose themselves. To feel the hope slipping away. I am not going to watch you stagnate as I did while I refused to acknowledge that I was losing my brothers."

I didn't know Gloam's full story, but Rig had told me enough to let me know that he really was speaking from experience. We stepped into the camp and he turned me toward him again, gazing down at me with solemn, pleading eyes.

"Please, Lilac."

At length, I gave a single nod, my eyes darting to the entrance behind him. He clenched his jaw and straightened to his full height, frowning down at me.

"I will carry you back in here like a child if I see you out there. I mean it."

I suppressed my glare, hands fisting at my sides. When I sniffed wetly, blood dripped from my soaked black mask onto the front of my shirt. Gloam's eyes immediately widened.

"You are hurt?" He went to pull my mask off, but I jerked back and shook my head.

"Just a nosebleed," I said flatly, because I didn't think my nose was broken. My mouth was the thing throbbing more, and that tooth was looser now.

He sighed. "More proof that your body desperately needs to rest."

I grunted and turned, knowing I wasn't going to win against the big beastie when he was this determined. I could feel him watching me as I dragged my feet toward the motel, ignoring the gawks and alarmed glances from other raiders at my dishevelled, unwashed state.

Rapid footsteps crunched through the snow toward me as I reached my door and fished the key out of my pocket with trembling fingers.

"Lilac."

Rig's frantic voice made me turn after a second of considering whether I could just ignore him. In the end, I couldn't bring myself to do it. Not to him, who had wanted so badly to help Seraph.

His eyes were big and worried as he reached me, lifting a hand to touch me before dropping it at the last second. Hunter was approaching behind him, his masked face grim.

I ignored him to look at Rig as he said, "Are you okay? What—We heard him screaming so Edin went out. He's—He's okay?"

I nodded once and forced myself to say, "He woke up, but it doesn't look good. He's back in the cage." My voice was flat. Lifeless.

Rig exhaled, shoving back his curly hair. “Well at least—at least he’s alive.”

I supposed that was a positive way to spin the situation, but I couldn’t bring myself to share the sentiment, even though I had been silently, desperately hoping Seraph survived over the last few days.

But what was the point in living if he had to live in a cage forever, mindless and rabid and lashing out at everyone who got close? Constantly in agonising pain, feeling wrong on the inside, a mishmash of other creatures drowning out his human self. Who he was.

My gaze slid slowly to Hunter, who was standing in silence beside Rig and eyeing me with a concerned frown. Pure, uncharacteristic fury flared inside me, making my hand clench into a fist to stop me reaching for my machete.

“Did you know?” My voice was soft with cold rage as I asked Hunter the question. “Did you know what they were doing?”

He glanced around warily, because most of the raiders here didn’t know that he was former military. It just made me even angrier.

“No,” he said simply, looking back at me. “I didn’t. Charlie didn’t either. I swear. I can’t imagine many people did, but we were just... low-level grunts. We weren’t privy to stuff like that.”

I didn’t know if I believed him. He looked sincere, but I didn’t know him. I didn’t trust him.

Not bothering to answer him, I shifted my eyes back to Rig. “Gloam is fine. He’s not hurt. Neither is Aury. Or Edin,” I added in a mutter, because I couldn’t bring myself to be that much of an asshole.

I turned to my door without saying anything else, unlocking it and slipping inside. Standing still, I surveyed my room. It was a mess. Dirty clothes strewn over the floor, bowls full of congealing, mouldy food that I hadn’t been able to eat when I’d been sick littering the scant surface space. Some of the plants looked sad and wilted but still alive, thankfully needing less watering in the winter.

My body sagged with exhaustion just looking at it all, but Gloam was right. I’d been neglecting myself completely, like my father had done when my mom died. Before I started cleaning up the mess, I gingerly peeled off my mask and went to look in the mirror.

My nose had stopped bleeding at least, and didn’t look crooked or broken. My mouth was caked in drying blood and swollen on one side, my

cheek red and tender. Wincing, I opened my mouth and poked the loose tooth with my tongue. More blood stained my teeth, and I could taste it trickling down the back of my throat as it seeped out around the wobbling tooth.

It was already irritating me, and I knew I wouldn't be able to eat with it, which I needed to do soon. My stomach was too empty. Reaching up, I tentatively grasped the wobbly first premolar on the right side of my mouth and gave it a gentle tug. Pain flashed through my whole jaw, making me blink rapidly. But I tugged again, feeling the root slide too easily from my gum, already knocked out of place.

I spat out the torrent of bloody saliva as I dropped the tooth on the dresser. Parting my lips in a non-smile, I inspected the gap in my bloody teeth vacantly as my whole mouth throbbed. I wasn't really vain, but I knew people liked how I looked. I'd been popular back at the brothel in the city.

Well, it wasn't like anyone would see it thanks to my mask. Rusty wouldn't care, though the thought of doing something as normal as having casual sex wasn't even remotely appealing while there was a tormented monster locked in a cage outside the camp.

Turning from the mirror, I swilled water around my mouth and swallowed it with a grimace. Then I started tidying up in silence, adding my bloody mask to the pile of dirty clothes that I shoved in the big cloth bag I used to take my laundry to the designated area in the camp.

After misting my plants, I sat down heavily on the end of the bed and stared vacantly at the bowls of uneaten food. Before I could stop it, my thoughts returned to Seraph and my chest tightened. He'd need food—and water. He hadn't drunk for days. Maybe he could go longer without it thanks to the monster DNA forced into his body, but still. He'd been eating and drinking every day before.

I started to get up before freezing and slowly sinking back down. I stared at the door, considering whether it was worth the risk to go back out there and make sure the beasties were looking after him properly. But I didn't particularly want any of the other raiders to witness me being carried back into camp by Gloam like a sulking child, and I knew without a doubt that he would follow through on his threat.

Exhaling heavily, I scrubbed a hand through my greasy hair and heaved myself up to reach for my towel. I'd look after myself and rest up for the day, but I was going back out there tonight. They couldn't stop me.

I wouldn't let them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Seraph had completely regressed.

Any progress I might have made with him was gone. Lost. He was as mindless and rabid as he had been when Gloam and Rig first brought him to the camp.

Worse, even. He screamed and thrashed constantly in his cage, stopping only for a few hours at a time to fall into exhausted sleep. Rig was worried that the thick padlock wouldn't be enough to hold him, but he never tried to escape that way, like he was so unaware that he didn't even remember that the roof was the only way out of the cage. He just smashed his body into the bars again and again until he grew so exhausted he collapsed onto the floor.

I kept guarding him at night, even though I was pretty sure that anything that got remotely close to his cage would be torn to shreds in an instant. During the day, I forced myself to do other things. Eat, sleep, shower, do my share of watch shifts on the wall. Aury and a few of the raiders, including Rusty, had harvested all the crops in my absence when it started snowing. But we needed to tend to the soil and get it ready for the next batch, so I kept myself busy doing that while my mind wandered constantly to the rabid beastie in the cage.

About a week after Seraph had woken up, Aury came and stood beside me while I was shovelling snow off the vegetable patch. I'd hardly spoken to him except for short, brisk explanations of what we needed to do for the crops. I'd hardly spoken to anyone.

I knew I couldn't continue like that. I didn't even know why I was isolating myself from everyone else, even more than normal—even from Rig and Ghost—but I just... didn't care.

I didn't stop shovelling, but after a minute or two of silence, I quietly said, "I'm sorry for making it worse."

Aury sighed and placed a hesitant hand on my arm, forcing me to stop. "I want to talk to you about it, Lilac."

I wasn't exactly embarrassed about how wild and idiotic I'd acted, I just really didn't want to address it. Acknowledge it. But I owed it to Aury. I'd almost made him change into the beast I knew he despised because his instinct to protect me had been roused by my own foolish actions.

I gave a clipped nod, turning to face him but keeping my eyes focused on his chest.

“My... The instinct wasn’t rising because of you. Not exactly.”

That made my gaze lift to his face. His straight black brows were pinched, expression as sombre as ever as he gazed down at me.

“Seraph wasn’t trying to hurt you, Lilac. The beast was rising because it wanted to protect Gloam. Seraph wanted to hurt Gloam. And me,” he added as an afterthought, then paused, watching me carefully. “Because Gloam and I were keeping you from him.”

I swallowed, trying to grasp what he was saying. “What does that mean?”

“It means that Seraph is very protective of you.”

“But...” I cleared my throat. “He flung me away—”

“He was confused. Scared. But he threw you away from us, trying to get himself in between so we couldn’t reach you. The longer you stayed, the more he wanted to kill me and Gloam to protect you.”

I took a step back, dumbfounded. “But you weren’t trying to hurt me.”

“That didn’t matter. All he saw was two creatures standing between himself and his... and you.”

I swallowed. “So... what does that...”

When I trailed off, Aury hesitantly said, “Many species from our world form lifelong bonds. Instincts guide us when it comes to... mates and relationships. Maybe it isn’t that—maybe he wasn’t acting on something that came from one of us. Maybe it was entirely human.” He gave me a sad smile. “I know it doesn’t really mean much, given his... But I thought you should know. He wasn’t trying to hurt you.”

I gave a vacant nod, the tip of my tongue poking absently at the new hole in my teeth. The gum there was still tender, but it had become a habit over the last few days.

“That doesn’t mean it is safe for you to get close to the cage,” Aury added, eyes darkening with an uncharacteristically stern frown. “He wasn’t trying to hurt you then, but that doesn’t mean he won’t now, even if he doesn’t mean to. He is... very confused. And in pain.”

I swallowed and forced myself to nod again. He was right. Seraph didn’t recognise me at all anymore, never breaking from his screaming and snarling and feverish pacing in his cage the entire time I sat out there every

night. He never, ever gave me his little greeting chuff anymore, and I refused to let myself acknowledge just how much I missed that sound.

I'd stopped trying to give him food, because he would just rip the bags to shreds and fling everything back out of the cage. He would only eat the meat Gloam gave him before it froze completely, biting into it savagely and spitting chunks back out. Aury had to change his water often to stop it freezing over, but most of the time he was guzzling it down like he was dying of thirst. So that was something, at least. Unless it was a desperate attempt to stop his body shutting down, failing completely, unable to settle into its new composition now that his human heart had given up.

I forced myself to nod at Aury and rasp, "Thanks for telling me," even though I couldn't bring myself to feel any hope or comfort over the fact that Seraph hadn't actually been trying to hurt me. It didn't matter anymore. He didn't recognise me. Whatever had caused him to want to protect me in that moment—maybe the last of his human side that had now been burned away—was gone. It wasn't going to magically come back.

The man he'd been before—the young soldier Luke Buckley, who'd already been all alone in the world—was gone. He was only Seraph now. The monster the military had made him.

When I went out into the Wastes that night to watch Seraph, I didn't bother saying hello to him. He was already letting out a low, ominous snarl as I approached, vibrating from his chest, and it turned into a raw bellow as he threw himself against the bars.

In silence, I sat down on the top step of the RV and turned on my lantern, setting it beside me before I pulled the whittling stuff out of my pocket. Thick snow still coated the ground, disturbed and muddy from all the monster boots walking around the RV, but there was a wide ring of untouched white around Seraph's cage. No one had gone near him since Wyn put him back in there, except for Aury flying onto the roof to refill his water.

The blankets that Wyn must have covered him with—I had been surprised he'd actually done it—were gone. Seraph had ripped half of them up before flinging the rest out of his cage in a fit of mindless fury. But it was snowing again, drifting between the bars and settling on his dark skin. I

could see him quaking as he shoved at the bars and paced, hunched over, unable to straighten fully.

I forced myself to ignore it, looking back down at the likeness of Seraph in my hands. I was working on the tiny details now, intricately carving out the many eyes and sharp teeth.

I knew that if I tried to give him a blanket by draping it over the pole and dropping it in the cage, he would just tear it to pieces. There was no point.

But it got harder and harder to ignore as the night wore on and the snow fell thicker, Seraph's screams devolving into heaving, snarling breaths that shuddered out of him from the cold. Eventually, I saw him sink down onto the floor of his cage from the corner of my eye, his limbs stiff and trembling.

When I reluctantly looked up, he was on his back and gazing vacantly at the roof of his cage, eyes all blinking slowly and out of sync. Violent shivers wracked him, and he rolled onto his side to curl up into a tight ball, trying to shield himself from the snow pummeling him through the bars.

He didn't look up when I stood and opened the RV door. Grabbing a couple of blankets and the pole, I walked down the steps and to the edge of the untouched ring of snow surrounding the cage. But as I stared down at the items in my gloved hands, I knew it wouldn't work. Even if I managed to drop the blankets on him, he wasn't going to cover himself fully. It wouldn't help.

Sighing quietly, I lowered the pole to the ground and shook out the blankets, stacking them together so I could drape them over him as quickly as possible before moving back. Moving slowly, I crunched through the snow until I was standing behind him, still well back from the cage. It might buy me enough time to run if he lashed out.

I tried to gauge how many seconds it would take me to cover him and get back. He was in the centre of his cage, which meant he was less likely to be able to grab me, but it also meant I'd have to stretch my arms through the bars to reach him.

Hesitating, I stared at his curved spine, his huddled form on the floor. He let out a weak, shivery snarl and tried to curl tighter in on himself, tucking his head down into his chest.

I couldn't leave him like that. I just couldn't. Walking slowly, trying to keep my footsteps light, I approached the cage. He didn't react. Didn't

move except for the violent shivers wracking his curled-up body.

Despite the cold air, sweat prickled at my hairline as I knelt on the other side of the bars and silently fed the blankets between them. The moment the warm fabric settled over Seraph's frame, he jerked with a shocked bark.

I was already backing up, but I wasn't fast enough. In an instant, he had rolled over and his long arm shot through the bars, grabbing my gloved hand. For the first time since he'd tried to strangle me, real fear shot through me and made me scramble back, trying to yank my arm free.

My hand slipped out of my glove, but before the momentum even allowed me to stumble back, he had dropped it and grabbed my bare wrist. His leathery skin was cold and felt damp against my sweating palm, but he didn't drag me forward.

In fact, he had fallen silent as he stared at me, all his eyes blinking rapidly. They almost looked focused. His snarling breaths had quieted, still trembly from the cold, but less rabid.

When his grip loosened, I yanked my hand free from his long fingers. The sudden movement made him bark in warning, and his hand dropped to snatch up my ankle as I fell onto my ass in the snow and tried to scramble back. His grip was tight through the leather, almost painful, but after a few seconds he shoved my foot away from him with a weak growl and turned away, curling back up into a tight ball.

I was panting wildly as I crabwalked back until I was at a safe distance. Rising unsteadily, I stared at his shivering back. It was almost like he... was telling me not to bother. Not to try and help him. Which was heartbreaking, but it was... something. It was a level of awareness that he hadn't displayed in days.

And he'd looked at me. Actually looked at me. As I walked unsteadily back to the RV and sat down, I picked up my whittling knife but continued to stare at him.

Something weak and fragile bloomed in my chest when he rolled over and jerkily covered himself with the blankets, his huge hands trembling wildly. I heard him let out a snarly sigh as he settled underneath them—the sound he used to make when he was enjoying his food.

A tiny smile curved my lips under my mask.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

By the following morning, Seraph seemed different. He was quieter, but still snarled in warning at any tiny sound that reached us from the forest or camp. There was a level of awareness in his eyes that had been missing ever since he woke up that day in the RV. When I glanced up at him as the sun started to rise, he was already watching me, sitting up in the centre of his cage with the blankets on his lap.

After leaving him at dawn when Gloam came out, I showered and slept for a few hours before I was woken up by raiders laughing and banging their doors as they left their rooms. But I still felt rested. I'd been eating and sleeping normally, going through the motions to keep me functioning. I hadn't gone to see Rusty, because I wasn't interested in anything beyond that. Like my body had gone into minimum upkeep mode, keeping me going but dormant aside from the basics.

I got dressed and went to the diner. It was late morning, still a little while to go before lunch, so it was thankfully empty when I slipped inside. Even Anchor wasn't in there, which relieved me. I still didn't really want to talk to anyone.

Daisy gave me an apple, a plum and two peeled carrots without question when I asked for them, patting my arm before walking back into the kitchen. I put them into the sack I'd brought and tucked it inside my zipped-up coat so no one could see it as I walked across the camp to the entrance.

Maybe Seraph would want to eat them today. Maybe he wouldn't just fling them out of the cage with a rabid snarl.

When I rounded the corner of the wall, I saw Gloam and the Soul Eater out here, standing together by the RV and talking quietly as they watched Seraph. Gloam was holding the plastic container of raw meat and the pole, while Wyn had his arms crossed, head cocked as he looked at the cage.

I stopped to look at Seraph. He was quiet, slumped back against the bars as he watched them. But he didn't look weak. Maybe tired or weary. His flat chest was rising steadily with deep breaths, eyes alert but... shockingly calm.

Gloam hooked the meat onto the end of the pole and took a few steps forward to extend it to the cage. Seraph watched with disinterest as it

landed on the floor with a wet splat, blood seeping out. He gazed down at it, lip peeling back from his jutting teeth in a sneer—not a snarl. His eyes flicked up toward the two monsters before he turned his head and looked away.

“*Dakna ronish.*”

We all froze.

He’d—he’d just spoken. Actually spoken. Said words.

His voice was deep and guttural. Grating and harsh. The words were stilted, sounding unnatural coming from him, but they were *actual fucking words*.

The Soul Eater’s head slowly cocked again, arms uncrossing to hang at his sides, fingers twitching. “Did he just—”

“That was isdernuc.” Gloam sounded shocked and frantic. “Get Edin.”

Wyn paused. “I can speak isdernuc—”

“So can I, but it should be Edin. Get Edin.”

Wyn vanished, black smoke shooting up and over the camp wall. I walked unsteadily toward the cage, but Gloam hurried forward and tugged me back to the RV.

“Don’t think I didn’t see those footprints in the snow going right up to the cage, Lilac,” he rumbled sternly. “And the blankets.”

I cleared my throat. “It was fine.”

“It *looks* like there was a struggle.”

“I’m fine,” I said dismissively. “He was cold.”

Gloam muttered something under his breath just as the Soul Eater reappeared. A few seconds later, Edin jogged around the corner of the wall.

“He spoke?” His purple eyes flashed with shock, swinging toward the cage.

Seraph hadn’t moved, still gazing away from the seeping lump of meat on the floor.

Gloam nodded as Edin reached us. “He said *dakna ronish.*”

Edin’s brows rose in surprise as he looked back at Seraph.

When he stayed silent, I gritted my teeth. “What does it mean?”

Gloam glanced down, giving me a tiny sheepish smile. “Apologies, Lilac, I forgot you cannot speak it.”

“It means *no more meat*,” Edin said, still staring at Seraph as he took a step closer to the cage. He rumbled something that was entirely foreign to my ears, deep and glottal.

“He is asking what Seraph would like instead,” Gloam murmured to me. Seraph was silent for a few moments as we all waited. Eventually, he turned away even more and wrapped his arms around his knees.

Then he repeated the same thing, before adding, “*Soma lorina.*”

All the monsters went still, before Edin slowly said, “That wasn’t isdernuc.”

“No,” Gloam mused. “I think it was—”

“The rycke’s dead language,” Wyn drawled, striding closer. “I’ll go and get him. If I must,” he added in a mutter before vanishing once again.

“What?” I said. “So he’s... speaking a mix?”

I still couldn’t quite believe that he was actually speaking.

“It appears so.” Gloam placed his big hands on his hips. “I speak most languages from our world, but the rycke’s obviously hasn’t been used for a very, very long time, so I only had archaic records to go off before.”

Of course it hadn’t been spoken in a long time. Aury had no one else to speak it to.

“I should be able to translate most, if he speaks any others,” Gloam added. “But we need Aury to translate for the rycke’s tongue.”

I was practically vibrating with impatience as we waited for Aury and Wyn to get back. What else had he said? Did he remember any human language? English?

Would I be able to speak to him and actually have him answer back?

When Aury finally appeared, the Soul Eater arriving separately in his smoke form over the wall, Gloam repeated the words back to him.

“Apologies if I mangled them, friend.”

Aury shook his head, black eyes wide with shock as he stared at Seraph and softly said, “You didn’t. He said *anything else.*” He swallowed. “I have never heard another speak my language before.”

It made me feel a little guilty, but I couldn’t bring myself to care that Aury was hearing another person speak in his tongue for the first time in his long life. I was already pulling out the hemp bag from within my coat and grabbing the pole from Gloam’s slack fingers.

“I have other things for him.” I hooked it onto the end and stepped closer to the cage.

At the movement, Seraph’s head turned. He stared at me for a long moment in silence.

Then he sat up straighter and let out his little greeting chuff.

My throat bobbed convulsively at the sound, but I refused to outwardly react as I extended the pole to his cage and waited. After he had crept forward and taken the bag, I pierced the slab of meat with the sharp hook and dragged it out. It left a murky pink line in the snow as I pulled it toward me, away from the cage.

The beasties all watched in silence as Seraph pulled a carrot out of the bag and crunched down on it, letting out a pleased snarl. I tried very hard not to let my smile grow too wide under my mask.

When he muttered something else between bites, I immediately asked, “What did he say?”

“That was vint,” Gloam said. “He said, *I like this.*”

That time, I couldn’t hold back the short bark of disbelieving laughter. He was *talking*. He was coherent. He was reacting to his environment and actions, not just thrashing in mindless pain.

“Talk to him,” I demanded, not caring which one of the beasties obeyed.

Edin cleared his throat and started to speak in isdernuc, but when he took a step forward Seraph froze and snarled at him, snatching up the bag and clutching it to his chest. Edin’s big hands rose placatingly as he stepped back again.

But then Seraph snarled out more words, stuffing the last of the carrot into his mouth.

“That was a mix of several languages,” Gloam said thoughtfully. “But together, it roughly translates to, *Mine. Get back. It’s mine.*”

“Keep talking to him,” I ordered, but all of the beasties stayed quiet as Seraph pulled out the plum and bit down, eyeing us warily.

“Maybe it would be better to wait until he’s finished eating,” Edin said hesitantly.

But Wyn, who was leaning back against the RV with his arms crossed, cocked his head and called something out in his distorted voice.

I turned to Gloam. “What did he—”

“He asked him which he prefers.”

My brows pinched with confusion, and I turned back to Seraph just as he rasped one word out, short and guttural. Gloam and Edin both let out rumbling laughs as Wyn huffed in amusement, but Aury looked as nonplussed as me. I supposed he probably didn’t know any other monster languages. It wasn’t like any of them had ever spoken to him before.

“He said *orange*,” Gloam told me, smiling wide. “So I think he prefers the carrot.”

Seraph grunted and said something else. Before I could ask, Gloam translated for me.

“He said it feels good on his teeth. Clean. But he likes the sweet soft fruit too.”

My throat closed up as I stared at Seraph. Swallowing, I hoarsely said, “I can get him more—”

“He is fine for now, Lilac,” Gloam said kindly. “He’s enjoying his food.”

Seraph finished the plum and flung the pit away before rooting through the bag again. He grunted and muttered something else. It was like now that he’d finally started talking, he didn’t want to stop.

“He—” Gloam cocked his head. “He said he wants the box of brown shards.”

I went still, trying to work out what he meant. What I usually put in the bag.

“The pecans?” I dropped the pole and frantically patted my coat pockets, shoving my left hand in when I felt the tin in there. “I have them. I can give them to him.”

Edin’s deep voice rumbled out, “You can’t go near the cage, human.”

“He’s fine,” I grated, gesturing at Seraph. “He’s not going to—”

“No,” Gloam said firmly, then cleared his throat and said something to Seraph, who snarled and clutched the bag tighter again as he spat out angry words.

Gloam exhaled. “I asked him to throw the bag back so we could give them to him, but he said he is not done. *There is more. Mine.*”

“He usually throws the bag back to me anyway,” I rasped. “Hopefully he’ll do it when he’s finished.”

We watched in silence as Seraph ate the apple, then the other carrot, saving it for last. Once the bag was empty, he grunted and raised his eyes to all of us watching. When they locked onto me, he chuffed and crept forward to fling the bag in my direction.

I hurried closer, but Gloam grabbed the back of my coat and sternly said, “Use the pole.”

I did, dragging the bag closer so I could put the tin of pecans inside and hold it back out to him on the end of the pole. Seraph took the bag and

immediately dug his hand in, letting out a pleased snort as he cradled the tiny tin with his long fingers.

He fumbled with it at first, struggling to open it, but soon he was shoving several pecans into his mouth and chewing, his eyes still fixed on me.

I couldn't help it. I grinned, refusing to glance over and see if any of the monsters were watching me.

Seraph ate a few more pecans before looking down at the tin, then back up to me. He carefully closed it, and when he threw it back toward me, I heard the rattle of several nuts still in there. I went still when he grunted a single word.

"Merra."

"He said, *Share*." Gloam told me, stepping up to my side.

But when he clapped a gentle hand on my shoulder, the peaceful moment was broken. Seraph went wild, snarling and thrashing in his cage, long arms reaching through the bars toward me.

Gloam released me and stepped back quickly, but it was too late. Seraph's moment of lucidity was gone. He screamed in fury and flung himself against the bars, alternating between straining for me with long fingers and swiping redundantly at the beasties surrounding me.

I heard Aury's soft voice. "We shouldn't touch Lilac."

That was fine with me. I didn't particularly like being touched when I hadn't explicitly allowed it. But a tiny tendril of guilt curled through me when Gloam said, his voice devastated, "I'm sorry. I didn't think—"

"It's fine." I shook my head and took a step back, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in my gut as Seraph devolved back into a savage, snarling, mindless animal. "It's... He made progress at least."

"He did," Edin said enthusiastically and shot me a wide, fanged grin. "You are his salvation, Lilac the human. If anyone can get him out of that cage for good, it will be you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The beasties all started trying to speak to Seraph in the days that followed.

He alternated between his usual screaming and thrashing in pain, and rare moments of calm lucidity where he actually spoke back. They were always short, stilted answers, and Gloam said he was still speaking in a muddled mix of many monster languages, the words all tangling together, never more than a few in one language at a time.

Even though I had never been a big talker, and even though he hadn't spoken any English or indicated that he could still understand it, I forced myself to talk to him while I guarded him at night. I was a fairly awkward person, especially as they were one-sided conversations, so it was difficult at first. I talked about my whittling. I talked about my plants and tending to the crops. I talked about the day-to-day activities of the raiders, running through all the jobs that kept the camp going in my head and listing them out.

Surface-level stuff. Unimportant stuff, because it didn't really matter what I was saying, and I wasn't going to talk about myself in detail while raiders were up on the wall keeping watch, and my voice might carry in the quiet stillness of the Wastes at night.

He'd seemed to understand me before, but that had been before his human side died. He never outright indicated that he could understand me, but my talking kept him quiet at least. He'd watch me, sitting right up against the closest wall of the cage, long gangly legs crossed and his head resting between two bars, temples pressing into the metal.

Maybe it should've unnerved me, how closely and unwaveringly he watched me every night. But it didn't. Often, I found myself staring back as I spoke, my whittling knife and the figurine forgotten in my lap.

I started bringing him food again, even though Gloam was now giving him a mix of fruit and vegetables every day. No more meat. But he still always dug into the bag and let out his pleased little snarl as he bit into whatever I'd brought him. I tried to mix it up, to give him other things seeing as he was already getting fresh produce now. Nuts, flatbread, blocks of crunchy uncooked ramen noodles that Ghost always brought back from the raider market.

He always shared the tin of pecans with me, eating half before carefully closing the lid and tossing it back. He'd watch me intently until I had dragged it closer, unhooked my mask and started eating them, letting out his pleased snort when I did.

I found myself smiling at him a few times when he made that sound. At first he'd cocked his head like it confused him, because realistically, when was the last time anyone had actually smiled at him? But the last time I had done it while popping a pecan into my mouth, he had snorted and hesitantly stretched his already wide mouth even wider, baring all his sharp teeth at me in a monstrous version of a grin.

It had actually made me laugh, which caused him to let out a bark before he huffed a snorting, wheezy sound. I liked to think he'd laughed too.

Even though his moments of quiet lucidity were still rare during the day, I started feeling hopeful. He was improving. It frustrated me when I sat out with Gloam and Aury while the former tried to speak to Seraph and hurriedly translated everything for me, with Aury interjecting every now and then for the words he said in the rycke's language. The beasties kept the conversations with him light—easy. Nothing about the military or Mary or what had happened to him.

They asked him about food. They asked him how he was feeling that day—his answer was always the same. *I don't know*. It made my throat close up every time he said it, because he said it so often I recognised the short, guttural phrase without needing it to be translated.

One night as I sat there watching him from the top step of the RV, my gut cramped with the overwhelming urge to go up to the cage. He was picking through the tin of pecans carefully with long fingers, selecting the best ones to eat—or maybe selecting the best ones to leave for me—and he just looked so... alone. Hunched over in the centre of his cage, long legs crossed and covered by the blanket he had haphazardly pulled over his lap while he ate. His head was bowed as he focused on the tiny tin in his hands, all his eyes tight with concentration and lips thinned over his jutting teeth.

My gaze drifted over him. Nothing about him was typically pleasing to look at by human standards, but I liked the way he looked. He was lean, but the strength was evident in his long, rangy body. I could remember the unusual texture of his skin from the few times I'd gotten to touch him. Tough but still smooth. Warm when he wasn't freezing to death from the snow. Unusual. I liked it.

Some of his eyes were strangely beautiful. There was one in the centre of his forehead, almost like a third eye, that was big and tipped on its side, pure black, but sometimes I thought I'd seen tiny splashes of colour in it when it reflected the light from the lantern.

The ones that I suspected had been his human eyes were the softest, and they still blinked and moved together, unlike all the others, which swivelled and blinked independently.

I couldn't really see much of any one type of monster in him. Not that I knew what other kinds of monster DNA he'd had injected into him besides Aury's and Edin's—and a vint, whatever that was—but he obviously didn't have Edin's lavender skin or Aury's prominent black veins. He didn't have horns or hair or wings or a tail, but I supposed that wasn't how it worked. It wasn't like they could've isolated the parts they liked and somehow forced the same parts of his body to change into them. He was a melting pot, as Wyn had called him, all the different monsters mingling together, altering him, turning him into something new. Something completely unique.

As I watched him, the urge to go to him, to just be near him, didn't fade, but before I could make yet another stupid decision, Seraph's head jerked up from the tin of pecans. He went perfectly still, so I did too. All his eyes swivelled toward the dark forest beside us.

I heard the quiet rustle from within the trees just as he did, and he let out a warning bark as I stood up and quickly shrugged out of my coat, because it had proven cumbersome the last time beasties attacked us. Unsheathing my machete, I walked around the cage to stand between it and the forest, so I could try and stop whatever was in there from getting to Seraph.

He let out another bark, more panicked this time, but I ignored him as I tried to peer into the darkness between the trees. I went still with shock when a vaguely human-looking face peered back from the darkness. It was lower to the ground, and smaller. Was it... a child?

Before I could even blink, something rushed out and lunged at me far faster than I had anticipated. But it wasn't a child—it was a beastie. A big one. And on the end of its huge, bug-like body was a horrifyingly humanoid face with a mouth that began to gape open wide into a black void.

I slashed with my machete and darted to one side, still trying to stay in front of the cage. Something long and thin darted into the space where I'd just been standing, and I realised grimly that the thing had a tail and a stinger, like a scorpion.

As Seraph snarled in panic and rage behind me, the beastie scuttled around on its six segmented legs, like it didn't know which direction to go. A long, thin black tongue curled out of its gaping mouth to taste the air. Before it could make its decision, I lunged closer and sliced it off.

The thing hissed, frantically scrabbling back, its stinger jabbing wildly into the air, again and again, so that I had to keep jerking back to avoid it. While it was stunned, I had one brief second to glance up at the wall to see if the raider up there had noticed what was happening. My eyes locked onto a tall, rangy body standing very still, clearly staring down at us.

Then they turned and walked away.

I clenched my jaw hard, but I didn't have time to think about it anymore. The monster had started scuttling closer to Seraph's cage, having obviously decided to go for the prey it deemed more vulnerable. Which he was—he was trapped in there, and the cage wasn't big enough to let him avoid that long tail and stinger.

Bristly legs wriggled frantically between the bars, the monster trying to get inside to get to Seraph. He snarled and lashed out with a long arm, making my chest clench with fear for him when the stinger narrowly avoided his hand.

When the stinger jabbed again, coming terrifyingly close to his face, he barked in panic and scrambled back, his weaker ankle slipping out from under him and sending him thudding to the floor of the cage.

I sprinted behind the monster and brought my machete down on the base of its tail, hacking again and again, jerking back to avoid the worst of the thick brown blood that spurted from the wound. But its hide or shell was tough—brittle but hard. It cracked under the impact of my knife, but it was taking a long time to cut fully through.

I was sweating as I hacked again, but then the thing hissed and swung its stinger around toward me, missing me only because its tail was half hanging off its backside now, its movements slower and weaker. I sliced through two of its back legs, cutting them clean off and making its fat body slam into the ground and tip toward me. Using the momentum, I dug my knife into the side of its underbelly and heaved, my arms shaking as I tried to drag it away from Seraph's cage.

Its bleeding tail slashed frantically as its remaining legs wriggled in the air. The mouth on that human-like face gaped even wider, the stump of its

missing tongue spurting blood over the shiny, pale skin as it tried to dart out.

I managed to get it several feet away from the cage. When I heard something snap in its wildly lashing tail, I yanked my machete out of its side and lifted it over my head, bringing it down with all the force in my body to hack at the bleeding tail again. It went limp when it was only hanging on by a thread, the stinger thudding onto the snow, which immediately began to melt with a hiss.

My blade was stuck, and I had to place a boot on the monster's side to pull it free. Its bristly legs scrabbled frantically, catching on my pants, but the moment I stumbled back as my machete jerked free, I lifted it again and sliced into the centre of the monster's face. It only went halfway through, and my blade got stuck again as the creature's body seemed to deflate in death and its remaining legs all curled up.

Arms trembling, sweating, I heaved the dead monster farther away from Seraph's cage and toward the forest. My teeth clenched hard as I strained to pull my machete free, the momentum when it finally came loose making me stumble back several steps as I panted.

Seraph was snarling with rage behind me, back in another manic episode from the attack, throwing himself against the bars. I didn't move for long moments, staring hard into the forest, waiting to see another freakishly human-like face peering back at me from the darkness.

When nothing happened, I let out a slow breath. Seraph went quiet when my boots crunched in the snow as I turned to see if he was alright, and I realised with a jolt that I was too close to his cage.

I turned in an instant to lunge away before he realised, but long fingers gripped my collar and yanked me back before I could get out of reach.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I let out a grunt as my shoulders banged hard into the metal bars.

My machete was still in my hand as Seraph's fingers curled around my throat, so long that it felt like they wrapped all the way around. I clenched my jaw, staring into the darkness, knowing I should lop off his arm before he could tighten his grip and choke me to death. He'd tried before.

But he didn't. He didn't... seem to be trying to kill me this time. His other arm slunk through the bars, and I froze in shock when it wrapped around my middle and pinned me back against the cage.

My fingers flexed around the hilt of my blade. For some reason, I was... hesitating. Waiting to see what he would do before I had to hurt him to get away. Which was perhaps the weakest, stupidest moment of my life. He was still juiced up from the beastie attack, his body trembling with adrenaline behind me.

I slowly looked down, as much as the hand around my throat would allow, to stare at Seraph's rangy, dark arm circling my middle. There were streaks of brown blood over my clothes, and I could feel splashes of it on my face.

He wasn't moving. Just pinning me against the bars.

I felt him snuffle at my ponytail, disturbing strands, his breath ghosting over the back of my neck. The space between the bars of his cage was almost wide enough to fit his head through, and with my head pinned, the hard metal digging into the back of my skull, he was able to dip his face to my neck.

More snuffling, and all I could picture were those sharp teeth, but I still wasn't reaching up to slice off an arm or jab my machete back into his face. I couldn't move, but it wasn't fear pinning me in place.

Seraph let out a low, hoarse whine, and then he was... nuzzling at the bend of my neck. The arm around my middle shifted until his huge hand was on my chest, fingers splayed out over both pecs. The thumb on the hand around my throat had been pressing in just below my earlobe, but then it moved, slowly stroking the sensitive skin.

I couldn't help it. I shivered.

“What are you doing, Seraph?” I asked in the calmest voice I could manage.

He whined again, lower, rubbing his face against my shoulder. The hand on my chest shifted yet again, and when a finger glided over my nipple, I clenched my teeth and swallowed against the light pressure on my throat.

My eyes darted to the dead monster. A big pool of brown blood had seeped out around the severed tail. One of the legs I had sliced off its body was still twitching.

Was Seraph... thanking me? For protecting him?

I didn't let myself jump when low words rumbled from him in an unknown blend of languages, vibrating against my skin. Could he not remember English at all?

“I think you can understand me,” I said, staring at nothing while this caged beastie nuzzled at me. “Can you?”

He said something short and brisk in response: “*Shi.*”

I had no idea what it meant, but I assumed it could have been a yes.

I wanted to test it.

“Are you going to hurt me?”

“*Dak.*”

That was different to his previous answer. The question was whether it had been a no.

I exhaled a slow breath. “Can you control yourself?”

His face paused against my shoulder.

“*Shi,*” he rumbled, then added a long string of words in a stilted, hoarse stream.

“Can you remember any human language?” I swallowed again, part of me unable to believe I was going to give this beastie an English lesson while he had me pinned against his cage. But it seemed to at least be keeping him calm.

Another jarred tumble of words that meant nothing.

I racked my brain, trying to think of a way to at least lock down the basics.

“You're... aware of what's happening to you, right? Yes?”

He let out a growl that stiffened my spine. “*Shi.*”

“You're in a cage.”

“*Shi.*”

“The military did things to you. They put you in there.”

A rabid snarl. His hands tightened on me, making my breath hitch as his fingers pressed into my neck and the hand on my chest pinned me harder against the bars.

“*Shi*,” he snarled, then said something else in a furious voice.

“They called you Seraph.”

A low whine, and his face was back to rubbing against my shoulder.

“*Shi*. Sssuhr—eph.”

I was fairly confident *shi* meant yes at this point. But I wanted to make absolutely sure.

Moving slowly in case it startled him, I lifted the hand not gripping my machete and held up four fingers. “Am I holding up four fingers?”

“*Shi*. *Kal*.”

I dropped one, making it three. “Am I holding up two fingers?”

“*Dak*. *Hiri*.”

The hand on my chest slid off, and I stared as Seraph’s spindly fingers tangled with mine. He tucked in another of my fingers and said, “*Jol*.”

Then he lifted it back up, so I was holding up three again. “*Hiri*.”

He lifted another, making it four. “*Kal*.”

“Okay.” I tried to ignore the strange way my body was reacting to Seraph’s long fingers curled around mine. His snarly breaths rasping against my neck. “*Shi* means yes. *Shi*—yes.”

“*Shi*.”

“Say yes. Yes.”

Seraph was silent for a few moments. His face pressed harder against my shoulder, and a shiver raced down my spine when I felt the rasp of sharp teeth through my shirt.

“Y-y-yes.” The word came out distorted and hesitant.

My mouth twitched into a tiny smile behind my mask. “And now no. *Dak*—no.”

Another long pause. “N-no.”

And then he said another word unprompted, rasping it into my neck as his fingers trailed down my throat. “L-Lie—*lack*.”

My gut clenched. I held perfectly still and cleared my throat, my pulse jumping when my Adam’s apple pressed against his palm. “Yes. I’m Lilac.”

Seraph rumbled a low noise and spouted off a long string of foreign words, but I heard my name in there—stilted and different from all the other sounds.

He was still holding me captive against the cage. He'd let go of my hand and looped his arm back around my middle at some point. I was still gripping my machete tight in my right hand, even though I knew that I wouldn't be able to use it on him.

And if I was being perfectly honest... I was fairly sure I could have extricated myself from his hold, if I did it slowly and carefully. He was calm. He was talking. I didn't know why I wasn't doing it. Why I was just standing there letting him pin me to the bars with a hand around my throat.

"I want to help you, Seraph," I said steadily. "But we need to work on your control. They'll never let you out of the cage if you keep flying into fits of rage."

His fingers tightened around my throat as he let out a snarl, sending a faint bolt of panic down my spine. He bit out a string of angry words, his grip steadily tightening with his growing fury.

"Stop," I rasped. His hand loosened immediately.

"*Ka teyan*, Lie-lack." He was back to nuzzling my shoulder and neck, which should not have been... doing things to me.

I felt a huff of breath against my neck as he snuffled at my skin. His teeth rasped. The flat slits of his nostrils trailed higher, behind my ear. To my utter shock, my cock twitched when I felt wet heat slink over my earlobe and to the edge of my jaw.

"Lie-lack," he murmured again. The hand around my middle shifted, sliding down, making my belly clench.

I wasn't clueless—I could discern the rasp in his voice. And I knew I could have—should have—stopped him. He was moving slowly, giving me time. His fingers reached the hem of my shirt and halted, his body going very still behind me like the predator he was. Assessing his prey, gauging whether they were about to bolt.

When I didn't move, my heart pounding in my chest, Seraph's long fingers slipped under my shirt, making me shiver almost indiscernibly. But I knew he felt it—he let out a low, thrumming purr as his thumb trailed up the line of hair on my belly before encountering my piercing.

He paused, then snarled as his thumb rubbed over the metal barbell. And for some reason, that rabid sound made my cock lurch in my pants.

"Lie-lack," he rasped once more, his thumb and the hand still around my throat making my brain start to blank. "*Ka lora ton li*. Yes?"

It was a question. Possibly the most loaded question I'd ever heard, even if I didn't understand all of it. My cock was filling rapidly, betraying my body's reaction to the touch of this unstable, rabid monster. I licked my lips, my tongue touching the fabric of my mask, which was getting hot from my fast breaths.

I heard myself say, very quietly, "Yes."

I knew what I was agreeing to. I knew what he was asking me.

Seraph let out a snarling purr and rubbed his face harder against my shoulder. The hand under my shirt looped around my middle again, dragging me down in a rush as he knelt behind me. I landed hard on my ass, chest rising faster and my machete slipping from my loose fingers onto the snow. Seraph's dark knees appeared in my periphery between the bars to frame my hips.

His hand still lightly clutching my throat, he slipped one long finger under the fabric of my mask. My breath caught a split second before it pushed into my mouth, so long that the tip slid to the back of my tongue and almost made me gag. My throat relaxed instinctively, body going hot and cold all over as Seraph started fumbling with the fly of my pants.

I didn't know if some part of him remembered how to undo pants, or if it was just luck, but he got the button loose. The zipper was forced down as he buried his big hand inside my underwear, and my breath escaped me in a hard rush when he gripped my cock.

It wasn't a particularly gentle touch, and it just made me even harder. My head was locked back against the bar, held in place by the hand around my throat and long finger sliding over my tongue. I was breathing fast around it, and I couldn't hold back my shudder when the hand in my pants moved lower, fingers squeezing my sac.

I stared up at the dark sky, unable to believe that this was happening. But my thighs jerked open wider, legs splayed, when Seraph purred against my neck and dipped his hand even lower.

My body jolted when a fingertip pressed hard against my hole. I clenched my teeth to stop any sound escaping me. My eyes darted to the top of the wall looming above us. Seraph's cage was tucked into the treeline, butting up right against the base of the wall, and we were around the far side closest to the forest. But if anyone peered down and looked hard enough, they'd be able to see *something*. If they'd even returned after leaving me to fight off a monster alone, that was.

In that moment, I found it very hard to care. Seraph was still pressing his finger hard against my hole, and my cock bucked with a burst of pre-cum at the firm pressure.

He snarled, hand sliding back up to run his fingertips through the wetness on the tip of my cock. When he felt my prince albert, his long body shuddered behind me. He shuffled as close as he could from behind the bars, and my eyes flared when I felt something stiff pushing into my back.

His hand pulled free from my pants, leaving me panting and trembling no matter how hard I tried to suppress it. When he lifted his hand and his long, mottled black and pink tongue appeared in the corner of my eye to lick his fingers clean, a tiny sound escaped me despite the way my teeth bit down on the digit in my mouth.

“Lie-lack,” he rasped again, slowly sliding his finger free from between my lips. “Yes?”

“Yes,” I said quickly. *Fuck. Yes.*

His long tongue wound around his fingers again, getting them slick. My gut clenched in anticipation, and my breath shuddered out of me when his hand burrowed back into my underwear.

One long, thin finger slid into my ass without any preamble. My head tipped back against the bars in supplication, body going lax even as I clenched around the intrusion. Jesus, it was so far inside me. I tried to control my breathing, but it burst out of me in a rush when he started moving his finger in and out, the palm of his hand rubbing over my sac.

I wished I could spread my legs wider, but the crotch of my pants was already stretched to its limit. I panted, clutching fistfuls of snowy grass, and looked down to see the flex of his rangy arm as he fucked me with his finger.

When he slid another inside, my cock jerked with a gush of pre-cum. He was thrusting them slowly, purring against my neck as the tip of his long tongue danced over my earlobe.

“Faster,” I heard myself pant.

He snarled, the stiff length against my back jerking. When he acquiesced, my entire body melted, tingles racing up the back of my neck and over my scalp. My eyes rolled back as he started sliding his fingers in and out faster and faster, his breathing heavy against my neck.

Oh fuck. I shoved down the moan that tried to rise from my throat. Lifting a hand, I fumbled to push Seraph’s finger back into my mouth under

my mask so I'd have something to suck on. Something to keep me quiet, because sounds travelled easily out here.

I vaguely wondered if he could remember human anatomy, because his fingertips were rubbing over my prostate with unerring accuracy. I didn't dwell on it for long though, instead deciding to just appreciate the relentless pressure, the steadily growing knot of pleasure in my core, making my sac tighten and my cock pulse with pre-cum.

I was breathing forcefully through my nose as I sucked on the finger in my mouth, but then my lips went slack to let out a hard breath as a rush of intense pleasure pulsed from my prostate and made my hips strain up. My ass was wet and freezing from the snow, but the rest of my body was hot—sweating, Seraph's skin heating up against my back and his tongue so warm as it danced over my earlobe and the side of my neck.

Then that tongue slunk lower, dipping into the hollow of my collarbone before curling under my shirt. Jesus Christ, it was longer than I'd thought. When the very tip of it flicked my nipple, I let out a choked sound around the finger resting on my tongue and started to shake.

He wasn't touching my cock, but it rubbed against the waistband of my underwear as my hips jerked wildly. The friction from the warm, damp fabric was enough, and my limbs seized up as I started to come.

