

~ So be it ~

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Description: Falling asleep in your own bed is great. Walking up in a strange new world is not. But what happens when you realise it is not a dream or a joke and rescue will not arrive?

Content warning: There are descriptions of violence in this story.

Opening my eyes was a real struggle. It took me a moment to realise that there was no warm duvet covering me, no soft bed beneath me. My eyes immediately snapped open as I sat up in a panic. The view in front of me made me blink. I closed my eyes and shook my head. This must be a dream of some sort. It would not be the first time. Slowly I opened my eyes again, willing the vista to change.

Yet nothing had changed. The ground all around me and as far as I could see from my semi-prone position was littered with bodies. I blinked again and again as I sluggishly pinched my thigh. This cannot be real. It cannot be!

Yet all my tried and trusted methods failed to wake me from the nightmare. It looked like this nightmare was not merely a night's wild imagining or some demented figment of my imagination. This nightmare was real.

With a quick sigh, I started to get up only to rather frighteningly find that my legs felt like water. As I sat back down heavily, I wondered what was wrong with me. Movement from somewhere near made me look around in apprehension.

I saw small movements in the bodies around me and a woman stumbling upright a few meters away from me. I shook my head, trying to clear it. Maybe if I lay back down and closed my eyes, I would sleep again and when I woke up I would be back in my bed, in my house, in my world.

Because this was not it. The greenish skies with the red-tinged clouds belonged to no sky I had ever seen or imagined outside of science fiction movies. The grass I was lying on was white with an odd bluish tinge, even the trees seemed white to my eyes with leaves in a million colours of blue. My mind wandered for a moment. Would the seas of this place be green then?

I squinted as I looked towards the sun. My heart thudded in fear at this last testament of the oddity of this place, the strangeness of it, as the sun shone pure white. I closed my eyes willing it all to go away.

"What the fuck?"

The strangled cry from beside me made me turn and open my eyes in an almost dizzying motion. The red-headed woman that had come to her knees in front of me was looking around with wide

eyes filled with fright. I could understand. My heart still thudded in my chest and I had to clench my legs together in fear that I would piss myself.

I took a breath, deep and cleansing. The air smelled fragrant and it brought a slight smile on my lips. Inner city living did not make for fragrant air, not unless one counted exhaust fumes and garbage smells as fragrant. Some people did I guess.

The sudden pain as the redhead grasped my leg, just above the knee, brought me out of my scattered thoughts.

"What is going on?" she asked me hoarsely, even as her hand opened and closed convulsively on the flesh of my thigh.

I tried to be gentle as I pried her fingers off my leg. My legs felt weak but the pain registered just fine in my brain. I could not keep the harshness out of my voice however. "I don't know. What do I look to you, the Pythia?"

Her wide eyes and quick breathing that almost slid into hyperventilation made me cringe inside. I really should have taken those anger management classes.

"Are you an... alien?" she stuttered, even as she tried to crawl away from me.

I looked at my hands. They were their usual white, no fleck of green in sight. I carefully felt my face. As far as memory served there was nothing unusual about it. Pudgy cheeks, prominent nose, a couple of spots, nothing particularly alien about it. Certainly no horns, antennas or overlarge acid-dripping teeth.

It took a moment before the analytical part of my brain, that for some reason always seemed to work in the background, kicked in and replayed my stropy answer to the poor woman. I shook my head, more to myself than to the redhead that still looked at me as if I were Satan personified. It would be just like me to revert to my native language, all those years on foreign soil counting for nothing.

I tried to smile as reassuringly as possible, this time gentling my voice as well. "Sorry. I am Greek, not alien. As I said, I don't know what's going on."

The redhead looked at me suspiciously. "Gyro? Acropolis?" she said haltingly.

I could not help but laugh. Sometimes you just have to love the English. "I prefer souvlaki to gyro and last time I was on the Acropolis..."

I stopped then, my voice losing its instinctive mirth. It hit me just then. It's telling of the odd turn of my brain that it only hit me just then. I was not at home and this was not a dream. And my father's daily phonecall would go unanswered. Chances were I would not see him again, nor him nor my home. I would never see the blinding glare of the sun's rays on the deep calming blue of the Aegean.

I guess I should have cried. A moment of blind panic and deathly grief should have overtaken me. But that's not me. Even so I could feel the coldness settling in, as I took in my surroundings once more. I was not at home any more. Hell, as far as I could tell I was not even on the planet.

"Fuck!" I swore in my customary manner as I came to my knees before I stood on wobbly legs. An elevated perspective gave me a bit more information, none of it particularly good.

As far as I could see people surrounded me. Some haltingly standing just as I had and others still prone on the ground. The redhead was still on her knees just a step away from me. Next to her was an odd rucksack. The same as the others I could see dotted around the landscape. A quick glance told me there was a rucksack next to every body.

For a moment the irreverent part of my brain swore it was a conspiracy. Some organisation or the CIA or something doing some odd experiment. It was only for a moment.

I knew better than to indulge in crazy conspiracy theories. A part of me was still juvenile enough to believe in them. Another part of me, the greater in many respects, the one that went through more years at university than I cared to think about knew better. There was no need for conspiracy theories when the nature of humankind was enough to create the greatest disasters.

I shook my head. Once again I was lost in my thoughts. The absent-minded professor had no place in this situation, in this world as a whole I imagined. I fell back to the person I had once been, or at least cultivated myself to be. The capable one that actually knew things like nature and being out in the open and working out things outside the obscure questions of research.

Untrembling hands grasped the rucksack, narrowed eyes took in the small axe and large knife secured at its sides. Ears finally tuned to something other than inner thoughts caught the jumbled words of the people around me. Mostly English, thankfully, but a mix of other languages as well. I would guess whoever put us here did it geographically, or near enough.

That was good. I didn't think it would be nice to wake up in the middle of China. Not that I didn't like the Chinese, people were people the world over and there were several places on Earth worse than China. Not knowing the language though, that would be a real bummer.

I found myself caressing the knife in its stiff sheath. A childhood fascination with weapons chose the oddest moment to resurface. So be it. I could remember my father's slow words, both on how to handle a knife and how to avoid getting skewered by one. He had not paid much attention then I was certain, merely humoured a younger me.

The chord that seemed to come from the sky and reverberate against the ground made me look up.

The screaming all around me I ignored. Screaming, like crying, never got you anywhere. Or at least that's what the would-be warrior in me advised snidely. I shook my head again. This time only for myself. This was no movie, nor one of the fantasies I liked so much, yet a part of me seemed to think it was. Or maybe I was still in a dream somewhere.

The voice that came out of nowhere, booming all around me, spoke clearly and plainly. In English. I could not help but snort. Conspiracy theory coming up immediately. Still I listened carefully, all those hours in lectures and seminars must have helped for something.

"Do not panic. Please do not panic."

The voice continued its simple message for long minutes as the screaming continued unabated all around me. The redhead, still on her knees just a step in front of my feet, was wailing, her face hidden behind her hands. I was starting to get annoyed. I could see people, near and afar, looking equally annoyed at the din all around.

I shook my head. I did not know what to do. My first instinct, to slap the people around me into silence, was, I was certain, the wrong thing to do. Plus, I had no desire to be some leader or something. That desire I had long ago resigned from. No matter what my mother believed, there was no great star I had to follow.

I closed my eyes for a moment. The usual sadness welling up as I thought of mom. Almost ten years gone but every now and again she still invaded my thoughts. I guessed that would never change.

And once again my thoughts had taken precedence over the world around me. I missed the end of the continuous loop as silence fell from the skies, only the wailing and screaming, frightened and angry, remaining to batter my ears. Lone voices could be heard over the din of crying and raging.

My lips twitched instinctively. Some hardy souls shouted for silence, for calm. I looked around even as I settled the heavy rucksack around my shoulders. A small movement of my hand verified what my eyes had suspected. The knife's handle lay just in reach for a cross-draw. Someone had been thoughtful or careful or something like that.

I felt my teeth grinding, my jaw settling in my oh-so-tough stance. A remnant of ages past, when looking tough mattered to me. My feet rearranged themselves instinctively into what someone had once called a standing swagger. I was certain it worked better when I was younger and fitter but it would do.

A part of me sniggered. As if it mattered how tough I looked. It hadn't mattered then, not really, but it could come useful. Cold eyes and a belligerent stance had been known to give people pause. Not much but enough. Maybe it would be enough once again.

My eyes connected for a moment with those of a tall woman some meters away. She was one of those shouting for calm and silence. It was only for a moment. I knew better than to get into a staring match. I kept those for when I was spoiling for a fight. It had been years but my body remembered better than I did.

My eyes surveyed all around them but little registered. It was merely an intimidation technique. Nothing more. My brain was busy finally noticing little details and each one hit me harder than the one before.

Uniforms. Everyone around me was clad in uniforms. Not of any army or police I knew and with no markings I could distinguish but uniforms nonetheless. Uniforms of tan trousers, whitish shirts and tan jackets. A purposefully negligent-looking movement of my arm, supposedly to pass a hand through my short hair, verified that I was clad similarly to the thousands around me.

That pass through my hair brought another bit of information. I had missed more than one phonecall with my father. I had visited the gregarious barber of the area I lived just the day before the last day I remembered. He had given me the usual. But the hair my hand encountered on my skull was longer. Not too long but certainly longer than it should have been. Days, maybe weeks, had passed since my visit to the barber's.

For a moment I wished for my brain to be more... more what I did not know or my mind refused to articulate. More something, something enough to have noticed how my hair grew. But I had always been like that. Simple things, important things like that, never really registered. I could not tell when my last cycle had been or when the next would start. I could not tell how quickly my hair grew or my nails needed clipping.

It had been days for sure. Days that I could not remember. Days that someone must have noticed I was missing. Days, enough days, for my father not just to worry but to travel to find me. I would guess from the numbers of people all around me and as far as the eye could see, enough days for the world to be in turmoil. Enough days for so many disappearances to be noted and create a world-wide panic.

I could only wonder. Had it been enough days for the news to find the next big story? Maybe it had. A part of me repeated the advice I had once heard for getting trapped in a cave. Sit tight, keep warm and await rescue. Await rescue.

I looked around once more as the wailing and crying slowly subsidised. I forgot to look tough that time. Not that it mattered. Await rescue. I had the strangest suspicion that awaiting rescue would not get me far. Green skies, white-blue grass and a sun that shone white.

Rescue was not an option. Unless this was a hallucination of some sort and then it didn't matter what I did or didn't do. So be it. Do not sit tight, do not keep warm, do not await rescue. That didn't sound right either. I barked a laugh that registered only when the sound, much lower than the din around me, reached my ears. Shock. That was the only explanation.

And whatever chemicals my glands provided that refused to produce real shock effects to me. At least not until whatever crisis was over. Then I would probably start trembling. For now I had only detachment and an even odder turn of thought than usual to sustain me.

It had always been like that. When my knee was slashed open at six years of age and still went to buy my mother's cigarettes, blood squishing with every step. When I dove head-first from the

terrace to the basket-ball court in second grade, ended up with a concussion, and walked to the nurse to tell her not to examine me but call my mother.

Now if you please for I don't like you and don't trust you and if you don't do what I say I will go to the director of studies. Had to go to old distinguished Mr. Triantafyllos after all. I liked him better than the nurse and he had the good sense to call an ambulance.

When the earthquake struck and I moved... One panicked grandmother. Check. One terrified dog. Check. Medicines for all the family. Who knew they needed so many? Check. Cash and jewellery in the house. Don't forget mom's prized diamond hidden in an innocuous old cigarette packet. Check. And one car. Who gives a fuck that I don't have a license? Check. All to the nearest empty field in case the block collapsed. The block didn't collapse but others did and we had to stay for three days outside.

Always mom had been equally proud and angry. Proud because I was different than the other kids. And angry for exactly the same reason. Dad had just been proud. He didn't care much for the other kids. Grandma had just looked at me oddly and shrugged. She had lived through war, Germans and all, recession and a junta my grandmother. She did take the oddest things in her stride.

There had been other times as well. I shook my head and tsked at myself silently. Stupido, now is not the time to go down memory lane. And certainly not pat ourselves on the back for going to buy cigarettes when bleeding all over the place. Stupido indeed.

By the time I had finally got my mind back on business, things had quietened down around me. People were still crying but it was more silent sobbing than loud wailing. Even the redhead by my feet had uncovered her eyes, even if she sobbed still and tear tracks marred her skin.

My eyes as once more they surveyed the land and people around met those of the tall woman. She had a relieved smile on her face. I answered it with a slight nod of the head. Courtesy never really hurt anyone. Or so I have been told. I don't usually stay around enough to find out.

Still with things quieter, it seemed that whoever was our heavenly host had decided to start again. The great chord sounded once again and barely a moment later the voice came as well.

"Do not panic. Please do not panic."

Thankfully this time around there was no panic, or at least the panic was far quieter than before. For that I was grateful.

"You will find guide-books with information about flora and fauna in your packs. You will also find dry food for three days and elementary guidebooks for rough living and first aid, as well as other useful tools. We wish you good luck in your endeavours."

The end of the voice's short speech brought a momentary lull before the screaming and wailing started once again. This time it was more anger than fear. Personally, although I would never

admit it, I felt relief. There was no cackling laughter, no sign of any madman or even a government conspiracy theory. That had been a worry in my mind, even if I had not realised it.

And the books would not be bad to have. No sir! Odd turn of the mind indeed. Everything sounded so clean, so clear as well. A suspicion, horrible in a way, relieving in others, dawned slowly as I looked around once more.

It sounded too clean. Too clear. Too much like an experiment. I shook my head. It would be just my luck. End up a labrat. If I had been a biologist, I would have even considered it a cosmic joke of sorts, or even karma. But no little rats, guinea pigs, or even amoebas had been used in my work.

So be it. The would-be warrior and all-around tough guy in me made me square my shoulders and look around once more, arrogant as hell. The rest of me held a debate in the recesses of my skull. Should I stay or should I go? The part of me that's just me laughed in the foreground. Look tough and have debates that are titles of songs I never liked. That's the way forward, baby!

I chuckled to myself. Shock and an odd turn of thought. What more one needed? Ah, yes. An odd planet and booming voices from the sky. Not to mention thousands upon thousands of people as far as the eye could see.

Yet it was a true question. Stay here and see what happens. Or leave and try to tough it out in the woods or something. Logic said to stay. Humans make communities and that's what makes them strong. Maybe some people around here would have the power or the charisma or something to forge this massive crowd into something that would mean survival.

Fear said to go. I never did well with people. No team-players in this husk of flesh and bone. No, sir... Fear aside, too much knowledge pushed me away from the thongs around me. Masses of people in a strange planet, most of them still in shock or in panic, probably with no common language, belief or desire. Away from an organised police or the ubiquitous necessities and responsibilities of modern western societies, humans knew only one law. Strength was bound to prevail.

The feminist in me felt some relief in that I could see no whiskers or flat chests around me. Women were better than men in this. Still I could not help but chuckle at myself. Too many feminist lesbian fantasies have graced my shelves over the years. It shows too. I knew better. Women were no better than men; human is human, male or female.

Another little detail hit me then. No more books, no more internet, no more reading. I shook my head. So be it. It would not matter, not for long. I knew enough, if not from experience. Survival would take precedence, learning new things. The knowledge of years would be forgotten or become nothing more than a dream, lost in the mists of the past.

So be it. That was the world. Maybe my mother had been right. There was a star in my future. Little did she know it was a strange white star in a planet far away. So be it.

My internal debate ended with murmurs, not so much of consent as of thought. Stay for a while. See what happens. If things start looking bad, then we could always go. Flight never stops being an option. That much I had learnt early on.

Another part of me. The always serious person with the string of letters behind their name that had a shrewdness and knowledge the rest of us lacked. The voice of history boomed in my thoughts. Even if something starts, it won't last. Too many people, too much panic, eventually too many ambitions and would-be leaders.

The words of a song from the land of my birth found their lazy way across my lips in a whisper that barely reached my ears. With fire and blades the world goes forward. A melancholy song with the habitual morbidity and pessimism of the east. True though. Even if it were merely my eastern blood talking.

I never would have thought how quickly my little professor would be proven right.

The conversations around me were quickly devolving into shouting matches. A quick glance across the flats showed clearly that similar shouting matches were taking place all around. Some people were moving. Some toward the river that could barely be seen through the press of bodies, others towards the west, the east, the north.

My feet itched to follow them but the sensible part of me still counselled to wait. In what was becoming almost an instinctive movement I checked the knife on my rucksack. It was still on my back. It would stay there no matter what. I could see others looking at me as suspiciously as I was looking at them.

My eyes roamed once more at the people around me. The loud one, blonde and bossy, American or English. I was never much for accents. She had a bearing though. Either army or police, or maybe a CEO or something like that. The one opposite her, equally blonde, less bossy but stubborn as hell. Certainly army or police, certainly British.

The tall one, the one that had tried to calm others in the initial panic. She had not talked much but her calm was welcome in the shouting match. A couple I would guess, German or Dutch. The one with the mousy brown hair kept translating to her companion in a low voice, her hands never straying from their instinctual protection of the bulge in her middle.

The redhead that had come towards me even before the sky-voice had sounded sat listlessly in front of me. She had not said a word yet but she was less pale than she had been in the beginning. Another redhead watched everything with raptor eyes. She had spoken little.

An African lady stood still in front of the one I assumed was her girlfriend, white, blonde and slight. Her accent was heavy but I had heard such before and not on the TV. British from London my gut said. It had taken me a while to realise that we had all been taken from Britain, one part or another.

The northern English accent on another, this one heavier than even me, told me that much. I was not much for accents but that I could recognise. My eyes roamed even as I desultorily followed the conversation around me. They were still debating the same old thing. Was it aliens or something else? As if it mattered...

My eyes, seemingly of their own accord, stilled on the woman just a few steps away from me. She sat, seemingly unconcerned, but her hand never strayed far from the knife next to her. The top of a tattoo I could not recognise peaked under her jacket sleeve every time she stretched her shoulders. An old injury I would guess but she covered it well. I could tell, I had some of those.

After a moment my eyes moved on. I had to force them. An odd turn of thought and an even odder attraction of the eyes. That's me. What can one do? There were others around our small circle. I had grasped no names of those who had given them. Never had a good head for names.

That's a lie. I had a good head for names. A good one for faces too. When I thought to use it. A liar I am. A good one at times too. But not to myself. Never to myself. Not if I can help it.

I feared these people. I knew not one of them. Knowing them would make them something more. More than merely glimpses of faces and voices that meant nothing to me. It was too early yet. No need to know them before I decided if I would stay. No need.

Voices were raised once more but I tuned them out. No point to them. No point to listening to them either. Let them shout.

My eyes returned, seemingly of their own accord, to the woman still absently fingering the knife. It took me a moment to realise it. When I did, I turned away. I was startled when my gaze met that of the tall one. She inclined her head just minutely before she turned to her almost constant perusal of the others.

I felt like I had just been issued a challenge, or maybe a warning. I shrugged, to myself mostly. Let her challenge. I am no duelist. Especially not for these things. Did it once. Once was enough. Not again. Never again.

I was lucky that moment. My scattered brain for once synchronised with the world around me. I heard the commotion early. An instinctive reaction brought me to my knees, my back protesting the abrupt movement and the weight of the rucksack.

I caught the movement quickly as my eyes searched feverishly all around me. It took me a moment though to recognise what it was. When I did, I did me proud. I stood up immediately, a movement more graceful than I ever imagined of myself shedding the rucksack even as I drew the knife. Classic cross draw and I was lucky not to slash my own flank.

I barely felt the movement of people around me. Most looked around, still searching for what was making others edgy. Others had stood, their eyes glued on the disturbance that was making its swift way toward us. I paid them little attention. My hand moved in a movement perfected

years before, part of my childhood fascination with weapons. The knife's hilt still rested in my hand but the blade was flush against my wrist and forearm.

I was a fool, a dreamer, an outsider, as I had always been. But I knew enough. Tough-guy attitude or not, most people would pass me by. Looking too tough, too belligerent, for people to think me a victim. Yet not tough enough to be a threat. As it should be.

In spite of everything, the woman that almost fell into our small circle, a rucksack on her back, her clothes already sporting dirt and rips, caught me by surprise. She fell, her voice thin and reedy as she looked at us unseeing. "Ndihmë. Ndihmë."

I didn't have the time to try to recognise the language. Not that I could. But I could always try. The meaning of it was clear enough. One does not need language skills to recognise a plea for help.

The little redhead was the first to try to go to the stranger in our midst. As if we were not strangers ourselves. Others stirred. The two Germans showed how much of a couple they were. As the one tried to go to help, the other held her back, a quick negative nod. I nodded to them, even if they were not looking at me. Smart move.

Trying to help was the human thing to do. Some of us had more of the animal still live in our souls I guess. The wounded one in our midst could keep. The danger coming would not.

She was a tower of a woman. Tall and broad-shouldered. The rucksack held negligently in her hand, as if it weighed nothing. My heartbeat jumped. There was no hero in me. Not even one of those every-day heroes that the movies promoted. I had drunk and smoked and self-pitied that part of me into oblivion.

Fear made my knees tremble. The tough guy in me stiffened them. One should never show fear. Especially in the face of bullies and others such as that. That much I had learnt from early on.

She paid no attention to us as she kicked at the woman on the ground. The redhead attacked, a true hero, and as doomed as all true heroes. A single slap sent her sprawling, almost to the lap of the CEO.

I could hear the shouts of the others. Stringent voices as they called for decency and civilisation. Fools all of them. Those things belonged in a different world. More fool me. For I knew they belonged in a different world and accepted it.

The woman ignored them as she continued the senseless abuse of the victim on the ground. Senseless? No, even if it took me a few seconds to realise what she wanted. The rucksack. Of course. What else did I expect?

The shouting continued. The policewoman, or army, I still was not certain, took a step forward but the knife that appeared as if by magic on the tower-woman's hand stopped her in her tracks.

There was no fear in her eyes. I could recognise the training about hostages, enough movies will do that. She would have to shed it if she wanted to survive. It belonged to a different world.

I closed my eyes for just a moment. It had to be done. Cold it was and it would bring scorn and contempt. It had to be done. Better a killer than a victim. Better dead than a victim. I knew that much.

My steps were small, almost childlike. I kept the knife hidden on the side of my trouser leg. I tried to remember everything I knew and had ever read about such things. Slash to the neck. Too far away for me. The woman was tall after all. Stab to the heart. Worked in movies but I knew little of anatomy. I'd probably hit a rib and then I was done.

Stab to the kidneys. Only chance. Stab and slash, down and to the side. Better chance of getting the job done that way. Have to remember. Stab and slash, then out, move, stab and slash the other side. Killing two kidneys is better than one. I had read that in a book somewhere. Probably some fantasy. I could only hope the author had done their research.

I was certain the blood had left my face. I could feel it. Just a few more steps. Small, silent, or as silent as I could make them. I did not look around. I did not want to see others. My eyes did not move from the spot. That spot, just there, where I had, rather arbitrarily, decided I would strike.

I was there, just another step. I swallowed once. This was it. No dreams. No dreams any more. A different world. A different me. So be it.

The hand on my shoulder startled me. I was lucky I guess, not a sound escaped my throat. I just glanced at her. The tattooed silent one I had been watching earlier. She shook her head before gently pushing me aside.

I stepped to the side, unthinkingly. I was too slow to follow her movement. One moment she was there, a hand on my shoulder, pushing me gently. The next she was chest to back with the towering woman. I saw the movement of her arm though. A single stab and then slash, then out, move, stab and slash the other side.

I had gotten the spot right, just right.

The tower woman crashed to her knees with a strangled cry. The tattooed saviour of my innocence did not step back. Her hands moved again, fast, untrembling. One hand to grasp short blond hair, the other to slash across an unprotected throat.

Like in the movies, blood splattered all around. It brought screams. I heard those. I did not turn to look at those screaming. The screaming would not continue for long. It was too early yet. Screaming belonged to a different world. A different world... So be it.

My hand crept without me thinking. It was my turn to clasp a shoulder. The tattooed one turned to me. There was a bleakness in her eyes before she blinked. She did not smile. I didn't smile either. What was there to smile about?

