

Guardians

of the

B.L.A.D.E.

ADALENE MARTIS

# Guardians of the B.L.A.D.E.

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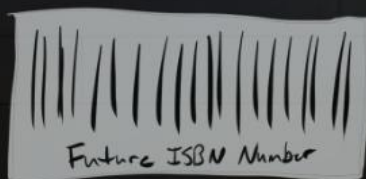
## HONOR BOUND TORMENTED BY INSTINCT A PRIDE TESTED

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In a species haunted by its war-torn past, one family's battle between instinct and honor could redefine the future—or risk plunging the galactic quadrant back into chaos.

For thirty-five years, Therak, a proud Urmah feline, has isolated himself to protect the galactic quadrant from a hidden planet destroyer known as the B.L.A.D.E. But when Nyra, a fiercely independent scavenger, breaks into his forsaken sanctuary, she brings more than chaos—she unleashes primal instincts Therak long believed he had conquered.

Struggling against overwhelming feral impulses and pheromone-driven desires, Therak and Nyra must navigate a complex bond while confronting taboos. And while ancient instincts threaten to unravel their hard-won love, their cubs will also inherit these primal forces, challenging them to come together as a pride or be torn apart by their urges.



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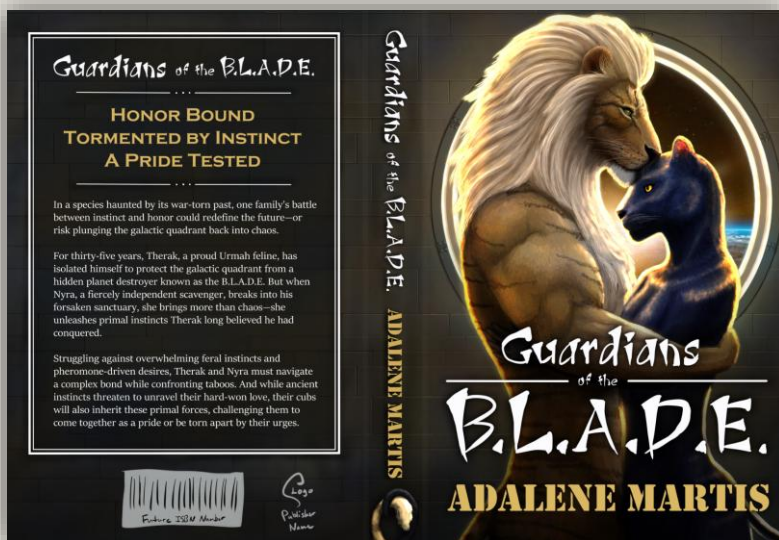
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**Guardians of the B.L.A.D.E. ADALENE MARTIS**

Guardians of the B.L.A.D.E

Advanced Reader Copy

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This is a memoir of the idyllic love between two interstellar Urmah felines after the Great War. These two Urmah and their cubs went on to accomplish a Grand Transmutation and change Panthera society to no longer accept systemic rape.

To Kiran and Maum, thank you for all you have done.

Artist's note: Please pretend Nyra is standing on a box.  
Therak is 10ft tall and Nyra is only 6ft tall.

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### **Be Aware.**

Herein anthropomorphic female Urmah cats, known as felinas, have heat cycles like cats on Earth. Female cats on Earth who aren't spayed are willing to risk death while trying to find a partner. Like their quadrupedal counterparts, felinas get extremely motivated. These beings are not human. They have different needs, dietary and otherwise.

To find out if this story is for you, please visit the author's website: [adalenemartis.com](http://adalenemartis.com).



# CHAPTER 1

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## Protocol

Therak's towering frame nearly filled the narrow washroom, muscles rippling beneath his tan coat of fur marked with dark stripes that were now streaked with grey. He raised a frayed piece of cloth to his mouth, meticulously scrubbing each of the long, sharp fangs inside his muzzle. The cloth caught momentarily on a jagged edge, making him wish for the toothbrush that had broken in his grasp a week before.

His hazel eyes scrutinized his white mane which hung in a wild halo around his face. Artificial light cast deep shadows from above, accentuating the stern set of his jaw and the intensity in his gaze. The familiar rattle of the vent circulated moist air that was thick with his musk, stirring his bed-stamped hair.

He spat into the sink, watching the swirling water carry away. The taste of the nutrient paste he'd had for breakfast still lingered despite cleaning his mouth, a bland constant in his existence as guardian of this forgotten place.

How much longer would the facility's systems purify the water, or provide the squirts of paste which graced his plate? It was a question that constantly gnawed at the back of his mind.

Reaching for his hairbrush, he felt the worn wood of the handle, its once-smooth surface now rough and splintered against his finger pads. The bristles were sparse and bent, barely clinging to the base. With a resigned sigh, he attempted to tame his unruly mane. Each stroke was a struggle, the brush snagging on knots formed during

restless nights. Suddenly, the handle snapped, the broken piece falling uselessly to the floor.

A deep growl resonated from his chest, escalating into a roar that echoed through the empty corridors. The sound faded, swallowed by the oppressive silence that always followed. He cast the broken brush aside, the clatter it made as it struck the wall and landed on the floor was the only reply to his outburst.

Breathing heavily, he leaned against the sink, his claws gripping the edges. The cold metal felt grounding beneath his hands. He glanced into the mirror, taking in the sight of himself slowly molding away in obscurity. Being well groomed was one of the few things that helped cheer him up, but now even that small joy had been stolen from him by the ravages of time. He breathed in deeply and then let out a resigned sigh.

Straightening up, he squared his shoulders and turned away from the mirror. There was no time for self-pity. Duty called, as it did every day, and he would answer. Leaving the remnants of the brush behind, he strode out of the washroom, past his narrow bed, past the faded image of his king, past the Feran flag on the wall, and past the picture of him with his brothers in arms who had abandoned him years before.

The Urmah warrior moved through the silent corridors of the facility, his footfalls muffled by the metallic flooring worn smooth over years of solitary patrols. Reaching the control room, he pressed a large, clawed hand against the biometric panel beside the door. A soft chime acknowledged his identity, and the heavy doors slid open with a whisper.

Inside, the control room was bathed in a cool bluish glow emanating from the myriads of dormant screens and consoles. He reached out and tapped a series of switches, and the overhead lights flickered to life—harsh, white beams that illuminated the chamber in stark detail. Dust particles danced in the air, stirred by the sudden activation of the life support system.

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He settled into the central chair, its padding molded long ago to fit his form. His fingers tapped the console as he accessed the message logs. Lines logging ambient signals scrolled past. A solitary transponder signal was highlighted yellow, but he'd seen yellow alerts countless times before. Probably just a freighter passing by the planet. There were no orders, no updates—just the same empty silence that had greeted him for years.

A blinking light caught his attention. A motion sensor triggered outside the facility. *Probably just wildlife*, he mused. Perhaps a herd of grazers or a solitary predator prowling the barren landscape outside. The thought of fresh meat made his mouth water. Maybe a hunt would be worthwhile today.

His gaze shifted to the array of external camera feeds displayed on the monitors. Unfortunately, each screen was a blank void, their sentinel eyes blinded by neglect and the ravages of time. The facility's engineer had departed with the rest of the garrison three decades ago, leaving him alone to maintain what systems he could. If he wanted to see what was outside, he'd have to check himself. But his duties came first.

Therak retrieved his code manual, its pages worn and edges frayed. Flipping to the marked page, he carefully input the day's authentication sequence into the console. The system acknowledged the input with a brief flash, sending out a coded ping to government channels. He waited, ears perked for any response. The silence that followed was unsurprising. The lack of reply had long since ceased to stir disappointment; it was simply another facet of his routine.

