



James' Story

[Chapter 001]

-- fabric market

As far as the eye can see, there's gorgeous fabric to be found everywhere. From the most luxurious silk, to the cheapest organza – it's all here at the market.

I adjust my scarf as a particular cold wind blows by. It's in the middle of winter.

This place is where I truly come to peace; I'm in my element. Colours, textures, patterns, I'm already formulating my next designs in my head.

A particular iridescent piece of fabric catches my eye. It changes colours when you look at it from a different angle. It reminds me a little of the way the 80's movies created space outfits. Everything had to be shiny back then.

"Excuse me?" I call out to the woman behind the stall, who was in the middle of talking to her companion.

"Yes dear? Would you like this one?"

"Yes, 4 meters will do."

The woman takes the iridescent fabric roll off my hands and starts measuring how much she needs to cut.

"You know – this fabric reminds me of Starlight's costume," says the woman.

Starlight – a superhero whose outfit I didn't design. Someone else got to her first. She has the power to brighten any kind of light source and quite literally blind you.

"Is that so," I say casually.

"Isn't it just... weird, how they're walking among us like normal people? It could be any one of us," she mutters in a dark tone.

I don't like where this conversation is going.

"Why do they hide? I don't like that anyone can just, you know, hide a really dangerous power." She cuts the fabric to my specifications.

I pull the scarf over my nose to hide my disgust.

1. "They wouldn't have to hide their identity if people didn't try to ruin their normal lives."

2. "I'm sure they have a very good reason to hide."

"They wouldn't have to hide their identity if people didn't try to ruin their normal lives," I fire back.

Imagine if everyone knew the identity of a superhero! There would be so much hatred and chaos. Lives would be uprooted entirely.

"Let's just agree to disagree," she says.

"I'm sure they have a very good reason to hide," I explain.

"Being too sympathetic can be a bad thing sometimes," says the woman.

"What do you mean?"

The woman flashes a fake smile at me as she bags the fabric.

"That'll be €44,95 sweetheart."

I pay the woman her money and quickly disappear from the stall. Suddenly I don't feel so in my element after all.

-- boutique workroom

I crack my neck and roll my shoulders – they're stiff from looking down for too long. I look out the window; it's snowing outside.

How many hours has it been? Three, four? I can't remember. I lose track of time once inspiration hits me.

I continue to embroider the iridescent cloth, weaving in metallic golden accents along with my thread. The details are really tiny and elaborate; something no sewing machine can achieve.

My thread does all the magic.

I focus my eyes on the cloth, being able to look at everything as if they are a magnifying glass. I see everything in sharp detail to the tiniest fiber. Flicking my index finger, I manipulate the thread so that it stitches the golden accents with accuracy.

Once I've finished the pattern, I simply dissolve the rest of my transparent thread. There's no need for me to clean up or use scissors. I stretch the cloth in between my hands, looking over the pattern I've stitched.

The metallic gold really compliments the ever changing nature of the iridescent fabric. I smile at it in satisfaction.

This is my job – this is my skill. The ability that I was born with really cemented my future as a fashion designer.

I can create a fine, transparent thread from my fingers. It's razor sharp and can even pierce through diamond like it's melted butter. Combined with my keen eyesight, I am unrivaled when it comes to precision and detail. People come to me to get highly sophisticated designs. They want *quality*, which is exactly what I offer.

Which is exactly why I felt so uncomfortable at the market. The woman was right; we all walk among them with a secret. I may not have a powerful ability like Starlight and blind people, but... I don't want it either.

I'm happy being able to use my ability for fashion.

Time to finish up this design and check up on my brother. I haven't heard from him in a while.

A loud explosion rumbles from underneath me.

"What in the world!?" I yell out loud, startled.

The rumbling brings down a few items on my counter. Is this an earthquake!?

Kim pops up in the room, looking worried.

"Joselina, are you okay? I heard an explosion!"

"I'm fine, it came from..."

"...Below," Kim finishes for me.

We both come to a realization.

"Ralph," Kim groans.

"Go back to work, Kim. I'll check up on Ralph," I say.

"Alright, let me know if I need to call an ambulance or not."

I give her a wry smile.

Kim exits the workroom and I sigh out loud. What is Ralph doing now? I knew it was suspiciously quiet. I should have checked up on him sooner.

-- hallway

I enter the hallway and walk all the way to the back, opening a small door underneath the staircase. It's the entrance to my brother's lab.

-- laboratory

There's soot all over the floor. I'm leaving footprints behind as I walk inside the lab. Lots of objects are on the floor. I'm panicking a little until I see two people sitting at the metal desk.

"Ralph!" I cry out. "What happened!?"

Ralph just looks at me with a shrug. His hair is standing up straight.

"I'm just a little *shocked*," he says dully.

The person next to him knocks him over the head.

"Idiot – now is not the time for your stupid puns!" Caine berates my brother.

"Caine?" I question. "What are you doing here?"

"Your brother asked me to come. I knew I shouldn't have. You guys are crazy." Caine huffs.

"Wait, why am I getting lumped into this?" I ask. "What did you do this time, Ralph?"

"Nothing! Why are all eyes on me?" Ralph puts his hands up and tries to look innocent.

Ralph sighs when he realizes I'm not buying into his act, then picks up a metal ring from the floor.

"I was trying to get this bracelet to harness Caine's electricity. I figured I could harvest it and perhaps create an infinitely generating power source."

Ralph gets hit over the head again by Caine.

"Moron, I told you that's not how it works. I can't keep generating electricity without pulling it from my own energy. Eventually I get tired, too, then I collapse from exhaustion."

Caine simply looks frustrated. "And then it blew up in your face! You know that shit is dangerous! I could have lost my license, you know."

Ralph shrugs, patting down his hair back to normal. "I was grounded. I'm fine."

I groan out loud. "No, Caine's right – don't toy around like that. I don't want to bury my younger brother as well, alright?"

A serious look dawns on Ralph's face as the words sink in, but then he quickly replaces it with a pout.

"Who else will come up with these nifty little gadgets then, huh?"

Caine smirks. "I have to admit, your tracking device came in really handy last time."

Ralph points finger guns at Caine. "Right, right!?"

I roll my eyes at the two of them. They're always up to no good. Now someone has to clean up the mess that they made; there's soot everywhere. The stench isn't all that great either.

I point at the floor. "Ralph, you made this mess so clean it up."

Ralph groans and slouches his shoulders, but nonetheless walks towards the broom closet to get some cleaning supplies.

Caine hops up on the metal desk and casually brings his hand up to his face. He holds his index finger and thumb together until a spark of electricity ignites between them. He keeps doing this until there's a steady stream of electricity going back and forth between his fingers.

"By the way, speaking of licenses – when are you getting yours?" he asks nonchalantly, playing around with his ability.

"You've been asking me for years," I say with a heavy sigh.

"And I'm asking you again!"

"Not everyone wants to be a superhero, Caine," I reply.

Ralph returns with a broom and starts sweeping the floor. "Don't bother, Joselina is pretty stubborn."

Caine stops playing with his fingers, suddenly looking serious. "Yeah but, come on – unlike your moronic brother–"

"–I resent that!" Ralph interjects.

"–You actually *have* an ability that could be useful in combat."

"That doesn't mean it *should* be used in combat," I fire back. "There are plenty of ways someone could use their abilities for the greater good without having to pick fights with bad guys."

"But you're just some lame ass tailor," Caine groans. "That's not exciting in the least."

Irritation spreads across my face – Caine is really getting on my nerves now. He's insulting my work and calling it boring. There's nothing wrong with being a fashion designer!

"I don't see you complaining when I'm the one who makes your superhero costume." I fold my arms across my chest and glare at him.

"That's different," he says flippantly. "You're still just using it on clothes."

His eyes then widens as he realizes something. "Oh! I've got it; the perfect superhero name for you." Caine grins then spreads out his arms.

"Black Widow," he says in a deep voice.

I just stare at him blankly.

"Do I *look* like a spider to you?"

"Hey, don't mock the name. Don't you know this one superhero – Spiderboy? He shoots webs!"

"From his *butt!*"

"Same difference!"

"That is one mighty big of a difference!" I protest. "I don't shoot weird web stuff from my butt. My thread is highly sophisticated. It's nothing like a web."

Caine just cocks his head to the side. "Isn't it just the same thing?"

"No! Webs are sticky, my thread is not."

"I've seen you attach that stuff to anything. What do you mean it's not sticky? Have I been living a lie all this time?" Caine questions.

Fed up with his attitude, I huff at him.

1. Sew his mouth shut with your thread.
2. Explain the difference to him.

My fingertips glow hot and I spread a thin thread between my index fingers. I control the thread, feeling its every move, and I make quick work of Caine's lips. The thread pierces his skin undetected, it's fast and it zigzags until it's completely sewed his mouth shut.

Caine tries to speak, but finally realizes he can't open his mouth.

He looks at me in horror.

"Hrrmppf!?"

"That, Caine, is the difference. My thread doesn't *stick*. It *pierces*," I explain smugly.

Caine claws at his mouth, trying to tear it open, but is unable to do anything.

Ralph sighs behind us. "Joselina, don't torture my test subject."

I wiggle my fingers and the thread dissolves immediately.

Caine opens his jaws wide open, testing out whether or not he can move his lips again. He glares at me.

"What did you do that for!? That's traumatizing!"

Caine then points at Ralph. "And it's *not* comforting to be referred to as a test subject!"

Ralph gives him a quizzical look. "Did I ever refer to you as anything else? I was pretty upfront about it."

"Look, if you want to get technical, my thread doesn't stick, okay? The only reason why it looks like it does, is because I'm actually tying it around the object. I'm piercing it with my thread and tying a little knot in it."

I grab a piece of scrap metal from the workbench.

"Hey, don't touch my stuff," Ralph protests.

I ignore him. I spread my hands apart, my fingertips glowing hot as a thin and transparent thread appears between both my index fingers. I stretch the thread, making it longer as needed.

The thread splits into two and I manipulate them in such a way that it pierces the metal object. It goes in without a hitch; the thread is so fine and sharp, it can pierce almost anything.

Caine watches me work with curious eyes until I've managed to attach the thread to the metal and I hover it in the air.

"Wow, I can't even see it. It looks like you're levitating it," he says in amazement.

I dissolve the thread and the scrap metal drops down back onto the table with a loud plunk.

"See? Different."

"Still, you can use it to kick ass with it," Caine points out.

I sigh. "Look – I'm happy with my job. I like making clothes. I don't need to fight crime or save the earth with my powers. Not everyone needs to be a superhero like you do."

Caine pouts at me.

"I just wanted to see you swing around the city like Spiderboy..."

Ralph is the one that laughs. "Dude, no, you're not going to see Joselina zip around like that. Besides, I wouldn't allow it."

I place my hands on my hips. "Oh, you wouldn't allow me to be a superhero? Since when do you have that right?"

"Since I'm your brother and have to look out for you."

With a somber look, Ralph's eyes are cast down towards the ground.

"We're the only ones left," he mutters.

There's a sudden tension in the air, and I try to prevent myself from remembering my own past. I put on a courageous smile.

"How about you worry about yourself? You almost got electrocuted by Caine when I walked in."

Ralph shrugs. "That's different. Sometimes experiments go wrong."

"I just want to point out that I'm immune to electricity. It can't shock me. So yeah uhm, it may very well kill only you," says Caine.

"Alright, enough talking. Give me some of your juice. I need to power up this bracelet."

"Still!? You've already sucked me dry enough!"

Ralph grimaces. "Dude, do you ever think about the words that are coming out of your mouth?"

I laugh in response. "I don't think he ever does."

Caine ends up blushing once he realizes what he's said.

"S-shut up! Go back upstairs already!"

Just as he says that, the intercom beeps. Kim's voice booms through the laboratory. Everyone's ears perk up to listen closely.

"Uhm, guys, do we own any flying ships?" she asks in an unsure tone.

Ralph walks up to the intercom and presses down a button to reply.

"The Forrester Incorporation owns several of them, yes. Why?"

"They should have the Forrester logo on them then, no?" Kim asks.

"That is correct," Ralph replies.

What's going on? Kim would never bother us unless it was something urgent. She's there to run the storefront, nothing more.

"Then this giant ship flying over Claner right now is *definitely* not one of ours."

The three of us look at each other in silence. Wait – a flying ship that isn't from Forrester Inc.?

"Do you have any cameras outside?" Caine asks urgently.

"None that point towards the sky," Ralph grumbles, hastily walking towards the exit.

"Are we under attack?" I question, nervous about this unidentified ship.

Ralph's silence speaks volumes and I'm suddenly on high alert. I rush over towards the table with the intercom, slamming my finger down on the button.

"Kim, get down here, *now!*"

Alarms suddenly go off in the lab. The sirens outside can be heard wailing. My stomach churns uncomfortably as I realize something bad is about to happen.

The lab is underground. We should be relatively safe here in case of an attack. However, Ralph and Caine are making their way towards the exit. They want to see what's going on.

An ear deafening blast can be heard above ground. The laboratory starts to shake and all three of us fall down from the shockwave.

The lab rumbles and trembles from the aftershock, dust falling from the ceiling.

"They're definitely not friendly!" Caine cries out.

I can hear Kim's groans – she's at the staircase! I want to rush over, but Caine stops me.

"Stay here. This lab is just like a bunker. Don't do anything stupid. Let me handle it." He then turns to Ralph. "Notify the rest of the squad."

When push comes to shove, no matter how immature Caine can be, in emergencies he's always someone you can count on.

He quickly bolts through the doors, leaving us alone in the lab.

Ralph turns on his heel and begins to furiously type on his cell phone, notifying the other members. Then he tunes in on the news channel. They're broadcasting breaking news at the moment.

Kim bursts inside the room, nearly coughing up a lung.

"Kim! Are you alright!?"

"Y-yeah, there's just a lot of dust in the air right now."

"What did you see?" I ask her.

"The ship – it shot down a building! It's still hovering directly above us. I'm so scared." Kim crouches down onto the floor, clamping her hands over the sides of her ears.

I bend down to comfort her. "You're safe here Kim. Let the superheroes do their work."

I'm trying to stay strong for her since Kim is younger than me, but I can't deny that I'm scared as well. Honestly, I'm really worried about Caine. He already looked tired – is he even able to fend for himself?

Then I walk over towards Ralph and I look at the TV screen. With my own eyes I see the images of what's happening above.

Though it's hard to spot due to the snowstorm, there's a giant ship suspended in the air. It's unlike anything I've seen before. It's a pearly white colour and it looks very sleek in its design.

"Ralph – who else other than us has the technology to create those?" I ask him.

"I... Other than Forrester Inc. and Rasestor... I don't think anyone else does." Ralph looks stumped. He's trying his best to recognize the vehicle.

"But that's not one of ours, and Rasestor has only created small ships. They wouldn't be able to create a ship of that size." Ralph brings his hand to his mouth, tapping his finger against his lip in contemplation.

"In fact, I've never seen such designs before... Someone must have been building this in secret."

Immediately I think of the terrorist group, Hulio. Anxiety and disgust whirls up inside of me as I suppress my painful memories.

"Do you think it's Hulio?" I ask. "Are they planning on attacking superheroes again?"

Ralph grows quiet.

"I don't know, maybe."

The news broadcaster is saying the ship suddenly appeared over Claner and fired a missile at a large office building. Luckily the casualties are low because it's Sunday so there weren't many people in the building.

Still... that's right near where we live! I really hope Caine is okay.

Kim joins us and she points at the TV screen, which is displaying a live feed of what's happening.

"Look – they're there!"

On the screen we can see several superheroes show up. It's a little hard to see it through all of the snow, but I recognize a couple of them – I've designed their costumes after all. There's a bunch that are unknown to me as well. At least one superhero is flying around, and I believe I spot Spiderboy swinging around.

"I don't see Caine..." I murmur softly.

I spoke too soon, because a huge lightning bolt appears from the sky and blasts the front of the ship.

"Ahhh Caine, don't be reckless. If that thing falls down, you're going to create even more casualties," Ralph sighs with a worried tone.

"But look, the ship seems unharmed," I point out.

"Hmm... shield technology. This is very sophisticated."

We all go quiet once we see the ship open up at the bottom and dozens of little objects come flying out. It's hard to tell what they are when there's snow everywhere.

"W-what are those!?" Kim shrieks.

"Drones?" Ralph says, though he's unsure.

I lean in closer to the TV. "No... I think they're people."

A lightning bolt blows one of them up, and then we can clearly see the pilot fall from his hovercraft. Thank goodness – it seems the smaller ships don't have any shields on them.

But wait – did I see that correctly?

"Did you see that too?" I ask.

"Yeah, their skin is..."

"Red," Kim finishes. "All of them are, see?"

"A shared ability? A family perhaps? This is unusual. Sometimes people are born with deformities because of their abilities, and they're certainly not unique to each person... but so many of them, together?" Ralph questions.

This is getting even more confusing. It doesn't seem to be the work of Hulio, but I can't be too sure. Who would openly attack Claner like this?

The news reporter says that everyone is fighting back against the smaller hovercrafts, but their numbers are too great for everyone to handle.

"Damn it, Caine already used up a lot of his powers just now." Ralph grits his teeth. "That's my fault."

"Oh no," Kim gasps. "Is Caine going to be alright?"

I clench my hand into a fist. I know I'm not a superhero. I'm not suited for combat one bit – but I can't sit here idly twiddling my thumbs as one of my best friends fights on his own.

"What if people need medical attention?" I ask.

"Joselina, you're not thinking what I'm thinking, right? Stay here. The lab is safe."

I narrow my eyes at him. "What if it was Caine bleeding out on the streets? Would you still say the same thing?"

Ralph presses his lips into a thin line and furrows his eyebrows together. He can't quite argue back with that, as we both care about Caine.

"I know first aid. I can be of some use."

I'm no superhero – but I can make sure no one dies under my watch.

With that in mind, I grab my coat and rush out of the lab. I can hear Ralph cry out behind me.

-- outside boutique

When I've made my way outside, the blizzard stings my eyes, making it hard to see.

I look up, being able to spot the giant hanging in the sky. It's hovering above the city, a slight distance away from the boutique. I'm standing in the shadow that it casts; it's humongous.

It's sleek and doesn't look like anything I've ever seen before. It's definitely not one of our ships, so whose is it? Who is attacking Claner?

I can't help but think about Hulio – what if it's them after all? They're back with another huge attack? I can't just stand by this time, I don't want to be helpless.

I can see the small hovercrafts zooming about the place, some of them shooting bullets down below. I'm out of the immediate danger area, but I'm still not completely safe.

Someone out there may need help though, I just hope it isn't Caine.

Judging by the lightning bolts in the sky, he's doing just fine.

Just then, I see something in the sky approaching me, fast. Snow whirls around at an enormous speed. I focus my eyes, easily being able to identify what it is from a large distance.

It's a superhero! And he looks knocked out! Oh no, if he falls at this height, he's going to die on impact!

Quick – I need to do something. He's headed this way and will land in just a few seconds.

My adrenaline gets pumped, forcing my body to react on instinct. I shoot a thread out to a lamppost, then to another lamppost and quickly start to weave a net in between.

He's coming closer!

Crap – I'm not done yet! This net will barely hold!

I focus even harder, forcing myself to manipulate several different threads from all my fingertips, until I've made a sizable net in between the street's lamps.

And not a second was wasted, because the superhero crashes inside of the net.

The net stretches out, luckily enough it doesn't tear as it distributes the momentum of his fall. I quickly whirl my thread around the person himself to make sure he doesn't go flying out the other way like some kind of catapult.

He wiggles back and forth in the netting until he finally comes to a stop.

I sigh out in relief; I caught him.

I look at my handiwork and cringe; Caine is never going to let me live it down when I tell him I caught someone from near certain death by spinning a web like a spider.

It'll just be my little secret, for now.

First things first; I have to see if he's alright.

I jog over towards the netting, dissolving it as I come closer, gently lowering him down onto the snow.

The superhero is a tall man, clad in a black outfit with red and gold accents. I don't recognize his costume at all, especially since it's torn to shreds. It's like something burned him because I can see it's charred in some places. A mop of messy black hair covers up the rest of his face.

The most important thing; he's breathing.

But also bleeding.

I have to get him inside!

Using my thread, I create a makeshift stretcher and drag the man inside the boutique.

-- lab

"Ralph – help me out!" I call out for him when I'm at the stairs.

Ralph quickly comes to my help, sees the man I'm dragging behind, and lifts an eyebrow.

"Who the hell is this?" he asks.

"Does it matter? He's hurt – help me put him on the table."

"What if it's the enemy!?"

"Well – he's not red, is he!? Come help me!"

Ralph doesn't complain anymore and swiftly helps me put the man on the metal table. However, he's so heavy, Kim has to come help us as well. It's one thing to drag the man. It's another to lift him entirely.

When he's flat on the table, I get a good look at him.

"Now what?" asks Ralph.

I quickly look over his torso, which has burns and a million little cuts. It doesn't look good. Something was attacking him before. Was it those red men? They looked so creepy on TV.

I place both my hands on his chest, grabbing what's left of the charred fabric, and tear it in half. The costume splits, baring his naked and burned torso. It's easier to work when clothes aren't in the way.

I lean closer to the man's face "Hey – can you hear me?"

The stoic expression remains on the man's face. He's completely out of it.

"I'll uhm, I'll get the first-aid kit!" Kim exclaims, running off.

I gently cut open his costume to get better access to his wounds.

My eyes are immediately drawn to the large scar he has across his chest – from an older battle, perhaps? Anyways, I need to focus on the wounds he has right now.

While he's covered in burn marks, the most pressing matter is a large cut on the right side of his waist; he's bleeding from it rather badly.

Kim hands me the first aid kit. She tends to the burn wounds while I clean his open wound.

Completely focused on the job, I touch his tanned skin with my fingers, forming a thread that eventually pierces it. The man remains passed out and doesn't notice as I stitch up his wound.

I puncture his skin back and forth, creating a very clean stitch. In no time, the wound is sealed.

Checking his body for any more open wounds, I notice he's only got smaller cuts that are easily cleaned and need only a bandage, if at all. The burns on the other hand, covered across his body, are another matter entirely.

I'm not a real doctor. He will need to go to the hospital for this. The only thing Kim and I can do is cool it and dress it with bandages for now.

I sigh in relief when I'm finally finished with my first aid. At least the bleeding has stopped.

"Joselina, look, we're winning. They're falling back," says Ralph, as he points towards the TV.

"That's good... Have you seen Caine?"

"I'm unsure. They haven't said anything about the death toll yet."

Hearing that makes me even more worried. No, Caine can handle himself. I still saw his lightning not too long ago. He won't go out without putting up a damn good fight.

There's no way they got to Caine. I won't believe it.

"By the way, do you recognize this guy?" I ask Ralph, pointing at the man in front of me.

"I seriously don't know – aren't you the one that's supposed to recognize them all, considering you're the one designing most of these costumes?"

I shake my head. "I don't provide for every single superhero, you know."

"Can't you look him up in the database? If he's a superhero, he has to be registered," Kim suggests.

Sure, I can look at that later. What's important now is nursing him back to health until he wakes up. I've taken care of most of his wounds, but he does need a trip to the hospital.

We just have to wait until he wakes up.

I lean closer to him, studying him. The burns are scattered across his torso like a lightning bolt. He's got another scar on his left arm, probably a defensive one from holding up his arms to shield himself. I wonder who this man is...

I can't help myself as my hands reach out to his face. I brush away his black hair, revealing his closed eyes and...

"Wait..."

My fingers trail along the grooves of his ear – his pointy elf-like ear.

Sometimes superheroes have abilities that affect their appearance. I've once seen a woman with polka dots all over her body, like she was some kind of Dalmatian. Another time I saw someone whose skin was like literal slime.

However, this is the first time I've ever seen someone with pointed ears. It doesn't appear to be a body mod of some kind. It looks natural. It's kind of fascinating.

"Wait, they're saying something on TV," says Ralph all of a sudden.

Absentmindedly, I trace my finger along the tip of his ear. It's really long, how come I didn't notice it before?

"–What? They're saying it's not Hulio?" Ralph exclaims loudly.

I look back down at the man.

I'm startled when dark brown eyes pierce me with such an intense gaze that it rattles me to my core.

The man swiftly gets up from the table, planting both feet firmly on the ground. I don't have time to react as he approaches me.

In an instant, I'm suspended in the air as the man grabs me by the throat, squeezing it.

I can't breathe!

1. Try to break free.
2. "L-let go!"

I claw at his hands, trying to break free. He instead just squeezes even harder and I'm starting to see black spots in front of my eyes.

"L-let go!" I try to say.

However, the man doesn't listen, and keeps me up in the air, tightening his grip on my throat.

"Let go of my sister!" Ralph screams.

The man gets knocked out of the way as Ralph charges into him. He releases his hold on me and I collapse onto the floor. I inhale a large gust of air to fill my lungs with oxygen.

"T-take that!" Kim yells as she throws a roll of bandages at the man.

I pick myself up. "Stop – we're not trying to hurt you. I helped patch your wounds up," I explain, coughing up for air still.

He must be disorientated. Maybe he thinks we're trying to attack him.

The man stands his ground, tall and menacing, before he looks down at the bandage on his waist, as well as the rest of the bandages covering his burns. His tense eyes meet mine again and I feel a lump form in my throat. I don't know why his gaze makes me feel a chill run down my spine.

"See, I did the stitches," I say nervously, pointing at his side.

Unexpectedly, the man rips off the bandages from his waist, revealing his freshly stitched wound.

"Don't! You have to keep the wound dressed!" I say.

His dark eyes travel from the wound, then back to me. As if he's silently asking me if I really did stitch him up.

"Please, calm down. Let me help you." I cautiously walk towards him.

I hold my hands up to make myself seem as non-threatening as possible.

"We're not here to hurt you, so please let me put the bandages back on."

As I take a step forwards, I can hear Ralph cry out in surprise. He's pointing at the TV in shock.

"T-that's – that's him!!"

I turn around, away from the man, to see what Ralph is talking about. My eyes widen when I spot the screen.

They're replaying a clip from the attack. A man wearing a black with red and gold armour, flying around in the air, battling the superheroes. He gets struck down by a lighting bolt and soars off into the distance.

The reporter says the ship came from the sky – it's an alien ship.

I feel horror wash over me.

"It's an alien!" Ralph cries out.

I can feel his breath down my neck, causing all the little hairs to stand up straight.

"You..." his voice croaks out. "Saved me?"

I don't dare to turn my head to face him. I can feel my heart racing a thousand miles per minute.

This man I saved... is not a man at all.

"You – get away from her!" screams Ralph, going for another charge attack.

However, before Ralph can even do anything, the man knocks Ralph away with a single punch. Ralph crashes into the wall and drops down onto the floor, unconscious. Kim hurriedly runs over to him in a panic.

I'm forcibly turned around as he yanks on my arm, making me stand in front of him, face to face.

"You..." He points at the stitches. "Did that?"

I can't speak – my body is frozen. He hurt Ralph! He's the one that attacked the city! What do I do? How do I take down a man of his size all on my own?

1. Try to attack him.
2. Try talking to him.

Maybe, if I'm fast enough, I can slide a thread around his throat. Or maybe I can pierce his heart.

Do aliens even have hearts!? I should go for his throat.

I raise my hands, forming a thread between my fingertips, aiming it at his throat.

The man reacts in superhuman speed, disappearing for a split second, before reappearing right before my very own eyes. I... I didn't even have a chance.

He catches me by my wrists, holding me captive. He is completely expressionless and it's scaring the daylights out of me.

"Y-yes," I reply. Maybe if I comply, he won't hurt us and leave us alone. I don't know what he's going to do.

"Please, don't hurt us," I beg him.

The man doesn't seem to be listening though, an ice cold and calculated expression etched onto his face.

Before I know it, he's thrown me over his shoulder, then launches himself into the air.

"Hey!" I cry out, pounding my fists onto his back.

Unfazed by my attacks, he keeps scaling higher. Wait – what's going on!?

He goes straight towards the ceiling, blasting a hole in it as he flies straight up, with me on his shoulder. The impact of the ceiling – and several other floors in between – causes me to black out.

My last thoughts before I lose consciousness are...

This is not a superhero.

This is a villain.

[chapter 002]
-- Spaceship cell

My body aches. I feel lightheaded and dizzy. I'm so lethargic.

Ugh, it's so hard for me to open my eyes.

I hear a steady and loud humming near me. As I return to my senses, I'm starting to realize I have no idea where I am.

I finally open my eyes.

I'm in a small room, lying down on a small bed. Or bench. I'm unsure. Whatever it is, it's not comfortable at all.

There's an oval door at the end of the room and that's about it. No windows, no decoration – just a bed. It's chilly in here.

What happened to me when I passed out? I got slung over the man's shoulder and then he simply blasted his way out of the underground lab. I vaguely remember flying through the sky... but everything is fuzzy after that.

Judging by the room I'm in, this is a cell.

I got kidnapped.

I check my body for any wounds or restraints to see if something has been done to me while I was unconscious. I'm about to sigh in relief, until I notice a small stinging pain in the tip of my ear.

I gently touch it with my fingers, wincing a little at the pain. I can't tell what happened to it. It's not that painful for me to worry about though, so I continue to check my body for anything else.

Luckily enough, I seem to be perfectly intact and healthy. I'm still wearing my clothes as well – I even have my cell phone.

I quickly take it out – the battery is at 30%. But what catches me even more off guard is the date; it's now the 18th. It was the 16th last time I was awake.

That's also when I realize the state of extreme hunger I'm in. I haven't eaten anything for two days... not to mention I'm really thirsty as well.

However, dealing with that can come later, I have more important things on my mind; I need to contact people for help! Ralph must be worried sick.

"Shit, of course I have no connection here," I mutter out loud, seeing the no signal symbol on my phone.

The metal walls of this cell must be blocking my signal. I've received no incoming messages either, so after I was taken, I must have been brought here straight away.

Am I on that ship? I'm unsure. The outside was sleek and white, but this cell is all dark grey and muddy looking.

And didn't Ralph say that they were aliens? Doesn't that mean I'm on a spaceship?

I'm so screwed...

Okay, Joselina, stay calm. I can get myself out of here. First things first; try the door.

I walk towards the oval door, studying it. There's no handle or doorknob to open it. Nothing on the sides that look like a control panel, either. I can safely deduce this is indeed a cell.

My stomach rumbles and I suddenly notice I *really* need to empty my bladder. Ugh, great timing. What should I do now?

1. Try picking the lock.
2. Try calling out.

Let's see if I can get this door to budge. Caine has taught me a trick or two when it comes to picking locks.

That is... if this door even has a lock.

I bend down to my knees, inspecting the rim of the door. It's oval all the way around, except at the bottom where it's straight. I don't see any light coming from the cracks; they seem airtight.

I touch the metal walls with my fingertips, tracing the door, trying to find any weak parts. Eventually I find a small crack in between the door and the wall. It's miniscule, but it does mean I can perhaps open it up.

My index finger glows and a thread sprouts from the tip, shooting straight at the crack. I can faintly feel the movements of the thread as I control it, forcing it to go down. Hopefully I can find the locking mechanism.

I close my eyes, focusing on the thread as it wiggles down. Then it hits something solid. The lock perhaps? I wrap my thread around it, feeling it out as much as I possibly can. It's got several pins and prongs, and I've found the latch, which is really large.

However, despite never encountering this lock before, it shares some similarities with the ones I've trained on.

I prod and poke at it from every angle, moving parts wherever I can with my thread. It takes me a while to scope out the entire mechanism, but when I've got a good grasp on it, I start to move the prongs.

My stomach continues to growl... ahhh, so hungry. I wish I had something to drink as well.

Oh! The latch moved!

I press my face against the door, and I can hear the latch moving around as my threads finally push it back. Great, I've got it off the latch, now I need to actually open this door.

Does it open inwards, or outwards? Or perhaps it's a sliding door...

I use my hands to push at it, but it doesn't budge. Alright, obviously a cell door wouldn't open outwards. I then push it to the side, away from the lock. I can feel it moving! Yes!

I push the oval door open all the way.

-- spaceship hallway

I enter a narrow and long hallway. It's a lot brighter than the cell, with white walls instead of the metallic ones.

I need to find an exit, but I should be careful, I may run into someone. Should I go left or right?

My feet take me left and I stick to the walls as I walk as quietly as possible, trying not to make a sound.

I finally reach a door at the end.

Wait, no, that's not a door – that's a window!

But it's dark outside. That can't be right, my cell phone's time said it was 14:34, it should be broad daylight.

I press my face up against the circular window, looking out into the vast darkness.

Which is when I finally notice the twinkling of stars. And a large blue orb hanging in the middle.

I swallow loudly as I come to the realization that I'm not in Claner anymore. I'm not even *on* Earth.

I'm in space, on a real spaceship.

Holy fu–

"Crafty," says a deep voice behind me.

I shriek in panic and whirl around, holding my arms up in a defensive position.

The same man that kidnapped me stands before me, staring down at me with those dark eyes. He's wearing that black costume, except it's all fixed and brand new. There's even a pauldron adorning his shoulders. It must be armour, now that I think about it.

He takes a step closer and I take a step back, now trapped between him and the window to space. I'm feeling claustrophobic.

"However, as much as I applaud your resourcefulness, it won't do you any good to escape," he says in a low voice.

Then he turns around on his heel, walking away from me.

"Come Earthling, you must eat."

He doesn't wait, nor does he force me to go with him. I see his back shrinking into the distance as he walks down the hallway.

What am I supposed to do? He's right, I can't escape – where would I escape to? We're in space!

Shit, I'm really stuck here.

I furiously bite on my lips and growl under my breath as I follow him down the hallway.

It doesn't seem like there's any way for me to open the door, perhaps I should try calling out for someone? Anyone who can help me understand this situation!

I bang loudly on the door.

"Hello? Hello!" I pound hard against the metal, hearing it echo in the small room.

"Is anyone out there? Hey!"

However, no matter how many times I call out for someone or knock on the door – no one comes. It's completely quiet, except for the constant humming in the background.

I sit back down on the bench, whipping out my phone and looking at the screen again. It's 14:34 right now. How I wish I had a signal...

My stomach growls in hunger and I wrap my arms around my waist. I'm so thirsty, too...

Am I really stuck here? I hope someone comes to rescue me soon, I know Ralph won't stop until he's found me.

No – I can't sit here waiting for someone to come save me; they don't even know where I am!

I stand up and pound hard against the door again, kicking it while I'm at it, making as much ruckus as possible.

"Let me out!" I yell out.

My hands are red and throbbing from slamming it against the metal door, it seems so futile.

Defeated, I stop pounding and take a step back with a sigh.

Instantly, the door slides open. Fear paralyses me and I stand still.

I'm left standing there, blinking at the oval entrance. No one has entered.

It opened up on its own? Cautiously, I stick my head outside to look around. There's no one there...

I step out of the cell.

-- spaceship hallway

I enter a narrow and long hallway. It's a lot brighter than the cell, with white walls instead of the metallic ones.

I don't see any sign of life around me. Did the door really just open up on its own, or did someone else open it for me? I'm a little freaked out now.

I need to find an exit, but I should be careful, I may run into someone. Should I go left or right?

My feet take me left and I stick to the walls as I walk as quietly as possible, trying not to make a sound.

I finally reach a door at the end.

Wait, no, that's not a door – that's a window!

But it's dark outside. That can't be right, my cell phone's time said it was already 14:34, it should be broad daylight.

I press my face up against the circular window, looking out into the vast darkness.

Which is when I finally notice the twinkling of stars. And a large blue orb hanging in the middle.

I swallow loudly as I come to the realization that I'm not in Claner anymore. I'm not even *on* Earth.

I'm in space, on a real spaceship.

Holy fu–

"Well, you're out," says a deep voice behind me.

I whip my head around, startled at the sudden voice.

The same man that kidnapped me stands before me, staring down at me with those dark eyes. He's wearing that black costume, except it's all fixed and brand new. It must be armour, now that I think about it.

He takes a step closer and I take a step back, now trapped between him and the window to space. I'm feeling claustrophobic.

"Now, where do you want to go? Space? Not exactly a bright idea for an Earthling like you," he says in a low voice.

"W-where am I?" I ask nervously.

The man straightens his back, stepping away from me. He averts his brown eyes as well, paying me no more attention.

"Varitus' fleet," he answers.

That... doesn't answer anything! I have so many questions right now.

"I suggest you put to rest the idea of escaping this ship. Unless you *want* to explore space, then be my guest," he says in a non-caring tone.

Then he turns around on his heel, walking away from me.

"Come Earthling, you must eat."

He doesn't wait, nor does he force me to go with him. I see his back shrinking into the distance as he walks down the hallway.

What am I supposed to do? He's right, I can't exactly leave here, we're in space! I can't go out there, I'd die.

Shit, I'm really stuck here.

I nervously bite on my lips and lower my head in defeat as I follow him down the hallway.

-- spaceship common room

There's a perpetual look of confusion on my face as I enter a large room with white tables and small chairs.

I see others – the same red skinned men from before, but they're eating something. Are they aliens? They look like really tall lizards...

Can they really be aliens if I can understand what they're saying? The man spoke English before...

As soon as they notice my presence, all eyes are on me. There must be forty of them in the room. This is so scary. What are they going to do to me? Why am I here!?

The black-haired man – or alien, I'm unsure what to refer to him as – points at an empty seat at the table.

"Sit down," he commands.

I don't want to.

I want to know what the hell is going on!

"Who are you?" I bark at him. "Why am I here? Where are you taking me?"

"Ooh, she's got a fine mouth," says one of the lizard men.

The alien man shoots me a cold look.

"You will address me as Prince Jæmis or Captain Jæmis from now on," he says.

I narrow my eyes at him. A prince?

"James?" I repeat.

"That's Captain *Jæmis*, get it right!" yells out one of the other men.

"And you will eat," he says gruffly, before throwing a plate onto the table.

I don't even know what is on the plate, it looks like brown mush.

"Not until you tell me what I'm doing here! You just took me by force – I don't know what's going on."

Perhaps, I can bluff my way out. I have no leg to stand on, but I have to do what it takes to get home. He says he's some kind of prince, maybe status is something important to him? Perhaps I can appeal to that side.

"You *will* eat," he says, raising his voice.

"People are out there looking for me, you know," I say. "When they know I'm gone, they'll come for me. You'll be sorry when they find me." I hope I sound convincing.

Jæmis only raises his eyebrows slightly, but his expression remains the same.

"And who is it that they will be trying to find?" he asks.

"I'm... I'm a princess," I lie. I stare him in the eye, hoping to god he won't see me shaking.

If he thinks I'm princess, maybe he'll let me go. To make me look bigger than I really am. I don't have any other bargaining chips. No way can I overpower forty something aliens in the middle of fucking space.

The desired effect however, is far from what happens in reality.

The aliens all laugh out loud.

"A princess, a princess!" one of them shouts.

"Captain got lucky! Lord Varitus will be pleased!" says another.

"We got the Earthling Princess!"

Impending doom dawns on me as I realize I just dug my own grave.

...That backfired immediately.

Jæmis' expression finally changes, his lips pulled back smugly.

"A princess, you say?" he asks.

I gulp. That was the wrong move, Joselina. Now they think they caught someone of importance and will definitely not let me go.

Well. Shit.

My face pales as Jæmis advances on me. He threateningly stands up close to me, arms crossed over his chest.

1. "Touch me and you'll die."
2. "I really am one! So, you better not hurt me."

"Touch me and you'll die," I threaten.

Jæmis tilts his head to the side, his expression remaining unchanged.

"You're a real feisty one, aren't you?"

I stand my ground, glaring at him.

"I wonder how long it will take to crack that spirit of yours..."

Jæmis suddenly moves in closer to me, grabbing my wrist and leaning his head next to mine, his lips near my ear.

"Because, make no mistake, Earthling Princess. Here, you are my prisoner." His voice pierces right through me.

A bit nervous, I try and stand my ground. "I really am one! So, you better not hurt me."

On the inside, I'm screaming. Please, for the love of god, let me get out of this in one piece.

Jæmis however, simply smirks at me. "Princess, or no princess," he says as he moves in even closer.

My heart starts hammering in my chest. My god, this guy is tall.

"Make no mistake, Earthling Princess. Here..." He leans in closer with that large body of his. "...You are my prisoner," he says menacingly.

A chill runs down my spine and I stare down at the floor with my heart beating out of control. I've got no more cards left to play.

Jæmis pulls back and walks past me.

"Get some food and water in her, then send her to my quarters," he commands the others.

"Aye, will do, Captain."

Jæmis briskly walks away.

I'm left in a room full of aliens. I'm scared. What's going to happen to me?

"Princess, over here!" one of them calls out to me, and pats down on the seat next to him.

"You can sit next to me, don't bite," he says as he grins at me.

They look so bizarre, definitely more alien-like than that brute. Reptile-like skin, teeth that could possibly devour me...

All of them are wearing the same kind of outfit as each other, like they're part of a troop.

Which is when it dawns on me that they *are* a troop, referring to the other one as their 'captain'.

"Princess, come, come!" he calls out to me after noticing I've been standing still for a while.

Cautiously I sit down next to the lizard man. All eyes are on me. It's suffocating.

"You must eat. It has been a long time. Drink, too." The alien offers me a bowl of water.

This person seems to be nicer than that brute, perhaps they can help me out with some questions I've been dying to ask.

"Where am I?" I ask.

"Varitus' 6th division fleet!" he replies proudly.

"Where are we going?"

"Back to Yool, we go home."

"Why did you take me?"

"Not know, Captain Jæmis brought you back. Spoils of war."

I shudder. Am I spoils of war? Was this an act of war?

"Why did you come to Earth?"

"Princess asks many questions," he suddenly sounds less than enthusiastic.

I bite down on my lips, thinking over my options. It's clear to me that I don't have any options. I can't go busting out of here and fly off into space.

I really am a prisoner... My future is looking incredibly bleak. A couple of days ago alien life forms weren't even confirmed, yet here I am, in a spaceship. Flying to some planet named Yool.

"When uhm, when we arrive on this Yool – what will happen to me?"

The alien shrugs his shoulders. "Do not know, do not know," he repeats. "Ask Captain Jæmis."

Frustrated, I decide to stay silent and look down at the table. The plate in front of me has something on it that I do not recognize. It just looks like a pile of dung, not appetizing in the least. Not to mention, it could just as well be poison.

The man offers me a small bowl with clear liquid inside.

"Drink Princess, drink."

"Can I even drink it?"

"Of course – all water is the same! Water is life. Now drink."

I can't deny that I'm incredibly thirsty. My thirst overrides my brain and I take the bowl and chug it down.

Ahh, it really is water. I finish it all up in one go.

He seems happy. "Good – now try eat!" He offers me a weird spoon-like utensil.

I don't know if this is good for me, but I guess I don't have much of a choice. I take the odd spoon-shaped object and dip it into the pile of mush. It's goeey and it looks gross. Ugh.

I put a small amount into my mouth, expecting it to taste horribly.

Except it... doesn't taste like much at all. It's in fact, tasteless. It's really all soft and mushy in texture. I hope this won't kill me.... I swallow it.

"Good, finish up. Then you go to Captain."

What I want is a damn bathroom...

-- Jæmes' quarters

After I've forced myself to wolf down the tasteless food, I'm taken to a different room.

The room is smaller than the one I was in before, which makes sense, as it had like forty people in it. There's a desk and a large bed. No decoration.

A single window shows the twinkling lights of the stars. It only reminds me of how trapped I am.

My kidnapper sits in an odd-looking chair at the desk. He motions for my 'guard' to go away.

"That will be all," he says.

"Yes, Captain!" The man who's helped me before disappears from the room.

I'm left alone. I kind of want to pee myself.

Silence fills the room. Jæmis isn't even looking at me, he's doing something on a weird electronic device that looks like a tablet. He's ignoring me.

What is going to happen to me now? I just want to go back to Earth, but it seems we're going to some planet named Yool...

I should try to bargain for my life. I don't want to be sold in some kind of alien slavery trading scheme.

"What are you planning on doing to me?" I finally ask him.

Jæmis makes no indication he's listening.

"Why did you take me? Why did you come to Earth? How come I can understand you?" I fire off question after question.

He can't ignore me forever.

Jæmis sighs and places down the device on the desk. He then gives me a dull look.

"You ask too many questions, Earthling Princess," he says, echoing what the other person said before.

He's still referring to me as a princess, so I guess royalty does carry some weight with him.

"To indulge you on your last question, however." Jæmis taps his finger on the tip of his pointy ear. "A Babblefish device was implanted that translates the universe's languages for you in your mind."

I clamp my mouth shut – there's a device that can do that!? They must have done this while I was unconscious. No wonder my ear stings.

Wait, why am I so surprised? They've been talking in English this entire time. They're supposed to be aliens. Of course something allowed them to talk this way.

Not to mention I literally live on a planet where people are born with the strangest abilities.

He then leans his elbows onto the desk, folding his fingers over each other, looking at me thoughtfully. His gaze still sends a chill down my spine.

"So, a princess you say..."

I break out into cold sweat. I really need to keep this lie alive, lest he causes me bodily harm when he finds out I'm lying my pants off.

"Yes..." I confirm.

I stand there waiting for him to continue, but he goes right back to playing on that device again.

I wonder if I could get away with murdering him while his attention is divided... But then what? I'm still stuck in space and there's a whole troop of aliens who, presumably, would simply either kill me or lock me up.

Seeing no other option, I decide to be obedient for now.

...But damn I really need to pee! My bladder is about to burst!

I fidget on the spot, getting increasingly more uncomfortable.

"Uhm," I start. "Is there a toilet here or something?"

Jæmis looks up at me with a bored expression. "I cannot focus with your voice in the background. You will speak when spoken to." He then returns to moving his fingers across the tablet-like device.

I grow annoyed. He wants me to come to this stupid room and then tells me to shut up?

He kidnaps me against my will, I'm stuck in the middle of fucking space – AND HE IGNORES ME?

I'm about to crack!

1. "I will pee all over your desk if you don't offer me a way to relieve myself right now."
2. "Dear Prince Jæmis, may I please use a facility to relieve myself before an accident happens?"

I grit my teeth, taking a step towards his desk and slamming my hand down on it, forcing him to face me.

"I will pee all over your desk if you don't offer me a way to relieve myself right now," I say darkly.

Jæmis eyebrow twitches, he looks annoyed. Good. He better be annoyed. He can't ignore me like this. This is my last act of bravery before I really do soil myself.

I'm playing a dangerous game, as I'm in unknown territory and I'm yelling into the face of my captor. For all I know, he could literally murder me on the spot. I've seen his strength. I've seen what he did to Ralph. I've seen him burst through walls.

However... so far he's given me food and water and I haven't been hurt yet.

"I can deduce that if you've given me water and food, that it also means you will provide me a way to relieve myself. Unless of course, an alien such as yourself doesn't pee, then let me inform you that humans need to get rid of their waste."

"So, you better let me do it now, before I do it here."

Jæmis runs a hand through his black hair, pushing it away from his face. He closes his eyes and sighs deeply, putting away his device.

"No need to threaten with your bodily fluids here, Earthling Princess. There is a perfectly adequate stall in your chambers."

"There was nothing in that room besides a bed," I respond, taking my hand off the desk.

"Seems you're not as observant as I thought," he says, smirking slightly.

"Dear Prince Jæmis, may I please use a facility to relieve myself before an accident happens?" I ask in the fakest nice voice I can muster.

Jæmis raises his head, flashing me an annoyed look for speaking out of turn.

I'm playing with fire here – but I do not want to douse myself with water anytime soon!

Lazily he flicks his finger at me. "Are you hard of hearing? I told you to only speak when spoken to. Must I remind you of the predicament you're in?"

"I've been asleep for too long. I'm about to burst..." I say weakly.

Jæmis sighs loudly, stopping his swiping on the electronic device.

"There is a perfectly adequate stall in your chambers."

Chambers? He means my holding cell? There was nothing there but the bed I woke up on.

Seeing my confused stare, Jæmis sighs once more.

"...I guess I overestimated your observational abilities."

He gets up from the desk and walks towards the far end of the wall. There's an oval door there, the same one as in my cell. He stands directly in front of it and taps his heel against the floor.

The door slides open in an instant.

Wait – is that how you open doors? Just as simple as kicking your heel against the floor?

That's what I had to do in the cell before?

Well, I feel stupid now.

Jæmis returns his gaze on me, an irritated expression on his face, as if he's annoyed he has to deal with me.

"Are you going to continue to stand there gawking until you soil yourself, or are you going to use the waste facility?"

I huff loudly and march up towards him, entering the small room. The door automatically closes behind me. At least I have some privacy.

There's a hole in the floor, leading to a bowl, which I guess is what I'm supposed to use. I crouch down and quickly do my business.

Ahh... finally.

When I'm done, I realize there's no toilet paper or anything, so I just suck it up and rise to my feet.

Immediately the hole opens up completely and a tremendous amount of vacuum power sucks out everything inside.

Whoa, that was scary.

The door opens up and Jæmis is waiting on the other side.

"Don't linger," he says.

I compose myself as I exit the small bathroom.

Jæmis walks away and then leans against the edge of his desk, crossing his arms over his muscular chest.

He cocks his head to the side.

"Now, let's get down to business."

[chapter 003]

I'm staring at the face of my captor, my knees shaking. What have I gotten myself into?

Jæmis remains stoic and motionless, arms crossed over his chest in a threatening manner as he leans against the edge of the desk. I don't know what he's thinking at all.

Then finally, after eyeing me all this time, Jæmis makes a move. He pushes himself away from the desk, standing even closer to me with his tall stature.

I gulp loudly, my mind formulating a million escape plans – including one where I just shoot myself out into space with a self-made spacesuit, but I quickly scratch that idea.

My heart starts racing when he unfolds his arms, grabbing the odd belt buckle with his hands and unfastening them. He's removing it.

Wait – wait! What is he planning on doing!?

Slowly, I back away from him as he starts to slip out of his suit, removing the upper half.

Is this the end for me? Am I going to become some sort of sex slave to an alien? Out of all the things that I thought would eventually cause my demise – being turned into a sex slave by an alien was nowhere near being on that list.

Jæmis grunts as he stands in front of me, his bare chest in full view. His body is so much like a human, I forget he's technically an alien. He's so damn ripped, I'm surprised the suit of armour can contain all of those muscles.

And then I notice something.

The burns – the ones he sustained back on earth during the battle – they're gone. His skin is in pristine condition, with the exception of a couple of old scars and the stitches that I left behind.

But even that particular wound is looking super mild and rapidly healing up.

Great. Aliens have super regenerative healing capabilities. That means even if I were to harm him to escape, it's not going to put a dent in him.

"This treatment of my wound – that was your doing, was it not?" he asks.

Well, it's not like I can deny it at this point.

I hesitantly nod my head.

"Speak up, Earthling Princess," he says in a commanding voice that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up straight.

"Y-yes!" I squeak out.

Does he not understand the gesture of a nod?

"I have not yet seen this kind of technique. It's healing without scarring over. Do all Earthlings possess the ability to treat wounds like these?"

"Uhm... No?"

"Then, is it a skill only royals such as yourself can learn?" he asks, narrowing his eyes at me.

Right, I'm supposed to be royalty. However, I'm not inclined to give him much information at all. I don't want him to know about my abilities, as far as I can help it.

"Yes..." I lie.

"Very well then. You may return to your chambers now."

Jæmis puts his suit back on as if he's just finished a business meeting, then sits down at his desk. He's still got this pokerface on, I can't tell what he's thinking or scheming.

"What are you planning to do with me?" I ask out loud, unable to live with this uncertainty.

His chilly eyes look up at me, they feel ruthless. Devoid of any emotion.

"To present you to Lord Varitus," he answers coolly.

Varitus, there's that name again. One of the other aliens mentioned it before. Is it their king – his father perhaps? Am I being offered on a golden plate to some strange alien far away from Earth?

I want to scream and protest, but I try to keep a level head. I won't gain anything from throwing a temper tantrum in *space*.

1. Threaten. "That wouldn't be very wise."
2. Plead. "Please, let me go back to Earth."

"That wouldn't be very wise," I tell him.

I have to bluff my way out of this. I have to use any leverage I can get to hopefully be able to return home.

Unfazed by my threat, Jæmis just tilts his head to the side, looking at me like I'm an insignificant bug. In front of him, I do feel like a powerless insect, but I will fight back as much as I can.

"Earthling Princess, I advise you to not hand out empty threats unless you can back it up with something."

My anxiety grows worse. He's so sharp.

"I can back it up," I reply. "You don't know who you're dealing with here. Do you think my people will just let this happen? That they're not going to stop you from kidnapping me?"

"Oh but..." Jæmis looks around the room with his eyes. "It seems they already have. No one is coming after us, it seems Earth does not have the technology for space travel."

This time, he gives me a smug smirk, like he knows he's won.

"It's been very quiet around these parts. Not a single launch of attack in the vicinity."

"Please, let me go back to Earth," I plead with him.

Jæmis' eyes don't even blink as he looks down at his tablet and ignores me completely.

"Please," I repeat, a little bit more desperately. "I have a brother, I can't abandon him."

His eyes flicker back up at me. He interlaces his fingers together and then leans his chin on the top of his hands. It feels so menacing, so powerful.

I know I won't be able to overpower him at all. I can't do anything but plead for my life.

"Seems this brother of yours isn't as concerned with your wellbeing as you are for his," he drawls out slowly.

"Of course he is!" I fire back immediately.

Ralph must be worried sick about me, stressing out about my kidnapping.

"He's figuring out a way to save me, right this moment," I say confidently.

"There has been no attempt made to follow our ship – Earth doesn't seem to have the technology for space travel. You, my dear princess, have been abandoned by your people."

I feel myself choke on my own words. I'm cornered now, truly. We can fly to Mars but... the capacity and advanced technology I've witnessed is no match for our current technology.

"No one is going to come get you." Jæmis' voice feels like venom. A dose of a reality check I needed.

I'm in space, kidnapped by aliens – and no one is going to come save me. They simply can't. Not even Ralph, who is a genius in his own right, can find a way to instantaneously cross space and teleport beside me.

I'm on my own.

"You will go to planet Yool, and you'll be a gift to Lord Varitus. That is final."

Despair and anxiety well up inside of me, as I'm starting to accept the reality of my situation. *I'm not going back home.*

Jæmis leans back into his chair and then taps his finger onto the tablet on the desk.

"Come get the Earthling Princess," he commands.

The tablet beeps and the door to the room slides open. One of the armoured platoon soldiers walks inside.

"Captain Jæmis," the alien salutes him.

Jæmis lazily flicks his hand towards the exit.

"Get her out of my sight."

The soldier roughly takes my upper arm and yanks me towards the door.

"Hey!" I protest.

The soldier ignores me, and I'm thrown out of the captain's quarters.

-- spaceship hallway

As I'm being forcibly dragged around by this brute, I see other the other aliens walk about the ship. Most of them seem to be training.

"Can't believe we lost Eel Luyuk and Madra Ka..." the soldier mutters.

I raise my eyebrows at him. Is he talking to me?

He yanks hard on my arm and I yelp out in pain.

"We only got the stupid princess." The soldier shakes his head.

When we arrive at a door, he throws me against the wall. I use my hands to prevent myself from face planting into it.

"Lord Varitus won't be happy about this. He won't. He won't." The soldier shakes his head once more.

He taps his heel against the panel on the ground and the door slides open. It's my holding cell.

With his tiny eyes, he looks at me, expecting me to go inside, but I haven't budged.

"Are you really going to keep me locked up all this time?" I ask.

The soldier huffs loudly.

"Inside!" he chastises me.

Afraid he might rough me up, I quickly step inside of the cell. The door immediately closes behind me.

-- spaceship cell

Ralph, Caine, Kim – how are they doing?

Are they searching for me right now? Is Caine even alive? Did... that brute kill Caine?

I shake my head; no, I refuse to believe anything happened to Caine. Caine got out, I'm sure.

I pace back and forth on the panel on the floor. Each time I step on it, I expect the door to open, but this time it's truly locked.

Breaking out of here would serve no purpose though, it's not like I have anywhere to escape to. I have to be careful about what I'm going to do, I need to scope things out first. There're so many things I need to think about.

First, I need to determine whether or not an escape shuttle of some sorts exist on this ship. Then, how long it will take for our journey to end before we reach this planet 'Yool'. When I've got a timeframe, I can plan my escape.

If there are no escape shuttles, then my last resort will be to threaten the captain.

My mind flashes back to the moment where he slung me over his shoulder and flew through the underground base up into the air.

That alien... he's super strong. I definitely won't be able to overpower him with sheer force. I have to be clever, I have to set a trap.

I'm going to have to come up with a plan to either subdue or kill the captain.

-- time passing

Being locked up like this, I've lost my sense of time. I've been fed twice already, but I have no idea how long I've been locked up here.

It's very cold here, too. I'm huddled in the corner of the makeshift bed.

Racking my brain with plans and ideas to escape this spaceship, I realize I can't do much when I'm still left in the dark about a lot of things.

First, I need to know how big the ship is, and perhaps if there are any escape shuttles that could bring me back to Earth. To be able to explore, I need my freedom.

I need to get out of this cell and explore the ship.

1. Pick the lock of the door and escape your room.
2. Call out for someone.

It's dangerous, but I can't expect them to give me free reign when I'm officially deemed spoils of war. I need to take matters into my own hands.

I crack my neck and stretch out my hands as I look at the door. Time to do this.

Silver thread sprouts from my fingertips, growing longer and longer. It slips into the crack of the door and wall. Due to the vibrations, I can, as it were, feel through the thread itself and see where I'm guiding it and explore the inner workings of the door mechanism.

I can do this, I just need to focus.

The door slides open when I finally unlock it.

Quickly, I stick my head out and look left and right outside the hallway. I don't spot a soul.

Alright, time to explore.

-- spaceship hallway

I turn on my heel and go the opposite way I came from, hoping this will lead me to something good. I walk down the hallway, coming to a split.

Before I can make any decisions though, I run into one of the red soldiers.

A bit startled, he shakes his head and then glares at me.

My face pales.

"Earthling! What are you doing out!?" He roughly grabs me by my arm.

I cry out in pain; he squeezes me hard enough that I think the bones in my arm will shatter.

"You're coming with me to answer Captain Jæmis!"

He yanks me along with him.

-- Jæmis' quarters

I'm shoved into the same room I was in before. I lose my footing from the forceful push and collapse onto the floor.

"Captain! She was runnin' off!"

Jæmis is still at his desk, as if he hasn't moved since the last time I saw him.

The alien stands up from the desk and makes his way over to me, each step echoing in the metal room.

Is he going to punish me for breaking free?

I look up at him, my body shaking, but my eyes are unwilling to let him see how afraid I am of him, so I hold his gaze.

Maybe it's a good thing he brought me to the Captain. Now I could perhaps open a dialogue with him, and bargain for my freedom to roam the ship.

"You have an uncanny talent for breaking out of holding cells."

I can't exactly bust my way out of here – they'd just throw me back into this cell, I'm sure. Or worse; physically punish me for breaking free.

No, I have to be smart about this. Perhaps I can speak to the captain again, maybe I can bargain for my freedom on this ship. It's not like I'm going anywhere in the first place, maybe he will grant me this small favour.

That seems to be the best course of action, so I stand up from my bed and walk towards the door.

"Hello? Anyone there? I need to speak to the captain!" I pound my fists on the door.

No response.

I continue to pound on the door.

"Anyone!?! Let me speak to your captain!" I yell loudly.

This goes on for some time, until my hands are raw and sore from slamming repeatedly against the door, and my voice becomes hoarse. My throat feels so dry.

No one has come to my cell, no one's responding to my pleas.

But then, the door slides open, a soldier stepping inside.

"What's all this noise you're making!?"

Finally, someone came!

I stand my ground. "I wish to speak to your captain. I have a proposal."

"I'm not listening to your demands, Earthling!" he spits out at me.

Then another soldier appears inside my cell. I'm suddenly feeling very claustrophobic with the both of them here.

"What's wrong, Geroed?" the second soldier asks.

The other one points his claw at me.

"The Earthling won't shut up."

"Then maybe we should teach it a lesson," he replies menacingly.

Nope, nope! A thousand times nope!

"Can't. Captain doesn't want us touching the goods."

The soldier huffs loudly. "Fine. Let's take her to the Captain then."

And just like that one of the soldiers roughly grabs my arm and drags me out of the cell.

-- Jæmis' quarters

When the door opens, I'm pushed into the room without being able to brace myself.

I yelp out loud when I fall down onto the cold floor.

Jæmis looks up from his desk, annoyed he's being disturbed.

"Why is the Earthling Princess here?" he questions the soldier.

"Captain Jæmis, she kept banging on the door and makin' a ruckus!"

Jæmis slowly gets up from the chair, making his way around the desk and slowly walks over towards me.

I feel the hairs on the back of my neck rise as he looks at me with his icy stare. He doesn't look happy at all, in fact, quite the opposite.

Suddenly I'm feeling a little less confident.

He crouches down to my level, staring at me with menacing eyes.

Then his hand shoots out and he roughly grabs my chin, forcing me to look up at him. His grip tightens and I'm starting to realize everyone on this ship is most likely able to shatter my bones if they so wish.

The touch of his hand against my skin makes me feel sick.

"Does the Earthling Princess have a death wish?"

I say nothing, wisely holding my tongue this time. The fighting spirit inside of me is shining through my glare, I'm unable to look away.

Jæmis breaks my gaze, his dark eyes flickering elsewhere as he lets go of my chin.

He slowly gets up, then addresses the red soldier.

"Tie her up this time, and station someone at her cell."

My eyes grow wide.

"No!" I yell out loud as I get up.

My vision blurs immediately and my thoughts are rattled. I'm left wobbling on my feet, struggling to stay upright.

I have no idea what just happened until I finally start feeling the stinging pain on my cheek.

"Silence!" barks the soldier.

My fingers touch my glowing red cheek. I got hit... holy hell does it hurt.

Jæmis folds his arms across his chest, obviously not amused at my outburst.

I need to bargain for my ability to explore the premises, there's no other way.

"It seems you have no sense of self preservation. Perhaps Earthlings are just eager to meet their demise."

The soldier stares at me with these despicable, beady little eyes. I'm already imagining how I will slice his throat with my thread.

Jæmis then turns around, showing his back to me as he walks back towards the desk.

"Well, state what you want to say."

"Captain?" the soldier says, confused.

"I want to roam free," I say.

Jæmis stops walking, the room grows quiet.

"Free, you say..." he repeats slowly.

"I know I'm not going anywhere – we're in space after all – but I'll go crazy if you keep me locked up in that room."

I look down at the floor and try to swallow my pride. The sting on my cheek still hurts.

"So please, with your permission, let me wander around. I won't cause trouble." I grit my teeth.

The soldier next to me starts to laugh out loud.

"Ahaha, Earthlings are funny!"

Jæmis finally turns around to face us again.

"Earthling Princess, perhaps I need to educate you on the art of the deal. When one desires something from another, one must be able to strike an offer in return."

Jæmis cocks his head to the side.

"What does an Earthling like you have to bargain for your freedom to roam in this vessel?"

I swallow; I don't have anything to bargain with. I only have my body and talent. I'm definitely not going to offer my body to him, so all that leaves is my thread. He did seem interested in it.

"I can show you how I closed that wound for you." Please, let that be a suitable enough of an offer.

Jæmis brings a hand to his chin, clearly mulling over my offer. I can feel my heart beating against my chest, I'm so nervous. What if he won't let me?

"Geroed," Jæmis calls out.

The soldier stands straight.

"Yes, Captain?"

"Assign one of the lower ranks to guard and guide the Earthling Princess at all times. Make sure to deliver a full report at the end of each day."

"Captain?" he repeats.

My eyes have stopped blinking; I can't believe my luck. He's agreeing to my request! I can't help but suddenly let out a breath in relief.

Jæmis notices my obvious change in demeanor, and he approaches me all of a sudden. He sizes me up, glaring down at me with those dark eyes.

Oh god, for a second I forgot how muscular this alien is, he could snap me in half with very little effort.

"However, mark me. One suspicious activity and I will hang you outside the ship the rest of the way."

He turns on his heel and briskly walks away.

"Dismissed. Take the Earthling and find someone else that will babysit her."

"Yes, Captain."

A sudden yank on my arm brings me back to reality. I'm forcefully removed from the room.

-- spaceship common room

There are a few soldiers sharing a meal, but they all look up when I enter the area.

"Eeyok!" the soldier bales loudly.

A small soldier jumps up from his seat and comes running towards us.

"Yes, Geroed!"

Oh, it's the same one that gave me some water to drink on the first day.

"Captain wants you to guard and guide the Earthling. Take her for a walk, make sure to report all her activities to me."

"A walk? What's walk for?" asks Eeyok.

"I don't care. Just let her walk around. Stay with her. Don't let her go near the engine room, off limits."

Engine room? I definitely need to check out that place, sounds important.

"Every day?"

"Every day."

"Yes, Geroed!"

Geroed glares at me as he releases my arm.

"Any funny business and I will eat your head," he threatens.

Geroed finally disappears from the room.

"Haha, Geroed not mean that. Geroed not eat Earthlings," says Eeyok in a high-pitched voice.

It seems this soldier has a lower ranking than the rest, but he seems a lot friendlier. Maybe I can be persuasive and get him to show me around the entire ship.

"Eeyok, is that your name?" I ask.

Eeyok smiles at me. "Yes, yes!"

"Alright, well. Eeyok, do you think you can give me a tour of the ship?"

"A tour? Yes can!"

He readily jumps next to me and urges for me to start moving forward.

"Go, go!" he gushes eagerly.

We head out of the room together.

-- Spaceship hallway

Within an hour, I've witnessed pretty much the entire ship. Or fleet, as Eeyok likes to call it.

It's not that big. My cell seems to be on the same floor as the sleeping quarters for the rest of the crew. Then there's the common room where I came from, where everyone eats their food.

I also entered the observatory room, which had a few weird machines lying about that didn't look familiar to me.

The engine room and bridge were off-limits, though Eeyok did point out to me how to get there.

"That the fleet!" says Eeyok with a big smile.

It was a pretty short tour. I did not see any rooms that had an escape shuttle or anything close to it. Unless those are hidden in the engine rooms.

I need to gain more information.

"So uhm Eeyok, who is Varitus?" is my first question.

"Lord Varitus is our King of planet Yool. He save planet from death," he explains.

King. Must be Jæmis' father then. They're probably both crazy and power hungry.

"...And why did you attack Earth?"

Eeyok looks down towards the floor, suddenly growing silent.

"Yool not dead, but not alive. Yool need water."

"Water?" Is that why they came to Earth?

"But what about me? Why am I being taken away?"

Eeyok furiously shakes his head.

"Said too much. Must rest now. Go to room." Eeyok points at the door of my cell.

I guess those are all the answers I'm getting for today.

"Okay, thank you for showing me around," I say.

Eeyok brightens up with a smile. He seems easily pleased.

-- Spaceship cell

So, my escape pod plan is a no-go. I'm stuck on a spaceship and I somehow need to turn it around back to Earth.

I'm going to have to take the captain hostage and threaten his life so they will turn around and send me back to Earth.

But... he's very strong. He not only has the ability to fly, as far as I know, but he pretty much rammed his way through several floors of my house!

How can I get past someone like that? I'm no superhero, I've never had to fight before... He could very easily overpower me with brute strength alone.

I need something a little more clever.

If I can somehow get close enough to him to pierce his skin with my thread, I should be able to pinpoint his heart and be able to threaten his life. Then I'll be in a position to make demands and get them to return me back to Earth.

But wait... he's an alien. Do aliens even *have* hearts?

While I have super sharp eyesight, I don't exactly have super hearing or anything – I wouldn't know if he has a heart or not.

I scoff to myself; well he's certainly heartless in a figurative sense.

I can't remember him looking all too different from a normal human body when I was dressing his wounds. But it's not like I paid attention whether or not his heart was still beating.

What if he does have a heart, but it's in a totally different place, like somewhere near his stomach? I'm going to have to find out *where* his heart is before I attempt to stab it.

To do that, I need to get physically close to my abductor and hope he doesn't kill me on the spot.

[chapter 004]
-- Spaceship cell

I'm rudely awakened when someone grabs my arm.

In a panic, I scream out loud and hit whoever is holding me.

"Princess!" yelps Eeyok. "It me!"

I retrieve my hand, realizing I've just hit a soldier in my confused state. Oh no, what will he do to me? I have to smooth this over right away.

"I'm so sorry Eeyok!" I quickly apologize. "I was startled. I didn't mean to hit you."

Eeyok then smiles at me.

"It ok, Earthling Princess. Eeyok forgive."

I sigh in relief. I need to make sure I'm on this soldier's good side.

"Geroed does not," Eeyok grumbles under his breath.

"Geroed is that big soldier, right?" I ask.

"Geroed is Commander. He not forgive easy." He shakes his head.

Alright, it seems rank matters a lot among these soldiers. From what I've gathered, Jæmis ranks highest as Captain, which is then followed by Geroed.

"What does that make you, Eeyok?"

"Eeyok scum. Grunt."

That makes him one of the lowest ranks... Still, not a bad idea to have him on my side, if I keep acting nice to him.

"Captain Jæmis wants to see you," he says.

"Oh?" Wait – does he want to see me for my ability?

Eeyok leads me out of the cell.

-- Spaceship hallway

As we walk down the hallway, I see a meteorite flash past us outside the window.

"Wow! That almost hit us!" I say in a frightened voice. That was super close!

Eeyok sniggers at my response.

"We safe. Ship has shield. Small rocks do not hurt."

"What about big rocks though?" I ask wearily.

Eeyok shrugs as if he doesn't have the answer either.

Small meteorites continue to flash past the windows. Knowing it's safe, I think it's kind of pretty to look at. They leave streaks of debris behind.

I'm sure back on Earth, these would have looked like falling stars...

-- Jæmis' quarters

We enter the Captain's quarters. I can always feel my heart beat faster whenever I step foot inside of this cold room.

Jæmis is behind his desk as usual, not even bothering to look up and acknowledge us.

"Captain, bring Earthling Princess," Eeyok announces us.

Jæmis finally bothers to look up as he waves his hand at Eeyok, dismissing him. He quickly walks out, leaving me alone with this tyrant.

I fiddle around with my fingers, anxious and nervous. What does he really want from me? Am I really able to kill him? I need to get close to him...

"Why am I here?" I decide to ask.

"Have you forgotten your own bargain already?" He clicks his tongue at me.

He gets up from his chair and leans against the edge of his desk.

"You were going to show me how you treated my wounds. Today's your chance."

"Now?" I wasn't prepared for this at all.

"Did I stutter, Princess?" His voice is sultry and dark.

I shake my head. "No..."

I look around. I'm going to have to show him my power after all. But... I also need to get close to him. I need to find out his weak point.

"I need a test subject," I point out. "I can't close a wound that doesn't exist."

Jæmis pushes himself away from the desk, threateningly gaining distance on me. Each step he takes makes me quiver in response; I don't know what his endgame is. Is he going to hurt me?

Then I realize the gravity of my own words; I said I needed a wound. Is he going to create one for me!? Oh no, I didn't think this through!

When he raises his hand, my heart stops beating. He's totally going to!

Except he carefully rolls up the sleeve on his arm, revealing the scar I had seen before.

Then, in the blink of an eye, he makes a swiping motion with his other hand, and a vivid red line red appears on the surface of his bare skin.

He's cut himself on his arm and didn't even wince.

I breathe out a sigh in relief.

"Show me," he commands.

At least he didn't hurt *me*. Alright, perhaps now I can find out if his heart is in the right place as a human.

"Any inconspicuous movements and I won't hesitate to kill you on the spot. Do you understand?" he growls.

I gulp and quickly nod at him.

"Do you understand?" he repeats in a booming voice.

My eyes widen.

"I said yes!"

He narrows his dark eyes at me, finding me suspicious.

"I have a very keen sense of hearing – do not mock my hearing and lie to me. Next time, it will be you who will be cut."

Wait – it's the same as before. When he didn't realize I nodded. Oh. *Oh.*

"Uhm, do you..." I find this awkward to ask. "Do you know body language? Like a nod?" I nod my head.

"I have no intention of studying your erratic Earthling behaviour," he scoffs. "What silly things you do with your head is your business. But you possess a tongue, and the ability to speak. *You best be using it.*"

Okay then! He definitely doesn't know human body language!

"Well, humans can speak through gestures. A nod is a yes, and shaking—"

Suddenly he's in front of me, occupying my personal space. The blood trickles down his arm and splatters onto the metal flooring. He's as intimidating as ever.

"I do not have the time to listen to you. Show me how you treated my wounds," he snarls at me.

He's so impatient. Alright, I guess I'm going to have to do this.

Let's find out where his heart is.

1. Touch his arm and chest to feel for a heartbeat.
2. "I have to make sure I don't hurt any important organs. Where is your heart?"

Here goes.

Avoiding his threatening gaze, I direct my attention towards his bleeding arm. Slowly, to make sure every single movement is telegraphed, I reach my hand out to his arm.

At the same time, I take a step closer to him, my other hand reaching for his chest, to pretend I'm stabilizing myself as I work on his arm.

His gaze is so intense! I feel like he's going to murder me with only his eyes.

"Hold still," I tell him.

I really don't want to show him my ability, but I have no other choice.

I hover my fingertips over the small wound, and slowly, my thread shoots out of it.

There's absolutely no reaction from Jæmis, who remains completely still.

"This might sting a little," I warn him.

I pierce his skin with my thread. He doesn't even flinch or blink. There's absolutely no reaction from him.

Then I take the plunge; I touch his chest with my other hand. The suit he's wearing feels cold and smooth to the touch. I'm so nervous that I can only feel my own heartbeat, but not his.

Jæmis looks down at the hand that's suspiciously on his chest.

"Is this... required?" he asks.

"Uhm, yes," I lie quickly. "It's to steady myself."

I continue to stitch, afraid he's going to find out what I'm trying to achieve.

I look up at him, and see that his eyes are focusing on my threads, which are slowly, but surely, closing the wound. He's distracted. Good. He doesn't mind that my hand is pressed against his chest.

I move my hand a little, shifting across his suit to where I believe his heart would be. I try and feel his heartbeat.

Except... I hear something.

I cock my head to the side at the strange sensation. I don't hear it thump... I hear a rhythm. It's very subtle, but steady and unlike any heartbeat I've heard before.

It's almost like a melody...

Suddenly the whole room shakes with a violent crackle, sending me off my balance.

My whole body crashes into Jæmis and we're both sent flying towards the ground.

The fall is cushioned by Jæmis' body, with my face is squished against his chest. That melody from before has vanished, instead eerie crackling sounds overwhelm my senses. I'm completely out of sorts.



I'm going to have to ask him outright.

"I have to make sure I don't hurt any important organs. Where is your heart?"

"Do you require medical knowledge of my species, you mean?" he asks.

Even better!

"Yes."

"That didn't seem to stop you when you treated me before," he points out.

Well. He's not wrong. Damn it. How I wish I simply let him crash before, then this would have never happened.

"Now, stop dawdling and show me your skills," he commands, clearly running out of patience.

I gulp and finally step towards him.

A thin thread appears from my index finger, and I guide it towards his arm, piercing his skin. Jæmis doesn't even flinch.

As I stitch his wound closed, I'm trying to come up with another way to find out where his heart is. If he won't tell me, I'm going to have to find out myself.

Suddenly the whole room shakes with a violent crackle, sending me off my balance.

My whole body crashes into Jæmis and we're both sent flying towards the ground.



The fall is cushioned by Jæmis' body, with my face is squished against his chest. I press my hand against his suit to lift my head away from him.

Before I can think about what just happened, I realize I can feel a heartbeat. Oh! His heart is right there!

Wait... I expected to feel it thump underneath my hand, but instead... I feel something else. It's like a rhythm, subtle and steady, almost like a drum playing to a beat.

Like a melody...

The room makes an eerie metal sound and shakes once more.

I look up at Jæmis, whose facial expression finally changed to something mildly perturbed.

"W-what's going on?" I ask in a panic.

"Collision with a meteorite, most likely," he grumbles.

"Wait, that sounds rather serious! I thought this ship had a shield! Are we going to die!?"



"GYAAA!!"

Jæmis went all super-devil on me! His hair is standing up straight! Holy shit – that is utterly terrifying!

The stuff of nightmares!

"Will you kindly shut your mouth hole before I rip your tongue out!?" Jæmis grunts back.

Wait.

Suddenly I'm floating. I don't feel my weight anymore.

Jæmis curses in an unknown language under his breath as he floats into the air along with me.

I wave my arms and kick my legs into the air, only I can't change my direction at all. There's no more gravity!

"We're floating!" I cry out.

Oh no, the ship is breaking!

With nothing to hold onto, my body starts spinning around. It's making me dizzy and I lose my sense of direction. My own hair is sticking out in all directions as well.

I quickly shoot out a piece of thread, aiming at the wall. The thread immediately latches onto a metal bar. Wow! That shot out much faster than I expected!

I pull myself towards it so I can steady myself.

"Are we going to crash?" I ask, looking back at Jæmis.

Jæmis is still mindlessly floating around in the air. His cape is flying around him, clinging onto his body as if he were swimming underwater.

"We're in *space*," he huffs as he pushes the cape out of his face. "Unless we find ourselves a planet, there's nothing to crash *into*."

"Fine – are we going to explode?" I spit back at him.

"Our artificial gravity generator has preemptively shut down. There won't be anything that might explode," he explains.

Jæmis tries to reach out towards the ceiling to grab hold of something, but is unable to get within range. He's aimlessly hanging around in the middle of the room.

"...Can't you fly?" I ask.

I mean, he can fly, right? Can't he just zip his way over to wherever this generator is and turn it back on?

Jæmis shoots me the deadliest glare he's given me yet, and I instinctively freeze on the spot, clinging onto the wall.

For the longest time, he remains silent, brooding as he floats mindlessly in the middle of the chamber.

"I'm unable to steer myself in these conditions..." he mutters.

"Oh."

I have no idea how he can fly in the first place, but it is useful to know that he's as helpless as I am in this sort of situation.

I try and pat down my crazy hair, but it keeps standing up straight like I'm Medusa. This is crazy. I've never been in zero gravity before.

Jæmis is still trying to orientate himself, clumsily trying to reach for anything he can get his hands on.

1. Pull him in yourself.
2. "Do you need help?"

Impatiently, I shoot out a thread towards Jæmis. Once more, it shoots out faster and further than before, so I have to adjust before I miss my target. I finally wrap it around his waist.

I give it a small tug and Jæmis' body starts floating towards me. Eventually he softly lands next to me, planting both his feet against the wall, holding onto one of the bars with his hands.

He gives me this judging look, and I immediately dissolve the thread around his waist.

"What?" I say with a shrug. "You looked like you needed some help."

"I had everything perfectly under control, Earthling Princess," he says in this snappy tone.

I huff at him. "I guess prisoners don't deserve thanks."

Unable to watch him struggling any longer in this pressing situation, I decide to speak up.

"Do you need help?"

"Stay where you are, Earthling. I have this under control," he replies immediately.

He's still spinning in the air though, flexing his muscles to propel him enough into a single direction. His fingers reach out for the desk, but he narrowly misses and does a flip.

"Yeah, looks like you're doing *great*," I say sarcastically.

"Maybe I could do a better job if someone wasn't breaking my concentration the entire time," he huffs loudly.

"You can fix the gravity, right?"

"Of course I can."

"Then..."

I shoot out my thread to catch his wrist. With a slight tug, I pull his body over towards my side.

When he arrives at the wall and grabs a hold of one of the bars, I quickly dissolve my thread. He doesn't look amused at all.

"Return to your chambers immediately, I must deal with this mess," he commands.

"What? Wha!"

I don't have time to protest when Jæmis grabs me close, forcing me under his arm, then he launches himself off the wall and we both hurl towards the door.

Right before crashing into the door, Jæmis holds his hand out in front of him to catch the momentum and slow us down. He then taps his foot against the panel on the floor, causing the door to slide open.

Holding me tightly, we exit the room.

-- spaceship hallway

"Captain! Captain! The artificial gravity generator is broken!" yells out one of the floating soldiers.

"Tell me – do you think your captain is so incompetent he is unable to tell whether or not he is in zero gravity?" Jæmis asks in an aggravating tone.

The soldier clamps his mouth shut in fear.

"N-no Captain!"

"Where is Geroed? Why did he abandon his post?"

"He's fixing the antenna outside! The meteorite hit it!"

I stay silent this entire time, wondering when in the world Jæmis is going to let me go.

Then, all of a sudden, I'm thrust into the alien, slamming hard against its armour. He catches me in surprise.

"Take the Earthling, get her back in her chambers. I'll go fix the generator."

Claws wrap around my arms to keep me steady.

"Yes, Captain." The soldier looks down at me. "Com'on, Earthling, back to your cell, Captain's orders."

It's not like I have much of a choice. The soldier keeps a tight grip on my arm as he pushes himself off against the floor, launching us both straight down the hallway.

Jæmis disappears in the opposite direction.

As we're floating past one of the windows, I notice a silver object outside.

Oh, it's one of the aliens in a suit. They're outside. That must be Geroed, the one that hit me in the face. I hope they can fix everything... I won't be able to go back home if this ship breaks on us.

All of a sudden, I feel a strong weight pulling my body down.

Then I fall face-first onto the floor with a splat.

"Oof!" The wind gets knocked out of me.

I pick myself up from the floor. Oh, the gravity is working again!

"Captain Jæmis must 'ave turned it back on," says the soldier.

I see something whizz past the corner of my eye.

Startled, I look out the window and see the silver suit spinning around in a rapid fashion and moving away from the ship. It doesn't seem like they're secured with a tether or anything.

"Oh look!" I say to the other soldier. "He's floating away!"

The other soldier freezes up when he sees his fellow crew member moving away from the ship.

He quickly turns around and sprints off in the direction Jæmis disappeared.

I press my face up against the window to see. The alien is rapidly disappearing into the distance.

I look down at my hands; I could theoretically save him with my thread. The way I shot it out just now, I think under the circumstances I'm in, I can shoot it further than normal, so the distance wouldn't be a problem.

The question is... do I *want* to save an alien who's part of a crew that kidnapped me? Not to mention hit me in the face!

Then I see a bunch of soldiers running towards me, with Jæmis flying behind them.

They all stop to stare out the window.

"It's Geroed! His tether broke!" yells out one of them.

"Save him, save him!" chants another.

Jæmis stands still, contemplating quietly as he looks out the window.

Geroed has drifted away quite a distance by now. Even with my keen eyesight, I have a hard time telling him apart in the darkness of space.

"The ship cannot turn around," says Jæmis coolly. "Mark the log that we lost Geroed during a maintenance check."

Everyone looks at him, quiet for a moment.

"What! It's Geroed – save him Captain!"

"Yeah, yeah!" says another. "Fly, fly to him! He's not lost yet!"

"I *said*, the ship cannot turn around. By the time we made such a drastic maneuver to go back, he would have fallen off our radar, and we'd be adding another month to our voyage."

"But Captain Jæmis!"

"Everyone, return to your posts!" he bellows.

The crew grows quiet once more, then one by one, they start shuffling their feet and walk away from the windows.

The crew is murmuring amongst themselves, obviously not happy having to abandon one of their own. Soon, the hallway is empty, with just me and Jæmis left.

I glance at my fingertips. Should I tell them? That I can still save him?

1. Don't tell Jæmis.
2. Tell Jæmis you can save him.

On the other hand, that's one less creepy alien to worry about. I don't need to save him. All I need to do is worry about myself.

I clench my hands into fists. No, I'm not going to tell them.

Jæmis finally sets his sights on me, and I can feel the anger radiating from his entire being. This alien is *not* in a good mood.

He ventures a step forwards, forcing me to take one backwards until I'm stopped by the wall.

"I told you to return to your chambers immediately, Earthling." His voice is chilly and dangerous.

"This disobedience of yours won't be tolerated another time, mark me." Jæmis' words feel like he's spitting venom at me.

I don't dare say another word in fear of angering him even more.

"Uhm," I stammer awkwardly, trying to catch his attention.

Jæmis' eyes pierce right through me – he is *not* in a good mood right now. It makes me freeze up on the spot.

"I can still save him."

He approaches me, his body intimidating and fierce. God – why is he so damn muscular? He's like a moving wall! With each step he takes, I take one backwards, afraid of what he might do.

"You best be keeping that to yourself, Earthling Princess," he says in a dark tone.

He slams his foot against the floor and the door to my cell opens up.

In a lightning fast reaction, he shoves me into the room with only a flick of his finger.

Painfully I land on the unforgiving metal floor and look up at him, these cold, dead eyes staring down at me. The door slides closed and I can hear him walking out of the hallway.

I huddle myself into the corner, pressing my legs against my chest for warmth.

...How can I possibly subdue the captain and force him to take me back to Earth?

[Chapter 005]

Since people get seasick, can one get spacesick?

Desperately I want to look on my phone to check for any symptoms you can get in space, but I'm once more reminded of my situation; *I am kidnapped and I'm in space.*

There's no search engine to consult. There's no one here to hear me scream.

My phone is turned off to conserve battery life; it's useless to me now anyway.

It's 10 days since I've been here, eating the same thing every day. I feel weak and tired. It's hard coming up with a plan to kill someone when you feel like the world is spinning, but it isn't really.

The door suddenly opens.

"Princess, here is food." It is Eeyok, walking in with a tray of the same food that has dulled my palette.

I can't help it. I'm unable to suppress it any longer; my stomach is churning at the thought of swallowing that thick paste again.

Eeyok watches me helplessly as I hurl out my stomach contents.

I sit back against the wall, feeling clammy and nauseous.

"Must see Captain!!" Eeyok shrieks and rushes over to me.

I'm roughly grabbed by my waist and he flings me over his body, running out of the room with me.

-- James' quarters

"There better be a very good explanation as to this disturbance."

Suddenly my feet are on the floor again, with Eeyok holding me up straight. I feel even more nauseous now that he ran all the way over here with me on his back.

"Captain, Princess is regurgitating food!"

With no sense of urgency, Jæmis walks around his desk, his footsteps echoing in the room. He's imposing and not in a very good mood as he stands inspecting me.

Then again – when has he ever been in a good mood? I sure as hell haven't been since I got kidnapped.

"Eeyok."

"Yes, Captain?"

"She regurgitated, yes?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Then go clean it up, don't let the stench fill up our ship."

Eeyok promptly leaves me alone and runs out of the room.

I'm left alone with the captain.

If only I felt a little less woozy, then maybe I could... I don't know, trick him or something.

His dark brown eyes bore themselves into me. I'm too weak to glare back at him, but I try nonetheless.

"Still defiant no matter what, aren't we?" he comments offhandedly, flicking his hand at me.

He makes my blood boil. If I had the energy to talk, I'd give him a piece of my mind.

Jæmis walks around his desk to the wall behind it. He opens up one of the drawer-looking vaults.

"The artificial gravity in our ship takes some getting used to, especially for someone who's never been exposed to it before."

After rummaging through the drawer, Jæmis takes something out of it – it looks like some kind of syringe.

My eyes widen – no way, what does he intend to do with that?

"This should relieve you of your symptoms."

Oh hell no, I'm not getting shot with alien fluids! Who knows what kind of reaction I could have!? I could be implanted with alien eggs, using my body as some kind of incubator, and have them bursting through my stomach!

He places two fingers on the side of his own neck. "Best to do it in the neck, so it goes straight to the heart."

Finally, I find my voice.

"Then why not shoot it straight in the heart?"

Jæmis exhales what I believe to be something akin to a chuckle. Or maybe he's just scoffing and making fun of me.

Or maybe he just inhaled a speck of dust and had to free up his nostrils. I don't know.

"Shoot this drug straight to your heart, and it will make anyone's heart stop beating."

A chill runs over my spine. But the gears in my mind start spinning as well. I know where his heart is located...

I might actually have found a way to kill him – or threaten his life at the very least.

I *need* to get my hands on that drug.

"Then please, give me the medicine, I feel sick." I play up the helpless act.

Jæmis walks up to me – sometimes I forget how massive and intimidating he is – the syringe ready in his hand. Somehow, I have to get it... I need to distract him.

Slowly, his hand reaches out to my hair and he sweeps it aside, exposing the skin on my neck. The heat from his hand prickles my skin.

My heart starts racing wildly as adrenaline rushes in, pumping myself up to find the right moment to take the syringe.

There's a slight hesitation in his actions. For the briefest moment, he lingers with the syringe near my skin.

My chance!

Quickly I knock the syringe out of his hand. It flies in the air but I grab it, flipping it in my hand and I point it at his heart, sinking the needle through his outfit but stop right before it pierces his skin.

I take a breath.

Silence.

My heartbeat is ringing in my ears. My stomach is sloshing around.

Jæmis is simply staring at me, unmoving. There's no expression on his face to indicate his emotions whatsoever.

It's like he's accepted this fate of his. As if he doesn't care if he dies.

1. Threaten him.

2. Let him go.

"Unless you want your heart to stop beating – you *will* turn this ship around and bring me back to Earth."

He's even more frightening when he says nothing at all. Just staring at me with those emotionless eyes of his.

Doesn't he care if he dies!?

"Go on – you made the threat, now carry it out if you're able to summon enough courage."

I push the needle even deeper, knowing I've breached his skin.

"I will not hesitate to do so," I bark back at him.

Jæmis takes a deep breath and then he disappears right before my eyes.

What the!?

He reappears behind me – he's so damn fast!

He takes the needle out of my hand and then painfully pins my arms behind my back. He pushes me against the desk.

Before I can protest, he jabs the needle in the side of my neck.

Those empty eyes of him. How can I kill him when he already feels dead?

Defeated, I drop the syringe to the floor and take a step back from him.

"My, and here I was thinking you had the guts to follow through. I overestimated you." His tone is neutral, like it didn't even phase him.

Jæmis bends down to pick up the syringe on the floor.

Then, in a quick succession, I am pulled in by my wrist and he slams me against the desk, flipping me around so that my back is facing him.

I cry out in pain as he twists my arms behind my back.

"Careful." He leans in closer to my ear, his voice nothing but a whisper.

"When you deliver a threat, you must have every intention of following through. The universe doesn't give you second chances."

Then he jabs the needle into my neck.

Shocked, I let out a painful yelp as I feel an icy fluid flow through my veins.

"I applaud your attempt – but a mere Earthling like you with your puny strength has no way to compete against mine. This was your battle to lose from the start," he grunts against my ear.

He finally tears himself away from me, releasing my arms and pulling the needle out of my neck.

"I believe I mentioned I'd hang you outside the ship if you did anything suspicious..." His eyes flicker over at me.

"But given your current condition, I'll write this off as a delusional Earthling acting out due to space fever."

I take in a deep breath to steady myself and I rub the spot where the needle pricked me. My wrists are also hurting from his strong grip.

I want to yell back at him – I'm *not* delusional. But there's just no way I can compete with him; he's totally right, I don't have the power to defeat him.

I'm... never going home. The reality of my predicament settles down and I feel this uneasiness wash over me.

At the same time, my mind starts clearing up. The sickness in my stomach is slowly subduing.

Wow – wait, this medicine is actually working.

"Feeling better now?" he asks without a care in the world, as if I didn't just try to murder him.

I can't help but nod at him in wonder.

"Maybe now that your senses have returned to you, you will learn to not make so many hasty decisions in the future."

Jæmis threateningly crosses his arms over his chest.

"Any further attempts on my life and I will not hesitate to rip off your head."

I can't help myself but ask, "Why haven't you already? Why have you taken me?"

Another silence stretches between us. The needle lies forgotten on the desk.

Jæmis finally averts his eyes and settles his gaze upon the only window in the room.

"Not only are you of royalty, which can prove to be useful during bargaining positions, but you have demonstrated the ability to heal torn skin."

Then his dark eyes are back on me.

"Such an ability will be quite useful to have. When we arrive, you will be put to use in our medical bay."

It dawns on me that I made my own grave by rescuing a stranger from the sky and patching him up.

He thinks I'm some kind of doctor – which I'm not, I just did basic first-aid – and that's why I'm here, on this ship. Kidnapped by aliens because I can manipulate pieces of thread.

"Beware, Earthling Princess," he growls.

"One more wrong step and I will personally end your life."

I fearfully nod at him.

Remembering he doesn't understand human body language, I quickly correct myself.

"I... understand," I mutter under my breath.

I'm not going back home. I'm not killing or threatening the captain to bring me back. No one is coming to save me either.

Home has never felt so far away before now.

-- Spaceship common room

I'm losing track of the days. With no sun that rises and settles out here in space – not to mention no watch – my sense of time is slipping away.

How long have I been here? It feels like weeks, but I don't even know for sure.

Eeyok has been taking me to the dining area more often. He seems to enjoy taking care of me, and I'd rather have at least one alien on my side.

"Eeyok, why are you here?" grunts another soldier at him.

"Taking care of Earthling, yes?" he answers.

Suddenly the larger soldier knocks Eeyok down on the ground, starting a brawl. Everyone around us looks up and forms a circle.

"No, you must be cleaning the living quarters."

"You not commander, Eeyok not listen."

The soldier grabs Eeyok off the floor, hoisting him high in the air.

"After Geroed, I'm the acting commander. Everyone has to listen to what I say." The soldier laughs loudly, with everyone else joining in.

Not good... I don't know what to do. Should I try and stop them? Eeyok looks like he's not getting enough air.

1. Try and free Eeyok
2. "Please put him down."

I stealthily conjure a thread from my index finger, sneaking it down onto the floor where no one is able to notice it.

I latch it around the soldier's ankle and yank on it. The soldier falls backwards, dropping Eeyok along the way. Hastily I dissolve my thread and try to look as innocent as possible.

Embarrassed, he quickly stands up and looks around. Everyone around him starts laughing.

"Who did that!?" he yells.

Eeyok picks himself up from the ground, looking a bit bewildered himself.

"You did that!" the soldier yells at Eeyok. He pulls back a fist and is about to slam it into Eeyok's face, until a booming voice catches everyone's attention.

I stand up from my spot.

"Please put him down," I say loudly enough for everyone to hear.

It goes quiet for a second, and the acting commander looks me in the eye.

He then drops Eeyok to the floor, his sights set on me. Wait no, this is bad.

"What's that, little Earthling has got demands?" He steps closer to me.

"Perhaps you should be the one at the end of my claws." He smirks and the soldiers around him snigger as well.

"N-no, don't," I warn him while backing off.

Eeyok picks himself up from the floor and jumps in front of me.

"No!" he yells.

"What is all this commotion about?"

The captain flies in; strong and confidently he lands next to the acting commander, staring him down.

"Jilyuk, what is the meaning of this?" Jæmis asks in a very calm but threatening voice.

"Captain, Eeyok is abandoning his duties," says Jilyuk, playing innocent.

I huff out loud, unable to contain myself.

"And which duties would that be?" The captain looks unimpressed. "Because as I recall, it's his job to guard the Earthling, is it not?"

Jilyuk looks frightened. He casts his eyes down at the floor.

"Yes, Captain..."

"Make yourself useful and check the radar on the bridge for any incoming meteor storms."

"Yes, Captain!" Jilyuk immediately disappears.

Jæmis stares down everyone around him, his arms crossed over his chest. The message is clear enough; everyone needs to get back to their post and stop loitering about.

When we're not the center of attention anymore, Jæmis suddenly takes a step closer to me.

"Earthling," he calls out to me.

Fed up with all this 'Earthling' stuff, I finally blurt out my frustrations.

"It's Joselina," I fire back. "My name is Joselina. No more of this Earthling nonsense."

He cocks his head to the side.

"Well Princess, if you were getting tired of the way we were addressing you, then perhaps you should have told us your name much sooner."

I stare back at him, feeling embarrassment rise up to my cheeks, knowing I haven't told anyone my name since the moment I was captured.

But it's not like I'm in the best position to! I got kidnapped against my will! Who thinks about properly introducing themselves under such a situation? No one, that's who.

"Your rebellious eyes will be the death of you one day," he mutters darkly.

1. Give him the middle finger.

2. Glare at him.

As childish and ludicrous it might seem – I end up showing him my middle finger.

As expected, he makes no indication that he recognizes the sign. Human gestures are a foreign language in space.

That only makes me narrow my eyes even more. How I wish I could shoot laser beams out of my eyes like the superhero Lazek can.

Jæmis however, ignores my small act of defiance.

"Be careful about meddling with Yoolun's affairs, you might find yourself in a situation you can't handle," Jæmis warns me.

"Yoolun?" I repeat quizzically. Is that what these soldiers are called?

Jæmis simply tears his cold eyes away from me and turns on his heel. He slowly makes his exit by flying off, his cape fluttering behind him.

"Princess!" Eeyok suddenly speaks up.

"Ah, yes?"

"Eeyok grateful, but Princess should be careful." Eeyok looks around him as the others glare at us.

"Eeyok grunt," he whispers.

I look down at my bowl of mashed food. The warnings don't bode well.

-- Spaceship cell

Not much later I'm back in my cell, bored out of my mind, when suddenly the door slides open.

I expect Eeyok to enter, but it's that brute from before – Jilyuk, I think?

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up straight and I huddle myself in a corner.

"Earthling Princess," he greets me in a mocking tone.

He taps his heel onto the floor and the door is shut fast. I'm alone with him.

"You made a mockery of me today, in front of the rest of the platoon." His voice is surprisingly calm for what he's saying.

"I am the commander now. I require respect. How can I gain respect when a small fry like you makes me look stupid?"

In the blink of an eye, he's in front of me. His large posture looming over me.

"W-what are you doing?" I ask, surprised he's gotten so close.

"Time to teach you a lesson." There's an unsettling smile on his face that gives me a bad case of goosebumps.

I've been worried about the captain all this time, when I should have been worried about the rest of them. This is the end of me, isn't it? This is how it's going to happen.

I brace myself, ready to defend – but the punch to my stomach was too fast for me to block.

I gasp out loud in pain as I double over, gaping for air. My vision starts getting blurry as the pain immobilizes me.

Then a smack against my face causes me to cry out in pain and I'm down onto the floor, my ears ringing from the impact.

I'm completely disoriented, but I try to crawl away from Jilyuk. The pain is so immense, it's hard to move even an inch.

He grabs my ankle, dragging me backwards.

"No!" I shriek. "Let go!"

1. Fight back.
2. "Someone, help me!"

I shoot a thread out towards him, hooking him around his ankle and tugging on it, hoping he'll fall.

Jilyuk however, has both of his feet firmly planted on the ground. There's no way I can catch him off balance.

He stands above me, lowering his face towards mine.

"What's this – you dare to fight back?"

"Someone, help me!" I scream loud and clear, hoping someone can hear me from the hallway.

Jilyuk hovers above my body, leaning down towards my face. I can feel his stinky breath hitting the back of my neck.

"What's this – screaming for help?"

Suddenly he grabs my long hair, lifting me up from the floor. I yell out from the pain and try to scratch him with my fingers, but he pays no mind to my feeble attempts.

Then my feet are lifted from the ground – I'm hoisted into the air, only hanging by my hair. It feels like my scalp is going to tear off.

"Earthlings are *weak*," he spits out. "You have to listen to *me* – the commander."

"No..." I say through gritted teeth, creating a thread from my fingers.

I catch the other end of the thread and hook it around my own hair.

"I will not!" I scream and slice through my thick locks.

I fall back down onto the floor as my own hair cascades around me like falling feathers.

Not expecting me to do this, Jilyuk stands there, temporarily stunned.

I roll over onto my back and look him in the eye. Then I deliver a switch kick in his own stomach as well.

It doesn't pack much of a punch, but it's enough for him to stumble backwards. I use this opportunity to pick myself up and run towards the door.

I step down onto the panel to open it.

But it doesn't.

Horror washes over me.

"Sorry Earthling... Doors don't open unless you have a key." He's right behind me.

This is it. I tried the best I could.

I'm so sorry, Ralph. Caine.

Jilyuk grabs the back of my head and slams me into the door.

But miraculously – the door slides open before my face is pulverized.

Instead, I'm pushed into someone's chestplate.

"..."

Jæmis looks down at me.

"There he is, Captain!" yells Eeyok behind him.

"Captain Jæmis!" Jilyuk says with a startled screech. He immediately lets me go.

"Told you Eeyok saw him sneakin' in here."

I've never been so happy to faceplant into the chest of my captor.

Jæmis gives me a gentle push, forcing me to back off and let him through into the cell. He surveys the situation. The hair flying around in the room, the bruises on my knees from falling down – he takes it all in.

Finally, he looks at Jilyuk.

"Didn't I tell you to not harm our prisoner?" His icy voice makes even me tremble on the spot.

"But Captain I—"

There's a loud crack.

It happens so quickly; my brain can't even comprehend the maneuver Jæmis pulled out just now.

But all of a sudden, Jilyuk falls down onto the floor like a lifeless ragdoll.

My eyes are as wide as saucers. I bite back my shriek and cover my own mouth. He... he instantly snapped his neck!

"Eeyok, take care of this. Filth must be disposed of." Jæmis wipes his hands for dramatic effect.

"Yes, Captain!"

Eeyok hurries to get Jilyuk's dead body and hoists the much larger alien across his shoulders. He disappears through the door.

When we're alone, Jæmis clicks his tongue in an annoyed tone.

"Princess, prepare yourself. We'll be arriving soon."

He turns his back on me, standing in the oval doorway.

"...Your fate will be out of my hands; I won't be able to save you from your obstinate actions." His warning leaves me with a chill I can't shake off.

"Are you blaming me for being attacked by one of your subordinates?" I finally find my voice.

1. "Because to me it looks like you can't control your platoon."

2. "How is that my fault?"

"Because to me it looks like you can't control your platoon."

Silence.

As if he were a bolt of lightning, Jæmis appears in front of me and the palm of his hand is wrapped around my throat. His beady little eyes stare down into my own.

"Watch your tongue, or you'll end up like your attacker."

He squeezes my throat, making it harder for me to breathe.

"...If – if you wanted me dead, I'd already be dead," I fire back at him.

"You are flirting with *death*," he spits into my face. "An attempt on my life, your foul mouth, and your insolent behavior; do you take me for a fool?"

He roughly flings me against the wall in a painful manner. I grunt out loud upon impact and my body drops down onto the bed. My back stings like hell.

"You still have some use to me, that's the only reason you're still alive," he sneers at me.

"But that doesn't guarantee your safety."

"How is that my fault?" I question him.

Jilyuk was the one who entered my room and started assaulting me.

Jæmis scoffs loudly as he turns around to face me once more.

"It's in your eyes. Your defiance is like a burning rage reflected back to anyone who gazes upon you."

He crosses his arms over his chest, giving me this distant look.

"You would do well to behave and submit."

"You're saying I should just let myself get beaten?"

"It seems like your hearing *does* work, how peculiar. And here I was thinking all Earthlings were deaf."

I glare at him. "I'll never submit."

"Your tune will change soon enough once we arrive."

Eeyok comes running back into the room.

"Captain, Eeyok released the body into space!"

Jæmis composes himself. "Very well. Clean up this mess here as well. You know the Lord likes to have his ships return in pristine conditions."

"Yes, Captain!" Eeyok says obediently.

"Let's see how you fare meeting *him*," mutters Jæmis ominously.

He finally exits my cell.

-- James' quarters

It feels like a couple of days have passed since then. The crewmembers have mostly left me alone. No one seems to be questioning what happened to Jilyuk.

Eeyok is the only one who I still interact with.

Today, he brought me to the captain's quarters. My presence was requested.

"Captain, Eeyok brought the Princess."

Jæmis as usual, is behind his desk. He dismisses Eeyok, but doesn't even make eye contact with me.

Nervously, I rub the back of my neck, finally getting used to the fact that I now have a bob. Not that slicing through my own hair was considered a good haircut.

"We'll be descending soon and touch ground with Yool," he explains as he taps his fingers on a few buttons on the desk.

"I do not have any data available on Earthlings, so you'll be going in blind. The temperature is scorching hot there. You may experience side effects from the atmosphere."

He stands up from his seat and walks to the wall lined with vaults. He opens up one of them and takes something out of it.

"Chew on this root, don't swallow it. It may alleviate or reduce some of the symptoms."

Jæmis walks around the desk, his hand clutching a small glass bottle. He presents it to me; inside of it is a tiny piece of root. The red colour of its roots reminds me of saffron.

Hesitantly I take it from his hand.

"Or, you may combust on the spot. That's also a possibility." There's a smirk on his face, as if he'd be happy to see it happen to me.

Great. I'm going to a planet whose atmosphere may very well cause me to burst into flames.

"How do I know it's not just poison?" I ask, staring at him suspiciously.

"It's either you chew on this, or you meet your end sooner rather than later. Your choice."

I hug the small bottle protectively against my chest.

"It's not my choice," I grumble back. "Nothing has been."

The floor suddenly shakes and vibrates. The ship makes puffing noises as if it's releasing compressed air. I look around in confusion, but Jæmis remains as composed as ever.

"Welcome to Yool, Princess."

Chapter [006] -- Desert

Hot.

Hotter than hot.

Back on Earth it was snowing, but here, I have entered literal hell.

The moment we exit the spaceship, I'm hit by a gust of wind so hot, that the hairs inside of my nostrils slowly shrivel up. It's like stepping inside of an oven.

It hits me like a punch in the gut and I double over onto my knees. The metal platform I'm standing on feels like it's going to melt right through my shoes. Nothing is safe to touch.

I try to breathe, but only sweltering air enters. Can I even breathe on this planet!?

Their sun sizzles above me in the sky. I can feel my skin burning to a crisp as an immediate reaction. My body is already perspiring, sweat trickling down my brows into my eyes. It stings.

I really do think I can spontaneously combust into flames. There's no way I can last even a minute in these conditions.

Eeyok appears behind me, tapping my shoulder.

"Princess – take the root. Chew, chew!"

I don't even think twice about the small bottle in my hand. I remove the lid and shake out the small red coloured root onto my palm. I immediately throw it into my mouth.

Ugh – bitter!

My face contorts into a grimace as I chew on this extremely bitter tasting root. It tastes like a hundred-year-old leather shoe dipped into coffee. My first instinct is to spit it out, but then I realize the effect it's having on me; my skin feels light. Airy.

Suddenly the scorching warmth all around me feels like a pleasant summer day. I can breathe normally again. My mind is perfectly clear; the heat doesn't bother me anymore.

I'm hoisted up on my feet before I get the chance to do it myself.

"Look alive, Princess. The heat is the least of your problems," says Jæmis in a foreboding tone.

He too seems to be chewing on the root, minus the weird face like I'm making right now.

"Move out," Jæmis commands his platoon.

We've landed on top of a large cliff with sand dunes as far as the eye can see in the distance. Move out to where exactly? Where are we going? The only thing around us seems to be a large platform where the spaceship has landed on.

Wait no, the large dust storms seemed to have hidden the large city in the far distance. The very *far* distance.

I don't even dare look over the edge of the cliff.

"We're walking?" I ask, my eyes darting over towards Jæmis.

The stoic man turns his head to face me. There's a slight smirk on his lips.

"I certainly am not," he says before he launches off into the sky.

He zooms away towards the city in the blink of an eye.

Wait.

He gets to yeet off into the distance, but I'm the one that has to climb down a cliff!?

1. "You could have parked closer!"
2. "Eeyok, do we have to walk to that city over there?"

I kick the platform in frustration, shaking my fist at the sky.

"You could have parked closer!" I yell out loud, angrily chewing on my root.

"Princess." Eeyok tries to get my attention.

"Huh, what?"

"We take these." He gestures behind us, where several soldiers have taken out what seems to be some kind of vehicle on three wheels.

Oh, thank god, we're not traversing the desert.

"Eeyok, do we have to walk to that city over there?" I ask, already resigning myself to the fact that I'll have to drag my feet across this massive desert.

Eeyok looks impressed. "You can see that far!?"

"Ah, yes, I have really good eyesight," I say sheepishly. It's not *that* far...

Eeyok laughs. "No worries. We will use these!" He points behind us in an excited manner.

I look to see a bunch of soldiers taking out several large mechanical vehicles with three wheels. I sigh in relief; at least I'm not walking.

"How do we get down though?" I ask, still unsure how we're going to get off this cliff.

Eeyok mounts one of the large vehicles by hoisting himself up. I blink up at him.

Uhh, that's a little out of reach for me to climb.

Before I can voice my concerns however, another soldier throws me up in the air without any warning.

I shriek in surprise and Eeyok catches me, placing me behind him on the large saddle.

"We hover. Now, close your eyes, Princess. Sand everywhere," he warns me.

I don't even have time to say anything before Eeyok starts the mechanical craft, and the wheels kick up a ton of dust in the air. It starts hovering above the ground.

I cough in response and immediately squeeze my eyes shut.

Finally, we're off.

-- Palace entrance

My hair is dusted with sand. My entire body has sand in every nook and cranny. It's so uncomfortable.

I already couldn't take a shower the entire time I was on that spaceship and felt like a dirty pig, but now I just feel like I've got a ten-pound layer of dirt permanently stuck to my skin. I feel so dirty.

The atmosphere has changed since we arrived at this massive palace entrance.

I can feel it in my stomach, this tense knot that won't go away.

I'm being pushed around by soldiers, forcing me to walk straight towards the entrance. Jæmis is standing there, arms crossed behind his back, facing the gate.

Has he been standing here all this time?

The platoon lines up in formation. I'm forced to keep my hands behind my back as well.

On the sides is a small tower with a large drum. No – it looks more like a gong. The soldier standing next to it slams a large hammer onto the metal piece.

The sound travels across the entire field. The bass is so low, I can feel the bones in my body vibrate with it. This is making me even more nervous.

"Lord Varitus, the 6th Division has returned to Kuluk!" the soldier that rang the gong yells out loud in a boisterous voice.

The gates open in a dramatic fashion as I fidget on the spot in anticipation.

God, that palace looks so huge. It's really intimidating.

With my keen eyesight, I spot a couple of new soldiers walking out of the gate. They all look the same as Eeyok – I guess this is their native planet.

And then I don't even have to guess who the next creature I see is supposed to be. This majestic creature with skin so light, it makes the sun reflect back at me as if it were snow. He stands out completely from the rest.

That has to be him – Varitus.

I lock eyes with his snake-like pupils. I freeze on the spot when I realize he knows I'm looking at him even from this distance.

He looks nothing like I imagined; not similar to Jæmis at all.

I cast my eyes downwards as the intensity of his stare is too much for me to bear. The distance between us is huge, but he definitely made eye contact with me...

Slowly, they make their way down the stairs. It feels like eons before they've finally arrived at the plateau.

All soldiers bow their head at this giant ethereal being, including Jæmis.

Someone smacks the back of my head.

"Bow!" hisses someone from behind.

Quickly, I bow my head as well.

Varitus raises his arm only slightly, which is enough to make all the soldiers stand up straight again.

They were so rowdy back on the spaceship, but here they look like highly trained machines. Falling perfectly in line.

Jæmis takes a step forward.

"Lord Varitus," he begins. "We have returned from our mission to planet HX-108, or 'Earth' as they called it. I present to you—"

Smack!

I flinch in surprise at the sudden strike. Varitus' long arm is outstretched and Jæmis' face is turned away.

"I see even less soldiers than you reported perished. Why is that?" His voice is like an ice cold shiver; it makes you tremble, but you can't shake it off.

"Lord Varitus, there was—"

Another smack across his face causes him to stop speaking.

"Do you take me... for a fool?" Varitus drawls out.

"You not only failed your mission to conquer HX-108, but you couldn't even mark how many soldiers you lost."

Varitus takes a step towards Jæmis, who meekly turns his head down.

"*You* were the failure here." Varitus waves his hand around in a rhythmic manner, causing particles to appear.

A sudden vine appears in Varitus' hand, having grown from his wrist it seems. The vine continues to grow until he wields it like a whip.

"*On your knees,*" he hisses.

Jæmis obeys him, falling down to one knee on the ground.

"Face your platoon," Varitus commands.

Jæmis turns towards us, his gaze unfocused. His hand is clenched on top of his knee.

I hold my breath as I see this all unfold in front of me. This is going to be a public flogging.

The first strike happens without warning. The sound of the makeshift whip cracks in the air, echoing off the empty grounds.

In quick and consecutive strikes, Varitus whips Jæmis back until his armour is torn apart. Jæmis grunts in pain, but tries to withstand the onslaught of slashes on his back, gritting his teeth and bearing with it as much as he can.

I can hear his flesh rip with each impact, and I turn away from the bloody horror. I can't stand to watch it; it's nauseating.

Varitus controls the vine like a deadly tool – he must have flogged Jæmis a hundred times by now, even though only seconds have passed. There's no break in between. The sound of the whip cracking is all but ear deafening.

I jerk back in surprise when a splatter of blood lands onto my cheek. I quickly brush it off.

The flogging finally stops and I dare to look again.

"...!" I gasp in horror, almost choking on the bitter root. I clasp my hands in front of my mouth.

Jæmis is still in the same position, but his armour is in tatters and his entire back has been beaten bloody. It's so inundated with red that I'm unable to recognize his regular skin tone.

"Captain Jæmis failed his mission, and this was his price to pay. The next time, it won't just be him who has to bear his punishment," Varitus draws out.

He then tosses the whip onto the ground without a care, turns on his heel and strides away with his henchmen, moving back up the stairs.

As soon as his back is turned, Jæmis collapses onto the ground, not stirring an inch. He's...fainted.

Immediately Eeyok and another soldier from the lineup rushes towards him. They hoist him up from the ground. Even the tiles are stained red with blood.

Still completely unconscious, they drag Jæmis' limp body away to the side.

I'm still frozen on the spot. I've seen Jæmis kill someone on the spot, but seeing him get beaten bloody had a much bigger impact on me.

If even the captain gets flogged – what chance do I have?

"Come on Earthling Princess, move it." A large soldier grabs my arm and yanks me away.

"Where are you taking me?" I ask, scared I'll get tortured, too.

"Just come!" He refuses to answer me.

-- Palace Hallway

Entering the palace feels like one giant labyrinth. I'm trying to remember the layout in case I want to escape, but all the hallways are so similar, and they seem to stretch on forever.

I've walked so many stairs as well. We're pretty high up.

If it weren't for the fact that I've been kidnapped to some alien planet, I would have otherwise admired the architecture of this place.

Eventually the soldier stops at what seems to be a door. He slides it open.

"In here," he says in this gruff voice.

He pats me hard on my back and I stumble inside.

"Wait – for how long? What's going to happen to me?" I ask, turning around.

"Don't ask me, only Captain Jæmis knows."

With that, he slides the door closed.

-- Palace bedroom

Immediately, I try to open the door, but it's locked from the outside. I don't see a keyhole, so I have no idea how to open it. It must be a hinge or something I can't see.

I turn around to inspect my surroundings.

It's a rather large room with a bed in the middle. There's a large window behind it, letting in some daylight.

At least it's not a dungeon of any kind. In fact, I feel like I'm staying at a super fancy hotel. Everything seems rich and super detailed.

"This must be the palace..." I mutter out loud. After all, they addressed him as 'Lord' Varitus, so it makes sense that everything is so huge and decorative.

Images of Jæmis' beating flashes through my mind, and I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts.

1. Try to think about escaping.
2. Wonder how Jæmis is doing.

I shouldn't think about how my abductor is doing. In fact, he deserves it for kidnapping me in the first place.

Instead, I should focus on getting out of here. I may not have been able to escape from a spaceship, but here, I'm on land.

Well, still stuck in a giant desert, but it's worth a shot to explore my options.

I walk over towards the window. The frame prevents me from even thinking about using it as an escape route. A gust of wind blows through it. I'm *really* high up...

There doesn't seem to be a way out. I seem to be stuck here. I can't lockpick the door either.

I quietly walk over towards the bed and sit down, gathering my thoughts.

I didn't expect Jæmis to get flogged in front of everyone. I've been scared of him this entire time – he's kidnapped me after all.

But at that moment, he was powerless, just like me.

I wonder how he's holding up? Those wounds definitely looked brutal alright. Way harsher than the state I first found him in. Maybe he'll even die...

Oh, what am I doing, sympathizing with the enemy. He's the one that kidnapped me in the first place!

A small voice in the back of my head reminds me that he also made sure no one hurt me on the spaceship...

Suddenly something else begs for my attention; my full bladder.

Traversing the desert on those hover bikes still took some time, and I haven't peed in forever it feels like. Great.

Looking around, there are no other doors in this room other than the one I came through. There's no fancy toilet like in the spaceship.

I walk back towards the sliding door and bang my fist on it.

"Hello? Hello! I need to use the bathroom! Uhh, I mean, the waste facilities!" I shout out loud.

I press my ear against the door, but I hear nothing. There doesn't seem to be anyone in the vicinity.

Ahh, the more I think about my full bladder, the harder it is to keep it in!

I look around. Maybe they have uhh, one of those chamber pots. If I'm lucky...

I check under the bed. Nothing. Well, I'm not on Earth after all.

Oh, there's a small round pot on the side cabinet. When I check it, there's nothing inside.

Okay, this will have to do. Anything is better than just letting it out on the floor.

After doing my business, I lie down on the bed, which is rather fluffy. I wonder for how long I need to chew on this bitter root, and if I could get something to drink.

I wonder how Ralph and Caine are doing...

"Princess!" The door unlocks and opens up.

I sit up straight and see Eeyok appear in the doorway. Relief washes over me to see a familiar face. Which is weird, because he's still the enemy.

Am I getting a case of Stockholm syndrome?

"Princess, must come to infirmary."

I stand up straight. "Alright."

Eeyok suddenly points his nose in the air and sniffs. One more sniff and Eeyok looks directly at the chamber pot I used.

"Princess..." he starts. "That's water vase. It is not for waste."

My embarrassment is hard to hide.

"Well!" I argue back weakly. "No one was answering me and I really needed to relieve myself..."

Eeyok simply chuckles and beckons me to come follow him.

-- Infirmary

After strolling through the maze-like hallways once more, we arrive at a large room. It's different from the rest of the palace.

It seems there's more technology here.

Oh! Jæmis is in here! He's lying on top of a table, another man hunched over him.

"Healer Billius, I brought the Earthling Princess," Eeyok greets him.

The redheaded man turns to me. His striking white pupils are the first thing I notice. If it weren't for that, I'd say he could be a distant family member of Caine.

"Thank you for bringing her. You can go now."

Eeyok salutes him and leaves the premises.

My eyes glide over to the unmoving body of Jæmis on the table. It seems the man was in the middle of stitching up his wounds. Healer he said, hmm...

"Let me introduce myself. I'm Billius, head healer of the infirmary." The man gives me a short bow.

With an expressionless face, he taps his finger onto his cheek. I simply stare at him in confusion.

"The root, Princess."

I slowly stop chewing on the bitter medicine. Don't tell me it *is* poison.

"Safrin root only needs to be chewed for a small amount of time to work."

Oh...

He stretches his arm, offering me a small glass.

"Spit."

Awkwardly, I finally spit out the bitter root into the glass, which he promptly empties and cleans at a small sink. Filling the glass with water, he wordlessly offers it to me again.

He doesn't say much, does he...

I take the cup from his hands and silently take a sip. Which turns into a glug, until the entire glass is empty within seconds. I was really thirsty.

"Are you feeling better now?" he asks, still without giving much of an expression.

"Ah, yes. I was thirsty. Thank you."

This Billius, while a little stoic, seems much nicer than the rest. He does look completely different than anyone else, though. I wonder how many species live on this planet.

"I read the report from Prince Jæmis in advance," he starts, turning away from me and sitting down on a stool next to Jæmis' body.

"It seems you have some expertise in the medical field?"

Why do I suddenly feel like such a fraud?

"I don't really..." I admit sheepishly. "I can stitch up a wound."

Billius stays quiet for a bit after that, focusing on closing up the wounds on Jæmis' bare back.

"Perhaps you can demonstrate your skills right now, if you don't mind."

It's hard to say no to someone so polite. It doesn't seem like he's going to hurt me or anything, so I feel a little safer around him.

"On him?" I ask, pointing my finger at Jæmis.

Billius looks up at me, raising his eyebrows a little before lowering them.

"Yes..." he draws out. "Unless you want to wait for another body to be delivered?"

That doesn't sound ominous at all.

"No, that's okay. I can do it."

"Then please, take a seat." He gestures towards a stool in the back.

As I take it and sit opposite of him, Billius offers me a thread and some kind of hook.

"No need," I say, refusing the materials.

With curious eyes, he sits back and watches me, waiting for me to start.

"It must be said out loud, but do not harm the prince," he warns me. "As a healer, we have a code of conduct to treat anyone regardless of affiliation."

He looks at me. "Even if he did indeed capture you from your home planet, please put aside those thoughts when treating a patient."

1. "Even if he tried to murder you and your family?"
2. "I won't harm him."

"Even if he tried to murder you and your family?" I ask, my eyes flickering over to the unmoving body of my captor.

So defenseless. So easily killed.

"Yes," he says with no hesitation. "It is especially important to remain neutral, despite the patient's previous actions."

Those are some hardcore morals over there, I can't help but respect his beliefs.

"Alright. I promise, I will not harm the prince," I concede.

I take in a deep breath and close my eyes.

I may have wished harm upon him when he took me, but seeing him on the table here, flogged to an unconscious state...I would never stoop so low as to hurt someone who's already down.

I took no glee in seeing him get punished.

"I won't harm him," I reassure him.

Billius remains silent for a few seconds, simply watching me. Then he averts his gaze back to Jæmis.

"Very well then, you may begin."

I look at my hands; they're dirty and sand is stuck everywhere. That's not even mentioning how much I smell in general. Not taking a shower for a month *and* flying through a desert has me looking like a swamp monster.

"Can I clean my hands first? I just arrived here without a chance to..." I say sheepishly.

Billius points back at the small sink.

"Please, go ahead."

I walk over to the stone sink, surprised by how similar it looks to the ones we have back on Earth. It even has a bar of soap.

Quickly, I wash my hands, feeling refreshed after having been stuck with sand underneath my nails forever now.

When I'm finished, I return to my seat. First, I inspect the wounds.

There are so many open wounds, some of them can't even be stitched closed and would need to scar over. It's like he's been mauled by an animal with very large claws. I've never seen an injury this intense before.

I look for a wound I can treat.

There, at the small of his back. I focus my energy to my fingertips, pulling out a thread in between my fingers.

Billius' expression changes slightly as he watches how my thread pierces the tanned skin. It goes through without any resistance, and I start looping it around, as if I'm stitching a piece of fabric like I've done a thousand times before.

Within a few seconds, the wound is now closed and neatly stitched. I cut the thread off and tie it at the end.

"Peculiar, you seem to be materializing a very fine thread. It's so thin, I hardly noticed it until the light caught it." Billius has suddenly gotten close to me and he reaches for my hands.

Oh – he feels ice cold!

"Are you able to form them anywhere on your body, or just your fingertips?" His long icy fingers glide across my hand, inspecting it carefully.

"Uhh," I stammer, feeling awkward.

Billius' eyes shoot up and he immediately pulls back.

"Ah – I'm sorry! That was inappropriate of me. I shouldn't touch you without permission, forgive me." Suddenly the once stoic man has become a lot more expressive.

I clear my throat. "No, it's okay, you didn't hurt me or anything."

"I was slightly fascinated by your skills. They are definitely well suited for suturing wounds," he praises me. "I have not yet met anyone with such a gift as you have."

He makes me sound like I'm some type of godly being with an overpowered skill. Back on Earth, I'm just a regular tailor...

"And no, it's just from my fingers," I say, answering his previous question.

"It is no wonder Prince Jæmis brought you back. Your gift is extraordinary."

Great. He's saying I really *did* bring it upon myself by patching up a 'superhero' who turned out to be some alien from space and kidnapped me *because* of my 'extraordinary' stitching!

I just want to slam my head into a wall right about now.

I glare at his back; if I had just listened to Ralph and hadn't decided to go and help out, I might still be at home right now.

Caine would have returned and gloated about shooting space aliens from the sky. Ralph would have made some stupid pun about aliens. Kim would have cleaned up the boutique.

Instead, I'm here.

"Let's continue," Billius says. It's not a question.

I sigh. "Yes."

He is right. Regardless of what Jæmis did to me, at the moment, he's just someone who needs medical care.

For the rest of the time, we suture in silence until most of the wounds are closed. Billius dresses the other wounds with bandages or gauze.

It was oddly relaxing, I only had to focus on the stitching. It almost felt like I was working on another dress or something, even if that sounds really strange. This is *skin*, not fabric.

Once he's mostly cleaned and stitched up, I can finally tell his back is covered in old scars. Old lashings most likely. This was not the first time it happened.

Suddenly someone comes bursting into the room, carrying another soldier on his arm.

"Healer, we need help! His shoulder got dislocated during training!"

Billius gets up from his seat, quickly walking over to the two of them.

"You stay here," he says to me. Then he addresses the other two. "Come," he commands, and guides them to the back part of the room, away from me.

I chew on my bottom lip as I look around. I guess I'm not needed right now. Not that I know what to do with a dislocated shoulder.

A loud pop startles me, followed by a terrifying scream that echoes through the infirmary. He sounds like he's in agony. It's agonizing to listen to.

I'm startled once more when I hear a deep cough emerge from Jæmis' unconscious body. No wait – he's not unconscious anymore.

His eyes crack open, wild and frantic, looking around to see where he is. In an instant, he is up on his feet, knocking over the stool Billius sat on before.

His brown eyes lock with mine, though his are a little unfocused still. A strong sense of déjà vu washes over me.

Please don't strangle me like last time.

"Billius," he bellows and winces at the same time.

"Coming, Prince Jæmis," he hollers back.

Jæmis reaches for his own back with his hand, touches the gauze and immediately leaves it alone.

"How are you feeling?" asks Billius once he's sent the other two soldiers away.

Jæmis does not seem to be in a good mood and glares at the redhead.

"Why is the Earthling Princess here?"

1. "I helped stitch you up. A thank you would suffice."

2. "He asked me to help."

"I helped stitch you up. A thank you would suffice," I comment with a slight mocking tone.

Jæmis clicks his tongue at me. "Did I ask you for your assistance?" he fires back at me.

"It's only polite to thank the person who helped you out," I reply, narrowing my eyes at him.

Then he refuses to look at me any longer, pretending as if I'm not even there.

"He asked me to help," I answer for him.

Jæmis just grunts at me.

"Be quiet. I told you not to speak unless spoken to."

I roll my eyes at him in response.

"Prince Jæmis, don't be too harsh on her. I did indeed ask her to help me with your wounds," says Billius in a calm tone.

"How long have I been unconscious for?" he asks groggily.

"A little longer than last time," Billius replies.

My eyebrows raise; just how common is it for this to happen to him? I noticed the old scars on his back, but I didn't think it was something that happened frequently.

Not that it's any of my business.

"Now, answer me. How are you feeling?" Billius repeats.

"Like a newborn infant," Jæmis replies sarcastically.

Billius sighs in response. I get the feeling these two don't get along so well. Or maybe they do? I can't tell.

"I'm taking the Princess to her chambers. She should not be here yet."

"Yet?" I echo his sentiments.

"Could you be quiet already? Your voice is too overwhelming right now," he complains, closing his eyes.

"Might I suggest that you spend the night in the infirmary and—"

"—*We're leaving*," he announces loudly and grabs my upper arm, yanking me away.

"Hey!" I screech. "Don't be so rough!"

Jæmis takes no heed to my complaints and drags me towards the door.

"Prince Jæmis, if you don't rest you'll...!"

"I'll get to decide when I'll rest or not!" he growls back.

He shoves me out of the infirmary.

Chapter [007]

-- Palace Hallways

Once more I find myself in this maze of hallways. Jæmis' hand is still clutched tight around my arm, not even giving me a chance to walk on my own.

"You don't have to drag me, you know," I point out. "Are you afraid I'll run off?"

Jæmis stares down at me, then his eyes travel over towards his hand and he promptly releases me.

Now that he's not lying on his back, I can tell just how damn muscular he is underneath that armour of his. It's like he takes steroids for breakfast.

Shouldn't he be covered up anyway? I can imagine getting sand in some of those open wounds would hurt like hell.

"Don't you want to wear something to cover yourself...?" I ask, looking at his naked upper half. It's hard to ignore him like this.

"No talking," he says, a little out of breath.

He's obviously not taking the beating so well. I wonder if they have any painkillers here?

I quietly follow him through the richly decorated palace. We pass one servant on the way there – at least, I believe it's a servant as they weren't wearing the armour I've been seeing before.

Mostly, everything else is deserted. Do people even live in this place?

I've got so many questions in my head that I want to ask, but the only living soul around isn't exactly the best conversational partner. Plus, he's in pretty bad shape.

-- Palace loggia

We arrive at a large and open gallery. It seems he's taking a different route this time.

Jæmis stops walking and slowly leans against the wall, taking a small breather. He closes his eyes for a second.

Now that we've stopped, I have a chance to look around. There are no windows in here; wind flows freely through the large pillars.

Wow – what an amazing view of the city!

A gust of wind messes up my hair. It's very windy up here, and there's no railing to prevent you from falling off the edge. Kind of dangerous, actually.

I finally turn back to Jæmis, who is still resting with his eyes closed. I'm concerned he's going to drop dead at any moment, even his face is super pale.

I don't exactly want to be found with the corpse of their dead captain.

"Do you need to go back to the infirmary?" I slowly look over at him.

His eyes pop open and he growls, pushing himself away from the wall.

"I have no need for your concern, Princess. Now, follow me," he says through gritted teeth.

Such a stubborn tough guy persona. Why do I care anyway? He's right, I shouldn't concern myself with him.

Admittedly, it was hard to watch him get flogged and beaten like that. It's not like I'm sympathizing with him – but even I have morals.

-- Palace hallway

We trudge along for a while in silence. Jæmis' breathing is becoming more labored and uneven. I'm starting to wonder how he can stay upright like that. Must be sheer willpower.

He stops and tries to open a door, but it's locked. Not even acknowledging he had the wrong door, Jæmis continues to walk as I try to catch up with him.

...He's not lost, is he? No...

"Where are you taking me?" I decide to ask, looking up at him.

"You really can't shut your mouth hole even for a second, can you?" he grunts at me.

I huff out loud. He's so irritable right now, losing his sense of composure.

"I just want to know. It's taking forever." It's not exactly comfortable to be walking around all dirty and stinking up the place.

Not responding anymore, Jæmis picks up the pace. I can tell he's swaying on his feet though.

I just can't stop myself from speaking up – I really don't want to explain a dead captain and get flogged myself.

"Are you *sure* you don't need help?"

"SILENCE!" he shouts at me. Suddenly his eyes flare up, sparkling a brilliant blue. Markings carve into his skin, illuminating with the same hue.

Faced with unknown territory, I back away from him in fear. Why is he glowing!?

There's a sort of primal marking right underneath both his eyes, as well as the stripes on his arms and chest. It's like he's turned into a real beast.

Jæmis staggers and shakes his head, squeezing his eyes shut with a grunt. He's leaning against the wall for support and taking deep breaths.

When he opens his eyes again, I notice they've faded back into his regular colour. The markings slowly disappear from his skin as well, like it was my imagination all along.

"Just...Come," he commands briskly and starts to walk again.

Okay, let's pretend that didn't just happen. Nope, he didn't glow at all.

When he tries to open another door for the second time and find out it's locked, Jæmis curses under his breath.

Second time in a row? Maybe the pain is making it hard to focus.

"Uhm, if you're looking for the room I was in before, it's right over there." I point at a door a few rooms away.

Jæmis shoots me the dirtiest glare he's given me so far, as if I've wounded his pride.

"I don't recall saying you could speak," he hisses under his breath.

1. "Get used to it."
2. "I'm only trying to help."

"Get used to it," I sneer in response, not exactly in the mood either.

So far all of his threats have been empty, hence why I feel brave enough to speak up against him. Especially in his weakened state right now.

"Get in there already, you troublesome pest." Jæmis slides the correct door open and pushes me inside.

"I'm only trying to help," I mutter quietly.

"You are the most troublesome..." he cuts his muttering off short. "Stop helping. Just get inside!"

Jæmis slides open the correct door this time and ushers me inside.

-- Palace bedroom

"You'll remain here for now," he explains slowly. His eyes seem to glaze over a little bit, like he's not really paying attention.

I'm almost wondering if they'll change to blue again at any moment's notice.

"And tomorrow you'll..." he drags out, suddenly stopping.

Jæmis sniffs the air, until his eyes land on the pot I used to urinate. There's a universal expression of disgust on his face as he crinkles his nose.

1. "Yes, oh my god, I peed in it! No need to point out that I shouldn't have!"
2. "I apologize for using the water vase for my urine."

"Yes, oh my god, I peed in it! No need to point out that I shouldn't have!" I throw my hands up in the air.

"..." Jæmis stares at me, not saying a word.

"We use that to hold drinking water, Princess. You can..." He starts slurring his words.

"You can..." he repeats, trying to remain upright.

Already knowing what he's thinking, I'm quick to swallow my pride.

"I apologize for using the water vase for my urine," I say meekly.

"There is no need to use the vase. We have a perfectly fine..." He quits talking.

"We h-have a..." His words start to slur.

Oh no, he's going to...! My quick thinking has me shooting thread out of all my fingertips, aiming at the wall.

Not a second later, Jæmis' eyes roll in the back of his head and he collapses, falling right into my makeshift net. His entire body bounces up and down until he finally remains motionless.

Jæmis is unconscious once again.

I groan out loud. What the hell do I do now?

-- Palace Hallway

I decide to look for help.

"Hello? Anyone? I need help!" I shout through the hallways. My voice booms and ricochets from the walls, but it feels eerily empty.

"Eeyok?" I call out for him, hoping against hope he's around.

One last call for help and I'm met with silence. Is there really no one around in these parts?

What am I supposed to do with an unconscious Jæmis? I remember dragging him around before to get him to Ralph's lab, but I can't exactly do that now with all those wounds on his back.

And there's no way I could lift the guy up.

Fine, I guess I'll just have to find my own way back to the infirmary.

-- Palace loggia

It feels like it takes me ages before I find the gallery again, having taken a wrong turn here and there. Still no sign of anyone.

Just where is everyone here?

I stand closer to the edge, looking down at the city below. It's so far down, so I rest my hand on the pillar for support, in case I accidentally lose my balance.

I focus on the people below; there's definitely life down there as I see the same sort of species as Eeyok walk around on a busy street market.

Maybe it's just that there's no one in the palace at the moment. Which is weird in itself.

I linger on the sight below me for a little while longer, briefly wondering if I'm able to climb down myself using my thread.

"Careful, life's too short to think about throwing it away to the likes of below."

An alluring and mature voice startles me. I whirl around with my heart in my throat and accidentally lose my footing on the edge.

"Ah!" I cry out, falling backwards.

A woman catches my wrist and pulls me back to safety.

"Oh my, you really do have a death wish," she chuckles at me.

My adrenaline's coursing through my body after experiencing a near certain death. I thought I was alone, but finally – I found someone!

She releases my wrist, flipping away her long hair from her shoulder.

"Once upon a time, I was in your shoes as well. Staring down below, wondering if it would be better if I jumped or not," she continues in a steady voice.

She looks towards the sky, heaving out a long sigh.

"How I wish I could jump out here and fly off into the sunset."

She shakes her head. "Unfortunately, life doesn't work out that way."

"...Who are you?" I finally manage to ask.

"The name's Læna. Welcome to the planet of Yool, I promise it's not all that bad here."

She chuckles once more.

"Well, as long as you ignore a few brutes around here. They can be a handful to deal with."

I stare at her quizzically, does she mean Varitus?

"Ah, don't worry, everyone tries to escape the first few times."

"Oh – I wasn't trying to escape!" I say quickly. This time I legitimately wasn't!

"I was trying to find someone for help!"

She stands next to me on the ledge, leaning against the pillar, looking down below.

"You're out on your own here, no help is coming. It's better if you just cooperate and behave, it makes things a lot easier."

I feel like she's not listening to me.

"No – I mean, Jæmis needs help. He collapsed in my room. I was trying to find the infirmary."

That definitely caught her attention.

"Jæmis you say?"

"Yes! He was terribly wounded from the flogging."

"Ah." She crosses her arms. "*Again*," she mutters.

She sighs loudly. "I certainly can't take my eye off of him for even a second. Alright, let's get him to the infirmary."

Suddenly Læna gets pulled to the side by another man wearing armour.

"Læna! What have I told you about staying away from the edge!? You could fall!"

The voice startles me so much that I jump back as a reflex. Except, I lose my footing and slip.

"AH!" I cry out as I tumble over the ledge.

Wind rushes past me as I free fall down towards the ground.

Desperately I shoot out my hand towards the stone wall to catch myself, but the force and momentum of my body just snaps the hand into two.

Crap – I'm really going to plummet to my death!

And then I'm suddenly swooped up in the arms of a large man.

Still bewildered from the adrenaline, I can only register that I'm not falling anymore. I cling onto the man for support as he hovers in mid-air.

At first I think it's Jæmis because of the armour – but then I remember he was topless. I look up and see a man with different features. He flies back up to the gallery where he gently puts me down.

I take in a deep breath as I clutch my pounding heart. My legs are shaking.

I think I peed a little.

"I apologize for startling you, that was not my intention," says the man.

"Thought I was going to die..." I hiccup.

"Come on now Kæleb, you can't just shout whenever you feel like and not expect anyone to react to it," Læna scolds him.

The soldier named Kæleb bows his head in front of me, looking apologetic. That's when I notice his strangely coloured eyes; they're two different shades. One of them is brown and the other a milky white blue.

Noticing I'm staring at him, he straightens his back. "What is it?"

Læna chuckles.

"She's looking at your eye."

He suddenly covers his blue eye with his hand.

"Ah – I'm sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you with my appearance."

"This is turning out to be a very bad first impression..." he mutters.

"Oh, you're not frightening," I say quickly. I feel a little embarrassed I stared at him in such a blatant manner.

"Please, uhm, let me thank you for catching me just now." Unsure of what to do, I also bow my head at him.

My heart is finally calming down after that near-death experience. I'm never walking so close to the edge again! I'm definitely no Spiderboy.

"Ah – she's got manners," Læna points out. "Tell me, what is your name?"

"My name is Joselina."

