Olivia’s Choice

By

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**OBSERVED TENDENCIES:**

* You. Love. “More than a little”. Rather than letting the extent of the emotion be inferred from the context, or the conversation, there are tons of places where “<person> was more than a little <emotion>.” Trust that the reader doesn’t think that every mention of an emotion is in its most raw form.
* Repetition. This manifests in two ways. First, repeating facts already stated, in generally the exact same way. This was very glaring with “typical annax” and describing annax universal features (eyes, hair color) several times over.
* Second, repetition in meaning. Many times something is said, then it’s said a different way but with the exact same meaning. Nothing is added other than words. I have outright deleted some cases of this, and commented a good deal of the rest.
* Making explicit well-implied emotions, reactions, and expressions. I removed a good number of adverbs because the dialog they were attached to didn’t need them at all. There are several other phrases, additional explanations, and the like that you don’t need.
* “Stock images.” People’s eyes resemble dishware when surprised, people’s stomachs get afflicted by a Boy Scout troop gone rogue with the knot-tying class, and many very similar descriptions. When a single emotion is almost always represented by the same visual image, it comes off as a lack of creativity on the writer’s part.
* Tendency to narrate “outside” of the character’s perspective. There are several cases where the style of prose shifts to be more distant than a perspective character, and it sticks out. There are also a couple of cases of the narrator stating something that the perspective character could not know.
* Over-use of Rule of Three. Too many descriptions get bogged down by a seeming *need* to have three pieces to it. This, that, and the other thing every single time slows things down, and rarely enhances the richness of the scene. Sometimes this applies to two descriptions where one would do.
* Fragment Gestures: There are a few places in the story where a gesture is simply said, like “a nod”. This doesn’t fit with your flowing, description-heavy style of writing prose. It’s too short, too abrupt. The way you write is like an oral historian, telling the tale over a campfire. Fragment gestures don’t fit with that.
* Now, Then: There’s a lot of “<thing happens> now”, or “then <thing happens>” in the story. Every single case of now, then, or similar, is unnecessary. The passage of time is implied by the text moving onward, of what is said in a later sentence by necessity being later in time than an earlier one. It’s a verbal tic of sorts, and unnecessary. Other guilty words are “those”, “these”, and “that <thing>” (instead of “the <thing>”).
* Grinning speech: Most of the time you avoid the oversight of having someone say something, and them do an action that speech cannot possibly do. (e.g., “I get you,” she waved.) The one you almost *always* mess up is “He/she grinned.” One does not speak language with grins.
* Lack of commas before conjunctions: Very rarely are there proper commas before typical conjunctions like “but”, “and”, and “though.” Instead, the comma tends to be moved to the beginning of a parenthetical phrase (e.g., “He was typing but, after some reflection, decided to stop”) *after* the conjunction. Even when there’s a parenthetical phrase involved, the comma remains in front of the conjunction (e.g., “He was typing, but after some reflection, decided to stop”).
* Using “…” instead of “-“ for when someone’s speech is interrupted by another person. “…” is for when they trail off on their own, their voice stopping at an unnatural point in the sentence. “-“ is when someone cuts them off. I’ve corrected most of them.

Chapter Thirteen

HE tightened up immediately. She could feel tension run through him like electricity, bunching up muscles before setting them rippling under the skin.

She had hoped one taste would end the craving, but unfortunately, the opposite happened. One kiss and she was an addict. She wanted, needed, more.

Baphrem turned his head and those incredible eyes focused on her mouth. They were warm now. The pale blue had gone hazy with heat and longing. Under the weight of his stare, Olivia turned her head towards his.

“Baphrem…”

The intensity in his gaze grew, vacuuming out her breath and sucking all the light out of the room. The walls, the floor, the sofas, everything disappeared to leave his blue eyes staring into hers. From the pool of ache inside her, a longing slid free and whispered its way up to her lips. “Baphrem…please…”

“Ask,” he said. “You have to say it.”

The old panic made one last ditch attempt to avoid that vulnerable demand and she shook her head. “L-let me go. I d-don’t want you…touching me…ape.” Her voice had no power, no heat.

“Liar.”

He raised a big hand, wiped her cheek, and as he moved by her mouth, her lips opened and touched him. The kiss was soft, tiny, but he felt it. His eyes closed and he bit his lip. When he let his breath back out and his eyes re-opened, the hunger in them made Olivia’s breath catch in her chest.

His fingers dropped down to her blouse, and while his eyes remained on hers, he slipped the first white button free. Then the second. And stopped. “If you want this, you have to ask for it. You’re no coward, Teil. Say it.”

Her proximity to him was the only thing keeping that blouse closed. Olivia’s eyes fell down to his mouth. He was so close to her, so close. She wanted, ached to have his hands on her. “Please…” *Please don’t stop. Please touch me. Please!*

He brushed her cheek with his lips, kissing away the tears. “Say it.”

“I c-can’t.”

His hand slid behind her neck, tilting her face up to his. “You want this? Tell me.”

She didn’t think the agony could get worse. “Please…”

“No. Not until you say it.”

Hiding her eyes from him, she finally found the courage to whisper the words. “I want you.”

The triumph in his eyes was almost painful to watch. Without waiting for anything else, his hands moved up and pulled her jacket and blouse off, then held her shoulders while his lips found hers.

He had kissed her before, but this time it was very different. His tongue swept in, claiming her as his and making everything below her waist feel wonderfully shaky.

She might have been shy to say it, but Olivia knew what she wanted. With confident hands, she pulled at his shirt, yanking at it until he raised his arms and the thing went away. He was beautifully made and she didn’t shy away from taking one good long look. Powerful, wide shoulders, tight stomach, wide, thick chest, Baphrem was a feast for the eyes. Biting her lower lip with anticipation, she reached for him, touching the soft skin, learning textures as the butterflies in her stomach fluttered like mad.

She would have liked to keep going, but Mr. Impatient had other plans. One flick and her pants were open, another and they were falling down her legs. Normally, Olivia was aware of what was happening to her clothes, especially when they were on her, but everything seemed surreal, dreamlike. One look at his abs and she couldn’t care less what he was doing to her bra. It took him cupping one of her breasts in his hand and flicking the nipple to catch her attention.

“Ahhh…” A wonderful, hungry feeling oozed through her. It added to the surreal feeling of the moment, but let her be honest in a way she never had before. She kicked her pants away and moved closer to him, craving him. Imitating him, she licked one of his nipples and, when his breath caught, she sucked on it.

His breath stuttered and, delighted, she used her teeth on him.

He cursed and grabbed her. With a single lightning-quick move, he placed her down on the couch with him on top. His body pinned her down, the weight feeling deliciously heavy. She tried moving her legs or arms, and finding herself truly caught, felt a rush of wetness between her legs in response.

“Baphrem…” She writhed under him, moving desperately, arching into him, trying to get the relief she needed. Her legs kicked and pushed at the couch, shoving her pelvis into his, sending her mind somewhere else completely.

Now that her fear was gone, evaporated under the heat of his eyes, she could see what had been hiding behind it. She hadn’t known she could be this aggressive or hungry. Her two previous attempts with human lovers didn’t even register on this scale.

She didn’t think of choices or consequences when she shoved her hips against his. She certainly didn’t consider what was coming when she bit into his forearm. The rules of decency that usually guarded her behavior had snapped with the heat of their struggle, leaving her naked spirit out to play. She was a wild creature, wanton, hungry, and fearless.

Baphrem ducked her mouth, sneaking past it until he reached her neck. His teeth caught the tender flesh and bit down. Hard.

Olivia went completely still. Her body tensed up, coiled and tightened. Baphrem’s mouth didn’t slow down. It was busily nipping, brushing, and pulling at her while she tensed under him.

He shifted his shoulders so that he caught both her hands into one of his and moved the other one down to her waist. The sound of fabric ripping was loud in the silent room, but Olivia barely heard it. Her mind had given up processing any of the mundane everyday things that usually kept it busy. When Baphrem’s mouth closed over a nipple, she cried out, curling under him like a bow. He moved lower and she didn’t understand why until she felt his breath near her pelvis.

His lips touched the inside of her thigh and cleared the fog in her mind. Baphrem wasn’t sophisticated or even civilized, and sex seemed to bring that aspect of his personality out in force. He was intense, driven and certainly never asked for permission or checked in with her to see if what he did was all right. In shock, she realized he was headed right down *there*!

Olivia jackknifed off the couch and tried to stop him. “No,” she said, trying to pull at his shoulders.

Pale blue eyes looked up at her. “Why not?”

She was already hot and flushed, but his question sent her skin into volcano territory. “Because it’s not…” She waved a hand, at a loss for how to explain manners during intimate moments at such a time. “Decent people…” she started again

His eyes grew heated. “I’m not one of your decent, civilized humans, Teil. You won’t be able to keep me on a leash.” And with that his head dipped low.