I made a promise just then. Not with my words but in my mind. I could not give what I had been given. But I would remember it. And something would be given in return, something, sometime. I promise. And I never forget a promise.

That was my way. And that would not change. Different world or not. So be it. So be it.

I sat next to my rucksack, my hands trembling, my shoulders hunched. I had not done the deed but my body acted as if I had.

I ignored the raised voices around me. They were still arguing. About many things. All of them together.

Had it been necessary? Was it civilised? Was it right? Was it wrong? What should we do now? Did one have the right to take the dead woman's things? Her clothes? Her provisions?

I ignored them. As I ignored the furtive glances sent my way. As I ignored the anything but furtive glances sent the way of the tattooed one. She was sitting too, just a few feet away from me. Her eyes looked at some distant horizon none of us could see, or at least I couldn't.

The almost victim of the tower-woman's attack was cowering next to the two Germans but I could see her watching the shouting-match avidly. I still had not managed to think about what language she had spoken. Still it looked like she had some English. Not a bad thing.

I was getting tired, even if the sun had not yet fallen. Maybe noon had passed, maybe not. My gut instinct and what I could see of the sun told me it had. I was thirsting for water and needed the loo something fierce. Neither of my two needs looked like they would be magically taken care of.

Syn Athena kai cheira kinei, as the ancients said. And I was getting tired. Tired of the arguments, the raised voices, the expansive hand-gestures. Tired of not knowing and tired of waiting to see what others would do. Logic still counselled to wait but there was a rebellion inside me. I've had enough.

I stood up abruptly and the world around me moved. Not that I had made the world move in the name of every god in creation. I have been called conceited, I have been called arrogant, I have even been called mad but please. I was not that bad.

It was merely my usual falling pressure that made the world seem to move. I narrowed my eyes and stiffened my knees. Usually I grasp a wall under such circumstances but there were no walls near me, not even a tree. Still I managed to stay on my feet until the fit of dizziness passed.

My movements were careful as I put the rucksack on my back once more and made certain that there was an easy draw for the knife. I had to remember to always do that. Every time, always, forever. Forever. So be it.

My steps were a bit wobbly. Too much time sitting cross-legged I guess. Still I managed to get to the dead body in our midst without falling or stumbling. I always hated making a fool of myself.

My hands trembled as I took the rucksack. Silence had fallen all around me. I could feel their eyes upon me. Let them stare.

A clearly irritated voice behind me made my back stiffen. "What the hell is she doing?"

I did not turn, neither did I speak. Whoever was wondering would know soon enough.

The rucksack was first as I moved it away from the body and the puddle of blood. When I knelt next to the body, my trembling hands extending to the first of the jacket buttons, a hand fell on my shoulder.

"What are you doing?" the same irritated voice asked over my shoulder.

I turned slowly, my hand moving across my body to grasp the hilt of the knife, even as my head rose to look at the woman above me. I should have expected it. The CEO was looking at me, irritation mixed with contempt in her eyes.

"Recycling."

I heard my own voice and I could not help but smile. It was gruff and low. I was a smartass. Always had been when pressured.

I saw her mouth open, her eyes flashing with real and perceived insult. I just looked at her, allowing one of my patent arrogant smirks on my lips.

I never had to finish that contest. A booming laugh sounded in our little circle. I glanced towards the sound. The tattooed one looked at me with twinkling eyes. My smirk became a small smile. Her lips twitched but never widened into a true smile.

The CEO's anger moved from me to the one that dared laugh at her anger. Or even maybe at my small joke. It was the type. Always angry, even if they showed it or not.

A different voice answered the yet unuttered question. "She is dead. It would be a waste to leave the things. They will be needed."

The voice came from behind me but I did not dare turn. I still felt more threatened by the CEO's anger. The shadow that fell across my body made my eyes flicker but I still did not turn.

The tall dark-haired one that had tried to instil some peace in the initial panic appeared on my right. Her hands were unflinching as she continued the undressing of the body that I had started but moments before.

I stood up slowly. I touched her shoulder briefly, a silent thank you for her support. I sidestepped around the CEO with the flaming eyes and took the dead woman's rucksack. My steps were slow but I did not allow even a slight wobble to mar their confidence.

I knelt heavily in front of the tattooed one. I looked at her and she met my gaze, her eyes shuttered with suspicion.

I tried to choose my words well. It would be too easy to say something wrong. I kept my voice low, ignoring the footsteps that had followed me.

"You can have it all. Right of conquest and all."

My eyes closed of their own accord. I had done it again. As always when it was important, the words came out wrong.

I think I blushed. A hand on my arm made me open my eyes. The tattooed one was looking at me, again with a twinkle in her eyes. She shook her head in a sort of gentle admonishment.

I shrugged. Don't ask me why but I did. It seemed like for once my intention was the one heard rather than my words.

She spoke then, her words low, almost as if they were for my ears only. "What would you do?"

I swallowed. Advice was something I gave to others all my life. I had no desire to take up that role here. Still I had been asked and the question looked honest.

I kept my answer to a whisper. "Keep the knife and the axe. The books too."

She cocked her head to the side, like I have seen dogs do. "The rest?" she asked.

I looked at the ground. It seemed weak even to me but I could not help my upbringing. I turned slightly glancing at the German couple. They were watching us, their hands entwined.

She did not have the time to speak when a deep voice asked from behind me. "Right of conquest and ensuring the next generation?"

I glanced at the tall one, her arms laden with bloody clothes. I nodded once. I did not want to try to explain. Feminist lesbian fantasies aside, I was no fool.

"The clothes too?" the tall one asked gently.

I nodded again. Babies need warmth and so do expectant mothers. Maybe the winters on this strange planet would be mild. Maybe they wouldn't. It would be bad enough with no doctors, no hospitals, no antiseptics and antibiotics. No need to make it worse.

The tall one nodded back at me and then turned to look at the tattooed one. I turned too but slower. She looked at us both, her eyes moving from me to the tall one and back. Finally, she nodded too.

Her hands were quick as she took the knife and the axe from their loops at the sides of the rucksack. She paused for a moment before opening the flap. Yet she was quick to take the two slim volumes from inside and close the flap again.

She nodded again then. At me this time, even if her eyes flickered towards the German couple. I shook my head. It was not my place to do this. Right of conquest and all.

The tattooed one sighed. Neither she nor I had the time to think further. The CEO's shrill but no longer so angry voice sounded from where she stood a few steps behind me. She had stood there throughout but thankfully silent.

"Why?"

I looked at the ground. I did not want to answer. Silence stretched and I realised no-one would take this cup from me. Then again I did not expect it. It had been that way for as long as I could remember. I hated confrontation but it seemed that it was in my blood. So be it. Let this cup be mine.

I stood slowly, turning to face the CEO. I kept my voice calm, as I always did with my boss. It did not work with my boss. She said she could feel the intensity, the anger, the fury, even if my words were slow and calm. I could see the same in the CEO's eyes.

The story of my life. I was neither intense, nor angry, nor furious. When I was angry, people did not realise. It was merely my irritation that they felt. I told my boss once. If I were angry, you would know. She did not understand but she knew me enough to believe me.

This one, the CEO, knew me not at all. Still she stepped back. All that intensity of mine I guess. Would she believe that I was merely tired, and sad? No matter. I was too tired even to try to explain.

I took a breath. "You expect rescue. I don't. They need it more than a dead woman."

Her words dripped half-venom, half-sadness. "A murdered one."

The smirk that appeared on my lips was merely sad but it looked arrogant as hell. "Dead is dead."

I looked around, more to the sky than at anyone on this odd-coloured ground that I stood on. The CEO opened her mouth to speak. I spoke before her. I had no intention of getting into the shouting match the tower-woman's attack had stopped.

"Neither words nor notions of justice mean anything here. Would it have been better if she had taken the little one's things? Hit her more than she already had?"

She looked at me, eyes wide, mouth even wider as anger made her flush once more. I turned away. She did not want to think. Most people seldom do. I shook my head.

I turned back to her, my hand fingering the knife, a clear intention of threat. "Let it be, madam. Feel well that your hands are clean. Your objection is noted."

She took a step toward me, the CEO with the flaming anger. I stood fast, my hand curling on the knife's hilt. It seemed like this world demanded blood this day. I had been saved once, I did not expect it again. So be it.

I never had the chance to draw. My shoulders felt the proximity of others. The tall one's voice sounded from my right. "Let it be. What's done is done."

The tattooed one grunted from my left. She had little use for words this one. I understood. I wished I did not need them either.

Overwhelming force. Or the threat of it. Civilisation in the making. I knew it. Not that others did. I would not enlighten them, even as I observed the CEO moving backwards, retreating from the unstated but very real threat. The burden of too much knowledge settled on my shoulders. Things were easier in the library and telling students the right way to open their minds. Things were easier in a different world, far away. No matter. No matter at all.

I shook my head when the tattooed one gave me the dead woman's rucksack with a nod towards the Germans. She insisted for a moment, enough for me to shake my head again. I would not accept that burden. Her hands, her knife, her gift. Law was left behind in the blue skies and bluer seas of a planet a universe away. Only conviction was left, and beliefs. I would stand by mine. Justice as it spoke in my mind.

The tattooed one stepped back finally, her eyes unreadable. I watched her, I watched them both as they stepped to the Germans, leaving a rucksack, minus knife, axe and books, and an armful of clothes wet with blood in front of the expectant mother. A mother-goddess cult in the making. I smirked. So be it. Better than a vengeful father. Far better.

The other German, the girlfriend, stood up. Her voice was hoarse. "Danke." She must have understood more English than she let on. Not a bad thing. Not bad at all.

I looked away as she moved her gaze towards me but not before I saw the slight inclination of her head. I would not accept her thanks. I had done nothing to deserve them.

I shook my head. It had taken too long, this mute theatre of contrasting beliefs and personalities. I squared my shoulders, settling the rucksack as far as I could. My hand once more checked the knife's draw.

I turned away towards the river. Needed to find out which way was upstream. People piss in rivers. A case of dysentery was not in my plans. Yet another gem of wisdom from a fantasy book or other.

Swift steps sounded behind me before I had walked more than a meter. A heavy hand fell on my shoulder. I turned slowly. I was tired. Another confrontation just then was not in the cards. No matter whoever it was wanted.

The tall one looked at me, questions in her eyes. "Where are you going?"

I looked away. But still I answered. I owed her that much. "Upstream."

She nodded once. I turned to get away but her hand on my shoulder stopped me. "Wait a sec."

I wanted to shake the hand away and move away and be lost once more in the throngs of people.

"Please."

I sighed and nodded. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. The British had gotten that much right. I had to nod again before she turned away.

I waited, looking at the ground. The CEO's voice assaulted my ears and my fists clenched. I closed my eyes. The temper that I had managed to subdue the past few years decided to flare just then.

"Where do you think you are going?"

I did not have to answer. The tall one spoke, her voice calm and composed. "Upstream."

I blushed even if no-one was looking at me. I had turned my back on leadership years and years ago. It had taken a while but I had realised that my stomach could not take it. Hard decisions and playing with other people's lives was not for me. And that was where there was still civilisation and it was not like I had the keys and codes to America's nukes. Now... No way, no how. It would be hard enough taking care of myself.

The voice that sounded loud, but still calm, was neither the CEO's nor that of the tall one. I turned slightly, trying not to call attention to myself, to look at who had spoken. I had forgotten about her. The policewoman had stood and looked at us all, hands at her waist.

"Why upstream?"

The tall one looked at her for long moments before she turned ever so slowly toward me. I held her gaze but for a moment. I forced the change that time. My shoulders squared away from their previous hunch and I allowed the arrogant smirk to come to my lips once more. For my eyes I knew I could do nothing but people did not often look at them.

I kept my words short, my voice harsh and unyielding. "People piss in rivers. Fresh water can only be found upstream. Beyond the crowds."

The policewoman had intense eyes but I held her gaze without flinching. I just imagined a man looking at me with contempt in his eyes and I answered back, the pride I had adopted long years past coming to the fore, sustaining me.

Moments passed, not too many I would guess, but it seemed many to me. Finally she nodded at me, even if she uttered no words. I waited until she turned away before I lowered my eyes. I looked towards the river in the near distance, my eyes misting.

I could hear others moving around me but I did not look. I wanted no woman to follow me. I was no leader nor did I know anything about this world or survival in it. By every hell on two planets, I did not want this.

I sighed once. I would go upstream. If others followed then that was none of my business. I neither spoke to anyone nor did I suggest anything. If they followed a fool, on their heads it was. So be it.

The hand on my shoulder made me turn from my thoughts. The tall one was standing beside me, the tattooed one beside her. She nodded at me, once again with a twinkle in her eyes. My lips twitched even if I could dredge no smile from inside me.

The first of my steps was heavy but the next one evened out. It was a trek to the river and there were people aplenty to wade through. I checked the knife's draw. It was clear and I could draw without too much fuss. Still I kept my hand free and near enough.

Long treks and a threat unknown but not unexpected all around. Suspicion and fear. And the ghosts of my mind leading me on a road I knew nothing about and wanted to know even less. A new road, a different road.

I looked at the people in front of me and at the river beyond. At the green sky and the blue-tinged leaves of the white trees in the distance. A new world, a new road. So be it. So be it.

The water was cool. I drank it eagerly and so did the people around me. I drank my fill, or at least enough to slacken my thirst. Another bit of what I thought useless reading came to mind and stopped me from gulping down too much. Too much cold water brought colic.

I couldn't help but smile. I was not certain if it was for people or horses but I thought better safe than sorry. I could guess that would be my life from now on. Random pieces of knowledge, an imperfect memory and lots of hope. Well, at least it would be better than others. So be it.

I retreated from the river bank and the people that still drank in the shallows. I took off my rucksack and sat on the hard ground. I looked around me. The throngs had been left behind. I was lucky I guess. I had woken up at the edge of the crowd, relatively at least.

It had felt like more than two hours to traverse the crowds and move enough upstream to be certain that the water was clean. Well, as certain as my untrained eye and even more untrained palate could tell.

I had been followed by more people than I could believe. I looked at them as they drank. I shook my head. The good scout inside me wanted to take responsibility. I refused. No way. I could see, even with my usually limited and tinted vision, the talent in them, the strength, the ability. There were people to be leaders.

I shook my head once more. I was losing myself again in internal debates and thoughts that churned. Carefully I opened the rucksack, finding the two slim volumes I was expecting. A little bell chimed warning in my mind.

I ignored it just then. I went on rooting into the rucksack. I had barely taken the single blanket out and finally found the water bottle when everything seemed to stop in my mind.

Certainly anyone looking at me just then must have thought that I had completely lost my mind as I threw away blanket, water bottle and even the rucksack in my frantic search for the two slim volumes.

As soon as I found them, I blinked. It could not be. It just could not be. I almost ran to the tattooed one but the logical part of me stopped me before I had taken a single step. I stuffed the two books in my belt. I put the things back in the rucksack caring little about order.

Closing the flap quickly I slung it over my shoulder. Still my hands did their sidetrips to check the knife and axe. Those I could not lose.

Then I did run. I ran without a second glance to the tattooed one. She almost jumped to her feet as I neared. I would guess she must have seen something in my eyes. I did not care. I did not care if I seemed mad or stupid. I had to know. I had to.

"The books..." I gasped, my unfit body protesting at the running.

She looked at me uncomprehending.

"The books. I need to see your books," I panted out, trying to convey my urgency.

She almost shook her head but the movement was arrested quickly. Looking away from me, she opened her rucksack and fished out four slim volumes.

I snatched them from her hands even before she had quite extended them to me. I could feel her looking at me as I kneeled down on the hard ground, carefully, almost reverently putting the books in a row in front of me.

My hands trembled as I opened each slim volume in turn, leaving them open in front of me. The tattooed one squatted next to me and I could hear her slight gasp as her eyes travelled from book to book.

The tall one's voice from behind me made me stiffen. "Are you alright?"

I turned just enough to glance at her. Something must have shown in my eyes or my flushed face for she knelt on one knee next to me.

The tall one did not look at the books. She was looking at me. I could feel her scrutiny. My voice came out hoarse as I knew it always did when I was rushed or stressed. "They are different."

It took her a moment to decipher my almost cryptic statement. She lurched forward, her hands sure and steady as she turned the pages of first one book and then the others. Finally she turned to me, her voice low. "They are different!"

I nodded. Inside I railed at whoever it was that had brought us to this place. It was a smart movement. A trade of knowledge. A surety for the creation of communities. Too much knowledge of history gave darker possibilities. Monopolies of knowledge. Blackmail. Ways to discipline, punish, control.

I shivered. My eyes darted everywhere but at the books. I hummed inside my mind, an old technique to calm myself. Hysteria and panic would help me none. A detail of my environment registered.

The tattooed one's rucksack was lying on its side, still open, where she had let it fall when she took the books out. I shook my head and a tiny smile appeared on my lips. Different books. Different tools it looked like too.

I turned to look at the tattooed one. She looked back at me, her eyes narrow. I cleared my throat. This was not what I had planned.

"Can I see your gear please?" I asked as humbly as possible.

She nodded without waiting and made a negligent gesture towards the rucksack. I moved quickly, feeling her eyes on me as I carefully starting getting stuff out of her rucksack.

It took me only moments to go beyond the blanket and the waterbottle. It seemed that those were common to all, or at least common to the two rucksacks I had seen. After that though there was a knife and an axe. I knew where those had come from. The next item though was interesting. A pan rested at the bottom of the rucksack, the provisions the voice had promised snuggle inside of it.

I smiled. Not a true smile but something more than a smirk. As carefully as possible I returned the items to their place, although I was certain the tattooed one would redo them. I never was much for order and housekeeping, even if it were in a sack.

I closed the flap loosely when I finished and moved quickly to grab my own rucksack. With little care for order I started taking items out. The blanket and waterbottle were there. Underneath though were provisions but no pan. My heartbeat increased for a moment before I spied the twin grey stones underneath the food pack.

I took them out reverently even as my mind worked overtime. I looked them over for a moment but I was no geologist to know. Still I had an inkling. I was careful as I took my knife from its sheath.

I could feel eyes on me but I ignored them. If it was merely a foolish notion then I had no desire to see the ones witnessing my foolishness. The knife had a single edge and I turned it. No need to dull the edge. I struck the stone with the knife, my eyes narrowing.

Nothing. Not a single spark. My lips twitched in disappointment. Way to go! Foolishness! I shook my head before turning the knife in my hand and sliding the knife's edge along the stone. I smiled then. Whetstones, stupido!

I could only hope someone else had flints. Lighters or matches would be useless in the long run, not unless there was sulphur somewhere around and someone knew how to make whatever it was that made matches.

A hand on my shoulder made me turn, expecting the tall one. I flinched when I realised it was the CEO.

"What have you found?" she asked, her voice demanding.

Anger ignited hot and furious in me. How did she dare touch me? The inherent contradiction of reaction did not bother me. My reaction it was and I was touchy about those.

I shrugged her hand off quickly. "Don't touch me," I growled.

Once more a shadow fell on me. The tall one was there, her brows furrowed. "Easy," she said warningly. I wasn't certain if the warning was for me or the CEO. I nodded either way. I was overreacting. I always did with such people. Knowing didn't help at all. Not at all.

I stayed silent though. I was too stubborn to answer such questions, especially in such a tone. Hah!

My own personal stand against rudeness lasted all of a few seconds. The tall one's voice rose above us all, calling everyone to her. Magnetic leadership if I ever saw one, especially as the stragglers by the riverbank started walking towards us.

A few minutes passed until everyone was standing in a loose circle. I could feel the CEO fuming beside me throughout. Enough times she opened her mouth to speak, another order of some sort I could guess. She closed it mutely every time. Maybe it was the coldness that I was trying hard to project to all and sundry that stopped her. My money though was on the tattooed one that was glaring at her every time she made a move.

The tall one cleared her throat. "Thank you," she started.

I looked up to her from my seated position. Belatedly I came to my feet, still clutching knife and stone in my hands. Once again the tattooed one's eyes twinkled. It should have rankled but it didn't. My lips twitched in answer.

The tall one opened her mouth to continue but the CEO was faster. Her voice dripped contempt. "Our knife-yielding fellow here has found something. Maybe now that you are all here, she might want to share it with us."

I closed my eyes biting my tongue. No figure of speech that. I always did when I tried to calm myself. Biting too hard hurt, biting too softly I did not feel. I had to be careful. It centred me that odd exercise in discipline.

I never reacted well to insults. Especially veiled ones. Guilt-tripping I hated more than anything. My feet twitched as my instincts screamed fight. My compass was still in a haze from before. I had decided to kill a couple of hours before. The decision had not changed since then.

A hand on my shoulder stilled me outside and inside. I opened my eyes. The tattooed one was looking at me. "Easy," she mouthed.

I shook my head. Her hand on my shoulder tightened and I breathed out once, a long sigh. I nodded perfunctorily. She was right. I was being touchy. Again.

I nodded again. This time more deeply. She was right after all. Still it galled. Another delayed response to shock I guessed. Irrational anger and a temper that resisted my attempts at containment. Violent they had called me once. I had tried hard not to be. Yet I was slipping.

Thankfully the CEO shut up just then. I would not be a happy bunny if she pushed me some more.

I heard a quiet sigh from my side and an unfamiliar voice sounded so near to me. It was velvet coupled with whisky-smokiness. I shivered at its sound.

"Teach here..." the tattooed one started, gesturing at me. My eyes widened. I had just acquired a nickname it seemed.

"Teach found out some things. Best you tell 'em, Teach," she said calmly, composed, ending with a genteel pat on my shoulder.

I swallowed then on a dry throat. Who would have thought I would get stage-fright? Me? I've faced audiences small and large, all of them with expectations. Never did I care, not since the first time. And now I got stage-fright? It figures!

Finally I managed to get some spit in my mouth. I breathed once as every eye was on me. My voice was low, gruff. Unintended results of repressed anger and stress from before.

"Far as I can tell, we all have different books. The guidebooks they talked about. And different tools."

I stopped then, swallowing again. I should have thought of taking my waterbottle to the river. There hadn't been time but I should have. I should have.

The tall one continued with a nod my way. "Like Teach said, we all have different things. If we stick together, we'll all have more of what we need. Still, that's up to all of you."

I saw a couple of people looking at me questioningly and I nodded without thinking. I wanted to kick myself afterwards. Remember, bozo! Assume no responsibility.

I looked down at the ground then. Better not to call attention to myself. Let them look at another if they want confirmation. Not to me. Never to me.

The discussion started then, the CEO, as I expected, the first one to speak. I shook my head. Another shouting match in the making.

I left then, retreating away from the circle. Slowly I found my rucksack, stuffing the things inside. I put it on my back quickly and checked the knife's draw. The waterbottle I kept outside.

I trudged to the water's edge. It was clean, the small pebbles in the bottom keeping the mud away. Patiently I waited until the waterbottle was as full as it could be. The slow footsteps from behind me made me stiffen.

I waited there, squatting on the bank, but my hand found the knife without effort.

"You ok?" the tattooed one asked in her smoky voice.

I turned then. There was no twinkle in her eye. I nodded, my listlessness showing. She squatted next to me, filling her own waterbottle.

We stayed thus in silence until the waterbottle was filled. I moved after a bit, sitting finally on a stone. She squatted for a few moments more before standing and coming towards me.

She clasped my shoulder. "Come on."

I looked at her questioningly. I had neither desire nor reason to go back to the shouting match that was reaching some sort of early crescendo.

Her eyes were serious. "Tall, dark and responsible over there will need some help. Come on..."

A laugh bubbled out of me. Tall, dark and responsible? For a moment there I had a vision of Xena in small Himler-like glasses behind a desk with a smudge of ink on her nose and a ledger open.

The tattooed one smiled a bit at me. I sighed and glanced up the tiny hill. She was right. The shouting match was going on strong.

I stood up, once more putting the rucksack on my back and checking the knife's draw. I nodded at the tattooed one.

She walked off first but I stopped her before she had taken a couple of steps. "Hey!"

She looked back at me, arching her eyebrows at me.

I swallowed. "What's your name?"

Her eyes narrowed at my question. "What's yours?" she asked immediately.