Rising from the chair, he lifted a portable communication device from its charging cradle. The device felt solid in his grasp, a lifeline to a command that no longer answered. Hooking it onto his belt, he left the control room and headed toward the gym.

The gymnasium echoed with memories of intense training sessions. Metal training dummies lay broken in the corner, their surfaces marred by countless strikes of his claws and sword. With no

means to repair them, they stood as memorials to his relentless pursuit of readiness. Well, perhaps readiness was a stretch. Working out had become more of a meditative practice, one that helped keep him sane amidst the endless empty days.

Therak approached the weightlifting area, where a heavy barbell rested on its rack. All the weight plates he possessed were already loaded onto the bar, yet when he grasped it and lifted, it still felt light. He began his repetitions, muscles moving with practiced efficiency, the clank of the weights providing a steady rhythm.

As he lost himself in the familiar exertion, a sudden, distant sound pierced the monotony—the faint hiss of the facility’s main door disengaging. He froze mid-lift, ears swiveling toward the source of the noise. The lights overhead flickered, then shifted to a pulsing red hue, casting the gym in an eerie glow. A red alert.

Therak’s heart pounded as adrenaline surged through his veins. The facility’s systems were indicating an unauthorized entry. Carefully setting the barbell back onto its rack, he strained to listen, every sense heightened.

Who could have accessed the facility without proper authorization? Was it an attack? Was this an intruder who had somehow bypassed the security protocols?

His fingers tensed instinctively, and he reached for his sidearm – only to find it wasn’t there. There was no time to go to the armory. Steeling himself, he flexed his claws and padded toward the entrance corridor, muscles coiled and ready.

As he navigated the crimson-lit passages, shadows danced along the walls, and the wail of an alarm echoed faintly through the halls. Therak pushed aside any trace of uncertainty. Even though he was unarmed, whomever had entered *his* facility would soon face an elite Feran warrior. And they would not survive to speak of the experience.

Dropping to all fours, he stalked stealthily through the corridors, the crimson glow of the red alert casting long shadows along the metal walls. As he approached a junction, a flicker of white light illuminated

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the adjacent passageway. He pressed himself against the cold wall, muscles coiled, eyes sharp.

Peering around the corner, he saw a small, dark-furred female Urmah, a felina with striking golden eyes. She moved with agile confidence, her lithe frame barely making a sound as she approached an access panel on the wall.

“It stinks in here,” she muttered, wrinkling her nose. “Anybody home?!” she shouted, her voice echoing through the empty corridors.

He remained silent, observing her. She didn’t wear any military insignia—her attire was that of a scavenger, complete with a belt of dangling tools for stripping and dismantling. Greedy bastards. He’d seen them several times scouring battlefields even before the dead were cold. His jaw tightened.

She turned her back to him, deftly opening the panel and fidgeting with the tangled wires inside. As she worked, the blaring alarms ceased, and the oppressive red lighting shifted back to the steady hum of normal illumination.

“Got it!” she called out toward the entrance, a hint of pride in her voice.

Seizing the moment, he crept closer, each step deliberate and silent. When he was within striking distance, he launched himself at her with a fierce roar. The edge of his hand struck the side of her neck with precision. Her golden eyes widened in shock before her body crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

A startled cry echoed down the corridor. “Nyr!”

He snapped his head toward the voice to see a young, dark-furred Urmah male staring at him in horror. The male’s hand shook as he raised a disruptor, aiming directly at Therak’s face. Their eyes met—a clash of determination and fear.

Without warning, the male repeatedly pulled the trigger. Therak’s whiskers twitched, and his fur prickled as bolts of energy sizzled through the air. He twisted and leaped, the shots scorching the wall where he’d stood moments before.

A high-pitched whine filled the corridor—the telltale sign of an overheated weapon. The young Urmah frantically tapped the disruptor, panic evident on his face.

Therak did not hesitate. With a guttural growl, he charged forward, bursting through the doorway and into the large open airlock. Four small dark-furred Urmah surrounded him, their expressions shifting from surprise to terror.

“A Feran soldier!” one shouted, voice shaking with fear. “We should run.”

“We can’t! He’s got Nyra,” said the dark-furred male, pulling out a long knife.

The invaders steeled themselves, their faces darkening with murderous intent. They closed in, brandishing improvised weapons—wrenches, blades, and claws. Time seemed to slow as Therak assessed their weak stances, his training kicking in.

The first attacker, the male with the long knife, lunged at him. Therak sidestepped smoothly, grabbing the assailant’s wrist and wrenching it backward until a sickening snap echoed. The knife clattered to the floor as the attacker dropped, clutching his broken limb.

A second assailant swung a large metal wrench at his head. He ducked, the wrench whooshing harmlessly above. Rising swiftly, he delivered a powerful uppercut beneath the attacker’s chin, sending him sprawling backward, his neck tilted at an unnatural angle.

Two remained. They hesitated, exchanging nervous glances. One charged with a roar, claws extended. Therak met him head-on, their bodies colliding. He drove his elbow into the attacker’s ribcage, feeling the bones give way. With a swift motion, he tossed the smaller Urmah aside. He landed in a heap, coughed up blood, and then lay motionless.

The last attacker, a female, backed away, fear flickering in her eyes. Her ears flat against her head. She brandished a dagger, her hands trembling. “Stay back!” she warned.

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Therak advanced steadily. She thrust the dagger toward him, but he deflected it effortlessly, trapping her arm and twisting. The dagger fell as she gasped in pain. With a decisive strike on her sternum, he ended the confrontation.

The female slumped to the ground. "Please," she gasped.

"We're at war, and you trespassed. I'm sorry, miss. I'll make it quick." Said Therak. He raised his claws, looking down on the fragile female who was no longer a threat to him. He hesitated, warring with himself. He had been raised to never strike a felina, but protocol stated that no intruders to this facility were permitted to survive during a time of war.

If the location of this facility leaked and it was captured, the cataclysmic weapon it contained could destroy countless lives. Taking advantage of his hesitation, the felina produced a hidden blade from somewhere on her body and thrust it at his thigh. Therak instinctively hopped back and slammed his hand down atop her skull, crushing her life.

Her body crumpled at his feet, a substantial divot in her skull. He stared down at her corpse for a moment, disbelieving.

"Why?" He asked, as if she'd somehow rise and tell him.

The male with the broken arm started moaning and rolling on the ground, distracting him. He walked over to the male and placed his foot on his chest.

"I-I surrender! Please, I didn't want to fight, but Nyra is our pilot and engineer. We couldn't leave without her." He said.

Therak glanced to the unconscious felina back in the hall and then back to the male.

"It must get lonely out here, right? If you want her, you can have her. Just let me live. I'll go. I won't come back." He said, his face desperate.

Therak's eyes narrowed at the coward as he sold out his crewmate. Without a word, he slammed his palm onto the male's muzzle several times until he stopped moving. Then, one by one, he



went to the others who had attacked him and verified they were dead. Heaving a heavy sigh, Therak surveyed the scene. Corpses lay scattered around him, the scent of blood and ozone thick in the air.

He tossed their bodies outside onto the desert sands. The suns outside were high, with not a cloud in the sky. There was one small craft outside. It looked like a custom build, not like any of the factory-made craft that he'd seen before. Its metallic sheen stood out more than he liked. The atmosphere was breathable, but he had no idea how hot it would get during the peak of the day.

There were no other signs of life.