“Ahh….” Olivia fell back among the cushions, what she was about to say vanishing behind a keening gasp. Her embarrassment flew out the window in the face of the most acute pleasure she had ever felt. The feeling was so strong she feared it might not only be addictive, but could make her lose any sense of decency.

He paused and she almost managed to find her brain, then he did it again, and again. Olivia shook with the force of the orgasm. It rose from the soles of her feet, rushed by weak knees until it encompassed her entire body. Sweat broke out over her skin as she tensed and screamed with the force of it.

There was a pause while Baphrem disposed of his pants. It lasted less than a second, possibly less, but even in that small amount of time, she felt his loss. When he came back to touch her, she actually sobbed in relief and curled her legs around his waist, trying to keep him near her.

He wasn’t going anywhere. His hands pinned hers to her sides, his hips met hers and he thrust his length inside her. She bit her lip in response. Either he was much larger than her previous lovers, or she was so worked up she could feel every inch of him. He moved out, creating incredible friction, then shoved back in until she saw stars behind her eyes. He repeated it, thrusting into her, conquering her, marking her as his and sending her over the edge she had been heading to. Bending back, clawing at his shoulders, Olivia came again in great, almost painful waves that contracted her entire body, pulling at her muscles until she had to thrust a hand into her mouth to keep from screaming.

In spite of being otherwise occupied, Baphrem managed to take the hand back out by holding both of hers in one of his. “No.” He sounded out of breath and Olivia found consolation in that little fact. “You’re not holding back on me.”

He was still moving inside her, sending aftershocks through her. Her hands were on his shoulders, her nails digging into his flesh. He wasn’t done. She couldn’t stop the feelings, and part of her didn’t want to, but they were sending her out of her carefully protected comfort zone. Behind that, there was only wildness.

With a growl that would have made her blush under normal circumstances, she reached forward with her mouth and caught his neck with her teeth. She bit, not gently, and heard his responding hiss. His face whipped around to face her and she saw his eyes smolder. Fire licked at her and then they were both clawing at each other.

He turned her around onto her knees and entered from behind. Olivia screamed, the penetration hitting her deep, to her very soul. She was pliable under his hands, moving as he directed, all her resistance gone. His hand reached between her legs and she whimpered when he found her. “Baphrem…”

He thrust back in, harder than before, somehow larger. From this angle, he was able to hit something inside that made her gasp in shocked disbelief. She couldn’t talk, couldn’t reason, could only hang on and feel while he pounded into her.

She screamed, the cry wrenched from her throat, but it didn’t slow him down. Baphrem was driving into her, creating delicious friction along sensitive tissues that shrieked at her until release became the only thought she could understand. He pounded and ground and she writhed under him, feverish for the peak only he could bring her to.

“Come for me, Teil,” he commanded. And she did. She flew apart like shattered glass, fragmenting into a million pieces that left her body shuddering in the aftershock.

She felt him release with a harsh grunt and a rush of warmth flooded her insides. Then they collapsed in the mess of cushions and covers that was the sofa.

They were both breathing heavily, a film of sweat coating their skin. Olivia didn’t think she would be able to move for a week, but Baphrem was a machine. With a groan of effort, he got up off of her and walked away.

She frowned, her body suddenly cold without him, the sweat she had created cooling on her as the reality of what she had just done sank into her awareness. They had just had sex. It wasn’t something she did with people she had only met a couple days ago. And if she was honest with herself, she had only had sex a couple of times. It had been such a dismal experience that she had almost considered becoming a nun and giving up on the entire thing.

He was back with a blanket and a washcloth before the thought could fully unravel itself. He wrapped the blanket around her, then used the washcloth to clean between her legs. Olivia sighed at the first and moaned at the other. She sat up to stop him, but with a frown he held her hands away.

“You’ll let me do this, Teil.”

She frowned in return, but fell back among the cushions, too exhausted to complain. He finished, wrapped her up in the throw and pulled her to a sitting position on his lap. He sat touching her face, tracing her jaw while she struggled to remain awake. She watched him watch her until he leaned down to kiss her softly on the lips.

“Mine,” he breathed against her mouth.

She frowned again as sleep slid further away. “No,” she whispered. “I belong to myself.”

He smiled and she gritted her teeth. It was the condescending smile of an adult to a child. “I marked you, Teil. You carry my scent now. Other males will recognize it and stay away from you.”

Good God. They really *were* animals. “Nope. I’ll wear perfume or something. I belong to no man.”

His hand curved around her jaw, then pulled her sideways until their mouths lined up for his kiss. In spite of her exhaustion, in spite of everything she had just done, Olivia felt the pull of attraction deep in her gut. For a tempting moment, she let herself go with it, then drew back. His hands tightened in response, moving her until she was where he wanted her, taking control and turning her on once more. She resisted again, horrified at her own reaction, and pushed at him. A moment later, they were wrestling again, tumbling onto the floor.

The blanket tightened around Olivia, encumbering her ability to fight him off—not that she was Rambo or anything but still, it would have been nice to do something. Instead, she was tied up like the human version of a sausage. She struggled to free her arms and legs while Baphrem moved freely above her. While she wiggled like a worm on a hook, Baphrem opened the blanket below her legs and sheathed himself in her all at once.

He filled her completely, taking breath, speech, and resistance from her, the onslaught of pleasure rendering it all pointless. Instead of struggling, Olivia moaned and shoved back at him, shamelessly asking for more.

He gave it to her. With a fierce, possessive look on his face and sweat drops on his forehead, Baphrem shoved into her until all thought fled from her mind, until she was coming, until she was his.

When he slowed down enough that they were both panting and shaking, he moved his body so that he wouldn’t squish her while he looked at her through lazy, sleepy eyes. “Mine,” he breathed.

Olivia only moaned softly in complaint. Her body felt too happy and satisfied to do more, but she wasn’t all right with what had just happened. Not because she hadn’t wanted it or enjoyed it, but rather because she had.

“I…I can’t.” She wasn’t making much sense because she was still trying to unscramble her brain from where he had sent it. Somehow, he had the power to not only make her lose control, but to make her enjoy doing it. “This…this isn’t going to happen again.”

“If you don’t want it, just say no.”

She knew that, knew it, and hated the fact that she had caved as soon as he touched her. “I’m saying no now.”

“Now doesn’t count.” He grinned. “You have to say it *while* I’m touching you.”

Big, blooming bastard. He knew exactly what her weakness was: him. “Look, the point is that this was a slip, and if we use our heads instead of thinking with our hormones, we can see that it was a mistake. We should stay away from each other.”

He gave a low chuckle. “Wrong. You’re mine, Teil. Admit it. Mine.”

The possessive, happy tone of his voice shook loose the last of the cobwebs in her brain. Her frown turned into a full-fledged scowl. She sat up and hurriedly pulled the blanket up to cover her breasts. They were not massive things like Nassa’s, but they were hers and she had no intention of having them on display. “We’re not animals, Baphrem. Other males….” She shook her head. “What other males? How many people do you think I have sex with?”

His eyes flashed. “After today, only me.”

“Oh, my God.” She raised her hands then lowered them quickly to keep the blanket in place. Baphrem was naked as well, but that fact didn’t seem to bother him in the least. “Look, you don’t give me orders or to tell me what to do. You’re not my father.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be talking to your father soon enough.”

Nassa’s comments flew through her head and she gawked at him. “What? You’re insane! I’m not mating you! I’m leaving! You don’t seem to get the fact that I’m not staying!”

“If you’re right, you have nothing to worry about.”

He was wrong, of course. She had a ton of things to worry about. She had just had sex with someone she wasn’t sure she liked, she was still stuck in Viddion, for an extra week no less, she had not been able to call Charlotte, and the exchange project was no further along. Her time in Viddion had been an unparalleled disaster.

Something must have showed in her eyes, because he frowned. “Don’t start,” he warned.

“What?”

“You change things around until you get all scared.”

“What? No. I do not!”

He gave a derisive snort. “Please. I’ve never met someone as scared as you.”

“I’m not scared! What would I be scared about? Huh? You have no idea…” Olivia was about to start pacing when she realized she was still naked. She hastily returned to her seat where the blanket covered most of her. “I’m not scared!”

“You, sweetheart, are terrified.”

“Of what?!”

“Of everything, Teil.”

“Olivia!” she snapped. “It’s Olivia.”

“No, you’re not. That’s exactly my point.”

With a growl, Olivia secured the blanket around her body and tried to find her clothes. When the only thing she could find was part of a sleeve from her blouse, she gave up on her suit and looked for the annax clothes. Victims of their physical tussles, they were scattered on the floor. She grabbed them as best she could with one arm while the other held the blanket in place.