My head ground back against the cage bar, hands shooting out to clutch Seraph's knees as my hips strained up with every hot spurt of cum from my cock. I didn't make a sound, biting down on the finger in my mouth to keep quiet, but my breaths were ragged as I struggled to take in enough air from the intensity of it.

When my body finally sagged back against the bars, Seraph purred into my neck. His tongue gave my nipple a final swipe, making me jolt, before it slunk out from under my shirt and back into his mouth. He slid his long fingers free and curled his palm around my throbbing nuts, squeezing gently and making me jolt again with a weak aftershock.

"Lie-lack," he rasped into my neck, slipping his finger out of my mouth and from under my mask to grip my throat again—lightly, gently. "*Ka lora ton li.*"

I vaguely recognised it as the same thing he'd said earlier, but I was too dazed as I panted and stared up at the dark sky.

Seraph had just furiously fingered me to orgasm. The monster in the cage had made me come.

My throat bobbed against his palm as I swallowed weakly. Seraph chuffed and gave my earlobe a final lick before he released me. I didn't move at first, trembling with the intense adrenaline rush from the beastie attack and... what had just happened. Eventually, I grasped my abandoned machete and rose unsteadily to my feet. Seraph didn't try to stop me as I walked slowly to the RV, but I could feel his many eyes on my back. I could hear the low thrumming purr—a new sound from him—coming from the cage.

When I turned and thumped down hard onto the top step, automatically picking up my whittling knife, I stared at him. I knew my eyes were still wide and dazed from what had just happened, but Seraph looked calm as he watched me back. In fact, he almost looked *smug*, pleased with himself, as he stretched his wide mouth into his monstrous version of a grin.

I found myself letting out a huff of laughter, my own mouth tipping up into a smile behind my mask.

CHAPTER THIRTY

I was still in a state of mild disbelief when the sun rose behind the thick bank of grey clouds, lightening the sky.

The seat of my pants was still damp from sitting in the snow, but the wet patch was hidden beneath my coat, which I'd zipped right up to hide the lines of crusted white cum staining my black shirt.

Seraph had fallen asleep a couple of hours after the... incident. Before he'd grabbed his blankets and settled down under them, I'd found my eyes drifting down his body. To between his legs.

I'd definitely felt something hard and phallic against my back, but there was only a smooth, slightly raised mound there. Like the old dolls rotting away in toy stores in the Wastes. There had to be something wrong with me, because even the sight of just that—no discernible genitals—had made my spent cock twitch in my pants.

Seraph had seemed to fall into a deep, peaceful sleep, so I'd quietly started whittling once my hands stopped trembling. The figurine of him was almost finished, but I already had an idea for another once it was done.

When Ghost and Rig appeared around the corner of the wall, Seraph let out a snuffle under his mound of blankets and lifted his head, blinking blearily. He snarled once in warning, but it was halfhearted at best, and he still seemed calm as he sat up and pushed the blankets into his lap. His mouth opened impossibly wide in a yawn, displaying all his sharp, jagged teeth.

"Morning," Rig said cheerfully when they reached me. He'd been much happier since Seraph started talking—improving. And since he got his big beastie back in his room every night, instead of out here in the RV with me. "How was guard duty?"

"Oh my god," Ghost said shakily before I could answer. When I looked at him, his wide blue eyes were fixed on the severed monster legs and the very edge of the carcass just visible beyond Seraph's cage.

"Beastie attack. We're fine." I said flatly, pocketing my whittling stuff and standing up with a stretch. I was stiff from sitting still in the cold, and I made sure my face remained blank as my hole twinged.

But the reminder of that creature lurching out from the forest made me frown up at the camp wall. Keen was up there now, his figure shorter and slimmer than the tall raider I'd seen purposefully walk away as I was fending off a monster.

I was pretty sure I knew who it had been.

I didn't bother telling Ghost and Rig. There was no point.

"Why are you out here?" I asked instead. It came out more bluntly than I'd intended, but Rig wasn't fazed. Probably used to me.

He grinned at me under his mask. "Just wanted to come and see how you were after another long night. And take you to breakfast."

He didn't voice the unspoken part of that sentence—*and make sure you actually eat.*

I nodded once and looked over at Seraph. He was watching us in silence, and I could have sworn his eyes were dimmed with something like sadness. My chest tightened.

"Is Gloam coming out?" I asked, because I didn't want to leave Seraph alone. There might have been more of those things in the forest, even though the rest of the night had been quiet.

Rig nodded and started walking back to the wall. "Yeah, he's coming out in a little while with Aury to talk to Seraph."

I reluctantly followed him and Ghost, watching Seraph until we rounded the corner and the cage disappeared from view. I heard him let out a single morose chuff when he couldn't see me anymore.

I'd eat and sleep, then go back out there, I decided as I followed Rig and Ghost in silence, Rig slinging his arm around his friend's shoulders and chatting about some little contraption he was cobbling together. I wasn't paying attention, realising there were a couple of other things I had to do before I could go back out to Seraph. But I didn't want to leave him for long. It felt wrong to, after what had happened.

I didn't want him to think I hadn't liked it. Because I had.

Before I could stop it, I wondered if it would happen again.

My stomach twisted a little as I wondered if he would tell Gloam and Aury. Not because I was embarrassed or ashamed, but because I was pretty sure they would get protective and try and stop me going out there. Telling me it was too dangerous to get close to him, that it wasn't wise to... form that kind of attachment to a monster who might never get better. Who might never get to step foot outside of his cage again.

I followed Rig and Ghost into the diner to collect my breakfast. I knew they wouldn't expect me to stay here and eat with them, because they wouldn't do that either. Ghost would take his back to his room, Rig joining him or going to his own room to eat in the company of his beastie.

Before I left, I sidled up to Anchor sitting at the counter and gave her a nod.

"Hey." She gave me a distracted smile, making notes on her scribbled timetable of watch duty shifts.

I'd been about to ask her who had been watching the south wall last night, but instead I let my eyes furtively scan the page. When I saw Tank's name, my mouth settled into a grim line behind my mask. My guess had been right, then.

Realising I had to give her some reason for coming over, I cleared my throat and asked, "Did you send Tank and Bishop out on a run?"

She chuckled, picking up the steaming mug on the counter filled with dark liquid. The scent of coffee filtered through my mask. "Yeah, and they actually brought back something good. Pretty sure it was only because they wanted it for themselves, though."

I preferred tea over coffee, so it didn't overly interest me. Giving a single nod, I turned and carried my bowl of oatmeal out of the diner. There was no point telling her about the beastie attack, because then she would ask why Tank hadn't alerted anyone. And there was evidently no point telling her that Tank had left his post, because her punishment didn't seem to have done anything.

So I'd ask him myself.

I went into my room and ate bites of oatmeal between stripping off my damp pants and cum-streaked shirt. After redressing, I tied my hair back up into a ponytail and carried my empty bowl over to the diner.

When I stepped back outside, I scanned the camp. Spotting Tank making his way down the motel steps, I started walking toward him.

His eyes widened when he saw me. He glanced around hurriedly, throat bobbing under his mask with nerves. He froze on the stairs, like he was considering running back up them, before I saw his shoulders stiffen and he slowly walked down to meet me.

I didn't say anything at first when I stopped in front of him. Just stared at him until he squirmed and looked away.

“Didn’t feel like helping me fight a monster last night?” I eventually asked in a soft voice.

He swallowed again, face growing pink above his grey mask. But then he cleared his throat and lifted his head, looking at me with hard eyes.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I quirked a brow but didn’t react otherwise. “Were you hoping it would kill me? One less mouth to feed?”

His face grew redder, and he glanced around again before taking a step closer, trying to intimidate me with his taller stature.

“You think I haven’t noticed Daisy giving you extras every fucking night?” he hissed. “I’d tell Anchor but there’s no point—she wouldn’t do anything. You’re her little lackey. Her *favourite*.”

“I’m not anything,” I said mildly.

“And that thing out there is still alive,” he continued with a sneer. “Guzzling down all our water. Do you know how many extra trips I’ve started having to make to keep the tanks filled?”

I’d gone very still at what he’d called Seraph. My fingers twitched for my machete, and I didn’t know if he noticed, but he went pale and took a step back.

Forcing down the rush of anger, I stepped closer and murmured, “Stay at your fucking post when you’re on watch.”

He flinched when I skirted past him to walk up the motel stairs, not bothering to wait for any response. By the time I stopped outside Rusty’s door and glanced down, he had vanished.

I felt only a brief flitter of nerves as I knocked on the door, because I would have to voice what had happened when I was only just coming to terms with it myself. That I’d had sex with Seraph. That I was attracted to him.

That I... thought I wanted him.

“It’s Lilac,” I said quietly after knocking, so she wouldn’t have to worry about getting completely dressed or putting on her mask.

She answered a few moments later, peeking around the door and opening it enough for me to slip inside. “Hey.”

She was still wearing her pyjamas—a grey sports bra and baggy pants. Her long red hair was loose and slightly wavy from the braid it always lived in.

“What’s up?” she asked, sitting back down on the unmade bed cross-legged.

I slowly walked over and sat beside her. I’d spent a lot of nights in this bed. Never sleeping—I didn’t stay after we’d finished fucking. That wasn’t what this had been about.

Still, my gut tightened with faint nerves as I looked over at Rusty. I didn’t want to hurt her.

“If I tell you something, will you keep it to yourself?”

Her fine brows twitched. “Of course.”

Exhaling, I leaned my forearms on my thighs and stared between my boots. I wondered how she would react to what I was about to tell her. Monsters scared her. I didn’t know if she’d understand.

“I’m... attracted to Seraph.”

There was nothing but silence for long moments. I could feel her staring at me in shock.

“You’re... attracted to him?” she asked slowly. “To *Seraph*?”

“Yes.” I lifted my head to look at her steadily. “I had sex with him.”

Her face jolted, blue eyes wide as she stared at me. “Holy shit.”

“I know we aren’t exclusive or even in a relationship, but obviously I needed to tell you.” I swallowed. “And I...”

When I trailed off, she blinked hard, some of the shock receding from her eyes. “Wow. Um... okay. I... Are you going to do it again?”

Yes. “I don’t know. But I think it’s probably not a good idea if you and I keep... I don’t know if he’d understand.” And it felt... wrong.

She was silent for a moment, before hesitantly saying, “Lilac, I’m not trying to... insinuate anything, but... *can* he understand?”

I stiffened in offense, my voice curt when I said, “Yes. He’s aware. Intelligent. He’s gotten better since he’s stopped having those injections. We... talked.”

“You talked,” she echoed, disbelief colouring her tone. She stayed out of the monsters’ way, so she probably hadn’t heard about it when he started speaking.

“Yes.”

“He can talk?”

I clenched my jaw. “Yes. I didn’t assault him, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“I’m not,” she said quickly. “I just... All he’s done is scream and try to get out of his cage.”

“He was in pain. He still is, I think, but... less so. The injections were making it worse. He’s calmer now. Thinking more clearly.”

Rusty was quiet for a moment, before softly saying, “That’s good.”

“He’s getting better.” My voice came out a little hoarse when I thought about Seraph chuffing at me in greeting. Picking through the tin of pecans with his long fingers, concentrating hard. Throwing the tin back to me to share. Peeling an orange, muttering about liking carrots the best.

When Rusty stayed quiet, I glanced over at her warily.

She gave me a tiny smile as she rested a hand on my back. “You have feelings for him?”

I stiffened, not knowing how to answer that. Not knowing what the answer was.

“I... guess.”

Rusty exhaled, reaching down to twine her fingers through mine atop my thigh. “Thank you for telling me. And you’re right. This isn’t—wasn’t a relationship. I’m not going to stop you... pursuing something with someone else.”

After a pause, she hesitantly asked, “Is that... what you want? To be with him?”

“No,” I said, a knee-jerk reaction, because was it even possible? I heard myself adding, “I don’t know. I don’t... I just wanted to tell you. It’s no one else’s business, but... it’s yours. It affects you.”

She huffed in amusement, squeezing my hand. “That’s sweet. You’re a good guy, Lilac. And it was good while it lasted, wasn’t it?”

My mouth quirked into a smile as I looked over at her. “Yeah. It was.”

It had been. Even though it had never been emotional between us, Rusty was an excellent fuck.

“Well, I can’t say that I... see the appeal.” She chuckled. “You know the monsters scare me. But especially him.”

“He’s getting better.”

“That’s good.” There was a pause, before she slyly asked, “What was it like?”

I exhaled, reaching up to scrub my face. I tried not to think too hard about him pinning me to the bars. His long fingers thrusting inside me. His tongue dancing over my neck and ear.

“Intense,” I said eventually.

“I bet.” After another pause, she cleared her throat. “I actually... There was something I wanted to talk to you about, as well.”

I glanced over at her with a brow raised. Her face was already pink, and she looked down at our linked hands. “I’ve, um... I’ve kind of been getting close to Nun.”

I went still. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She shot me a sheepish smile. “I’ve always had a bit of a crush on her.”

I let out a tiny huff of amusement at that. “Me too.”

She laughed, releasing my hand to give my shoulder a weak shove.

“Really?”

“Yeah. The crossbow’s hot.”

“The *crossbow*?” She rolled her eyes. “You’re the only person I know who would be attracted to someone because of their weapon. But... yeah. You’ve been... busy with Seraph, and we just started hanging out a little and... I don’t know. Maybe it’ll be nothing, but...”

“She’d be lucky to have you, Rusty.”

“Thanks, Lilac.” She leaned in to hug me, keeping it brief. “I hope it works out for you. Whatever you want to happen. And I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

“I know you won’t.” I stood up from the bed. “Let me know if you want me to put in a good word for you with Nun.”

She rolled her eyes. “Shut up.”

“I mean it.” I glanced back at her as I walked to the door, my mouth quirking into a teasing smile behind my mask. “I can tell her how good you are at—”

“Oh my *god*, Lilac.”

“Okay, fine.” I opened the door. “See you around, Rusty.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The smile slid off my face the moment I closed the door behind me. I had just one thing left to do before I made myself sleep for a while, even though my insides were straining to get back to Seraph.

Walking back down the stairs, I made my way to the far end of the motel, to Gloam and Rig's room. Because I wanted to ask Gloam what Seraph had said to me. I needed to know, the question burning in the pit of my stomach.

Ka lora ton li.

I suspected that it would probably reveal what had happened after, seeing as he'd immediately started touching me once I'd told him yes, but I wasn't embarrassed about Gloam and Rig finding that out, and I wasn't going to let them stop me seeing Seraph. I knew this camp better than the beasties. I knew people's schedules and when it was quietest. I could slip out the rarely used back entrance if they started guarding the main one, and once I was out there, I would just march up to Seraph's cage and refuse to let go of the bars.

They couldn't stop me seeing him.

When I got to their door and raised my hand to knock, a faint sound from inside made me freeze.

Then I heard Rig's voice, muffled through the door.

"Gloam, my breakfast is getting cold!"

He sounded entirely unbothered by that, though. In fact, he sounded delighted. Breathless.

"You can have it after, firebrand," I heard Gloam rumble back, his voice deep and sultry.

Okay, they were busy. I hurriedly backed away from the door and turned, spotting Aury's big wings over by the vegetable patch.

I started making my way over. He'd only be able to tell me if any of the words Seraph had said were in rycke, but it was something at least. I was too impatient to wait for Gloam and Rig to finish fucking. I needed to know.

I cleared my throat when I reached him so that he'd notice me. When he turned to me with a soft smile, I forced myself to say, "Good morning."

“Good morning. How was Seraph in the night?”

My gut twisted with lust, but outwardly I gave a single nod and said, “Good. He spoke some more.”

“Oh?” Aury’s black eyes flashed with interest.

“Yeah. I was wondering if you could tell me any of what he said. It was, uh, *ka lora ton li*.” Remembering the other short phrase I’d managed to pick up, I added, “And *ka teyan*.”

He’d said that after loosening his grip from my throat, when he’d been growing angry thinking about what the military had done to him.

Aury’s eyes dimmed. Disappointment settled over me when he shook his head. “I do not know any of those.”

“Okay,” I said quietly. “How about, uh... *shi* or *dak*? He said those too.”

The beastie’s face perked up. “*Shi* means yes in my tongue.”

That was what I’d thought, but I was glad to get the confirmation. “And *dak*?”

Aury shook his head. “No, I’m sorry. It sounds like it could be *isdernuc*, maybe. You could ask Edin. Or Gloam.”

I cleared my throat, taking a step back. “Gloam’s busy.”

Aury’s brows drew together for a second, before understanding dawned and he chuckled. “Ah. Well perhaps Edin can help. He just went into the diner with Hunter.”

I nodded, already turning to head to the diner. “Thanks.”

I could see the big purple monster through the diner windows as I approached. Hunter was beside him, accepting a few sticks of jerky from Bo, who clapped Edin on the shoulder and walked back to the kitchen.

When I stepped inside, two pairs of eyes swung over to me. The diner was empty except for them, though I could hear Bo and Daisy talking in the kitchen.

Coming to a stop at the counter a short distance away, I looked at Edin. “Can I talk to you?”

Hunter leaned an elbow on the counter, flinty eyes watching me as he chewed the piece of jerky hanging out of his snarled mouth. “What do you want to talk to him about?”

I quirked a brow. “Does he need your permission?”

Edin burst out laughing.

“He only wishes that he could ever boss me around like that. He is putty in my hands, human,” he told me cheerfully, palming Hunter’s nape and

jerking him closer. He didn't seem to notice—or care—how red the ex-soldier had gone. “What would you like to talk about?”

“Seraph said some more words when I was guarding him last night,” I said carefully, just as Danny and Wyn stepped into the diner.

The Soul Eater let out a little snorting huff for some reason. I barely spared him a glance before continuing.

“I asked Aury if they were in his language, and he said only one of them was. So I was wondering if some of them were in yours.”

“What did he say?” Edin asked with interest, slapping Wyn on the back when he came to a stop beside him and crossed his arms. I could feel the Soul Eater watching me from the depths of his hood.

Danny had slid into the seat beside Hunter, and the two of them were laughing together about something. I was glad they weren't actively listening, because it was bad enough having the Soul Eater here staring me down judgementally.

“He said *shi*, which Aury said means yes in his language. And also *dak*.”

Edin's face brightened. “Yes, *dak* is *isdernuc*. It means no.”

That was what I'd thought. “He said some numbers as well.”

I recounted them as Danny peered over with interest. Hunter watched me as he chewed his jerky, eyes cool.

“I do not know those.” Edin shook his head.

“He also said, uh... *ka teyan*. And *ka lora ton li*.”

I probably mangled the words a little, because Edin's brows drew into a frown. The Soul Eater huffed and cocked his head.

“I only know *ka*. It means *I* in *vint*,” Edin said. “But the rest are not my language or any I speak.”

I tried not to feel too disappointed.

“Okay. Thanks.” I turned to leave, but Edin's rumbling voice stopped me.

“You should ask Gloam. He speaks many languages. Most. He will probably know.”

I nodded, not bothering to voice the fact that I wouldn't be able to ask Gloam for a while. The urgency to know still burned in me, making me consider going and banging on their door anyway to interrupt them. I'd seen Rig's ass before. I didn't care if I saw it again.

“I will happily speak with Seraph,” Edin told me before I left the diner. “Let me know if he says anything else while you are guarding him.”

Nodding again, I pushed open the door and stepped outside, still trying to decide whether I could be enough of an asshole to interrupt Gloam and Rig fucking. The urge to know what Seraph had said to me burned in my gut. What he'd said before he'd...

I felt the Soul Eater's cold, eerie presence on the nape of my neck, making my shoulders want to hunch. Goosebumps threatened to prickle, but I kept on walking without acknowledging him lurking at my back.

"Guarding," he drawled, his distorted voice affecting me more than I cared to admit. "Is that what it's called?"

I froze, before calmly turning to face him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Wyn's shoulders rose in a tiny shrug as he crossed his arms. His tone was sly when he said, "Just wondering if all humans refer to getting finger-fucked by a rabid splice as *guarding*."

I stiffened.

"You were spying on us?" I asked, unable to keep the cold anger out of my voice.

Wyn huffed. "Don't flatter yourself, human. I heard a commotion and went out to check. Then I saw Seraph pinning you against the bars of his cage, so I decided to wait and see what would happen. Whether you'd need me to help you, seeing as you weren't even using your little knife. You're welcome, by the way."

"I don't need your help," I said flatly, staring into his dark hood. A weak tendril of guilt curled through me. He'd helped Seraph. He hadn't been unkind to him. But I was still wary of him.

Plus, he'd watched us. Hadn't figured the Soul Eater would be a voyeur.

Wyn snarled. "You'd be dead already without my *help*, human."

"I thanked you for that. I don't need it again."

"Evidently not," he sneered. "It seems you've found another way to calm him, haven't you?"

"And you have a problem with that?" I shot back. "That's a little hypocritical."

"I couldn't care less who any of you humans fuck," he snapped. His voice turned sly again when he added, "I was simply making an observation. I'll be sure to leave you alone the next time you are *guarding* the monster in the cage."

"You do that."

“One more thing.” He stepped closer, and I resisted the urge to back away. “I can tell you what he said. But I suppose you’re not interested in my help, are you?”

I gritted my teeth. “What did he say?”

I could hear the smirk in his voice. “What was that, human? You *do* want my help?”

“I don’t have time for this,” I told him flatly. “Tell me or don’t. I can just go and ask Gloam.”

“You don’t need to ask the aytorin,” he said airily. “And he is busy fucking his human. I can tell you right now.”

“Then do it.”

He shrugged a shoulder and raised a hand to inspect his blackened fingertips. “I thought you didn’t—”

“You’re wasting my time.”

Wyn went very still. His hand lowered as he took another step closer until he was looming over me. Tendrils of cold air seemed to creep from him, making my skin prickle.

“Watch how you speak to me, human.”

“I’m not scared of you,” I told him, staring up at him blankly.

He snarled, fingers twitching by his sides. “Then you’re a fool. I could kill you without lifting a finger, if I wanted. I could—”

“Wyn!” Danny’s voice cut across to us as he emerged from the diner, narrowing his eyes in suspicion at the Soul Eater. “What are you doing?” he asked sternly.

The Soul Eater stilled, then huffed petulantly.

“Nothing, my sweet,” he called back, trying to make his tone innocent, before his hood turned to face me again. “The numbers all came from different languages. But you don’t care about those, do you?”

I said nothing, watching him in silence.

“*Ka teyan* is a blend of vint and ashara. But together it means *I’m sorry. Loosely.*” Wyn paused, and I could feel him smirking again. “*Ka lora ton li* means *I want only you.* Congratulations.”

With that, he turned and stalked off to meet Danny, who was approaching us hurriedly with a worried look on his face.

I refused to outwardly react as I made my way to the motel, but my heart had sped up.

I want only you.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

My stomach was a little jittery as I made my way out into the Wastes later that day, after sleeping for a few hours and doing a shift on the wall. I'd been on the north side for it, so I hadn't been able to watch Seraph from above, but when I'd emerged from the hatch I'd peered down and seen Gloam and Aury out there, sitting side by side a short distance from the cage.

As I made my way along the base of the wall, I wondered if Aury—or Wyn—had mentioned to Gloam the words I'd recited to them. What Seraph had said. If they had, Gloam would no doubt have something to say about it.

But when I rounded the corner and the two beasties looked up, he just gave me a kind smile and gestured me over. As I walked toward them, I looked over at Seraph. He was on his knees gripping the bars of the cage, and when our gazes met he let out his little chuff. I smiled, hoping he'd be able to see it in my eyes.

I came to a stop a few feet away from the two monsters, because I didn't want to get too close and risk Seraph getting angry and protective again.

"He has been a little less responsive today," Gloam told me, then chuckled. "Honestly, he seems to be in a bit of a bad mood. Not mindless with pain—just grumpy."

He didn't look grumpy anymore, his eyes lively as they danced over my frame. His long fingers tightened around the bars, making my gut clench with arousal as my gaze fixed on them.

When I forced myself to look away and back at the beasties, Aury shot me a tiny smile. I cleared my throat and unzipped my coat to pull out the hemp bag.

"Brought you some things." I addressed Seraph directly, because we couldn't keep talking about him like he wasn't here. He understood English. He'd proven that the night before.

He chuffed again, sitting up straighter on his knees as his eyes blinked and focused on the bag. He rumbled out a few words I didn't understand, but I caught my name at the end in the stilted way he said it—*Lie-lack*.

Gloam let out an incredulous chuckle. "He said, *Thank you, Lilac*."

My mouth curved into a wry smile under my mask, and I took a single step forward before stopping. I knew Gloam would make me use the pole, but... I wanted to touch him again. I wanted to be close to him. Surely he needed social interaction and contact at least occasionally. I knew what it was like to be so isolated—although I did it out of choice—that you stopped feeling like a person when you hadn't been touched by anyone for a while. I'd gone from constant skin-on-skin contact back in the city—more than I preferred—to absolutely none once I'd come out here. It was probably the only reason I'd said yes to Rusty when she approached me with her offer of a casual thing. I hadn't ever even seen her face—not that looks mattered much to me—and we'd barely spoken. But looking back now, I realised that my body had probably been starving. Not even necessarily for sex. Just for contact.

I wanted Seraph to have that, but it wasn't a purely selfless desire. I wanted to touch him.

He'd said he wanted me. Only me.

I wanted him too.

It had been turbulent and at times violent, but we had built up an intense bond without me even really noticing. Now, I forced myself to acknowledge the unusual desire to spend all my time with him. To just be in his presence, even if we were silent and not near each other. Even when he was lost in a fit of pain-filled anger. I hoped that my being here, even during those times, had given him some comfort. Had made him feel less alone.

I quashed the desire to walk up to the cage and hand him the bag myself, because I knew Gloam would have stopped me, and if he touched me, Seraph would lose it. I went and retrieved the pole from the RV, pausing to survey the space for the first time since that morning when Seraph had woken up in here.

The table had been destroyed, one of the beasties ripping the top off to slide the chain free from the warped leg. Blankets were strewn about everywhere from Seraph flinging them off to protect himself—and me—but other than that, it was largely intact. I already knew I would probably end up sleeping out here again, as long as I could convince Gloam that I wasn't falling into the same neglectful pattern as before. I just wanted to be out here. I didn't want the wall separating us, so that I couldn't see him. Keep him safe.

When I stepped back outside with the pole, Seraph perked up again, but his face dimmed when he saw it in my hand. He was smart—he knew that meant I wouldn’t be coming close to the cage. His eyes flickered over to the two beasties as he let out a disdainful huff, like he blamed them for our separation, which made me have to suppress a smile as I hooked the bag on the end and extended it to him.

Once he’d taken it, I set the pole down and perched on the top step of the RV to watch him eat. My gaze flickered warily to the far side of the cage, but the imprints I’d left—specifically the imprint of my ass—had been covered up by more snow in the night. That didn’t stop the memories bubbling to the surface though, making my hands clench into fists in my coat pockets as my cock twitched. His long, long fingers, in my mouth and inside me. The taste of his skin, warm and textured and earthy. His tongue slinking over my ear and neck.

I could feel myself getting hotter under my coat, so I was glad for the distraction when Gloam said, “I moved the dead mortik into the forest. Are either of you hurt?”

I assumed that was the species of monster that had attacked last night. When I looked over, the carcass was gone, along with the severed legs. The brown blood that had pumped out of the creature had been covered by more snow.

I shook my head. “Both fine.”

“Why didn’t the raider keeping watch alert anyone?” Aury asked softly, gazing over at me. “Mortiks are awful. I’m sorry you had to deal with it on your own.”

I shrugged. “It was fine. Quick.”

Gloam chuckled. “You are an interesting human, Lilac.”

At the sound of my name, Seraph’s head popped up as he crunched on some dried apple slices. He rasped out some words in his deep, guttural voice.

“He asks if you will be back out tonight,” Gloam told me.

My gut clenched with anticipation. Clearing my throat, I gave a single nod. “Yep. Same as every night.”

Except I was already pretty sure that tonight wouldn’t be the same.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

By the time Aury and Gloam finally got up to leave, it was already dark. I knew I'd have to go and get some dinner to avoid being hounded by Gloam or Rig, so I reluctantly stood from the top step of the RV and started to follow them.

"I'll be back out in a minute, okay?" I told Seraph, who made a disgruntled sound but stayed calm, sitting back on his heels as he gripped the bars.

When we got back into camp, Gloam clapped me on the shoulder before walking off toward his and Rig's room, but Aury paused and turned to face me with a tiny smile.

"You are good for him," he said quietly. "But please still be careful, Lilac. You shouldn't go near him. He is calm at the moment, but we have seen how quickly that can change."

I poked the gap in my teeth with the tip of my tongue and nodded.

"Part of me..." Aury's face grew pained before he looked down. "Part of me feels to blame. If he has some of me, that means he might have some version of the thing inside me. The thing that only wants to hurt others."

"That's not all it wants though," I reminded him. "It protects people as well. And if he does, that's not your fault. It's not his fault either. He's getting better."

Aury lifted his head to give me a grateful smile. "He is. It is wonderful to see."

I cleared my throat and stepped back. "I should go and get some dinner."

"Of course. I hope tonight is calmer for you." He gestured at the wall. "If anything happens, just shout. One of us will hear. We will come and help."

I nodded, already knowing that I wasn't going to do that. Not unless something showed up that was too big or strong for me to keep Seraph safe on my own, but I was pretty good at killing monsters. And people.

After Aury had walked off, no doubt to find Ghost, I went into my room to grab the lantern and my whittling stuff before heading to the diner. Daisy passed me a bowl of thick stew and the drawstring bag, the tin of pecans

rattling within. When I turned from the counter, I saw Tank sitting at one of the booths. Watching me.

I stopped and stared back, daring him to say something. After a few seconds he flushed and looked away, but I kept my gaze on him as I slowly walked out of the diner, knowing he'd be able to feel it.

I didn't linger in the camp any longer, making my way back into the Wastes. I smiled when Seraph chuffed in greeting at the sight of me.

"Hungry?" I asked as I automatically started walking toward the RV to get the pole. Then I stopped, eyes darting back to the wall and up to the top, where I could see a raider sitting on the edge. They waved down at me.

I remembered seeing Ghost's name down for tonight's shift on Anchor's spreadsheet. He had eyes like a hawk, and his anxiety would make him immediately run and tell the beasties if he saw me get near the cage.

Still I found myself slowly crunching through the snow to the far side of the cage, closest to the forest. Out of sight from the top of the wall.

Seraph twisted around to keep me in sight, shuffling on his knees to the closest side and gripping the bars. I stared at him, nerves fluttering in my belly. I didn't get nervous, so it felt strange. I wasn't afraid of him hurting me. This was... excitement, I realised. Anticipation over what was going to happen. Over getting to be close to him again.

Before stepping closer, I forced myself to quietly ask, "Are you feeling calm, Seraph?"

"*Shi*," he grated immediately, then stretched his mouth into his big grin, sharp teeth jutting.

I huffed in amusement and slowly started walking closer. He didn't move at first, watching as I set the bowl of stew and the drawstring bag down a couple of feet from the cage. I switched on the lantern, tucking it right into the corner where the cage sat against the wall so it was as hidden as possible from above.

As I took the last few steps closer, he shifted into a crouch so our faces were mostly level, his a little lower than mine. It made me realise just how tall he was—how long his body was. Far taller than the height stated for Luke Buckley on that military document, which was safely stowed away in my nightstand.

His long arms threaded slowly through the bars, making my stomach tighten, and then he was wrapping them around me and drawing me closer until I was flush against the side of the cage.

“Lie-lack,” he murmured hoarsely, nuzzling his face into my neck, sharp teeth scraping against the collar of my coat.

My gut clenched with want. Hesitantly, I reached through the bars and cupped the back of his smooth head. I couldn’t feel the texture of his skin through my gloves, but he was warm.

He released me briefly to burrow his arms under my coat, letting out a contented snarly sigh into my neck as he wrapped them back around me tight. My dick twitched when his big hands slipped under my shirt, sliding up my bare back, fingers so long that together they spanned the entire width of it and still overlapped.

“Lie-lack,” he rasped again into my neck, fingers gripping tighter.

I shuddered with pleasure when I felt the wet heat of his tongue slink over my Adam’s apple, making me swallow convulsively. But he didn’t try anything more, seeming content just to... hold me. It made my throat ache. I was right—he just needed contact. Touch. To know that he wasn’t so monstrous that no one wanted to touch him.

I wanted to touch him, so I did.

I ran my palm over the back of his head, down his neck. He let out that raspy purr against my throat, trying to burrow closer, the bars of the cage digging into his elbows.

I spanned the width of his shoulders, trailed my gloved hands down the top of his back. My cock was still getting hard, but I ignored it. I didn’t need more than this right now, and I didn’t think he did either. Besides, I didn’t think it would be a good idea to fall into that habit—of coming out here every night and doing something sexual with him. He just needed to be touched. To be close to someone. And he was still in the cage.

Plus, Ghost was sitting up on the wall. Even though we were tucked away right in the corner, out of sight, he’d hear any tiny sound. He noticed everything.

I didn’t want to pull away, but I knew my dinner would be getting cold in the snow, so I cupped the back of his head again, stroking his gnarled little ears with my thumbs, and said, “Do you want to eat?”

He let out a snarly sigh against my neck, but slowly pulled back and grumbled, “*Shi. Y-yes.*”

My mouth stretched into a grin as I took a step back, but Seraph’s hand shot out to grip mine—gently.

“Ta ryash ini.”

When I didn't react, he huffed and lifted his free hand to his mouth, miming chomping down on something before pointing at where I'd been standing before.

"*Ta ryash ini*," he repeated, then hesitantly said, "E-eat." He pointed at the ground again. "*Ini*."

My mouth twitched as I nodded. "I'll eat here."

He grunted with pleasure and released my hand. Before stepping back, I kicked away some of the snow so I'd have a clearer patch to sit in and my nuts didn't freeze off. Seraph sat perfectly still and watched me with unblinking eyes.

After giving him a tiny smile, I turned to retrieve our food and heard him moving in his cage. By the time I turned back, he was carefully feeding a blanket through the bars and laying it on the patch I'd tried to clear.

My chest tightened unbearably. Swallowing hard, I walked back and passed him his bag, then sat down on the blanket facing him, my legs crossed and knees digging into the bars so I could be as close as possible.

"Thanks," I said shortly, feeling uncomfortable with how much the gesture had moved me.

Seraph grunted, already distracted by the prospect of food as he dug into the bag. I smiled a little and looked down at my bowl of stew. It was already cold from sitting in the snow, but I unhooked my mask and stuffed it in my coat pocket to start eating.

Seraph pulled a peeled carrot from the bag and broke it in two, immediately handing me half. I took it and crunched down as he did, smiling at the snarly sound of pleasure he made.

He asked me something between bites, his guttural voice rising in inflection at the end, telling me it was a question. I swallowed my mouthful of carrot slowly, trying not to get disappointed over the fact that I couldn't understand him.

He said it again, pointing at the carrot in his hand, then the one in mine.

Taking a guess, I said, "Yes, I like carrot."

"Kkk-err-ot," he repeated slowly. Then all his eyes flashed with excitement and he leaned closer, babbling more words in a tangled stream that ended the same way. "Kerr-ot."

When I just stared at him in silence, he huffed and actually rolled his eyes at me, which was a surreal thing to see on someone with so many fucking eyes. I chuckled, and he let out that same wheezy snorting sound

that I'd thought might have been a laugh before. His human eyes scrunched up as his mouth stretched wider, and the sight of it made my throat close up.

We finished our carrot, and he watched me intently as I lifted my spoon and ate some cool stew. His hand was absently rooting through the bag, but it went still when I asked, "Do you want to try some?"

Eyes darting down to the bowl, he tried to shuffle closer.

"*Shi*. Y-yes." He paused, eyes tightening with concentration for a long moment, before he hesitantly said, "P-pleess."

My insides twisted with excitement. Before I could stop myself, I was leaning in to drop a brief kiss on his chin, feeling a totally foreign flutter in my stomach as Seraph let out a pleased snort.

Clearing my throat, I sat back and tried to get a spoonful of stew without any chunks of meat. As I lifted it to his mouth, I warned, "The gravy will be meaty. You might not like it."

He grunted, already leaning forward to scrape his teeth carefully over the spoon. His head cocked as he messily chewed the soft, cooked chunks of carrot, potato and celery. After swallowing, he rasped something.

I chuckled, eating another bite myself. "Didn't like it?"

His eyes scrunched, and he quickly rooted through the bag, chuffing in triumph when he pulled out another raw carrot. He spoke again, gesturing at the carrot in his hand then pointing at the stew.

"You prefer raw vegetables?" I guessed, pleased when his face lit up and he said, "Yes."

"Well, at least you're getting plenty of those now." I shovelled the stew into my mouth quickly, because it wasn't particularly pleasant when it was cold.

"Yes. *Dakna ronish*."

I smiled, already knowing what he'd said. The first words he'd ever spoken in front of me were burned into my brain.

"That's right. No more meat."

"Mmmeat," he repeated between bites of carrot, then fell quiet as he stuffed the rest into his mouth and reached back into the bag.

We finished eating in comfortable silence, until Seraph pulled out the small tin and carefully opened it, setting it down on his crossed ankles. I moved the bowl to the side and accepted the pecan he held out to me, affection warming my belly as he crunched down on one himself.

Once they were all gone, he closed the tin and put it back in the bag, which he slyly moved behind him as if it was his collateral to keep me close. I huffed in amusement and pulled my whittling stuff out of my coat pocket, shifting around to lean back against the bars.

He immediately stretched his arms through and wrapped them around me, tipping his face onto my neck. In my periphery, I could see his many eyes blinking as he stared at the items in my hands.

I'd brought the half-carved borolesh figure out with me, because the one of Seraph was done and I didn't like leaving anything unfinished. Plus, I wasn't sure how he would have reacted to a likeness of himself. I didn't know if he even knew what he looked like, or what it would trigger in him.

He chuffed in surprise and curled his long fingers around mine to take the figure. I wondered if he recognised the borolesh from Mary's, or his journey back here with Gloam and Rig. Maybe he'd even seen them in the forest since he'd been out here. They were still in there, though they didn't often come close to the camp.

"I told you about my whittling before, didn't I?" I asked as he brought the figure closer to his face to inspect it.

"Yes."

After a few more seconds, he handed it back to me and rubbed his face against my neck, seeming to be mindful of his teeth, because they didn't catch on my skin. He mumbled a few words that ended with my name, and the overwhelming desire to understand him burned in my gut.

But we were making good progress. He'd improved so much—more than I could have ever expected or hoped for. So as I whittled, we kept talking, and he kept repeating more words back to me in English, picking them up faster and faster.

When dawn started to approach, I put my knife and the figurine away, knowing I didn't have long until I'd have to move over to the RV before any of the other beasties came out.

Seraph hadn't moved an inch in the hours we'd sat here, still hunched over and holding me tight against the bars. I tipped my head back onto his shoulder, staring up at the lightening sky. Then I slowly turned my face into his neck, taking the opportunity to breathe him in properly while I wasn't wearing my mask.

My eyes slipped shut as Seraph's chest thrummed with a deep, raspy purr against my back. I knew I could have easily fallen asleep like that, but

obviously didn't let myself.

I tried not to think about the fact that this might be the closest we'd ever get.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

I waited until the very last minute I had to get up and move over to the RV. Before I did, I shifted around to face Seraph and dropped another kiss on his chin. There wasn't much space anywhere else on his face, but I didn't care.

"I have to go sleep for a while, but I'll be back out later," I told him, holding on to the bars either side of us while he clutched my wrists.

He snorted miserably but nodded—the first time I'd ever seen him do it. It was such a human gesture, but it looked odd on him.

"Yes, Lie-lack." He carefully tugged my coat sleeve down to expose my inner wrist, dipping his head to nuzzle me there. "*Ta exan a sssleep.*"

My mouth quirked.

"I promise I'll sleep." I cleared my throat, feeling awkward when I gruffly said, "I don't like leaving you."

Seraph rumbled some hoarse words, giving my wrist a tiny lick before carefully pulling my sleeve back up to shield my skin from the cold. Then he lifted his head and cocked it toward the camp wall, before giving me a sad grunt and releasing my wrists to sit back.

I knew what that meant. One of the beasties was coming.

He passed me the drawstring bag morosely, and I stuffed it in my coat pocket before picking up the bowl and standing. As I walked reluctantly toward the RV, I tried to kick snow over my footprints as I left them, hoping to disguise them a bit.

I had only just sat down on the top step and fixed my mask over my mouth when thick black smoke wove lazily through the air from over the wall. My jaw clenched, remembering my last encounter with the Soul Eater. I stared resolutely ahead at Seraph as his tall, hooded frame appeared in my periphery.

He huffed, crossing his arms. "And how was your night? As *stimulating* as the one before?"

Gritting my teeth even harder, I turned my head to stare coldly at him. "Is this all a joke to you?"

Wyn paused, actual offense stiffening his shoulders. He huffed again, this time in impatience.

“He is not a joke to me,” he rasped, gesturing at Seraph before muttering, “Gods, humans are so fucking sensitive.”

I stood up, not particularly wanting to stand out here and bicker with the Soul Eater. Looking over at Seraph, who was watching us in silence, I quietly said, “See you later.”

He chuffed once, eyes tracking me as I started walking toward the wall. Wyn followed, slinking behind like a wraith.

“Why did you come out here?” I asked flatly. He let out a distorted, long-suffering sigh as he caught up with me.

“We all agreed that one of us would come out every morning to make sure you were fine and get you to come in. Apparently you haven’t been doing human things.” He waved a hand carelessly. “Eating or sleeping or something. I wasn’t paying attention.”

“I am eating and sleeping,” I muttered, but reluctantly, silently, acknowledged why Gloam—because I knew it would have been Gloam—had probably ordered the beasties to check on me.

I could also silently admit that I would’ve just stayed out there with Seraph all the time if they’d let me.

“Good for you,” Wyn drawled, the sarcasm heavy in his inhuman voice.

I side-eyed him. He was kind of an asshole, but I didn’t care about that. A lot of people thought I was an asshole too. Or they thought I was a creep. I was still wary of him, but he had helped to look after Seraph. He had never been unkind to him or treated him like an animal. He talked to him like all the other beasties did.

Before we could step into the container entrance, a loud, guttural bark rang out from further back. I froze, recognising Seraph’s voice instantly. Dread churned in my belly, intense worry that he had flown into another episode. That the peaceful night we’d shared wouldn’t happen again.

Wyn’s hood cocked before it turned back. “What did he just call me?”

“What did he say?” I asked immediately, already striding back along the wall.

Wyn caught up, not answering for a few moments until he huffed in disgust and muttered, “Smoke man.”

I managed not to smile, and when we rounded the corner and the cage came into view, my shoulders unclenched. Seraph wasn’t thrashing in his cage. He was still calm, kneeling and gripping the bars as he watched us approach.

Wyn cleared his throat and called, “*Shi?*”

All of Seraph’s eyes turned toward me. I stared back, practically vibrating in anticipation over what he might say. As far as I was aware, this was the first time he had initiated conversation with one of the beasties since he’d told them he didn’t want to eat meat anymore.

What did he want to tell Wyn?

He stared at me in silence before a few of his eyes swivelled back to the Soul Eater. Most remained fixed on me, though.

Then words started tumbling out of his mouth, snarly and tangled together in an unbroken stream. Wyn straightened from his cocky slouch beside me, seeming to pay attention as Seraph spoke. And spoke.

When he finally fell silent, the Soul Eater turned slowly toward me.

“He said he hates being apart from you too,” he told me gruffly, seeming almost embarrassed to be sharing such an intimate moment with us. It was pretty surreal. “He said he wishes he could speak back to you and have you understand him, and he is trying, but please be patient with him. He said you are the only one he wants to speak to. Be near. He said...” Wyn cleared his throat awkwardly. “He said you make him feel like a person again, not just a thing.”

As I stared up into the Soul Eater’s dark hood, my eyes started to burn. I looked away quickly to hide my face, turning toward Seraph again and trying to swallow around the lump in my throat, once, twice. It took a few seconds for me to be able to answer.

“Thanks,” I said hoarsely.

Wyn grunted and cleared his throat again. “That was the gist of it, anyway. A few of the words in there were in the rycke’s tongue, which I’m not fluent in, but... yes.”

He didn’t say anything else as Seraph and I stared at each other in silence.

“Tell him—” I stopped myself. I didn’t need the Soul Eater to translate for me. Seraph understood me. And I didn’t particularly want Wyn to be involved in such an intimate moment any more than he already was. I was pretty sure he didn’t either.

“I’m staying out here,” I told the Soul Eater. I needed to. I needed to talk to Seraph, to tell him... I didn’t even know.

Wyn huffed. “No you’re not, human. I am not having the aytorin scold me like an overprotective father for letting you stay out here. You can come

back out later. Seraph knows you need to eat and sleep.”

Seraph chuffed and jerked his head down in a nod, rasping something out in his guttural voice.

“See?” Wyn nodded at him. “He agrees with me. At least one of you is smart.”

That made Seraph snarl at him in warning. The Soul Eater huffed.

“You’re suited for each other,” he muttered. “Neither of you have a fucking sense of humour.”

I ground my teeth together, wondering what would happen if I stabbed the Soul Eater with my machete. I reluctantly admitted to myself that I’d prefer not to find out.

“I’ll talk to you later,” I croaked to Seraph instead, giving him a tiny smile when his head jerked in a stilted nod.

Exhaling unsteadily, I turned and started walking back around the wall, Wyn falling into step beside me in silence. Neither of us spoke until we started approaching the entrance and I glanced over at him.

“How come you know most of the languages? Do you study languages too, like Gloam?”

Wyn huffed in derision, but hesitated before saying, “No. I am just... an impressive age.”

I side-eyed him. “Is that why Danny always calls you an old man?”

I hadn’t spent any time with the Soul Eater’s human lover—husband—but I’d still heard him call Wyn that around the camp. Several times.

Wyn hissed like a feral cat and stomped through the container entrance. By the time I made it into the camp, he had vanished. My mouth tipped up into a tiny smile as I walked toward the motel, the foreign sensation of unbridled joy bubbling inside me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

I forced myself to stay away for several hours, because I'd seen Gloam making his way into the container entrance as I was walking back to my room from the shower stalls. But he would have no reason to chide me now. I was clean, my hair still slightly damp in its ponytail. I was fed, having gotten a big breakfast from Daisy and Bo and eaten all of it. I'd actually slept well for once, though probably still not for long enough. I felt fresh and well-rested.

And I was desperate to see Seraph again.