A soft groan drew his attention back to the corridor. Therak approached, his footsteps echoing ominously. Nyra stirred, a soft moan escaping her lips. Her golden eyes fluttered open, confusion evident as she took in the scene. Her eyes lingered on Therak's claws, drenched in the warm blood of her companions.

"You... you killed them," she stammered.

"They violated a restricted area." Therak replied coldly. "How did you get in? Who gave you the access code?"

"T-The Feran access codes have been public knowledge for years," said Nyra.

"Impossible. Don't lie to me!" Therak roared.

Nyra screamed in terror and shielded her head. "Please, I swear it's true. We didn't know anyone was here. We're scavengers—we thought this place was abandoned."

"That does not excuse your trespass," he said, his gaze unwavering.

She pushed herself up slowly, trembling with fear. Her eyes locked onto him. "Who are you?" she asked.

"I am the guardian of this facility," he answered. "You are intruding on sovereign Feran territory. Who else knows you're here?"

She glanced around as if looking for a way to escape. "N-No one. I beg you, please don't kill me. We meant no harm," she pleaded. "We

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were looking for supplies—technology to trade. We didn't think anyone was left after the war."

He felt a jolt run through him. His eyes bore into hers. "What did you just say?" he demanded.

She hesitated, confusion knitting her brow. "We're scavengers. We thought no one was here."

He took a step closer, towering over her. "After that," he pressed.

She blinked twice, realization dawning in her eyes. "Th-The war is over—it's been over for thirty years. Before I was even born."

The corridor seemed to spin around him. "That can't be," he murmured, a knot forming in his stomach. His reality began to warp, the steadfast truths he clung to unraveling. "Why didn't command contact me then?" he questioned aloud. "If we won..."

"You didn't win," she interjected with caution. "The Feran lost. The entire quadrant united against you. Your king is dead, and his empire gone."

A surge of anger and disbelief coursed through him. "No!" he roared, the sound reverberating off the metal walls. He slammed his fist into the wall beside him, denting the panel with a resounding crash. The force of the blow sent a tremor through the structure.

Nyra recoiled, cowering on the floor. Her ears flattened against her head, and her tail wrapped tightly around her. Fear flashed in her golden eyes as she pressed herself against the wall.

He stood there, chest heaving, fists clenched. The weight of her words pressed down on him, threatening to crush the very essence of his existence. Everything he'd known, everything he'd sacrificed for—it was all gone.

His gaze snapped back to her, sharp and piercing. Without warning, he reached down and gripped her by the front of her shirt. She gasped as he hoisted her to her feet, her legs barely supporting her.

“Don’t kill me,” she pleaded, tears streaming down her face as she struggled against his iron grip. “F-Feran warriors don’t kill felina. D-Don’t kill unarmed civilians. W-Where is your honor?”

Her words struck a deep chord in him. “I have never abandoned my honor.”

“B-But you killed them. They did nothing wrong.” She said, her voice quaking.

“I regret that. They attacked me, and my protocol states—” He began, but she cut him off.

“Damn your protocol. They were untrained and half your size. What about your legendary Feran pride?” She said. Her words cut him deeper than claws or blades.

“I’m sorry...” He said, his voice trailing off.

He started to say more, but then thought of the spacecraft outside the facility. Was this a ploy to buy time for reinforcements? Therak set his jaw in grim determination. Dragging her along the corridor, he moved with purpose. She stumbled, trying to keep pace, her protests echoing futilely in the empty halls.

“Where are you taking me?” Nyra demanded, panic lacing her voice.

He remained silent, eyes fixed ahead. Reaching one of the unused bedrooms, he pressed his hand against the panel beside the door. It slid open with a hiss, revealing a sparsely lit interior.

He took her tool belt, tossing it clattering to the ground, before shoving her inside. She stumbled forward, catching herself before she fell. Spinning around, she looked so small.

“Wait, please,” she pleaded, her eyes wide with fear. “You can’t just leave me in here.”

He met her gaze, a storm of emotions swirling behind his eyes—rage, confusion, a flicker of shame. Without a word, he stepped back and the door slid shut between them, the lock engaging with a decisive click.

## CHAPTER 1: PROTOCOL

Nyra rushed to the door, pounding on it from the other side. “Let me go!” she shouted. “You can’t do this!”

Her voice echoed faintly in the sealed corridor. He stood on the other side, listening to her muffled cries. For a moment, a pang of doubt pierced his resolve, but he pushed it aside. Turning away, he walked down the hallway, his footsteps heavy against the metal floor.

As he moved deeper into the facility, her words haunted him. The war was over thirty years ago. His king is dead. The foundations of his reality were shaken, and uncertainty gnawed at his core.

But duty had been his compass for so long that, for now, it was the only thing he could cling to. His duty brought him to the most pressing issue: should he kill her?

As he walked away from the locked room, Nyra’s muffled pleas faded into the background. The image of her golden eyes lingered in his mind’s eye—striking and filled with fear. Guilt gnawed at his guts. Protocol dictated that he should eliminate any intruders during wartime. He didn’t want to kill her, though. He struggled with himself for a moment. The image of her bright eyes as she shut down the security system stuck in his memory. She was clever, and an engineer. If so, he could use her help. In peace time, useful prisoners could be kept.

Relief flooded his heart as he clung to the loophole, his choice making him happier than he’d like to admit. Therak shuddered and pushed the thought of killing the poor girl aside. Needing fresh air, he made his way to the facility’s exit. He deliberately avoided the area where the bodies of her companions lay, not wanting to confront the aftermath of his actions. Stepping out into the harsh sunlight, he squinted as his eyes adjusted to the brightness.

The scorched landscape stretched out before him—a barren expanse of sand and rock under a cloudless sky. His gaze settled on the small spacecraft the intruders had arrived in. Its sleek design was unfamiliar, simple yet practical. There were no shields, sensors, or weapons that he could see. Most of the vessel seemed dedicated to its

engines and hold. A speedy hauler ideal for a scavenger. It appeared she was telling the truth. He briefly cleaned the blood from his claws in the sand before opening the door.

Climbing aboard, he moved to the cockpit, ducking his way through a vehicle not designed for a Feran's size. He located the transponder—a device that could broadcast their location to anyone listening. Ripping it out, he crushed it effortlessly between his hands, metal and circuitry crumpling under his strength. Any chance of someone tracking the vessel was now eliminated. However, if she had logged a flight plan there was a distinct possibility that her last location was known. Someone could come for her eventually, and the silver sheen of the ship would easily be spotted from above.

He surveyed the cockpit, his fingers brushing over the controls. Finding the starter, he hesitated for a moment before pressing it. The engines hummed to life, a gentle vibration coursing through the ship. Sealing the hatch, he settled into the pilot's too tiny seat, the leather creaking beneath his weight.

With a thrust of the controls, the craft lifted off the ground, ascending wobbly into the sky. Therak's heart pounded in his chest. It had been far too long since he'd flown. As he scanned the surroundings, he guided it slowly toward a canyon visible in the distance. The vastness of the desert unfolded below. Shadows cast by rocky outcrops painted patterns on the sand.

Movement caught his eye as he flew—a herd of dromedaries traversing the dunes in a serpentine line below. Their tan hides blended with the landscape, humps swaying rhythmically with each step. Powerful legs carried them across the unforgiving terrain, seeking sustenance from sparse vegetation. The sight stirred a primal instinct within him—a hunger for meat echoing deep within.

Reaching the canyon, he eased the ship down into a sheltered crevice between towering cliffs. The rock walls rose steeply on either side, providing concealment from prying eyes and protection from the

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elements. Powering down the engines, he sat for a moment in the ensuing silence.