“This was a mistake,” she said as she walked out of the room. “Clearly it got to your ego, which didn’t need much inflating to begin with, and now you think you have some sort of insight into my life. You don’t.”

She was close to another door now. Bathroom or kitchen, she didn’t care. It closed and would give her privacy to get dressed, and find what was left of her dignity. “And one more thing, you are not Freud. So I suggest you stop trying to psychoanalyze me. You do a terrible job.” With that she closed the door on his face. She had to shut it with her hips, lessening the volume of the slam.

The annax clothes were a new set of triggers for her. The drawstring pants, blue sash, and soft tan shirt brought back memories that she could have done without. Still, they were clothes. With boots, shirt, and sweater she felt warm, comfortable, and able to handle him. Armed with that boost of confidence, she ran a hand through the bird’s nest that was her hair, realized that part of her was completely hopeless, and opened the door again.

Outside, Baphrem was waiting for her like a tiger prowling inside a cage. He too had dressed. When he saw her in the annax clothes, his eyes lit up with fire, and Olivia felt her jaw tighten in response. How she could have let him kiss her, let alone had sex with him was a mystery. She was obviously not well.

“You shouldn’t read something into this that isn’t there,” she started. Strangely, the annax clothes gave her extra confidence. She knew that the boots would grip the wooden floor, the pants would move with her, and though she would never admit it, she liked how she looked in them.

He walked up to her, crowding her against the wall. “Just what do you think happened?”

“A mistake.” She had opened her mouth to say more when he lowered his face and touched his lips to the tender skin under her ear.

“Is this a mistake?” he asked, kissing her. “Or this?” His teeth raked her gently where her shoulder met her neck.

He was doing it again, and just like before, she was unable to refuse him. It was like Superman and kryptonite—except it felt good. Olivia bit her lips to keep from making noise. His hands were on the wall next to her face and she wanted them on her, bruising her, touching her, branding her. Just thinking about them made her shiver with need. She clenched her hands into fists to keep from touching him. She was afraid of what would happen if she did.

He was still kissing her, his tongue sweeping into her mouth, touching hers, making her forget her desire to resist. His scent was in her nose and in her skin, surrounding her, soaking her in him. She swallowed and felt a few more of her reasons against him disappear.

“Answer me.”

She turned away from him, trying to remember her reasons. She caught sight of the trees outside and went immediately numb. “I *am* answering you. You’re just not listening to me. Try and hear what I’m saying. I’m leaving, Baphrem. I don’t belong here, and I’ll be leaving soon. If we continue like this, we’re only going to hurt each other.” She was staring at him when she said it, without heat or anger, and it seemed to finally get through to him.

He frowned, his eyes darkened with something that she refused to see as pain. “You’re serious,” he said finally.

She nodded. “Very.”

“You’re smarter than that, Teil.”

Olivia frowned. “What are you talking about? I *am* smart.”

“Not if you think going back to live with those humans is going to stop you from being what you are.” He gripped her arms hard and gave her a little shake. “You’re annax, Teil. You belong here. Running away didn’t change that the last time you tried it, and it won’t this time either.”

She felt a growing ball of panic settle just behind her chest. “My DNA doesn’t dictate who I am. My choices do.” Her voice had changed, become harder and colder. She was past anger into a numbness that seemed to freeze everything down to her toes. Her heart was beating at a frantic pace, her chest a vice crushing down on her.

“If you really think living among humans makes you one of them, you’re crazy.”

“And if you think the fact that I was born here means I have to live here for the rest of my life, you’re in denial!” She broke his grip with a shaky hand and took a couple of steps away from him. “You’re just upset because I said no. Shocking! Someone actually said no to Baphrem!”

He gave a short little chuckle. “You’re pretty good at trying to shift the focus away from yourself, but the bottom line is you and your fear.”

“Stop it!” she shouted. Her head hurt and her knees were shaking. “Stop pretending that you know me better than I do, because you don’t. I’m leaving and you don’t like it. Fine. There are a lot of things that I don’t like in my life, but I still have to deal with them. You need to accept that you can’t control it and that us working together isn’t such a great idea if…”

“Olivia.”

Everything stilled.

He was very still as well. In fact, his face had lost all expression. His eyes were not the heated, warm ones she knew. Instead, they looked dispassionate and cold. A lick of hurt cut down her throat, ending at her heart. She forced her face to remain still. She wouldn’t let him see how much those eyes hurt her.

“I believe you.”

“What?”

“I said I believe you.” His voice was like his face, calm and unemotional. It didn’t sound like him at all. Tears formed in the back of her eyes. “You’re right. We shouldn’t work together. I’ll arrange for someone else to help you with the exchange package.”

“Well, thank you…finally, you’re showing…”

“And you should leave.”

She froze. “What? Look, I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings. I really didn’t want to do tha,t but you really need to-”

He held up a hand, stopping her. “I’m not hurt.” He grinned, but it was nothing like his previous smiles. “Well, a little, but it’s mostly ego and nothing that a little time won’t heal.” There was a calm about him that almost convinced her of his sincerity. “Like you pointed out, I’m the larenleader. Of all annax, I certainly can’t afford to mate with a human.” The expression on his face was almost apologetic, and she felt a frown tighten her face.

“What? What are you…” Why was her heart beating so wildly? This was what she had wanted to hear.

“I’m not done,” he continued. “You’ll finish the project as quickly as you can and then, you’ll leave. I have one favor to ask.”

“What?” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“Don’t come back. If you want to visit with your brother and father, ask them to meet you somewhere outside our borders. Viddion is no longer your home.”

She nodded, the tears making her exit an urgent necessity. She opened her mouth to say something, but he turned and walked away. Dismissing her in the most effective way.

She staggered away from the laren, telling herself she would eventually be glad that they had broken up. This ending was inevitable and waiting would only make it more painful. But that logic didn’t hold a lick of power against the maelstrom of pain raging in her chest.

Blindly, she made her way back to the laren, to her bedroom and luggage. She dug frantically through it, her tears impeding her sight, and finally found them. A moment later, dressed in shorts, t-shirt and running shoes, she was heading out the door when she bumped into Maddias. He stared at her, then froze.

“What’s…”

“Just going for a run,” she managed.

He stared behind her. “You walked right by the living room…”

Olivia looked after him. He was right. So she had. “I…I have to go for a run.” Her voice sounded dead, void of any tone.

Maddias’ nose twitched and he frowned. “Are you all right?”

She gave a shaky nod. Crap. Annax and their sense of smell. She should have had a shower. “Yeah. Fine.”

His frown didn’t clear, but he nodded and she ran by him. If she had to do any more talking, she was going to burst into tears, and once those started, she wasn’t sure she’d be able to stop.

As soon as she was outside, her feet took over.

Once upon a time, she had known how to run deep into a forest and let herself go without fear of not finding her way home. Like all annax, she had the innate ability to never get lost. She hadn’t lost the talent; it was just rusty from disuse. Today, she was in so much pain that she actually wanted to get lost, to leave Viddion behind with its demands and memories and just immerse herself in the barren, leaf-less forest around her. But she knew she’d never be truly lost.

As she ran, she found that her pain translated easily into speed and with each step, she was distancing herself from the raw agony raging inside her. For some reason, her body was starving for the exercise. She craved movement, wanted to run, further and faster.

There were sounds around her, birds and critters, but the only things she heard were her breathing and the rhythmic pounding of her running shoes against the earth. There was as much anger in her as grief and running became the outlet that she used to exorcise both emotions out of her body.

Faster, harder. She gritted her teeth and urged her legs to move quicker.

The forest floor wasn’t even. It wound up and down hills, offering roots and rocks she had to jump over. It didn’t deter her. If anything, those challenges goaded her on.

The wind was cold against her as she ran and that was a blessing because she could feel heat gathering in her body, concentrating in her temples and core, coming out as sweat. She welcomed it as well. She wanted to sweat and tire herself out. She wanted to run until there was no air and no strength left in her, to go on and on, to never, ever stop.

Running wasn’t completely carefree. Memories haunted her, reminding her of a time when she had been so much younger and she had run desperately, much like she was doing today, trying to get away from Viddion. She remembered the tears she had shed. They were not unlike the ones that ran down her face now, mingling with sweat and tickling her chin as they hurried downwards. Branches had slapped against her then just like they did now and pain had made her numb to their numerous cuts just like her anger did now.

She had come full circle after all. After spending all those years avoiding Viddion, she was back where it had all started. Maybe Baphrem was right; maybe she did belong in this chaotic, barbaric environment. It had certainly found a way to get her back here, even when she was so determined to stay away.

Baphrem. Just the name triggered so many emotions. Part of it was because they had sex, but mostly it was because of the way she responded to him. From day one, he’d been able to get under her guard. Why him? Why did it have to be an annax? As if she didn’t have enough emotional connections with the race.