It was a strange sensation for me. To... yearn for someone. For their company. I didn't generally like anyone's company for too long—even Ghost's or Rig's, though I would never tell them that.

It was different with Seraph. He didn't give me wary looks like most of the raiders in the camp did, unease radiating from them in my presence. He didn't expect me to fill the long silences. He didn't make me try and talk constantly, but I actually *wanted* to talk to him.

Maybe I was just contrary. Maybe I just never wanted to do what people expected of me. Seraph didn't seem to expect anything more from me than what I offered him, and that made me want to offer him... everything. He liked me for who I was, and I liked him for who he was too. I didn't wish for him to look or act more human. I didn't wish I could've met him when he was still Luke Buckley, just a young soldier with dark eyes and a narrow jaw. I probably wouldn't have looked at him twice if I had, seeing as he'd been in the military.

I liked *Seraph*. Who he was now. I liked his little beastly sounds—the chuff he let out when he saw me, his snarly sighs of pleasure when he ate or settled under his blankets. His wheezy, snorting laugh. I liked his grotesque smile. I liked his scent and the textured feel of his tough skin. I liked all his eyes, so expressive and interesting to look into. His rangy body and long fingers and wide mouth.

I liked his deep, guttural voice, which was probably grating and harsh to everyone else's ears. Hearing him say words back to me in English, stilted and hesitant at first before he grew more confident. How animated he sometimes got when talking to me, rattling out words in a tangled stream,

even though he was fully aware I couldn't understand him. We had managed to muddle our way through our conversations last night, and he picked up new words with shocking speed. He was so clever—I could see his brain working as he figured out how to show me with actions what he was trying to tell me.

As I left the camp, I could faintly hear the deep rumble of Gloam's voice down the other end by Seraph's cage. A few seconds later, I heard Seraph's guttural rasp respond to him. My mouth twitched into a smile, which I quickly wiped from my face before rounding the corner.

"Ah! Lilac." Gloam gave me a wide grin and gestured me over, but first I looked over at Seraph and smiled.

"Hi," I told him, my belly warming when he sat up straighter and greeted me with his usual chuff. Then he grated out a few words.

Gloam chuckled warily. "He said he missed you."

My throat burned with the urge to tell him I'd missed him too, but I didn't want to say it in front of Gloam, and I could see the big beastie watching me as I slowly walked toward him, a slight frown twitching his textured brow.

I kept my face carefully blank as I nodded at him in greeting, coming to a stop a few feet away from where he was perched on the RV's top step.

Gloam's brow cleared as he gestured at Seraph and smiled. "We have been having a good conversation."

I nodded, my eyes automatically drifting back over to Seraph. He was watching me already. "That's good."

"It is very good," Gloam rumbled, sounding excited. "Lilac, he gave me a different answer today when I asked him how he was feeling."

That made my gaze shoot back to him. "What did he say?"

"He said he felt good. Happy." Gloam's grin was so wide I could see his little tusks and fangs. "And he *seems* it. He has been remarkably calm and responsive. He was telling me about the creatures that attacked you both—the typilds and the mortik. He said you are a very skilled killer," he added with a wry chuckle.

My mouth twitched into a smile as I looked back at Seraph. I gave a tiny shrug. "I wasn't that good with the little ones."

Gloam rolled his eyes and grunted as he stood up. "You took out a whole swarm of them alone."

"Seraph killed a lot as well."

That made Seraph shoot me his big grin, sharp teeth jutting. My smile widened before I wiped it away to look back at Gloam.

“Going in?” I asked, keeping my voice carefully flat.

“Yes. I don’t want to wear him out.” Gloam chuckled. “I could keep talking to him for hours. He is fascinating to listen to—how all the different languages blend together seamlessly. The way his mind works must be incredibly unique.”

“Yeah,” I said vacantly, already gazing at Seraph again.

“In a sense, he is a marvel.” Gloam was gearing up for one of his deep thoughtful discussions. I sighed internally but didn’t outwardly react. “An amalgamation of many from our world. We have some species that can cross-breed, but not many. Ayturin and telyths can, though it has been extremely rare. Isdernucs and eyriads used to mate, many millennia ago, but then they became enemies and the isdernucs helped to drive the eyriads underground. And then Edin’s people all died out.”

I stared at him blankly until he let out a sheepish chuckle.

“Anyway, I will go and find my firebrand.” He gave me a nod instead of his usual clap on the shoulder, because Seraph was watching. “Hopefully you and Seraph will also have a good conversation.”

“Did he speak any English today?” I asked quickly before he could walk off.

Gloam paused. “Yes. A few words. I wasn’t expecting it.”

“I talked to him last night,” I said carefully. “He repeated some words back to me.”

“Well, that’s wonderful. Yet another language to add to his roster.” He grinned at Seraph, who grunted in response, making me want to smile again.

But as he started to walk off, Seraph barked out a single, hesitant word.

“G-Gloh-wem.”

We both froze, before Gloam turned back and calmly asked, “Yes, Seraph?”

He rasped out a string of words, a few of his eyes darting to Gloam but most staying fixed on me as he gripped the bars of his cage. When he went quiet, Gloam inclined his head gracefully.

“Of course.” He turned to me. “He asked me to help him practise English during the day. So that he can speak to you.”

I cleared my throat so my voice wasn't thick when I nodded and said, "Okay."

Gloam stared down at me, his brow slightly pinched with worry. "You have grown very close to him, Lilac. You mean much to him. You are all he wants to talk about."

I gazed back up at him impassively, refusing to react. "I've been guarding him for a while now, so. Makes sense. You should go in. Rig will be missing you."

The pointed words didn't escape him, and he winced a little as he glanced over at Seraph. "I am not trying to... I am not being judgemental, Lilac. I just worry about you. And Seraph. And..." He lowered his voice. "There is a chance that your friendship with him will never progress outside of that cage."

Friendship was definitely not all that Seraph and I had, but that wasn't what pulled my focus. I stiffened, my gaze growing cold.

"He's been getting so much better. He won't have to stay in there forever."

Gloam sighed. "Lilac, we cannot make a decision based on just a few days. There have still been times when he has... lost himself."

"Because he's in a fucking cage," I gritted out, shoving my hands in my coat pockets when they clenched into fists.

I didn't know if Seraph could sense my anger, but he let out a warning snarl that I knew was aimed at Gloam, so I forced myself to calm down. I didn't want to ruin the progress Gloam had made with him—it wasn't fair to either of them. And I couldn't let Seraph alienate himself from the rest of the beasts because I didn't agree with how they were handling the situation.

"We should at least keep it on the table," I said, keeping my voice flat. Emotionless. "Letting him out at some point. Trusting him."

Gloam watched me carefully. "Do you trust him, Lilac?"

"Yes," I said immediately, but I realised that... I only trusted him with me. I trusted him not to hurt *me*, but I could reluctantly admit to myself that he wasn't ready to be free around anyone else. He was still too volatile, too quick to fly into a rage.

"Maybe we could try when it's just me out here," I said carefully to Gloam. "He's calm around me. I could—"

“No, Lilac.” Gloam’s voice was firm. Final. “I will not let you risk yourself.”

“It’s not your decision,” I shot back.

“Yes. It is.” Gloam sighed sadly. “I have the key.”

Before I could stop them, my eyes darted down to his pockets of his leather pants. He chuckled, taking a step back.

“Rig will have something to say to you if you stab me to try and get it, but I don’t have it on me.” He shook his head. “I promise you, Lilac, I am not writing Seraph off. You are right—maybe one day he *will* be well enough to come out of the cage. But today is not that day.”

He turned to leave, rumbling a goodbye at Seraph, who grunted and watched him until he had vanished around the corner. Then all his eyes swivelled back to me, and I took a few steps closer to the cage before I glanced up at the top of the wall. It wasn’t dark yet, and I could see eagle-eyed Nun up there with her crossbow.

Walking to the edge of the untouched ring of white around Seraph’s cage—my footprints from the night before thankfully covered by more snow—I cleared my throat and glanced around to make sure none of the other beasties were around. The Soul Eater was sneaky sometimes.

“I’ll come and sit with you tonight,” I told him quietly. “But I wanted to...”

When I trailed off, Seraph chuffed and blinked at me, waiting patiently.

“I’m not good at talking about stuff,” I said gruffly, then gave him a tiny smile under my mask. “You’re the more eloquent one.”

Which was not something I ever thought I’d end up saying to the monster who had shown up at our camp screaming and thrashing in his cage.

“But...” I swallowed thickly, forcing myself to look at him. “I’ll always be patient with you, Seraph. I don’t care how long it takes for you to pick up English. Or... or how long it takes until you can come out. I’ll be here. I’ll wait.”

Seraph’s big hands slid down the bars as he sat back on his heels.

“Lie-lack,” he rasped, then said a few more words before growling in frustration. He snorted, eyes tightening with concentration, before he hesitantly grated, “Lie-lack... mine. Seraph *tel*. Y-yours. Seraph yours.”

My throat ached. I allowed myself to take a single step closer, hands fisting in my pockets with the urge to cross the distance between us and

touch him. My voice was hoarse when I said, “Yes. That’s right.”

“Seraph Lie-lack *kiritil*,” he told me. “*Reeagna*.”

I didn’t know how to respond, because I had no idea what he’d said. Repeating the words back to myself in my head so I’d remember them, I gave him a tiny smile.

“I’ll go in and get us some dinner, then I’ll come back out and we can... talk.”

But I was already hoping we would do more than talk tonight. I had never felt this kind of desperate need to be close to another person before, not just for the physical gratification of sex, but for the intimacy of it. As a way to show him how I felt about him—to convey it in a way that I struggled to with words.

“I won’t be long,” I told him as I started heading back to the wall, and he chuffed in response as he watched me leave.

Once I was back inside the camp, I looked around for the Soul Eater. It didn’t take me long to find him—he had crowded Danny up against the side of the old bar and was looming over him as he stroked a blackened thumb over his human’s chin.

But Danny didn’t look at all freaked out or scared. Of course he didn’t. He was grinning slyly up at Wyn, his gaze growing heavy-lidded at something the Soul Eater murmured to him.

Well, they’d have to put a pause on their public foreplay. I strode toward them with purpose, and Danny noticed me heading their way as his eyes darted over Wyn’s shoulder. He straightened up and said something to the Soul Eater, his face going a little pink.

“Sorry to interrupt,” I said flatly when I reached them, even though I wasn’t sorry at all. “Wanted to ask you something.”

Wyn let out a long-suffering sigh and turned to face me, crossing his arms.

“What is it, human?” he drawled, then tensed as his hood tilted either side to see if anyone was around. He took a step closer and pointed a long, black-stained finger at me, hissing, “If you call me an old man, I will tear out your fucking throat.”

Danny snorted, pursing his lips to hold back his snicker as Wyn’s hood turned toward him, a feral hiss coming from within.

“Seraph said some more words to me,” I said, and Wyn paused before relaxing, crossing his arms again. He huffed.

“Didn’t want to ask Gloam?” he asked demurely, because he knew full well why I didn’t want to ask Gloam. It would make Gloam suspicious that something more was happening than he’d realised.

Ignoring the question, I repeated the words Seraph had said to me. “He said *kiritil* and *reeagna*.”

“Isdernuc and vint,” Wyn said, being surprisingly forthcoming with the information. Maybe he was remembering what he’d translated for me this morning. Maybe he wasn’t a total asshole.

“They mean together and always,” he told me. “*Kiritil reeagna*. Together always.”

Danny made a little sound, and when my gaze drifted to him, he gave me a smile. “That’s sweet.”

He didn’t seem shocked. I assumed the Soul Eater told him everything, which meant he had probably recounted what he’d seen and what Seraph had said earlier. But Danny didn’t look disgusted or like he was judging me.

I supposed he couldn’t. He was *married*—in a sense—to the Soul Eater.

“You think *that’s* sweet?” Wyn grated, pulling Danny closer. “I shared half of my remaining life with you.”

Danny rolled his eyes. “If I’m not allowed to use that as an excuse, you’re not either.”

Wyn huffed. “I don’t try to use it as a valid reason to get my dick sucked.”

As Danny spluttered in embarrassment, throat going splotchy, I started backing away. I wasn’t interested in standing here and watching more of their public foreplay, so I gave them a brief thanks and turned to leave.

But before I could stop myself, I turned back. “It probably is a pretty valid reason, though.”

Wyn and Danny both paused and looked at me.

“Tethering your lives together,” I clarified flatly, gesturing between them. “Sharing your remaining years. Solid justification for getting your dick sucked.”

As Danny chuckled sheepishly, Wyn huffed in amusement and pulled him closer.

“So you do have a sense of humour,” he drawled, then started tugging Danny toward the motel. “Come on, my sweet. Let’s go reminisce about how I extended your life for several millennia. Such a selfless act that surely deserves a reward.”

“Selfless, my ass,” I heard Danny mutter as they walked off.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

It was dark by the time I went back out to Seraph. I had asked Daisy for a bigger bag of food instead of a cooked dinner for myself, so that Seraph and I could share a meal properly.

While in the diner collecting it, I'd casually asked Anchor who was on watch tonight. She said Keen would be on the south wall after dinner, which had made my stomach twist into an excited knot. I knew everyone's habits here, even though I didn't talk to many of the raiders—I just watched them—and Keen tended to stay down the other end of the wall, near the hatch.

Away from Seraph's cage.

If I sat where I had last night, he wouldn't be able to see us. The roof of Seraph's cage blocked most of the interior, shielding the far side from view of anyone over by the hatch.

I tried not to think about it too much as I gave Seraph a tiny wave, rounding the cage to the far side from a distance just in case raider eyes were peering down. After switching on the lantern and tucking it right into the same corner, I pulled off my mask and smiled at Seraph.

He grinned back, already reaching through the bars as I stuffed the mask in my pocket.

"Hi," I said a little awkwardly as he wrapped his arms around me, tugging me closer until my hipbones banged into the bars.

I managed to get my arms around him, dipping my head to press my nose to the top of his smooth scalp, just above where the wall of eyes ended, as he buried his face in my throat and let out a snarly sigh of contentment.

"Lie-lack," he rasped before releasing me, leaning back to graze his long fingers down my front. My belly lurched with arousal.

Remembering what Gloam had told me he'd said earlier, I cleared my throat and gruffly said, "I missed you too today."

Seraph let out a quiet version of his wheezy chuckle, peeling my coat sleeve back to lightly lick my wrist. My insides twisted again, but I forced myself to hold up the bag, its handles looped around my wrist. I wanted him to eat. First.

“Hungry?”

He nodded jerkily, so I started to sit down but froze when he barked and hurriedly grabbed one of his blankets. Something slipped out of the messy pile, caught in the folds, and I stared at it as Seraph carefully arranged the blanket by my feet, snorting and nudging me back so he had room.

I stepped back, chest squeezing tight as my eyes stayed fixed on the glove in his cage. My glove. The one my hand had slipped out of the night he grabbed me, before he started getting better. I’d looked around for it the next day, but had just assumed he’d flung it into the forest or it had been covered by snow. I was wearing an older pair that were more worn out, but still warm.

“Kept my glove, huh?” I said slowly as I sat down on the blanket after Seraph gestured me forward again.

He went still, face looking a little guilty as he glanced back at it. Quickly shoving it back under the blankets, he bared his teeth at me with a little snarl.

My mouth curved up. Gripping the bars to hoist myself up, I leaned in and kissed his chin. “You can keep it.”

Shivering, Seraph quickly reached up and cupped the back of my head before I could sit back, his fingers so long they overlapped, getting tangled in my ponytail. I went very still as he tilted his head down to look at me, our faces only an inch or two apart.

There *were* colours in that central eye, I realised. Faint swirls of coloured speckles, like the ones I’d noticed in Aury’s before.

Some of Seraph’s eyes were fixed on my mouth, and I automatically wet my lips when I noticed, my tongue bar clicking against my teeth. His breath hitched, human eyes darting up to meet mine, to assess my reaction, as his long tongue slowly emerged from between his jutting teeth and he lightly flicked my lower lip with the pointed tip.

My lips parted in reaction, and I exhaled a quiet, unsteady breath. Seraph flicked his tongue again, just inside, against my teeth. As I shifted onto my knees, I let my hands drift down the bars to grip his thighs, hoping he’d take it as the signal I’d intended.

He let out a tiny thrumming purr and dipped his tongue again. I couldn’t stop my shudder as I opened my mouth wider and felt his tongue feather over mine. If this was the only way he could kiss, that was fine with me.

His tongue was hot and smooth as it sank even deeper into my mouth, the tip dexterous, winding around my piercing before retreating.

And then he was gripping my head harder with a snarl and surging his tongue back inside in a rush. Deeper. My eyes had drifted shut, but they popped open wide when the tip brushed my uvula.

And then it kept going. I shuddered, relaxing my throat instinctively as it burrowed its way inside. God, it was so far down my throat. It probably would've made me heave if my gag reflex hadn't been obliterated years ago.

My eyes grew heavy-lidded as I stared up at him, drugged by the feel of his long, sinuous tongue undulating in my throat. His sharp teeth were just millimetres from my mouth, and his fingers clawed at my hair, keeping my head still in an unyielding grip, but I wasn't afraid. My cock was stiff, throbbing in my pants despite the cold air. When his tongue retreated from my throat to curl back around mine, my quick inhalation was shaky. I couldn't stop the tiny sound that left me. Seraph's breaths were snarling out of him, his chest heaving.

I slid my tongue against his with growing desperation, my body getting hot under my thick coat. Seraph snarled and shuddered, but a second later his tongue retreated. He sat back in his cage, quickly pulling a blanket over his lap while I panted shallowly.

"Eat, Lie-lack," he rasped.

I blinked at him, too dazed to process the words at first. Then I cleared my throat and nodded quickly, sitting back and looking down at the bag to hide the faint flush on my cheeks. My hand was a little unsteady when I passed him the bag, which he immediately opened and started digging through.

He let out a little chuff of surprise. "*Na perrik.*"

I said nothing, trying to calm my body down as I watched him pull two pears out of the bag. He glanced up at me and went still, eyes tightening with concentration.

"M-more," he grated eventually, gesturing at the bag. "More... tonight."

I grinned at him, nodding. "I asked Daisy for more so we could share."

"Ssshare. *Shi*. Yes. *Ka merra ge* Lie-lack." He paused. "I... sshhare w-with Lie-lack."

I didn't think I'd ever smiled so wide in my life, freezing air drifting through the gap in my teeth. Taking his empty hand, I drew it closer to kiss the first set of his many knuckles.

"You're picking it up so quickly, Seraph."

He let out a pleased chuff, looking almost shy as he passed me one of the pears. He rumbled out more words before huffing in irritation, pausing again with the fruit poised at his mouth.

"I... kn-know words. *Ra ini*." He tapped his temple with one spindly finger. "B-but... no come out."

"They are though," I said immediately, my voice thick. "It just takes time. And I don't care how long it takes."

He grinned at me, teeth jutting. Taking a big bite of pear, he said around his mouthful, "Seraph Lie-lack *kiritil reeagna*."

My throat closed up. I nodded unsteadily, clutching my pear tight. "Yes. Together always."

Because even if nothing more progressed between us sexually or... romantically—though it looked like it would—I knew I'd never be able to leave him alone in the world. I wanted to protect him, keep him safe. If he eventually got well enough to come out of the cage and wanted to leave the camp, I already knew I'd go with him. I'd look after him.

He looked ecstatic that I knew what he'd said. His free hand fumbled through the bars for mine, gripping my gloved fingers tight. "Yes, Lie-lack. T-together al-ways."

When we finished eating, I forced myself not to think with my dick. It was difficult, seeing as I'd just had to watch Seraph's long tongue curl around several fruit pits.

Once the bag was empty, I moved it to one side and nodded at his left leg. "I want to check your ankle. You hurt it before."

I didn't say more than that, not sure how much he remembered from when he woke up. When he nearly died.

He huffed, a few of his eyes rolling as he obediently leaned back on his hands and stretched his left leg out through the bars until his long foot was in my lap. I tried not to pay attention to how close it was to my groin as I stripped off my gloves and gently clasped his ankle.

It had been a while since he'd sustained the injury, but I'd noticed him limping slightly when he paced in his cage. His ankle wasn't swollen or sitting at a funny angle, but when I carefully pressed my thumbs in, Seraph hissed as his foot jerked.

"Still hurt?" I asked, mouth pulling down into a frown. He nodded, staring at my hands on him.

"Yes. Lee-tol."

"Only a little?" When he nodded again, I sighed and rubbed the sole of his foot with my thumbs. "It might just still be healing. We'll keep an eye on it."

Seraph shivered, still staring at my hands. His other leg twitched, knee falling open a little wider. Before I could stop it, my gaze was drifting up his long leg. Over his strong calf, his rangy thigh, to the smooth mound in between. The blanket had slid off his lap when he shifted his leg for me to inspect it.

At first, I could see nothing but unbroken dark skin. Then I thought I saw faint lines fanning from the crease of his groin and above his hip bones, coming together in a point right where human genitals would have been.

My hands had gone still on his foot, and I knew I should look away. I was staring. At his groin. It was rude and creepy. There wasn't even anything there, and I was probably making him feel self-conscious, but I couldn't lift my gaze.

Not until Seraph suddenly shifted, yanking his foot out of my grip and scrambling up. But he didn't look angry or embarrassed. His eyes were heavy as he knelt opposite me, breathing hard.

"Lie-lack up."

I stared at him in confusion, and he huffed and reached through the bars to gently grip my sides, urging me to stand.

"Up," he repeated.

I glanced around quickly in case he was telling me that a beastie was coming and I had to get away from the cage, but once I was standing he didn't release me, his hands sliding down to my hips.

Then they moved around to my front before his fingers started fumbling with my fly.

I sucked in a sharp breath, hands shooting down to grab his wrists.
"Seraph—"

He loosed a thrumming purr, fingers going still as he looked up at me. “*Ka lora ton*, Lie-lack. I... w-want you. You... want Seraph?”

I stared down at him, already breathing hard, my cock straining.

“Yes,” I said hoarsely. “I want you too.”

His mouth widened into his big monstrous grin, before he dipped his head to nuzzle my stomach through my shirt, teeth catching on the fabric. The reminder of those sharp, jutting teeth made my throat bob with a nervous swallow, but I wasn’t going to say anything.

And I definitely wasn’t going to stop him.

In fact, my cock was getting even harder at the thought of those teeth so close. His long tongue sliding over my length. I shuddered, releasing his wrists to palm his head. Seraph chuffed against my stomach before pulling back and concentrating hard on the button of my fly.

When it popped open, he grinned up at me again in triumph and slyly rasped, “Eat Lie-lack.”

I went still, brows pinching with confusion as he repeated the words he’d said earlier. When it clicked, I chuckled hoarsely and stroked my thumbs over his gnarled ears.

“Telling corny jokes already,” I said dryly. “We should probably nip that in the bud before it becomes a habit.”

Seraph let out a wheezy laugh, but then he was carefully tugging my pants down along with my underwear, just enough for my cock to pop free. I shivered when the hot length met freezing air, but I knew I wouldn’t be feeling the cold for long.

I exhaled unsteadily as Seraph slowly sat back on his heels, all his eyes flicking up to my face one last time before he lowered his head.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

At the first touch of his hot tongue against my tip, I bit my lip hard to stay quiet.

I stared as it curled around the head, flicking at my piercing and making my hips twitch with sensitivity. Then it slunk lower, coiling around my entire length until the tip brushed the seam of my sac.

My lips parted with a tiny gasp, and I couldn't stop staring as his long tongue slithered back up my shaft, leaving it slick and shiny. The air was freezing against my wet cock, but before I could really feel it he was winding his tongue back around and sliding the coiled length up and down.

My knees buckled. I tried not to grip his head too tight as he licked all over my cock, using his long tongue to stroke me off with hot, slippery pressure. I was breathing hard through my nose, pursing my lips to try and keep quiet as my legs started to tremble.

Seraph made a low sound of pleasure, long fingers curling around my back and tugging me closer until my hipbones met the bars. I jerked from the shock of cold against my bare skin, shaking fingers curling around the freezing metal and gripping tight.

Even more of his tongue emerged, coiling further around my length until the tip slid over my balls.

"F-fuck," I got out as quietly as I could manage, hips trying to arch forward even more against the bars.

Seraph chuffed out a little grunt, the tip of his tongue laving my tightening nuts before sliding even further back to the sensitive stretch of skin behind. A strangled sound escaped me as my head tipped back, feet shuffling wider apart to give him more room.

The tip brushed over the edge of my hole, making my cock jerk in the tight, slick coil of his tongue. Pre-cum pulsed from the tip, directly onto his waiting tongue. He snarled, tongue retreating in a mind-numbing rush, sliding over my balls and around my length to unwind, making me gasp unsteadily.

Seraph lapped at the tip of my cock, licking up my pre-cum as he snarled and gripped my sides harder, fingers digging in through my shirt. His tongue twisted around my length again, tightening and pulling like he

was milking me. I let out a shuddering breath, my nuts lifting to hug the base, my cock twitching and getting harder as my orgasm began to tighten the base of my spine.

“I’m going to come,” I warned him in a quiet, strangled voice.

I gritted my teeth in anticipation, my hips starting to rock and bang into the bars until I forced them to stop, not knowing how far the sound would travel. My thighs shook, legs struggling to keep me up as Seraph’s tongue massaged the cum out of my cock.

A choked breath escaped me as I started to come, trying to stay upright as my knees threatened to buckle. Seraph’s tongue was steaming in the freezing air, still coiled around my cock as it pumped cum directly between his jutting teeth.

He snarled hoarsely, his fingers trembling against my back and a shudder racing down his hunched spine. When I sagged heavily against the bars, breathing hard, he finally uncurled his tongue and gave my sensitive head a slow lick, making my breath catch.

As I struggled to regulate my breathing, which puffed out of me in steamy clouds, he carefully tucked my cock back inside and pulled my pants up so it didn’t freeze. I swallowed and bent my shaky legs to kneel, wanting to do the same to him, but he jerked back and snatched up a blanket to cover his lap before I could reach for him. I blinked rapidly, trying to clear my head.

“What’s wrong?” My voice was raspy, so I cleared my throat. “I want to touch you, Seraph.”

“No,” he said quickly, not looking at me as he clutched at the blanket on his lap. “I d-don’t l-look like you.”

My gaze dropped to the blanket. I’d felt something stiff against my back before, and I could see a long, hard protrusion jutting up under the fabric. But then I noticed... movement. Not like a cock jerking, filling up.

Something wriggled under the blanket.

Lifting my gaze before he could get more self-conscious, I calmly said, “I want to touch you, Seraph.”

“It is b-bad,” he snarled, sounding a little panicked. “Wr-wrong.”

I exhaled, sitting back on my heels so I wasn’t crowding his personal space. “Nothing about you is bad or wrong. If you don’t want me to touch you, that’s fine. I don’t ever have to touch you in that way if you don’t want

it. But... if you *do* want it, please don't hold yourself back because you're embarrassed."

I gripped the bars to stop myself reaching for him.

"You have nothing to be embarrassed about, Seraph," I told him.

"Especially not with me. I want *you*."

He shifted, still gripping the blanket tight in a trembling hand.

"I w-want you too, Lie-lack," he mumbled, breathing unsteadily.

"If you want me to touch you in a sexual way, I want that too," I said calmly. "But if you *don't* want that, that's fine. Not everyone likes being touched intimately. Plenty of people don't like sex, or prefer to not be on the receiving end. There's no wrong answer."

He was silent for a long time, eyes darting.

"It doesn't make what we have together any less valid or meaningful," I told him, "if you decide you don't want to be touched in that way."

"I do," he rasped quietly, eyes flickering to me and away again. "I w-want it. Only f-from you."

I nodded. "No one can touch you without your permission, Seraph."

He sighed, bowing his head as his fingers slowly uncurled from the blanket in his lap. "I d-don't... want to sc-scare you."

My throat closed up, but I managed to croak, "You won't."

Hesitating for a few more seconds, he slowly pulled the blanket away. I didn't look down at first, instead stretching my arm out to reach through the bars.

"Will you hold my hand?" I asked, not moving until he shyly curled his long fingers over my palm.

I finally let my gaze drift down between his legs, and immediately noticed what I'd seen wriggling under the blanket before.

Around a somewhat human-looking penis were several short tendrils, maybe a couple of inches in length, that were waving gently. And above the base of his cock was a much longer, thinner protrusion that seemed more prehensile, flicking anxiously over the top of his thigh.

Protective plates had folded back to reveal his genitals, forming a star shape that fanned out over his hips and upper thighs, the insides of them slick and a dark red. They actually reminded me of a stapelia cactus bloom, an alien-looking star-shaped flower that was tinged with red. It was beautiful, in its own way.

My eyes returned to his cock. While still looking somewhat human, it was flushed a dark, mottled burgundy-black. He had a sac, hairless and covered in a thinner, more fragile version of his leathery skin.

The tendrils and long protrusion were the same mottled tone as his cock, and all of them looked tender—sensitive, which made sense if they were kept covered. I didn't want to keep staring, even though my dick was perking back up in my pants, so I lifted my gaze to smile at Seraph.

"You're beautiful," I told him, cheeks flushing awkwardly. I raised our linked hands to kiss his knuckles. "When you feel ready for me to touch you, you can put my hand where you want it."

His cock jerked, flushed and slick all over from whatever coated the inside of those protective plates. My throat bobbed hungrily, but I knew he wasn't ready for me to suck him yet, as much as I wanted to. I wondered what those little tendrils were for—what they would do if anything... got near.

Neither of us moved for a couple of minutes as Seraph let out shallow, snarling breaths, his other hand fisting on his thigh. Eventually, I squeezed his fingers and quietly asked, "Will you kiss me again, Seraph?"

I was hoping it would help him get out of his head a little bit, because he still wasn't looking at me. Plus, I just really wanted to kiss him. I didn't mind if that was all we ended up doing.

He let out a little sound and shuffled closer, pressing his face to the bars. I leaned in, kissing along his jaw to his chin until he hesitantly flicked his tongue over my cheek. Lifting my head, I held his gaze as his tongue slowly dipped between my lips, filling my mouth.

I moaned quietly as I started to suck, which made his fingers tighten around mine as our linked hands rested on his thigh. He curled the tip of his tongue around mine, tugging at the bar piercing it, flickering over my palate.

My pulse leapt in anticipation when I felt him slowly draw our hands higher up his thigh. He was trembling, breathing fast, and sweet pride made my chest tighten when he fumbled to wrap my fingers around his cock.

It felt painfully stiff, pulsing under my palm. And it was so hot and slick, the skin tender. I squeezed gently, keeping my grip light as I moved my hand up and down to feel his whole length.

It was big—long, but not as thick as what I'd caught flashes of under Edin's kilt whenever he vaulted over the motel railing without a care. I'd

taken every size and shape of cock imaginable in my old job, though never one with little tendrils surrounding it and that intriguing prehensile length moving gently above. My gut clenched with want—but not because of what he had. Because it was Seraph.

Those tendrils brushed over the sides of my hand, stretching a little to tickle my skin. As I sucked on Seraph's tongue and held his gaze with heavy eyes, I felt them latch on—tiny suckers gripping my skin, keeping my hand in place. I groaned at the idea of it—his body clinging on to me in its own way, preventing me from pulling back. Before I could stop it, I was wondering if they'd do the same thing if his cock was inside me.

I tightened my grip a little and started moving my hand faster, my belly dipping with pleasure when his breath caught and his eyes flashed. Fluid pulsed from the tip of his cock, slicking over my hand as I pumped it up and down his length.

Seraph snarled unsteadily. He reached through the bars to grip my head, holding it in place as he thrust his tongue deep, wriggling it into my throat. I moaned, my body going lax, cock once again stiff and aching in my pants.

The slick sound of my hand stroking his cock seemed loud in the quiet night, but I knew the raider on the wall wouldn't be able to hear it from here. Sliding my other hand up his thigh, I cupped his balls, making his hips jerk as he snarled again.

I gave them a gentle squeeze before trailing my fingertips over those little tendrils in fascination. They were still latched onto my hand, the faint sucking sensation tickling and causing tingles to race up my inner wrist. When I reached the long, thin protrusion at the base of his cock, it wound around my middle finger and clung on.

For some reason, that made my breath hitch. Not with lust—something deeper. Seraph's tongue had retreated from my throat to twine around mine, moving faster as his chest heaved and his cock bucked in my hand.

His tongue curled back into his mouth, but he kept his head close to mine, fingers tangling in my ponytail as he panted.

"L-Lie-lack," he rasped stiltedly, his eyes wide and desperate.

"Does it feel good?" I asked quietly—not in a seductive way. I wanted to make sure he was enjoying it, that it wasn't too overwhelming for him.

"Y-yes." His hips jerked, a broken sound leaving his throat as his eyes tightened. "It—I—"

I stopped pumping his cock to squeeze the slick head, then trailed my fingertips over the weeping tip. I couldn't stop myself from looking down when his breathing got faster and faster, fingers clawing at my hair desperately. My gut clenched with arousal when I saw my hand, which looked so small, sliding up and down his dark cock. I pumped faster, desperate to see him come, to give him a few brief moments of numbing pleasure.

The long, thin tendril was still wrapped around my finger, but I had enough movement to rub my fingertips over the hairless base of his cock, wrapping my thumb around to press it against the seam of his tight sac.

He snarled jerkily, hips thrusting up into my hand as he pressed his face against the cage bars. "L-Lie-lack—"

A guttural groan left him, his entire body shaking as his cock started firing in my hand. I felt it throb heavily, swelling and growing even harder, the tendrils attached to my skin sucking and tightening to pull my hand closer until it was squeezing the flexing base of his cock.

I couldn't stop the quiet moan that left me as I watched, his cum steaming as it spurted onto his thighs and the floor of his cage. As the last weak pulse trickled down his length, his body sagged, fingers sliding from my hair.

I didn't move my hand, not wanting to hurt him if I pulled away from the tendrils still latched onto my skin. The thin protrusion slowly unwound from my finger, allowing me to shift my hand onto his thigh and squeeze gently.

"How are you feeling?" I asked quietly.

The tendrils finally unlatched, so I slowly slid my hand up and off his length, making him jerk with a tiny snarl. He let out a raspy exhale, eyes blinking slowly.

My chest unclenched with relief when he slowly grinned at me.

"G-good." He cupped my face, thumb rubbing over my temple as he gazed at me. "Lie-lack."

I smiled back at him. "I loved touching you. Do you think you might want to do it again?"

"Yes," he said instantly, making me chuckle.

"Let me go and get something to clean up," I said. "Don't use one of your blankets."

He nodded, watching as I stood and crunched through the snow to the RV. I found an old dish towel at the back of one of the kitchen drawers, and when I got back to the cage I quickly cleaned his skin and wiped up his cum from the floor.

Those protective plates were slowly curling in, back over his sac and relaxed cock. I tried not to stare in fascination as they met in a point, tucking his genitals neatly away, those little tendrils shrinking back and the long, thin protrusion coiling up before it was covered.

His body was like a work of art. So unique, unlike anything I'd ever seen before. I loved every part of it.

I wanted him more than I'd ever wanted anyone.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

A few days later, I went looking for Gloam in the camp. Seraph had been calm and lucid for a while now. He was sleeping better, eating well, talking to the other beasties when they came out.

I wanted to ask Gloam once again to consider letting him out when it was just me out there. I already suspected what his answer would be, but a weak tendril of guilt in my gut forced me to do it. To give him one more chance to allow it.

Because I already knew what I was going to do when he said no.

When I couldn't find him around the camp, I knocked on his and Rig's door. Luckily there weren't any sex noises coming from within this time, and after a few seconds Rig answered, giving me a wide grin. He wasn't wearing his mask.

"Hey, Lilac."

I nodded at him in greeting, eyes already drifting over his shoulder to the big beastie sitting at the small table tucked into the corner. A book was in his hands, but he was looking over at me with a smile.

"Lilac." He stood up and inclined his head. "How are you?"

"Fine. Wanted to ask you something."

Rig stepped back to let me in, closing the door behind me. I eyed the piles of junk on the floor, keeping my face blank as I skirted around them.

"Of course," Gloam said, though there was a hint of trepidation in his gaze, as if he knew what was coming.

Looking directly at him to stop my gaze flitting over the room, I said, "I want you to reconsider letting Seraph out when it's just me out there. Just for a little while each night."

Gloam sighed, his wide shoulders drooping. Before he could say anything, I added, "He's been doing so well. He's been calm for days—"

"Lilac." I tensed up at his placating tone. "I want him out of that cage as much as you do, but I will not risk anyone else by releasing him too early. He is calm now, yes. He doesn't appear to be in so much pain. But we don't know how he will react if he comes out of the cage. It could... trigger something in him."

I clenched my jaw. "I can keep him calm. He trusts me."

“Yes.” Gloam eyed me warily. “And I know you trust him too, but I do not yet. Not fully. It hasn’t been that long, Lilac. And it might make him feel worse to come out only for us to put him back in, again and again. At least he is comfortable in there—”

“It’s a cage,” I seethed. “Outside. In the snow. He’s not comfortable in there. He just knows he has to put up with it.”

Gloam looked away quickly, guilt tightening his goat-like eyes. But then they drifted behind me to Rig, who was listening silently. Face growing stern, he straightened to his full height and looked at me again.

“I will not risk Rig, Lilac. Or the rest of the camp. Surely you don’t want to risk them either.”

“Of course I don’t,” I shot back. “But they wouldn’t be at risk. They’d be inside the camp. He doesn’t know how to get in.”

“He is smart,” Gloam rumbled, brow furrowing. “You know he is. He could run off the moment you let him out. He could watch the camp from the forest to work out how to get in.”

I barely resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “He’s not going to do that—”

“He could climb up the camp wall, like the shulc did. We do not know what he is fully capable of, Lilac.”

“He’s not interested in the camp,” I said through gritted teeth.

“No, Lilac.” Gloam’s eyes flashed with a hint of anger. “I am not risking Rig. Do not ask me to do that.”

“I—I think it’s a good idea,” Rig said hesitantly from behind me. When I turned to look at him, quickly sweeping my gaze over the room, he gave me an anxious smile.

“No,” Gloam said stubbornly. “We will wait. I am not acting rashly in this. I have seen what happens to the creatures Seraph goes up against.”

I couldn’t answer for a minute, my tongue poking at the gap in my teeth as I tried to calm down. Taking a quiet breath, I made sure my face was blank as I nodded once. “Fine. We’ll give him a bit more time.”

Gloam watched me for a few moments before his face softened. “I am sorry, Lilac. I know it pains you to see him in there. And you are right—he is getting so much better. But he’s not ready yet. It hasn’t been long enough.”

I nodded curtly, trying not to be too obvious as I scanned the room again.

“Was there... anything else?” Gloam asked when I didn’t move.

Clearing my throat, I shook my head, trying to buy more time by nodding at the orchid I had gifted them on the windowsill. “How’s the orchid doing?”

Gloam paused, then turned to look at it with a chuckle. “Very well. Thank you.”

Rig laughed, seeming relieved that the tense air had been broken as he sauntered across the room and picked up the plant. “I swear Gloam loves this thing more than me.”

Gloam chuckled and shook his head, already sitting back down in his chair and picking up his book. “Impossible, my love.”

But I wasn’t looking at the orchid. My eyes had locked onto what had been revealed when Rig picked it up.

The key to Seraph’s cage was tucked under the flowerpot.

Forcing my eyes away, I looked at Gloam’s wide back, the dark inkblot stain on the top of his skull as he bent his head over his book. He hadn’t seen Rig pick it up. He didn’t know I’d seen the key.

Glancing at Rig, I gave him a brief smile and stepped forward to take the plant from him under the pretence of inspecting it. After a few seconds, I grunted and carefully set it back down over the small silver key on the windowsill. “Looks good.”

“Yep.” Rig was watching me.

I had no idea if he’d done that on purpose—picked the pot up so I’d see the key. I wasn’t going to ask him later to find out and risk him moving it in case he hadn’t. And the likelihood was that it hadn’t been intentional—I couldn’t imagine Rig going behind Gloam’s back like that. Plus, he was pretty oblivious most of the time. He probably hadn’t even noticed the key.

I nodded once at him in goodbye, turning to leave. He followed me to the door, opening it for me.

“See you later, Lilac.”

“Mhmm.” I stepped outside, pausing as I formulated a plan.

Striding past the other motel doors, I slipped into my room and looked around. I didn’t keep much stuff in here except for my plants, but surely there had to be an old key somewhere.

Eventually, I found the key to the bathroom door shoved right to the back of my nightstand drawer. It was a little bigger and more old-fashioned looking than the key to the padlock, but it would do. It would buy me time

before Gloam noticed, although I doubted he looked at the key often. It wasn't like he'd used it since Aury had locked Seraph back in the cage.

Stuffing it in my pocket along with my whittling stuff, I left my room and walked across the camp. After clearing a patch of snow outside the old bar with my boot, I sat with my back to the wall. I had a clear view of the motel block from here. Pulling my knife and the borolash figure out of my pocket, I started whittling, trying to finish it quickly.

I glanced up every few seconds to look at Gloam and Rig's door, but it was a while later that the big aytorin finally emerged. He noticed me across the camp, lifting a hand and calling, "I am going to talk with Seraph."

I nodded, the whittling stuff forgotten in my lap as I watched him leave through the container entrance. After giving it a few more minutes in case he came back for some reason, I pocketed my whittling knife and retrieved the key, tucking it into my palm as I stood.

The guilt returned as I walked toward the motel, but then I pictured Seraph finally getting out of his cage, being able to stretch out fully for the first time. Being able to touch me without bars in between us.

I knocked on Rig's door and made sure my face was blank. When he answered, his brows twitched in confusion, but he gave me another big smile.

"Hey."

I cleared my throat. "I just wanted to give you something. You and Gloam."

His eyes perked up before they drifted down to the figurine in my hand. "Really?"

I nodded, taking a step forward to indicate that I wanted to come in. Rig quickly pulled the door open more and moved aside so I could walk into the room. I glanced at the windowsill once before turning to face him.

I held up the borolash figure, the key still tucked tightly in my palm. "It's a borolash. I know you and Gloam like them."

Rig's eyes softened as he took the figure from me. "It's amazing. Thanks, Lilac."

Guilt soured my gut, but I pushed it back. I wasn't deceiving Rig, as such. I really did want him to have the figurine. I was deceiving Gloam. And Rig had said he thought letting Seraph out sometimes was a good idea, so...

Either way, I was still stealing the key.

Taking the figurine back, I cautiously said, “I’ll put it on the windowsill for you. It’ll look nice there.”

I didn’t move at first, watching him. Waiting to see if he’d react—if he really had been showing me where the key was on purpose. Rig looked back at me for a few seconds, his gaze inscrutable, before his mouth stretched into a wide grin and he nodded.

Maybe he was craftier than I’d thought. I genuinely couldn’t tell if he knew or not.

I made my way over to the windowsill slowly, giving him a chance to say something. If Rig outright asked me not to take the key... I wouldn’t. He was my friend. It would pain me to leave Seraph locked up, but I would just hound Gloam every day until he gave in.

Making sure my back blocked out the plant pot, I set the borolash down and swiftly swapped the key for the one in my hand, making sure the pot didn’t make a sound as I placed it back over the top.

Keeping it tucked in my palm, I turned and gave Rig a brief smile. He was still watching me, but then he grinned and nodded at the figurine.

“Looks good.”

I blinked, a little thrown, because I still had no idea if he knew what I’d just done—what I’d come back in here to do. Walking across the room toward the door, I eyed him cautiously as he clapped me on the shoulder and followed me.

“Have fun guarding Seraph tonight,” he said cheerfully, opening the door for me with a chuckle. “I know it’s probably TMI, but I am so horny. I’ll be keeping Gloam busy tonight.”

When I didn’t say anything, he added, “All night.”

Surely he knew. *Surely*. When I looked over at him, he gave me another tiny smile, something flashing in his brown eyes. He squeezed my shoulder once before letting go.

“Be careful,” he murmured, closing the door once I’d stepped outside.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

I spent the rest of the day practically vibrating with tension as I waited for it to get dark.

I forced myself to act like it was any other day—like I wouldn't be letting Seraph out of his cage tonight. I did a shift keeping watch on the wall. I took a shower. I helped Aury in the vegetable patch. I sharpened my machete and sat with Anchor in the diner for a while, taking the opportunity to casually ask her who was keeping watch on the wall tonight. She'd told me it was Huck and Tipley, two raiders who kept to themselves and were mediocre at best.

I'd easily be able to get Seraph out without them noticing.

I'd threaded the key onto a thin chain I'd found in my room so it couldn't slip out of my pocket. It was tucked under my shirt, and I'd zipped my coat right up so no keen beastie eyes would spot the outline of it through the fabric.

Gloam had been out with Seraph for a while, and when Danny and Hunter walked into the diner together, I spotted the Soul Eater's thick black smoke form winding over the camp wall to join him out there.

He didn't seem to have said anything to Gloam about what he knew—what he'd seen and what Seraph had said to me. I wondered if he just didn't care enough, or maybe he *did* care about Seraph and didn't want to put a stop to what was happening between me and him. Or maybe Danny had simply ordered him not to say anything. I was pretty sure he had Wyn wrapped around his little finger.

Whatever it was, I was grateful. Not that I'd ever actually tell the Soul Eater that. He was still a sly, overbearing asshole. But he *was* helping to look after Seraph, and he was also sticking around to lead all the monster-human couples to that time place. Plus there was the whole saving my life thing. So I guessed he wasn't too bad. As long as he left me alone as much as possible.

Danny seemed alright, though. Always smiling, friendly to everyone even when his ghoulish husband was standing beside him and hissing at anyone who approached. I thought he seemed fairly young, maybe a bit

younger than Rig, but he managed to keep the Soul Eater in check, so he obviously had a bit of fire in him.

Anchor had left the diner to check on the food stores, so I was sitting alone when Danny and Hunter came in, waiting for Daisy to give me our food package for the night. I'd started coming in a little earlier to get it, because I couldn't be bothered with Tank staring me down every time I came in here while the raiders were eating.

"Hi, Lilac," Danny said a little shyly as he came to a stop at the counter beside me.

On his other side, Hunter glanced at me before looking away. I seemed to make him uncomfortable.

Good.

I nodded at Danny in greeting, forcing my fingers to stop drumming impatiently on the counter. I wanted to get out there. It was getting dark.

"Wyn's just gone to check on Seraph." Danny chuckled as he slid into the seat beside me. "And Edin's out hunting."

"Hunting again!" Daisy exclaimed as she bustled through the door from the kitchen, clutching my food bag. "We have more meat than we know what to do with. Especially since that poor beastie outside stopped eating it."