Protocol dictated that he should destroy the craft to prevent any possibility of it falling into enemy hands. But something made him pause. The technology could prove useful, and with no support from command, resources were scarce. He decided against obliterating it—for now.

Exiting the ship, he dropped to all fours, muscles coiling as he broke into a swift run across the desert floor. The heat was intense, but his endurance was honed from years of rigorous training. Adjusting his path, he headed toward where he'd seen the dromedary herd.

Cresting a dune, he spotted them grazing on sparse tufts of grass. Selecting the largest of the group, he approached stealthily, using the wind to mask his scent. With a sudden burst of speed, he launched himself at the creature. The hunt was swift; his claws found their mark, and the dromedary fell.

He hoisted the hefty carcass over his shoulder and switched to running upright. It was a longer journey back than he thought. The suns began to dip toward the horizon as he ran, casting long shadows across the sand.

Upon reaching the entrance, he entered the cool interior, the contrast to the outside heat was jarring. He carried the dromedary to the cold storage room, quickly gutted the beast, tossing its innards into the recycler for later use in nutrient paste. He then deposited the corpse among the preserved supplies. The prospect of fresh meat was a welcome change from the tasteless paste. He was looking forward to indulging himself in the days ahead.

## CHAPTER 2

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# I Don't Want to Smell You

Leaving the freezer, he made his way back towards Command. As he walked past the room where Nyra was confined, a soft voice reached his ears. “Hello?” she called hesitantly. There was a note of uncertainty, perhaps even hope.

He paused for the briefest of moments but did not respond. Resolutely, he continued down the corridor, the sound of her voice fading behind him.

In the control room, he initiated lockdown protocol. His fingers moved deftly over the console, and the facility’s defenses whirled into action. Thick barriers reinforced the exterior door, active stealth systems activated, and a sensor suite searched the skies above.

The systems hummed with energy, yet he couldn’t shake the unease settling in his chest. Nyra’s revelations were a weight on his mind. Was she really telling the truth? If the war had truly ended decades ago, what did that mean for his mission? For his unwavering commitment to duty?

He reviewed the communication logs once more, looking at the date of the last transmission—thirty years of silence. The realization that no messages had come through in that precise amount of time tracked with when she had said the war ended. The isolation he had attributed to strategic necessity now seemed... hollow.

Standing abruptly, he left the control room. The walls felt constricting, the air thick. He needed an outlet for the turmoil raging within.



## CHAPTER 2: I DON'T WANT TO SMELL YOU

Entering the gym, he approached his weights. The barbell still held all the plates, but as before, it offered little challenge. Gripping the bar tightly, he began lifting, muscles tensing and releasing in a relentless rhythm. The habitual meditative exertion provided a temporary escape from the doubts clouding his mind.

Each repetition was punctuated by the clank of metal, a steady cadence that echoed in the empty space. He pulled off his shirt as he pushed himself harder, the sound of his panting drowning out the questions that refused to be silenced.

Yet, no matter how much weight he lifted or how fast he moved, he couldn't escape the unsettling possibility that the life he had been living was built on a lie.

Nyra's voice echoed faintly through the corridors, reaching his ears even over the clanking of weights. "Hello?" she called out again, her tone aching with vulnerability. "Please, is anyone there? I need water... a-and I need to use the facilities."

He set down the barbell, the metal plates settling with a dull thud. Wiping his hand across his chin, he stood still for a moment, conflict flickering in his eyes. Duty dictated he only have minimum contact with her, but something else—something deeper—stirred within him. The prospect of someone to talk to about what had been happening all these years.

Conflicted, he made his way to her holding room. The door hissed open, revealing Nyra huddled on the floor near the unused bed. Upon seeing his imposing silhouette filling the doorway, she visibly shrank, her golden eyes wide with apprehension.

He gestured for her to step forward. "Come," he said curtly.

She hesitated before rising slowly. As she approached, he reached out and gripped her shoulder. She let out a small, frightened sound, and he felt the tension in her slender frame. Realizing his firmness, he softened his hold, his large hand resting more gently as he guided her into the hallway.

“W-Where are we going?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“The last working bathroom is this way,” he replied, his tone devoid of emotion.

They walked down the dim corridor, the hum of the facility’s systems the only backdrop to their footsteps. The stark lighting cast long shadows. As she walked, she stole glances at Therak from over her shoulder—his stoicism etched into his features.

He led her to a door and pressed a panel to open it. Inside was his personal quarters—a spartan room with minimal furnishings. A neatly made bed occupied one corner, a Feran flag hung on the wall beside an old photograph of soldiers standing in formation. The air carried his scent, a mix of musk and metal.

He pointed towards an open door on the opposite side. “In there,” he directed.

She moved hesitantly, pausing at the threshold of the bathroom. Turning back to face him, she mustered the courage to ask, “Could I have some privacy?”

He met her gaze evenly. “You’re my prisoner,” he stated bluntly. “Be quick.”

Her ears flattened slightly. “Right,” she murmured before stepping inside.

She left the door ajar, and he stood just outside. The bathroom was utilitarian, much like the rest of the facility. She undid her buttons and slipped her pants down around her ankles as she sat. A stream tinkled into the waiting water as Therak watched. Unlike the other female, she didn’t have any hidden weapons that he could see. Perhaps she wasn’t trying to trick him after all. He averted his eyes from her accusing gaze.

Then he caught her scent, a deep heady musk, which caused his upper lip to curl back and his mouth to open, exposing his teeth as he inhaled deeply. The scent caused his heart to race. She was in heat.

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Uncomfortable, Therak covered his face with his hand and turned away.

While she was occupied, he busied himself at the sink in the main room. Taking a clean metal cup from a shelf, he filled it with cool water. The simple act felt strangely significant—offering a basic kindness that he wouldn't give to someone he intended to execute.

When she emerged, she found him holding out the cup. Her eyes flickered with surprise. "Thank you," she said softly, accepting it with both hands. She drank greedily.

He watched her silently, arms crossed uncomfortably over his chest. There was a noticeable tension between them.

Handing back the empty cup, she ventured cautiously, "I didn't catch your name, guardian of the facility."

He hesitated. It had been years since anyone had addressed him personally. "It's Therak," he finally said.

"Therak," she repeated, as if testing the sound. "I'm Nyra."

He gave a curt nod. "I know."

She glanced around the room, her eyes landing on the photograph. "Those were your comrades?"

He followed her gaze. "Yes."

"What happened to them?" She said, seemingly eager to keep him talking.

"They left," he replied tersely.

She seemed to choose her next words carefully. "Why did you stay behind?"

"My duty is here," he said, a hint of defensiveness in his tone.

She looked at him thoughtfully. "Even after all this time? The war has been over for decades."

"How did my king die?" Therak snapped, determined to take hold of the conversation.

"He killed himself," she said cautiously.

Therak nodded slowly, a tightness forming in his chest. "Why?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Nyra thought for a while, her eyes frantic as he loomed over her. “Well,” she began hesitantly, “it’s been years since I studied this, but the Feran had a weapon that united everyone against them. When it was clear he would lose, your king agreed to peace talks. He agreed they wouldn’t use the weapon if the alliance didn’t attack Feran territory. The Etorthan delegation demanded to be part of the peace talks, but your king refused. However, they showed up anyway. Before they could land, your king ordered everyone who knew about the weapon’s location to... to take their own lives. It was shocking—the king and all his top staff ended their lives before anyone could stop them.”