After a while, the pain subsided, letting Olivia finally admit—to herself at least—that she cared for the man. Otherwise, his dismissal wouldn’t have hurt so badly. She could accept it now, when she was running and pounding her feet against the forest floor. It didn’t change anything, because she still had to leave Even if he didn’t understand her reasons, but she could understand her own pain better now.

It was illogical, but his dismissal had hurt worse than she could have ever imagined. She had expected a sense of relief at his acceptance, not that agonizing pain. Part of it had to be that she was attracted to him, but the rest?

She didn’t understand it any better now than she had before, but it didn’t matter. The bottom line, as she had told him, was that she didn’t belong in the marah. It wasn’t a capricious whim that made her stay away; it was personal experience and knowledge. She knew what would happen if she stayed. She had seen it happen to her mother. Anything was preferable to that. Anything.

She slowed down to a walk, giving her burning muscles a chance to recover before she started the jog back. Around her, the forest was coming alive. She tried and failed to shut her ears against the barrage of information coming at her. She could easily get lost in the sounds, but she’d lose everything she had fought so hard for if she did.

Something made her turn around. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up as she looked through the foliage around her, only to find nothing amiss.

Pain exploded on her head and she went down. She had barely enough time to wonder what branch had fallen on her head before everything went black.

Chapter Fourteen

“SHERHANN is determined to start that extension tomorrow. I told him it’s going to start snowing any day now, but he’s pigheaded enough that…” Lios paused and stared at his son. “What’s the matter?”

“Teil isn’t back.”

“What?”

“She left this morning to go for a run and she’s not back yet. It’s the middle of the afternoon.”

Lios thought it over. “She’s probably with Baphrem.”

“Maybe,” Maddias agreed. “Even so. That’s still not right. She can’t just disappear without telling anyone where she’s going, or when she’s coming back.” His voice rose in volume as he spoke. “She needs to understand that there are rules here. I don’t care what sort of standards they have in that human city of hers, we’re annax. It’s dangerous out there. She needs to tell us where she is so we know she’s safe.”

“Right,” Lios agreed without any heat. Very little upset him anymore. He didn’t make decisions or voice opinions.

“I’m going to go talk to her, and she’s going to hear me out. I don’t care if she’s with Baphrem, or with the Mother Tree herself. If she thinks she can just stay at someone’s laren without letting us know…” He was still muttering to himself as he walked out the door. “I’ll be back in a while!” he called as he strode away.

Maddias talked to himself all the way to Baphrem’s. Since he agreed with everything he said, by the time he got there, he had worked himself into quite a temper and was ready to crack a few skulls. He wasn’t a fighter and didn’t know the difference between a jab and a hook, but he worked in construction. The trade gave him daily workouts and genetics had given him size. If he punched someone, the recipient wasn’t going to forget it for a while.

Point in case, the knock he gave the door shook the laren to its foundations—and gave Maddias a lot of gratification.

Ias opened the door with a frown that could freeze lava.

“I’m here to see my sister,” Maddias snapped, strolling right by him. “Where’s Baphrem?”

Ias didn’t get upset over the dismissal. Instead, the guard’s mouth curled into a delighted smile and he walked purposely forward, hands turned into fists.

“Right here.” Baphrem walked out of the reception area with a frown that had even more power because of his dark eyebrows. “What brings you here in such a foul mood, Maddias?” He gave Ias a warning look, and managed to stop the man before punches flew.

“Rats!” Ias grumbled, looking around for another victim.

Maddias ignored the guard. “Why are you keeping Teil here?” he demanded. “Where is she? I want to talk to her.”

Baphrem raised a hand in warning, not to Maddias, but to stop the rest of the guards who were suddenly pressing in on them. “Let’s all calm down,” he said softly. “First of all, Maddias, your sister’s not here. She left this…” He frowned, suddenly understanding Maddias’ anxiety. “She’s not with you?”

“What do you mean she’s not here?” Maddias asked, his anger turning into sudden worry. “Where the Claws is she? She came home this morning, then left to go for a run. We haven’t seen her since! I assumed she came back here. If she’s not here, where in all the sacred trees is she?”

Baphrem’s face hardened. “She’s not with you?” he repeated even more softly.

Little by little the tension that had filled the room—and most of the guards—changed from anger into concern. They all had either mothers or sisters; they understood Maddias’ concern. More than that, as guards they protected the inhabitants of Viddion. If one of them went missing, it hit all the guards on a personal level.

“No, of course she’s not with me! Would I be here if she was back at the laren? And I want to know what you think you’re doing by keeping her-”

Baphrem interrupted him with a shake of his head. “I’m not keeping anyone here against their will. I haven’t seen your sister since this morning.”

His answer hit Maddias like a ton of bricks. “That can’t be! I mean, if she’s not with you and she’s not with us, where-” He paused suddenly and a terrible truth flew by his mind. “Do you think…do you think she left? Could she have left Viddion?”

He looked around, as if one of the guards might know the answer to his question. “But she didn’t say anything…” With a sinking heart, he thought of the last time his sister had left Viddion. That time, she hadn’t told anyone either. “She went back to the humans…”

Baphrem placed a hand on his shoulder. “Maddias, wait. Let’s not go jumping to any conclusions. Right now, we need to make sure she’s not in Viddion meeting up with some old friend while we’re convinced that she’s gone.” He motioned to Aerden. “Can you go check on Nassa? Ask her if she has seen Teil.” Then he turned to Almas. “Get Lilli,” he said softly. “Let’s see what the trees will tell us.”

Almas and Aerden were gone in a second. Behind them, there was a sudden silence.

“I thought…” Maddias ran a hand through his red hair, feeling like an idiot. “I’m sorry for what I said earlier, Baphrem. I thought she was here arguing with you or something.”

“No apologies needed. But I think you should tell your father that she’s missing.”

Maddias shook his head. “No,” he replied, his eyes haunted. “I’ll tell him once we know she didn’t—” Maddias swallowed his next words. He refused to say *run away*. Refused to say it. “Once we know she’s coming back,” he amended.

When Baphrem nodded, Maddias walked over to one of the long couches and sat down. He wasn’t going anywhere until he found his sister or answers.

He didn’t have to wait long.

“I’M going to get her, Klias.” Baphrem grabbed his broadsword and a quiver full of arrows. Though their choice of weapons put them at a disadvantage, no annax would ever use a gun.

“Not alone.” Klias, ever calm, actually frowned when he grabbed his arm. “Baphrem.” His tone of voice cut through his friend’s pain. “Not. Alone.”

Any other time, Baphrem might have marveled at the concern he saw on Klias’ face. But today, he barely noticed it. All he could think of was Teil. He knew very well just what she was enduring at the hands of the tionnax—two years of hunting with the norns had been very educational—and that knowledge was eating him alive.

Even worse, he had told her to leave Viddion. Sure, he hadn’t meant immediately , and he certainly hadn’t meant for her to get caught by tionnax, but his conscience wasn’t listening to any of that. It kept insisting that it was his fault.

It had taken Jaddan, Lilli, and Eidan less than an hour to find her tracks and figure out what had happened. The signs of her struggle had been a dead giveaway, in spite of the tionnax’s attempt to hide their trail. Lilli had explained it all to them in that direct, efficient way of hers.

“I told her to go.” All Baphrem could see was the hurt in her eyes when he had banished her. His mind couldn’t seem to focus on anything else. “I told her to leave, Klias. And now she’s…they have her. The tionnax!” If he didn’t do something to help her soon, he was going to go mad.

“Baphrem…” Klias was his usual calm, icy self, and Baphrem had the sudden urge to kick him where it counted. He was sure Klias would develop some empathy for his situation if he had some pain of his own to bring him clarity.

“They have her. They’ve had her for hours already!” He had to focus on the simple mechanics of breathing to get air into his lungs. “I’m going after her.” Baphrem slid a broadsword behind his back. “I’m not waiting around on this. They’ve had her for hours. Hours! You know what that means, Klias. You, of all men, know!” His eyes, haunted and desperate, fixed on his friend.

“You’re not thinking rationally,” Klias said with some asperity. “She’s not annax. She’s more tionnax than…”

Baphrem’s fist caught him square in the jaw and threw him back against the wall. Klias leaned against it for a second before he shook his head like a dog and stood back up. It was a pretty good hook, but he recovered quickly—after all, he’d been punched by norns. The only concession he made was to move his jaw gingerly back and forth. He stared at Baphrem with a tightly controlled expression. “If you were any other man…”

“I’m getting her back, Klias,” Baphrem repeated. His jaw was so tight it hurt even to breathe. “I won’t ask you to come with me, but I’m not going to just sit here and let them kill her.”

“Baphrem.”

“What.”

“Not alone. I’m coming with you.”

Baphrem turned and stared at Klias for a long, charged moment. “That’s better.”

Klias raised long fingers to his jaw again, then gave him a dark look.