I accepted the bag she held out to me with a nod, unzipping my coat just enough to tuck it inside before zipping it back up again before Hunter's irritatingly keen eyes saw the outline of the key through my shirt.

But he wasn't looking at me, too busy shooting Daisy a wry smile under his mask.

"He enjoys it. And he doesn't want to give the raiders an excuse to resent us being here while we wait for Charlie, so he wants to pull his weight." His eyes slid over to me. "We both do."

I stared at him blankly before looking away. I didn't care what he did or didn't do for the camp. I couldn't have cared less if he just lounged around here while he waited for Charlie to get back, eating our food and drinking our water. It wasn't like we didn't have enough.

I cared about the fact that he'd been military. Which was probably hypocritical. Seraph—Luke—had been military too, but that was different.

Danny had also been military, I realised as my gaze drifted back to him, but only briefly, and it sounded like he'd left to be with Wyn. Then again, Hunter had left to be with Edin. I looked away from them both, reluctantly

acknowledging to myself that I'd probably been a little unfair to Hunter. Assuming he really *hadn't* known anything about Project Divinity.

The food bag was safely tucked in my coat, so I had no reason to stay here. Daisy was telling Hunter that it was lovely having him and Edin here, so I stood up and nodded at Danny before turning to leave.

Before I could, oily black smoke appeared outside the door, Wyn's usual form replacing it a second later. He pushed his way inside and made a beeline straight for Danny, cupping his shoulders from behind and dipping his hood to kiss the top of his head.

"Seraph is fine," he drawled. "Gloam is heading back in for the evening."

I didn't know if he said it for my benefit, but I slipped out of the diner in silence. My stomach grew jittery as I made my way across the camp, until a voice behind me stopped me dead.

"Wait. Lilac."

Tensing, I turned around. At least it wasn't the Soul Eater this time, skulking behind me to tell me he'd watched Seraph fuck me with his fingers. It was Hunter, his eyes tight and hands stuffed in his coat pockets as he crossed the distance.

I stayed silent once he was in front of me, waiting for him to talk. He sighed and reached up to scrub a hand through his short hair.

"Look, I get why you don't like me," he said bluntly. "And I don't care. But I want you—and Seraph—to know that I really didn't have any idea about what they were doing. Neither did Charlie."

"You've already told me that," I said in a flat voice.

"Yeah, and I can tell you don't believe me." His brows pinched. "If I'd known, I would just admit it. We had to do some shitty stuff, but we thought we were doing the right thing. We thought we were *helping*. If I'd known what was actually happening..."

When he trailed off, I shifted uncomfortably and asked, "Why do you care if I believe you?"

"Because it fuckin' bugs me," he snapped. "It bugs me that Seraph might think I was okay with what they did to him."

"Seraph doesn't even know you were a soldier."

"But he might one day. When he's better." Hunter took a step closer, making me tense up. His face was hard when he said, "Look, I don't give a shit if you don't like me, but you're cold to Edin when all he's trying to do

is help, and *that* pisses me off. Be a dick to me all you want, but do *not* be a dick to him.”

He turned and walked off. I watched him impassively as he shoved his way back into the diner before slowly turning and continuing toward the entrance.

I hadn’t been a dick to Edin. Had I? I supposed most people thought I was a dick just from the way I usually acted, but I hadn’t been intentionally cold to the big beastie. And did he even care? Or was Hunter just being overprotective?

I passed Edin on my way out as he sauntered into the camp with something dead and furry slung over his shoulder. He gave me a big grin.

“Lilac.” He gestured at his kill. “I did well tonight.”

I forced myself to stop and give him an uneasy smile under my mask. “Uh... great.”

Edin chuckled, clapping me on the shoulder before continuing toward the diner. “I won’t keep you from Seraph.”

That made me eye him a little suspiciously as he sauntered off. Did he know something? Had Wyn told him? I didn’t care if the other beasties knew I’d had sex with Seraph. I just didn’t want Gloam to find out. And I thought Edin had a big mouth.

Before I stepped into the container entrance, I realised I needed to get my lantern. Backtracking to my room, I fixed it to my belt before stuffing another blanket into my coat.

I had a plan for tonight. I wasn’t going to even mention the key until I’d gauged how calm Seraph was. And I’d still wait a couple of hours, even though Rig had assured me he would be keeping Gloam *busy* all night.

I bumped into the big aytorin on my way back out of the camp. He gave me a warm grin.

“Seraph is in a very good mood. It should be a quiet night for you.”

I nodded as he passed me, pausing and looking over my shoulder to watch him go into his room. Seeing the door close behind him settled some of the tension in my gut. I wasn’t nervous about letting Seraph out—about what he might do—but I was uneasy about the thought of one of the beasties coming out while he wasn’t in the cage. If Gloam did, he would try and put a stop to me even seeing Seraph. Not that I’d let him, but I would rather not get into something where Rig would be stuck in the middle.

The key was warm against my chest, a slight weight I would have barely felt if I wasn't so focused on it. When I rounded the corner of the wall, a grin stretched my mouth as Seraph chuffed instantly and sat up.

"Hi," I told him, heading toward the RV. "I'll be back out in a minute, okay?"

He grunted. "Yes, Lie-lack."

I could feel his eyes on me as I walked up the steps and pushed the RV door open. It was dark and cold in here, so I switched on the lantern and set it in the middle of floor so I could see.

First, I quietly coiled up the chains that had been used to restrain Seraph and stashed them away in an empty kitchen cabinet. I didn't want him to see them. Then I heaved up the broken tabletop, carrying it over to the door and outside to lean it up against the side of the RV.

Heading back in, I gathered up all the blankets and dumped them on the bench so I had a clear space to pull all the couch cushions off and onto the living room floor. Then I shook out all the blankets and draped them back on top. Before leaving the RV, I grabbed the pillows from the bedroom and added them to the nest.

I knew there was a perfectly fine bed in here, but I wasn't sure if Seraph would prefer to be low to the ground. Plus, the windows in the living room faced the camp wall. I needed to be able to see—and hear—if someone was approaching.

When I went to close all the curtains, I waved at Seraph through the window before drawing them shut. The one that had the best view of the wall I left open the tiniest amount, giving me a sliver of space to peer through if I heard any sounds out there.

I shivered when I stepped outside after turning the lantern back off and placing the food bag on the nest of blankets. It was chilly in the RV, but still a lot warmer than out here. My boots crunched through fresh snow as I took the long way around the cage to the hidden corner. It was dark, my lantern still in the RV, but there was enough moonlight to let me see where I was going.

Seraph's white eyes shone eerily in the dark, but I loved the sight of them. I pulled off my mask, stuffing it in my pocket as I crouched outside the cage. He'd already draped the blanket back in my usual spot, making my chest get tight.

“Hi,” I said quietly, dipping my head to kiss Seraph’s knuckles when he reached through the bars for me. “How are you feeling tonight?”

“G-good,” he grated, then shot me his big grotesque grin. “B-better you are here.”

I grinned, shuffling closer to the bars, my eyes slipping shut when Seraph palmed the back of my head and his long fingers sifted through my ponytail.

“Your lessons with Gloam are going well,” I said, eyes popping back open to look at him in the dark. “You’re so smart, Seraph.”

It was awkward for me to compliment anyone, but I wanted Seraph to know how clever he was, how massively he’d improved. I wanted to encourage him to keep trying—not for my sake. Not so I’d get to understand him when he spoke to me. For *his* sake. Because the better he got, the sooner he could come out for good.

At least I’d be able to get him out for a little while tonight. But I knew I had to be careful—I knew I had to make sure that, as heartbreaking as it was, he understood that he would have to go back in at dawn if I did let him out.

I suddenly doubted my entire plan. Was it crueller to let him out only to put him back in there? Was Gloam right?

I kissed Seraph’s cheek distractedly when he pushed his face against the bars, blinking at me. As I sat down on the blanket, I stared at him, trying to figure out what to do.

Was I being selfish, wanting him to come out before he was truly ready? Was it really the best thing for him, or was it just what *I* wanted?

Before I could let the doubts start to plague me, I pushed them away. Seraph was intelligent. He was capable of making a rational decision—I trusted that he was. I would explain everything and he could decide. It wasn’t like he still spent every day trying to get out of his cage in a mindless fury. He was calm. Thinking clearly. No longer wracked by so much pain.

His deep, guttural voice pulled me out of my thoughts.

“No... f-food to-night?” he asked, looking at my empty hands.

I smiled, reaching in to grasp his long fingers as his hands rested on his crossed ankles. I just wanted to touch him. All the time. I’d never wanted that with anyone before.

“We have dinner,” I assured him. “But we’re going to have it in a little while, if that’s okay with you.”

“Yes, Lie-lack.”

“How was your day?” I asked, still holding his hands as I leaned closer until my temple rested against a cage bar.

“Good. *Ka yona ge* Glo-wem.” He paused, concentrating. “I... t-talked with Glo-wem.”

I smiled. “What did you talk about?”

“*Le*—H-his... *tira*. R-Riiiiig.” He drew the word out. “Ad-am.”

I vaguely remembered hearing Gloam call Rig that when Seraph had been dying. I hadn’t known his real name. Raiders didn’t share that information with many other people.

I wondered if Seraph remembered me telling him *my* real name, but I didn’t want to bring it up in case it triggered bad memories for him. I’d told him as he was dying.

Instead, I nodded. “Rig is my friend. You’ve seen him out here. He’s usually wearing a fringed jacket and a leather mask with studs on it. Curly hair.”

“*Shi*.” Seraph’s eyes brightened. “Yes. I kn-know him.”

“He’s the one who brought you here. Him and Gloam.” I clutched Seraph’s hands tighter. “He wanted to help you.”

Seraph stared at me for a few moments, before all his eyes blinked discordantly and softened. “Y-yes. He is... good.”

“He is.” I nodded. I didn’t think Seraph would hurt anyone, but I still wanted to drill it into him that the raiders weren’t bad. They weren’t a threat.

“Do you remember seeing Ghost?” I asked. “He hasn’t come out here much, but he’s Aury’s mate. The rycke. He wears a gas mask.”

“Gas... mask?”

“Uh...” I didn’t know how to explain it, and it told me that Seraph definitely didn’t remember much from when he’d been human. He would’ve obviously known what a gas mask was as a soldier.

Before I could try to explain what it was, Seraph added, “Yes, I know rycke... m-mate.”

“Yeah?” I grinned at him. “You remember him too?”

He nodded. “Yes. And... b-big one. With isdernuc.”

“Hunter, yeah.”

“Your *pagna*?” He growled in frustration, thinking hard. “L-like Riiig.” I sighed, gruffly saying, “Yeah, they’re my friends too.”

I wasn’t going to make Seraph wary of Hunter for no reason. And I didn’t want to alienate him from anyone. He’d said before that I was the only one he wanted to be near, to speak to, but he might change his mind once he was out of the cage for good, free to socialise in a more even setting. He might be more eager for interaction with other people than he realised. He seemed to enjoy talking to the beasties more now, no longer reacting badly when Aury or Edin were near.

“So are the beasties,” I said. “Uh—the other people. They’re my friends too. And they’re your friends. They’re trying their best to help you.”

Seraph nodded. “Yes.”

My mouth quirked into a wry smile. “Even the smoke man.”

Seraph wheezed his little laugh, his raspy voice dry when he spoke. “*Ka yer i—I... s-say for joke.*”

I chuckled, squeezing his hands again.

“C-corny joke,” he added, grinning at me as he repeated the words I’d said when he told me he was going to “eat Lilac”.

My chest tightened with longing for him. Not for us to have sex again, but just to be close to him. Properly close. No cold bars between us.

Glancing up at the wall to check Tipley was still down at the other end, I shuffled as close as possible and gripped Seraph’s hands harder.

“Seraph, if you could come out of your cage for a little while—just at night, while I was here... would you want that? Knowing you’d have to go back in when it got light?”

He stared at me, eyes tightening as he considered the question. I stayed silent as I waited for him to think it over.

“Just... for lee-tol?” he asked cautiously, then looked around his cage as his wide mouth tipped down. “Th-then... back in?”

I nodded, trying not to frown as I thought about locking Seraph back in the cage each morning. I hadn’t really thought about that aspect of it either. That was going to hurt.

“We could go and sleep in the RV.” I released his hand briefly to gesture at it, swallowing. “Together. But if it would be too difficult to come back in here every morning—”

“*Dak, Lie-lack.* No. I... w-want to.” He leaned forward, pressing his face to the bars, so I tipped closer to get rid of the remaining distance and

parted my lips when his tongue swiped over them. He mumbled some more words hoarsely, clutching my hands tight.

“Are you sure?” I croaked. “Are you... Will you let me put you back in the morning? I trust you, Seraph, but I know it will be difficult for you to come back in here.”

“Yes.” He nodded sadly. “I let you.”

As I stared at him, I considered letting him out and just... leaving. Together. We could go. He wouldn’t have to go back in the cage at all.

My throat bobbed as I glanced at the camp wall. Could I do it? Just leave Rig and Ghost without saying anything? Anchor and Rusty? The beasties—Aury and Gloam?

I looked at Seraph again. All his eyes blinked back at me as he waited for me to speak. His back was hunched so our faces were level, his long legs crossed as he pressed himself up against the bars to get as close to me as possible.

I didn’t think I had it in me to put him back in there.

“What about if we just left?” I said quietly, my voice hoarse.

His head cocked. “L-left?”

I nodded. “If I let you out, we could just go. Get away from the camp and find somewhere else to live. You wouldn’t have to go back in.”

He stared at me intently for a long time, eyes tightening. Then his face softened. He released my hand to cup my cheek, long fingers reaching all the way past my ear to rub over my hair.

“No, Lie-lack.” He rasped out a string of tangled words then gestured at the camp wall. “Y-your... f-friends.”

I shook my head, even as my chest tightened at the thought of never seeing Ghost and Rig again. “I don’t mind—”

“No. I not... let you do. And I...” He paused in concentration. “I want get better. Glo-wem help.”

My throat closed up, and I looked down quickly to hide my face. But Seraph tilted my chin back up, not letting me.

“I c-come back in. M-morning. I let you.” He nodded at the RV. “We sleep. *Kiritil*. Together.”

“Okay,” I said hoarsely. “I... I stole the key from Gloam earlier.”

I didn’t want him to think I’d had it on me this whole time. He paused, then huffed out his wheezy, snorting laugh and rasped something at me in a sly tone.

Grinning shakily, I kissed his palm before standing up and making my way over to the RV to grab the tabletop I'd brought outside. I had to try and get onto the roof of the cage to unlock it, and there wasn't anything else that would give me a leg-up. Not unless I ripped out one of the benches in the RV, but that would be too loud. It would draw attention from the raiders on the wall.

I glanced up again to make sure the coast was clear. Tipley was still down the other end, legs swinging absently as he sat on the edge of the wall. I could see that his face was tilted in the other direction.

Moving quickly, I brought the tabletop to the hidden corner and propped it against the side of the cage, using the blanket on the ground to reduce the chances of it slipping when I hoisted myself up with it. Luckily I was good at using narrow ledges to climb, doing it all the time to get onto the bar roof.

My gut churned with anticipation as I tested it to make sure it wasn't going to slip out from under me, before gripping the bars up high and placing the toe of my boot on the edge of the table. Seraph's hands quickly shot out to hold it secure for me, and I managed to hoist myself up with ease.

I didn't linger up there for long, aware that I was a lot more visible while I did this. I unlocked the padlock as quietly as possible and eased open the hatch, setting it down as gently as I could and wincing when it still let out a tiny clang. My legs were a little unsteady with adrenaline as I clambered back down.

"Okay, maybe make a nest with your blankets so it looks like you're under them," I whispered. "Just in case."

Seraph was staring up at the night sky above his head, frozen in place. When I whispered his name, his head jerked down and his eyes blinked in a wave.

He nodded absently, arranging his blankets so it looked like there was a lump underneath. His breathing grew shallow as he looked up at the open hatch again, long fingers curling into fists against his thighs.

"Be quick," I whispered. "And close the hatch as quietly as possible behind you. Stick close to the wall until you're just inside the forest and make your way to the RV from there. You need to stay hidden."

He nodded again, slowly rising as his arms stretched up to grip the edges of the hatch.

I stepped back, my stomach squeezing into a tight knot as I watched him climb out of the cage.

CHAPTER FORTY

I held my breath as he gently closed the hatch behind him before climbing down.

I didn't have time to properly appreciate the enormity of this moment, too on edge until he was safely hidden in the RV. At least it was dark out here, and his skin blended into the shadowed camp wall as he slunk alongside it on all fours. White eyes blinked at me from the treeline, moving closer to the RV.

I walked swiftly over and opened the door silently, waiting, my eyes darting repeatedly up to the camp wall. Tipley still hadn't looked this way, and I was pretty sure he wouldn't see much anyway. It was pitch black out here, the moon now hidden behind thick clouds.

My breath caught when Seraph suddenly appeared, still on all fours as he silently slipped inside the RV. I hurried in after him, easing the door closed and locking it with the latch. Stepping past him as he crouched on the floor, as still as a statue, I lit the lantern and set it down beside the nest of blankets.

My heart was thudding as I turned to face him. He was looking around warily, but then his eyes locked on me. Slowly, he stood. I realised that he still couldn't straighten to his full height in here, the RV ceiling too low. He stayed hunched over just a little as he took a single step closer. Then another.

I had to tilt my head far back to keep looking at him when he came to a stop in front of me. He blinked down at me, chest heaving with his shallow, snarly breaths. Then he crouched again to wrap his arms around me, pressing his face to my chest as he let out a hoarse sound.

"Lie-lack," he rasped against my shirt.

I blinked rapidly as my eyes got hot, quickly wrapping my arms around his head and leaning down to press my lips to the top of his skull. His skin was a little cold, but as it began to warm up I could smell his scent. Warm and earthy. My eyes slid shut as I breathed it in, feeling him tremble against me.

We didn't move for a long time. He burrowed as close to me as he could, sliding his arms under my coat to hold me even tighter.

“Are you feeling okay?” I eventually whispered, aware how monumental this moment was for him.

The first time someone had trusted him. The first time he had been out of his cage in god knew how long while awake and lucid. I couldn’t bear to think about how long he’d actually been in there, so I didn’t let myself. I didn’t want to ruin this. I finally had him with me, properly, with nothing between us.

He nodded against my chest, letting out a long, drawn-out version of his snarly contented sigh. “Yes, Lie-lack.”

I grinned shakily against his scalp, finally lifting my head. “Are you hungry?”

He chuffed in amusement, reluctantly pulling back but keeping his huge hands on my waist. “Yes.”

I was as hesitant to step away as he was, and the moment I settled on the nest of blankets I caught his fingers with mine and urged him down. He sat opposite me, then seemed to change his mind and shifted until he was at my back. Long, dark legs splayed wide to frame mine, his back hunched as he wrapped his arms around me and tipped his face into my neck.

I felt him shudder as all his eyes slid shut in my periphery. Turning my head, I kissed his cheek, his little gnarled ear. I let my cheek rest on his shoulder for a moment as I breathed him in, the food package forgotten in my lap. Eventually I felt his hands move down and gently take it from me so he could open it. Chuckling, I lifted my head and looked down to see what Daisy had given us tonight.

I could see two peeled carrots in there, but Seraph still snapped one in half to share it with me when he took it out of the bag. We ate slowly, talking quietly. I was pretty sure we were both still a little dazed over the fact that we were in here together, not having to share our meal out in the cold with Seraph locked in his cage. It hadn’t really sunk in yet.

Once the bag and the pecan tin were empty, I moved them off the nest of blankets and turned to face him. I wanted him so badly, but at the same time I didn’t want to have freed him from his cage just so we could have sex. I just wanted to be close to him.

“Can we, uh, lie down?” I asked awkwardly, trying to will my cheeks not to flush.

He nodded immediately, face calm as we shifted to get some of the blankets out from under us. I pulled off my boots, coat and machete before

lying down and lifting up the blankets covering me so Seraph could slip under.

He chuffed with pleasure and slunk into the nest, immediately wrapping himself around me as I settled the blankets over us. He let out a snarly sigh as my body relaxed from the warmth, from the feel of his long limbs twined around me.

I stretched an arm out from under the blankets to turn off the lantern, plunging the RV into darkness. Turning my head back toward him on the pillow, I stared at him. He stared back, his white eyes faintly visible. Shifting even closer, I kissed his chin.

“Will you kiss me, Seraph?” I asked quietly, turning onto my side.

He cupped my cheek, thumb stroking over the corner of my mouth. I parted my lips, already breathing faster in anticipation. A second later, I felt the warmth of his tongue flicker over them before dipping inside.

He didn’t sink it down my throat this time, instead letting it wind lazily against mine. My body reacted, heating up, but I didn’t need more than this right now. I slid my tongue against his, shuddering as the taste of him filled my mouth.

When the kiss eventually ended, I sighed and shuffled closer, pressing my face against his throat as my legs curled up to keep me warm. His long arm settled over me, the other cushioning my head. He was so much bigger than me that I was tucked neatly against his torso, and I felt his legs bend to cushion mine.

He surrounded me completely, his thrumming purr vibrating against my face and chest, and I found myself falling asleep far faster than I had wanted to. Falling asleep with another person, not alone, for the first time in my life.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

It was still dark when I woke up, and my body was damp with sweat beneath my clothes from the heat pumping out of Seraph. He was still curled around me, his snarly breaths deep and even in sleep.

I had rolled over at some point, so my back was nestled tightly against his chest. I could feel some of his sharp teeth digging into my scalp as his steady exhalations ruffled my hair, but they weren't hurting me.

Staring sleepily into the darkness, I reached up and clutched the wrist of the arm tucked against my chest, letting my fingertips trail absently over his textured skin. Then I dipped my head to press my face into his palm, eyes closing as I curled his long fingers over my cheek.

I had never felt like this before. This... needy. I'd been horny before, sure, my body frantic with the urge to come, but this feeling wasn't about getting off. It was... deeper. I didn't *need* sex, but I already knew I needed this. Being this close to him. Being able to touch him and smell him and feel him around me. Sex would just be another facet of that. A way to let me get as close as possible to him. A way to show him. But it wasn't the only way, and it wasn't the most important one. This—just lying with him, being able to sleep with him—was so much more meaningful to me. Especially as I had never done it before—never wanted to do it with anyone else.

Seraph stirred behind me, and for a second I wondered if he would panic when he woke up in here—if he would remember the last time. I felt him stiffen for a brief moment, but then he let out a deep, purring sigh and tucked his face against the back of my head, snuffling at my hair.

He rasped out a few words sleepily, pulling me tighter against his chest. His hand slid down to slip under my shirt, trailing over my hot, damp skin.

My breath caught as my cock twitched in my pants. Seraph's legs tangled with mine, and when his thigh pressed against my nuts, I gritted my teeth to suppress the tiny sound that tried to escape.

Suddenly, my cock was stiffening in a rush. My breath left me in a sharp puff, and I reached back to slide my hand down his side.

Swallowing, I rasped, "Seraph."

He went still behind me, then gently rolled me onto my back. I stared up at him in the dark as he leaned over me, my chest already rising quickly with my shallow breaths.

The hand under my shirt slid down, long fingers playing with my navel piercing, making my belly dip. Then they trailed lower, and my hips twitched when he palmed my stiff cock through my pants and rumbled out a low sound.

“Seraph,” I panted again, my cock jerking when he snarled and dipped his head.

I couldn’t stop my hoarse groan when his long tongue filled my mouth, immediately burrowing its way into my throat. My trembling hands dropped, tangling with his fingers as I fumbled with my fly. My cock smacked against my stomach as I lifted my legs to shove my pants and underwear down, head immobile with Seraph’s long tongue dipping its way in and out of my throat.

He took over, grabbing the crotch of my pants in one big hand and tugging them down my legs until they were off. My knees fell open wide, hips arching up as his hand slid up my thigh to rub over my cock and nuts. I moaned shakily, pressing up into the touch, clutching at his wide shoulders.

The moment his tongue retreated from my mouth, I sat up and ripped off my shirt, breathing hard. Seraph grunted, and before I could lie back down, he was flipping me around so I was on my knees.

When he palmed the back of my head and exerted gentle pressure, I exhaled shakily and lowered my face into the pillow. My chest sank into the pile of blankets, ass still high in the air. As he shifted onto his knees beside me, I spread my legs wider, turning my head so my cheek pressed into the pillow and I could see him.

His cock was out, the protective covering peeled back and fanning out on his abdomen and the tops of his thighs. My mouth watered with the urge to taste him. To run my tongue over the slick length, feel those little tendrils grip onto my face and keep me close—

I sucked in a sharp breath when his long fingers splayed over my raised ass and squeezed, spreading me wide. My cock leapt, hanging between my legs like a steel bar. He dipped his head and nuzzled my lower back, tongue flicking out to taste my skin. When it slid down my crack, I bit my lip hard to keep quiet, conscious that the RV walls were thin.

My eyes rolled back when his tongue touched my hole, the tip swirling in a mind-numbing circle. He grunted with pleasure and licked, softly at first, then in rapid flicks that made my thighs tense up and start to tremble.

I was panting already, fingers curling into the blankets as his tongue trailed lower, the slick length of it undulating over my hole as he wound the tip around my nuts.

“F-f-fuck,” I got out as quietly as I could manage, my hips jerking when the tip of his tongue tickled the base of my shaft. Then it slunk back as he snarled, his heaving breaths fanning over my wet ass, and wiggled the tip against my hole, seeking entry. My head reared up when it pushed inside, a hard breath bursting from my lungs.

Seraph snarled again, and in the next instant he was pinning my head back down with his knee, locking me in place. My cock pulsed uncontrollably, dripping pre-cum onto the bed, my chest heaving against the blankets. He wasn’t leaning his full weight on me—just enough to keep me down. Keep me helpless for whatever he wanted to do.

I loved it so much my eyes rolled back again, body starting to shake. I let out a strangled sound as he worked more of his tongue into my hole, pushing in and out to get deeper, fucking me with it. His long fingers dug into my ass harder, spreading me so wide it almost hurt, but it just made more pre-cum thread onto the blankets as my cock bucked in the air.

When the tip of his tongue wriggled against my prostate, my knees almost gave out. I bit down on my lip hard to try and keep quiet, shaking uncontrollably. He thrust his tongue deeper—so impossibly deep—bringing a sharp flare of pain that made my hole clench around the intrusion. He snarled, withdrawing his tongue to give me several shallower thrusts. I moaned hoarsely, my head still pinned beneath his knee.

Faster than I could process, I was being rolled onto my back and his tongue was laving my dripping cock, winding around the length, circling my tight nuts. I shuddered, still gripping the blankets as my knees dropped open wide and my hips strained up.

When he sat up, breathing as hard as I was, I stared up at him in the dark with wild eyes for a moment. Then I was scrambling onto my knees and pushing him back until he was leaning against the front of the couch. Clambering onto his lap, I reached down and fisted his cock in a trembling hand.

He shuddered, hands squeezing my ass. “Lie-lack.”

“I w-want—” I tried to take a breath, my chest heaving. “I want to fuck. Do you want that?”

“Yes,” he rasped immediately, his voice unsteady. “P-please, Lie-lack.”

I couldn’t wait any longer. Sitting up on my knees, I notched his cockhead against my wet hole, still relaxed from his tongue. Seraph snarled, hips twitching as he tried to keep them still, all his eyes fixed on where our bodies were joining.

“*Unngh fuck*,” I gritted out as the head popped inside and all those little tendrils immediately latched onto me—my ass and inner thighs and taint. It felt unreal, making me shake harder.

I started lifting and sinking back down rapidly, desperate to get him fully inside me, wincing when I went too fast and my hole strained around his thick length. But I was determined, and it wasn’t long before I was fucking myself on his cock, gripping his shoulders for leverage. My breaths were shaky and unsteady, thighs trembling and beginning to burn as I bounced on his dick as fast as I could.

“S-Seraph,” I croaked, clutching the back of his head as his big hands smoothed up and down my back, trembling against me.

When I felt that long, prehensile protrusion above his cock wind around my straining length, I had to tip forward and bite down on his shoulder to stop myself from crying out. He snarled raggedly, cupping the back of my head and tangling his fingers in my bouncing ponytail, already messy and coming loose.

I groaned in protest when his hands dropped to grip the backs of my thighs and lift me off his cock, but he was already spinning me around until my back was to his front. I tipped my head back onto his shoulder as he lowered me down, his cock sinking back inside.

Then those hands slid along the backs of my thighs to grip behind my knees. My eyes flashed open when he lifted my legs into the air, keeping me easily suspended as his hips started to rut up wildly into me.

I clutched at his rangy arms, staring down in disbelief even though I couldn’t see much. Just the shadowy shape of my cock bouncing against my stomach as he used my body like a cocksleeve, slamming me down onto his dick again and again while he snarled against my neck.

“F-f-fuck,” I panted, reaching back to twine my arms around his neck, gripping the back of his head as I let out a jerky moan with every smack of my ass against his hips. “Oh fuck—oh fuck, I’m gonna come.”

“Yes, Lie-lack,” he snarled, before his tongue curled over my throat, so long it almost wrapped completely around it.

I let out a strangled sound, my head falling back again as my hips tried to strain up but couldn’t, my entire body completely at his mercy. My toes curled in the air, so hard they cramped, and I couldn’t suck in enough oxygen as the relentless slide of his cock against my prostate made my dick start to pulse.

The cum streamed out of me in a lazy, continuous flow as my entire body seized up from the orgasm, rendering me completely silent. My hole spasmed around his tunnelling cock, making him snarl as I shook wildly against him. It didn’t stop, my limbs tingling and going numb, heat spreading out from my core as I struggled to breathe.

Before it ended, I felt him stiffen against me and start to shake. He slammed me down and pinned my ass tight against his lap, and I was finally able to let out a ragged groan when I felt his cock jumping inside me, pumping out his cum. His teeth grazed the back of my sweaty shoulder as he trembled wildly, fingers tightening their grip on my knees.

I was completely boneless when I sagged back against him, panting weakly. I was hot with sweat, my hair damp and limp in what remained of my ponytail as I turned my face into his neck and let out a shaky sigh.

Seraph’s chest vibrated against me with his deep, thrumming purr. He gently set my legs down and wrapped his arms around me tight, snuffling at my hair. I jerked when those little tendrils unlatched from my skin, tickling me before they retreated. Seraph carefully lifted my hips so his cock could slide free before settling me back down, and I exhaled shakily again as my body slumped back.

“Lie-lack,” he rasped, making my mouth curve up into a tiny smile as I nuzzled his neck.

I knew I could fall asleep like this, but when I blinked my eyes open and finally lifted my heavy head, I could see the sky beginning to lighten through the tiny gap in the curtains. Utter despair filled my chest, chasing away the boneless satiation from what we’d just done.

Seraph knew as well. He sighed sadly into my shoulder and squeezed me tighter. His voice was despondent when he rasped, “Back in soon.”

I swallowed, sitting up so I could turn to face him, kneeling between his splayed thighs. His cock was softening, those protective plates slowly curling inward to cover it.

“Not for long,” I said hoarsely, cupping his face. “Just until tonight.”

When he nodded, I bit my inner cheek and tried to blink away the heat gathering in my eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I croaked. “I wish—”

“Lie-lack.” He leaned forward to wrap his arms around me, dipping his face into my neck. “I know.”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

I couldn't shift the lump in my throat as Seraph and I snuck back outside after I got dressed, the sky murky and hazy with early morning glow. I could see two raiders standing by the hatch on the wall, having a quick chat before one of them took over the other's shift. It gave us enough time for Seraph to get back inside his cage and help me climb up so I could click the padlock back into place.

My throat bobbed convulsively as I clambered back down.

"Just until tonight," I repeated, clutching the bars of the cage.

He nodded, gently uncurling my fingers so he could tug my coat sleeve down and lick my wrist. Then he glanced behind him at the corner of the wall and eased back. "Glo-wem coming."

My pulse leapt. I quickly picked up the tabletop and carried it over to the RV, kicking snow over my footprints on the way. After stashing it back inside, I hurriedly fixed my mask over my mouth and zipped up my coat.

Gloam was rounding the corner as I stepped back outside, stuffing my hands in my coat pockets. He smiled at me easily, but I was sweating just a little, convinced he'd realise. Notice something.

My eyes darted over to Seraph. He had already moved the blankets so they no longer formed a lump that could have been him, and he was sitting back against the bars of his cage, a feigned expression of boredom drooping his eyes. My mouth twitched.

"Did you stay in there overnight?" Gloam asked as he reached me.

Keeping my face blank, I said, "No, I was just seeing if I could make it more comfortable. I'm going to sleep in there today."

He instantly frowned, but before he could speak I added, "I'll go inside to shower and eat, but I'd like to sleep out here. It's no colder than my room in there. And I've been sleeping well. I'm fine."

He exhaled, peering at my face. "You do look better. But I planned on talking with Seraph today. His English lessons are going very well. Won't it keep you awake?"

I shrugged. "No more than the raiders in the camp."

Gloam was still watching me carefully. "Why do you want to sleep out here, Lilac?"

My face hardened. I gestured at Seraph. "Because Seraph is my friend. And you're not out here all the time during the day. It's not like other beasties who might attack him only come out at night. He's still vulnerable the rest of the time. If I'm in the RV, I'll be able to hear if something tries to attack him."

When he didn't say anything, I calmly said, "You can't stop me, Gloam. You're not my father. And even if you were, I'm an adult. I can do what I want."

He winced, looking away. I felt a little guilty when he shook his head and quietly said, "I know. I'm sorry if I have been... overbearing, Lilac. I just worry." He lowered his voice. "I have seen the aftermath of Seraph's rage. I know it is infrequent now, but there are some images I will never be able to wipe from my memory."

"I understand. But he's been getting so much better. He's only going to improve." I looked over at Seraph, who was watching us quietly, to smile at him. I raised my voice to say, "You're determined, aren't you, Seraph?"

"Yes," he rasped back, some of his eyes flicking to Gloam. "I am... Thank you for help, Glo-wem."

Damn, Seraph was a bit of a charmer. He knew exactly what he was doing, because Gloam's face softened as he smiled at him.

"It is my pleasure, Seraph." He inclined his head in a graceful nod. "I very much enjoy talking with you."

He turned back to me and sighed. "As long as we won't disturb you. And please do go and get some food first."

"I will." I started walking away, shooting Seraph a secret grin once I'd passed Gloam.

When I stepped back into the camp, I noticed Rig hovering by the side of the motel. The moment he spotted me, he started marching over, brown eyes tracking over my frame worriedly.

"You okay?" he asked when he reached me.

"Yes. Why wouldn't I be?" I asked flatly, because I still couldn't figure out whether he *definitely* knew I'd taken the key or not.

Except I was pretty sure he did. He cleared his throat and gave a light shrug. "Just... you know. Wondering."

I couldn't stop the tiny smile twisting my mouth. I clapped him on the shoulder and headed for my room.

“I’m going to sleep in the RV today,” I told him as he followed me, “but I’ll eat and shower first.”

“Okay.” Rig didn’t question it, but he sounded a little anxious. “Is it warm enough in there?”

“Yeah, we—” I stopped, clearing my throat. “Yeah. It’s warm enough.”

I glanced over at him as I stopped outside my door and fished the key out of my pocket. I could see his mind churning, hands on his hips as he stared vacantly at me.

“Okay.” He gave me a nod and strode off.

I quirked a brow as I opened my door, wondering what his weird brain had been mulling over. After grabbing my towel and a clean set of clothes, I went and took a shower. My hole twinged, a little sore, and there was a patch of dried cum pulling at my pubes, making me shiver under the cold spray from the memory of what we’d done.

Once clean and dressed, I collected my breakfast from the diner and went into my room to eat it between tending to my plants. Then I grabbed my backpack to start filling it. My pyjamas and sweatshirt, a fresh lump of wood and my whittling knife, another blanket and my big water canteen.

When I got back out into the Wastes, Gloam had given Seraph his breakfast—fruit and some of Daisy’s flatbread. I waved at him, not wanting to interrupt, when his eyes perked up at the sight of me. After a second, he hesitantly lifted his hand and waved back, curling his long fingers.

I ducked my head to hide my smile as I walked up the RV steps and went inside. After dumping my stuff, I went into the little bedroom to change into my pyjamas and sweatshirt. I’d lied to Gloam—it was colder in here than my room—but when I got under the mound of blankets, it was like some of Seraph’s warmth still lingered. I could smell him, earthy and organic.

It took a while for me to get to sleep, seeing as I’d slept with Seraph during the night. I listened to Gloam’s muffled voice outside, saying sentences to Seraph in English and getting him to repeat them. My chest ached at the guttural, hesitant sound of his voice. But he was getting better shockingly fast—repeating whole sentences back, not just broken fragments.

His raspy voice eventually lulled me to sleep, and when I woke up I could tell that a few hours had passed. The light had shifted in the RV,

seeping in under the curtains, and I was almost uncomfortably warm under all the blankets despite the air in here still being chilly.

I stretched before sitting up and wiping my eyes. It was quiet outside, but when I climbed out of the nest and peeked between the curtains, I could see Gloam still out there. Seraph was curled up under his blankets, eyes shut as he slept.

Somehow, he looked almost fragile when he was asleep. He always curled up into a tight ball, tucking his chin down. One of his big hands was poking out from under the blanket, long fingers curled lightly near his face. My throat closed up with the urge to go and lie with him. I'd stay in the cage with him if I could. I didn't care.

After having a big drink of water, I got dressed and quietly stepped outside. Crunching through the snow to Gloam, I crouched a short distance from him and looked at Seraph.

"How did his lessons go today?"

Gloam grinned at me. "Excellent. He is picking it up so fast. He told me he knows the words—he has them. It's like they won't come out, all the other languages coming out instead when he tries. But he is pushing through it."

I supposed that made sense. His human self had been drowned out by all the monster parts forced into him. A tangle of other creatures fighting for dominance in his brain and body, erasing who he once was.

"He is doing very well, Lilac," Gloam murmured, looking over at me. "I have been thinking about what you said—your suggestion. It might... work, in the near future. Letting him out for short stints. Seeing how he responds to the environment."

My gut clenched into a knot, but I just nodded calmly. When it came to it, I would just admit to stealing the key. I'd take whatever punishment I got—from Gloam, the beasties, even the camp if they found out and wanted a say in it.

It was worth it.

That night, we didn't fuck again, my hole still tender from the pounding he'd given it. After we ate, he tugged my clothes off until I was naked and held me on his lap, seeming to just want to be skin-to-skin with me.

I buried my face in his throat, body relaxing on top of him as he leaned back against the front of the couch. Eventually though, both our cocks started to get stiff. Those protective plates brushed over my sac and inner thighs as they began to unfurl, making me shudder.

Soon, we were grinding together frantically, those little tendrils around the base of his cock latching onto my nuts and the crease of my groin. The long, thin protrusion on his pubic mound curled around our lengths, pinning them together as I rutted my hips feverishly against his, gripping his shoulders and panting like I'd run a marathon.

I gritted my teeth to stay quiet when I started to come, but a strangled sound still escaped me. As my cock spurted over his length, Seraph snarled and strained his hips up, fingers biting into my ass as he followed me over.

After collapsing against his chest for a long time, I slowly climbed off to put on my pyjamas, my legs still a little unsteady. Seraph seemed to like the crop top, because he let out a snarly chuff and pushed me onto my back to flick at my bellybutton ring with his tongue, making me chuckle.

He pulled the blankets over us and fumbled with the lantern to turn it off, then sighed with pleasure as he burrowed into my side. We fell asleep quickly, curled up together, and I woke up when the sky was just starting to lighten.

When I gently shook Seraph awake, he snorted and blinked at me, before his eyes drooped with sadness. He nodded once and sat up, watching me as I quietly got dressed. Neither of us spoke as we crept back outside and he slunk into his cage, the mood sombre in the dark early morning.

A little piece of me broke when I climbed up and clicked the padlock shut, once again locking him back inside.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

We'd been managing to get away with it for almost a week.

Part of me was still on edge, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting for the night when I didn't wake up in time, and one of the beasties came out and found Seraph gone from his cage. Found us still curled up together in the RV.

But at the same time, I wasn't overly worried. If that *did* happen, I would be able to show that Seraph could be trusted. I could prove to them that he could come out, because he had been, every night, and he'd been calm and gentle the whole time.

The only thing that made me a little anxious was the thought of one of them startling Seraph. I didn't know how he'd react to that—to someone invading our space unannounced.

I was sleeping in the RV every day, and Gloam hadn't commented. I still went into the camp to wash up and get food and do my shifts keeping watch on the wall. I tended to the crops with Aury. I spoke to Anchor and Ghost and Rig. As far as I was aware, absolutely no one knew what I was doing every night.

Except Rig. Rig knew.

That was confirmed one afternoon when I was sitting by the RV and whittling. Gloam had gone back in a couple of hours ago, and it was just me and Seraph out there. We were talking, but I didn't dare get close to the cage in the daylight when any of the beasties could suddenly appear, and the raiders on the wall above had a clear view of us.

When Rig appeared around the corner of the wall, heaving something behind him, I paused my whittling and quickly stood up to help. As I got closer, I realised the solar powered generator from Mary's RV was sitting on a tiny trailer.

"Do you have any idea how difficult it was getting this through the entrance?" Rig panted when I reached him and gripped the handle to help him pull. "This thing weighs a fucking ton."

"Why are you bringing it back out here?" I asked, muscles straining as we tugged it closer to the RV. Seraph watched us curiously, kneeling in his cage and gripping the bars.

“Well.” Rig puffed out a breath when we came to a stop, his face flushed above his mask. “I thought seeing as you’re... uh, sleeping out here in the day now, you might want to actually be warm. Plus, the shower will work when we hook this up.”

I stared at him before looking down at the generator. Licking my lips, I cautiously said, “I’m okay. It’s not too cold during the day.”

Rig stared at me blankly. A flush started rising up my cheeks, but I stayed silent and stared back.

Eventually he snorted and looked away. “Okay, sure. Well, let’s still hook it up. I haven’t figured out what to use it for in the camp yet anyway, so no one will miss it.”

He put his hands on his hips and peered up at the roof of the RV. “How the fuck are we gonna get it up there, though?”

“Seraph will be able to,” I said without thinking. When I went very still and darted a look at Rig, he snorted and rolled his eyes.

“Wow, you’ve been letting Seraph out? What shocking information.” He crossed his arms. “You know I’ve been *selflessly* throwing myself at Gloam every single night for the past week so he stays distracted, right?”

“Selflessly,” I deadpanned.

Rig snickered, but sobered up when he looked over at Seraph.

“How’s it been?” he asked softly. “Is he okay?”

“It’s been fine. It’s been good for him.”

“Uh-huh.” Rig was side-eyeing me, but he got instantly distracted when Seraph sat up straighter and waved at him—his cute, awkward little wave that he was still learning.

“H-hello, R-Riiig.”

Rig froze beside me. My mouth twitched. As far as I knew, this was the first time Seraph had ever spoken directly to him. To any human except me.

“Oh my god,” he hissed, like his favourite celebrity had just addressed him. Waving back eagerly, he raised his voice and said, “Hi Seraph.”

Several of Seraph’s eyes darted over to me, and he looked a little shy when he rasped out, “Th-thank you for... h-help. Helping me.”

“Oh my god,” Rig mumbled again, his voice wobbly. He sniffled a little. “Of course. I’m—I’m so glad you’re feeling better.”

“Yes. Better.” Seraph grinned at me, his mouth stretching wide. “Lie-lack m-make me f-feel better.”

“Yeah, I bet he does,” Rig muttered good-naturedly. I narrowed my eyes at him.

Turning to face me, he gestured at the generator and said, “I’ve had to wait ‘til the camp’s been quieter to sneak this out. Gloam’s out hunting with Edin.”

I quirked a brow. “He’ll notice it as soon as he comes out.”

“Yeah, but I can tell him it’s for you during the day. Which it partly is. But... I’m guessing you’ll also use it at night.”

His voice was a little sly, but I refused to react, saying flatly, “Thanks. That was nice of you.”

“It’s nothing.” He waved a gloved hand. “Help me drag it around to the side. Um... you’ll have to stay out here to keep an eye on it until Seraph can hook it up later. Do you want me to show you what he’ll need to do?”

I nodded, then helped Rig drag the trailer to the side of the RV before we climbed up onto the roof. He showed me how Seraph would need to connect it and said even though it was cloudy, it should generate enough power to heat the RV up and let the shower run.

“Just maybe don’t leave the lights on,” he said as we climbed back down. “Even with the curtains shut, you can see the glow from outside. I always knew when Mary was still awake because of it.”

I nodded. “I have my lantern in there, and it’s dim enough that uh, no one’s seemed to notice.”

Rig snickered, nudging me with his elbow before we rounded the RV. “You’re such a sly dog. Hey, I never asked you whether you have any other piercings. You know, aside from your bellybutton.”

I stopped and looked at him blankly as he stared back with an expectant grin. I let out a quiet huff. “My tongue and my dick.”

He blinked at me in shock. “Wow.”

I crossed my arms. “Any other questions?”

“Well, I mean...” His eyes darted down and back up. “The dick one—does it make stuff feel better? Like—”

“Yes,” I said bluntly, skirting past him.

“Does Seraph like it?” he muttered as he caught up, making me huff again as he snickered to himself.

“Shut up, Rig.”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he said airily, waving at Seraph as he sauntered back toward the wall. “See you later, you sly dog.”

The heater in the RV hummed quietly as Seraph and I ate our dinner on the nest of blankets, the air finally warm in here.

He seemed to like it, but he was fidgeting a lot, so once we'd finished eating I shuffled closer and gripped his hand.

"You okay?"

"Yes, Lie-lack." He leaned in and flicked his tongue over my mouth, then sat back and hesitated. "But I am... I feel a way."

"What way?" I asked immediately, assuming he didn't have the word for it yet. "Explain it to me."

"Like... here." He pressed a hand to his flat belly. "And my l-legs are... They want to st-stretch. Run."

"Restless?" I squeezed his hand. "You're feeling restless? Like you want to move."

"Yes," he said instantly. "Like... p-pressure here." He pressed a big hand to his chest.

My mouth tipped down. "Anxious?"

"Yes," he said again.

I exhaled, sitting back as my mind started to churn. I had no doubt he was feeling restless and anxious. He hadn't been able to move much at all for a very long time, and now he was coming out of his cage every night, getting a taste of freedom, but still just staying in here with me. Not going anywhere. Not able to straighten up to his full height, still having to hunch over in the RV.

Guilt squeezed my stomach as I looked at him. "I'm sorry. I should've thought about that."

"No, Lie-lack," he said instantly. "No sorry."