As Nyra spoke, Therak felt as if the ground beneath him was giving way. A deep, resonating silence filled his mind, drowning out her words as they echoed distantly. The room seemed to narrow, his vision tunneling until only Nyra’s face remained in focus, her expression uncertain and afraid.

He swallowed hard, his throat suddenly dry. The implications of what she was saying crashed over him like a tidal wave. The Etorthans were powerful psychics capable of extracting secrets from the deepest recesses of the mind. His king had chosen death over the risk of the facility’s discovery. The facility that Therak had been guarding all these years.

His usually steady hands began to tremble subtly. He clenched them into fists at his sides, his claws digging lightly into his palms. A knot formed in his stomach, tightening with each passing second. The weight of three decades pressed down upon him, the years of isolation and unwavering vigilance hadn’t been wasted.

Therak’s breath hitched, and he took a step back, needing space to process the flood of emotions surging within him. A mixture of pride, grief, and a profound sense of purpose swirled in his heart. His king had made the ultimate sacrifice, entrusting Therak with a duty of immeasurable importance. The protection of their territory, their culture, and their entire race.

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Nyra approached cautiously, her footsteps soft against the floor. She slowly edged around him making her way towards the door. He reached out and put a heavy hand on her shoulder, causing her to jump.

“Nice try,” he said. “It’s time to return you to your room.”

As they walked to her room, she kept glancing back. “Therak,” she began softly, “This whole thing has been a horrible misunderstanding. The war is over. I have a ship. Surely you have someone back home? Friends, family? They’re probably still alive. You can contact them over my communicator. You don’t have to do this anymore.”

He stiffened but didn’t reply.

“Please,” she pressed gently, “just consider what I’ve said.”

They arrived at her holding room. Before he could open the door, she placed a tentative hand on his arm. He glanced down at her, surprise flashing in his eyes.

“Thank you for the water,” she said earnestly.

He nodded slowly, a flicker of something indefinable passing between them. “Inside,” he instructed.

She stepped into the room and turned to face him as the door began to close. “When is dinner? Can we eat toge—” she started, but her words cut off as the door sealed shut.

For a moment, he stood there, feeling bad about cutting her off. He could hear her soft sobs echoing out from behind the door. Poor girl. She had been trying so hard to be brave. He admired her cool head and ability to keep her captor talking while establishing a rapport. He’d learned a similar technique in resistance training back in his academy days. A civilian like her attempting such a tactic without any training or succumbing to their emotions was impressive. He’d have to keep an eye on her.

Therak found himself wandering thoughtlessly back to the gym by habit. He stood by the weights, but his focus was shattered.

No matter how hard he pushed himself, he couldn't escape his thoughts. He felt more justified in killing the scavengers now that he'd heard about his king's sacrifice, but their faces haunted him... especially the female. He desperately tried to think of something more pleasant.

Nyra's voice entered his thoughts instead. Her offer to help him find his family was something he couldn't consider given the secrecy of his mission. He tried to console himself with the thought that she'd probably been lying and would have sent a distress beacon the second she got back on her ship.

He'd be put on trial for murder shortly after. Then the Etorthans would find him. Therak shuddered at the thought of one of those ugly gray bastards crawling through his mind.

There was only one choice for Therak, and that was to stay on the facility. But what about Nyra? She was young, had her whole life ahead of her. Was it fair to trap her with him there? He didn't think so. But, if he released her, she'd tell others she'd seen this place.

"What am I going to do with you?" He said. He thought about getting her help to repair some major systems and then letting her go. The facility would leave the planet eventually. If she behaved and helped him, he wouldn't have to worry about the facility breaking down for several more years.

But, there was another problem. Nyra's presence had stirred something long dormant within him—a yearning he hadn't felt in a long, long time. Her being in heat wasn't good. Right now, it was a minor inconvenience because she was probably on birth control. Almost all female Urmahs who weren't actively trying to get pregnant were on birth control to give themselves clear heads during their heats.

However, if she didn't take her medication, she'd start to lose control over herself, and he didn't want to think about what would happen after that. He'd never actually met a felina who wasn't on birth control, but he'd heard stories, and he didn't want to deal with that

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kind of crazy... or the emotions for her that it would force him to feel. Female felines gave off pheromones that made the males around them lose control of their dignity.

He sat on the weight bench, head bowed, mulling over his options until his stomach distracted him with a low growl. Deciding to put off his problems till later, he headed toward the mess hall, the prospect of fresh meat warming his spirits.

Entering the mess, he moved to the freezer where the dromedary carcass awaited. With practiced efficiency, he hoisted the creature onto a metal table. Using a sharp blade, he opened an artery, allowing the blood to drain into a container. He carried the crimson liquid to the recycler, pouring it in. The machine whirred appreciatively, gobbling up the offering to convert it into the nutrient paste that had sustained him for so long.

Returning to the carcass, Therak skillfully butchered the meat, setting aside choice cuts. He carved a thick, fatty steak from the hump—a rare delicacy he hadn't enjoyed in ages. Turning on the electric grill, he placed the meat onto the hot surface. The steak sizzled, releasing a rich aroma that filled the mess hall and stirred his appetite. He watched as the edges browned and the fat melted, juices seeping and sizzling.

As he stood by the stove, he realized that his knee was swelling. Probably from the long run and the strain of carrying the dromedary. The old injury often acted up after strenuous activity. He wouldn't be able to make another trip like that anytime soon. However, fresh meat was worth the pain.

Once cooked to perfection, he placed the steak on a plate. The sight and smell were almost overwhelming after years of bland sustenance. As he walked back toward his quarters, the warm plate in his hands, he allowed himself a small moment of anticipation.

"Therak? Did you make dinner? It smells great." Nyra's voice called out softly from behind her door.



He paused mid-stride, his grip tightening on the plate. He hadn't intended to share his meal—or his company.

“Hello?” she tried again, hope tinged with uncertainty.

With a heavy sigh, he turned and approached the holding room. Pressing the control panel, the door slid open. Nyra jumped as she took in his massive silhouette.

“Drome hump, my favorite,” she remarked with a forced smile that didn't reach her eyes. “Would you like to eat with me? I can tell you more about what's happened while you've been stuck here—and then we can make that call to your pride. Ferans really cherish their families, right? You must be desperate to hear something after all this time.”

For a moment, he was at a loss for words. Her audacity was astounding. He would have sneered at her attempt to manipulate him if it wasn't for his heart pounding in his chest as he caught her scent. Without replying, he thrust the plate toward her. She accepted it gracefully, her fingers brushing against his. The brief contact sent a surprising jolt through him.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “Come in, let's talk.”

He averted his gaze, the walls he'd built around himself fortifying. “I'll be back later to take you to the bathroom,” he said gruffly.

Therak stepped back and pressed the door panel. As the door slid shut, Nyra's eyes widened with surprise.

He walked away, her voice following him, muffled through the door. “Therak? Therak, please.”

He quickened his pace, her words chasing after him in the quiet corridor. Returning to his quarters, he shut the door firmly behind him.

He approached the nutrient paste dispenser that was on the wall next to his bed. One of the privileges of being the captain was that he didn't have to leave his quarters to eat tasteless goop. Placing his hand under the spigot, he pressed the button. A viscous, unappealing

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substance oozed out, its color and texture far from appetizing. He stared at it for a moment—the stark contrast to the savory steak he'd just handed over was not lost on him.

With a resigned grimace, he consumed the paste, the bland taste doing little to satisfy him. The rough texture of his tongue scraped against his palm as he licked it clean.