Baphrem ignored him and ran a hand through his hair. Klias was right. He couldn’t afford to let his emotions run things. If he did, then Teil would die.

Years ago, he had left his home and friends to help a friend. When they had found Meoghan dead and Klias’ search turned to vengeance, Baphrem had had trouble understanding him. He had no such difficulties now. No one hurt his family and got away with it. No one.

“We’ll both go.” He stood and stuck out his arm.

Klias gripped his forearm with a nod. “And we both come back.”

Baphrem nodded and, just like that, pledged his life to Klias once again.

They had vowed the same thing in Zearlach. With a shake of his head he released Klias’ arm and turned towards the door. “Go and tell Niobis to be ready for casualties. We’ll leave in half an hour.”

“There’s a message that came from the tionnax camp. Someone named Bill wrote it,” Klias said as he walked away. “The guards are going over it now.” He touched his jaw, winced, and gave him a dark look. “Damn that hook…”

Baphrem hid a smile. “I’ll handle it. Come back as soon as you’re done.”

Without another word, Klias left. Baphrem walked back into the living room.

The guards were still there. Though they were sitting down on the sofas and teasing each other, there was no mistaking the tension in the air. This was what they trained for.

“It could be a fake,” Emmaires was saying as Baphrem walked in.

“How could a message be a fake, Emmaires?” Ias asked.

Emmaires opened his mouth, frowned, and shut it back up.

“Maybe a group of aliens wrote it,” Thane suggested to Ias’ amusement. “Or maybe Elvis wrote it.”

“Who’s Elvis?” Emmaires wanted to know.

Baphrem cut through the circus and took the message without a word. He already knew what he was going to do, but the poorly written message in smudged charcoal only confirmed his course of action. “This is just a poorly hidden attempt to get me out in the open. We’re not going.”

“They have Teil? We know that for sure?” Aerden asked, breaking the silence.

Baphrem nodded.

“They sent the message to you. Personally…” Sharmas frowned, tilting his head thoughtfully. “Something doesn’t add up here. I mean, how do they know you’re larenleader? The leadership only changed hands yesterday.” He looked at Baphrem. “This message’s addressed to you as Larenleader of Viddion. How could they possibly know that so quickly? And, along the same line, how did they know to kidnap Teil? How did they know that she’s important to you?”

He leaned forward and glanced at the rest of the guards. “I think…if they had someone watching us, or watching you, we would know.” He winced, uncomfortable with what he was saying. “I think we have a traitor inside Viddion.”

It was like letting a coyote loose inside a chicken coop—absolute chaos. There were shouts, threats, screams, and even a couple of laughs.

It was Aerden who finally shouted loudly enough that they went quiet. He turned to his brother. “You knew about this!” At Baphrem’s guilty silence, Aerden got even angrier. “Well, why in all the holy Mother Trees haven’t you told us until now?!” he asked, standing up.

Baphrem coolly waited until his brother sat back down. “The tionnax have been trying to cripple Viddion for years. That’s nothing new. The spy was their latest attempt…until they took Teil. I didn’t want anyone to know we were aware of the spy. I want him relaxed and comfortable. I still do. So this information doesn’t leave this room.”

There were frowns and nods around the couches. Then silence as Klias walked in.

“All set in the healer’s hall,” he said, motioning to Sharmas. The guard passed him the message, which Klias read with the calm of a monk.

“It’s obviously a scam,” Almas put in. “The signature is interesting. Bill must be their leader.”

Baphrem nodded. “Tonight, we’re going to go in and get out quick. Our greatest advantage is time and numbers. I need you to stay here, guarding Viddion while Klias and I go do this.”

There were a couple of displeased looks around the guards, but no one said a thing.

“They’ll have guns,” Ias mentioned softly.

“And we’ll have jakkars,” Emmaires grinned. His comment earned a round of cheers from the group.

“They’ll be expecting a rescue attempt,” Klias added when they quieted down. “And the more we wait, the more prepared they’ll be. I agree with the larenleader. We have to be quick and careful. This is what I’m thinking.” He motioned to the map spread out over several tables and outlined the plan. “Clear?” he asked when he was finished. There were nods around the group.

“I like the plan, Klias. We’ll go with it. Now, let’s talk to that messenger then get ready to go,” Baphrem said. “Ias, tell Lios and Maddias that we’re on our way, then come back and take your position.”

“Got it.” Ias walked out the door.

“At this time of night-” Emmaires frowned.

“They won’t be sleeping,” Baphrem broke in. Neither man would sleep until Teil was back safely in Viddion. “Where is that messenger?”

“She’s in the other room with Ellix,” Sharmas answered. “She seemed terrified.”

“She?” Baphrem frowned. “The messenger is a woman?”

Sharmas winced. “Looked more like a kid to me.”

Baphrem swore, took off his sword and longbow, then turned back towards Klias. “Let’s go. The rest of you, get ready. We’re leaving in ten minutes.”

With Klias leading the way, they walked into the small waiting room. He was hoping that Sharmas had exaggerated and the messenger was really a big man or, even better, a scruffy, rough-looking, brutish man. Instead, he saw Ellix, standing by a chair looking gloomy. That in itself wasn’t a good sign. Ellix had a silly grin permanently on his face.

Baphrem had trouble spotting the messenger. He dismissed the small bundle of clothes next to Ellix as unimportant and kept looking through the room. Finally, finding nothing, he had to return to it. A closer look revealed a shock of red hair and a pair of freckled skinny arms that sank the rest of his easy-to-dislike-brute theory.

Seeing them come in, Ellix bounced to his feet and rushed over. “Thank the Mother Tree you’re here. I didn’t know what to do with her.”

Klias gave him a reproving look that the other completely missed.

Baphrem’s hands turned into fists. “A child. They sent a child.”

“Nothing weirder than folk, my grandfather used to say.” Ellix rocked back onto his heels.

“They probably thought she would make a good messenger because we wouldn’t harm a child,” Klias put in, ignoring Ellix’s comment. “If that was their plan, they miscalculated. We need to interrogate her.”

“She can’t be a day older than twelve, Klias,” Baphrem said softly. “I’m not letting you interrogate a child.”

“She’s eighteen,” Ellix said nonchalantly. “And her name’s Natalie.”

Baphrem gave him a long look. “You introduced yourself, did you?”

Ellix never got sarcasm. “Yeah. We talked for a bit before she started the rocking thing.”

Klias shook his head in disgust and approached the girl. Baphrem followed, liking the entire situation less and less.

She looked up when they got close, revealing large green eyes and a pale, freckled nose. Her cheeks were streaked with tears, and though she was sitting, there was no missing the shakes running through her body. If she was eighteen, she was the youngest eighteen Baphrem had ever seen.

“Natalie, my name’s Baphrem. I hear you brought us a message.”

She gave a tiny nod. “What are you g-going to do with me?”

“We ask the questions here,” Klias replied with the warmth of a blizzard.

“Who told you to bring that message, Natalie?” Baphrem asked.

But Natalie couldn’t focus on him. Her eyes had taken on a wild quality as they looked frantically around. When she caught sight of the ring on Klias’ hand, she went eerily still. Then her eyes turned back into her head and she fell backwards into the chair.

“She’s going into shock,” Baphrem said, moving forward. “Ellix, get some blankets and a cloth.”

Natalie gave a sudden lurch and threw up the contents of her stomach all over the floor.

At the first sign of vomit, Ellix squirreled out of the room. Even cool, calm Klias sprang backwards. It was Baphrem who ended up grabbing the shaking girl and set her down until she was sitting on the floor.

Ellix eventually reappeared with blankets. Baphrem wrapped up the girl from head to foot. “Let’s take her to Niobis.”

“Baphrem, we can’t risk her escaping,” Klias warned. “Niobis isn’t prepared to keep her under watch. She has to stay in a cell tonight.”

Baphrem didn’t like it one bit, but he nodded. “Ellix, you’re staying here tonight, on watch duty,” he ordered. “Klias, you can put her in a cell, but I want her to have a blanket and water. Comforts. Keep in mind that she’s as much a victim of the tionnax as Teil is.” With that, Baphrem walked out of the room.

Klias turned to the still green Ellix. “She goes in her cell with a bucket of water and a blanket, but she doesn’t come out. For any reason. Am I clear?”

Ellix nodded repeatedly.

“She gets water, but nothing else. I don’t want her fed.”

He might not like it, but Ellix walked forward to obey, his nose still covered by his shirt.

BILL was a small man with a big problem: he was insane.

Like most people who are mentally ill, Bill was convinced he was healthy, even when faced with pretty damning evidence. For example, he should have known something was off the first time he took advice from a squirrel. Most people—most sane people—don’t usually consult rodents when making decisions. Bill had rationalized the incident by calling it an inconsequential detail at a time when he was incredibly preoccupied. Afterwards, when the logical part of his mind reasoned that such behaviour hinted at a deeper problem, he shrugged it off. Who really cared where he got his ideas as long as they were sound?