Her eyes suddenly widen with a bright smile.

"Right – the Earthling Princess!"

"Princess?" Kæleb echoes. He's still covering his eye.

"Oh, would you stop covering it up. She doesn't seem to be some meek little being that will faint at the sight of your blind eye."

Awkwardly, he reveals his eye to me. He seems to be very polite, even if he did give me a jumpscare before. It's a bit of a relief to meet people who aren't out to hurt me or lock me up.

"Wait – if she's the Earthling Princess then..." Suddenly his timid eyes glaze over, turning serious. "She should be in her chambers."

Never mind what I said about locking me up.

"Uhm..." I take a step away from him.

The woman huffs loudly and taps him on the arm.

"She actually left to go find someone for help. We should be grateful we ran into her."

"But there are rules," he stresses.

"I'm under those rules too – have you forgotten?"

"Not a day in my life."

She turns to me. "Ignore my brother – he likes following the rulebook."

"Sure..." I say, a bit uncertain. "But what about the captain?"

Læna looks at the other man again. "Actually, now that you're here, could you do me a favour?"

"What is it?" Kæleb asks.

"It seems Jæmis went through another beating and he collapsed in the guest room. Could you take him to the infirmary?"

"Understood. I shall take the Princess with me, too. She can't be out on her own, not while the rest of them are having a banquet with Lord Varitus."

"I'd disagree with you, but it does seem like the Princess is indeed in need of a good night's rest," Læna mulls over.

No one really seems to be taking Jæmis' collapse as something that requires immediate attention. In fact, quite the opposite; it seems it happens often.

Also, how can I rest with everything that's happened? I'd much rather take a bath at this point!

1. "How can I rest well when I've been taken hostage?"

2. "Perhaps it will."

"How can I rest well when I've been taken hostage?"

For a second, the woman looks forlorn.

"We all have to deal with it, my dear Princess. It's best if you start accepting your reality instead of trying to fight it."

Then she laughs. "But I do like your fighting spirit."

"A defiant attitude will only make things worse for her," Kæleb points out.

He sounds just like Jæmis, and I wonder if they're all related.

"Perhaps it will."

"That's right! A good night's rest and you'll be freshened up like a beautiful flower in the morning."

"But... how can I sleep in a place surrounded by enemies?" I speak up.

They both remain quiet for a couple of seconds.

"We all manage, somehow. You'll get used to it," she says.

"Don't cause any problems and follow the rules," Kæleb adds on.

"I mean, it could be worse. You could have been thrown into a dungeon and tortured just for the sheer pleasure of it," she says offhandedly.

I shiver in response. That could still very well be a reality. Or worse; to be used as some sort of sex slave.

"Does the Lord... keep any uhm, harems per chance? Concubines?" I ask hesitantly.

They both raise their eyebrows at me.

"Ahahah – Why? Are you interested in becoming part of his harem?" Læna laughs.

Kæleb shyly looks away and coughs into his hand.

"Lord Varitus does not dabble in such frivolous manners."

"I didn't mean to become part of it!" I say hastily. "I just...wanted to know if I had to be prepared."

"Do not fret, Princess. Lord Varitus may be many things, but a connoisseur of alien flesh and company is not one of them." Kæleb looks a bit uneasy as he says this.

"If you're worried about what might happen to you, trust me, it's nothing of the sort. Keep your head down and try not to cause any trouble, you'll coast along just fine. If you're lucky, you won't get to see much of Varitus."

"Also, my room is always open if you wish to chat!" she offers.

"No it's not, the Princess isn't allowed to roam the palace unsupervised," Kæleb immediately argues.

"Oh hush, if you're so worried about that, why don't you supervise her yourself?"

Kæleb bows towards me again, his hand on his chest.

"If the Princess is okay with having me, I will personally keep watch over her."

A little flustered, I bow my head in return. I guess he doesn't seem so bad? He is wearing armour however, which makes him a soldier... Anything better than Jæmis though.

"Yes, that is alright."

"Now, shall we return you to your chambers? You said Jæmis was there as well?"

I nod my head.

Seeing the blank stares on their faces, I awkwardly clear my throat. It's so hard to get used to not nodding.

"Y-yes. He collapsed."

"Alright, let's head out."

"Take care of my little brother for me!" Læna says cheerfully.

The both of us walk away.

-- Palace Hallway

Kæleb has been making polite small talk here and there, he doesn't seem so bad.

"Kæleb..." I start. "Is this a regular thing? Jæmis getting lashings, I mean. Does Lord Varitus beat up all of his subjects?"

He remains quiet for a bit as he stares straight ahead of him.

"Lord Varitus is not a merciful man. Jæmis will accept any punishment towards him, even someone else's."

"You mean he'll take someone else's punishment for them?"

"That is correct. He has taken many punishments because of my own failures," he says in a rather sad voice.

"I'm surprised..." I say honestly.

"Perhaps when you get to know my brother a bit more, you'll come to learn of his good side."

"Oh, so he *is* your brother," I mutter.

Kæleb briefly tilts his head to the side.

"Yes, Jæmis is my older brother. The three of us serve Lord Varitus."

"How can I learn of his good side when he's the one who attacked my planet and kidnapped me?" I argue, feeling a little peeved.

"That is how it goes on these scouting missions," he says in an unconcerned tone. "Jæmis is a very successful captain. I can only hope to follow him in his footsteps."

A chill runs down my spine. His kind persona and polite small talk had me fooled into thinking this could be a decent person. But no – he's just like Jæmis. Heartless. Cruel. A soldier and nothing more.

He opens the door for me, still acting like the perfect gentleman.

"Kæleb?" calls out a deep voice.

I'm confounded to find Jæmis in an upright position, looking extremely irritated. He manages to walk towards the door.

"What is the Princess doing outside of her chambers?" he demands to know.

For someone who collapsed not too long ago, he looks perfectly alright now.

"It seems she went to go look for..." Kæleb looks at me with his odd coloured eyes. "Help."

"*Help?*" Jæmis glares at me.

"Again, simply doing as you wish. I warned you that your behaviour will be the death of you."

"W-what!? You were the one that collapsed!" I snap at him. "How can it be a bad thing I decided to find someone to help you?"

Kæleb cuts in with a cough.

"Princess, perhaps it's better if I explain it like this. Us Ræhu have very durable bodies. We heal much quicker than any other species known to us."

I just look at Kæleb, slightly irritated and mostly bewildered. Is this why no one was really all that concerned about him in the first place? Because they knew he'd get right back up?

Well, now I feel like a fool for thinking he needed emergency care.

"I do not appreciate being wrapped in this... netting," Jæmis complains, as he brushes off a loose thread still attached to his arm.

This... is starting to really agitate me. The sheer audacity of mocking my willingness to help out – what an ungrateful little shit.

"Well, I shall report to Læna you appear to be in good health."

Jæmis crosses his arms across his naked chest.

"Læna knows?"

"Yes, it seems the Princess ran into her first, asking for help."

Jæmis glowers at me even more. I glare right back at him. Yeah – I told your sister what's up! Come at me!

Jæmis lets out a deep sigh.

He looks at Kæleb. "You, leave," then at me, "and you, get in there," he says as he forcefully pushes me inside of the room once more.

He walks in behind me, sliding the door closed.

-- Palace bedroom

My eyes follow his every move. My glare is almost permanently etched onto my face.

"Quit it with your gaze – you do not intimidate me," he says, a little annoyed.

1. Argue back with him.
2. Look away.

Good, if I can get under his skin, then all the better. I do not wish to give in to him at all. My patience is wearing extremely thin.

"Oh, should I just look at my captor all lovingly instead?" I say sarcastically.

He crosses his arms and huffs. However, I notice the slight frown of his eyebrows as he moves his arms. He winced. I guess he hasn't completely recovered after all.

"I'm so sorry for running to your sister for help," I continue being bratty.

"Don't speak of my sister," he growls back at me.

"You are so ungrateful. I can't believe I worried about you for even a second. Next time you lie in a pool of your own blood, I'm going to dance around your corpse."

"Look here!" he suddenly bellows, losing his composure.

"As you've noticed, Lord Varitus is not a forgiving ruler. He is ruthless—"

Fed up with his explanations, I cut him off.

"—*You* are ruthless! You attacked my people and kidnapped me! You took me away from my home to who-knows-where and now I'm stuck in some kind of alien palace!"

It feels like my frustrations have finally come to a boiling point. They're spilling over – I cannot control my mouth.

"I got attacked by one of your soldiers who could have killed me. And now I'm sentenced to this horrible life where I'm away from my family, all because YOU took me away!"

"You, are fucking ruthless," I hiss at him.

"...Are you done throwing your little temper tantrum?" he asks coolly.

"Fuck you."

"Copulation is out of the question."

I throw my hands up in the air.

"Just get out, leave me alone!"

"I shall return tomorrow when you've calmed down. Clearly Earthlings cannot be reasoned with in their emotional state."

"Just stay away forever!"

Jæmis opens the door and gives me one last look before disappearing.

I look away, trying not to piss him off even more. I'm irritated just by seeing his face in the first place, but I cannot blow up at him again.

"I'm not trying to intimidate you," I explain. How can I? He's the one with all the power here.

"I'm just very annoyed that I tried to find help because you fainted, but apparently that was a bad decision."

"I told you before – you do not need to concern yourself with me."

"You fainted right in front of me! I didn't know if you'd die or not. What would they do to me if they found their captain dead in my room?" I argue back.

Jæmis actually remains quiet for once. It seems I struck a chord.

"Again. Your concern is unnecessary. I have no need for an Earthling to fuss over me."

"And I certainly won't do it again. Lesson learned," I say bitterly.

"Good, you're learning. You won't last long here if you don't."

A sense of dread wells up inside of me.

"It's not like you've given me much of a choice," I mutter.

"You will have to learn to live with it," he snaps back.

"I will warn you, Princess, to behave yourself. Lord Varitus is not a forgiving ruler. He is ruthless, as you very well have witnessed today."

Jæmis closes the gap between us, backing me up against the wooden frame of the bed. My heart starts to beat faster – he really is intimidating at times.

It also doesn't help that he's topless, flexing all of his muscles at me.

"You may be able to use your silver tongue on me, but Lord Varitus won't hesitate to cut it out," he drawls out in a low voice.

He grabs my chin with his large hand, catching me off guard.

"And your eyes..." He leans in closer, peering into my own.

My ears start pounding in tune with my heart.

"The colour of wood..." (brown)

"The colour of grass..." (green)

"The colour of the moons..." (silver)

"The colour of sand..." (gold)

"The colour of water..." (blue)

"The colour of blood..." (red)

He releases my chin and turns away from me, showcasing his recently bandaged back.

"Do something about them, it will only invite trouble."

I want to mumble something sarcastic about wearing sunglasses, or perhaps simply closing my eyes, but I decide against it. This time, I'll keep my 'silver tongue' in check.

"Get some rest. I shall return tomorrow."

Jæmis finally leaves the room.

I take in a deep breath and sit down onto the bed.

I feel like crying, but tears refuse to come. I'm so frustrated, angry and most of all – I miss home.

Chapter [008] -- Palace bedroom

It's hard to breathe.

I wake up, completely drenched in sweat. The bed is soaked and wet – have I peed myself?

No... that's not it. I wipe the sweat off my neck. My entire skin is clammy and sticky. The air is burning my lungs.

The night was so cold that I actually enjoyed sleeping under the covers. But now that it's morning, it's raining down hellfire upon me upon me.

I have to cool down, *now*. Ungracefully, I remove my sweater, which now resembles a wet rag, I fling it away and take in a deep breath.

No good, I'm still hot. That stupid root thingy must have stopped working.

I try peeling off my tights which are stuck to my legs like glue. It's a struggle to roll them all the way down until I can finally remove them. I quickly dispose of my skirt as well, leaving myself in just my bra and underwear.

Still perspiring at a rapid rate, I throw myself down onto the tiled floor, hoping for a sliver of relief. The tiles touch my skin and while they feel cool to the touch, my body is transferring its heat to them. In only a few seconds, they're the same temperature as me.

The sweating isn't stopping – at this rate, I'm going to have a heatstroke!

There's a knock on the door.

"Princess? Are you decent?" I can hear a voice say.

"Help!" I yell loudly in response.

The door bursts open and someone flies inside. For a brief second I think it's Jæmis, but it's his brother Kæleb instead.

Once he sets his eyes on me, he looks surprised and gently kneels on the tiles next to me.

Awkwardly, he looks away from my body, coughing into a closed fist.

"Princess, I know you're in a dire situation, but I assure you that seduction won't work on a soldier like me."

1. "For crying out loud – I'm dying here!"
2. "I'm not seducing you, I need help!"

"For crying out loud – I'm dying here!" I yell exasperatedly.

Kæleb jumps a bit in surprise at my outburst. I don't care – I'm literally going to die from the heat if I don't get any help right now.

"But why are you halfway stripped down to your... unsightly undergarments?"

"I have better things to do in life than try and seduce the enemy – I'm trying not to die from this heat!"

"I'm not seducing you, I need help!"

Kæleb takes a cautious step forward.

"Have you fallen down?" he asks, not looking over at me at all. "Should I help you sit up, and perhaps find some more suitable garments?"

"The heat...It's the heat," I pant.

"..." Kæleb still refuses to look at me.

"You – uhh – didn't drink the tea?" he asks tentatively.

"What tea? And no! Please, I'm dying of the heat!"

Kæleb scans the room with his eyes, then he growls under his breath.

"They didn't deliver your tea, those miscreants," he curses.

"No fear, Princess – I shall take you to the infirmary where you can get a Safrin root straight away!"

Kæleb bends down onto one knee, his arms awkwardly stretched across my body. There is an unmistakable blush spreading on his cheeks. I feel like I'm melting – I have no patience for his modesty.

He closes his eyes and slips his arm underneath my back and legs, hoisting me up.

"Right, hold on."

I weakly grab hold of his arm before he suddenly zips out through the door.

-- Infirmary

Flying has actually cooled my body a little through the rush of the winds. However, once we're at the infirmary, it's back to feeling like molten lava.

"Healer Billius!" Kæleb roars loudly as he sets me down onto the floor.

Billius' red hair pops up from behind a corner.

He takes one look at me before dashing over towards a cabinet and rummaging through its contents.

Two seconds later and he's in front of me, his outstretched hand hovering near my mouth. He's holding the root.

"Chew on this," he orders me.

He doesn't have to tell me twice – I take the root from his fingers with my teeth and quickly start to chew on its bitterness as if my life depends on it.

Which it does, so I power through the grimy taste it's spreading inside of my mouth.

I close my eyes and wait for the effect to take place. Kæleb and Billius look at me in anticipation, holding their breaths.

And just like that, the heat dissipates, ebbing away until I feel nothing more than the glow of a warm sunset. I finally take a deep breath with my lungs back to normal.

"Well, that was certainly stress inducing," Kæleb sighs.

"Earthlings don't seem to be able to tolerate much heat," Billius notes out loud. "I'll have to record that in my journal."

"Princess says there was no tea delivered to her room," says Kæleb, who is again – not looking over in my direction.

With the heat gone, I'm slowly starting to realize I look rather revealing.

"Perhaps Prince Jæmis forgot to announce to the staff that they needed to deliver her tea," Billius points out.

Chewing awkwardly, I cross my arms over my chest, wishing I had my clothes back on. This is starting to feel super awkward for me, especially since Kæleb misunderstood and thought I was seducing him.

It seems this planet does have some modesty in their culture at least. I think.

"That doesn't sound like him," Kæleb muses out loud.

"You're right, it doesn't. He probably just told them the wrong room," Billius replies.

The two of them grow quiet, closing their eyes as they think about something.

"Agreed," says Kæleb.

"...What is this tea you're both talking about?" I ask. It can't be regular tea with the way they're discussing it like this.

"Safrin tea, Princess. It has cooling properties, so everyone here drinks it daily," Billius explains helpfully.

"Does it taste as gross as chewing on it?" I'm not a fan of the bitter taste.

Kæleb chuckles lightly.

"I'm afraid the taste doesn't improve by much."

All of a sudden, the doors to the infirmary slam open.

A perturbed looking Jæmis comes flying inside.

"Where is the—" His eyes land upon me and he quickly shuts his mouth.

He lands in front of me, almost knocking me over. There's a snarl on his face.

His hand shoots out to catch my wrist and he yanks on it hard, making me cry out in pain as I stumble forwards.

"You have an uncanny talent of disappearing from your chambers, and it is really starting to get on my nerves, *Princess*," he spits out.

"And now I find you here – clad in what can only be your undergarments – trying to seduce a soldier and a healer? Preposterous!"

"I wasn't seducing anyone! Stop judging me!" I whine.

Kæleb puts a hand up and awkwardly clears his throat.

"Captain Jæmis, it is my fault the Princess is here. She was overheating as she didn't have her Safrin tea."

Feeling Jæmis loosen his hold on my wrist, I quickly pull it free from him and back away, glaring at him. My wrist is throbbing; he squeezed it so tight.

"What incompetent moron didn't deliver her tea?" Jæmis huffs loudly.

"You," says Billius in a dull voice as he unfastens his cloak.

Kæleb's eyes widen at the way Billius so casually blamed Jæmis. However, Billius doesn't change his expression as he advances on me and throws the cloak around my shoulders.

"Here you go. You seemed a little uncomfortable like this," he says in a quiet voice.

I hold the cloak together, feeling grateful he showed me some kind of concern.

"Thank you."

Now Jæmis directs his anger upon Billius, puffing out his chest and sizing him up.

"Are you calling me an incompetent moron?" he breathes out in a threatening manner, his eyes narrow and eyebrows furled.

"Yes."

Oh, I like this guy. I've decided here and now, this redhead is on my side.

"You sent it to the wrong room."

Billius stretched out his hand in front of me. "Princess, please spit. You don't need to chew for so long."

Awkwardly I spit out the bitter root into his hand.

Jæmis bares his fangs in response, looking quite ticked off. But he doesn't do anything beyond childishly stomping his feet on the ground.

"You're mistaken, Billius. I'm going to find the server who got the wrong room and throw him in the dungeons!" he proclaims loudly.

"Captain Jæmis, I'm sure that's unnecessary," Kæleb adds weakly.

Billius shrugs, tapping out of the conversation and walking away.

So... I nearly died of the heat because Jæmis couldn't remember which room I was in?

What a baboon.

I rub the painful spot on my wrist.

"You almost got me killed," I mutter.

"Shut your mouth hole – come here!" he growls in an uncharacteristic manner. It seems he's rattled. Perhaps caught off guard.

"Hey – where are you touching me!?" I shriek when he grabs my waist with his hands and lifts me up into the air.

Jæmis places me down onto the same table he was lying down on just yesterday. I desperately try and keep the cloak from slipping off.

He huffs at me. "Stop it with that murderous gaze."

"Then how about you keep your hands off me?" I fire back. "And quit staring at *me*."

Incredulous, Jæmis removes his hands from my waist and clicks his tongue at me.

"You're in no position to be making any dema—"

"—Captain Jæmis, please handle the Princess with more care." Kæleb cuts in.

"Captain Kæleb, go do something useful. Fetch the Princess her clothes," Jæmis grunts at him.

Kæleb does a polite bow, conceding to his demands, and he flies away.

I feel like I'm a test subject about to be experimented on now that I'm half naked in this infirmary. Not to mention with a very scary beast in front of me.

Jæmis brandishes something from his cape – a hidden pouch perhaps. It's a piece of jewelry; an armlet I suppose. Made out of gold and two red coloured gems.

He doesn't say a word as he grabs my arm and lifts it up, then slips the cuff around my upper arm. Confusion spreads across my face; why is he dressing me up with jewelry?

"...There, now you won't be able to mysteriously vanish anymore," he grumbles.

I look down at the cuff on my arm, then avert my gaze over towards Billius in the back. A gold cuff adorns his upper arm. It's the same design, but with different coloured gems.

"What do you mean?" I ask, still confused.

"This is a tracker, so there will be no more opportunities for you to slip away unnoticed."

I frown at the two gems. Couldn't I just take it off? I touch it with my fingers, feeling the smooth surface of the gold.

"Go ahead," he says, smirking slightly. "Take it off, see what's left of your body if you do."

My eyes widen as I retract my hand.

"He's lying, Princess," Billius cuts in nonchalantly. "The armlet won't bring you any harm if you choose to remove it."

To demonstrate, he removes the cuff on his own arm, remaining unharmed. I breathe a sigh in relief; I didn't want to be stuck with a ticking time bomb.

Is everyone in this place required to wear one? I didn't see one on Jæmis, though, and none of the other soldiers were wearing one.

Jæmis huffs loudly. "Billius, if I hear one more word from you, I will personally see to it that you'll be cleaning Parse dung for the rest of your life."

Billius seems to close his eyes as he puts the cuff back on his arm and releases a large sigh. Wordlessly, he returns to his own work.

"What's a Parse?" I cut in, unfamiliar with the term.

"It is a transportation animal," Jæmis answers me.

I guess this device in my ear doesn't translate actual names of objects and animals. Which makes sense.

Then his brown eyes are back upon me. I still feel really naked in front of him, despite the cloak covering most of my chest.

"You're instructed not to leave the premises of the palace. If I catch you outside, you're dead. You understand?"

Resisting this huge urge to nod – why is this such a human thing – I close my eyes.

"Yes."

"Billius," Jæmis calls out loudly.

"What?" he replies exasperated. "I thought you didn't want to hear another word from me."

I stifle a giggle; it's nice to see someone not act scared of Jæmis.

"I'm placing the Princess under your charge."

This time, Billius stays quiet for a bit. He doesn't have an immediate snarky reply.

"What does that even mean?" I interject. If he's talking about my future, I want to have a say in it!

"It means you'll be working for him," Jæmis replies gruffly.

1. "I refuse."

2. "Do I get a choice?"

"I refuse," I say immediately.

Billius chuckles lightly, his eyes flickering over to me.

"HX-108 certainly had an interesting specimen. I like her spirit."

Jæmis growls at him. "She doesn't get to refuse, and you know that very well, Billius."

A fleeting sorrowful expression graces his face before disappearing. Billius looks down at the floor instead, remaining silent once more.

Jæmis turns his attention back on me.

"To refuse is to choose death. I shall grant your wish to perish by my hands if you refuse to work."

I swallow my tongue. He sounds dead serious, and I know he has the ability to snap my neck in a second, just like he did with Jilyuk. That memory is still hard to shake from my mind.

I narrow my eyes at him.

"Do I get a choice?"

Jæmis scoffs at my question.

"What do you think, Princess?" he fires back.

I clench my hands around the cloak, feeling this impending doom hanging over me.

"...No," I sigh. Of course I don't get a choice. He'll probably kill me if I don't.

"Good, you seem to be able to learn."

I bite down on my lip and glare at him. Seeing my hateful expression towards Jæmis, Billius chuckles lightly.

"She's got spirit, that one. You've got yourself a troublesome prisoner."

Jæmis simply huffs at him in annoyance.

"She has healing capabilities; you know what to do."

Billius sighs. "Of course, *that's* why you took her."

"Speaking of – shouldn't you be resting yourself? I know Ræhu have a rapid regeneration rate, but I don't want to stitch you together again if one of your wounds opens up."

"I'm fine. Mind your own business," he huffs.

From what I can see, Jæmis really is doing much better than yesterday. Unless he's trying his best to hide any discomfort or pain he's in; I'm unable to tell.

"I'm the head Healer, your health *is* my business," Billius replies snarkily.

Another person suddenly enters the infirmary as well.

Her long skirt sways behind her as she skips inside with a devilish smile on her face.

"Bill!" she says in a coy voice.

Jæmis groans at the sight of Læna cheerfully approaching us.

"Why are you here?" he asks, aggravated.

I take note of the same piece of jewelry on Læna's arm; it matches mine, though the gems have a different colour.

Læna is about to walk up to Billius – who has profusely started to sweat – until she catches sight of me sitting on the table.

"Oh! It's the Earthling!" she says in genuine surprise.

"...And why is she wearing that," her tone flattens.

I pull the cloak closer to my body. "Billius lent it to me."

She gasps in an exaggerated manner.

"Are you already moving onto another woman?" she accuses Billius.

"W-what... No. Of course not!" he replies in a flustered manner. "And w-what do you mean, another woman?" he mutters afterwards.

"We can't have you in those kinds of clothes. And..." She leans in closer to me and sniffs.

"Yuck – you need a bath."

I press my mouth down into a thin line, trying to control my temper. I spent the past hour almost *dying* from the heat, my body completely drenched in gross sweat. Not to mention that I was trapped in space for god knows how long. It's not like I have had many options to clean myself.

Instead of being sarcastic, I just put on my fakest smile.

"I would love to take a bath."

"Oh, then follow me! I'll take you to the hammam. That should do wonders for your skin."

I have to wrack my brain trying to place the word 'hammam', but I figure it has something to do with a bath.

Læna tries to walk away, but Jæmis physically blocks her, folding his arms across his chest.

"The Princess stays here. She has work to do."

"I'm sure she doesn't have to work all day, right?" Her eyes wander over to Billius, who suddenly straightens his back.

"Uhm, y-yes. No, I mean. It's not a busy day today."

"Yes – a bath!" I exclaim in pure joy all of a sudden.

They all look at me and I quiet down. I didn't mean to say that out loud.

"No. Don't listen to Læna. She can't leave until the work for today is done, you hear me? I'll be checking up on you to make sure you've been following my orders."

"As you command," Billius says in a monotone voice.

"Oh lighten up, Jæmis. Even *you* are stinking up the place. In fact, compared to the Earthling here, you smell like the rotting corpse of a Parse. And I'm paying you a compliment here."

I can't help it; I giggle.

My laughter doesn't go unnoticed and Jæmis glares at me with his tiny eyes. I feel a chill run down my spine; I probably shouldn't have laughed at him.

Læna taps Jæmis on his shoulder.

"Leave her alone. If I were miserably stuck on a ship for over a month, I'd be dying for some humor, too."

Jæmis grunts loudly. "Læna – you will wait until she's finished her work. Then you can take her to the hammam. And only then."

He finally starts walking away from us.

But not before taking a good whiff underneath his own armpit.

"And I *don't* smell like a dying Parse," he flings back at her.

1. "Correction; she said rotting, not dying."
2. "Perhaps you could take a bath as well."

"Correction; she said rotting, not dying," I point out with a smirk.

Jæmis pauses at the door, his hand on the frame. He throws his head back, his dark eyes glaring at me.

Suddenly a gust of wind washes over me like a shockwave, causing the cloak around my shoulders to fly off.

I shriek in surprise, covering my body with my arms. Jæmis smirks and exits the infirmary.

He did that, didn't he? What a jerk! I quickly grab the cloak from the floor and fling it back over onto my shoulders.

"Perhaps you could take a bath as well," I suggest.

Jæmis pauses at the door.

"What I do with my time is my concern, Princess. How many times do I have to repeat myself?"

"I mean, there's nothing wrong with being clean," I reply.

"I think she's letting you know that you stink and you need a bath," Læna helpfully adds onto the conversation.

Jæmis grunts loudly and exits the infirmary, slamming the door shut behind him.

That... just made my day. Really. I let out a deep sigh and feel this uneasiness lift from my shoulders.

"Don't mind my big dumb brother. If he wanted to kill you, trust me, he'd have done so by now."

"I – that's not very reassuring, you know."

Billius coughs into his hand.

"What she means is that you're safe, for now. Follow the rules and complete your orders, and you might just survive here, Princess."

"We should really get you something to wear, though," Læna muses softly.

"As nice as Bill is for lending you his cloak," Læna smirks at Billius, who looks a bit guilty, "I think you should be given some proper clothes. You may be stuck here, but you're still royalty."

"Oh, I think someone else is getting me my clothes," I say. Didn't Jæmis instruct Kæleb to get them?

"No matter what, she has to stay here. You heard what Jæmis said," Billius points out.

"Since when do you take orders from my brother?" she huffs.

"I'm very confused about ranks here," I say honestly. The way Billius treats Jæmis with no repercussions, that means he's either above him or the same.

"Oh, don't you worry about ranks. The only thing you should concern yourself with is remembering you are a prisoner." Her cheerful tone makes the words sound harsher.

My eyes wander over to the cuff on her arm.

"Why do you wear that?" I ask, pointing at the jewelry. "And you too," I address Billius.

Læna looks over at Billius, who gazes back at her with his eyebrows furled.

"That's a very good question, but now is not the time nor place," she answers me seriously, her cheerful demeanor disappearing.

"However – I think I'm going to leave you here with Bill. I'll pick you up later on with a fresh set of clothes, and I'll lead you to the hammam."

I would much rather have some new clothes now rather than later. It's not very comfortable being in my underwear, only covered up by a long cloak.

But I also realize I am not really in a position to be demanding things, especially since Læna seems to be very accommodating. I don't want to press my luck.

"Okay, thank you," I say instead.

Happy with my answer, she smiles at me, then walks away. Now it's just me and Billius in the same room.

"So..." I start slowly. "What kind of work do I need to do here?"

Billius blinks his eyes over at me, almost expressionless. He's a lot more rigid without Læna around.

"I need to find out the extent of your medical abilities and judge accordingly," he says in this monotone voice.

I'm going to have to tell him I don't have any healing abilities. I'm just kickass at stitching things, including skin apparently.

"I don't..." I gulp. "I don't have any. What you saw yesterday is about all I can do. Jæmis mistook me for someone who can heal."

Billius brings a hand to his chin, deep in thought.

"Zero medical knowledge?" he asks me.

"Absolutely nothing," I confirm.

"So your..." He points at my hands.

"I can create a thin piece of thread to stitch with, that is all."

"Hmm," he wonders out loud. "Troublesome," he mutters.

Oh, that doesn't sound good.

He looks up at me. "Princess, for your own interest and survival, don't tell anyone what you told me."

Wait, what does he mean? I can't tell anyone that I am not some kind of doctor?

"Lord Varitus disposes of those that contribute nothing to his quest," he says in this dramatic tone.

"Quest?" I repeat, slightly scared. I don't want to get 'disposed' of.

"I cannot reveal much, but the only reason you stand in front of me today, is because Prince Jæmis thought you had medical abilities."

Yes... Jæmis did mention that. I really worked myself into a corner here.

"Simply put, prisoners here are either useful, or executed by Lord Varitus."

A chill runs down my spine. It seems only people with medical abilities survive here, and I'm definitely not one of those people.

He sighs. "I can... teach you as much as I know. You were quite handy yesterday, and I believe you'll be a quick student."

"You'll help me?" I ask, hope welling up inside of me. This is *definitely* one of the good guys.

"After all, you're now under my care," he answers, flashing me a hint of a smile.

I feel relieved knowing there's someone on my side. At least I'm not alone.

Then Kæleb enters the infirmary again, my skirt and sweater draped across his arms.

"Princess, I have returned with your apparel," he announces.

"Thank you so much," I thank him. I gratefully take the clothes from him.

"They do omit a foul odor, though. Perhaps you should consider burning them."

I raise my eyebrows in surprise. "B-burning them?"

"Why yes. You will be given some new attire instead, more appropriate for the palace."

I press my face into my sweater inhaling its sweaty and musky scent. Yes, it stinks alright. But at the moment, it's better than the alternative. I feel my phone in the pocket of my skirt, glad it's still there.

"I don't really want to burn the only things I have..." I mutter. It feels like giving up everything I own, and I don't want that.

I also really hate fire.

"That's... understandable. I guess you can keep them, no matter how strange they are." Kæleb looks a bit confounded by my outfit in general.

"Prince Kæleb," Billius calls out. "You should be getting back to your training now. I have a lot of things I need to go through with the Princess today."

Kæleb seems to understand as he promptly turns on his heel.

"Very well. Have a good day," he says before flying off.

I end up quickly dressing myself in my old clothes and returning the cloak to Billius, who accepts it without another word. He's still a bit impersonal, but I definitely appreciate that he wants to help me out.

True to his word, Billius teaches me to the best of his ability. He starts with explaining little things about the planet Yool, and how the indigenous people are called Gaötte. They are very heat resistant, though during the day they still have to drink Safrin tea to cool down.

He also explains that every room in this palace has a toilet. That would have been nice to know yesterday... Apparently what I assumed was a closet, was actually the toilet.

The Gaötte soldiers have a rigorous training schedule, which means Billius has to apply first aid to them a lot. He mentions this is probably the work I'll be doing from now on; patching up wounded soldiers.

When I ask him why Varitus looks for people with medical abilities, Billius says it's classified.

He switches to showing me around the infirmary, showing where all the medicine is, and which tools they use.

When he's not looking, I use my phone to snap pictures of the environment.

--

At the end of the day, Læna comes to pick me up.

My stomach gurgles out loud, and I end up looking down at the floor in embarrassment. I haven't eaten all day.

"Well that's a funny way to greet someone," Læna chuckles.

"Uhm, I'm hungry..." Do their stomachs not growl when they get hungry?

Billius' eyes widen.

"T-that's my mistake! I forgot, I was so absorbed in—" He catches himself and stops speaking.

"Well, you're in luck, there's a banquet in an hour. You can finally go clean yourself up at the hammam, then get to eat with the rest of us."

"Banquet?" Billius questions.

"The generals are getting restless. They want to see the Earthling," Læna explains.

"Me?" I pipe up.

"Fret not. At least you won't be served on a platter as the dinner," she jokes.

"But Jæmis came back with not much to show for, that is why Varitus requested you attend. It's going to be a riot otherwise."

I can't tell if she's serious or joking again. Is she insinuating there would be riots if Jæmis had returned without a prisoner?

"Anyways, come with me! Let's get you all cleaned up." She takes my hand and with a strength I didn't realize she possessed, she yanks me away.

-- **Bathhouse**

After going through the palace like a maze, Læna takes me to what I can only assume is the bathing area. The hammam, as she calls it.

"Your new attire is right here. You can take any towel from the rack over there." She starts pointing at the various things in the room.

"Is there any shampoo?" I ask. I'd love to wash my hair with shampoo. Get the sweat and sand out of my hair.

She stops to stare at me, raising her eyebrows. "Sæmpó?" she repeats.

Oh no, do they not have shampoo here?

"It's uhm, soap for your hair," I explain.

Læna giggles. "Princess Joselina, maybe you haven't noticed, but we're on a planet with reptilians who have no hair."

"Point taken. Regular soap will do."

"It's right there," she says and points to a white bar lying next to a stack of towels. "Please wash yourself first and rinse off before entering the water."

"Makes sense." Back on Earth, some cultures require you to wash first before taking the actual bath.

Her olive coloured eyes fall upon me, studying my body as she brings a finger to her lips.

"My, you seem quite frail. Are you sure you'll be alright all alone? Would you need some help?"

I shake my head. "I'm fine! I can bathe alone."

"Hmm, a shame," she hums.

I suddenly feel a little preyed upon.

"Well, now that we have that settled, I'll have someone pick you up in time for the banquet. Enjoy the bath!"

Læna happily struts away, leaving me alone. I release a content sigh, letting my eyes wander around the place. I can see the water shine and twinkle behind the wooden doors.

I strip myself of my clothes, neatly tucking them away next to the stack of towels. I stare down at the jewelry on my arm; should I take this off, too? Billius said it was okay...

I decide to remove it as well.

A small bucket with clean water rests next to a stool with the bar of soap. Time to clean myself and get rid of the awful smell and sweat. And the sand! Oh god, the sand.

As I sit down, naked as can be, I start scrubbing myself down with soap.

My mind wanders back to Earth in this quiet place where I'm left alone with only my thoughts. I wonder how Ralph is doing, is he searching for me? Did Caine sustain any injuries during that fight? Is Kim still running the storefront?

A pang of pain alerts me as I rub over my wrist. It's a bit bruised. Jæmis' strength is nothing to scoff at...

I drag the soap through my hair, taking my time. I still need to get used to having short hair. I wish I could get a proper haircut.

I'm doing surprisingly okay, given my situation. I'm not being tortured; I haven't experienced any sexual abuse. I am undeniably stuck in a horrible situation, but at least I have someone looking out for me. Willing to help. Eeyok has been nice to me, too.

I scoff at myself; perhaps I'm experiencing a case of Stockholm syndrome. Just because Eeyok has been nice to me doesn't mean he didn't have a hand in my kidnapping.

I dump the bucket of water on myself, rinsing off the soap from my body. It's cold, but it feels good to cleanse myself of all the grime and dirt that's been gathering for a month.

That reminds me: I haven't had my period yet, but I chalk it up to extreme stress. That'll mess up anyone's schedule.

I take myself over to the bathing area of the room. Oh, it's an open bath; I can see the night sky.

And there they are. The reminder I'm on an alien planet. Three moons. They're smaller than the one from my solar system, but they're moons nonetheless.

The stars are reflected on the water and I finally dip my toe in it.

"Oh – it's warm!" I say in surprise. I expected it to be cold.

Not wanting to take a second longer, I submerge myself completely. The water only reaches my thighs, but it's enough for me. I come up for air, feeling super refreshed.

It feels like I'm in a hot spring. It's actually kind of nice.

"Ahhh," I sigh out loud.

There's a low grunt from behind me, scaring the ever-living lights out of me.

"Is this another seduction attempt from you...?"

I freeze up; there's someone in the bath with me!

Lights start firing up inside my brain, and I freak out.

"AHH!!" I shriek loudly and attempt to swim away from the source.

"Wai – Augh!" the person coughs as I manage to kick him in his stomach as I'm swimming away.

"You pesky little Earthling – stop struggling!"

Jæmis overtakes me and grabs my wrist to stop me from escaping.

I wince in pain, as it's the exact spot he's hurt before.

And then I realize what's standing before me. Or rather, what's being paraded in front of my face.

As naked as can be, Jæmis stands in front of me in this intimidating posture. His abs are decorated with droplets of water, trickling down his enormous thighs.

I gasp.

Aliens definitely have human looking genitals!

"What are you doing here? Have you decided to track me down? Is that what this is?" he demands to know.

I look away, at a loss for words. I want to escape. Maybe dive into the water to hide my embarrassment. Anything besides literally being in front of Jæmis' crotch.

But he's still painfully holding onto my wrist. I try to cover up my breasts with my other arm.

"Let go, you're hurting me!" I complain.

He releases his hold on me, and I stumble back into the water in confusion. I didn't expect him to let go that fast. I keep my body low so that the water covers it; I don't want him to see me naked as well!

"Pathetic. Earthlings are weak if they cannot even endure a little force without bruising," he grumbles.

1. "How about you stop trying to grab me!?"

2. "Please... Can you cover yourself?"

"How about you stop trying to grab me!?" I fire back at him.

"Then don't run away when I question you!" he barks at me, equally as fired up.

"I'm running away because you're naked and *pointing* that... that *thing* at me – oh god, please cover yourself up already."

"Why do you act coy when you were the one that tried to seduce me."

"I'm taking a damn bath! I'm not seducing you!" I say, turning my head away from him again.

It's just there! With no shame present in his body; proudly showcasing it like a peacock!

"Please... Can you cover yourself?" I ask, blocking half my vision with my hands so I don't have to see his naked form.

"You puny Earthling. You try to seduce me once again, and now you act timid?" he scoffs at me.

"I'm *not* trying to seduce you!" I say quickly.

"That's not what this looks like. First the incident this morning, and now *this*."

For the love of – he's really hellbent on this seduction thing!

"I just want to take a bath. I didn't know you were here."

"You are in the male's hammam, Princess," he clicks his tongue at me. "Only men are allowed in this hammam."

"How am I supposed to know that? I just followed Læna," I reply.

"You can tell by the red coloured pillars," he says as he looks around the room.

...

"You mean... those *green* coloured pillars?" I say, pointing at the very striking emerald coloured pillars.

He's not colourblind, is he? Unless he meant to say the green ones are for the men's bathroom.

Jæmis' eyes glide over towards the pillars. Slowly, he folds his arms and closes his eyes for just a second. I really wish he would stop standing there and cover up already. This is so awkward.

Do these aliens simply not care about being uncovered? Well – it still bothers me!

"Princess – where is your tracker?" he suddenly grunts at me.

I gulp. "I took it off–"

"–Did I not warn you *not* to take it off?"

"Yes, you did but – hey, don't change the subject! Those pillars are definitely green!"

Splash!

Jæmis zooms past me by flying out of the bath, water flopping around everywhere.

And just as fast, he returns, grabbing my wrist once again and lifting me up from the water. I shriek in response, my naked form laid bare in front of him. He ignores my cries and snaps the tracking device back onto my arm.

His eyes narrow at me and I immediately lower myself down into the water again, trying to hide my body.

This is so awkward! And embarrassing! Please just let me have a bath in peace!

"You have to keep this on at all times. If I see you without it one more time, I will personally end your life on the spot. Don't expect to get away with it, I *will* find out."

"Keep the bracelet on. Got it," I say in a tiny voice as I turn away from his crotch.

"C-can you put on some clothes now? Or leave, or something?" I mumble.

"There's a banquet tonight, and you have to be present. You better be ready then!" he huffs, then walks out of the water.

On his way over to the doors, he glances at the pillars, just to make sure they are in fact, green. He runs a hand through his wet hair and clicks his tongue before taking a towel and disappearing from the hammam entirely.

I blow bubbles into the water, hugging my own body.

The pillars are definitely green.

Chapter [009] -- Palace dinnerhall

When I've been picked up by another servant, I'm dressed in their traditional garb. My outfit resembles that of Læna, though it seems more sparkly. The long skirt I'm wearing doesn't seem to have any pockets, so I just sew my cellphone right into it.

I don't want to lose it, even if I can never use it once the battery is completely drained.

I'm led to a very large hall with small tables lining the sides. There are a lot of people around, but I recognize none of them. I don't spy any soldiers, and the trio of siblings are missing as well.

The servant guides me to a small table and tells me to sit down. There are empty bowls on the table, ready to be used for food.

My stomach rumbles in response. I'm so hungry – I haven't eaten all day. I'm surprised I didn't faint from low blood sugar.

Then, I spot a familiar face; Jæmis walks into the room. He's not wearing his armour this time around, adorned instead in some more relaxed apparel.

Immediately the picture of his naked form pops into my mind and I try and shake it away. No, go away you evil, intrusive thoughts!

Our eyes meet across the hall. His face twists into annoyance. I'm the first to break eye contact. It's so awkward looking at him. What am I even doing here?

Oh no, he's coming over.

With each step he takes, my anxiety rises. Soon enough, he sits down on the empty spot next to me. *Of course* he has to sit here.

"It seems you managed to find your way over here in one piece," he draws out in a bored tone.

1. "And it seems you didn't get lost this time either."

2. "That's because a servant guided my way."

"And it seems you didn't get lost this time either," I reply sarcastically. I'm not afraid to bite back.

"*This time?*" he snaps back.

"Well you got lost finding my room, and then you thought the bath was for the men and—"

"Silence!" he cuts me off. "You will sit here and not open your mouth hole for the rest of the evening."

"We'll see about that," I mutter under my breath.

"That's because a servant guided my way," I explain.

"Ah, of course. It's impossible for you to know the layout of the palace." He seems pleased with himself.

"Also, you shouldn't be walking around unaccompanied," he points out.

"Are you going to accompany me from now on?"

"Of course not. I have better things to do with my time than babysit an Earthling," he scoffs at the idea.

"Just sit there in silence and wait for Lord Varitus to arrive."

I roll my eyes at him. That Varitus better hurry up, because talking to Jæmis only works up my appetite even more.

My stomach gurgles loudly once more. It's so loud, even Jæmis looks down at me, eyebrows raised and all. Okay, this is really awkward, I can't control the noises my stomach is making.

"...Do you have a living parasite inside of your body?"

"What – no!" I deny hastily. That's gross!

"Then *what* is making that dreadful noise? I told you to stay quiet."

"I can't help it. I'm really hungry, and I haven't eaten since I got here," I complain.

Jæmis looks rather disgusted. "Pathetic. Earthlings really are weak. You act like you're on the brink of starvation simply because you missed a day's worth of food."

"I'm not going to apologize for being hungry and having a different appetite from you," I reply with as much dignity as I have.

"The meals will be served once Lord Varitus has arrived. Until then, control your stomach."

I would if I could!

"Ah, Princess Joselina," a voice calls me out.

I look up and see Kæleb walking behind me. He is also not wearing his armour, his outfit resembling that of Jæmis'. It feels less intimidating, and makes him look more approachable.

"Hello," I greet him politely.

"You are looking positively radiant tonight. I presume your trip to the hammam went without any trouble?"

I didn't expect to be smooth talked like this, and shyly look down at my table. My eyes shift over to Jæmis, who hasn't said a word. It certainly didn't go by without trouble...

"It was nice," I answer instead.

And just to make a point, I add, "The green accents in the room really complemented the view from the night sky."

Kæleb smiles at me. "I'm sure they do, though I haven't witnessed such for myself. The men's hammam have red accents."

"Captain Kæleb, go to your seat. You know this isn't your place," Jæmis cuts in with a curt tone.

Hah – he's annoyed!

"If you'll excuse me, Princess," he says politely before leaving.

Kæleb takes a seat across from us instead.

"I'd much rather have him as my seat buddy," I mumble under my breath. Instead, I'm stuck with this grumpy potato.

I wonder if Billius or Læna will arrive, but I haven't seen either of them. I haven't spotted Eeyok either, so I'm assuming this banquet is not for grunt soldiers like him.

And just like that, the entire room quiets down. Before, it was lively and people were walking about, chatting amongst themselves, but now it's eerily quiet. Even I tense up before I know it.

Long flowing hair enters the room. With an elegance to his stride, Varitus slowly makes his way to the very end of the seats.

He passes by me, and the hairs on my neck stand up straight. I'm getting flashbacks of yesterday – the brutality I witnessed with my own eyes. Seeing the blood splatter from Jæmis' back, hearing his skin tear open...

I've already experienced Jæmis killing someone in front of me. But that was quick, to the point, without suffering. It was so fast I barely knew what was going on.

But yesterday's flogging was a show. A point to be made. Cruelty.

I'm terrified of him, more than I've been of Jæmis.

Once Varitus sits down at the end, the crowd starts back up again.

"Let the feast begin!" yells out one of them.

Servants start entering the room, carrying golden trays filled with carefully placed food, like a gourmet dinner. They're unfamiliar shapes, but it's rich in colour: reds, greens, yellows – it's making me forget my terror and salivate instead.

This looks a lot better than what I've been eating on the spaceship!

They start serving everyone in the room. I can't wait until they get to me!

"Princess, contain yourself. You are excreting in an unsightly manner," Jæmis snaps at me.

I wipe away the corner of my mouth.

"But it looks so good," I say. "I thought all the food was going to be textureless and boring."

Jæmis smirks at me. "Careful before you stuff yourself full. Some of these foods may very well kill you."

I bite down on my lips. No matter how appetizing the food looks – it's still alien food. I don't know how I'll react to it.

My stomach groans in response once my nose picks up the scent of something very delicious.

Nope, screw it – I'm stuffing my face into that plate of food. I will take my chances!

A servant places down a couple of bowls on my table. I examine each one, curious as to what their food is like.

I wrinkle my nose in disgust when I see something that resembles an animal head on one of the plates. It's got a strange long body, looking part snake and part crocodile. It's surrounded by leafy vegetables, it's not very appetizing.

I use one of the long prongs to poke it; its skin feels hard and tough. How do I eat this?

I glance over at Jæmis who picks up the end of the snake-like reptile and uses his bare hands to tear off the head, pulling its entire spine with it.

Barbaric!

I've spontaneously lost my appetite. In fact, I almost want to hurl. That was disgusting!

Jæmis then uses the prong to stab the body and lift it up to his mouth. He effortlessly bites it off with his long canines.

I look around the hall; everyone is eating the same way. To be fair, they all have razor sharp teeth. Can I even bite into this tough skin with my human teeth?

"Have you forgotten how to eat?" Jæmis questions when he sees I haven't touched any of it.

I poke the head with the prongs. "No..." I say, unsure of myself.

"Then why are you not eating?" He sounds a little impatient.

1. Try and separate the head from its body yourself.
2. "I don't think I can rip off the head like you did..."

Well, here goes. I lift up the reptile with my bare hands – it's lukewarm to the touch. With one hand I grab the head and with the other, the tail. I then try to tear it apart.

But the skin is so tough, it feels like I'm trying to pull apart a thick rubber band. It's not budging in the least.

"Ugh – why is this so hard!" I complain, still trying to tear it off.

Jæmis chuckles behind me, clearly amused by my futile actions.

"You better learn fast, Princess, otherwise you'll starve," he mocks me.

I huff at him and drop the reptile back onto the plate. Frustrated that my strength wasn't enough and that Jæmis is mocking me – I shoot out a string of thread from my fingertip.

The thread pierces the skin like it's melted butter. I wrap it around the head and slice it off in one clean cut.

Jæmis looks on with interest as I then proceed to grab the head and pull it off its body – spine and all. Urgh, so nasty. I discard the carcass and use my thread again to slice into the reptile, removing its skin to reveal the white flesh underneath.

Now I can eat!

"I'm not starving today," I say triumphantly towards Jæmis.

Jæmis lets out a deep sigh and focuses on his own meal again.

"I don't think I can rip off the head like you did..." I say honestly.

"What makes you so sure when you haven't even tried?" he asks. "You either try or starve. Your choice."

I glare at him and fidget in my seat. Fine, I'll try.

I lift up the reptile with my bare hands – it's lukewarm to the touch. With one hand I grab the head and with the other, the tail. I then try to tear it apart.

But the skin is so tough, it feels like I'm trying to pull apart a thick rubber band. It's not budging in the least.

Not wanting to admit I can't do it, I keep my mouth shut and try again, putting in all my strength.

Except the tail slips out of my grasp, and I end up flinging the entire body right into Jæmis' face.

He blocks it with his hand before it smacks him. He narrows his eyes and growls at me.

"Uhh..." I stammer as I let go of the body. That wasn't supposed to happen.

Jæmis impatiently rips the head from the reptile – spine and all – then flings it back onto my plate.

"Just eat already," he complains. "Don't toy with your food."

I use the prong to scrape out the flesh and finally pop it into my mouth.

"Oh!" I say, surprised at the taste as the flesh melts onto my tongue.

Expecting it to be flavourless, I'm happy to find out it tastes a lot like regular fish!

And then I throw all my manners out the window and dig in; I'm hungry, and this actually pleases my palate.

All these new flavours and textures are scratching an itch I've had for a long time. A month on a spaceship eating tasteless food has been much more soul sucking than I thought. Now my taste buds can experience all kinds of new foods.

I'm surprised they don't all taste bitter like that root I have to keep chewing on. It's mostly savory, sprinkled with earthy spices.

In no time, I finish up everything on my plate, finishing it off with a splash of cool water.

People in the hall finally quiet down again. Varitus has risen his hand up in the air – a command, perhaps.

"Captain Jæmis, report," he says in a quiet voice.

Jæmis pounds his chest to dislodge a piece of meat, before he clears his throat to speak.

"The journey to planet HX-108 went smoothly, taking us no longer than a little over one full noon. As we've seen from the scans, the planet was covered in mostly water."

My ears perk up – he's explaining his mission to Earth. I guess HX-108 is their name for Earth.

"Parts of the planet were populated, but they did not respond to any of our communications."

Well, that's news to me!

"The Earthlings didn't seem to pose a threat, so we fired a warning missile. The immediate response was a primitive attack on our ship."

I scoff loudly. Primitive he calls us.

"I attempted to negotiate, but it resulted in being hit by lightning. While the Earthlings may seem primitive with no technology, they do seem to possess strange abilities of their own."

Way to go Caine, you launched a direct hit on him!

"Wounded myself, I ordered the troops to retreat."

Suddenly everyone starts murmuring amongst themselves. They don't sound too happy.

"Coward!" grumbles one of them.

"Should 'ave stayed 'n fought!" says another.

"With our retreat, I managed to secure our bargaining chip for the future," Jæmis starts again in a louder voice to drown out the others.

He gestures to me. "I took the Earthling Princess."

I glance to my left and right, feeling everyone's eyes on me. I'm the center of attention. Or should I say, the *conquest*...

People start cheering.

"The Princess!" they joust.

"A good prize, very good!"

"I believe with the Princess as our bargain, we can attempt to force HX-108 to surrender and seize control."

My eyes somewhat bulge out. He wants to take Earth? Wait, not only that – he wants to return? What does that mean for me, am I returning to Earth as well? Please, let it be so.

"In three nunoons we return to Earth, and this time we'll claim it as our own. Yool will be prosperous. Lord Varitus' reign will prevail," he announces.

"Yeah!" the crowd cheers.

"Lord Varitus!" The chanting begins.

I gaze down at my empty plate. I know what I heard right now was a war cry; they want to conquer Earth. But all I can think about is...

I might be going home after all.

-- Infirmary

A day after that grand speech about seizing Earth and whatnot, I am forced to report to the infirmary.

"Princess Joselina, you are looking more energized than yesterday," Billius greets me.

"Well, I finally had a bath and ate some food," I explain.

"Did you take the tea?"

"I made very sure to drink the tea so I won't spontaneously burst into flames, yes."

"Good."

"Healer!" Someone charges into the room, screeching at the top of his lungs.

Billius gets up from his seat and briskly walks over towards the frazzled soldier.

It appears his arm is... Oh no – it's broken!

"Captain Jæmis broke my arm during training! Please fix it!" he says desperately.

Billius says nothing at all, but starts handling the soldier with care. He quickly examines the damage, touching here and there with his hands, all the while carrying a serious expression.

"Yaahh!" the soldier cries out in pain when Billius presses down on a particular sore spot.

"Please relax," he says.

Then his hands begin to glow a strange light blue, spreading onto the soldier's arm.

With one swift movement, Billius cracks the bone back into place and the arm looks completely normal again.

The soldier blinks at it, and clenches his hand into a fist a couple of times, swinging around his arm to test it out.

"Aha, excellent! Healer Billius really is the greatest," he says in awe.

Honestly, I'm super impressed as well. Did he really fix the broken bone just like that? I wonder what his healing capabilities really are... I didn't see him do anything special when he was working on Jæmis' back.

This time, however, he definitely used some special ability.

"Take it easy for today, no heavy lifting," Billius says in a serious tone.

"Yes, yes!" says the soldier, and he happily skips out of the infirmary.

Once he's left, I turn to Billius.

"Is it normal to have soldiers come in for broken bones?" I ask.

"If you're wondering whether Prince Jæmis injuring soldiers is commonplace, then your intuition is correct."

My eyes widen. "That sounds awful."

Billius' face doesn't change.

"Soldiers get injured all the time during training. It's not my job to question it, only to heal."

"Well, you seem to do a good job at that," I note.

He shyly looks away, surprised I complimented him. It's a little funny to see his serious demeanor change to something more demure.

"Perhaps... Perhaps you can assist me on-site at the training grounds sometime."

"I definitely wouldn't mind a change of scenery," I say with a smile.

For the rest of the day, Billius teaches me how to add a cast to someone's broken arm, in case his ability isn't able to fix it. It seems even he has limits.

-- Palace loggia

A couple of days pass. I had someone tell me that while I could roam around, there were still restrictions to my 'freedom'.

Can't leave the palace, can't step anywhere near Varitus' private chambers (which is comprised of an entire stretch of land), and I already forgot some of them. They should be easy to spot though... they're guarded by their entrance.

As long as I'm wearing the armband, I can go nearly anywhere else.

Still, I'm a prisoner, just trying to make my way back to my room. Get some food perhaps.

As I'm walking along, I immediately notice someone's body peeking out at the end of the balconies, behind the corner. With my keen eyesight, I notice that the person has a dark blue hue in their hair. Oh – that's Læna if I'm not mistaken.

I should thank her for showing me where the baths are. I try and quicken my pace to reach the end of the balconies and round the corner.

-- Palace hallway

Just as I enter the hallway, I see Læna's hair disappear at the other end. Ah, she's too quick!

"Læna!" I call out, hoping she hears me.

I start jogging up to her.

However, when I reach the end, there's no trace of her left. I'm confused.

Where did she go? I didn't imagine it, right?

I sigh loudly. Fine, I guess I'll just head back.

Except something else catches my attention. The sound of birds chirping. That's the first time I've heard an animal noise in this palace, and it intrigues me so much, I follow the chirps.

-- Palace garden

Soon I come across an open area leading into a garden. Wow – look at all that plant life!

Whereas the desert I had seen on the outside of the palace had been barren, this garden was the complete opposite of that.

Lush with greens and various other vibrant colours from all the flowers and bushes, it feels like I've stepped into another dimension.

There's a water fountain spread across the garden, supplying water to all the plants around. It's so gorgeous.

I stand in front of a particularly large plant. It looks like a yellow bell – Oh, it smells super sweet! I lean in to take in the scent.

"No – get away from there!"

I turn to face the voice, but I'm caught off guard when suddenly, the bell-shaped plant releases a vine from its open mouth and lashes my hand with it.

I shriek and jump back, protectively holding my hand against my chest. The plant jiggles around and goes back to staying stationary.

Ouch, it gave me a cut across the top of my hand. It stings.

I look around to see where the voice came from, and suddenly see a mini-Varitus rapidly approaching me.

"Let me see, let me see!" he says in a concerned tone, his golden eyes focused on my hand.

Awkwardly, I show him my hand. Ah, it's starting to really throb by now.

Wait. Is it poisonous!?

"Please hold still," he says in a gentle voice. "This is going to sting a little."

He deftly plucks a leaf from a nearby bush, pushes it into his mouth, and chews on it a little. With a feather-light touch, he lifts up my hand to his face. He then spits out the chewed up leaf and presses it against my cut.

"Ah!" I gasp when it stings even more.

"Sorry," he immediately apologizes. "But we need to extract the poison, so bear with it."

And just like that, I clamp my mouth shut. Don't approach strange alien plants, got it. I should treat everything like it's a death trap.

"I'm going to be okay, though... right?" I ask with a nervous giggle.

He shoots me a smile as he continues to dab the leaf onto my wound.

"Don't worry, it's only a few more seconds, and that should work. No side effects either."

"Haha, I guess I wandered into the wrong garden..."

"You certainly did, because no one is allowed to enter here besides me." He says this in such a cheerful voice that I have a hard time telling whether he's sarcastic or not.

He removes the leaf from my wound and I pull my hand back; it doesn't sting anymore.

"Thank you," I say, appreciating his help.

"But were you serious? I shouldn't be here?"

He chuckles lightly. "Completely forbidden to!"

Oh. Well.

"But I can tell you're new. Everyone knows they're not allowed to enter my garden. Strict orders from my brother."

I notice the word 'brother' here and his striking similarities to a certain overlord, so I immediately blurt it out.

"Varitus?"

"Yes, he doesn't want me interacting with the staff."

"But I'm not staff," I start to protest.

"It's okay, I can keep a secret if you can."

You know what. Considering he immediately applied first aid and seems to be otherwise very nice, I'll agree to it.

"Alright. Don't tell anyone I've been here."

"What's your name?" he asks me. "You don't look like a Gaötte or Ræhu."

"My name is Joselina. I'm from planet Earth. I'm human," I explain.

"A human, huh. Well then, you're the first human I've met!"

Finally, it feels good to hear someone call me a human, after being addressed as Earthling for the umpteenth time.

"Then, what's your name?" I ask with a smile.

"Nornus. Prince Nornus," he says politely.

"Well, Prince Nornus," I say, addressing him correctly, "You have a very nice garden here."

His eyes well up with pride, the pupils turning into even thinner slits.

"You think so?" he asks, excitement leaking into his voice.

"Yes, it's very pretty! I mean, a plant did just try to poison me, but that's my own mistake. Do you tend to this all by yourself?"

"I do, yes. It's my own little world," he says in a soft tone.

Nornus beckons me to follow him towards the water fountain. Curious, I follow him.

Oh! There's a reptile-like bird bathing in the water fountain. It has a striking blue colour. It flies away when we get too close.

Nornus dips his slender finger into the water. Rings appear from the surface, until they start to glow an iridescent green. Silently, I watch as the rings appear faster and grow larger.

Then, he pulls out a long green stem from the water and presents it to me. It grew into a golden flower. Wow – the petals are a really shiny gold!

I gasp in response and Nornus shyly looks down at the ground in response.

"You can have it," he says.

Eager to accept it, I'm about to take it from him, but I stop midway.

"...Is it poisonous?" I ask.

He smiles timidly. "No. I don't wish to harm you."

That's probably the nicest thing anyone has said to me since I arrived here.

I've been miserable all this time, but this stranger, who apparently doesn't even know I'm a prisoner, treats me with a kindness I've been missing. Eeyok has been nice to me, too, but I haven't seen him since the day I arrived here. Even Billius hasn't been this hospitable towards me.

So I can't help but have my eyes water up in response. I feel like crying.

Nornus pulls the flower back, his eyes wide.

"Oh no – are you having an allergic reaction?"

I quickly wipe away any forming tears with my hands.

"No, I'm sorry about that," I quickly apologize. "It's just... I'm happy you're being so nice to me."

He looks a little confused at my reaction. Perhaps he doesn't know what crying is. I don't really want to explain it, though. I feel silly for tearing up.

"Thank you, it's very lovely. I'd love to have it," I say, stretching out my hand to the flower.

I'm about to accept the flower, until a strong gust of wind makes it go flying out of Nornus' grasp.

"You wretched pest!" I hear someone bellow.

I instinctively freeze up as Jæmis lands in front of me.

"You are in the *Royal Garden*." He advances on me. "You are *trespassing*. You are engaging with the *royal Prince*." I shrink in response to him enunciating each word with venom.

He's seriously mad!

"You are going to be—"

"Prince Jæmis, don't be mad!" Nornus whines as he grabs Jæmis' arm.

"I asked her to come here. Please don't punish her."

He pauses. His eyes shifting over from me to Nornus.

It seems he doesn't quite believe what Nornus is saying, but I keep my mouth shut. I don't want to anger him even more.

"...Regardless, Prince Nornus, you shouldn't engage with our 'guests'. You know the rules," Jæmis says with a sigh.

Nornus looks crestfallen. "...I know."

There's a rule where he can't talk to people? Wait, now he's the one being scolded? I can't let him take the fall for me.

"Actually—" I start, but Nornus quickly jumps in front to cut me off.

"Why don't you take her back to her room then?" he asks Jæmis in this nervous voice.

"Very well. Please take care." Jæmis deftly bows in front of Nornus.

Then all attention is back on me.

"You," he growls. "Follow me."

Nornus gives me an apologetic look, and I smile back at him.

-- Palace Hallways

Jæmis remains quiet as he takes me back to my room. Perhaps he's seething inside. Or perhaps he is an unfeeling machine. Who knows what he's thinking.

Jæmis takes a small round device out of his shirt. He looks at it while we walk.

"You may be able to roam the palace, but don't forget that I know where you are at all times," he warns me.

"And the Royal Garden is definitely off limits."

"No one told me," I defend myself. "You didn't either."

I finally manage to catch a glimpse of the device and see a map of the palace, covered in several coloured dots. Jæmis quickly puts it away when he sees I'm looking at it.

"I'll check with the servants to confirm whether they told you, or if you just have brain damage."

"B-brain damage!?" I gasp, astonished.

"Your Earthling body is frail and weak – you've already gotten a new cut since the last time we spoke." Jæmis looks at the cut on my hand.

I pull it out of his view. "That doesn't mean I have brain damage. I'm perfectly rational, and my memory is fine."

"That's debatable."

He's so damn rude! I can't stand him, argh!

Just as I'm about to reply, we arrive at my room, and Jæmis quickly opens up the door.

"Do you think you can manage not to starve without provisions until dinner is served this time?" He smirks at me.

1. "And do you think you can manage to find your way back without getting lost?"
2. "Why, are you worried about me?"

"And do you think you can manage to find your way back without getting lost?" I ask in a fake sweet tone.

Annoyed, Jæmis clicks his tongue at me.

"You'll eat in your chambers today. You're forbidden from leaving until a servant comes in the morning."

I roll my eyes at him. House arrest. Fine.

"Why, are you worried about me?" I ask, a hint of sarcasm hidden in my tone.

Jæmis shifts his eyes away from me in an uncharacteristic manner.

"Don't speak such lies. Worry does not come into the equation. You are but an insignificant pest I have to deal with."

Again, he calls me a pest.

"If I'm such a pest, then perhaps you shouldn't have kidnapped me," I snap back.

"Enough. Return to your chambers," he barks at me.

I step towards the door frame, but halt my movement.

We haven't spoken since the banquet, but something has been on my mind. A question I've been dying to ask.

"...Are you returning to Earth?" I ask. "Am I?"

Jæmis keeps quiet.

"Report to Billius in the morning. A servant will wake you," he says, ignoring my question.

Without another word, Jæmis disappears. I sigh out loud, left to wonder whether or not I'll be going home.

Chapter [010]

-- Infirmary

A couple of days pass by without incident. My time consists of waking up, drinking tea and having breakfast, then going to the infirmary to work with Billius.

He has been quite helpful in teaching me how to apply first aid to the many different kinds of wounds the soldiers can sustain. It seems to be the majority of the Healer's job here; taking care of injured soldiers.

Though I do see Billius work on something else every now and then, he won't tell me much about it. I'm just glad he's willing to teach me.

Today, however, it seems he's busy with someone.

The curtains are drawn closed, hiding them from any prying eyes.

I hear a small yelp from someone followed by some muffled talking. Then the curtains open up, revealing Billius and...

"Oh, hello Nornus," I greet him. I haven't seen him since I met him in the garden.

Upon seeing me, Nornus' anxious face transforms into a happy one.

"Joselina!" he greets me cheerfully.

"You shall address him as Prince Nornus," Billius brings to my attention.

"Right, Prince Nornus," I correct myself.

"Haha, it's okay, she's new, right? Do you work here? Or are you sick, too?" he asks.

"I guess I work here?" I say, unsure. Does it still count when I'm being forced? "And what are you doing here? Are you sick?"

Nornus looks down at the floor. "I feel fine, but my brother doesn't seem to think so. He says I'm sick."

"Prince Nornus, that's enough. Please return to your chambers," Billius insists.

"You should come to my garden again if you have the time," says Nornus as he walks past me.

I know that place is off-limits, but I can't help it, he's too nice to reject.

"Sure," I say.

Billius sighs once Nornus leaves the infirmary.

"Is he really sick?" I ask.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that," he says in a stoic voice. "Please don't concern yourself about the Prince's health."

Knowing I shouldn't tread any further, I heed his warnings and stop questioning him about Nornus.

"Perhaps you'd like to gain some experience in the field today?" he asks, changing the subject.

"You mean outside of the infirmary?"

"Would you like to accompany me to the training grounds today?"

"Yes!" I say eagerly.

I was getting a little sick of this routine, so it's nice to go somewhere else. Especially after seeing that gorgeous garden and not being able to visit it anymore...

"Alright. Here, take the kit with you," he says as he hands over a small case of supplies.

"Someone always gets hurt during training."

Together we leave the infirmary.

-- Training grounds

It's much bigger than I expected, with one part being covered, and one part uncovered. There are mats on the floor that feel softer than the usual tile.

There are soldiers working in groups, practicing their close combat skills. Some of them are using long spears to spar. There's a shooting range as well, using weapons that fire projectiles.

I think they used those to attack Earth...

I wonder if I can snap a picture while no one is looking at me. This information could be super useful back on Earth.

Trying to be inconspicuous, I fish my cell phone out of my skirt, powering it on without anyone being able to tell. I open up the camera app and quickly snap a couple of pictures of the surroundings without anyone noticing.

Even Billius, whose back is turned towards me, has no clue.

Then I see a familiar face on my screen, and I immediately put away my phone.

"Princess Joselina!"

I'd recognize that shriek from anywhere – it's Eeyok! He definitely saw me holding my phone... does he know what it is? I sure hope not.

He's smiling at me, not giving any indication that he's going to mention a strange device in my hands.

I'm actually so happy to see his goofy smile.

"Hey Eeyok!"

"Why you here? This here place is not safe for you," he says a little concerned.

"The Princess is here to observe me and act as my assistant," Billius explains.

"Ahh, of course, of course!" He turns to me. "Then Princess will see how I fight!"

"Indeed. Are you any good at it?"

He meekly looks away. "Eeyok still grunt, but try best."

"Healer Billius, why are you here?" Another person joins the conversation.

There's someone I didn't wish to see at all. Arms crossed, and a perpetual pissed off look on his face: Captain Jæmis.

"I'm here in case anyone needs urgent care, of course," Billius explains as a matter of fact.

"What's she doing here as well?" Jæmis' brown eyes land on me.

1. "Why, you don't want me spying on your training?"

2. "I'm tagging along to be his assistant."

Not liking his tone, I retort, "Why, you don't want me spying on your training?"

"Spying? Who will you report to?" Jæmis smirks at me.

Knowing I don't have anyone, I keep silent, glaring at him.

"Princess Joselina is here to assist me today," Billius comes to my defense.

"Why is that? You alone should be enough."

"I'm tagging along to be his assistant," I explain.

"The training grounds are no place for an Earthling like you," he says.

"Why not?"

"You possess no combat skills, you're extremely frail, and you have the slowest reaction times I've seen so far."

I puff out my cheeks; that's just rude!

"Prince Jæmis, don't take it out on her, she is my assistant today. I need the extra help."

"I've been noticing an influx of soldiers arriving at the infirmary with injuries since you've returned."

"That sounds a lot like you're saying the training I devised is flawed."

"I *am* saying that," he responds honestly, glaring at Jæmis.

These two definitely don't see eye to eye.

"Eeyok!" Jæmis yells all of a sudden.

"Eek!" he jumps in surprise. "Y-yes Captain?"

"Let's show everyone our training regimen is perfected beyond belief. Face me on the mats."

"Yes, Captain," says Eeyok, his voice full of uncertainty.

Wait – they're going to have a match? Isn't Jæmis ridiculously strong, though? He snapped Jilyuk's neck without any effort and threw Ralph against the wall with a flick of his hand. Eeyok could barely hold his own against the other, beefier soldiers...

"Come, sit here, Princess Joselina," says Billius and points to a bench at the side of the wall where we can survey all the action.

"I'm sure we'll be needed in a second."

Jæmis and Eeyok walk onto the middle of the mats, everyone clearing an area for them.

"Hand to hand combat only, no weapons," says Jæmis, narrowing his eyes at Eeyok.

It feels like he's a wolf preying on the sheep.

"Ready," states Eeyok as he puts up his hands, balling them into fists.

Jæmis starts circling Eeyok, hands not raised at all. He doesn't assume a fighting position.

Eeyok looks too hesitant to make the first move, so he just follows Jæmis along with his eyes.

"We didn't train you to do nothing – *attack!*" Jæmis hisses.

Eeyok lunges forwards with his right fist, aiming at Jæmis' face.

Yet the fist never makes contact with anything solid; it hits nothing but air. Jæmis dodged it without me even noticing.

"Again," Jæmis commands, walking around Eeyok.

Flustered, Eeyok throws out another punch.

A slap, a punch, a shove – Jæmis deflects the attack and counters so easily that Eeyok stumbles away on his feet, barely able to stand up straight.

Oh – he punched Eeyok in his face! He's so damn fast, and it doesn't even look like he's putting any effort into it.

"Argh!" Eeyok screams and thrusts his entire body into Jæmis out of frustration.

Jæmis raises his arm and jumps, pushing Eeyok underneath his armpit and slamming him onto his back with his elbow. At the same time, he knees Eeyok's stomach.

Eeyok doubles over with a cough.

I clasp my hands over my mouth to swallow a gasp.

"Are you okay!?" I call out in worry.

Eeyok lifts himself up from the floor, grumbling something under his breath. He ignores my question and faces Jæmis, glaring at him.

This fight is feeling very one-sided.

Jæmis smirks. "Seems now you want to take it seriously."

Eeyok rushes forwards, attacking Jæmis with a flurry of punches and swings. Jæmis either dodges or deflects without breaking a sweat, making as minimal moves as possible.

I can clearly tell Eeyok is outclassed, as he's getting countered each time. He's taking hit after hit, Jæmis showing no mercy on him.

Eeyok is struggling to stay on his feet, and finally all he's doing is blocking and defending against Jæmis' attacks.

They become more vicious, faster – Eeyok can't keep up and yelps out in pain.

Jæmis delivers a blow to Eeyok's jaw, causing him to go down like a ragdoll. That looked like it really hurt!

Eeyok stays motionless on the mat. I'm about to rush over to him, but Billius holds up his hand, urging me to stay.

I see him stir and raise up his head, a little disoriented. Good, he's not unconscious.

I feel horror wash over me as I see Jæmis advance on Eeyok's body, ready to kick him while he's down.

1. Prevent Jæmis from hurting Eeyok.
2. "No – he's already down!"

I get up from the bench and conjure a thread from my fingers, wrapping them all around Eeyok's waist. Using all my strength, I snap the threads back, making Eeyok's body slide across the mat, away from Jæmis' foot.

Jæmis looks up in anger. He sees me, and I just glare back.

"Kicking someone who's down is just unnecessarily cruel," I sneer at him.

Eeyok brushes the threads away from his waist and I dissolve it. He quickly gets up, fear reflecting in his eyes.

"Princess, don't–!"

"–Who said you could interfere in our training!?" Jæmis bellows, walking up to me.

All the soldiers quit fighting as our voices carry across the room. Their eyes are on us now.

"Clearly, you're much stronger than him. You were just beating him up senselessly. Someone had to stop you."

"No – he's already down!" I yell out, standing up from the bench.

Jæmis stops right before his foot connects with Eeyok's body. Agitated, he looks over at me.

Eeyok scrambles away, getting back up on his feet. He looks frightened.

"No, Princess, don't interfere!" he says, concerned.

Jæmis flies over towards me, clearly pissed I interrupted their match.

"Who said you could speak and disrupt our match!?"

Not backing down, I narrow my eyes at him.

"You did, when you decided you were going to kick someone who's already down! That's cruel."

"The Princess has a point I'm inclined to agree with," Billius takes my side. "The less injuries, the better."

"War is gritty and cruel. The enemy will not hesitate to kill you when you're down. You are living in a fantasy of petty ideals," he huffs.

"All that matters is being strong and surviving."

"You don't make someone stronger by beating them up," I counter.

"That's exactly how it goes, and I will not tolerate any dissidence! Strength is all that matters. If you're weak, you die. If you're down, you get right back up, or you die."

I can tell he's heated up, but I just won't stand for him beating up Eeyok without him having a fighting chance.

"Pick on someone your own size. How can he learn anything if the fight was his to lose from the start?" I growl back.

"She is right, you know." Another voice joins the conversation.

Kæleb enters the scene, stepping onto the mats with a cocky smirk on his face.

"Come spar with me. I'm sure I'm much more of a challenge than some grunt."

Jæmis presses his lips into a thin line, his eyebrows lowering. I can tell he wants to yell at me even more, perhaps send me away, but Kæleb sent him a direct challenge he can't refuse.

I'm starting to figure out how all of these ranks work.

Eeyok bows politely in front of Jæmis, before scurrying off the mats. Billius flags him over to do a quick check-up and make sure he's okay.

I want to be concerned about Eeyok, but I can't take my eyes off of the brothers, who are staring at each other as if they're playing mind games. There's this intensity between them that's hard to ignore.

I have a feeling they both won't be holding back.

Jæmis bends through his knees and turns his body towards Kæleb, his hands finally up in a fighting position. Kæleb mirrors his stance.

Oh boy, yep, these two are serious.

"I accept your challenge," says Jæmis.

Eeyok pulls me aside. "Princess, stay back," he warns me.

"Huh?" I say, confused.

But I'm nearly blown off my feet as a strong gust of wind erupts between the two men. Eeyok stabilizes me and forces me to sit down.

I can barely tell what's going on – I see the two brothers clashing against each other on the mats, delivering blow after blow.

Parrying, blocking, countering; there's so many fighting moves, I can't follow along anymore. This fight is on a whole different level than the one with Eeyok.

"Captain Jæmis holding back with Eeyok," he says. "No reason to interfere."

Kæleb throws out a high kick towards Jæmis' ribs, which gets parried and followed up by an immediate counter. Jæmis manages to land a blow which makes Kæleb grunt out and stagger backwards.

Kæleb rubs the side of his jaw. He looks really pissed off for Jæmis getting a clean hit in. I'm surprised by how much he's losing his composure.

"Is that all you got?" Kæleb taunts his brother.

"Seems you still don't know your place," Jæmis fires back just as arrogantly.

This enrages Kæleb and he charges an attack. Anticipating it, Jæmis easily blocks it.

They're back to trading blows again, it's hard to follow even with my keen eyesight. Kæleb grabs Jæmis' garb and forces him into a headlock.

Except Jæmis flips Kaleb over his entire body, slipping out of his robe.

Kæleb lands on his feet and turns around, also getting rid of the garment he was wearing.

Why is everyone suddenly stripping!? God, these two brothers are so beefy.

"Seems they're getting serious," Billius mentions dryly.

"That sounds concerning," I say.

"It is. Please pay attention to your surroundings. You may get hurt."

I think I would have preferred to stay in the infirmary at this point...

"Yaaargh!" Kæleb yells and punches Jæmis in his face.

Jæmis spits out some blood, his eyes serious and focused. Kæleb looks pleased for landing a hit.

His arrogant smirk gets wiped off his face when Jæmis lands an unexpected kick on his shin, flooring him. Not stopping there, Jæmis is about to punch him in the face, but Kæleb rolls across the mat, dodging it.

And then suddenly, they're not on the mats anymore – they're flying. Continuing their fight unabated, but this time, they're in mid-air.

The intensity and speed of their attacks is making wind blow all over the place, messing up my hair.

Everyone around us has stopped training to witness the sparring match. They're cheering them on, yelling out the name of whoever they think is going to win.

"Surely Captain Jæmis is the best – our undefeated champion!"

"Captain Kæleb's determination is unrivaled!"

A strong punch against Kæleb's jaw makes him go flying against the wall, knocking over a bunch of equipment and weapons.

Jæmis lands in front of him.

"I'd finish it while you're down, but it seems that tactic is too uncouth for the Princess' feeble eyes," Jæmis mocks him.

I let out a puff of annoyance in response.

Suddenly Jæmis is knocked off his feet as Kæleb barrels him down.

Wait – he's glowing. Now both his eyes are blue. Oh, and he's got those tribal markings on his skin as well!

"You can be as underhanded as you like – I'm not gonna stop you! Hahaha!" Kæleb's voice has changed somewhat, it sounds more unhinged.

Even his posture and movements are different. They're more fluid but also unpredictable. Jæmis has a hard time keeping up with him.

"Oh no," Billius sighs. "This is not going to end well."

I turn to him. "What do you mean?"

"You'll see."

Kæleb punches Jæmis in his stomach, causing him to plant both feet on the mat to brace himself.

"What's this – our little Captain can't take a hit?" Kæleb mocks him. His speech has gotten a lot less formal.

"Kæleb, control yourself," Jæmis snaps at him.

Kæleb appears behind Jæmis in an instant, elbowing him in his neck.

"Just die!" he hisses.

A faster scuffle breaks out. It's hard to make out where punches are flying and if they're landing, but Jæmis has a difficult time keeping up with this new and improved Kæleb. It's like he gets a strength buff whenever those markings show up.

Kæleb gets thrown across the mats by Jæmis, crashing into a couple of nearby soldiers.

He doesn't care about the damage and gets right back up, flying straight at Jæmis.

"Kæleb – get a hold of yourself before I have to take you down," Jæmis warns.

"Take *me* down?" Kæleb laughs out loud. "You couldn't even take down HX-108!"

This seems to be a sore issue for Jæmis because all of a sudden, his eyes glint a light blue as well.

I blink and completely miss it; Jæmis simply vanishes into thin air. He reappears behind Kæleb, and their movements are so fast, it's impossible to figure out what's going on.

All I hear is that they're hitting each other, with Kæleb grunting more often. It seems now that Jæmis has those glowing markings, he can keep up much better.

In fact... I think he's overpowering Kæleb.

Then Jæmis holds Kæleb in a chokehold, his arm snaked around his neck.

"Turn back, now," Jæmis yells at him.

"Hahaha... Eat my fists!" Kæleb laughs maniacally as he escapes the chokehold.

It's so strange to see this side of Kæleb; he's been so polite the couple of times we've met. Now he's like a whole other person.

"That's what happens when Prince Kæleb fazes. He becomes this uncontrollable monster," Billius explains.

"Hm. Only Captain Jæmis can stop him," Eeyok joins in.

"Fazes?" I repeat.

"The markings, it's in their species. It makes them stronger, faster, and tougher."

"And crazy?" I ask, looking at how unhinged Kæleb has become.

Billius closes his eyes. "No... that is unique to Prince Kæleb. It is a condition of his."

"Which means Prince Jæmis is fine... and stronger," I muse.

"That is correct. They are a very powerful race."

"How come they aren't always in that mode?" I ask. Makes sense to always be in this state if it means you're stronger.

Billius gives me a sympathetic smile.

"No power comes without consequences. Look closely, Prince Kæleb is getting sloppier."

He's right: Kæleb is getting slower and isn't able to dodge Jæmis' attacks anymore, only deflecting them at best.

"Stop what you're doing, faze back," Jæmis says in a calm voice.

"Stop chattering and fight me!" Kæleb yells at him in frustration.

Kæleb picks up one of the fallen spears on the mats and starts using it to hit Jæmis. With more range to his attacks, Jæmis has to dodge them skillfully.

It's strange to say, but looking at these two glowing men, fighting each other like this, it's almost like a dance. It's a little mesmerizing, to be honest.

Jæmis manages to kick Kæleb away. In his rage, Kæleb throws the spear directly at Jæmis like a javelin.

He deflects it with his hand, not even flinching.

Wait, no – that spear is coming straight at us!

"Ahh!" I scream, scrambling to jump out of the way.

It all goes by so fast. Eeyok tugs me on my arm, pulling me out of harm's way. But then suddenly, I'm pushed against the wall with Jæmis' body pressed up against me.



I blink several times, seeing only his naked chest in my view. My heartbeat is spinning out of control.

"This..." Jæmis breathes out slowly as his blue eyes gaze into mine. "Is exactly why this is no place for an Earthling like you."

I gasp loudly when I finally notice the spear sticking out of Jæmis' shoulder. It's staring me right in the face. It went straight through his body.

"Prince Kæleb, stop staring in shock and help break the end off of this projectile," Billius speaks up.

Kæleb shakes his head, his eye colour returning back to brown, his markings fading.

Jæmis grunts in pain as he pushes himself away from the wall. I can finally breathe again.

He... He took that spear for me. That could have killed me. I can't believe it.

-- Palace bedroom

I wake up, drenched in my own sweat again.

The tea! I have to take the tea!

I roll out of bed and scramble towards the small table where the cup of tea is. It's cooled down by now, and still tastes as bitter as ever, but my body feels so much better once I down it.

Getting used to this will take a while; knowing I'll die if I don't take this medicine.

That's when I notice a certain other bodily function that has been conveniently missing for over a month. The cramping, the wetness; my period has finally started.

Due to the entire stress I've endured, it's thrown my cycle off so I haven't had to worry about it all this time. And now that it's here, it's making me cranky.

I need to wear something to catch the blood... I can't go around bleeding all over myself. That's so unclean. I want to retain some of my dignity as a woman.

I look over at the bed and all of the colourful pillows. Well, time to use what I can get my hands on.

The fabric tears easily as I rip it apart. I fashion a crude pair of underwear out of it using my thread.

A knock on the door alerts me, and soon it slides open.

"Princess Joselina, it is I, Captain Kæleb," he announces himself.

He takes a tentative step inside, but holds in his breath when he sees me on the floor, torn fabric lying about.

"Uhh," I stutter, unable to form a proper greeting.

Suddenly he rushes over to me, bending down on his knee to my level. There's a concerned expression on his face. He stares at me with his good eye.

"My Princess, are you hurt? Are you bleeding anywhere?"

Well, this is awkward. My face colours quickly and I turn away. Can he smell my period!? Why is it that Kæleb always seems to find me in embarrassing situations?

"I'm fine, Captain Kæleb, please do not worry about me, I just... want a change of undergarments."

I gesture towards the torn fabric.

"I didn't have much choice but to use the pillows."

Kæleb leans in closely to me, sniffing the air.

"I am positive I smell blood on you—"

"—Like I said, do not worry, I am okay!" I quickly interrupt him and back away.

Kæleb examines me with his brown eye, staying silent as he studies every detail. I'm reminded of his training with Jæmis yesterday, when his eye turned blue and those markings were carved in his skin.

The way he impaled Jæmis with that spear. Honestly, it was a little terrifying being so close to certain death again.

Not to mention I saw a whole other side of Kæleb. From the prim and proper rulebook guy, to someone unhinged and reckless.

Kæleb finally gets up from the floor and stands straight. He offers me a hand.

"Very well. Please, allow me."

A little hesitant, I accept his hand and he pulls me to my feet.

"Princess, I wish to apologize for my behaviour yesterday. That is why I'm here."

"I don't think there's anything to apologize for."

"Yes, there is. I had almost harmed you due to my own carelessness. It was an unsightly display," he says in a stern voice.

"I was lucky to have my brother step in before you got hurt."

"...How is he?" I ask, slightly curious.

After yesterday's training, Jæmis was carted off towards the infirmary. I didn't get to help this time; I was sent straight to my room.

"He is doing well, though he has to rest his right arm and shoulder for a day."

Geez – *only* a day. It's ridiculous how fast they recover. I still have a slight bruise on my wrist from when Jæmis held me.

Kæleb bows in front of me in a very polite manner.

"Please accept my apology by letting me take you out to the market so that you may purchase new garments."

My ears perk up; going out? Leaving the palace? Possibly buying clothes? The thought of going out to see the actual ground for once instantly lifts up my mood.

"But I thought I wasn't allowed to leave the palace," I point out, and tap the restrictive jewelry on my arm.

Kæleb follows my line of sight then plasters on a confident smirk.

"When you are as accomplished of a captain as I am, you get certain... *perks*. I would have to ask for permission, possibly bring more guards. But it is not impossible."

I eagerly smile at him.

"Then yes! I'd love to! When can we go?"

Kæleb seems a little surprised at my enthusiasm.

"I shall check with my superiors – however I hope to take you tomorrow."

"The sooner the better," I say.

"Then it is settled." Kæleb bows to me once more.

"And are you sure you are not in need of any assistance?" His eyes travel downwards.

"Yes! I'm good!" I shriek. Please stop bringing it up!

"Very well. Good day, Princess Joselina." Kæleb politely takes his leave.

Once he's left, I put on the makeshift underwear for now. It'll have to do.

Chapter [011]

-- Palace entrance

The sun shines so bright in the sky.

Wait – can I even call it the sun? I don't think it's *the* sun, just *a* sun.

In front of me are the three siblings and...

"Eeyok!" I greet him cheerfully.

"Greetings, Princess," he says with a smile.

It feels like it's been ages since I last saw him.

"I didn't expect this many people to join," says Kæleb, looking a bit troubled.

"How dare you leave the palace without taking me with you? You know I get bored out of my skull in this place," Læna complains.

"That's because you're not allowed to go out either," Kæleb stresses.

"The both of you, shut your mouth holes," Jæmis grunts in an annoyed tone.

"Don't you pick that tone with me," says Læna, her eyebrows lowered. "You rarely take me out anymore, Jæmis. Where has that sweet boy gone?"

I awkwardly stand in the middle of all this. It seems Kæleb got permission to take me out, but Jæmis is coming with us to supervise, and somehow Læna tagged along.

"Eeyok are you coming with us as a guard?" I ask.

"That be so," he answers.

Læna waves her hand in the air. "I always need a guard around me if I go anywhere."

"We can't have you running off on your own," says Kæleb.

"Are you insinuating I don't have the mind to follow some simple rules?"

"That's exactly what I'm—"

"Enough!" Jæmis bellows, clearly agitated by their conversation.

"Yes, Læna, it is no time to squabble. We are taking the princess out and returning before sunset, that is all," says Kæleb, as if he's on a mission.

"What happens if we don't make it back before sunset?" I ask.

"Heads will roll," Jæmis answers.

I clamp my mouth shut, getting the message.

"Stay close and move out," he commands.

"And you," he points at me. "Don't leave my sight."

-- Streetmarket

While the palace has been nothing but breathtaking at times, being down in the streets gives me a much better sense of their culture.

There's colourful stalls everywhere. Gaötte are walking about, holding large baskets of woven straw. Some of them carrying metal pots and pans. Everyone is constantly on the move.

The streets are crowded, and the four of us stand out like a sore thumb. It's clear to me that the Gaötte live and breathe on this planet like it's their home. The siblings are a completely different race. I wonder if they have their own city someplace else.

"I haven't been out to the market in ages," Læna cooes as she examines one of the stalls filled with trinkets.

"Let's keep it that way," says Jæmis. "You know you're under surveillance."

"Why *is* Læna under surveillance?" I finally ask. My curiosity has been burning ever since I met Læna and came to find out what the jewelry on her arm meant.

"Don't speak," says Jæmis, dismissing me.

"Don't tease the poor princess – she's merely curious," says Læna.

"Læna has the tendency to run away," Kæleb interjects.

"Well that's just a blatant lie."

The three of them continue to ignore my actual question and argue among themselves. Eeyok seems to be tuning out the conversation; even he can't bear it that much longer.

"Princess, stick close with us. The streets aren't entirely safe," Kæleb warns me once he's done arguing with Læna.

But everything looks so inviting, it's lifting up my spirits to be outside the palace for once.

"Yes, there are sometimes cases of rebels attacking the cityfolk," Jæmis explains.

Rebels? I had no idea. Everything seems so peaceful.

"Don't you worry about a thing; we've got two well trained captains and a soldier to protect us. A little bomb here or there won't hurt us," says Læna nonchalantly.

"Ehehe... Eeyok protect," he says happily.

Suddenly I am on alert; bombs? Okay, the streets don't look so inviting anymore. I end up gravitating towards Eeyok as a personal shield.

"I didn't realize the city had rebels," I mumble quietly. I figured this was a strictly run planet under Varitus' rule.

I guess he's got some opposition as well.

"Pests, nothing more. They are merely an annoyance," says Jæmis, seemingly not concerned.

"Are they dangerous or are they an annoyance? Which is it?" I ask, noting the discrepancy between Kæleb's earlier statement.

"Princess, relax – breathe in the air! Enjoy the sights!" Læna chirps in with a gorgeous smile.

"Well, I'd like to, but I also don't want to get blown up..."

"Not on my watch. You are safe, Princess," Kæleb gives me a curt bow.

"Shouldn't you be keeping *me* safe?" Læna points out with a pout. "I am your oldest sister."

"You're also my only sister."

"Even more reason to treat me better!"

I tune out their banter when a shimmer catches my eye; a piece of fabric glistening in the sun. It's such a gorgeous orange colour, decorated with the most detailed lace I've ever seen before.

My feet can't stop themselves as I'm attracted to the stall with the rolls of fabric lying about.

I've never seen these patterns at home before; they take my breath away. The craftsmanship really shines through. The must have spent hundreds of hours to finish this handwoven piece of fabric. I'm in awe.

I end up taking out my phone and quickly snapping a few pictures of the market. Only 1% remaining; it's on its last leg.

Then I'm back to gushing about the fabric.

My mind goes into overdrive; what kind of material is it made out of? What does the texture feel like against my skin? Is it heavy? Airy? Does it change colour in a certain light?

So many questions! I have to know!

"See anything you like?" asks the shopkeeper. "Two pieces of oogalt per kroun."

I want to ask what an oogalt and kroun are, but I'm rudely shoved aside.

"Didn't I tell you not to leave my sight?" a voice hisses in my ear, clearly belonging to Jæmis.

1. "I'm still in your sight, am I not?"
2. "I didn't mean to wander off that far."

"I'm still in your sight, am I not?" I answer plainly.

I didn't go *that* far. I can still spy the others right behind us!

"Don't get pedantic with me. You are not allowed to leave my side."

"Possessive," I drawl out, not caring. I just want to get my hands on that gorgeous fabric.

"This has nothing to do with being possessive. I need you to stay close before I'm forced to put you in chains."

He pauses briefly. "In fact, that is sounding like the better option here."

"No thanks," I huff.

"I didn't mean to wander off that far," I explain myself.

Honestly, I just walked across the street to the nearest stall. It's not that far. Then again, they did mention rebels...

"That doesn't matter – you need to be with me at all times," he warns me.

"You may have gotten a favour out of my brother, but don't forget you're still our prisoner here."

"I remember crystal clear," I bite back.

A hurried Gaötte pushes past me, bumping me into Jæmis.

"Earthlings have feeble feet," Jæmis complains.

"Hey, I got pushed by someone," I argue back.

But then, with our close proximity to each other, Jæmis leans in even more and takes a whiff.

No... don't tell me. I cleaned myself before coming here! There's no way he notices it!

"I smell blood, Princess." His voice is so close to my ear, like a low whisper.

"What are you hiding?"

Why do these people have such an amazing sense of smell!? This is ridiculous. Let me period in peace.

"It's none of your business," I mutter.

Jæmis clearly doesn't like my answer and forcefully grabs my wrist, keeping me close.

"Speak, why do you smell of blood?" His voice raises and his tone is sharp.

Embarrassed by his loud voice, I avert my eyes. Everyone around us are starting to stare. Do I really have to explain myself?

"It's nothing... it's a normal human thing," I mumble.

Jæmis slowly releases my wrist, but he doesn't look all that convinced.

"...Human thing?" he drawls out.

My face colours slightly.

"Yes, a female thing. It's nothing, I'm okay! Please stop bringing it up!"

"You are hiding something."

Yes – my really disgusting blood stained panties!

"Just please, let me buy some fabric so I can deal with my issue."

Jæmis' brown eyes dart over towards the stall with the rolls of fabric.

"You wish to purchase fabric?" he asks, genuinely sounding confused.

"If I'm allowed to. Kæleb says I could."

"That's *Captain* Kæleb," he corrects me with a hiss.

It's hard to keep remembering that I have to address people by their title.

"Right, my mistake. Captain Kæleb said he'd buy garments for me as an apology for yesterday's actions."

"I recall not a hair on your body had been harmed yesterday," he points out with arms crossed in an intimidating manner.

"I made sure of that."

That's right, Jæmis took that spear for me. It would have sliced right through me otherwise. I guess I ought to thank him for that.

But my pride and stubbornness are not so easily overcome. In my mind, everything is his fault in the first place.

However, my conscience is nagging at me; he *did* save my life.

1. "You did a good job."

2. "Thank you... for blocking that spear."

"You did a good job," I end up saying.

Jæmis looks at me weirdly.

"Good job?"

"Yeah, for blocking that spear for me."

"It is not my job to block anything for you," he hisses. "I am not your personal guard."

No, he certainly is not. He's my personal kidnapper instead.

"Thank you... for blocking that spear," I say in a quiet voice.

"Come again? Do I hear a sense of gratitude uttered from your lips?"

I bite on my lower lip, immediately regretting it after seeing his smug reaction.

"Nothing, I said nothing!" I quickly backtrack.

Jæmis remains silent, seemingly satisfied that I've thanked him. There's a perpetual smirk on his face. Alright, I can't stand it, I need to distract myself.

"Anyways... I'd like to go look at some of the fabric," I say, changing the subject.

Not only do I want to make some underwear for my period, but I would also love to have the fabric in the first place. I want to study their techniques – it is an alien planet after all.

Jæmis lazily flicks his hand, throwing me a small pouch which I catch. Inside are a few brightly coloured gems.

"Go on, you're allowed no more than five oogalt. That's Captain Kæleb's budget for you."

Excited, I finally start inspecting the stall for real this time. I have no clue how much an oogalt is worth, but if I can get my hands on something, I'll be happy.

The sparkling rolls of cloth all vie for my attention. For the briefest moment, I forget my situation, my surroundings – instead, I'm focused on all the options in front of me. The countless ways I could use them.

Designs start spinning through my mind, outfits supers could wear. Perhaps some casual attire.

"Earthlings must be obsessed with shiny materials," Jæmis mentions when he sees me reaching for a sparkling roll.

"I won't deny that seeing something shiny is appealing," I admit.

"Of course. You have feeble minds. Simpletons."

"Hey – there is no reason to insult me!"

"I'm not insulting you. I'm discussing the Earthling race."

"That's the same thing! And there's no 'Earthling race', we're humans. People. I don't call you an alien either."

"Yes, I recall many other words being uttered from your mouth hole. Some obscene words."

And he deserved every single one of them...

"Humans you say..." Jæmis gazes down at the fabric on the stall, though he doesn't seem to care for them much.

"Do they all excrete blood from their nether regions?"

I feel the tips of my ears turn red. He can smell my period and where it's coming from. This is almost invasive.

Can't I have some privacy? I just want to make period panties and then cry in bed.

With as much grace and dignity that I have, I shake my head.

"No. Only the females do," I explain.

"Your race seems defective."

"Not everyone can heal up holes like you can. In fact – do you even *have* a bruise where the spear impaled you? I can't tell at all." I stare at his shoulder, but he's been moving it like normal.

"Curious, aren't you?"

I don't want to admit I am. But I totally am.

Jæmis slides his shoulder out of his robe, giving me a peek of his injury.

Except, I see nothing at all. His skin is as smooth as butter, no discolouration to be seen either.

"What – there's nothing. Not a trace." I'm perplexed.

"But you have scars... How come your wound vanished completely, but still have so many scars left on your body?"

Jæmis puts the robe back on.

"Ræhu's accelerated healing doesn't start until they're older," he explains.

"You mean to say you got these when you were young?"

"Enough questions – pick your garment so we can move on," he says grumpily.

I can't help but think about it. The scars on his back, the one on his chest and arm – he sustained these when he was younger. Possibly a child. Kæleb's got a scar over his eye that turned him blind, was he a child, too?

"Pick one," Jæmis urges me.

"Alright, alright!"

I select two fine pieces of cloth – a teal and orange one. They're both so gorgeous.

With Jæmis' help, I pay the vendor their fee. Turns out, five pieces of oogalt gives me a lot of length in return. I even have gems left over! There's so much fabric I'm handed a basket to carry it all in.

And it's heavy, too!

"Finally, now we can head back to the palace with the others."

The both of us look back to where we left the rest, but spot no one there. Jæmis remains uncharacteristically quiet as he scans the crowd for any signs of them.

Actually, I did find it a little strange that no one came to join us, but I guess I was too engrossed with the fabric to really pay attention to them.

I look over the crowd as well, but honestly, I can't find them either. My eyesight is much better than Jæmis I believe, but I don't spy them anywhere. It's like they simply left us.

"Where did they go?" I ask.

Jæmis mumbles something under his breath and starts taking some strides towards the middle of the street.

"Hey – don't leave me behind!" I cry out, suddenly worried about being left alone.

Jæmis stands still and takes out a device from his pouch. I catch up to him and look at the circular device. It's the one that had the map of the palace with the coloured dots.

Except this time, the map has changed. It seems to be a plan of the streets we're in, like it's a GPS. There's a single dot on the screen. Jæmis' eyes make contact with mine.

That's my dot. It's pointing at me, and only me.

"Putrid mother's nutsack," he curses.

"What the f–"

There's no time for explanations as Jæmis grabs my wrist and pulls me into the crowd. I hold onto my basket for dear life.

"What's wrong?" I ask, though I think I know the answer.

We've lost sight of the rest, but it seems Jæmis can't track them either.

Jæmis doesn't answer me as he pulls me along the crowd, not caring who he bumps into, or if I stumble along the way.

At this point, you'd think flying would be better.

"Hey, slow down!" I call out to him as I nearly trip over my own feet.

However, Jæmis pays no attention to my calls. He's hyper focused on looking for our companions.

Jæmis ends up bumping into someone with a huge cart. Fresh produce spills onto the ground and people stop to help.

"Out of my way!" he hisses as everyone blocks his path.

Seeing as everyone is taking their time to forge a way out for us, Jæmis ends up losing his patience.

He pulls me into his chest and wraps his muscular arm around my waist.

I shriek loudly when he launches us into the sky.

I cling onto him, afraid I'll fall. The wind rushes past us and it's making it difficult to keep my fabric from flying out of the basket.

Jæmis hangs in the air, stopping to look down at the city below us.

Oh boy... we're *really* high up. This is triggering a sense of fear for heights that I never knew I had. I look away from the city, my cheek pressed against Jæmis' bare chest.

Thump. Thump.

My ears catch that heartbeat rhythm again. It's much louder now that I'm pushed up against him like this.

That means it wasn't just my imagination last time... His heart beat really does sound like this. It's an almost soothing rhythm, distracting me from the fact we're up in the air.

When Jæmis growls in frustration, the trance is broken. I tilt my head to see him look over the city in agitation. It seems he can't find them, despite the high vantage point.

Gathering my courage, I gaze down into the streets of the city.

I see it all; the Gaötte walking about, the fabric stall we were at before, even other landmarks I haven't been to yet. It shouldn't be too hard to spot them; Kæleb and Læna definitely stand out from the rest.

That is, if they're outside. I don't have x-ray eyes like a certain superhero does, I can't look through walls.

But then I see the shimmer of Læna's blue hair in an alley. I found her!

I point at her location.

"There she is, there's Princess Læna," I tell Jæmis.

Jæmis follows my finger and narrows his eyes, straining to see her. For a second it looks like he's going to call me a liar, but then Læna steps into our view and he immediately recognizes her.

I see she's with Eeyok as well.

I hang onto his shoulders as he flies straight towards her, not even wasting a second.

When we get closer, I can tell they haven't spotted us yet. I don't see Kæleb with them. Where is he? Shouldn't he be with them?

They're both hidden away in an alley, talking among themselves. I can't lip read them though, so I don't know what they're saying.

-- Yool alley

Jæmis finally flies in close enough to park us on the ground again. Læna's eyes grow wide when she spots Jæmis.

He releases me and marches his way over to Læna.

"What is the meaning of this!?" he demands to know. "*Where* is your tracker?"

"Jæmis. It was – it was stolen!" she cries out.

"Stolen?" he spits out, finding it unbelievable. "Where is the captain?"

"Thief took jewels. Captain Kæleb go catch thief," Eeyok explains.

"And you – why didn't you come find me?" he now directs his anger towards Eeyok.

"Eeyok protect Princess Læna..." he says meekly.

"By taking her away from me?"

"Calm down your temper, Jæmis. We got separated at the market. Eeyok is keeping me safe. Why don't you make yourself useful and find that thief that stole my armlet?"

Jæmis takes out the tracker once more and looks at it. I can tell there's still only one dot on the screen.

"Stolen or destroyed?" he asks in this foreboding tone. "Because I cannot track you anymore."

Læna doesn't look particularly concerned. "Oh, I guess maybe the thief broke it. Who knows? Anything could have happened."

"The issue at hand is that this shouldn't happen in the first place. You are without a tracker, this is unacceptable."

"It's not like it's my fault, you know," Læna complains.

"Stay here. Eeyok, make sure the two of them don't wander off anywhere. I shall go find Captain Kæleb."

Jæmis doesn't even wait for a response as he launches into the sky, dirt rising up from the ground as he goes. I end up coughing and sneezing when the dust tickles my nose.

"Tch, he sure found us fast," Læna mumbles.

"It wasn't the Captain," Eeyok explains. He then looks over at me.

"Princess, has good eyes, yes?"

Læna suddenly looks interested as she raises her head to finally acknowledge me as well.

"Is that so?" she drawls out.

I look down at the basket I'm holding onto.

"Uhh, yes. I spotted you when Captain Jæmis took off into the sky."

"You sure are holding back all these fun little surprises. Peculiar Earthling."

"Revealing everything I have up my sleeve isn't very smart when I'm in enemy territory," I explain.

Læna laughs out loud, her eyes lighting up.

"Clever, very clever! You are most certainly correct."

There's a seductive smile on her face.

"Everyone's got a thing or two they wish to keep secret from everyone else."

She then taps her fingers on my basket. "Like this, what are you holding there?"

"Oh this? It's fabric." I can't help but grin.

Læna is clearly confused though.

"Fabric? You mean a dress, right? Something dazzling, I'm sure."

"No, it's just... fabric."

"A skirt? Robe? Bottoms? You could have gotten any number of extraordinary garments in this market, but you chose..." She points her long finger at my basket. "Fabric."

"Earthlings must like cloth," Eeyok butts in.

"Haha no, it's just me. I like making clothes. In fact, I—" Immediately, I shut up.

I was about to run off my mouth and tell them I'm a fashion designer with her own boutique. That's definitely *not* what a princess should be doing.

I should be more careful...

"Err, in my spare time, I like tinkering with pieces of fabric," I quickly correct myself.

Læna strokes her hand across the blue fabric while humming to herself.

"Tinkering, you say. You know, I'm quite curious about Earthling's fashion. Sometimes it gets too stuffy in the outfits they have over here. It'd be nice to see something new for once."

"Would you like me to create something for you?" I ask, my designer senses tingling. She's got the perfect body to make clothes for!

"That won't do. Don't you think you should be spending your little gift on yourself?"

"It's alright! I've gotten way too much anyway."

"Hmm, what do you think Eeyok, should the princess create Earthling fashion for me?"

Eeyok looks confused and out of place.

"...Yes?" he says, a little unsure, gauging our reactions. "If no trouble."

"No trouble at all! In fact, it would be a nice distraction from everything else," I admit.

"You know, there is the upcoming Maaka next nunoon," she mentions.

"Will Princess Læna participate?" asks Eeyok, suddenly curious.

"Participate? I'll lead it!" she says excitedly.

I try and keep up with the conversation, but some words aren't being translated for me. I know nunoon might be a passage of time – Jæmis said we'd be returning to earth in three nunoons. However long that is.

"What's Maaka?" I ask.

"It proud celebration of Gaötte culture," explains Eeyok. "Held in palace."

"Yes, and I would *love* to wear something special for the occasion," she chirps. "Something easy to move around in."

"Like a dancing outfit?"

Before Læna can respond, the three of us are shook to our core as an ear-deafening blast fills the sky.

Our surroundings quake and tremble. In the distance, smoke rises to the top. I can hear shouting and screaming.

My heart beat rises through the roof, it drums against my chest. Læna and Eeyok don't look too concerned, but I find myself clam up.

Ashes fall from the sky and a scent of burning wood and flesh mixes into the air. It's stirring up my memories.

The smoke, the ash – the *fire*.

-- Flashback

Embers cascade downwards as the fire blazes strong.

"NOOOO!" Caine shrieks.

"Mom – dad!" I yell at the top of my lungs.

"MOOOM! DAAAAD!" Caine screams.

"They're all in there!" I scream and run towards the fire.

Ralph holds me back.

"Joselina, Caine! No! Please, don't chase them into the fire," Ralph begs us with tears running down his face.

"What are you talking about!? THEY'RE IN THERE! WE HAVE TO GO GET THEM!" I say in a panicked voice.

"ARGGH!!" Caine's entire body sparks with electricity.

I fall to the ground wailing, hopelessly watching the fire burn.

-- Yool alley

Then I'm brought back to reality with another loud blast from the distance.

"Princess, are you alright?" Læna asks me.

"Huh?" I say, finding my voice.

I'm sweating profusely. My fight or flight senses are going into overdrive. I'm getting heart palpitations.

"You've been catatonic this entire time."

It's hard to focus. The smell is overwhelming. I have to get out of here.

"Is the city under attack?" I ask, scared and confused, gripping my basket tightly.

"Rebels," is all she says.

My senses are running ahead of me as I can't help but make an immediate parallel to Hulio back on Earth, the terrorist group.

We... we have to get to safety if the city is under attack!

Not a second later, Jæmis makes a grand entrance, landing on the ground with a large boom. Dust kicks up everywhere.

"We leave – *NOW*."

A moment later Kæleb joins us, he was right on Jæmis' tail. He steps over towards Læna and takes her hand.

"Time to strategically retreat." He then flies off with her.

Jæmis doesn't even wait until I'm prepared and takes me by my waist, launching off as well.

"W-what about Eeyok!?" I screech as I see him get left behind.

"Eeyok will manage... Perhaps," Eeyok yells after us.

-- Palace entrance

We all arrive at the palace once more. My feet finally touch the ground, but I'm still holding onto Jæmis. I'm shaking profusely.

Soldiers are marching out of the main gate, towards the streets. Perhaps to quell the rebellion.

Jæmis pushes me away from him and walks towards Læna. I'm nauseous from the flying, but also completely anxious and terrified with what happened.

We left Eeyok behind!

"You'll go to Healer Billius this instant and get another tracker. Don't let Lord Varitus see you like this."

"Don't fret so much, I'm sure he's too busy being briefed about the explosion just now."

"Now, Læna," he growls.

"I'll take her, let's go." Kæleb takes her hand again and they fly off together.

"What about Eeyok?" I ask, worried for his safety. We left him down there.

I... I can't leave someone else behind again. I just can't.

"He could be in danger! We need to go back and get him!"

"One grunt's life doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things," he explains, annoyed. "Eeyok can take care of himself, he's a soldier."

1. "Eeyok is your responsibility!"
2. "Please go back and save him!"

"Eeyok is your responsibility!" I yell at him.

Anger bubbles up inside of me; I can't let him leave Eeyok behind!

"Why do you care all of a sudden?" he snaps at me.

"Because Eeyok saved me from certain death! He's been nothing but kind to me. Not to mention he protected your sister!" I go off at him.

"And he's part of *your* platoon, your division or whatever – should a captain not look out for his crew?"

I glare at him with all my might; he really is the scum of the universe if he doesn't go back to save him.

"Or are you going to let him perish just like you did with Geroed on the spaceship?"

A myriad of expressions crosses his face; anger, annoyance, indignation – he's livid.

But no words exit his mouth. He's quiet, seething on the inside.

"Please go back and save him!" I beg.

My mind is spinning, I can't think clearly. Why did he leave without Eeyok!

"Princess, you shouldn't concern yourself with any of the soldiers here," he replies, irritated.

"How can I not? Eeyok has saved my life before. We can't just leave him down there when he could be in danger, too!"

"That's exactly what I'm planning on doing."

"But you could save him!" No – I can't let someone else die!

"And why should that be on my list of priorities?" he asks sarcastically.

"I... How could you?" I ask, catching my breath.

"To leave someone behind... He protected your sister. Don't you have any sense of gratitude?"

That seems to have hit a nerve, as he simply crosses his arms to stare at me.

"Please, surely you can go back to get him?"

"You're shaking," he states, noticing I've been trembling all this time.

"I don't do well with fire... And I certainly won't let anyone die in one! Please, you're his captain."

"If the weak can't save themselves and perish... then so be it," he mutters.

"Your sister can't fly! Should she perish, too!?" I snap at him.

A long stretch of silence. His eyes gaze upon me like I'm an insignificant pest, a thorn in his side.

But I know I'm *right*.

Don't think I haven't noticed Læna's distinct lack of flying. Kæleb had to carry her back. She could have been left down there just like Eeyok, but we didn't.

He closes his eyes, biting down on his bottom lip as he clenches his hands into fists.

For a moment, I think he might actually hit me to teach me a lesson about shutting up.

Then slowly, but surely, blue markings weave into his skin. They pop up like a glowing river.

When he opens his eyes again, they're blue this time. Shining. Hypnotizing. Power simply radiates off his body in this state; he's fazed.

He doesn't say a word. His posture is so imposing; he's ready for battle.

But then he blasts off into the sky, debris swirling around and kicking up a storm.

When he's up high, he creates a sonic boom as he changes direction. It hasn't even been two seconds and he's already out of my sight.

I'm left a little perplexed, but also slightly impressed.

Did I get through to him? Is he going to get Eeyok?

My eyes are on the lookout for a flying person in the sky. My heart is still drumming along with adrenaline.

Other soldiers around me ignore my entire existence until there's none left; they've all marched out of the gates. I'm unsure what's unfolding, I just hope Eeyok will be safe.

That dreadful feeling of losing someone to an explosion... I don't ever want to feel it again.

A loud noise and blast knock me off my feet and I stumble around trying to keep my balance.

When the dust settles, I see Jæmis flinging Eeyok onto the ground.

"It seems the Princess deemed it necessary to confirm your safety and whereabouts," he tells Eeyok.

His markings dim and his eye colour returns as he fazes back to normal.

"You worry far too much about weaklings. It's the order and nature of the universe. Only the strong will survive. Those that need handouts are going to die sooner or later."

Eeyok groans as he tries to get up, but seems a little disorientated. I think he must have gotten nauseous from the flying just like me.

The amount of relief that washes over me is so great, I almost well up with tears. I feel like hugging him.

"Helping the weak isn't doing them any favours," he scoffs.

I don't even care what Jæmis is saying right now.

"Eeyok!" I exclaim and rush towards him. "I'm so glad!"

I help him get up on his feet, he's a little out of it still.

"Eeyok no assistance need," he says a bit sluggish.

"See?" Jæmis remarks. "Our soldiers are perfectly capable of looking after themselves."

"Princess worry too much about Eeyok. Eeyok only grunt," he says sheepishly. But he is smiling though.

"I don't care, you're safe. That's good," I say with a smile.

I gratefully look over towards Jæmis. I don't want to say it, especially not after his small villain monologue about only the strong surviving – but I have to let him know what he did was the right choice.

"Thank you for going back."

Ignoring my thanks, Jæmis huffs loudly.

"Now that we've 'rescued' this miserable runt, you should be heading back to your chambers."

I've got so many questions though; what's going on down in the city? I saw a bunch of soldiers deploy, so are we in some kind of civil war? Are we safe in the palace?

But I've already pressed my luck with Jæmis just now. I should take one victory at a time. At least Eeyok is accounted for.

"Eeyok, escort the Princess back to her chambers."

"Yes Captain."

Complying this time around, I grab my basket of fabric and follow Eeyok back inside of the palace.

Hopefully there will be no more explosions today.

I hate being reminded of my parents' deaths.

Chapter [012]

-- Infirmary

The aftermath of the explosions never got a conclusion. Or at the very least, I'm kept in the dark about it, which makes sense. I'm not privy to that information, I am still their prisoner.

An uneventful week later, I'm in the infirmary working alongside Billius.

He's not a man of many words, but he does answer any questions I have. Today he's been showing me how to sterilize wounds.

"You're getting pretty good at this," he compliments me, seeing my work on the patient.

"Ahh, careful!" the patient cries out when I nick him at a sensitive spot on his wound.

"Sorry," I apologize quickly. "Hold still please."

I'm so engrossed with my work that time flies by. It's easy to keep busy so that I'm unable to have time to think to myself. A distraction, pretty much.

"You seem a little less anxious today," remarks Billius once we're left alone.

"Did I seem anxious before?"

"Yes. After the explosions in the city, you seemed more withdrawn and perhaps a bit numb."

How close has he been keeping a watch on me?

"It is my job to track the health of everyone in the palace," he explains when he sees the look on my face.

"How is your monthly cycle?" he asks out of the blue.

I had to explain to Billius what a menstrual cycle was once he noticed I was cramping. At the very least, he couldn't actually smell any blood.

"It's stopped. I feel a lot better," I reply.

At least I was able to wash my reusable period panties, the servants were kind enough to let me use their washing facilities.

"Good. Your complexion has gotten better, too."

"Haha, you really do sound like a worried doctor."

Awkwardly he averts his gaze away from me.

"...Is it bothersome?"

I shake my head. "No, it's fine. Thank you for worrying."

"I will have to note down this biological behaviour about Earthlings," he mutters to himself.

"Humans," I find myself correcting him. "We call ourselves human."

He simply closes his eyes. "My mistake. We tend to call each race from the planet they're from."

"How'd you know it was called Earth?" I ask.

"We didn't. Your planet is called HX-108 to us. I believe shortly after entering your atmosphere, Prince Jæmis received messages from your planet. Broadcasts."

That's the first I've heard of it. "Like videos?"

"Radio waves."

"Oh, I see."

"I think they used it to finetune the Babblefish before engaging. It's why he was able to speak your language right away. He spoke my language, too."

That makes a lot of sense, actually.

Wait.

My ears perk up. Billius hasn't shared much private information with me, so it surprises me when I hear him say 'too'.

"Too?" I repeat. I'm curious.

I've seen the jewelry on his arm, the tracker. Læna and I each have one, though she had to get it replaced. I'm starting to suspect, combined with Billius' exotic appearance which is too different from the Gaötte, that he doesn't belong here.

Billius realizes what he's said and grows quiet.

He's not going to volunteer that information, is he? I'll have to ask directly.

"Billius, why do you have to wear a tracker?"

Billius quietly starts cleaning up the infirmary, putting away used bandages and bottles. He does this for a while, long enough for me to think I won't be getting an answer out of him anytime soon.

But then he speaks up.

"My planet was called Grinya," he says softly. "Peaceful. We were all pacifists. A lot of us were capable of healing the sick and wounded."

I'm noticing the lack of present tense when he's describing his people.

"Grinya was also full of water, a prime target for Lord Varitus' army."

I can see where this is going.

"He took over the planet, didn't he?"

Billius hesitates for a second. There's a sorrowful expression in his eyes.

"Prince Jæmis led the attack."

I can feel this huge lump form in my throat. It's hard to swallow.

"I can see why the two of you don't get along now..." I say, thinking back to the times Billius has been disagreeable with Jæmis.

"Intrigued by my abilities to heal the others, he took me with him."

A grim shadow washes over him.

"The rest weren't so fortunate."

I end up gasping. It's just like my story; except this time, Jæmis succeeded. Is this what would have happened if he didn't get stopped?

Attacking a peaceful planet full of people who didn't want to fight...

1. "How cowardly of them."
2. "I'm glad nothing happened to you."

"How cowardly of them," I say, angry on behalf of Billius.

"Lord Varitus doesn't follow any rules but his own. He will conquer what he can."

"Not if I can help it," I grumble. "I'm going to be a thorn in their side every step of the way."

He raises his eyebrows. "A thorn in their side?"

"Oh, it's just a human expression. It means I'm going to make it difficult for them. I'm not backing down without a fight."

He chuckles lightly.

"I admire your perseverance."

"I'm glad nothing happened to you," I say.

"Thank you, though sometimes I wish it could have gone differently," he admits.

"Yes, I can imagine... You must have lost a lot."

"I do hope your planet doesn't meet the same fate as mine."

"Well, I certainly won't let them get away with it that easily," I say with a brave face.

"I have faith you will succeed in that mission," he says, his eyes softening.

There's a rare smile on his face. "It hasn't been all bad though. In this darkness, you find yourself getting support from the ones you least suspect."

The doors to the infirmary bust open.

"*Billllll!*" Læna announces loudly.

Billius jumps up straight, his face suddenly sporting a rosy colour, like he's been caught sharing a secret.

"P-Princess Læna!" he squeaks in a high voice.

"Hello, good day," I greet her with a smile.

"Oh you're here too! How's my outfit coming along?" she asks eagerly.

"It should be finished by tonight! I've been working on it every night now."

In fact, it's taking me so long because I don't have a sewing machine, nor do I even have any sort of needle or thread to use. I've just been using my own thread and hand stitching it.

"Great! And don't worry Bill, you'll be the first to see me in my new attire." She gives him a seductive smile.

Billius ends up awkwardly coughing into his hand, still blushing slightly.

I think... he likes her. That's kind of adorable.

But the ramifications ring eerily in the back of my mind. Liking the sister of the man who kidnapped you and conquered your planet?

Actually, something *still* doesn't add up.

"Princess Læna?" I ask, getting her attention.

"Hmm?"

I point at the new tracker on her arm. "Why do *you* have to wear that?"

Læna flips her hair over her shoulder, then taps the large gem with her finger.

"Don't you think it kind of clashes with my skin tone?" she asks, feigning innocence.

"Captain Kæleb said it's because you like to run off... What does that mean? Are you also...?"

"So many questions, Princess. Is she always like this?" she asks, turning her attention to Billius.

"I cannot fault her curiosity. She's in an unfamiliar place filled with strangers."

"Well, let's not talk about a boring piece of jewelry like this – instead, let's get back to your work! I'm impatient to see your results."

I sigh, realizing I'm not going to get an answer out of her. Læna does as she pleases.

"If you come to my room tonight, you'll be able to fit it," I say.

"That sounds great! Bill, want to join?"

"Pardon me?" he stutters. "I believe a man visiting a woman's room late at night is overstep—"

"You and your archaic norms. We're not asking you to bed her, just come and join our party. Completely harmless."

"Yes, I would like you to come as well," I encourage him.

It's nice to have people around to talk to. I get really bored and lonely in my room.

"Then it's decided!" Læna exclaims.

Billius simply sighs in defeat.

-- **Palace bedroom**

Late at night, I prepare my final stitches, making sure I've got everything nice and polished.

While originally, I simply wanted to make more underwear for myself, I ended up creating an entire dress for Læna. Well, a two-piece anyway.

I tried to incorporate the planet's own fashion style, and mix it with my personal touch. I couldn't really make her anything modern that people wear on Earth, as that would really stand out. Imagine a business suit on Læna – hah!

Actually, I'm sure she'd rock it. She could have been a killer supermodel in my world.

Soon, the both of them arrive at my room.

"Now, let's see what you've created for me," says Læna with a glint in her eyes.

Billius stands to the side, seemingly a little out of place.

I show Læna the two piece, to which she immediately starts disrobing herself.

"P-Princess Læna!" Billius shrieks as he turns around.

"Why are you so easily frightened?" There's an air of confidence around her words.

"You should take your chance when it's presented to you, Billius," she chuckles.

"Let me know when you're decent," he mutters.

I help Læna get into her new clothes, feeling a bit like I'm a servant at this point.

Her top slides off her rich bronze skin, revealing the massive scar on her back. I almost audibly gasp when I see it; a slash going right down the middle of her spine.

She tilts her head, noticing I've stopped my movements.

"Like what you see?" she hums.

I avert my eyes; it's improper to stare at scars. Putting it in the back of my mind, I continue helping her dress.

My measurements seemed to have been fine, despite having to do everything manually and creating my own measuring tape.

It's a little saggy at her chest, so I quickly put in a few extra stitches to help it stay up.

There, now it's perfect.

"It's certainly peculiar to see you stitch," she says, finding my ability fascinating.

"You look gorgeous," I compliment her, because she really does look fantastic in her new outfit.

"So, this is Earth fashion," she muses as she rubs her hands along the fabric.

"Can you believe it? She made it with the fabric from that little stall at the market. It must have been cheap, yet it feels so... *right*," she says to Billius.

"Billius, doesn't it look magnificent?" she asks, twirling in front of him.

Billius turns around – having had his back faced to us this entire time – and takes Læna's new look in.

"Yes, magnificent," he repeats.

"You like it?" I ask, finding myself glowing at her positive reaction.

"It's very agreeable on me, splendid. Finally, no more stuffy clothes. I'll be the star of the Maaka for sure."

"That's good to hear."

"Do all princesses on Earth sew their own clothes?" Læna questions me.

I knew this would come back to haunt me.

"Just me," I clarify. "It's a hobby." More like my entire lifework.

"You're very talented if it's just a hobby."

I giggle nervously.

All of a sudden a soldier bursts into my room. The three of us jump in surprise.

"This is a check-up!" he yells at us.

"Have you seen the young Prince Nornus anywhere!?"

I see a bunch of other soldiers outside, running around. When the soldier spots us inside, he promptly clams up and stands up straight. He bows politely.

"Princess Læna," he says in a much softer tone.

"There's no prince here," Læna answers in a bored tone.

"Now, you're bothering us, please leave."

"Princess Læna, of course." The soldier respectfully bows and retreats.

It's surprising how his tone suddenly switched when he saw Læna was in the room with us. She seems to earn a lot of respect among the soldiers.

Læna sighs loudly. "Haaa, I guess our party is over. The place is buzzing with soldiers."

"It sounds like they're looking for Prince Nornus, is he missing?" I ask, a little concerned.

What if rebels have gotten inside the palace and kidnapped him or something?

"Unlikely, he's probably just hiding around in his garden. That little prince can be quite mischievous."

"I agree with Princess Læna, he is most likely in the palace still. No need to worry. The palace is heavily fortified; no one would be able to take the young prince."

Everyone seems to be so casual about it. Even when those explosions went off in the city. However, I was never told about the aftermath. I'm kept in the dark, and it bothers me more than it should.

"We should let you get some rest, Bill and I have something to discuss."

Billius looks at her like he has no idea what she's talking about.

"We do?" he asks.

"Oh, lots for sure," she purrs.

Billius clears his throat, his cyan eyes avoiding Læna as much as possible.

"You are a wonderful tailor, Princess Joselina. I bid you good night," he says.

"Yes, please rest well," I say and bow my head towards him.

"Thank you so much for my new attire. I am smitten with it." Læna flashes a brilliant smile at me.

She ends up pushing Billius out of my room, finally leaving me alone.

I sit down on my bed and release a sigh. Their flirting is a little heavy handed at times.

Oh – I notice Læna forgot to bring her old clothes with her. They're still on the floor. I quickly gather them up.

Perhaps I'll give it back to her next time. I walk towards the wardrobe on the far side of the room and open it up.

Unexpectedly, out rolls a person, limbs flailing everywhere.

I let out one of the highest and girliest screams of my life.

He screams in return, startled at being found.

"P-Prince Nornus!?" I cry, finally getting my wits back.

I thought my heart would stop!

The prince picks himself up from the floor, he looks a little dishevelled since he fell out of my wardrobe just now.

Wait – was he hiding in there!?

"Please, be quiet, they'll find me!"

In fact, not a moment later and my door slides open.

I whirl around to see Billius at the door, having run the way back.

"I heard a shriek, is everything alright?" he asks, out of breath.

I look behind me, but Nornus is missing. It seems he instantly withdrew back into the wardrobe like a ninja. Læna was right; he *is* mischievous. And even a little devious!

"Ahaha," I laugh tensely. What do I do now? Should I out him?

"I stubbed my toe," I say and point towards the wardrobe. "And it really hurt," I lie.

Billius heaves a sigh.

"I thought something might have happened to you..."

"Sorry... I'm just very clumsy."

"Please be careful now," he says and bows out.

I groan out loud once I hear his footsteps disappear.

Then I hear a tiny voice from inside the wardrobe.

"Is he gone?"

"You can come out now," I say exasperatedly.

Prince Nornus pushes open the wardrobe and climbs out. He sheepishly gives me a smile as he shuffles on his feet.

1. "You better have a good reason for hiding here."

2. "What are you doing here?"

"You better have a good reason for hiding here," I warn him.

"You made me lie. Now I'm an accomplice!"

Nornus fiddles with his slender fingers, pouting at the floor.

"...I promise, if I get caught, I won't mention you at all."

"I don't think that's the point I'm making here," I sigh.

Actually, has he been here this entire time? Watching us?

"What are you doing here?" I ask, perplexed.

"Uhh," he stammers awkwardly.

"Hiding?"

"I realize that... But why?"

He pushes his fingers together, refusing to speak.

"Were you... were you spying on me?" I decide to ask.

"Did you see Princess Læna strip?"

"No!" he shrieks. "I looked away!"

"I didn't realize this was your room, Princess. In fact, I feel awful for barging in!" He suddenly bows deeply in front of me.

"But when I heard your voices, I couldn't reveal myself anymore..."

"I'm so sorry for treading on your private chambers."

He seems so apologetic, it's hard to be stern with him for hiding in my room. Especially since he's also a prince.

"It's alright... but really, what are you doing here, Prince Nornus?"

He lets out a tiny sigh.

"I may have tried to explore the areas I'm forbidden to visit..."

His pale cheeks turn a shade of pink with his next sentence.

"...I admit I also wanted to find you."

"Me?" I repeat, surprised. "Why me?"

"You were really nice to me when we met," he says nervously.

"You're the only person to have seen my garden. It was... a pleasant experience to share it with someone." There's a sense of longing in his voice, he seems happy to talk about the garden.

"I simply wanted to invite you back," he mumbles shyly.

Nornus has such an innocent demeanour, that my heart positively melts for him. He wanted to invite me to his garden, that's really sweet.

"But does your brother, uhm, Lord Varitus, not want anyone in the garden?"

"In general, I'm simply not allowed to have much contact with anyone in the palace. If he knew I was here, he'd be livid..."

That's a very sheltered life he has, it's almost tragic. A prince locked up in a palace. I may be locked up as well, but at the very least I've interacted with quite a few people around here so I don't go mad with loneliness.

I can't fault him for wanting to reach out to someone.

I give him a gentle smile. "Well, it'll be our secret then."

Nornus' eyes lit up in response and he shows me a beaming smile in return.

"I knew you'd understand!"

"Haha, calm down, please don't alert the guards outside."

"Right. Actually, I must be taking my leave. I didn't mean to intrude at all."

"So, are you going to invite me to your garden?" I ask him, gently fishing for an invitation.

"Oh! Princess Joselina, would you... would you like to come by the garden again?"

"I'd be happy to," I answer with a smile.

Happy that I accepted, Nornus starts grinning widely, it's almost infectious. He's super cute, a stark contrast to what I've seen of Varitus. I almost can't believe those two are related.

"I'm there every single day! So, uhm, I'll be waiting," he says shyly.

Then he runs off towards the door.

"Bye!" he says in a cheeky manner before slipping away.

I shake my head at him with a smile. Guess I'll be breaking a few more rules.

-- Palace Loggia

I haven't had the chance to visit Nornus yet. Simply put, I've been too busy to – there's a lot of work to be done in the infirmary.

Billius has me set on collecting blood from the soldiers. For what reason, I know not, but it's quite tiring. At the end of the day, I simply want to crawl back into my bed.

As I round the corner, my nose bumps into a firm chest.

"Ow!" I yelp and stumble backwards.

"Captain Jæmis?"

Jæmis clicks his tongue at me. When I notice he's holding the tracking device in his hands, he hurriedly puts it away in his pouch.

"Huh – wait, were you tracking me just now?"

"Genius observation you made there, Princess. What else kind of purpose does a tracking device have?"

Stingy, he seems to be in a bad mood.

"I'm not breaking any rules..." I say slowly. I'm allowed to roam around once the work is done at the infirmary.

All in all, I should be thankful that I retain some sort of autonomy. That's not at all what I thought would be the case when he kidnapped me. I thought I'd be thrown in a dungeon, chained to a wall, being fed scraps of food. Maybe abused, tortured, or raped – who knows.

Reality has been a lot more forgiving than my fantasies. Not to say I'm enjoying my time here, but it's better than what I had prepared myself for.

"I didn't say you were," he says, slightly shaking his head. "I was looking for you."

"Why? Are we going back to Earth?" I ask, hopeful.

"Tomorrow is the Maaka festival," he explains, ignoring my question.

"Right, Læna told me she'd be leading it."

"Well, she's requested your presence," he says gruffly. It seems he didn't quite agree with her sentiments.

"She did? Then I'm not going to refuse."

"You can't refuse either way," Jæmis points out.

"At least entertain me with the illusion that you're asking instead of demanding," I reply bitterly.

He crosses his arms, a glint of a glare in his brown eyes.

"Do I look like an entertainer to you?" He flexes his biceps as if to prove a point that he is indeed, a captain, and not an entertainer.

This man, it has only been a day since I found out he conquered Billius' home planet and took him away as well. I should be afraid of him, disgusted even.

Yet, there he stands; arms crossed, trying to flex his muscles at me. Of all the things he could do to intimidate me, *this* is what he's going with. It comes across as so innocuous and benign, it's almost silly.

I end up snorting out loud at how funny he looks.

Not expecting me to laugh, Jæmis stands there, his posture turning awkward. He's peeved at my reaction.

"Are you *mocking* me?" he asks incredulously.

1. "Yes. I'm laughing at you."
2. "No, it was just a little funny."

"Yes. I'm laughing at you," I say, chuckling lightly.

"I guess you *can* be an entertainer."

For a split moment in time – blink and you miss it – Jæmis' face comes undone. Mouth open, eyebrows furled together in confusion, and a flash of emotion in his eyes. Something other than anger or annoyance.

And just as fast, he's back to scowling at me, baring his fangs.

"You will not mock me in this way," he huffs, clearly offended.

"No, it was just a little funny," I admit, smiling a little.

"Funny?" he repeats.

Jæmis and funny don't really belong in the same sentence together, yet somehow, it works. If I look at him as just some muscle head flexing his muscles at me, he's not so scary anymore.

He's all bark and no bite. His threats of violence don't really mean much when he hasn't acted upon them.

I giggle to myself.

Not appreciating my amusement at his expense, Jæmis growls at me.

"Perhaps I should take away your dinner for tonight. Maybe that will remind you of your place."

My mouth drops open. The situation stopped being funny.

"You wouldn't." I narrow my eyes at him.

A confident smirk. He's got me there.

"What was that before? You acted like it was the end of the universe simply because you hadn't had your provisions yet that day."

I purse my lips at him. I've been working all day at the infirmary, I'm hungry as I can be. No way could I sleep on an empty stomach.

"That's cruel," is all I end up saying.

"Then stop turning me into a mockery."

"You're doing a fine job of that yourself," I mutter.

"I'm not doing anything," I mutter.

Jæmis glares at me, and all of a sudden, he thrusts something into my hand.

"Take this."

I'm confused by what I'm holding in the palm of my hand; a small woven ornament it seems. Made out of twigs, resembling a star – or a sun maybe. There's a red ribbon dangling at one of the ends.

"What is it?" Am I supposed to tie this up somewhere? Is it like a charm?

"Tch. Ask someone else. Bring it with you tomorrow night," he grumbles.

Then without another word, Jæmis flies off the balcony.

I'm left staring at the small ornament.

-- Palace entrance festival

The festival could be heard from a very long distance away, I'm sure. The drums are pretty overwhelming.

It's being held right in front of the main gate. They've erected a huge bonfire in the middle. Tons of Gaötte are dancing around it.

I stand on the side, away from the fire. The smell of burning wood sickens me.

It's okay... it's just a bonfire, part of their festival or whatever. No need to go into panic mode.

You can do this. Just... take a deep breath.

I take a deep breath to calm myself down.

The atmosphere is lively and bold. The gates have been opened to the common folk it seems, as the area is crowded with those that aren't servants or soldiers.

It's hard not to get swept up in their rhythm. For a brief moment, it doesn't feel like I'm a prisoner, just a woman, enjoying a really cool festival.

There's a friendly tap on my shoulder.

"Princess Joselina!"

I turn to face Eeyok with a smile. "Hey!"

"Happy to see Princess make it. Maaka festival happen every twenty nunoon!"

"Eeyok, how long is a nunoon? I don't actually know."

Eeyok starts counting on his fingers, deep in thought.

"Eeyok think nineteen days."

Oh, that's less than a month. Makes sense, they have their own orbit around the sun with their own way of marking time. I've been thankful that a day is very similar to earth at the very least.

"Also, could you tell me what this is? Captain Jæmis gave it to me, but I don't know what to do with it," I ask, and then show him the ornament.

Eeyok ends up smiling, showcasing his own that's tied to his wrist.

"Everyone get it. At end, you tie to someone respectful."

"Do you tie this around someone's wrist?"

"Yes, yes. Left wrist, left one. Right you. Left not you."

Then he points at a soldier, surrounded by plenty of others. He's got a bunch of those ornaments tied around his wrist.

"Some start early..."

I giggle. "I guess he must be popular."

Eeyok helps me tie the ornament to my right wrist.

"Ah, Princess Joselina, you came," I hear someone call my name.

It's Kæleb. He's got his own ornament tied around his right wrist.

"Yes, Princess Læna invited me. I'm not quite sure what the celebration is for though."

"The people of Yool celebrate their culture once every twenty nunoons. It is a sign of peace and belonging."

I bite my tongue; they're not exactly peaceful if they go around conquering planets.

"But mostly, it's to strengthen the relationships between everyone. Everyone has to give their Makoet to someone worthy, otherwise they themselves are not worthy to be called a Gaötte."

"Captain Kæleb knows lot," says Eeyok, impressed.

"What do you take me for? I've practically been raised here!"

I point at the ornament on my wrist. "Is this the Makoet?"

"Affirmative." He leans in closer to me with a smirk. "Best be sure you give that away to someone at the end of the dance."

"Do you already know who you're giving yours to?" I ask, curious.

He closes his eyes with a satisfied smile.

"That I do. Lord Varitus may accept mine."

"Lord Varitus not yet arrive," Eeyok points out.

"Hm, perhaps I should investigate. I have matters to attend to. Please enjoy the festival, you two." Kæleb bows and then leaves us alone.

"Ahh, Eeyok must leave too. Eeyok begin dance soon." He gives me an apologetic look.

"Oh, do I get to see you dance? That's so exciting!"

He shyly looks away. "Yes, uhm. Eeyok not very good..."

"Haha, I'm sure you'll do fine. I can't wait to see you dance."

He flashes me an adorable grin and then slinks away into the crowd.

My feet take me to one of the benches scattered around the site. I sit on the one furthest away from the fire.

I look around my surroundings and see people happily engaging in conversation, or practicing their dance moves. Sometimes I see them exchange their Makoet.

Some of them are eating at the food stalls. I even see children running around.

I tap my foot along with the music. I admit... this is actually kind of fun. I can't wait to see Eeyok and Læna dance.

I wonder if Nornus will attend?

"Princess."

That voice. That all familiar tone. It sucks all the fun right out of my body.

"Captain Jæmis," I reply exasperatedly.

"Seems you didn't forget to bring the Makoet with you. Smart."

"I don't have the memory of a goldfish, you know."

He raises an eyebrow as he sits down next to me.

"Gouldfitz?" he repeats in a strange accent.

"Oh," I say, realizing my mistake. I shake my head. "Forget it."

Jæmis folds his arms over his chest, surveying the festival in silence. I manage to glance over on his wrist; he's still got his Makoet.

Who is he going to give it to? Would he be just like Kæleb and give it to Varitus? Or perhaps someone else he thinks is strong?

"Princess, I can feel your eyes burning a hole into my arm without having to look."

Embarrassed he caught me staring, I quickly look at the dancing children ahead of us.

But I'm itching to know!

"...Eeyok explained to me what they're for. Who are you planning on giving it to...?" I ask, as nonchalant as possible. Like I couldn't care less if he answers me or not.

But please, do answer me.

Jæmis remains stoic as ever. Doesn't budge an inch. In fact, he doesn't even blink for the longest time.

Yep, he's not going to answer me...

I sigh and lean my elbows onto my knees, putting my chin into the palm of my hand. Why did he have to sit next to me of all people?