He knew what Nyra was attempting. She was trying to gain his trust so she could escape. So far, she'd been completely open about her intentions. However, he couldn't afford to let his guard down. The facility he guarded was a superweapon capable of catastrophic destruction. Even if the war was over, his king had entrusted him to continue his task, to guard this hidden weapon and keep the dark cats honest.

While he didn't want to keep Nyra captive, after careful consideration, he couldn't let her go either. Keeping her around was a liability because she had every reason to hate him. In addition, she was clever and would soon become desperate. While she was too small to be conventionally dangerous to him, there was no telling what she would be capable of while cornered. But the worst part of this whole situation was that she was female.

He couldn't shake the image of her standing in front of him helpless and vulnerable. While he couldn't set her free, his honor demanded that he find a way to help her feel as safe and comfortable as possible. As he tried to think of how he could possibly do that in this situation, he caught the scent of her lingering in her quarters—a delicate musk that clouded his thoughts. The image of her hips as she slid down her pants entered his mind.

Frustrated, he moved to the ventilation control panel on the wall. He adjusted the airflow, increasing it to the max in hopes of clearing both the air and his mind. The vent rattled as the fan struggled to comply. With a clunk, it sputtered and stopped altogether.

"Damn it," Therak muttered under his breath. Another system failing, another reminder of the facility's gradual decline.

He sank onto the edge of his bed, running a hand over his face, lines of stress deepening on his face. Staring at the blank wall, he pondered his next move. Perhaps he should determine Nyra's skills. She was, after all, the engineer on her ship.

But involving her further posed risks. What if she decided to sabotage the place? Therak shook his head. She wanted to live. She wouldn't risk tearing down the facility around her. So long as he treated her well and didn't let her get too close, things should be relatively safe.

But what was he going to do about her being in heat?

Unbidden, his thoughts drifted to images of her body, a young felina in her prime. The assertion of the unwanted images disturbed Therak. He gritted his teeth and tried to block out her scent that assaulted his mind.

Standing abruptly, he contemplated going about his routine for a distraction. There were protocols to follow, duties to fulfill. Yet... a small voice in the back of his mind whispered doubts. What was the point? For the first time in thirty-five years, Therak missed his nightly comms check-in. Instead, he found himself wandering to Nyra's room and escorting her to the washroom as he had promised.

He kept his back steadfastly turned as she did her business.

"The steak was good," she said while sitting on the pot.

Therak remained silent. His arms were crossed tightly over his chest as he tried his best to ignore the heady scent of her. However, try as he might, he felt a stirring below. His pants grew tight around a swelling there. Self-conscious, he stepped away from where she could see him and tucked his erection under his belt. Unfortunately, his shirt had an exposed belly, so it didn't do anything to hide his shame.

He looked down to see pink flesh towering above his pant line. Frustrated, he tucked it down instead, running along his leg. It was contained, but to his dismay, it was easily noticeable.

Suddenly, a loud forceful flush of water erupted from the bathroom as Nyra finished. Therak's body jolted in a minor panic. His

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eyes widened, darting frantically in search of something to cover himself with.

“Therak?” Said Nyra as she poked her head out of the bathroom.

He jumped at her voice and snatched the blanket from his bed, wrapping it around his waist. He glowered at her, furious and embarrassed. She quickly turned away from his dangerous expression. She looked terrified, which made Therak feel like a monster. It wasn't her fault she was in heat.

“Where's your medication?” Therak asked her, attempting to make his voice as nonthreatening as possible.

“My what? Oh. My birth control, you mean?” She asked. He nodded and she continued, “It's on my ship. I can show you.”

She started making her way to the exit, but Therak got in her way. “You aren't going anywhere. It'll be dark soon and I moved your ship far away.”

Nyra glanced down at Therak's sheet, then back up at his eyes. “I'd feel more comfortable if I had the pills now.”

“Relax. I won't touch you. I'm not that type of person.” Said Therak.

Nyra crossed her arms over her chest. “That's what they all say,” she mumbled.

Therak frowned. “If you were worried about males, you should have taken a stronger dose of medicine. Your pheromones are too strong.” Said Therak, defensively.

“I'm taking low dose for a reason—not that it's any of your business.” She replied, equally defensive.

Low-dose meant that the felina could still inspire males, but she wouldn't get pregnant from the result. She would also stay relatively calm during her heat, enough to act sensibly.

“Whatever your reason was doesn't matter. *I* don't want to smell you.” Said Therak.

“You could let me go. Problem solved.” She suggested.

Therak grew quiet, then motioned her down the hall. She got excited for a moment until he stopped her at her room and opened the door.

“Get inside,” he commanded as gently as possible.

“So, you’ll let me go later? Tomorrow?” She asked.

Therak closed his eyes for a moment and let out a deep sigh.

“The only way for you to leave this facility is the same way your friends did. Let me know if that’s what you want. I promise I’ll make it painless.”

Nyra’s mouth hung open in shock. “Wh-What?”

“I’ll give you a couple of days to make your decision.” He said.

He started to push her inside, but she clung to the doorframe.

“Why? Why are you doing this?”

A civilian like her couldn’t understand why he had to make this choice, so he didn’t bother explaining. He shoved her and easily broke her grip on the doorframe. Then he locked her inside.

Back in his room, he flopped on his bed as the lights dimmed and the clock slipped past his bedtime. He stared at the ceiling, picturing her terrified expression and feeling miserable about what he’d done. Tomorrow, he would speak with her and try to explain things better.

For now, he needed rest. Stripping off his constraining clothes, he lay down on the bed, the unfamiliar scent of her still lingering in his room. Sleep came fitfully, haunted by dreams of golden eyes and an uncertain future.

## CHAPTER 3

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# Ready to Talk?

*“Therak. Therak.” Her voice called to him as a dark shape crawled over his body, rubbing against him. He saw flashes of sinuous muscles shifting under dark fur. The curve of her hips as she slid over him.*

He woke with a start to find that it was morning... and that he'd dirtied his sheets. Disgusted with himself, he rubbed his blanket roughly over his stomach, only to find that he was rubbing his mess deeper into his fur. Therak swung his legs out of bed. As soon as he put weight on his feet he winced. The old injury on his knee had flared and the joint was ridiculously swollen, as if someone had smacked him with a club.

“Damn it,” he cursed. There was no way he would be running to Nyra's ship today.

Therak limped over to the sink and looked in the mirror, groaning at what he saw. His cum-stained fur clung to itself in clumps. *And* his mane was a mess. Therak let out an exhausted sigh as he reached out for the faucet. It had been a long night, and all he wanted right now was to be clean. He flicked the faucet switch on, expecting the familiar rush of water. Instead, a sputtering stream of water coughed and wheezed its way out of the tap, as if the last remaining water pump in the facility was struggling to keep up.

“You've got to be kidding me,” Therak muttered, glaring at the faucet as if it was his mortal foe.

The water continued to spit and sputter, each reluctant drop accompanied by the strained groaning of the pump somewhere down the line. Therak could feel his patience slipping away.

“Don’t you dare quit on me now!” he snapped, giving the faucet a firm shake to force it into obedience.

As he stood there, struggling to keep himself from truly breaking the sink, the water began to stabilize, gradually becoming steady and strong once more. Therak let out a relieved breath, shooting the faucet one last warning glare before plunging his hands into the water. He tried to clean off the mess. Unfortunately, the smell of cum stubbornly clung to him. He hadn’t made a mess like this since he was a teenager when his sisters had first started going into heat and tramped around the house getting their scent everywhere. From that experience, Therak knew he had to get Nyra’s smell out of his room—and to do that he had to get her medicine as soon as possible.

