

MONSTROUS: BOOK FIVE

MOTH

A close-up, artistic photograph of a person's face, focusing on the right side. The person has long, straight, white hair that falls over their forehead and cheek. They have a large, pointed, pinkish-white ear that resembles an elf or a fantasy creature. The ear is pierced with several small, circular studs and a larger, dark, ornate earring. The person's skin is fair, and they have a dark, patterned tattoo on their cheek. The background is a soft, out-of-focus landscape with rolling hills under a pale sky.

LILY MAYNE

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

Warning: *This m/m love story contains explicit sexual content and is not suitable for young readers. It also contains graphic depictions of death and violence.*

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CHAPTER ONE

Charlie

“Nervous?”

I jumped and glanced over at my best friend Hunter as he fell into step beside me, nudging me briefly with his elbow.

“What? No.” I was. I was vibrating with tension, dread churning in my belly. “What makes you say that?”

Hunter let out a low huff of amusement. “You’ve been humming ‘Monday, Monday’ on a loop for the last five miles.”

My face went hot, but I rolled my eyes. “It’s a good song, asshole.”

“Not when you’ve heard it five hundred times.”

“I liked it,” Edin piped up from the other side of Hunter.

The big lavender monster leaned forward to grin at me, his fangs peeking out. We hadn’t got off to the best start, but in the time since Hunter and Edin had gotten me out of that underground fighting ring, we’d warmed up to each other as we worked together on the homestead that Edin and Hunter had made their home out here.

Now, I relished telling Hunter—my best friend of twelve years, the only guy in the world I trusted wholeheartedly with my life—that I preferred his big monster boyfriend over him.

“Thanks, Edin.” I laid it on thick. “At least *someone* is appreciating the time they have left with me before I’m gone forever.”

Hunter’s face fell, features turning to stone in an instant. “That’s not funny, asshole.”

My own words had made an ache form in my gut. I really *would* never see them again when I went back to the military, which was why we had left the homestead and were travelling back toward Tennessee. I’d been gone for so long—too long—but every day I’d told myself I’d pack up and leave *the next day*.

I couldn’t show Hunter how unsure I felt about returning, though. He’d just worry and try to talk me out of it. Which... There was nothing wrong with that, except I was pretty sure I’d cave so easily. And then what? I’d

live at the homestead with them, an awkward third wheel while they created their life together? No thanks.

Pushing away the wave of unease, I snorted.

“Oh, shut up, jackass, it was a joke. Being in love has made you soft.” I reached over and patted Hunter’s firm, flat stomach through his shirt. “Is that a gut I feel?”

“What? Fuck off.”

Hunter shoved my hand away and lifted his shirt to peer down at his stomach.

“I don’t have a gut,” he snapped, but his voice had an edge of worry.

Edin boomed out a big laugh.

“Don’t worry, josdo.” He pulled Hunter into him with a thick arm around his neck. “I still love you, even with your gut.”

“I don’t have a gut!”

“Gah, and if you did?” Edin waved an imperious hand. “What is so wrong with a gut? It means I am feeding you well. Providing for my mate.”

He reached over and patted Hunter’s stomach. “When we get back to the homestead, I will start hunting twice as much for you. We’ll start working on your gut.”

“You won’t need to hunt twice as much, Edin,” I piped up. “I won’t be there taking half of what you catch anymore.”

The big, purple monster’s brows twitched into a frown.

“I will miss you, Charlie.” He reached around Hunter to pat my shoulder. “Are you sure you must return? Can’t you stay at the homestead with us? I don’t mind hunting twice as much to grow Hunter’s gut.”

Longing panged in my chest as Hunter huffed in annoyance.

“You don’t want me staying there, Edin.” I waved a hand, feigning nonchalance. “Once I’m gone, you can fuck wherever you want on the property.”

Hunter cleared his throat as Edin shot me a big, fanged grin.

“What makes you so sure we haven’t already?”

Blood drained from my face as I swung my eyes between them. Hunter darted a glance at me and looked away, face going slightly pink above his mask.

“Have you... have you fucked in my *room*?”

“No,” Hunter said immediately. “Come on, man, we wouldn’t do that.”

“We have everywhere else though,” Edin said with an evil grin.

I shook my head, looking away. “You’re animals.”

“Even the bunker,” he added.

“Alright, I get it,” I barked.

I still wasn’t used to seeing Hunter in love, even though he actually didn’t act all that different to how he always had. He was still a grumpy, short-tempered hardass—but he was *my* grumpy, short-tempered hardass. Well, mine and Edin’s now. I was going to miss him more than I would ever admit.

I was happy for him—glad he had Edin, and glad he’d made the decision to leave the military, because it seemed to make him happy. But the thought of returning without him was freaking me the fuck out.

I still had no idea what they’d do with me when I got back. I’d have to detail every fucking minute of my whereabouts and actions during the long time I was gone. We’d come up with a different story to what had actually happened, so that no one would get put on the military’s radar. Edin had been captured by them before, and the Soul Eater and his human partner Danny had a nasty history with them too.

We went with a basic story, because giving too many details was the first faux pas of a gigantic lie. I was going to tell them that Hunter and I stumbled into a monster nest and were held captive for weeks. They ate Hunter, but I managed to escape before they could get around to me.

I’d never been a particularly good liar, so I was nervous as shit.

I was pulled out of my thoughts when Hunter and Edin suddenly stopped beside me. I glanced at them with a frown before I realised what they were staring at.

A huge metal wall, looming in the distance.

“What is that?” I asked uneasily.

“A raider camp,” Edin said, folding his arms over his chest as he stared at it. “A secure one.”

“Wait.” Hunter turned to look at Edin. “Scratch, whereabouts are we?”

He cocked his head, horns slashing through the air with the movement. The right ended in a jagged stump, an injury he’d already sustained by the time they got me out of the prison.

“Not too far north of the military base that went up in smoke.”

“The Nebraska base?”

At Edin’s nod, Hunter turned back to the wall that loomed in the distance. There was a small forest behind it, and I could have sworn I saw

the big, drooping head of a borolesh. Two of them lived in the forest that surrounded the homestead.

“Shit.” Hunter’s eyes were wide. “I think... this is the camp Cat’s from.”

I turned to stare at him. “Huh?”

He nodded. “He said he’s from a camp on the Nebraska-South Dakota state line.”

My stomach clenched up at the mention. I’d shared a cell at the fighting prison with Cat for one night, and I’d talked shit the entire time because I was so freaked out. He was a tall, quiet guy who hadn’t said much, but what he had said managed to comfort me just a little.

He’d been nice. Kind.

And he’d stayed behind, even though he could have escaped with us.

I swallowed. “He asked you to give them a message, right? In exchange for his help getting me out.”

Hunter nodded, and we both looked at Edin. His craggy face was grim, big eyes tilted up. I followed his gaze, jolting in shock when I saw the outline of a creature sitting on the camp wall. One with huge, black wings.

I couldn’t see much more than that, but I could tell it was watching us. My stomach clenched when it slowly stood, and those wings stretched out wide for a moment before tucking back in against its body.

“That camp will be a mass grave now, josdo,” Edin said in a low voice.

Hunter quirked a brow. “What do you mean?”

“I mean every human who lived in there will be dead.” Edin jerked his chin up toward the creature. “He will have killed them all, if he’s decided this place is his.”

There was a pause, before Hunter huffed.

“What are you talking about, scratch?” He nodded toward something at ground level. “There are people right there.”

My gaze dropped, and I stared at the small group heading toward us. They were too far away for me to see many details, but one of them definitely didn’t look human. He looked big. Not as big as Edin, but still damn big. Plus... his skin was grey.

And that war hammer he was dragging with him looked way too big and heavy for human arms.

My throat bobbed as I eyed the group. They were still a fair distance away, but their destination was unmistakable. Us.

Edin suddenly growled out a low sound and grabbed Hunter, jerking him back and ignoring his splutter of irritation. When he did the same to me, I glanced around quickly and realised why.

That winged creature was flying directly toward us.

“Run, both of you.” Edin’s tail lashed, its razor-sharp tip coming dangerously close to my side, making me leap back.

“Fuck that.” Hunter swung his gun around, so I did the same. “I’m not leaving you, scratch.”

Edin growled a furious sound. “He will kill us all—”

The winged creature dropped gracefully a few yards in front us, his big bird feet curling into the ground as he landed.

I stared, even as I lifted my gun and aimed it at the creature’s chest. He was tall and lithe, with ghoulishly green-tinged white skin and huge black eyes that looked mournful. Burn scars decorated one side of his face, partially hidden by waves of green-hued black hair that reached his chin.

He stood there in silence, watching us with big eyes. I side-eyed Edin, who was bristling with tension and gripping Hunter’s arm to keep him back. His tail whipped from side to side in agitation.

The creature’s sombre gaze moved slowly over each of us. When it reached Edin, he watched him for a long moment.

Edin stared back, his huge body vibrating with tension. Like he was waiting for the monster to lunge at us and start attacking.

Instead, still watching Edin, he said, “I’m not going to hurt any of you.”

His voice was low and soft. It sounded gentle, which made my shoulders relax infinitesimally, though not enough to make me lower my gun.

“Not unless you are here to harm anyone in this camp,” the monster continued. “Especially my mate.”

That made Edin freeze. Even his tail stopped lashing around.

“Your mate?” His voice was cautious.

The monster nodded. When he gave Edin a tiny, shy smile, I exhaled and let my gun lower a fraction, ignoring the grunt of irritation Hunter aimed at me.

This monster was surely not dangerous.

“My mate is a raider here. A human.”

He gestured at the camp wall behind us—and the small group who were closer now. I could see them a little more clearly. The other monster with them was big and muscular, with wide, bulging shoulders framed by a

leather harness. His skin was a deep, mottled grey, and he was bald. The war hammer he was dragging was enormous.

There were two humans with him. A guy with dark hair pulled up into a high ponytail and a plain black mask covering the lower half of his face... and a machete held in a loose, easy grip, leaving no doubt that he knew exactly how to use it. The other guy had a mop of wild, curly brown hair, a studded leather mask and a tan, fringed jacket. He was holding the free hand of the grey monster.

My brows twitched up at that. Seemed like it wasn't just Hunter chasing monster dick, then. Well—and Danny. I'd only met him briefly, but he had apparently decided on the most monstrous dick of monster dicks. The Soul Eater was... terrifying.

They stopped, still a fair distance away, like they were waiting for the winged monster's assessment of us before approaching.

Big black eyes swept back over me and Hunter, and he offered us a small smile.

"I am Aury," he told us, not directing it at Edin. "The rycke. I will not hurt you."

Hunter stiffened, eyes shooting over to Edin. "Wait, is this—"

"Not the same one, josdo." Edin's voice was hard, and his gaze was still intense as he stared unblinking at the monster.

The creature's face flushed, his eyes dropping to the ground before he glanced at Edin through long lashes.

"I am... I carry the memories of those before me," he said quietly. "I am sorry for what my ancestor did to your people."

My eyes were swivelling between the two monsters. What? His ancestor did something to Edin's people? Hunter's face was grim, but not surprised, so I was guessing he knew what Aury was talking about.

Edin was silent for a long moment, before his demonic face cracked into a small smile.

"It would be foolish of me to hold a grudge against you for something your ancestor did. But I appreciate the sentiment."

He peered hard at the rycke. "But I have a mate of my own," he added, gesturing at Hunter. "And I know what you are capable of."

Aury flushed again. "I know. I have control over it. I'm not mindless."
"How can you be so sure?"

“My mate and I... We practised.” He clasped long fingers together in front of him, fidgeting. “I swear, I won’t lose control. I would never harm anyone in the camp.”

“Who is your mate?” Edin nodded at the group standing back. “One of them?”

Aury shook his head. “He’s still inside. We came to see what you want.”

Edin finally peered at the group properly. He’d been focusing intently on the monster in front of us.

What he saw made him stiffen. “The aytorin.”

Aury glanced back over his shoulder before offering us an uncertain smile. “Yes. He joined us recently. He was being held captive by—”

“Someone in an RV?” Hunter interrupted, glancing at Edin with a brow raised. “Holy shit.”

Aury’s head cocked. “You know him?”

Edin shook his head. “We saw him, a while ago now, when we were heading north. He was chained to the side of a vehicle with two borolash. With a cage on his head.”

Aury nodded.

“Yes. Collector Mary enslaved them.” He gestured back, undoubtedly at the guy holding the aytorin’s hand. “Rig freed him.”

Edin froze, then chuckled. “That human must be tenacious.”

Aury smiled then—a proper smile. It lit his face up, transforming it from sombre into something sweet.

“He is.” Then he stilled, watching us carefully. “What brings you here, friends?”

It was Hunter who spoke up, his voice cautious. “Is this Cat’s camp?”

Aury froze completely, except for his wings, which twitched and fluttered. “You know Cat?”

Hunter nodded. “We have a message from him. For, uh... Anchor?”

Aury’s wings twitched again. “Wait here, please.”

He rose into the air and shot back to the waiting group, the rush of air from the single, powerful flap of his wings almost knocking me back a step. He stopped in front of them and spoke hurriedly. The one with the machete peered around his wing at us, eyes unnervingly calm.

Aury turned and gestured us over.

My heart was beating a little faster than normal as we slowly started making our way to the group. I knew Hunter was still on edge too, because

he didn't put away his gun, though he did lower it.

As we got closer, I could make out more details. The grey monster had two small, dark horns protruding from above his temples, unnerving eyes with goat-like irises, and thick cabling under his skin. His long fingers gripped the handle of his war hammer, but he kept it resting on the ground, which let me breathe a little easier.

"Tiny horns," Edin muttered in a conspiratorial tone to Hunter as we approached.

He snorted. "So?"

"Just saying." Edin lifted a big purple arm in greeting, raising his voice to be heard across the remaining distance. "It's good to see another of the old ones, my friend."

After a pause, the aytarin nodded once. "And you, my friend."

Edin grinned as we stopped in front of them, eyeing the whole group.

"Hello, humans," he said in his deep voice—which I was positive he made a little more rumbling in the presence of new people—then focused his smile back on the aytarin. "And it's good to see you free of that cage."

The aytarin smiled, showing short fangs and tusks. He still held the hand of the guy in the western jacket, who was watching us silently.

"Thank you." He looked down at the guy, and his smile got softer. "Rig freed me from Mary's control."

The guy—Rig—looked up at the aytarin, his face breaking into a huge grin behind his leather mask.

"I go by Gloam," the aytarin said, releasing Rig's hand to step forward and clasp Edin's shoulder. "It's an honour to meet the last isdernuc."

Edin boomed out a laugh, grasping his shoulder back. My eyes darted to Aury, who flushed and looked away.

"I am Edin. And the honour is mine. We wanted to help when we saw you, but we were on our way to free Charlie here."

He gestured at me, and I smiled uneasily at the group when all eyes turned on me.

"Which is how we met Cat," he added.

The two humans in the group stiffened at the mention.

"You really saw him?" Rig asked, stepping forward and wrapping his hands around Gloam's forearm. "He's okay? He's alive?"

Edin winced. "Well, he was when we saw him. It was a while ago now."

"Where is he," the other guy asked in a flat voice.

His green eyes were piercing as he stared at Edin, and he hadn't sheathed his machete, despite the tentative truce that seemed to be forming.

"Being held in a prison to the north," Hunter said. "There's a fighting ring going on up there. Humans and monsters working together to operate it."

Rig choked on a breath, his fingers squeezing Gloam's arm tight. "Oh my god."

"If you got *him* out," machete guy asked, nodding at me, "why didn't Cat come with you?"

"We tried," Hunter said quickly. "He said he couldn't leave. He said there was someone there he couldn't leave without."

Rig's brown eyes widened, and they darted frantically between Gloam and machete guy. "Who could he have wanted to stay for?"

"Don't know." Machete guy was still watching us. "Better tell Anchor."

Rig nodded but eyed us nervously. "Um..."

"We are peaceful," Edin told him, his voice uncharacteristically serious. "We were travelling past and realised this was Cat's camp. We wanted to deliver his message." With a chuckle, he added, "Besides, you have the rycke here protecting you. I am no match for this beast when he is unleashed."

He clapped a jovial hand on Aury's shoulder. The winged monster flushed but gave a shy smile.

"I won't be unleashing anything, I swear," he said, then nodded at Hunter. "Your mate is safe. And your... Charlie."

I cleared my throat. "I'm Hunter's best friend. We're not a throuple."

The winged monster's head cocked. Gloam chuckled while Rig's eyes creased with a grin. Machete guy didn't react at all, just watching us silently. He was a little creepy.

"Shall we go inside the camp, then?" Gloam said, then turned serious eyes to Edin. "Aury is in control. He wouldn't lie to you. He doesn't want to hurt anyone."

Edin cast a glance at Hunter, brows pinched. Slowly he nodded.

"I trust your word, friend," he said, then looked at Aury with a smile. "You are strong, to control it."

Aury flushed and gave a little shrug. "Because of my mate. He helped me."

“Well, I look forward to meeting him.” Edin grinned at Hunter, palming the back of his neck. “Shall we?”

CHAPTER TWO

Charlie

As we followed behind the monster-human group in silence, Rig started chatting away to Gloam, bouncing excitedly on his toes and gripping the big monster's hand tight between both of his.

"Anchor is going to lose her *shit*. And this means Ghost can stop going out looking for him. Although..." He sounded uneasy. "I hope Anchor doesn't make him go to this prison to bust him out. We have to make sure she doesn't force him into it. Right, Aury?"

He peered around his chuckling monster at Aury, who gave him a small smile and a nod.

"If he does decide to go, I'll go with him."

"Well, hopefully Charlie and..." Rig looked over his shoulder at us and gave Hunter a friendly smile. "I didn't get your name, sorry."

"Hunter."

The raider didn't seem deterred by Hunter's short tone and one-word answer. He nodded.

"Hunter. Cool. Hopefully Charlie, Hunter and Edin can tell us where it is."

Edin was walking beside Aury, whose head stayed bent as he watched his big bird feet, though he was nodding at what the big purple monster was saying in a low voice. I caught the tail end of it.

"...sorry for leaving you there." Edin's voice was uncharacteristically sombre. "It was wrong of me. I wasn't thinking clearly—consumed by fury at being captured. But I—"

"It's alright." Aury gave him a tiny smile. "I understand. I wasn't... in my right mind either."

Edin grasped his shoulder gently. "Forgive me, my friend."

"There's nothing to forgive." Aury hesitated, then patted Edin's thick forearm.

"At least not all humans are so bad, eh?" Edin chuckled and yanked Hunter closer, ignoring his grunt and rubbing his cheek over his baseball

cap.

I smiled, but my gaze snagged on silent machete guy in time to see him narrowing his eyes at Edin. Guess he was a little protective of the quiet winged monster.

“Wait,” Hunter piped up as we reached the camp wall.

I eyed the looming structure in front of us. It was made up of old shipping containers, trucks and cars, rusted sheets of corrugated metal. I couldn't help but be impressed at the raiders who'd managed to cobble together such an impenetrable fortress out here.

Everyone stopped and turned to face him. Hunter squared his shoulders, straightening to his full height as he glanced at Edin.

“Before we go in, I want to clear some things up so there are no nasty surprises.” He gestured at me. “Charlie and I are ex-military.”

The raiders stiffened. Machete guy's fingers twitched around the handle of his weapon.

I didn't voice the fact that I technically wasn't ex-military like Hunter. I was still planning on going back. But I knew why he'd said it—he'd told me about what happened when the Soul Eater found out he was military and was mere moments from gutting him for it.

“We left to stay out here,” Hunter continued, gesturing at Edin as the purple monster lumbered over and grasped his nape in a gentle grip. “To stay with Edin. We would never betray you or your camp in any way. I swear. So does Charlie.”

I nodded quickly when the machete guy's impassive yet piercing gaze flicked to me.

“Hunter left it all behind to stay with me,” Edin rumbled, kissing the visible line of Hunter's scar at his temple. “Didn't you, josdo?”

Hunter's eyes creased with a lopsided smile as he looked back at him. “That's right.”

“Where... What base did you...” Aury's eyes were shadowed, and his head twitched.

Rig shot him a worried glance before looking back at us. “What base were you stationed at?”

“Not Nebraska,” Hunter said immediately, looking at Aury with serious eyes. “Edin told me they captured you. That he saw you there when they captured him too. We never had anything to do with the military's specimen programme. I swear.”

He gestured at Edin, his eyes hard. "It's why we left. We could never have gone back after finding out what they did to you in there."

I wanted to shrink in on myself. I knew he was just saying it to make it clear that we wouldn't fuck these raiders over, but his words made me feel an inch tall.

Because I *was* going back. Despite knowing what they'd done to Edin. And the Soul Eater. And apparently, this gentle, winged monster too.

Aury's head twitched again, eyes on the ground. Rig let go of Gloam to go stand beside him, slipping his hand into Aury's and squeezing it.

"Do you want them to go, Aury?" he asked quietly.

Big black eyes turned up to look at us. After a long, tense moment, he shook his head and gave us a small smile.

"No. It's fine. I believe them."

God, what had the military done to this monster? I swallowed and kept my eyes on the ground, feeling ashamed that I was part of an organisation that had traumatised and tortured creatures just for being different.

Hunter's voice made me lift my head, because it was uncharacteristically soft.

"I'm sorry for what they did to you," he told Aury.

The monster dipped his head in a nod. "Thank you."

I let out a slow breath, darting a glance at Hunter and Edin. The latter kissed Hunter's cheek and murmured something in his ear.

When I looked back at the others, Rig and machete guy were exchanging a loaded look.

"Thanks for telling us," Rig said, moving back to Gloam's side and gripping his hand tight. "And for... for stopping when you realised this was Cat's camp. We're so glad to hear he's still alive."

He looked at Aury, then Gloam, then let out a hard breath.

"Okay. You can come in. But maybe... maybe keep that to yourselves around the others. Some people in here really don't trust the military."

"Sure, no problem," Hunter said quickly.

As we started heading toward the side of the wall, machete guy said flatly, "Don't make us regret our hospitality."

Edin rumbled out a laugh.

"If we had any nefarious plans, Aury here would tear us all to shreds." He clapped a hand on the rycke's shoulder. "And I'd wager Gloam is adept with that beast in his hand."

Gloam shot us a fanged grin over his shoulder. “Indeed.”

“Best skull-basher in the Wastes,” Rig said cheerfully, making me side-eye him before shooting a nervous glance at Hunter.

These guys were... interesting.

The camp entrance was tucked away in a narrow gap between two containers, well-hidden and reinforced with steel bars that I spotted as Rig opened a cut-out portion of the metal to reveal a door. Machete guy slowed his steps until he was bringing up the rear, no doubt keeping an eye on us as we made our way through.

I forced myself not to stare slack jawed as we emerged into the camp. It was big, and completely surrounded by that tall wall. A couple of raiders were standing at the top, pacing along as they kept watch.

There was a big motel block to our left, and a sprawling vegetable patch with raiders tending to the crops to our right. Tucked in the far corner was another building that looked like wooden stalls.

“Damn,” I muttered to Hunter as we followed the others.

Aury peeled away from the group, heading toward the motel block. I could still feel machete guy’s eyes on my back.

There were a few raiders milling about, and most of them stopped to eye us. I swept my gaze over them. One was wearing a plain white mask that covered her whole face, a long red braid hanging over her shoulder. Another was big and broad, wavy black hair tied back from his face in a knot. He was holding an armful of carrots, and after a pause he carried on walking toward an old diner tucked into the corner.

A former bar sat dormant beside it, the neon sign proclaiming *Billy’s Bar* now dead and colourless. Leaning against the old bar was a guy with long white hair and pale eyes that watched us closely. Too closely. Something about his face made my gut tighten with unease.

“That dude with the white hair is creeping me out a little,” I muttered to Hunter as we followed Gloam and Rig. “He’s giving me uncanny valley vibes. Something’s off with him.”

“Yeah?” Hunter cocked his head as he looked. He shrugged. “I guess. He’s hot.”

Edin let out a disgruntled snarl from the other side of him and smacked Hunter in the chest. It was immensely satisfying for me—and I suspected for Edin—to hear Hunter wheeze at the impact.

“I just meant objectively, scratch.” His voice was tight, like he was trying to mask the discomfort. I snorted.

“Yes, well.” Edin grunted and lifted his chin imperiously. “Just remember who you said was the *hottest thing you’d ever seen* when I was riding your—”

“Remember those boundaries we discussed, Edin?” I interrupted loudly. “Remember all those times—the many, many times—I told you I don’t particularly want to hear the details of your and Hunter’s sex life?”

Unfortunately, my words did not shut the big purple guy up like I’d been hoping. They did the opposite.

“Gah, poor Charlie.” He lumbered around and slung an arm over my shoulders, making me grunt from the impact. “How long has it been since you fucked? A while, yes? You must have—what was it you said the other day, Hunter? Blue balls.”

He ruffled my hair, making my head jerk forward. My face was already on fire.

“I would have blue balls by now, I’m sure. Although, my balls are already purple—Hello, human.”

The guy who’d appeared in front of us blinked, looking dazed at being greeted just after hearing about a big purple monster’s balls.

“I—um, hi.”

He was with Aury, and their hands were linked. So this was the rycke’s mate, then. The raider wasn’t overly tall, and a gas mask covered the lower half of his face beneath brown hair and blue eyes.

I glanced over at Hunter and Edin. Hunter was looking around stoically with a cool, assessing gaze. He’d be no help being friendly to anyone. Edin was already distracted, raising a hand and lumbering over to the white-haired guy who’d been the catalyst for that entire painful conversation. Guess he knew him, then.

“So, you said you’ve seen Cat?” the raider asked, snapping my eyes back to him and Aury.

I nodded and tilted my head at Hunter. “We both have. In the prison up north.”

“Prison?” The guy’s voice was sharp.

“He’s being held in a prison where they’re putting on fights between humans and monsters. I was kidnapped by monsters and taken there. They put me in a cell with Cat.”

I nodded at Hunter again, who was now eyeing Aury.

“Hunter tried to get him to come with us when he busted me out, but Cat said there was someone there he couldn’t leave behind.”

The raider shared a look with Aury.

“We need to go get Anchor—our leader.” He looked back at me. “Will you wait here? She’ll want to hear everything.”

I nodded. “Yeah. Sure.”

They walked off toward an old diner tucked into the corner of the camp, Gloam and Rig following.

I turned to Hunter with a fake pleasant smile on my face, my eyes darting to the raider with the machete who was still watching us in silence.

“So. Been discussing my balls with Edin, have you?”

His cool gaze slid to my face. “Relax, champ. We weren’t talking about *your* balls. The term just, uh... came up in conversation and Edin asked what it meant.”

I pursed my lips and looked away. I didn’t particularly want to know how the term “came up” in conversation.

Besides, I couldn’t disagree with Edin’s assessment. My balls *were* blue. It had been years since I’d had any sex, of any kind. With anyone. Even though I’d never had any interest at all in fucking Hunter—and I knew that sentiment went both ways—having to listen to two, shall we say, *robust* people fucking loudly and vigorously almost every night for months had just reminded me of everything I was missing.

I’d taken to sitting outside in the yard for a while after they went to bed, to try and avoid the worst of it. But I’d miscalculated too many times and ended up quietly heading inside to finally sleep while they were still going at it. Working on the homestead was hard, and I could only force myself to stay awake for so long.

Edin had some incredible stamina, I’d give him that.

As we waited for the raider and Aury to return with their camp leader, my eyes snagged on the white-haired guy again. He was talking to Edin, a slight smile on his freakishly perfect face.

That was what had jarred me when I’d first spotted him, I realised. He was *too* perfect. Too stunningly beautiful to really look human. He looked more like what an artist would picture the perfect human to look like.

His hair was white—almost silver—but his brows were black and finely shaped, above pale eyes of a colour I couldn’t see from here. His face was

narrow but chiselled, with a slim, straight nose and a full mouth that had three rings piercing it—one through the centre of his lower lip, and two either side of his cupid's bow. I thought I could see tattoos on his neck, disappearing under the collar of his shirt.

He had a rangy-looking body, with wide shoulders and a torso that tapered into narrow hips and long legs. He was wearing heavy black boots, black jeans and a grey shirt under a brown leather duster that reached his knees. His hands were stuffed in the pockets.

I quickly looked away when my stomach tightened with an exhilarating rush of attraction. Fine, sure, he was hot. Hunter was right. But there was still something off about him. Something not quite... right.

He was also the only other human here besides me not wearing some kind of mask. Hunter had his, but I'd lost mine when the koleb fuckers took my stuff, and I hadn't bothered to replace it. All the raiders in here were wearing theirs.

Did that mean this guy wasn't one of the raiders?

Aury reappeared from the diner with his mate and a thin, rangy woman with curly black hair pulled up into a ponytail and a green mask covering the lower half of her face. Her dark eyes were anxious but lively as they approached.

"You've seen Cat?" she asked as soon as they reached us. This had to be Anchor, the camp leader. "He's alright?"

I shot an uneasy glance at Hunter before answering.

"Yeah, we've seen him. Has, uh..." I gestured at the raider clutching Aury's hand, clearing my throat awkwardly.

"Ghost," Aury supplied in a quiet voice.

I nodded. "Did Ghost tell you what we told him?"

She nodded. "He's being held in a prison to fight."

Hunter finally contributed. "We tried to get him to come with us, but he wouldn't. Said there was someone there he couldn't leave behind."

Anchor's bushy brows pulled together into a frown.

"Who?" she barked at Hunter accusingly.

He held up his hands. "Hey, we have no idea. We only had a few minutes to get out. We couldn't stick around to chat."

"What did he say to you?" she urged, taking a step closer, making Hunter stiffen.

"He just said to tell you that he's okay. And still alive."

Anchor stared at him for a long moment. “That’s it?”

Hunter shrugged. “That’s it.”

Her slightly wild gaze cast over all of us before swinging to Ghost. “We have to get him out.”

Ghost’s eyes looked uneasy above his mask, but he nodded. She stared at him, doubt creeping into her eyes as she let out a tense exhale.

“Ghost, I know—”

“I’ll go.”

The new voice made me stiffen. I looked over and realised Edin and the white-haired guy had come over to join us. His pale eyes were blue, I noticed. Ghostly blue, almost like there was a film over them, including his pupils.

And they were aimed at Ghost with an embarrassingly obvious expression. Christ, his pupils had practically reshaped themselves into cartoon hearts.

I suppressed my wince, glancing down at Ghost’s hand firmly tucked inside Aury’s. *Tough break, dude.*

Anchor was staring at him.

“Are you... Really?” she asked.

He nodded, eyes darting back over to Ghost before lowering.

Ghost was watching him. “You don’t have to do that, Moth.”

The guy—Moth—gave an uncomfortable shrug. After taking a breath, he lifted his head, and it seemed like bravado settled over him like a cloak.

“I’ve stayed here too long, and I’m bored,” he drawled. “Need a bit of excitement.”

My eyes swept over his shoulder to the hilt of a sword—a freaking *sword*—that was peeking up. Did this guy think he was some modern-day conqueror or something?

Where did he get a sword from? Now I’d seen it, I kind of wanted one.

“Well, whoever goes, you shouldn’t go on your own,” Hunter said. “It took a lot to get Charlie out. The guards in there have military-grade weapons and armour.”

Moth’s face flushed, the pink hue just slightly unnatural.

“I’ll manage. Thanks,” he bit out. Hunter quirked a brow.

“You won’t,” he said flatly. “The only way you’ll be able to get in is if you enter as a fighter, which means you need a monster with you to do that. And then once you’re in, you won’t be able to get back out.”

“I won’t be entering to fight humans.” The way he said it made my brow furrow. “I’ll get him out another way.”

“Even so, Hunter is right,” Edin piped up, moving away from Moth to grip his mate’s nape. “You shouldn’t go alone, Moth.”

Moth’s face got tense, his eyes darting to Ghost once. The raider fidgeted uneasily, looking up at the silent Aury.

“Maybe—”

“I’ll go with him.”

I hadn’t even realised I was going to speak until the words were already leaving my mouth. All eyes turned toward me, including the piercing pale ones of Moth. He swept his gaze up and down me, then sneered. I bristled, glaring at him.

“What?” Hunter turned to face me, brows pulled low. “You can’t go back there. What if they recognise you?”

“They won’t. It’s been long enough, and I was probably just one of many humans they did that to.”

“Even so, what about the—” Hunter glanced at the watching group. “Where we were heading?”

I licked my lips. I couldn’t deny the flash of excitement I felt in my gut at the thought of not returning to the military just yet. Which was... worrying, to say the least.

“It can wait.” I gave Hunter a pointed look, because we couldn’t discuss it any more in front of the other raiders. “I want to do this. Cat helped me out in there. He’s a good guy.”

“What makes you think you’ll be any help?” Moth said to me, folding his arms over his chest.

I gritted my teeth. “I can fight. I know the Wastes. I know how to use a gun. And I’ve been *in* there.”

He snorted and looked away, making me want to punch him in his too-perfect fucking mouth.

“You got a problem, asshole?” Uh oh. Hunter was bristling, his eyes hard as he stared down Moth.

I stepped forward and gave his chest a solid pat, telling him to back off. “It’s all good, man.”

“I don’t see you getting any other offers.” Hunter continued glaring at Moth, who stared back with narrowed eyes. “You’d be *lucky* to have Charlie with you. Especially because he’d know where the fuck he’s going.

You gonna wander around aimlessly 'til you happen to come across the prison? Huh?"

"Hunter, relax," I muttered, giving Edin a pointed look to calm him down. The big monster stepped forward.

"Calm, Hunter." Edin gripped the back of his neck. "Moth didn't mean anything by it. He's just used to travelling alone."

Hunter let out a derisive snort and looked away.

"Tensions are running high with this news," Gloam said calmly. He and Rig had joined us in time to hear the conversation. "Hunter and Edin are right," he continued. "It is foolish to go alone. And you know that really, don't you?"

He gave Moth an intense look. Shockingly, the prickly asshole glanced at him before lowering his eyes to the ground and shifting away.

"Yes," he muttered like a petulant kid.

"It is very kind of Charlie to offer to accompany you." Gloam smiled at me. "And it makes the most sense. He knows the way. He even knows what cell Cat is being held in."

I nodded. "And if we can't find a way to get him out, we can always just scout it out before heading back here and coming up with a plan." And then I could delay my return to the military for even longer.

"We can load you up with supplies," Anchor jumped in, seeming eager to get this locked down. "Whatever you need."

I gave her a smile. "Thanks."

Edin clapped his huge hands together. "So it's decided then."

He grinned at Hunter, whose eyes were tight with worry as he looked at me.

"And we'll wait here for Charlie to get back," Edin continued, appearing oblivious to the way all the raiders stiffened at his declaration.

I resisted the urge to look at machete guy. He was still standing there in silence, watching this all unfold.

He still had his machete out.

"Um..." Ghost shifted on his feet.

"That should be fine." Rig shot us a grin behind his mask, glancing up at Gloam then to Anchor. "We have spare rooms. And it's only fair to let you guys wait here for Charlie to get back. Right, Anchor?"

She swallowed, eyes uneasy as they tracked over Hunter before stopping on Edin. The big purple monster gave her a fanged grin.

“Yes. That’s fine,” she said faintly. “I, um... I’ll go tell Bo and Daisy to start putting together some food packages for you both.”

She turned her dark eyes to machete guy.

“Lilac.” She jerked her head, indicating that she wanted him to come with her.

After a pause, the raider finally sheathed his machete and slunk past us, green eyes tracking each of us newcomers before he walked off with Anchor.

“Don’t mind Lilac,” Rig said cheerfully. “He’s just, um... quiet.”

He shot us a smile as he wrapped his arms around one of Gloam’s impossibly thick ones. “So where were you guys headed?”

I forced myself not to glance nervously at Hunter, but it was Edin who spoke up.

“Just to the ruined military base,” he said easily. “To see what is left of it.”

Ghost grimaced. “Not a lot. And when I went there last, there was a real nasty creature that had moved in.”

“Oh?” Edin eyed him with interest. “What creature?”

“A karik,” Aury supplied softly.

Edin went totally still, then turned his big eyes to Hunter. They gleamed.

“Did you hear that, josdo? A karik.” He growled. “What I wouldn’t give to hunt one of those fuckers down and rip all the legs off its body.”

Rig burst out laughing while Gloam chuckled. Hunter shifted uneasily.

“He had a leg ripped off by a karik when he was younger,” he explained. “He’s not, uh... super violent or anything.”

Gloam chuckled. “I understand. I’ve come across them before too. Awful things.”

“And I suppose it was no match for that war hammer of yours, eh?” Edin grinned at him jovially.

Rig beamed up at Gloam before resting his masked cheek on his bicep. His brown eyes were soft and friendly when he looked at us again.

“So where do you guys live? I don’t mean details,” he added quickly. “I’m not gonna try and track you down or anything.”

As he chuckled nervously, Hunter’s gaze became cool and flinty. I rolled my eyes. He didn’t have to be so mistrustful of everyone—especially the raiders who had welcomed us into their camp.

“A homestead further north,” I answered Rig with a smile. “Edin found it—it’s awesome. Middle of nowhere, surrounded by forest. Pretty peaceful.”

I jerked my chin at Hunter. “He loves it, because no one bothers him. Well, except me.”

I flashed Hunter a wolfish grin as he rolled his eyes.

“That sounds nice,” said Ghost, who was still holding hands with Aury.

Rig tilted his head toward Ghost, grinning at us. “Ghost here is a bit of an introvert, too.”

“Hunter’s not an introvert,” I said cheerfully. “He’s just an unlikeable asshole.”

Hunter scowled and shoved my arm as his big purple boyfriend burst out laughing, so deep I could have sworn the ground rumbled under our feet. Gloam, Rig and Ghost laughed too, and even Aury grinned. Like last time, it transformed his face from a picture of melancholy into something sweet and playful.

Moth, who’d been standing there in silence, huffed and stalked off. I quirked a brow at him.

This little trip was going to be fun, then.

CHAPTER THREE

Charlie

Rig and Gloam showed Edin and Hunter to an empty room they could stay in, and told me I could sleep in the one next door seeing as Moth had stomped off before we could even discuss when we'd set out for the prison.

Hunter and Edin vanished into their room after saying thanks, no doubt eager to be *alone* for the first time in weeks after us travelling, but I turned to Rig.

"Hey, do you think you could show me the wall?" I asked, pointing to the top where a raider was keeping watch. "Bet the view's awesome up there."

Rig grinned behind his mask and nodded. "Sure."

As the three of us walked back around to the camp entrance, Rig chuckled and said, "Moth comes across as a bit of an ass, but he's okay really. Just cocky."

I quirked a brow. "Uh-huh."

"Thank you so much for what you're doing," he continued, his brown eyes warm when he looked at me. "We've all been so worried about Cat. He runs things with Anchor around here. Well, he did until he went missing."

I smiled at him. "No problem."

As we made our way inside the containers and up a ladder to the next level, warm satisfaction bloomed in me at the thought of helping Cat—helping these raiders. It was far larger than anything I'd felt while carrying out orders for the military. At the time, I thought I was making a difference. Doing something to protect humans. To protect the cities.

Now I wasn't so sure.

I whistled as we emerged out of the final hatch and into the air. It was cold, winter just around the corner, but the view up here was incredible. A sprawling forest—bigger than I'd initially thought—stretched out from the back of the camp. The land was flat everywhere else, sliced down the middle by the old highway that led to this place, giving a clear view of anything approaching for miles.

“Great set up,” I told Rig with a grin. “I’m kind of jealous.”

He laughed. “Your place sounds great too. Come on, let’s go sit.”

I followed him further along the wall, past a tall blonde raider holding a rudimentary crossbow. She eyed me cautiously but gave me a brief nod, which I returned.

We sat down on the edge of the wall, which made me a little nervous, but I didn’t show it to Rig or Gloam.

“Damn.” I chuckled, trying not to look down at the sheer drop beneath my boots. “That’s a long way down.”

“Yeah, you kind of get used to heights living here.” Rig waved a hand before tangling his fingers with Gloam’s atop the big monster’s massive thigh.

“So, um... how did you guys meet?” It sounded like such a weird question when directed at a monster-human couple. “You said you... freed him from someone?”

Rig nodded. “There was a woman who collected monsters. Collector Mary. She’d captured Gloam and enslaved him. When they showed up here to capture Aury, I made it my mission to free him.”

He grinned up at Gloam before resting his cheek on his shoulder. The big grey monster smiled and kissed the top of his head.

“That’s the short version, anyway,” Rig added.

I nodded and tentatively leaned forward when I spotted a big, sand-coloured head among the trees in the forest.

“Hey, are those borolash? We have two living behind the homestead.”

Gloam nodded. “Mary had captured them too.”

“Right, okay.” I spotted an old RV sitting against the edge of the camp wall, just outside the forest perimeter. “Is that the RV Hunter was talking about? That you were chained to?”

I winced at the insensitive question as soon as it left my mouth, but Gloam just nodded.

“Yes.”

“Seraph’s down there as well.”

Rig pointed at something, and when I squinted, I could just make out the edge of a big, box-like shape with a metal frame and glass panes.

“Seraph?”

Rig nodded. “Another beastie that Mary had in her collection, but he’s too dangerous to free just yet. We’re trying to figure out how to help him.”

His head suddenly whipped around to stare at me.

“Hey, I know you said you weren’t part of the military’s monster programme, but did you happen to hear about them drugging beasts?”

“Drugging them?” I shook my head. “No. Sorry. Hunter and I didn’t get involved in any of that. We went out of our way not to.”

Rig’s shoulders sagged. “Okay. No worries.”

“Were they... drugging Seraph?” I asked cautiously.

I peered down at the edge of the cage again, but couldn’t see anything in it.

“Yes.” Gloam sighed and turned his goat-like eyes to Rig. “I really must read Mary’s journals to find out more, my love. I was just about to do it when you came in.”

The raider looked anxious. “Okay. If you’re sure you’re ready.”

Gloam stroked a big hand through his hair and smiled down at him. Geez, everyone was just loving monsters these days, huh?

“At least he’s gone quiet,” Gloam said, gesturing down at the RV and hidden cage.

“Yeah, that’s true.”

“Rig!”

We all turned at the sound of a voice calling up from within the camp. I spotted Aury’s mate Ghost, the one with the gas mask, gesturing for Rig to come down.

He shot him a thumbs up and yanked down his mask quickly, revealing a handsome face with a big nose, to kiss Gloam on the cheek before he scrambled to his feet.

“Coming!” He turned to look at me. “Charlie, feel free to walk around the camp. And there are shower stalls in the corner if you want to wash up.”

“Thanks.” I smiled up at him. He was a genuinely nice guy.

“See you in a bit, love,” Gloam said as Rig walked off back toward the hatch with a wave.

I felt a little nervous being alone with the big grey ayturin. Not because I was worried he was going to hurt me, but because he was... kind of intimidating. More so than Edin—but maybe that was just because I was used to Edin and had seen him countless times being a loud, rambunctious goof.

Plus, I’d seen him naked. Hard to be intimidated by someone you’ve seen naked.

Although Edin's... equipment was intimidating all on its own.

"Rig seems real nice," I said to Gloam with a small smile.

He gave me a big, fanged grin that somehow radiated love. "He is wonderful."

I chuckled and looked back out at the view. It was weird how beautiful the Wastes could be, even though it was technically one gigantic graveyard of humanity's former life.

Not all humanity though. The atmosphere in this camp was relaxed. Kind of nice. Everyone working together to live somewhat comfortably out here, like we had been on the homestead.

Eventually, I'd become less paranoid that a bunch of raiders or rabid monsters would smash down the front door and kill us all in our sleep. Aside from the borolash, we hadn't seen any big monsters out there. Just a couple of little ones, like the one Edin had tried to get us to eat when we hadn't been there long.

I thought of my tiny room back in the barracks at the Tennessee base. Four blank walls, a bed and a closet. I'd never bothered to make it feel more 'homey', because Hunter and I had always been out on missions in the Wastes. It had never bothered me before, when we'd returned there for a few nights to sleep.

Now, the thought of waking up to silence in that tiny room made me feel kind of sick. Especially because I wouldn't be meeting up with Hunter to work out before breakfast.

I wouldn't be going on missions with Hunter anymore either. Would they make me go alone? Surely not. But that meant I'd be partnered up with someone else—some stranger—and I didn't like that idea one bit either.

Fuck. Thinking about the military just made my head hurt these days.

"You look deep in thought."

Gloam's low, rumbling voice made me jump. I smiled over at him sheepishly.

"Just thinking about how we'll get Cat out of that place," I said. "It's like a fortress. More so than this place, even," I added with a chuckle.

Gloam smiled, then glanced behind us into the camp.

"I am very grateful that you offered to go with Moth. I've never met Cat, but I know he means a lot to Rig." He glanced behind us again, then turned those eerie eyes to me. "I don't say this to unnerve you, Charlie, but... be careful with Moth."

I stared at him. "Why?"

He grimaced. "He is... He seems to care for this camp. And these raiders."

I snorted at that. "One raider in particular, by the looks."

Gloam paused, then let out a sad chuckle. "Indeed. He certainly pines for Ghost. He knows what Aury would do if he ever tried anything though."

I swallowed at that. "Yeah, everyone's acting like Aury is this... big, terrifying beast. He seems kinda shy. And quiet."

Gloam gave me a small smile. "He is a gentle soul. You don't need to worry about your friends remaining here while you're gone."

I nodded, pursing my lips.

"But, so... what were you saying about Moth?" I looked at him. "Should I be worried?"

Gloam sighed. "Maybe not. As I said, he does seem to care for these people. But he... There are things about him that they don't know."

I stared. "What things?"

Gloam shook his head. "It's not my place. They are his secrets. His burdens."

He reached over, across the space Rig had previously occupied, and took my arm in a gentle grip.

"Just be careful. Never put your complete trust in him," he said in a low voice, then released my arm and shrugged. "Perhaps I'm wrong, but I wouldn't have wanted you to leave without at least telling you to... keep your guard up."

My eyes were wide as I stared at him. Shit. There was nothing more dangerous than having a partner out here who you couldn't trust to have your back.

"I... Thanks," I said, staring out at the empty landscape.

Gloam sighed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to unnerve you."

I shook my head.

"No, I'm grateful. I'll keep my guard up." I looked over at him. "Do you think he'd... fuck me over out there?"

He cocked his head. "Not necessarily."

I exhaled a long breath, reaching up to wipe a hand down my face. "Okay."

"I must go and read Mary's journals to try and find answers for Seraph." Gloam looked over at me with a smile, showing off his fangs and little

tusks. “Stay up here as long as you like.”

“Thanks.”

Gloam gracefully stood up, gripping his war hammer. He looked down at me with a slight grin.

“And at least you’ll be in the company of a half monster out there. He should understand their actions and customs better than others. That will help.”

I gave a polite chuckle. “Yeah.”

But as he started to walk away toward the hatch, his words registered properly. I turned to stare at the big black spot on the back of his bald head.

“Wait, what?”

CHAPTER FOUR

Moth

Everyone just fucking *loved* the new human in the camp.

Edin's surly human lover didn't really speak to anyone or make an effort to ingratiate himself with the raiders, but the one with dark hair and grey eyes—*Charlie*—seemed to effortlessly draw attention and make people want to flock to him. With his big, stupid smile and smooth, low voice with a southern accent.

He was *charming*. My lip curled. He was making them all laugh again as I watched from my spot alone outside the old bar. He'd been here a few hours and they were already acting like he'd been a part of the camp for years.

Jealousy streaked through me when I saw him say something to Ghost with that charming grin on his face that already infuriated me. Ghost laughed at whatever it was, his blue eyes creasing in the corners.

I looked away quickly in case someone saw me staring, gazing down at the charm bracelet I was absently twisting in my fingers. I normally kept it hidden when I was here, because I didn't want anyone to see it and ask what it was or why I had it. The answer was too humiliating.

My human mother had died in childbirth, as far as I was aware. It had been before the monster apocalypse, and at first, no one had noticed anything different about me. I'd been placed into care. They thought I was a baby girl, but when my body started changing, the people looking after me didn't want me anymore. The ones after that tried for a while, but they didn't want me either. They found me horrifying to look at. They thought I had some awful disease or congenital malformation.

The monsters rose when I was five. When it happened, the couple who'd been caring for me just... left. They packed up and fled, leaving me in their house.

I'd waited for them at first. Waited for them to come back, even though they hadn't been nice. I'd had no one else. When I'd eventually wandered outside to find food and ask someone if they knew when they were coming

back, the entire street had been deserted. Windows were smashed. Cars piled up in the road from people trying to flee and crashing into each other. There were some bodies on the sidewalk, which I hadn't fully understood as I'd wandered down the street hoping to find someone.

I'd eventually been found by some humans making their way to one of the newly established safe zones on the coast. They'd seemed unnerved by me, just like all the others had, and had argued amongst themselves about what to do with me. Leave me out here to die, or take me with them?

They'd reluctantly taken me with them, but disappeared the moment we were inside the safe zone. They didn't want the responsibility of looking after a creepy little kid during an apocalypse. No one did.

I was six when I found the charm bracelet, and had been living on the streets of the city, which got built up shockingly fast as humans crammed themselves into the military's safe zone. No one paid much attention to a weird little homeless kid by then, except to sometimes throw food scraps when they noticed me.

The woman had been walking down a dark, empty street one night when the charm bracelet slipped off her wrist. She hadn't even seen me curled up next to a dumpster, but I'd watched her. Her hair had been long and blonde—not as pale as mine, but my eyes had latched onto it. She had fair skin and was wearing a short, tight red dress and high heels.

I'd wondered if my mom had looked like her. If she'd been blonde and pale like I was, or if I got those traits from my other parent. I didn't fully understand what I was, but I knew I wasn't like other children. Other people. They all looked at me with mild revulsion, like they couldn't quite work out what was wrong or different with me, but they knew there was *something*.

When the echo of her heels had faded, I'd crept forward and snatched up the bracelet. I'd curled back up clutching it, pretending it had belonged to my mom. Pretending I had something of value in the world, even though it was just a cheap bit of metal.

The bracelet had rusted and turned discoloured over the years. Sometimes if I fiddled with it for too long, it stained my fingers green. And even though I obviously knew it didn't belong to my mother, the lie I'd told myself as a child had become a twisted half-truth at some point, and now I couldn't bring myself to get rid of it.

Like I said. Humiliating. Pathetic.

I managed to hold back my surprised jump when someone sat down beside me. I stuffed the bracelet in my coat pocket and glanced over, scowling when I realised it was *him*. Charlie. The charming, handsome newcomer who already had everyone eating out of the palm of his hand. Even Ghost, who kept literally everyone at arm's length. Well—except Aury now. Searing jealousy tightened my chest again.

I stiffened up when Charlie spoke.

“Hey. So, we didn't really get to discuss logistics before.” He chuckled. “Or anything at all. I'm Charlie.”

“I know.”

He paused. “Okay... Well, we should probably get to know each other seeing as we'll be, uh... travelling together soon.”

My lip curled as I glanced over at him. The fairy lights Rig had strung up everywhere cast yellow and pink streaks over his chiselled face, reflecting in his grey eyes.

I could see the appreciative yet uneasy gleam in his eye as his gaze tracked over me, but it just made me want to scowl. That was how all humans looked at me initially, but I still freaked them out too much for them to ever want to actually get close to me.

Except Ghost. Ghost had been interested in me. Actually interested. Until I'd managed to fuck that up.

“We don't need to *get to know* each other,” I bit out. “We'll go to the prison, get Cat and come back. We don't have to become *friends*.”

“Jesus,” he muttered, leaning back against the wall behind us. “I don't know what your problem is, but we need to be able to trust each other at least a little. We'll have each other's backs out there, won't we?”

I eyed him. “You really think I'm going to trust an ex-soldier to watch my back?”

Rig had pulled me to one side and quietly told me earlier that Hunter and Charlie were former military. He'd said they both left it behind when they found out about the true extent of the *specimen programme*, but that sounded like bullshit to me. I didn't trust them.

A faint flush crawled over Charlie's high cheekbones, but his gaze was flinty as he looked at me. “Well you're gonna have to. You think it'll be easy for me too? I heard... I know you're half monster. I don't care—I'm not prejudiced—but that'll still take some getting used to.”

I scowled and looked away. My eyes automatically tried to seek out Ghost, but they settled on Gloam instead. My scowl deepened. I bet he'd been the one to tell him. I knew he didn't trust me. I knew he knew far more than I wanted him to.

When Collector Mary had arrived here and Rig described the aytorin to me, my stomach had clenched up with fear, but I'd managed to convince myself that it wouldn't have been... one of them. And even if it had, it wouldn't have mattered. He'd had a cage on his head. He couldn't talk.

But then he'd arrived at the camp with Rig all those weeks later, with his head free and his voice back. When our eyes had locked in the diner that day, terror made me break out in a cold sweat. I'd been convinced he was going to tell them all, and I didn't know what they'd have done to me if they'd found out.

But he hadn't. I didn't know if he'd told Rig, but the raider treated me the same as he always had. But if Gloam *did* ever tell him, Rig would tell Ghost.

I didn't think I'd be able to stand seeing the horror and disgust in Ghost's eyes if he knew.

I dragged my gaze away before Gloam noticed me staring and scowled at Charlie again.

"Then don't come," I drawled. "I didn't want you to. I didn't ask you to. And then you won't have to worry about putting your trust in a *half monster*."

"I want to do it," he said, voice hard. "I want to help Cat. And you won't be able to do it alone. Besides, you need me to show you where it is."

I clenched my jaw. "I know the Wastes. I'll be able to find it."

"Then why haven't you heard of it already?"

I wanted to snap at him to shut up. I didn't want to fucking talk to this guy, especially if I was going to be stuck with him for the foreseeable future.

"Look, if you insist on coming, I can't stop you," I bit out. "But don't think we're going to become *buddies*. I don't *need* you. I don't need you to watch my back. Tag along if you want, but just don't get in my way and we'll be fine."

Charlie was silent for a few moments.

"Wow, you really are an asshole," he said in a hard voice, standing up. "Fine. So we'll set out in the morning?"

“Fine. Whatever.” I went back to staring at Ghost.
I heard him exhale a long breath.
“Can’t wait,” he muttered before walking off.

CHAPTER FIVE

Charlie

My face burned as Hunter and Edin fussed over me like I was their only child getting ready to go on his first school field trip.

“You got enough ammo?” Hunter asked with a frown as he checked my gun, even though I’d already fucking done it.

“Yes.”

“And your hunting knife?”

I rolled my eyes. It was strapped to my hip. He could see it. “Yes.”

“Are these clothes warm enough?” Edin frowned as he plucked at my sleeve. “It is getting very cold. Snow is coming. It’s probably already settled further north in the time we’ve been travelling here.”

“I’ve got thermals from the bunker,” I told him, exasperated. “And this big-ass coat. I’ll be plenty warm. I’m *used* to this. Hunter and I used to do this all the time.”

“Mm,” he grunted, brows still pulled low over his huge purple eyes as he stepped back and eyed me critically, hands on his hips. His tail swished beneath the hem of his kilt. “Did they give you enough food?” he asked, lifting his head to stare hard at the diner. “I will tell them to give you more —”

I let out an exasperated laugh. “They gave us both plenty. We’ll be *fine*. I can hunt when we run out.”

Hunter grunted, lifting his eyes to stare over at Moth, who was waiting alone by the container entrance, arms folded over his chest and an impatient scowl on his too-perfect face.

He handed my gun back to me. “I don’t trust that guy.”

Edin waved a hand. “Moth is fine.”

“Is he?” Hunter was still staring hard at him. “He’s an asshole. I don’t trust him to watch out for Charlie.”

I choked on a laugh at that and teased, “*He’s* an asshole? Have you met you, Hatton?”

Hunter scowled as Edin chuckled. “I may be an asshole, but I’ve always had your back.”

I softened, stepping closer to slap his arm. “I know. And don’t worry. I won’t put my complete faith in him. I don’t trust him either.”

Not because he was half monster, although finding that out had certainly jarred me at first. I hadn’t known that was even possible. It was just because Moth really *was* an asshole. Snarky and arrogant. He’d been a total dick to me for absolutely no reason, and I didn’t know what his problem was.

But I wasn’t going to let it bother me. *Kill ‘em with kindness*, my gram always used to say. He could be as prickly as he wanted, but I wouldn’t rise to it. Mainly because I had the distinct impression that it would piss him off even more if I didn’t.

It would be entertaining, at least, to see how deep I could make that scowl mar his overly perfect face, despite doing or saying absolutely nothing offensive. Was he like that with everyone? I hadn’t seen him talk to anyone at all, really. He’d been sitting all alone when I went over the night before. I didn’t know if it was because he didn’t like any of the raiders, or he didn’t feel like he was welcome.

I suspected the latter. I could recognise insecurity when I saw it. And the way he’d continued to stare at Ghost with moon eyes, despite the raider cuddling up to his big, winged beastie, made me think he just liked torturing himself by hanging around the camp.

Whatever. I wasn’t here to be his therapist and figure out where his issues stemmed from. We just had to get to the prison and try and find a way to free Cat. Like he’d said, we weren’t doing this to become *buddies*.

Although, I did feel kind of bad for him. As embarrassing as Edin and Hunter’s fussing was, at least I had someone who would care if I didn’t come back. Moth was just waiting there all alone. He’d collected his food pack from Bo and Daisy—the two friendly raiders in the diner—in silence and gone to wait for me at the entrance without speaking to anyone.

As I glanced surreptitiously over, Gloam and Rig approached him, which made me feel a little better. The raider was smiling as he spoke. Moth gave him a tiny smile and nod back, but then his pale eyes darted to Gloam and away again just as fast. He looked wary. I wondered if he knew or suspected that Gloam had warned me about him—had told me he was half monster. There was some tension there between them, despite how friendly Rig was being.

Aury and Ghost joined them, and I saw the way Moth's eyes softened as he hungrily stared at the raider before looking away. Jesus, he had it bad. I wondered if Ghost even knew.

"Be careful, Charlie." Edin lifted me into a bear hug, making my face get hot again. "Look after yourself."

He set me down and ruffled my hair. "Try not to get captured by kolebs this time, eh?"

I rolled my eyes, leaning into the one-armed hug Hunter gave me. "Real funny."

"Seriously, Charlie." Hunter stared at me hard, hands on my shoulders. "If something happens, and you have a chance to get away but he doesn't..."

My gut twisted uncomfortably. "I'm not going to fuck him over just because he's an asshole."

"But *he* might. So don't give him the opportunity."

Edin shifted, brows pinching into a frown. "He won't. Moth is... He keeps himself at a distance from everyone, but he is good. *I* trust him."

That made me feel a little better, and I gave Edin a small, grateful smile. He returned it with a big, fanged grin, palming my head to jerk it closer and rub his cheek over my hair.

"Edin," I muttered, my cheeks on fire as I glanced over to see if Moth and the others had seen.

They had. They were all watching. Gloam's lips were quirked into a little smile, but Moth just huffed in disgust and looked away.

"Safe travels, Charlie," Edin rumbled as I exhaled and starting walking toward the entrance.

"See you when you get back," Hunter added in a gruff tone that told me he would accept no other outcome.

"All set?" Rig asked cheerfully when I reached the group. "Thank you both again for doing this. We really appreciate it."

"No problem," I said with a smile. Moth just huffed again and adjusted the strap of the backpack slung over his shoulder.

"Be safe." Ghost's blue eyes were tight with worry as he looked between us. "Both of you."

Moth's cheeks flushed that faint, weird pink, and he nodded once before quickly turning to start heading into the containers.

Guess we were leaving then. I raised my hand in goodbye to the raiders and monsters, then followed him out. Neither of us spoke as our boots echoed on the metal, and I was shocked when Moth actually held the door open for me after stepping outside.

But before I could even say thanks, he turned and strode off. I refused to hurry after him, so I walked steadily a few paces behind. I wasn't going to rise to his childish sulking.

We started heading north in total silence. I quickly got hot in my heavy coat, but knew I'd be grateful for it soon. Edin was right—I could see that snow was coming. The clouds were thick and heavy, a steely blue-grey as they hung low in the sky.

I absently watched Moth's back as he walked ahead of me. His backpack was slung over his sword, the hilt of which stuck up into the air behind his head. He'd braided his long white hair back, though a few strands had already escaped in the faint, cold wind that was making my cheeks tingle.

He was irritatingly attractive. Even the back of him was. The wide shoulders and long legs. The sword. Why was the sword so hot? He should have looked like a douche.

At least I understood better now why he was so freakishly perfect. He wasn't entirely human. I wondered what his monster half was. It had to be something humanoid, right? Aside from the weird uncanny valley vibes—which were getting fainter already—he looked basically human.

I'd seen the weird tattoos covering his neck and hands. My belly heated when I wondered where else he had them. And whether he had any other piercings, aside from the three in his lips and the several small hoops I could see in his ears, which weren't human—they tapered into delicate points.

Were the piercings just for aesthetic purposes or did they mean something? Were they something to do with his monster half? I wanted to ask him but knew he wouldn't tell me.

This tense, stupid silence was already getting to me. We'd been walking for about an hour and hadn't said a word. I'd lose my mind if this continued for the entire trip, so I decided to try and forget how prickish he'd been before and break the ice.

"So, you travel the Wastes a lot, huh?" I asked, still a few steps behind him.

Moth's shoulders stiffened, but his pace slowed just a little—just enough for us to gradually end up walking side by side.

"Yeah," he said, then fell silent again.

This was going to be like pulling teeth.

"Seen anything weird or fucked up?"

He glanced over at me, black brows twitching. "Like what?"

I chuckled. "I don't know. Anything. When Hunter and I were on a mission once, we were camped out gathering intel on a new raider camp. A monster appeared one night, and we were sure the whole camp was gonna get ripped apart. But they let it right in and then..."

"And then what?" Moth reluctantly asked when I trailed off, which made my mouth quirk.

"They had a giant orgy."

His brows shot up before he narrowed his eyes at me. "Are you lying?"

"No." I chuckled, shrugging. "They had one giant orgy by their campfire. Every single one of them fucked that monster."

"What did the monster look like?"

I cocked my head as I thought back. "Kind of... fish-like, I guess? It had gills. But it was humanoid, and it could speak. The camp was by a lake, so I guess it came from there. That's probably why they set up there in the first place."

Moth grunted. "Sounds like a narid. They're known for being particularly seductive."

I chuckled and glanced over at him, resisting the urge to give him a friendly nudge with my elbow. "Know from experience?"

He tensed up and scowled over at me, saying nothing.

I'll take that as a no.

I exhaled and tried to think of something else to keep him talking. Even though he was a prickly, moody asshole, conversation with *anyone* was better than complete silence for miles. For days and weeks.

"So how did you meet the Nebraska raiders?" I asked, figuring it was a pretty safe, neutral topic—unless he got uptight talking about Ghost.

He gave a stiff shrug. "Came across Ghost one day out in the Wastes when he'd been cornered by a monster. Killed it."

"Oh. Well, that was nice of you," I offered carefully. Moth just side-eyed me and said nothing.

Well. Alright then.

The sun was setting when we heard voices.

Not that we could see the sun. It was still behind a thick bank of grey clouds, but the sky was darkening rapidly as we made our way down the street of an old town and the sound of several voices drifted from one of the buildings.

I glanced at Moth to see what he wanted to do, but he didn't look concerned. He kept walking, so I cast a furtive look around and kept walking too.

It's people, I told myself as my hairline dampened slightly. Doesn't mean they'll be friendly, but it's not little floppy-eared fuckers who'll tie you up with their creepy two-pronged hands. It's not.

"Hey."

I tensed when a gruff, male voice called out to us. Moth still didn't stop, so I didn't either, but I glanced back to see four people coming out of an old convenience store.

The one at the front was tall and broad, with long red hair tied back in a bun and a scruffy ginger beard on his face. He was dressed in ripped jeans and a leather jacket and holding a pistol. Behind him was a short, thin guy with a shaved head and a calculating gleam in his eye, a switchblade already clutched in his fist. The other two were female, one Latina with short dark hair and defined muscles, the other blonde and softer looking. But looks could be deceiving. They each carried a baseball bat, the one in the blonde's hand covered in gouges and dents in the wood.

"Hey, I'm talking to you," redhead barked. They were heading down the street toward us, so I gripped Moth's arm, but he shook me off and kept walking.

"What?" he said in a bored voice.

"Give us your shit."

He snorted. "No."

"It's four against two, asshole. This will go better for you if you just hand the stuff over."

They were getting closer, walking quicker to catch up with us. I stopped and pulled the gun off my back, turning to eye them calmly.

"Leave us alone and we'll leave you alone," I said.

Redhead's eyes darted to my gun, but his mouth twisted into a sneer behind his beard.

"You think you're a big man because you have a gun?" He waved his pistol at me with a mocking smile. "I have a gun too, hotshot."

"I'll shoot you if you come closer," I said calmly.

"I'll shoot you first."

Jesus Christ. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes, instead glancing at Moth who had finally stopped walking and was staring at the group with a bored look in his pale eyes, arms crossed over his chest. He wasn't even reaching for his sword. Maybe it was just for show—maybe he didn't even know how to use it.

I saw the blonde staring at Moth. Her mouth twisted before she leaned in to whisper to the muscular woman, who nodded and shot Moth a disgusted look.

"Doubt you even have ammo for that thing." Redhead's voice pulled my attention back to him. He was smirking at me, and I realised the short, thin guy had slunk closer. I aimed my gun at him, then back at redhead, gritting my teeth when Moth continued to just fucking stand there.

"Is our stuff really worth finding out?" I asked, then barked at the short guy, "Don't fucking move."

The blonde shot toward us, raising her bat over her shoulder as her lips peeled back in a snarl. I swung my gun toward her, but then I realised redhead was raising his pistol. I jerked it back and shot him once in the shoulder before he could fire off a round. He stumbled back with a shout, the gun slipping from his fingers. Skinny guy lunged for it immediately as the muscular woman sprinted toward us.

I shot skinny guy in the thigh. He screamed, dropping to the ground. He tried to drag himself toward the abandoned pistol, and my lips thinned into a grim line as I prepared to shoot him dead.

But before I could, Moth was suddenly there, moving with blurring speed. My brain struggled to catch up as I watched him swing his sword down and cut off *both* of the skinny guy's hands, before lopping off the arm of the redhead as he stumbled back, clutching his shoulder and trying to get away.

I realised that someone was screaming loudly and constantly to my right, and when my eyes slowly swung that way, I saw the blonde scrabbling back across the ground with blood pumping from a stump where her right arm—

and her bat—had previously been. The muscular woman was writhing on the ground, face drained of colour and her teeth clenched, her arm severed just below her elbow.

My heart was pounding as I stared at Moth again. He calmly wiped the blood off his sword with the skinny guy's shirt, ignoring his thrashing and gurgling screams as he waved his two handleless arms that were spurting blood everywhere.

He straightened and irritably wiped away some blood that had splashed on his coat.

"If any of you survive, maybe you'll learn to just leave people alone." His voice was steady, and his face was almost emotionless when he turned and walked back toward me.

I stared at the four people all thrashing on the ground, moaning in agony, blood pumping from their various severed appendages.

Okay, so... the sword wasn't just for show.

CHAPTER SIX

Charlie

“Will you stop doing that?” Moth gritted out through clenched teeth.

I looked over at him with a confused frown. “Doing what?”

“Humming. You keep humming.”

I rolled my eyes, even though I hadn’t realised I was doing it. “What else am I supposed to do? You won’t fucking talk.”

We’d set off a few hours ago after spending the night in an old gas station, taking turns to keep watch. It had been as tense and uncomfortable as the entire day had been. Mostly silent, with Moth grunting answers at me when I asked him anything.

“Why does me not talking mean you have to hum the same fucking song for miles?” he snapped.

Anger flared, but I pushed it down and chuckled. “I can switch it up. Hum something else. Any requests?”

“Is silence an option?”

“Nope,” I said cheerfully. “Either we talk, or I hum. Or I can sing?”

“No,” he barked, then let out an irritable huff. “What do you even want to talk about? We don’t know each other. We’re not doing this to form a lifelong fucking friendship.”

“No,” I said steadily, “but we can at least make it less painful. We’re gonna be stuck together for a while, Moth. Is there a particular reason you want to make this as unpleasant as possible? Or are you just that much of an asshole that you can’t control it?”

“Christ, you’re annoying,” he muttered, which made a pang of hurt tighten my chest before I could stop it. “I would have preferred the giant surly one over you.”

I snapped.

“What’s your problem?” I stopped and turned to face him. “Seriously, what the fuck have I done to you? Or are you just angry that I offered to come with you before *Ghost* could?”

He stiffened, face going pink. “What are you—What’s that supposed to mean?”

I snorted. “Come on. If you wanted to keep it a secret, maybe you shouldn’t gaze at him like a lovesick teenager all the time.”

A muscle in Moth’s jaw twitched as he took a step closer, hands clenching into fists. “Fuck you.”

“It’s not my fucking fault that he’s in love with someone else. If the only reason you offered to do this was because you were hoping he’d come with you, well—sorry. That’s not what happened. You’re stuck with *me*, so get the fuck over yourself and deal with it.”

His face darkened, going slightly purple. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“Sure, maybe I don’t. I don’t know you. But what I *do* know is that we’re stuck together out here, and we should at least *try* to get along while we’re doing this. The Wastes are dangerous. We need to trust each other, Moth. I need to trust that you’re not gonna leave me for dead the moment shit goes down. And you need to trust the same of me.”

He was breathing hard through his nose, and it took him a long time to answer.

“I’m not going to leave you for dead,” he eventually got out, averting his eyes. “But I don’t trust you.”

I exhaled. It was something at least.

“I’m not going to do that either,” I said, staring at him. “So we have each other’s backs?”

He gave a tight nod and turned to carry on walking. I followed, happy to stay quiet for a while. I wasn’t sure if I trusted him either. I wasn’t sure if he actually *would* have my back, but one of us had to start trusting the other at some point.

“So did you decide?” I asked with a tiny smile, looking over at him. “Talking or humming?”

He rolled his eyes, nose wrinkling slightly. I tried not to stare at him. He was a moody asshole, but he was a fucking beautiful one. Attraction curled low in my belly, despite his attitude and the fact that he was clearly in love with an already-attached raider.

The longer I spent with him, the more that initial weird vibe I’d gotten faded. It helped that I understood why I’d had that reaction now.

“Talking, I guess,” he muttered, and I couldn’t help the wide grin that stretched my mouth. I’d take that as a win.

“So how long have you known the Nebraska camp raiders?” I asked, hiking up the strap of my backpack as we walked.

“About five years.”

I glanced over at him. “How old are you?”

It was kind of hard to tell, given how perfect his face was.

“Twenty-five.”

A little younger than me, then. I was thirty-one.

“Wait, so…” I frowned. “You were born before the monsters came?”

“Yes. Some creatures from that world were coming over before the tear widened.”

I nodded. “Like the parasites.”

He glanced over at me. “Parasites?”

My brows twitched into another frown. “Uh… yeah. That the Soul Eater hunts?”

“I—” He stopped, his face going pink again before he shrugged and looked away.

I stayed quiet for a while, confused. He didn’t know about the parasites? Hunter had told me what the Soul Eater—and others like him elsewhere in the world—were really doing. I assumed all monsters knew. And Moth was half monster.

“Wait, so Edin never told you that? About the parasites?” I asked. I thought they were friends.

He gave another stiff shrug. “Edin and I are just… casual acquaintances. Friendly when we run into each other. That’s about it.”

But so… no other monster had ever told Moth about them? Did he not have any monster friends? Maybe he didn’t like them. Maybe he related more to humans. But I didn’t think so. He’d been distant at the camp, despite knowing those raiders for five years. He kept himself apart from them.

Did he have *any* friends?

I cleared my throat, feeling awkward. “Well anyway, so you were born before the monsters rose. Did you live here? Or in their world?”

“Here.”

“Where are your parents? Which side is the human side? Your mom or dad?”

He grew even stiffer. "My mother was human."

Was. Ah. I glanced over at him furtively. He was tense, jaw clamped. It was obviously a touchy subject, which was understandable.

"I grew up on a farm in Texas," I said to move past it. "My parents were stern and hard-nosed when we were kids, but... you know. They were fine." I chuckled. "My daddy refused to leave the farm at first when the monsters came. Posted up on the front porch with a shotgun. Momma had to threaten to shoot his knees and drag him into the truck so we could get to one of the safe zones."

Moth nodded, staring at the ground as we walked. "Do you ever get to see them?"

I scrunched my nose. "Some. Hardly ever. I've visited them when I had leave. They live in New Houston now. Kinda hard to get to."

"Close to the tear," he murmured, and I nodded as I glanced over at him.

"Have you seen it?" I asked. "The tear?"

"No. The military guards it. It's risky getting anywhere close to it." He looked over at me. "Haven't you, then?"

I shook my head. "Never got posted there, which I'm grateful for. Sounds like a shitty job."

There was a lull in the conversation, so I frantically tried to think of something else to say. He was finally fucking talking, so maybe this trip wouldn't be total agony.

"So have you travelled all over the Wastes? Or do you tend to stick to this area?"

He gave a one-shouldered shrug. "Mainly stay around here. I've been to most parts, though."

"Have you always lived out here? In the Wastes? After the monsters came, I mean."

He tensed right back up. "No."

Oookay, another no-go.

"Maybe we should think of what we're going to do when we get to the prison," I said, because that seemed like the safest topic.

His shoulders unclenched. "Yeah. So what are you... How do you think we'll be able to get Cat out?"

Oh, so *now* he wanted my input. I thought I wasn't *needed*.

I held back the snarky reply and instead said, "It's gonna be real fucking hard, I won't lie. They keep the humans locked up in the cells most of the

time, and the guards have assault rifles. They're mean bastards."

"What was it like?" he asked quietly after a moment.

I chuckled. "Pretty fucking scary. These little dudes grabbed me when Hunter and I were looking around a town and tied me up. Dragged me into this tunnel network underground. Then some big fuckers joined us and started trying to train me up, even though I had no idea what they were doing." I exhaled. "I worked it out when we got to the prison, obviously. And I was only there for one night before Hunter got me out, so... it wasn't too bad."

It had been terrifying. I'd been shitting bricks the entire time they'd dragged me across the Wastes, even though they hadn't hurt me. And then I thought I was going to be stuck in that prison until I got the shit beaten out of me by another human or a monster and died a painful death all alone.

"You were in a cell with Cat?"

"Yeah," I croaked, then cleared my throat. "He was a nice guy. Calmed me down. I want to get him out of there."

"Did he tell you anything about the person he chose to stay for?"