"My sister," he suddenly starts and jolts my attention.

"Every festival, Læna gets my Makoet."

How sentimental of him. I was sure he'd pick someone strong, what with his 'only the strong survive' speech the other day.

I guess he does seem to care for his siblings a lot.

I miss Ralph so bad right now. He'd be out there, dancing himself silly. Making fingerguns, pointing at the sky as he shoots out fake laserbeams.

Now *I'm* getting sentimental.

"How many Makoet does that make so far?" I ask, wondering how many festivals they've attended.

The corner of his mouth curls up slightly. I can't tell whether it's a smile or a smirk.

"Too many to count."

For a split moment, I wonder how old Jæmis is. I've always had him pegged around my age, but who knows what the reality is. Besides, their calendar system wouldn't be equal to mine.

From the corner of my eye, I spy vivid red hair. I almost want to cry out and hug Caine – until I realize it's Billius.

That treacherous similar hair colour of his! Everything is reminding me of home right now.

"Hello, Billius," I greet him politely.

He takes a seat next to me. "I hope you've been enjoying the Maaka festival so far."

Billius then notices Jæmis. They both stare at each other. Sparks go flying.

"Healer Billius," says Jæmis in a cool voice.

"Prince Jæmis," Billius greets him back.

Talk about awkward.

"So uhm, have either of you seen Princess Læna? I believe she said she was leading the dance, no?" I start to talk, hoping to relieve some of the tension.

"She'll be here soon, last I heard she was getting ready to wear your outfit."

Jæmis joins in the conversation, despite clearly not wanting to discuss anything with us.

"Your outfit?" he asks.

"Remember the fabric we got in the city? I made something with them for Princess Læna."

He gives me this cold and disapproving stare.

"...Those scraps of cloth?"

"Why, is there anything wrong with them?" I end up pouting.

"You better not have made a mockery out of her," he huffs.

"Princess Læna looks respectful, no one would dare to mock her. I think Princess Joselina did a terrific job."

"Aww, thank you Billius." My eyes are sparkling at his compliment.

Then I see a horde of guards in the corner of my eye. They're escorting Varitus to his seat, front row of course. Away from everyone else.

He seems as emotionless and cold as always. I don't spot Nornus anywhere though.

"Hey, is Prince Nornus attending?" I ask Billius.

He shakes his head. "He's never allowed to attend."

"Oh... that's so sad. Even I'm here to enjoy the night."

"As am I, so please, shut your mouth hole and let me watch in silence," Jæmis cuts me off.

1. "If the sound of my voice irritates you, you're free to leave."

2. "You could ask me in a more polite manner."

"If the sound of my voice irritates you, you're free to leave," I suggest snarkily.

Jæmis grits his teeth at me, sounding out a low growl.

"I might just do exactly that."

"I'm in agreement with the princess," says Billius, hiding his own smirk.

"I didn't ask for your opinion," Jæmis snaps at him as he gets up from his seat.

The drums blast throughout the palace grounds, silencing anyone, even Jæmis, who sits back down.

"You could ask me in a more polite manner."

Maybe if he was nicer about it, I'd lower my voice. But nooo, he always has to tell me to 'shut my mouth hole'.

"Polite? This is as polite as one can be," he argues back.

"But you said it so aggressively!" I respond.

"Prince Jæmis, I do believe there's a multitude of ways you could have worded your request better," Billius chirps in.

I let out a small chuckle.

"You can shut your mouth hole, too," Jæmis grumbles. "I'm not here to listen to you two chatter."

Billius is about to reply, until a thunderous amount of drums echo throughout the palace grounds, silencing anyone.

The dance, it's about to start!

Everyone takes a seat on the wooden stands, shuffling away from the bonfire. The drums grow louder and more intense.

Then a long line of dancers appear, walking down the grand staircase. Oh – Eeyok is among them! I can see him behind a bunch of others. He seems very focused, an expression I haven't seen on him so far.

The Gaötte move in tune with the drums, smacking their thighs, planting their feet aggressively onto each step. They hit their chest, all in sync with each other. I see male and female alike. Everyone is wearing different outfits, there's no central uniform.

Then as each dancer stands on a step, they split in half, like they're parting the red sea. At the very top of the stairs is unmistakably Læna, who descends down each step like the goddess she is.

She's dancing, throwing up her hands in the air with each beat, stamping her foot on every step. It's a very powerful movement, I'm entranced.

"Don't you think she looks beautiful, Billius?" I ask, thinking she looks like she's completely in her element.

"..." Billius seems to be at a loss for words. He's unable to take his eyes off of her.

"That's my sister you're talking about here," Jæmis grunts, irritated.

Eventually, everyone makes it off the stairs and they form a circle around the bonfire. Dancing, pounding, slapping.

Then they begin to sing, loud words, expressive vocals. Some of them aren't even words.

"*We are here, we are here,*" they chant as they stamp their feet onto the ground.

"*United and strong. We hear, we hear your plight.*"

Læna is the one doing her own dance moves, her voice loud and clear, carrying herself above everyone else.

"Strong together, never alone. For one of many, this is our song."

Then people in the audience throw them spears. Each of the dancers catches one, and they all slam them on the ground, making as much ruckus as possible.

In tune with the drums, they use their spear like an instrument. Twirling, throwing, then tapping it against the floor.

Eeyok, I can't believe it, looks graceful in his movements. Strong and confident even. For being a grunt, he sure knows how to stay in sync with the rest and expertly handles his spear. It's like an extension of his body.

My heart is pounding, I'm being dragged into their rhythm, their dance. It's so raw, so emotional.

"We are here, we are here!" they roar.

Læna is the star of the show, weaving in between the dancers, jumping, sliding, trading spears with one another. She dances with them, a short twirl and linking of the arms, before moving onto the next one.

Her hair is constantly in movement, she never stops to take a break.

The drums are so powerful, it's hard not to get sucked in with the crowd, who join them in their song.

Stomp, stomp, tap. That's the rhythm the crowd goes along with.

"Stand together!" Læna shouts, pointing her spear at the audience.

"AYUP!" the crowd responds, beating their chest.

"We hear you!"

"AYUP!"

"Gaötte live on!"

The crowd goes absolutely wild. Everyone is standing, pounding their chests, arms, legs – whatever they can get their hands on. It's so easy to get pulled along with all their energy, I want to stomp and pound, too.

"Together we are one!" she shouts in one final breath.

The dancers all jump in the air, landing in perfect synchronization on the ground, to deliver a powerful bang that ricochets against the palace gates.

"AYUP! AYUP!" They're screaming now, cheering. The dancers all bow, until their arms are stretched out and faces pointed to the ground.

Læna is breathing hard, as are the rest of the performers. The dance is finished.

It's Billius who stands up first, joining in with the rest of them. He pounds his chest and grunts out the same chant.

"Ayup, ayup!" he yells.

The crowd repeats the same phrase over and over.

This is their way of applauding.

I want to honor their incredible performance as well, so I stand up. Absolutely enthralled with their act, I beat my own chest, no matter how painful it might be.

"Ayup! Ayup!" I shout, mimicking the rest of the crowd.

Jæmis gives me one sideways glance, until he too, unfolds his arms and stands up from his seat.

I can hear him slam his fists into his rock-hard pecs. He loudly yells out the chant, same as everyone else.

At this moment in time, I'm not a prisoner. I'm not an 'Earthling'. Neither is Billius, nor Jæmis.

The crowd has become one, like a magic spell has been cast upon all of us. It feels like we are *all* Gaötte.

With one obvious exception. I can tell, through the pounding and cheering, that there is exactly one person who hasn't joined in; Varitus.

Bored and still, he remains in his seat, unmoving. I'm almost perplexed he hasn't risen to applaud. It's like the spirit of the festival has left him completely cold.

The dancers rise from the ground and people from the audience walk over to them, showering them with compliments. They start to exchange their Makoet.

The applause begins to die down.

"She did amazing, didn't she?" I say, directing my attention to Jæmis.

He's got this sentimental look on his face, it almost softens his appearance.

"Yes, that she did," he agrees with me.

Jæmis gets up from his seat and walks over to Læna, who is receiving quite a lot of ornaments from supposed fans.

He too, gives his Makoet to her. I can spy a tiny smile on his face as he ties it to her wrist. He's proud of her, that much I can tell.

"Billius, now's your chance, you can give yours to Læna, too," I say, turning to face the redhead.

I'm surprised to find him already removing his Makoet.

"No, I don't think I will," he says softly and gently grabs my wrist.

"In honor of your strength and perseverance in the face of adversity, please accept my Makoet."

He ties it on my left wrist, not too tight, and not too loose.

Already experiencing a high from the performance, a rush of emotions surge through me, colouring my cheeks red. I didn't expect this at all.

"Thank you so much," I manage to express my gratitude.

He gives me the softest of smiles, his eyes twinkling. I can't help but copy him and mirror his smile.

"Bill!" Læna shrieks as she comes over, disrupting our conversation.

"What did you think of my dance?" she asks excitedly, wiping away some sweat from her brow. Her entire left arm has Makoet tied around it that she resembles a mummy.

"Absolutely breath-taking."

"You are the best, please, take this," she says, pinching his cheek and then tying her Makoet around his left wrist.

"I don't know what I expected, but I'm so impressed with your dance, Princess Læna," I compliment her.

"Aww – keep the compliments coming!" she says with a chuckle.

In the background, I see Jæmis and Kæleb talking amongst themselves. Both of them have given away their own, but their left wrist isn't empty; they have received a couple in return.

Then I spy Eeyok, who is collecting the forgotten spears on the ground. He hasn't received a Makoet from anyone yet.

Who should I give my Makoet to?

> Jæmis

My mind immediately goes to Jæmis.

Wait no, why should I?

Then again... I've seen a different side of him tonight. I didn't expect him to join in with the crowd, I thought it would be something that was beneath him.

That's why it was so strange... to see this more emotional side of his. Especially when he exchanged his ornament with Læna. He seems to care about her a lot, dote on her even.

It's a bit silly, and totally ridiculous. Giving this to Jæmis when he's the one who kidnapped me and is planning to wage war on earth.

But... If he didn't, I would have never experienced all of this.

I wouldn't have met all these different kinds of people with their own quirks and personalities. Eeyok who at first, I found strange and was a little wary of, but now I'm cheering him on for doing his best at a dance.

Billius who seemed cold when we first met, but is surprisingly caring and has had my back ever since.

Kæleb has saved my life twice, and even though he may have almost killed me during training, I think he's a man full of honour and commitment.

Læna has been a whirlwind, providing me distraction and lifting up my spirit. Her dance has left me breathless.

Even the cute Nornus whom I've only met a couple of times, has been a joy to interact with.

I tentatively take a step towards him, still wondering if this is a good idea.

Jæmis is alone this time, Kæleb having left to speak to others. When he sees me enter his vision, he turns towards me.

"Ah, it seems someone gave you a Makoet," he says, his eyes fixated on my left wrist.

I'm surprised he didn't say it in a mocking manner.

"Yes, Billius gave it to me," I say with a smile. "It was very kind of him."

"A little out of character for him, he's always given it to my sister before."

I bite my lip, suddenly feeling a bit awkward to present him mine.

"Captain Jæmis," I announce.

"What?" he says gruffly.

"Please accept my Makoet." I remove the tie from my wrist and extend it towards his.

His hand flinches back in surprise. Jæmis quickly composes himself.

"Princess, perhaps the explanation you were given before was faulty. Let me explain, a Makoet is given to—"

"—I know what it means. Please take mine before I change my mind."

Maybe I'm crazy. Maybe I'm just looking for excuses to pretend everything is fine, that I'm grateful that I've been taken.

I'm not. I *want* to go back home. It's Jæmis who stole me from my family back on Earth. I will resent him for that no matter what.

"Princess, you must be mad," he drawls out in a low voice.

But despite all of that, I want to give it to him.

He's startled when I voluntarily touch him, lifting up his hand.

"You have taken me away from my home planet. From my brother, my last surviving family member," I start as I grab the ribbon and wrap it around his wrist, making sure to avoid the other ones.

"Probably attacked my very best friend on Earth. Thrown me into a cell on a spaceship. Forced me to work as some kind of healer." I start tying the Makoet in a knot.

"And you may have very well done the same thing with other people before."

I look up at him. "I know I'm not your first prisoner of war."

Jæmis continues to stare at me, remaining silent all this time, which is a pleasant surprise. He's letting me speak.

"But I have experienced many different things I wouldn't have otherwise. A culture different from my own, a race that seemed scary at first."

"This festival made me realize that even though you attacked Earth, I shouldn't look down upon the rest of the civilization and judge them as evil. They all experience joy and even sadness – they're not that different from me."

I look down at the ribbon on his wrist. "I've found kindness in the least likely people."

"Even you saved my life twice. That's not something I'll forget anytime soon."

"And I've been to space, not many others can say that," I say with a small chuckle and give one final tug on the ribbon to make sure the Makoet is secure.

"For that, accept my Makoet, Captain Jæmis."

It's the first time that I see Jæmis struggling with what to say. He retrieves his hand, touching his left wrist. His eyes rapidly switch between me and the Makoet.

It seems I have rendered the captain speechless.

He then finally closes his eyes and takes in a deep breath.

"As you wish. I accept."

"Glad we could come to an agreement," I say playfully.

"You are a strange one."

"Takes one to know one, I guess," I say with a shrug.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go find Eeyok and talk to him about his dance!"

I walk away with a spring in my step to go look for Eeyok.

When I spot the alien, he eagerly walks up to me. He turns all bashful when I compliment him for his performance and in the end, Eeyok gives me his Makoet as well.

The rest of the festival ends on a high note, though I do notice in particular that Varitus has been the only person who didn't give away his Makoet.

> Eeyok

I grin to myself as I shoot my hand up in the air. Of course, Eeyok gets my Makoet!

"Eeyok!" I call out for him as I rush over.

Startled, Eeyok ends up dropping some of the spears to the ground when he hears my voice.

"Princess!" he says nervously as he bends down to pick them up again.

"I am so impressed with you Eeyok!" I gush about him.

He presses the spears against his chest.

"Impressed with Eeyok?" he asks, baffled.

"Yes! I saw the way you moved. I don't know, I've never seen you act so serious and focused before. It was like you were a different person entirely."

Eeyok rubs the back of his head, laughing nervously.

"Aahaha, not realize that Princess keep watch on Eeyok."

"How could I not? You looked really amazing up there! Especially the way you handled that spear. Good job."

Eeyok's forehead ends up turning a more vibrant red, he's clearly embarrassed. It's rather cute.

"Thank you, Princess."

"And that's why... Here, I want you to have it." I say as I remove the Makoet from my wrist.

His eyes turn large when I grab his hand.

"For sticking up for me and helping me whenever, please accept my Makoet," I say with a smile.

"For Eeyok?" he asks, floored I would ever decide on giving it to him.

"Of course."

"Well..." Respectfully, he lightly bows his head and closes his eyes, allowing me to tie the Makoet to his left wrist.

Grinning all the while – Eeyok deserves it in my opinion – I neatly tie it up to make sure it won't fall off. He keeps staring at it with his golden eyes, like he's in shock.

"My first..." he gasps, astonished.

It's a little disheartening to hear him say this is his first. As I'm about to pull away, Eeyok grabs my hand.

"Wait," he says. His voice doesn't sound as shrill as usual.

"Princess Joselina is purehearted." He starts to remove his own Makoet.

He wraps the ribbon around my left wrist.

"Even to a grunt like me," he says with a tiny smile.

He ties it off and releases me. Aww, he gave one back to me. This makes me feel all fuzzy inside.

Then something dawns on me about his speech pattern.

"Huh, *me*?" I repeat. "I thought you always referred to yourself as Eeyok."

Realizing what he's said, he starts to panic a little.

"Eeyok's speech not always bad! Just a bit clumsy, not stupid," he mutters.

"Ahaha, I don't think you're stupid Eeyok. Thank you for the Makoet. You're probably the first friend I made over here."

"Friend?" he echoes my words.

"Yes, my friend."

He starts grinning widely.

"Aye, friend!"

Eventually the festival comes to an end. I'm feeling energized and actually quite happy. I've received two Makoet, which feels special.

One thing that jumped out to me is that Varitus was the only person there who didn't give away his own. He didn't accept any either, so people resorted to placing them on the ground in front of him, like an offering.

Why join the festival if you weren't going to participate?

> **Billius**

My eyes fall down to the Makoet on my left wrist, the one Billius gave to me.

I think I want to give mine to him as well.

Ever since I arrived, Billius has been patient with me, even saying he'll look out for me. It's because of him that I could stay working in the infirmary, instead of something more sinister happening to me.

Like being thrown into an actual dungeon for being useless.

"Bill, where's yours?" Læna starts to pout once she realizes he doesn't have his anymore.

"He gave it to me," I say.

"Whaaaaat," she cries out incredulously. "Am I already replaced? You always give me your Makoet, Bill!"

Billius lowers his head. "...I feel like Princess Joselina deserves to get her first Makoet."

"Hmpf, I was looking forward to yours."

"You have already gotten plenty from the others," he says, pointing at the ten or something ornaments tied to her wrist.

"It's not the same!" she whines, and then dramatically runs off.

"Uhm, perhaps it would have been better if you gave yours to her," I mumble, feeling a bit awkward.

Billius laughs, something I haven't heard from him yet. He seems more relaxed.

"It's alright. She'll accept it eventually. I believe it was more essential to see your smile, instead."

Okay – who knew Billius could talk like this? He's been so stoic to me, not showing much emotion, but I guess perhaps something about the dance loosened him up. He's so expressive, not to mention suave with his words.

"Billius," I say, taking a step towards him.

"I think... I want to give mine to you, too." I start to untie the Makoet on my wrist.

"Princess, I won't be offended if it's not an equivalent exchange. There is no need to give me your Makoet if you feel obligated."

I shake my head. "No, it's not that I feel obligated..."

I take his hand into mine, which causes him to flinch.

"You've looked out for me since I got here. You're actually a very caring soul. I appreciate what you've done for me so far. So please, accept my Makoet."

Billius' face lights up like a Christmas tree, glowing a nice reddish hue. He covers it with his right hand, trying to avert his gaze away from me.

He's blushing so hard, it's so endearing. I never thought I'd see him like this.

"I don't do well with compliments..." he mutters shyly.

"Will you accept?" I ask, smiling at him.

"Yes, of course..."

He extends his left wrist and I tie the ribbon of the Makoet around it. Not too tight, of course.

He bows in front of me.

"Thank you, Princess. You are too kind to someone like me."

I grin at him. "Just don't let Princess Læna know, she might get jealous."

He shows me a nervous smile. "You bring up a decent point."

I finally leave Billius alone to go search for Eeyok.

When I spot the alien, he eagerly walks up to me. He turns all bashful when I compliment him for his performance and in the end, Eeyok gives me his Makoet as well.

The rest of the festival ends on a high note, though I do notice in particular that Varitus has been the only person who didn't give away his Makoet.

> **Kæleb**

My eyes wander back over to Kæleb and Jæmis.

Well, I'm certainly *not* giving it to Jæmis. However... Kæleb is starting to seem like a good option.

Yes, he may have almost killed me during training – but that was an accident. Plus, he's apologized!

He's saved me when I fell from the balcony, without even knowing who I was at first. He's also brought me to the infirmary when I didn't receive my Safrin tea.

Yes, he's been nothing but a gentleman towards me.

I walk up towards the two brothers.

Jæmis is the first to address me.

"Ah, Princess. It seems someone must have given you their Makoet after all," he says, noticing the one I got from Billius.

"I can see why, Princess Joselina is an elegant and wonderful lady to give a Makoet to," says Kæleb.

Jæmis ends up rolling his eyes. "If she's so wonderful, why didn't you give yours to her?"

"As always, Lord Varitus has my respect," he says, looking sure of himself.

"Lord Varitus never accepts any, including yours. It's a waste to try."

"One Maaka he might," Kæleb replies stubbornly.

"I'm going to remove myself from this pointless conversation," Jæmis grunts, and approaches Læna instead.

"Uhm, Captain Kæleb?" I call out to him as I unfasten my Makoet.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Would you like to accept my Makoet?"

Kæleb's eyes widen. "Me? Surely, have you not found anyone else suitable enough? Someone stronger than me? Captain Jæmis is very powerful."

I shake my head. "I don't want to give it to him, I want to give it to you."

"You've saved my life, not once, but twice. I mean, the second time was a little embarrassing..."

Kæleb turns away with a cough, also remembering the time he found me practically naked.

"But nonetheless, I'm grateful you did. I also really enjoyed going out to the market. So thank you, Captain Kæleb."

"I'm deeply humbled, Princess Joselina. I figured after that time during my sparring match with Captain Jæmis, you would have resented me," he admits.

"Not at all! That was an accident, you clearly didn't aim for me."

"Still, I was not in control, an unsightly beast. Someone such as you should not have been witness to that."

I place my hand on his, surprising him.

"Captain Kæleb, I don't think you're a beast. You've been very thoughtful of me all this time."

I raise his hand so I can wrap it with the ribbon of my Makoet.

"Will you accept?" I ask him, looking at his brown eye.

He closes both his eyes and sighs, a slight blush appearing on his cheeks.

"Princess, you are too kind. But I will not refuse from someone as lovely as you. Yes, I gratefully accept."

Happily, I tie the ornament around his wrist.

"It is only now that I regret my decision to offer my own Makoet to Lord Varitus."

"That's alright! You don't need to give me yours. Besides, Billius gave me his already," I say, pointing at it.

Kæleb flashes me a smile. "Very well. Thank you for your kindness."

"Hehe, don't mention it," I say shyly. He really is a gentleman.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go look for Eeyok and compliment him on his dance moves!"

I leave the captain alone and look around for Eeyok.

When I spot the alien, he eagerly walks up to me. He turns all bashful when I compliment him for his performance and in the end, Eeyok gives me his Makoet as well.

The rest of the festival ends on a high note, though I do notice in particular that Varitus has been the only person who didn't give away his Makoet.

> Læna

Then Læna spots the Makoet on my left wrist – the one Billius gave me.

"Would you look at that, even you are popular around here. Already snagging yourself a Makoet? How lucky."

"I could say the same for you, you've got more than ten on your wrist," I say, counting the ones tied around her entire arm.

"Haha, this isn't much at all. Now, Bill, where's yours?"

"I gave mine to Princess Joselina," he replies in a serious voice.

Læna looks shocked.

"Whaaat? But you give the Makoet to me every Maaka! I was looking forward to it!"

Billius looks uncomfortable, switching between looking at me and looking at Læna.

"Princess Læna, I want you to accept mine!" I say quickly.

She raises her eyebrows. "Me?"

"Yes! I think you had such a lovely performance; I was completely entranced in your movements. I want to give my Makoet to you."

Læna puts on a confident smirk.

"See Bill – even Princess Joselina is giving hers to me. You are missing out."

"I think I'll survive," he says bluntly.

"Hmpf. Well, I accept!" Læna eagerly sticks out her left arm.

I look to see if there's any room for mine, until I see an open spot. I untie mine and then fasten it around her wrist.

"There. I'm glad you accepted," I say with a smile.

"Oh my, if there's one thing I've learned is to never reject a gift," she says playfully.

Then she turns her attention towards Billius.

"And you. Next Maaka you better give me yours. I will throw a fit if you don't."

Billius simply sighs. "Yes, Princess Læna."

"Good, good!"

I end up giggling at their interaction.

Oh, I should find Eeyok and compliment him for his dancing, too!

I excuse myself from the both of them and go look for Eeyok.

When I spot the alien, he eagerly walks up to me. He turns all bashful when I compliment him for his performance and in the end, Eeyok gives me his Makoet as well.

The rest of the festival ends on a high note, though I do notice in particular that Varitus has been the only person who didn't give away his Makoet.

--

I'm ready to head back to my room and sleep. The festival was fun, but also very emotionally draining and exhausting.

A lot of people have already left, so it wouldn't be strange if I left, too, right?

Even Læna is making her quick getaway.

Oh! She dropped one of the Makoet around her wrist!

"Princess Læna!" I shout out to her, but the crowd is still lively and she doesn't quite hear me.

Unbeknownst to my yelling, Læna quickly retreats towards the side of the castle gates.

I walk up to the forgotten Makoet on the ground and pick it up. Someone wanted her to have this, so it would be respectful to give it back to her.

I end up following her, seeing her disappear into one of the doors.

-- Palace secret hallway

"Princess Læna?" I ask, seeing nothing but an empty hallway.

No wait, there she is, at the very end. Damn, she's fast.

I am about to yell at her when I see her pull down on a torch like a lever. The wall suddenly opens up in front of her. She quickly goes through the opening.

I'm left perplexed and wide awake. Is that a secret entrance?

My spiderboy senses are tingling. Time to investigate.

I walk towards the end of the hallway and study the lit torch on the wall. She simply pulled on it, let me try.

The torch easily pulls down and I can hear a mechanism unlock on the inside of the wall. The stones disappear into the wall, revealing an opening...

...To the outside.

Chapter [013]

-- Secret passageway

An old memory resurfaces, making me pause.

A young Ralph crying, holding his broken arm. He's just gotten into trouble by following my dad, who was off on his own mission. He got a stern lecture about the importance of not butting into business that isn't your own.

I stare at the stones and jolt wide awake when I realize the entrance is closing.

I take a half-step backwards and watch the entrance close up, looking like a regular wall again.

Læna is not supposed to leave the palace, that much I know. However, following her...

It's not any of my business.

There's no doubt about it that she's up to something, and I'm definitely curious to find out what exactly she's doing out there on her own. However, I shouldn't blindly run after her.

The fire reflects off the gems on my armband – a stark reminder I'm being tracked. Jæmis has found me like this plenty of times. Even if I dropped it off here, there's no telling when he would come look for me, only to find me missing.

I've got a feisty spirit, but even I know when to reign myself in.

Not today.

-- Infirmary

My day goes by as usual, working together with Billius in the infirmary. So far, there have been no alarms that Læna went missing.

"Princess Joselina," Billius vies for my attention.

"Hm, yes? Sorry?" I've been so caught up in my thoughts, it's hard to pay attention to what Billius is saying.

His eyes look at my wrist. "You do not need to wear that any longer. You can keep it in your chambers."

"Oh, the Makoet? But I like it," I say with a smile.

I've got one from Billius and one from Eeyok tied around my wrist. I didn't take them off; they feel special to me.

"Do as you like," he concedes.

We go back to work, and I'm lost in my thoughts again, wondering where Læna snuck off to.

At the end of the day, a surprise drops in.

"Bill!" Her high chipper voice is unmistakable.

"Princess Læna," Billius greets her politely.

She's back. And no one suspects a thing.

"Oh, I figured you'd be eating your supper by now, Princess Joselina," she says once she notices me.

My stomach definitely hates me for staying here so long. There's always something to do in the infirmary.

"I will, soon," I say with a smile.

My curiosity is burning in the back of my mind. I want to know. Where did she go? What about her tracker? I see she's wearing it right now, but what about the night before?

...That incident at the market, when someone 'stole' her armlet... was it *really* stolen? Or did she plan it?

I can't resist – I have to prod!

"So Princess Læna," I say casually. "I couldn't find you anywhere after the festival. Where'd you go?"

"Oh, too much dancing and yelling – straight off to my chambers for me. I was simply exhausted," she lies expertly.

If I didn't know the truth, I would have believed her, completely.

"Hmm yes, Princess Læna had to be escorted back to her chambers," Billius collaborates her story.

It throws me off for a split second, but I compose myself. I catch myself staring at him dubiously.

He's in on it, too.

"I can imagine. All that dancing definitely looked tiring," I say with a fake grin.

"Maaka festivals are always very draining, I just want to crawl into my bed and dream the night away," she says wishfully.

She's really good at this; the lying. I didn't expect Billius to be aware of it either.

Though it makes sense now that I think about it. Læna comes to visit him often. Not to mention they both wear trackers. I know why Billius has to wear his – Læna's tracker is still a mystery to me.

Kæleb said it's because she runs away often, but why is she not allowed to leave in the first place?

She's always deflected my question and refuses to answer it. Which means she doesn't want me to know.

"Princess, why don't I walk you back to your chambers?" Læna offers.

"Oh, sure, I don't mind. I'm just about done here."

-- Palace loggia (night)

After my shift is over, Læna escorts me back to my room. My mind is burning with questions I want to ask her.

"There's rumors going around the palace that say my brother is returning to your home planet for another mission," Læna starts casually.

"Is that true?" Her eyes flicker over to me.

She's vying for information.

"I think so, yes. That's what he announced at the dinner a while ago. It's been rather unclear whether or not that means I'll be returning, too..."

"I wish you all the best Princess. May you see your planet one more time, before that opportunity is taken away from you completely."

It dawns on me that she means that the planet could very well be destroyed, much like with Billius' home planet.

"Yeah..." I say in a sad tone. "I want to see my brother again."

"I'm sure you will eventually. Keep your chin up, Princess Joselina."

If only her own brother didn't have a hand in conquering Earth.

-- Palace hallway

When we round the corner, I get knocked off my feet.

"Ouch!" I yelp when I painfully land on the tiled floor.

Princess Læna quickly helps me up, though her eyes are glaring at the two soldiers in front of us.

"Pests. Watch where you're going," one of them says in a deep voice.

"Perhaps you should stop wearing that bulky armour around the palace, then you wouldn't bump into anyone by accident," Læna snaps at him.

"Are you mocking our national armour?" the other soldier huffs. "Maybe we should take you to see Lord Varitus."

He roughly grabs Læna's arm, pulling her towards him.

1. "Hey, pick on someone your own species!"
2. "Look, I'm sorry, it was my fault for not watching where I was going."

I get in between them, feeling protective.

"Hey, pick on someone your own species!" I snap at the soldier.

The soldier releases Læna, his eyes now focused on me.

"Vermin has a mouth. Perhaps I should teach it a lesson," he threatens me.

"There will be no such thing – return to your post, soldier Darok," Læna says in a strict manner. "Otherwise you'll have to answer to Jæmis himself."

I quickly come between them, hoping to prevent any conflict.

"Look, I'm sorry, it was my fault for not watching where I was going," I apologize.

The soldier releases Læna, his eyes focused on me.

"There, was that so hard to say?"

"You two should return to your posts, lest Jæmis hears back from this," Læna speaks out.

Name dropping her own brother seems to have done the trick, as both soldiers back off.

They mumble something under their breath until they shuffle out of view.

"What's wrong with them... they bumped into *me*," I grumble.

"Gaötte don't like outsiders," Læna explains.

"Odd, I thought many soldiers respected you," I point out, recalling the times soldiers obeyed her without question.

They all seemed to love her at the festival as well.

Læna laughs at me, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

"Don't be fooled. In this world, many want my head on a spike."

I'd like to ask her why, but we arrive at my door. She bids me a good night and I'm still left with so many questions.

-- **Royal garden**

A couple of weeks pass by in the blink of an eye. I've lost track of how long I've been here. There's one thing that gets me through each day; the hope I'll be returning to Earth.

Finding some time – and evading any watchful eyes – I manage to visit the garden again.

It's so beautiful and serene, I'm starting to relax just by being surrounded by all the plants. Everything else in the palace seems so sterile, lacking any vegetation. It's pleasing to see greenery.

I give the bell-shaped plant a suspicious look, remembering to stay away from it.

I traverse the small path, my eyes wandering around, trying to spot the young prince. That's when I see him, hunched over a small patch of dirt.

"Prince Nornus!" I call out to him.

I crouch down next to him with a pristine smile on my face.

"I managed to sneak in undetected," I explain.

Nornus holds up his pale hand in front of me.

"Quiet," he warns me with a whisper. His eyes are trained on the dirt patch.

Curious, I hold my tongue.

"Here, lend me your hands," he whispers.

"Oh?" I hold out my hands in front of him.

He takes my hands into his own, guiding them closer to the dirt.

"Dig them in, just like this," he instructs, as he pushes my hands into the middle of the soft soil. It's a little damp.

He releases me and pushes the hair out of his face; he's concentrating.

"Hold it like that..." Nornus then uses his own hands to dig into the spot where my own hands are.

I feel something moving in the dirt, something lightly touching my fingers. I have no idea what it could be.

"Get ready to cut it with your hands," he tells me.

Excuse me – cut?

Then Nornus twists his hands around in the dirt, until he pulls them out, raising the dirt along with him. A long and slender root follows along, still stuck in the soil.

The root is twisting like it's alive!

"Cut it!"

Not wasting a second, I conjure up a piece of thread between my fingers and slice the root in half. It immediately stops squirming, retreating back into the soil.

Nornus then releases an excited giggle, leaning in closer to me as he shows what's captured in his hands.

What I assumed was just a patch of dirt, instead reveals a small white seedling emerging from the soil. It glows bright, like a heartbeat. The glowing continues as it sways from side to side, reacting to Nornus' own movements.

"Wow!" I say, amazed, taking my hands out of the dirt.

"It's a Nefferi," Nornus explains with the biggest smile on his face. "They sometimes need a little help with sprouting."

This strangely feels like I just helped him with giving life to a plant – plant labour.

Nornus gently lowers his hands into a small pot prepared with soil besides him, burying the seedling. Except the glowing dims, until it darkens considerably.

Nornus looks distressed. "Oh no..."

"Is it okay?" I ask, concerned the seedling may have died.

Nornus leans his face closer to the seedling, his lips nearly touching the small leaf. He closes his eyes and breathes on it with a powerful huff.

Green droplets exit out of his mouth and land on the seedling. Nornus pulls back without another word.

I anxiously wait for anything to change.

"Look!" I say, as I see the seedling start to glow again.

Nornus lets out a relieved sigh.

"It's still alive," he says with a smile.

"You did such a good job!" I compliment him. I'm genuinely happy for this small little seedling.

Nornus closes his eyes and takes in a deep breath, before he collapses onto the ground.

Alarmed, I quickly look over his body to see any form of injuries.

"Prince Nornus, what's wrong!?" Did he get poisoned perhaps?

He seems to be sweating and short of breath.

Weakly, he lifts up his arm, pointing into the direction of the fountain. He's mumbling something that's hard to hear.

"What are you saying?" I ask, leaning closer.

"Water..." he breathes out.

In an instant, I understand.

I grab one of the other pots next to Nornus and quickly run over towards the fountain. I dip the pot into the water, quickly filling it up, then return back to him.

"Here's water," I say and place the rim of the pot on his lips.

Nornus weakly lifts his hand to be able to sip on the water. He ends up drinking everything I gathered.

"How are you feeling now?" I ask.

Nornus sits up straight, wiping away some sweat from his forehead.

"Ahh, thank you, Princess Joselina. I really needed that."

"Should I call for Healer Billius?" I recall Nornus visiting the infirmary a couple of times – perhaps he's sick?

"It's alright, I just need to recharge, no need to worry." He flashes me a gentle smile.

Eventually we move to sit down on one of the benches in the garden.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, still worried.

"Better. My condition can become quite severe at times if I'm not treated promptly... Sorry for scaring you," he trails off.

"Don't be sorry. I didn't realize it was that bad though."

"If I'm near water I should be fine. That's why I like being in my garden," he says and points to the fountain in the middle.

"Water, you say?"

"Water is the source of all life," he explains proudly.

Water is life... Eeyok said the same thing to me at the beginning. They came to Earth for water and conquered Billius' planet for it as well. Was it all because of...?

...Nornus?

"There doesn't seem to be much water on this planet. It looks like a big desert wasteland," I note.

"It used to be way worse. My brother tells me Yool was on the brink of death before he arrived. However – we have a lot more water available to us now!"

"You're not from this planet?" The question leaves my lips faster than I can think.

I mean, yes, I did think it was odd how different they looked from everyone else. Especially when Billius told me that the Gaötte are from Yool. But I didn't stop to think that meant... Varitus and Nornus aren't from Yool.

Nornus shrugs at me.

"We're not, no. I was a baby when my brother brought me to this planet. I don't remember much from that time..."

My brain goes over his words at the speed of light. They arrived here... and somehow Varitus was made Lord. However, was he truly named Lord – or did he take that title for himself? Did he conquer Yool just as he plans to do with Earth?

I'm too afraid to ask, so I flash Nornus an awkward smile.

"Thank you for coming. I was starting to worry that you'd forgotten the way to the garden."

I chuckle lightly. "Not at all, it's just been very busy. I don't have a lot of freedom."

"Neither do I," Nornus confesses.

"You went to the Maaka festival, right? I'm forbidden from going, so I don't know what it's like." He's looking at me with these curious looking eyes, like he's waiting for me to say something.

"Yes, the Maaka festival, I was allowed to attend. There was a very big bonfire and a dance led by Princess Læna. It was all very intense and explosive."

"Explosive?" Nornus cries out. "Was there an attack!?"

"Oh – I meant, the energy was very lively!" I quickly explain.

"That's good. I've heard some of the explosions in the city. Those poor Gaötte..."

"Yeah..." I trail off. "It was very scary when I saw it up close at the market."

His eyes light up.

"You've been to the market?"

"Yes. I didn't go alone, of course, I was escorted and guarded. Then an explosion went off and we all had to return."

Nornus stays quiet for a bit, looking straight ahead of him.

"Did you try out any of their foods?" he asks me.

"At the market?"

"Yes! I have heard many servants talk about the food there, how it's much better than here in the palace because it suits their tastes more. I'm immensely curious."

I feel a pang in my heart. This poor guy. He obviously can't step foot outside of this palace, let alone attend a festival or visit a market to eat different kinds of food.

"Is your condition so severe that you can't leave the palace? Is that why you're not allowed to go anywhere else?"

Nornus bites down on his bottom lip.

"That's one of the reasons... but I can hold up quite well! If I – if I carry a pouch of water with me, I should be fine! I've tried convincing my brother lots of times before, but he won't even listen to what I have to say..."

"I'm sorry, that doesn't sound very fair."

Then again, here I am, kidnapped against my will, also stuck in the same palace. But I feel for him, I do.

"So, why don't I tell you about Earth, my home planet? Did you know we have huge oceans of water there?" I say with a grin, hoping to cheer him up.

His childlike innocence is contagious and I can't help but answer his questions, one by one. I explain how lush and wonderful Earth is like, with its wonderful rainforests and snowy mountains, or the vast oceans.

Nornus hangs on my every word, listening intently. It feels nice to talk about my home like this, it makes me miss it even more.

-- Palace grounds

Today is my day off. Billius said he has some business to attend to himself, so with nothing else to do, I end up wandering the palace grounds.

I stare at the door that leads to the secret passageway, wondering if perhaps I could slip out...

-- Palace secret hallway

The urge to break free, to escape from the palace – even if just for a moment – is so intense that it's hard to ignore.

Not only that, I'm still very much interested to know what Læna is doing when she sneaks out. Does she visit a secret lover? Does she visit some sort of club? Attend a gathering?

She makes it look so easy. Not wearing a tracker, or it mysteriously vanishes. She walked right through this opening.

...Can I do the same? Can I go out as well, without anyone suspecting?

I know Jæmis likes to check up on me randomly, but that's still sparse and days can go by without seeing him. So it feels like there's no one constantly checking my location.

However, he did say he'd end my life on the spot if he caught me without the tracker. Then again, 'death threats' is practically his middle name, and so far, he hasn't actually done anything. In fact, I feel like I have immunity because I know he intends to use my 'position' as a Princess.

Surely, I can go out...

I shake my head at myself; I really shouldn't be trying to actively defy the rules, no matter how stubborn I am.

It's not like I have a good reason for leaving.

-- Palace grounds

I shriek out loud when I almost collide into someone's chest once I exit the hallway.

"Oh – Captain Jæmis," I say, noticing he's glaring at me. "You frightened me."

My heart is hammering in my chest – does he know about the secret passage?

That's when I notice the tracking device clutched in his hand.

"Tsk." He clicks his tongue, looking away from me.

His attention is obviously on the tracker. This time however, it doesn't seem like he's looking for me.

"...Looking for Princess Læna?" I inquire.

Surprise shows on his face, however brief. I guessed right. He's looking for her, he must be.

"As a matter of fact, I am," he answers honestly, straightening his back.

"Have you seen her?"

"No, can't say I have."

Jæmis releases an agitated growl. He doesn't know where she is – that means he doesn't know about that secret passage.

Should I tell him of its existence? That Læna could have slipped out of the palace? It's right behind us, it would be so easy.

No... I can't go revealing people's secrets just like that.

"Captain Jæmis," I call out his name. "Why is it that Princess Læna has to wear a tracker and can't leave the palace?"

For a while, he remains silent, his brown eyes piercing into my own.

I'm going to find out the truth one way or another.

"Why is it that you're always full of questions?" he asks, annoyance seeping through his words.

1. "And why is it you never seem to answer any?"

2. "Is it wrong to want to know more?"

"And why is it you never seem to answer any?" I quip.

He's always avoiding the question, or telling me to shut up.

Actually, now that I think about it, Læna is exactly the same way. I guess it runs in the family.

Jæmis lets out a huff of irritation and folds his arms.

"Challenging me won't make me answer your questions, Princess."

"Yes, but it sure does make me feel better."

He tilts his head to the side.

"Is it wrong to want to know more?"

"Asking the wrong questions could get you killed," he says in this chilly tone.

"...I seem to still be alive," I point out.

"Not for much longer if you keep bothering me," he huffs.

He jests. It doesn't seem like a threat.

"I'm merely curious."

"Læna doesn't enjoy the same amount of freedom as the rest of us do. That's all you need to know."

I blink at him; that's the most information he's volunteered so far.

"Well, I haven't–"

Speak of the devil. In the distance I spot Læna up high on the balcony. She seems to be engaged in some kind of conversation with some soldiers.

I guess she was in the palace all along.

"—Actually, she's right there." I point towards the balconies.

Jæmis turns to look into the direction I point, squinting his eyes against the sun.

"...She's there?" he asks, sounding unsure.

My vision is much clearer and detailed than his, as far as I can deduce. It's the same with anyone else back on Earth; they'd never really know what I was looking at in the distance.

"Yes, there seems to be two soldiers with her. She looks... a little angry."

"*Angry?*" Jæmis repeats.

Wait – those are the same soldiers we ran into a couple of weeks ago.

That's when I see one of the soldiers grab Læna. She pulls herself free, throwing a punch in his face. Except the second soldier punches her in her stomach, causing her to drop down.

I gasp loudly. "They're hurting her!"

"What!?"

"The soldiers, they're hitting her!"

Dust fills my lungs as the shockwave blows a giant cloud of sand my way. I cough loudly, momentarily distracted, not quite realizing what's happened.

Then I see it; Jæmis hurtling himself towards Læna at high speed. He's fazed, his markings glowing a cyan blue.

Taking a second to collect myself, I follow after him, running across the grounds. I don't know why I am – Jæmis has got this handled, but when I see the soldiers kicking Læna when she's already down, something inside of me just takes over.

I'm halfway across – my heart rate is going out of control; I haven't exercised in forever – and Jæmis has already landed on the balconies. He knocks one of the soldiers away from Læna.

The other one however, jumps on Jæmis' back.

As I run closer to the large walls, I can't see them anymore; my vision is blocked. I can hear them grunting as they fight.

Something large drops right next to me, scaring the living daylights out of me.

"Ahh!" I shriek, jumping away in surprise.

It's one of the soldiers. I immediately look away as my stomach churns unpleasantly at the sight of a dead body. The distance of the fall instantly crushed him.

I look up, expecting to see Jæmis handling the situation. Instead, I see Læna at the very edge, pushed off by the soldier.

Shit!

I spread my arms wide, fingers fanned out, and I shoot pieces of thread towards the walls.

Læna falls before my very eyes. I can't weave a net fast enough!

"Jæmis!" I yell at the top of my lungs.

Læna reaches my dangly safety net, breaking apart several strands in an instant. But I try, as fast as I can, to keep spinning more thread.

Her entire body makes a dent in the net, weighing it down until she almost touches the ground, and then bounces back up like it's a trampoline.

Jæmis swoops in to catch her in mid-air, making sure she doesn't fall back down.

I let out a breath of relief when I see her safe. My net was enough to catch her, despite the shoddy weaving technique I used.

Jæmis lowers both of them down onto the ground next to me.

"Læna are you alright!?" I ask, catching up with them.

"Those blasted *fools*," she says, huffing loudly. She pats down her skirt to remove any wrinkles.

"Læna – what happened? Tell me!" Jæmis urges her.

"Their tempers got the better of them. Or perhaps they've been lying in wait all this time until an opportunity presented itself." She's biting down on her finger, deep in thought.

"...I'm glad you're alright," I say. She doesn't seem that concerned.

"Yes, thank you, Princess Joselina. Quick thinking."

Another sound blast fills the sky, and suddenly Kæleb appears as well. His eyes are immediately on the dead body on the ground.

"I heard a scream! Læna what did you do?" he asks.

"What did I do?" Læna repeats, annoyed. "Why is that your first question?"

"There were these soldiers that were attacking her," I explain.

Kæleb inspects his sister's body for any injuries, and finally notices the swollen cheek.

Kæleb looks at Jæmis, eyes narrowed.

"And you didn't protect her?"

Jæmis growls at him in return. This isn't looking good.

"I addressed the problem." He points at the dead body. "Another one up there, too."

"You let them hurt her," Kæleb hisses darkly. "It is our duty to protect our family. To protect *her*."

Jæmis suddenly grabs Kæleb by his shirt, aggressively pulling him towards him as they butt heads.

"You think I don't know that!?"

"Can both of you idiots *stop* talking like I'm a child? I'm not some fragile being that needs constant protection just because I've lost my ability to faze," Læna tells them in anger.

The two of them break up and step away from each other.

So Læna can't faze... Is that why she can't fly?

"Læna, you are vulnerable, which is why the two of us need to make sure nothing happens to you. If one of us is allowing such infractions to happen then—"

"I did not allow this to happen!" Jæmis cuts him off.

This feels all... wrong. Why are they all fighting with each other when there's been an attempt on Læna's life?

1. "Captain Kæleb, no offense, but you weren't there."
2. "He's right. Captain Jæmis saved her."

"Captain Kæleb, no offense, but you weren't there," I speak up.

It bothers me that Kæleb is treating Jæmis this way, when all he did was defend his sister as soon as he knew she was in trouble.

Kæleb closes his mouth and stares at me, thinking it strange I decided to insert myself into their argument.

"Pardon me?" he says.

"If it weren't for the captain, Læna would have probably died," I stress.

"So dramatic," says Læna, not impressed. "Again, like I said, I'm not some helpless child incapable of defe—"

"The princess is wrong," Jæmis cuts her off.

"If it weren't for her, Læna would have died. It was you that spotted her in the first place, and somehow conjured up this web to catch her when she fell."

"He's right. Captain Jæmis saved her," I tell him.

Kæleb tilts his head to the side to stare at me, wondering why I'm even concerning myself with this squabble between them.

But it bothers me so much that he thinks it's somehow Jæmis' fault when he did everything he could to protect his sister. I have this strange urge to take his side.

"Two soldiers were attacking her and he got to her as fast as he could. Without him, Princess Læna might have died."

Kæleb's eyes shift over towards the dead body on the ground.

"No, the Princess is wrong," says Jæmis all of a sudden.

He turns to me, his dark eyes boring into my own.

"If it weren't for you, Læna could have died. You were the one to spot her and catch her when she fell."

"*She fell!?*" Kæleb echoes incredulously.

"And the Princess caught her," Jæmis finishes for him.

Is he paying me a compliment? Is he saying thanks? I can't tell. He sounds angry.

"To be fair, you caught her as well..." I say.

My net probably would have been torn apart had she bounced on it a second time.

Læna throws her hands up in the air, agitated that everyone is talking about her while she's there.

"I'm done! I'm leaving! You two can clean up this mess!" She dramatically starts climbing the stairs.

"Any other dead soldiers I should be looking for?" asks Kæleb, referring to the one on the ground.

"Another one up on the loggia. Broken neck."

"This needs to be reported to Lord Varitus."

Jæmis gives one hard, long look at his brother.

"...Tell him the soldiers plotted to kill her. That is all."

"What if there are more? What if they weren't the only two?" I ask, still worried they'd come after her.

Jæmis chuckles lightly.

"Of course there's more. There always are. Læna has a knack for creating enemies."

Suddenly, I feel like it's my fault.

"I recognized those soldiers from before – they bumped into me and got all angry. Princess Læna helped me out. It wasn't any of her doing, it was because of me."

Jæmis walks up next to me, lowering his face next to my ear.

"No. The fault lies with those soldiers. Do not take the blame when it has nothing to do with you."

I stare down at my hands, feeling a little flustered. I thought he'd jump at the chance to blame this on me, but it's the exact opposite...

"Now, I suggest you return to your chambers as we deal with the aftermath."

I don't exactly want to stick around any longer either, dead bodies make my anxiety spike.

Eventually, with Jæmis' urging, I go back to my room.

-- Infirmary

As I'm sorting vials in the infirmary, I come across a section that's locked away.

"Billius, what are these for?" I ask, curious as to why it's locked.

Billius follows my line of sight.

"Prince Nornus' blood samples. They are not to be touched."

I heed his warning and stay away from them.

"Does Prince Nornus have to do a lot of tests for his condition?" I wonder out loud.

I'm going to guess that Billius is helping Nornus with his condition.

There's a slight pause before Billius answers.

"Have you been seeing the Prince?"

Oh crap, I gave myself away. My visit to the gardens was supposed to be a secret!

"Well, it's none of my concern either way," he says, closing his eyes.

"However, Prince Nornus' medical records are classified. There's no need for you to know that kind of information, given your lack of medical training."

He's right about that, I may be able to suture a wound, but I wouldn't be of any use when it comes to analyzing blood samples. I can't even read their language.

"I will tell you this, Princess Joselina. The reason you were most likely taken by Prince Jæmis is because of the young Prince's condition."

That is starting to make a lot of sense to me. When I first arrived, Billius told me Varitus disposed of anyone who wasn't useful to his 'quest'. This quest – is it about Nornus?

"Oh... You mean, Lord Varitus is looking for a cure? And he is rounding up anyone with any medical abilities?"

Billius remains quiet, but his silence speaks volumes to me.

Nornus says he is alright as long as he's near water. Jæmis spoke of Earth's oceans and vast amounts of water at the banquet. Billius said that only people with medical abilities were taken.

Is that really it? Is Varitus conquering planets because he wants to cure whatever it is that Nornus has? Just for a single person, he is willing to sacrifice billions...

I'm left to ponder my own thoughts for a while.

I get into a fit of coughs when I inhale a bunch of dust from moving an old looking container.

"Are you alright?" Billius asks.

I clear my throat. "Y-yeah, just a bit of dust," I say, coughing one last time.

"Let me know if your cough gets worse."

"I'm fine!"

"By the way, Princess Joselina, there's something I wish to discuss."

"Yes?"

"Tomorrow your assistance won't be required. I won't be present, as I need to attend some other business."

"Wait, what am I supposed to do then?"

Billius flashes me a tiny smile.

"You can use your day off to relax. Perhaps, visit a certain garden..."

I guess it's not a secret I've been to Nornus' garden, but at least Billius seems to be keeping it to himself. I guess he's full of secrets.

"That sounds nice," I reply.

A day off...

-- Palace bedroom

All I want to do is crash on my weird bed-couch and sleep.

However, I was wholly unprepared for another person to be inside of the room.

My heart just about stops, seeing Nornus sitting on my bed.

"Prince Nornus! What are you doing here? You really scared me."

Looking apologetic, Nornus stares at the floor.

"My apologies..."

He then stands up to get closer to me, a grin spread widely on his face. As if he's unable to contain himself any longer. Bursting to share with me some kind of interesting fact or news.

"I really wanted to let you know about the Neferri. It's grown so much since you last visited. I wish you could see it."

I can't help but smile in response; his enthusiasm is always contagious. It's good to hear the plant I helped with is still going strong.

"I would love to see it," I answer honestly.

"Have you been taking good care of it?"

"Why yes! Though it would need to move to another pot soon, as it's growing quite fast. I wish I could select the pottery myself, but I always have to make do with what the servants give to me."

Nornus looks deep in thought, probably mulling over the fact he doesn't have a hand in picking out what he wants.

"That's too bad. Can't you tell them which one you want?"

"I tried, but they always get the size wrong. I've lost many seedlings because they outgrew their containers." He looks genuinely guilty.

Gardening is not something I have much knowledge about – much less when you add special abilities that make plants grow – I do appreciate the work that goes into it. It must be pretty important for Nornus to get a good-sized pot.

I remember a very lovely pottery stand at the market last month.

My eyes widen as an idea formulates in the back of my mind. Like an urge, growing stronger and faster.

"To tell you the truth, Prince Nornus, I'm free tomorrow."

"Really? Then you can come see me?" His eyes light up with an energy rivaling the sun.

The corner of my mouth lifts up as my lips transform into a devious smile. I slip off the tracker from my arm.

"Prince Nornus – do you want to see the outside?"

Chapter [014] -- Street market

Covered and hidden, we move among the crowd as if we are a part of it. No one is paying attention, at least, not much.

This is probably the most dangerous thing I've done so far; my heart can't catch a break. Every single corner is suspicious, every glance could mean a death sentence.

Yet I'm doing it. I'm wandering around the market, amongst the people of Yool. Undercover. Somehow, I still vaguely remembered how I got here last time. It's the most exhilarating situation I've experienced. It feels like I'm... free.

"Keep your hood on," I warn Nornus.

Nornus fixes his hood and makes sure nothing is showing from underneath his large cloak. We stand out like a sore thumb among the mass of Gaötte natives. Nornus with his pale blue skin, and me just being a regular human – we do *not* fit in with the rest.

But no one is really paying attention to us. Everyone is busy with their own business and aren't interested in two hooded figures.

"Got your water?" I ask, looking back at Nornus.

Nornus taps the small flask on the side of his hips.

"All prepared."

Good. He needs water for his condition in case it acts up. Being stranded in a desert with no water would not be the best situation for him.

I cough into my hand a few times.

Nornus offers me the flask.

"Here, drink some, sometimes the dust gets in your lungs."

I shake my head. "I'm fine. Keep it for yourself."

"Oh, do you smell that?" Nornus suddenly chimes in.

As a matter of fact, I do smell something delicious.

"I think it's coming from one of the stalls over there," I say, pointing at a particular market stall.

Our feet gravitate towards the savoury scent until we see what's causing it. A Gaötte is frying some strange vegetables, mixed with a type of grain and meat in a large, circular pan. It reminds me of paella, what with the golden hue and smell.

"Want some yeveeris? That'll be thirty kulden for one!" says the shopkeeper once he notices us.

Confused, I look at Nornus, and I whisper to him, "How much is thirty kulden?"

Nornus looks inside the small pouch that was given to me by Jæmis from before. He digs out a few gems and hands it over to the shopkeeper.

"We'll take two, please!"

"Comin' right up!"

I hug the cape closer to my body and smile at Nornus. He seems to be enjoying himself, eagerly awaiting his meal. I have to admit I'm also quite curious myself.

The shop keeper hands us two bowls of steaming hot 'yeveris', complete with wooden spoons.

We stand to the side, away from the crowd, as we inhale its scent. Nornus is right; the street food is really different from the kind that's prepared in the palace.

"Have you ever had this before?" I ask Nornus.

"Absolutely not – but I'm excited to try it!" he says in a chipper voice.

We dig in. I take a spoonful in my mouth. The grain is crunchy but light, breaking down into small crumbs. The vegetables are also crunchy and have this earthy taste to them. It's a little bitter, too.

But it's actually really delicious!

I grin at Nornus, seeing his own smile on his face.

"It's good, right?"

Nornus takes another bite in response.

"Yes – yes, it is! It's so different, and honestly a little too crunchy, but I like it!"

Seeing him be so happy about tasting new food is worth the risk of leaving the palace. Besides, it feels good to move about without anyone telling me where I can or cannot go.

Without Jæmis breathing down my neck.

I giggle when I notice Nornus has a few pieces of grain stuck on the side of his mouth.

"What is it?" he asks, slightly confused by my laughter.

1. Rub the grain off his face.
2. "You've got some food on the corner of your mouth."

I step closer to him with a smile. He stares at me with wide eyes from underneath his hoodie.

I stick out my thumb and wipe the corner of his mouth, removing the grain.

"Uhm..." he stammers, shyly looking away.

"Heh, you had some food right there," I say.

Nornus timidly wipes the rest of his mouth.

"O-oh... I was just a little too excited to eat it, hehe."

"You've got some food on the corner of your mouth," I say, pointing at the grain.

A little flustered, Nornus quickly wipes his face with the back of his hand.

"Gone?"

I shake my head, giggling again.

"No, it's still there."

He wipes at his mouth furiously once more, finally removing the food.

"There you go, you got it."

"Heh... guess I got a little too excited about eating."

"Can't blame you, this is delicious!"

Happily, I go back to eating from my bowl.

When we finish our food, we continue our exploration of the market.

"The streets are so crowded," Nornus points out. "I've never seen this many Gaötte before."

"Well, I've never seen Gaötte before until a little while ago," I joke.

Nornus giggles. "I guess that's true."

My eyes spy a market stall in the distance selling some pottery.

"Look, Prince Nornus, I think they sell some pots over there!" I say while pointing.

"Really? Then let's go! I can't stay outside for too long after all."

Yes, we can't stick around here all day. Someone is bound to notice our absence. Our plan was to simply buy a suitable pot for Nornus' plant, then return as soon as possible.

When we arrive at the stall, Nornus' eyes start to twinkle. He eagerly inspects each piece of pottery with this childlike amazement.

Finally, he picks one up that is rectangular in shape, with tribal-like etched carvings on the outside.

"This one is just the right size!"

"Do you want to buy that one?" I ask. I hope we have enough money for it.

The shopkeeper looks at us with a smile.

"For you, my prince, it is free. It is an honor to have you visit my wares."

Nornus pulls the hood across his face some more, looking shifty and nervous.

"I-I think you've mistaken me, I'm just a traveller," he murmurs.

I'm on high alert as well – no one was supposed to find out Nornus' identity. I figured most people wouldn't recognize him because he said he never went outside, but I guess I was wrong.

The shopkeeper's smile never leaves.

"Alright, my fair traveller, then as a token of Kulul's hospitality, you can have that one for free."

There's subtext behind their words – they're playing along. Relief washes over me; they're not going to rat us out.

"A-are you sure?" Nornus asks, hesitant to take something for free.

"Just make sure you pay next time," the shopkeeper laughs.

And just like that – Nornus found his pot.

I tug on his arm.

"We should head back now. Can't stick around for too long."

"Right," he says, hiding the pot underneath his cloak.

Now to make our way back to the palace before anyone notices we're gone.

But just as luck would have it, my eyes notice something familiar in the distance.

Red hair.

It was just a quick glance before it disappeared in the crowd. I stand frozen on the spot. Gaötte don't have hair. Did I just imagine it? No... I have really good eyesight.

"Prince Nornus," I say in a low whisper.

"What is it?"

"Mind taking a small detour? I think I saw something..."

"Oh?" he questions me.

I start moving through the crowd with Nornus trailing behind. Suddenly I'm on another mission. I just have to find out if what I saw was really...

Billius.

He said he needed to do something else yesterday, hence why he gave me the day off, but I'm pretty sure that he can't leave the palace either.

"Princess Joselina, what did you see?" Nornus asks, curious why I'm scrambling to get past all these Gaötte.

The crowd thins out and we arrive at the area where I saw the small glimpse of red hair. I look around for any other clues, but I don't see anything suspicious.

I think I lost him. Well, shit.

"Princess, what is it? What are you looking for?"

"I think I saw Healer Billius," I admit.

"What, really? Then we should say hi!" he says, not realizing that we're supposed to be undercover.

"Wait, no, we shouldn't say any—"

"Excuse me, have you seen someone with red hair pass by?" Nornus asks a bystander.

The Gaötte simply throws his thumb over his back, pointing down an alley.

"Went into the Screaming Howl over there," he answers.

"Thank you so much!" Nornus bows politely.

Well, I'll be damned – I wasn't just seeing ghosts. It was Billius. Or at least, someone with red hair.

Nornus turns to look at me. "Look, Princess Joselina, now we know where Healer Billius went. Come on!"

"Prince Nornus, please remember we can't let anyone know we're out here," I warn him.

"That's true... but Healer Billius won't tell anyone! He's always so attentive and careful with me. I'm sure he can keep a secret."

Oh he's keeping secrets alright... And now I *have* to find out if it was really him.

We both rush over towards the building hidden in an alley, with a large sign outside. Nornus confirms it reads Screaming Howl before we enter.

-- Screaming Howl

It's very dark inside, just like the pubs back on earth. In fact, I think it is a pub, when I see everyone seated at a table, drinking some kind of beverage.

The Gaötte behind the counter addresses us.

"Hey, invitation only," he barks at us.

I flinch in response, causing my hoodie to fall off.

"I-I," I stutter. "I saw my friend go in here... He has red hair?"

He inspects me for a little before answering. I feel like I'm going through security at an airport.

"Another one, eh? Ye all look the same to me. Yer friends are inna back." He throws his head into the direction of a small area with a divider.

"Thank you!" Nornus replies for me, as I'm too shocked to respond.

We walk towards the back, and I can feel my heart beat drum in my ears. Are we going to find Billius behind the divider? What will he say?

Right as I'm about to walk around the divider, I hear a voice that makes me freeze on the spot.

"That means our suspicions were correct?" asks the voice.

I instantly grab Nornus' cloak and drag him over to another table, keeping our heads low. Nornus looks at me all bewildered.

That voice belongs to Eeyok!

"Yes, I confirmed it multiple times after running the tests."

That's... that's Billius!

"Why are we hiding?" Nornus asks softly. He looks a little nervous.

"Please stop talking," I tell him.

I throw my hoodie back on and strain my neck to be able to look around the divider. It's blocking my view, but it's enough for me to see the person sitting in the middle. Or at least, part of their hair.

Læna's hair.

I swallow as my mind goes into overdrive. Why is she there? Why are they *all* there? What the hell did I stumble into?

"So our little prince is hiding more than he's letting on," Læna drawls out.

Little prince? Are they talking about Kæleb? Or... I look at Nornus, who's trying his best to not talk.

Eeyok is the one who replies, but his voice – no, his *vocabulary* – is completely different.

"Then Princess, what would you like us to do to proceed? Surely, he is the one who—"

"—We can decide that on a later date. He's always holed up in his garden anyway. He's not going anywhere. The little prince will receive his punishment eventually."

Nornus shrinks into himself as he realizes they're talking about him. Did she just say punishment? Are they trying to harm Nornus?

"As you wish, Princess," Eeyok concedes.

"Now that we've got that confirmed, we have to focus on getting our men past the border."

"I hope this doesn't result in another explosion like last time," says Billius.

"It had to be done," Læna answers.

The explosion – they were behind it!

"We have some supporters who work as gatekeepers. Would you like me to make arrangements?" offers Eeyok in a calm voice.

"Yes, be quick about it."

I barely have time to process that Læna is talking about the rebels, when I realize someone has gotten up from their table and is walking over towards us.

They're going to spot and recognize us!

I scramble to get up, pulling Nornus along.

My heart stops when I see Eeyok stare right into my eyes, immobilizing me.

Fuck.

"...Princess?" Eeyok says, flabbergasted.

Nornus shuffles his feet and awkwardly looks at the wooden floor.

"What is it Eeyok?" Læna calls out instead.

Eeyok is so surprised to see us here, it's taken a moment for him to gather his wits. I've caught them red handed; they're conspiring. They're the rebels. And I just walked into the lion's den unarmed.

I have to do something, before they do something to *me*.

1. Shush him.

2. Plead with him.

Without thinking, I grab Eeyok's wrist and pull him away from the view of everyone else.

Bewildered, he's about to say something, but I place my hand over his mouth, silencing him.

I mouth to him. "Don't tell her."

I remove my hand and stare at him. Please. *Please* don't rat us out.

Eeyok looks conflicted, his jaw grinding down on his sharp teeth.

"Eeyok?" Læna calls out again, this time more alert.

I look at him, pleading with my eyes.

Eeyok turns away from me.

"Nothing, Princess, I stubbed my foot on the table."

"Well, get a move on!"

Before I can take a breather, he quickly starts moving.

"Come with me. Quietly."

I have to appeal to him, beg if I have to.

"Please, don't tell them," I plead with him in a low whisper.

I'm desperate. I don't know what I walked into, but it's definitely something dangerous.

Eeyok closes his jaw, grinding down on his sharp teeth. He stares at me with his yellow eyes.

I shake my head. "Eeyok, *please*," I attempt once more.

"Eeyok?" Læna calls out.

Eeyok closes his eyes.

"Nothing, Princess. I'll be on my way."

Then his eyes are open and glaring at me. I'm not accustomed to this icy stare from him.

"Follow me. Quietly."

I guess I wasn't going to get off easy after all. I beckon Nornus to follow as we quietly shuffle out of the Screaming Howl with Eeyok leading the way.

-- Yool alley

My mind is racing. We've stumbled across the rebels, and I'm shocked to find out who is involved. There were a few others in the same corner, some I didn't recognize... but Læna, Billius and Eeyok?

"Eeyok," I call out to him.

He hasn't said a word, merely striding through the various back alleys.

"Keep your hood on!" he hisses at me.

Frightened, I clasp the hood tighter together so I'm fully covered. I look over at Nornus to see him do the same thing. He hasn't made a peep since we got caught.

Eventually Eeyok leads us to another alley, away from prying eyes. We stop to rest.

Eeyok immediately slams me against the wall, pushing his arm against my neck. I shriek out loud in response, afraid of what he might do to me.

"How did you find us!? Who are you working for!?"

Nornus throws his pot against Eeyok's head, causing it to shatter.

"Let her go!"

Eeyok stumbles backwards, holding onto his head.

"We don't know what's going on! We found you by accident!" I say quickly, jumping over towards Nornus' side.

"Eeyok why are you... Why are princess Læna and Billius talking about that explosion? Why are—"

"Silence!" he barks at me.

This is not the Eeyok I know... I don't know who this is. Aggressive, jumpy, and his entire speech pattern is different.

"Let me think."

Then his eyes shoot open as if he's realized something. He lunges towards me, and I brace myself, thinking he'll hurt me.

Instead, he grabs my arm and pulls it out from underneath the cloak. His eyes travel up and down, until he pulls out the other arm to check it out as well.

"Not there," he mumbles.

Is he talking about my tracker?

"I took it off," I say.

"So our location hasn't been compromised yet," he continues to talk to himself.

"I don't know what's going on. Were you all talking about me in there? About some sort of..." Nornus gulps. "Punishment?"

"How did you escape the palace?" Eeyok asks, ignoring Nornus.

I bite down on my lips... I have no other choice.

"I saw Princess Læna use a secret exit before when she thought no one was looking."

Eeyok bites down on his thumb. "The south exit..."

His eyes are back on me. "You followed her?"

I shake my head. "No. I wanted to go out on my own. I didn't tell anyone."

My eyes meet him.

"I *won't* tell anyone," I stress, trying to bargain.

"Tell anyone?" he repeats as he straightens his back.

"Princess. You're not understanding your situation here. You're not telling anyone because..."

He takes a threatening step closer.

"I can't let you return." He looks at Nornus. "Same for the Prince."

"We-we promise not to tell! We can keep a secret if you can," says Nornus, looking scared.

I stand in front of Nornus to protect him.

"Look – whatever we saw or heard today, no one has to know. Just let us go," I say.

"I can't do that," is his quick response.

Eeyok sighs exasperatedly, shaking his head in disappointment.

"Why did it have to be you... You've put me in a predicament."

Nornus suddenly yelps loudly when he's pulled back by someone else. A soldier yanks off Nornus' hood, revealing his bright hair and pale skin.

"I knew it! It's the Prince! He was in the Screaming Howl!" the soldier barks loudly.

"Let me go!" Nornus tries to struggle free.

"Our leader will be pleased to find the young Prince in our hands. Good work, Eeyok."

Eeyok just stands there with large eyes, not expecting a third party to come crashing in.

"Hehe, I'll have fun taking my revenge on you," the soldier laughs, twisting Nornus' arms.

1. Attack the soldier.

2. Throw your cloak on the soldier to confuse him.

Something in me takes over – my fight or flight instincts decided then and there, I'm fighting. I need to protect.

I lunge towards the shards lying on the ground from Nornus' broken pot.

I roll over and grip it tightly in my hand as I dash towards the soldier and slash his hand, drawing blood.

"Ah!" the soldier screams, letting go of Nornus.

"Run!" I yell at him.

"Princess – no!" Eeyok calls out and tries to follow.

Except I conjure up a thread and quickly wrap it around his ankles, causing him to faceplant down onto the ground with a grunt.

Nornus is running ahead, dust kicking up everywhere. I want to follow, but the other soldier pulls me back by my cloak, nearly choking me.

Quick – take it off, take it off! I fumble around trying to unfasten the cloak.

It's slipped off, except he's already grabbed my arm. Nornus stops running to turn around when he notices I'm not following him.

"Who is this?" the soldier questions, seeing me for the first time.

My fight or flight instincts are firing off inside of me, my adrenaline pumping up my blood pressure. I decide without a second thought; I need to protect Nornus.

I rush over towards them, unfastening my cloak.

"Huh, who's this?" the soldier demands, confused.

Not giving him the time to react, I throw my cloak on his head and tighten it.

"Hey!"

In his confused state, he lets go of Nornus, trying to take off the cloak. I grab Nornus' arm and pull him away from the soldier.

"Run!"

"Princess, don't!" Eeyok warns me.

Except I shoot out my thread and wrap it around his ankles, causing him to trip over his feet as he attempts to catch us.

Nornus runs ahead of me, and I want to follow, but the other soldier has taken off the cloak and used it to wrap it around my arms, forcing me back.

"Let me go!" I hiss loudly.

"Princess!" Nornus has turned around and stopped running once he's noticed I wasn't following him.

"Nornus – just run!" I yell.

"Ahh – shut up!" the soldier flings me against the wall, knocking the air out of my lungs.

I fall down in a heap of limbs, temporarily stunned. My back hurts, it's such a paralyzing pain.

I can barely focus; all I see is the soldier running after Nornus.

Nornus widens his stance. "Don't. Touch. HER!"

He opens his mouth to scream, but something so unnaturally high-pitched exits, I'm not sure *what* it is. It's making my ears ring.

Then he starts to glow like a bright light. The wind howls around us, gathering near Nornus like he's sucking it all up like a vortex. No he's... taking all the water out of the air.

The walls around us start breaking from the wind's strength. A window pane shatters from the force. The soldier in front of me is pushed back by all the wind. I can barely recognize Nornus since he's glowing so bright.

"Ah!" I shriek when I get slashed across my cheek.

Then I get another cut on my arm, a line of red blood immediately appears. It's impossible to see what's cutting me, I'm so confused.

"Nornus!?" I yell out to him. He's got to stop this!

I take a step forward, narrowing my eyes to protect against the wind. Ah! I got hit again, this time on my shin!

The wind gathers faster and faster, Nornus is now just a glowing ball of white.

"Princess!" Eeyok screams, finally breaking my thread apart and running to my side.

I'm blinded by a flash of light.

I don't know what's going on, but one moment, I'm in an alley, the next, Eeyok has kicked down a door and tossed us both inside, to nearly escape the barrage of lashings.

The walls around us crash and crumble. Eeyok's thrown his body across me to protect me from any falling debris.

When the ceiling threatens to cave in, Eeyok pulls me outside once more, just fast enough to escape being crushed to death.

I stumble around on my feet, completely bewildered by what happened. I turn my head to look at Nornus.

He's on the ground!

A loud shriek leaves my mouth when I see the other soldier in front of me as well. Or, what's left of him.

I turn around, my stomach churning at the blood splatters everywhere. He's been... he's been cut into a million pieces. Keep it together, keep it together...

"Are you hurt anywhere? Can you still walk?" Eeyok finally asks me, checking my body.

"Just a few scrapes," I say breathlessly. Eeyok looks worse off for protecting me.

"But – Nornus!" I tear myself away from Eeyok and run towards the small body lying on the ground.

I try to ignore the way my feet sink into the blood, and how the stench fills up my nose. Suck it up Joselina, don't freak out now. I've got to check on him.

"Nornus – talk to me," I say desperately, kneeling down next to him and grabbing his face.

His eyes are closed, but he's still breathing.

Water. Yes – he probably needs water!

I quickly search under his cloak for the flask of water. Removing the cap, I position it on his lips, tipping it over.

"Please... drink some."

Water drips down his parched lips, into his mouth. He's not responding...

The flask is knocked out of my hand when a gust of wind settles near me.

I scramble to fetch it from the ground. Near someone's feet.

I look up; Kæleb has landed in front of me.

It doesn't take long for the other brother to touch down.

Shit.

Eeyok is nowhere to be seen either.

Finally taking in the situation, Kæleb's eyes grow wide when he sees me near Nornus' immobile body.

"Get away from the Prince!" Kæleb roars and knocks me away from Nornus without a care.

Not caring I've been tossed aside; I look up at him.

"Please, he needs wa–"

My words get swallowed when Jæmis lifts me up by my arm.

"What were you thinking!? Putrid mother's nutsack – that was literally the most brainless and moronic stunt you could have pulled."

"He needs to see Healer Billius!" Kæleb announces and then flies off into the distance with Nornus in his arms.

"But Billius isn't–"

"–You lost your right to speak!" Jæmis picks me up and grabs me by my waist.

He launches us into the sky.

-- Palace grounds

It's impossible to get a word in. Even if someone did listen to me, would they believe me?

I was found over Nornus' unconscious body, outside of the palace. I might as well have plunged a knife into him.

So here I am, on my knees, bound and gagged.

Kæleb lands beside us, addressing Jæmis who's been keeping guard.

"Healer Billius isn't in the infirmary."

"That wretched sack of Parse dung. No one is where they should be today." Jæmis sounds infinitely pissed off.

That's because he's not at the palace. He's at the Screaming Howl. Does Jæmis know about everyone? Conspiring against Nornus, and probably Varitus, too?

Not like I can say anything.

It wasn't supposed to go like this today. I just wanted a quick trip to the market, have a fun time with Nornus, and return in time before anyone noticed we were gone. That's all.

The doors of the palace open, an envoy of soldiers appear, and in the middle – a furious looking Varitus. He's descending the stairs.

I am a dead woman.

"Hrmpf!" I try to speak, but the gag prevents me from saying anything comprehensible.

"Shut your mouth hole! Nothing you will have to say will matter now," Jæmis warns me.

"You answer to Lord Varitus now. I warned you, Princess. I *told* you this would happen."

I know. I know you did. That doesn't stop the extreme fear from filling up the core of my body.

I've been dancing around the edge of death all this time. Pushing boundaries whenever I could – I quickly noticed how far I could go without being punished.

But this... This does not look good for me at all. I haven't even harmed Nornus, but he's not here to vouch for me. Eeyok has mysteriously disappeared, and I doubt anyone else back at the Screaming Howl would speak up for me.

I am royally fucked.

Varitus has finally arrived. His body language is composed, but I can see the fury in his eyes.

SMACK!!

I'm rattled as I feel a hotness sting my cheek, right where I was cut from the wind before.

He's whipped me with a vine. I didn't even see him conjure it, nor swing his arm. It was too fast. Oh damn, it burns.

"Visiting... speaking... and then you kidnapped him." His voice is chillingly soft.

I *didn't* kidnap him!

Another whiplash hits me across the other cheek, drawing blood this time. Ugh, these really sting, the pain is making it hard to think straight.

"I shall have you executed!" Varitus roars.

He pulls back his arm and my eyes widen in paralyzing fear. My life flashes before me. I'm not going to see Ralph ever again.

"My Lord!" Jæmis cuts in. "We need the Earthling Princess for our negotiations," he explains.

Varitus doesn't strike me, but remains his position. Oh please oh please, listen to Jæmis. Let me return to Earth.

He seems to think it over for a while, the silence almost suffocating.

"Who says she needs to be in one piece?" he drawls out.

No! No! Definitely all in one piece!

Jæmis stands in front of me, then kneels before Varitus, bowing his head low.

"Lord Varitus, the Earthling was my responsibility, so I will take her punishment instead."

Wait, what?

Varitus glares at Jæmis beneath him. I can't believe he's doing this.

"Captain Kæleb," says Varitus.

"Yes, my Lord?"

"Are you in agreement with this settlement?"

"No, Lord Varitus. I believe the Earthling should be executed for her crimes on the spot."

My eyes grow wide in response. He wants me killed!

"We *need* the Earthling," Jæmis stresses, his gaze still focused on the ground in front of Varitus.

"The planet is too precious to give up all of our bargaining chips."

Varitus extends his hand towards Kæleb, offering the vine whip.

"Then accept the punishment in her stead, by Captain Kæleb's hand."

"Yes, Lord Varitus," Jæmis agrees.

"You don't stop until he's on the brink of death," Varitus hisses.

Kæleb accepts the vine and bows in front of Varitus. Then he cracks it and turns to Jæmis, still kneeling down.

"Face her. I want her to look you in the eye, the person who nobly decided to sacrifice himself," Varitus taunts.

Jæmis twists his body until he's facing me. There's no sense of hesitation or fear on his face. It's just blank. He's accepted this.

"A life for a life..." he murmurs in a soft voice that only I can hear.

The first lash comes out of nowhere, startling me. The crack of the whip was so loud, it tore right through Jæmis' armour. But he hasn't even flinched.

Another crack. Blood splatters into the air. Jæmis didn't even blink.

Kæleb continues his barrage of attacks, flogging Jæmis' back without a break.

Then Jæmis' expression finally begins to change, he's wincing slightly with each strike. His chest is heaving up and down due to his elevated heartbeat.

The extreme circumstance I'm under is heightening my senses. It makes everything appear in perfect clarity.

The sight before me is barbaric.

I... I can't watch. I turn my head away.

"No. Don't you dare look away," Jæmis grunts in between the flogging.

"That is the – *ugh* – least you can do."

I bite down on my lips, tilting my face towards him, my eyes slowly landing upon his body. Kæleb's flogging isn't as fast as Varitus', but this is so long and downright brutal.

This is your brother – how could you do this to him?

But most importantly, why is Jæmis doing this for me? Offering himself to bear my punishment.

Sitting there, kneeling, beaten to a bloody pulp. All because I ventured outside and took Nornus with me. My actions have consequences, and despite Jæmis taking the fall for it, I still have to face it.

So I look into Jæmis' brown eyes, watching how he grunts and grinds down on his teeth, each beating taking a toll on him.

He's right; it's the least I can do.

For a split second, I see him faze as his eyes flicker that hazy light blue. Jæmis' face contorts as he bears the brunt of Kæleb's lashings, but he's not screaming. He's not toppling over.

With one particular lash of the whip, Jæmis breaks formation, falling down on both his knees, his hands on the ground, bracing himself. But he still maintains eye contact with me.

This is terrifying, even if I'm not the one being flogged. It's so hard to watch, I want it to stop.

Varitus is in the background, watching everything unfold with cold and calculating eyes. There's no sense of emotion behind them.

Another crack of the whip and it's cut right on the back of Jæmis' neck, blood trickling down into his suit of armour.

Then Jæmis' eyes turn blue once more, the markings on his face appear as well. He's wincing, his eyes losing focus. This... this is actually worse than the first time. Kæleb isn't stopping until Jæmis is passed out on the ground.

I avert my eyes to check out Kæleb's expression, but it's completely emotionless as well. It's like he doesn't care he's beating his brother.

"*Look at me!*" Jæmis grunts loudly when he's noticed I've changed the direction of my focus.

Strangely enough, I do meet his gaze once more. But I don't want to, it's unnerving. I feel so damn guilty. I want it to stop.

And it continues.

...And continues.

The longer it goes on, the less energy Jæmis has left to focus. His eyes are rolling in the back of his head. His back is split open, completely soaked with blood. His armour is in tatters.

Then he's finally become unresponsive; his eyes are closed and his arms are hanging by his side completely limp. The markings on his skin fade away.

But Kæleb continues.

"Hmhhm!!" I try to speak.

Stop! He's passed out!

This stupid gag! These ropes around my wrists – I can't do anything!

This might actually kill him. Please stop! Don't let him die on my account!

Kæleb delivers another powerful blow and Jæmis' body doesn't even flinch anymore. I can't tell whether he's dead or not, but I can't stand it.

All I see is suffering in front of me, and I want it to stop.

My hands glow hot and warm, my fingertips stretching and flexing until I've conjured threads from all my fingers. They slice right through the rope binding my wrists together.

I break free.



I don't even think, I just lunge forwards to grab Jæmis' face in my hands.

I pull him close to my body and wrap my arms around him in a protective manner, shielding him from the whip. My hands are drenched in Jæmis' blood as I touch his back.

CRACK!

Kæleb hits my arms instead. It stings so badly; blood is already dripping from my open wound. It sends a tremor throughout my body that it rattles my brain, temporarily stunning me.

He finally stops.

"Princess – what do you think you're doing, interfering with my work?" He sounds so vile and offended.

I try and make some noise through the gag, but it's impossible. I'm already relieved to feel Jæmis' breath on my neck; at least he's still alive.

"The Captain passed out," says one of the soldiers, noticing Jæmis hasn't moved this entire time.

"Ahh, is that so," Kæleb pulls back the whip.

Varitus doesn't say a word and simply turns around.

"Lock her up," he says before ascending the stairs with his army of soldiers.

Kæleb bows in front of Varitus' back, then turns to me.

I rest my head against Jæmis', closing my eyes. It's finally over.

-- Palace dungeon

It's much colder here. Shivers have taken over my body. I'm aching all over.

I was thrown in this cell yesterday, but after waking up today, I feel feverish and weak. I clumsily stitched my own arm from the wound Kæleb gave me.

I cough a few times and huddle my legs to my body for warmth.

My vision has become blurry. It's hard to tell what's going on.

Then my cell door opens up, a blurry figure enters.

"Princess Joselina," says the voice belonging to Billius.

It's him...

"What are you..." I try to speak, but it takes such effort, that I end up spending all my energy and I have to take a break.

"Don't speak. I'm here to deliver a message," he whispers.

"From...?" I drawl out.

"Don't breathe a word of what you saw or heard yesterday to anyone, and you might just get out of here alive."

I groan and throw my head back against the brick wall.

Billius pauses, unsure whether I heard him or not.

Then his cold hands are on my wrist, checking my pulse.

"Elevated heartbeat, feverish cheeks, above average temperature... Princess it seems your body is fighting a virus."

I try and snort – no shit, I have a fever – but I struggle and let out a weird squeak instead.

"I believe you may have caught the Rikkitti virus. Very common among Gaötte, but they deal with it rather well. I'm unsure what toll it will take on your Earthling body."

That sounds comforting.

"Where's Normus? Is he okay? Did you... hurt him?" I finally gather enough energy to ask the questions that have been burning in my mind.

A stretch of silence draws between us. I cough several times.

"The Prince is safe and alive, that is all you need to know."

"But you were all..." I take in a deep breath. "Conspiring against him."

"I'll have some medicine delivered to your cell to help with the virus, along with a lot of water. Hopefully, you'll manage to control it."

He didn't answer my question.

Then he suddenly leans in closer.

"We are not the enemy here, Princess," he whispers in my ear.

He pulls away his hot breath.

"Take care, Princess Joselina of planet Earth."

He turns around and exits the cell. Those sounded a lot like parting words.

--

I wake up disoriented when someone brushes the sticky hair out of my face. I've been sweating in my sleep.

How many days has it been?

"Drink," says a scraggly voice.

"Hmm? Eeyok...?" It's so hard to focus. My head hurts. My body aches.

"Take the medicine. You have to see your home again before you die."

Something touches my lips and I open up; Eeyok is helping me drink. It's bitter, just like the Safrin tea.

"Rest."

I close my eyes, feeling too weak to stay awake.

--

It's hard to keep track of time when I'm going in and out of consciousness. The fever has broken, so at least that has improved, but I still feel absolutely terrible and weak.

Someone enters my cell but doesn't speak. My vision is still blurry and I'm almost starting to accept this sickness has affected my eyesight.

The shadowy figure sits next to me without a word. A flask pushes against my lips.

Ah, water and medicine again. I don't object and drink it all.

The figure leaves without speaking and I fall back asleep.

--

A soldier enters my cell. It's been a while since someone directly came in after I had recovered from my sickness. Still some coughing here and there, but my vision is back and I'm not aching all over anymore.

He takes me by my arm.

"We go."

"Huh, go where?"

He doesn't say a word and drags me out.

-- **Palace Grounds**

I can't remember the last time I felt the sun's rays hit my face. It feels like it's been forever since I was outside.

There's an army of soldiers all lined up in front of the grand staircase, protecting Varitus.

Jæmis and Kæleb are among them.

Oh. Jæmis' hair has grown longer. He looks... well, same as always to be honest. I haven't seen him since I got tossed in the cell, which was a while ago.

Jæmis doesn't look over my way at all, his eyes trained on Varitus.

"The trip to HX-108... I won't accept anything but success," says Varitus in a low voice.

"Captain Jæmis, this is your last chance."

Jæmis bows.

"Yes, Lord Varitus."

"Fail to conquer HX-108, and I shall personally see to it that you're forced to watch how I'll slit your sister's throat."

My eyes grow wide – he's threatening to kill Læna!?

"I understand, Lord Varitus," Jæmis says obediently, closing his eyes.

He clears his throat and opens his eyes once more.

"We will conquer HX-108. This time won't end in a failure," he announces in a bold voice.

"Captain Kæleb, the same goes for you," says Varitus.

Kæleb bows as well. "Yes, my Lord. I understand very well that failure is not an option."

"Move out!" Jæmis roars.

The soldiers start marching away. One of them pushes me so that I start walking, too. I drag my feet over the ground, looking up at the blue sky.

I'm... going home.

Chapter [015] -- Spaceship cell

The steel walls, the hard surface of the bed; I'm back inside the spaceship.

The door is locked – I already tried stepping on the mechanism and it wouldn't budge.

My clothes... the ones I wore when I was taken, they're left behind on the planet. I'm lucky enough to have my cell phone with me, something they haven't taken away. Perhaps they never realized its significance.

Time has gotten a bit fuzzy with me. I don't know how long I spent in that cell. Weeks? Months? I've been so sick, I can barely put together my memories.

There's one thing I do remember crystal clear; Læna, Billius and Eeyok are all with the resistance. The rebels. Læna especially seemed to be very important.

But I couldn't tell anyone. Not only was I sick, but even Billius warned me not to say anything.

I'm an outsider, I shouldn't care... but I feel very deceived.

It's not that they're rebels, I honestly do not care. But I liked Eeyok, I was fond of him. To find out it was most likely an act all this time...

Ugh, I don't know why it bothers me so much!

The door to my room opens up, my eyes instantly lock onto the entrance.

It's just a soldier I don't recognize, carrying a tray of food.

"Eat," he says, placing it on the floor.

"Wait," I tell him as I see him getting ready to leave.

"Where's Eeyok? Did he come, too? I need to speak with him."

The soldier looks annoyed.

"What do you want with a grunt?" he huffs.

If only you knew how much more he is than that.

"Tell him I want to talk to him."

"Hmpf." The soldier doesn't bother acknowledging me anymore and leaves the room.

Exasperated, I eat the food he delivered.

--

A day later, I get another visitor delivering food.

But this time, I recognize them.

"Eeyok," I say with an unintended amount of disdain behind it.

He stands to the side, not looking me in the eye. He places the tray down on the floor.

"Eeyok, talk to me. You have a lot of explaining to do," I say.

Eeyok clears his throat.

"Princess eat," he says in his typical scraggly voice.

"Drop the act," I warn him, getting up from my bed.

"That day – what did I walk into?"

Eeyok's shoulders slump and he sighs.

"Nothing you should concern yourself with." His voice is clear and his grammar correct.

"What were you going to do with Prince Nornus? What happened to him?" I fire off my questions.

I don't know anything at all – whatever happened after I was put into a cell is a mystery to me.

"The young prince is doing fine..." he drawls out, still avoiding my eyes.

"It is he who you should thank for still being alive."

"What do you mean? Captain Jæmis was the one that negotiated for my life," I point out.

Eeyok shakes his head.

"That's a separate issue. The people I work with – they couldn't let you go. You and the prince knew too much."

Then he finally does make eye contact with me.

"In return for his silence, we cut a deal to keep you alive."

I feel my heart beat faster. They 'kept' me alive? Which means...

"You were going to kill me," I state in a small voice.

Eeyok looks down at the floor.

"It's not my decision to make."

I feel horrified. To think I had any amount of trust in him.

"You completely played me. Fooled me." I'm so disgusted.

"Making everyone think you're just some insignificant grunt. Speaking strangely. Lowering down people's guards..." I start to rant.

"I bet you giving me your Makoet was also all part of that plan. Just to lure me into a false sense of—"

"—I did not deceive you, Princess!" he cuts me off with a shrill voice.

"Princess – you were an anomaly no one was prepared for," he explains with a sigh.

"New plans had to be made... but my decision to give you my Makoet was all part of my own volition."

"...And I hope the princess' own feelings were as genuine as mine when you gave me your own Makoet."

"That's because I didn't know you were going to kill me back then!" I yell.

"How can I believe you? You wanted me dead," I mutter.

"I didn't want – I *vouched* for you!" Eeyok raises his voice.

"Princess Læna wasn't convinced until I suggested the deal with Prince Nornus."

"You're saying Princess Læna wanted me dead?"

"...There is a lot to unpack here, but Princess Joselina, I am on your side."

She certainly isn't. What about her brother?

"Does Captain Jæmis know?" I question him.

Jæmis was the one that wanted to keep me alive. Even that bit he said at the end, right before getting flogged, a life for a life... That doesn't sound like someone who would conspire to have me killed.

"Captain Jæmis is unaware of our involvement with the resistance."

With how big of a lapdog Kæleb seems – I doubt he knows, either.

Which means, I know their dirty little secret. A secret people were willing to kill me over.

Can I really trust what Eeyok is saying? He vouched for me? It's hard to believe.

But I do know I'm alive, on a ship filled with soldiers that are not friendly to rebels. If Jæmis knew Eeyok belongs with the rebels, he'd probably get spaced on the spot.

Which means, I hold all the cards. I could use this.

1. "If you don't want me spilling your secret to the captain... You're going to help me escape."
2. "What's preventing me from telling him everything?"

"If you don't want me spilling your secret to the captain... You're going to help me escape," I threaten him.

If Eeyok doesn't want this information getting out to a certain high-ranking captain, then he'll help me escape as soon as we're on Earth.

"When we arrive on Earth, I want you to help me get out and escape, before Captain Jæmis can negotiate."

Eeyok snorts, mildly amused.

"Princess Joselina, there's no need to threaten me," he says with a small chuckle.

"That's already part of the plan."

Surprised, my eyebrows raise high in response.

"What's preventing me from telling him everything?" I ask.

"Absolutely nothing, Princess Joselina," he answers honestly.

I'm actually quite surprised at his response. It's almost like he doesn't think I'll tell.

"...Is it because you think I won't do it?"

Eeyok chuckles lightly.

"It's because there's a much better plan. One that involves helping you get off this ship."

"What?" I'm stupefied.

"Princess Joselina, I'm helping you escape."

"What?" I repeat again, unable to say anything else.

"Like I said before – you're an anomaly. We had to improvise and change our plans. It suits us much more if the negotiations with HX-108 do not proceed as planned."

"Oh... You're just using me as a pawn."

Eeyok sighs once more.

"I was the one to suggest the idea."

He takes a step closer to me.

"Everyone who has been wrongly taken prisoner deserves their freedom. Especially someone with a kind heart like you."

This time I close my mouth. I can't tell if he's serious or not. Am I just being used in his plans, or does he really want to help me escape?

"You get to go back to your family," he says with a soft smile. "Isn't that what you want?"

I desperately want to go back to my family, to get to live a normal life again.

"...But what about you?" I ask.

This is not going to end well; Earth will be much better prepared for the second round of invasions. The first time we were caught off guard, but I'm sure preparations have been made by the Forrester Incorporation at least.

"You'll get caught in the crossfire."

"That is alright with me, I'm prepared to perish in battle for what I believe in."

And just like that... my sympathy returns in full force. If what he's saying is true then... He really does intend to die to give me back my freedom.

"What exactly are you fighting for?" I ask.

Eeyok closes his eyes, his demeanour changing.

"That's a very broad question."

"I think you owe it to me to explain. It doesn't seem like you want to attack Earth."

"You're right. I don't. The resistance doesn't care about intergalactic war or conquest. We have no intention of conquering your planet."

"But you're here," I point out. "On this ship. Just like the first time."

He heaves a sigh.

"I slip through the ranks and act as a spy. Soldiers don't pay attention to me, as I'm just a lowly grunt who can't even speak right."

That much has been obvious that it's all been an act. Has his kindness also been an act?

"...You being friendly with me, was that just acting as well?" I ask sadly.

Eeyok smiles. "No... Princess Joselina has continually surprised me. I am enamoured."

"I hope what you said at the Maaka can still be true, that we are friends."

Something inside of me melts at his words.

"Again, we're on the same side. Lord Varitus took over my planet, and he intends to do the same to yours."

"Ah... I thought you said he saved your planet."

"Yes and no. It's complicated, but Lord Varitus arrived on planet Yool when I was very young, and executed our ruling royal family."

This only makes me wonder how old Eeyok is.

"What about Princess Læna? She wanted me dead."

"It's nothing personal," he says.

"My life is *very* personal!" I quickly react.

I can't believe I gave my Makoet to someone who wanted me dead.

"Princess Joselina, you only need to know that the resistance is actively working to fight against Lord Varitus and dethrone him. Princess Læna is on the forefront of that."

"You mean she's your leader?"

That is starting to make sense. Her frequent disappearances, the reason she had to wear a tracker, all those soldiers that were strangely respectful towards her.

"One of them, yes."

"And she's conspiring against her own brothers?"

Eeyok looks a little distraught.

"The reality is a lot more complicated, Princess... I can't--"

The door to the room opens up, startling both of us. Kæleb walks in. It's the first time I've seen him on the spaceship.

"Princess Joselina, the Captain wants to see you."

"Eeyok will take princess," Eeyok interjects, having easily switched to his other persona.

"No, Captain Jæmis asked me. You, come." Kæleb grabs my arm and pulls me along.

I guess I won't get all the answers right away.

Eeyok's eyes are fixated on me, filled with a mixture of worry and fear.

"I won't tell him," I reassure him in a small whisper as I pass Eeyok.

-- **Spaceship hallway**

It's a little stiff walking with Kæleb like this. I don't have very fond memories of him the last time we interacted, which was when he was beating Jæmis to a near pulp.

He keeps quiet, strictly professional.

I have to ask...

"Captain Kæleb," I start, my voice betraying my hesitation, "why did you agree to punish Captain Jæmis?"

His eyes fall upon me and it's this unfamiliar gaze.

"I will do whatever Lord Varitus commands me," he explains.

"Including taking over your planet, if that's what it takes," he warns me.

It doesn't seem like he would change his mind or loyalty to Varitus. He's a very devout follower if he has no issues beating his own sibling just because his lord said so.

I keep quiet for the rest of the way.

-- Captain's quarters

Once more, I've arrived at Jæmis' room. I'm getting flashbacks of the time I tried to feel for his heart.

...And heard that strange heartbeat.

"Captain, I brought the Princess," Kæleb announces.

Sitting at his desk, Jæmis as usual, doesn't look up, and merely gestures at the Kæleb to leave.

There's not much love between them, is there? Kæleb bows and leaves the room.

It's still a little strange to see Jæmis with longer hair. Just how long was I locked up in that cell?

Jæmis stands up from his desk, walking over to the vaults behind him.

He opens one of them up and retrieves a small vial. Is that the Saffrin root? I wouldn't need to take it anymore now that I'm in space, right?

"Healer Billius wanted to make sure you could survive the trip and asked me to administer these to you." His voice is cold and unfamiliar.

"Come here," he commands, noticing I've been idling by the entrance.

Hesitantly, I walk towards him.

"What is it?" I ask, seeing the vial.

Jæmis takes out a syringe and sucks up the contents from the vial.

"Medicine," is his simple answer.

"Give me your arm." It's not a question as he grabs my left arm.

"Healer Billius said you were still recovering from the Rikkitti virus, and should continue to take a shot every three days until the end of the trip."

"I feel fine though," I mutter.

But I guess I should trust what Billius knows about an unknown alien virus. I'm just happy I'm back to normal.

"I'd rather not have a dead princess on my ship when we arrive," he says, irritated.

His fingers touch my arm, making me flinch unexpectedly.

His eyebrows furl as he detects something on my skin.

"What's this?"

He's referring to the fading mark on my arm. The one I got from Kæleb's whip. I had to stitch it myself.

"A wound," I reply in a simple manner.

"I have eyes, Princess. What I mean is – where did this come from? Tell me."

"Captain's Kæleb's whip," I answer.

Jæmis pauses, his eyes slightly widened. As if he doesn't quite understand. He twists my arm, inspecting it on all sides. The wound travels from my elbow to my wrist.

"How–"

"–I tried to shield you," I quickly cut him off.

"Shield me?" he echoes incredulously.

This seems a little awkward to admit.

"You were passed out. He was going to beat you to death... I couldn't..."

"You couldn't *what*?"

I couldn't bear to watch him die in front of me.

But I'm not about to say that to his face.

"Just give me the shot," I say stubbornly.

Jæmis narrows his eyes – I can tell it bothers him that I tried to intervene with his punishment. I'm not in the mood for introspection though.

Thankfully, he lets the issue go this time.

He turns my arm until the inside faces him. Brown eyes are strained on trying to find my veins, until he pushes the needle into my skin. I squeeze my eyes shut for a second, I never liked the sensation of getting a shot.

"Can't I do it myself?" I ask once the liquid has filled my veins. "This way I don't have to keep bothering you."

"No," he says quickly. His tone leaves no further discussion.

He dabs a small cloth against the puncture wound from the syringe, cleaning away a few drops of blood. He's surprisingly gentle with his actions.

"I'll personally see to it that your health is maintained."

"Because you can't present me when I'm damaged, right?" I say flippantly.

He certainly doesn't care about my actual wellbeing.

Jæmis releases my arm, storing away the syringe and vial.

"That is correct. Negotiations will run much smoother when they see you're alive and well."

Sorry to break it to you Jæmis, but there won't be any negotiations. Not only have I lied about being some kind of royalty with worth, Eeyok is going to help me escape.

This is not going to end well for him. If one lightning bolt from Caine sent him into an unconscious state, I doubt they can do much.

He might actually die, returning to Earth.

That makes me pause.

I feel like such a hypocrite. Jæmis is the entire reason why I'm in this predicament, aboard an alien spaceship.

But he did also bargain for my life with Varitus. I watched how he took that gruesome beating for me. It still eats me up inside.

Because of that... there's a part of me that doesn't want him killed. Punished for his crimes, for sure, but to want him dead after he's saved my life feels wrong.

So, I have to ask.

1. "Why don't you give up on taking over Earth?"

2. "What if the negotiations won't run smoothly?"

"Why don't you give up on taking over Earth?" I ask of him.

Jæmis actively scoffs at that notion, crossing his arms, looking amused.

"Princess, do you really think we'd be returning to your planet with friendly intentions?" he asks in return, his tone sarcastic.

Of course he's not.

"You can give up now, return me to my family. They might let you live. You may even be able to strike up a deal and help us against any further invasions."

Jæmis chuckles darkly.

"You have quite the imagination there."

I look at him, deadly serious.

"You could help us defeat Lord Varitus."

That was enough to wipe the amused grin off his face.

He's about to respond, his eyes already narrowing in anger, when I pipe up before he can talk.

"He threatened to kill your sister. I understand that. But what if we could work out a plan where that doesn't have to happen?"

"What if the negotiations won't run smoothly?"

Jæmis raises his eyebrows at me.

"Are you worried about your people?" he asks.

"No, I'm worried about—"

I swallow my tongue. I was just about to say I was worried about him. That's not something I'm about to admit.

"I'm just saying... it's not looking good for you. You should consider peacefully surrendering me. In fact, maybe you can strike a deal where we could help one another," I suggest.

Jæmis scoffs out loud.

"What makes you think I would surrender our best bargaining chip? Surely you're smart enough to figure out that puts me at a disadvantage."

"You don't *have* to attack Earth just because Lord Varitus threatened to kill your sister," I point out.

"What if we could help you keep Princess Læna safe?"

Jæmis suddenly enters my personal space, growling down at me.

"Do *not* speak of things you have no knowledge of," he hisses at me. "Remember your place."

I shut my mouth, but continue to stare at him. He's right, it's not my place, but if I could convince him not to attack, that would be the best course of action.

Jæmis walks away from me and moves towards his desk, tapping a button.

"Come take the Princess and escort her back to her chambers," he voices out a command.

Not a second later, a soldier walks into the room to take me away.

-- Spaceship cell

Now that I've met with Eeyok and gotten my medicine from Jæmis, I can't stop thinking about all of the implications.

What Eeyok told me about Læna being one of the leaders, her wearing a tracker, and Varitus threatening to kill her to keep Jæmis in line... All of it points towards the siblings being forced to work under this dictator.

I'm not sure how they ended up in that situation, but Varitus seems to keep Jæmis under control by using Læna.

Which means, if Læna was safe, perhaps Jæmis could...

No, no, that seems rather silly. I haven't seen anything to indicate he's secretly a knight of justice and would do the right thing.

That man is still cunning and evil. Just because he saved my life, doesn't mean his sins are forgiven. Even a broken clock is right twice a day.

But that doesn't mean I shouldn't *try* to convince him.

Varitus mentioned he'd come to Earth himself if Jæmis failed, and I definitely see him failing here. Which means we could use his help against Varitus. He has a lot of inside information of course...

-- Captain's quarters

The second time I'm called in to Jæmis' quarters, I immediately question him.

"Have you given it some thought?" I ask when he pulls out the syringe to administer the medicine.

Jæmis' eyes glaze over. "Princess, silence, I need to concentrate."

"But – ow!" I yelp out in pain.

He nicked me quite hard.

"I *told* you to stay quiet," Jæmis sighs and tugs on my arm.

I huff and shut up long enough for him to prick me again and give me the medicine.

"You could join us, you know," I whisper.

Jæmis runs his fingers through his hair, pushing it away from his eyes as he cleans up my puncture wound, ignoring what I'm saying.

"We have so many superheroes that are strong and capable, they'll put up a good fight against Lord Varitus."

With bored eyes, Jæmis releases my arm. He doesn't seem interested in what I have to say, and can't be bothered to tell me to shut up either.

"...*Zoeparhiro?*" he repeats in this strange accent.

I caught his interest!

"Superhero," I repeat. I realize the word is not being translated by the device in our ears.

"That's what we call the people with unique abilities that fight for justice."

And just like that, I've lost his interest, as he goes to clean up the syringe and places it back into the vault.

"Go back to your chambers, Princess."

Hmpf. Fine. I'll keep trying.

--

This time, Jæmis remains seated in his chair as he beckons me over.

"Your arm, Princess," Jæmis asks of me.

I extend my left arm to him. This will be the third shot.

"..." Jæmis notices something.

I follow his line of sight; the area he previously nicked has a bruise formed. The skin surrounding it has turned a rather deep purple.

"What is that?" he asks.

I rub over the spot.

"Nothing. Just a bruise from when you gave me the previous shot."

Jæmis leans back in his chair, eyes focused on my bruise. It's really nothing serious – people get small bruises from shots all the time.

"First the wound you sustained from well over a nunoon ago, and now this. Earthlings are too fragile," he says, brushing away his hair from his face.

I've heard that one before.

"Compared to you, maybe," I reply, not ready to get into an argument again.

"How is your... back?" I find myself asking despite knowing the answer.

I expect him to say it's none of my business, or that I should shut up. Or any number of outbursts from him.

But I'm surprised when Jæmis reaches out and curls his fingers around my right arm instead, tugging me closer to him.

"My back is fine," he answers in an unusual soft voice, not taking his gaze off of my arm.

"Ræhu have accelerated healing, unlike your race."

"I know, you told me already..."

His thumb presses down on my skin; his touch is very light. As if he thinks I could shatter if he exerts more pressure.

He's even using my other arm to administer the shot.

Perhaps he's finally realizing the difference between us. I wouldn't say I'm fragile, but I guess when compared to someone who heals up holes in their body within a day, yeah, I look quite frail.

Maybe that's why he's being extra gentle with me.

Jæmis pushes the hair away from his eyes; it's gotten so long it keeps getting in his way. He scans my skin for a vein, ready to insert the syringe.

I can't help but stare at him in silence as he tries to be gentle with his actions. This brute of a man, who has caused me so much misery, is actually showing me a caring side I didn't think he had.

Well... I guess sacrificing himself to save my ass would count as caring.

I never did thank him for that. He says his back is fine, but in that moment, he must have experienced excruciating pain.

Even if he recovered fast... no one should have to go through that in the first place.

A lock of hair falls in front of his brown eyes again, obstructing his vision.

1. Push the hair away yourself.

2. "Maybe you should think about getting a haircut."

My hand moves on its own accord. Fingers slide across his forehead, pushing away the hair and tucking it behind his pointy ear.

His eyes fly wide open and he rolls away on his chair. He stares at me in shock, as if he's been stung by a bee.

"Ah," I say, feeling awkward at his extreme reaction.

"Your hair... was in the way," I mutter. Alright, maybe I shouldn't have done that.

Jæmis clears his throat, looking away and rolling back his chair into a normal position. That rattled him, but I'm not exactly sure why. He's usually very composed.

"Just stop moving before I hurt you again," he says with a grunt.

"Right," I agree, extending my left arm.

"Maybe you should think about getting a haircut," I mention, staring at his hair.

Jæmis briefly closes his eyes as he brushes away the hair from his vision.

"Haircuts are a luxury I cannot afford at the moment."

"Too busy conquering worlds?" I joke.

He pricks me with the needle and I yelp.

"Too busy preventing you from perishing from the Rikkiitti virus."

I guess he's got a point there.

This time, I couldn't find the right moment to convince him not to attack Earth.

-- Spaceship cell

I'm so damn bored being locked up. How long do I have to endure this?

Eeyok visits me, delivering my meal for the day.

"Eeyok!" I exclaim happily.

"Princess, here are your provisions," he says politely.

It's still a little weird to me now that he doesn't speak in that funny way anymore.

"Eeyok, how much longer until we arrive? I'm going mad staying here all locked up."

Eeyok pauses for a moment, trying to think.

"I believe we'll arrive in roughly twenty more days."

"Twenty!?" I groan. "It already feels like it's been ages."

Eeyok looks apologetic.

"I'm sorry, I can't do much. Captain is adamant you stay locked up this time. He says you have a knack for causing trouble."

I huff; he's not wrong though.

"Eeyok, is there anyone else on this ship that belongs to the resistance?" I ask him.

If more people are on Eeyok's side, my chances of escaping grow larger.

Alas, Eeyok shakes his head.

"Just me on this ship."

"What about Captain Kæleb?"

"Captain Kæleb is probably the most loyal to Lord Varitus," Eeyok sighs.

I recall Kæleb at the Maaka festival, looking for Varitus.

"Right... I remember he said he always gave his Makoet to Lord Varitus."

"I've been trying to convince Captain Jæmis to give up on his attack and peacefully surrender," I say.

Eeyok looks flabbergasted.

"Y-you're negotiating with the Captain!?"

"Is that a bad thing?"

"No..." He looks unsure. "He's listening?"

I pout. "Not really. He tells me to shut up, but it's worth a shot. I'd much rather he not go to war with my planet at all. I don't want you to die, either."

He chuckles lightly. "I'm not about to die just like that. This time will be different, Princess."

"Not only does the captain intend to use you in a deal, but we've brought along our strongest ship and more men."

"So there will be an even bigger bloodbath?" I ask, horrified.

Eeyok's brows lower, confirming my suspicions.

"I can't predict how it will really go down... But I will try to get you off the ship before the fighting starts."

That worries me.

"Princess, do you have a way to contact the people who will keep you safe as soon as we land?"

That's a good question. My phone is deader than a potato. It won't even boot up anymore, let alone make a phone call.

"I don't have a way to contact anyone right away, however... we'll be met with an envoy, and I'm sure they'll recognize me."

My face should have been plastered all across the news. The human that got kidnapped by aliens. That's got to make for a juicy headline. Not to mention I still know many superheroes as a client.

They'll recognize me and take me to safety.

-- Spaceship captain's quarters

"Princess," Jæmis' voice vies for my attention.

"Hm, what is it?"

"I smell blood."

His eyes travel down towards my legs.

Oh for god's sake.

"As I've told you before, it's a female human thing," I say.

Yes, I'm once more on my period. This time I'm a little more prepared because Eeyok got me some pieces of cloth I could use. It still sucks being on my period out in space though, I can't even clean myself properly.

I must smell even worse than I usually do...

"The mystery bleeding of the Earthling race has got me puzzled. What a strange defect in your evolution line," he mutters sagely.

1. Explain in detail how periods work.
2. "It's not a defect, it's normal."

Annoyed by his heightened sense of smell, and not just letting me deal with my period in peace, I bite down hard on my lips.

"Okay, you asked for it."

"Asked for what?"

"Now listen closely, I'm going to give you a biology lesson."

"That won't be necessary—"

"—Every month, no I'm sorry, roughly every *nunoon*, the human female is fertile and can be impregnated," I quickly shut him up.

Jæmis narrows his eyes at me for being interrupted.

"Princess, now is not the time to—"

"And!" I cut him off again, "when she is not impregnated, her body will dispose of the lining of her uterus – which manifests itself as blood exiting the vagina. It lasts for a few days."

"That's the reason I'm bleeding. We call this a period," I finally finish.

Jæmis crosses his arms and huffs loudly in annoyance.

"I didn't ask to be lectured. I have no time to listen to your Earthling nonsense, come here and let me inject you."

"...Are you saying you want to impregnate me?" I gape at him.

His jaw drops open and his arms fall by his side, limp.

"Wha – don't suggest something so preposterous!" he snarls at me. It seems I managed to rattle him.

"As if I – a royal prince – would ever consider doing such an act outside of my own race."

I smirk at him.

"Then stop focusing on my blood, thank you. I'm fine."

Jæmis grumbles something I can't understand. He then hastily reaches out for my arm.

"It's not a defect, it's normal," I remind him.

Must he always act so pompous about humans?

"You and I have a strange definition of normal," he says, quirking an eyebrow at me.

"Will you bleed to death before we even arrive?"

"Of course not!" I say. "It will go away on its own. It hurts a little and it's uncomfortable, but I've had this since I was young."

I awkwardly look at the floor.

"You don't need to worry about me."

His head snaps up at me, eyes ablaze.

"Who says I'm worried?" he argues, offended.

"Well, if you're not, then please stop interrogating me about my period," I reply softly.

Something doesn't translate. "Period?" he repeats.

"Oh, it's the name of my... condition, I guess. I'm having my period. It's on a monthly cycle. A month is a little more than a nunoon, I think?"

Jæmis begins to growl.

"Quiet, I didn't require you to be here so you could lecture me about your Earthly business. Just give me your arm."

I huff and then extend my arm. So childish. He's the one that got confused when I mentioned the word period.

Jæmis reaches for my arm, focusing his gaze.

"Look - your right arm is also bruised."

I look down at the inside of my right arm; there's a blue spot where I've been shot before. Now both my arms are bruised. I'll be totally honest... I hadn't even noticed until now.

"No matter how careful I am with the injections, your skin is still bruising," he states in a frustrated manner.

Wait, is he actually worried about hurting me? I can't stop the amused grin from creeping up on my face.

"I have my doubts whether you'll be able to survive this treatment," he admits.

"Don't be ridiculous, you're only giving me injections. This is normal," I answer. He acts as if my arms will fall off at a moment's notice.

"This is not normal," he says gruffly, almost insulted that I suggested otherwise. "Bruises, wounds, gashes, I've seen it all. It is my daily life."

His fingers flutter across the sore spot on my arm.

"Never have I seen a species bleed voluntarily or turn different colours just because they were pricked with a needle."

"I guess it must be hard for you to reconcile the fact that other species don't just heal up their wounds within a day."

Jæmis simply huffs, this time not responding. He looks a little unsure on how to proceed.

"Go on, I can still take it. I'm not going to break."

"You better be right," he says, brushing away hair from his eyes and sticks the needle in my arm.

"It's still not too late to end this on peaceful terms," I say out loud.

Every single time, I try and convince him to change his plans.

"You are a very stubborn creature," he groans. "Go back to your chambers."

"Fine. But I won't give up."

Jæmis cleans away any blood from my arm and clears his desk of the equipment, before a soldier takes me to my room.

-- Spaceship hallway

Weeks have since passed, and when I'm called to meet up with Jæmis in his quarters again, I'm excited when I walk past a window.

I squish my face up against the glass.

Earth! I can see Earth!!

We're almost home!

-- Captain's quarters

"Today will be your last shot," Jæmis mentions, already having everything prepared.

The inside of my arms are purple and blue from all the injections I've received these past few weeks. At least the wound I've gotten from Kæleb healed up – though it has turned into a scar.

"Are we landing soon? I saw Earth from the window!" I say excitedly, surprising Jæmis with my good mood.

"Yes, we shall be arriving soon at our destination."

Jæmis' fingers curl around my wrist and he twists my arm around to inspect my skin.

"It's scarring," he says, referring to the wound I received during the flogging.

"Yes, well, it's a given for me. It should fade from red to white in a few years and then you're barely able to tell," I say optimistically.

The tip of his finger trails the scar. It's a very light touch; it doesn't hurt, or feel bad.

"It's the same," he murmurs quietly.

I raise my eyebrows.

"Same?"

"A defensive wound," he says, and then raises his own left arm, rolling up his sleeve to show me his own scar.

It takes me a second to realize. But the scar on Jæmis' arm does look very similar to mine. A defensive wound he said... I raised my arm to protect him. Did Jæmis have to protect someone? Or himself?

He must have blocked an attack when he was younger. Or received a flogging, if his scarred back is any indication. His early life must have been very rough on him.

"We can still negotiate peacefully," I say quietly. "To change your plan. To not attack Earth. We could help each other."

"Still have that idea in your mind? You never give up, do you?"

"I've been told I'm stubborn," I grin at him.

"And you have the nerve to keep challenging me."

"Must be in my blood," I say with a shrug.

"I'm surprised you still have any left after that horrible 'period' of yours," he quips.

I can't help but laugh, causing Jæmis to still. Briefly, he looks confused, wondering if he's said something funny.

"You sound way too chipper despite your predicament."

Well, he doesn't realize I have plans to escape.

"I'm just happy to be home again," I say, which isn't a lie. "Wouldn't you be happy to return to your home again?"

Jæmis silently fills up the syringe with the medicine.

"My home planet doesn't exist anymore," he says, his fingers coiling around my arm.

My eyes widen slightly – that's the first time he ever confirmed he has a home planet. Even the shot doesn't disturb me from my thoughts.

He doesn't have a home planet anymore... What does that mean?

"...Are you the last of your kind?" I find myself asking.

Jæmis removes the syringe from my arm, not saying a word.

BANG!!

The entire room shakes and echoes with a loud metal sound. Alarms blare throughout the quarters.

I've been caught off guard, nearly tripping over my feet. It's Jæmis who keeps me upright.

The device on his desk lights up.

"Captain!" a voice yells.

Jæmis immediately walks towards his desk to respond.

"Speak! What was that explosion!?"

"HX-108 has fired a missile at us! It's much stronger than our shield can take!"

"Earth is shooting at us!?" I screech.

But I'm on the ship, too! Why are they trying to take us down straight away!?

"Can we run more power to our shield?" Jæmis asks, trying to stay calm, but I can hear the sense of urgency in his voice.

"We used up most of the shield's power with the impact just now! We can't take another direct hit!"

"Putrid mother's nut—"

There's a blast.



I'm unable to tell what's going on. I'm floating in a silent debris.

I can see the stars. The earth. Everything is spinning.

There's no oxygen, no air. I can't breathe. The room has been obliterated.

Jæmis hovers out in front of me, eyes open and still conscious. He's unable to move, much like I am.

We are simply left to our own devices in space.

The liquid of my eyes start to evaporate, drying them out.

Instantly I shoot out a piece of thread towards what's left of the ship, hooking it around a metal bar.

I fling out my other arm towards Jæmis and shoot one more thread.



The thread spirals towards Jæmis, who sees it.

Grab it! I'm starting to lose vision!

He reaches for it, grabbing hold of it. I tug on it *hard*, reeling him towards myself.

Once close enough, Jæmis wraps an arm around my waist, holding onto my entire body. He grasps the other end of my thread and yanks on it, propelling us back towards the ship.

I'm losing consciousness... It's so hard to stay awake.

It all goes dark.

-- Spaceship common room

A flurry of footsteps echo around me in the darkness.

"Why is she still unconscious!?" I hear a very agitated Jæmis rage.

I find it hard to move or even open my eyes. My eyes and throat are so dry. I feel extremely bloated, too.

I notice there's some kind of mask on my face, supplanting me with oxygen.

"Earthling can't take outer space very well!" says another deep voice.

Genius observation made there.

"HX-108 has stopped firing missiles at us." That voice belongs to Kæleb.

"We're losing so much pressure; we need to enter orbit and land!"

"Prepare for landing!" Jæmis barks loudly. "Make sure the Princess stays alive!"

All this yelling is giving me a huge headache; it hurts.

There's some more frantic running around, with someone else tending to me.

Then soon, I'm lifted up in someone's arms.

"We're going," Eeyok whispers.

Is he taking me away?

So hard to open my eyes, it's easier to doze off...

--

The next thing I know, I can feel the vibrations of a machine.

I hear explosions as well.

"It's hard to navigate the missiles," Eeyok says, concern rising in his voice.

Suddenly I feel my stomach churn as the machine we're in does a loop.

Are we in one of those drones?

"Brace yourself!"

-- **Park**

Eeyok carries me outside – the fresh air fills up my lungs.

I feel rejuvenated enough to finally crack open my eyes.

Ahh, the sunlight nearly blinds me. I'm so sensitive to the light!

"Eeyok, are we...?" I say, straining my eyes to see.

"We're on your planet," he confirms.

"Princess, can you walk?"

"I can try."

Eeyok gently lowers me onto the ground. I feel bloated still, but I have enough strength to keep upright.

When my eyes have finally adjusted, I can see that the spaceship is hanging above the city in the sky. Drones are flying everywhere.

They're attacking. Superheroes are gathered around and launching a counterattack.

So much for any negotiations.

Where are we anyway? I think we landed in some park. Oh – I know this park!

A sudden yell alerts us.

"You vile creature!"

Eeyok gets knocked onto the ground, unable to react at all.

A superhero is on top of him, delivering blows to his face.

1. Pull the superhero off of Eeyok.
2. "No – get away from him! Stop!"

Rage overcomes me and I immediately conjure up two threads from my fingers. They wrap around the superhero's wrists to prevent him from punching Eeyok anymore.

I then yank on the thread to cause him to topple off Eeyok, who hurriedly gets up from the ground.

"Thanks, Princess," he says quickly, rushing to my side.

"Stop!" I tell the superhero.

"No – get away from him! Stop!" I yell frantically.

Eeyok struggles with the superhero, wrestling each other on the grass.

"Get off of him!" I screech.

Eeyok manages to land a punch right on his jaw, knocking the superhero off of him. He scrambles to get up and rushes to my side.

The superhero picks himself up and glares at me.

"Why are you interfering? Why are you trying to protect this alien?" The superhero asks, dumbfounded.

"He's not the enemy!"

"Do you need to get your eyes checked lady, he's one of those aliens that came from the ship!"

"Just don't touch him," I threaten, my jaw clenched tight.

"Princess, I can use the drone to leave," he suggests quietly.

Horror washes over me when I notice someone flying in the sky, coming towards us in a rapid fashion. I can see, quite clearly, that it's Jæmis.

"He found us!" I say, pointing at the sky.

How did he...!?

No! I snatch the tracker from my arm and throw it on the ground, stomping on it.

I forgot!

The both of them turn around to look behind them, just in time for Jæmis to land in front of me.

"Aha – another alien!" exclaims the superhero.

The superhero tries to charge an attack, his fist extended, but Jæmis backhands him into the nearest tree. I screech, surprised at his strength.

"You – what is the meaning of this!?" Jæmis roars, advancing towards Eeyok.

Eeyok's brows droop in fear; he's trapped in a corner.

"Leave him out of this," I say, stepping in front of Jæmis.

Jæmis roughly grabs my wrist, hoisting it up in the air.

"Conspiring!?" He glares at Eeyok. "You convinced him to help you? You treacherous filth, I will dispo—"

CRACKLE!

I'm blown aside, unable to tell what is up and what is down.

"YOU FUCKER, DON'T TOUCH HER!"

My eyes fly wide open – that voice! *That profanity!*

"Caine!" I cry out of happiness.

He's here! He threw a lightning bolt at Jæmis who is now staggering away.

Hair crackling and a bright yellow-green – it's rare I get to see him in his full superhero get-up.

"How did you find me!?" I want to throw my arms around him, but we have more pressing matters to attend to.

"Careful!" he warns me.

Caine conjures a ball of electricity in the palm of his hand, clearly targeting Eeyok this time.

"Ah!" Eeyok shrieks.

"No!" I cry, jumping in between them. "Don't hurt him!"

"The fuck, Joselina?" Caine awkwardly lowers his arm.

Unfortunately, now that he's distracted, Jæmis launches a counter attack straight away, punching Caine's stomach.

He goes flying across the grass and I scream in shock.

"Caine!" I yell, running after him.

"Princess, watch out!" Eeyok warns me, clutching my arm and preventing me from checking on Caine.

"AAARGH!" Caine releases multiple beams of lightning from his body.

They're surging around him, crackling loudly, ready to strike.

He shoots one bolt at Jæmis, who dodges it by flying upwards.

Just in time for me to see Kæleb flying towards us.

"Oh no, Captain Kæleb found us too, I don't think we can—" Eeyok is cut off when Kæleb lands on the grass.

He instantly fazes in front of us, ready to fight alongside Jæmis.

"Caine, watch out!" I scream.

I know how powerful both these captains are, no way Caine can handle them on his own.

Kæleb flies towards Caine, but Caine keeps him at a distance with another bolt of lightning, which sizzles across the grass, leaving scorch marks.

"Captain Kæleb, beware of the lightning!" Jæmis hollers at him.

"Mind your own business – this small fry is mine!" Kæleb grins manically. He's lost control again.

Jæmis appears in front of Caine, ready to punch, but Caine sends a flurry of lightning bolts from his body, making him roll out of the way.

"Grab the Princess!" Jæmis commands.

Kæleb's cold blue eyes land upon me and I freeze up. He's not in control, I don't know what he'll do to me.

Kæleb launches himself towards me, flying at high speed. But before he's able to reach me Eeyok jumps in the way.

Caught off guard, Eeyok uses the opportunity to kick him away from me, and Kæleb stumbles across the grass.

"What do you think you're doing!?" he yells at Eeyok.

Eeyok assumes his fighting position, but doesn't say a word.

In the background, Caine continues to throw lightning bolts at Jæmis, who is forced to dance around the lightning to avoid getting hit.

"Captain Kæleb – grab the princess and retreat!" Jæmis barks at him, repeating his order.

"Hey you assholes – I'm your opponent!" Caine yells out loud before shooting a beam of lightning at Jæmis.

Jæmis dodges it immediately, cursing under his breath.

I'm so amazed that Caine is holding his ground! Lightning definitely seems to be their weak spot, and Jæmis remembers this from last time. One good hit and he's out.

Irritated that Eeyok interfered, Kæleb turns his attention to him instead. He punches him in his stomach, causing him to fly backwards, skidding across the grass.

"Eeyok!" I shriek, concerned for him.

I rush over towards him.

"Get out of my way!" Kæleb yells, flying towards us.

"I SAID DON'T TOUCH HER!"

Caine fires a strong lightning bolt towards Kæleb, who is unable to dodge.

"NO! DON'T GET HIT!"

Jæmis flies in front of the bolt and takes the full brunt of it, preventing it from hitting Kæleb. His armour burns to a crisp and he immediately collapses on the ground, completely fried.

"Captain Jæmis...?" Kæleb asks, shocked at the sudden attack.

Jæmis cracks his eyes open – his skin is scorched with burns, much like the first time I met him. It seems he can't move around at all. Caine got a direct hit on him.

"Retreat..." Jæmis heaves. "Protect Læna."

Kæleb looks at us, fazing back to normal. He's confused. *I'm* confused.

"But..." he argues.

"GO! THAT IS AN ORDER!" Jæmis hollers.

Kæleb gulps and then launches himself into the sky, zooming away.

Caine advances on Jæmis, who is barely holding onto consciousness. He readies a ball of lightning in his hand.

Sitting there, unmoving, it's not Caine Jæmis looks at, it's me. There's this sorrowful expression on his face, and it's not due to the physical pain he's in.

"You... you have no idea what you've done," he hisses in discomfort. "Lord Varitus is going to destroy us all..."

Caine steps in front of my view, raising his arm as he prepares to strike.

"End of the line, you mother fucker," Caine spits out.

No! He's about to kill him!

I go as fast as my feet can take me, slipping across the grass. My heart beat is going out of control.

I shoot a thread that catches Caine's wrist, and I pull on it just fast enough for him to change trajectory and miss his lightning bolt attack. It hits the ground next to Jæmis instead.

I rush to put myself in between the both of them, spreading out my arms.

"Don't kill him," I pant.

"Joselina? What are you doing?"

"He's not a threat anymore, don't finish it. Please."

Behind me, Jæmis has already lost consciousness from taking a direct hit from Caine's lightning. He's held on for a surprisingly long time.

My spread arms start to succumb to my emotions and I falter in front of Caine.

"Caine," I say with a hiccup, my arms landing on his chest.

"Caine," I repeat, tears welling up in my eyes.

Caine's hair turns back to normal and without hesitation, he pulls me into an embrace.

"I'm home," I sniff, my tears staining his suit.

"Took you fucking long enough," Caine grunts, his own tears spilling onto my cheek.

Chapter [016] -- Forrester's Headquarters

I feel like I'm on trial.

Currently I'm sitting in Forrester Incorporation's headquarters. Everything went by so fast.

Lots of cars and flying ships came over and picked all of us up. They detained Jæmis and Eeyok, transporting them in a different ship. I don't know what became of them.

As far as I know, Kæleb returned to his own ship and left Earth.

I still can't believe I'm actually back.

"Joselina." Caine's voice disturbs me from my thoughts.

I look up at him.

"Why won't you tell me?" he asks.

"Tell you what?"

"Why you were protecting those damn aliens. The both of them!"

That's a very long story... At least with Eeyok I can readily say it's because he helped me escape.

But honestly, even I have a hard time wrapping my head around the fact that I didn't want Caine to finish off Jæmis. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I saw my best friend kill him.

I sigh and lean my face into my hands.

"Give me a moment, Caine. I was in outer space not too long ago. And I mean legit. *In space*. With no suit! I don't even know how I survived that!"

"You were in space?" Caine repeats incredulously.

"Yes! You shot at us!"

"What – I didn't do anything," he says indignantly.

"Correct, we were the ones that decided to shoot the ship," says a voice entering the room.

Two other goons follow suit.

A perfectly tailored coat, neatly styled purple hair; it's the Forrester's heir, Neil Forrester. His face is plastered all over the news for being rich and powerful.

"Miss Hearth, I presume?" he asks, looking at me.

"Yes," I answer.

"Had we known you were on that ship – we wouldn't have fired. But it was best to defend earth from another attack," he explains.

"You shot it twice," I point out. "The second one nearly killed me."

"Yet you're alive," he drawls out.

I glare at him. Don't start being pedantic with me.

Neil sits behind his desk, keeping a watchful eye on me. The two men who are with him stand by the door, looking like imposing bodyguards.

"We have a lot of things to discuss, but first, would you like something to drink, or eat?"

His golden eyes stare at the bruises on my arms. "Perhaps medical attention?"

I wrap my arms around my body in a defensive manner. I know this looks bad.

Caine finally notices the bruises on my arms as well.

"What did they do to you there?" he gasps.

"Nothing, they're just bruises from shots," I explain.

"They were drugging you!?"

"N-no!" I protest. Even when I try to explain, it all sounds worse!

"We'll get back to that later." Neil waves his hand at Caine.

"Where did you take them?" I ask, wanting to know where Eeyok and Jæmis are.

"That's classified information at the moment, which is what I was about to—"

I quickly interrupt him.

1. "I don't care – tell me where they are!"

2. "Why can't you tell me?"

"I don't care – tell me where they are!" I raise my voice.

What if they're torturing poor Eeyok!? Or worse; dissecting him.

Neil sighs. "Clearly this situation is... emotionally stressful for you."

"Stop analysing me. I just want to know if they're safe and you aren't dissecting them on a table somewhere."

"Why are you so protective of them? Is this Stockholm syndrome?" Caine questions me.

"No! Look, it isn't that simple. One of them helped me escape. I can't have you hurting him."

"Why can't you tell me?" I question him.

"Claner just suffered an attack, we are trying the best we can to make sure the extraterrestrials aren't a threat to us anymore."

"Are you hurting them?"

Neil rubs his temples.

"Wait, why do you care?" Caine jumps in.

"Because one of them helped me escape. I can't have you hurting him."

"Miss Hearth, I promise you, we're not dissecting any extraterrestrials. They've been detained and are currently being held. We will eventually interrogate them."

"Interrogate!?" I exclaim.

Don't tell me – they're planning on hurting them? I can't – no, I *won't* allow that to happen. Eeyok has helped me and he's been my friend, there's no way I would let him get tortured.

And... Jæmis, too. I'm conflicted about him, but I think I understand his situation now. The reason he's had to attack Earth. Now that he's failed, more trouble is coming.

"In fact, your brother's invention has been very helpful in that regard," Neil adds nonchalantly.

"Ralph?" I say, my voice halting. "Is he here?"

I want to see him so bad. It's enough to make me tear up again.

"Ralph Hearth has been notified of your situation, he's in transit."

"Yeah, don't worry Joselina, Ralph is the one that sent me to the park in the first place. I'm sure he'll be here before you know it," Caine reassures me.

"Miss Hearth, we brought you here to discuss some very important matters," Neil suddenly begins.

"I'm going to guess it's not because I was abducted or anything," I mumble.

"Roughly four months ago, Claner was attacked by an unidentified ship. This ship left the same day, and from our reports – you were taken along with them."

I nearly stutter; has it really been that long? Four months?

"Ralph went mad, I tell you. Well, I did, too. But he's the genius who can actually do something about it," Caine interjects.

"The world was in chaos, suddenly we needed to protect ourselves from not only the many powerful factions and terrorists on earth, but also attacks from outer space," Neil continues.

"Forrester Inc. has erected a new division; the Defence Against Extraterrestrial Terrorism, or DAET for short. Mr. Hearth has been a valued asset in helping shape our national defences from any such attacks."

That's when I realize; when the ship was shot...

"Ralph's invention shot down the ship," I state.

"We now have a defence mechanism that shoots powerful blasts into space. Today proved it works, and that Forrester Inc. can protect Earth as we know it."

"With my brother's invention," I point out, not liking how he's taking all the credit.

"Well, he wouldn't have gotten very far without our financial backing," Neil says with a smirk.

"But I digress; the public knows very little about the extraterrestrials and we like to keep it that way. The fact we captured two of them is now a national secret."

Neil produces a stack of papers from a briefcase. He pushes them across the desk towards me and Caine.

"You will need to sign this non-disclosure clause."

"What!?" Caine exclaims.

"For what?" I question. "People are going to want to ask me where I've been, you know."

"Actually..." Caine starts.

Neil shoots me this smug look, like he's privy to some information that I'm unaware of.

"We were ahead of that, too. Your disappearance has been kept from the public as well. Very few people actually knew of your kidnapping."

"No one knew!?" I thought the entire earth would have known my face by now!

I turn to Caine. "And you went along with it!?" I accuse him.

"For what it's worth, I was against the idea! But Ralph made me agree to it, in return for whatever money he needed to work on his inventions, or something."

"The document identifies the people who are cleared for this classified information, including everyone in this room. Outside of that circle of cleared names though, you are not to breathe a word of this to another soul."

Neil lowers his eyebrows, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"You shall not contact your friends to share your experiences in outer space. You shall not use any form of social media to talk about these experiences, whether anonymously, under a different pen name, or under your own name."

The more Neil blabbers on the list of things I can and cannot do, I slowly start to tune him out.

I'm still in shock that I'm back on earth, and immediately thrown into some kind of legal waiver.

Caine groans loudly and quickly starts signing the paper. He didn't even read it.

"Why do I have to sign this?" I ask, very wary of it.

"Unfortunately, if you want to return to your daily life, you must. You have now become a person of interest, all of you involved. Together, we can strengthen our defences against this extraterrestrial invasion. But we must keep it from the public."

"Well," I say, staring at the paper.

"Where is she!?" A voice hollers through the hallways.

"Is she in there!? Let me in! Get out of the way you musclehead!"

That voice! I get up from my seat and turn around just in time to see Ralph burst through the doors.

The two bodyguards immediately apprehend him, holding him back.

"Joselina!" he exclaims upon seeing me.

Neil shakes his head at the both of them.

"It's fine, let him go."

"Ralph!"

Tears start running down my cheeks as I fling my arms around Ralph, who returns the favour, squishing me against his body.

"I... I can't believe it," he sobs in an unsightly manner.

He touches my face, tilting it left and right, inspecting me to see if it really is me.

"Yeah... I'm back," I say with the biggest smile.

"Your... your hair," he says, noticing it's different.

I wipe the tears from my eyes.

"I had to cut it," I say with a small chuckle. I have so many stories to tell.

"You stink so bad," he laughs.

"Shut up, I couldn't shower for nearly a month," I reply, smiling broadly.

Ralph's eyes darken when his hands lower and he touches my arms.

"What is this? Did they hurt you!?"

"No, no – it's okay," I say quickly.

"As much as I would like to allow this family reunion to continue, we should finish up our contracts here," Neil interrupts us.

"Pipe down and wait your turn, I haven't seen my sister in months – she's been traumatized. Who knows what she's been through? The last thing she needs right now is you harping on her to sign a piece of paper," Ralph argues with him.

I can't help but smile and feel so proud. I'm so happy I'm back. I missed Ralph so much.

Neil sighs dejectedly.

"Fine, I'll grant you a moment."

He leaves the room, taking his bodyguards with him.

"Were you really the one that shot at the ship?" I ask once we're alone.

"I tried to stop the lot of them – what if you were on it? Turns out, I was right!"

"They blew up the room I was in! I was blasted into space!"

"Space!?"

"Joselina is a fucking *legend*," Caine interjects.

"But I somehow managed to reel us back in. Caine, you would have been proud. I think Jæmis got me back inside, I'm unsure, I fell unconscious."

Ralph tilts his head. "James?" he repeats.

"Oh, Jæmis. Captain Jæmis. That's the guy you caught. The one that started this mess."

"Is he the one that gave you this?" he asks, pointing at my arms.

"Yes–"

"I'm going to kill him!" Ralph yells, his eyes flashing with anger.

1. "Don't you dare!"

2. "No, you don't understand! Let me explain!"

"Don't you dare!" I exclaim immediately.

Ralph and Caine stare at me in silence, shocked at my sudden outburst.

"Joselina?" Caine asks, a bit hesitant.

I take in a deep breath, willing my heart to calm down. I don't know why I suddenly raised my voice like that. I didn't mean to defend Jæmis or anything, but... they only know half the story here.

"You're not killing anyone. Look, he didn't hurt me. These bruises you see on my arms – they're caused by injections from a medicine I had to take."

"Medicine? What was wrong with you? Were they treating you?" Ralph keeps firing question after question.

"No, you don't understand! Let me explain!" I interrupt him.

"Why are you defending him?" Caine asks, looking irritated.

I swallow my tongue. I didn't mean to defend Jæmis; he's done plenty of things to be upset about. However, treating me with medicine should not be mistaken for torture.

"I'm not, you just don't know what's really going on," I say quickly.

"Then why don't you tell us?" Ralph huffs.

"I got these bruises because of the injections he was giving me," I explain. "I was sick."

"Sick? Injections? What is going on?" Ralph asks, getting more confused.

I sigh; this is a mess.

"I have so much to tell you guys... but at the moment, not everything is black and white."

I think what's important is to focus on what Jæmis said right before he passed out. Varitus is going to kill us all. That's a threat I do not take lightly.

Jæmis failed his mission again, which means, if what Varitus said was true right before we left Yool, then he is going to return to Earth.

"Guys, something worse is going to come," I warn them.

"You're not making any sense, Joselina," says Ralph, concerned.

"Look – that ship left, right?"

"Yeah, they couldn't handle the preparations we made. Our newly formed DAET team kicked their asses," Ralph explains.

"That ship is going back to its home planet to inform their leader of what happened. And he's going to come back, personally, to finish the job."

"What are you saying...?" Caine asks. "I thought that guy I fried was the leader."

I shake my head.

"He's just a captain of the ship. They have someone who rules the planet and he's... much scarier."

Varitus is the one we should all worry about. If the power that I saw coming from Nornus, is something that Varitus is easily able to control himself... then Jæmis is the least of our worries.

Both Caine and Ralph stay silent as they process my words.

"So more aliens are coming?" says Caine with a sneer.

"Pretty much."

"We'll be ready for them," Ralph reassures me.

"...I need to see them," I say.

"Huh, see who?" Caine asks confused.

"The ones that are locked up right now. I need to speak to them."

"Why?" Ralph inquires. "They're locked up and subdued. My invention is keeping them in check."

"Your invention?"

"Yeah – remember that weird infinity bracelet Ralph wanted to make with my electricity?" Caine interjects.

"The one that blew up in your face?" I look at them disapprovingly.

"I improved it. It didn't turn out the way I wanted it to – but the side effects surprised me."

"Side effects...?" Oh no, don't tell me they're being tortured already.

"With the unique properties of Caine's electricity, I invented a bracelet that locks your ability. Your power. It keeps a current of electricity flowing that prevents you from using your ability."

I'm honestly quite impressed. A bracelet that can turn off your ability...? Is it true?