After that? He wasn’t sure. Ideally, she’d volunteer to join the crew and would help him repair the facility without trying to escape or get revenge. Therak scoffed at the thought. The bitter laugh came out forcefully. He’d met mercenaries who could set aside their personal feelings and focus on the mission at hand. However, he couldn’t expect such a practical attitude from a civilian.

At most, they’d learn to tolerate each other. But it was more likely that he’d always have to watch his back around her. The wet dream troubled him. Perhaps having her around was going to be too much of a liability.

The room seemed to grow cold as Therak found himself thinking about how to kill her painlessly. A disruptor blast? Behead her with his sword? He stood motionless in front of the sink, his vacant gaze fixed on the torrent of water rushing from the faucet. In the quiet of the failing facility, the sound of the water echoed like a chorus of whispers, a hissing sound of madness slipping into his thoughts.

His mind drifted to dark places. As the thoughts flooded his consciousness, his face contorted into a pained expression, as if he were being tormented by what he saw. The hissing of the sink seemed to grow louder, drawing him in. He felt like he was falling, swirling like the water about to go down the drain.

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In a sudden moment of clarity, he reached out towards the faucet, his hand trembling. With a forceful flick of his finger, he shut off the water, and the torrent was replaced by an eerie silence.

Therak closed his eyes, taking a deep, shuddering breath. As the last remnants of water spiraled down the drain, he willed his ruthless thoughts to do the same, pushing them away into the darkness where they belonged. When he opened his eyes, his face was calm once more, the haunted expression replaced by a steely determination to keep his prisoner... no... to keep **Nyra**, the innocent felina who had done nothing wrong, as safe and happy as possible, even if that meant taking some risks.

Therak took a deep breath, licked his hands, and ran his fingers through his mane in an attempt to tame the unruly strands. The water from the faucet had helped clean his fur, but his reflection still showed signs of redness in his eyes. He straightened, squaring his shoulders, and looked over the line of his jaw. He plucked a few outstanding gray hairs. Once his hair was as good as it was going to get, he went to the closet and managed to find some clothes that didn't have holes worn in them.

He tried his best to angle his sheath to where the inevitable erection he was going to get would grow down his leg instead of out of his pants. His penis was extremely mobile. He used to be able to angle it as he wished. However, it had been a long time since he'd tried to control those muscles. Better to be prepared. Fighting with an erection in front of her probably wasn't the best way to make her feel comfortable. Finally satisfied that he was as ready as possible, he turned toward the door.

His footsteps echoed softly in the corridor as he limped down the hall toward Nyra's room. The metallic walls of the facility reflected the dim lighting, casting long shadows that danced with his movement. Each step caused a twinge in his swollen knee, but he ignored the discomfort. His mind was focused on the conversation ahead.



Reaching the door, he hesitated for a moment, his hand hovering over the control panel. He recalled their last encounter—the fear in her eyes, the tension in her posture as he had given her that stark choice. Shaking off the memory, he tapped the panel, and the door slid open with a quiet whoosh.

Inside, the room was modestly lit, revealing Nyra seated on the edge of the small bed. Her ears perked up at the sound of the door, and her eyes darted toward him, widening ever so slightly. She appeared both alert and cautious, her tail curled tightly around her. The dim light accentuated the subtle patterns in her fur, but there was a visible stiffness in her posture.

Nyra's gaze locked onto Therak's, a mix of emotions flickering across her face—apprehension, defiance, and a hint of vulnerability. Since he had left her here, the weight of his ultimatum seemed to have pressed heavily upon her. Around her golden irises, her eyes were bloodshot. He wondered if she had slept at all.

As he stepped inside, the air seemed to thicken with her musk. He was submerged in her scent. Freezing for a moment, he subtly guided the growing tightness down his pant's leg.

As he stood frozen in the doorway, his imposing figure was framed by the corridor's light. Nyra's eyes grew large as she watched what was growing alongside his leg. She held up her forearm, looking between Little Therak and her arm as if comparing, then gulped. She shuddered, then straightened her back, lifting her chin slightly in a show of resilience.

"Have you come for my decision?" she asked.

Therak noted the steadiness in her voice and the determination in her eyes. He stepped further inside, allowing the door to close softly behind him. "No," he replied evenly. "I've decided I don't want to hurt you even if you ask me to."

Nyra's brows furrowed. "Are you being serious?"

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“I wouldn’t joke about this. I think you could be useful to me. I want to know what skills you have. But first, how are you holding up?” He asked.

She blinked, momentarily taken aback by the concern in his tone. It clearly wasn’t what she had expected. “I’m managing,” she answered cautiously. “Though I can’t say the accommodations are particularly welcoming.”

He gave a slight nod. “I apologize for that. Resources are limited here. But I’ll improve your quarters as soon as I can.”

A brief silence settled between them. Nyra studied him closely.

“So, what sort of jobs have you done in the past, Miss Nyra?” Therak prompted gently.

Nyra pulled her head back sharply as if she had been smacked in the face by his words. She laughed in disbelief and palmed her forehead.

“You really *are* serious. After everything you’ve done—you’re giving me an *interview*? No. No-no-no. Let’s be honest, here. You’re trying to enslave me. You **fucking** asshole.” She hissed at him, her ears flattening.

Therak turned around, getting ready to leave. “I can see you’re not ready to talk. I’ll come back later.”

“W-Wait!” She called. He ignored her and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Therak spent the next couple of hours in the mess hall, icing his knee with frozen hunks of meat. When he was done, he diced up one of the hunks, seasoned it with salt, and then fried it until it turned golden brown. He then made gravy out of the fat by adding some water and thickening it with old bone flour. He poured the gravy over the meat and brought it back with him to Nyra’s room.

Therak’s mouth was watering as he opened the door. Nyra was waiting for him. She was sitting at the only table in the room and had set up a metal stool across from her which was clearly meant for him. He walked over and set the plate of meat and gravy in front of her.

“Ready to talk?” He asked.

She nodded and motioned for him to join her.

“Give me a second,” he said as he adjusted himself, waiting for the tingling of his most sensitive skin to settle down before he took a seat.

Nyra took a slow breath, her ears flicking back momentarily as she steadied herself. Therak considered her changed attitude and was hopeful. Perhaps she could be practical after all.

“I’ll be frank,” Therak began. “This facility is falling apart, and I need your help. If you join my crew, you’d be expected to contribute to the maintenance and operation of this facility. Can you do it or not?”

“I can.” She said.

Therak felt a surge of relief course through him which he tried not to let show. “If you help me, I’ll do everything I can think of to make your time here as easy and enjoyable as possible.”

She arched an eyebrow. “And if I refuse?”

His expression grew somber. “Then I would have to ensure that the security of this facility remains uncompromised.”

Nyra held his gaze. “You mean you’d kill me,” she stated flatly.

He didn’t flinch. “No. I wouldn’t kill you, but the result would be the same. We would both die a slow, agonizing death as the life support system failed.”

A heavy silence filled the room. Nyra’s tail twitched slightly, and she glanced away for a moment. “I don’t have much of a choice, do I?”

He shook his head slowly. “No, I’m afraid you don’t.”

Nyra sighed, her shoulders relaxing slightly. “Fine. I’ll join your crew.”

“That was fast,” said Therak, suspicious.

Nyra held up a finger. “But I have conditions.”

Therak raised an eyebrow. “Such as?”

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“I want full access to the facility’s systems,” she declared. “If I’m to help maintain this place, I need to know what I’m working with.”

He regarded her thoughtfully. “Access will be granted as appropriate.”