"Maybe... maybe tomorrow night we can go into the forest for a while. Before we come in here. We'd have to be really quiet, but we could walk around for a while."

"No," he said again. "Not safe for you."

My mouth twitched. "I'll be fine."

He wheezed out his little chuckle, dipping his head to rub his cheek against mine. "Good fighter. Lie-lack protect Seraph."

My throat bobbed, and I raised his hand to my mouth to kiss his knuckles. “Yes. I’ll always protect you, Seraph.”

He leaned back to look at me intently. “I protect you too, Lie-lack.”

“I know,” I murmured, turning his hand to kiss his palm. His long fingers curled over my cheek, the tips rubbing against my hair.

My bladder suddenly tightened with the urge to pee, ruining the moment. Sighing, I kissed Seraph’s hand again before heaving myself up.

“There’s a bathroom in here if you need to use it,” I told him. “I filled the water tank earlier.”

I’d walked to the river when Wyn came out to see Seraph, lugging a big plastic sack of water back for the RV. I could’ve just taken some from the camp, but I was pretty sure Tank and the other raiders would have had something to say about that.

Seraph followed me up from the floor, clutching my hand as I walked through the RV to the bathroom. I didn’t turn the light on, conscious of the small window in here. As I lifted the toilet lid and unzipped my pants to pee, Seraph poked his head in curiously.

I smiled over at him as the sound of my urine hitting the toilet bowl filled the tiny space. He hunched over to squeeze inside, looking around.

As I zipped my pants back up, he turned and accidentally flicked on the light switch with his elbow. I blinked in the sudden bright light, opening my mouth to tell him to turn it back off, but froze when I heard him suck in a shocked, snarling breath.

When the dots cleared from my vision, I saw him staring at his reflection in the mirror over the basin. My gut squeezed with trepidation. I’d forgotten about the fucking mirror in here. I should’ve covered it up.

There was silence as Seraph stared at himself. The shock that had stilled his body told me this was the first time he was seeing himself. Seeing what he’d become.

I had no idea what to say. How to make him feel better. How to tell him that it didn’t matter what he looked like—that I thought he was beautiful, that he was fine just as he was. The words were there, but I was frozen in place.

Finally parting my lips, I croaked, “Seraph—”

He stumbled back, tripping in the tiny space and falling into the miniscule shower cubicle, ripping the curtain down. Panicking, he snarled, fighting with the cold white plastic, his legs kicking out frantically.

“Seraph,” I said hurriedly again, kneeling to pull it off him. “It’s okay —”

“Put me in,” he snarled, making me go still with confusion. “Back in—I n-need to—go back in.”

His chest was heaving as he scrambled up and shot out of the bathroom. I could hear the low, ominous vibration that signalled the start of a scream rumbling in his throat. Stumbling out after him, my vision whited out with panic when I saw him push open the RV door and crawl outside.

Fuck. The moment I got outside, I looked up at the wall. I didn’t know who was up there, but they were down the other end. They didn’t seem to have spotted him, and Seraph was already clambering up the side of his cage and dropping down.

“Lock,” he snarled, hands starting to shake as he gripped the bars. “Now.”

Fuck. Fuck. I ran toward the cage and scrambled up, my boot almost slipping on the tabletop edge. My heart was pounding as I fumbled to click the padlock shut, Seraph letting out strained snarls from below. He was trying to hold it back—I could tell, and it just made me feel even worse.

When I landed back on my feet in the snow, his chest was heaving unsteadily like he was having a panic attack. He stared at his hands on the bars, the dark, leathery skin and overly long fingers with too many knuckles. Then he let out a tortured sound and let go, like he didn’t want to look at them.

Trembling fingers lifted to his face and touched his jutting teeth. They trailed over his blinking eyes. He sucked in a snarly, unsteady breath and loosed a raw scream.

“Seraph,” I said shakily, trying to reach for him through the bars. He jerked back, huddling against the far wall and clawing at his chest.

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” I tried to tell him, but he was snarling constantly now, frantic and scared. “Seraph, there’s—”

“What happened?”

The Soul Eater’s distorted voice came from behind me, and I spun around wildly to see him standing a short distance back, blackened fingers twitching at his sides.

“He—” *Fuck it,* Wyn knew more than most anyway. “He saw his reflection in the RV and panicked.”

The Soul Eater grunted, his hood tilting back toward me. I realised the key was hanging outside of my shirt when he looked up at the cage roof. Huffing, he strode a little closer and nodded at the tabletop still propped against the side of the cage.

“You might want to move that. Gloam’s coming.”

Shit. I grabbed the tabletop and carried it into the RV, quickly turning off the bathroom light and the lantern in the living room. I stuffed the key back under my shirt and fixed my mask over my mouth before coming back outside and closing the door behind me.

Gloam appeared around the corner a second later, a worried frown on his face.

“He got spooked,” the Soul Eater said before I could think of a reason for Seraph suddenly flying into a panic-fuelled rage. “The human said some harmless creature passed by in the forest.”

Gloam sighed sadly, watching as Seraph threw himself against the bars of the cage. My throat closed up so much I struggled to take a breath as I stared at him.

Swallowing, I walked to the edge of the ring of snow circling his cage. I just had to hope Gloam didn’t notice my footprints on the far side.

“Seraph,” I said. “You can calm yourself down. I know you can.”

Gloam and Wyn watched in silence as he snarled and dug his shoulder into the bars. Then he bit out a string of foreign words, his voice guttural and pained.

“He... he said, *I am a monster*,” Gloam murmured, sounding worried and confused.

My throat bobbed as I desperately tried to think of something to say. He *was* a monster, in the truest sense of the word, but that didn’t mean he was bad or wrong. That didn’t mean I didn’t want him.

But I couldn’t say that in front of Gloam.

“You—”

“I am a monster too, Seraph,” Wyn rasped, crossing his arms. “So is Gloam. So are Edin and Aury. In this world, we are the monsters. But that doesn’t mean there is anything wrong with you.”

I blinked in shock, because the Soul Eater’s words had made Seraph quieten down, just a little. He was still heaving out snarling breaths, but his furious pacing slowed. Eventually he stopped and let out a desperate, raspy sound that made my eyes burn.

Falling to his knees, he gripped the bars of his cage and stared at the Soul Eater. “H-help me.”

“We are trying, Seraph,” Wyn said calmly. “And you’re doing well. Calm yourself. Lilac is right. You can do it.”

At the sound of my name, Seraph sucked in a snarling breath and swung his head around to stare at me. I took a step closer, pleading with him with my eyes.

After a few seconds, he bowed his head and sat back on his heels. His hunched back heaved with a shuddering breath.

“I am... s-sorry, Lie-lack,” he rasped unsteadily. My chest burned with the urge to go to him.

“You don’t need to be sorry,” I croaked. “You did nothing wrong.”

He turned and crawled to the far side of the cage, clutching at a blanket and dragging it over himself as he curled up into a ball and rasped something in a low mumble.

“He said he doesn’t want you to look at him,” Wyn told me quietly.

“No,” I blurted, fighting the urge to take another step closer. “There’s nothing wrong with the way you look.”

Seraph didn’t answer, tucking his chin down and hiding under the blankets. We stood in silence for a few minutes until Gloam sighed.

“I can stay out here, Lilac,” he murmured.

“No,” I said immediately. “Go back in to Rig. We’ll be fine. He’s calmed down.”

I tried not to think about the fact that this would probably set back Gloam’s decision to let Seraph out. And it wasn’t even Seraph’s fault. I was the one who hadn’t thought about the fucking mirror in the bathroom. Of course he hadn’t seen his reflection before—not while lucid and off the drugs at least. Of course it had been a... shock.

I desperately wanted Gloam and Wyn to leave so I could try and reassure him. After a few more minutes they did, Gloam slowly walking back to the wall and disappearing around the corner. Wyn walked closer to me, his big black boots crunching through the snow.

“Don’t leave footprints,” he muttered. “Gloam will notice them.”

Then he disappeared into a cloud of black smoke that shot up and over the wall. The moment he was gone, I hurried over to the cage and dropped to my knees beside Seraph’s huddled form.

“Seraph, please look at me.”

He buried himself deeper under the blankets, trembling lightly.

“Seraph, please.” I swallowed, reaching through the bars to cup the back of his head. “I love the way you look. There’s nothing wrong with you.”

“U-ugly,” he mumbled, clutching the blankets with long, spindly fingers.

“You’re not ugly,” I got out, pressing myself right up against the bars.

“You’re not.”

“M-monster.”

“I don’t care,” I told him hoarsely. “I think you’re—” My cheeks grew hot with awkwardness, but I pushed through it. “I think you’re beautiful, Seraph. I mean it.”

He was quiet for a moment, before slowly lifting his head to look at me morosely. “I am n-not.”

“Yes, you are,” I insisted, cupping his cheek. “You—Your eyes are beautiful. And your skin. You’re tall and strong and—and I like it.”

He gazed at me for a few seconds, before letting out a tiny chuff. “Yes?”

Some of the tension in my chest eased. I smiled at him, pulling off my mask so he’d see it. “Yes.”

I lay down on my belly so my head was level with his, not caring when the snow immediately made my pants wet and cold. Reaching back through the bars, I curled my fingers over his hand.

“You said you were restless,” I said calmly, tracing over his knuckles with my thumb. “And anxious. I can understand why seeing your reflection could make you panic, especially when you’re already feeling that way. But I promise you, I love the way you look. I wouldn’t want to change anything about you.”

He chuffed quietly, shuffling around so he was facing me, his curled-up knees pressed against the bars under the blankets. “Th-thank you, Lie-lack.”

“I think it’s pretty obvious how much I like the way you look, right?” I said with a tiny smile. “How much I... want you.”

“Yes,” he rasped, gripping my hand. “I want you too, Lie-lack.”

I smiled at him, drawing his hand closer to kiss it. “Tomorrow, we’ll go out for a little while so you can stretch your legs and burn off some energy. Okay?”

“Okay,” he repeated quietly, letting out a snarly sigh as his eyes drifted shut. “Tired, Lie-lack.”

“Sleep,” I said, kissing his hand again before gently tucking it back into the blankets. He gripped my fingers tighter before I could pull away. “I’ll be

here when you wake up.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

I was loath to leave Seraph the next morning, but I had to go inside to eat and shower. I knew Gloam would be more alert again after Seraph's episode, watching keenly to make sure I didn't fall back into my neglectful pattern, so when he showed up in the morning, I made myself leave.

I had a shift keeping watch, so after sleeping for a couple of hours in my room I went up onto the wall and took over from Nun. By the time it was over, my belly was rumbling with hunger, so I went into the diner to get some late lunch, hoping there was some left.

Anchor was in there, sitting in her usual spot with a steaming mug of coffee in front of her on the counter. She gave me a distracted smile when I slid into the seat beside her, before doing a double-take to look at me properly.

"I've been meaning to ask you if you've spotted any more campfires nearby."

I went still. I'd completely forgotten about that, too distracted by first myself getting sick and then Seraph nearly dying.

Keeping my face blank, I said, "I'll go out again today to look around."

I doubted there would still be anyone nearby. It had been weeks since I first saw the campfire in the distance. If someone had been camping out nearby to do something insidious to the camp—try and take over or steal or whatever—they would've done it by now.

It had probably just been a trader or nomads, but I knew I had to go and check, so after receiving a small bag of food from Bo, I stood up and said, "I'll go out now."

"Thanks, Lilac," Anchor said vacantly, head bent over her clipboard. Before I could leave, she looked up and said, "How's Seraph doing? A couple of people said he woke them up in the night. He's been so quiet recently."

I nodded stiffly. "He got spooked last night, but managed to calm himself down quickly. He's doing a lot better."

"That's good." She gave me a hesitant smile, but sounded cautious when she said, "Maybe one day he'll be well enough to come out of the cage."

"He will be," I said bluntly, pulling open the diner door.

I strode across the camp and back out into the Wastes, walking along the wall to Seraph's cage. I'd go and look in the other direction, like I could vaguely remember planning to do before the Soul Eater had appeared and sucked black goo out of my throat.

When I rounded the corner, Gloam was sitting on the top step of the RV and talking quietly to Seraph.

"He is calm," he told me, sounding relieved. "He even apologised. I told him he had no reason to."

I nodded, looking over at Seraph and smiling when he grinned at me.

"I'm going out to scope the area," I said, loud enough so he heard. "I'll be back in a few hours."

"Is there a reason to be concerned?" Gloam said quickly, standing up.

There was no point telling him, because the likelihood was that no one was nearby anymore. I shook my head and said, "Routine check."

"Alright. Well, be safe." He gestured at Seraph with a smile. "We will wait for you to get back."

I glanced up at the sky and made a face. "Might be dark by the time I get back, so don't wait out here for me. I'll be fine. I've done this a lot."

"If you're sure," Gloam said hesitantly.

"I'm always fine, remember?" I said, giving Seraph a wave as I headed for the trees. "See you later."

The forest was cool and dark as I made my way through it, spotting a few harmless creatures darting between the trees—some from this world, some from the other. Further north, I could see one of the borolash's big, sagging heads as it stretched up to strip leaves from a tall tree.

I walked for a couple of hours, staying quiet and keeping my footsteps light even though I couldn't see any signs of people at all. No remnants of campfires or impressions on the forest floor. Not much snow had made it through the tree canopy, but there were a few patches crusted with ice.

Just as I was about to turn around to start heading back, convinced that whoever had come close before was long gone, I noticed something on the ground.

Crouching down, I cleared away some dead leaves and stared at the shallow impression of a boot's toe print in the frosty mud. Straightening back up with my hands on my hips, I slowly lifted my head to look in the direction it was pointing. It could have easily been left by one of the raiders, but none of us generally travelled this far in this direction—not through the

forest. There was no reason to, there were plenty of fruit trees and things to forage much closer to the camp.

I started walking forward, making sure to stay quiet. The trees were thinning out, telling me I was approaching a clearing or the forest edge. Just as I thought I saw something moving in the near distance between the trees, the faint sound of voices made me freeze.

Moving slowly, I stepped behind a thick tree trunk and went very still, trying to pinpoint the exact direction they were coming from and how many there were.

I could only hear two people talking, but that didn't mean there weren't more. It sounded like they were just beyond the forest. Close enough to the camp to be a concern, but far enough to not be detected.

My mouth thinned into a grim line behind my mask. Carefully, I started creeping my way closer and picked up on the crackle of a campfire. It helped cover any tiny sounds I made as my boots crunched lightly over dead leaves and twigs.

I got as close as I dared and stopped behind another tree, waiting. A few minutes later, a soft voice sighed.

"So hungry," they said. "I'm sick of fruit."

A flat masculine voice answered. "You know we can't eat unclean meat."

And then a third voice rang out, gruff and impatient and sending tingles over my scalp when I immediately recognised it.

It was Cutter.

"That's a stupid rule," he muttered.

The sound of his rough voice made me picture that day, watching him shove Ghost off the wall. Seeing the terror in Ghost's eyes before he vanished over the edge, the horrible sound of despair Aury made before he leapt off after him.

"It is not, newcomer," the flat voice said stiffly. "You have witnessed the glory of the Herald's cleansing fires. How can you want to consume impure flesh after that?" He scoffed. "Something as low and dirty as a rabbit or deer."

Cutter grunted, not sounding convinced. "Well how much longer are we going to wait? I'm hungry too. We have the words to get that beastie under our control, to take it back for the Herald. Why the fuck are we just sitting around?"

“Beastie,” the softer voice said disdainfully. “You are not a raider anymore, brother. It is a monster. Nothing more or less. A wild creature that is beneath us, all of us, just like the rest of humanity.”

“If you think that, why do you follow the Herald?” Cutter asked with a sneer. “They’re a monster too.”

The short silence was thick with tension.

“Watch how you speak about the Almighty, newcomer,” the flat voice hissed. “They are different. Above all others. Transcended. If you don’t believe that, why did you join us?”

Who the fuck were they talking about? The Almighty? The Herald? This person was obviously a monster, but it sounded like these people... worshipped them.

Had Cutter... joined a monster church after he got kicked out of the camp?

“I *know* they are,” he snapped. “*I’m* the one that told the Herald I’d seen the bea—monster here. *I’m* the one they sent out to get it.”

“Only because their spawn refused,” the other guy muttered. “The Herald told me that because they trust *me*.”

“Whatever,” Cutter snapped. “The point is, *I’m* the one they trusted with this. You’re just tagging along.”

“We are making sure you do not do anything foolish,” the other guy said stiffly. “And you didn’t even know it would be here for certain. You said it left.”

“Yeah, but one of the dumb raiders from the camp went with it,” Cutter snarled. “And I was pretty sure he wanted to fuck it, so I knew there’d be a chance they came back together, especially when the missionaries found Mary’s place empty and the RV gone. And I was right. It’s back here.”

“One of the raiders wanted to... *fornicate* with a monster?” the soft voice said, horrified.

Cutter grunted. “They’re all perverts in there. I’m glad I left.”

Left? My brow twitched, but I was too busy focusing on their other words. They were talking about Gloam and Rig. They’d mentioned missionaries going to Mary’s abandoned mansion, confirming this was a church or religion of some kind.

They were talking about taking Gloam to this Herald. Cutter had said he “had the words” to get Gloam under his control. I had no idea why this Herald wanted him, or how they could control him with words, but I

understood enough to know that this was probably how Mary had gotten him under her power in the first place. He was huge, unfathomably strong, and had hated Mary, but had obeyed her every command. Something else had been forcing him to.

And now Cutter had the means to control him too.

“The newcomer is right, sister,” the flat voice said. “We have waited long enough. We need to get the creature back to the Herald.”

“But...” The softer voice sounded scared. “We have seen the Soul Eater going in and out of that camp. I thought we agreed to wait until it left.”

“Well it’s not leaving,” Cutter snapped impatiently. “And it obviously hasn’t killed them all yet. You’ll just have to take the risk.”

“But...” she said again unsteadily. “There is—there is something outside the camp, behind Mary’s RV. We have heard it screaming and snarling—”

“Then just walk all the way around to the other side, through the forest.” Cutter sounded bored. “Then you can avoid it.”

“What is it?” she whispered.

“I don’t fuckin’ know,” Cutter snapped. “It wasn’t there when I left. Another monster for them to fuck? Who cares. Just walk around to the other side. I can tell you where the entrance is, but *don’t* use it. Wait outside until one of them notices you.”

Her voice was unsteady when she said, “A-alright. And I... They will let me in?”

“Pretend to be injured,” Cutter said flatly. “They’re all idiots in there who think everyone should be helped. They’ll let you in.”

I was breathing steadily as I listened, staring at the forest floor.

“Once you’re in, talk to as few people as possible. You’ll probably have to speak to the camp leader, Anchor, but she’s a fuckin’ idiot who’s too distracted by her missing boyfriend to notice anything. Tell her monsters attacked your camp or something. Whatever works. You just need to stay there long enough to get the monster under your control.” Cutter paused, then added, “And if you see a raider with dark hair tied up who looks a bit Chinese, don’t go near him. He’s a fuckin’ psycho. He’ll stab you before you’ve even had a chance to say anything.”

I’m half Japanese, you ignorant prick, I thought mildly, trying to pay attention to all the tiny sounds in case one of them started heading this way.

“But what if... what if the raiders try and stop me once the monster is under my control?” the soft voice said worriedly.

“If it’s under your control, you can order it to protect you, right?” I could hear the sharp grin in Cutter’s voice. “Order it to kill anyone who gets close. It has that giant war hammer. In fact, get it to kill the raider wearing a gas mask. Short, skinny guy.”

My blood went cold.

“Why?” the flat voice asked.

“Because he’s a fuckin’ weasel,” Cutter seethed. “He’s the reason I— He’s just a little freak. Trust me. He’s fucking a monster as well. And if you get the monster to kill him, it can bring him out here. We can eat.”

Somehow, my blood got even colder, a ball of ice forming in the pit of my stomach.

“He won’t have been cleansed by the Herald’s fires, though,” the flat voice said. But he sounded tempted. Hungry.

“We can roast him over the fire in the Herald’s honour,” Cutter said impatiently. “Say a few prayers or something. Surely they’d want us to be rewarded for doing this.”

“That’s true,” the female voice said hesitantly. “And the missionaries have to eat when they are away from the church. They must do something similar.”

There was silence for a few moments, before the flat voice said, “Fine. It will give us strength for the journey back.”

They fell quiet, no doubt hungrily thinking about the meal they planned to consume soon. Ghost. They wanted to fucking *eat* Ghost.

Of all the things I imagined happening to Cutter after he’d been kicked out, him joining a cannibal church was not one of them.

“I must admit, *brother*,” the flat voice sneered. “I’m still not sure why our sister is the one going in there. *You* are the one they know. Surely they would let you back in no question. You said you left of your own free will.”

Cutter was quiet for a few moments, no doubt struggling to think of an answer. Eventually, he snapped, “I think I’ve done enough, haven’t I? *I* was the one who could tell the Herald where the monster might be. *I* was the one who led us here.”

“Done enough?” the other guy snapped. “You would no doubt be dead if our missionaries hadn’t found you out here and taken you to the Herald. You were filthy and starving. And missing a hand.”

I heard a rustle. “Yeah, you see this?” Cutter snapped. “Monster attack. I still killed it, *and* I survived. You’ve been living the easy life, sequestered

away in that shopping mall, being given fresh meat and clean water and sleeping in a comfy bed. *I* was out here fighting monsters and keeping myself alive.”

I wasn’t overly interested in the lies Cutter had told these people. It wasn’t at all important. I silently willed them to get back to discussing their plan. The plan where they took control of Gloam and made him kill Ghost for them to fucking eat, before taking him to this Herald. To what? What did the Herald want with Gloam? Was it something to do with Mary?

“So, tomorrow?” Cutter said. “Let’s get this done. I’m sick of sleeping in a fuckin’ tent in the snow.”

“I thought you were used to surviving out here,” the other guy said flatly.

“I am,” Cutter snarled. “But that doesn’t mean I like it when I know I have something better.”

I had no doubt that was the only reason Cutter had joined this church—for an easier life out here, with a warm bed and hot food. He was an opportunist. It hadn’t crossed my mind that he’d stoop as low as cannibalism to get what he wanted, but that was evidently the case.

“Why tomorrow?” the other guy asked. “Why not now?”

“Because it’s getting dark, and she has a better chance of being spotted quickly in the day. Plus, the camp will be quieter. Some of them will be out hunting or collecting water. Fewer people around.”

“Alright,” the soft voice said quietly, still sounding scared. “I w-will go in the morning. For the Herald,” she added reverently.

“Praise the Almighty Herald,” the flat voice said confidently. Cutter muttered it unconvincingly a few seconds later.

“Remember what I said,” he added gruffly. “Avoid the creep with the dark ponytail and the machete. He’ll be suspicious of you anyway, and he really is a little psycho.”

“I will,” she said softly, then sighed in despondence. “I will go and forage for more fruit for tonight.”

“Good,” the flat voice said shortly. “And then tomorrow, we will feast on holy flesh in the Herald’s honour.”

I started moving away quickly before she could get up and come into the forest. As I walked back to the camp, I tried to work out what would be the best thing to do. Tell Anchor? I didn’t really want to give her any more stress, and I really didn’t want to give the raiders an excuse to turn against

her for her original decision of allowing Cutter to live, seeing as it had backfired. Badly.

The Soul Eater? He could come out here and kill them all in seconds. Quick and easy and... probably not painless, but still. They didn't deserve painless, anyway.

But as I remembered Cutter's sneering voice, cold and calm fury washed over me. I wanted to be the one to do it. I wanted to kill him. I'd wanted to kill him when he nearly killed Ghost.

If word got out around the camp that he was here, if the raiders learned about their plan... I didn't want to find out what that would do to Ghost. For him to know that there were people nearby who wanted to fucking *eat* him. And it might trigger something in Aury—an uncontrollable response that sent him into a murderous tailspin.

I could just go back there and kill all of them myself. There were only three of them. It would be easy. But as the camp wall came back into view in the distance, my eyes immediately homed in on where I knew Seraph was waiting.

He'd said he was restless. Getting anxious.

It was dark well before I got back, and he let out his little greeting chuff as I appeared from the forest and made my way over.

"Lie-lack," he rasped, his eyes swivelling over my frame. "You are safe?"

I nodded, crouching when I got to the cage and reaching between the bars to cup his cheek in my gloved hand. The camp was quiet, the moon high, so I knew it was late. I knew no one was likely to come out here now.

Glancing up, I saw the outline of a raider halfway along the wall, but it wasn't Nun or Ghost—someone who would immediately spot us. It looked like it might have been Bishop, which was perfect.

Looking back at Seraph, I leaned in and kissed his chin through my mask, then his neck. He purred in contentment and rubbed his cheek over my hair.

Clearing my throat quietly, I sat back and looked into his eyes.

Then I softly asked, "Want to go for a little walk?"

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Once Seraph was out of the cage and we were walking quietly through the forest, his hand clutched in mine, I told him what I knew.

"I don't know who this Herald is, but for some reason they want Gloam," I said after recounting what I'd heard the three church members say.

"I... r-remember," he rasped. "I remember her t-talk about Herald."

I stiffened, reluctantly asking, "Who?"

He let out a low, rabid snarl, clutching my hand tighter. "M-M-Mary."

I didn't look at him, keeping my eyes on the forest floor as I quietly asked, "You remember Mary?"

"Yes. Sh-she made me f-fight."

My chest tightened. I stopped and turned to face him, rising up onto my tiptoes to cup his face.

"You don't have to hurt anyone, Seraph," I told him. "I'll do it. I *want* to do it."

"No," he rasped, eyes tight with anger as he looked down at me. "I want to help. I want pr-protect others."

I stared up at him, before releasing his face to wrap my arms around his middle and hug him tight, pressing my cheek into his chest. A strange sense of pride washed over me. I doubted anyone else would feel proud of Seraph wanting to kill people, but... it made sense to me. He wanted to help protect Gloam and Ghost and all the others. Sometimes that meant doing bad things.

And he was calm, even though he had just talked about the evil woman who'd kept him on drugs and forced him to fight other monsters. He wasn't devolving into mindless fury.

When I stepped back and looked up at him, his face was grimly determined, reflecting my own sentiment. I didn't relish killing anyone or anything, but I'd do it if I had to.

"I'd do anything to keep you safe," I told him quietly, feeling awkward. "I hope you know that."

"I know, Lie-lack."

Taking his hand again, we continued walking. Seraph stretched briefly, letting out his snarly sigh as his back finally straightened. Jesus, he was so fucking tall. I tilted my head back to smile up at him, and he grinned back in the darkness before hunching over again so he could keep hold of my hand. I wondered if he would always walk like that now, having spent so long being unable to straighten fully.

We stayed quiet as we made our way through the forest, and I switched off the lantern hanging from my hip when the trees started thinning out. I could hear the faint sound of someone snoring up ahead, and my lip curled when I recognised it. I could remember hearing it from the upper floor of the motel at night, loud and rattling and obnoxious.

The fire had been banked, and three tents were set up around it. As we silently stepped out from between the trees, my eyes focused on the one that the long, loud snores were coming from.

Looking at Seraph, I pointed at myself and then the tent to indicate I was going for that one. He gave me a jerky nod, several of his eyes swivelling over to the other two. He crouched and crept closer on all fours, coming to a stop between the two tents and going still as he waited for me.

I unsheathed my machete and silently walked to the side of the third tent. Crouching down, I raised my machete until the sharp tip was poised against the thin nylon.

Then I slashed down, slicing through the material. The snores from within cut off abruptly, and when the ruined flaps of the tent flopped open, wide, watery blue eyes met mine.

“Hello, Cutter,” I said quietly.

He went deathly pale, sucking in a shuddering breath to yell, but I was already bringing my machete down on his throat. Blood spurted, coating the dark fabric of his sleeping bag and rolling off the waterproof material. He choked, hand jerking under the sleeping bag as he tried to clutch his slashed throat.

To my left, I could hear Seraph snarling and tearing through nylon. Frantic screams, horrified yells, the gurgles of the other two dying. In my periphery, I saw blood arcing and splattering over the ground. An arm or leg sailing through the air. But I kept my eyes on Cutter, watching calmly as he writhed in his sleeping bag, blood pumping from his neck.

It wasn't long before he grew weak, skin going grey in the pale moonlight. His body jerked, lungs filling with blood. It sputtered from his

mouth, staining his chin and cheeks as he finally slumped down. His eyes went flat and lifeless, still fixed on my face.

I grabbed a discarded shirt from the side of the tent and stood, using it to wipe off my machete as I looked over at Seraph. The two other church members were... gone. I could see pieces of them scattered around the ruined tents.

"That didn't take long," I said flatly, sheathing my clean machete and walking over to Seraph.

He snorted his wheezy laugh, letting me gently clean the blood from his hands with Cutter's old shirt. I took stock of him silently. He was calm. He wasn't trembling or drawing in shallow breaths, nor was his chest vibrating with an impending scream.

Once his hands were clean, I tugged down my mask and leaned in to kiss his chest. "How are you feeling?"

"Good," he told me, wrapping his arms around me tight. "G-glad they are gone. C-can't hurt others."

I nodded, breathing in his scent as I pressed my cheek to his chest. When I stepped back, I gestured at the carnage around us.

"You're efficient, but messier than me."

He chuckled again, taking my hand. "We go?"

"Hold on, I'll check the tents first—what's left of them. They might have some good stuff."

He nodded and crouched again to prowl between the ruined tents, picking things up to inspect them. I returned to Cutter's tent, ignoring his lifeless body as I went through his bag. There was a knife, not a great one, but I slid it carefully into my belt anyway. I wrinkled my nose at the pair of dirty, worn underwear, but something pale at the bottom of the bag made me reach in further.

It was a slip of paper. I squinted at it in the dark, then unhooked my lantern and turned it on so I could see.

The words written were meaningless to me, in a foreign language. But I grimly realised that this was probably what Cutter had been talking about—the words that could force Gloam under someone's control.

I pocketed the scrap of paper and looked through the bag again, just in case there was anything else. There wasn't, the contents pitiful. He'd always been shit at looking after himself.

"Find anything?" I asked Seraph as I made my way back over to him.

He glanced up from his crouched position, looking a little guilty as he munched on an apple. I chuckled, smoothing a hand over the back of his head and leaning down to kiss him before I put my mask back on.

“N-nothing good,” he told me, straightening up and holding something out. “J-just these. They are... s-strange.”

I took the objects, realising they were two identical white masks. Stiff and hollow, like they’d been cast from papier maché. I held one up to inspect the face. Bland moulded features stared back at me with tilted eye sockets, a little like Rusty’s plastic mask, except these had obviously been cast in someone’s likeness and not just as a blank canvas.

Seraph hunched over further and pushed his face against the inside of the mask, his two human eyes lining up with the holes to peer at me. He grinned, his wide mouth and sharp teeth stretching further than the sides.

I chuckled and lowered it, wondering if I should take one to show Gloam. It might mean something to him. One of the masks was cracked, a chunk missing, no doubt from the sudden rampage of Seraph tearing through their tents. I looped an eyehole of the intact one through my belt to let it hang there. I’d have to tell Gloam anyway. I couldn’t just hide the fact that people were looking for him—that they’d got so close.

“Ready to go?” I asked Seraph. He nodded and reached for my hand.

We started walking back into the forest, and I squeezed his hand as I looked up at him. “We can wash up in the RV when we get back. The shower works now. It won’t be comfortable for you, though. It’s tiny.” I hesitated, gripping his hand harder when I asked, “Do you want me to cover the mirror before you go in the bathroom again?”

He was silent for a few moments as we walked, before letting out a quiet sigh. “No. It is okay. I kn-know I... look like this.”

“I love the way you look,” I told him straight away, smiling up at him. “And I’ll prove it to you when we get back.”

He grinned down at me, all his white eyes gleaming in the dark. “I c-can’t w-wait.”

By the time we got back to the RV and managed to slip inside unseen, I knew we didn’t have long until it started getting light.

After helping Seraph scrub the blood off his arms, I washed my face and hands and led him into the living room. Urging him to lie down on the nest of blankets, I hurriedly stripped off my clothes and straddled his lean hips, resting my hands on his chest.

I dipped my head, indicating that I wanted him to kiss me. His long tongue unfurled from his mouth and flicked between my lips, before I opened them wider to let it burrow inside. I moaned when it slid into my throat, clutching his chest. My cock was stiffening up rapidly, jerking when Seraph's protective folds unfurled and brushed over the length.

I felt his stiff cock slide against mine, slick with his natural lubrication. Rocking my hips, I shuddered when those little tendrils brushed over my balls and the stretched tendons of my inner thighs. Before the thin protrusion above his cock could pin our lengths together, I slid down his body until I was kneeling between his splayed thighs.

He snarled, shuddering as his hands curled around my ponytail and his hips arched, cock bucking in the air. Dipping my head, I snaked my tongue around his leaking tip, groaning when his taste filled my mouth and the tendrils stretched to latch onto my chin and jaw. I knew they'd leave marks—they always left them on my inner thighs, like tiny love bites—but they'd be covered by my mask, so I didn't care.

I cupped his balls and squeezed gently as I sank my mouth deeper before pulling back to rub my tongue bar over his frenulum. Seraph's hips jerked, thighs quaking as they splayed wider.

"Lie-lack," he rasped, looking down at me, all his eyes soft and hazy.

I moaned around his length in response, letting it fill my mouth again until the head rubbed over the back of my tongue. Relaxing my throat, I took the rest of his cock until that long, thin protrusion was flicking wildly against my cheek.

When I swallowed, Seraph snarled and strained his hips up. His hands were shaking in my hair, but he wasn't trying to control my movements. I swallowed again and again, waiting until my lungs started to ache from the lack of air before pulling back with a gasp. Spit dripped from my mouth onto his straining cock as I caught my breath, but then I was plunging my mouth back down to deepthroat him again.

My eyes grew heavy-lidded as I sucked his cock with all the skill I possessed—which was a lot of skill. Seraph writhed beneath me, breathing hard as wet slurping sounds filled the RV. I moaned hoarsely, my throat and

jaw starting to ache, but I wasn't willing to stop while Seraph shook and snarled with pleasure and his hips started pumping jerkily to meet my sucking draws.

I squeezed his sac again, extending a finger to press against the stretch of skin behind. His upper body curled up off the floor as he shook wildly, but before he could come, he reached down and grabbed me, hoisting me up.

Before I could ask him what he was doing, he had spun me around so I was facing his lower half, straddling his chest. Letting out a sharp breath, I leaned down to suck him back into my mouth and pushed my ass out eagerly.

His body was longer than mine, so I felt his head lift before his hot tongue swirled around my hole. My moan was garbled around his cock, my fingers gripping his thighs tight as I bobbed my head feverishly.

His tongue swirled again before the tip pierced my hole and sank inside. I shuddered, sucking his cock even harder, the tendrils around it latching back onto my face. The longer protrusion danced over my throat, sending hot shivers down my spine.

Seraph's tongue retreated to slink down over my tight nuts before winding up the length of my shaft. I grunted around his cock, hips bucking as his hot, wet tongue coiled around my dick and tightened and released repeatedly. When the pointed tip played with my piercing before dipping into the tiny slit at the head, I gasped and started to shake.

"*Mmm.*" I wasn't willing to stop sucking his cock as desperate moans burned my throat. My nuts tightened, wet hole clenching as my orgasm raced up my aching stiff length.

My hips twitched uncontrollably when cum started firing from my cock, making me let out a strangled, breathless moan around his throbbing length as I shook. Seraph's tongue laved over the head, catching as much of it as he could, his own cock swelling in my mouth. I pulled back to suck on the head so I'd be able to taste his cum when it started pumping onto my tongue, guttural snarls leaving him as he shuddered beneath me.

Seraph's tongue slowly uncurled from around my pulsing dick as I lifted my head, panting heavily. My throat ached, but I grinned as I looked back at him.

He grinned back, wrapping his arms around me and making me grunt as he flattened me onto his chest and stomach.

“Let me turn around first.” I chuckled, climbing off his body and spinning when he released me.

Lying down, I sighed as I nestled myself into his side and rested my head on his chest. There was no steady thump from his human heart anymore, but I could faintly hear the life seed thrumming further down.

“We don’t have long,” I mumbled, my mouth tipping down as I stared vacantly into the dark. Lifting my head, I forced myself to smile at him. “Do you feel better after burning off some energy?”

He chuckled, palming the back of my head. “Yes, Lie-lack. But this—this m-make me feel the best. Being with you.”

I swallowed, lowering my head again to nuzzle his throat.

“This makes me feel the best too,” I whispered.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Weeks passed without anyone finding out about me and Seraph.

I was still letting him out every night. Most nights we went into the RV to be alone together, eating our dinner and curling up in the nest of blankets, or falling on each other the moment we stepped inside. Sometimes we went for walks in the forest so he could stretch his legs and explore a little.

There were the couple of people who knew—Rig and Wyn and no doubt Danny—but they didn't bring it up, and I obviously didn't talk to them about it.

And aside from Gloam and Rig, no one knew that Cutter had returned with members of a cannibal church. Had wanted to take control of Gloam and kill Ghost. I'd gone back to Anchor the next day and calmly told her there was no sign of anyone, that whoever had been nearby before was long gone.

Then I'd gone to Gloam, showing him the mask and the slip of paper while we were hidden in his bedroom. Rig had been there too, and had gone very pale at the sight of both. Gloam had explained the Herald's cannibal cult to me briefly, his eyes haunted when he mentioned his brothers.

I had obviously not told him that Seraph went with me to kill them, saying I'd done it alone. I hadn't asked for any more details about the Herald or the cult, just telling him he could keep the mask and paper to decide what to do with. Later that day, I'd seen him building a small fire outside of the camp to burn them.

Things had grown peaceful after that. A few times, Seraph and I had walked back to the spot where we'd killed Cutter and the two church members to see if anyone else had turned up. The bodies were gone, no doubt scavenged by a hungry animal. The ruined tents were still there, buried under more snow and barely visible.

Seraph had started talking a little about his past—only to me, not to Gloam or the other beasts. His English was improving every day, but he still stuttered and sometimes spoke in broken sentences. I didn't care at all—I loved the way he spoke. I loved listening to his guttural voice, hearing his snarly little breaths as he slept curled up around me.

He told me he had only vague memories of being human, but only of the short period before the military started experimenting on him. He said it felt like they were the memories of another person, so I didn't push him to talk about his life as Luke Buckley. But he told me it hadn't been his choice—what they had done to him. He hadn't put himself forward to be part of Project Divinity. He had been knocked unconscious and taken out of his bunk in the dead of night, and woken up strapped down to a table in a bright white room.

He said the pain started the moment they gave him his first injection. And then it hadn't stopped.

He said he couldn't remember much from Mary's mansion, deep in his agony and mindless on the drugs while there. He told me there were lots of black holes in his memory, voids of missing time between Gloam shocking him in his cage until he lost consciousness and waking up splattered in blood with his body aching, sometimes with injuries littering his skin. But he knew Mary had made him fight other creatures. He'd hunched over like he was ashamed while telling me, so I'd climbed into his lap and hugged him tight, telling him I'd probably still killed more people and monsters than he had. That it hadn't been his fault.

He hadn't had another episode since he'd seen his reflection in the mirror, so I started gearing myself up to speak to Gloam again about letting him out. I would admit to stealing the key. I'd have to, unless I managed to sneak it back into their room. But I didn't want to do that. And I didn't care if he got angry at me for stealing it. I'd take the punishment.

Seraph still spoke to the beasties, seeming to start enjoying the conversations. He even laughed with them sometimes, especially with Edin, who was always cheerful when he came out. He started speaking to them in English more, telling them he wanted to keep practising, but I knew it was also for my benefit—so I could understand what was being said while I was out there with them.

He asked the beasties about their partners, his eyes getting a little soft with affection when Gloam talked reverently about Rig. Edin told him that Hunter liked to act tough, but was as soft as butter when they were alone together. Aury quietly talked about Ghost, about how he soothed him and had helped him control the destructive beast lurking under his skin.

Seraph was particularly interested in that, saying he felt something similar, though more mild, inside him. Something he had to keep a tight

rein on so that it didn't take over. But he said he was getting better at controlling it, which made Aury beam at him.

He even listened dutifully when Wyn went on and on about Danny, subtly rolling his eyes at me when the Soul Eater arrogantly announced that Danny was different to all other humans—he had to be, of course he did, because he was the only person Wyn had ever loved and that automatically made him superior.

He grew fascinated when the beasties talked about their world, saying a part of him felt like he'd been there even though he never had. He said he'd like to see it one day while Wyn, Gloam, Edin and I were sitting out with him one afternoon.

Wyn started saying that he and I could go with them when they went through the tear, before stopping himself as his hood tilted to look at Gloam.

"I will take you there one day," he said instead. "When you are out of the cage."

"Charlie and Moth should have been back by now," Edin piped up from beside him, his deep voice tense. "Hunter is very worried. So am I."

They'd been gone a couple of months, so he was right. I stayed silent, not wanting to voice the fact that they might have been dead, or captured and taken into the prison themselves while trying to get Cat out.

Wyn grunted, picking at the seam of his pants as he sat in a cleared patch of grass near Seraph's cage. It had stopped snowing, but it was still fairly thick on the ground. The sun was bright in the sky, the air cold and prickling at my skin above my mask as I whittled on the top step of the RV.

"I can go there," Wyn said gruffly. "To see if they are there, and get them out if they've been taken in."

"Would you, Wyn?" Edin reached over and gripped the Soul Eater's knee. "It would mean much to me. And Hunter."

Wyn grunted, rising to his feet. "I'll do it for you. Not the human."

Edin rolled his eyes and went to shove Wyn's leg, but it had already vanished into thick black smoke that wound lazily up into the air.

"Tell Danny where I am going." The Soul Eater's distorted voice came from everywhere, making Seraph jump. "I'll be back later."

I watched the smoke shoot high up into the air before travelling over the camp, becoming a tiny speck as it moved impossibly fast. Once he was gone, Edin grunted and looked over at Gloam.

“Gloam, have you thought any more about my offer?”

I side-eyed him but stayed silent, not wanting to show that I was intrigued. Gloam sighed and looked at Seraph, but before he could speak, Edin grinned over at me.

“I’d like to take Seraph out sometimes. Perhaps go for a walk in the forest.” He turned his fanged grin to Seraph. “We are good friends now, yes? We could go hunting together.”

Seraph’s lip curled a little before he smoothed out his expression and gave Edin a tiny smile.

“He wouldn’t like hunting,” I said, quickly adding, “I don’t think. He doesn’t like meat, remember?”

“Bah.” Edin waved a big hand. “Just a walk then. These woods are fairly quiet most of the time.”

Seraph’s eyes darted to me, and I could see him wondering how he should respond. If he said he wanted to and Gloam agreed, they’d all find out I’d stolen the key. I was prepared to admit it, but I knew Seraph was worried about me.

There was no way in hell I was going to try and put a stop to Seraph coming out of his cage more often, but if Gloam did agree, I’d have to give the key back. Unless he was in an extremely understanding mood and allowed me to keep hold of it, which I doubted. I knew he’d feel betrayed, and guilt soured my stomach at the thought of hurting him, but it was done now, and I didn’t regret it.

I couldn’t regret it. Not when it had allowed me to give Seraph some freedom. When it had allowed us to be together, properly together, warm and safe and alone in the RV. I’d never been one to regret my decisions, knowing there was no point, and I knew I would have done the exact same thing if I could go back in time.

“Yes.” Gloam’s deep voice pulled me out of my thoughts. I stopped breathing as Seraph and I stared at each other. “I think it is time. Seraph, you have astounded me with your progress. I hope you are proud of yourself. Of how well you have done.”

Warm affection filled his voice, making my gut clench harder with guilt. Seraph fidgeted in his cage, eyes darting between me, Edin and Gloam.

“I... w-would like that,” he said slowly. “Th-thank you, Ee-din. Glo-wem. M-maybe soon.”

“You just tell us when you’re ready, Seraph,” Edin rumbled easily. “There is no rush. But I am excited to see you moving about. I bet you’re even taller than me when you stand up straight, eh?”

“Yes,” Seraph said with a grin. “You are all... s-small.”

Edin and Gloam let out deep laughs as my mouth twitched behind my mask.

“It is not often in my life I have been called small,” Gloam commented with a chuckle.

“And smoke man is t-tiny,” Seraph added slyly, making Edin burst out laughing again.

“Don’t say that in front of him, Seraph,” he rumbled good-naturedly. “He likes you. That would change if he heard you call him tiny.”

“Back to the topic at hand.” Gloam was serious again as he gazed at Seraph. “How would you feel about one of us taking you out for a while, Seraph? Myself or Edin or Wyn. Or Aury.”

Seraph looked at me, sitting up straighter. “And Lie-lack.”

Gloam glanced at me warily, but sighed and nodded. “Yes. Lilac could join us.”

“But would it trouble you to go back in the cage each time, Seraph?” Edin asked with a frown.

“I w-will be fine.”

Gloam grunted, shooting me another look. “He sounds like you.”

“N-not yet,” Seraph said, looking at me again. “S-soon.”

I knew he was giving us time to figure out what to do. But I already planned on telling Gloam that I had stolen the key. I just didn’t want to do it here, in case he got angry and Seraph got protective.

I gave Seraph a tiny nod and a smile before returning to my whittling. Gloam went in a short while later, and my gut clenched a little as I wondered if he would look at the key, seeing as we’d been talking about letting Seraph out. But he didn’t come back out, and Edin sat talking easily with Seraph while I stayed quiet.

It was nearly dark when the Soul Eater returned, solidifying beside Edin and making Seraph let out a little bark of surprise.

“The prison is empty.”

My head shot up as Edin scrambled to his feet. “What?” He sounded devastated.

Wyn nodded. “Completely deserted. I could see no footprints, but even if the human and half monster had been there recently, any signs of them would have been covered by the snow.”

“Oh no.” Edin shoved his hair back, a thick clump getting caught on his broken horn. “What if they didn’t even make it there? Surely they—Charlie is good and capable. Moth is a skilled fighter.”

Wyn grunted and clasped Edin’s shoulder. “They may have already been and gone. They may have found something to keep looking for the human. It doesn’t necessarily mean... I spotted no signs of... anything untoward as I made my way there.”

I knew what he meant by that. He hadn’t spotted Charlie and Moth’s corpses somewhere on the way to the prison.

“I must go tell Hunter. He is going to be”—Edin swallowed, brows furrowing—“very worried.”

“If his friend has managed to keep himself alive out here before, I’m sure he would manage now. Especially with the half monster.” Wyn squeezed Edin’s shoulder. “Try not to worry too much, Edin. All you can do is wait to see if they come back.”