"I mean, I haven't tested it on many superheroes yet, and we lucked out when we realized it worked on that alien. So yeah, he can't do anything anymore, you're safe. He's not a threat."

It's not that I'm afraid Jæmis is a threat at this point. He's failed his mission and Varitus personally threatened to kill Læna in front of him if he messed up. He's in a bad situation, much like the rest of us.

I believe we can still join forces together.

"Ralph you don't understand. I think it is in our best interest if we convinced him to join us and help us against the next attack. We can't have him locked up like this."

Ralph laughs at my suggestion.

"Surely, you're joking, right? Why the hell should we ask them to join us?"

"One of them is already my ally!" I reply. "To lock him up is unethical. He's on our side."

The doors to the office open and Neil walks back inside.

"Alright, I've heard enough," he sighs.

"You were eavesdropping!?" Caine accuses him.

"We have cameras, yes."

Neil turns to me.

"So, what is this about another threat we need to worry about?"

I take in a breath to prepare myself. Neil Forrester is a businessman; I have to play this smart.

"Good. Now that I have your attention, I want to make a deal."

"A deal? What for?"

"The prisoners. I want to see them, and I want to make sure no harm comes to them."

I then close my eyes. I know I'm asking the impossible here... but... Eeyok deserves it.

"And release them."

Neil laughs, looking unconcerned.

But then he sees I'm dead serious and stops laughing.

"Joselina, what the hell are you talking about? You want to free them!? You really do have Stockholm syndrome! We need to take you to see a therapist," Caine rattles on.

Neil crosses his arms. "What would you even offer in return?"

There's the business side of him, I knew he'd toss away the idea because there's nothing in it for them. Luckily, there's a lot of information I can offer.

"I have a lot of knowledge about the planet, about their soldiers, how powerful they are. Not to mention I already know the prisoners. I can talk to them. Bring them over to our side as allies."

Neil lazily looks at his fingernails.

"That's hardly enough to justify the release of these extraterrestrials."

"Well yeah, it's a stupid idea," Caine agrees.

"However – perhaps if you were to throw in the schematics to this bracelet device Mr. Hearth invented, then we might have room to negotiate."

"What?" Ralph looks perplexed.

"Deal," I say immediately.

"Joselina!" he groans. "You don't know what you're agreeing to here!"

"Whatever it takes. Let me see them."

"Alright, we'll make some arrangements. You'll hear from us tomorrow," Neil confirms.

Good. I have to make sure nothing bad happens to them. Eeyok helped me escape, and Jæmis could be a very valuable asset against the imminent threat of Varitus arriving.

Ralph just keeps staring at me as if I've lost my mind.

-- Living room

That I'm back on earth is bizarre to say the least. I feel like it's not real, that I'm in shock. I expected to open my eyes and find myself back on Yool.

My own living room feels so unfamiliar to me. I don't actually *feel* like I'm home.

Both Ralph and Caine bombarded me with questions last night. I had to tell them to shut up and leave me alone as I just wanted to get some rest.

My boutique has been closed ever since my disappearance, though Ralph used the Forrester Inc's money to pay for all my outstanding bills. He's handled everything well in my absence.

I could finally charge my phone as well, so I turn it on.

I flip through the pictures I took on Yool, confirming that what I went through was real. One of the pictures shows Eeyok in the training room.

I can't stop thinking about Eeyok and Jæmis, what's happened to them. I have to protect Eeyok at all costs – he helped me escape after all. I can't leave him rotting in a cell.

My phone beeps – I've received a message.

Ralph:

"They're here."

Joselina:

"Alright, I'm coming."

I take in a deep breath. Time to meet them.

-- Holding cell

We're taken to an unknown location. There were no windows in the van, and there's no signal in the building either so we can't use our phones.

I guess it is a secret facility of Forrester Inc.

"Miss Hearth, I hope you feel more settled in now that you're back on earth," Neil greets me.

"Not really," I answer him honestly. "Can I see them?"

A little peeved I'm not here to make small talk, Neil turns around and starts to walk.

"Follow me."

He leads us through a corridor, passing by several armed bodyguards.

"I hope you know what you're doing," says Ralph quietly.

"I hope so, too..."

My idea is crazy, but I do believe having Jæmis on our side would help tremendously. And Eeyok... well, he doesn't deserve to be locked up in the first place.

Neil stops as we pass by a large open window. Behind the window is the unmistakable body of Eeyok tied to a chair. A black bag covers his head.

"Eeyok!" I slam my fists on the window.

"You barbaric people – remove that sack from his head this instant! That is no way to treat my friend!"

Eeyok's head stirs as he recognizes the sound of my voice.

"Princess...?" he calls out weakly.

"Miss Hearth, it is for our own safety that we—"

"Take it off right now!" I yell.

"You better listen to her, Joselina looks furious," Ralph pipes in.

Neil closes his eyes and sighs. He then flicks his head at one of the guards, who quickly comes over and presses his hand against the window.

The window lights up to scan his hand and beeps. A small opening appears in the glass. I don't even waste a second and rush inside.

My hands quickly tear the bag off his head.

Eeyok's golden eyes roll in different directions.

"Ah..." he says, confused at the sudden light.

His hands and feet are bound. I conjure my thread and quickly slice through the plastic tie wraps.

"Princess is alright, I'm glad," he says with a small smile.

"Hey now – I did not agree to release the prisoner!" Neil quickly enters the room in alarm.

"He's not a threat!" I bark at him.

Then I look at Eeyok's face.

"Are you hurt anywhere?" I ask.

Eeyok's hand reaches for his side and I can tell that it's bruised. He could very well have broken a few ribs.

"Mostly fine," he replies. "Captain Kæleb's kick was very strong."

"Joselina, who exactly is this guy? And how can you understand him?" asks Ralph.

I turn to look at them.

"Wait, you can't understand him?"

Eeyok taps my arm to catch my attention.

"We have a babblefish in our ears, it makes our brain understand each other's language," he reminds me. "I will have to consciously focus on speaking your language before they can understand me."

"What's he saying?" Neil demands to know.

"Do you think you can do that, Eeyok? I need them to understand that you're not a threat, that you helped me escape," I tell him.

"I will try," he agrees.

I turn to the rest once more.

"This is Eeyok. He's a soldier in their ranks, but in reality, he's a spy that's been working for the rebellion. He helped me escape off the ship. His enemy is our enemy," I explain.

"A spy you say..." Neil starts to circle around Eeyok. "With a common enemy?"

"Varitus," I say, which makes Eeyok's brows lift up.

"This... Varitus. Who is he?"

"He... took my planet," Eeyok answers him.

Everyone's shocked to hear him speak, I guess he's actually speaking English at the moment. It does sound slower than usual, reminding me of how he used to talk before.

"It speaks," says Neil, slightly impressed. "All night long and we didn't hear a peep from it, but now it can formulate words."

"Have some respect, don't call him an it," I tell him.

Suddenly Ralph leans closer to Eeyok.

"Fascinating – how can you speak our language?"

"It's this little device in our ears, it lets us interpret foreign languages, I guess," I quickly explain.

"You have one, too?" Ralph turns to me.

"Yes," I say, brushing away the hair behind my ears to reveal the tiny scar at the top of my ear.

"Anyways, let's not get distracted right now," I say while shaking my head. Ralph can sometimes get a little too excited about technology.

"Varitus is their lord."

"Illegitimate one," Eeyok corrects me.

I let Eeyok do the talking this time around.

"He take water planets. He wants your planet," says Eeyok in slightly broken English. It's taking him a lot of effort to speak this way.

"And why should we be afraid of this Varitus?" Neil asks flippantly. "Your attack yesterday was stopped dead in its tracks. A failure. We now have an impenetrable defence."

Eeyok's eyes narrow.

"Varitus has power to undo planet," he says.

"Undo?" I repeat.

Eeyok looks at me apologetically.

"I'm sorry Princess, it's hard for me to focus."

"It's okay," I reassure him. "Have you had anything to drink or eat yet?"

"No – tell us more about this Varitus," Neil interrupts us.

"Can you stop being so hard on him? He's trying his best to talk given the circumstances. Maybe if you gave him some water, he'd be in a better shape to help us," I defend Eeyok.

"Fine," Neil huffs.

"Guards, get some water for our prisoner."

One of the guards leaves the room.

"Princess, Varitus is a very powerful being. Do you remember, when the young Prince Nornus flashed a blinding light?"

"Yes..." I remember how everything was pretty much torn to shreds in that alley. Nornus killed one of the rebels as well.

The guard returns with a cup of water. I quickly take it from his hands and offer it to Eeyok.

"Here, drink."

"Ah, thank you, I was quite thirsty."

Eeyok happily downs the entire cup of water. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. He focuses his gaze on Neil.

"Undo planet. Destroy. Gone," he says in a serious tone.

Everyone in the room understands his words and the implication.

"You're saying that there's a being in the galaxy out there with the power to destroy planets?" Neil asks flippantly. He almost sounds scared.

"He come for your planet. Three nunoon he here."

"What the heck's a nunoon?" Ralph raises his eyebrows.

"It's something like twenty days," I explain.

"He's arriving in sixty days, is that what you're saying?" asks Neil.

Eeyok gives me a slight smile after seeing the worried expression on my face.

"Don't be scared Princess. We anticipated this from the start. The resistance will use the opportunity to overthrow him."

"You mean when they come for Earth?"

"Yes, with less soldiers staying behind, the resistance has a chance to take over the palace."

"But what about when he arrives, here? Isn't he taking Princess Læna with him as well?"

"That will be our moment to strike," he says with a grin.

"Can you two stop speaking as if you're the only ones in the room," Ralph complains. "Some of us don't understand alien language!"

"That runt," says Eeyok, looking at Ralph. "He looks like you."

I end up giggling at his description of Ralph.

"That's my brother."

"Yeah, and you better not touch my sister, or I'll kill you," Ralph threatens him.

"Who is this Princess Lana you mentioned?" Neil interjects.

"So much to unpack..." I say with a sigh. "It's Læna by the way."

I turn around to face Neil.

"You heard what Eeyok had to say. I think you understand what's going to happen now."

"Another attack," Neil finishes my thoughts.

"And we need his help to stop it. Including the other one as well."

"What are you proposing?"

"Let us all work together to stop Varitus from destroying Earth. Let them go free."

"Free!?" Ralph exclaims.

Neil pauses to think.

"I can't just let them go free. These are beings who launched an attack on us yesterday, and you expect us to let them walk among us like nothing happened?"

"I can hide them," I say immediately. "There's this uhm, lake. A cabin. My parents owned it."

"Mom and dad's cabin?" Ralph repeats. "It's been empty for years. We haven't returned since they died—"

"Exactly. It's empty. Secluded. They can stay there."

Neil rubs his temples, looking upset.

"Just because you have a hole to put them in, doesn't mean we can let them go free. They attacked earth. We can't trust them. They could attack again."

I fiddle my fingers together, trying to come up with any solutions.

"The... the bracelet! You said it was holding their power back, right?"

"Joselina, it's not fused to their body or something, and it's just a prototype. I only have the one that's currently being used on the other one," Ralph explains.

"Then... then..." I wrack my brain, trying to come up with something else.

What can I do to make sure they will trust them? I'm already taking a wild shot in the dark in presuming I can convince Jæmis to be on our side... but how can I convince Forrester Inc? They have a point; they can't trust them not to attack again.

A promise not to attack are just empty words.

And then it hits me.

"Oathkeeper," I announce.

Neil tilts his head.

"Where are you going with th—"

"Call Oathkeeper. We can make a deal. Make them promise not to attack."

Oathkeeper, a superhero shrouded in mystery. They deal in promises. I've never actually met them, but I know they have ties to Forrester Inc. and that they sometimes hire them to seal an oath.

An oath that cannot be broken unless both parties are willing to die on their word.

Neil sighs.

"Ridiculous. For one, Oathkeeper's services always come with a very steep price," he starts.

"And secondly, it only works when both parties know the same language."

I shrug. "That's fine, just bind it to me, I can speak to them."

"You are willing to die?" he questions me.

I look down at Eeyok, still in the chair. He was willing to sacrifice his life for me. Jæmis... he has saved me many times before. I wouldn't say I'm ready to die for the both of them, however...

"Joselina are you mad? Are you being serious right now? You can't just make an oath like that. That's some serious shit."

"The reason I'm standing here is because of Eeyok. He is our ally and I trust him."

Eeyok blushes timidly.

"You humble this lowly grunt..."

"Regardless whether or not he's your friend," Neil starts. "You are not in position to bargain with us. Both of these are under Forrester Inc's jurisdiction."

"You said you wanted the schematics to that bracelet, no? In return for my brother's invention, you let me make an oath to the both of them, they won't be an issue. They can help us."

"Joselina don't just go around using my designs as bargaining chips," Ralph groans.

Neil furrows his eyebrows and folds his arms, deep in thought.

"We will have to draft a new contract. You'll have to abide by some very strict rules. They must be chipped and tracked, they must be surveyed 24/7 and they cannot be alone. Those are some of the basics."

My eyes twinkle; he's considering it!

"Yes, I can do that!"

"In return, you sign our contract and Mr. Hearth hands over the designs of the bracelet contraption."

I nod my head.

"Well, this is not how I had planned my morning..." Ralph grumbles.

"Mr. Ivet," Neil calls one of the guards. "Call my cousin."

Cousin?

"We have an oath to make."

--

As we wait for Oathkeeper to show up, I had asked them to let me see Jæmis. He is secured in another cell. Much like Eeyok, he's been tied and bagged.

I don't like how they're treating the both of them... this is just unnecessarily cruel. I've already gotten another cup of water as I suspect he hasn't had anything to drink yet either.

"Let me be alone with him," I tell everyone.

"Alone? With him?" asks Ralph incredulously.

"Yes. He won't hurt me," I say, confident in my assessment.

"You accept the risks?" Neil points out.

"Yes."

"Very well. Open the cell."

A guard opens up the entrance and I enter. It shuts behind me.

I take in a deep breath as I approach the chair in the middle of the room. He hasn't moved or said anything.

His wrists are behind his back, cuffed and chained, unlike Eeyok who got the tie wrap treatment.

I know Jæmis is strong, strong enough to free himself from his chains – but I also realize he's wearing that bracelet Ralph invented. Perhaps it really is sufficient to hold him back?

My fingers reach out for the bag and I grab a hold of it, slowly removing it from his head.

A mop of black hair falls down on his face. His eyes are closed.

It's so strange to be in front of him like this. Our roles have been reversed. Before, I was the one who was captured and at his mercy. Now, everything depends on me.

"Good, you've healed," I say, scanning his body for any injuries.

His armour is in tatters, but his body looks fine, though the impact area is still a little bruised.

"Jæmis," I softly call out his name.

Is he pretending to be asleep, or is he really out cold?

"I've got some water for you," I say as I raise the cup of water.

"Doesn't matter," Jæmis grumbles.

I bite back my tongue. Jæmis spoke, though his eyes are still closed.

"What do you mean it doesn't matter?"

"Everything."

"I know your mission failed, but my offer is still on the table," I point out.

"What good is your offer when Lord Varitus is going to murder my sister!?" Jæmis spits out, eyes finally wide open.

"I lost. Now I'm forced to watch her die, before he kills everyone else," he says in this defeated voice. Like he's accepted it.

I kneel down in front of him.

"You don't need to watch her die," I say in a soft voice. "Now drink something."

I press the cup to his lips, but he turns the other cheek, knocking away the cup from my hands, letting it spill out on the floor.

Frustrated at his noncompliance, I pull back and sigh.

1. "Are you just going to sit there and wail in your self-pity?"

2. "We can save Læna, you know."

"Are you just going to sit there and wail in your self-pity?" I demand to know.

"There's nothing I can do anymore," he says, looking down at the floor.

I never expected him to just resign himself to his fate and not even fight for it.

"Where did your spirit go? You're not even going to *try* to save your sister?" I egg him on.

Jæmis scoffs. "Opposing Lord Varitus is futile. He is the strongest being I know."

"Strong doesn't mean he'll win," I point out.

"Strength is all that matters."

"If that's true, then why are *you* the one in the chair and not me?" I point out.

His brown eyes flash anger at me, a seething irritation bubbling towards the surface. There's no retort, no remark. My words are sinking in.

I can't have him act like this. Where did his pride go? His stubbornness? Is he really going to accept his defeat? I need to get a rise out of him if I want to bring him over to our side.

"You've taken so many punishments – you saved my life twice. Those scars on your back are proof you always got back up," I start to rant.

"Now that someone stronger than you is in the picture, you suddenly lose the will to fight? To get back up?"

I cross my arms and click my tongue at him.

"I guess I overestimated you if you're willing to roll over and accept death so easily."

I turn around, flicking my head over my shoulder to look back at him.

"Have fun rotting away in this prison and watching her die."

His nostrils flare up and his muscles flex, struggling against the chains that bind him.

I see a flicker of blue in his eyes, but it's gone before I know it.

Jæmis grunts loudly as his eyes travel down to his hands.

"What is this putrid device?" he demands to know.

It's preventing him from fazing.

I face him once more, grinning at him as I bend down onto my knee.

"Seems you're not willing to go down without a fight after all," I say, feeling smug.

"We can save Læna, you know," I point out.

I don't much care for Læna at this point – after all, she wanted me dead – but I know Jæmis thinks the world of her. He doesn't want her to die.

And I don't want Varitus to blow up the earth.

"Don't speak nonsense," Jæmis grumbles. "There is no way you pathetic Earthlings could ever hope to defeat Lord Varitus."

I cock my head to the side.

"Us 'Earthlings' chased your platoon off the planet and we have you bound and chained," I point out.

"That wretched grunt – he ruined all my plans. Made everything fall apart and my own men were without a leader as I had to find *you*."

"Do you really think you can save my sister from Lord Varitus' claws?" Jæmis huffs. "Don't make me laugh."

"If you help us, I'm sure we can make it work. We have many superheroes ready to fight."

"They won't be a match for Lord Varitus."

"Why are you talking like you've already decided you're going to lose?" I ask, frustrated with his rebuttals.

"Because I *have* lost," he snaps. "No one can stop him."

I cross my arms over my chest.

"So that's it? You're just going to accept defeat? You're not even going to try?"

Jæmis remains silent, biting down on his lower lip, giving me a death glare.

"If that were my brother – I would do anything I could to save his life," I say honestly.

"You think I haven't tried!?" Jæmis growls loudly, his eyes briefly flickering to a blue hue.

"What is this putrid device!?" Jæmis grunts, trying to look behind himself to see the bracelet on his wrist.

It's preventing him from fazing, it's working.

I turn to face him and bend down to my knee.

"Don't stop trying then. We can save her."

"Shut your mouth hole – you do not know the terror that is coming. The true nature of Lord Varitus."

"Then help us. You know everything about him, and we have the power and numbers to defeat him. Together, I believe we can save your sister."

"Help you?" Jæmis laughs. "I was the one that kidnapped you."

"Yes, but our roles have been reversed. And I think you could be a great ally."

"You have a mad thought process, Princess."

"I've been trying to get you to reconsider this entire time. You want to save your sister, and I don't want my planet to blow up. I think our interests are aligned."

"So what will it be? Will you help us, or stay in this prison?" I offer him the choice.

Jæmis clicks his tongue at me, glaring at the ground.

-- Forrester's Headquarters

Somehow, I managed to get all parties convinced.

Forrester Inc. has excellent lawyers. They were able to draw up a contract in just a few hours that detailed everything. From me being the designated translator (because they don't understand alien language), to their caretaker, to being very limited in what they can and cannot do.

In exchange for Ralph's schematics and patent, as well as the full cooperation of both Eeyok and Jæmis.

I mean, there's quite a few naysayers and reluctance, but both Eeyok and Jæmis are willing to side with us for the upcoming attack against Earth. We'll have to uphold a few rules here and there before I can get them out of here.

I've finally signed the contract. The Oathkeeper will be involved as well, which is who we're waiting for.

"You!" Jæmis exclaims once he enters the office and spies Eeyok sitting in a chair at the desk.

Eeyok nearly jumps inside his own skin and yelps.

"I'm going to turn your insides out and strangle you with them!" he threatens and rushes over towards Eeyok.

However, one of the bodyguards keeps him in check and pulls back on his chains, causing him to stagger backwards.

Eeyok whimpers, looking at me with worried eyes.

"...I'm not sure this will work."

"Why does he look so angry? What's the matter?" asks Neil, looking at the scene unfold between Jæmis and Eeyok.

"Oh... He's just happy to see one of his crewmembers alive," I say with a fake smile.

"Dude looks like he's going to strangle the little dude," Ralph so accurately observes.

I quickly jab him in the side with my elbow. Let's not start up things!

Neil shuffles some of the documents on his desk.

"Now that all the papers were signed, we just need to wait for—"

"*Daaarling!*" The door to the office bursts open.

A woman wearing very sophisticated and expensive clothing marches inside. Her eyes are covered by a giant set of glasses.

"It's about time you called, I was beginning to think you've forgotten all about me," she says with a slight pout.

Neil grimaces at her behaviour. He pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"You're here for a job, *Oathkeeper*," he stresses her superhero name.

So that's Oathkeeper? First time I've seen her. I didn't even know it was a woman.

The woman surveys the situation. There's several people in the room, but the one that stands out the most...

"Oh my!" she exclaims once she notices Eeyok, the odd one out.

"Would you look at that fantastic skin colour," she gushes as she walks up to Eeyok.

Eeyok doesn't know how to react and decides it's best to play opossum and not move.

Neil gestures towards the three of us.

"We require two oaths," he explains.

"Two?" she echoes, sounding surprised. "That's highly unusual."

"I know it's a family business and all, but surely you're asking a bit too much here from little ol' me," she complains.

Neil sighs. "You'll be compensated, of course."

"Hello, I'm Joselina Hearth," I introduce myself. "I'm the one who requested you."

"Oh darling, you've definitely seen better days," she says, worriedly looking at the bruises on my arms.

She stands up straight.

"Alright, alright. Who is taking the oath and who is the keeper?" she asks.

I'm a little confused.

"Hmm, seems I'm dealing with a newbie," she tuts disapprovingly.

"To be honest, I personally thought you were a myth," says Ralph.

"Well, I am quite dreamy," she chuckles.

"The one who takes the oath will be the one who cannot break it. The keeper will be the one to 'keep' the oath, and they're able to break it whenever they wish," Neil explains.

He looks at me. "Miss Hearth, you're the keeper. Both of them are the oath takers."

"This little darling is the keeper? You know what happens when someone breaks an oath, right?"

"They die," Ralph finishes for her. "Or at least, that's what the rumors are..."

"Correct! Except *both* of them will die," she says cheerfully. "So, it's in your best interest to uphold the oath, okay? No takebacks."

Jæmis suddenly takes a step forward.

"How will we die?"

Everyone turns to look at him, he's been quiet this entire time, listening in on us. I've already explained to him what was going to happen, but he has a better understanding of the situation now.

"What was that now? Is he a foreigner?" asks the Oathkeeper, a little confused.

"Darling, you know this only works if both of you speak the same language, right? You have to understand what oath you're taking."

"I can understand him just fine," I reassure her. "He asked how we'll die."

"Well... Once the oath taker has broken their oath, both the keeper and taker's hearts stop beating instantly," she explains.

If Eeyok or Jæmis breaks the oath, we will both die. I am putting a lot of faith in them.

"I am having some serious doubts about this – how can we trust these aliens? I don't want my sister to end up dead!" Ralph complains.

My eyes flicker over towards Jæmis, the one I'm most worried about.

"I trust them not to do anything stupid," I say.

"It's a good thing I'm the one taking the oath then," says Jæmis with a sneer. "Since we've crossed paths, you have done nothing but make irrational decisions that should have gotten you killed."

Granted, sneaking Nornus out of the palace was pretty stupid of me, I'll give him that – but everything else was done out of survival!

"What's he saying?" asks Oathkeeper, in the dark as much as anyone else.

"Nothing. He wants to go first," I answer for him. Jæmis shoots me a glare.

"Alright then, please stand in front of each other," she instructs us.

Jæmis slowly drags his feet across the floor and walks towards me.

"Put out your right arm," she continues.

I stretch out my arm in front of me. Jæmis mimics my actions, though he has to stretch out both arms since he's still chained.

The Oathkeeper takes both of our hands and places mine on top of Jæmis, with hers holding us together.

Suddenly, I feel something tremble. Like it's vibrating deep within me. Jæmis looks slightly surprised as well.

A symbol lights up on the back of the Oathkeeper's hand. It's a circle with many faded lines.

"Speak your oath and may you be forever bound to it," she says in a much deeper voice than before.

"Go ahead Miss Hearth, he has to repeat what you say, verbatim," Neil instructs me.

I take in a deep breath and look at Jæmis. Here goes.

"I will not harm those of the human race," I begin.

Jæmis' eyes narrow. For a brief second, doubt settles in the pit of my stomach and I believe he won't go through with it after all.

"I," he starts, making me exhale in relief, "will not harm those of the human race."

The symbol on the Oathkeeper's hand blinks and one of the lines in the circle burns into her skin.

"Go on, say the next line," Neil urges me.

I look back at Jæmis, trying to calm myself down despite the constant humming my body is experiencing. This feels so... I'm not sure how to describe it. Final? Serious? Like I'm at gunpoint.

"I will cooperate and do as I'm told by the members of the Defence Against Extraterrestrial Terrorism team."

As of now, that includes almost everyone in this room.

Jæmis slowly exhales, taking his time to speak.

"I will cooperate and do as I'm told by the members of the Defence Against Extraterrestrial Terrorism team," he repeats.

Another line of the symbol burns into Oathkeeper's skin.

"I will not contact, or communicate in any way, with the extraterrestrials who sent me to Earth."

Jæmis follows me along, and another line is added to the circle. We're almost done.

"I will do anything in my power to help defeat any extraterrestrial threat against Earth."

Jæmis mindlessly repeats after me.

And the final part...

"I will not remove, deactivate, or destroy this bracelet on my wrist."

"I will not remove, deactivate, or destroy this bracelet on my wrist," Jæmis exhales.

"Is that the oath you take?" asks the Oathkeeper of Jæmis.

"You have to say yes," I tell him.

He grunts, slightly peeved at how long and thorough this is.

"Yes."

In an instant, I feel something burn through my hand and I shriek in response, pulling it away.

I hold my hand close to my chest – it stings! Ouch!

Jæmis blinks down at his own hand, and I can see it from here – the symbol is burned into his skin. It's like it transferred over from the Oathkeeper to him.

That's when I notice the same symbol is on the back of my hand, too. Oh, that's why it hurts.

"That is the symbol of your oath," Oathkeeper explains. "Only the keeper may break it."

"...How do I break it?" I ask, suddenly beating myself over the head that I didn't ask this before actually going through with it.

"You chop off your hand," she says in a serious tone.

I look at her, completely horrified. Upon seeing my reaction, she starts to laugh out loud.

"Ahaha – no you silly. Nothing that dramatic. You just hold the hand that contains the oath to your heart and say you wish to break the oath. You can think it, too!"

I close my eyes, sighing heavily. I just about had a heart attack...

"You may unchain him, guards," Neil instructs the guards holding Jæmis.

They remove the chains from his wrists and ankles, leaving behind the bracelet. With this oath, he's not allowed to harm us, so he's not a threat anymore. He also can't fly away as long as he continues to wear the bracelet. We have effectively neutered him and rendered him harmless.

"I know you can understand me – so as the founding member of the Defence Against Extraterrestrial Terrorism team, you will now be instructed to follow Miss Hearth's commands for the time being."

Jæmis stares at him blankly.

I quickly realize... he doesn't know my last name.

"He means me," I pipe in awkwardly. "My last name is Hearth."

The Oathkeeper claps her hands together.

"Alright – next!"

"Are you really sure about this? If either of them break that stupid oath, you'll die," Ralph warns me. He's not happy about this one bit.

"Yeah, I thought about it. It's okay, Ralph. I'll be fine."

I hope. At least I trust Eeyok more.

Using my other hand this time, we repeat the same process with Eeyok. His last command differs from Jæmis; he's not allowed to remove Jæmis' bracelet as Eeyok doesn't have one of his own.

And finally, both oaths are taken; I now carry two symbolic circles on the back of my hands.

"Earthlings have very sophisticated technology," Eeyok says in amazement.

I giggle a little. "It's not technology, just something someone was born with. A lot of people here have a unique ability."

"Just like the Princess?"

"Yes, just like me."

Wait.

"Oh right." I turn to the both of them.

I innocently tilt my head to the side.

"I forgot to tell you, but I lied from the moment you took me aboard your ship. I'm not a princess at all."

Out of everything we've done and said today, *this* is what gets Jæmis' jaw to drop open.

Chapter [017] -- Boutique

The chime rings as we enter through the front door.

It feels so bizarre to be back now.

"Joselina!" Kim screeches once she spots me.

"Kim!" I immediately smile at her.

"You're *baaaaack!*" she wails dramatically, running over to me.

She throws her arms around me for a hug.

"I didn't know what was going to become of you, and Ralph told me to keep running the business as usual and *waaaah* it's been so stressful!"

She releases me, looking like she's about to cry.

"You did well, Kim. Thank you for looking after Sunshine in my absence," I tell her. I'm actually quite proud of her, doing this all on her own.

"I don't get it, how are you back?" she questions me.

That's when she spots the other figures in the boutique with me.

"H-h-h-him!" she splutters nervously, jumping back and pointing a finger at Jæmis.

Jæmis imposingly folds his arms and glares at her.

"That's the alien! He kidnapped you!"

"It's alright, uhm, calm down Kim, there's a lot of... explaining to do."

"I never forget a face. That girl, she threw something at me," Jæmis remarks with a drawl to his voice.

"Dude, if you're going to stick with us, you'll have to speak English," Ralph complains as he walks up to Kim.

"And Kim, don't worry, he can't harm you. He's under oath." He stresses that last part.

"Ah!! Another one!" Kim yells once she finally sees Eeyok in the background, sticking out like a sore thumb.

Eeyok sheepishly bows in front of her.

"Hello, I am Eeyok," he says awkwardly.

"See, *he* speaks English," Ralph points out. "Why can't this oaf do that?"

Jæmis sneers in response.

"This runt keeps saying 'oaf', I can only deduce it is some kind of vulgarity."

Everyone is driving me crazy!

1. "Argh, everyone, just shut up!"
2. "Please, one at a time!"

"Argh, everyone, just shut up!"

And everyone does shut up, staring at me, startled at my outburst.

I have no patience to sit here watching Jæmis and Ralph go back and forth, or Kim freaking out.

"Starting today, these two are with us. Yes, they attacked us. Yes, that muscular guy over there with biceps as big as my thighs is the one who kidnapped me. Yes, oaf is a vulgar word and he's insulting you. Yes, he can speak English but he refuses to."

I take in a deep breath.

"Any other question I may have missed?"

"Please, one at a time!" I raise my voice.

Kim looks nervous, but she's the first to speak.

"I'm just really confused..."

"Starting today, these two will be staying on Earth. With me," I explain patiently. "And no, they can't hurt you."

"But he kidnapped you!" she whispers in a horrified voice.

"I know that," I sigh.

The bell chimes and everyone turns their head to look at the entrance. Neil steps inside, looking around with judging eyes. There are two bodyguards outside, keeping watch.

My boutique is starting to feel very cramped with this many people inside.

"What a... quaint shop you own," he remarks dully.

I can't tell whether that's a compliment or an insult.

"Mr. Forrester!" Kim pipes in.

"Hmm, Miss de Jong, right?" he inquires.

Bashfully she nods.

"I require you to sign an updated NDA contract. I brought it with me." He takes a stack of papers from his briefcase and hands it over to Kim.

Kim, still confused, merely switches over to autopilot and starts signing the papers with her name.

"Miss Hearth, we went over the rules and nuances, however I have to stress that they need to be kept out of the public eye."

"I understand," I say.

Jæmis can sort of blend in with the rest as long as you cover his ears and he keeps his mouth shut. Eeyok however... There's no hiding that. Not unless I get a glamour for him, which I'm suspecting that's where this conversation is going.

"Producing a glamour is your first priority."

Yep, there it is.

"Any chance you'll cover it for me?"

Neil smirks. "Miss Hearth, we're already giving you a lot of leeway here. It is your responsibility to take care of these beings. That includes shelter, food – and yes, glammers."

I groan. Glammers are expensive!

"However..." Neil studies Jæmis up and down. "You would only need a glamour for the little one. This one can vaguely pass as human."

Neil passes me a business card. I look at the name printed on the smooth paper; Secret Identity.

"Secret Identity? That's a little on the nose, isn't it?" I quip.

"They produce quality glammers. I recommend you stop by today."

"Alright," I say with a small sigh.

"Now, Mr. Hearth, please retrieve the schematics that we agreed upon," says Neil, addressing Ralph this time.

"I'm not happy with it... but whatever, come with me."

Ralph leads Neil towards the basement, leaving me alone with the rest.

"Joselina," Eeyok starts awkwardly.

"Yes?"

"...So you're not a princess?"

I knew they would have questions after I announced that I lied to them all this time.

"She is as much of a princess as you are part of my crew," Jæmis cuts in with a sneer. His words are dripping with venom.

Ignoring him, I answer Eeyok.

"Yes, I'm sorry, I figured that was my best chance at survival by pretending to be royalty. In reality, I'm just a fashion designer."

I spread my arms and gesture at my boutique.

"Welcome to my boutique, Sunshine!" I giggle awkwardly.

"Uhhh," Kim joins the conversation. "I'm done signing the thingy. What now?"

"We'll have to wait for Mr. Forrester, I guess."

"No, I mean, what happens to Sunshine?"

"Oh!"

I haven't thought about everything yet. "I can't go back to work right away, Kim."

"I figured as much; you've been through quite a traumatic experience. You take as long as you need! I'll man the front."

Then she gives me a sheepish smile.

"But uhm, please hurry back, people have been *begging* for new designs. Especially with that new alien division from Forrester Inc."

"I'll be gone for two months – just tell people I'm taking a sabbatical or something."

"Will do!"

Ralph and Neil return to the scene, with Neil looking pleased. It seems he's got the schematics of that bracelet my brother invented.

"Our business here is done," he announces.

"However, Miss Hearth, you need to report back to us daily. We will come check up on you every now and then as well."

"Yes, I understand, you know the address."

We'll be heading to my parents' cabin at the lake. Away from prying eyes, a whole piece of land to ourselves. It's the first thing that came to mind when I needed a place to hide out at.

"Until then, we will prepare for another invasion in the next sixty days."

Kim's eyes pop out.

"A-another!?" she screeches.

"Yes, there is no time to waste. I must train so I can become stronger and face Lord Varitus," says Jæmis.

"Well, you suddenly changed your tune," I point out. He was ready to give up hours ago.

He glares at me.

"I will do whatever it takes to save my sister's life," he swears.

"It's nothing to worry about Miss de Jong. And with that, I have to bid you all a goodbye. I have matters to attend to," says Neil, reassuring Kim.

Neil finally leaves the boutique with his briefcase.

"Alright, I need to start packing." I clap my hands together, thinking of what to pack.

"We both do," says Ralph.

"What? You're staying here."

"Hah! As if I'd let you go off on your own after you've finally returned! Much less leave you alone with *them*," he huffs.

"I'll be fine. We'll just hide out there for two months while that new team figures out a way to stop the next attack."

"I will assist you in that," says Eeyok politely.

"Thanks, Eeyok. We'll see what'll happen. But for now, we're going to another place where you can both stay. And I need to get you a glamour, too."

Eeyok looks a little confused. "I keep hearing that word, glāmor, but it is not being translated."

"Seriously, can you speak English?" Ralph groans. "I want to know what you're talking about!"

Eeyok's brows raise, startled.

"Y-yes! I not know glāmor," he says with a stutter.

"Ah... Well, you don't look human. So we're going to turn you into one," Ralph replies nonchalantly.

"Turn... turn Earthling?" Eeyok repeats, unsure. He's got an uneasy look on his face.

"Don't worry!" I say quickly. "It's temporary. You'll basically look like one of us for a bit, but you can revert back anytime you want."

"...Alright, if I must," he mumbles.

"What about the oaf? Getting a glamour for him, too?" asks Ralph.

"Even if I wanted to, I don't think we can afford it..."

Ralph cocks his head to the side.

"Didn't I tell you we've got a truck load of money from Forrester, Inc.?"

"...No. You did not."

"Well – just don't worry about it! Maybe we can get rid of his stupid pointy teeth and ears."

"Absolutely not," Jæmis growls imposingly.

"You wanna fight me, big guy?" Ralph challenges him.

I sigh and shake my head.

"Can we not, please? No fighting in my boutique."

"He'd be dead before he can blink," Jæmis mutters darkly.

"No death threats!" I complain.

"Is he threatening me!?"

These two... are just not going to get along at all!

"Ralph – please, go out and get us a glamour. I'll be here, packing up some stuff."

"I don't want to leave you alone with these two," Ralph says with a pout.

"Well you're going to have to. I can take care of myself. Now please, go before I lose my mind."

He takes a good long look at me, before huffing loudly and mumbling 'fine' under his breath.

Ralph marches up to Jæmis and pokes his finger into his chest, earning a growl from him.

"You better not touch my sister, or I'll electrocute your alien ass and I'll have you for dinner. You hear me?"

"Ralph – I said no death threats!"

Jæmis brushes away Ralph's finger, clicking his tongue at him.

"I suggest you sleep with one eye open tonight."

"Still won't talk English, huh? Stupid oaf."

"Can you make this little runt shut his mouth hole? He has the nerve to be even more annoying than you," Jæmis addresses me.

"Guess it runs in the family," I say flippantly, then I push Ralph out of the boutique.

Whew – now I can get some things done!

-- Living room

I would have never expected to see Eeyok and Jæmis stand around in my living room. It really does feel surreal that I'm back home.

Kim's downstairs running the boutique as usual.

"Hey uhm, would you like something to wear?" I ask Jæmis, realizing he would probably need some clothes.

His current armour has been fried up like the first time. Besides, two months is a long time, I can't have him go around in this one set of armour and stink up the place.

Actually... he's already stinking up the place. A shower is in order.

"I will not wear your Earthling garb," Jæmis rejects steadfastly.

"I would like to wear them," says Eeyok with a smile.

"Thank you, Eeyok," I say, smiling back. "At least some of us don't want to walk around naked."

"Naked?" Jæmis repeats, eyebrows raised.

"Well, if you're not going to be wearing 'Earthling garb', and I forbid you to walk around in that tattered armour, then yes, your only option is to walk around naked."

"My armour is perfectly adequate."

Even Eeyok gives him the side eye.

"You know, I think you should take a bath first. You stink."

"I what?" Jæmis is startled at my forwardness.

"You too, Eeyok," I say. "When no one is able to bathe in space, you all start to smell, really bad."

Eeyok looks embarrassed. "...I am sorry."

"Aw, don't be sorry! I have a bathroom here that you can use. I'll show you how. Come on."

Jæmis lifts his arm to take a whiff of his armpit.

-- Bathroom

It's... really cramped with the three of us.

"Well uhh, this is my bathroom. Here's the bathtub, and you use this faucet to make the water run."

I lean over the tub to turn on the water, and show them which is hot and which is cold.

Jæmis looks decidedly unimpressed.

"This looks like an outhouse. Where is your hammam?"

"We don't have those here."

"Blasphemy."

"That tub is all you're going to get." I put my hands on my hips.

"That little crevice can't possibly contain even more than one person," he points out.

"It does look awfully small..." Eeyok agrees.

Oh! They think they're taking a bath together.

"It's for one person at a time," I explain. "You're right, it's too small for two people. So just take turns, okay? Who wants to go first?"

Eeyok bows politely.

"Captain Jæmis should be first."

"I am *not* your Captain," Jæmis sneers at Eeyok, still having a lot of animosity towards him.

"Alright, can you wait outside Eeyok?" I instruct him.

Eeyok quickly leaves the bathroom.

"Here's some soap and shampoo to use," I say, looking at my colourful bottles on the edge of the bathtub.

"And with this lever here," I point at a small metal lever at the faucet, "you can make the top part rain water."

I quickly demonstrate how it works, with Jæmis being awfully quiet about it all.

My eyes catch the bracelet on his arm and I wonder if that thing is waterproof.

"Uhm, please keep the bracelet dry. You can't submerge it in water."

"Why is that?" he drawls out.

"You'll get electrocuted if you do," I say, knowing it might not be true. But it should be a good warning.

"Hmpf," he huffs and ignores me.

Then, without warning, Jæmis starts removing his armour in front of me.

I quickly whirl around.

"Let me know when you're done!" I say quickly.

That man, he really has no shame.

-- Bedroom

Whilst Jæmis is taking a bath, I'm in my bedroom packing up some clothes.

Eeyok helps me, after instructing him to fold the clothes and stuff them in my suitcase.

"It's very different here," Eeyok remarks.

"In what way?" I ask.

There are so many things that are different from our planets, but there are also quite a few similarities.

Eeyok holds up a lacy black bra.

"The clothing?" he quirks an eyebrow at it.

I snatch it from his hands. "Those are my undergarments," I mutter.

"Ah..." he says awkwardly and places it neatly into my suitcase.

"You're going to have to wear them, too," I say, speaking my thoughts out loud.

Once he's in human form, that is.

"I will need to wear that?" Eeyok points at my bra.

I sheepishly laugh in response.

"Uhh no, you'll turn into a male human so you don't need to wear what I do. Actually, I don't have any clothes for you... hmm."

I look around my room, wondering what I can get the both of them to wear. As much as I would love to see Jæmis in a dress that I made, I doubt the fabric could contain his muscles. He's huge.

Maybe I've got some of my dad's old clothes lying around.

"I'll have to look around for something you can wear, will you help me?"

For now, they can wear whatever I have at home, and in the next few days, I can maybe go shop for something they can wear.

It feels weird to think I'd be shopping for Eeyok and Jæmis.

"Yes, I'd be glad to, Princess," he agrees.

Then he catches his mistake, eyes wide.

"Uhm!" he stutters. "S-sorry, the habit got stuck..."

I grin at him. "It's alright, just call me Joselina. No need for fake titles."

Eeyok scratches the back of his head, looking a little uneasy about his mistake.

"Right!"

-- **Hallway**

Once I have my suitcase packed, I open the door to the hallway.

I step into a puddle of water.

"What the!?" I shriek, jumping back.

"Wow, so much water," Eeyok remarks in surprise.

There's water all over the floor! My eyes bulge out of my sockets when I realize it's coming from the bathroom. That idiot – he didn't turn off the water!

I quickly pound on the door.

"Jæmis! You're flooding my house! Turn off the water!"

"Don't bother me," replies his lazy voice.

The water creeps towards my staircase and I realize it's going to be dripping downstairs as well. I have to save my store!

I quickly open the door to rush inside.

-- **Bathroom**

I see Jæmis, lazily lounging in the tub, arms and legs dangling outside of it, producing a waterfall off the edges.

He looks like he gives no fucks he's flooding the entire bathroom.

Water splashes onto my feet as I run towards the bathtub.

"Turn it off!" I hiss.

"Why are you here? I am not done yet," Jæmis responds, annoyed at the intrusion.

I lean over him to reach the faucet and quickly turn the knob to shut it off. I plunge my hand in between his legs – not caring for his privacy at the moment at all – and pull the plug from the drain. The water slowly starts to recede.

"You can't just keep the water running!" I scold him as I lean back.

"Is that not what this room is designed for?" Jæmis states lazily. "To clean oneself with water."

"Yes – but in this tub only! The water has spilled out onto my hallway and ugh, that's going to damage my floors."

I look at him with stern eyes.

1. "You're going to clean up this mess."

2. "Please get out of the bath, I have to clean up."

"You," I raise my voice, "you're going to clean up this mess."

"I'm cleaning myself; your mess is your own," he says nonchalantly, closing his eyes as if he doesn't care.

My entire first floor turned into Water World, and he sits there in my tub, acting like the king of the world?

I reach for the lever of the showerhead and turn it on, watching with devious eyes as I see the cold water splash onto Jæmis' head.

"What!" he complains and sits up straight, brushing away the hair from his eyes.

"What are you—"

"This is *my* home, you are now under *myfi* rules. You made a mess, and you damn well better clean it up."

I huff loudly and produce a bucket from under my sink. Time for a mop, too. While I'm at it, I collect his pieces of armour from the floor. I'm going to take delight in throwing them away.

It's then that I notice that Jæmis has finally left the tub and is standing right behind me.

With his imposing and naked figure, he approaches me.

"Earthling," he growls.

"My *name*," I hiss as I whirl around to shove the bucket into his chest, "is Joselina," I stress.

I'm not afraid of your naked alien bits! Come at me!

"And you're going to clean up this water."

"Please get out of the bath, I have to clean up," I say with a loud sigh.

He lazily flicks his hand in the water, causing it to run down the edge.

"I am not finished bathing yet," he replies nonchalantly.

"I'm asking you to get up and leave so I can clean up the mess you made."

Jæmis looks at me strangely.

"Did you want to join me? Is this another seduction attempt again?"

"What?" I suddenly feel my heart drop.

"No! Of course not," I say quickly. "Why is everything a seduction attempt with you?"

"Then why are you blabbering about cleaning? Leave me be."

He's infuriating!

"Look – I'm saying you flooded my house! Water isn't supposed to go outside of the bathtub!"

I angrily kick at the water covering my floor, but then I end up slipping on the tile.

Oh crap.

I don't know what happens, but somehow Jæmis has managed to appear in front of me and catch me before I fall.

Ba-dum, ba-dum I hear that heartbeat again. It takes me a few seconds of staring at his chiseled abs that I realize...

"Ew – don't touch me when you're naked!" I screech and push him away.

"Wha—" Jæmis loses his footing and stumbles backwards, falling back into the tub.

A flood of water splashes out and onto the floor.

"What are you doing, Earthling?" he growls at me as he climbs out of the tub.

Ahh, I can't look at him when he's all naked like this! Also, I'm secretly impressed I was able to throw him off balance...

"Hey, what did I say about that Earthling nonsense?" I suddenly pay attention to his words.

"My name is Joselina."

"Joselina what is going on, why is everything flooded?" Ralph's voice rings through the bathroom as he walks in.

Then he sees a naked Jæmis standing in front of me.

"Don't you touch my sister!" he yells out in anger, blindly running forwards.

Except he slips in the water and falls down.

"Ralph!" I cry out, worried about him.

Jæmis huffs loudly. "Let's have an entire meeting in here, shall we?"

I help Ralph get up from the floor. He seems to be okay. This is such a hazard.

"Can I not take a bath in peace?" Jæmis complains.

"You don't get to demand anything after flooding my home," I snap back at him.

"Come on Ralph, let's... clean up this mess. Do you think you can find some of dad's old clothes?" I ask.

Ralph continues to glare at Jæmis.

"I don't want him to wear anything dad owned," he says, sounding pretty determined.

I tap his arm. "Would you rather continue to stare at him naked? No? Good, go fetch some clothes."

I sigh exasperatedly and then leave the bathroom with Ralph.

-- Livingroom

The three of us – Jæmis refused to cooperate – managed to get rid of all the excess water. There were a lot of trips to the sink to dump the water in all the buckets.

"This is not what I had in mind when I woke up today," Ralph sighs loudly.

"Not think anyone know what happen today," Eeyok answers.

"Thank you for helping me, Eeyok." I'm very grateful he's so compliant.

"Of course!" He smiles at me, gripping the mop close to his body.

"So now what?" asks Ralph.

"Well, you got the glamour, right?"

"Oh right, let me go get it!"

Ralph quickly disappears.

"I'm turning Earthling now?" asks Eeyok.

"For now, yes. It's temporary. Let's go get you some clothes as well, and check up on Jæmis. He's been in the bathroom for way too long."

-- Hallway

I knock on the bathroom door this time, Eeyok standing behind me.

"Are you dressed this time?" I ask loudly. "I don't want to see you naked again."

The door bursts open; a pissed off looking Jæmis walks out of it.

"Earthling – what part of this garment is supposed to fit?" he sneers at me.

I can instantly see why he's slightly upset; the old clothes my dad used to wear don't fit him at all. The shirt he's wearing is too tight and nearly tearing apart. The pants are too short on him and his rock-hard thighs... Well, I'm surprised he even managed to fit those in.

Everything is too tight.

Why is this even worse than being naked? It's hard to look at him.

"Where is my armour?" he demands to know.

"I threw it away. They were in tatters, and they had this awful pungent smell to them. There's no way I would have let you wear that again."

"You threw it away!?"

"I got you something new to wear!" I protest.

Jæmis flexes his muscles and suddenly the shirt he's wearing straight up rips at the seams.

I stand there, mouth open in awe. He really tore it! Those muscles can't be contained!

"Find me something else."

1. "You don't get to demand anything."
2. "I will when I can, but right now this is all I have at the moment."

"You don't get to demand anything," I point out.

But I do agree he needs to wear something... I can alter clothing just fine, taking in fabric is easy. However, extending fabric where none exists isn't possible. I'm going to have to legit shop for this guy.

Jæmis bares his fangs as he takes a step closer to me. He's trying to appear intimidating, but I know he's under oath...

I smirk at him.

"Even back on Yool you couldn't control me. Do you really think that in your current position, you have any power over me?"

His glare disappears as he leans closer.

"Don't forget who you have to thank for your life," he grunts.

Yes – he did bargain for my life when Varitus was going to kill me, but does he think he can use that against me?

"I didn't ask you to," I retort. "So, don't try to manipulate me. Just do as I say and I'll get you something new to wear tomorrow, alright?"

Jæmis clicks his tongue, pulling away from me.

"I will when I can, but right now this is all I have at the moment," I explain.

I know I'm going to have to shop for him for real. Jæmis is a huge man, there won't be that many clothes that could fit him. Ugh, this is going to be a pain.

"You expect me – a prince – to walk around like this?"

I give him one lookover again; shirt torn at the seams, pants too tight on him... Man those muscles are great.

"Uhh," I stammer. "No one will see you?" I suggest awkwardly.

Jæmis' stern eyes immediately land upon Eeyok, who looks like a deer caught in headlights.

"I demand a suitable replacement, or the return of my armour."

"No way – I told you, I threw it away. I know the clothes I gave you right now don't fit, but I promise I'll get you something that does. You'll just have to be a bit patient, alright?"

"My patience has run thin ever since the day I met you," he remarks with a drawl.

"Yeah well, you uprooted my entire life the day we met. So I guess we're sort of even."

"Captain Jæmis still looks presentable and strong," Eeyok helpfully adds to the conversation.

Jæmis simply growls at Eeyok, who yelps and jumps back in response.

"I'll get you something more suitable to wear tomorrow, okay?" I say.

Jæmis clicks his tongue at me.

"It better fit this time around."

I sigh; this man is so difficult. Stupidly large muscles.

Ralph finally returns, walking up the stairs and seeing us all stand in my tiny hallway.

He quirks an eyebrow at Jæmis.

"What the hell happened to you?"

"...Dad's clothes didn't fit."

"Hey, who said you could ruin our dad's clothes!?" Ralph growls at him.

"It's not his fault! I'll get him some new ones tomorrow. Anyway, do you have the glamour?"

Still side eyeing Jæmis, Ralph hands me a small capsule. It's the glamour! I break it open, and out falls a small, silver ring.

I hand it to Eeyok, who looks at it with curious eyes.

"This is your glamour. You wear it on one of your fingers and it will transform you into a human."

"...I will turn back if I remove it?" he asks, a little dubious.

"Yep! That's how it works. It's only got so many uses though, so please don't do it too often."

"Yeah, glammers only work until a certain extent. It's good for around fifteen or so uses, so don't just take the ring on and off willy-nilly!" Ralph explains.

"Willie neelie?" Jæmis repeats. It's an expression that doesn't get translated.

Ignoring Jæmis, I address Eeyok.

"Eeyok, you can take a bath now. Please make sure to shut off the water before everything spills all over the floor again. Put on the ring so you transform, and get dressed with the clothes I put out for you."

"Yes, of course."

Eeyok disappears into the bathroom. Not going to lie – I'm curious what he'll look like when he's human.

"Okay, what's left?" I ask, clasping my hands together.

"I believe Caine will be coming over soon with his car so he can take us to the cabin," says Ralph.

"Oh right, he's never been there before, has he?" I ask, thinking back.

Ralph shakes his head. "It's always been just for the family. Not even Caine's parents knew about the place. It's totally secluded!"

"This place – does it have a training room?" Jæmis suddenly chips in.

"Uhh..." I blank out for a second. What a strange question. "It's just a small house with a few rooms. But it's in the middle of a forest so there's lots of space to train if you'd like."

I briefly wonder if he's ever seen a forest before.

"Seriously, if this arrangement is going to work, he's going to have to speak English before I'm forced to create my own translation device," Ralph complains.

Jæmis smirks at Ralph. "You think you can recreate such a sophisticated piece of Ræhu technology? I'd like to see you try."

"Huh, Ræhu technology?" I repeat. He's talking about the babblefish isn't he? "Not Gaötte?"

"Were you really under the impression that the Gaötte could ever produce such technology? All of the sophisticated designs come from my planet," Jæmis scoffs arrogantly.

"I didn't know," I admit honestly. I didn't even think about it.

"Yep. Making that translation device ASAP," Ralph mumbles.

-- Outside boutique

It's strange, the last time I was outside Sunshine, it was during a blizzard. It was also the time when I saved Jæmis from crashing into the ground.

Now the sun is high in the sky and there's a pleasant breeze. Four months is a long time...

Caine who has arrived at the boutique to help transport the lot of us, helps me load my suitcases into his car.

"You never told me about this cabin," he says with a pout.

"I don't know, mom and dad just wanted to keep it away from everyone else. It was family time," I say.

"Stop worrying about it Caine. We haven't been there in years anyway," Ralph pipes in.

"Still," he mumbles. "I thought we shared all our secrets."

Ralph dumps a whole box of gadgets into the trunk of the car. He wipes away the hair from his forehead; he's been sweating carrying it. It must be heavy.

"Trust me Caine, it's not that interesting. Just a lake, a cabin, and some trees. You're one with nature there. Barely any reception, too."

"Well, I still don't like that *he* has to come to your 'secret' place," Caine complains as he points a finger at Jæmis, who's been standing off to the side this entire time.

"That runt sounds jealous," Jæmis remarks.

"Also – what's with his ridiculous getup?" Caine looks at Jæmis' torn clothes.

"That's what /said!" Ralph agrees.

"Earthling, your family is mocking me," Jæmis says, glaring at the two of them.

I roll my eyes.

"Just call me by my name already! I'm Joselina, this is my brother Ralph, and the redhead is my friend Caine. We have names!"

"You're all just runts to me," he scoffs.

"What's he calling us? Bad names? I can zap him if you want," Caine suggests, lowering his eyebrows at Jæmis.

"No fighting!" I warn him.

"I have changed..." A strange voice alerts us all.

Everyone goes quiet when they see an unfamiliar man step out of the boutique.

"Eeyok!" I gasp.

Bronze skin, golden eyes with slit pupils, and red markings around his eyes – that's humanoid Eeyok!

"It strange, no tail," he says, grimacing at his missing tail.

"A little imperfect, there's some markings left on his skin," Ralph notes.

"Do I pass human?" Eeyok asks. Even his voice is different.

1. "You look so cute!"

2. "You definitely pass as a human!"

"You look so cute!" I squeal.

I didn't realize how absolutely adorable he would look in human form!

"Cute?" Eeyok repeats, looking unsure. "I look female?"

"Oh! Cute is uhm, it's an endearing term used here. Basically, I think you look really handsome," I explain.

"H-handsome?" Eeyok scratches the back of his neck, which is now turning red.

"Ew gross, you're making him blush," Caine cuts in.

"Oh shut up Caine, I think Eeyok looks nice," I grumble.

"You definitely pass as a human!" I say excitedly.

He looks so good in his human form! There's still some obvious tell-tale signs he's not really human, like the slit pupils and the markings on his skin, but at least he can pass among the crowd.

Eeyok grins at me, which looks so strange to me on his new face.

"Now I look like Joselina," he says with a chuckle.

"Haha, I guess you sort of do. It doesn't look too bad on you."

"So, this is the power of 'glamour'," Jæmis decides to put in his two cents. He's slightly impressed.

"Yep! This way we can take him in the car ride with us without anyone noticing a certain red-skinned alien in the back," I respond.

"I don't like how he's taller than me," Caine points out.

"Seriously, *that's* your concern?" I groan. "Just get in your car and take us to the lake."

"Whatever. Give me the address then."

I make sure to send the address to him through my phone so that he can use the GPS.

"Okay everyone, get inside of the car."

Ralph and Caine quickly enter the front. I open the passenger door to the side. I guess I'll have to be sandwiched between them.

"Is everything on your planet small?" Jæmis remarks the size of the car as he gets inside.

"No, you're just too big," I retort.

Finally we're all inside the car. It's cramped, but it'll have to do.

-- Lake cabin outside

The moment we arrive, there are already two black vans parked on the property. They're from Forrester Inc. Making sure the two 'extraterrestrials' are where they're supposed to be.

They've come to install cameras on the perimeters, as well as giving us some more lectures about all the rules we have to keep track of.

When they've left, I leave out a deep sigh. This is exhausting.

"This place is huge by the way," Caine says in awe, looking around.

"Isn't it?" I agree. "It's been so long since the last time I came here."

"Eight years and 213 days, to be exact," Ralph pipes in.

"Has it really been that long?" I muse. I was eighteen years old back then.

"Come on Caine, let's go inside and hook up the generator," says Ralph.

"You guys got a generator!?" Caine sounds impressed.

"Of course – I engineered it!" Ralph boasts proudly.

The two of them disappear into the cabin.

"So, Joselina," Eeyok approaches me, "You said this was your parents' house, right?"

"Not exactly, more like a vacation house."

Eeyok looks at me strangely. I can only assume they don't really have those in Yool.

"Well, I would very much like to meet your parents," he says with a big grin.

I tilt my head to the side, he means well, but it still brings me a pang of hurt to my heart.

"My parents passed away in a fire many years ago," I say with a sad smile.

Eeyok immediately looks apologetic.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"It's alright, of course you didn't know."

He casts his eyes down towards the grass beneath us. I still need to get used to his human appearance.

"My parents were both murdered by Lord Varitus when they tried to stop him from taking over," he mentions darkly.

"Oh." I honestly don't know what to say. But that sounds awful.

"I guess that made it pretty easy to join the resistance, right?"

"That's the primary reason, yes," he agrees.

Jæmis, who's been keeping quiet and studying his surroundings this entire time, steps forwards.

"Repeat that again – what you said just now," he says in an urgent voice.

"About joining the resistance?" I say, a little confused.

Jæmis eyes widen, and suddenly I realize why; all this time, he hasn't known Eeyok was with the resistance.

He faces Eeyok. "You are with the resistance!?"

"Uhh," Eeyok stammers awkwardly.

"Why else do you think he helped me escape?" I point out.

"I was under the impression he was doing this all because you're his mate."

Now it's my turn for my eyes to bulge out of my sockets.

"*Whaaat?*" I exclaim.

Jæmis crosses his arms over his chest. "Are you not his mate?"

"Don't think I didn't notice you gifted him your Makoet at the Maaka festival. He gave you his, too."

Eeyok suddenly displays a nice shade of pink on his cheeks, discovering his ability to blush as a human.

"What is this about a mate!? Eeyok is my friend! He helped me escape because he didn't want me to be used as a pawn in your negotiations," I say through gritted teeth.

"Then it is true? You're with the resistance?" he asks Eeyok.

"...That is correct," he admits.

Jæmis nostrils flare up and his eyebrows lower until he forms a crinkle on his forehead. Oh, he looks pissed off alright.

I have to defuse this, fast!

"Don't freak out! You don't know the whole story!" I say quickly.

"All this time, you were in my platoon, masquerading as a lowly grunt to gain access where no one else could – all because you were colluding with the enemy?" he spits out.

Eeyok takes a step backwards, slowly getting scared.

"*You* set off that explosion in the market," Jæmis hisses, coming to a realization.

It's the same realization I came to when I stumbled upon their operations in the Screaming Howl. That they were the ones behind the explosion, using my day to the market as an excuse to separate themselves from Jæmis and Kæleb.

It all makes sense...

"Earthling," Jæmis starts, his beady little eyes looking at me.

I want to correct him and say my name is Joselina, but he immediately talks over me.

"This oath I took... I cannot kill any Earthlings, correct?"

I nod – promptly forgetting he doesn't know the gesture.

"Yes, you can't kill any humans."

"The oath didn't mention anything about Gaötte, did it now?"

Jæmis' eyes hone in on Eeyok. I feel a chill wash over me.

Eeyok realizes it first and immediately makes a run for it, making use of his new human legs.

Jæmis starts the pursuit in response.

"H-hey!" I yell. "Don't – leave Eeyok alone!"

He's not listening. Damn it!

"*Jæmis!*" I groan.

Chapter [018]

-- Lake cabin kitchen night

Eeyok lives to see another day. Caine had to intervene and shock Jæmis, just to get him to stop chasing.

There were a few other 'shocking' moments for Jæmis, when we had to explain that Læna was with the resistance, which he refused to believe for a while.

He's not allowed to hurt Eeyok from now on, as he has to listen to the commands of the members of the DAET.

After showing Jæmis and Eeyok the layout of the cabin as well as their rooms, I end up talking to Ralph and Caine for a few hours. Simply catching up and letting them know my experience on Yool.

Caine is convinced Jæmis is going to backstab us, and Ralph doesn't put much faith in him either. At least they seem to be relatively okay with Eeyok, whom I explained helped me escape.

The first night, I was hoping it would go without any issues. Until I hear something shatter in the kitchen.

I sneak into the kitchen and turn on the lights.

Immediately, a naked Jæmis whirls around to greet me, startled at the intrusion.

"Wha - what are you doing in the middle of the night?"

I give him a once over, noticing he's at least wearing briefs to cover his genitals. I've seen this man naked too many times in a lifetime.

"And *where* are your clothes?" I demand to know.

At least he's wearing the bracelet still; he hasn't attempted to remove it.

"I heard something shatter," I say as well.

Jæmis' line of sight reveals what I heard moments before; a broken cup on the floor.

"Perhaps if this room was sufficiently lighted enough, I wouldn't be knocking things over."

I sigh while bending down to pick up the broken shards of glass.

"There's a light switch near every door if you need light," I explain, pointing at the switch behind me.

I throw the shards into the bin and face Jæmis again.

"I'm surprised you didn't know, with you running a spaceship and all."

He huffs, acting all prickly as he turns away from me.

"Lights are activated at my command deck. Your technology is different from mine."

"I suppose it is."

Wait, that doesn't explain why he's here, half-naked, in the middle of the night.

"Why are you not wearing any clothes?"

"I didn't think I would run into anyone to have to dress myself decently," he explains.

"Also, the garments you've given me are garbage and in tatters. Why should I have to wear them?" he questions grumpily.

There's something inherently funny about a half-naked Jæmis complaining about clothes in my kitchen.

"Well, I didn't have anything your size," I argue weakly.

"Is this what you do to your prisoners? Deprive them of decent garb?"

1. "No, we prefer to lash them until they pass out."
2. "You'll get new clothes first thing in the morning."

"No, we prefer to lash them until they pass out," I reply bitterly.

Jæmis narrows his eyes at me, tilting his chin down.

"As far as I recall, you were spared of any lashings," he huffs.

"I know. I was being sarcastic," I mutter.

I give him one lookover again. Too muscular for his own good. I have one shirt left and I hope he doesn't tear through that one, too, before we get the chance to buy new ones.

"We'll get you some new clothes in the morning. I can't have you walking around like this all the time."

"Why, does my presence bother you?" he asks with a smirk.

"More like your entire existence," I fire back.

"You'll get new clothes first thing in the morning," I say, hoping to appease him.

"I don't want you walking around like this anymore than you do."

He ends up smirking.

"Is that so? And here I thought you were enjoying yourself seeing me in these conditions."

"I don't enjoy seeing you naked," I reply immediately, feeling myself start to blush at the insinuation.

"I wasn't speaking about that," he responds in a crass voice. "You seem to enjoy being on the other side."

"Other side?"

He takes a step closer, appearing tall and threatening. However, I hold my ground. I know he can't do anything to me.

"Let's not forget that it was *you* who seemed very adamant I stay here and help your 'side'," he says in a low voice.

"You could have left me there, but you did not."

He's not wrong. I did negotiate to release him – or at least, use him as an asset. That, and I also didn't want to have him locked up.

"You are an enigma to me. You challenged me every step of the way. Disrespectful towards superiors, disobeyed orders, snuck out of the palace, and you have certainly not held back your contempt for me," he goes off at me.

He circles around the kitchen island, his eyes trained on my left arm – the one with the scar.

"You have made an attempt on my life, yet strangely enough, tried to protect me as well."

"You even saved my life when the ship exploded. You could have easily only saved yourself," he says in a softer voice.

"And I'm beginning to think the Makoet I received from you, wasn't a poor attempt at humour either."

"Do I confuse you?" I cut in.

I admit, my actions do seem contrary when he lists them all like this.

"Very much so," he admits as he leans over the kitchen island, arms on the counter.

I'm not quite sure how to respond to that.

"Why?" he asks, the question echoing in my mind.

"Why what?"

"Were I in your position, I would have left you to die in space. Be done with the hassle."

I end up chuckling out loud.

"I doubt that," I say.

This makes Jæmis raise his eyebrows in response.

"You sound very sure of yourself."

I guess I am a little pretentious, thinking I know him better than he knows himself. However, everything I've seen of this man up until now, I doubt he would have let me die in that scenario, were the roles reversed.

I've seen him kill in front of my very eyes, but I've also seen him sacrifice himself for others. He's complicated, demonstrating the capacity for murder, but also showcasing the opposite.

Even now, he's doing this all because he wants to save Læna, his sister.

"There have been plenty of moments you could have killed me," I point out.

"You were supposed to be a princess – royalty," Jæmis growls. "Why would I kill you and squander my chances?"

"I think you're lying," I say.

It's not because I think he has some goodness in his heart. No, I think there was something else.

"For a long time I thought you took me because I pretended to be a princess," I say, looking down at the counter.

"But I forgot you didn't even know about that when you initially took me."

"Then Billius told me that you'd only take back prisoners who demonstrated medical abilities."

Jæmis keeps quiet, staring me down.

"Once I knew of Prince Nornus' condition, I thought it was because Lord Varitus commanded you to take back anyone who could possibly heal him."

And it does make sense, I think that's a huge reason why Varitus does anything he's doing. He wants to keep Nornus safe. He wants to find someone who can cure Nornus.

But Jæmis doesn't care about Nornus. He cares about his own siblings.

"But... You didn't take me because you desperately want to find a healer for the young prince," I drawl out.

I bat my lashes at him. "...You were looking for someone to cure your sister, weren't you?"

She said she lost her ability to faze – to fly. Both brothers are immensely protective of her because of this. I can't see Jæmis risking his life to find someone to heal Nornus, but I can definitely see him doing this for his sister.

The small nibble on his bottom lip and a flash of irritation in his eyes confirm my suspicions.

"Don't speak as if you know everything," Jæmis grunts lowly.

1. Bring up how he didn't know Læna was part of the resistance.
2. "You're right, I don't know everything."

"Seems like you didn't know everything either," I point out. "Læna is part of the resistance, and she kept it hidden from you."

This time, Jæmis doesn't have a response at the ready.

"I guess she wasn't as helpless as you thought she was."

Suddenly Jæmis bears his fangs at me.

"Shut your mouth hole. You know nothing about our family and our history."

"Enough to know you'd do anything to save her. And that's why you're here, on Earth."

I back down. "You're right, I don't know everything."

"Then shut your mouth hole, simple as that," he responds.

"I'm simply making a deduction of what I've witnessed so far. And I don't think I'm wrong when I say..."

I look him in the eye, searching for something that he might be hiding.

"You'd do anything to save her, right?"

Jæmis huffs in response, but doesn't reply. I assume that's a yes!

I give him a comforting smile.

"I promise, we'll save her. She doesn't have to die. If we work together, I'm sure it'll be alright."

"Cheh," he clicks his tongue at me. "You are a bothersome creature."

I roll my eyes at his choice of words. When will I stop being Earthling or 'creature'?

"How about we start over?" I propose.

"Start over?" he repeats.

"I know you don't really want to kill me, and I want to make sure my planet isn't blown up. So how about we just... move past the ugly things you've done to me and focus on our new objective of defeating Lord Varitus?"

He stares at me in disbelief.

Honestly, I'm a little surprised at myself as well. I'm ready to move past it. The abduction, the imprisonment. I lost my freedom due to this guy. The past month spent in a dungeon wasn't fun for me either.

Now our dynamics are reserved, but I don't really want to be the one to take away his freedom. I don't want a repeat of what happened to me.

I just want us to work together.

Jæmis sighs this time around.

"You forgive me of my sins, is that what you're saying?"

"I guess, in a sense. But you have to apologize though."

"Hah," he chuckles incredulously.

"Again, you are an enigma. Are all Earthlings as perplexing as you?"

"I think I'm just stubborn."

"I just try to be kind and forgiving."

"Well, you're out of luck. I won't apologize for my actions," he says gruffly.

Okay, that stings a little, I have to admit. I had hoped he'd be ready to play along and apologize.

"I will bear my sins until the day I die. An apology won't undo the things I've done. Words are meaningless."

I get the sense he's not just talking about kidnapping me.

"Well, words matter to me. And I think if we're going to start over—"

"—*You* decided that on your own," he cuts in.

"Then you're going to have to learn to say you're sorry for the bad things you've done," I finish.

"Oh – and use my name!" I quickly add.

"That's never going to happen, so forget about it," he replies and then turns on his heel.

I can't hide the disappointment on my face. I suddenly feel embarrassed for thinking I could actually convince him.

"You better start thinking of ways to save your planet, instead of trying to make me apologize," he says as he walks away.

"Where are you going?" I call out to him.

"To find this putrid 'bathroom' you mentioned earlier. I need to relieve myself."

I sigh and close my eyes.

"Wrong way, it's down the hall over there," I say, and point in the opposite direction Jæmis was going in.

He avoids my eyes as he walks past me, pretending he was going the right way all this time.

I guess we still have a long way to go. But first things first; I have *got* to get him something to wear, because I don't think I can handle seeing him strut around half-naked like this all of the time.

-- Cabin kitchen day

In the morning, I'm startled awake by the sound of someone smashing a hammer against the wall.

"What is that!?" I yell out loud, walking into the living room.

"Oh, mornin'," Ralph greets me as he pauses from his work.

"What in the world are you doing?" I question him, seeing the hammer clutched in his hands.

"Well, see this door here?" Ralph points to the door next to the kitchen.

"Huh," I say, slightly confused. "We had a door there?"

"It leads to the basement, I think. It's stuck."

"...And you think taking a *hammer* to the door will magically open it up?" I say in a deadpan voice.

"No. But yes!" Ralph swings the hammer against the door's lock.

I sigh; my brother is brilliant, but sometimes he misses a lot of common sense.

"Can you quit that hammering, here let me see why it's stuck," I say and push him out of the way.

I press my hands against the door and try to move it. As Ralph said; it's stuck. It won't budge.

"I already unlocked it," says Ralph, showing the key in his hand.

Well, if it isn't locked, perhaps the deadbolt is stuck. I crouch down onto my knees and look through the keyhole. Obviously, it's too dark to make out anything.

Caine would be much better at this than me, but I'll give it a shot. I conjure a thin thread from my index finger and guide it inside the hole.

I try to feel my way around, poking and wiggling as much as I can.

Except nothing is moving, which is starting to frustrate me.

"Hello, good morning," Eeyok greets us as he enters the kitchen.

I stand up straight and dissolve my thread.

"It's not budging," I say dejectedly. "And hello to you too, Eeyok."

"Just leave it to me, I'll get it open before you're back!" Ralph says enthusiastically.

I leave him to tinker with the door.

"Where's Jæmis?" I ask, noticing Eeyok is alone.

Eeyok's eyes shift over to the window.

"The captain is training outside, I believe."

"Of course he is." What else did I expect? Sleeping in? Hah!

"Alright, Ralph I'll be back later. I'm taking the car to go to the mall with these two to shop for some clothes."

Ralph pushes himself away from the door and digs into his pocket, retrieving his wallet.

"Here, take it. I got some cash from Mr. Forrester so that we can buy them 'essentials'," he says while air-quoting.

I store his wallet in my purse. I guess that's covered.

I've gotten permission from Forrester Inc as well – Jæmis and Eeyok cannot leave the premises of the lake without someone high-up giving approval.

-- Outside lake cabin day

There he is; wearing practically nothing as he kicks the air, showcasing his very toned calf.

"I told you to put some clothes on," I call out to him.

Jæmis stops his training and lowers his leg.

"Those garments don't fit."

"We're going to get you some new ones, but I can't have you walking around like that in public, alright? Just put on the shirt and pants I gave you. The cardigan should cover up the ripped seams."

Jæmis roughly reaches for the pile of clothes left in the grass and finally dresses himself.

It's time to take them out in public.

-- Shopping mall

I feel stared at.

No, correction; I can feel everyone stare at Jæmis. Alright, I guess it is a little strange to see such a muscular man walking all funny because he's afraid he might rip through the seams of his pants.

Actually, I'm a little glad Jæmis is taking all the attention, because otherwise people would be staring at Eeyok, who still has a few non-human traits that the glamour couldn't hide.

"You think he's super?" I hear someone whisper in the crowd, referring to Jæmis.

That's not good. I quickly block that person's sight by walking behind Jæmis.

"This is a very busy marketplace," says Eeyok in awe at all the people around us.

"We call it a shopping mall," I say with a grin. "I can give you a tour if we have some spare time left."

"It's uncomfortably crowded," Jæmis complains.

"It'll be less crowded once we enter a store."

"I see many humans walk holding hands," Eeyok observes. "Why is that?"

Pleased that Eeyok shows some curiosity towards our culture, I happily oblige him.

"People hold hands to show they're a couple in public," I explain. "Also, parents hold their children's hands so they don't get lost."

"Couple?" Eeyok echoes.

"Couples are romantic partners." I think remember Jæmis used the term 'mate' before, when he thought Eeyok and I were together. "Mates," I add.

"These couples hold hands so they don't get lost?" Eeyok asks.

I end up giggling. That's one way to look at it!

It's then that the couple Eeyok was looking at stops for a brief second to peck each other on the lips.

Jæmis staggers backwards at the sight, eyes wide.

"How indecent!" he complains loudly.

Eeyok awkwardly looks away as well. "Hmm yes, that should be done in private."

I never actually saw anyone kissing on Yool, I figure it was just a human gesture, but it seems they *do* have it in their culture.

"Do Gaötte kiss as well?" I ask.

"Intimacy like that is reserved behind closed doors," Jæmis points out. "It is disgusting they would do this out in public."

"Perhaps humans don't think so," Eeyok points out.

"I mean, some people do," I add thoughtfully. "A small kiss like that is usually okay out in public. But a long and intimate kiss, yes I think people would rather do that in private as well."

"Does Joselina kiss anyone?" Eeyok asks.

My mouth drops open; I didn't expect a question like that.

"He's asking if you have a mate," Jæmis grunts.

"Yes, I know what he's asking," I reply, a little irritated.

"And no, I do not, Eeyok. I think if I did, my time on Yool would have been much lonelier..."

Eeyok is quickly distracted by something else, something that is very flashy and loud. An arcade.

"Ooh, what's that?" he asks eagerly, like a child in awe.

"Eeyok, control yourself, it is unsightly," Jæmis reprimands him.

Eeyok's face falters and he looks down at the ground.

"Don't be a grump, he's excited about what he sees!" I quickly come to his defense.

"Also, that's an arcade hall. People go there to play games," I explain with a smile.

"Games?" Eeyok perks up.

"I'm not sure we have time for playing games right now, but it won't hurt to look, right?"

"Yes, yes!" he agrees eagerly.

"What about our garments?" Jæmis protests in annoyance.

"It can wait for a couple of more minutes!" I dismiss his concerns and start walking towards the arcade.

Right at the entrance of the arcade are a couple of photo booths. A small group of girls walk out, giggling at their photos. Eeyok looks on, intrigued.

"Those are pictures," I say before he can ask me anything. "I noticed that was something I didn't see on Yool. Do you not take pictures there?"

"Gaötte's technology is not sufficient enough for photographs," Jæmis cuts in like a know-it-all.

"Ehehe, Captain Jæmis is correct, Yool doesn't have that sort of thing," says Eeyok sheepishly.

"I am not your Captain anymore," Jæmis snaps at him. "You lost that privilege the moment you decided to abandon your troop."

Eeyok directs his gaze down to the floor.

"You will refer to me by my proper title," he huffs.

"Yes... Prince Jæmis."

1. "Guess I'll just be calling you Jæmis then."
2. "Can you at least try to act nicer to Eeyok?"

"Guess I'll just be calling you Jæmis then," I say flippantly. He's being rude to Eeyok.

"If you will not refer to me as Captain, then Prince Jæmis will—"

"Yeah I don't see you using my name at all either, so Jæmis it is!" I quickly cut him off with a big grin spreading across my face.

"Only fair, right?"

Surprisingly, Jæmis doesn't reply to that, he just gives me a deadpan glare.

"Can you at least try to act nicer to Eeyok?" I ask exasperatedly.

I know they're not exactly on good terms at the moment, but Jæmis could at least try to stay civilized.

"To this deserter?" Jæmis asks incredulously.

"Yes," I answer him without hesitating. "He's helping us, so please behave yourself."

Jæmis glares at me, but doesn't seem to argue back.

"So, Eeyok, would you like to take a picture?"

"I can?"

"Yeah! The three of us!"

"I did *not* sign up for th—"

I yank both of them inside the booth.

-- **Photobooth**

I grin mischievously as I stare at the screen in front of us.

This is a sticker booth, where you can edit your pictures afterwards. I throw in some coins from my purse so that it starts.

"What do we do?" asks Eeyok, eager to start.

"We should be getting me something fitting to wear," Jæmis interjects with a sigh.

"We can do that after this!" I dismiss him.

"Anyways, just stare at this circle over here and smile."

Eeyok pulls back his lips and shows me a pained grimace. It's like he just ate something sour.

"Smile, like this?"

Never change, Eeyok. You're perfect.

I notice the both of them are actually out of frame.

"Can you crouch down? Especially you Jæmis, you're way too tall."

Eeyok bends at the knees so he fit in the frame.

"I'm perfectly comfortable where I am," Jæmis replies indignantly.

Then he realizes what he's said and immediately backpedals.

"I mean – no, I am not comfortable. This space is cramped. Why are we doing this?"

I yank down on Jæmis' arm so that he's forced to bend over and fit in the frame.

"What are you doing–"

FLASH.

The first picture was taken!

I try to get the guys to pose differently for the next one, but they're both quite awkward at it. The booth takes the next couple of pictures before it tells us it's finished.

I quickly rush outside.

-- Shopping mall

"What a bizarre blinding room," says Jæmis, rubbing his eyes.

"The flashes were a bit bright..." Eeyok agrees.

"It'll be worth it, you'll see!" I say eagerly, hoping the pictures turned out alright.

I'm pretty much doing a happy feet dance as I await the roll of pictures to appear from the machine.

The machine whirs and cracks until a strip of pictures falls down the slot. My greedy hands are like magnets as I swipe them up.



...!

1. "HHAHAHAahaha!!!"
2. "Oh my, you have such lovely eyes, Jæmis."

I snort, I wheeze, I can't breathe.

"HHAHAHAahaha!!!"

Oh. My. God!

Those ridiculous sparkling eyes!

I just can't! I can't!

"What kind of abomination is this!?" Jæmis demands to know.

"Wow – do I look like this?" Eeyok gapes in awe.

I take in a deep breath and continue my laughter.

"Why are you laughing? Stop it this instant."

There are tears welling up in my eyes. But I finally take the time to look away from this magnificent piece of art to see Jæmis looking... awkward.

"Ahaha... Are you..." I stifle a giggle. "Are you embarrassed? *You?* The mighty Captain Jæmis?"

Jæmis' face immediately turns into a scowl as he bares his fangs at me.

"This is not a true representation!" he argues. "That is a disgrace that needs to be destroyed!"

Jæmis makes an attempt to take the pictures out of my hand. I quickly pull them away from his reach and hug them close to my body.

"Oh hell no! This should be framed and hung up above my toilet!"

"Oh my, you have such lovely eyes, Jæmis," I say, trying to hold back my laughter.

"What is this... What putrid and deformed atrocity is this?" Jæmis demands to know.

"It's you!" I say cheerfully.

"Wow, my eyes are like gems," says Eeyok in wonder.

"That is *not* me," Jæmis hisses.

"Pretty sure it is. Look at how... Look..." I can't contain the burst of giggles washing over me.

It's just so ridiculous! I can't with this photo sticker!

"Stop mocking me this instant!" Jæmis snaps at me.

"I'm sorry – it's just so funny!"

"It is *not* funny. It is a misrepresentation of my magnificence."

"Oh, this is the picture of magnificence alright," I say, roaring with laughter.

"This is unacceptable. This should not be allowed to exist. Burn it."

I hug the pictures close to my body and gasp in shock.

"No way, these are precious."

"Give that to me!" Jæmis strong-arms his way into my personal space and swipes the roll of pictures out of my hand.

He immediately tears it up into a million little pieces.

My jaw drops open in shock.

Nooooooo!

I wipe out my phone with a triumphant smirk.

"Hah! They send you digital copies to your phone these days! Your sparkly face is mine forever!"

Eeyok chuckles in the background.

"Hehe, sparkly face."

"That picture isn't allowed to see the light of day," Jæmis warns me.

"I don't think you have anything to say about that," I fire back.

"I'd like a copy," Eeyok happily chirps in.

"Don't worry Eeyok, you'll get a really *large* copy!"

Jæmis bites down on his bottom lip, giving me a death glare. He can glare all he wants, but the image of his innocent sparkly looking eyes makes him the least threatening man on earth.

That was priceless!

"Come on, let's finally get some clothes," I say, urging them to continue to walk.

Jæmis begrudgingly follows.

-- Clothing store

What size is Jæmis? How did I forget to measure him before we left? I feel stupid now.

I should get the largest sizes they have, that will probably work out. An XXL?

"Okay, so there's a ton of clothes here. If you have a preference, you can go ahead and pick an outfit out yourself if you'd like," I instruct them.

Eeyok looks particularly interested in a really shiny sequined dress. He grabs it with his hands and releases a gasp in awe.

"This is so beautiful," he says, running the fabric through his hands.

"Shiny like gems."

"Uhm," I start awkwardly. "You should probably not pick out a dress..."

"You just told us we can pick whatever we liked," says Jæmis, looking at me crossly.

I scratch the side of my cheek. I know Jæmis wore a long skirt back on Yool, and I did see many people wearing robes and dresses regardless of perceived gender.

However, this is earth, and right now, a man wearing a dress still goes against social norms even if I think they should wear whatever they want. They'd stand out even more than they already do. I can't have them bringing too much attention to themselves.

"The females here wear dresses and the males wear pants and shirts," I explain in simple terms. "I'm sorry Eeyok, wearing that would make you stand out too much."

Eeyok's face falls and he drops the dress from his hands.

A pang of guilt pierces my heart. How can I deny him something he thinks looks pretty?

"You know what, if you like it, let's get it," I say with a smile.

He looks at me, his eyes growing large and wide, clearly excited.

"I'll just pick out a few outfits you can wear in public, too," I add.

Eeyok takes the dress from the clothing hanger.

"Thank you, Joselina!" he says eagerly, hugging the purple sequined dress to his body.

"Earthling, I require suitable training garb," Jæmis demands.

"Technically, supersuits meant for combat are my specialty, I could just make you your own."

Jæmis quirks an eyebrow. "Zoepersoets?" he repeats.

I shake my head. "Ah never mind, let's just get you some decent clothes first."

As I scurry down the aisles of men's wear, I pick out a bunch of clothing that I think would fit them. As well as look stylish, of course.

I even grab some underwear. I couldn't resist a pair of underwear with alien faces on them.

Though the thought sticks around in my mind; a supersuit for Jæmis. I haven't made one in ages, and my fingers are itching to get back to work.

It's silly to focus on this when there's this impending doom over my head of Varitus arriving on earth, but I've missed designing. I really have.

"Come here, let me see if this would fit you," I say as I hold a shirt in front of Jæmis' chest.

As I look at his face, I try not to remember the photo sticker, lest I burst out laughing again.

"Seems adequate," he mumbles.

"Prince Jæmis will look impeccable," Eeyok compliments him.

"I think it's time you try on some of those clothes, to see if they fit." I give Jæmis a meaningful stare.

"Don't tear the clothes, please. You break it, you buy it."

"Just point me in the direction of a private room," Jæmis says. "As you seemed adamant on making sure people don't see me 'naked'."

I look around for the changing rooms and see the sign at the back.

"There it is, in the back. You can use a small stall to change in."

Jæmis takes all the clothes from my arms, turns on his heel and... promptly walks into the wrong direction.

Eeyok awkwardly taps Jæmis arm.

"This way, Prince Jæmis," he mentions, and extends his arm to where the changing rooms are located.

"Hmpf," Jæmis huffs. "Don't bother me."

"You know what, just follow me, I don't want you getting lost," I say and start walking with them towards the back.

"I do not get lost," Jæmis immediately replies.

"Sure, you just strategically misplace yourself, right?" I quip.

Eeyok chuckles, which he quickly covers with a cough once he notices Jæmis' death glare that could rival Varitus' look.

Attempting to quickly defuse the situation, I push them both into two separate stalls and pull the curtains closed.

"If you need any help, I'm right here, just call!" I tell them.

I hope the clothes I got Jæmis fit, I just picked the largest size I could find.

There's some shuffling of fabric and I rock back and forth on my feet as I wait.

If only Jæmis didn't tear up the pictures, I could be standing here, giggling like a little girl at the ridiculousness of it all. It's been a while since I really laughed like that.

My eyes wander over towards a stand of accessories near the entrance of the changing rooms. Curious, I check out what's available, and see a ton of cute hair accessories.

There's a small mirror at the top of the stand and for the first time in a long time, I take the time to look at myself.

My hair, which I had to cut when Jilyuk grabbed me, has grown a little since then. It's still uneven though, and I could really use a real haircut. Maybe I should get some bangs?

I spot a cute hairband among the accessories. I try it on and check myself out in the mirror. It looks cute. Perhaps I should buy myself a little gift.

"Earthling, I acquire your assistance," I hear the booming voice of Jæmis.

"Alright, I'm coming in," I announce myself and push away the curtain.

-- Changing room

I almost faceplant against his naked chest.

Dangit, how many times do I have to see his muscles up close?

"What's the problem?" I say, trying not to stare.

That's when I realized he's halfway put on some pants, but is having trouble with the...

"Oh, it's a zipper," I say, noticing his hands on his fly. "I guess you don't have those over there."

1. Zip up his fly.

2. Explain how a zipper works.

I step closer to him, my hands reaching out for the zipper as I pull up the rim of his pants.

Jæmis gives me a cold look, remaining silent as he allows me to get closer.

"You just grab the pull tab like this," I grab it, "and then zip it up." I close his zipper.

Then I fasten the button as well to finish the job. My eyes trail from his crotch to his chest, eventually looking into his brown eyes. I smile.

"There, all done."

Jæmis is temporarily distracted by something else.

I catch a faint sound of the rhythm of his hearts now that we're this close together. Strange how sometimes I can hear it and other times I don't.

"You pull the little tab up," I say and point at his crotch. This feels a little awkward.

Jæmis hooks his finger around the tab and starts tugging at it.

"Be careful not to zip yourself!" I warn him, noticing the protruding bulge.

I should... not be staring at any bulges.

Jæmis grunts in response, giving me a side eye, then pulls the zipper up in one smooth motion. He did it.

"Good, it fits you," I say with a smile.

Jæmis says nothing, but slowly moves closer to me.

"What?" I ask, noticing his silent stare.

"You have something in your hair," he states.

"Oh, right, I'm still wearing it," I say sheepishly and take out the hairband.

"You know, you should do something about your hair."

I can tell that his hair is falling into his eyes and bothering him.

"Perhaps a haircut?" I propose, reaching out to his black hair.

Jæmis cocks his head to the side, avoiding my fingers.

"I don't trust anyone to get close enough to me with a blade. Not while I'm under this oath."

I pout in response; is he really that paranoid?

"Oh come on, no one is going to murder you just because you're getting your hair cut."

"I am in enemy territory," he exclaims. "I cannot take that risk."

"Well, if you're that adamant about it, I could do it for y—"

"Ahh, Joselina! I am in need of aid!" Eeyok suddenly screeches.

I quickly exit out of Jæmis' room and enter Eeyok's.

Or at least, I think it's Eeyok. He's weirdly stuck in a shirt.

"Eeyok... your arm is supposed to go through that hole, not your head," I say with a small chuckle.

I help him get out of the sleeve and pop his head through the collar instead.

"There we go, all done. Does it feel okay?"

I check the fit around his arms and see it's the perfect size, for his human form anyway. I should probably grab a few extra sizes that he can wear in his original form.

"Seems like it fits," he replies, then checks himself out in the mirror.

"Are you okay with the pants, or do you need help with those, too?" I ask him.

"I think I can manage," he says sheepishly.

"Alright, please put your original clothes back on when you're done!"

I exit the stall.

-- Clothing store

I stand in front of Jæmis' changing room, faced with a closed curtain.

"Hey Jæmis, please wear one shirt and some pants when you come out, so you can immediately start wearing them instead of my dad's clothes."

"All of these clothes feel restricting to move around in. None of them are suitable for combat," I can hear him complain.

"I'll figure something out, okay?" I say with a sigh.

I want to get this over with already; I'm hungry.

Eeyok is the first to be finished, walking out with his load of clothes. Eventually, Jæmis appears as well.

"Oh," I say in surprise.

He looks surprisingly modern and human. Give him a decent haircut and you could even say he looks handsome.

"What is it?" Jæmis asks, raising an eyebrow in reaction.

"Nothing, the clothes look good on you."

"But they're not appropriate for training," he points out.

"I also feel very restricted in this," Eeyok admits.

"Guys, please, let's just be happy you're not naked, okay?" I plead with them.

"I'll figure something out when we get back home."

I urge them towards the register so we can finally be done with this shopping nightmare. These two are a little picky!

"Can you scan his shirt and pants? He wants to wear them straight away," I tell the cashier, pointing to Jæmis.

The cashier points the scanner at Jæmis, waiting for him to show the tags.

I quickly place my hands on his stomach, earning another cocked eyebrow from Jæmis, and force him to turn around. I fish the tag out of his collars and out of his pants to present them to the cashier.

The cashier scans the pieces of clothing and removes the tags. They then scan the rest of the items.

When I see the total, my eyes nearly bulge out. Over 400 euros!?

Damn, clothing prices must have skyrocketed since the last time I was here.

I remember Ralph gave me his wallet, I really hope that has enough money in it. As I open his black wallet, what's inside surprises me the most.

"They're... purple," I gasp. The purple paper in Ralph's wallet are 500 euro bills. There's about twenty of them in there.

Anxiety starts to settle in the pit of my stomach – they don't accept bills as huge as this! Who goes around walking with 500 euro bills on their pocket!? What was Ralph thinking?

"Miss, is there anything wrong?" the cashier asks, seeing my hesitation.

"Uhm, you don't happen to accept these, right?" I say with a nervous chuckle, brandishing one of the bills from the wallet.

The cashier's eyes grow large and shakes their head.

"No Miss! We accept 100 euro bills and below only. You will have to cash these in at the bank for something smaller."

Well, damnit. Stupid Ralph. No one accepts these bills. I stuff it away in the wallet and put it back into my purse.

Luckily, I did carry my own debit card with me, so I begrudgingly pay for it using my bank account. I throw in the cute hairband as well.

When the transaction is finally complete, Eeyok is the one who carries all of the bags for us.

"What was wrong, Joselina?" he asks me.

"My brother gave me the highest amount of currency we can use here, and they wouldn't accept it," I explain.

"What kind of backwards planet would refuse legitimate currency?" Jæmis comments.

"Honestly, I don't know either." He's got a fair point.

We finally leave the store.

-- Shopping mall

Perhaps we can get a bite to eat now that we're done. I skipped breakfast, and both of these two did as well, so we should probably do something about that.

"Hey, are you two hungry?" I stop to ask them.

Before they have a chance to answer, a person dashes towards me and snatches my purse, running away with it.

Needing a second to realize what's happened, I glare at the person running away.

"What the hell – thief!"

"Eeyok," Jæmis growls. "In position."

Eeyok drops all of the bags to the ground and spreads apart his feet.

"Yes, Captain."

"Go!" he yells.

Both he and Eeyok pretty much vanish into thin air, leaving me alone with all the bags.

Oh no... Oh no! They can't chase that thief! If they hurt the thief then...!

I worriedly look at the marks on the back of my hands; this is going to kill us.

I gather all of the bags and chase after them.

It's hard to run with a plethora of shopping bags in my hands, but I try my best to still be within range of the thief's. As long as I can still spot him with my eyes, then I can follow him.

The thief is heading for the exit.

Oh! Eeyok just appeared in front of him!

Jæmis apprehends the thief, grabbing his wrist and tearing my purse from his grip.

I start full on sprinting – they can't hurt him!

Once I get closer, I can hear their conversation.

"The hell do you need that much money for anyway?" the thief snaps at Jæmis.

"Stupid supers. You don't need to be that rich!"

"Thieves need to be punished," says Jæmis in perfect English, his eyes narrowing and glaring at the thief.

"Aye," Eeyok agrees.

Jæmis raises the thief in the air without much effort.

"Let me go, you super scum!" he yells.

A crowd has gathered around them, some of them are even recording the events. Shit, that's not good – I can't have Jæmis or Eeyok on video!

Sneakily, I shoot out my thread towards two of the cell phones of the people, knocking them out of their hands. I quickly dissolve it before they can notice.

Sorry, but I have to do this!

"Don't hurt him!" I yell, running up towards the three.

I drop the bags next to me and take in a deep breath.

Jæmis clicks his tongue and releases the thief, letting him fall to the floor.

"Here," says Eeyok, handing me my purse. "We got it back."

"Thank you, but you know you can't hurt him."

Eeyok looks apologetic. "Understood."

I glare at the thief on the floor. "Even if he's a lowly piece of scum who stole my purse, you need to be careful, alright?"

"Fucking super!" the thief yells and gets up from the floor, lunging himself at me.

When I see the knife clutched in his hands, my instinct takes over.

I sidestep him, dodging his attack, then quickly conjure a thread and wrap it around both his wrists. I force him to put his arms behind his back and I tie him off so he can't break free.

"You think you can handle *me*?" I hiss at him darkly.

"Crime doesn't pay," I tell him sternly.

"Argh!" The thief yells, and then runs off with his hands behind his back.

Eeyok and Jæmis look slightly impressed at my handling the thief.

"Did you see that? She used an ability..." someone whispers.

"She's not wearing a suit," mumbles another.

All eyes are suddenly on me as a sea of whispers and murmurs erupt among the crowd. My heart starts beating uncomfortably fast.

I feel myself shrink; for a brief second, I forgot. I forgot what it was like to be back on Earth.

I quickly grab Eeyok's and Jæmis' arm.

"Come on, grab the bags and let's get out of here," I mumble.

"But Joselina, the thief is still...!" Eeyok protests.

"He is correct, are you just going to let a thief go unpunished?" Jæmis backs Eeyok up.

"What did she shoot from her hands? That can't be normal," I hear another voice whisper.

"Are they all supers?"

Anxiety starts to spread inside of me. I can't bring attention to the both of them either – what if they recognize them? I start hiding my face behind my hand and hang my head low.

"Let's go!" I snap and urge the both of them to come with me.

-- Store bench outside day

I need to get to the car, *fast*.

"Joselina, why the hurry?" Eeyok asks, concerned.

"I've been seen," I tell him, my heart still beating in my throat.

"Why is it important you are not seen? You are an Earthling, you blend in," Jæmis points out.

"Not... exactly," I breathe out, scanning the parking lot for the car.

"Unlike most people, I have an ability, a power. They call us supers," I explain.

I sigh, feeling a weight on my shoulders.

"The normies tolerate us supers to an extent. They don't want you to use your ability in public, not without hiding your identity anyway."

"And just now, I've been spotted. This is not good at all."

Jæmis raises his nose in the air and scoffs at the audacity of it all.

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've heard in my life. Why should you have to hide your power?"

"I agree with Captain Jæmis, I think you should not hide what you are born with. I am proud to be Gaötte."

"Stop calling me Captain," Jæmis grunts.

"Ah right, my apologies, Prince Jæmis," Eeyok quickly expresses his regret.

"Let's just get out of here, okay? I already brought attention to myself, I don't want them to figure out who you are as well."

We finally arrive at the spot I parked my car at and I hastily throw all the bags inside the trunk. Time to leave!

-- Cabin living room day

As I dump the bags on the couch, I sit down and exhale a large breath. Finally, we're home. That was so stressful.

There's something strange though...

"Ralph?" I call out. Where is he?

"Over here!" he says, sitting on the floor, swinging a wrench around.

"You still haven't opened the door?" I ask, noting how the door is still very much shut.

"It's like it's reinforced steel or something, I just can't crack it."

"Why would mom and dad have a reinforced steel door for our basement?"

"That's what I'd like to find out," he says with a grin.

I honestly don't even remember that we had a basement in the cabin.

"How'd shopping go?"

I sigh loudly. "Not good at all. Something happened."

"What?" He raises his eyebrows and stops messing around with the door.

My phone starts to ring.

"One second, I'm getting a call."

I fish out my cell phone from my purse and see the caller ID. It's Caine.

"Caine?" I answer the phone.

"What the fuck Joselina, your face is all over social media!" Caine exclaims.

I feel my heart stop. No... No, it can't be.

"They're calling you the Super Mallgirl!"

Well. Fuck.

Chapter [019] -- Lake cabin living room day

This is not the turn of events I had expected. Sitting in my parents' cabin, being scolded by a very rich man, surrounded by aliens.

"You should be thankful we were able to scrub out the other video someone uploaded, which had the two extraterrestrials in clear view," Neil says with a stern sigh.

"You can't get rid of the other video?" I ask, hopeful.

Ralph matches Neil's heavy sigh.

"It's been reposted hundreds of times on a lot of mirror websites. There's no way we can do anything about it now. It's out on the internet forever."

I just want to bury myself in a hole and die. I can't believe I let myself get caught like that. I've been careful my entire life.

"You haven't even been back for a full week, and yet you're already out there, face plastered on every social device," Neil reprimands me.

"How *do* you do it? To make such a colossal mistake? You were supposed to keep a low profile, not start a campaign under Super Mallgirl," he starts to rant.

"Well first off; that name is ridiculous. And second of all, I didn't mean to get caught," I explain myself.

"You used your powers in public, without anything to hide your identity behind," Neil stresses.

"Now we're forced to have you under house arrest, too."

"What!?" I shriek. "House arrest!?"

"We can't have you out in public. We'll have to wait until this blows over, or until the next interesting development happens. It's too risky for you to be recognized."

"So you're saying I'm stuck here? I can't even go to my boutique?"

Neil nods. "That is correct."

"You can't keep her locked here forever, you know," warns Ralph.

Neil rubs his temple. "Look, we're all trying to minimize the consequences. It's best if Miss Hearth remains out of the public eye until the video has been forgotten about."

"Imagine if Miss Hearth had paparazzi following her, then what? They'd find the lake, the cabin, and the two very secret extraterrestrials that we're hiding." He shakes his head.

"No, we can't let that happen."

I understand... I don't like it, but I get his grievances. Reporters following me around and finding out where the cabin is located is a very real possibility.

"I can't believe I returned to Earth only to be locked up again," I mumble darkly.

Ralph furrows his eyebrows at that, contemplating what I've said.

"She can at least go out to the store, right?" he asks.

"No," Neil says steadfastly.

"Oh come on, she needs to eat and drink too, you know," Ralph argues.

"For the time being, it will be your job to take care of your sister so that she doesn't leave the premises."

He stares at me, eyes narrowing.

"That includes the extraterrestrials. It's too dangerous to move them around. They must be kept here at all times as well."

Great, I guess I screwed it up for everyone. So much for getting Eeyok a glamour so he could hide in plain sight. Now he's not even allowed to leave the lake.

"Do you understand, Miss Hearth?" he asks in a loud voice.

I begrudgingly nod.

"Fine," I admit. "I won't go out in public for a while."

There's a look of satisfaction on Neil's face.

"I believe you should remain out of public until we have to deal with the upcoming invasion. No one will care about Super Mallgirl by then."

He wants me to remain inside for two months!? I groan loudly in despair.

Neil fixes his jacket and straightens his back.

"Now, Mr Hearth, please do check your e-mail, my engineers are awaiting your answer to a problem they encountered with your bracelet."

"I've been kind of busy here..." Ralph mumbles. "But I'll answer today."

"Very well. I believe we have discussed everything." Neil turns to me. "I don't want to hear any more trouble coming from you."

I have this strong urge to stick out my tongue to him. I'm not actively being troublesome!

"Have a good day," he bids his goodbye and finally leaves the cabin.

Ralph sighs loudly as he crashes on the couch.

"I can't believe now you're stuck here, too."

"Back on Yool I couldn't leave the palace, and now here I'm under house arrest as well..."

Jæmis finally opens his mouth, having been quiet this entire time, listening in on us.

"You barely followed the rules in the palace – I doubt you'd follow the rules here, either," he states his point.

"Nothing seems to stop you from going out," he finishes.

"No, they can't force me to stay inside, but I'd be foolish if I didn't."

"Didn't seem to stop you last time," Jæmis points out, squinting his eyes at me.

"I mean, if it weren't for the rebels, I probably would have gotten away with it," I grumble.

"The first time you go out and you're caught, not the best track record," Eeyok adds.

"Hey – you're the one I ran into!"

Eeyok grins widely. "I have a lot of experience going undercover."

Ralph worms himself into the conversation.

"Okay, I've had it up to *here* with your alien language. If you refuse to speak English, then at least let me take a look at your translator."

Ralph approaches Eeyok, a screwdriver ready in his hand.

"Me?" Eeyok's eyes grow large.

"You said it was in your ear, right? If I can study it, I can reverse engineer it, no problem!"

"Ralph, can you please not experiment on my friend?" I ask exasperatedly.

"Can't you go back to trying to open that door?"

"I can multitask," he answers.

"If that little runt can understand our technology, I will be very impressed," says Jæmis with a sly voice, like he obviously doesn't believe Ralph is intelligent enough to figure out his tech.

"I don't know what he said, but I don't like the look on his smug face," Ralph grumbles, glaring at Jæmis.

"You know what, go ahead. Eeyok, please go with my brother. Maybe he'll figure something out."

Eeyok looks hesitant, but doesn't question my command.

"Alright, I help out," he answers Ralph.

"Great! Follow me!"

Ralph quickly escorts Eeyok towards his room, which is his temporary office. That leaves just me and Jæmis in the same room together.

"Earth is a very backwards place if you can't even catch a common thief without repercussions," says Jæmis in a dismissive tone.

"It's a little more complicated than that," I reply.

He's not wrong though... the fact I tried to stop a thief from taking my own money, and I'm the one that has to lay low doesn't seem fair at all.

"It was nice seeing you and Eeyok work together though," I say with a small smile.

Despite the animosity between them, Jæmis was quick to command Eeyok to catch the thief.

Almost bashfully, Jæmis turns his head away from me.

"That's because he's a trained soldier. He will do what I command of him."

"Well, it was still nice to see you work together. Thank you for catching the thief," I say, feeling grateful they stepped in.

A small stretch of silence weaves between us. Then Jæmis moves, getting ready to speak.

"I did notice your reflexes seemed to have improved since the last time you were met with a sharp weapon." There's a smirk on his lips, which kind of irritates me.

1. "Sounds like you're impressed."

2. "You think I've improved?"

"Sounds like you're impressed."

Jæmis cocks an eyebrow at me.

"Merely stating the difference."

"You can just admit I dodged that like a pro," I say, a sly smile appearing on my lips.

"Pro'?" Jæmis repeats in an odd accent.

"Short for professional. Basically, I'm saying I dodged like an expert."

"I wouldn't say that maneuver of yours was done expertly at all," he huffs.

"Yeah, yeah, all I'm hearing is that you're impressed," I continue to stress my point with an ever-growing grin.

He lets out an indignant puff of air, glaring at me as if he's perfected it like an art form.

"No, I was not," he argues back.

"Thanks for the compliment!"

"Did you not hear what I said!?" he raises his voice.

"Loud and clear; you were impressed."

I'm having fun messing with him. I need to do something with my 'house arrest' time after all.

Jæmis turns on his heel and stomps towards the front door.

"Where are you going?" I ask, a little sad he doesn't want to bicker anymore.

"To train!"

He swiftly disappears and slams the door shut.

Hmm, so he was impressed by my actions.

"You think I've improved?" I ask, my eyes blinking at him in surprise.

"There was a clear difference in skill between the two moments, yes," he answers truthfully.

"Oh, well, I guess it's because I didn't expect to be hit during your training regimen," I offer as an explanation.

"You expected the thief to attack you with a dagger?" he asks, slightly confused.

"At that point I was prepared for anything to go wrong, which helped, I guess." I shrug at him.

"But you have no combat experience at all, do you?"

I shake my head. "None whatsoever. Unless you count wrestling my brother for the TV remote."

Jæmis looks at me weirdly, and I know it's because he doesn't understand what a TV remote is.

"Haha, never mind. Either way, it was just a reflex. I'm glad though, I can't imagine what would have happened if I didn't dodge."

"I would have deflected it out of his hand," Jæmis states clearly.

"Huh, but you didn't move at all," I point out, recalling that he didn't seem to react.

"I have sharp senses. I was able to tell that you were capable of evading that attack on your own," he says with an annoyed huff, as if everyone's senses are as sharp as his.

"So, you're saying you would have protected me?"

"That is—" He cuts himself off, his eyes briefly growing large.

"Hmpf, I'm leaving," he suddenly announces and then turns around.

"What – where are you going? You're not supposed to leave!"

"I'm staying within the vicinity to train," he answers roughly and pulls the door open.

He disappears as the door slams shut.

Hmm, so Jæmis would have protected me.

-- Lake Cabin Kitchen

"Please, don't screw it up," I warn Ralph.

Ralph dangles in front of me with a pair of scissors, staring at my forehead with the utmost concentration.

"I wouldn't dare. You know my fingers can do extraordinary feats," he boasts.

"Yes, with *technology*. Not with hair," I stress.

"Don't you worry about a thing. I just need to snip a bit here," he takes a cut off my hair, "and here," another snip, "and there we go!"

I blow air at my new bangs to remove them from my eyes.

"Give me the mirror."

Ralph hands me a small hand mirror, and I grab it with my greedy hands. I need to know if it looks good!

I see myself reflected; my once uneven do-it-yourself haircut now looks like a straight bob with cute bangs. They don't look out of place at all.

I smile up at Ralph and squeal.

"It looks cute!"

Ralph suavely rubs his chin, eyes closed.

"Did you ever doubt my skills?" he says arrogantly.

"All the time," I reply with a laugh.

"Hey now – I'm doing this for free, you know!"

"Well that's because I can't go to town to get a haircut anymore," I complain.

It's already been two days since the Super Mallgirl incident and I'm slowly losing my mind having to stay inside.

Eeyok enters the kitchen, looking like his usual self again after removing the glamour. He seems happier like this.

"Hey Eeyok, look!" I say excitedly.

Eeyok, eyes wide and large, starts looking around the room.

"What is it?" he asks.

I point at my hair, a little disappointed he didn't notice it straight away.

"My hair," I say.

"Hm yes. Hairy."

Ralph bursts out laughing, earning a glare on my end.

"Dude, you're supposed to compliment her new hairstyle."

"Ah..." Eeyok looks distraught. "Gaötte don't have hair. It's a foreign concept to me."

I pout at him, but forgive him as well.

"It's alright," I reassure him.

"Also, what is 'deud'?" he asks a bit awkwardly.

Ralph starts explaining what dude means to Eeyok. He's already managed to reverse engineer the babblefish and created his own. He can now follow along with our conversations.

Sometimes, I wonder why I didn't inherit any of his brainpowers...

I push the newly acquired hairband in my hair and look in the mirror once more. It's cute. I look a bit younger like this, I wonder why longer hair makes you seem more mature?

As I look around the room, I start wondering if Jæmis is still outside, training. Like he's been doing every single day.

"Eeyok, you were training with Jæmis, right?" I ask.

"Yes, Prince Jæmis wants the both of us on a strict training regimen."

"It's interesting how, despite him thinking you betrayed him, he's still training you."

Eeyok smiles. "Hehe, perhaps he doesn't dislike me as much as he says he does."

"He's not very honest, is he?" I say with a giggle.

"Not honest?" Ralph repeats with an indignant scoff. "That man has brutal honesty written all over his face."

"People who say they're 'brutally honest' are people who tend to hide their feelings," I explain.

"I don't think he's even capable of feelings," Ralph remarks.

I direct my gaze towards the windows of the cabin, seeing a shimmer of Jæmis' shadow move back and forth. Not capable of feelings wouldn't be correct. Not with what I've seen so far, anyway.

"You know, both of you should take a break. Let me make you some lunch," I say.

Eeyok perks up. "Oooh, can I have another *zandwest*?"

"Sandwich," I correct him. "And yes, of course!"

Ever since arriving on Earth, Eeyok's been pretty happy trying out all the different kinds of foods available to him. He seems to be very fond of ham and cheese sandwiches.

-- Lake cabin outside day

I step outside, holding a plate with a sandwich, and a cup of hot chocolate. It's a little warm to be drinking hot chocolate, but I wanted to see if Jæmis would enjoy such a beverage.

"Jæmis, I brought you lunch," I call out to the void.

He's been training in between the trees, and despite wearing that bracelet, he still seems to possess superhuman speed. It's hard to keep track of him.

He suddenly appears in front of me, nearly startling me off my balance and spilling some of the hot chocolate onto the grass.

"What is it," he says in this deadpan tone.

"Don't just appear in front of me like that," I grumble. "I almost dropped your food."

"Ah, you've brought me provisions," his tone improves.

"Yes, I figured you should take a break from all this training you're doing."

"Whether I take a break is not up to you," he says, almost offended I would *dare* interrupt his training.

"Do you want the food or not?" I say with a sigh.

Jæmis wordlessly takes the sandwich from the plate and turns around, ignoring the cup of hot chocolate.

I gasp in surprise when I see his back.

"Jæmis...!"

He tilts his head to look over his shoulder, his mouth already stuffed with the sandwich.

"You ripped your pants!" I cry out in annoyance.

There's a huge gap in between the seams on his butt! It's like a giant fart blew a hole through his pants!

Jæmis huffs as he tears off a piece from his sandwich, facing me once more.

"I already told you this garb isn't sufficient enough for training. You can't blame me for the flimsy material not holding up."

I try to control my own temper – those were cargo pants meant for a lot of movement. It's been two days and he's already ruined them. Did he do constant splits or something to rip them like this? I don't even know.

I can fix it though, but he can't use them anymore during training, otherwise the same thing will happen again.

"Fine," I say begrudgingly. "I'll make you something myself."

"Training garments?" he asks.

"A supersuit you can use to fight in – like I said, it's my specialty. I just need to get the materials from my boutique..."

I start sketching out several ideas in my head about the kind of outfit I should design him. And that I should get Ralph or Kim to pick up some fabric from my store, since I can't leave myself.

"I'll need to measure you later on," I tell him.

Would black be a good choice? Perhaps I should incorporate some static-resistance fabric, since he seems to be weak to electricity.

I would also need to take into account that he can fly, so the design would have to be streamlined for aviation.

Oh wait, I forgot – he can't fly at the moment.

"You have that look in your eyes again," says Jæmis, disturbing me from my thoughts.

"Huh, what look?"

"The same look you had right before disobeying orders. As if you're planning something."

"Is there something wrong with the way I look?" I raise my eyebrows at him.

Jæmis munches on a piece of the sandwich, before swallowing to reveal a smirk.

"It's the look of excitement at being challenged, I know it all too well."

I really can't tell if he's making fun of me, or if he's... I don't know – slightly impressed?

Jæmis then finally notices the cup in my hands.

"Is that water?" he asks.

"No, it's hot chocolate. Please be careful, it's hot," I tell him and offer the cup.

"It's a tea?" as he sniffs the contents.

"Not exactly... It's a sweet beverage served hot."

"Sweet you say..." he repeats, sounding a little forlorn.

Eyeing the cup with a suspicious look, Jæmis finally takes a sip. I can see his Adam's apple bob up and down as he swallows, which makes me think how alike our bodies are.

I expect Jæmis to savour the taste after a single sip, but he downs the entire cup in one go. Weirdly enthralled, I can't help but stare at him. Did he like it?

"...Was it good?" I ask.

He returns the empty cup to me, as if I'm some kind of servant.

"You can bring me more of these hot shoklats," he states.

I sigh internally. What kind of way is that to ask for another cup?

"I would, if you'd ask me nicely," I bring up the notion. "And it's pronounced *chocolate*."

"Are you unsatisfied with my way of speaking?" he asks, sounding almost legitimately offended.

1. "Yes."

2. "It sounds more like you're commanding rather than asking."

"Yes," I reply quickly and without pause.

It clearly perturbs him as Jæmis raises both his eyebrows at me.

"If you liked the drink, then you could have asked for another."

"I did exactly that," he points out gruffly.

"No, you did not," I fire back. "That wasn't a question at all. You told me to give you more, but you didn't ask."

"Why are you being so pedantic and difficult about my request?" he growls.

"All I'm asking for is just a little bit of respect. You can ask me things, but don't presume I'll do them for you like you're the boss running things here – okay?"

I'm not backing down. I've been trying to accommodate both him and Eeyok, but he can be such a pain in the ass. All I want is some respect, not to be commanded around.

"It sounds more like you're commanding rather than asking," I reply.

He's never actually asked for anything respectfully. It's always been a command, just like how he bosses Eeyok around.

"I'm not someone under your command, you know," I point out the issue.

"Clearly, with the way you have never obeyed my orders," he snorts in agreement.

"Exactly. *Orders*," I stress. "You can ask me things, but don't presume I'll take any orders from you. I'm here to help, not obey."

"You're not helping by being difficult."

"All I want is for you to treat me respectfully. Not like another one of your soldiers you can command, that is all."

"Respect goes both ways, Earthling," he finally says after a long pause.

"For sure, you won't be receiving mine for as long as you refuse to call me by my name," I huff.

"I'm not here to socialize or mingle with Earthlings – I'm going to train to prepare for Lord Varitus' arrival."

"Well, believe it or not – we are all you've got, so you better accept that us 'Earthlings' are your only help and treat us with some respect, or..."

"Or *what?*" he urges me on.

"Just – just ask me for another cup next time, okay? I don't want to argue about this anymore!"

I take the cup and plate with me as I turn around and head back inside the cabin.

-- Lake cabin living room night

Sprawled across the couch with my phone in my hands, I scroll through the various comments. You would think that after a few days, the hype around my little slip up would die down.

Except all the social media I've been browsing online; I'm everywhere. I can't blame Forrester Inc. for not being able to scrub the video; it's impossible. At this point I've been turned into various memes.

The worst part is reading all the hate comments, too. The normies that hate supers – Hوليو supporters, in a sense. I feel like such activity has increased since I've been away.

"Stop looking at that crap, your brain will fall out," says Ralph as he pulls my phone out of my hands.

"Hey – I was reading that," I complain weakly.

"Yes, and it was making you nearly burn a hole through your screen for glaring so much at it."

"You can't blame me for checking," I say.

"You should not only be under house arrest, but also social media arrest. Stop looking it up!"

"Ahhh, but what else do I have to do?" I whine. "Nothing! My fabric isn't even here so I can't make any clothes either!"

"Kim's coming over to drop by some of your stuff. You can survive another day," says Ralph as he narrows his eyes at me, almost disappointed in the way I'm behaving.

I pout at him and then nudge my foot against his leg.

"Caine told me you went crazy by the way."

"He's lying, obviously. I've always been a nutcase."

I giggle. "I mean, when I was taken. He said you barely slept."

"Oh." A grim expression washes over his face.

He takes in a heavy breath.

"I'm just glad you're back." He shoots me a small smile.

"Yeah," I nod at him. "Same."

"If you have nothing else to do, you can help me with that door," he suggests with a grin.

"Ugh, give it a rest, it's just some smelly basement anyway. Probably has got mold growing as well."

"Never give up, never surrender!" he exclaims loudly.

Eeyok suddenly enters the house.

"Oh hey Eeyok," I greet him. "Are you both finished with training? You hungry?"

"Hm yes, definitely hungry," he says in agreement.

I guess training works up quite an appetite! They've been going at it since this morning.

"Where's Jæmis?" I ask, noticing Eeyok came alone.

"He went to train near the lake on his own," he mentions.

He shivers and shakes his head. "I don't like large bodies of water so I stayed near the house. I haven't seen him since."

Ralph and I look at each other; did Jæmis...?

"Nah, he couldn't have gone far, the alarms would have set off. Remember, he's being tracked," says Ralph quickly with a huff of air.

"Right, then where is he?" I ask, looking outside the window.

It's already dark, but I can still see just fine. However, when I scan the lake, I don't see any sign of Jæmis.

As I pull out my phone, I launch the app for the tracker, to see where he is. A map of our surroundings appears on my screen, with three dots. One of them being me, Eeyok's next to mine – and the other dot all the way near the edge of the forest.

"He's nearly at the edge of the perimeters," I say, sounding alarmed. "What's he doing there?"

Oh... Maybe he's lost? It is dark outside and Jæmis isn't familiar with this place yet, not to mention he can't fly.

"I'm going to get him, okay? Then we can all eat dinner."

Without waiting for a response, I leave the cabin.

-- Forest night

He should be straight ahead, according to this app. The GPS isn't entirely accurate though, so I have to use my own eyes to find him. I tuck my phone away.

I step through the grass, peering through the trees to spot a certain man.

My eye catches a shimmer. It's the shine of his jet-black hair, reflecting in the moonlight. He's looking around, eyes focused.

Before I can announce myself, Jæmis has suddenly appeared in front of me and pushed me up against a tree.

"Ow – hey, what's the deal?" I complain, suddenly aware how his body is pressed against mine. He's not hurting me though.

Jæmis removes himself from me and steps away.

"You were sneaking up on me," he says. "You should have said something."

"I was about to, until you shoved me against this tree."

"Better safe than sorry."

"What would you have done if it wasn't me, huh? You know you can't hurt humans," I point out.

One slip-up and he can kill the both of us.

"I didn't hurt you, now did I?" he fires back.

"No..." I admit begrudgingly. He did scare me though.

"What are you doing out here anyway?" I ask, changing the subject.

"Training," he replies nonchalantly.

"This far out?" I question.

"I was... exploring."

"...You couldn't find your way back to the cabin, could you?" I ask in this dull tone.

Jæmis turns defensive, crossing his arms over his naked chest and huffing loudly at me.

"I do *not* get lost. I am perfectly capable of locating the house," he says crossly.

"Uh-huh," I hum dryly, not believing a word he says.

"Can you point in the direction of the house then?"

A cricket chirps in the background. Jæmis doesn't make a move. I only see his eyebrows furl more and more.

He then points directly at me.

"It's in that direction."

I tilt my head to the side as I bite back my smug grin.

"You're just pointing in that direction because you think that's where I came from, aren't you?"

"Well, am I right or not?" he urges me, sounding impatient.

I point to my right instead.

"It's actually over there."

Jæmis clicks his tongue.

"I came to pick you up. It's really late, let's go have dinner."

I smile at him as I start to move.

"Come on, follow me and don't get lost."

"I do not get lost!" he hisses.

I chuckle in response as he obediently follows me.

"It would be unbecoming of me as a Captain and as a Prince to have lost my way," he speaks.

"Actually," I start, looking over at him. "It would make you pretty human."

"I'm a Ræhu, not an Earthling like you. Don't compare us."

"How can I not? We do seem similar, you know. Have you met many species that look like me?"

"Aside from Healer Billius' race, I have not come across many species that resemble Earthlings," he answers me.

I drag my feet through the slightly damp grass, slowing my pace so that I walk next to Jæmis.

"What about your own race? Are there others like you out there?"

He's quiet again, not answering as the sound of rustling grass fills my ears.

Then I suddenly remember what he said to me on the ship before; his home planet doesn't exist anymore.

A sense of dread washes over me. I didn't mean to sound insensitive; I was genuinely very curious. I'm about to apologize, when Jæmis speaks up first.

"As far as I know, my siblings and I are the only survivors."

It's an interesting choice of words; *survivors*.

"You're the last of your kind?" I ask.

"That is why I must protect Læna," he says, determined in his plans.

"You know, I think I can understand the way you feel," I say, thinking out loud here.

"And I don't mean the bit about being the only ones left – I can't possibly imagine what that's like – but... the desire to protect your siblings, I get it."

"It seems when you took me from Earth, my brother Ralph did everything he could to get me back. He didn't quite build a spaceship, but he was the one that invented the machine that launched a missile attack at your ship."

Jæmis looks a little surprised.

"Are you saying your own brother willingly shot at you?"

"No... he's just the person that invented it. Apparently, it was Neil Forrester that gave the command. You know, the man with the slick, purple hair?"

"Hmpf, good to know who is responsible for blowing a hole in my quarters."

1. "I admit, I would like to slap him for that."

2. "Trust me, I haven't forgiven him for that either."

"I admit, I would like to slap him for that."

Because of that blast, we were launched into open space without any sort of protection. I literally could have died if I didn't have my ability.

The corner of Jæmis' lips tilt up into a smirk.

"Condoning violence, are you now?"

"We could have died because of him," I say through gritted teeth.

"Trust me, I haven't forgiven him for that either," I say with a sigh.

Jæmis cocks his head to the side, a devious smirk pulling on his lips.

"We could always remind him of his deeds."

I raise my eyebrows, then brush off his suggestion.

"No way, come on, you can't hurt him. I know he tried to kill us, but he didn't know I was on that ship, I can't blame him for that."

"I'm just glad we survived that blast at all."

"It is quite impressive that you remained calm enough to survey the situation and react in a timely manner, given the circumstances."

My mouth drops open as I unabashedly stare at Jæmis.

"Was that a compliment?" I ask incredulously.

"I suppose it can be taken as one."

I'm temporarily speechless. I'm having a civilized conversation with Jæmis, who's been nothing but a stubborn and oversized brat all this time. Not that I haven't been fanning the flames as well, but I didn't expect this level of... politeness?

"I wasn't... I wasn't really thinking," I say, suddenly feeling flustered. "I just reacted."

"That is a very good skill to have. Sometimes it is better to act first than to think. Every second counts."

"I passed out at the end though. I don't know what happened afterwards."

"Once I got a hold of the exterior of the ship, I quickly found us an exit that wasn't destroyed. I brought us inside."

I guess we both saved each other there. If it weren't for me, we'd still be spinning around in space, but if it weren't for Jæmis, we would have died either way if he didn't get us inside.

"Thank you," I speak up.

Jæmis raises an eyebrow at me.

"I realized I haven't properly thanked you for saving my life."

He shakes his head in response.

"You are very peculiar, thanking the one who took you from your own home and had every intention of using you as a pawn in the negotiations."

"These were different circumstances," I point out.

"Just take my thanks, alright?"

"As you wish."

His feet stop dead in their tracks, and I turn around to see him standing underneath the moonlight, staring up at the sky.

"Only one moon," he muses out loud.

Maybe he misses Yool, I wonder. It has two moons.

"Do you miss it?" I ask him.

"No," he says. "My home planet only had one moon as well."

"I see."

We both gaze up at the moon for a while, not saying anything. It feels serene, almost comfortable.

Then his brown eyes lock with mine.

"I think I would like a shoklats."

My lips curl into a smile. I would like to point out it wasn't so hard to ask, but instead I nod at him.

"Sure, I'll make you a cup of hot chocolate."

I start walking again in the direction of the cabin and Jæmis follows suit.

"Did you like it?" I ask, remembering that he seemed to down the entire cup in one go.

"It has an earthy but sweet taste," he explains. "Yool doesn't have anything sweet. Gaötte don't even have the capacity for tasting it."

"Actually, I don't remember tasting anything sweet either," I say, remembering mostly savoury flavours.

Eeyok didn't seem very overjoyed at the cup of hot chocolate either. I guess it's because he couldn't taste the sweetness and only the bitterness.

"I was definitely craving some chocolate back on Yool," I admit.

There's a relaxed expression on Jæmis face.

"It has been a while since I could taste anything sweet. I had nearly forgotten what it was like."

"We have a bunch of sweet food and drinks here on earth," I say excitedly. "Chocolate is very popular, but we also have candy, which is pretty much hardened sugar most of the time."

"Schuker?" Jæmis repeats.

"Sugar," I correct him. "It's an ingredient we use to make things sweet. Sometimes people eat it plain as well."

"There was this plant on my planet," he starts. "When it would blossom, it would shed its sweet petals. That's what we used in our dishes."

It's actually very interesting to hear about his planet. It sounds a lot different from Yool.

"What was your planet called?" I ask.

"We were the royal family of the planet Vaantus," says Jæmis, a hint of a smile on his lips.

"Læna was going to be the next queen."

I nod in agreement. "I see, well she's the eldest after all."

"That behaviour of yours," he suddenly mentions.

"What behaviour?"

Jæmis nods his head.

"That. You have been doing it more frequently since your return."

I guess I have been. Now that I'm back among people again, it's hard to ignore my own body language.

"As I've told you before, it's how us humans communicate with our body that we're saying 'yes', or are in agreement with something."

Jæmis suddenly takes a bow in front of me, eyes locked on mine every step of the way.

"That is how we are taught to respectfully say yes."

He straightens his back. "I suppose your way is a more shortened and informal version."

"Huh, I guess you could say that." I have recounted many times that the people of Yool bowed in front of others.

Our conversation lulls to a stop again, but it isn't an awkward silence this time around. It feels nice that we got to have a conversation like two civilized adults.

I learned a little bit more about Jæmis and where he's from. And that he apparently has a sweet tooth. I start thinking of all the candy I would like him to try out.

A faint shimmer of light catches my attention – we're nearly at the cabin.

"Look, we're almost there," I say, sounding excited.

It's almost like I'm looking forward to having dinner with everyone and making Jæmis a cup of hot chocolate.

I'm not paying attention to what's beneath me and accidentally stumble over an exposed root.

Jæmis is there in an instant, his chest pressed up against my back and his hand curled around my wrist to stabilize me.

"Careful," he whispers near my ear.

Ba-dump. Ba-dump.

I am suddenly feeling very self-conscious in this position. I'm hyper aware of his heart beat and the way he gently holds my wrist.

It's like he's learned to control his brute strength around me, knowing just enough to catch me without actually hurting me this time around.

I can't even spit out a word of thanks, my breath is caught in my throat.

Jæmis releases his grip on me, taking a step back. The hum of his heartbeat fades away.

"You've cut your hair," he says.

Subconsciously, I immediately start fanning my fingers through my hair as I feel myself grow a bit nervous.

Why is he suddenly being so observant? Even Eeyok didn't notice. It's catching me off guard.

"Yes..." I say slowly. "My brother cut it."

I clear my throat. "Perhaps he can cut yours, too?"

Jæmis narrows his eyes at me.

"I am still not trusting anyone to get near me with a blade," he huffs stubbornly.

I sigh as he walks past me, towards the cabin that's finally in range.

Don't worry Jæmis, I'm going to cut that hair of yours one way or another. Maybe bribe him with some sugar.

-- Lake Cabin living room day

It's here! Kim dropped off all my stuff in boxes the next day. Now I can actually make a supersuit for Jæmis.

"Can you please move all this stuff to your room? It's a chaotic mess in here," Ralph complains as he walks around the various boxes.

"I will, I will," I promise him.

"You just focus on whatever it is you're doing with that basement door."

I walk towards the front door and open it, sticking my head outside.

"Jæmis!" I yell loudly. "Please come inside!"

I close the door and start grabbing a box from the floor.

Not a second later and Jæmis walks in, brushing a hand through his unruly hair.

"Why are you interrupting my training session?" he demands to know.

"I need your help carrying this stuff to my room, and I will need to take your measurements as well."

Jæmis narrows his eyes at the boxes on the floor.

"...This couldn't wait? Is it really such a pressing matter?"

"Look – the sooner we get this done, the sooner you actually have pants that don't rip every time you try to kick, alright?"

Jæmis doesn't seem like he's going to argue with me on that one. The pants he's wearing has already been stretched and torn to its limits.

"Pick up a box and carry it to my room please," I ask of him as I head towards my room.

Jæmis easily stacks a bunch of boxes on top of each other and hoists them onto his shoulder.

-- Lake cabin bedroom

I clean my desk to make way for the box of materials.

"Just put them on the floor, thanks," I say, seeing Jæmis walk in with four boxes.

Actually, I think he pretty much carried all of them to my room, there weren't that many boxes.

I start rummaging through the boxes. Kim managed to pack all of my tools and most of my favourite fabrics. Lying awake at night, I couldn't help but brainstorm about his supersuit.

Of course... he's not a superhero or anything – but a suit is a suit! I think I want to incorporate some of the intricate tribal markings he gets on his skin when he fazes.

It's then I realized Jæmis has been staring at me all this time.

"You've got that look again," he notes.

I smile at him. "Sorry, got lost in my head. I'm actually excited to do this."

"To make my armour?"

"A supersuit, yes."

"It has to allow for freedom of movement," he states.

"I'm taking that into account, of course. Are there any specific requests you'd like?"

"Such as?"

"Well, some clients request built-in support for their breasts, or a reinforced crotch area," I start to list off.

Jæmis looks slightly horrified at that idea.

"As long as it doesn't weigh me down and doesn't tear when used a lot, it should be good."

"You don't want anything reinforced? Extra padding? ...Anti-electricity?"

His eyes turn into thin slits as I mention the last feature.

"Erm, I sketched out some designs last night, do any of these catch your attention?" I take my sketchbook and flip through it to find the sketches.

Jæmis takes it from my hands and studies the pages with genuine interest.

I feel slightly... nervous. I always do whenever I show someone my work.

He then flips the sketchbook over and taps his finger against one of the designs.

"This one," he says, pointing at a black suit with blue markings. "You got it wrong."

"Huh?" I say, confused.

"There are two wings on each side, with three dots beneath."

He's referring to me trying to recreate his markings in the sketch.

"Oh, I was trying to do it from memory," I say sheepishly.

I take a pencil from my desk and offer it to him.

"You can correct it if you want."

He takes a second to think it over, before taking the pencil from my hand and putting it to the paper. I anxiously await in anticipation as Jæmis makes a few minor corrections on my designs.

It's always weird when someone messes around with my designs. I'm slightly touched that he's taking it seriously though.

"Here," he says, handing back my sketchbook.

I look over the corrections he did on the design. There are now more intricate scribbles on the suit, reflecting his own markings. There are also a few extra lines near his legs and shoulders. I guess this is how he wants it.

"Do you want it like this?" I ask, making sure.

"It seems suitable enough."

Feeling giddy, I close the sketchbook and reach for my measuring tape.

"Alright, time to take your measurements then!"

I stand in front of him and move a few boxes out of the way to make some space.

"Can you please spread your arm, like this?" I spread my arm away from my body.

Jæmis mimics me, watching me very intensely as I get closer to him and press the tape against his shoulder, pulling it all the way over to his wrist.

I note down the numbers on my little notepad. Then I quickly get the width of his shoulders done as well. To be extra careful, I measure his biceps as well. Because lord knows how big those things are.

I throw the tape around him and tie it around his chest. Not too tight and not too loose.

For some reason, my eyes stare at the large scar spanning across the right side of his chest. It seems old, which makes sense considering he must have gotten this when he was a child.

It feels inappropriate to ask him where he got it from.

Ah, there it is. The rhythm, the melody – I can hear it again. Each time I hear it, it becomes more pleasant. Steady and familiar.

"Is there something the matter?" Jæmis asks, noticing I've been lingering at his chest.

Awkwardly I look away, feeling embarrassed at being caught listening to his heart.

"Uhm, no, haha." I quickly release the tape around his chest and quickly note down the measurements.

He's definitely got a well-defined body. I've had some pretty muscular clients before, but Jæmis' thickness has no rivals, that's for sure.

I crouch down to measure his waist. I try my best to stay professional, but this skin on skin contact with him is making me all jittery.

Oh wait, didn't he have markings near his belly button as well? I wonder how far down it goes...

My eyes travel to his crotch.

Would he have them there...?

"...Do you need to measure my genitals as well?" he asks in this deadpan voice.

1. "Why, are you offering?"

2. "N-no, not at all!"

"Why, are you offering?" I look up at him, my expression serious as I do not want to fall for his gloating.

It's Jæmis who breaks our gaze as he tilts his head to the side.

"Shouldn't those be my words? You're the one that has attempted seduction many times," he says.

I huff loudly and stand up straight, lifting up the tape so that it slides across his back, all the way to his shoulders, eventually resting on his neck.

I yank down, forcing him to face me at eye-level. His brown eyes blink at our close proximity.

"If I were seducing you, then you'd definitely know," I say in this sultry tone.

I lean closer, our faces side to side, so I can whisper in his ear.

"Or is it really you who is trying to seduce *me*?" I purr.

Jæmis straightens his back in a jiffy, snapping upright like a rigid stick. He creates some distance between us and just before his black hair falls and covers his pointy ears – I notice they're tinged with red.

So he *can* blush, that bastard!

"Just get back to measuring," he says gruffly.

Feeling smug that his little comment backfired on him, I finally get the measurements of his waist.

A fierce blush spreads across my face as my head snaps up at him, furiously shaking.

"N-no, not at all!" I immediately reply.

Oh god, I don't want to measure his alien bits!

"Your face has turned red."

I turn away from him, hoping to will my blush away.

"It's just hot in here," I lie.

"It seems Earthlings can blush when they're embarrassed," he says with this everlasting smug grin on his face.

He releases a low chuckle.

"You've seen me naked many times now, and yet the mere suggestion sends you reeling. Interesting."

Now he's just rubbing salt in the wound!

"Can we not discuss your genitals? Please?"

"Then stop staring," he huffs.

"I wasn't!" I screech, feeling even more embarrassed.

"Can... can we just get back to measuring?" I say with a sigh.

"I'm not the one who suddenly stopped," he feels the need to point out.

I squeeze my eyes shut as I control the colour of my face. Eventually I tighten the tape around his waist once more. Opening my eyes, I note down his waist measurements.

I try to do the rest on autopilot. It's hard not to get distracted though. The more I measure him, the more I realize how different he's been from everyone else.

But he's also extremely similar to the human race. Aside from his ears and sharp canines, I would say we're pretty identical.

When I've finally got everything noted down, I put away my measuring tape.

"Alright, I'm finished now," I announce.

"Is there anything else you need of me?" he asks.

Actually...

"I do have a question..." I start.

I'm immensely curious about the melody I keep hearing whenever I'm close to him.

"Does everyone of your race have the same heartbeat?"

I stare at his chest and subconsciously inch closer to him, wanting to hear it again.

He tilts his head to the side.

"What do you mean? Can you he—"

"FINALLY!" I hear Ralph shout, interrupting me and Jæmis.

I walk towards my bedroom door and open it.

"Ralph? Why are you shouting?"

"The basement! I finally got the door to open!" he yells triumphantly.

I lean against the doorpost and smile. I guess I should go check it out.

Chapter [020] -- Lake Cabin basement

I carefully step down the wooden stairs leading down into the basement. Jæmis follows me closely.

It's smaller than I thought it would be, but it's also not as uninteresting as I presumed. This is no ordinary basement.

Ralph is seated in the chair in front of a computer, the monitor still off.

"Look at this, he says excitedly. "It's an entire office!"

I look around the damp and dark room; a desk lines up against the wall, holding many stacks of paper and other sorts of files.

"I mean, they were accountants, they probably got some work done here, away from us," I explain.

"Yeah, but the entrance was sealed."

"How'd you open it?"

"I didn't. Or at least, not on purpose. There's a hidden switch in the kitchen. Managed to knock over a bowl of cereal and voila – hidden switch behind the faucet!"

The basement required a hidden switch to access? That's so weird. I don't ever recall seeing the basement in the first place.

"Hey Ralph..." I start slowly. "I'm trying my best, but I can't actually recall a basement. I don't even remember the door. Am I crazy?"

Ralph shakes his head. "No, I don't remember it either. I think..."

He looks at all the equipment around the room.

"I think this was a secret base, and the door was hidden during the times we were here as kids."

I scoff at the idea – our parents were both boring accountants. Who would need a secret room for that?

But I really can't recall there being a door leading to the basement. Is it true – was it hidden?

"The switch to open the entrance also had another switch to conceal it," he says in a serious tone.

"I think the last time mom and dad were here, they rushed out before they could conceal it. Maybe."

"Why is this room so important?" asks Jæmis, who's been standing near the stairs.

"This cabin was my parents'... and we don't remember there being a basement here. They kept it hidden from us when we were young – but why?" I wonder out loud.

"Sounds to me like your parents were doing things that children had no business being a part of," Jæmis explains.

Ralph snorts in response. "Yeah, accounting is so scary. Can't do that around the kids!" he says sarcastically.

"What if they were doing something illegal?" I mention, my mind going to dark places.

"Like what, laundering money?" asks Ralph.

"Possibly? I don't know – you tell me why there was a hidden basement in the lake cabin."

"I will, once I boot up this PC! It's slow as hell!" Ralph complains, angrily pushing a button on the keyboard.

I look around the place as Ralph fiddles around with the computer. I spot a cell phone on the desk, behind a suitcase. It's one of those older models, a flip phone with physical buttons.

"Hey Ralph, whose phone is this?" I ask, showing the silver phone to him.

"Beats me – I guess mom or dad's? I don't recognize it though."

I try to turn the phone on, but of course, the battery has long since died out. Guess I'll have to charge it. Oh right, these older batteries didn't charge with a USB cable eight years ago, they had their own plug. Hmm, where is it?

"Jæmis, can you look for a small black box with a cable running out of it? It should fit in the palm of your hand."

Wordlessly, he starts scanning the room, helping me find the charger.