I looked away at the question. For some odd reason I had no desire to say my name, not even to this woman that had helped me more than once already.

She smirked at me, her eyes twinkling with suppressed mirth. I thought she would not answer me. I looked away and started walking towards the impromptu council at the top.

I had barely taken a step when her smoky voice reached my ears.

"Jinx."

I nodded at her thankfully. It was no true name of course but then again I had refused to give mine.

We walked side by side until we got back to the circle of women. As I had expected the CEO was shouting about something or other. The tall one, tall dark and responsible as Jinx had said, was fuming on the opposite side.

I shook my head. Rhetoric was not something I liked. I had spent too much time studying it to like it. Rhetoric is the coward's and the liar's weapon.

I looked at Jinx. Her lips were a thin line of anger. I could understand. Tall, dark and responsible indeed. Maybe the romantic in me was being too optimistic but anger on behalf of another? Well, who knew? Maybe Jinx had something against rhetoric too.

The CEO stopped for a moment. She had to take breath after all. Both the tall one and the policewoman opened their mouths to speak. They never had the chance for the CEO went on ignoring them.

This was too much. Just that little drop of water that made the flood. I looked at Jinx, she looked away. This was how it was to be. I could understand even if I hated it. Still there was neither time nor patience to change that. This was how it was to be. So be it.

I stepped inside the circle. The unexpected movement made the CEO stop talking. I did not give her the opportunity to speak more. That much I knew to do.

"I don't know you. And you don't know me. But standing around here talking does nothing. The sun is going down. Let's bunk for the night, have some dinner, think it over. Decide tomorrow what you wanna do."

I could see the CEO opening her mouth to say whatever. I did not give her the chance. I nodded at the tall one once and then turned on my heel leaving the circle. As I walked away, I could hear the policewoman's voice sounding over the CEO's.

"Teach is right. Let's get some supper."

Teach is right. So be it.

Unfamiliar stars dotted the sky above me. I tried to ignore them. I did not need the reminder. I tried to keep my ears open, my eyes scanning the darkness all around. I had to do it. Not for others but for myself.

Dinner was some sort of trail mix in bars. Sweet and heavy. Still it was food and that was enough for me. Not for some of the others but I ignored them as I could. The top of the little hillock became a makeshift camp.

One of the others found flintstones in her pack. The CEO, even the tall one argued for a fire. As the dusk fell it was not cold but it was chilly. A fire would be good.

I wanted to shake my head at them all but I refrained. No matter what they wanted the trees were far away and there was no time for chopping one down with the sun falling rapidly. They decided on a cold camp after yet another shouting match.

I decided to be odd, odder than usual. I spent the last of the light reading from one of the slim volumes in my pack. It had information about plants. I was no botanist but I could try to learn. That much I could do.

The others bedded down quickly or as quickly as they could. I heard enough bitching and moaning for half a lifetime. No soap, no toothbrushes, no bath. I moved away from them, sitting on the edge of the hilltop.

I stayed there, my blanket around my shoulders, scanning the darkness. The sound of steps made me turn. It was the tall one.

Her voice was low, as if she were trying not to disturb someone's rest. Yet I could hear that none of the others had yet achieved that much.

"What are you doing?"

I looked away from her, once more checking the darkness. I could see little, it seemed as if this world had no moon, or maybe it was merely a moonless night.

"Teach?"

I sighed. "What's up?"

She knelt beside me on one knee. "Come on. Let's get some sleep."

I looked at her then, even if I could see little in the darkness. I took a small breath. I so not wanted to do this. Why was no-one else thinking?

"Someone needs to keep watch," I said finally.

Her hand was heavy on my shoulder. "I know."

I looked down then. Of course someone had thought about it. But I had moved away long before dinner had finished. The press of people and too much shouting driving me away. Of course, I had not heard anything. My fault, my weakness.

The tall one spoke again. "Come on. Get some sleep. Linda will stand first watch."

She must have realised my question because she gestured towards the back. I turned a bit and saw the policewoman standing a few meters away. I nodded then and stood abruptly.

Before the tall one could turn, I grasped her hand, feeling her stiffen at my touch. I let her go as if burnt.

"Sorry," I whispered.

"It's alright," she whispered back, grasping my shoulder once again.

I swallowed. "What's your name?" I asked looking away from her in the darkness.

"Gloria," she answered immediately and I could hear the smile in her voice.

I nodded even though I knew she could not see it in the darkness. We did not speak further as we moved toward the prone bodies in the camp. I looked for an empty space and finally decided on one far away from everyone.

I never had the chance to move that way. Gloria's hand on my shoulder stopped my movement. Even in the darkness I saw her gesture towards the one side of the camp. I shook my head wordlessly in denial. Yet her hand did not move from my shoulder.

A squeeze from the hand on my shoulder made me move again where Gloria led. I did not want to sleep alone in this new world, this different place. Yet I had neither the courage nor the humility to ask. So I moved along fortified in my inability to ask but thankfully enough ability to accept a gift when given.

I looked away again when I realised that they had left a space for me between Jinx and one of the redheads I thought. I stopped once more shaking my head. Another squeeze of my shoulder prompted me to speak. Practicality this time rather than cowardly pride.

"I move... in my sleep," I whispered towards Gloria.

"It's alright," she whispered back.

I wanted to shake my head again but I had neither fortitude nor strength for an argument just then. They would find out what I meant before the night was done, I was certain.

It took me but a few moments to huddle in my blanket, the rucksack under my head, my hand next to the knife's hilt. I lay there stiff and chilly trying to somehow will my mind to sleep.

I could hear whispers from around me but thankfully no-one addressed me. I screwed my eyes tightly shut and tried to relax. It didn't work as I knew it wouldn't but I could feel my body clamouring for sleep. It had been a long day. Too long.

I stiffened even more when I felt the restriction of an arm snaking around me. The smoky voice that could so easily make me shiver, whispered in my ear. "Calm down and get some sleep, Teach."

I breathed out, trying to determine how restricted I felt. It came as a surprise that in spite of everything, it actually felt good to be held, even by a stranger. I nodded in the darkness. Humans needed packs too. Even my querulous self could not deny that. Who would have thought? Me, independent stubborn me, part of a pack. Truthfully it didn't sound that bad especially with warmth front and back and an arm around my shoulders. Part of a pack. So be it.

A small bitter smile stretched my lips, even as sleep stole over me.

I opened my eyes, sitting up, almost in a panic. It took me a moment to realise that Gloria was next to me, shaking me out of sleep.

There was a bit of light but not enough to clearly see yet. A waterbottle was thrust into my hands and I drank eagerly.

Finally I stood up, letting the blanket fall from my body. Gloria looked at me, her eyes in the shadows still at the time just at dawn. I nodded at her when she gestured towards the edge of the hillock.

I gathered my rucksack and the blanket in my hands before making my way there. I had barely sat when Gloria came to sit beside me. I looked at her questioningly. She should be trying to get some rest after her watch.

"Sorry. The little bitch can't get up for all her talking," she said hoarsely.

"Huh?" I was unintelligent so early with no coffee and no cigarettes. It hit me just then. No more cigarettes. Ever. My breath caught. That I would have never imagined. I almost wanted to cry. I shook my head instead. No cigarettes. I would survive. I would.

"Amanda. You know the one you put in her place yesterday?" Gloria whispered drawing me from my half-asleep meanderings about cigarettes and nicotine highs.

"The CEO?" I asked sleepily before what I had said quite registered in my brain. When it did I blushed, shaking my head. I had to wake up and quickly.

Gloria laughed softly. "That's as good a nickname as any... Teach..."

I blushed again and Gloria laughed. I guessed the sky had lightened enough for her to see the flush on my cheeks. A hearty slap on the back, unexpected as it was, almost made me pitch forward.

I turned angrily at whoever had dared to touch me. Twinkling eyes and a half-smirk met my outrage. Jinx arched her eyebrows at me. Clearly a morning person. What could I say? A damned morning person! Early morning and without coffee too!

I grunted at her. Outraged as I was, I could not help but be slightly amused. My amusement must have shown for she smiled at me. It was more of a deep smirk really but I took it for a smile. The twinkle in her eyes made it so.

I inclined my head. Who would have thought the serious killer I met yesterday would have a playful side? I looked toward the east as the whitish sun started to show over the horizon.

It was peaceful but I could not abide it for long. My eyes turned to the plain beyond whence we had travelled yesterday. There were still people there, visible even in the early light. Too many of them.

A sense of urgency filled me. I didn't know why. Just something in the desultory milling of people down in the plain made me uneasy. Very uneasy.

I turned to Gloria. She looked at me and her eyes were narrowed. She sighed once.

Her voice was low. "They're sleeping yet. And we did say we'd talk this morning."

I looked away. I did not want to answer. At least not with the first thought that came to my mind. Fools all of them. More fool me.

Jinx's smoky tones were low, almost too low to be heard. "We need to get out of here, don't we?"

I looked back down the plain. The milling seemed a bit more frantic to my eyes, in spite of the early hour. Something almost reached my ears but there was little wind. Still my uneasiness grew.

I nodded at Jinx's previous question. I didn't know why but something told me that we had to go. We were too near still. Too near.

"It's early still," Gloria murmured, I think more to herself than to me.

I shrugged. I had said all I could say. The game of trying to convince was not one I wanted to play.

A grunt sounded from my left where Jinx squatted, almost against me. I turned to her and felt Gloria do the same. She was looking at us, censor clear in her eyes. She spoke slowly as if instructing small children.

"If you're both iffy over staying, then I say go. Early or no."

I looked away. I did not want the kind of power she tried to lay upon me. Gloria must have nodded because I felt another hearty slap on my shoulder from Jinx.

"Come on, Teach."

I shrugged in answer. Some animal instinct was screaming at me to move. Get out of there. Now!

"Teach..." Jinx's voice had taken on the tone of a warning. I looked down to the plain. I was right. I was certain I was right. Still...

I sighed once and heard Jinx taking breath to speak.

"You're right," I blurted out.

"Alright then. It's settled," she answered standing up.

Gloria stood up too but I stayed where I was, unseeingly looking at the plain below and the people milling there more and more frantically by the minute.

I knew I should stand but something stubborn inside of me made me continue sitting.

Some communication must have passed between Jinx and Gloria for Gloria moved away with slow steps without saying anything more. Jinx once more lowered herself to sit beside me.

Her hand moved to touch my knee. I stiffened. Really I was not much for people touching me. Even if that same person had spent a night with their arm around me.

I was certain she had felt me stiffening but the hand did not move from my knee. On the contrary, it gave me a slight squeeze. With a sigh I turned but did no more than glance at her, instead finding a convenient spot in the distance to focus my eyes.

"Why are you being such a twat?" Jinx asked harshly, her hand still squeezing my knee.

I looked at her then, outrage colouring my vision, as I suspected it coloured my face. I opened my mouth to answer but nothing came out. After all what could I say? I was being a twat. For a reason but that did not change my behaviour. Instead I looked away, refusing stubbornly to answer. Of course it made me more of a twat but I preferred to be thought an arrogant twat than a frightened coward.

Something must have showed on my face or in my body language because Jinx spoke more softly.

"What's going on in your mind, Teach? Yesterday you were white as a sheet but you still tried to stick a knife in that bitch. You don't say three words together but when you do it's the right thing to do. What's wrong?"

I turned away from Jinx, her words ringing in my mind. Her hand squeezed my knee so hard I almost yelped from the pain. I gritted my teeth instead, stubbornly refusing to show any weakness.

Her voice reached my ears in a harsh whisper. "Look at you. Even now. It hurts but you say nothing. You know what to do but you say nothing."

My knee was a sea of pain. The old injury was complaining, hell, it was screaming its head off. Tears were coming to my eyes but I blinked them stubbornly away. My jaw was locked so tight that I feared my teeth would break.

I barely heard Jinx's sigh but I certainly felt the moment she let go of my knee. I could not stop the hurried exhale of breath as the pain subsidised.

Her voice held a tone of alarm, shading into panic. "I really hurt you."

At that even my stubbornness receded, even if only a bit. I was always a sucker for care. "It's alright. It's my bum knee. It'll pass."

Jinx's reaction caught me completely by surprise. Her hands were swift and strong as she literally took hold of me and turned me around to face her. I stared at her incredulously for a moment before I looked away.

This time Jinx did not allow me the out. Her hand was gentle as she took hold of my chin. Mine was not as I slapped her hand away. I could not keep the anger from my eyes as I looked at her and I did not want to. I really didn't like people touching me, especially like that.

Most people would have given up by now. Just another headcase, they would say. And I would agree with them. They would have been, after all, right.

Jinx didn't. She grasped my hand in a gentle grip and spoke quietly. "Talk to me, Teach. Whatever it is, talk to me."

I looked at her then, really looked at her. I had to swallow hard when I finally recognised what I was seeing. Seriousness, concern and compassion. This woman had saved my innocence just a day past. I could only castigate myself for being an ass to her.

I was certain the debate inside of me showed on my face. Pride or debt? What was stronger? Arrogance is a failing. So is cowardice. And I was guilty of both. Yet no-one had ever found reason to accuse me that I did not pay my debts.

I looked away for a moment. Confession never held much appeal to me. Still I owed Jinx that much. Hell, I owed her a lot more.

"This is as fucked up as it gets. We are babes in the woods here. You fuck up here, it ain't like back home. It can get you killed."

I paused then, the hoarseness in my voice making me clear my throat. I could have stopped just then. It was half an answer but it was an answer. Fear rather than cowardice but enough to stop even persistent questioning. What was better? Be a chicken or a coward?

I went on. Chicken I was. And a coward too to boot. But I paid my debts, in full if I could do it. It would take more than a forced confession of my faults to even out with Jinx but it was the least I could do.

"If others follow you in your fuck up, they get killed too."

Jinx was silent for a moment after I finished. She didn't look away from me and although I wanted to, I didn't either.

A small smile creased her face, revealing slightly uneven white teeth. "Teach, I don't know about any others but for me... I'd prefer to die doing something wrong than doing nothing at all."

I almost snorted at her naiveté. Death was not a bad option. I always had a good relationship with it. Living though was another matter. Especially if you knew that you had gotten people killed. That was not an option in my book. I debated for a moment whether to answer. The earnestness in her eyes made the decision for me. Cowardice. That was my fault. Dishonesty though wasn't. So be it.

"And what if you survive?"

I could see clearly the incomprehension at first and then the slow realisation of my meaning in Jinx's eyes. She was the one that looked away then. My lips twitched in a grimace.

I stood up then, absently stuffing the blanket in my rucksack before slinging it in place. My hand followed its usual path to check the knife's crossdraw. I stepped away from Jinx as she slowly came to her feet.

I had barely taken two steps towards the camp and the woman Gloria was slowly but implacably waking up when a hand on my shoulder stopped me. I turned slowly to face Jinx. Her voice was as hoarse as mine had been a few moments ago.

"What if people die because you said nothing, did nothing? How is that better, Teach?"

It was like a fist in the gut but I sucked it in as I would with a real blow. I couldn't help the sad smile that appeared on my lips or the sadness in my voice. "It isn't."

Jinx's eyes narrowed and she swallowed. I inclined my head at her before turning away and slowly trudging back at the campsite and the women milling there, their voices rising as more woke.

There it was. All of it. And nothing that could be said. Good people, responsible people knew the answer well. It was better to try and fail than not try at all. I was neither good nor responsible. There was another way. The coward's way. Stay aloof, a shadow moving through the noon, a comet appearing just for a moment on the night sky. Sometimes remembered, sometimes forgotten. Either way no more than a momentary blip on the radar. The coward's way. My way.

So be it.

I had barely reached the campsite when the CEO's voice rose almost in a shriek. Her aggressiveness towards Gloria had ratcheted up a notch. Her words were more than I could handle as I was.

"You said we'd talk today. And now you want us to move again. What are you trying to do? Who made you God?"

I ignored her and the murmurs of the women, most still tousled from sleep, blankets around their shoulders in the early morning chill. I walked up to Gloria but made certain my voice was loud enough to carry.

"The river is the best bet. There are woods further upstream and that means game. And water from the river. Hopefully there should be some better shelter for the night too."

Gloria nodded at me and spoke quickly, her voice loud in the silence. "Can you wait a bit? Just to get everyone ready?"

I looked at her, trying to judge what game she was playing. What did she want me to say? I was neither oracle nor mindreader. I chose honesty instead. Maybe she did want me to play the bad guy.

"Just a bit though. I don't like all that milling around down there."

Gloria nodded once again but she never had the chance to speak as the CEO, Amanda, started shouting once again.

"And who made this clown leader? This isn't your personal playground and we are no puppets."

Gloria opened her mouth to answer but I was angry, irate and way too raw to listen through another shouting match. I kept my voice as even as I could but pitched it higher, high enough to carry to everyone. It was time to make our positions clear, or at least for me to make mine.

"Fuck her. Democracy ain't worth it. Get your stuff and let's go. This isn't a movie. It won't wait until the plot has progressed enough."

I could feel the cold stares from everyone. Even Gloria was looking at me with narrowed eyes. I almost laughed aloud but I managed to choke it before nothing more than a snort came out. If role-play was what they wanted, then they would get it. So be it.

I turned in a circle matching everyone's stare. I let all my arrogance shine forth and the bottomless pit my soul had become yesterday, was it just yesterday?, make its impression.

"You are all adults. Make your own fucking decision. Talking about it just wastes time."

I turned to face Amanda, the CEO, my hand going to my knife in clear threat.

"And you shut the fuck up. This isn't a fucking boardroom. You do what you want and let others do what they do. It ain't none of your business."

I did not speak any more nor did I plan to stay longer to see what happened. I stepped quickly, almost managing to escape when one of the others stepped in front of me, stopping me by her presence. I would have stepped around her, or through her if that was her intention, but she spoke instead and the courtesy instilled to me by loving parents came forth.

"If we stick together we have a better chance to survive. You know that, so why the act?"

I looked at her and at her girlfriend that she held close. It was a beautiful contrast, dark chocolate and pale ivory. I almost ignored her but her words propelled me to answer.

I changed my tone to the one I often used with students. The bright ones that simply needed an opening to pour their intelligence into. It was patronising in a way but I tried to be as sincere in my intentions with her as I was with my students. She would probably find it as irritating as they did. Still it had worked with some of them and most did realise afterwards what I was doing.

"There are a lot of people in the plain still. So many together and with no leadership, they will become a mob. Someone will realise that the more they can get, rations, blankets, equipment, the better chance they have. With weapons all around, it will become a bloodbath. People will run, panic. Yesterday everyone was in shock. It's wearing out now. People are realising this is for real. Everyone will be out there for themselves. I don't want to be around when it all goes to hell."

It was a long speech, the longest I had given since I had woken up yesterday morning. Years of classroom experience made my voice strong but still I needed water at the end of it. I did not drink though. It would ruin the image.

I expected her to answer but she did not. Silently she turned away from me but only enough to shoulder her own rucksack before handing one to her girlfriend. It was just for a few moments before she turned again, this time not to me but to Gloria.

"We're ready to go."

I could hear the fear in her voice and it strung a note inside of me. No matter what the movies showed, fear was good. Fear kept you cautious and caution kept you alive.

I inclined my head to her even if she did not see it. I would need to ask her name sometime. It was good to have names for people. Sometimes. A name gave you power, it gave them power too. They were something then, something more than strangers to pass through or around.

The instant decision had done something for the others. Most, the German couple among them, were packing up, their preparations done in minutes. Some others were looking around, slightly dazed. Amanda had retreated in a huff but I cared not what she did.

The hand on my shoulder alerted me to Jinx's presence. I did not have time to turn when her silken whisper reached me. "You did good, Teach."

When I finally did turn she was already walking away towards the river, her waterbottle in hand. I followed meekly. I needed to fill up mine too.

The sounds behind me told me that others were following. It took more than a few minutes for everyone to fill their waterbottles. I did not look at them, studying the land instead. The river was continuing slightly uphill but nothing that seemed too strenuous to my untrained eye.

I watched the trees in the distance. It looked like the beginning of a forest. For a moment I wondered whether I was being foolish. There would be game in the forest but I knew nothing of hunting. Still the river was there. Maybe there would be a chance at fishing.

I had not fished since I was child. That dreaded summer when a stupidly acquired injury kept me from the sea I loved. My father, as kind as he was practical, had bought me a fishing rod and other paraphernalia. I fished that summer to alleviate the boredom and be near the sea.

I had no fishing rod or other paraphernalia. There was a hope in my mind that a fishing set would be among the pieces of equipment that the others had. Either way, it should not be that difficult to make a spear. I had no idea how to spear-fish. I had only seen it done in TV documentaries. Still I could hope. With enough repetition, surely there would be some success.

I started walking upstream, my stomach rumbling. I drank some water, trying to ignore the hunger. Better to save the rations. Maybe I would be lucky and a fish, hopefully an edible one, would decide on suicide and jump out of the river at my feet. I chuckled at myself. If a fish jumped out, it would certainly be poisonous. Miracles did not happen. That I knew.

Soft murmurs from the others alerted me to their presence. I fought my impulse to look back, see who had decided to follow and who had stayed on the hilltop. I kept my eyes stubbornly forward. I would not look and I would not care. I had played my role but that was all.

Gloria's voice when it came from beside me sort of startled me. I had not even realised that it was her that had come to walk with me. "Anything I should be looking for, Teach?"

I glanced at her wondering if she was baiting me. I had not expected that from her. Yet all her eyes revealed was earnest question. Something of my suspicion must have showed because she answered it quite clearly. "You got good ideas, Teach. I'm just asking for advice."

Advice I could give. As long as no-one expected me to enforce it or follow it. I nodded at her, silently apologising for my suspicion. I cleared my throat.

"Someone should stay at the back. Herd the stragglers and keep an eye out for anyone following us."

She nodded at me and I continued. I almost wanted to shake my head at her. I didn't know what she was looking for. Still I spoke on, even if I cursed myself inside.

"Everyone should keep an eye out. Anything people have left behind can be useful though I don't expect anyone to have left their stuff behind so early. Also if there are any other people out there."

Gloria kept nodding as if she were taking mental notes. I had no idea what she had already thought of and what she actually took in but I had been a teacher for too long to ignore attentiveness.

"When we reach the forest, anything that looks like a clearing would be good. We need to stay the night somewhere and it's not like we have a destination. Small trees or big branches for walking sticks and spears. I'd like something bigger than a knife if things go wrong. If anyone has found any line or hooks, then we can always try fishing in the river. Again any wood or grass that looks dry. To start a fire later. If anyone sees something like fruit or veggies then we should have a look, check the books and stuff. But no-one should eat anything but rations, at least not before we check with the book. Keep an eye out for large animals, especially if they look like predators. I wouldn't fancy meeting a mountain cat or something."

I wound down slowly, trying to remember something, anything. "I don't know. That's all I can think for now."

Gloria looked at me and waited until I had met her eyes. "Thank you. I hadn't thought of branches or small trees. Spears would come in handy I guess. Or deadwood for the fire. Or a couple of other things."

I nodded at her. At least my gabbing had been useful for something. I had expected Gloria to move away. I was certain she had things to arrange. Jinx had been right. Tall, dark and responsible indeed. I had not expected her to lean in, her lips almost touching my ear.

"Thanks, Teach."

I almost glanced back when she abruptly moved away. I merely shook my head. Sometimes I wished I had been born a boy. At least then I would have a valid excuse for not understanding women.

Shaking my head once more, I kept on walking, my eyes roaming the landscape. It would be a long walk to the edges of the forest. So be it.

I sat by the fire watching the others talking, even as the shadows danced around the small clearing. In the almost darkness just inside the trees I could see the one standing guard. It was one of the Germans, her name was Petra as I had been told a few hours ago.

I should have paid more attention to the discussions around me as the others slowly got to know each other. A flurry of names had been thrown at me in the past few hours. I could remember very few of them and wanted to remember none.

Finding the clearing had thankfully been easy, especially after hours of walking to reach the forest edge. We were lucky enough that one of the redheads, not the panicked one I had met first

in this strange world but the other one, the silent one, had found fishing hooks and line in her pack.