Bill wasn’t only insane: he was also hardworking, intelligent, organized, and confident in his abilities. If it hadn’t been for that one small detail, he would have made an incredible leader. As it was, he was only a passable one.

The tionnax weren’t aware of his illness, but had they known, they would have done little to change things. As a general rule, tionnax died young, including their leaders. If Bill was a little odd, at least he was alive and in charge.

Still, there were disturbing signs.

To decorate his own hut, Bill had covered the outside with an assorted number of round pink dots—to keep the evil out. Last summer, he had started feeding peanuts to the trees to boost their energy, and lately he had started taking his own vitamins—anally. When two of his guards saw him arguing with a shrub, they were convinced they had seen the worst of it. They were wrong.

What no one knew was that Bill was slowly being tortured by his own imagination. Thoughts, images that weren’t his own appeared in his mind unbidden. At first, they had been odd ideas that he could simply ignore, but with time, they became more persistent and, worse, more gruesome. If he tried to ignore them, they simply came back, again and again, filling his every waking moment until he wanted to scream.

Then, one day, out of desperation, he acted one out and, miracle of miracles, the thought didn’t return. It was gone and Bill was free.

Unfortunately, his delight only lasted a little while. A day later, the thoughts were back again. This time, however, there was one difference. Bill knew what to do. As soon as the first graphic, violent thought entered his mind, he went into action and made it a reality. And immediately, the thought disappeared and he had blessed relief.

Overnight Bill went from tortured to optimistic. He could sleep, he could enjoy being around his friends and, most importantly, he was free to have his own thoughts. He had found a cure. Beyond delighted, Bill hoped to get rid of all those horrible thoughts for good with his new tactic. There was only one problem: he had to act out the images.

But it was the only cure he had. So day after day, week after week, Bill acted out the thoughts. He was convinced this new strategy would put him in control of his life, and he wasn’t one to give up and surrender. The more frequent they became, the faster he acted them out. The more violent they were, the more brutal his re-enactments. Over and over, he kept at it until he couldn’t stand the things he had to do to keep them at bay. Until even he saw that he was turning into a monster.

Inside what remained of his soul, Bill realized there was something wrong with what he was doing. Desperate, he came up with a new idea. Maybe the solution wasn’t to act them all out, but to do one to the extreme. Maybe, if he did something really, really horrible, they would leave him alone for good.

As ideas go, it wasn’t his best, but it was the best one he had time for. Bill decided to try it out. All he needed was for a thought to appear.

When he saw in his mind Baphrem’s girlfriend covered in blood, he didn’t even get excited. He simply planned, organized his men, and went about making that thought a reality. Just like any other time.

Catching the girlfriend wasn’t even difficult. He got lucky: the girl in question went for a run just as his men were patrolling the vicinity. It was that easy. Now that same girlfriend was in his hut, tied up, and waiting for him. And Bill was more than ready for her. Time to get rid of those bothersome thoughts once and for all.

Still, Bill knew what he was doing wasn’t right. He knew he was going to hurt, and most likely kill that woman. He didn’t enjoy hurting people. But he was hurting as well.

Using his intellect, he rationalized what he was about to do. He might hate himself for what he had to do to her, but he hated those horrible thoughts more. So she had to suffer. It was only for a little bit. He had been suffering his entire life. If she only knew the hell that was his life, she wouldn’t complain. Plus, Bill would eventually end her pain when he killed her. He only had to make sure he surpassed the expectations of the scenario in his head. That way the thoughts might finally leave him alone. And he’d be free. That was all he wanted.

He really was a peace-loving man.

Chapter Fifteen

PAIN was her entire world. It had intensity, frequency, and even moods. It was so powerful, it shredded her thoughts and blew away pretenses and the wonderful comfort of denial. In the middle of its fiery embrace, without excuses to mar the view, Olivia saw herself clearly for the first time in years. A couple of things became immediately clear. One, she was going to die, and two, she was in love with Baphrem.

It wasn’t just pain that marred her reality. Her body was fighting injuries in several places at once. As she faded in and out, it became more and more painful to return to her body. They had broken several of her ribs and her right leg. They had cut off her hands and burned out her eyes. They had kicked her stomach and back so many times she could barely breathe for the agony. With each drag from her struggling lungs, oblivion became more and more tempting.

She had no concept of time, but eventually, Olivia heard someone walk inside and come to a stop near her. Acting out of reflex, she tried to open her eyes. It took her a moment to remember she couldn’t do that any longer.

One syllable and she knew who it was. Terror told her his identity before he had finished pronouncing his first word. It was the leader of the group, a man with sunken, dark eyes and long, brownish hair.

“I know you’re awake,” he said softly. “I…there’s a few things you need to know. I…” His voice drifted off uncertainly for a moment. He sounded sad, almost remorseful, which made no sense to her. “I didn’t want to do this, you know. I really didn’t! I hate hurting people. I really hate it! But…they’re awful! You don’t know what they’re like. They’re in my head every moment, every day! They’re going to drive me crazy! I had to do this or….” He stopped again, and there was the sound of movement. “I bet you think I could have stopped them another way, but I’ve tried everything. Everything!” he shouted.

He was angry, as angry as if *he* had just been tortured. Olivia kept quiet, her mind frantically trying to figure out if there was a chance she could use this visit to escape. “You probably think it’s easy to stop them, but you don’t know. You can’t know what it’s like in my head! You have no idea!” He stopped, leavingonly the noise of his heavy breathing for a moment. “I spoke to the squirrels. They knew. They knew what was what.”

Oh God. She was in the hands of a madman. Despair kicked in, followed by another gut-wrenching lightning bolt of pain.

“It’s really hard for me. I can’t eat, I can’t sleep. They’re there all the time, every moment of the day. Every. Single. Moment!” Sobs filled her ears. Then, just as quickly as he had been upset, he sniffed and stopped crying. “I shouldn’t even be talking to you. They won’t like it. But I’m done doing what they want. I have a plan, you see.”

 He gave a watery little laugh that was as creepy as it was repelling. “It’s going to work. I know it is…I just can’t do it any longer.” He was crying again. Olivia couldn’t keep up with his mood changes.

“But I had to tell you, because I really didn’t want to hurt you. It’s just that I can’t fight them any longer. I’m just so tired of them. So tired…I just want them to leave me alone….” More tears. He sniffed and cleared his throat. “You’re no annax. We both know that. You don’t have a connection any more than we do, so really, you don’t deserve this, because you’re one of us. But those images kept coming, They wouldn’t listen!”

He shuffled closer and Olivia felt her stomach contract with fear. “But I have a plan, see?” He giggled for an eternity. Olivia wondered if he had finally lost what was left of his mind. “It’s a great plan, and it’s going to work. I know it! And that’s where you come in. I have to hurt you, you see. It’s the only way they’ll leave me alone. So, I’ve sent your boyfriend a little present and I’m pretty sure that’ll satisfy them. I just wanted you to understand why I had to do it. I’ve really suffered enough.”

With an inhuman effort, Olivia managed to open her mouth. “You…deserve everything they’ve done to you and more.” Her voice was a hoarse whisper, but he heard her.

Just like she had hoped, he broke into a rage and came at her. His furious curses were the last thing she heard.

THE cell was freezing.

By all rights, something the size of a closet should warm up easily enough, but this jail was perpetually icy. Worse, it was also clammy. Natalie hadn’t expected a king-sized bed or silk sheets, but the cramped, moldy, and freezing space was beyond horrid.

It truly was like a closet, except for the heavy door. It was claustrophobic, small and lacked furniture or windows. The only other inhabitant of the space was a lonely water bucket.

The cell was also incredibly dirty. The floor was stained and slimy, the walls wet and moldy. Out of sheer disgust, Natalie refused to sit on the dirt at first, but, exhaustion eventually won over disgust. So she sat against the cleanest corner she could find.

Sitting let her rest, but it didn’t do much about the cold. When her teeth started chattering, Natalie tried doing push-ups and lunges. That didn’t last. The sweat she generated cooled her body as soon as she stopped and she realized her efforts were counter-productive. She sat back down in her corner and waited for them to come and get her. And while she waited, she worried.

It wasn’t hard to start second-guessing her choices and doubting her own ability to make decisions. She certainly had made some stellar mistakes in the last few days, and they had culminated in her present captivity. Trusting Bill had been a mistake, one she had compounded by trusting Kinnom. Desperation to help her father had blinded her to obvious signs of deceit, but those signs were neon bright now that she was inside the dark cell. Bill had claimed to know someone—Kinnom—who would lead her to her ailing father. In exchange for the contact, she had delivered messages back and forth between the tionnax and Viddion for months. Looking back it was pretty easy to see that both men had been stringing her along, and didn’t actually know anything about her father.