Still curious about the rest of the room, I take my time looking around. There's a cabinet behind the stairs, too.

Just as I'm about to open one of the drawers, something bounces down the stairs.

"Ow!" Eeyok yelps as he stumbles down the stairs.

He crashes against Jæmis' chest, who huffs menacingly.

"Fool. Have you become so incompetent you forgot how to use stairs?" he chastises him.

"I'm sorry Cap–Prince Jæmis," Eeyok apologizes as he pushes himself away from Jæmis.

"Hey Eeyok, are you okay? That looked like a bad tumble," I ask of him, worried he may have broken something.

"Ahh, I'm okay. I came here because I heard voices, but I think my foot stepped on something."

The three of us all look down at the floor and see that Eeyok's boot has dug down into the glass covering of a picture frame. Quickly, he lifts it up out of guilt.

I bend down to pick up the broken frame and inspect the picture inside of it.

It's a picture of my mom and dad, along with Caine's parents. The four of them were really close, and they all ended up working at the same company.

"I'm sorry," Eeyok apologizes with a grim expression.

"It's okay, the picture is still fine, see?" I show him the picture.

"Who are they?" he asks.

"These are my parents," I say as I point them out. "And their close friends, Caine's parents. They were all working in the same building when it was set on fire by a group of terrorists."

"Setting things on fire sounds like someone I know," Jæmis quips, staring at Eeyok.

"Hmpf, we never harmed any Gaötte. They were strategic bombings."

"I would... rather not think about bombings right now, thanks," I say with a heavy heart.

I suddenly hear the computer whir and the monitor finally turns on.

"About damn time!" Ralph complains as he takes control of the mouse and starts digging through the PC.

As I let Ralph do his thing on the computer, I pocket the picture and investigate the rest of the room, in search of a charger.

"Hey Eeyok, can you help me look for something as well?" I ask, and then explain what a charger looks like.

Eeyok and Jæmis both start shuffling around the various objects on the desk.

I walk around the stairs to reach the cabinet, opening up the drawers to see if there's anything useful inside. Just a bunch of files and paperwork.

But then one of the files catches my eye; the name. Mr. Invisible. That's a superhero name!

I take the brown file out of the drawer. It's thin, there's not many papers inside. As I flip it open, I'm greeted by a detailed profile of Mr. Invisible. It includes his superhero picture which is laughably empty because he can turn invisible – but it also includes a regular picture of him, face visible and all.

What the hell – it's got all his personal information noted down, too. Where he lives, what kind of day job he does, who his associates were.

Why would this be here? Even if he were somehow, a client for mom and dad's company, there's no way they would need this kind of information.

I check the last paper in the file and I feel my heart drop in my stomach.

It's a screenshot of a conversation he had with someone. I don't even need to scan it to see the notes taken at the bottom, in my mother's handwriting;

Runner for Hulio.

A million questions race through my mind. Firstly, is Mr. Invisible connected to Hulio? How? Hulio is strictly *against* superheroes, why would any super work for them? But most importantly;

"Why the hell is mom writing about superheroes and their connection to Hulio?" I say out loud.

Ralph spins around on his chair as he points at the screen.

"Joselina I'm finding a lot of files on this computer, and not one of them has to do with accounting."

I place the file back in the drawer, noting the other various files with superhero names on them, and I walk to Ralph to check the PC.

"Let me guess... Something about superheroes."

"Yep, it's really bizarre. There's a bunch of folders with all these superheroes, even some that have since vanished or died."

"Do you think... mom and dad were investigating them?" I ask, still confused about it all.

"It looks like it," Ralph agrees and starts opening up the web browser.

He digs through the history to see what website they accessed last.

"Joselina," he says in this chill voice when he notes the date.

"Yeah, I see it," I say, feeling my heart clench tight.

The last time they accessed a website, is the date of their death. But that's impossible, mom and dad weren't even at the lake that day. They were with us. It was a normal workday.

We both hold our breaths as the web browser loads the last website. Once it's loaded, it's just a simple map of an industrial area, a warehouse specifically.

"It's an address," Ralph notes. "The last thing they looked up was this warehouse."

"What was so important about it? Do you think they went to go check it out...?" I question.

"I'm not sure, they were at the company that day, and this warehouse is on the other side of town."

"Earthling, isn't this one of those zoeparzoots you design?" Jæmis suddenly takes my attention away from the PC.

Jæmis has pushed the cabinet I was looking through earlier out of the way, revealing a glass case behind it.

Inside are two mannequins, dressed in what seems like a supersuit. They're matching.

It's clearly meant for a woman and a man.

Ralph pushes me out of the way and presses his nose up to the glass.

"What the fucking fuck – those are supersuits!" he screeches.

I don't have any words; all this information is so heavy on me that I sink to my knees.

Eeyok rushes over to me.

"Joselina!" he gasps. "Are you not feeling well?"

"Just feeling... extremely woozy," I breathe out in discomfort.

Eeyok helps me stand up straight.

"No way," Ralph says, astonished. "There's just no way. Mom and dad had no ability. They were normies, just like me."

"You... You're the only one of us who was born with one. Mom and dad were just accountants," Ralph repeats in his head.

But no matter how much we can fool ourselves, we can't deny what is right in front of us. A supersuit for our parents. I don't recognize the suits at all, I've never seen them before in my life.

"I'm a little confused here," says Eeyok.

"That makes two of us," I quip.

"Seems like your parents had secrets they didn't want their children to know after all," Jæmis accurately observes.

"That's one *big* fucking secret," Ralph grunts loudly. "They were *vigilantes!*"

"Vigilantes – like rebels?" asks Eeyok.

"A little?" I say, not sure how to explain. "In my world, you have to register as a superhero to be able to openly practice your ability."

"But mom and dad weren't registered," Ralph finishes my thought.

"And yet they have a secret base and a supersuit. They were doing this off-grid. They were vigilantes, right under our noses. How the hell did we not see this?"

"Calm down Ralph, for all we know this is not actually mom and dad, maybe it's... I don't know, maybe someone else? Caine's parents?" I suggest.

"They were also normies!" he points out.

"Well, I don't know! Nothing we know seems to be true anymore!" I lash out at him.

"Anyone who keeps something from their loved ones must have a very good reason to do so," says Jæmis.

"Agreed. It sounds like they hid it, but not with the intention of deceiving you," says Eeyok.

I run my hands through my hair as the world that I thought I knew spins upside down.

The fire my parents died in... it was a terrorist attack claimed by Hulio. It seemed random; they were at the wrong place at the wrong time.

At least, that's what I believed.

But all this evidence in my face is screaming at me that my parents weren't just regular accountants who perished in a fire due to bad luck. Instead, they may have actually been connected to this all.

Vigilantes... superheroes who work in the dark and go against the government. They don't believe in registering and openly advocate for any super to use their ability in public.

By definition, they would be Hulio's number one enemy, who wants to rid the world of supers.

I can suddenly feel tears fall down my face.

"Did... Did Hulio kill them because they dug too deep?" I ask out loud to no one in particular.

Ralph looks at me with a grim expression. He doesn't say anything, but his silence speaks volumes.

"I... I need some fresh air," I say, feeling like the walls are closing in on me.

I quickly run up the stairs to flee the basement.

-- Lake Cabin living room

I crash down on the couch. My mind is racing, it's hard to calm down and organize my own thoughts.

Everything I knew about my parents has been an outright lie. Simple, hard-working normies, who perished in a terrorist attack.

No, instead I find a secret lair with files on superheroes and their own supersuits.

I sigh out loud in frustration.

I hear steps going up the stairs, and it's Jæmis who appears in the door opening.

Not saying a word, he slowly approaches me, standing behind the couch.

"Running away?" he chimes in.

1. "Running away from *what*?"
2. "I'm not running away; I just need a breather."

"Running away from *what*?" I bite back.

He shuffles on the spot, pausing for dramatic effect.

"The truth."

"Look, everything I've ever known about my parents turned out to be a lie. I'm not in the mood to argue with you."

"Much like how I found out you were not actually a Princess?"

I bite down on my bottom lip.

"That's different. I *had* to lie for my own survival."

"Who says your parents weren't doing that to ensure your survival?"

"Don't talk like you know what my parents were doing when even I don't know what they were doing!" I suddenly yell at him, losing my cool.

"Seems I misjudged you," he says as he brushes the hair away from his dark eyes.

My eye twitches in response.

"Misjudged me how?"

"You're sitting here, crying about your family lying to you, when you could be finding out who they truly are."

I glare at him as he retreats.

"Where are you going?" I call out after him.

He can't just leave after saying something like that!

"To train," he huffs loudly. "What else is there to do?"

He then opens the front door and disappears outside.

I huff and cross my arms, suddenly annoyed at him.

Sitting there, fuming at myself, I realize I acted very aggressive towards Jæmis, and it's not even his fault this time. I'm just... so confused. And angry.

My parents suddenly don't feel like my parents anymore.

But Jæmis is right... I should be finding out who they really are then, and why they kept it hidden from us.

"I'm not running away; I just need a breather," I say.

"Funny, looks to me like you couldn't handle the truth."

I glare at him.

"I don't need your comments today. I just found out my parents have been lying to me my entire life. I need a moment to gather my wits."

"Gather your wits, or deny reality?"

"Why do you care?" I find myself asking.

"I don't," he answers honestly. "However, if it were me... If I could find out something about my parents – to understand why they did the things they did – I would do anything in my power to do so."

"After all, both our parents are dead, and the dead can't speak," he says, pushing his hair away from his dark eyes.

My eyes soften; Jæmis lost his parents when he was very young as well. There must be things he would like to ask his parents but can't anymore, just like I can't ask mine why they lied to me.

"I don't know why they lied..." I say in a small whisper.

"Then what are you sitting around for? Go find out," he says with a huff.

I can't help but manage a tiny smile.

Then Jæmis starts to leave.

"Hey wait, where are you going?" I ask.

"To train, of course. Can't sit and wait around until you make a decision."

Without even waiting for a reply, Jæmis opens the front door and goes outside.

He's right; I shouldn't sit around, being angry at the fact my parents lied to me all this time. I need to get to the bottom of this.

I get up from the couch and go back down into the basement.

-- Lake cabin basement

"Ah, Joselina, I found the box!" says Eeyok once I'm back downstairs.

He's holding an old charger.

"Oh, thank you!" I say and grab it.

I quickly plug it into the nearest outlet, and start charging the cell phone. Perhaps we can find out some good information on it.

"Joselina," says Ralph. "I've been digging more and more through these files. There seems to have been a clean wipe at a certain point, with files missing, but from what I can deduce, it seems mom and dad were definitely part of a group of vigilantes."

"I still can't believe it. Vigilantes. What kind of ability did they have?" I ask. They've never shown an inkling of power to us.

"I don't know, maybe they took up the cause despite still being normies?"

Ralph tries to open a folder on the computer, but a prompt window shows up instead, asking for a password.

"Oh, there's actual security."

"Try our birthdates," I suggest. Mom and dad weren't the brightest when it came to technology.

Ralph starts typing away on the keyboard, but both our birthdays are rejected as passwords.

"Anniversary?" I propose instead.

Rejected again.

"Seems I'm going to have to crack it."

"I'll leave that to you then," I say, and resume my attention back to the cell phone.

"What kind of device is that?" asks Eeyok, looking at it with curious eyes.

"We call it a cell phone, it's a communication device. It's a very old one, so I'm charging it up with power so I can turn it on," I explain.

"A communication device from your parents?"

"I'm not actually sure... I don't recognize it."

The phone's charging light finally lights up, indicating it's got enough power to turn on. My fingers immediately hold down the on button.

The screen flashes with the logo of the phone. Eeyok looks on in amazement.

I'm hoping there's no pin code on this, otherwise I wouldn't know what it is. Luckily, the phone boots up without asking for a pin confirmation.

I search through their text messages, but it's empty save for a single message.

"On my way."

To a number that's not saved as a contact. The date of this text message is...

My eyes flutter downwards; the date of their death.

Along with the last usage of the computer; mom and dad were definitely here the day they died. Perhaps they were saying they were on their way to meet Caine's parents? That would make sense at least.

They're dead, too, so their phone number would be out of service. Or someone else may have gotten it.

But I end up calling the number anyway.

...It's ringing!

I wait as the ringing fills my ears, with my breath stuck in my throat. I expected to hear a message saying the number was out of service, but it turns out it's still in use.

Someone picks up, but it's silent on the other end.

"H-hello?" I croak out.

Immediately the line disconnects.

"Huh, were you calling someone?" asks Ralph once he's noticed what I've been doing.

"Someone picked up," I say, staring down at the screen.

"Who?"

"I don't know. There's no name saved with the number. But they sent a text message to mom and dad on the day they died."

Ralph's eyes turn serious as he realizes the gravity of the implications as well.

"Call again," he tells me.

I redial the number.

It goes straight into an automatic message that the number could not be reached. I sigh exasperatedly.

"They turned their phone off."

"So it is a person at least," Ralph notes.

I nod at him. I may not have heard anyone, but someone definitely picked up and got spooked as soon as I spoke.

I check the contact list in the phone, but as expected, it's empty. Looking at the call history, it's a bunch of calls to the same number I made just now. Including one made on the day of their death.

Oh, I notice another number that was called before.

However, when I try calling the number, it is out of service. There's nothing else of interest on this phone anymore and I close the phone with a snap.

"Done looking through the communication device?" Eeyok asks.

"There wasn't much on it. Just dead leads."

"I'm still working on the computer. I may have to write my own program to hack it. Might take a day or two," Ralph mentions his progress.

"Hey – what if I go to that warehouse?" I suggest. It was the last thing they were looking at after all. Maybe we can find something there.

Ralph doesn't seem to think it's a good idea though, having this grumpy expression.

"Did you forget you're under house arrest?"

"Oh." Yes, I totally did just now.

"Besides, I can see just from here it's an empty warehouse. Besides, it's been eight years – it may not even exist anymore."

"Well, don't you want to find out?" I say with a pout.

"Of course I do!" he groans. "Let's dig through everything we can find here before we start breaking any rules or contracts, alright?"

Well, he's got a point. There's a ton of things to shift through in this basement.

"Alright, I'll look through some more files," I say as I start walking towards the cabinet.

I'm about to ask Eeyok for his help, to find anything that looks interesting, but I realize he can't read our language so he's not much use.

"Why don't you go train with Jæmis? We can take it from here," I tell him.

Eeyok politely bows in front of me.

"Will do. Good luck in your search."

"Thanks," I say with a smile.

-- Lake cabin bedroom

My search through the basement was more or less the same; a bunch of files on superheroes and other people. It's got addresses, occupations, pictures, known associates etc.

They were really doing their research on these people.

I recognize half of them; superheroes that were quite prolific eight years ago. Some of them have since vanished, never to be seen again. Most speculated that they simply retired and led a quiet life pretending to be a normie.

But there were also a lot of files on regular people, and those had a lot of notes that they were connected to Hulio.

I had to take a break from all this information, so I went ahead and started working on Jæmis' supersuit. Or well, his 'training armour' as he likes to call it.

Ralph is still busy trying to hack the password on the computer.

I briefly wonder if I should let Caine know about all this... But even I have a hard time wrapping my mind around it.

My parents, vigilantes. Who could have known?

-- Lake cabin kitchen night

A day later, I wake up thirsty and end up going to the kitchen to get something to drink. I've not been sleeping very well due to lying awake at night because I can't stop thinking about my parents.

"Hmm, naked again, I see," I muse out loud when I see Jæmis' bare back rummaging through the fridge.

Seems he had the same idea for a midnight drink. Or snack. And of course, only wearing underwear.

With a huff, he turns around to face me, a glass of milk in his hand.

"Stop showing up unannounced and I will dress myself decent," he argues back.

"Or you could realize there's other people living here besides yourself. Just a thought."

"Does it bother you that much?" he asks with a sigh.

1. "Not really. You have a nice body."

2. "It feels a little awkward to look at you when you're not wearing much."

"Not really. You have a nice body," I mention casually, eyeing him up and down.

Jæmis raises both his eyebrows.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"What other meaning could it have?" I question back.

"You're being intentionally unclear."

"I'm just saying you're not bad to look at."

I raise up my arm to quiet him before he can speak.

"And before you start saying I'm seducing you again, let me explain that a lot of humans on earth would say you have an ideal body."

I'm unsure why I'm getting all technical on him. It's weird to admit he looks... nice. Attractive, even.

"I have an ideal body?" he questions.

"Uh, well, to a lot of people..." I say awkwardly.

"It feels a little awkward to look at you when you're not wearing much."

As much as he is an alien, his body still looks very much human. A very impressive body to boot.

God, those thighs...

"Then perhaps you should exert a little discipline on your part and control your eyeballs."

I feel almost undignified, as if I can't control my eyes!

"Well, it's hard when you're so big and bulky! I'd be staring at the floor otherwise."

"Are you not used to seeing your own kind like this?" he questions.

"Uhh," I suddenly stammer. What kind of question is this?

"No...? I mean, people are dressed here. They don't strut around half naked like you."

"I'm talking about my physique," he huffs. "When we went to buy garments, I noticed that Earthlings all seemed petite."

"Oh, like that. Well, not a lot of people go through the kind of training as you do. You kind of have the ideal body for many."

"I have the ideal body?"

I shyly avert my eyes for admitting that to his face.

"Of course I have an ideal body. I must work at it every day to perfect my training," he boasts.

"Well, you've definitely been doing that constantly..." I say with a small sigh.

"How is my armour coming along?" he asks.

I step closer to him and take the glass of milk out of his hand. He doesn't complain or pull away.

"Slower than I'd like," I admit.

As I take another cup out of the cabinet, I set them both down on the counter and pour in some chocolate powder, stirring it gently and throw it in the microwave for good measure.

"What with finding out my parents were vigilantes, I haven't gotten much work done."

"Are you still investigating that?" he questions. It almost sounds like he's interested.

"As much as I can. Searching through their files, what they were doing, who they were talking to," I list off the things I've done.

"Your world is very odd," he says.

"How come?" I ask.

The microwave beeps – the hot chocolate is done. I remove it from the microwave and hand one cup over to Jæmis.

"Careful, it's hot," I warn him.

He takes a small sip, seemingly enjoying the taste.

"You said people cannot use their powers in public. They have to hide. Why should someone powerful have to hide themselves? They should fear them."

I drink some of my hot chocolate before answering.

"I mean, I agree with you, I don't think we should have to hide it either... But I don't want people to fear me," I say.

"Hm yes, you're not especially fearsome," he agrees as he blows on the cup of hot chocolate to cool it down.

"Hey," I exclaim indignantly. "I can be fearsome if I want to be."

"I am shivering in my undergarments before you," he mocks me with a cocky smirk.

I puff out my cheeks from behind my cup of hot chocolate.

"I may not be physically intimidating, but I am a force to be reckoned with when it comes to a battle of wits!"

"What are you going to do, annoy people to death with your incessant talking?" he scoffs.

"Seems to work on you," I grin at him.

He huffs defiantly.

"You are annoying, yes. But I'm still alive."

"Am I annoying you right now?" I ask instead.

He closes his mouth, his eyes softening as he looks down at the counter.

"No," he confesses.

A simple answer, yet it suddenly makes me speechless. I didn't expect him to say that.

"Get some rest, you look like you've haven't been getting sleep the past couple of nights," he says, suddenly turning away from me, taking his cup with him.

"Thank you for the hot chocolate," is all he says before he leaves the kitchen.

I lean my elbows on the counter, my fingers wrapped around my cup, suddenly deep in thought. I didn't think it was obvious that I wasn't sleeping very well.

I finish the rest of my hot chocolate. This wasn't so bad, running into him at midnight, having an actual conversation.

-- Lake cabin basement

After my late-night chat with Jæmis, I managed to actually get some sleep. It's Ralph who wakes me up to tell me to come down into the basement.

"Did you finally unlock it?"

"Yes I did!" he boasts, looking a little like he's had ten cups of coffee.

"I eventually had to brute force it which... took a considerable amount of time, but it's done. I can see the folder."

I hunch over the desk to look at the monitor. What was so important it had to be hidden?

It's a single picture. A picture of someone on a terrace, drinking in broad daylight.

"What? What is so special about this?"

Ralph enlarges the picture so we get a better look at the person in a suit.

"Oh, that's Caine's dad!" he notes.

Sporting that famous red hair, I finally recognize him as well. It's been so long since I've seen him, but that's definitely Caine's dad, Benjamin.

"Was he a vigilante, too?" I wonder out loud.

"Could be."

"Look, there's another person behind this bush that he's drinking with," I point my finger at the screen.

"Can you see who it is?"

"No, those stupid plants are in the way."

"Well, can't you zoom in and enhance or something?"

Ralph narrows his eyes at me, giving me this stupid look.

"*Zoom in and enhance?*" he stresses. "What the hell do you think this is? Some movie where we can magically find out a person's face because it was reflected on someone's eyeball?"

"No! I can't create pixels out of nothing."

"Okay, geez, I get it. I was just making a suggestion," I grumble.

I take a picture of the monitor with my own phone so I have a copy on hand.

Ralph closes out on the picture and checks out the folder one more time, but it really is a single file in there.

"I don't get it, why go through the trouble of protecting this picture?" he questions.

"I think... whoever Caine's dad was drinking with, was a very important person."

It has to be. Maybe he was undercover and trying to gain the trust of someone in Hulio. Maybe that's why the folder was protected.

"We should tell Caine," says Ralph. "All of this... it's bigger than us. It involves Caine just as much as it involves us."

"No, I agree. We should tell him. Can you let him know?"

"Sure, will do."

I grab the flip phone from the desk, which has been charging all this time, doing nothing. I've tried calling that number a few more times, but it always went straight to an automatic message that the number was not reachable.

However, I want to try again. I dial the number one more time.

It rings this time.

My eyes widen – it didn't go to an automatic message.

The ringing stops; someone picks up. Again, there's no greeting, nothing. Just silence.

"Who is this?" I ask.

The line disconnects just like the last time.

"Aargh – they hung up again!" I groan out loud and close the phone.

Dialing the number once more, I hear the automatic message again. Figures.

Someone is definitely on the other end and avoiding a call from this phone. Who is it? It's driving me nuts!

"Ralph can't you figure out who this number belongs to?" I whine.

"You think I haven't already tried?" he huffs. "It's been scrubbed clean. A secure line. I can't find shit on it."

"Besides, I'm an engineer, not an investigator."

I sigh loudly. "I know... You know, we should really visit that warehouse."

Ralph suddenly types in the address in the web browser and opens it up. He turns on street view so that we can see a rendered image of the appropriate address.

There's nothing there, aside from a bunch of rubble.

"A few years ago, it got burned down and eventually taken down completely. There's nothing there to see."

Nooo! I really wanted to visit it and see for myself. But it's already gone?

"I guess that makes sense, eight years is a long time for buildings to appear or disappear."

"Well, I'm going to keep digging, find out what I can," says Ralph, sounding determined.

I rub my temples with my fingers. So much to think about. Time for a break of all this.

-- Lake cabin bedroom

To keep myself distracted from everything we've found out so far, I throw myself into my work. I even avoid social media as much as possible – which are still buzzing about my Super Mallgirl antics.

Jæmis is getting his supersuit and that's final.

So I work extra hard and long nights to finish it.

It's been five days since we discovered the basement, and I finally finished the suit.

I call Jæmis in for a fitting.

"About time you've finished my armour," he complains as he enters my room.

"Leave your complaints at the door, alright. I would much rather hear some gratitude from you, because I didn't need to do this at all."

"I don't recall asking you to make one," he grumbles.

I put on a deeper voice.

"These clothes are too tight! I am a bulky man! I need training garb! Argh!" I imitate his voice.

"I do *not* sound like that," he hisses.

"Come over here and put it on."

I grab his wrist and pull him along, showing him the supersuit laid out on top of my bed.

"So that's what you made?" he asks, eyeing the pieces of fabric.

"Yes. Do you need help getting dressed?"

"I have learned the art of zipping, I am fine."

I choke back a laugh. *Zipping.*

"Alright, don't forget to zip up the back!"

I turn around to give him some privacy as he starts to undress. Not like I haven't seen him in less...

Hearing the soft rustling of fabric behind me, Jæmis zips up the back.

I turn back around to see him in his new suit.

God. Damn.

I'm *good*.

I see him wince as he moves his head.

"Huh, what's wrong? Too tight?" I ask, suddenly concerned about the fit.

Jæmis reaches behind the back of his neck – something seems to be irritating him there.

I can see from here; the back of his hair has gotten stuck in the zipper.

"Okay, you really do need to tie up your hair, or cut it off," I say, sighing.

"It's fine," he attempts to convince me, trying to get his hair free from the zipper.

"Here, bend down," I say, flagging at him.

Jæmis surprisingly lowers himself so that I can reach the back of his neck. There's a tuft of hair stuck in the zipper and I gently remove it.

He straightens his back and flips his hair out of his face. It almost feels like he's a model; posing for a shoot. The supersuit looks good on him, the fit is just right. It seems to highlight his toned body quite well.

Jæmis flexes his muscles and whirls his arm around, testing out the limits of the fabric. Then he does a few squats, to see if it can handle all of the stretching. So far, nothing seems to be bursting at the seams.

I've outdone myself; I'm quite proud of my creation. I've missed doing this so much.

"You're grinning," Jæmis states.

I bite down on my lip to prevent myself from looking like a goof, drooling over her own work.

"I'm just happy it looks good. How is the fit? Stretches alright?"

"Arms and legs seem to be flexible," he answers. "We shall see how it holds up during training or in actual combat."

And I'm back to grinning again.

"You'll see it holds up quite well – I make nothing but the best. Unlike that armour from Yool which seems to get blown up all of the time."

"It does not get 'blown up all of the time'," Jæmis grumbles pedantically.

"I've seen it in tatters twice," I point out.

"Those were exceptional circumstances," he argues back.

"Well, I create *based* on exceptional circumstances," I reply. "You won't be seeing my work get blown to bits."

"You seem to be quite confident about this."

"Because it's the truth."

The corner of Jæmis lips lift up, he seems amused.

"Is that so, should I test the reality of that statement?"

I shrug, not worried in the least.

"Be my guest. Please train in your supersuit – it's what I made it for, after all."

He huffs. "I will."

I stare at him with a smirk on my face as he exits the room. I'm glad I did this; it gave me the much-needed distraction from everything else.

Hmm, I wonder what I should do with the scraps of fabric...

-- Lake cabin outside

A while later, I'm curious how the supersuit is holding up during training.

Once I'm outside, I spy Eeyok and Jæmis sparring in the distance.

I wave at them.

"Hey!" I call out.

Jæmis turns his head to look at me – right as Eeyok is about to throw a mean left hook and hits him square in his face.

I gasp out loud as Jæmis stumbles backwards.

"Oh no – are you okay?" I ask, rushing over to them.

"Ehh, I didn't think that would have landed," says Eeyok in an apologetic voice.

"Is Prince Jæmis alright?" he asks.

Jæmis rubs his nose for a bit and flips his hair out of his face.

"Stop coddling me, you landed a hit because I got momentarily distracted by a screeching voice."

"Hey – you don't have to be mean like that about my voice," I cut in.

"Don't disturb us when we're training – it could lead to accidents. Remember the last time you sat in for a session?" he huffs.

I mean, he's got a point... but no one is throwing with spears out here. Besides, he can't faze either, so he's less powerful.

"I just wanted to know how your supersuit is working out for you."

"I'm impressed," says Eeyok happily. "I would like one, too."

I have hearts glowing in my eyes.

"Really!? You want me to make you one too? I can totally do that," I start to ramble off.

"The armour seems adequate but this frustrating zip is interfering with my training," Jæmis complains as he grabs at the back of his neck.

"My hair keeps getting hooked and pulls at my head."

I narrow my eyes; that could have been easily avoided if he simply had shorter hair.

"Just cut it already," I say. "Your hair is getting in the way, why won't you admit it?"

"It is perfectly fine," he rejects the notion.

"It is not, Prince Jæmis never allows his hair to get this long," Eeyok whispers in my general direction.

"Silence!" he barks at Eeyok.

"I can't take it anymore," I complain. "*Please* let me cut your hair."

Jæmis presses his mouth shut, exhaling a large breath of annoyance through his nostrils.

"Why are you so insistent on cutting my hair?"

1. "Truth be told, it looks very unkempt."

2. "Because shorter hair would bother you less."

"Truth be told, it looks very unkempt," I answer honestly.

Jæmis visibly recoils at my statement, eyes wide in shock.

"Unkempt!?" he exclaims.

"Yeah, well, what can I say – it looks unruly and like you don't care about personal grooming."

It's the truth; his hair is wild and hasn't been properly trimmed in ages.

Actually, now I'm curious whether he can grow facial hair or not...

Eeyok seems to keep quiet, but he definitely looks like he agrees with me.

"Never have I been told – as a *Prince* – that I looked ungroomed. This is preposterous," he says indignantly.

Seems I stepped on some toes.

"Are you really going to pretend your hair looks fine? I mean, aside from the fact it looks like a hot mess, it keeps getting in your way which impacts your training."

Jæmis crosses his arm defiantly, clearly annoyed and insulted.

"I admit it can block my vision and isn't as optimal as I would like, but–"

"Great, so you agree!" I cut him off with a smile.

"That was not what I was saying!"

"So, can I cut it?"

Jæmis quickly uncrosses his arms, nearly stomping his feet on the floor.

"Fine! You get your wish! Enough badgering me!"

I clap my hands together. "Finally! Let me go get the scissors."

"Because shorter hair would bother you less," I offer as a valid reason.

"Who says my hair is bothering me now?" he fires back gruffly.

I narrow my eyes at him; *really?*

"Be honest, I've seen you brushing away your hair from your eyes countless times."

"That's normal with long hair."

"Prince Jæmis continually takes small breaks between training to fix his hair," Eeyok points out.

"I told you to be quiet, insolent pest," Jæmis growls at him.

"You *want* it to get in the way of your training?" I ask.

He glares at me.

"Perhaps shorter hair would benefit me more, especially in combat. However, I am not letting anyone get close with a blade while I am defenceless."

"I'm not going to slit your throat, please give me some credit," I whine.

"May I remind you of the time you attempted to kill me with a syringe?"

Eeyok looks surprised. "That's news to me."

"That was so long ago! And it's not like you haven't done your fair share of grievances against me, too."

"I have made no attempt on your life," he feels confident enough to say out loud.

"You have only made an endless amount of threats on my life instead," I argue back.

"Now please, I promise I'm not going to hurt you. If I wanted you dead, I wouldn't have made an oath with you that also puts my life in your hands."

Jæmis stares at me for a very long time, contemplating what I've said so far.

"Tsk. Fine. You get your wish," he finally concedes.

I grin at him. "Great! Let me go get the scissors."

Eeyok just smiles with this goofy grin and waves at us.

-- Lake Cabin kitchen

Jæmis is seated on a chair in the middle of the kitchen floor. There's a pair of scissors in my hands. The same one Ralph used to cut my hair with.

I lift it up in the air.

"That posture is way too threatening. If I didn't personally know you, I would have assumed you were in position to strike," Jæmis groans.

I advance towards him, unable to keep the smile from my face.

"Relax! Finally, your hair goes chop-chop."

"All I hear is you insulting my hair."

"Don't worry, I'm going to make you look good."

Jæmis raises an eyebrow.

"You... want me to look good?"

I nod. "Yes. And of course, give you a more practical haircut."

"Hmpf, then hurry up," he says, leaning back into the chair.

"Mind the ears," he warns me.

I circle around him so that I can see the back of his head. I plunge my fingers inside of his silky-smooth hair, pulling it down so that I can take the first snip.

Seeing a tuft of his black hair fall to the floor is super satisfying.

"See, that wasn't so bad now, or was it?" I say, leaning in closer to his head.

"You are acting like my hair is sentient and capable of feeling pain."

"Honestly, with the way you were resisting my offer to cut your hair, I wouldn't be surprised if it could."

"We may be two completely different species, but I doubt our hair differs all that much," he grumbles.

I snip away some more hair from the back.

"I'm actually surprised by how alike we are," I muse out loud.

"Are you really comparing yourself to me? Your body has not an ounce of muscle on it, much like the rest of the Earthlings I saw."

I end up pouting. "I admit I don't really work out... but not a lot of people here train as much as you do to achieve that 'ideal' body of yours."

"Sounds to me like you're jealous."

I end up cutting off more than I wanted to as I jerk upwards in response to his statement.

"I'm not!" I deny. "I'm perfectly fine like this. I don't want to imagine what I'd look like if I was as muscular as you."

I cringe at the image in my head of a very buffed version of myself.

"You would look like a respectable warrior."

"Well, I'm not a warrior," I feel the need to say.

"Clearly."

After that, Jæmis keeps quiet as I continue trimming the back of his head. I can now actually see his neck. It seems like a decent length.

I turn towards his side and start taking in the hair there.

"...Is being muscular such an important aspect to you?" I ask in a soft voice, my mind still on that subject.

"Of course, Ræhu pride themselves on their physical prowess. Being strong is the most important factor," he answers.

"Hmm, only strength? Is there anything else important to you?"

His eyes move to the corners to look at me.

"What else is there?"

I nearly chuckle in response.

"Surely people have some other merits besides pure strength, right? Maybe they're really smart, or perhaps they're very creative. Or maybe they are just super charismatic."

I pull a lock of hair straight over his ear, measuring the length. I guess I could keep the length just slightly over his ears.

I notice Jæmis pulling away from me slightly.

"Please sit still," I tell him, moving his head back where it was before. "I can't cut it straight if you move."

Jæmis huffs. "Don't you dare touch my ears."

"I won't, I'll be careful." He's so sensitive about letting me cut his hair.

I resume my work, snipping away, slowly but surely, getting his hair to a nice length.

"There were some Ræhu who were smart," Jæmis suddenly speaks up. "They were in the minority though, most of them rejects of society, unable to find a mate of their own when they were so weak."

"That sounds so sad, just because they were smart, they were outcasts?"

Jæmis' eyes flicker downwards.

"I knew a chamber boy who was weak. He got the position in the palace because of his parents' well-known strength. But he himself had none."

There's a slight smile on his lips as he reminisces on the memory.

"Were you friends with him?" I ask, noticing the gentle expression on his face.

"Of course not. A prince like me wasn't allowed to be friendly with the staff," he immediately rejects the idea.

"Those are some strict rules," I remark.

"Life as royalty is strict," he points out. "I believe he wanted to gain my favour by giving me pieces of sweet candy."

"Aww, I think he wanted to be your friend," I say with a smile.

"I was young and impressionable," Jæmis huffs, as if he regrets it.

"So, what happened? Did you become friends?" I ask, curious what became of their friendship.

"He was slaughtered like the rest of the staff during the takeover," he answers darkly.

Immediately the mood turns sour and I slow down my cutting.

"Oh..." I say, regretting my question.

Now I feel stupid for asking and making him remember something awful like that.

I cut away his hair in silence after this, not knowing what to say anymore.

After a while, Jæmis speaks up.

"You've stopped talking," he mentions.

"Do you want me to continue talking?"

"It distracts me from how close you are with a deadly weapon."

Mentally, I roll my eyes at him.

"Sure. What would you like me to talk about?"

Jæmis pauses for a moment to think.

"What was your Earthling childhood like?"

I sit back, scissors away from his hair. Now that's a question I didn't expect from him. He's actually curious about me?

"...Did I say something wrong?" he asks, noticing my silence.

I quickly turn to his other side to start trimming the hair there.

"N-no!" I say, reassuring him. "Uhm, my childhood..."

"I'm the eldest of two, Ralph is younger than me. But that never stopped him from being an annoying little pest as we grew up," I start to talk.

"Whenever he'd get into trouble with my parents, he'd blame it all on me. A plate got broken? It was me. Candy was missing? I stole it."

Jæmis leans back a bit, smirking.

"We seem to have that in common with our younger brother."

"Oh I doubt Kæleb was as much of an ass as Ralph was. He was actively pranking me. He wasn't born with an ability of his own like me, but he's crazy smart. He kept inventing these *weird* things."

"Like one time, he invented a hair growing supplement, which he of course, tested on me without permission."

I still hate that memory so much.

"Did it work?" Jæmis asks, curious now.

"I nearly drowned in a sea of my own hair. I was a god damn *Rapunzel*."

"Rapansul?" Jæmis repeats awkwardly.

"Ah, right. It's a fictional character with very, *very* long hair that she uses to climb. Basically, my entire room was filled with a thick mane of hair."

"I made him cut it, of course," I say, feeling a little smug. "*And* clean the entire room."

"I wonder if it would make Gaötte grow hair," Jæmis muses out loud.

I stop cutting; now that's a really good question.

"How do you think Eeyok would look like with a head full of hair?" I question.

"Like an abominable evolutionary reject," he answers.

I can't help it; I laugh out loud. The image of Eeyok with a mop of red hair on top of his scaly head, combined with the reject remark from Jæmis is all too funny to me.

"Best not to let him hear this," I say as I resume cutting his hair with a grin on my face.

"I'll be sure to let Eeyok know you made fun at his expense after hearing him being called an abominable reject."

I gasp. "*You wouldn't.*"

A sly grin creeps on his face.

"Try me," he counters almost playfully.

I huff and puff, pulling down on his hair, causing his whole head to fall to my side.

"Be careful," he warns sternly.

1. "You know, *I'm* the one with the scissors here."

2. "Right, of course. I won't accidentally cut your ear."

"You know, *I'm* the one with the scissors here," I stress in a high tone, playing along.

"That you are," he agrees.

"And I could oh so easily slip and..." I brush his hair away from his ear.

"Oops, I could have nicked your precious ear," I say, my fingers trailing the outline of his ear.

I await with baited breath for his response – for once we're having friendly banter and it's amusing.

"Right, of course. I won't accidentally cut your ear," I reassure him.

We were just having some friendly banter, too...

I tuck the hair behind his ear in a gentle manner. It looks completely unharmed.

"See, I've been very careful," I say.

My fingers trail along the tip of his pointy ear.

"Nothing to be seen!" I say cheerfully.

I wait for Jæmis to fire back another remark.

Except, he remains quiet. Eerily so. He's not moving either.

Finding it strange he's not replying, I look over at his face.



There's this pained expression on his face. Jaws clenched tight and pupils turned into tiny slits.

Wait – is he in pain!? I drop my scissors to the floor in shock.

"Oh my god, did I really nick your ears!?"

I quickly check his ear, touching and lifting it to find any small wound I may have accidentally caused.



"...!" Jæmis makes a strange noise.

Like it's magic, the colour of his ears change from his usual tanned skin tone to a very deep maroon.

"What..." I breathe out, completely confused.

It's then that I realize the colour has spread over his entire face as well. He is completely flushed.

"Ku..." Jæmis loudly grinds his teeth.

"How long are you going to continue to assault me!?" he suddenly yells, getting out of the chair and backing off.

My jaw drops open.

"E-excuse me? *Assault?*" I question in confusion.

Jæmis holds a hand over his ear in a defensive manner. The colour of his face remains unchanged.

I start piecing things together. He's not in pain... he is completely embarrassed.

Embarrassed, of what, exactly?

"You continue your barrage of seductive tactics on me – I won't stand it anymore!"

"Seductive... seductive tactics?" I echo mindlessly.

He thinks I'm seducing him again?

All I did was touch his ear!

Wait.

Oh.

Ohhh...

"Are your ears, uhm, sensitive?" I ask, raising half an eyebrow at him.

"Of course they are," he huffs indignantly. "To touch another Ræhu's ears the way you have is unspeakable."

I feel myself shrink. I know he told me to be careful of his ears, but I thought he was just worried I was going to nip him with the scissors. Not because... well, because of this.

"I am... so sorry. I didn't know," I apologize profusely.

"I mean, my ears are a little sensitive too, but I wouldn't have the same reaction as you would if someone touched mine. I didn't realize yours were that different," I explain myself.

Strangely enough, this makes Jæmis look even more insulted.

"The touch of another Ræhu's ears is part of the mating ritual, only reserved for their mates. And you so blatantly...!"

I can feel the cold sweat trickle down my back, and then suddenly, my face is completely red as well.

"M-mating ritual?" I repeat with a gulp.

Did I just unknowingly participate in some kind of sexual act? God, I feel awful and so, so embarrassed.

"You were..." Jæmis starts, still rattled. "You were... Trying to arouse me."

My face fills up with all the blood in my body that my legs suddenly give way and I collapse to the floor.

Nope. Nope, nope – nope.

Please let these kitchen tiles open up and swallow me whole, because I don't think I can face him ever again, knowing I was trying to arouse him by touching his ear.

I bury my face in my hands.

"Oh god, I'm so sorry, I really didn't know!" I apologize again.

Jæmis finally lowers his arm, unguarding his sensitive ear. His face isn't as red anymore as he tries to compose himself.

He awkwardly clears his throat.

"Earthlings... do not have this... feature?" he asks, unsure.

I shake my head.

"No, no, I'm fine touching it, see?" I say, touching my own ears like it's nothing.

Then I start thinking; wait, is me touching my ears the equivalent of me flashing my breasts to Jæmis?

Sheepishly, I stop touching my own ear and cover it with my hair, feeling even worse.

Jæmis runs a hand through his freshly cut hair; loose strands fall down onto the floor.

"Very well... I shall accept your apologies for your ignorance and pretend this never happened," he says in an eerily chilly voice.

"But I cannot allow you to continue cutting my hair anymore," he finishes.

"Totally reasonable!" I quickly agree.

I wasn't finished with his haircut, the front still covers his eyes somewhat, but I guess this will do. Because I don't think I could go near his face again without bursting into a blush.

"We are finished here," he says in an almost robotic tone.

He then turns around and leaves the cabin.

I scream a bunch of obscenities into my hands once he's left.

A jolt of vibrations startles the hell out of me. Oh, it's the flip cell phone that I still had in my pocket. I've been carrying it around.

Wait – I'm getting a call!

Clumsily I fish it out of my pocket and shakily press the accept button.

"He-hello?" I breathe out uncertainly.

There's no sound on the other end.

"Who is this?" I ask.

"118 Bouwmaki Street, tomorrow at noon," says a male voice.

The phone then disconnects.

I can feel my heart racing in my chest – it hasn't stopped since that embarrassing moment with Jæmis, but now it's beating for a whole other reason.

I got a call from my parents' secret cell phone, and an address to meet someone at.

Chapter [021] -- Lake cabin living room

I peer into my brother's eyes, pleading with him. He's being rather difficult and blocking me from going to meet the caller at the location he mentioned.

"I said *no*," he barks at me.

1. "You don't get to tell me what to do!"
2. "You haven't even listened to my arguments."

"You don't get to tell me what to do!" I reply childishly.

"Yes I do! You're not only under house arrest – but how can you even *think* about going to this mysterious location all on your own? You're no super!"

"I could totally be Super Mallgirl," I reply with an air of confidence, flipping my hair to complete the look.

"Stop joking around," Ralph grumbles.

"I'm not joking around," I say, my eyes narrowing. "I'm serious, Ralph. I'm going."

"We don't know if it's a trap!" he says hectically.

"We don't know anything at all, and that's the issue here, isn't it?" I fire back.

"You haven't even listened to my arguments," I gripe.

"I don't need to – the answer is no! You're no super. What makes you think you can go out there and meet some mysterious man all on your own?"

"Besides - you're under house arrest!"

"When have you ever lived by the rules?" I huff. "Look, I'll be careful. I'm just going to meet up with them, I'll be in and out in a jiffy."

"Jiffy my ass," Ralph sneers. "It's totally a trap. You're walking into a den of the unknown."

"Well, there's only one way to find out..."

"I'm not letting you go alone."

"Well, someone has to stay back and babysit these two here," I remind him.

I also don't want Ralph to come with me in case it is a trap. I'm protective of him, but I'm prepared to put my own life in harm's way to find out more information about my parents.

Ralph stubbornly puts his foot down.

"The answer is still no."

I sigh loudly. "A mysterious man calls and asks me to meet him – how can I refuse? He might know what really happened with mom and dad!"

"Don't you think I know that? I want to know too, but they were in some deep shit. Like, *vigilante* shit. Joselina, you're not a super. You can't defend yourself if you get attacked."

"Ugh fine – what if I bring Caine along? He's a registered super!"

Briefly, Ralph shuts up as he mulls it over.

"No – then I'd be putting *both* of you into danger!"

"What, Caine is amazing. Have you not seen him kick Jæmis' ass? He's very competent you know."

"Competence has nothing to do with it. We don't know what kind of trap you're being lured into. You may get ambushed and killed on the spot, if we're lucky. If we're not lucky, you'll get kidnapped again and this time, you'll be tortured."

"I'm not stupid Ralph. I know very well the danger I'm walking into, but it's our only clue here. Our only real piece of the puzzle. I want to know more about mom and dad... And if that means blindly trusting a stranger to go meet them, then I will."

I'm too stubborn to give this up. I'm going to meet that person. Whether I'm alone or have back-up, one way or another; I am going.

Ralph groans loud and buries his face into his hands, his palms digging into his eye sockets.

"You are infuriating!"

"I get that a lot," I dismiss.

"There are cameras here, you know. Forrester Inc. is watching us. They'll notice you leaving."

"Well, you're the genius here, I'm sure you can disable those cameras for a brief time."

"What makes you think I will do that?" he sneers at me. "I *want* you to stay home!"

"And I want to know what really happened to mom and dad!" I snap back, feeling my anger rising.

Ralph clicks his tongue at me and averts his eyes, fixing his gaze on the floor.

"You think it's fun for me to be in the dark as well?" he grumbles.

I take in a small breath to calm myself down.

"Sorry for snapping," I apologize.

"You're going to go either way, whether I like it or not, huh."

"Yep," I nod.

"Fine. If you're going, then you're taking Caine with you, *and* I'm flying my drone as a back-up."

I relax my shoulders and smile at him.

"Thanks, you're the best."

I ruffle Ralph's hair, but he bats my hand away.

"And we gotta come up with a plan! And a back-up plan. And maybe a plan C..."

"Riiiiight, you can go ahead and think of that. I'm going to call Caine."

I bow out of the living room and head to my bedroom.

-- Lake Cabin Outside Day

The very next day, I'm outside, waiting for Caine to arrive. The sky looks dark, like it's about to rain. Ralph is next to me, fiddling around with his drone.

Eeyok's come out to see me off. I'm a little glad Jæmis is off training in the forest again, after yesterday I don't really know how to face him at the moment.

"Cameras are off?" I ask Ralph.

"They're being spoofed. They're seeing some old footage from yesterday," he explains.

"Good, so I can leave in peace without them knowing."

"I'm still a little confused as to where you're going," says Eeyok sheepishly.

"It's okay, I don't know it either exactly," I admit.

"I looked up the address and it's located in an industrial area. It's a warehouse for some kind of company dealing in ceramic tiles. Or something like that," Ralph rattles off.

"Well Eeyok, no matter what, I'm going to find out why that person called my parents' cell phone after so many years. I want to know what kind of information they have."

"It sounds dangerous to me," Eeyok acknowledges.

"That's because it is. It's crazy to go out and meet that random stranger," Ralph pipes in.

"Can't I come with you?" asks Eeyok.

I smile at him, appreciating the offer.

"Sorry, you can't. You're supposed to stay here and not leave."

Eeyok continues to look worried though.

"...So are you," he brings to my attention.

Well, he got me there.

"Uhm... yeah, I know. But I can't sit here and twiddle my thumbs. I have to go look for answers."

"Let me come – I can protect," he stresses.

"Yes, but," I raise up my left hand, flashing the faint oath symbol to him, "you have an oath not to hurt anyone."

"True... But I could still be a lookout, warn you of anything dangerous."

Ralph coughs loudly before starting up the app on his phone and flies his drone high up in the sky. It makes a loud engine noise as it flies.

"I'll be the lookout with this drone."

"How far is the range on that thing? Can you really operate it all the way from here?" I ask skeptically.

"Are you doubting my prowess?" he asks, feeling insulted.

I decide not to answer that. If Ralph made it, then I'm sure he's got a ton of range on his drone.

"I'm stuck babysitting the aliens, but at the very least, I'll have eyes on the both of you."

"I hope the weather won't mess things up," I say, looking at the dark clouds.

Even Ralph pauses at that, looking a tiny bit worried.

Eventually, Caine pulls up on his motorcycle. I guess he wanted to be adventurous today and not use a car. He removes the helmet from his head and shakes his fiery red hair free.

"So – how long were you two going to keep me in the dark with all of this?" he accuses us.

"We're still figuring things out ourselves, you know," I reply.

"Like dude, your parents were vigilantes! What if my parents were, too?"

"We only have scarce information on our own parents, nothing about yours. We don't even know if your parents knew ours were vigilantes. They could have hidden it from them, too," Ralph explains.

"Will he protect you?" Eeyok asks, pointing at Caine.

"Of course. I'm Joselina's bodyguard here. I won't let anything happen to her," Caine answers dutifully.

I muster up a smile. Caine has got my back, always has. Ralph may not like what I'm doing, but he's making sure nothing happens to me either.

"Come on, Caine, let's go. I don't want to be late," I say as I walk towards his motorcycle and take the second helmet off the back, putting it on myself.

"I'll be there, watching," says Ralph, as the drone hovers in the air. "And don't you dare lose that earpiece."

I tap my ear, which has a small electronic device wedged into it. It's a direct line to Ralph so he can talk to me, and I can talk to him. His own invention, of course.

"Good luck, Ralph," says Eeyok.

"Thanks! I'll be back before you know it. Make sure that Jæmis takes a break from all that training and eats, alright?"

Eeyok only gives me a confident smile.

Caine climbs onto the motorcycle and I hop on the back, wrapping my arms around his waist.

And then we're off.

-- Outside warehouse

Rain starts to fall down from the heavens once we arrive at our meeting spot.

As we get off the bike, I talk to Ralph.

"Hey Ralph, can you still see us from up there?" I ask, looking at the drone that's been following us the entire ride.

"I still maintain visibility, but if this rain gets any worse, I'm going to have to park the drone somewhere, it's not built to withstand extreme weather," he sounds annoyed.

"I hate the rain," says Caine once he removes his helmet.

"Can't control where my electricity really goes," he groans.

Right, rain is kind of Caine's biggest weakness. He won't be able to shoot out any lightning attacks if he's worried about hitting me in the process due to the rain.

Maybe we should go inside the warehouse? The caller didn't specify whether or not we should enter.

The place is deserted with no one in sight. Just a rundown looking metal building. It's eerily quiet, only the pitter patter of the rain filling the silence.

"Do you see anyone?" I ask Caine, still looking around for any sign of another human being.

"Nothing. I haven't seen anyone since we last passed that drunk man on the street five minutes ago."

"Ralph, do you see anything up there?"

"Negative. I haven't seen anyone around the premises. Be on your guard," I hear his voice say through the ear piece.

I nudge my foot against the metal door of the building, wondering if I should go inside.

"You think he's inside?" I voice out my thoughts.

"If he is, why would it be locked on the outside?" Caine questions, pointing at the large metal padlock on the door.

"Maybe there's a side entrance or something," I mutter, and start walking along the building.

"Hey – don't go too far," says Caine as he jogs after me.

"Ralph, can you fly around to see if there's any other entrances to the building?"

The drone moves away as it starts to fly over the building. The rain is starting to worsen, I hope he'll continue to keep watch over us.

A few seconds later, and Ralph alerts me.

"On your right, there's a staircase leading to a door," he says.

Caine and I walk around the right of the building, indeed seeing a staircase attached to the building.

I eye it suspiciously, but there's no time for having second thoughts. I place my foot on the first step and scale the stairs. My heart drums with each step I take.

I place my hand on the handle and push it down. There's a click and I can feel the door move – it's unlocked!

"Well, isn't that convenient," Caine mutters sarcastically.

"Check for boobytraps," Ralph says in an urgent voice.

I inspect the door frame and handle for anything suspicious, but as I push the door open, I don't see anything out of the ordinary. No string setting off a trap either.

"Joselina, Caine – I can't come inside. You better tell me what you see," Ralph warns us.

Then, something occurs to me. What if they get spooked by seeing Caine? They didn't mention I should come alone, but maybe it will complicate matters if they think they're in danger.

Caine is a registered super under the name 'Boltage' after all...

Caine nearly bumps into my back when I stop.

"Yo – why are you stopping?"

1. Tell Caine to wait outside.
2. Allow Caine to join you.

I put my hand up against the doorframe, blocking Caine from entering.

"Caine," I start softly. "I think you should wait outside."

"The fuck I am – let me in." He tries to duck underneath my arm to get inside.

I grab his arm and pull him back outside.

"No. Stay outside. You may spook the guy. I'll let you know if I need help, okay? Just stay right outside the door."

"Huh?" Caine gripes. "Are you for real? Besides – it's raining buckets!"

"Joselina you're insane, let Caine come with you!" Ralph echoes in my ear.

I ignore their pleas and step inside, closing the door behind me.

-- Inside warehouse

Ralph curses a stream of remarks into my ear, but I try to focus on the warehouse itself.

I'm up on a raised platform, looking down at a bunch of crates filled with wares.

With my enhanced vision, I check out every nook and cranny in the room as fast as I can. But I don't see any sign of life. No one is here.

I sigh loudly. Have I been led on a wild goose chase? Was that person never going to come?

"Hello? I came, just as you asked," I say out loud. My voice carries through the room.

But silence is all I'm met with.

I'm just about to turn around to open the door for Caine, when I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

"How did you get this number?" a voice rings loudly.

I whirl around, frantically looking around for the source. But when I turn to the spot it came from, I see nothing.

"Who's there?" I demand to know.

"In eight years, not a single call. Who are *you*?" he fires back, the voice suddenly appearing from behind me.

I whip my head back – but still see no one.

I bite down on my lip; this guy has invisibility powers. Or maybe teleportation. I don't know. I have to be on my guard.

"Joselina who is it?" Ralph asks, being in the dark.

"How'd you know my parents?" I ask, ignoring his own question.

"Parents?" he almost guffaws.

An invisible hand shoots up to my throat, pushing me back against the railing.

"They left me!" he yells.

I claw at his hands, trying to break free.

But it's the door that swings open that causes him to lose his grip, allowing me to escape.

"Joselina, duck!" Caine shouts, shooting a bolt of lightning my way.

Like my life depends on it, I duck and run out of the way.

The bolt of lightning hits the rooftop of the warehouse instead.

"WHO IS THIS!?" the voice yells angrily.

"WHY DIDN'T YOU COME ALONE!?"

I suddenly get hit in my stomach, making me double over and fall down the railing. The invisible super pushes past Caine, his footsteps clambering to get out the door.

"Joselina!" Caine shrieks as he sees me fall.

I don't have the energy to use my thread to catch myself, and I land with my back on top of a bunch of crates, knocking the breath right out of my lungs.

A tremor runs through my body, temporarily paralyzing me. Oof, I can hardly move.

Caine jumps down the platform next to me, worried hands lifting me up to my feet.

"Are you alright?" he asks, completely distressed.

"I'll live, but Caine, he's getting away!"

-- Outside warehouse

We run outside, or at least, I try to be as fast as possible while my stomach and back feel like they're on fire.

But by the time we look out into the distance, rain falling all around us, we see nothing. He's gone.

Shit.

I kick the ground in frustration. Which only reminds me of the pain surging through my body at the moment.

"Someone tell me what the hell is going on!" Ralph complains.

"Joselina got attacked by a super," Caine says in a serious tone. "One that can turn invisible."

All I hear is Ralph's shocked breath.

"Nothing, just don't try to spook the guy, alright?" I warn him.

"As long as he doesn't pull any funny business," Caine grumbles in response.

Then I finally enter the warehouse with him.

-- Inside warehouse

I scan my immediate vicinity for any boobytraps, then use my keen eyesight to inspect the rest of the warehouse.

Caine and I are on a raised platform, looking out over a bunch of crates full of wares.

But what I don't see is anyone else besides me and Caine. There's no one here.

"Hello?" I call out into the void.

My voice echoes around the metal walls, sounding eerily creepy.

"Doesn't seem like anyone's here," Caine remarks.

Then suddenly, Caine yelps out loud as I hear a solid punch land on the back of his head.

Frantically I look around for the attacker, but I see nothing.

"What the fuck?" Caine groans, looking around, hair ready and crackling.

"Why didn't you come alone!?" a voice booms through the warehouse.

Caine and I both look around the premises for the source of the voice, but still don't see anyone.

"Who's there!?" Caine barks out loud. "Don't think I'm going to allow you to land a freebie on me."

"I was the one that called!" I say out loud. "You didn't tell me to come alone."

"You brought *him*," a voice hisses in my ear and I shriek and jump away in response.

He was super close!

"Joselina, this guy is invisible!"

"Please, I just want to know why my parents would call your number. Who are you?" I ask.

"Parents?" He's on the left of us.

"*Parents!?*" he yells, this time on our right.

"Eight long years they left me in the dirt!"

"You're just here to finish the job – aren't you!? Well, fuck that!"

Suddenly all the air is knocked out of my body as I get punched in the stomach. I cough loudly and drop to my knees, wrapping my arms around me as I feel a tremor of pain paralyze me.

Caine doesn't hesitate to retaliate, and he shoots a bolt of lightning in the direction of the voice. But it ends up hitting nothing at all.

The door swings open and we hear footsteps running outside.

"Caine – stop him!" I shout.

He immediately follows in pursuit, and I pick myself up, wincing as I rub my stomach, but I force myself to walk through that door.

-- Outside warehouse

We follow him outside, running down the stairs. Puddles of water splash as we see his invisible footsteps making its mark on the ground.

I gather my thread, attempting to perhaps lasso him into submission. But the rain clatters all around us, limiting not only my vision, but the control I have over my thread as well.

I hit nothing but air; I've missed.

"Caine, he's getting away!" I shout.

"I know – but I can't shoot in this rain!"

"Ralph can you see him from above?" I ask, hoping the drone can follow him.

"No – I can't make out anything in this rain. Let alone someone who appears to be invisible!"

And just like that, I don't hear his footsteps anymore. I kick the ground in frustration. He got away!

"Damn it Joselina, that was dangerous. That guy's a super," says Caine.

"I know that," I almost hiss at him.

I'm frustrated my only lead ran away.

-- Lake Cabin living room

Two angry men stare at me.

"I shouldn't have let you go. This was stupid. Dangerous. What if Caine wasn't there?" Ralph prattles off.

"I'm not a child, Ralph," I grumble. "Stop speaking to me like one."

"You went into a dangerous situation – even after I warned you!"

I fold my arms across my chest, sticking my nose up in the air. I wince a little as I still feel the ramifications of getting hit in the stomach by that super.

Truth be told, I do feel powerless. I couldn't dodge him. I was super confident I could protect myself, or at least react fast enough to be able to dodge any incoming attack.

Sadly... when the attacker is invisible, it suddenly becomes a lot harder to predict an attack.

Ralph is right, I *did* go into a dangerous situation. And it's aggravating to sit here, listening to him, berating me like this.

"I'm going to my room," I say, standing up from the couch.

"That's definitely something I agree with. Go rest," says Caine.

"Caine and I will study the camera footage," Ralph adds. "You go lie down."

I huff my annoyance out loud and walk upstairs.

-- Lake Cabin bedroom

I fall down onto my bed with a sigh.

I've tried calling the same number again, but it's disconnected once more. Whoever it was, my chances of reaching him have been squandered. He seemed to go berserk once I mentioned my parents. He also really didn't like Caine.

I sit up straight, staring at the wall, thinking over how many registered supers have the ability to turn invisible. It's a relatively uncommon ability, so perhaps I can narrow it down?

Or maybe he's not even registered...

...Or perhaps he's in mom and dad's archives. I did read about some Mr. Invisible in that file, after all.

Yes, I should go to the basement to find out more information.

As I'm about to open my door and walk downstairs, I'm met with a surprising sight.

"Eeyok, Jæmis – do you need something from me?"

The two of them walk inside my room.

"He insisted on bringing me along," Jæmis huffs.

Our eyes meet and I suddenly recall our misunderstanding yesterday, and I immediately break eye contact. It's nice seeing him with a better haircut though.

"How did it go?" Eeyok asks, curious about my 'mission'.

I close the door and lean against it with a sigh.

"A failure. I got attacked and he ran off."

Eeyok's eyes widen. "You got attacked!?" he exclaims.

I lift the hem of my shirt, looking down at the red mark on my stomach.

"Yep, punched in the stomach."

"I fell down as well, so my back is killing me," I groan.

"That's a completely unguarded attack," Jæmis notes, studying my skin.

Then he looks up at me. "You were caught by surprise."

"The man I was supposed to meet, he's a super just like me. Except... he can turn invisible. I didn't know. I couldn't see him."

"Whoa – invisible!? Humans are amazing..." Eeyok sounds impressed.

"Some supers can turn invisible. It's uncommon, but not really rare to be honest," I explain. "Either way, it was hard to expect an attack I couldn't see."

"That does seem quite difficult to guard from," Eeyok muses out loud.

"She is completely untrained. Even if she could see him, she'd be unable to block such an attack properly," Jæmis says.

I narrow my eyes at him. He's right, but I hate it. I am not a superhero – and I'm untrained in combat arts. I can do some clever maneuvers with my thread, but nothing can compare with being able to block and parry actual attacks.

It's frustrating that I'm unable to do these things.

My one lead on my parents' mystery got away *and* attacked me in the process.

I felt helpless, and I don't want to feel like that again.

So, I muster up my courage.

"Eeyok, Jæmis – will you help me train in self defence?"

There's a silence between the both of them as they stare at me. Jæmis in particular looks surprised.

"Of course, I will do it!" Eeyok happily agrees.

My eyes lock with Jæmis'. He huffs in return.

"It would not be a sufficient training regime if we're unable to hurt you."

1. "Wait, you *want* to hurt me?"

2. "You don't need to hurt me to be able to train me."

"Wait, you *want* to hurt me?" I question him.

He sighs deeply, briefly closing his eyes.

"That is not my intention. But I have to attack."

"Training includes being able to parry an attack. May I remind you that we are under an oath not to harm any Earthlings. I cannot attack you."

"Ah, that's what you mean..."

"Prince Jæmis, I believe we can train Joselina with more guided instructions," Eeyok suggests.

"Yes, you can just show me what to do. You don't actually need to go all in," I agree with him.

"You don't need to hurt me to be able to train me," I say.

"Joselina has a very good point, I believe we can simply instruct her on what to do," Eeyok agrees with me.

"What good is training in self defence if she has never had to block an actual attack during training?" Jæmis huffs.

"Maybe do it slower, and without any power?" I propose awkwardly, not really knowing much about training.

Jæmis just shakes his head in dismissal.

Suddenly he's closed the distance between us. His hand grabs my wrist as he spins me around.

"Training is about anticipating the attack and reacting fast enough to dodge," he says as he pins me down onto the bed, with my arm behind my back.

My face is pressed into the mattress and he hovers his body above me, lowering his face next to mine.

"How can I train you properly without actually sparring?"

Then he removes himself, letting me go.

I turn around on the bed and click my tongue at him.

"You didn't have to demonstrate my lack of reaction," I say grumpily.

"I'm sure we can figure something out. At least Joselina can learn the basics, such as a good fighting stance," Eeyok says cheerfully.

He's always wonderfully positive.

"Besides, Prince Jæmis is the best Captain I know of! Surely, he will be able to overcome such a challenge." Eeyok grins at Jæmis.

Oh, good one Eeyok! Appeal to his pride!

"Of course I can do it. Remember who you're talking about here," he says, sounding mildly annoyed.

"Yes, Prince Jæmis," Eeyok says, shooting me a small smile.

"So – you'll help me train?" I ask, feeling all hopeful.

I can see Jæmis grind down on his own teeth, but after a few seconds, he relents.

"I don't want to hear you complain about the rain. We start tomorrow."

He then turns his back on us and walks out of my bedroom.

I can't help the wide smile stretching across my face. I'm going to learn self defence!

-- Lake Cabin woods

Safe to say I'm anxious but also excited about this. Yesterday was a reality check for me. Ralph was right, I am completely unprepared and out of my element.

That's why I'm taking these steps to rectify my weaknesses.

Jæmis and Eeyok stand before me, a serious expression on their faces. I'm grateful they're taking it seriously.

"We'll just be going over some basics. I adjusted them for your size as well as combat knowledge, which is non-existent," says Jæmis.

I pout at him; I know I don't have any experience. You don't have to take a dig at me like that.

"Now, run two laps to the house and back here," Jæmis instructs me.

My shoulders slump.

"Seriously? I thought you were going to show me some self defence moves," I complain.

Eeyok beats his chest with his fist.

"Joselina must warm up first! I can run with you, if you'd like."

"You think you're going to train before properly stretching your muscles?" Jæmis asks in this tone that shows he's almost insulted that I would complain.

"When is the last time you had any kind of training regime?" he asks.

I stare at him blankly.

"...Any kind of physical movement?" he asks instead.

"...I ride my bike?" I say, gesturing my hands vaguely.

I know I haven't exactly been working out and live quite a sedentary lifestyle, but I do ride my bike around!

"Bike?" Jæmis inquires.

"It's a uhm, a vehicle powered by pedaling with your own legs," I try to explain, knowing I'm only making it more confusing.

"I can show you later?" I suggest with an awkward chuckle.

"Just do the laps," Jæmis sighs.

Guess I'll have to. Warming up is important. I push the hairband back across my head to keep my face as free from hair as possible. Then I start to jog out of the clearing.

Eeyok soon follows me, clearly more experienced and not breaking a sweat.

After running the two laps, I'm already exhausted. The clearing we're in is like a 10-minute walk away from the house, so having to run all that...

Ok, ok, I'm complaining too much.

"Very well," says Jæmis, approving of my warm-up.

"Eeyok will be your sparring partner." Jæmis points at Eeyok. "He is a lighter and easier target for you."

Eeyok gives me a wide grin.

"Don't worry, you can hit me all you want!"

I can't help but snort in response, wondering if Eeyok is just a big masochist.

1. "You sound very enthusiastic about getting hit by me."

2. "I don't really want to hit you."

"You sound very enthusiastic about getting hit by me," I say with a small chuckle, poking fun at him.

Eeyok's positive mood isn't dampened. Instead he puffs out his chest.

"I am honored to."

I snort again – god, he's so endearingly weird sometimes.

"Eeyok, there's nothing honorable about being someone's punching bag," Jæmis huffs.

Eeyok's brows droops in response.

"I don't really want to hit you," I mumble.

"Lesson number one; don't empathize with your attacker," Jæmis grunts loudly. "You *want* to attack them, there should be no hesitation."

I gulp, nodding along. "Okay, okay... I'll try."

"Joselina, I am used to getting hit, there is no need to hold back. I am a trained soldier after all!"

That doesn't make it any easier!

"Eeyok, in position," he commands.

Eeyok twists his body and faces me, arms up in a fighting position.

"That's your basic form. You want to make yourself a smaller target, covering your own openings."

Jæmis walks behind me and I watch him with curious eyes. He taps his foot against mine, forcing me to spread my legs apart. My feet drag across the dirt until they're spread far apart that I'm matching Eeyok's stance.

"Always make sure you have good footing; it's the best way to withstand an attack if you keep your center balanced."

He then grabs my arms from behind, positioning them up in front of my face, tucking my elbows in close to my body. Then he makes me twist my body sideways, facing Eeyok.

It's strange, but with his back pressed up against mine, I'm hyper aware of the places where he's touching me.

Come on Joselina, focus. Stop recalling him blushing.

"Always create distance between you and the attacker. Prevention is the best defence," he mentions as he steps back.

"You don't want them close enough to land a hit, so always keep moving on your feet."

"Got it, move around, don't be an easy target," I say.

"Eeyok, grab her," Jæmis instructs.

Eeyok moves slow enough that he's not threatening at all. His hands grab the collar of my shirt.

"Regardless of species, we all have our common weaknesses," says Jæmis as he circles around the two of us.

"The eyes are a small target, but highly effective to reduce their vision, letting you get away."

"Use your fingers to press into their eye sockets if your hands are free."

Well, that's certainly a gruesome image.

"If you're being restrained, you can use your elbow to strike the chin instead." Jæmis showcases the maneuver where he lifts up his elbow and strikes with an uppercut.

"Okay, but how do I know where the eyes are on an invisible target?" I point out.

Jæmis' face falters for a second as he thinks it over.

Even Eeyok looks confused. "That's a good question."

"Then let's not focus on the eyes. Focus on the parts that are vulnerable and not hard to miss. The face is always a good target to attack, regardless of whether they're invisible or not."

"Try using your elbow to strike him."

Awkwardly I raise my arm and twist my body so that I lift my elbow up to lightly bump Eeyok's chin.

"Hehe, that tickles," Eeyok chuckles.

"The point of this exercise is to actually learn how to hit. So hit him," Jæmis groans exasperatedly.

I'm a little wary of actually aiming to strike Eeyok, a friendly face. What if I knock out one of his many teeth?

Jæmis repeats the maneuver again to demonstrate, then gestures for me to repeat.

1. Hit Eeyok with all your strength.
2. Do it gently.

"Sorry, Eeyok," I say, bracing myself.

As his claws are still grasping my collar, I bring up my elbow to strike him in the chin. My entire arm feels tingly for a second as I hit my funny bone by accident.

"Ah!" he shrieks, letting me go and stumbling backwards.

I look at him with remorseful eyes.

"Sorry – did it hurt?"

Eeyok rubs his chin, but gives me a smile.

"You did good, that had a lot of power behind it!"

"Hmpf. Seems you can land a blow when needed," Jæmis begrudgingly concedes.

"I didn't really want to though. I feel a bit guilty," I confess.

"Okay, here I come," I warn Eeyok.

I raise my elbow once more and boop his chin.

Eeyok blinks at me a couple of times, then he moves his face away and releases a dramatic groan.

"Owww, that was powerful!" he wails, stumbling back on his feet as if he'd just been hit by a wrecking ball.

I giggle at his overdramatic antics, but Jæmis gives me a disapproving stare.

"You two are impossible," he grumbles. "If you do not take this seriously, I will quit teaching you and train on my own."

"Right, sorry. It's just hard for me to seriously hit someone I like."

"One day, you may have to attack someone you know and trust," Jæmis exclaims.

He gives me this withering glare. "And you'll have to be ready to strike without any hesitation then."

"That's messed up..." I mumble.

"Hm, Captain – I mean, Prince Jæmis – is right. You can't let your feelings get in the way, otherwise you leave yourself very vulnerable to attack yourself," says Eeyok.

"I'm glad to see you at least retain *some* amount of your training, you traitor," Jæmis grunts at him.

Once more, Eeyok's face falls.

"Hey, leave the remarks, you're training me, after all," I say.

"Fine. Eeyok, grab her from behind," Jæmis instructs.

Eeyok steps behind me and puts me in a chokehold.

"To get free from this position, use what you can to your advantage. Your arms and legs are free, so you can attack his feet by stomping on them."

As far as I recall, Eeyok's wearing very shiny metal shoes as armour.

"Uhh, even when he's wearing that?" I ask reluctantly.

"Yes. It's your goal to make him lose balance, so try whatever you can."

"Alright..." I slam down my foot on Eeyok's shoe.

I don't put a dent in it at all, but I can tell he lost his balance a bit, loosening his hold on me.

"Then go for the stomach or groin. Make a fist with your hand and bring it down hard."

"Go ahead, Joselina, I have a hard stomach," Eeyok assures me.

Awkwardly, I make a fist with my right hand and slam it into his stomach. Whoa – I never realized how muscular Eeyok really is! There was almost no budging it!

"Good. Now do them both consecutively. Feet first, then stomach. You want to be quick and use the momentary confusion to break free."

Eeyok tightens his hold on me, and I dig my heel into his foot, then quickly slam my fist backwards against his stomach.

He stumbles back, releasing a small groan, and I use the opportunity to break free.

And immediately uppercut him with my elbow.

"Ahh!" he yelps as he falls backwards, clutching at his stomach and chin.

There's this satisfying smirk on my face, realizing I broke free and got the combo off perfectly.

When I look at Jæmis, it seems even he is impressed, a cocky grin on his lips.

"Well done, especially the moment where you counterattacked him in his moment of weakness. Very intuitive."

I feel myself glow with pride as he compliments me. It means a lot, coming from him.

However, seeing Eeyok's pained expression brings me back to earth and I suddenly feel super guilty for hurting him.

"Oh no – did I hit you too hard, are you okay? Do you need a break?" I ask, fretting over him.

"Pull yourself together, Eeyok. This is simple training," Jæmis barks at him.

Eeyok shakes his head and slaps the sides of his face to wake himself up.

"Right – let's continue! Joselina is doing amazing!"

I giggle at him. I can't believe how both of them are being so supportive right now.

We spend the rest of the session repeating the same maneuvers, with Jæmis teaching me a few other moves as well. I'm completely exhausted and covered in sweat when I ask to call it a day.

-- Lake Cabin bedroom night

My body is sore and aching from the small amount of training I received today. Coupled with my own problems, it seems I just can't fall asleep.

I may be getting some training, but the mystery of that invisible super still isn't solved. Ralph's drone footage revealed nothing but a bunch of rain. It only recorded Caine and I fleeing the building.

I toss my legs over the edge of the bed and get up with a sigh. If I can't sleep, might as well go down the basement and perhaps find a clue.

-- Lake Cabin Basement

I turn on the lights and slowly walk down the stairs.

My parents kept a cabinet full of archives on superheroes, maybe I can get some more information from there.

I open up one of the drawers and take out a bunch of folders. Time to look at them one at a time.

--

It's been like an hour later and I can barely keep my eyes open. There are so many supers that are listed in here, all with apparent ties to Hulio. I had no idea. Some of them I actually recognize – they have since passed away or gone missing in those eight years though.

In fact... given how many are dead or missing, I'm starting to wonder that a lot of these folders may just contain information about missing supers in the first place. Maybe mom and dad were tracking them down?

I did find several folders with supers who had the ability to turn invisible. Who knew the ability was that common? One of them I could already cross off the list, because they were deceased (big red stamp over their name).

Another I could cross off as well, because their ability was defined as only being able to turn their body invisible, and nothing else.

There's a difference between only turning invisible, and being able to make other objects invisible as well. My mysterious caller was the latter – unless he was naked this entire time...

I shiver just thinking about it. No, I don't think anyone would waltz around naked in the rain. Most likely he can turn objects he touches invisible as well.

So that leaves me with five supers with this ability. Some of them have their address listed, but not all.

Of course, this information is at least eight years outdated... so they may not actually live there anymore. I'll have to visit these locations myself to find out.

Though Ralph is going to be an issue. He will forbid it.

I guess for now, I'm going to have to continue the training sessions with Jæmis until I'm confident enough to take on an invisible super.

-- Lake Cabin Kitchen Night

I finally emerge from the basement, stretching my arms.

All this thinking got me thirsty, I should go drink something.

As I open the fridge, scanning the shelf for anything Ralph may have bought me, I hear another pair of footsteps descend the stairs. I peer over my shoulder to see Jæmis walking down.

"I guess I should get used to you being up in the middle of the night," I say, making light conversation.

My eyes travel down his body, expecting him to be in his underwear.

Jæmis lowers his brows, realizing why I'm giving him a funny look.

"...I am wearing proper clothing," he says defensively.

Granted, he is wearing pants, though his upper half is still exposed. It's fine, really, it doesn't bother me.

"Is there anything you need?" I ask. "I can fix you something to eat, if you'd like."

Jæmis sets his gaze upon the fridge, taking a long time to answer.

"Maybe a hot cup of chocolate?" I suggest cheekily.

That seems to get him to talk.

"I was planning on taking a stroll, but I wouldn't mind drinking that beverage."

"Alright, sit back and relax!" I say, and scoot him over to the living room instead.

-- Lake Cabin Living Room Night

A couple of minutes later, I carry two cups of hot chocolate into the living room. Jæmis is seated on the couch and I hand him one of the cups, then sit next to him, holding my own.

We drink in silence. I want to say it isn't awkward, but the silence is making my mind go places. I still feel a little embarrassed about that ear incident.

It doesn't seem like Jæmis is affected as I am, so that's a good thing.

"So Jæmis," I start slowly, blowing over the warm liquid to cool it down. "Couldn't sleep?"

Jæmis pulls the cup away from his lips and stares down at the coffee table.

"Sleeping proves to be difficult lately," he admits in a soft voice.

"Hm, same," I agree with him. "So many things on my mind – not to mention my muscles are killing me. I'm sore all over."

"That's because you've never properly followed a training regime. You have a weak body."

"I know," I groan. "You don't need to tell me that. At least I'm trying, right?"

"I suppose," he admits.

"Keep this up and your body will remember, then it won't hurt anymore."

"Are those words of encouragement?" I say jokingly.

"Motivating your troops is an important task as a Captain," he says dutifully. "Bad morale can mean defeat."

"Erhm, well, I'm not part of your troop, but I am thankful you decided to teach me. So, thank you."

He says nothing, instead taking a sip from his hot chocolate, silently acknowledging my thanks.

I lean back into the couch, pulling my legs up against my chest, resting my cup on top of my knees.

"You know, I was much more active when I was younger, I swear. It's just now that I'm older, I don't really do any sports or the like. I'm too busy."

"Busy, or lazy?" he asks for a distinction.

I pout slightly.

"Maybe a bit of both," I admit as I drink from my cup.

Another silence stretches between us, though it's not awkward or anything.

I'm surprised it's Jæmis that breaks the silence.

"What were you like when you were younger?"

I'm acutely aware that this is the second time Jæmis asked me a personal question. It catches me off guard.

1. "I was a rowdy girl, never letting anyone get me down."

2. "I was a little quiet, but super sweet to everyone."

"I was a rowdy girl, never letting anyone get me down."

Jæmis exhales a small chuckle.

"You mean to say you never grew out of being a troublemaker."

I shoot him a lopsided grin.

"That's exactly right. If I saw something I thought was wrong, I would try and step in."

"Getting yourself into a mess," he mentions.

"I don't care. I can't stand by and do nothing when I know I have the power to change things. To maybe help someone. It's always been like that with me."

I hum out loud. "Wait, does that mean I'm still childish? Hmm..."

"It means you had strong enough convictions to hold onto as you matured."

"That's a very wise thing to say," I say, giving him a strange look.

"You expected me to belittle you?" He quirks an eyebrow at me.

"Maybe, yes?" I admit.

He sighs in response, closing his eyes.

"Sometimes, it's not a bad thing to remain the same as when you were younger. Not all change is good."

"I was a little quiet, but super sweet to everyone."

Jæmis snorts in response, like he can't believe it.

"Quiet, *you?*"

"Is that so hard to believe? I was a bit shy as a little girl, you know."

"Seems you've outgrown that."

"Hmm, I can still be a bit shy every now and then," I confess. "But I won't hesitate to stand up for what's right."

"Which gets you into trouble more often than not," he points out.

"It's hard to watch injustice happen before your very eyes when you have the power to stop it," I say.

Something flickers in his eyes, but I can't quite place it.

"It would be wise to remember you don't always have the power to stop it."

That's certainly true.

"Doesn't mean I can't try, right?" I say, raising both my eyebrows at him with a smile.

Jæmis looks to the side, deep in thought.

"Trying can sometimes turn out worse than not trying at all..."

"I would disagree. Haven't you ever stepped in when you were younger?"

That seems to make him grow quiet.

"I have, yes."

"You know, I actually wanted to become a superhero when I was younger," I admit.

"Your planet's version of a soldier?" Jæmis asks to clarify.

"A little, yes. If you have an ability you can register yourself as an official superhero and you can use your ability in public without repercussions."

I feel a little childish for admitting my young ambitions.

"I just wanted to help, if I could, you know?"

"Wanting to become a soldier is an admirable trait."

"Well, my parents were heavily against it. They didn't want me to risk my life, fighting for the greater good. They said my ability wasn't exactly combat applicable," I say with a shrug.

"At some point I started to believe it as well, that I didn't want to become a super. There were enough people like that in the world, it didn't need me as well."

I sigh loudly. "And my parents ended up as huge hypocrites; being vigilantes themselves."

"Parents wanting to protect their young isn't hypocritical," Jæmis argues. "It is smart."

"Well, they accomplished what they set out to do. I'm not a super. I ended up making supersuits for the actual supers, just to feel like I was still helping out a little."

I give him a sheepish smile. "Don't get me wrong; I do love my work, but lately I can't stop wondering what could have been."

"Wondering what could have been, huh..." Jæmis exhales a small breath as he stares down at his cup.

"So, Jæmis, what were you like as a child?" I ask, getting curious myself.

The question makes him pause for a second.

"Weak," is his answer as he takes a big gulp.

"Oh, come on, you were a child, children are supposed to be weak," I say flippantly.

"Ræhu aren't meant to be weak. We value strong members of society. As a Prince, I had to become the strongest."

"I guess I didn't look at it from that perspective, having to grow up under such pressure," I mumble quietly.

"Weak and ideally naïve, that is what I used to be. Young me wrongly thought he could save the day without having the strength to back it up."

Then my eyes land on his chest – the scar that he got when he was younger.

"Is that how you got this?" I ask, and I point at his chest.

"Yes," he says, finally finishing the hot chocolate. "I was too young to properly heal it."

"Leading to scars," I finish for him.

1. Touch the scar on his chest.
2. Talk about the scar on his arm.

I scoot a bit closer to him, raising my hand towards his chest. I lock my eyes with his dark ones, wondering if it's okay to touch.

When he makes no indication of moving, I let the tips of my fingers touch the scar on his chest. Jæmis inhales a sharp breath, but keeps looking at me.

"Did it hurt?" I ask softly as I trail the scar all the way down.

Then suddenly his hand grasps my own, halting my movements.

"*Did yours?*" he inquires back.

I feel like my breath is caught in my throat. I avert my eyes away from him, opting to look down at the scar on my own arm.

"At the time, yes," I answer.

He releases my hand.

"It was reckless to protect me," he comments.

"I don't regret it," I fire back.

I scoot a bit closer, looking at his left arm.

"You said it was the same, right? Right before getting blasted into space. Just like mine; a defensive wound."

I lift up my own arm, showcasing the thin red line I got from being whipped by Kæleb.

Jæmis appears remorseful.

"You never should have been hurt," he grumbles lowly.

I'm surprised, I didn't expect him to sound so sincere. To think this is the same person who was threatening to kill me from the moment I met him.

"You did the same thing young me tried, and failed."

"Who says I failed?" I ask crossly. "I genuinely believed your own brother was going to beat you to death. As far as I can see, you're still alive, so mission accomplished."

"It was foolish. You got hurt yourself."

"I don't regret it, if that's what you're getting at."

His eyes falter and his shoulders slump slightly.

"It is my regret that I thought I could protect my siblings. But the bright light and the subsequent barrage of wind attacks was not something I could defend against."

He suddenly bares his fangs.

"I couldn't even protect my brother, who was a baby at the time. He got slashed across his eye, permanently losing his vision."

I'm starting to put the pieces together. A blinding white light and wind...

"That's just what happened to Nornus," I say softly. "He brought down a house with it."

"Prince Nornus is Lord Varitus' younger brother, that he shares the same maniacal strength as his older brother should be no surprise."

So that confirms it; Varitus attacked Jæmis and his siblings when they were younger. I can't imagine the trauma he must have gone through at such a young age.

I keep quiet for a while, letting it sink in.

"Still," I start slowly as I finish my cup of chocolate.

"It was a very brave thing of you to do to protect your family. I don't think anyone could have asked for more when you were just a child."

"Only an Earthling such as yourself would think that," he says with a small huff.

"And you can't change my mind about it either," I reply.

"I wouldn't take back what I did if I had the chance," I say, referring to when I stopped Kæleb from hitting Jæmis.

I tilt my head to the side. "Would you?"

Once more he remains silent. Jæmis carefully thinks it over.

"No. I wouldn't," is his unwavering answer.

I smile in return.

"Seems the current you and the younger you still have some things in common."

Jæmis turns his head away.

"Hmpf. We do not," he denies. "I am much stronger now."

"Yes, I definitely won't deny that," I say as a giggle escapes from my mouth.

I hide my smile from him. It feels like I understand Jæmis and his principles a little better.

"You should get some sleep," he says all of a sudden, getting up from the couch.

"Tomorrow, we will train again. You need to be well rested."

"Yes, I'll try," I agree, also standing up from the couch.

"Thank you for the hot chocolate." He bows slightly in front of me, catching me off guard. He's being rather polite.

"Yeah, no problem..." I say awkwardly.

When he begins to walk away, I stop him.

"By the way," I ask as I take a step closer to him. "Isn't this cutting in your own training time? Teaching me, I mean."

"Are you concerned with how I spend my time?" he asks, genuinely confused.

"Well, you *do* seem a bit overzealous with training. I didn't mean to drag you away from that just so you can teach me."

He lifts his chin, as if scrutinizing my very being.

"I don't mind."

My eyes widen at his response.

"After all, who would stand around doing nothing when they have the power to help?" he says, repeating my own words.

"It would be an injustice to not help when you have the power to do so – right?" he says, repeating my own words.

I stare at him, my mouth agape. That's the opposite of what he's been saying this entire time! What's up with him?

He's being needlessly contradicting.

And yet I can't help it as my heart flutters in my chest. It's like he's saying he respects my values.

Jæmis finally turns around.

"Sleep well," he says as he ascends the stairs.

"Same," I say quietly.

My eyes stare at his scarred back, reminding me of the troubled childhood he's had. Yes, I do think I understand him a bit more now.

But I didn't expect this feeling to blossom where I suddenly want to know more about him.

Chapter [022] -- Lake Cabin Living Room Day

The very next day, I let Ralph know what I found.

"So there's five supers in those archives who can turn invisible?" he repeats what I said.

"Technically, there's way more. However, these five can not only turn themselves invisible, but other objects as well, including their clothes."

Ralph looks over the folders I picked out and placed on the coffee table.

"We don't know that the guy who attacked you is one of them, though." He crosses his arms and leans back into the couch.

"True..." I admit. They may very well have nothing to do with the guy that attacked me.

"But it's worth a shot to find out, don't you think? Some of them have addresses, we can go and--"

"--*You* are not going anywhere," Ralph interrupts me.

I fix him with a glare, my eyebrows lowering.

"Just because I got hit last time, doesn't mean it'll happen again."

"No, it's too dangerous. I don't trust it. How do you fight a guy you can't even see?"

"Look... I'm getting some self-defence training from James and Eeyok, would that put your mind at ease?"

Ralph just laughs at the audacity.

"You think a few tricks can help you go up against a *super*? A super involved with Hulio of all organizations!"

He shakes his head in disagreement.

"You're mad. I'm not letting you go again. Caine and I can figure things out ourselves."

"Hey – if you're not letting me investigate, I forbid you to go out on your own as well!"

"Who says I'm going out in the field? I've got my drone, you know."

"Ah yes, it was very helpful in the rain last time," I grumble.

"Don't insult my drone," he snaps.

"Whatever – I'm just not going to stay locked up again. I did that on another planet, and I'm done waiting around," I say proudly.

"I know it's dangerous, that's why I'm taking some lessons to be able to protect myself better. But one way or another, I'm going to find out who that guy is and why he was the last person our parents had contact with."

Ralph throws his hands up in the air.

"Do what you want – but not until after I see with my own eyes you can protect yourself. Until then, just sit back and let me and Caine deal with it."

I bite down on my bottom lip and look away.

"Fine. Fair enough."

It seems I'm going to have to shape up a bit before I can investigate further.

-- Lake Cabin Woods Day

A few days later, going through some rigorous training from Jæmis, we're at it again early in the morning.

I slide my hand across my shoulder, stretching my neck. My muscles feel so stiff and sore. Shouldn't I be getting used to this by now?

"Sore shoulders?" asks Eeyok in a concerned tone.

"Hmm," I confirm. "Throwing out all those punches just makes my arms super tired."

"Well, that's because you're a beginner. Keep at it and it'll be easier!" he cheers me on.

I give him a smile. "Thanks. Let's hope."

"Alright, show me the moves. Eeyok, restrain her from behind." Jæmis inserts himself into our light conversation, using a tone that means he's not in the mood for chit-chat.

Eeyok grabs me from behind again, a chokehold position that I've repeated many times by now.

To be fair, I *am* getting used to the routine, it's easier to grasp. I punch backwards and deliver my full combo on Eeyok before he releases me.

Jæmis remains quiet however, his arms folded across his chest. He's been watching me like a hawk these past few days, correcting even the most minor posture mistakes.

It's a little unnerving to be examined so closely. At times, I feel like I'm performing worse when he's watching. I get nervous.

"Now from the front, dodge his attempts," he instructs us.

Eeyok stands in front of me and I spread my feet apart with my hands in front of my face, ready to disengage.

Eeyok tries to grab my wrist, but I quickly deflect it with my own. He keeps repeating it, getting closer and closer to me each time.

"Remember to step back," Jæmis tells me, noticing I'm letting Eeyok get too close. "Always remain a proper distance between you and your attacker."

I jump back to put some distance between us. Except Eeyok is also light on his feet and he lunges forward, successfully grabbing my wrist and pulling me close.

I push my palm up against his chin, delivering a swift blow. I then knee him in the groin as he leaves himself wide open.

With a guffaw, Eeyok backs away, a pained expression on his face.

"Oh no – did I hurt you?" I ask, fussing over him. I tried to keep it light!

"No, no, it was a good shot," he says through a grimace.

All I can do is give him an apologetic look.

"Time to switch partners," Jæmis announces, stepping forwards himself.

"It's clear Eeyok is holding back – but so are you. Your attacks are restrained. You need to hit like you mean it."

I wince a little – he's right. I have been holding back, it's hard to want to punch Eeyok for real.

Maybe I wouldn't have such reservations against Jæmis' smug face.

"Eeyok, resume your own training, I'll take it from here."

Eeyok bows and leaves the two of us alone.

"Let's see how you fare against someone more competent," he says as he unfolds his arms.

That doesn't sound ominous at all.

1. "Come at me!"
2. "Go easy on me."

"Come at me!" I roar, getting into a fighting stance.

Jæmis throws back his head with a smirk.

"Have it your way."

In an instant, he's in front of me, grabbing my wrist before I can react. He twists me around and pins my arm behind my back. I struggle to break free, but he has an enormous amount of strength forcing me into submission.

He lowers his face next to my head. "You're dead," he says.

Jæmis releases me, taking a step back.

"You're small, use it to your advantage. Make yourself a target that is hard to catch. Move, dodge and duck."

Then he spreads his feet apart, getting ready once more.

"Again," he announces.

When he approaches me again, I sidestep him, ducking away from his grab. Except he's faster than I am and he throws an arm around my neck, pulling me into his chest.

I step onto his foot, but he pulls it back, making me slam my heel into the ground. Frustrated, I try the groin attack, but he hugs me so close to his body, I am unable to move my arm.

"Dead again." There's a hint of amusement in his tone, it makes me want to smack him.

Jæmis lets me loose, and I huff in annoyance.

"Your priority is not to get grabbed in the first place," he lectures me. "Because no matter the moves you know, someone stronger than you will always have the upper hand."

"Let's test that theory out, then," I warn him, narrowing my eyes at him.

"Go easy on me," I ask of him.

"Enemies will never go easy on you," he huffs.

"You're not my enemy, though," I mutter.

"Get ready," he commands.

I get into a fighting position and wait for Jæmis to approach. I expect him to appear in front of me in the blink of an eye, but he moves slow enough for me to react.

I sidestep him and hop away. Jæmis follows in pursuit, taking a larger stride this time to reach me and aim for my wrist.

I quickly deflect it, just as he taught me, and back away once more.

"Good – always stay out of reach and be quick on your feet," he says, sounding pleased.

I feel myself glow at his compliment.

Then he advances towards me once more. After a couple of dodges, he manages to snatch my wrist. He turns me around and twists my arm behind my back. With his other arm he keeps me in a chokehold.

I try to punch behind me with my free arm, but Jæmis hugs me closer and it makes it impossible to move. He shows no indication of letting go or being caught off guard. He's simply... so much stronger than I am.

"No matter the training, you can't escape someone powerful once they've got you," he says right next to my ear.

"Then what's the point of trying to teach me how to get out of a chokehold?" I ask with a huff.

"To understand that someone stronger than you will always win. Do not get caught in the first place," he warns me as he finally releases me.

Annoyed at his words, I jump away from him. I feel this strong urge to show him he's wrong. That I could free myself.

He makes his move, approaching me with velocity. I end up evading him, skirting around the field, staying light on my feet.

But Jæmis is just so much faster than I'm able to keep up with, and within a split second, he's behind me again. One arm wrapped around my neck, and the other holding my left arm.

When I try to punch backwards, Jæmis does the same thing as before; pulling me in closer so I can't hit him.

Frustrated, I conjure a thread from all my fingers, weaving them together to make a cohesive piece of rope. With this rope, I hook it around his arm that's restraining my neck, and I yank on it.

Surprised by the sudden pull on his arm, Jæmis' hold weakens, allowing me to wiggle to freedom.

I jump away, grabbing the piece of woven rope with me. A smirk creeps onto my face, feeling quite proud of myself for escaping him.

"That's not what we taught you," he says, looking at the white rope in my hand.

I dissolve it and shrug at him.

"You said I can't beat someone more powerful than me, but I don't need to be stronger than them. Just smarter."

"It's clever, I'll give you that," he admits.

"Perhaps it would be better to train you while keeping in mind you can..." He points at my hand.

"Make this?" I say, making a single thread grow from the tip of my index finger.

"Yes. I was under the impression it only served medical purposes, but I've been wrong about that. You can apply it in combat as well."

He steps closer to me, suddenly very interested in my ability.

"How strong is it?"

A little giddy he's showing interest, I show him how strong my thread is by spreading it between both hands and snapping it apart.

"It's not that strong, just a good tug and it snaps. But if I weave it together like this," I say as I conjure multiple threads from my fingertips, "then it becomes much stronger. Like a piece of rope."

I lace together a string of around a meter long, then detach it from my fingers, handing it over to Jæmis.

He gives it a close inspection, tugging at it to gauge its strength. He also weighs it as he moves his hand up and down.

"It's lightweight," he notes.

Then he pulls it apart in two pieces without much effort. Giving it one last glance, he hands it back to me.

"Maybe strong enough to hold your own weight."

"You know, that's how I caught you," I say as I dissolve the rope.

"Caught me?" Jæmis repeats, eyebrows raising.

"Oh right, you probably don't remember. The first time I saw you, you were falling from the sky. I weaved a net between two poles to catch you." I gesture with my hand to show him the scale of the net I had to make.

"I was so afraid I wouldn't be fast enough! But luckily, I caught you without injuring you," I say with a triumphant smile.

He slowly tilts his head to the side as he takes this information in. This is completely new to him.

"...It seems I owed you my life even before everything," he mumbles quietly, eyes cast on the dirt in front of him.

"Yeah well, you ended up being the bad guy here and kidnapping me. That's my thanks for helping you," I say facetiously.

Jæmis clicks his tongue. "Lessons learned, haven't we? Don't empathize with the enemy."

"I didn't know whose side you were on," I argue back.

"But even so, I told you that night... I can't stand by doing nothing when I know I have the power to help someone."

I look at him, a flash of determination flickering in my eyes.

"Even knowing who you are and what would happen to me, I'd do it all over again, too."

Jæmis suddenly closes the gap between us and he's right in front of me. His gaze is just as intense as his posture.

"I have wronged you so much, yet you still look at me with your unyielding eyes. Like a fire that can't be put out."

Something inside me wavers. Like I'm becoming entranced by him.

"...I think I understand why you would give me your Makoet at the Maaka festival. Only someone as resilient as you would do so."

"I wanted to give it to you, so I did," I explain.

"You have integrity, standing by your beliefs. I can respect that," he says in this low whisper.

We stare at each other for a while. It's weird, and even a little exciting.

He all but told me he respects me. Coming from Jæmis, that feels huge. My heart can't stop beating faster.

And suddenly I don't know how to move my body anymore. Weren't we supposed to be training? How did we end up in this conversation?

After a few more seconds, Jæmis retreats, stepping away from me and creating some space between us. It feels like I can breathe normally again.

"Now, let's resume training. Try and use that ability of yours if you can."

I nod at him as I get into a fighting stance.

"Alright. I'm ready."

A flash of a genuine smile on Jæmis' face stops me dead in my tracks.

"I'm going to have to get used to your 'nodding'," he says in a light manner.

I'm absolutely floored to see him act so... carefree? I have only seen him smile once – at the Maaka festival towards his sister – but never directed to me.

God, it feels like an absolute rarity to see.

My lips pull into a smile of my own.

"You're going to have to get used to a lot of things with me," I reply, matching his tone.

Jæmis stops smiling, his face back to his usual self as he launches himself towards me.

-- Lake Cabin Woods Noon

We've been at it for hours now. Jæmis is unabashedly strong and ridiculously fast, but I'm improving. I'm starting to keep up with him, even using my thread to get me out of difficult situations.

But now, I'm just getting drained and tired.

Jæmis hasn't even broken a sweat, I'm so salty about that. I'm drenched in my own sweat and I reek.

I get out of my fighting stance. "Jæmis, can we quit now?" I whine.

Except that was the wrong move. Jæmis was already running towards me. With my unguarded body, his attempt to grab me ends up knocking me off of my feet.

I yelp and claw at his chest, trying to catch myself.

It's no use; I fall down onto the dirt with him on top of me. The force of Jæmis' push is so big, it makes us tumble across the dirt, rolling around until we come to a stop.

With elbows planted on the sides of my head, Jæmis gazes down at me, pure fear reflected in his eyes. God, his entire body is crushing me; he's so heavy.

His heart is beating fast – the melody almost erratic. My breathing is out of whack, too.

"A-are you hurt?" he asks, scanning my body for any injuries.

I blink up at him as I realize what he means. The oath. He can't harm humans.

"No worries... your heart's still beating," I pant.

"Putrid mother's nutsack – I didn't think you'd suddenly drop your guard."

"Sorry," I mumble.

"We could have *both* died."

I feel so guilty, but also completely terrified that he's right; we could have died if he had hurt me.

Jæmis removes himself from me and swiftly pulls me to my feet as well.

It's then that I notice a small scrape on my elbow.

"Oh huh, I *did* get hurt," I say, showing Jæmis my small scrape.

Jæmis' eyes flickers between my elbow and his own hand.

"...We are not dead," he states.

1. "That's a genius observation."
2. "I'm definitely glad we're not."

"That's a genius observation," I say with a snort.

Jæmis fixes me with a glare.

"You know very well what I mean."

"I'm definitely glad we're not."

"We're still breathing," he observes.

"Standing, too."

"The oath we took – is it not working?" he questions.

I have no idea either... is it faulty? I stare at the back of my right hand and see the faint lines of the oath.

"I don't think so..."

"Then why are we alive?"

"I think..." And I'm making a *huge* assumption here. "Maybe there's a distinction between intent and an accident?"

"Clearly, you didn't mean to hurt me. It was an accident."

"Hmpf." Jæmis crosses his arms, looking a bit peeved.

"Training is over, let's return and replenish ourselves," he says stiffly.

I'm all in agreement with that.

I'll admit; it was nice to see him panic a little bit.

-- Lake Cabin Livingroom Day

Ralph has spent the next few days investigating the addresses of the supers who can turn invisible.

"Another dead end," he says, throwing the folder onto the coffee table.

"What was it this time?" I ask.

"Cancer. Can't hide from that, I guess. Dead for two years."

Okay yes, being dead definitely gets you crossed off the list. We've gone through four of them so far, they've either moved out of the country, are dead, or just missing completely. There's only one left.

"We're working with eight year old data, it's not going to help us much," says Ralph.

"Seems Mr. Invisible is left. He's in the next town over, at least it's not far," I say, browsing through the last folder.

"That's going to have to wait, Caine is out on his own mission at the moment."

"Huh, Caine's gone?"

"I mean, he's a super after all. He's gotta do missions every now and then to earn money."

"What if I go?" I suggest.

Ralph fixes me with a strong, disapproving glare.

"You kidding me?"

"Of course not. I've been receiving training, you know!"

"It's been like a week!"

"My god, you are one irritating little bugger, you know that," I groan.

"I'm thinking of your safety here. If Caine's not around to protect you, who will?"

"Jæmis," I blurt out.

Ralph blinks several times at me, his head twitching.

"Hahahahaha!" he bursts out laughing.

He kicks the table and punches the air. He then clicks his tongue and gives me finger guns.

"Good one, sis."

I don't know why I said it, but now that his name has left my lips, I am starting to see that it could work. Bringing a beefy guy along with me as a bodyguard? Surely, that would scare anyone off.

"I mean, he doesn't need to physically hurt anyone – it's enough for him to appear threatening," I say.

Ralph sits up straight, giving me a funny look.

"Wait – you're serious?"

"He can be my back-up," I explain. "He's got really good senses, you know."

"That lump of alien shit kidnapped you to another planet – then tried to attack Earth again!" he cries out loud.

"Why would you even trust him enough to help you!?"

Do I?

A month ago, when I returned back to Earth, I would say I trusted Eeyok, but I wouldn't have an answer for Jæmis.

Except... I think my feelings have started to change.

"Well, first of all, he's under oath, so he honestly has no choice but to listen to me," I say.

"And second of all, he's already been training me to get better at self-defence. It shows good faith."

Ralph shakes his head, rubbing his temples.

"You're mad. Bonkers. Caine was right about that Stockholm thing."

I punch his shoulder, glaring at him.

"Don't joke about that. Look, he's big and bulky, he could get me out of trouble. If Caine isn't available, then he's our next best bet."

"It's not like we can hire a super of our own for protection – the Forrester company would know. Then we'd have them breathing down our necks, asking us questions. And we don't want them finding out our parents were actually vigilantes."

"I hate that you make a good point," he grumbles.

"But you're supposed to be laying low," he points out. "At least with Caine you were wearing a helmet so people couldn't see you."

"I know, Super Mallgirl and whatever. Relax, I'm not trending anymore and uhh..." I quickly start thinking of some designs I could use. "I'll wear a disguise."

"...You're going to make your own supersuit, aren't you?"

I give him the widest and cheekiest grin I can muster.

"That's right."

-- Lake Cabin Bedroom

Eeyok looks at me with curious eyes as I run around the various boxes of fabric.

"Wow, so you are going to be a soldier?" he asks in wonder.

I hold up a piece of white latex and laugh.

"No, not exactly. I'm just going to investigate a lead on that man who could turn invisible. And I'm going to make myself a supersuit so that people won't recognize me."

"I'm a little confused how wearing something flashier makes you stand out less," he says sheepishly.

"It'll work, trust me," I say with confidence.

"I just need Jæmis to work with me," I mutter as I bite down on my thumb. I haven't asked him yet.

"What do you want of Prince Jæmis?"

"To uhm, act as my bodyguard."

Eeyok stands up straight and pounds his chest.

"If you are in need of protection, I am willing to serve you," he says with a respectful bow.

I smile at him; he's always so eager. I'm glad he got to stay on Earth with me, I'd miss him too much otherwise.

"Thank you so much for the offer, Eeyok."

He grins at me, thinking I'll agree to it.

"But, I think Jæmis is a better fit. I know you're both competent when it comes to combat, but neither of you can attack anyone in the first place. It's about looking intimidating."

Eeyok's brows droop. "Oh..."

"Yeah, sorry, you're very cute in your human form. Not exactly something that instils fear in people."

That makes him look even more dejected.

"I am useless then..."

"No, no, no!" I say quickly, feeling guilty. "You're here for moral support."

My bedroom door suddenly bursts open.

"What is this I hear about looking intimidating," Jæmis demands to know.

"What is up with that hearing of yours?" I question loudly. "Also, can't you knock first?"

Jæmis gives me a long glance, then casually knocks on the door whilst keeping eye contact with me.

"Haha, very funny," I quip.

"I am not acting funny," he replies, deadpan.

Eeyok snorts in response.

"Whatever – I wanted to ask you something."

"Well?"

"Do you want to act as my bodyguard for a little while?" I ask, suddenly feeling stupid for asking.

He tilts his head to the side, giving me a strange look.

"Bodyguard?" he repeats.

"Yes. I am going to the place where a super lives who can turn invisible, to see if it's the same one that attacked me. I think I could use a little back-up."

"You're asking me – a *prince* – to protect you?"

1. "That's exactly what I'm asking."
2. "Yes, please?"

"That's exactly what I'm asking."

He huffs in response.

"Do you know how ludicrous that sounds?"

"Look, all you need to do is stand around looking broody – just like you're doing right now. Perfect snarl, you got it *just* right," I say, innocently smiling at him.

"Asking Prince Jæmis seems a little beneath him," Eeyok admits.

"I'll do it."

Both Eeyok and I stare at Jæmis like we didn't hear him correctly.

"What?" I ask dumbly.

"This is the man that attacked you before, yes?" asks Jæmis.

"Yes..." I say slowly.

"Then I shall go with you."

I still can't quite wrap around his logic, but he's saying yes at least. I was expecting more of a struggle, that I'd be forced to use the oath card and that he doesn't have a choice.

"Yes, please?" I ask sweetly.

He crosses his arms, eyes narrowing.

"What makes you think I'll say yes to that ridiculous request?"

"Because... You want to help me?" I say innocently.

Seeing his natural expression, I sigh.

"You don't need to do much. Just stand there and look menacing. That's all."

"This is the same man that attacked you before?" he inquires.

"Well, that's what I'm trying to find out, and why I'm asking for your help."

"Prince Jæmis, you can't let her go alone without protection," Eeyok chimes in.

"Going alone would be a mistake, agreed. Then I shall accompany you."

I pause, quite surprised he'd agree to it so fast. I would have thought he needed some more convincing. Maybe even begging, who knows. I didn't quite expect his readiness to help me out.

"Okay... thank you."

"It hasn't been too long since you've started your training, but I believe you should be able to defend yourself much better now. I will go to oversee," he explains.

"Prince Jæmis is not honest, he's just worried you'll get hurt again," Eeyok whispers to me.

Jæmis narrows his eyes at him. "Eeyok, be quiet or I'll throw you into the lake."

Eeyok shrieks and backs away.

"Y-you wouldn't... You know Gaötte can't swim," he says in a fearful tone.

He smirks at him. "Exactly."

"Can you stop threatening Eeyok, please?" I ask with a loud sigh.

"When do we leave?" Jæmis asks, his tone serious.

I look around my room.

"Uhm, as soon as I finish my suit. I have to wear something so people don't recognize me when I go out."

"How many days?" he asks more urgently.

"I'll have it ready in two days," I say quickly.

"Then we should prepare. Let's head out to train."

"Now?" I whine. I was about to work on my suit! I had all these designs in my head; ready to go!

"If you want my help, you're going to have to work for it," he says, a cocky smirk gracing his features.

"Prince Jæmis is right, you should train as much as you can before facing the invisible man again," Eeyok agrees.

"Alright, alright, I'll train again. But please leave me some time to finish my own work," I plead.

"Manage to beat me and you can wrap up training early," he says.

I groan. "That means I'll be training all day!"

"Get to it, then." Jæmis then disappears from my room.

-- Lake Cabin Living room Day

I pull the tab all the way up the zipper, completely fitted into my own suit. I stretch out my arms and do a few squats to test out the fit.

"The hell is that?" asks Ralph as he enters the living room.

"This," I say, flaunting my body, "is my super suit."

"You look like a squatting white frog."

I growl at my brother. "My design is very sophisticated, thank you very much."

"*Sophisticated?* Yeah, you're right, I take it back. You look like a PlayStation 5 instead."

I shove Ralph onto the couch with a huff.

"Don't be an annoying little pest. I'm about to head off, you know."

His playful demeanor changes.

"You're officially a vigilante now, you know that, right?"

"So were mom and dad."

"And look how that turned out for them."

I give him a cold look. "That's what we're trying to get to the bottom of."

Ralph heaves a sigh and then tosses me a small metal can.

"Here," he says as I catch it. "Spray the dude if you come across him. It's blue paint."

"How would that help?" I question. "He can turn matter invisible aside from himself."

Ralph rolls his eyes. "Yes, exactly. Which means you're going to see a man shaped hole in the middle of all this blue floating paint. Easy to find, no?"

"Oh." I feel a bit slow. That definitely works.

"Now, where's that meathead, I need to have a word with him before you leave," says Ralph, looking around for Jæmis.

"He's outside, probably doing a bit of training before we leave."

I stuff the can into a pocket I've strapped to my waist. We both leave the cabin to go outside.

-- Lake Cabin Outside Day

At least it isn't raining this time around.

As suspected; Jæmis is training off in the distance, right near the pier. Eeyok appears to be his sparring partner.

"Jæmis!" I holler at him, waving my hand.

They halt their training and walk towards us. Jæmis is already in his gear.

"Now you two are matching idiots," remarks Ralph.

1. Knock him over the head.

2. "Can you please stop insulting my work?"

I knock him over the head, giving him a disapproving stare.

"Hey!" he protests. "I'm just giving you my honest opinion."

"You can shove that opinion up your—"

"Can you please stop insulting my work?" I ask exasperatedly.

"How can I? You both look like walking consoles! I'm trying to figure out where the power button is."

"Look here, you little—"

"—Are we moving out?" Jæmis cuts in.

I stop arguing with Ralph and nod at him.

"Yes. Are you ready?"

"To find an invisible man without being able to use my own powers?" he fires back.

"You don't need your powers. Can't you sniff him out? You always manage to know when *I'm* bleeding."

Ralph's nostrils flare up.

"Bleeding!? Did you hurt my sister!?" he yells at Jæmis.

"No!" I quickly cut in. "Not *that* kind of bleeding. Ugh. Never mind, let's go, okay?"

"Good luck Joselina, may you return safely," says Eeyok as he bows in front of me.

Ralph suddenly pokes his finger into Jæmis' chest.

"Look – you better bring my sister back in one piece, alive and well. If I notice she so much as has a scratch on her, I'm going to toss you into a pool of piranhas and piss on your remains."

Jæmis keeps his cool, probably because he has no idea what piranhas even are.

"Enough with the death threats. Don't pee on anyone, Ralph, that's gross. Just follow us with the drone."

I start guiding Jæmis towards the car.

"See you later!" I wave at them.

-- Inside car

With the location entered into the GPS, we're on our way to Gion, the town next to Claner.

It's a little strange to be driving a car with Jæmis in the passenger seat next to me. We're both wearing super suits as well.

"Make sure you put your mask on when we leave the car," I warn him.

I had to make him a small mask to cover most of his face – I don't want Forrester Inc realizing Jæmis has left the premises. Ralph is already hacking their tracking on Jæmis in the first place, but if his face gets captured by a security camera, then there's not much he can do.

"It feels a bit unnecessary," he comments.

"They can't know you've left. Same for me. We're both not supposed to be out right now," I say as I turn a left.

Jæmis' body lurches to the side of the car and he shakes his head, trying to keep himself balanced. He coughs and sits up straight. Strange.

"Figures you're like this as well on your own planet," he mentions.

"Like what?"

He takes in a deep breath. "Not listening to authority."

I snort in response.

"Guess not."

I enter a roundabout and Jæmis clutches the car door, his face looking pained.

Actually, last time he was in the car, he was on edge as well. It was just not as noticeable because I had Eeyok with me who kept talking to me about the things he was seeing.

"Hey Jæmis," I call his name as we exit the roundabout.

"What is it?" he asks, sounding pained.

"Are you nauseous?"

He stares out the window, though he's unable to hide the paleness in his face.

"No," he answers. "There is no need to concern yourself."

Standard Jæmis talk. I bet he's carsick. I try to drive slowly and avoid roundabouts when I can.

After a while of silence, Jæmis speaks up.

"...What are pieranjas?" he questions.

I stifle a giggle; I knew it was bothering him that he didn't know what Ralph meant.

-- Outside apartment building

We've finally arrived at our destination. Before exiting the car, I pull up my own mask over my nose.

"You sure you're okay?" I ask, concerned about Jæmis.

He seems to be wobbling a bit on his feet, even breaking out into a sweat. The car ride was not easy on him.

"Fresh air is good," he says, inhaling loudly.

"Mask on," I tell him.

Thankfully, he listens as he pulls it over his face.

God, we look like we're up to no good.

Which I guess is correct?

"This is where he lives, in apartment 55. Or supposed to, anyway," I say with a shrug.

I check out the front door and read the list of residential names, looking for 'Alexander Kotov', his real name.

"Oh! He's here!" I say excitedly, spotting his name on number 55.

"Why are you acting like you didn't think he'd be here?" Jæmis questions me.

"Because he could have moved, the data I got on him is pretty old. I'm glad he's still living here though."

I stare at the door; what do I do? Do I just ring the bell? I look up at the apartment; number 55 is on the top floor it seems. If I ring and he recognizes me, he's going to run. I can't have him buzz me in, I need to break in myself.

"Ralph, can you check apartment 55? See if you can look through the window and find anyone inside," I say to my earpiece.

The drone that's been following us rises up in the sky; circling the apartment building. It hovers at the top floor.

"See anything?" I ask.

"Mostly closed curtains," Ralph mumbles. "Maybe I can get a better view on the other side."

The drone flies away to somewhere I can't see.

"Oh! I saw someone move inside!"

"Great! He's there!"

"Be careful, let the meat shield enter through the door first."

I roll my eyes at his nicknames for Jæmis. Then I turn to Jæmis.

"Okay, my brother confirmed someone is indeed at home."

"Now... how to open this door..." I mumble as I pace up and down.

As I'm pacing there, contemplating on how to unlock the electric door in front of me, wondering if perhaps I could scale the building and enter from the balcony, Jæmis nudges me.

"Huh, what?" I say, flustered he broke my train of thought.

Jæmis holds the door open for me, cocking his head to the side.

I look around and see an old woman walking away, presumably she just exited the building and kept the door open for us as a nice gesture.

"Oh. Well that was easy," I say, feeling a bit sheepish for making it more complicated than it needed to be.

No scaling buildings then! Caine would have too much fun with that and call me Spider Widow or something.

We enter the building.

-- Outside Alex apartment

As we stand in front of apartment number 55, I suddenly begin to get cold feet. We don't know for sure this is the same guy that attacked me, but it makes me pause nonetheless.

"Remember your training. As long as you are prepared, you'll do fine," Jæmis reassures me.

Yes, he's right. Invisibility does not mean invincibility – he's just a normie who can turn invisible. Which means I have a chance.

I knock on the door, gulping as my knuckles hit the wood.

I wait for a response, keeping my eyes trained on the window for any movement, in case he decides to bail. Two people with super suits showing up is bound to make anyone back off...

When there's no response, I look over at Jæmis.

"Joselina! He's on the balcony, trying to use the fire escape!" Ralph yells in my ear.

"He's escaping through the back!" I tell Jæmis.

Then I look at the door. "Can you—"

Wasting no time, Jæmis kicks the door in. The sound of shattered wood fills my ears and it takes me a second to readjust.

Jæmis has already entered inside without me and I scramble to hurry up after him.

-- Alex's balcony

I make my way through the messy apartment, reaching the balcony.

"He's turned invisible," Jæmis explains, following the sound of the footsteps hurrying down the fire escape.

I quickly pull the can of paint from my pouch and I start to spray it in the air. Blue paint particles start floating around everywhere, covering the fire escape.

And soon enough, particles start to disappear as they stick to the invisible super. A man-shape hole can be seen through the paint, two floors below us.

"There!"

Jæmis jumps down several flights of stairs to catch up to the guy.

I quickly weave a rope together with my thread, using it to catch him. Shit, where do I aim? It's still hard to see through all this floating paint.

Jæmis takes the initiative and grabs my piece of rope, dangling from above, and swiftly uses it to lasso it around the invisible man, tying it around him and restraining him.

"Oh – good job!" I scream for joy. Jæmis caught him!

With pure brute strength, Jæmis flops something invisible over his shoulder and launches himself up in the air.

For a brief moment, I believe he's flying, but no, he lands on the balcony with a loud thud. He just has a lot of muscle power in those thighs of his. He's like a certified grasshopper at this point.

"I apprehended the suspect," he says coolly.

I can see his arm holding something, with my thread being bound around it as well.

"Let me go you bastard!" groans the invisible man.

"Let's put him inside," I say quickly. We already made too much noise; people might call another super to investigate.

We quickly head inside, despite the protest of the guy we captured.

-- Inside Alex's apartment

The front door has been hastily propped back up, though the locks and hinges are completely busted. But it's enough to block any noise from exiting.

Because... this guy won't shut the hell up.

"Let me go! You treacherous thieves! I'll spit on your graves!"

There's an invisible person tied up on a simple chair, with Jæmis and I standing in front of him.

"Show yourself," I demand.

A wad of spit materializes from thin air and flies my way. I quickly jump to the side to dodge it. Eww, gross.

1. "Alright, you want to do it the hard way?"

2. "I have all day, you know."

"Alright, you want to do it the hard way?" I growl.

"Fuck you," he hisses.

Agitated he's not working with me; I decide to straddle his waist by sitting on him. This way I know where he is.

"The hell are you—"

My hands reach out for his face, accidentally almost plunging a finger into his mouth.

"LET ME GO!" He's whipping his head back and forth in my hands, but I've got a good grip on it.

I stare into the air as a wicked grin spreads on my face. Both my thumbs are pressed hard against his cheeks.

"If you won't show yourself, or won't stop screaming, you're going to regret it," I threaten him.

When he's still screaming and thrashing about, I shrug and align all my fingers around his mouth.

In an instant, my threads have pierced his skin, quickly sewing his mouth shut.

Nothing but muffled yelps can be heard.

"Now, that's not very comfortable, is it?"

I can feel him shake his head in my hands.

"I'll remove it if you show yourself."

Poof. In an instant, I see a guy's face in front of me, blue eyes staring at me with fear, and lips sewn shut. He's covered in blue paint that I sprayed on him earlier.

I remove myself from his lap, satisfied with my work.

"Neat trick," says Jæmis, looking pleased.

The guy in the chair says something muffled, looking at me expectantly.

I touch his lips with my index finger, feeling it rub against the thread. I then dissolve it completely so there's no trace.

He opens up his mouth, taking in a large breath, and then another – like he's hyperventilating.

"Who the – who the fuck *are* you people!? What do you want!"

"Can you keep your voice down, otherwise you'll force me to shut you up again," I say, keeping my own voice calm and collected as much as possible, despite my racing heart.

That seems to do the trick and he stubbornly closes his mouth, glaring at me.

"I have all day, you know," I say casually, trying to ignore the spit directed at me.

"Good for you!" he replies sarcastically. "Now let me go!"

"This man is disrespecting you. We should gag him so he can't talk," says Jæmis.

"No that's okay... for now, maybe later," I answer.

"Are you talking in some kind of code?" the invisible man questions.

"We're not going to do anything at all, not until you show yourself first," I repeat.

"Fuck you." He spits at me again, this time it lands on my shoes.

Suddenly a scuffle breaks out and the chair has been toppled over – hovering above the floor as Jæmis holds it up by pulling on the thread that's tied around the man's waist. Wow, he's fast!

"If I did not have this oath keeping me in check, rest assured, this man would be dead," says Jæmis in a low voice.

I know he's threatening to kill another human being, but it's nice to know he got angry on my behalf.

"W-what's he saying?" asks the man, fear clearly heard in his voice.

"He wants to throw you off of the rooftop," I lie.

I fold my arms and lazily look at my nails.

"...Unless you show yourself, of course."

"Bite me, bitch."

"Okay, let's take him outside."

Jæmis lifts him and the chair up.

"No-no-no!" he shrieks. "Put me down!"

"Then show yourself."

And there it is, a man covered in blue paint suddenly appears in the chair. His blue eyes staring frighteningly at Jæmis, who's still holding him above the floor.

Jæmis puts him down and steps back.

"Alright, are you ready to talk civilly now?" I ask.

"Who the – who the fuck *are* you people!? What do you want!"

"Can you keep your voice down? I can't vouch for your safety otherwise. I don't really control this guy," I say, pointing at Jæmis.

That seems to do the trick and he stubbornly closes his mouth, glaring at me.

"Alright, my first question is... Are you the guy that told me to meet you at that warehouse?"

The widening of his eyes says everything.

Gotcha, Mr. Invisible.

"...You're her," he says, realizing who I am.

"That's right. I don't take too kindly to being hit in the stomach, you know."

Suddenly he spits at my feet again.

"Fucking deserved it, if you are who you say you are."

"This man is acting insolent towards you. I suggest we really do throw him off the rooftop," says Jæmis.

Mr. Invisible whips his head towards Jæmis.

"The hell kind of language is that?"

"No, that won't be necessary," I reply.

"Tell me what you're doing here in my house! How the hell did you find me here!?" he demands to know.

"I thought you could tell me," I answer. "I want to know who you are and why you were the last person my parents had called."

"Smoker and Portation? They're trash. They left me to die," he hisses.

Those two names mean nothing to me, but my instinct tells me they were my parents' vigilante aliases.

"What do you mean they left you to die?" I inquire.

"You think I *like* living in this shithole of an apartment, getting overrun by supers like you? Being Hulio's lapdog? Eight years they left me to hang out and dry!" he growls loudly.

That means he's definitely involved with Hulio – but why is he so mad at my parents?

"Where were they when I needed them the most, huh!?"

I pause, slightly taken aback.

"You don't know?"

"Know what," he spits back.

"They're dead. They died in a fire eight years ago. A fire claimed by Hulio," I explain.

The man slowly closes his mouth, momentarily not talking. Then he rapidly blinks his eyes, shaking his head.

"No – they can't. That's not true."

"They're my parents. I saw the bodies. They're *dead*," I restate.

"Why do you think I'm here? I finally figured out a lead on their deaths – *you* were the last person they called. You even sent them a text message you were on your way. On your way to what?"

"Me?" he says, sounding surprised.

He stares at me with his blue eyes, an eerie silence settling between us.

"You don't know anything, do you?" he asks.

"That's what I'm trying to find out. All I know is that my parents had your information, including your address."

"Of course they did, I *gave* them all of that information," he scoffs.

Irritation flashes in his eyes. "They never told me about having a daughter."

"They never told me they were meddling with supers either," I retort back.

"Meddling? They were supposed to get me out!"

"Get you out of what exactly?"

"Fuck it, you don't know anything. I'm not saying shit. For all I know, you're some kind of Hulio spy. God knows how many they have."

This guy is extremely frustrating to work with... he's being incredibly difficult.

"If he doesn't want to answer any questions, I can tell you some interrogation methods," Jæmis offers.

I shake my head. "I really don't want to torture him," I sigh exasperatedly.

"Torture!?" His eyes widen in alarm.

"See this guy over here? He's very eager to get his hands on you to get you to talk," I casually lie as I point at Jæmis.

A bit of good cop and bad cop acting wouldn't hurt.

"So if you don't start cooperating with us, I may just let him do his thing."

"That works, too," says Jæmis in his own language.

"I don't know what you want from me! I haven't seen Smoker or Portation in years! When I got the call from their number, I didn't know what the hell to do."

"All I want to know is why you were calling them eight years ago," I repeat my question.

"I gave them the information they asked for – okay!? And then they were supposed to get me out! Instead, I waited around like a fool, thinking I could start over," he spits out in annoyance.

Sharing information that they asked for...

"What kind of information did they ask for?" I inquire.

"Fuck you, I'm not saying."

Jæmis steps forward and kicks at the chair's leg, breaking it down in one swift motion. The chair falls to its side with the man still tied to it.

Looking threatening, Jæmis pulls back his foot, getting ready to kick again, this time aiming at the man's knees. Seeing his line of sight, the man starts to panic.

"F-fine, I'll tell you! Just leave my kneecaps alone!"

Jæmis lowers his foot onto the floor with a smirk. He is good at getting him to talk, for sure, since he doesn't know Jæmis can't harm him in the first place.

I help him sit up straight, though it's a bit hard with one of the chair legs missing.

"Now, what was this information you told them?" I ask, looking him right in the eye.

"That one of their friends was a backstabber. The biggest backstabber you can think of. Monumental shit, apparently."

"Can you stop being so vague, just tell me already," I say impatiently. "Which friend backstabbed them?"

"I don't know his name; they call him the boss. I just know what he looks like. They don't let me know that kind of information, okay? I'm just a low grunt they use if they need some spy work done," he explains.

"You were a spy for my parents?" I ask, raising my eyebrows.

"*Informant*," he hisses, correcting me.

The pieces of the puzzle start to fall into place. My parents were using this guy as an informant.

"You're a spy for Hulio, but were feeding my parents information about them – is that right?"

"Look, it's not by choice, alright?" he huffs, annoyed.

"You try getting out of being blackmailed for something you did when you were stupid and seventeen – and kind of horny – they just keep making you do more fucked up stuff until you're in too deep and can't leave."

I narrow my eyes at the 'kind of horny' part.

"What'd you do that they're blackmailing you for?" I question.

"Does it matter at this point? I've done worse since then," he sighs.

"Yes, of course."

His blue eyes shift to the side, debating whether or not to tell me.

Then he hangs his head low. "I spied on some women changing, okay? My ability is quite useful for that."

My face scrunches up. Gross – he was leering at women while invisible!

"That's so gross, you pervert," I chastise him.

"They somehow got proof and... made me their lackey. I ended up having to do more fucked up shit until there was no way out," he laments dejectedly.

"Smoker and Portation were going to get me out... A new identity, a new life. Portation was going to set up a portal so I could leave this shithole, but the portal never appeared. They abandoned me after they got their juicy information."

I'm quite surprised to hear talk about a portal – one of my parents had an ability, named Portation.

"Like I said, they didn't abandon you – they're dead," I repeat, getting a little annoyed he's not accepting it.

"It seems on the night they were supposed to 'get you out', they ended up trapped in a building on fire and perished."

The man casts his eyes onto the floor.

"Do you know who did it?" I ask.

He looks at me weirdly.

"Isn't it obvious?"

I tilt my head to the side, clearly still in the dark.

"I found out who was at the top, running all this shit. I showed them a picture I managed to take while he was having lunch. It was one of their friends."

I can feel a chill settle in my stomach.

"Which friend?"

"How should I know? I still don't know the boss's name. Just that he looks like an older version of that super you brought along last time, before his hair went all lightning-y."

Huh, he means Caine? Because they both have red hair or something?

Caine's parents died in that same fire as well...

"Hey, if I show you a picture, can you tell me if it's the same guy?" I fish out my cell phone.

"Sure, whatever. Even if you know what he looks like, the guy is nigh impossible to catch. He practically won't leave his precious hideout unless he's armed with his flock of supers, and he's always rotating bases as well."

"...One of the top guys at Hulio hires supers?"

"Duh – what, you think they got to be so powerful because they were all normies? Hah! They blackmail us to do their bidding!"

That definitely makes sense. Hulio is a powerful organization that still terrorizes supers and people alike. To think they're using supers to do the job... ugh, it makes me sick.

I browse through the pictures on my phone, opening up the one I took of Caine's dad out on the terrace. The one that was encrypted. At the time, I thought the identity of the man hidden in the shadows was important, not the one in plain sight...

I turn the phone over and show it to the man.

"Do you recognize him?"

"How'd you get that picture? That's the one I took," he says, eyebrows furling together in a frown.

I feel my heart stop.

"*This* is the picture you sent to my parents eight years ago?"

"Yeah. That's Hulio's leader, having lunch with another super. Portation wanted proof so he put me on a stakeout."

"Hulio's leader?" I echo mindlessly. "Are you sure?"

"One hundred percent," he says with an air of confidence that's hard to ignore.

No way, I can't believe it.

"But he died in that fire as well," I point out. "I went to the funeral; there was nothing left of him but ashes."

"Hah – he's very much alive. Saw him in a meeting with the other top supers a couple of days ago. Shit's going down, that's for sure."

I quickly pocket my cell phone and look away. All this information is making my head spin.

"Joselina did I hear that right? Caine's dad is alive?" Ralph's voice echoes in my ear.

"Yeah, and apparently he's the top boss of Hulio," I answer through gritted teeth.

This can't be real. It's already so much to take in that my parents were involved as vigilantes and were tracking Hulio – but to hear that the man I've known as Caine's dad all this time, he's part of Hulio?

"Did... Did he kill my parents?" I choke out.

"Probably. He was obsessed with capturing them, you know, but I don't think he knew Smoker's and Portation's true identity."

I rub my temples, feeling emotionally exhausted.

"Hey – are you gonna untie me anytime soon or what? I'm spilling out my guts here," he whines.

I feel like I need some time to process this. It's too much.

"My suggestion is to bring him with you and return to your sibling," says Jæmis, after being quiet all this time.

"I'm not taking hostages," I respond.

Mr. Invisible looks alarmed at this.

"I need to know – how long have you been playing informant for them?" I ask.

He groans. "As if I keep track! A year maybe? Gah – just let me go already! I answered everything!"

"Where is this boss now?" I continue to grill him.

"I don't know! Look, he changes where he's hiding frequently. We never meet at the same place twice."

Damnit – if Caine's dad, Benjamin, is alive, then I want to know where he is!

"That's all I know! Just untie me already, fuck," he huffs.

"Keep your phone on," I tell him. "We'll be in touch."

"The hell you are. Get out of my apartment."

I turn to Jæmis. "Come on, we're leaving."

"Hey – untie me first!"

1. Leave him tied up.
2. Untie him.

I stare at him coolly.

"I'm sure someone will come to your defence once they see the door has been broken into," I say.

"Hey! No, don't you fucking dare!" he sneers.

I start walking away, Jæmis following silently.

"This is payback for punching me in the stomach," I say smugly, flipping my hair back.

"BASTARDS!"

Mr. Invisible throws a string of curses at our backs as we exit his apartment.

I sigh and bend down to touch the thread wrapped around his body and dissolve it.

He immediately spreads his arms.

"Finally!" he rejoices.

"I would have left him tied up," Jæmis comments.

I sigh, not replying to that. It wouldn't feel right to leave him like that.

"Hey, who's going to pay for my door, huh? You think that shit comes free?" Mr. Invisible asks, narrowing his eyes at us.

I start walking away, Jæmis following closely.

"I'm sure your landlord will fix it," I say before exiting the apartment.

-- Inside car

My grip on the wheel tightens as I try to organize my own thoughts.

"This Hulio – who are they? It was mentioned a lot." Jæmis looks at me with a quizzical gaze.

He must have been pretty lost with all this talk about Hulio and whatnot.

"It's a terrorist organization, they want to eradicate all people with abilities; like me," I explain, still seething on the inside.

"...They were the ones that started the fire that my parents died in," I finish.

But now I don't really know what to believe. What exactly happened that day?

Caine was with us when he got a distress call from his mom. She said she was in the building along with my parents, and it was on fire. She called Benjamin's name, but the call disconnected before she could finish speaking her sentence.

We rushed to the office, but when we arrived, it was too late; the building was completely engulfed in fire. The autopsy later on confirmed that the four bodies they recovered were indeed my parents, as well as Caine's.

"Caine's parents died in that fire, too. But now I'm hearing from this guy that he didn't. He's alive – and Hudio's boss? I am so confused," I say with a heavy sigh.

"He could also be lying. It's best not to trust him completely," Jæmis points out.

"Hm yes, you're right. We have no way of confirming whether or not he was speaking the truth."

I focus my attention on the road, making sure to drive slowly so it doesn't upset Jæmis.

"Hey," I start softly. "We made a pretty good team back there," I say, slightly smiling.

Jæmis was supposed to be my imposing bodyguard, but instead I got someone who actively pursued Mr. Invisible. He even helped interrogate him.

Jæmis folds his arms across his chest with a smirk.

"Perhaps you've forgotten I am a very skilled captain. Trained in the art of aerial and close combat."

"No, I certainly haven't," I say, waving my hand at him. But I admit; I didn't expect him to be so competent without being able to use his abilities.

"...Nevertheless, we were in tandem with each other. Good synergy is hard to come by," he admits.

"You didn't use pure strength, but your tricks and wit were an asset."

"I guess I'm the brains and you're the brawn," I joke.

"Excuse me?" he questions, raising an eyebrow.

"Ah, nothing, just an expression. It means you use strength, and I use my smarts."

"Hmpf. It's still better to be strong," he says stubbornly.

I suppress a chuckle. Still, it makes me happy to see him admit I did a good job. I hope Ralph thinks so, too.

However, I've got more important things to think about. Like how I'm going to tell Caine his dad is actually alive, and he's kind of the leader of this terrorist organization.

...And how *I'm* going to bring them down.

Chapter [023] -- Lake Cabin Living Room

The mood has changed since our return to the cabin. Like there's something tangible in the air, almost suffocating.

Caine still cannot be reached, so we're just twiddling our thumbs with this information on our hands.

Ralph doesn't know when Caine will be returning either. He's definitely gone into investigator mode; digging through everything we have on Caine's parents. Well, more specifically, his dad; Benjamin Prins.

Eeyok shakes his head at me.

"This sounds complicated," he says after I've brought him up to speed.

"We don't know if the information we got from this guy is reliable, but it does tie into the picture we found..." I say, looking down at my own phone.

"The only way to confirm whether or not the information we extracted is correct is to find this person," Jæmis adds.

"Caine's dad, presumably the leader of Hulio?" I echo. "That's going to be... hard."

I sigh heavily, wondering if it's even a good idea to tell Caine all of this when we can't know for sure. All I have going for me is this man's word, and I don't really trust someone who's a criminal.

On the other hand – he was working with my parents. Does he have credibility or not? I can't be too sure.

"The man we interrogated could come into contact with this supposed leader. All you have to do is make sure he relays that information to you whenever they will meet again."

I look at Jæmis, thinking it over. That's a pretty solid idea. If Mr. Invisible said he saw Benjamin only a couple of days ago, then it stands to reason he could see him again. And if he does, I want to know about it.

"But what if he won't tell us? We're not exactly on good terms with each other," I point out a hole in his plan.

Jæmis shrugs. "Extortion."

"Hmm, torture, if need be," Eeyok agrees.

My eyes widen at the suggestion.

"We're not going to torture anyone," I stress.

"Extortion, blackmail, torture – whatever needs to be done to extract the information you need," Jæmis explains in a neutral voice.

I groan. "I know I decided to put on this suit and turn into a vigilante, but I don't want to resort to criminal tactics."

"The man is a criminal himself, no?" Eeyok asks.

"Well, yes--"

"--Then there is no need to hold back. Use whatever you can to your advantage."

I'm surprised I'm hearing Eeyok say all of this. I had thought he didn't actively like being a pawn in Varitus' army, doing his dirty business. But he's quick to suggest using shady tactics to further my personal desires.

"Eeyok is correct. Do what you must if you want to find this man."

I run a hand through my short hair with another heavy sigh.

"I'll think about it."

I just need a break.

-- Lake Cabin Basement

More often than not, I catch my brother in the basement, having set up his own PC and equipment down there.

"Have you found anything?" I ask as I stand next to him.

"Managed to hack into the coroner's office to dig through their files. Found the death certificate of Caine's parents. DNA testing was done to confirm their IDs," he says with a sigh.

"So... that means Benjamin did die in that fire."

"It means the death certificate says so." Ralph points at the screen, which has the two certificates next to each other.

"This one is for Kelly Prins, and this one's for Benjamin Prins," he explains.

"What about our parents?" I ask as I scan over the information.

Ralph pulls up the documents of our parents. Same thing; died in a fire. DNA testing confirmed it.

For all intents and purposes; Benjamin Prins died in that fire. The death certificate confirms it.

As I glance in between the documents, I notice something off.

"Hey, these were all done on the same day, no?" I ask, noting the date of each document.

"Makes sense, same fire after all. Better to pump them out all at once," says Ralph with a shrug.

"This one," I say, and tap my finger on Benjamin's document. "It's different."

Ralph narrows his eyes at the screen. "How so? All the information is the same. Even the signature."

"It's not, see? This one's in black ink."

The other three documents are written with a blue pen, but Benjamin's document was written in black.

"Maybe they just forgot to scan it in colour, who knows. Maybe he ran out of ink," Ralph starts to justify.

"Really? We have information that Benjamin could be alive – and a leader of Hulo of all things – and you want to dismiss that his death certificate could potentially be forged?" I hiss.

Ralph crosses his arms and huffs.

"I don't trust that guy. He could be lying, you know."

"I get that. But..." I look at the old CRT monitor. "Why have Benjamin's picture locked behind an encryption?"

Even Ralph doesn't have an answer to that.

"And that betrayal comment – what if Benjamin had something to do with our parents' deaths?"

"Ugh, I just wish Caine was here. It feels so wrong to talk about this when he doesn't have a clue," Ralph groans.

"Do you know when he's coming back?"

Caine's been missing in action for several days now. He usually doesn't keep any contact with us during his missions.

"Beats me, I just know that they needed him, specifically."

"Ralph I..." A sigh escapes me. "I want to take them down," I announce.

Ralph gives me a cold look, like he knows exactly what I'm talking about.

"You think I haven't fantasized about it either? For years now..."

"I know we're supposed to be thinking about the upcoming invasion – but I can't help but want to deal with Hulo as well. I want to eradicate the entire criminal organization."

"Definitely sounding like a vigilante there," Ralph quips.

I smirk at him. "I think I've found a taste for it."

"It's dangerous though."

"That's why you'll help me, right?"

Ralph rolls his eyes.

"As if I could let you do everything alone! No way."

"And here you were fussing over me visiting Mr. Invisible today," I tease him.

"Can you blame me? You're not exactly superhero material."

He balls his hands into fists, glaring at the monitor.

"But, if we have a shot at taking down Hulo, then I say, anything goes."

"That's the little brother I know. No more fussing about keeping me safe. We've already passed that threshold."

"Caine will join us, too."

"He better, especially if the information we've gotten turns out to be the truth. There's no way he would ignore it. He'd tear down the entire city to find his dad."

"Let's hope he doesn't go on a true rampage," Ralph grumbles.

"All of this is giving me a headache," I complain.

"Can't sleep well either, huh?" he asks, quirking an eyebrow at me.

"Not at all. My muscles are also aching so it's hard to find a good position to sleep in as well." I stretch out my arm, rubbing my shoulder.

"Get some rest. We have to wait till Caine gets back to do anything either way," Ralph suggests.

I ruffle his hair. "Don't forget you need sleep, too. Don't stay all holed up in here."

He grins back at me. "If I could become a hermit for life, I totally would."

"Please don't," I say, shaking my head.