Edin shook his head, horns slashing through the air. “No, we must—we must go and look for them.”

“Might not be a good idea,” I commented flatly. “They might come back while you’re gone. And you have no chance of finding them out in the Wastes. They could be anywhere.”

If they were still alive.

Personally, I thought they would be. I didn’t know much about Charlie except that he’d been a soldier, but Edin was right—Moth was a skilled fighter. I’d been out of the camp with him a few times, and we hadn’t talked all that much—both of us closed off and awkward—but I’d seen him take down monsters. And people. He was good with his sword.

Edin mumbled something, looking deep in thought as he strode away and vanished around the corner of the wall. Once he was gone, I cleared my throat and said, “Weird that the prison’s deserted. Didn’t you say it was full of monsters and people?”

Wyn grunted, crossing his arms. “Yes. It is strange. I looked around inside and saw some blood. Tables and chairs ripped up and destroyed. Looked like there’d been a fight of some kind.”

My gut clenched with worry for Cat. Where was he? Was he still alive? Had Charlie and Moth managed to find him?

I didn't voice any of the questions to the Soul Eater, knowing he probably didn't really care about a raider he'd never met.

"I'm sure Charlie and Moth are fine," I said slowly.

"Wh-who are Ch-Charlie and M-Moth?" Seraph asked.

"They went looking for our friend at a prison up north," I told him. "He was being held there. Being forced to fight."

Seraph snarled angrily, gripping the bars of his cage. "Then I am g-glad it is gone."

"So am I, Seraph," Wyn drawled. "Even *I* think it's wrong to keep humans locked up as fighting slaves. And I think humans are stupid. Except Danny," he added, as predicted.

Seraph chuffed in warning. "Lie-lack is not st-stupid."

I got the distinct impression that Wyn was rolling his eyes, but he stayed silent. Poking at the gap in my teeth with my tongue, I looked at Seraph before side-eyeing Wyn.

"Gloam said he'll let Seraph out of the cage," I said quietly. "For short periods, with one of you to keep him company."

Wyn went very still, before letting out a huff as he crouched. "I see. So he will soon discover that you stole the key."

"Yeah."

After a moment of silence, the Soul Eater gruffly said, "I could replace it. Slip into his room in my smoke form while neither of them are in there. You'd just have to tell me where to put it."

I shook my head. "No, it's okay. Thanks. I'll tell Gloam what I did."

Wyn grunted, standing back up. "He won't be pleased, human."

"I know," I said woodenly. "But at least it'll show him that Seraph is perfectly fine outside of the cage. He has been for weeks."

"Yes," Wyn mused, turning to look at him. "It will be good to see him out of there for good. Where will he stay?" He glanced down at me. "Surely the other little raiders won't allow him into their camp."

I gestured at the RV. "We can stay in here."

"We?" Wyn huffed. "I suppose you have practically moved in there already."

"Or if you want to leave, we'll leave," I told Seraph directly, smiling at him and ignoring the pang in my chest at the thought of leaving Rig and

Ghost for good. “Whatever you want.”

“You are a strange little human,” Wyn muttered, striding toward the wall before drawling, “I’m going to find Danny. See you later, Seraph. And Lilac,” he added reluctantly.

“S-see you l-later, tiny smoke man.” Seraph shot me a sly grin, and my mouth twitched up when a feral hiss came from beyond the corner of the wall.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

“Wh-what do you want to do, Lie-lack?” Seraph murmured that night while we were curled up under the blankets in the RV. “I can t-tell Glo-wem that I do not want to come out—”

“No.” I turned onto my side to face him, tangling my legs with his.

“Definitely not. I’ll just tell him I stole the key.”

“I do not want you to get in t-trouble.” He cupped my face, long fingers sifting through my hair, which was loose for once.

I smiled wryly, trailing my fingers up and down his side. “I don’t care. And what can he realistically do anyway?”

“St-stop you from s-seeing me.” Seraph’s eyes grew worried in the dark. I shook my head.

“No, he can’t,” I said bluntly. “I won’t let him.”

Seraph was quiet for a minute, playing with my hair, before he murmured, “He w-will be a-angry with me.”

“No he won’t,” I insisted, lifting my hand to cup his cheek. “You haven’t done anything wrong. *Anything*. I’m the one who’s been letting you out. Would he honestly expect you to just sit there once I’d opened the hatch to your cage?”

“I could have re-refused.”

I clenched my jaw. “You are not a wild animal that should be locked in a cage, Seraph. You don’t *deserve* to be in there. You’re a person.”

“N-not a p-person anymore.”

“Yes you are.” I lifted my head to kiss his chin. “You’re a person. The person I want to be with.”

He shuddered, pulling me closer until my face was nestled in his throat. “I w-want to be with you, Lie-lack.”

“And you will be. You are.” My eyes slid shut as I wrapped my arm around his back, tracing over the knobs of his spine. “I won’t let anyone stop us from being together, Seraph. I promise.”

“I kn-know, Lie-lack.”

He shifted his body, hunching further until our faces were level on the pillow. White eyes blinking at me in the dark, he traced his fingertips over the corner of my eye, down my cheek to my mouth.

“J-J-Jesse,” he rasped quietly. I blinked as my eyes started to burn.

“I didn’t—” I had to swallow, but my voice was still hoarse. “I didn’t know if you remembered me telling you that.”

“I r-remember.” He pulled me closer, his tongue flicking over my cheek and down to my neck. “I remember e-everything you t-told me.”

When I woke up a few hours later, I was sprawled out on Seraph’s chest, my naked body pressed tightly to his and sweating a little from his heat.

Lifting my head and blinking blearily, I realised the sky was getting light. Mouth tipping down, I looked at Seraph and realised he was already awake, his long fingers running up and down my back in a light caress.

He gave me a tiny smile. “Back in soon.”

“Maybe for the last time,” I croaked. “I’ll tell Gloam today. Maybe—maybe he’ll see that you don’t need to be in there at all anymore.”

Seraph said nothing as I climbed off him to start getting dressed. He sat up, fingers worrying the blanket as he bowed his head.

“Wh-what if he takes the k-key but won’t let me out?” he mumbled. “No more nights together.”

“He won’t do that,” I insisted, my voice hard. “He’s a good person. He’s doing what he thinks is the right thing. He’s not trying to be cruel.”

“I know,” Seraph said quietly, but he still sounded worried.

An idea started to form as I shrugged on my coat and strapped my machete to my hip. Tangling my fingers through Seraph’s, I led him to the door and we crept outside after making sure the coast was clear.

After shutting the padlock and jumping down from the top of the cage, I carefully pulled the chain off my neck.

Crouching, I held it out to Seraph through the bars. “Here.”

He stared at it, blinking rapidly. “Wh-what?”

“You should have it,” I told him calmly. “You should be the one to decide when you’re ready to come out. I trust you, Seraph. You know I do.”

His wide mouth trembled as he hesitantly reached for the chain. He stared at the key once it was cradled in his big palm, before his head lifted and his gaze rose to the top of the cage.

For a split second, panic flared in me at the thought of coming back out here later and finding Seraph gone. But I knew, deep down, he wouldn’t do

that. He wouldn't leave without me.

This was the right decision. I should have done it weeks ago.

"I'm sorry," I croaked. "I haven't acted any better than the rest of them. I've still been the one deciding when you can come out and when you have to go back in. It was wrong of me."

"No, Lie-lack." Seraph closed his fingers around the key and shuffled closer, pressing his face against the bars. "You have d-done nothing wrong. I was not well enough before. You h-helped me the most."

My mouth trembled when he added, "Y-you have m-made me feel like I d-deserve to leave the cage. You have g-given me the r-reason to want to get better."

"You should want it for yourself," I said hoarsely, gripping his hand tight. "Not for me. And you've always deserved to leave the cage, Seraph. You never should have been in there."

Even though... he was right. He hadn't been well enough before. But he was now, I knew he was.

And surely Gloam knew that too.

Even if he didn't, Seraph was the one in control of his destiny now. He had the key to his cage. He could decide for himself.

Sniffing, I lifted his hand and kissed his knuckles, then stood because the sky was rapidly getting light.

"I'll tell Gloam when he comes out," I said, taking a step back to walk to the RV before he got here.

But then I realised... no. I wasn't going to. There was no point hiding it anymore.

I slowly sat back down, pulling my mask out of my pocket to put it on.

"Will you be able to stay calm if Gloam gets angry at me?" I asked, because I really *was* putting a lot of trust in Seraph.

He had the key to his cage now. If he stayed lucid enough but flew into a rage out of protectiveness over me, he could let himself out and attack Gloam. My gut twisted with worry. I didn't want Gloam to get hurt. I just had to hope the big, calm beastie stayed exactly that. Calm in the face of my deception.

I imagined he'd be more disappointed than anything, and I... didn't really like the thought of that. I'd been telling myself that I didn't care, but I did. I liked Gloam. I felt bad for deceiving him, for stealing the key.

But I still didn't regret it.

When Gloam finally appeared a while later, I stood up quickly after squeezing Seraph's hand. He had threaded the chain around his neck, but I didn't know if Gloam would see it right away against his dark skin.

The big aytorin stopped at the sight of me next to the cage, but he sighed and didn't say anything.

"I have something to tell you." I walked over to him, ignoring the flash of nerves in my belly. I stopped and looked up, directly into his eyes. "I stole the key a while ago."

He didn't react, gazing down at me with his goat-like eyes, until he quietly said, "I know."

Shock jolted through me. I stared up at him in silence, not knowing what to say.

He sighed. "I moved the plant pot last week to water the orchid and noticed the key was different."

"Why... why didn't you say anything?"

"I didn't know for certain that it was you. I didn't want to accuse you of anything. Except..." He chuckled and shook his head, gaze lifting to Seraph. "Of course I knew it would've been you."

When I stayed silent, Gloam shifted on his feet and said, "Whatever you have been doing, it has worked, Lilac. I didn't want to put a stop to it. And I was hoping... I was hoping you'd tell me yourself."

When he gave me a tiny smile, I huffed.

"You're like a dad," I muttered, which made him chuckle.

"I *am* very protective of you, Lilac." He smiled at Seraph. "Just as Seraph is. Though I suspect not in the same way."

Clearing my throat, I willed my cheeks not to heat as I lifted my chin and said, "We're together. Me and Seraph."

Gloam chuckled, his textured brow lifting. "You may have kept me in the dark about much, Lilac, but do you really think I haven't caught on to that?"

"I—Not necessarily," I shot back, face heating. "I'm good at hiding things."

"Mm." Gloam smirked at me. "Not as good as you think you are."

"So I don't—" I tried to move on from that quickly. "You're okay with it? With the fact that I've been letting Seraph out every night?"

He nodded, but his brow pinched. "If I had found out sooner, I think I would have tried to stop it. Only because I would have worried for you,

Lilac. But Seraph is... He should not be in there anymore. He never should have been, but I think even he knows he was not ready to leave at first."

"I know," Seraph said quietly, gripping the bars. "Th-thank you, Glo-wem. For helping me."

Gloam shook his head, eyes growing shiny. "I did nothing, Seraph. You did it all yourself."

"Yeah. He did." I turned to smile at him. "Which is why I've given him the key. He can come out when he feels ready to be out for good."

When I looked back at Gloam, his eyes flashed with a hint of alarm before he exhaled and nodded. "That is the fairest thing. But I am... a little concerned about the reaction from the camp. Perhaps it would be prudent to keep this from them at first."

I nodded. "We've gotten good at sneaking into the RV without being seen. And it's not like any other raiders come out here except the beasties' partners, and they won't say anything. Maybe we can push the cage further into the forest so you can't see it from the wall at all."

"Yes. Excellent idea. Edin and I will do it later."

I couldn't contain my wide grin as I looked over at Seraph, taking a step closer to him. "We'll be ready whenever you want to come out, Seraph. I'll bring my plants to the RV."

Seraph grinned. I'd told him all about my plants.

"I c-can't wait to see them."

"I bet you'd be good at looking after plants as well," I told him, taking another step forward, unable to stay away from him. "You can help me."

His eyes brightened as he gave me a jerky nod. "Yes, I'd like that."

Gloam cleared his throat, eyeing the way I'd stepped closer and closer to the cage, until I was well within reach of Seraph's long arm span.

"I... Would I be able to come closer, Seraph?" Gloam asked tentatively. "It would be nice to talk to you without such distance between us."

There was no hesitation from Seraph, his face calm as he said, "Yes, Glo-wem."

Gloam leaned his war hammer against the camp wall before slowly making his way over, boots crunching through the thin snow. He crouched, gripping a bar with a big grey hand.

"It is wonderful to see you properly, Seraph," he said, stretching his arm through the bars.

Seraph stared at it for a second, before gently enveloping Gloam's huge hand with his long fingers, engulfing it entirely.

I watched in silence as Gloam swallowed, his voice thick when he said, "I hope—I hope you know that what she made me do... I despised every second of it. I hated having to hurt you. She had control over me—"

"I know," Seraph said quietly, squeezing his hand. "The w-words. I went with Lie-lack to kill the H-Herald's people."

Gloam blinked rapidly, and I stayed very quiet and still when a tear dripped from his cheek before he bent his head, pressing his forehead to the bars.

"Forgive me, Seraph."

"There is n-no need." Seraph smiled at him. "We were b-both trapped."

Gloam sniffed, lifting his head and quickly scrubbing at his cheek with his free hand. "Well, soon we will *both* be free, my friend. Whenever you feel ready."

"Yes. Thank you." Seraph paused, uncurling his fingers from around Gloam's hand. Then he quietly said, "I kn-know I w-was one once... but hu-humans seem cruel. What th-they did to us. And to Ee-din and Aaau-ree. And smoke man."

Gloam cleared his throat, nodding as he gripped the bar again. "Yes, some can be cruel, but so can some creatures from our world. And there are many good people too." He smiled at me. "Like Lilac. And Rig. Many others in the camp."

"It's just the bad ones who have the power," I said flatly. "It's always been that way."

"Is th-the other w-world better?" Seraph asked cautiously. "I kn-know it is not mine, but—"

"It is yours, Seraph," Gloam insisted. "And so is this one. You are a part of both. You... you truly are a marvel, Seraph. I know it may not feel that way after all that you've been through, but you are important. You have fought your way through everything and come out the other side. I... I know it probably doesn't matter to you either way, but..." He sniffed again, blinking hard. "I am very proud of you."

Seraph looked at him in silence for a moment.

"It m-matters," he quietly said.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

That night, well after it got dark, the beasties and their partners all gathered to witness Seraph coming out of his cage for good.

I was vibrating with excitement, but managed to keep my face blank as I stood right next to the cage while all the beasties milled about, quietly discussing the plan to move the cage deeper into the forest once Seraph was out.

I knew it was a show of trust for them to bring their human partners out here. Wyn had even let Danny come out, and he was standing with Hunter and Rig in his thick winter coat, cheeks flushed from the cold as he grinned at something Rig said. Ghost stood with Aury a short distance away, talking quietly but looking at ease, not anxious or worried.

I turned to Seraph, crouching down and reaching through the bars to take his hand. “You okay?”

He was calm, but looked a little nervous from the sheer number of people around. He gave me a tiny smile, shifting closer to me. I lifted his hand to kiss it through my mask.

At this point, I didn’t know who knew what about us, and I didn’t care. They’d figure it out soon enough, seeing as I was going to be living in the RV with Seraph from now on.

I barely went into the camp at all anymore, only to collect food, do my shifts on the wall and check on my plants and the vegetable patch. I showered and slept in the RV, and I spent all my free time out here already. I didn’t give a shit what the other raiders thought. They weren’t important.

“Hey,” someone called down from the wall. I quickly tucked myself deeper into the corner, out of sight as everyone standing around looked up.

“What’s going on down there?” the raider shouted. I thought it sounded like Keen.

“None of your fucking business, human,” Wyn called back, throwing his voice and—I was pretty sure—making it extra distorted and creepy.

“Just a meeting to discuss Seraph’s care,” Gloam added hurriedly, his deep voice booming. “Nothing you need to be concerned about.”

The raider didn’t say anything else, but Gloam glanced over at us worriedly. “We need to be careful they don’t spot him.”

“They won’t.” I squeezed Seraph’s hand. “He knows what he’s doing.”

I knew it wouldn’t be smooth sailing after this. We’d still have to be careful, making sure no one spotted Seraph whenever we left the RV. I wasn’t going to make him stay cooped up in there every day. We’d go out and explore. We could forage in the woods together, or just go and find somewhere quiet to sit where he could be outside, truly free, able to stretch his legs and move around.

Gloam stepped closer, his boots crunching over icy grass. “Are you ready, Seraph?”

My gut clenched, legs a little unsteady as I stayed crouched beside him, gripping his hand tight. My eyes met Seraph’s, and we stared at each other in silence before he smiled and nodded.

“Yes. I am ready.”

“Now’s a good time,” Hunter said quietly a short distance away.

“Raider’s down the other end of the wall. He’s not looking this way.”

I squeezed Seraph’s hand one last time before letting go and standing up. I quietly asked, “You’re okay unlocking it on your own?”

He nodded again, already pulling the chain off his neck. But before he stretched up, he dug around in his blankets until he found my glove, which he clutched tightly, making my throat close up.

His hand trembled a little as he reached up between the bars and felt around on the roof until he found the padlock. He fumbled with the key as everyone waited in silence, and when I heard the tiny click of the lock, my breath caught.

No one moved when he pushed on the hatch, keeping hold of it as he lifted himself out of the cage so it didn’t bang against the roof. He gently closed it again, just as he had every other night, and slunk down onto the ground.

I tangled my fingers through his the moment he was in reach and quietly led him along the base of the wall until we were in the shadow of the trees. My chest was hitching, which made me feel a little foolish. We’d been doing this for ages now, but this... this was different. This was the final time.

The others followed us, but stayed back as I turned and stared up at Seraph. Before I could stop it, I was launching myself at him and burying my face in his chest, hugging him tight. He rasped out his little purr and

hunched down to rub his cheek over my hair, enveloping me in his long arms.

“Oh my god,” I heard Rig whisper, his voice wobbly as he sniffled.

That made me pull back and clear my throat awkwardly. Everyone was staring at us, so as the urge to cling onto him surged again, I reminded myself that I could plaster myself against him all night once we were alone in the RV.

I could fall asleep with him, not worrying about having to wake up in time to get him back in the cage before anyone saw. I could stay in bed with him all day if I wanted, hidden in our nest of blankets, just the two of us.

We could have it all the time now.

I heard the Soul Eater clear his throat before saying, “Can we come closer, Seraph?”

Seraph straightened to his full height as he looked around at the group, making everyone tilt their heads back. Ghost’s eyes widened as Edin chuckled, slinging his arm around Hunter’s neck.

“Yes,” Seraph rasped, his mouth stretching into a wide grin. “Y-you can.”

I stepped back as the others crunched closer, wanting to give him a chance to finally greet the people who’d been helping him. My throat tightened as I watched Edin slap him on the back, chuckling and commenting on his height. Gloam placed a gentle hand on his arm and squeezed.

The Soul Eater gripped his shoulder, but muttered, “Do *not* call me tiny smoke man,” before gruffly adding, “It is good to see you free, Seraph.”

Aury stayed back, looking shy and unsure, but Seraph’s eyes locked onto him and they stared at each other in silence. Then Seraph gestured him closer, and Aury slowly let go of Ghost’s shoulders to walk forward.

When he reached him, Seraph placed a hand on Aury’s chest and murmured a string of words to him. None of the other beasties reacted, so I was guessing he’d spoken in the rycke’s tongue. Aury blinked hard, covering Seraph’s huge hand with his own. He said something back, voice unsteady.

My throat bobbed as I watched them, vision getting a little blurry. They shared something that no one else did. Aury’s DNA had given Seraph the thing that kept him alive when his human heart gave up. They both had life seeds thrumming inside them, the only two in existence.

Just as a single tear dripped down my cheek, I realised Rig was standing quietly beside me.

“Do you think he’ll let me hug him?” he asked hoarsely, and I quickly turned my head away to scrub at the tear before he noticed it.

But he already had. God, Rig was way more perceptive than I’d previously thought, because his eyes softened as he stared at me. “Lilac—”

“Do not say a fucking word,” I muttered, huffing with false annoyance when he snorted and threw his arm around my neck to pull me into an overbearingly tight hug.

“Lie-lack.”

Seraph’s guttural voice made me jerk back. I cleared my throat and scrubbed roughly at my face before stepping forward.

“Yeah.” I slipped between the beasties to take his hand. “You okay?”

“Yes.” He clutched my hand tight. “I w-want to meet your f-friends.”

“Oh. Uh...” I looked around awkwardly, avoiding Hunter’s gaze, and jerked my chin at Rig. “Well, Rig, uh, wants to give you a hug.”

“Is that okay?” Rig rushed forward eagerly, twisting his gloved fingers together.

Seraph chuckled, releasing my hand to carefully wrap him in a hug. Rig was sniffing again when he pulled back.

“I’m—I’m just so happy for you,” he blubbered, letting Gloam pull him away and kiss the top of his head.

Wyn huffed in disgust, slinging his arm around Danny’s shoulders. “Overemotional humans.”

“Oh, shut up.” Danny shoved his side. “As if you didn’t get choked up when Seraph came out of the cage.”

Wyn stiffened, hood tilting side to side as he glanced at the rest of us. “I did not.”

Danny snorted, stepping forward. “Whatever. Um, hi Seraph. I’m Danny. Tiny smoke man’s husband,” he added with a teasing smirk.

“Yes. Danny.” Seraph smiled at him, sharp teeth jutting. “He has spoken much about you.”

“And look at the treatment I get in return,” Wyn muttered, hissing as Edin chuckled and punched him on the shoulder.

“And that’s Ghost,” I said, nodding at Ghost, who gave Seraph a little wave.

I was conscious that the longer we stayed out here, the more chance there was of the raider on the wall noticing Seraph's cage was empty. We needed to get inside so the beasties could move it into the forest.

Letting out a tiny sigh, I jerked my chin toward Hunter and said, "And Hunter. Edin's mate."

Hunter grinned under his mask, stepping forward to grasp Seraph's shoulder in a friendly grip.

"Friend, huh?" he muttered to me with a smirk before stepping back.

"Shut up." I took Seraph's hand again. "We should get inside."

"Yes." Gloam nodded and stepped forward. "We need to move the cage. Quietly."

"I can do it," Aury said softly. "I'll lift it into the air so I can set it down in the forest."

"Do you have everything you need in there?" Gloam asked, turning back to me and Seraph.

I nodded quickly, because I was impatient to get inside and be alone with Seraph. "Yep. Got some food earlier. We'll be fine."

"Of course you will." Gloam smiled, clapping me on the shoulder before giving Seraph's arm a final squeeze. "We will move the cage once you're inside. I'll bring you some water in the morning to top up the tank."

"Thanks." I cleared my throat, lowering my voice to add, "Thank you, Gloam."

"Think nothing of it, my friend." He gestured at the wall. "At some point, we will have to think of a way to tell the camp that Seraph is not a threat. So you don't have to keep hiding even out here."

I nodded. "Yeah. We will."

"But not tonight," Rig added slyly, smirking at me. "Let's let these two go and enjoy the rest of the night in their love shack, shall we?"

I gave him a flat look, not saying anything as I pulled Seraph deeper into the forest so we could walk through the trees toward the RV.

He chuckled quietly. "L-love sh-shack."

I let out a tiny, strangled sound, because I was pretty sure he was going to start calling the RV that now, but at the same time, my belly warmed with pleasure, so I glanced back to give him a smile.

I went to the RV first, opening the door and waiting by the top step so he could slink through the dark and inside. As I followed him in and went to close the door, I glanced over at everyone watching and forced myself to lift

a hand in goodbye. I felt a little awkward, because they clearly all thought we were going to fuck in here. Which, yes, we were. Once they'd gone, at least.

Until then, though, I was happy just to sit with him, knowing I would never have to put him back in the cage again. After locking the door, I turned and walked to the living area where I could see Seraph already sitting on the nest of blankets.

I switched on the lantern, glancing around to make sure all the curtains were safely closed, before grinning at him as I wriggled out of my coat and ripped off my mask. Then I launched myself onto his lap.

He chuckled, chest thrumming with a deep purr as he pulled me in tighter. "Lie-lack."

"How does it feel?" I asked, burying my face in his neck to breathe in his scent.

"G-good. St-strange. It f-feels like I will have to go back in."

"Nope." I pulled back to look at him, grinning so wide my cheeks hurt. "You'll never have to go back in there ever again."

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

We ate our dinner, talking quietly like it was any other night, but I could tell we were both just waiting for everyone outside to leave. I was restless, desperate to be as close as possible to him, my stomach jittery with anticipation as I forced down my food.

When it had been silent out there for a little while, I got up and peeked out between the curtains. The cage had been moved, tucked deeper into the forest, and was now completely hidden from view from the wall.

And everyone was gone.

Grinning, I turned back to Seraph and stripped off my shirt as I walked back to the nest. He purred, eyes dipping to take in my chest once I'd dropped my shirt on the floor.

I hurriedly tugged off my boots and socks, then unclipped my machete and let it fall to the floor before shoving down my pants and underwear together. But before I could climb onto his lap, Seraph grasped my hips and grinned up at me. A second later, his long tongue emerged to wind around my hardening cock.

I grunted, hips twitching as I cupped the back of his head. My thumbs trailed over his ears, down to the corners of his wide mouth, pleasure making my thighs tense as his tongue uncoiled to flick over my piercing.

His eyes flickered up to mine as he extended his tongue along the base of my length, the muscle curling up at the sides a little to cup my shaft. I shuddered, breath escaping me in a little puff when the tip slithered over my balls and further back.

My feet shuffled out, spreading me wider as the tip of his tongue prodded at my hole until it relaxed enough for him to slide it inside. I grunted, hole clenching around the hot, slick muscle, shuddering as it burrowed its way deeper.

My hips jerked, sliding the underside of my cock along the soft, wet cradle of his tongue. He chuffed in amusement when I gasped, rocking my hips again to chase the slippery pressure. A strangled sound escaped me when the tip of his tongue danced over my prostate.

"S-Seraph," I panted, fingers tightening on the back of his head.

He let out his wheezy laugh as his tongue retreated, swirling over my rim on the way and making my ass cheeks clench to try and stop it from leaving.

“You l-like my t-tongue, Lie-lack,” he rasped slyly, big hands sliding up my outer thighs to grasp my hips, urging me down on shaky legs.

My mouth tipped up. “Yeah.”

“And you l-like my c-cock.” He slunk over me once I was lying down, dipping his head to flick his tongue over my neck, making me shiver.

“Yeah,” I breathed again, eyes drifting shut as his tongue trailed lower to circle a nipple. “I love all of you.”

Seraph let out a soft sound, his back curving to keep his tongue on my chest as he spread my legs and nestled his hips between them. I felt the wet tip of his cock nudging my balls before trailing lower, and my hips strained when the long, thin tendril slipped around the base of my shaft.

I exhaled sharply when his cockhead pushed against my wet hole, my thighs draped over his, keeping my hips arched off the floor. I fisted the blankets either side of me, head tipping back as I bore down and felt the head pop inside.

Letting out a shaky groan, I breathed through the sting and reached up to smooth my hands over the back of his head as he hunched over me, his tongue dancing over my nipples and dipping even lower to flick my navel piercing.

When it lashed the tip of my cock, I gasped and strained my hips up. Firm, wet heat slid around my cockhead, jostling my piercing and making tingles of pleasure race down my length as his cock steadily tunnelled deeper.

I moaned when those little tendrils latched onto my inner thighs, locking me to him, sucking gently and making my balls clench. Before I could wrap my arms around his neck and pull him closer, his big hands slid under my back and gently lifted me until I was on his lap as he sat back on his heels.

I clutched his shoulders, legs snapping around his narrow hips to lock my ankles together at the small of his back. His hands slid down to grasp my waist, and then he was lifting me on and off his cock, slowly at first, all his eyes watching me.

I groaned in bliss, revelling in the feel of him working me over his cock. My hips writhed, but I couldn't move all that much as he kept me suspended, and I loved it. Every time he sank me back down, my sac slid

against the inside of his unfurled protective folds. They were slick and soft, but had the faintest texture that made me shudder.

“Lie-lack,” he rasped, eyes finally leaving my face to look down between our joined bodies.

I followed his gaze, panting as he started plunging me down onto his cock faster. And faster. His fingers tightened on my sides, breaths leaving him in heavy snarls. The long, thin tendril slowly unwound from the base of my cock, and I stared as it slithered over the inside of his protective plates, like it was making itself slick all over.

I realised why a second later when it slid up the length of my dick and its narrow, blunt tip poked at my slit, jostling the piercing.

My breath caught, cock jerking wildly. I couldn’t look away as it carefully slipped inside, stretching to become even thinner. I went hot and cold all over, shivering uncontrollably when I felt it steadily worming its way down my urethra.

“Sh-sh-shit,” I gritted out, my head tipping back, ponytail bouncing against my shoulders. “Oh fuck.”

It stung, but any pain was secondary to the sensation coursing through the inside of my cock. He was being achingly gentle, even as he slammed me down onto his length again and again, breathing hard, his long fingers twitching against my waist.

“G-good, Lie-lack?” he asked unsteadily, his voice guttural and breathless.

“Y-y-yeah,” I managed, clawing at the back of his head, my legs shaking around him. “F-f-fuck, it’s s-so good.”

He snarled in pleasure, pumping his hips to meet every downward smack of my ass. The tendril retreated a little before sinking deep until I felt the tip tickling the very base of my cock inside, making me choke as unimaginable pleasure exploded from my prostate.

I went weak, hot and flushed all over as I wrapped my hands around the nape of his neck to cling on. I couldn’t suck in a full breath, my entire body shaking, desperate sounds jarring out of me with every smack of his hips.

My breath escaped me in a trembling rush, head falling back. “I—I—”

The tendril slid back up my urethra, making me jolt with a strangled sound, before coiling around my length and squeezing. The inside of my cock felt strangely tender, the slit almost painfully sensitive, but pre-cum pulsed out the moment it could.

My dick throbbed, nuts clenching up tight. My hands scrabbled over the back of Seraph's head, thighs going weak as I tried to cling on. When my orgasm hit, it was so intense that not a single sound escaped me, my throat closing up and vision whiting out as I went completely stiff in his arms. Cum streamed out of my cock in thick spurts, painting my stomach, each shot bringing with it a tiny hint of pain from my tender slit, making me come even harder.

I was faintly aware of Seraph snarling, working me on and off his cock faster and faster, before he pinned me tight to his lap and I felt him flex inside me. He pulled me closer, shaking wildly as he wrapped his arms around me and kept me crushed to his chest.

I panted into his shoulder, trembling uncontrollably as the explosion of pleasure started to ease off, leaving me limp and weak. My legs uncurled from around his waist to thump onto the blankets, toes still cramping from how hard they'd flexed as I came.

Seraph sagged against me, his unsteady, snarling breaths ruffling my ponytail and cooling my sweat-damp scalp. When I felt his arms relax around me, I let out a tiny sound and found the strength to burrow closer, sliding my arms around him and clinging on weakly. I didn't want to let go.

"Lie-lack." He cupped the back of my head, carefully pressing his face to my neck. Sharp teeth scraped gently over my skin, making me shiver. "J-J-Jesse."

I squeezed my eyes shut, pressing my cheek to the front of his shoulder. My eyes filled, all the emotions I'd tried to hold back during the night spilling out, unstoppable for once. From watching him come out of the cage for good. Watching him be truly accepted by the people who were important—the ones who'd helped care for him. Fuck, even watching him hug Rig.

"I'd do anything for you," I told him, my voice wavering, hoping he'd know what I truly meant, the things I struggled to say. "I'll always be here. Always."

He sighed, a deep, snarly sound of contentment, and held me tighter. "I kn-know, Lie-lack."

CHAPTER FIFTY

Seraph and I had been living together in the RV for a month, and none of the raiders in the camp had noticed.

It didn't surprise me. Not many people noticed me when I was around, and I liked it that way, so it made sense that none of them noticed when I was gone. I still went in to do my shifts on the wall and collect food, but I'd let Aury take over the crops, because I knew it soothed him anyway, and I'd gradually moved all my plants and other stuff from my room into the RV.

Now, plants covered most of the surface area in there. Seraph loved it. He also loved all the figurines I'd whittled—including the four I'd made of him. I was already working on a fifth.

I asked him if he wanted me to teach him how to whittle, but he said he preferred watching me do it. We discovered, though, that he enjoyed actual carpentry when we'd gone for a walk in the forest one day and he picked up a big fallen tree branch.

"I want to make s-something," he told me. "Like you do, but... different."

"Okay." I stepped closer, rubbing my gloved hand over his flat stomach as I looked at the branch. "Like what?"

"I don't know," he said with a little frown. "Something for us to u-use."

"We'll take it home and you can decide later." I kissed his chest and stepped back, watching as he easily snapped the branch in half to bring the thicker end home with us.

Rig had come to visit us the next day and noticed the log sitting on the bench.

"What's that for?" he asked interestedly, nodding at it.

"Seraph wants to make something, but he hasn't decided what yet," I said from the kitchen. I was boiling water on the electric stovetop to make us some tea. Daisy had sneakily given me some crockery and a few pans from the kitchen, because she *had* noticed that I wasn't around much.

I'd told her I was living in the RV so I could keep an eye on Seraph, but for a split second, I'd been tempted to tell her that he was in there with me. I was pretty sure she'd understand and not get freaked out by the thought of Seraph out of his cage.

I hadn't said anything, obviously. None of the raiders knew except for the beasties' partners. Not even Anchor.

"Oh, awesome," Rig said, smiling at Seraph. "I'm not too bad at carpentry. Cat's better. I can give you some tools if you want."

"Yes please, R-Rig."

Rig beamed. "Um, have you done it before? Carpentry?"

"No," Seraph rasped. "I don't th-think so."

That meant he had no idea if Luke Buckley had ever done it. He had started remembering more from when he was human, but he said it still felt like the memories of another person.

I thought of him as Seraph, anyway. Who he was now. The person I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.

"Um, well, do you want me to show you how to get started?" Rig asked shyly. "We could start with something small and fairly easy. Maybe a spoon?"

Seraph perked up. "Yes. S-something for Lie-lack to use."

I grinned over at him. I wasn't wearing my mask, because it was only Rig in here and the curtains were closed—the ones that faced the camp wall were always closed. We opened the back ones during the day to let in the sunlight, which was getting warmer as winter came to a gradual end.

"Okay, let me go get the stuff," Rig said eagerly, standing up from the couch. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Th-thank you, Rig."

"My pleasure." He beamed at Seraph. "It'll be fun."

He hurried out of the RV, and I made our tea while Seraph picked up the branch to inspect it.

"Spoon's a great thing to learn with," I told him, carrying the mugs over. He took his from me with a pleased chuff. "I can't wait to use it."

He grinned at me, all his sharp teeth jutting. My mouth tipped up, and I dipped down to kiss the top of his head before sitting beside him.

Rig returned about ten minutes later with his backpack, sitting down cross-legged on the living room floor to unzip it. We had started sleeping in the bed so our living space was clear, especially as the beasties and their partners visited us fairly often, but we still had the nest of blankets piled up on the mattress.

"Your tea's over there," I told him, nodding toward the steaming mug waiting on the kitchen counter.

“Awesome, thanks,” Rig said vacantly as he pulled carpentry tools out of the bag, already distracted by the prospect of teaching Seraph a new skill. “Sorry I took so long. Couldn’t find the handsaw.”

He laid the woodworking tools out neatly and gave me a sheepish grin.

“These aren’t Cat’s tools. I had some lying around in my room, so Seraph can keep them.”

“Th-thank you, Rig.”

“No problem. So we’re gonna have to saw the log into smaller pieces. Um...” He looked around uncertainly. “I guess we have to do it in here. You’re gonna get sawdust on the floor.”

“I don’t care,” I waved a hand. “I’ll clean it up later.”

“Okay.” Rig smiled at Seraph. “Want to do it, Seraph?”

He nodded, passing me his mug and sliding onto the floor to join Rig. I watched as Rig directed him to saw the branch into smaller pieces, then showed him the tools to chip away at the wood and craft it into the shape he wanted. He’d brought out several squares of sandpaper in different grits, and instructed Seraph to sand the wood down until it was smooth, seeing as splinters on a spoon wouldn’t be great.

“Normally you’d treat and seal the wood, especially for stuff you’d use with food, but...”

I shrugged. “It’ll be fine.”

“They might not last long,” Rig told Seraph, then grinned at him. “So you’ll just have to get real good at making spoons, huh?”

“I will.” Seraph grinned back. “And when I am better at it, we will make b-bigger things.”

“Hell yeah. I’ll help you with whatever you want. Like I said, I’m not as good as Cat, but—”

“You’re as good as Cat, Rig,” I said dryly, and he flushed with pleasure.

“Well, anyway, let me know if you get stuck with anything.” His brown eyes brightened. “Hey, maybe we could make a sheltered area out the back for you both. Like some kind of awning or something. Then you can sit out there. No one can see that side of the RV from the wall.”

“A v-vegetable patch for Lie-lack,” Seraph rasped.

Rig nodded eagerly. “Yeah, we could make an enclosed space so nothing can get in and dig them up.”

“You don’t have to do that, Rig,” I said quietly, even as my chest got a little tight.

“Oh, shut up.” He stood and peered out the back window. “I think that would be easy. Easier than carving. But it would be a good way to learn some tricks.”

“Yes.” Seraph grinned at me. “I make you a sh-shelter, Lie-lack.”

I grinned back, leaning forward to kiss his cheek. “That’d be nice.”

“There are some planks in the bar,” Rig said, turning back from the window. “From when Cat and I built the shower stalls years ago. I made sure they stayed dry, so they should still be good. We can get one of the beasties to drag some big logs from the forest to use as pillars.”

My mouth quirked. Rig was in full Rig mode, his usually scattered brain narrowing in focus to concentrate fully on a single task. Like when he’d left behind his entire life to try and save a beastie with a caged head from his evil captor.

“When do you want to start?” he asked Seraph eagerly.

Seraph smiled and held up the narrow chunk of wood he’d sawed off the branch. “I make sp-spoon first. Tonight. Maybe tomorrow we start on shelter?”

“Okay, awesome.” Rig grinned at us both. “This’ll be fun. I like a project.”

“Pretty sure the others are going to notice you out here building a shelter,” I said warily.

“I will stay hidden, Lie-lack.” Seraph reached back to squeeze my knee.

My mouth tipped down. I didn’t want him to keep having to hide, but we didn’t really have any other options unless we told the camp that he was out of the cage. And I didn’t think they’d react well to that news. I still remembered what Tank had called Seraph before. A *thing*. Every time I did, I wanted to go into the camp to find him and stab him.

“You’re right though,” Rig said anxiously. “They’re gonna notice. We’ll be hammering and stuff.”

I didn’t want to stop Seraph from doing it, from learning a new skill, so I said, “If anyone asks, just tell them I’m living out here if they haven’t already realised. I doubt they’ll be all that interested.”

“Okay.” Rig finally went to collect his tea from the kitchen counter. “I’ll get Gloam to help me bring out the wood tomorrow. He’ll probably want to help build it.”

He stayed for a while longer, filling us in on what had been happening in the camp, which wasn’t all that much. Someone had clogged one of the

toilets, and no one would admit to it, but Rig said he was pretty sure it had been Bishop. Ghost had gossiped with him about seeing Nun and Rusty looking very cosy in the diner one night, which made me happy for them both.

When Rig eventually left, Seraph immediately picked up the woodworking tools to inspect them. He didn't move for hours, concentrating as he started carving into the wood. When the evening drew in, I left him briefly to go and get our dinner from the diner.

I kind of liked the thought of us having our own vegetable patch out there. Growing our own food. I had plenty of seeds, always collecting them from Daisy and Bo to dry them out and store them for the next batch of crops. More than enough that it wouldn't affect the camp's crops if I kept some for us.

When I got back to the RV, Seraph still hadn't moved. He distractedly ate his dinner in slow bites between carving and carried on while I went to take a shower. He only stopped when I started kissing his neck to coax him to bed, but I woke up early the next morning as he slipped out of bed to go into the living room.

I knew he was working on it again, so I smiled sleepily and rolled over to doze for a while longer. When I eventually got up, he proudly presented me with the spoon. My throat closed up as I took it from him and stared down at it. It was lopsided and rough, the handle a bit too thick, and he told me he hadn't sanded it yet. But it was perfect.

Later that morning, Rig and Gloam arrived, the latter carrying several long planks of wood easily on his shoulder. He went back inside the camp to get more as Rig started setting out tools and planning how they were going to build the shelter.

Seraph and I had gotten good at slipping out of the living room window that faced away from the camp, so we could come and go during the day with less risk of being spotted from the wall. I followed him out and watched for a while as Rig told Seraph what they needed to do. Then Edin and Hunter came out to help, saying they'd go into the forest to look for some tall logs to use as supports. They'd returned with Edin dragging two actual trees behind him, ripped straight out of the ground with the roots still dangling from the ends.

When Hunter had noticed me staring, he chuckled and simply said, "Yeah."

Within a few days, we had a rough little shelter attached to the back of the RV. Seraph seemed to enjoy the work, but he kept his voice quiet as he talked and laughed with the others. Once it was built, he and Rig immediately started planning a vegetable patch. Rig said he had some spare chicken wire we could use to keep animals out, and he suggested building a small bench for us to sit on out here made from the leftover wood.

Each day, Seraph would carve more, getting better and better. I now had a collection of wooden spoons, each one smoother and more uniform than the last, but my favourite was still the first one he'd made—the flawed, lopsided one. It was a little difficult to actually eat with, but I used it every day.

I'd brought the few bottles of nail polish I'd stolen from Mary to the RV, and Ghost had let me borrow some of the ones Rig had brought back for him. The first time I'd painted Seraph's nails, he picked green. He loved it, the colour vibrant against his dark skin, but he tended to pick the polish off absently while he was deep in thought. The second time I did it for him, he picked orange. Then a mix of both.

I started cooking a little, mixing up Seraph's diet a bit more, though he still preferred his vegetables raw and didn't like meat. I hadn't cooked for myself for years, but found that I enjoyed it. Plus, I wanted us to be as self-sufficient as possible, in case the raiders turned against us when they inevitably found out that Seraph was free. Someone would spot him eventually, although Ghost had told me he'd been listening furtively around the camp and had heard no one talking about it—not even Tank and Bishop were suspicious. But the day they found out was bound to come at some point.

Everything had been going so well, better than I could have ever hoped for, until that day came far sooner than we'd anticipated.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

We'd woken up early to go for a walk and collect more wood for Seraph to carve with. We often slipped out at dawn, taking advantage of the early morning haze and the lazier eyes of whoever was keeping watch on the wall, tired and cold and miserable by the end of their night shift.

I peeked out as I zipped up my coat, spotting Spike standing up and stretching with a yawn. I knew that gave us a window. We were all supposed to wait for the person taking over a shift to come up, but a lot of the raiders tended to head down when they saw their replacement in the camp below.

I waited until he'd vanished down the hatch before moving to the back window to open it. Seraph slipped out first, slinking quietly to the edge of the shelter as I followed him. I peeked around the corner of the RV and saw no one up there, so ushered Seraph toward the forest.

But I must have looked away at just the wrong second.

Before we could make it into the trees, I heard a faint shout. A second later, my blood went cold when the familiar grind of Nun's crossbow rang out in the still morning.

Seraph jerked, letting out a shocked snarl as he stumbled back and fell. I sprinted toward him and dropped to my knees, my heart pounding as my wild gaze tracked over him, trying to see where he was injured.

When I heard Nun reloading her crossbow, I swung my head up to the wall.

"Stop," I shouted, my voice raw. "Don't."

She froze with indecision. I turned back to Seraph, trying not to panic as he let out snarling, shaky breaths.

"Show me where." My voice was quaking, no matter how much I tried to steady it.

When he looked down at his shoulder, breathing hard, I swallowed at the sight of the bolt sticking out of it. Before I could move, Seraph had ripped it out with a snarl, blood spurting from the wound.

"I am—okay, Lie-lack," he panted. "It w-was just a shock."

"It's not fucking okay," I snapped, angry tears gathering in my eyes. "They can't just shoot you."

I was terrified someone else was going to shoot at him. I could hear a commotion in the camp now, people yelling. When I looked up, Nun was gone. I helped Seraph up and hurriedly got him back into the RV, grabbing the medical kit I'd brought from my room to clean his wound.

The bleeding was already slowing down, and I had never been more grateful for the monster DNA inside him. He winced when he tried to move his arm, but he was staying calm and wasn't snarling with pain.

"I'm sorry," I said desperately as I wrapped a bandage around his shoulder and under his armpit. "I should've been more careful—"

"No, Lie-lack." He smiled at me, but it was tight with pain. "W-we knew it would h-happen one day."

"I didn't think they'd fucking shoot you on sight." My voice wavered, hands trembling as I put everything back in the medical kit.

I jumped when someone pounded on the RV door.

"Lilac? Seraph?" Ghost's quiet voice was raised in distress. "You— Lilac, I think you need to come into the camp."

"Fuck," I muttered, then called out, "Come in."

Ghost's blue eyes were anxious when he stepped inside and looked at us. "Are you okay, Seraph? Nun said she..."

"I am f-fine, Ghost."

He nodded, turning his nervous gaze to me as he swallowed. "They— they all know, Lilac. Everyone's gathering to talk about Seraph being out of his cage. Some of them are... really angry. I ran here to... I think you need to come in."

I gritted my teeth, staring down at Seraph as indecision tightened my gut.

"I'm not leaving Seraph," I rasped, even though I knew this was going to go a lot worse if I wasn't in there to explain. Hopefully the beasties would be able to calm down any angry raiders.

"You h-have to go, Lie-lack," Seraph said. "Ex-plain to them. I will be fine here."

"I'm not leaving you on your own," I gritted out.

"I'll stay with him," Ghost said quickly. "You really need to go in there, Lilac."

I huffed out a sharp breath, scrubbing my hands over my face. I trusted Ghost. He was sensible and pragmatic. He'd look after Seraph. Plus, he had

the keenest eyes and ears of anyone here. He'd hear if someone started approaching the RV.

"Okay," I said tightly, crouching to kiss Seraph's cheek and neck through my mask. "I won't be long. Are you sure you're okay?"

He smiled at me. "H-hurts a lee-tol, but not much."

I supposed a crossbow bolt to the shoulder was nothing compared to the pain he'd endured for years, but that didn't make it fucking okay. I gave Ghost a tight nod, squeezing his shoulder as I passed him and left the RV.