I shook my head and gave a self-deprecating chuckle. "No. He didn't talk much. I didn't give him much of a chance. I, uh... I tend to ramble when I'm nervous."

He quirked a brow at me. "You must be nervous all the time, then."

I paused for a second, then laughed. Had that actually been a *joke*? From *this* asshole? Not that he was being an asshole right now. He'd relaxed a little since we'd moved on to safer topics—ones that weren't about him.

"Okay, maybe I just talk a lot. Guess you better get used to it."

He grunted and looked away.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Charlie

“You hear that?” I whispered, my body tense as I reached over and gripped Moth’s arm, ignoring the way he stiffened under the touch.

We’d been finishing our dinner after setting up for the night in the manager’s office of an old warehouse. It was freezing, and I could see snow drifting into the main part of the warehouse through a hole in the roof, casting a beam of weak blue light inside the otherwise dark space.

And I’d just heard something skittering around out there.

Moth jerked his arm free.

“I heard it,” he muttered, reaching for his sword. “I’ll go kill it.”

“What?” I hissed, grabbing him again. “Shouldn’t we at least see what it is? What if it’s a person?”

He gave a little shrug. “So? They might try and rob us or kill us for our stuff. They might’ve followed us here.”

“That doesn’t mean—” I stopped abruptly when another sound came from the warehouse, closer to the door to the manager’s office.

We were sitting in the centre of the room, completely visible to whoever or whatever might peer in through the windows either side of the door. Scrambling up, I dragged Moth over to the wall beside the window so we were out of sight. He hissed in irritation, but was smart enough to stay silent.

I pulled my gun off my back and cautiously peered around the edge of the window. It was hard to see out there, but my heart spasmed when I noticed movement close to the office door.

When I realised what was out there, I relaxed slightly. I’d seen monsters like this plenty of times out here. It looked a bit like a monkey, but its back and long tail were covered in spikes, and its face was flat like a bat’s. Its tail was flicking side to side as it rummaged through a pile of junk with its back to us.

These creatures only attacked when they were scared and cornered. Most of the time, they left people alone. This one was probably searching

for food. My eyes darted to our packs resting in the centre of the room. I wondered if it would be able to smell our food from in here.

As I watched, it moved further away from the door on all fours, loping to another pile of junk and picking through it.

I moved back and stood close to Moth so I could whisper in his ear. He tensed up at my proximity, but I ignored it. I wasn't going to speak louder and risk the monster hearing us just because he was uncomfortable. I respected his personal space most of the time, but there was a time and a place to just deal with it.

"If we keep quiet, it'll leave when it doesn't find anything," I whispered in Moth's ear.

"What is it?" he whispered back, voice tight.

My mouth quirked. "I don't know the real name. Looks kind of like a monkey with spikes."

I could practically feel him rolling his eyes. "I'll just kill it."

When he went to move, I flattened my palm on his chest and pushed him back into the wall, frowning at him.

"We don't need to kill it," I hissed. "It's not doing anything to us. Just let it leave."

He'd gone completely still, and even though he was glaring at me, I could feel his heart thudding hard beneath my hand.

I heard the monster shuffling across the floor again, and from my position I could see the broken pane in the warehouse ceiling. After a few minutes, I watched it scale the wall using its tail to swing between the metal beams, before it scrambled up through the hole and vanished.

I let out a breath. "It's gone. See? No need to kill anything."

Moth was slightly taller than me. When I glanced up at him, he was already staring at me, his eyes pale in the dark. I saw them dart down to my mouth, making my gut lurch, before he flushed and shoved me.

"Get off me."

I stepped back immediately, raising my palms. "Relax. I wasn't trying to cop a feel."

He just sneered and slid out from between me and the wall, walking quickly back to our pile of stuff. "I'll keep watch first."

I frowned and followed him. "Are you sure? You kept watch first last night—"

“It’s fine,” he said flatly, picking up his sword and easily sheathing it on his back, which was *so weirdly hot*. “Get some sleep. I’ll wake you up in a few hours.”

Then he was striding out of the office without another word. I exhaled and sat down by our bags. It was fucking freezing, even in my thick coat, so I pulled out my blanket and lay back, using my pack as a pillow. Even though I was shivering, years in the military had trained me to get sleep when and where I could, so I dropped off almost instantly.

I jerked awake when Moth stepped back into the room, his cheeks flushed from the cold.

“Hey,” I rasped, sitting up and rubbing my eyes. “Anything?”

He shook his head, sitting down cross-legged on the other side of our stuff and removing his sword from his back.

I yawned and blinked hard to wake myself up, balling up my blanket and handing it to Moth in case he wanted it to sleep. He stared at it like I was offering him a live snake, before slowly reaching out and taking it with long, pale, tattooed fingers.

Before standing up, I dragged my bag closer and pulled out my canteen to have some water, surreptitiously eyeing Moth as I did it. He looked tired, shadows under his pale eyes and face drawn. We were *both* tired. Snow had come after a few days of travelling, and it was falling thicker the further north we got.

The long days of walking had been pretty uneventful, but it was still taxing slogging for hours through the cold. We both had gloves, but I wished I had a scarf to shield the lower half of my face from the freezing wind. My lips were dry and chapped, and my skin felt raw beneath the shadow of a beard coming through.

“Will you judge me if I take a leak in the warehouse?” I chuckled as I stood up and stretched. “I don’t want my dick to fall off if I whip it out in the snow.”

I stretched and shivered when my shirt rode up, the freezing air hitting my lower stomach. When I glanced down at Moth, his eyes darted away quickly.

He shrugged, fingers fiddling with the edge of his bag. “Do what you want.”

I zipped up my coat and slung my gun on my back before sheathing my hunting knife.

“Hope you can get some sleep,” I said as I headed for the door.

Moth just nodded, still sitting up. I’d noticed already that he wouldn’t even lie down until I was gone, like he didn’t want to look vulnerable. As if sleeping was a *vulnerability*.

Seriously, Moth had some issues. I made my way into the warehouse, keeping my footsteps light in case anything else had snuck in through the roof after Moth came into the office.

It was totally quiet. I walked across the vast space, my boots crunching on glass and rubble. It was even colder out here, and I dreaded unzipping my coat and pants to piss, but my bladder was screaming at me.

I went to the furthest corner away from the office and unzipped, tense while my back was to the room. My ears strained for the slightest noise or whisper of movement over the sound of my urine hitting the concrete floor.

After zipping up, I swung my gun around to grip it as I walked to the opposite corner and settled back in the shadows, hidden from anyone or anything who may have crept in. I was used to staying completely still for hours on end, thanks to the many stints Hunter and I had done watching monster nests and raider camps.

Guilt flared every time I thought about our missions now. We hadn’t hurt anyone, unless they’d seen us and tried to hurt us first. But we’d still passed on detailed information of raider camps—where the entrances were, how many lived there, what their day-to-day activities were.

Same with monster nests or hives. We gave intel on what they ate, if they slept, whether they had young. We weren’t a part of what happened with the information we passed on to our superiors. That wasn’t part of our job—we were just the messengers. The watchers.

But I’d heard rumours of raider camps being stormed by the military. Raiders vanishing, though some of those could have been stolen and taken to the fighting prison.

And I had no doubt what the military did with the info we passed on about monsters. My lips pulled down at the thought. I had nothing against monsters, unless they were trying to eat me or kill me. I didn’t like the thought of them being killed just for existing, especially as a lot of them

only attacked humans when threatened. A lot of them just wanted to be left alone.

I glanced over at the closed office door. What if we'd spied on a group of whatever monster Moth's non-human half was? What if the intel we'd given the military had meant they'd been wiped out? We could've even spied on Moth's actual monster parent, I realised with a pang of more intense guilt. We'd seen plenty of humanoid types out here.

What if Moth had been living with them, and we'd inadvertently gotten him killed? I knew it was pointless to think about, even as I squirmed uncomfortably. What was done was done. I couldn't take it back now. I couldn't erase all the years I'd spent collecting information for the military.

I hadn't wanted to join the military as a kid. It'd been drilled into me from a young age that I would take over the family farm one day. My little sister and I had helped out as soon as we were old enough, and I was used to the work. Some days I even missed it—how simple life was then. The flat land that stretched for miles. Helping dad fix the fence posts on the very edge of our property line. Getting up early with mama to milk the cows. Collecting eggs from the hens with my baby sister, laughing and teasing when she squealed with disgust the first time I'd made her reach under one of the chickens to get its egg.

But then the monsters had come and changed everything. I wasn't bitter about it. What was the point? That had just become life. We'd had to leave the farm and travel south to the military's safe zone. Get a shitty education in a school with far too many kids until I was old enough to work.

My parents had despised city life. I'd struggled to adjust too—to our tiny, cramped, two-bed apartment in a high-rise after years living in the shanty town of tents that all the misplaced people had had to stay in before more buildings had been put up. Their structural integrity was questionable at best, thanks to how fast they'd been built, but no one had any other options.

I'd joined the military because there was nothing else. Because I knew my daddy would have wanted me to do something worthwhile. And I hadn't hated it. I'd liked that it kept my mind busy—gave me a purpose. My parents loathed the monsters—everyone did—and they'd been pleased when they thought I'd be coming out into the Wastes to help wipe them out.

I was glad my sister hadn't joined too when she became old enough. Last I knew, she was working in a café in the city they lived in. Dad had

been softer on her—though not as soft as most other parents. Our parents had never been abusive, but they believed in hard work and toughening us up for the real world, which I was grateful for now. But my daddy still had outdated notions about me being a “man”, so I’d been worked harder from a younger age on the farm, and I’d been expected to find a job in the city when I turned thirteen and my crappy education ended.

I tried to imagine going back to the military after all of this. Walking into the Tennessee base and no doubt spending days—if not weeks—being grilled about everything. Where we’d been. What had happened to Hunter. What I’d seen and witnessed out here.

I was pretty sure I’d been gone far too long at this point for the story Hunter and I had concocted to be at all believable. Fear tightened my gut as I wondered what they’d do to me if they saw through the lies. Would they try and force me to reveal what I knew? I’d rather die than put Hunter at risk, and the thought of fucking over Danny and Edin and the Nebraska raiders—hell, even the Soul Eater—made my stomach turn sour.

It was too much to think about. I forced it all to the back of my mind and concentrated on keeping watch. I couldn’t afford to get distracted worrying about what I was going to do while we were out here. Moth may not have liked me or trusted me, but I took keeping us both safe seriously.

I knew he would no doubt be perfectly fine looking out for himself out here, if he travelled the Wastes alone a lot, but still. He was my partner out here, whether he liked it or not. We had to have each other’s backs.

I just wished I knew for sure that Moth would have mine if the shit hit the fan when we got to the prison. The thought of being captured again and forced back in there made fear streak through me. I’d tried so hard not to let it affect me, because part of me had felt weak. Nothing had even really *happened* to me. The kolebs and behamots had captured me, lugged me across the Wastes and deposited me in a cell with Cat. I’d had to fight one human, and I’d won easily.

I couldn’t let it affect me or play on my mind, so I’d locked it all up in a tight box and shoved it away.

My eyes drifted over to the office door again, unease tightening my gut. I tried to think of Edin’s words about trusting Moth, and not Gloam’s about being wary of him. About the secrets Moth had, and how cagey Moth had acted whenever the big aytorin was near.

I was grateful to Gloam for warning me, but at the same time irritation flared whenever I thought about what he'd said. Telling me my partner out here had *secrets* but not telling me what they were wasn't much help.

And seriously, what could they be? Had he killed someone? For some reason, I got the feeling Moth wouldn't give a shit if people knew he'd killed someone. I'd seen him lop off several limbs in quick succession without even breaking a sweat. He probably *had* killed people, and I couldn't judge him for that. I had too.

Then what? I stared at the office door, picturing Moth sleeping behind it. What were Moth's secrets?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Charlie

“Wait—no, we gotta keep heading north,” I said to Moth as he started veering right, leading us northeast.

It had temporarily stopped snowing, and only a light dusting coated the ground in this area. The grass crunched with ice under Moth’s heavy boots as he stepped off the road we’d been following.

“We’re making a pit stop.”

I hurried to catch up with him. “Where?”

“Raider market.”

“No shit?”

I felt a flash of excitement. We’d heard whispers of the underground raider markets across the Wastes in the military, but they were impossible to find. A closely guarded secret, where essential supplies and black-market goods were traded.

Hunter had told me about the secret entrances into the cities that Edin had mentioned to him. The thought made me nervous—that monsters had ways of getting into the cities. It didn’t bother me as much that raiders could get into them. I didn’t care if they were smuggling stuff into the Wastes.

Moth glanced over at me as his brow quirked. “If you want to stay alive, you better not mention to anyone that you’re ex-military.”

I flushed and nodded. *Not quite ex.*

“I won’t. I’m not stupid.” I looked over at him. “Do you go to the raider markets often? Do they know you there? The one we’re going to?”

“Yes.”

When he didn’t say anything else, I rolled my eyes. “What kind of stuff do you want to pick up from there?”

“Just supplies.”

“Like what?” I pressed.

“Just *supplies*. Jesus,” he snapped, glaring over at me. “I thought you said you’d been out here for years. Surely you know what kind of supplies

we need.”

My cheeks flushed, so I glared right back at him. “Sorry for asking a fucking question.”

I was getting real sick of his shitty attitude. It faded very occasionally before he seemed to realise he was actually being half decent and tensed right back up again. I was trying very hard not to rise to it, but it was getting more difficult.

I took a slow, quiet breath and shook it off.

“So where did you get the sword?” I chuckled. “I gotta admit, I’m kinda jealous.”

“Stole it.” He sneered over at me. “Does that offend your law-abiding sensibilities, army boy?”

I made a face. “What? I don’t care if you stole it. Jesus, you’re so fucking defensive about *everything*.”

His face flushed pink and he looked away with a scowl.

“Do you really hate it *that much* that I’m mi—ex-military?” I asked, frowning over at him hard. “Is that what your problem is?”

“I don’t have a problem,” he muttered.

I let out a harsh laugh. “Fuck me, if this is you without a problem, then I don’t want to be around you when you *actually* have something to be pissed about.”

“I told you,” he exploded, whirling around to face me. “I didn’t ask you to come with me. I didn’t *want* you here. I can do this on my own.”

I couldn’t tamp down the flash of anger this time. He was making this *impossible* for no reason. No matter what I did, whatever way I approached him to try and get him to at least be *friendly*, nothing worked. It was fucking exhausting. It was pathetic and childish.

“Okay.” I shrugged off my pack and set it on the ground. “Do you need a fight? Need to punch it out? Let’s do it, then.”

He made a face. “What?”

“I’m sick of this, Moth. Stop being such a fucking baby. You have a problem with me? Let’s settle it and move on.”

“What?” he repeated, taking a step back as his eyes flashed over my frame. “I don’t—”

“So you *don’t* want to fight?” I stared at him hard, hands on my hips. “What do you want to do, then? What will make you stop acting like a fucking child?”

His face went pink, and the anger in my gut twisted with something else when his pale eyes darted down to my mouth then away again just as fast.

"I'm not acting like a child," he snapped.

"Yes. You are. I've done *nothing* to you and you're treating me like I killed your dog or something. How many times do I have to say this? We are *stuck out here together*, Moth, whether you like it or not. Why are you making it so fucking difficult?"

"Why did you even volunteer to do this?" he burst out. "So you can be the big man to all the raiders in the camp? So they all fucking love you?"

"What?" I blinked, hands sliding off my hips to hang loose at my sides. "I don't give a shit if they love me. I don't even know them. I just want to help Cat."

And delay my return to the military, but I didn't say that.

"Why?" he blurted. "You don't know *him* either. You spent one fucking night with him in the prison."

I stared at him, totally confused.

"Are you... Wait." I let out a disbelieving laugh. "Are you pissed that I'm—Do you think I'm trying to steal your *glory*?" I took a step closer. "Is *that* what this is? You wanted to go and rescue Cat alone and be the big hero to all the raiders? To Ghost?"

"Shut the fuck up," he snarled, face going even pinker.

"Dude." I raised my hands and scrubbed roughly at my face. "I can't even—If you want to tell them that you did it all on your own when we get back, and I just got in your way, go for it. I don't care."

"You were there for less than twenty minutes before you had them all eating out of the palm of your hand," he burst out, breathing hard, making my brows hike up. "You just waltzed right in and they all fucking loved you. *I* didn't offer to do this because I wanted to be a fucking hero. I offered to do it so Ghost wouldn't have to."

He stopped abruptly, chest heaving, and looked away when he realised he'd revealed far more than he probably wanted to.

Sadness tightened my chest despite the incredulous anger. Damn, Moth had issues. And I knew my initial assessment of him had been right. It wasn't just about helping Ghost, despite what he'd said. He desperately wanted to be accepted by the camp, but he wasn't. And he hated that I had been so easily.

I couldn't imagine what it was like, straddling both worlds. He didn't seem to have been fully accepted by either.

I took a deep breath and forced myself to calm down. I was good at it, having spent years dealing with Hunter's hot temper.

"Look, I'm sorry." I took a step closer, but he flinched back. "I didn't... I wasn't *trying* to get them all to like me. And that's... You did a good thing. Doing this so Ghost wouldn't have to."

He clenched his jaw and straightened, bravado cloaking him despite how flushed his cheeks still were.

"Whatever," he drawled, turning to start walking again. "I don't need or want your approval."

"Wait," I said in a hard voice, snatching up my backpack and striding forward but not grabbing his arm to get him to stop like I wanted to, because I was fairly sure he'd punch me if I touched him. "We still haven't resolved this. You don't have to like me, Moth, but can you at least make the effort to be civil? So this is bearable?"

"I *am* being civil," he snapped, not looking at me.

I snorted as I followed him. "Come on, you know that's bullshit."

Maybe he just had really fucking bad people skills. Maybe he didn't talk to anyone enough to know how to act around others.

He was in full arrogant Moth mode now, which had emerged multiple times over the several days we'd been travelling together. I already knew he used it like a shield when he was feeling unsettled.

"Look." He rolled his eyes as he turned to face me, walking backward. "I've already told you I don't want to be your friend. I'm being civil, but I'm not going to be your *buddy*."

But I wasn't listening to him anymore. My eyes had drifted behind him and locked onto the small mound of earth that he was stepping toward.

I tensed. "Moth, stop."

"Just give it a fucking rest. Not everyone wants to be your best fucking friend—"

"Moth, *stop walking*," I barked, just as the heel of his boot sank into the mound.

He finally stopped, frowning at me before peering down behind him. "Oh shit."

The long, wriggling legs emerged first, looking like bony, reddish-brown human fingers with too many knuckles. Then the flat, wide bodies

shimmied out of the nest. Dozens of them.

I barrelled forward and grabbed Moth's arm, jerking him with me as I started running in a flat-out sprint. He followed without a word, reaching back to unsheathe his sword.

"We can't outrun them," he said grimly.

"I know." I was reaching for my gun and clicking off the safety. "Just needed a sec. Ready?"

I could hear the skittering of their legs chasing us. I knew they were fast—and that they could jump really fucking far. As we stopped and turned, I felt one latch onto my leg and start shimmying up it horrifyingly fast.

I reached down and ripped it free, my gorge rising at the feel of its legs moving frantically around my hand, trying to latch on. Moth slammed his sword down and cut it in half the moment it landed on its back in the grass, legs still wriggling in the air.

I really didn't want to waste ammo aiming at dozens of small creatures that were hard to hit, but I had to. There were so many of them. I peppered bullets over the writhing swarm teeming over the ground toward us, many of them collapsing onto their underbellies with little death shrieks. Moth managed to take a few out in the air when they leapt at us, slicing them cleanly in half with his sword.

I refused to be impressed, even as my gut tightened at the sight of it. Seriously, why was the sword *so freaking hot*?

When one landed on Moth's boot, he shook it off frantically and stomped down on its exposed underbelly before it could jump back up. But it didn't die. Its legs curled around his boot and gripped on, the sharp tips digging into the leather.

"Fucking—" He stomped again and again, but another landed on his shin while he was distracted, making him stumble back.

I shot several that were still skittering toward us and darted over, prying my fingers underneath the flat body of the one clinging onto his leg. Its body was squishy, my fingers sinking in and making me want to retch. Its legs gripped too tight around Moth's calf, so I tried to prise them loose, gritting my teeth at the feel of the sharp bristles catching on my skin.

It ripped free with a little shriek, and Moth stumbled back and fell on his ass as I whipped out my hunting knife and impaled its body into the ground. The one on his boot finally slid off, its body crushed.

I jumped back up and aimed my gun, shooting the last few still trying to crawl their way toward us. When silence fell, broken only by our fast breaths, I lowered my gun and turned to Moth.

He was still on the ground, leaning back on his hands as he panted, staring at the little monster impaled by my knife.

“You okay?” I put away my gun and knelt beside him. “We should check your leg.”

But as I reached for the hem of his jeans, he jerked back and scrambled quickly to his feet.

“No, I’m good. Fucking—I just got distracted by the one on my foot.” His tone was defensive as he dusted off his coat and squared his shoulders.

I straightened up after jerking my knife free from the ground. “I know. They’re fast little fuckers.”

He cleared his throat and shoved back the strands of hair that had come loose from his braid. “You’ve seen them before then?”

I nodded. “Yeah, loads of times. I’ve seen what they do to people.”

He cringed and put away his sword. “Yeah.”

They really were nasty little things. They clung to whatever part of you they could so the teeth on their underbelly could rip through your clothes, then your skin, then the rest of you. I’d seen raiders and fellow soldiers get completely covered by them and be half consumed in minutes.

The smaller ones even crawled into your mouth to eat you from the inside if they got the chance.

I exhaled and scrubbed a hand over my head. “You sure you’re good?”

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat again and flicked me a look through dark eyelashes. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

I started walking, and he fell into step beside me.

“Can’t believe I stepped in a fucking chekla nest,” he muttered.

I chuckled and glanced over at him. “Is that what they’re called then?”

He nodded. “Why, what do you call them?”

My face went hot. “Um... just finger fuckers.”

There was silence before Moth let out a choked sound. “*Finger fuckers?*”

I resisted the urge to bristle. “I mean, yeah. We don’t have anyone to tell us the proper species names in the military so we... Hunter and I just had to come up with names we’d recognise when we came across them.”

He snorted. “Finger fuckers.”

I paused, then chuckled even though my face was still pink. I could take a bit of ribbing if it meant he loosened up.

“I mean, you’d know what I was talking about if I shouted it to you, wouldn’t you?”

He let out a little huff—not quite a laugh, but it made me grin over at him.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll tell you all the stupid names I’ve made up for monsters when we see them,” I said, shooting him a huge grin.

He glanced over at me with a tiny, wry smile, but it dropped when his eyes darted to my mouth. He flushed and looked away again quickly as my gut gave a little swoop.

Yeah, I was attracted to Moth, even though he was an asshole most of the time and in love with a raider. And I was pretty sure that he was attracted to me too, even just a little.

I was also pretty sure that he hated it.

CHAPTER NINE

Charlie

The underground raider market was wild.

Moth led us to an old superstore on the outskirts of a little town. I was confused at first, because the inside looked dark and empty. The front windows had been smashed out, and some of the shelving units from within had been dragged out into the parking lot.

But Moth didn't take us in. I followed him around to the loading docks at the back. The wide shutters were down, and it was completely still and dark out here. Moth walked to a small side door and gave five quick raps. It cracked open a second later, and a beefy bald guy eyed us suspiciously before nodding once at Moth. He stepped back, opening the door to let us in.

I resisted the urge to snort in amusement as I followed Moth inside. As we walked down a cold, narrow corridor I could already hear voices yelling and the low rumble of a generator.

I tried not to stare in shock as we rounded the corner into the main loading bay and came face to face with dozens of stalls and market cubbies built out of bits of wood and corrugated metal. Some had a single lightbulb dangling above them, illuminating the stuffed spaces, while a few even had blinking neon signs that had clearly been lifted from old towns.

Girls! Girls! Girls!

PAWN SHOP

LIQUOR

It was a proper little dystopian shanty marketplace—one that the military was entirely unaware of. And it was teeming with people. There was even a food stall set up in the centre with a cobbled-together bar circling it, and almost every seat was filled as people slurped up instant ramen or fried rice.

It was loud as shit in here, and the mix of smells coming from the incense wafting out of the brothel, the food stall and the sheer number of people made my nose sting. I followed Moth in silence as he casually

wound his way around people and between stalls, not seeming to notice when they eyed him warily or downright gawked.

But as I glanced at him, I saw a muscle ticking in his jaw. Maybe he did notice, then.

He led me over to the side of a cubby at the edge of the huge room and turned to face me. “Watch your bag. And your gun. And your knife.”

I nodded and tried not to glance around warily, slipping my backpack off my shoulders to grip the handles in a fist. I had no doubt that this place was heaving with pickpockets.

Moth did the same, but kept his sword strapped to his back. Guess it was probably pretty difficult to steal a sword without the owner noticing.

“So what are we here for?” I asked, looking around.

The stall we were standing next to seemed to mainly sell tobacco, bongs, pipes and other smoking paraphernalia. There was a tiny round table tucked into the corner, low to the floor, with several raiders sitting around it on cushions smoking a hookah. The smoky air smelled sweet and made me want to cough.

“General supplies.” Moth shrugged one shoulder as we started walking again. “Maybe a weapon.”

“What weapons do they sell here?” I muttered, trying to spot a stall selling guns.

Moth shot me a look. “Whatever they can get their hands on.”

As we passed a cubby stuffed with both new and raggedy clothing, the owner narrowed his eyes at Moth and proceeded to spit at his boots. Anger flared on Moth’s behalf, and I turned to ask that dickhead what the fuck he thought he was doing, but Moth grabbed my arm and dragged me away before I could.

His face was pink and jaw clenched hard when he turned to face me.

“You can go and have a look around if you want,” he said, voice tight.

I got the sense that he was deeply embarrassed, so I didn’t bring up the asshole from the clothing stall, even though I wanted to ask how many people treated him that way. And he probably didn’t want me witnessing anything else they’d do or say to him while we were here, so I gave a reluctant nod.

“Okay.” I swallowed nervously. I was way out of my depth, surrounded by raiders. It felt like I had MILITARY stamped on my forehead. “Uh... any advice?”

“Don’t get any food unless you like finding surprises in it,” Moth said flatly. “Watch your stuff. And most people will realise you’re new here, so they’ll try and rip you off if you want to trade anything.”

I didn’t, but I nodded gratefully. “Thanks. So uh... where shall we meet up when you’re done?”

I looked around and spotted the pink neon PAWN SHOP sign flashing near the entrance.

“Shall we meet up by the pawn shop?” I asked Moth, my brows twitching when he got a panicked look on his face.

“Uh...” He looked around the room like he couldn’t see the big, bright pink letters flickering directly opposite him.

“...There?” I said slowly, pointing at it.

He stared at it, then nodded tightly and turned to walk off without another word. I stared after him for a few seconds.

“See you later then,” I muttered, turning to wander between the stalls.

I hated the fact that I was nervous, my hand clenched tight around my backpack straps like I expected someone to rip it from my fingers. Which... they might have done. I’d never been to a place like this. Some of the poorer parts of the cities were similar, but even though they were hideously cramped, they weren’t *this* cramped. There were still mainly actual shop buildings and neatly set out market stalls in the cities. Not this crammed-together mishmash of wooden frames and metal cubbies, with people pushing and shoving to get past.

“Hi sweetie.”

I glanced over as the husky voice cut through the shouts and chatter, directly to my right. When I saw the person leaning out of the cobbled-together brothel window, I realised they were talking to me.

I stopped and chuckled nervously, eyeing the structure. It was the best built thing in here—actually like a proper building, with two floors that stretched up to the loading bay’s roof. Behind the worker I could see a dimly lit bar teeming with bodies.

I cleared my throat and gave them a nod. “Hi.”

“You’re new here, aren’t you?” They leaned further out, arms folded on the windowsill, showing off a slim, androgynous body dressed in an almost-sheer pink slip. “Want to come in and have a drink?”

I chuckled. “No, thank you. Just looking around today.”

“Ugh, that accent.” Blue eyes tracked over my frame. “And you’re handsome. And actually clean. You sure you don’t want to come in?”

I laughed again and went to politely refuse when long fingers wrapped around my bicep and jerked me away. The sex worker’s smile dropped, turning into a disgusted sneer as they leaned back from the window and vanished.

Moth’s clean, citrusy scent filled my nose, stopping me from ripping my arm free and swinging around to land a punch.

“What are you doing?” he hissed, dragging me away from the brothel. “We don’t have time for you to get fucked, and I’m not going searching for you in there.”

“What?” I frowned over at him. His face was still tight with tension, cheekbones lightly flushed. “I wasn’t—They said hello to me. I was just being polite.”

He let out a derisive snort and dropped his hand. “Whatever. Just... stay out of trouble. I won’t be long.”

I stared after him as he strode away.

“I wasn’t getting into any trouble,” I muttered under my breath, turning to walk in the opposite direction.

I wasn’t even particularly interested in looking around, but Moth clearly didn’t want me with him as he got whatever we’d come here for. I wondered what it was. He was so fucking cagey about everything—wouldn’t even tell me what *supplies* he wanted. Did that mean it was something... weird? Or bad?

I gave a mental shrug. I didn’t care what Moth bought, but he obviously thought I would. He called me *army boy* like it was a slur, and I hated that it made my face threaten to get hot every time.

But maybe that was because I was technically lying to him. He thought I was ex-military, and I wasn’t. I was supposed to be going back. Even standing in the middle of this chaotic, uncomfortable raider market didn’t lessen the stab of unease I felt at the thought of returning to the military.

I shoved it back, irrationally afraid that someone would be able to tell what I was thinking about, and wandered through the stalls for a while. Several owners called out to me, trying to get me to buy old computer parts or nuts and bolts or bottles of old, stale shampoo that were twenty years out of date.

But some stalls—the better made ones, with proper lighting—were selling shit that had clearly been smuggled out of the cities. New packets of painkillers and other medical items sat behind a metal cage at the back of one cubby, while another had an assortment of guns and blades locked away behind an owner who stood tense, gripping a rifle and watching everyone warily.

One cubby was bigger than most others and looked almost like a minimart had been dropped right into the loading bay. Shelving units had been taken from the store upstairs to form neat aisles loaded with the generically branded food and drink from the cities.

I got tense when I felt someone brush purposefully close to me, their hand making a careful grab for my hunting knife before I jerked around and they melted into the crowd. I sighed in relief when I felt the knife still sheathed at my hip. Feeling uneasy, I decided to just go and wait for Moth outside the pawn shop so I could have my back to a wall.

I watched the people as I waited. Most ignored me, but a few glanced over as they walked past. I wondered where they all came from. There weren't *that* many raider camps in the Wastes, and I didn't think they formed their camps close together. They must have travelled far to get to the market, which made sense—if you were running out of food or didn't have a weapon, trekking across the Wastes was probably worth the risk to your life.

And some of these raiders definitely looked worse off than others. One guy had an ear torn off and a deep scar on half of his shaved head that I knew instantly was a monster bite. He looked tough as shit, quite frankly, and was laughing raucously with another raider at the food bar.

One girl who looked worryingly young was dressed in a ripped, baggy t-shirt and leggings, and she was hovering around the raiders eating at the food bar, brown eyes crafty as she eyed them. As I watched her, she slipped past the bald guy and lifted something from his jacket pocket, then melted into the crowd.

“You gonna come in to trade or just stand in my entrance?”

I looked back at the gruff voice, seeing a weathered, dark-skinned face frowning back at me from the doorway to the pawn shop. This was another well-built structure like the brothel, with a proper front—not just a cubby or a stall.

“I’m just waiting for someone,” I told the owner shortly.

She grunted. "At least move aside then, so people can get in."

I nodded and shifted a few steps to the left. "Sure. Sorry."

She eyed me, running a hand over her shaved head. "Haven't seen you here before."

I chuckled and shot her my charming grin. "First time."

Raising an eyebrow, she crossed her arms over her chest and surveyed me. She looked to be around her fifties, and was wearing a long, flowy, patterned dress with big shitkicker boots. Bangles rattled on her wrists.

"How'd you find it?"

Her tone was suspicious. I knew this place would be a closely guarded secret among the raiders. I wondered how many markets like this were out there.

"My—friend brought me." It felt weird calling Moth my friend—we weren't friends—but I wasn't going to get into the whole thing.

"Who?"

I looked around, spotting the hilt of Moth's sword first through the crowd. He was at a stall, with his head bent as he looked over whatever they were selling—I couldn't see from here—and strands of his white hair had slipped loose from his braid to brush his high cheekbones.

My gut panged with attraction again, but I ignored it and nodded toward him. "Him."

The pawn shop owner followed my gaze and stiffened. "The monster?"

I frowned. "He's half human."

She grunted. "What's the difference?"

My frown deepened. Did every human treat Moth that way?

Before I could say anything, she muttered, "Don't know why he bothers coming here. Most of us won't serve him."

"What?" I looked back over at Moth. He was talking to the stall owner now, obviously haggling for whatever he wanted. "Because he's half monster?"

"Mm," she grunted, eyeing him a moment longer before looking at me. "What you doing with him?"

"I—" I didn't know how to answer that, and I was getting angry at the thought of these people refusing Moth service just because he was half monster. "He's my friend," I said again, more defensively this time. "He's a good guy."

I didn't entirely know if that was true, but I had an overwhelming need to defend him. He wasn't fucking *doing* anything here. He just wanted to get stuff. Could these traders really afford to be picky about who they served? What did it say that most of them refused to trade with Moth just because he was half monster? Did humans really hate him that much?

"I wouldn't put my trust in a half monster," the pawn shop owner grunted.

"Has he actually done anything to anyone here?" I asked in a hard voice.

Her brow rose. "No, but look at him. Creepy fucker. Gives me the willies just seeing him across the room."

My face got hot with anger. "He's not creepy."

"Mm," she grunted again, then shot me a hard look. "Don't clog up my doorway, boy."

She turned and walked back inside the shop. I took a deep breath and shifted another step over, putting my back to the edge of the shop wall. My eyes sought out Moth again, but he'd vanished from the stall and I couldn't spot him.

He appeared after about ten minutes, face blank as though he didn't notice the raiders who stared at him and muttered to one another, but I knew he had. He looked tense.

I couldn't stop the pang of sadness for him, so I gave him a grin to try and make it less awkward. "All done?"

He nodded silently, and I followed him back toward the entrance. The same burly guy was still standing there, and he opened the door without a word. When it closed behind us, the muffled sounds of the market inside vanished instantly, leaving us in silence aside from the low whistle of the wind.

We'd gotten here after dark, and I eyed the empty superstore as we made our way back around the building.

"Should we camp out in there?" I asked, jerking my chin toward its smashed-out front doors. "Is it safe?"

"No," Moth said without breaking his stride. "We're going somewhere else."

"Where?" I shivered in the cold, pulling my coat tighter around me. "Another market?"

"I know somewhere near here," he said shortly, tucking his chin down as snow fell around us.

He suddenly stopped and pulled off his backpack to unzip it. Without saying a word, he thrust a bundle of warm, soft fabric at me. I fumbled to grab it before it fell into the snow.

“What’s...” I trailed off when I looked up and saw Moth winding a thick black scarf around his neck, pulling it up so it covered his nose and mouth.

I looked back down at the scarf in my hands. It was a grey version of his, and I grinned wide as I wrapped it around my neck and did as he had, covering my nose and mouth to keep them warm.

“You got me a scarf?” I let out a blissful sigh, my warm breath heating my cold chin and nose under the fabric. “Thanks, Moth.”

He grunted, pale eyes flashing to me before he started walking again. “So you stop bitching about being cold.”

I snorted a laugh as I followed him. I’d mentioned it maybe twice—and it was *snowing*. We both already had gloves, so we pulled them on as we trudged through the snow. Moth’s were made of soft brown leather that looked old and worn, whereas mine were barely broken in—I’d taken them from the bunker before we left the homestead.

“I spoke to someone in there about the prison,” he said, his voice muffled behind his scarf.

I looked over at him, my brows hiked. “You did? Good thinking.”

I was impressed—and embarrassed. I could have done that. Instead I’d just wandered around then waited outside the pawn shop for Moth. I could have at least asked that grumpy pawn shop owner if she knew anything, but I hadn’t thought to.

I was out of my element out here, discovering the other side of the Wastes that we never got to see in the military. And even though it was intimidating... I kind of liked it. It was fascinating seeing how people had created new lives and communities out here, choosing to stay out of the military-protected cities.

I didn’t blame them. I hated going into the cities.

“So what did they say?” I asked. “About the prison?”

He huffed. “Not much. Either he didn’t know much or just didn’t want to tell me. Said he’d heard about it, and a couple of his friends had gone missing over the years, and he suspected they’d been taken there.”

My brows hiked up as I looked over at him. “And... what, he just never went to look for them?”

Moth glanced back at me. "Friends are only friends while they're at your side out here. Most raiders aren't willing to risk their own skin for others."

"Hunter travelled halfway across the Wastes to help me."

Moth huffed. "Well you must be a special little snowflake then."

I rolled my eyes, more exasperated than annoyed by his snide tone.

"So you and the big angry one weren't ever... together?" Moth asked gruffly.

"What, me and Hunter?" I laughed. "No. He's like my annoying, grumpy brother."

Moth was silent for a while as we traipsed through the snow in the dark. It was falling thicker around us now, making it hard to see anything beyond a few feet in front of us. I was on edge, listening for any sounds of other footsteps cracking in the snow, but it was dead quiet around us.

"They both seemed to be worried about you doing this," Moth said eventually. I could detect the bitter edge to his words, but I knew what the cause of it was. "Him and Edin."

I chuckled. "Yeah, they're both pretty overbearing. Together they're like... one big ball of arrogant, overwhelming energy."

I glanced over at him as he walked beside me. His eyes were down, watching the ground, shielded by dark eyelashes that were flecked with snowflakes. The snow was almost indistinguishable from his pale hair as it settled on his head.

The pawn shop owner's words rang through my head again. And all the disgusted, wary looks that the raiders had given him in the market. The stall owner who had literally spat at Moth's boots.

His prickliness made a lot more sense. Humans treated him like shit.

"The Nebraska raiders seemed worried about you too," I offered, wanting to make him feel better, even though they... hadn't seemed that way at all, really. "Ghost and Rig. And Gloam and Aury."

He said nothing, so I glanced over at him and hesitantly asked, "Do you and Gloam not get along? You seemed tense around him."

He stiffened. "He just... hasn't been there long. We don't know each other."

I nodded, sensing there was more to it than that, but I knew he wasn't going to open up to me.

"Gloam was the one who told me you were half monster," I said, because I didn't want Moth to think the raiders had been gossiping about

him. “He said you’d be a big help out here, because you understand them better.”

I didn’t tell him what else Gloam had said. About not trusting him. About the secrets he was keeping. He was finally relaxing just a little around me, and I knew that would close him right back up.

And... I kind of wanted him to see that his monster half was a good thing. Not something to despise, even though it ostracised him from other humans.

Moth looked over at me then, brows pulled down. “You couldn’t tell there was something when you saw me?”

I could, but again, I didn’t want to say that.

“I was mainly distracted by how hot you were,” I said in a joking tone—but it wasn’t entirely a joke.

The visible part of Moth’s face flamed pink. He didn’t seem to know how to respond for a few seconds, but then he snorted and muttered, “Whatever.”

I shrugged and chuckled, trying to ignore the way my heart was beating a little faster. “Just calling it like I see it.”

CHAPTER TEN

Charlie

As the landscape around us grew familiar in a way that sent unease into my bones, I tried hard to hide how anxious I was. The feeling had been growing for days, getting worse the closer we got to the prison.

I'd made sure to pay attention to my surroundings when the kolebs and behamots were dragging me across the country to this place. I was used to picking out identifying markers and keeping an eye on the sun to work out what direction I was heading.

And I knew the prison was just up ahead.

I could already see the outline of it in the growing dark. A big, ominous block sitting alone, dark and silent.

Way too dark and silent.

"Uh..." I frowned and slowed to a stop. Moth glanced over at me and stopped too, turning to face me.

"What?"

"It's..." I gestured at the building in the distance. "That's the prison, but... there were hundreds of monsters camped outside before. We'd be able to see the fires. And the fights should be starting soon."

Moth turned to face the building, and we stared at it in silence.

It looked... empty.

"Are you sure this is it?" he asked doubtfully, making me glare at him.

"Yes, I'm sure."

He quirked a brow at me but said nothing.

"It is," I insisted, reaching for my gun and striding forward. "Maybe they're... all inside?"

I heard Moth huff before he followed. Our boots crunched through the snow, the only sound for miles except the wind whistling. It was picking up, and fat flakes started drifting down to settle in our hair. I tugged my scarf up higher over my nose, eyes narrowed as I stared at the dark and silent prison.

By the time we reached it, the wind was howling and snow was falling thick and fast, obscuring my vision. I blinked rapidly, feeling flakes settle on my eyelashes, blurring everything with hazy white. Moth was palming the hilt of his sword with a gloved hand, but he held it loose at his side.

I stopped and stared up at the sign on the front of the building. The old, torn US flag was sodden, hanging flat against the pole. Just visible beneath a mound of snow was the table that the behamots had dragged me over to when we'd arrived here, barking at the weird monster manning it before shoving an ID bracelet on my wrist. The big whiteboards nailed to the side of the building were now a mess of indiscernible letters, colours running in long streaks.

Moth took a step closer, then glanced over to side-eye me again, like he thought I'd brought him to the wrong fucking place.

"This is *it*," I gritted out again, starting to stride forward before stopping, unease tightening my gut as I eyed the front doors that led inside. There was no gangly, hairy creature guarding them anymore.

There was no one here at all.

"Well..." Moth drawled slowly, making my jaw clench. "Looks pretty empty to me."

"Great deductive skills," I snapped, beyond confused as I looked around us. "Remind me to give you a gold star sticker later."

The snow was thick and untouched around us, telling me this place had been empty for a while. There weren't any traces of the dozens of campfires and tents that had been dotted around at the side of the sprawling building. I started making my way around to the back, where the bleachers and fighting ring had been set up in the old prison yard.

Moth followed in silence, his boots crunching. The haphazardly constructed bleachers were buried under mounds of snow, the yard a smooth, untouched blanket of white behind the fence, which had been warped and ripped open in some places.

I stepped closer and carefully gripped the jagged slit in the fence, pulling it wider to duck underneath. I held it back for Moth, whose pale eyes were calm but attentive above his scarf as he looked around.

"This was where they held the fights," I said in a tight voice, though I wasn't sure if he'd heard me over the wind whistling through the fence.

But he nodded, eyes tracking over the makeshift bleachers surrounding the yard.

“They brought us out from here.” I approached the doors where the behamot had yanked me outside, slapping me on the back so hard I’d stumbled forward as the little koleb chattered endlessly beside him.

The doors were partially open, snow drifting inside the dark building. Moth brushed past me and pushed the door open wider, taking a cautious step over the threshold with his sword held in a relaxed grip.

I didn’t follow at first. My body locked up as I stared into the dark depths of the prison. A part of my brain was convinced that I’d somehow end up locked back up in a cell if I went in there.

When Moth glanced back at me, I forced myself to step inside. The door swung shut behind me, making me flinch, and I saw Moth’s dark brows furrow slightly over his pale eyes as he stared at me.

I cleared my throat and lowered my head, feeling too exposed. Moth didn’t say anything, just pulled his flashlight out of his backpack and handed it to me.

It was completely silent in here. The wind howled outside, fainter now that the door had closed behind us. I resisted the urge to go and check that I could open it—to make sure that we could get out.

“Can you remember where they kept you?” Moth’s husky voice was hushed. We didn’t know if anything was lurking in here, even though the whole place looked abandoned.

I gave a brisk nod and started walking. I’d managed to stay relatively calm when the behamot and koleb had retrieved me from my cell and led me through the prison to the fighting yard with a silent human guard. I’d made sure to count and track the turns we’d made down the long winding corridors, in case there might have been a chance of escape.

We both stayed silent as Moth followed, his sword ready. I held the flashlight against the barrel of my gun, sweeping its yellow beam back and forth with my finger hovering over the trigger, ready for the slightest movement or sound.

The light played over a long smear of frozen blood on the torn linoleum floor. Neither of us said a word as we kept going. The double doors to the cell block they’d kept all the humans in were partially ajar, more blood caked over the handles and the stretch of floor between them.

I noticed some of the previously bolted down tables and benches had been ripped up when we stepped into the dark, silent space. There was old, flaking brown blood everywhere, but no bodies. As I swept the flashlight’s

beam over the sides of the room and up, I realised all the cell doors were open.

Moth silently brushed past me and headed for the nearest cell, not needing the flashlight to see. He placed a gloved hand on the door and slowly pushed it open, peering inside, then turned back to give me a slight shake of his head.

“Empty?” I whispered when he made his way back over to me.

He nodded. “Want to check all of them?”

I exhaled and shook my head, jerking my chin at the staircase. “I’ll check Cat’s cell.”

We stepped slowly and carefully up the metal staircase to keep our footsteps as quiet as possible. Our boots still thudded softly against the walkway, but nothing stirred. It was eerily quiet, making my gut churn. This place had been constantly bright and loud before, the main lights always on, guards always walking around, people yelling and slamming on the doors of their cells.

I let out a tiny, relieved breath when I pushed open the door to the cell I’d shared for a single night with Cat and saw no body and no blood. But I couldn’t bring myself to take a single step inside, and Moth didn’t comment as I moved back.

“What now?” he whispered.

I shook my head, looking around the silent cell block. I didn’t lower my gun, even though I was pretty confident that this place was completely deserted.

What had happened?

We made our way back down the stairs and toward the doors. I didn’t know where they’d kept the monsters in here, and I didn’t want to check. I didn’t want to risk getting lost wandering around this huge building—or trapped by a door swinging shut behind us and not re-opening.

It was pitch black when we stepped back into the yard, the wind howling and snow falling even thicker. I shivered hard and trudged back to the gap in the fence, the snow up to my ankles and my feet frozen solid in my boots.

I could hear Moth’s boots crunching behind me as I walked a short distance away from the building and turned to stare at it.

“What do you think happened?” he asked, voice faint over the howling wind. The side of my face was frozen from the snow pummeling it, and I

reached up and rubbed at my ear to try and warm it.

"I have no idea."

I started walking back toward the front of the building, the wind whistling in my frozen ears and my vision almost completely obscured by the thick falling snow.

"I know we haven't checked the whole building, but should we stay here tonight?" I asked Moth as he walked behind me. "We can camp out in the lobby."

He didn't answer, or maybe I didn't hear it over the wind. I glanced back and almost stumbled as I jerked to a sudden halt.

Moth was gone.

I squinted, trying to see if he was just trailing behind me, blocked by the snow. I took a few steps forward, peering hard, a sickening feeling twisting my stomach.

He wasn't there. He was just gone.

I looked around wildly, trying to spot any boot prints in the snow that would indicate where he'd gone. But there were none except our tracks from the yard, and it looked like he'd been walking in the footprints I'd made anyway. There were no drag marks. Nothing to indicate that he'd fallen or sprinted off.

"Moth?" I called hesitantly, not wanting to make too much noise in case something *was* still lurking in the prison.

The wind whistled, and I strained my ears hard to try and hear any faint sounds over it. Nothing.

"Moth?" I shouted again, louder now as panic gripped me. I swung the flashlight back and forth frantically.

Where was he? Had something grabbed him?

"*Moth*," I yelled, then started slogging as fast as I could through the snow back toward the yard. My heart was thudding hard in my chest, and the fabric of the scarf against my mouth grew warm and moist with my fast, panicked breaths.

I ducked under the fence and jogged to the doors, pushing one open and taking a hesitant step inside. I didn't want to go in here alone.

It was still completely silent within. Indecision gripped me, making my armpits start to sweat despite the fact I was shivering from the cold.

Knowing it was stupid, I shouted, "Moth."

My voice echoed down the long, empty corridors. When no one shouted back, I hurriedly backed away from the doors and pushed them shut. If something was in there, I'd just alerted it to my presence.

My fingers were frozen solid around my gun despite my gloves. My breaths shuddered out of me as I ducked back under the fence, partly from the chill and partly from fear.

Where the fuck had he gone? Was he okay? Was he hurt?

I shouted his name repeatedly until my voice was hoarse as I made my way around the entire building's perimeter. There were no footsteps in the snow other than mine. There was nothing.

No one shouted back. Nothing crashed out of the building or through the snow toward me. I was completely alone.

Moth was gone.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Charlie

I couldn't decide which emotion was stronger: seething rage or intense worry.

Where the fuck had he gone? He'd been there one second and just... not in the next. Had he sprinted away? Had he fallen in a hole? I'd kept searching around the outside of the prison until I was shivering too hard to keep a good grip on my gun and I could no longer feel my fingers and toes.

Was he hurt? Had something snatched him up?

I didn't want to go deeper into the prison on my own for multiple reasons, so I was camping out in the rotting front entrance, huddled behind the counter in case anything snuck in. The prison still sounded totally silent, but creatures or humans could still be lurking somewhere inside. And I'd stupidly alerted anyone who was here to my presence by shouting for Moth.

I had no idea what to do. Moth was gone and Cat wasn't here. I knew I'd feel like total shit if I went back to the Nebraska camp with even worse news than what we'd originally arrived with.

At least I had time to decide. No way in hell was I going out there in the pitch black with the snow obscuring anything more than two feet in front of me. And I wanted to search for Moth again when it got light. If he'd fallen in a hole or something, I just had to hope it didn't snow hard enough to cover him. My gut clenched with worry again.

What if he'd abandoned me? Just high-tailed it right out of here? I couldn't stop the pang of hurt at the thought. He was still prickly and closed off, but he'd gradually relaxed around me. He'd gotten me a scarf at the raider market. He wasn't as bad as he tried to come off, and I thought he was growing to like me just a little. But maybe not.

I was pretty sure I wouldn't be able to sleep at all here. This place was somehow even worse—more eerie—when it was silent and completely deserted.

What the fuck had happened here? Had the military come and cleared it out? But I'd seen the military here before. I'd seen Mallory—who was dead

now, thanks to the Soul Eater—forcing that soldier to train for fights. It had looked like they were drugging him.

A fierce wave of loathing rose up. Part of me was disgusted with myself for ever even considering going back after everything I'd seen here, and everything Hunter had told me. But if I didn't go back... what would I have? I wasn't going to be the third wheel at the homestead for the rest of my life. And I absolutely was not going to go and live in one of the cities working a shitty job for next to nothing.

Could I... become a raider? Would the Nebraska camp let me stay there?

I shivered and wrapped my coat tighter around myself. Now was not the time to try and figure out my life plan. I had to survive the night, try and find Moth in the morning, then figure out what I was going to do in the immediate future. Head back to the Nebraska camp alone and with even worse news, or try and somehow find Cat on my own? How the hell would I even start looking? He could be anywhere. If he was still alive.

I froze when I heard a sound outside. A dull thud, and snow crunching under impact. Then a low groan.

My heart started pounding, and I gripped my gun tighter, ears straining for any other sounds. When I heard footsteps crunching through the snow with stumbling steps, I stopped breathing entirely and waited.

“Charlie?”

My breath caught, but I still didn't move. That had sounded like Moth, but I couldn't be sure. Had he said my name when we got here? Someone could have been lurking and heard it, and was trying to trick me.

“Charlie?”

The voice came again, louder and more frantic. And I realised it definitely was Moth—I recognised the husky tone. He sounded panicked.

Scrambling up from behind the front desk, I ran for the doors just as they flew open, stopping me in my tracks.

Moth looked dishevelled, his hair coming free from its braid. He was breathing hard, and his pale eyes flared with relief when he saw me.

All anger fled. I couldn't stop myself from striding forward and pulling him into a hard hug, holding my gun down at my side.

“Fuck, are you okay?” I asked worriedly. “What happened? Where did you go?”

Moth was stiff in my arms, but he briefly wrapped them around me to return the hug before stepping back.

“I’m sorry,” he said desperately, which made me go completely still with shock. “I didn’t—I didn’t mean to leave you.”

His eyes were sincere, face tight with worry as he stared at me. I tugged him further in so the doors could shut behind him, blocking out the howling wind and some of the chill.

“What happened?” I asked again, tracking my gaze over his frame to try and spot any injuries. “Did you—You were there one second and gone the next. Did you fall? Did something grab you?”

“I—” He looked panicked, which just made me more worried. “I had to—go and do something. I’m sorry,” he blurted again.

I stared at him hard, anger slowly creeping up and replacing the sheer relief that he was here and still alive.

“Go and do something?” I echoed incredulously.

He flushed and stepped closer to the desk to ease his backpack off his shoulders.

“What did you have to go and do?” I pressed, the anger bleeding into my tone. “Without telling me first? You’ve been gone for *hours*, Moth.”

“Look, I’m sorry,” he snapped, reaching up and shoving back his messy hair. He ripped the tie free with a snarl of irritation and ran his fingers through the strands to get rid of the braid.

I gritted my teeth together as I stared at him. He obviously wasn’t going to tell me what the fuck he’d disappeared to do.

“How am I meant to trust you at all now?” I asked harshly. “How am I meant to know that you won’t do that again?”

He let out a hard breath and shoved his hair up into a bun. “I—I might have to leave again. But I’ll come back. I promise.”

“What the *fuck*, Moth?” I stomped forward. “Where did you go?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it *does*,” I burst out. “You *vanished*. I thought you might have been dead!”

He flushed. “Sorry.”

“Where did you go?” I asked again through clenched teeth.

He stared at the floor. “I can’t tell you.”

“What the *fuck*?” I exploded, shoving a hand through my hair. “Why not? What were you doing?”

“Charlie, just drop it.” He sounded weary as he picked up his bag and walked around to where I’d been sitting before.

I spluttered with furious disbelief, stomping around the counter after him. "I'm not just going to fucking drop it. Seriously, how am I meant to trust you now?"

"I guess you can't," he said hoarsely, pulling his bottle out of his bag.

I was seething with anger. I'd finally started trusting him a bit, and then he had to go and pull a bullshit stunt like this. It didn't make any sense. He looked forlorn as he sat down on the floor and had a sip of water, head bent low and shoulders sagging. Like he was regretting what he'd done. But he'd still done it.

"So what now?" I bit out, dropping down opposite him and wrenching the zipper on my bag open. "Cat's not even fucking here."

Moth exhaled and reached up to wipe his forehead. He looked even paler than normal in the faint glow from the snow coming in through the windows. There were shadows under his eyes.

Worry cut through the anger, just a little. Seriously, what the fuck had happened? Where had he gone?

"Are you hurt?" I asked, my tone harsh because I was still fucking angry.

He shook his head wearily and fiddled with the lid of his bottle, eyes downcast. He looked miserable.

I let out a long, slow breath to try and calm down. But I had no idea what to say. I just wanted to keep asking him where the fuck he'd gone, and I knew he wouldn't tell me. Then I'd just get angrier.

I understood why Gloam had warned me about him now.

"I understand if you want to go back to the camp," Moth said, his voice emotionless. "I'll keep looking for Cat."

"No," I barked. "I want to keep looking for him too. I just know not to assume you'll have my back now."

Moth let out a tiny sigh but didn't lift his head. He didn't make any fucking sense. He was happy to run off into the dark and leave me here alone, but now he was acting like he regretted it? Like he knew I didn't trust him at all now and he didn't like it? Well, that was his fucking fault.

"What now?" I asked again, my voice still tight with anger. "How the fuck are we meant to know where to even start?"

Moth finally looked up at me, his eyes eerily pale in the weak light. "The nearest city is Chicago."

I stilled. "What? There isn't a city there."

Moth nodded. “There is now. A group of raiders started forming a bigger community there a while back when they realised Lake Michigan was safe. The military didn’t like it, so they went in and took over. Kicked out most of the original settlers and bussed in city-dwellers from the east coast to try and spread the population a bit.”

I stared at him, feeling another wave of disgust toward the military. “So it’s military-controlled now?”

“Yeah.” His voice was hoarse and eyes tired when they flitted to me briefly. “But it stands to reason that if any humans managed to escape this place, some of them would have headed to the nearest city. And Cat hasn’t shown up at the camp, so... he’s either dead or out there. It’s somewhere to start looking, at least.”

I nodded, forcing back all the confusion and anger and worry over Moth’s disappearance to focus on making a new plan.

“How will we get in?” I asked.

“I know how to get in. The hidden entrance traders use.”

I let out a hard breath. “Okay. Fine. Like you said, it’s somewhere to start. We’ll set out in the morning, so let’s try and get some sleep.”

I got out my blanket with jerky motions and stretched out on the floor, pillowing my head with my backpack. As I stared up at the dark ceiling, I saw Moth slowly shifting out of the corner of my eye. Eventually he lay down on his side, curled up.

I tried to unclench my jaw and relax my face, but my gut was swirling with unease and anger and confusion.

“I’m sorry,” I heard Moth whisper.

My brows pinched. He sounded... broken. Defeated, like he was fully aware that I didn’t trust him anymore and he hated it. Which made no fucking sense.

“Will you tell me where you went?” I asked, voice still tight.

There was silence for a long moment.

“I can’t,” he said hoarsely. “But I didn’t want to go. I wouldn’t—I didn’t want to just leave you, Charlie. I mean it.”

That just made me more confused. I frowned harder and turned my head to look at him. He still looked miserable, and more vulnerable now he was curled up on his side.

“Are you going to fuck me over?” I asked, staring him down.

“No,” he said straight away, brows pinching as he stared back at me, like he was trying to show me he was sincere.

I let out a breath. “Did you disappear to do something awful? Like... murder puppies or something? Or is it a monster thing?”

“It’s a monster thing,” he mumbled, then leaned up on one elbow. “It might happen again. I’m sorry if it does. But I promise I’ll come back, Charlie. I’m not going to leave you out here. Or in the city. I just... I just can’t give you any more than that.”

God, my head was starting to hurt with how hard I was frowning. I looked back up at the ceiling and forced my eyes shut, trying to smooth out my brow.

“Let’s try and get some sleep.”

I heard Moth sigh as he lay back down. I stayed tense, ears straining for any sounds from him. I rested one hand beside my hunting knife, ready to grab it if I heard him getting up or sneaking closer.

But he didn’t do anything. He just lay there in silence, his uneven breaths telling me he was still awake. I tried to block out how completely despondent he had looked—and how relieved his eyes had grown when he’d seen me.

Was this the secret Gloam had talked about? What the fuck was it? What had he disappeared to do?

How was I meant to trust him now?

CHAPTER TWELVE

Charlie

I stared hard at the impression in the snow.

I'd woken up first, which had surprised me. Normally Moth was already up if I took the last watch shift before morning. But when I'd quietly risen and tucked my blanket back in my bag, his face had looked pale and tired even in sleep. Guess whatever mysterious thing he'd left to do last night had worn him out.

I tried to ignore the pang of bitterness as I silently walked to the doors with the intention of taking a leak outside. It had stopped snowing in the night, so when I slipped outside, my eyes immediately fell to the boot impressions in the snow.

I could see mine from when I'd finally given up searching for Moth and headed inside. And I could see Moth's from when he'd got back. But the weird thing about Moth's was that they were only visible for a few yards before ending suddenly at a different, deeper impression.

I stepped closer to it warily, my boots crunching in the fresh snow. I stared down at the outline of Moth's hands and two long, narrow dips that were deeper at the ends.

It looked like he'd... landed on all fours in the snow.

There were no other tracks beyond this impression. No other footsteps leading up to this spot to suggest that maybe he'd just tripped on his way toward the building. Beyond it was nothing. Just untouched snow.

I looked around wildly. It looked like he'd just been fucking dropped from the air.

What the *fuck* was going on?

I stomped to the side of the building to piss, then went back inside where it was marginally warmer. Moth was awake, still looking drawn as he sat up and rubbed at his eyes.

He went stiff when I walked in, gaze darting to me and down just as fast. "Morning," he said hoarsely, voice tight with apprehension.

I stared at him hard for long, silent moments. “Did you drop out of the fucking sky?”

His eyes darted to the doors. “What?”

I gestured behind me. “There are no tracks, then suddenly your handprints appear. Like you just fell out of the sky.”

“Uhh...” His eyes darted again, to anywhere but me. “I tripped but—there are tracks—”

“No there aren’t, Moth.”

He fell silent, not looking at me. It dragged on for long, uncomfortable minutes.

“Will you tell me where you went?” I asked again, trying to keep my voice calm.

His shoulders hunched, and he shook his head without looking up.

I clenched my jaw. “Are you in danger? Is something... bad happening to you?”

How the fuck did you drop out of the sky?

His head jerked up, and I went still when I saw the poorly masked desperation in his eyes. Like he wanted to tell me. Like he was about to.

I waited as he licked his lips and parted them, taking in a shallow breath. But then he just shook his head sharply and looked away again, down at his bag as he unzipped it. But I hadn’t missed the utter despondence in his gaze before he’d lowered his head.

My gut clenched with foreboding. Something bad *was* happening to him. Or had happened last night. But *what*? I wanted to tell him he could trust me, but that didn’t seem fair when I’d said repeatedly last night that I could no longer trust *him* after this.

In the end, I hesitantly approached and sat opposite him.

“I’d help you,” I said gruffly as I pulled out some food. “Whatever it is.”

He just shook his head and took a tiny bite of a cracker. He’d picked more food up for us at the raider market and given me half without saying anything. I exhaled and stared down sadly at the cracker in my hand.

I wanted to trust him, but he was so... confusing. He’d been generous to me out here. He didn’t have to buy me a scarf or share his food, but he had. And aside from last night, he *hadn’t* left me whenever we’d come across monsters on our way here.

But he was still closed off and cagey most of the time. He wore bravado like a mask whenever he was feeling unsettled. He hadn’t opened up to me

at all, though he had become marginally less prickly.

“Are you sure you want to come to Chicago?” he asked quietly, his voice still croaky from sleep. “I don’t mind going alone.”

I shook my head. “I’m going with you.”

He nodded and stuffed the cracker in his mouth, pulling out his bottle to have some water. We finished eating in silence, and still didn’t speak as we packed up our stuff and set off.

At least it had temporarily stopped snowing. The sun was bright in the pale blue sky, and I was glad as we left the prison behind. I had one more reason to fucking hate this place now, and I never wanted to see it again.

We travelled southeast for days and days that all blurred together, turning into weeks, the atmosphere once again tense between us. I was on edge constantly, expecting Moth to just vanish and leave me in a blanket of indiscernible white dotted with trees and the occasional town or store.

But he didn’t. He hunted meat for us when we ran out of food, and found us shelters every night where we could make campfires to get warm.

He barely spoke, but it wasn’t the same surly moodiness as it had been at the beginning. He was withdrawn, his blue eyes constantly tight above the black scarf pulled up to protect the lower half of his face. His voice was quiet when he did speak to me to tell me we were stopping for the night, or that he’d boiled some snow for drinking water for us both.

This was fucking miserable. Not that I’d expected this to be a fun jaunt through the Wastes, but at least it had been bearable once Moth had chilled out a little and stopped snarking at everything I said. I would have preferred his barbs over his weird, uneasy silence.

I knew that whatever he’d vanished to do that night, I couldn’t keep dwelling on it. He’d given me several opportunities to head back to the camp—even telling me that he would go back with me before setting out for Chicago alone—and I’d refused. So I had to try and move past it, and just be prepared if he *did* vanish again.

“You have no idea how grateful I am for this scarf,” I said one day, as a peace offering as we trudged through the snow. “My nose would definitely have frostbite by now without it.”

Moth glanced over at me and blinked, looking surprised that I'd talked to him in an easy tone. I'd been as closed off as he had since the prison, not knowing what to say to him.

It was dusk, the setting sun barely visible through thick clouds. I could see a tiny town up ahead. It looked deserted, but I knew raiders were good at staying invisible.

So were little monsters with giant ears and weird, two-fingered hands.

Moth didn't seem to know how to respond. He cleared his throat and gave a little nod. I exhaled and burrowed my nose deeper in my scarf.

"Look," I began, "I won't keep bringing it up, because I know you won't tell me, but I meant it. If you're in trouble... I'll help you, Moth. If you want me to." I looked over at him. "You don't have to tell me anything, but if you want to talk, I'm... happy to listen."

Moth was tense as he walked.

"Thanks," he said hoarsely, then cleared his throat and nodded toward the town up ahead. "We're stopping there for the night."

"Sounds good. Do you think we'll be able to have a fire tonight?"

Moth nodded. "The town is deserted. No one around for miles, and monsters won't pay attention to smoke coming from a chimney."

"Yeah? Have you been here before?"

"I have a safehouse here."

My brows rose as I looked over at him. "Really? This is where you live?"

Moth shrugged uncomfortably. "Some of the time. When I'm not moving around."

I ignored the weird jolt of excitement I felt at seeing Moth's place.

"We won't have to keep watch tonight," he added. "It's safe."

I grinned over at him. "Awesome. Do you have water? Will we be able to wash up?"

"Yeah. Uh... we'll have to heat it over the fire though."

I chuckled. "That's fine."

When we reached the town, he led me down the main street before turning into an alley next to an old burger joint with boarded-up windows. He produced a key and unlocked the backdoor that led to the apartment above the restaurant, but as we stepped inside and he locked it behind us, I realised the staircase had been completely smashed out.

Moth tugged his backpack off and unzipped the front pocket to pull out a length of rope that was already looped on one end. I watched in silence as he threw the rope up and caught the loop on a metal hook driven into the wall. He tugged on it once to make sure it was secure, then slung his bag back over his shoulder and climbed up with agile speed.

I chuckled, impressed. Glancing up, I saw Moth had already reached the floor above, so I grabbed onto the rope to climb up.

Once I was up, he unhooked the rope and stuffed it back into his bag, then walked down the hallway with his boots echoing on the wooden boards, to the door at the far end. Flicking to another key on his keyring, he unlocked the door and moved to the side to let me in.

“Thanks,” I said distractedly as I stepped inside and looked around.

It was a decent-sized bedroom, with a large bed tucked into the corner and a fireplace against the far wall. The windows were boarded up, and candles dotted most flat surfaces. Moth walked deeper into the room and opened a drawer, pulling out a box of matches before he proceeded to light the candles.

I smiled a little as I shrugged off my bag. This place was nice. The bed looked big and comfortable, the sheets clean. A couch, no doubt from the living room, had been dragged in and sat opposite the bed, beside an old coffee table that had a stack of books on top.

A dining table shoved into the corner was littered with pots, cans of food and packets of dried pasta and rice. A big rug was in front of the fireplace, and blankets were thrown over the back of the couch. I could see an ensuite bathroom through a door to our right. It looked blessedly clean.

“This place is great, Moth.” I left my bag by the door and wandered in deeper. “Do you want me to lay the fire?”

There was a stack of logs beside the fireplace, and I could see he’d already cleaned the hearth the last time he was here.

“I’ll do it.” Moth had set down his pack and shrugged off his sword. “You, uh... get comfortable.”

I wondered if anyone else had ever been here. I doubted it, but couldn’t be sure. I resisted the urge to poke around his space. I was grateful he’d brought me here, because even without the fire lit, this room was insulated and so much warmer than anywhere else we’d stayed.

Once the fire was lit, Moth stood up and went into the bathroom. I could hear a tap running before he returned, heaving in a huge pot filled with

water. I hurried over to help him hook the handles over a metal frame he'd constructed over the flames.

"I'm seriously impressed," I chuckled, stepping back. "I feel like you've got your shit together way more than even entire camps of raiders out here."

Moth flushed and shrugged, heading over to the table in the corner. He grabbed two bowls and some packets of instant ramen.

"You can wash up first, when the water's warm. We'll use some of it to make noodles."

"Sounds good." I shrugged off my coat and sat down on the couch to pull off my boots. My eyes drifted over to the bed opposite, heat curling low in my belly. Moth had said we didn't need to keep watch, which meant we'd both be sleeping at the same time.

But... surely he didn't mean we'd share the bed.

This couch was pretty comfortable. I wouldn't mind sleeping on this thing, and he had blankets thrown over the back, so I knew I'd be warm.

Once the water had heated, Moth handed me some towels so I could heave the pot into the bathroom after he'd taken some of the water for our noodles. Closing the door behind me, I stripped down and washed up quickly in the tub. He even had some of the generic branded shampoo and body wash from the cities.

I felt more relaxed than I had in weeks as I got dressed in a clean shirt and underwear. I set the empty pot under the bath tap to refill it as I pulled on my pants, then carried it back into the bedroom and set it over the fire for the water to heat for Moth.

He'd made our ramen while I was in the bathroom, and we sat on the rug in front of the fire to eat it. The room was blessedly warm now. It felt cosy with the windows blocked up. And safe. The safest I'd felt in weeks.

I noticed the bottle of bourbon on the floor beside Moth and chuckled. "Bet you've got a good stash of booze here."

He glanced down at it and shrugged. "A couple. Do you want some?"

"Nah, I'm good, thanks."

I'd never been a big drinker, but I wasn't going to stop Moth if he wanted to loosen up. It had been a gruelling few weeks, and he'd been especially tense ever since the prison. It would be nice to see him more relaxed.

Once we finished eating, Moth took the pot of water into the bathroom to wash up—and the bottle of bourbon. He was still wearing his coat and

boots as he closed the door behind him. He hadn't undressed at all in front of me while we were out here. Which was fine—I wasn't shy at all about stripping down, but I knew other people weren't as unbothered by it.

I dragged my bag over and checked my gun while he was in the bathroom. When he emerged, he was fully dressed again—coat and boots back on. My brows twitched but I said nothing, then they hiked up when he sat heavily beside me on the rug and I saw just how much was gone from that bottle.

"Sleep aid, huh?" I chuckled as I set aside my gun. "Don't blame you."

He just grunted, lifting the bottle to his lips as he watched the fire. I tried not to stare at him. His face was faintly flushed from both the booze and being scrubbed clean. His hair was wet and braided back again. The firelight flickered over the tattoos on his neck and long fingers.

My gut clenched with want, but I tamped it back. It was stupid to want him. I couldn't even trust him.

But he was just... so freaking beautiful. He still looked slightly inhuman, but that didn't put me off. It just made him even more interesting to look at.

His body was long and lean but strong. When he leaned back on an elbow and drank more, my gaze drifted down his chest and stomach, which looked tight beneath his shirt.

His legs were long, encased in dark jeans, one knee cocked up and the other stretched out. When the piercings through his lips winked in the firelight, I wondered if he had them anywhere else.

My cock twitched. It was already getting hard, just from me looking at Moth fully dressed. I was *ridiculously* horny. At least on the homestead I'd had the privacy to jack off, which I'd done—a lot. Moth and I had no privacy out here. I was practically vibrating with pent-up need.

"Might go sit in the hall for a while," I said, because I needed to calm my body down. "Getting kinda warm."

He just nodded, nursing the bottle and staring moodily into the fire. I resisted the urge to ask him if he was alright. He'd probably appreciate a bit of time on his own, especially now he was here, back in his safe place.

I picked up my gun and shoved my boots back on, then walked into the hallway. It was much cooler out here, but I didn't mind it. I really *had* been burning up in there, staring at Moth's gorgeous face and body.

I sat down with my legs dangling over the edge where the staircase used to be, my mouth quirking. This really was an awesome little hideout. The town was totally deserted, and we hadn't passed anything else for miles on our way here.

But it was also probably really lonely. It was safe, sure, but incredibly remote.

Did Moth get lonely here?

I realised that the booze had hit him hard when I heard him stumble into the hallway behind me. He thumped down beside me, which was surprising. I thought he would have relished the chance to be away from me for a little while.

"How's it going?" I asked with a wry smile, eyeing the bottle still in his hand.

He shrugged and wiped at his face blearily. "Don't get drunk often, but... wanted to."

I wondered if it had anything to do with whatever had happened to him at the prison. He'd been so quiet and tense since then. The urge to ask him once more where he'd gone surged up, but I pushed it back.

"Yeah, well, you've been stuck with me for weeks," I teased, nudging him with my elbow. "I understand."

He snorted. "You're not that bad."

I stared at him in shock. "Yeah, you're definitely drunk."

He snorted again and lazily turned his head to look at me. His eyes were glassy and a little unfocused, but they roamed over my face.

"Doesn't it worry you?" he asked. "Being out here with a half monster?"

That wasn't what worried me.

"No," I said. "It doesn't worry me that you're half monster."

"So you really don't care?" His words were a little slurred. "That I'm not all human?"

"No," I told him. "I really don't."

He gazed at me in silence through bleary eyes for a few moments. When his unfocused gaze drifted down to my mouth, my gut tightened with attraction and nerves. I wanted to kiss Moth—a lot—but not while he was drunk.

And if he tried to kiss me right now, I'd have to stop him, and I was pretty sure that would be that. He'd never try again, because his insecurity would flare and his arrogant, prickly wall would come right back up.

It was probably just wishful thinking on my part, anyway. I'd noticed his gaze flick to my mouth often, and a few times I'd caught him staring when I changed my shirt in front of him. I was pretty sure he was attracted to me, but I also doubted he would ever act on it. Being attracted to me didn't wipe away his feelings for Ghost, or his glaringly obvious insecurities about his monster half.

If anything was going to happen between us, I'd have to make the first move, and I was fairly certain that his kneejerk reaction would be flat-out rejection if I did. So I was doomed to lust after my constant companion out here, with no hope of it going anywhere. Awesome.

"I don't freak you out?"

Moth's question pulled me out of my thoughts, making me realise I'd been staring back at him. I snorted and looked away.

"No, you don't freak me out, Moth."

His mouth twisted as he looked down at the bottle in his hands.

"Most humans think I'm..." He shrugged awkwardly. "Attractive or whatever at first, but when they get closer, they get this... I don't know. Repulsed look on their face, like they can't work out what's wrong with me, but they know there's *something*."

"There's nothing wrong with you," I said immediately, brows pinching into a frown. "Fuck anyone who looks at you like that, Moth."

He exhaled and lifted the bottle to have another swig, muttering, "*Everyone* looks at me like that."

"You're not repulsive," I said incredulously. "Even *with* your shitty attitude," I added in a teasing tone to try and make him feel better.

He just huffed, staring down at the bottle again, his long, tattooed fingers picking at the peeling label.

I really wanted to reach over and lace my fingers through his, just to give him some comfort. But I didn't think he'd like that, so I refrained. Just because he was opening up to me a bit—while drunk—didn't mean he suddenly liked me.

"I obviously have no idea what it's like to... try and fit into two different worlds," I began hesitantly. "But I can imagine it's difficult. Really difficult. I know I'm not that much older than you, but trust me, Moth—the older you get, the more you realise that it's pointless wasting time worrying about the people who don't like you. They're not gonna like you whatever you do. Focus on what makes you happy."