I eventually leave Ralph alone in the basement. Getting some rest is the furthest thing on my mind right now, I'm way too pumped with adrenaline.

-- Lake Cabin Forest Noon

My hands are raised to protect my face. I dodge an incoming attack from Jæmis and easily sidestep him.

He had no qualms about resuming our training when I asked if he wanted to continue.

It's kept my mind off of things – I only need to think about the next punch to dodge.

Jæmis advances on me and throws another hook. I step backwards and raise my hand to deflect his arm.

A sharp pain stings in my shoulder and I wince in pain, halting my movement.

Jæmis stops and resumes his normal position, looking at my shoulder.

"What happened?" he asks.

I rub my shoulder, feeling the muscles ache in response.

"I think I pulled a muscle."

Jæmis gives me a long and silent glance as I wiggle my shoulder trying to find some relief.

"Where does it hurt?" he asks.

"Uhm," I stumble, "Right around here?" I circle my finger around the affected area.

"Hmpf, you must have not warmed up enough," he says with a click of his tongue. "This is the result."

I blink at him with dead eyes, not in the mood to be chastised by him.

"A good massage can help out the kinks. Turn around."

My jaw almost drops open. He wants to massage it? The idea seems almost ludicrous.

"I don't think that's necessary," I start awkwardly.

"The quicker you feel better, the faster we can resume training. Now stop complaining and remove your garb," he repeats in a stern tone.

"You want me to strip?" I ask, my eyes widening. What kind of massage is he thinking of!?

"Just the top. It is harder to reach the muscles when you're wearing that."

I hold my arms together and look around; we're alone at least. But I'm not wearing anything besides a bra underneath my supersuit.

1. "Are you trying to seduce me this time around?"

2. "But I..."

"Are you trying to seduce me this time around?" I ask, genuinely curious.

Jæmis' eyes widen and he bites down on his bottom lip.

"Of course not!" he responds immediately, a little too hot-headed.

"Well, you're always going off on how I'm supposedly seducing you – but now *you're* the one telling me to undress."

"For perfectly legitimate reasons," he huffs.

"Or you just want to see me naked."

"I—" Jæmis stutters, now at a loss.

It's fun seeing him get all tongue twisted just because he's the one being accused of trying to 'seduce'.

"Forget I said anything," he grumbles.

"Aww, no, I want you to do it."

I turn around with a smile and unzip the front part of my supersuit.

"But I..." I start to argue, looking at Jæmis.

"But what?" he cuts in impatiently.

"You'd be seeing me in my br – I mean, undergarments."

He tilts his head to the side.

"And you have seen me in my undergarments, many times."

"Not by choice," I grumble.

"Seeing a flash of your skin is not enough to seduce me, if that's what you're worried about."

I suddenly feel my cheeks flare up with a blush.

"That's not what I'm worried about!" I reply.

"Then what is the problem?" he asks impatiently.

"I'm just a little self-conscious," I admit.

Jæmis sighs, his hand running through his short hair.

"I promise to exercise restraint and won't look. Is that alright?"

"I guess so..."

"Then please remove it."

Silently, I turn around and unzip the front part of my supersuit.

I rid myself of the upper part, now standing only in my bra and pants.

I nearly flinch when his large hands land on both of my shoulders.

"...Did that hurt you?" he asks, actually sounding worried.

I clear my throat. "No, you just surprised me, that's all."

"Your muscles may be underdeveloped, but you *do* have them. They appear very similar to my own," he says as his hand starts kneading into my skin.

I expected a lot more force behind it – but he's being surprisingly gentle about it. Probably because he's worried if he 'hurts' me, well... that would be disastrous. Jæmis has already been very careful not to hurt me during training. His attacks are always slow and telegraphed.

I'm so unfamiliar with his touch that it's making the hairs on the back of my neck raise. It's an odd reaction.

"Massaging them helps the blood flow to them faster, enabling a quicker recovery. Relax your shoulders."

I slump my shoulders and try to relax, leaning into his hands, which are working my skin. Lightly rubbing around the affected area.

I crack my neck in tune with his rhythm, feeling slightly better. The pain is still there, but Jæmis is definitely helping to alleviate it.

"This is why you must always stretch and warm-up before doing any kind of training."

"Do you always sound like an instruction manual when handing out massages?" I ask.

Jæmis exerts more force as his hands press into my skin.

"I do not give out many massages," he responds.

"Lucky me then," I chuckle.

Jæmis removes his hands from my shoulders, and I nearly whine in disappointment. It was starting to feel good!

"You are mocking me," he states.

"What? No. It's actually helping. Please continue."

With a small huff, I can feel his calloused hands return to my shoulders. They stroke across my bare skin and I start to relax again.

I roll my shoulders against his hands, which are warm and actually very pleasing. Who knew Jæmis could give good massages? Or any, for that matter?

"You know, your touch has gotten a lot softer," I mention.

"Softer?" he repeats, continuing the tender massage.

"Before, just grabbing me by my wrist would hurt me. I got bruises from that, too."

"I didn't realize how fragile Earthlings could be," he defends himself. "I have since adjusted my strength around you."

I can't help but smile; I've definitely noticed he's restrained himself.

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

Jæmis says nothing as he continues to work out some knots in my shoulders. This went from easing the pain on one side, to a full-on massage. Not that I'm complaining. He can do me any day.

"...Is that better?" he asks after a while.

"Much, actually," I say, smiling brightly.

The warmth of his hands leaves my body.

"Good. Let's continue."

I turn around to face him with a whine.

"Hey, I was enjoying that."

"It wasn't meant to be enjoyed," he replies coolly.

"Can't stop me," I mumble under my breath as I reach for my supersuit on the grass.

I quickly dress myself again and wince slightly as I do – seems my muscle still aches.

"Can we take a break? Continue tomorrow?" I suggest.

Jæmis glances at my shoulder, then closes his eyes.

"Very well. Get some rest."

I smile at him, bowing out.

"Don't take too long out here!" I warn him. "Get some rest, too."

-- Lake Cabin Living Room Night

It's time to relax, and I feel like watching a movie. Perhaps I can convince Jæmis and Eeyok to join me? They've probably never seen a movie in their life.

Eeyok's already sitting on the couch, having just finished his own training.

"Hey Eeyok, would you want to watch a movie?" I ask him.

"A what?" he asks, confused.

"It's entertainment!" I say with a huge grin.

Still not getting it, Eeyok just chuckles nervously.

"Alright. I've finished my training regimen today, so I'm free."

"Where's Jæmis?" I ask.

"Probably still training in the forest."

"I'll go get him then."

I open the door to greet the night sky.

-- Lake Cabin Forest Night

Following the beep on my phone that's showing where James is located, I quickly reach an opening where he's busy delivering swift kicks to the air.

"I came to get you," I announce myself.

Jæmis stops kicking the air and turns to me, brushing away some sweat from his forehead. It seems he removed his top during training, probably because it was getting too sweaty with it on.

The act of seeing him all sweaty and half naked, catching his breath, makes me avert my eyes from him. It's a sensual sight and I don't know how to feel about looking at Jæmis in that way.

"Get me?" he echoes my words. "I do not need a chaperone."

"I'm just making sure you do not get lost," I say, trying to bite back a grin.

"I do not get—"

"—Please, I know you have trouble getting out of this forest," I quickly cut him off, knowing exactly what he was going to say.

Jæmis shuffles on his feet and huffs loudly.

"I'm perfectly fi—"

"—Alright, come with me!" I say cheerfully, cutting him off again.

"I wasn't finished yet," he growls.

"Don't you want to bathe and eat? Look at you, you're sweating all over," I say.

Jæmis pushes back his sweaty hair and exhales loudly.

"I suppose I can call it early today," he grumbles.

"Great! I'll make you some dinner while you take a shower, then we can watch a movie together."

He raises his eyebrows.

"Movie?" he asks, just like Eeyok.

"You'll see," I say, smiling secretly at him.

Jæmis grabs the top part of his suit and follows me as I start to walk.

A small source of light floats in front of me, startling me.

"Oh!" I say in surprise.

"Look, it's a firefly!"

The small insect glows on and off, then flies away.

"Firefly?" asks Jæmis, following the insect with his eyes.

"Yeah, the season for them must have started. Harmless insects. When they're trying to find a mate, they glow," I explain.

Firefly season has always been my favourite at the lake. Certain nights there would be a swarm of them. It's making me feel nostalgic.

As several more fireflies start to whiz by us, all glowing majestically, Jæmis asks a question.

"If they all glow to find a mate, how do they know which one is the most compatible?"

I stop to think; I'm not exactly a scientist in this area of expertise.

"I don't know, I guess they keep trying until they randomly find one?"

"Seems terribly insufficient," he remarks.

"Well, how do *you* find one?" I ask offhandedly.

"Are you asking me how I find a mate?"

"Yes."

I can feel his eyes burn a hole in my back.

"There is a way..." he answers.

The soft rustle of the leaves from the trees masks his forlorn voice.

"But there is no one alive besides my siblings."

I feel slightly guilty for asking, knowing that his entire culture has been basically wiped out.

1. "What about interspecies relationships?"

2. "So you'll remain alone?"

"What about interspecies relationships?" I ask, thinking that's entirely possible.

"What about it?" he grunts.

"I mean, Healer Billius looks similar to you," I tease him.

"That is disgusting." His face pulls into a scowl. "That no-good, insolent, blood-haired pest."

I giggle at his description of Billius. They really don't get along.

"You have put a wretched image in my head and will need to be punished for that."

"What – it was just a suggestion! I mean, you thought Eeyok and I were a thing."

"Tomorrow you'll run ten laps back and forth to the house as warm-up," he decides.

"You are so unfair," I complain with a whine.

"So you'll remain alone?" I ask.

"Is that a problem?" he questions back.

"No... I was just thinking it's a little sad that you wouldn't have a mate. It seems like something pretty significant in your culture."

He did mention something about powerful people being a good mate.

"It is perfectly fine to not find a mate. I knew plenty of Ræhu who remained alone in their old age, because they could never find their perfect mate."

I pause slightly, my feet sliding through the grass with each step.

"Do you want to remain alone?" I ask instead.

I'm not sure why I'm so interested in knowing, but I find myself asking either way.

"Curious creature, aren't you?" he avoids my question.

He walks past me without a word, remaining silent this time around.

Still, the thought of Jæmis not having anyone does feel a little lonely.

-- Lake Cabin Living Room Night

After stuffing myself with dinner, taking a nice shower, and putting on some pajamas; I am ready for movie night. I strut towards the couch, holding two bowls of popcorn in my hands.

"Oh, I smell something," says Eeyok as he sniffs the air.

"I made popcorn," I say as I hand one of the bowls to him.

"This one is yours, it's salty," I say with a smile.

Then I dump the other bowl in Jæmis' lap.

"And sweet for you."

Jæmis doesn't look amused.

"What are you plotting?" he asks, narrowing his eyes at me.

"To have a movie night? These are snacks while we watch. Relax, sit back – enjoy yourself."

I then sit down in between the both of them on the couch, wearing a huge smile. This is such a mundane activity, and I'm doing it with Jæmis and Eeyok of all people.

Ralph had politely declined my offer to watch a romance movie. Oh well, his loss.

I grab the remote from the coffee table and turn on the TV. Since I've been gone, loads of new titles have been released. One of them I've been looking forward to for a while! It's a Korean movie.

"How is your shoulder?" Jæmis asks out of the blue.

Surprised he's concerned about it still, I answer politely.

"Doing much better, actually. I guess all I needed was some rest and a good massage," I say with a smile.

"Massage, huh?" Eeyok says while happily munching on the popcorn.

Jæmis gives him a dirty look and Eeyok doesn't question it further.

"These are very crunchy," Eeyok says excitedly.

I browse through the available titles on Yeflix, eventually finding the one I'm looking for.

The movie starts to play.

"Glad to hear you like them," I say. Then I turn towards Jæmis. "Have you tried them yet?"

Jæmis stares at the bowl of fluffy popcorn with a skeptical eye.

1. Feed him popcorn.

2. "I promise it's not poison."

I swipe a piece of popcorn from the top layer and cheekily offer it in front of Jæmis' mouth.

"Open up!"

"I do not need to be fed like an infant," he complains, turning away from my hand.

"Alright, how about you work for it instead?" I say, leaning back into the couch.

"What?"

"I promise it's not poison," I reassure him.

"That is not my issue," he replies.

"Then what's wrong? It's just a snack." To demonstrate, I pick one out myself and eat it.

"Actually, it's fun to catch with your mouth as well."

"Here, catch!" I say and I toss the popcorn up in the air.

Jæmis motionlessly watches the popcorn fall on his lap. He didn't even make an attempt.

I pout at him. "Guess you can't catch food with your mouth," I say, shrugging.

"Try me – try me!" Eeyok says eagerly, mouth already open.

I take a piece from his bowl and toss it into the air towards him. Eeyok snaps it out of the air with a triumphant smirk.

I clap my hands in response.

"Nice one!"

Suddenly Jæmis thrusts the bowl into my lap.

"I just wasn't prepared. Toss it again," he huffs.

I grin at him, briefly wondering if I should tease him for being jealous that Eeyok caught it and he didn't, but decide against it.

"Okay, here goes!" I say and toss another piece into the air.

Jæmis moves only the slightest bit forwards and tears the popcorn right out of the air. He angrily munches on it with a sense of superiority.

"Captain Jæmis, that was amazing!" Eeyok cheers him on.

An angry glare from Jæmis makes him cower and lean back into the couch, keeping quiet.

"Hmpf, these are too crunchy," Jæmis complains.

"Well, you don't have to eat them if you don't like them," I say, hugging the bowl to my body.

Jæmis' hand plunges into the bowl and he grabs a handful of popcorn, stuffing it into his mouth. He chews on them for a bit and swallows.

"I didn't say I wouldn't eat them," he says nonchalantly.

"Alright – but don't eat them all, I want some, too!"

Then I return my attention towards the screen; the movie has just finished going through a long intro.

When the cast starts to speak and the subtitles appear on the screen, I'm baffled by the fact that I can completely understand what they're saying.

"I can understand Korean!" I yelp out loud.

Jæmis and Eeyok look at me oddly.

"Are they not speaking the same language as you?" asks Eeyok.

I giggle awkwardly and shake my head.

"...It's the babblefish, isn't it?" I ask sheepishly, totally forgetting that I even had this device in my ear.

"We can understand it, too," says Eeyok.

"It's so strange. I can hear them speaking Korean, but my brain is automatically translating it to English for me," I say in awe.

"Why do you sound so impressed? You've been hearing us talk a language other than your own as well this entire time," Jæmis points out.

"I know, but for some reason, I didn't stop to think it meant I could understand other languages on my planet as well."

"They sound different from you," Eeyok mentions.

"It's a different language," I explain.

It's so cool that I don't need subtitles anymore!

"So, Joselina, what are we looking at?" Eeyok asks after a minute runtime has passed.

"A movie. It's entertainment. People act out a story, and this story is about two countries who are at war with each other. But then a regular woman accidentally ends up in the other country, even though it's forbidden, and she meets a soldier from there."

"Ooh, it's a play," says Eeyok.

"A romance one, at that," I say with a smile. "The woman and soldier are supposed to fall in love."

Jæmis suddenly grunts in response, folding his arms across his chest, clearly showing his disapproval.

"Nonsense, fraternizing with the enemy will have both your heads roll. How foolish of them."

"Let's just watch, maybe you'll change your mind."

As the movie continues, the woman accidentally manages to get stuck in the enemy country. She is immediately found out by border control and she flees for her life.

The leader of the soldiers manages to apprehend her, thinking she's a spy from the other country. As they scale a mountainous area to transfer the woman to be questioned and interrogated at the bureau, the leader suddenly falls off the edge.

The woman saves his life by holding onto his lifeline and helps him get back to safety. Because of this, the man hesitates sending her to be questioned because they would most certainly kill her. She begs for his help to send her back to her country.

The man relents, and together with his troop, they concoct various ways to smuggle her back inside of her own country without being caught by border control.

Jæmis finally speaks up after the man was caught by other authorities and was jailed.

"This is idiocy, why would he ever risk his life for someone who, by all means, is supposed to be his enemy?" he questions loudly.

Eeyok, whose eyes have been glued to the screen, looks down at his bowl and whines when he realizes it's empty. He doesn't speak though, no, he's too engrossed in the movie.

"Because he doesn't see her as the enemy. Never has," I explain. "Or at least, that's what it seems like."

"That doesn't explain why he would willingly go through such ordeals to get her back to her own country, risking his life for that of hers."

I shrug. "Maybe it conflicts with his own morals. Maybe he's started to fall for her. I can see why he would do these things."

Not to mention I *have* done these things myself. I risked my life for Nornus, Eeyok and even Jæmis, by putting myself smack-dab in the middle of conflict.

They're supposed to be my enemy, but it's not that black and white anymore. I can totally sympathize with the male lead.

"Foolishness," Jæmis grumbles under his breath as he grabs another handful of popcorn from the bowl.

The movie continues as the woman manages to escape the country, but the man is being held in jail.

Wracked with guilt, the woman cannot stand to leave things like this, and turns away at the border, refusing to go back home. She wants to free the man.

Together with his troop, they come up with a plan to bust him out of the prison. The man is freed and reunited with the woman. He calls her stupid for not going back to her country despite everyone risking their lives for her.

She explains there's no way she could leave him behind like this, locked up in jail because of her. She then kisses him.

Jæmis and Eeyok both lean back into the couch, eyes wide in shock.

I'm such a sucker for romance, but I totally forgot that these two don't really do well with seeing people kiss. It's a movie and it's fake, but still... I guess it's too real for them.

"Humans are very... free," Eeyok remarks awkwardly.

Why does it feel like instead of watching a chaste kiss, I'm viewing porn with them?

"They're just happy to see each other," I try to explain with a lopsided smile. "It's how we express our feelings."

"Yes, Earthling mating rituals are very 'frisky'," says Jæmis, giving me a side eye.

...He's thinking of the ear situation, isn't he? He was supposed to pretend that never happened!

The kissing scene felt like it dragged on for way too long, with multiple repeats in different angles – why do they do this in Korean dramas? It just made it even more embarrassing.

Eventually the movie continues and instead of returning to her own country, the man and woman defect and escape to a third country together. Now they can live in peace, without being enemies of each other.

It's actually a very beautiful story.

"I really enjoyed that," I say, feeling touched.

"Idealistic delusions," Jæmis remarks gruffly.

"Oh, come on – you don't think they had a beautiful love story?" I whine.

"It was very gripping, I wanted them to escape and be free," says Eeyok.

"Running from your responsibilities will solve nothing. He gave up his life for her," Jæmis cuts in.

"Yes, isn't it beautiful?" I say cheerfully.

"Beautifully *moronic*," he replies.

"Really, you think it's moronic to give up your life for someone? Because I'm sure you were doing that for your sister," I point out.

"That's—" He shuts his own mouth as he thinks it over. "That's family. I wouldn't do so for anyone else."

"Prince Jæmis is ready to sacrifice himself even for someone who isn't family," says Eeyok with a small chuckle.

Jæmis whips his head towards Eeyok, fixing him with a very deadly glare.

"I would not!" he rejects the idea. "I would *not* risk my life for someone else."

"...Didn't you bargain for my life in front of Lord Varitus?" I tilt my head towards him. "That was pretty risky, was it not?"

"I—"

"Prince Jæmis would never have done that before," says Eeyok, grinning at Jæmis. "But he's... changed."

"Stop yapping your mouth. I haven't changed a bit. Don't be ridiculous," he huffs.

"Prince Jæmis also came back to get me when we went to the market," Eeyok chuckles.

"That's right – I had to beg him to go back for you!" I say.

"Thank you for your concern, Joselina. I appreciate it, even though I was perfectly safe," he says sheepishly.

I guess he's right, he was the one involved in the attack. I didn't know it back then, so I pleaded with Jæmis to pick up Eeyok as I was concerned for him.

"Haha, I guess so... I feel silly for being so worried for you now."

"What a waste of time it was to retrieve you," Jæmis sighs loudly. "Should have left you there."

Eeyok leans in closer to me.

"Prince Jæmis has grown softer since your arrival," he whispers in my ear.

I blink at him. "He has?" I echo, feeling myself grow warm at the suggestion.

Jæmis groans as he gets up from the couch, fed up with the conversation.

"I'm not going to sit here and listen to your conspiracy theories about me. I'm leaving."

He takes large strides around the couch, before knocking Eeyok on the back of his head.

"You shut your mouth hole, you cretin. I have *not* gone soft," he hisses.

Eeyok rubs the back of his head with a small whine, his brows drooping low.

"Don't hit Eeyok, be nicer," I warn Jæmis.

"Hah – I barely used any strength!" Jæmis complains as he walks away.

"See? *Soft*." Eeyok laughs.

As Jæmis struts away, I hold back a giggle. It's been five months since I first met Jæmis, and I can tell he's a much different person now.

After all, earlier today he admitted he adjusts his strength around me to make sure he doesn't hurt me. It's not just because of the oath, though of course it plays a part. When he was administering the medicine to me, he was careful and gentle.

To think he's kidnapped me, thrown me into a cell – even killed someone in front of me, and yet here we are. Handing out massages. Training me. Backing me up during my selfish mission to confront Mr. Invisible.

Eeyok's right. He's changed.

...And so have I.

"Hey, Eeyok," I call out to him.

"Yes?"

"You have changed, too, you know," I say, nudging him with my elbow.

"I have?" he replies, unsure.

"You've become much braver. Even standing up against Jæmis."

"Oh..." Eeyok hangs his head, a red spot appearing on his head.

"Your Makoet must have given me strength," he says with a gentle smile.

I giggle in return. "Maybe!"

"You think? Haha," he chuckles, embarrassed.

"Yes, for sure! You've grown."

He casts his eyes downwards, still smiling.

"Thank you, Joselina."

"No problem. Hey – do you want to watch more movies with me?" I ask.

Eeyok's smile grows wider.

"Yes, please!"

Eeyok and I spend the rest of the night watching movies together.

-- Lake Cabin Forest Day

There; I end up tying the last ribbon on the tree nearest to the cabin.

Knowing Jæmis gets lost quite easily, I decided to leave him a trail of breadcrumbs in the form of ribbons tied around tree branches. In between each ribbon is my thread which is held up high in all the other trees. It leads all the way to the open clearing he usually trains at.

As long as he finds one of the ribbons, he should be able to follow them without getting lost. Now I don't have to keep fetching him anymore. He can find his own way back.

I place my hands on my hips and smile at my own work.

I almost debated writing down a note, but quickly realized neither Jæmis nor Eeyok can read human language. Ribbons it is!

-- Lake Cabin Kitchen Day

A day later and Caine has finally resurfaced. He said he's got something to tell us, but so do we...

Ralph and I wait for Caine to finally appear at the cabin. Sometime in the morning, he arrives. I guide him into the kitchen.

The air feels thick with tension. The past two days I've been trying to distract myself from this conversation, watching movies with Jæmis and Eeyok, or doing some training with Jæmis.

Anything to keep me forgetting about the possibility that Caine's dad is alive and Hulio's leader.

"Something to drink?" I ask.

Caine sits down on the bar stool and sighs with a heavy heart.

"Yes, please."

"Caine, we've got something to tell you, too," Ralph starts in a serious tone.

"Look – before you say anything, I've got something way more important to tell you," he cuts off.

As I place a beverage in front of Caine, he quickly takes a drink from it and slams it onto the counter.

"I know I'm under NDA and all that shit – superhero's code – but I can't stay silent. Not when I know this is something we caused."

"Sorry – we?" I echo.

"Caine, if you're under NDA, telling us could land you into serious trouble," Ralph warns him.

"Ralph, we're not exactly law abiding citizens either," I have to add.

We've gone the vigilante route, we're not exactly in the right place to start lecturing Caine on following the rules.

"I don't care, this is big. It involves Forrester Inc and Hulio," Caine stresses.

Ralph and I finally shut up and simply listen to Caine.

"I was sent on a mission to retrieve a stolen item. It had to specifically be me, because I'm immune to it," Caine grumbles.

"Immune to what?" Ralph questions.

"Your bracelet."

I tilt my head to the side. "The one Jæmis is wearing...?"

"It was stolen!?" Ralph shrieks.

"Way worse than that. It wasn't just stolen – they engineered it in such a way they could replicate the exact wavelength of my powers. They don't *need* a bracelet anymore to stop someone from using their ability."

My heart starts to sink and I feel myself take in a breath.

Caine's eyes gloss over as he stares straight out in front of him. Like he's been through a lot.

"Guys, Hulio found a way to use Ralph's bracelet to strip supers of their powers. For good."

"No way!" I gasp.

"But – how?" Ralph stutters. "I mean, how is that even possible?"

"I don't know. They got a hold of the blueprints you gave to Forrester Inc. They weaponized it. Several supers were already sent out to clear the mission, but all of them came back without the use of their ability."

Caine runs his hands through his mane of red hair, clearly shook at the situation.

"I got the original blueprints back, but it didn't matter. They were already mass producing it. We... we helped create a weapon that gets rid of abilities. Guys, what the fuck?"

I don't know what to say. This feels like I've been slammed by reality. Ralph's bracelet, stolen and reproduced as a weapon that strips supers of their abilities?

That makes Hulio the most powerful faction in the world. It's exactly what they want; to get rid of all the supers in the world. So only normies will remain.

"How the hell did Forrester Inc. let those blueprints fall into Hulio's hands!?" Ralph demands to know.

"I'm going to raise hell about this!"

I'm quick to shush him.

"Don't – they'd know Caine told us. You know many supers face financial ruin because they broke their NDA."

"We *have* to do something to hold them accountable," he says with a huff.

"It doesn't matter if you do or not – guys, Hulio's got the ability to rid the world of supers for good. That's the way bigger issue here," Caine cuts in.

He looks at me with sad eyes.

"You and me, we could be next."

The pit of my stomach tightens, leaving me feeling heavy and dark.

"Then we need to make sure we destroy whatever copy they have of Ralph's blueprints," I announce.

"Wait – what do you mean we?" Caine questionably narrows his eyes. "They already have a team of supers on the case, you know."

"Caine, we have some bad news to tell you as well," I start sinisterly.

Ralph and I explain to Caine what we found in my parents' basement. The picture of Benjamin, meeting up with Mr. Invisible, finding out that the leader of Hulio is Caine's supposedly dead father.

As expected, Caine doesn't take it well.

"I don't fucking believe you," he barks at us.

"Trust me Caine, I don't want to believe it either," Ralph immediately agrees. "But... there might be a kernel of truth in it."

"That super – the guy who told you about this, let me see him. I'll question him myself," Caine insists.

"I'm not going to stop you. I don't believe it myself 100% either, but all the evidence we've collected so far is not looking good," I say.

"No way dad is still alive and happens to be the leader of Hulio. There's just no chance in hell." Caine vehemently shakes his head, refusing to accept it.

"We didn't exactly have a good relationship – he was often working, and he didn't really pay any attention to me, but *Hulio*? Really!?"

I don't know what to say either. Is it true? It's possible, but also highly improbable. Then again, I never thought my own parents were vigilantes of all things.

I can't imagine what Caine is going through, having to confront the fact your father is alive, and actively working for a terrorist organization.

1. "I think we need to consider it seriously."

2. "I'm sure it's just a lie."

"I think we need to consider it seriously," I speak up.

"Are you for real? My *dad*?" Caine stresses with a growl.

"I found out my parents were vigilantes – nothing is out of the realm of possibility at this moment, Caine."

"Joselina has a point. I'd like to believe it's just a stupid ruse, but the picture left behind on the PC does add some credibility to it," says Ralph, backing me up.

"Hmpf. I want to see that piece of scum. Let's go."

"I'm sure it's just a lie," I reassure him.

"Of course it is, it's absurd," Caine agrees.

"We can't be sure though," Ralph chirps in. "We have to rule it out."

"How do we rule out my dad is Hulio's leader?" Caine hisses.

"I guess we just have to find the real leader," I suggest.

"Now we're talking. Let's go talk to that super," says Caine.

Guess we'll be dropping by Mr. Invisible again. What a mess.

-- Lake Cabin Outside Day

As we're all geared up and ready to leave, it is Jæmis that meets us at the front.

He seems to have used the ribbons I left behind for him, which makes me smile.

"Leaving?" he asks in his own language, checking out our suits.

"What do you want?" Caine demands to know.

"We're going back to that invisible super to get some more information," I explain.

Jæmis tilts his head to the side and gives a disapproving glare when he looks at Caine.

"Perhaps it's best if I came along as well."

A little surprised he'd offer to come; I shake my head.

"No that's okay – I've got Caine with me. Mr. Invisible didn't seem much of a threat last time."

"Does he want to come along?" Caine turns to me. "Why?"

"Well, he came with me last time. We... interrogated the super."

"*Interrogated*. You're well on your way to being a vigilante," says Caine, sounding impressed.

"Caine, I *am* one," I correct him.

"Never thought I'd see the day, but I thought if it would happen, you'd have one of these." Caine takes out his superhero ID card, flashing it to the both of us.

"Regardless, we'll be leaving now," I tell Jæmis.

"Remember your training," Jæmis warns me. "Don't let yourself get caught."

I smile at him, nodding.

"I won't."

"Come on, let's go." Caine starts walking towards his motorcycle.

"Hmpf. You better not die," he says gruffly.

1. "It's cute how you're worried."

2. "I will try my best!"

I grin at him slyly, seeing through his tough ruse.

"It's cute how you're worried."

A flash of surprise graces his face. Jæmis coughs and shuffles his feet on the spot.

"I am *not* worried," he stresses, eyes flickering away from me.

I chuckle. "I'll be fine."

"I will try my best!" I say optimistically.

"If you're dead, who else am I supposed to blame when Lord Varitus succeeds in his plans?"

I frown at him.

"And here I thought you were worried about me," I grumble.

"As if," he huffs defiantly.

I wave at Jæmis and get on the back of the motorcycle with Caine. Off we go.

-- Outside Alex's apartment

Caine gives me a weird look after seeing the state of the front door.

It's been taped up and has wooden planks nailed in certain areas to reinforce it. All in all... it's definitely still the same door Jæmis kicked in.

"We had to kick it in," I say with a shrug. "Seems he hasn't replaced it."

"So, do we knock, or do you want me to kick it in as well...?" asks Caine, a bit unsure.

"Uhm," I hum, wondering this myself.

"Kick my door in again and you're dead," says a voice behind us.

Caine and I whirl around to see Mr. Invisible's grumpy face. He gives Caine a once over.

"Bringing Boltage along, I see. Am I going to get tortured again?" he asks casually.

Caine, not the most patient person in the world, steps closer to Mr. Invisible and grabs him by his shirt, glaring at him.

"We're here for answers," he hisses.

"Torture it is," Mr. Invisible huffs. "Can't you guys just fuck off and let me be?"

Caine throws him up against the broken front door.

"I heard some of your delusional conspiracies," he growls.

"Boltage – let's not uh, do this where everyone can see us," I warn him.

"You heard the lady," Mr Invisible chuckles.

Caine lets him go and then throws a swift kick against the door, breaking it down and letting it fall backwards.

"You motherfu–"

Before he can finish his curse word, Caine's already pushed him inside. I hurry up afterwards.

-- Inside Alex's apartment

After awkwardly placing the broken door back into its frame again, Caine and I confront the man in his living room.

"Is this going to be a normal occurrence now? Should I just move?" he complains.

"You said Benjamin Prins is alive – what proof do you have?" Caine demands to know immediately.

Mr. Invisible cocks his head to the side, clearly confused.

"Who?" he asks.

I don't think he knows of Benjamin's real name.

"The leader of Hulio," I explain. "The picture you showed us, the man's name is Benjamin Prins."

"Oh..." He's starting to understand. "I don't know his real name. People call him boss or bossman. What about him?"

"When's the last time you saw him?" Caine asks through gritted teeth, clearly still not believing his father is alive.

"You know what? I'm not telling you shit anymore. You come here, break down my door *twice* – demanding to know about some stupid Benjamin, and I'm supposed to throw myself down to my knees in front of you like a lapdog?"

He shakes his head and crosses his arms.

"No way. Get lost."

"You worked with my parents – why can't you work with us?" I ask.

"Hey, you were the one to tell me they were dead. Excuse me if I don't want to end up just like them."

Caine raises his hand, electricity buzzing between his fingers.

"Torture it is," he says darkly.

Mr. Invisible yelps and steps back, suddenly becoming completely invisible. He's about to run off.

"No you won't! I warn him and quickly shoot out a thread to where I can hear his presence.

I manage to wrap my thread around his waist, keeping him in place. I can feel him struggle as I wrap him up real tight so that he can't escape.

"You and your annoying fucking web," he complains, trying to break free.

"Boltage here wants to torture you for answers – but I think we can come to an agreement, no?" I speak up.

"...What agreement?" he mumbles, still remaining invisible.

I have to bargain with him somehow. I don't particularly feel like torturing someone just to get information from him, or make him do something against his will.

Then, what can I offer him and make him work with us?

He worked with my parents; he wanted out of Hulio.

"Do you still want out?" I question him.

"...What's that supposed to mean?"

"You said you worked with my parents as an informer, in turn for getting a new identity. What if I could do the same thing for you?"

Caine shoots me a weird look – knowing I'm talking out of my ass.

But Mr. Invisible reveals himself again and he looks at me with skeptical blue eyes.

"You're lying."

He's not wrong on that one. I'm grasping at straws. However, I think I can convince him either way.

"I have some high-up connections; I could make you disappear just like you wanted to. All we need is your inside information about Hulio," I say in a serious voice.

"We need to know where Benjamin is," Caine joins in. "Or any proof that he is in fact, alive."

"The man doesn't leave his house without a flock of supers around him – how am I supposed to give you proof?" he snaps at us.

"...They use you for your invisibility to spy on others, but you can't figure out how to do the same thing with them?" I ask, quirked an eyebrow at him.

"A video recording," says Caine. "And he has to be in clear view."

"And then what?" he grumbles, still struggling against my thread.

"Then I'll see what I can do about getting you a new identity," I answer.

I dissolve my thread around his body, freeing him.

"I'll send you a new phone number you can reach me at. I expect to see a video of proof of life within the next few days."

"Days!? I don't know when I'll have the opportunity to meet him again!" he whines.

"Don't worry, I think you'll be seeing him soon," I say, shrugging. If whatever Caine told us was true, then Hulio is up to something massive, and there's no way they wouldn't use all their cronies involved.

"Come on, let's go," I tell Caine.

"One sec," he says, and turns to Mr. Invisible.

He gives him a small zap with electricity, causing him to yell out in surprise.

"What the hell, man!"

"That's payback for hurting her at the warehouse last time," says Caine casually.

I pull on Caine's arm so he leaves the apartment with me.

-- Lake Cabin Outside Noon

After returning to the cabin with Caine, I'm greeted by everyone.

Eeyok is waving at me, Jæmis seems to be leaning against the porch railing, and Ralph emerges from the front door.

"Joselina, you've returned! Where did you go?" asks Eeyok, not realizing I left.

"I went back to that invisible super to question him some more," I tell him.

"Seems you came back in one piece," Jæmis observes quietly.

"There wasn't any need for violence, so we're okay."

"Joselina told him to send proof that my dad is still alive. I doubt we'll get it, but whatever," says Caine as he kicks the dirt.

Then he snorts loudly, remembering something.

"She did however, make him believe we're going to help him get out of Hulio and give him a new identity."

"Really, Joselina?" Ralph groans.

I feel myself shrink a little.

"Why did you say that? We're not going to help out some guy who works for Hulio!"

"I don't want to help him out either!" I argue back. "But we needed information, so I lied a little and made him think he can break ties with Hulio."

"What if he actually gives us proof, and you don't deliver on your promise?" asks Caine.

"I mean, he works for Hulio, I don't particularly care what happens to him," I say flippantly. "We have to use what we can."

Eeyok is the one to respond to me this time, looking a little conflicted.

"Uhm, Joselina, this is the man that attacked you before?"

"That's right – why should I give any sympathy to the man? You even told me to use torture if it was necessary!"

"You say he wants out? What does that mean?"

"He's a low-level criminal that fell in with the wrong crowd. Now he works for the terrorists. He says he wants out, but can't without a new identity," I explain.

"I know I'm an outsider in all of this, but Joselina, why wouldn't you help him? It sounds like he is stuck and wants to quit."

For a second, I'm a little dumbstruck to hear Eeyok come in to defend Mr. Invisible of all people.

"He's a criminal who works for Hulio... Didn't you tell me to do whatever I must in the first place? If I had to lie a little to get him to work with us, it's fine," I defend myself.

Eeyok looks quite disappointed.

"If he is working for this organization but wants out, it's a bit different. I have done countless crimes myself. Even though I was part of the resistance, I still had to maintain my duties in Lord Varitus' army."

I swallow and stay quiet as his words echo in my mind.

"Why do you give me a pass, but not him?"

Jæmis flashes a smirk at Eeyok.

"Pointing out her hypocrisy, are we? I'm impressed you'd speak your mind against her, given how fond you are of the little Earthling."

"I'm not a hypocrite!" I bite back.

It's different with Eeyok. He's not a bad person.

"Seems to me you like to pick and choose who to help," Jæmis notes with an ever-growing smirk. "So much for your morals of wanting to help out anyone if you can."

I can feel the blood rush to my face as his words cut through me like a knife.

"I'm—"

"First let's see if he's got any proof my dad's alive," Caine interjects. "Then we can worry about the super."

I try to compose myself a little, feeling betrayed by them ganging up on me.

"Fine," I say gruffly.

Am I really a hypocrite for not sympathizing with the enemy?

Chapter [024]
-- Lake Cabin Living Room day

I'm fretting about it.

I've called Eeyok to come inside. I want to set things straight. I didn't like the look he gave me. A look of disappointment.

"You called?" he announces himself as he enters the room.

"Yes, please sit." I gesture towards the couch.

As Eeyok sits down, his tail wrapped around his waist to make room for me, he looks at me with curious eyes.

"I wanted to explain myself a little more," I say. "From earlier today."

"The invisible man," Eeyok says.

"Yes. He works for a terrorist organization. We're using him to get some information that could be vital," I explain.

"But you lied, yes?"

"I don't really want to see it as lying—"

"—Joselina, I'm no fool when it comes to extortion and crimes. Sometimes we end up doing bad things and we have no choice in the matter."

Caught off guard that Eeyok would cut me off, I shut my mouth and listen.

"As you know, I am with the resistance back on planet Yool," he starts slowly.

"But before that, I was a regular soldier. I participated in missions. I have actively helped out Lord Varitus to conquer planets."

Eeyok casts his eyes downwards, like he regrets it.

"I was just a soldier doing what he's told... So who is at fault? Me, for committing the crime, or Prince Jæmis, for commanding me to?"

I shake my head.

"Wouldn't it be Lord Varitus? He's at the top. Jæmis is just following his command as well, isn't he?"

"Exactly. We were all just following orders. It wasn't until I met Princess Læna that the resistance began to form."

He fiddles with his hands, looking uncomfortable.

"But even then... I have had a hand in some atrocious deeds. I'm not proud of them."

I guess I just never stood still to think about the fact that Eeyok has done his fair share of 'war crimes' as well. He's always been very genuine and helpful from the moment I met him, it's hard to imagine him as anything else.

"I hate the regime that Lord Varitus created, the bloodshed that has been spilled. I wanted to stop it, but I'm not innocent either. That is why... I sympathize with the invisible man."

"If you can ignore my previous deeds, why not for this man as well?"

I swallow loudly as his words reflect in my mind.

That's a very loaded question.

1. "Because... I know you personally. You haven't done me wrong."

2. "You're right, I am picking and choosing here."

"Because... I know you personally. You haven't done me wrong."

"I have done many things, Joselina. Perhaps not to you, but you should not treat me like I am innocent of any wrongdoing."

I guess this is why Jæmis called me a hypocrite. I've been helping out Eeyok because he's been nice to me. But Mr. Invisible is just a stranger to me.

"I don't know, I guess it's hard for me to imagine you plundering and pillaging," I admit.

Eeyok chuckles. "What about Prince Jæmis?"

I've definitely seen evidence of his crimes, which is why there had been animosity between us from the start.

...And I've also seen some of his good sides. I guess no one is truly black and white.

"Joselina, sometimes good men commit bad deeds."

I flash him a gentle smile.

"You're right, I am picking and choosing here," I say begrudgingly.

Both Eeyok and Jæmis have done their fair share of crimes, I'm sure. Yet I'm helping them out either way. Mr. Invisible is a rude individual, but it seems like he's just being used by Hulio and wants out.

I am being a big fat hypocrite for not genuinely wanting to help him out.

"I'm not saying you should ignore his past, but perhaps he's simply someone who got stuck with no way out. I know plenty of Gaötte just like him."

From what I know so far, that seems to be the case. Mr. Invisible did say he was being blackmailed.

"Yes, I should give him the benefit of the doubt," I admit. "I shouldn't have lied to him about helping him out."

"Your lie can always turn into the truth, Joselina. But do not give him false hope."

He flashes a painful smile. "When your hope is crushed, you're left with nothing else."

"Eeyok, I never pegged you to be so eloquent with words," I point out, slightly impressed by him.

"It's... it's because of my disguise, isn't it?" he asks regretfully.

"I admit; I never thought you could be so insightful compared to our first meeting."

I give him a slight bow of my head.

"Thank you for pointing out my hypocrisy."

"Ahh, I didn't mean to offend you," he says sheepishly.

"But I didn't want you to turn someone away when there could be more to the story. Do you think you can help him?"

I chew on my bottom lip as I try to think of a way to make sure I live up to my promise.

"I think I can ask Forrester Inc. for help. They are a huge company, surely they can produce some new papers for him," I say absentmindedly.

Now I only need to convince them to do it...

Suddenly Ralph comes crashing our conversation.

"In case you missed the entire first part of the day – Forrester Inc. is the reason we're in this mess with Hulio in the first place," Ralph chides me.

"Hey! Were you listening in all this time?" I question him, annoyed he barged in like that.

"What kind of crazy plan are you concocting now?" he wishes to know.

"Nothing. I think we can actually give Mr. Invisible a new identity if we ask for Forrester Inc.'s help."

"What makes you think they'll help? Because of them, Hulio got their hands on the most powerful weapon on earth."

"Exactly. It's *their* fault. If they want to put a stop to it, they should help us out. Our goals would be aligned."

"Didn't Caine say they already have a team of supers on the case?"

"Yeah but, we have an informer that has direct contact with the supposed leader. I think we have the upper hand here. I say we confront Forrester Inc."

Ralph shakes his head.

"You do realize that means we have to tell them how we met the informant, right? The whole vigilante thing?" Ralph rolls his eyes.

"Not necessarily, we don't have to explain how we came to meet Mr. Invisible. There's also no need to tell them about Caine – we can just say we're aware of the situation because of our informant."

Ralph remains quiet for a bit, closing his eyes.

"...I hate to acknowledge it, but you bring up a good point," he grumbles.

"You think Forrester will help us?" Eeyok asks hopefully.

"Maybe. We'll definitely give it a shot though," I say, smiling at him.

"You're way too comfortable with this," Ralph observes. "To think my sister had a knack for playing superhero."

"Well, someone pointed out I'm being a hypocrite," I say, looking at Eeyok. "I couldn't exactly do nothing after that."

"Ehehe..." he chuckles nervously. "It is just my humble opinion."

"So, tomorrow?" I suggest.

"Alright, we'll visit them tomorrow," Ralph agrees.

-- Forrester Inc office

To think I'm back so soon.

It was hard to get a hold of Neil Forrester, his secretary said scheduling a meeting with him could take two months. He must be a ridiculously busy man, or ridiculously important to have such long waiting times. Probably both.

Of course, after saying we were part of the DAET team, the secretary miraculously found an opening for us.

"This man is grating on my nerves," says Ralph irritatingly.

"Getting impatient?" I question.

"It's been twenty minutes since our appointment, where is he? Does he enjoy making us wait?"

Ralph has been very tense since we arrived. After all, it's his invention that got set loose to the world, now being weaponized by a terrorist organization. All because of Forrester Inc.

"I assure you; I have much better things to do with my time than purposely make your life miserable by waiting a measly twenty more minutes," Neil announces as he barges into the room with two of his goons.

"About time you showed up," Ralph sulks.

Neil sits down at his desk, eyes closed and fingers folded together.

"Now, what was so important you had to meet with me today?" he asks, his serious eyes staring at us.

"Have the extraterrestrials caused any troubles?" he asks, raising both his eyebrows at us with a questionable glance.

There's something about the way he refers to Eeyok and James as extraterrestrials that bothers me. Like it makes them appear more robotic or different from us. I want to say it's dehumanizing, but they're not exactly humans in the first place...

"They've been on their best behaviour," I say.

"That is good to hear. Then what is the issue here?"

"How could you let the blueprints be stolen?" Ralph accuses him.

Neil is visibly surprised, then quickly waves at the two guards standing near the door. They understand his gesture and leave the room.

"Blueprints stolen? What is this ludicrous idea?" he asks with an air of arrogance.

"Cut the crap, we know it got stolen by Hulio. Now they're making a weapon out of it. How could you?" Ralph quickly barks back, leaving no room for argument.

Neil remains silent for a moment, his eyes narrowed in contemplation.

"...So," he drawls out, "who told you?"

"We have an informant that works for Hulio, he told us," I jump in.

"What is going to happen now? People can lose their ability? That's insane and dangerous," I say.

"We are very aware of the situation," says Neil as he leans back into his office chair.

"We've deployed a team of supers that are on the case. You do not need to worry."

"Not worry? My bracelet's blueprints have been stolen and weaponized against supers. What are you doing to stop it?" Ralph demands to know.

"Mr. Hearth, that's nothing to concern yourself with," Neil stresses.

"It definitely concerns us," I chip in.

"Do you even know where Hudio's headquarters are?" Ralph questions.

Seeing Neil's silence is enough to know that he, in fact, doesn't know where Hudio is.

"Our informant might know more," I say. "But he won't help us unless he gets something in return."

"Something in return...?" Neil repeats.

"He wants out. A new identity. If we can get one for him, he'll let us know where Hudio's leader is."

That's not exactly what I told Mr. Invisible – he's supposed to send proof Benjamin is alive – but I figure the details aren't as important when talking to Neil Forrester.

"...You think I trust the word of this mysterious informant of yours? Miss Hearth, I believe you aren't even a registered superhero."

"Does it matter? If we can help out and make sure to stop Hudio from using the blueprints, why would you deny us?" I question.

"Miss Hearth, unless you're registered, you're forbidden to use your ability in public. We've already had to deal with the Super Mallgirl fiasco from before." Neil rubs his temples with a sigh.

"I'm not using my ability," I groan. "We have a way of cleaning up the mess you made. All we need is a little something in return."

"I can assure you our best supers are on the case. We do not need help from civilians like you. I cannot say more about it than this, but my decision is final."

"Are you sure about that? Because if they have the ability to stop anyone's powers, I'm pretty sure your best supers won't hold a candle against that weapon. They'd be instantly useless," says Ralph.

"That is for us to handle. Please have faith that we are doing the best we can to combat Hudio's operations," he rattles off like a spokesperson trying to cover up a grave mistake.

1. "We're not leaving unless you get us those new identity papers."

2. "Can you not reconsider? Our informant is valuable."

"We're not leaving unless you get us those new identity papers," I state loudly.

Neil chuckles at my posture.

"Miss Hearth, I could have you removed at any moment I want to. So, let's not resort to petty threats."

"Look – we have a chance to find out Hudio's location of operation, all we need is to give our informant the necessary reward. Mid-twenties male, Caucasian – surely you can get a new identity for him?"

"As much as I like hearing your comical ideas, I'm not entertaining the notion any further. We have it handled," says Neil exasperatedly.

"What exactly do you have handled? You allowed my design to get stolen and to be used as a weapon. We could very well let the public know," Ralph interjects.

This makes Neil narrow his eyes in response.

"I do not take that threat of going public lightly. Tread carefully, Mr. Hearth," he says chilly.

"Can you not reconsider? Our informant is valuable," I stress.

Mr. Invisible could definitely help us take Hulo down, if he's able to interact with its leader.

"That could very well be, Miss [2], however it doesn't concern you. Neither of you are registered superheroes, nor are you assigned to this case. We've got it handled," Neil explains.

"Handled? You've let Hulo steal my designs and create a terrifying weapon they could unleash to the world. This is huge," Ralph interjects.

"And it is our duty to contain it. I expect you not to let anyone know of this, lest there be consequences."

"But we could help! Our informant is—"

"We've already allowed a lot of leeway for the both of you, including allowing the extraterrestrials to cohabitate with you."

"Do not test our patience," he warns us.

Before I can get another word in, Neil gets up from his desk with a confident stance.

"Now, I have a lot of work left to do, I'll take it you will leave without causing any problems?" he asks us.

I ball my hands into fists, feeling powerless to convince him otherwise. I know I was being a hypocrite by not actually helping out Mr. Invisible, but now that I've decided to get him that new identity, I feel like I've failed him.

"No, we're leaving," I say, biting down on my lip.

Ralph looks at me expectantly, but once I get up from my seat, he follows suit.

"Will you let us know if you've destroyed all their data about the bracelet?" asks Ralph.

"I'm not allowed to disclose that," Neil says robotically.

I click my tongue at him.

"Come on, let's go," I tell my brother.

We leave the Forrester building with heavy hearts.

-- Lake Cabin Bedroom Night

This is all just so frustrating. I couldn't do anything this time around. No leverage.

Unable to sleep with this on my mind, I roll around on my bed and punch my pillow.

Without Forrester Inc.'s help, I cannot give new papers to Mr. Invisible. Which means I'm unable to keep my promise after being chided by Eeyok about it.

This really sucks.

How did my parents do it? They were going to help him out, and Mr. Invisible did say he was going to meet with them on the day that they died. But that was over eight years ago... where would I even start?

Maybe I can find something in the basement that was left behind.

I fling my legs out of my bed and exit my bedroom.

-- Lake Cabin Kitchen Night

On my way to the basement, I pass by Jæmis, who's enjoying a beverage that looks suspiciously a lot like hot chocolate.

"Did you learn to make it yourself?" I ask, pointing at his cup.

Jæmis looks down at his beverage, before his brown eyes flicker over to me again.

"I could not operate the heating device. It wouldn't warm the liquid," he says.

"Oh, the microwave you mean. Here, it's simple," I say as I walk towards him and take the cup out of his hands.

I throw it into the microwave and immediately press the largest button, which automatically starts counting down from one minute.

After a minute, it beeps and I remove it from the microwave, handing it over to Jæmis.

"Enjoy," I tell him with a slight smile.

"Are you going to your parents' lair?" he asks as he sees me walk towards the door of the basement.

"Lair?" I repeat. That sounds funny; like it's an evil lair.

I shake my head. "Yes, I would like to see if there's anything down there that could help me out."

"Help you out – or the man we questioned?" he inquires.

He's got a good intuition.

"...The invisible man," I answer.

"Want to help?"

Jæmis doesn't answer, he just follows me downstairs.

-- Lake Cabin Basement

"I take it you've decided to help out our little fiend after all?" he drawls out, smugly sipping on the hot chocolate.

"Yes. Eeyok talked some sense into me."

"Good. Then you can stick to your convictions as you said you would," he says sagely.

"I don't want to hear that coming from someone who was totally okay with torturing the poor man," I say, shaking my head.

"Hey, they're *your* convictions. Not mine. Besides, it was a bluff. I am unable to act on my threats in this state." He gestures at the bracelet on his wrist.

I sit down in the chair, staring at the powered off computer screen.

"My parents were going to help him with a new identity. He claims he was going to meet with them on the day of their death, so they must have had *something* prepared for him. I just don't know what or where..."

"Just a reminder I cannot read your Earthling language," he says casually.

"The babblefish may translate spoken words, but not written ones."

"Yes, I understand. I think, if we're looking for new documents, it should include a picture of him at least."

I pick up one of the folders from the racks next to the desk, calmly browsing through its contents.

"Do you think you can help me browse through all the papers here and look for his face in one of the pictures?" I ask him.

"The invisible runt?"

"That's the one. You remember his face, right?"

"I never forget a face," he reassures me.

"Good. Let's get to work." I pull out another folder and hand it over to Jæmis.

He gives me a pointed look, before taking it from my hand and flipping through the pages as he holds his cup of hot chocolate with his other hand.

We begin browsing through the various folders that are archived in the basement, placing the ones we've already checked on a different pile.

"Is this not him?" says Jæmis, showing me the folder in his hands.

I can feel myself getting excited as I see it is a picture of him.

Then my hope is crushed when I realize it's just the regular file they have on him, the very first one I looked through.

"It is yes, but it's not the file I'm looking for. It might be closed in an envelope or hidden somewhere."

I keep the folder open on the desk, as a reference point of his profile picture. We resume our work, going through each drawer one by one.

Two hours later and we're almost at the last drawer. I yawn out loud and stretch my arms in the air.

"If you're tired, you should rest. There is no need to stay awake to look through everything in a single night," says Jæmis.

I crack my neck. "It's fine. I wouldn't be able to sleep otherwise, with this weighing on my mind."

I ignore his advice and comb through the rest of the files. There's a lot of information my parents have accumulated throughout the years. So much personal info on supers, it's almost like they were paparazzi.

The idea that my parents may have left the papers with Mr. Invisible's new identity behind is farfetched, but it would feel wrong not to at least try and find out.

An hour later and we've completely looked through the green archive, but there's still some more files behind us.

What time is it? Four AM? I can't keep track of time when there are no windows in the basement.

My eyes glaze over as I flip through the pages, the faces getting all blurry to me.

Soon, I find my own eyes closing.

--

I jerk awake with a jolt, snapping up my head from the desk as I felt something touch my hair.

I blink up in a daze at Jæmis, who stares back at me with an equally confused expression.

Jæmis steers away his gaze and quickly pulls his hand back to his side. He looks like he's been caught doing something he's not supposed to.

"...You were asleep," he says in a robotic tone.

"Wha – what were you doing?" I ask groggily.

His eyes widen for just a fraction of a second, but he quickly masks it with a poker face.

"I've been browsing through all this paper," he states.

I brush the hair away from my face, distinctly remembering something touching my hair and moving it.

"Were you touching me?" I ask, demanding to know.

"...I was making sure you were really asleep," he says with a slight cough.

"By touching my hair?" I cock my head to the side, staring at him with blank eyes.

Jæmis' expression becomes increasingly more uncomfortable, almost as if he's fidgeting at this point.

"I admit my curiosity got the better of me, I apologize," he says politely.

Curiosity? This is confusing me. But the fact Jæmis would willingly want to touch me is making me feel all kinds of nervousness.

"What were you curious about?" I ask quietly.

He looks like he *really* doesn't want to answer that question, opting to narrow his eyes at me.

"You should return to your room and get some rest. It is unsightly to be drooling on the table," he says, avoiding my question.

I wipe the corner of my mouth with the back of my hand, finding a little bit of dried drool there. Ah crap, I must have been asleep for a while.

"Hey, don't avoid the question," I grumble.

"I found something while you were sleeping," he says, ignoring me again.

Suddenly an envelope is shoved in front of my face. It's been torn open by Jæmis. Interestedly, I take it from him and remove the papers inside.

A plastic ID card tumbles out of it and lands on the desk.

My eyes grow large when I recognize the person in the picture; it's Mr. Invisible! Except, the ID card does not say his real name, Alexander Kotov. It says Jeremy Baksteen.

"This is it!" I cry out in happiness, standing up from the chair with the ID card in my hands.

The rest of the papers are a fake birth certificate, some kind of vaccination booklet, and a passport as well, matching his ID card.

The ID card has since expired due to lying in this basement for eight long years. However, there's still two years left on the passport. Mr. Invisible could easily request a new ID using this. He could leave Hulio like he wanted to.

"This is what you were looking for?" Jæmis asks, seeing my happy expression.

1. Hug him in exhilaration.
2. "Yes! Thank you so much for helping me find it!"

Feeling myself float on a cloud, I throw my arms around Jæmis neck, pulling him in for an embrace.

Jæmis stiffens up at my hug, his arms stretched outwards, standing motionless.

"Yes! This is exactly what I was looking for!"

"Ugh," he groans as I squeeze him and press my face against his chest.

His heart beats in a pleasant melody.

"Thank you so much! I can't believe it was actually here after all," I say with a giggle, so happy they left the papers behind.

"Ah..." Jæmis starts, suddenly swallowing his own tongue.

I release him from my death grip, my arms sliding down his neck so I can get a proper look at his face.

Except he immediately turns around to hide his face. Well, whatever. I'm too happy to care about his grumpy attitude!

"Yes! Thank you so much for helping me find it!" I say with gratitude.

Jæmis proudly sticks his nose up in the air.

"Like I said, I never forget a face."

"You sure didn't. Where did you find it?" I ask him. We've been through so many files...

He points at the glass case with the supersuits.

"It was on top of there."

"Oh," I say dully. "It was in plain sight but we ended up combing through the entire archive... That feels like a waste."

"Nothing is a waste if you found what you were looking for," he states.

I smile at him. "That's right. I'm super glad it's actually here. Thanks a lot for your help, Jæmis."

A slight smile appears on his face, but he quickly turns around to hide it from me.

I turn my attention back on the papers, scanning through the information. It's all here. I can actually bargain with Mr. Invisible and help finish what my parents started.

I neatly tuck everything back inside of the envelope and keep it on top of the desk.

"Come on, let's sleep," I tell Jæmis.

"Huh?" he says, expression puzzled.

I push against his back so he'll walk up the stairs.

"Sleep!"

-- Lake Cabin Kitchen Night

After hounding him up the stairs, he whirls around to face me.

"There is no need to express your gratitude this way," he says awkwardly.

I raise my eyebrows at him.

"What are you talking about, in what way?" I ask, confused.

"You do not need to bed me. Verbal gratitude is sufficient enough."

I blink in confusion. Did I hear that right? No, I must be sleepy.

"...I was just telling you to sleep."

"...You don't want to join?" he asks, equally confused now.

I almost guffaw in response.

"*That's* what you think I was saying!?"

Seeing my over the top reaction, Jæmis sports an awkward expression of his own.

"Your Earthling ways are very contradicting, perhaps you should be clearer in your wording!" he hisses back in embarrassment.

"How about you stop misconstruing everything I do as some sort of seduction tactic?" I reason.

"Then quit being so seductive," he blames me.

I tilt my head to the side.

"Wait," he says, realizing the gravity of his words. "I mean—"

1. "Ooooh, so that's how it is. I see."

2. "If my very being is seductive to you, then you should control yourself."

"Ooooh, so that's how it is. I see," I drawl out.

"No—"

"—You think I'm being seductive? Or is it that you're just attracted to me, so everything I do seems like I'm seducing you?" I dart around him with a flirty smile.

"That is not what I mean," he says in a flustered tone.

"Jæmis, you should reel yourself in. I'm not actively trying to get you into bed here. Those are all your own interpretations."

He's accused me of this too many times. I can't help just being the way I am.

He parts his lips to speak, but then closes it just as quickly. He runs a hand through his short hair, mulling it over.

With a heavy sigh, he closes his eyes.

"Your actions are vexing. I am not completely... immune," he grumbles lowly.

"If my very being is seductive to you, then you should control yourself," I tell him.

I've done nothing wrong – it is Jæmis who's been misinterpreting everything I've done as some sort of seduction tactic.

"Control myself?" he huffs indignantly.

"Do you have any idea how much control I exercise around you?"

His words cut right through me, causing my heart to skip a beat. I know he watches his strength around me – but what if that's not the full extent?

"What do you mean by that?" I ask in a single breath.

His eyes flutter shut with a sigh, rubbing his face with the palm of his hand.

"I am not... immune," he admits with a grumble.

My throat suddenly turns dry; I'm dumbstruck. My sleepiness has waned and now I'm wide awake.

"Immune?" I repeat sheepishly. "I haven't done anything on purpose."

Is he saying that whatever he thinks I'm doing, is actually having an effect on him?

"...I apologize for misinterpreting. I'm merely trying to rebuff your advances," he explains solemnly.

That's a blow to my ego.

He thinks I'm making moves on him so he's rejecting me in advance? I haven't even flirted with the man for real and he's already rejected me!

"Maybe Earthlings are different, but for Ræhu, we take seduction seriously. We mate for life, so not anyone can attempt to court us."

They mate for life? I can see why he would be so... conservative in response.

Oh, that must mean Jæmis has never been intimate with anyone.

Not that I needed to know that.

Totally not at all.

"Look, I'm really not trying to court you or anything," I explain myself.

"If I'm romantically interested in someone, then maybe I'll touch them more often. I would smile around them, or perhaps blush. I will seek them out for their company or assistance. Maybe even confide in them."

At this point I'm just rambling, but Jæmis needs to realize whatever he thinks I'm doing, it's not what it means.

I don't know why I'm so hung up about it. It's just a misunderstanding.

But Jæmis' comment about not being immune – to whatever he thinks I'm doing – has rattled me.

He pins me down with a long and pointed stare, remaining quiet all this time.

"Very well. Then let's put this behind us," he says slowly.

"Gladly," I say, smiling awkwardly. "Let's just rest for now, okay? Thank you for your help."

He gives me another weird stare, before finally turning around and walking up the stairs.

All the while I can't stop thinking about his comment.

He's not immune!?

I'm not going to be able to go back to sleep.

In the morning, I send a text message to Mr. Invisible that his papers are ready, in return for proof of life.

-- Lake Cabin Forest Day

Focus Joselina, stop thinking about last night.

Jæmis is going to kick my ass otherwise.

Not that he can, but it's a figure of speech.

Oh god, here he comes.

I dodge to the side, avoiding his massive body coming straight at me.

I defend myself the best I can, but he's sneaky and manages to catch my wrist. He spins me around and brings me in close to his body, keeping me locked down.

I struggle to break free, but am hardly even trying at this point.

I can't help but focus on the rhythm of his heart, or how his large torso is pressed against my back.

Then all of a sudden, he releases me with a click of his tongue.

"You're not even trying to break free," he observes.

"I'm..." I honestly have no excuse.

"If you're not going to take this seriously, then run back to the house and let me train in peace," he says gruffly.

"I have better things to do than train someone who doesn't put in any effort."

"I'm sorry," I say with a gulp. "I'm just a bit distracted."

"Distractions can be *deadly*," he hisses.

"I know..."

"Then focus!"

I shake my head, trying to clear my mind. I do need to focus. This is stupid.

"Okay, ready!" I shout back at him, getting into my stance.

I try my best to get back into training, parrying, deflecting, even throwing in some punches. Lately I've been favouring low kicks to get him down into the dirt.

Or at least, that's my intention, but the practicality of it leaves much to be desired.

"Come on, go down!" I say, trying to get him to bend the knee.

"How many times do I have to tell you? A leg sweep won't work on someone of my size," Jæmis explains.

"You are too petite for this. You might find a glimmer of success if I'm already in motion and caught off guard."

I pout at him; I wanted to sweep him off his feet. But I guess he's too much of a brick wall for that.

"Alright, how do I catch you off guard?" I ask in return.

"Do you think your enemies would casually tell you how to bring them down?"

"That's why I'm asking *you*, not my enemy."

At least, we're not supposed to be enemies.

Jæmis sighs loudly, relaxing his muscles and standing straight.

"Fine. If you want to be crafty, look for a blind spot; every species has one."

I gesture at his whole body. "Well, what's your blind spot? It always seems like you can see everything, or anticipate what I'm going to do before I know it myself."

"As much as I appreciate the compliment of my abilities, I am however, not omnipotent."

He points to the back of his head.

"I do not have eyes on the back of my head, in case you hadn't noticed."

I snort at his sarcasm.

"I've become very acquainted with the back of your head, you don't need to point out the obvious," I reply.

That seems to grow Jæmis' expression to a humbler one, as he's probably recalling the time I cut his hair. When I found out how his ears are a big weakness of his. That's still an awkward memory, and now I can't stop thinking about Jæmis' blushing face.

God – I kind of want to see him make a face like that again.

Jæmis coughs into his hand, catching my attention.

"The point is, if you want to catch me off guard, it has to be in a position where I cannot see you, or when I'm too distracted to pay attention."

I shrug. "But your senses are super sharp, you can tell I'm behind you even when I don't make a sound!"

He crosses his arms, smirking slightly.

"That's because I have a keen sense of smell."

"I can't tell if you're praising yourself, or if you're saying I stink."

"Both," he answers matter-of-factly.

My jaw drops open in response; he really said I smell! Not even a white lie or anything!

"Well excuse me for sweating when training out on a hot day," I say, feeling mildly slighted.

"The perspiration is not the issue. You merely smell like an Earthling," he attempts to explain his statement.

I lift up my armpit to smell myself. What the hell does a human even smell like?

"But you have a different scent than the other Earthlings. It's distinct. Dirtier."

I am ready to throw hands.

"*Dirtier!?*"

He shakes his head. "No, incorrect choice of words – I meant dirt. Your essence is more like dirt."

I try to control myself from having an outburst.

"Jæmis, you better stop talking right now. Over here, calling someone dirt is a pretty low insult."

Jæmis exhales a heavy sigh, rubbing his temples.

"This is puzzling me; it was not meant to be an insult..."

My arms are crossed and I stare at him with a judging glare, not wanting to further argue with him on this point.

"Forgive me if I spoke out of line."

Seeing Jæmis unexpectedly act humble because of his words, it does make me feel a little better.

I make a mental note to start wearing unscented deodorant from now on.

"Alright," I drawl out awkwardly.

"Let's resume training," he grunts loudly. "Perhaps then you can hold your own against someone of the same level as Eeyok."

Jæmis gets ready into a stance, but instead I lower my arms, letting them hang to the side.

"Hey Jæmis," I start, suddenly recalling my conversation with Eeyok.

His brown eyes flicker to meet my gaze and he relaxes his posture.

"What now? Have you decided to quit?"

"Eeyok said that sometimes, good men do bad things."

"Seems that little runt has the capacity for philosophical thought after all." He looks pleased about this.

"Where does that leave you?" I ask.

"What?" he echoes flatly.

I start advancing closer to him, dragging my feet across the dirt.

"I'm asking... Are you a good man doing bad things, or are you a bad man doing bad things?"

I can see Jæmis rolls his eyes so much, it's practically doing a 180 in his sockets.

"What kind of childish question is this? Through what metric are you categorizing them as good or bad?" he huffs.

"It's a simple question, really. Do you think your intentions are good?"

All of a sudden, Jæmis has closed the gap between us.

I yelp in surprise when he wraps one arm around my waist and lifts me up from the ground. Then he tosses me into the air like a ninja throwing star. I'm ejected above the canopy of the trees, way too high up.

"Jæmis!" I scream in a panic.

I come crashing down towards the earth – but not before Jæmis catches me in his arms, distributing the kinetic force of my fall through the grace of his actions.

I'm completely bewildered for a second, my heart beating fast and my mind still trying to play catchup. He's not putting me down, instead still carrying me in his arms.

"Don't forget who I am," says Jæmis in this foreboding tone as he peers down into my eyes.

"I could end your life in a second with these hands of mine." He tightens his grip on me to illustrate his point.

"My intentions are purely selfish, so don't try to force me into your black and white worldview."

1. Laugh at his intimidation tactic.
2. "I don't believe you would kill me."

As I finally find my voice, I can't help but laugh at him.

"Seriously? You had to throw me up in the air to intimidate me?"

Unnerved by my positive reaction, Jæmis doesn't look like he knows what to do with me anymore.

I tap his shoulder. "Now, put me down."

Without even a single word of complaint, Jæmis gently places me down onto the dirt.

I wipe down my clothes, having caught a bunch of dust as he threw me into the air.

"I know you're not an innocent man, Jæmis. Certainly not a tragic hero one – but you can't fool me with your empty threats anymore."

"You're not going to kill me. Nor hurt me, for that matter. So... let's stop the pretenses?" I give him a cheeky grin.

"I don't believe you would kill me," I say dismissively.

"You sure love to test and try my patience," he growls.

"And I'm *not* stuffing you into a silly black and white worldview. I know the reality is much more complicated than that."

I find myself reaching out to his cheek.

"*You're* much more complicated than that."

Rattled at my attempt to touch him, Jæmis quickly lowers me from his arms and places me back onto the ground.

"Did you have to throw me up in the air though?" I complain as I dust down my clothes.

"I am merely reminding you of my past transgressions and the amount of power I have over you," he finally responds.

"What power?" I say, flashing the back of my hand to him – our oath.

"And so what, even without it, you still wouldn't have done anything to me," I say with an air of confidence.

Jæmis growls at me, his patience growing thin.

"What is your point with all this drivel?"

Honestly? It's more for me.

"My point is... Eeyok reminded me that even people with a bad history deserve a second chance."

I scratch my head, trying to find the words to explain myself better.

"I'm saying I've changed my mind about you, and that I forgive you for kidnapping me."

It's a simplified version of what I really feel. The more I've gotten to know Jæmis and his history, the more I realize that... he's just a product of his surroundings.

What truly matters is how he acts going forward, without these chains of commitment and threats holding him back.

Who is the man he's going to choose to be now that he has the freedom? I know he's under the oath, so strictly speaking, he has no freedom, but I am finding myself willing to remove it.

And while I doubt he's helping us fight off Lord Varitus because he cares about humanity and Earth – he did say it was for his sister – I do believe that a small part of him, wants to help *me*.

Or at the very least, he doesn't want me to die.

"You have a very strange mindset if you think combat training was the appropriate time and place to air all of grievances," he says with a small sigh.

I shrug my shoulders at him, my smile not leaving my face.

"You could just say something as simple as 'I understand' in return, you know."

The agitation present in his eyes tells me he's not in the mood for this.

But with another weighty groan, he says it.

"I... understand."

"Good!" I say cheerfully, clapping my hands together.

"Oh, and another thing."

"What now?" he asks tirelessly.

Before he knows it, I have jammed my foot into the back of his knee, making him bend. With a low kick, I sweep him off his feet.

Finally catching him off guard, he stumbles forward, landing in the dirt. A rush of accomplishment flows through my body, burning all of my nerves.

"Yes!" I cheer out loud. "I did it – I got you!"

Jæmis finally comprehends what has happened and he gives me a deadly glare.

"You caught me off guard," he states moodily.

"Exactly!" I say happily. "I nailed it!"

But even Jæmis can't stay mad for too long, and soon his expression softens, his lips curving into a smirk.

"Congratulations, I've fallen for you."

"Yes – wait, *what?*" I stutter, perplexed.

Jæmis slowly rises from the dirt, looking super casual about the bombshell he just dropped.

"You've... you've fallen for me?" I manage to choke out, my mouth turning dry.

"Yes, I've fallen before you. That was your intention, no?"

My cheeks turn poppy-red in response, for mishearing his words.

"Haha... yes. Completely." I fan my face to cool down.

I've been wracking my mind thinking about Jæmis' 'immune' comment, that I never stopped to realize...

Maybe *I'm* the one who's not immune?

"Perhaps we should quit after all, your face is getting overheated," he says.

I'm blushing, you dimwit. On the other hand, it's a good thing he doesn't realize I thought he was confessing his love for me.

And I would really rather be anywhere but here right now.

My phone suddenly rings, startling the both of us. Great – a distraction! Just what I needed.

The name on the screen reads Mr. Invisible.

"Hello?" I greet him, turning serious.

"You're lucky they had a job for me to do. They're busy as hell lately. Check your phone, you have your proof. I expect the papers by tomorrow."

He then hangs up just as fast.

Dumbfounded for a moment, I can't do anything but stare at my screen and see the small notification in the corner that I've got a message.

As I open it up, I see it's a video file, about thirty seconds long. Just from the thumbnail alone, I can tell that the redheaded man in a suit is Benjamin...

"What was that?" asks Jæmis, noticing my uncharacteristic silence.

"The proof we asked for, that the man he claimed was the leader of Hulio, that he's alive..." I say with my mouth agape.

Jæmis stands next to me as I press the play button. The scene begins to play.

-- Boring office background

There are ruffling sounds as the video starts to play. Mr. Invisible is operating the phone, walking around and weaving in between several people who don't notice him.

He's in a large meeting room, several board members are seated at the table.

"We will use that day to strike," says Benjamin.

"Some of us board members have... concerns about this plan," says another man.

"Concerns?" Benjamin spits out in a mocking tone.

"If what our moles found out is true, that there is an imminent attack on Earth, much larger than the last one – what will happen to us if there's no one to stop them?"

"Gentlemen, we'll be safely locked away at our bunker when that happens. We are completely safe."

"How long do you expect us to stay in a bunk--"

"Now, our plan comes with some risks, but it is sure to succeed. On the 18th, during the Superday Parade when many famous supers will attend, we will begin."

Benjamin fixes his tie. "Plans are already set in motion. I hereby adjourn this meeting."

"We shall resume on the 15th at the Grand Hotel."

The video screen then blurs and stops.

-- Lake Cabin Forest Day

I honestly have no words for what I just watched.

Not only did Mr. Invisible get proof that Benjamin is alive, but also that... they're planning an attack.

Jæmis looks at me, his gaze contemplative.

"Were they talking about the anticipation of Lord Varitus' attack?"

"I think so, yes. But how would they know?"

"The people you work with don't seem to be very trustworthy," he huffs. "Leaking out information, objects getting stolen..."

"No... they seem to be doing a poor job. I need to let Ralph and Caine know about this."

We wrap up our session and hurry back to the cabin.

-- Lake Cabin Living room day

We decided to not tell Caine the news over the phone, nor send him the video. It felt wrong to send him the video of his supposedly dead father like that, so we invited him over.

And the look of horror that washes over Caine's face breaks my heart.

Ralph looks at him with apologetic eyes. We both just want to comfort him.

When the video ends, Caine pushes the phone back into my hand. His eyes look cool and devoid of any emotion.

He combs his hair back with his hand and plops down onto the couch with a groan.

"Fuuuuuck!" he yells out loud, throwing a pillow across the room.

I understand his anger. This is a double whammy. Not only is your father still alive, he's also running things at Hulio, actively hunting people like me and Caine, his own son.

"What does this mean? Is my mom alive, too?" he questions us.

"I honestly don't know at this point," I admit my limited knowledge.

"I am starting to believe that..." Ralph starts, casting his eyes down at the coffee table.

"The night they died – Mr. Invisible told us he was supposed to be meeting our parents. He gave them a picture of Benjamin."

"So far what he's said has been true. Which means... That he wasn't lying when he Benjamin backstabbed them," I add to the conversation.

"Are you implying that...?" Caine gapes at me.

"I think our parents found out Benjamin was involved with Hulio, and Benjamin killed them to silence them," Ralph finishes my train of thought.

All the evidence so far does point in that direction.

"But what about my mom?" Caine asks, seemingly not conflicted at all to accept our theory.

"I don't know, maybe our parents tried to warn her and she got caught in the fire..." I suggest.

"I don't think we'll ever truly know what happened that night, not unless Benjamin tells us," says Ralph.

"Shit – I still can't picture it. He's *alive*? But also Hulio's boss!?" Caine pulls at his own hair in frustration.

"I think right now we should focus on the contents of the video – Mr. Invisible actually recorded a very good moment for us," I say, trying to steer Caine away from falling into rage.

"Plans of an attack and the location of their next meeting; the Grand Hotel." Ralph nods as he closes his eyes.

"Hey guys – they mentioned they knew of the attack that will happen sometime this month. What if that's their goal?" I ask, recalling one of the board members having concerns.

"What do you mean?" asks Caine.

"They're trying to use the Super Parade to strip as many supers from their abilities as possible, so that they can't fight back against Varitus' attack."

Ralph seems to understand. "That actually makes sense. It would definitely align with their goals to wipe out superheroes. It would just cause even more chaos if there was no one left to defend us."

"Yeah... If supers failed to protect, then Hulio could flaunt it to the world, saying this is why we don't need supers," Caine weighs in.

"...Do we tell Forrester Inc.?" I ask in a tiny voice.

"You heard him last time – he's got it 'handled'," Ralph huffs, mimicking Neil's voice. "They don't want our help. Fine by me – we can do this ourselves."

"Guys – are we really doing this?" Caine asks, looking at us with these innocent eyes.

"Are we turning vigilantes?"

I stroke his head with a comforting but pained smile.

"It's too late for that, we already are."

Ralph looks at us. "So, we all in?"

I nod at him. "Yes." Then I turn to Caine.

"Let's infiltrate them and apprehend my dad," he says, determined.

"He's got some questions to answer."

He certainly does.

-- Lake Cabin Outside Day

If we're going to infiltrate, we need all the help we can get. Hulio is serious business, they not only have weapons, but they also seem to employ various supers to their cause.

Not to mention Mr. Invisible said that Benjamin never leaves without an army of bodyguards.

"...And that is why, I'm asking for your help," I say, looking at Eeyok and Jæmis.

Eeyok bows in front of me.

"It would be my honor to serve you, Joselina," he immediately accepts.

I smile at him, knowing that's what his response would be.

But the question is... will Jæmis?

"This plan of the terrorists, are they specifically targeting Lord Varitus' return?" he asks.

"I believe so, at least that's what we can infer from the video. They want to attack supers and strip them of their power so that..." I look solemnly.

"So that there's no one left to fight Varitus."

Caine, Ralph and I gathered this is what the meeting is about. What they were planning to do with the Super parade, and one of the men mentioning the imminent attack.

They want to make sure no one can fight back, so that it'll create even more chaos, while they safely sit in a bunker somewhere. If Varitus can kill a bunch of supers, that's a job well done for them.

"Then obviously we have to exterminate these cretins." Jæmis looks like he's made up his mind.

"A little less on the exterminating, please, hehe," I chuckle awkwardly.

"Will I receive a supersuit as well?" Eeyok asks excitedly.

"Of course! We have to match now that we're all on the same side," I say, smiling broadly.

"You will have to glamour back into a human though," I address.

"Ah, out in public. Yes, I understand."

"We have no time left to waste, we must prepare a new training regime at once," Jæmis barks out.

His brown eyes lock with mine.

"You included."

"I totally understand. We definitely need to prepare."

Alright, they're in. If Hulio is gathering on the 15th, we have a week left to plan and prepare.

Chapter [025]

-- Lake Cabin Kitchen Night

A pair of footsteps descends the stairs. Just in time for the microwave to beep.

I take out two cups of hot chocolate, then turn around to face Jæmis, who's just entered the kitchen.

"I made one for you," I say, offering the second cup.

Jæmis gives me a suspicious look.

"How did you know I would come?"

I shrug. "Had a feeling you couldn't sleep either."

"I heard a noise, so I came to see if it was you," he says as he takes the cup from my hand.

"Worried about me?" I ask, shooting him a smirk.

It's the last night before we infiltrate Hulio's meeting location. The past week I've been training non-stop with Jæmis and Eeyok, to prepare for this.

"You've received as much training as I could give you in such a short period of time. It is not I that is worried," he responds.

I guess he realizes I've been fretting all night and wasn't able to sleep.

I gesture towards the couch in the living room so we can sit down.

-- Lake Cabin living Room Night

We sit down on the couch together, cups in our hands. The steam of the hot chocolate slowly dissipates into the air.

"I admit, I am quite anxious about tomorrow. I've never done anything like this before."

"Nerves before your first mission are completely normal. It keeps your senses sharp."

I quietly sip my hot chocolate.

"...It's also not letting me sleep."

"Are you concerned the mission will not succeed?" he asks.

"Hulio has been a large terrorist organization for decades. If the authorities haven't been able to stop them before, what chance do I have – a no-name superhero?" I sigh softly.

"It sounds like the authorities in your world are incompetent at their jobs," Jæmis sneers. "Or willfully turning a blind eye."

"You know, it could very well be that they're both in on it, working together," I suggest, my head filling with conspiracy theories.

"Just like your sister and Eeyok were part of the resistance all along."

Jæmis wraps his hands around the cup, silently contemplating.

"I did not know she was conspiring in the shadows," he admits. "Or perhaps I was turning a blind eye to her actions as well."

"I mean, you did know she was sneaking out of the palace. You must have had your suspicions," I surmise.

"The closer someone is to you, the harder it is to face the truth about them," he says softly.

In a way, that's the same thing with Benjamin. I never had an inkling of an idea that he was actually with Hulio – let alone the de facto leader.

"Why do you think she kept it a secret from you?" I ask.

The question makes Jæmis stiffen up in response.

"I don't know. My family is what is most important to me. She should have known I was on her side. I always have been..."

Everything Jæmis has done has been in the name of the survival of his family.

"Didn't you say so before? That my parents never told me they were vigilantes to protect me. Perhaps Læna was doing the same thing."

Jæmis snorts in response.

"I was doing the protecting. Læna was powerless after the invasion of our planet. How could she possibly protect me?"

I shake my head. "Not everything is about physical strength. Læna may not have been able to fly, but she was mighty powerful behind the scenes. From the small glimpses I've seen, she's charmed many Gaötte to be on her side."

I place my empty cup on the coffee table, then lean back into the couch.

"She could rally them to support her. I'm sure she was doing everything she could to keep you and your brother safe in her own way."

For a small moment, Jæmis grows quiet. Usually he has a retort or counter argument – repeating only strength matters – but it seems my words finally got through to him.

Absentmindedly he places the cup on the table as well.

"Had she told me; I would have helped her."

"Maybe that's why she didn't; she knew you'd help her and get into trouble yourself."

"That would have been my choice to make."

"No, I agree with that. I don't think she should have taken away your agency. Much like how my parents kept everything hidden from me and my brother."

"I understand their position – both my sister and your parents – but also disagree with their actions." He scans me with his dark eyes. "I think you would be perfectly equipped to handle whatever they were involved with."

I can't help but smile in response.

"Thanks. I also think Læna should have told you. You'd probably lead them to victory."

"I never lose a battle," he smirks confidently.

"Except when it comes to Earth," I chuckle.

"Earth doesn't count," he dismisses just as quickly.

"What – how come it doesn't?"

"It wasn't a battle," he states simply.

"I guess my eyes must be deceiving me, I'm pretty sure there was fighting involved."

"It was supposed to be a negotiation. Unfortunately, due to Eeyok's actions and yours, it failed."

I poke my finger into his bare chest.

"Just admit it; you lost," I goad him on.

Jæmis brushes away my hand, huffing indignantly.

"I did not lose. I made a strategic decision not to engage."

I burst out laughing.

"Wow, you really don't want to admit your loss, huh." I rub at my eyes, still smiling like an idiot.

"Because I haven't," he persists stubbornly.

"Keep that positivity for tomorrow," I say. "We're going to need it."

"Do not fret, we won't fail," he reassures me. "You are under my protection."

A lump forms in my throat as I stare at him with wide eyes.

The way he just came out with it, so nonchalant, it's something I need to get used to.

"You'll protect me...?" I ask, almost hesitantly.

Jæmis folds his arms across his chest, quirking an eyebrow at me.

"What else should I do – let you perish?"

"No, no of course not." I shake my head. "It's a little strange to hear you say you'll protect me."

Not to mention it makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

"I have trained you; it is my responsibility to see things through and make sure my student doesn't get hurt."

"Ah." That makes a lot more sense. "So, it's not just because you think I'm an amazing person and you don't want me to die – it's because I'm your student."

Jæmis tilts his head to the side, causing some of his bangs to fall into his eyes.

"I do not intend to see you die. Student or not."

And just like that, my insides turn all syrupy.

1. **Lean against his shoulder.**

2. **"That actually puts me at ease."**

I let my head fall against his shoulder. Something uncertain flashes in those dark brown eyes of his. He tenses up at my gesture.

"Thanks," I say softly. "It's nice to know you don't want me dead."

Jæmis takes his time to respond, debating whether to push me away, or leave me like this. It's clearly throwing him off his game, as he didn't expect any physical intimacy from my side.

"I don't want to see you die either. So, don't do anything stupid, okay?"

Jæmis scoffs, the movement of his muscles ripples through me. There's no indication he wants to pull away or remove me.

"That's my line. You have a knack for trouble."

I close my eyes. "Hmm, maybe you're right."

"I guess you have to make sure to be there for me when I fall."

Thump. Thump.

"If you stumble, it is your own fault," he mutters.

"What if it's not?"

"I'll catch you regardless," he whispers near my ear.

There are things in life that will never happen with near certainty. Pigs learning to fly. The moon turning into the sun.

My heart racing and blushing at something Jæmis said was supposed to be one of them.

Yet here I am, desperately trying to use my short hair to cover my red cheeks, because damn – that was *smooth*.

"Are you going to stay like this?" he suddenly asks.

"Yep," I answer, my voice monotone. "Does it bother you?"

He sounds out a small huff, closing his eyes.

"It helps distract my thoughts from tomorrow. So... let me stay for a bit," I mumble.

Jæmis doesn't say anything, but he doesn't remove me from his shoulder either. He lets me be, listening to his unique heartbeat.

Eventually he stirs, preparing to say something.

"...The ribbons. That was of your doing, wasn't it?" he asks softly.

My eyes flutter up at his stoic face.

"The ones I tied to the trees?"

"Leading all the way back to the house," he says.

"Yes, that was me."

"Why?" he asks.

"Cause you needed a little help finding your way back," I say nonchalantly.

"I don't recall proposing such an idea."

"Exactly; you wouldn't ask for my help, so I took the initiative."

Jæmis huffs dismissively.

"Stubborn," he states.

"It worked, didn't it?" I ask gleefully.

He doesn't respond to that, his eyes shifting away from mine.

There's a smile on my face that's hard to keep from growing. I snuggle up next to him, feeling brave enough to get so familiar with him.

"Isn't it time you should rest in your own chambers?" he finally asks.

"I suppose you're right."

I remove myself from his shoulder with a slight sigh. I do need to sleep.

"Thanks for keeping me company," I say. This small chat with Jæmis did take my mind off of things.

Jæmis gets up from the couch and walks towards the staircase.

"Get as much rest as you still can. Sleep well." He then takes his leave.

I sink back into the couch, taking a small moment before I get up to return to my room.

"That actually puts me at ease." I smile shyly at him.

"As long as I'm around, I'll make sure nothing happens to you," he says, sounding quite confident.

I can feel my throat tighten. He sounds so protective, and there's this sensation I can't shake off that he's not doing it out of some strange sense of duty.

"Do you *want* to protect me?" The words fall out of my mouth before I can stop myself.

"Want?" he repeats slowly.

I stare down at my lap, emotions going a little haywire.

"Yes, want. Are you genuinely worried I might get hurt or die?"

His brown eyes tremble from left to right as I confront him with this question. He seems momentarily confused, befuddled, really.

"I don't," he starts vaguely, "understand the question. A leader naturally cares about keeping his troop alive."

I shake my head, leaning in closer to him, staring at him with large eyes.

"No. Not like a soldier that's under your wing. Let's say you weren't training me – would you still protect me?"

He gives me a long and hard look.

"Haven't I already?" he fires back.

Stupidly, I've conveniently forgotten the moment he managed to spare my life in front of Varitus.

"...I thought you did that because you wanted to keep me alive as your bargaining chip," I mumble softly.

"You're not wrong," he agrees. "But... I had to repay the debt I owed you for saving my sister's life."

"What about now – there's no more debt to repay – would you still save me when I'm in trouble?"

"You attract trouble like bacteria on a piece of dung," he says dully.

"Well, that's not a very pleasant comparison."

"There's no doubt I would save you."

I turn my head to stare at him. Did I hear that correctly?

"What?" I ask dumbly.

"You're like an overgrown infant I have to keep track of in case it'll do something stupid – like kill itself."

I puff out my cheeks at him.

"Overgrown infant?" I repeat indignantly.

"At least I can find my way back to the house without getting lost," I huff childishly.

Jæmis blinks at me, eyebrows raised high.

"So it was your doing," he states, referring to the ribbons I tied to the trees, creating a trail.

"Well..." I drawl out with a shrug. "Someone has to make sure you can find your way back."

Awkwardly, he turns his body away from mine.

"I didn't need any guidance."

"Clearly," I reply sarcastically.

Jæmis squeezes his eyes shut with a deep sigh.

"It's better if you pay attention to yourself. Don't lose focus – tomorrow won't allow for mistakes."

He stands up from the couch and walks towards the staircase.

"Get some sleep."

I stare at him as he walks up the stairs. He's right, I do need to get some sleep and not lose focus.

-- Outside Lake Cabin Night

As much as I tried – I wasn't able to get a lot of sleep. There's this pit in my stomach, heavy and anxious – but it's combining with this exhilarating feeling as well. I'm nervous and also fired up.

At least it gave me some peace of mind that I held up my end of the bargain and gave Mr. Invisible his new identity papers. We haven't heard from him since – probably enjoying his new life away from Hulio.

We're all here. Caine, Jæmis and Eeyok are all in supersuits, with Eeyok in his human form as well. Ralph is staying behind as back-up and our intel, as he'll be monitoring the cameras inside the hotel.

First, we're going to need to tap into those cameras though.

"If this is going to work out, speak English," Caine warns them. "I know you can."

"Yes, no problem," Eeyok answers in English.

"Everyone, please wear this in your ear," I say as I hand everyone an earpiece. "We can communicate through these."

Eeyok blows into the earpiece, creating a high-pitched feedback loop that makes me cringe and immediately remove mine.

"Try... not to do that, Eeyok," I say, rubbing my ear.

He gives me a sheepish smile, looking a bit guilty.

Before handing the earpiece to Jæmis, I briefly recall the moment when I touched his ear, eliciting a strong reaction from him. I'm worried he may not want to wear it.

"Are you okay wearing this...?" I ask him.

Jæmis tilts his head to give me a strange gaze.

"Why wouldn't I be?" he says in English this time around.

"I don't know... sensitive ears I guess?"

Jæmis snatches the earpiece from my hand with a loud huff. It seems he's slightly embarrassed.

"Mind your own business," he grumbles, reverting back to his own language. He plugs the earpiece into his ear without any issues.

"Oh, also, take this pill," I tell him as I remember the motion sickness he gets in the car.

Jæmis eyes the small round pill suspiciously.

"What is it?"

"It's so you don't get nauseous in the car. We don't want you feeling out of sorts when you need to be sharp of mind."

Jæmis is about to rebut and probably deny he gets nauseous, so I take his hand and press the pill into his palm.

"Please," I urge him.

His brown eyes flicker to mine, but then he closes them and pops the pill right into his mouth. I smile in relief at his obedience.

"Now, remember. First you gotta find the electric control panel, so I can tap into the security cameras and tell you guys where Ben is holding up," says Ralph.

"It's near the back entrance, should be easy enough to break into," Caine adds onto the conversation.

"It's going to be guarded," I point out.

"No problem, we'll just take them out," says Caine with a confident nod.

"Eeyok, Jæmis – please don't harm anyone, just stick close to us and stay on the lookout, alright?" I warn the both of them.

"I'll be Joselina's second pair of eyes!" Eeyok exclaims excitedly.

"Please don't do anything stupid," Ralph warns me.

"Like what?" I say innocently.

Ralph says nothing, instead he pulls me in for a quick hug.

"Hulio is dangerous, don't let me lose a sister to them as well."

"I know, I'll be careful," I tell him.

I release him then wave my hand at him, trying to reassure him that it's going to be alright.

But when I enter the minivan with everyone else, I know it's not that simple. This is serious; I might get hurt for real, or worse – die.

I'll regret it if I don't go for the rest of my life, so I keep myself focused.

-- Alleyway

By the time we arrive in the city, it's already dark. Hulio wasn't going to convene until after 6 Pm at least.

Our minivan is parked a street further away from the hotel. Now we're in an alley, at the servant entrance.

We all hide behind a large dumpster, putting on our masks.

Caine looks around the container to inspect the entrance.

"No one is there, but there's a camera pointing at the door. We need to disable it without alerting them."

"How are we going to do that?" I ask, worried.

Caine just grins at me, putting his index finger to his thumb, creating a small spark.

"We're just going to short circuit it for a bit."

He stands up. "Everyone get ready, we're going to bust down those doors as soon as I fire at the camera. Take down anyone standing in your way."

"He means restrain them," I quickly correct Caine.

Then Caine gets up, swiftly running towards the entrance, firing out a small beam of electricity towards the camera. Sparks go flying and the camera appears to have shut down.

Caine kicks against the doors, but they won't budge, clearly locked on the inside. He kicks it again with more force, but the doors stay closed.

Jæmis rushes past Caine, delivering a calculated kick in the middle of the doors and they break open.

Caine gives Jæmis a dirty glare, but doesn't say anything as he rushes inside. Eeyok and I quickly follow after.

-- Hotel servant area

Surprisingly, there's no one around to guard the back entrance. I quickly pull the doors closed, hoping no one will notice we broke it down.

"Go down this corridor and then take a left," says Ralph's voice in my ear. He's giving us instructions as he's the one with the blueprints of the hotel.

I gesture towards the rest and we all hurry down the corridor.

When we reach a corner, we halt.

"There's two guards stationed outside," I whisper to them. They seem to be armed with weapons.

"I can take both of them, they don't look like supers," Caine suggests.

"If you can zap them so they can't react, I'll tie them up, okay?" I say.

"Ok – go!" Caine urges.

He jumps from behind the corner, extending both hands towards the guards. Startled at Caine suddenly announcing himself, the guards don't have time to react when Caine fries them both with his electricity.

Their bodies spasm and they tumble down to the floor.

My time to shine. I reveal myself as well and quickly shoot out thread from all my fingers, wrapping them around the guards' bodies.

In under thirty seconds, I've got them wrapped up like a cocoon. They can't move, nor talk.

"Eeyok, Jæmis, come help us move these bodies," I whisper to the earpiece.

Caine fiddles around with the lock on the door, eventually having to lockpick it before he can open it. Eeyok and Jæmis helps us drag the two bodies inside the room.

-- Hotel control room

We enter the room, quickly stuffing away the two guards. They're conscious and wriggle around, but they can't do much when they're tied up like that. I quickly tie them up to a pole to make sure they can't slither away like a caterpillar.

Caine walks around the room, there are control panels and wires everywhere.

"Okay Ralph, time to tell me what to do," says Caine.

As Ralph prattles off instructions, telling Caine which control panel to open and which wires to hook up with his own laptop, I stay close to the door with the other two.

"Got eyes!" Caine exclaims as he looks at his laptop.

I lean over his shoulder to look at the screen; it shows the live feed of all of the cameras in the hotel. There must be a hundred of them. There's so many!

"That's a lot," I sigh. "So tiny, too. I can hardly tell what's going on."

Caine moves his mouse around to click on certain feeds, enlarging the video so we can get a good look.

"He should either be in a room, or at the meeting," says Ralph.

"Probably the penthouse or something," Caine mutters darkly.

He browses through the many camera feeds as we try to locate Benjamin.

"There! They *are* having a meeting," I exclaim as I notice one camera feed.

Caine enlarges the camera feed so we can have a better view. It's a large ballroom, tables spread across with many people in business suits attending. Benjamin is at the front of the podium, speaking.

"The old man really is alive," Caine breathes out, still astonished at this fact.

"Caine, those are supers," I say, pointing at the bodyguards behind Benjamin's back.

"Shit – one of them is Vapor. He literally breathes out poison."

"And the other one?" I ask.

"Don't recognize them. That means we should be careful."

"As if we shouldn't already be careful around someone that can make us die by simply breathing," I snark.

"Ralph what should we do?" asks Caine.

"There are five other supers in the same room. It seems almost impossible to extract the target like this."

"Well, that's why we're here in the electricity room," I explain. "To cause a blackout."

There was some debate on how to cause the blackout. The easiest solution was going to be Caine short circuiting the system entirely, but we need Caine to deal with the other supers so he couldn't stay behind.

It was Eeyok that offered to stay behind. I'm still not a fan, as Eeyok cannot defend himself if caught.

"Make sure you get out once you cause the blackout, okay?" I warn him.

"I will be careful, do not worry about me," he says with a big grin.

"Alright," I say, still unsure. "Once the blackout has set in, we can capture the target using the small moment of confusion and pull him out."

"I can incapacitate Vapor – but I still don't know who the other super is and what they can do. So, we need to be careful."

Caine glances at the laptop again, thinking over our current plan.

PASSIONATE ENDING

"Come on, let's find that ballroom," I say. "What floor is it in?"

"12th floor it seems," answers Ralph.

"Let's go then," I say.

Time to put the plan into action.

As seen on the camera feeds; guards are stationed outside every elevator exit on the 12th floor, including the stairway. There's no way we would be able to pass through undetected.

"Guys, I still don't agree with this plan. No actual climbing gear sounds wholly unsafe," warns Ralph.

"Your precious sister will be safe with me, I can carry my own weight tenfold," answers Jæmis.

"You better be telling me the truth about that," I say skeptically.

"Come on, let's go back outside," says Caine.

"Eeyok, do you know what to do?"

Eeyok looks a bit sheepish.

"I'll instruct him," says Ralph in our ears.

"Do not worry about him, he's a soldier so he can take care of himself," says Jæmis.

"Okay, meet us out in that street where we left the car once you're done," I tell him.

Caine hands the laptop over to Eeyok.

"Good luck!" he tells us.

I wave at him with a smile as we leave the room.

-- Alleyway

"You sure you know what you're doing?" asks Caine, giving me a cynical side eye.

"Not at all," I answer for him.

To be honest, the plan is ludicrous, but it's crazy enough that it just might work.

I look up at the backside of the building and start counting the floors until I reach the 12th. Then I spread my arms and let my thread do all the work.

All my fingertips spawn thread that I weave together to form two tight ropes. They grow longer and longer, rising up against the concrete of the building, slithering higher.

Within a minute, I have two strong ropes hanging off the side of the building, securely tied.

"The coast is clear guys, all cameras are disabled, no one will see you," Ralph notifies us.

I look over at Caine and hand one of the ropes.

"You really are Spiderboy," he says. I can feel this smug smirk radiating through his mask.

I roll my eyes at him.

"Shut it and climb."

Jæmis suddenly swoops in, taking the rope from my hand and wrapping it around his arm. Then he tugs me in close by my waist, holding me firmly against his body.

"Let's go," I say, wrapping my arms around Jæmis' neck.

Caine starts walking up against the building, using the rope to climb higher.

Jæmis, like the brute man that he is, propels us forward in the air, leaping up several stories high, until he lands against the concrete and holds onto the rope again.

He's like a grasshopper, effortlessly leaping up several stories again. I try my best to hold on. I'm so happy the cloak of darkness keeps us hidden. This wouldn't be possible during the day.

Caine is lagging behind, but his strength and agility is no joke either; he's halfway up the building.

They really are on a whole other level.

-- Hotel window

Finally, Jæmis arrives on the 12th floor. He places me down on the ledge poking out, though doesn't remove his arm around my waist, just in case.

I dare to look down and immediately regret it.

"We're so high up!" I yelp. If we fall here...

"You're not going to fall," Jæmis reassures me.

"Tell that to my lizard brain screaming right now," I joke halfheartedly.

"Lizard brain?" Jæmis repeats strangely.

"Never mind. Oh, there's Caine."

Caine lands next to us, clearly breaking out into a good sweat from the workout.

"You're good guys, no one's seen you," mentions Ralph.

"Good," says Caine with a relieved sigh.

It's time for him to do his part of the plan; break open the glass.

These hotel windows aren't designed to open, so we're going to have to brute force it. Caine crouches down on the ledge and inches over towards the first window he can reach.

Light peers out of the windows, there's clearly a gathering present at the moment. Peeking through it, Caine determines it's safe enough to proceed.

"Most people are facing away from that window," Ralph assures us as he flies his drone around the premises.

Caine takes out a suction cup from under his suit and fixates it onto the window. He pulls on it a couple of times to check if it's secured tightly.

Then, he brings his right hand up to the glass. A small zap of electricity shoots from the tip of his index finger. It looks hot enough to be a flame. He then directs it towards the glass and starts cutting through it like it's made out of butter.

"I thought Ralph made you something to cut the glass, I didn't realize you were capable of being a bona fide laser cutter," I say in awe.

"Shh, I'm concentrating," Caine hushes me.

I let Caine do this work in peace, keeping quiet. He cuts out an irregular circle shape, but it's big enough for the three of us to enter through. He had to make it extra large for Jæmis.

Caine takes in a deep breath and then attempts to remove the piece of glass using the suction cup.

Luckily, the glass pops right out and stays attached to the cup.

My heart rate is going so fast right now. We could seriously end up dying here if we get caught.

Caine looks up at me; my turn again.

I spread my fingers apart and weave together a rope – shorter this time. I attach it to the outside of the building and let it flow inside so that we have something to climb down as the windows are quite high up.

Not waiting around long enough, Caine takes the cut piece of glass with him as he climbs down my rope into the room. I follow after, with Jæmis entering last.

-- Hotel ballroom

We try our best to be quiet and stealthy as we group up in the corner, surveying the room and the people inside.

There's around twenty people here, excluding the hired bodyguards. Benjamin is up at the front, speaking into the microphone.

The plan is to extract Benjamin and get out of here safely.

Caine ends up glaring at his father, there's some deep-seated hatred buried down there.

"Joselina, are you able to grab him from here?" Caine whispers.

"I should be able to attach a rope around him and have Jæmis pull him out," I answer.

But I am worried about his bodyguards though. One of them is Vapor but he shouldn't be able to harm us from this distance. But the other super, dressed in all black and hints of purple... I don't recognize them.

They could be a wildcard that we didn't prepare for. I have to be careful.

I start to create another rope once more, preparing myself for the eventual blackout.

"Okay, I'm ready," I say, keeping my eyes on the prize.

"You ready to pull him in?" I ask Jæmis.

"Yes," is his simple answer.

"Ralph, give us a countdown," says Caine.

"Alright Eeyok, remember what I told you to look for?" asks Ralph.

"Yes, five large buttons," answers Eeyok through the call we're all connected with.

"Make sure all buttons are flipped down when I count down to one."

Everyone tenses up, getting ready to jump into action.

"Close your eyes so you're used to the dark," I warn everyone. "Open them again on one."

I close my own eyes and take in a deep breath.

"Five," Ralph starts to count.

"Four... three... two..."

"*One.*"

The lights flicker out. The entire room gasps in surprise and confusion.

I open my eyes, being able to see in the dark much better than everyone else. I only have a few seconds to act.

I shoot my rope across the room, aiming at Benjamin in the middle.

The rope makes contact and it quickly ties him up.

"Got him, pull him in!" I tell Jæmis.

I detach the rope and hand it over to him, to which he gives a powerful tug.

I see Benjamin's body get dragged through the room. I can't believe we got him!

In an instant, the unidentified super snatches Benjamin away and breaks the rope. No!

And then I start coughing, followed by Caine.

My lungs prickle and hurt – the air is toxic.

Shit, it's Vapor.

"Joselina, Caine? Get out, now!" Ralph yells into our ears.

I try to stay strong on my legs, to abort the mission, but the toxin has already entered my body. I am light headed and my strength leaves my body. Even Jæmis has started to cough.

Flashlights shine into our eyes and my vision blurs away.

I fall unconscious.

--

Gradually I stir awake. My eyelids feel heavy. There's a sharp pain in my chest when I breathe.

That's when I noticed my hands are tied behind my back. I'm kneeling down onto the floor, right in front of Benjamin Prins.

Caine and Jæmis are both tied up as well, kneeling next to me. All of our masks have been stripped.

"To think I'd ever have to see your face again," says Benjamin with this nasty sneer.

"Funny, I must be seeing a ghost then," Caine spits back at him.

What can I do? We're tied up and trapped with terrorists. Think Joselina, how do you get out of here?

"S-shit," Ralph hiccups into my ear. "Eeyok is on his way. He's going to get you guys out."

Eeyok can't do anything though, he would just get caught himself.

Noticing my struggle with the binds around my wrists, Jæmis' eyes flash over to me.

"Remain calm," he whispers in a low voice. "Don't do anything rash."

He's right, all eyes are on us. There's no way we can get out of this. Not with all these supers around.

"Nearly a decade and you haven't changed a bit, you brat," says Benjamin.

"What did you do to mom!?" Caine questions him, electricity flaring around him.

The super dressed in black and purple kicks Caine's face in, making him howl in pain and quit generating electricity.

"Silence, boy," Benjamin shushes him.

He then walks around us, addressing the crowd.

"As you can see... I have a shameful lineage myself. I helped create this abdominal reject."

The crowd bursts out into whispers.

Benjamin walks back over to the podium and gestures the super. The super picks Caine up by his hair.

"Hey – let go of me!" Caine yells out loud.

The super drags Caine towards the podium as well.

"But no longer will we share this world with them," Benjamin speaks into the microphone.

"Harbringer, please demonstrate on this reject."

My eyes widen when I see the super, Harbringer, take over one of the guns a guard was holding. He points it straight at Caine.

"No!" I yell, trying to get to my feet.

I attempt to create a thread but a man immediately blocks my view. He raises the back of his gun high in the air, intending to strike me with it.

Jæmis hastily throws himself in front of me, taking the blow.

No!

Jæmis' brown eyes flicker at me.

"Don't look," he murmurs as a trickle of blood falls down his face.

"Don't move a muscle, any of you," the guard warns as he pulls Jæmis back to his previous spot.

Powerlessly, I watch as Harbringer pulls the trigger.

I expect a large bang, but instead, a dart shoots from the barrel and hits Caine right in his chest. He grunts in response. Oh, thank god it wasn't an actual bullet.

"With this simple weapon, we will take back what is ours. We will have our revolution," Benjamin continues to speak.

"I guess I do have to thank you for it though, I heard you were involved with its early beta stages," he smirks at Caine.

"Shut the hell up – you monster!" Caine screams.

He struggles against the ropes tied around him and his face is completely warped with hatred.

But then soon, fear settles in.

"Why can't I...?" he breathes out in shock.

I cast my eyes down; if they didn't shoot him with a real bullet, it can only mean one other thing that they injected into him.

"You asshole – GIVE ME BACK MY POWER!"

Caine gets cut off by Harbringer who kicks him in the face again. Caine's unconscious body flops down towards the floor. I feel my heart drop down to my stomach in horror.

"Gentlemen – what we witnessed here was a super stripped of his power. For good," Benjamin proudly boasts.

The crowd erupts into cheers.

I feel like I'm trapped in a lion's den with no way out. Regret washes over me as I see Caine's body on the floor, not moving whatsoever.

Then, something touches my shoulder and I flinch in response. I want to look behind myself, but a voice stops me.

"Don't look," he whispers. "They'll notice."

...Mr. Invisible!

"Act like I'm not here," he warns me.

But what is he doing here? He should have been long gone with the new identity I've given him.

"Can you make me invisible?" I ask him in a low whisper.

"Too risky, they'll notice straight away," he rejects the idea.

I feel him untie my hands.

"Hold them together to fool them," he instructs me.

I hear him shuffle away from me and move towards Jæmis, who has heard every word of what he's said. He unties Jæmis as well.

I need to get Caine and then escape from here somehow. The window is still an option. If I could just tie a rope around Caine, I could save him.

"Why'd you have to get yourselves into this mess?" Mr. Invisible groans.

"Why are you helping us?" I ask him instead.

He takes a moment to pause.

"I still owe your parents for all that they did for me," he whispers.

"Do you have a plan?" I ask, hopeful.

"This is as far as I got," he replies. "I wasn't even sure if you'd come today."

Jæmis nudges my shoulder.

"Survey the situation, don't make hasty decisions," he warns me in a low voice.

Okay, think. We've got invisibility on our side. Mr. Invisible can make anything he touches invisible as well, so we could theoretically all escape right in front of them.

But I need Caine with me as well.

"Mr. Invisible," I call out for him. "Can you make things partly invisible?"

"I sure can," he answers.

"Good. See what I'm doing with my hands? Make sure the rope stays invisible."

Inconspicuously I start to weave another thick piece of rope. From the way the guards are behaving, I'm assuming Mr. Invisible is keeping it from being seen. Good.

They're also too preoccupied listening to Benjamin to really pay attention to what I'm doing.

I continue to watch Benjamin address the crowd as I weave a rope long and strong enough to grab Caine.

"On the 18th, these rejects of the earth will get their retribution. We will live on an earth free of their ways."

This man has completely lost it. It's sickening to have to listen to this, and even more so after he's shot his own son without remorse.

I glance up towards the ceiling. There's a chandelier I could make use of. I direct the rope to go straight up.

It's a little hard to maneuver since I can't see it, but I can still make out it's whereabouts as long as it's attached to me.

Okay, it's in place. Now for the second rope.

"Here comes another one," I warn Mr. Invisible.

"Just a reminder that I have to continue touching them or otherwise it wears off," he tells me.

I give a small nod.

"Then hold the other one, too."

When I've woven another rope, this one I direct to slither across the floor. I just hope to god no one accidentally steps on it.

It goes up all the way to the podium to where Caine lies and I sneak it around his body. He's still out cold and doesn't respond. I hope he's alright...

"Jæmis," I whisper. "In my right hand is a rope attached to Caine. On my mark, use all your strength to pull him towards you and pick him up so we can get out of here."

My nerves are making me shake, but I try to keep it under control.

"Mr. Invisible, get ready to turn us all invisible – we're exiting through the window."

"Wait – what? I don't even know if I can do that!" he says in a much higher voice that it catches a guard's attention.

"Hey, shut your mouths, filth," he sneers.

"Now!" I hiss under my breath.

"Shitballs – fuck," Mr. Invisible curses as Caine vanishes in front of my eyes.

Jæmis gets up as he tugs on the piece of rope as hard as he can. Mr. Invisible quickly moves behind us, touches everyone, and we're now invisible to the naked eye as well.

"What the hell, where did they go!?" the guard next to us yells.

I can feel Jæmis catch Caine's unconscious body. Good, he's got him.

"Moron, they're invisible, not intangible! Shoot them!" Benjamin roars.

"Climb!" I whisper.

I quickly climb up the rope I attached to the chandelier and feel the rest follow me.

The guard below us shoots randomly, hitting nothing but the floor.

"They're gone!" he yells.

"Jæmis, can you swing us towards the window?" I ask when we're up high enough.

"Are we fucking monkeys!? I thought you had a plan!" whines Mr. Invisible.

Jæmis however, starts to shift his bodyweight to move all of us.

"Something just touched me!" yells a man in the crowd as the rope hits his head.

I prepare my hands to shoot out a bunch of thread to pull us towards the open window. We gotta make this!

This time, a visible thread shoots out and attaches to the further window – our escape route. Jæmis swings us over and I manage to pull us in.

"There they are!" Benjamin points at the visible thread giving away our position.

"Slide down everyone!" I say hastily.

Mr. Invisible seems to have let go of my rope and appears to climb through the window...

But that left all of us wide open and visible.

Jæmis hops through the window as well, carrying Caine's body on his back. Everyone in the room sees him.

Everyone sees me, still high up on the rope. No – I gotta make the jump, now! I push myself away from the rope, hoping I can make the window.

Harbringer points the gun at me and pulls the trigger.

The blow to my neck causes me to lose my senses and I momentarily black out. I fall through the window in an uncoordinated manner.

-- Hotel Window

Jæmis desperately tries to grab me as I tumble over the edge, but nearly drops Caine in return, so he misses me by a hair.

Jæmis leaps from the ledge, plunging down into the depths to follow me.

"JOSELINAAA!" he screams, reaching out his hand towards me.

My hand reaches out for him, too. I can attach a thread... stop us from falling...

No... Nothing is happening. I can't. I rip the dart from my neck. My ability – it's not working. No, no, we're both going to die like this!

"*Break the oath!*" Jæmis hollers.

I don't miss a beat as I bring both my hands to my chest.

"I wish to break the oath!" I yell loudly.

The backs of my hands burn and sizzle and a pain stings me as I see the marks fade away.

Jæmis roughly tears the bracelet off of his wrist.

And then it's game on.

Blue eyes zoom past me as he swoops me into his arms. I've never heard his heart beat this fast and loud before, it's overwhelming.

Jæmis flies me back up to the building, dodging any incoming darts the guards are shooting at us.

A super climbing through the window gets kicked into his stomach by Jæmis, making him fall back into the building.

"Hey, we're here!" yells out Mr. Invisible's voice. He's kept both himself and Caine invisible to stop the enemy from finding them straight away.

"Climb on my back," Jæmis instructs me as he lands on the ledge.

Once he puts me down I quickly clamber onto his back.

"You too," he tells Mr. Invisible.

Jæmis punches away an incoming dart.

I can see the puffy clouds of vapor's poison pouring out of the window.

Mr. Invisible holds onto Jæmis' back as well. He picks up Caine's body and then jumps off of the ledge, zooming into the air.

"Jæmis – we have to go back for Eeyok, he's still in the building!" I tell him in a concerned voice.

-- Street shops

Jæmis lands down onto the street where our car is parked. We both hop off his back and I unlock the car, helping Jæmis move Caine's body inside.

"Joselina, are you safe!?" Ralph screeches.

"I am, for now. Caine's with me too, but he's unconscious. We're going back for Eeyok."

"I don't think that's a high priority right now..." Ralph says with a gulp.

"Why's that? Did something happen!?" I can feel myself grow cold at the thought of Eeyok being hurt.

"Supers and men wearing Forrester Inc.'s logo are storming the building."

"Hey, I'm getting the hell out of here," says Mr. Invisible, this time actually revealing himself.

"I'm not exactly on good terms with either of these groups," he says.

"I still have a little brother to take care of, you know?"

I run a hand through my hair; everything is so chaotic right now.

"No, I understand. I'm very grateful for your help. Please be safe," I tell him.

Mr. Invisible gives me an informal salute and then vanishes in front of me.

"What do you want to do?" asks Jæmis, standing next to me. His eyes are back to brown.

"Attempting to retrieve Eeyok might be difficult."

"Uhm, they just apprehended Eeyok. I can see them on the cams right now. Ugh." Ralph groans out loud.

"Please tell me it's Forrester Inc. that caught him," I say, hoping for the best in this worst-case scenario.

"Yes, it's Forrester Inc. Benjamin has escaped with another super and everyone who was in that room is currently on the run," he explains.

"This is such a mess," I groan at my plans falling apart.

"We need to go get Eeyok, we can't let Forrester Inc. lock him up again with a bag over his head."

"They're taking him outside right now," says Ralph.

I close the car door; Caine will have to wait.

"Come on, let's go," I tell Jæmis.

He follows me as we run back towards the hotel.

-- Hotel entrance

There are a bunch of minivans parked outside the hotel entrance. Lots of people are walking around, blocking off the area or escorting suspects out of the hotel.

One of them happens to be Eeyok.

"Eeyok!" I yell, rushing over to him.

"I'm sorry for failing you," Eeyok says meekly.

"Ma'am, please stay back, this is an active crime scene," says the guard that apprehended him.

A figure steps out of another car, intervening us.

"Of course I would find you here, Miss Hearth," says Neil with a large sigh.

"Mind telling me why I am finding two of the extraterrestrials out in public, when—" he checks something on his phone, showing two beeping dots on a map, "—they're supposed to be at the safe house?"

1. "I'm cleaning up your mistakes."
2. "I admit, we lied. But with good reason!"

"I'm cleaning up your mistakes," I say with a huff.

"You wouldn't listen to us when we said we had information about Hulio."

"Did it ever occur to you that we *did* have the data? We just didn't share it with you because you're not a registered superhero. Let alone one that is classified to such information," he answers.

"I admit, we lied. But with good reason!" I argue.

"And what reason would that be? To play superhero on your own, when a far more competent group of professionals could have handled it?" Neil asks sarcastically.

"But you *weren't* handling it," I say weakly.

"Miss Hearth, you are not a registered superhero, do not pretend to know what Forrester Inc. has planned."

I press my mouth shut. He's saying that Forrester Inc. knew what Hulio was planning?

"We knew Hulio's leader would be here today but..." Neil sighs once more. "He managed to escape because of someone's irrational actions."

"If he managed to escape under your nose, that is a sign of your incompetence, not ours," says Jæmis, butting into the conversation.

Neil lowers his brows at him in response.

"I see the bracelet has been removed as well," he notices.

"It was an emergency," I explain. "I would have died otherwise."

"Miss Hearth, your safety would have been guaranteed if you didn't put yourself at risk and infiltrate a Hulio meeting ground," Neil barks at me.

"You're the one who gave Hulio its strongest weapon!" I argue back.

Neil glares at me. Then he turns to the guard holding Eeyok.

"Please release him."

The guard releases Eeyok and he quickly runs to my side.

"Miss Hearth, I believe it's in everyone's interest if you retreated and went back to your safe house. Where you're supposed to remain until further notice."

"I'm not going to sit there fiddling with my thumbs while Hulio is stripping supers of their powers. *My power.*"

That surprises Neil.

"You were affected?"

I rub the side of my neck where the dart struck me. Realization of my own predicament settles in.

"...Yes. I can't seem to use my ability anymore," I murmur.

"All the more reason to stay at home. You're powerless now, stop trying to meddle. Let us do our jobs."

Neil turns around, before flipping his head back to stare at Jæmis. Then he addresses another guard.

"Make sure this man receives a bracelet before they leave."

The guard quickly retrieves a suitcase from one of the minivans. Inside of it are a bunch of replicas of the bracelet; the source of all our misfortune.

He grabs Jæmis' wrist and snaps it in place.

Now he's bound again.

I feel hopeless. We didn't catch Benjamin, Caine and I got hit by a super-stripping dart, and Forrester Inc. is telling us to mind our own business.

"Joselina, what do we do now?" asks Eeyok, looking at me with these sad eyes.

"We go home," I mutter.

Chapter [026P]

-- Lake Cabin Living Room Night

A sense of dread and defeat hangs over us. I keep looking at my fingers, willing them to spawn my thread. My ability. My livelihood.

But nothing is appearing. It's really gone.

Caine is holding a pack of ice against the back of his head. He looks even more pissed off than I am.

I guess I can't blame him, everything is worse off for him. Not only did he lose his ability as well, but we failed in capturing Benjamin.

"God damnit!" Caine yells and kicks at the coffee table.

"I was supposed to be immune!"

I can't even tell him to knock it off because I understand his position very well.

Ralph is sitting next to Caine, his hand cupping his chin, deep in thought.

"Are we... is this..." I start awkwardly.

"Permanent?" Ralph finishes my thoughts.

"Is it?" I ask, fear filling my voice.

"...I can't answer that."

Caine kicks the table again.

"This is bullshit!" he groans.

"Our mission may have ended in failure, but this is not the end," Jæmis interjects.

"Who the hell asked for your opinion?" Caine snarks at him.

"Are you all giving up?" asks Jæmis.

"...What else can we do?" I ask, feeling dejected.

"Caine and I can't use our powers... People actually know our faces and even our identities. Benjamin escaped and we don't know where he is. There's nothing we can do at this point."

Jæmis gives me this look, this hard and chilly expression in his gaze. Like he's disappointed in me.

I don't know why, but that look hurts even more than knowing Benjamin escaped.

"Pathetic. Continue sitting here feeling sorry for yourselves, I'm not going to interrupt your pity fest."

With that he turns around and walks out of the cabin.

"What are we gonna do?" asks Caine helplessly. "Hulio knows who we are now."

I look down at my hands, unable to answer that. We were unmasked in front of a ton of Hulio supporters, not to mention Benjamin himself. It'd be dangerous for us to go out, especially now that we can't defend ourselves.

"I can't believe he said all that," Caine murmurs. "Calling me filth."

I tense up in response.

"Caine – that's not your dad anymore," I tell him. "After seeing him tonight... it's safe to say that the dad you once knew died that day as well. This man is not your dad anymore."

"Don't you think I know that?" he snaps at me angrily.

He gets up from the couch.

"I'm going home."

"Wait—" I try to stop him, but Caine quickly leaves the cabin.

Ralph suddenly gets up from the couch as well.

"And where are you going?" I ask.

"This is all my fault. I created this... this *thing*, and now both of you have lost your powers."

"Oh, come on, you know that's not your fault at all," I reassure him.

"But it is, Joselina. And I'm going to find a way to get your powers back." He stares at me with these stubborn eyes.

"I promise you."

With that, Ralph also leaves the room.

"Joselina, are you alright?" asks Eeyok, coming forwards.

"I..."

I don't really know how to answer that.

"I don't think I am, no," I reply honestly.

"Is there anything we can do?" Eeyok looks slightly hopeful.

"Forrester Inc. told us to stay home, so... I guess that's the plan." I shrug helplessly.

"What about Lord Varitus' arrival?" he addresses the elephant in the room.

"Forrester Inc. is supposed to handle it. I thought I could help, too, but in this state I'm just... useless."

I shake my head.

"I just want to rest. Sorry, Eeyok."

I can't even look him in the eye as I walk up the stairs to hide in my room.

-- Lake Cabin Kitchen Day

The next day, there's no one around the cabin. Caine left to his own place, Ralph is holed up in the basement working on something, while Eeyok and Jæmis are most likely training.

I honestly don't know what to do, I could barely get any sleep last night.

I lost my powers and I feel very vulnerable. Not to mention disappointed in myself for failing the mission. We had everything worked out, but it still went up in flames.

The door to the cabin opens up and in walks Eeyok. He hasn't changed back to his original form.

"Good morning, Joselina!" he greets me cheerfully.

"Prince Jæmis asked me to fetch you."

"Oh, hello Eeyok. Have you had breakfast yet?"

"I did, one of those yummy bread rolls Ralph made for me," he answers with a grin.

"You can take that ring off, you know," I mention. He's still wearing the glamour.

"I know, but after yesterday, I realized I should train in this form as well," he admits.

"I wasn't able to be of much use..."

"Don't say that, you were incredibly useful," I cheer him up.

Then his gaze softens as he looks at me, shoulders slumped.

"...How are you feeling?"

"You must be really worried about me if you keep pestering me about it," I joke.

"I am," he answers plainly.

He then raises his right hand, staring at the back of it.

"I wanted to ask last night, but... I felt a sting and the symbol disappeared. What does that mean?"

"Oh," I say while raising my eyebrows. "I broke the oath."

"You broke the oath?" he repeats.

Fragments of yesterday race through my mind, the moment I ended the oath, the exact time Jæmis swooped in to save me from falling to my death.

Jæmis calling out my name.

Wait – I've been so preoccupied with losing my ability and failing the mission, I totally forgot about this part.

"I had to. I was going to fall from the building and Jæmis leaped after me. We'd have both died otherwise."

"Prince Jæmis leaped after you, you say?" Eeyok looks curious.

"Quite heroically," I admit.

Eeyok smiles to himself.

"Wish I could have seen it for myself," he mutters quietly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I huff. "You want to see me die?"

"N-no!" he hastily denies.

"I mean, I would have liked to see Prince Jæmis risk his life for you."

"Well, it's not the first time."

Pieces of a puzzle start falling in line as I repeat that sentiment in my head. *It's not the first time.*

"You must be very special to Prince Jæmis if he put you ahead of his own life," Eeyok smiles.

"Special?" I repeat, baffled.

"It's nice to see him be protective of someone other than his own family."

I stare down at the kitchen counter, deep in thought.

"Isn't it funny? He was the man that kidnapped me, yet here he is, making sure I don't die."

"Joselina, I was also the man who guarded you and kept you prisoner." Eeyok reaches out his hand towards me.

"Right now, he's not under Lord Varitus' control, we have a choice in what we do. Maybe he's trying to make amends."

"Do you think that's his way of making amends? Protecting me?"

Eeyok shrugs. "I don't know for sure. Prince Jæmis guards his feelings very well."

"That he does," I agree.

There's suddenly so much to think of...

"Are you coming to train with us?" Eeyok asks cheerfully.

"Ah, I don't think so, I just want to be a potato."

Eeyok looks at me funny. "Potato?"

"Never mind, I'm going to watch some TV."

"Alright, please take it easy."

Eeyok disappears from the kitchen and goes outside to resume his training.

-- Lake Cabin living room day

I plop down onto the couch in the living room, ready for a day of nothing. Sulking in my misery.

As I switch on the TV, my mind loses focus, wandering off into directions I don't want it to go.

What became of Benjamin? Where did he go? We're never going to find our answers like this, whether he killed my parents or not.

Is he still planning to attack tomorrow, at the parade?

I'm too absorbed in my thoughts that I don't notice someone approaching me.

SPLASH!

All of a sudden, I get dunked on by a bowl of water.

"What the hell!?" I yell, getting up from the couch, soaked to the bone.

Jæmis tosses the bowl to the side with a sneer.

"You train with us," he states. "No skipping."

1. "What is wrong with you!?"
2. "Couldn't you have asked nicely?"

"What is wrong with you!?" I yell.

Jæmis takes a second to answer, after checking his own body.

"I appear to be in perfect condition," he answers.

"I didn't ask about your health! Why did you soak me in water!?"

"You needed an intervention."

"Intervention!? Why!"

"Couldn't you have asked nicely?" I ask him through gritted teeth.

"Would you have obliged in the same way?"

"No," I answer honestly.

"Thought so."

"That doesn't give you the right to drench me with water!"

"Eeyok told me you wish to be a potato. I have learned that is a vegetable in your world. You are not going to be a useless plant under my watch."

I throw my hands up in the air in frustration.

"Now I'm all wet. Not to mention the couch, ugh."

"It is sunny outside; you will dry up in no time."

"Do you have to have a response for everything I say?" I quip at him.

"Affirmative."

"Up yours."

Jæmis cocks his head to the side.

"Is this a seduction technique? I am starting to learn more 'slang' from your language, but it—"

I push Jæmis away as I walk past him in a fury.

-- Lake Cabin Kitchen Day

I open the kitchen cabinet beneath the sink to take out a bucket.

I turn on the sink and start filling the bucket with water, patiently waiting until it's full.

"What are you doing?" asks Jæmis as he creeps up on me.

"Nothing, just checking the temperature of the water," I reply sarcastically.

"When you're done, we can res—"

SPLASH!

Arms crossed over his chest, Jæmis is dripping wet just like I am.

"—Resume training," he finishes his sentence.

His eyebrows lower in anger, but I match his expression perfectly. I am pissed.

"You are coming with me," he says.

"No," I reject the idea as quickly as possible.

Jæmis reaches for my wrist, but I quickly dodge his attempt.

Frowning at my movement, Jæmis tries to grab my arm this time.

I jump back and shake my head.

At that point, Jæmis no longer cares and gets into a fighting stance. I match his movements as well.

He lunges forwards, managing to grab my arm. I elbow him in his stomach and twist and turn, freeing myself from his grasp.

I run towards the living room.

-- Lake Cabin living room

I dash around the couch, providing myself a barrier between us.

"Do you really think you can run from me?" he asks in this dangerous tone.

"I very well can," I answer stubbornly, feeling more confident with the barrier between us.

Except Jæmis really doesn't give a damn and hops over the couch, landing on the coffee table.

With wide eyes, I dodge roll to the side as he jumps on top of me, nearly escaping certain doom.

Except Jæmis leaps forwards like he's playing in a baseball game and going for a homerun. He manages to catch my ankle, tripping me up.

I fall on top of the couch and try to free myself by pulling my leg away from him. He's got such a strong grip!

"Ah!" I shriek as he pulls me down from the couch onto the floor.

"I'm not letting you get away," he says with a huff.

A swift kick to his chin shuts him up alright. I can feel bad about it later; now I'm scrambling to get on my feet once more and run away from him.

But Jæmis is much quicker than I am, gripping my wrist, forcefully spinning me around.

"Let go!" I demand.

"Why are you resisting?" he asks me instead.

Not wanting to answer, I lift up my right leg to kick him in his side.

Except he effortlessly blocks it. The block makes me lose my balance and I fall backwards.

Jæmis tries to keep me steady, but I use the momentum to pull him down with me onto the wet couch.

Droplets of water slide down his black hair and splash onto my cheek as I look up at him. I struggle against his body, but he's got me pinned down.

"Why should I train when I don't have any power!?" I whine.

Jæmis releases my wrist and lifts up his right hand, showing me the bracelet he's wearing.

"Do you think you're the only one?" he grunts.

"Were you not the one who wanted to learn how to fight without having any power yourself?"

"That was before they stripped my ability! Now I'm practically naked."

"You are no different than before in terms of skill."

I growl at him.

"Besides, why are you still wearing that bracelet? Nothing is preventing you from taking it off anymore."

"I—"

"What's happening up here?" Ralph wanders into the living room, having exited the basement.

When he sees us both on the couch, dripping wet and Jæmis on top of me, his face contorts into disgust and anger.

"Are you fucking my sister!?"

"No!" Jæmis and I yell out in unison.

"Get off me," I murmur as I push Jæmis away.

This time he complies and pulls himself away from me and stands up straight.

"What the hell are you two doing? Why is everything wet?" Ralph asks as he gets closer to the couch.

"Ask Mr. Grouchy over there," I say, brushing the wet hair out of my face.

"I designed a training regimen based on your utter lack of combat talent, even an infant could be taught lifesaving skills," says Jæmis in a more composed voice.

"Whether or not you have your ability, has no bearing on your training."

I huff in response, knowing he has a point, but too annoyed to let him win the argument.

"I didn't think you would run away in the face of adversity."

Great, kick me while I'm down, why don't you. Stupid Jæmis.

"Training is not going to help me get my ability back," I hiss.

"Neither is acting like a food substance."

"Food what now?" Ralph asks, confused.

Jæmis closes his eyes with a sigh.

"I'll be outside in the woods, training."

His brown eyes fix on me.

"I'll be expecting you, even once the sun goes down."

Jæmis dramatically walks out of the living room. Or at least, it would have looked cool if he wasn't leaving wet footprints behind.

"Care to tell me what that was all about?" asks Ralph.

"It's nothing. I'm just pissed. And wet. I am going to dry myself off."

"...You know that might get moldy, right?" Ralph gives a skeptical eyebrow raise at the couch.

I groan loudly.

--

The blow dryer blows hot air against the couch as I crouch down, directing it towards any wet spots.

I've dried myself off, currently contemplating my own life choices as I dry a couch. This is stupid.

Ralph said he's working on something to revert the changes brought upon by the weapon made by Hulio. I honestly don't have much hope.

I look over at the windows, seeing the sun slowly settle down.

They must still be training then...

-- Lake Cabin Kitchen Night

Eventually it's night time and I've made dinner for everyone. That's the only thing I could force myself to do.

However, it's only Eeyok who is on time.

"Where is Jæmis?" I ask.

"Fasting, I presume," Eeyok answers.

"You're not?"

"I'm way too hungry for your delicious food to do that," he grins.

"Heh, thanks," I say with a smile.

"Ralph doesn't want to eat either, he's holed up in the basement trying to figure out if there's a way to undo..." I gesture at myself. "*This*."

"Your brother is very smart; I have high hopes he can do it!"

We sit down at the bar to eat our dinner.

"What is our plan for tomorrow?" he asks, slurping up some noodles.

"I don't really have a plan," I admit.

"I thought we were going to attend the parade. Just to be sure."

"We're supposed to stay inside," I say with a sigh. "I've already been warned not to go out twice."

"Back on Yool, you sure didn't listen to that rule..." he mumbles.

"I heard that," I say, giving him a sharp and judging look.

But he's right. Rules don't really hold me down.

I guess I'm just really demoralized with everything that's happened.

"Your food is very delicious again," he says, changing the subject.

"Thank you." Not like I did a whole lot.

"I'm going to miss it."

A wave of sentimentality and sense of dread washes right over me as I realize the gravity of his words. Eeyok will leave earth. He's not going to stay here.

"...You're going back to Yool, aren't you?"

"Of course. That is, if we can defeat Lord Varitus when he arrives. I wouldn't really have a home to come back to if that doesn't succeed."

"What's going to happen if you return to Yool?"

"An uprising, for sure. Reformation of our current command. Not everyone will be on board, but many Gaötte loathe Varitus for violently taking over."

"That sounds really complicated," I say. I don't have much knowledge about their politics.

"You'll stay safe, right?" I ask hopefully.

He smiles at me. "I will do my best."

I poke at my food, not liking the fact Eeyok will leave. Jæmis, too.

"...What about Jæmis?" I ask. "Will anything happen to him?"

Eeyok stops eating his food, deep in thought.

"Most likely he will remain Captain and command our troops."

"Oh that's good, I thought you would all lynch him or something."

"Prince Jæmis is a worthy Captain, he earned that rank all on his own. Many admire him," he says, sounding confident.

He'll be returning to Yool and remain a Captain. If things go according to plan.

There's a pain in my heart at thinking of saying goodbye. To never see them again. It's been what – six months since we've first met? It feels like a lifetime with everything I've experienced.

And the people we've left behind on Yool, like Billius who had taken great care of me. Or the adorable Nornus.

"Wait – what happens to Nornus?" I ask, my voice cracking in the middle.

Eeyok managed to negotiate his safety, but that's with Varitus still alive. Not to mention, Nornus would be devastated if his own brother is murdered.

Eeyok looks troubled this time.

"I can't say for sure... Princess Læna doesn't seem to think kindly of him."

I reach out for Eeyok's arm.

"Please, make sure he's safe. He's nothing like Varitus. He's kind and... and totally innocent of any of the war crimes his brother has committed."

"I will try, Joselina. I don't want to kill the young prince either."

This makes me super worried for him. I would even welcome him to stay on Earth if it's too dangerous on Yool, but it's not like he'll be tagging along with Varitus, who is getting ready for war.

"I just want him to be safe," I mumble as I release his arm.

"I promise I'll keep him safe to the best of my capabilities," Eeyok says with an encouraging smile.

"Maybe Jæmis will help, too."

"Ahaha... that's a little *too* optimistic," Eeyok chuckles nervously.

"I'm going to miss you, Eeyok," I say with a sad smile.

His face falters as well.

"Same. I am happy we managed to cross paths, even if it wasn't under ideal circumstances."

"Hah, maybe in another life, the circumstances would have been different."

"Maybe," he agrees with a smile.

Having to say goodbye to Eeyok feels like saying goodbye to a best friend. Caine is a very dear friend of mine and nothing will replace him, but I've grown so attached to Eeyok.

And admittedly, Jæmis has also filled a spot. He's not the same as a best friend or anything, he fills an unlikely niche. I feel a different sense of loss when I think about him leaving earth.

"Do you reckon I should bring dinner to Jæmis? He still hasn't come back," I say.

"Maybe he's lost," Eeyok says with a snort.

"No, I tied ribbons around the trees so he could find his way back." I shake my head.

"Ooooh, so that's what they were. That's very thoughtful of you."

I almost feel like blushing, as if Eeyok caught me doing something naughty.

"I think it's a good idea though. Prince Jæmis was sulking earlier because you didn't join our training."

"It's not the end of the world if I skipped a day," I mutter.

"No... but it's his way of supporting you and giving you a distraction. You did seem rather stressed."

Eeyok balls his hand into a fist and grins at me.

"Training does help take your mind off of things!"

"Alright, I'll go see him after we finish our food. Now eat up!"

-- Lake Cabin Forest Night

Finding my way through the forest, I notice a firefly here and there twinkling in the distance. They seem to be coming out in droves now that it's turning summer.

As expected, Jæmis is out in the clearing, practicing some moves.

He really has been training out here the entire day, already topless. I guess it's because he gets too sweaty.

"I brought you dinner," I call out to him. "Since you didn't show up at the cabin."

Encased in a plastic container, I present his dinner to him.

Jæmis quits moving around and tosses his head towards my direction.

"So you finally decided to join," Jæmis drawls out slowly.

"Uh no, I'm just here to bring you dinner."

"I have no need for sustenance, unless potatoes are on the menu tonight."

I nearly do a double-take. Is he insinuating he wants to consume me!?

...*Sexually?*

Haha, no wait, this is Jæmis. Mr. Don't-Seduce-Me.

"Excuse me?" I ask.

Jæmis walks over to me, his strut seemingly premeditated and alluring.

"I'll be making quick work of you."

I gulp loudly. He seems angry that I didn't join the training.

"What... what kind of work? Please stop looking at me as if you're going to devour me."

"If you think that's an appropriate punishment, then I will oblige."

"W-what?" I stutter, flabbergasted at the way he's acting.

He pushes a hand through his black hair and flicks it away from his eyes.

"You didn't show up for training today, don't think I'll take it easy on you."

"Alright fine, I shouldn't have skipped today," I admit.

Please stop staring at me like I'm a piece of meat ready to be eaten. It's unnerving.

Kinda hot though.

"The day hasn't ended yet," Jæmis so happily surmises as he gets into a stance.

"You really wanna go at it right now?" He is getting on my last nerve.

"Take your best shot," he says smugly.

I growl at him.

"I do warn you," he says with this confident smirk. "This time I won't be holding back."

I throw the container onto the grass with a huff and launch myself towards him with an extended fist.

Jæmis easily parries it and pushes me away, immediately throwing a fist in my direction instead.

I dodge it and retaliate by getting closer to him and striking his chin with an open palm.

It barely even phased him, instead he stares down at me, smirking.

"Good, use that untapped rage of yours."

"Argh – stop being so smug!" I yell and try to knee him in the stomach.

Jæmis catches my leg and uses his brute strength to flip me up in the air.

I spin once and fall down to the ground. Miraculously, my hands touch the dirt first and I manage to boost myself away from a disastrous tumble, landing on my feet.

Okay, not gonna lie; that was pretty fucking cool.

I grin at him, feeling my heart pounding.

"Crafty," he says, impressed.

He doesn't give me a second to enjoy it as he charges right at me.

Jæmis really doesn't hold back. His punches and kicks legitimately hurt, even though I manage to block most of them. I can never land a good hit on him, he's always either dodging or blocking.

But for some reason, even though I'm getting my ass handed to me – I'm enjoying it. I may not provide much of a challenge, but I feel like my spirit is coming back to me. My will to fight.

My heart is racing and my lungs are begging for oxygen; I'm giving it my all.

It is exhilarating to only focus on blocking the next attack.

I catch a glimpse of Jæmis' face; it's so intense, but he is unmistakably enjoying himself to the fullest.

The fireflies glowing in the background feel like an audience to our dance in the forest.

But even a dance has to come to an end.

Jæmis does so by pinning me down into the dirt, his arm thrust against my throat. My chest heaves up and down as I catch my breath. He does the same.

His eyes gaze at me fiercely. Hungrily.

Maybe he really did want to eat a potato.

The lull of Jæmis' heartbeat rings through my ears.

He eventually removes his arm from my throat.

"Well done," is all he says.

"Satisfied?" I ask, looking up at him.

"Never," he answers gruffly.