I had spent most of the afternoon fishing, as others gathered wood and built a fire. A smile spread on my lips as I remembered hunting for worms for bait. It was funny how the others let me do the worm-hunting on my own. A couple of them had even brought me their hooks to bait, gingerly admitting that they had no desire to touch the slimy worms.

For all our hours in the river, we had not managed to catch enough fish to feed everyone to repletion. Still they had been enough for a soup that had me feeling warm inside. I felt content knowing that we had managed to conserve our five hooks.

I made a mental note to find a piece of wood to carve. I would probably be a useless carver, artistry of that sort never having been in my blood in spite of my father's genes. Still I was certain I could make some primitive hooks, sturdy enough to catch fish and thus save the metal ones.

The hand on my shoulder brought me out of my thoughts. I turned my head to look at Jinx, who was looking at me mischievously.

"I see you finally stopped studying," Jinx commented.

Belatedly I remembered the slim volume in my lap. I looked down at it, squinting a bit. I was never particularly good reading in poor light. Still it had not been a conscious decision to stop my reading. More like I had gotten distracted.

I shrugged at Jinx and she wiggled her eyebrows at me.

"What?" I asked tersely.

"Tall, dark and responsible asked me to remind you that you wanted to know what tools the others had in their packs."

I was sure a blush covered my cheeks just then. I had completely forgotten about that pearl of wisdom I had blurted out at Gloria earlier in the evening. I almost shook my head but I stopped the movement before it would truly register in anyone's eyes.

"Sure. She wants to do this now?"

Jinx looked at me oddly. "Actually she was wondering if tomorrow morning would be better."

I nodded wordlessly at Jinx. I was tired and going through equipment was not something I wanted to do just then. Some of my tiredness must have showed. Nothing I could do about it now. So be it.

"You look tired."

"I'm fine."

"You lie well, Teach, but your face tells the story," Jinx admonished me gently.

I shrugged. She leaned until her mouth was next to my cheek.

"Too many people?" Jinx whispered.

I nodded silently. People watching was less tiring than having to participate but tiring nonetheless. It had been a long day and I had never been much of a walker, not even in my student days.

"You should sleep."

I nodded again and slowly stood up. I patted Jinx's shoulder as I turned away, absently snagging my rucksack and moving towards the few prone bodies that had already found refuge in sleep.

I made my makeshift bed a few feet away from them, still unwilling to share in their common warmth. I was asleep as soon as I closed my eyes, my body unable to protest the hard ground.

Not much later proximity of another pulled me from my slumber. It was only for a moment as Jinx's smoky tones greeted my almost-wakefulness. "It's just us. Sleep, Teach, sleep."

I slept.

I guessed the animal to be this planet's equivalent of a deer. It was clearly lame or wounded, one of its legs never touching the ground. I tried to keep as silent as possible, my eyes constantly moving to Jinx's barely visible figure a few meters away. My hand sweated around the shaft of the makeshift spear and I could only hope I would not do something stupid.

Surely I could not outrun a deer but I could hope to corner it. Hell if I knew what I would do if the animal came toward me. It was a spear not a javelin and even if it had been a javelin I was certain I would miss if I tried to throw it.

Jinx's outstretched hand told me to wait still. I tensed waiting for the signal to do something.

"Now!" someone yelled and I ran. I ran as fast as I could even as the deer tried to escape. Even lame it was quick. I was lucky, it tried to pass a bare meter away from me. Thankfully for once my reflexes worked right. I felt the spearhead, no more than hardened wood, hit something and then it was ripped from my hands as the deer moved away.

I turned to follow, my eyes immediately seeing my spear still stuck at the deer's side. At least I had not completely missed. The next thing I knew was the vibrating spear that struck the tree trunk just next to me.

I must have whimpered and it was only luck that stopped me from wetting myself. I shook my head, my eyes wide. Slowly I turned to look in the direction it came from. Linda was looking at me horrified. I glared at her but the more logical part of me reminded me of the deer.

I ducked under the spear shaft as I tried to follow the animal's hobbled escape. I jogged more than ran, even jogging was hard through the thick undergrowth. Someone was in front of me and I followed in their footsteps. I had no idea of how to track a deer in the forest.

It felt like I was jogging for hours but it must have been only minutes. Others passed by me, faster and fitter. I did not worry about that. I was certain that on this planet fitness would come of its own accord. The lifestyle demanded it.

Finally I reached the small circle of people around the exhausted deer. It was still alive as the others looked at it. I shook my head once and stepped into the circle. Sometimes I wondered at people.

My hands trembled as I fumbled the knife out of my belt. The deer thrashed as I grabbed hold of the tiny protrusions on its head before slashing its throat. I was brutal in my cut as fear that I would do it wrongly and make the animal suffer even more than it did already flooded me.

Blood spurted from the wound but I felt the deer collapse immediately. My stomach churned for a moment but I swallowed quickly keeping the automatic nausea down. The silent redhead, Lily or Lil' Red as Jinx had taken to calling her, turned abruptly and vomited into the undergrowth. I had to swallow again.

Thank the gods for Jinx, who came just then, Gloria at her side. I was alarmed for a moment as a long scratch marred Gloria's face but it was not even bleeding. Jinx snorted at us all before competently walking to my side.

"Good job, Teach," she said in a low voice and I nodded. It was a hack of a job and pure luck that we had gotten the deer and well I knew it. Still it felt good in spite of that. Our first real effort at hunting and it had succeeded. A part of me danced wildly in glee and relief.

Gloria's voice was loud in the silence of the forest. "We need to move it to camp."

I cleared my throat in what had become my unconscious signal over the last couple of days that there was something I wanted to say. Gloria turned to me expectantly.

"We need to dress it first," I said quietly, for her only. A soft snigger came from behind me but I ignored it. Some of our little group scoffed at me for my ways. Not for my advice oddly enough but simply because I disliked talking to them, addressing my remarks to Gloria or Jinx, even Linda at a pinch.

"You know how?" Gloria asked quietly after glaring at whoever had sniggered. It had shut them up but did not make me feel much better.

I shook my head to show my ignorance but Gloria knew better and waited for me to speak. I dredged my mind for information, gosh all those fantasy novels had certainly come in handy.

"Cut open the belly... be careful not to puncture the entrails or the meat will spoil. Take out the insides. Everything is useful. Skinning too but I think that can be done at camp."

Gloria nodded at me and turned toward the deer. A thought hit me and I spoke up quickly and louder than usual. "Stop! No! Skin it here. The less blood we have at camp, the less chance of predators coming in for a visit. Having fresh meat will be bad enough."

Gloria glanced back at me and nodded again. I sighed in relief. We had found our communication channel, I and Gloria. It had not been easy at first but thankfully Gloria was good at reading people and read me like an open book. Thankfully she never really pressed me either. That was Jinx's job apparently.

I smiled to myself. Truly those two had my number. What was done was done. So be it.

"Proud of yourself, Teach?" Emma, the panicked redhead I had met first, asked me with a smile.

I narrowed my eyes at her and shrugged. She was a talker that one and quick to panic. I tried to ignore her as much as possible. She seemed to take it in her stride and moved away from me with a quick nod.

Jinx was the one to dress the deer and I watched for a few moments before wandering away. I was careful as I wiped my knife and put it in its sheath. Another pearl of wisdom from a fantasy novel.

I felt eyes on me and turned to look back. Gloria was looking at me. I nodded at her and she nodded back before turning to help Jinx. I kept myself busy looking at the trees and plants around. Carefully I took the small book on flora out of the inside pocket of my jacket.

I tried to identify the small bushes, checking what was edible and what was not. Thankfully most plant-life on this planet was edible, at least according to the book. Or at least the plant-life covered in my slim volume. There were at least another two volumes on flora that I had briefly looked at.

It made sense. No tidy slim volume could cover such a vast subject and dividing information among lots of people seemed to be the way of those that had settled us on this planet.

I smiled when I recognised what looked like a small tuft of bluish grass with frayed leaves. According to the book, its root was edible. Carefully I uprooted the plant and was rewarded with a thing that looked like a carrot, only white. I shrugged to myself. Who cared about the colour?

It seemed that there was a small patch of these things and I uprooted several of the ones that looked bigger. Another remembered pearl of wisdom told me not to uproot all of them, so that more would spawn.

"Teach!" Gloria's shout made me flinch and almost drop the roots. I shook my head at myself. Quickly I started walking back toward them. Either I had strayed too far away for Gloria's liking or she had something to ask.

She had something to ask. She did not have to speak, I could see the issue immediately. The bloody mass of guts that everyone avoided. I looked at her and shook my head. Looking around I met Lil Red's gaze and motioned her to come nearer. She came, even if she carefully stepped around the pile of guts.

I did not speak as I passed the roots to her. I squatted next to Jinx where she was starting to skin the animal. A thought came to me.

"Jinx, stop."

She stopped looking at me questioningly. I turned to Gloria.

"I am not certain about this skinning thing. Back home I'd be worried about flies and stuff getting on the meat. Here..."

Gloria gave me a small smile. Over the past couple of days she was getting used to the randomness of my thoughts. She did not expect me to be right or always have the answer and it made me feel good.

"Let's skin the thing at camp," she said quickly and loudly.

I nodded at her even as I turned my sleeves carefully up to my elbows. I did not want to get too much blood on them in addition to the stains they had already gained. I had never been filthy but the environment did not make for clean and tidy clothes.

My mouth twitched in distaste as I gripped the guts looking for an end. I tried to do what I had to do as quickly as possible, ignoring the sounds of distaste all around me. My hands moved almost of their own accord as I emptied the filth from the entrails. Not completely of course, that needed water, but enough.

The stomach was next and I had to swallow as the half-digested plants and leaves inside it spilled on the ground. I was amazed at myself and I almost laughed as the memory came to me fuzzy with age and a child's recollection.

No fantasy novel had given me that information. In my mind's eye I could see the sheep, bright red blood staining the ground, grandfather Kostas gutting it with ease born of long experience. I must have been no more than five or six that Easter in the village.

I sent a thought of thanks to my long dead grandfather, great uncle truly. Who would have thought his long ago demonstration to the gaggle of cousins would come in handy decades later and lightyears away?

A bunch of big leaves were set beside me and I looked at Linda gratefully. She did not meet my eyes, guilt shadowing her face. I would have to talk to her about it. It had been an accident. Surely she should have been more careful when throwing the spear but these things happen. I had not been hurt and that was all there was. So be it.

I was careful as I ineptly wrapped the entrails and other guts into leaves. It would make it easier to carry them back to the camp.

I placed the last of my efforts at hook-making on the ground beside me. I looked at them closely. I had lost count of how many I had made, yet I could tell my earlier efforts from their chunkiness. Still I thought most of them would work.

A low laugh made me look up and I could not help but smile a little. Jinx and Gloria were sitting crosslegged on a blanket, talking quietly to themselves. It had taken them almost two weeks to recognise the sparks that flew between them.

They had been taking it easy, clearly neither of them wanting to rush into things. It would be too easy to rush given the circumstances. Waking up on a different world without the comfortable trappings of civilisation made one crave companionship.

I could understand. Even I craved it for some odd reason. I shook my head at myself. I had been a bachelor for a long time, having neither the time nor the heart to get into the game. I had even accepted that of myself. I was better off alone than burdening another with my problems. So be it.

That was back there, in the world we had left behind. Here, where the darkness was illuminated only by the fire's weak light and the still unfamiliar stars, one craved the touch of another human being. We were adrift, all of us even if some did not want to accept it, and any anchor would do.

Jinx and Gloria were trying hard not to fall into that trap. The trap that made night-time an exercise in trying to keep the noises from around the campfire from striking an unquenchable thirst in my belly. I did not begrudge the others their desire or indeed their need. Sometimes I just wished they could keep the volume down.

Absently I brushed the wood-chips from my lap and wiped the knife down. I returned it to its sheath even as I felt the presence of another beside me. I didn't turn to look. If they wanted something, they would try to attract my attention.

Even after almost a month, I was still not comfortable with the people in our small community. It had grown a bit, the community, since the early days with someone coming in every couple of days or so.

"Fishing hooks?" Lil' Red asked me in her usual low tones.

I nodded at her without looking up. It was rest day as had been decided just last evening but I have never been good at keeping still. With my impromptu hook-making finished, I cast around for something else to do.

"I was thinking..."

Lil' Red's voice pulled me from my, as usual, disorganised thoughts. That I had not heard before. She was a hard worker Lil' Red, never complaining. Still I had not once heard her offer an opinion or a plan.

Not that most of the plans, or indeed opinions, offered nightly around the two campfires were much use. Silently I chided myself. Everyone was doing the best they could, even Amanda and that loud-mouthed Venezuelan that had stumbled into our camp a week or so past.

Still I swore I could not hear another stupidity coming out of someone's mouth. Someone had even thrown the amazing idea that we could get a hydro-electric facility going in the river. That still made me crack up every time I thought about it. The saddest thing was that whoever had said it had actually been serious.

Cynicism aside Lil' Red had not come up with something before. I liked the little redhead, or at least she had not managed to get into my stupid list. Not yet at least. I looked up at her and wordlessly patted the patch of ground next to me. I would not get a crick in my neck looking up at her.

Slowly, almost hesitantly, she sat beside me, tucking her knees under her body. I expected her to talk but she didn't. Instead she took something out of her jacket and left it just in front of me.

As soon as I looked at it, I could feel my irritation coming to life. Not that again. That had been a shouting match to remember when some idiot had started cutting a blanket into strips to make rope. Not even Gloria had kept her cool over that. I had been ready to thrash the little idiot to within an inch of her life.

The memory of that event alone kept me from uttering any angry words. Lil' Red had been there and I could remember her shaking her head at the idiot. I could not believe she would have made the same mistake. She was quiet but she had not struck me as a fool.

I took the long piece of string in my hands and immediately stifled a sigh of relief. Even from casual touch it was clear that it did not come from any of our precious blankets. I looked at it closely before testing it gingerly. It held well and I exerted a bit more pressure. It still held as I started truly trying to break it. I was impressed at its strength.

Most importantly I was stumped. I could not tell what it was made of. I turned slowly to look at Lil' Red. She was not looking at me, her eyes having clearly found something terribly interesting on the ground in front of her.

"How did you make it?" I asked, surprised to hear the gentleness in my voice.

She cleared her throat before answering me shyly. "Tendons from last hunt."

Tendons? Fuck! I wanted to hit my head against the wall, only there were no true walls near me and it would make me look even more foolish that I felt. I should have thought of that. Stupido!

"It looks strong. Can you make more?" The words came out, surprising me. For some reason my inner irritation did not come out in my voice, not even a little bit. Instead I sounded interested and encouraging. I wanted to laugh at myself. Trust me to go into teaching mode at the slightest opportunity.

"I can't make much. Not enough material. But... I think... enough for fishing lines?" Lil' Red replied hesitantly, the last coming out more as a question.

I nodded at her. She was right. The string looked strong. It would certainly be worth a go. It was not like we had all that much line left and I had been drawing up blanks trying to find a way to make more. All my experiments with strips of bark and the like having come to absolute naught.

"You should tell Gloria," I said finally.

I felt Lil' Red stiffening next to me and I tensed in instinctive reaction.

"I thought maybe you could..." she said, almost stammering.

I shook my head negatively even before two words had left her lips. My voice was strong, almost cool. "Your idea, you tell her. You did good, Lil' Red."

Lil' Red looked at me questioningly, as if she didn't quite believe me. I nodded as emphatically as I could without looking like one of those nodding dogs. Carefully I put the string in her hand, squeezing it slightly.

She nodded at me finally before standing up and slowly walking to where Gloria and Jinx were still talking in low voices. I watched her with a smile. I knew she was a smart one.

I was a fool. And I knew it from the top of my head to the bottom of my soles. I was a fool and acting like one to boot as well.

The worst part of it? I did not care one bit. So be it.

I put muscles and weight into my move and I felt the shoulder under my grip tremble.

"You will not say that again. Am I clear?"

That was me. About as butch as it gets. And I was playing it to the hilt.

"It's the truth!" Amanda squealed.

I gripped her shoulder so tightly, she yelped and tears came to her eyes. I was being a bully but I did not care.

"Am I clear?" I enunciated clearly through gritted teeth.

Jinx's tired voice answered quietly from beside me. "Let it go, Teach. It's alright."

I barely glanced at her. I would expect it from Jinx. That did not mean I had to let it go. I had let it go for too long.

I felt Amanda's bones grit under my hand and I smiled. It was a feral smile but I did not care. "I asked you. Am I clear?"

Amanda's gasp was clearly audible to all. "Yes. Yes!"

Only after the tears had started to flow from her eyes did I release her.

I looked at the women around, my eyes challenging any one of them to dare dispute me in this. I was no leader. That was Gloria's lot in our little group. And I stayed away from most of them most of the time.

But I would not stand still and let that little bitch walk over Jinx. Most certainly I would not stand it as I knew that she was only doing it to hurt Gloria's standing.

I nodded once, more to the air than to any of the others. It was still intimidating though. I started to walk away, away from the circle and from the cold anger that suffused me.

Linda's low tones stopped me. "Are you being the enforcer now, Teach?"

I turned to her, arrogance oozing out of me. I could not take Linda in a fight and I knew it. That did not mean I would back down.

"I won't stand for that shit, officer. And neither should you."

My barb hit home and Linda flinched. I smirked at her and turned away once again. I walked calmly away until I reached the small hut that I called home. I did not step inside, instead taking my customary place on the piece of wood that served me for a stool.

The knife was steady in my hand as I continued the simple labour that Amanda's overheard words had interrupted. I did not look at the others but I kept them in my peripheral vision.

Slowly, ever so slowly, they dispersed back to whatever they had been doing before the confrontation. Amanda stalked away into the woods beyond the campsite but thankfully no one followed her.

I watched carefully as Jinx and Gloria started to walk in my direction. My shoulders bunched instinctively. I did not want to try to explain and it looked like I would have to. I hated explaining myself.

Stupidly I did not even realise that there were others in their wake. My eyes had stubbornly returned to the bone I was trying to carve into a needle. We needed clothes after all, even if they were patchy leather. I was not even certain bone was the best material but I had to try. Needles would make things so much easier.

"Teach." Jinx's low greeting made me stiffen.

Her hand on my shoulder was as always warm, almost gentle. "Don't do this," she said slowly.

The anger I had not managed to expend before flooded me and I looked up to her. My voice was not loud but I could not keep the anger from it.

"Why not?"

"It was not a lie. Hurtful yeah. But not a lie."

I shook my head, this time in anger. "I don't care what you did before. Here... here you've been strength for everybody. I won't stand and let that bitch fuck you over."

"Nothing she says is important, Teach. I don't care."

I stood up then, too upset to sit anymore. "I do!" I almost shouted.

"Why?" Carmen's soft tones made me whirl around to face her, not even surprised that she was there, Anita as always at her side.

"What do you mean why?"

"Why, Teach? Just because you carry a torch for Jinx, it ain't no reason to fuck Amanda over."

I lost it then. My hands held the strength of long days of manual work and trembled with anger. The fabric of Carmen's shirt was stiff in my fists as I slammed her against the hut's wall.

"I don't carry a torch for anyone," I hissed.

Even as hands tried to pull me away, I grasped Carmen cruelly. "And I am not gonna stand for that shit. No matter who it is. You got me?"

It was Gloria that finally managed to pull me off Carmen. I did not fight her, even in my anger not wanting to hurt her. Carmen did not back down as she came right to my face.

"Really? You wouldn't stand it? Not for anyone? Not for me? Or Anita? Or Petra? Or anyone?"

She was trying to intimidate me and I laughed in her face. "Not for you, not for anyone! No-one hurts my people! No-one!"

As soon as the words came out of my mouth, I froze. My people. My people? What the hell was I saying? It couldn't be. It couldn't! It couldn't...

Carmen's sly smile made me want to upchuck the soup I had had for breakfast all over her boots. I swallowed hastily, trying to keep the bile down. I must have turned green or something because in a second everything was changing.

I did not even know how I found myself away from the others, bending over, my breakfast a disgusting sight on the ground, Jinx's gentle hands holding me upright. I could barely hear her calming whispers but I anchored myself on the sound. I almost spilled the water Jinx gave me to rinse my mouth.

Someone must have said something because the first thing I heard clearly was Jinx. "Let'er be, godamnit!"

I allowed myself to be led inside my hut, my head still whirling, my stomach cramping and my mouth tasting so bad I wanted to cut off my head. Jinx had it in her to be the protector.

"Not now. I said not fucking now!"

I tried to straighten. Go out there and face whatever it was. Capable hands led me instead to the makeshift pallet where my blankets lay. I resisted lying down and Jinx let me sit on the blanket instead.

A pinch of reddish leaves were thrust in front of me and I took them gingerly. The taste somewhere between mint and aniseed was a welcome change over the rat that had decided to die in my mouth. The books said the leaves were edible but did not give much more information. Some, Jinx among them, used them for tea.

I chewed slowly, not looking up. I hated embarrassing myself like that. And I was still reeling from what I had said. From the mouths of babes and stone-cold idiots.

"It's alright, Teach," Jinx said gently as she sat beside me. I did not dare look at her, so I just shook my head.

Jinx was gentle but firm as she turned my head around. "It's alright," she repeated firmly.

I shook my head at her.

She shook hers right back. "So you got yourself a community. It's not the end of the world, Teach. No matter what you think."

"I didn't want this."

"So what? What you gonna do? Leave? That would be suicide and you know it. You got friends here. Don't run yourself mad over it."

The cynicism at my stare must have been even more obvious than usual. Friends? I wanted to laugh. A community does not mean friends, no matter what anyone thought. I knew better than that.

Jinx smirked. "Alright. Not that many friends. But some."

I could not dispute that. At least not at face value. Friendship needed time and effort and I had never been much for expending either. Still if I had to make a decision, I would have to admit that Jinx and Gloria were friends.

Proto-friends, a voice whispered inside of me and I had to laugh. You can take one out of academia but you cannot take academia out of you.

Thankfully Jinx did not ask what I was laughing about. It would be too embarrassing to say. And the last thing I wanted was for someone to suspect who I had been back home. Their general opinion of academics was not all that high to begin with as far as I could tell and being around Amanda every day did not make it any better.

She had not been a CEO, the little bitch. Instead she had been a high-placed academic turned administrator in one of those oh-so-prestigious institutions. In other words a CEO with a bunchload of letters after her name. I had kept my peace every time she paraded her superior intellect and qualifications around the fire.

For some odd reason no-one had asked. They all sort of assumed I had been a teacher of some kind. I did not correct them and thankfully there were no questions on the subject. As if it made any difference. Amanda's rantings aside, in this world and in this situation I wish I had been a hunter or a fisherman, hell even a carpenter, back home. It would have been a million times better and at least I would know something more than odd memories from fantasy novels and BBC documentaries.

"Did you really mean it?" Jinx asked hesitantly.

I turned to look at her questioningly. Not only I had no bleeding idea what she was talking about but it was not like Jinx to be hesitant.

"What you said... about doing it for anyone?"

Ah... the million dollar question. I wanted to laugh at her. I should have expected that. Still there was nothing to say really. No matter what others thought, I was not carrying a torch for my ex-inmate friend. Me and love? Well, we didn't really connect on any plane but the physical.

"For anyone."

My terse answer seemed to take a weight off Jinx's shoulders and I had to smile.

"No torches anywhere in the vicinity, Jinx," I joked and she smiled.

The expression brought an odd thought. Could we make torches? I shook my head almost immediately. They needed some sort of material. My eyes narrowed. What about resin? Certainly there should be trees that made resin, or the local equivalent. Torches would be good. Smoky but good.

I stood abruptly, my mind already taken up with this latest idea to cross my brain.

"What's up, Teach?"

"Torches," I mumbled as I left the hut, my eyes already looking for likely trees and my hand on the knife.

Jinx's low laugh followed me as I left for the latest quest for materials and maybe making something that would make life somewhat easier in the prehistory we had been thrown into.

It was fun. Even I had to admit it was fun. The weather was turning colder and I had spent all day chopping wood for the winter that was certainly coming. But this night it was fun as people danced and sang around the three campfires.

Linda and her group had managed well in the hunt and not only was there meat smoking in the hut built for precisely that reason but we had all had a filling meal of roasted meat and some tubers Anita had discovered.