What made the betrayal worse was the fact that by lying to her, they had kept her from truly trying to find him and getting him some help. They had promised her that they were on her side and would help her. Kinnom had gone as far as promising to personally lead her to her father. On the contrary, Kinnom had lied to save his own neck when the annax guards had caught them.

Furious with regret, Natalie cried bitterly, wishing she had paid attention. If only she’d been quieter, those annax guards wouldn’t have heard her. If only she hadn’t trusted Bill and Kinnom, she might have had a chance to find and help her father. If only her father hadn’t gotten sick. If only.

She cried until she got tired, stopped, then cried again. It was much later that she finally grew tired of weeping and accepted that the only thing she could change was herself. She could try and bemoan her luck, try and change something she couldn’t change, or she could accept her fate and live with it.

As bad as her situation was, she realized that denying it would only hurt her in the end. It wasn’t easy , but because she had never been one to back down from a fight, Natalie chose acceptance. She was never returning to the tionnax camp. She’d never see her brother, friends, or her father again. And she was probably going to die in the morning.

She was still in the cold cell in the dark and she was still going to die, but she was done trying to figure out a way to change the impossible. Her teeth chattered and her hands hurt, but somehow accepting the inevitable made it bearable. Since she was going to die, cold hands weren’t that important. In fact, a lot of things suddenly lost their urgency.

Behind her acceptance, Natalie found a strange tranquility. Facing death carried a certain amount of freedom. There was simply nothing worse they could do to her, and that was relieving in its own way. Besides, death didn’t seem that horrible. It was actually sort of peaceful. There was nothing she could do about it, nothing to figure out, no choices to agonize over. All she could do was to wait.

The entire experience of getting caught and thrown in jail was like her own version of death. The old Natalie, who dutifully obeyed her father even when he shouted contradictory demands, who never once complained as her brother hit her, truly died sometime in the night. Out of her ashes was born a stranger: more determined, wiser, and very courageous.

And with that thought, Natalie managed to finally fall asleep in the cold, smelly cell. In what seemed like a moment later, there was the noise of the door opening, waking her as it revealed a tall annax guard.

“Come with me,” he said.

Natalie stood slowly, her legs complaining after their cramped position. She blinked at the light and crept to the door.

“Are you going to kill me?” she asked.

He stared at her. “What?”

“Because, if you’re going to kill me, I’m staying right here.” Having nothing to lose gave her an incredible amount of courage.

The guard stared at her as if she was mad. Natalie, surprised at her own temerity, started to wonder the same thing.

“No one’s going to kill you,” he said flatly. “But you need to come with me. Klias wants to talk to you.”

Feeling euphoric at her courage, Natalie walked to the door and out of the tiny cell. It was even brighter outside, and her eyes blinked in complaint. It took her a moment to get her bearings, but then she stared at her captor. The guard at her side was blond, with messy hair and quiet, pale eyes. He waited, letting her study him.

“What’s your name?” she asked him.

His eyes somehow managed to be both annax, and yet intensely different. When he stared at her, she had a feeling that he saw right into her soul. It was oddly unsettling.

“Sharmas,” he answered finally.

“I’m Natalie.” She motioned ahead of her. “Lead the way, Sharmas.”

Something flew by those pale eyes of his, but he had turned and was walking away before she could figure it out.

Sharmas took her upstairs to the main part of the building, and past several rooms until he came to a door that was ajar. Natalie didn’t really try to keep track of where they were. It was warmer, and that was pretty much all she cared about.

Sharmas knocked on the door and motioned for her to enter.

The room inside was almost as tiny as the cell Natalie had just vacated. In it, a desk and two chairs crowded out the floor space. The large window tried to give a sense of space, but lost the battle to the overcrowded bookshelf that hogged the remaining part of the room. There was nothing pretty to make it a pleasant place to be: no plants, nopictures, nothing personal that would make it homey. Everything inside served a simple, functional purpose—except for the items on top of the desk. Among its utilitarian neighbors, the spread that covered the desk surface was a complete surprise.

It wasn’t a very large desk, but it was overflowing with breakfast offerings. Everything from cereal to toast, bagels, eggs, sausages, fruit to pancakes covered the surface. It all looked fresh, and more importantly, highly tasty.

As a tionnax, Natalie had felt her share of hunger. But that was in her past. Right then, facing a spread suited for a queen, she was ready to shove Sharmas aside to get at the food. Her previous fears around death faded into a distant memory, while her stomach came to growling life and ruled all thoughts.

Then she saw Klias seated on the other side of the desk. One look at those eerie eyes, and she stayed frozen in place. Self-preservation won over hunger.

“Natalie. Come in and sit down.” Threaded in his voice was the caress of horrors that belonged in the dark. “Are you hungry? Help yourself.” He pointed to a clean, empty plate.

The man was terrifying for a million different reasons. The food could be poisoned, and the entire thing was probably a lure to catch her in a scheme. Natalie knew she should refuse his offer simply on the grounds that he still had that norn ring on his finger. But she didn’t. Her pragmatic stomach rejected every warning as insubstantial and she grabbed the offered plate. Whatever was going to happen next, at least she would face it with a full belly.

Her previous self—the one who didn’t know what it was like to face death from the inside of an annax cell—would have tittered on the edges of the desk and grabbed only the barest pieces of food to keep her satiated. Her new self didn’t exercise such restraint. She walked right up to the desk and started filling up her plate with the best items: eggs, sausages, pancakes, and toast. She started to eat while she was still adding to her plate, not caring about manners or what either man. Finally, when the food threatened to fall over, she sat down.

After a couple of minutes of filling her stomach, she was able to glance up at them. Sharmas hadn’t left. He had grabbed a cup of coffee and was leaning against a wall, watching her inhale her food. So was Klias. Having both of them watching was unnerving, but it didn’t slow Natalie down one bit.

She ate until everything was gone from her plate, then remained seated, licking her lips. Her stomach was only just starting to believe that it was full. She knew from experience that hunger made an almost inedible imprint on it.

“Coffee?” Klias asked.

She stared at him warily. Now that the immediate threat of starvation was gone, her brain had come back alive and warned her that she was too trusting. There had to be an ulterior motive to his charity. She certainly didn’t think he had developed compassion for her.

Still, she had already eaten breakfast. If he wanted to poison her, the damage was done. Coffee wasn’t going to change anything.

“Thanks. I’d love some.” She got a cup of the stuff, then added sugar and milk. Just like the scent promised, it was good coffee. Along with the breakfast she had just inhaled, it was adding incredible clarity of thought to her brain, and making her feel almost human again.

She looked up the moment she realized it. “You’re doing this because you just want me to know that you can hurt or reward me, right?”

Klias glanced up lazily from his own cup of coffee, but said nothing.

His silence didn’t daunt her. With her stomach full, Natalie was feeling confident about things. Who said she was going to die? Sharmas had actually said the contrary. She might very well survive this.,Everything looked more positive.

Surreptitiously, she glanced up at the guard. Still leaning against the wall, Sharmas kept up his silent vigil. Oddly enough, Natalie was glad he was there. He hadn’t been exactly friendly, but next to his terrifying boss he was almost pleasant.

Klias was still staring at her with those alien-looking eyes of his. His gaze was so disturbing Natalie feared for her digestion. “I have a proposal for you,” he finally said.

She didn’t need to hear any more. “Forget it. I’m not doing any more spying or delivering any messages for anyone. I’m done.”

Sharmas’ eyes sharpened, but Klias’ expression didn’t change. “Perhaps you’d like to hear what I’m proposing before you reject it,” he added in a bored tone of voice.

She sipped at her coffee and tried to appear as confident as he looked. She’d never admit it, but the man intimidated her. “Alright.”

“The larenleader has granted you your life and freedom. You can leave Viddion and go to wherever you like. We won’t stop you.”

Natalie waited for the catch.

“There is, however, one condition. You have to leave Viddion and never return to our forests, our lands. If we find you here again, we’ll kill you on sight.”

“No problem.” She had expected so much worse that the reality almost made her cry with relief. She was going to live! It was almost too good to be true.

Or was it? She was certain Klias hadn’t brought her up from her cage just because he was worried about her caloric intake. There was something else he wasn’t telling her. He was like a spider, spinning his web, trying to catch her. She wanted to avoid the trap, only he was much better at this game than she was.

Before he had a chance to change his mind, Natalie stood up. Time to get going while the going was good.

She hadn’t reached the door before Klias spoke up again. “Before you leave, however, I have a question for you.”

Nuts. Natalie stopped, inches away from freedom. “What?” she asked warily.

“Do you want revenge?” Klias asked.

“What?”

“Do you want to get back at the person who betrayed you to us? Do you want revenge?”