He snorted at that. "I don't know what makes me happy."

God, that was kind of heartbreaking.

"What about... Have you considered going to the monster world?" I asked cautiously. "Maybe you'd like it there better."

"No." Moth made a face and shook his head. "Monsters hate me even more than humans do. It wouldn't be better."

I bit my lip, resisting the intense urge to pull him into my arms and hug him.

"Edin doesn't hate you," I offered. "He said you're a good guy. He said he trusts you."

Moth said nothing, still looking down at the bottle. He looked so... lost. I hated it. I hated that he felt completely alone in the world and chose to close himself off from everyone.

"What about the Nebraska camp?" I asked gently. "Why don't you live there?"

"They wouldn't want me to live there."

"They like you," I protested with a frown, not adding that only a few of them seemed to, which made me sad. "Rig and Ghost. And Anchor? I know you said you and Gloam don't know each other well, but you'll get to know each other, right?"

He tensed up and shook his head. "They wouldn't want me there all the time. They don't fully trust me. And it would be... difficult now. Because of—"

He stopped abruptly and pursed his lips, before raising the bottle and taking another swig. But I knew what he'd been thinking about.

I sighed. "It sucks when the person you want doesn't want you back."

He stiffened up even more, face going pink, but I persevered.

"But... it'll get easier, Moth. With Ghost, I mean."

"I don't—" He rubbed his face. "I want him to be happy. Aury makes him happy."

God, he sounded so miserable. Tentatively, I reached up and rested my hand on his back.

"I know it hurts, but that makes you a good person, Moth. You'll find someone who wants you as much as you want them."

He just shook his head and took another swig from the bottle.

I eyed him carefully. "Were you and Ghost... together before?"

He shook his head again, sharper this time. “No, but we were... I thought he was interested. But then...”

“Then he found Aury?” I said when he trailed off.

He let out a self-deprecating snort. “I thought it was my—the monster thing that put him off. Obviously it wasn’t.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, I don’t think a *monster thing* is a problem in that camp.”

He just sighed and started picking at the bottle again. His eyes were hazy from the booze, but still pained. My chest ached for him. I got the feeling he struggled with a lot of self-loathing because of his monster side. He’d assumed that Ghost couldn’t want him because of it. Humans treated him like shit because of it, and by the sounds of it, so did most monsters. Even though Edin had said he trusted Moth, I’d seen for myself that Gloam didn’t.

“Well, I think it’s awesome,” I said, dropping my hand from his back. “You being half monster, I mean. Nothing wrong with being different.”

Although that was easy for me to say—I’d never really had to deal with any kind of prejudice. I flushed at my insensitive words, but Moth just snorted.

“Sure.”

“So... what is your monster half?” I asked tentatively, glancing at him. “Maybe I’ve made up a stupid name for your species,” I added with a little smile to try and cheer him up.

But he didn’t smile back. He tensed up, fingers tightening on the bottle.

“I’m going to bed,” he mumbled instead of answering, standing up unsteadily and wavering on his feet for a moment. “You can... We can share the bed. It’s big enough.”

I nodded once. “Thanks. I’ll stay out here a while longer.”

“Kay,” he mumbled, heading back through the doorway to the bedroom. “Night.”

I heard it close behind me and sighed as I glanced around the dark hallway. The thought of Moth living here alone was heartbreaking. In a dark, empty house on a dark, empty street in the middle of nowhere. Surely he had to get lonely, otherwise he wouldn’t visit the camp.

He’d said the raiders there didn’t fully trust him. Why? Just because he was half monster? Anger flared on his behalf. That was bullshit, especially

as they had two *full* monsters living there. Well—three, if I included Edin while he and Hunter waited there for me to get back.

So, was it something else? Had he done something to the camp? I doubted it, because then surely they wouldn't let him in at all. And I also highly doubted that he would have done anything to risk Ghost. Maybe he'd pulled a similar disappearing act on them like the one he'd done on me.

Everyone held him at arm's length. Even Edin, who'd said he trusted him, hadn't bothered to tell him about the parasites, which meant they obviously weren't all that close.

He'd referred to his human mother before in the past tense, so I was pretty sure she wasn't alive anymore. And he hadn't mentioned his monster parent at all—he got cagey about it, so I doubted there was a good story there either.

I was pretty sure Moth had no one at all. Even though I didn't know him that well, and he was a prickly ass most of the time, the thought made me really fucking sad.

I exhaled and stood up. I wanted to get in a good stretch of sleep while we were somewhere relatively safe and neither of us had to keep watch. Moth had said we could share the bed, which made my dick twitch even though nothing was going to happen.

I opened the bedroom door and froze.

Moth froze too. Except he was completely naked. A pair of old grey sweats were clutched in his hands, which he'd clearly been about to put on.

His back was to me, and before I could stop them, my eyes slid down his frame. His arms and back were covered in tattoos, most in black ink, but there was a line of symbols down his spine that looked like scarification. The skin between all the ink looked faintly scaly—it shimmered slightly pink in the candlelight, interspersed with sections of smooth pale skin in patches.

Oh—and he had a tail.

Partially hiding a tight, firm ass, it was thicker at the base below his tailbone, before thinning off into a narrow point. It reached about halfway down his thighs, which were strong with toned muscle and covered in scales that turned beige and faint purple in places.

His feet were completely inhuman, the scales thicker and more pronounced. They arched a little at the heels and had three long, thick toes with black claws.

My eyes darted back to his ass before I could stop them, arousal flaring in my gut. It had only been a couple of seconds, but we were both frozen in place. My face burned with shame when I realised I was staring instead of marching back out of the room like a decent human being.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” I blurted and spun back into the hallway, slamming the door behind me, my heart pounding.

“Fucking knock.” Moth sounded furious, but his voice shook. The shame swelled, making me bite my lip.

“I’m so sorry, Moth.” I stood there clenching the door handle tight in a sweaty hand. “I didn’t realise—I—”

“You said you were staying out there,” he shot back through the door. I could hear him shoving on the sweats, his movements clumsy because he was drunk.

I swallowed.

“I’m sorry,” I croaked again. “I can sleep out here.”

I heard him huff and stomp across the room before the door was flung open, the handle wrenched from my grip. I spun around to face him.

“Just fucking knock next time,” he mumbled, turning away immediately, but I caught a glimpse of his bright pink face.

I had no idea what to say, and as I stepped into the room and closed the door behind me, the silence was thick and uncomfortable. Moth had put on thick socks and a long-sleeved shirt, covering up every inch of his body.

Because that was where all his monster parts were hidden.

I felt awful. The room was agonisingly silent as I sat on the edge of the couch to pull off my boots. Moth had gotten into the far side of the bed and was lying on his side with his back to me. I stared at the back of his head. His white hair was still in a braid, trailing behind him over the pillow.

I didn’t want to make him more uncomfortable, so I kept my pants and shirt on. And socks. I stood in the centre of the room, staring at the empty space on the bed.

“I’ll sleep on the couch,” I said eventually, voice husky.

“Just shut up and get in the bed, Charlie,” Moth snapped, voice thick with anger and embarrassment. “Unless the thought of sleeping next to me makes you feel sick.”

“Jesus Christ, it’s not that,” I blurted, padding closer. “I just don’t want to make you more uncomfortable.”

Moth was quiet for a long time. Eventually he burrowed deeper under the blanket and tucked his chin down.

“Just go to sleep,” he said quietly, which made me bite my lip.

I wanted to apologise again. To tell him that there was nothing wrong with him. God, I couldn’t believe he’d even considered the idea of sleeping next to him would make me *feel sick*.

But he clearly didn’t want to talk. About anything. So I stayed quiet as I blew out the candles, then pulled back the covers and slipped into bed, making sure to stay right on the edge to give him some distance. But then I worried that he’d think I was doing it because I didn’t want to be near him.

I inched closer, but still kept a respectable distance between us. Moth’s body was tense, and he kept his back to me. I shifted onto my side and tried to get comfortable, but my eyes kept popping back open to stare at the back of him.

The sheets smelled like him. Faintly citrusy. My gut lurched when a picture of his long, lean body flashed in my mind. His wide shoulders and tattooed skin. His legs were long and toned, and almost human in shape but... not quite. Like they could bend differently. His tail protruded above a firm, rounded ass, and I bit the inside of my cheek as I pictured the curve of it.

I squeezed my eyes shut again and tried to focus on something else. Anything else. I’d feel like absolute shit if I popped a boner while lying next to him, when he was clearly embarrassed and uncomfortable, but had still been kind enough to let me share the bed.

The urge to apologise didn’t fade, and for once, sleep didn’t come to me easily.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Charlie

Moth was back to his arrogant, prickly self when we left the next morning. I knew it was his shield, so I didn't comment on it, but I still felt like shit for barging in on him getting changed. I didn't care about people seeing my body, but Moth clearly did. He went to great lengths to stay covered up. I understood why he kept his coat on all the time now. To hide his tail.

I wanted to tell him to freaking *embrace* his monster side, but that was easy for me to say. I didn't have to live with it, and he clearly hated it.

At least he wasn't acting so withdrawn anymore. I was actually happy to see him getting snarky and rolling his eyes at everything I said. I started lightly teasing him again, and it felt like the level of camaraderie we'd finally managed to reach before the prison, when he was slightly more relaxed around me, had returned.

Except my attraction to him was growing. A lot. Not because of the inhuman parts of him I'd seen, and not in spite of them either. I'd always been attracted to people, not specific genders or body types. And even though Moth was a complicated, prickly, difficult ass, I was wildly attracted to him.

I knew he was attracted to me too. I was certain of it by this point. At first, after we'd left his safehouse, he'd given me wary glances like he was still waiting for me to bring up what I'd seen. Like he was waiting for me to ask him what the fuck was going on with him in disgust or something.

But eventually, as we got closer to Chicago, the quick, heated looks at my mouth returned, like he couldn't control them. The way his eyes lingered on me when I got changed in front of him.

My cock was half hard around him constantly, despite the freezing cold. I desperately needed to get laid. I wondered if I'd be able to find someone in the city—if I'd be able to make an excuse to slip away for a few hours.

But... the thought wasn't all that appealing. My body had decided it wanted Moth and only Moth right now. Too bad that was never going to fucking happen. Not unless I made the first move, and I had absolutely no

idea how to approach him like that. I highly doubted he'd be receptive if I blurted out, 'Hey, want to fuck?'

I was distracted from my near-constant thoughts of what it would be like to kiss him and feel those piercings against my mouth when the big wall surrounding the new city of Chicago came into view in the distance, a halo of light pollution reflecting into the dark sky above it.

We didn't head directly for it. We skirted a long path around the edge, with Moth leading the way. I could already see that it was much smaller than the coastal cities. Anger flared when I remembered what Moth had told me—that raiders had settled here to start a larger community, and the military had kicked them out and taken over.

I could see the watch towers that every city wall had. They were manned twenty-four hours a day to watch for any approaching monsters—or raiders who weren't allowed back in once they'd been shunted into the Wastes or made the decision to leave.

But Moth led us away from them to a section of the wall that didn't look as well kept. We stuck close to its base until he suddenly stopped and leaned down.

I stared in shock as he curled his fingers under an almost indiscernible edge in the metal and pulled. A section of the wall swung out, like a mini door. It had been carved out and hinges attached on the inside.

"Damn," I whispered as I followed him in quickly and pulled it shut behind me, making sure it was flush. "Do all the cities have these?"

"Yeah," he murmured from in front before straightening up. When I followed him out, I realised we were standing right behind a dumpster in a narrow alleyway. It was dark back here, but as we stepped out from behind the dumpster, I could see the street ahead. It looked dingy and filthy—so did the alley—and I knew we were in the worst part of town.

All the cities had them, despite almost everyone living in complete squalor. Humans still managed to find a way to segregate those they deemed to be "lowlifes" or the worst in society, despite a fucking monster apocalypse.

Before we'd left Moth's place, he'd given me a bag to put my gun in and stuffed another long, thin one in his backpack for his sword. We couldn't walk around a city with a rifle and a sword visible on our backs. I still had my knife strapped to my hip beneath my coat, but I was uncomfortable with my gun not being in easy reach as I carefully put it in the bag and slung it

over my shoulder. Moth did the same with his sword, sliding it into the long bag that was probably meant for golf clubs before zipping it up.

As we stepped into the street, no one paid us any attention. I knew it was late, the moon high in the sky, but there were still plenty of people around and the multiple bars looked busy.

There were a lot of homeless people on the sidewalks, some of them sleeping, others asking for money from passers-by. I could see a fight spilling out of a bar further up the street, angry shouts and the dull thud of fists hitting skin drifting back to us.

The air smelled sour and dirty with fumes. The high-rise buildings loomed above us—floors and floors of squalid apartments above rows of shops at street level. Most were closed—hardware stores, clothing stores, a rundown doctor's office and a bakery with filthy windows.

The pawn shop was still open, as were all the bars and several cafés. I spotted a diner across the street, its windows dirty but the interior bright and busy with people.

“Want to get something to eat?” I asked Moth. We'd been walking all day and hadn't stopped since late morning.

He nodded. “We can think of a plan to start looking for Cat while we're in there.”

“Good idea.” Looking around, I saw an ATM. Trepidation tightened my gut, but I nodded toward it. “I'll go get some cash out.”

Moth shook his head. “I have a little—”

“No. It's okay.”

He'd already given me a lot. I owed him. As we crossed the street to the ATM, I tried not to wonder about what might happen if I used my account. It had obviously sat untouched for months, and I didn't know how closely the military monitored them. I didn't know if they were actively looking for me, and something would flag if I withdrew money.

I doubted it. I was under no illusion that the military gave a single shit about its actual soldiers as people. By this point, they probably just presumed Hunter and me dead and had moved on, assigning others to the jobs we used to do.

All ATMs had an option for the military now, which allowed us to access our accounts through our soldier identification numbers. I keyed mine in and tried not to glance around warily to draw any more attention to

us. Moth stood facing the street beside me, his pale eyes watching everyone keenly, which made me feel better.

I withdrew several hundred dollars, even though I really didn't want to carry that much cash on me in a city, and stuffed it quickly into my pocket. We'd have to find a room as well. The hotel industry didn't really exist anymore—wasn't like anyone could travel—but I knew a lot of the bars and pubs in the cities had rooms for rent on their upper floors, for people who picked up sex workers.

That kind of sex work was still, for some reason, illegal, which I'd never understood. The military made the laws now, and soldiers used their services more than anyone else. But it meant the establishments that catered to the field tended to be seedier, in the bad parts of town like the one we were in right now.

The diner was steamy and unpleasantly warm when we stepped inside, smelling like grease and stale coffee. We slipped into an empty booth, and an overworked-looking waitress came over to give us menus and fill our cups with coffee.

She eyed Moth warily as she handed him his menu. He'd left his hair loose today, and he kept his head bent low over the menu so it shielded him a little from view. I felt a pang of sadness. His face wasn't inhuman enough for people to be able to immediately work out that he *wasn't* entirely human, but they still got that uneasy vibe I'd gotten when I first saw him.

I felt guilty for that now.

"Let's load up," I said once the waitress had walked off, opening my menu and my mouth already watering as I read the options. "Shit, this is like Christmas. I want one of everything."

Moth gave a little huff of amusement and leaned back in his seat to pick up his coffee cup. His eyes were wary as they flicked over the rest of the diner.

"What are you gonna get?" I asked to distract him. "I'm having a burger. And pancakes. And fuck, a milkshake. I need sugar."

Speaking of sugar, I picked up a handful of the little sugar packets stuffed into a bowl on the table and ripped four open to pour into my coffee all at once. Moth stared in mild horror, which made me chuckle as I stirred my coffee.

At my first sip, I couldn't stop the groan that left me. Overbearingly sweet black coffee was my jam. I could sense Moth watching me. When I

glanced at him, he flushed and looked away, but his eyes darted back when I licked my lips, making my gut lurch with arousal.

“I’ll have a burger too.” His voice was hoarse as he studiously looked down at his menu, like he was concentrating intently on it. “And an iced tea.”

“Get something else too,” I said. “Seriously. We’ve been living on flame-roasted meat and packets for too long.”

One corner of his lips tipped up into a tiny smile, the rings piercing them flashing in the harsh overhead lights of the diner. He looked even paler under the fluorescent light, and at the very base of his throat, between tattoos, I could see just a hint of the pink scales I’d seen elsewhere on his body.

I looked away before he could notice me staring, smiling at the tired waitress as she approached to take our orders. Moth also asked for some extra fries and a salad with his, and I leaned in closer once she was gone, my coffee cup clasped between my hands.

“So how do we start looking?” I murmured, trying not to get distracted when Moth’s gaze darted down to my mouth again. “How do we even know Cat might be here?”

“Like I said, it stands to reason that some of the humans who managed to escape the prison would come to the nearest city, if they knew how to get in. And if they did, they’d stay in the shitty part of town to remain undetected.”

I snorted. “*Every* part is the shitty part.”

He huffed in irritation. “You know what I mean.”

I nodded, my eyes drifting over to the window and the people beyond it. “I guess... we just start looking in the morning.”

“Yeah.” Moth picked up his cup and took a sip. “We can ask around in the bars. Anyone who came in would need somewhere to sleep.”

I wiped a hand down my face as I nodded. “We’ll need to find a room, too.”

We were both exhausted. I could see it in the drawn lines of Moth’s face, the shadows under his eyes. We’d been travelling for weeks and not getting anywhere near enough sleep. I gulped down the rest of my coffee, and when the waitress appeared with our food, she said she’d come back to refill my cup.

We didn't talk as we ate, clearing our plates almost ludicrously fast. At least Moth was inhaling his food as quickly as I was, which made me feel less like a pig.

"Damn, that was good," I groaned when we were done, leaning back and finishing the last of my milkshake. My belly was uncomfortably full, and I could feel my eyelids drooping now that I'd eaten.

"Let's go find somewhere to sleep," I said after asking the waitress for the check.

Moth nodded, rubbing at his tired eyes while I left the cash plus a tip on the table. We stood up and made our way out, anger flaring again when I saw others in the diner eyeing Moth with wary disgust like the waitress had done.

I hoped he didn't notice, but I already knew he did. He always noticed when people looked at him like that. Probably hard to ignore when *everyone* looked at him like that.

We started making our way down the street toward the cluster of bars and pubs up ahead. My pulse leapt when Moth suddenly stopped and whirled around.

"Why are you following us?" he asked someone behind me, so I quickly spun around too and rested my hand on the handle of my hunting knife.

The guy looked unwashed and bleary eyed, like he was a little out of it. He was scrawny and underfed, dirty clothes hanging off his narrow frame.

"I can help you," he rasped, gaze darting around before he took a wary step closer.

Moth and I stepped back as one.

"We don't need your help," Moth drawled, crossing his arms in a casual pose as he quirked a brow at the guy.

He nodded frantically, eyes darting again. "You're looking for the people from the prison, right?"

Neither of us outwardly reacted.

"What are you talking about?" Moth asked coolly.

"I heard you in the diner." He gave a rough, slightly hysterical bark of laughter. "Which is lucky, 'cause I know where they are."

My hands clenched into fists, and I saw the guy's eyes drop warily to the hunting knife at my hip.

"You were eavesdropping?" I gritted out.

He shook his head. “No, no, not intentionally. I was just in there and I... Look, I can help you. But it’s not safe out here.”

He glanced around, then jerked his chin toward the dark alley beside us. “Let’s talk down there.”

I snorted as Moth rolled his eyes.

“Come on, man. We’re not going down a dark alley with you,” I told him. “If you actually have anything to tell us, tell us here.”

“No, I can’t,” he hissed, gaze darting about again. “It was a whole thing when the prisoners got here. The military realised some of them had snuck in and took them away. The rest are hiding from them now, and if they hear anyone talking about it, they get taken away too.”

My brows twitched. I didn’t believe him, but I’d seen the military at the prison myself. I supposed there was a chance that they were trying to cover it up—stop the news of them being involved from spreading through the city.

It was worth a shot. It could be a genuine lead, and I knew we were going to struggle searching for Cat—we didn’t even know if he was definitely here.

I wasn’t worried about this guy hurting us. He was small and looked severely underfed, his face sallow and lips crusty and chapped.

“Alright,” I said coolly. “Let’s go talk.”

Leaning into Moth, I murmured, “You wait at the alley entrance.”

The guy gave us a quick grin, showing off brown teeth with many gaps, before shuffling toward the alley.

“Wait,” Moth barked as he pulled his flashlight out of his bag. The batteries were almost dead, but it cast enough light down the alley to show that it was empty except for two dumpsters and trash strewn about everywhere.

Good thinking. This guy could have had his cronies waiting down there for me.

“Don’t use your gun if he tries anything,” Moth murmured in my ear, a strand of his white hair brushing my cheek. “The military will come if they hear gunfire.”

I nodded, gripping the handle of my hunting knife as I followed the guy into the alley, which reeked of piss and rotting food. I stopped several feet away as he turned to face me, fidgeting nervously and eyes darting about.

“Go on then,” I said in a hard voice. “You know anything?”

“Yeah, yeah.” He nodded and took a step closer, but stopped when he saw my fingers flex around the hilt of my knife. “You—you’re looking for uh... Cam, right? I know him.”

I didn’t react, staring at him hard.

“That’s right,” I said smoothly. “Short white guy? Blond hair?”

“Yeah, yeah.” The guy nodded frantically. “Yeah. I know him. I know where he is.”

Cat was black and almost as tall as Hunter.

“So where is he?” I asked.

The guy chewed on his lip, eyes darting down to my knife again. “Just... Give me your cash and I’ll tell you.”

I barked out a laugh and turned to leave the alley.

“No, wait,” he cried desperately. “I mean it, I know where they are. Just... Can you help me out, man? In exchange for the info?”

“No,” I said bluntly, because I knew he didn’t know shit.

He gritted his stained teeth. “You got a fat wad of cash in that pocket. You don’t need all of it. Just fucking give me some and I’ll tell you.”

I stiffened as I realised just how long he’d been watching us. He’d no doubt followed us into the diner after watching us at the ATM so he could try and get his hands on my money. But he hadn’t been listening hard enough as he eavesdropped to make this at all believable.

“I’ll break your legs if you try and follow us again,” I told him as I turned to leave.

My back tensed a split second before I heard his footsteps rushing up toward me. I spun around and saw him brandishing a short steak knife with a serrated blade, his lips pulled back from his teeth.

“Just give me the fucking money—”

I gripped his wrist and twisted until he dropped the knife, spittle quivering between his bared teeth as he snarled out panting breaths. When he lunged at me again, I shoved him back hard.

I didn’t have time to react as his boot heel landed on an open container of rotting noodles, causing him to slip and his arms to pinwheel as he fell back. The back of his head hit the sharp corner of the dumpster behind him, letting out a sickening crack before he slumped to the dirty ground.

A thick pool of blood spread out from beneath his skull instantly. He didn’t move. His chest was still beneath his stained clothes.

“Oh, shit.” I felt the blood drain from my face as I stared down at the very still—and very dead—guy.

“Moth.” My voice was only slightly hysterical when I hissed his name.

A few moments later, I heard him jog up behind me. His citrus scent filled my nose when he peered over my shoulder at the body on the ground.

“Whoops,” he said.

My lips parted on a stunned little puff of breath. I turned to face him.

“Whoops?”

He quirked a brow at me. “Well, did you mean to kill him?”

“Of course not!”

“So it was an accident.”

I clenched my hands into fists. “That doesn’t mean you can just be so... cavalier about it.”

Moth folded his arms over his chest. “*I* didn’t kill him.”

My face burned. “It was an accident.”

“I know. I *just* said that.”

God, Moth was the most infuriating person I’d ever met—and I’d spent over a decade in the company of Hunter. I inhaled a long breath through my nose, trying very hard to calm down.

Moth eyed me. “Don’t you kill people all the time? You were a soldier.”

“No! And anyway, that’s different!” I gestured at the cooling corpse on the ground. “He hadn’t actually *done* anything to us.”

Even though he’d tried to. He *had* tried to stab me and steal my money.

“He was a lying asshole.”

“So? You can’t kill people just because they’re assholes!” I stilled and focused intently on Moth. “Do you kill people just because they’re assholes?”

He gave a tiny, noncommittal shrug, like he wasn’t sure if he wanted to admit it or not in case I started yelling.

“Jesus, Moth.” I swiped a hand over my head then down my face, pulling at the skin briefly as I stared up at the dark sky. “How many *assholes* have you killed?”

He looked both bewildered and mildly sheepish. “Am I supposed to keep track?”

Jesus Christ. I parted my lips to yell at him, but stopped myself with great effort. I had to try and remember that Moth wasn’t entirely human, even if he looked it. His brain didn’t work the same as mine. His morals

were different, and had probably been greatly influenced by how he'd been treated by humans his whole life. Which was to say: like shit.

Try and think of him like you do Edin, my brain suggested, and I almost physically cringed at the idea.

I couldn't. Mainly because I definitely did not want to fuck Edin—I'd seen what he was packing beneath that kilt; there was no way in hell I'd ever let that baseball bat anywhere *near* me.

But when I looked at Moth, I could never decide if I wanted to strangle him or start tearing off his clothes. He was *infuriatingly* attractive. His face was like a work of art—almost too perfect to be real. *Definitely* too perfect to be human.

Didn't stop me wanting to punch it, though.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Charlie

We ended up dragging the body behind the dumpster and waiting until the street looked a little clearer before we strolled casually out of the alley.

“Don’t worry,” Moth murmured. “Even if someone does find him, no one will care. People find dead bodies all the time in these parts of the cities.”

That didn’t make me feel any better. Guilt churned in my gut. I hadn’t meant to kill that guy. He’d been a lying shit, but that didn’t mean he’d deserved to die.

“He just... probably wanted a fix or something.” I exhaled, staring at the dirty ground as we walked. “I should’ve just given him some cash.”

“No, you shouldn’t have.” Moth’s voice was hard. “It’s your money. You earned it. Even though I don’t agree with *how* you earned it, you still did. And if you start giving money to everyone who needs it here, they’ll tear you to shreds.”

I knew he was right. If I started throwing cash around, we’d *definitely* get knifed and robbed.

I let out a breath and said, “Okay, where shall we try and get a room?”

Moth shrugged. “They’re all the same. Dirty and rundown.”

I cringed and stopped outside a pub that had a yellow neon sign advertising rooms available upstairs. Several sex workers were hanging around outside, shivering in the cold and eyeing us as potential customers. I pushed open the door and gestured for Moth to go in before they could approach and make things awkward.

The steamy air inside made me wrinkle my nose, too many unwashed bodies packed together. Moth didn’t seem bothered as he wove between people, his cold, arrogant mask back in place as if he didn’t notice all the wary looks he was getting.

The bartender was a short, older woman with bleached blonde hair. She eyed us as we stopped at the bar, setting down a draught beer in front of a skinny guy wearing a leather jacket before making her way over.

“What can I get you?” Her watery blue eyes tracked over Moth, nose wrinkling slightly.

“Do you have any free rooms?” I asked.

She finally tore her gaze away from Moth to give me a nod. “By the hour or for the night?”

I chuckled. “For the night.”

She quirked a thin brow, glancing at Moth again. “Forty bucks for the night.”

I gave her a winning smile even though I knew the room would be worth nowhere near forty dollars, digging into my pocket to peel off two notes.

“Thank you.”

Her face softened a little as she took the money, her gaze turning appreciative as it tracked over me. I felt Moth stiffen beside me, but he stayed quiet.

“You want a drink, hon?” she asked me as she reached under the counter for a metal box.

“No, we’re good thanks.” I kept smiling at her, even though I was getting pissed with the way she was ignoring Moth.

As she handed me the key, she leaned closer and flicked a disdainful look at him.

“You sure you don’t want someone else, hon?” she murmured, her painted lips curling into a little smirk. “We got some girls in the back. Prettiest ones on this street.”

My smile turned brittle as I took the key. “No. Thanks.”

She grunted as she leaned back. “Suit yourself. Room number’s on the keychain. Stairs to upstairs through there.”

She pointed at a dingy door tucked away at the side of the room next to the bathrooms, then walked off to serve a waiting customer.

Neither of us spoke as we made our way through the bar and into a narrow hallway that reeked of booze and piss. The staircase was sticky under our feet, and the hallway upstairs was dim, with stains all over the threadbare carpet.

As we walked down the corridor, the sounds of two people fucking furiously drifted through a closed door. I could hear another couple having a loud argument in a different room.

Unlocking our door, I pushed it open and stared as Moth stepped inside and flicked on the light switch. It was small and pretty bare, just a double

bed with two nightstands and a table tucked into the corner.

Moth walked deeper into the room and opened a door against the far wall, revealing a tiny bathroom with a yellowing shower. It looked nasty, but at least it was private.

“Well.” I exhaled and stepped into the room, making sure to lock the door behind me. “At least it’s better than sleeping outside, right?”

“That’s up for debate,” Moth muttered as he pulled off his backpack and the bag with his sword, setting them down on the end of the bed.

I chuckled and did the same with my stuff, crossing the room to set my bags down on the little table. Then I went to wipe my hands over my tired face but stopped with a grimace. I went into the bathroom and washed my hands and face, then wandered back out as I shrugged off my coat.

“Fuck, I’m exhausted.” I dropped my coat on the back of one of the chairs and sat down to pull off my boots.

Moth nodded, sitting on the end of the mattress and fiddling with his coat sleeve. He didn’t move to get undressed as I stripped down to my underwear. All my clothes desperately needed a wash, and now we were in a locked, warm room, I was going to take advantage of not sleeping in them.

“We can find a laundromat in the morning and wash our stuff,” I said as I balled up my clothes and left them on the table.

Moth didn’t answer. When I looked up, his pale eyes were fixed on the bulge in my grey boxer briefs. They slid down my bare legs then back up, over my stomach and chest, making my balls tingle. His face flamed pink when he realised I was watching him. He jerked his gaze away and grabbed his bags to shove them onto the floor next to the bed.

I carried on watching him as he leaned down and got his water bottle from his bag, still not making any move to even take off his coat. He was tense. This felt different to the night we’d slept in his place, mainly because he’d been drunk and more relaxed there—until I’d ruined it by bursting in on him changing.

Sleeping in old stores and gas stations had been different, because we’d never slept at the same time, one of us keeping watch. But being locked together in this tiny room felt... intimate.

God, I was so attracted to him it was ridiculous. And it was obvious that he was attracted to me too, at least physically. The urge to just ask him if he

wanted to fuck to relieve some of this pressure between us was overwhelming.

But I didn't. I could see that he was tense and uncomfortable. I forced my body to calm down.

"Moth, you... you don't have to sleep in your coat," I said hoarsely. "Or your boots."

"It's fine," he said quickly.

I pursed my lips. We didn't bring up the incident of me walking in on him naked. Ever. I wanted to tell him that I didn't give a shit about his monster feet or his tail, but I knew it wouldn't help. It wouldn't make him any less self-conscious about it.

I stayed quiet and turned to grab my bags so I could keep them on the floor next to the bed. I could practically feel Moth's eyes on my ass, and the arousal flared back up instantly. I held my bag in front of my groin as I walked back to the bed, because my dick was getting hard at the thought of sleeping in a bed with him again, even though he'd be fully dressed and nothing was going to happen.

I slipped into the bed quickly, trying not to think about how clean the sheets may or may not have been. Moth turned off the light, plunging the room into darkness. We were both tense as he settled on the bed beside me, on top of the covers.

My dick pulsed in my boxer briefs, achingly stiff now as I breathed in his citrus scent. I rolled onto my side away from him to hide it, and after a few minutes I heard him quietly take off his boots and coat before sliding under the blanket.

"Okay, how do we start?" I asked Moth the next morning as we waited for our clothes to dry in the empty laundromat down the street.

The sky was grey, and slushy brown snow butted up against the sides of the road and sidewalk. People hurried past outside, their heads down, no one talking to each other. As I sat beside Moth on the counter in the centre of the room, my eyes fixed on someone stumbling along the sidewalk on the other side of the street.

Their skin was grey, but a yellow tinge stained their mouth. They were hunched over as they walked with jarring steps, clutching their stomach.

My brows twitched as they started heaving, turning to place a trembling hand on the brick wall of a hardware store.

No one paid them any attention at all—not until they retched again and started throwing up an insane amount of vomit. Then people shot them disgusted looks as they skirted around them, not wanting to get close.

Jesus. My gut roiled and I quickly looked away, the food in my belly churning with nausea. We'd gone to a different place for breakfast, further away from the alleyway where that guy's body probably still rested.

"Start asking around, I guess." Moth's low, husky voice pulled me back into the laundromat. The dryers rumbled, and the air was warm and scented with fabric softener in here.

I nodded. "And I'll keep an eye out for anyone I might recognise from the prison."

The dryer clicked off, its spinning drum coming to a slow stop, so I slid off the counter and went to bundle our warm, fragrant clothes into my arms. As I carried them back to the counter, Moth jumped down and immediately started picking his stuff out.

I eyed him as I slowly folded my clothes. He seemed to be hurriedly snatching up his socks and underwear, like he was embarrassed for me to see them. I pursed my lips, fighting off a smile.

"What?" he snapped, tone overly defensive.

I blinked at him, trying to keep my expression innocent. "I didn't say anything."

He huffed and shoved his shirts into his bag. As I reached over to grab some socks, I noticed a pair of unfamiliar boxer briefs.

"Missed a pair," I said lightly as I held them up.

Moth's hand shot out, long fingers fumbling over mine in his haste to yank them out of my hand. I didn't let go straight away, just to fuck with him a little, and he glared at me as his face went pink.

I chuckled and released them. "Would've pegged you for a tighty-whities kind of guy."

"Fuck off," he muttered, zipping his backpack up with a forceful tug.

Still chuckling, I finished folding my clothes and balling up my socks before sliding the neat pile into my bag. When I glanced over at Moth, his face was still pink as he fiddled with his backpack just to keep his hands busy.

"Sorry," I said, feeling bad. "I was just teasing."

He huffed and looked over at me, eyes narrowed and lips parted like he was about to speak. But he didn't, going still as we stared at each other. The laundromat was quiet now, no other machines whirring. I licked my lips, and his pale eyes immediately dropped to my mouth, making my gut lurch with a sharp flutter of arousal.

When the tip of his tongue played absently with the ring going through his bottom lip, the arousal bloomed bigger, and my heart sped up just a little. I imagined him leaning in slowly, pale eyes hooded, and flicking his tongue against my lips before fitting his mouth to mine.

For the millionth time, I wondered what Moth would be like in bed. Slow and seductive, or fast and rough? Despite the big windows and all the people outside, I pictured him hoisting me up onto the counter and stepping between my legs. Grabbing my face roughly and thrusting his tongue into my mouth.

We were on the far side of the central counter, our legs hidden from view. If Moth dropped to his knees, no one would be able to see—

“Ready?” His voice was rough, jerking me out of my heated thoughts. He wasn't looking at me anymore, tugging his backpack on with jerky movements, but his face was still flushed, and I could see his chest rising a little faster than normal.

I cleared my throat and nodded, sliding my backpack onto my shoulders. “Yep. Let's start checking out the bars.”

We made our way outside, the cold air and city sounds jarring after the warmth and quiet of the laundromat. Neither of us spoke as we started walking down the street to the nearest bar, its rusty sign proclaiming it as *Ricardo's*.

It was already pretty busy inside. A guy with a ratty ponytail was slumped over a table in the far corner, several empty beer bottles already in front of him. Most people kept their heads down as we wove between the tables, but a few glanced up and immediately started staring at Moth with mild disdain. It was like they didn't even realise they were doing it.

The guy behind the bar looked grizzled, his grey hair cropped short and nose big and red from too many years of too much drinking. Pockmarks littered his sagging cheeks, and the rag that he was using to wipe down the draught taps looked filthy. The whole place looked filthy.

He was staring at us with narrowed, suspicious eyes, and, like clockwork, his gaze snagged on Moth and refused to budge. His lip curled.

“You seen any new faces in here recently?” I asked without preamble, because I was already pretty certain this guy wouldn’t be willing to talk to us.

He reluctantly tore his eyes from Moth to stare hard at me. “What?”

“Have you noticed any new people coming in here recently?” I tried to keep my tone patient. “Or maybe you got some new long-term tenants in the rooms upstairs?”

His eyes narrowed again. “Who’s asking?”

I gave an easy shrug. “We’re just looking for a friend. He might be here. New to the city.”

The guy grunted. “Don’t get *new* people in the city.”

“Pretty sure you do.”

He dropped the rag and rested a weathered hand on the counter. “Nope. Ain’t seen no one new.”

“You sure?”

“Yep.” He pulled his hand back and started arranging glasses under the counter.

I tried a different tactic. “Know anywhere around here where *new* people might go?”

“Nope.”

I clenched my jaw and took a step back, looking around the bar in case I recognised anyone. But I hadn’t been there long enough to truly take in any faces except for Cat’s, and maybe the guy I’d had to fight.

The bartender’s rough, unfriendly voice pulled my attention back to him.

“Your friend blind or something?” He shot Moth a sour look, his lip curling. “The fuck’s wrong with his eyes?”

Anger flared, making my hands clench into fists, but before I could say anything Moth sneered.

“I can see well enough to punch you in the fucking mouth.”

My lips curled into a tiny smile as the guy’s face blanched, but that mildly disgusted look continued to twist his features.

“I told you I don’t know anything, so get the fuck out,” he snarled, though his voice was a little unsteady now. “Take your creepy friend with you.”

“You’re the creep, dickhead,” I snapped, turning and striding out of the bar, Moth following behind me in silence. “Sorry about him,” I added, my voice still rough as we stepped back onto the street.

He gave a stiff shrug, keeping his eyes averted. “Used to it. I don’t care.”

But his posture was tense, and I could tell he wanted to get away from the bar as he started walking down the street. I caught up with him, still quietly seething. Did literally *everyone* treat Moth like that? Just immediately treat him like shit?

I glanced down a side alley as we wove between people, stopping dead when I noticed a pair of legs sticking out from behind a dumpster. We weren’t anywhere near where we’d left that guy, so I knew it wasn’t him. But something made me stop and stare, nausea curling through my belly.

Moth stopped too, grunting when someone shouldered past him, and followed my gaze.

He stepped closer and murmured, “See? People ignore the bodies. The military will come along to collect them eventually, but they don’t give a shit. Especially in these parts of the cities.”

I swallowed, giving a slight nod. I could make out a pool of dark, mucousy liquid seeping out from behind the dumpster, soaking into dirty, torn jeans. A single hand was just visible next to the dumpster’s grimy wheel, fingers curled stiffly and skin grey. It looked like they’d just... collapsed face first onto the ground and not gotten back up.

I jerked and started walking again when someone bumped roughly into my back, jostling my gun in its bag. Moth didn’t say anything as he fell into step beside me, and I eyed the people around us just going about their day. Going about their business when a fucking body was just out on the street, which I knew was disgustingly hypocritical—I’d left a fucking body on the street.

God, I hated the cities.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Charlie

We saw nothing, overheard nothing, and hardly anyone would speak to us. Those who would didn't know anything, or at least claimed they didn't.

By our third day in the city, we were both tense and snapping at each other even more than normal. It didn't help that sex workers constantly asked us if we wanted to fuck as we walked around at night. Sometimes they were already in the bars or hallways outside the squalid rooms that we stayed in, and would ask the same thing as we went to our room for the night after giving up our search.

Several of them offered to fuck us both at the same time for a better rate, which made the atmosphere even more tense when we stepped into our room and were stuck in an enclosed space together for the next eight or so hours.

I'd lie beside Moth at night picturing it. Not picturing us having a threesome with a stranger, but just the two of us fucking.

Because I really, really wanted to fuck Moth.

Not just because I hadn't fucked anyone in a painfully long time—although that was a part of it. He was almost overwhelmingly gorgeous, even when he was scowling and being snarky with me.

But... I kind of liked his prickliness now. It was fun teasing him. It was fun trying to get him to actually smile—a proper smile, not the arrogant smirks that sometimes emerged when he was speaking to other people to try and wheedle information out of them.

We stayed in a different place every night, because it felt safer that way, and normally just got the one room. But tonight, I wanted to get two. I couldn't take it anymore—this tension between us. So I was going to gather my courage and ask Moth if he was interested in a... casual arrangement while we were out here. And if he said no, I didn't want him to be uncomfortable all night, so I needed to get two rooms.

As we approached one of the pubs advertising rooms available, I could hear someone throwing up profusely down a side alley, which did not bode

well for the state of the place inside. But as we walked in, I could immediately tell it was cleaner than most others. The air didn't stink of sweat and stale booze, and the floor wasn't sticky beneath our feet as we made our way to the bar.

When I asked for two rooms without looking at Moth, I felt him stiffen beside me. After paying and being given the keys, I passed one to him without a word. He snatched it out of my hand and turned to stomp toward the door that led upstairs, clearly pissed for some reason.

I frowned as I followed him. I'd thought he would have liked a night away from me. Even though I was pretty sure he was attracted to me, I was under no illusion that he really *liked* me. And he was an intensely private person. His own room meant he could actually sleep comfortably for once and not have to worry so much about staying constantly covered up.

"I—uh, I'm just gonna go to the store and grab some stuff," I told him, staring up at him from the bottom of the stairs as he stomped up them.

"Fine," he snarled before vanishing around the corner.

What the fuck? I sighed and turned to leave the bar, striding across the street to the minimart opposite. I tried not to think about it too hard as I grabbed condoms and lube. It felt like I was tempting fate going in there prepared, but I'd use the lube anyway. I'd probably use half of it in one night if he said no. At least I'd finally have some privacy to furiously jerk off.

And he was going to say no, I was pretty sure. He was too insecure about himself. But I hoped that the fact that I'd seen his body already made him less tense about the possibility of us hooking up. I hoped that me asking him would make him realise that he wasn't *repulsive*, like he'd claimed that night in his safehouse. Sadness still filled me when I thought about what he'd said. That all monsters and humans hated him. That he didn't know what made him happy.

Well, I couldn't offer him the relationship he clearly craved with Ghost, but I could make him feel good, at least. I wondered how long it'd been since he last fucked someone. It had been a painfully long time for me. Maybe if he said yes, he'd loosen up a bit. Maybe he just really needed a good, hard fuck. I knew I did.

The idea of it was already making me hard as I made my way up the staircase in the bar. We'd been given rooms next to each other, so instead of going into mine, I let out a hard breath and knocked on Moth's door. I was

annoyingly nervous, which didn't happen often to me in situations like this. I wasn't shy about asking people if they were interested, and I'd never been all that bothered if they turned me down.

But... I knew I'd be bothered if Moth did, even though I wouldn't show it. I wanted him fiercely. If he said no, I'd make sure to treat him the same as I always had. I didn't want to make him uncomfortable.

I was suddenly doubting my decision to bring this up when the door swung open and Moth scowled at me from inside the room.

"What do you want?" he snapped. "You've got your own room."

"I... I wanted to talk to you," I said cautiously as he stomped back to the bed and sat down with his legs crossed.

I stepped into the room and closed the door behind me, watching as he fiddled with a cheap charm bracelet between long fingers.

"About what?" he muttered petulantly. "Want me to go and stay in a different fucking building so I'm even further away from you?"

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes, even as my lips twitched as I realised why he was so pissed. He was offended.

"Moth," I said as I perched on the edge of the bed, "there's a reason I got two rooms. It's what I want to talk to you about."

He didn't say anything, staring down at the bracelet as he twisted it slowly between his fingers.

I exhaled, trying to ignore the way my gut fluttered with nerves.

"Okay, so..." I licked my lips. "Uh... We're both pretty tense, right? This is stressful and... this whole thing has been gruelling."

Moth stayed silent, but I could tell he was listening intently, his head bent to stare at the bracelet in his hand.

"And I, um... I had an idea I wanted to ask you about. I'm..." I licked my dry lips again. "I'm really attracted to you, Moth. Like, *really* attracted."

I chuckled even as he went completely still, staring down at the bed with his back hunched.

"And... maybe I've got it completely wrong, but it feels like... you're attracted to me too?" I asked uncertainly.

I heard Moth's breath catch and saw his tongue dart out to lick his lips. He cleared his throat, but his voice was still croaky when he gave a tiny shrug and said, "I... Y-yeah. I guess."

I paused, then snorted before teasing, "You guess? Real flattering."

His face went pink, but he still didn't look up at me.

"Yeah. I am," he mumbled, shoulders hunching up like he was worried about admitting it.

Some of the nerves fled. Lust heated my belly. I tried to ignore it as I continued. "Okay, so, I know that doesn't mean you... actually like me or want anything with me. You know, like a relationship. I know you're... You have feelings for Ghost. And I'm not in a position for any kind of relationship anyway."

Because I was supposed to be going back to the military after this. Fear churned, chasing away the low throb of arousal.

"So I thought... you know... we're attracted to each other," I continued nervously. "We're out here together for the foreseeable future. If you're interested, we could... have a casual thing."

Moth sucked in a breath so fast he nearly choked. He finally lifted his head and stared at me, face pink.

"A... casual thing?"

I nodded. "Just fucking."

His face somehow grew even pinker, and he looked away again quickly.

"It was just an idea," I rushed out, chewing the inside of my lip. "If you're not interested, that's totally fine."

Moth was staring down at the bed again, his curved back rising and falling faster with his shallow breaths.

"I'm... You know I'm not all human," he croaked.

That wasn't a no.

"Yeah," I said easily. "I know."

His head lifted, and his eyes were a mix of wariness and something like longing as he stared at me. "Don't you care?"

"No," I said simply.

"But you've..." His face deepened even more in colour. "You've seen that I—I'm..."

My chest ached for him. I wanted to reach out and rest my hand on his back, but didn't know if he wanted any kind of touch. He hadn't said yes or no yet.

"I'm attracted to people, Moth," I told him. "Not... specific genders or body types or whatever. I know you're not all human. That doesn't factor into it one way or another. I just..." I shrugged. "Want you."

His breath caught, but he didn't say anything. His fingers worried the blanket on the bed, pleating the fabric.

"So that's why I got two rooms," I said. "I wanted to ask you, and if you said no, I didn't want you to feel weird sharing a room with me all night. And if you do say no, we'll keep getting separate rooms. I don't want you to feel uncomfortable with me, Moth. If you're not interested, that's honestly fine. But I thought I'd... shoot my shot, ya know?"

I chuckled to try and ease the tension, already worrying that this had been a mistake.

"So, um... I guess think about it," I said, standing up from the bed. "Take your time. I'll leave you alone and uh... see you in the morning, yeah?"

Moth swallowed and nodded, still staring down at the bed. I let out a quiet breath and turned for the door. As I stepped back into the hallway, my lip curled when I heard someone violently throwing up behind a closed door further down the corridor.

I went into my own room and closed the door behind me, blocking out the unpleasant sounds. My dick was already hard as I undressed and got in the dingy shower in the attached bathroom, but I was too jittery to do anything about it.

Part of me couldn't believe that I'd actually asked him. Asked prickly, closed-off Moth who came with a truckload of issues if he wanted to have a fuck-fling while we searched for Cat.

The worst he could do was say no, I thought nervously as I scrubbed myself down with the cheap soap from the dispenser. But I didn't want him to feel weird around me, or be worried that I was going to try it on with him anyway even if he turned down my offer.

It would be uncomfortable as fuck, but I'd have to reassure him in the morning. Make sure he knew that I was totally fine with him saying no, and that nothing would change between us.

Because I was pretty certain that he was going to turn me down.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Charlie

I was staring up at the dark ceiling in my lumpy, cheap bed when a knock came at the door.

Flicking on the bedside lamp, I sat up and grabbed my gun from the nightstand.

“Who is it?” I said cautiously as I crept my way over.

Through the door, I heard Moth’s familiar huff of annoyance.

“It’s me.”

My stomach lurched with nervous anticipation as I opened the door and took a few steps back to put down the gun. Surely he was here for one of two reasons: to agree to my suggestion, or to shoot it down.

He was fully dressed—even his boots and coat were still on. The sickly yellow light from the hallway outlined his lean frame, casting shadows over his pale eyes as he stared at me with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his coat.

“You okay?” I asked with mild concern when he didn’t say anything.

Moth pursed his lips and gave a stilted nod as he glanced back into the hall, before stepping into the room and closing the door behind him. He leaned back against it, and I saw his throat bob as he watched me. Even though he’d already seen me several times in just my underwear, I couldn’t help but feel a flash of pleasure when his eyes briefly flitted over my whole frame and flared with appreciation.

He was attracted to me. He’d admitted it. It was just a question of whether his hang-ups would let him act on it.

“Okay,” he said quietly.

I stared at him, my gut squeezing tight with anticipation.

“Okay what?” I said, even though I knew what he was referring to, but I needed him to voice it out loud. To remove any doubt.

Moth huffed again but didn’t move. “Okay to your... proposition.”

I couldn’t help it—I snorted, even as my dick twitched in my underwear.

“Proposition.” I chuckled, but forced myself to stop when Moth’s face flushed that slightly unnatural pink hue.

I sobered up quickly, not wanting him to get self-conscious. Not just because I didn’t want him to snap, “Forget it,” and storm out in a huff, but because... it made me sad to see Moth so unsure of himself. So insecure.

“You want to fool around?” I clarified. “Have a... casual arrangement while we’re out here together?”

He cleared his throat. “I... Yes.”

I narrowed my eyes at him and took a step closer, not sure whether to be worried or gratified when I heard his breath catch.

“You don’t sound totally sure,” I said, trying to keep my voice gentle. “We’re not doing this if you’re not a hundred percent in, Moth. That wouldn’t be nice for either of us.”

He swallowed and raked his teeth over his lower lip, catching the piercing through the centre.

“No, I’m sure.” His voice shook just a little. “I’m in. I want to. I’m just... kind of nervous.”

The admission softened me. I already knew it took a lot for Moth to admit to feeling unsure about anything.

“We won’t do anything you’re not comfortable with,” I said, not moving even though my body was straining to get closer to him.

My dick twitched again, plumping up, and I knew it would be visible, but I couldn’t control it. The idea that I might get to touch Moth—kiss him, see what he looked like when he lost control and came—was affecting me more than I realised it would.

“We’ll go as slow as you want,” I continued. “And we’ll stop completely if you don’t want it anymore. We’ll keep getting separate rooms. I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable with me, Moth.”

“I don’t,” he said quickly, then cleared his throat and looked away. “And... thanks. I appreciate it,” he mumbled.

I gave a single nod, and we stared at each other in silence for a few moments.

“Can I come closer?” I asked cautiously.

Moth swallowed. He straightened up from the door and removed his hands from his pockets, fingers curling and uncurling into fists.

“Yeah.” His voice was husky with nerves.

I crossed the distance, but stopped when there was still a few inches of space between us. Moth stared down at me from his slight height advantage. His filmy pupils were blown, cheeks flushed, lips parted around quick breaths.

He was nervous, but he was also excited.

His eyes briefly tracked over me, taking in my mouth, my throat, my bare chest and stomach. They flared when his gaze locked onto my stiffening erection, outlined by my grey boxer briefs. He couldn't seem to tear his eyes away.

My cock reacted, giving a jerk as it filled more rapidly. I bit my lip when his breath caught in his throat.

"Can I kiss you?" I asked, my voice lower as arousal started pumping through my blood.

His eyes darted back up to mine before dropping to my mouth. He licked his lips and gave a nod. As I started leaning in, his breath hitched.

"Will you... will you tell me if I'm doing it wrong?"

I froze, then jerked back as I stared at him.

He'd never kissed anyone before?

Did that mean he'd... never done *anything* with anyone before?

I didn't want to ask and embarrass him, but guilt squirmed in my belly. I didn't care if he was inexperienced, but did he really want his first time doing *anything* to be during a casual hook-up with a guy he didn't even seem to really *like*?

"Moth..."

He stiffened, that soft expression of anticipation fleeing instantly as he closed himself off.

"I couldn't care less what you have or haven't done," I hurried to clarify. "But... are you sure you want this? You don't want to... save it for someone special?"

After a tense pause, he relaxed infinitesimally and huffed out a derisive sound. "Someone special? No. I haven't been *waiting* for someone special."

I stared at him in silence for a moment. His reasons were his own, and it wasn't my place to question them, but I still couldn't help feeling doubtful that this was a good idea for him.

"Monsters consider me an outcast because I'm half human," Moth said in a flat voice. "And humans would... they wouldn't..."

He trailed off, the colour deepening in his cheeks. He glanced at me before quickly looking away again.

"I don't look human," he said bluntly, though his voice shook with nerves.

I knew he wasn't referring to his face.

"Hey, I've already seen you without your pants on, remember?" I joked, trying to alleviate some of this thick tension. I quickly sobered and added, "I'm still sorry about that. I really didn't mean to burst in on you."

Moth let out a breath. "No, I know. It's okay."

He swallowed and looked at me, his irises a pale ring around his pupils.

"But you... you haven't seen all of me," he got out with effort, his face deeply flushed now. "And the... parts you haven't seen don't look human either."

I wanted to hug him, but I didn't think it would be appreciated. I was pretty sure that if Moth got the sense that I pitied him or felt sorry for him, he'd be out of this room before I could even blink.

And I *didn't* feel sorry for him. I was angry that he'd been made to feel like a freak. That he'd been rejected by both halves of his heritage. Humans held him at arm's length—even the friendly raiders at the Nebraska camp—and by the sounds of it, most monsters had rejected him entirely.

"I told you," I said gently, "I'm not attracted to specific body parts. I'm attracted to people."

I hesitantly raised a hand, and when he didn't move, I rested it on his chest. His heart thudded against my palm, hard and fast.

"That doesn't mean I won't want to lick every inch of you," I told him with a little grin, pleased when his pupils expanded in a rush. "When you're comfortable with me doing it, that is. I guarantee, Moth, I'm going to love every part of you."

When he lifted his eyes to mine, the yearning in them threw me off guard, even though I knew it wasn't yearning for *me* as such. It was for acceptance. Being able to be intimate with someone for the first time in his life. Being *touched*.

I wondered how often anyone touched Moth. Even pats on the shoulder or a slap on the back. Before we'd left the camp, I remembered thinking that he seemed lonely even when standing surrounded by others.

He let out a breath and nodded, eyes dropping to my mouth again.

"Okay," he said softly. "I'm... I want this, Charlie."

I nodded and gave him a smile. “Me too.”

Lowering my gaze to his lips, I licked my own as anticipation flared in me and added, “And as to your question, there’s not really a wrong way to do it. Just do what feels good.”

Moth nodded again, breathless now. “Okay.”

My hand was still on his chest, over his racing heart, so I slowly slid it down and across to rest on his hip beneath his coat. I leaned closer until his trembling breaths hit my lips.

Our lips moulded together gently, a simple press at first to let him get used to it. I was shocked by the intense rush of lust that tingled over my skin and tightened my balls from such an innocent kiss.

I pulled back a little to kiss him again, my lips slightly parted this time so I could lightly suck his lower lip into my mouth, feeling the hard, thin ring of metal piercing the centre. Moth’s breath hitched, and I felt him hesitantly rest a hand on my side. I shivered from the skin-on-skin contact.

He’d been kissing me back tentatively, but as soon as I released his bottom lip, he pushed his mouth against mine with a touch more force. Our lips parted just a little with each kiss. When I brushed my tongue just inside his mouth, between his teeth, he shuddered and gripped my side tighter.

The next time I did it, the tip of his tongue timidly met mine. There was something slightly different about it compared to a human tongue—the tip was pointier, and the texture was still slick and soft, but... patterned.

My dick lurched in my boxer briefs from the feel, trying to escape, which was a reaction I hadn’t known I’d have in the face of Moth’s inhuman side.

I couldn’t stop the low groan that left me as our lips opened wider and our tongues finally met in a slow, wet glide. There was a metal bar piercing the centre of his, and the feel of it dragging against my tongue made my dick leak at the tip. Moth’s breath shuddered out of him, and suddenly he was raising both hands and framing my face, as though he was scared I’d pull back before he was done.

I pressed closer and slid both hands around to his back beneath his coat, feeling the warmth of his skin through his shirt. My dick bucked against the front of his jeans from the pressure, but I couldn’t feel any answering hardness from him. That was okay, though—I knew he was nervous, and I could tell he was enjoying this regardless.

He thrust his tongue greedily into my mouth, moaning against my lips as he got completely swept away by our kiss. It was immensely gratifying to know that his nerves had at least lessened enough to let him truly enjoy it. And it was arousing as hell.

I could feel him growing more confident with every thrust of his pointed, textured tongue. His long fingers dug into my hair behind my ears, and the wet warmth of his pierced tongue in my mouth made me moan.

I sucked on his tongue, my cock straining when he shuddered and moaned, arching his hips forward just a little into mine, even though there was still no stiff bulge pressing against mine through his pants—maybe he didn't have a cock. I'd meant what I said; I didn't care what he did or didn't have. I wanted *him*. Moth. Even though he was prickly and arrogant and closed-off most of the time. It wasn't just his looks, despite the fact that he was ridiculously beautiful. He was smart and quick-witted and kept me on my toes. It was *fun* having verbal sparring matches with him.

The things that made him different from humans fascinated me. Intrigued me. But not in a fetishistic way. In a way that made me want to force *him* to see how those differences were good, not bad. I wanted to make him feel good about himself, for seemingly the first time in his life.

His mouth had been a little stiff at first, but now it was completely soft and eager as he slicked his tongue against mine. His hands slid back, fingers threading through my hair as his kiss grew more desperate. Consuming. Like he wanted to eat me whole, like he couldn't stop even if he wanted to. His tongue thrust into my mouth again and again, making me shudder with pleasure.

Had he seriously been worried he'd be bad at this? It felt like I could come in my boxer briefs just from kissing him. I knew I was hard-up, but I wasn't *that* hard-up, surely.

I gentled the kiss, trying to calm my raging body down just a little, because I didn't want to get carried away and push him too far before he was ready. Moth moaned and followed my lead, our tongues slowly gliding together in a way that made me desperate to feel that textured slickness on other parts of me.

Okay, I needed to pump the breaks—give him some space to process. I was getting too worked up, and just because he was kissing me like he needed it more than air didn't mean he was ready for anything else that could follow.

I gave him a final kiss, brushing my tongue against his top lip and making him shiver, before pulling away just an inch. Moth's breaths were trembling, and mine weren't much better. My cock bucked hungrily, leaking into my underwear.

"Charlie," he mumbled shakily, long fingers still cradling the back of my head.

I bit my lip and gave him one more kiss, unable to stop myself, before pulling back so I wasn't rubbing my aching cock against him and taking a sharp breath.

"Do you want to stop there?" I asked him, my voice raspy with lust. I smoothed my hand up and down his back beneath his coat, being careful not to go too low toward his tail in case it made him tense back up.

He stared at me, panting, before his white teeth sank into his kiss-plumped lower lip.

"N-no," he said eventually, eyes dropping to my mouth again. "But I..."

"We're not gonna do anything you're not totally comfortable with," I reminded him. "If that's all you're comfortable with tonight, let's stop."

"No," he blurted. "I don't want to stop. I..."

His eyes drifted down my body, and he bit his lip again as he stared at the glaringly obvious outline of my hard cock through my underwear. It jerked under his gaze, and he made a soft sound in his throat.

Did he want to touch me? God, the thought of Moth's long, elegant, tattooed fingers wrapped around my straining dick, stroking me until I came, made my balls tingle and wrench up.

But he was still skittish. Still unsure. I didn't think he even really knew what he wanted. Lust was riding him like it was riding me. His pupils were blown, his skin flushed, his gorgeous mouth pink and swollen from our frantic kisses.

I didn't want him to regret any of this.

"I have an idea," I told him, voice hoarse with arousal.

I slid a hand around from his back to snap the band of my underwear as I shot him a small grin.

"Why don't I take these off and get on the bed? You can look your fill and see what you're considering getting up close and personal with." I gave a little shrug. "Maybe you'll hate what you see and we'll call it quits."

Moth snuffled out a little laugh, and the sound of it softened me.

“I don’t think that’s going to happen,” he said dryly, then let his gaze drift back down to my cock.

He bit his lip again, eyes getting heavy-lidded as he stared. His head dipped in an almost desperate nod as he looked back up at me.

“Yeah. Okay.”

I grinned and pulled away, stroking his side before taking a few steps back. I turned and headed for the bed, pausing beside it to shove my underwear down my legs, bending over just a little so I knew Moth got a good view of my ass. I had a great ass.

Thanks to years in the military, I wasn’t at all shy about my body. I’d had years of physicals and communal showers, stripping down to get changed beside Hunter, or whipping my dick out to take a leak when we were out in the Wastes.

Moth still hadn’t moved from the door when I got settled on the bed and slouched back against the headboard, but his chest was heaving as he stared at me. At all of me, but particularly my cock, which was flushed and curving up over my belly.

He hesitantly walked forward to stand beside the bed. I strained to keep my hands where they were, one by my side and the other resting on my stomach, but my fingers twitched, just an inch from my cock, when Moth’s gaze slid back to it and his lips parted around a little breath.

“Did—” He cleared his throat, but his voice was still husky when he asked, “Kissing me really... did that?”

I chuckled. “What, made me this hard?”

My fingers twitched again with the intense urge to fist my cock and give it a stroke, but I held myself still.

“Yeah,” I told him, staring up at him as he stared at my dick. “Kissing you made me really need to come, Moth.”

His breath hitched, and he finally tore his gaze away to stare at me.

“Not that I expect you to do anything about it,” I said hurriedly, in case I’d made him feel pressured to ‘follow through’, or any of that bullshit. “I’ll just make myself come when you go. It’ll still be great.”

I chuckled, but Moth didn’t even crack a smile. His lips parted as though he was going to speak, before closing again. His throat bobbed, and then he took a quick breath.

“Can I stay?” he asked in a rush.

My brows twitched at the question.

“I didn’t mean I wanted you to go.” I sat up a little, leaning on my elbow. “I just meant—”

“No, I know,” he blurted. His cheeks flushed. He licked his lips, drawing my gaze there, making me want to kiss him again. “I meant... I meant... can I stay and watch?”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Charlie

Fuck.

Moth wanted to watch me masturbate?

The thought of him watching me stroke myself off was so arousing that I was barely able to keep from grabbing my cock and fucking my fist frantically. I hadn't known I'd be into that, but I didn't let the epiphany stop me.

Just as I was about to answer, Moth blurted, "You don't have to." His face still flushed, he darted a glance at me. "Sorry. If you're not comfortable ____"

"No," I rasped, shaking my head. "That sounds hot. I want to."

He raked his teeth over his lower lip, eyes darting back to my cock as though he couldn't go more than a few seconds without staring at it. I felt it pulse under his attention, pre-cum spilling from the tip and threading onto my stomach.

I supposed I should just start, though it did feel a little awkward to just grab my cock and go to town, despite how painfully hard I was.

"You ready?" I asked instead with a little grin, trying to ignore how hard my heart was thumping in my chest.

"Yes," Moth said immediately, still staring at my cock from his spot beside the bed, fingers flexing at his sides.

A brief flash of nerves tightened my stomach. Maybe he wouldn't like this. Maybe he'd be turned off by the sight of it—although he looked the opposite of turned off as he stared at my dick like he was impatient for me to get started.

Before I did, I leaned down to my bag and fished around for the lube I'd bought earlier. Moth watched, his breaths quick, as I slicked up my hand. Letting out a quiet exhale, I wrapped my fingers around my shaft. My thighs twitched from the feel, and my breath left me in a rush as I slid my fist up in a slow stroke.

Knowing he was watching made this a *million* times better already. I clenched my jaw as I stroked slowly, knowing I'd come too soon if I went any faster. Besides, Moth wanted a show. I'd give him one.

Letting my knees fall open wide, I rocked my hips toward my fist, gratified when Moth made a small sound in the back of his throat. He was vibrating with tension beside the bed, his breaths fast and audible as they escaped between parted lips.

I didn't want to stare at him in case that made him uncomfortable, so instead I followed his gaze and watched my hand sliding up and down my cock. I paused at the top to thumb the slick head, shuddering when another bead of pre-cum welled.

My stomach was tense and flexing, my balls flushed and pulled up tight to hug the base of my shaft. My knees fell open as wide as they could, and I bit my lip as I started sliding the cage of my fingers up and down faster, unable to stop as pleasure rushed up the length of my cock, tingling in my balls and making my asshole clench.

A guttural groan left me when Moth murmured, "Does it feel good?"

Fuuuck. I nodded, chancing a look up at him and groaning again when I saw the intense lust tightening his features, making his pale eyes flash beneath pinched brows.

"Yeah," I croaked, hips bucking to meet the downward stroke of my fist. "Not gonna take long."

Moth's breath hitched at that. He took a tiny step closer, until his knees pressed into the side of the bed. His fingers flexed at his sides, like he was aching to touch me.

Jesus Christ, I wanted him to touch me. But I wouldn't say it. He was in control here. He'd do what he was comfortable with.

Moth swallowed and licked his lips, eyes lifting briefly from my cock to meet mine. They darted back down almost immediately, like they were magnetised.

"Slower." His whisper was enough that I had to strangle the base of my cock so I didn't come straight away.

"Fuck," I panted, sliding my trembling fist back up my length so slowly that my entire body shuddered from the teasing wisps of pleasure that curled through my balls and up my cock.

My hips strained, nuts tightening despite the fact that I shouldn't have been able to come from such a slow stroke. But I was so close already, just

from him watching me.

I reached down with my free hand to cup my sac, tugging gently so I wasn't in immediate danger of coming. Moth groaned softly and began to move in a rush. He stripped off his coat, letting it crumple on the floor, before stepping around to the end of the bed.

My brows pinched with desperation when he hesitantly placed a knee on the mattress.

"Is—is this okay?" he asked, eyes big and uncertain as he looked at me.

I nodded immediately, heart pounding in my throat. "Whatever you want."

Moving slowly, his long, lean body filled the space between my spread thighs—not close enough to touch, but close enough for me to feel the heat of him on my skin as he sat back on his heels. I moaned, squeezing the slick, swollen head of my cock as I watched him—watched him stare down at my hand working my cock, which was flushed and shiny with lube and pre-cum.

I was almost mindless with lust, just from jacking myself off. I would have done anything he asked, but Moth didn't say anything, just panted as he watched me stroke my dick and play with my tight nuts.

When long fingers tentatively palmed my inner thighs, just above my knees, they spasmed as I groaned through clenched teeth.

"Fuck, Moth," I croaked, so he'd know I didn't want him to let go.

Those hands slid higher and gripped tight, fingertips digging in and spreading my legs a little wider. His chest heaved as he watched me, and when my hips jerked and yet more pre-cum spilled from my tip, his eyes flashed up to meet mine.

"F-fuck," he choked out, his voice desperate.

My eyes nearly rolled back in my head. I wanted to touch him *so bad*. I would have forgone my own orgasm if it meant I could see his—if I could wring one from him myself.

Stark pleasure rushed up my cock at the thought of it.

"Sh-shit, I'm gonna come soon."

I bit my lip and stared down at my hand, which was still sliding painfully slowly up and down my cock. I concentrated on the head, squeezing it in my fist in short, slick pulls that made my eyes slide shut with bliss as I shuddered.

I was vaguely aware of the bed dipping by my side, but I was too lost in the pleasure to truly register it. I jolted when Moth's warm mouth pressed against mine, kissing him back in a greedy rush as his citrus scent filled my nose.

Our lips parted at the same time, sharing hectic breaths as our tongues met hungrily. His body was hovering over mine—I could feel its heat, but he wasn't touching me. His kiss distracted me from the pressing need to come, so I kept pumping my fist over my agonisingly stiff cock, tugging on my balls again in the hope that I could make this last a little longer.

I moaned helplessly into his mouth when a new sound drifted up. I could feel the movement of Moth's other arm and, over the slick sound of my fist on my cock, I heard a different noise. A wet noise that called to the primal part of me, making me tear my mouth free to look down between our bodies.

"Oh fuck," I croaked when I saw Moth's hand moving frantically in his pants.

His jerky hand motions didn't look like he was stroking a cock, but I could see a bulge there now. The faintly pink tip of a wet cockhead rubbing against the inside of his wrist. Everything in me tightened at the sight.

There were only inches of space between us. My fingers spasmed with the desperate desire to rip down his pants and touch him, a desire I wouldn't act on until he was ready.

Moth was panting, his hot forehead pressed to mine, until he tilted his head down so he could watch me furiously stroke my cock. I wasn't trying to make it last now. The sight of him touching himself had me too desperate to come. The fact that it was hidden somehow made it even hotter.

As the tremors began at the base of my shaft, wrenching my nuts up tight in my grip, Moth let out a choked sound. His hips bucked. His arm jerked, burying his hand deeper in his pants.

"F-fuck—Charlie—"

His parted lips pressed against my cheek, ragged breaths heating my skin. I groaned, unable to look away as he shook, his long body hovering above me.

Moth let out a low, desperate sound. Cum gushed over the edge of his jeans—so much of it, like he'd had years-worth stored up. When it dripped onto my stomach and the head of my cock, I let out an agonised moan.

"Holy *shit*."

Cum burst from my cock in powerful spurts, momentarily blacking out my vision as my hips strained up from the bed with the force of my orgasm. My quaking thighs brushed against Moth's jeans-clad legs, and he placed a trembling hand on my chest to steady himself. When I felt the wetness coating his fingers, I groaned helplessly as my cock gave another spurt.

By the time I came back to myself, Moth was sitting upright between my spread knees, his hands on my thighs. He stared down at me in disbelief, his chest still rising quickly, his face flushed.

I was still hazy and languid as I finally released my softening cock and let my hand rest on my coated stomach, trying to slow my breaths.

I smiled up at him, eyes heavy-lidded with the sudden, pressing urge to fall asleep. I'd never come that hard in my life.

From giving myself a tug job while Moth masturbated above me. We hadn't even really touched.

"Well." I cleared my throat, but my voice was still hoarse when I spoke. "If you want to do that again, just let me know."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Charlie

I was already grinning as I knocked on Moth's door with my elbow the next morning, trying not to drop the two takeaway cups and box of donuts in my hands.

I smiled widely at him when he opened the door. "Morning."

He returned it with a tiny smile of his own, even as his cheeks flushed pink. "Morning."

"I bought coffee and donuts." I waited until he stepped back before walking into the room. My gut tightened at the sight of the rumpled sheets.

Moth had left last night after I'd gotten off the bed and cleaned up. We'd shared one final kiss—which had gone on longer than it probably should have—before he mumbled goodnight and slipped through the door.

I'd slept better than I had in weeks, and I was in an exceptionally good mood this morning. I deposited the donuts on the table before turning around to hand Moth his coffee as he approached. I made sure not to accidentally give him mine, which was loaded with sugar.

"You like donuts for breakfast?" he asked, our fingers brushing as he took the cup. "You're such a sugar addict."

I chuckled as I opened the box and grabbed one powdered with sugar. "Yeah. Want one?"

I held out the box, trying not to stare at Moth as he picked one out with long, tattooed fingers. His hair was wet and half tied back, covering the pointed tips of his ears, so he'd been up for a while. I wondered if he'd slept well, or if he'd stayed awake regretting what we'd done.

I really hoped not.

The silence was a little loaded as we ate, but I was going to make sure I acted the same around him. Maybe he'd decided that he didn't want to do anything else. I'd be disappointed, sure—*super* disappointed—but I didn't want him to feel pressured.

"So, another day of searching, huh?" I shook my head as I finished my donut, licking the powdered sugar off my fingers.

Moth was watching me, his half-eaten donut in his hand. He flushed when he saw I'd noticed, raising it to his mouth to take a big bite as he nodded.

My gut tightened. Fuck, I wanted to kiss him. Honestly, I wanted to forget searching for Cat and get back into bed with him to repeat what we'd done last night. Or maybe do more. Maybe he'd let me touch him.

I cleared my throat and pushed away the thoughts, taking a sip of coffee. "I'm starting to think he's not here."

Moth pursed his lips and looked at his cup, tracing the edge of the lid. "He might not be. What do you want to do if he isn't?"

I frowned, not sure how to answer.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I'd feel like shit if we went back to the Nebraska camp without even any news on what happened to him."

"Yeah," he said, eyes going a little vacant.

I wondered if he was imagining telling Ghost that we hadn't been able to find Cat. A sharp spike of jealousy went through me before I could stop it, which was fucking ridiculous. We'd fooled around *once*. I'd gone into it *knowing* he was in love with someone else.

If he did want to continue, it wouldn't be about a relationship or whatever. It would just be fucking. Relieving the tension while we were together.

I couldn't get into a relationship anyway. Not when I was supposed to be going back to the military. Not when he didn't even know that I hadn't really left.

Guilt churned, so I gulped down some more coffee. "Well, we'll keep looking for now—"

I cut off when a loud noise came from outside—a low, rasping squeal that sounded like hydraulics. Moth was already heading to the window, so I followed him.

"What the fuck?" I muttered when I saw the crane just outside the city wall. It was slowly lowering a shipping container directly into the middle of the street further down from the pub we were in.

My pulse leapt when I noticed soldiers everywhere, armed with rifles and watching the container sway as it descended between the buildings. They ignored the people who went up to them and clearly asked what was going on, gesturing at the shipping container as it settled on the ground with a loud thud.

“What are they doing?” I said, staring as the hook rose back up before the boom swung around.

“I don’t know,” Moth murmured, voice tense.

We didn’t move as we watched people eyeing the container warily, walking around it. It was unmarked, the metal painted yellow but chipped in places. It looked pretty new, though. Not like the old, rusted containers you could find out in the Wastes.

I tensed up when I heard the crane again. It swung back around with another container on its hook, which it began lowering further down the street from the one already sitting there.

I turned my head to see if there were any more the other way. More soldiers stood at the end of the street leading to another district in the city. Unease stiffened my limbs as I watched them, but they weren’t doing anything. Just standing there. All of them were.

The second container had been placed on the ground, and no others followed. I could hear the low rumble of the crane being driven away outside the city. Moth took a step away from the window, and I looked back to see him watching me carefully.

“What do you want to do?” He nodded at the window. “There are a lot of soldiers down there. Could any of them recognise you?”

I shook my head. “I doubt it, especially not in civilian clothes. But I... Do you think it’s safe to go outside? What’s in those containers?”

“I have no idea.” Moth’s voice was grim as he crossed the room to shrug on his coat and sling both his bags over his back. “Maybe we should make one last effort to try and find more information, then leave before... anything happens.”

I nodded, casting one last look out the window. People were still eyeing the containers warily, but otherwise seemed to be going about their business as usual. Maybe... this was normal here? Maybe this was how they shipped in supplies of stuff the city was running low on? They had to get food and things in somehow.

“Okay, let’s go.” I turned and headed for the door. “You got everything?”