Someone had managed to rig a whistle of some sort and played songs that she remembered. The sound was a bit on the shrill side but having music was more important.

A part of me scoffed at the hours spent on the small instrument but I silenced it ruthlessly. Civilisation was a necessity as much as food, water and fuel for the coming winter. Surely we were not as prepared as I would like us to have been but nothing could be done about that.

Hopefully it would not mean death. I could only hope. Still the weather as it changed from summer to autumn reminded me more of Greece than England. So no heavy winters, or at least not as heavy as they could have been. Personally I would have preferred a place in the tropics. Well, if wishes were horses...

I watched couples of existing standing and new ones created of a night's good spirits dance around the campfires. As usual my eyes went to Jinx and Gloria. They were dancing out of rhythm but they were having fun. It was good to see them happy.

I was sitting in my habitual place, just outside my hut, enjoying the vibes. It felt almost like a bar and I could not help but smile. Another day I would find something to castigate myself about. That day I simply luxuriated in being a wallflower, just as I liked to be in the bars and clubs back when there were any to go to.

In truth, as far as I could tell, the bar feeling had been an intentional part of the game our still unknown hosts were playing. It had taken me a long while to realise, probably the last one in our camp, that the selection of abductees had been made on grounds more specific than gender.

It almost made me believe in the conspiracy theory option that some of the others were still stubbornly clinging to. I spared a thought for the community back on Earth. It would not be easy to have a good portion of the L part of the LGBTQ disappearing into thin air. Even if part of it had been largely not acknowledged. After all quite a few people in our campsite had been married or in the closet back on Earth.

As usual when my thoughts strayed in that direction, I could not help but wonder if we were the exception rather than the rule. Maybe it had just been chance that the group of women around me when I woke up were queer in some way or other. I shook my head. I could have believed in chance if only the ones that had stumbled into our campsite and adopted into our little community had not been queer too.

No, it seemed like our hosts had made a careful selection. I could not even begin to fathom why. Unless I succumbed to the lure of the conspiracy theory, there was no explanation that made sense to me. I shrugged quietly to myself. No point in wondering.

It made no difference truly. We still had to survive tomorrow and the winter coming. Wondering about reasons and conspiracies was only a waste of time. Still, I would like to know. Well, nothing to it. Better just sit back and enjoy the atmosphere. So be it.

Soft steps alerted me to someone coming. I wondered which of my hutmates would be the one to first retire. Living with two couples and four singles certainly made for interesting nights. I had amazed myself as to how I could fall asleep and sleep like a log as all sorts of stuff happened around me. I guessed long days and manual labour would do that to you. So be it.

Surely it was one my hutmates. My eyes narrowed as Lil' Red came to sit beside me without even asking whether I wanted company. I shrugged to myself more than her. She had taken to doing that some nights.

Still I was surprised that she had not some eligible woman on her arm. Not that Lil usually did but the night had that feel. Even I was feeling it and I had been no better than a nun since the beginning.

"Teach?"

"Hmm?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Hm..."

"Do you dance?"

"No..."

"Ah... alright."

I looked at Lil questioningly. Where had that come from? A couple of the others had come by earlier, asking pretty much the same. I merely shook my head at them. After three months, they should have known better.

I had heard the rumours. Hell, Anita had once come out and plain asked me whether I had a girlfriend back home or something. She had not gotten an answer, not that she should have even asked.

When Gloria had asked as we were fishing a few weeks ago, she had gotten a slightly better answer. After all I knew that she did not ask digging for gossip, she was merely concerned for some reason. She had nodded at my answer and did not speak of it further. I was grateful.

Still I would not have expected something like that from Lil.

If we were back home I could have the excuse of being drunk. Just then I had no other excuse than that my words got away from me.

"I'm sure Linda would love to dance..."

I blushed as soon as the words left my mouth. Earth, open up and swallow me now! What are you playing at, you stupido? You are no matchmaker. My internal voices started a chorus of castigation and I closed my eyes. So I had misspoken. Sue me!

"Not you too, Teach..." Lil' Red's soft voice censored me.

"Sorry..." Apologies did not come easily to me but I owed Lil one.

I stiffened when I felt her body slide next to mine, her head on my shoulder. She did not move further and after a few moments I forced my body to relax. Still it must have been obvious that I was uncomfortable.

She did not speak further and neither did I. It took a long time but finally I sort of forgot she was there and went back to my people-watching.

It was cold. It was fucking cold! Even the constant motion of chopping wood did not make me immune to the cold. I was getting more and more worried about our supplies. Winter had come fast, hard and unforgiving.

We were not yet to the bottom of the pile but it was becoming startlingly clear that what we had hoarded, fuel and food both, was nowhere near enough. Thus the chopping of wood. Most of the others had gone hunting.

It made no sense to waste a clear day. It had been snowing or sleeting for what seemed like weeks, making chores outside a dreadful experience and hunting an exercise in futility.

I was not alone. Carmen and Anita were with me, both of them chopping away. A part of me knew that I should be out there with the others, trying to find game, any game. Gloria had put her foot down though and sent me for wood.

It was her way of repaying me. She knew I disliked hunting, mostly because I could not run. Years of smoking and poor aerobic exercise would do that to you. I was getting better, I had to admit. A few months without tar had done wonders for my lungs, not to mention all the weight I had lost.

When sniffles and colds had hit, I had been surprisingly unaffected. I did not expect it. Usually any bug or cold in the vicinity found its way to me. This time though I had escaped or at least whatever I had caught did not affect me as much as the others.

I was sure I ran a fever some days but it had not done me any damage beyond being even more grumpy than usual. Either I had really managed to escape or too many illnesses in the past had made me somewhat immune to the discomfort.

It had made for long days in the rain or slushing snow as I had been one of the few able to go out every day. Fishing had been great and thankfully brought enough of extra in our diet that some days at least we didn't have to go into the smoked meat hoard.

Not having to run and track for a day, staying near the camp instead, had been Gloria's unspoken thanks. Chopping wood was a chore I did gladly. I had always been strong, even as a kid, and I could put it to good use there.

The screams, from the direction of the camp, halted me in mid-swing. I did not even look at the others as I reacted without thought. Axe in my hand, the knife as always securely at my waist, I started running.

It was easy for Carmen to pass me as she ran full tilt but I did not care as the screams continued, shouts and cursing interspersed with them. My heart was in my mouth as I ran as fast as I could.

We burst into the camp quickly but it took me a moment to realise what was going on. The faces I could not recognise and the fighting clued me in. I felt fear clutch at me when I realised we were outnumbered.

Maybe it was a cultural thing or even genetics. Greeks had something for last stands and doomed fights since Thermopylae at least. Maybe it was just instinct, some primal thing that had been buried by technology, law and civilisation.

My swing was brutal as I buried my axe in a stranger's back. The scream that came out of my victim made me laugh in abandon. I had to use both hands to get my axe out of its fleshy prison.

Some sound made me turn and I faced some unknown woman brandishing a stick at me. Months of manual labour told the story. The stick barely touched me even as the woman's head exploded in blood and brains, my axe almost cleaving it in half.

The kick at my side sent me sprawling, my hand losing its grip on the axe. I fumbled to get the knife out but I never had the time as someone jumped on me, fists flying. I gave as good as I got, finally managing a good one on the woman's chin. She fell away from me, eyes glazed.

I was slow getting up, my mind fuzzy. She had gotten in some good ones. Finally I was at my feet and running as soon as I saw some idiot hitting Katharina. The sane part of me could even understand the attack. After all I had been expecting something like that from day one.

But someone hitting on an obviously pregnant woman? That was an entirely different ballgame. My knife bit deep, instinctively following a dance I had only seen once. Just like Jinx had done months before I stabbed and then slashed, then took the blade out, moved, stabbed and slashed the other side. As had happened then, the woman collapsed on her knees. My hands were steady in what felt more like a charade than an attack as the knife bit deep into the stranger's neck, bright red blood spurting away.

I took a moment to look at Katharina. She nodded at me, clearly shocked but still relatively hale. I nodded back before I turned to spy my next victim.

I was shocked to see that any strangers left in our camp were either running away, some of them clearly injured, or were sprawled on the ground, unconscious or dead.

I stood there, blood dripping from the knife in my hand. My eyes met the eyes of the others, those still standing. There was shock in the gazes I met and fear too. As I met Carmen's eyes I could see the same horrified detachment I felt. The axe in her hand dripped red too.

I shook my head trying to clear it, chase the shock away. I could see some of us wounded, Amanda was keening cradling her arm in pain. My eyes surveyed the fallen, some dead, some still alive. Something would have to be done about them too. The solution was easy but I could not stomach cold-blooded murder. Not yet at least.

A part of me, the greatest part, wished Gloria was there, or Jinx, even Linda in a pinch. They were not though, so I had to tell the greater part of me to stow it and get moving. There were wounds to treat, supplies to check and, my mouth twitched in distaste, strangers to restrain. So be it.

Even as I moved to Katharina's side, my mind could not stop but skip ahead. A wall was necessary and, in the back of my brain, a part of me was already laying plans.

"I say kill them!"

I almost exploded right then and there. I was no lily flower and hell knew I had blood on my hands. But cold-blooded murder I could not stomach. Not like this. Never like this.

Jinx's hand on my shoulder stopped me from moving or speaking. Gloria's voice took the words from my mind.

"We are not barbarians, Amanda! We don't kill people just like that."

"Fuck you! You were not here. I was wounded! We could have died!"

"I wish I had been here! Do you think I wanted to come back to see my friends covered with blood?"

I could hear the guilt in Gloria's voice. She had been shocked to see the campsite, the smell of blood heavy in the still air.

"You weren't here so you don't know! It should be up to us! We were the ones that fought."

The little bitch was pushing it. Jinx's hand fell from my shoulder and I smiled.

Standing up brought every eye to me. I did not try to reign in my anger or the heaviness that had taken residence in my heart when I had to close Marie's eyes for the last time earlier this evening.

"I was here."

There was not even a murmur as I paused. Not even Amanda dared speak into the momentary silence.

"We were attacked and we defended ourselves. That's one thing. Murder is another. I won't do murder."

It was nothing more than talk of course. I had done murder earlier in the day. I could have tried to disarm or just wound. I hadn't. Killing without trying anything else first had been my choice. Instinctual or not, it had been my choice.

I met Jinx's eyes as I sat back down next to her. The understanding in them almost undid me and I had to look away. There were no words. I knew I had it in me since that first day. Today I had just proved it.

"So what do you want to do with them? We can't just keep them here. We barely have enough food for ourselves," Amanda said, contempt heavy in her voice.

I did not have to answer. Linda was there first. "I for one would like to know more about them. Or are you blind? None of them had knives or axes, no backpacks that I can see. Hell, most of them look starved to exhaustion."

The words were like fists hitting at me. Jinx's hand on my shoulder became my sole anchor. It had taken me very little time to realise that we had been attacked by people with much less than what we had. It burned in my mind that I had killed without question or compunction. It burned me that I had used steel against people that had attacked with sticks and bare hands.

The shouting match that was about to erupt made me ill. I stood without speaking or looking at anyone. Fuck them all! I could not stand another debate or Amanda's insanity.

My steps were quick and I never felt or heard the steps of those following me. The small huddle of prisoners sat next to one of the campfires. They were not talking to one another and most of them looked lost or resigned.

I stood in front of them, trying to ignore the fear in their eyes.

"Any of you speak English?" I barked.

I got some nods but not much else.

"Why did you attack?"

Silence greeted my question. Anger ignited in me once more. I did not have the patience to be kind, even if I had it in me to be so. Right then I was certain I didn't. So be it.

I grabbed the woman nearest to me, my hands anything but gentle. "Why?" I shouted at her.

"We were hungry." The tired frightened voice that answered felt like someone had hit me over the head. I let the obviously terrified woman go and turned away. It took everything in me to stay upright, even if my eyes teared.

Linda's voice was gentle as she asked the next question. The one I could not dare ask.

"Why did you not ask for food or something? Why just attack?"

The one I had grabbed did not answer but another voice, from deeper in the huddle, did.

"We did. She told us to go away."

I turned then. I could not have heard right. I was not much for talking and taking part in the nightly discussions but certainly I would have heard that someone had asked for help. If nothing

else, I would have expected Gloria to ask me for my opinion. She always did, even if I did not attend the meeting.

I looked at Gloria, only to see the same questions in her eyes. Jinx was my next port of call but the paleness of her face told me she had as much of an idea as I had. Which was none. None!

Linda recovered first. "Who told you that?"

Six pairs of eyes turned towards the right. We all turned with them.

"Her," one of the frightened voices said faintly.

Amanda was standing away from the rest of us, illuminated by the firelight. She did not meet my gaze. Her words were low but audible. "We don't have enough food or huts as it is. What else could I have done?"

I saw red just then. I did not realise when I started walking towards Amanda, knife in hand and murder in my heart.

Jinx tackled me to the ground before I was even near Amanda. Her hand was like steel as she gripped mine. I would have bucked, fought her but it seemed like all fire went out inside of me in the blink of an eye. Just before I closed my eyes, I saw Carmen on the ground a few feet away, Anita and Linda both restraining her as she cursed and shouted trying to get away.

Jinx's voice was low, for my ears only. "Easy, Teach. Easy. It's gonna be ok. It's gonna be ok."

The tears that escaped my closed eyelids were hot against my skin. I did not sob, I had no breath for it. I never knew the moment that Jinx let go of my hand, her arms coming around me, holding me close.

I did not cry for long, just a short outburst to somehow bleed off some of the feeling that threatened to drown me. I had killed the helpless, the desperate, and for no reason. No reason at all but one woman's fear and arrogance.

"Let me go," I rasped at Jinx. She was slow to let go of me. As I climbed to my feet, instinctively returning the knife to its sheath, she almost spoke to me. I did not give her the chance as I walked away.

The river was calm in the night's stillness. The stars whose strangeness I had yet to accept blinked in their eternal light in the cloudless sky. Some animal was moving in the bushes just beyond. I sat there motionless, voiceless, empty.

There was nothing to say, nothing to think, nothing to feel. I was empty. Just empty. So be it.

As soon as I finished the last bite of my dinner, I stood up to move to my blankets. I was so tired, it felt like I could not even walk. And tomorrow would be another long day.

I closed my eyes as soon as I had covered myself, the cold seeping into my bones. I grunted when a hand fell on my shoulder. I wanted to sleep, just sleep.

Yet I opened my eyes. No-one dared to disturb me, hell most people did not even try to talk to me. For someone to do so now, it had to be important. It was Gloria.

I looked at her, trying to blink the blurriness that seemed to dodge my vision constantly these days. She sat next to me, her hand still on my shoulder.

"It's rest day tomorrow," she said finally.

I shrugged at her. Who gave a fuck about rest days? I did not try to make the point, just tried to turn away, my eyes closing already.

The last I heard was Jinx's voice. "Let'er sleep. We'll talk tomorrow."

I almost protested but I was too tired and sleep took me unawares.

I woke up to the sounds of someone poking the fire. My head was heavy, as it usually was, and I was stiff. I did not moan or curse, as I got out of my warm cocoon, shivering in the early morning chill.

I took the tin cup with something warm that Lil' Red thrust into my hands. I grunted my thanks at her as I had done yesterday, and the day before and the day before that. It was becoming a habit but I did not think much about it.

I drank the minty beverage quickly, feeling its warmth spreading inside of me. With a shake of the head, I left the cup on the side of the fire and turned to get my jacket.

Warm hands on my shoulders stopped me. Lil's low voice reached my ears. "It's rest day today, Teach."

I shrugged without turning to look at her and went on putting on the jacket and the belt with my axe, knife and fishing tackle that Lil' Red had made for me. With some twenty people more in the camp, we needed more food than we could get and more wood too. Thank the gods for the river and the fish that were stupid enough to take my bait.

I stopped on my tracks when I saw Lil' Red blocking the tiny doorway of the hut. She was shaking her head, her cheeks flushed.

"What?" I grunted at her. I did not have the time for this.

She shook her head again. "You won't be going anywhere, Teach. You need to rest."

I rolled my eyes as I pushed past her. I had barely cleared the doorway when Jinx was in front of me. I sighed. It seemed like everyone was out today.

"Have you eaten yet?" she asked, blocking my path.

"I'm fine."

"Starving yourself won't help anyone!"

I looked away. I was eating. I knew I had to eat or I would get sick or something. So I was eating. That didn't mean I had to eat three times a day. A good dinner was enough for me. The grumbling of my stomach betrayed me. I ignored it as much as I ignored Jinx's smirk.

I felt Lil' Red standing behind me.

"Let it be," I growled at Jinx.

She did not back down, coming within inches of me, invading my space boldly.

"Today you are not leaving camp if I have to sit on you. If you want to kill yourself do it cleanly. Starvation and overwork is not a nice way to die."

I looked away from her, the words hitting too close to home for comfort. As my gaze slid away from Jinx, I noticed the others. It seemed like I got a full committee. Gloria and Linda were standing by the nearest campfire, watching avidly, both obviously ready to get into the action.

I shook my head. I did not have the energy to deal with this bullshit.

"Fine," I mumbled. Maybe if I had breakfast with them, they'd back off. The day was young still, I would probably miss the fish but I could chop wood. Fuel was as important as food.

I allowed myself to be herded to the campfire. A wooden plate was put into my hands, fish and some sort of tuber both steaming in the chilly air. My stomach grumbled appreciatively at the smell.

I felt like a biologist's specimen as I ate, everyone watching my every bite. Finally I growled at them all. They got the message thankfully and started talking with each other.

When I finished, I tried to stand but Jinx's hand on my arm stopped my movement. Lil' Red took my plate away, her glare stopping my protest. I had hoped I would be able to escape under pretence of rinsing the plate.

When Gloria sat on my other side, I knew I was beat. My shoulders stiffened instinctively and I looked at the ground.

"I don't know how to help you, Teach," Gloria said slowly.

"I'm fine."

"You ain't and you know it. But I am no shrink."

"It'll pass."

Gloria shook her head sadly at me but I refused to respond.

Jinx's angry voice startled me. "There is always Amanda's solution. No need then to kill yourself getting food for twenty-odd extra mouths."

"No!" My hoarse gasp surprised me as much as the tears that sprang unbidden to my eyes. I shook my head. For a moment I wondered if my elusive period had decided to make an appearance. It was not like me to be so emotional, or at least to show it.

I shook my head again. I had not menstruated once since we had been dumped on this planet and I was grateful for that. The last thing I needed was the usual stupid loss of blood it brought. I did not even want to think of going through the pain and cramps with no medicine.

It would have been an easy solution but the logical part of my mind snickered. I had heard the others talking, I was not the only one with no sign of the monthlies. The general consensus was that it was the water. My personal opinion was a lot more sinister. After all some of the women in the camp had had no problem menstruating.

As the months progressed I was becoming more and more convinced that this was all some bizarre social experiment. It had happened too many times when I thought I saw something odd just at the edge of my vision. And the fact that there were only a few men confirmed my suspicion. Hell we even had one in camp, although I hesitated calling Joseph a man. A sixteen-year-old was still a boy in my book.

I closed my eyes, willing myself away from that train of thought. Let us survive first and then we could tackle the survival of the species. Now was most certainly not the time.

"Teach?"

The soft question brought me back to the present of the campfire and the people waiting for something from me. I shook my head with a sigh. Maybe I had been overdoing it. I knew in my heart that Jinx's words were no more than an empty threat to get me to think.

I spoke to Gloria instead. "I'll go chop some wood now. Only until midday or so. That ok?"

I could see that Gloria wanted to stop me from doing even that. I tried to forestall her protest.

"I need to do what I need to do, Gloria. Just until midday though. I'll be careful."

She looked at me as if I had spawned another head. It threw me for a moment until I realised what had her so flustered. I had spoken in a normal voice, sounding almost like a regular person. No grunts and no posturing.

A small smile came to my lips and I nodded at her. Sometimes the regular Joe in me made an appearance. The one that was just a regular person, the one that usually came out only in the close confines of my family home. She had been elusive and shy these past few months, the insanity of the situation and too many strange people driving her into hiding. She had decided to come out. So be it.

Gloria finally nodded at me and I stood. The narrowed-eyed looks from the others almost made me laugh but I did not want to offend them. I was a sourpuss at the best of times. It must have thrown them for a loop to see me smiling, even if it was only a small smile.

As I walked out of the camp, Lil' Red joined me without a word. The axe in her hand told me what I needed to know. I nodded at her. If she wanted to keep an eye on me, it was none of my business. After all it meant more wood at the end of the day.

I took a deep breath, allowing myself to relax even if it were only for a few moments. Spring in this world was as much a riot of colours as it was back home. Even though all my allergies had decided to come out and play, I still enjoyed it.

Truly it was not so much spring that I enjoyed but rather the end of winter. Winter had ended and we had neither frozen nor starved to death. There had been some touch-and-go moments but we had survived. All of us, included the twenty-odd new arrivals and most importantly the infant whose cries pierced the air in our hut at regular intervals.

Katharina had finally given birth, in the middle of a snowstorm nonetheless, and Petra, even after almost a month, was the proudest parent in the whole world. The little boy, named Hans after his father, Petra's brother, was a lovable little tyke. It would not be unfair to say that most of the women in camp had fallen in love with him already.

The new arrivals were also settling in nicely. Thus, my playing in the woods as we had to make at least two new huts for them, now that finally winter was over and we could do something more than merely trying to get food and fuel for everyone.

In truth we were putting a sizable dent in the forest around us but even the environmentalist in me did not dare complain. We needed the wood and it was not like we were polluting the environment. So be it.

The presence at my side was expected, as was the small bundle of food that she brought. It had been months since the last time I actually managed to get my food on my own. Lil' Red always seemed to be there a few minutes before me, ready to present me with a steaming platter or bowl.

As usual I grunted my thanks at her and she sat beside me on the fallen log and started on her own lunch. As it had become custom by now, we ate in silence. Lil was not much for idle conversation and I was grateful.

"Teach?"

I almost sighed. Well, Lil was not much for idle conversation usually but it appeared today was one of those days that she wanted to talk. Well, we all had those days. Even I.

"Yeah?"

"Could you come with me after lunch?"

"Huh?"

"I tried to do something and I think it worked. But... you should see it first."

"Gloria."

Lil' Red shook her head immediately at my usual suggestion to go to Gloria. It had almost become a game between us. She had an idea or did something and I tried to send her to Gloria. She told me no and I usually ended up being her guinea pig for a morning or afternoon.

Unlike others that needed the whole group to see and congratulate them on whatever they had made or discovered, Lil' Red preferred to show it only to one person, usually me. She had good ideas, I had to admit that, so it was usually a good few hours spent.

"Alright, then. Gotta tell Carmen though."

She nodded at me, respecting my wish to inform at least someone that I would not be logging for the rest of the day. Usually it would be Gloria but she had gone with the hunting party, so Carmen was given the chore of trying to put the logging group in place. Thankfully she had stopped resisting the assignment a few days ago, finally realising that I would not take on any sort of leadership or responsibility.

The last of the winter had been good in that respect. For some odd reason, although I suspected Gloria's hand in that, I had been left alone. Even Amanda had backed off. I was left alone to work where I wanted to work, or where Gloria thought I would be needed, and otherwise to pursue whatever idea had taken up my brain at the time. Life was good. So be it.

Lunch finished, even though my stomach would have liked a bit more, I took a swig off my waterbottle and stood up. Lil' Red had already devoured her lunch and was ready to go to.

As I started walking toward where I knew Carmen was, Lil' Red clasped my hand. I did not protest, though it made me feel the fool. She had taken to doing that in the last couple of weeks

or so. It did not hurt me, just the image of me, so I kept my silence. I suspected she was trying to avoid an unwelcome suitor, although she had never said such to me.

"Any requests?"

The deep sonorous voice that rose over the sounds of talk and laughter made me look up. She had not been in camp for long, her and her girlfriend. It was still obvious that they had a hard winter. They were a welcome addition however. Hard workers both of them and real, honest to god, musicians.

Altai had a beautiful voice too and it seemed like she knew every song in creation. She was American, apparently from one of the fly-over states, although I had not really caught which one. I still chuckled every time I thought about her name. I had no clue why a mother would name her child over an inhospitable mountain range on the other side of the world. In truth, I had not asked either.