There were no raiders up on the wall as I made my way to the camp entrance. That meant everyone was inside, gathering together as Ghost had said. Aury appeared, gazing at me solemnly as he walked toward me.

"I'll stay with him," he said softly. "I'll protect him."

I gave him a tense nod, trusting him. He was protective of Seraph, which meant if anything happened, the beast inside him would come out to keep him safe.

I tried to calm down as I entered the container, so that I'd be able to explain everything rationally. To show them that Seraph wasn't dangerous, that he wasn't a threat to the camp. That he wasn't even fucking *doing* anything, just trying to live in peace.

But the moment I stepped into the camp and saw all the raiders gathered near the motel, my gaze homed in on Nun.

I had always liked Nun, but in that moment, I hated her. She'd hurt Seraph.

Cold, calm fury washed over me. I shook out my shoulders and unsheathed my machete, eyes still fixed on her as I strode forward.

Her blue eyes widened, uncharacteristic fear flaring in them as she stumbled back and held up her hands, still clutching her crossbow.

"It was reflex, Lilac," she blurted, her accent getting thicker. "It was reflex—He just appeared—"

"Lilac," Anchor snapped, pushing her way between the gathered raiders.

I clenched my jaw and stopped, fingers twitching around the handle of my machete. I didn't look away from Nun even as Anchor reached me.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Anchor hissed unsteadily, but didn't try and touch me. "You can't just—What are you *thinking*, Lilac?"

Everyone was watching in silence, all their fearful gazes trained on me. Grinding my teeth, I relaxed my shoulders and cast my gaze over all of them.

“If any of you try to hurt him again, I’ll kill you,” I told them calmly.

Anchor spluttered in shock as several raiders gasped and backed away. Rig was clutching Gloam’s hand, eyes frantic with worry, Edin and Hunter a short distance away and watching in grim silence.

“Lilac.” Anchor’s voice was filled with despair—and betrayal. “Did you just... *threaten* the whole camp?”

“Yes.” I sheathed my machete. “If any of you hurt him, I *will* kill you.”

“What the *fuck*?” A raider stepped forward, and I quickly realised it was Tank. Because of course it was. His incredulous gaze darted between me and Anchor. “You let that fucking thing out of its cage without us knowing. Without us getting a *say* in it. Are you just going to allow that?”

He directed the question at Anchor, who swallowed and went pale under her mask. “I—”

“He’s not a thing.” My hands clenched into fists, but I managed to keep my voice steady. “So I’ll add to my last statement. If any of you talk about him like that again, I’ll kill you for that too.”

“Lilac, please stop,” Anchor whispered, terrified gaze darting over the raiders.

“Fuck this,” Tank snapped. “He just threatened us. All of us. The whole fucking camp. We kicked Cutter out for trying to hurt Ghost and none of us even saw it. We were going off *his* word. And we just heard him threaten *all* of us.”

Edin stepped forward, palms raised in the air. “I think tensions are—”

“Shut the fuck up, beastie,” Tank snapped. “You’re not even a part of this camp. And why the fuck are we letting *him* stay here too? I joined a camp to get away from the monsters and now we’re just inviting them all in? What the hell *is* this?”

“Watch your fucking mouth,” Hunter snarled. “Talk to Edin like that again and I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” Another raider stepped forward, emboldened by Tank. It was Bishop. “You’re outnumbered. Just because you bend over for a monster you think you can take all of us? We have guns.”

Edin let out a low growl, lip curling as he stared at the raider, his eyes growing dark with anger and his tail lashing with agitation. Rig hurriedly stepped forward, eyes frantic above his leather mask as he held out his hands in a placating gesture.

“We all need to calm down—”

"I'm calm." Tank rolled his shoulders and turned to Anchor. "We need to take a vote. On whether this is a *human* camp or a monster camp. We need to vote on whether we let them stay."

"We already voted on it." Anchor's voice was still unsteady, but it grew hard as she stared at Tank.

"Yeah, and look what's happened." He gestured at me. "Lilac thinks he can just free the fucking rabid beastie right next to the camp without even *telling* anyone. It's not *fair*, Anchor. That thing is dangerous. We've listened to it screaming for months—"

I reached for my machete again, and only Rig's frantic hand on my arm made me pause.

"Seraph's not dangerous," he said desperately. "If he was dangerous, wouldn't he have reacted badly after Nun shot him—"

"Who wants a fresh vote on the beasties?" Tank ignored Rig, looking around expectantly. I stiffened slightly when a few hands went up, making sure to take the faces of those raiders in.

Apollo was hovering to the side, watching worriedly. His hand wasn't raised. Neither were Bo's or Daisy's when I spotted them at the back of the crowd. Rusty was standing a short distance from them, eyes hidden behind her mask, but her arms were folded over her stomach and she was fidgeting anxiously. Nun had moved back to stand beside her, a protective arm around her shoulders. At least their hands weren't raised either.

"Enough of us want to," Bishop said defiantly, his own hand raised. "That means we have to take a vote. That's how it's always been run here."

"If you all vote to kick the monsters out, you're kicking out Ghost and Rig too," Anchor said shakily.

"And me," I said, even though no one looked like they cared about that. "I'll go with Seraph."

"Then you'd be doing us all a favour," Tank snapped back, glaring at me. "You just fucking threatened Nun, Lilac. You threatened *all* of us. You're as dangerous as that thing is. You think because you can kill monsters you don't have to follow the rules?"

"No," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "But Nun shot him. For no reason."

"Because it's a mindless animal," Tank shouted, face getting red above his grey mask. "This is *bullshit*. We're supposed to be *safe* in here."

“You are safe in here.” Gloam’s deep voice came from behind me as he stepped forward. “Seraph is better now. He is well. Lilac would never risk the camp. He has protected all of you for years.”

“Until he started fucking a monster like the rest of you.” Tank gestured at the wall. “Is that what you’ve been doing out there? Fucking that thing? What the *fuck* is going on here?”

He rounded on Anchor again, jerking a finger at her. “We’re *scared*, Anchor. You’re letting anything in here. You’re letting the fucking *Soul Eater* stay here. It’s *not fair*.”

That made me wonder where Danny and Wyn even were. Glancing up, I saw them leaning over the railing of the motel’s upper floor, watching all of this unfold. Wyn’s posture was relaxed as he leaned his forearms on the railing, head cocked with mild intrigue, but Danny looked frantic as he whispered to him and tugged on his sleeve.

“You have no reason to be scared.” Anchor drew herself up taller, eyes getting flinty. “None of these beasties have ever been violent. They’ve helped look after us. Protected us in here.”

“The one outside hasn’t,” Bishop sneered. “That one’s been nothing *but* violent.”

“If you vote to kick them out, you’re voting to kick out Ghost and Rig and Lilac,” Anchor continued over him, voice growing louder. “You’re talking about their partners. Not just random beasties. The people they love.”

“Then they can go and make their own camp and love them there.” Tank looked around. “I’m not trying to be an asshole. I’m trying to speak up for those of us who’ve felt unsafe here for *months*. We didn’t say anything when the beasties let it out of the cage before—”

“When he was *dying*,” I snapped.

“Yeah, and then it didn’t,” Tank snapped back. “It stayed just as rabid as before so it went back in, which means it’s still dangerous. And now *you* think you can just do what you want and free it when it’s a threat to all of us.”

“He’s not a threat to anyone,” I seethed.

“That’s bullshit,” Tank snapped. “We’ve all seen it out there screaming and trying to get out of its cage. Trying to attack anything that gets close.”

“He hasn’t done that for months,” Gloam said, a hint of anger in his voice. “And it was not just Lilac’s decision to let Seraph out. It was mine

too. You cannot blame just him.”

“So now the beasties get to decide what’s best for us?” Tank’s voice went a little shrill with disbelief.

“No,” Gloam said steadily, “but ultimately, this decision did not affect the camp. Seraph has not bothered you. He doesn’t want to. He just wants to live peacefully with Lilac.”

“It doesn’t just get to do that next to our camp without us getting a say,” Tank snarled.

“Stop fucking calling him *it*,” I shouted, making everyone fall silent. “He’s a person. He’s not a fucking *thing*. Fuck you, Tank.”

“No, fuck *you*,” he snarled, hands clenching into fists. “I don’t know what the fuck has happened to this camp, but I’m sick of having beasties here. Look at all the shit they’ve brought with them. We lived in peace for *years* until they started showing up. We need to vote on this.”

I was breathing forcefully through my nose, knowing the urge to murder him was written on my face. I couldn’t hide my emotions this time, and I hated that everyone could see it. I hated feeling so exposed. My fingers cramped as I uncurled them from their tight clench, letting out a slow breath.

“We’ll go.” I took a step back. “You don’t have to kick anyone else out. Seraph and I will go.”

Rig sucked in a breath, reaching for my arm again. “Lilac—”

“We should still take a vote on the rest of them,” Bishop piped up. “Cutter was right. He said it would all turn to shit if we started letting them in. This is supposed to be a *human* camp.”

“If you vote to kick the beasties out, I’m leaving with Gloam.” Rig’s voice was loud and rough with anger, but his eyes grew glassy. “Fuck all of you if you think you can treat people like that. *I* would want to kill any one of you if you hurt Gloam. It’s not just Lilac. So fine.”

He drew himself up taller, even as a tear spilled over and rolled down his flushed cheek to hit the edge of his mask. “Kick us out.”

“No one is getting kicked out,” Anchor shouted, rubbing her damp forehead. “This is—Look, Seraph startled you. Fine, I get it. I get the fear. And Lilac—Lilac’s sorry for overreacting, aren’t you, Lilac?”

“No.”

“For fuck’s sake, Lilac,” she muttered in a strangled voice, wiping her face. “Please.”

“I’m not sorry. I meant it. And I meant what I said about leaving. Seraph and I will go, and everyone else can stay.”

“No.” Rig gripped my arm. “If you go, we’ll come with you. Right?”

He directed the last part uneasily to Gloam, but his big beastie just nodded calmly.

“So will we.” Hunter gripped Edin’s hand. “We’ll find Charlie some other way,” he said, but he looked worried, his eyes tense as he glanced up at Edin, who was frowning heavily as he watched all of this unfold.

“Wyn, please do something,” I heard Danny whisper frantically from above, followed by a long-suffering sigh.

“Or...”

The distorted, raspy voice from above made everyone go still. Thick, oily smoke curled down to the ground from the upper level of the motel, before Wyn appeared in the centre of all of us, looking entirely unbothered as he crossed his arms.

“I can just kill all the little humans who aren’t happy about the *monsters* in their camp,” he drawled, turning to stare directly at Tank and Bishop. They both blanched and stepped back.

“That wasn’t what I meant by helping,” Danny gritted out from above, before hurrying along the walkway to the stairs.

“Do you—Do you see what I mean?” Tank’s voice was shaky with fear now, but he still looked around at all the silent raiders. “They’re taking over. They’ll start running this camp soon, and then what?”

Wyn snorted. “I have no desire to control a bunch of fearful, weak-willed humans.”

“Just to kill us and torment us, right?” Bishop asked unsteadily, gripping his crowbar in a tight fist.

Wyn huffed, the smirk audible in his voice when he drawled, “That’s right.”

Tank seemed to realise that this wasn’t going the way he’d hoped as he stared at the Soul Eater, pure terror blanching his features. He took another step back, gripping Bishop’s arm to tug him back with him.

“We—we should at least vote on Lilac and *Seraph*.” He sneered the word, as if Seraph didn’t even deserve a name. My fingers twitched for my machete, and he noticed, blinking rapidly as he stared at me. He looked just as afraid of me as he did of Wyn.

Danny carefully pushed his way through the raiders to stand at Wyn's side, tangling their fingers together. His throat bobbed with a nervous swallow.

"Can I—Can I say something? As an outside perspective—"

"No," Tank snapped, face red. "No one's interested in what you have to say. This is a camp matter."

Wyn froze as Danny went red, then let out a low, ominous snarl. "I will kill you just for speaking to him that way, human."

"*Stop*," Anchor shouted, stepping forward. "All of you, stop fucking threatening to kill each other. Jesus Christ." She stared at all of us, her gaze wild. "No one is getting kicked out. There'll be no vote. We already voted on this. *None* of us deserve to live with the constant fear that one day we'll get kicked out for no reason. None of these beasties have *done* anything."

"What about Lilac?" Tank asked harshly. "*He* did something. He freed that beastie then threatened to fucking kill all of us."

"He didn't mean it." Anchor stared at me hard, daring me to argue.

"Yes I did."

"For fuck's sake, Lilac," she shouted in frustration. "Stop it. Are you *trying* to get kicked out?"

I shrugged stiffly. "I'll go if it makes all of this stop."

"We should at least vote on Lilac," Tank piped up. "He's been taking extra food for himself for months as well. I've seen him."

I sighed wearily. "I haven't been taking it for myself. I've been giving it to Seraph."

"Then that's even worse," Tank snapped. "And you were still taking it without asking. And now you've threatened all of us. We need to vote on whether Lilac stays, just like we did with Cutter. It's only fair."

"We are not voting on whether Lilac stays," Anchor snapped, brow heavily wrinkled with concern.

"That is *bullshit*," Tank went red. "This is supposed to be a democracy. Like on old pirate ships—that was what Cat always said. If we want to call a vote, we need to call one."

"It's just because he's her little righthand man," Bishop piped up. "She knows she wouldn't be able to handle running the camp if he was gone. He *keeps us in line* for her." He shot me a sneer. "Fucking snitch."

I narrowed my eyes at him, knowing he was referring to the night he left his post, but said nothing.

“Hey.” Apollo’s voice was hard as he stepped forward. “Fuck you, Bishop. Anchor can—and has—run the camp fine. *You’re* the one making it difficult.”

“He’s not the one who just threatened to kill all of us,” Tank shouted. “He’s not the one who’s been taking our food to give to that rabid *thing*. He’s not the one who set that thing free when it could come in here and rip us all to pieces.”

“That is enough.” Gloam’s usually calm voice boomed out across the camp, filled with anger and making everyone fall silent. He stared hard at Tank, his long pupils flickering. “Seraph has no desire to hurt any of you. You know what happened to him. You know the pain he was in. It disgusts me that you are talking about him like that.”

“You think I give a shit about what disgusts *you*?” Tank snarled. “You’re part of the fucking problem. All these beasties have done is bring us trouble. Cutter lost his fucking *hand* because of one and then got kicked out. He was the only sane person here. We need to get rid of them.”

“Stop talking about them like they’re not even here.” Rusty’s voice wavered as she stepped forward, Nun’s arm slipping off her shoulders. Tank shot her an incredulous look.

“What? You hate monsters.”

“I don’t hate them,” she said immediately, embarrassment tinging her tone. “I just—I just—”

“I understand,” Gloam told her, taking a calming breath before looking around at the group. “We are different. But surely you have seen that we are not *that* different. We feel things just as you do. We aren’t mindless beasts.”

“Fine, maybe some of you are civilised,” Tank snapped, gesturing vaguely at Gloam and Edin. He shot Wyn a wary look, muttering, “Not him, though.”

The Soul Eater hissed, but seemed to take it as a compliment as he slung his arm around Danny’s shoulders and gave a careless shrug.

“And *definitely* not the one outside,” Tank added, pointing an accusing finger at the wall. “I always knew there was something fucked up about you, Lilac.”

“I’m done,” I said flatly, taking a step back. “Seraph and I will go. No one else has to leave.”

“No.” Gloam gripped my arm hard before I could walk off. “No. I try not to get involved in camp matters, but I am not letting him scare the

others into thinking Seraph is a threat. He is *not a threat*. You're truly willing to kick out someone you have lived with for years, someone who has protected you and grown your food, because *this* ignorant human hates all of us for no reason?"

"For no reason?" Tank's face was purple. "No *reason*? You *destroyed the world*."

I could almost hear Cutter in his voice. I remembered that some of the raiders had sided with him before, when Rig and Ghost brought Aury back. I briefly wondered how Tank and Bishop would react to knowing their idol had become a cannibal who followed the twisted teachings of a monster.

"You need to stop," Anchor snapped at Tank, pointing a sharp finger at him. "We are not taking a vote on anything. Everyone needs to go and cool off, and we can discuss this calmly later. But we are *not* forcing Lilac and Seraph to leave, and we are *not* voting on whether or not to kick out any of the beasties just because you'd rather they weren't here."

Tank stared at her, still red in the face and breathing hard. His hands clenched into shaking fists, and I reached for my machete again when I thought he was going to punch Anchor, but after a few seconds he stepped back, bumping into Bishop who immediately gripped his shoulder.

"Fuck this," he said hoarsely. "Fuck all of you. I'm leaving."

Anchor stiffened. "Tank—"

"I'm not staying here anymore. If anyone wants to come with me, they can. I'm going to pack up my shit."

He turned and roughly shoved his way through the crowd. Bishop was frozen with indecision, before his face hardened and he turned to follow.

"I'm leaving too."

"You don't need to leave," Gloam said. "We can all—"

"Fuck you, beastie." Tank didn't break his stride, heading for the motel stairs.

Rig stepped forward, red in the face, but Gloam smoothed a hand over his curls and murmured something to him, shaking his head.

The rest of the raiders watched in silence as Tank and Bishop stomped up the stairs and vanished into their rooms.

"Anyone else going with them?" Wyn asked casually, still lounging against Danny's side.

No one spoke. Not until Tipley stepped forward unsteadily.

"I—I don't feel safe here anymore either."

“Then I’m sure you’ll be just fine out in the Wastes,” Wyn drawled, lifting the hand draped over Danny’s shoulder to give him a sardonic wave. “Good luck.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

Tank, Bishop and Tipley left shortly after the tense camp meeting fizzled out, no one else willing to speak up, even though I saw several pairs of fearful eyes dart in my direction.

I turned and left without speaking to anyone. When I got back to the RV, Ghost quietly told me that Seraph had drunk some water before falling asleep. I could see him curled up under the blankets on our bed. After I woodenly recounted what had happened and Ghost and Aury left, I pulled off my coat and mask and crawled into bed with him.

Seraph woke up, all his eyes blinking blearily at me. "Lie-lack."

"Everything's okay," I told him quietly, cupping his cheek, even though I didn't know if that was true. "There were a few raiders who were angry, but they've left."

"Left?"

I nodded. "They decided to leave the camp."

His eyes tightened. "Because of me?"

"No," I said steadily. "Because they're ignorant assholes."

He didn't look convinced, so I shifted my head closer on the pillow to nuzzle his chin. "How's your shoulder?"

"Okay." He gave me a tiny smile. "I'm fine."

I stared at him, unable to remove the image of his body jerking back as Nun's bolt drove into his shoulder from my mind.

"I will never let anyone hurt you again," I told him, my voice hoarse. "I'll kill anyone who tries. Anyone."

"Do they st-still want to hurt me?" he asked warily.

"No," I said calmly. I did *not* want him to worry about that. "Nun said it was just reflex. I think she regrets it."

I had no idea if that was true, but I was hoping it was. She'd never been prejudiced toward the beasties. She got on especially well with Gloam, happily teaching him Swedish.

But she'd still shot Seraph.

"I was thinking..." I licked my lips, tracing my thumb over Seraph's tiny, gnarled ear. "When the others leave for the monster world... we could go with them."

His eyes flared with intrigue. "When they go to the... t-time place?"

My mouth quirked, and I briefly wondered if Rig or Danny had told him about it, seeing as none of the beasties were likely to call it the *time place*.

"Yes. We could find somewhere to live there." I gave him a tiny smile. "You might like it better there."

"What about you?" he asked, mouth pulling down. "You c-can't leave all your f-friends for me."

"Yes, Seraph. I can," I told him. "It's an easy decision. I'd miss them, but you're more important to me." I swallowed, trying not to feel awkward when I said, "You're the most important thing to me."

Before he could say anything, I shrugged and added, "And maybe some of them will decide to stay there as well. Maybe we'll set up a new camp in the monster world. Away from all the other humans."

I smiled at him, hoping to make him see that I was happy with whatever decision we made. His eyes creased with emotion as he stared at me, before he curled up into a tight ball and buried his face in my neck.

I wrapped my arms around him, smoothing my thumb over the back of his head. Eventually I heard his breaths even out, becoming slow and raspy as he fell asleep, no doubt tired from blood loss and the shock of his injury.

After checking the bandage and sighing in relief when I saw only a tiny spot of blood seeping through, I carefully slipped out of bed. I knew I wouldn't be able to relax at all today, not while I knew that Tank, Bishop and Tipley were leaving the camp and would be out here in the Wastes.

I didn't think Tipley had the courage to do anything, and Bishop was useless, but Tank especially would be fuelled by rage. He might try something. He might try to hurt Seraph out of spite.

So after putting my coat back on, I went outside and sat on the top step of the RV. I didn't move for hours, not even when Rig and Gloam came out and told me the trio had left. Rig anxiously asked if Seraph was okay, and I told him he was fine, but sleeping.

I could tell Gloam wanted to talk to me about what happened, but he seemed to realise that it wasn't a good time, because he and Rig left again without saying anything else. I stayed out there until late afternoon, scanning the area constantly, before heading inside to check on Seraph and make him something to eat.

He tried to stop me from going back outside, but I refused, telling him I needed to do it for my own mental wellbeing. I needed to make sure no one

came near us. Near him.

As the sky started darkening and I stayed stiff and tense on the top step of the RV, Wyn appeared and told me he would stay out here to keep watch. He'd obviously considered the same thing that I had.

I shook my head, telling him I was fine, but he sat down with his back to the RV anyway.

We sat in silence for a while, until Wyn cleared his throat and awkwardly said, "You should come with us, when we go through the tear."

I nodded. "I was thinking that too. Seraph might prefer the monster world."

"Not just for that." Wyn's hood turned toward me. "He could live for a long time."

I went still. I hadn't even considered that—that Seraph's lifespan could have been lengthened by the monster DNA inside him. Part of me didn't want him to cut his life short for me, but at the same time, I didn't want him to ever be without me. I knew he wouldn't want that either.

"Maybe," I said quietly. "We'll see."

Wyn cleared his throat again, gesturing at the camp wall with a black-stained hand. "They're all little fuckers in there anyway."

My mouth quirked. "Not all of them. And the ones who were have left now, anyway."

"Mm." He glanced over at me again. "Where do you think they'll go?"

Cold anger flared as I pictured Tank's face, the words he'd spat about Seraph, but I forced myself to give a stiff shrug. "Don't know. Not sure how long they'll survive. Tipley and Bishop are useless. Tank's probably a little more savvy, but he's an arrogant hothead. It won't be long before he takes on a monster he has no hope of winning against."

Wyn huffed, then lowered his voice as he said, "I could just go and find them. Kill all three of them, so there's no chance of them ever showing up again."

I'd already considered doing that myself. Because that was exactly what had happened with Cutter, and Seraph and I were more exposed out here. I was only human—I could easily not wake up in time if someone approached the RV in the night. I could easily be caught off-guard just like anyone else. Why should I have to stay tense and alert and constantly on guard when I could be settling into my new life with Seraph? I'd always be wondering if they'd come back like Cutter did, always wondering what they

were doing out there, how far they'd gone, whether they'd met other raiders who hated monsters just as much and told them about us.

I wasn't a bloodthirsty person. I didn't have an uncontrollable urge to kill like some of the raiders in the camp probably believed I did.

But I wanted to kill Tank. I wanted to show him that my threat hadn't just been empty words.

I *had* told him that I would kill any of them if they talked about Seraph like he wasn't a person, and he had continued calling him *it*. A *thing*.

"How far do you think they've made it from the camp?" I heard myself asking Wyn quietly.

He went still when he realised I was actually considering his offer, even though I wasn't. I wasn't going to get Wyn to kill them. I was going to do it myself.

"It won't take me long to find them," he rasped. "And I can—"

"I want to do it." I glanced over at his hooded form. "Can you find them for me?"

Wyn stayed silent for a moment before letting out an amused huff. He gracefully rose to his feet and tipped his hood in a nod.

"I won't be long."

He vanished, thick black smoke shooting off. I stood up, limbs stiff and aching from sitting still for so long. The walk would loosen them up. Get me ready.

Stepping into the RV quietly, I found Seraph curled up in bed. He'd been sleeping a lot since leaving his cage, like his body could finally truly relax and heal. I'd asked him one night how much pain he was still in, and he'd said it was minimal now. Just brief flashes that sometimes woke him up, but I thought Aury had been right in what he'd said the day Seraph woke up. His body had finally settled into what it would remain, no longer trying to twist and mutate into something new.

The relief that had coursed through me at hearing that he was no longer in constant pain, that he wasn't just hiding it from me, was staggering. And I was so glad that this was how he'd stay forever. I'd never wished for him to start... reverting to something more human once he was no longer being dosed. I wanted him just as he was. Long, gangly limbs and sharp jutting teeth and the wall of beautiful discordant eyes. All of it.

He was like a work of art. His face was so expressive, despite its monstrous features, but maybe I was just so in tune with him now that I

knew what every slight twitch and tiny change meant. The way his eyes tightened when he was concentrating on his words or his woodwork. The unhappy droop of his wide mouth when he was sad or disgruntled—not that I saw that often anymore.

His big, grotesque grin that made my throat ache. How those two human eyes would scrunch up when he laughed. The smug smile and heat in his gaze when I was naked and panting for him.

I'd meant what I'd said to him. I would do literally anything to keep him safe. To keep him happy, now that he finally was. To keep him warm and comfortable and allow him the peaceful, pain-free life he deserved.

I felt bad for disturbing him, but I didn't want to risk him waking up and coming outside to see me, only to find me gone. Resting a knee on the bed, I leaned down and pressed my lips to his smooth head through my mask. He stirred, eyes blinking open and tightening in a grimace when he shifted his shoulder.

"I have to go do something, but Wyn will be outside," I murmured, smoothing my gloved fingers over the back of his head. "You can invite him in if you get bored."

"D-do you w-want me to come with you?" His guttural voice was even croakier from sleep.

"No, you need to rest." I kissed his temple, just beside a drowsily blinking white eye. "I won't be too long."

Assuming Tank and the others hadn't gotten too far, anyway. But something told me they hadn't. I was pretty sure they'd stick close to the camp for at least their first night sleeping exposed out in the Wastes. Tipley had said he didn't feel safe in the camp anymore, but he was quickly going to realise just how safe it was compared to the alternative.

I pulled the blankets up higher over Seraph and quietly left as his eyes drifted shut again. Once I was outside, I checked my machete, glad I'd sharpened it recently, and stood waiting for Wyn to get back.

He appeared just a few minutes later, solidifying and brushing off his coat sleeves.

"They are about an hour's walk east," he told me in a low voice, glancing up at the camp wall.

I followed his gaze, seeing Hunter and Edin up there. I wondered if they'd offered to keep watch for the same reason Wyn was out here—

maybe all the beasties were suspicious of Tank and the others trying something.

“They won’t say anything,” Wyn said, nodding at them. “I’ll tell them.”

I already knew they wouldn’t, but I nodded. “Whereabouts?”

“There is a small town to the east of here. They’ve set up camp on the edge of it. Probably assume they’ll be safer near buildings.” Wyn snorted like the idea was preposterous.

“I know it.” I nodded, picturing the tiny rundown stretch of buildings I’d been to before. Turning to Wyn, I stared at him hard. “You won’t leave, right? You’ll stay and watch Seraph until I’m back.”

He nodded, crossing his arms. “I swear it, human.”

I believed him. I trusted him to protect Seraph. I wasn’t exactly sure when it had happened, but I *did* trust the Soul Eater. Glancing back up the wall again, I begrudgingly admitted to myself that I even trusted Hunter.

Giving Wyn a final nod, I started walking away from the RV. His hood turned as he watched me, and I heard his distorted voice quietly say, “Enjoy it.”

I wasn’t going to enjoy it. That wasn’t why I was doing this. I pushed all my emotions down as I started heading east, away from the camp. I forced my mind to remain blank and calm, my limbs warming up and loosening as I walked.

It wasn’t dark yet, but it would be by the time I got back. I wasn’t worried. I’d walked through the Wastes in the dark before, though it wasn’t all that wise. The sky was relatively clear, the moon full. I’d considered bringing my lantern, but the land was flat and empty around here—they’d see it coming, and it was usually loud as it banged against my leg while I walked.

It wasn’t long before the small town came into view up ahead, squat black buildings silhouetted against the deep purple of the sky. There was a very faint glow coming from between two of them, orange and flickering. Campfire.

My lip curled under my mask. It looked like they’d built the fire down an alleyway between two buildings. Not the *worst* place, at least somewhat hidden and discreet. But not enough when there was someone actively hunting them.

My footsteps were silent as I approached the town. I took the time to consider whether there would be any complications if one or more of them

had a gun. I doubted their aim would be all that good, but my machete required me to get up close, making me an easier target.

Just as I was trying to decide on the best angle to approach, a loud crack rang through the air, making me freeze.

Well, that answered the question of whether any of them had guns, I realised as my lips thinned into a grim line. That had been a gunshot.

Another rang out, followed by faint, frantic shouts. I started walking quicker, darting into the shadows of the first building and stopping to listen. Had they turned on each other already?

Then I heard a deep, ululating sound—not quite a howl, something that sounded unnatural to my ears. Beastie.

One of them was shouting in distress. More gunshots cracked through the air. I stood still, wondering whether I should just let the beastie kill them.

My hand clenched around the hilt of my machete. No. Tank, at the very least, was mine. My kill. I wanted him to know that my threat hadn't been an empty one. I wanted him to die for a reason, not just for invading a monster's territory or to become their next meal. I wanted my face to be the last thing he saw, just like Cutter, so he knew exactly why he was dying. For Seraph.

I stalked along the edge of the building and deeper into the town, making my way past rotting front porches and broken windows. Firelight spilled out between two buildings, wavering over the cracked concrete. Stopping at the very edge of an old general goods store, I peered around the corner and felt my eyes widen.

The monster attacking them was enormous. It looked like a gigantic version of a cellar spider, but with only six thick, heavy legs. Its body was a round black ball that rose high, high into the air above the three raiders' heads as it straightened its legs, avoiding the shots from the gun shaking wildly in Tank's hands.

It jerked, a leg buckling when a bullet skimmed it, greyish-white blood oozing from the wound. I quickly took stock of the three raiders. Tipley was plastered against the opposite building's wall, a pistol in his hand that he wasn't even trying to use. His tanned face was slack with terror, the whites of his eyes visible all the way around dark irises.

Bishop was shouting at him to shoot the monster as he swung his crowbar in wild, ineffective arcs, trying to fend off the thick leg jabbing

toward him. Tank's gun stopped firing, clicking with every frantic press of his finger on the trigger. He cursed and fumbled to get a new clip from his pocket.

"Shoot it, Tipley!" His voice cracked as he yelled, but Tipley just shook his head, hiccupping sobs leaving his throat as he inched farther along the wall, away from the other two.

"Tipley, you fucking—" Bishop cut himself off with a manic scream as two legs shot around him and dragged him closer to the monster's fat, round body, which was lowering closer to the ground as its joints bent.

Something whiter and thicker than its blood squirted from an unseen orifice, coating Bishop's pants. He kicked, but it looked like the fluid was sticky—very sticky. It was only seconds before his legs were fused together, and he was screaming non-stop now, smashing his crowbar into the creature's segmented leg.

My eyes swung back to Tank. One of the monster's other legs was jabbing toward him now, like it had with Bishop. Getting ready to trap him next.

More goo had covered Bishop until his arms were pinned to his sides, and he was wrapped up like a mummy on the ground. His throat was raw with his constant screams, his desperate pleas for Tank to keep shooting it, to kill it. The monster seemed to be ignoring him now, knowing he was incapacitated and ready for whatever it planned to do with him. It turned its attention to Tank.

My jaw clenched. The creature could have Bishop, but Tank was *mine*.

Goo shot from the monster, knocking the gun out of Tank's wildly shaking hand. He shouted in terror and stumbled back, but his fingers were already stuck together.

"Tipley!" he screamed. "Shoot it!"

Tipley did the opposite. With a final sob, he tore out of the alley, not even noticing me as he sprinted away and vanished into the gloom of the town.

"F-fuck you, Tipley!" Tank screamed, his voice breaking with terror as the monster's fat black body loomed closer to him.

I sprinted into the alley and brought my machete down on the monster's leg, just as it curled around Tank's back to drag him closer. I didn't manage to slice it off, but an impressive dent appeared and the monster's leg buckled, its body stumbling to the side.

That strange, ululating sound came from somewhere on its indecipherable black body. I hacked again, positioning myself in front of Tank. When I stabbed my machete toward its body, the monster hissed and reared back, long legs straightening again to protect itself.

It scuttled back, limping on its damaged legs, which vibrated with some kind of defence mechanism. Then the front two shot out, making me stiffen and get ready to swing again, but all it did was pick up Bishop's mummified body, his eyes bulging out of his head as he screamed.

"Help me!" He let out a terrified sob as the monster started dragging him up the brick wall of the building, its long legs bending and clinging on. "Help me! Help me, please, don't let it—"

The creature managed to wriggle its huge body through a broken window, dragging Bishop inside with it. His frantic screams grew muffled, a little fainter as they came from higher up, the monster carrying him up to the attic of the building. Then they stopped abruptly.

I swung around to Tank to find him shaking wildly as he stared at me, his eyes wide.

"Y-y-you..." He swallowed, breathing hard. "You saved me."

I let out a tiny sigh, shaking out my shoulders to loosen them. Adjusting the grip on my machete, I gave him a flat look.

"No I didn't."

His brow furrowed, face still grey and clammy with fear above his mask. "Wh-what—"

Before he could even blink, I'd sunk my machete into his gut. He froze, brows still drawn tight as he stared at me in confusion, before they slowly pinched up as pain flooded his eyes.

I yanked the blade out and he stumbled back, thudding hard onto the ground. Stepping over his sprawled form, I crouched and watched him in silence for a few moments as he sucked in shallow breaths, shaking hands feeling the pumping wound.

"I told you I'd kill you if you kept talking about him that way," I said calmly, bringing the blade to his throat.

Tank choked on a breath, letting out a low moan like a dying animal. His hands came up to weakly push my arm away, but I tightened my grip until a thin line of blood seeped onto the sharp edge of my blade.

"Pl-please," he gasped, wincing sharply when the blade dug deeper into his throat.

I drew it back, quirking a brow. “You want me to leave you like this? Bleeding out from a stab wound in your gut? That would take a lot longer. And be a lot more painful.”

“H-help me.”

“No,” I said simply, watching him with a blank expression. He hadn’t wanted to help Seraph.

“L-Lilac—”

“I gave you fair warning. You made your choices, knowing the consequences.”

His eyes widened, shaking hands trying to push me away again. “No—”

I sliced across his throat, quick and efficient, standing up before too much blood could splash onto me. I watched impassively as he gurgled, hands clawing at his gushing throat, one of them still coated with sticky monster goo. Blood gurgled out of his mouth and misted into the air through his soaked mask.

He didn’t take as long as Cutter had to die, blood already pouring from the wound in his gut. I waited until he’d gone still before using his water canteen to put out the little campfire. After collecting his pistol and tucking it into my belt, I dug through his backpack and cleaned my machete with a shirt before sheathing it on my hip.

The monster would probably come out and collect him for another meal, but even if it didn’t, something else would no doubt consume the body or drag it away. I wasn’t worried about any of the raiders from the camp finding him. No one came out this far except for Ghost, and he’d scavenged every inch of this town years ago, so he had no reason to come here either.

I felt calmer as I started walking back to camp. Tank was gone. So was Bishop. Neither of them could ever hurt Seraph. Tipley was still out there somewhere, having run off, but I wasn’t going to bother trying to find him. I didn’t think he had the courage to ever try and hurt me or Seraph, or attack the camp. He probably wasn’t going to survive the night.

When I made it back to the RV, Wyn was sitting on the ground against its side, flipping a dagger in his hand. He went still when he saw me, hood cocking.

“How was it?”

I sat down heavily on the top step, suddenly exhausted. “Fine.”

Wyn huffed in amusement, tucking his dagger away in his coat. “All dead?”

“Killed Tank. Tipley ran off. They were getting attacked by a monster when I got there. It dragged Bishop away, so pretty sure he’ll be dead soon too if he isn’t already.”

“What monster?” Wyn asked with interest.

I shrugged, shoving strands of hair back from my face and tightening my ponytail. “Looked like a giant spider, but with six legs. Black. About ten feet tall, I think.”

He grunted. “An iphlim, by the sounds of it. Did it coat him in a white substance?”

I nodded wearily.

Wyn grunted again, tipping his head back against the RV. “He’ll be sucked dry soon. Did you go after the one who ran off?”

I shook my head. “Didn’t bother. Doubt he’ll survive for long.”

“I can find him.”

I leaned back heavily against the RV door, letting out a breath. “Nah. Let him realise how good he had it.”

Wyn snorted. “Yes, you humans have that saying, don’t you? Living well is the best revenge. He will quickly realise how different life is outside of the camps. Hopefully he’ll pick up a parasite soon,” he added, his distorted voice faintly gleeful.

We lapsed into silence as my gaze drifted up to the wall. Hunter and Edin were gone, but I couldn’t work out who was up there keeping watch now.

When I didn’t move, Wyn gestured at the RV. “Go inside to Seraph, human. I will stay out here tonight anyway.”

The RV was quiet and dark behind us, but I could faintly hear Seraph’s snarly little snores from the bedroom. My mouth tipped into a tiny smile behind my mask.

“Do you mind?” I asked, standing up and stretching.

“No. I went inside for a while to check on him. He’s fine. Was worried about you, but I told him you’d be back soon.” There was a touch of affection in Wyn’s distorted voice as he spoke about Seraph.

I nodded once. “Thanks.”

He grunted, turning his hood away. “Go and rest. Don’t fuck him, though. I don’t want to hear that.”

My lips curved again. “I’m not going to fuck him when he’s injured.”

“Not that I’m encouraging you to, but he is already healing. He has *far* superior healing abilities to a human. He’ll heal as he sleeps.”

Some of the lingering tension in my chest eased. I gave Wyn a final nod and turned for the door, stepping inside and locking it behind me.

I listened to the quiet sound of Seraph’s steady breaths for a few seconds, letting them soothe me, before going into the tiny bathroom to wash off the blood that had managed to splatter over me. I shed my coat and boots in the living room, then carried my machete to the bedroom and rested it quietly on the floor next to my side of the bed.

I stared at Seraph in the dark as I stripped down and pulled on my pyjamas. He was burrowed under the blankets, just the top of his smooth, dark head visible and some of his eyes fluttering as they darted behind his lids. But he looked peaceful—sleeping soundly with his face slack, not drawn in pain.

I crawled under the blankets with him, wriggling my way into the cradle of his body. His limbs uncurled in sleep, just enough to let me press myself tight against his chest. I felt his arms wrap around me a second before I dozed off, my breath leaving me in a long, drawn-out sigh.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Charlie and Moth returned the next day, completely oblivious to the shitstorm they'd narrowly managed to avoid.

I didn't go into the camp all day—not until I heard the faint sound of the bell outside the diner being rung in the evening, which meant a meeting was being called.

Knowing it would be about me and Seraph, I forced myself to leave after hugging him tight and telling him to stay alert. Tank and Bishop were dead, and I was positive that Tipley would never be brave enough to try anything if *he* was still alive, but the paranoia was hard to shake in the face of leaving Seraph out here alone.

He assured me he'd be fine, pulling down my sleeve to give my wrist a tiny lick before I left. Luckily it hadn't been the shoulder of his dominant arm that got shot, so he could continue carving to pass the time while I was gone.

When I stepped into the camp, most of the raiders were already in the diner, but I could see Anchor standing by the old bar with Edin and Hunter—and a third figure I didn't immediately recognise.

When I realised it was Charlie, I glanced around for Moth but couldn't see him. But if Charlie had made it back in one piece, I was confident that meant Moth would've done too. We weren't close, but that didn't mean I wanted him to be hurt or killed.

Hunter's face already looked less tense as he said something to Charlie, no doubt pleased his friend had finally shown back up and didn't appear to be injured. Anchor spotted me over Charlie's shoulder as I made my way to the diner.

She looked tense and distracted as she said something to the others and started walking to meet me. A tiny kernel of guilt flared in my gut, making me want to apologise for giving her more stress, but when she reached me just as I was pulling the diner door open, she muttered, "Meeting's about Cat, not you and Seraph. But I'll reiterate at the end that we're not taking any votes. You and I *do* need to talk, though."

I blinked in surprise, although I should have realised there'd be news about Cat now that Charlie and Moth were back—without him. Which

meant it probably wasn't good news. Giving her a tiny nod, I slipped inside and stayed at the back of the room, sidling over to Rig and Gloam.

A few raiders gave me wary looks, but the atmosphere was far less strained than it had been the day before. Most people were probably distracted by the prospect of an update about Cat, which Anchor launched into without any preamble.

"Cat's still alive," she said, looking around. Her eyes were tight and a little glassy, but she kept her cool. "Charlie and Moth found him in New York."

"I thought they said he was in a prison," Apollo said, brows furrowing in confusion.

"He was. But something happened there—they don't know what. The prison's deserted now." Anchor didn't sound overly interested in that. "The point is, Cat is alive and—and healthy, as far as they could tell."

"Why didn't he come back with them?" someone else piped up.

Anchor exhaled, a flash of anger crossing her face.

"He said he couldn't yet. He said he had something to do first—something that was for all of us. But he... They said he was with a monster."

Everyone was quiet as they absorbed that. My brow quirked as I crossed my arms and leaned back against the window. A monster? In a city?

Rusty voiced my thought in the next moment.

"In *New York*?" She sounded confused and a little apprehensive at the thought. "How is there a monster in New York?"

"I don't know," Anchor said tightly. "Moth said he wasn't all that forthcoming with information. But Cat told them to tell us that he would be back soon."

Everyone looked a little nonplussed. A few people looked pissed.

"So he's just swanning around New York with a monster while we've all been thinking he's dead for *months*?" Apollo said incredulously. "What the hell?"

"Look, Cat loves this camp and everyone in it," Anchor said wearily, but I could tell she was angry at him too. "He must have a good reason for staying away. We... I guess we just have to trust him and wait for him to get back."

"What if he brings the monster back with him?" someone asked quietly. My eyes flickered over the group, spotting Keen when Anchor's gaze

lasered in on him.

“Would that be a problem?” she asked in a hard voice. He shrank back, shaking his head quickly.

“No, no, not for me.” He glanced over at me nervously. “I’m—I don’t have a problem with beasties. I’ve always voted to let them stay.”

“Keen brings up a good point.” Anchor looked around at everyone with flinty eyes. “We need to address Tank’s outburst yesterday. Who here has a problem with beasties living in the camp? Now’s your chance to speak up.”

No one spoke or raised their hands—not even the few people who had seemed to be siding with Tank and Bishop yesterday—but after a few drawn out moments of silence, someone cleared their throat, making me stiffen up.

“I don’t have a problem with beasties,” a slim, quiet raider called Dino said hesitantly. “But... I do think we need to talk about Lilac and Seraph. Not vote on whether they can stay,” she added in a rush. “I don’t think they need to go. But... Lilac *did* let Seraph out without telling us, and I think that should have been a camp decision. Or at least something we were informed about.”

I could tell Gloam wanted to say something, shifting on the other side of Rig, but he stayed quiet to let Anchor answer.

“You’re right,” she said calmly. “It probably should have been something we were told about.”

She glanced over at me, and I could see a hint of hurt in her dark eyes. I shifted uncomfortably, looking away.

“But I think what Gloam said yesterday summed it up,” she continued. “Lilac would never put us at risk. He’s protected us for years—mostly on his own before any of the beasties arrived—and he’s taken care of our crops and made sure we never run out of food. If Lilac trusts Seraph, the rest of us can too.”

“He has never actually hurt anyone,” Daisy piped up, leaning on the other side of the counter beside Bo, though her eyes darted to me as she said it. She knew that Seraph had choked me that first night I’d guarded him, but she also knew how much pain he’d been in. I hoped she understood. “And Rig told us why he was always screaming and thrashing about. That poor beastie.”

“He is better now, Lilac?” Bo asked in his deep, comforting voice.

I cleared my throat, straightening up from the wall as I nodded. “Yes. He’s much better. He’s calm. And gentle. He doesn’t want to hurt anyone. He just wants to live in peace.”

“With you,” Keen added nervously. I shifted my gaze over to him, and he shrank back a little again.

“Yes. With me.” I slid my eyes over the rest of them. “We’re together.”

Apollo crossed his arms, eyeing me with concern—which I guessed made sense. He’d seen the aftermath of Seraph choking me up close. But he cautiously said, “Glad he’s better.”

“He’s much better.” I held his gaze and reiterated, “He doesn’t want to hurt anyone. He couldn’t think clearly before. Because of the drugs and the pain.”

He looked at me for a moment longer before giving me a slight nod, his shoulders relaxing. “Good.”

“So you’re living in the RV with him?” Nun asked me. My eyes swung to her, and I felt them go cold. She looked away quickly.

“Yes,” I said tersely, still watching her. “I collect our own water. I’m going to start growing our own food. We won’t take any resources from the camp.”

“You take whatever you need,” Daisy declared, then froze and glanced at Anchor. “If Anchor says you can.”

“Of course they can,” Anchor said impatiently. “You’re still a part of this camp, Lilac. You don’t need to cut yourself off from us. No one wants you to do that. Don’t think that some of us haven’t noticed how little you’ve been around.”

She gave me a pointed look when she said it, which made me shift awkwardly. Sighing, she tore her gaze away to look around at the group.

“Is there anything else anyone wants to bring up while we’re all here?”

“Yes,” Nun said, her voice firm as she stepped forward from Rusty’s side. She was looking at me again. “I want to apologise to Lilac for what happened. I—It was honestly reflex. I’d never expected to see Seraph out of the cage, and then he was just... there.”

I stayed silent, crossing my arms and gripping my biceps with clawing fingers.

“I’m sorry,” Nun said hoarsely. “I panicked. I wasn’t trying to kill him. I swear.”

When I still didn’t say anything, Gloam stepped forward.

“If I may say something...” He waited for Anchor to give him a nod. “I obviously cannot speak for Lilac or Seraph, but I... understand Nun’s reaction. We hadn’t told any of you that Seraph was free. Which was perhaps, looking back, our mistake. If we had, it could have prevented him from getting hurt.”

I clenched my jaw. “We didn’t tell them because of pricks like Tank and Bishop.”

“Do *not* lump us in with them,” Apollo said. “Those who... felt strongly enough about the beasties left with him yesterday. I don’t have a problem with Seraph being free, and like Anchor said, I trust you, Lilac. You wouldn’t do anything that would put us at risk.”