She nodded, accepting the compromise. “And I expect to be treated with respect. No more locking me in rooms or making threats.”

A hint of a smile tugged at the corner of Therak’s mouth. There was that audacity again. “I’m afraid not. At least not yet. I’ve seen what you can do with a set of tools. Until I feel I can trust you, I’ll be watching you closely.”

“Are you scared of me, mister Feran warrior?” Nyra asked as she took a bite of the meat. Her eyes opened wide, seemingly startled by the taste, but she quickly regained her composure.

Therak considered his response. Should he fear her? He inhaled her scent deeply and let out a low growl as chills chased over him. It felt like a magnet was pulling his entire body towards her. The growl continued to rumble in his chest as he reeled himself back in.

“You’re dangerous,” he said, at last.

Nyra’s mouth hung open slightly, the bite she had been bringing to her mouth froze in her fingertips. She suddenly had difficulty meeting his eyes. Her hips shifted as she cleared her throat.

“Please tell me you got my medicine,” she said.

“Not yet,” he admitted.

“When?” She pressed.

“As soon as my knee gets better. I aggravated it yesterday while hauling back the meat you’re eating.” He said.

“And how long will that take? I need to take my medicine every day.” She said, seemingly disturbed by the thought of being unmedicated around him.

Her worried expression comforted him. It made him trust her more.

“It usually only takes a day or two for the swelling to go down when it gets like this,” said Therak. He paused for a moment, considering. “How bad is the heat for you? Do you want me to leave you alone?”

Once again, Therak’s consideration for her seemed to confuse her. Her brows furrowed and she shook her head, “It’s nothing I can’t handle... at least for now.”

“Alright. Let me know if it gets worse. I have excellent discipline, but if you suddenly jumped me, I don’t know if I’d be able to stop myself.” Said Therak.

Nyra stared at him, dumbfounded, as if she’d just stumbled upon an impossible enigma. “Are you trying to trick me right now? Is this some twisted attempt to get me to like you? Surely you don’t think I’m that stupid.”

Outrage surged through Therak at her words. He snarled and slammed his palm lightly on the table, causing her to jump. “You dare question my honor? Don’t mistake me for one of your *pathetic* Panthera males. Trickery is the tool of the weak.” His stool scraped against the floor as he stood and loomed over her. “Do I look weak to you?”

Nyra shrank under his towering height, her ears flattening as her entire body was cast his shadow. “N-No. Not weak.” She gasped, her breath starting to come in quick, shallow pants. He could smell her fear mixing with her musk as she began to panic.

Her terror startled him, shocking him out of his outrage. He quickly grabbed his stool and sat back down.

“I shouldn’t have done that. Are you okay?” He asked.

“No. I’m not. I’m *not okay*. I’m not okay at all.” She said. Her voice caught in her throat as she wrapped her arms tightly over her chest and folded over, her body shuddering.

A powerful sense of empathy affected Therak as the innocent felina in front of him began to break. Her pheromones ripped open the mental barriers he’d placed around his heart, forcing him to feel

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her distress. Unable to bear what he'd wrought; he hid his face in his hands.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice fading to a whisper. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"If you didn't want to scare me, killing everyone I know and imprisoning me is a strange way to go about that." She said.

Therak closed his eyes at her accusations. "I know. I wish I had talked to you first. I wish I had sent you and your friends on your way. Ancestors, what have I done?"

Nyra's ears swiveled forward at his words. Her trembling began to subside as she watched his broad shoulders sag with remorse. She straightened slowly, her arms loosening their grip around her chest. She seemed to steady as she took in the sight of his genuine distress.

A calculating expression crossed her face, passing so fast that it barely registered. She reached out her hand and placed it gently on his arm. Her touch was electric. Therak jumped at the shock of it.

"Therak," she said softly, her voice tentative. "I didn't mean to question your honor. I'm just... not used to males like you."

He lifted his gaze, eyes meeting hers. A thrill shot through him as Nyra studied his face. Her eyes were golden pools that seemed to suck him in. His heartbeat quickened, each pulse palpable within his coursing veins. His emotions were a mess. He didn't know what he was feeling anymore.

He pulled away. "I should go." He stood, only to find her hand had slipped into his. "What are you doing?" He asked.

"I need to go," she said.

His brows furrowed. "Huh?"

"I need to go to the bathroom," she clarified.

He nodded slowly.

A faint smile touched her lips. "Can you escort me, mister guardian?"

Therak's eyes narrowed slightly. "I suppose."

Nyra relaxed a bit more, the tension easing from her shoulders. “Just one more bite before we go, this meal is quite good,” she said, taking another bite of the meat, then spoke around her food, “Do you always eat like this?”

Therak shook his head. “No.”

She tilted her head slightly. “What do you normally eat?”

“Nutrient paste,” he replied, a touch of melancholy in his tone.

“I haven’t had fresh meat in a long time.”

Nyra tilted her head in the other direction. Then she stood and waited for him by the door. He pressed his hand against the access panel and the door slid open. Soon after, he found himself walking side-by-side with her down the hall towards his room. The sudden change in her behavior was odd, but at least she wasn’t paralyzed by fear anymore.

“Have you not had any of the dromedary yet?” She asked.

“I haven’t,” he admitted.

She considered his words. “Why not?”

Therak blinked. “I... honestly don’t know,” he realized.

“Somehow all the meat I’ve made has wound up in your belly.”

Nyra had an odd look on her face as she took in his confession. Her ears tilted slightly back with uncertainty. She slowed her march a bit, as if considering something. Then she shook her head. She huffed a deep breath. Her hesitating ceased as she seemed to come to a decision, and a broad smile crossed her face as she glanced up at him.

Once they got to his room, she startled him by gently grabbing his hand and guiding it to press on the panel, opening the door. She then walked a couple of steps away from him and hooked her thumbs onto her waistband. Therak froze as she began pulling her pants down as she walked, shimmying her hips as she moved the fabric down her body.

“Oh gosh, I really gotta go,” she exclaimed. She hopped and tripped as she pulled down her pants, tipping over as she seemingly lost her balance. She fell onto all fours and her back arched

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magnificently as she lifted her tail, showing him a flash of pink.  
“Oops!”

Thrills chased over Therak as his hair stood on end. He quickly averted his gaze as the bulge in his pants got painfully hard. The aged fabric strained to contain him. Therak turned to the door and considered running down the hall.

“So, Therak, tell me more about what it’s like to be Feran,” she called. “If we’re going to live together, I’d like to understand your culture better.”

Therak halted his escape, opting instead to just keep the door open so that he could get fresh breaths of air that weren’t filled with concentrated musk.

“Honor is central to our way of life,” he called back.

“Is that why you exploded back there?” She asked.

“Personal pride is a small part,” he admitted. “But more important is integrity, respect, and responsibility to others. If we see something wrong, we must act. It’s our way of life.” He said, paraphrasing words his king had said long, long ago.

“Is keeping a civilian caged in this place responsible or respectful?” she asked.

Therak closed his eyes and sighed. “We’re not rehashing that topic, Nyra. Anything else you want to talk about?”

“Why do you sound so far away?” She asked.

“I’m getting fresh air by the door,” he responded.

“Okay, well, could you get me some water? That meat was salty and I’m *really* thirsty. The sink in my room isn’t working.” She said.

Therak stood by the doorway, trying to steady his thoughts. Nyra’s presence was affecting him more than he’d like to admit, and he needed to keep his distance.

“Therak,” she said from the bathroom, “was the meat supposed to be that salty?”

He turned slightly, keeping his gaze averted. “Was it too much? I might have overdone it with the seasoning.”