“Yeah.”

Moth followed me out, and neither of us spoke as we made our way downstairs to the bar. After handing in the keys to our rooms, we headed

outside. I stared at the closest shipping container again, then over at the soldiers standing near it.

They weren't doing anything. Just standing there. But we'd seen no military presence in this part of the city the entire time we'd been here. We were in the poorest district, tucked right away at the back corner of the city.

There were a lot of them now, and it made me incredibly uneasy as we walked down the street. What if one of them *did* recognise me? Or what if they noticed that there was something different about Moth? They saw monsters more often than any civilians would. They could realise.

I wanted to get him off the street, away from them. I grabbed Moth's arm and tugged him into a bar. We'd been coming to bars anyway to try and overhear conversations or ask the bartenders if they'd noticed an influx of new people, most likely injured.

I grabbed us two beers that I knew neither of us would drink, before we sat down at an empty table in the busiest section. Even though it was morning, the bars were always full.

We sat in silence, and I gripped my bottle as I furtively watched the soldiers across the street through the window. My gut clenched when the conversation between the two guys sitting behind me drifted over, even though they were speaking in low voices.

"I can't believe it, man. We barely made it out of that fucking prison alive and now Jed's dead anyway."

I didn't move, except for my gaze darting to Moth to give him a meaningful look. He glanced over my shoulder, pale eyes watching them keenly as he picked up his bottle and took a sip.

"Do you even know what he had?" the other guy hissed. "He was fine a week ago."

"He said he started feeling rough a few days ago." The first guy's voice was miserable. "Then he wouldn't leave the room. When I woke up this morning, I found him in the bathroom face down in a puddle of vomit. Fuck, man, there was *so much*. And it was like this... weird grey colour. But he'd barely eaten the last few days."

"Shit." The second guy's voice was tight, and there was a pause as I heard him take a gulp of his drink. "What did you do?"

"I had to just leave him there." The first guy sounded tearful. "I didn't know what would happen if—if someone came up and saw him and called someone. We're not even supposed to *be* here."

Something pinged in my consciousness, making my brows twitch into a frown. This guy's friend had contracted some mysterious illness and died after throwing up a lot. I'd heard other people throwing up a lot while we'd been here. Someone had been retching their guts up last night in another room in the pub.

Something Hunter had told me a while back started creeping to the forefront of my mind, but I immediately went still, distracted when I heard one of them mention the prison again.

"What if it's... what if it's something we all caught from the prison?" one of them hissed. "And why's the military suddenly in this part of town? Do you think they've heard something? Are they going to round us all up and shove us in those containers?"

This was the best—the *only*—lead we'd found here. Making a decision, I turned in my seat and eyed the two guys. They both looked thin and tired, and the one wearing a black baseball cap and gripping a beer bottle was slightly grey.

"I was there too," I murmured as they both look at me with wary suspicion.

The one in the baseball cap's eyes widened before they darted to his friend.

"The prison?" he whispered, inching his chair closer.

I nodded. "These big fuckers grabbed me in the Wastes and took me there."

"What big fuckers?" the other guy said, still eyeing me suspiciously.

"Their skin looked like rock. They were huge."

Baseball cap nodded. "I remember them. A few of them started working security after they arrived."

"I don't remember seeing you in there," the other guy said, gripping his bottle tight.

"I shared a cell with Cat."

They both straightened at that, sharing a glance.

"Cat was there longer than almost anyone else," baseball cap hissed. "He was fucking unbeatable."

"I had to fight him once," the other guy muttered, hunching his shoulders. "Nearly killed me."

"Did he come here with you?" I asked, then quickly added, "I lost him when... everything went down."

We had no idea what had happened at the prison or why it was empty now, but I couldn't ask these guys. It would make them suspicious and raise too many questions I couldn't answer.

Baseball cap exhaled, lifting his bottle to take a gulp. "He wasn't with our group. But we spread out once we got into the city to look less obvious."

"I know some of the others kept heading east," the other guy added. "Toward New York."

I looked back at Moth. I knew he'd heard—he had better hearing than humans. His pale eyes were watching me already, and he gave me a tiny nod.

"Hey, what do you think is going on out there?" baseball cap hissed, leaning over the table. "Do you think they know we're here and they're gonna take us back out into the Wastes in those containers? To shoot us?"

His eyes were wide and fearful as he glanced at his friend, who flattened his lips into a grim line and took a swig of his beer.

"Don't know," I said shortly. "So you haven't seen Cat? I'm worried about him, man. I... heard what happened to your friend. I'm sorry. I want to make sure Cat's alright."

Baseball cap's eyes got glassy. "Yeah. No, we haven't seen him since we got out. Haven't seen him here either."

I exhaled, giving them a nod. "Okay. Thanks."

Moth rose without a word, so I followed him up. We left our drinks on the table and went back out onto the street.

"So he could be in New York," I muttered as we headed down the sidewalk, toward the second container that sat ominously in the middle of the road.

"What do you want to do?" Moth asked.

I glanced behind us and froze when I noticed all the soldiers making their way down the street that led out of the district. Moth turned, and we watched as two big trucks slowly backed up down the street before coming to a stop side by side.

Blocking off the road.

The soldiers started hoisting themselves up metal ladders on the side of the trucks. Most of them vanished over the other side, but several remained on top of the trucks with their rifles ready.

“Almost in place for outbreak containment, sir,” a low, raspy voice came from behind us before a soldier walked past, a gloved hand touching the comms on the side of her black helmet.

She didn’t even glance at us, shouting at the last few soldiers to get to the trucks as she gripped her rifle in her hands and followed them.

Outbreak containment?

I stared at the trucks. They’d set up blockades either side to completely seal off any gaps. To stop anyone getting out of this district.

The blood drained from my face when it hit me. All the people throwing up. The guy from the prison saying he’d found his friend face down in a huge puddle of grey vomit after feeling sick for a week.

I remembered what Hunter had told me. What he’d seen for himself when the Soul Eater found a raider infected by a parasite while they were on their way to free me from the prison.

“I think it’s the parasites.” My voice was hoarse when I turned to Moth. “I think there’s been a parasite outbreak here.”

“The... What you said the Soul Eater hunts?” he asked in a low voice, staring at me.

I nodded, my gaze drifting over to the containers.

What was in the containers?

I grabbed Moth’s arm and started dragging him down the street, away from the military blockade and all the soldiers standing with their guns ready.

Just as we got clear of the second container, I heard a beeping. A red light was flashing on its side, and then its back shutter started slowly rolling up.

“Get your sword,” I said to Moth before the first thin black leg covered in hard bristles even appeared from within the container. The small claw wrapped around the edge of the open back, and people started screaming. I couldn’t look away as the terrible face with rectangular eyes appeared, followed by a long, curving neck and a narrow black body.

“Fuck,” I heard Moth grit out as he quickly unzipped the bag and pulled out his sword.

I’d seen these things before. Hunter and I had come across one not long before the koleb fuckers took me. As the first one let out a screech and leapt at the nearest person, another one slunk out of the container. Then another.

“Run.” I grabbed Moth’s arm and yanked him hard, trying to block out the sounds of people screaming and being torn to shreds behind us.

There was already a sea of people sprinting in the same direction as us, desperately trying to get away. Some of them forced their way into shops, others vanished down side alleys. But the majority just kept running forward, toward... nothing. Just a fucking wall that kept us all trapped. But there was no other way to go, they’d blocked off the only route into the rest of the city.

My heart was pounding, and I didn’t want to let go of Moth’s arm, even though it slowed us down. We could easily lose each other in this teeming mass of fleeing people. He didn’t comment on it and didn’t slow his pace, his fingers gripping the edge of my coat to keep hold of me too.

Someone terrifyingly close behind us screamed in terror before it cut off abruptly, ending in an agonised choking sound. I could hear the sounds of the monsters tearing into flesh, screeching as they chased their prey.

It was a fucking massacre. The military were wiping out an entire district of the city because of an outbreak. Did they know about the parasites? Or did they not care what was infecting people, they just didn’t want to deal with it?

Rapid gunfire echoed down the street, making my heart leap into my throat. Were they shooting at us or the monsters? They’d have to kill the monsters eventually if they didn’t want them to run rampant through the entire city. But I was also pretty sure they’d pick off any people left alive to make sure the parasites didn’t spread any further.

Moth suddenly tugged hard on my coat, jerking me down a side alley and away from the fleeing crowd. We didn’t slow down as we ran down the empty alley and behind a dumpster. I panted wildly as I stared at the city wall looming in front of us. Why had he taken us down here? Now we were trapped.

When he dropped into a crouch and started digging his fingers into the metal, I could have fucking kissed him. He’d brought us to the secret door out of the city.

My relief didn’t last long, though. One of the monsters barrelled into the alley entrance, shaking a limp human body in its mouth like a dog. Its long, rectangular eyes locked onto us, and it let out a screech.

“Fuck.” I glanced down at Moth as he gritted his teeth and pulled the carved-out door open, then back at the monster as I fumbled with the bag

containing my gun. I wouldn't have time to get it out—I knew that already. It was racing down the alley toward us, legs scrabbling over the ground.

Moth grabbed my hand and dragged me into the short tunnel just as the monster lunged forward and swiped. I gritted my teeth as I felt a sharp sting drag all the way down my calf, slicing through my pants, but then Moth was yanking me in. I had the sense to grab the door and pull it shut behind me, trying not to hiss in pain when my fingertips caught in the metal before I yanked them free.

There was a short handle welded to the inside, so I grabbed it and heaved with my entire body to ensure the door was flush in the wall and the monster's sharp little claws couldn't dig into the metal to get it back open. On the other side I heard it screech before its clicking footsteps retreated rapidly back toward the street.

Moth grabbed my arm and dragged me through the wall, kicking open the door that led into the Wastes and pulling me upright. We started running without a word, eager to get as far away as possible.

My boots slipped over the icy grass, and I could feel my right leg stiffening up as it throbbed in waves of pain that radiated from the gash on the back of my calf, but I didn't stop. Not until we were running down the curving street of an abandoned suburb, weaving between wrecked cars.

I stumbled, my right leg throbbing and my knee almost unable to bend. Moth grabbed my arms quickly and held me upright. His eyes were wide with fear as they tracked over me.

"You're hurt."

I nodded and peered down at my leg. The monster had slashed through my pants, and I could see a long cut down the back of my calf, blood trickling. The pain made my jaw clench hard, and my voice was tight when I spoke.

"I'll be okay. Hunter got scratched by one of those things before and he's still alive." I tried to chuckle, but all that came out was a pained hiss.

"Shit, Charlie." Moth wrapped his arm around me and led us toward one of the empty houses.

I couldn't put any weight on my leg or bend my knee now, it had completely stiffened up. It felt like it was swelling to double the size, throbbing in time with my rapid heartbeat. I tried not to panic as I leaned heavily on Moth, letting him lead us into a house after he kicked in the door.

Hunter had been fine after getting a scratch from one of those things, and mine didn't look much deeper than his had been. I was going to be fine.

You're going to be fine. You're going to be fine.

My heart was pounding too hard as Moth carefully set me down on the couch in the dusty living room and stepped back. Before I could stop myself, my hand shot out and grabbed his coat to stop him walking away. The pain was travelling up from my leg now, into my groin and lower back.

Moth knelt in front of me and grasped my knees, quickly letting go of the right one when I hissed in pain.

"I need to check the house is safe, Charlie." His pale eyes bored into mine. "I'll be right back. Okay?"

I nodded and forced myself to let go of him. I wasn't sure why I didn't want him to leave me for even a few minutes. I knew he was right—he had to make sure the house was empty before anything else. But the waves of searing pain had reached my shoulders now, and as Moth left to check the rest of the house, I stared down at my leg stretched out straight in front of me through blurry eyes.

It hadn't swelled up, but it felt like a balloon. It felt like there were thousands of needles jabbing into my skin repeatedly, and my foot was visibly trembling.

It seemed like Moth was gone for hours, but I knew it was only minutes. Even blinking was painful now. My breaths were shuddering out of me no matter how hard I tried to steady them, and I forced a pained smile onto my face when Moth returned.

"All clear?" I asked, voice tight.

He nodded and crouched down to unzip my bag, pulling out my canteen.

"Have some water," he said, holding it out as he gazed at me anxiously through those pale eyes.

I tried to lift my arm, but I sucked in a breath as the throbbing pain travelled through my whole body in a wave. Moth hurriedly unscrewed the cap and held the bottle up to my lips, long fingers gently cradling my chin to help me drink.

"I'll be—all good in a few minutes." I didn't know why I said it—even if I would eventually be fine, I could already tell that I was gonna be in a shit-ton of pain for a while.

Moth huffed and screwed the lid back on the canteen. "You'll be okay, but not for a while. Those were forileuns. Their toxin won't kill you, but it

amplifies pain receptors.”

I exhaled and relaxed a little hearing Moth say that it wasn’t going to kill me.

I nodded tightly, trying to pant through the pain. “Good to know. There’s —antiseptic in my bag. In the medical kit.”

Moth’s eyes grew panicked for some reason, but he nodded and quickly dug the small red kit out of my bag. I’d never been more grateful for the bunker on the homestead, which was stocked with survival gear like this.

“Uhh...” Moth’s voice was a little shaky as he dumped everything out of the kit onto the couch cushion next to me.

I’d already spotted the tube, antiseptic clearly written on it. But Moth was anxious and didn’t seem to see it, so I reached over with a wince and grabbed the tube to hold it out to him.

He took it and quickly unscrewed the lid, bending down at an awkward angle to carefully smear it over the thin cut down the back of my calf. The cool ointment soothed away the burning, throbbing heat for a few moments, and I let out a shaky breath as I rested my head against the back of the couch.

“You’ll be okay, Charlie.” Moth sounded tense as he quickly shoved everything back into the medical kit.

I rolled my head over the back of the sofa so I could smile tightly at him. “I know. Sorry for being a jackass and getting cut.”

“That wasn’t your fault,” he said hoarsely. “I should have got the door open quicker. I was panicking—”

“We’d both be dead if you hadn’t thought of it,” I interrupted, looking back up at the ceiling. “Either ripped apart by one of those things or shot by the military.”

I still couldn’t quite believe what we’d witnessed. That the military had wiped out an entire city district because some people were sick—and they’d used *monsters* to do it. Why? I didn’t understand that. Why didn’t they just go in and shoot everyone if they wanted them all dead?

“I can’t believe they dropped in monsters to massacre everyone,” I rasped, anger making the painful heat in my chest flare even hotter. “Why would they risk an entire city like that?”

“Probably pre-emptive damage control.” Moth’s voice was husky as he turned and sat, resting his back against the couch by my feet. “Looks better

for them if monsters *got loose* and killed everyone, then the military went in and saved the rest of the city.”

I gritted my teeth. “You’re probably right.”

Ignoring the pain, I lifted my hand and found Moth’s shoulder, giving it a squeeze.

“Thank you, Moth. You saved both of us.”

I felt him shrug uncomfortably under my hand. “It’s fine. You should try and sleep.”

I snorted again. “I don’t think I can sleep through this.”

The waves of pain intensified, making my eyes squeeze shut. I heard Moth scramble up as I groaned through clenched teeth.

“Hunter didn’t have a reaction like this,” I got out.

“Maybe he didn’t get cut as deep.” I felt Moth’s long, cool fingers on my sweaty forehead. “I’ll get a wet cloth to try and cool you down.”

I heard his boots on the hardwood floor as he walked away. I squeezed my eyes shut tighter, as though I’d be able to push the pain back if I concentrated hard enough.

It obviously didn’t work.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Moth

I tried to hide how unsettled I was as I helped Charlie turn and lie down on the couch, his right leg stiff and unbending.

He shouldn't have gotten hurt. My brain struggled to link this injured Charlie with the one I'd come to know. He was so... capable. He almost seemed unstoppable, but in a calm, understated way. Like he just rolled with the punches, and it would always work out.

I didn't like seeing his brow furrowed with pain as he kept his eyes tightly shut, breaths shuddering out of his nose. I went into the kitchen to re-wet the cloth I'd been using to try and cool him down, returning to place it gently on his forehead.

His skin was hot, and he was sweating. I just had to fucking hope that the bits of information I'd heard over the years about forileuns were correct, and their poison couldn't actually kill people. It wasn't like I had any fellow monsters to ask. Or that would tell me anything. Everything I knew about the monsters came from overheard conversations and occasionally spying on them.

I forced down the pang of hurt I felt at the fact that Edin hadn't even told me about the parasites. We weren't friends, but we were... friendly. And the fact that there were goddamn monster parasites infecting people was kind of vital fucking information to know out here.

It was stupid to be hurt by it. Edin was friendly when we came across one another, but he was friendly to everyone. He was still a monster, and all monsters hated me. They saw me as a freak they couldn't trust because I was half human.

And humans all felt the same about me because of my monster side. I clenched my jaw and focused on Charlie. Whatever. I didn't need any of them.

Except... Charlie didn't care about my monster side. Charlie had seen me naked, for fuck's sake—though not all of me—and he still... wanted me. Despite what I looked like under my clothes.

But again, he hadn't seen all of me. And the parts he hadn't seen would probably be what turned him off if anything else happened between us. A big part of me wanted to put an end to our new arrangement now, before it had even really started. Before he expected me to... get naked with him. Where he'd see all of me.

I still couldn't believe that he actually wanted me. All humans seemed initially attracted to me, before they got too close and that uneasy, mildly disgusted look passed over their features. Like something about me creeped them out, made instinctive revulsion rise and put them off.

But Charlie had been out here with me for weeks. He'd seen me up close multiple times. He'd seen my skin and legs and fucking tail and hideous monster feet. My face burned, and I was glad he still had his eyes shut.

He'd kissed me. He'd gotten hard just from kissing me—*really* hard. And he'd made himself come in front of me, and he hadn't seemed disgusted when I lost control and shoved my hand down my pants at the sight of it. In fact, he'd seemed to *like* it.

Weak, pathetic guilt flared when I thought about what we'd done and then pictured Ghost. Which was fucking ridiculous. Ghost may have been interested at one point, but he didn't want me anymore. He had Aury. He was happy with him. I hadn't... *betrayed* him in any way by messing around with Charlie. He wouldn't have given a shit if he knew.

I hated that the thought hurt. And then that just made the guilt shift as I looked down at Charlie's tense face. I felt like a shitty person for still... feeling strongly about Ghost while fooling around with Charlie. But it wasn't like he didn't know. He'd even brought it up himself, saying that he knew I wouldn't want a relationship with him.

And it definitely hadn't been Ghost I was thinking about as I'd watched Charlie stretch out on the bed in front of me and stroke his cock. His body was beautiful—strong and toned, but not bulky. His legs were long and dusted with dark hair, thighs thick. When he'd shoved off his boxer briefs, the sight of his ass had nearly made me drool.

It had all felt so much... better, because I'd felt like I actually had permission to stare at him. To want him. There hadn't been the fear that if I stared for too long, he'd sneer and ask me what the fuck I thought I was looking at. He wanted me back. He'd *wanted* me to look at him.

Eventually, the tension in Charlie's body exhausted him and he fell asleep. I left the cloth on his forehead and sat on the floor beside the couch.

I wrapped my arms around my knees and let my head fall back against the cushion. Charlie's shoulder pressed against my temple, and before I could stop myself, I turned my head to lean into his warmth, my eyes sliding shut.

I was tired too, but I wanted to stay awake in case he got worse. His tense body had relaxed a little in sleep, and his breaths were deep and even, which made my shoulders unclench with relief. I didn't want to think about the possibility of going back to the Nebraska camp and telling Edin and his big, surly lover that Charlie was dead. They'd probably think I'd done something to him out here. Left him for dead or killed him myself.

Or Gloam would think I'd taken him to my progenitor. And then he'd tell everyone. They'd all hate me, probably try to kill me. Lilac wouldn't hesitate to do it.

No. Charlie's going to be fine. He's not doing to die.

His skin was cooling down, but he was still warm. I pulled his blanket out of his bag and covered him with it, because the house was cold. We were too close to the city to risk a fire, even though there were still logs piled up in a metal frame beside the fireplace in here.

I pulled my coat tighter around myself and nestled my cheek closer to Charlie's shoulder, soaking up his warmth.

My head jerked up when Charlie shifted on the couch. I'd dozed off, but I was wide awake the moment I heard him groan softly.

Scrambling up, I turned and knelt beside the couch. "Are you okay?"

It was getting dark now. He'd slept through most of the day. The room was even colder, and when I noticed the blanket had slipped down at some point, I pushed it up to cover Charlie completely.

"Yeah, I feel better." His voice was croaky, so I quickly grabbed his water and unscrewed the lid. Palming the back of his head, I gently helped him lift it to drink.

"Thanks," he rasped, giving my arm a pat before I pulled the bottle away.

"You'll be okay." I didn't know whose benefit I said it for as I put his canteen back in his bag. "How's your leg?"

He winced as he bent his knee, but shot me a weak grin. "I can move it. Progress, right? The cut still throbs like a bitch, though."

“I’ll put more antiseptic on it.”

I got out his medical kit and pulled out the antiseptic. I’d made sure to study the tube and its red cap when I’d used it before, so I knew which one it was. Bending down as Charlie twisted his leg so I could get to it, my monster eyesight let me see the thin cut down the back of his calf. It didn’t look puffy or inflamed, and it wasn’t overly hot beneath my finger when I carefully smoothed ointment over it.

As I recapped the tube and put it away, Charlie muttered, “What kind of assholes decide shipping monsters into a city is the best way to deal with an outbreak?”

I shrugged one shoulder. “Like I said, looks better for them than if they just went in there and gunned down an entire district of people. Especially if no one knows about the parasites.”

“If there was a parasite outbreak in that city, where the fuck was the Soul Eater?” Charlie gritted out, struggling to sit up until I helped him. “I thought that was his fucking job.”

I swallowed, fear slithering through me at the thought of the Soul Eater. I’d never met him, but I knew Edin knew him, which had always made me more wary of Edin—the fact that he was friends with the ghoul who appeared every three years to slaughter at random.

Except... apparently that wasn’t what he was doing. I stared at Charlie.

“So... he’s been hunting parasites this whole time?” I flushed at how ignorant I sounded. *I should have known this. I was the half monster.*

Charlie nodded, and his mouth flattened into a grim line as he looked at me. “We might be infected.”

The fear hardened into a lead ball in the pit of my stomach. My voice was husky when I asked, “How would we know?”

“I’ve never seen it, but Hunter said infected people look really weak and malnourished. The one he saw had a yellow tint around her mouth. And she... threw up a huge amount of grey vomit with eggs in it.”

My gorge rose. I resisted the urge to palm my stomach, wondering if there was a parasite growing in there.

“I saw someone who was clearly infected.” Charlie sounded guilty and angry at himself. “The first morning we were in the city. I saw them across the street throwing up. I should have realised.”

I shook my head. “It’s not your fault you didn’t realise. And we got away. We’re fine.”

Except we might not be. I licked my lips and looked at Charlie. “How long until we know if we’re infected?”

“I think it takes about a week. We’ll start feeling ill, then we won’t be able to keep food down. I think the symptoms are pretty subtle, and unless the Soul Eater shows up to get rid of them for us before they kill us... we just have to wait and see.”

“Do you feel ill?” I asked quickly, terror gripping me at the thought of having to watch Charlie slowly weaken and die.

He shook his head and gave me a lopsided smile. “Don’t feel sick or anything. And the pain from the scratch is fading now. How about you?” he added with a frown, grey eyes darting over my face.

“I feel fine.” Even though I felt mildly nauseated at the thought of a parasite potentially growing inside me.

Charlie let out a slow breath. “We’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Yeah,” I croaked, then grabbed my bag to distract myself. “Are you hungry? I can make us something.”

He made a face and shook his head. “Not right now. Thanks, though. Could you grab the aspirin from my bag?”

Panic flared, but I tried to cover it as I nodded and reached for his bag. I pulled out the little medical kit, recognisable by the white cross on the side, and unzipped it.

I stared down at the multiple packets within. I didn’t know what aspirin looked like, and the longer I didn’t move, the hotter my skin got. Scalp prickling with heat and face on fire, in the end I just grabbed all the packets and set them beside him on the couch.

“Here.”

Charlie’s eyes darted down to the pile then back up to me. I tensed up, expecting him to ask why I didn’t just hand him the fucking aspirin like he’d asked. But he just gave me a smile and said, “Thanks.”

I watched carefully as he reached for a yellow packet, so I knew which one it was in case he asked again. My face was still burning. Had he realised? Humiliation made me want to hunch my shoulders, but I forced myself to casually put the rest of the packets back in the medical kit as though everything was totally normal.

Charlie swallowed two pills dry with a grimace, so I quickly handed him his canteen.

“What do you want to do now?” I asked to move past the painfully awkward moment. “Go to New York? Or back to the camp?”

“Do you know how to get into New York?”

I nodded and tried to tamp down the flash of pleasure I felt when Charlie gave me an impressed grin.

“I’m up for heading to the coast if you are,” he told me with a wry smile. “Might as well keep going while we can. We might be dead in a week.”

I licked my lips as I nodded, which made Charlie’s grey eyes drift down to my mouth as they sparked with appreciation.

My stomach clenched when he sat forward with a groan, then shot me his charming grin.

“I really hope I at least get to kiss you one more time before we both possibly die painful, parasitic deaths.” Uncertainty flitted over his features. “If you want to, that is.”

“I—”

The urge to close myself off and remove any risk of painful rejection flared, the arrogant mask I wore trying to settle into place. I forced it back and nibbled on my lower lip as I nodded, the ring piercing it clicking against my teeth.

“Yeah,” I rasped. “I still want to.”

But Charlie didn’t make a move. He was so careful with me, and I appreciated it more than I could express, even as it made me feel hideously exposed and pathetic. Part of me couldn’t believe what I’d admitted to him—that I’d never done anything sexual with anyone. I’d never even kissed anyone before him.

I was sweating as I rose onto my knees and palmed his thighs, moving between them. My legs were trembling wildly, which made me feel even more pathetic. It was just a kiss, for fuck’s sake.

When I started to lean in, he met me halfway. Strong fingers slid through my hair as his mouth moved softly against mine. I suppressed the small sound that tried to rise from my throat when our lips parted and our tongues glided together. Fuck, it felt so good. He *tasted* so good, even with the faint bitterness from the aspirin he’d swallowed.

The kiss was slow, but my insides pulsed with want. I wanted him so much. It confused me, because I still thought about Ghost a lot. Not when I was with Charlie, but still. I’d wanted Ghost for so long that it was just an automatic reaction to think about him, but I realised I’d been thinking about

him less and less since I'd been out here. The thought of him back at the camp with Aury hurt less because I'd been distracted.

And I could recognise that the way I wanted Charlie was... hotter. More urgent. The tension between us had been palpable from the beginning. My desire for Ghost had grown more slowly, once I'd noticed that he didn't seem to care about my monster side—when he treated me no differently to anyone else. Until I'd vanished during that scouting mission and he'd started hating me.

Humiliation flared. Had I just latched onto him because he'd been the first human to treat me kindly? He'd seemed to want me back, but he'd never looked at me the way I saw him look at Aury. With that burning, all-consuming gaze like nothing else mattered.

Charlie had looked at me kind of like that when we were fooling around. Like his entire being was focused on me. Like he was desperate for me. But I wasn't stupid enough to think that he wanted me for anything other than sex. He'd told me he didn't want a relationship. I didn't know if it was that he didn't want one with *me*, or just didn't want one in general.

I refused to let that hurt, and my determination to enjoy this grew. I wanted him badly, and he... wanted me too. We could mess around while we were out here together. I could finally experience everything I'd been missing—if I could bring myself to be that vulnerable with him. To let him see the rest of me.

I couldn't stop the little moan that vibrated against Charlie's mouth as he sucked on my tongue before curling his around the piercing through the centre of it. I felt him smile against my mouth before he pulled back.

"I've never kissed anyone with a tongue piercing before," he rasped, his pupils swallowing up the grey of his irises. "How long have you had it?"

The question made me tense right up, all pleasurable feelings fleeing instantly as the painful memories rose. The hot needle piercing through my tongue and lips. The wire being roughly fed through the fresh wounds, cutting into them, forcing my tongue down and sewing my lips shut.

The pain of the wire being yanked back out, slicing through the barely healed holes, had been worse. The next time my progenitor had done it to me, they'd been healed at least. But it'd still hurt.

"Um, since I was a teenager," I mumbled, pulling back and fishing my water bottle out of my bag for something to do.

I knew Charlie was perceptive, and he seemed to realise that it wasn't a subject I wanted to talk about. He cleared his throat and sat back on the couch.

"Do you think they managed to kill all the monsters before they got into the other parts of the city?"

I was grateful for the switch in topic. "I don't know. Maybe they wanted to wipe out the entire city. Maybe they're not interested in it anymore."

Anger tightened his features. "Then why don't they just leave and give the people there a chance to make do on their own?"

"Because it's the military," I muttered. "They want to control everything. If they've decided they don't want Chicago to stand anymore, they'll just eliminate all the people living there."

Charlie swallowed, but said nothing for a while. When he eventually spoke, his voice was low and hesitant. "I have to tell you something, Moth."

Trepidation tightened my gut. I slowly looked up at him. "What?"

"I..." Charlie worried the fabric of his pant leg, staring down at his hand. "I haven't actually... officially left the military."

I stared at him, fear and anger threatening to swamp me. Had he been planning to fuck me over this whole time? And the Nebraska camp?

I'd shown him the raider market. I'd shown him how to get into one of the cities. I'd taken him to my *safehouse*, for fuck's sake.

Panic flared, quickening my breaths as I stared at him. My voice was hoarse when I asked, "What do you mean? You're working for them right now?"

"No," Charlie said instantly, raising his eyes to look at me. "I mean... Well, I guess Hunter hasn't left *officially* either, but he's definitely never going back. But I'd been... planning to."

"What?" I stood up quickly, fingers twitching for my sword. "You're going back? What are you going to tell them?"

"I'm not," he rushed out, then let out a hard breath as he looked up at me. "I'm not going back. Not anymore. I can't." He looked down and shook his head miserably. "I already felt like shit for even considering it after everything Hunter told me. Everything I learned about their specimen programme and what I saw when I was at the prison. The military were involved in it. But I..." He shrugged helplessly. "I don't have anything else. I can't just be the third wheel at the homestead with Hunter and Edin for the rest of my life. They want to live their lives together."

I was shocked to see Charlie looking so unsure of himself. He always seemed so sure of everything, like he knew exactly what he was doing. Like he had his shit together.

“So what are you going to do?” I rasped, not sure whether I wanted to step away from him or sit beside him. He looked... lost. Like I felt all the time. I swallowed around the lump in my throat.

He shrugged again, reaching up to scrub roughly at his face. “I don’t know. I guess I’ll just have to... try and find somewhere to live in the Wastes. I can’t live in one of the cities, and after seeing what the military did in Chicago, I know I can’t work for them anymore.”

I licked my lips and slowly sat on the couch next to him. “You could live at the Nebraska camp.”

He exhaled. “Maybe. I don’t know. I’ll figure something out.”

You could stay with me. I stiffened up as the thought crossed through my mind. Would I even want that? I’d been alone for so long. My whole life. I was used to it, even if the loneliness became almost crushing sometimes.

It didn’t matter anyway, because Charlie definitely wouldn’t want to do that. We still got on each other’s nerves, even though we’d finally admitted that we were attracted to each other. He didn’t want anything from me except... casual sex. I hoped I’d be able to get over my fears to give him that much, at least.

I tensed up when Charlie reached over as if he was going to touch me, but he pulled his hand back at the last second.

“I’m sorry, Moth.” His eyes were uneasy as he looked at me. “I’m sorry for hiding it from you. But please believe me—I’m not going back. And even if I was, I wouldn’t tell them anything. I promise.”

I cleared my throat and nodded. “Okay. I believe you.”

I did. And I had no right to judge him for keeping it from me, when we’d barely trusted each other in the beginning.

I was keeping things from him, too.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Charlie

“Are you sure your pack’s not too heavy? I can carry it.”

I grinned over at Moth as I adjusted the straps of my backpack to tug it higher.

“Are you gettin’ sweet on me, Moth?”

He flushed pink and looked away. “You’re so annoying.”

There was no heat behind it. And when I wrapped an arm around his shoulders and tugged him close to place a big kiss on his cheek, he let me.

“I’m good,” I said, releasing him. “Feel great. Having a sexy nurse helped speed up my recovery *immensely*.”

He rolled his eyes, cheeks going pink even as his mouth twitched into a tiny smirk. “Yeah, well, you better remember my nursing if anything happens to *me* while we’re out here.”

I chuckled. “I will, don’t worry. I’ll nurse the shit out of you if you get hurt.”

I was in an incredibly good mood considering I’d recently been almost paralysed by a monster and witnessed the military massacre an entire district of people. I was disgusted by what they’d done. I’d meant what I said to Moth—I couldn’t go back. Not after that.

I’d fallen back to sleep and woken up with only a faint headache, which more aspirin had cleared, and a dull throb in my leg. Before we left the house we’d holed up in, Moth had sewn up the slit in the back of my pants for me. His cheeks had flushed lightly when I sat back on the couch with my thighs spread wide in only my boxer briefs, which had made me grin.

After we’d both washed up and eaten, we set off. We were still far too close to the city for comfort, and Moth led us a long way around Chicago’s perimeter to start heading east.

I felt lighter after telling him about the military. After deciding once and for all not to go back. I was scared as shit, but... I’d figure something out. I *could* stay at the homestead with Edin and Hunter. I knew they’d be happy if I did. But the thought of it felt almost overwhelmingly lonely. It was so

remote there, and we had no reason to leave. If I stayed with them, I'd be alone for the rest of my life.

I could see if the Nebraska raiders would let me stay at their camp. They'd seemed to like me, and now that I knew I definitely *wasn't* going back to the military, I wouldn't feel so guilty or like I was hiding shit from them.

But... for some reason, that idea didn't appeal to me much either. The camp was impressive, but it was like a fortress, and a part of me resented a lot of the raiders there for how coldly they treated Moth. Rig and Ghost had seemed nice, and Aury was sweet, but I felt almost protective of Moth when it came to Gloam, because the big aytorin clearly had an issue with him.

And then there was machete guy. Lilac. He hadn't trusted me one bit, and he'd been a creepy little fucker with his piercing green eyes and blank stare.

Maybe the Nebraska camp would seem more appealing if we were able to find Cat and take him back. But... I was starting to think that we weren't going to find Cat. That something bad had happened to him. Because if he wasn't stuck at the prison anymore, why hadn't he gone back to the camp himself? If he *was* in New York, why the hell had he gone there, when he'd clearly made the decision at some point to live in the Wastes?

I didn't voice those worries to Moth though, because I still wanted to try. We could at least look. And... I kind of wanted to hang out with Moth for a little longer. Not just because I was desperate for us to fuck, but because... he'd grown on me. He was still weird and prickly, but he'd softened.

And now that I knew he wanted to continue our casual arrangement, I was eager to show him how gorgeous and desirable he was. That he wasn't *repulsive*. I wanted him to experience all the pleasure he'd been missing out on. The idea of being the one who got to show him made my cock tingle with blood as we walked.

"So, do you have a made-up name for forileuns?" Moth asked me, glancing over with a tiny smirk as we made our way down a depressing suburban street with empty, weathered houses standing in silent rows either side of us.

It seemed like it hadn't snowed for a few days, so icy grass was visible in some patches in the overgrown front yards. It was still cold, but the sun was bright in the pale sky. I pulled my scarf up higher over my nose and mouth, burrowing into its warmth.

“Cob monsters,” I admitted with a rueful smile. “’Cause their bodies look like ears of corn.”

He let out a husky laugh, and the sound of it made my stomach tighten.

“Finger fuckers is still my favourite,” he commented dryly, and I grinned over at him.

“Mine too. Although I hope we don’t see any more of them. They creep me out bad.”

“It’s too cold now.” He gestured at the icy ground. “They’ll wait ‘til the ground thaws.”

I nodded, watching my feet as we walked. “Bet you’ve seen a lot of monsters.”

“Yeah.”

His gloved hands were stuffed in his coat pockets, head tilted down and his damp hair braided back. A few strands had come loose, like they always did, to flutter over his high cheekbones above his scarf.

He was so beautiful. Way more beautiful than anyone else I’d ever seen—even Danny, the Soul Eater’s human partner, who was a total hottie and had for some reason decided that the creepy, ghoulish Wyn was the one deserving of all that male beauty. I’d been a little out of it when they’d gotten me out of the prison, but I’d still noticed how freaking hot he was.

Despite the cold, my cock jerked in my pants at the memory of Moth on top of me. His tongue in my mouth, and the slick sounds his hand had made in his pants before he jerked and shuddered with his orgasm.

When were we going to do it again?

“Bet you’ve seen a lot too,” Moth said. “Monsters, I mean.”

When I nodded, he glanced over at me warily.

“What did you... do in the military?”

The question made me tense up, but I wasn’t going to lie to him.

“Recon, mostly. Spying on raider camps and monster nests. Relaying the information back.”

Moth cleared his throat. “What did they do with the information?”

My shoulders hunched, and I kept my head bent as we walked. “Not sure. But it... wouldn’t have been good.”

He was quiet for a while, which made me feel even worse. Did a part of him hate me for being in the military? For being involved in monsters getting killed and camps getting raided? I kind of hated myself for it now.

“There are worse things,” he offered eventually. “That you could’ve had to do. And I know... there aren’t many options for people in the cities.”

My shoulders unclenched just a little, gratitude welling. My voice was still hoarse when I said, “I guess.”

“I’m not judging you.” He let out a humourless huff. “I can’t. I’ve killed a lot of monsters. And a lot of people.”

That made me snort, and I shot him a tiny smile. “And chopped off a lot of limbs.”

He shrugged one shoulder. “People are assholes. And they get greedy. They wouldn’t lose limbs if they didn’t try and steal my shit. We’re all just trying to survive out here.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. I didn’t judge Moth for how he dealt with people who tried to rob him in the Wastes. Especially because they all immediately treated him like dirt.

If people looked at me the way they all looked at Moth, *I’d* go around cutting off body parts with a sword.

Not that I had a sword. A gun felt kind of lame in comparison now.

I still grabbed it the moment a faint sound drifted from one of the houses to our left. Moth reached for his sword more slowly, not looking overly worried, even as his keen eyes fixed on a specific house with a red pickup rusting in the driveway. I knew his hearing was better than a human’s, so I focused on the same house, noticing that its front door was open.

When another rustling sound echoed from within, I tensed up. Visions of the forileuns’ long, bristly legs curling around the edges of the doorframe filled my mind. Their rabid shrieks. The searing agony that coursed through my entire body for hours, rendering my leg stiff and useless.

I wasn’t overly keen to repeat the experience, so I grabbed Moth’s arm and tugged him up the cracked driveway of the nearest house, ignoring his irritated grunt.

“What are you doing?” he hissed as I dragged him into the house and shut the door behind us. “I’ll just kill it.”

“You don’t *have* to kill everything, Moth,” I grumbled as I gripped his sleeve and pulled him up the stairs.

“It’s just easier,” he muttered, but didn’t jerk his arm free. He let me tug him into the bedroom at the front of the house.

“We can just watch and see what it is,” I said patiently, dropping his arm. “Wait for it to leave. Okay?”

He huffed and stalked across the room to the window, yanking back the curtains and standing there with his arms crossed over his chest.

“The idea is to *remain undetected*,” I hissed as I joined him, trying to nudge him to the side so he was out of sight from the street below.

He glared at me and gave a weak shove back, and it quickly devolved into a hushed bickering match as I tried to push him to the side of the window.

“I don’t give a shit if they see me,” he snapped, smacking my hand when I tugged at his coat.

“And I don’t want to have to fight off more fucking cob monsters,” I hissed back.

“It’s not a—See?” he burst out, jabbing me in the gut with his elbow and nodding at the window. “It’s just a myrm. I *told* you.”

“What? No you didn’t.” I gave him a weak shove back and peered out, staring at the horse-sized worm creature with six stubby legs as it emerged from the house across the street. I’d seen these things before, and their long giraffe necks and blank faces creeped me out.

But I knew they were timid and I’d never seen one attack anything—normally *they* were the ones being chased down by bigger, aggressive monsters.

“So you were just gonna kill that harmless thing.” I laid it on thick, shaking my head and giving Moth a disapproving look.

He went pink, snapping, “No I wasn’t.”

“You just said you’d kill it.”

“That was before I knew it was a myrm!”

“You *just* said you’d already told me it was. Which you hadn’t.”

He glared, cheeks still flushed. “You’re so annoying.”

I smirked. Moth’s eyes dropped to my mouth, the colour on his face deepening, before they darted to the side. I glanced over to see what he was looking at, going still when my gaze landed on the bed. It was big. Covered in a thick, dusty floral quilt. Looked pretty sturdy.

I looked at Moth again.

His chest was rising slightly quicker than normal, and he clutched the straps of his backpack so tight his knuckles bleached. My heartrate sped up, skin prickling with awareness as we stood there in silence, staring at each other.

When his eyes jerked back down to my mouth, I took an impulsive step closer. Moth's breath caught, fingers spasming around his bag straps.

And then one of us was moving. Or both of us. I wasn't sure. All I knew was that Moth's pierced tongue was suddenly in my mouth and his hands were shoving my coat off my shoulders, taking my bags with it, everything dropping to the floor with a dull thud. I did the same with him, kissing him frantically as his sword clattered to the floor.

We stumbled toward the bed, and I reached out to fumble with the quilt and yank it off, revealing the musty-but-clean sheets underneath. I tried to climb on gracefully, but that wasn't possible with my mouth still locked to Moth's. I fell back and he landed on top of me with a grunt against my lips, quickly clambering up to straddle my hips.

He moaned into my mouth as his weight pressed down on my straining cock. My hips tried to buck, trapped under him, and I finally broke the kiss to hurriedly shove him onto his back, *needing* to get on top of him. Moth groaned and lunged up to kiss me again, breathing hard as his legs tangled with mine and his long fingers clutched at my hair.

His hands shot down. When I felt them shoving up my shirt, I groaned and forced myself to break the kiss, panting against his mouth. My cock jerked in my pants, already aching hard.

"You okay?" I rasped. This was quickly escalating past what we'd done before. I didn't want to rush him.

Moth nodded, hands still impatiently rucking my shirt up. I sat back to let him pull it off, and his pale eyes flared as they roamed down my chest and stomach to my cock, visibly straining in my pants.

He lunged up to kiss me again. I followed him down as he lay back on the bed, hands sliding down my back before reaching between us to start fumbling with my button and fly. When long fingers wrapped around my prick through my underwear, I grunted against his mouth and flexed my hips.

Moth made a small sound before breaking the kiss, sucking in fast breaths.

"You... you're so hard." His voice was low and husky, despite the way his eyes told me he still couldn't quite believe I wanted him that much.

I let out a hoarse chuckle and kissed him again. "Yeah."

His fingers mapped out my length through the fabric. They were trembling when he slipped them past the band of my underwear, his breath

catching as he touched my bare cock for the first time.

I moaned, my dick jerking in his hand until he slid it lower and hesitantly cupped my balls. That made me shudder, his palm cool against my sensitive, overheated skin.

“Charlie.” Moth’s breathless voice against my mouth made me bite down on my lower lip as my cock bucked again. “Will you... Do you want to take these off?”

I chuckled and sat back, Moth’s hand slipping free of my underwear. “I’ll never turn down the chance to get naked.”

I hurriedly pulled off my boots and socks before standing up to take off my pants and underwear together. Before Moth could get self-conscious lying on the bed waiting for me—which I knew he would—I climbed back over him and leaned down to kiss him.

He let out a small groan into my mouth, pointed tongue thrusting as his hands slid down my back, hesitated at my hips, then continued lower to palm my ass. I moaned, trying not to grind my naked cock against the front of his jeans.

“You know, the morning after we fooled around, I made myself come again thinking about it,” I murmured, grinning against his mouth.

He went still, then huffed out a tiny laugh. I felt some of the anxious tension release from his body. “You jerked off thinking about yourself jerking off?”

My grin widened as I shook my head. “No, I jerked off thinking about you touching yourself on top of me.”

Moth’s breath caught, long fingers tightening on my ass. I kissed the corner of his mouth, then his cheek, before asking, “Do you... want to do that again? Or something else?”

When he froze, I pulled back to give him some space. His hands tightened even more on my ass, as if he thought I was going to get up.

“Uh...” His voice shook a little, eyes darting away. “I... Maybe you could...”

I waited patiently when he trailed off. I didn’t want to make suggestions, in case I made the wrong one and he felt too embarrassed to say no. I stayed leaning over him on straight arms, and his eyes slid down my body to snag on my cock again. When he licked his lips, it jerked.

“Maybe we could... do it to each other,” he managed to get out eventually, face flaring pink.

I grinned, anticipation tightening my gut. “Yeah? You’re... okay with me touching you?”

His throat bobbed as he swallowed, but he nodded.

Slowly, I sat back on my heels and rested my hands on his knees. “Do you want to leave your clothes on?”

Moth sat up on his elbows, pale eyes hungry as they roamed over my frame. I was pretty sure no one had ever looked at me like that—with that kind of intense desperation, even as it warred with the nerves tightening Moth’s features. I could see the desire to say yes to my question mixing with fearful determination to take the leap.

In the end, he caught the piercing in his lower lip between his teeth and shook his head.

“No, I...” His voice was husky with nerves, and he swallowed before continuing, “I’ll... take them off.”

“You don’t have to,” I said immediately, but he was already reaching for the hem of his shirt.

He yanked it off and dropped it on the floor beside the bed before letting out a hard breath and looking at me. His torso was pretty human-looking, except for the patches of pink, brown and faint purple scales, as well as the black ink that covered most of him. It looked kind of like letters, but in some totally alien language that my brain had no hope of deciphering.

I made sure the lust was plain on my face as I stared down at him. Moth grabbed my arm and pulled me back down to capture my lips. I could feel his heart pounding in his chest against mine, and I raised a hand to cup his cheek as our tongues glided together.

He didn’t stop kissing me as his shaking hands slipped between our bodies and fumbled with his fly. I knew he was distracting himself from what he was doing as he kissed me fervently, but before he could start tugging his pants down, I pulled back.

“Do you want to get under the covers?” I asked, kissing along his jaw.

I heard his relief-tinged sigh before he nodded. We quickly manoeuvred to shove the comforter down without moving apart too much, but before I pulled it back up over us, I grinned at him and asked, “Want me to take your boots off?”

He shot me a tiny, nervous smile. His voice was hoarse when he rasped, “Yeah. Thanks.”

But when I reached down to unlace them, he stiffened up and grabbed my arm. "Wait."

I went still, letting my arm drop. His face was agonised as he stared down at his boots.

"You can leave your socks on." I chuckled, stroking his knee. "But if you want to take your pants off..."

"Yeah." He cleared his throat and flushed deep pink. "Maybe... Maybe if you lay down for a second and I'll just... uh, get undressed."

"Sure." I climbed off and pulled the comforter up over both of us as I laid down on my back beside him.

Moth sat up, his back a curved, ink-covered shield as he tugged off his boots and socks, letting them drop to the floor, before lying back and shoving down his pants under the sheets. His face was still deeply flushed, and his throat bobbed repeatedly as he turned to face me once he was naked.

I shifted onto my side and leaned in, cupping his cheek as I kissed him. Moth's long fingers trailing down my side to my hip made me shiver, and then he was moving closer until he pressed against me. I couldn't feel any answering hardness from him against my stiff cock, but there was intense heat emanating from his body. And when he shifted closer, breaths ragged against my mouth, the underside of my shaft brushed over slickness, making me moan gutturally.

We couldn't stop kissing. Each kiss grew deeper and wetter, more frantic as I squeezed his side before sliding my arm up his back to grip his shoulder blade. I really wanted to feel his ass, remembering how tight and firm it had looked, but didn't want him to tense up if I got near his tail. Against my fingertips, I could feel the scarred symbols that ran down his spine.

Moth made a hungry noise into my mouth and shifted even closer, sliding his knee between my thighs. I shuddered when the back of his thigh pressed against my sac, slinging my leg over his hip.

He let out a little moan and rolled onto his back, taking me with him, our legs tangled and that wet heat rubbing against my thigh. My cock jerked against his hip, leaking pre-cum that smeared over his skin when I arched forward. The sheets pooled around our waists, and I could feel his chest heaving against mine as our tongues thrust together hungrily.

"F-fuck, can I touch you?" I begged, frantically kissing along his jaw and down his neck.

I knew I should have waited for him to tell me what he wanted, but I was too desperate for him. My cock strained, each brush against his hot skin making me shudder with pleasure. I was already sweating, the comforter trapping our combined body heat, but I wouldn't push it off.

Moth was panting, his fingers moving anxiously through my hair as I dropped wet, sucking kisses down his neck. I felt his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed, and I forced myself to lean back and look down at him.

"Or we can just do what we did before." My voice was raspy with lust, and I cleared my throat before smiling at him. "Won't take me long to come. I'm so hard it hurts."

Moth's pointed tongue came out to swipe his lips. "Yeah, m-me too."

At his words, I realised I could now feel a stiff, pulsing length against my thigh, as well as the wet heat that was short-circuiting my brain. I desperately wanted to look down and see him naked, but forced myself not to, instead dipping my head to kiss him softly.

"What do you want to do?" I asked in a murmur.

Moth's fingers slid over my shoulders before threading back through my hair, making me shiver with pleasure. He licked his lips again, the fear in his expression warring with desperate desire.

"I... w-want you to touch me." His voice shook with nerves.

I nodded and reached up to grip his wrist, bringing it down so I could kiss his palm. "Then you take my hand and show me where. We'll stay under the covers."

White teeth sank into his plump lower lip, catching the piercing there. His fingers clutched tightly at my hand, but he didn't move.

My gut plummeted when I saw his expression close off. He averted his eyes.

"That doesn't seem fair." His voice had turned wooden, but it was still unsteady. His jaw clenched with resolve before he looked back at me. "You should see... what you're getting into. And we can—We'll stop if you don't like it."

"Moth, you don't have to—"

"No." He released my hand and shoved his white hair back from his flushed face. "It's not fair to make you touch me when I'm not... normal, if you haven't even... seen."

Before I could protest that, he cringed slightly and added in a flat voice, "And I'd rather know if you're not into it before we—Before anything

else.”

“Moth, I’ve already told you,” I began hoarsely, “I want *you*, exactly as you are. You don’t need to do anything you’re not comfortable with. You don’t need to worry about—”

“Don’t talk me out of it,” he rushed out, squeezing his eyes shut. “Just... do it. You can look.”

I didn’t move, my heart thudding hard with indecision. I wasn’t at all worried about not liking anything I saw, but I *was* worried about Moth pushing himself too far and regretting it.

“Charlie, please,” he choked out when I still hadn’t moved, throwing an arm over his eyes. “Just do it. And then—If you’re not interested, just... don’t say anything. We’ll pretend this didn’t happen.”

My throat ached painfully at the idea of him thinking I’d just get up and leave in silence while he lay here completely exposed to another person for the first time in his life.

Moth’s quick, anxious breaths were loud in the silence of the room. I slowly moved back to sit on my heels, the sheets pooling behind me around his calves. He kept his arm slung over his eyes, but I could see how tightly clenched his jaw was.

I slid my gaze down his body. I’d already seen his chest and stomach—leanly muscled and beautiful, the patches of scales decorating his pale skin between the dark ink. But that wasn’t what he was worried about.

I let my eyes drift lower, my dick getting painfully hard again in a rush just from looking at his gorgeous body.

He did have a cock. It was long and slim, flushed pink at the head—which didn’t have a tiny slit at the very tip. Instead, it had a long slit down the underside of the mushroomed head that ended at a human-looking frenulum. It looked tender, and clear fluid was leaking from it and meandering down his length, which was already slick and glistening all over.

I realised why when I saw that his cock emerged from a slit on his pubic mound. It was wet and slightly swollen, flushed the same pink as the base and head of his cock. His tail lay between his legs against the mattress, the tip thumping with his agitation.

My gaze automatically slid back to his cock, my mouth watering at the sight of it. There were delicate veins winding up his length, but I could also see a faint texture all over it, almost like his scales, but a little smoother.

The scales on his skin grew heavier and more pronounced at the tops of his thighs and around his pubic mound. I couldn't see much of his legs, but I realised they were more inhuman than I'd first thought. They were almost completely covered in pink and brown scales, the skin rough when I gently rested my hands on them.

Moth jolted at the touch, his teeth sinking into his lower lip as he stayed silent. I swallowed hard, sliding my hands up to his narrow hips.

"You're perfect," I croaked, forcing myself not to dig my fingers in and hold him tighter. "I want to touch you so much, Moth. If you still want me to."

He made a hoarse sound in his throat and finally pulled his arm away, his eyes tight when he looked at me. My chest ached at the weak, fearful hope I could see in his gaze.

He licked his lips. "You... I want you to. If you want to."

I choked out a laugh and squeezed his hip before wrapping my hand around my cock. "Think it's pretty obvious that I *definitely* want to."

Moth's breath caught as his eyes darted down to watch me while I slid my fist up and down my cock a few times. I wanted him to see how painfully hard he made me. How much I wanted him. My pulse was hammering in my throat, skin prickling with sweat.

His own cock jerked, standing proud and flushed. More pre-cum pulsed from the slit, sliding down the length. I groaned and gripped the base of my shaft hard to keep from coming immediately.

"You're sure?" I forced myself to ask, my voice gravelly. "Tell me what you don't want. Is anything off-limits?"

Moth shook his head, sucking in a trembling breath. "N-no, nothing is... And yes. I'm sure."

Trying not to immediately fall on him like a slaving beast, I took a deep breath, released my cock, and leaned forward to kiss him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Charlie

As we kissed hungrily, I slid my palm up and down his side to try and relax him before touching him any lower.

Moth was trembling, but he moaned into my mouth and slid his hands down my back, palming my ass again. I felt his thighs spread open wider before he tugged me closer, pressing my hips into his. Our cocks slid together, his so hot and slick, making me groan with pleasure.

I let my hand trail down his side, digging my fingers into the curve of his ass and holding his thigh to me. When I slowly slid my hand around to his front, he tensed up, so I went still. But then he nodded, kissing me harder. His fingers bit into my ass cheeks, spreading them a little and making me moan as my hole clenched. I wondered if he'd be into any ass-play, but we had to get over this hurdle first.

When I curled my fingers around his cock, Moth let out a shuddering breath against my mouth.

"Okay?" I murmured, sliding my fist up and down slowly.

He nodded, then let out a ragged gasp when my thumb stroked over the long slit on the underside of his cockhead. It was so slick, fluid pulsing from it in little bursts. My mouth watered as I wondered what he tasted like.

I needed to find out. I needed him to know how desirable he was. Releasing him briefly, I lifted my hand and sucked the pre-cum off my thumb, my cock jerking when Moth let out a shaky breath as he watched me, his pale eyes growing heavy-lidded.

"Fuck, you're so hot," I rasped before kissing him again as my hand burrowed back between our bodies to grasp his cock.

I could feel it throbbing against my palm as I jerked him off, our tongues winding together and Moth's body twitching as he panted against my mouth. The smooth but rippled texture under my fingers was making my cock leak profusely, and I kept returning to the head to slide my thumb up and down the slit because it made Moth's thighs tremble and his hips flex.

I was already addicted to stroking his cock, but I didn't want him to think I was ignoring the other parts of him that weren't as human. I forced myself to let go, even though I wanted to keep stroking him, to trail my hand down and run my fingers over his slit. I groaned at the slippery heat of it even as I concentrated on his reaction, making sure I wasn't pushing him too far.

Moth choked out a groan, his thighs jerking open wider. I couldn't keep from tilting my head down so I could watch myself touch him, moaning through clenched teeth at the sight of my fingers sliding over him, the iron bar of his cock rubbing against the heel of my hand and inner wrist.

My own dick was dripping with need, hovering just inches above his. I jerked down, the singular need to taste him and feel all of him against my tongue overriding everything as I started frantically kissing down his neck and chest.

I forced myself to stop when I reached a tiny pink nipple, swirling my tongue around it and hearing Moth's gasp from above.

"Can I use my mouth on you?" I sounded like I'd been eating gravel. My fingers were coated when I slid them back up his shaft.

Moth's breath shuddered out of him. "You—y-you want to?"

"Fuck yes," I groaned, moving to his other nipple and sucking feverishly. "If you want me to. It's okay if you don't."

"N-no, I..." Moth's cock twitched in my hand, his fingers threading through my hair. "I want you to. I've never..."

I knew he'd never experienced any of this before. Being able to be the one who got to show him how good it could feel was driving me wild, making my free hand move frantically over his body—sliding down his scaly thigh, then back up over his hip to stroke his tight stomach.

"If you want me to stop, just say so." I was already kissing my way down his stomach, too desperate to go as slow as I had been.

Moth was trembling uncontrollably, his breaths fast and ragged, but his fingers tightened in my hair when I tilted my head down. I licked over his leaking cockslit before taking the head into my mouth in a wet, sucking kiss, groaning at the taste of him. He sucked in a breath so fast he nearly choked, body shuddering and fresh pre-cum pulsing out.

"Fuck," I muttered before sliding my tongue down the underside of his cock.

Wrapping my arms around his thighs, I gently spread them wider as I licked over his slit, feeling the heat of it against my tongue. Moth let out a strangled sound and jerked his thighs open even more, his body shaking as I slicked the flat of my tongue over him, the underside of his cock rubbing against my nose.

His wetness covered my mouth and chin. All I could taste and smell and feel was him, and it was addictive. I swiped my tongue over each side of his slit, licking up the wetness and feeling the rougher scales that fanned out onto his inner thighs.

“Oh sh-sh-shit.” Moth’s voice was hoarse and breathless, his fingers clenching even tighter in my hair.

I slid my tongue back up the length of his cock, moaning at his taste and how fucking hard he was. I could feel him throbbing. When I reached the head, I wrapped my fingers around the slick base and squeezed, trailing my thumb down to brush over where it emerged from his slit.

Moth let out a choked sound, his hips straining up. I glanced up to make sure he was still alright, my eyes growing heavy when I saw the intense pleasure tightening his beautiful features. I kissed the tip of his cock, holding his gaze as I licked over the slit that ran down the underside of his cockhead.

Even more pre-cum was leaking in heavy pulses, trailing down his length until I licked it up. When I stroked the pointed tip of my tongue up the slit at the head, dipping it just inside, Moth’s lips fell open with a ragged gasp.

His body shook. His hands clutched my hair tighter, and when I slid my fist up and down his cock once as I lapped at the head, his hips strained up off the bed.

Hot cum shot from his cockslit in a long stream and covered the lower half of my face as he choked out a low moan. I laughed softly through a groan and sucked the head into my mouth to catch the last spurts, moaning at the taste of him. His cock throbbed beneath my fingers, but when it finally stopped shooting, I heard him let out a miserable sound.

“Fuck, sorry,” he said shakily.

I glanced up to see him covering his flushed face with a hand, the other leaving my hair to grip the sheets in a tight fist.

“What?” I blinked up at him, licking my lips when cum rolled down my cheek and hit the corner of my mouth. “You’re sorry? Why?”

“Because I...” Moth looked down at me and flushed pink again, averting his eyes quickly. “I should have warned you.” He twisted around to grab his shirt off the floor, holding it out to me. “Clean up with this.”

I laughed and sat up, taking the shirt to drop it back on the floor. “You think I’d be annoyed that you came on my face? That was so hot.”

To reiterate my point, I brushed the cum on my chin away with my thumb and sucked it into my mouth. Moth’s eyes flared as he watched me, still breathing hard.

I wiped the rest away with my arm so I could lean forward and kiss him. My aching cock brushed against his, and I moaned into his mouth as our tongues slid together. Moth kissed me back desperately, wrapping his arms around my neck.

“You taste real good, Moth,” I murmured against his mouth, grinning when he sucked in a shaky breath.

“I can’t believe I... came so fast,” he muttered, embarrassed.

“So?” I kissed down his neck and chest, then lower, my mouth watering when I saw his cock was still out and hard, pink and glistening.

“Are you too sensitive, or do you want to keep going?” I asked in a low murmur as I stroked his slippery length in my fist, my own cock jerking when Moth’s lips parted around a quick inhale.

“Keep going,” he croaked immediately, then licked his lips. “But I... I want to touch you too.”

“We can worry about me in a minute,” I rasped, already lowering my head to suck him into my mouth.

I slid my fist down and off his cock to trail a finger over his slit. It was so wet, and when I dipped the tip of my finger inside, I moaned at how burning hot he was. I slid my finger deeper, groaning gutturally around his cock when he squeezed tight around it as he sucked in a breath.

I could feel the root of his cock inside, and I slid the pad of my finger over it, mapping its length, until Moth choked out a hard groan and stiffened.

I immediately went still, about to pull back, but he shuddered and moaned, “Th-there.”

My cock pulsed between my legs. I ran my finger over him again, and just as I felt a tiny, raised bump, he shouted in pleasure and splayed his trembling thighs wider.

“Oh fuck, there,” he panted, fingers clenching tight in my hair. “Oh shit —”

He let out a long, loud groan. I glanced up in time to see his head craning back, his chest heaving. And then he seemed to lose complete control.

One hand left my hair to reach up and splay over the headboard so he could push himself down, fucking himself on my finger. His cock pulsed in my mouth, still leaking pre-cum in a continuous flow.

I quickly slid a second finger in to join the first and started fucking him with them fast, matching the frantic pace of his hips. He was moaning with every hard breath, getting louder and louder. I groaned desperately and slid my mouth up his cock to tongue the head, frantically lapping at the slit.

The slick sound of my fingers inside him almost made me come, my cock bucking hungrily in the air. Shit, he was going *wild*, like he’d finally released all the years of pent-up need.

“F-fuck. Charlie—”

I moaned at the sound of my name in Moth’s husky, pleasure-drenched voice. Never slowing my pumping fingers, I lifted my mouth from his cock to stare up at him.

“Are you gonna come again for me, Moth?” I rasped, then dipped my head to slide my tongue over his weeping slit.

“Oh fuck,” he practically sobbed, his hips’ movements turning jerky as his cock visibly throbbed.

I felt him clench up around my fingers, that little bump bulging as his body stiffened. I stroked it faster and sucked his cock back into my mouth. Moth’s back arched as he let out an anguished shout, and I felt a flood of fresh wetness coat my fingers just before his cock flexed in my mouth and started gushing long streams of cum.

I moaned gutturally around him, sucking and sliding my fingertips over that spot to prolong his orgasm for as long as possible. He shook violently, letting out harsh, hoarse sounds until his body finally relaxed and his cock stopped firing.

He was trembling like a leaf as he sucked in shaky breaths, palm finally leaving the headboard and his hips sinking back onto the mattress. I slid my fingers out slowly and released his cock, but couldn’t stop myself from nuzzling down its length.

I turned my head to kiss his trembling thigh as I glanced up at him. “You okay, baby?”

Moth finally raised his head, biting his lip as he stared down at me with dazed eyes. My gut shrivelled up into a painful knot and my erection deflated instantly when I saw them go glassy.

I sat up quickly when his chin trembled, and then I was scrambling up the bed as he let out a weak sob.

“Fuck, Moth—”

He covered his face with both hands and wept—hard, gut-wrenching sobs that made my own eyes water. I knelt beside him, desperate to comfort him but not knowing if that was what he wanted.

“I’m sorry,” I croaked, my voice shaking. “I’m so sorry, Moth—”

“N-no,” he got out, his voice thick and muffled behind his hands. “I’m—I d-don’t—Fuck, I’m sorry.”

He sobbed again but turned toward me, so I quickly lay down beside him, being careful not to touch him. But then he buried his face in my chest and wrapped his arm around me tight, weeping uncontrollably against my skin.

I tentatively ran my fingers through his hair, my chest aching. Kissing the top of his head, I kept my nose pressed there to breathe in his scent.

“I’m s-sorry,” he got out. “I d-don’t know w-why I’m c-crying.”

But I did. He’d finally let himself be vulnerable with someone for the first time in his life. He’d forced himself to push aside all his fears and insecurities about his body and let someone touch him. See him.

I desperately hoped he wasn’t regretting it. Not because it would mean that this would all stop, but because I couldn’t bear the thought of Moth thinking back on this and despising it—despising letting me touch him. I’d carry the guilt of it for the rest of my life if he did.

It took a long time for him to calm down. When he finally did, I could feel his body tensing before he pulled back and sat up, roughly scrubbing at his face.

“Jesus, I’m the worst... fuck buddy in existence.” His face was flushed and tear streaked as he looked down at his hands, back hunched like a shield.

“No, you’re not,” I said hoarsely, sitting up and resting my palm on his back.

“Yeah?” he shot back, his voice harsh as he reached down for his pants and shoved them on with jerky movements beneath the covers. “You had any other hook-ups who started fucking crying the moment they got off?”

He got out of bed and snatched up his shirt, pulling it on as he left the room without another word. I sat there in the bed not knowing what to do. I wanted to go after him and tell him it didn’t matter, but he was clearly embarrassed and wanted to be alone.

Should I go after him anyway? I shoved an agitated hand through my hair and got up to get dressed, but sat down on the end of the bed instead of going out there. I felt like shit. I’d made him cry. This had been such a bad idea. I should have put a stop to it the moment I realised he’d never even kissed someone.

Guilt churned in my gut, making me flinch and stand up. I wiped my face, feeling the stubble on my cheeks scratch my fingers. Grabbing the razor and soap from my bag, I went into the bathroom to shave in the hopes that it would calm me down.

By the time I was done, Moth still hadn’t reappeared, and I felt even worse. I paced the room, then stopped when I spotted Moth’s socks and boots on the floor. He was probably stressing about having to walk back in here with his feet visible.

Deciding I’d waited long enough, I picked them up, shouldered my bag and crossed the room to open the door. I couldn’t hear him moving around, and fear made me clench up as I wondered if he’d vanished again. I made sure my footsteps were audible as I went down the stairs, so he’d know I was coming if he *was* still here.

I found him in the living room, sitting cross-legged with his back against the front of the couch. My shoulders sagged with relief at the sight of him, even as he quickly jerked his feet in to tuck them under his legs so they were hidden.

He didn’t say anything, so I cautiously crossed the room and placed his boots and socks next to him before straightening up.

“I’ll make us some dinner,” I said, clutching the strap of my backpack as I turned and headed into the kitchen.

By “make us some dinner” I meant finding bowls and dumping cold canned spaghetti into them. Even once our dinners were ready, I clattered around for a while longer just in case he needed more time, looking through the cupboards and pretending I couldn’t find forks.

I tried not to tense up when I heard him slowly walk into the kitchen. Before turning from the counter, I fixed a smile on my face and picked up the bowls.

“Sorry, I’m a terrible cook,” I said jokingly as I carried them to the table and sat down.

Moth didn’t move at first, just stood there not saying anything. I didn’t look at him as I set out his bowl and fork at the seat opposite in case he didn’t want to sit next to me. I started eating even though I wasn’t hungry. My gut still roiled with guilt.

Eventually he sat down opposite me and stared down at his bowl.

“I’m sorry,” he croaked after long minutes of silence.

I shook my head, not looking up as I said, “You have nothing to be sorry for. *I’m* sorry. I should have realised it was... too much.”

“No,” he blurted. I warily glanced up to see his face was bright pink, but he forced the words out. “I loved it. What we—What you did. I want to do it again. I don’t know why I...”

He trailed off and rubbed his face anxiously, then finally picked up his fork and shoved in a mouthful of cold spaghetti. Intense relief bloomed at hearing him say he’d loved it. And if he wanted to do it again, hopefully that meant he didn’t regret it.

I cleared my throat, toying with my food. “It’s always overwhelming, the first time you have sex with someone. There’s nothing wrong with having an emotional reaction to it.”

“But I ruined it,” he said miserably. “You didn’t even get to...”

My mouth quirked up. “So? It’s not a trade. Trust me, Moth, I loved it. You didn’t ruin anything.” I hesitated before asking, “Can I sit next to you? Or do you want to be left alone tonight?”

“No, I’m—Yeah.” He swallowed, face still flushed. “That’s fine. You can.”

That wasn’t the most coherent answer, but I slowly stood up and carried my bowl to the seat next to him. Going with my gut instinct, I leaned over and gave his cheek a quick kiss before I carried on eating.

Moth let out a quiet breath and started eating again too. After a few minutes, I felt his free hand creep cautiously onto my leg beneath the table and his fingers threaded through mine.

I swallowed, my chest aching, but I didn’t comment on it in case it embarrassed him. I squeezed his hand back, holding on tight as we finished

eating in silence.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Charlie

I knew that what I felt for Moth was already growing from casual physical attraction to something deeper. How could it not, after witnessing his intense emotional reaction to us having sex? Knowing why he'd had it—knowing how he felt about himself, and what it must have taken to gather up the courage to be that vulnerable with me. With anyone.

The realisation terrified me. I didn't know what to do about it. He was in love with someone else, for fuck's sake. We'd both gone into this with the understanding that it would be a casual thing—even though it didn't feel all that casual.

This wasn't going to be easy and relaxed fucking to take the edge off, but that didn't mean I wanted to put an end to it. I still wanted Moth fiercely, but it was more than just sexual gratification. I wanted him to see how desirable he was. How there was someone who wanted him just as he was, even if he didn't want anything more with me.

Despite holding my hand throughout dinner, he closed himself off after that. When we finished eating, he stood up and cleared away our bowls, mumbling a thanks for dinner before retreating into the living room.

I stayed at the table for a while, not sure what to do. I'd picked up a pack of cards in Chicago and spent several nights in our crappy rooms in the city teaching Moth how to play poker, but I didn't think he'd be up for that tonight.

There wasn't much else to do. In the end, I wandered into the living room and saw that he'd retrieved his bag from the bedroom and was sitting on the floor in front of the couch, carefully sharpening his sword. His head was bent, and I saw his shoulders stiffen when he realised I was in the doorway, but he didn't look up.

Okay, he didn't want me near him. I tried to ignore the pang of hurt and said, "I'm beat. Gonna take a shower and go to bed."

It was just getting dark, but I knew Moth had some kind of night vision. He didn't seem to be worried about hurting himself as the room grew dim,

and I knew he had his flashlight with fresh batteries in his bag if he needed it.

“Goodnight,” I croaked, heading up the stairs.

I heard him mumble it back to me, and I didn’t know what to feel as I stripped down and got under the freezing shower. He’d said he loved what we’d done, and he wanted to do it again, but he’d retreated inside himself after dinner. Maybe he just needed time to process everything. I wouldn’t push him—I wouldn’t bring it up until he did.

The room was warm enough that I dressed only in fresh boxer briefs before slipping into the bed. The sheets smelled like Moth, and my dick started hardening immediately, my balls feeling full and tender. But I ignored it, shifting onto my side and forcing my eyes shut.

I woke when I felt the bed dip behind me. The room was pitch black, the air cooler against my exposed shoulder, making me shiver.

My gut lurched with pleasure when I felt Moth press up against my back, a sleeve-covered arm reaching over to wrap around my chest. I shivered again, not from the cold this time, when warm lips pressed against my bare shoulder blade.

I didn’t move, even as I bit my lip with the desperate urge to turn around and kiss him, or just hug him close. I didn’t know if he knew I was awake or not, and I didn’t want to make him feel embarrassed if he thought I was still asleep.

But then he murmured, “Charlie,” in a low, hoarse voice. I let out a breath and let him tug me onto my back when his hand slipped up to my shoulder and urged me around.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled before kissing me hard, making my insides swoop. His tongue slicked into my mouth urgently, and his hands were already sliding down my body to tug at my boxer briefs.

“Moth,” I said shakily, quickly reaching down to still his hands, even as my dick hardened in a painful rush. “You don’t have to do anything.”

“I want to,” he rasped between kisses down my chin and throat, making my breath hitch.

God, I wanted him to touch me so much, but not out of any sense of obligation. I believed that he wanted to, but I knew an edge of guilt would

be guiding his actions right now. I shook my head.

"I want you so bad, Moth, but I can wait." I raised his hands and kissed his knuckles. "It's been an intense evening. We don't have to rush."

He stilled, and I could feel him closing back in on himself, so I reached for his face in the dark and pulled him closer to kiss him.

"I don't want you to regret anything," I admitted in a mumble, feeling his shallow breaths against my chin. He swallowed and shook his head.

"I don't. I wouldn't, Charlie. I just..." He made a small sound in his throat and rested his palm on my chest, over my thudding heart. "You just wanted a casual thing and I've turned it into this... big fucking drama. I'm making everything difficult."

"You're not," I said immediately, then pressed my lips to his cheek so he could feel my smile. "I'm an adult, Moth. I can wait."

"But you... you only asked me for this because you wanted to fuck."

I chuckled, twining my fingers through his on my chest. "And we are. I didn't expect you to be at my beck and call, ready to fuck the moment I snap my fingers. We're only doing this if we're both enjoying it, Moth."

I hesitated, then moved closer and wrapped my arm around him, hugging him close as I pressed my lips into his shoulder. I didn't know if he'd want me to bring it up, but I said, "I know how difficult it must have been to let yourself be that vulnerable with me. I'm... It means a lot that you trust me enough. You're really brave, Moth."

I kissed his shoulder again as he let out a humourless snort.

"So brave that I waited until I was twenty-five before... doing anything."

I frowned and shook my head. "You're not on anyone else's schedule. Who cares what age you are when you decide you want to start having sex?"

I felt him swallow as he burrowed closer, fingers digging into my back.

"It's not that I... haven't wanted sex," he said hoarsely. "But I haven't— There hasn't been... I know how different I look."

I lifted my head and kissed him, sucking his lower lip into my mouth and swiping my tongue over his piercing.

"I love every part of you," I told him. "You're perfect."

"God, Charlie." He let out a shaky breath and rested his forehead against mine, fingers trailing down my back to fiddle with the band of my underwear.

“What?” I murmured, tilting my head to kiss his cheek. He shook his head.

“You’re just...” He buried his face in my neck, pressing his lips there. “Thank you. I’m sorry I was such an asshole at the beginning.”

I chuckled and threaded my fingers through his hair, damp from a recent shower. “Sorry I was so annoying.”

“You weren’t.” His voice was muffled against my neck. “I just hate everyone.” He was silent for a moment, before he croaked, “I don’t hate you.”

My throat closed up. *I don’t hate you either. I like you, Moth. I want you. Do you want me back? For more than just sex? Are you still in love with Ghost?*

The thoughts were painful, and I didn’t voice any of them. Instead, I just pressed a kiss to his hair and closed my eyes, still holding him close to me as we drifted off to sleep.