A few people nodded, looking at me, which made me shift uncomfortably again. Clearing my throat, I made sure my face was blank and voice flat when I said, “I meant what I said though. I’ll kill anyone who tries to hurt him. Or talks about him like he’s not a person.”

To my surprise, Daisy laughed. “Such an overprotective boy.”

“I—” My face heated. “I mean it.”

“We know, Lilac.” Anchor gave me a tiny smile behind her mask. “If that’s everything, you can all go. Edin, Hunter and Charlie are up on the wall keeping watch, but those of you scheduled should go back up. Thanks, everyone.”

As raiders started filtering out of the diner, I turned to leave. My brow quirked when I saw Charlie walking hurriedly toward the motel with his head down. He wasn’t up on the wall then.

Then Moth was bursting out from the entrance and striding toward him, calling his name. There was a weird little spiky creature loping along behind him.

Before I could leave, I heard Nun’s voice behind me.

“Lilac.”

Stiffening, I slowly turned to face her. She looked nervous, but straightened up to her full height—which was far taller than me.

“I understand if you don’t accept my apology, but I want to apologise to Seraph.”

I stared at her blankly. “You really think I’m going to let you go anywhere near him?”

She flushed, glancing back at Rusty who was fidgeting anxiously by the door. The sight of her made me let out a tiny sigh, some of the cold anger

trickling away.

Looking at Nun again, I said, "I'll speak to Seraph. See if he wants to talk to you."

She nodded. "Thank you. And I—I really am sorry, Lilac."

I glanced at Rusty again, tongue poking at the hole in my teeth, before nodding.

"Fine." I lowered my voice. "Don't screw Rusty around."

"What?" Nun chuckled warily. "I don't plan to. I... I really like her."

"Fine," I repeated, giving Anchor a brief nod when I saw her gesturing at me from behind Nun.

Once they'd left, I reluctantly made my way over and slid into the seat beside her.

"Okay, firstly, is Seraph okay?"

I gave a tight nod. "He's fine."

"Good." Anchor paused, then punched me in the arm. "Secondly, what the fuck? Why didn't you tell me?"

I cleared my throat, feigning ignorance to say, "Tell you what?"

"Uh, that you're in a relationship with Seraph? That you've basically moved out of the camp and into the RV? That he's better and out of his cage?"

Shrugging stiffly, I muttered, "Just didn't."

She let out a weak laugh, rubbing at her forehead. "Well, I'm happy for you."

"Thanks." I paused, then carefully asked, "What are your thoughts on the news about Cat?"

"God." She wiped her eyes, looking exhausted. "I don't know. I'm so mad at him for staying away when he could've come back."

"Mm." I side-eyed her. "We don't know for sure that he could have, though. Maybe he stayed away for a good reason."

"Maybe," she said dully, staring down at the counter. "I feel so guilty, because while I just want him to be safe, part of me wishes he'd come back so I didn't have to do this alone."

I shifted uncomfortably, forcing out, "You're not alone. You have plenty of support."

"Yeah, but as much as I hate to admit it, people listened to Cat more."

"People are sexist assholes."

She chuckled. “Well, at least most of the misogynists are gone now, huh?”

“Yeah.”

For a second, I considered telling her about Tank and Cutter—that I’d killed them both. But looking at her drawn face, knowing she was still processing the news about Cat, I decided it was kinder not to. Tank and Bishop were gone, and Seraph and I had dealt with the Cutter problem. We knew to keep an eye out for any other cult members. Nothing would be gained if the camp found out, and I wasn’t sure how much Gloam wanted them all to know about his past.

“What do you think he’s doing?” Anchor asked quietly. I knew she was referring to Cat.

I shrugged, sliding out of my seat. “Knowing Cat, probably trying to take on the entire military to make our lives marginally better.”

She snorted. “Yeah, probably.”

I turned to leave, but paused and cleared my throat. “Sorry, by the way. For, uh, what happened with Tank.”

She waved a weary hand. “Don’t be. He was an asshole. I’m glad he’s gone. And Bishop was useless.” Glancing over at me, she asked, “How long do you think they’ll survive in the Wastes?”

I cleared my throat a little awkwardly. “Not long. Anyway, I need to get back to Seraph.”

“Yeah, of course.” Anchor hesitated, looking over at me again as she leaned on the counter. “Don’t be a stranger, Lilac. I’ve missed you.”

I coughed, heading for the door. “Yeah. I won’t. I, uh... See you later.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Seraph got a little emotional when I told him he didn't have to hide anymore—that all of the raiders were happy he was out of his cage.

When I told him what I'd done to Tank, he gazed at me silently before pulling me into a tight hug, burying his face in my neck. That made it all worth it.

I also reluctantly told him that Nun wanted to apologise, and he said he was willing to let her come and speak with him. I thought a part of him was a little curious about all the raiders in the camp—the people he'd never met who lived so close. Who had watched him from the wall for months.

Now that he didn't have to hide, I wanted to make sure our visitors stayed outside rather than coming into the RV. I liked our space to stay ours. I'd never liked people going into my room in the camp, and that hadn't changed, but I'd put up with it before so Seraph could spend time with the others.

Before Rusty and Nun came to see us, I cautiously told Seraph that I'd previously had sex with Rusty. Several times. It felt wrong for me to let him meet her without having that knowledge, like I was trying to hide things from him.

He'd chuffed in displeasure, but had simply said, "She kn-knows you are mine now th-though, yes?" which made me wrap my arms around him and press my cheek to his chest to hide my smile.

When I saw them making their way around the corner of the camp wall the next morning, I quickly stepped outside so they didn't try to come in. I could see that Rusty was shaking already, clutching Nun's hand tightly. I hoped that her meeting Seraph would take away some of the fear she had of the monsters, but I was grateful she was making the effort anyway.

I gave them a stiff nod when they reached the RV, crossing my arms and hanging back as Seraph came outside, hunched over so he could squeeze through the door. When he straightened to his full height, Rusty let out a tiny gasp as Nun's eyes grew wide.

"*Herregud*," she exclaimed with a wary chuckle. "You're tall, aren't you?"

"Yes." Seraph grinned at them. "Hello, N-Nunnn. R-Rus-tee."

Rusty was still clinging onto Nun's hand and trembling, but she managed to ask, "H-How is your shoulder feeling, Seraph?"

"Not t-too bad. Thank you."

He fixed his gaze on Nun and went silent, which made me want to smile because it reminded me a little of myself. Her eyes pinched, but she didn't look away.

"I'm sorry, Seraph. If I'd known you—" She stopped and took a breath. "I'm sorry for hurting you."

"It is f-fine. I understand."

I clenched my jaw to stop myself from interjecting that he shouldn't *have* to understand—that no one should have tried to shoot him at all, just because he was a monster. But I stayed silent, hanging back, letting Seraph accept Nun's apology in his own way.

They didn't stay for long, but Rusty looked a little calmer when they walked off back to camp. I was mostly concerned about Seraph, but he seemed happier, almost excited as we went back inside and he started asking me about the other raiders in the camp. Like he felt like he'd been accepted.

"I w-want to make you s-something," he told me after they'd left, picking through his various lumps of wood lining the bench.

Rig had said he'd fix the table in here so we could eat at it, but he'd gotten distracted when he and Seraph started working on the bench, so I'd have to gently remind him.

My mouth tipped up as I set a pot of water on the stove to boil for tea. "You make me things all the time."

"Something d-different." He seemed to decide on a piece of wood, because he carried it over to the corner of the living area where he kept all his tools. "A s-surprise."

"Oh yeah?" I grinned over at him.

"Yes. So you have to go for a wh-while."

I froze, turning to face him. "Do I?"

"Yes," he said stubbornly, head already bent over the lump of wood.

"Uh..." I looked around blankly. "I guess... I can go sit in the camp. I have a shift on the wall soon anyway, so..."

"Yes. C-come back later."

I stared at him, before my mouth quirked and I walked over to lean down and kiss his head. "Bossy. Fine, I'll go. You'll be okay here?"

“I’ll be f-fine.” He lifted his head to grin at me, before stretching up as his tongue snaked out. I quickly ripped off my mask so he could kiss me, gliding my tongue against his before it retreated.

I blinked, a little dazed as I stepped back and put my mask back on. “Okay, well I guess... see you later.”

I grabbed my whittling stuff before leaving the RV and making my way into the camp. I paused, looking around. I didn’t really know what to do with myself. I was used to spending all my time outside now, so I started heading for the wall so I could sit and whittle in peace until my shift keeping watch.

As I made my way over, I spotted Moth and Charlie sitting very close together outside the old bar, which made my brow twitch. Seemed Moth had finally got over his unrequited love for Ghost then. And that weird little creature was still with them. I was pretty sure I’d seen them out in the Wastes before, but they always ran at the sight of people.

This one was leaning against Moth’s legs as he fed it bits of his meal. I cocked my head, but Gloam approached and pulled my attention away.

“Lilac.” He gave me a smile. “How are you?”

“Fine.”

“And Seraph? Rig wants to go and see him later.”

My mouth quirked. “He’s fine. He kicked me out of the RV so he could make me something. He wants it to be a surprise.”

Gloam grinned, a hint of pride on his wide face. “He is getting very good at woodwork, yes?”

“Yeah. He really enjoys it. Can’t pull him away from it sometimes.”

Gloam huffed in amusement, but then his expression grew serious as he said, “I wanted to ask you how you are feeling about everything that happened.”

I went a little tense, glancing around. “Nun came to apologise to Seraph this morning.”

He nodded. “Good. She does seem to truly regret hurting him.”

“I guess,” I muttered, then added, “The camp seems... better now Tank and the others are gone.”

“Yes. He has always made it clear that he did not like us being here,” Gloam said grimly. “But I can’t help but be concerned that we might see a repeat of the Cutter situation.”

I stayed silent, wondering if I should tell Gloam I'd killed Tank. I didn't think he'd... approve. There was a chance Wyn or Edin might tell him, but I decided I wasn't going to say anything.

Instead, I cautiously asked, "Well, how likely are they to be picked up by the Herald's missionaries?"

Tipley was still out there. There was a chance he could come across more cult members. He was weak, and seemed to be a bit like Bishop had been—bland and in need of guidance, moulding himself to fit the person he'd decided to follow without question.

Gloam's face did something complicated. "Unlikely."

I quirked a brow at him. "How do you know?"

"Because..." He glanced over at Charlie and Moth, but shook his head. "I don't think the Herald's missionaries will be roaming the Wastes any longer."

"Okay," I said slowly. He seemed to know something that he wasn't sharing, but I was too, so I didn't push it. "Either way, they probably won't survive long out there. On their own, at least. Guess they could try and join another camp."

"Yes," Gloam mused. "Perhaps."

When he fell quiet, I shifted uncomfortably. "Well, uh... I think everything will be fine now. I'm glad Seraph doesn't have to hide anymore."

"Yes," Gloam said again, smiling. "And I hope you are no longer thinking about leaving. We would miss you very much."

"Well you're all leaving soon anyway," I said dryly, but cleared my throat. "We were... We might come with you."

Gloam went still. "To the Caen an Sin?"

"Not necessarily there. I haven't talked to Seraph about that yet. But... to the monster world. I think he might like it better there. Or at least like to see it."

Gloam's face softened, breaking into a huge smile. "Rig will be so happy, Lilac."

I grunted, gruffly saying, "We haven't decided for sure yet."

"Well, you have time." He clapped me on the shoulder. "I am so glad you and Seraph found each other, Lilac. You are good together. You are good for each other."

"Yeah," I said awkwardly. "I—Thanks."

He chuckled, squeezing my shoulder before walking off. I slowly walked to the base of the wall and sat down, pulling my whittling stuff out of my pocket. I was working on my fifth figurine of Seraph, trying to capture all his different poses. This one was of his hunched over gait.

The snow had finally melted, but the ground was still cold under my ass. I sat alone, wondering what Seraph was making for me, my belly warming with pleasure at the thought of going back to the RV and getting to spend another night with him, safe and comfortable in our own home. Free to do whatever we wanted.

I eventually went up to take my shift on the wall, getting impatient as I whittled and constantly glanced at the RV down below. When it ended, I hurried down through the hatch, eager to get back to him, but Aury stopped me as I stepped out into the Wastes, coming back from visiting Seraph.

“He said you can’t come back yet,” he told me with a tiny smile.

I exhaled and turned to drag my feet back into the camp, Aury following behind. I resisted the urge to ask him what Seraph was making me, not wanting to ruin his surprise.

“What are you planning on growing for yourself, Lilac?” Aury asked me with interest. He loved plants as much as I did.

“Just the usual.” I stopped and turned to face him, gesturing at the vegetable patch. “How are the crops going?”

“Very well.” He gave me a shy smile, his pale skin flushing. “Now that Tank and Bishop are gone, a couple of the raiders have already asked if I would like them to help.”

I couldn’t help but smile back at him, because I knew how much it pained him that everyone avoided him. “That’s good.”

“Yes. I’d like to teach them everything you taught me, so they are prepared for when we leave.”

I went still. “So you and Ghost have decided to do it then?”

Aury shook his head. “No. I don’t think we will. But we would still like to go with the others. I would like to show Ghost my world.”

I nodded slowly. “Seraph and I might come too.”

Aury’s black eyes brightened. “Yes?”

“Yeah. We might not do the tethering thing either—we haven’t talked about it yet—but... yeah. I think we’ll come.”

He grinned. “That is wonderful, Lilac. Though... I am a little worried about the journey there.”

I silently agreed. A big group of humans and monsters travelling together across the Wastes was sure to attract some attention, no matter how deserted it was out here. Word would spread between camps and traders and nomads.

The military might spot us. And I didn't know what that would mean for Seraph.

I didn't voice any of that to Aury though, not wanting to worry him—or Ghost—more. Instead, I nodded and said, "It'll definitely have to take some planning."

"Yes." He smiled at me. "But we have time. We will be careful. And I am less worried about our safety knowing you will be coming with us," he added with a hint of teasing in his voice.

I barely resisted the urge to roll my eyes, because I very much doubted my presence would make a difference to the group's safety. Not with the Soul Eater and the rycke and Edin and Gloam with us.

Letting out a breath, I asked, "Did Seraph say how long I have to wait?"

"Just a little longer. He's nearly done."

"Okay," I said woodenly, turning to make my way back to the wall.

The moment I sat down and pulled out my whittling stuff, Moth's little pet monster appeared. It blinked at me with big buggy eyes, sitting a little distance away until it cautiously crept closer.

I ignored it, carefully carving the figurine in my hands. In my periphery, I saw the little monster creep even closer until it was sitting right next to me. Just staring at me.

I side-eyed it but said nothing. When it sniffed at my elbow, I went tense but still stayed silent. A few minutes later, it pushed my hands out of the way to climb onto my lap. I froze, staring down at it as it gazed at the camp cheerfully, its spiked tail swishing next to my knee.

I glanced around in mild alarm, trying to find Moth so he could take it away. I couldn't see him, so I slowly lifting my figurine and knife above the creature's head to carry on whittling, trying to pretend it wasn't there.

Rig appeared a while later, laughing as he crouched beside us. "She likes you, huh?"

"Apparently," I deadpanned, glancing at the little monster still curled up on my lap. I cleared my throat. "Could you maybe... move her?"

He chuckled, straightening up. "I'll go and get some jerky to try and tempt her away."

As he walked off, the monster looked up at me before her eyes latched onto the figurine in my hands. Before I could react, she'd snatched it from me and started chewing on it. I stared at her, wondering whether there was any point in asking for it back.

Feeling self-conscious, I looked around for Rig, trying to will him to hurry up. He reappeared a few minutes later with a fistful of jerky, which he held out to the little monster.

"Hey, Chuck, want some of this?" he cooed as she dropped the figurine to lean forward and sniff at it.

I immediately grabbed the likeness of Seraph to carry on whittling, trying to ignore what was happening, but then she let out a hiss and clutched at my arm, making me go stiff.

"Go away," I muttered, but she just chirped at me cheerfully.

"She likes you," Rig said with a hint of jealousy in his voice. He sighed. "Which I guess makes sense, if she also likes Moth. You're both... unique."

I gave him a flat look, but jolted in alarm when Chuck snatched the figurine back out of my hands and ran off with it.

"Little—" Scrambling up, I took off after her as she loped across the camp to where I could see Moth and Charlie sitting with Edin and Hunter.

When I reached them, she'd already handed the figurine to Moth. He was staring at it with a nonplussed expression, so I cleared my throat, which made him look up.

"I'll take that back," I said, holding out my hand.

He passed it over without a word. Feeling awkward, I glanced around and nodded at the four of them before walking off.

I was done waiting, I decided. I didn't want that little creature to latch back onto me, so I quickly left the camp and made my way around to the RV.

Knocking on the door, I quietly called, "Can I come in yet?"

I heard Seraph chuckle from within, his snorting wheeze that made my chest ache. "Yes, Lie-lack."

I stepped inside immediately and sighed with relief, beyond glad to be back in our space and out of the camp. Shedding my coat, I hurriedly walked over to him as he stood up, holding something behind his back.

"It is n-not good," he told me, which made my throat close up.

"It'll be good," I croaked, desperate to see what he'd made me.

He fidgeted a little, looking nervous, before hesitantly revealing what was behind his back.

It was a bowl. Small and almost as lopsided as the first spoon he'd made me, gouge marks still clearly visible in the wood, and a little nick on the side where his hand must have slipped while carving.

"F-for your p-pecans," he told me shyly. "So we can sh-share."

My throat bobbed as I took it from him.

"I love it," I said, glad it was just us here when my voice came out a little choked. "It's perfect, Seraph."

"I will make you a b-better one when I am—"

"No." I shook my head, stepping closer to bury myself against his chest as I clutched the bowl. "I don't want another one. I want this one."

He chuffed with pleasure, wrapping his arms around me and dipping his head to snuffle at my ponytail. "I am pl-pleased you like it."

"I love it," I said again, closing my eyes as I slid my arms around him, still gripping the bowl tight. "Thank you."

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

Over the next few days, not much changed except we no longer had to skulk out the back window to leave the RV and go for walks. At least one of the monster-human couples visited us every day, and Rig came out often to help Seraph build a bench for our shelter out the back.

All the beasties seemed to love Seraph and were almost as protective of him as I was—even the Soul Eater. Because yes, Danny and Wyn were still here. Now that Charlie and Moth were back, they had started planning how they would get through the tear further south.

A few days after they got back, Charlie and Moth came out to see us at the insistence of Edin and Hunter—mostly Edin. They both stared in shock as Seraph straightened up and gave them his little wave as we stood outside.

“Hello,” he told them as they blinked at him in unison. “I am g-glad you are back safe.”

Charlie seemed to recover first, a charming grin tipping up his mouth as he stepped forward to give Seraph’s hand a vigorous shake. It was awkward, because Seraph seemed a little confused by the action.

“Pleasure to meet you, Seraph,” he drawled.

Moth gave Seraph a wave and an awkward smile, that spiky little creature clutching onto his leg and peering up at Seraph curiously. She inched out from behind Moth and crept closer, sitting back on her haunches and gazing up at Seraph.

He stared back, all his eyes blinking in a wave. “Wh-what is this?”

Charlie chuckled, crossing his arms. “That’s Chuck. She’s a copicen.”

She chirruped and tentatively reached out to touch Seraph’s leg. His clawed toes twitched, but he held very still and let out a little bark of surprise when she suddenly scurried up his long leg and around his waist, her spiked tail swishing happily as she chirped at him again.

He let out his wheezy, snarling laugh, hesitantly patting her back. I tensed when his fingers brushed her spikes, but they didn’t seem to hurt him.

“Ch-Chuuuck,” he rasped, grinning down at her.

She seemed to grin back, her mouth stretching wide in her flat grey face and revealing little fangs.

“She likes you.” Charlie chuckled.

“I l-like her too.” Seraph patted her back again, his impossibly long fingers stretching almost completely along her spine.

I realised Moth had sidled over to me when he muttered, “So he’s... better? I thought I heard him screaming the night we got back.”

I side-eyed him and said in an inflectionless voice, “He wasn’t screaming in pain.”

I’d taken full advantage of us no longer having to keep quiet and hide by sucking Seraph’s cock so enthusiastically and relentlessly that he’d let out a furious snarl as he came, his hands scrabbling over the headboard of the bed. I’d tried massaging the base of that long, thin protrusion above his cock with my finger and thumb, and that had been what made him scream. And come again.

It took Moth a few seconds to get what I meant. When he did, his face flamed bright pink.

“Oh. Right.” He stepped back, looking flustered as he let out a nervous chuckle. “Uh—okay, I—sorry.”

He returned to Charlie’s side hurriedly, tangling their fingers together and shooting me an embarrassed look. I hadn’t realised Edin had overheard until he chuckled and clapped me on the shoulder.

“Moth’s a bit shy,” he muttered to me conspiratorially. “Got just as flustered when I started telling him about fucking Hunter last night.”

“For fuck’s sake, Edin,” Hunter snapped from his other side.

I cocked my head, eyeing the half monster. I’d never considered him to be shy, but he did seem quieter—more relaxed as he leaned into Charlie’s side and listened to his conversation with Seraph.

“They might come with us as well,” Edin said cheerfully, releasing my shoulder to grab Hunter’s nape and yank him closer, ignoring his irritated grunt.

“To the monster world?” I didn’t bother asking how Edin knew that Seraph and I were considering it. I was pretty sure the Soul Eater gossiped with him about everything.

“Yes. We will be quite a troupe travelling across the Wastes, won’t we, josdo?” Edin kissed the side of Hunter’s head, draping his thick arm around his shoulders.

“Just have to hope the military doesn’t spot us on the way,” Hunter said grimly, watching Seraph before shooting me a look. “They might be

looking for him if they've discovered he's gone from Mary's."

I'd already thought the same thing, but I didn't want to worry Seraph with it, so I calmly said, "I won't let them hurt him."

"None of us will," Edin told me sincerely. "We will be a force to be reckoned with. The military stands no chance against all of us, especially with Wyn and Aury. Honestly, they're lucky that most creatures from our world have no interest in taking over this one," he added in an airy voice. "It would be laughably easy."

Hunter and I shared a look, but neither of us said anything. When Seraph called me over, his guttural voice excited, I went to stand at his side. Chuck was up on his shoulders now, clinging onto the back of his head and looking excited about being so high up in the air.

"M-Moth is a half m-monster," he told me eagerly. "H-he is different. Like me."

Moth gave him a tiny smile. "Yep. We're both a mix from two worlds."

"All the good bits and none of the bad bits," Charlie declared, tugging Moth closer to kiss his cheek. "Well, except for your attitude."

"Shithead," Moth muttered, but wrapped his arm around Charlie's shoulders.

"Am I the g-good bits, Lie-lack?" Seraph asked me, his guttural voice sly as he tangled his fingers in my ponytail.

I looked up and gave him a wry smile behind my mask. "Yeah. The best bits."

I was eager to show him how much I loved certain bits of him, so I cleared my throat and said, "Thanks for visiting."

Charlie caught on immediately that I wanted them to go, chuckling and pulling Moth back. "No problem. Come on, Chuck. Let's go get something to eat."

She let out a weird hissing click and obediently scrambled down Seraph's body, pausing to chirp in his face and give his chin a nudge with her snout. He grinned, gently scratching her back before she clambered down and loped over the grass to take Moth's hand.

I eyed her, glad she'd left me alone this time. Everyone seemed to love her. She was cute, I guessed, but I'd never had pets growing up, so I had no idea what I was supposed to do with her when she started clinging onto me and chirruping frantically. And I didn't want to ask and look stupid, so my plan was to just pretend like it wasn't happening if she did it again.

Hunter and Edin followed Moth and Charlie after giving us a wave, and I watched until they had vanished around the corner before pulling Seraph into the RV. I refused to call it the love shack like he did—and everyone else did—and would never admit that I'd found the words almost slipping out a few times when talking to the others.

Once the door was shut, I pulled off my mask and grinned up at him. "We better not get any more visitors today."

"Wh-why not?" he asked with a chuckle, but his eyes glinted knowingly. "B-because you'll kill anyone who interrupts us f-fucking?"

I huffed. "Am I that predictable?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's usually an effective threat," I muttered, grabbing his hand and leading him into the bedroom.

He let me push him back onto the bed, and I tugged off my shirt before kneeling on the mattress to kiss my way up his inner thigh as I undid my pants. When I reached the mound between his legs, I gave it a soft kiss. The protective plates were already peeling back, like a blooming flower.

Straightening up to hurriedly take off the rest of my clothes, I watched hungrily as they unfurled and his hardening cock rose between his legs, slick and deeply flushed.

When I clambered onto the bed naked to straddle his hips, he chuckled, hands sliding up my thighs.

"D-do you want to be in ch-charge this time, Lie-lack?" he asked slyly, thumb stretching to stroke the seam of my sac.

My cock bucked in reaction as I grinned down at him. "Maybe for a little while. I *am* pretty good at this."

I'd told him everything about my life—my parents, my time in the orphanage, my job before I left the city, what I'd had to do in the Wastes before joining the camp. What I'd had to do *for* the camp. I wanted to share everything with him. I wanted him to know me better than anyone ever had.

Seraph grinned back at me, grasping my hips and rocking me a little over his cock, making me groan as his long, thin tendril pinned our lengths together. Chuckling, I reached down and gently slid my finger underneath it until it uncurled to wrap around my digit instead.

"Want to get me ready?" I asked him with a sly smile, already knee-walking higher up his body.

“Yes,” he rasped immediately, big hands lifting me until my feet were above his shoulders.

I gripped the headboard, lowering myself into a squat so his tongue could swirl over my hole. My head tipped back, throat bobbing as I grunted from the feel of his tongue carefully pushing inside. This was my favourite way to stretch for his cock—letting his tongue tunnel deep first, getting me slick and ready for him.

I panted as he stretched me open, absently playing with the piercing on my dick as Seraph gripped my ass tight, keeping me spread wide. He snarled beneath me, shifting against the mattress. I glanced back, my eyes heavy, and saw his hips straining, cock bucking into the air as those little tendrils waved gently around its base.

When the long, thin protrusion wound around his length and coiled up and down, I moaned as my hole clenched at the sight of it.

“Does that feel good?” I rasped, fisting my dick to stroke as I watched the tip of the tendril sink just inside his cock slit.

He snarled beneath me, tongue thrusting harder. Pleasure lashed up the length of my cock, making me grip the base tight as I panted.

“I’m ready,” I said, lifting up to let his tongue slide free.

Shuffling back down quickly, I squatted over his cock and gripped the base to notch it against my hole. We both groaned as I sank down slowly, my thighs already trembling as I lifted on and off to get him a little deeper each time.

When my ass met his hips and all those little tendrils latched on, I gave him a breathless grin. Steadying myself with a hand on his tight stomach, I reached under my nuts to stroke his long, thin tendril with my thumb and forefinger.

Seraph snarled, hips bucking and plunging his cock deeper inside me.

“Why don’t you put this inside me, too?” I asked in a low voice. “Would that feel good?”

He stared up at me, breathing hard, before giving me a jerky nod.

“Then do it,” I rasped, slowly directing the tendril to the base of his cock.

His breath hitched, but I felt the tendril wrap around his length and slowly wind its way up. I bit my lip when I felt it prodding at my hole before it slithered inside, coiling around his cock. The tip wriggled inside me, then latched onto my prostate. And started to suck.

“Oh sh-shit, okay,” I panted, my legs going weak as I crouched over him.

I placed my other hand on his stomach to lift my hips and sink back down, then again, picking up the pace until I was bouncing on his cock, barely able to think from the faint, soft pressure against my prostate, the slide of his cock inside me.

“J-Jesus,” I gasped, brows pinching as my head tipped back. “Seraph, that—that feels—”

I cut myself off with a cry as his hips started rutting up, pounding his cock inside me. Long fingers curved over my ass, helping me stay upright, working me on and off his length. I could feel myself already going limp, shaking too hard from the pleasure throbbing from my prostate, tingles racing up my wildly bouncing dick.

I wrapped a trembling hand around it, crying out again as I started to stroke fast. I didn’t want to draw it out. His pounding cock and that relentless soft pressure against my prostate were making me go mindless—losing complete control of myself. Something that only happened with him.

“M-make me come,” I heard myself beg. “I need to come—Seraph—f-fuck, I need—”

He sat up in a rush, wrapping an arm around my back to support me as his other hand dropped to knock mine off my cock. He took over pumping my length, his huge hand engulfing it entirely.

I could barely open my eyes to look at him, moaning with every breath, but the moment I did he thrust his tongue into my mouth and down my throat.

I melted, hot shivers racing over my whole body. I was pretty sure I was drooling, and I was damp with sweat, my skin slippery against his as I clutched his nape. My thighs burned, but I didn’t stop bouncing on his cock, faster and faster until—

“Nnngh.” I let out a strangled sound, my throat tightening around his tongue as my ass squeezed around him.

Cum pumped from my cock directly into the cage of his fingers, slicking his fist as he kept stroking, making my vision white out as my hips jerked wildly.

The tendril sucked harder, causing my knees to finally give out. Seraph caught me, gathering me close as his tongue retreated so he could bury his face in my neck, snarling savagely. His hips strained up, thrusts getting

jerky, and then he was letting out a howl as he started to come, crushing me against his chest.

I moaned, completely boneless in the cage of his arms, pleasure still pulsing from my prostate as all his tendrils tightened. When his body sagged and his arms loosened, I started tipping back, too weak to hold myself up at all.

Seraph chuffed in amusement, carefully lifting me off his cock before lying down and turning us onto our sides. My panting breaths were shaky, body twitching with aftershocks as he pulled me close and danced his tongue over my ear.

It took a solid ten minutes for my body to calm down, limbs still weak as I lifted an arm and let it flop lazily over his waist.

“I don’t—” I swallowed to try and make my voice less croaky. “I’ve never come that hard before.”

“B-because it is me,” Seraph said smugly. “I m-make you feel the best.”

I smiled drowsily, shuffling closer to nuzzle his throat.

“You don’t need to make me come to make me feel the best,” I mumbled, eyes slipping shut. “You do anyway.”

“I know,” he rasped, smoothing back my hair. “B-but I am good at it.”

I huffed, moving my head back to look at him. “Yeah, you are.”

He let out a contented sigh and nestled closer, legs curling up to cushion mine. As I watched him, my mind drifted to what Edin and Hunter had said earlier. That if we went with the others, there was a chance the military could spot him and try and take him.

If we stayed here, there was a chance of that too. They might return to the old Nebraska base one day to rebuild it. They might hear something about a camp of humans and monsters living together and come here to inspect it.

I didn’t think we were totally safe here either.

But we would be in the monster world. There wasn’t any military in the monster world. There weren’t any other humans at all.

“Do you want to go with them?” I asked quietly. “To the other world?”

Seraph went still, before his mouth tipped down into a frown. “It shouldn’t just be what I want.”

“It’s not,” I said, cupping his cheek. “I want to go too. And... if you wanted, we could do the tethering thing. At the time place.”

My face got hot. It almost felt like I was proposing to him.

“S-so we can be together always?” he asked, sifting his fingers through my hair. I guessed one of the others had told him in more detail what it meant.

I cleared my throat, giving a tiny shrug. “If you want to.”

He was silent for a moment, before letting out his wheezy chuckle. “Y-you know I do, Lie-lack.”

My mouth tipped up into a hesitant smile. “You don’t mind sharing your life with me? However many years you have left?”

Not that we knew how many he had. I doubted anyone could really tell us. But if we did this—tethered our lives—it wouldn’t matter anyway, because we would never have to be without each other, our lives exactly the same length.

Whether that gave us fifty years or thousands, I didn’t care. It didn’t matter how long we had, because when he went, I would go too.

Seraph cupped the side of my face, all his eyes fixed on me. I gazed back into his human ones, letting him see everything. Everything I felt. Letting myself be completely vulnerable with the only person in the universe who I wanted to be that open with.

“I w-would do anything for you, Lie-lack,” he told me. “L-like you have done f-for me.”

I flushed, lifting my shoulder in an uncomfortable shrug. “I didn’t really do much.”

He chuffed, pulling me closer to curl his long limbs around me, enveloping me completely. My eyes slid shut, body relaxing in his embrace.

“You d-did everything,” he said.

SERAPH

I had been wrong before.

His green eyes weren't dead. He shielded most of himself from others, didn't let them see much, but when he looked at me, he showed me everything.

All the things he said and didn't say. All the things he struggled to voice, just like I still did sometimes.

I could remember him there at my worst moments. Always there. A quiet and calm presence that never wavered and never left and never gave up, even when I had no hope myself.

He had made me want to fight through it. He had made me want to stay alive despite the pain, despite how close death had come to taking me.

I hadn't let it. I had clawed my way back, forced my body to accept what it had become. I had clung on so that I would get to hear his voice again, feel his gentle hands on me, just be near him despite believing that we would never get to be truly close.

I hadn't let death snatch me away, even though for as long as I could remember, I had yearned for it just so that the pain would stop.

I had stayed. For him.

Author's Note

Thank you for reading Lilac and Seraph's story, aka Luke and Jesse's story. The tone of this one was a bit more sombre than all the others, but did you expect anything less from the screaming, tortured monster in the cage and the quiet, distant human who has to kill for the camp?

I think even though they are the murderiest, they are also the sweetest of the couples. Their bond is so incredibly strong and they really do mesh so well together. Lilac finally wants to open up to someone, even if he's still awkward about it. And he makes Seraph feel like a person again *sob*.

They were a pleasure to write even though their story made me super sad in places. But they also got the most perfect HEA, in my opinion. Living out in their love shack with all their plants and woodworking and going for walks and foraging in the forest and just generally being an eco green warrior power couple who occasionally slaughter on the side.

It was wonderful being able to expand some of the friendships—and non-friendship. Rig and Lilac are so cute, and although Lilac takes a *long* time to warm up to Hunter, that makes it more meaningful in the end, in my opinion. He trusts Hunter with Seraph, which is like the highest form of praise from Lilac.

It was also so much fun to write all the lads together! Including Wyn rocking up to the camp thinking he's tough shit and quickly learning that no, he is not, and no, sorry Wyn, no one is scared of you anymore. At least Seraph is now, collectively, the adopted son of all the monsters. They are all very protective of him—including Wyn. And why wouldn't they be? Look at him. He is a precious angel and I love him.

The full **Monster Index** and **Human Index** are both available to view on my website, lily-mayne.com. I have included just the relevant monsters and humans for this book in the back (slimmed down though, seeing as all the raider guys were relevant to this story).

What's next?

Next in the Monstrous series is a novella about a guy I mentioned, like, once, very briefly, in Danny and Wyn's novella, *Wyn*. But I've had an idea for him ever since I brought him up. Do you remember the Moric, who runs the fiefdom where the city of Thinir (and Wyn's valley) are located in the monster world? Well, there's a reason he has that big poison plant garden. He has his own secrets. Which we're gonna find out!

After that will be Cat's story, with his feral blueberry twink monster. His monster and Moric Lor are actually linked. Hence why Lor's story is coming first. I am very excited for both!

I will also be releasing book three in my Folk series, an m/m fae romance trilogy. This will be the conclusion to Ash and Lonan's bittersweet love story. They will obviously get a HEA—of course they will—but I'll be putting them through just a tiny bit more struggle before then.

Monster Index

Seraph (species name: N/A): Former human, soldier Luke Buckley, who was used by the military as Test Subject 01 for Project Divinity, a top secret military project that aims to create bioweapons using monster DNA. When it didn't work as they hoped, they absorbed Seraph into the specimen programme as specimen 008 at the military's Nebraska base and continued to dose and monitor him while taking samples to use on other test subjects, which always resulted in fatalities. He vanished from the Nebraska base under classified circumstances, and was taken to Collector Mary's mansion to be part of her monster menagerie, where he was kept on his dosing schedule and made to fight other monsters until Gloam and Rig took him back to the Nebraska camp in Book Four.

Was previously in immense, unending pain due to the drugs he was kept on, which were altering his DNA. When they ran out, what remained of his human self essentially died, but a new life seed that formed from Aury's DNA kept him alive as Seraph. He is utterly devoted to Lilac.

Appearance: Grey-black skin that is textured and feels and looks a bit like old leather. Extremely tall with long limbs and overly long fingers with extra knuckles, but he tends to hunch over due to being stuck in a cage for so long which didn't allow him to straight properly. Rows of solid black and white eyes that ring the entire front half of his head, blinking sporadically, including two human-like eyes and a rycke eye in the centre of his forehead. Only thin flat nostrils, and a big, gaping mouth crowded with needle-sharp teeth. A mottled black and pink tongue. Long feet with little black claws. He must be protected at all costs.

Observed by Danny in Book One; encountered by Rig and Gloam in Book Four before they take him with them back to the Nebraska camp to try and help him. Beloved by all the other monsters and, of course, by Lilac who would—as he tells him often—kill anyone who ever tries to hurt him. Which is Lilac's version of "I love you".

Ashara: Specimen 007 at the military's Nebraska base. Tall, slender humanoid species. Non-gender-specific. Pale grey. Angular yet flat face with alien-like features and big dark eyes.

Observed by Danny in Book One, standing in the centre of their cell, unmoving. Their DNA was used on Seraph.

Iphlim [*iff-limb*]: Big creature with six long, thick arms and a round, blank body. Described by Rig as “a monstrous version of those thin, wispy spiders that are everywhere when summer is coming to an end”. About nine feet tall, and shoots a sticky white substance that incapacitates its prey, allowing it to drag its catch into its nest, where it slowly sucks it dry.

One was part of Mary’s monster menagerie and encountered by Rig and Gloam in Book Four; another has nested in a small town close to the Nebraska camp, and is encountered by Lilac in Book Six when he follows Tank, Bishop and Tipley after they leave the camp.

Mortik [*mohr-tick*]: Invertebrate species. Opportunistic hunters that lure their prey in by camouflaging themselves depending on their surroundings. Some have adapted since coming to the human world. Nocturnal.

Appearance: Described by Hunter as a ‘cross between a beetle and a scorpion, but the size of a cow’. Six segmented legs. Long tail with extremely sharp stinger that secretes acid-like venom. Head that mimics a human face; small black eyes and open mouth with a long, thin black tongue that it tastes the air with due to poor vision.

Seen briefly by Danny in Book One; encountered by Hunter and Edin in Book Two in the tunnels; also encountered by Lilac and Seraph in Book Six outside the Nebraska camp.

Myrm [*muhrm*]: Big, worm-like creatures the size of a horse, covered in dark hair. Six short legs. Long, curving neck. Blank face with a wide slit for a mouth and two tiny black holes for eyes.

Described by Edin to Hunter in Book Two—a myrm is the reason Edin was caught by the military and became specimen 002. He came across one that had been trapped by the military and was freeing it when they tranquilised him. Observed by Ghost in Book Three, when he and Aury stop at the river after visiting the Topeka camp. Also observed by Moth and Charlie in Book Five, and by Lilac in Book Six.

Typild [*tip-ild*]: Bloodsucking bug-like creatures that hunt in swarms and use echolocation to locate their prey and communicate due to poor eyesight.

Appearance: Around three feet tall, bipedal with legs bent like a cricket's. Bristly front arms they keep folded like a praying mantis. Squat, oval transparent bodies that fill up with blood as they feed, blue-tinged skin with visible organs. Deeply sunken eyes, upturned teardrop-shaped heads, narrow mouths with a thin proboscis that has a barb on the end to inject a mild toxin that makes their prey docile so they can feed as a group. They have something brittle on their backs that snaps open and closed to make the clicking sound they use to communicate.

Encountered by Seraph and Lilac in Book Six, when Lilac takes down a swarm that are trying to attack them. One jabs him, causing him to briefly pass out.

Vint: Humanoid species that is dominant in the monster-world city of Thinir. Dark skin. Big, pointed ears that tend to be pierced and grow with age—their ears can get so large that they flop over. Long fingers, sharp teeth and elfin features. Sharp-tongued and combative. Keen botanists.

Encountered by Wyn and Danny in the monster world in Wyn's novella. Observed by Danny in Book One—specimen 014 at the military's Nebraska base is a female vint with white hair. The military also had another vint being held at the base, this one male who was specimen 006. A vint was seen briefly by Hunter in Book Two, pacing in a cage at the fighting competition.

Moric Lor, who runs the corner of the world that Danny and Wyn visit in Wyn's novella, is a vint. He lives in a hyll—like a palace—at the top of the city and grows a vast garden of deadly plants in his public gardens.

Unknown: Humanoid species. Tall, hulking monster with leathery tan skin that's hairy in places. Thick, clawed fingers. Beady black eyes. Big tusks that distort his lower lip.

Encountered by Hunter and Edin in Book Two; he is the lover of the fightmaster at the fighting competition. The military also had one of these monsters held in their specimen programme at the military base. They were specimen 003. Their DNA was used on Seraph.

The full Monster Index can be found on my website, lily-mayne.com

Human Index

Anchor (real name: unknown): Co-leader (currently sole leader) of the Nebraska raider camp. Anchor has been out in the Wastes ever since the monster apocalypse—she found Cat when she was just a teenager, and together (with a certain shy winged monster) they built their camp. Good at keeping things fair among the raiders. In charge of provisions. A bit of a taskmaster. She sees herself as a mother to a lot of the raiders, so tends to come across as stern or harsh when she's worried about them. Egyptian.

Appearance: Dark, curly hair typically worn up in a ponytail. Dark eyes and bushy eyebrows. Average height and slim, rangy build.

Lilac (real name: Jesse): Raider and resident killer of the Nebraska camp. Closed off, very quiet and hard to read. Keeps his emotions (and everything else) to himself, but he is very loyal to those he cares about—namely Ghost and Rig. A plant lover who oversees the crop-growing at the camp. He also enjoys whittling. Was previously in a casual arrangement with Rusty, another raider at the camp. Secretly a softie—he would never admit that he loves Ghost's laying hens. He has a machete. Japanese American.

Appearance: Very dark hair always worn in a high ponytail and vivid green eyes. Missing a tooth. Has a few piercings—navel, tongue and prince albert. Below average height and compact, toned build.

Luke Buckley: Former soldier who the military used as Test Subject 01 (Seraph) for Project Divinity, a top secret military project that aims to create bioweapons using monster DNA.

Former appearance: Closely cropped dark hair and dark eyes. Narrow jaw. Tall. Mixed race.

More details on Seraph's monster characteristics can be found in the **Monster Index**.

Nebraska Raider Camp (Other raiders mentioned by name)

Apollo: Raider and camp medic. Laidback and compassionate. Dutch American. Long blond hair often worn in a messy bun, brown eyes. Slim build.

Bishop: Raider. Kind of lazy and a bit useless. Leaves the camp with Tank and Tipley after the confrontation in Book Six. Presumed dead—I mean, let's be honest... He didn't survive that big spider thing.

Bo: Raider and camp cook (alongside Daisy). Very kind and gentle. Friendly to everyone. Really into the idea of having a perpetual stew going at the camp, but no one else is interested. Big, solid build. Native American.

Daisy: Raider and camp cook (alongside Bo). Mother figure to a lot of the raiders—wants to look after them. She is kind but fierce—she is absolutely not afraid of Wyn and he *hates* it. Korean. Small and slim.

Dino: Raider. Tall, slim and quiet. Keeps to herself.

Huck: Raider. Lilac describes him as “mediocre”.

Keen: Raider. Blond hair. Wears a blue mask. Is scared of Lilac, but doesn't mind the beasties. American.

Nun: Raider and camp badass-with-a-crossbow. Swedish. Tall with a solid build. Blonde hair and blue eyes.

Nun almost comes to an untimely end after shooting Seraph in Book Six, which makes Lilac **ahem** very angry. Is now in a relationship with Rusty.

Rusty: Raider. Trans woman. More scared of the monsters in the camp than she lets on. Irish American. Long, red hair worn in a braid. She wears a full-face mask—one of those blank masks you can get at craft stores. It's creepy.

No longer having a casual thing with Lilac. She is now in a relationship with Nun, and she's a little less scared of the monsters.

Spike: Raider.

Tank: Deceased. Killed by Lilac. Raider who didn't like monsters and really didn't like them living in the camp. Sided with Cutter during Book Three. He built up an unhealthy loathing of Lilac during Book Six, and exploded when he discovered Seraph was out of his cage before leaving the camp. But he didn't get far.

Tipley: Raider who leaves with Tank and Bishop after the confrontation with Lilac over Seraph. He flees when the trio are being attacked by an iphlim. Whereabouts currently unknown.

Villains and the Military

Cutter: Deceased. Killed by Lilac. Former raider and camp asshole. Bigoted—he hated monsters with a passion. Didn't trust the military, hence why he lived in the Wastes despite his fervent hate for monsters. He was banished from the camp for pushing Ghost off the camp wall. He previously lost his hand when Mary's pet shulc ate half of it, and Apollo had to amputate the rest.

After being kicked out of the camp in Book Three, Cutter's whereabouts were unknown until Book Six, when he returned, having joined the Herald's cult, to take Gloam back to the Herald with two other cult members. He fails, because Lilac and Seraph show up and eliminate the problem.

Mary: Deceased. Killed by Gloam. Monster collector who roamed the Wastes and had a menagerie of beautiful and interesting monsters in her mansion to the west. She was an avid follower of the Herald, and was trying to pull the military into the cult. Dark hair and watery blue eyes. Short and plump. She always had immaculate painted nails.

The Herald gifted Gloam to Mary to act as her protector while she carried out her missionary work. She had complete control over him and made him do everything for her, and treated him terribly. She also bought Seraph off the military for her collection, and continued to dose him as per the military's orders. She made him fight the creatures she was no longer interested in keeping in her collection.

The full Human Index can be found on my website, lily-mayne.com

Books by Lily Mayne

Monstrous

(MM Monster/Human Dystopian Romance)

Soul Eater (Book One)

Edin (Book Two)

The Rycke (Book Three)

Wyn (Novella)

Gloam (Book Four)

Moth (Book Five)

Seraph (Book Six)

Coming in 2023: Lor (Novella)

Coming in 2023: Lyri (Book Seven)

Folk

(MM Fae Fantasy Romance)

Mortal Skin (Book One)

Forgotten Vows (Book Two)

Coming soon: King of Death (Book Three)

About the Author

Lily Mayne writes what she loves to read: achingly sweet yet gritty romances against unusual backdrops—dark, futuristic, dystopian and more.

She enjoys reading and writing (duh), baking, watching terrible horror movies and many other hobbies that would have potentially made her an ideal Victorian maid. Just a really lazy one.

She currently lives in the UK with her husband and several fluffballs, who like to make a lot of noise while she's writing.

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