Natalie turned and stared steadily into Klias’ eerie eyes. “What I want is my father back and healthy.” Exhaustion was gripping her hard now, slowing down her brain and doubling the emotional impact of every thought.

The colour in Klias’ eyes swirled with deaths untold. For a second, Natalie saw her father in those dark rims. Then it was gone, leaving an anxious trail in its wake.

Klias blinked, leaving only a pair of strange eyes. “What I’m offering you is vengeance. You can get even, or you can let the man who betrayed you walk away without atoning for what he did.”

Natalie frowned, unconvinced. The lavish breakfast, the conversation, it all smelled like a trap. There was something Klias wanted out of all of this. She might not be able to see what it was, but there was no doubt in her mind he would benefit from what he was offering in some way. She didn’t trust him. She wanted nothing to do with him or his offer.

“You keep me all night in a freezing cell and have the gall to ask me to do you a favor?” she snapped.

For a tiny moment, Klias’ eyes froze on hers and she could feel the air leave her lungs. In that fraction of a second, she knew he was going to kill her. She looked into his eyes and saw her own death.

Then she could breathe once more.

“That might bother you now,” Klias commented with as much emotion as a snake, “But that’s not what’s going to bother you later on. Later on, once you’ve left, your conscience will remind you that he’s not going to stop. He’ll try again. And victimize someone else.” He shrugged. “I don’t think you’ll like knowing that you could have done something to stop it, and you didn’t.”

He was right, Natalie thought. She did hate him. She could feel it darkening her eyes.

“SHE’S still alive.” Klias’ voice seemed to come from far away. “Baphrem? *Baphrem.* She’s still alive.”

Baphrem stared at the bloodied, broken body in his hands, unable to see anything else. The face was burned beyond recognition and the arms were two useless stumps. It looked as though she had a broken leg and several broken ribs, one of them poking out through her skin. His mind kept trying to find the woman he knew in the tortured body in front of him and couldn’t.

He remembered her wide-eyed expression when she stared at him, the way her eyes flashed with anger or rounded in surprise. He remembered her touch while he entered her body and her tears when he had asked her to leave.

“*Baphrem*.” Klias’ voice finally cut through the haze in his mind and he looked up. “If you want to help her and get those who hurt her, we have to move.”

Beneath the roar of the agony inside his head, a new feeling gave Baphrem the ability to think. Vengeance.

“To get them, we have to leave. They’ll be coming any minute. We’ve got to take her back,” Klias was saying slowly. “Baphrem? We’ll kill them all, but we have to get her out of here or she’s going to die. Give Niobis a chance.”

The warm body under his hands twitched, and Baphrem’s world tilted on its axis. She was still alive. From inside his own personal pit of despair, Baphrem finally pushed his body into movement. One thought fuelled him. She was still alive.

“She doesn’t have much time, Baphrem,” Klias urged at his side.

With shaking hands, Baphrem clutched the bloodied body to his chest, cradling Teil as carefully as he could. He moved slowly, trying to minimize her movement, while Klias watched for anyone coming towards the hut. In the darkness, the streaks of tears shone against the dirt on his face. “They burned her eyes, Klias,” he whispered in a voice that was not his own.

Klias’ expression didn’t change, but his eerie eyes focused on his friend’s. “Once, years ago, you told me that if I trusted you I wouldn’t regret it. Trust me now. You won’t regret it.”

Amidst the horror and agony that Baphrem had found inside the tionnax camp, Klias’ words were more than a vow; they were a lifeline. Numbly, Baphrem let his friend lead the way back to Viddion.

“SHE’S dying.”

Niobis, shaking, sweating, and paler than a ghost, looked like he might need his own services. Sweat ran down his neck, his eyes were sunken, and the lines of strain around his mouth did nothing for his appearance. He swallowed, which sent his Adam’s apple bobbing, and repeated himself. “She’s dying.”

In front of him, Baphrem literally growled his refusal to believe it. The healer had just spent hours trying to heal Teil, only to give them the worst possible news. It was a good thing there were witnesses, because healer or not, Baphrem wanted to kill the man.

 Baphrem refused to even think about the possibility. “She can’t be dying. She. Can’t.”

The room was cool and dark. In keeping with the rest of the healer’s hall, it didn’t contain a lot of furniture, just the bed, a couple of chairs, a side table, and some plants. Teil was lying on the bed, looking deceivingly peaceful under her blankets. Her eyes were closed, her wounds, and most of her face covered by bandages. There wasn’t a drop of blood, or an unsightly scar in sight. If someone didn’t know better, they might think she was asleep.

“Niobis, you have to do something.” Baphrem gripped the handle of his sword a little harder to avoid strangling the healer. “You’ve got to heal her. She *can’t* die.”

Behind him, Klias shifted slightly, and the healer visibly flinched. Fresh sweat appeared on his forehead as his face took on a green hue. “B-Baphrem, I’m r-really sorry, but I can’t do anything else. I really, really wish I could, but I can’t.” Panic-stricken, his eyes flew past Baphrem to Klias. He looked upset, and the expression was too painful to be anything but honest.

Baphrem turned towards the bed in agony. “There has to be something you can try. Something! For the love of the Mother Tree, you’re our head healer!”

“Don’t you think I want to help her?!” Niobis wiped sweat from his forehead with a shaky hand. “She’s human, and she’s dying. Not only do I lack the training or the equipment to heal a human, I’m not even sure that her own doctors could help her now. She’s barely hanging onto life as it is. She could die at any moment.”

Baphrem was already shaking his head. “We’ll take her…to…to a human hospital…We’ll-” His comment was cut off by a knock on the door.

One of the aids pushed her head inside. “Niobis…”

“Not now!” Niobis exclaimed. The aid’s eyes widened, but the head didn’t disappear. Baphrem made a mental note to have that woman moved to cleaning duty permanently.

“But her brother is here.”

With a few very unprofessional words, Niobis rushed out of the room.

Baphrem walked over to the bed and stared at the swollen, bruised face almost completely covered by bandages. He was still having trouble believing it had all happened. He had made love with her only a day ago, yet it felt like an eternity. With infinite care, he reached over with a dirty hand and caressed the bandages lightly. “I love you,” he whispered.

There was a movement behind him and Klias walked to his side. “Baphrem.”

“What.”

“There’s a way to save her.”

Baphrem raised haggard, exhausted eyes to his friend. “What?”

“The connection, Baphrem.”

“The co…What are you talking about?” The burning ache in his chest threatened to obliterate any thought except revenge. The only thing he could process was that he about to lose her. Again.

Klias wasn’t one for lengthy explanations. “If she has a connection…”

Baphrem’s head whipped up as understanding dawned. He turned, hugged a stunned Klias, and rushed out of the room.

Maddias was standing still in the hallway while Niobis patted his shoulder awkwardly. Baphrem motioned the healer away and pulled the stunned brother into the room. “Maddias…”

But Maddias had caught sight of the figure on the bed and saw nothing else.

“Maddias,” Baphrem repeated

He didn’t move. Not even a blink.

Baphrem touched his arm gently. “Maddias.”

“We don’t have much time, Baphrem.” Klias was back at the doorway keeping guard.

“*Maddias*.” This time the touch wasn’t so gentle.

The pale eyes finally moved to Baphrem’s. “What?” Maddias’ voice was barely above a whisper.

“There’s something we can do for her, but I need your consent.”

Maddias’ only response was a confused frown before turning back towards the bed. His eyes blinked every few seconds and his mouth moved soundlessly. His eyes, red-rimmed and exhausted, were filling with tears, but he said nothing.

“Maddias, we haven’t lost her yet. If Teil has a connection, she’ll heal.”

The man’s blond frown deepened, but no emotion gathered on his face. Baphrem started to suspect shock. He tried to speak slowly, to help him understand, though each moment that passed was agony. “The Mother Tree will heal her, Maddias.”

Something seemed to register and Maddias turned confused eyes towards him. “The Mother Tree?”

“If she has her connection, she’ll heal.”

“She doesn’t want it.” It was the barest of whispers, but Baphrem caught it.

Baphrem gripped the man’s shoulder hard enough that he flinched. “She’s dying, Maddias. If we don’t do anything, she’ll die. Do you think she wants that?” Maddias cringed, causing Baphrem to change tactics. “I will not let her die.”

“Who did…who did this to her?” His voice broke at the end and Baphrem squeezed his arms in understanding.

“Later. First, we have to take care of her. Let me help her, Maddias.”

It was only a small, uncertain nod, but it was the only affirmation Baphrem needed. He moved to the bed, and with careful arms picked Teil up. She didn’t wake or even stir, but he could hear her breath.

“Which tree?” Klias asked, moving ahead of him.

“By my laren.” Baphrem’s answer was resolute. With Klias at his side, they walked out of the healer’s hall and towards his home.