But when I woke up in the morning, he was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Charlie

At first, I thought he'd just woken up before me, which was a regular occurrence. I stretched in the bed, feeling well rested, knowing I'd slept with Moth's arms around me all night.

The mattress was still warm beside me, but as I sat up, I noticed Moth's boots were on the floor beside the bed. His bag and sword rested against the nightstand, and his coat was draped over the dresser.

The house was completely silent.

Foreboding settled in the pit of my stomach as I got out of bed and hurriedly dressed.

"Moth?" I called, checking the bathroom before stepping into the hall. I looked in every room before thumping down the stairs, panic making my hairline bead with sweat.

"Moth?" I called again, even after I'd checked every room downstairs. I stood frozen in the living room for a minute, eyes darting to the front door. Had he gone outside?

Or had he vanished again?

I raced back upstairs to grab my gun, peering out the bedroom window to see if I could spot him—or any monsters or raiders—before I went outside. The street was quiet, mist still curling low on the ice-crusted, overgrown grass of the houses' front lawns as the sun rose.

My heart was pounding as I gripped my gun and stepped outside, shivering in the cold morning air. It had snowed again, but only lightly. A white dusting covered the ground and crunched under my boots as I slowly walked down the porch steps.

I didn't want to call for him out here, in case it attracted anything else lurking nearby. I made my way around the perimeter of the house, scanning the ground for any faint footprints in the dusting of snow.

There was nothing.

I could feel my pulse racing in my throat as I went back inside, once again standing like a statue in the middle of the living room. What the fuck

was I supposed to do? My stomach was twisted up into a tight knot, a part of me wondering if he had just left me here.

But I didn't think so. Deep down, I knew he wouldn't do that. Even at the beginning when he'd made it clear he didn't want me with him, I knew he would never have just fucked off and left me out here on my own. He wasn't like that. Besides, all his stuff was still here. His boots and coat and sword. He wouldn't have left without them.

He'd vanished again. The same thing that had happened at the prison—here one second and gone the next. But *how*? And where had he gone? Could he... teleport? I'd never heard of monsters being able to do that, but what did I know? There were hundreds of different types of monsters out here, and it wasn't like they happily shared their secrets when they came across humans—especially those in the military.

He'd said at the prison that it might happen again. That he might have to leave again. He'd also said that he would come back, and I was pretty sure he'd reappeared in the snow in the exact spot he'd vanished from.

Trying to calm down, I went back upstairs and gathered all his stuff onto the bed, then sat down to wait. Within seconds I was back up and pacing, wondering if I was doing the right thing. What if he was somewhere close? What if he was in trouble? I'd got the feeling before that whatever was happening to him was bad. What if he needed my help? Someone might have been hurting him, and I was just sitting here like a fucking chump.

But if I left, he might not be able to find me when he did come back. If he reappeared in the house, I wanted to be here.

Guilt made me sink back down onto the edge of the bed and rub my face with my hands. I should have pushed him into telling me more. I should have made him talk to me about whatever was happening, instead of ignoring it once he'd relaxed again, not wanting to rock the boat—and not wanting to think about him vanishing in an instant.

I waited for hours, periodically walking around the rest of the house and peering outside in case he reappeared somewhere else. Eventually the sun got high in the sky, before thick grey clouds blocked it out. I couldn't bring myself to eat—too tense with stress. And with every hour that passed I worried that I was making the wrong decision by waiting here for him.

I was doing another sweep downstairs when I heard a thud above my head. My heart spasming, I froze for a second before racing up the stairs, almost tripping in my haste.

When I burst into the bedroom, Moth was kneeling in the centre of the bed. His hair was dishevelled, and his left cheekbone was red and swelling, forcing his eye partially shut. He looked badly shaken, and as his wild, dazed eyes turned to me, he sniffed as blood trickled from his nose.

“Fuck.” I dumped my gun and strode toward him, wrapping him tight in my arms as I buried my face in his neck. My eyes burned with a mixture of pure relief and fury at seeing that someone had hurt him.

He was stiff and trembling in my arms at first, but after a few seconds his body sagged as he clutched at me and tipped his head onto my shoulder.

“I’m sorry.” His voice shook, and I pulled back to gently clasp his face and assess his injuries. My jaw clenched hard.

“Who hurt you?”

His cheekbone was still swelling, and he quickly reached up to swipe at the blood dripping from his nose.

“What happened, Moth?” I stared at him hard even as he kept his eyes lowered. “Please tell me what’s going on. I want to help you.”

“You can’t,” he mumbled, voice thick.

“Please tell me,” I repeated. “I was so worried. I don’t care if it’s something bad, Moth—if you’re involved in something. Please just tell me why you keep vanishing into thin air. Why you’re hurt.”

He pulled back and slid to the edge of the bed, reaching down for his boots. His back hunched as he tugged them on, and I quickly scanned him to see if there was blood anywhere else—if he was injured under his clothes.

“It’s... my progenitor,” he said quietly as he laced up his boots. I stared at the back of his head.

“Your—” I tried to think of what the unfamiliar word meant. “You mean your... parent?”

He gave a slight nod, reaching back for his coat on the bed. “The symbols down my back—they let them summon me.”

I stiffened. The symbols that had been scarred into his skin down the length of his spine. My eyes darted to his swelling cheekbone, rage making my hands clench into fists.

“Your parent did that to you? Hurt you?”

He shook his head. "Not them. They have... guards."

My voice was tight with anger when I asked, "Why did they hurt you?"

Moth exhaled and rested his elbows on his thighs, leaning forward to scrub his face and hissing with pain from the action.

"They—they want me to do something. I refused."

I slowly sat down beside him on the edge of the bed, wanting to reach over and take his hand but not sure if he wanted to be touched. "What do they want you to do?"

He swallowed. I could see his pulse hammering in his throat.

"They're... They have a... group out here. In the Wastes. They want me to find someone who's gone missing."

"A group?" I frowned. "What kind of group?"

Moth looked at me, his gaze despairing and his left eye almost completely swollen shut now. My throat ached at the sight.

"You'll hate me if I tell you."

My brows furrowed. "No I won't."

I slid off the bed to kneel between his legs, resting my forearms on his thighs to clasp his waist beneath his coat.

"I won't, Moth," I said, staring up at him. "You can't control what your parent does. Why would I hate you for it?"

"Because it's—it's terrible." He looked down, sniffing and reaching up to wipe away more blood that trickled from his nose. "They've been trying to get me involved since they found me when I was a teenager."

"And you've obviously refused." I squeezed his waist gently. "So why would I hate you for whatever they're doing?"

He let out a slow breath and rested his hands on my arms, long fingers worrying the fabric of my sleeve.

"They... they run a cult out here," he said quietly, making me go totally still.

A cult? What the fuck?

"Wow." I blinked, staring at the centre of Moth's shirt. There was a tiny spot of blood from his nose staining the fabric. "And they want you to be a part of it? This is... your monster parent, right?"

A monster cult, somewhere out in the Wastes. That was wild, but I believed it. I believed him.

He nodded, then gripped my arms tight as he looked at me fearfully.

“But it’s not just—It’s really bad, Charlie,” he croaked. “They... they eat people.”

I stared up at him, then forced myself to give him a tiny smile even as my gut roiled. “Moth, I know there are a lot of monsters who eat people when they have the chance. It’s... it’s not nice, but that doesn’t mean—”

“No, it’s not monsters,” he said hoarsely. “My progenitor is the... ruler, but their followers are people. Humans who think my progenitor is a god or prophet or something. They call themselves the Herald. And they... they’ve made all the humans become cannibals. They eat the people who don’t want to join.”

Jesus.

“Okay, that’s not... great,” I rasped, stroking Moth’s waist again to soothe him, because he looked anguished—like his parent’s sick actions were somehow on him. “But... there are probably cannibals out here anyway, Moth. Some raider camps are poorly made and badly run. I’ve seen them. And people... people get desperate. Whatever your parent is doing, that doesn’t reflect on you. It’s not your fault.”

“It’s still disgusting,” he mumbled, picking at my sleeve, “what they’re doing. Preying on desperate people. And I’m still related to them.”

“So?” I sat back on my heels and slid my hands down his thighs because my legs were starting to ache from kneeling. “No one can control the family they’re born into.”

When he didn’t say anything to that, I hesitantly asked, “Did they... Did you grow up with them? I figured your mom isn’t around anymore.”

Moth shook his head. “She died giving birth to me, I think. I was in care at first, until the monsters came when I was five. Um... I moved between families a lot because—because no one knew what was wrong with me and no one wanted to deal with it.”

I guessed he was referring to the differences in his body. Rage spiked again, making my fingers flex against his thighs. “There’s nothing wrong with you, Moth.”

“The couple looking after me when the monsters came left me behind, but another group of humans found me and took me to a city.”

They’d *left him behind*? When he was fucking *five*? I was breathing hard through my nose as I stayed quiet, letting him speak.

“Even then people could tell there was something wrong with me.” He rubbed the uninjured side of his face. “So they avoided me, and I, uh... I

lived in that city until I was twelve, then left for the Wastes.”

“You—” I swallowed, my voice trembling. “Did you live... in an orphanage in the city?”

He shook his head, still not looking at me. My eyes burned. He’d lived on the streets as a tiny kid. No wonder he hated everyone—no wonder he was so closed off and prickly. He’d been fending for himself since he was just a little boy.

He’d come out into the Wastes alone when he was *twelve*. How the fuck had he survived?

“How did your progenitor find you?” I asked hoarsely.

He let out a self-deprecating huff. “Because I was a fucking idiot. One of their missionaries found me one day. Promised me a safe place to live with hot food and other people, so I went with them. I was thirteen and I’d... I was barely surviving out here.”

Hot food. My stomach lurched as I thought about what that hot food would have been made from. It all sounded so insidious—evil. Finding a desperate, lonely kid out here and luring him away with the false promise of safety and no longer being all alone in the world.

“When I got there, the Herald recognised me as their offspring. And I... I recognised them too, even though I’d never seen them before. In a way, it... kind of helped.” Moth gave a weak shrug. “I’d always known I was different—that there was something wrong with me—but I’d never understood why. I’d started suspecting when a few monsters I came across in the Wastes called me a *half-breed*, but the Herald... confirmed that I was half monster.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” I croaked again.

“They weren’t happy to see me,” Moth continued as if I hadn’t spoken, seeming unable to stop now he’d started talking about it. His voice was painfully flat. “They said I was an abomination to their kind, and the only way to make myself worthy was to join their cult.”

“You’re not a fucking abomination,” I seethed. “That’s bullshit. How can they say that when *they* played a part in making you?”

“When I refused to join, they punished me.”

Rage boiled up again, my teeth clenching so hard it felt like they would crack. “How?”

Moth gestured at his arms. “Their protectors held me down while they tattooed this on me. It’s the salyik language. I don’t know exactly what it

says because I can't... I can't read it, but my progenitor told me it warns all other salyiks that I'm a half-breed and shouldn't be welcomed. I guess they thought that once I knew what I was, I might have tried going to the monster world to find others. So they wanted to make sure I couldn't."

"What a fucking piece of shit," I burst out before I could stop myself.

God, poor Moth. He'd probably felt hopeful when he'd found his monster parent, until he realised what they were doing and that they didn't want him anyway. He'd probably thought that he'd finally found his place in the world, only for them to ensure he never had anywhere or anyone.

I wanted to kill them. Not even for running a damn cannibal cult. Just for what they'd done to Moth.

"If they—" I didn't want to say *didn't want you*, because it sounded so hurtful. "If they thought that, why did they give you the marks so they could summon you? Does that mean they can literally summon you from wherever you are to them?"

He nodded. "They still tried to get me involved for a long time. They thought I could be useful by bringing new people into the cult. When I still refused, they locked me up for a while." His voice was still wooden, but it shook a little when he continued. "When I kept screaming and shouting for them to let me out, they, uhh... they pierced my lips and tongue and sewed my mouth shut."

Jesus fucking Christ. I stared up at him, swallowing around the hard lump in my throat. The metal rings in his lips glinted, and he toyed with the lower one absentmindedly as he spoke.

"I nearly died because they didn't feed me or give me water for a while." He cringed. "I try not to think about what I had to eat while I was there. I'm hoping it wasn't... anything that the followers ate, because I hadn't agreed to join."

Fuck. He'd nearly been starved to death, then potentially forced to eat human flesh. I didn't know how much more I could hear.

"They gave me the summoning marks, pulled the wire out of my mouth and told me to get out of their sight. That they couldn't stand to look at me because I was worthless." Moth lowered his hand, letting it fall on top of mine where it still gripped his thigh. "But they call me back sometimes to try and get me involved. To try and get me to find people to join or feed the cult, or... do other things."

“How can we stop it?” I asked, wanting desperately to fix this for him. To stop him from ever having to see his awful parent again. “Is there a way to stop them being able to summon you?”

Moth let out a tiny breath. “I’ve wondered if cutting out the marks could do it. But they’re on my spine and I’ve never had anyone who could...” He stopped and shook his head. “But I don’t think it would work anyway. All their followers have a mark burned into their skin, and it stops them being able to leave. I’ve seen some of them cut it out and they still couldn’t get away.”

“So they’re not even willing followers?”

“Some of them are. But when people are taken there, they’re given the choice between joining or being roasted alive for the congregation to eat. So, a lot of them choose to join. I guess I’m lucky the Herald never had me burned alive for refusing.”

I nearly choked on an incredulous breath. The fact that his parent hadn’t roasted him alive and fucking eaten him was not *lucky*. And the fact that he thought it was—that he saw that as a positive—was utterly heartbreaking.

“Could you kill them?” I forced myself to ask, my voice hard. I hated the thought of Moth’s life not really being his own—even though his progenitor didn’t even fucking want him. He must have constantly worried about being summoned, if it could happen at any moment. No wonder he was tense most of the time.

Moth’s right eye widened at the question as it darted to me, the left swollen shut.

“I... I don’t know,” he admitted shakily. “But even... Their protectors would kill me before I could. They’re big. And really strong.”

“Fuck,” I muttered, rubbing my face roughly.

Moth’s long, tattooed fingers curled around my wrist and pulled my hand away.

“It’s okay, Charlie.” He gave me a tiny smile. “I feel better for telling you. I’ve never... Thank you for understanding.”

I couldn’t stop myself from leaning up and cupping the uninjured side of his face, giving him a gentle kiss, uncaring of the blood smeared under his nose. “I want to help you.”

“You can’t.” Another tiny, defeated smile. “But it’s okay. I can handle a few punches to the face. I’m still not going to do what they want.”

But what if it escalated? What if the longer he refused to find whoever they wanted him to, the more they hurt him—worse and worse until he either had no choice but to obey or they killed him?

Terror flooded me, making my fingers bite into his thighs as I stared up at him.

“Really, Charlie.” Moth hesitated, then clasped my face and leaned down to kiss me. “It’s okay. And if it... If they summon me again, just wait for me. They’ll send me back. I’m not going to leave you out here. And if you—if you have to keep moving, I’ll find you. I promise.”

“Moth.” I bit my lip, eyes burning again. I nodded. “I’ll wait. But I still... We’ll try and think of something, okay?”

I took his hand and kissed the back of it, over the tattoos that his parent had covered him with to make him a pariah to his kind. The urge to kill them flared again, but I forced it back.

Moth let out a hard breath and tried to give me another smile. “It might not matter soon, anyway. If we’re infected with parasites, we’ll be dead in a few days, right?”

Fear clutched at my insides. He was right. I didn’t feel sick, but I had no idea what we should really be experiencing if we were infected. I had no true frame of reference except for what Hunter had told me, and that one person in the city I’d noticed throwing up. Which meant they’d been moments from death as I’d watched them.

And if only one of us was infected, that was an even more terrifying thought. What if I had to watch Moth get sick and weak and die an awful death? Or what if I died and he was still stuck being summoned against his will by his parent and hurt when he didn’t do what they wanted? I knew I was the only person he’d ever told. Would he ever tell anyone else? Would anyone else try to help him?

My legs were dead from kneeling for so long, but I still didn’t stand up. I slid my arms around his waist and rested my head on his chest, breathing in his scent and hoping that we were both still alive in a week.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Charlie

We kept heading toward the coast.

Moth never mentioned feeling sick, and he didn't vanish again in the days that followed. His face was healing faster than normal thanks to his monster biology, but it was still a little swollen, the skin on his cheekbone a light purple with yellowing around the edges.

I tried to fuss over him, which he seemed to secretly enjoy, even as he rolled his eyes and told me he was fine. He didn't have any other injuries, so it looked like he had just taken a single punch to the face from one of his parent's protectors before they sent him back.

I wondered what the protectors looked like. He said they were big and really strong. And sometimes I looked at Moth and tried to picture a more monstrous version of him—maybe with scales covering his whole body and face, darker in colour. Were his progenitor's eyes different? His were largely human, but very pale, and the pupils were filmy. Did he have the same hair as them? It was long and silvery white, though his eyebrows and eyelashes were dark.

I wondered what his human mother had looked like. Every time I thought about what he'd told me of his childhood, I wanted to gather him up in my arms and hold him close. He'd had such a shitty life. Part of me was glad the monster apocalypse had taken place, and he'd been able to carve out a life for himself out here. I dreaded to think what would have happened to him as a child if he'd stayed in the care system and the differences in his body had grown more noticeable. He probably would have ended up in a hospital being studied for years. Or worse.

We were both pretty tense in the days that passed after he vanished. I worried constantly that it would happen again, and he seemed withdrawn because of whatever his progenitor had ordered him to do. I wondered who they wanted him to find. Someone who had managed to escape the cult? But he'd said that they all had a mark that prevented them from leaving, even if they tried to cut it out.

Despite everything that had happened between us—the palpable shift in our relationship—we didn’t treat each other any differently. We didn’t start acting like a couple or anything.

Even though I wanted to.

I found myself wanting to reach for his hand as we walked across the Wastes, but he always kept them stuffed in his pockets. I wanted to sit right next to him, our knees touching, when we stopped for the night and built a fire if it was safe. I wanted to kiss him every time he gave me a tiny smile or laughed huskily at something I said—which he was doing far more often.

Nothing else had happened between us. We went back to taking turns keeping watch when we stopped for the night, and it was far too cold to get naked when we were camping out in gas stations or houses with smashed-out windows or old superstores. And besides, I didn’t want Moth to discover his sexuality in crappy places like that. He deserved better.

I wasn’t entirely sure where we were when we stopped to rest for the night in an old barn. It was at least somewhat warm, despite the lingering smell of rot and long-decayed hay. We set up in a horse stall, and I teased Moth about kicking his ass if he spotted dried up old horse shit with his night vision and let me sit in it, even though the horses were obviously all long gone.

He huffed a tiny laugh, sinking down onto the ground and pulling off his bag and sword. I sat beside him with a groan, my legs stiff. At least the scratch from the forileun had almost healed, just a faint scab now.

It had been well over a week since we left Chicago. The realisation made me go weak with relief, and I reached over to grip Moth’s forearm.

“Looks like we won’t be dying from parasites, huh?”

When he glanced over at me, I grinned. After a second, he grinned back—a rare, wide smile that showed off even white teeth in the dark.

I didn’t voice the fact that technically we could still get infected anywhere out here in the Wastes, but at least we knew we weren’t about to die right this second. Besides, I couldn’t have spoken—because Moth leaned over and kissed me.

My eyes slid shut as I hurriedly slipped off my gloves so I could reach up and cup his face. I’d been wanting to kiss him for days and days—ever since we left the house he’d vanished from. It was like we’d allowed ourselves to be closer while we were there—which made sense, considering

what we'd done together—but the moment we set off, we went back to just being travelling companions and nothing more.

But now he was kissing me, his pierced tongue gliding over mine. I felt guilty for loving the feel of that metal bar now that I knew why he had it. I got distracted quickly, though, when Moth made a soft sound in his throat and climbed into my lap, straddling me.

My breath caught, dick stirring in my pants. I knew it wouldn't go further than this, mainly because we hadn't had a chance to wash up for days and we were both grimy, but I was still going to enjoy the fuck out of it.

My hands found his thighs in the dark and slid up as we kissed. When they moved around to cup his ass, I felt the bulk of his tail under his pants. I already knew he kept it tucked in his pants to hide it, which was why he also religiously wore his coat to cover the outline of it.

Moth had tensed up, so I quickly moved my hands to his hips and breathed, "Sorry," against his mouth.

He panted against my lips for a few seconds, before shaking his head resolutely. "No, it's—I'm fine. You know I have it."

His hands covered mine and pushed them back onto his ass as he kissed me again, mouth moving anxiously against mine. I couldn't help but grip the firm mounds, groaning as our tongues grew more aggressive and our breaths became ragged.

My cock was already a pulsing steel bar in my pants. I was so horny that part of me wanted to ask Moth if he would mind if I shoved my hand down my pants and made myself come while we did this. I could feel the heat from between his legs against my crotch.

But then Moth's mouth suddenly stopped moving. It was still pressed to mine, but he was no longer kissing me. When I opened my eyes, his were already reflecting back at me in the dark, blurring and merging together from his proximity. He slowly moved back, licking his lips, but immediately covered my mouth with his hand.

My brows drew into a frown, but I wasn't stupid enough to speak, even though I didn't know what was going on. My body was already tensing up with foreboding, but my limbs stiffened in a rush when I heard a squeal of tyres skidding wildly. Then a mighty crash that went on for a long time.

We were already scrambling for our stuff before the rapid gunfire started, followed by shouts from multiple voices. *Shit*. It sounded like

automatic weapons, which meant this was most likely the military.

I didn't know if Moth could tell that too, but I wasn't going to speak and potentially give us away. The voices and gunshots were louder now. They were definitely heading toward us—probably looking to seek shelter in the barn from whatever they were shooting at.

Moth looked around the tiny horse stall we were in, then up. I followed his gaze, but couldn't see much of anything in the dark.

Suddenly, Moth was leaping onto the edge of the half-wall at the front of the stall and launching himself up, faster and more agile than I could ever be. I saw his legs vanish as he heaved himself up, and I realised there was a broken beam in the hayloft, creating a gap he'd been able to slip through.

Pale hair swept down in a curtain as he reappeared at the hole, stretching an arm down for me. I gripped his forearm, even as I started sweating at the idea of him pulling me up. Was he strong enough?

But the sounds outside were getting louder now. The gunfire was almost constant, and I heard a scream get cut off abruptly and be replaced by the loud, warbling chuff of something that was definitely not from this world.

Moth's teeth flashed in the dark as he gritted them and pulled hard, somehow yanking me into the air high enough that my other hand scrabbled for the hayloft floor and managed to grip on. My arms strained as I heaved myself up with his help.

The hay was all long since rotted away, and we were still totally exposed up here. As I looked around wildly for somewhere to hide or escape the barn, Moth peered back down into the horse stall below. His eyes flared in the dark, and then he was dropping back down.

"Mo—" I cut off my frantic whisper as a harried voice came from outside.

"Get in the fucking barn! We can't kill it! *Get in the barn now!*"

Fuck fuck fuck. I looked around again, jumping when Moth reappeared and easily pulled himself up. He thrust my gloves at me—which I realised I'd left on the horse stall floor—and grabbed my arm to tug me further along the hayloft, deeper into the shadows.

There was a window down this end, but I didn't know if Moth's plan was to leave the barn. Whatever the soldiers were fighting out there was evidently extremely hard to kill. They'd been shooting at it for several minutes.

The barn doors burst open below, heavy footsteps pounding inside and freezing us both in place.

“Shut the doors!” A rough voice barked. “Barricade them somehow!”

“There’s nothing in here,” another voice grated.

“Don’t give me that shit. *Find* something or we’ll be dead like Johnson.”

“Here,” a third voice said, and we stayed frozen as we listened to the soldiers heaving something across the barn floor.

Quiet fell, except for the soldiers’ heaving breaths. Then a low, warbling growl came from outside.

“Fuck,” one of them whispered. “How long ‘til reinforcements arrive?”

“No response yet,” the harsher female voice grated. “Check the barn. Make sure it’s clear.”

Shit. My eyes met Moth’s in the dark. My heart was pounding, but I’d been in situations like this before—although never hiding from the military. Moth seemed to be staying calm too, for which I was grateful. Panicking wouldn’t help us.

Two sets of footsteps started moving around the barn below, and another long warbling sound came from outside. Whatever was out there was pacing around the barn. Using the cover of the noise, we crept to the window at the other end of the hayloft, and I stayed back in the shadows while Moth peered out.

My pulse leapt when a warbling growl from outside sharpened with excitement. Moth pulled back quickly, and his lips were pursed in a thin line as he shook his head. *Shit.* So leaving the barn wasn’t an option. I wondered what was out there.

Beams of light filtered through the floorboards as the soldiers below scanned the barn. We ducked down, crouching right in the corner in the shadows, but it was a shit hiding spot. There *weren’t* any hiding spots. There was nothing up here. If one of them checked the hayloft, they’d see us instantly.

I could hear Moth’s near-silent, slightly trembling exhalations through his nose as he crouched beside me. He stopped breathing entirely, we both did, when we heard the clomp of boots coming up the ladder to the hayloft.

I was pretty sure there were only three of them down there, but they were three heavily armed soldiers with assault rifles. We’d stand no chance, and have no time to do anything if the one coming up here opened fire the moment he saw us.

I could feel Moth slowly reaching back for his sword as the flashlight's beam of light swung over the other end of the hayloft. The soldier didn't come all the way up, instead staying on the ladder as he scanned his flashlight back and forth.

But just as he started turning it in our direction, his superior's rough voice came from below, tinged with relief.

"Reinforcements on their way."

"Thank fuck." The soldier hurried back down the ladder. "All clear up here."

I wanted to scoff at his piss-poor job of sweeping the barn, despite the immense relief filling me. Neither of us moved, even as my legs started to shake from crouching, but as the soldiers fell silent below us, all we could do was wait.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Charlie

“I can’t believe that thing flipped our truck,” one of the soldiers rasped miserably from below, what felt like hours later. I was sweating from staying crouched for so long, my thighs on fire and knees sore.

The one in charge grunted. “I’ve seen them before. Normally they stalk their prey for a while. This one must be hungry.”

“Fuck,” the other soldier whimpered. He sounded young—was probably pretty new to the Wastes. “It got Johnson. Just... tore right into her.”

The rough-voiced soldier just grunted again. I heard the younger one suck in a panicked breath when the creature outside let out another warbling growl, reminding us all that it was still out there, waiting.

“Will—will the backup be able to take it down?” His voice was unsteady. “What if it does the same to them?”

“They’re sending a chopper. Said they’ll try and get close to the barn so we can get out fast.”

“There’s a window in the hayloft,” the soldier said nervously. “Maybe they can lower the ladder there so we don’t have to go outside.”

Fuck. My eyes slid to the window beside us, then to Moth. He was already looking back at me grimly.

Should we make a run for it? I tried to convey with my eyes. He gave a tiny shake of his head.

He’d seen whatever was out there, so he must know that we wouldn’t be able to outrun it. But if the soldiers came up here, they’d shoot us on sight. They’d think we were raiders, and most soldiers didn’t give a shit about shooting raiders. And they’d be pissed that we’d been hiding in here without them knowing.

My heart spasmed when the low hum of helicopter blades reached us. Fuck, we were running out of time. They’d be here in minutes.

“Thank fuck,” the young soldier breathed, and I could hear them moving about down there.

“Copy,” the superior officer grunted, and I knew she was speaking into her comms. “They’re bringing down the ladder by the upper window. Let’s go.”

The noise of the chopper was deafening now, directly above our heads, and light flooded into the barn through the window. We were still tucked in the shadows in the corner, but they’d see us instantly. They’d have to walk right fucking past us.

As boots sounded on the ladder, my eyes darted to our left, where there was another hole between the floorboards leading to the lower floor of the barn. We’d have to time it exactly right.

I gripped Moth’s arm and jerked my chin at the hole. The moment I heard the third set of boots hit the hayloft floor, I shoved him toward it.

“What—There’s someone up here!”

Moth dropped down through the hole without hesitating, and I was right behind him. My vision whited out when a burst of gunfire sounded, and I felt searing heat explode in my shoulder just before I dropped down through the hole, bullets spraying over the barn wall.

“You said you checked, you worthless piece of shit!” The superior officer sounded furious.

“I’m sorry,” the young officer stammered. “I’ll—”

“Forget it, just move!” I heard a shove and pounding footsteps above our heads. “That thing will get them anyway. Go!”

My shoulder was on fire. I clenched my teeth, gripping my bicep as Moth and I stayed frozen in place while we heard the soldiers scrambling up the ladder one at a time, before the helicopter rose in the air. The monster outside was warbling with confusion as the sound of the chopper’s blades grew quieter.

“Now what?” I whispered, then hissed as I slowly straightened up. My knees were aching, but at least I hadn’t sprained my ankles dropping down.

“Fuck.” Moth’s voice was frantic in the dark from behind me. I felt long fingers wrap around my forearm. “You’re—You’ve been shot.”

“Yeah.” I peered down at my hot, numb shoulder, but couldn’t see anything. “Is there an exit wound?”

“Uh...” Moth’s voice shook. I heard him walk around to face me, and then his long fingers were carefully tugging off my backpack and pulling down my coat sleeve. “It—It looks like it skimmed the top of your shoulder. There’s like a... divot.”

I let out a tight chuckle and fruitlessly peered down again. “Yeah? So it just took a chunk out of me? That’s great news.”

Moth made a strangled sound. “It’s bleeding a lot.”

I gave a grim nod and pulled on my gloves, which I’d been gripping in my fist this whole time. “Can you find the medical kit in my bag?”

I heard Moth crouch to rifle through it as I tried to ignore the pain in my shoulder that was somehow numb and searing at the same time. The fabric of my shirt felt hot and wet, sticking to my skin. Stabbing pains shot up my neck and down my arm, fingers tingling.

“I’ll just bandage it for now,” Moth said hoarsely. “We’ll clean it up when we get somewhere safe.”

I aimed a tight smile somewhere in his direction in the dark as I heard him straighten. “Sounds good. Thanks. Do you need your flashlight?”

“No.” His voice was husky with nerves. “But... we need to get your shirt off. The fabric is—There’s a lot of blood.”

He helped me pull my shirt off one shoulder, then gripped my nape. I bent my head, staring down at nothing, and tried to steady my breaths. Despite the pitch black, white spots appeared in my vision. My head swam, but I wasn’t sure if it was shock or blood loss or a combination of both. I took a few more steadying breaths to clear my head.

I forced myself to remain completely still while Moth held bandages to the top of my shoulder, soaking up the blood. I tried very hard not to think about how close I’d come to getting a bullet in the back of my skull. If that soldier hadn’t been so green, I’d be dead.

A shaky, relieved groan left me when Moth pulled the wad of bandages away, and I got some temporary relief from the raw, over-sensitive rasp of cloth against exposed muscle. I could hear the rustle of him unwinding more from the roll, and my shoulder was strangely hot as he carefully wrapped more bandage over and under my armpit, knotting it tightly and mumbling an apology when I hissed in pain.

“At least it wasn’t my head, right?” I tried to joke as I slowly pushed my arm back through my sodden shirt sleeve with his help.

“Don’t say that,” he mumbled, gently tugging my coat back up and zipping it for me.

The monster was still outside. I could hear it pacing and snuffling around, probably wondering what the big loud thing in the sky had been

and whether there was any prey still trapped inside here. Which there was. I wondered if it could smell my blood.

I let out a breath and briefly palmed the side of Moth's neck with my good arm in thanks, then got my gun from my pack with a groan of pain.

"Okay. It's still out there, right?"

"Yeah," he croaked, still sounding worried. "It might leave if we wait long enough. But you should—We need to get you somewhere to clean up the wound."

"I'll be fine, baby." The term of endearment slipped out without thought, but there were too many pressing things to worry about for me to get embarrassed by it. Neither of us commented on it before I added, "So we can't outrun it?"

"I don't think so. I've seen them before and they're fast. The only way to kill it is to flip it onto its back so its underside is exposed. But... most people die if they get close enough to do that."

I exhaled, cringing in pain when I reached up to wipe my forehead, my shoulder screaming. "I don't know how good my aim will be right now, anyway. So... we should wait for it to leave?"

Moth's breath caught. "It... These things stalk their prey for days. Weeks. We could be stuck here for a long time."

"Shit." We didn't have enough food or water to be stuck in here for more than a few days, let alone weeks.

My shoulder felt hot. When Moth moved behind me and carefully pulled away my coat to check it, he made a pained sound in his throat.

"Charlie, it's bleeding a lot."

"Well, yeah." I let out a tight chuckle. "There's a chunk missing from my shoulder. But really, I'll be okay, Moth. Could have been a lot worse."

He stared at me in the dark, and I could just about make out the grim determination that settled over his features.

"Can you get back up the ladder?" he asked.

When I nodded, he picked up my bag and took my hand to guide me across the pitch-black barn. His hands settled on my hips to steady me, even though I was able to quickly get up the ladder and back into the hayloft, ignoring the burning pain in my shoulder. He passed me my bag once I was up.

But he didn't follow. I stared down at him with a hard frown.

"What are you doing?"

“Stay up there.” He turned and walked toward the barn doors.

“Moth,” I gritted out, already turning to come back down the ladder.

“I said stay up there, Charlie,” he barked, no longer making sure to keep his voice quiet.

I realised why when he shoved the soldiers’ makeshift barricade out of the way and opened the barn doors, then pulled the sword off his back.

“Moth, what the fuck are you doing?” I hissed, swinging my gun up to aim it at the open doors, my injured arm weak and shaking.

I shot at the monster the moment it appeared in the doorway, but I *heard* the bullet bounce off it and hit the ground. Weak light flooded in from outside, letting me make out a domed back reflecting the moonlight. The creature was the size of a bear, and even in the poor light I could make out its bulk. The thickly muscled arms and wide, impenetrable back.

It charged at Moth with an excited warble, and my heart spasmed with terror as I pointlessly shot at it again. The bullets weren’t penetrating its hide at all, bouncing off harmlessly. I tried to aim for its head, but that seemed to be armoured too. It didn’t even pause as it scrabbled across the barn floor after Moth, who darted to the side at the last second.

I heard it crash into the barn wall below and let out a furious growl. Moth sprinted across the barn and launched himself halfway up the ladder. I gripped his arm tightly and tried to tug him back, but he shook me off, breathing hard.

The monster bounded over to the bottom of the ladder and stopped, growling up at us and sucking in fast, frantic breaths through its snout. I shot at its eyes, but its head tucked into its body instantly before it jerked back.

“Fuck,” Moth muttered, then took off along the hayloft before disappearing down the hole we’d escaped from the soldiers through.

“Moth!” I shouted, shooting pointlessly at the monster yet again when it turned and started running for him.

I went to climb down the ladder, but heard him shout, “Don’t fucking come down here, Charlie!”

I froze with indecision, then jerked back when I saw his outline running back toward the ladder, the monster right behind him.

This time, he waited at the bottom for it to catch up. When it was mere feet away, he launched himself back up the ladder as the creature swiped out with a giant arm and tried to knock him off. Growling, it stretched up to

try and get us, and I saw it wobble unsteadily on its hind legs before it thumped back down on all fours and paced at the bottom of the ladder.

Understanding dawned. Moth was trying to get it to jump up after him so it lost its balance and fell onto its back.

“God, you’re a fucking genius,” I muttered, still aiming my gun at the creature even though I knew it was pointless to shoot it until its underbelly was exposed. And I had very limited ammo, having used a lot of it already out here. I couldn’t waste any more of it.

Moth didn’t answer, already taking off toward the hole at the other end of the hayloft. But the monster seemed to be catching on, because it sprinted across the barn to wait for Moth to drop down.

Fuck. I couldn’t see from here, but I didn’t want to distract Moth by going down there, even though I felt completely fucking useless just sitting here. But my arm was trembling, and it hurt to lift it even an inch, my shoulder weak and screaming with pain.

Moth grunted in irritation from the other end of the hayloft and ran back over to me. He jumped down and darted to the side when the monster raced over and lunged at him. It caught his boot with its fist, making him stumble before he quickly found his footing and ran out of sight beneath the hayloft.

My heart was pounding in fear. All I could hear were the monster’s warbling growls and its heavy steps bounding across the barn after Moth. I stared over at the hole on the other side of the hayloft, sucking in fast breaths.

Moth’s head and shoulders appeared as he heaved himself up with one hand, the other still gripping his sword hilt. I choked on a breath when he jerked back down, and then he was grunting and twisting about, still stuck halfway through the hole.

I scrambled up and ran over just as I heard a booming thud from below followed by a furious warble. Moth’s white teeth flashed in the dark just as I reached him, and then he vanished, dropping back down.

I fell to my knees at the edge of the hole and peered down, already aiming my gun. But Moth... Moth was standing *on* the monster’s underbelly as it wriggled frantically on its domed back, trying to flip itself over.

He somehow kept himself steady despite its wild movements, gripping his sword hilt in both hands and lifting it above his head. Then he jabbed it down, sinking it into the creature’s throat. Its underbelly was pale and didn’t

gleam like its armoured hide, and it let out a hideous gurgling sound as Moth sliced it open from its neck to its hind legs, his sword buried deep in its belly.

Its frantic rocking stopped, muscled arms going limp and head sliding out from its tucked-in position to flop back. Even from up here I could feel the steam coming from its innards as they lay exposed. When Moth stepped off the monster, it tipped slightly to one side and its intestines poured out onto the barn floor with a wet slap.

“Jesus.” I swallowed, slowly putting away my gun. “You’re like a fucking... dragon slayer or something.”

Moth was breathing hard, but he let out a little huff of amusement and looked up at me. “Never killed one of those before.”

“Yeah,” I croaked, slowly straightening up on unsteady legs. “Seems like not many people have.”

“Do you need a hand getting back down?” I heard him follow me across the barn below as I made my way back to the ladder.

“I’ll be okay. Thanks.” I climbed down, my eyes darting immediately back to the shadowy lump at the other end of the barn.

I gripped the front of Moth’s coat as he put away his sword, stepping close to kiss him hard.

“You definitely deserve a blowjob for that,” I rasped after pulling back.

Moth went still, then his white teeth flashed in the dark as he grinned. “Yeah?”

“Hell yeah.” I grinned back, slipping my uninjured arm under his coat to slide my hand up his back. “But maybe once we’re both clean and you don’t smell like monster guts.”

He snorted and leaned in to kiss my cheek. “Princess.”

I burst out laughing and tugged him back into me when he went to pull away. “Okay then. Drop your pants, slayer.”

He let out a husky chuckle.

“Okay, fine. I’d prefer if we did that away from the pile of monster guts. And I...” I heard him swallow. “I want to do it to you too.”

My cock tingled with blood, but I knew the pain in my shoulder would prevent me from getting hard. Besides, we couldn’t actually just start fucking. We probably needed to get away from the barn, and not just because of the unpleasant dead monster in the corner.

“I didn’t do much to earn one except get shot, but I’ll take it.” I gave Moth a quick kiss before releasing him. “We should probably get away from here. I doubt those soldiers care that much seeing as they got away, but I guess there’s a chance they might come back to try and take out the monster. Or us.”

“Yeah.” Moth slipped his arm around me and under my backpack as we left the barn, even though I didn’t need help walking. I smiled a little and said nothing. “We could stay in the house, I guess. I could kill all the rats.”

I cringed. We’d checked out the farmhouse before deciding on the barn because it was infested.

“I’d rather not. Not a big fan of rats.” I chuckled and looked around, the small smile sliding off my face when I saw what remained of the dead soldier on the ground.

The monster had eaten most of her. All that was left was a helmeted head and one arm, a mangled gun lying beside her. A short distance away was a military truck that had been flipped completely over, one side of it a crumpled, caved-in mess. The young soldier had mentioned the monster ramming their truck.

I looked away. There was no point thinking about it now. The other soldiers were gone and the monster was dead, thanks to Moth. Exhaling, I glanced up. The sky was getting lighter as dawn approached. We’d been stuck in that fucking barn with the soldiers for hours.

“We should search the truck,” I said, eyeing the half-caved-in vehicle and trying to assess whether it would be safe to approach.

“I’ll do it.” Moth slowly pulled away and reached for his sword. I followed as he strode toward the ruined truck, my vision wavering just a little. Blinking hard, I tried not to sag from the wave of exhaustion that swept over me.

Moth had crouched to peer through the shattered windows of the truck.

“Be careful,” I said quickly when he leaned down further and stretched in to reach for the front seats.

“Nothing good in the glove compartment,” he said, then stood up and walked around to the truck’s back doors. It took him a few solid tugs to get one side open, and stuff tumbled free in a rush.

“Uh... ammo?” he called, re-sheathing his sword. “I... uh, don’t know if it’s the right kind for your gun or anything...”

“Let’s take it anyway.”

I watched him pull his backpack off and start shoving stuff in, including handfuls of the protein bars that the military gave all soldiers, and several blister packs of hydration tabs, which always came in handy.

By the time Moth straightened and approached me, zipping up his bag and slinging it onto his back, I knew I was swaying very slightly on my feet. His pale eyes grew worried in the gloom.

“Are you okay?” He slipped his arm back around me. “We need to find somewhere to rest.”

I blinked and shot him a reassuring smile, but it felt pretty wobbly. My tone was doubtful when I asked, “Is there anywhere else nearby?”

Moth glanced at me and pointed at the half-rotten hog pen a short distance away, the fence collapsed and the little wooden structure barely standing. I stared at it and snorted out a laugh.

“Maybe we should just set off, find somewhere else.” I gestured at the sky. “It’s nearly morning anyway. And you can see in the dark.”

Moth watched me, chewing anxiously on his lower lip.

“You need to rest, Charlie.” He nodded at my shoulder. “You’re injured, and you haven’t slept—”

“I’ve got a few more hours in me.” I peeled back my coat and the neck of my shirt to peer at the bandage. “I think it’s stopped bleeding, so I’m good. Luckily for me, that soldier had terrible aim.”

I let out a weak chuckle that Moth didn’t return. Feeling unaccountably nervous, I stepped closer and threaded my gloved fingers through his, half expecting him to yank his hand back. But he didn’t.

“Let’s keep going until we find somewhere safer.”

He still looked worried, but he nodded and gripped my hand tighter.

Neither of us let go as we started walking.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Charlie

I was feeling pretty woozy when we finally found somewhere to rest. It was a big, fancy house set well back in what had probably once been a beautiful estate, but was now just overgrown and kind of depressing.

We were both exhausted. It was mid-morning, but we needed to rest before going any further. Moth pulled his sword free as we stepped through the house's big, solid-wood double front doors. The interior looked like it'd been ransacked at some point, and ivy had crept in through a couple of smashed windows to take over the entire wall on our left. Dirt and dead leaves crunched under our boots as we stepped inside and closed the door behind us quietly.

The house was silent, but Moth gave me a meaningful look and squeezed my hand before letting go to check that it was empty. My shoulder had stiffened up, so I couldn't even reach for my gun, but I pulled out my hunting knife and crept cautiously toward the door to my right while Moth ascended the wide staircase to the upstairs, his boots silent on the old, gritty carpet.

The living room I walked into was less exposed to the elements, but had been stripped of anything worthwhile by raiders over the years. I could see the outline where a rug used to rest in front of the fireplace. The floorboards were darker there, and all the drawers on the tall, ornate cabinet had been opened and emptied.

Even the couch cushions were gone from the huge leather sofa dominating the centre of the room, facing an enormous, useless widescreen TV mounted to the wall above the fireplace mantel. I still wanted to sink down onto the bare couch frame and not get up again for hours. My eyes burned almost as much as my shoulder.

The kitchen was in even more disarray, every cupboard and drawer open and almost completely empty. Once-gleaming marble counters were dull and caked in dust, and the painted wall facing the wide windows was yellowed from years of sun exposure.

I stood by the sink and stared out at the sprawling backyard. It was wild and completely overgrown, but I could see paving stones leading to an old stone archway and what looked like a pool beyond it, empty and coated in green.

“All good upstairs.”

I jumped at the sound of Moth’s husky voice and turned, blinking hard. “Shit, sorry. I’ve only checked here and the living room—”

“I’ve checked the rest.” He approached and gently prised my hunting knife out of my hand. “You need to sleep, Charlie. But we have to clean your wound first.”

“Yeah.” I looked down at my shoulder and tried not to sway. I was exhausted, and even though the wound hadn’t bled for all that long, I’d still been shot. I knew I needed to rest.

“You need to sleep too,” I said, looking back up at Moth. He was paler than normal, shadows under his eyes, but he gave me a little smile.

“I will. After you’re clean and in bed.” He looped his arm around my waist under my backpack and led me out of the kitchen. “The water works. I’ll start a fire to heat it up.”

“There’s a fireplace in the living room.”

He grunted. “It’ll be blocked. We’d die pretty quick if the house filled up with smoke.” Shooting me a tiny smile, he added, “Aren’t you supposed to be a great survivalist who’s been out here for years? Rookie mistake.”

I snorted a laugh. “Give me a break. I’ve been shot.”

Moth sobered instantly as we started walking upstairs. “Yeah. One of the bedrooms has a hole in the ceiling. I’ll make a fire in there to heat up some water.”

“I don’t mind using cold water.”

“You need to warm up.” He gently squeezed my side and led me into a bedroom that was pretty intact. The window was still whole, though coated with grime, and I couldn’t see any animal faeces on the floor—always a plus.

“I’ve found clean sheets in the closet, so I’ll strip the bed.”

Moth deposited me on the edge of the dusty bed and gently pulled off my gun and bag, apologising when I hissed as pain throbbed through my shoulder.

“Just stay here and rest. I’ll be back in a minute.” Moth hesitated before leaning down and pressing a kiss to my hair before striding out of the room.

My eyelids sagged, wanting to close. I forced them back open and leaned down with a groan to tug off my boots and socks, shivering when my bare feet touched the cold floor. It took me a long time to get undressed. My movements were sluggish, and I was only just down to my boxer briefs when Moth came back into the room.

“The water’s getting warm.” The skin around his eyes was tight as he approached, staring at the blood-soaked bandage on my shoulder. “Let’s sort out the wound.”

I nodded. “We should flush it out with water.”

“Yeah.” He chewed on his lip. “I’ve cleaned the bath already. Let’s go in the bathroom to do it.”

He helped me in there, and I didn’t complain even though it wasn’t like I couldn’t walk fine. I *did* feel a little unsteady, and besides, I wasn’t going to turn down the chance to be pressed up against Moth.

He covered the toilet with an old towel and sat me on it, then went back into the bedroom to get my medical kit. There was tension in his eyes when he knelt in front of me and peeled off the bandage. It was soaked in blood, but the wound had stopped bleeding a while ago, I was pretty sure. I sighed in relief as I peered at it, seeing it properly for the first time.

The bullet hadn’t actually pierced my shoulder—it had skimmed the top of it, leaving a raw dent. It burned like a bitch, but I’d gotten lucky. It was a clean wound, pretty small. I’d be fine as long as it didn’t get infected.

“Still the best nurse out here.” I grinned at Moth as he flushed the wound out, trying not to wince. “Sexiest nurse I ever had.”

His lips quirked even as he grunted and raised a brow at me. “Maybe stop getting hurt, though.”

Once he’d wrapped the wound tightly in fresh bandages, he sat back and blew out a breath. “Let’s get you in the tub, army boy.”

I grinned and stood up, peeling off my boxer briefs and walking unsteadily to the tub, which was the only clean thing in here.

“Fuck.” I shivered as I sat down in it, the porcelain freezing against my ass. “Please remember what my dick looked like before and not what it looks like right now.”

Moth snorted as he left the room, coming back in a minute later heaving a huge stainless-steel pot. I eyed him in appreciation. He was strong. He’d lifted me up clear off the ground back in the barn. If I wasn’t so cold and in pain, my dick would have perked up.

“Too hot?” he asked, lowering the pot so I could dip my hand in it.

I sighed at the feel of the warm water, just about hot, and shook my head. Moth poured it into the bath. It barely covered the bottom of the tub, which made me laugh.

“It’ll take a few trips,” he said ruefully before carrying the pot back out.

By the time water was lapping around my hips, I was sagging with exhaustion. Moth had brought in my soap and helped me wash my hair, and I was carefully scrubbing down the rest of my body as I tried to keep my bandage dry.

“We’ll stay here ‘til tomorrow at least,” he said as he sat beside the tub. “Maybe two nights so you can rest. This place hasn’t been touched for a while, so I think it’s safe.”

“I’ll be okay tomorrow.”

“Charlie.” He rolled his eyes. “You’ve been shot. We’re not exactly in a rush. We don’t even know if Cat will be in New York.”

I grunted in response, scrubbing at my face and behind my ears with a soapy hand.

“Maybe we could stay an extra night,” I capitulated, then shot him a salacious grin. “I *did* promise you a blowjob. If I’m well rested, I can make sure it’s a fucking fantastic one.”

Moth’s cheeks flushed, but his mouth tipped into a lopsided smile. “Better than last time?”

“Oh yeah. I’m an overachiever. Have to up my game every time.”

He snuffled a little laugh, then sat up and hesitantly leaned in to kiss me.

“Once you’re healed,” he murmured.

I snorted. “This’ll take a while to heal. I’m not waiting that long to get my mouth back on you.”

He flushed deeper as he sat back, and he seemed a little flustered when he asked, “Are you all done? You need to sleep.”

I grinned at him. “Yeah, all clean. Thanks, nurse.”

Moth huffed and stood up to help me out, muttering, “You’re such a shithead.”

I woke only briefly when I felt Moth slip into bed behind me, his skin warm from washing up himself after he put me to bed. He’d changed the sheets

and drawn the curtains, but it was still light out. My heavy eyes drifted shut again when he wrapped his arm around me, nestling his face against my back and sighing deeply.

When I woke again, the room was washed with dim golden light as the sun set behind the curtains. I went to stretch, wincing instead when my shoulder throbbed with pain. Carefully turning onto my back, I realised Moth was still asleep beside me.

I stared at him, even though my eyes were still bleary with exhaustion. I needed more sleep, but I couldn't help but force myself to stay awake for a few minutes so I could look at him.

He looked younger in sleep, his lips slightly parted around even breaths and his long black lashes fanning over the tops of his cheeks. He'd braided his hair after washing it, but strands had come loose to frame his face messily, making my fingers itch with the urge to gently push them back.

I didn't, because I didn't want to wake him or startle him. My gut clenched with a heavy throb of want. Not just for his body. Not just for sex. For *him*. I wanted him. *Like* wasn't a strong enough word for what I felt for him, but *love* felt too strong just yet. But... I was pretty sure I could. Love him.

I wanted to keep him close. I wanted to protect him from judgemental people who treated him like shit, and monsters who rejected him and called him a *half-breed*, and his awful parent and their guards who hurt him.

I didn't want to go and live back at the homestead, or at the Nebraska camp. I wanted to stay with him. I wanted to go back to his cosy little safehouse in the middle of nowhere and stay there, just the two of us, until the snow melted and the cold thawed. I wanted to travel across the Wastes with him, visiting the Nebraska raiders together and letting him show me all the hidden, underground places that people had created out here away from the military's eyes.

But I had no idea if he'd want that. Maybe he'd be up for it as friends, or casual fuck buddies, or...

Was he still in love with Ghost? The thought hurt more than it should, and it was stupid to think about anyway. Why wouldn't he be?

I was a pretty forthright person. I said what I wanted. I didn't shy away from how I felt. But... I was scared to ask him. I was scared of hearing him tell me that, sure, this was fun, but he still loved Ghost and didn't want anything more with me.

I flinched at the thought, which made Moth stir. He didn't wake up, but he shifted closer to me until his head was on my uninjured shoulder, a sleeve-covered arm wrapping around my stomach. I let out a quiet breath, the tension I hadn't realised had crept into my limbs releasing as I closed my eyes.

I'd enjoy it while it lasted. Getting to be close to him. Getting to kiss him and hear his husky laugh and see his rare smiles. Getting to touch him and taste him and feel his hands on me.

And when the time came for us to part ways, I'd deal with it. I was a big boy. I could handle a little heartbreak.

Although I already knew that it would be particularly painful.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Charlie

It was pitch black when I woke up finally feeling rested, and the room was cold. Moth's head was no longer on my chest, but I could feel him lying beside me. When I reached up to rub my face, he propped himself up on one elbow.

"How are you feeling?" His voice was rough from sleep, telling me he hadn't been awake long.

"Great." I grinned up at him even though I couldn't see more than a faint outline. "Like new."

He huffed and rested his hand on my chest, fingers sifting absently through the sparse hair there and making me shiver.

"Charlie." His voice was low and husky in the dark. I heard him swallow. "Can I—Can I kiss you?"

My gut bottomed out.

"Yes," I rasped straight away. "You don't have to ask."

He shifted closer and leaned down, his breathing a little unsteady before he pressed his lips to mine. Longing for him surged in a rush, making me try to reach up and thread my fingers through his hair. I tried to suppress my hiss as fire bloomed in my shoulder.

"Just... lie back," Moth whispered against my mouth before kissing me again.

Our lips opened, tongues immediately meeting as though magnetised. My cock twitched, hardening in a rush and making my legs spread open a little wider as my hips flexed. When I felt the rough warmth of Moth's scales against my thigh, I realised he was only in his boxer briefs and a long-sleeved shirt. My chest tightened with the knowledge that he felt more comfortable with me—with himself.

My breath caught when the hand on my chest slid down, over my tense stomach. Long fingers slipped beneath the band of my underwear and glided down my hard cock, not stopping until they curled around my balls.

“Fuck,” I breathed against Moth’s mouth, then kissed him harder as he gave my nuts a gentle squeeze before sliding his hand back up to fist my cock.

I was already painfully hard. I hadn’t come since Chicago, and now Moth was jerking me off in the dark with his long, tattooed fingers. This wasn’t going to last anywhere near as long as I wanted it to.

I groaned into Moth’s mouth, knees falling open wider as my hips strained up. He hooked a knee over mine, pinning my leg down and making my dick pulse with a tiny burst of pre-cum.

My nuts tightened and my breath shuddered out of me when Moth broke the kiss to move lower.

“F-fuck.” I peered down, even though I couldn’t see anything, as he kissed his way down my chest. “You don’t have to.”

“I want to.” His voice was husky, but I could hear the nerves tingeing his tone. “I’ve—I’ve wanted to suck your dick for ages, Charlie.”

“Shit.” I stared up at the dark ceiling, my chest heaving as Moth’s lips trailed down my stomach. I lifted my hips instantly when he tugged my boxer briefs down and off.

He moved to kneel between my legs, and I could feel a faint tremor running through his body as his long fingers curled around my hips. My chest ached, and I was about to reach down and cup his face when his head dipped and wet heat slid around the tip of my cock.

I let out a shuddering breath and barely managed to stop my hips from bucking. Moth’s hand slid across my lower stomach to fist my cock as he licked again, then tilted my length to suck the head into his mouth. His tongue bar rasped over the sensitive V, making me shudder hard with pleasure.

I made sure not to hold back any groans or gasps, so he’d know how good it felt. I could sense his confidence growing as he lapped at the pre-cum leaking steadily from the tip of my cock and moaned. The fingers ringing my shaft slid down, trailing over my balls as his mouth sank deeper—and deeper, until he choked and rose back up in a rush.

“Sorry.” I could hear how flustered he was, and it made my throat ache.

“It feels so good.” I reached down and cupped his cheek. “You don’t need to—Just keep using your hand.”

When his fingers curled hesitantly back around my cock, I sighed in bliss and relaxed down onto the mattress. But then his tongue circled my tip

again, making everything stiffen back up with a hard rush of pleasure.

As he started bobbing his head, sucking softly and stroking my cock in time, I let out a choked groan.

“Yeah, like that,” I panted, curling my fingers through his hair, pulling more strands free from its messy braid.

Moth moaned around me, sucking harder. His free hand slid up my inner thigh before his thumb trailed over my tight balls, making me groan through gritted teeth as my knees fell open wider.

I lifted my head and peered down, wishing I could watch him do this, but all I could see was the faint outline of his bobbing head. It was enough to make my dick buck in his mouth, nuts wrenching up higher to hug the base of my shaft.

“Fuck, baby, I’m gonna come soon.” My head craned back as he groaned again, the sound vibrating down my shaft and into my nuts.

He was quickly losing the last of his hesitancy, the wet slurping sounds of him sucking me filling the dark room. I started moaning with every heaving breath, my thighs trembling and fingers clenching too tight in his hair.

This felt so much better than anything else I’d ever done with someone. The pleasure wasn’t just concentrated in my dick. It spread throughout every part of me, making my chest get hot and tight, my throat ache. I was shaking as I ignored the burning pain in my shoulder to reach down with my other hand and cup his face.

“Moth,” I croaked shakily as my cock grew agonisingly hard in his mouth, swelling. “I’m gonna come.”

I warned him in case he wanted to pull away, but he didn’t. He moaned desperately around me, bobbing his head faster as he sucked, his pumping fist matching the frantic pace.

“Oh fuck.” I sucked in a trembling breath, thighs quaking and hands moving feverishly through his hair. “Fuck—”

Fire licked over every inch of me, making me shake. My hips strained up as I started to come, sinking my cock deeper in Moth’s mouth as it flexed and spurted round after round of cum to the back of his throat. My vision greyed out briefly from the intense pleasure that exploded through my body, heat spreading to my limbs and temporarily numbing the pain in my shoulder.

Moth let out a guttural groan and pulled back so that the last few spurts landed on his tongue. He licked my pulsing cockhead frantically as his hand squeezed the base of my shaft. When my cock finally stopped firing, I was boneless and trembling like a leaf.

Moth kissed the sensitive tip of my dick, making me shudder and moan. I could hear his heavy breaths as he ripped off his shirt and shifted between my legs, then clambered up to straddle my waist. When I realised he was completely naked, I moaned hoarsely again.

My breath caught as he leaned down and kissed me, thrusting his tongue into my mouth. His hand was trembling when it found mine, and he drew it down between his spread thighs, making my gut lurch with pleasure.

“Please,” he mumbled shakily against my mouth, then let out a hitching moan when I slid my fingers over his slit.

It was dripping wet and throbbing with heat. I groaned and slid two fingers inside him, my cock trying to rouse when he clenched tight around them and moaned into my mouth.

I tried to ignore the searing heat in my shoulder and reach down with my other hand to fist his cock, but ended up just grunting in pain instead.

Moth shook his head and broke the kiss. “Don’t hurt your shoulder.”

He took over, stroking his cock in time with my thrusting fingers. His hips moved with our hands, and eventually he had to break the kiss to pant against my mouth, his burning hot forehead pressed to mine.

“Charlie,” he croaked, making me moan and kiss him hard.

“You feel so good,” I rasped, my free hand finding his thigh and squeezing. “I want to feel you come.”

He let out a choked groan and shuddered, releasing his cock to tug on my hand. When my fingers slid free, he pushed them back, lower, until the tip of my middle finger brushed over his hole.

“H-here,” he panted. “I want to feel it.”

“Fuck.” My brows pinched with desperation as I softly circled his hole, my fingers still slick.

Moth fisted his cock again and stroked fast, his hips grinding down and sliding his slit against the heel of my hand and my inner wrist. He shuddered hard.

“Please,” he panted against my cheek. “Now. I’m—I—”

I groaned and carefully sank my middle finger inside, my cock tingling and making a valiant effort to get hard again. He was so tight and hot, his

rim clenching my finger as I slid it deeper—

Moth cried out, hips jerking as his ass clamped down on my finger and liquid heat hit my stomach in thick spurts.

“F-f-fuck—Charlie—” He let out a hoarse groan and buried his face in my neck, hips still rocking to chase the last of the pleasure until his cock finally stopped spurting.

He was shaking hard. I slowly slid my finger free and moved my hand around to palm his thigh, automatically tracing over the rough scales I could feel there.

“Are you okay?” I murmured, my voice hoarse as I turned my head to nuzzle his temple.

He was panting into my neck, but I felt his lips curl into a tiny smile. Relief made me go weak.

“I’m great,” he whispered, lifting his head to kiss me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Charlie

We stayed at the big house for another night after that, barely leaving the bed, but eventually we had to set off, heading for the coast in hopes of finding Cat in New York.

I tried to work out how long it'd been since we'd left the Nebraska camp, but couldn't exactly. Weeks and weeks. I hoped Hunter and Edin weren't too worried about me—mainly because Hunter would be an absolute fucking nightmare to the raiders if he was freaking out. Which he probably was.

The moment we set out from the house, I threaded my gloved fingers through Moth's without saying anything, as if it was nothing out of the ordinary. He didn't comment and didn't pull away.

I started doing it every morning after we packed up our camp for the night and kept walking. I held his hand, and sometimes I tugged down our scarves so I could kiss his cheek or mouth. He flushed with pleasure every time.

We still had to keep watch in shifts most nights, so not much had happened between us since leaving the big house, but when we *did* find places that were relatively clean and had an intact bed, we couldn't keep our hands off each other.

The bed in the last place we'd stayed at had been nothing but a bare frame, so instead I'd pressed Moth against the door and dropped to my knees. After tugging his pants down to mid-thigh, I'd sucked his cock and licked him as his tail thumped restlessly against the door, hands fisting my hair tight.

I was in a perpetual state of happiness. Not even the odd monster or the slowly healing wound on my shoulder could dampen it. I didn't know if my good mood rubbed off on Moth, but he seemed happier too. He laughed more, and he seemed to like holding my hand. Eventually he even instigated kisses or easy, intimate touches between us when we set up camp for the night. Like sliding his arms around me and hugging me from behind,

kissing the back of my neck as he walked past, or leaning into me while we were eating.

He'd been starved of affection for so long—his whole life. I showered him with it to make up for the lack he'd experienced, and it was no hardship. I wanted to give him everything.

Despite what had happened in Chicago, I couldn't bring myself to be worried when we finally reached New York. Moth was more than capable of getting us in and back out of the city. I knew if it came down to it, I'd trust him with my life. It was strange now, thinking back to when we'd first set out from the camp, when I hadn't really trusted him at all. I couldn't imagine it.

The secret entrance was much like the one in Chicago, a doorway sheared into the looming metal wall, tucked away in one of the worst parts of the city where the military rarely bothered to go.

New York was an absolutely enormous city now. Far, far larger than it had been before the monsters came, having swallowed up everything around it along the coastline to make space for the flood of people who'd sought refuge here when the apocalypse happened.

I'd only ever been to New York since joining the military, way after the monsters came, so I didn't know if it was anything like how it'd been before. The street was teeming with people when we stepped out of the dark alley, despite the late hour—so much busier than Chicago had been.

My gut sank as we walked down the street toward an ATM. I still had some cash, but I knew we'd need more while we were here. How were we going to find Cat? It was so crowded. This already felt impossible, and we'd only just got here.

We didn't even know if he was *in* the city. We were going off the vague words of one guy who'd been drinking at eight in the morning, but we had nothing else. No other leads. Still, we'd come all this way, so we might as well look.

I kept an eye out for anyone throwing up, having seen just how quickly an outbreak could spread in such close quarters. Where the hell had the Soul Eater been? Did he not bother with eliminating parasites in the cities? It still baffled me to think that the terrifying, ghoulish monster feared by everyone was actually *helping* humanity. He'd helped me, even though I hadn't even been infected.

Monsters really weren't as black and white as humans made them out to be. My gaze slid to Moth as we walked. We weren't holding hands anymore, because we didn't want to draw attention to ourselves. Some people were somehow still bigoted assholes despite, you know, a fucking monster apocalypse and all.

Which side of his heritage did he relate to more? I got the feeling that he didn't really feel like he fit in with either, which made me want to hug him close. It seemed like he wanted to fit in with humans more, but he didn't, which was heartbreaking.

Fuck people. I wanted to tell him that he didn't need anyone else—that I'd stay with him. That I liked him—more than liked him—just the way he was. Prickly, defensive attitude, arrogance and all.

But his arrogance was only a mask, and his defensive attitude made so much sense. He was fragile beneath the façade.

I wanted to find us a room straight away so we could be alone together. Not to have sex, just so I could curl up with him in bed and maybe make him happy for a while. Take him away from all the wary, mildly disgusted looks he was *still* fucking getting from everyone we passed on the street. Every time I saw someone eye him, I bristled and wanted to tell them to fuck off. I wasn't an overly confrontational person, but it filled me with fury to see it, especially because I knew Moth noticed.

After I got some cash out, we made our way to a convenience store to grab some food and stock up on supplies. I slipped Moth some cash and we parted ways inside to get whatever we needed.

I grabbed some packaged food that would keep until we were back out in the Wastes, and a sad-looking sandwich from the deli section. I wished I knew more about what Moth liked so I could get him something—even though he was getting his own stuff—but he never really commented on his favourite things. Still, I remembered him ordering iced tea every time we ate in diners in Chicago, so I grabbed him a bottle.

I picked up some more first-aid supplies to replenish what we'd used. My shoulder was healing nicely with no signs of infection, and the scratch on my leg from the cob monster—*forileun*—was just a faded pink line down the back of my calf.

After grabbing an ice-cream bar—so it was cold out; it was still sugar—I approached the bored-looking cashier at the register. After giving her a winning smile and putting my stuff on the counter, my eyes drifted down to

the stack of tabloid newspapers next to the register. The smile slid off my face.

MONSTER ATTACK IN CHICAGO! THOUSANDS DEAD, MILITARY SAVES CITY

So, Moth had been right. The military controlled the very limited press now—all media; everything, in fact—and they’d clearly used the parasite outbreak as a fucking PR stunt. Word would have spread if they’d just gone into the district and gunned everyone down. This way, it looked like they’d *saved* people.

I added the paper to my pile of purchases so I could read the article once we found a room. I glanced over my shoulder to look for Moth as the cashier rang up my stuff, knowing the sight of him would make me feel less agitated.

When I saw him waiting behind me in line, I smiled at him. He returned it with a tiny smile of his own, a few items cradled in his arms. As the cashier told me my total in a bored voice, I saw his eyes dart to her and grow wary. Shit, he was probably dreading the cagey looks and reluctant attitude as she served him.

“Sorry, a few more things.” I gestured Moth forward and turned back to the cashier to give her a charming grin.

She rolled her eyes and started ringing up the items Moth placed on the counter. A plastic bowl of wilted chicken salad, a big bag of potato chips, a can of soda, some noodle packets, shampoo and a box of donuts.

I grinned at the sight of the donuts and nudged him with my elbow, handing the money over after the cashier had shoved the rest of the purchases into a plastic bag. She pushed it across the counter and dumped my change beside it, then turned back to her phone.

“Thank you kindly,” I drawled, resisting the urge to grab Moth’s hand as I picked up the bag and we walked out of the store.

We found a room quickly, both of us tired. It was much like all the ones we’d stayed in in Chicago—bare, just about clean, with a miniscule bathroom and cheap furniture. After tugging off our bags, coats and boots, we sat on the bed to eat.

“So you got donuts, huh?” I teased. “Are you getting a sweet tooth?”

He huffed. "I got them for you. Even though..." His cheeks flushed. "It's your money, but... I thought you'd want them."

I freaking melted. I reached over and stroked his knee, then shoved my hand into the bag to find his iced tea.

"I got you this." I grinned as I handed it over, and Moth snuffled out a laugh as he took it.

"Thanks."

"We'll have the donuts for breakfast. I'll go get us coffee when we wake up."

I held the disappointing sandwich in one hand as I pulled out the newspaper with the other. Moth glanced at it, shifting back to lean against the wall where one side of the bed butted up against it. His long legs were crossed, and the unusual shape of his feet was visible even through his socks. My chest warmed, but I looked away quickly so he didn't think I was staring at them. I was just glad he was getting more comfortable with me.

I quickly scanned over the article on the front page, my lip curling at the sensationalised bullshit.

The city of New Chicago fell under siege recently when monsters managed to scale the wall and wipe out an entire district.

An anonymous source reported that at least six monsters attacked the district, killing thousands before military efforts were able to contain the invasion and eliminate the creatures. The district is still under heavy military guard to ensure that the rest of the city remains safe.

"We are working hard to figure out how this breach happened," Major Bratton told the nation in a recent televised statement. "We want to reassure our cities' inhabitants that this was an isolated incident. We are already assessing the safety measures in place in our cities, including the walls, to ensure that Americans across the country remain protected from the threat in the mainland."

I snorted and flicked the paper around so Moth could read it. "You were right."

He tensed up, eyes darting to the paper and away again. "About what?"

My brows twitched into a frown as I glanced down at the paper, the words **MONSTERS ATTACK CHICAGO!** clearly visible in thick black letters.

“About the military’s stunt in Chicago.” I gestured at the paper. “Read the bullshit Bratton spouted off to the media. It’s a crock of shit.”

Moth swallowed and set down his plastic container of salad, then hesitantly reached for the paper with long, tattooed fingers. He stared down at it with his head bent while I took a huge bite of my sandwich, grimacing at its taste.

Moth blew out a hard breath through his nose, back hunched and tense. He mumbled something I didn’t catch.

I swallowed my mouthful. “Huh?”

“I can’t read.”

His voice was small and ashamed, and my chest clenched tight as I stared at him, slowly setting the rest of my sandwich on its plastic wrapper. He kept his head bent, even as he carefully put down the paper and reached for his iced tea with slightly trembling fingers.

I should have realised. I’d suspected something was off when I’d asked him for aspirin after the forileun cut me, and he’d instead handed me every pill packet in my medical kit. But I’d still been a little woozy from the pain, so I’d brushed it off.

God, of course he couldn’t read. He’d never had anybody to teach him.

“Do you want to learn?” I asked, making sure my voice didn’t sound at all patronising or pitying. “I can teach you.”

Moth’s breath caught, as if he hadn’t been expecting that response. Honestly, I had no idea what the correct thing to say was. I didn’t give a shit if he couldn’t read—it didn’t make him any less smart or capable—but he obviously did. He was obviously embarrassed by it.

My throat closed up. I wanted to hug him, but he looked brittle.

“I—” He fiddled with the cap on his bottle, then finally looked up at me, his eyes tight. “We don’t have time for that.”

“Of course we do,” I protested immediately.

“No, we don’t,” he said flatly, reaching for his salad again. “We have to find Cat, and then we’ll be travelling back to the camp. And then...”

A ball of ice formed in the pit of my stomach. And then we’d be parting ways. I’d be going back to the homestead with Edin and Hunter, or staying at the Nebraska camp, or going off on my own in the Wastes. And Moth would go back to his life, roaming the Wastes alone.

I swallowed hard, the food sitting in my stomach like a lead ball.

“Moth...”

“Have you thought about what you’re going to do?” he interrupted, before shovelling salad into his mouth. “After this?”

“I...” I licked my lips, nerves rising alongside the desperate urge to ask if I could stay with him. If he wanted me to. “No. I don’t know.”

If you ask me to stay with you, I will. I stared at his bent head, wishing I was brave enough to say it. *I’ll teach you to read. I’ll go back to your safehouse in the middle of nowhere with you.*

The overwhelming longing to do all those things hit me with the force of a truck. The thought of parting from him, of him being alone out there again, and me being just as alone wherever I was, was a sharp, stabbing pain in my chest.

It wasn’t just the desire to have *someone*. It was him. I wanted *him*.

But I didn’t think he wanted me back in that way. He wanted someone else.

Moth let out a quiet breath. “You’ll figure it out.” A hint of his bravado-laden mask settled over his features, and he shot me a tiny smile. “Thanks for the offer, but I’ll be okay. I’ve managed this long.”

He had. He was so strong. He’d navigated the world without what most people took for granted, because he’d never had anyone to teach him. Fury rose like a tidal wave when I thought about all the shitty people in his life. The carers who had left him behind when the monsters came. The people who had reluctantly taken him to a city before abandoning him there—a tiny little boy. His awful monster parent who had done nothing but abuse him since finding him. All the raiders who treated him like shit just because he was different.

I wondered briefly how different Moth’s life might have been if his mother hadn’t died giving birth to him—assuming that was what had actually happened. Surely he had no way of knowing for certain, but I suspected it was something he told himself for comfort. The alternative was too awful—that she hadn’t wanted him just like everyone else. She must have known she was carrying a baby that wasn’t entirely human—she’d had sex with his monster parent at some point.

I cleared my throat. “If you want to learn, I’m happy to teach you. And if you don’t, that’s fine too.”

Moth didn’t say anything, and after fidgeting with the comforter for a few moments, I couldn’t help myself—I launched forward and kissed him

hard. He made a muffled sound of surprise against my mouth, but kissed me back.

I pulled back and licked my lips, then kissed him again. I had nothing else to say to him—I just needed him to see how much I still wanted him. That he had nothing to be ashamed of.

Moth's fingers were clutching the front of my shirt when I eventually sat back. He uncurled them and cleared his throat, picking up his bottle again, looking flustered.

"Want me to read you the article so you can get pissed about how the military has spun what happened?" I picked up the paper in one hand and my disappointing sandwich in the other.

Moth let out a tiny chuckle and reached for his half-eaten salad. "Okay."

I read it out to him, unable to keep my voice from dripping with sarcasm. When I finished, Moth snorted and set aside his empty salad container.

"Anonymous source," he deadpanned. "As in their contact in the military."

I chuckled. "Yeah. The free press is well and truly dead, huh? Like a lot of other things."

I stood up and gathered up our trash to stick it in the waste basket by the bathroom door. Returning to the bed, I sat closer to Moth and leaned forward, resting my elbows on my crossed knees. He smirked a little and sat up from the wall to kiss me, mouth moving softly over mine.

"Wanna take a shower together?" I asked with a salacious grin when we broke apart.

Moth snorted, eyes flicking over to the tiny bathroom. "I don't think we'd both fit in there."

"We will if we're determined enough." I leaned forward and kissed him again, murmuring, "What if I sweeten the deal by eating your ass in there?"

Moth's breath caught so fast he nearly choked. His face flamed pink even as his filmy pupils expanded in a rush. We hadn't done that yet, but shit, I wanted to. I knew he wanted it too, even though his insecurity was holding him back.

Unease flitted over his features. "I think my—the tail would make that kind of difficult."

"No, it wouldn't."

He was silent for a few moments.

“Is it disgusting?” he blurted. His face deepened in colour. “The tail, I mean. Sometimes it... it feels like a growth I should cut off.”

My chest constricted. “No. It’s not a growth, Moth. It’s a tail. It’s part of you. And it’s not fucking disgusting. Nothing about you is disgusting.”

When he didn’t say anything, I reached over and took his hands.

“It’s normal to be self-conscious about some things, but you shouldn’t be *ashamed* of them.” I squeezed his hands. “I still get bacne sometimes, despite being in my thirties. And I’ve got stretch marks on my ass from getting way too into squats when I first joined the military.”