A rush of emotions course through my body. Mostly hormones. Thirsty ones.

At this point in time, I really wouldn't mind if he devoured me right here and now.

Which is why there's a visible look of disappointment on my face when Jæmis removes himself from me and stands up straight, taking away all that energy and fire I was feeling before.

He extends a hand towards me, which I take.

Jæmis gently pulls me to my feet; I feel as light as a feather when he handles me. Like it's no big deal for him to deal with me.

I wipe the sweat from my brows; my clothes weren't exactly fit for training, so I've just stained them with sweat. Not a very sexy look or anything.

I admit; this did lift up my mood. When I got out of bed this morning, everything felt bleak and hopeless.

But if even Jæmis is here to cheer me up – well, I'll take it.

"Thanks," I tell him.

Jæmis turns his back on me to scavenge for his dinner in the grass somewhere.

"For what?"

"Just for being you."

Picking up the container from the ground, he whirls around to face me.

"That's an odd thing to be thankful for."

I shrug my shoulders at him. Then I plop down at the base of a tree and lean my back against the bark to rest.

It doesn't even surprise me when Jæmis sits down next to me, already eating his cold noodles.

I look up at the stars through the lush foliage from the trees.

Somewhere out there is Yool. Everyone will be returning back to it. Eeyok and Jæmis will no longer be here.

I feel lonely.

"Jæmis?" I call out for him.

He grunts in response to indicate he's paying attention, but his mouth is full of food.

"Why did you say my name?"

Cough – hack – wheeze.

Jæmis pounds on his chest as if he tried to bite off more than he could chew.

He swallows whatever was stuck and clears his throat.

"I don't know what you mean," he denies.

I narrow my eyes at him.

"You yelled it. Everyone in the entire ballroom heard it. In fact, I'm pretty sure you compromised my identity by yelling my name at the top of your lungs."

"I'm sure there are more... Earthlings... with that name," he says awkwardly.

"What name?" I ask coyly.

He frowns at me.

"Your name."

"And what would that be?" I bat my eyelashes at him.

Jæmis tears his eyes away from me and focuses on his food, remaining silent.

"What, really? You're not going to say it?"

He slurps up a noodle.

"Why would I say it?"

"To indulge me?"

"Don't I indulge you enough?"

"So you're admitting it, you indulge me."

"I—" Jæmis shuts his mouth.

"No more talking," he grunts as he continues with his meal.

I pout at him. "Well, you're no fun."

"I've never been fun."

"I'm not going to disagree with that."

More slurping.

"Why'd you jump after me?" I ask instead.

"You couldn't fly. It was a death sentence."

Jæmis finally leaves his noodles alone.

"I don't know," he admits.

"That's not really an answer."

He glares at me slightly.

"It was instinct," he replies instead.

"Instinct to jump after people who are about to die, or just me?"

"I don't risk my life for just anyone."

My heart skips a beat.

This time his eyes soften; almost introspective, gazing down at his cold noodle soup.

"I don't know why I reacted the way I did. It was unbecoming of me."

Then his brown eyes flicker towards mine.

"You must know that to me, my family is everything. I don't throw my life away for no reason."

"I understand that," I say. "But you jumped right after me anyway."

"I knew you would break the oath."

"Is that because you think I trust you, or because you trusted I was so afraid of dying, I'd break the oath so you could save me?"

"Joselina."

"I trust you."

My face quickly fills up with blood as I awkwardly look away from him.

"That is not an easy thing for me to say."

I take a peek at him through the corner of my eye.

"Say it again."

"Say what?"

"My name."

"Joselina."

The hairs on my arms stand up straight; goosebumps are spreading everywhere on my skin.

I turn to face him.

"Again," I command.

His eyes glaze over.

"Joselina," he says in a softer tone.

My heart is racing with untold energy.

"Have you had your fill yet?"

"I don't think I could ever grow tired of hearing it."

"I'm not going to continue to indulge you."

"Then at least tell me; why is it that you trust me?"

Silence.

"...For reasons I do not even know myself."

His brown eyes are fixed on me, I can see the confusion settled in them.

"My family are the last survivors of the Ræhu race; it's all that ever mattered to me. All I ever trusted."

"I have never seen anyone as pitifully weak as you—"

"—Hey now."

"—Manage to have such a strong spirit. So insignificant, small, and easily bruised."

Jæmis brushes the back of his fingers along my upper arm, where a bruise has started forming from our sparring earlier.

"Yet you thrust yourself in front of stronger beings, if you believe that's what's right."

He closes his eyes with a deep exhale.

"...I trust you want to do what's right."

Why does this feel like a huge compliment?

"You've never shown me any fear when your life was in my hands – so why should I?"

That's not entirely true, I was definitely scared for a while, but my pride would never let it show.

"I was scared of you, at the start," I admit.

"But I'm very good at pushing boundaries."

Jæmis gives me a genuine smile.

"I'm not going to disagree with that," he says, echoing my earlier statement.

When I catch a glimpse of the bracelet on his wrist, a twisted feeling emerges inside of me.

"...Why are you still wearing that? There's no more oath. You can take it off."

Jæmis raises his right hand, the bracelet reflecting the moonlight.

"This is... a symbol."

"A symbol of *what*?"

"A symbol of whether you trust me in return."

I bite back my tongue.

Really – that's what he thinks?

I wrap my fingers around the bracelet, startling Jæmis.

I unhook the strap and slide it off his wrist, letting it fall into the grass.

Jæmis is stunned for a second, unable to process that I've let him go. Then he places the container onto the ground and lifts up his arms, rubbing his wrist with his hand where the bracelet used to be.

Why was it even in question whether I trusted him or not? It should have been obvious.

"Why...?" he asks, sounding genuinely surprised.

"Why not?" I fire back at him.

"I have done you wrong on so many accounts. My actions are unforgivable. I have so many past regrets..."

He sighs. "I've been a monster."

"I don't think you're a monster. Not anymore," I acknowledge.

"I think you're capable of doing good and making amends."

"Nothing I do will make up for the things I've done."

"No, you're right. But you can move forwards by learning from your mistakes."

He leans in closer to me.

"It's conflicting – it was a horrible deed of me to take you with me to Yool. However..."

"I don't want to consider meeting you as a mistake."

Oh lord have mercy, that look from him just about kills me.

"You have... affected me."

I swallow all of my hesitations. My feelings cannot be contained anymore.

"You have changed my world," I reply honestly.

Jæmis looks sincerely shocked. But then he shakes his head.

Within a blink of an eye he scoops me up in his arms.

"Kyaa! What are you doing!?" I yell.

"Showing you the world."

He holds me close to his chest and before I know it, launches us into the air.

-- Skyline

I cling onto him, my arms wrapped around his neck and feeling the wind flowing around me. We're actually up in the air, and really, *really* high!

Jæmis swirls in the air, making graceful movements. The air is chilly so I make sure I'm snuggled close to him. He's carrying me like a princess.

I finally dare to look down and see the amazing dancing lights of the fireflies below.

"Wow!" I gasp out loud. It's so pretty!

I press the side of my face against Jæmis' chest which gives me this comforting feeling.

Ah – his heart. It's singing to me, loud and clear.

I look up at Jæmis himself; he's wearing an expression I've yet to see on his face. He looks excited, perhaps even a little happy. It's so rare to see him displaying any kind of emotion, that I silently take in the sight.

Jæmis starts to descend from the heavens once we arrive above the lake.

He lands near the edge of the lake and finally releases me, gently putting me down onto the grass.

As I disturb the grass, fireflies appear around us, lighting up the area.

"Look!" I say, seeing them buzz around us.

The sight is simply magical. Or perhaps I'm just infused with a drug so everything feels ten times more beautiful.

Jæmis pays no attention to them, instead, he flies off into the night, creating a powerful gust of wind around us.

"Jæmis!" I yell out at him. Is he leaving me behind!?

I see Jæmis make a loop in the air, flying above the lake in a controlled manner. He's not leaving me behind... he's simply flying.

His movements are so graceful, I'm captivated by him. It's like he's doing some kind of ritual, as each movement seems to serve a purpose, each swerve to the right or left looking part of some kind of dance.

He's nothing but a blue blur in the night sky now. Wait – he's fazed! His markings are glowing.

Jæmis dives into the lake and immediately bursts out of it, spinning around, creating a vortex of water around himself. Water flies everywhere as he finally halts, his markings make the water droplets glow blue as well.

He looks so beautiful and mesmerizing to me; my eyes are glued to his form.

Slowly, Jæmis loses speed as he descends upon the middle of the lake. His feet touch the surface of the water and he hovers over it, watching the ripples flow away from him.

The blue markings on his face glow in the darkness of the night. The fireflies around me give me enough light to see what's going on. Everything feels like it's sparkling. He truly is not from this world.

Jæmis finally makes eye contact with me. I feel like I've been captivated by a spell that makes me unable to move. He gradually starts to hover towards me, the tips of his shoes dragging across the water.

When he reaches the edge of the lake, he extends out his hand to me. Water drips down from his face, rolling onto his glowing marks. They're so beautiful.

"Thank you – for being you," he says softly.

A smile spreads across my face.

I reach out for his hand, not afraid of him at all, I trust him. My life lies in the palm of his hand and nothing feels more perfect.

Jæmis lifts me from the ground, wrapping an arm around my waist and pulling me in close to his body, our noses almost touching each other.

The times I've seen him in his fazed state – those pretty glowing marks – it's always been a situation under duress, or anger. Pain, even.

This is not one of those times. I want to ask him; why have you fazed? But my tongue feels like lead.

Jæmis hovers backwards, taking us to the middle of the lake. I lean my head against his chest again, listening to the song his heart is playing. It's comforting to listen to.

His arm slides away from my waist and I look up at him, seeing him give me this smirk.

Before I know it, I slip from his grasp and he drops me into the lake below.

I crash into the water, immediately engulfed by it.

I frantically splash around to reach the surface and to be able to breathe again. My head pops out of the water and I take a deep breath of fresh air. I kick my legs to keep myself afloat.

I see Jæmis hovering above me, smirking at me.

"What the hell – do you just enjoy seeing me soaked!?" I demand to know.

Jæmis curls his lips into a smile, bringing a hand to his mouth to cover it.

"That was for skipping training today," he says with a chuckle.

I brush my wet hair out of my face and huff out loud at him. But I can't stay mad – not when I'm finally seeing him smile like that.

So he *can* have fun...

"Fine, I guess I deserve it," I grumble.

Jæmis crosses his arms across his chest, seemingly pleased with himself.

Two can play that game.

I reach out to grab his ankle and yank on it, *hard*. Not expecting the sudden movement, Jæmis gets pulled down into the water with a surprised yelp.

His head quickly resurfaces, his black hair covering his view. We're swimming right next to each other. I can see the stripes glow behind his wet hair.

I laugh at him. "Serves you right."

Jæmis swims closer to me, our faces in front of each other, bobbing across the water.

I look down into the water and see it glow up from his markings. When I look back up again, his blue eyes are gazing into my own. I find myself lifting a hand out of water and touching the mark right beneath his left eye.

Jæmis doesn't flinch away from my touch.

"Why did you faze?" I decide to ask. "I thought you only did it while fighting, or when in pain..."

"Ræhu glow when they're in combat or..." He looks me in the eye. "*Excited*."

"Ah, I was almost under the impression it was a silly way to attract a mate, haha."

It's a little embarrassing to admit he does look super pretty like this, it's very attractive.

"Who says it isn't?" he answers nonchalantly.

I immediately pull my hand away from his face. My cheeks burn with a blush – is he serious!?

Unexpectedly, Jæmis grabs my hand underwater, bringing it back to his face. My wet fingers touch his glowing marks.

"Do you... dislike them?" he asks in a soft voice.

How could I dislike them? I think they're gorgeous. I shake my head.

"How could I dislike a part of you?"

Jæmis closes his eyes, leaning his face into the touch of my hand. I'm shocked at his actions, I never imagined we'd be here, in a lake, me touching his face like this. His skin feels so warm despite the cool water.

I'm feeling a little short of breath.

I carefully push a few wet strands of hair from his face. His eyes flutter open, gazing at me with a look of longing. I feel like I'm melting in front of him.

There's a tension growing between us, it's almost palpable.

The slow hum of a beat can be faintly heard radiating from him.

"Do all Ræhu sound like you...?" I ask.

"What do you mean, sound like me? Do I have a strange accent?"

My hand moves away from his face and it slips back into the water. I press it against his chest, my fingers fanning out. I can feel his heart thump against it – it's that same strange beat from before.

"This... it feels like it's playing a song," I muse out loud.

Jæmis' eyes widen slightly.

"You can hear it?" he asks.

"I can *feel* it even now," I say as I push against his chest. His heart leaps against my hand, pounding harder than before.

I sound out the melody I've been hearing all this time, mimicking it in tune with his heart beat.

"It's so peculiar, I've never heard a heartbeat like yours."

For a moment, it's quiet as the both of us float in the lake. The beating rings louder in my ears.

Sudden laughter escapes from Jæmis' mouth. I'm shocked to hear it and pull my hand away from him.

"To think an Earthling would..." he says with a smile, shaking his head.

I'm seeing so many sides to him, it's a wonder to behold.

"No, it makes sense why you would."

Before I know what's going on, Jæmis pushes his palm against my lower back, pressing me against his chest. He lifts us out of the water, the cold wind sweeping past us.

We hover above the lake, our feet barely touching the water, it's like we're standing on it.

I'm snuggled against his warm body, hearing the lull of his heartbeat thump into my ears.

Jæmis starts to sway, still holding me firm, looking down at me with gentle eyes.

It's such a stark difference. He used to give me this ice-cold look, like I was nothing but vermin to him. If looks could kill, I'd be dead a million times over.

Now look at him... His once icy gaze now feels warm and gentle. Even his lips are pulled into what I can only deduce is a smile.

This is throwing me for such a loop, I wasn't prepared for this. I wasn't prepared to hopelessly fall for him.

Jæmis suddenly spins us around in the air. A small vortex appears beneath our feet.

He stops dead in his tracks and the droplets fly around us, cloaking us in a curtain of sparkles.

I can't help but smile at the pretty sight; it feels like a spell is being cast upon me.

I draw in a deep breath and look up at him, at his eyes that feel like they've captivated me.

The lullaby beats louder in my ears.

"Only the strongest and most suitable mate can hear a Ræhu's call," he whispers.

"Call?" I ask, feeling entranced. "You mean not everyone can hear it?"

It definitely sounds like some kind of siren, pulling me in too deep...

Jæmis dips me above the water, arching my back. His hands are keeping me firmly in place.

"No one's ever heard mine before... Didn't think it was possible. Yet, here you are, surprising me once more."

"I've heard it ever since you took me away," I confess. I didn't realize it was something only I could hear.

"...When I was planning to kill you," I admit. "That's when I heard it for the first time."

He lowers his face down to mine until he stops right before our lips touch.

"Do you still wish to kill me?" he asks, his tone serious.

"Not at all," I reply.

"Joselina." His voice is soft and low.

My name being spoken from those lips are giving me sensations I never thought were possible.

"Jæmis," I say his name as well.

"...Are you seducing me?" I ask, gesturing to the way he's been holding onto me and dancing with me on the lake.

All this skirting around the idea of seduction has been going on for months. The many times he's accused me of seducing him, even when I wasn't trying to. The way he's said he's not immune to me...

Being able to hear his 'call'...

Jæmis wavers for a small moment, eyes blinking at me.

"Yes."

My body succumbs to him; my will is evaporating away. That one word has way more power over me than the manner in which he utters my name.

"I will stop if you ask me to."

"...But I must confess I have a hard time controlling myself around you."

"Control in what way?"

"I say things I don't wish to say. I find myself gazing at you when you're not looking. Before I know it, I seek you out."

I can't believe how brutally honest he is about his own feelings right now. I'm getting embarrassed from it.

"Perhaps I was merely imagining your attempts at seducing me. Perhaps... I just wanted it to be true."

"I'll admit I subconsciously sought you out as well. I wanted your advice, I wanted your help, I wanted to..."

I look up at him, feeling my breath being taken away.

"I wanted to know more about you."

His blue eyes flash brighter for a split second. His lips transform into an awkward smile.

"Then... shall I continue?" he asks as his hand travels up my back.

I bite down on my bottom lip, trying to not jump at the chance.

"Yes," I answer.

"May I kiss you?" he weakly asks me for permission.

To me, that's the single greatest idea he's ever had.

1. Kiss him first.
2. Nod at him.



I close my eyes and don't hesitate at all; I press my lips against his and throw my arms around his neck. His markings flash a bright blue, more intense than I've seen before.

Jæmis pushes back against me, but it doesn't feel like he's sucking my lips, it almost feels like I'm sucking energy out of him. It's a warm, tingling feeling that flows down all the way to my toes.

I nod at him, a signal which he has learned by now. The significance of that small gesture breaks all of Jæmis' barriers.

Slowly, but surely, he inches closer. I hold in my breath, my pulse going out of control.

Then his lips finally press against mine. A warm energy flows through me, unlike anything I've ever felt before. His lips are so soft and so gentle, not what I expected at all.

My head is spinning as our lips move together. His kiss is leaving me tingling all over. Something builds up inside of me, something warm and familiar. It's telling me to keep kissing him, to not let go.

This feels *amazing*.

He sucks on my lips, at first gently, but as I respond, he gets a little more confident.

I pull away from him for just a second, so I can get some oxygen flowing to my head again, but Jæmis is impatient and immediately crashes his mouth against mine, kissing me harder than before. I go wild with hormones bubbling up towards the surface.

I've definitely been attracted to him all this time, but the intensity of my feelings right now are on a whole other level.

We float in the air, embraced in each other's arms, lips locked together as if it's our lifeline.

I trust him... and I want him, I can't deny that.

Jæmis finally removes his lips from me, and I already want to kiss him again. He lowers his head until he plants his mouth on the side of my neck. A shock travels through me and I groan out loud.

Ahh, that feels good.

He sucks lightly on that spot, making my body brim with electricity. My pulse is leaping against his lips.

I didn't realize that aliens could kiss so god-like.

Jæmis parts his lips and I'm suddenly struck by a sharp pain. I feel like I'm being infused with something as a certain fluid crawls underneath my skin.

"Ah!" I yell, pulling away from him.

I touch the spot on my neck and notice blood. It stings.

"Did you just *bite* me?" I ask, stunned at the revelation.

Jæmis slowly blinks at me, startled at my reaction.

"Affirmative," he states in a matter of fact.

"What the hell – why!? Are you a vampire!?"

I'm breathing so fast right now; my body is heating up and my heart is pounding even faster. I'm still in a whirlwind of emotions, my mind is playing catchup with what's happening.

"I was completing the imprint," Jæmis explains.

"Excuse me?" I guffaw. "Did you just say imprint?"

"Put me down!" I demand.

Jæmis flies me towards the field of grass and lowers me down onto the ground. I jump away from him as soon as my feet touch dry land.

My heart calms down a little due to the distance between us. I rub the spot on my neck, the bleeding has already stopped. But I feel it throbbing. It's an odd sensation; it's hard to explain. Like there's another life source inside of me.

"Jæmis, humans don't imprint," I tell him seriously. "What exactly did you do to me?"

Jæmis crosses his arms across his chest.

"I did what any Ræhu would have done in this situation. Making sure the bond is completed and marking you as mine."

My eyes just about bulge out. It's one thing to be making out with an alien – it's an entirely different story to have that alien try and take ownership of me!

"What do you mean yours?"

Jæmis frowns at me. "I don't know why you're being so difficult, you agreed to it, I didn't force you."

"I didn't ask to be bitten! Or imprinted, or whatever you were doing. Take it back!"

He huffs at me. "I can't take it back, it's completed." He looks insulted.

"I don't care, I didn't consent to any neck biting."

"Y-you," he stumbles, "you knew Ræhu mate for life."

He did in fact tell me this a while ago...

"We... we didn't mate though!" I say with cherry red cheeks.

Unless kissing is a mating ritual for them?

Seeing Jæmis' own embarrassed face, I realize that yes – kissing definitely falls under that umbrella.

I run my fingers through my hair in a panic. No... no. This can't be happening.

I've come to terms with my feelings for Jæmis, but to suddenly be thrust into a lifetime commitment!?

"Do Earthlings not...?" Jæmis asks awkwardly.

"No, no we don't. Usually you're in a relationship for a few years before you get married or something. You date around first, multiple people even," I explain in a frenzy.

"Have you been with multiple people?" he asks.

"Uhh..."

"Whatever your past may have been, it does not matter," he says dismissively.

"That's not helping your case!" I fire back.

"Are you rejecting me?" he asks, deadpan.

"I – no, I mean – but." I can't come up with a coherent sentence.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

"Argh, this is just overwhelming, give me a moment."

Alright, breathe in, breathe out. My mind is spinning.

And that kiss has no right to feel so good. I'm aching to just throw everything to the wind and kiss him again.

"Just... take me back to the cabin," I say, extending my hand to him.

Surprisingly, he obliges without further comment and pulls me against his body before taking flight.

-- Lake Cabin Living room Night

Once inside, I pace around for a bit as Jæmis stares at me.

"I can't undo it," he says.

I bite down on my thumb.

"I did not realize you had no intention of being my mate, despite your confusing actions."

"Look, Jæmis. While I'm not exactly rejecting you, it is quite a big deal to suddenly spring this on me without telling me about it first."

Jæmis shyly averts his eyes.

"...I admit I only have rudimentary knowledge about the proper way of bonding. There weren't any adult Ræhu around to teach us in full," he admits.

He holds a hand over his heart.

"But I do know that if you hear the call, then you are the best mate for me. Even if you aren't Ræhu."

Why can he make it sound so romantic? It's like he's saying it's fate that we should be together.

"I think... I want to sleep. Let me gather my thoughts," I say slowly.

"Very well. Perhaps you'll be able to accept it tomorrow."

I give him a wry glare.

"Right," I say sarcastically.

As I'm about to turn away from him, Jæmis catches my hand, forcing me to look at him.

"But you are mine Joselina, don't forget that," he says in this low voice that makes me want to melt.

"And I am now yours."

"...I understand."

He releases me and takes a step backwards. This man is going to be the death of me.

-- Lake Cabin Bedroom Day

My eyes fly wide open when I hear my brother yelling from downstairs.

"Joselina! Get your ass down here!" he yells.

Groggily, I roll out of bed and land on my feet. Memories from last night's flight and kiss come rushing back in.

I take a quick glance in the small mirror in my room to check my neck.

Oh. The bitemarks; they're gone. That's strange. I figured I would have to cover them up to avoid any embarrassing questions from Ralph or Caine.

I don't even know what to say to Ralph about it if he were to find out.

"Joselina!" Ralph impatiently calls for me again.

"Coming!" I yell.

-- Lake Cabin Basement

Finally making my way down to the basement, Ralph is spinning around on his chair like an overexcited kid.

"I'm here, I'm here," I say. "What do you want? I'm not making you breakfast."

Ralph shows me a small vial with a big grin.

"I'm not 100% sure since I haven't tested it yet. But Caine provided me a blood sample so I could examine the anti-super venom and I managed to sort out the genomes and—"

"English, please," I urge him.

"An antidote. I made an antidote!"

Chapter [027P]
-- Lake Cabin Basement

I squeeze my hand into a fist and then release it. I don't feel any different.

Ralph is staring at me with these hopeful, large eyes behind his glasses.

"And?" he urges me.

I raise my arm, fanning out my fingers in the air and try to conjure my thread.

Sadly, nothing happens.

My dejected posture says enough, and Ralph leans back into his chair, his hand on his chin.

"Hmm, maybe it might take a while to kick in?" he suggests.

"Maybe," I say with a strained smile.

I'm not going to lie; I was quite hopeful when he came running with an antidote. Too bad it doesn't seem to work.

Am I really never going to have powers again? I know Jæmis helped kick some sense into me, but it was still a large part of my identity.

"Don't worry, I'll get back to work. I'm going to continue to experiment until you get them back!" Ralph proclaims loudly.

"I'd rather not get injected with experimental shots every time though," I say drearily. "What if it makes me sick?"

Ralph shrugs.

"Side-effects are to be expected."

My eyes grow large.

"Joselina! Don't turn me into a guinea pig!"

"Well – Caine's already gone to the parade! Out of the two of you, you're the only one available."

"Ah, he's already gone?" I ask.

I haven't had much time to do anything this morning, let alone check the news.

"Yeah, he wants to make sure Hulio won't attack. Or something. I think he just wants to capture Ben."

"I don't blame him."

I shake my head. "Still, it's dangerous, he's defenseless."

"Why don't you follow the parade on the livestream?" Ralph mentions.

"I guess..."

I leave my brother alone to his thoughts and experiments and walk back upstairs.

-- Lake Cabin Kitchen Day

Jæmis halts his movements when he sees me appear from the basement.

A flurry of emotions hit me like a truck and I can't help but awkwardly look away.

"Good morning," I say, trying to force myself to talk.

"Morning," he greets me back like usual.

"I hope you won't be skipping your training again like yesterday."

Oddly enough, he's acting normal. Just the same Jæmis obsessed with training.

Not the one that kissed me last night as we flew across the lake, and then sank his fangs into my neck. I rub my hand over the area he bit, feeling self-conscious about it.

"I won't, training will be good to keep my mind off of things," I reply. "Though I do want to watch the parade."

As I rub my hand over my neck, I realize I can't find the small puncture wounds left behind. Huh, shouldn't it be on the right side of my neck?

"...What are you doing?" asks Jæmis after I've been trying to locate the area for a while.

"Uhh," I stammer. "I can't feel where you bit me."

Jæmis approaches me, standing in front of me as he reaches out his left hand.

Surprised, I stand still, and allow him to flip away some of the hair from my neck.

He narrows his eyes and I suddenly get all nervous.

"There," he says as he presses his thumb lightly against my skin.

I gulp at the proximity between us. The small gesture is enough to light a fire inside of me, making me recall the events of yesterday.

"Does this really mean that we're... together?" I ask, still feeling all jumbled.

Jæmis stands straight, shrugging off his hand from my neck.

"Well, usually there's an exchange between the two. I suppose since you haven't done your part, it isn't technically complete."

"...My part?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

"You're not saying I should bite you too, right?"

"That is customary, yes," he says calmly. "Ræhu surrender themselves to their mate and exchange power."

Ignoring the fact that he's saying I should be biting him, too, my ears perk up at the word 'surrender'. That makes me incredibly gleeful.

I – just a normal human being – managed to make an alien prince surrender to me.

"I don't like that look on your face," Jæmis says with a sneer. "What are you plotting?"

"I'm not plotting anything. But hey – surrender, you said? You've surrendered to me?" I push myself up close to him with a smile.

He awkwardly averts his eyes.

"Yes... in a sense."

My smile grows wider.

"So, the great Captain Jæmis has surrendered himself to me."

Jæmis gives me a small and disapproving glare.

"Are you enjoying yourself with this? This is not a joking matter."

"Oh, give me a break – I'm using humour to cope with the situation. This is all new to me," I say with a sigh.

He clears his throat. "As it is to me, too."

"You know, we should probably lay down some ground rules, or something. Just so we're on the same page," I suggest.

"Ground rules, such as?" he asks, crossing his arms with one quirked eyebrow.

"I don't know – like, we shouldn't be dating other people?" I say, awkwardly gesturing with my hands.

It's not every day that I need to be defining a relationship with someone who used to be my kidnapper.

"Define date," he says, and I realize that perhaps they don't do any dating over there.

"Uhm, let's see. To date means you are exclusive to someone, romantically. You spend time together and become intimate with each other. Intimate meaning things like holding hands, or kissing, or..." I gulp. "...Sex."

I can't believe I really am talking about this right now; for some reason it's quite embarrassing. I sheepishly look down at the floor as I realize my feelings are stronger for Jæmis than I initially thought they were.

"What I'm saying is – I don't want you to do those things with anyone else but me."

Jæmis cocks his head to the side.

"I told you before – Ræhu only mate once. I have no interest in mating someone else."

"...Is it an issue that I'm not like that?"

"What?" he says incredulously. "Are you saying you will attempt to mate outside of our bond?"

"No – no!" I hold up my hands in protest.

"I mean, in the past... I've been..." Why is this so hard to say? It almost feels like I cheated on him because his race is monogamous for life.

"You're not my first," I say through gritted teeth. "Is that okay with you?"

"Hmpf – I do not care for your history. You cannot change the past. But you better make sure you know you're mine from now on, only *I'm* allowed to touch you."

The way he's said this so aggressively triggers something inside of me. I should feel a bit creeped out that he's so possessive (who knew!), yet I can't help but kind of enjoy it?

The way he so confidently says it, that I'm his. It's got a nice ring to it.

"Okay, good," I say with a relieved sigh.

"I just want to make clear that uhm, I haven't been with anyone else before. Intimately, that is."

Jæmis also looks pleased.

"It seems our lifestyles are closely aligned then."

"I wouldn't say that, but for me specifically, I just haven't been with anyone before. I have no problem being loyal only to one person."

Jæmis turns his head away.

"And my body is only available to you. Always."

And that's what causes my cheeks to burn with a blush.

"Uhm, uhh," I start to stutter. Get a grip, Joselina! "Does that mean I have to seriously... bite your neck?"

"While it's customary, I'm unsure if that's the right procedure, since you are an Earthling."

"Human," I quickly correct him. "That's a ground rule from now on. Stop calling me Earthling. Our race is called human. Please respect that."

He purses his lips, but then closes his eyes.

"Very well, I will concede."

"Thank you," I say with a smile.

"I do not think human teeth can complete an imprint," he continues.

"I don't exactly have sharp canines like you do, no," I agree.

Then he suddenly grows quiet, looking away from me.

"Is this what you want?" he asks me, his voice soft.

"Want what?"

"To become my mate."

He clenches his hands into fists by his side.

"I suppose that... considering it was one-sided so far, you could still back out if you do not wish to proceed with me."

"But you said it was irreversible, didn't you?" I question him.

The tint on his cheeks turn darker.

"...Yes. I would be tied to you, but you are... free."

"Oh," I gasp slightly.

That would mean he's essentially tied to me for life, completely one-sided. Whereas I could just continue my life as normal and even get into other relationships.

I frown deeply.

No, I do not want to be in a relationship with someone else.

The man in front of me, sporting an awkward and adorable blush, is offering me a way out. Yet, I find I don't want to.

"You may have sprung this upon me quite literally," I start slowly.

I must be crazy to agree with this. But I guess I'm crazy for him.

"But I'm in. Let's finish what we started."

Jæmis relaxes his shoulders.

"You will?" he asks in relief.

Oh god, that cute puppy dog eyed look on his face right now. It's irresistible!

1. Kiss him.

2. "You look so cute right now."

I practically throw myself at him, standing on the tips of my toes to give myself a boost. I plant a quick kiss on his lips, grinning at him when I see his shocked reaction.

"Wha—" he says, startled.

Then his face reddens as he looks left and right, as if he's checking to see we're both alone.

"That was a sneak attack," he grumbles.

"There will be many more," I say with a sly grin.

"You look so cute right now," I say with a giggle.

His puppy eyes quickly transform into an indignant glare.

"Hmpf, I am relieved, that is all," he grumbles.

"I know, and it's nice to see you expressing so many emotions around me." The smile on my face keeps growing like this.

This just makes him more embarrassed as he crosses his arms over his chest once more.

I really am amazed to see the many different expressions he's been having around me. To think, this man used to give me these ice-cold glares, threatening to kill me.

And now... just look at him. Completely harmless.

I wish the moment had lasted forever, but Eeyok decides to finally join the party.

"Good morning everyone! Joselina, are you going to the parade?" he asks cheerfully.

Jæmis puts some distance between the both of us, turning away from me. I guess he doesn't want to show his embarrassed side to Eeyok, heh.

"No, I'm just going to follow the live stream," I reply.

"It means it's being recorded and I can watch from here," I quickly explain, when I see Eeyok getting confused.

"I'm a little sad we're not going," he admits sheepishly. "I would have loved to see how Earth celebrates festivals."

"Probably not much different than on Yool," answers Jæmis.

"Oh – but we definitely do!" I correct him. "This parade uses floats. They're these large pieces of art or displays that supers will stand on, so they can wave at the audience as they drive by."

Jæmis gives me a questionable look.

"That sounds like god worship."

"You know what... Now that you put it like that, yeah, it kind of does." I never really thought about it that way, especially since it's all superficial anyway.

People adore supers, but only when their mask is on.

"Whatever it is – that sounds like a lot of fun! Can I watch, too?" Eeyok asks excitedly.

"Sure thing!"

"What – no, training!" Jæmis interjects.

"We can train later!" I dismiss him as I pull on Eeyok's arm to get him to walk with me to the living room.

-- Lake Cabin Living Room

Jæmis follows us into the living room, giving Eeyok a death glare.

"The two of you, completely irresponsible," he huffs.

"I said we can train later," I argue.

"It is good to train in the morning, when you're full of energy."

"Clearly, you're a morning person," I mutter sarcastically.

I turn on the TV and start searching for the parade live stream.

"Oh look, it's already started! I guess there's some interviews and whatnot before they start the actual floats."

There's an ongoing interview with a popular super and a journalist on a large stage. Everything is going par for the course. I wonder if Caine has arrived as well?

Jæmis quietly sits down next to me on the couch, and I shoot him a small smile for deciding to delay his early morning routine for now.

"I hope nothing bad will happen. That our failed mission was still somehow enough to disrupt their plans," I say darkly.

"It would be foolish of them to continue their plans after being exposed," says Jæmis. "They are bound to fail if they attack now. Unless of course, the response from the authorities is subpar."

"Yeah... exactly what I'm worried about."

Then again, Forrester Inc. did seem to know about the Hulario meeting and was going to infiltrate them as well. We ruined those plans.

The interview goes on for some time until Neil Forrester appears on screen. Whenever I see his face, I just get a foul mood.

"We appreciate all the supers that turned up today to honour the yearly Super Parade and celebrate their accomplishments," he reads off his cue card.

"May we have many more to come," he signs off with a rehearsed and award-winning smile.

I roll my eyes, but then I see the parade start off with a bang.

"Look, here come the floats! You may even see some of my work," I say smugly.

I did design some of those supersuits after all!

"Your work?" asks Eeyok, curious.

"The supersuits they're wearing. Some of them were made by me," I boast proudly.

"Ah, like mine!" he points out eagerly.

"Exactly!"

Extravagantly decorated floats appear on the screen, with a super at its center, waving at the crowd. Some of them even have a dance crew to make the show more fun.

I see some familiar faces, which somehow makes me feel more at ease. It's been a while since I've seen these supers that I used to do business with. Has it really been half a year since I worked with a client?

I wonder if people still remember my name as a designer...

The parade continues without issue – much to Jæmis' dismay, as he's starting to get impatient.

"Have you seen enough yet?" he says grumpily. "We should start our training as soon as possible. Especially now that I can faze again."

Eeyok whips his head towards Jæmis.

"Prince Jæmis can faze again!?" he chirps out.

"...How is this news to you? I have for the past two days. Your carelessness is going to get us into trouble in the future if you keep this up."

Eeyok looks down after being scolded by Jæmis.

A bang interrupts their squabbling.

My eyes widen and I lean forwards, closer to the TV.

A super on a float falls down from his tower. Numerous other bangs can be heard through its audio.

I fear the worst.

"Gunshots – those are gunshots!" the reporter shrieks in fear.

I stand up from the couch, my blood pumping.

"Hulio!"

They decided to attack after all!

"Shit – Caine is there, too. This isn't good."

A news banner is shown across the screen, telling others to seek safety and hide.

Those aren't just bullets they're shooting – they're stripping the supers of their powers.

I turn to Jæmis.

"We have to help," I say. "At the very least, we should get Caine out to safety."

"But Joselina, you are very vulnerable like this," Eeyok points out in a concerned tone.

Jæmis gets up from the couch as well.

"I can get us there," he offers.

"Then let's go," I say with a nod.

"Ah – I'm coming, too!" Eeyok says hastily.

"Let's quickly get dressed," I tell them.

Once all of us don our supersuits, we gather at the living room.

Jæmis walks to the front door to open it up. He scoops me up in his arms and allows Eeyok to get onto his back.

His eyes flash a brilliant blue hue and he flies off into the sky.

"Wait - Joselina! WHERE ARE YOU GOING!?" I hear Ralph's voice scream after us.

-- Sky

As we soar through the sky, I quickly message Caine on my cell phone.

Joselina:

"Where are you? I'm going to the parade right now."

Caine:

"I saw my dad, I followed him."

Joselina:

"Are you safe?"

Caine:

"He definitely won't be."

Joselina:

"Don't do anything stupid, we're on our way! Tell me your location."

My phone beeps and it shows Caine has shared his location with me.

"Okay Jæmis, I know where Caine is, just follow the blue dot on this screen," I instruct him and show him the GPS on my screen.

"Affirmative," he says and changes direction.

-- Street Shops Day

I expected more chaos to be honest. What I see are emptied streets and trash thrown about.

In the distance, I see a couple of supers fighting off their assailants.

But more importantly; where is Caine? Did he already move away from the coordinates he gave to us?

Did he chase Benjamin? Was he captured?

"Over here!" we hear a voice hiss from an alley.

"Caine!" I exclaim and quickly run towards his voice.

-- Alley Day

We all hide behind a large dumpster.

"Look, I managed to warn some supers in advance, but plenty were already shot while the parade was going," he starts to explain.

"And I saw my dad orchestrate it all. I followed him until I saw him get inside of a grey van."

I whip my head around to look out at the street.

"*That* grey van?" I point out.

"Yes. He's still in there."

"Has Forrester Inc. made a move yet?" I ask.

"I saw a squad move out and subdue some of the henchmen."

"What about Neil?"

Caine shrugs. "I dunno. Beats me. I can only focus on one thing, you know."

I look over at Jæmis.

"Should we attempt to capture him? He's right there."

"Eeyok and I can apprehend him, yes."

I frown. "What about me?"

"You stay here and watch the professionals work," he says smugly.

"I'm going to assume he told you to sit back," huffs Caine. "Speak English, okay? And we can fend for ourselves. We may be powerless, but we're not stupid."

"You've been plenty reckless enough already," Jæmis replies as a matter-of-fact.

"Me and Caine could create a diversion," I suggest. "So they have to get out of the van to deal with us."

"Or they don't and just shoot you on the spot," says Jæmis.

"I'll be honest – I think they're only carrying the anti-super venom darts, not actual bullets. I think we won't get shot for real," says Caine.

"You sure?" I ask.

"Well..." he trails off. "Their guns look different from real ones, but considering they've been sniping supers out of the sky for the past ten minutes, I think they're darts, not bullets."

"It would be stupid of us to assume they're not carrying real guns though," I point out.

"True – but I'm tired of waiting."

Caine suddenly gets up with a determined expression on his face. He dashes out of the alley.

"Caine!" I yell after him. "Don't be stupid!"

Caine runs in front of the grey van.

"Hey! Yeah, you! The loser in the van!" he hollers as he runs in front of the parked van.

"I know you losers are in there, get out!"

"Shit," I hiss under my breath. Caine didn't give us time to react!

"Stay in the alley," Jæmis tells me.

"We can get through the back and open the doors," says Eeyok.

"Fine," I huff. "Just be careful. They have mirrors on the sides so they can see you approach from behind."

Jæmis takes notice of this. "Can they see us from above?"

"Uh, no," I say, and grin at him.

"Eeyok, stay out of sight, approach from behind," he commands him.

"Yes, Captain!"

Jæmis zooms up in the air, climbing past the tall buildings within a second.

Eeyok has also made his move, slithering away and blending in with his surroundings.

-- **Street Shops Day**

I peek around the corner to keep an eye on everything.

"Come out, you coward!" Caine yells as he kicks the van's bumper.

He's really asking to be shot like this...

A car door opens up on the passenger side and a tall man steps out with a gun, aiming it at Caine.

"Hah – you're going to strip me of my powers again?" Caine taunts the man. "Go ahead and try."

The man cocks the gun and holds it up to his eye.

My heart rate speeds up – I don't think he's going to be shooting a dart! That looks like a real gun!

Just as he shoots, Jæmis drops down from the heavens and barrels straight through the rooftop of the van.

Caine yelps and jumps out of the way as a bullet whizzes past his face.

Jæmis jumps out of the gaping hole in the roof, dragging Benjamin by his collar.

Two other men step out of the car and Eeyok starts hand-to-hand combat with them, easily dispatching of the first one, knocking him out cold.

When the other man aims his gun at Eeyok, Caine is the one to quickly tackle him in his midriff.

Except there's a third one who is free to attack.

Not under my watch!

From the alley, I start pushing against the large dumpster, causing it to roll out on the street. It collides against the man, throwing him onto the ground.

Caine quickly comes over to kick his face while he's down.

"Whew, thanks," I say with a smile.

Eeyok cleverly uses the handcuffs the men were carrying to cuff them together and render them harmless.

"Good job, Eeyok!" I praise him.

"All targets are secured," he tells Jæmis.

Jæmis grips the collar of Benjamin's shirt and jumps down the van's rooftop.

He pushes him forwards to face Caine and I.

"Unhand me you fiends," Benjamin hisses. "You will be sorry soon enough. I've got a whole—"

Caine punches Benjamin's face with a nasty right hook, causing a spurt of blood from his nose to expel into the air.

Even Caine winces at the pain.

"That's for taking away my powers," he growls.

And then he kicks Benjamin straight in his crotch.

The redheaded man howls in pain and nearly collapses from the pain, except Jæmis is still holding him up straight.

"And *that's*, for killing mom," Caine finishes.

I can't even tell him to knock it off, because I perfectly understand his grievances. We caught the man responsible for my parents' deaths, and my only complaint is that Caine didn't kick him even harder.

"Y-you're going to regret this," Benjamin coughs.

"No," I correct him in a loud voice. "You're going to regret this. I'd rather see you dead, but I'm happy to see you rot behind bars as well."

"We can commence torture to extract information," Jæmis speaks up in his own language.

"Maybe later, we need to reconvene. There are still a bunch of his henchmen out there shooting supers," I say in an urgent tone.

"You're going to call them off," I tell Benjamin with a glare.

He laughs.

"That's not going to happen."

He coughs as Caine punches him in his stomach.

"What's that? I couldn't hear you," he growls.

"...You morons. Do you really think I'm going to call them back? This is my life's work. We welcome the cleansing of this earth."

"Joselina, I can make him submit," Eeyok proposes, not speaking in English either. "I know many extraction techniques."

"He is right, all soldiers are trained for information extraction," Jæmis agrees.

"What are they proposing?" asks Caine.

"Torture him until he calls them off," I say.

This causes Benjamin to look up in fear.

There's an evil, lopsided grin on Caine's face.

"Oh, I like the sound of that."

But before we can come to an agreement, the sky suddenly darkens.

We all look up at the sky – except it's not the sky anymore. It's a giant ship.

"Putrid mother's nutsack," Jæmis curses loudly.

My mouth drops open as well.

"That's Lord Varitus' ship!" Eeyok shrieks. "He took the entire platoon with him!"

"What the fuck is this timing!?" Caine complains as he throws a fist up at the sky.

"Shit – our defense has been rendered useless by these anti-super venoms," I say through gritted teeth.

"Haha....Ahaha, they have come! They've come to cleanse the earth of this filth!" Benjamin cackles.

The ship hangs over the city like a shadow of gloom.

"We did it – we made sure no one could stop them! You will all be annihilated!" he yells.

"Shut the fuck up!" Caine growls and delivers a punch at Benjamin's face, knocking him out cold this time.

"Captain Jæmis, they're going to deploy the foot soldiers soon!" Eeyok warns him.

"*I know!*" Jæmis hisses.

"We're not going to get the back-up we needed from Forrester Inc," I say in an urgent voice. "They're incapacitated at the moment."

What is this timing!? What do we do, what do we do? We need to round up the supers that are okay to help fight Varitus!

They can't exactly fight in the city either, there's so many people around.

"Jæmis – can you lure them out in the open?" I ask of him. "Lead them away from the city so we can limit the number of casualties."

"I can make sure Lord Varitus follows me, but that still leaves the issue of the foot soldiers."

"We'll deal with them," says Caine.

"I know I can't exactly use my electricity at the moment, but I can definitely round up whatever supers are left to fight."

"And I can gather the rebels – Princess Læna wouldn't have come without them. Some of them are on our side," Eeyok pitches in.

"I can find Neil Forrester and hand over Benjamin while we're at it," I suggest. I'm not exactly fit for combat at the moment. "Then hopefully he can send down back-up to wherever you and Varitus are."

It seems we're all in agreement with each other.

Jæmis throws Benjamin and the three other men in the back of the van.

And then the small little drones start appearing out of the mother ship. Hundreds of Gaötte soldiers start descending down onto the city.

"Alright, I'll be getting the other supers!" says Caine as he runs off.

Eeyok bows in front of me and Jæmis.

"I will be reaching out to the rebels. Good luck to you, Captain."

"I think I've declared I wasn't your captain anymore," Jæmis huffs.

"Well..." Eeyok starts awkwardly.

"Now leave, Captain's orders."

Eeyok grins at him and then dashes off as well.

"Eeyok – don't forget you're wearing your glamour!" I remind him. "They won't know it's you straight away!"

"Ahh, yes, yes!" Eeyok replies, as if he's forgotten completely.

I stare at his back in worry. Both Caine and Eeyok are gone now.

"Varitus won't appear until he sees me," says Jæmis. "I'll have to announce myself."

I gulp, feeling even more worried now. Jæmis was never supposed to face Varitus alone. Forrester Inc. kept reassuring they had it under control.

"How did the ship even get here without us noticing?" I say. "I'm pretty sure we could see the ship approach last time."

"Lord Varitus' ship has a shield that cloaks. It's something that Ræhu technology does not possess, and it's how he so easily ambushed my planet."

"Oh," is all I say. That's terrifying.

Jæmis looks at me, his eyes softening. There's a brief glimmer of reservation – maybe even fear.

"Joselina," he calls for my name, voice slightly wavering.

"Yes?"

"Lend me that strength of yours."

He pulls me in and captures my lips with his, his entire life essence making contact with mine. I can feel my heart leap against my chest, something stirring up inside.

And just as easily, he breaks apart, eyes flashing blue right in front of me.

A small part of me wants to tell him not to do it – don't fight. Don't leave me. But all I can manage is to nod at him.

He's got to do this.

And then he blasts off into the sky.

I fiddle around with my phone, scanning over the countless missed calls and messages my brother has sent me.

I type in a quick message that I'm fine and we're all here.

Then I find Neil's name in my contact list and ring it.

Unsurprisingly, he doesn't pick up. So I try and try again, until I've been ringing it for 5 minutes.

He finally picks up.

"Miss Hearth, now is not the time. Call me when there isn't a national emergency," he says in an aggravated tone.

"I know, that's why I'm calling. I captured Benjamin Prins and I want to hand him over to you."

"..."

"I'll send you the location."

The phone call ends and a few seconds later, Neil has sent me the coordinates to wherever he is currently located.

I hop into the van and drive away.

-- Outside Mall

I arrive at the back of a large building. There's a bunch of black vans parked around.

Surprisingly, my drive through the city was uneventful, as the streets were deserted. I did see a lot of fighting in the air though.

I park the van and step outside. A bunch of men walk out of the building to greet me. Among them, is Neil Forrester.

"Where is he?" he asks.

I open up the back of the van to reveal the four captured men.

"Take them away," commands Neil.

A few of his men start unloading the people from the van, taking them inside the building. At least Benjamin was dealt with.

"What about the ship?" I ask, pointing at the sky. "Are there any supers to help?"

Neil sighs, rubbing his temples.

"Now is the worst time... We've lost quite a few high-profile superheroes from the drug they were injected with."

"My brother tried to make an antidote," I mention.

This makes him seem hopeful as he raises his eyebrows.

"Was it a success?"

"Oh, it's a failure. He's still working on it."

"Well, we certainly can't hope for an antidote here, my guys have been working on one since we got into contact with the drug."

Neil looks genuinely concerned.

"So, there's no one to help stop Varitus?" I say in this tiny voice.

Is Jæmis really alone?

Neil shakes his head.

"We've got a couple of supportive superheroes, but they do not possess aggressive abilities. We are in a difficult situation; we may have to start using our tanks."

I anxiously rub my hands together.

I look up at the sky, having a good view from here on the small field.

Jæmis is up in the sky, and I see two other people emerge from the ship. It's Kæleb, holding Læna.

A few seconds later and Varitus descends as well, a flurry of green vines wrapped around him, keeping him afloat. I wish I knew what they were saying, but everything is way too high up.

Neil suddenly looks away, pressing his phone against his face.

"Is that correct, they're pushing back? Keep us posted."

"It seems Boltage is leading some sort of attack against the extraterrestrials," Neil explains.

I sigh in relief; Caine managed to find some supers!

"What about Hulio?"

"We've taken out most of them, the few stragglers that were left have fled, but we're in pursuit."

He points at the sky.

"However, *that's* our current issue."

Jæmis flies away from his position, with the three of them following. Good – he's leading them away from the city. They're heading for the park.

Then, I see something else exit the ship.

My jaw drops.

It's Nornus! What is he doing here!? He's piloting one of the small drones the other soldiers are using, and is flying after the rest, heading towards the park.

"We have to get to the park," I warn Neil. "That's where they'll go."

Neil, not questioning my information, points at several soldiers and they all enter their vans.

"Miss Hearth, you're with me."

We all get inside of a van.

-- Park

Unrest swivels in my stomach as we approach the park. I've heard several blasts, but couldn't see anything due to the buildings obstructing my vision.

But now that we're here, I can see how Jæmis is fighting with Varitus up in the air.

I throw open the door and get out of the van, running towards the grassy hill to get closer to them.

"Miss Hearth, stay here where it's safe!" Neil calls out after me.

Jæmis is fast and precise, but most of his attacks are blocked instantly by a wall of vines that Varitus is controlling. It seems Varitus is barely putting in any effort.

I can't hear what they're saying.

Then I spy the small drone in the air – the one operated by Nornus.

He practically crash-lands into a small hill and the drone comes to a stop as it hits a tree.

I quickly rush over to check it out.

"Nornus!" I yell as I step over the small drone.

How the hell do you open this thing?

Then an opening appears from the top and Nornus climbs out of it, coughing loudly.

"Are you hurt!?" I question him as I help him get out of the drone.

He holds his stomach but gives me a strained smile.

"Hello Princess Joselina, it's good to see you again."

"What are you doing here?" I ask. "This is not the place for you to be right now."

"Hehe, I snuck on board. I was going to go with my brother and see another world for the first time."

He winces as he clutches his stomach – it seems like he's got a large bruise on his side, caused by the crash.

"But mostly... I just wanted to see you again."

"I'm flattered, but..." I look up at the sky to see Jæmis and Varitus fighting. "You should have stayed at the palace, where it's safe."

Nornus suddenly looks down at the grass.

"Princess Joselina, I found out about something while you were gone," he says ominously.

"What's that?"

"My brother he... he's the bad guy, isn't he?" he asks in a childish manner.

"I'm sorry," I say apologetically. "Your brother has apparently conquered many planets and is attempting to do the same to my planet."

Nornus' face falls.

"Yes, that much I've figured out..."

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to visit your planet, not harm it in any way."

"No, no, that's not your fault." I give him a sad smile.

"Also, while I was on board, I managed to talk to Princess Læna and..."

We're interrupted when Kæleb lands in front of us. Speak of the devil.

Læna releases her hold on his waist and steps onto the grass.

"It seems you decided to disembark the ship after all," she says, tutting at Nornus.

Nornus breaks eye contact with her, suddenly looking all anxious and stiff. I know Læna has never been fond of Nornus, but the animosity between them is downright palpable.

"Prince Nornus? What is the meaning of this?" Kæleb demands to know.

Nornus releases a nervous giggle.

"Hi... Captain Kæleb. Surprise, hehe."

Kæleb turns to Læna. "And you knew about this?"

"Well, it's hard to ignore him when I find him hiding in my chamber."

"Good to see you, Princess. Alive and well," Læna addresses me.

"How can you sound so chipper when Jæmis is currently fighting Varitus?" I ask of her.

Everyone is being so cavalier towards one another, completely ignoring the fight happening above us.

"Well, there's not much I can do here," Læna says, shrugging.

"If Captain Jæmis just begged for forgiveness, surely, Lord Varitus would forgive him. But now..." Kæleb sighs.

"This is a fight to the death. I'm not going to intervene."

"That's your brother!" I stress, angry that both his siblings don't seem to care much.

"Yes, and he went against Lord Varitus' commands," Kæleb responds plainly.

Læna rolls her eyes at him.

"Oh, you're going to have to stop following your rulebook already."

I suddenly see Jæmis zoom past me, apparently having been knocked away from a tornado of vines.

I quickly seek shelter as our surroundings get windy and debris starts floating around. Varitus approaches Jæmis with an army of vines.

No matter how many Jæmis cuts them down, a bunch of new ones immediately grow back to replace them. It seems like Varitus has the upper hand.

I feel so useless.

Jæmis charges towards Varitus, attempting a frontal attack to barrel through the wall of vines. He actually manages to pierce through it and reach Varitus.

Varitus easily throws his arm out towards Jæmis, creating a giant shockwave all around us.

With horror, I watch as Jæmis is shot in the opposite direction, landing in the dirt and creating a giant crater.

"Jæmis!" I cry out, running after all the dust and smoke.

My heart pounds like crazy, adrenaline rushing through all of my veins. My feet are quick but clumsy as I dash towards Jæmis' unconscious body.

When I see Varitus approach as well, I know I won't make it in time.

Jæmis lifts up his head, but I can tell he doesn't have the strength to evade a lethal attack.

"No, you can't kill him!" I yell with all the air in my lungs.

Varitus finally spots me running, diverting his attention towards me.

"Do not intervene," he says as he whips out a hand, sending a vine straight at me.

He knocks me off my feet and I land down in the dirt. I feel like I hit a brick wall. All my insides are tingling and I gasp for air.

I look up and still see him slowly approaching a wide open Jæmis.

A current in my blood grows stronger with each rapid heartbeat, until I feel my entire body heat up. My skin starts to tear open.

I pick myself up with newfound energy and run, run as fast as I can.



I pant heavily, crouched over James' body, who's staring at me in surprise.

Millions of threads have sprung from the pores of my skin, piercing my clothes and forming a cocoon around me and Jæmis.

My glowing eyes are wide and determined. I can feel every single thread; my power has not only returned, it has increased.

"Don't come any closer!" I hiss at Varitus, who has halted his advance.

"I *will* kill you!" I threaten.

I can't let Varitus come near him – he'll be killed, for sure.

"Hmpf, get out of my way, you pest," Varitus says coolly as he lashes out a vine whip straight at me.

I seal the cocoon completely, blocking his attack. My thread absorbs the damage completely.

"Jæmis," I heave out. "What do I do?" I ask in despair.

Jæmis stirs as his breathing becomes louder, but he has a hard time managing to produce a sentence.

"Hold," he coughs out.

The cocoon shakes and I gulp. This won't hold his attacks much longer.

Then it suddenly cracks in the middle, my thread falling to the ground as the cocoon caves in.

Varitus' form emerges from the dust. The icy look on his face makes me want to run away in fear.

A vine shoots from his hand. It's so fast I cannot react in time – it wraps itself around my neck.

I reach out my arm, sending a million pieces of thread his way, shaped like a drill.

It pierces.

The vine around my neck loosens and I gasp for air.

"No!" I scream in response when I realize what I've done.

"It's... okay, Joselina." Nornus musters all his strength to speak.

My makeshift drill of thread that was supposed to pierce Varitus, has gone through Nornus' chest instead. He's blocked it.

"Nornus!" Varitus gasps, his eyes wide as well. "What did you do!?"

I dissolve my thread immediately and Nornus collapses. Varitus catches him in his arms.

My legs start to tremble – I've... I've hurt Nornus!

Nornus coughs up some blood, contrasting against his pale blue skin.

"It's okay, I had to pay for what I've done," he mutters with a warm smile, looking right at me.

"Pay for what!?" I screech.

"I... realize, we b-both have to pay," he says, straining his voice. He's looking at Varitus now.

"Brother... you were good to me."

"Nornus, we are heading back to the ship to deal with this injury," says Varitus, his voice still alarmed.

"No, this is the final stop for us. I can't let you continue to terrorize these people."

"Nonsense, stop talking, we are leaving straight away."

"No..." he breathes out. "I want to talk to Joselina."

Nornus' eyes meet my gaze.

"Don't feel sorry, Joselina. Thanks to you, I got to see your world after all," he says with a sad smile.

"Nornus, I'm so sorry," I say with a hiccup. "I-I didn't mean to!"

"It's okay, I meant to. I had to pay for my sins."

He looks up at Varitus.

"Both of ours."

Then he finally closes his eyes, pursing his lips.

A ringing sound emerges from his mouth and his body starts to emit a white glow.

My eyes widen – that's the same thing he did back in the alley!

Kæleb takes Læna in his arms and quickly flies off with her.

"Nornus – no, don't do this!" Varitus warns in a panic.

But Nornus' high-pitched screams get louder and louder, his body glowing so bright, I have to look away from it.

I shield myself from the cutting wind around us, building another cocoon around me and Jæmis.

My ear drums can hardly handle the ringing, and my cocoon is getting shred to pieces. No – I have to hold on, if I don't, Nornus will kill us.

A large sonic boom explodes in the air, ripping away the cocoon and showering me with a thousand little cuts on my skin. My thread is flying around everywhere.

I throw myself on top of Jæmis' body to protect him, squeezing my eyes shut.

And then the screaming stops. The wind settles down.

I open up my eyes and see that Nornus and Varitus have vanished from the scene.

Nothing but a large crater is left behind.

"What..." I breathe out, wiping away my hair from my eyes.

My skin stings all over; I'm dripping blood by now.

I rid myself of all my thread, letting it fall from my body like a dog shedding its coat.

I look over to Jæmis, and I cup his cheek. He feels warm to the touch.

"Jæmis," I call out to him, lightly shaking him.

"Hrmpf," he groans. "Still alive."

I sigh in relief.

"Thank god."

"Why are..." he starts slowly.

But then his eyes widen as he sees me.

"It's not possible," he gapes at me.

He grabs my arm that's covered in scratches and pushes away the sleeve to reveal a glowing blue mark in my skin.

"*You've fazed,*" he breathes out.

I blink my blue eyes at him.

"Yes," I say, like I completely understand what's going on, even though I don't.

"Varitus," Jæmis suddenly hisses, looking around him.

"He's gone," I tell him.

Kæleb lands near us, placing Læna down onto the ground.

"Jæmis, you're still alive," she says, walking towards him.

When she sees me, she halts her pace.

"*That's* going to need some explaining," she tuts at my face.

"This can't be – Lord Varitus is..." Kæleb mutters to himself in shock.

"Obliterated by the little prince," Læna finishes for him.

A sharp pain stabs my heart. Nornus. He's gone. He sacrificed himself to stop Varitus.

I just can't make sense of it.

Læna bends down to Jæmis' level.

"Seems like you've sustained some internal damage. Nothing that shouldn't heal within a day or two," she says in a confident voice.

"Lord Varitus..." Kæleb repeats like an empty shell.

"Oh, stop your fussing – your precious Lord is dead," says Læna with a roll of her eyes.

"We've got some real work to do now."

Jæmis picks himself up from the ground, though he's having a hard time keeping up straight. I quickly pull his arm over my shoulder to stabilize him.

"Never expected the little prince could be useful when I helped him stay hidden in my chambers," Læna muses to herself.

I narrow my eyes at her.

"He's dead now," I say with a bite to my tone.

I can feel my heartbeat slow down. My skin prickles and the blue marks fade.

I just don't want to believe it. I pierced him with my thread and he's... he's gone.

"Well, he wouldn't have stayed alive for very long afterwards anyway," she says dismissively.

"You take that back!" I snap at her. "Nornus didn't deserve to go like that!"

"Læna..." Jæmis cuts in. "Are you really the leader of the resistance?"

"Would you expect anything less from me?" she says, her lips curling into a smile.

Kæleb snaps his head up.

"Excuse me?"

"Where is the rest?" Jæmis asks. "Surely you didn't come without any supporters."

Læna raises her nose in the air.

"No, of course not."

She then turns to face Kæleb, who looks gobsmacked. Reaching out for his wrist, she turns it around and presses down on a small device attached to his wrist.

"This is your Queen – rendezvous at Captain Kæleb's location."

"Q-queen?" Kæleb shrieks as he pulls his wrist back.

"Joselina!" a voice calls out to me.

I turn around to see Eeyok running at us at full speed. He looks a little roughed up, but otherwise okay. There are a bunch of other Gaötte running behind him.

"Eeyok!" I'm relieved to see his face.

"Eeyok?" Læna repeats in disbelief.

Eeyok and the others bow in front of Læna when they catch up to us.

"Princess Læna, it is good to see you again," says Eeyok with pride.

Læna gives him a look of disgust.

"Who is this?" she asks, turning towards Jæmis.

Jæmis huffs. "Your loyal servant."

"Ah!" Eeyok shrieks.

"I am wearing an Earthling disguise! It is me, Eeyok!" he says hastily and starts tugging on the glamour ring.

"Don't transform yet," I warn him. "Unless you want to burst out of those clothes of yours."

He gulps. "R-right."

Kæleb shuffles away from Eeyok, looking distrustful of anyone and anything at the moment.

"Eeyok, is that right?" Læna muses. "Seems you have survived after all."

"I have kept an eye on Prince Jæmis as well," he says with a polite bow.

"Good job. However, I am quite peeved to hear that you went against my plans and took the Princess away."

Eeyok's face falters. "That is... understandable."

"Queen Læna, we have managed to dispatch most of Varitus' loyalists," says one of the Gaötte soldiers.

"Well done," she says gleefully. "All according to plan."

"What exactly are your plans?" asks Jæmis with an edge to his tone.

"Don't die and take out Varitus."

"That's not much of a plan, is it?" Jæmis raises his eyebrows.

"Oh there's a lot going on behind the scenes, dear brother. There has already been a successful coup of Kulul now that he took most of his soldiers on this mission to HX-108."

"It's been successful?" Eeyok's eyes widen. "We have taken back the palace?"

"That's right. All we needed to do was deal with Varitus here and..." She looks down at the crater.

"Seems the trash took itself out."

"Do not call Nornus trash," I growl at her. "He sacrificed himself."

"I can call whoever was part of the genocide of my people trash," she says in a cold tone.

"Prince Nornus was not a part of that," Jæmis corrects her.

"Now that, my brother, is where you're wrong," she says with a sly smile.

"We found some evidence about Nornus' powers," Eeyok explains.

"And how it related to our family being brutally murdered," says Læna.

"What is that supposed to mean?" I ask.

"The little prince is the one who wiped out the Ræhu in our palace. Our family. I always thought it was Varitus, but he's actually not as strong as he appears... It was the little prince all along."

"That cannot be true," says Jæmis. "Prince Nornus is the same age as Kæleb, who was but a mere baby at the time."

"A baby with extraordinary powers," she stresses. "It was Varitus' most powerful weapon."

I refuse to believe that.

But then... He did say he has to pay for what he's done.

"He was just a baby," I mutter. "It's not like he knew what he was doing."

I can feel tears well up in my eyes, but I do my best to suppress them.

"Did he know what he's done?" I ask.

"He was ignorant of the matter until I informed him of his past on the ship while I hid him in my chambers."

"So you told him..." I can't tell whether or not it was better he stayed ignorant.

"Then Prince Nornus was the one who killed our parents..." Jæmis looks resigned. "And also who took away your fazing ability."

"Now, can you understand why I'm not so fond of the little prince?"

We're suddenly interrupted by a ton of small ships arriving at the scene. Soldiers controlling the ships land on the grass and march towards Læna.

"Princess Læna," says one of the soldiers. "No – Queen." He corrects himself and bends down on his knee.

All the other soldiers do the same. I think this is pretty much the entire ship.

"Varitus is no more. We have freed ourselves from his wretched claws. Yool is ours!" she preaches in front of the small crowd.

The soldiers all cheer in response.

"I am... completely lost here," says Kæleb.

"It seems our sister was cleverer than we gave her credit for," Jæmis says with a small smile.

"Captain Jæmis... is Lord Varitus really gone?"

"It appears to be that way."

"Nornus basically vanquished him for us," I say softly.

"Who do I serve now?" Kæleb asks, looking for some guidance.

Jæmis lifts up his hand and points at Læna's back.

"Her. Protect her, serve her. That is all I ask of you."

"What do you mean – we can protect her together."

Jæmis stands up straight, shrugging off his arm from my shoulder.

"That is not going to be possible."

Kæleb starts to laugh out of nervousness.

"Can someone please explain what's going on here...?"

Læna marches up to Jæmis and me.

"Now, you'll have to enlighten us about this." She looks directly at me.

"It is as you saw," says Jæmis vaguely.

Her eyes widen.

"*You mated with the Princess?*" she gasps as she puts it together.

Eeyok's mouth drops open as well.

"Mated!?" he echoes incredulously.

1. "Yeah, we did. What are you going to do about it?"

2. "Is this going to be a problem?"

"Yeah, we did. What are you going to do about it?" I ask in a highly defensive tone.

Jæmis snorts behind me, smirking.

"Easy now, my sister knows what it means, and that there's nothing she can do to revert it."

"I just can't believe it – you mated with someone that isn't even Ræhu!"

"You will have to accept it," Jæmis says, completely calm.

"Is this going to be a problem?" I ask, unsure how this mating ritual affects things.

"Of course it's going to be a problem!" she responds in a shrill voice.

"You're not even Ræhu. How is this even possible?"

"I did not think it was possible either," Jæmis confirms. "But it happened."

"It's not conventional at all," she sighs.

"This is going to ruin my plans," she says, suddenly biting down on her nails.

"Læna," Jæmis starts. "I am not going to be part of your plans."

She stops biting and looks up at him.

"What do you mean?"

"Lord Varitus is gone. You have conquered Kulul. Yool is not my home, I do not belong there."

"HX-108 isn't your home either," she snaps.

He smiles softly at me.

"Home is wherever my mate is."

My stomach leaps in response.

"Ugh, repulsive," Læna says in disgust.

"Do you... do you want to stay here?" I ask, as this is news to me, too.

"That is what I have decided, yes," he answers. "It was decided the moment we bonded."

"No – you have to come back with me!" Læna whines. "We're the last of our kind, we need to stick together."

"I didn't go through all this trouble to have us be split up!"

Jæmis closes his eyes with a light sigh.

"I'm sorry to have to disappoint you. But I am glad I got to see you are safe and well. That is all I could ever ask for."

Læna pouts at him.

"Are you really not going back with us? You don't have to be a captain anymore. You can do whatever you want. You can bring the princess along as well."

"Yool was never our home. It was taken by force," Jæmis explains.

"I shall remain here, with Joselina."

Læna suddenly throws her arms around Jæmis, surprising him.

"You dumb dumb!" she whines. "Why do you always have to be the responsible one?"

Jæmis hugs his sister back.

"Someone has to make sure you don't do anything stupid."

"I can hardly believe what you're saying. This is not the same brother I saw nunoons ago."

"You'd be correct," he grins.

Læna releases Jæmis and faces me.

"I guess... a princess isn't so bad after all."

"Oh, right – you don't know," I say. "I'm not a princess."

Jæmis suddenly awkwardly looks away as Læna's face pales.

"*What!?*" she screeches.

Kæleb closes his eyes. "Nothing I know is the truth anymore. I need to lie down. Perhaps check myself in at the medical bay."

"I lied to save my own skin," I explain. "I'm just a regular person. I am a tailor, I make clothes, like the ones I've made for you."

"That does make a lot of sense," she muses. "So not a princess..."

"This is absurd, you're of royal blood, Jæmis."

"... She heard the call, Læna. Do not argue my choice."

Læna clicks her tongue at him.

"Fine, I won't dwell on it. However, I cannot possibly leave you alone here, it's not safe. How have they not taken you prisoner yet?"

Jæmis and I make eye contact with each other.

"It's a long story," I say.

"I will take care of myself; it is you I'm worried about. The humans see you as their enemy. You will have to leave as soon as possible."

"I'm sure we could come to a peaceful agreement after a discussion with their leader," she says flippantly.

"As much as I would like to believe so, you did just attack Earth again." I do not think Forrester Inc. will give them much leeway.

"Well, I didn't, for sure," she stresses.

"Take Kæleb and go," Jæmis says urgently.

"I have to agree with Prince Jæmis here, we should leave as soon as possible," Eeyok joins the conversation.

As they're talking amongst themselves, my eyes wander over towards the crater left behind by Nornus.

I still can't face the reality that he's sacrificed himself.

Wait, I see something.

In the middle of the crater... It's a small nub in the dirt.

I push myself past everyone else, shoving them out of my way. I run as fast as I can, dropping myself down inside of the crater.

In front of me, there's a small white seedling in the dirt. It's the same type I've seen in Nornus' garden.

"Nornus!" I exclaim as I bury both my hands in the dirt to scoop the seedling out.

It's small and white, but it feels brittle and lifeless. It should be glowing, but it's not.

What did Nornus do to save it when I was there? He used his powers... I don't have those kinds of powers.

The more time passes, the more I see the seedling wilt in front of me. I have to try!

I move it in front of my mouth and I purse open my lips, exhaling my warm breath against it.

Please – let it work!

Footsteps appear behind me and I can tell Eeyok has joined me.

"Joselina, what is that?" he asks.

I breathe against it one more time, hoping it'll go through. But it's not glowing like it should be. I can feel tears wanting to burst out of me, and it's hard to reign them in.

"I think... I think it's Nornus. But, it's dying. I can't... I can't—" I start to sob.

Tears finally roll down my face and my eyes flicker blue due to my highly emotional state. I blow against it one more time, and again – and again.

"You did your best," Eeyok says solemnly, placing a hand on top of my shoulder.

My tears fall into the small patch of dirt in my hands, soaking the soil.

I'm about to give up, but then...

The seedling starts to glow. Fading in and out, very faint. Like a heart that's winding up. I can't help but cry out of happiness.

"It's... it's glowing!" I say, holding it up in the air.

The glowing becomes stronger until it's a pearly white and the seedling softly starts to sway with life.

"Wow, you did it, Joselina," Eeyok says in awe.

I snuggle the patch of dirt and seedling close to my chest. This is what Nornus left behind. A piece of him.

I'm going to take care of you, don't you worry.

Jæmis finally enters the scene.

"Eeyok, tell me why my mate is crying. If it's because of you, I will—"

"Ahh, I didn't do anything!" Eeyok jumps away from Jæmis.

I stand up from the ground and proudly show the glowing seedling to Jæmis.

"It's Nornus!" I say with a smile.

Jæmis doesn't look convinced, but doesn't argue with me either.

Læna joins us as well, one of her eyebrows raised.

"What is all this fuss about some plant?" she asks.

Before I can explain, we're interrupted by the wailing of sirens. Forrester Inc. has finally decided to join us, after watching from the sidelines. I hug the plant close to my body, afraid something will happen to it.

Neil and an army of guards march up the grassy hill. He looks over at Kæleb and Læna.

"By the power vested in me by the United Nations, I declare you are all under arrest for crimes against humanity."

Chapter [028] Epilogue -- Forrester's Office

Neil folds his hands together, a serious expression etched onto his face.

"...So what you're saying is; I must look the other way."

We're all here; me, Jæmis, Eeyok, Læna, Kæleb, Caine, even Ralph showed up a little while later. The rest of the Gaötte soldiers have been locked up for now.

"I think we can come to an understanding that they were forced into an attack," I explain.

I've been championing for the forgiveness of everyone's misdeeds.

"Forced or not, they attacked earth. This is our third interaction with an extraterrestrial life form, and it was never anything but hostile. We cannot allow this to continue to happen," Neil says as he shakes his head.

"You've got a point," I admit begrudgingly, "but the threat here is gone. They have no reason to go to war with us anymore."

"And who is to say they won't come back later to plunder the earth once more?"

"Under my authority, I will personally guarantee that we will not attack your planet," Læna butts in.

"Also, why do you keep carrying that strange plant?" she asks me, eyeing me weirdly.

"I will die for this plant, so don't you dare touch it or make fun of it," I bite back at her, snuggling the potted plant closer to my chest.

Neil was kind enough to offer me a temporary pot from his office so I could put Nornus inside.

"Your authority says nothing. From what you've briefed me about, you only just now staged a coup and your planet is under new rule. Who is to say they will follow you?" Neil argues back.

Læna leans against his desk, frowning at him.

"You remind me too much of my brother with how uptight you are."

In the background, Kæleb raises his eyebrows.

"We have no interest in this planet. Let us leave and we shall never return," she shrugs nonchalantly.

"I hope you realize what that means, Jæmis," she says, speaking her own language. "We will never see each other again."

"I am very well aware of that, but I stand by my decision to stay," Jæmis answers.

"Again, we have nothing but your word for this. We cannot trust you or let you leave like this without tangible proof that earth won't get attacked again."

"Not to mention the people are going to want justice," Neil grumbles.

"I think if you wave it in their faces that you caught Hulio's leader, people will quickly forget about the attack," I point out.

"You could even say that Hulio conspired together with the Gaötte, and now that we've captured Benjamin, the danger is completely gone," I say.

"Are you telling me to concoct an elaborate lie, Miss Hearth?" Neil quirks an eyebrow.

"You're good at that, aren't you?" I say, shrugging.

"I'm liking this side of you," Læna chuckles. "I can see why my brother grew so fond of you."

"Miss Hearth, Miss... Læna," Neil gestures awkwardly at the both of us. "No matter how convincing your arguments, the fact of the matter is that you are always able to return to earth and attack us again in the future."

"There is no guarantee that you wouldn't."

My lips transform into a pout; I've been trying to convince him for a while now to let the charges drop against all of them, to let them return to Yool. But Neil isn't budging.

I understand his position though; there is no guarantee that Læna wouldn't carry out another attack against earth.

Then Eeyok comes forwards.

"...What about an oath?" he suggests.

The room grows quiet, even Neil sits back into his chair.

"What's this oath about?" asks Læna, one of the only ones who doesn't understand its meaning. "I will pledge any oath to assure your planet's safety."

"When Eeyok and I were left behind on this planet, they made us take an oath," Jæmis explains.

"Yes. It was very powerful. If we broke the oath, we'd die," Eeyok continues.

"Die?" Læna raises her eyebrows.

"Die?" she repeats in English, looking at Neil.

"It's not a bad idea," I immediately jump in. "Unless there's some kind of distance tied to the oath."

"Theoretically, there shouldn't be," Neil mumbles, his eyes narrowed.

"Then let's do it!" I say enthusiastically. "Let them take an oath with Oathkeeper."

"Now hold on there, Miss Hearth. Exactly who will be the keeper in this situation? Let me remind you of the fact that both parties will find their demise if the oath is broken," Neil points out.

I swallow.

"I'll do it then. I'll take another oath."

"Yes, that went splendidly last time." Neil dismissively waves his hand at Jæmis and Eeyok.

"Mind letting me know what you are talking about? This doesn't sound like an ordinary promise," Læna speaks up.

"If you take an oath with the Oathkeeper, you can't break it, otherwise you die," I explain.

"That seems extreme," she says.

"Well, you both die. The one you made the oath to, and yourself."

"So it's an all or nothing situation. Very well, I understand. If that's what it takes to convince you that we have no ill intentions towards earth, then so be it."

"Læna, are you sure?" Jæmis joins in. "The consequence is death."

"That sounds like you don't trust me to keep my word," she says slyly.

To be honest, with what Læna has done behind the scenes – I wouldn't trust her exactly either. But if she's willing to put her life down on the line, then it's hard to argue her sincerity.

But Neil doesn't trust me to break that oath. I've already broken the oaths for Jæmis and Eeyok, so I understand his reasoning.

"I want you to know what you're getting into," replies Jæmis.

"You said you did an oath yourself, no? Will you die if you break it?" she asks.

"The oath was broken," Jæmis explains, his eyes darting over to meet mine. "The person who you make the oath to is the one who can break it, but not the other way around."

"A one-sided deal. I see." Læna folds her arms and thinks deeply.

"Are you sure you're willing to do it?" I ask.

"To ensure the safety and future of Yool, I will do whatever it takes."

"Then who—"

"—I'll be the keeper," Neil cuts me off.

Ralph gasps and so does Caine.

"Really? For real? Aren't you just going to sacrifice one of your henchmen?" Caine asks, disturbed.

"Mr. Boltage, oaths are not meant to be taken lightly. If their leader is willing to undergo this process, then I am willing to meet them halfway."

Honestly, I'm also shocked. I did not think Neil would offer himself.

"If she breaks the oath, you die," I emphasize. "Are you *sure*?"

"Miss Hearth, if the extraterrestrials decide to attack earth once more, then I've failed my job as head of DAET."

He folds his hands together, leaning his chin on top of it. I can nearly see his glasses glint.

"Bring in my cousin."

--

While we wait for Oathkeeper to arrive, Neil told me he wanted to have a conversation with me and Caine alone.

"Miss Hearth, I want you to look at this," he says as he hands me a tablet with a video playing on it.

It's a recording of someone's phone. Specifically, a recording at the park from a couple of hours ago.

"That super is getting his ass kicked by that alien!" says the cameraman.

Indeed, in the distance, he is recording Jæmis and Varitus fighting. Then Jæmis gets knocked away, landing in the grass.

"Oh shit – it's Super Mallgirl, yo!" the cameraman says excitedly once I run into the frame.

From this angle, I can see how all the threads spring from my body and swiftly create a cocoon around me and Jæmis. Man, I have to say – that's impressive.

"Look at her go – she's spinning a cocoon! You go Super Mallgirl!"

I can hear myself threatening Varitus and I dread what happens next.

I look away, knowing full well how I hurt Nornus instead of Varitus. My eyes fall upon the potted plant on the desk and I sigh.

"What do you make of this?" asks Neil, retrieving the tablet. "I was under the impression that you had no powers anymore."

"I think it's awful they saddled me with that atrocious nickname. Really, Super Mallgirl? I think I would have preferred Spider Lady at this point."

Neil clicks his tongue.

"I am not amused, Miss Hearth."

"To be fair, you never are."

Caine snickers in the background.

"I mean, I gave her an experimental antidote, but it didn't seem to work this morning," says Ralph.

He then looks at me. "But those blue markings... that looks like Jæmis."

Well, this is a little awkward to explain.

"I think Jæmis gave me a little boost to regain my ability. Or maybe it just took a little while to kick in. Either way, I say your antidote works, Ralph."

"At the very least, that's the good news out of all this. Mr. Hearth, please share with us your findings of this antidote. Many supers are left with no powers after Hulio's attack."

"Sure," Ralph shrugs. "But it's not gonna be free, you know."

"Wait – you gave her an antidote?" asks Caine.

"Yea, want me to hook you up, too?"

"You couldn't have done this *before* the parade!? I was running around without my electricity!"

"I didn't know it worked, okay!" Ralph argues back.

Neil rubs his temples, clearly annoyed at their argument.

"Perhaps this conversation can happen after you two have returned home," he grumbles.

"Hey, my father is locked up, right?" asks Caine, changing the subject.

"He is being held captive, yes."

"I wanna talk to him, alone," Caine asks, slamming his hand onto the desk.

I quietly push the potted plant away towards safety.

Neil looks like he's about to deny his request, but then concedes.

"Very well, you were an asset today, and he is after all, your father. I will give you thirty minutes alone with him after we've dealt with the extraterrestrials."

"Do the people know we've caught Hulio's leader as well?" I ask. It all happened behind the scenes.

"We haven't yet broken the news to the public yet, it's too chaotic at the moment. Social media is going off about Super Mallgirl." Neil shakes his head.

"The video has been watched almost a million times," he says with a deep sigh.

"You've even started a new hashtag... #AlienSale."

This time, I'm the one that snorts out loud. Caine is trying to hold in his laughter.

"This is a PR disaster; no amount of scrubbing will get rid of this footage. Not to mention there were several videos posted by multiple people from different angles."

"With your identity laid bare like this, there's no guarantee I will be able to protect your privacy, miss Hearth."

"I understand your concerns..." I start slowly. "But I think we have bigger problems to think about at the moment than people recognizing my face."

"It's not just that people are recognizing your face, miss Hearth."

Once more, Neil pushes the tablet in front of me, showing me a super's social media page.

"Supers – *our* supers – are coming out in droves to support you. Hailing you as the hero of Claner."

I look at the picture posted. It's a super I know; one I've created a suit for. Her smile is not being covered by a mask. Her post says she stands behind me.

Neil pushes his finger across the screen, scrolling down the media feed. More and more supers show up on the screen, all bare faced.

"...They're all posting face reveals," I say, in shock.

Caine stands next to me, looking at the screen with big eyes.

"No fucking way – even Spiderboy! Oof, damn, I think the mask definitely looked better."

"People are under the impression you defeated the extraterrestrials and are defending your right to show your face."

"Well, what is so wrong about that?" I question loudly. "Why do I have to hide?"

"You know why," Neil says agitatedly. "Supers are supposed to register with us. This way we can protect their privacy."

"All you did was make it so people had to hide themselves. I wasn't even allowed to use my ability in public at all," I argue back.

"Actually, I agree. Joselina kicked ass today. We've been working to capture Hulio's leader as well – we didn't do anything wrong here," Caine speaks up.

"If Joselina's face is on social media, then I will show mine, too," he says dramatically.

Neil closes his eyes and sighs once more.

"You are all making my job much harder here. It's the law, nonetheless, for supers to register before they can use their ability in public. Laws don't change overnight."

"People are willing to do it. I'm sure if you lobby the government, we can overturn that law. Imagine; supers are free to walk the streets without masks or being registered."

"What makes you so sure I would lobby and campaign for super's rights?" he asks.

"Because you all owe us, big time," I point out.

"We captured my dad," Caine speaks up.

"And I made an antidote," Ralph also chips in.

"And social media thinks I defeated Varitus."

Neil grumbles.

"I'm not the enemy here – I recognize your valiant efforts. If this is what you wish to do, to show your face to the world, then I will help lobby for that right. Provided the social media presence stays as strong as it is right now."

I end up grinning widely.

"Really? You would?" I guess Neil Forrester is useful for something after all.

Then the doors to his office spring open. A woman dressed in high fashion enters the room.

"*Daaaaarling!*" she screeches.

All of us turn to look at her; it's Oathkeeper.

She spots me sitting at the desk and her lips curl into a devious smirk.

"It seems you've broken the Oath. How did that work out for you?"

"Uhh," I stutter.

"Oathkeeper, we called you here for different business," says Neil.

"Aw, you didn't just call me because you missed seeing me?" she coos.

Neil presses a button on the phone on his desk.

"Bring them in," he says.

And that's when everyone else is shuffled into the room.

"Let's do this," he says, looking at Læna as she enters.

Oathkeeper proceeds to explain the rules and eventually ties an Oath between Læna and Neil, promising to never attack Earth or do anything to harm Earth or its inhabitants.

Læna is forced to make an Oath between herself and Kæleb as well. He can't attack earth either, since he is the Captain in command. One of the conditions to her Oath with Neil, is that she cannot remove the one with Kæleb. A loophole, so to speak.

All in all, the procedures advanced nicely. Jæmis wasn't required to take an Oath this time around. He just quietly stood by and watched. Same with Eeyok.

Then we all leave for the ship to let them return to Yool.

-- Park Noon

The sun is already setting at this point. The park is empty; they've set barricades around so that people cannot enter. We're escorting the Gaötte party back to their ship.

Caine decided to stay behind so he can have a chat with his father.

The crater that Nornus left behind is still here. I'm carrying the plant under my arms, not letting it out of my sight.

"Okay, so sis, you gotta be real with me for a sec – when you said Jæmis gave you a boost, what exactly does that entail?"

I glance at my brother from the corner of my eyes. *Now* of all times he wants to know? Just when we're all walking up to say goodbye to everyone?

"I saw that video; your face was glowing like a disco ball on a Friday night."

"Do not compare my face to a disco ball, thank you very much."

"But it looked like *his*. What the hell did he do to you? And why is he deciding to stay on Earth? Why isn't he returning?"

"That little runt is asking too many questions," Jæmis grunts from behind us in his own language.

"I can understand you, remember? Idiot," Ralph huffs.

"Let's just say that uhm... Jæmis is going to be staying with us from now on," I try to explain.

"But why?"

God, his incessant questions are annoying.

"It's his decision," I reply.

Ralph turns to Jæmis.

"Can't you just yeet yourself to your own planet?"

"What is this 'jiet' you speak of?"

"Ralph stop badgering him."

"I just want to know why he's staying with us!"

"Because your sister is my mate," Jæmis grunts loudly. "You and I are going to be seeing a lot of each other from now on."

"Mate?" Ralph echoes. "Wait, what does that me–*MATE!*?"

I shield my face with my hand, looking down at the ground and hoping my brother will stop screeching.

Thankfully, Neil stops walking and speaks up.

"Is this place alright for you?" asks Neil once we stand on top of a hill.

"Here is fine. My soldiers will use their drones to return to the ship," says Læna.

Ralph stops badgering me with questions when he sees the broken drone that Nornus crashed. His eyes start to glint.

"...You don't mind if I keep one of them, right?" asks Ralph, barely able to contain his excitement.

I sigh in relief; at least he won't be bothering me with questions for now.

"That one? But it's broken," says Læna, raising an eyebrow.

"Doesn't matter!"

"If that's what pleases you, then you can keep the wreckage."

"Score!" he exclaims and starts running towards the crashed drone.

"Mr. Hearth – that is property of Forrester Inc., leave it alone!" Neil yells after him.

As Neil tries to reign in Ralph, Læna steps forward to grab Jæmis' hands.

"Are you really sure you will not be returning with us?" she asks in this sorrowful voice.

"Things have changed. Yool has changed, too. Lord Varitus is no longer a threat against our family."

Jæmis gives her a small smile.

"For once, we're free to choose what we want to do."

"And staying here on Earth is what you want to do?"

"Their world doesn't seem too bad," Jæmis says casually. "But I won't be separated from my mate."

"You didn't even ask me if I wanted to leave with you and live on Yool," I say.

"An excellent point," Læna agrees.

"This is where you were born and raised," Jæmis tells me. "I am nothing but a wanderer without a real home. Yool has never felt like one. Nothing more than a prison."

"I'm sad to hear you call it a prison," says Eeyok, frowning.

He's finally removed his glamour and changed into his usual armour. Eeyok is returning to Yool with the rest, something that saddens me.

"Lord Varitus has tainted my perspective on Yool, but I believe Læna can help and bring prosperity to Kulul. It just isn't where I belong," he explains.

"Ugh, enough with the dramatic speeches – I get it, you want to remain. But don't forget Jæmis, you are Ræhu, nothing will ever take that identity away from you."

"And nothing will," he assures her.

Jæmis then looks at Kæleb, who has been eerily quiet.

"Captain Kæleb," he calls out to him.

Kæleb straightens his back.

"Yes, Captain!" he answers.

"Don't be a fool – forget about Lord Varitus."

Kæleb's worried eyes fall to the ground.

"But who else do I look up to now?"

"Am I invisible? Incompetent? Perhaps I played the damsel in distress role too well," Læna mumbles.

"Protect her, serve her. You are Ræhu, never turn your back on us. Be the Captain in command that the people of Yool need you to be."

Kæleb pounds his chest and bows deeply in front of Jæmis.

Then Eeyok turns to me.

"Joselina, I..." he starts.

1. Hug him.
2. Hold his hands.

I don't wait for him to finish and simply hug him, startling the poor guy. The potted plant is squished between us.

But then he smiles softly and returns my embrace.

And quickly lets go once he sees Jæmis' eyes shooting daggers at him.

I hold onto his hands and smile up at him.

Eeyok returns the smile, squeezing my hands with his larger ones.

Jæmis gives him a disapproving glare and he drops my hands just as quickly.

"I'm sorry I couldn't fulfil my promise with Prince Nornus." He looks gloomily at the plant.

"That is not your fault at all. It's my own..."

"Oh don't act so dejected, the little Prince sacrificed himself out of his own accord. I may not be fond of him, but do not disregard his agency and blame it on yourself," Læna huffs.

"That is true, Prince Nornus made a sacrifice, for all of us. It was very brave," says Eeyok. "Even though I would have liked to take him back to Yool."

"I think I'm going to keep him here," I say, looking down at the plant. "You said Yool is not his home planet either, right?"

Eeyok shakes his head. "Lord Varitus came to Yool with Prince Nornus when he was but a small baby. He wasn't born here."

I pull the pot tightly against my chest.

"Then Nornus can stay here, on earth."

"Hehe, please take care of him," Eeyok chuckles.

"I'm really going to miss you though," I say, pouting. "You're welcome to stay here as well."

"As much as I would have enjoyed that, Yool is my home. It is time to take back what was once ours."

He's got such a deep connection to his home planet. No way would he ever stay here.

"However, I'll never forget my time here, or even our meeting. You were kind to me even though you had every right to be angry. You didn't look down on me for acting... weak and unintelligent."

He gives an awkward smile.

"I am glad I got to meet you."

Eeyok falls down onto one knee and grins up at me.

"Princess or not, you shall always be my princess."

My cheeks flush red with the compliment.

"I will treasure your Makoet, always," he says.

I giggle at him.

"Goodbye Eeyok, I wish you the best, and may we meet again."

Eeyok rises from the ground and gives a pointed look at Jæmis.

In complete silence, he makes a very polite and grand bow in front of him as well.

"Goodbye, Captain Jæmis. Your teachings will always stay with us."

Jæmis closes his eyes and also bows in front of Eeyok.

"Never thought a soldier like you was secretly running in cahoots with my sister. But... you were resourceful and clever at times. May you continue to serve your people."

Eeyok grins widely at the compliment, probably the first of its kind he's ever received from Jæmis.

Kæleb grabs onto Læna's waist.

"Goodbye, Jæmis," says Læna.

"May you rule Yool in peace," Jæmis replies.

Kæleb then shoots up in the air, carrying Læna towards the ship in the sky.

"Hey – don't forget about Eeyok!" Eeyok cries as he runs after them on the grassy hill.

Thankfully, a drone swoops down to pick him up, and that's the last I see of any of them before they enter the ship.

I lean against Jæmis' chest, looking up at the large ship.

"Last chance to join them," I say.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd think you wanted to get rid of me," Jæmis says with a smirk.

"Maybe I do," I tease him.

The ship suddenly camouflages itself, disappearing from my sight. Then I hear its engine whirring and a loud sound blast indicates it's left orbit.

"There they go," I say with a whistle.

"That is the last we will see of them."

"We captured my parents' murderer, and you finally freed your family from Varitus' claws," I say with a small sigh. "That's a lot in one day."

"...And I found out I can fæze because of you."

"Trust me, that was a surprise to you and me both. I did not think that surrendering one's powers meant that it would happen literally."

"Well, I'm not complaining. It somehow boosted my own ability. I was never able to conjure thread from anywhere but my fingers, until now that is."

"You were magnificent," he says, smiling down at me.

I feel myself blush in response and bury my face into his chest to hide it.

And that's when I hear his call. Soothing and strong. Just for my ears only.

"So, what now?" asks Jæmis.

I look up at the empty sky and take a deep breath. Jæmis' family left, Varitus is defeated, Benjamin has been captured, and Ralph is taking apart an alien drone. And me?

What's going to happen now?

"Beats the hell out of me," I laugh.

Passionate ending merges into the epilogue here.

INNOCENT ENDING

I point my finger at the security feed of the ball room.

"Which floor is that ballroom?" I ask.

"Seems it's the 12th floor, pretty high up," answers Ralph.

"Ralph, pull up the blueprints. There's gotta be vents in that ceiling."

There's no way we can roam around the hallways undetected. Getting to the ballroom in the first place is impossible; the entrance to the elevator and stairway and completely guarded.

That's why we decided to use the vents to get around. They're big enough to crawl through without anyone catching us out.

"There's one main line running through the middle of the ceiling, with three vent openings," says Ralph.

"Great. Let us know where to go. There's a vent in this room we could enter through."

I look up at the ceiling in this room and see a vent we could easily open up and enter.

"There's not much to guide you for, once you hit the dead end it's just straight up from there."

"Caine, help me get rid of this grate."

Caine helplessly throws his arms up in the air.

"You know I'm short, right?"

"Nice to know you can still joke at this time," I say with a chuckle.

Jæmis then bends down on one knee in front of me. His brown eyes look up.

"Use my back," he says.

Well, I certainly didn't expect Jæmis to offer his help straight away.

I step closer to him and raise my knee, eventually planting a foot right on his shoulder. Thankfully he's so beefy and muscular; he remains very stable as I try to climb onto his back.

Jæmis holds onto my ankle as I try to place the other foot on top of him. When I've got both feet on his shoulders, I raise my hands towards the ceiling.

"Still too high!" I complain.

I shriek when Jæmis rises from the ground and stands up straight, nearly causing me to knock my head against the ceiling.

"A little warning next time," I grumble.

"You can reach it now, yes?" he asks in this deadpan voice.

I focus my attention back on the grate, which is fixed by screws on all four corners. Thankfully, that's one of the tools we brought with us.

"Caine, screwdriver," I ask, extending my hand.

Caine quickly retrieves the screwdriver from next to the laptop and hands it over to me.

I start using it to unscrew the bolts from the frame. Once I've got the last one unscrewed, I dig my fingers through the grate and pull on it. It detaches from the ceiling and I drop it down to give to Caine.

I poke my head through the vent, coughing at the amount of dust entering my lungs.

"How's it looking in there, Joselina?" asks Ralph.

"Dusty," I answer honestly. "It goes to the right for a bit and then it goes up once it reaches the wall," I explain.

"Yep, exactly like the blueprints. You're going to have to climb that vent for twelve stories."

"Neat," I answer sarcastically. "Now, give me a flashlight."

Caine hands me a flashlight, clicking it on.

I shine it up through the vent and bite down on the handle with my teeth. Then I hoist myself inside.

-- Vent shaft

I crawl through the vent until I reach the dead end. I shine the flashlight up; it's a very long shaft. It probably spans the entire building.

I focus my energy to the tips of my fingers and start weaving together a strong rope. It'll help with climbing up. I start guiding it up through the vent.

Jæmis leaps up into the vent as well.

I wonder if he can even fit through the vent; he's so big and the shaft is pretty narrow. If he gets stuck...

"It's so cramped in here," Caine complains when Jæmis has lifted him up inside.

"Just be glad you're small," I say.

"Hey!" he argues.

Eventually I can tell I've reached a dead end with my rope and quickly attached it to the metal. I pull on it to test its strength; good enough to hold our weights combined.

I take the flashlight out of my mouth and attach it to one of the pouches on my hips.

"Ready!" I tell everyone.

"Alright, let's go," says Caine.

"Eeyok, do you know what to do? I'm a little concerned about leaving you behind..." I talk through the ear piece.

"Eeyok is a trained soldier, you do not have to worry about small fry like him," says Jæmis.

"He's not a small fry," I defend Eeyok.

"No, Prince Jæmis is right; I am a trained soldier and I'll be fine! Your brother will give me instructions to follow, so please be careful going up," says Eeyok.

"Fine... Just make sure you go back to the car when you're done, okay?"

"Understood," he says with a chuckle.

"Alright, up you go," Jæmis cuts in and gives me a boost.

I cling onto the rope and start to climb.

Jæmis follows me, grabbing onto the rope and lifting himself up.

I'm not the best climber, but I do still remember my PE classes.

Caine follows our example. The three of us start making our way all the way up. Each time I pass by an intersection, I make sure to count them, because we have to stop at the 12th.

"God, I really do hope we'll be on the right floor," I mutter darkly.

"We'll be able to tell soon enough if we are on the right floor or not," Jæmis reassures me.

"Yeah sorry sis, can't help you there. My drone can't go inside the building to help out," Ralph tells me in an apologetic voice.

Suddenly, something squishy falls right on my face.

I shriek in response and accidentally let go of the rope.

I slide down fast, coming to a stop when I crash into Jæmis.

"Why did you let go?" he says, his voice muffled because I'm smothering him.

Oh, that was scary. I'm glad he didn't let go of the rope, or else we'd have crushed poor Caine.

"S-sorry," I apologize as I reach for the rope again.

"A bug fell down on me," I explain.

"A bug? *A bug?*" Caine repeats incredulously.

"It scared me, okay!" I defend myself.

"We're infiltrating Hulio, a mission where we could possibly die, and you get scared by *a bug!*?"

"That is a strange weakness to have," Jæmis agrees.

"Shut up, both of you, leave me alone," I whine.

"Standing up against the most powerful creature in the universe, yet gets frightened by a bug," Jæmis mutters.

I grit down on my teeth and climb up again, not in the mood of getting roasted by everyone.

But it did settle my nerves a bit.

I continue my climb.

After what seems like forever, I reach the 12th floor and quickly crawl into the side shaft so I can rest.

Finally, no more climbing, my hands were hurting by the time I got to the 6th floor.

I scooch over to make room for Jæmis and Caine.

"This is it?" asks Caine. "Did you count right?"

"Guess we'll find out soon enough," I say in a foreboding tone. "Now be quiet, they may actually hear us."

We crawl through the small space until I reach a point where there's a grate. Light emerges from it. I peek down through the small holes.

It's the ballroom! We're on the right floor!

"We're here," I tell them.

I scan the room through the small openings, trying to locate Benjamin and everyone else.

"He's on a podium, talking. It's further back, I think we should be able to get right above him."

The three of us venture further into the shaft until we're near the back of the ballroom. We can hear him talk from here.

"With these weapons, we can neutralize all the filth from this world," speaks the voice of Benjamin.

"Is that really my dad?" Caine asks with a scoff.

"He's talking about the weapon they created from the bracelet," I say.

"This makes me sick," he grumbles.

Jæmis crawls up towards me to look through the grate as well.

"The men behind him look like bodyguards," he notes.

"Yes, it seems they're supers. Wait – that's Vapor."

I recognize the one on the right, clad in a black and green supersuit.

"Really? Fuck. We gotta be quick then, because he will choke us all out by turning the air toxic," says Caine.

"Can't believe he's a Hulio supporter," he tacks on.

"The other one, do you recognize them?" asks Jæmis.

"Hmm... Caine, what do you think?"

Jæmis makes room for Caine to look through the grate as well. I have to back up even further through the shaft. I can hear the metal creak and rumble beneath my hands and knees.

"No... I don't recognize them. This is risky if we don't know what kind of ability they have."

"Perhaps you can incapacitate them while I focus on Benjamin," I tell Caine.

"What about Vapor?"

"Hold your breath, I guess," shrugging.

"We ready for the blackout?" asks Caine.

"Ready for your command," Eeyok answers.

"We can initiate a countdown," says Ralph.

I tap Jæmis shoulder.

"You ready to pull him in?" I ask.

Jæmis turns around and goes over the grate to make room for me.

"He should be up here within a second," he replies confidently.

I crack my knuckles and shift my weight. I'm ready.

"Good, let me sta—"

CRACK!

The world beneath me shatters as the metal of the vent tears open, causing me to fall through it.

-- **Hotel ballroom**

No one can react quickly, not even Jæmis who tries to grab me, but is unable to move fast enough in such a cramped space.

I quickly shoot out thread from all my fingertips in a desperate measure to hook onto something and save myself from crushing my spine.

They latch onto the ceiling and it slows down my fall, but they all snap immediately under the weight.

I collapse on top of an unsuspecting person; all the air is pushed out of my lungs.

My back feels paralyzed from the sharp pain of the impact. Momentarily, I'm out of sorts and can't move.

"Argh, what the hell?" groans the person I crashed into.

Of course, it was Benjamin I dropped down on.

I look around in a panic, exposed to the crowd in the ballroom, on display for anyone to see.

Then the lights shut off and the crowd gasps.

"Kill her!" Benjamin yells in the dark.

Shit. I can barely move. I try to pick myself up from the floor, but my body feels like lead. The sharp pain is throbbing and it's pushing me over the edge to vomit.

Scurried footsteps sound through the ballroom as bodyguards rush over to me. Someone lifts me up from the floor and aims a gun to my head.

"JOSELINAAA!" Jæmis hollers from above.

Though dark, I can see his shadow leap from the ceiling above, his fist pulled back, ready to unleash fury on my captor.

"*Break the oath!*" he yells.

My heart beat slows down to a crawl as I feel time decelerate.

I raise both my hands up to my chest.

"I wish to break the oath!" I yell loudly.

The backs of my hands burn and sizzle immediately.

Just in time for Jæmis to dramatically land down and punch the guard away from me. He tears off the bracelet from his wrist as he pulls me up into his arms.

My back glows with a hot warmth from the pain, but I try my best not to make a sound.

A flash of glowing blue looks down at me before he turns around to rush after Benjamin.

"Ahh – shoot them!" yells Benjamin.

Gunshots are being fired into random directions, but with Jæmis' superhuman speed, he easily dodges them all.

The super we didn't recognize confronts Jæmis and throws a ball of energy at him.

It doesn't even slow Jæmis down as he kicks the super into his stomach, launching him across the room.

I start to cough when the air prickles my lungs – oh no, that's Vapor's work.

But it doesn't matter; Jæmis reaches Benjamin and grabs onto his shirt.

"You vulture, release me at once!" Benjamin cries out.

Jæmis braces himself against the ground, snugly holding me with his other arm against his chest, and he flies up towards the ceiling.

"Jump on my back, now," he hisses towards Caine, who's been watching up from above.

Caine doesn't even question him as he jumps down, landing onto Jæmis' back.

Carrying three people, Jæmis flies towards the large windows in the ballroom.

"Prepare yourself," he warns us.

I press my face against his chest and squeeze my eyes shut.

He barrels straight through the glass, shattering it as he flies out of the building.

-- Street shops night

Jæmis lands in front of our minivan, gently lowering me down. Caine hops off his back and opens the backdoors.

I quickly conjure some thread to tie down Benjamin, including wrapping it around his mouth so he'll stop yelling. He's thrown into the back of the van along with Caine.

"I can't believe that just happened," he says, still a bit in shock.

"Were we followed?" I ask, looking around us.

"Nah, no one there had superspeed, we're good," Caine replies.

"How are your injuries?" asks Jæmis, fazing back to normal.

"Not gonna lie – I can barely stand. I think I may have broken a couple of ribs as well," I answer honestly.

"You broke your ribs!?" Ralph shrieks in my ear.

"Ouch, keep it down, I'm still alive. *And* we got Benjamin."

"We need to retreat," Jæmis says with concern.

"No!" I nearly shout. "We have to go back and get Eeyok."

Jæmis closes his eyes shut in irritation, but he holds back a sigh.

"Fine. We'll retrieve him and leave immediately. You need medical attention."

Caine's gaze lands upon Jæmis' wrist.

"Is that alright?" he asks me.

The ramifications of me breaking the oath and Jæmis not wearing the bracelet to disable his power anymore is something I don't want to think about just yet. This man saved me and that's worth it.

"It's fine – let's go get Eeyok."

"I'm staying here. I need to have a little chat with my father," Caine says darkly as he climbs into the back of the van and closes the doors.

"You should stay here, I'll retrieve him myself," Jæmis tells me.

"No, take me with you."

"You're hurt—"

"I *said*; take me with you. You may still need help," I insist.

"Hmpf, perpetually stubborn."

Jæmis reaches out for me with his hand, but then he awkwardly keeps it hanging midway, unsure of what to do.

"Ribs, you said?" he asks.

Realizing he's unsure of how to hold me now that I'm injured, I end up flashing my first smile at him since the chaos that unfolded.

1. "Carry me like a princess."

2. "I can get on your back."

"Carry me like a princess," I say sweetly.

"But you aren't one."

I huff.

"It's an expression. Just carry me in your arms."

Jæmis takes my hand and pulls me up, putting his arm underneath my legs and supporting my shoulders. It still hurts, but it's probably the best position right now.

"I can get on your back," I suggest. "Like Caine did."

"Are you sure you're able to hold on?"

"If need be, I'll just stitch myself stuck to you," I say half-jokingly.

Jæmis turns around and lowers himself to his knees.

"Get on then."

I wrap my arms around his neck and hold onto him. He pushes me up using his own arms. This is comfy.

Then he flies off towards the hotel.

-- Hotel entrance night

There's a sight we didn't expect to see.

I was expecting guards and supers swarming outside to come get us. Except, the street is surrounded by black mini vans. There are people in black suits all over the place.

These aren't the same people I saw in the hotel.

Jæmis lowers me to the ground, being wary of our surroundings. What's going on?

"Joselina, it's Forrester Inc," Ralph answers my thoughts.

Then, I see Eeyok emerge from the entrance, hands cuffed behind his back, escorted by a man in a black suit.

"Eeyok!" I yell, rushing after him.

A person with a gun holds me back.

"Ma'am, please stay back. This is an active crime scene."

"Well, well, even with a mask you can't fool me, Miss Hearth."

Hearing my name, I whirl around to see Neil Forrester step out of a black car.

"I should have expected you were involved in this."

"Please release Eeyok," I tell him.

"As far as I know, the extraterrestrials were supposed to be in a safe house – including you."

Neil beckons at the guard to release Eeyok. He rushes to my side. Thankfully, he appears unharmed.

"Are you okay?" I ask, just to be sure.

"What about you? I heard you took a fall. Are you okay to stand?" He sounds worried.

I give him an apologetic smile.

"Tell me – why did you interfere with our operation?" asks Neil.

"*Your* operation?" I repeat, surprised.

"Where did you get your intel that Hulo would be here?"

"I told you about my informant," I stress.

"Miss Hearth, you're not even a registered superhero. What exactly are you doing running around playing hero?"

"She's the only one actually doing something to take on a group of terrorists," Jæmis speaks for me.

"You should be thanking her."

"What's this? He's not wearing the bracelet?" Neil sounds aghast.

"You there, bring me a bracelet at once!" Neil barks at one of the men near him.

"What were you thinking – letting loose an extraterrestrial? This is for your own safety, Miss Hearth."

"I'm plenty safe. It was an emergency. I would have died otherwise," I defend my decision.

"If you were at the safe house, where you should have been, you wouldn't have been in a dangerous situation, now would you?" he asks sarcastically.

The same man returns with a bracelet.

"Cuff it," Neil instructs.

The man places the bracelet around Jæmis' wrist, which he surprisingly allows.

Neil sighs and shakes his head.

"You've broken countless violations. I should have you apprehended right here and right now."

"But you're not," I say, challenging his bluff.

"No, because I believe you're harboring a very dangerous man and we need him."

It seems Neil knows what's happened so far. Perhaps they were watching everything from afar, or even through the security cameras that Ralph hacked into.

"Take me to him."

I honestly don't have a choice at this point. We were going to hand him over to Forrester Inc. eventually, right after we had our own talk with him, because he's got a lot of questions to answer.

"Fine," I say through gritted teeth. "Follow me."

-- Street shops night

Caine is waiting by the van, he is surprised to see Neil and two other men walk with us.

"Hey, hey – what's going on here?" he asks, stepping away from the van.

"Step aside, Boltage. Open the doors."

I nod at Caine with a sigh.

"Do it. They've seen everything."

Caine bites down on his bottom lip and angrily opens up the doors, revealing Benjamin tied up in the back.

His eyes grow wide in fear when he sees Neil.

"Good. Take him in. He's coming with us."

The two men pull Benjamin out of the van.

"Wait – we caught him! He's ours!" Caine interjects.

"Ours? You should have brought him to us. What were you thinking, keeping a terrorist a secret?" Neil scoffs at him.

"You abide by our laws. Any fugitive or terrorist apprehended will be sent to Forrester Inc.' headquarters."

Caine growls. "But he's–"

"–I have no interest in hearing your reasoning. Leave now before you face real repercussions."

Neil turns to me.

"And you. I'm going to ignore the transgressions you've committed today, as long as you return to the safe house and *stay there* this time."

Dejectedly, I direct my gaze towards the ground. This is out of my hands.

Caine's hands are balled into fists by his side, but he's not angrily rushing in either.

Neil takes Benjamin away and we're left with nothing.

"Joselina, what do we do now?" asks Eeyok, looking at me with these sad eyes.

"We go home," I mutter.

Chapter [026I] -- Hospital room

The ER doctor has left us alone in the room, right after showing us the x-rays of my ribcage.

Not looking so pretty.

On one hand, the painkillers I got are definitely helping. Can't feel a thing! I feel a little woozy though.

Caine paces around in the room, he can't sit still.

"Screw Forrester Inc.!" he yells. "We had him!"

"After eight years of believing he's dead, I had him right in front of me!"

"Hey, don't yell – let's not forget my sister here has two broken ribs and a mild concussion," Ralph chastises him.

"How long do Earthlings take to heal such an injury?" asks Jæmis, completely serious.

I giggle in response. "*Waaaay* longer than you."

"Doctor said a month or two, whilst not doing any exercise or heavy lifting," Ralph answers.

Jæmis is about to ask how long a month is, but Eeyok quickly sits down next to me on the bed.

"I'm so sorry, I feel like I failed you," says Eeyok with a sad face.

"Oh don't be sad," I reassure him. "You saved me there with that blackout."

"I didn't catch you though," he pouts.

"Well of course not silly, you weren't even there. Even mighty hulk Jæmis couldn't catch me!"

Jæmis suddenly looks offended.

"Why is she acting so... odd?" he directs his question towards Ralph.

"Excuse me? I am *not* odd," I reject his comment.

"It's the drugs they gave her, for the pain."

"There was definitely a lot of pain," I say, nodding.

"Then Jæmis went all – rawrr!! Not my Joselina!" I say, making fake grabby claws with my hands.

Jæmis' mouth drops open.

"T-that is not what went down—"

"Then *fwoosh* – no more oath!" I proudly show the back of my hand.

"Oh, so that's what happened!" Eeyok pipes in, looking at his own hand.

"So that means... the rules are broken?" he asks.

"No rules! Kill humans all you like!"

Ralph puts his hand in front of my mouth, preventing me from speaking any further. I huff indignantly.

"Let's not get carried away here, shall we?" he says, laughing awkwardly.

I angrily bite down on his finger.

Ralph yelps and pulls his hand away.

"Demon!" he hisses at me. "God, we need to take you home and get you to bed."

"She can't sleep," Caine says in a more serious tone.

"At least, the doctor said to keep waking her up to see if she isn't acting weird because of the concussion."

"...Any weirder than this?" Ralph quirks an eyebrow.

"Can you stop calling me weird?" I request with a yawn.

Hmm, now I'm starting to feel sleepy.

Ralph sighs and runs a hand through his hair.

"Fine, someone can watch while she sleeps and wake her up."

Jæmis heroically steps forwards.

"I shall keep watch."

Ralph looks at Eeyok.

"Anyone other than the muscular freak?"

Eeyok meekly looks down.

"Prince Jæmis can keep watch, yes," he agrees with Jæmis.

"Aww, that's so kind of you. I knew you cared about me after all," I coo at Jæmis.

Jæmis rolls his eyes at me, his lips curled in disgust.

"By the way, catch," says Caine as he takes something out of his pocket and throws it towards Ralph.

Ralph catches a small vial that looks like a tranquilizer dart. Oh, I didn't realize Caine was into some kinky things.

"Is this what I think it is?" he asks, eyeing the object carefully.

"He had a sample on his person, I kept it away from that Forrester guy. It's the real deal."

"Wow, I can't believe they turned this into some kind of anti-super venom."

"...Do you think... Do you think it's possible to create some sort of antidote from my powers?" Caine asks, sounding hopeful.

Ralph rubs his chin, deep in thought. My little brother can look so mature sometimes.

"I can definitely try, but I first need to see what they did to achieve this kind of formula."

Ugh, he's talking science right now. That will put me right to sleep.

I reach my hands out to Jæmis, like a kid trying to grab a cookie.

Then again, Jæmis is a snack...

"I'm sleepy, let's go home."

He looks at me strangely.

"...What do you want from me?"

"Carry me."

He thinks it over for a second before Ralph interrupts.

"You can use one of those wheelchairs in the hospital like a normal person."

I pout. "Then I want Jæmis to push me."

Ralph shrugs. "Suit yourself."

-- Lake Cabin Bedroom Night

Jæmis gently lies me down on the bed, being unable to walk up the stairs myself. He pulls the covers over my body.

"That's all the carrying I'm doing today," he says gruffly.

"What if I have to pee?"

"Then you'll have to walk yourself."

"Just yell if you need any help going to the bathroom, okay?" says Ralph.

"Fiiine. Where's Caine?" I ask, noticing he's absent.

"Downstairs, we've got a few things to discuss."

"Super secret stuff?"

"Top secret," he says with a wink. "Now, get some rest. Your pills are on your night stand in case you start feeling some pain again."

Ralph walks towards the door, before stopping at Jæmis.

"She needs to be woken up every 2 hours, can you do that?"

"Affirmative," he answers stoically.

Ralph walks out of the room and when I notice Jæmis is about to follow him, I feel my stomach drop in a bundle of nerves.

"Hey!" I call out to him. "Are you leaving me?"

He quirks an eyebrow at me.

"You do not need constant supervision, as far as I'm aware."

"Don't leave me," I mumble quietly. "I don't want to be alone right now."

For a few long seconds – what feels like an eternity – Jæmis sighs, closing the door of my room.

"Fine," he concedes. He folds his arms across his chest and leans against the door.

"Well, you don't have to stand there, come." I pat down on my bed, making room for him.

Jæmis gives me a perturbed look, but pushes himself away from the door and sits down on the end of the bed.

I smile at him, satisfied he's not leaving.

Then I realize I'm still in my supersuit and it would be kinda uncomfortable to sleep in this.

I unzip the front part of the suit and slip out of the top.

"..." Jæmis quickly turns his head away.

I kick my pants off as well and then pull the covers over myself, nuzzling my face against the pillow.

"Are you gonna keep watch over me all night?"

"I'll be here," he grunts.

I grin widely.

"Good."

I fall into a deep slumber.

-- Lake Cabin Bedroom Day

Something touches my shoulder and shakes me.

I groggily open up my eyes to see the blurry figure of Jæmis standing over me.

I sigh.

"I just want to sleep," I complain. "Stop waking me up."

"It's time to get up," he mentions.

I blink up at him, then quickly look at my phone to see the time. I wince in pain as my chest starts to throb and I lie back down in bed.

"Ouch, it feels like I've been hit by a truck," I explain.

A worried expression covers Jæmis' face.

"Are you in pain?"

I nod at him, feeling a little breathless at the moment.

"Earthlings are so feeble..." he says softly as he reaches for the pills on my night stand to hand them to me.

As I take them from his hands and pop a pill into my mouth, I look into his brown eyes.

Suddenly, the ramifications of what happened last night settles in.

The way I fell down the shaft, how Jæmis protected me from getting shot, how we managed to capture Benjamin – all for it to be ruined with Forrester Inc. crashing the party.

I bury my face into my hands with a deep sigh.

"I can't believe we had to hand him over," I groan. "There were so many things I wanted to ask him."

"Your senses seem to have somewhat returned," says Jæmis.

I suddenly feel myself flushing, realizing how I acted last night when they gave me a high dosage of painkillers.

I turn away from him, giving an awkward giggle.

"Hehe... I acted a bit silly last night, didn't I?"

"...If that's what you want to call it."

"But thanks, for staying with me," I say, feeling grateful he kept watch.

"Why can you not visit their headquarters and question him there?" asks Jæmis, changing the subject.

"They'd turn me away, probably?" I say, unsure. I'm not exactly in good standing with Neil Forrester right now.

"Last night I acted illegally, it's a miracle that Forrester Inc. didn't apprehend me on the spot," I admit.

"...Non-registered supers aren't allowed to use their ability in public," I say with an awkward smile.

Jæmis tilts his head to the side.

"They have no evidence you used it. So where is the issue?"

I guess he's got a point there. However, just going after Hulo in the first place was a big no-no. I've been in the waters with them ever since the Super Mallgirl incident as well.

I shake my head.

"I guess we can try, but I don't expect much."

My stomach suddenly rumbles loudly, interrupting our conversation.

"...You are making strange noises again."

A bit shy, I look down at the bed.

"Just hungry. I didn't eat anything when we came home last night."

"Then let's make sure you are provided with sustenance, keep your strength up."

"I'd like some breakfast, yes."

Jæmis pauses slightly before asking a different question.

"...What is the duration of an Earthling month?" he asks.

"Oh, you're asking about my recovery time? A month is roughly thirty days. I think the Doctor said it'll take a month at the very least."

"You take *that* long to recover?" he sounds aghast.

"I don't think you understand how abnormal your extraordinary healing abilities are compared to, well, everyone else."

"Earthlings are—"

"—Yeah, yeah; help me up?" I interrupt as I reach out my hand to him.

Jæmis lifts me up out of the bed and I lean against his body for support.

As the cold air hits my naked skin, I come to the realization that I'm only in my underwear. I didn't put on any pajamas last night...

"Uhm," I mumble awkwardly. "I need to get dressed."

Jæmis hand slips out of mine and he turns around, not saying a word. He walks towards the door.

"I'll be outside."

The door shuts behind him and I let out a small breath I've been holding.

Today is weird. My feelings are going haywire.

-- Lake Cabin Kitchen Day

Eeyok and Ralph are already eating in the kitchen as Jæmis carries me downstairs.

He places me down on the floor and I wave at everyone.

"How are you feeling?" asks Ralph immediately.

"Would Joselina like some of my food?" Eeyok offers a half-eaten sandwich.

I shake my head at Eeyok. "Thanks, but I'll make my own breakfast. Or lunch, I suppose."

"By the way, why are you still in your human form?" I question him.

Eeyok pounds onto his chest.

"After yesterday, I feel like I should be training more in this form to get more acquainted with it!"

I smile at him. "I guess that makes sense."

Then I turn to my brother.

"And I'm not going to lie, my body is definitely aching all over," I answer him.

"Are the painkillers not helping?"

"I just took one, so it should kick in after a bit."

I look around, not spotting Caine.

"Did Caine go home?"

"Yeah, he's pissed of course."

"Do you think we could... See Benjamin?" I ask hesitantly.

"Well, that's what Caine is going to find out. He'll be going to Forrester Inc. today and demand to see his father."

"Oh – we should go, too."

Ralph snorts loudly.

"You're not going anywhere. Look at you, you had to be carried downstairs."

I narrow my eyes at him.

"I can still walk, you know."

"You need rest. You took a pretty large blow and broke a couple of ribs. Let Caine do his thing. He deserves it the most."

I sigh; I suppose he's right. It is Caine's dad after all – but I still want to question him myself. Ask him if it's true he killed my parents. Why he did it. I just...

I want to feel vindicated. Yet now I won't get that opportunity.

"Your brother is right, Joselina must rest. Eat, eat," Eeyok urges.

I sigh as I sit down on the bar stool.

"What are you gonna do then?" I ask, looking at Ralph.

"I'm going to study the sample Caine gave to me. Perhaps I can configure a sort of antidote."

"Wait, what sample?" I ask, surprised.

"You were kind of out of it last night, but Caine managed to swipe a sample from Ben. It's the anti-super drug."

"I can't believe they turned it into a drug. Are they really going to use it tomorrow at the parade?"

"I'm unsure. We did manage to disrupt them last night, and Forrester Inc. seemed to know what was going on – so maybe they have it under control?"

"I don't trust them one bit," I say ominously.

"Well, me neither, so I'll be working in the basement for the rest of the day, see what I can find out about this drug they made."

Ralph gets up from his seat.

"By the way, if they allow Caine to visit him – he'll be wearing a camera," he says while winking.

That makes me break out into a relieved smile. If I can't be there, it'd be nice to see Caine question him.

Ralph disappears into the basement.

"So Joselina, what are your plans for today?" asks Eeyok cheerfully.

"Rest," answers Jæmis for me as he places down a plate of food.

"...Is that for me?" I question him, looking at the crudely made sandwich he concocted while I was talking to Ralph.

I poke at it and see there's cucumber and ketchup hidden between the slices.

"Is it not adequate enough for you?" he huffs.

1. "I appreciate it, but that doesn't look edible..."
2. "It's fine!"

"I appreciate it," but that doesn't look edible," I admit.

"You're complaining about someone providing you with food?" he huffs.

"At least give me something that's tastier."

"I don't understand Earthling food," Jæmis grumbles, looking away. He seems offended.

I pick it up and take a bite.

"It's fine!" I say with a full mouth.

I try my best to swallow the strange and unpleasant combination. After all, Jæmis was nice enough to make it for me.

Jæmis looks pleased that I've taken a bite.

"And uh, I don't have anything planned for today, Eeyok. Training has been cancelled."

I almost wanted to say I could continue my training once I recovered, but that's like a month or two in the future. Are Eeyok and Jæmis even going to be around anymore?

Varitus is arriving any day now, and they will both be returning to their home planet.

The thought makes me sad.

"Hey Eeyok, what will you do once Varitus has been defeated?" I ask him.

"Hmm, it is hard to say. I'll be returning to Yool and fight any remaining loyalists there. Then hopefully, Princess Læna will be our new leader."

"Læna a leader?" Jæmis cuts in, like he's never given the idea much thought.

"She's been the forefront of this rebellion. Many Gaötte back her. I think she'll be an excellent choice in getting Yool back on track."

"Yool isn't even our home planet. Why would she want to invest her time to lead them?" Jæmis questions.

"What about you Jæmis, what do you plan to do?" I ask instead.

Jæmis folds his arms across his chest.

"I haven't put much thought into it. As long as I can keep my family safe, that is all that matters."

That sad feeling multiplies as I think about never seeing Jæmis again.

"What about your brother, Kæleb?" I ask, changing the subject. "He seemed to be a rather big fan of Varitus..."

Eeyok looks a little concerned as well.

"It's something Princess Læna is also worried about. Captain Kæleb has been a loyalist for his entire life. She does not want to have to fight him."

"Fight him?" Jæmis exclaims, looking alert.

"If Captain Kæleb continues to support Lord Varitus... that may very well be the outcome."

I gasp in response.

"Are you saying you'd kill his brother!?"

Jæmis suddenly grabs Eeyok's shirt by his collar in anger.

"You do *not* get to touch a single hair on my brother's body – you understand?"

Eeyok cowers in fear.

"O-of course!" he yelps.

"Jæmis, release him – it's not his decision to make here," I try to make peace between them.

Jæmis pushes Eeyok away from him and then stomps his foot on the ground, dramatically turning on his heel. He quickly snatches my sandwich from the plate and takes it with him.

"I'm training," he barks.

He leaves the cabin.

Eeyok sighs in relief.

"Whew – Prince Jæmis can be terrifying at times."

I feel worried all of a sudden, what if Jæmis is forced to pick a side between two siblings? Kæleb seemed very nice at the start, but he ruthlessly flogged his own brother on Varitus' command.

"What's going to happen if Kæleb will actually fight his siblings?" I question out loud.

Eeyok gulps. "It's a situation where no one wins."

"I hope that won't be the case. Surely, he would side with his siblings, no?" I say hopefully.

Eeyok doesn't respond, instead there's a gloomy expression on his face.

"Hey Eeyok – what about Nornus?" I ask, all of a sudden remembering him.

If Varitus is dethroned, what will happen to his younger brother?

"Uhh," Eeyok stutters. "I don't know..."

Alarm bells go ringing off in my head.

"No, no – you have to make sure nothing happens to him. He's completely naïve to whatever Varitus is doing. He's so innocent."

"I know that. Prince Nornus is not involved in any war meetings and the like. But Princess Læna..."

"Please," I beg him. "Just make sure he's safe."

"I will try, Joselina. I don't want to kill the young prince either."

This makes me super worried for him. I would even welcome him to stay on Earth if it's too dangerous on Yool, but it's not like he'll be tagging along with Varitus, who is getting ready for war.

"I just want him to be safe," I mumble as I release his arm.

"I promise I'll keep him safe to the best of my capabilities," Eeyok says with an encouraging smile.

"Maybe Jæmis will help, too."

"Ahaha... that's a little *too* optimistic," Eeyok chuckles nervously.

"I'm going to miss you, Eeyok," I say with a sad smile.

His face falters as well.

"Same. I am happy we managed to cross paths, even if it wasn't under ideal circumstances."

"Hah, maybe in another life, the circumstances would have been different."

"Maybe," he agrees with a smile.

Having to say goodbye to Eeyok feels like saying goodbye to a best friend. Caine is a very dear friend of mine and nothing will replace him, but I've grown so attached to Eeyok.

And admittedly, Jæmis has also filled a spot. A dubious spot. I've grown far too attached to him than I'm willing to admit.

"Do you reckon he'll be training the entire day?" I ask, looking at the window.

"Prince Jæmis? Most likely. It's all he does. He's very dedicated, which is why it's amazing he sacrificed his own training to instruct you instead."

"I suppose that's true," I agree quietly.

"Joselina, what will happen tomorrow?" he asks. "Isn't that the day those Hulios were going to attack?"

"That was their plan, yes. To attack the superheroes at the parade. Now, I'm not so sure. We definitely disrupted something last night."

I sigh.

"I just want to question Benjamin..."

Eeyok places a hand on my shoulder.

"The time will come to get your answers, I'm hopeful."

I smile back at him.

"Thanks, let's hope."

Eventually, we wrap up our conversation and Eeyok goes to train as well.

My day is spent lounging in front of the TV watching some movies.

-- Lake Cabin Basement

A while later, Ralph helps me down to the basement.

It's time. Caine went to Forrester Inc. to demand to see his father.

"He just texted me, said they'll allow it because it's his father, and only because of that."

My heart starts pounding.

"Will they allow him to record it?"

Ralph snorts. "Hell no they won't – but they don't know that we're doing it in the first place."

"I can always count on you to be sneaky," I say with a cheeky grin.

Ralph opens up his laptop, which is showing a live feed from a small camera situated on Caine's chest. He's currently being escorted by some guards.

Ah, that hallway is looking very familiar.

"That's where they held Eeyok and Jæmis, isn't it?" I point out.

"Most likely, yes."

And then he enters the holding cell with Benjamin in the middle. Caine is left alone.

-- Holding Cell (shows only Benjamin)

It's silent for a while as Caine stands in front of his father. In fact, nothing is being said for so long, that I think the audio isn't working.

But then Caine speaks.

"Why'd you do it?"

Benjamin doesn't even look Caine in the eye.

"Answer me!" Caine yells when he doesn't get a response.

"What are you going to do boy, torture me?" Benjamin laughs.

"I damn well will if you won't give me the answers I'm looking for," Caine hisses back.

"Get lost," Benjamin sneers.

Suddenly, I see Caine zap him with electricity, making Benjamin scream out in agony.

"Why'd you kill her? Why'd you kill the Hearths? All this time, it was you, wasn't it?"

"Why so interested in it now? You didn't seem to care much all these years," Benjamin huffs.

"You seemed pretty content to think you were an orphan," he grins.

Caine once more zaps his father in response. I can feel his hatred flowing through the video feed.

"For years I thought you were both dead. I was alone all this time – but you were the one that killed her! Why!? What did she do!?"

Benjamin narrows his eyes at Caine.

"What *didn't* she do? She birthed you, a freak of nature. An abomination."

"My only regret is that you didn't run into that fire to die with her."

Caine loses it and he throws an electric punch into Benjamin's face. It hits him in his jaw and he's knocked away from the chair and falls onto the ground.

"You bastard!" Caine yells as he delivers another punch.

Then Caine is quickly pulled off of him as he struggles against two guards holding him down.

"Boltage, I understand you're upset, but please do not hit our suspect. We need him alive," says the voice of Neil off-camera.

Caine huffs and tries to compose himself.

Benjamin is tied to the chair once more. His face looks bruised.

"Why did you kill her? Why then? Why there?" asks Caine.

"She was going to betray me," Benjamin answers chilly. "I couldn't let that go unpunished."

"Betray you? How?"

"That damn Portation and Smoker – I didn't realize they were onto me. Those meddlesome vigilantes turned out to be the Hearths. And they were going to persuade your mom to testify against me."

"So you killed them before they could?"

"Very convenient for them all to gather in one place," Benjamin smirks.

I feel my stomach contents fighting its way up. I'm so sick.

"Again, my only regret is that you didn't die with her."

And just like that, Caine delivers another punch to Benjamin's face.

Neil can be heard yelling from the other side, but Caine calmly walks out of the holding cell.

"We're done here. Do whatever you want to him. I'll testify whatever you need me to."

Caine then brushes past Neil and leaves.

-- Lake Cabin Basement

I can feel tears welling up in my eyes.

The confirmation that it wasn't just some freak accident, but that Benjamin killed our parents... It's cathartic. After all these years, I know the answer to my parents' deaths.

My parents were going to stop him. They were good people. They didn't have to die like that...

Ralph sees I'm about to cry and quickly pulls me in for a hug.

"Don't think about him," he tries to calm me. "That piece of shit can rot in jail for a lifetime."

I sniff and then lean my chin on his shoulder.

"...Your hug is actually hurting me," I whine softly.

"Oh geez – I'm sorry!" Ralph yelps and quickly backs off.

I giggle, rubbing away any tears that may have formed from my eyes.

"Mom and dad were vigilantes, they were going to stop Benjamin," I say with half a smile.

"They died doing what they thought was the right thing... I can't be more proud."

Ralph's bottom lip starts to tremble.

"Don't be sappy, you'll make me cry," he warns.

"It's okay, you can cry if you want," I say, giving his shoulder a slight punch.

"Nah, it's okay. I've worked through their deaths a long time ago. It's no longer time to be sad – we should be mad instead!"

I nod at him.

"I agree. Benjamin needs to be punished. But not only him – Hulo, too. That entire organization needs to be eradicated."

"And here I thought you wanted to take it easy," Ralph grins at me.

"I'll never give up until they're gone," I say confidently.

Ralph ruffles my hair with a smile.

"Go back to bed. We can think about Hulo when you've recovered enough to actually walk up and down the stairs yourself."

"Fair enough."

-- Lake Cabin Living Room Day

A couple of hours later and Caine returns to the cabin.

"So, there you have it," he says, sitting down on the couch. "My dad was actually secretly the leader of Hulo and killed my mom and your parents."

His shoulders slump and he sighs.

"He's a monster. I can't believe I cried over him."

"Hey – they all fooled us. There's no need to feel bad about it," I reassure him.

"Can't believe your parents really were vigilantes," Caine says with a crooked grin.

"That's kinda cool, you know."

"Not like they told us," Ralph points out.

"What kind of abilities do you think they had?" I ask.

"From what I can gather, dad went by the name of 'Portation' and I honestly believe he was able to teleport. Or make some kind of portal."

"Really, what makes you think that?"

"Well, for one, the name. And the fact that we never really knew about the basement before."

"Ah, the secret door."

"I think dad just created portals to get inside the basement so we wouldn't be suspicious. Or so that others couldn't find it, maybe."

Creating portals... I start to think about it, and some things do start to click.

"Maybe that's how they got to the office so fast as well. Remember, they were going to give Mr. Invisible his papers? But in that small moment, they managed to get from the cabin to the office, which is like more than an hour drive."

Ralph smiles at me. "Seems you're pretty clever yourself, sis."

"Portals, huh..." Caine says, deep in thought.

"Do you think my mom...?" he questions.

"I'm not sure, I think she was just a normie," I say. "They were going to warn her what your dad was really involved with."

"He legit thinks we're abominations," says Caine with a snort.

"He's lost his mind. I never realized it as a kid – I mean he mostly ignored my existence, but I never would have thought he loathed my very being."

"Hulio's organization and its supporters are all kinds of messed up," says Ralph.

"Did you see the number of supers that were at that hotel? I can't believe they would willingly ally themselves with people who want to see them dead."

"Maybe not all of them have a choice," I point out. "Mr. Invisible seemed to be blackmailed into it."

"Yeah, but I doubt every single one of them has dirt they don't want exposed. Some of them seemed to agree with Ben."

"Either way, it all feels too real. Too close to home. We need to deal with Hulio once and for all," Caine says decidedly.

"I agree," I nod.

"Same. Just because we cut off the head, doesn't mean the body dies with it as well," Ralph agrees.

"Forrester Inc. kept stressing that they've got it handled and told me to not get involved. But I don't trust them to deal with it at all. Tomorrow at the parade, I'm sure they'll strike."

Caine narrows his eyes.

"We're going to have to warn all the supers there. Who knows how much of that drug they made and got stashed away?"

"Speaking of – I managed to get some information out of that sample," says Ralph optimistically.

"What did you find out?" I ask, curious.

"There's a genetic footprint based on Caine's electricity, but it's combined with something else. I haven't identified it yet, but my hunch is that they used another super's ability to turn it into a drug that suppresses their powers indefinitely."

"So... Don't get drugged, right?" Caine jokes.

"That's for sure. But I'll try my best to reverse the effects, an antidote will certainly be handy."

"I'm going to send out a notice to as many supers that I personally know that are going to attend the parade," says Caine as he gets up.

"Are we going to the parade?" I ask.

"Well, I am. It's better if you stay home, you need to rest," says Caine.

I can't help but feel dejected and useless.

"Ralph?" I turn to my brother. "What about you?"

"Think I'll stay here with you. In case anything bad goes down there, at least I won't be in the crossfire."

"My drone will be there as my stand-in," he says with finger guns.

"That means you're alone, Caine," I tell him.

The thought of him being out there on his own is scary to me...

"That's alright, I can take care of myself," he says with a cocky grin.

"But first, gotta warn who I can. I'll be heading off – I'll text you guys later, okay?"

Ralph and I nod at Caine before he heads off.

-- Lake Cabin Kitchen Night

Even before I reach the stairs, Jæmis blocks my way before I can go down myself.

"Don't walk around alone like that," he fusses over me.

He extends out his hand, expecting me to take it so he can guide me downstairs.

Slowly, he helps me get down without much trouble. Everyone is babying me right now because of my broken ribs, but I guess I don't mind as much. It is hard to move around stairs like this.

When I enter the kitchen, I see two cups of hot chocolate on the counter.

I end up smiling at Jæmis.

"You came prepared."

"You're a creature of habit. It seems even grave injuries don't keep you away from your sweet beverage."

I giggle in response. Well, he's not wrong. I do quite enjoy drinking hot chocolate.

Or should I say – I enjoy sharing it with Jæmis? There's something about the nights we spend together like this, all peaceful. I've come to enjoy it.

...And it really rather bums me out when I realize that it will all come to an end very soon.

I sit down on the bar stool with my hands clasped around the cup.

"...Is it not hot enough?" asks Jæmis.

"Huh, why do you ask? It's fine," I say, perking up.

"You look gloomy. Like when I prepared you food earlier today."

"Oh, well, your sandwich was rather... uhm, *creative*. Not a very good combination, I'm afraid."

Jæmis frowns at me.

"But I appreciate the gesture, I do!" I say quickly, not wanting to offend him.

Jæmis huffs in response, but then takes a sip from his own cup to preoccupy himself.

"How are your injuries?" he asks me when he swallows.

"The same as a few hours ago," I reply with a sigh. "It's not going to improve that fast, you know."

Jæmis places the cup down on the counter and stares at it, his brown eyes not quite focused.

"That is..." he starts off awkwardly.

My eyes glance over towards him. There's something on his mind, I can tell.

"That is what?" I repeat.

He averts his gaze from mine, his frown deepening even more.

"That is my error," he grumbles.

I raise my eyebrows at him. I can't tell if he's talking about the sandwich, or something else.

"My failure, to save you from the fall," he adds.

"Oh," I breathe out.

"What, are you blaming yourself for that? Don't be silly. Me falling through the shaft was no one's fault."

"My reactions weren't quick enough, I let you fall. For that... I am deeply regretful."

Jæmis' body has turned all meek and uncertain. I don't think he's lying..

"I know how delicate Earthlings are and yet failed to prevent any harm done towards you," he sighs.

"You were under my protection and I didn't follow through."

"But you did – I was about to get shot and you made sure that didn't happen," I stress.

Suddenly a hand reaches out across the counter to capture mine. I feel myself grow warm in response. He gently tugs on it.

"Look – bruises are forming. I can't imagine what your back might look like."

My eyes flutter up to his.

"Honestly? I think your back probably looks worse."

"This is no joking matter," he sneers with a glare, but his touch remains gentle.

"...Do you want to see?" I ask him.

I'm unsure why I would offer. It would only make him feel worse. My back is probably a combination of blue, purple and maybe even green. Bruises can be quite colourful.

Jæmis stiffens up at the suggestion, but then his eyes turn serious.

"Show me," he says.

I slip my hand out of his and get up from the stool. I turn around and grab the hemline of my shirt with my hands.

I wince when I try to lift it up.

Within a second, Jæmis appears right behind me, his hands on mine, urging me to slow down. I can feel his hot breath on my neck and I find myself flushing at our proximity.

Slowly, I lift the shirt over my head with Jæmis' help. He gently removes it from my arms and takes a tiny step backwards to look at me.

I cover my naked chest. This... was probably not the best time to not wear a bra. However, it hurt way too much to wear one, I could only tolerate loose clothing.

"...!" I flinch forwards when I feel Jæmis' finger poke my spine.

"Apologies, I didn't mean to hurt you," he declares quickly.

"No, no, you didn't, I was just surprised," I tell him.

I didn't expect him to touch me.

"How does it look? I haven't seen it myself."

"Your fair/dark skin has been tainted by dark marks," he explains.

"Hm, I figured," I hum.

Jæmis softly presses his fingertips against my back.

"I am sorry," he says in this genuine remorseful tone.

I end up shivering from the cold. Or perhaps from his touch. I'm unsure at this point.

"Honestly, it's not your fault. You ended up saving me from getting shot anyway."

And said my name.

Jæmis hands me my shirt and I slowly pull it over my head again.

This entire day, I've been preoccupied with thoughts of Benjamin and Hulio – and the occasional back pain. But I didn't stop to think about what happened between Jæmis and me.

Jæmis sits down at the counter again, taking a sip from his cup. I'm sure the chocolate has slowly turned cold by now.

But now there's this question burning in my mind.

"When I fell down – you called me by my name," I point out. "Why?"

Jæmis suddenly spits out his chocolate and coughs.

He closes his eyes and pretends nothing is wrong, clearing his throat.

"Must have been your imagination," he murmurs.

I tilt my head to the side, eyebrows slightly lowering.

"You said it loud and clear. Everyone in that ballroom heard you say my name."