Someone shouted out a request and Altai smiled and nodded. As the temperatures climbed and spring progressed everyone seemed happier. I could understand. The winter had been hard. Spring and summer were welcome. We had all been working hard. It was time to have some fun and with a successful hunt just completed we had everything we could think of. Food, good weather and music.

I recognised the song and I had to smile. I truly missed music, almost as much as I missed books. I put the thought away. I would get morose if I thought too long about it.

Lil' Red's presence as she sat next to me did not alarm me. After all these months I had gotten used to her sharing my space of an evening.

"I am not going to ask you to dance." Her low words startled me for a moment and then recognised them for a joke. I grunted in acknowledgement. Humour had never been my forte.

"What about a kiss then, Teach?"

I almost fell off the small piece of tree trunk I was sitting on in my haste to turn and look at Lil. My heart thudded and my stomach churned when I saw not laughter but seriousness in her eyes.

"Jinx was right. You truly are clueless," she whispered, I think more to herself than to me.

That certainly put my back up. I was not clueless! Or at least I had seen no clue. Before irritation even managed to get hold of me, it felt like something collapsed in my mind. Memories came to me in a rush. The food that was always there waiting for me. The silent companionship on the log on so many evenings. Even the few times that Lil had crawled next to me in the dead of winter, her low voice saying something about body-heat.

I closed my eyes. Damn! Fuck! Fuck!! I had been clueless. Fuck!

My chagrin and my realisation must have been obvious to Lil. She did not touch me but she came very near me and spoke slowly. "Easy, Teach. I did not ask you to marry me."

My eyes opened wide at that, searching her face in the shadows of the twilight. I closed them again, willing myself to calm. I so did not want to do this.

Clearing my throat was not easy, nor keeping my voice cool and collected.

"Lil' Read, I'm flattered. But this is not a good idea."

There it was. Stock answer that usually stopped all further discussion in its tracks. Not that I had to have such discussions many times in my life. An obvious broodiness and a definite unsociability meant that few ever came close to speaking to me of such.

"Why?"

The scream in my mind was loud and I felt like I wanted to whimper out loud. I should have expected that. Lil' Red would not just give up and go. The woman had the patience of a saint.

So, kiddo, time to buckle up and give the extended version. Fuck! I debated whether to be an asshole. I shook my head immediately. Lil' Red did not deserve such from me. No other choice then. Honesty would do it.

Lil was waiting patiently, a small smile playing on her lips. It made me slightly suspicious but I was certain it would not be there for long.

So I started talking. It was not my favourite thing to do but I had enough to say. I was certain it would be enough to sent her running and I could go back to enjoying the music. A small pang of sadness run through me. I would miss the company. She was smart and did not talk much. Well, nothing to be done about it.

"I am not good at relationships. I... I have my moods. I can't care for others like that. I am not stable, Lil. I know it, so does everybody else."

I paused then. She was sad I could tell. Ok, time for the pick me up.

"You are a beautiful woman, Lil. And you are sweet and caring. Smart as a whip too. If you go out there right now, I am sure there would be ten women trying to catch your eye. Why not be with someone that can make you happy?"

There it was. I was so proud of myself, I almost smiled. I was quick to keep it in. A smile would ruin the performance. I was still proud though. Everything had sounded so reasonable. So I waited patiently for the words to filter in and Lil' Red to go.

The hand on my arm startled me almost out of my skin. Lil's voice sounded harsh in the shadows.

"You are moody. You don't speak a lot and when you do it's usually because you are angry at something. You certainly have a temper and you can keep a grudge forever. You are cold to everyone and it's been only a couple of times I've heard you laugh."

As Lil spoke I nodded sagely at the end of every sentence. It hurt a little to hear her words but I pushed that down. She was right after all.

She paused just then and I waited for her to stand up and go.

"You are also kind, even if it comes out gruffly. You are loyal and protective to a fault."

I had almost nodded at the beginning before the words made sense in my brain. When I realised what Lil was doing I tried to move away. Alright, the whole words thing had not worked. Plan B in action. Run fast and disappear. It had always worked before.

I did not have the chance as Lil Red's hand clamped down on my arm almost painfully. I tried to shake it off but she had gotten stronger too. Manual labour would do that to you. I was stronger than Lil, that much was known and proven. I could have literary thrust her away but I could not make myself do it. So I just sat there waiting for her to finish.

"You work hard and don't ask for thanks or acknowledgement. You don't suffer fools or arrogance but you will still put your life on the line for them. You are also shy to the point of stupidity."

After a few moments of silence, it was obvious that Lil was waiting for me to say something. I remained stubbornly silent. I had nothing to say. Certainly nothing that made sense.

I felt her smile even if I did not turn to look at her. When she took in a breath, I expected another lashing. The gentle tones surprised me.

"I know, Teach. I've been observing you for almost a year now. I've seen all I needed to see."

Panic rose in me. She had been observing me since the beginning? The beginning? I strained to listen for the voices of the watch that would inform us of an attack. I so wished for one right now. Anything to stop me from having to turn and look at Lil.

Nothing happened. Then again I did not expect it to. Never an alarm when you need one.

"Still isn't a good idea," I mumbled finally.

Lil's laugh made me turn. I could only hope she had been joking all along. There was mirth in her eyes but they were still serious as they looked at me.

"Maybe not, Teach. Maybe not..." she whispered and I felt hope.

"Do you dislike me so?" Lil asked finally, sadness and disappointment clear in her voice.

I should have said yes. That would have certainly sent her away. But I could not. No matter how I cursed at myself, I could not. Hurting someone like that, I simply could not do. Especially someone I knew and liked. Fuck!

"You are a great woman, Lil. Don't put yourself down. I am not good at this. I am really not."

She looked at me then, again a smile on her lips. It took me a moment and I mentally kicked myself. I was using normal voice again. What were you thinking, you idiot? I closed my eyes in self-recrimination.

"Give it a go, Teach. You never know. It might work."

I shook my head in denial. The soft caress on my cheek stopped me. Instinctively I leaned into it before I realised what I was doing and jerked my head away.

Lil's laughter sounded silver over the sound of music and song.

"No expectations, Teach. None at all. One day at a time and all that."

What could I do? My ruse had not worked and I could not really run away and hide in the crowd. There was not enough of a crowd.

I sighed. I sighed again, Lil's fingers playing with my hair. For a moment, I wished it was anyone but Lil' Red. I had come to enjoy her company. I should have known that was a bad sign. And she really had been observing. She was giving me no out and certainly no chance to get angry and stropy and my usual obnoxious self.

I nodded then and received a kiss on the cheek for my efforts. It made me tremble. Traitorous body of mine!

Lil's low laugh made me turn sheepish. I should have been irritated but I wasn't. That was enough to tell me that at least some parts of me were not dissatisfied with the situation I found myself in. Well, that was better than nothing.

"It's been a long time..." I finally admitted.

"That makes two of us."

I nodded. I knew she had not taken a lover in all the months, almost a year, we had been on this planet. Truly I was clueless. I should not have known that. Why did I know it? Fuck!

I shook my head. It seemed like I had done it again. Cross-signals and all. Shit! It was not the first time and I had promised myself I would not let it happen again. No woman would take me unawares again. Lust was fine and I liked it. Anything more I always ran fast and hard.

I allowed Lil to pull me nearer to her. I was stiff for a moment but she persisted and I finally gave in. I took a moment to gauge my reactions, body and mind. It didn't feel bad. Actually it felt pretty good.

With a sigh I let myself relax, closing my eyes and stilling my thoughts. Warm softness under my head and Altai's beautiful voice. It felt good. No point in arguing about that.

So be it.

I looked at Gloria stunned. She nodded with a smile. I shook my head. Who could have thought that people would like the hooks, needles and spear-tips I made during the evening. Working with wood and bone had become my evening past-time. I was not the only one but I worked a lot more steadily than any of the others.

I turned to look at the small group of women that had stumbled across our camp just yesterday. They were not looking for a place. Instead they were from a camp a couple of days away and they wanted to visit.

I knew of the camp but had never been there. We generally did not go that far in our hunts. Gloria clapped my shoulder as she moved away, back towards the women. They were trading apparently.

It was a good thing. Trading. Still I had no desire to go and speak with the visitors. So I just sat on my log and went on making the hooks they liked so much.

Laughter made me look up. It was only for a moment though. Apparently someone had made a joke. Oh well.

I barely managed to finish the curve on a hook, when Lil was at my side, a hot cup of something in her hand. We had been lucky. Emma of all people had found a bed of a clay-like substance a few hours away. Clay was easier to work than wood or bone. I made a mental note to start thinking about a wheel. Even I knew that without a potter's wheel anything we made would be very, very!, primitive.

I took the cup from Lil's hand, smiling at her in thanks. She smiled back to me and took her customary place next to me. We sat there silently, sipping our beverages.

I had to admit that it had worked. Spring had turned into summer and summer into autumn and it had worked. Or at least it had worked as much as we both let it. There were no great fireworks between us but it felt that it suited us both fine.

Hell, I had even talked about it with Lil. Thankfully she had not laughed, just kissed me once and told me not to worry. I trusted her enough and put it out of my mind. It was not as if sparks were always a necessity. My eyes travelled to Gloria as she was speaking with the visitors, Jinx, as always, at her side.

I smiled. They were doing well too. And there even a blind man could see the sparks. It was good to see them happy.

I set my cup next to me and took up my tools again. I nodded when Lil took the cup putting it further away, away from the tiny wooden chips that flew every now and again.

"Thanks," I mumbled. A squeeze of my knee was her answer and I smiled.

When Lil started talking, I gave her my attention, even if my hands never stopped working. It had become her habit of our evenings to tell me the news and gossip from around the camp. I was not particularly interested in either news or gossip but we had both found that sometimes ideas would spring of something totally inconsequential. And I did like Lil's voice as she slowly gave me information. Sometimes I even laughed at something or other.

"Anyway and most wanted the wine or whatever it is but Gloria put her foot down and said the pelts were more important. I cannot believe them sometimes. Winter is coming and they are thinking of alcohol."

I nodded agreeing with Lil but stopped mid-nod. "Did you say alcohol?"

She nodded back at me. I was at my feet even before she had finished her nod, almost running to the huddle of people around the big campfire.

Gloria did not even hesitate when I touched her shoulder, motioning that I needed to talk to her.

"What's up, Teach?"

"Do they have anything stronger than wine?"

Gloria looked at me as if I had just grown another head. I shook my head at her in exasperation.

"Alcohol, Gloria! The strongest antiseptic we can find!"

Gloria's eyes widened before she closed them with a sigh. "I'm such an idiot," she murmured.

I just looked at her waiting. She opened her eyes finally and nodded at me. "Will do, Teach."

I grunted at her before trudging back to my log and Lil's questioning eyes.

"Antiseptic," I murmured. She looked at me for a long moment before nodding at me sheepishly.

A few moments passed as I struggled with the wood in my hand once more. I stopped suddenly.

"Lil?"

"What?"

"You talk to these visitors?"

"A bit..."

"See if you can ask them what they made the wine with. What sort of fruit. The procedure and whatnot."

She smiled at me and I was slightly startled when she kissed my cheek. "Will do, your shyness," she whispered at me.

I looked at her, my turn to be sheepish. This time she kissed my lips and I had to smile. With a shake of my head, I turned back to the wood on my hand and the hook that was slowly appearing.

That girl sure had my number. And, hell must have frozen over, I didn't even mind. Actually, it was kind of cute. Not to mention bloody convenient. Well, sometimes things do work out. So be it.

The shouts and arguments that greeted me as I came into the campsite made me cringe. Silently I motioned to the women with me towards the big woodpile. I walked that way myself, almost bent double under the weight of the firewood. It had been a long day, even if the nice spring weather sort of made up for it.

Still anything was better than the winter. I had never particularly liked winter but I was coming to hate it with a passion. This year it was even worse than the last one. At least we were better prepared and there had been no need for anyone to work long hours to replenish diminishing stocks of food and fuel.

I opened my arms instinctively when Lil came towards me, a bare few seconds after I had let my burden fall. It was someone else's job to make the pile tidy. Having spent all day chopping wood my muscles protested and I was dead on my feet.

Lil was in my arms and I sighed. It was good to be home. A bump against my leg made me look down. Hans' smile greeted me. Lil was quick to pick him up, knowing I was still too afraid to play with the toddler. I had never been good with children. Still it seemed that little Hans liked me. Gods know why.

"Come on. Let's take him to Kat and I'll get some tea for you," Lil said over her shoulder.

I followed her. Tea would be good. Dinner would be even better. As I walked I tried to loosen the muscles of my back. Katharina took the toddler with a grateful smile. He sure was a bundle. She smiled at me too and I nodded at her in greeting. We didn't speak often but I liked the German. She had a calm I liked.

The argument surged around the central campfire and I looked that way for a moment. When Lil took my hand guiding me over where Emma was making tea for the loggers, I followed her eagerly. Emma had done well in finding some odd root or something. It made terrific tea. Some said it tasted like honeybush, some South African beverage or other. I had no idea, coffee being my poison of choice back home, but I still liked the tea.

"What's going on?" I asked when I finally sat on my log, tea in hand and Lil at my side. I had come to cherish that time of the day. A bit of time to relax, then do some woodwork and then have dinner. Best time in the day.

Lil sighed. I looked at her questioningly. She usually liked telling me what the latest dust-up was about. Sometimes it was something interesting enough to get me over to the central campfire. Usually I just spoke to Gloria but it had been known to happen that I spoke to the others too.

Lil sighed again. "You are not gonna like this," she murmured finally.

I was immediately concerned and I stood up, tea sloshing on my hand. I ignored the slight sting.

"Everyone is fine," Lil said urgently.

"What's going on then?" I said harshly.

She sighed again. Gently she took my hand, tugging it downwards. I sat with a grunt but I went on looking at her. I wanted some answers and I wanted them now.

"We have visitors. From that village on the other side of the river?"

I nodded. The last days of autumn had brought visitors from nearby camps. It seemed like everyone had gotten some sort of travelling bug. I was certain someone from here would want to go gallivanting around before long. That was the nature of humans. So be it.

"They say they got news from further east. It's second or third hand mind you. It seemed that in some village, they found that one of them was an alien. A shape-changer they said."

My grimace said what I thought of that. Not that I had not expected a visit from whoever had dumped us here. And having plants in the population sort of made sense, especially if this was an experiment of some sort as I had long suspected. But shape-changers? That sounded like something out of a sci-fi movie.

I had to laugh then. More to myself than about the issue. We had been taken from home without any of us knowing how or when. We had woken up in some strange planet where a voice from the sky talked to us. And then we had been left to fend for ourselves. Well, it was sci-fi for sure.

"So?" I asked finally.

Lil shrugged at me. "They say we should all be careful. That they are among us and it could be anyone."

"So?"

Lil smiled at me. "You couldn't give a shit, could you?"

I smiled back at her and shrugged. Who cared? It wasn't like I could do anything about it. It was pretty clear that whoever had brought us here had technology far beyond what we had at home. I had no stomach for heroics or wild goose chases. Surviving was hard enough in a pre-technology world.

"No point borrowing trouble," I said finally.

I was still not much of a talker but it was different with Lil. She didn't mind me not talking and she did not mind me talking when I wanted to talk. She was good to me and I tried to be as good as possible for her.

"Teach!"

The shout made me look towards the central campfire. Gloria was motioning for me to go there. I sighed even as I climbed to my feet. It was a rare thing for her to call me like that. Usually she just came to ask whatever she wanted.

Lil was immediately at my side as I slowly walked to the small crowd around the campfire. Gloria took me aside immediately.

"Lil' Red told you what's going on?"

I nodded with a sigh.

A shout from behind made me turn.

"Yo, people! Shut up!"

I looked at Carmen in surprise. That she had never done before. Everyone, I thought, was as surprised as I was and thankfully they stopped their jabbering.

"What's up, Carm?" someone asked from the sidelines.

Carmen was quick to answer. "I wanna hear what Teach thinks."

I looked away then. Not that again. The soft murmurs of accent from the others and Lil's steady hand on my arm were the only things that stopped me from leaving right then and there.

I cleared my throat once, looking at Gloria.

"Alright. So there are aliens, they are shape-shifters of some type and some of them are playing at being human. Right?"

Gloria's nod was small and her eyes dead serious. I nodded back.

"So what?"

"What do you mean so what? Are you stupid or something?" Amanda screeched immediately.

I had to sigh. Keeping a civil tone with Amanda was becoming more and more difficult as time passed.

"So what, Amanda? If they look like us, how the hell are we supposed to tell who is an alien and who isn't? What do you propose we do? Start a witch hunt and make everyone a suspect? That's stupid!"

"What should we do then, Teach?" Liz asked. She was one of those who had attacked us but she was good with an axe and had a deft hand with a spear as well.

I shrugged at her. I really could not see the point in all of this.

"Nothing. We do nothing. Think of it this way. Whoever brought us here had more technology than Earth. Even if we find an alien what are we going to do? Hold her hostage or something? We'd only get killed."

Soft murmurs greeted my words, as well as some harsher ones that I could clearly hear for the disagreement they were. I sighed once. I did not want to get into this but maybe it was time to say it.

"There is no point to any of this. We need to accept it and move on. This is where we are and rescue is not coming. Or if rescue ever arrives we'll be long dead. This is our world now. Aliens or no aliens."

There was silence then. Most of us did not want to think about it. I knew some still held hope and others said that they did.

I nodded at Gloria once. My words would not stop the argument or the bitching or the shouting. But at least I had made my point clear. Gloria graced me with a small smile. Apparently she agreed.

A part of me was relieved. I did not want to put a spoke in her plans, whatever they were. I did not stay around for the myriad opinions that were sure to come. My steps were slow as I walked back to my log, Lil at my side.

"I guess dinner will be late..." I said as soon as we had sat down again.

"Looks like it," Lil agreed.

I sighed once and drank some of my tea. It had gotten cold but it still tasted good. The raised voices from the central campfire told me the argument continued unabated.

I found Lil's hand and squeezed it once. She was quick to respond to my unspoken signal. She leaned into me and I put my arm around her shoulders. It had taken me a while but I had finally found out it felt good to hold her like that.

I tried to ignore the shouts and raised voices. Maybe I was a fatalist. I just didn't see the point. We still had to hunt, fish, chop wood and try to survive. Shape-changing aliens didn't change that. Not that I expected the others to agree. But then again that was their way. So be it.

Hell though. I would have loved to see a shape-changer. Who knew? Maybe I would one day.

I had an audience but I could not even growl at them. This was anything but easy. I hated audiences when I was trying something. And this thing would probably not work. Or at least not work cleanly.

The makeshift barrel, a piece of tree trunk very carefully hollowed out had been sitting on its equally makeshift base for three days. Hell if I could remember how long it took for this process to work.

I took a breath as the water slowly drained into the clay pot I had placed underneath the barrel and the hole that had taken me hours to make. When it was all done, I sighed. Jinx's hand on my shoulder steadied me.

I had never been good at chemistry. Hell, I barely even managed to pass my exams and thank the gods I never had to do any experiments. I looked at the liquid that had slowly, oh so slowly, drained from the barrel.

Ok now, Mr Big Inventor, how the hell do you tell if the thing is supposed to be what it is? I shrugged at myself. With a breath I started to put my hand into the pot. If it burnt, it had worked. If it didn't then it was back to the drawing board.

Jinx pulled me back almost violently. "What the hell are you doing? You said that thing burns!"

I looked at her shaking my head. What did she expect me to do? I had to test the bloody thing somehow and I would not ask someone else to try getting burnt.

Joseph's hesitant voice made me turn to the young man. Ah, so that was my unwanted audience. "Maybe try this?"

A piece of root was extended towards me. I closed my eyes for a moment. Stupido! You could have thought of that. It's not exactly rocket-science!

I shook my head to push the recriminating thoughts from my mind. I nodded at the boy, taking the root from him. I let it fall into the pot, waiting for something to happen. Minutes passed. Nothing happened.

I sighed and shook my head.

"Looks like something is happening," Jinx said carefully.

I was quick to turn and look at the pot. A quick stab with my knife and the root was back into the air. I looked at it closely and smiled. It worked, although probably not as well as it should. Still the slight discoloration of the root told me that my experiment at making lye had worked.

I rolled my shoulders and closed my eyes for a moment. Now all I had to do was manage to make soap for humans. Lye was good for cleaning things, at least nothing that someone could eat. But humans needed soap. More specifically one Lil' Red would love soap.

The pale memories of my grandmother telling me stories included olive oil. Of course that I did not have. But I had animal fat, as refined as I could make it. And I had flower extract or as close to it as I could make it.

I had a long day in front of me. And I would make soap if it killed me. For the others, even for Jinx, this was yet another of my myriad experiments. I knew better.

I had never been a romantic. I was too much of grump and a pessimist to be romantic. But Lil had managed to survive three years with me. Three years or as close as I could make it without a calendar. In another life and another planet, I would have been offering her a ring and the promise of a lifetime.

In this life and on this planet, I could offer her soap. Not the odd soapy root that I had discovered on a hunt that sort of got you clean but not really and smelled like old boots at the best of times. Real soap, flower scented, and hopefully not too caustic. Hopefully.

As I started heating the fat, Jinx's low voice reached me. "Good job, Teach."

I had to smile. Even after all these years she, and Gloria too, still felt the need to provide me with positive encouragement. I had grown a bit from the morose rude idiot I had been four years ago. Only a bit as Lil sometimes teasingly reminded me.

Well, a bit was better than nothing. And it still felt good to hear her positive encouragement, even if I would never admit it. Well, that was how I was. If I had to deal with it then so would everyone else.

So be it.

I could not keep the smile from my face. Lil's warmth felt like the sun's gentle rays at my side. Others were dancing and Altai's clear haunting voice could be heard over the, slightly shrill, music of pipes and reeds.

The lucky couple was still dancing in the middle of it all, next to the roaring fire. I caught glimpses of them as bodies moved in the impromptu dance floor, or dance ground to be more precise.

The ceremony had been simple. After all there were neither ministers nor government officials in this world of ours. It had been merely a circle, all of our community, standing together as vows were given.

They had been beautiful vows too. As summer ended and the weather progressed into autumn we had all stood and witnessed. Even without the pomp of old world weddings, or even civil partnerships, it had made them happy.

I smiled even wider as I caught a glimpse of Gloria kissing Jinx lightly as they danced. This was their night and they were enjoying it to the fullest. Theirs was not the first ceremony. Carmen and Anita had snagged that honour in the beginning of the summer.

There was no law to give them rights. No papers to sign or permissions to be granted. I had been against marriage back on Earth. I never saw the point really beyond the legalities of it.

Here of course there were no such things and it felt more pure to me than any old world ceremony. Here it was merely between the two of them and the rest of us were there merely to witness and bask in their happiness. If they decided to break up tomorrow, there would be no fuss and no need for more than an announcement.

The historian in me grumped and puffed that this was no different from marriage back on Earth. After all our witnessing created the only legality that could be conferred without bureaucracy and written law. For once I just shoved that little voice to the back of my mind. Sometimes primitive was better.

A whoop of delight from our guests made me turn a bit to look at them. I almost shook my head. It was Brianna, of course. She was always so exuberant, she made me tired just watching them. They had come just a day past, bringing wine and fine alcohol with them, along with the invitation to what had become a custom for us and them.

The autumn hunt which hopefully would make certain that winter was just a bit easier than it would have been otherwise. It would be only the third year we did it but after the first time, it had become a custom. It was easy to make customs these days. I smiled at the thought. Sometimes primitive was better. So be it.

A kiss on my shoulder made me squeeze Lil a bit. In a movement that had become instinct after all this time, I turned and kissed her forehead. She snuggled further into me and I smiled.

For a moment I wondered. A few years past, I would have panicked. Certainly I would have spent days, if not months, agonising over it. As time passed though I had learnt to trust. Not in general of course. I was still the suspicious bastard I had always been. But I had learnt to trust Lil.

"Lil?"

"Hmm?"

"Would you..."

"Only if you want to..."

"I'll talk to Gloria. Mid-autumn after the big hunt?"