Moth snuffled a tiny laugh. “You’ve—you’ve got a great ass.”

I grinned as pleasure suffused me. “See? Moth, when I look at you, I don’t sit there picking out things that could be perceived as flaws. Because they’re *not* flaws. They’re just a part of you. And I love every part of you. You’re beautiful.”

He didn’t seem to know what to say to that, so I raised our tangled fingers and kissed his knuckles before releasing his hands.

“We can shower in the morning. Let’s just get into bed. Want me to read the rest of the paper to you? We can see what city folk deem headline news while we’re out in the Wastes fighting off finger fuckers and... We should come up with a name for that thing in the barn.”

Moth snorted as he slid off the bed and pulled off his shirt. “You haven’t come up with one already? I thought that was your speciality.”

“Hmm.” I tugged off my shirt and stood up to undo my pants. “Dome bear? ‘Cause of its back? No, that’s kinda weak.”

Moth let out a husky laugh. “I like it.”

He hesitated with his fingers poised over the button of his jeans. I saw his throat bob, but he began undoing them. My throat closed up, and I wanted to hug him. He left his socks on after pulling off his pants, but he was making progress, at least. His tail protruded over the band of his underwear, and it was flicking just a little, but he seemed pretty calm. If he’d let me, I’d kiss every inch of his tail and legs and monster feet to show him that he absolutely was not disgusting in any way.

We cleared the rest of our stuff off the bed and climbed in. I settled back against the headboard with the newspaper in my lap while Moth sat up, swiftly braiding his hair, before leaning back beside me with our arms touching.

I cleared my throat. “Okay, so I read you the bullshit on the front page already...”

I turned to the first inside page, folding the paper in half. “So here’s a nice story about a string of murders linked to a gang. Let’s start there. Doubt it’s going to get much more cheerful, to be honest.”

Moth snorted and shifted, slouching lower until his head rested on my shoulder. I started reading out loud, and after a few minutes he shifted again, curling into me and resting his head on my chest with his arm slung over my belly.

My heart spasmed, giving a mighty thud. I dipped my head to press a kiss into his hair, then started reading again, my voice a little hoarser this time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Charlie

Moth was still asleep when I woke up the next morning, his head on my chest and an arm and leg slung over me. I could feel a little patch of drool on my chest, which made me want to smile as I carefully manoeuvred out from under him. He stirred, a tattooed arm curling around my pillow and tugging it into him, but didn't wake up.

I dressed quietly and left to get us some coffee. This place had a side door to get to the rooms upstairs, and the sky was clear when I stepped out into the dirty alleyway, the sun bright, with frost still coating the dumpster opposite.

It was already busy. Market stalls further down the street were crowded, traders shouting over one another. People walked along the sidewalks with their heads down and collars pulled up to ward off the chill, not speaking to each other, their breaths leaving them in cold puffs.

I spotted a coffee shop across the street with a queue out the door, so instead I went back to the convenience store we'd gone to last night and got two cups of cheap, crappy coffee from the machine in there, loading mine up with sugar before snapping the lid on.

The store clerk wasn't the same one as last night, but looked equally bored sitting behind the cash register. The store was empty apart from me, so as I dug in my pocket for change to pay, I cleared my throat.

"Have you noticed any new people coming in here recently?"

The guy looked young and had several piercings in his septum, lips and eyebrow. The bar in his brow glinted as he raised it. "New people?"

"Yeah."

He narrowed his eyes at me as he took my money. "*You're new.*"

I chuckled and noticed his eyes dart down to my mouth. His cheeks flushed and he looked away quickly as he shoved the note into the register and picked out my change. It reminded me of Moth—hesitant and guarded, like he didn't think he was allowed to look.

Feeling just a little gross, I used it to my advantage. Resting a palm on the counter, I leaned in and shot him my charming grin.

“I am.” I made sure to lay my Texan accent on a little thicker, because some people seemed to like it. “And I guess I was just wonderin’ if anyone else had... arrived the same way I did.”

The guy’s eyes flared, and he licked his lips as he glanced once at the door.

“Did you get in from the Wastes?” he whispered, excitement dancing in his gaze before it tracked down me and back up. “You’re a raider?”

I could tell he thought the idea was intriguing, like raiders were some great, mystical warriors roaming the Wastes. I flashed him another grin and shrugged.

“Damn, that’s so cool.” He leaned closer, eyes darting to my mouth again. “I’d heard there was a way in. My friend Bethany works at this bar down the street, and she said she’d noticed new faces in there. Did something happen in the Wastes? Why are you all coming into the city?”

“Well I don’t know about the others, but I’m looking for someone.”

“Oh.” He sat back, nose wrinkling a little, and muttered petulantly, “Your... boyfriend or something?”

My lips twitched. “No, not a boyfriend. Just a friend.”

His eyes brightened again, and he leaned back in. “Well, I mean... I *have* noticed some new people coming in here over the last few weeks. What does your friend look like?”

“Tall. Black. Strong build.” I tried to think of Cat’s face, but I hadn’t been with him long, so I couldn’t give a great description. “Uh... beard. Dark eyes.”

The store clerk rolled his eyes. “Not the most detailed description, dude.”

I chuckled. “I know, sorry. Maybe you could tell me where your friend’s bar is? If she’s noticed new people there, I might spot him.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I think there are... certain places where new folk tend to hang out. Where the military never goes. Not that they come around here much anyway, except to get laid.”

I grunted. “Not a bad thing.”

“Yeah, no,” he agreed eagerly. “Fuck the military, right? They treat us like dog shit here, especially in these parts of the city. Shit, man, sometimes I wonder if it’d be better to be out in the Wastes.”

My face tightened. I wasn't going to try and encourage this kid to take off into the Wastes. "The Wastes are really dangerous. I know it sucks here, but it's safer."

Except when the military dropped in a load of monsters to wipe out an entire district.

Unfortunately, all that did was make his eyes flash as he leaned in, staring at my mouth again. "Yeah? Have you killed a lot of monsters?"

I didn't like the insinuation that killing monsters made me some kind of badass. I picked up our coffees and forced myself not to frown. "Yeah. Only when I had to. Most of them just want to be left alone."

"That's so cool," he breathed, then jerked back when the door opened, letting in a gust of cold air. A young woman in a big puffer coat stepped inside and made her way to the fridges at the back.

"So, this bar?" I flashed him another charming grin. "Could you tell me where it is?"

"Yeah, yeah, of course. It's called Big Jake's. It's just down the street, past the market, but it won't be open yet. Bethany's working tonight."

"Thank you kindly." I grinned at him again and let my eyes drift down to his nametag. "Pete. I appreciate your help."

"Are you going there tonight?" he blurted, eyes darting to the woman who was approaching the register behind me. "I'll—I'll be there. So..."

I smiled. "Yeah, probably. Might see you there."

He bit briefly on his pierced lip and nodded. "Okay. Cool. Maybe, um... What's your name?"

"Chuck," I said smoothly, raising a coffee cup to him as a goodbye before stepping away from the counter.

When I got back to our room, Moth was up and dressed. He stood up from the bed the moment I opened the door, eyes anxious as he approached.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, sorry, just went to get us some coffee." I handed his over and took a sip from mine. "Want a donut?"

I crossed to our plastic bag from the night before and realised as I pulled out the box of donuts that I'd forgotten to eat my ice-cream bar. I chuckled and threw the squishy wrapper in the trash.

"So I spoke to the store clerk in the convenience store," I said around a mouthful as I held the box out for Moth. "He said there's a bar near here

where they've noticed some new people. Good enough place to start, I guess."

"Okay." Moth took a donut. "Anyone who did come in from the Wastes will probably stay around here. Do you want to go now?"

"He said it's not open yet. We could walk around for a while, see if I can spot anyone from the prison."

Moth grimaced and sipped his coffee. "Feels impossible."

"Yeah." I cleared my throat and looked down at my coffee cup. "Do you think he's dead?"

I heard Moth swallow his mouthful.

"I don't know," he said huskily, "but those guys in Chicago said he was unbeatable at the prison. If they managed to get out and make it to the city... maybe he did too."

"Yeah." I rubbed my face and gulped down some coffee. "What do you think happened?"

"At the prison? I have no idea." Moth shook his head and finished his donut. "I didn't see any bodies there, but they could have been covered by snow. Or eaten."

Letting out a hard breath, I threw my empty cup in the trash. "I'm glad it's gone. Although I'm sure another one will pop up somewhere else, if it was a lucrative business."

I started stripping off to take a shower. I could see Moth had already had one, his hair damp but still loose to cover his ears.

"I'll wash up and then we'll head out there."

"Yeah," Moth croaked, and as I stepped into the bathroom, I glanced back to see him staring at my ass.

Grinning, I closed the door behind me as my cock perked up. God, I wanted Moth all the time. Part of me wondered if we could just stay in our room until the bar opened later. But no—we had to at least try and look. I didn't particularly want to extend our stay here longer than was necessary, the threat of another parasite outbreak always lurking at the back of my mind.

I took a quick shower and dried off with Moth's slightly damp towel, which he'd taken from the big house we'd stayed at. My cock perked up again when I stepped out of the bathroom and he turned from the window, his eyes flaring when he took me in.

I chuckled, digging clean underwear out of my bag. “Don’t look at me like that or we won’t be going anywhere.”

Moth flushed, looking guilty before he seemed to realise I was teasing him. He let out a quiet chuckle. “I can’t help it.”

My insides lurched with pleasure. Moth often struggled to word things when it came to sex or his attraction to me. Almost like he was nervous about what would happen if he voiced his desire.

“I know what you mean,” I rasped, sauntering over to him, my boxer briefs still in my hand. His eyes flared as they tracked down my body and fixed on my cock, which was twitching with interest.

I cupped the back of his neck, pulling his head down to kiss him. His hands crept around my waist as he kissed me back, then slid down to palm my ass. When my cock jerked against his hip, he moaned hoarsely and pulled me tighter to him, long fingers biting into my ass cheeks.

I softened the kiss and pulled back before we got too distracted.

“I have an idea about what we can do later.” My voice was gravelly as I rested my hand on Moth’s chest, over his thudding heart, and grinned at him. “When we’re done looking for Cat.”

He licked his lips, pale eyes sliding from my mouth back down to my eager cock. “What?”

“You’ll find out later.” I patted his chest and stepped back, pulling on my boxer briefs and wrangling my hard cock into them.

Moth stood frozen, staring at me until he snorted. “Shithead.”

I grinned and returned to my bag to finish getting dressed. By the time I was carefully shrugging on my coat, my shoulder still tender, Moth had his on and both his bags slung over his back—his sword once again hidden.

“Okay, slayer.” I approached and gave him one last firm kiss before we left. “Let’s go.”

Big Jake’s Bar was heaving.

We’d spent most of the day walking around, trying to overhear conversations or spot people from the prison. We found a laundromat to wash our clothes, then had dinner in a small diner before coming here not long after it opened, but it was already packed.

Moth was tense beside me, making me want to reach for his hand. We wouldn't spend long here, because people were already giving him those mildly disgusted looks. It seemed like most people didn't even realise they were doing it—it was just an automatic reaction. I wanted to punch every single person I saw doing it.

I got us each a beer at the bar before we made our way through the crowd to the side of the room. But before we could get to a less crowded spot, I felt a hand on my arm. I tensed up immediately and whipped around, then forced myself to relax when I saw it was the guy from the convenience store.

“Oh. Hey.” I gave him a nod and forced a friendly smile. “How’s it going?”

“Hey, I spotted you—” He gestured at the bar, his face flushed from the heat in the packed room. “Uh... Have you seen your friend?”

I chuckled. “Not yet. We’ve only just got here.”

The guy—I couldn't remember his name, which made me feel guilty—finally seemed to notice Moth standing silently beside me. His eyes flared with appreciation for a split second before the inevitable tinge of wary disdain settled over his features. He shifted away from him a step.

“Uh... cool.” His voice was a little less eager. “Well, Bethany’s working tonight. Want me to introduce you so you can ask her if she’s seen your friend?”

“Yeah, that would be great.” I grinned at him just to soften him back up. “I appreciate it.”

When I looked over at Moth, he was scowling as he stared at the convenience store clerk. My mouth twitched. We didn't want to draw more attention to ourselves than was necessary, but the sight of his jealousy made my insides swoop. I leaned over and kissed the side of his neck.

“Ready, baby?” I made sure the guy heard, feeling a little guilty, but I was more concerned with making sure Moth didn't feel insecure. Besides, I wasn't interested in this guy.

Moth's face smoothed out, and after a moment he nodded. The clerk was the one pouting now as he led us over to the bar. Moth slipped his hand into mine as we wove through the crowd, so I squeezed it. His arrogant mask was firmly back in place by the time we reached the bar, which just made me want to kiss him again.

“Hey, Beth!” The clerk leaned on the bar and yelled down to a woman with a black mohawk and heavy eyeliner. “Come here a sec.”

She wandered over, eyeing me and then Moth. I was shocked when her face remained blank—she was the first person I’d seen who didn’t curl their lip at the sight of Moth. I warmed to her before she’d even said a word.

“Hey, Pete.” She nodded at both of us.

“Chuck here is looking for someone,” Pete said. “One of the *new* faces, you get me?”

I heard Moth let out a quiet snort and mutter, “Chuck.”

I squeezed his hand. “Yeah, hi. We’re looking for our friend and Pete here mentioned that you’d noticed some new folk around.”

“Yeah.” Bethany nodded and didn’t ask any difficult questions, which made me like her even more. “A big influx a while back. What do they look like?”

“Chuck gave me the most basic description.” Pete nudged me with his elbow, shooting me a smile, and I felt Moth tug me closer to him. “Tall black guy with a beard.”

Beth huffed. “Yeah, not the most helpful.”

“He has a scar on his temple. On the left side,” Moth said in his husky voice. Of course he’d be able to offer a better description—he knew Cat far better than I did.

“He might be with someone else,” I added with a frown, remembering that he’d stayed behind at the prison for someone. “But we don’t know what they look like.”

Beth stared at us both with a flat look. “You guys would suck at detective work, you know that?”

I chuckled and shot her my charming grin, even though I was pretty sure it wouldn’t work on her like it had on Pete. “Yeah.”

“Sorry. Haven’t noticed anyone with a scar on their temple, but I’ll keep an eye out.” Beth nodded at someone signalling her further down the bar. “Come back in a few days and I might have news for you.”

I exhaled, forcing a smile on my face. “We appreciate it. Thanks.”

She shot us a thumbs up before walking down the bar to serve a customer. I squeezed Moth’s hand and turned to Pete.

“Thanks for your help.” I felt kind of bad for the guy, so I dug in my pocket. “Let us buy you a drink.”

Moth stiffened up beside me. Pete’s eyes brightened as he grinned wide.

“Thanks. You don’t have to.”

“No problem, you’ve helped us out. Right, baby?” I grinned over at Moth, raising my brows to let him know I could tell how much he hated it.

He scowled at me and flicked his eyes away, but as Pete gestured for Beth to come back over, I felt Moth’s arm slide under my coat before long fingers slipped beneath the hem of my shirt to trail over my lower back. I shivered, leaning into him, even as I told myself that I should *not* be enjoying him getting possessive over me.

It’s just casual, I tried to remind myself as Beth returned and I handed over the money for Pete’s drink. *He’s in love with someone else.*

CHAPTER THIRTY

Moth

“So, *Chuck*,” I drawled from behind Charlie as we made our way up the stairs. We’d gotten a room above Big Jake’s Bar for the night, and I was pretty sure that fucking convenience store guy had been hoping for an invitation—provided I wasn’t around. “Already making new friends.”

Charlie glanced back over his shoulder and shot me his wide grin. “What can I say? I’m a people person.”

I snorted but said nothing, trying not to think about the intense jealousy that had streaked through me when I’d seen that guy—*Pete*—gazing at Charlie like he would have dropped to his knees right then and there in the bar.

I’d had an intense urge, for just a second, to cut his head off with my sword. But I had that urge about a lot of people, so... it didn’t mean anything, right? Charlie had made it clear that this was just casual. That he didn’t want a relationship.

Technically, he was free to fuck whoever he wanted. But the thought of it made me feel sick, my gut churning with something I didn’t have a name for. Almost like a sense of urgency to... I didn’t even know. But I knew I hated it.

When we got into our room for the night, Charlie groaned as he eased off his bags. I hurried to help him take off his coat. I knew his shoulder was still tender, because I checked it religiously every night.

“I need another shower after being in that bar.”

I tried not to stare as Charlie pulled off his shirt, revealing his tight, lightly muscled torso with the sprinkling of hair on his chest that I, for some reason, always wanted to sift my fingers through. There was another thin trail leading from his navel into his pants that I was desperate to nuzzle whenever I was down there—which was often—but I didn’t know if he’d think it was weird, so I didn’t.

When he sat down on the bed to pull off his boots, I realised I was still just standing there like an idiot. I took off my bags and coat then sat down

beside him to tug off my boots, feeling only a brief flash of fear about revealing my monster feet. *Charlie doesn't care. He doesn't.*

He stood up to undo his pants, and I started staring again. My eyes locked onto his ass, encased in snug grey boxer briefs, when he shucked his pants and socks. I looked away quickly when he turned to face me, even though I... I was allowed to look. He liked me looking.

Charlie moved to stand in front of me, between my spread knees, and my hands rose to his hips as though magnetised as I looked up at him. He pushed my hair back off my face and kept his hand on the back of my head, cradling it and making my chest get weirdly tight.

I saw his throat bob before he grinned down at me, almost like he was nervous. But that was ridiculous—Charlie didn't get nervous.

"Want to join me?"

Lust shot through me, making my gut lurch. But it was quickly followed by fear at the thought of being naked with him, under bright lights, which I knew was stupid. He'd seen me naked plenty of times now, but that was always when we were... preoccupied. When I wasn't just *standing* there where he could focus on all the parts of me that weren't human.

"I—" My eyes darted to the bathroom door. "Is that the idea you were talking about? Earlier?"

He chuckled, stepping closer until I had to bite the inside of my cheek to stop from leaning forward and pressing my lips against his stomach.

"No, this'd just be the precursor."

Heat settled between my legs. My voice was raspy when I asked, "To what?"

"Well." Charlie crouched between my knees, hands landing on my thighs. He looked up at me and gave me a tiny smile. "I was wondering if you wanted to fuck me."

I stared at him. For some reason, I'd assumed that if we ever did that, I'd be the one who...

I swallowed, gripping his forearms. "You want me to?"

"God, yes." Charlie's brows pinched, and he started leaning up to kiss me before abruptly halting. His throat bobbed again. "But only if you want to. It's okay if you don't. Not everyone likes it—"

"No," I blurted, my fingers digging into his arms. "I want to. I..."

I couldn't stop myself from cupping his face and leaning down in a rush to kiss him. Part of me still clenched up every time with the worry that he

would pull away. But he never did. He seemed to like it when I touched or kissed him first. I was still struggling to get used to the fact that I could. That he wanted me to.

He kissed me back fervently, tasting faintly of the beer we'd both sipped while hanging around the bar to keep an eye out for Cat. Charlie scrambled up off the floor when I tugged him up and stood, my hands already fumbling to pull down his boxer briefs.

I dropped down to tug them off over his feet and, after only the briefest hesitation, kissed the head of his half-hard cock. It jerked as he moaned, fingers sifting through my hair, so I kissed it again. Throat bobbing with nerves, I nuzzled the thatch of hair at the root of his cock, trying to subtly breathe in his scent.

"Moth," Charlie rasped from above me, a hand sliding around to palm my cheek.

I let out a shuddering breath and stood back up. "Okay, let's—let's shower first."

Taking a step back, I tugged my shirt off and reached for the fly of my pants. Charlie grinned at me, leaning forward to kiss me once as he rested his warm hand on my stomach.

"I'll go get the shower started." He padded across the room and disappeared into the bathroom.

I was grateful for the moment of privacy as I got undressed. Charlie was unnervingly perceptive, which I was pretty sure was a big part of why I'd managed to bring myself to ever get naked with him and let him touch me in the first place. He never pushed me. He was so careful to respect my boundaries, which allowed me to lower them slowly, one at a time.

I was still incredibly nervous as I made my way over to the bathroom. I could hear the shower running, and when I pushed open the door, I stopped and stared. Charlie was already under the water, his back to me, his shoulders flexing as he slicked back his wet hair. His body tapered into lean hips and a round, firm ass that made my mouth water every time I saw it. His legs were long and dusted with dark hair. I loved running my fingers through it. I loved everything about him that was different to my body, and I... I was starting to believe him when he said he loved the differences in my body too.

Trying to tamp down the nerves, I stepped into the tiny, cramped enclosure behind him. It was so small that I was immediately pressed up

against him, but Charlie seemed to like it. He pressed back and let out a soft sound when I hesitantly wrapped my arms around his midsection.

I could feel my tail flicking nervously, and I cringed when I heard it slap against the shower wall. But Charlie didn't notice or comment, and as I dipped my head to kiss his wet shoulder, I could see his cock standing at full mast, jutting out from his hips. My insides clenched up with want, and my own cock slid free.

Charlie groaned when he felt it nestle against the top of his ass, shifting back so it rubbed harder against his skin. My breath shuddered out of me as my cock slid between his cheeks. Charlie let out a rough sound, one palm pressed to the shower wall while the other reached back and grabbed my hip, holding me tight to him.

Neither of us spoke, but our breaths grew heavy in the tiny, steamy space as I slid my hands down his stomach and arched my hips. Charlie's hand shot out to the soap dispenser, pumping some into his palm before he spun around and kissed me hard. He leaned back against the shower wall and reached down. When I felt him pin our cocks together in his soapy hand and stroke, I gritted out a moan and steadied myself with a hand on the wall beside him.

We kissed hungrily, tongues duelling as he stroked us together in his slippery fist. I could feel how slick I was getting, and pre-cum was pouring from the head of my cock. I'd initially worried that he would be grossed out by how much there always was, but he seemed to love it. He loved licking it up, and the many memories I now had of his hot tongue on me made my cock throb in his fist.

Charlie groaned and reached out for more soap. He threaded his fingers through mine, lathering up my hand before directing it behind him.

To his ass.

"Fuck," I breathed as my fingers slid down his crack until they found his hole. Charlie moaned into my mouth, squeezing our cocks as I started stroking.

I broke the kiss to watch him as I carefully slid my finger inside, gut lurching with arousal when his eyes flared and his lips parted. I couldn't get all that deep because of the angle, but the feel of him inside, so hot and smooth... I couldn't help but kiss him again in a greedy rush.

I wanted to taste him there. The thought made the root of my cock pulse inside me, and I slid my finger free to spin him around. Charlie grunted,

palms flattening against the shower wall, then moaned when I slid to my knees behind him, hands trailing down his sides to his hips.

“Is this okay?” I asked, suddenly unsure.

“Shit, yes,” he panted, arching his hips back and making my mouth water.

I leaned in and kissed his ass cheek, licking up some of the water on it. My fingers trembled as I grasped his cheeks and spread them gently, groaning at the sight of his hole. I told myself to go slow, but my control fled quickly as I licked him and let out a low moan.

Charlie spasmed, breath leaving him in a rush. “Fuck.”

I licked again, encouraged by his response. The faint hint of soap mingled with the taste of his skin, and my fingers dug into his cheeks tighter as I swirled my tongue around his rim.

“Moth,” Charlie panted, hips arching back to get closer to my mouth.

I moaned against him, my cock pulsing between my legs as I licked him again and again. Breathing hard, I trailed my tongue down to lap at his sac, which was already pulled up tight. I loved playing with his balls—maybe because I didn’t have them myself, but mainly because he seemed to really fucking like it. He let out a strangled sound, fingers scrabbling over the wet shower wall. I sucked one into my mouth and moaned around it, but I wanted to get back to his ass, so I quickly licked my way back up.

My tail slapped against the shower floor with aroused agitation, but I couldn’t bring myself to be embarrassed as I ate his ass feverishly. When I carefully dipped the tip of my pointed tongue inside, Charlie let out a trembling groan.

My cock ached. Now that I knew he wanted me to fuck him, I was desperate to do it. I stood up after one final kiss to his hole, trembling with arousal. He spun around and kissed me with a low moan, panting against my mouth.

“Bed.” He fumbled behind him to switch off the shower, then tugged me out with him, not stopping to dry off before he dragged me into the bedroom and over to the bed.

When we got there, Charlie turned and kissed me again. My hips jerked when he reached down and played with the head of my cock.

“How do you want me, baby?” he rasped with a grin. “Hands and knees?”

The nerves flared back up. “Uh—I—”

He pulled away to reach for his bag, producing a bottle of lube. “Just have to get me ready first, but I’ll do it.”

“No,” I blurted. “I want to do it.”

Charlie’s cock jerked as he handed me the bottle of lube before climbing onto the bed on his hands and knees. I was instantly distracted by the sight of his firm ass, but then I noticed his wince.

“No—your shoulder.” I climbed on behind him and urged him onto his back with my hands on his hips.

“I’ll be okay.”

“No.” I glared at him, which made him chuckle. “I didn’t nurse you back to health just for you to fuck up your shoulder during—while we do this.”

“Well, I got no complaints about getting to watch you fuck me.” He shot me his charming grin and planted his feet flat on the mattress either side of my hips. “Now get your fingers in my ass.”

I choked out a laugh and quickly lubed up my fingers, briefly cupping his balls in my slippery hand before trailing lower to his hole. Charlie moaned and reached down to hold the backs of his knees, pulling his legs up higher.

I tried not to stare as my cock throbbed. He was just so... open. He had no reservations about being seen in such a vulnerable position, and it made my chest ache as I slowly stroked his hole before pushing a finger inside.

This angle was much better, and I was able to slide my finger all the way inside, gritting my teeth at the feel of him. God, I’d get to feel that around my cock soon. The realisation made my insides spasm with a fresh flood of want that only increased when Charlie let out a low moan. His cock jerked, leaking onto his stomach, so I leaned down to lick up his pre-cum as I started fucking him with my finger.

Charlie cried out, hips trying to strain up. I moaned, tilting his cock up with my free hand to suck it into my mouth. I fucking loved the feel of him, hard and straining against my tongue. The salty taste of his pre-cum was addictive. How had I gone so long without this?

“You’re gonna make me come.” Charlie’s voice was breathless and unsteady, which made me want to grin as I circled the head of his cock with my tongue. “Two fingers. I need you to fuck me, Moth.”

I groaned and obeyed, carefully sliding a second inside, my cock jerking when he tightened around them. Charlie’s calves brushed my shoulders, so I let go of his shaft, still sucking on the head, to slide my free hand along the side of his thigh, gratified by the tremble I could feel running through it.

“Oh shit.” Charlie audibly swallowed, but his voice was still gravelly when he spoke again. “Th-three fingers.”

When I pushed a third inside him, he groaned and his cock swelled in my mouth, getting even harder.

“F-fuck, baby, you have to stop sucking me,” he panted. “Or I’ll come.”

I chuckled and released his cock, trying to ignore the warmth that flared in my chest at hearing him call me that. It was just... the heat of the moment. It would be stupid to read too much into it.

I couldn’t help but lightly tongue his leaking head as I carefully stretched him with my fingers. Charlie shook, fingers twitching against the backs of his knees.

“Okay, I’m ready.” He sounded frantic. “Get your cock inside me, Moth.”

Holy shit. I carefully slid my fingers free and sat up, chest heaving as I stared down at Charlie. I resisted the urge to ask if he really wanted this—if he really wanted my inhuman cock inside him. He’d made it pretty clear that he did.

Gratitude welled inside me, making me lean forward in a rush to kiss him. God, I wanted him so much. I didn’t know why he wanted me back, and it felt pathetic to be grateful for it, but I was. I was so grateful for how he’d carefully edged me out of the thick, angry shell I’d built up around myself. I’d been convinced I’d be alone forever, never getting to experience any kind of intimacy like this.

And then he’d appeared, bluntly but gently telling me that he wanted me just as I was. Even *after* seeing the monstrous parts of me. He’d still wanted me.

“Charlie,” I rasped unsteadily against his mouth. We both moaned when my hard cock brushed against his sac. I couldn’t help but tilt my hips until the head trailed over his hole.

“I—” He was panting, speaking between desperate kisses. “The lube—”

“I don’t need it.” I sat back and forced the embarrassment down as I dipped my fingers inside myself and slicked my cock with the wetness. I was leaking pre-cum profusely anyway, but I wanted to be completely slick so I didn’t hurt him.

Charlie groaned, eyes flashing as he watched me. He licked his lips and reluctantly lifted his eyes to meet mine. “I have condoms.”

“Oh.” I stilled with my hand wrapped around my cock. “Okay. I—You’ll have to show me how to...”

I felt my face get hot, but Charlie didn’t mock me. He let go of his legs to lean up on one arm, the other reaching out to palm my chest.

“I’ve *never* been this irresponsible, but...” He bit his lip. “I’m negative. Haven’t had sex with anyone except you since my last physical. And we know you are, so...”

I cleared my throat. “I don’t mind using one.”

Charlie chewed on his lower lip, staring at me in silence for a long moment. Then he let out a soft groan.

“Fuck it. We’re both negative, and I really want you to... We don’t need it.” He tugged me closer and kissed me hard. “Get inside me, Moth.”

I followed him down as he lay back, kissing him desperately. Charlie hitched his knees back up, and I took over holding the left as I reached between us to grasp my cock. I was shaking with nerves and lust. I hoped it wasn’t too obvious, but even if it was... Charlie understood. He never made me feel bad for how totally inexperienced I was.

I let out a shuddery breath when my cockhead notched against his hole. I pressed forward but stopped immediately when I felt resistance. I didn’t think it was going to fit, but then I felt Charlie bearing down. After a few seconds, I was able to slip the head inside.

“Oh shit.” The words escaped me before I could stop them, brows pinching as I looked down between our bodies. When I saw my cock sinking inside him, it pulsed with a mini orgasm that made me spasm.

He was so tight. And *hot*. His smooth muscles squeezed around me as I sank deeper, his rim clenching my shaft so tightly.

Charlie let out a low groan, and I looked up quickly to make sure I wasn’t hurting him. He gave me a little grin, running his fingers through my hair when I took over holding both of his legs up.

“Are—are you okay?” I asked, trying very hard to ignore the searing pleasure racing down my cock and the intense urge to plunge deep and start fucking him like an animal.

“Oh yeah.” He pulled me closer and nuzzled my cheek. “How does it feel?”

I let out a helpless groan as my hips met his ass. “R-really fucking good.”

Charlie chuckled hoarsely, dropping soft kisses along my jaw that made my throat close up. “Yeah, it does.”

I worried he was straining his shoulder too much, all bent in half with me pressed so close, so I let go of his legs and urged him to wrap them around me. I couldn’t even bring myself to be self-conscious when I felt his ankles cross against the base of my tail, because I was slowly dragging my cock back out before sinking deep again. Charlie grunted, and I felt his cock jerk against my stomach.

“Shit, you feel good,” he breathed before kissing me, thrusting his tongue into my mouth. I let out a muffled moan and kissed him back, my hips picking up speed as I fucked him.

The slick sounds of it were making me lightheaded. I could feel how wet I was, and I knew Charlie would be able to feel it against his ass, but I didn’t care. It was too fucking good.

“Harder,” Charlie rasped, grabbing the back of my neck and panting against my mouth. “Fuck me as hard as you want, Moth.”

I groaned helplessly as my hips jerked forward, slamming my cock inside him. And then I couldn’t stop, pounding my cock into his hot body with all the force I possessed, panting into his neck.

“Holy shit—” Charlie made a strangled sound and clutched at me with frantic hands. “Fuck—okay—”

I forced myself to slow down, trembling with the effort. “S-sorry.”

“No,” he barked, hands grabbing my ass and jerking me close. “Don’t you dare stop. Keep going. You’re just—Shit, you’re strong.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, hips twitching despite my best efforts to stay completely still. “I can—”

“No,” Charlie repeated, his voice gravelly. He lunged up and kissed me, thrusting his tongue against mine. “I love it. I can take it. You feel so good, Moth.”

I let out a shuddery breath against his mouth, our hot foreheads pressed together. “Are you sure?”

“Fuck yes, I’m sure.” He jerked my ass closer again, pushing my cock all the way inside.

And then neither of us could speak as I fucked him with heavy, pounding thrusts that jerked his whole body beneath me. We kissed messily, panting against each other’s mouths, tongues thrusting together until we couldn’t keep it up anymore. I buried my face in his neck as Charlie grunted

with each thrust, getting louder and louder until I chuckled breathlessly against his throat.

We both jumped and froze when a heavy thud pounded through the wall behind the headboard.

“Keep it down in there!” a gruff, muffled voice called through the wall.

Charlie laughed breathlessly and reached up to pound the side of his fist against the wall in answer. “No!”

A disgruntled huff. “We’re trying to fuck in here!”

“So are we!” Charlie called back, grinning up at me, his face flushed and chest still heaving.

“Come on boys, a bit of common fucking courtesy?” the guy shouted back, which made Charlie snort with laughter.

“Fine, we’ll try and keep it down,” he called back, then shot me a salacious grin before yanking my head back down to kiss me.

My hips started moving again of their own volition as I moaned into his mouth. Soon we were back to fucking as hard and fast as before, but I could tell Charlie was trying to muffle his groans.

“Fuck, your dick feels so good,” he grunted.

His words made blinding pleasure gather at the base of my cock, making it throb wildly as everything clenched up. I choked out a groan, brows pinching from the intense rush of hot bliss growing and growing until—

“F-fuck,” I choked out, my cock jerking inside him as I started to come in a blinding rush. I pushed as deep as I could go, crying out into his neck, and the feel of my slit sliding against him made me come again. I shook wildly on top of him, hard jets of cum spurting inside him and making everything so much slipperier.

Even after it ended, I couldn’t stop. My hips started bucking furiously again as I raised my head to shove my tongue into his mouth, feeling hot and flushed all over. Charlie groaned raggedly and tightened his legs around me, holding on as I kept pounding into him.

“Jesus—Moth—” he gasped, head craning back. I attacked his throat with my lips and tongue, feeling like a wild animal. I couldn’t stop. I was still painfully hard, still fucking desperate for him.

I needed to feel him inside me. Sliding free, I scrambled up until I was straddling his hips and wrapped my hand around his impossibly stiff cock to tilt it up. We both moaned when the head brushed over my wet slit. I was trembling with the need to sink down onto him, but I forced myself to stop.

“Is—is this okay?” I asked, suddenly not sure if he’d want this.

“Yes,” Charlie rasped immediately, hands finding my hips and squeezing tight as he stared down at where we were nearly joined. “Fuck,” he choked out. “Yes—fuck, baby—if you want to—”

I sank down while he was still speaking, shuddering at the feel of his hard cock sinking inside. My vision whited out for a second at the unspeakable pleasure as I started riding his cock frantically. In that moment, I didn’t care about the scales on my body or my tail or my monstrous feet and legs. I didn’t care about my inhuman genitalia, because Charlie seemed to be enjoying this as much as I was, judging by the desperate pleasure tightening his features and the way he was rutting up into me, both of us frantic.

“Oh fuck,” I breathed, digging my fingers into his chest as I fucked myself on his cock. When the head slid back and forth over the spot inside me, my entire body stiffened up. “Oh shit—Charlie—”

He let out a ragged shout and craned his head back, lips parting around hard moans as he started to come. I wanted to grin at the sight of it, weird pride filling me that *I’d* been the one to make him come so hard. But then a different, overwhelming type of pleasure heated me from the inside, my legs going weak even as I kept riding his cock.

I could feel him flexing inside me. I could feel the heat of him. I shook wildly as everything inside me tightened up, unable to hold back my increasingly desperate moans until my body went simultaneously loose and tight with my orgasm. I clenched up hard around him, and my cock gushed with a few smaller spurts of cum, but the orgasm was centred mainly inside me, making me go weak when it finally ended. I collapsed onto Charlie’s chest, trembling and sucking in shallow breaths.

“Holy—shit,” he panted, shaking almost as hard as I was. I could feel his heart thudding hard and fast against my ear.

I clenched around his slowly softening cock with a little aftershock, and he let out a strangled gasp which made me snort as I slowly lifted my hips until he slid free.

I’d never felt this loose and relaxed before. I didn’t even care that my tail was swishing contentedly, brushing over his thighs. I sighed and rested my cheek against his sweaty chest, closing my eyes and breathing in his scent.

I shivered when his fingers gently threaded through my damp hair.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice still hoarse.

I nodded without lifting my head, feeling myself start to drift off.

“I need to go clean up,” Charlie whispered, dipping his head to press a kiss to my hair.

I roused, suddenly feeling self-conscious. Of course he did, and I was just lying on top of him like a useless lump. “Sorry. I’ll—”

“No.” He urged me onto my back beside him and leaned down to kiss me. “You stay here, baby. I’ll be back in a second.”

He pulled the blanket up over me and got up to go into the bathroom. I relaxed onto the bed, watching him through heavy lids, all the tension gone from my body. My eyes had drifted shut when I felt the bed dip beside me, and I didn’t even get self-conscious when Charlie carefully cleaned my cock and between my legs with a warm, damp cloth.

He settled under the blanket beside me, wrapping his arm around me and kissing my cheek. I shuffled closer, sighing when he nuzzled my jaw.

“I really like you, Moth,” he said in a low, hoarse voice. I swallowed, eyes popping open to look at him. He’d turned the lights off, but I could still see him clearly. He was gazing at me in the dark, eyes intense with something I couldn’t name.

“I like you too,” I whispered back, trying not to get caught up in wondering exactly what he meant. I didn’t want this content, blissed-out feeling to go away. I wanted to bask in it for as long as possible. I wanted to feel it again and again while he was with me, until we got back to the camp and parted ways.

Charlie closed the small distance between us and kissed me, wrapping his arm around my back and pulling me closer.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Charlie

I was in deep shit.

I stared at Moth beside me in bed, feeling like a creep but unable to stop. He looked soft and peaceful in sleep, dark lashes fanning out and his lips slightly parted around deep, even breaths. His white hair was loose and messy around him on the pillow, the tattoos on his throat stark against his skin and the sheets.

I'd been such an idiot to suggest a casual thing between us, although I couldn't have known I'd end up feeling... like this. Like I wanted to wake up like this every morning, warm and naked in bed beside an equally warm and naked Moth.

We'd be able to at his safehouse—not that I was under the impression he'd take me back there. Why would he? I still had no idea how he actually felt. I wished I'd been brave enough to say more to him last night—more than a childish “I really like you.” But my throat had closed up with nerves.

Did he still love Ghost? Was this more than just fucking to him? That was all it was supposed to be, but it wasn't to me anymore.

Was it wrong of me to keep this going when I felt more strongly for him than I should? Part of me felt like I should tell him, but the thought was terrifying. What if I said I wanted more with him and he had to let me down, and then we were still stuck out here together? God, that would be fucking awful. I was a roll-with-the-punches kind of guy, but I knew that particular punch would be a really shitty one.

I should have got up and dressed ready for another day of fruitlessly searching the vast, crowded expanse of the city for Cat. Instead, I shifted onto my side with my back facing Moth and shuffled back until I was nestled against his front. When his arm slid around me in sleep, tugging me closer, I sighed with pleasure even as my healing shoulder gave a weak throb.

Moth stirred, his arm tightening around me before I felt his nose rubbing against the back of my neck. But not in a sexy, nuzzling way—more like he

was scratching an itch. He let out an irritated, half-asleep grunt, making me chuckle.

As he slowly woke up, it was like his body realised I was pressed up against him naked before he did. I suppressed a groan when I felt his cock slide free and nestle directly between my cheeks.

We'd never slept naked before. My own morning erection gave a hearty throb, and I twined my legs between Moth's scaly ones, hoping it didn't make him tense up.

It didn't. He let out a low sound and pressed closer, his slick cock sliding back and forth between my ass cheeks as he rocked his hips, making me bite out a moan.

That seemed to wake him up fully. His body stiffened as he sucked in a breath, and I was immensely grateful when he didn't pull away.

"Morning," I croaked so he'd know I was awake—and very much into what he was doing. I slid my hand back over his hip and the side of his ass, holding him to me.

Moth's lips feathered over the nape of my neck, making me shiver. "Morning."

His voice was always so much huskier after sleep, and it was the sexiest thing I'd ever heard. I smiled and turned onto my front, trying not to arch my hips when my cock dragged against the bed. I settled my head on my arms and grinned again when Moth slung a leg over my ass. Warm lips trailed over my shoulder.

Last night had been... kind of ridiculous, quite frankly. Easily the hottest sex of my life. When Moth lost his inhibitions, it was the most glorious sight I'd ever beheld—and *I* was the one lucky enough to be on the receiving end of all that wild, animalistic lust.

Also, I was pretty jealous of his total lack of a refractory period.

"Mmm." I spread my thighs eagerly when I felt Moth shift, sliding on top of me and trailing kisses across the back of my shoulders.

I couldn't contain my low moan when his cock slid between my cheeks again, deliciously stiff and slippery. I tilted my ass up in invitation and felt the length pulse.

Moth seemed more confident this morning, and it ratcheted up his sexiness another hundred levels. He chuckled against my skin, lips sliding lower. "Shouldn't we get up?"

The protest was on the tip of my tongue, because my cock was now painfully stiff, pinned between my stomach and the mattress. My asshole twinged from last night, but I could handle it. I was totally fucking willing to handle the slight discomfort if it meant he fucked me again.

But I felt guilty. Cat was still out there somewhere—hopefully, anyway. He could be here, and we had to look, as much as I'd rather have stayed in bed with Moth all day.

That annoying sense of duty—the one that had forced me into the military, and kept me in it for twelve years—made me let out a long-suffering sigh. “I guess.”

Moth chuckled again, trailing wet, licking kisses down my spine and making me shiver. But then I felt him shove the covers back, letting in a rush of cool air, and I jumped with a yelp when he smacked my ass before bounding out of bed.

I groaned, burying my face in the pillow. My sense of duty fled shockingly fast when my hips arched, dragging my aching cock over the sheets. But by the time I rolled onto my back, Moth was already wearing socks and boxer briefs.

My hand slid down my front to grasp my cock when he bent over to grab his pants, his firm ass wonderfully displayed beneath his tail.

I tucked my other arm behind my head and shot him a charming grin when he glanced over at me. He froze with his pants in his hands, then chuckled even as his pale eyes flared with heat.

“Come on, Charlie, time to get up.” He shot me a little smirk and started pulling his pants on. Once they were zipped, he yanked open the curtains and filled the room with bright sunlight, making me squint.

“I am clearly up.” I slid my fist up and down my straining cock, gratified when Moth's eyes locked on it. I grinned and jerked my chin toward the window. “Anyone who can see in here is probably wondering why you're getting dressed when a naked, aroused dude is trying to tempt you back to bed.”

Moth snorted, walking over to the bed and making my cock buck in the cage of my fingers. He leaned down, placing a hand on the mattress beside my head. When he kissed me, I moaned eagerly and threaded the fingers of my free hand through his hair.

He pulled back, but dropped a final soft kiss on my mouth before murmuring, “Up.”

I groaned dramatically as he straightened up and walked away to grab his shirt from the floor. As he tugged it on, he glanced out of the window.

He went totally still. “Holy shit.”

“What?” I jerked up immediately, picturing more containers being lowered into the streets.

But what Moth said froze me in place.

“I think—” He rushed over to the window and gripped the ledge tight. “I think I just saw Cat.”

I stared at him before finally coming to life and scrambling off the bed. “Are you sure?”

“Not a hundred percent, but... shit, I’m pretty sure.”

I rushed over to the window, uncaring of my nudity as I stared out. “Where?”

Moth pointed at a building to our left. “He went in there.”

“Holy fuck.” I turned and started snatching up my clothes, hopping in place as I struggled to pull my socks on. “Okay hold on, I’ll be ready in a sec.”

Moth was fully dressed, coat and boots on and bags slung over his back by the time I tugged my coat on. He handed me my bags and grabbed the room key before we left.

“Was he alone?” I asked as we thudded down the stairs and emerged into the alley beside Big Jake’s Bar. It reeked of old booze and piss, like most city alleys, but I barely noticed it as we joined the throng on the street.

“Yeah.”

“Did he look okay? Or injured?”

Moth shook his head, gaze scanning everyone around us keenly. “Seemed okay, but he was moving in a rush, like he wanted to get back inside that building.”

I eyed it as we approached. It was another bar with rooms advertised in the window. *Marcy’s*, the neon sign proclaimed, though it wasn’t lit.

Before I could step inside, Moth grabbed my arm and tugged me to a side door. “He went in here.”

It wasn’t locked, and we stepped into a narrow corridor with a staircase straight ahead. It was completely quiet until our boots started thumping up the steps. We emerged onto a hallway lined with doors, the carpet brown and filthy and the walls a faded yellow. It was as dingy as every other place like this we’d seen.

We both stopped and stared. There were sixteen doors, eight on either side.

“What do you want to do?” I asked Moth in a low murmur. “Knock on each one? Yell for him?”

I could hear someone speaking in the room closest to us, their voice a low muffled murmur but too high-pitched to be Cat’s. But then, he could still be with someone. He’d stayed behind for someone. I doubted he would have stayed away from the camp if he was on his own.

I still had no fucking idea why he was here. Why he hadn’t just gone back to his camp. It made no sense, not now that we knew he was definitely alive. Well, assuming it was him Moth had seen. But I trusted Moth, and he had eyes like a hawk.

Except for the time he’d stuck his foot directly in a nest of finger fuckers.

“Shouldn’t yell for him. Doubt he’d come out if we did.” Moth exhaled and took a step forward. “I guess we start knocking and hope no one gets too pissed about being disturbed.”

I shot him a grin. “I’m not all that worried if they do, slayer.”

Moth rolled his eyes, but his pierced lips tilted into a tiny smile. He nodded toward the far end of the corridor. “Let’s start at the other end.”

We walked down the corridor, our boots silent on the threadbare, slightly sticky carpet. I knocked on the first door, arranging my face into an easy, charming smile.

A short, round woman with greying hair and a heavily wrinkled face cracked it open, a lit cigarette between her lips. She narrowed her eyes at us and barked, “Not interested,” before slamming the door in my face.

“Alright then.” I turned to knock on the door opposite, keeping the smile fixed on my face.

This time, a young Hispanic guy opened the door and shot us an uneasy smile. “Can I help you?”

“Hi, sorry to bother you.” I smiled at him. “We’re just looking for Cat?”

He made a face and shook his head. “Sorry, wrong room.”

I exhaled. “Okay. No problem.”

After he shut the door, I turned and walked to the next one, where a harried young woman with dreads coiled up on her head answered, a crying baby in her arms. She shook her head when we asked for Cat.

The next four doors were much the same. My face was aching from keeping the stupid, pleasant smile on it.

When I rapped on another door, I could hear two male voices behind it before they abruptly cut off. There was silence, followed by the rasp of the lock being turned. The door opened just a crack, the chain still on.

I stared in disbelief at Cat's familiar face.

We'd actually found him.

He stared back suspiciously for a moment, eyes dark and piercing before recognition dawned over his features. "Are you—?"

"Charlie," I said with a grin, in case he didn't remember my name.

"From... the place. The one who got away," I added with a chuckle.

"What the fuck?" His gaze swung behind me and widened. The door pulled open another millimetre. "Moth?"

"Hey, Cat." Moth's husky voice came from behind me.

"What the fuck?" Cat repeated, face slack with shock. The door jerked in, and I heard him pull the chain off, but he didn't widen it any more than a foot, and he blocked it with his big body.

"What the hell are you doing here? Both of you?" His brows pinched. "Together?"

"We've been looking for you." I grinned at him, still kind of in shock that we'd actually fucking found him. "We went to the camp—me, Hunter and Edin—to give your message to Anchor. Then Moth and I decided to try and spring you from the prison."

"But..." Cat spluttered, staring between us. "How the fuck did you end up *here*?"

I chuckled. "Sheer luck that we found you. Well, and Moth's keen eyes. This isn't our first stop. We've been looking for a while."

He shook his head, reaching up with his free hand to rub his beard while the other kept the door mostly closed. My brows twitched at that. I'd definitely heard two voices in there. Did that mean he was still with the person he'd stayed behind for?

And was he... hiding them from us?

He hadn't invited us in. And he was clearly trying to make sure we couldn't see into the room, blocking any hint of it with his body.

"We're glad you're okay," Moth said quietly. "What happened at the prison?"

Cat closed his eyes briefly, shaking his head. “Long story. But I’m... Yeah, I’m fine. I... I can’t believe you came all this way to look for me.”

“Well, of course we did.” I shot him a big grin. “So... uh... what are you doing here?”

Cat tensed up immediately.

“There’s some stuff I have to do before I go back to the camp,” he said, his voice cagey.

What stuff? I wanted to scream. *We’ve come all this way—tell us!* But I didn’t. Instead, I gave a brisk nod and tried very hard not to peer over his shoulder into the room.

I couldn’t resist asking, “And... the person you stayed behind for, they’re okay?”

Cat got even tenser.

“Yeah,” he rasped. “They’re fine.”

“Are they here?” I pressed, because shit, I *really* wanted to know who he stayed behind in that hellhole for.

Cat’s face closed off, similar to how Moth’s did. I sagged in disappointment.

“Look—” he began.

“Cat.” A low, melodic voice came from within the room, the accent heavy even on just that one word, which came out more like *Cet*. “Do you need me to kill them?”

Moth and I stepped back as one at that, warily looking at Cat as his eyes widened.

“No!” he gritted out, clearly pissed that his cover had been blown. “It’s fine. Just stay there.”

“Uh... okay, so... what now?” I asked uncertainly, glancing at Moth for guidance.

He was watching Cat carefully.

“We won’t say anything,” he said, making my brows pull together in confusion. “We won’t tell anyone he’s here.”

Huh? What? Who? My head swung between the two of them. Did Moth know who was in the room?

Cat exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck. “I know. It’s just...”

He glanced back into the room, and the action caused his body to turn enough for me to catch a flash of midnight blue skin and a delicate, elfin

face framed by long, dark grey hair. Only one eerie silver eye was visible, the other covered by a black patch.

Cat quickly blocked the door again, hiding them from view. But I understood now.

They weren't human.

"I'm sorry you came all this way." Cat sounded truly regretful, and his dark eyes were sad as he looked between me and Moth. "But I can't go back yet."

"Why not?" I spluttered, then glanced around before lowering my voice. "The camp won't care. You know that. There are three monsters living in it!"

Cat stared at me. "What?"

"He was gone before Ghost—" Moth shook his head. "A lot has changed, Cat. I think Anchor is... feeling the pressure of running things without you."

Cat's eyes dimmed with sadness. "Shit. I... I *will* go back. I promise. I just need a bit more time. Can you tell her? All of them?"

"Time for *what*, Cat?" I hissed. "Why don't you—both of you—just come back with us? We can get him out of the city—"

"There's something we need to do first." Cat's voice grew more determined—he wasn't going to be budged. "Trust me. It's... it's for everyone. It's important."

I stared at him. "What is it?"

He shook his head. "It's too complicated to explain. But please tell the camp I'm safe. I'm okay, and I'll be back soon. I promise."

I was starting to get a headache. I reached up and rubbed my temple to alleviate some of the pressure. "Cat—"

"Look, I'm sorry you came all this way for nothing." He shook his head. "But I'm not going back yet. Get out of the city and go back to the camp. Please."

He scrubbed a big hand over his face, his beard rasping against his palm, before he eyed us both carefully. I'd forgotten how eerily intense his eyes were—not that I'd spent all that much time with him. But enough for it to leave a lasting impression.

"You're both okay? Safe? You'll be alright getting back?" He looked at Moth, and his mouth finally cracked into a tiny smile. "Still got your sword, Moth?"

I glanced over to see Moth smirking a little. He reached back and unzipped the long bag to show Cat the ornate hilt of his sword.

There was a flurry of sound from behind Cat, and he jerked as a midnight blue hand appeared on his shoulder.

“That is *my* sword.”

Uh... *What?*

I stared in disbelief as Cat hurriedly started closing the door, shooting us an apologetic look.

“Sorry, guys—uh, good to see you. See you soon.”

“Thieving little—”

Cat went to close the door, fighting off a long-fingered hand that was reaching for us—for Moth. Or more specifically, for his sword. I caught another glimpse of that elfin, masculine face, twisted in fury this time with its silver eye flashing, before the door clicked shut. Muffled voices came from the room behind, the monster’s accented one raised in irritation.

Not really knowing what the fuck had just happened, I slowly turned to look at Moth, who’d already zipped his sword away. We stared at each other in silence for a moment.

“Did you steal that guy’s sword, Moth?” I asked solemnly. His face flamed that unnatural pink hue.

“I did tell you I stole it,” he hissed, pale eyes darting to the door behind me before he grabbed my arm and dragged me down the hall. “He had two of them! I didn’t even—It was years ago. I came across a group of monsters in the Wastes, and they’d left all their stuff to go swim in a lake. There were two!” he repeated. “I didn’t leave him totally defenceless.”

I snorted at the absolute absurdity of everything that had just happened as I followed Moth down the narrow staircase and back onto the street.

“What are the fucking odds?” The street was distractingly bright and busy as we fought our way through the crowd back to Big Jake’s. “He definitely doesn’t have the other one anymore. They wouldn’t have let him have it at the prison.”

Moth flushed again, eyeing me as he chewed his lip. “Do you think he... Do you think that was why he was captured? Because I took one of his swords?”

Honestly, I had no idea, but I shook my head. “I doubt it. If he couldn’t defend himself with one sword, he had no business owning two. But it

sounds like he's pretty adept at... you know... killing. He was all too prepared to kill us just for knocking on the fucking door.”

So Cat had stayed behind for a monster. It made more sense now—he'd told Hunter the person he couldn't leave behind wasn't in the same cell block as us. They'd kept the monsters in a different one.

And maybe it explained why he'd stayed away from the camp, if none of the monsters now living in it had been there when he'd been captured and taken to the prison. He'd probably worried that they wouldn't let his monster... companion come in.

But that didn't explain why he wasn't coming with us now. And it didn't explain what this important thing he had to do was.

Honestly, I was even more confused now than I had been when we'd come across the abandoned prison.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Charlie

“Well, that was anti-climactic as shit,” I muttered when we walked back into our room. As I shed my bags and coat, I turned to look at Moth. “How did you know the other guy wasn’t human? Before we even saw him?”

Moth shrugged a little, dumping his bags on the bed. “I could hear it in his voice.”

“Do you know what he is? What kind of monster?”

He made a face. “Don’t know the name. I recognise his kind—uh, mainly from when I stole his sword.” He flushed lightly.

I chuckled. “Little thief. How long ago was that?”

“Maybe...” Moth tilted his head. “Eight years?”

I tried to picture a seventeen-year-old Moth sneaking up to a pile of weapons and bags left by monsters going to take a dip in a lake. He’d probably been skinnier and ganglier than he was now, not yet fully grown into his long limbs.

And if he’d been desperate enough to steal a sword from a group of monsters, he probably hadn’t been doing great out in the Wastes. Any amusement fled, replaced by sadness as I stared at him.

“What?” Moth gave a wary chuckle.

I shook my head and forced myself to look away, resting my hands on my hips. “So... what now?”

Silence fell. I didn’t know why I’d even asked. We both knew what happened now. We had no reason to stay here—to not go back to camp.

And when we got back to camp, this would all be over. This weird, confusing thing between us.

“I guess...” Moth’s voice was hoarse, and he cleared his throat before continuing. “I guess we start making our way back.”

I swallowed. Croaked, “Yeah.”

I tried not to picture returning to the Nebraska camp and seeing Moth talking to Ghost. The jealousy was irrational, because Ghost was with Aury and had seemed deliriously happy with him, but it was still there. It flared

hot in my chest, mingling with a stab of pain at the thought of Moth still being in love with him.

Was he? It wasn't something I could just ask.

He was attracted to me. He liked having sex with me. But that didn't automatically equate to anything deeper or more emotional. And that wasn't even what this was supposed to be about. It would be wrong of me to suddenly start demanding more from him, when we'd both gone into this with the understanding that it would just be a casual thing while we were out here together.

Still, I wanted to ask him if he... felt anything for me, outside of physical attraction. He seemed to at least *like* me now. He'd said so last night, but we *had* just had incredible sex, so maybe he'd just been riding an endorphin high.

Just enjoy it while it lasts, I ordered myself. *Enjoy him while you have him*.

I forced a charming, lopsided grin on my face and crossed the distance between us to wrap my arms around his neck.

"Maybe we could spend one more night here before setting off?" I rasped, leaning in and nuzzling his throat. "You can fuck me into the mattress again."

Moth let out a throaty chuckle and slid his hands up my back. "Okay."

Okay? What did that mean? Did that mean he wanted to, or he would do it to appease me, but he was really just eager to start heading back? God, I did not want to turn into *that guy*, a neurotic mess agonising over every word Moth said as though it might contain a double meaning.

Then Moth's long fingers were on my face, tilting my head up so he could kiss me. I sagged against him, shivering with pleasure when his pointed, pierced tongue slid into my mouth. His citrus scent filled my nose, my body reacting instinctively to it now, warmth blooming in my chest and filling me entirely.

I wanted him so much it hurt.

Fuck it. I was going to say something. I'd never been one to shy away from anything, and I wasn't going to start now at the age of thirty-one, goddamnit. If he rejected me... well, at least the end was in sight. We'd get back to the camp and part ways, and he'd never have to see me again.

I broke the kiss, panting softly against Moth's mouth.

“Moth.” I swallowed and rested my palms on his chest, soaking up his warmth. “After we get back to the camp, I want to—”

He shoved me away, so hard and suddenly that I stumbled and nearly fell over. Hurt flared—grief for something that I hadn’t lost yet, and hadn’t even had to begin with—before I heard him groan in pain.

He doubled over, back shuddering and arms twining around his stomach.

“What’s wrong?” I barked, immediately terrified for him.

“Herald—summoning me,” he bit out, shuffling back a few steps and lifting his head. He looked almost angry, but I knew it was pain furrowing his brow and making his teeth clench. “It hurts.”

Pure, unbridled rage flared. I strode closer, but Moth jerked back and held out a hand. “Don’t touch me.”

I stopped immediately, my fingers twitching with the urge to try and soothe him. To try and stop his awful parent taking him away from me again.

“How do we stop it?” I asked desperately, looking frantically around the sparse room as though it would contain something that could stop a monster magically forcing Moth to vanish into thin air. “Tell me how to stop it.”

“Can’t.” He groaned again, then made an effort to stumble to the bed, hand stretching desperately for his sword. I reached for him again and he jerked back. “Don’t touch me. Don’t know what—will happen—”

I went to grab his sword for him, but then I realised I could see Moth vanishing. His skin was turning ashen, hair lifting with static. Indecision froze me for a split second. I didn’t want him to go there alone and face them, but I didn’t know what would happen to me if I grabbed onto him. *I* hadn’t been summoned. Would I just... die? Turn to nothingness? Be winked out of existence?

Moth let out a weak whimper of pain, his voice faint now. Determination flooded me, hot and demanding. I wasn’t going to make him face them alone—not if I could help it. I wasn’t going to let them rip him away from me again and hurt him.

I lunged and grabbed his arm, fiery pain tearing through my entire body just before the room around us vanished.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Moth

“Have you changed your mind?”

The Herald’s flat, impassive voice reached my ears before the room even appeared around me.

Us, I realised suddenly with a sickening jolt of horror. Because Charlie had grabbed onto me, and now he was here too.

I heard the Herald let out a mildly surprised sound, but I couldn’t lift my head yet, agony still searing through every inch of me as I panted, staring at the floor on my hands and knees.

“Tide, restrain the stranger.”

I heard the pounding footsteps of one of my progenitor’s aytorin come closer. Charlie was panting beside me, trying to stand up. My breath caught when he was suddenly yanked to his feet and dragged away from me.

Ignoring the pain, I forced myself to stand on shaky legs. We were in the Herald’s private room, which was where they normally summoned me. They had turned the upper floor of the old shopping mall that their cult occupied into their living quarters. Furniture had been dragged in, and thick, pale fabric hung on every wall to hide the former food court.

Because we were away from the cult members, their two aytorin weren’t wearing their masks in the likeness of the Herald’s face. I shot Charlie a quick, furtive glance and could see recognition dawning on his features. He stayed silent, though.

The Herald was watching him, their face as blank as ever. Charlie glared back, trying to yank his arm free from the aytorin’s grip. But there was no way he was ever getting free. Tide jerked him closer with barely a tug, saying nothing.

The two aytorins’ faces were eerily similar to Gloam’s. Before he’d returned to the camp with Rig, I’d only ever seen him briefly with the cage on his head. All three had already been here when the Herald’s missionary brought me to the cult, but Gloam had vanished soon after that. I now knew it was because the Herald had gifted him to Collector Mary.

But he'd seen me enough to recognise me that day he'd stepped into the diner with Rig. He knew I was the Herald's son.

Their pink-grey eyes slowly shifted to me. I wanted to cringe back from their intense, flat stare, but the thought of appearing so weak in front of Charlie was humiliating.

"Have you changed your mind?" they asked again, voice as toneless as ever.

My eyes darted to the other ayturin still standing behind them. Dain—he'd always been the cruellest. He was the one who'd smashed his giant fist into my face the last time I was here. I was pretty sure he'd shattered my cheekbone, but at least the Herald had given me their abnormally fast healing gene.

Wasn't like they'd given me much else.

"No." My voice came out stronger than I'd thought it would. My eyeballs strained with the urge to look at Charlie, to make sure he was alright, but it would be too telling. Fear for him was a constant drumbeat pounding in my stomach.

When the Herald had summoned me from the prison, it was to order me to go and find the third ayturin. One of their missionaries had gone to Collector Mary's place and found it deserted. The mansion empty, her RV and borolosh gone, and every cage that had previously housed her monster collection either empty or missing. And there'd been a large bloodstain on the floor of the barn, scrubbed away but still visible.

The Herald didn't give a shit if Mary was dead. But they *did* care if the being that had been under their control was somehow free. They wanted me to find him. They wanted to tell me the words that would somehow let me control him, that would force him to come back here.

Panic had streaked through me when they'd made their demands. I'd been terrified that the truth would somehow show on my face—that I already knew *exactly* where Gloam was.

I knew he didn't trust me, but that didn't mean I was going to fuck him over. That I was going to force him back into a miserable life of servitude at the hands of my cruel progenitor and his two brothers.

"You will find our brother, half-breed." Dain's voice was low, rumbling, and also eerily similar to Gloam's. "Find him and bring him back here, where he belongs."

"No. I'm not doing it."

I saw Dain's huge hands clench hard around the handle of his double-headed axe as he stepped forward, but my progenitor halted him with a flick of one long, pink-scaled hand.

"You are the shame I am forced to carry, Malimoth."

They stared at me with dead eyes. It felt worse than if they'd looked at me with hate or disappointment. At least that would have meant they felt *something*.

My face burned so I lowered it, keeping my eyes on the floor. I could feel Charlie's gaze boring into the side of my head, making me hot with humiliation.

"Make yourself useful for once," my progenitor continued in their flat voice. "Do something worthwhile with your sorry life."

"Don't fucking talk to him like that."

Charlie's voice made me flinch, my shoulders tensing. My breath caught in my throat, and I chanced a quick glance at the Herald in time to see Dain once again step forward.

Terror streaked through me.

"Charlie, shut up," I gritted out, eyeing the gleaming blades on the aytorin's double-headed axe. I knew he wouldn't hesitate to cut Charlie in half if my progenitor ordered it.

"Charlie," the Herald drawled, and I clenched up with fear as I realised my mistake. "And who are you to my spawn?"

"He's no one," I said woodenly, hoping Charlie would understand why. "Just a trader I was talking to when you summoned me. We were shaking hands to finalise a deal. You brought him here with me."

The Herald let out a disinterested sound.

"Take him as the newest coal then." They flicked a hand, causing the wide sleeve of their robe to shift.

"No," I barked before I could stop myself. Visions of Charlie being impaled alive and hoisted over that burning pit of coals made my legs go weak. He was stubborn enough to choose death over joining the cult and eating human flesh. I *knew* he was.

The Herald had gone very still. They stared at me, their face still a blank mask, but I could see the calculation in their eyes.

"So he is important, then. Lying to your progenitor is a grave insult in the salyik culture, Malimoth."

As if I gave a shit about that. They'd prevented me from ever finding out anything about my monster heritage, aside from the cruelty they had shown me. I didn't know if the Herald was an anomaly, or if all salyik were as abusive and power-hungry.

"He—" I didn't know how to answer, panic gripping me. "He—"

"He is important to you. So you have finally found someone who can stand to be in your presence for longer than a few minutes." Their voice was infuriatingly flat and emotionless, somehow making their words even sharper. "You don't want him to receive my gift."

"It's not a gift," I spat, terror for Charlie making me braver—or stupider. I couldn't decide which. "You don't give them a real choice."

"It is a gift." Their voice held no reaction to my anger. "But I will do this for you, Malimoth. I will refrain from making him a coal. If you bring the aytorin back."

"Moth." Charlie's voice was unsteady. "Don't—"

"Shut up, Charlie," I snapped, my head pounding. "Fine. Fine, I'll find him."

The Herald just nodded once. "And I will keep your Charlie here until you return with him."

"No," I blurted again. "I'll—I'll find him anyway. I promise. You don't need to keep him here."

"Promises mean little from you, Malimoth." The Herald laced their long fingers together. "You have been nothing but a disappointment since I found you. You should think yourself lucky that I am giving you this chance to finally prove yourself. To be of some use."

My eyes darted, landing on Dain's axe. Charlie and I didn't have our weapons on us. We were defenceless. Not that I thought I'd ever be able to take down an aytorin anyway, let alone two of them.

"I swear I'll find him if you let Charlie go." I knew I was playing this all wrong, but I was desperate. What if they forced Charlie to become a coal anyway? What if they just killed him the moment I was gone? The Herald didn't want me to have any happiness. If they thought Charlie made me happy, they wouldn't hesitate to eliminate him.

And he did make me happy. He was the only thing I could remember making me truly happy in almost my entire life.

"Please." My voice cracked, and I allowed my eyes to dart to Charlie. He was staring back at me, misery for me painting his handsome face. Not

for himself. Not for what might happen to him. For me.

I looked back at the Herald, despising how pleading my expression was. “Please. If you let him go, I’ll do whatever you want. I’ll—I’ll join. I’ll become a missionary. Just—”

“Moth, no,” Charlie barked, struggling fruitlessly in the aytorin’s grip again. “Don’t.”

“No, I don’t think I will let him go,” the Herald said mildly. They reached into an unseen pocket in the flowing folds of their robe and pulled out a small scrap of paper.

I took it without thinking when they held it out to me, staring down at the words written on it. Some of the letters I recognised, telling me at least part of this was written in the Roman alphabet, but...

I almost wanted to laugh.

“Use this to get him under your control.” The Herald dipped into their pocket again and held out a ring of keys to Tide, who took them without a word. “Take him down to the basement. He will be waiting for you when you return with the aytorin.”

Fury made my scalp tingle, my knuckles cracking as I clenched my hands into fists, crumpling the useless scrap of paper. *No*. I wasn’t going to let them take Charlie from me.

“No,” I gritted out, lunging toward him.

Tide yanked him back with a painful tug, just as Dain shot forward—moving impossibly fast for his bulk—and slammed his fist into my chest so hard I flew back. It felt like my entire breastbone shattered, like my heart had been a second away from exploding under the meat of his fist.

And then the familiar agony washed over me in a wave, making me double over even as my lungs struggled to fill, having been emptied completely by the aytorin’s punch. I gasped for breath, taking one stumbling step closer to Charlie as Tide dragged him toward the door.

I could feel myself fading, my insides burning away in the Herald’s fire, hollowing me out from the inside. Invisible flames licked at my spine, the overwhelming pressure of energy pulling the meagre air from my lungs, like I was trying to breathe through thick fabric. It prickled over my sensitised skin, lifting my hair with static.

“Moth—” I thought I heard Charlie shout before I burned away to nothing, and in the next instant I was landing with a pained thud back in our room in New York.

I shot to my feet, ignoring the searing heat and jarring pain shooting up my wrists from my uncoordinated landing.

“Fuck,” I shouted, shoving a hand through my hair. “*Fuck.*”

I couldn’t suck in deep enough breaths, my chest tight and aching fiercely from the ayturin’s punch. I hobbled over to the bed and grabbed all our stuff, slinging both mine and Charlie’s bags over my back until I looked like a packrat and the combined weight made my weak knees tremble.

I stuffed Charlie’s coat into his bag, making it bulge. After making sure I hadn’t left anything behind, I snatched up the room key and left. I didn’t say a word as I dropped it at the bar and strode out onto the street. People gave me funny looks—when didn’t they?—but I didn’t care.

I had to get back to Charlie.

I’d tucked the scrap of paper that the Herald had given me into my jeans pocket. It wasn’t like I could use it even if I wanted to. I couldn’t fucking read.

But there was no way in hell I was leaving Charlie there.

Charlie, with his annoyingly charming grin and seductive voice. With his constant humming while we were travelling the Wastes. With the way he’d told me he would help me when I returned to the prison, even though he’d had no idea what was going on.

Charlie, who’d made me feel truly desirable for the first time in my life. Who’d told me that he loved every part of me. Who didn’t care that I was half monster, who didn’t sneer with instinctive revulsion at the sight of my face. Who’d been patient with me, even when I’d been a complete asshole. Who’d offered to teach me to read and had kissed me and held me close while he was sleeping.

My chest burned as I made my way down the busy street toward the hidden entrance into the city, shoving people out of the way in my haste, not caring when they yelled at me for being an asshole.

I had to get to Charlie. I had to get him back.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Charlie

What the *fuck* was going on?

I wasn't the smartest guy in the world, but I'd been able to work out that the person Moth was meant to be searching for was Gloam.

The other monster had called him *his brother*, and they looked identical to the big, grey-skinned guy I'd met at the Nebraska camp, with his nubby horns and goat-like eyes.

Beyond that, I was clueless. I had no idea why Gloam's brothers were here, serving the Herald as their protectors. I had no idea why they wanted Gloam back so badly. I had no idea why the Herald had handed Moth a scrap of paper and said he'd be able to control him with it.

I frantically tried to recall my conversation with Rig and Gloam on the camp wall as the silent aytorin dragged me through what appeared to be a former shopping mall. Shimmering white fabric had been draped everywhere, but I could occasionally see old shop fronts. There were still benches and old advertisements, and a big, unmoving escalator that the aytorin took me down.

I could only remember Gloam's words about not trusting Moth. About his secrets. But now, recalling it just made me angry. If Gloam had been here in the past, hadn't he *seen* how terribly the Herald treated Moth? Hadn't he seen how the Herald had tattooed him and scarred him and sewn his fucking mouth shut? And if he'd been here, had *he* been a part of the cult? At least Moth had refused, even when it meant he was treated so badly.

Everyone treated Moth so badly, even those who had witnessed his abuse. And look at Gloam's fucking brothers. He was one to talk about not trusting Moth because of who his parent was when his own *siblings* served as their protectors.

If I ever made it back to that camp, I was going to give that fucking monster a piece of my mind.

Not that it looked like I'd be making it back. The aytarin led me around a thick wall of fabric on the main floor of the mall. Intense warmth emanated from the curtains, and I could hear the low, constant murmur of hundreds of voices speaking in unison from behind them. It made shivers run down my spine.

He took me down to the basement, the walls dank and dripping with moisture, barely any light coming in. One big hand was still clamped around my arm, the other around my neck, fingers so long that they were pressing into my throat and making me want to choke, holding my head immobile. The terrifying mace with its round head covered in deadly spikes hung from his hip.

We rounded a corner and I stared in disbelief at the rudimentary jail cells lining one wall—five of them. They looked almost like giant dog cages, but the bars were thick, and I could see the bubbled seams over the whole thing where it had been welded together.

As the aytarin tugged me forward, making me stumble, I realised one of the cells was occupied. I locked eyes with the young guy sitting inside. He had pale blond hair, sad brown eyes and a smattering of freckles across his nose and cheekbones.

He didn't say a word as the aytarin opened the cell door next to his and shoved me inside, no matter how much I struggled. In the next instant I was locked in, the key turning with an ominous clank in the lock. I tried not to give in to the immediate urge to hyperventilate from being locked in a cell again.

Every time I blinked, I saw the dark, earthy cage the behamots had stuffed me in underground. The cold prison cell with angry voices yelling into the night and Cat's deep, soothing voice trying to calm me as I trembled and rambled nervously.

The aytarin left without a word. The cage was barely high enough for me to stand, but I hunched over and gripped the bars of the door, tugging fruitlessly. Sweat beaded on my brow, my hands growing slick as I heaved and heaved.

"You won't be able to open it." The voice was low and soft. I looked over at the guy as my chest heaved, and he gave me a tiny, sad smile.

"Sorry."

"Fuck," I barked, kicking at the bars.

“Are you okay?” He shuffled closer on his knees, gripping the bars of his own cage. His head cocked. “You... Who are you?”

I didn’t know how to answer that other than, “Charlie.”

The young guy stared at me. “Were you... brought here to be a coal?”

I exhaled and shook my head, sinking down to the floor because my neck was starting to hurt from hunching over.

When I didn’t say anything, the guy tentatively offered, “I’m Samson.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, rubbing at my brow. It wasn’t this guy’s fault. I wasn’t going to be a dick to him for no reason.

I lowered my hand and looked over, my mouth tipping into a false version of a smile. “Nice to meet you.”

He snorted, sitting back on his heels. “Yeah, not really.”

I couldn’t even force a weak chuckle. “Yeah. Why are you in here?”

“I helped someone escape before they got the Herald’s mark.”

That made me look back at him. My eyes took in his white clothes—well, they’d been white once. They were stained and dirty now, and his hair looked like it was growing out. His face was gaunt and pale. He’d been in here a while.

“Are you in the cult?” I asked hoarsely. Samson flinched.

“Not out of choice.” He licked his cracked lips. “I was born here. My parents are followers.”

Jesus. Poor kid.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, eyeing me with confusion. “Did you... come here willingly thinking it would be something different? Did a missionary bring you?”

I exhaled, struggling to think of how to explain. And what I wanted to tell this guy.

“No, I... My friend was forced to come here. I was with him.”

Samson’s eyes flared. “The Herald’s son?”

I looked at him sharply. “What makes you say that?”

He licked his lips. “I’ve seen him before. I remember when the Herald tried to get him to join. We were confused at first, why they didn’t put him over the pit when he refused. But I could... I could see that they were related.”

So this kid had witnessed some of Moth’s abuse. I shifted onto my knees and gripped the bars, feeling the overwhelming need to defend him.