Jæmis cracks his eyes open, but avoids looking at me. He remains silent.

"In fact... you may have just outed me, you know? I was wearing a mask, but you yelling out Joselina to the dozens of people inside of it, I may just have to stay hidden forever now."

"I'm sure there are... more Earthlings with that name," he mutters defiantly.

"What name?" I ask coyly.

Jæmis glares at me.

"Yours."

"Which would be?"

"If you're attempting to make me pronounce your Earthling name, then prepare to be disappointed."

I pout at him, feeling crestfallen.

"I was just..." I start, stopping myself mid-sentence.

What was I going to say? Impressed? Shocked? Gleeful? It's hard to articulate my thoughts.

"I felt... seen. Thank you. For treating me with respect," I finish.

Jæmis awkwardly crosses his arms over his chest.

"It's hard *not* to see you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Even if I try to ignore you, you're always in my peripheral vision, demanding attention."

"Aren't you just admitting you're keeping an eye on me no matter what?"

"If I don't, you get hurt."

I can feel my heart start to throb. The way he's talking about making sure I don't get hurt, or his regret that he couldn't protect me...

"Jæmis, do you care what happens to me?" I ask him.

Jæmis bites down on his bottom lip, tightening his arms around his body, like he's trying to prevent himself from spilling out any secrets.

He's trying his best to deny, and I will have none of that.

"Jæmis," I call out to him again in a clear voice. "Do you... care about me?"

Dark brown eyes finally meet mine.

"...Yes."

I know all the signs have been there – even Eeyok has teased me about how Jæmis has grown soft because of me – but nothing could have prepared me for the explosive feeling in my heart right now.

My face starts to heat up in response.

"D-didn't expect you to be truthful," I say with a slight stutter.

"You're the one that asked the question," he says in a gruff voice, equally feeling awkward.

"You are... Ugh." Jæmis finally unfolds his arms and runs a hand through his black hair.

Then he leans his face into his hands with a sigh.

"I don't know why you're having such an effect on me."

"Oh..." I breathe out, feeling a little overwhelmed.

It's not like I'm immune either.

Jæmis removes his hands from his face, taking in a deep breath.

"You must know, my family is all I care about. The survival of my siblings and preserving the sliver of Ræhu bloodlines we have left, that's all that ever mattered."

"Being chained and used, forced to make heinous decisions, all in the name of survival."

He gives me a serious look.

"And I'd do it all over again, if I had to."

"I can understand that," I admit.

I don't agree with his methods, but I understand his position. Much like how Mr. Invisible had to continue paying for a mistake he made when he was younger, forced to continue to do even worse things. There wasn't an easy way out.

Jæmis likely didn't have much of a choice either.

"Good, you should feel bad about that," I say. "It was the wrong thing to do."

"Most of my life I've been someone else's puppet. Forced to do things I don't want to do."

Jæmis' eyes flicker down to the bracelet cuffed around his wrist.

"Chained..." he mutters.

"I did everything in the name of my family," he says as he clenches his hands into fists.

His chocolate brown eyes look at me, reaching for something inside of me. A lump starts to form in my throat.

"We're the last of our kind," he says bitterly.

I get it, I do. But...

1. Hold his hand but tell him that doesn't excuse what he did.

2. "I understand why you did what you did."

I gently place my hand on top of his. Our skin contact makes him flinch as he straightens his back, staring at me with a puzzled expression.

"This didn't give you the right to kidnap me from my own home," I say. "I understand your reasoning, but that doesn't make it okay."

Jæmis turns his face away from me, biting down on his bottom lip as if in distraught.

"Varitus destroyed my home and took my last surviving family members as prisoners." His eyes flicker back to mine. "In my quest for survival, I became exactly like him..."

Hesitantly, Jæmis turns his hand the slightest bit, allowing my fingers to slide towards his open palm. He ever so gently closes his hand around mine. This small token of affection is driving my heart crazy.

"I was wrong, I shouldn't have taken you," he says.

I feel relieved to know he's admitting his mistakes.

"It takes guts to say that you were wrong. You've come a long way, Prince Jæmis," I say with a smile.

Jæmis doesn't even react to my lighthearted way of calling him by his title. Instead, he pulls his hand away from mine.

"I understand why you did what you did," I say. "Including taking me away."

Jæmis huffs and turns his face away from mine.

"Varitus came to my planet, threatened to destroy it, took me and my siblings prisoners – and then destroyed my home. I'm not any different from him."

He looks conflicted. "What he did to me, I did the exact same to you... I became a monster."

My heart aches for him. I can see why he did everything, to save his family, but in the end... he still kidnapped me.

I lean in closer to him. "But you're not..." I say softly. "I don't think you're a monster. Monsters don't care about anyone else but themselves, but you do."

"I was wrong to take you, I fully regret my actions," he admits.

"I don't want to be the person who destroys homes and families." He looks up at me, a determined expression on his face.

"I want to become the person who'll protect those he cares about."

Sheepishly, I ask, "...Like me?"

"Joselina."

My heart skips a beat when he says my name like that. All of my nerves are on alert.

He clasps his hands together.

"You seem to hold a power over me I cannot fight."

He shakes his head.

"I have come to trust and care for you. My mind cannot take the thought of seeing you get hurt ever again."

I don't know what to say – I'm speechless.

Awkwardly, he looks away from me.

"...Perhaps now is not the best time to suddenly resemble a mute," he mumbles. "Usually you cannot stop speaking your mind."

I swallow a hard lump in my throat.

"Sorry, I need to gather my thoughts. I'm trying to figure out what you mean."

"There are no hidden meanings here," he huffs.

"I am fully admitting that it was wrong of me to use you like an object. That I now see you as someone with their own strengths and weaknesses. Someone worthy of respect."

It's hard to stop my heart from racing. This is not what I expected at all when I came downstairs to have a chat with Jæmis.

"...This conversation is feeling very one-sided," he says, the slightest hint of a blush forming on his cheeks.

"Ah, uhm," I say quickly, realizing he expects me to respond.

"I fully admit that I had some very negative thoughts about you when we first met," I start slowly.

"In fact, I was even thinking of ways to... kill you," I admit.

His eyes soften as he looks at me.

"Do you still want to?"

"No, of course not. I haven't for a long time now..."

"Good," he says, actually sounding relieved.

"In fact – Jæmis, I've also come to trust you. Rely on you at times as well."

I reach out to him across the counter to grab his wrist.

"Which is why it's silly that I'm still making you wear this wretched thing Forrester Inc. made."

I open the clasp of the bracelet and let it fall onto the counter.

Jæmis gives me a look of disbelief. He rubs his wrist where the bracelet used to be.

"What is this?" he questions me.

"The oath is broken; you don't need to wear it anymore. You're free," I tell him with a smile.

"After everything we've been through... it's the least I can do."

For a long time, Jæmis says nothing, staring at the bracelet with hardened eyes.

Then he gets up and walks around the counter to face me. He stretched out his hand.

"What is it?" I ask, but take his hand regardless.

"You trust me, right?"

I nod.

He gently escorts me towards the front door and opens it. The cool wind of the night rushes past me.

Then Jæmis pulls me into his bare chest. I'm surprised, wondering what he's attempting to do.

"Let me know if I'm hurting you," he whispers as he scoops me up in his arms.

Then he takes me to the sky.

-- Lake Cabin Outside Night

I cling onto him, my arms wrapped around his neck and feeling the wind flowing around me. We're actually up in the air, and really, *really* high!

Jæmis swirls in the air, making graceful movements. The air is chilly so I make sure I'm snuggled close to him. He's carrying me like a princess to make sure he's not hurting me.

I finally dare to look down and see the amazing dancing lights of the fireflies below.

"Wow!" I gasp out loud. It's so pretty!

I press the side of my face against Jæmis' chest which gives me this comforting feeling.

Ah – his heart. It's singing to me, loud and clear.

I look up at Jæmis himself; he's wearing an expression I've yet to see on his face. He looks excited, perhaps even a little happy. It's so rare to see him displaying any kind of emotion, that I silently take in the sight.

-- Lake

Jæmis starts to descend from the heavens once we arrive above a lake.

He lands near the edge of the lake and finally releases me, gently putting me down onto the grass.

As I disturb the grass, fireflies appear around us, lighting up the area.

"Look!" I say, seeing them buzz around us.

The sight is simply magical. Or perhaps I'm just infused with a drug so everything feels ten times more beautiful.

Jæmis pays no attention to them, instead, he flies off into the night, creating a powerful gust of wind around us.

"Jæmis!" I yell out at him. Is he leaving me behind!?

I see Jæmis make a loop in the air, flying above the lake in a controlled manner. He's not leaving me behind... he's simply flying.

His movements are so graceful, I'm captivated by him. It's like he's doing some kind of ritual, as each movement seems to serve a purpose, each swerve to the right or left looking like part of some kind of dance.

He's nothing but a blue blur in the night sky now. Wait – he's faded! His markings are glowing.

Jæmis dives into the lake and immediately bursts out of it, spinning around, creating a vortex of water around himself. Water flies everywhere as he finally halts, his markings make the water droplets glow blue as well.

He looks so beautiful and mesmerizing to me; my eyes are glued to his form.

Slowly, Jæmis loses speed as he descends upon the middle of the lake. His feet touch the surface of the water and he hovers over it, watching the ripples flow away from him.

The blue markings on his face glow in the darkness of the night. The fireflies around me give me enough light to see what's going on. Everything feels like it's sparkling. He truly is not from this world.

Jæmis finally makes eye contact with me. I feel like I've been captivated by a spell that makes me unable to move. He gradually starts to hover towards me, the tips of his shoes dragging across the water.

When he reaches the edge of the lake, he extends out his hand to me. Water drips down from his face, rolling onto his glowing marks. They're so beautiful.

"Thank you – for trusting me," he says softly.

A smile spreads across my face.

I reach out for his hand, not afraid of him at all, I trust him. My life lies in the palm of his hand and nothing feels more perfect.

Jæmis gently lifts me from the ground, wrapping an arm around my waist and pulling me in close to his body, our noses almost touching each other.

The times I've seen him in his fazed state – those pretty glowing marks – it's always been a situation under duress, or anger. Pain, even.

This is not one of those times. I want to ask him; why have you fazed? But my tongue feels like lead.

Jæmis hovers backwards, taking us to the middle of the lake. I lean my head against his chest again, listening to the song his heart is playing. It's comforting to listen to.

When my foot suddenly becomes soaked, I look down in surprise.

Jæmis is lowering us into the water.

"Hey!" I whine. "Now I'll get wet!"

There's a sly grin on his face as he lowers us completely, until I'm finally floating in the water.

"Don't let go," I tell him. "I don't think I can swim with my injuries."

Jæmis leans his face closer to mine. "Don't worry, I'll never let you go."

I find myself blushing and avert my eyes from him, looking down at the water.

The water is glowing from his markings.

When I look back up again, his blue eyes are gazing into my own. I find myself lifting a hand out of water and touching the mark right beneath his left eye.

Jæmis doesn't flinch away from my touch.

"Why did you faze?" I decide to ask. "I thought you only did it while fighting, or when in pain..."

"Ræhu glow when they're in combat or..." He looks me in the eye. "*Excited.*"

"Ah, I was almost under the impression it was a silly way to attract a mate, haha."

It's a little embarrassing to admit he does look super pretty like this, it's very attractive.

"Who says it isn't?" he answers nonchalantly.

I immediately pull my hand away from his face. My cheeks burn with a blush – is he serious!?

Unexpectedly, Jæmis grabs my hand underwater, bringing it back to his face. My wet fingers touch his glowing marks.

"Do you... dislike them?" he asks in a soft voice.

How could I dislike them? I think they're gorgeous. I shake my head.

"How could I dislike a part of you?"

Jæmis closes his eyes, leaning his face into the touch of my hand. I'm shocked at his actions, I never imagined we'd be here, in a lake, me touching his face like this. His skin feels so warm despite the cool water.

I'm feeling a little short of breath.

I carefully push a few wet strands of hair from his face. His eyes flutter open, gazing at me with a look of longing. I feel like I'm melting in front of him.

There's a tension growing between us, it's almost palpable.

The slow hum of a beat can be faintly heard radiating from him.

"Do all Ræhu sound like you...?" I ask.

"What do you mean, sound like me? Do I have a strange accent?"

My hand moves away from his face and it slips back into the water. I press it against his chest, my fingers fanning out. I can feel his heart thump against it – it's that same strange beat from before.

"This... it feels like it's playing a song," I muse out loud.

Jæmis' eyes widen slightly.

"You can hear it?" he asks.

"I can *feel* it even now," I say as I push against his chest. His heart leaps against my hand, pounding harder than before.

I sound out the melody I've been hearing all this time, mimicking it in tune with his heart beat.

"It's so peculiar, I've never heard a heartbeat like yours."

For a moment, it's quiet as the both of us float in the lake. The beating rings louder in my ears.

Sudden laughter escapes from Jæmis' mouth. I'm shocked to hear it and pull my hand away from him.

"To think an Earthling would..." he says with a smile, shaking his head.

I'm seeing so many sides to him, it's a wonder to behold.

"No, it makes sense why you would."

Before I know what's going on, Jæmis presses me against his chest. He lifts us out of the water, the cold wind sweeping past us.

We hover above the lake, our feet barely touching the water, it's like we're standing on it.

I'm snuggled against his warm body, hearing the lull of his heartbeat thump into my ears.

Jæmis starts to sway, still holding me firm, looking down at me with gentle eyes.

It's such a stark difference. He used to give me this ice-cold look, like I was nothing but vermin to him. If looks could kill, I'd be dead a million times over.

Now look at him... His once icy gaze now feels warm and gentle. Even his lips are pulled into what I can only deduce is a smile.

This is throwing me for such a loop, I wasn't prepared for this. I wasn't prepared to hopelessly fall for him.

Jæmis suddenly spins us around in the air. A small vortex appears beneath our feet.

He stops dead in his tracks and the droplets fly around us, cloaking us in a curtain of sparkles.

I can't help but smile at the pretty sight; it feels like a spell is being cast upon me.

I draw in a deep breath and look up at him, at his eyes that feel like they've captivated me.

The lullaby beats louder in my ears.

"Only the strongest and most suitable mate can hear a Ræhu's call," he whispers.

"Call?" I ask, feeling entranced. "You mean not everyone can hear it?"

It definitely sounds like some kind of siren, pulling me in too deep...

"No one's ever heard mine before... Didn't think it was possible. Yet, here you are, surprising me once more."

"I've heard it ever since you took me away," I confess. I didn't realize it was something only I could hear.

"...When I was planning to kill you," I admit. "That's when I heard it for the first time."

He lowers his face down to mine until he stops right before our lips touch.

"So, you have always heard it?" he asks, his tone serious.

"I guess I have," I reply.

"Joselina." His voice is soft and low.

My name being spoken from those lips are giving me sensations I never thought were possible.

"Jæmis," I say his name as well.

"...Are you seducing me?" I ask, gesturing to the way he's been holding onto me and dancing with me on the lake.

All this skirting around the idea of seduction has been going on for months. The many times he's accused me of seducing him, even when I wasn't trying to. The way he's said he's not immune to me...

Being able to hear his 'call'...

Jæmis wavers for a small moment, eyes blinking at me.

"Yes."

My body succumbs to him; my will is evaporating away. That one word has way more power over me than the manner in which he utters my name.

"I will stop if you ask me to."

"...But I must confess I have a hard time controlling myself around you."

"Control in what way?"

"I say things I don't wish to say. I find myself gazing at you when you're not looking. Before I know it, I seek you out."

I can't believe how brutally honest he is about his own feelings right now. I'm getting embarrassed from it.

"Perhaps I was merely imagining your attempts at seducing me. Perhaps... I just wanted it to be true."

"I'll admit I subconsciously sought you out as well. I wanted your advice, I wanted your help, I wanted to..."

I look up at him, feeling my breath being taken away.

"I wanted to know more about you."

His blue eyes flash brighter for a split second. His lips transform into an awkward smile.

"Then... shall I continue?" he asks as his hand travels up my back.

I bite down on my bottom lip, trying to not jump at the chance.

"Yes," I answer.

"May I kiss you?" he weakly asks me for permission.

To me, that's the single greatest idea he's ever had.

1. Kiss him first.

2. Nod at him.



I close my eyes and don't hesitate at all; I press my lips against his and throw my arms around his neck. His markings flash a bright blue, more intense than I've seen before.

Jæmis pushes back against me, but it doesn't feel like he's sucking my lips, it almost feels like I'm sucking energy out of him. It's a warm, tingling feeling that flows down all the way to my toes.

I nod at him, a signal which he has learned by now. The significance of that small gesture breaks all of Jæmis' barriers.

Slowly, but surely, he inches closer. I hold in my breath, my pulse going out of control.

Then his lips finally press against mine. A warm energy flows through me, unlike anything I've ever felt before. His lips are so soft and so gentle, not what I expected at all.

My head is spinning as our lips move together. His kiss is leaving me tingling all over. Something builds up inside of me, something warm and familiar. It's telling me to keep kissing him, to not let go.

This feels *amazing*.

He sucks on my lips, at first gently, but as I respond, he gets a little more confident.

I pull away from him for just a second, so I can get some oxygen flowing to my head again, but Jæmis is impatient and immediately crashes his mouth against mine, kissing me harder than before. I go wild with hormones bubbling up towards the surface.

I've definitely been attracted to him all this time, but the intensity of my feelings right now are on a whole other level.

We float in the air, embraced in each other's arms, lips locked together as if it's our lifeline.

I trust him... and I want him. I can't deny that.

Jæmis finally removes his lips from me, and I already want to kiss him again. He lowers his head until he plants his mouth on the side of my neck. A shock travels through me and I groan out loud.

Ahh, that feels good.

He sucks lightly on that spot, making my body brim with electricity. My pulse is leaping against his lips.

I didn't realize that aliens could kiss so god-like.

Jæmis parts his lips and I'm suddenly struck by a sharp pain. I feel like I'm being infused with something as a certain fluid crawls underneath my skin.

"Ah!" I yell, pulling away from him.

I touch the spot on my neck and notice blood. It stings.

"Did you just *bite* me?" I ask, stunned at the revelation.

Jæmis slowly blinks at me, startled at my reaction.

"Affirmative," he states in a matter of fact.

"What the hell – why!? Are you a vampire!?"

I'm breathing so fast right now; my body is heating up and my heart is pounding even faster. I'm still in a whirlwind of emotions. My mind is playing catchup with what's happening.

"I was completing the imprint," Jæmis explains.

"Excuse me?" I guffaw. "Did you just say imprint?"

"Put me down!" I demand.

Jæmis flies me towards the field of grass and lowers me down onto the ground. I jump away from him as soon as my feet touch dry land.

My heart calms down a little due to the distance between us. I rub the spot on my neck, the bleeding has already stopped. But I feel it throbbing. It's an odd sensation; it's hard to explain. Like there's another life source inside of me.

"Jæmis, humans don't imprint," I tell him seriously. "What exactly did you do to me?"

Jæmis crosses his arms across his chest.

"I did what any Ræhu would have done in this situation. Making sure the bond is completed and marking you as mine."

My eyes just about bulge out. It's one thing to be making out with an alien – it's an entirely different story to have that alien try and take ownership of me!

"What do you mean yours?"

Jæmis frowns at me. "I don't know why you're being so difficult, you agreed to it, I didn't force you."

"I didn't ask to be bitten! Or imprinted, or whatever you were doing. Take it back!"

He huffs at me. "I can't take it back, it's completed." He looks insulted.

"I don't care, I didn't consent to any neck biting."

"Y-you," he stumbles, "you knew Ræhu mate for life."

He did in fact tell me this a while ago...

"We... we didn't mate though!" I say with cherry red cheeks.

Unless kissing is a mating ritual for them?

Seeing Jæmis' own embarrassed face, I realize that yes – kissing definitely falls under that umbrella.

I run my fingers through my hair in a panic. No... no. This can't be happening.

I've come to terms with my feelings for Jæmis, but to suddenly be thrust into a lifetime commitment!?

"Do Earthlings not...?" Jæmis asks awkwardly.

"No, no we don't. Usually you're in a relationship for a few years before you get married or something. You date around first, multiple people even," I explain in a frenzy.

"Have you been with multiple people?" he asks.

"Uhh..."

"Whatever your past may have been, it does not matter," he says dismissively.

"That's not helping your case!" I fire back.

"Are you rejecting me?" he asks, deadpan.

"I – no, I mean – but." I can't come up with a coherent sentence.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

"Argh, this is just overwhelming, give me a moment."

Alright, breathe in, breathe out. My mind is spinning.

And that kiss has no right to feel so good. I'm aching to just throw everything to the wind and kiss him again.

"Just... take me back to the cabin," I say, extending my hand to him.

Surprisingly, he obliges without further comment and pulls me against his body before taking flight.

-- Lake Cabin Living room Night

Once inside, I pace around for a bit as Jæmis stares at me.

"I can't undo it," he says.

I bite down on my thumb.

"I did not realize you had no intention of being my mate, despite your confusing actions."

"Look, Jæmis. While I'm not exactly rejecting you, it is quite a big deal to suddenly spring this on me without telling me about it first."

Jæmis shyly averts his eyes.

"...I admit I only have rudimentary knowledge about the proper way of bonding. There weren't any adult Ræhu around to teach us in full," he admits.

He holds a hand over his heart.

"But I do know that if you hear the call, then you are the best mate for me. Even if you aren't Ræhu."

Why can he make it sound so romantic? It's like he's saying it's fate that we should be together.

"I think... I want to sleep. Let me gather my thoughts," I say slowly.

"Very well. Perhaps you'll be able to accept it tomorrow."

I give him a wry glare.

"Right," I say sarcastically.

As I'm about to turn away from him, Jæmis catches my hand, forcing me to look at him.

"But you are mine Joselina, don't forget that," he says in this low voice that makes me shiver.

"And I am now yours."

His voice just makes me want to melt into a puddle.

"...I understand," I say with a small gasp.

He releases me and takes a step backwards.

I sheepishly look down at the floor.

"...Can you help me get upstairs?" I ask.

"Of course."

Jæmis ends up smiling as he helps me get up the stairs.

This man is going to be the death of me.

-- Lake Cabin Bedroom Day

I wake up when sunlight starts flooding into my room.

I lift my head up from the pillow and groan, wanting to sleep some more.

Having to face Jæmis again after what happened last night, I'm unsure how to act.

He imprinted on me – *imprinted!* Irreversible!

Not that I don't have feelings for him, but this is all a little too sudden.

"Joselina, get up! The parade is today," Ralph calls for me from downstairs.

I grumble and finally step out of bed.

When my feet touch the floor, I suddenly notice something different. I feel lighter. Like nothing is weighing me down.

Like... there's no pain.

In fact, I'm not feeling any pain when I breathe in as I have been since yesterday. Are the painkillers still working? No, I didn't take any when I went to bed last night.

Curiously, I lift up my pajamas to inspect my chest.

Expecting to see it covered in bruises – I see nothing but my own skin. Flawless. Pristine.

My injuries. They're gone. Healed, I would say. Even the marks on my neck from Jæmis' bite are gone.

"What the fuck."

Chapter [0271]
-- Lake Cabin Bedroom Day

I'm spinning around my room, trying to check my back.

Honestly, I feel great, physically. There's no pain or discomfort. I can move my body around like normal.

Completely baffled.

Why am I healed?

"Jæmis!?" My voice comes out louder and more pressing than intended.

A few seconds later, my door bursts open, Jæmis barreling through.

"What's wrong!?" he asks, looking around for any sort of threat. "Are you hurt?"

"Look!" I say, still lifting up my shirt.

Confused, Jæmis doesn't know whether to look away or keep his eyes on me.

I turn my back to him and that's when he gets it. He takes a couple of steps closer.

"Your wounds have healed," he states.

"Yes!"

"I thought you said Earthlings heal much slower?"

"Humans," I stress as I drop my shirt and turn to face him. "I'm human. Please stop calling me Earthling already," I groan.

He grunts. "Fine. Human."

"And yes, this is completely unprecedented. I shouldn't have healed overnight, but I feel completely fine!"

I rub the side of my neck.

"Is it... because... of you?" I ask, unsure.

Jæmis folds his arms across his chest.

"I am in the dark as much as you."

"Well, last night, you bit me—"

"—Bonded," he corrects me.

"Yes — *bonded* — does that mean you somehow, I don't know; transferred some of your healing ability to me?"

He takes a while to answer.

"You are in no pain whatsoever? All bruises healed?" he asks, sounding concerned.

"I feel completely fine."

"A Ræhu bonding with someone of another race is unexplored territory. We haven't been going about it the traditional way at all, so I don't have many answers."

"What's the traditional way?" I ask, curious.

Jæmis clears his throat, coughing slightly in his hand.

"...We *both* complete the imprint."

"Both?" I repeat. "What, so I have to like, bite you, too?"

"As is customary, yes. Right now it's... not fully completed."

"Wait, that means you can revert it, right? We wouldn't have to go through with this bonding?"

"I suppose since you haven't done your part, you are free from the bond," he muses.

"Then what about you?"

"My part is already done. I am yours, now and forever," he says sincerely.

I look down, feeling guilty all of a sudden. So he's basically stuck with me, for all eternity?

"If you wish to..." he starts awkwardly, "choose another mate, I will not stand in your way."

"Well that's entirely one-sided," I say, shaking my head.

"Look – you did spring this up on me last night. And I don't know what in the world is going on with my body right now – but I can assure you that I don't intend to date another man."

"Get another mate, in your words," I clarify.

"Oh," he exhales. There's a relieved expression on his face.

It's kind of adorable.

"Then... You are alright with this situation?" he asks, his posture showing vulnerability.

I scratch my head. I've had time to think of it in bed, but it's still completely wild.

To go from kissing a man, to suddenly being stuck with him for life; it's not something I ever thought I'd experience.

"I guess I am?"

"You either are, or you're not," he says in a stern voice.

"Since it took you by surprise, I want to be sure I'm not forcing you into bonding."

He's got a point. Do I want to go through with this?

"I... it's been a roller coaster of emotions since I've met you. You were threatening to kill me – remember?"

Jæmis averts his eyes. "My actions in the past have been questionable, yes. I apologize."

"And now you're... what, exactly? Towards me?"

He blinks a couple of times, trying to comprehend the question.

But then he takes my hand in his own and brings himself closer to me.

"You are my mate. I will protect you, cherish you, make sure you flourish. I will never abandon you."

I swallow loudly, feeling a blush creep on my face. Those sound like wedding vows!

"Joselina, I am not very eloquent with words, but meeting you has changed my world view. I have inexplicably grown attached to your fiery spirit. So much I couldn't stay away."

He says he's not good with words, but wow, this is blowing my mind.

"The fact you've been hearing my call, only cements that fact that you are my other half."

I bring a hand up to my face, trying to hide the fact I'm blushing to the roots of my hair.

"Will you be my mate?" he asks softly.

1. Kiss him.

2. "How could I say no to that?"

Not having the words to convey my answer, I stand on the tips of my toes to reach his face and kiss his lips.

His wide-open eyes stare down at me, temporarily stunned.

I lean back with a shy smile.

Jæmis is also starting to get a little red in his face.

"...T-that answer shouldn't be legal," he grumbles.

"It's my answer nonetheless."

"How could I say no to that?" I mumble, still blushing hard.

"You're basically proposing to me and... and..." I swallow. "I can't say no to you."

That brings a smile to Jæmis' face. I love seeing him like this.

"Then it's real? Will you complete the bond with me?"

"Do I really have to bite you though? I don't exactly have those sharp canines that you do."

"We can figure something out," he says with an encouraging smile.

"Joselina! Are you up yet!?" Ralph screams from downstairs.

Jæmis and I jump away from each other, startled at the intrusion.

"God, how am I going to explain this to my brother?" I say, suddenly realizing how this complicates things.

"Would he object?" Jæmis asks.

"I think he'd punch your face, to be honest."

Jæmis smirks. "I'd like to see the runt try."

"Let's just... not tell him for now, I don't think it's the right time," I propose.

"You wish to keep it a secret?"

"At least for a little bit? Let me figure out how to tell him that I'm your," I gesture at Jæmis, "mate."

I sigh loudly. "He's going to be pissed."

"Joselina!" he yells once more.

"Coming!" I yell back.

I guess this is real. Me and Jæmis. I hope I'm making the right decision here.

"Can we do that biting thing later?" I ask awkwardly.

Jæmis gives me a small bow. "I shall wait till you're ready."

"Okay good, now let me get dressed and get some breakfast."

I shoo Jæmis out of the room.

-- Lake Cabin Kitchen Day

Ralph is at the stove, making some eggs. Eeyok is also up, sitting at the counter.

"Morning Joselina!" he greets me cheerfully. "How are you feeling today?"

"Uhh," I stammer, looking at Jæmis who's behind me.

How do I answer this question?

"I'm feeling really good," I answer honestly.

"Sit your ass down and eat some of my world famous scrambled eggs," Ralph boasts proudly.

"They're just scrambled eggs," I say. He can be so dramatic.

"But I've got a special secret ingredient," he says with a wink as he throws his head back at me.

"And what's that?"

"Well, if I told you – it wouldn't be so secret anymore, now would it?"

I roll my eyes and sit next to Eeyok, awaiting my breakfast.

"So, where's Caine?" I ask. "Has he already gone to the parade?"

Ralph serves me some scrambled eggs on a plate.

"Not only that, but apparently he's going to be speaking, too."

"Speaking? What for?"

Ralph takes a vial that was sitting on the counter and holds it up.

"I think he's going to talk about this."

"*What?*" I exclaim.

"Some statement about the anti-super venom, that's all I know."

"I guess everything has been kept under wraps, not a lot of people knew about it," I say.

"Any progress so far on making an antidote?" I ask.

Ralph shakes his head. "I'm still working on it."

I look down at my plate of scrambled eggs.

"I want to go," I say in a quiet voice.

"*Right*," Ralph gives a harsh snort.

"I'm serious," I stress. "I don't want Caine to be alone."

"May I remind you that you broke a couple of your ribs and even got a concussion?" he says sarcastically.

"You need to stay here and rest. Use the TV for the live stream."

"Well..." I trail off.

How do I break this to him when I can barely understand what's happening myself?

Whatever Jæmis did to me, it seemed some of his healing powers have carried over to me. That's the only explanation I can think of. There's no way I had some dormant healing power by myself.

"It seems I have recovered?" I say awkwardly.

"Recovered, what do you mean? Just because the drugs are working, doesn't mean your body can take it, you know."

"Amazing - Joselina can also heal fast!" says Eeyok, jumping in between our conversation.

"I mean for real; my ribs are healed. I feel fine," I repeat.

Ralph scoffs. "No way. I don't believe you. Don't lie just so you can go to the parade."

"What do you want me to do, flash you? Because I will," I argue stubbornly.

"*How?*" he breathes out exasperatedly.

I shrug, not really knowing how to explain. "I woke up this morning and felt no pain. It's gone, healed."

Ralph just frowns at me, still sceptical.

"Look, it seems Jæmis has the ability to accelerate healing in others," I try to explain.

It's not technically a lie.

"He does?" Ralph turns towards Jæmis, surprised.

"You do?" Eeyok turns to Jæmis as well, also caught off guard.

Jæmis crosses his arms, suddenly not knowing what to do, or how to answer.

"Uh," he stumbles over his words. "That's one way to describe it."

"You healed my sister?" Ralph asks. "Really?"

"It seems so," Jæmis answers vaguely.

"Huh. I guess you're useful for something after all. Thanks, dude!"

Ralph walks over to Jæmis and gives him a playful punch on his arm. Jæmis seems confused by the action.

"Prince Jæmis could heal others all this time?" Eeyok gasps. "How come he never healed—"

I kick Eeyok's leg right next to me, causing him to shut up. I'm not ready to tell my brother about my makeout with Jæmis just yet. Can't have Eeyok saying anything unnecessary that will make him more suspicious and question us.

"He could always heal – right?" I ask, looking at Jæmis.

"It is normal for Ræhu to accelerate the healing process once they're adolescents."

"Would have been nice to know about sooner," Ralph grumbles. "We could have taken that into account when I was sending you to Hulio's meeting."

"Well – now we know," I giggle nervously.

"Anyways; I'm going to the parade," I say, changing the subject.

"Well, if you insist on going, you're taking Mr Bodyguard as well," Ralph suggests.

"I will gladly accept this task," Eeyok says humbly.

"No – I mean the other beefy guy. Then again, I guess both won't hurt."

"Sure thing. Do the both of you want to come with me to the parade?" I ask them.

"I've been curious to know how Earthlings celebrate," Eeyok says with a big grin.

"Wherever you go, I go," Jæmis states as a matter-of-fact.

"Then that's settled. We're going. Let's hope nothing bad will happen."

We finish eating up our breakfast and prepare to leave for the parade. I make sure to carry the vial of anti-super venom with me.

-- Fashion Show Outside

The atmosphere is definitely there. Lots of people are gathered in the city to watch the parade. Plenty of supers are casually walking amongst the crowd, donning their supersuits.

As we all are – I didn't want to come in normie clothes, in case there was a need to intervene.

There's a small field behind a building where people are gathered. There's a platform with lights and speakers in the distance. Currently there's a super on stage being interviewed.

I've been texting Caine, and he said he'll be making his speech at 12:00, which is very soon. He also mentioned a surprise, so I'm curious what it will be.

"Is this how you party?" Eeyok asks, looking around. He seems to be a little disappointed that people aren't dancing.

"It's just a gathering, really. We come to look at our favourite supers and watch the floats."

"Float?" He tilts his head to the side.

"Uhm, a float is like this huge moving platform decorated in some kind of theme with a super riding it. Sometimes they have like a group of dancers on the platform as well. They wave at people as they drive by."

"Hmpf, sounds like god worship to me," Jæmis remarks.

"Err, I guess in a sense it is a bit... people can become crazy stans for supers."

"Stans?" Eeyok asks.

I guess I've been using a lot of words that aren't translating.

I shake my head and give him a friendly tap on his back.

"Never mind, just watch the floats and enjoy the show. It should start soon, right after Caine has made his speech!"

The interview with the other super goes on for some time as the crowd starts to become bigger. Soon enough, they announce Boltage as their next super.

I smile as Caine walks up on the stage, dressed in his supersuit.

However, I'm completely caught off guard when I also see Neil Forrester take the stage with him.

"What is he doing here?" I wonder out loud.

I know Forrester Inc. sponsors the parade, but didn't expect Neil to appear.

"Welcome to our annual Super Parade, to celebrate the accomplishments of all our supers," he speaks into the microphone.

"Today, we have something special to share with you," he notes.

"I am here with Boltage, who was part of our mission to infiltrate a top-secret location from Hulio."

The crowd murmurs as the information sinks in. My mouth drops open – we were never officially part of that! We went in on our own, unbeknownst that Forrester Inc. was preparing to invade them as well.

"Our supers fought valiantly against the terrorists and prevailed. I am pleased to announce that the leader of Hulio, the terrorist organisation, has been captured."

The crowd suddenly goes wild, cheering loud and bold.

Hulio has been a menace for years, so to hear that the leader has been captured is wonderful news to them.

"We have gathered information on the rest of the leaders and important supers that were working with them. We will not stop until we catch every Hulio member."

The crowd continues to cheer. I didn't realize they knew who the other members were.

Caine has been silently standing next to Neil. When the crowd finally dies down, Neil hands him the microphone.

"Hey everyone," Caine speaks to the people. "As some of you may know, I am Boltage."

Caine does a little zap with his fingers, showing off his powers. The crowd chuckles at his introduction.

"I want to be transparent about the events that happened, since I figure it's going to surface sooner or later anyway."

Neil gives him a strange look, probably because Caine might be going off-script.

"Hulio invented a way to strip supers of their abilities," he says.

The crowd gasps. It's been secret information until now. It's good that they know. I have no idea how many vials of this venom is in circulation.

"They managed to achieve it using my unique DNA. Something about electrodes, is what Forrester Inc. told me."

Caine shakes his head. "I didn't realize this was possible. Not only did I somehow take a part in creating that messed up drug, but... there's something else."

Neil starts nudging closer to Caine, as he's not amused by Caine's candidness anymore.

"About eight years ago, my parents died in a fire." The crowd shows their sympathies. "Tragic, I know."

Caine walks around the stage with the microphone clutched in his hand, avoiding Neil.

"What no one knew though – is that only one of them died. The other one was most likely never even near that fire."

His eyes narrow as he looks at the crowd.

"My dad was the one that faked his own death. He went on to become the leader of Hulio."

The crowd gasps, and Neil lunges forwards to grab his microphone. Caine skilfully dances away.

"Yeah – my own dad! I want everyone here to know I despise the son of a bitch and wish he *had* died in that fire."

"He used me to create that stupid drug."

I shake my own head; what is Caine hoping to accomplish here? It would have probably been better if no one knew about the connection between him and Benjamin. Now people might start conspiracy theories that he's a Hulio member, too.

"I just don't want people finding out that Benjamin Prins was Hulio's leader, and somehow think his son was in on it, too."

The crowd murmurs and my eyes bulge out. Neil looks positively livid at this point.

You can't just name-drop him! That'll rat yourself out, Caine!

"And that is why..." Caine dramatically removes his mask. "I want everyone to know my name is Caine Prins."

Neil suddenly elbows Caine in his side and forcefully removes the microphone from his hand. The crowd is going crazy by this point. People are taking tons of pictures with their cameras and cell phones.

"Well everyone, that certainly wasn't planned for this day. Boltage here is still enjoying that high from a successful mission." He tries his best to do damage control.

My mouth just won't close at this point. Caine revealed his identity in front of *everyone* – it's being live streamed as well!

What is he thinking!?

Caine leans over Neil's shoulder to speak into the microphone.

"I am done hiding everyone – done! You hear that? Whether I'm Boltage or Caine; I will kick the shit out of Hulio no matter what! Our abilities belong to us!"

At this point I just can't help but giggle nervously. This is not the kind of surprise I expected from Caine. Not in a million years.

Reporters start swarming the stage, trying to catch Caine's attention. They all want to talk to him.

Instead, Caine walks off the stage towards the back.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but I thought you were supposed to keep a hidden identity," Eeyok points out casually.

"No, you're right..." I admit. "Caine just outed himself towards the world."

"Good," Jæmis says in a pleasant tone. "No one should have to hide what they are."

"I mean, I agree, but you don't get it. People are rabid when it comes to being a fan, they will inevitably stalk him in his private life, even showing up to his house unannounced."

Caine basically held up a big middle finger to those consequences.

Though I can't deny I want to do the same; I don't want to hide either.

"Well Caine, I guess I'll just have to follow your example," I say with a bitter smile and remove my own mask.

I look at Jæmis, then at Eeyok, until they remove theirs, too.

And then, our world turns dark.

The sun is suddenly blocked off and a shadow cloaks the entire city. Everyone goes quiet as we all look up at this huge ship floating above in the sky. It doesn't look like any ship I've seen before.

"Is that!?" I gasp.

"Lord Varitus!" Jæmis spits out. "He arrived!"

"How!? He instantly appeared!"

"Everyone, please remain calm and seek out shelter," Neil announces to everyone. "Lock your windows and doors!"

People start panicking immediately and run away from the stage.

"That's not a Ræhu ship – that's his own. He's got a cloaking ability, which is how he managed to conquer my planet as well," Jæmis explains.

"He's going to send in the foot soldiers soon," Eeyok warns us.

"Prince Jæmis, what is your command?"

Jæmis grinds down on his teeth, glaring at the ship above.

"We take a stance, once and for all. I will deal with Lord Varitus. Eeyok, take care of the other soldiers."

"I believe some of them are with the resistance, I can convert some of them to fight the others," says Eeyok.

"That's right, there are some rebels... Find them, get them on our side."

"Eeyok – remember you're glamoured!" I speak up. "They won't recognize you."

"Oh, that's right."

Eeyok starts tugging at the ring on his finger but I quickly stop him.

"Unless you want to burst out of your supersuit, I recommend keeping it on for now. It'll offer protection, at least. Don't run around naked."

Eeyok chuckles sheepishly. "Haha, I guess that's a good point..."

Jæmis stares at the ship as it moves over the city.

"They're heading towards that clearing in the distance," he notes, pointing towards the city park.

And just like that, hundreds of small ships appear in the sky, each piloted by a Gaötte.

"There they are," I say, feeling my heart rate speed up.

Caine who's been on stage suddenly fires up; his hair standing up straight and glowing with electricity. Sparks go haywire as he runs off the stage towards the park.

"We gotta follow him!" I say. "Hopefully some other supers will come to help, too."

"Eeyok, deal with the foot soldiers," Jæmis grunts.

"Yes, Captain," Eeyok bows.

Eeyok leaves our presence as he goes towards one of the many drones in the sky.

Then one of the drones lands right on top of the stage, nearly breaking it. The crowd has mostly dispersed by now, except Neil is still on stage, trying to yell out instructions for others.

A Gaötte exits out of the small ship, stepping onto the stage. I had forgotten how muscular and big some of these guys were, as Eeyok has always been leaner compared to them.

Neil looks positively frightened as his guards are trying to run up the stage to protect him.

Jæmis jumps up in the air and quickly lands next to the Gaötte, creating a shield between him and Neil.

"C-Captain Jæmis!" he squeaks. "You are alive!"

"Ulrik, where is your Captain in command?" Jæmis demands to know.

"Captain Kæleb is still up on the ship..." Ulrik looks down at the ground.

"Captain Jæmis, if we were to find you alive, we had to apprehend you."

Jæmis spreads his legs apart and gives Ulrik a threatening glare.

"Eeeek – Ulrik did not see anything!"

The Gaötte quickly enters his ship again and flies off.

Jæmis turns around to address Neil.

"This is no place for non-combatants at the moment. Retreat."

Neil, not wanting to argue, simply nods. "Very well. I will have a team of supers to deal with this mess."

He then gets off the stage, escorted by his many bodyguards.

I walk up the stage now that there's no one around anymore.

"What do we do now? It seems they're looking for you."

"They can come find me," Jæmis huffs. "Let's go."

I'm startled as Jæmis snakes an arm around my waist and pulls me close.

"Hold on to me," he says.

He flies off with me towards the park.

-- Park Day

We fly towards a grassy hill, right beneath the ship.

Gently, Jæmis lowers me down and releases me, but remains airborne.

"I'm going to confront them."

"Please be safe," I say, feeling myself fill up with worry.

Jæmis hovers closer to me and brushes my hair out of my face. I lean into his touch, closing my eyes. I wish he didn't have to do this.

There are supers in the background, fighting off the other soldiers. Jæmis doesn't have to do this alone, but he's going to regardless.

He gives me a soothing smile.

"Stay out of trouble."

With that, he climbs up higher in the sky until he stops near the front of the ship. I can't do anything but lean against a tree, waiting.

Soon enough, I see the bottom side of the ship open up and Kæleb flies out of it, carrying Læna.

And right behind them is Varitus.

I look around to see if maybe another super might come to join, but it seems everyone has stayed in the city. There's no one else at the park. It's completely empty as people have already fled inside.

My eyes fall upon the four people in the sky. I didn't realize Varitus could fly, too. He's using his vines somehow like a floating cloud.

I can't hear what they're saying, but it seems Kæleb is speaking to Jæmis. I say speaking, but he looks super angry.

Then a bolt of lightning strikes Kæleb out of nowhere. He goes limp and starts to fall.

"Caine!" I yell, seeing him standing on the horizon, his arm stretched out towards the sky.

A second bolt shoots up, aimed at Varitus, but somehow, he manages to neutralize the effects using a wall of vines. It seems electricity doesn't affect him like it did Kæleb.

Jæmis frantically flies after his siblings who are falling and manages to catch Læna first, and grabs Kæleb next. He makes a haphazard landing on the grass, a little way beyond from where I'm standing.

"Did I get the wrong guy or something? Why are you helping them?" Caine asks as he runs up to Jæmis carrying his siblings.

I rush towards them as well.

"Caine, don't hit Læna!" I warn him. "She's on our side."

"Oh, it's the Princess," Læna notes casually as she sees me.

Kæleb groans as he opens his eyes; he's still a bit out of it.

"You..." he murmurs. "You struck me." His voice sounds higher pitched than normal. He's looking directly at Caine.

A blur passes in front of me as he flies towards Caine, kicking him in his side. Caine barely manages to block, but still gets thrown across the grass.

"Kæleb!" Jæmis hisses as he jumps in front of his brother to stop him.

I run over towards where Caine is – he seems to be struggling to breathe.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Hrmpf, he got a lucky hit," he grumbles.

"Stay here, let Jæmis handle it," I tell him.

"Listen to me – we need your help. We can both take on Lord Varitus," says Jæmis.

"Don't spout such rebellious nonsense," Kæleb spits out at him.

"Please Kæleb," I plead. "We're all on the same side here. We can defeat Varitus and you and your siblings will be safe."

Kæleb's brown and blue eyes land on me, but they hold none of that warmth from when I was back on Yool. Instead, I'm nothing but an insect, standing in his way.

"Who told you to speak? Stay out of it, Princess."

"She has every right to speak, you are conquering her planet," Jæmis argues.

"Why are you defending her? I told you – just beg for mercy and maybe Lord Varitus will forgive your defiance," he says, like it's the easiest thing in the world.

"You have no idea what I had to do to make sure he didn't kill Læna when I returned after a failed mission," he growls.

"Honestly, you didn't do anything out of the ordinary," Læna quips.

Our conversation is interrupted when Varitus floats down.

"Lord Varitus, I apologize—"

Kæleb is cut off by Varitus himself, striking his cheek with a vine.

"This vermin in front of me is no longer useful. Captain Kæleb, you are to dispose of him, at once."

Even Kæleb looks a little distraught.

"Lord Varitus," he starts.

"Are you defying my orders? Kill him."

"Don't do it, Kæleb. You don't have to listen to him," I urge him.

Suddenly Varitus' eyes are on me.

"Ah – the Earthling Princess. Kill her first."

"Understood, Lord Varitus," Kæleb bows.

Suddenly Kæleb is in front of me, his hands reaching for my neck.

Before I can even do anything myself, Kæleb is knocked away by Jæmis.

I've never seen that hateful expression on his face before.

"You do not touch her. Not now, not ever. Brother or not – if you touch a hair on her body, I won't hesitate to kill you."

"Well, that's certainly dramatic," Læna mentions. It seems like she's experiencing an entirely different situation, with the way she's so relaxed and nonchalant.

Kæleb rubs his chin from where Jæmis landed a hit.

"Why are you so protective of the Princess?" he questions Jæmis.

Jæmis says nothing, standing in front of me like a shield.

"No – it can't be." Kæleb suddenly looks perplexed. "You – you mated her?"

It is only now that Læna shows any other emotion besides boredom.

"You did *what!*?"

I guess that's out in the open now.

Caine looks at me weirdly.

"What does that mean?" he asks me.

"Long story," I whisper.

Kæleb cackles out loud, his eyes flashing blue as he fazes.

"You went off on your own and cahooted with our enemy!"

Kæleb stops cackling and glares at his brother.

"You are no longer my brother."

With that, he throws a punch towards Jæmis, who easily blocks it.

"I will protect what is important to me," Jæmis warns him, also fazing.

"So will I!"

Kæleb launches another attack, a low kick at Jæmis' legs.

He jumps in the air to dodge and now they're both up in the air, throwing blows at one another.

"You abandoned your only family," Kæleb hisses at him.

"I did not have a choice in that matter," Jæmis responds, throwing another punch at him.

"Have you forgotten what we look like already? I'm sure you've had fun just shacking up with that trash Earthling Princess. Tell me, have you consummated already?"

This time, Jæmis lands a nasty hit on the left side of Kæleb's face. He's thrown off his balance and crashes against a tree.

I throw a fistpump in the air.

"Yeah – go Jæmis!" I cheer.

"Joselina, what the hell is he saying?" Caine demands to know.

"Now's not the time!" I tell him.

Kæleb picks himself up from the ground and glares at Jæmis. But then he fixes his attention elsewhere.

Me.

He's closer to me than Jæmis, which is how he manages to grab me and put me in a chokehold.

-- **Sky Day**

Caine yells at him and tries to help me, but Kæleb launches us both in the air, out of reach from Caine.

"Shit!" yells Caine. "I can't shoot, I'll hurt you, too!"

Kæleb nuzzles his face on the side of my neck, chuckling lowly. I feel chills run down my spine.

"Let me go, you creep!" I say, struggling.

I thrust an elbow into his stomach, but Kæleb laughs it off.

Damnit, all the training I've done with Jæmis, the countless holds he's had me in – never accounted for the fact I could be held up in the air! I can't properly defend myself like this.

Jæmis flies towards us.

"Uh-uh," Kæleb warns him. "Get any closer and I will rip open her pretty little neck."

"Let her go, Kæleb," Jæmis warns him. I can tell by the inflection in his voice that he's actually scared.

I look down at the ground – we're so high up. Even Caine can't help me out.

"You should have just begged. That's all you had to do. Throw away your ridiculous pride and fall to your knees in front of Lord Varitus. We could have all stayed together, just the three of us, serving Lord Varitus like always."

"Then what, Kæleb? Continue to plunder and conquer for him? Whilst he keeps Læna's livelihood above our heads for the rest of our lives?"

"Shut up – he would have promoted me to second in command! If we conquered HX-108, he would consider Læna's freedom!"

"He does nothing but spout lies," Jæmis growls.

While they're engaged in conversation, I made sure to make myself useful. Inconspicuously, I've generated a thread thick enough that could restrain Kæleb's wrists. I just need a little more weaving, and I could get both of his hands.

"We could have been great. We could have ruled the galaxy. Oh Jæmis, how you've fallen."

"I haven't fallen," Jæmis grunts. "I have ascended."

His blue eyes fix on mine. Here we go; he's ready to attack.

I'm ready to restrain.

I take in a deep breath to steady myself.

Then, I nod at him.

Jæmis yells as he launches towards Kæleb. Kæleb is momentarily thrown off guard and I can feel him loosen his arm around my neck.

Using this small window of opportunity, I use my thread to wrap around his wrists and yank at them hard, creating an opening for myself.

I quickly absolve the thread so we're not connected anymore, and that's how I slip from his grasp, falling into the sky.

Jæmis lands a solid punch right in Kæleb's face, hurtling him across the sky a large distance away. Immediately he changes course and flies towards me to catch me.

"Holy crap – I can't believe that worked," I pant loudly against his chest.

"It isn't over yet," Jæmis warns me. "Kæleb is knocked out, but Lord Varitus is still the primary threat."

"He's going to kill Læna like this," I say, worried.

But as Jæmis flies towards the two of them, I notice something in the distance.

"Look!" I exclaim loudly, pointing at the city. "It's Eeyok! And a bunch of other soldiers!"

"The rebels," says Jæmis, sounding slightly hopeful.

"They're going to help!"

Jæmis quickly flies over to Læna.

-- Park Day

Varitus looks displeased that Kæleb has been taken out of the equation.

I honestly don't know if he's dead or unconscious, but he's lying in the grass somewhere, not moving.

"It seems if I want something done right, I have to do it myself," Varitus sighs.

He raises his right arm and vines start appearing around it.

"Jæmis, I am putting you out of service."

Jæmis puts me down and quietly pushes me away from him, so that I'm not in the way.

"I will gladly take down the murderer who exterminated my entire planet," Jæmis replies with a cocky smirk.

The vine that Varitus was creating suddenly shoots towards Læna.

Oh no – he's going to kill her!

And then the most unlikely hero comes in to ward it off.

Eeyok hollers loudly as he kicks at the vine, diverting its direction. Even Læna is phased by this action.

"What the – who is this miscreant?" she demands to know, unable to recognize Eeyok.

"Eeyok, at your service, Princess Læna!" he says eagerly.

A bunch of soldiers back him up, surrounding us all.

"You," Varitus hisses. "All of you, go back to the city and finish your mission," he commands them.

Except none of the Gaötte move. They all stand behind Læna.

"We have taken all of the loyalists as prisoners, we are now in control of the ship," says one of the men.

They all bend down on one knee, including Eeyok.

"Queen Læna."

Varitus growls loudly.

"All of you! What is the meaning of this!?" He creates a vine and starts wildly slashing it around, hitting several soldiers.

Læna huffs, crossing her arms in an arrogant manner.

"It seems Varitus, your days are numbered. This façade can finally end. It is time we said goodbye to your tyranny."

"Watch it, Joselina!" Eeyok quickly moves me out of the way as one of the vines was about to hit me.

"I am going to obliterate every last one of you!" Varitus yells, rising up in the air with a bunch of vines lifting him up.

The vines grow thicker until they're solid stalks, thick and strong. I blink once and one of them manages to pierce a soldier completely at incredible speed.

Varitus flings the soldier off into the distance.

I hurry and run away with Eeyok – I can't stick around here!

Soldiers start running towards the vines, attacking them as much as they can, but it seems they're no match for Varitus' power. It's like he's got eyes on the back of his head, able to control all the vines and deal with all the soldiers without effort.

Jæmis flies towards Varitus, weaving in between several large stalks that try to hit him. He throws out a punch towards Varitus, but it's immediately blocked by a vine.

Jæmis does his best to punch his way through the thick weave of vines, but they seem to be spawning endlessly.

And then electricity manages to hit Varitus' bare skin this time around.

Temporarily stunned, the vines stop moving, giving Jæmis a clear hit on Varitus.

"Did you forget about me!?" says Caine, smirking wildly.

Caine shoots off another bolt of lightning, which Varitus manages to block off this time with a grimace.

Jæmis is already flying on the other side of the wall of vines, getting around his defensive and landing another solid hit.

"Keep it up, Caine! You're distracting him!" I cheer for him.

"You got it!" Caine shoots out multiple lightning bolts, trying his best not to hit Jæmis in the process.

"These soldiers are on our side; they're part of the rebellion. Please don't hurt them!" I call out to him.

Having to ward off Caine's attack as well as Jæmis and all the other soldiers, Varitus is becoming sloppier. There's so many people to account for that he is having a hard time keeping up.

Which is why he yells loudly and suddenly launches himself up into the sky, vines and all. They all wrap together, slithering across each other to make a giant drill, which then angles itself towards the earth.

Oh god, he's coming down with it.

I make like a banana and split, using whatever energy I have left to propel myself forwards.

Eeyok and Caine are running after me.

The huge drill makes contact with the earth, striking many soldiers in the process.

The shock wave it creates knocks everyone off their feet. It's even created a small crater.

I cough a few times from the rising dust and look around to see if Jæmis is still fine.

I see him zooming around in the air, getting ready to strike once more. Except he has to dodge a swarm of large stalks being sent his way. He has no time to attack Varitus when he's busy evading these massive vines.

How can Jæmis win this?

We need more supers...

I feel something poke in my pocket and I quickly take it out.

"I forgot I had this," I say, holding the small vial in my hand and showing it to Caine.

"Wait, that's the vial I took off my dad," says Caine, recognizing it.

"Do you think it could work on him?" I ask, a plan formulating in my mind.

Eeyok sees what I'm holding and understands what I'm thinking of doing with it.

"We can definitely try – Lord Varitus is too strong for us soldiers to handle."

"If only we had Kæleb on our side, perhaps we could actually beat him," I groan.

"We don't have a gun though, how are we going to shoot him with it?" Caine points out.

"Shit, you're right." It's only the vial that I possess, but nothing to shoot it with.

How are we going to inject this into his blood?

"Joselina!" Caine exclaims. "It doesn't stick, it pierces!"

"What?" I say, flabbergasted.

"Your thread – *it pierces!*"

I snap my fingers at him. "You're right!"

I can coat my thread with the poison and pierce Varitus with it.

"Varitus can easily block it off – we would need to distract him and keep him in place," says Eeyok.

"Jæmis is already trying his best to deal with the vines... how am I going to get through them?" I wonder.

"I can stun him if I get a lightning bolt off," Caine mentions. "When he's stunned, you can stab the fucker."

I conjure a thread from my finger, and pierce it right through the vial, making sure to coat it with the liquid inside.

"Let's do this," I say, holding the vial in my hand, keeping the thread inside.

Caine roars loudly and shoots multiple lightning strikes into the air, his hair swizzling along with it.

"Come fight me, you ugly alien fishhead!" Caine yells as he runs towards Varitus' massive column of vines.

"Queen Læna, stay back," Eeyok warns her as he also runs after Caine.

"My, it seems you all have some sort of plan that I am ignorant about," she says in a whiny voice.

"We'll make it work," I assure her.

My blood's pumping, my heart is racing – I can't screw this up.

I run after the two; getting closer gives me a much higher chance of succeeding.

All I need is for Varitus to have an opening, and I will strike.

Jæmis is still up in the air, fighting off the vines, it seems he's getting more and more exhausted staying in his fazed state like this for so long.

Hang in there a little longer, Jæmis!

Eeyok tries his best to be useful and fend off some of the vines, but he gets swept off his feet by a giant stalk instead.

Caine shoots off another lightning bolt, but it's quickly blocked off.

Damnit, I need an opening!

Then, like a hail Mary – a set of supers appear at the park. Some of them running, some of them flying – but there's a ton of them, all coming towards us.

They quickly recognize the threat and focus their attention on Varitus. One of the supers breathes out fire at the vines, causing it to light up and burn.

Oh great – we've got help!

Varitus realizes there's more numbers now and he tries to knock them away from him, but some of the vines are now becoming burnt and useless.

Jæmis sees his opportunity and lands another blow in Varitus' face.

Caine quickly follows up and shoots lightning at him.

Varitus' face grimaces as he stiffens up.

And that's when I throw my thread through the air, except it's immediately blocked off by a giant stalk moving in the way.

Damnit - I missed the opportunity!

I dissolve the thread and quickly conjure a new one, coating it with the poison.

"Jæmis!" I yell out loud, trying to catch his attention.

Jæmis hears my voice and turns his face to me. I wave my hands at him, hoping he'll retreat and come down.

As he dodges an incoming stalk, Jæmis flies down towards me.

"Jæmis, I need to get closer to Varitus so that I can try injecting him with the anti-super venom," I explain once he's close enough.

Jæmis follows my thread and sees the way it's coated; he understands what I'm trying to do.

"It's worth a shot," I say, seeing the small seed of doubt in his mind that this could work.

"Just get me around those stupid bean stalks, and I can pierce him with it."

"Alright, I'll get you close," he says and opens up his arms.

I step closer to him and wrap my arms around his neck. He hugs me close and lifts us up into the air.

— Sky

Supers are still battling the many vines and stalks, lighting them on fire, or even freezing them. But Varitus seems to have an endless supply of them.

A giant stalk shoots straight at us, but Jæmis whirls around it, making it miss. There are so many of them; it feels hopeless. Jæmis does his best to weave around them and get closer.

In between the many vines, I see glimpses of Varitus' pale blue skin. It's still not enough though, he's constantly moving, making it a hard target.

Then a lightning bolt shoots right at him, hitting close enough to make it ripple through his body causing him to stiffen up. The stalks temporarily stop moving.



Now's my chance!

I shoot out my thread, dancing around the vines, and going straight for his wide open neck.

It's a direct hit. I can feel my thread pierce his skin, but it seems Varitus hasn't even noticed with how light the sting actually is.

"I got him!" I announce.

He yells loudly and raises his arm, conjuring more vines. Jæmis quickly dodges them, getting me out to safety.

"Wait – Varitus can still use his ability," I say anxiously.

Jæmis grunts loudly as he dodges another vine.

Fear settles in my stomach as I realize our plan may have been futile after all.

But then the vines start to wilt and burn.

"What is – what is happening!?" Varitus demands to know.

Right before our eyes, the vines stop moving and Varitus is slowly lowered to the ground.

Jæmis lands us on top of one of the dead stalks as we watch it wilt and turn brown.

He smirks down at Varitus, who is frantically trying to conjure more vines, but it's not working anymore.

"Lost your power, huh?" Jæmis mocks him.

"It worked, it worked!" I jeer loudly as I hold onto Jæmis.

The stalk we're standing on shrinks so much it lowers us - as well as Varitus - to the ground, until I'm safe in the grass.

Varitus looks absolutely distraught that his vines aren't working anymore.

Jæmis flies over to him and grabs Varitus by his clothes, raising him up in the air. Varitus struggles against him, but his frail arms barely have any physical strength in them, so he's unable to actually do anything to Jæmis.

"Lord Varitus is Lord no longer!" Jæmis shouts towards the soldiers around us.

Even the supers have stopped fighting.

"You're no longer lord over me and my family." Jæmis then punches him in the face once more, for good measure.

When I reach them, I immediately conjure some thread to tie Varitus' wrists together behind his back.

I hug Jæmis out of excitement.

"We did it! The drug worked on him!"

"You have no idea what you're doing," Varitus warns us.

"The consequences of your actions – they're on such a galactic scale, you bothersome insects will never understand its gravitas."

"What's he on about?" I ask, turning towards Jæmis.

"He's never had to think about losing his powers," he answers.

1. "Should I gag him so he can't speak?"
2. "Now he can spend the rest of his life thinking like that."

"Should I gag him so he can't speak?" I suggest deviously.

"I won't stand in your way," Jæmis replies.

Before Varitus can reply, I quickly wrap his mouth with my thread, making sure he cannot speak anymore.

"That felt good," I admit.

Jæmis flashing me a smile in return.

"Now he can spend the rest of his life thinking like that," I say.

"I have raised you – you insolent deviant! Where is your respect!? Unhand me and return my powers!" Varitus yells at him.

Jæmis leans down to face Varitus; his eyes narrow and full of contempt. That's a look I've never seen before.

"Palace servants raised me. All you did was take me prisoner."

Then he closes his eyes with a small sigh, like he's made peace with it, and he stands up straight.

"Regardless – you there, hold him. Make sure he doesn't escape," Læna commands one of the soldiers.

One of the Gaötte quickly skips over to Varitus and drags him away. He doesn't even seem to put up a fight. I can't believe we did it.

"Everyone – don't fight the remaining aliens!" Caine suddenly starts shouting.

It seems a couple of supers have continued the fight and were battling some of the remaining soldiers, the rebels.

I raise my voice as well.

"Please don't fight anyone else! They are on our side and didn't want to attack earth! They helped us take down the actual monster!"

Some supers stand down, though are confused by our actions.

"Boltage is telling us to stop fighting," says one super.

"I can't believe he did it all unmasked," says another.

"Don't attack!" Caine continues to calm down the crowd of supers.

"I'm going to get Forrester Inc. here, alright?" he tells me before walking off.

Læna suddenly steps forwards.

"Gaötte, it seems we have succeeded in taking back Yool," she announces.

The soldiers around her cheer.

"Is the palace already under our control?" asks Eeyok.

Læna gives him a strange look.

"...You, are you really Eeyok? Why do you look like an Earthling?" she questions him.

"Ah – it's Earthling technology, they didn't want me to look out of place among them. I can turn back whenever I want!"

"Good. I can't stand looking at you like that, change back at once."

"Uhm, on second thought, I can go back when I've gotten new armour..." Eeyok blushes slightly.

"So, it is true? You've captured Kulul?" Jæmis steps forwards.

"As soon as we left Yool, my troops were ready to move in. It's been all but confirmed a nunoon ago."

"That's truly good to hear," says Eeyok with a big smile. He looks relieved.

"Yool is finally free."

"Now, as for this... *tyrant*," Læna points at Varitus in the distance.

"I was planning on beheading him, but it seems you inflected him with some kind of condition. What did you do?"

"It's a drug that removes your powers," I explain. "I wasn't sure if it would work on him, but it does work on us humans."

"Is it permanent?"

"I can't say for sure, but the person who created the drug seemed to think so." I hadn't actually thought of the effects only being temporary.

"Rest assured, Lord Varitus is rendered harmless now," Jæmis backs me up.

"He's Lord no longer," Læna corrects him.

"My mistake," Jæmis concedes. "Then is it true that you will lead the people of Yool?"

"I've been planning this for so long, my dear brother. I just didn't expect things to work out like it did. Kæleb has been a thorn in my side ever since; he certainly did not make things easier."

My eyes wander over to where Kæleb landed where Jæmis knocked him out cold. Is he still alive? No one bothered to check.

Læna clears her throat and my eyes snap back to hers.

"You are certainly a wildcard I didn't account for. It worked out in the end, however... Jæmis, did you say you mated the Princess?"

Jæmis bows slightly in front of Læna, then stands next to my side, like we're a team. It somehow makes me feel treasured, but I'm also a little embarrassed.

Having to talk about our relationship in front of an entire crowd.

"Affirmative," Jæmis responds.

Her jaw slacks slightly, like she can't believe it.

Eeyok on the other hand; his mind is completely blown.

"C-Captain Jæmis and Joselina!?" he shrieks. "All this time!?"

"Well, no, not technically until last night," I add awkwardly.

"Is it because you had no other choice? Was it a diplomatic decision? What spurred this on?" Læna quickly fires off her questions.

"It's nothing like that, Læna. She heard the call; I cannot ignore that."

Now her eyes bulge out.

"Wait – you did? You can? How is that possible, she is not Ræhu."

"I don't have an answer to that, but my decision is irreversible."

Læna starts chewing on her nails, looking deep in thought.

"Well, it's not the worst decision you could have made. A Princess of Earth, I'm sure that could work in our favour."

"Uhm, I feel the need to cut in here. Læna, I'm sorry, but I am not a princess. I lied."

Læna promptly stops biting her nails.

"Excuse me?"

"I'm just an ordinary person; a tailor. I make clothes for others. I'm not a princess at all. I lied so I could save my own skin."

"*Whaaat?*" she gasps. "Is this true, Jæmis?"

Jæmis awkwardly sighs.

"It is. She is not of royalty."

"Jæmis, this cannot be. You are a prince! You are to rule Yool with royalty by your side!"

"I'm not going back."

That's news to me, too. I can't help but stare at Jæmis with a huge question mark floating above my head.

Honestly, I didn't stop to think about whether or not he'd stay now that we're bonded together. Granted, I didn't have much time to think about it, but leaving Earth is a rather big deal.

And here Jæmis is saying he wishes to stay.

"Do not joke around with me. Yool is your home, your family is there. You are coming back with us."

"Yool has never been our home and you know it. I shall remain on Earth."

"You want to stay with me?" I ask, looking up at Jæmis with these sparkling eyes. "Really?"

"Home is where my mate is. I will not leave you," he reassures me.

My cheeks glow with a sense of pride and a twinge of embarrassment. He wants to stay for me!

"No – out of the question! I didn't go through all of this just for my family to be split apart! Who knows whether Kæleb is even breathing right now."

"He is. He will need two days to recover," Jæmis states plainly.

Læna suddenly throws a small punch at Jæmis' chest.

"Don't be pedantic with me. Come home. I need you there."

"With everything I've seen you accomplish behind the scenes; it seems like you don't have a need for me after all."

Jæmis lowers himself down onto one knee.

"If there's one thing my time spent on Earth here has taught me," his eyes move towards me, "is that even those who are physically weak, can have extraordinary influence and reach."

"You will be fine without me, Queen Læna."

Læna bites down on her trembling lip.

In consolidation, I also sink down to one knee and bow in front of Læna.

"I would like to have your blessings," I ask of her.

"My blessings?" she repeats in an almost offended tone.

"I know how much Jæmis cares about you – about his family. So it would mean a lot if you approved," I say.

"I can't believe it. This is not what I had planned!" Læna groans frustratingly.

"Believe me, no one could have foreseen this future. I am just as surprised with my decision as you are," says Jæmis.

"But if Captain Jæmis does not return, then who will be Captain in command?" Eeyok asks worriedly.

"Can't give it to Kæleb, his mind is not in the right place at the moment." Læna clicks her tongue.

"See, Jæmis – we need you."

"What do you mean, I see a great Captain standing right in front of me." His eyes land straight on Eeyok.

With wide eyes, Eeyok points a finger at himself, just to make sure.

"R-r-really?" he stutters, embarrassed.

"But I – I am not as talented as Captain Jæmis, not by a long shot!"

"You gathered all the rebels together! Not to mention the way you fooled everyone, including me. You have a lot of skill, Eeyok. Don't diminish your own talent," I tell him with a smile.

"I totally agree you'd make a good Captain."

"I..." Eeyok looks down at the floor, totally red in his face.

I feel so proud of him, I really do.

Then Læna hits him in the back of his head.

"I'll be making the final call on that, don't let it inflate your ego."

"Seems everything would work out alright even if I didn't go back with you," Jæmis points out with a smirk.

"I can't believe you went from following the rules to actually deciding to break them. If I knew you were going to be like this, I would have involved you in my plans a long time ago."

Læna sighs loudly, rubbing her temples with her long fingers.

Jæmis finally stands up, pulling me along with him.

"Læna, you will always be with me. Everything I've done, I did it for the sake of our family. Now, that threat is gone. We now have a choice in what we do."

"...And you want to stay behind with your mate."

"That is right."

"Waaah – but then we're worlds apart! I won't ever see you again!" Læna whines as she suddenly embraces Jæmis.

He pats her on her back with a smile.

"I doubt it would bother you much. At least you won't have to see me squabble with Healer Billius anymore."

Læna chuckles, then lets go of him.

Then we're all interrupted by a cavalry of black vans driving across the grass towards us.

One of the vans stops near us and once the doors open, I see Caine exiting, along with Neil.

Oh right, he was going to get Forrester Inc. involved. They're going to have to clean up this mess.

Neil clears his throat and looks over towards Læna and the rest of the soldiers.

"By the power vested in me by the United Nations, I declare you are all under arrest for crimes against humanity."

Chapter [028I] Epilogue

-- Forrester's jail

I really don't like this place.

Forrester Inc. escorted everyone to headquarters, all under arrest. Varitus is held in a different room. Kæleb, who has survived the fight with Jæmis, is also separated from the rest.

Læna is the one I urged Neil to talk with, and we've explained the situation thus far. I've been campaigning for their release. Jæmis is also in the room with us.

"As you can see, the threat has been neutralized. I want to take him back to our planet where he will face trial in our new justice system," says Læna.

"Also, can you remove these bindings already? It's not good for my skin," she whines, gesturing at the tie wraps around her wrists.

"Commit crimes on our planet, and you will face *our* justice," Neil corrects her. "Why should we let you go back after an attack?"

"Because our previous leader is the one who made that call. And now he's harmless," she waves her hand at him.

"Let us return to our home planet and we will never return again."

"This is the third time we have been invaded by your species; you will have to account for your deeds."

"Not by choice," Jæmis grumbles.

"Again – they were oppressed and forced to attack by their dictator," I cut in. "They were hoping to overthrow him during this last attack and they succeeded. No one among the Gaötte actually wanted to attack earth."

"Intentions don't matter when there's been real consequences. People have died from their attacks. Several supers were critically injured today. Not to mention the damage to our infrastructure."

Neil pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose, his eyes sharp as always.

"Surely, you don't expect me to let you walk away without any repercussions?"

"Why can't you?" I ask. "What if we kept Varitus and you let the others go?"

"No – Varitus comes with us. The people of Yool deserve their justice," Læna immediately rejects the idea.

"We will comply with your demands, but that is not one of them," she stresses.

"Læna, you were willing to kill him regardless – do you really need to take him with you?" asks Jæmis.

"Dead or alive. That lightly tinted fish is coming with us."

"This is going in circles," Neil sighs. "While I understand your plight and struggles – you do not get to come here and circumvent our laws because you promise nicely to not come back again."

"Is it a deal you want?" Læna suggests, also getting irritated at the conversation.

"I can give you some of our technology as a peace offering."

Neil crosses his arms, remaining silent.

"...Such as?" He seems interested.

"We have access to several military-grade ships you can keep," she says, referring to the small drone ships the soldiers used.

Then she taps her ear. "And we'll give you several copies of our babblefish, a device that automatically translates foreign languages to your own."

I keep my mouth shut about the fact that Ralph already reversed engineered it and made a working prototype on his own.

"Does it make you talk in a foreign language as well, like you're doing right now?" he asks.

"Not quite, that's a learned ability. The use of speaking said language with the help of a babblefish requires a lot of training."

Jæmis steps forwards.

"I would be willing to teach," he offers. "I am very familiar with the babblefish's workings; it's made from Ræhu technology."

Neil dismisses the idea with a headshake.

"Regardless, a small ship and a little gadget is not comparable to the damages we've suffered."

Læna growls at him.

"Our people have suffered long enough at the hands of *him!*" she exclaims.

"Mr. Forrester, please, surely we can come to an agreement here, right? What else do you hope to achieve? Put them into prison?" I say.

"May I remind you it was Jæmis and I that helped take out the biggest threat Claner has faced yet. You owe us, a lot."

"An operation you did illegally, without any masks, may I add," he says.

"Then I will take on all of their crimes. Punish me, let the others return," Jæmis grumbles.

"You getting punished for their crimes doesn't change the issue here; we've got a ship capable of interstellar flight hanging above Claner. Using this, a future attack by them is very possible."

Neil takes in a deep breath.

"There is no guarantee that you will not return to attack us again. As of now, you are earth's declared enemy number one."

Even Læna doesn't have anything to say to that.

"You Earthlings are so uptight," she complains. "It's impossible to negotiate. All we want to do is leave and never return."

"With just your word for it, I cannot allow you to leave just like that."

"...What if that's all you need, her word?" I speak up.

Neil raises an eyebrow.

"Explain?"

"She could take an oath."

"And who would she take an oath to, pray tell?" he says sarcastically.

"Me. She can make one with me," I answer.

"No offense Miss Hearth, but your track record with oaths isn't particularly stellar. I would not even trust you to take care of a goldfish, let alone the fate of the human world."

I bite down on my lips, feeling hurt by his words. He's right though; I did break the oaths with Jæmis and Eeyok, he can't trust me to not do the same thing with Læna.

"However, I am willing to become the keeper," Neil answers, surprising me.

"You're willing to die?"

"If I can't protect earth against extraterrestrial attacks, then I do not deserve to be head of DAET."

I've grown a little bit of respect for Neil Forrest just now.

"Alright, you have to keep me in the loop – it doesn't sound like you're talking about a verbal oath here," Læna interjects.

"That is right. Their oath is done by a person who will bind your word to your life. If you break your oath, the both of you will perish," Jæmis answers her in his own language.

"I had to take the same oath as well, to promise not to harm anyone on Earth."

"Die, you say?" Læna muses. "So, if I tell you I'll never return to Earth, but I do – I die?"

"You say you are now the de facto leader of your planet – correct?" asks Neil.

"As of today, I am Queen of the planet Yool. They all follow my rule," Læna clarifies.

"...That is not to say there isn't an eventual coup that overthrows you, much like with what happened today."

"No, no one can be sure of that. But I will do whatever I can to rebuild the planet. And I will not be plundering other planets for their resources nor committing genocide."

"Mark my words, pretty boy," Neil raises his eyes at this. "Queen Læna is here to stay."

"So, do you think taking an oath would work?" I ask.

Now I'm thinking whether or not oaths have a distance limit to it or something. I can't imagine Oathkeeper ever had to consider actual galaxies between two subjects.

"It's risky. Like I said; the current governing body could be overthrown as well and return to attack earth."

"It's much better than nothing, right?" I sigh. "You can't account for everything. Now that we know there are many other lifeforms in our galaxy, another planet could attack us instead."

"You don't have much of a choice," Jæmis adds. "You either take the oath where they will leave Earth alone, or you don't, and you'll never be sure of another attack."

"Hm, I think you should just focus on your own defense, to be honest," Læna says casually. "Earth seems to be wide open to attack, whether that's from Yool, or another planet."

"That," Neil's eyes suddenly widen. "That is something we can negotiate with. Your ship."

"I am not giving up my ship, we need it to return home," Læna tuts at him.

"The technology that camouflaged your ship and got through our satellite spotters – if you give me the blueprints for that technology, along with taking an oath, I will let you leave."

Læna frowns at him, thinking over the offer.

"That would be hard. It is not originally our technology. We do not know how it works, just that it does."

"Then deliver me the piece of technology that camouflages your ship. That way, you disarm yourself and Earth will possess the same technology for defense."

It's not a bad trade, to be honest.

"Very well, we have no need for it anyway. If you let my men back on the ship we will hand it over to you," Læna agrees.

"Then you agree you will take an oath to never return and attack Earth or harm any of its inhabitants?"

Læna bows slightly.

"If that's what must be done, so be it."

Neil taps a button next to the phone on his desk.

"Summon my cousin," Neil speaks loudly into the intercom.

--

As we wait for Oathkeeper to arrive, Neil has agreed to let us visit Varitus' cell.

Chained to a chair in the middle of the room, his light hair falls into his eyes.

Even though he's supposed to be completely harmless, I feel a chill run over my back.

"Eyes up," Læna commands him as she approaches the middle of the room.

Her tie wraps have been removed for now.

Varitus doesn't respond however, head still bent down towards the floor.

"Seems attacking the Earthlings proved to be your demise. So much for underestimating the enemy," she says with a chuckle.

I guess she came here with the express intent to gloat. Not that I blame her; he was the one to completely eradicate their home planet after all.

"You thought you'd continue to use me to keep my brothers in check. When that proved to fail, you decided it's better if no one lives... What a foolish thought."

She bites down on her nail. "You managed to get Kæleb on your side, but luckily, Jæmis came to his senses."

"After all this time, forced to serve you – I no longer feel contempt for you," Jæmis speaks up.

"You are just a weak being, undeserving of my hatred," he dismisses him.

"Now that we're all here, how about you tell us how weak you really are?" Læna asks with a broad smile on her face, like she knows his secret.

"I figured it out, you know," she chuckles. "That it wasn't you that killed everyone in our palace. It was the little prince."

Finally, Varitus' head shoots up and he glares at Læna. That comes as a shocking revelation to me, too.

"Do not speak of matters which you have no knowledge of," he hisses lowly.

"Oh, but I do," she says in a sing-song voice. "The little prince has a tremendous amount of power – so much he can annihilate entire planets."

Nornus... destroyed planets?

"Even though he was but a mere baby, he was still a hundred times more powerful than you are."

"What are you implying, Læna?" Jæmis asks, unable to grasp the new information.

"The little prince murdered our parents, Jæmis. That blinding white light was all him, not Varitus."

That's a tough pill to swallow, but I do remember how Nornus basically brought down an entire building when he tried to protect me. So... Varitus has been using him as a weapon? Is that why he's been so desperate to find water for Nornus?

"Billius has been running experiments on him to improve his condition, and he figured out the extent of his actual powers."

"Hold back that tongue of yours. You are going to regret the day you met me if you speak of Nornus any further," Varitus growls at her.

"He has nothing to do with any of this."

"Still protective of him, aren't you?" Læna teases him.

"Do what you must to me, but Nornus goes free."

"Nah, I don't think I will."

My eyes widen as well.

"Læna, you can't be serious," I say in a worried tone. "Nornus doesn't even know what Varitus has been doing."

"Nornus is a weapon, plain and simple," she states. "A weapon that must be disarmed."

Noticing how worried I am about Nornus, Jæmis steps in.

"Læna, the prince must have also been used, just like the rest of us. There is no need to dispose of him, or even charge him of any crimes."

"Have you not been listening to me?" she exclaims. "He killed our family! Our parents! I protected you from his attack and lost the ability to fæze!"

Varitus chuckles lowly.

"Is that how you want to remember it?" he quips.

"You shut your mouth hole," she growls. "Nothing you say is of any importance at this point."

"I have nothing more to say regardless. Do what you must." Varitus remains silent.

Jæmis' eyes soften.

"Knowing what truly went down doesn't change the fact that it was all due to Varitus' doing. Prince Nornus was too young to probably even remember, much like how Captain Kæleb doesn't remember anything from that time."

"There is no need to punish the prince."

"Læna, I will tell you now, but I'm not going to be on your side if you do anything to hurt Nornus," I warn her.

She huffs arrogantly.

"I know you're Jæmis' mate now, but that doesn't mean you can make any demands of me."

"Her demands are my demands," Jæmis says in an almost threatening tone.

I feel appreciated that he's got my back like this.

"You're both impossible!" she cries. "Don't you want revenge? It's right there; at your fingertips."

Jæmis takes in a deep breath.

"Revenge doesn't change the past. We have also committed atrocities to protect our family."

He gives Varitus a stern gaze.

"In a way, I guess we've been similar."

That's a pretty wild connection to make. But if Varitus has been doing this to protect Nornus, then I guess I can see why Jæmis would say that.

"Læna, I have to ask you to not harm Nornus when you take the oath," I tell her. "You can't punish him for crimes he did when he was a baby."

"You are too fond of the little prince." She clicks her tongue at me.

I smile at her. "Yes, he was very nice to me in the brief period I stayed at the palace."

"Læna, please. Varitus deserves justice, but I agree with Joselina that we should not take revenge on someone who was too young to even remember."

She bites down on her thumb and then sighs.

"Fine. The little prince will remain unharmed."

"And taken care of," I immediately add, in case she decides to throw him out of the palace.

"Want me to tuck him in at night as well like a good mother?" she mocks me.

"He has to be unharmed and taken care of," I repeat. "Do not remove him from the palace. Let Healer Billius continue to improve his condition."

"You sure know how to pick your mate," Læna grumbles towards Jæmis.

"A decision I do not regret," he immediately replies. "Do not test my patience."

Læna throws her hands up in the air.

"Alright – I just want to get off this planet and return!"

I smile at Jæmis and nod at him.

"Thanks," I say. "For having my back."

He returns my smile with a nod of his very own. It seems my habits have finally rubbed off on him.

Jæmis turns to Læna.

"Let the people of Yool make their decision on what to do with Varitus. Be a merciful leader."

"What made you this wise all of a sudden?" she asks, raising a dark eyebrow at him.

"Perhaps you never realized I was always like this," Jæmis responds.

I sigh in relief; it seems Nornus' safety, at least, is guaranteed.

Then a guard walks in to retrieve us. Oathkeeper is here. It's time to make an oath.

-- Park Noon

After Neil and Læna took an oath together – one of the conditions was to ensure Nornus' safety – we've been escorted back to the park.

Neil would like to have the camouflage technology before they leave.

"I will send someone up there to retrieve the device," says Neil. "You stay here before you're allowed to board again."

"One of the Gaötte will escort you," says Læna.

She beckons to one of the Gaötte among the crowd of soldiers who steps forwards. One of Neil's guards follows the Gaötte, marching towards one of the drones parked nearby. They both enter and fly up towards the ship.

"Now we wait," says Neil and he turns around to wait at his van.

"Jæmis, are you sure you're staying behind? We could rule Yool together, do whatever we want," Læna pleads.

"You are free to call yourself queen, but I do not have any interest in leading the Gaötte," Jæmis says, shaking his head.

Then he looks over at me.

"My mate has family here. This is her home. I already separated her from them once, I'm not making that mistake again."

"It makes me happy to hear you say that," I admit. "But are you sure you don't want to stay with your own family?"

"That's an odd question. You *are* my family now." Jæmis gives me a weird look.

"I can't believe what I'm hearing," Kæleb speaks up, having been quiet all this time.

"Lord Varitus defeated, Captain Jæmis mating with an Earthling – even Gaötte not looking like Gaötte anymore."

He's currently wearing the same bracelet provided by Forrester Inc. to keep his fæzing in check. It seems when he isn't fæzed, Kæleb acts like a much more reasonable person, capable of actual conversation.

"I am worried about leaving Kæleb with you," Jæmis mentions. "He was truly devoted to Lord Varitus."

"He is Lord no longer, don't call him that," Læna immediately chastises him.

"That doesn't change the fact that he put you into danger," Jæmis stresses.

"Me?" Kæleb scoffs. "Do you have any idea what I had to do to make sure Lord Varitus didn't harm Læna?"

"To be fair Kæleb, your efforts were quite fruitless. Varitus was going to kill me either way and I had taken that into account," says Læna.

"From now on, little brother – you are going to be serving the people of Yool. No longer do you have to listen to that tyrant."

Kæleb grows quiet, looking down at the ground.

"You think he'll be okay?" I whisper to Jæmis, worried that Kæleb being a loyalist will pose an issue in the future.

"...Despite his dedication towards Varitus, he does care for his family. I trust he will make the right decision and lead Yool as Captain in command."

"It will be strange to return to Yool but not have you as our Captain anymore," Eeyok speaks up.

He has already removed the glamour and changed back into his traditional garb, to prepare for his departure.

"I'm sure you'll do just fine without having me around," Jæmis replies.

"Well, I'm definitely going to miss you, Eeyok," I admit.

1. Hug him.

2. Hold his hands.

I don't wait for him to respond and simply hug him, startling the poor guy.

But then he smiles softly and returns my embrace.

And quickly lets go once he sees Jæmis' eyes shooting daggers at him.

I hold onto his hands and smile up at him.

Eeyok returns the smile, squeezing my hands with his larger ones.

Jæmis gives him a disapproving glare and he drops my hands just as quickly.

"I promise to take care of Prince Nornus," he says.

"Take him out of the palace too, okay? He shouldn't be cooped up."

"Anymore demands?" Læna asks with a roll of her eyes.

"Yes, tell him that I enjoyed our time together," I answer seriously.

Eeyok grins. "Will do."

"But I'm really going to miss you though," I say, pouting. "You're welcome to stay here as well."

"As much as I would have enjoyed that, Yool is my home. It is time to take back what was once ours."

He's got such a deep connection to his home planet. No way would he ever stay here.

"However, I'll never forget my time here, or even our meeting. You were kind to me even though you had every right to be angry. You didn't look down on me for acting... weak and unintelligent."

He gives an awkward smile.

"I am glad I got to meet you."

Eeyok falls down onto one knee and grins up at me.

"Princess or not, you shall always be my princess."

My cheeks flush red with the compliment.

"I will treasure your Makoet, always," he says.

I giggle at him.

"Goodbye Eeyok, I wish you the best, and may we meet again."

Eeyok rises from the ground and gives a pointed look at Jæmis.

In complete silence, he makes a very polite and grand bow in front of him as well.

"Goodbye, Captain Jæmis. Your teachings will always stay with us."

Jæmis closes his eyes and also bows in front of Eeyok.

"Never thought a soldier like you was secretly running in cahoots with my sister. But... you were resourceful and clever at times. May you continue to serve your people."

Eeyok grins widely at the compliment, probably the first of its kind he's ever received from Jæmis.

Then all of a sudden, the ship above us disappears.

Neil immediately runs up to us.

"What is going on?" he says in an urgent voice.

"Nothing to worry about, my guy is probably showing how the device works."

And just like that, the ship returns into view, like it never left at all.

"See? They'll be coming back down soon."

Neil huffs but remains quiet.

True to her word; the ship opens up as one of the drones flies out with the soldier and guard from before.

As the guard steps out, he carries along a large and rectangular metal box, nearly the size of a door.

"Mr. Forrester, I retrieved the device," he says.

"Very well." He turns to Læna. "You are now free to leave and never return."

"So dramatic."

Jæmis bows in front of Læna.

"Goodbye, Læna, may your rule bring peace to Yool."

"Enjoy your time on Earth, Jæmis, don't forget who your family really is," she says with a sly smile.

She then turns to Kæleb and removes the bracelet. He gives her an odd look, rubbing his wrist.

Kæleb then silently bows in front of Jæmis before he grabs Læna by her waist and flies up into the sky.

Eeyok waves at me as he and the other Gaötte enter the small drone ship to leave as well. They force Varitus along with them. Small drones all fly up to the ship to get ready and disembark.

"May we never hear from them again," says Neil, looking up at the sky.

In a lightning-fast movement, the ship disappears from orbit, leaving the planet.

"You two better behave," Neil warns us.

"Now that Mr. Boltage has outed himself and you've shown your support, super identities are out in the open. I will not be able to protect your privacy from now on."

"I understand and I accept the consequences of my action."

He tilts his head to the side.

"Do you really?"

I shrug. "We'll see."

Neil shakes his head and finally leaves us alone, getting into his van with his guards and driving away.

Jæmis and I stare up at the sun setting in the sky. He's staying behind to be with me. It's crazy how this all turned out.

"I'm still going to have to tell Ralph and Caine..." I murmur.

"Tell them what?" he asks, looking down at me.

"That we're together and you're staying with us."

It still feels unreal when I say it out loud.

I lean against Jæmis' side, looking up at him. I still remember seeing him fall from the sky and having to catch him.

"Never thought this is what would have become of us," I say, reminiscing about our first meeting.

"This is not what I had planned either," Jæmis agrees.

Then his eyes soften and his lips curl into a smile.

"I met someone that challenged me in such ways I had no choice but to change my plans."

He closes his eyes briefly before peering at me again with his brown orbs.

"While you may never be able to best me in a match... your smile brings me to my knees."

I giggle shyly, feeling my heart warm up. I still can't believe how enamoured I've become with Jæmis.

"...Hey, you say that now, but I kicked ass today. Surely, someday, it'll be yours."

His soft smile transforms into a cocky smirk.

"Is that a challenge?"

"I'll tell you when we get home," I say with a grin.

I close my eyes and rest my head against his chest.

Innocent ending merges with the epilogue here.

Endings merge here.

-- Lake Cabin Forest Noon

Things quiet down after a day, but I avoid the news like the plague. I don't want to see my face plastered all over the place. Turns out, I'm hailed as the savior against the aliens. Of course, Super Mallgirl is once more at the forefront.

Jæmis has also been recorded on many devices – they've nicknamed him Azure Man. Due to his blue eyes and flying in the sky, that nickname seemed to have stuck with people.

Ralph and Caine knows that me and Jæmis are together. They're not exactly supportive of it, especially Ralph, but they accept it.

People have already figured out that I'm the owner of Sunshine. Kim told me the phone's been ringing non-stop, so I've decided to shut the business down for now and wait it out at the cabin until things quiet down.

Benjamin is facing a trial and so far, Forrester Inc. proclaimed that Hulo has been successfully eliminated. I still can't believe he was the one to kill my parents, but I'm relieved to close that chapter behind me.

For the supers that lost their abilities yesterday, Ralph has been working on the antidote that seems to have worked on me. He is getting funded by Forrester Inc.

On that note; I got mail from Forrester Inc. today.

I hold up the card against the light, seeing Jæmis' picture staring back at me. He's got long hair in this picture, so they must have taken this picture the moment he was apprehended about two months ago.

I can't help but break out into a huge smile.

"Jæmis!" I call out.

Jæmis seems to have resumed training like nothing has changed. I guess it would seem a little weird if he gave up his habits straight away. The danger is gone, but he will probably want to keep up his regime.

He stops his training to walk over to me.

"What is it?" he asks, folding his arms across his chest.

"Look what Forrester Inc. sent us!" I say excitedly and hand over the card to him.

Jæmis looks at it with curious eyes, seeing his own picture. Then his brown eyes meet mine again and he raises his eyebrows, not quite understanding what it is.

"Go ahead, read what it says," I say, trying to hold back a huge grin.

Jæmis narrows his eyes, looks back at the card, then back up at me.

"...Are you daft?"

"What do you me—" I stop myself from talking.

Of course. Jæmis can't read.

I feel so ashamed of forgetting this small detail that I find myself blushing from embarrassment. How could I forget he can't read? I'm so stupid!

I take the card back from him, settling my gaze on the ground.

"Sorry. It's an ID card, with your name on it." I scratch the side of my cheek. "...With my last name."

"What is an ID card?" he questions instead.

"It's official proof of who you are, kind of like a seal, I guess? You're now an official resident of Earth. It says your name, birthdate and so on..."

I look at the card once more. It seems they tried to westernize his name, changing it to James Hearth. Then arbitrarily slapped on a day of birth, making Jæmis thirty years old in the eyes of the government.

"Actually, Jæmis – how old are you?" I ask, stuffing the ID card into my pocket.

I realize I've never asked him about his age.

"I am fifty-four kreols," he answers without a second thought.

I press my mouth into a thin line.

"No, that is incorrect. I believe I turned fifty-five a while ago."

"Alright... can you tell me what a kreol is?" I ask. That's definitely not being translated.

"A kreol is ten nunoons long," he answers. "If you want to be specific, I am roughly 10,600 days old."

"Phew, thank you, that helps a lot more."

I start doing some math in my head. A day seemed to be very similar to a day on earth, so if he's that many days old... That should make him roughly...

"You're twenty-nine years old!" I say, completing the math in my head.

It's nice to be able to place an age on him. I had always felt Jæmis was around my age, but you never know...

"Oh, that makes you older than me, I'm twenty-six."

Then I stop myself.

No, I'm not twenty-six. I had my birthday while I was on Yool and totally forgot about it. I slap my hands to my cheeks. I've turned a year older without noticing!

"I can't believe I forgot my birthday."

"Why, is it of importance that you remember the day you were born?" he asks.

"Yes? We celebrate birthdays here every year, or kreol in your language."

"Strange day to celebrate. You didn't do anything of significance when you were born," he states casually.

"We celebrate our coming-of-age days instead."

"Oh, that actually sounds interesting. What does that entail?"

"Once Ræhu hit puberty, their body goes through a transformation so that they may be able to fæze."

"I guess I skipped that step," I say awkwardly.

"Your case is unprecedented. I never imagined I would pass it onto you."

"To celebrate, they will be ceremonially stabbed in the stomach by a sword."

I look at him in horror. "Y-you do that to kids?"

"They're not children anymore," he corrects me. "This will trigger their fight response, and in turn, awaken their ability to fæze, so that they may heal their grievous wound."

That sounds awful to me to be honest...

"Did you... did you go through with it?"

Jæmis silently averts his eyes to the ground.

"...I was too young to go through the coming-of-age ceremony, so were my siblings."

I should probably not tell him I'm happy he didn't get stabbed, that would be too insensitive regarding his situation with his early childhood.

"Then how did you..." I gesture at him.

"Fæze?"

"Yes."

He flashes me a sad smile.

"One day at the palace, my sister tried to escape. They caught her. Varitus was going to punish her, but she was already very weak, so I... took the pain for her."

"It wasn't the first time it happened, but it was the first time I felt this warm sensation course through my veins."

I place my hand on his upper arm to comfort him.

"You've always been quite brave, haven't you?"

"Brave or foolish, sometimes I do not see the difference."

I giggle. "I guess you have to be a bit foolish to be able to commit an act of bravery."

"I've felt foolish for doing a lot of things lately," he admits.

"Such as?" I ask curiously.

He rubs the back of his neck.

"...Not stopping to think that we are two different species with our own customs."

"Ah," I say, realizing he meant the fact that he bit me. "That was quite surprising, yes..."

He closes his eyes and coughs into his hand.

"...That, what you said earlier," he starts slowly. "Would you still like to go through with it?"

I blink up at him.

"You mean bonding with you?"

"To complete the bond, so that we may both be connected."

Then he awkwardly looks away. "I didn't want to pressure you, but I don't know when is the right time to ask either," he mumbles.

His demeanour makes me feel shy as well. I guess he hasn't stopped thinking about this.

What with Varitus attacking, everything has been so chaotic, that I didn't really stop to think about *us*.

But I told him I would do it – I'm not going to back down now.

"Alright, let's do it. Show me how it's done," I say, determined.

I pat myself down and stand in front of him.

A bit surprised at my readiness, Jæmis tries to pull down the collar of his supersuit, but it wasn't designed to reveal his neck, so he just takes off the entire top instead.

His chest looks pristine as always; there are no traces from yesterday's battle.

Somehow, this feels really intimidating. How am I going to do this?

"All you have to do is bite through my skin," he says, tilting his neck to the right.

"Uhm, does it have to be on your neck?" I ask, looking up at him. He's rather tall.

The question stumps Jæmis for a second.

"That is a fair question, I never imagined it could be anywhere else," he admits. "But as far as I know, the neck has always been depicted in any mating ritual graphics."

Mating ritual graphics. That must be his version of porn.

A cheeky grin spreads on my face as I think about an inexperienced Jæmis looking at porn to learn about this ritual.

"Besides, I can feel myself being drawn towards it..." he says softly. "It took a hold over me before I knew it."

I awkwardly slide my hand over the side of my neck.

"Even now?"

I can see Jæmis gulp before he answers.

"...I don't wish to answer that," he grumbles.

So that's a yes.

"Then neck it is," I say with a supportive smile. "But could you bend down? It's hard to reach you from here."

Without a word, Jæmis bends down on one knee in front of me, resembling a knight paying tribute to his queen.

A small fleeting thought enters my mind; since Jæmis is an actual prince, does this make me a princess?

I shake my head, intending to empty my mind and focus on the now. I place one hand on his shoulder and move closer to him. He's purposely not making eye contact with me, baring his neck to me instead.

I can do this; I just have to bite him.

But somehow, the closer I lean towards him, the more nervous I get.

"Jæmis, uhh, I'll be honest; I don't really want to hurt you," I admit.

"It won't hurt," he replies. "Do not worry. It will heal up soon."

"But I don't have sharp fangs, I have human teeth – they're not exactly designed to stab flesh."

"Yes, it is a miracle how the human race has survived thus far," he quips.

I huff, a little frustrated.

"Don't make fun of me, this is hard."

Jæmis takes in a deep breath and exhales loudly.

"Apologies. I am a bit anxious as well," he says.

"Please continue, there is no need to worry whether or not you'll hurt me. Just try your best to nip at my skin and draw a little bit of blood."

"Do I have to suck your blood?" I ask. Is this really a vampire thing?

"No, just pierce through it. Your saliva is what matters here."

"My saliva?"

"It is what will enter my blood and complete our bond," he answers.

I almost want to suggest I could simply prick his skin with my thread and kiss it, but I feel like Jæmis wants to keep this traditional. And who am I to take that away from him?

I ready myself once more. Here goes.

I lower my head down to his neck, trying my best to avoid touching his ear, despite how tempting it is. Then I plant my lips on the side of his neck.

Jæmis sucks in a breath when I make contact, a reaction I didn't expect. I haven't even bitten yet!

My lips are lightly pressing against his skin and I'm trying to sum up the courage to open my mouth and use my teeth.

Any second now...

"How long are you going to keep me hostage like this?" Jæmis complains.

Indignant, I remove my lips from his neck to glare at him.

Which is when I realize Jæmis' face has flushed entirely, up to his ears.

"It's almost suffocating," he says a little out of breath.

"Is your neck sensitive?" I ask dumbly.

Jæmis bares his fangs at me.

"Does it look like it has no effect on me?" he asks sarcastically.

This just makes me want to kiss his neck all over.

"Sorry, I'll try again," I say and dive back in and press my lips against his neck.

"...!" Jæmis gulps loudly.

I suck it lightly, feeling a bit too nervous to start biting straight away.

Jæmis, despite his previous complaint, doesn't tell me to stop or hurry up. In fact, he's trying his best to control his breathing.

His warm skin is too enticing and I start leaving smaller kisses on the side of his neck. Each kiss makes Jæmis jerk and twitch in response.

"You..." he growls in this gravelly tone.

"Ah!" he gasps when I decide to suck on one spot.

His reactions are too encouraging!

It makes me want to play with his ears...

But before I do any of that, I part open my mouth and graze my teeth across his skin. The sensation makes Jæmis shiver the slightest bit. He cranes out his neck to make room, inviting me in.

I press my teeth into his skin, but not enough to break it. My heart is beating so fast.

Jæmis squirms and holds in his breath.

Let's do this!

I bite him, *hard*. Jæmis draws in a sharp breath.

Thinking I'm going too far, I release him and pull back.

Jæmis exhales loudly, nearly relieved it's over.

I look at the damage I've done; my teeth have left a purple imprint behind on his neck. But sadly, it didn't break his skin.

I whine disappointingly.

"Sorry, I didn't pierce it."

"That is alright," he says in this shaky voice. "Try again."

"You sure?" I ask, looking worried at the purple tooth marks.

"Same place, don't hold yourself back. Think of it like you're feasting."

I mean, Jæmis is a total snack, but I don't think I want to go *that* far.

"Okay, let me try again," I say, placing one hand on the other side of his neck and leaning down.

As my lips touch his neck once more, I can feel Jæmis tense up. I kiss the spot I bruised softly, feeling guilty for hurting him and failing to actually pierce his skin.

This time I won't fail.

I open my mouth and press my teeth against the skin. I squeeze my eyes shut and force myself to bite down on him.

"Ngh," Jæmis grunts in response as his fæze flares up.

The tiniest sliver of warm liquid seeps onto my tongue, making me taste metal. I've done it; I broke through his skin.

I want to pull back, but suddenly there's a hand on the back of my head, firmly keeping me in place.

Jæmis' chest is heaving up and down as his breath steadily accelerates. I can feel his heartbeat leap against my mouth, even now it is filling my ears with his melody.

Another hand snakes up my back and presses me close to him. He doesn't want me to leave. So I oblige; I softly kiss his neck on the spot that I marked.

He shivers with each kiss, his fingers digging into the back of my head.

The longer I suck at his skin, the more I realize, I'm starting to feel something, too. Something like a kick.

It's unusual and unfamiliar. For a brief second, I think it's because this is arousing me, but that's not it either.

As I press my mouth against a certain spot on his neck, I feel a strong sensation inside of me as if I were the one getting kissed.

Before I know it, I can feel my veins pulsating and blue markings appear on my skin; I've fæzed. It must be because I'm excited, or because I've finally completed the bond with Jæmis.

Or maybe something else entirely...

The feeling gets stronger with each passing second. It's like my own neck is throbbing. It stings a bit, but every time I press my lips against his skin and suck...

Ah! There, I felt it!

My mind is spinning, so I take a break and pull away from him.

"Wait, Jæmis..." I breathe out. "Something weird is happening."

"You've completed the bond," he replies softly. "Well done."

"But it's like..." I start, staring at his neck.

To test it out, I return, placing a kiss above the marked area.

I sigh out loud as I feel my own neck tingle. But it isn't my neck, it's hard to explain...

I slide out my tongue to run it up his neck. Jæmis responds positively, his fingers playing with my hair and guiding me towards a spot he seems to enjoy.

And I know he enjoys it, because when I suck on that spot, I can feel it, too.

The sucking sensation is relayed back to me, it's almost like it's being done to me, but not.

I try out another spot and that one is just as sensitive, making me shiver in delight. I continue circling my tongue around on his skin, leaving behind small and fluttery kisses.

Ahh... I am feeling what Jæmis is feeling, there's no other explanation.

I nearly moan when I find a good spot to suck, feeling myself tense up in response. But Jæmis does, too. He's enjoying this a lot.

"Jæmis," I start once more, continuing to leave kisses.

"Hrmpf?" he responds somewhat slow.

"I can feel it, when I kiss you," I explain.

I don't want to stop – it feels so good, it's addicting.

"Is that normal?" I ask, my tongue eventually trailing the line of his collarbone.

"I'm unsure what you mean..." he says honestly.

"It's like I can feel what you feel," I explain and I suck on the marked area.

Wow – that area is super sensitive and raw! I suck harder, nearly blurring the line between pleasure and pain. Until I draw out a low moan out of Jæmis' throat.

"You feel it, too?" he heaves out.

I finally pull away to compose myself.

"Is this what it means to bond? Can I now... feel your feelings?" I ask, still confused and a little in a daze.

"I'm unsure," he says slowly. "Perhaps we should test it."

My eyes light up. If I can feel the sensations he's feeling, then perhaps...

1. Touch his ears. (Take the lead)

2. "Can you try touching me, see if you can feel anything?" (Let Jæmis lead)

His response was so dramatic when I gave him that haircut. He said they were sensitive, and now it's possible I can find out just *how* sensitive they are.

A hunger wells up inside of me and I wrap my hand around his neck.

"Stay like that," I tell him, getting a good angle on the side of his face.

I lean closer to his ear. "Let me see if I can feel this..." My breath hits the tip.

That small breath transfers a heat inside of me that makes my hand shake. I almost can't wait, so I stick out my tongue and lick the tip.

"...!" Jæmis sits up straight in response.

I feel weak in my knees. That was... exciting. A little tingle that I could feel in my ear and spread downwards.

"Joselina," he warns me. "Y-you know that this is part of the mating ritual."

"Uh-huh, totally clear," I say, almost drunk on this new power.

I lick it again, this time a little longer.

A warm shiver travels through my body and I tense up in delight.

Oh... this sensation. I'm shivering. I can tell how much he likes it, how much it excites him. And who can blame him? Because just that small touch of my tongue felt amazing.

It's hard to hold myself back and I mercilessly attack his ear with my tongue.

"Hmmm," I moan as I trail the top down to his earlobe.

"This is..." Jæmis grunts out. "Very seductive of you."

"Do you want me to stop?" I ask, as a warm spark of electricity builds up inside of me.

Jæmis doesn't respond, or perhaps he's unable to. His teeth are clenched and his eyes are shut.

"No," he eventually grunts out. "This is all still new to me," he says, gulping loudly.

I dart out my tongue to lap up his earlobe and bring it between my teeth.

Oh yes, right there, that's the sweet spot. It's nothing like the sensitivity of my own ear, no, it's almost tenfold the range. My heart rate increases and I can just feel myself get heated up everywhere.

I play with the supple piece of flesh, loving the way it feels. It's so soft, yet it sparkles with amazing sensations.

Jæmis is unable to really restrain himself like this, he's been clawing at my back and panting hard.

I slowly bite down on his earlobe, gently nibbling it.

"Nghh..." Jæmis grunts through gritted teeth.

Even I have to temporarily stop to let out a moan.

Shit. I guess nibbling is the way to go. This is turning me on so much.

"I didn't realize how sensitive your ear was," I say, looking down hungrily at his ear.

"You are finding my weak spots," he grunts out. "How?"

"I said I can feel it. And damn, it feels *good*."

There's no way I can stop. I want to pay attention to his other ear which has been sadly left out.

I force Jæmis to tilt his neck the other way and I quickly plant a few kisses on that side of his neck.

Hmm, I haven't been here yet. It feels ripe to be taken. A patch of skin that has been unexplored. It's highly responsive to my touch, causing Jæmis to squirm against me.

I explore his neck first; it's exciting finding the spots that he's the weakest to. He doesn't even need to tell me; I can already feel he really loves to be sucked... right... *there*.

Ahh...

"Joselina," Jæmis suddenly chokes out. "I believe you, it's okay you can—"

I take his earlobe into my mouth and tug at it.

My body nearly freezes as a shock of pleasure travels down between my legs. Even Jæmis completely shuts up.

Again, is all I can think about.

I lick at it, I swat at it, I graze my teeth across it – dear god this feels amazing. Even my quickening breath against his ear feels hot.

If I had ears this sensitive, I would be begging Jæmis to have his way with me.

Which is why I'm having my way with him – it's impossible to stop toying around with his ear.

"Hmm," Jæmis moans as I nibble on his ear again.

It's hard to nibble while I'm moaning as well. The more I pull on it and press my teeth down on his earlobe, the more sensitive it becomes. It's so delicate it doesn't matter how I touch it at this point, everything feels good.

My lips just won't leave it alone. I've slathered his entire ear with my tongue, and I can feel the sensation in my bones.

Just a nip here... ahh.

"You are so sensitive," I say briefly before nibbling.

"Ah," Jæmis breathes out. His body keeps twitching more and more.

I take his earlobe between my teeth and bite down on it.

I have to steady myself as the pleasure increases. Hmm, maybe a little harder.

Yes, he likes that.

"Joselina," he breathes out in a low rumble.

I bite down harder. It's starting to hurt, but it's such a pleasurable hurt, I can't help but flick at with my tongue before biting down on it again.

Hmm, I'm pretty sure I could orgasm just from this alone. It's that amazing.

I ravish his earlobe, feeling the pleasure transfer to me.

Until suddenly, Jæmis pulls away.

"Joselina!" he exclaims, staring at me in the face.

I shake my head to wake up from a daze.

"I-I'm sorry," I apologize quickly.

He shows me this soft look. "If we continue like this then I won't be able to..."

"Keep it in?" I finish for him. That's what it felt like to me.

"Yes," he confesses. "As much as I want you to... fondle my ears some more, I do think we should see to what extent this bond has become."

"You know what, I agree." I look over his body.

"What *e/se* can I feel?" I lick my lips and I press my fingers against his chest.

I can feel his heart pound loudly against my hand. My eyes travel down even further to his waist.

I don't need to see it to know there's a bulge in his pants. Somehow, I can feel he's excited. Which in turn, makes me super happy and excited as well.

I want to explore his entire body...

"Jæmis, why don't you sit down against that tree?" I ask, pointing at a tree behind him.

"What are you planning?" he asks, his eyes narrowing.

"I want to explore your body," I answer honestly. "Are you going to reject me?"

The flush on his cheeks and the bulge in his pants say enough. He can't reject me even if he wanted to. His body is just begging for me to take him.

Listening to me, he props himself up against the tree.

What I didn't expect was him pulling on my wrist and making me fall against his chest.

"You think you're the only one that wants to explore?"

He lifts up my chin with his hand, capturing my lips.

I close my eyes and press back against his kiss, feeling all fluttery and light. I can feel my own lips impact his, how they softly brush against his. How I exert just the right kind of pressure.

He forces his tongue inside, meeting mine halfway through. A zing explodes in my body and I grow all weak and needy in front of him. He explores my tongue with his own, and it's like he knows just where to lick and where to touch... because my head is spinning and this feels amazing.

He pulls back, his tongue slipping out of my mouth.

"You're right... I can feel it," he says.

"That means we both can," I state, looking into his blue eyes.

I'm too impatient to wait, I let my hand travel across his chest, wondering what parts are sensitive.

The warmth of my hand feels like I'm standing in the sun on a very nice day. It's soothing.

Jæmis isn't just going to take it, his hand is also traveling up my back. He tugs at my shirt and gives me a pointed look.

"It's in the way," he says plainly.

Well, I guess we are completely secluded here in the woods.

I straighten my back and lift the shirt over my head, throwing it into the grass. I unhook my bra as well and free my breasts.

Jæmis stares at me for a little while, taking it all in. A calloused hand lands on my shoulders and travels down my chest. His fingers run down across my breast.

"Soft," he mentions, his eyes giving me this excited look.

Unable to wait, I lean forwards and let my hands roam across his naked chest as well. Jæmis smirks up at me and pulls me close, both his arms wrapped around me. He notices I like it when he exerts pressure and soon enough, he's scraping his fingernails down my back.

I wonder if his nipples can be sensitive...

My index finger flows down his peck and runs over his erect nipple.

A slight tingle awakens inside of me. I end up grinning at him; seems I found another spot to tease.

But Jæmis doesn't stay still. He cups his hand around my breast, squeezing to see my reaction to it.

I lick my lips at him; he can touch me all he likes.

His hands wander over my skin, squeezing here and there, trying to see what I like, what I don't like. It feels refreshing to be honest.

Then I grab his nipple between my fingers, tweezing it slightly. A prickle of pain transfers over to me, but it's a good kind. One that's powerful and full of warmth.

I toy around with his hard nipple, flicking at it, rubbing it – all the ways to elicit a response from him. I'm getting way too much of a kick out of this.

Jæmis grunts loudly and eventually grabs the back of my neck and forces me to kiss him.

Our hot mouths connect and our kiss is fierce, each moving in different rhythms. Hands never leave skin unexplored. At this point it's hard to know what I'm feeling and what Jæmis is feeling. It's all blending together.

Then his mouth is on the side of my neck and I throw my head back to give him better access.

I can feel his fangs scrape across my collarbone and gently pressing down onto the spot where he marked me for the first time.

He bites me and I gasp. He doesn't puncture my skin, but it sends a rumble through my body. He knows just how far to go before it gets uncomfortable.

He moves a bit to the left and bites down again.

"Hnn!" I groan and press his face close against me.

Then I rub my fingers on both sides of his ears.

This time, both Jæmis and I moan out loud. But I don't stop touching his ears, holding the tips between my fingers, massaging them.

It's turning Jæmis into a mess as he breathes down heavily onto my neck.

It feels way too good to not touch his ears. It's like a completely new erogenous zone. One that I can have my way with.

Jæmis rolls his head against my touch, his eyes closed and mouth open. Having both ears touched like this, it's irresistible. They're like small tremors on the side of my head. It's soaking my panties.

Then Jæmis growls loudly as I touch his earlobes, and he sinks his fangs down into my neck.

I cry out loud in pleasure as he becomes all primal. He doesn't leave it at one bite, he leaves another mark, and another – until I'm fretting against him and just barely holding on.

As he's got a hold of my neck, I massage his earlobes, grazing my fingernail across it. Every single movement shocks me and my vagina starts to pulsate with a pounding heat.

I find myself rocking over his hips, until I scrape something beneath me that makes me gasp.

That's his erection alright. Even Jæmis stopped attacking my neck to compose himself.

"Take off your pants," I tell him.

I definitely want to feel that.

"We should both undress," he replies in a sultry voice.

I'm not in disagreement of that; my panties are going to be ruined this way.

I get off Jæmis and slowly slide my pants off, taking my panties with it so that I'm completely naked in front of him.

I don't feel uncomfortable or shy at all, despite it being my first time doing such a thing with someone. Jæmis just makes me feel so... safe.

Jæmis' eyes travel from the top to the bottom with a gentle expression.

"You're the most beautiful creature I've laid my eyes on," he suddenly compliments me.

The unexpected and honest compliment makes my heart flutter wildly.

"My marks look so alluring on you," he says as he licks his fangs.

"Let me see you, too. You have a magnificent body," I say, giving him a seductive smile.

Jæmis eventually unhooks his belt and starts rolling down the white spandex from his muscular thighs. I watch with fire in my eyes. The outline of his erection is neatly shaped underneath his briefs.

My god – I've seen it before, but didn't think it could grow this much.

Too impatient to wait, I lean forwards onto my knees in between his legs and wedge my fingers underneath the hem of his briefs. Jæmis places his hands on mine as I help him slide it down.



(CG variation with Joselina having markings)

I gasp when it comes into view.

"It *does* glow!" I say excitedly, seeing a glowing blue line go down his rock-hard penis.

It's thick; Jæmis has some real girth. Besides the fact that it glows and is probably thicker than most, it looks like a regular penis.

And my grabby hands can't wait to touch it.

I wrap my hands around the warm shaft.

Jæmis hisses in response, and I know exactly why; his body is begging to be touched. An itch that needed to be scratched. He needs relief.

I don't hesitate to lower my face and lick the tip with my tongue. A tremendous shock of pleasure materializes inside of me. It's throbbing, wanting more.

Jæmis' entire body writhes in front of me, and my own legs shake as well.

And that was just a lick.

"Hearth," he starts. "...Is this not indecent for you?" he heaves out.

"Definitely not, I want to devour you," I answer honestly.

"Not at all, I want to touch you here. I want to make you feel good," I answer.

I press my entire tongue against the shaft, amazed how good the wet and hot sensation feels. I travel up, slithering from side to side until I reach the tip once more.

It's such a highly sensitive spot, I can't help but moan and lick at the same time. His penis twitches against my tongue.

Jæmis places a hand on my head, groaning loudly. He rocks his hips so that the entire shaft slides into my mouth.

My mind suddenly goes numb as I can feel the heat of his penis on my tongue, but also how snug it feels inside of my own mouth.

And then he slides out with a moan, throwing his head back.

Addicted, I immediately move my head back to take in the entire shaft. My own moans are muffled by how large he is, even blocking my airway when he's all the way inside.

It's so warm inside. It's so sensitive – every twitch I can feel, sending waves of pleasure throughout my body. I can feel my own clitoris pulsate in response.

Jæmis pushes inside of me again. I welcome him wholeheartedly.

It's like I'm fucking my own mouth.

So I have no objections when he gets a little rougher with his movements. I can feel how much he wants this, how I'm pressing all the right buttons.

"Haaaa..." he breathes out as he stops when he's pressed himself all the way inside.

He runs his fingers through my hair.

"I can tell how much trouble it is to take me into your small mouth," he says and his penis suddenly twitches as if to make a point.

He slides out again, shivering as he does.

"This is so indecent..."

I engulf his shaft once more; I want him inside. I want to feel how warm I am. Jæmis grunts and bites down on his lips.

"I'm trying my best..." He says while panting. "To not be too... rough."

I swirl my tongue around the tip; it's so damn pleasurable. I love lapping him up, to feel him twitch. To feel what he feels.

Disregarding what he said about trying not to be rough, I devour his penis with everything I have.

"Hmm... Ah!" Jæmis moans as I bob my head up and down.

Wet sounds fill my ears. I can't help but moan in irregular breaths. Each time he goes back into my mouth, I'm in pleasure heaven.

I want to keep going. I suck him off and groan in response. It's like my own little plaything; everything I do to it, I can feel tenfold.

"Joselina, b-be careful," Jæmis chokes out in pleasure.

I know exactly what he means, because I can feel his climax building up. It's not going to stop me; I'm going to suck him off until completion.

"Joselina," he moans once more.

I briefly remove my mouth from his penis, lapping up the tip to take a small break.

"Careful of what? I can feel how much you're enjoying this. Your body doesn't want me to stop."

"I don't want to dirty you..." he admits.

That alluring expression on his face and the way he's being so genuine and with a twitching and hard erection in front of me, I can't help but smile.

"That's not a problem," I say deviously.

Then I dig back in, my mouth wrapping around his girthy penis. Jæmis sighs out in relief, his thighs clenching together.

I use my hand to travel up and down the base while I suck the top with my mouth. This actually feels like I'm moving through something. It's reaching the entire base, sending tingling sensations down my legs.

"Ah... hmm..." Jæmis is unable to hold his own moans back.

I know exactly what gets him going, and I can't help but respond to it, too.

The way my tongue feels when it slides right underneath the tip – ohhh, it's giving me shivers.

Jæmis hips move along with me, pressing his penis into my hands, sliding the tip further into my mouth.

I almost want to stay still and savour the feeling as he pushes himself in. Who knew blowjobs were this amazing?

Addicted to the feeling, I eagerly greet his entire length, sliding my mouth down until it hits the back of my throat. I can feel it pulsating. I can feel how warm I am clenching around him.

I can feel the vibrations of my own muffled moans hitting his sensitive areas.

"Ahh... haa!" Jæmis groans as he pushes my head against his crotch, forcefully making me take it all in.

But I love it.

The way he gets rougher just increases the sensations. It's pulsating so badly; it wants to be released. I'm trying my best to eat him up.

I can feel it... he's at the edge.

I dance my tongue around the shaft, until Jæmis slams it inside of me again.

"Nggg...!"

I moan loudly, but the sound is blocked by his enormous girth. I nearly want to beg him to do it again, but instead, I do it for him.

I slide my mouth up the shaft and then roughly bring it back down again.

"Ah...aarghh!" Jæmis groans as he pulls me by my hair to remove his penis from my mouth.

I can feel it pulsate and vibrate in my body with each spasms his penis makes. The way the liquid builds up inside and unleashes itself onto his own stomach.

I am brimming with pleasure, my entire body shaking as each shock feels better than the last.

Jæmis pants loudly as glowing semen splatters onto his sweaty body.

I collapse on top of him, unable to do much else as my body surrenders to this fantastic wave of pleasure.

I wipe my mouth and feel in a complete daze as I stare at his torso. I just basically felt his orgasm, and it was the most amazing thing ever.

"I can't believe..." I start, still panting fast. "You actually have luminous sperm."

Jæmis brushes his fingers on the back of my scalp.

"Do you think I'm done?" he asks seriously as he gets up.

"Huh?"

— Kind choice

"Can you try touching me, see if you can feel anything?" I ask.

"I can try," he says, a bit unsure.

Finally, he rises from the ground to face me. I look up at him and gulp, feeling a bit like prey in front of him.

Then a hand tentatively reaches out to touch my cheek. It's a gentle touch despite his calloused hands. I lean into his hand by instinct.

"Hmm," he hums while focusing his eyes on me.

He moves his thumb across my skin and then presses down, softly making a dent on my cheek.

"Something is there," he says. "It's unusual and..."

"Warm," I finish for him. "I feel warm, do you?"

Jæmis brushes his thumb to the corner of my mouth, completely zoned out. Then his thumb swipes across my bottom lip.

My heart leaps against my chest.

Jæmis' eyes widen in response.

"I felt that," he says.

He starts moving his thumb across my lip, pulling it down. I feel super shy in front of him like this, but his touch is very gentle and intoxicating...

"Soft and tingly," he murmurs, leaning closer to me.

I nod slowly, agreeing it feels soft and tingly when he rubs my lips like this.

Intrigued, Jæmis explores further, his thumb pulling down my bottom lip even more until he presses it inside my mouth.

The skin of his thumb grazes across my teeth until he meets with the tip of my tongue. A small crackle of electricity travels down my spine and I close my eyes with a soft sigh.

"..." Jæmis suddenly has no words to say either.

More confident this time, he swipes past my wet tongue, toying around with me.

"This... you like this," he says, his breath quickening.

Unable to speak with his thumb in my mouth, I just shyly nod at him.

"...*Suck it*," he tells me.

My heart beats against my chest and my eyes fly open.

He's giving me such an erotic look, there's no way I could disobey his command. In fact, him telling me what to do is really kind of hot.

So I bring my lips together to suck on his thumb.

Jæmis continues to watch me, his cheeks red and his own mouth parted open.

His thumb plays with my tongue, circling it, then tickling the top. Hahh... this is really sexual.

Then he removes his thumb from my mouth and I nearly whine in response.

"Seems you are right – I can feel the way I was inside of your mouth," he explains.

I kind of want him to go back in again.

"...And how much you enjoyed it," he says in a softer voice.

He places his other hand on top of my shoulders, gently pressing down.

"On your knees," he tells me.

Without a word, I bend down onto my knees, my face dangerously close to his crotch. I look up at him as he places a hand on top of my head and brushes the hair out of my face.

"Open up," he says, licking his lips.

I open up my mouth – yes, tell me what to do.

This time, he presses both his index and middle finger inside. They're much thicker than his thumb and I suck on them in delight.

Eager to explore and see what kind of reactions to get out of me, Jæmis moves his fingers around, scraping them across my tongue. I happily lap him up – the feeling is quite intense.

Then he slowly drags them out of my mouth, only to push them inside again. I sigh with a shiver, my eyes nearly fluttering close.

I twirl my tongue around his digits, loving the way it tingles and makes me squirm for more. Jæmis notices I seem to like it when he pushes them in, so he starts to set a rhythm of brushing his fingers across the top of my tongue, going in and out of my mouth in a steady pace.

Ahh, it kind of feels like he's fucking my face, but with his fingers instead.

To say this is a turn-on is a huge understatement.

But what I feel is relayed back to Jæmis as well. It's clearly having an effect on him as his chest is heaving up and down faster than before.

"Amazing," he breathes out. "To think your tongue is this sensitive."

He brings them back inside, a little rougher this time. I moan in response, but the sound is muffled by his fingers.

His fingers slide across my tongue, then over my lips – and back in they go. Faster than before.

My entire body heats up. I just want him to have his way with me, it feels amazing.

But when he removes them again and doesn't push them back in, I groan in disappointment, looking up at him.

He's smirking.

"I wonder what else you're sensitive to."

That's what I want to find out as well.

"Strip." It's a single command, but he says it so seriously.

I gulp and then stand up. Slowly, I remove my top, dropping it behind me. I unhook my bra and let it fall as well.

It's a little embarrassing how Jæmis is watching my eyes move.

"Everything," he stresses.

"I'm getting there," I say. So impatient.

Kicking off my shoes, I roll down my shorts, along with my panties.

It's not the first time I've been naked in front of him, but this is under a completely different context.

Jæmis deliberately takes his time to look at every inch of my naked body.

Then he takes a step forward, and another, until I'm pushed back against the harsh bark of a tree.

He gazes down at me, hunger evident in his eyes.

I feel completely defenceless like this. Open for the taking. It's riveting.

"Just magnificent," he says.

I feel myself blush in response.

Then he moves in for the attack, his hand on the side of my head as he tugs on my hair to force me to lean to the left, leaving my neck wide open.

Before I know it, his lips are on my neck, right above my collarbone. I hit my head against the tree, but the small dull pain is soon forgotten when he sucks my skin. His lips feel sizzling hot, or maybe that's just my reaction to it. I bite down on my lips, holding back a moan.

He leaves a trail of fluttery kisses, moving up my neck. I squirm in response, feeling helpless.

"How sensitive are human ears?" he whispers directly into my ear.

"...Why don't you find out?" I tease him.

"It's rounder than mine," he says as he licks the tip of the cartilage.

I heave out a shivery breath, grabbing onto his back with my hands.

"How many times have I lied awake at night, thinking of doing exactly this..." he murmurs before taking my earlobe in between his teeth.

I gasp out loud as he nibbles on it. It's definitely sensitive alright!

Even Jæmis ends up groaning into my ear, feeling the same thing. God – his moans are hot.

I whimper in front of him, clawing his back as he continues to graze his teeth on my sensitive piece of flesh.

The clawing feels good – in fact, it seems more enjoyable if I use my nails.

Then he bites down on my earlobe and I nearly scream, digging my nails into his back. The pain soon turns into pleasure and I squeal in elation. My ear feels hot and sensitive, the longer Jæmis decides to lick and tug at it.

I can't help the tiny moans escaping my mouth.

Neither can I stop roaming my hands across his broad back, feeling all the scarred tissue with my nails. I drag my nails down his back, scratching him.

Jæmis hisses, pressing his body against me, releasing my ear.

"It's hard to focus with you doing that," he grunts. "Stay still."

"Why don't you make me," I smirk at him as I scratch his back again.

With another hiss, he aims straight for my neck and bites down on it.

I yelp in response, but my body knows better and shivers in glee. He doesn't pierce the skin, but it's enough to make me wince. But I love it nonetheless.

Before I know it, Jæmis' hands are wandering down my chest, his hand brushing over my breast.

I arch my back against him, sighing softly as he sucks on the area he bit.

His fingers flutter over my nipple and I bite back down a moan.

I can feel him grin against my neck.

"This spot..." he says darkly, his index finger flicking across my nipple. "Is sensitive."

"Hmmhmm," I agree, squeezing my eyes shut as he starts to play with my nipple.

Then he leaves my neck alone and suddenly his tongue slides down my breast, teasing it across my nipple.

I release a soft moan.

He holds my breasts with both his hands, squeezing them softly while his tongue swirls circles along my nipple. I want more, this is too good.

He sucks on the hard knob, rolling it between his teeth.

"Ah!" I gasp loudly when he nibbles it softly.

"Haa..." he himself moans in response and suddenly he's fæzed right in front of me.

That means he's loving this, too.

He flicks his tongue against it several times before going back to biting, driving me wild. He knows exactly what I like, because he feels everything I do.

I never knew this would drive me wild, but it does.

After my nipple starts to get sore, he moves over to the other breast, repeating the same thing there.

I rub my thighs together for some friction, as Jæmis is driving me crazy with thirst. I'm dripping down my own legs like this.

Jæmis leaves my breast alone, staring into my eyes with his azure ones.

"I can feel you rubbing," he says, then looks down.

I turn my head away, a little embarrassed.

"I'm just... turned on," I admit.

"Turned on?" he repeats.

"Aroused," I clarify.

He brings his face closer and sucks on my earlobe again.

"So am I," he confesses. He's not lying, because I can also feel the heat coming from his pants.

I sigh, throwing my head back, giving him more access.

What I don't expect though, is how his arms snake behind my back, his hands gliding over my butt, before they squeeze my thighs, hard.

I'm lifted up in the air with a yelp.

He throws my legs across his shoulders and pushes me against the tree bark.

"Hold on," he tells me.

I look up at the tree branch above me and grab it with my hands to keep myself steady. His strong arms keep me propped up on his shoulders.



He pushes one leg up, spreading me apart so that his face rests right in front of my vagina.

"I can feel it contract," he says, looking directly at it. "It's *aching* to be touched."

I feel embarrassed with how exposed I am in front of him, yet it also turns me on exactly for that reason.

Slowly and gently, he sticks out his tongue, softly making contact with my flesh.

I squirm against the tree, squeezing my eyes shut. Ahh, it really is aching.

He pushes his tongue against my folds, laying it down flat to reach as much surface area as he can. The muscles inside of it contract and I moan.

He licks his tongue in an upwards motion, until he hits my very sensitive spot.

"Ah!" I cry out, my fingers digging into the tree branch to prevent myself from losing grip.

But Jæmis doesn't give me a moment to gather my thoughts – he got a taste and he wants more. He flicks his tongue across my clitoris again and he moans against my vagina.

"This knob is... riddled with nerves," he breathes out, before he licks it again.

Those nerves are definitely being fired up right now. He's touching me in all the right places.

Noticing that too much pressure can be uncomfortable, he leaves it alone for a second, his tongue moving down to my entrance.

"An opening," he murmurs, licking across the area.

"Hmm," I groan.

"You want me to press it inside," he says. "I want inside," he clarifies.

His hot tongue worms himself through my opening and I groan, rocking my hips into his face.

It slithers inside before he pulls out, licking my clitoris again.

"Shit," I curse. "Haaa..."

I don't have to tell him what I like, he's just finding it out all on his own.

He slurps me up, his tongue gliding up and down, hitting all the right spots. My body is convulsing like this, an unstoppable force is building up inside.

It's even hotter when Jæmis moans along with me. We're both feeling it.

The sounds are downright nasty, but I don't care. He's got the most magnificent tongue in the world.

"Jæmis," I warn him as I lick my lips.

But it almost seems like he's not listening, he's licking me so enthusiastically, that I can't tell whether it's for him or for me.

"Ahhh," I moan, not caring anymore.

Just eat me out as much as you want.

I bite down on my lip and push my hips into his face; my body craves more friction. More pressure.

"Shuuu," Jæmis moans hotly against my vagina.

The pressure is building up. His tongue is flicking back and forth, expertly moving its way across my most sensitive spots.

"I'm not gonna last much longer," I announce.

He buries his face into me, devouring me like an animal. He's groaning and licking; he wants me to come.

He wants to *feel* me come.

I throw my head back, opening my mouth as I hold my breath, rocking my hips into him.

Yes....yes...!

He flicks his tongue across my clitoris before dipping it inside of me and I can't hold it anymore.

My body contracts and arch my entire back, rubbing myself all over his face as a wave of pleasure washes down on me.

"Ahh... haaaa!" Jæmis is the one moaning, shivering as well.

My muscles contract and spasm as I tremble gleefully in the pleasure of my orgasm.

His tongue slows down until he's just softly lapping up my juices.

My muscles feel so weak, that I end up letting go of the tree branch.

I collapse into his arms and he catches me, finally putting me down.

My legs are trembling all over, I'm barely able to stand straight. I rest against him, taking deep breaths. So is Jæmis, as he's experienced the same thing.

"God, that felt good," I say while panting.

"I've never felt like that before," he replies. "It was hot and wet and..." he trails off without finishing his thought.

I press my forehead against his bare chest, trying to catch my breath.

He softly strokes the back of my head, giving me some time to recoup.

"Joselina," he calls out my name.

"Hm?" I tilt my head up to look at him.

"Don't think for a second we're done here," he says hungrily as he unhooks his belt.

He rolls down his white spandex off his thighs until it pools near his ankles and he kicks it all off. Standing in only his briefs, I can see the outline of his erect penis in his briefs.

I gulp.

Jæmis slides off his briefs, releasing his penis. Oh god. It has a glowing stripe on it, of course it does.

— choices merge

Before I know it, Jæmis has spun me around, pinning me against the tree. I can feel his erection rest against my butt.

He lowers his face into my neck.

"I *need* you," he groans. "I want to feel myself inside of you."

It's not a lie; I can feel it in every fibre of my bones.

My vagina is dripping wet, and honestly, I just want him to rail me.

"Then take me," I answer, flicking back my head towards him.

"Hold on," he says, referring to the tree.

Jæmis lifts up my lower body with his strong hands pressing into my thighs and I hang onto the bark of the tree to keep myself steady.

He lines me up so that the tip of his penis presses against the entrance of my vagina. My wetness is dripping all over him and I hold in a breath, feeling myself shiver in anticipation.

"Don't worry," he reassures me as he kisses my neck. "I'll go slow."

Then he presses forwards and the tip finally enters. I'm so turned on and wet, that it easily slides in. I don't think he even needs to go slow.

I groan when I feel my soft walls cling around him. Jæmis bites down onto my neck with a grunt and I can barely breathe.

He's... so... thick! And I'm so squishy and warm, I want him to keep going in until there's nothing left for me to take.

My vagina contracts, squeezing around him, and both Jæmis and I moan in response from the pleasure. He likes it when it's tight.

"Haa... how can you... even take this?" he grunts into my ear. "I'm so big inside of you."

I push myself against him until he's slid all the way inside. Each vibration I can feel and I stop moving to savour the feeling. I can't believe I know what it feels like to be inside of myself. The way it's so warm and how each slight movement makes me tingle.

"I can't believe how good this feels," I say with a moan.

"Bite me again," I beg.

Jæmis happily obliges and sinks his fangs into my neck and I moan out loud. Then he starts to move his hips, I can feel him slide out, hitting my pleasurable spot on the way out.

What I didn't expect was his fingers accidentally grazing over my clitoris. When he brushes over the highly sensitive knob, I groan loudly and push myself up against him, making him fill me up.

"Ahh," Jæmis moans as he releases my neck. "Right there," he whispers.

"Yeah," I agree. "Now fuck me," I tell him.

His fingers reach my clitoris and work their magic on me again. I can't help but completely submit to the pleasure he's giving me.

"Ahh, that feels so good, Jæmis," I moan.

Then he slams inside of me, groaning loudly. My walls cling around him as he pushes through, slippery and sensitive. My god – his penis is just getting stimulated from every possible side, it's hard to concentrate.

This feels way tighter than my mouth. He's just spreading me from the inside.

Even Jæmis has a hard time to keep himself steady as he slowly slides out.

Jæmis' fingers work magic on my clitoris, shocking me each time he moves it just the right way.

He slams against me, making a loud smacking sound between us, and immediately muffles his own groan by biting down on my neck again.

I throw my head back, crying out in pleasure.

"Your moaning is absolutely..." Jæmis grunts. "Addicting."

He rocks his penis in and out of me, his fingers making sure to rub my little knob of pleasure.

I can't believe how good I feel. I can't believe it's like I'm fucking myself.

My pleasure and his start to blend together. The way his penis moves inside me, the way I feel around him. How his fangs sink deeper into my skin until I'm sure he's actually pierced it.

I'm in ecstasy.

Jæmis picks up the pace, rocking himself against me. Yes – just like that.

He doesn't release my neck, insisting on keeping a hold on me. His breaths are low and fast, coming out in bursts.

I can feel my orgasm coming. Or is it his orgasm? I don't know. All I can feel is scaling a mountain of pleasure and I'm nearly there.

Jæmis knows just which spot to hit each time he dunks back in; it's making my knees so weak. Thank god he's holding me up.

I cling onto the tree as he rams into me, more and more I can tell he's losing control.

"Yes," I moan. "Keep going."

He buries his fangs into my neck and with one final push, it delivers us release. Our orgasm melts together into one heap of explosive pleasure.

"Grr...ngghhaaa..." Jæmis groans loudly as his penis throbs and pumps out his sperm.

I can feel it release and settle inside. I can feel every nerve on my body just pulsate erratically. My mouth is wide open but no sound comes out, I'm desperate to inhale as much oxygen as I can.

I feel so weak and fluttery.

Jæmis rests his arm against the tree, covering me with his body as he pulls out. I can feel his warm sperm leaving a trail between my legs. He heaves in deep breaths as he snuggles his face into my neck.

"I apologize... for marking you again," he murmurs softly.

"Hmm," I say softly. "Don't apologize," I take in a deep breath. "You could feel how much I liked it."

"*I felt everything*," he whispers.

"I didn't think that..." I pant. "This is what bonding meant."

Jæmis lowers himself down and pulls me into his lap so that I rest against his naked chest.

"I had no idea either," he confesses as his eyes turn back to normal and his markings fade.

My own seemed to have faded as well.

"I've heard adults tell me that you will be joined as one – this is not what I thought it meant," he breathes out.

"Please don't tell me I can now feel you get hurt as well," I groan.

Jæmis likes to train and I'm sure with what he's always up to, it's quite heavy on his body.

"...I cannot answer that," he replies honestly. "I will keep that in mind."

My eyes widen when I realize this could go even further.

"Do I die when you die!?"

Jæmis looks down at me, his eyebrows lowered in confusion.

But then he bursts out into a boisterous laugh.

"Haha...!"

I puff out my cheeks at him in response.

"Do not worry, this is nothing like that oath we took. Your life isn't tied to mine. Plenty of Ræhu outlived their mates."

I crash against his chest with a sigh of relief. That's good.

Then I start realizing how sticky I am with sweat, not to mention the semen leaking out in between my legs.

Would we be compatible enough for this to impregnate me? It's a good thing I'm using birth control pills, can't be too sure after all.

I wedge my fingers between my thighs to wipe off a wet spot and then notice my fingers are glowing with some kind of substance.

I give Jæmis a strange look. "Your semen is literally glowing," I say, flicking it off my fingers.

"Is that so strange?"

"After what I've experienced with you today, I guess this is the most ordinary thing of them all."

Jæmis chuckles lightly.

"As much as I like cuddling here with you, Jæmis, I'm sweaty and sticky and I would like nothing more than to take a bath."

"That can be arranged, we can go to the lake."

"...I meant a shower, not a lake."

Jæmis gives me this devious smile and there's a glint in his eyes.

"No, you wouldn't dare," I warn him.

But he's already lifted me up and shot off into the sky.

-- **Lake**

Soon enough, he's across the lake and releases me until I fall into the water.

I splash frantically in the cold water to reach the surface.

"Jæmis!" I yell out at him, soaking wet.

Jæmis also dives into the water, swimming up next to me.

"What's there to complain about? Now you can clean yourself," he says with this shit-eating grin.

I splash water into his eyes.

"Jerk," I say grumpily.

He catches one of my wrists and pulls me into him. Our foreheads bump into each other. Droplets runs down his hair into his eyes.

He takes one of my hands from the water and brings it to his lips, kissing my knuckles.

"I may not know what a 'jurk' is, but I'll be the best 'jurk' you'll ever meet."

I snort out loud and laugh.

"I don't think it means what you think it means, but I appreciate the sentiment."

I tug my hand free and cup the side of his cheek.

"I guess you're my jerk now," I say softly.

Jæmis' eyes flare up blue, fæzing in front of me. He gives me a genuine smile, one that I savour every bit of.

Then he leans in and kisses me on the lips.

I guess I fell for the biggest jerk in the universe.

And that's okay.