"Sounds good."

I kissed her again, only this time on the lips, and she kissed me back. It did sound good. It most certainly did. I looked toward the sky and the stars that still jarred me at times.

I sent a thought to my father, if he was still alive. I'm getting married, baba. Mid-autumn. Wish you were here.

I smiled. I could just see him in my mind's eye, a proud smile on his lips wishing me luck and happiness. I pulled Lil closer and closed my eyes resting my cheek on her head.

Luck and happiness. Luck was blind and came and went of her own accord. Nothing to be done about her.

Happiness I had, snuggling against me, her red hair tingling my nose. What more could I want? So be it.

I passed my hand through my hair. Actually I just massaged my scalp and what little stubble was there. Lil had given me a shave just the day before. It always made me smile, the feel of stubble under my hand.

When I was younger, back on Earth, it was usually a sign of me getting too anxious or too pressured. Usually I had the equivalent of a crew cut but a shave was for the bad times. Here it was merely convenience.

I had been certain that there was the equivalent of lice on this planet and I had wanted to avoid it at all costs. After all these years I still had to see or hear of any but I still kept the style. I had become too accustomed to it.

It was hot for mid-autumn but I did not mind. The Mediterranean sang in my blood even unknown light years away. It was the cold I hated and it would come soon enough.

It had been a successful hunt in all. We had managed to snag four deer and a multitude of smaller animals. I was not much concerned. We already had more than we would need for the winter but it never hurt to oversupply.

So I just sat on the rock by the riverside listening to the others talk. They were discussing hunting techniques and using traps and the like. It was interesting but I had had my fill of people over the last couple of days. All I wanted was to go home.

Lil was talking to one of the women from the other community, Tina or Mina or Nina or something. Still she was trying to get what information she could about their brewing ways. All of our efforts had been less than successful.

A shout from far above made me look up. My lips twitched in a grimace. Sometimes I had to wonder about people. Amanda and a few of the others had wanted to climb to the top of the cliff.

The ravine was an interesting place and I had never been here before. Exploring was never in my blood. Why anyone would want to spend their time walking up the steep incline after days of hunting was beyond me. Apparently they wanted to look at the view. I'll take the view from ground level, thank you very much.

A hand on my shoulder made me turn and I nodded at Gloria. She nodded back and we shared a small smile. She looked as tired as I felt. It had been a hard couple of days, long hours and sleeping on the ground did not make for relaxation.

A scream from above made me look up and the world seemed to turn into a slow-motion sequence in a movie. The shelf at the end of the cliff was moving. Amanda was falling, her mouth open in a scream.

The strange gurgling sound made me look to my right. I took a step backward as Gloria seemed to melt into... I blinked. For a moment I wondered if I had died and not even realised.

An angel stood in front of me, marble-white skin and wings stood up against the muddy brown of the forest. I blinked. Dust rose at the wings' first beat and I could only look as the creature rose into the air, one wingbeat at a time.

Time seemed to snap into place and the next thing I knew, the creature had Amanda in its arms and it was coming down to the ground. It landed just a few feet away from me, its clawed feet sinking in the mud of the river's edge.

As it deposited Amanda to the ground, it turned and looked at me. It had Gloria's eyes. My stomach turned and I had to swallow to keep the bile from exploding from my lips.

Someone screamed and the next moment the creature was batting a spear out of the air. My feet moved and before I could think what I was doing I was standing in front of it.

My eyes were on the others, recognising shock, dismay, fear and outright hatred in their eyes. The skin of my back crawled as I could feel the creature's gaze on it.

"Nobody fucking move!"

The sound of my own voice made me shiver in surprise.

No-one moved. My own people obeyed me because they were used to it. It did not happen frequently but when I said something, they tended to follow my lead. After all I never addressed them except in an emergency.

The people of the other village probably did it due to surprise. I had seen it happen before. At that moment I could not care less. I only cared that no more spears would fly. I was no alien to be able to bat them out of the air. I would probably get skewered.

Without thinking, I searched for Jinx with my eyes. I found her easily, just at the edge of the crowd. My heart bled at that moment. The pain on her face, the stunned disbelief in her eyes, were like knives in my heart.

For the first time ever, Amanda's voice was not shrill. It was hoarse and gritty. "It's an alien. Oh my god! It's an alien."

Amanda's words were a catalyst as everyone started shouting simultaneously. I did not speak, nor did I move from my position. My eyes sought Lil and thankfully our gazes connected.

She was moving towards me and I shook my head, warning her with my eyes. She stopped mid-step and I could see the narrowing of her eyes. A bare second passed before I could see her making the decision in her mind.

When she started walking toward me once again I wanted to scream. I wanted her away, far away from panicking people and flying spears. I never had the chance to speak.

The women moving towards me made me react in pure instinct. Without thought, my knife was in my hand, held low and ready. They stopped, looking at each other before turning back to me. I did not know their names but I had seen them around. A couple, both belligerent and arrogant.

"You would defend it?" One of them sneered.

I took a breath. I could have predicted a hundred deaths for myself. Over the years I had been close to some of them. This however I could never have imagined. Well... I had enough of the east in me to believe in fate. If that was the end of my thread... so be it.

"Back away," I said with as much threat as I could manage.

"Stop this! Immediately!" Linda's shout was a relief. I would have closed my eyes but I did not trust two people I did not know to allow me that luxury.

Linda walked calmly until she stood between me and the two women. Her placating gesture was not lost on me.

"Everyone, please calm down. There will be no bloodshed."

I wish I could believe her. Emotions were too high. I could see too much hatred in too many eyes. In blood we live, in blood we die. The words floated in my mind and I smiled. So be it.

There was no-one more surprised than I when the two women lowered their spears. Lil's warmth at my side made my breath hitch, the glint of the knife in her hand made my insides clench painfully.

Oh, the stakes had just gotten a lot higher. I could give my life for a strange creature with Gloria's eyes. I had never valued it for much.

Lil's life though. That was another matter entirely. I felt the coldness settle inside of me. I welcomed it. Over the years there had been enough close encounters, enough attacks and bandits to make me know the feeling well.

The killer I had suspected existed since I was a child, the same killer that had come out of the shadows the very first day I saw the odd white sun of this planet, the one that had been making regular appearances since then, had come out to play.

I had expected to speak a vow to protect, honour and love in just a few days' time. It would have been just words though. After all I had already given it long ago in my heart. For some things words were only for the benefit of others.

The knife was light in my hand, so was the axe I could not remember getting from the belt-loop it hanged. My vision became sharp, my heartbeat slowed. I blinked once. I was ready. Ready to die, ready to kill. Whatever blood flowed this day, I knew one thing only. It would not be Lil's. So be it.

Linda was speaking. I did not hear her. I was too far beyond it now. I could only take in details. Shuffling feet. Red faces. Open mouths. Staring eyes. Clenched fists. Rising spears. Rush movement.

There was no lethal dance. No light sidestepping. No finesse. After all brute strength had always been more my thing.

Two and a half breaths and it was done. I wrenched the axe out of a woman's skull. A flicker of my wrist sent blood flying from my knife to the ground. It was done. Who would have thought I would become so efficient in this business?

I looked at Linda, on her knees, where she had been pushed into at the women's rush. I could only smile at the horror in her face. It was done. So be it.

I let my gaze travel over the pale faces of the people I called my own and those that were familiar strangers. I tried to make them feel my promise to their bones. The two crumpled bodies at my feet were the first but they would not be the last.

"Oh, Teach. No." Gloria's rich voice reached me like the sound of waves on a distant shore.

I did not recognise the hoarse voice as my own in the silence. "Move and you'll be next. Fancy wings or no."

I felt her retreating, as if she had been ready to touch me but thought better of it.

I almost laughed as I saw the sea-change in the faces around me. Somehow I had said the right thing. Apparently it was good to be an equal opportunity killer. Well, if that's what it took. So be it.

"What do we do now?" Someone asked from the back. I chuckled at that. Who knew? Who the fuck knew? I certainly didn't.

The soft whisper barely reached my ears. "They will be coming to get me in a few moments."

I shivered as if someone had poured a bucket of ice water on me. My eyes moved of their own accord to catch a glimpse of Lil's profile.

Maybe I was a fool. Maybe I was getting to be a romantic in my old age. I could not stop the thought that almost brought me to my knees. What if it had been Lil that suddenly spouted wings and clawed feet? What would I have wanted then?

I turned abruptly, ignoring the horrified gasps from the crowd. It was still the winged creature and it still had Gloria's eyes, and her voice.

"Jinx," was my only answer. It nodded at me.

As it started moving, I turned and moved with it, keeping myself between it and the crowd of women. Their eyes followed us. I did not look at the creature. I did not look at Lil, not wanting to see the disappointment in her face. After all I was putting her in more danger with each passing moment. I looked only at the others.

Finally, we reached Jinx. She still stood, stock-still, shock and disbelief radiating from her. For a moment I wished she had known. I would have preferred the lie to knowing that she was stunned and hurt by a revelation she never expected.

I turned my back to them, trying to give them whatever privacy they could scrounge amidst so many avidly staring eyes. The low whispers I ignored as best as I could manage. I would not take away those moments from them. I would not have wanted someone to take them away from me.

The odd whirring sound from behind me and the gasps of surprise and fear from the others did not make me turn. I had a good suspicion of what they were looking at. The creature had said after all that they would come for it.

I never expected the clawed hand on my shoulder, nor the breathy whisper in Gloria's voice that followed.

"Thank you, Teach. For everything. If they throw you out, go west. Straight west for three weeks. You will like it there. If you need me... if you need me, break the seal inside the lining of my jacket and I will come to you."

I turned then, relying on the fear of the aliens that were behind us to keep me safe. I ignored the alien face, looking only into the eyes that I would always recognise as Gloria's.

"Be safe."

A single nod answered me before the creature turned away to find its own. I did not watch its retreat, turning instead, waiting for the violence I expected to follow the aliens' exit.

The strange whirring sound came again to my ears. Jinx's cut-off sob told me they were gone and the one I had known as Gloria with them.

Lil's squeeze on my arm made me breathe deeply. It was done. Gloria was gone. A part of me screamed that I needed time and space. I always had needed both to be able to mourn.

I silenced it without hesitation. There was neither space nor time for such luxuries. I had two people to care for. Two people I cared for. I breathed again. It was time to be strong. The detachment I could remember from when I watched my mother die stole over me. I welcomed it. It was the kind of strength I needed then, even if I knew I would pay dearly for it later. So be it.

I did not give anyone the opportunity to react, hoping their surprise and fear of an alien sighting would keep them compliant for a few more minutes.

"Linda, get our people together. We're going home."

I left no room for question or disagreement. There was bound to be a backlash. I wanted my people away from it.

I watched the women of my community move almost woodenly. Linda, reliable Linda, herding them towards our packs, abandoned by the cliff base, and the packets of meat waiting them there.

"Lil, take care of Jinx."

Another squeeze was the only answer to my gruff order. I hated ordering her around and had made a point over the years to always ask, never order. Right then though, I could only order. Just a part of the price I would pay.

I heard Lil move around me to get to Jinx. I did not have to see her arm snaking around slumped shoulders but I heard their shuffling steps as Jinx was led to the relative shelter of the others.

I did not turn and I did not move. My eyes were keeping their own watch of every movement and every glance of the people of the other community. I watched as they slowly came off their stupor of surprise and fear.

My back tensed in anticipation. I blinked once trying to pull over me a mantle of arrogance. It was necessary. I would do anything to keep their attention on me and away from my people. They had to get away, far away from this place of blood and shattered lies.

In a moment of madness my mind conjured the image of Richard Chamberlain as Blackthorne acting the madman to stop Ishido from shooting at the palanquin where Toranaga hid, disguised as a noble lady. Thankfully I did not have to act the part of a madman in this drama, merely be one. So be it.

My people were already slowly leaving the scene of this crime, Carmen at the front, Lil with Jinx only a few steps behind her. For a moment I met Lil's eyes as she turned back to look at me. I wished I could smile at her but I did not dare. Arrogance and danger was the image I was trying to achieve. Smiling would not do.

"Where the hell do you think you are going?"

The shout did make me smile. I answered quickly with all the right inflections to make everyone turn to me again.

"They are going home. As should you."

"Who made you god? Or are you one of them too?"

"I am an atheist."

The non-sequitur, given as flippantly as I could manage, brought me all the attention I could possibly desire. Shouts rose and swearing. I cared not for either. From the periphery of my vision, I could see Linda herding our people away, into the forest.

One voice rose above the others.

"You killed our people and you think you're gonna get away with it?"

"I am right here, ain't I? What are you gonna do about it?"

More shouts came that I let pass through me. I smirked with my lips even as I smiled inside. Linda was the last to leave and she had already disappeared into the forest. This was it then. The end of the line.

They were angry and there was only one target for their anger. Like I had wanted to it to be. Small movements, timed to escape their attention, brought the knife back to its sheath. The axe I held steadily.

I glanced downwards once, where Gloria's jacket lay by my feet. I had to get that and I had to be quick about it too. My smirk deepened. Their first running step was my queue.

Years without smoking had been a miracle for my lungs. Daily exercise had lent me muscles and speed I had not even possessed as a teenager. The water was cold as I struggled with axe and Gloria's rescued jacket in my hands. I had always been a good swimmer though.

I felt them following me, some into the water, others from the bank, as the current took me. I did not fight it, angling my strokes towards the other bank. Shouts and screams gave a soundtrack to my flight. I could only hope I had insulted and angered them enough to forget about the small convoy that had escaped into the forest's embrace.

Silence greeted me as I entered the camp, a village by the standards of this world, that I had helped build. Everyone was looking at me, surprise battling horror and even fear on their faces.

I did not look good, that much I knew. They had caught me twice and almost caught me more times than I wanted to remember. The two times they had caught me were bad enough.

I had escaped both times, leaving spilt blood and crumbled bodies in my wake. I was reasonably certain I had given them the slip two days ago but I knew I had to be cautious.

I did not speak to anyone, my eyes searching frantically. I was so hungry I was numb and I knew I was burning with fever.

I shook my head, shaking the rain from my eyes. Another time I would have cursed at the weather. I was grateful for it though. It had helped me escape my pursuers, hiding my passage through the forest.

I had almost reached my hut when Lil exited it. I stopped abruptly. I looked at her only for a moment before my gaze focused on some distant point. I had never been beautiful, hell even on my best days I had been handsome at best. Still I had my pride. I did not want Lil of all people to see me like this.

She never gave me the chance to retreat, paying little notice to my shame. Her arms were gentle but strong as they held me, her lips cool against my heated skin. A part of me wanted to protest when she started leading me towards the hut but it had no strength to resist her.

I allowed her to sit me by the small fire, taking the soaking coat off my shoulders. I even allowed her to take off my equally soaked boots. When she started on my shirt, I pushed her hands away.

"I need to go. Soon as the rain stops, they'll come looking for me here."

Maybe if I had not killed any of them after what had happened in the clearing, they would have let it go. But I had. I had killed too many of them for them to just let it go. I would not be the cause of what could become a war. Our community was too small to survive a conflict of that sort.

"Tomorrow," she whispered even as she hugged me again.

I could only nod. I was too tired to protest. I was in too much pain to push her away again.

So I let her do with me what she wanted. I closed my eyes and allowed her hands, gentle as they always had been, to undress me. I flinched at her gasp when she saw my body. I gritted my teeth as she cleaned the wounds and scrapes I had accumulated over the last few days.

Lil gasped only once but I could feel her breath hitching at each new revelation. When she saw the scratches on the inside of my thighs, she kissed me on the lips. I did not respond. I did not know how. It looked worse than it truly was.

The bitch that had done it had not gotten as far as she would have liked. She should have realised that anyone with the strength to decapitate with a small axe, would be strong enough to throttle her.

Lil bathed me in warm water afterwards and settled me in my blankets without a word. I expected her to speak but she said nothing. She merely burrowed under the blankets and held me close. I did not protest, merely shuffled as close to her as I could. It felt good to be protected, if only for the next few hours. It was weak but I could not muster the energy to care. So be it.

I fell asleep at the sound of her heartbeat and the feel of her lips on my skull.

I woke to the sound of low angry voices and the knowledge I was not alone. I did not open my eyes. The anger in the voices in the same space as me made me cautious.

"I don't know what to do. Everything's gone to hell, Lil' Red. Gloria was a goddamn alien. Teach killed two of them that I saw and I am sure they were not the last. Jinx... Jinx I don't even know what to say about that. What am I supposed to do? Who am I? Fucking King Solomon?"

"So what do you want, Linda?"

"I don't know! If I knew, I wouldn't come to ask, would I? Everyone is jumpy and Amanda's been talking all the time. And Jinx won't say a goddamn word. And I am sure someone will be coming wanting Teach. You can't just kill people! It ain't right! You know that!"

"They attacked first, Linda!"

"Bullshit. She should not have stepped in front of Glo... of the alien. That was a fucking stupid thing to do. And everyone wants to know if she knew. 'Cause why the fuck else would she protect it then?"

"That's who she is, Linda, and you should know that much by now. Right or wrong, white, black or alien, Teach will stand by us. Gloria is an alien. Who cares? What does it matter?"

"What does it matter? You are not stupid, Lil. Of course it matters!"

"That's your opinion!"

"That's everyone's opinion. Just because you are sleeping with Teach that doesn't make what she did right!"

"So it's wrong to protect your own?"

"It was an alien!"

"It was Gloria!"

I had had enough. I had known it was the end of the line the moment I had stepped in front of the alien creature with my friend's eyes. If Lil had not come to my side, I would not have minded death. It would have made a sort of ironic sense to die for nothing.

She had though. And that was that. I couldn't quite tell why I had not let them kill me in the forest on the other side of the river. My people were safe, Lil and Jinx were safe, it should have been ok for me to surrender.

I had not though. No reason for it truly but pure stubbornness. Surrender was not in my nature. I did not fear death, hell it had been a friend all my life. But I refused to go as a lamb to slaughter. They'd have to take me down and they'd pay for it. Pay dearly.

Maybe it was pride. Maybe it was self-preservation. I did not know and I did not want to look into my soul to find the answer. That was my way. They wanted me dead? Well, it would happen my way or not at all. There were no other options on the table. So be it.

I cleared my throat loudly enough for both Lil and Linda to look at me. I met Linda's eyes and smiled.

"I'll be out of here as soon as I get my stuff, Linda. When they come, you tell them I am gone. All they have to do is hunt me down."

Linda never had the chance to answer.

"Leave us."

I was as surprised as Linda to hear the tone of unmitigated command in Lil's voice. I watched as Linda opened her mouth to speak and thought better of it. Her steps were hesitant but she did get out of the hut.

I did not speak as Lil came to my side, kneeling gracefully. She waited until I propped myself up to my elbow, better able to look at her straight in the eye.

Her voice was low to go with the anger in her eyes. "Is that what you want?"

I looked at her questioningly. The fever still plagued me. I had neither time nor patience for games.

"Do you want them to hunt you down?"

I shrugged. "Maybe they will, maybe they won't. Point is they mustn't find me here."

Sadness replaced steely anger on Lil's face. "Always the protector, aren't you?"

I looked away. I was no protector. I just knew what I had to do.

"Alright, love. So be it."

I cocked my head but Lil said nothing further. I watched her, suspicion turning into dread in my mind, as she stood and steadily walked to the side of the hut we stored our things. Her movements were quick but careful as she started putting her stuff and mine into a rucksack.

"No!" I husked at her. That was not the way. That was not what I wanted. I wanted her to be ok. To be out of danger. Not follow me into it.

She turned to look at me then. I looked into her eyes and trembled to see the rage there. If I had been standing my knees would have folded.

Lil's voice had a tone I had never heard before. "I can come with you or I can follow you. Your choice."

The coldness that had not left me since the moment I had felt Lil step beside me days ago in the clearing that the life I had built for myself in this new world shattered in a moment and a step, seemed to solidify inside of me.

I looked at Lil steadily. "I'll let them take me before I lead you to your death."

I knew my words had an impact because Lil stepped back as if hit. Another time I would be on my feet, rushing to her side. Not this time though. My death I had no issue with. Lil's death though. That was another matter. Another matter entirely.

"You fool..." Her whisper barely reached my ears.

I should have been afraid when she walked to me but I was too foolish to know. I should have been terrified when she knelt beside me but I was too stupid to realise.

Her hand on my face was warm, her grip gentle, her voice low and husky, almost dreamy. "It must have been what two, three years ago. I was asleep but something woke me. You didn't even realise I was awake. But I heard you."

I looked away from her. I knew what she would say but I could only hope I was mistaken. That moment had not been for her to witness.

"In the name of my gods and whatever gods roam this foreign land, I swear in my life and my honour to love you above myself and all others, to protect you from all, to honour you in every moment of every day, to respect you as you are and however you change, to cherish you in word and deed, to be loyal to you as long as you will have me, to die for you and live for you, to be at your side through good and bad, to support you in whatever you desire, to hold you when you wish to be held, in the roads that you walk and those that you shall walk and those you wish to walk to be your companion. So be it."

Every word in Lil's solemn voice was a knife in my heart. I could not deny those words any more than I could deny myself. It had been my decision and my decision alone to say them that stormy night.

In the darkness, away from all the things that I despised about commitment, the pomp, the ceremony, the hateful idea that feelings had to be witnessed by others to be valid, I had spoken my vows.

Maybe to others it meant nothing. But to me it meant more than I could ever explain.

When she finished, she turned my chin gently but firmly until I could do nothing but raise my eyes to look at her. She smiled at me and I wanted to die.

"This is the road I wish to walk."

I closed my eyes, willing down the tears that sprang unbidden. I could not deny her. When she kissed me, I could only kiss her back.

I turned as I reached the crest of the small forested hill. I looked at the small village with its wooden stockade for what I knew would be the last time. I had helped built some of those huts. I had designed the stockade.

I had made friends there. I had laughed and I had cried. I had helped birth children and I had witnessed couplings and vows and hurtful break-ups. I had killed in their defence and came close to dying more times than I wanted to remember.

It was over. It was the past. I took a breath of the crisp air that already smelled of winter. I met Jinx's gaze for a moment before she nodded at me, the sadness like a veil over her eyes. She had decided to come with us as I had suspected she would. I was the killer but she was the alien's lover. There was no space in the village for either of us.

Lil's hand was warm as she took mine. I turned to look at her and met her smile with a small one of my own. I felt guilty and angry still that she had decided to come with me. But I would never speak of either my guilt or my anger.

This was the road she wished to walk. I loved her too much to disrespect her decision.

I turned my back to the village that had been my home almost from the beginning. As I started walking, my mind kicked into high gear. We had to be careful and we had to be quick.

Three weeks straight west, the alien with Gloria's eyes had said. I could only hope it had been honest with me. I had no idea what we would find at the end of the long trek with winter snapping at our heels. I could only trust that it would be somewhere safe and we would be accepted.

I checked the knife's draw instinctively, my hand moving upwards to pat the side of my jacket. Not my jacket actually but Gloria's. Mine had been abandoned early in my escape. The single hard spot that I had discovered quickly was still there. My line to help from above. I could not help but smile.

Lil matched me step for step, neither of us wasting energy or breath in speech. We had to put as much distance between us and the village as possible. I was certain the avenging pursuit for those I had killed over the last few days would not be far behind. I could only hope that they would get tired of the game quickly.

Hope... It was the condition of humans to be hopeful. The old myth came to me and I could not help but smile. Pandora and her jar had never been my favourite myth. I always preferred Prometheus with his odd love of humans and his cunning mind.

Well, hope was not the only one that had stayed in the jar, no matter what my ancestors wanted to believe. Eros had stayed too, only they had made him into a god. So much like them.

I squeezed Lil's hand and got a squeeze in return. I had a purpose and a destination. Protect Lil and get to that unknown place three weeks to the west. So be it.

I stayed at the back of the hut, resting on the sturdy wooden wall. I was dead on my feet and still running a fever. All my wounds had closed, even the ragged cut on my shoulder. Yet the fever still persisted. I feared some infection inside of me but Lil insisted it was no more than tiredness and stress. I could only hope she was right.