“He doesn’t want anything to do with them,” I said roughly. “They force him here with some kind of—”

“Yeah,” Samson interrupted with a sad smile. “I know.”

He shifted until his back was to me and reached around to tug down the collar of his loose white shirt. I leaned closer, peering at the mark I could see on the back of his neck. It looked raised, like the scars down Moth’s spine, but it was too dark in here for me to make out the exact shape.

“He told me about the mark,” I said hoarsely as Samson shifted back around to face me, crossing his legs. “I’m sorry.”

“He has them too. But worse, I’m guessing, if they can summon him from anywhere.” Samson gestured at his neck. “This just stops us from leaving.”

“How does it work? Is it... magic?” I asked uncertainly.

Samson lifted a shoulder in a slight shrug. “I don’t know. I guess. Some monster power we couldn’t have predicted.”

“Is there any way to stop it?”

He shook his head. “Not that I’ve found. I’ve wanted to leave for years.”

Poor kid. He looked miserable, but then he’d clearly been stuck in that cell for a while. He looked dirty and malnourished. I finally glanced around, my nose wrinkling at the lidded saucepan tucked into the corner, clearly placed there as a chamber pot.

I wondered if this was where they’d put Moth when they’d sewn his mouth shut.

“So... you came here with the Herald’s son.” Samson offered me a sympathetic smile. “Why are you in here?”

I licked my lips. “They... they want him to find someone. I’m the collateral.”

“Is he going to do it?”

My throat closed up. I croaked, “I don’t know.”

I knew he didn’t want to bring Gloam back here. I knew he’d refused before. And I’d heard the desperation in his voice as he pleaded with the Herald—seen the utter anguish in his eyes when he looked at me. Even if he didn’t feel strongly for me, it was still yet another thing that the Herald was ripping away from him.

Besides, the Herald had given him a slip of paper with words written down to get control over Gloam, so Moth wouldn’t be able to do anything about it anyway.

“Do they feed us in here?” I asked hoarsely, remembering Moth telling me about nearly dying from thirst and starvation. “Give us water?”

Samson nodded. “A member will bring us food and water, and occasionally empty the pots.” He cleared his throat, face flushing pink. “Maybe we could... establish some kind of privacy system when one of us needs the bathroom. Turn our back and plug up our ears or something.”

I let out a humourless snort. Having to take a shit in front of someone was the least of my worries right now. Any embarrassment over that had been burned out of me years ago, particularly after the time I got explosive diarrhoea while Hunter and I were out on a job in the Wastes. He’d found it hilarious, especially when I’d shakily called out for him to get me more leaves to clean up. I was so weak and dehydrated by the end that he’d even had to pull my pants back up for me.

God, I missed that big bastard.

“Sure,” I answered Samson faintly, rubbing my eyes.

We lapsed into silence. I shifted back until I could lean against the bars, the metal floor hard beneath my ass. I tipped my head back and stared up at the cage roof.

Was Moth okay?

I tried to picture him returning to our crappy room in New York, alone and panicking. What would he do? Maybe go back to Cat and ask him for help? Cat seemed like a decent guy, but I doubted he’d be willing to help when he clearly had his own thing going on—with his own monster.

Would he go and get Gloam? Maybe ask him for help?

My head jerked forward when a door closed somewhere down in the basement, the echoing clang followed by light, careful footsteps.

I stared when the person appeared, wearing a flowing white dress with a creepy white mask on their face. A long brown braid trailed over one shoulder.

They were carrying a tray that they set down in front of our cells. I could see two bowls of thin broth, two hunks of stale-looking bread, two glasses of water and one plate with several slices of cooked meat.

My gut roiled at the sight of the meat.

They didn’t approach the cages. Instead, they retrieved an old broom and used it to push the tray toward us.

“The meat is for you, Samson.”

He went pale and studiously ignored it as he took a bowl, some bread and a glass of water, then pushed the tray over to me.

“I don’t want it. Don’t eat it,” he told me quickly.

Bile rose. “I won’t.”

The cult member watched us in silence, their face hidden by that horrible blank mask. It tilted slightly as they looked at Samson.

“Are you ready to atone?” they asked, their voice inflectionless.

Samson’s jaw clenched. “No.”

The cult member didn’t move for a moment. I could just about see their eyes fixed on Samson through the eyeholes of their mask.

“The Herald would prefer that you were not down here with the stranger. He will infect your mind with lies. Agree to atone for your sins, and we will take you back upstairs.”

“No.”

The cult member said nothing else. They hovered for a few moments, then dragged the tray back over with the end of the broom, the plate of meat still sitting on it.

Once they’d left, I glanced over at Samson uncertainly. “What... what are your sins?”

His mouth quirked into a humourless smile.

“I told you. I helped someone escape.” His smile softened, becoming more real. “It was worth it. I hope he made it back to his camp.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I hesitantly picked up my glass of water and tried to give him a hopeful smile.

“I’m sure he did.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Moth

I couldn't remember the last time I'd slept more than a couple of hours in one stretch.

My eyes burned with exhaustion. The sunlight glinting off the snow was like needles piercing my brain. Our combined stuff on my back seemed to grow heavier with every step, but I wasn't going to dump any of it. I wasn't going to leave Charlie's stuff behind.

I didn't know exactly how long I'd been travelling west. I knew I hadn't made it past the Nebraska camp yet, but I wasn't going to be stopping there. I wasn't wasting any time while Charlie was still stuck with the cult, and honestly, I was pretty sure that his big angry friend would be convinced that I'd killed him myself, or at the very least fucked him over out here.

The constant, low-level thrum of panic hadn't left for even a second, threatening to swell and choke me if I thought about Charlie stuck there for too long. I had nightmares of him being pierced through with a spit and hoisted over the glowing coals. I pictured the cult and my progenitor tearing into his flesh. I woke up sweating and gasping every time I did stop to sleep, which wasn't often and nowhere near enough.

At least carrying all this stuff meant the cold didn't really affect me or slow me down. I was coated in a thin layer of grime and sweat, not bothering to wash until the itch of my skin got too bad. My hair hung lank and limp around my face, and I clawed a hunk back when it flopped in front of my eye.

Charlie. Was he okay? What were they doing to him? Were they giving him food and water, or was he down there in those shitty cells starving and delirious with thirst?

I couldn't let myself think about the fact that I might already be too late—that I was taking too long getting back to him, and the Herald had gotten bored and killed him anyway. I had almost the entire country to get across. It felt like an impossible task if I thought about it for too long, so I didn't. I just kept walking.

I was on the edge of a sprawling strip of industrial units when I heard voices. I forced myself to stop, my hands trembling when I got out my water and had a sip. My vision was winking. I wasn't drinking enough, which was a stupid fucking mistake. I'd been out here more than half my life. I knew better, but panic was driving me to just keep going, as quickly as I could.

I slowly put my water away and drew my sword, forcing myself to concentrate on the voices. There were three of them. Gruff. Male.

And then I heard an inhuman squeal of pain.

Fury whited out my vision for a moment. What were they doing? Were they torturing a creature? Whatever it was sounded scared. Not rabid—not like it was fighting back.

I'd seen humans doing despicable things to monsters out here. And other animals. And other humans. It was how I'd gotten so good with my sword—because I made sure to kill every single person who I came across hurting something.

I shook off the lethargy and slowly approached the corner of the building. The voices echoed back louder, sounding excited. When I peeked around the corner, I could see three human men with their backs to me. One was gripping a short knife, another a club with nails driven through it, and the third was crouching down and pinning a small monster to the ground with a piece of rough metal.

It was one of the spiky monkey-looking things, I realised. I'd seen them before, and it had been what snuck into the warehouse that Charlie and I rested in not long after we set off from the Nebraska camp. It had a long tail with spikes down one side, but it wasn't using them to defend itself. Its tail was curled up protectively against its body. It knew it was outnumbered.

It was letting out weak, terrified chirps as the man pinned it to the pile of junk it had probably been picking through. The other two were laughing, the sound rough and nasty. My jaw clenched so hard I thought my teeth would crack.

A wave of guilt washed over me when I remembered impatiently telling Charlie that I would just kill the one that had been picking through junk in that warehouse. He hadn't let me, and I could admit, only to myself, that I'd been trying to show off. To show him how skilled I was at navigating the Wastes and everything that lived in it. I was glad he'd stopped me now.

After scanning the landscape to make sure no one else was around, I carefully eased all the bags off my back and tucked them against the side of the building. Resettling my grip on my sword, I peered around the corner again.

The one with the club was pinning the creature to the ground now as it thrashed weakly, while his friend pulled hard at its tail, like he was trying to yank it clean off.

I didn't try to sneak up on them. I just ran full pelt toward them, rage guiding me, and swung my sword the moment I was within reach.

It took a few seconds for the other two to notice that their friend had stopped yanking on the creature's tail, and that his head was rolling across the ground instead of being attached to his neck. As the guy with the knife jerked back with a horrified yell, club man stumbled away from the creature, not seeming to realise at first that his arm stayed where it was as my sword sliced it clean off.

He screamed, flinging himself back onto his ass. Knife guy took off at a run.

"Where you going?" I called as I chased after him, baring my teeth in a rabid grin. "Don't want to fight someone your own size?"

Murderous rage washed over me, burning away all of my exhaustion. As I chased him down, I pictured the Herald, their long white hair streaming behind them as they stumbled over their robe, desperately trying to get away from me. I pictured their head flying through the air and thudding to the ground, their blank, emotionless face frozen in death.

I was faster than the human. I was faster than all humans. I gritted my teeth and swung my sword down, embedding it deep in the meat of the guy's shoulder.

Blood sprayed as I yanked it free. He collapsed onto his belly, his knife skittering across the ground. I didn't give him a chance to make a sound before I separated his head from the rest of him.

Breathing hard, I turned around. Club man was scrambling back across the ground, whimpering as blood pumped from his stump of an arm. He let out a little scream and tried to stand up as I approached.

"No—p-please—"

The last head rolled. Silence descended, aside from the terrified, hissing chirps of the creature as it scrambled away from the arm still clutching that nailed club. I gave it a cursory glance to make sure it didn't have any dire

injuries before shoving my lank hair back from my flushed face and wiping my sword clean on club man's grimy shirt.

Re-sheathing my sword, I turned to walk back to where I'd left our stuff. My vision was winking again, white spots dancing. I'd expended too much energy after not eating and drinking enough. Making sure the landscape was still clear, I sank down beside our bags, my back to the wall of the building, and pulled out my water and some crackers.

The ground was freezing against my ass as I sat there, chewing morosely and staring at nothing. My throat was dry and sore when I swallowed the cracker, making me wince. Movement from the corner of my eye made me jerk my head to the side, but it was just the monkey creature, peeking around the corner of the building at me, its flat grey fingers curled around the bricks.

I rested my head against the wall and watched it. I wondered what dumb name Charlie had made up for these ones. I'd never asked after we saw one in that warehouse.

My eyes abruptly went blurry, so I quickly looked down at the crackers in my hand. Sighing, I chucked one toward the creature. It let out a chirrup, eyes big and buggy as they darted between me and the cracker on the ground.

I waved a hand at it. "Take it."

Hesitantly, the creature inched around the corner and stretched out a long arm. It snatched up the cracker and jerked back, nibbling on it.

Now that it was closer, I tried to assess it again for any injuries left behind by those pricks. It seemed to be okay, all its limbs moving normally and its long tail swishing as it crunched down on the dry cracker. Its big ears twitched, bulging eyes darting about as if it thought something was going to come and steal its cracker. Or more humans were going to appear to torture it.

I threw another one, and it crept closer again to pick it up. It didn't back away this time, gazing at me with big, curious eyes as it chewed.

I stuffed the last of my own cracker into my mouth and stood up with a groan, all my limbs aching. The creature stared up at me, long tail swishing back and forth over the ground as it picked bits of cracker from its teeth.

"Run away from the humans next time," I told it flatly. "They're all shit. Except for one."

I heaved all the bags onto my back, my weak knees buckling momentarily from the combined weight. Maybe I should have stopped here to take a nap. But no. I still had so fucking far to go to get back to Charlie. I could travel a few more hours before exhaustion forced me to stop.

I started walking again, hunching over and staring at the ground to try and take some of the weight off my lower back. My eyes darted to the side when something loped next to me.

“Why are you following me?” I muttered, staring at the monkey creature.

It gave a cheerful chirp back and kept pace. I huffed in irritation and looked away, ignoring it as I slogged forward.

My knees buckled when sudden added weight jerked all the bags on my back down. Trying to twist around, I could just about see the flat, bat-like face of the creature inches behind my head.

“What are you—” I twisted around again. “Get off!”

It chirped out a little hiss and gripped on tighter, clinging to the backpacks. I knew I looked like a total idiot as I spun around in a circle, fruitlessly trying to reach for it.

“You can’t hitch a fucking ride!” I finally managed to lift my arms enough and fumble for the creature.

It let out another chirp and let me yank it off my back. I somehow managed to avoid its spikes, and I held it up in front of me by its armpits. It dangled there cheerfully, tail swishing through the air and bug eyes fixed on me.

“No,” I told it firmly. “I already have enough stuff on my back. I can’t carry you.” I set it on the ground and pointed at a random spot in the distance. “Go.”

The creature spun in a circle. As I took a step forward, it darted to my leg and latched on.

“Fucking—” I shook my leg to try and dislodge it, but it clung on, all its limbs wrapped around my calf and knee. “Come on! I don’t have time for this!”

The creature wasn’t letting go, so I gritted my teeth and started walking again, my right leg dragging from the added weight. Its tail twined carefully around my ankle, as if it was trying its best not to hurt me with its spikes.

Surely it would get bored eventually and let go. I wasn’t going to let it slow me down, so I just kept walking, trying to ignore the fact that a little

spike-monkey monster was wrapped around my leg.

It didn't let go.

It had been dark for hours when exhaustion finally made me stop to rest. As I started shedding my bags, the creature finally climbed off my leg and inspected the floor of the storage unit I'd decided to stop in. Most of the stuff was gone, except for some old Christmas decorations and a big cherry-wood dining table on its side in the corner.

I sank down to the floor with a shaky groan. "If you're not going to leave me alone, you can't keep clinging to my fucking leg," I told the creature. "You're slowing me down."

It started picking through the boxes of Christmas decorations, but returned to my side when it heard the rustle of the cracker packet. Huffing, I passed it one before stuffing another into my mouth.

"You're more annoying than Charlie," I muttered through my mouthful, pulling out my water bottle. "Or maybe not. You don't hum."

After we'd both eaten, I tried to get comfortable. Despite how tired I was, my brain wouldn't shut off. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Charlie stuffed into a tiny cage, dying of thirst. His body burning over a pit of glowing coals. A cult member slicing off neat chunks of flesh and handing them to my progenitor to eat.

Sweat beaded on my hairline and my eyes popped back open to stare into the dark storage unit. I tensed when I realised the creature had crept closer, and was now sitting right beside me.

We stared at each other in silence. It had a long white streak in its short, coarse grey fur that looked kind of like a cowlick, curling down and around one eye. I stiffened when it leaned in and sniffed me. Its bulging eyes narrowed, slitted nose wrinkling as it let out a little snort.

"Yeah, I know," I snapped. "I smell like shit."

It hissed as if in agreement and spun around a few times, like a cat trying to find the perfect comfortable spot. Then it curled up into a ball beside me, its butt pressed against my thigh and tail curling around my shin.

I grunted in irritation and slammed my eyes shut, trying to will myself to sleep. My hand slipped off my stomach, and my eyes flew open again when

the creature immediately yanked it closer before squishing its cheek into my palm, using my hand as a fucking pillow.

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered, my brow furrowing hard as I closed my eyes yet again and shifted to try and find a more comfortable position.

But the warmth from the little bat face was, for some reason, kind of soothing. I could feel its deep, even breaths tickling my skin, which lulled my brain into slowing down and drifting toward unconsciousness. I heard the creature let out a tiny hissing snore before I finally dropped off.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Charlie

I missed Moth.

I knew it was ridiculous. I knew my primary concern should have been my actual fucking life and making it out of here—somehow.

I knew, realistically, that there was a chance he wasn't coming back—at least not until the Herald next summoned him. He hadn't wanted to "find" Gloam for the Herald. I didn't want him to do it either, even though my feelings toward the big grey monster had soured the closer I grew with Moth.

Moth's loyalties were surely with the Nebraska camp over me. He'd known them longer. He wouldn't have done anything that would upset Ghost, and dragging the monster lover of Ghost's friend back here would *definitely* upset Ghost.

If he even tried, Gloam would no doubt smash his head in with that giant war hammer. Terror for Moth streaked through me, mingling with the constant, intense fear that I was going to die in this stupid makeshift cell or be roasted alive.

I had no idea how long I'd been in here. Samson had been taken away at some point, despite refusing to "atone", so now I had no one at all to talk to.

I tried hard not to let it get to me, being back in a cell of some kind. Not knowing my fate. This was better than the claustrophobic underground cage that the behamots had put me in, at least. It didn't have the cloying stink of dirt or make me feel like I couldn't pull in enough air, and it was warmer than the prison cell.

But at least Cat had been there at the prison, making me feel a little less freaked out. And the prison cell had had a proper toilet—not a fucking saucepan I had to squat over to take a shit. Not that they were feeding me enough for me to have that urge often. Hunger gnawed constantly at my gut, and I made sure to sip my water slowly throughout the day, just in case they didn't bring me more.

I hummed to myself to try and block out the rising terror. Was the Herald going to make me choose between eating human flesh and being burned alive if Moth didn't come back? How long would they give him? It felt like he'd been gone for ages, but I'd seen the Herald "send him back", which meant he'd reappeared in our crappy room in New York. So even if he was coming back for me, it would take him weeks. He'd said the Herald's cult was to the west. I had no idea how far west, but we'd been on the east coast—as far away as possible.

Did he care enough to come back for me?

Did I even *want* him to? I would have preferred it if he never had to see his terrible parent again, but I was human—my human instincts strained to keep me alive, and Moth was my only chance of getting out of here alive.

I pictured the Herald's eerily blank face as I lay on the floor of my cell, staring up at the ceiling. I could see the resemblance. The white hair, the delicate features, the pale eyes—though the Herald's were a milky pink-grey and Moth's were a filmy blue.

Their body had looked long and lean beneath their robe, like Moth. I wondered if their torso was different to his—more inhuman. I'd noticed that their scales were solid pink—not like the sweet, different-coloured patches of brown and purple and pink over Moth's body—and they covered every part of the Herald I could see, including their face.

But where Moth's features combined to make an overwhelmingly beautiful face, the Herald's was just strangely, monstrously blank. Dead. Like a mask.

They'd spoken to him like he was worthless, their voice flat and utterly emotionless. I'd burned to rip my arm free from the aytorin's impossibly tight grip and beat them to a pulp.

And then that other fucking aytorin had smashed his giant fist into Moth's chest. I cringed remembering the pained wheeze that had escaped him as he'd flown back. Was he okay? Was he lying on the floor in that crappy room in New York, gasping for breath and unable to move?

I hadn't wanted him to come here and face them alone, but all I'd done was make everything worse.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Moth

A tiny part of me hated myself for naming the monkey creature.

“Chuck, *no*.” I shook my leg, and she reluctantly slunk off. “You can’t hitch a ride on my leg.”

I assumed she was female, because I’d noticed the two lines of nipples on her underside after she’d stretched up to swing from a tree branch. I could’ve been wrong, but I didn’t think she minded, even though I suspected that she kind of understood me.

When she’d continued to follow me after I set off from the storage unit, I’d begrudgingly accepted that she was going to be keeping me company out here—at least for the time being.

“You can be my replacement Charlie,” I told her gruffly. “Until we get him back. But I swear to fucking god, if you start humming, I’m tying you to a tree so you can’t follow me.”

She’d just given me a cheerful hissing chirp in response.

We’d been walking west for days. Occasionally Chuck would try and sneakily climb up onto my back, but for the most part she loped alongside me, sometimes getting distracted by picking through old trashcans or wrecked out cars.

After a while, I found myself talking to her. Telling her all the things I’d never told anyone—not even Charlie.

“I can’t remember what I was called when I was a baby,” I told her as we skirted around the edge of an old superstore. “But I hate the name Malimoth—what the Herald named me when they found me.”

I hadn’t had a name for a long time. I didn’t give myself one, because I hadn’t needed one. No one had talked to the creepy, filthy, white-haired kid curled up beside a dumpster in the city. And then I’d made my way out here alone, and I hadn’t needed one then either.

But I refused to go by what my progenitor had chosen for me. Which was why I went by Moth.

“The Herald said I was just a mistake when I asked them how I’d been born,” I told Chuck woodenly. “They found the tear to this world before it grew bigger and let everything else through. They found my mom, and for some fucking reason she slept with them, despite them being a hideous, blank-faced psychopath. Maybe she was homeless and desperate. They wouldn’t tell me anything about her.”

I exhaled, staring blankly ahead of us. I tried not to let myself think about what my mom could have been like, because what was the point? The odds were that she would have been repulsed by me like everyone else—maybe even more so, because she’d birthed me.

I resisted the urge to fish out my charm bracelet, flushing with the familiar humiliation that I still had it. That it hadn’t even belonged to her. I remembered fiddling with it as I sat on my bed in that shitty room above the bar in Chicago, trying to ignore the sting of rejection from Charlie asking for two rooms.

I’d been convinced that he hadn’t even wanted to be near me anymore—that he had just been waiting for the right time to get away from me after seeing what I hid beneath my clothes.

But he hadn’t. It’d been the opposite. He’d said he wanted me.

Fierce longing rose in my chest, making it ache. It was so much stronger than anything I’d ever felt before, which just confused me. If I’d really been in love with Ghost, shouldn’t I have felt like this whenever I was away from the camp? This... stabbing pain just from being away from him.

Mainly, I’d just felt bitter and rejected every time I left the Nebraska camp. And mortifyingly pathetic, because I was clinging desperately to the few people who had seemed to accept me. And they hadn’t even accepted me fully—none of those raiders actually trusted me completely, and only a few of them deigned to even speak to me.

Ghost had started to trust me, until the Herald had summoned me while I was out scouting with him in the Wastes. I hadn’t even been able to explain why I’d seemingly abandoned him as he was fighting off a pack of little monsters. And then he’d hated me for it, so it didn’t matter anymore.

When I thought about Ghost now, I realised that I felt only strong affection for him. Sweet, friendly—but shockingly mild—emotions.

When I thought about Charlie, my chest clenched up tight and fire heated my belly. The sensation was almost painful, especially because he

wasn't here walking beside me, annoying the shit out of me with his constant humming and talking and teasing.

"I don't... I don't think I was ever actually in love with Ghost," I croaked to Chuck. "I think I just convinced myself I was because he didn't seem to care about my monster side. Because he didn't immediately look at me with disgust. I just clung onto him."

I let out a weak, humourless sound and looked down at Chuck loping beside me. "Pathetic, right?"

As if she understood, she stretched up one flat grey hand, using the other to keep lumbering forward, and tucked her fingers into my palm.

My eyes got hot, and my face flamed pink as I glanced around furtively to make sure no one was nearby. But I couldn't bring myself to tug my hand away.

"What the hell, Chuck?" I tucked my chin down and refused to look at the little creature. "Stop making me feel things."

Not that it mattered how I felt about Charlie. He'd made it clear that he was only looking for a casual thing—just fucking—and that he didn't want a relationship.

I grunted in irritation at myself, making Chuck glance up at me and cock her head as she clung onto my hand. What the fuck was wrong with me, thinking about *relationships*? I'd never had an actual, real relationship with anyone in my life—not even platonic ones. Not really. At least, not until Charlie.

And besides, did I *really* think that Charlie was going to want to come and live with me in my depressing little safehouse in the middle of nowhere? A single room above a shitty old burger joint, when he could go back to that seemingly idyllic homestead with his best friend and Edin?

Either way, I was going to get him out of that fucking shopping mall, even if it meant I had to stay with the Herald and their cult. Even if it meant I had to do terrible things for them for the rest of my life. Charlie didn't deserve to be caught up in my shitshow of a life and punished for it.

At least I'd had him for a little while. At least I knew what it was like to want someone so fiercely it consumed me, and to be wanted back. At least I'd gotten to know someone truly decent, and kind, and compassionate—even if he could be an annoying shithead sometimes.

I knew logically that I'd met other nice humans—Ghost, Rig, Cat. Anchor, even though she was stern, and Lilac, despite how weird and closed

off he was. But... they weren't like Charlie. No one else was like Charlie.

Fiery pain ripped me out of my thoughts, causing me to tear my hand free from Chuck's. She chirped sadly, but I shook my head as I backed away, doubling over with an intense wave of agony. If she got summoned to the Herald with me, one of the ayturin would rip her little body to pieces the moment they saw her.

"St-stay back, Chuck." I shuffled back, my spine arching as flames licked down it. I panted, gritting my teeth, but forced myself to lift my head so I could get one last look at her. I'd never see her again—there was no way I'd ever be able to find her out here. Yet another thing the Herald was taking from me.

"D-don't go near humans," I got out weakly as she hissed in fear and skittered closer to me. I jerked back, holding out a hand and barking, "No. Stay away, Chuck."

She looked frantic but didn't come closer, twisting in a tight circle and worrying her little grey hands together. Shockingly intense grief at the thought of losing her mingled with the fear and relief swirling inside me. I'd be back with the Herald in mere moments. I'd be closer to Charlie, but what would they do to him when they saw I didn't have Gloam with me?

What if Charlie was already dead, consumed, and they were summoning me to gloat?

"St-stay safe, Chuck," I gritted out as she darted closer then back again, fear and confusion making her movements jerky.

As I felt my insides hollowing out, burning away to nothing, I managed to take a final step back to make sure she didn't latch onto me as I vanished.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Moth

“Inform me of your progress.”

I wanted to scream at the sound of the Herald’s flat, toneless voice. Breathing hard, I lifted my head and bared my teeth in a snarl as I forced myself to stand up, my legs shaky from the pain still coursing through me.

“Where’s Charlie?” I gritted out, my eyes shifting to the two aytorin behind them.

“Inform me of your progress in finding the aytorin.”

“No,” I snarled. “Take me to Charlie. I’m not telling you shit until you take me to Charlie. Is he still alive? What have you done to him?”

The Herald gazed at me with dead eyes. Finally they dipped their chin once in a slight nod.

“Fine. I will take you to him to prove that he is still alive. I am upholding my end of the bargain, Malimoth. Your Charlie’s life depends on whether you do the same.”

I wasn’t stupid enough to think that the Herald actually planned to free Charlie. They were going to kill him at some point, in some way. Or they would make him a coal and force him to choose between joining the cult and being burned alive.

And Charlie would never join the cult. I knew he wouldn’t.

I needed to see that he was still alive, that they hadn’t already done something terrible to him. He was the Herald’s collateral, but he was also mine, as guilty as the thought made me feel.

Dain affixed his mask to his face and followed us silently as the Herald led me out of their private room and through the mall. We didn’t pass many cult members. I didn’t know what time of day it was, but I knew they held several worship sessions every single day where they gathered around the pit and murmured prayers about the Herald.

Those we did pass all dipped into deep bows at the sight of the Herald. They all wore their creepy fucking masks, but I could feel their curious eyes

on me as I trailed between the Herald and Dain, bags piled up on my back, hair greasy and flat on my head and clothes caked in dirt.

One of them stopped dead when they saw us. I could see wild blond hair peeking out from behind their mask, and as I glanced at them, wide brown eyes met mine through the mask's tilted eyeholes.

They dipped into a jerky bow when Dain grunted from behind me, but as they straightened, their eyes fixed on me again. I looked away, not interested in any of the people who were here worshipping my evil progenitor.

The Herald led me down to the basement. It was cold and dank down here, and I clenched my jaw at the thought of Charlie being kept in these conditions. As we rounded a corner and those goddamn cages came into view, my eyes immediately locked onto him.

He looked thinner. Gaunt, made worse by the scraggly beard on his pale face. His grey eyes were deeply shadowed, lips pale and cracked.

He scrambled onto his knees the moment he saw me, gripping the bars. "Moth."

I forgot everything else, lunging forward to get to him. Dain's grip on one of my bags stopped me dead, making me grunt as he jerked me back.

"Bags off," he rumbled ominously. "And the sword, half-breed."

I quickly shed them, leaving them by the door and striding forward to drop to my knees in front of Charlie's cage.

"Are you okay?" I asked shakily, reaching through the bars to cup his face, my eyes tracking down him to see if he'd been injured in any way.

His eyes darted to the Herald and Dain behind me, growing grim before he offered me a tiny, tired smile. "I'm okay."

His voice was hoarse. They weren't giving him enough water.

I wanted to kiss him so badly that my throat ached, but I refused to do it in front of the Herald. I reluctantly slid my hands from his face and gripped the bars above his hands.

"Alive, as I said." The Herald's toneless voice made me flinch. Charlie and I stared at one another in silence. "Now we will go upstairs and you will inform me of your progress."

I swallowed, still staring at Charlie. Before I stood up, I pried one of his hands free from the bar to kiss the back of it.

"I'll get you out," I whispered. "I promise."

His throat bobbed, and he shook his head. “Don’t promise anything to them—Don’t tell them that you’ll—”

A huge crash above our heads cut him off, both of us jerking our gazes up. There was another faint, muffled sound like someone smashing through wood, followed by a chorus of frantic voices.

A door opened somewhere in the basement level, and then the sound of bare feet slapping over the ground got closer and closer.

“Almighty,” the cult member gasped as they appeared, clutching at the wall. “The sinner is—He has gone *mad*. He is destroying the great hall—He —”

“See to it.” The Herald’s voice held absolutely no anger or shock as they waved a hand at Dain, who turned and loped off after the cult member obediently.

I eyed his wide back until it disappeared and his heavy footsteps got fainter. As my gaze flitted to the Herald, a sudden realisation made my stomach jolt with a spike of adrenaline.

This was the first time I could ever remember being alone with them—without at least one of their aytorin in tow.

Before I could stop it, my gaze darted to my sword sitting with all our bags by the door.

Would I have time to reach it?

And if I did... would I be fast enough to kill them? Strong enough? I knew I was stronger than humans. Charlie had told me several times. But was I stronger than a full salyik? I had no idea what salyiks were like. I’d never seen the Herald do anything that required the use of strength.

The Herald been languishing here for years, being waited on hand and foot by doting cult members.

I hadn’t. I’d been living alone in the Wastes, fighting off monsters and terrible humans, fending for myself.

Before standing, I took one last look at Charlie, just in case this all went horribly wrong. I forced myself to give him a tiny smile, then straightened up and turned to face the Herald.

They were standing there impassively, hands clasped together at their front, eyes dead and flat as they watched me.

“Upstairs.”

I didn’t answer. I realised that I wasn’t afraid of what I was about to do. I just worried about what it would mean for Charlie. Maybe I’d be able to

hurt the Herald enough to at least find the key to Charlie's cage before they killed me. I was sure they had that keyring hidden in the secret pockets of their robe. They were too controlling to let anyone else keep hold of them.

I slowly walked over to my bags, keeping my eyes off my sword in case they noticed. The Herald followed in silence, and when we reached the pile of stuff, I stopped and turned so my back wasn't to them.

They let out a tiny sound of displeasure.

"Incapable of following even the simplest of orders." A hint of disdain filled their pink-grey eyes as they looked over me. "You will go upstairs, Malimoth, and you will—"

Those horrible eyes flared as I lunged for my sword. Before I could grab its hilt, the Herald was fisting my hair and wrenching my head back. They flung me away, and I lost my footing and skidded on my ass toward Charlie's cage.

"Fuck," I heard him bark frantically, but I couldn't afford to look at him for even a second.

I scrambled to my feet and lunged at the Herald when they approached, anger twisting their usually blank face—the first emotion I had ever seen them truly display. Their arms came up to ward off my blow, but I anticipated it and punched them square in the face. I felt their nose crunch under my knuckles, which started throbbing immediately, but I didn't let it stop me. I lifted my leg and booted them in the knee, making it buckle. They dropped, clutching at their nose as deep purplish-pink blood gushed down the front of their robe.

The familiar, searing pain washed over me, making my teeth clench so hard it felt like they would crack. They were trying to send me away. Trying to get rid of me before I could hurt them any more, because they were a fucking coward. The pain was near debilitating, but I refused to let it incapacitate me. My limbs trembling, I clutched at my stomach and lifted a leg to kick the Herald once in the head, causing them to fly back until their skull hit the concrete with a dull thud. The pain faded as they lost their concentration, and I turned to run for my sword, but a foot kicked out at my ankle, making me stumble. Long fingers curled into the fabric of my jeans and yanked.

My legs flew out from under me, chin hitting the ground hard. I twisted frantically onto my back as the Herald's clawing grip reached higher up my

leg, dragging me closer to them. I kicked out, dislodging their arm and once again scrambling up to try and reach my sword.

“P-pathetic mongrel,” they gasped, clawing at my ankle and yanking me back until I landed on my belly with a pained grunt. “Half-breed abomination.”

Fury bled into my vision. Any pain I was feeling faded as adrenaline flooded my limbs, allowing me to twist around and slam the heel of my boot into the Herald’s chin.

Their head flew back with a pained cry, fingers slipping off my ankle. I scrambled up and grabbed a fistful of their hair, slamming their head into the ground. They screeched and clawed at my hands, sharp nails gouging long, deep lines into my skin.

I slammed their head down again before a fist smashed into my stomach, causing my grip to loosen as I grunted with pain. They wrenched their head free and slid away a few inches, trying to get some distance.

But they made a mistake.

Charlie was waiting. The moment they were within reach, he snatched up their hair and pinned their head against the bars of his cage. I didn’t waste any time, crawling over to straddle the Herald’s waist as they twisted and fought Charlie’s hold.

Sharp fingernails raked down my face as I grabbed a handful of white hair at the top of their head and brought my fist down hard on their ruined nose. They choked in agony, nails scrabbling over my throat and collarbone, digging deep into my skin.

I punched again. And again. I couldn’t see anymore, red and black clouding my vision, the resistance against my knuckles getting softer and wetter until my fist was sinking into raw meat. Hot blood splashed up my arm. The Herald’s chokes turned to gurgles, then nothing.

But I still couldn’t stop. There was only ringing in my ears, red and black and purple in my vision and intense, searing pain in my knuckles that just pushed me to keep going—to relish it.

It was only when a low, soothing voice broke through, faint at first, that everything else started returning around me. I was shaking wildly, my breaths shuddering out of me too hard and too fast. When I blinked, the crushed cavern of deep pink blood, raw meat and shattered bone that had once been the Herald’s face stared back up at me.

“They’re dead, baby.” Warm, trembling fingers cupped my cheek as I stared down at the mess beneath me. “You can stop. Look at me, Moth.”

I blinked again, then again, my fist still cocked up by my shoulder. I lowered it slowly, my entire hand throbbing and already swelling, as I lifted my wide eyes to Charlie through the bars.

He’d let go of the Herald’s hair, and he cupped my face in both hands, forcing me to keep looking at him.

“Deep breath, Moth.” He gripped my chin and lowered his other hand to my chest, its warmth seeping through my shirt. “Come on. You need to slow your heartrate.”

I sucked in a deep, shuddering breath.

“Again.”

I sucked in another, then another, keeping my eyes locked with his grey ones.

“Good.” He stroked his thumb over my chin.

Everything else came back in a rush. Where we were, what I’d just done. The fact that Charlie was still locked in a cage.

I shuffled back and searched frantically through the folds of the Herald’s robes until I found the hidden pockets. The ring of keys was small, not many on there, and I fumbled with them as I became increasingly aware that Dain could return at any second.

The third one fit the lock to Charlie’s cage. The moment its door swung open, he was wrapping me up in a brief, hard hug. I felt him press a kiss to my lank hair, then he was moving swiftly toward our bags and snatching them all up.

I rose unsteadily to my feet, feeling dazed. I went to help him, but my eyes caught on the Herald’s ruined face and froze me in place.

They were dead.

Their body was sprawled haphazardly against Charlie’s cage, white hair matted and soaked in blood, the front of their robe stained completely with it. Their face was just... gone. One eyeball with its pinkish-grey iris was—

I swallowed and looked away, just as Charlie appeared in front of me with all our bags. My body was trembling with a fresh wave of adrenaline as I took mine from him and slung them over my back, then laced my blood-sticky fingers through his, ignoring the stab of agony it caused, and tugged him away from the cages.

We made our way through the basement in silence. We couldn't go up to the main floor—too many people around, and the aytarin could be lurking anywhere. We just had to hope there was a way out down here.

It had gone quiet above. I wondered briefly what had happened—why a “sinner” had started smashing up the room where they all worshipped—but I didn't let myself think about it for too long.

When I spotted the half window high up on the wall, murky light seeping through the grimy glass, I pulled Charlie over without saying a word. He stretched up to unlatch it, shoving until it finally unstuck and swung out with a squeal.

“You first,” I rasped, pulling off Charlie's bags and chucking them through the window.

He shook his head. “No, you—”

“I can jump.” I lowered myself to one knee beneath the window to give him a leg-up. “Come on, Charlie.”

He knew we didn't have time to argue. I laced my fingers together on my thigh, palms up. My right hand was almost double the size of the left, and my fingers felt useless, but I just squeezed them with the ones on my left and refused to acknowledge the searing agony that briefly whited-out my vision.

Need to get Charlie out.

I lifted him with a groan when his boot gingerly stepped onto my palms, and the moment his hands gripped the edges of the window he lifted his foot. His arms shook as he pulled himself through. He was weak, underfed, but he didn't make a sound as he wriggled through the narrow window.

His worried face reappeared, arm stretching down. “Bags.”

I passed him my bag and sword, before bending my knees and leaping up to grip the bottom ledge of the window. Black spots danced in my vision as my ruined fingers struggled to cling on. Gritting my teeth, I heaved myself up and felt Charlie tugging me the rest of the way through.

I wanted to just lie there, panting into the cold ground, my body trembling wildly. But Charlie still needed me. He needed me to get him away. My legs shook as I stood up, gritting my teeth to suppress the hiss of pain when I pressed the heel of my damaged hand to the ground.

Charlie helped me slip my bag and sword back on, then did the same with his own stuff. My hand was useless now, and I saw him cast the swollen appendage a worried glance before his tight eyes tracked over the

multiple cuts I could feel stinging my face and neck, but he didn't say anything.

He pointed toward the forest behind the mall, and we started running. The outside of the shopping mall was quiet, but it was only a matter of time until Dain returned to the basement and found the Herald.

Would he come after us to exact revenge? Or would he try and take over the cult now that the Herald was dead? How long until the members realised they could actually leave—that their marks were useless now?

Despite the shock that had yet to really fade, it hit me in an overwhelming rush that the Herald would never summon me again. As Charlie and I crashed through the forest, leaving the mall and the cult behind, I felt my mouth stretch into a wide, wobbly grin.

I was free.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Charlie

I'd never seen anyone go into that kind of killing rage before.

I could tell that Moth hadn't really been with it. Long after the Herald stopped struggling, stopped moving at all, he'd just kept punching. And punching.

If I'd had a weaker stomach, I would've thrown up its meagre contents at the sight of Moth pummelling the Herald's face into pulp. And if I hadn't known what the Herald had subjected Moth to, I would've been horrified.

But I wasn't. I was just overwhelmingly relieved that the Herald was gone, and they'd never be able to hurt him again.

We eventually stopped running when Moth told me, face still dazed and filmy pupils still too big, that we had to change course to head east. Before we started heading that way, he pulled my coat out of my bag and handed it to me, making my eyes get hot.

I was desperate to pull him into my arms and make sure he was alright—to convince myself that I was really back with him. That we were away from that place, and together. But we had to keep moving. I didn't know if those aytorin would come after us when they found the Herald's body.

We kept going even when it got dark, with Moth threading the fingers of his good hand through mine and guiding us. I was exhausted. I could feel how weak I'd gotten from lack of food, fresh air and movement. But Moth was coming down from an intense adrenaline high, and he was still pushing forward, so I forced myself to as well. I wanted to get him as far away from that place as possible.

Eventually we stopped when we came across a house that looked deserted but largely intact. Moth fumbled to get his flashlight out of his bag, hissing with pain when he tried to use his wrecked hand. I stepped closer to get it out for him, then couldn't stop myself from cupping his face in the dark and pressing a kiss to his cheek. I lingered there for longer than I probably should have, breathing in his faint citrus scent, still detectible beneath the layer of sweat and grime coating both of us.

“I think my hand might be broken,” Moth said shakily as I pulled away and switched on the flashlight.

“Yeah.” I found his good hand in the dark and pulled him to the front door, then reached around to unzip my bag and take my gun out. “Wait here, okay? I’m going to check the house.”

“I’ll do it.” He made a move for the front door, but I gently urged him back.

“No, Moth, you wait here.” I pushed his straggly hair back from his face. “I’ve done this a thousand times. I’ll be fine.”

He let out a slow breath and nodded, but his fingers were reluctant to uncurl from the front of my shirt. When I went to ease the door open, I realised it had been smashed in at some point, which didn’t bode well for us, but the hallway was dark and still, grit crunching into the old carpet under my boots as I stepped inside.

I stopped and listened. Silence.

Sweeping the flashlight from side to side, I saw the staircase in front of me next to a long hallway that led to what looked like the kitchen. On my left was a set of open double doors leading to the living room, and on my right an old office, the big solid-wood desk one of the few things remaining in there.

I made my way methodically through the lower floor of the house before slowly making my way upstairs. The rooms were stripped just as bare as the floor below, even the curtains ripped down from the windows. But there was still a mattress on one of the beds, and the bathroom was intact, though filthy. Vines had crept through a cracked window and wound their way along the shower rod. When I turned on the faucet over the bath, nothing came out.

Once I was sure the house was empty, I thumped back downstairs hurriedly to get Moth. He was waiting exactly where I’d left him, pale eyes staring vacantly into the dark. I gently took his good hand and pulled him inside, heading straight upstairs to the bedroom.

After easing his stuff from his back, I made him sit down on the edge of the bed before dropping cross-legged to the floor in front of him, hurriedly searching through my bag for my medical kit. My chest ached at the thought of Moth carrying all our combined stuff across the Wastes. I wouldn’t’ve cared if he’d left mine behind in New York, but I was so grateful to him that I couldn’t help leaning forward and pressing a kiss to

the back of his good hand, not caring how dirty it was. I wasn't in any better state.

"Let's get your hand fixed, huh?" I tried to smile up at him, because the vacant expression hadn't left him yet. "I told you I'd nurse the shit out of you if you needed it. Now's my chance."

He didn't say anything as I cleaned the blood and dirt from his swollen hand with an antiseptic wipe, trying to be as gentle as possible. I saw his white teeth flash in the weak beam from the flashlight as he grimaced with pain, but he didn't say a word.

"This will hurt," I told him grimly as I gently felt across his knuckles, trying to see what was broken. It was too swollen to tell, but that was enough of an indicator.

"Yeah, I've had this before." Moth's mumble was vacant, but he brushed my hand aside and felt across his knuckles, the swollen skin turning white under the pressure of his fingertips.

I jumped when he suddenly tightened his grip and pulled, my gorge rising at the crunching sound. Moth shuddered hard but didn't let go, wiggling his ruined knuckle gently.

"F-f-f-fuck," he shuddered out, voice tight, and after another sickening, crunching pop, his body sagged in relief and he let go. His swollen fingers twitched.

I stared in disbelief, my throat bobbing as I swallowed repeatedly. I tried to let out a weak chuckle.

"I can only guess how many times you've had to do that before, slayer." I stood up, trying to ignore how shaky my legs were, and pressed a kiss to his head. "We should try and take the swelling down. Wait here, okay? I'll be back in a minute."

I hurried downstairs and out to the yard. There wasn't much snow left, but a small drift butted up against the side of the house. I managed to find an old dishtowel in one of the kitchen drawers, and I packed as much snow into it as I could before running back upstairs.

Moth hissed when I knelt down and pressed my makeshift icepack against his swollen knuckles. I didn't know if the shock of the cold jarred him out of his mild catatonia, but his pale eyes seemed to suddenly focus on me.

"Are you okay?" he asked, reaching up with his good hand to cup my face.

I smiled and turned my head to kiss his palm. "I'm fine."

"You're pale." His thumb stroked my cheekbone. "They weren't feeding you enough."

I chuckled. "I'm just glad they didn't force me to eat any meat."

He grimaced and dropped his hand, looking down at the snow-stuffed dishtowel pressed to his knuckles.

"You had to do it," I said softly. "I'm proud of you, Moth."

He let out a sharp breath, but when he looked at me, there was a tiny smile on his face.

"I know. I can't believe—they're gone." He let out a bark of slightly hysterical laughter.

I grinned, leaning up to kiss him. "Hell yeah they are."

Moth kissed me, his lips desperate as his free hand rose to cup my jaw. I felt his fingers comb through my straggly beard, and I flushed as we pulled back.

"I'm not so sure about the beard." His white teeth flashed in the dark as he grinned.

"Not everyone can grow a good beard," I shot back defensively. "It's lucky I look so good without one."

He laughed and scrubbed at the mess on my face. "Yeah, well, we both look like shit right now. And smell like shit."

"Well *I*'ve been stuck in a cage. What's your excuse, slayer?"

Moth shrugged one shoulder, looking back down at his swollen hand. "I didn't want to waste any time. I was trying to get back to you as fast as possible."

I swallowed hard, lunging forward to kiss him again. But then I remembered the deep cuts all over his face and throat from the Herald's clawing hands, so I pulled back and gently eased the icebag off his knuckles.

"When the swelling goes down a bit more, we'll see if you need a splint." I deftly wrapped his hand in a bandage. "But hopefully your monster genes will help you heal quick."

His mouth tipped into a tiny, lopsided smile. "Uh-huh."

I got another wipe and carefully started cleaning all the cuts on his face. Moth hissed when I shone the flashlight into his eyes, but his pierced lips curved up into a grin.

“Weak human eyes.” He reached up with his good hand and cupped my cheek again, seeming as unable to stop touching me as I was him. My chest warmed, and I smiled at him as I tended to his cuts, knowing he’d be able to see it even though the light was shining on him and my face was in shadow.

His fingers traced along the edge of my crappy beard, and he let out a shuddering breath.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” he croaked. “I’m sorry, Charlie. I’m sorry my—the Herald did that to you.”

“Hey, it’s my fault.” I moved to the cuts on his neck. They’d all stopped bleeding, at least. “I grabbed onto you. I know I should’ve just waited there for you to get back, but... I didn’t want you to be alone with them in case they tried to hurt you again.”

He didn’t seem to know what to say to that at first, but his fingers slid back to thread through my grimy hair. Eventually, he mumbled, “Yeah, well, it was pretty stupid.”

I chuckled and wiped over the final cuts on the backs of his hands and forearms. “Apparently I am pretty stupid. I keep getting thrown into cages.”

“Did they hurt you?” he asked quickly, fingers tightening in my hair. “The aytorin—Did they—”

“No, no one hurt me.” I sat back and gathered up all the dirty wipes. “There was another guy down there for a while, but they took him away because they didn’t want the *stranger* to infect his mind with lies.”

Moth exhaled, his shoulders slumping. I could see the exhaustion in every line of his body.

“I wonder what will happen to the cult now. The Herald’s dead, so their marks won’t keep people stuck there anymore.”

I shrugged, moving to sit beside him on the bed. “Not our problem. Don’t worry about it. You never have to go back there again.”

Although I felt a pang of guilt from my words when Samson’s sweet face flashed in my mind. But Moth was right—they could leave now. Surely they’d all find out the Herald was dead soon enough.

I lifted a hand to stroke it over Moth’s hair, cradling the back of his head. “You need to sleep.”

He sighed, reaching up to rub his eyes with the back of his wrist. “Yeah. So do you. And then we need to get you some proper food.”

We scooted back to lie down, neither of us bothering to take off our coats or boots, but then Moth sat up, reaching down to grab his sword and

my gun. We laid them either side of us on the bed, and once Moth had stretched out on his back with a groan, I curled up against his side.

His bandaged hand rested on his stomach, but the other looped around my shoulders and tugged me closer when I rested my head on his chest. I slung a leg over his thighs to cage him in, wanting to keep him as close as possible.

I'd been terrified as I'd watched him fight the Herald, totally useless and stuck in that fucking cage. I'd been convinced I was about to witness Moth being torn apart by his parent when there was nothing I could do to stop it.

He's safe. I forced my mind to slow down, but couldn't help shifting my head on his chest so I could feel the steady beat of his heart before I closed my eyes.

CHAPTER FORTY

Charlie

We didn't linger at the house after we woke up.

I checked Moth's hand, which was already far less swollen. The cuts all over him had scabbed over, but I smoothed antiseptic cream over them anyway, even as he huffed and rolled his eyes at me.

After we ate, we set off and kept travelling west, carefully choosing the places we slept each night to make sure we'd be able to see and hear anyone approaching from afar—and have time to escape.

It was only after several days, when we decided that the aytorin likely weren't following us, that we finally stopped to wash up. We both smelled and looked like death, and my skin was itchy beneath my clothes and starting to rash, but we hadn't wanted to risk anyone catching up with us.

The lake we came across was secluded and calm, its waters still. The air was cold, but there wasn't any snow or ice. I forced myself to strip off and wade in but I couldn't contain my yelp.

"Fuck, that's freezing."

Moth huffed in amusement behind me. He was slower to get undressed, glancing around several times to make sure we were alone before stripping down. He waded in quickly, body shuddering hard from the cold, but didn't stop until he was submerged up to his navel.

He threw me the bottle of shampoo he'd carried in after I dunked my head, and I grinned wide as I squirted some into my palm.

"I can handle the cold if it means getting clean." I scrubbed hard at my hair, then dragged my soapy hands down my face and behind my ears.

"What about our clothes?" he asked as he started washing his hair. He no longer had the bandage on his hand, and the swelling had gone down completely. His knuckles had healed ridiculously fast.

I shrugged, soaping my armpits. "I've worn dirtier pants before."

He laughed and flicked water at me. "Of course you have. Animal."

We finished washing up quickly, eager to get out of the cold water. After scrubbing every inch of our bodies, we waded back to the bank and pulled

clean shirts, socks and underwear out of our bags. Moth still had his towel, and we both used it to dry off before getting dressed.

Before we set back off, I pulled my razor and soap out of my bag. “Hey, can you help me shave? I don’t have a mirror.”

Moth laughed and set down his pack. “Self-conscious about the beard?”

I glared at him, holding out the razor. “It’s itchy.”

He smirked. “Sure.”

After kneeling down at the edge of the water and quickly lathering up my cheeks and jaw with the soap, I straightened and held perfectly still as Moth carefully dragged the razor down my face.

He huffed in amusement. “Never had to do this before.”

I grinned as he tilted my chin up to get to my neck. “It’d be a travesty to cover up a single inch of that perfect face with hair.”

I glanced down to see his pierced lips pursing as he fought off a smile. The cuts on his neck had left faint scars—furrows through his tattoos, and a couple on his face were faded but still silvery.

Once he’d finished and wiped my neck and face clean with the towel, he leaned in and kissed my throat. “Done.”

I patted my smooth cheeks. “Thank you. Want me to braid your hair in exchange?”

“What?” He laughed, crouching to shove my razor and soap back in my bag. “Really?”

“I know how to braid hair.” My tone was a touch too defensive. “I used to braid my little sister’s hair all the time.”

He looked up at me with a wry smile, then gave a shrug. “Sure.”

I grinned in triumph and moved to stand behind him as he knelt, running my fingers through his damp hair to get rid of any snarls.

I wasn’t kidding. I was a pro at braiding hair. I was even good at doing it gently, because my sister used to shriek at the slightest tug.

Moth sighed, his shoulders sagging as I quickly braided his long hair back and tied it off with the band he passed me, which lived around his wrist when his hair was loose. Before stepping back, I palmed his head and leaned down to kiss the top of it, furtively breathing in his scent.

He cleared his throat, cheeks lightly flushed as he quickly stood up and grabbed his bag. “Thanks.”

After we’d shrugged into our coats and slung all our stuff back onto our backs, he stepped closer and kissed me in a rush. I moaned as his pointed

tongue slid into my mouth, fingers threading through the damp hair behind my ears.

My arms slipped under his coat and around his back to tug him closer. Our tongues glided together, and the longer the kiss went on, the hungrier it got, until we were both panting and my cock was filling rapidly.

Moth pulled back slightly, breathing fast against my mouth. “Want to find somewhere?” His voice was even huskier than normal. “To stop?”

I grinned and kissed him again. “Fuck yes I do.”

It didn’t take us long to find somewhere, mainly because we were too desperate to wait. We stumbled into the first house we came across that looked empty and intact, but didn’t even make it upstairs to find a bed.

Moth pulled me over to the old couch and hurriedly shrugged off his bag and sword while I did the same. Once we were both out of our coats, he pushed me back onto the couch and clambered on top of me in a rush.

I groaned as he leaned down and kissed me, slipping my hands beneath his shirt to run them up the bare length of his back, fingers catching on the patches of scales. Our tongues glided together until my cock was straining in my pants, pressing against the intense heat between his legs as he stretched out on top of me.

I wriggled my hands between us to undo his pants, still kissing him hungrily. My aim had been to loosen them enough that I could shove my hands down the back and grip his ass, but the moment I felt the wet heat emanating from him, I slid my hand into his underwear to cup his slit with a groan.

Moth’s cock wasn’t out yet, but he was already slippery against my fingers. He moaned into my mouth as I stroked my palm over him before slipping two fingers inside. It was so tight, and I could feel the hard length of his cock still tucked inside. When I ran my fingertips over his wet cockslit, his hips jerked and he gasped against my mouth.

His cock started pushing out insistently, but before I could slide my fingers free, Moth’s hand shot down and burrowed into his underwear to cover mine. His cockhead was pushing against my palm, starting to peek out, but he rocked our hands inward to force it back in. When it immediately tried to slide free again, he repeated the action. And again.

A groan broke from deep in my chest when I realised what he was doing. Stroking his cock from the inside. Shit, I bet that felt incredible.

Moth broke our kiss to pant against my cheek, letting out a helpless groan as he shuddered. “F-fuck, that feels good.”

“I bet.” My voice was gravelly with lust. I didn’t want to stop, but I *really* wanted to get naked with him.

When I took over, pushing my palm against him repeatedly, Moth pulled his hand free and fumbled with my fly. The moment he got my cock out he started stroking it in a loose fist, making my thighs tense as I moaned. I had to pull my hand free of his underwear when he shifted back and yanked my pants and boxer briefs down my legs. They bunched at my ankles, and Moth grunted with irritation as he unlaced my boot with hurried fingers and tugged it off. Once my pants were off one leg, he didn’t bother with the other. He slid back up, cupping the back of my knee and shoving it up until it hung off the edge of the couch.

I shuddered with pleasure as he kissed up my inner thigh. My head tipped back against the couch arm, lips parting with a tiny groan when his tongue slid over my balls.

Moth seemed to enjoy playing with my nuts as much as I loved him doing it, which made me want to weep in thanks. He sucked one into his mouth, then the other, moaning against me and sending tingling vibrations up my pulsing cock.

One of my hands reached down to cup the back of his head while the other shot up to grip the couch. When I felt the grit under my fingers, I cringed, getting jarred out of the moment.

“Is—Do you think this couch is clean enough to fuck on?” I panted, shuddering as Moth’s pointed tongue slid down to my taint.

He slowly lifted his head and stared at me incredulously, then let out a husky laugh. “Why don’t I put the towel down, princess?”

I grinned, scrambling up when he moved back to grab his bag. “Great idea. And maybe take all your clothes off.”

I hopped on one foot to tug off my other boot and remove my pants and underwear completely, then whipped off my shirt. Moth spread the towel on the couch before pulling off his shirt as he toed off his boots.

His pale eyes watched me hungrily as I sat down completely naked and grinned at him, spreading my thighs and gesturing for him to climb on top. His throat bobbed with nerves, but he stripped down to nothing, and I gave

my cock a single slow stroke as my eyes wandered over his gorgeous body. The long white braid draped over one shoulder, pale strands already coming loose to frame his face. His toned, tattooed arms and chest. His flat, lightly ridged stomach and long legs. He was beautiful.

His tail swished behind him as he placed a knee on the couch, then slung the other over my lap to straddle me. I immediately slid my hands up his strong thighs, loving the unusual texture of them. His cock had slid free and was glistening, flushed pink. I curled my hand around it as he dipped his head to kiss me, arms wrapping around my neck.

His hips jerked when I stroked the pad of my thumb over his weeping cockslit. He groaned hoarsely and thrust his tongue into my mouth, shifting closer, spreading his knees wider and dropping down so his slit painted the underside of my straining dick with a long stripe of wetness.

I shuddered at the feel, squeezing his cock and sucking on his tongue until we were both panting, hips grinding frantically together. I could remember how unbelievably hot and tight he was inside, and I pictured him lifting his hips just enough to sink down onto my cock.

My nuts wrenched up, dick throbbing with my impending orgasm. I broke the kiss to try and cool down just a little, because I did *not* want this to be over so soon.

Moth was gripping the back of the couch hard, and he let out a small groan and tilted his head when I trailed kisses down his neck.

“Stay there,” I rasped, lifting one of his legs so I could slide out and off the couch.

He stiffened slightly and glanced over his shoulder at me with an uncertain expression, still kneeling on the edge of the couch and gripping the back tightly. I clasped his face and leaned down to kiss him.

“Don’t move.” I shifted to stand behind him, kissing down his spine and feeling the rough texture of the scars there as I lowered myself to my knees. “Shit, you look so hot like this.”

He shuddered as I reached his tailbone, kissing the very base of his tail while my hands gripped his ass and squeezed.

“God, your ass is amazing.” I kissed down one cheek. It was mostly smooth, but had patches of scales over it that got heavier at the crease where it met his thigh.

I gently bit down, making him jolt with a sharp breath before I swiftly flipped over so I sat on the floor between his spread thighs, my head resting

against the very edge of the couch.

Before Moth could react, I slid my hands up his thighs and gripped his hips hard to jerk them down, lashing my tongue up the length of his slit.

“Oh f-fuck.” One of Moth’s hands shot down to clutch my hair. Beyond the jutting length of his cock, I saw his head tip back, throat bobbing as he swallowed.

I moaned low, nuzzling his cock where it emerged from his body as I licked his slit again, softer and slower. My tongue sank deep, and I stroked it over the base of his cock inside him. Moth let out a ragged groan and pressed closer, rocking his hips as I licked over him again and again in long, hungry swipes.

I let out a desperate moan as he started riding my face, inhibitions gone. My cock was straining, pulsing at the feel of his wetness sliding all over my chin and mouth, the soft heat of him against my tongue. I slid one hand around to grip his ass and lowered the other to give myself a loose stroke, my hips jerking with hot pleasure.

I was going to come way too soon if I kept doing that. I lifted the other hand to his ass, squeezing and spreading his cheeks while I ate him out feverishly. I reluctantly pulled away when Moth’s thighs were trembling wildly on either side of my head. Lightly trailing the tip of my tongue down, I used my grip on his ass to urge him to arch his hips forward.

Moth’s breath caught. He choked out a groan when I spread his cheeks wide and licked his asshole, arching my neck to press my mouth as close as possible.

I moaned at the feel of him clenching against my tongue. I swirled my tongue, my constant moans muffled as Moth panted out heavy breaths above me. His hand released its death grip on my hair, and when my eyes popped open, my brows pinched in desperation when I saw his long, tattooed fingers sliding over his slit.

He dipped one finger inside, pressing deep until he shuddered and his hole twitched against my tongue. He slid his finger free and ran it up and down, breaths trembling out of him, then he fisted his cock and started stroking furiously, his body jerking as he let out a sharp groan.

Oh fuck. I snaked a hand up his side and strained to reach his face. After giving his hole one last lick, I turned my head to bite gently at the crease of his groin, my heavy breaths practically snarling out of me.

“Suck,” I uttered, my cock leaping when Moth moaned and dipped his head without question, sucking two of my fingers into his mouth. His pierced tongue slid between them, his mouth hot and wet as he sucked feverishly, panting around them.

Ungh, god. The feel of that suction was making my cock weep with precum. I knew how good that mouth and pierced tongue felt against my cock and nuts. When my fingers were good and wet, I pulled them free and lowered my hand back to his ass.

Moth jolted when I circled his hole with a slick fingertip. “F-fuck, yes.”

It was all the encouragement I needed to slide my finger inside. I started slow, gently fucking him with my finger to let him adjust. Soon he was practically bouncing on it as hoarse, desperate sounds ripped from his throat, so I slid free and returned with two. I could feel his tail resting down the centre of my chest and stomach, flicking wildly. I tried to suppress my flinch when the very tip lashed the head of my cock, but a surprising jolt of pleasure followed.

The slick sound of his fist flying over his cock was driving me wild. I could tell he was close to coming, because his thighs were trembling madly, and he couldn’t stop moaning. But then he shifted, pulling his hand away and dropping down until he straddled my waist where I was slouched on the floor.

His pale eyes were wild, face flushed as he fisted my hair and kissed me hard, biting down on my bottom lip.

“Fuck me.” His voice was gravelly. “Fuck my ass, Charlie. I want it.”

I croaked out an unintelligible sound. My hands were shaking wildly as I reached over and managed to snag my bag.

Moth snatched it from me and tore open the zipper to get to the bottle of lube. He discarded the bag carelessly, shuffling back a little to slick up my aching dick.

I gripped his thighs too tight, chest heaving as I watched his long fingers stroke up and down my cock, making every inch slippery. Then he gripped my shoulder with one hand while the other held my cock upright. We both stared down between our bodies as the weeping tip met his hole.

My hands flew up to grip his ass, spreading the cheeks. “B-breathe out. Bear down. We’ll stop if it hurts too much.”

Moth shook his head, determination glinting in his pale eyes as he gritted his teeth and did as I said. After a few long seconds, I felt his hole

relax enough for the tip to slide in. He sucked in a sharp breath, body tensing.

“We can stop,” I rasped, holding myself completely still, even though my hips were twitching with the urge to plunge deep.

“No.” He exhaled another long, shaky breath and slipped down another inch.

My head tipped back against the couch as I shuddered. “Jesus, you’re so fucking tight.”

I heard Moth let out a hoarse chuckle, and I lifted my head weakly when he leaned forward.

“Does it feel good?” he murmured against my mouth, making me shudder even harder. It was so incredibly hot to see Moth growing more confident in himself.

“So good,” I got out, then made myself ask, “Are you hurting?”

He shook his head, brushing a soft kiss against my mouth before leaning back. “It’s fading.”

He lifted his hips then sank back down, taking me a little deeper. He did it again and again, slowly, staring between our bodies to watch until I was fully seated inside him. His rim gripped the base of my cock so tight I actually whimpered.

Moth let out another strained chuckle, clenching around me and forcing a guttural groan from my chest. He dipped his head to slide his tongue between my lips.

“You look like you’re about to come already,” he rasped. “I know your cum-face well enough by now.”

“I am,” I gritted out, fingers digging into his ass. But his words made me let out a tiny laugh, distracting me from the orgasm already churning in my balls. “What’s my cum-face?”

“Kind of like this.” He made an incredibly undignified face, eyes squeezing tightly closed and pierced tongue peeking between his parted lips.

I burst out laughing, which jostled my cock inside him and made us both jerk. “Mocking my sexy cum-face—real nice. Bet you love it, though.”

He chuckled, opening his eyes to smirk at me. “Yeah.”

“Well, you’ll be seeing it pretty damn soon.” My hands urged him up of their own volition, and we both moaned as Moth sank back down onto my dick. “You feel so fucking good.”

“Yeah,” Moth repeated, his voice shaky now as he started rocking his hips. “So do you.”

His slit was sliding over the hair on my belly, and I worried that the feel would be uncomfortable for him, but he seemed to like it. He ground his hips down into me, his cock tapping against my abs with every thrust.

Soon he started moving faster and faster, one hand gripping the couch cushion beside my head while the other clutched at my shoulder, fingers squeezing. Once I was sure it wouldn’t hurt him, I tightened my grip on his ass and started fucking up into him until he was bouncing on my cock.

“Uhh—f-fuck. Charlie—” His head tipped back, exposing the long column of his tattooed throat. His hand shifted and gripped my hair tight. We were both sweating and panting as we fucked frantically.

My groans were getting louder and louder, making Moth look down at me with a breathless smirk until I reached down and fisted his slippery cock, sliding my thumb over his weeping cockslit. His brows pinched in desperation, the smirk falling off his face instantly. Both hands palmed my shoulders and shoved me back deeper into the edge of the couch, making my cock pulse with pre-cum inside him.

“Fuck yes,” I rasped, my fist flying over his cock now. “Ride my dick.”

My legs were splayed behind him, and I could feel his tail lashing, sliding over my sensitive inner thighs and making me shudder. Moth bared his teeth in a pleased snarl, swooping in to bite feverishly at my jaw and down my neck. The sounds leaving him were almost animalistic, fingers like claws where they held me down.

He was slamming down onto my cock now, the sound of our skin smacking together mingling with our heavy, panting breaths. I could feel how wet he was, the liquid heat of his slit burning my skin. I concentrated my strokes at the head of his cock, squeezing it rhythmically in a slippery fist.

He lifted his head, breaths trembling against my lips before he kissed me. “I’m gonna come.”

I groaned between clenched teeth. “Yeah?” That was a relief, because my cock was reeling, agonisingly stiff and sensitive inside him and moments away from blowing.

“Yeah.” Moth let out a helpless groan, fucking himself on my cock with almost blurring speed. “Shit, Charlie—Fuck, yes—”

He cried out a rough sound, head tipping back as his eyes squeezed shut and his lips parted. *His* cum-face was fucking glorious, and seeing it—coupled with the feel of his ass rippling around my cock—made my balls wrench up.

Cum gushed from his cock in heavy spurts, covering my hand and stomach. My dick swelled, the boiling pleasure almost painful for a second before my orgasm broke through, and my hips jerked as I started pumping my cum inside him.

I shouted with bliss, my head falling back against the couch until Moth yanked me into his arms, moaning into my hair as I shook wildly. He kept rocking his hips, prolonging my pleasure until I was weak and trembling. My breaths shuddered out of me, hot and damp against his shoulder.

Once my brain was functioning again, I turned my head and buried my face in his sweat-damp throat.

“I don’t mean to spoil the mood, but I’m pretty sure this floor is way too dirty for my bare ass to be sitting on it.” My voice was hoarse, and I felt the vibration in Moth’s throat as he chuckled.

“Okay, princess. Let’s get you up.”

He climbed off me and stood, holding out a hand to help me up. My legs were still unsteady, and he definitely noticed. He smirked and helpfully brushed off my ass before giving it a firm smack, then reached for his clothes.

My sated cock gave an eager twitch, but there was no way I was getting hard again anytime soon. My balls were drained, my body loose and relaxed for the first time in weeks.

Neither of us were in a hurry as we dressed. I considered asking Moth if he wanted to see whether this place had a decent bed so we could stay here for the night, even though it was early in the afternoon, but he beat me to it.

“Want to stay here and set off tomorrow?” He wasn’t looking at me as he asked, sitting on the edge of the couch with his head bent as he laced up his boots.

“Yeah,” I said quickly. I hoped that meant he was as eager as I was to draw this out.

Because we had no excuses left now. We had to start heading back to the camp, which meant our time together would be coming to an end.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Charlie

“So... Gloam,” I said cautiously as we skirted around the edge of an old public swimming pool. The fence had collapsed, and I could just see a few feet of murky, stagnant, partially frozen water at the bottom of the empty pool. Yellowed plastic sunloungers were strewn over the cracked, weed-ridden concrete around it.

At the sound of my voice, there was a splash from the depths of the pool. A fish-like, deep purple face with long gills fluttering on either side of its head popped up. Bulbous purple eyes, shot through with wavy lines of white narrowed at us, but the monster didn’t do anything except watch us as we passed, so we didn’t pay it any attention. Moth always knew when something was dangerous, and he barely glanced at the creature.

He exhaled and gave a slight nod. “The Herald and his brothers enslaved him years ago and kept him with the cult. Then they gave him to Collector Mary, which was how, uh... Rig and the camp met him. Rig went off to free him.”

I vaguely remembered the raider mentioning a *Collector Mary*. “What happened to her? Mary?”

“Gloam killed her when Rig got the cage off his head. Freed him.”

I nodded. “So the Herald wants him back. Wanted, I mean. They can’t do shit now.”

He shot me a tiny smile. “Yeah. And he’d seen me there, so... he knew I was related to them. Or at least involved. That was probably why he told you I’m half monster. Trying to warn you.”

His shoulders had hunched up, so I reached over and threaded my gloved fingers through his.

“Maybe, but he’s one to talk. He should know better than to judge someone without all the facts when his own brothers served the Herald.”

Moth snorted and glanced over at me with a wry smile. “You gonna tell *him* that?”

“Fuck yes I am.” I clenched my jaw. “The moment we get back, I’m gonna give him a piece of my mind. I’m not scared of him. Or his stupid giant war hammer.”

Okay, maybe I was a little scared of the war hammer.

Moth’s cheeks flushed. “You don’t have to do that.”

“Yeah. I do. I’m not going to let him think poorly of you for something you couldn’t control.” I squeezed his hand. “I won’t tell anyone else about the Herald. I promise.”

“I know you won’t,” he mumbled, and squeezed my hand back.

“Thanks.”

I cleared my throat. “Are you excited to get back to the camp? See your friends?”

Searing jealousy made me tighten my grip on his hand, wanting to tug him closer. I pictured us walking back into camp and Moth striding off at the sight of Ghost, leaving me behind. Everything in me rebelled at the thought of him even *talking* to the quiet, unassuming raider, which was ridiculous and needy and way too possessive—worryingly possessive.

He’s mine, my brain snarled anyway.

Maybe it was because I still had no idea how he actually felt about me, aside from enjoying having sex with me. Moth wasn’t all that forthright with his feelings, and the parameters we’d set in place when we started this thing loomed over my head like a black cloud.

Moth’s derisive huff pulled me out of my thoughts. “They’re not my friends.”

I frowned over at him. “Sure they are.”

Even though I hadn’t seen any of them actually treat him like one. Rig had been friendly, but his big monster lover had warned me not to trust Moth. Ghost hadn’t been *unfriendly*, but I got the feeling he knew how Moth felt about him and didn’t want to be overly affectionate because of it.

“They’re not.” He shook his head, watching the ground as we walked. He didn’t sound overly bitter about it—just matter-of-fact.

I had an overwhelming urge to spin Moth around and lead us away from the camp—away from unfriendly raiders, away from judgemental monsters. Away from the person he wanted more than he wanted me.

But we couldn’t. We had to tell the camp about Cat. I had to see Edin and Hunter, show them I was okay, because I knew Hunter would be furious

and frantic about how long we'd been gone. He probably thought Moth had left me dead in a ditch somewhere.

"Have you thought about what you're going to do?" he asked, keeping his eyes on the ground. "After we get back?"

"No," I said quickly. "No plans yet."

Ask me to stay with you.

"You won't go back to the homestead with Edin? And your big angry friend?"

My mouth quirked. I wanted to chuckle every time Moth called Hunter my "big angry friend". It was pretty apt.

"It's just... so remote. Nothing else around for miles."

Moth went tense beside me and gave a tiny nod. I suddenly realised that may have been the wrong thing to say—his safehouse was equally remote, way out in the middle of nowhere with not another soul around for miles.

Panic streaked through me and I added, "Not that remote is bad. It's safe. But I... you know. I think I've had enough of listening to Edin and Hunter fuck each other's brains out." When he didn't say anything, I licked my lips and nervously said, "I liked your safehouse."

I'd live there with you. Just ask me. Fucking ask me.

One shoulder jerked up in a stiff shrug. "It's okay. Nothing like the prepper's paradise you lived in."

"It's not paradise," I said quickly. "Not for me, anyway. It is for Edin and Hunter, and... I think they should just be together anyway. Alone. Without me hanging around as an awkward third wheel."

My face got hot, but Moth just gave a tiny nod. We were still holding hands, so I cleared my throat and tugged him closer, stopping to lean in and kiss him. It wasn't as cold anymore, so we had our scarves around our necks rather than covering our mouths to ward off the chill.

"Maybe I'll just keep tagging along with you," I said with a tiny shrug after pulling back, trying to mask the nerves in my voice.

Moth stared at me, pale eyes wide. Something flashed through them. Then he looked away and let out a rough laugh, as if I'd told a joke.

"Yeah, and keep getting shot or cut or captured." He tugged on my hand to get me walking again.

Disappointment made my shoulders sag, and I let out a weak chuckle. My voice was hoarse when I said, "Yeah. Must've just been Hunter keeping me alive out here all these years. I'm obviously terrible at it myself."

He nudged me with his elbow. “You’re not so bad, princess. Just need a few pointers. I imagine it’s a lot different being out here when you know you can’t call in the military if shit hits the fan.”

I bristled. “We never did that. We were cut off from everyone most of the time.”

He chuckled. “So defensive.”

That made me splutter with indignation. “That’s fucking rich, coming from yo—”

A clattering noise coming from a nearby abandoned truck made me stop dead. I dropped Moth’s hand and whipped my gun off my back. He was pulling his sword free and trying to tug me behind him, but I pushed at his hand irritably.

“I have the gun. I’ll go.” I went to edge closer, aiming my gun at the truck. There was another rustling sound from the truck’s cab. Its door was open, but I couldn’t see anything inside at first.

When a little bat-like face appeared, peeking out with buggy eyes darting about and long, pointed ears twitching, I froze with indecision.

Then Moth was there, shoving my gun away. “No.”

“I’m not just going to automatically shoot it,” I griped, eyeing the creature warily.

It blinked at me, one eye framed by a curling strip of white in its grey fur, before looking at Moth. Its face twisted, and it let out an ear-splitting hiss followed by a trilling chirrup as it clambered down from the truck.

“Chuck!” Moth suddenly cried, confusing the shit out of me. He lunged forward then stopped dead, face flaming pink as he looked at me.

“Uh, I mean—that’s—” He cleared his throat. “This monkey thing started following me when I was coming to get you.”

A slow grin spread over my face. “And you named him Chuck?”

“She’s female. I’m pretty sure anyway. And yes.” He shot me an imperious look, arching his brow. “She was almost as annoying as you at first, so it felt fitting.”

I burst out laughing, which seemed to spook the little spike-monkey as she loped hurriedly toward Moth, letting out a chirruping hiss. She froze, shooting me a wide-eyed look as her little grey hands worried the ground.

I could *feel* Moth physically restraining himself, before he gave up and ran toward her. She chirped excitedly and scurried up his legs the moment he was in reach, clinging onto his front like a baby spider monkey.