My eyes moved constantly, assessing everyone for danger. Lil was sitting a few feet in front of me, Jinx at her side. They were facing an old woman. I had been suspicious of her from the first moment I saw her. I had yet to meet anyone on this world with white hair.

Others were also in the hut. Women all but one. A young man was sitting by the entrance, watching the proceedings seemingly unconcerned. Laura smiled at me when my eyes passed over her. I did not respond. She had been the first to greet us as we stumbled in the snow, the column of smoke in the distance guiding us to shelter.

I was certain that this was the place the alien had directed me to. We had not seen a soul for almost a week and as far as I could tell we had been travelling straight west. It had taken us more than three weeks but I was guessing the snowstorm had delayed our trek.

Lil was doing most of the talking with the old woman, who appeared to be the leader of this isolated community. The job had fallen to her by default but she had accepted it with grace. I had never been either sociable or diplomatic and Jinx was fighting depression.

I kept half an ear on their conversation. I trusted Lil to say what needed to be said and nothing more. I was more concerned with keeping her secure if everything went to hell in a handbasket.

"Our laws are simple, Lilian. No killing, no stealing, no rape or bullying. No shirking of the chores and follow whatever those with the red bands say. You will be given food, shelter and protection."

I spied red armbands on most of the women in the hut. I almost shook my head. The terms seemed reasonable but I was suspicious of this idea that we had to obey.

"What sort of orders should we expect to follow?"

Lil's question elicited a small chuckle from the old woman.

"You are suspicious. And rightly. There are things happening out there that boggle the mind. You need not fear, my dear. Those with red bands will assign you the chores you need to do according to what needs be done and what you can do. They are also responsible for organising a defence if there is an emergency. Nothing more and surely nothing sinister."

The words sounded good and reasonable but I was still suspicious. What things were happening "out there" that boggled the mind? And how did someone in a community far away from anyone

knew what was going on? I almost snorted. I had my suspicions but if I were right, then I could not care less if those with the armbands were aliens.

"I see..." Lil's non-committal answer made me smile. It was clear to me she wanted to discuss this further but without an audience. I agreed. I wanted to hear what she had to say, what her feeling about this place was. It all sounded reasonable but if Lil was unhappy then we would leave, winter or no winter.

The lack of agreement was clear to the old woman too. Her voice was gentle, as if she were speaking to children or wounded animals. "You want to discuss it with your companions. It is to be expected. Will the night be enough?"

When Lil nodded her acquiescence, the old woman smiled.

"Alright then. Someone will show you to a hut and you can rest, eat and discuss it."

I was on my feet quickly then and so was Lil. The dismissal was clear but it made me even more suspicious. It was too quick a dismissal and in truth they knew little about us. I had expected a much longer interrogation and certainly a question about what had brought us here. Jinx was the last to get up, her knee hurting her with cold.

Even as one of the women, one with a red armband, stood to escort us out, the old woman's voice stopped us all before taking a single step.

"Oh, before I forget, just a quick thing. What made you leave?"

"There was a misunderstanding. We did not feel welcome there anymore," Lil trotted out the answer we had agreed days before.

The old woman chuckled. "You are a diplomat, my dear. But it is not common for three to come together. We've had it all. Bad break-ups. Racism. Language problems. Murder. Rape. Even simple wanderlust. But three women together and unrelated is a first. So why don't you tell me the truth?"

My hand clenched on the knife's hilt. This could go bad very quickly. Lil turned to look at me and I knew it was my turn to speak. We had rehearsed that possibility too.

The old woman spoke before I had the chance to open my mouth. "Whatever it is, it won't make a difference, I assure you. What is it then? A threesome maybe? Or does the silent one top you both? We have no problem with that. We have enough of the alternative parts of life already. It won't even make the gossip mill."

The suggestion almost made me lose my train of thought. I didn't know what was more absurd. The idea of a threesome with Jinx or me being a hard-core dominant. I shook my head to stop a laugh from escaping. I had a story to tell and I would tell it.

"There was a misunderstanding. With another community. It ended badly and I had to leave before it escalated into conflict of some sort. Lil is my partner, she chose to come with me. Jinx had just gone through a bad break-up. It was an opportunity to get away from it."

When the old woman nodded at my explanation, I almost sighed in relief. It was the truth after all, just with one or two key facts missing. No reason to mention aliens and I was not ready to admit to killing as many as I had.

A gesture from the old woman signalled our dismissal. Our guide almost herded us out of the hut. I took a breath of the crisp cold air. That could have gone worse. Now all we needed was to make a decision and hopefully by morning we would have somewhere to live once again. It could have been worse. So be it.

My eyes were half-closed, my body as relaxed as it could be, every one of my senses sated. I managed a kiss at Lil's collarbone and I could feel her smile.

"Comfy?"

"Hmm..."

I took a breath trying to become slightly more energised. It was not common for me to be so relaxed, even if Lil had managed many times over the years to tire me out completely. Finally I felt like I could move again.

"Thank you," I whispered at her, kissing her gently.

Lil's arms tightened around me as I tried to move off her. I cocked an eyebrow at her and she pressed a kiss on my forehead. I went back to being half-sprawled on her. If she wanted me there, who was I to complain?

"Love?"

The tone of her voice made me rise. It was odd, unlike our previous sated tones.

Lil cleared her throat carefully. "Are you happy?"

My breath caught as panic rose in me. Lil read me immediately.

"It's alright. It's nothing bad."

I sighed in relief. I had never been good at the sensitive chats. Thank the gods, Lil never pressed me on that. Which made her question even more surprising.

"What's up, Lil?"

"You are more relaxed now than you were... you know. You look happier."

I took a breath trying to think. In a way she was right. I was more relaxed in this strange little community we had found. It was spring now and we had come here the winter before the last one. Almost a year and a half.

Was I happier? I guessed I was in a way. I did not have to think any more. Not really. I did what I was told to do and when I had an idea or something I wanted to try all I had to do was tell Suyai, the Argentine that was responsible for our hut.

It wasn't that Suyai went along with whatever I proposed. Most often someone would take me aside and talk about it, exchange ideas, talk with more people, until angles had been covered and it was time for an experiment to begin or whatever.

No, it was the lack of pressure that made me relaxed. No-one expected me to perform or have a working idea for everything under the sun. Even my making of needles, spearheads and other small objects of bone and wood brought no pressure. There were three others with the same tendency to craft out of wood and bone. Most evenings we would sit together around a fire and craft to our hearts' content.

Being a loner and gruff was not something that people resented here. It felt like the camp was made of oddballs and people that preferred to sit apart. Lil had been accepted immediately and she was finally blossoming. I had never realised back in our old community how much she was stifled.

Even Jinx seemed happier in the role of hunter and provider. No-one had asked her about the supposed bad break-up and no-one had pressured her to take a lover or come out of her depression before she was ready. It had been a happy moment at the end of autumn when she had started working the field again. That was fine too. There were enough people just floating about and no pressure for steady couplings.

Not that she had forgotten Gloria. Too many times she got that sad far-away look in her eyes as she looked at the stars. I could tell then that she was thinking about Gloria, missing her. Alien or no alien, they had been together for a long time and I knew that there had been love.

At least she had gotten over her depression. Gloria was gone and nothing could change that. Or at least nothing that we could do. Although I cursed myself for a romantic, I still had a hope that one day a woman would come in, a stranger with a face I had never seen before but with Gloria's eyes.

Finally the hands making lazy circles on my back brought me out of my thoughts. I looked up to Lil. "Yes," I answered, silently thanking the gods for gifting me with a woman that had a saint's patience.

She smiled at me, gently squeezing my shoulders. "I thought so. It is good to see you happy. I never thought I'd see it."

I ducked my head even as I could feel my cheeks flaming in embarrassment. Lil always took me by surprise when she said something so sweet. I scooted up a bit until I could whisper into her ear. I was getting too old to be shy but there were things that I wanted to be only between us.

"Without you, I could not be happy," I whispered the truth to her. It was sappy but true. I could not imagine any kind of life without Lil, much less a happy one. So be it.

For a moment she squeezed me so hard, it almost hurt. "I love you too, your shyness."

I knew even my ears had turned red. Even after all this time, I was still chuffed to hear Lil say she loved me. A part of me could still not believe that I, of all people, had been so lucky. The rest of me just trusted Lil and took it on faith.

I kissed her then, as gently as I could manage, trying to put all my feelings into it. Lil's hands took hold of my face and she looked at me as if she were trying to map every single one of my features.

I tried to look away but the gentle bump of her forehead against mine made me look at her again, trying to ignore the blush that seemed to cover every bit of my skin. Her kiss, gentle and strong at the same time, was water in the desert.

Some things were constant in an existence that was precarious at best. Maybe tomorrow a tree would fall on me. Or maybe there would be an attack and someone would be luckier, or smarter, or stronger, or faster. Maybe the coughing disease would hit and I would have to pay for the abuse I had heaped on my lungs on Earth.

It didn't matter. I had a home and it had a name and red hair. And for some reason I could still not fathom she loved me.

When I had been a kid, I had driven my mother crazy with bouts of depression. She had done her best by me, always asking what I wanted, what would make things better. I always told her I wanted to go home. She had not understood and I could never explain it.

Later, as I grew and became a supposedly useful member of society, I had given up even saying the words. I had accepted my lot in life and knew that home was something only a lucky few ever found. I did not believe in miracles, so I did not expect to find it and gave up even looking for it.

When I had woken up in a strange world, I had not expected that to change. Miracles did not happen even if alien abduction did. I would never have even imagined that I would find that elusive home.

I had never been religious. These days though I tried to remember to always send a thought of thanks to whatever gods inhabited this alien world. They had given me the greatest gift I could ever hope for. I could only be thankful for it for I certainly had never done anything to deserve it. So be it.

I rang the neck of the small bird with the four legs. Little things like that used to throw me completely in the beginning. These days I only made certain to check the book if I didn't recognise the species. Some beasts and birds on this planet were poisonous to humans.

My hands followed without thought to the next bird, this one larger and with only two legs. Sometimes I had to wonder if evolution had truly gone haywire on this planet. I did not really look at the birds. It was cruel what we did to them but there was no other way.

The odd glue-like substance that our traps were coated with had its equivalent on Earth although I could not remember its name. I could remember however my uncle telling me a funny story about glue-like substances and his father, who had been a hunter by trade.

Jinx grunted from her place a few feet away from me. I glanced at her and shook my head. For some odd reason she had never really gotten the hang of putting the glue on the branches.

I threw the bird in the sack by my feet before moving quickly to her side. I did not speak as I bumped her away and took the branch from her hands. It was quick work to spread a new coat of glue on the branch and then carefully let it go, making certain that it did not tangle with any others.

"Thanks."

"Hm..."

I went back to my side of the little forest track, ready to administer glue to the branch I had been working before.

The loud clearing of the throat made me turn, my hand instinctively drawing the knife at my belt. I had to blink at the sight before my eyes. The irreverent thought wandered lazily through my stunned mind. Maybe this glue-thing was a hallucinogen and I had not realised the other times I had used it.

"Glory?"

Jinx's gasp was a bucket of cold water on me. If this was a hallucination then Jinx was having the same as me. Because even my stunned mind could only recognise the woman standing a few feet away from us as Gloria. Gloria, as in Gloria who was an alien, that Gloria. Gloria, my friend, tall, dark and responsible. Gloria.

"Do not panic. Please do not panic."

The woman spoke with Gloria's voice but my mind took an odd turn of thought. I could almost hear, even if only in my mind, the booming voice from the sky in that first frightening awakening on this planet. It too had said the same words, with the same gentling inflection.

"What are you doing here?"

Jinx's bitterness was clear in her voice. I sighed and the woman with Gloria's face and eyes flinched.

"I... I..." it stammered and I had to shake my head. Either it was one hell of an actor or Gloria had really come back.

I took a careful step backwards and then another. My movement brought two sets of eyes to look at me. I did not look at the alien, concentrating on Jinx. I tried to keep my voice low, calming.

"Take your time. Shout if you need me."

Jinx looked ready to argue but after a moment she nodded. Maybe I was as much of a fool as I had been almost two years past. I could not help but think. What if it had been Lil? What would I have wanted? The answer was clear in my mind. I would have wanted time and answers. Certainly I would not have wanted an audience, even if that audience was a friend.

I did not glance at Gloria as I slowly retreated beyond the forest-track's bend. I was far away to hear only murmurs from them but near enough to get there in moments if Jinx called.

I looked at the sky. It was still early, the sun still climbing towards its zenith. We were not expected back to the village until late afternoon at best. And as far as I knew no-one was supposed to come this way today.

I could not help the suspicion. Jinx and I belonged to different teams, although we had worked together sometimes. To be sent together on this day to a part of the forest no-one else would visit smacked of premeditation.

I shrugged to myself. My suspicions of two years ago about this community had not abated in the time I had spent being part of it. One should always be suspicious of people who knew of events far-away in a pre-technology society.

It made no difference. I could not care less if everyone but Lil and Jinx were aliens. If they were, they did not advertise it. If it brought that mischievous spark of old to Jinx's eyes, I did not care who they were or what they were. Some things were more important than others. So be it.

Lil's squeeze was so hard it was truly painful. I did not move though. I knew it was the shock that made her react like that. So I just gritted my teeth and endured.

As Gloria disappeared into the main hut, Jinx remained for a moment outside before turning towards us. She walked slowly, her eyes on Lil. I took a breath. This looked like a sensitive chat coming and I truly did not want to be there.

It happened so quickly, I almost laughed at my unfounded fears. As soon as Jinx had neared, Lil pulled her into a close embrace.

"Are you happy?" she whispered at Jinx.

"Yes..."

I watched with trepidation until finally Lil stepped back and smiled widely. "Good!"

I sighed in relief. I had been somewhat afraid that Lil would be angry. After all it had come as a surprise to her. A tiny voice in my mind grouched that if I had told her as soon as I came into the village, I wouldn't have to worry afterwards.

I shrugged. I had not thought about it. I had just been happy to see Lil and get some food. Trying to get all of the birds that two people should have gotten had made for a long and tiring day. Especially if one started late because of standing watch for hours as others talked things through.

Lil's voice brought me back from my thoughts. "Let's get you something to eat."

I nodded to myself. Whatever was the case with this community's secrets, Gloria would be inside the main hut for a while. And Jinx had been out there all day and I was certain food had been the last thing on her mind.

I was clearly too slow to move because Lil's hand grasped mine and tugged at it, clearly wanting me to follow. I sighed and followed as docilely as I could. Even a couple of years ago I would have protested at that show of dominance. I almost laughed at myself. I knew better now and just followed Lil, a small smile tugging at my lips.

It wasn't that she was the dominant in our relationship but she had definite ideas about some things. And apparently this, whatever this was, was one of them. So I followed her to the small campfire on one side of the village, where the communal food for the latecomers was.

Jinx was sat on a log and fixed with a plate in moments. I sat down on a log too, waiting patiently. I had nothing to say after all. Gloria's presence told me all that I needed to know. It looked like my romantic fantasies had somehow become reality.

I was slightly startled when a plate was put under my nose. I looked up to see Lil shaking her head at me. "You didn't finish," she said with a small smile.

The grumble from my stomach reminded me that indeed I had not finished with my extremely late lunch, sort of early dinner. I had been quick to leave my plate when I spied Gloria and Jinx coming through the wooden gates.

I smiled at Lil and nodded, taking the plate gratefully. It was just Lil to observe, remember and rectify. She sat next to me as I slowly finished the meal I had abandoned almost an hour before.

Jinx was eating little, mainly pushing the food around her plate, as her eyes returned again and again to the main hut. I could understand her preoccupation. Personally I would probably be a quivering wreck by now. I never was good at letting others take decisions that affected me.

Well, I had been off in my estimations of how long it would take. Jinx was up on her feet and walking quickly towards the hut. I was quick to follow, Lil just a step behind me. A part of me winced. Again I had not managed to finish the plate and I just knew that I would once again be dragged to the campfire later.

Gloria's smile told me all that I needed to know and I watched, my arm instinctively going around Lil, as she took Jinx in her arms. Tears burned in my eyes at the sight and at Jinx's wide happy smile. I had not seen her happy in a very long time. It was good to see her so again.

Lil snuggled into me and I squeezed her gently. Gloria nodded at me once and I nodded back before she started leading Jinx towards one of the huts. Clearly food was in neither of their minds but that was ok.

The slight tugging at my hand made me smile and I once again let Lil lead me to the campfire. I sat down on my log and once again took the plate in my hands. Lil's arm around my waist brought a small chuckle around a mouthful of food.

Lil bumped my shoulder. "Eat up, love."

A looked at her questioningly. The evening was still young, there was no real need to hurry.

"I fancy a walk."

Ah, comprehension dawned and I nodded at Lil. It had been a long day but I would never miss one of Lil's walks. That was our time, as private as could be and for us only.

I ate as quickly as I could, not that I had all that much left. As soon as I was finished, I returned the plate to the small rack set up for those whose chore was to wash dishes in the morning.

I took Lil's hand and slowly drew her to her feet.

"Lead on, love," I said quietly. I couldn't help but smile at the quick kiss she gave me. As we walked through the wooden gates of the stockade, I nodded at the guard. She winked at me.

I almost laughed. I didn't even want to know what she was thinking. When Lil put her hand around my waist, all thoughts about the guard and her winking vanished.

This was our time and there was nothing better than that. I only spared a thought at the gods that inhabited this planet. This night I had a lot to be thankful for. We were all alive and well. Gloria had come back. Jinx was happy. Lil was at my side.

My world was in order. So be it.

I looked at the young woman working next to me. She was a new arrival. I watched what she was doing closely. It took me a moment to realise what was going on.

I felt the anger surge in me. I stood up abruptly and walked away. I had barely taken a dozen steps when Suyai was at my side.

"Teach?"

I just looked at her. I was not angry with her, not really, but she was part of the issue. Of that I was certain.

Something in my eyes or on my face must have given Suyai a clue. She looked at the young woman quickly, her eyes widening immediately.

"Fuck! The little idiot!"

I grimaced. That was more confirmation of my suspicions than I wanted. I turned away. I had no reason to be around. This was between them, the aliens. Nothing to do with me. Truly, I did not want to know. Not like this.

Suyai's voice stopped before I had taken a single step.

"Teach, stay. Please."

I turned then to look at her, allowing all my anger to shine.

"I am human, Suyai. Not stupid or blind. I don't appreciate being treated as if I were."

It was harsh. Even my jaundiced eyes could tell that the woman was still young. And youth meant arrogance. Stupidity truly, but arrogance would do.

"Stay, Teach. She needs to understand and no words of mine will be enough."

I paused for a moment, debating whether to ask or not. Did I really want to know? Oh, the hell with it.

"You training them or something?"

Suyai's eyes searched my face for long moments before she nodded finally.

"And it ain't easy." Her whisper was probably not intended for my ears but I couldn't help but smile. I could still clearly remember my own frustration with students. It had been a different world and a different training but students clearly were the same across species. Arrogant, lazy

and with an odd belief that they knew better. Well, not all of them. Just enough to make an impression.

I shrugged at Suyai. I would stay. Not that I could see much point in it but I would stay. Far be it from me to intervene with another's teaching methods. In my old life, I certainly hated it when people interfered with mine.

I kept my face as impassive as I could as Suyai went to stand next to the young woman. Her voice was stern, even if I could not recognise the words. I looked on as the young woman turned to look at me, her eyes wide and fearful. After a quick moment, she looked away.

Well, I had never thought that I would become an educational aid. What could one do? So be it.

The feel of a small hand on my knee made me stop the simple repetitive movement of my hand as I shaped yet another bone spear-head. I looked at Myong-sun and I had to answer her gap-toothed smile with one of my own.

I was quick to take the spear-head from her hand. As far as I could tell she had polished the bone to perfection. Certainly a lot better than I ever had.

"Good job, Myong-sun," I said grinning at the six-year old girl that had taken a liking to me and bone-crafting.

A wide smile was my answer and a shy glance towards Ae-cha, her mother, who was sitting on the next campfire over.

"You want to show your Mama?" I asked slyly and the little girl nodded affirmatively.

I was careful as I put the spearhead back into her waiting hand.

"You walk now, you hear? No running!" I told her as sternly as I could. Even more vigorous nodding was my answer and I just had to smile as I motioned my permission.

Myong-sun flashed me a wide smile as she walked carefully towards her mother. I shook my head in bemusement.

"Don't you ever wonder?" Lil's voice sounded wistful in my ears.

I took a breath. I could understand even if I did not share her feelings.

"I'm sorry, Lil," I apologised, not for what was but for the sadness it brought her sometimes.

Like me and most of the others Lil had stopped menstruating years before. Yet as the years passed I had caught her too many times looking wistfully at the children.

A part of me raged against the aliens for taking that chance away from her. She would have made a good mother.

Another part of me could only sigh in relief. I didn't want to think about dealing with that. It was stupid and I knew it but I could not help the dark feeling that rose in me. Maybe I was simply too old-fashioned.

Certainly others had no such problems. Sue, Ae-cha's Canadian lover, had certainly adjusted well enough to the need for intercourse. I looked down at the ground, shame colouring my cheeks. I did not think I could have been so calm if it had been Lil.

A soft hand on my arm and an even softer whisper in my ear pulled me from my thoughts.

"Don't think about it, love. It never happened. It never will."

I could only sigh. I had never talked to Lil about my thoughts or feelings about this matter. Yet she knew. It seemed that as the years passed, she knew more and more about my thoughts.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to her, an apology for disappointing her.

A quick kiss on the cheek made me turn to her questioningly.

"You are who you are," Lil said slowly, a small smile on her lips.

I looked to the ground again even as an arm strong from daily physical labour snaked around my shoulders. Lil squeezed me, not gently at all truth be told. I resisted for a moment before snuggling into her.

A gentle kiss on my scalp greeted me and I smiled. We are who we are. Good, bad and all the myriad inbetweens. So be it.

Red. I always sort of liked red. Not this time though. I sat heavily on the ground, my eyes moving sluggishly to observe the last of the attackers being cut down by Suyai.

The body just a foot in front of me twitched one last time, my axe still buried at its neck. It would have been a good end to the fight, if only the woman had not managed to stick her knife in me at the last moment.

So there was red. Red on my hands. Red on my clothes. Red pooling around me. I looked up to the sky and for once I wished it were blue. Even after all these years, I still missed the blue of the sky. A part of me was grateful that I had never seen a sea on this planet. I could not quite imagine sea another colour than blue.

I leaned against the wall of the hut. There was pain but it was not too much. That was good. I had never been much for pain. I looked down once and slowly removed my hand from where it had instinctively gone. A couple of spurts and I returned it to its position. Spurts.

Well, that was it clearly. At least it was better than a perforated intestine. I had seen people die of that. Not nice, not nice at all. Bleeding out was not that bad.

I watched as if it were slow motion, Lil realising where I was and then running toward me. I smiled.

We are born alone, we die alone. I chuckled at the old adage. I had not been born alone. My mother had been there and a bunchload of doctors and nurses. I had no desire to die alone.

Thankfully Lil was not prone to panic. She must have read the truth on my face because tears started falling from her eyes almost as soon as she knelt beside me.

"Hold me?" I whispered. Another time I would have been embarrassed to ask, especially where everyone could see. Not this time though. Death beat embarrassment ten times out of ten. I wanted Lil holding me and I did not care a whit about looking tough.

It took a few moments for Lil to turn me and put her arms around me. I leaned back into her, luxuriating in the warmth of her body.

"I love you. I love you so much. Why? God, why? Why did it have to be you? God please. I'll do anything. Please. Hold on, baby. Please, god. Please."

It took a moment for the frantic whispering to pierce through the lassitude born of blood loss that had taken over me.

I turned slowly until I could see Lil. I tried to smile. I was not certain I succeeded.

"Lil..."

"I'm here, baby. Hold on, love. Please. Oh God."

"Love you..."

"I know, love. I know. I love you too."

I did smile then. For once I sent a request to whatever gods there were. Keep her safe. Let her be happy. I thought I could get away with one request in all these years. Maybe I would be lucky and they would grant my wish.

So this was the end of the line. It wasn't that bad. I had had a good life. Better than I had hoped for. Surely better than I deserved.

I just wished Lil didn't look so sad.

The End

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