He patted her back, avoiding the spikes. "You okay? No other humans got to you?"

She chirped again and climbed up onto his back, tail whipping happily through the air as her long arms twined around his neck. My heart freaking melted.

Moth slowly turned to face me with his cheeks still adorably flushed pink but his chin raised defiantly. "So... this is Chuck."

"I was replaced so quickly." I sauntered forward and grinned at the buggy eyes peering at me over Moth's shoulder. "By an upgrade, apparently. I can't ride on your back like that."

His mouth stretched into a wide grin. "You can if you want."

I laughed. "No need to show off about your monster strength, baby. Besides, I think the seat has been taken."

I smiled at Chuck, wondering if she was going to whip that tail around and embed those wicked spikes into my skin if I got close to Moth. She stared back at me, then let out a tiny chirp and snuffled at Moth's hair.

My lips quirked, and I looked around at the highway we'd been walking down, strewn with abandoned cars. "Is this where you were when the Herald summoned you again? Did she wait here for you?"

Moth shook his head. "We hadn't made it this far yet. She must have kept walking west after I vanished." He hesitated, face flushing, before reaching up to scratch under her chin. She chirruped and rubbed her face against the tattoos on the back of his hand.

"That's the cutest thing I've ever seen," I told him solemnly, and his face flamed even darker.

"Shut up."

"I mean, you *have* to keep her, right?" I took a step closer, but didn't reach to touch her yet. "She's clearly already in love with you."

You and me both, girl.

Moth cleared his throat and shrugged uncomfortably, but he kept his hand up so Chuck could keep rubbing her face against it. "I mean, I don't know. I found her when she was getting hurt by some people. I think she's kind of timid."

I frowned. "What were they doing to her?"

"Just hurting her for no reason." He shrugged, glancing up at Chuck. "I killed them."

I froze for a split second, then laughed. “Well, alright then. Your kill card must be full for this month, right?”

He shrugged again. “Depends on if we come across any other assholes.”

I grinned and finally stepped closer to kiss him, my shoulders hunching up instinctively when I felt and heard Chuck snuffling curiously into my ear. But I didn’t get any spikes in my face, so she seemed happy to share him.

Not that we’d be sharing him for that much longer.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Charlie

We'd delayed our return for as long as possible—without either of us actually acknowledging that we were doing exactly that—by stopping often, sleeping longer and walking slowly with Chuck loping along beside us.

But now the camp wall loomed ahead of us like a giant tombstone, grey and sombre against the sky.

Moth had grown increasingly closed off the nearer we got, like he was withdrawing into himself for protection. I didn't know if that was in anticipation of seeing Ghost with Aury, or of us parting ways.

Once we'd reached the camp and delivered our news, I planned to talk to him. To tell him exactly how I felt when he would be free to give his honest answer without fear of making it awkward. We wouldn't be travelling together anymore, having to rely on one another. He'd be able to reject me and go on his merry way without a look back.

I really, really fucking hoped he didn't do that.

We weren't going to tell anyone about the Herald and that whole ordeal. I was particularly glad, because I was pretty sure Edin would laugh his damn head off if he found out that I had once again been captured and thrown in a cage. Hunter's head would probably explode.

Hunter's head had probably *already* exploded. We'd been gone months. Way, way longer than it should have taken us to get to the prison and back.

"Do we tell them Cat was with a monster?" I asked Moth, dread colouring my voice as the camp wall loomed ever closer.

I really wanted to reach over and thread my fingers through his, but his hands were stuffed in his coat pockets. I tried to ignore the part of me that was hurt by it—hurt by the idea that maybe he would be embarrassed to be seen with me in that way. That he wouldn't want Ghost to see.

He shrugged stiffly, keeping his eyes locked on the ground. "He didn't tell us not to. Not our place to pick and choose what information to share with his camp."

I exhaled. “Yeah, that’s true.”

I could see Aury sitting on the camp wall, leaning back on his hands with his big bird feet dangling over the edge and huge wings lazily opening and closing behind him. I knew he’d spotted us when he got to his feet.

For some reason, pure panic tightened my gut as he took flight, heading directly for us. It felt like everything was going to change the moment we got into the camp—Moth and I would be ripped apart and taken in different directions, and I wouldn’t be able to stop it.

My throat bobbed, fingers twitching by my sides with the overwhelming urge to grab Moth and run in the other direction. To stay, just the two of us, out here where nothing could change.

“Moth—” I got out before Aury was landing in front of us, a shy smile on his alien face.

“It’s good to see you both safe,” he said in his soft voice. There was no animosity in his expression when he looked at Moth, and as I glanced over, I saw Moth give him a tight smile.

“Yeah.” His voice was husky. “Sorry we’ve been gone so long.”

Aury shook his head as if to say it didn’t matter, then peered around Moth to eye Chuck with interest. She was clinging to Moth’s leg, peeking around at the big bird-monster with wide eyes.

“Why do you have a copicen with you?”

Moth bristled defensively, reaching down to rest his hand on Chuck’s head. “She was getting hurt by some people. She’s not dangerous.”

The monster’s big black eyes dimmed with sadness. He nodded, then offered Chuck a tentative smile. She chirped in terror and hid her face behind Moth’s leg, clinging onto his jeans with shaking hands.

Aury’s smile faltered, shoulders slumping a little.

“Shall we go in?” He gestured behind him at the camp. “They’ll be eager to see you back. I’m... guessing you didn’t find Cat.”

“We did,” Moth said shortly, checking to make sure Chuck was alright before we started walking.

Aury fell into step beside me and cleared his throat. “Hunter has been... very worried.”

I chuckled. “You mean he’s been an unbearable ass?”

A tiny smile tilted his mouth. “Edin keeps him calm. Somewhat.”

I grinned over at him. “He just shouldn’t be around people for too long. Small doses is best. He’ll relax when he’s back at the homestead.”

Moth was walking silently on my other side, and I sensed him stiffen up. Aury led us into the containers, the big claws on the top of his wings rasping against the metal. It was dusk, so the last of the sunlight couldn't reach over the walls, bathing the camp in murky purple as we stepped inside.

"Holy shit, they're back!" Rig dropped the pile of junk he'd been cradling in his arms and ran toward us, the fringe of his tan jacket swaying. When he reached us, his brown eyes tightened with grief over his mask. "Oh no. Cat—"

"He's alive," I said quickly. "He's fine."

"Why isn't he with you?" the raider asked worriedly, just as Anchor burst out of the diner and started striding toward us, Ghost trailing behind her.

I turned to Moth as Aury walked off to meet Ghost. We stared at each other in silence for a few seconds, before I offered him a small smile. "Do you want to tell them everything? I should probably go and find Hunter. Let him know I'm back."

Moth's throat bobbed as he swallowed, and he gave a single nod. "Sure."

I watched in silence, my gut twisting painfully when he walked away to meet Anchor and Ghost. Rig followed, and I was left standing there on my own, which hurt even though I'd just *told* him to go and tell them. Searing jealousy made me clutch the straps of my backpack too tight when I saw Ghost give Moth a tiny smile and say something—even though he was holding Aury's hand.

Okay, this wasn't healthy. Or normal. I exhaled and forced myself to turn away. Ghost seemed like a nice person. It wasn't his fault Moth was in love with him and not me.

"Charles Dylan Keane." The sweet, familiar roar of my best friend boomed across the camp, bringing a tiny smile to my lips and chasing away the gnawing ache in my gut. "Where the *fuck have you been?*"

My lips quirked up into a proper grin as I saw Hunter stomping over from the motel, fury twisting his face and making his snarl even more pronounced. The moment he reached me, he yanked me off my feet in a painfully hard hug.

"You stupid prick," he barked in my ear, squeezing me too tight and making me grunt. "Where the fuck have you been? What happened?"

He set me down and grabbed my chin, yanking my head from side to side like he was checking my face. “Are you hurt?”

“Jesus, relax.” I huffed in irritation when he gripped my shoulders and stepped back, brows drawn low over his eyes as he assessed me for any hidden injuries. “I’m *fine*.”

“What happened?” he demanded again, just as I saw Edin ambling over to us with a big, fanged grin on his face. “We went to the prison—Well, Wyn did. He said it was deserted.”

My brows twitched with confusion at that, but I shot Edin a smile as he reached us. “Hi, Edi—*guh*—”

I was yanked off my feet yet again by giant purple arms. Edin rubbed his cheek against my hair frantically.

“Charlie,” he rumbled, his voice vibrating through me before he set me down. “You are back and safe. I told you he would be fine, josdo.”

“Yeah, all good,” I said distractedly. “You—So, what? Wyn went to the prison?”

“Yes.” Edin nodded eagerly. “Do you remember him, Charlie?”

I stared at him incredulously, before furrowing my brow and lifting my hand to tap a finger against my lips. “Hmm... Wyn...”

Edin huffed with impatience. “Yes. Wyn. Who you humans call the Soul Eater. He got you out of the prison. Remember?”

Hunter rolled his eyes as I gasped and exclaimed, “Oh, *that* Wyn. The terrifying, hooded ghoul-man who can turn to smoke and appeared in the middle of my cell? Then proceeded to brutally murder a superior officer in front of me? *That* Wyn?”

“Yes!” Edin grinned at me with an approving nod.

“He’s fucking with you, scratch,” Hunter grunted, giving my shoulder a weak shove.

Edin paused, then burst out laughing. “Oh, I see. Charlie, I have missed your jokes.”

“Barely fucking jokes,” Hunter muttered. “But yeah. Wyn and Danny showed up a while ago.”

“Are they still here?” I looked around, as if I wouldn’t have already noticed that ghoulish, hooded figure. And his hot boyfriend.

“Yes, currently fucking in their room,” Edin said cheerfully, like that was a normal thing to announce. “I could hear them before we came out here when we realised you were back. Something about a bet—”

“Anyway.” Hunter shot him a look. “Wyn went to the prison as his... smoke thing when you’d been gone for so long and said it was totally deserted. What happened?”

I shrugged. “It was already deserted when we got there.”

Hunter stared at me expectantly, grunting with irritation when I purposefully didn’t elaborate, just to fuck with him a bit. “And then what? You’ve been gone fucking months.”

“We went to look for Cat. Went to some of the cities.”

“What?” he barked, looking like he wanted to strangle me. “And you couldn’t have come back here first to tell us?”

“Nah.”

His face went an interesting shade of purple. “You are such an ass.”

I snickered and reached up to give his cheek a pat. “I missed you too.”

“You didn’t find him then,” Edin said sombrely. “Cat.”

“No, we did. In New York. He said he couldn’t come back yet.”

Hunter rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest. “What the fuck is with that guy?”

I chuckled. “Don’t know. He said he had... something important to do. He was with a monster.”

“In the city?”

“Yeah. Must have hidden his face when they snuck in. Oh, hey. I have some good news.” I grinned at the both of them, then lowered my voice. “I’m not going back to the military.”

Hunter blinked, like he was having trouble keeping up with the conversation. Then his face jerked, and his arms twitched like he resisted the impulse to grab me again.

“Really?” he rasped. The poorly-masked hope in his voice made me swallow around the sudden lump in my throat.

“Yeah. I can’t go back.” I shook my head. “We saw... some stuff.”

“You can tell us later, but... So, you’re staying?” A tentative smile played on Hunter’s snarling mouth. “You’re coming back to the homestead with us?”

“Uhh... Well, I’m not...” I winced, and my eyes immediately sought out Moth. He was still standing with the raiders and Aury, telling them about Cat. Chuck was clinging onto one of his legs, and Rig seemed more interested in baby-talking the little monster than paying attention to what Moth was saying.

“Ah.” Edin’s low, amused voice made my eyes jerk back to him, and he shot me a knowing smirk. “You and Moth fucked.”

Hunter choked on a breath as my face went pink. “What?”

“It is obvious, josdo,” Edin drawled with a wave of his hand before I could say anything. “Look at him. Charlie is gazing at Moth like he wants to—”

“Hey, shut up,” I hissed, glancing over at the small group worriedly. “We haven’t exactly... talked about what’s going to happen.”

Edin’s brows twitched into a frown. “Why not?”

“Because it—” I rubbed my face. “It was supposed to just be casual. But it’s... complicated.”

Hunter snorted. “Only you could make something as simple as fucking *complicated* after a goddamn monster apocalypse.”

I glared at him. “Says the guy who decided a big purple dude with horns is his ideal life partner.”

That made Edin give me a wide smile as he threw his arm around Hunter’s neck and tugged him close.

“Don’t worry about Moth’s lack of horns, Charlie,” he told me earnestly. “I’m sure he is still very virile. Well, you’d know, anyway. Is he? Virile?”

My face burned as Hunter muttered, “Don’t get him started on the horns, dude. It was a whole thing while you were gone.”

What? Horns? That piqued my interest, but not enough to get me off the topic of Moth.

“Look, I’d appreciate your... discretion until I’ve talked to Moth.” I glanced over at him again, unable to keep my eyes off him for too long.

As if he could sense my gaze, his pale eyes cut over to me. We stared at each other for a few seconds before Hunter’s voice jerked my attention back to the pair in front of me.

“So you’re not coming back to the homestead?” he asked, lips pulled down into a frown. “You’re gonna go with him?”

I shrugged uncomfortably. “I mean... if he wants me to.”

“What?” Hunter barked immediately, eyes narrowing as he glared over at Moth. *Uh-oh*. “Why wouldn’t he want you to? What’s his problem? Does he think you’re not good enough for him?”

“Jesus, Hunter.” I wiped a hand down my face. “No. Nothing like that. We just haven’t talked about it yet. Like I said, it was just supposed to be a

casual thing. I told him I didn't want a relationship because I thought at the time that I'd be going back, and... I don't know if he wants one anyway."

With me.

But Hunter was bristling now. "So he's happy to fuck you, but doesn't think you're good enough for anything more? Is that what he does? Just fucks people and then takes off without a look back?"

"No," I snapped, defensiveness on Moth's behalf rising in an angry wave, because that couldn't be further from the truth. "Chill the fuck out, Hunter. And don't talk about him like that. I swear to god, if you're an asshole to Moth I will knee you so hard in the balls you won't be able to fuck Edin for a month."

Hunter blinked at me. "Wow."

Edin chuckled, leaning in to nuzzle his face. "Not used to being put in your place, eh, josdo? Well, except by me." He shot me a conspiratorial smirk.

Hunter turned pink. "I wasn't—I'm not going to be an asshole to him."

"You're an asshole to everyone," I said flatly. "But you're gonna be on your best behaviour with him. *Aren't you?*"

"Alright," he muttered like a petulant kid, wrapping his arm around Edin and gripping the side of his kilt.

"That reminds me." I looked around, hands on my hips and eyes flinty. "Where's Gloam? I need to talk to him."

"If he's not with Rig, he's probably in their room," Edin told me.

I glanced over at the raiders standing with Moth. "Hey, where's creepy machete guy?"

Edin chuckled. "Do you mean Lilac?"

"Sure. Whatever. The guy with the machete."

Hunter winced. "He's, uh... busy. Long story."

I wasn't interested in creepy machete guy's *long story*, so I asked, "Which room is Gloam and Rig's?"

Edin glanced at Hunter, then hesitantly pointed it out. I started striding toward it.

"Hey, champ, why do you need to talk to Gloam?" Hunter hurried alongside me, sounding a little worried.

"Don't worry about it." My voice was hard, and I spared Hunter a single glance as I pounded on the door. "I'll come find you in a bit."

He hesitated, then reluctantly walked off back to Edin, and a few seconds later the door opened. Gloam's huge, muscular frame filled the doorway, his bald head with its little horns looming above me. I gulped, some of my bravado fleeing.

"Charlie." He shot me a smile, tusks peeking out. "It's good to see you back safe."

"Yeah," I said coolly, shooting him a flinty smile. "Both of us are back safe. And you and I are going to have a little talk."

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Charlie

Gloam's weird, textured brow twitched into a tiny, concerned frown.

"Oh?" He stepped back to let me in, glancing over my head, no doubt searching for Rig. His eyes tightened, probably when he saw him standing with Moth, which made rage flare again. I clenched my hands into fists.

Gloam and Rig's room was cluttered with what looked like small piles of random crap. There was a stack of books on the table in the corner, and a single orchid on the windowsill. Rig's clothes were strewn about everywhere, and when Gloam noticed me looking, he gave a wary chuckle.

"Rig isn't the tidiest, but it's not as bad as our previous room," he said in his deep voice as he closed the door. "What is it you want to talk about, Charlie?"

His tone made it seem like he suspected, and I whirled around to face him with a glare.

"I know about the Herald. That's what you were warning me about, right? That Moth was related to them?"

Gloam pursed his lips, tusks peeking up. "Yes, it—Wait a moment. Was?"

I gave a tight nod. "He killed them."

Gloam stared at me, blinking his goat-like eyes slowly as his mouth opened and closed. "He killed the Herald?"

"They were an abusive, sadistic fuck who tortured their own child for years." I clenched my jaw. "Why wouldn't he kill them?"

"Did—" The textured lines on his brows drew together hard in a frown. "Did their... protectors not try and stop him?"

"You mean your *brothers*?" I snapped. "Yeah, that's what I want to talk to you about, Gloam. You made it seem like Moth couldn't be trusted just because of who his parent is. Should I judge *you* the same way, huh? Should *I* go around telling all the raiders here not to trust *you* because your brothers served an evil, sadistic monster who ate people?"

Gloam took a breath and raised his huge hands. "I understand what you're—"

"They found him when he was just a kid, all alone out here, and abused him for years." My eyes burned. "Whatever marks they gave their followers, he had them—but worse, because they could summon him from anywhere. They could control him. I'm guessing *you* know what that's like, right?"

Gloam's expression became pained, and he sat heavily on the edge of the bed, the frame creaking under his weight. "I... I didn't know the extent of it. The Herald gifted me to Mary shortly after Moth appeared as a child at the cult."

"Then it was wrong of you to make assumptions about him," I snarled, aware that I may have been pushing my luck with the big, scary monster. His war hammer was resting beside the door, and my throat bobbed as I glanced at it.

"You are right." His horned head dipped in a nod, and he gazed at me sadly. "I am sorry, Charlie. It was wrong of me."

"It's not me you need to apologise to."

"No, of course. Of course I will speak to Moth and apologise." He hesitated, then eyed me curiously. "Why were you with the Herald?"

"I told you, they could summon him from anywhere. It happened a few times while we were out there. They hurt him. So the last time, I grabbed on so he wouldn't have to face them alone."

Gloam watched me carefully. His fanged mouth tilted into a tiny smile. "You have come to care for him."

I felt my face get hot, and I shot him a weak glare. "I'm not discussing my relationship with Moth with you."

Especially when I hadn't even discussed it with Moth.

"That is fair." He stood up from the bed, once again towering over me. "How did he do it? Kill them?"

"He can tell you what he wants. It's his business, not mine."

Gloam nodded solemnly, then let out a rumbling chuckle as his hand clapped my shoulder. "You're almost as fiery as Hunter. It has been a delight having him and Edin here with us."

I snorted, not sure the others would agree. "And the Soul Eater and Danny, right? Hunter said they showed up a while ago."

"Ah, yes." He chuckled. "Interesting pair."

I let out a long breath as all the fight left me. Now that we were back, I was utterly exhausted. And I just... wanted Moth. I didn't want all these other people around. I wanted to find a room and get into bed with him and block everything else out.

"So, uh..." I scrubbed a hand through my hair and shot Gloam an awkward smile. "Did you ever find out anything about that monster in the cage? The one the military..."

His face tightened. "Yes. Lilac has been—"

A loud clanging from outside cut him off, both our gazes jerking to the door.

"Anchor is calling a camp meeting." Gloam looked at me. "You didn't find Cat, then? We know the prison has been abandoned."

"We found him. Moth's told Anchor everything."

He nodded and gestured for me to head to the door, following behind. "I will find Moth after the meeting to speak with him. And—Charlie..."

I turned at the door. His broad face was contorted with pain, eyes dark as he looked at me.

"Did you... see them? My brothers?"

I swallowed and nodded. "Yeah. I hope you're not like them. They were cruel. Cruel to Moth."

He looked away quickly and shook his head. "I'm not like them."

I didn't really know what else to say, so I added, "We had to get out quick before either of them found the Herald after Moth... So I don't know what they're going to do. Now the Herald's dead."

"No," he murmured, brow creasing. "Neither do I."

I had a strong urge to tell Gloam what the Herald had ordered Moth to do. That they'd been looking for him. He looked genuinely remorseful over his ill-conceived judgement of Moth, and he *didn't* seem to be like his brothers. He seemed kind. His advice to me had been misguided, but he'd given it for what he believed to be the right reasons.

I would leave it to Moth to tell Gloam what he wanted. I trusted him. So I opened the door and left the room in silence, Gloam behind me.

The raiders were all making their way toward the diner. I looked around for Moth. I couldn't see him, but I spotted Hunter and Edin standing with Anchor outside the old bar, where I'd first seen Moth all that time ago.

"Everything okay?" Hunter asked with a frown as I reached them, glancing over at Gloam as he met Rig and smoothed a big hand down his

wild curls with a little smile. Rig grinned up at him from behind his mask, tangling their fingers together to tug him toward the diner.

“Fine.” I looked around again. “Have you seen Moth?”

Anchor shrugged, her bushy brows furrowed into a worried frown. “He walked off after telling us about Cat. Didn’t see where he went.”

“We’re going to keep watch on the wall while they have their meeting,” Hunter told me.

“Oh.” I glanced up. “I can take the other side. If you want.”

Anchor gave me a distracted smile from behind her green mask. “That would be great. Thank you.”

“No problem. But, uh... where do you think Moth went?”

He couldn’t have just... gone, right? He wouldn’t have done that.

Right?

“Um, maybe to the room he stays in while he’s here? Or the bathroom stalls?” Anchor took a step closer to the diner. “Sorry, I need to go tell everyone, so...”

“Sure. Go.” I smiled at her before she turned and hurried off, following the last few stragglers inside.

I finally spotted creepy machete guy—Lilac—slinking into the diner just before Anchor. She murmured something to him, and he nodded once in response.

Silence fell over the camp, and we made our way to the entrance to head up to the wall. I didn’t speak, looking around again for Moth, but he and Chuck had vanished. Uneasiness settled in my gut.

“Moth won’t have just left, Charlie.” Edin squeezed my shoulder before I started climbing up the ladder in the containers. “He’ll be here somewhere.”

“Yep,” I croaked, climbing quickly so I wouldn’t have to talk about it.

We split up when we emerged from the hatch, Hunter and Edin heading left while I walked right and sat down carefully on the edge of the wall near the old RV I’d spotted when we first arrived. It was dark now, and I could barely make out the dull metal of the vehicle in the shadow of the forest. I wondered if that monster was still in his cage down there.

The camp below was dead quiet as I sat there, staring into the darkness. What was I going to do if Moth didn’t want to stay with me?

The obvious answer was to go back to the homestead with Hunter and Edin. It wasn’t that I didn’t like it there. It was pretty idyllic for the Wastes,

if I ignored the constant, gnawing pain in my gut that said I would be alone for the rest of my life if I stayed there.

Without Moth.

It felt kind of pathetic to consider staying here at the camp if he didn't want to be with me, just so I'd be able to see him again. That would mean witnessing him stare hungrily at Ghost every time he was here. I'd been a fun distraction while we were out there, but it was Ghost he'd pined for. For years.

"Charlie."

My gut lurched at the sound of Moth's husky voice, and I glanced up to see him walking along the wall toward me. Chuck lumbered behind him, letting out a sweet little chirp at the sight of me.

I scrambled quickly to my feet. "Hey."

He stopped a few paces away, pale eyes tracking over my face in the dark. My fingers flexed by my sides with the intense urge to cross the distance and pull him into my arms, but I could see that his expression was closed off.

He cleared his throat. "I'm—I'm going. I just—uh, wanted to say goodbye."

My breath caught as I froze. Every inch of me filled up with an awful, overwhelming blend of grief and anger and the urge to... to somehow stop him.

"What?" I croaked. "You're *going*? Just... You're just leaving? Now?"

He nodded curtly, pursing his lips and making the rings through them glint in the faint glow of the fairy lights from the camp below.

Anger and desperation closed my throat up. I took a single step closer. "Are you serious? After everything, you're just... leaving me here?"

I hated how vulnerable the question made me feel—how small my voice came out.

Moth shifted uncomfortably, adjusting the strap of his backpack. His sword peeked up over his head, making my stomach tighten. He really *was* about to leave. He was all ready. I'd been his last pit stop before he went.

"You're back with Edin and Hunter now," he rasped, his voice huskier than normal. "You can go back with them. Or... are you going to stay here?" His voice took on a hopeful note. "If you are, I'll see you when I next visit—"

“You’re just going to leave me behind after everything?” I repeated in a croak.

Moth’s face tightened, and for just a second before he masked it, longing shone in his pale eyes. “What—what do you mean? Did you... want to come with me?”

I choked out an incredulous laugh. “Of course I want to come with you! I want to stay with you. Hasn’t that been fucking obvious?”

“I—” His eyes darted nervously, no longer looking at me. “You—you said you just wanted a casual thing while we were...”

“You seriously think *that’s* what a casual thing looks like? Feels like?” My voice was rough.

I knew it was the wrong thing to say when Moth’s face flamed pink. His tone was embarrassed and defensive when he snapped, “How am I supposed to know what it—what a casual thing looks like? You know I’ve never... done any of that before.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—” I exhaled and scrubbed anxious hands down my face. “I know you—”

I cut off and glanced down at the camp. They were all still in the diner, and Hunter and Edin were all the way on the other side of the wall, but I lowered my voice anyway so I didn’t embarrass him. “I know you have feelings for someone else, but do you really not... feel *anything* for me? You can seriously just walk away?”

I could feel my eyes pleading with him, and Moth’s gaze tightened before he looked away. He let out a shuddering breath and shook his head, and my stomach squeezed into a tight, agonising knot.

But then he said in a quiet voice, “I don’t... I’m not in love with Ghost.”
Oh.

I froze, staring at him, the painful ball loosening just a little with fragile hope. I waited for him to say more, to say how he felt about *me*, but he didn’t. He just stood there in silence, pale strands of hair moving gently against his cheekbones in the cold breeze. He still wasn’t looking at me.

The rejection was even more painful than I’d anticipated. He wasn’t in love with Ghost anymore, but evidently he didn’t feel anything like that for me either.

“Okay.” I tried to keep the devastation out of my voice as I nodded, reaching up to scrub roughly at my face. “I understand. Sorry for... Sorry.”

I took a deep, shaky breath and forced a smile on my face. I could feel how wobbly it was, and my eyes burned. “Thanks for everything. Thanks for keeping me safe out there, Moth. I’m glad I could get to know you. I don’t... I don’t think I’m going to stay here. So... I hope things get better for you now the Herald’s gone.”

“Where are you going to go?” he asked immediately, head lifting to stare at me through intense eyes that sparked with fear. “Not out into the Wastes alone?”

I exhaled and shrugged, scrubbing at my jaw. “I don’t know. I don’t think I can go back to the homestead, either. It’s just so... remote. Lonely.”

“You can’t go out there alone, Charlie.” His voice was harsh and biting. I waited for him to say more. To offer for me to come with him.

He didn’t.

“I’ll be okay,” I rasped, then tried to inject some levity by adding, “I’m not some super slayer like you, but I can manage.”

“I’m used to it,” he snapped immediately. “I’ve been alone out there for years.”

My chest squeezed painfully tight. *Ask me to come with you. Then we’ll be together.*

But Moth had fallen silent again. He was vibrating, staring at the ground. The pain was making it hard to breathe, and I needed to get away before I said anything stupid.

“You’ll find someone,” I croaked. “Someone who’ll see how amazing you are.”

I do. I see it.

I went to walk past him toward the hatch on unsteady legs. As I passed him, I stopped but didn’t touch him. He was stiff, staring at nothing with his head lowered.

“Even though you don’t feel the same, I...” God, I needed to shut the fuck up. “I think you’re perfect just as you are. You don’t need to change or hide any part of yourself for someone else, Moth.”

I heard him suck in a tiny, shaky breath, but I was already moving toward the hatch, needing to get away before I did something pathetic like beg him when he clearly wasn’t interested. I couldn’t help but stop when I reached Chuck, crouching down to scratch under her chin.

My eyes got hot as she gazed up at me and clutched my wrist with both flat little hands. “Bye, Chuck.”

She chirruped sadly as if she knew what was happening, fingers clinging on as I straightened. My legs were shaking wildly as I climbed down through the containers, and I tensed up when I made it back into the camp and saw all the raiders pouring out of the diner. I didn't want to speak to anyone. I didn't want to pretend I was fine.

I started walking quickly toward the motel, not knowing where I was really going. I didn't know if there'd even be a room for me here, but I wanted to hide until I... figured out what the fuck I was going to do with my life. I didn't want to stay here. It didn't feel right, especially if I'd have to occasionally see Moth when he visited. That would be too painful.

But the thought of going back to the homestead and being without him for the rest of my life was crushing. A heavy, throbbing weight in my chest. My eyes burned again, so I kept my head down and walked faster as the raiders started milling about the camp.

"Charlie."

Moth's husky voice made me tense up and stop dead. He'd yelled my name, so all the raiders stopped too. When I reluctantly turned to face him, he was striding toward me with determination tightening his beautiful face. It wavered slightly when he noticed that we had the attention of the entire camp, his throat bobbing, but as his pale eyes fixed back on me, I saw something in them that made my chest tighten.

I didn't move or say anything when he stopped in front of me, and his hands twitched like he was going to reach for me before his eyes darted over to the raiders again. He swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing in his tattooed throat.

Then he lunged at me in a rush.

Long fingers cupped my face, pulling me into a deep kiss. I reacted automatically, sliding my hands around his waist beneath his coat, kissing him back with fervent desperation that made me feel too raw and exposed, but I couldn't stop it.

"I'm sorry." His voice was ragged when he broke the kiss. "I didn't think you—I got... scared. What I wanted to say was that... that... how I feel about you is—"

He cut off with a weak, frustrated groan, hands sliding down to clutch my shirt. I swallowed nervously, ignoring all the raiders, several of whom had stopped and were staring.

“I thought I was in love with Ghost,” Moth whispered, because Ghost was standing right over there. Watching. “But I never felt like this about him. How I feel about you. I’ve never... felt like this about anyone.”

I tightened my grip on him beneath his coat. “And how... how do you feel about me?”

He groaned again, face flushing as he glanced over at the raiders. And the monsters—Gloam and Aury were there too. Gloam had a little smile on his face. I could practically *feel* Hunter and Edin gawking from the wall.

“Don’t make me say it,” he mumbled. “Everyone’s... watching.”

I let out a shaky laugh, tugging him closer. “Hell no, slayer, I’m gonna make you say it.”

Moth glared at me without heat. “Such a shithead. Fine, I...”

He swallowed again, but lifted his chin and stared at me with a determined expression, even as his voice wavered when he said, “I love you.”

My face hurt from how wide I was grinning. “Yeah? So you’re gonna let me tag along with you?”

A hint of uncertainty flared in Moth’s eyes when I didn’t immediately say it back. His fingers slowly uncurled from my shirt, but before he could get far, I wrapped my arms around his neck and yanked him into a hard kiss.

“I love you too.” I buried my face in his neck, breathing in his scent. “I love you, Moth.”

He let out a weak, relieved chuckle and pressed his mouth into my hair. “Shithead.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Charlie

“Damn, Charlie,” Rig hollered, shattering the moment. “How’d you manage to break the ice queen?”

Moth’s face flamed pink even as he shot the raider an unimpressed look. I laughed and leaned in to kiss his tattooed neck, happiness bubbling inside me.

“Deepthroating,” I called back, which made Moth give my stomach a weak shove.

“Holy shit, no kidding, right?” Rig’s brown eyes were lively as he dragged Gloam over to us. “The first time Gloam—”

“My love, why don’t we let Moth and Charlie... talk?” Gloam smoothed a hand over Rig’s wild curls, then gave Moth a serious look. “And I would like to speak with you later, Moth. Or tomorrow. If you’ll allow it.”

Rig glanced between them with a confused expression. Moth’s face was wary as he stared back at Gloam, but he gave a tight nod.

The big monster’s horned head dipped. “Thank you. Come on, firebrand.”

He gently tugged Rig away, and I noticed the rest of the raiders dissipating after our little display. When I glanced up at the wall, Edin shot me a big thumbs up—a gesture I’d taught him—then grabbed the back of Hunter’s neck and yanked him closer. Hunter stumbled and shoved at his rock-hard stomach, snapping at him before Edin shut him up with a kiss.

I turned my attention back to Moth, my cheeks hurting from the wide grin that refused to leave my face. “You got a room here, slayer?”

His eyes flared and he nodded quickly, tangling his fingers through mine and tugging me toward the staircase that led to the second floor of the motel. Chuck loped along behind us with a chirp, and I glanced back to give her a smile even as I wondered how we could get rid of her for a little while.

Lovingly. I wondered it lovingly. But still.

Moth strode along the walkway, dragging me behind him, but halted when Edin's booming voice called down to us from the wall.

"I told you, Charlie!" I could see his fangs flashing in the dark even from this distance, a huge grin on his face. "Enjoy yourselves!"

My face went hot even as I chuckled. Moth turned bright pink.

"Uh, yeah. Thanks," I called back, then jumped when the door beside us flew open.

Moth and I stared in silence as the Soul Eater filled the doorway, gripping the frame with blackened fingertips. He had his coat on, the hood up and his face completely obscured in shadows, but it was slung on over a bare, greyish-white chest absolutely covered in scars. And... were his pants undone?

"Shut. Up," he snarled, his ghoulish voice making my entire body break out in goosebumps.

Moth let out a tiny sound and jerked forward when Chuck loped closer to the Soul Eater, seemingly unafraid, before slipping between his legs and vanishing into the room. He hissed and spun around, fingers flexing by his sides.

"Shit," I croaked, a second before there was a squawk of surprise from inside.

"Wyn." I recognised Danny's voice. "Uh... what's that?"

"She's friendly," Moth blurted immediately. "She won't hurt you."

"Really?" Danny sounded a little less freaked out, eagerness bleeding into his voice. "Aw, she's kind of cute. Wyn—"

"No," he barked, then spun back and snarled at us, "Get that fucking thing out of our room."

"Chuck," Moth called immediately, his voice cracking. "Come here. Please."

She appeared, sniffing briefly at the Soul Eater's knee and making him snarl down at her, before slipping past him and clinging to Moth's leg. Danny appeared behind Wyn, shrugging into a shirt.

"She's so dang cute!" He stopped and blinked. "Oh, hey Charlie."

"Hey." I smiled at him, then side-eyed Wyn as an evil thought came into my head. "Want to hang out with her for a little while?"

Danny's face brightened immediately. I could feel the Soul Eater trying to murder me with his eyes from the depths of his hood.

“Really?” Danny crouched down and held out a hand. Chuck uncurled from Moth’s leg to edge forward, sniffing his palm. “Hey, girl. Chuck, right?”

She chirped at him, and Danny’s eyes went big and soft. Wyn growled out a low, terrifying sound, but his hand was gentle when he rested it on top of Danny’s head.

“My sweet—”

“Aw, come on, Wyn. Please?” Danny straightened and held out his hand to Chuck. “You want somethin’ to eat?”

She slipped her grey fingers into his, and Danny melted. She loped into the room with him.

“Thanks,” I said to Wyn, shooting him a big grin. “Real nice of you. We appreciate it.”

He snarled as I shoved Moth away from the door, grabbing his hand to pull him further down the walkway.

“Fucking camp,” I heard Wyn seethe before the door slammed behind us.

“Is she going to be okay?” Moth asked worriedly. “With him?”

I waved my free hand. “She’ll be fine. Danny will fuss over her. Which room is yours?”

He pulled me to a stop outside one of the doors and fumbled with his bag for the key. I shoved him inside the moment the door was unlocked, already yanking off my gloves and shrugging out of my bags and coat.

I barely paid attention to the room around us, but it looked sparse in the moonlight coming in through the window, like the one I’d stayed in for a single night before we set off for the prison. I wasn’t interested in it at all, especially when Moth tugged off his bags and coat before pulling off his gloves.

“So.” I smirked at him, sauntering forward to slip my hand beneath his shirt and run it up his side. I traced over a little patch of scales. “You love me, huh?”

He huffed. “Shut up.”

“And you were gonna just leave without me,” I added, pinching his side and making him jump. “You ass.”

He went pink. “Sorry.”

“I’ll forgive you if you take me back to your safehouse.” I wrapped my arms around him and tugged him closer with a grin. “And fuck me in that

big bed like you did in New York.”

He licked his lips and dipped his head to kiss me, hands sliding under my shirt to palm my lower back. “You want to live there?”

“Hell yeah. But we can keep visiting the camp and wandering the Wastes. We’ll also have to visit Edin and Hunter at the homestead.”

He rolled his eyes, but his cheeks flushed with pleasure. “The big angry one won’t mind me being there?”

“The big angry one will do what I tell him.” I kissed him again. “Besides, he’s secretly a giant marshmallow. Especially when it comes to Edin. And Edin likes you.”

Moth gave me a look that told me he didn’t believe the part about Hunter, which made me chuckle.

“But I don’t want to talk about them.” I smirked and started urging him toward the bed.

Moth chuckled, quickly toeing off his boots before sitting back heavily on the edge of the bed. I yanked my boots off and stood between his legs, cradling the back of his head as he looked up at me and rested his hands on my hips.

I saw his tattooed throat bob as he swallowed.

“I love you, Charlie,” he said quietly in his husky voice.

My chest went tight, something inside me clicking into place. *Finally*. “I love you too.”

He leaned forward and kissed my stomach through my shirt, resting his forehead there for a second. Then he cleared his throat and glanced up at me.

“By the way, I don’t recall you ever deepthroating me.” He smirked. “For the record.”

I burst out laughing, remembering what I’d said to Rig.

“No? We’ll have to fix that.” I pushed him back and crawled over him. “Since it’s apparently how I broke the ice queen and all.”

Moth’s cheeks went pink as he glared up at me. “I swear to god, Charlie, if you start calling me that...”

I sat up to pull off my shirt. “I promise I won’t if you get naked.”

He grinned, but his eyes darted over to the door. “It’s locked, right?”

I climbed off him to go and check, undoing my pants on the way before turning the lock and putting the chain on for good measure, because I was just as reluctant as Moth for anyone to interrupt us. I was pretty sure there

was a chance Edin would burst in here and ask how it was going. Maybe try and give us some pointers.

I turned around with a salacious grin, my cock bucking in my pants when I saw that Moth had moved to the centre of the bed and stripped down to just his underwear. I hopped as I lifted a foot to tug off one sock, then the other, my eyes glued to him as he shoved his boxer briefs down and off.

He choked out a laugh as he leaned up on his elbows, the lean muscles in his stomach tightening in a glorious display. "So seductive."

I grinned and shoved down my pants and underwear in one, my hard cock bouncing up to smack my abs. The grin dropped from his face as his eyes flared with heat, and he eagerly spread his legs so I could climb between them.

I kissed him once with a moan, but I was desperate to get my tongue on other parts of him. Moth let out a hard breath as I started kissing down his neck, his fingers twining through my hair. My tongue swirled over a tiny nipple before I made my way lower, until I was dropping soft kisses over his pubic mound.

Moth's hips arched slightly, and he let out a broken moan when I slicked my tongue up his slit. I groaned at the taste of him, the feel of him so hot and wet as I dipped my tongue inside. My hands cupped behind his knees and spread his legs wider, before I curled my arms around his thighs to hold him in place.

"Charlie," Moth panted, hips straining up again when I thrust my tongue inside him and felt the head of his cock. The tip of my tongue licked over his leaking cockslit before it started pushing out insistently against my mouth.

I pulled back slightly to drag my tongue down the length of his cock as it emerged. Moth's breath shuddered out of him, his hips rocking and long fingers still fisting my hair tight.

I kissed my way up his shaft, wrapping a hand around the base to tilt it closer to my mouth.

"Okay," I rasped. "I talked a big game but I'm not actually all that great at deepthroating, so you'll have to be patient with me."

Moth choked out a laugh, lifting his head to look down at me. "You don't have to."

"Oh no." I smirked up at him. "I told you I'm an overachiever, didn't I?"

“Yeah, but—” His words cut off with a sharp inhale as I sank my mouth over his cock. “Fuck.”

I tried to relax my throat as best I could, his cock filling my mouth. I felt my gag reflex kick in when the tip touched my throat. I tried to suppress the reflexive heave and Moth squirmed, half laughing and half groaning as I quickly pulled back.

I grinned up at him, panting as I fisted his slick cock and stroked. “I tried, baby. I’ll get better.”

He pulled me up and kissed me, hands sliding around to cup my face. “You don’t need to get better.”

One hand dropped, burrowing between our bodies to grasp my achingly stiff dick. I gasped against Moth’s mouth, then let out a trembling groan when he guided me to his slit. I shuddered hard as I sank inside him, my moan muffled by his mouth when he kissed me again and wrapped his arms around my neck.

“Hard, army boy,” he rasped against my mouth. His lips curved into a little grin before he repeated my words from New York. “Fuck me as hard as you want.”

I groaned helplessly, one hand cupping the back of his head to fist his hair. I buried my face in his neck as my hips started to thrust. I tried to go slow at first, but when I felt Moth’s long legs wrap around me and jerk me closer, I lost control.

“Fuck,” I bit out, pumping my cock into him harder and faster. My chest ached with almost overwhelming want, despite the fact that I was inside him. It was like I couldn’t get deep enough. Close enough.

Moth’s moans were shuddering out of him, punctuated by every hard thrust of my cock. The headboard rattled against the wall as my hips sped up. I had a vague moment of realisation that there were several monsters in this camp who could probably hear us, but I didn’t care enough to stop.

“Ch-Charlie,” he panted desperately, making me lift my head and crush my mouth to his.

He moaned, tongue thrusting feverishly into my mouth. His strong legs tightened around me, and I could feel his hard cock sliding between our bodies, the head leaving slick trails over my stomach.

Pleasure surged in a hot rush. My thighs trembled, a ragged groan escaping me as I broke the kiss.

“F-fuck, baby, I’m gonna come.” I shoved a shaking hand between us and fisted his cock, stroking it recklessly fast to bring him off with me.

Moth grunted, head tipping back as his chest heaved. I could feel him tightening up around me, and I tried to angle my cock to rub over that spot inside him, knowing I’d hit it when he seized up in a rush.

He came so hard he didn’t make a sound, clinging to my neck as he shook wildly and clawed at my shoulders and the back of my head. His cock spurted long, heavy ropes of cum over my hand, and he tightened up so much around me that I couldn’t even thrust anymore.

I let out a strangled sound as the pressure broke, my hips jerking as I started to come. I clenched his long hair too tight, gasping into his neck with every hard spurt from my cock. I was shaking like a leaf when it ended, collapsing on top of Moth as he panted beneath me.

Our bodies were damp with sweat, hot even though the room wasn’t all that warm. I carefully slid free and relaxed, kissing his neck as he let out a sated groan that vibrated against my lips.

“So,” I breathed, my heartrate still slowing. “You don’t mind me invading your safehouse?”

Moth choked out a husky laugh and threaded his fingers through my hair. “No. We’ll have to figure out where Chuck can sleep.”

“Can we open up another of the rooms?”

He shrugged one shoulder, jostling my chin. “Sure. I’ve only ever needed the one.”

I lifted my head and grinned down at him. “Well, you might want to get away from me sometimes when I piss you off too bad. I know you like your privacy.”

He gave another tiny shrug, tracing a long finger over my collarbone.

“It’s different with you.” Then he glared up at me. “But if you hum all the time...”

I laughed, dipping my head to kiss him. “I’ll try not to.”

I finally heaved myself off him, landing on my back with a groan and immediately pulling him into my arms. Moth rested his head on my shoulder, playing with my chest hair as he slung a leg over my thigh.

He cleared his throat. “By the way, uh... I’m pretty sure I can’t get... pregnant or anything. Because of my monster side. I think I’m too human for that. In case you were worried.”

Jesus, I hadn't even considered that. But I didn't want to make it a thing, so I dipped my head to kiss his hair. "Okay. I wasn't worried."

He let out a breath, his body relaxing more into me. We stayed in contented silence for a while, the sounds of the camp drifting in through the door. I heard Edin's booming laugh before he called someone an "old bastard". The Soul Eater's ghoulish, distorted voice followed, snarling something back at him.

"Will you teach me to read?" Moth asked quietly, laying his palm on the centre of my chest and stretching out his long, tattooed fingers.

I nuzzled into his hair. "Of course."

"I tried, but it's just... meaningless shapes. I can recognise numbers okay, but..."

I remembered seeing the stack of books in his safehouse, and I'd been able to teach him poker.

"I'll teach you." I kissed the top of his head, leaving my mouth pressed there so he could feel my grin. "Then I can leave you dirty notes."

He snorted, rubbing his nose against my shoulder before resting his cheek there and sighing. I pulled him closer, breathing in his scent as my eyes slipped shut.

Finally.

MOTH

I tried very hard to contain my flinch when the Soul Eater appeared out of nowhere beside me and Charlie in the diner.

My shoulders wanted to hunch up when his distorted voice curled around my ears.

“Danny needs food.”

Daisy tutted, not even looking at him as he loomed over the counter with his hood up and his face concealed by impenetrable darkness. “We’ve talked about this, scary man.”

His blackened fingers flexed, and he was silent as Daisy ladled stew into two bowls and passed them to me and Charlie.

“Please,” he snarled eventually. “Danny needs food *please*.”

She tutted again, grabbing another bowl. “Better.”

He let out another low snarl, but she just slid him a bowl of stew and tilted her head up—and up—to raise a brow at him. He snatched up the bowl, almost spilling half of its contents, and that hood slowly tilted toward us when Charlie let out a long, braying snort of suppressed laughter.

“Something funny, human?” he said in a terrifyingly soft voice.

My fingers twitched for my sword, and I inched closer to Charlie as he sobered immediately, pursing his lips to fight a smile as he dragged his spoon through his stew. “Nope.”

The Soul Eater didn’t move for long seconds, before I felt his unseen eyes shift to me and linger for a terrifyingly long time. Then he huffed in disgust and vanished—with the bowl—into thick black smoke that shot out of the diner.

“I want a thank you next time,” Daisy called after him, tutting again. “So rude. I don’t know why that sweet boy is with him.”

“Damn, you’re hard as nails, huh?” Charlie grinned at her. “Even Hunter wouldn’t dare talk to him like that.”

She waved a hand. “Your Hunter is a teddy bear. And I’m not scared of any beasties. Especially not when I’m feeding their precious mates.”

“Speaking of that *teddy bear*.” I could tell Charlie found that hilarious and would probably start calling the big angry one by it just to piss him off. “You wouldn’t be a darlin’ and dish up another bowl for me to take to him, would you?”

Daisy rolled her eyes, but she wasn’t immune to Charlie’s charms. No one was. Except maybe the Soul Eater.

She patted his arm and ladled more stew into a bowl. “And you tell that big purple boy he doesn’t need to hunt for at least a few days. We have more meat than we know what to do with.”

Charlie chuckled, picking up both bowls. “Sure.”

I gave Daisy a brief smile when she beamed at me, then followed Charlie out of the diner. Chuck climbed down from where she’d been riding on Rig’s back and hurried over as we made our way to sit by the old bar to eat. She stretched up on her hind legs to sniff at my bowl, big eyes buggy and interested.

“You’ll get some,” I told her as I sank down to sit cross-legged. I’d already shoved a few crackers in my pocket for her before we left our room.

“I’m just gonna take this to Hunter.” Charlie placed one of the bowls beside me and straightened up, lifting the other. “I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.” I pulled the crackers out of my pocket and broke off a piece to dip it in the stew before handing it to Chuck. She sucked on it first, which was kind of gross, then crunched down as she rested her hands on my knee and gazed at me for more.

I snorted. “So greedy.”

Fishing out a chunk of meat, I passed it to her and sucked the gravy off my fingers. She let out a hissing chirp that I was pretty sure meant *thank you*, and chewed with her mouth open as her long tail swished contentedly.

“You’re an animal,” I told her. She chirped back.

“Hi, Moth.”

I glanced up and saw Ghost hesitantly approaching, so gave him a small smile. “Hey.”

He twisted his long fingers together before sinking down to sit beside me, shuffling back so he could lean against the wall and carefully moving Charlie’s bowl of stew to one side so he didn’t knock it. He stared at Chuck, smiling behind his gas mask, before looking over at me.

"I just wanted to thank you for what you did. Both of you."

I shrugged, feeding Chuck another bit of cracker. "S'fine."

"It means a lot to all of us. And I..." Ghost exhaled and looked down at his hands. "Even after you found Aury, I... I never apologised for how I treated you after that scouting trip." He rubbed his forehead anxiously with a gloved hand. "I think I handled the whole thing badly. I acted like a child. I'm sorry."

I gave an uncomfortable shrug, but internally I didn't disagree. He'd just started ignoring me, before making it clear he didn't like me anymore without even giving me a chance to explain. Not that I could've explained.

Charlie had done the opposite. Charlie had tried to help me.

"Doesn't matter." I fed Chuck the final bit of the cracker, and she climbed into my lap while she nibbled it, gazing around at the camp.

Ghost chuckled. "She's cute. Even with the spikes."

"Yeah." I smoothed a hand over her head, thumb rubbing at her little white cowlick.

"Charlie seems really nice." Ghost gave me a little smile from behind his mask, blue eyes crinkling at the corners. I huffed.

"He can be an annoying ass, but... yeah." I couldn't stop the wide grin that stretched my mouth as I looked back at him. "He's... He's great."

Great wasn't a big enough word, but I'd never been good at talking about... much of anything.

"Do you think you'll both stay at the camp for a while?" Ghost stood up, brushing off the back of his pants. "It's been nice having new people here, which... isn't something I ever thought I'd hear myself say. But Aury really likes Edin. I'm not so sure about the Soul Eater, though. Danny's nice."

I smiled crookedly. "I don't know how long we're staying for."

We. Not just me this time, going off on my own. I'd be with Charlie. And Chuck.

When we'd got back to the camp and immediately split up—with me going to talk to Anchor and the raiders, and Charlie reuniting with Edin and his big angry friend—something like grief had made it hard to breathe. *That's it, then*, I'd thought.

I hadn't wanted to stick around and watch him slip back into his life so easily. I hadn't wanted to see him take off from the camp with Edin and Hunter, disappearing forever. So I'd tried to protect myself by leaving first.

The pissed, rough voice of Charlie's big angry friend drifted over, jerking my eyes to the side.

"Don't call me that, asshole!" he yelled as Charlie made his way over from the motel, snickering to himself. He sobered when he noticed Ghost standing over me, eyes darting to him before he shot me a tiny, uncertain smile.

I could tell he was a little insecure about Ghost, which was... mindboggling to me. That *he* could be worried about *me* not wanting him. When we'd got back to the camp and I'd seen Ghost, I'd felt nothing more than friendly affection.

Now that I knew what it actually felt like, I realised with perfect clarity that I hadn't really been in love with him. I'd been obsessed with the idea of finding someone who accepted me. I'd latched onto him because he'd treated me no different to anyone else.

Charlie, though... Thinking about Charlie made my chest get hot and tight and my stomach twist with pleasant nerves. Made me feel a little jittery, like I had to make sure I did everything in my power to keep him with me. He still irritated the shit out of me sometimes, and I was still getting used to his teasing and blunt way of speaking, but I just... wanted to be with him all the time. Even when he was annoying me. The moment I saw him, I wanted to kiss him or touch him in some way. I just wanted him next to me.

I knew I'd still want to be alone sometimes—I didn't want to stay at the camp full time—but the difference was... I wanted to be alone with *him*.

The intensity of my feelings was a little overwhelming. I'd never felt this strongly about anyone before. Like even when he was pissing me off, I wanted to grab his face and kiss him to shut him up.

Was that normal? Was that how humans felt when they were in love? I had no idea.

"Hi, Charlie." Ghost's eyes crinkled with a shy smile as Charlie reached us. "Um, okay, so I'll see you later."

Charlie clapped him on the shoulder before sitting down beside me. I reached over and palmed his thigh, because I didn't want him to feel unsure of anything. Of us. The thought almost made me want to laugh hysterically.

"He was just thanking us for going to look for Cat," I told him after Ghost had walked off. I passed him his bowl, then finally picked up my own to eat and gave Chuck another cracker to distract her.

“Wonder what they’ll do about him,” Charlie said before shovelling in a mouthful of stew.

I shrugged. “What can they do? He’ll come back when he’s done with... whatever it is he’s doing.”

Charlie nudged me with his elbow, shooting me a dirty grin. “Do you think he’s getting it on with that monster? The one whose sword you stole?”

I flushed and glared weakly at him, but begrudgingly said, “Yeah. Probably.”

“Have you talked to Gloam yet?”

My gut tightened with nerves at the thought of speaking to the aytarin, but I shot Charlie a dry look. “I’ve been with you all morning. You know I haven’t.”

We’d fallen asleep after going to collect Chuck from the Soul Eater’s human mate. He’d been cooing over her and seemed reluctant for her to go, but the Soul Eater had let out a low, feral growl until I’d taken Chuck’s hand and tugged her away. Then he’d grabbed Danny, who’d let out a surprised yelp that was all excitement and absolutely no fear, and dragged him into their room.

When we’d woken up this morning, I’d let Chuck out so she could go and explore the camp before Charlie had pounced on me. It hadn’t been long before he’d been riding my dick so enthusiastically that the bed squealed obnoxiously loud, which I knew for a fact the other monsters in the camp would be able to hear. That was confirmed when we finally emerged from our room and Edin gave us a huge, shit-eating grin with Chuck sitting on his shoulders, fiddling with his hair.

“I spoke to him,” Charlie said, scraping the last of the stew from his bowl. “Gloam.”

I passed him the rest of mine and split the last cracker with Chuck. “You did?”

“Yeah, when we got back.” Charlie chuckled. “I was kind of shitting myself. I may have, uh... gone off on him a little. Was kinda convinced he was going to cave my skull in with that war hammer.”

I cleared my throat, my eyes finding the big aytarin as he stood with Lilac in what looked like an intense conversation. “I don’t think he’s like them.”

“No, I don’t either.” Charlie glanced over at me. “You don’t have to talk to him if you don’t want, baby.”

I exhaled. “No, it’s fine. I should probably... I need to tell him what they wanted me to do. That they were looking for him. His brothers might still be.”

“Yeah.” Charlie stacked the bowls in front of him, then swept my hair back so he could kiss my neck. I leaned into him instinctively. “How long do you want to stay here before we head back to your safehouse?”

My belly warmed at the thought of going back there with him. “Don’t mind. I thought you’d want to stay awhile with Edin and your big angry friend. Until they leave.”

He chuckled and rested his head on my shoulder. “It’d be nice for them to get to know you better. If you don’t mind.”

I wasn’t so sure I was all that interested in getting to know Hunter better, but I’d do it for Charlie. It weirded me out a little that he seemed like he was... proud to be with me. Like he wanted to show me off. To show everyone that I was his.

I tangled my fingers with Charlie’s on top of his thigh, and he laughed when Chuck tried to yank my hand back so she could hold it instead.

“I don’t mind,” I said, kissing the top of his head. “Whatever you want.”

Gloam found me a few hours later when I was looking for Chuck, who had decided to latch onto Lilac once he reappeared in the camp. I didn’t know where the aloof raider had been, but I’d passed him and Aury earlier and heard them talking quietly about Seraph—the terrifying, howling monster Rig and Gloam had brought back with them from Mary’s place, and who was currently living in his cage outside the camp walls. He hadn’t screamed all that much since we’d been here, so maybe he was getting better.

“Moth.” Gloam’s deep, rumbling voice came from behind me, just as I spotted Lilac watching impassively while Chuck took the lump of wood he’d been whittling out of his hands and tried to chew on it.

I swallowed, forcing back the nerves as I turned to face the big aytorin. “Yes.”

He gave me a hesitant smile, tusks peeking out. “May I speak with you?”

I cleared my throat and glanced around furtively. None of the raiders were nearby, but after nodding, I walked closer to the wall so no one would

overhear.

Gloam followed and gazed down at me steadily with his creepy goat eyes. “I want to apologise for being cold to you when I came back with Rig. I... I recognised you as their son. That was all I knew.”

He looked away, textured browbone furrowing. “Charlie told me they... they were cruel to you. Abused you. Not just the Herald, but my brothers. He didn’t share anything with me that you might not want me to know, but I... I’m sorry, Moth. For judging you. I had no right.” He gave me a sad smile. “I know what it’s like to have blood ties with those who don’t turn out the way you hoped them to.”

My voice was rough when I said, “I didn’t expect much from them. A missionary found me and took me there. I didn’t really have a chance to be hopeful of anything before they... before it started.”

He nodded, his face pained. “I understand.”

Licking my lips, I glanced around before rasping, “I killed them.”

He nodded again. “I know. You had to.”

“I, uh...” I fumbled in my pocket and pulled out the crumpled, torn scrap of paper. “They... they were trying to make me look for you. To take you back. They gave me this to... control you.”

His eyes flared, and he stared at the scrap of paper before slowly reaching out to take it.

“I wasn’t going to use it,” I said quickly. “I can’t even... I refused.”

“Thank you.” He let out a long breath. “I’ve said nothing about—I’ve told no one. Not even Rig. And I won’t.”

I cleared my throat awkwardly. “Thanks.”

Gloam screwed up the paper and tucked it into his pocket, then shot me a small smile as he stepped closer. After hesitating, he rested his huge hand on my shoulder.

“We’re more alike than I thought.” He squeezed my shoulder gently. “If you ever need anything...”

I tried to keep my expression impassive, but I felt my cheeks getting hot. “Uh... thanks.”

He nodded once and let go, turning to walk off toward Rig who was trying to tempt Chuck away from Lilac with a piece of jerky. She refused, hissing at him and clinging to Lilac’s arm while he tried to ignore her and keep whittling.

I stood there for a few moments, not entirely sure what had just happened, before slowly walking over to where Charlie was sitting with Hunter and Edin.

“Moth!” Edin bellowed. “Charlie was telling us about his cut from the forileun. Did he turn into a complete bastard like Hunter did?”

“*Turn into one?*” Charlie snickered and kicked Hunter’s boot. “He’s always been one.”

Hunter scowled at him and kicked back, lounging back between Edin’s spread thighs. But I noticed that he didn’t actually look all that angry—it was more like scowling and snarling were just reflexive, especially in the face of Charlie and Edin’s teasing. He tilted his head against the front of Edin’s shoulder, snarled mouth softening when the big purple monster absently rubbed his cheek over Hunter’s hair.

I stood awkwardly for a second before Charlie reached up and grabbed my hand, tugging me down. I settled on the ground beside him, our knees pressed together and Charlie’s hand resting on my thigh.

When Edin looked at me with an expectant grin, I realised he was actually waiting for an answer.

“Uh...” I rubbed my face and glanced over at Charlie. “No, he wasn’t a bastard. Just whimpered in pain for a few hours.”

It was Charlie’s turn to scowl. “I did not *whimper*. I sat there stoically even though it felt like my body was filling up with needles. Barely made a peep.”

I snorted. “Sure. You were actually way calmer after being shot.”

“What?” Hunter jerked up, eyes lasering in on Charlie. “You were shot?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Military.”

“You got shot by the *military*?”

“Uh-huh. Then Moth killed this big dome-bear thing.”

Edin’s brow wrinkled. “Dome bear?”

“Like... big and muscular, with a shell thing on its back. Couldn’t even pierce it with bullets.”

“Ah.” He shot me an impressed look. “A cagin. A tough foe. You are very strong, Moth. Don’t worry about the lack of horns. You don’t need them.”

He smiled at me like he’d just given me the biggest compliment, and my brow creased as I glanced at Charlie in confusion. He just gave me a weak

shrug back.

“Thanks,” I said slowly.

A chirrup made me glance back, and I grinned when I saw Chuck loping toward us. She had something clutched in one little grey fist, which she deposited on my lap when she reached me.

I picked up the lump of wood, which was starting to take the shape of a long, rangy body, hunched over with its arms trailing. Before I could react, a shadow fell over me and I heard someone clearing their throat.

“I’ll take that back.” Lilac’s voice was as flat as ever. He held out his hand, so I gave him the figurine wordlessly.

He nodded once, green eyes tracking over each of us, before turning and slinking off.

“Still creepy,” Charlie muttered beside me, before adding in a normal voice, “So how long are you two going to stay here? We’ll hang around until you leave. I know my teddy bear wants to soak up every second with me while he can.”

He nudged Hunter’s foot again, smirking when Hunter glared at him.

“Well...” Edin glanced down at Hunter, then gave us a sly look. “There may be somewhere we’re going before we return to the homestead. But it will require some work, so we’ll be here for a while.”

Charlie’s brow furrowed. “What? Go where?”

Hunter cleared his throat and sat up. “Danny and Wyn told us something. When they got here.”

“Told you what?”

Edin shot Hunter a look filled with so much love that *I* got embarrassed. I shifted awkwardly, my knee pressing against Charlie’s. He reached over and threaded his fingers through mine, lifting our hands to kiss my knuckles.

Then the big purple monster’s eyes shifted to me. He grinned, fangs flashing in the sun.

“Have you ever been to our world, Moth?”

Author's Note

Thank you for reading Charlie and Moth's story! Seriously, if the raiders in the Wastes ever elect a president, it needs to be Charlie. He's the best. And Moth can be his feral bodyguard/First Human-Monster-Partner/terrible ambassador for the monsters because he doesn't like anyone.

I think one of my favourite things about Moth is that he's like the opposite of Wyn. Moth knows his face is at least initially attractive to humans, but he is incredibly self-conscious about his body and his monster parts—whereas Wyn is insecure about his face, but fully aware of the fact that he has a bangin' bod.

So, yes, Moth hasn't had the best life. He's been alone for basically all of it, he had to learn how to fend for himself at a very young age, and he always knew there was something different about him, but didn't know what until he met his awful progenitor. Who just made everything worse.

Charlie is just... the best. (I know I've already said that.) He is thoughtful and kind and treats Moth just how he needs to be treated. He quickly discovers how different life is in the Wastes if you're *not* in the military, but he and Moth make an excellent team (even if it took Moth a while to realise it).

I just love them both so much! And I hope you do too!

The **Monster Index** and **Human Index** were both getting VERY long, so I've included just the monsters and humans relevant to this book at the back. You can find the full indexes on my website, lily-mayne.com

What's next?

Next in the Monstrous series is the one I think everyone has been waiting for—Lilac's book! Our quiet, aloof camp assassin who has a machete. A machete that we haven't seen him use yet.

Before that, though, will be the second book in my m/m fae romance trilogy, *Forgotten Vows*.

Monster Index

Salyik [sal-yick]: Humanoid species that live in the monster-world city of Thinir, but are relegated to the poorer areas close to the city's ports because they are the minority. Treated poorly by other citizens. Quiet and tall.

Observed by Wyn and Danny in the monster world in Wyn's novella.

Moth (full name: Malimoth) is half-human, half-salyik. He is the son of the Herald, a power-hungry salyik who ran a cannibalistic cult in the Wastes. He is a very prickly, closed off and arrogant person due to being alone for basically his entire life—he lived on the streets in one of the cities as a little boy, before making his way out into the Wastes alone when he was twelve. He was then found by one of the Herald's missionaries at the age of thirteen, which is how he discovered the truth about his monster half. He is a nomad who travels the Wastes, sticks close to the Nebraska camp, and has a very remote safehouse. Formerly in love with Ghost—has since realised that it wasn't love, just a desperation to have someone who didn't seem to instantly detest him. He's *actually* in love with Charlie, even though Charlie annoys the crap out of him.

Appearance: Moth has long, silvery-white hair that he tends to wear either in a braid or half-tied back. Dark eyebrows and eyelashes, very pale blue eyes with filmy pupils. Tapered ears with several piercings. Unnaturally beautiful, with a 'vibe' that makes most humans instinctively find him "wrong" or slightly repulsive. Tall and leanly muscled. His torso, neck, hands and arms are covered in black tattoos which are words in the salyik language that basically tell other salyik to not approach him because he's a "half-breed". He also has a line of symbols scarred into his spine, which allowed the Herald to summon him. He has patches of pink, brown and purple scales all over his torso, and his legs are completely covered in scales and are not quite human, with completely inhuman feet with arched heels and three toes with thick, black claws. He also has a very cute tail that tends to betray how he's feeling. And he has a sword. That he stole.

The Herald was Moth's progenitor and a power-hungry salyik that travelled through the tear and began amassing a following to create a cannibalistic cult that operates out of a shopping mall to the north west. They were guarded by Gloam's two brothers, Metelimus and Neminos, and

enslaved Gloam when he refused to follow them with the brothers' help. They gave Gloam to Mary to act as her protector while she carried out her missionary work with the military.

Appearance: The Herald had long, white hair half tied back in complicated braids. Androgynous, inhumanly perfect face described by Rig as looking “like no one else alive, and a million other people all at once—blank enough to be forgettable”. Ghostly pale skin covered in faint pink scales, and intense, pale pinkish-grey eyes. They wore long white robes made of an otherworldly fabric.

Encountered by Rig and Gloam in Book Four when Mary takes them to the cult for Rig to become a coal. Also encountered by Moth and Charlie in Book Five. Destroyed by Moth.

Parasite (species name: unknown): A parasitic monster that infects humans. They are the same species as Wyn; he can detect them, so he destroys them to stop them wiping out humanity. Capable of injecting deadly venom through its bite as a defence mechanism when threatened or a nest is attacked.

The life cycle of a parasite is as follows: a hatchling will crawl inside the mouth of an unaware human—usually while they are asleep—and into the digestive system. The human will, at this stage, start feeling somewhat ill as the parasite begins consuming all of the nutrients in the body as it prepares to lay its eggs. Once the eggs are laid in the stomach, the parasite uses its sharp teeth to escape the stomach; it expels a glue-like substance that it uses to ‘patch’ the tiny tear it has made in the stomach lining so that the host stays alive long enough to incubate the eggs. The parasite will then latch onto the spinal column to control the host’s brain activity and keep the host functioning as the eggs incubate. During this time, the parasitic eggs continue to absorb nutrients through their permeable linings, causing the host to lose weight rapidly, weaken and eventually become too ill to function. When the eggs are ready to hatch, the host will expel them from the stomach and die, the parasite dying alongside it. The eggs then hatch and go off in search of new hosts.

Queens live in nests, laying eggs. A queen produces a thick jelly that creates the environment the eggs need to incubate outside of a host. She is normally tended to by worker parasites, which are bigger than normal

parasites, and bring the queen food and tend to the eggs when they are ready to hatch, sloughing off the queen's jelly.

Appearance: Full-sized parasites at the end of their life cycle are about the size of a small rabbit. Dark, scaly skin. Twelve legs, thin and spindly and covered in hard bristles. Flat face with wide eyes like a housefly that curve around the sides of its head. Circular mouth with sharp teeth.

The parasite spawn expelled by a host is a thick, grey mucus, with the darker eggs visible. Hatchlings are tiny versions of adult parasites—about the size of a bumblebee.

Worker parasites are bigger—about the size of a small dog.

Queens are huge—car-sized—and shaped more like a tick, with a thinner thorax and a fat, bloated abdomen that is usually swollen with eggs. Two dozen legs with sharp ends that she uses as weapons.

Cagin [*cay-jin*]: Muscular, bear-sized monster with dark brown hide that's thick and solid, like armour. Domed, gleaming back that is impenetrable—even bullets can't get through—but its weakness is on its underbelly, if you can stay alive long enough to flip it over. Long head with a split snout. Teeth that grow in every direction. Long, thin eyes. Poor eyesight, excellent sense of smell. Makes a soft warbling sound. Cagins eat very infrequently, so will stalk the prey they choose for as long as it takes.

Encountered by Ghost and Aury in Book Three, when it is stalking a group of soldiers barricaded in an old house. It runs at the sight of Aury. Also encountered by Moth and Charlie in Book Five, when it attacks a group of soldiers, driving them into a barn, and is subsequently killed by Moth. Charlie calls it a dome bear.

Chekla [*check-lah*]: Small creatures that look like reddish-brown, human hands with too many knuckles and too thin, bony fingers. Ten bristly legs, five either side of its fleshy flat body. They make soft, termite-like nests in the ground. Charlie describes them as “nasty little things” that will cling to whatever part of you they can so the teeth on their underbelly can rip through your clothes, then your skin, then the rest of you. According to him, the smaller ones even crawl into your mouth to eat you from the inside if they get the chance. He calls them “finger fuckers”, much to Moth's amusement.

Encountered by Rig in Book Four outside of the grounds to Mary's mansion, and by Moth and Charlie in Book Five when Wastes aficionado Moth makes a *minor* error by stepping in a chekla nest because he's too busy (and flustered) trying to seem all tough to Charlie.

Copicen [*coh*-pick-ehn]: Small monster-world species with grey fur, long limbs and a long, spike-covered tail. They have spikes over their backs and small, flat hands. Flat, bat-like face with long pointed ears and big bulging eyes. Make chirruping, hissing noises. Tend to be seen picking through junk in the Wastes. Will attack only if cornered.

Chuck is a very timid, very clever copicen who Moth rescues when she is being attacked by some humans in the Wastes. She decides Moth is hers, and keeps him company until he vanishes—she then keeps travelling across the Wastes looking for him until they are reunited. She has a little white cowlick going round one eye. She's not scared of Wyn—but she *is* scared of Aury—and has taken a liking to Lilac. Rig is jealous.

Forileun [*fohr-il-ee-yun*]: Invertebrate species. Secretes a poison from its claws that amplifies pain receptors to incapacitate its prey.

Appearance: About seven to eight feet tall on all fours. Four legs that are segmented and covered in hard bristles, ending with small claws that let it grip. Long, thin body (shaped, as Hunter describes, 'like an ear of corn') covered in dark bristles over a shiny exoskeleton. Long, curving neck and low-hanging face. Rectangular, vertical black eyes that wrap over the top of its head. Blunt, thick teeth.

Encountered by Hunter and Charlie in Book Two, and by Moth and Charlie in Book Five, when the military drop several into the new city of Chicago to wipe out infected citizens from a parasite outbreak. Charlie calls them cob monsters.

Myrm [*muhrm*]: Big, worm-like creatures the size of a horse, covered in dark hair. Six short legs. Long, curving neck. Blank face with a wide slit for a mouth and two tiny black holes for eyes.

Described by Edin to Hunter in Book Two—a myrm is the reason Edin was caught by the military and became specimen 002. He came across one that had been trapped by the military and was freeing it when they tranquilised him. Observed by Ghost in Book Three, when he and Aury

stop at the river after visiting the Topeka camp. Observed by Moth and Charlie in Book Five.

Narid [*nah-rid*]: Water-dwelling creature that tends to inhabit lakes in the human world. Humanoid with the ability to speak. According to Moth, they are known for being “particularly seductive”. Charlie describes them as fish-like, with gills.

Mentioned by Charlie to Moth in Book Five.

Unknown: Water-dwelling creature with deep purple skin, long gills either side of its head, and bulbous purple eyes shot through with wavy lines of white.

Briefly observed by Charlie and Moth in Book Five.

The full Monster Index can be found on my website, lily-mayne.com

Human Index

Cat (real name: unknown): Co-leader (but currently MIA) of the Nebraska raider camp. Cat was found alone by Anchor in the Wastes when they were just teenagers, and together they built the raider camp. A calm, protective leader who most of the raiders look up to. Loves to read—his room at the camp is stuffed with books he's scavenged. African American.

Currently Cat is holed up in New York with an interesting, unknown beastie after being held at the fighting prison to the north. He declined the chance to escape the prison with Hunter and Charlie, claiming there was someone there he couldn't leave behind. Something happened at the prison which resulted in it being abandoned.

Appearance: Dark hair, very dark eyes and a beard. Tall and solidly built. A scar on his left temple.

Charlie: Soldier and Hunter's best friend. Charlie is more easygoing and less grumpy than Hunter. He tends to hum the Mamas and the Papas or talk a lot when he's nervous. Very patient and compassionate. Grew up on a farm before the monster apocalypse. Addiction to sugar he is not even remotely interested in kicking. Irish American.

Charlie was captured by kolebs and behamots to be their human fighter in the fighting prison further north. He meets Cat at the prison, as they share a cell for the one night he is there before Hunter, Wyn, Edin and Danny rescue him.

Appearance: Dark hair and grey eyes. Fairly tall, and slim but muscular build.

Moth (full name: Malimoth): Half-human, half-salyik nomad who sticks close to the Nebraska camp area. Arrogant, kind of feral and prickly, but secretly a total vulnerable marshmallow who needs all the love. Follows his own moral compass, which tends to lead to him cutting off the heads or other body parts of people he doesn't like. Has a sword. Is very good with sword.

Appearance: Long, silvery-white hair and very pale blue eyes with filmy pupils. Tall and rangy muscular build. Covered in weird tattoos from his

neck to his fingertips. Several hoops in his ears, which are tapered, and three through his lips: one through the centre of the lower, and two either side of his cupid's bow. He is almost unnaturally beautiful.

More details on Moth's monster characteristics can be found in the **Monster Index**.

Other

Pete: City dweller who works in a convenience store in New York. He tries to help Charlie and Moth find Cat by telling them about a bar where “new folk” tend to go. Is definitely into Charlie—Moth hates him on sight.

Samson: Unwilling member of the Herald's cult. He saves Rig when Mary takes him there as the newest ‘coal’, but says he cannot leave because he has the mark of the Herald. He hates it. Bitterly calls himself a “true son of the Herald”. He meets Charlie in the cells under the mall. He was born in the cult. Pale blond hair shaved close to his head, brown eyes and freckles.

The full Human Index can be found on my website, lily-mayne.com

Books by Lily Mayne

Monstrous

(MM Monster/Human Dystopian Romance)

Soul Eater (Book One)

Edin (Book Two)

The Rycke (Book Three)

Wyn (Novella)

Gloam (Book Four)

Moth (Book Five)

Coming later in 2022: Seraph (Book Six)

Folk

(MM Fae Fantasy Romance)

Mortal Skin (Book One)

Coming soon: Forgotten Vows (Book Two)

About the Author

Lily Mayne writes what she loves to read: achingly sweet yet gritty romances against unusual backdrops—dark, futuristic, dystopian and more.

She enjoys reading and writing (duh), baking, watching terrible horror movies and many other hobbies that would have potentially made her an ideal Victorian maid. Just a really lazy one.

She currently lives in the UK with her husband and several fluffballs, who like to make a lot of noise while she's writing.

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